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By the Author of "Tricked by Wireless," "The Island of Fire," etc.

(The Narrative related throughout by Nipper.)

CHAPTER I.

HELPLESS ON HOLIDAY ISLAND—AN EXPLORING TRIP—THE MYSTERIOUS VALLEY.

HOLIDAY ISLAND basked in the sunshine.

Perhaps it would be better to say that Holiday Island sweltered in the sunshine, for the heat was certainly grilling. The tropical day was perfect, and the only relief from the tremendous heat was the slightly cooling breeze which blew from the sea.

Half a dozen members of the Remove Form of St. Frank's were standing beneath a towering cocoanut palm, taking advantage of the patch of shade provided by that lofty tree. All the fellows were dressed in white flannels and Panama hats; but they wore no coats. They would have been far more comfortable, strictly speaking, in bathing costumes; the less one wore, the more comfortable one felt. But bathing costumes were scarcely a respectable attire for general use.

"We're going exploring, ain't we?" demanded Edward Oswald Handforth. "Well, I vote we go to some place where the sun ain't so jolly scorching. Phew! It seems to get hotter and hotter every giddy day!"

"Well, it's better than St. Frank's," remarked McClure comfortably. "I'd rather be on this island than stewing in the Remove Form-room in the Ancient House!"

"Begad! Rather!"

The little party consisted of Handforth, Church and McClure, and Tommy Watson, Sir Montie Tregellis-West, and myself—Nipper. It was comparatively early in the forenoon, and we had come "ashore" from the yacht in order to do a little exploring—as Handforth unnecessarily reminded us.

I have placed the word "ashore" within quotation marks for a sufficient reason. It wasn't necessary to come ashore at all, be-

cause Lord Dorrimore's luxurious steam-yacht, the Adventure, was high and dry to such an extent that one could stroll beneath the propellers with perfect comfort.

"I've got the wheeze!" I exclaimed, making a jab at a fly which was attempting to convert my nose into a landing place. "You want to explore a spot where the sun isn't in evidence, Handy?"

"Yes, if there is one."

"Well, what about that queer old valley we caught sight of yesterday afternoon?" I asked. "It looked as dark as pitch down there when the sun was fairly low, but it'll be light enough now. And I'm rather curious to have a squint there, too."

"Any old thing you like, dear fellow," said Tregellis-West languidly. "Only don't take me up any hills, will you? I really couldn't climb hills in this weather. It would be askin' too much of a fellow."

"We shall go down hill, you ass!" I grinned. "Come on!"

"Ain't those other chaps coming?" asked Church.

"No," I said. "Farman's got some idea of fishing from the rock barrier, and Yakama and De Valerie are going with him. The Bo'sun's staying on board with his pater."

"But I thought Lord Dorrimore was coming along——"

"Dorrie said that he might do so if he felt energetic enough," I interrupted. "You know what that means. The lazy bounder will loll in a deck-chair all the morning, and he'll probably get Umlosi to keep the flies off his face for him. Anyhow, we needn't stop for Dorrie. He and the guv'nor might follow us later on—they knew we are going to that valley."

And we started off into the sunlight and made for the interior of the island. The yacht had been at the island for just ten

days, but there were many places we had not yet explored.

Our position was somewhat extraordinary.

We had started out from England in Lord Dorrimore's yacht with the avowed intention of searching for treasure in the South Seas. Captain Burton had suggested the trip, and we had met with excitement almost at the commencement, for an old enemy of the Bo'sun's father, a rascal named Captain Ebenezer Jelks, had made strenuous attempts to delay us so that he would be able to arrive at the island first.

Of course, Jelks had failed, and we had arrived at the island in due course—a merry, light-hearted party. As you probably know, Nelson Lee and I held positions at St. Frank's Collège; he was the Housemaster of the Ancient House, whilst I adorned the Remove Form in the capacity of junior skipper. And this trip to the Pacific was being undertaken during the summer holidays.

Our old friend Miss Eileen Dare was with the party; and so, also, was Aunt Esther—Eileen's aunt, not mine. And at first everything in the garden had been lovely.

The treasure island proved to be a veritable paradise until a certain discovery was made. It was only a tiny coral islet in the vast expanse of the Pacific. There was no other land for hundreds and hundreds of miles with the exception of another island named Zambua, which lay only fifteen miles away. Both islands were right off the beaten track, so to speak, for Holiday Island was uninhabited, whilst Zambua was populated by a tribe of savage cannibals of the worst type.

The treasure was within the rotting hull of an old Spanish galleon, which lay on the bed of the lagoon. Before any serious diving attempts could be undertaken, the discovery I referred to was made.

A volcano, in fact, situated comparatively near the shore, commenced active operations. Its principal discharge was black smoke, and this did us little harm. But the eruption was accompanied by a convulsion of Nature which led to the most astounding results.

Earthquakes had accompanied the volcanic display, and the lagoon had been completely cut off from the sea by a solid wall of volcanic rock which had risen as though from nowhere. It towered high across the bay, from headland to headland, shutting in the yacht completely. As though this were not enough, the water from the lagoon had drained completely away during the night, leaving our lovely yacht completely stranded.

Needless to say, our position was serious, although the Remove fellows didn't consider it in that light. I knew very well, however, that our only chance of rescue would come from a South Sea whaler, which might appear during the next few months. It was also on the cards that no whaler would appear at all. There was very little prospect of any other vessel appearing in these latitudes.

It was all the more galling because our own yacht was as seaworthy as when she had

been delivered from the dockyard. But as we couldn't lift her bodily over that barrier of rocks, we were compelled to resign ourselves to the fact that we must await rescue from the outer world.

As these events had only occurred a few days before, we had not yet fully realised the serious nature of our position. Nelson Lee had, I daresay, and so had Captain Burton. It was no use moaning, however, and so we were quite cheerful.

We little guessed that some exceedingly exciting happenings would occur that very day.

I led my five companions through the tropical woods towards the valley I had mentioned. I didn't exactly know what this was myself, and I was keen to find out. But the previous day I had caught a glimpse of a deep gully on the other side of the volcano—which was now as quiet as a lamb.

The ground became rocky after we had negotiated the base of the hill, and then the gully came within sight. It led steeply downwards into a narrow valley. The sides were so acute, in fact, that the place was in the nature of a canyon, with towering masses of rocks rising on every hand.

We plunged into the gully eagerly, but without hurry. Handforth would have blundered headlong down if he had had his own way, for he was a most impulsive youth. He never thought of possible dangers.

"Hurry up, you ass!" he said politely. "Blessed if I can see the reason for this slow crawl—"

"You'd see the reason for it if you tumbled down about sixty feet all at once," I interrupted. "You'd see stars, too, my son. Recklessness ain't a virtue, it's a vice. Just look at this place for example. It looks safe enough, and I dare say you'd blunder down innocently enough, Handy—"

"Oh, don't be potty!" snapped Handforth. "That place is safe enough!"

"Is it?" I said. "Look at this!"

I placed my foot upon a heavy slab of rock, which looked as solid as a doorstep. Very slight pressure sent it crashing down twenty feet, where it splintered to atoms on the other rocks. Naturally, I had tested the thing beforehand; but Handforth, had he been leading, would have accompanied the rock on its downward journey.

"That's why we have to be careful," I remarked.

"Begad! You're right, Nipper," said Sir Montie. "Hadn't you better tie a rope round Handforth—"

"You—you ass!" snorted Handforth. "Do you think I shouldn't have tested the strength of that rock first? I'm not quite dotty!"

Sir Montie raised his eyebrows.

"My mistake," he said blandly; "I thought you were."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"You cackling idiots!" roared Handforth.

"Still, it's a wonderful thing for Handy to

admit that he's nearly dotty, you know," went on Tregellis-West thoughtfully.

"I didn't admit anything of the sort," bel-lowed Handforth. "I meant that I'm not so dotty as I look—I—I mean——"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Or, rather, that you look dottier than you really are!" grinned McClure.

Handforth rolled up his shirt-sleeves.

"If you want your nose punched, Arnold McClure——" he began darkly.

"Oh, my only hat!" I groaned. "He wants to fight half-way down this gully! If you don't dry up, Handy, we'll pitch you down, neck and crop! Follow me, and don't act the giddy goat!"

I cautiously continued the descent, and as all the other fellows followed me, Handforth was left isolated above us. He gave one snort, and followed. He was last in the line now, and therefore out of harm's way.

The further we descended the cooler became the air, and for this reason alone we were glad that we had come. When we finally reached the valley itself the atmosphere was delightfully cool, as though we had descended into a deep cellar.

The direct sunlight was completely excluded by masses of overhanging rock overhead, and although the daylight was quite strong in the valley, there was no glare. The whole scene was subdued and somewhat gloomy.

In fact the place had a sinister aspect, for there was no sign of green stuff of any description; nothing but bare, jagged rocks. The valley itself was almost circular, like the arena of a vast circus.

We walked forward towards the centre, gazing about us curiously and grateful for the coolness of the atmosphere. The silence of the valley was extraordinary, for when we paused for a moment no sound could be heard whatever. Had I been there alone I should have been depressed, and, indeed, awed. But my five companions made it impossible for me to feel lonely. We walked forward, talking loudly together.

"We shall have to bring Farman down here," I remarked. "It will remind him of his native canyons in California. They are much grander than this, of course, but on the same style."

"Well, I don't think much of California, then!" said Handforth, with a sniff.

"I never knew such a chap for airing his ignorance as you are, Handy," I said, with a chuckle. "If you think that California is composed of one long series of canyons, you're mistaken. Taking it altogether, it's the sunniest State in America, where they have perpetual summer. You ask Farman about it, he'll jaw at you for hours."

"It's rather queer, dear fellows," remarked Sir Montie thoughtfully. "I had an idea this island was uninhabited? I thought there were no savages on it?"

"Well, there's one," I replied drily.

"Rats!" said Handforth. "I've never see him!"

"No, but you've seen his reflection—when you look at yourself in the mirror——"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Are—are you calling me a savage?" roared Handforth.

"Oh, crumbs! I've started him off again!" I groaned. "No offence, Handy. Let's hear what Montie has to say."

"Well, old boy, I've been lookin' at this ground," said Tregellis-West. "Ain't it curious? If the island wasn't uninhabited, I should say that people have been treading all over this valley for years an' years past. It looks just like the Triangle at St. Frank's—all beaten down smooth an' level with thousands of different feet."

"Handforth's feet, for example?" remarked Watson. "They'd beat anything level!"

"I say, it's a bit too bad!" I grinned. "We shall have old Handy leaving us in the lurch soon—and where should we be without his guidance? We can't afford to lose Handy at any price!"

"Glad you've got some sense, anyhow!" growled Handforth, quite oblivious of the fact that I was pulling his leg.

We transferred our attention to the surrounding ground, and there was certainly a great deal in what Sir Montie said. The rocky floor of the valley was almost as smooth as a metal road, for all the world as though people had danced there for ages past. But of course this couldn't be the case, and I wrinkled my brows in search of a possible explanation.

"I'm blessed if I can make it out," I said at last. "It's a bit too tall to suppose that animals have beaten the ground level like this. And what's that curious pillar of rock over there, right in the centre? Let's go and have a look."

We walked forward slowly. In the very centre of the natural arena a tall, thin rock pillar projected straight into the air for a distance of twenty feet. A close view showed us that the pillar projected from the very centre of a black-looking pool of water.

"Great pip!" ejaculated Church. "There's some seaweed!"

And, amazingly enough, Church was right. Huge masses of thick, tangled seaweed half-choked the pool at the edges and round the base of the pillar. The intervening water was inky-looking, but this was probably on account of the deep shadows of the mysterious valley.

"How the dickens can it be seaweed?" demanded Handforth, who always liked to differ from everybody else. "Talk sense, for goodness' sake. The sea's a mile and more from here, and there's no inlet!"

"You mustn't always judge by what you can see, Handy," I said. "Or, rather, by what you can't see. There's such a thing as an inlet underneath the surface, and it strikes me that it's the case here. Just have a look at that green slime all up the pillar, and look at the sides of the pool."

"Well, what of it?" asked Watson.

"Can't you see that the water's nearly five

feet below the edges?" I asked keenly. "And what about this fresh seaweed right near the top? It proves one thing, my sons, and if you don't know what it is, you ought to!"

"Jolly clever, ain't you?" said Handforth sarcastically.

I grinned.

"Not that I know of," I replied. "But Mr. Nelson Lee has always taught me to use my eyes and to reason things out for myself—although this thing doesn't want much reasoning out. It's obvious."

"Nipper, dear boy, don't keep us on tenter-hooks," said Sir Montie languidly. "How can we know what's working in your mighty brain? I'm frightfully dull, and all I can think of is that this pool is tidal. When the tide's in, the water rises almost to the top—an' by the look of it the tide must be nearly out at present."

"It couldn't mean anything else," I replied. "And, anyhow, it's the only explanation. But it's queer, you chaps. This thing doesn't look like a natural formation to me. This basin was carved out, or I'll eat my hat. I expect there's a tremendously deep cavern underneath, which is constantly filled with water—and choked with seaweed."

I was becoming fairly certain, indeed, that human beings in hundreds had walked over this spot before us. But it was remarkable, all the same. The island was uninhabited, and always had been, so far as we could judge. Then who were the people who visited this gloomy valley?

"I'll tell the gov'nor all about this," I declared. "He'll probably deduce quite a lot from what he sees. He's a wonder at finding things out when there's hardly anything to go by."

Handforth and Co. had wandered off towards a great crevice in the rocks. It looked almost like the entrance to a cave, but was merely a deep crack. The three juniors disappeared within. And then a moment later a wild yell sounded. Owing to the formation of the rocks the shout echoed and re-echoed in the most uncanny fashion. It sounded first on one side of the valley, then on the other, booming and quivering as though a dozen voices had cried out.

"Begad! What's that?" asked Sir Montie, almost startled.

"That ass, Handforth!" I replied. "But what an echo! I've heard something of the same sort in rocky places before, but this is weird. There he goes again!"

"—here!" roared the echo. "Here!"

It repeated itself fully a dozen times before the sound quivered away into a murmur. I don't know why, but it seemed to send a cold shiver down my back. There was something uncanny in that booming voice coming from the bare rocks on every side. Sir Montie and Tommy and I hurried over to the crevice, and found Handforth and Co. staring in at the entrance with rather scared faces.

"We've found something!" exclaimed Church nervously.

"What's all the giddy mystery?" I demanded.

"Look in there!" said Handforth, pointing.

We looked. And we saw upon the rocky ground a great pile of bleached bones. I knew, in a second, that they were human bones, for on the very top were several grinning skulls!

CHAPTER II.

NELSON LEE'S SUSPICION—AN OMINOUS PROCESSION—TROUBLE BREWING!

HANDFORTH'S discovery shook our nerves somewhat. I wasn't particularly affected, because I had seen far more gruesome sights than this when engaged upon detective work with Nelson Lee. But the unexpectedness of this find took our breath away and made us uneasy.

"Oh, begad! This is rather shockin'!" exclaimed Tregellis-West, carefully adjusting his pince-nez and gazing at the grisly pile, "I'm not a particular fellow, old boys, but I don't quite like this."

"They're human skeletons," I said, taking a pace forward. "It doesn't look very healthy, does it? Some poor chaps have been getting it in the neck, that's very certain. It looks to me as though these bones were piled up here deliberately."

"What does it mean?" asked Watson, casting a glance over his shoulder. "I—I say, hadn't we better shift out of this rotten hole? Let's get up into the sunlight again. This valley gives me the creeps!"

"Well, I don't wonder at it," I commented. "It gave me the creeps before I saw these bones. There's something—something—I'm blessed if I know how to describe it. But it's just—uncanny. It doesn't fit in with the island at all. Over those rocks there are glorious woods, with the most wonderful bird and insect life; there are flowers and fruit-trees, and everything delightful. And here we're in a kind of desolate pit. It's all wrong, you chaps."

Sir Montie nodded solemnly.

"It's wonderful how you do it, Benny," he observed. "I couldn't express my feelin's like that at all; but it's just what I think, too. It may be cool down here, but, begad! I'd rather be swelterin'—I would, really!"

"Let's make a move," growled Handforth. "I ain't nervous, of course. Personally I wouldn't mind staying down here all night, but you chaps seem to be anxious to get back, so we'd better climb up the gully again."

I grinned.

"You needn't come, Handy," I said. "If you don't mind staying down here, we'll leave you for a bit—"

"Oh, rot!" snapped Handforth hastily.

We moved away from the pile of skeletons,

and just as we were about to turn up the valley towards the gully I saw three figures outlined against the sky at the top. I recognised them as Nelson Lee and Lord Dorrimore and Umlosi. They waved, and we waved in reply.

"I thought that perhaps they'd come along," I said. "Let's stay down here for a bit, until they join us. I should like to hear what the gov'nor's got to say."

"Right-ho!"

The fact that Nelson Lee and Dorrie were practically on the spot gave the other fellows confidence, and they had no desire to leave now. We stood in a clump near the black pool and waited.

A curious kind of swirl sounded in the water, but when we looked round there was nothing to be seen.

"What was that?" asked Handforth carelessly.

"One of you chaps chucked a stone in, didn't you?" I asked.

Nobody had, and I gazed into the pool curiously, and not without a certain feeling of uneasiness. The whole atmosphere of this place was eerie and mysterious. I was very glad when Nelson Lee and his two companions reached the bottom of the gully and strolled over towards us.

"Queer kind of place, ain't it?" Lord Dorrimore exclaimed, in his careless, languid manner. "It's cool, an' that's one blessin'. I haven't been cool for days. It's quite a relief."

"I like not the place, N'Kose," exclaimed Umlosi gravely. "The feeling is within me that tragedy has occurred here and that it is a spot of death and tortures. My instinct tells me that it would be wise to depart, O my master."

"You shove your instinct in your pocket, old man," said Dorrie lightly. "What a cheerful beggar you are!"

"He's not far wrong, Dorrie," remarked Nelson Lee. "You're a thick-skinned boulder, and you may not be affected, but a certain sense of depression has descended upon me since I entered this valley. I can see that the boys are similarly affected. They are by no means so cheery looking as usual."

"Wise words, O Umtagati," said Umlosi. "The spirits of the dead are all around us —"

"Can't you think of a more cheerful subject, you black undertaker?" demanded Lord Dorrimore.

"I speak as I feel, N'Kose."

"I'm glad you've come down, gov'nor," I said, walking forward. "We've just been having a look round this valley, and we don't like it. Isn't it a rotten place?"

"It is certainly not enlivening, Nipper," agreed Nelson Lee. "A pool, I observe. This is quite interesting, Dorrie. H'm! A tidal pool, too. And there is a remarkable amount of seaweed."

"The water must reach here underground, somehow, sir," I remarked. "I suppose the level of the water here is the sea level?"

"It must be, young 'un," replied the gov'nor. "And it is quite obvious that this basin is no natural formation. We are learning things, Dorrie. I can picture quite a lot."

"What did I tell you?" I murmured to the other chaps. "The gov'nor's started his deductions already."

"There's a pile of skeletons over there, sir," said Handforth, trying to speak carelessly. "Skulls and things!"

"More cheerin' information," said Dorrie. "It's all tommy rot, saying the island's uninhabited. How could bones get here? I'm beginnin' to think, Lee, that you're not far wrong. I'm becomin' frightfully depressed."

We strolled over to the crevice, and the newcomers examined the gruesome relics. Nelson Lee bent close over them, and nodded to himself once or twice. Umlosi was greatly interested, too. He stood upright, a dreamy expression in his eyes.

"Wau! There have been gory battles upon these grounds, O Umtagati!" he rumbled. "It was a great fight, methinks. See! There are ugly scars even upon the bones themselves, telling of deep spear-thrusts. I am troubled, my father. I like not this place."

Nelson Lee stroked his chin.

"I had no idea that this valley was of such interest," he exclaimed thoughtfully. "Many possibilities are suggested, but I think one explanation is quite feasible. Savages have been here; these bones tell a tale of a grim fight to the death, and there are many other signs which lead me to the same conclusion."

Nelson Lee stood silent for a few moments, his keen face wearing an expression of concentrated thought, his grey eyes gazing unseeingly into the distance. I had seen him like that often enough.

"What's your theory, gov'nor?" I asked.

"Eh? Oh, the theory, Nipper?" he exclaimed slowly. "Captain Burton has told us quite a lot concerning Zambua, the island which lies fifteen miles to the southward of this island."

"What's Zambua got to do with this?" asked Dorrie.

"Possibly a great deal," was Lee's reply. "We know, for example, that the Zambuans are savage cannibals. They speak a lingo which is somewhat similar to the language of the Papuans."

"Oh, that's handy," said his lordship. "If we receive a call from the gentlemen, I shall be able to exchange compliments. I've done quite a lot of explorin' in Papua, an' can jaw like a native."

"Zambua is generally shunned by South Sea navigators," went on Nelson Lee. "There are two reasons for this. One is because the coral reefs of the island are extremely treacherous, but the chief reason is on account of the hostile character of the blacks themselves. They are a fierce, war-

like people, and they have certain fanatical religions of their own."

Lord Dorrimore nodded.

"I wouldn't deny it," he said. "But what have these head-huntin' merchants to do with this valley, my dear Lee? Havin' an island of their own, they wouldn't trouble to come over here, would they?"

"It is distinctly possible," declared the great detective. "Bear in mind the volcano, Dorrie. A few days ago it belched forth dense masses of inky smoke—and those clouds were certainly visible on the island of Zambua. I have been thinking over this matter, and it is quite possible that our volcano is one of those which break into eruption at regular intervals, say once a month or once in every six months. Knowing something of savage tribes, I do not deem it at all out of the question to assume that the Zambuans might regard the volcano as a kind of god."

"Thou art right, Umtagati," said Umlosi, nodding wisely. "Even on the borders of Kutanaland there is a tribe of accursed dogs who call themselves human beings that worship a boiling spring—what thou would'st call a geyser, mayhap. Wau! I have killed with my own spear many warriors of that pig-tribe. They are men of water-blood!"

I was greatly interested, and so were all the other juniors. This was only a theory of Nelson Lee's, but it sounded quite probable.

"But why should the Zambuans worship a god on another island, sir?" I asked. "That seems a bit off-side, doesn't it?"

"I make no attempt to explain why these savages should have such queer ideas," replied Nelson Lee. "I am merely judging by what I have seen in other wild spots of the earth. We will take it for granted that these inhabitants of Zambua regard the volcano as a god. What then?"

"Yes, what then?" echoed Dorrimore, lighting a cigarette.

"Well, I should say that they would come along here occasionally for the purpose of worship, and it is quite on the cards that they make sacrifices—do not overlook that pile of bones."

"Ugh!" murmured Sir Montie. "That's too awful, sir!"

"My dear lad, you don't know these matters as I do," said the gov'nor. "Sacrifices are quite common among certain tribes, and human sacrifices were only suppressed in certain territories under British protection after arduous work on the part of the authorities."

"And they still make the sacrifices in secret, even now," put in Lord Dorrimore. "By gad! I ought to know—I was nearly roasted alive myself once."

Nelson Lee nodded.

"Well, to surmise that these Zambuans visit this island for the purpose of making sacrifices is by no means improbable," he said. "And it is also possible that their visits coincide with an outbreak from the

volcano. They may regard an eruption as a sign, and come here in force after the volcano has quietened down."

"But we've seen no sign of 'em, sir," said McClure.

"That does not say that we shall not," replied the gov'nor. "No, boys, I don't wish to alarm you. We might see no signs of these blacks whatever. You must remember that I am only making guesses."

"Let's hope the beggars don't come to repay their respects after this eruption," said Dorrimore. "I'm a peaceful man, an' killin' cannibals is a bore. Besides, they might kill me—an' that wouldn't be comfortable at all."

"Thou art pleased to be flippant upon a great subject, N'Kose," said Umlosi. "My thoughts are even as the wise wizard, Umtagati. See! The ground is beaten with countless feet, telling of dances on many thousands of occasions. And is not this valley an ideal spot for black doings. Wau! Thy words are wise ones, Umtagati."

"I—I say, sir, you don't think there's any chance of the cannibals coming here, do you?" asked Handforth eagerly.

"There is certainly a chance, Handforth—"

"Oh, good!"

"But you need not be alarmed——"

"Alarmed, sir!" snorted Handforth.

"I thought possibly that you were nervous——"

"Great pip! Nervous!" stuttered Handforth. "Why—why, I've been hoping that the cannibals would come for days! It would be ripping to have a scrap with real cannibals!"

"Oh, yes—very rippin'!" said Dorrie significantly. "But it wouldn't be the kind of rippin' you're thinkin' of, young un!"

"You needn't take any notice of Handforth, sir," I put in. "He wouldn't hanker after cannibals if he knew what they were really like. I believe he's got an idea that they are harmless creatures—something like Umlosi!"

"Thou art complimentary, Manzie," said Umlosi softly.

"And you needn't think that this chunk of copper is harmless, either," put in Dorrimore. "Why, if Umlosi turned against me, I'd start runnin', an' I'd never stop!"

"Thy words are frivolous and light, N'Kose," said the black giant, showing all his white teeth. "The day will be long before I turn against thee, O Thou of the Shimmering Eye—thou greatest of all friends!"

"Well, we won't argue," said Dorrimore. "I've got a feelin' that luncheon isn't far off, so who votes for makin' a move?"

A few minutes later we all walked up the valley and mounted the steep gully to the outer world. This is exactly how it seemed to us, for this valley was an uncanny place, and did not seem to belong to the rest of the beautiful island.

As we went I thought over what the

guy'nor had been saying. The fact that no natives had been seen near the island was somewhat comforting; for if the guy'nor's theory was correct, surely the Zambuan would have appeared before this?

The temperature was much higher as we neared the top of the valley, but we did not mind the heat so much. The air seemed sweeter and cleaner, and was pure in our nostrils.

Twenty minutes later we were passing through the luxuriant tropical woods on the way to the beach. Insects hummed in the air and the sun blazed overhead, and the depression was lifted from our shoulders. I resolved then and there that I would not visit the valley again. Once was quite enough for me—although the guy'nor will tell anybody that I'm not nervous.

We were still some distance from the shore when a man in white drill uniform came hurrying through the trees. He gave us a hail as he saw us, and I recognised him as a member of the yacht's crew.

"It's all right, Simpson," said Dorrie. "We're not lost."

"Captain Burton sent me ashore to search for you, my lord," exclaimed the man quickly. "There are a number of native canoes in sight, and they are approaching the island—"

"By gad!" exclaimed Dorrie mildly.

"Native canoes!" yelled Handforth. "Oh, my hat!"

"This is really remarkable," was Nelson Lee's comment. "Can it be possible that direct confirmation of my suspicions have come already? We must hurry ourselves, Dorrie. I don't like this news at all!"

We all broke into a trot and hastened towards the beach. Handforth was in high glee, and he raced the lot of us. The other juniors did not know whether to be glad or sorry, but they were undoubtedly excited.

We broke through a belt of cocoanut-palms, and a minute later emerged on to the sandy shore. By all rights the water ought to have been almost at our feet, but the lagoon was as dry as a ditch in summertime, and the beach shelved steeply downwards for a long way. The stranded yacht was in the centre of the lagoon-bed, and she maintained an even keel—having become wedged between two masses of rock.

We did not make for the yacht, however, but hastened towards the great barrier of volcanic stone which had been thrust up by nature. Many figures could be seen upon the top of this natural wall, and I recognised Captain Burton, one or two officers of the Adventure, and the four Remove juniors who had not accompanied us.

Eileen Dare was on the yacht's deck, and she waved to us as we branched off towards the great barrier.

Arriving, it was an easy matter to climb to the top, for the rocks were jagged and uneven, proving excellent foothold.

"Say, there's somethin' doing!" called

down Farman, as we climbed. "Gee whiz! You'll sure miss the circus if you ain't quick!"

We arrived at the top breathless. The sea lay right beneath us, for the barrier was high, and the waves dashed upon the rocks at our feet, some distance below.

"Great Scott!" I exclaimed involuntarily.

I had been expecting to see perhaps a dozen small native canoes. But there, some distance beyond the outer reef of coral, fully thirty great canoes were manoeuvring up and down. Each vessel contained a large number of blacks, and these men were evidently in a considerable state of excitement.

"Are they going to attack, sir?" asked Handforth eagerly.

"I hope not, my boy," said Captain Burton. "They are Zambuan—some of the most murderous niggers in the South Seas. I have already ordered several men to fetch two of the machine-guns, Lord Dorrimore. It is just as well to be prepared. By the Lord Harry! we'll give the scum a taste of something warm if they attempt any trickery!"

"Splendid, captain; you have acted wisely," said Nelson Lee approvingly.

We watched with interest.

But almost at once the whole collection of canoes turned about, and the paddles worked regularly and evenly. The Zambuan had made no attempt to land, and they were making off at full speed.

What was the meaning of this move?

CHAPTER III.

LORD DORRIMORE IS GRIM—ACTIVE PREPARATIONS—THE ENEMY IN FORCE.

EDWARD OSWALD HANDFORTH looked wrathful.

"They've bunked!" he said, as though he couldn't believe it. "I say, that's rotten! I was expecting a fight —"

"You ass!" I broke in. "It's a good thing the beasts have bunked. Fighting cannibals may be all right in a book, but it's a different matter in real life, I can tell you."

"But why have they turned tail?" asked Handforth, gazing out at the fast-retreating canoes. "Surely they weren't scared of us?"

Nelson Lee looked keen.

"They turned about because they are not arrayed for warfare," he exclaimed. "They came to this island thinking it to be uninhabited, and were taken aback by what they saw."

Lord Dorrimore nodded, and I could see that there was a grim glint in his usually languid eyes.

"I may be a bit of an idiot in most things," he said slowly; "but I have been in these latitudes before, and I know something about the Zambuan. "I don't like the look of this business, Lee. There'll be somethin' doin' before long."

"But the blacks are frightened off, sir," said De Valerie.

"Not they!" declared Dorrie. "Frightened off! Ye gods! I wish I could believe that, my lad. They have gone, we know, but not because they were scared. They have returned to Zambua to raise the battle-cry."

"And what then, sir?" asked Handforth intently.

"Why, they will return in force—perhaps double the number—and they'll be in full war-paint," declared Lord Dorrimore grimly. "They'll return with the full intention of slaughterin' every one of us. We're impudent poachers, don't forget—these preserves are sacred. An' our presence here has aroused the fury of these devils. By gad! There'll be some excitement soon!"

"A—fight, sir?" asked Tommy Watson.

"Ay, and a gory fight, too!" said Dorrie, with unusual vehemence. "If we want to avoid being wiped out, we shall have to work like troopers. I hardly expected anything of this nature—just when the old yacht's helpless, too! What brutal luck!"

"Wise words, N'Kose," rumbled Umlosi. "Thou art truly right when thou sayest that these accursed black men will return. Wau! They are even as the jackals—sly and cunning and treacherous. It is well that thou hast brought the guns that spit fire and lead. They will be needed, my father. And we must have courage, or the fight will be lost."

There was a buzz among the juniors.

"A fight!" I exclaimed. "Dorrie's right, my sons. Those blacks haven't turned tail because they're scared. They'll be back again before the evening, and then we shall be in the thick of it."

"Oh, ripping!" said Handforth enthusiastically.

I was somewhat irritated by Handforth's misplaced enthusiasm.

"Look here, Handy, you seem to regard this affair like a circus!" I exclaimed tartly. "For goodness' sake get that fatheaded idea out of your head. Oh, don't interrupt—I'm serious. You've got to realise that if it really comes to a fight there'll be bloodshed—and I don't suppose you're keen on that. We shall probably kill scores of these savages, but it's fully on the cards that they'll kill some of our men."

"Oh, rot!" said Handforth uneasily.

"You idiot!" I snapped. "Do you think the blacks will come back with peashooters? They'll have spears and other weapons—and you can bet your boots that they'll be poisoned weapons, too. One jab, Handforth, and it means death. They're far more deadly than revolver-bullets or shots from a machine-gun. A bullet can go through a chap's leg without doing it much harm, but a scratch from a poisoned spear is nearly always fatal."

Handforth was somewhat subdued by my tone.

"Oh, it won't be so serious as all that," he protested.

"I hope not—but it might be," I replied.

Nelson Lee had overheard our talk, and he nodded approvingly.

"Nipper is quite right, boys," he said gravely. "Above all, get the idea out of your heads that you are going to see some fun. I sincerely hope that these blacks will not return. But, if they do, we shall be in for a grim and anxious time. So you must curb your excitement and do as I wish."

"Oh, of course, sir," said all the juniors together.

"For the moment I want you to go to the yacht," said Nelson Lee. "There is nothing further to see here—even if the blacks return they will not do so for many hours."

"I was thinkin', sir," began Sir Montie.

"Well?"

"Isn't it possible that those canoes have gone round to the other side of the island, sir?" suggested Tregellis-West keenly. "An attack from the rear would be serious, wouldn't it? I expect I'm puttin' my foot in it, but—"

"No, Montie; I appreciate your thoughtfulness," said Nelson Lee. "But I do not think we need fear a landing on the other coast. The barrier-reef is quite impassable, even for small craft. These blacks were as much startled by the disappearance of their one safe channel as they were by our presence. Probably they will believe that we are responsible—and that will enrage them. At the same time, they will find no difficulty in landing on this natural wall if they are given half a chance."

"So it will only be necessary to defend this bay, sir?" I asked.

"That is all, Nipper—and quite sufficient, too," replied the gov'nor. "Now, go back to the yacht and have your luncheon as calmly as possible. There is much work to be done, and you cannot help with it. The men must organise our defences, and I am quite confident that we shall be able to give these Zambuans an unpleasant surprise if they return."

"All right, sir. We'll obey orders," I said promptly.

The other fellows agreed without a murmur, for they all realised the seriousness of the situation. We should be more hindrance than help if we remained on the spot now, and we didn't want to make ourselves a nuisance.

As we crossed the sandy bed of the lagoon to the yacht I saw that Lord Dorrimore was busily getting to work already. He was instructing several men in the placing of a machine-gun. Much depended upon the manner in which our defensive weapons were placed.

"It's a lucky thing we brought out these machine-guns," I said, with satisfaction. "It was the gov'nor's idea—he didn't expect trouble, but he's always anxious to be well prepared. We've got six of 'em, and thou-

sands of rounds of ammunition. And then, of course, there are heaps of rifles. The men who aren't manning the machine-guns can get busy in another way. Oh, there'll be a terrific scrap before long!"

"I suppose we shall be able to see it?" asked Handforth anxiously.

"Yes—if we keep out of the way and don't push forward," I replied. "That's the main thing, my sons. This is a man's job, and the gov'nor wouldn't think of allowing us to take a hand in it. If we butt in we shall be ordered away, and pretty smartly, too. So bear that in mind, Handy."

When we arrived at the yacht Eileen greeted us at the top of the ladder. She was looking very anxious, but every bit as pretty as ever. She had been able to see the approach and retreat of the native canoes.

"Oh, Nipper, do you think anything dreadful will happen?" she asked, taking my arm. "My aunt is so worried, and I wish to comfort her."

I shook my head.

"I'm afraid there's going to be a fight, Miss Eileen," I replied. "But the blacks won't be able to get past our defences, and the yacht will be as safe as eggs, in any case. The gov'nor told us to go on just as usual."

"Isn't it terrible?" asked Eileen. "Oh, why do these awful black men wish to attack us? I thought we should be so peaceful on this island."

I told her about the gov'nor's suggestion—that the Zambians regarded the volcano as a sacred thing. Eileen could then understand why the savages were enraged and why an attack was probable.

Luncheon was a somewhat strained meal. Dorrie and Nelson Lee and Captain Burton were absent, of course. But we tried to be cheerful and to make Aunt Esther comfortable. The old lady had heaps of pluck, really, but the prospect of a battle so close at hand naturally made her nervous.

We pointed out that under no circumstances could the Zambians gain the upper hand, and she was greatly relieved.

After luncheon we hurried up on deck again and viewed the proceedings from there. The afternoon was more sweltering than the morning had been, but the yacht's crew worked with a will. The men were with us heart and soul; they knew that their lives were as much at stake as anybody's, and a feeling of complete confidence reigned everywhere.

Already the machine-guns had been placed in their allotted positions—five of them. The sixth was reserved for the yacht itself, in case of extreme necessity. It would probably never be used, but it would have been madness to leave the vessel entirely unprotected.

By four o'clock in the afternoon everything was ready to the last detail. Ammunition had been carried out to the barrier in large quantities and all the men's rifles were in readiness.

"Well, we shall give the beggars a rousin' reception if they pay us a visit," remarked Lord Dorrimore, as he was taking a brief rest under the awning. "Of course, they may not come at all—our lovely dials may have scared 'em off."

"I don't wonder at it, begad!" remarked Sir Montie, looking at Handforth.

"Look here——" began Handforth warmly.

"Dear fellow, I wasn't referrin' to your face," Sir Montie exclaimed; "although now you come to mention it, the blacks would be naturally scared at such a strikin' face as yours——"

"Why, you—you——"

"It's so jolly strong, you know," went on Montie diplomatically. "Strong an' determined. Enough to frighten a dozen chaps!"

Handforth nodded.

"If that's what you mean, I can understand you," he agreed. "I thought you were trying to be funny."

"Dear fellow, what an amazin' idea?" exclaimed Montie. "Do you think I could pull your leg—Handforth's leg? Begad! The idea is frightfully silly!"

Handforth nodded again; but everybody else was grinning. It wasn't such a difficult matter to pull Handforth's leg—as the present instance showed. For it was being pulled forcibly.

"Oh, we shall defeat the blacks if they come—I am sure of it," said Eileen, with supreme confidence. "It is awful, of course, but if they chose to fight, it will be their own fault."

Lord Dorrimore nodded languidly.

"A truer word was never spoken," he observed, reaching for a glass of iced drink. "Goodness knows, we ain't longin' for a scrap. Umlozi won't mind, I don't suppose, because Umlozi is rather partial to scraps. But, for my part, I'm rather a peaceful chap, an' I love the simple life."

"Tell that to the Marines!" I grinned.

"By gad! Don't you believe me?" asked his lordship.

"Yes—about as much as the Marines would!" I replied. "I've been in scraps with you, Dorrie, and I know jolly well that you glory in 'em. It's no good you trying to kid me, even if these other simple fellows swallow the yarn. I believe you're anxious for those cannibals to show up!"

Lord Dorrimore lost his smile.

"Not on your life, Nipper!" he said seriously. "I may like a decent fight now an' again, an' I won't deny it—since you've shown me up so basely—but this affair looks like being somethin' more than a roundabout. If those blacks come in force there'll be the deuce to pay."

And we all felt that his lordship was right. There was no alarm, however. Everybody remained cool and collected. Eileen Dare did not merely stand idly by, but busied herself in a manner which proved that she fully grasped the seriousness of the situation.

It was not pleasant to anticipate that we should suffer casualties—that some of our

defenders would be wounded. But it would have been mad to ignore such a possibility. And Eileen spent a lot of time in preparing bandages and first-aid appliances of every description. By the time she was ready several cabins had been turned into a temporary hospital, and nothing had been forgotten.

Two lookout men were perched up aloft with glasses, ready to report the first sign of the enemy's approach. But the hours passed and nothing occurred. Some of the fellows were of the opinion that we had been scared for nothing.

"That's rot!" I declared. "We're not scared, anyhow."

"Well, you know what I mean," said McClure, who had made the remark.

"We've simply taken precautions—and I reckon that Lord Dorrimore knows more about these latitudes than we do," I went on. "Captain Burton is of the same opinion—he's pretty certain that trouble is brewing. The Zambians may wait until after dark—in fact, it's more than probable that they will. But we shall be ready for 'em. They'll never be able to land in face of our machine-gun fire."

"Say, it's just a real pity we haven't got artillery on board," remarked Justin B. Farman. "Gee whiz! I guess we'd blow them damned war canoes out of the water before they got anywhere near if we had some dandy guns."

"Rather!"

"A fatheaded oversight!" declared Church.

"I reckon you ought to be jolly glad that we've got machine-guns!" I retorted. "It was the gov'nor who thought of having them on board. We should have been in a fine old fix if we'd had no weapons at all."

"I guess we're grouzers," said Farman. "Say, it don't kinder seem right. But I was jest wonderin'—"

A loud hail came from aloft.

"Boats in sight, sir—boats in sight!"

There was an immediate buzz.

Lord Dorrimore, in spite of his professed laziness, swarmed aloft as nimbly as any sailor. Not to be outdone, I followed his example. Clinging there, high above the deck, I gazed over the sun-lit sea.

At first I could see no sign of the approaching enemy. The lookout's eyes were very keen apparently—and then, of course, I remembered that he had binoculars. It was some little time before the canoes came within the range of the naked eye.

I saw numerous black dots upon the horizon. They were so small as to seem insignificant, but they gradually grew larger and larger.

At last there could be no further doubt that the cannibals were approaching in force—Dorrie's surmise had been correct.

Ten minutes later the sight was an imposing one. Scores of great war proas or canoes were approaching the island in magnificent formation, the leading canoe being much larger than the others, which spread out in the rear like an enormous fan.

"Each one of those canoes contains twenty men strong—at least," yelled Lord Dorrimore. "By gad! There must be well over a thousand niggers there!"

I swarmed down to the deck after a while, flushed and excited. Umlosi was standing there, tenderly polishing his great spear.

"N'Kose is mistaken, O Manzie," he rumbled. "The number approaches fifteen hundred I suspect. Wau! It will be a big fight!"

"You—you old ass!" I roared. "You can't use that spear in a fight like this, Umlosi. I'll fetch you a rifle—"

"Thou art mistaken, too, Wise One," interrupted Umlosi, seizing my shoulder. "Thinkest thou that I would use the fire-weapon whilst I possess my trusted spear—the friend of a thousand fights? Nay, Manzie, I am well fitted for the battle. Worry not, nimble youth!"

"Well, it's your look-out," I replied. "But you ought to have a rifle handy, Umlosi. It doesn't matter, though, it will never come to a hand-to-hand tussle."

Umlosi smiled grimly.

"Thinkest thou not?" he asked. "Wau! I should like to believe thee, Manzie. But numbers count, let me remind thee. A determined charge would even defy the guns that bark with the rapidity of falling hail-stones. And then it would be a time for close fighting. I await that time, Manzie."

I grunted.

"I hope you'll have to go unsatisfied, then!" I replied. "If once those blacks overran the island we should be in a proper fix."

I turned my attention seawards again. The canoes were now approaching swiftly, spreading out as they came. Practically every defender was at his post, led by Nelson Lee and Captain Burton and Lord Dorrimore. We boys, of course, were compelled to remain on the yacht—in the grand circle, so to speak. We should be able to see the whole fight perfectly—and we waited.

There was no doubt that the position was serious, but everybody was confident. We had the advantage all on our side.

CHAPTER IV.

THE GREAT BATTLE—AN UNLUCKY MISHAP— THE CAPTURE OF DORRIE.

NELSON LEE was holding a brief consultation with Lord Dorrimore. The rock barrier was a natural defence, and each machine-gun was so concealed amidst the rocks that it could be operated with deadly effect and with scarcely any danger to the gunners.

"We can't start blazing away the instant the blacks came within range, Dorrie," said Nelson Lee. "We are not absolutely positive yet that the Zambians are hostile towards us—"

"Oh, no!" said Dorrie drily. "They're doin' this just for fun!"

"Man alive, don't joke now!" snapped Lee. "You know what I mean. It's a hundred to one chance that the blacks mean grim business, but if we fired the first shot, without letting them know that we were friendly, we should invite an attack. I'm going to parley with them, if possible."

"My dear man, it's not possible," protested Dorrie. "If you show your head you'll have it bowled off in half a shake!"

"Well, I'm going to risk it," declared Nelson Lee grimly. "We must avoid a fight if possible, Dorrie. We are helpless on this island, owing to the disaster to the yacht, and the position is deadly serious. I know the ~~lingo~~ lingo of these savages sufficiently to be able to pow-wow."

"Well, so do I," said Dorrie promptly. "I'll do the pow-wowin'!"

"You don't trick me in that fashion, you old rascal!" said Lee. "It's going to be risky, and it's up to me to do the job. But be ready to fire at the first sign of treachery."

By this time the Zambuanas were close inshore. They could see nothing of the defenders, since the barrier rocks concealed them. And the blacks probably imagined that a landing would be perfectly simple.

We on the yacht watched with intense interest. We could see the savages very clearly. They were fierce, ugly-looking fellows, as black as coal and of a repulsive type. They were smothered with paint and feathers and other decorations, and were very obviously on the war-path.

The two leading canoes came on, one straight on. The foremost was of great size, and contained, I judged, the chief. There was practically no surf here, owing to the curious formation of the rocks, and it would be easy to take the canoes right up to the land, as though it were a huge jetty.

And then, to our astonishment, Nelson Lee rose from cover and stood fully exposed upon the rocks.

"Oh, my hat!" muttered Handforth.

"Why has Mr. Lee done that, Nipper?" asked Eileen anxiously. "Surely it is dangerous to expose himself in that fashion?"

"Jolly dangerous, I should say," I replied. "Oh, the reckless chump!"

This was, perhaps, scarcely a respectful term to apply to my esteemed gov'nor; but to see him asking for death like that was the limit. I knew the reason for it, of course. He meant to jabber with the savages, if possible, with the obvious intention of preventing the battle. Well, that was all right, but what if the Zambuanas wouldn't have any of it?

We waited and watched.

The gov'nor flung up his hand, and we heard his voice distinctly, although the words were a mere jumble to us. The blacks understood them, I believe, for they all listened and turned their heads.

"It's going to work!" declared Handforth excitedly.

But even as he was speaking the chief stood up in his canoe and hurled a spear with unerring aim. A dozen other spears followed, and I caught my breath in a gulp.

Nelson Lee dropped like a stone, and only just in time, for the spears whizzed overhead and descended harmlessly in the sand beyond the barrier.

"Thank goodness!" I muttered.

Nelson Lee himself turned to Lord Dorrie more grimly.

"They've asked for it, Dorrie," he said.

"By James! We'll let them have it!"

One moment later the battle commenced.

The machine-guns rattled viciously, sending a stream of lead out towards the foremost canoes. Only two of the guns were in operation at present, but the effect was electrical.

Several men in the large canoe collapsed, and the air became filled with hoarse, fierce cries. The sound rose and swelled enormously, until the whole air quivered with it.

The canoe retreated, and the Zambuanas held a consultation. Several men had been killed, I believe, and their fury was aroused. Lord Dorrie was in charge of the gun nearest the yacht, and he was already at his post, leaving Nelson Lee twenty yards further away. We knew well that this was only a momentary lull.

For, practically at once, the canoes swept to the attack determinedly. The chief, on this occasion, had remained behind, and I could see that fully thirty canoes were lying in reserve at the rear.

About twenty swept on towards the shore, their occupants yelling madly, and throwing spears at the same time.

Buzzzzzzzz! Crack! Crack!

Machine-guns and rifles spoke together, and one of the canoes swerved giddily and overturned, and its occupants were cast into the shark-infested water. Another canoe crashed into the side of the hapless craft, and this, too, sank—apparently badly holed.

Many of the blacks were hauled into other canoes, but a certain number never came up from the depths.

And this serious check only infuriated the Zambuanas more. Instead of retreating, they pressed their attack, regardless of casualties.

On they came, and the machine-guns rattled away continuously. It was a terrible business altogether, but it was necessary to prevent a landing at all costs.

"By George!" roared Handforth. "That's the stuff to give 'em!"

"Go it, ye cripples!" shouted the Bo'sun.

"Hurrah!"

The juniors were tremendously excited, and they yelled continuously. I tried to remain cool, but couldn't manage it. Very soon I was shouting as lustily as the others.

But I knew very well that everything depended upon the strength of the defence. If the Zambuanas gained a footing on the rocks—if they succeeded in landing a force—Nelson Lee and Dorrie and the others would be simply wiped out.

So I was anxious as well as excited.

"By Jupiter! Can't we do something?"

I muttered fiercely. "It's rotten, being stuck up here—spectators!"

We all felt like that; but it was no good grumbling. We should have been useless at the defences—for everything depended upon the machine-guns. If they failed, the defences would be overrun in a moment. For, actually, we were outnumbered fifty or sixty to one.

Apparently they placed little value upon human life, for, although they knew that many of their numbers were falling, they surged forward relentlessly in their canoes—a solid mass of boats paddling at full speed towards the land.

Hundreds of spears chipped the rocks, sending sparks flying in all directions. But owing to the cunning defences nobody was killed, although two members of Captain Burton's crew received minor but ugly wounds.

Very fortunately it was found that the Zambuan's spears were not coated with poison—although this had been considered likely. It was obvious that they had not anticipated any big resistance.

The enemy came on grimly.

This was an anxious moment for everybody. We watched from the yacht, hushed into silence for the time being. There was something appalling in the appearance of all those great canoes charging recklessly in the face of death.

"The idiots!" gasped Handforth. "They'll simply get wiped out."

The machine-guns were rattling away at full pressure, especially at our end—that is to say, the end nearest the yacht. For at this point the blacks appeared to be concentrating their attack. The other guns, however, were busily at work, whilst Dorrimore was forced to labour at prodigious speed.

It was at this moment—the crucial moment—that the mishap occurred. The first I saw of it, or knew of it, was the sight of Dorrie wrenching feverishly at his gun, assisted by Umlosi and one of the men.

The Zambuan, meanwhile, were taking advantage of the fact that the gun-fire from this quarter had ceased. Four canoes bore down straight upon that stretch of rock. Other canoes were being hotly engaged further along the barrier, and the defenders had no time to think what was happening on the extreme left.

"Great Scott!" I panted.

"Dear boy, it's shockin'ly serious," muttered Sir Montie, touching my arm. "The gun's jammed, or somethin'—"

"Of course it has, Montie!" I interrupted hoarsely.

Eileen stood near by and didn't say a word. She was fascinated by the tremendous fight, but she was well aware of Lord Dorrimore's peril. The next minute would decide the matter one way or the other.

And it was decided!

Nelson Lee became aware of the trouble on the left, for he had seen the canoes charging forward, unchecked. And then he

saw that Lord Dorrimore's gun was out of action. Lee came to a decision in a second.

"Leave it, man—leave it!" he shouted. "They'll be swarming over you in less than a minute—"

"Hang it all, I'm not going to retreat!" roared his lordship.

"Man alive, it's suicide to stay there!" called back Nelson Lee. "I can swing my gun round and catch the beggars under a withering fire as they swarm over. There's no danger if you retreat—but I can't pot you! Hurry, you old ass—hurry!"

Lord Dorrimore could understand the gunner's idea exactly. There was no time to shift the machine-gun, and some intervening rocks prevented Nelson Lee from firing at the canoes as they neared the land; but he could easily sweep the top of the rock wall, making it impossible for the invaders to land in force.

But at that moment Dorrie succeeded in freeing his gun. He gave a great yell, and the gun barked furiously. But that delay had been fatal. Two canoes were already grounding, and their occupants swarmed out and charged up the rocks, notwithstanding the fact that several of them fell as they ran.

Even as Dorrie was working his gun a dozen yelling Zambuan's surrounded him. I looked on, sick at heart. Umlosi was doing great work with his spear, and I knew very well that the success was only a temporary one and all the blacks would be certainly wiped out. But what of Lord Dorrimore?

Every second I expected to see him fall, speared to death. But, to my amazement, the small party of invaders seized him and carried him bodily down to one of the canoes. A moment later the craft had pushed off and the blacks were paddling furiously out to sea. Nelson Lee shouted like mad, and all the firing ceased.

And there, held in the canoe, was Lord Dorrimore—unharm'd, and looking as cool as ever. For some astounding reason the Zambuan's had taken him prisoner—they had lost two dozen men in doing so, but the fact remained that Lord Dorrimore was in their hands.

What could be the meaning of this move?

CHAPTER V.

THE ZAMBUAN CHIEF'S TERMS—THE VALLEY OF THE UNKNOWN—A WILD SCENE.

CAPTAIN BURTON was greatly alarmed. "By jings!" he shouted. "They've got Lord Dorrimore—don't fire, men! Don't fire!"

The other defenders were in no need of this warning, however. Not only had Nelson Lee shouted it a moment previously, but the machine-guns and rifles were silent. The skipper was evidently fearful lest they should lose their heads in the general uproar and consternation.



The machine guns were rattling away at full pressure: but the enemy came on grimly.—(See page 12.)

A large element of astonishment was included in this consternation, for everybody expected to see Lord Dorrimore speared to death and cast into the sea. But he remained in the boat, unharmed. Why? Why had these cannibals spared his life after we had taken many of theirs?

We on the yacht were nearly frantic.

"Oh, my hat! It'll be all up with poor Dorrie in a couple of ticks," I exclaimed huskily. "Oh, it's awful!"

"It was his own fault!" snorted Handforth, his face pale. "What the dickens did he want to stick behind that gun for? He could see the niggers were swarming all round. Oh, he'll be killed!"

"Say, I guess you're kinder skeered," remarked Justin B. Farman. "Lord Dorrimore ain't finished yet—an' there's something doing. I guess them nigs wouldn't make him a prisoner unless they had a darned good reason!"

"Torture. I expect," said McClure, shivering.

"Oh, dry up!" I growled.

Perhaps I thought something of the same myself; but I did not like to give voice to the idea. Indeed, it seemed the only possible explanation of the Zambuan's conduct. They meant to torture Lord Dorrimore before our eyes? But I was wrong.

The explanation was quite different.

The war-canoes, having retreated, bunched themselves together, and we could hear the voices of the natives. After a short period one canoe advanced towards the shore—it was the canoe which contained Lord Dorrimore.

The blacks were cunning enough to know that we should not fire upon them with their prisoner in such a prominent position. And the canoe advanced until it was within hailing distance. Lord Dorrimore was held by two ugly blacks, but he remained perfectly cool in these trying circumstances.

One of the Zambuan—evidently a minor leader—stood up and held his hand majestically aloft. It was a sign that he wished to speak. And the only people who could understand him were Nelson Lee and Captain Burton and Lord Dorrimore—and even they were only able to gain the gist of his utterances. In order to make matters clear, however, I had better set down the conversation in good old English. The fact of the matter is I couldn't set it down in the Zambuan lingo even if I wanted to—which I don't!

"I would speak with you, white men!" shouted the Zambuan leader—or words to that effect. "Let your fire weapons be silent!"

Nelson Lee stood upon the rocks, fully exposed, for he had no fear that any treachery would follow at this moment.

"What have you to say?" he shouted curtly.

"Words which will bring you to reason, white man," exclaimed the Zambuan. "We have seized one of your number, and we hold

him prisoner. He will die by the spear unless you surrender completely!"

There was an immediate murmur among the defenders when Nelson Lee rapidly interpreted the statement. On the yacht we could distinguish nothing, and we were therefore filled with anxiety and curiosity. But we learned all about it afterwards, and it's necessary for me to put it down as it occurred.

"You must surrender ere the sun dips beyond the great hill," went on the Zambuan leader, pointing grimly.

The sun was low in the heavens, and it would be dipped beyond the hill in less than ten minutes.

"Don't do anything of the sort!" bawled Lord Dorrimore, in English. "Let the blighters do their worst. If you surrender I'll never forgive you, Lee! Hang the dogs! I don't count!"

We heard Dorrie's yell easily enough—and understood the drift of the former remarks. Eileen clutched at my arm almost fiercely.

"Oh, did you hear, Nipper?" she asked, her voice quivering. "I believe those dreadful blacks have threatened to kill Lord Dorrimore unless we all surrender——"

"Great pip!" gasped Handforth; "we can't surrender!"

"But we must—we must!" declared Eileen firmly. "Oh, we could never let Lord Dorrimore be killed before our eyes!"

"Leave it to the gov'nor, Miss Eileen." I said quietly. "He'll know what to do—and he'll do the right thing."

My confidence in Nelson Lee was profound, and all the others shared that confidence. But I won't deny that a thrill passed through us as we contemplated the possibility of surrendering en masse to the bloodthirsty cannibals.

"Do you hear me, Lee?" roared Dorrimore angrily.

"Of course I do," shouted back the gov'nor. "Hold your tongue, man, and leave this to me."

"Rot!" yelled Dorrie. "If you surrender, I'll be your enemy to your dying day! You can't do it, Lee—think of those involved. Let these blacks do their worst, and forget all about little me. You can beat them off easily—and there'll only be one casualty."

Dorrie was suddenly pulled back into the canoe and held down. The Zambuan, not being able to understand, were becoming suspicious. The leader waved his hand again.

"What is your answer, white men?" he called.

"Wait!" replied Nelson Lee curtly. "You shall have your answer soon!"

And then a consultation was held. Captain Burton and Mr. Scott and the gov'nor talked rapidly together. At the same time Eileen and I dashed to the ladder, descended, and hurried to the scene. All the Removites followed, excited and alarmed.

"Oh, you must surrender, Mr. Lee!" exclaimed Eileen anxiously. "We can never let Lord Dorrimore be killed——"

"Of course not," said Nelson Lee quietly. "But do you realise the seriousness of the situation, Miss Eileen? If we surrender unconditionally—as we shall be compelled to—the prospect is too awful for contemplation. I am not thinking of myself, but of you and Miss Gilbey and the other feminine members of our party. Moreover, there are the boys—"

"Oh, don't consider us, sir," exclaimed Handforth promptly.

I thought that was rather decent of old Handy, for he had sense enough to know that a complete surrender would be almost the same as death. When it came to a crisis Handforth was not wanting.

"We must surrender, sir—there's nothing else for it," I put in. "Great Scott! We can't see Dorrie murdered before our eyes—it's unthinkable, gov'nor!"

The position was, indeed, acute. We were in a cleft stick, so to speak. The Zambians had displayed unsuspected strategy. They knew well enough that they could not conquer us by a frontal attack; therefore Dorrie had been captured in order to make us surrender.

What could we do but comply? As I had said to the gov'nor, the idea of allowing Dorrie to be killed in cold blood was quite unthinkable. Whichever way we looked, there was only one possibility—and that was to give in.

By so doing we should probably seal our own fates, and I dare say it seemed a mad thing to do; but Nelson Lee saw that we were all of one mind—even the crew urged him to give way. Lord Dorrimore was popular with the men, and a surrender on our part would at least save his life.

It was probable that the respite would only be a short one—that we should all be killed before night. But, on the other hand, there was also the probability that we could come to some terms. By argument and persuasion Lee and Dorrimore might be able to reason with the Zambians.

So, all things considered, a complete surrender was decided upon. Nelson Lee shouted out this information in a steady voice—and Lord Dorrimore jumped up like a Jack-in-the-box.

"By glory! You're mad—you're dotty!" he shouted. "You can't knuckle under on my account, Lee—I'm not worth it—"

"Dry up, Dorrie, please!" said Nelson Lee quietly.

His lordship subsided, realising that once the gov'nor's mind was made up, steam-engines wouldn't shift it. And the Zambians talked excitedly together and a bunch of canoes came nearer.

"It is well, white men," said the leader. "You will gather together in the open space, leaving your fire-weapons behind. If there is any treachery, everybody will be killed without mercy. But so long as you remain faithful to your word, no harm will befall you."

We were not deceived by this remark, when

the gov'nor told us the gist of it. At the same time it gave us a certain amount of comfort. And without further delay we all marched into the centre of the sandy lagoon-bed and stood there in a group. Captain Burton and his officers and men were together, whilst Lee and Umlosi and the rest of us stood a little apart. Eileen had hurried away to the yacht to fetch her aunt and their two maids and the two stewardesses. The whole thing was simply awful, but we were helpless.

The battle had gone in a manner which nobody had anticipated. And the shock was so great that we were somewhat stunned and did not realise the full gravity of the position. We waited half curiously and half fearfully.

The Zambians landed in great numbers, and very soon we were surrounded by a swarming, yelling mob of ugly savages. They were scantily attired, but compensated for this by liberal applications of paint all over their legs and bodies.

Nothing more was said to us, but we were marched off in the centre of the great crowd, as though we were a flock of sheep.

By this time the sun was low, and the tropical night would soon descend with its usual rapidity. We did not speak together, except in occasional whispers. And it seemed as though our destination was to be some spot towards the centre of the island.

Very shortly, however, we entered upon a large space with a black cliff ahead. Near the foot of this cliff there was a wide opening, and into this cave we plunged. It was very weird now, for the darkness was complete, and the blacks stalked before us, whilst others came on behind.

Lord Dorrimore had not joined us yet, but was being brought along by a party of other blacks in the rear. Umlosi, although he was almost insane with anxiety and chagrin, managed to remain calm.

"Wan! I am sorely worried, Manzie!" he managed to whisper to me. "This matter is indeed of the gravest character. I would prefer to die rather than submit to this treatment!"

"It was the only way, Umlosi," I replied. "But we're not dead yet, old son."

Umlosi nodded.

"True words, O wise youth," he rumbled.

We did not know where we were going, but we were compelled to move through the darkness of the mysterious tunnel without a pause. And then, to our astonishment, we emerged into daylight again.

But here it was very subdued and gloomy, and we instantly recognised the spot. We were in the mysterious valley which we had visited only that morning. But we had not known that there was a short cut into it like this. Instead of going right round and descending the gully we had passed clean beneath the intervening hill.

And now I began to understand.

But my thoughts were so awful that I tried to make myself believe that I was mistaken.

We already knew that this valley had been used for countless years as a meeting-place. Was it not probable that it was used for other purposes? I could not help remembering the bones we had seen—and these blacks were cannibals.

We were not immediately destined for the pot, however. For we were all gathered in a bunch, and then bound with tough ropes made of some reed material—as tough as whipcord.

Everybody was treated the same; Eileen and her aunt and the four girls were bound as tightly as we were. And then we were all carried bodily into the mouth of the tunnel we had just passed through.

Here, in total darkness, we were left to ourselves. There was a kind of cavern in this tunnel, and we occupied one side of it. The savages passed to and fro constantly, but we were left to ourselves. And continuous shouts from outside told us that preparations were being made.

"I hardly know what to say!" exclaimed Nelson Lee in a steady voice. "It would be foolish to deny that our position is desperate——"

"It was the only way, sir," put in Mr. Scott. "I'm only worried about the ladies and the boys. We men can look after ourselves."

"And what of Lord Dorrimore?" asked Captain Burton gruffly. "Those infernal ruffians have kept him behind, and he is probably dead by this time. We've been tricked, Mr. Lee. We've simply given ourselves up and have gained nothing."

"Better that way, captain, than to have left Lord Dorrimore to his fate without lifting a finger," said the gov'nor quietly.

And there were several murmurs of assent.

As though to deny Captain Burton's suggestion, several Zambians came near at that moment and deposited something close beside us. The something proved to be poor Dorrie, bound as we were.

"Thank heaven you are all right, Dorrie," said Nelson Lee fervently.

But Lord Dorrimore did not seem grateful.

"What do you call yourself?" he demanded, his voice quivering with emotion. "What the dooce do you mean by surrenderin'? Man alive, it was my own fault that I got captured, and it wasn't fair for you to drag all these good people into this frightful scrape because of my foolery!"

"We were all of the same mind. Lord Dorrimore," said Captain Burton.

"Rather, sir!"

"We're all in the same boat!"

"Begad! It couldn't be any other way."

Dorrie breathed hard in the darkness.

"That's all very well, sentiment's a fine thing!" he growled. "But just think of the awful stew we're in now—or it may be an Irish stew before long! These gentlemen with the black skins are rather partial to such dishes."

"You needn't remind us of it, Dorrie!" I put in.

"What's the good of blinding our eyes to

the fact that we're in the hands of cannibals?" asked his lordship. "Personally I don't care tuppence. I've been in worse holes than this. But it drives me dotty to think that I've caused you all to share the danger. Oh, it's rotten!"

"You must not worry yourself, Lord Dorrimore," said Eileen quietly. "It is nobody's fault really. Luck has just been against us, and we must face the situation bravely. And we may escape, even now."

"I'm sure we shall!" declared Aunt Esther stoutly.

"By gad!" murmured Lord Dorrimore. "What a spirit! By gad!"

There was no doubt that Eileen's brave little comment impressed us all, and Aunt Esther's superb confidence made me feel rather silly for having doubted that we should win through. We simply had to.

"It's no good growling and grumbling, anyhow," said Captain Burton. "We all know the position, and we are all prepared to face the worst. As Miss Dare just said, nobody is particularly to blame. I can't quite see how we can improve our position, but we're still alive—and that is something to be thankful for."

"By the way," put in Dorrie. "What about those poor chaps who were potted? Have they been attended to?"

"We're all right, sir," said two of the men.

They were suffering from rather ugly gashes, but the wounds were bound hurriedly but effectively—this had been done on the field of battle. The two sailors were greatly to be commended for their bravery.

"We must face the position," said Nelson Lee. "It is just possible that we shall be able to defeat these blacks—but not at all probable. It is just as well to understand that at the outset. I am sorely worried with regard to the ladies and the boys——"

"Never mind us, sir," I put in. "If you can stand this racket, so can we. Handforth's having his fill of cannibals now, anyhow. He won't be able to grumble any longer."

Handforth grunted.

"They ain't going to eat us. I suppose?" he muttered.

"They might," I replied shortly.

"Thou art pessimistic, Manzie," came a rumble through the darkness. "Thou sayest wild things. We shall not be eaten by these accursed dogs of black men. My own skin is dark, but I am not of the scum thou hast seen on this island. I am the King of Kutaland, and my blood boils. Wau! These wretches shall suffer ere long! I have spoken!"

"I wouldn't deny it, Umlosi," said Lord Dorrimore. "You've spoken all right, but the question is, what have you said? I'm an optimistic chap myself, but I can't quite see how the wretches will suffer. We don't happen to be in a position to cause much sufferin'—except to ourselves!"

"Thou art of the weak heart, N'Kose——"

"Thanks!"

"I mean not the insult, O, my father," went on Umlosi. "But thou must understand that visions sweep before my eyes. I see strange sights and wondrous scenes. The red mists obscure much that would otherwise be clear, but I am permitted to fathom a great deal."

"What the dickens does he mean?" muttered Tommy Watson.

"Oh, he's always like that when we're in a tight corner," replied Dorrie. "When Umlosi sees the red mists you can bet your boots that trouble's in the air. But he's not pessimistic, an' that's a good thing. I'm beginnin' to feel hopeful. Umlosi's as good as a tonic!"

"Thou art pleased to be flippant, N'Kose," exclaimed Umlosi severely. "It is true that I have high hopes, but there are many dangers to face, many trying minutes to pass through. Much blood will flow ere the night is dispelled by the coming dawn, and there will be many excitements!"

"I am prepared for the excitements, but I hope it won't be our blood that'll do the flowin' business," remarked Dorrie. "You might make us easy on that point, Umlosi."

"Wau! It is not possible for me to know such details, my father," replied the Kutana chief. "My snake tells me, however, that victory will be ours ultimately, although much will occur meanwhile. Mayhap I shall suffer, but that matters not. Be of good heart, my masters, for all will be well. And thou, O White Flower, be of good heart also. No harm will befall thee. I have spoken."

White Flower—otherwise Eileen—felt comforted. Somehow, we all shared her feelings. Umlosi managed to instil into us a sense of confidence; he was so solemn and so grave, and his words were convincing.

How he knew was more than we could understand—I don't suppose he really did know. But Umlosi could generally be relied upon to know approximately what would occur. He seemed to possess a sixth sense, somehow or other.

And everybody felt more settled in mind, and our main sensation was one of curiosity as to what would occur. The Zambians were preparing a feast or a dance, or some such heathen ceremony.

It wasn't long before we were permitted to know.

But another matter was concerning my mind for the moment. My bonds were very secure, but I'm a bit of an eel when it comes to wriggling out of ropes. Not that these ropes could be cast off in that fashion. They were very securely fastened, and I was just attempting to loosen them in order to gain more comfort.

Whilst doing this something gave. It wasn't a snap, but I knew jolly well that my wrist ropes were very much slackened. I judged that a portion of the rope had been weak, and my extra effort had caused it to give way. I made no attempt to free myself at present, for I was afraid that the Zambians would discover what had occurred, and then I should simply be bound afresh.

Before I could finally make up my mind the crisis arrived. Forty or fifty blacks entered the cavern from the valley, many of them carrying great flaming torches, which caused long, eerie shadows on the roof overhead. It was a weird scene altogether, and impressed us greatly.

And then we were carried out into the valley, two men dealing with each of us. The journey was a short one, for we were set down against the rocks in a kind of semi-circle. To my satisfaction I was at the very rear, with my back to the rocks. Sir Montie and the Bo'sun were on my left, and Dorrie and Mr. Scott occupied the position to my right.

The scene was altogether wild.

Hundreds and hundreds of torches were blazing in the valley, and the whole place was as light as day, only the effect was lurid and unreal. It looked like a scene out of a terrible nightmare.

Many of the torches were thrust between the rocks, but others were carried by the blacks. These latter had decorated themselves about the heads with tangled seaweed, and they presented a repulsive, horrible appearance.

Scores of them were dancing madly round the sinister pool in the centre of the valley, and at least a dozen torches decorated the great central pillar. Upon our appearance wild cries rent the air and the dance was continued with greater vigour. It made my flesh creep.

We were all fascinated by the spectacle, and more than a little apprehensive. These preparations had not been made for nothing. I firmly believed that we were to be sacrificed in some way or other, but Umlosi's confident word remained in my memory.

"Rather excitin'—what?" I heard De Valerie exclaim with perfect coolness. "We're gettin' more than we bargained for on this trip. Won't the fellows stare when we tell 'em all about it at St. Frank's!"

"Yes, if we ever get back!" grunted Handforth.

We were too excited and thrilled to be scared, and even if some of us were scared we shouldn't have shown it. The dance continued with greater violence than ever, but ceased as though by magic.

Then four Zambians came running towards us. They seized Umlosi and carried him towards the black pool; and the wild cries were renewed with greater strength than even before.

What was the meaning of it all?

CHAPTER VI.

THE SACRIFICE—NIPPER AND DORRIE GET BUSY—UMLOSI'S DANGER.

UMLOSI behaved in the most astonishing fashion.

He struggled and he yelled with terror. His eyes rolled almost alarmingly, and it could clearly be seen that he was frightened out of his life. It was cer-

fainly enough to frighten anybody—for it was generally believed that our black friend was to be tortured and put to death.

"Well, I'm jiggered!" muttered Handforth, who was just in front of me. "I didn't know Umlosi was a funk! Rather sickening, ain't it?"

Lord Dorrimore chuckled.

"Don't you make a bloomer, my son," he said. "Umlosi's about the bravest chap on this earth, and, by gad, he's a clever actor, too. He's doin' it splendidly."

"Why, do you mean to say he's shamming, sir?"

"If you used your wits, my brainy Handforth, you'd know that Umlosi wasn't a funk an' you wouldn't be sickened," replied Dorrie calmly. "He's proved on several occasions that he's worth his weight in kitchen nuts!"

"But—but what's the idea, sir?"

"Blessed if you ain't as curious as ever, Handy," I broke in. "Shut up, and don't jaw so much. Of course Umlosi's shamming—it's a wheeze. These rotters will be deceived, and that'll give Umlosi the advantage."

Umlosi was a cunning old beggar, and he was certainly acting as though he were in the last stage of terror. In consequence—as he had hoped—the Zambians regarded him with contempt and handled him carelessly.

To our wonder, our black friend was carried across the pool by means of a rough bridge arrangement and then tied to the central pillar. Owing to his terror, however, the savages were careless, considering that they need pay no great attention to their terrified victim.

But it mustn't be supposed that Umlosi had any chance of escape. He was bound securely to the pillar, and, personally, I reckoned that his dodge had been in vain. His bonds were slightly loose perhaps, but I couldn't see how that would help him.

Hundreds of cannibals surged round the pool in an excited throng, and Umlosi was concealed from us for the time being. I couldn't see the object of all the excitement. I couldn't understand why Umlosi had been bound to the pillar.

The torches flickered on every side, smoking and flaming, and casting weird shadows in every direction. It was a scene to be remembered, and I know jolly well that I shall remember it for many a year.

And then commenced a wild, savage dance round the pool. At first it seemed to be merely a disorderly movement, but gradually resolved itself into something more rhythmic. Finally, the blacks were dancing at a furious pace, swinging round and round in a continuous mad caper. Others joined them, and the noise created was deafening.

They never seemed to tire, but kept up the pace without the slightest pause. And, meanwhile, it seemed as though the rest of us had been forgotten. We were merely spectators, looking on with wondering eyes and with a curious feeling of apprehension in our hearts. The awe-inspiring nature of the whole scene had taken away our fears—

for it would be absurd to state that we were easy in mind. When a chap is expecting to be killed by cannibals at any moment he can't be exactly comfortable.

Poor old Umlosi was the centre of this madly dancing throng, and I gathered that the whole thing was a caper of triumph, and that when it came to an end the Zambians would commence business in earnest.

I was provided with a fine chance, however, for testing my ropes. I had been placed just a little in the rear of the others, and so I could wrench away and go into contortions without attracting attention.

This I did with all my strength. I was pretty sure that I should be unsuccessful, and that's why I didn't want the others to see my attempts. It would be rotten to raise their hopes in vain.

After about two minutes I gave a gasp of sheer amazement. For one of my bonds had certainly snapped under continuous pressure—it must have been the weak rope. And almost before I could believe it my wrists were free. I felt like yelling aloud with triumph.

Yet there was nothing particular to shout about. What the dickens could I do alone? If it comes to that, what could any of us do? Even if we all got free, any attempt to escape would be spotted at once. So upon the whole I decided to remain quiet.

I quickly got out my clasp knife and cut through my ankle ropes. Then I sat back, breathing hard.

"Jolly neat, Nipper—thundering neat, by gad!" said a voice near by.

I turned my head quickly.

Lord Dorrimore was looking at me, and he nodded.

"Quite an interestin' performance, young 'un," he remarked calmly. "How the dooce did you manage it?"

"Sh-sssh! Don't let the others know!" I whispered. "I don't suppose we shall be able to get away, even if we're all freed."

"Well, chuck over that knife, my son; I shall feel a lot more comfortable if I can use my hands," murmured Dorrie. "You may not believe it, but I've been wantin' to scratch my left ear for ten minutes!"

It wasn't much good throwing the knife over to Dorrie, so I bent towards him and quietly cut through his bonds. As I did so I glanced up at the rocks behind us. They towered steeply, but there was a narrow cleft almost behind my back.

"That's interestin', too," observed his lordship. "I've just been takin' stock of the place, Nipper, an' that cleft is full of possibilities. There's no tellin' where it leads to, but I should think it would be safer than this valley—even if it led into the middle of the bally old volcano itself!"

I began to get excited.

"My hat!" I breathed. "Do you—do you think—"

"I haven't got to that stage yet," said Dorrie. "Thinkin' isn't good—we might get imaginin' that we can escape—an' that would be silly. The best thing is to act, Nipper."

We'll do the trick while our jovial hosts are makin' merry. There's nothin' like strikin' while the iron's hot."

"What shall we do?" I asked eagerly.

Lord Dorrimore considered.

"Well, I can reach Mr. Scott, an' then you can release those two youngsters on the other side. That'll do to begin with, anyhow. The others are a bit too far away just at present."

The others, indeed, were several feet in front of us, and any movement of ours in their direction would be risky, for the whole place was lit by torchlight. As it happened, Dorrie and Mr. Scott and Sir Montie and the Bo'sun and I were lying in the shadow cast by a mass of rock. But all the rest were in the full glare.

While it was an easy matter, therefore, for us five to get free, it would be far more difficult to assist the others. But, as Dorrie said, we didn't want to try too much all at once.

Mr. Scott was quickly set free by Dorrimore. Then the knife was handed back, and I passed it over to Sir Montie. He seemed bewildered when I touched his shoulder, but he did not become at all excited. His eyes gleamed behind his pince-nez, and he smiled.

"Begad! Am I dreamin', Benny?" he whispered. "What an amazin' chap you are; you're always doin' somethin' that takes a fellow's breath away—you are, really. Thanks, awfully, dear old boy!"

He took the knife and was free in next to no time. The Bo'sun, near him, had seen and heard everything, and he was eager to cut himself free also. I badly wanted to release poor old Tommy Watson, but Tommy was right in the front, far out of reach.

"That's five of us, anyhow," said Lord Dorrimore softly. "By glory! We're gettin' on! I'm afraid it'll be rather risky, freein' the others, but you fellows lie low whilst I creep forward."

We didn't object, although we all realised that our little game would probably be spotted. But to escape without trying to aid the others was out of the question. So far they knew nothing. Owing to the comparative darkness in which we lay, and the appalling din from the centre of the "arena," Nelson Lee and Eileen and all the others were in ignorance of what had been occurring.

Dorrie went down on his hands and knees and wormed his way forward.

But our interval of peace was at an end. For before Dorrie had covered a yard the wild dance abruptly ceased and the blacks commenced running in all directions.

"By gad! That's done it!" gasped Lord Dorrimore. "Back with you—into that cleft! Move, you bounders!"

We slithered back into the darkness, and managed to wriggle ourselves into the cleft between the rocks. How we did it I can't imagine, but we somehow found ourselves in a kind of hollow space, with towering masses of rock on both sides, and completely hidden from the valley.

"What about the others?" I panted.

"We couldn't help 'em," replied Dorrie briskly. "My dear Nipper, we should have been spotted in another second, and we can help the rest of our pals better by bein' free than by bein' collared again."

"Begad! That's a sound argument, anyhow," murmured Sir Montie.

"But it's rotten, leaving them in the lurch——"

"It's not rotten—and we haven't left them in the lurch!" snapped Dorrie. "We couldn't help ourselves, Nipper. I expect there'll be an unholy dust-up when they find we've got away—an' that's all to the good."

"Souse me! How do you make that out, sir?" asked the Bo'sun.

"I have no wish to souse you, young 'un," replied Dorrie calmly. "You shouldn't make these awkward requests. An' as for a dust-up bein' to the good—well, you didn't leave your brains behind, did you?"

"Bust my tops'l!" muttered the Bo'sun. "I don't understand!"

"There you go again—askin' me to bust your tops'l this time!" exclaimed Dorrie. "I never knew such a boy! Since you seem a bit fogged, I'll just explain that the natives will create blazes when they find that we've hooked it. An' what's the result? A search, an' general trouble. Old Lee an' the others will be forgotten while they're scourin' round for us. So we'd better retreat to a more strategic position—as the military experts say!"

"By thunder!" exclaimed Mr. Scott. "You've got an amazing head, sir!"

"No, just the same as yours," replied Dorrie. "The contents may be a bit different—less of 'em, perhaps—but I'm always brilliant when there's work to be done. That happens about once in five years, an' all the rest of the time I'm stagnant. I've got a wheeze!"

"What is it, Dorrie?" I breathed.

"Well, we'll see what we can do in the firework line," replied his lordship. "We've got heaps of 'em on board, an' there's just a chance that we can reach the yacht. A nice little display of fireworks would set these infernal blacks scamperin' to their canoes like blackbeetles into their holes!"

"By jingo!" I muttered excitedly.

"It sounds rosy, but we may not be able to work the trick," Dorrie reminded us. "We've got to get out of this hole first—an' goodness knows how that's goin' to be done, because I don't!"

Without waiting further, we turned our attention to the rocks. Our task was not so difficult as we had feared, for the cleft led straight upwards towards the night sky. Dorrie led the way, I went next, Montie and the Bo'sun followed, and Mr. Scott brought up the rear.

It was a nightmare climb, and we scaled almost impossible points. Even in broad daylight, under ordinary circumstances, we should have considered it madness to attempt the feat. But, somehow or other, we won through, disregarding all dangers and pressing on without pause.

Providence must have guided us, for when

we broke into the open at last we found that we had worked round in the course of our ascent and were within a short distance of the steep gully which we had visited during the morning.

We knew our position at once, and that was a great advantage. Quite a little time had elapsed since we escaped from the valley, and up here everything was quiet. A lurid glare rose from the depths, but we turned our backs to it and hastened towards the beach.

"Oh, we shall do it—we shall defeat the heggars!" declared Lord Dorrimore, with great satisfaction. "Our luck's in, or we shouldn't have got as far as this, an' I've always noticed that luck is pretty steady, once it comes along. But keep quiet, an' let me do the leadin'."

By the time we arrived at the fringe of of palms near the beach we were all perspiring freely, not that we cared about this. The night was warm and black, the sky looked velvety purple, spangled with dazzling stars.

Contrary to our expectations, the lagoon bed was all quiet, and our spirits rose ever higher. So far as we could see, everything was exactly as we had left it when we surrendered to the Zambuanas.

"It looks as if there hasn't been any search, ah," suggested Mr. Scott.

"All the better," declared Dorrie. "By gad! If we can only get those fireworks and loose 'em off at the right time we'll do the trick splendidly. But the main thing is to make haste. While we're loitering here our guv'nor may be peggin' out, Nipper."

"You're sure to say something cheerful!" I grunted.

We were loitering in a most energetic fashion, for while Dorrie was speaking we were proceeding at the double towards the yacht. It was necessary to take precautions, but the silence convinced us that this portion of the island was quite deserted. All the blacks were evidently in the vicinity of the mysterious valley.

We reached the yacht without mishap, ran lightly up the ladder, and were soon plunging into the interior of the vessel—in the dark, of course.

We knew our way about perfectly, and before five minutes had passed the store of fireworks had been located. They had been brought, at Dorrie's suggestion, for the purpose of giving the juniors a treat one night, but we had never used them. Very possibly they would be the means of saving our lives at this critical period.

Fully loaded up, we reached the deck once more and commenced the return trip. I was carrying a number of powerful rockets; Mr. Scott was overburdened with a huge bundle of Roman candles and fireworks of a similar description. Red fire would play an important part in the display.

As it happened, we did not find it necessary to use the fireworks at all—not that night, at all events. They certainly came in extremely handy later on, but that's another yarn, which I shall tell in due course.

For the present we made all speed back to the gully. Arriving in the vicinity, Lord Dorrimore called a halt.

"We'll put the stuff down here and find out the lie of the land," he whispered. "I've got some binoculars, and we shall be able to see exactly what's going on from the top of the gully. I hope to Heaven those blacks haven't done any harm to poor old Umlooi."

In our innocence we fondly imagined that everything in the valley was as we had left it. But, since the moment of our departure a great deal had been happening—a great deal which would have amazed us could we have seen, and which did amaze us almost at once.

When the blacks had ceased their wild dance so abruptly we believed that a definite move was being made in the savage ceremony. Actually, the cause of that abrupt stoppage was very different.

And it was providential that we had left the valley when we did, for our absence was to mean a great deal afterwards. It was Dorrie who first made the astonishing discovery.

He had crept forward to the top of the gully, where the glare from the torches below flickered up into the night sky.

I was close behind his lordship, and I wondered what was the matter when I heard Dorrie catch his breath and murmur "By gad!" three times in succession. He turned and beckoned to me.

"You fond of surprises, young 'un?" he asked calmly.

"Why, what's the matter?" I asked.

"Come an' look!"

"Is it anything—anything bad?"

"Don't ask questions; come an' look!" repeated Lord Dorrimore.

Impressed by his tone I went to his side, and Sir Montie and the Bo'sun and Mr. Scott crept up in the rear.

We gazed right down into the valley, where the many torches made everything as light as day. And what we saw there filled us with utter astonishment, for it was something so completely unexpected that we had not been prepared for it.

What was it we saw?

That's not a conundrum, because I mean to set down, straight away, what had happened in the grim valley during our absence.

CHAPTER VII.

A TERRIBLE FIGHT—THE MYSTERY EXPLAINED— OUT OF THE FRYING PAN——!

NELSON LEE was keener than I had given him credit for being—although I well knew that he was as keen as mustard. But the guv'nor, in spite of my belief to the contrary, was well aware of the fact that I had escaped from my bonds, and that four others had benefited by that fact by being similarly free.

How he found it out I don't know. Some times I half believe that the guv'nor's got an eye hidden somewhere in the back of his

head. At all events, he manages to spot things in the most surprising manner. I had seen no move on his part, yet he knew that things were happening.

Being in the full light of the torches, he had not turned round to look at us, realising that his best policy was to lie low.

Just before we were compelled to retreat into the cleft, however, Nelson Lee leaned slightly towards Eileen, who sat next to him. The girl was looking perfectly calm, although she knew that the position was deadly. Her pretty muslin frock was sadly disarranged and torn, and, being bound, she could not move a finger. But Eileen was famous for having a cool head.

"Nipper has managed to get free, Miss Eileen," whispered the gov'nor softly.

She gazed at Nelson Lee with just a little start.

"Oh, how did he manage it?" she asked. "Do you think— Oh, but it is impossible that he can do anything, Mr. Lee. We must not hope—"

"On the contrary, there is every reason to hope," said Nelson Lee. "I merely mentioned the matter to you so that you should be ready to act at once, if necessary. Our position is a terrible one, and any move in the direction of freedom must be adopted if the opportunity presents itself."

And then, at that moment, came the abrupt cessation of the wild dance round the pool in the centre of the valley. The Zambians ran about in all directions. Out of the corner of his eye Nelson Lee saw that five of us had slipped away—and he knew the reason. It was better that we should go while we had the chance than to remain and be re-bound.

But it soon became apparent that the savages were not intent upon their victims. For some unearthly reason they disappeared into the several exits which led towards the beach, and before five minutes had elapsed there wasn't a single Zambian left in the valley.

Dorrie and the others were climbing out of the cleft at that time, and we knew nothing of this. We fondly imagined that our enemies were still in possession of the valley.

But they had gone—they had fled!

Why?

What on earth could be the reason for such an unexpected move?

Handforth and Co. were quite confident that something dreadful was about to happen—that it was only a temporary affair. But Nelson Lee was quite positive that the hostile blacks were scared. They had not merely departed, but had fled helter-skelter.

"Dear me! This is most astounding!" he exclaimed to Eileen. "I am quite at a loss."

"Do you think Nipper—"

"Nipper can have nothing to do with it, or Dorrie either," interrupted the gov'nor. "The exodus commenced before Nipper slipped away, Miss Eileen. The explanation is something far different, and I am very curious."

"Say it has got me rattled, good an'

plenty," remarked Farman, shaking his head. "Guess I just can't fix this game."

"Some trick or other!" said Handforth. "You can't diddle me, you know. We shall find ourselves in a terrific fix before long. Perhaps the volcano's started off again, and we may be deluged with fire before long."

"Oh, shut up, Handy!" muttered McClure.

"Rot! We've got to face the thing," said Handforth. "No good being squeamish. I'm what they call a fatalist. If a thing's got to happen, it—it— Well, it has got to happen!"

"That's lucid, ain't it?" snapped Tommy Watson. "What the dickens has happened to Nipper? And where's Montie? Oh, crumbs, we're having a fine old time, ain't we. I'm all in a muddle!"

But Handforth's suggestion did not seem so wild. In fact both Captain Burton and Nelson Lee had thought of the same possibility. If the volcano had commenced another eruption the mystery was explained. The blacks would certainly take fright and make tracks.

But the volcano was perfectly quiet, and there was no sign that it had become active once more. The silence in the valley was now almost oppressive, and the great space looked more sinister than ever, deserted as it was.

Nelson Lee was attempting to free himself from his ropes, but he had been tied very securely and all his efforts were in vain, and the attention of everybody was attracted towards the unfortunate Umlosi, who still remained bound to the stone pillar in the centre of the pool.

"Wau! What is this?" came Umlosi's voice.

"Are you all right, old man?" shouted Nelson Lee.

"I know not, Unitagati," replied the black giant. "If thou art referring to my bodily state, I must make answer that I am unharmed. But these ropes are obstinate, my master, and I am impatient."

Everybody was pleased to hear that Umlosi was still all right, for they had begun to fear that he had met with some disaster; the Zambians had surrounded him, and for some moments after the departure of the blacks he had remained absolutely motionless.

"Is there anything the matter, Umlosi?" shouted Captain Burton.

"I am sorely troubled, O thou man of the great seas," replied Umlosi. "The water around me bubbles and stirs, yet there is nothing to be seen otherwise. I suspect that some devilry is afoot— Ah! What is this?"

The onlookers could not see the surface of the water at that distance, but they could easily see that Umlosi was staring down at the water steadily and with a certain fascination. What was it that was attracting his attention so closely? Even he, himself, did not know.

But, as he had said, the water of the pool was strangely disturbed. It heaved, as though some enormous force beneath the surface was exerting its strength. And then,

as Umlosi looked, something long and black and snake-like came out of the water and slid towards him.

"Wau! Thou art indeed a strange object!" muttered Umlosi.

Another tentacle appeared, and it wound itself round one of Umlosi's legs like a steel rope. The pain was tremendous, and Umlosi caught his breath involuntarily. At the same moment something huge and black rose to the surface of the pool.

Umlosi knew in a moment that his danger was appalling. For the thing was an enormous octopus!

So this was the secret of the pool—the murderous blacks had been dancing round and round the rock pillar, waiting until the octopus should rise out of the water and secure its victim.

An interruption had come, but the reason for it was a mystery. It made no difference, however, to Umlosi's peril. Nelson Lee, by a great effort, had managed to get to his feet; although he could not move a yard without falling again.

He saw the dreadful creature in the pool.

"Good heavens!" he exclaimed hoarsely. "Can't you get free, Umlosi? Use every ounce of your strength, man. If once that thing gets hold of you, you'll have no chance."

"Wise words, O Umtagati!" shouted Umlosi calmly. "I heed them. See! I care nothing for these foolish ropes!"

And Umlosi, with an amazingly forceful heave, snapped his bonds with one effort. It had cost him all his strength, but he had succeeded. Even now, however, his peril was considerable. For he had yet to reach the edge of the pool—and the octopus was barring the way.

"What is it, sir?" asked Handforth huskily.

"An octopus, lad—and a particularly deadly one, I believe," replied Nelson Lee. "Unless Umlosi is amazingly agile he will meet his death within the next minute. Indeed, there is little hope for him!"

"Oh!"

It was an exclamation from many voices.

All else was forgotten in the intensity of this moment. Umlosi was almost as popular as Dorrie himself, and to lie here helpless and to see the Kutana chief done to death before their eyes was as much as the boys and the yacht's crew could stand.

Several of Captain Burton's men attempted to go to the rescue; but it was quite impossible for them to reach the pool. And, meanwhile, Umlosi was engaged in a terrible combat with the repulsive monster.

It seemed as though Umlosi was entangled in brambles or ropes. It was hideous, and the ropes flickered and wound themselves round him grimly. And just for a second the face of the octopus was visible.

It was a horrible, awful face, almost impossible to describe. The eyes were as wide as saucers, their expression stony and absolutely steadfast. The thing was like a creature out of the Pit itself.

A parrot-like beak, large and heavy, hung before the eyes. And it wobbled and appeared to beckon to the startled Umlosi. For the black giant, courageous as he was, was thoroughly startled now.

The whole adventure was enough to startle the strongest man—and Umlosi had never experienced anything of this nature before. What caused him to shudder more than anything else was the expression of the eyes—passionless, and full of deadly purpose and hatred.

Two of the great tentacles whipped out of the water, creating a smother of foam. They seized Umlosi by the thigh, and held him. And then Umlosi realised the full nature of his peril, and every ounce of his terrific strength was exerted.

The onlookers scarcely knew that was occurring, except that a terrific commotion took place in the pool—a commotion so violent and sustained that it seemed to be never-ending.

"Poor fellow—poor fellow!" muttered Nelson Lee, between his teeth.

For, in truth, the detective believed that Umlosi was done for. And yet nothing could be done for him—nothing whatever! Help was within a few yards, and yet it might as well have been a hundred miles away.

A spear thrust through one of those horrible eyes would have ended the fight swiftly; but Umlosi had no spear, neither could he obtain one. It was his strength pitted against the sea-monster, and the fight seemed hopelessly uneven.

"Thou slimy reptile!" roared Umlosi suddenly. "Wau! Thinkest thou that I can be defeated by such means?"

Everybody started. If Umlosi could shout so lustily, it proved that his strength was still formidable, and hopes were revived. A great series of shouts immediately went up.

"Go it, Umlosi!" roared Handforth encouragingly.

"Buck up, old man!"

"You'll win!"

"Use all your strength, Umlosi!"

But Umlosi was already doing that, to judge from the terrific splashing and foaming which came from the pool.

"Wau! Thou art not victorious, thou beast of blackness!" bellowed the Kutana chief. "It is not I who feel the effects of the fight—thou wilt succumb first, thou monster!"

How Umlosi managed to free himself was more than he could explain afterwards. His strength was enormous, as everybody knew, and, by sheer determination and brute force, he tore the clinging tentacles from him and reached the bank. Once there, he hauled himself up, but was dragged back again. The fight recommenced, and Umlosi's hoarse cries and heavy breathing told a story of diminishing strength. It was telling even upon this black Hercules.

No white man could have stood the strain—and very few black men. But, at last,

with a final cry, Umlosi reached the bank for a second time. And on this occasion he sprawled face forward upon the ground, one tentacle of the octopod still entwined round his ankle.

But now Nelson Lee could see Umlosi's object. A spear lay almost within his grasp; by reaching out at full length he seized the thing, held it firmly, and turned.

One terrific, deadly drive, and the weapon went home, through one of the ghastly eyes and into the soft gelatinous carcase. The water of the pool became stained as black as pitch, and at the same second the grip relaxed.

Umlosi staggered forward, his arm raised high.

"Wau! It was a good fight!" he croaked. "I win, Umtagati, my master!"

But it had been touch and go, and Umlosi's great strength was spent. He staggered and fell full length, laying like a log upon the ground. Nelson Lee took a deep breath.

"The man is a wonder!" he exclaimed. "Upon my soul, I should never have believed it possible."

"But what of our position, Mr. Lee?" asked Captain Burton. "Why on earth did those blacks desert the valley so suddenly? And what has happened to Lord Dorrimore and Nipper and—"

"There's somebody coming, sir," shouted De Valerie suddenly.

And, sure enough, a large party of men appeared in the valley. At the very first glance Nelson Lee saw that they were not Zambians. On the contrary, they were white men—sailors.

"Oh, my only hat!" yelled Handforth. "Rescue! Another ship must have come along, and we're saved!"

"Hurrah!"

"Thank Heaven!" exclaimed Aunt Esther fervently. "Oh, my dear, I cannot understand why I have not fainted!"

But Eileen was not paying her aunt attention. She was looking at the men who had just appeared. They were white men, certainly, but a more ruffianly looking set could scarcely be imagined. Nelson Lee could easily understand why the Zambians had vanished so abruptly—the mystery was now explained.

A ship had appeared off the island, and the cannibals' look-out had seen its approach. The blacks had probably thought that their retreat would be cut off, or that the new force was a large one. At all events, they had left the island at once, in order to be on the safe side.

And who were these men?

The prisoners were not left long in doubt. For a series of exclamations in a well-known voice came to their ears. And then appeared in the torchlight a figure which was well known to them all—the figure of Captain Ebenezer Jelks! The shock was a big one, and everybody was thunderstruck.

At the same time, the relief at seeing white faces instead of black somewhat nullified this unpleasant surprise. But Nelson Lee realised in a moment the full purport of this new development.

Captain Jelks and his men were upon the scene, and they had found their enemies trussed up like so many chickens, helpless and at their mercy. The Zambians had gone, certainly, but the yacht's party found themselves out of the frying-pan and into the fire!

The position was scarcely any better than before—perhaps worse. Captain Jelks had them in his power—completely. Even Umlosi was helpless on this occasion, for he was so exhausted that he was of little use. Indeed, he was seen and made a prisoner almost at once.

"Well, I've had a few surprises in my life, but I reckon this is just about the biggest thing I've struck!" exclaimed Captain Jelks, with great satisfaction. "You allus was an obligin' man, Cap'n Burton, durned if you wasn't! I 'ain't thought o' such luck as this, not even in my dreams!"

Captain Burton said nothing. He was too sick at heart to do so. And the surprise of Lord Dorrimore and myself, at the top of the gully, can be understood. For we looked down upon this scene; we saw that all the blacks had vanished, and that Nelson Lee and the others had fallen out of the Zambian's hands, only to be captured by Jelks and Co.!

But the peril, for the moment, was over—and so is this episode.

THE END.

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SCHOOL CHUMS.

"HELLO, young 'un. Are you bound for the school?"

The speaker, a hefty but rather pale-faced boy, all bone and muscle, though he had a somewhat languid air, strode up to a bewildered-looking junior half his size, and, with arms akimbo, eyed him critically.

The "kid" started, and glanced nervously about him, as if for some way of escape.

"I'm—I'm going to Littleminster School, sir," he answered. "But—there aren't any cabs—"

"No. No cabs. It's war-time, you see, and all the men of military age are in the Army. No taxis, no horse cabs, and the old school bus don't run now. That your luggage?"

The words were snapped out, and the "kid" grinned feebly.

"Y-yes," he stammered. "And I—don't know how I'm going to get it all to the school."

"H'm! You travel a lot of stuff for a little 'un. New boy, eh?"

"Y-yes, sir."

"Thought so. Hadn't seen you before. Hope you'll get on here. Father's got plenty of money, eh?" The bigger boy spoke with a certain yearning emphasis which suggested that, at any rate, his father had not.

"I think my dad has. And—he's sending me here so that I can be educated like a gentleman."

"H'm." The bigger boy stroked his chin thoughtfully. The somewhat hard expression of his face softened. "I shouldn't advise you to tell the other chaps that," said he. "They mightn't like it. You don't want to make a bad start. Porter!"

He roared the last word out lustily, and, receiving no answer, hawled it again and again, until at last an overworked and surly-looking porter of about fifty shuffled along.

"Comin'!" he yelled. "I can't attend to everybody at once."

"Don't want you to," said the bigger boy scornfully. "Keep your hair on, Manders. Look here, I want you to take charge of this chap's luggage. You can bring it up to the school to-night, can't you?"

"You dratted schoolboys think as a man's got nothing else to do but fetch and carry for yer," said the porter in a tone of irritation. "No, I can't bring it up to-night, and I don't think I can to-morrow neither."

"Supposing you try, eh? Look here, kid—what's your name—"

"Basil Hood, sir—"

"Don't 'sir' me. Those five pieces are yours, aren't they, Hood? Yes. Which is the bag in which you've got the things you'll want to use immediately? The kit bag, there? Right. Then there are five bigger pieces. Manders, that makes five for Master Hood, and there are two of mine, over on the back of the platform there. Seven in all. Bring them up to-night and you shall have five bob. If you bring them in the morning you'll have four."

The porter's face softened. He touched his cap.

The bigger boy held out his hand to the smaller one.

"Give me half-a-crown, Hood. That's your share, and yours is the bigger half, mind. Thanks. Wouldn't ask you for anything, only I'm poor, you see. Now, then, Manders, here's four shillings. If the things come up to-night you'll have the extra bob. That's fair, isn't it?"

"You shall have the luggage to-night, sir."

"Honour bright?"

"I give you my word, sir."

"You can have the money now, then. No cabs, of course? None? Thanks. Now, then, kid, I'll carry the bags, and we'll walk."

The small boy with the wistful face hesitated. As he glanced at his companion out of a pair of big, frightened eyes one could tell that he was wondering whether he ought to trust himself to this stranger who declared himself to be a Littleminster boy.

"Is—is—it far?" he asked timidly.

"It's a mile and a half, my lad, and a stiffish walk at that. Ought to think yourself lucky that I'm going your way, as there aren't many boys arrive the day before the term begins. Now, step it out and come along."

He cut short further argument by gripping his bag in one hand and the small boy's in the other. Then, with a last injunction to the porter not to fail to deliver the luggage that night, he led the way out of the station, and the two of them, heading away from the town, began to walk briskly along the dusty and winding country lanes in the direction of Littleminster School.

"So, your name's Basil Hood, eh, young 'un. Nice-sounding name that. Mine's Challis—John Challis. I'm Fifth Form. Ought to be in the Sixth, you know, but I'm a

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slow learner. I'm not very popular at the school"—here he smiled grimly—"but it's not my fault, you know. My father's poor. Takes him all his time to keep me here. I'm sorry he ever sent me to the place—though he isn't."

The smaller boy glanced at him in blank wonderment as John Challis ventured the foregoing information.

For some yards they walked in silence, and then the sturdy, pale-faced boy, who seemed to make light of his load, went on: "I've told you that because I've taken a fancy to you. Don't want you to blab about it, though."

"I won't," said the new boy fervently.

"That's right. And, I say, you don't look very strong, young 'un?"

"I'm not. My father is, though. I had an accident when I was a baby. The nurse dropped me, they say. I've been sickly ever since."

"Poor little chap. Well, I hope you get on with the boys, and that they won't bully you. You'll have to fag, of course. Still, you may get somebody decent to fag for. Hope you do."

After that they walked in silence for a great way.

In fact it was not until the school houses showed through a break in the trees—an irregular pile of nicely designed red brick buildings, set on the side of a hill, with spacious playing fields all around them—that John Challis spoke again.

Before he did so he put both the bags down and drew in several deep breaths, for it had been hard work and he was winded.

After mopping his face with a handkerchief—and its pallor had given place to a ruddy glow, the result of the exercise—he pointed at the buildings.

"There's the school, young 'un," he cried. "That's Littleminster. I've been there two years, and I can't say I've ever had a decent time. Still, some of the boys manage to. I'm not popular. But I hope you will be; and, I say—we'll be friends, I hope, for I like you."

The new boy's heart warmed towards his sympathetic friend as he looked timidly at him out of his big eyes.

"And I like you, Mr. Challis," he said.

"That's all right, then. Suppose we shake hands."

Solemnly the smaller boy placed his thin, delicate hand in that which John Challis held out to him.

Challis sighed deeply.

"Now we'll get on," said he. "And, look here, Hood, if you find yourself in any sort of trouble, and want a friend, don't forget to come and confide in me, will you? For I'll help you if I can."

The smaller boy, gulping down the lump that rose in his throat, promised, and they continued their walk side by side, neither of them uttering another word, until the big gates were passed and they found themselves approaching the great range of school houses, at which the new boy stared in awe.

"We've arrived at last," said Challis, as he made for a side door. "This is Littleminster School."

A CHALLENGE.

WHAT followed after their arrival at the school Basil Hood could never afterwards remember in any proper sort of sequence. He knew that Challis found the housekeeper, after considerable hunting, and consigned him into her care.

He was given some tea, and later in the afternoon went before the headmaster, who questioned him, and smiled in a set, sort of way, and then handed him over to one of the masters, a Mr. Evans, who showed him his dormitory and the curtained-off bed in which he was to sleep.

He met other boys, who chaffed him, and a few who were as dull and miserable and homesick as himself.

He remembered eating in the evening in a huge dining-hall with about thirty other boys, whilst about them stretched long, vacant tables, empty now, but which would all be occupied to-morrow.

Never had the lad felt so miserable. The few masters who were there ignored the boys and talked among themselves. John Challis was the only one who took any notice of him, and the smile his friend gave him was the only thing that gave the new boy heart. He went to bed that night tired and overwrought, and, if the truth must be confessed, cried himself to sleep, for Basil was only a weak little chap, and not strong in spirit like you.

Then came next day, the opening day of the term, and from early morning onward all was bustle and excitement in the school. Most of the boys walked up from the station. Their luggage followed them, being brought to Littleminster by the overworked and grumbling station-porters or the porter of the school.

The quad. and the precincts of the school echoed with merry laughter and loud shouts as old friends greeted one another after the holidays and old enemies began the school warfare anew. Basil was too bewildered and hustled to mope then. And at night, when the great dining-hall was packed and the boys of his own age seated beside him and opposite him plied him with questions, made jokes at his expense, shied pellets of bread at him, and put him through the hoop generally, he set his teeth and tried to smile.

Presently a big boy came to him and said, in a tone of command:

"Look here, new kid, you're in Evans' House, aren't you?"

"Y-yes," faltered Basil, his heart giving a great jump, for he didn't like this big, sinister-looking boy.

"Thought so. You're young Basil Hood, aren't you?"

Basil admitted the soft impeachment.

"All right. Then you've got to fag for

(Continued overleaf.)

me. My name's Myers. I'm in the Fifth Form. If anybody else wants to bag you, say you're claimed by me. See?"

"Yes," cried Basil, staring, and wishing that any other big boy but this one, to whom he had taken an instant dislike, had claimed him.

"That's right. And I say, if you serve me a dirty trick and go fagging for anybody else, I'll skin you! Understand?"

Basil admitted that he did understand, and Myers turned scowling away.

As he passed along the table he saw Challis, further up, towards the head of it, gazing at him intently.

"Myers, can I have a word with you?" asked Challis quietly.

"Well, what is it?"

"You've been asking young Hood to fag for you?"

"Well, what if I have?" asked Myers hotly.

"Oh, nothing, save that I've promised to be his friend, and I won't have him ill-used, that's all."

Myers uttered a defiant laugh.

"Oh, we all know what to think of you, cad Challis," he sneered. "And I pity that young beggar if he's got under your wing. I shall have to train him, that's all." And he walked away, leaving Challis brooding.

"Myers means mischief," Challis thought. "Well, he shan't harm that youngster while I remain at Littleminster, that's all."

JOHN CHALLIS INTERVENES.

JOHN CHALLIS was one of those boys who find study difficult.

He had been something like a dunce when he first arrived at the school, and his progress had not been as swift as he himself desired, nor had the masters taken much interest in him. It was commonly understood that his parents could hardly afford the school fees, and almost from the first the boy had been left to himself.

Yet he had made progress, principally by dint of sticking closely to his work. And, like many slow boys, what he did memorise in the way of knowledge his brain assimilated for all time, so that as the terms went on much leeway was made up, and he began to earn the respect of the seniors and the masters, at least.

It was often his practice to rise before the school bell rang in the morning and go work in the quiet seclusion of his private room.

Lately, when Myers and Coggin, who occupied a room above, got up, there was so much stamping and shouting that study became impossible.

The day after the term began John Challis rose at his usual early hour, intending to begin well. For a long time he worked, and

then was interrupted by the loud clanging of the school bell, and later by the sound of scuffling in the passage. He heard a boy whimpering plaintively, and his heart leaped, for he knew that it was young Basil Hood, the new boy.

Then he heard another boy bullying, and knew that it was Myers.

Challis, leaping to his feet, made for the door and peeped out.

He saw Myers holding young Hood by the ear and scowling at him, while he tweaked the organ of sound.

"Don't tell me you don't know what you've got to do," howled Myers. "Think I've nothing better to do than run about after you? You go up to my room—it's number thirty-three—and tidy and dust-up quick. And if it isn't done when I come up in ten minutes I'll murder you."

"Ow! Oh! Oo! Oh!" sobbed poor little Hood.

Then the bully, with a final wrench, released him, and urged him on his way along the corridor with a kick.

"I'll soon reduce you to order, you young cub!" he scowled as he followed the fag.

Challis remained at his door, white with anger, his heart swelling within him.

"Brute!" he muttered; but he didn't interfere, for he knew that he would only make matters worse for the new boy if he did. Time enough for interference when Myers went too fag.

So he walked back to his chair and resumed his studies. He soon became absorbed in his work, and forgot all about Basil Hood until he heard a loud thump on the floor overhead and the low cry of a boy in pain. Then followed some scuffling, and Myers' loud, strident voice made itself heard, now and then accompanied by remarks from Coggin.

Challis listened. He heard Basil Hood shriek out, and then followed more storming from Myers.

John Challis, with tight, set lips, left his chair, opened the door of his study, and went out. He leaped along the corridor, and mounted the stairs to the floor above, two at a time.

To reach the door of Myers' study was the work of a moment.

"Stop that howling," he heard Myers shout, "and go on with your work. I'll teach you—"

"I won't do it! I won't—I won't—I won't! you shall kill me first—" Challis heard the new boy reply.

"We'll soon see about that. Hold him, Coggin—"

Challis wrenched the door open and leaped into the room.

(To be continued.)