THE NELSON LEE LIBRARY 1½D

THE SHIP OF MYSTERY.

April 16, 1921.

The Ship of Mystery.

A Story of Holiday Life and Detective Adventure, introducing NELSON LEE, LORD DORRIMORE, NIPPER, and the Boys of St. Frank's. By the Author of "On the Track of the Schemer," "Fooled at the Finish," "Adrift in Mid-Air," and many other Stirring Tales.

(THE NARRATIVE RELATED THROUGHOUT BY NIPPER.)

CHAPTER I.

MISSING.

THE Duke of Somerton swung himself with much agility to the top of a five-barred gate. And he sat there swinging his legs, and with his hands thrust deep into his trousers pockets.

This may seem a somewhat curious proceeding on the part of a noble duke. But it so happened that Somerton was merely a boy of fifteen—a St. Frank's junior, in fact; and his actions, therefore, were not out of the ordinary.

"No news of any sort!" he said gloomily. "My only hat! I wonder what's happened? I wonder where they are now?"

"It's not much good wondering," said Clapson, shaking his head. "Goodness only knows where the airship will come down, and what will happen when it does come down! I'm in an awful funk, and I don't mind admitting it!"

"Swab my main deck!" exclaimed Tom Burton. "I was never so scared in all my life, shipmate! When the airship crashed down, just near the shed, I thought she was going to founder straight away. "Souse my scuppers! We shall be lucky if we see Nipper and the others again!"

"Eh, lad, don't say that!" muttered Dick Goodwin huskily. "By gum! I can't think that they've met with a real disaster. They'll manage to land somewhere, I'll be bound. Captain Mason is in charge of the airship, and he's a clever man—he is that!"

The little crowd of St. Frank's juniors were collected about the gateway. Only a short distance off could be seen the magnificent pile of Dorrimore Hall, the famous and beautiful ancestral home of Lord Dorrimore. It was situated not very far distant from Stowmarket, in Suffolk.

It was now between eleven o'clock and noon, and the April day was bright and sunny. A few hours earlier there had been a sudden thunderstorm, with powerful rain squalls and bursts of wind. But the weather had cleared since then, and the sun was now shining gloriously from a blue sky; but away in the south there were heavy masses of white, thick clouds. No doubt there would be some showers before long, for it was typical April weather.

There were nine juniors altogether in the group—Tom Burton, Somerton, Dick Goodwin, and the Trotwood twins. These fellows belonged to the Ancient House at St. Frank's. The other four juniors were Clapson, Nation, Page, and Harron, of the College House. They were all guests at Dorrimore Hall, spending the last few days of their Easter vacation with his lordship.

Of course, there had been a great many other juniors in addition—Handforth and Co., Pitt, Farman, Fatty Little, Cecil De Valerie, Bob Christine, Sir Montie Tregellis-West, and quite a few more. Nelson Lee himself had been among the party, and, with the genial Lord Dorrimore as the host, everybody had enjoyed themselves immensely.

"And to think that only this morning we were a complete party," said Somerton gloomily. "We were all here—Nipper, Watson, and Christine, and everybody else! Who would have thought yesterday that this terrible disaster would have happened?"

"Nobody!" said Clapson. "We were all invited to go on that airship trip to London. And I'm jolly pleased now that my people wouldn't allow me to make the trip."

"Eh; but I'd like to know what's happening to the others—I would that!" said Dick Goodwin.

"We'd all like to know," agreed Somerton. "What are the absolute facts? Let's just talk over them. This airship, the Suffolk Queen, is a magnificent rigid vessel, which was purchased from the Government by the East Anglian Aircraft Company, Limited. And the ship was to be used for passenger traffic during the spring and summer."

"Yes; and this morning it was going on a trial trip to London and back," put in Nation. "Captain Mason is the skipper—and a jolly decent chap, too! He invited us all to go up, and to enjoy the journey. But I didn't quite fancy it; I don't trust these blessed airships! It only shows that I was right, doesn't it?"

"By gum, yes!" said Goodwin, nodding.

The juniors were silent for a moment or two. They were thinking of the happenings of the morning. At seven o'clock the party had started out from Dorrimore Hall—gay, light-hearted and merry. They had journeyed to the aerodrome, not far distant, and had found the Suffolk Queen all ready for immediate departure. The airship had looked magnificent in the sunlight, with her silver, shimmering body. It had seemed impossible that any mishap could befall such a grand, stately craft.

True, the airship had commenced her trip in perfect style. She had left the ground gracefully, and had swung over the aerodrome, rising higher and higher as she circled. And then, with all her engines humming, she had set off for London—a triumph of aerial construction.

There had been sixteen St. Frank's juniors on board, Nelson Lee, Lord Dorrimore, and the captain and crew of the vessel. And they had started off light-heartedly and gaily.

Somerton, Clapson, and the others had remained behind at the aerodrome for some little time, much interested in the evolutions of two aeroplanes which had been taken up for trial. Then they had commenced the journey back to Dorrimore Hall, wondering how they could spend the day with nearly all the fellows away.

Then some dark clouds had been noticed—a storm was coming up. Thunder sounded, and the juniors decided to hurry, before the rain came. But then, when they were comparatively near to the Hall, somebody had noticed that the airship was returning. With one accord the juniors turned and raced back to the aerodrome, to be there in time to see the landing.

They had little guessed what was to follow!

For, before the Suffolk Queen could reach the ground, the storm burst in all its fury, rain pelting down. Excited and rather alarmed, the juniors stood there, watching.

And among the onlookers was Sir Gregory Tweed, the chairman of the Aircraft Company. He had been about to start for London by road, but the return of the airship delayed him.

Captain Mason, with rare skill, piloted the airship to the ground, but just then a tremendous wind squall had come sweeping across the ground. It lifted the airship as though it had been a feather, sending the forward car down to the ground, smashing the propeller of the engine, and causing other damage. Fortunately, nobody was hurt.

But this was only the beginning.

Before anything could be done—in fact, before anybody could draw breath—the rear part of the airship had been lifted high by the wind. Then, with appalling force, it came crashing down, smashing the two rear power cars to smithereens, and rendering the airship absolutely helpless. Not only were the engines put out of action, but the

rudders and elevators were tangled up and wrecked. By a miracle of good fortune, nearly all the members of the crew had managed to swarm down ropes to the ground before the disaster took place.

And then, completely in the control of the sudden squall, the airship was torn away from the scores of men who held her, and sent careering aloft, high in the air. By a bare inch or two she had missed the great shed, and, swooping upwards, had been swallowed up in the dense thunder clouds.

She had gone; the Suffolk Queen had vanished into the clouds, all her engines disabled, her rudders and elevators put out of action, and her skipper unable to effect control.

And the vast airship had gone; she had apparently vanished into nothingness.

Now, three or four hours later, not a single word had come. The mystery still remained a mystery. Nobody knew what had happened to the airship and her crew and passengers. The anxiety at the aerodrome was overwhelming.

And the juniors, who were all looking serious and worried, recalled the feverish excitement that followed the disaster. Sir Gregory Tweed had nearly gone off his head with worry and alarm. For a short time he had been like a madman, raving about, trembling with agitation, and as pale as a ghost.

A few of the men had been injured in getting down from the ill-fated aircraft. Two men, in fact, suffered from broken limbs. These had been cared for, and the minor injuries of the others had been seen to.

And then the aerodrome officials, when they had recovered their heads, sent telegrams and wireless messages to all corners of the country, asking that information should be sent the very instant the disabled monster was sighted.

Less than an hour later the sky cleared, and the sun shone. But there was no sign of the airship; she had vanished into space. And now it was nearly noon, and still no news had come.

"I don't think I've ever spent such an anxious time in all my life before," said Clapson quietly. "Just think of it, you chaps! Shall we ever see Nipper again—and dear old Montie? Or will they be killed when the airship is driven to earth——"

"Don't!" put in Nicodemus Trotwood, in a low voice. "It's—it's awful—too awful to think about!"

"But we've got to think of the facts," put in Somerton. "There's no sense in kidding ourselves, Trotwood. The chances are that the airship will be driven down somewhere, and wrecked completely, and, if that happens, most of the people on the craft will be killed. It might even come down in the North Sea, and not one of them would have a chance!"

"That's what I've been thinking!" said Dick Goodwin, with a catch in his voice. "If they come down in the sea they'll be doomed! They haven't got any boats, or anything. They couldn't live for ten minutes in the sea. Eh, but it's terrible—it is that!"

"And what shall we do at St. Frank's without all the chaps?" went on Clapson miserably. "Fancy St. Frank's without Handforth and Nipper, and all the others—oh, it's too horrible to think about! There must be some news before long—there must! I can't possibly think that all those chaps will never come back!"

The juniors after a while turned towards Dorrimore Hall. They did not know what to do with themselves. For the past hour or two they had been walking about aimlessly, between the Hall and the aerodrome, hoping that they would be able to pick up some information. But everybody else was in the same plight as they were; no news had come to hand.

Sir Gregory Tweed himself was at the Hall, waiting for information. It was more convenient for him than the aerodrome. He was in telephonic and telegraphic communication with London and other big centres constantly. And he wished to be there in case some of the boys' relatives turned up, and this was almost certain to happen.

For he had at once informed them of the true state of affairs. All the parents of the boys concerned had been communicated with. It was only right that they should know the absolute truth, and as they would probably know from the early edition of the evening newspapers, it was better that Sir Gregory himself should give the information.

And when the juniors arrived at Dorrimore Hall, just after twelve

o'clock, they found Sir Edward Handforth there. Handforth senior was very much like the leader of Study D—big, clumsy, and extremely impetuous. Lady Helen Tregellis-West was also present, and she was sobbing quietly to herself. There were others there—Tommy Watson's uncle, Bob Christine's father and mother, and quite a good many more. They were all filled with alarm and anxiety, and thirsting for information.

Dorrimore Hall was a house of sorrow and worry. The uncertainty of it all was terrible. The juniors kept to themselves, remaining out in the grounds for the most part; they didn't like to be hemmed in. They preferred to be in the open, and, somehow or other, their gaze was always roving up into the sky. They did not actually expect to see the airship anywhere, but the impulse to gaze upwards was irrisistible.

And then, just before one o'clock, Sir Edward Handforth came charging out of the big lounge hall. His face was flushed, and his eyes were gleaming.

"Hallo! Perhaps some news has arrived!" exclaimed Clapson, as he caught sight of Sir Edward. "Look at Handforth's pater—he's as excited as anything! Let's go and ask him!"

"Swab my decks, we will!" said Tom Burton.

They rushed up to Sir Edward, and surrounded him.

"Any news, sir?" asked Trotwood eagerly.

"Yes, thank Heaven, there is news!" replied Sir Edward Handforth. "But it is not very satisfactory, by gad! No, sir, it is not satisfactory! Of all the infernal muddlers and——"

"But what's the news, sir?" asked Clapson. "Has the airship been sighted?"

"Yes, my boy—yes!"

"Hurrah!"

"Where, sir—where?"

"Tweed has just received the information that a cablegram has arrived in London from Holland," said Handforth senior. "The airship was sighted at a great height, drifting rapidly over Dutch territory!"

"Great Scott!"

"Shiver my main decks!"

"By gum!"

"Over Holland!" gasped Clapson. "Oh, my goodness! Then the airship must have crossed the North Sea, sir?"

"Use your brains, boy—use your brains!" snapped Sir Edward. "Of course it must have crossed the North Sea! How could it get to Holland otherwise? When last seen, the airship was eight or ten thousand feet high, drifting helplessly, and making in the direction of Germany!"

"Oh!"

The juniors were startled, but relieved. So far, at all events, the Suffolk Queen was safe. She was drifting high in the air—helpless, it is true, but, so far, unharmed.

The juniors hurried into the house, and very soon they were talking excitedly with some of the new arrivals—Lady Helen Tregellis-West, Christine's people, and others. And now there was a very different feeling. Hope had been revived, and everybody believed that everything would come right before so very long. They were all waiting—waiting for further news—waiting for the information that the airship had landed in safety.

The time passed by in a dreadfully slow manner. And then, at about half-past five, another message came to hand. This was instructive, but by no means definite.

And this time the information came from Germany.

The helpless airship had been seen by hundreds of people in Dusseldorf and Cologne, and the vessel had then been drifting in the direction of Bavaria.

"And so she's still all right—and that's the main thing!" exclaimed Clapson eagerly. "But, my goodness—over Germany, and making for Bavaria! What a trip! They never expected to go as far as that!"

"Rather not!" said Somerton. "Why, if they go on at that rate, they'll be somewhere in Turkey, or Asia, before the morning!"

"Oh, bosh!" exclaimed Page. "They won't go all night. They'll come to earth, somewhere or other, before the evening is over!"

"It's all very well to say that, but how can we be certain?" asked Nation. "You seem to forget that the airship is helpless, and out of control. What if they can't bring it to earth? It's simply got to drift on and on until

it comes down of its own accord!"

"And goodness only knows when that will happen!" said Clapson. "But it's ripping to know that they are safe, and that the airship is still afloat. That's the main thing, my sons. It doesn't matter where they are so long as they come down in safety!"

The evening passed slowly and wearily, and all the time the party at Dorrimore Hall waited for further news. But no further news came, and at last the hour grew late, and the juniors went to bed. In spite of their anxiety they slept well, for, after all, they were healthy boys, and sleep was natural to them.

But they were up early, and they needed no calling. Before eight o'clock they were all down, eagerly asking if any further news had come through during the night. All the other guests were up, too—and the juniors found that further news had come.

It was exactly of the same nature as the earlier information.

But this time the message came from Munich, in Bavaria. It stated that a large airship, obviously out of control, had been seen by many inhabitants of Ingolstadt.

Hope was revived, and further messages were eagerly waited for.

Much speculation was indulged in, and everybody was of the opinion that the next message would come from Vienna, in Austria, for it was apparent that the airship had drifted in that direction.

Everybody was astonished when the next message did come to find that its source was Triest. And this message contained news which caused widespread alarm and consternation.

For it stated that the airship had been seen drifting through the clouds at a fairly low altitude, and it was making out to sea, driven by the wind!

It was clear that the great airship had got into a fresh current, and had drifted out of her original direction. And now she was sweeping over the Adriatic Sea!

This was the worst piece of news of all, and faces were haggard and lined as the situation was discussed.

"After all, there's no need for us to worry much," said Clapson. "We'll suppose that the airship drifted across the Adriatic—well, it's not a very big sea, and it's quite likely that the airship was soon over Italian territory. Perhaps she's come down in Italy. We shall know before long, anyway."

"Well, that's all we can do—wait!" said Somerton. "But I can tell you that I'm in a bit of a funk—I'm frightfully worried. It's wonderful, when you come to think of it. We've been able to follow the course of the airship right the way across Europe. She must have drifted at a pretty good speed, you know!"

The other juniors nodded.

"Well, she's been on the go now for over twenty-four hours," said Clapson. "Look how far an ordinary balloon can drift in that time. And the airship is just like a balloon now; it can't be controlled, or anything."

The next wait was destined to be the most nerve-trying of all, for the day passed and no news came in. Sir Gregory Tweed sent out telegrams, cablegrams, and wireless messages, but he could obtain no information in reply.

Nothing had been seen of the airship since it crossed the coast and went out to sea. From that moment it had completely vanished, and nothing was heard, and, as the hours passed, the anxiety grew greater and greater.

Indeed, it was not until evening that the dreadful news actually arrived—the most awful news that could possibly come. For it was definite, and positively final. This last message served one purpose, at all events—it dispelled all doubt.

It was a long communication by cablegram, and it had been dispatched from the port of Brindisi, on the Adriatic Coast of Italy. A steamer had come into port that evening, and it had brought news of the most startling character. For, in the captain's report, it appeared that airship wreckage had been sighted, and the ship had altered her course, in order to make investigations. These investigations had been duly carried out, and it was discovered that the wreckage was that of a big rigid airship, which could be none other than the Suffolk Queen.

The wreckage was very low in the water, and, indeed, practically submerged.

And, most appalling news of all, no lives had been saved! Not a living soul

had been seen on the wreckage, or near it. But this was accounted for by the fact that the central saloon and the forward cabin were completely submerged; they had evidently been submerged at once, even as the airship struck the sea. It was concluded, therefore, that everybody on board had been trapped, and had been unable to escape.

Before the ship had taken its departure, the wreckage had completely disappeared, sinking to the ocean bed. Only one or two scraps of debris remained.

This was definite and final.

The Suffolk Queen, after drifting right across Europe, had come down in the Adriatic. Everybody on board had perished—everybody had gone down!

And all those in Dorrimore Hall were stunned—almost speechless with horror. In spite of all their hopes—in spite of all the indications that everything would turn out right, this was the result!

"Dead!" said Clapson, in a whisper. "Good heavens! Nipper, Sir Montie, Handforth, Mr. Lee—all of them! They've gone down—gone into the water—gone——"

Clapson broke off, his voice choking, and, in front of everybody else, he commenced sobbing like a child. And he was not the only one. The Duke of Somerton, Tom Burton, Dick Goodwin—they were all wet-eyed, and they all had great lumps in their throats.

But appearances are sometimes deceptive—they were certainly deceptive in this case. For those souls who had been on the Suffolk Queen were not at the bottom of the Adriatic. They were, in fact, on the surface—and quite comfortable, too!

CHAPTER II.

ON BOARD THE ARGOSY.

"NOT so dusty!" said Edward Oswald Handforth critically.

"Not so dusty, eh?" repeated Church. "Why, you ass, it's glorious—absolutely gorgeous! Whoever dreamed that we should be so lucky as this?"

"Well, I didn't!" remarked Arnold McClure. "I was expecting to be floating about in a lifebelt by this time, and with no prospect except exhaustion and death. That's speaking pretty bluntly, but it's the truth! Handy, old son, we're the luckiest chaps on earth to find ourselves on board this ship, safe and sound!"

Handforth nodded.

"I'll admit that," he said. "We are lucky, certainly; and we're as safe as houses, too. It only remains for us to get into a port, and then we can send cablegrams to England, and follow along at our leisure. On the whole, I'm jolly glad that everything happened as it did. We shall have a ripping trip back through Europe!"

"Well, that's one way of looking at it!" grinned Church. "At the same time, I feel awfully sorry for Captain Mason and Sir Gregory Tweed. Just fancy—that beautiful new airship! She's at the bottom of the sea now, I expect—lost beyond recovery."

Handforth shrugged his shoulders.

"Oh, there's no need to worry about that," he said carelessly. "I expect the airship was insured, anyway, and I'm not going to shed any tears over a blessed insurance company—it can easily afford to pay up. By George! Doesn't the water look ripping?"

Handforth and Co., the famous trio of Study D at St. Frank's, were leaning over the side of the large three-masted schooner, Argos. They were just lounging about, enjoying the warm evening air. They had had a good square meal, and were feeling very comfortable.

The decks were not particularly tidy, but they were fairly clean and perfectly dry. Stretching high overhead the great sails were intact, but they were practically idle, for hardly a puff of wind was blowing, and the schooner was almost becalmed.

On every side stretched out the sea—the blue waters of the Adriatic. And not another sail was within sight, and only a smudge or two low on the horizon, caused by passing steamers. They were too far distant to receive any signal; in fact, they were so far distant that they were not visible—they were hull down. Only their smoke could be seen.

On the poop of the schooner Nelson Lee stood chatting with Captain

Mason and Lord Dorrimore. They were smoking, and looked quite cheerful and at their ease. They were, in fact, immensely relieved, for their startling adventure had not ended as they had anticipated. They were safe; and all the passengers of the Suffolk Queen were safe, too. The airship herself was a total loss; but this was only a trifle compared to the other matter. No human lives had been lost.

I came strolling down the deck, arm-in-arm with Sir Montie Tregellis-West and Tommy Watson. And we were talking about our wonderful escape—almost everybody on board had no other subject to discuss, for it was only a few hours since that we had set foot upon the schooner's decks.

And we were not only astonished by the fact that we were safe and sound, but we were surprised at the condition of things on board the schooner. And, indeed, there was much to cause surprise.

"It's like a giddy fairy tale, my sons," I was saying. "And if anything appeared like this in a story, it would probably be ridiculed. And yet, when you come to think of it, it's absolutely natural."

"Of course it is," said Tommy Watson.

"At the same time, dear old boy, you must admit that we have been frightfully fortunate," said Sir Montie, adjusting his pince-nez. "All these things have been happenin' so swiftly that I can't think clearly, begad! My brain ain't particularly useful at the best of times, but just now it's overwhelmed—it is, really!"

I laughed.

"Rats!" I said. "Just go over the facts, Montie; I don't think you will find your brain incapable of taking in all the details. I'll put it all in a nutshell. We went out in the Suffolk Queen to make a trip to London. A storm arose, we tried to land, and the airship was busted up—at least, all her engines were."

"And then we drifted," said Tommy Watson.

"Exactly; we drifted right over the North Sea, over Holland, and then over Germany," I went on. "Not satisfied with that, we proceeded across parts of Austria, in the darkness of the night, and found ourselves at dawn somewhere near the sea. Then the airship, growing tired of being in the air for so long, settled down in the water and took a rest. By acting quickly we managed to get to the top of the envelope, and we were quite safe there for the time being."

"And then this schooner happened to come along, and it butted into the wreckage," said Watson. "That's the queer part about it, Nipper."

"Yes, you're right there, my son," I agreed, looking thoughtful. "And, when you come to think of it, it was amazingly lucky. Why, we weren't even splashed—we didn't get a drop of water on us!"

"Dear old boy, it was indeed amazin'!" said Sir Montie Tregellis-West. "I was frightfully afraid that we should get a ducking, and all the rest of it; but we're just as neat and dry as we were when we left Dorrimore Hall!"

"Precisely," I said. "You see, we were in that comfortable saloon of the airship practically all the time. We didn't come to any harm at all. Then, when the vessel dropped into the sea, we mounted up through the body of the ship to the platform on the top. We were still whole, and dry. And then, before the airship settled down into the water, and became submerged, this schooner came sailing along and crashed into the wreckage. All we had to do was to flounder over the huge envelope of the airship, climb on board, and there you are! There was no trouble about it at all. It couldn't have been better if it had all been prepared for the cinema!"

"But what about this ship?" said Watson. "That's what I can't understand, Nipper. All the rest is quite natural, of course; but this ship isn't natural. It's a mystery—and we're absolutely done. It was natural for the airship to drift, and it was natural for it to fall into the sea; but I am dashed if it was natural for this schooner to come sailing along, without a soul on board!"

"It seems that Providence took a hand in the game," I said quietly. "Without a living soul at the helm, the schooner came sailing over the water, and it struck the airship. Of course, even if the schooner had veered off a quarter of a mile away, we should still have been all right, because the guv'nor would have swum the distance,

and then we should have brought a boat or two. But we mustn't forget that everything happened in a most surprising manner. For instance, why was this ship sailing on the sea without anybody on board?"

"I suppose her officers and crew deserted her," said Watson brilliantly.

"Well, you ass, of course they did!" I said. "But that tells us nothing. The officers and crew of a vessel don't usually desert it unless there's danger, or the vessel is sinking. But there was nothing like that about this schooner; she's perfectly intact, and everything is in fine condition. It's a mystery, and I'm looking forward to the guv'nor getting to the bottom of it."

And we continued to stroll along the deck, joining Handforth and Co. a minute or two later. Reginald Pitt was having a chat with Farman and De Valerie. Bob Christine and Yorke and the other College House fellows were standing together in a group, laughing and talking. Fatty Little was nowhere to be seen; but, of course, this was not at all surprising. He was probably down in the saloon, feeding his face. Fatty was never satisfied.

Only a comparatively few hours had elapsed since we had set foot on board the dock of the Argos. We had washed, fed, and now we felt fresh enough. We did not want to sleep—at least, not until night arrived.

The chief thought that kept entering our heads was that we should soon sight a steamer, and signal, for we wanted to send out messages to home that we were safe, and that no casualties had occurred. So far, of course, we had done nothing in this direction, for we were cut off completely from the outside world.

When we had fallen into the sea, we had done so unobserved by any shipping. After a while we had seen the schooner approaching, and we had taken it for granted that it had on board a full complement of officers and crew.

It was not until we were actually in the vessel that we discovered her derelict nature. We had sailed away as soon as the schooner had become disentangled from the airship wreckage, and we had rapidly left the remains of the Suffolk Queen behind. And since then the wind had completely dropped, and we had not come within signalling distance of any other vessel.

We realised, of course, that if the wreckage was seen by a passing steamer, it would be assumed that we had all perished. And that report would go to England, and cause widespread alarm among the relatives of the fellows who were on board. But we could do nothing. There was no wireless apparatus on the schooner, and we could not communicate with any living soul, unless a ship happened to come within distance. And, so far, we had only seen the smoke of passing steamers which were hull down.

Our party was not a particularly large one, numbering twenty-five in all. There were sixteen juniors, including myself; and, in addition, the others comprised Nelson Lee, Lord Dorrimore, and Captain Mason. Then there were three officers of the airship—Mr. Morgan, Mr. Leighton, and Mr. Bateman. The final three were Mr. Powell, one of the airship engineers, and two men named Warren and Royce. The last-named were mechanics. All the other members of the airship's crew had managed to get to the ground when the crash had come at the aerodrome, at the outset of our adventure.

And, although we were all saved—the whole twenty-five of us—we could not impart this information to the world. If the breeze had continued, we should not have had much difficulty in steering it to a regular steamship course, and then, naturally, we should soon have communicated with a vessel which had wireless on board. But as it was, we could do nothing, for we were practically becalmed.

This, however, would not last for ever. The breeze would probably spring up again before so very long—on the following day at the latest—and then we should be able to carry out our programme, and, once ashore at a port, we could start the journey back to England. And it would be a long journey, too, and quite interesting.

But, now that all the danger was over, and that we were safe and sound, the majority of the fellows shared Handforth's opinion—they were rather glad that everything had happened in this way, for we had had an exciting adventure, and an interesting journey lay before us. So, on the whole, we didn't mind.

On the poop, Nelson Lee was chatting with Lord Dorrimore and Captain

Mason, V.C. They were talking seriously together now, and the subject under discussion was connected with the schooner.

"Well, of course, it's deucedly mysterious," said Lord Dorrimore. "I'm not getting away from that, Lee. How on earth did it happen that this schooner was floating about the Adriatic—I judge this sea to be the Adriatic—without a soul on board?".

"That is a mystery which I should like to get to the bottom of," said Nelson Lee slowly. "So far as I can discover, this vessel is a Greek. We found her with sails fully set, and without any living being on board. And yet she is perfect; there is nothing whatever the matter with her. Down below, her store-rooms are filled with excellent food; and there is no indication of foul play—as, for example, mutiny."

"Yes, but there's evidence that the ship was deserted in a hurry," put in Captain Mason. "You agreed there, Mr. Lee."

Nelson Lee nodded.

"Precisely," he said. "There is not the slightest doubt that the vessel was deserted at once—at short notice, I mean. Two of her regular boats are missing, and down in the captain's cabin there are clear signs that the skipper himself was very hurried in his departure. But why did he go—why did the crew leave the ship?"

"It's no good asking me," said Lord Dorrimore, with a shrug of his shoulders. "Perhaps there was a ghost, or something; perhaps they were scared away. Sailormen are infernally superstitious, you know!"

Nelson Lee smiled.

"I will grant you that the majority of sailors are superstitious," he said. "But, at the same time, Dorrie, that does not account for this queer state of affairs. I do not think any ghost would scare the whole ship's company away. In any case, I don't believe in ghosts—although that doesn't mean to say that the crew might not have been scared by something they thought to be a ghost. But that's not the solution, Dorrie—I'm sure of it."

"Well, I don't see why you need worry about it," said Lord Dorrimore. "We've found this schooner, and it's proved to be a wonderful haven of refuge for us—and that's all that really matters. I dare say we shall manage to struggle into port, somehow or other, before long, and then we needn't trouble any more. We can get on the first boat back to England, or we can go overland."

"That's all very well, Dorrie, but I want to solve this mystery," said Nelson Lee.

"Oh, yes, of course. I was forgettin' that you're keen on mysteries," grinned Lord Dorrimore. "There'll be no rest until you've elucidated the dark and dreadful problem! Well, you can go ahead with it, Lee. I shall be awfully interested to see how you progress."

"Well, to begin with, I intend to make a thorough examination of the whole ship," said Nelson Lee keenly. "We will go over her from stem to stern. So far, we have made only a cursory examination, and we must now be more thorough in our methods."

"A good idea," said Mason approvingly. "And we have an excellent opportunity now, Mr. Lee. The ship is becalmed, and it doesn't need any attention. We can have a leisurely look round, and study the problem from all points of view. Where do you propose to start?"

"Down in the captain's cabin," replied Nelson Lee. "Then we will go forward to the fo'c'sle. After that we can work our way back to the stern, even examining the hold."

"Right you are," said Dorrie. "Go ahead, old man."

They went forward until at last they made their way down the companion, and so along a dim passage until they arrived at the captain's cabin. This was not a particularly large apartment, neither was it particularly clean. Lord Dorrimore paused in the doorway, and lit a fresh cigarette.

"It's just as well," he remarked, emitting a cloud of blue smoke. "I came down here once before, and I have distinct recollections of the atmosphere. Fumigating won't do it any harm!"

The air of the cabin was certainly far from being pure. There was a distinct and unpleasant smell of stale tobacco smoke, spirits, and tar. These were the most distinctive odours; there were quite a number of others.

"We cannot help these little matters, Dorrie," smiled Nelson Lee. "The

cabin of a ship of this kind is generally somewhat odourous. Now, by what I can make out, the captain left the ship in a great hurry. As you will see, if you take the trouble to look round, there are many signs which lead us to that belief."

Dorrie looked round.

"Of course, you've got better eyesight than I have, Lee," he said. "I don't exactly understand how you arrive at your conclusions."

"Well, my dear fellow, it is quite obvious," said the famous detective. "For example, our unknown friend—the late skipper of this schooner—was so hasty in his departure that he did not even trouble to take with him all his personal belongings. On the table you will see a quaint-looking dagger, evidently drawn from its sheath and carelessly left behind. Then, again, you will see a little pile of money on the shelf to your left. The coins are Greek, and are the equivalent to about seven pounds in English money. The captain would never have left that behind if he had had more leisure. But let us examine the place more thoroughly."

Nelson Lee picked up the dagger from the table. It was a long, wicked-looking article, with a curiously designed handle. The blade was quite bright and clean, and Lee gazed at it closely.

"Searching for gore?" inquired Dorrie.

"Not exactly," smiled Lee. "I do not think there has been bloodshed on this vessel, old man. At all events, there is no sign of it. To tell you the truth, I was just examining the manufacture of this dagger. It is either Serbian or Mordanian—the latter, I fancy."

"What does it matter where it originated?" asked Captain Mason.

"I don't know that it matters at all," said Lee; "but it is just as well that we should know as much as possible. Everything indicates that the men who left this vessel were Greeks—but I'm not so sure of that. The very fact that it was deserted—abandoned by captain and crew—indicates that something of a startling nature took place; and I am inclined to the view that some of our mysterious friends, at least, were Mordanians."

"I have heard of Mordania," said Mason thoughtfully. "A mountainous little kingdom somewhere in the Balkans, isn't it?"

"Exactly," said Lee. "It possesses quite a respectable piece of coast line, and I do not suppose we are very many miles distant from it at this very moment, since it is almost certain that we are in the Adriatic. Many mysterious things occur in Mordania, as you probably know."

"Yes," said Dorrie. "As a matter of fact, I have often hankered after making a trip to Mordania; but, wishing to retain a whole skin, I have put my feelings aside and travelled to a more healthy district—among the cannibals in Papua, for example."

Captain Mason grinned.

"So you prefer cannibals to Mordanians, eh?" he inquired.

"Well, I understand that it's safer," replied his lordship. "Mordania is an extremely hilly country, and it is, I believe, a sort of kingdom, although the king is probably a bloodthirsty ruffian with several dozen murders to his credit. Life is very cheap in Mordania, and, if you want to commit suicide, you couldn't do better than enter that country. I don't suppose you would come out alive."

"I suppose you're joking, Lord Dorrimore?" asked Mason. "I must confess that I don't know very much about the Balkans; but this seems rather far-fetched——"

"My dear fellow, I can assure you that Dorrimore is quite correct in his statements," put in Nelson Lee. "Only two or three foreigners have attempted to enter Mordania. Two of them never returned, and the third—who happened to be a rich man—was captured, and his release was not effected until a very large sum was handed over to the brigands who had seized him. Mordania is a country of hills—a wild, desolate place which the average Englishman can scarcely conceive of. I have never actually been there, but I have travelled very near to the border. But we will continue our examination."

"Good!" said Dorrie. "Tell me what to do, and I'll get busy."

"The best thing you can do, old man, is to stay just where you are," said Nelson Lee. "You ornament the doorway very artistically."

His lordship grinned, and continued watching. Nelson Lee went slowly round the cabin, examining everything

he came in contact with. Certainly, his task was rather a difficult one, for there was very little that could be examined with a promise of enlightenment.

"No, there doesn't seem to be much here," said Lee, at last. "We will continue our examination in a different part of the ship. One moment! What is this?"

The detective bent down, and picked up a screwed piece of paper from the floor. He smoothed it out on the table, and then his attention became more fixed, and there was a keen light in his eyes as he glanced up.

"By Jove!" he murmured. "This is rather significant!"

Captain Mason and Lord Dorrimore came forward, and looked over Nelson Lee's shoulders. They saw a crumpled piece of paper, with nothing upon it except a crudely executed drawing, which represented a torch flaming fiercely at the top.

CHAPTER III.

ASTONISHING DISCOVERIES.

LORD DORRIMORE grunted.

"I'm hanged if there's anything particularly startling in that!" he remarked. "In fact, as an example of art, I call it distinctly rotten!"

"It is not the drawing I am speaking about, Dorrie, but what it represents," said Nelson Lee. "The artist, as you say, was obviously a poor draftsman; but you will observe that this is a drawing of a flaming torch."

"Oh, my mistake!" said Dorrie. "I thought it was a bunch of celery!"

Captain Mason chuckled.

"Now you mention it, Mr. Lee, I can see that it represents a torch all right," he said. "But what does it mean, anyway?"

"Have you never heard of the Tagossa?" asked Lee.

"The which?" said Dorrie.

"The Tagossa!"

"I suppose I'm wrong, but it sounds like a tropical fruit!" exclaimed his lordship.

"My dear fellow, how on earth can I conduct this inquiry seriously while you will persist in being facetious?" asked Lee, frowning. "The Tagossa is not a tropical fruit, as you humorously suggest, but something very grim and deadly."

"Oh, a poison?"

"No—a vast secret society," replied Nelson Lee. "You must not confuse this secret society with anything of the nature of the Camorra, of Italy. The Tagossa is far more deadly and dangerous, and the headquarters of the organisation is among the hills of Mordania. There has recently been some trouble in that kingdom, I believe, although the news has not leaked out into any of the London dailies. People in England are not interested in the welfare of Mordania; I might even say that nine persons out of ten are unaware of the existence of Mordania. And the Tagossa, as I have indicated, is a murderous secret society of the most dangerous type. No man has ever been known to escape death after he has been marked down."

"Mordania seems to be a cheerful place," said Dorrimore. "I suppose these Tagossa fellows are knocking about every street corner?"

"There are no streets in Mordania, Dorrie," smiled Nelson Lee. "There is the capital, of course, but this is only a small place perched high upon a mountain. The members of the Tagossa are spread everywhere throughout the hills, and that is one reason why it is so unsafe for a foreigner to enter. You see, foreigners are not allowed, and they are shot out of hand at sight."

"We'd better be careful where we go ashore, then," said Dorrie. "After passing through all these adventures, it would be rather unfortunate if we made ourselves into targets for the Tagossa. Personally, I rather fancy a touch of danger now and again, but too much of a good thing is somewhat irksome."

"And what do you think this scrap of paper means, Mr. Lee?" asked Mason.

"It is really difficult to make any guess," replied Lee. "But there are certainly indications that the inhabitants of this ship were marked down by the Tagossa, and removed, leaving the vessel to the mercy of the wind and sea. But perhaps we shall gain more enlightenment after we have made a further examination."

They passed out of the cabin, and

went forward towards the fo'c'sle. Before they reached it, however, I intercepted them. Tregellis-West and Tommy Watson were with me, and the other juniors were looking on.

The evening was now advancing, and the sea all around was wonderfully calm and blue. Not a breath of wind stirred the canvas overhead, and the only sounds, except for those caused by ourselves, were the creaking of the ropes and the rigging caused by the gentle swaying of the vessel in the swell.

"What's the game, guv'nor?" I asked, halting in front of Nelson Lee. "You look pretty keen over something."

"Don't bother me now, Nipper," said Lee. "I am making a tour of the ship, in order to get to the bottom of the mystery."

"Oh, good egg!" I said. "May I come, too?"

"If you wish—but don't get in the way, young 'un."

Nelson Lee and Dorrie and Captain Mason passed down into the stuffy forecastle, and I followed. But we did not remain there for long; it was obvious at the first glance that nothing of importance was to be found.

"What's the next move?" inquired Mason.

"We will take up one of the forward hatches, and have a look into the hold," replied Nelson Lee. "The ship is fairly well loaded with something; but that may turn out to be ballast. However, we will soon find out the truth."

It was not a very long job to unbatten one of the hatches, and, when this was off, we stared down into a deep, black cavity. There was a ladder leading downwards into the depths, and Nelson Lee pulled an electric torch from his pocket, and proceeded to explore.

"Do we go down, too?" asked Dorrie.

"Oh, we might as well," said Captain Mason.

They followed Nelson Lee into the hold, and I brought up the rear. And when we reached the bottom we found that the great space was well filled with gigantic packing-cases. These cases were nearly new, and there were foreign words upon them, probably indicating their contents.

"H'm! This doesn't seem to be particularly interesting," said Nelson Lee. "Glassware—fragile! It appears that the cargo consists of glassware, Dorrie. Quite harmless, eh? The schooner was apparently an ordinary trading vessel. But we must not trust to appearances too much. We'll have one of these lids off."

"Why, what do you expect to find?" asked Captain Mason.

Nelson Lee smiled.

"To tell you the exact truth, I fully expect to find glassware," he replied. "But, at the same time, it is just as well to be certain. I am not inclined to take these packing-cases at their face value, as it were."

It was a somewhat difficult task to wrench open the lid of one of the big cases, for it was iron bound and extremely strong. However, a belaying pin was brought into operation, to say nothing of a chisel which Tommy Watson had fetched from some other part of the ship.

And, finally, the lid was off, and we looked down into the case. On the top we could see a large amount of sawdust and shavings—the usual packing for glassware. Nelson Lee dived his hand in, and drew out a small, long parcel, which, upon examination, proved to be a dozen small tumblers fitted into one another.

"Sold!" grinned Lord Dorrimore.

"Well, we sha'n't be in want of drinking vessels!" said Captain Mason. "Yes, Mr. Lee, this cargo is quite innocent."

"So it would appear," said Nelson Lee thoughtfully. "But we might as well dive a little deeper, just to make sure."

He proceeded with his examination, and drew forth parcel after parcel of glassware, until, in fact, he had taken about a quarter of the contents out of the box. Then Lee uttered an exclamation, and drew something quickly up.

"This seems to be rather heavy, for glass!" he said crisply. "And it doesn't altogether feel correct, either."

He tore the wrappings from the object quickly, and then, after a moment or two, an object was revealed which brought forth several exclamations of astonishment. For Nelson Lee held in his hand a brand new, glittering revolver!

"By gad!" said Lord Dorrimore blankly. "Why should that revolver

be buried in the midst of all this glassware?"

"My dear fellow, I rather fancy that there are a few score more revolvers in this case," said Nelson Lee. "The glassware is merely a blind—a safeguard in the event of a sudden examination. Now that we have started on this examination we will finish it—thoroughly."

It was finished thoroughly.

The box was completely emptied, and it proved to contain exactly one hundred heavy revolvers, all of them of a most expensive type, and brand new. And the case had been completely lined with glassware—the revolvers were all contained in the centre. No matter which side of the box had been opened, glass-ware would have been discovered.

Nelson Lee cast his eye over the great pile of cases.

"There must be enough arms here to supply a division!" he exclaimed grimly. "And I rather fancy that those longer cases contain rifles. But we will see; we will not be content with this one peep."

It did not take long to get two or three other boxes open; and Nelson Lee's surmise was proved to be correct. Many brand new rifles were unpacked, and, in another case, box after box of cartridges were revealed.

In short, the cargo of the Argos, although ostensibly glass-ware, really consisted of arms and ammunition—rifles and revolvers in sufficient numbers to arm a very large force of men.

"I do not pretend to understand what this all means," said Nelson Lee, at length. "It is extraordinary that the ship should have been abandoned with such an extremely valuable cargo as this in her holds. But perhaps we shall arrive at a solution sooner or later. And now we will continue with our investigations."

They climbed on to the deck once more. Darkness had now fallen—for the operations in the hold had taken well over an hour. Mr. Powell, one of the engineers from the airship, had taken upon himself to set burning the port and starboard lights. Other lamps had been lighted in the saloon and down in two or three of the cabins. A dead calm still lay over the sea, and not another light could be seen; there was no other craft within sight.

Nelson Lee only made a short examination of the after hold. It contained packing-cases in exactly the same manner as the forward hold, and it was obvious that these packing-cases were similarly filled.

Lee made his way right down into the bowels of the ship—down into the store-rooms near the keel. And here, after a barren search of half an hour, he came upon something of great interest.

In a small, cupboard-like store-room—a place which was fitted with a heavy door—he found a number of curious-looking metal cases, and, after a very brief examination, he turned to his companions with an almost startled look in his eyes.

"Upon my soul!" he exclaimed in a low voice. "High explosive."

"Eh?" said Dorrie.

"For Heaven's sake take that cigarette out of your mouth!" snapped Lee. "There is no telling what fumes there are in the atmosphere. I detected a curious smell as I came in. There is enough high explosive here to blow this vessel into a million particles."

"By gad!" said Dorrie, backing hastily out of the store-room.

He stamped upon his cigarette in the passage, and then re-entered the cupboard-like apartment. Nelson Lee, of course, was using an electric torch, and there was no danger from that.

"But why was this high explosive put here?" asked Captain Mason. "By what I can see, it is not protected or disguised in any way. And what are those wires leading downwards? They look like electric bell wires."

Nelson Lee was already examining them, and he did so very gingerly, without laying his fingers upon anything. He flashed his light about here and there, and at last he looked up.

"I am beginning to understand," he said slowly. "According to all the rules of chance, this ship ought to have been blown to atoms at exactly seven o'clock, although I cannot say on what day. As you will see, these wires lead to an electric battery, and the battery, in turn, is connected with a cheap clock. It was so arranged that the contact should take place when the hands of the clock reached seven."

"And why didn't that happen?"

"For the simple reason that the clock stopped—at exactly half-past six," said Nelson Lee. "The hour hand and

the minute hand jammed—as clock hands sometimes will—causing the mechanism to stop. But for that trivial defect, this ship would have been at the bottom of the sea by this time."

"And so should we have been!" said Dorrie bluntly. "There's no doubt that Providence took a hand in the game, Lee, when that clock stopped. For, if this schooner hadn't walked into the scene when it did, we should have gone down with the airship."

Nelson Lee nodded.

"You are undoubtedly right there, Dorrie," he said. "I can now understand why the ship was abandoned so hurriedly. No doubt the destroyers gave themselves a clear hour, or even more, in order to get away. But the very presence of this explosive hastened their movements."

"And why was it done?" asked Dorrie.

"Obviously to destroy the cargo," said Lee. "And we must be very careful how we deal with this infernal contrivance. If that clock happens to start going——"

"We shall start going—pretty quickly!" said his lordship. "We shall go skywards, and there'll be nothing left of us to tell the tale. I'm not afraid of a lion or a wild elephant, but when it comes to cartloads of high explosive, my knees begin to shake. You don't mind if I go on deck while you perform the operation, do you?"

Dorrie, of course, was only joking. He stood there while Nelson Lee cut the wires and disconnected the entire affair. Not one of them knew precisely how those wires were fitted, and it was quite possible that an explosion would take place. But they stood there quite calm, and as cool as though no danger existed.

"The next thing is to heave these cases overboard," said Nelson Lee. "We have no earthly use for this high explosive on board. It is deadly dangerous, even if no light is brought near it—that is, no open flame. Explosive of this nature sometimes has a habit of going off on its own accord."

"So it'll be quite a cheerful business carrying it up to the deck!" said Mason. "We'd better not give any to Lord Dorrimore to carry—he's bound to stumble on those narrow stairs."

"Rubbish!" said Dorrie. "I'll do my share."

But, in spite of his protest, he was not allowed to. Dorrie was proverbially clumsy, and he was just as likely to drop the explosive as to carry it. And so Mr. Morgan and the other two airship officers were called down, and before twenty minutes had elapsed every ounce of the explosive was overboard.

Nelson Lee wiped his brow, and breathed a sigh of relief.

"Well, I'm glad that's over," he said thankfully. "The facts, as we know them, are somewhat startling. This ship, filled with arms and ammunition, was left deserted on the ocean, with the clear intention of blowing it up so that all traces should be destroyed. Now, we don't know the authors of this act, but I strongly suspect that they are connected with Mordania, and with the Tagossa in particular."

"And what do you propose now, Mr. Lee?" asked Captain Mason.

"Well, I think a little supper would come rather welcome," replied Lee. "I'm tremendously hungry, and after that we will keep watches while the others sleep. And to-morrow, no doubt, we shall be able to communicate with some passing steamer. It ought not to be long before we reach port—it doesn't particularly matter which port."

Lord Dorrimore nodded.

"As long as the weather remains as it is now, we're not likely to reach anything," he observed. "We've moved about ten yards in five hours; and if the wind springs up we shall fall out of the frying pan into the fire. Both you and I, Lee, are pretty handy with a sailing yacht, but we could never hope to handle this schooner in a stiff breeze. As for the others, they know about as much of seamanship as my left boot. We shall be in a pretty pickle if the weather gets really rough."

"Well, it's no good looking on the worst side of things," said Lee. "We've come through safely so far, and we must trust to luck to carry us to the finish. And now for some supper."

The juniors did not know anything about the high explosive incident until it was all over—until the stuff had been cast overboard. Then, of course, it didn't matter, and they excitedly discussed the situation.

But they were wondering when they would be able to communicate with the outer world—when they would be able

to send messages to anxious parents and relatives.

"Well, it can't be long now," remarked Church. "Some time to-morrow we will probably be able to signal to a passing steamer, and it's quite likely that they have wireless on board."

"Exactly," said Tommy Watson. "Then they'll be able to send a message over to England, telling everybody that we all escaped. It's quite likely that they believe we're dead, and that's simply rotten."

Handforth grunted.

"It doesn't matter twopence what they think!" he declared. "After all, we're alive, and we shall soon let 'em know all about it. At the present moment, I'm thinking about this mystery, and, as a matter of fact, I mean to elucidate it."

"My dear chap, the best thing you can do is to go to bed and forget all about it." I grinned. "The guv'nor is here, and he'll do all the elucidating that's necessary. If you start playing about, you'll only make a mess of things."

Handforth glared.

"Of course, I only expect sneers from you!" he said tartly. "That's the worst of being jealous. You know how jolly keen I am on detective work, and you're afraid that I shall get to the bottom of the mystery before Mr. Lee."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Everybody roared.

"That's it, cackle away!" said Handforth bitterly. "I don't expect any support from you asses. I intend to conduct this inquiry on my own lines, and I don't want any interference or any criticism. Now, what is the mystery? We'll just go over the facts and see how they stand."

"Oh, my hat!" groaned Church. "He's fairly started now!"

Handforth ignored the interruption.

"This ship was deserted," he went on. "We found it sailing on the ocean without a soul on board, and with a terrific load of arms and ammunition packed secretly in the hold. Not only that, but there was a large dose of high explosive packed away in a storeroom, with the evident intention of blowing the whole ship to mincemeat. Now, I've got a theory about all this."

"Oh, good!" I said. "Let's hear it."

"So you're becoming interested now—eh?" said Handforth, trying to look important. "Well, my theory is this. The ship was found deserted, and I'll guarantee that the whole crew were conspirators, including the captain and officers. They were taking this load of war material up to the Bolsheviks. But somebody on board was a traitor, and he meant to blow everybody up. But the captain must have got wind of the plot, and he and the crew left the ship."

"Begad!" murmured Sir Montie. "What amazin' deductions!"

"Well, I rather pride myself that they're pretty cute!" said Handforth. "What do you say, Nipper?"

I grinned.

"I don't think I'd better say it." I replied. "I hate causing trouble."

"What are you getting at, you ass?"

"Well, if you want plain language, I think that theory of yours is sheer piffle!" I said frankly. "And, if you like, I'll proceed to pull it to pieces."

"It's more than you could do!" said Handforth aggressively.

"We'll see," I went on. "To begin with, you reckon that the war material on this ship was booked to go to Russia?"

"Exactly."

"Which port, for example?"

"Well, any old port," said Handforth vaguely. "Petrograd, for example."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Petrograd," I grinned. "Then what the dickens is the ship doing in the Adriatic Sea? Odessa would be more likely, but in order to reach Odessa the Argos would find it necessary to go round Greece, up the Aegean Sea, through the Dardanelles, past Constantinople, and then into the Black Sea. So that's knocked the bottom out of your precious little wheeze."

But Handforth was obstinate.

"Nothing of the kind!" he said. "In a case of this sort, you've got to look at the facts. Which country wants arms and ammunitions now? Russia! Therefore, it stands to reason that this ship was bound for Russia. That's logic!"

"Well, I can see there's no sense in arguing with a fathead like you!" I went on. "But there's another point. You reckon that one member of the crew was a traitor? Where did he get all that high explosive from to blow up the ship?"

"Oh, that was included in the cargo!" said Handforth, who was never at a loss.

De Valerie yawned.

"Well, I think we've had enough of this," he said. "I'm off to my little bunk, and you fellows had better follow my example. If we go on much longer, I shall be dreaming about Handforth and his theories all night."

"You—you silly ass!" began Handforth warmly.

But the other fellows took no notice of him, and were soon below getting into their bunks. They rather revelled in the new conditions, for they were altogether novel. Fortunately, the sailing-ship was in a fairly clean condition, and the sleeping bunks were quite comfortable.

I did not go to sleep at once. It was rather stuffy below, the night was not at all cold. There were two other fellows in the little cabin with me—of course, Tregellis-West and Tommy Watson. They were soon asleep, but I sat on the edge of my bunk for some little time, only half undressed.

Then, after a while, I slipped out, went along to the companion, and passed up on to the deck. The stars were still shining, but they did not look quite so brilliant as before. There was a certain haziness in the atmosphere, and I came to the conclusion that we were in for a change of weather. But at present a complete calm reigned. Hardly a breath of wind disturbed the spread of canvas overhead, and the schooner rolled lazily to and fro in the gentle swell.

Up on the poop I could see Nelson Lee and Lord Dorrimore, chatting. They were leaning against the rail, smoking their pipes. Captain Mason had apparently turned in.

The ship required no attention, although a man was at the wheel on duty. He had nothing to do. Everything was quiet, still, and peaceful.

CHAPTER IV.

AN ALARM IN THE NIGHT.

HANDFORTH sat up.

He blinked into the darkness of the cabin, but could see nothing—nothing, that is, except the hazy and uncertain outline of the porthole. He listened carefully, but only heard the steady breathing of the three other fellows who shared the cabin, and the faint creakings of the gear above decks.

Handforth was rather puzzled. He had not been sleeping very soundly, mainly because he had been attempting to put his precious theory into reasonable shape. But he had certainly dozed, and then, for some reason or other, he had been aroused. He felt quite certain that he had heard footsteps.

But now everything was quiet.

"Oh, rats!" muttered Handforth. "I suppose it must have been my fancy. In any case, why shouldn't I hear footsteps? Some of the chaps may be dodging about, for all I know. There's no sense in getting suspicious."

He was just about to lay down again when he listened more intently than ever. This time there was no doubt about it. Somebody was moving about in the passage, just outside, and the movements were stealthy and strange.

Handforth, with his mind on startling theories, became instantly alert. All sorts of wild ideas surged through his mind. What was the explanation of these stealthy footsteps? The leader of Study D slipped quietly out of his bunk and tiptoed towards the door. He stood there listening.

For a moment or two he heard nothing. Then he gave a little start, for he heard something brush against the other side of the door. It was as though a hand had been passed across the surface of the woodwork. Obviously somebody was feeling his way along the corridor. But could it be one of the juniors? Certainly this was the most logical explanation, but Handforth was not inclined to accept that.

He decided then and there to make investigations. So without troubling to dress, he quietly opened the door and peered out.

All was darkness. But at the end of the passage a little shaft of light came down the companion from a lamp, which had been placed on deck at the head of the stairs to show as a guide.

Gazing down the passage, Handforth became aware of the fact that his clear vision was obstructed. Something moved, something was creeping along the passage towards the companion.

Whether it was Handforth's imagination or not, he could not be quite sure, but it seemed to him that this strange figure was of an uncouth shape. It appeared to be shaggy and hairy, and not at all like that of a human being.

Fresh perils await our adventurers, who, although having escaped drowning, find themselves stranded on the wild coast of Mordania, a mountainous country inhabited by fierce tribes of bandits.

And Handforth felt his skin tingle, and he instinctively hung back. There was something very sinister and uncanny about the movements of that figure. But Edward Oswald pulled himself together and set his teeth.

"Oh, rot!" he muttered. "What's the good of me fancying things like this? I'll bet a penny it's only one of the fellows acting the giddy goat!"

And Handforth walked firmly out into the passage, and made a sudden run down towards the companion. It was his intention to pounce upon the figure from behind, and, if it proved to be a junior, to punch him firmly and squarely upon the nose. This would be a punishment for disturbing Handforth's peaceful slumbers.

But Handforth had hardly reached the object when it turned. It did not utter a sound—but Handforth did. He gave vent to a startled cry and fell back, with his eyes staring and with his mouth open, and that creepy feeling became ten times more pronounced. He could even feel his hair rising.

For the thing he looked upon was certainly ghastly.

Dimly Handforth saw before him an uncertain, shaggy figure. There was a face, with awful vacant-looking eyes, and with the skin smothered with hair. Handforth only caught one glimpse, but it was sufficient. He had impressed upon his vision a picture of that terrible hairy countenance and the shaggy body. Then the object charged into him.

"Good heavens!" panted Handforth desperately.

Something which felt like a claw took hold of his arm. He was whirled round, and sent staggering backwards down the passage. He heard a scuffle, and then all became silent. The thing had gone, apparently into thin air.

"Help!" roared Handforth, struggling to his feet. "Hi, you fellows! Help! Mr. Lee—Nipper! Help!"

As a matter of fact, Handforth hardly knew what he was saying. His mind was in a whirl, but he was quite convinced that his imagination had not played him false. He had actually seen that dreadful thing.

A door opened a little distance away, and Reginald Pitt looked out.

"What's all this din?" he asked sleepily.

"I—I've just seen something!" gasped Handforth, finding it rather difficult to stand steadily, his legs, for some absurd reason, seemed incapable of sustaining the weight of his body. "It was something awful!"

Pitt stared.

"What the dickens are you talking about?" he asked.

"I tell you——"

But before he could say anything further I came hurrying down from the deck, for I had been up there at the time of the disturbance. As a matter of fact, I had nearly dozed off into a sleep under the lulling influence of the quiet night and the gentle motion of the ship.

"Who's fighting down here?" I asked briskly. "Oh, it's you, Handforth? What's the trouble? Was that you yelling just now?"

"Yes, it was," said Handforth, breathing hard. "Where's Mr. Lee?"

"Up on deck."

"No, he isn't," put in Pitt. "Mr. Lee's just coming down."

The guv'nor appeared, and he politely inquired what the disturbance was about and whether he could be of any assistance.

"We can't understand it, sir," said Pitt. "Handforth suddenly started yelling at the top of his voice—shouting for help, and all the rest of it. I think he must have been having a row with some of the other chaps——"

"Nothing of the kind!" put in Handforth.

"Now, boys, you mustn't make all this disturbance," said Nelson Lee. "You ought to be all asleep by this time, and you had better go back to your bunks——"

"Hold on, sir!" interrupted Handforth. "I haven't told you what happened. Not three minutes ago I saw an awful face staring at me——"

"Are you talking about my face?" asked Pitt warmly.

"No, of course not, you ass, although I'm glad you know what your face is really like!" retorted Handforth. "I'll tell you all about it, sir," he added, turning to Nelson Lee.

"It was like the face of a gorilla, all covered with hair, and with two horrible eyes staring out at me. And he was covered with something that looked like fur."

"What in the world are you talking about, Handforth?" asked Nelson Lee. "Covered with fur? A hairy face? My

dear boy, you must have been dreaming!"

"But I haven't been dreaming, sir!" declared Handforth firmly. "I'm not a chap of that sort—I don't fancy things!"

"Oh, never!" murmured Pitt.

"Well, let me hear all about it, Handforth," said Nelson Lee. "If you really did see anything, you might as well tell me the exact story. Go ahead!"

Handforth took a deep breath.

"Well, it was like this, sir," he began. "I was asleep in my bunk when I suddenly woke up. I couldn't imagine why I woke up at the time, but I had a feeling that something out of the ordinary had aroused me. I am like that, sir. The slightest disturbance of an unusual nature always finds me on the alert."

"Quite so!" said Nelson Lee dryly. "But there is no need for you to tell me of your wonderful qualities, Handforth. Please go ahead with the story."

"Well, as I said, sir, I was awakened by something of an unusual nature," repeated Handforth. "I couldn't tell what it was, of course, but I determined to make immediate investigations. I didn't see any reason why I should hang about and let the thing pass. Everyone else was asleep, and it was therefore up to me to get on the job. So I opened the door of the cabin and looked out."

"And what did you see?"

"Something was out in the passage," said Handforth mysteriously. "It was something which crouched down, and which moved stealthily along towards the companion. I knew at once that everything was not as it should be. This object looked like a huge gorilla, or something of that kind——"

"Come, come, Handforth!" protested Nelson Lee. "This won't do. You can't tell me seriously that you saw a gorilla moving along the passage?"

"I'm not actually saying that, sir," said Handforth. "But I do know that this object wasn't an ordinary man; but I determined to make sure, so I rushed down the passage and pounced on him from behind—at least, I meant to pounce on him."

"But you didn't actually do so?"

"No, sir," said the junior. "Before I could get there the thing turned round, and I distinctly saw its face. I can't describe it, sir, it was so awful; it was just like a face out of a nightmare—covered with hair, and with vacant-looking eyes which stared at me in the most horrible way. Then, before I could do anything, something grabbed hold of my arm—something that felt like a vice. I was lifted clean off my feet and thrown yards down the passage, just as though I were a sack of feathers!"

Handforth had drawn somewhat upon his imagination; but, as Nelson Lee had been prepared for this, it didn't much matter.

"Is that all, Handforth?" asked Lee, at length.

"That's all, sir," replied Handforth. "And enough, too, I should think!"

"H'm! Well, it seems to me that your reference to a nightmare was not far from the mark, my boy," said Nelson Lee indulgently. "I'm afraid you partook of supper rather too heartily ——"

"Why, don't you believe me, sir?" asked Handforth indignantly.

"My dear boy, you surely do not expect me to credit this story?" asked Nelson Lee. "You know as well as I do that this ship was absolutely deserted when we came on board, and I do not think there is anybody among our own company who answers to the somewhat hairy description you have supplied. The fact is, Handforth, you allowed your imagination to get the better of you."

Handforth stared, literally staggered.

"But—but I did see it, sir—really and truly!" he exclaimed quickly. "It wasn't imagination—it wasn't a nightmare! I woke up, and went out into the passage, and I saw this thing here, just where we're standing. There's no spoof about it, sir—I never imagine things!"

Nelson Lee shook his head.

"As a matter of fact, Handforth, you are a highly imaginative young man," he said calmly; "that is why I do not pin much faith to this story of yours. I know from past experience that you are liable to manufacture details with singular ease. I do not say that you deliberately intend to deceive; but you have an unfortunate habit of letting your tongue run away with you. You fancy a certain thing, and this fancy takes such a strong hold upon you that you firmly believe it to be actual fact."

Handforth nearly exploded. He did not like being told of his weakness at any time, but just now it was particularly unwelcome. For he actually had

seen this thing; it had really occurred. There was no question of imagination about it.

And yet Nelson Lee and everybody else regarded him with indulgent smiles. They apparently took it for granted that he had seen nothing at all, except the phantoms of his own imagination—which was distinctly unfortunate.

"And now you'd better get back to bed," said Nelson Lee briskly. "And to-morrow night, Handforth, I should advise you to partake of less supper ——"

"But—but, you silly ass——" gasped Handforth. "I—I mean——"

He paused, suddenly realising whom he was addressing.

"I—I beg your pardon, sir!" he grinned. "I—I didn't mean to say that! But you're wrong if you think I imagined all this. I really saw this thing in the passage, and it was exactly as I have described."

Handforth clutched at Nelson Lee's sleeve.

"Don't you believe me, sir?" he went on earnestly. "I'm not spoofing—honour bright! The thing was in this passage, and I couldn't possibly dream anything like that! I only wish to goodness that somebody else had been with me, and then perhaps you would have believed it."

Nelson Lee stroked his chin thoughtfully.

"Well, Handforth, we will not discuss the matter further now," he said. "You had better get back to bed without any loss of time, and, if necessary, we will go into the matter again in the morning. You other boys must return to your bunks, too."

With great reluctance Handforth returned to his cabin. Personally, he wanted to search the ship from end to end, then and there; but there was a note of finality in Nelson Lee's tones which could not be overlooked. Handforth was boiling with indignation and outraged dignity.

"Well, I thought you had more sense," said Church, sitting on the edge of his bunk. "Fancy rousing the whole ship, and making all that fuss over a fatheaded nightmare——"

"Nightmare!" roared Handforth fiercely. "Are you going to start now? If you say that again, you babbling lunatic, I'll punch you until you can't stand, and then pitch you through the porthole!"

This was obviously an idle threat, and Church grinned.

"Keep your hair on!" he said cheerfully. "But you must admit, Handy, that you've beaten your own record this time. How the dickens you had the nerve to tell that yarn to Mr. Lee fairly beats me!"

"Yarn!" howled Handforth. "It's the truth, I tell you."

"Oh, draw it mild——"

"I saw that thing out in the passage, and if you say I didn't there'll be trouble!" said Handforth aggressively. "I don't want any of your rot, and I'm not going to have any!"

McClure yawned.

"Oh, leave him alone, Churchy!" he said sleepily. "There's no sense in arguing all night. Let him have his own way; he did see some weird monster in the passage, and all the other details. Perhaps the ship is haunted, and perhaps Handy saw a ghost!"

And McClure rolled into his bunk and composed himself for sleep. Church did likewise, but Handforth marched up and down the little cabin with restless strides. However, at length he thought it just as well to turn in.

Meanwhile, Nelson Lee and Lord Dorrimore had returned to the poop, and were leaning idly against the rail.

"Queer how these boys get such ideas into their heads," remarked Dorrie. "By gad! Did you ever hear a yarn like it, old man. A shaggy monster with vacant eyes! Yo gods and little fishes! What a nightmare!"

"Yes, it was certainly rather vivid," agreed Nelson Lee thoughtfully.

"Obviously, it was a piece of pure imagination——"

"I'm not quite so sure about that," interrupted Nelson Lee.

"Eh?"

"I know well enough that Handforth is a highly imaginative junior," said Lee. "I know, also, that he is prone to exaggerate, and, accordingly, I take about fifty per cent. off his statement. But I believe he had a foundation for this story."

"You think he really saw something?"

"I do."

"But, my dear old chap, what could he see?" inquired Dorrie. "One of the other boys? Surely Handforth.

with even his wonderful imagination, could not mistake a boy for the awful thing he described!"

"He was very persistent," said Nelson Lee, "and I certainly think, Dorrie, that he saw something which has not appeared to you or I. We only assumed that the ship was deserted—that is to say, we did not make any careful search."

Lord Dorrimore stared.

"No careful search!" he repeated. "Why, hang it all, I didn't think your memory was so short, Lee. We looked everywhere—we went down into the store-rooms, into the holds, and we turned out the whole bally ship!"

"That's quite right," agreed Nelson Lee; "but, at the same time, there were many places where we did not search—for example, down in the bilge. Not a particularly attractive place, but a good spot for hiding."

Dorrie shook his head.

"I don't quite see it," he said. "I think you're on the wrong track, Lee. Personally, I'm certain that Handforth manufactured the whole yarn—not with the deliberate intention of spoofing us, but mainly because he's built that way. Anyhow, I'm turning in. What about you, Lee?"

"Well, I shall remain on duty for another three hours," said Nelson Lee. "Then Mason will relieve me, and I shall get some rest. You will be required at about seven o'clock, so you'd better make the best of your time."

"Anything you like," said Dorrie. "If a wind happens to spring up, give me a call, and I'll get busy with the sails. I don't know much about these schooners, but I might be handy. There ain't many of us on board, and if a wind does come, we shall need all hands on deck."

And Lord Dorrimore went off below, whilst Nelson Lee remained leaning against the rail, smoking thoughtfully. He did not keep this position for long, but moved away and went towards the companion.

Everything was quiet on deck, and Nelson Lee's presence there was not actually necessary. He went below after a minute or two, and prowled about the dark passages. He was still thinking about that story, and, somehow or other, he was beginning to feel convinced that the junior had really seen something of a peculiar nature. And Nelson Lee wished to have a look round.

He went right down to the store-rooms—down below in the very heart of the ship; but during this search he saw nothing suspicious, and heard no peculiar sounds. Now and again came the scuffle of rats, but Lee took no notice of this.

He decided to go on deck again, and to leave matters until the morning. He could not very well search the whole ship single-handed.

He was not far from the companion when he suddenly came to a halt. He flattened himself against one of the walls, and stood there as motionless as a statue. At the top of the companion stairs he had caught sight of a crouching form, dim and indistinct against the sky; and he did not want the form to know that he was near. Instinctively, Nelson Lee knew that this figure was the one that had scared Handforth. He had met with success, although quite accidentally.

Turning his head slightly, he stared up the narrow companion; but now he could see nothing except one or two waning stars and a mass of rigging. So he moved forward, quietly and slowly.

He crept up the stairs like a shadow, and at last he was in such a position that he could look right along the deck, towards the prow of the ship. At first he could see nothing out of the common.

But then suddenly a figure appeared from behind the forward mast. It crept round stealthily and came forward with cat-like tread. Nelson Lee watched, hardly breathing. He could not see the thing very clearly, owing to the darkness of the night, but he knew well enough that the form did not belong to a boy, or to anybody else of the party.

And Nelson Lee decided to settle the matter, once and for all.

He suddenly sprang out, raced down the deck, and grappled with the unknown. The thing had no time to turn or to escape, and, as Nelson Lee seized it, a peculiar sound came to the detective's ears; it was something between a grunt and a gasp, but was quite inarticulate.

Then Nelson Lee found himself fighting desperately with the strange being. Lee was tremendously strong, and he was a famous fighter. He knew every

trick of boxing and wrestling, and, as a rule, it was a comparatively simple matter for him to deal with an adversary much heavier than himself.

But this present task was a different proposition.

The thing was fighting with the strength and desperation of a madman. Backwards and forwards along the deck they swayed, and even now Nelson Lee was not able to determine the character of the thing with which he was fighting. He was convinced, however, that it was a man. In the semi-darkness he caught one glimpse of a hairy face with two staring eyes; but then, with a sudden wrench, the thing twisted away.

And, unfortunately, Nelson Lee's heel caught against an obstruction at that moment. He staggered slightly, and this gave his opponent a momentary advantage. A fist came lashing out, and it struck Lee fairly and squarely upon the jaw.

He reeled over, fell to the deck, and the thing went tearing away towards the companion. It literally fell down headlong and vanished from view. And at that moment Captain Mason and Lord Dorrimore came hurrying along from below, having been aroused by the commotion.

"Anything the matter, Mr. Lee?" asked Mason briskly.

"Apparently there is," said Dorrie, when Lee did not answer. "By gad! He's bowled over, by the look of things. What's wrong, professor?"

Nelson Lee struggled to his feet, and tenderly rubbed his jaw.

"I don't think Handforth's imagination assisted him much this evening," he remarked. "Indeed, I am quite certain that the boy told us the absolute truth, with very few embellishments."

"Why, have you seen this remarkable object, too?" asked Dorrie.

Nelson Lee briefly explained what had occurred, and Lord Dorrimore whistled.

Mason did not know what on earth his companion was talking about, for he had been asleep when the first disturbance took place; but he was soon put in possession of all the facts.

"Then, according to this, there is somebody on board, after all," he said.

"Somebody who knows how to fight, too," said Lord Dorrimore. "We shall have to be wary of this mysterious person. What's your opinion, Lee?"

"As soon as it is daylight we shall search the whole ship from stem to stern," said Nelson Lee grimly. "We must put an end to this mystery."

But for the rest of the night the mystery remained unsolved.

CHAPTER V.

WHAT THE SEARCH REVEALED.

"GOOD business—a breeze!" said Tommy Watson.

He had just come on deck, and with him were several other juniors, including Tregellis-West and Handforth and Co. I had been on deck for some time, and was now leaning over the side, gazing at the foaming water as it sped past.

For a big change had taken place since midnight. The dawn had brought with it a fairly good breeze, to say nothing of heavy masses of thick clouds overhead. By all appearances, in fact, some rough weather was brewing.

The schooner was now slipping along at a good speed, with all sails set. Nelson Lee and Dorrie and Captain Mason had been working hard. The other men—Mr. Morgan, Mr. Bateman, etc.—had assisted to the best of their ability. But they knew practically nothing about the handling of a sailing-ship.

When it came to controlling an airship they were in their element, but on the sea they were fairly helpless. Between them, however, they had managed everything fairly well, and Captain Mason was now at the wheel.

Up till now Nelson Lee had had no opportunity of searching the ship. He had intended making this search as soon as daylight came. But the rising of the wind caused him to alter his plans. The main thing was to see that the sails were set correctly, and that everything was trim.

"Hallo, boys!" said Lord Dorrimore cheerfully, as the juniors came aft. "We sha'n't be long now, by the look of things. Before many hours have passed we ought to strike a regular shipping route, and then perhaps we shall be able to transfer to a big steamer and get back to civilisation. On the other hand, it's just as likely that we shall

hit the coast somewhere, and we shall probably hit it hard. With such a gang of land-lubbers on board, we shall be lucky if we don't wreck the blessed schooner before we get ashore."

"Oh, we shall be all right, sir," said Bob Christine. "The main thing I'm worried about is my people. They'll be in a terrible state; they'll think I'm dead, and by this time they are probably all dressed in black."

"Oh, well, they'll soon know different!" said Dorrie. "Taking everything into consideration, I reckon we've been deucedly lucky. We're still intact, the whole party, and we're not even scratched. When you come to think of all the perils we've passed through, it's rather a wonderful record."

The juniors were quite ready to agree with this. They could hardly believe that so much had really taken place since their departure from Suffolk. It seemed ages since they were all at Dorrimore Hall, cheerfully enjoying their Easter holidays, and yet, in reality, only a day or two had passed. A tremendous lot had been crowded into a short time.

And before any further discussion could take place, Nelson Lee arrived with Mr. Morgan and the two other officers. They were about to commence their search. I noticed that the guv'nor had his revolver handy.

"Shall I came, too, sir?" I asked.

"You may come if you wish, Nipper," replied Lee. "But it will be really impossible for all the other boys to come with you."

And so the search began. We went into every hold of the ship. We examined every storeroom and every cabin—even down to the bilge. But we drew a complete blank. There was not a sign of anybody on board.

"Well, this is queer," said Dorrie at last. "If you hadn't seen this apparition yourself, Lee, I should certainly think that Handforth——"

"We haven't examined the holds as thoroughly as I should like," interrupted Nelson Lee. "I think we had better renew our efforts in that direction."

"But, my dear man, we've turned the ship inside-out!" protested Dorrie.

"We have certainly looked in every likely place," agreed Nelson Lee. "But you are forgetting those packing-cases in the holds. They are huge things, and we have taken it for granted that they are all full. Perhaps one of them is empty; perhaps our mysterious friend has converted a large packing-case into a hiding-place. At all events, that is the only possible explanation, as far as I can see."

I listened.

"Now you come to mention it, sir, I remember seeing one of those packing-cases in the after-hold," I said. "The lid looked a little loose to me, and behind it there was a pile of rubbish. I wonder if the chap turned the stuff out of the case and got inside?"

We went aft without any further delay. Nelson Lee had not searched this hold himself—he had left it to Lord Dorrimore and me—and he was very keen when we climbed down the ladder and flashed our electric torches upon the pile of enormous packing-cases. At the first glance it seemed impossible that any living thing could be concealed in the hold. There was not an inch of space available.

"That's the case, sir," I said, indicating one which stood a little apart from the others.

Nelson Lee went across to the packing-case and touched the lid. He saw at once that it was loose, and, with a sudden heave, he sent the lid flying backwards. It had not been fastened at all.

A peculiar sound came to our ears, and then a figure appeared—or, to be more exact, the head and shoulders of a figure. Obviously the stranger had been fast asleep, and had known nothing of our efforts until Lee jerked the lid from the packing-case.

We stared at the unknown in amazement.

For he certainly presented an extraordinary sight. In the full glare of our electric torches there was nothing whatever uncanny about the man, although I can easily understand how Handforth had been so startled when seeing this apparition in the gloom of the passage.

We were gazing upon a man, a strange-looking man with long black hair, which hung over his shoulders in matted disorder. His beard was long, too, shaggy and uncut. It was quite certain, in fact, that the unfortunate individual had not been trimmed up for several months.

He was attired literally in rags. His clothing was worn to shreds, and how they hung on his person was something of a puzzle. And the man looked at us vacantly, like a hunted animal.

"By gad!" muttered Lord Dorrimore.

"Who can he be, sir?" I asked, in a whisper. "It seems that he's been a prisoner on this ship for months."

"Not necessarily, Nipper," said Lee. "But we will question him."

The guv'nor spoke to the man in English, French, Russian, and he even tried Greek. But the stranger did not answer. He did not seem to understand that he was being addressed. He merely continued to stare vacantly, gazing from one to another of us, as though he could not understand what we were.

Nelson Lee turned away at last, and looked at us significantly.

"The fellow is dumb and apparently deaf as well," he said, in a low voice. "Without a doubt he is quite insane. Harmless enough, I believe."

"Harmless," I echoed. "He didn't seem very harmless last night!"

"He merely wished to escape, and instinct told him to fight," said Nelson Lee. "I do not think for a moment that he would have attacked on his own account. There is some mystery here that I mean to unravel, Dorrie."

"You think the man is the victim of some outrage?"

"That is my opinion," said Nelson Lee. "He is certainly not a born lunatic. I am convinced that he has been driven out of his mind by some terrible shock. He will probably recover in time. But, for the present, he is quite incapable of rational action."

"What on earth shall we do with him?" asked Dorrie. "We can't leave him here, and we can't very well invite such a scarecrow to meals with us in the saloon."

"He must be removed to one of the cabins," replied Lee. "Perhaps after a day or two he will be able to give some account of himself. We shall see."

It was quite useless to ask the man to get out of the packing-case. He ignored everything that was said to him. But Nelson Lee persisted, and made signs. These failed, too. So, finally, the man was lifted out by force, and, although we had been prepared for a struggle, he did not resist.

He was led up to the deck, and then along to one of the cabins. Not for a moment did he show fight. He was as meek and mild as a lamb.

While on the deck I noticed him with greater curiosity than before. His clothing, for all its state of rags and tatters, was made of rich material, and it certainly struck me that the man was actually wearing a uniform. He was, in fact, an officer of high rank, if one could judge by his clothing.

"A jolly queer business, that's what it is," I remarked to a group of juniors after the stranger had been taken below. "Of course, he escaped from the hold last night——"

"How could he escape?" put in Watson.

"Well, we found a broken partition," I replied. "It doesn't seem to be broken at the first glance, and we didn't notice it to begin with. The fellow must have got through that way, and then come along the passage."

"I suppose you'll believe me now?" asked Handforth tartly.

"For once you were right, old son," I said. "But you can't blame us for discrediting that yarn of yours. I'm jolly curious about the man. I'd like to know who he is, and how he came to be placed in such a terrible fix."

Lord Dorrimore came strolling along the deck, and he was grinning.

"There'll be a change soon," he remarked. "They've fixed up an impromptu barber's shop down below, and our unknown friend won't know himself when he looks in the mirror. They're giving him a shampoo and a shave, and goodness only knows what else. He's taking it all as quietly as possible. When you see him again, boys, he'll be unrecognisable."

"What about his clothes?" I asked.

"Oh, they've routed out a suit from the locker in the captain's cabin!" replied Dorrimore. "I expect it will be several sizes too large, but it'll be a distinct improvement on the ragtime suit he's wearing at present."

Nelson Lee himself appeared before long, and I noticed that he was looking very keen. I went up to him at once.

"Have you formed any opinion, guv'nor?" I asked.

"Well—yes, as a matter of fact, I have," he replied. "In the first place, I believe the poor fellow was driven insane by the knowledge that the schooner was to be blown up," said Lee. "Apparently, at that time, he was a prisoner. He may have stopped the clock after escaping, but we don't know for certain. I am rather inclined to my original theory that the clock stopped of its own accord. Our unknown friend

was imprisoned, and he knew that the infernal machine was set. He went insane, but escaped later because instinct told him to search for food. No doubt he was looking for food last night."

"That's all very well," said Dorrie. "But who is he, and why was he bottled up in this ship? Why should he be treated in this way?"

Nelson Lee looked at us calmly.

"I have seen the man only a few minutes ago," he said. "His hair has been cut, and he is now clean-shaven. I am positively certain that I saw him some years ago at a large public gathering in Budapest."

"My hat!" I exclaimed. "You know him, guv'nor?"

"Yes, I think so," replied Lee quietly. "I have a good memory for faces, and I do not often get confused. I am convinced that I know the identity of our friend."

"Evidently somebody of importance," remarked Dorrie. "You say you saw him at a public gathering?"

"Yes."

"And who is he?"

"No less a person than Paul, Crown Prince of Mordania," replied Nelson Lee smoothly.

"What!"

"Eh?"

"The Crown Prince of Mordania."

"Oh, my goodness!"

"By gad!"

We all stared at Nelson Lee in amazement.

"Are—are you joking, sir?" I asked blankly.

"It is not my habit to joke in such circumstances, Nipper," replied Nelson Lee. "Astounding and preposterous as it sounds, I am sure, in my own mind, that the man below is Prince Paul of Mordania."

"Well, this is about the limit!" said Lord Dorrimore. "I believe you, Lee—I believe anything, by gad! Nothing would surprise me now; I'm past it! At the same time, I must admit that I'm rather curious."

"Curious!" I echoed. "I should think you are! How could it possibly happen that the Crown Prince of Mordania is imprisoned on this old schooner?"

"You are probably aware of the fact Nipper, that there has recently been grave trouble in the tiny kingdom of Mordania," said Nelson Lee. "When you come to look at the facts squarely, you will find nothing extraordinary in this present state of affairs. I assume that Prince Paul fell into the hands of revolutionaries many weeks ago. In fact, I remember reading something in a newspaper—quite an obscure paragraph—that Prince Paul had mysteriously disappeared. As I said, he was probably captured by revolutionaries, and held a prisoner in the hills. For some reason at present unknown to us he was placed on this ship, to be blown to atoms with the schooner itself. By chance the disaster was averted."

"Fortunately for Prince Paul, and, if it comes to that, fortunately for us," said Dorrimore. "By gad, the wind seems to be getting higher, and I believe I felt a spot or two of rain just now!"

His lordship was quite correct, and in less than ten minutes rain was pelting down fiercely. The wind increased in violence, and the sea correspondingly became rough. Without a doubt, we were booked for some bad weather.

But, so far, the schooner was skimming along freely, and she caused no trouble. This was all to the good.

Later on in the morning I went below and had a look at Prince Paul, for we had all taken it for granted that Nelson Lee was right in his surmise. The guv'nor has a wonderful memory of faces, and I do not think I have ever known him to be wrong. I was astounded by the difference in the man's appearance. With his hair cut and carefully brushed, with his face shaven, and attired in a rough but serviceable suit, he was not recognisable.

For I could now see that he was a tall, handsome man of about thirty, dark and impressive looking. But there was still that vacant stare in his eyes; he was not interested in his surroundings, although he partook of food eagerly and without any urging.

I watched him for some little time, and it was quite easy to see that he was a man of excellent upbringing. The very way in which he used his knife and fork proved this. He ate daintily, notwithstanding his hunger and his unfortunate state of mind, and when he had finished he allowed himself to be led to a locker, where he reclined on some cushions in comfort. It seemed to come quite natural to him to be waited upon.

But we were not able to give much attention to our guest.

For the wind continued to rise, and the sea became much blacker; in fact, the schooner was soon behaving in rather an alarming manner. She tossed about in the waves restlessly, and Nelson Lee and Dorrie and every other man on board were doing their utmost to keep the ship under control. Handforth, of course, offered to help, and, needless to say, this offer was declined.

There might come a time, Nelson Lee informed us, when our assistance would be useful, but there was very little we could do now. At first the fellows took keen enjoyment in running from section to section of the deck, dodging the masses of spray which constantly came on board.

It happened, however, that De Valerie and Christine and Lawrence, during one of these dashes, ran full tilt into a wave which swept over the side. They were not only drenched to the skin, but they were hurled into the scuppers with tremendous force.

All three were badly bruised, but otherwise unharmed. It was a lesson to the other juniors not to take any unnecessary risks, and, after that spray, dodging was taboo.

As the day advanced, so the wind increased, until the late afternoon found the schooner struggling along, nearly stripped of all sail, with Nelson Lee himself at the wheel. So far, everything had been all right. But what if the gale increased? What if it became a raging hurricane?

Without the slightest doubt, the vessel would become unmanageable, and then we should be in sore straits. Our only chance, it seemed, was to be rescued by another ship. And other ships were most inconsiderate—they didn't come anywhere near us.

Certainly, we saw a vessel or two occasionally, through the driving rain and spray; but they were always a long distance off, and, although we signalled for assistance, these signals were ignored.

"Things seem to be getting pretty lively," said Dorrie, when evening was coming on. "If this wind increases during the night we shall be in several kinds of a pickle. By gad! The waves are getting infernally high!"

"How far are we off the coast, sir?" asked Fatty Little.

"Goodness knows—I don't know!" replied his lordship. "We might be a hundred miles, or we might be ten. It's not a bit of good asking me. You see, we haven't got our bearings; we don't know where we are. We don't even know where we're making for now. It's a frightful position."

Dorrie spoke quite calmly, and even laughing. But there was grim truth in what he said. We didn't know where we were, and we didn't know whither we were going. So far, chance had played right into our hands. But would our run of luck continue?

It seemed not.

For when the day was drawing to a close, and when the storm was increasing with the coming of night, we caught sight of a big steamer only a short distance away. The rain had been driving down hard for a good hour, blotting out the horizon and everything around. We could only see the troubled sea on every hand.

And then the rain had held up for a short while. This big steamer was revealed, struggling along in the teeth of the wind, and only about a mile distant.

There was great excitement among the juniors, and even Dorrie looked anxious. Nelson Lee acted without hesitation. He sent up several distress rockets, for, of course, a number had been found on board.

The signals of distress went soaring upwards in the sky, and they must have been plainly visible to the steamer. But there was no response; the big ship went surging on its course without taking any notice.

At least, so it appeared to us. But the rain came pelting down again very soon, and we could only faintly see a bare outline of the steamer in the distance. Probably she raised signals, for it was hardly possible that her captain could have ignored our appeal for help.

"I hardly expected any reply," said Nelson Lee, shortly afterwards. "In my opinion, the steamer was herself in difficulties—not seriously so, but it was as much as she could do to fight against the wind. We must continue this struggle alone, and trust to Providence to see us through."

It was the only thing to be done.

But, with the night, the gale became a hurricane, and the schooner, creaking in every joint, went blindly on her way through the darkness and the smother.

What was to be the end of this alarming voyage? Somehow, I did not feel very optimistic.

CHAPTER VI.

CAST ASHORE.

THE wind howled fiercely through the rigging, and the great masts of the schooner bent perilously under the savage lash of the gale. It was night now—pitch black and terrifying.

It was impossible to see twenty yards in any direction. It was as though we were in a vast cavern, where no light could penetrate. Overhead dense black clouds obscured any light that might have come from the stars.

And rain pelted down pitilessly the whole time. It came in the wind, lashing into our faces fiercely and with terrible force. To remain on the deck for long seemed almost impossible.

Nelson Lee was still at the wheel, wrapped to his eyes in oilskins, and doing his utmost to keep the schooner with the wind. Once she got out of control it would be all up. Broadside to these heavy seas, she would wallow about in agony for a short time, and then founder—this, at all events, is what the majority of us believed.

But Nelson Lee rose to his task in a way which filled us all with admiration. He kept the schooner under control; never for an instant was she allowed to get broadside to the gale.

As to our course, this was a mystery. Nobody knew where we were going, or what direction we were taking—except, vaguely, that we were being driven in a south-easterly course.

It was impossible to give full attention to the sails. There was not a man on board who knew much about canvas of this type. And setting the sails of a big schooner is a task which calls for expert knowledge—first-class seamanship. The same applies to reefing the sails, and making everything snug for foul weather.

A great deal had been left to chance—and the wind. The result, of course, was what we might have expected. The force of the gale caused large masses of canvas to break away. With a terrible commotion, this canvas would flap for a short while in the wind, to burst, finally, with a report like that of a gun. And shreds of canvas were flying wildly in all directions. The rigging was flapping loose, and Heaven only knew what fresh disasters would overtake us.

There was only one thing that could be done, and that was to keep the vessel under control. Nelson Lee saw to this. Meanwhile, the juniors remained below, in the big cabin.

They didn't like to admit that they were scared; but they were, all the same. Some of them were terrified by the motion of the ship. This was, indeed, very startling. The schooner was rocking and dipping wildly; it was almost impossible to walk across the cabin.

At one moment the floor would be normal, and at the next it would tilt upwards in an alarming manner. Then, with a sickening lurch, down would come the floor again, to heave up in the opposite direction.

Handforth and Christine and three other fellows were in their bunks, fervently wishing that the ship would sink. They had no desire to live, for they were in the throes of sea-sickness. All interest in life had vanished—and anybody who has suffered the pangs of mal-de-mer is fully acquainted with the direful effects.

Hardly any of the others wanted anything to eat; but I urged them to take no notice.

"The best thing we can do is to have nothing," said Church. "We're all right now, but there's no telling when we shall be—— Whoa! That was a terrific lurch, if you like."

Church clutched at the table—which, of course, was fixed to the floor. He received a pile of plates and several cups in his lap, and they went crashing to the floor, to break into smithereens.

"Take my advice, my sons, and eat," I said. "It won't make you any worse; and if you are sea-sick, it'll be all the better. I've been through it, and I know!"

"Hear, hear!" said Fatty Little, who was already taking my advice. "Eating is the finest remedy for sea-sickness. It won't make any difference to me. Without food a chap is liable to any sort of illness. Grub is the only thing that keeps people alive. If ever I'm ill—it doesn't matter what it is—

I eat more grub than ever. It's the finest cure anybody can think of."

But Fatty, of course, was an exception, although, as a matter of fact, he wasn't quite so enthusiastic an hour later. For he became aware of sundry spasms beneath his waistcoat, to say nothing of an awful giddiness in his head; and very shortly afterwards Fatty was in precisely the same position as Handforth.

He went to his bunk and laid down, groaning.

"What you want is grub!" said De Valerie, who had come down to sympathise. "Grub—and plenty of it."

Fatty Little groaned.

"Great doughnuts!" he gasped. "Don't—don't talk of grub——"

"But, my dear ass, it's the finest remedy in the world!" said De Valerie cheerfully. "Some of the chaps are just bringing down some nice fat bacon, and some potatoes fried in a lot of oil!"

Fatty made a wild cry of anguish, and buried himself between the blankets. Food did not seem to be quite so acceptable to him now; the very mention of it made him turn white.

But, although the juniors had obtained a little relief by chipping the sufferers, they never forgot for an instant that the danger was real, and that any moment their safety might be gone.

It seemed that there had been hours of darkness, but when I looked at my watch I found that the time was only just ten o'clock. The greater part of the night had to be passed through, and we knew not what lay ahead.

If anything, the weather conditions were worse than before; and into the night we plunged—helpless and desperate. But all we could do was to wait—wait for what fate would bring. It was a night of terror.

Lord Dorrimore and Nelson Lee hardly said a word. They remained near the wheel for the most part, Dorrie doing everything he could, and refusing to go below even for a minute.

I remained on deck, too, keeping near the guv'nor. If any disaster overtook us, I wanted to be with Nelson Lee at the very moment. To pass along the decks was now an extremely perilous undertaking, for the waves were surging over the bulwarks in great rolling masses.

The roar of the gale was tremendous, and this, intermingled with the singing and rattling of the rigging, made conversation almost impossible.

The spray smothered the ship practically all the time, and but for our oilskins we should have been drenched through within a few seconds. Ahead lay absolute darkness, and we were being driven blindly forward with the storm.

And so the time went on, hour after hour. I found myself praying fervently that the daylight would soon come. The darkness was terrifying. But it was even now only just midnight, and we had many more hours to go through before the dawn would break.

It was about half-past twelve when an unusual note was heard in the smother of the gale. In spite of all the nerve-trying sounds, it was possible to distinguish something different, for a new sound had been added to the others.

We heard it again and again, and at first I could not imagine what it could be. I tried to place it, but failed. Listening carefully, and trying to shut out the other noises, I heard a deep, rolling booming sound. It came in one continuous roar, and seemed to be away on the port bow.

At last I decided to question Nelson Lee.

"Can you hear anything, guv'nor?" I roared, with my mouth close to his ear.

"Yes," he shouted back.

"Anything different, I mean?"

"Yes!" said Nelson Lee again.

"A booming noise!" I yelled. "Do you know what it is, guv'nor?"

"I do!" said Lee grimly. "Breakers."

"What?" I ejaculated, startled. "Are—are we near the coast?"

"There is no doubt, Nipper, that we are very near to land," shouted Nelson Lee. "We are in a position of deadly peril, and it would be pointless for me to say otherwise. We can only go blindly on, and trust to Providence; but I am seriously afraid that we are being driven on to the rocks!"

"Good heavens!" I muttered.

I stared straight before me—straight out over the side of the ship. I could see nothing but darkness—inky, im-

penetrable darkness. And still that ominous sound came—that rolling booming. It was louder now, and even more menacing than before.

I noticed that Lord Dorrimore was no longer present; at last he had gone below.

Why? It was not long before I knew the reason. Less than fifteen minutes later all the juniors came trooping up on deck, and they all came aft. Not only the juniors, but the airship officers and the three members of the crew. The whole ship's company, in point of fact, gathered on deck.

I knew the reason. Nelson Lee feared that we should soon strike the rocks, and he wanted everybody to have an equal chance when the dreadful moment arrived, as it certainly would arrive, sooner or later.

For now there was no longer any doubt.

The boom of the surf was above every other sound now. It made conversation an impossibility. And it seemed to me, as I strained my ears, that the awful noise came from the direction ahead. We were, in fact, bearing straight down upon the coast.

Perhaps ten minutes later the rain ceased, and we noticed that the clouds were now patchy. In one or two cases we could see a star twinkle for a moment before it was blotted out by other clouds.

And the darkness became less acute. I could make out the prow of the ship quite clearly from where I was standing. Then raising my gaze I looked ahead. It seemed to me that I could see something white, an uncertain, ever-changing line, and then, in a flash, I knew the truth.

That white line was the creamy surf, boiling on the rocks ahead. Gazing still higher, I saw rugged cliffs rising.

It was a great shock, although I had been expecting it. The schooner was, in fact, almost on the point of going ashore. There was no time to think of anything, or to do anything.

The end came then—at that moment.

A tremendous series of waves came up behind the schooner, pitching her up and down in a manner which we had not experienced before. And I knew the reason. It was because we were near the coastline, where the waves had greater strength and power. Up and up went the schooner, raising her bows until it seemed that she would never recover. Then, with a sickening lurch, she went down, shooting downwards into the trough of the sea. I thought the crash was coming even then. It did come, but not the final crash.

As we slid down, the whole ship gave a sudden jar, and I felt the decks quiver and shake beneath my feet. An awful grinding sound came from below. In short, the keel of the ship had just grazed upon a rock. Nothing more, but it was quite sufficient to send terror into our hearts.

Then once more we were lifted on high, lifted up until it was only with great difficulty that we retained our position on deck. We only did so by clutching at anything near at hand.

And, when we were on the crest of an enormous wave, we went flying forward. I took one deep breath, and waited. Instinctively I knew what would come.

Crash! Crash!

With a jar which knocked us in every direction, the schooner struck the rocks. It had come before I anticipated, before we had descended from the wave top. It seemed indeed that we had been lifted by that giant roller on to a mass of rocks which were really above the sea level.

The confusion and the noise was like pandemonium. I hardly knew what had happened for a moment or two. Two of the masts snapped like carrots, and went crashing overside in a terrible confusion of ropes and tangled canvas. If such a disaster as this had occurred in the open sea we should have been doomed.

An extraordinary sensation came to me. It seemed that the deck was firm and steady; it no longer lurched and swayed. Was it my imagination, or the actual truth? I had not time to determine, for gigantic waves were breaking over the stern in a continuous succession, sweeping the decks and making me terribly anxious for the safety of the others.

The disaster had not happened as Nelson Lee had expected. To begin with, we had not gone to pieces. By a remarkable trick of chance—and chance seemed to be taking a big hand in our affairs—the schooner had been lifted high on the wave and sent hurtling forward into the midst of some huge snags. And there she was perched, firm and fixed, rigid in the embrace of the rocks.

It was an extraordinary position, but after all, one which has occurred to many

a ship before. Instead of being battered down on the rocks again and again, and thus broken to pieces in less time than it takes to tell, she had been cast right up, and there remained a fixture. Not for long, perhaps, but for the time being.

The furious sea, cheated of its victim, surged up helplessly, dashing against the stern of the ship in impotent wrath. Wave after wave dashed against the schooner's sturdy old timbers. But, although the effect was appalling to witness, in reality it was not serious.

We were all drenched through, but, fortunately, unharmed otherwise. And there had been no loss of life. We were all present, every member of the party, even including Prince Paul of Mordania.

Conversation was still impossible, owing to the appalling roar of the breakers. The air was filled with the sound, and, incidentally, the air was filled with stinging spray, too. And there we clung, helpless, and wondering what would happen next.

And somehow it seemed to me that the waves were not quite so angry now as they had been. To get ashore was quite impossible. It would have been madness to attempt such a thing, for no boat could have lived in such a blinding smother. Not only that, but we should never have launched a boat. It was only possible for us to stay there, hoping that we should be delivered.

And as the time passed, so the waves decreased in violence; and we knew why this was. The tide evidently was running out, and, naturally, the waves receded further and further from their lost prey.

Now the sky was much clearer, and quite a number of stars were gleaming overhead. The wind, however, was just as forceful as ever, and we were chilled to the marrow before so very long.

For the time being it seemed that the schooner was safe. The sea still surged all round, but with much less violence now, and Nelson Lee decided that it would be safe for everybody to go below and to partake of hot tea or coffee, and, if possible, to get into dry things.

We had no change of clothing, of course; we were absolutely devoid of anything except what we stood in. We did not even possess a clean collar among the lot of us, for we had started out from Dorrimore Hall to go on a mere six hours' trip in the Suffolk Queen.

But we all got into warm blankets, and did our utmost to dry our clothing. And so the remainder of the night passed, finding us still safe and sound, although our trusty vessel was nothing but a wreck, lying helplessly upon the rocks. Considering everything, we had been amazingly lucky.

And, at length, when the dawn came we went on deck and found ourselves looking at a wild and rugged coastline. Black rocks stood up everywhere, and the cliffs rose menacingly ahead, and we were all surprised to see the position of our ship. It was lying fairly and squarely on the rocks; the tide was right out. Gazing over the side, we looked down upon rocks; the sea had even receded from beneath our keel.

Had we struck that coast while the tide was low we should have perished, one and all. There was not the slightest doubt on that point.

The wind was still fierce, but it had no terrors for us now.

"Well, guvnor, this is a queer state of affairs," I said, going up to Nelson Lee. "Where do you think we are?"

"I cannot say for certain," replied Lee; "but I believe that we have been shipwrecked on the coast of Mordania."

This was a queer coincidence, indeed!

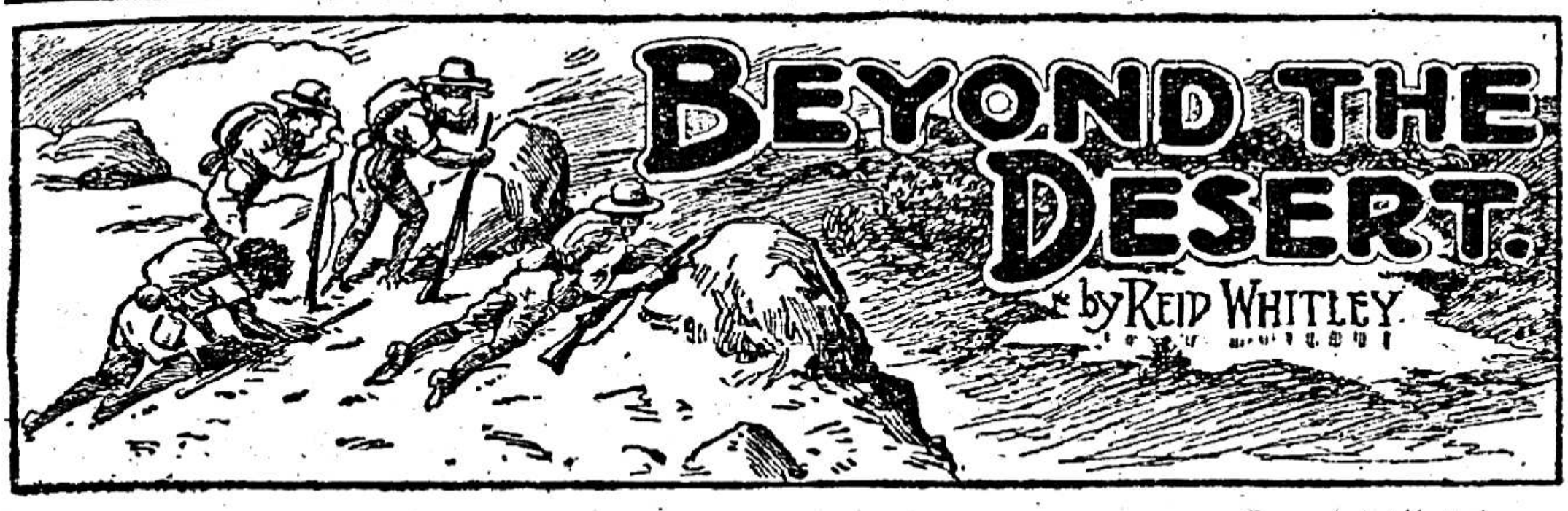
On the coast of Mordania! And below, in the cabin, sat Prince Paul! And the way was clear for us to go ashore—into safety.

Safety?

Had we known what amazing and startling times lay ahead of us, we should all have been very amazed indeed. For our adventures, instead of being over, were only just beginning!

THE END.

Start To-day This Grand New Australian Serial!



AUSTRALIAN TALE OF ADVENTURE BY AN AUSTRALIAN AUTHOR

FOR NEW READERS.

Jack Maxwell and Jim Harding have come to settle in Australia from the Old Country. They go to Cairns, where Jack has an uncle, Professor Maxwell, the naturalist and explorer. Hearing that the professor has been absent in the interior for some months, the young Englishmen decide to try and find him. They are joined by Tom Anson, an Australian, with whom they have struck up a friendship. Accompanied by Snaplus, a black tracker, they start off across the desert until they come to a dried up water-hole. Here they find a message from Jack's uncle, directing them to the Secret Valley where, after many strange adventures they find the professor.

(Now read on.)

The Keeper of the Narrow Way.

VERY early next morning, the professor, accompanied by his nephew, Anson and Harding, set out on their exploring trip towards the upper end of the valley, accompanied by four of the Bheels. Snaplus remained on guard over the hostage, Gom, by his own choice. He much preferred drowsing about in comfortable quarters to the risks and worries of the trail; and, having seen that the prisoner was secure and the bars in place across the door, he settled down to spend a happy day.

The exploring party marched on until, a little beyond the spot from which they had watched the battle in the water the night before, they came to a swing bridge similar to the one they had previously crossed on the further side of the village.

This they swung back after crossing, being confident that they could easily get it into place again with Anson's rope. Beyond this spot the path became less even. At one place it dipped, and for some fifty yards ran along the cliff face at a height of little more than five or six feet above the water.

The Bheels halted before descending the slope, twittering low among themselves and making signs that all should be silent, while they scanned the waters anxiously. Then, beckoning the whites to follow, they raced down as if for their lives.

But, as they got under way, Jack's foot dislodged a small stone which rolled a little way down the slope before him then plunged into the deep water at the cliff foot. The Bheels heard the splash and uttered a squeal of dismay. They had reached the lowest dip of the path, and there they halted for an instant in panic, then, turning, scuttled back towards the higher level.

They had moved only in time. Instinctively, the white men had halted and peered down into the depths. They saw something dark that might have been mistaken for a tangle of water weed, writhe and shoot upwards with the suddenness of a released Jack-in-the box. The water foamed, a dozen long, many-jointed, bony arms, each provided with a pair of snapping pinchers at the end, flung aloft, sweeping the ledge at the spot which the Bheels had quitted an instant before. Then two much larger pairs of pinchers appeared, and lastly a pair of horrible dull eyes, set on bony stalks, which swung this way and that, as though counting the party.

It made no attempt to clamber up to the ledge which was too narrow to accomodate it, but, after a long scrutiny, sank slowly back until it was just under water.

"Oh, my aunt! What a nice present for a nervous child!" exclaimed Jack. "Evidently he is the keeper of the pass. Shall we pot the beggar, uncle?"

"Stop! Let us try the effect of a few stones first. There is no need to advertise our presence here with firearms, and, besides, we must husband our ammunition. There is a good-sized chunk of rock which ought to upset the—— Eh, what? Look out!"

The Bheels howled, the whites raised their weapons, as, round a turn of the path beyond the dip, tail and neck fur erect, came one of the terrible long-toothed brutes that had attacked the three at their first coming into the valley.

It was smaller than these had been, not more than half-grown, though formidable enough none the less. Probably its youth accounted for its carelessness, since it never

paused; but, reckless of the menace that lay in wait, charged straight at the group of men beyond.

"Hold your fire till it's close!" called Jack. "It may not—— Ah!"

The great creature had reached the place where the crab thing lurked, travelling at a great pace, yet not fast enough to escape. Up flew the bony arms, the snapping pinchers closed on the flying beast and brought it to a stand.

With a roar of pain and fury it struck out with its tremendous paws, breaking one of the arms. But the others only gripped the more relentlessly, while the injury seemed to galvanise the big crustacean into wondrous activity. It flipped itself out of the water, clinging to the edge of the rock with one great nipper while the other closed with awful power across the animal's loins.

For a moment there was nought to be seen but a tangle of furry body amidst a criss-cross of horrible claws and writhing arms, which looked more like the rods of some weird piece of machinery than the limbs of a living creature. Then there was a tremendous heave, a mighty splash that sent spray flying high up the cliff, and, still struggling frantically against inevitable doom, the lion-tiger was drawn into the depths.

A line of bubbles moving out towards the middle of the lake showed the route the crab had taken.

"The coast's clear!" cried Jack. "Come on, all of you!"

They raced down the path and up the further slope, and so continued without hindrance for some distance. They were nearing the head of the lake which now receded from the cliff. A forest of tall trees whose leaves almost swept the path grew at the foot of rocks, and presently, the professor halted and pointed ahead to where one of them, a giant, had at last yielded to time and toppled against the rock standing at an easy angle, its head across the narrow way.

"There is the ladder by which that beast ascended," he said. "I have been puzzling over his appearance, because I know this path is esteemed safe. We must try to clear it away."

But at first sight this seemed easier said than done. Anson and Jack Maxwell each carried a small, keen hatchet at his belt with which they might have chopped away the base of the tree so that it would fall. But besides taking time, the noise they would inevitably make might call up some other terror of this well-stocked wild, and though they were confident of holding their own, they wished to save their precious cartridges.

Anson, however, soon solved the difficulty. Climbing down the thick trunk, he found that the lower part of the tree was hollow and dry. A heap of dried twigs and a match soon had it flaming merrily. He clambered aloft, the party scrambled over the tangle of branches lying across the path, and proceeded. They had not gone far before a heavy crash told that the fire had done its work, and that the tree no longer stood to give entrance to undesirables.

Another hour's brisk walking brought them to the end of the trail. It finished at the brink of a precipice that dropped sheer for nearly a hundred feet to boulder-strewn level.

"This, so far, has been my limit," said the professor. "Look over and you will see shallow steps and handholds cut in the face of the rock. The day is not far advanced, and we should be able to do a dozen miles out and back before nightfall. That should take us to the head of the valley. I am anxious to see whether there is not some possible way out there."

They agreed to make the venture, but first Anson suggested a meal. Accordingly they fed, sitting with dangling legs, mapping out the path they should follow the while.

Harding suggested that the Bheels should be left behind, but the little fellows appeared to have full confidence in these men who treated them kindly, and scrambled down the rock ladder at their heels.

The character of the country was somewhat changed. It was higher and the soil was lighter. Instead of the luxuriant growth of trees and tree fern, matted with creepers which ran riot over rich, swampy loam, there were wide spaces of coarse grass dotted with clumps of thorny trees and sage brush, while here and there stood a few tall gum-trees very much the same as those of the country beyond the desert.

There was plenty of cover, however, and as they advanced they put up many kangaroos which skipped nimbly away to take refuge on the cliff face. They caught sight, too, of many small antelopes, though these fled like the wind while still a long way off. If some of its inhabitants had not been quite so formidable, the valley would have been a sportsman's paradise.

Exactly how formidable, they were shortly destined to discover, but meanwhile, they plodded along cheerily, glad to be free of the steamy reek that hung above the forest by the lake border. They had halted on the top of a ridge that the professor might take a photograph of the valley from that point with the tiny camera he carried in an inside pocket.

"I lacked the presence of mind to get a snapshot of that struggle between the tiger and the crab," he said mournfully. "It would have been unique. I have several of that remarkable brute which you saw attacking the fishers and killed, but they will be bad I fear, for the light was almost gone. It never appears except in the evening. However, I will have ample opportunity for the rest of the beasts before we leave, I have no doubt."

"Glory be! Here's an opportunity coming

(Continued on page iv. of cover.)

towards us, professor!" cried Anson, in a strange voice. "Look out! It sees us! Scoot up that bit of rock there!"

He pointed to a large isolated rock as big as a church, which, a long while before, had fallen from the cliff above. The Bheels were already running for it, and the whites stood not on the order of their going but followed, for the thing that was ambling towards them with the worst intentions, was a trifle too big to be tackled.

"A Stegosaur!" panted Professor Maxwell, as he reached the rock and scrambled towards the top where grew a fringe of bushes. "Or, at least, something of that kind. Here it comes!"

Only in time had the party reached the top of the rock, for even while Anson dragged himself on to the grass that covered the upper surfaces, the thing thudded to a halt beneath, and, rearing itself up on hind legs and tail, stretched its neck in a vain effort to grab him.

It was a terror none the less frightful, because its like was to be seen nowhere else in the world. It was a lizard, but a lizard large as an elephant, covered with an armour of scales and spikes; its great jaws furnished with an array of formidable teeth that would have given the biggest alligator living points and a beating.

It was in a great rage. Its long tail swished to and fro, smashing down the saplings it encountered. It swung round the rock looking for a place it might climb, but, fortunately, found none. Then it came to a standstill, and, looking up, emitted an ear-splitting, hissing snarl.

"Oh, you beauty! Oh, you mother's-pet!" ejaculated Anson. "Go to it, professor! The picture-papers will tumble over each other for pictures of this old nut."

But already the professor had brought his camera to bear and took several shots in various positions to display the creature's points. This done, they had to consider what they should do next. Time was flying, but the Stegosaur seemed determined to wait for ever, if necessary.

"We must get on. Here goes!" said Jack impatiently, and, taking careful aim, sent a soft-nosed bullet crashing through the creature's head.

It shook its head impatiently, but nothing more happened. It did not stagger or seem much inconvenienced by the loss of part of its brain. Jack was about to fire again when the professor stopped him.

(To be continued.)

Printed and Published every Wednesday by the Proprietors, The Amalgamated Press, Limited, The Fleetway House, Farringdon Street, London, E.C.4. Subscription Rates: Inland, 11s. per annum, 5s. 6d. for six months. Abroad, 8s. 10d. per annum; 4s. 5d. for six months. Sole Agents for South Africa: The Central News Agency, Limited. Sole Agents for Australia and New Zealand: Messrs. Gordon & Gotch, Limited; and for Canada: The Imperial News Company, Limited.