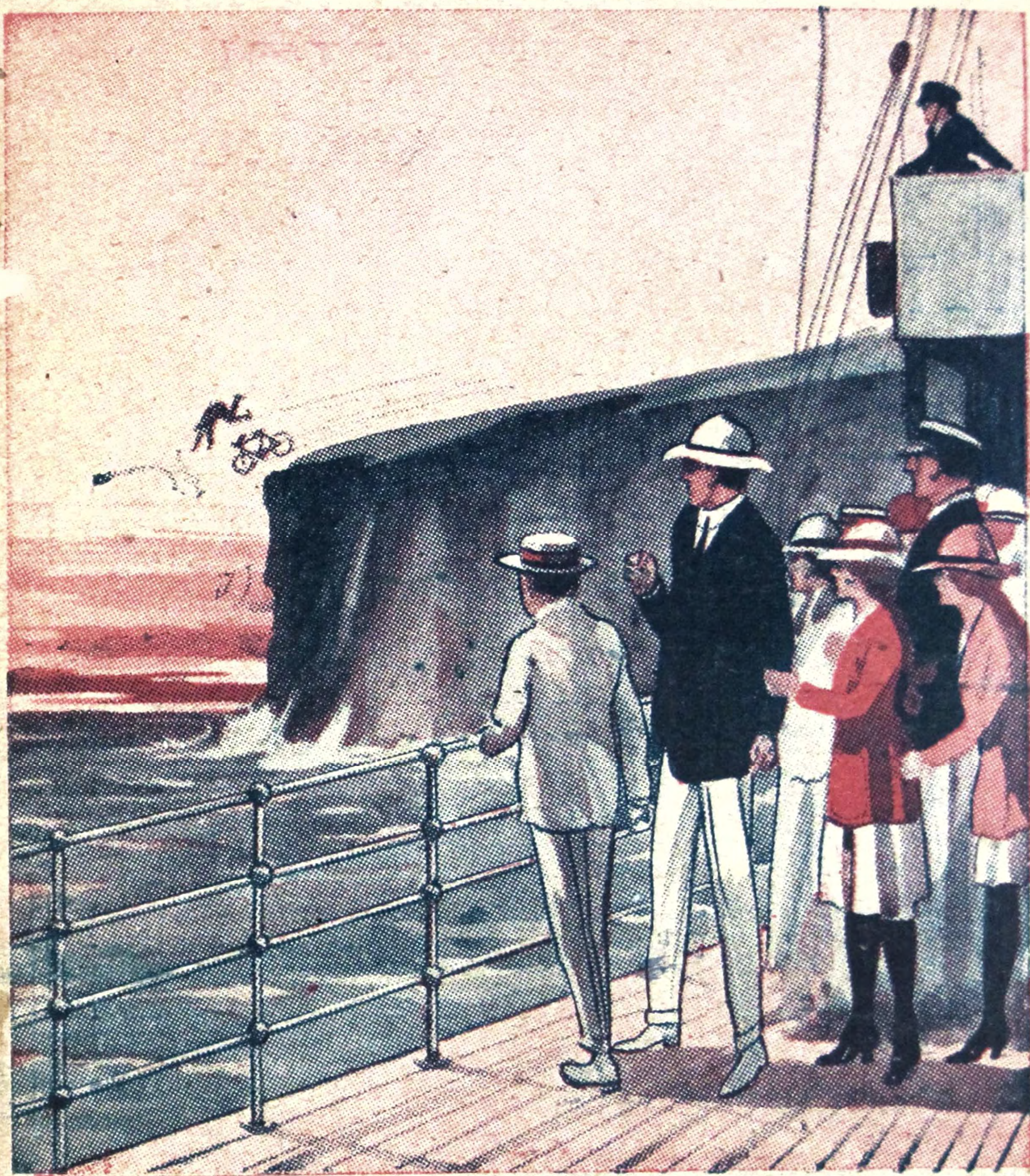


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(THE NARRATIVE RELATED THROUGHOUT BY NIPPER.)

CHAPTER I.

MANY APPLICANTS.

MR MUDFORD gasped. "My heye!" he exclaimed, with difficulty. "They—they must be mad!"

Mr. Mudford was the village postman, and he certainly had excellent cause for his suspicions. It was a glorious June morning, and Mudford had been trudging up the dusty lane from Bellton to the grey old pile of St. Frank's.

And he had just turned the bend which brought the great gateway of the school into view, when he became aware of the fact that a crowd of juniors were waiting in the roadway.

And Mudford's appearance was the signal for a general rush.

The crowd came charging down the road at full speed, and the postman stopped in his tracks, fairly lost in amazement. He was somewhat alarmed, too, for that crowd looked rather dangerous.

"Here is the bounder!"

"On him!"

"Collar his giddy letters!"

"Hurrah!"

"My heye!" ejaculated Mr. Mudford again.

He had never experienced such an adventure in all his career. The juniors of St. Frank's, for some unknown reason, were bent upon attacking him! And the postman looked round him wildly for a way of escape.

He saw a gap in the hedge, but it was ten yards away. It afforded the only means of escape, however, and he charged at it clumsily and frantically. As a result, he became stuck half-way.

And before he could extricate himself the crowd was upon him. He was yanked into the middle of the road, gasping and scared, and nearly deafened by the yells which went up.

"Got one for me, Muddy?"

"Gimme mine!"

"Search his giddy bag!"

Tommy Watson, of the Remove, glared round him.

"Give the chap a chance!" he shouted.

"You've scared him out of his wits already! Can't you have a little patience?"

Mudford took a deep breath.

"Are you out o' your minds, young gents?" he asked. "I ain't done any harm, an' it's not like you to pounce on a poor man——"

"We want our letters, you chump!"

"That's all, Muddy!"

"Hand 'em over, old son!"

The postman gave a gasp of relief.

"Is that all, young gents?" he asked.

"You only want your letters? But you ain't never been so eager before—not as long as I can remember! Why, I thought you was a-goin' to half-kill me——"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"You're safe enough, Muddy." I grinned.

"These chaps want their letters from home, that's all. There's something special on."

"My heye! I should reckon there is!" said Mudford, with feeling.

It was, as a matter of fact, very special indeed. I was on the spot with my two chums, Tregellis-West and Watson. Not that we were expecting letters from home. The others were anxious—not Study C.

"Any luck, Handy?" I asked, as Handforth feverishly tore open a letter and scanned its contents.

"Hocroo!" yelled Handforth, dancing into the air. "I'm going! My pater's written to say it's O.K."

"Same here!" grinned McClure delightedly. "What about you, Church?"

"I haven't got my letter yet," said Church anxiously. "Hurry up, Muddy, you ass! Haven't you got one for me?"

"Lor' save us, Master Church, I don't know whether I'm on my 'ead or my 'eels!" gasped the postman. "I don't reckon that there is one—— Oh, yes! 'Ere we are, Master Church!"

Church took his letter eagerly, and as he tore it open his hand shook. For much depended upon what that letter said; a tremendous lot depended upon it; as a matter of fact.

"I've got permission!" panted Church weakly.

"Then we're all right!" roared Handforth. "Oh, good! Let's rush up to the tuck-shop and celebrate. Study D's all serene!"

I grinned as Handforth and Co. marched gaily off arm-in-arm. There were other juniors who were just as pleased—and some who looked glum and discontented. For that morning's post was most important.

A great many juniors had written home to their parents, asking a very important question; and the bulk of the replies had turned up, as everybody had anticipated. But what was it all about?

Jack Grey, of the Remove, had issued invitations broadcast—and they were invitations of a character which were seldom seen or even heard of. An acceptance meant that the lucky junior was to spend the entire summer vacation—except, perhaps, for a week at the end—on a wonderful trip to Africa in Sir Crawford Grey's sumptuous steam yacht.

And it was to be no ordinary trip, either. The idea was to hunt for a treasure which was supposed to exist in an oasis far into the desert. Adventure and excitement galore was anticipated, and the fellows were falling over themselves in their efforts to obtain invitations.

Sir Crawford Grey, Jack's father, had given the lucky Removite carte blanche. Jack could invite whom he pleased—and as many as he pleased. For the yacht was sumptuously appointed, and could accommodate any number.

Tregellis-West and Watson and I, as a matter of course, were booked to go. Nelson Lee was on the list, too—to say nothing of Lord Dorrimore. Reginald Pitt, Jack's study-mate, was the first to be asked, and he had obtained his parents' consent without any difficulty.

There were to be some lady guests, too, for a number of fellows had invited their sisters—at Sir Crawford's suggestion—and the party promised to be an exceedingly gay one.

But it was generally understood that the ladies and a good proportion of the fellows would remain on board the yacht while a smaller party attempted the journey into the desert. But that, of course, would come later. At present the juniors only thought of the voyage to Africa.

A good few were disappointed by that morning's post—for parents were not always ready to let their sons go off on a trip to tropical climes. But there were others—and a greater proportion—whose letters brought them joy.

And Grey was still leading a strenuous life. He was almost afraid to show himself in public, for he was pestered by applicants who wanted to receive invitations. And Jack's task was no pleasant one—for he wished to please all.

Several seniors were booked to go. Both Morrow and Fenton, of the Sixth, had gladly accepted, and there were one or two others, too. But, naturally, the bulk of the guests would be from the Remove.

Handforth had a few words to say on matters in general—as usual—but his strong point just now was concerning the girls. In

the Triangle he was arguing matters out with Church and McClure.

"I don't believe in it!" he exclaimed firmly. "I think it's a rotten idea! What the dickens do the chaps want to have their sisters with 'em for? It ain't right! Why should we be bothered with a lot of silly, giggling girls?"

"Dash it all, Handy, a few nice girls will help to liven things up a bit," said Church warmly.

Handforth glared.

"Oh, so you're one of that sort, are you?" he exclaimed. "I didn't think you were such a soft ass, Walter Church! Girls! Silly noodles—that's what they are! And I've a dashed good mind to make a firm stand!"

"But you can't, you ass!" put in McClure.

"Can't? Why can't I?"

"Because it's not your business," said Church. "You've been invited, and there's an end of it. You can't dictate to Jack Grey or his father, you chump! They can invite whom they like, I suppose?"

"But it's different when it comes to girls," argued Handforth. "Girls on a ship don't seem right. They'll be ill half the way, and cause no end of trouble. I think it ought to be pointed out to Grey—and I'm going to use a strong weapon, too."

"Don't you take a cricket stump——"

"You—you ass!" roared Handforth. "I don't mean literally! Do you know what I'm going to do?"

"Goodness knows!" sighed Church.

"I'm going to tell Grey that if there are any girls on board, Study D won't go!" said Handforth triumphantly. "How's that for an argument?"

Church and McClure stared at their leader aghast.

"You—you madman!"

"Eh?"

"You hurbling idiot!"

"What?"

"Do you think Grey will care tuppence?" roared Church. "If you threaten anything like that you'll upset the chap—and we shall be barred altogether! Don't bring us into it, you dotty lunatic!"

Handforth was quite surprised.

"But it would carry weight!" he said.

"You don't think Grey would go without me, do you? He'd be bound to consent if I took up a firm stand——"

"You can take up what stand you like—but don't bring us into it!" snapped McClure. "We don't count, anyhow—so your argument will have just as much weight without us."

"That's right, of course," he agreed.

"Hallo! I can see Grey over by the gym. I'll put the thing to him at once!"

And Handforth marched across the Triangle, leaving his chums staring after him in a hopeless kind of way.

"It would serve him right if he got turned down," said McClure. "The silly, conceited ass! Who does he think he is, anyhow? Does he reckon the party couldn't get on without him?"

"Looks like it!" grinned Church. "But Handy can't help it—he's not conceited, really. It's only his way. In about another two years the poor chap will be just fit to enter a lunatic asylum—he's been getting worse for months past!"

Handforth, fortunately, did not hear these remarks—or there certainly would have been ructions on the spot. But Handforth was intent upon Grey, and he marched up grimly.

"I say, Grey, old man," he exclaimed. "Just a word!"

Jack Grey looked round.

"What's up, Handy?" he asked, smiling.

"About these girls——"

"Eh? Which girls?"

"I understand that some of the fellows are going to bring their sisters along," said Handforth. "Is that right?"

"Of course it is," said Grey. "A jolly ripping idea, too! It was the pater's suggestion, in the first place."

"I don't want to say anything against your dad—he's a brick," said Handforth; "but everybody's liable to make mistakes at times. I've made mistakes before now, if it comes to that——"

"Go, hon!" grinned Pitt. "You, Handy? You make a mistake? Impossible! Perish the thought!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Well, I think this idea of having girls on the yacht is a rotten one!" said Handforth firmly. "No offence to your pater, of course, Grey. Girls ain't any good on a sea voyage; but I don't suppose your dad considered that. And it's my opinion that the idea is absolutely off-side!"

"And no offence to Sir Crawford!" grinned Pitt.

"Of course not," said Handforth.

"Look here, Handy, I should advise you to drop the subject," said Jack good-naturedly. "I should think you ought to know that it isn't really your affair, anyhow. And I don't call it very chivalrous on your part to grumble because some of the chaps' sisters are coming."

"Well, when I take up a stand I take it up with both hands," said Edward Oswald grimly. "I stand firmly——"

"On your hands?" asked Pitt politely.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"I stand firmly!" roared Handforth. "And I consider that it ain't wise to have any girls on board the yacht—they'll only cause trouble and quarrels, and all that sort of thing. So I want to tell you, Grey, that if you stick to the idea of taking girls—well, I sha'n't be able to come!"

"You—you silly ass!" yelled Pitt.

"I don't like to say it, but I believe in being straightforward. If the girls go, I don't. So there's only one way out!"

"The girls don't go?" asked De Valerie.

"Exactly!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Jack Grey looked at Handforth regretfully.

"I'm sorry about this, Handy," he said, winking at the others. "But, of course, since you've taken up this stand I can't do anything. It's got to be one or the other—and there's really no choice at all. I'm awfully sorry that the trouble has arisen."

"You won't miss the girls much," said Handforth.

"I wasn't thinking about that—because the girls will be there," said Grey calmly. "I was thinking how much Church and McClure will miss you, old son. It'll be pretty rotten for them on board without you."

"With—without me?" gasped Handforth.

"Of course."

"But I'm going, you ass!"

"Are you?" asked Grey, in surprise. "But you just led me to suppose you weren't. Didn't you say that if the girls went you'd stop behind?"

"Yes, but——"

"The girls are going, so there's nothing more to be said," remarked Grey, turning away. "Still, I suppose you know best, Handy. Sorry you can't come. I'll consider your invitation cancelled."

"You—you—— I—I mean——" Handforth paused and gulped. Then he looked round him with an expression of wild alarm and dismay. "I—I say, Grey!" he panted, rushing forward.

"Well?"

"I'm going, you know——"

"Rot!" said Jack. "Your invitation's cancelled!"

"Oh, my goodness!"

"You can't go if the young ladies go," said Jack gravely.

"I—I didn't mean——"

"Ah, but you took up a firm stand, don't forget," said Grey. "I wouldn't dream of making you depart from it, Handy."

The expression upon Handforth's face was so comical that everybody howled.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"I—I won't press the matter, of course," said Handforth feverishly. "I'm coming, Grey, you duffer! In fact, I'd rather like the girls to be there! I—I made a mistake!"

"You chump!" grinned Jack Grey. "I was only pulling your silly leg! But I'd advise you to go easy in future, my son. If my pater heard you talking like that, he might take you seriously—but I happen to know what an ass you are!"

And Grey marched indoors with two or three others, leaving Handforth staring after them, hardly knowing whether to be indignant or relieved. Upon the whole, he decided that his relief was greater than his indignation, and he joined his own chums without saying a word.

Handforth had had quite enough of taking firm stands—and if it was proposed to take a hundred girls on the trip, it would not have drawn a single protest from the mighty leader of Study D!

CHAPTER II.

PREPARING FOR THE START.

"ALL complete now?" asked Reginald Pitt smilingly.

Jack Grey nodded.

"Yes, I think so," he replied.

"Six or seven chaps haven't been able to get permission from home, but we shall be a pretty big party, in spite of that. It'll seem rather queer at St. Frank's this evening—when practically all the fellows will be gone."

"But it won't last long," said Pitt. "We shall be on board the yacht within a day or two, and then the real fun will commence."

Several days had elapsed, and Grey and Pitt were chatting in Study E. The rest of the school was in a tremendous bustle—for to-day was the last day of the term. Everybody was leaving for home—with the exception of the party which was destined to spend the vacation on the Wanderer—Sir Crawford Grey's private yacht.

There were no lessons, of course, and the din throughout the school buildings was terrific. The fellows didn't care how much noise they made on the last day of term.

It was impossible for all Sir Crawford's guests to be ready for the trip at a moment's notice. So it had been arranged that the whole party should collect at St. Frank's. When complete, it would transfer itself to the yacht, which was lying in Caistowe Bay, and then the voyage to Africa would commence.

"Who's going?" asked Pitt. "I know most of the chaps, of course; but there's such a bunch booked for the trip that I can't keep them all in my mind. You've got the whole crowd down on your list, haven't you?"

Grey laughed.

"Yes—here they are," he replied. "We'll take the gentlemen first. There's my pater, Mr. Nelson Lee, Lord Dorrimore, Dr. Brett, and Captain Burton. Four Sixth-Formers are coming—Fenton, Morrow, Carlile, and Reynolds. I'm rather glad of that, because they'll help to keep the chaps in order."

"Perhaps!" grinned Pitt. "It's a holiday, don't forget, and even Fenton won't have an ounce of authority over the juniors. If any of the Sixth-Formers butt in they'll be hoofed out of it."

"I didn't mean they'd keep order in that way," said Jack. "But the very presence of the seniors will help to maintain peace in case any of the fellows get scrapping. Handforth, for example—you know what an ass he is. But I was going through the list, wasn't I? Well, the remainder consists almost entirely of juniors. There are sixteen of us, including this study."

Grey read out the names, and they were as follows:

Handforth, Church, McClure, De Valerie, Somerton, Farman, Christine, Yorke, Talmadge, Tom Burton, Nicodemus Trotwood, Pitt, Jack Grey, Tommy Watson, Tregellis-West—and, of course, myself.

Grey had invited both the Trotwoods; but their father had written to say that only one could go. Cornelius was a quiet, peaceful youth, and he was not particularly keen upon adventures. So he preferred to go home while his brother went on the sea voyage to Africa.

Then, of course, there were the girls. It had been arranged that Sir Montie's aunt would come with us—and she would act as a kind of mother to the four young ladies who were destined to be on board. Lady Helen Tregellis-West was a really delightful woman, and she would be a welcome addition to the party.

Tommy Watson's sister, Violet, had promised to come, and Watson was feeling rather pleased with himself. He told us that his sister was a regular ripper—but we should be able to judge for ourselves before long.

The other girls were Ethel Church, Agnes Christine, and Margaret Fenton. They were not due to arrive at St. Frank's until the day after breaking up. Many preparations were necessary, for the trip was to be a long one.

Naturally, a great many other fellows were envious. It wasn't possible to invite the whole school, and those who couldn't go were inclined to be jealous. And it had been rather amusing to watch the remarkable change which had come over Fullwood and Co. during the past three or four days.

The cads of the Remove had changed very considerably. They had been on their best behaviour continually. Ralph Leslie Fullwood had been extremely polite to Grey for at least a week. He had hovered round in a manner which left no doubt as to his motive.

"The chap must be dotty!" grunted Watson, as he saw Fullwood and Co. chatting under the elms. "He doesn't expect that Grey will invite him, does he? Why, we'd rather have the giddy pageboy with us."

"Don't insult Tubbs like that," I chuckled. "Fullwood isn't fit to be mentioned in the same breath as Tubby. He's been angling for an invitation, but I'm jolly glad to see that Grey doesn't take any notice of him. Gulliver and Bell have been trying on the same game."

"The silly rotters!" said Watson warmly.

"Dear boys, I am rather worried about it," observed Tregellis-West. "I'm not suggestin' that Grey will be ass enough to be deceived—but there is Sir Crawford to think about. Grey's pater doesn't know what a frightful set Fullwood and Co. are."

"How does that affect the question?" I asked.

"Well, old boy, I've noticed that Fullwood and Co. have been makin' themselves very pleasant to Sir Crawford at every opportunity. Supposin' the awful cads got themselves invited? We couldn't sneak to Sir Crawford, an' we should be saddled with Fullwood and Co. for the whole trip."

"Yes; but it won't happen," said Watson. "It couldn't, Montie! Even Fullwood would not have the nerve to ask for an invitation."

"I'm not so sure, dear old boy—I'm not so sure," said Montie, shaking his head. "Fullwood has a way of doin' things by a roundabout method. An' if he gets himself invited——"

"Oh, dry up!" interrupted Watson. "Talk sense, Montie!"

But I was rather inclined to agree with my noble chum. Fullwood and Co. had not been making themselves pleasant for the mere fun of it. It must have been something of an ordeal for the cads of the Remove. They were not naturally pleasant, and their efforts during the last three or four days must have been a great strain upon them.

And, as it happened, a discussion was proceeding at that very moment in Study A, in the Remove passage.

"We'd better be packin' up," Gulliver was saying. "We want to go by the afternoon train, Fully——"

"I don't want to go at all," interrupted Fullwood.

"Oh, rats!" said Gulliver. "It's no good thinkin' about this yachtin' trip. We've been nice to that cad Grey for days—an' he doesn't take any notice of us. It's sickenin'. He doesn't mean to invite us, so we might as well give it up. Hang the rotten voyage—that's what I say!"

Fullwood frowned.

"If you're willin' to give it up, I'm not," he said. "Why, the time for action has only just arrived. We've been workin' up to this point all the week, an' now we've got to get busy."

"How?" asked Bell.

"I'm goin' to approach Sir Crawford Grey——"

"An' ask if we can go?"

"Yes——"

"But, you ass, he wouldn't listen!" snapped Gulliver. "He'd look upon it as a piece of rotten cheek!"

"Not if it's done properly," said Fullwood calmly. "I mean to get round the old buffer. He's easy-goin', an' it ought to be simple. An' once we've got the invite from Sir Crawford himself, we can snap our fingers at the other chaps."

Gulliver and Bell looked doubtful.

"It couldn't be did," said Bell. "For one thing, the old chap will ask if we've got permission from home—he'll ask that right at the beginning. An' what the deuce can we say?"

"We can say that we have got permission!"

"But we haven't, you ass!" said Bell.

"What does that matter?" snapped Fullwood impatiently. "If it comes to it, we can fake up some letters an' pretend they're from home. Our people won't mind, I know. Anyhow, I'm goin' to do my best to go on that trip."

Fullwood thought he had quite a good chance of success. Sir Crawford Grey knew nothing of his real character. As a matter of fact, Jack's father had mentioned only a day or two back that it surprised him why "that nice, well-dressed boy" had not been

invited. Jack had not disillusioned his father. For there was no need to give Fullwood away.

But it seemed as though a word of warning would have been useless; for, as matters stood, Fullwood and Co. had an excellent chance of "getting round" Sir Crawford. When Ralph Leslie liked, he could be very pleasant.

"Might as well get it over at once," he said, as he opened the study door.

"Shall we come?" asked Bell nervously.

"Why not? Sir Crawford's in the Head's garden, I believe," replied Fullwood. "We shall have him to ourselves, an' it won't take five minutes to get the invite out of him. An' then we shall be booked for the voyage—an' we can cackle at the rest of the chaps as much as we like."

"Eh? What's that?"

Pressure was applied on the outside of the half-open door, and Handforth appeared. He was looking rather grim, and Church and McClure were just behind him.

"What's that you were saying?" he went on.

"Mind your own business!" snapped Fullwood savagely.

"Didn't you say that you were going to see Sir Crawford—to wangle an invitation out of him?" demanded Handforth. "Look here, Fullwood——"

"You sneakin' spy!" shouted Fullwood. "Can't a fellow talk privately without havin' a beastly eavesdropper listenin' at the keyhole?"

Handforth rolled up his sleeves.

"You insulting cad!" he roared. "I was just passing the door—and I couldn't help hearing what you said. I'm glad I did, too! Because you're not going to try any of your rotten games on Sir Crawford."

"Rather not!" said McClure warmly. "Sir Crawford doesn't know what a set of cads these chaps are, and he might even invite them for the trip—Fullwood can be as nice as pie when he likes!"

Fullwood gritted his teeth. He knew that he had been incautious, and he was angry with himself. But he was far more angry with Handforth, and he glared ferociously at the leader of Study D.

"Go and eat coke!" he snarled.

"I'm not going anywhere," retorted Handforth. "I'm going to stay here, you cad, and I'm going to keep you here, too!"

"Why, you—you——"

"If you attempt to approach Sir Crawford, I'll half-slaughter you!" went on Handforth. "You know well enough that we can't sneak, and you mean to take advantage of the old chap's good nature. Once you're invited we can't keep you out of it—but you're not coming! If you went on the trip life wouldn't be worth living."

"It ain't to be thought of!" said Church warmly. "I told my sister that all the chaps were first class—and if Fullwood and Co. went she'd go on at me tremendously. She hates cads."

Fullwood and Co. fumed.

"Look here, Handforth, I don't want to get wild," said Fullwood steadily. "This isn't any of your business—you're only a guest, anyhow. What I do doesn't concern you. So clear off, and try not to be such an outrageous beast."

"Are you talking to me?" roared Handforth.

"Punch him, you ass!" advised McClure.

"By George! I will!" snorted Handforth furiously.

Biff!

"Yaroooooh!" howled Handforth, wringing his hand painfully.

Fullwood had dodged, and Handy's fist struck the doorpost with a crash, which grazed his knuckles. And his feelings were by no means improved when Fullwood and Co. grinned.

"Don't you think you'd better clear?" asked Fullwood sourly.

Handforth didn't wait to argue any longer. As he would have described it himself, he sailed in at full speed.

Biff! Crash! Biff!

Handforth's fists whirled about, and Fullwood and Co. were knocked right and left almost before they knew what was happening. Fullwood went down with an eye which would ultimately become black; Gulliver's nose was already bleeding; and Bell's left ear was certainly destined to be a thick one.

"Come on, you cads!" panted Handforth. "I'll teach you to try these rotten games on! Get up, Fullwood, you beast! I want to knock you down again!"

But Fullwood did not oblige until a minute had elapsed; then he took the precaution to place the table between himself and the excited Handforth.

"Clear out of this study!" he said thickly. "I—I won't go to Sir Crawford if you don't want me to—"

"Do you think I'm going to take your rotten word?" snapped Handforth. "I've got nothing to do to-day—so I'll keep a watch on you. I'll wait until you've taken the train for London before I have any rest!"

Fullwood knew well enough that Handforth would keep his word. There was no chance of going to Sir Crawford—and that had been the only hope. Owing to his own carelessness, Fullwood's little idea had failed.

Handforth and Co. retired, and the cads of the Remove looked at one another with expressions which were not exactly amiable.

"You silly fool!" said Bell harshly. "If you hadn't opened that door—"

"Oh, shut up!" snapped Fullwood. "How was I to know that that cad was listenin'? But I'll get even with him somehow!"

"Don't talk out of your hat!" said Gulliver. "How can you get even with him? What chance will you have to-day? I don't suppose you'll get even when the new term starts, will you? The idea's off—an' I'm not exactly sorry. Rats to the rotten sea-voyage! Our people wouldn't have consented, anyhow."

Fullwood scowled.

"It's all very well to console yourself like

that," he said. "You're as disappointed as I am, Gully. I'm absolutely positive that we could have worked the thing—and Handforth mucked it up. Confound his interferin'!"

Fullwood dabbed his eye tenderly, and he did not look very pleased. He knew well enough that his scheme could never be carried out now. He had proof of this shortly afterwards, when he went out.

For Church was hovering about in the passage. McClure was stationed in the Triangle—in case of a move from the window—and Handforth was holding himself in readiness in the lobby.

There was evidently no prospect of getting into touch with Sir Crawford Grey. And matters grew worse shortly afterwards; for Handforth told De Valerie and Somerton and a few others. The result was that Fullwood and Co. found themselves watched wherever they went.

The juniors were fully determined to prevent such a catastrophe as the inclusion of Fullwood and Co. in the party. And at last, realising that all hope was at an end, the Nuts prepared to leave by the afternoon train.

And it was not until they had actually entered the train that Handforth was satisfied. Fullwood himself was not in a similar frame of mind. He looked at his chums savagely as they sat in their compartment.

"We've got Handforth to thank for this!" he said grimly. "If he hadn't interfered we should have worked the thing as easy as winkin'."

"Oh, it's no good growlin'," said Bell. "Let the thing drop."

And Ralph Leslie Fullwood said no more. But, judging from the expression on his face, he thought quite a lot.

CHAPTER III.

A LOOSE TONGUE.

SHADWELL is not exactly one of the most select suburbs in London; and the back room of a dingy house in a small side street was certainly not the most select apartment in Shadwell. It was, in fact, extremely dilapidated and squalid.

Two men occupied the room. They were seated at a small deal-topped table in front of the open window—for the evening was warm, and the air in that neighbourhood was not of the best quality.

Both men were smoking, and a jug of beer adorned the table, to say nothing of two half-empty glasses. The pair were attired in a garb which smacked of the sea, and they did not look exactly prosperous.

"Yes, Simon, we shall 'ave to be thinkin' of movin' afore long," said one of the men.

"We're pretty nigh stony—"

"Don't growl!" interrupted Mr. Simon Grell. "I've been in a worse fix than this before now, Jake. I've still got a few quid,

an' I'm not goin' to sign on a ship until I find the job I want."

"Well, I'm with yer, old man," said Mr. Jake Starkey. "You an' me 'ave bin together for a year or two past, an' we git on well. If only we could 'ave a big stroke o' luck—that's wot we want, Simon."

The other man knocked the ashes from his pipe against the heel of his boot.

"Luck don't come the way of people who keep honest," he said. "But that don't sound right, Jake. Luck didn't come our way when we was playin' the other game, did it? So if we wait long enough we may strike something—an' I must say that honesty don't suit me bad. It's worth somethin' to 'ave a good clear conscience. Surprised to hear me talk like this, ain't you?"

"Well, you don't seem yourself," admitted Mr. Starkey frankly.

"I've been thinkin' things over, mate," said Grell. "Durin' the last week I've been offered three payin' jobs—but they're all shady. They was offered to me because people think I 'aven't changed. But they don't appeal to my mind now, Jake. Ever since that affair of the kid I've tried to be different—an' I've made you different, too."

"You've made me bloomin' well stony!" said Mr. Starkey. "Honesty's all right when you've got plenty o' money, Simon; but wot's a man to do when 'e's on 'is uppers? Go in the work'ouse? That's likely, ain't it?"

"No able-bodied man don't need to go into the workhouse," said Mr. Grell. "There's work for everybody who likes to find it. It may not be the work you want, but you've got to put up with inconvenience now an' agin. Take me, for instance. I want a soft job on a big steamer—an' all I can get is a third mate's billet on a blamed old windjammer. It ain't good enough, Jake—so I'm waitin'."

Mr. Starkey took a cautious sip of beer.

"An' you're likely to wait, too," he said, setting down his glass, and regarding the contents rather anxiously. "The job you want won't come along just when you need it, old man. By the way, talkin' about that kid, 'ave you seen that bit in the paper about Sir Crawford Grey?"

"Yes," said Mr. Grell.

"Well, wot do ye think of it?"

"The old man's goin' on a sea trip on his yacht, with a parcel o' schoolboys," said Mr. Grell. "It don't say anything in the paper about what the trip's for, except that they're bound for Africa—just for a cruise."

"It's a bit fishy, ain't it?" asked Jake.

"Not fishy," said the other — "it's obvious!"

Mr. Grell lit his pipe afresh, and sat thinking for some minutes.

Months earlier he and Jake Starkey had visited the neighbourhood of St. Frank's. Grell had been a rascal then, and Jack Grey had supposed that his own position in life was very different. He had been "Jack Mason," and Simon Grell was his uncle.

Owing to a small gold locket, however, it had been established that Jack was really

the son of Sir Crawford Grey, and that Grell was no relation whatever. Grell had stolen the locket—not for its intrinsic value, but because it contained the secret of a treasure which was buried in the isolated desert oasis of El Safra, in Northern Africa.

Nelson Lee had tracked Grell down after the man had kidnapped Jack Grey; but Sir Crawford was merciful, and Grell was allowed to go free with Jake Starkey. And Grell had promised to lead a different life. That promise, broadly speaking, had been kept.

"Obvious?" repeated Mr. Starkey. "What d'ye mean—obvious?"

Simon Grell looked across the table.

"I mean that the party aboard the Wanderer is settin' out to hunt for that treasure," he replied. "You remember? That gold locket, an' the Arabic writin'? The old man means to get that loot this trip. That's why he's goin' to Africa—to the port of Agabat."

"That's in Morocco, ain't it?"

"No; lower down the coast," said Grell. "Not that it matters to us, anyway, Jake. We ain't in this business. By jinks! but I'd like to be goin' on the trip, old mate!"

"Couldn't we—just you an' me—couldn't we manage to—"

Starkey paused, and fingered his glass slowly.

"Well?" asked the other. "Couldn't we what?"

"We're 'ard up," said Mr. Starkey bluntly. "Couldn't we get to Africa somehow, Simon? That treasure is temptin', and if we could lay our 'ands on it—"

"It wouldn't be ours," cut in Mr. Grell sharply. "Look here, Jake, we've finished with that stuff—understand? An' it applies particular to this case."

"How does it?"

"Sir Crawford was good to us. He allowed us to go when he might have jugged the pair of us for years," said Grell. "What's more, he gave us money. He acted like a real sport, an' now you talk about robbin' him!"

"He's rich enough," growled Starkey.

"Mebbe," said Mr. Grell. "An' the Bank of England's rich, too. But that's no excuse for our robbin' it. No, Jake. Sir Crawford Grey is a real gent, an' I wouldn't do a thing to harm him. No, old man, not me. I wouldn't think of plottin' against Sir Crawford. Forget all about it."

"Yes, but look 'ere—"

"I don't want to talk about it," interrupted Mr. Grell. "Drink that beer up, an' come out with me."

He rose to his feet, and Starkey drained the beer jug without any loss of time. Then the pair made their way out of the house, and before long they were in the vicinity of the river.

Mr. Grell had no particular plan in mind, but he wanted to get himself occupied in another way; and he wanted to get Starkey off the subject, too. Starkey was not a bad sort, but not strong minded. He was willing to be led, and it would not take him long

to fall into rascality again. Grell was sincere in his desire to keep straight.

It was rather unfortunate, therefore, that the pair should run into Captain James Nixon. This man was a burly individual, and he caught sight of Grell at the same moment that Grell saw him.

"Let's go down here, Jake," muttered Grell.

He didn't want to meet Captain Nixon, for the skipper was not exactly an upright, honest man. Among the seafaring fraternity he was regarded as a fairly complete scoundrel. But he was a splendid sea captain, and that was all his owners cared about.

He and Grell had been big friends in the past, but Grell had been different then. His desire, now, was to avoid Nixon. But Captain Nixon was not to be avoided, it seemed.

"Why, Grell!" he shouted, in a booming voice. "Haven't seen you for years, old man! How's the world usin' you?"

Grell stopped; he couldn't do anything else.

"Well, I'm blamed if it isn't Cap'n Nixon!" he exclaimed, with forced heartiness. "How d'ye do, cap'n? The last time I saw you was at Plymouth, when you were master of the old Collindale."

The pair shook hands.

"Yes, that was a good while back," said Captain Nixon. "I'm still skipper of the same boat, Grell—she's not a bad old tub. Fast and reliable, although she ain't much to look at. I'll back the Collindale to beat many a liner when it comes to speed. Let's have a drink, old mate."

The skipper acknowledged Mr. Starkey with a nod, and then the three of them crossed the road and entered the saloon bar of a gaudy-looking public-house. Under the influence of two or three whiskies, Mr. Grell began to expand somewhat, and his manner became more genial.

Nixon had plenty of money, it seemed, for he insisted upon paying for the drinks; and Mr. Starkey, for one, had not the slightest objection. His private opinion of Captain Nixon was that he was one of nature's gentlemen.

"It's not often we meet, Grell, so we might as well celebrate a bit," went on the skipper jovially. "Why not come aboard the old craft an' have a look round? I've got some whiskey there, too—real whiskey. Not the blame swill they serve here."

"That's a fine idea, cap'n," said Mr. Starkey promptly.

"I don't reckon we need go," said Grell. "I'm not so strong on drink as I was at one time, Nixon—"

"By glory!" roared the skipper. "That's rich, that is!"

He laughed heartily, and Grell was unable to stick to his half-formed resolution. And very shortly afterwards, led by the persuasive tongue of Captain Nixon, Grell accompanied his acquaintance to the wharf. Mr. Starkey

hovered in the rear, hoping fervently that he would be allowed aboard.

He was. The trio, after a short delay, climbed the ladder of the steamship Collindale, and descended to the captain's cabin. The boat was not particularly large, and it was certainly not clean. But she looked speedy and business-like.

The cabin was in a similar condition to the deck—dirty. The atmosphere down there, on that warm summer's evening, was extremely stuffy, and it stank of foul tobacco fumes and whiskey.

"Try some o' this, Grell," said the captain genially. "You, too, Starkey. You're Grell's pal—so I reckon you're mine. I never was a man to have a heap of false pride."

The whiskey was certainly of a better quality than that which had been obtained in the public-house. Simon Grell liked the flavour of it immensely—to judge by his capacity for drinking. Nip after nip he had, until, at length, he was in a mood which can best be described as extremely merry.

Grell was not drunk. But he was just in that state when a man becomes irresponsible. His tongue was allowed to become loose, and he spoke of things which would ordinarily have been kept securely locked away.

"Things ain't goin' so well with you, are they?" asked Nixon, after a while. "You don't seem so prosperous as you used to be, Grell."

"Oh, I'm gettin' on all right," said Grell, gulping down some more whiskey. "An' I'm all the better for meetin' you, cap'n. An' if I like I dare say I could lay my hands on more wealth than you'll have if you live to be five hundred!"

"You will have your joke!" said Nixon, laughing.

"It ain't a joke!" put in Starkey. "It's dead true, cap'n!"

"True?"

"Well, I suppose it is, in a way of speakin'," said Grell. "Y'see, Nixon, I happen to know all about a trip that's just startin'—a trip to Africa. An old gent o' the name of Sir Crawford Grey means to find a treasure what's buried out in the desert. It's worth millions!"

Starkey looked at his friend rather curiously. He hadn't partaken of the whiskey so freely as Grell, and he guessed that the influence of the spirit was responsible for this change in Grell's attitude.

"You're pullin' my leg!" said Captain Nixon.

"If you don't choose to believe me, you needn't. I ain't askin' you to," went on Grell rather thickly. "But that yacht's sailin' either to-morrow mornin' or the day arter. An' when they get out to Africa a party is goin' out into the desert. I know there's a treasure there, because some months ago I was mixed up in the whole business. It's true, Nixon—as true as I'm sittin' here!"

The captain became more attentive.

"You reely mean it?" he asked.

"I do!"

"It sounds a bit tall——"

"I ain't denyin' it," put in Grell. "But Sir Crawford's yacht, the Wanderer, is due to sail in a day or two for the port of Agabat, in Africa——"

"By thunder!" interrupted the skipper. "Agabat! Why, that's where this old hooker's bound for, Grell! She's loaded up, an' we're sailin' with the tide to-morrow evenin'!"

"Well, that's a rum coincidence," said Grell. "So you're bound for the same port? When do you reckon to get there?"

"I'll bet fifty dollars we drop anchor days before that steam yacht, anyway," declared Nixon. "This boat is fast, an' when she's got fair weather she'll simply pass everything. I've been on a few tubs, but it's an insult to call this craft a tub. I can do what I like with her."

"Why don't you tell the cap'n about that locket, Simon?" suggested Starkey.

"Wot locket?"

"Don't you remember? That locket with the Arabic writin'."

"Oh, yes, o' course," said Grell. "That's how I got to know, ain't it? You see, Nixon, it was like this'ere. Some months ago——"

And Grell proceeded to relate the whole episode in Jack Grey's life concerning the gold locket and its secret. His story was something of a rigmarole—owing to his condition—but he managed to make himself clear.

And he was talking of things which he had fully decided to keep locked away in his own memory. But a man under the influence of drink is ready to expose the inmost secrets of his soul.

Captain Nixon listened with great interest, and with growing excitement. And when Grell had finished, the skipper was looking eager and keen. The whiskey had somewhat inflamed him, too.

"I've heard o' that oasis—El Safra," he said. "It's right out in the desert, an' the niggers out there shun it like pizon. There ain't any water, you see—not wot you can drink, anyway—an' so the place is left deserted. I don't see why we couldn't work the trip, Grell."

"Wot trip?"

"If we get out there first, we can get a lot of natives an' bribe 'em—it won't cost much to buy skunks like them," said Nixon. "Then, when Sir Crawford's party goes into the desert, we can ambush the whole bunch."

"Arter they've got the treasure?"

"No; before they get to the oasis."

"But what's the good o' that?"

"Every good," said the skipper. "We can force them to give us the secret of the treasure—threaten to take their water away, or something. It'll be easy—dead simple. An' it won't cost us hardly a cent."

"It seems good, anyhow," remarked Grell. "But wot about me an' Starkey? Where do we come in?"

The captain rubbed his chin.

"Well, I can't take no passengers, that's against the owners' rules," he said. "But we needn't be afraid of a detail like that.

You can sign on as purser if you like, not that we usually carry a purser. An' your pal 'ere can be chief steward for the trip—a soft job, too. It'll be the best way for you, because you'll be paid for goin'."

"I reckon it's a great idea," said Starkey heartily.

"You wouldn't be gettin' a billet like that if it wasn't for this treasure idea," said Captain Nixon grimly. "But are you sure it's true, Grell?"

"Haven't I told you the whole yarn?"

"Yes, an' I must admit it sounds the real goods," said the skipper. "It's a puzzle to me why you didn't think of something like this yourself, but then, o' course, you didn't 'ave a ship. An' couldn't have done nothin' if we hadn't been goin' to the same port. It's just a stroke o' luck, Grell—pure luck. If the whole thing fails it won't cost us nothin', an' we stand a chance of gettin' rich for life. Jimmy Nixon was always a man to take a chance, an' I'm takin' this one. Wot do you say, Grell?"

"I'm with you, old man—with you right along," said Simon Grell heartily.

And the three shook hands on the bargain.

And then, at that one sitting, the complete plan for the trapping of Sir Crawford Grey's party was discussed. The full details could be arranged during the voyage out to Africa. The compact was sealed.

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CHAPTER IV.

A SHOCK FOR HANDFORTH!

"RIPPING!"

That was the general verdict of the juniors with regard to the situation. A few more days had elapsed, and now everything was ready for the start of the voyage from Caistowe Bay.

The big yachting party, after having collected at St. Frank's, was now transferred completely to the Wanderer. We were all in our own quarters, and the preliminary confusion had been straightened out.

"Well, my sons, what do you think of it?" I asked, as I lounged on the deck during the cool of the evening. "We've taken our last look at St. Frank's for some weeks to come, and there's no telling what might happen before we get back again."

"We're going to have a terrific time," said Pitt genially. "I say, Watson, your sister's a ripper!"

"That's no news to me!" said Watson. "Didn't I always say she was? Although, of course, I can't see much in her myself!"

"Brothers never can," grinned Pitt. "There's Miss Christine, too, she's a jolly nice sort of girl. Fancy old Rob Christine having such a ripping sister! He never boasted about her, did he?"

There was really a good reason for the admiring remarks which were passed. For both Miss Watson and Miss Christine were very charming young ladies. They were what some

people would term "flappers," although that's not a very nice word, to my mind. Both girls were about fifteen years of age, and they were pretty and altogether jolly. Fenton's sister was a year younger, and was plump and not pretty in the least. Still, she was merry, and everybody liked her. And Ethel Church was regarded as the boss of the quartette—being sixteen and of a somewhat imposing appearance.

But, of course, the girls were under the direct care of Lady Helen Tregellis-West—Montie's aunt. And there were numbers of maids and stewardesses to look after them. Sir Crawford had forgotten nothing.

In addition to the cabins allotted to the juniors, there was an extra large cabin which Handforth immediately dubbed "the common-room," and this name was likely to stick to it. For it was an apartment where we could all gather, just by ourselves, and jaw to our hearts content.

The four Sixth Formers who were with us also had a cabin of their own. Everything had been planned with much judgment, and I was not surprised when I learned that Nelson Lee himself had given Sir Crawford much advice earlier. The gov'nor could be trusted to do things properly.

"Well, young 'uns, how goes it?" asked Lord Dorrimore.

He had just strolled along the deck, and he looked quite himself in his spotless white flannels. A panama was on the back of his head, and a cigar was between his teeth.

"Anxious to be off, aren't you, sir?" asked De Valerie.

"Me?" said Dorrie. "Bless your life! It won't worry me if we don't leave for days, my son. I'm comfortable here—this is just the kind of life I enjoy. Nothin' to do, an' with people to wait on you hand an' foot!"

"Lazy beggar!" I grinned.

"I must plead guilty," said his lordship calmly. "Nothin' pleases me better than lazin' about, it just suits my constitution. I'm physically weak, you know, especially when there's some work to be done!"

Everybody grinned, for Lord Dorrimore was well known to possess an extraordinary amount of strength and energy, and when it came to a test he was always ready to work until he dropped.

"I'm not sure that this is a good idea for you boys," he went on, regarding us thoughtfully. "By the time we get back you won't know the meanin' of work. An' there'll be frightful trouble. I think I'd better advise Captain Burton to sack the crew, then you fellows will have a job!"

"I think everybody would have a job if we got caught in a storm," I chuckled. "I can just imagine Handy helping to launch one of the lifeboats! He wouldn't be very handy then!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Look here, you ass, if you're asking for a thick ear——" began Handforth.

"Peace!" interrupted Dorrimore. "Good gracious! If you're goin' to start squabblin' before we set sail, what's goin' to happen

later on? Perhaps I'd better not make that suggestion to the captain, after all."

And his lordship strolled away, grinning.

"You silly ass!" snorted Handforth, glaring at me. "Perhaps you'd like to know that I can launch a lifeboat as well as I can play cricket!"

"Well, that's not saying much!" remarked Pitt calmly.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Why, you—you——"

"Shurrup, you fathead!" hissed Grey. "The girls are coming!"

Handforth composed himself at once, and there were a few chuckles. The mighty Handforth was as bold as brass under ordinary circumstances. He didn't care a snap for anybody—until it came to girls.

And then Handy changed his character. He became meek and mild, nervous, and extremely self-conscious. He had a horror of being made fun of before a member of the fair sex. And, as a rule, he escaped from a group as soon as the girls arrived.

It was hardly a compliment, but Handforth didn't care. In the present instance, the girls were Miss Christine and Miss Watson. They looked extremely dainty and pretty in their white dresses.

"When do we start, Tommy?" asked Miss Watson, as she came up.

"Not until to-morrow morning, sis.," replied Watson. "We sha'n't haul the anchor up until the sun rises. When you come on deck in the morning we shall be far out to sea."

"Oh, shall we?" said Miss Violet firmly. "Don't you believe it, Tommy! I'm going to be up before we leave—even if I have to get out of my bunk at three o'clock in the morning."

"Same here!" said Christine's sister.

"In that case," I remarked, "we shall have to be up, too. We can't allow the girls to beat us, you chaps. You'll have to look alive, Handy. It would be an awful come-down if—— Hi, you ass! I'm speaking to you!"

But Handforth was escaping. He strode down the deck as fast as his legs would carry him. And, as it happened, he ran into a steward, who was coming from the opposite direction.

"I think you're Master Handforth, sir?" said the steward.

"Yes, that's right," said Handforth, pausing.

"This telegram came aboard a few minutes ago, sir," went on the steward. "It's addressed to you."

"Rot!" said Handforth. "It can't be for me!"

He examined it and stared.

"It is, though!" he went on. "Now, who the dickens can this be from? It's got my name on the envelope—in full, too. There can't be any bloomer. But I'm jiggered if I can make it out!"

Handforth walked down the superb stairway, and made his way to the cabin which was allotted to himself and his two chums.

And there he tore open the envelope and extracted the pink form.

"Good—good heavens!" muttered Handforth huskily.

He read the message through three or four times, and he appeared to be quite dazed. His expression of blank amazement gradually changed into one of anxiety, mingled with trouble. And there was really little wonder. For the telegram contained a double shock, and it ran as follows:

"To Edward Oswald Handforth, On Board Steam Yacht Wanderer, Caistowe Bay, Sussex.

"You must come home at once. Your mother has been taken suddenly ill, and I cannot permit you to leave England under these circumstances. Come at once, by first train.
FATHER."

Handforth's dismay was not surprising. At one blow he heard that his mother was ill, and that he could not go on the voyage—the trip he had been eagerly looking forward to for weeks.

The disappointment for poor old Handy was a terrible one; he was staggered. It was some moments before he could fully realise what the telegram exactly meant. But it could not be mis-read; the meaning was all too plain. Handforth's pater had called him home—on the very eve of departure!

"Oh, my only hat!" muttered Handforth hoarsely. "It—it can't be true! I—I must be dreaming!"

The door burst open, and Church and McClure appeared.

"You silly ass!" said Church warmly. "What the dickens was the idea of bunking like that? You made everybody grin—Great pip! What's the matter with you, Handy? You're as pale as my handkerchief!"

"Eh?" said Handforth dazedly. "Oh—oh, nothing!"

He crumbled up the telegram and stuffed it into his pocket.

"I was only thinking about—about the ripping times we shall have," he went on, attempting to look careless, and failing miserably. "Leave me alone, for goodness sake!"

Church and McClure exchanged wondering glances.

"What's the matter with the ass?" asked McClure. "If you look like that because you've been thinking of the ripping times we shall have, Handy, I don't reckon the time will be very enjoyable!"

"I—I'm all right, you duffer!" said Handforth gloomily.

"What's that you stuffed into your pocket just now?" demanded Church.

"My—my pocket?"

"Yes, what did you stick into it?"

"Stick—stick into it?"

"What did you have in your hand, you fathead?"

"My—my hand?"

"You silly parrot!" roared Church.

"What's the matter with you?"

"Matter with me?" repeated Handforth, with a gulp.

His chums stared at him in amazement. Handforth hardly knew what he was doing, or what he was saying. But for some strange reason he wanted to keep that dreadful telegram to himself.

"The chap must have gone off his rocker!" said McClure. "I've never seen him looking so idiotic—Hullo! What's that on the table?"

Handforth looked round with a gasp; but McClure had seized the envelope of the telegram before Handy could reach it.

"Gimme that!" he panted. "It's mine!"

"A wire!" said McClure wonderingly. "A telegram addressed to Handforth! So that's what I saw the steward giving you? Who's it from, Handy?"

"No—nobody in particular," said Handforth. "At least—That is to say—Or, rather—Can't you mind your own silly business?" he roared suddenly. "Leave me alone, blow you!"

But Church and McClure looked grim.

"He's just received a telegram, and he stuffed it into his pocket when we came in," said McClure. "If you don't show us what it is, Handy, we'll take it by force. My hat! Can't you trust us, Handy? Is it something that Church and I mustn't see? I didn't know you had any secrets from us!"

Handforth realised that secrecy was impossible.

"Well, if I tell you, you've got to keep it dark," he said. "I don't know what to do. I want to think—but it's impossible to give up this trip—even if the mater is ill!"

"Give up the trip!" gasped Church, staring.

"Read it!" said Handforth dully.

He passed the crumpled form across, and Church and McClure read the fatal lines with expressions which changed rapidly. Instead of being puzzled and astonished, they became anxious and concerned.

"Oh, my goodness!" said Church. "You—you've got to go home, Handy!"

"You can't come with us on the voyage, after all!" exclaimed McClure. "How frightfully rotten!"

"Poor old chap!" said Church feelingly.

"I'm not going, you fatheads!" snapped Handforth. "I—I mean, I'm not going home! Not likely!"

"But this is from your pater!"

"I know it is!"

"And he orders you to go back!"

"I can't help that!" said Handforth gruffly. "The pater shouldn't be so beastly unreasonable—"

"But your mother's ill, Handy!" broke in Church. "You've got to go home—it's important. Your mater's been taken ill!"

Handforth sat down and stared before him.

"It can't be much," he said. "That's just like my guy'nor. I suppose the mater fainted because of the heat, or something, and he goes and sends off this wire on the spur of the moment. I'll bet the mater's as right as rain again by now. It's just like dad to do a fatheaded thing of this sort! I'm jolly

well going to ignore it, and pretend I didn't receive——"

"But you can't!" interrupted McClure concernedly. "Hang it all, old man, don't be so beastly heartless!"

"Heartless!"

"Your mother might be really bad!"

"What would you do?" demanded Handforth warmly. "We're due to start to-morrow morning; we're going on a ripping voyage to the tropics, and at the last minute I'm called home! Everything's mucked up for me; I shan't even have you chaps to spend the holidays with! What would you do if you were in my shoes?"

His chums looked uncomfortable.

"It's a rotten position," said Church slowly. "But it's your duty to go home, Handy—you must see that, although you don't like admitting it. We shall miss you awfully——"

"Miss him?" I exclaimed. I looked in at the doorway. "Miss who? You can't miss Handy on board a ship like this—— Why, what's up? What's the meaning of the concentrated glumness? Why this thushness, my sons?"

I had looked into the cabin quite carelessly, and was very surprised to find Handforth and Co. as serious as judges, and with expressions on their faces which denoted grave concern.

"I think we'd better tell Nipper, Handy," said Church.

"Oh, I don't care!" said Handforth miserably. "I suppose everybody will have to know—and I suppose I shall have to go, too. I knew it all along, but I didn't like to admit it."

I read the telegram which was shown to me, and I could easily understand. I felt rather uncomfortable as I faced Handforth's gaze.

"I'm sorry, old man," I said quietly. "I'm tremendously sorry. I'm afraid there's only one way for it. Your mother's ill, and you'll have to go."

"Yes, I—I suppose so," said Handforth shakily.

"You don't know how we shall miss you," I went on. "I'm not joking, old son—I mean it with all my heart. The party won't be the same without you knocking about. It's rough luck for all of us."

Handforth looked at me with rather watery eyes.

"Do you mean that, Nipper?" he asked. "Will you really miss me?"

"Tremendously, old chap—honour bright!"

"That's jolly decent of you," said Handforth. "I—I didn't know that I should be missed so much. But what about me? I shall go dotty until you get back, and perhaps the mater isn't very ill, after all——"

"It's no good thinking of ignoring that telegram, Handy," I broke in. "If you did ignore it, you'd hold yourself in contempt afterwards—you wouldn't enjoy a single hour of the trip."

"I know I shouldn't," said Handforth

dully. "I shall have to go home, of course, but couldn't we ask Sir Crawford first? Let's hear what he says."

We were a very gloomy little party when we presented ourselves to Sir Crawford Grey a few minutes later. He came to the rail with us, smiling genially, and leaned against the brasswork as he read the wire.

"Good gracious me!" he exclaimed quickly. "I did not realise that the matter was so serious, boys. You must go home at once, Handforth. Poor lad—poor lad! I'm afraid this is a great disappointment to you."

"I'm bowled over, sir," said Handforth.

"I don't wonder at it, my dear boy," said Sir Crawford kindly. "But it is impossible for you to undertake this voyage under such circumstances. Your father has ordered you to return home, and there is nothing else for it."

"No, sir," said Handforth gloomily.

Everybody knew about it in a few minutes, and Handforth had never been made such a fuss of in his life before. He would have enjoyed himself immensely if the situation had been different. But just then he was too miserable to enjoy anything. And Church and McClure were miserable, too.

"We shall have to see the poor chap off," I said, gathering the fellows round me. "Dash it all, he'll be as unhappy as a chap could be for weeks. Let's show him that we all sympathise."

Accordingly, when the motor-launch put off for the shore, it contained Handforth and at least a dozen other juniors, including myself. Handy did not take any luggage—there wasn't time, for the train was due to leave within half an hour, and it was the last train that evening.

Handforth pretended to cheer up when he entered the train, and he even bucked up sufficiently to smile. But I knew that his disappointment was almost more than he could bear, and I guessed that he would "blub" like a fag once he found himself alone. He couldn't be blamed.

"Well, good-bye, you chaps," he said huskily. "I—I hope you have a decent voyage, and all the rest of it. I'd give quids to be with you, but—but—— Oh, it's no good talking. My luck's out. So-long, everybody!"

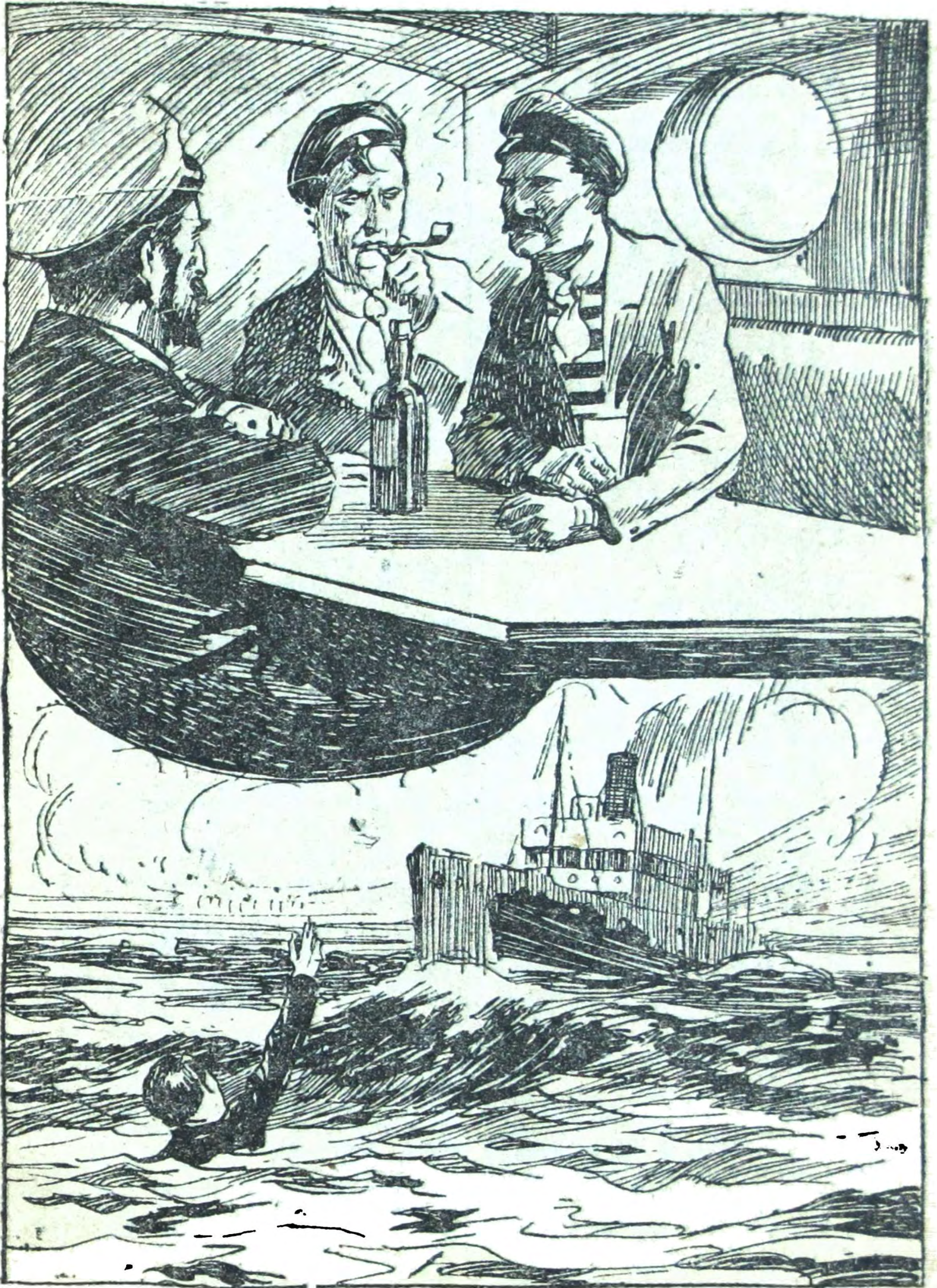
"Good-bye, old man!"

Further expressions of sympathy at that moment would have hurt, rather than soothed. So we all bade him a warm good-bye and waved our hands as the train steamed out. One of our number had left us before the start!

And as we returned to the yacht we had very little to say. We were all feeling rather unhappy. Handforth's absence wouldn't affect us so very much, perhaps, but it was absolutely rotten for him.

We shouldn't see him again until the beginning of the next term—at least, that's what we thought as we returned to the yacht.

But Fate had decided to decree otherwise!



1. "An old gent of the name of Sir Crawford Grey means to find treasure buried in the desert what's worth millions!" said Grell.

2. Handforth struck out strongly, since this was the only thing he could do.

CHAPTER V.

THE AWAKENING.

MEANWHILE, certain other events which would ultimately affect the schoolboy adventurers were taking place in London.

On the morning following the compact made in the cabin of the steamship Collindale, Mr. Simon Grell awoke with a somewhat aching head—not that there was anything particularly surprising in this.

He and Jake Starkey shared the same lodgings, and Starkey was already up and about. The hour was by no means early, Grell having slept like a top until after eleven. He found Starkey smoking and reading.

"I thought you wasn't goin' to turn out until the evenin', Simon," said Mr. Starkey pleasantly. "Ow are you feelin' now?"

"Rotten!" said Mr. Grell. "I think I must have had too much whisky last night, Jake."

"Well, you did 'ave a tidy drop," said Starkey.

"It was all on account of meetin' Cap'n Nixon," said Grell gruffly. "I wish we hadn't seen the feller, Jake. I don't like Nixon, an' I don't mean to have no more to do with him."

Jake Starkey stared.

"No more to do with 'im?" he repeated.

"That's wot I said," declared Mr. Grell firmly. "I'm goin' out now, Jake, to get a bit o' breakfast inside me."

"But wot about that arrangement?" asked Starkey. "Don't want to see Nixon no more! Wot about that there plan?"

Grell paused, with his hand on the door-knob, and turned.

"What plan?" he asked sharply.

"I s'pose you don't remember wot 'appened last night?" demanded Starkey, with a touch of sarcasm in his voice.

"Well, I don't remember much, an' that's the honest truth," confessed Mr. Grell. "We met Nixon, didn't we? An' we went in a pub with him—Oh, yes, and arter that we went aboard the Collindale. But I don't remember much else, Jake. Did you bring me home?"

"You brought yourself 'ome," said Starkey. "You wasn't wot I'd call real bad, Simon. I've seen you worse—although not durin' this six months past. An' wot about your scruples, hey?"

"My scruples?"

"Wot about not doin' anythin' on the shady side?" grinned Starkey. "I reckon you change your ideas pretty quick, old mate. Not that I mind so much. We've got two nice soft jobs on the Collindale—an' it's worth goin' for that alone."

Mr. Grell walked forward and puckered his brow.

"That's queer!" he said slowly. "I'm blamed if I can remember a thing. What rot are you talkin', Jake? What's that you were sayin' about soft jobs aboard the Collindale?"

"Well, strike me blue!" said Mr. Starkey.

"D'ye mean to say you've forgot that, too? We're goin' to sign on, Simon—you as pusser, an' me as chief stooard. We'll 'ave a fine time on the trip to Agabat."

"By thunder!" said Grell, sitting down and taking out his pipe. "An' I arranged that, did I—when I was nigh-on drunk? Well, I'd made up my mind to quit drinkin' at that rate, but if it leads to a stroke o' luck like this I might alter my decision. Purser on the Collindale!"

"But there's a lot more'n that, Simon," said Jake. "We're out to nab a fortune, if it can be managed—it's all fixed up. You an' me an' Nixon. If we can get that there treasure we're goin' to share it equal."

Simon Grell suddenly became serious.

"What a durned fool I was!" he exclaimed slowly. "I got drunk an' blabbed everything. Look here, Jake, you've got to tell me exactly what was discussed with that blighter Nixon last night. Everything, mind you!"

"It won't take long," said Starkey.

He related to his amazed companion how he had entered into a conspiracy with Captain Nixon while under the influence of the whisky. Grell was rather startled when he had heard all.

"So I've planned to go on this trip, and to help Nixon to play a low-down, filthy trick on Sir Crawford Grey's party," he said, at last. "I tell you honest, Jake, I don't remember anything about it, an' if I'd been sober I wouldn't have said a thing."

"Well, it's arranged now——"

"Anythin' that's arranged can generally be disarranged!" put in Mr. Grell grimly. "And this deal's going to be called off. Understand? It's going to be called off!"

"But look 'ere, Simon——"

"I'm not going to be a party to it," went on Mr. Grell. "I entered into the arrangement when I didn't know what I was doing—and I'm a bigger fool than I ever thought I could be. Fancy me spouting like that to Nixon—tellin' him the whole yarn! I ought to be kicked!"

"Oh, don't be a fool, old mate!" said Jake Starkey. "This thing might set us up for life——"

"By stealin' somebody else's property?"

"I s'pose it's as much ours as wot it is 'is!" growled Jake.

Grell thumped the table.

"Look here, Starkey, if you take them views I don't want nothing more to do with you!" he said fiercely. "You an' me agreed to go straight—arter Sir Crawford's kindness to us. Didn't we?"

"In a way——"

"We agreed upon it fair an' square," went on Grell. "That old chap acted like a gentleman to us—an' so did the kid. They made me feel reg'lar ashamed of myself, and I realised what a silly fool I'd been. Sir Crawford Grey could have put us in quod—but he didn't. He acted like a sportsman. An' in return for that you want to rob him—you miserable rat!"

Mr. Starkey scratched his head.

"But—but you arranged it all yerself, Simon," he said weakly.

"When I didn't know what I was doing," exclaimed Grell. "But I do know what I'm doing now, an' I can tell you straight out it was a rotten piece of dirty work. I won't have a hand in it, Jake—an' we've got to come to an understanding now. Will you stick by me, an' remain decent, or join hands with that skunk Nixon?"

"I'm with you, o' course, old man," said Starkey promptly.

"Good enough——"

"But you can't call off now," went on the other. "Nixon knows all about it, an' if you talk to 'im like this 'e'll tell you to go to blazes—an' carry out the whole plan on 'is own."

Grell nodded thoughtfully.

"You're right there, Jake," he admitted. "There's only one thing to do. I must make Nixon believe it was a fairy tale, and then he won't take no more notice. You stay here. I'll go and see him at once."

"But what about our billets aboard the Collindale?"

"They'll have to slide," said Grell firmly.

And a moment later he had passed out of the room, and was soon on his way to the wharf. Simon Grell was proving that the lesson he had received months before had sunk deep. He was no longer a rascal, and he possessed the instincts of honesty.

Captain Nixon was on board his ship, and he welcomed Grell warmly. Grell was acting a part now, and, although he detested the captain, he pretended to be cordial. They shook hands and went below.

"I won't take anything to drink, thanks," said Grell.

"I wasn't goin' to offer you any," said Nixon frankly. "You 'ad too much last night—hey?"

"Just a little," admitted Grell. "An' that was a fine yarn I stuffed you up with, wasn't it? I made you think it was the real goods!"

And Grell laughed uproariously as he filled his pipe. Captain Nixon watched him, and at once detected that the laugh was not absolutely genuine. Grell's whole manner was rather forced.

"Wot's the game, Grell?" he asked bluntly.

"Game? I'm only tellin' you about that yarn——"

"It wasn't a yarn," interrupted the skipper.

"I made it all up," said Grell. "I only did it as a joke, cap'n. I just wanted to see if I could take you in. By jinks! You was took in beautiful! Me and Jake have had a rare laugh this mornin'!"

Captain Nixon looked grim.

"I don't see anything to laugh at," he said. "An' if you expect me to believe wot you're sayin' now, Grell—well, you'll 'ave to expect. You want me to be bluffed out of it, don't you?"

"Man alive, you don't take it seriously?" demanded Grell, aghast.

"Yes, I do!"

"But it was a yarn——"

"It wasn't half such a yarn as the one you're tellin' me now!" interrupted Nixon. "I ain't quite a fool, Simon Grell! When a man's half drunk 'e says the truth—'e can't invent lies like that. It's the truth 'e lets out. You're sober now, an' you're tryin' the lies on me."

Grell was rather taken aback.

"But look here, Nixon——"

"I don't know why you're tryin' this game on," interrupted Nixon. "Everything's in your favour—better for you than it is for me. You get a soft job aboard this ship, an' if the whole plan comes to nothin', you'll be in pocket—not out. I shall be the only loser in case of failure. An' yet you're tryin' to stuff me up with a blamed fool yarn! Wot's the idea of it, Grell?"

"But it's only a joke," said Grell, without conviction.

"You can say that fifty times if you want to—but I sha'n't believe you!" exclaimed the captain. "Don't play them games on me, Grell. I don't like 'em. If you want to back out of the game, just say so—an' I'll do it on my own. You won't need to come aboard at all then."

Grell realised that he was helpless.

"Oh, all right," he said. "I can see that you're a bright 'un, Nixon. The fact is, I didn't want to take the risk, so I thought I'd call off——"

"You're at liberty to call off if you want to—as I said," exclaimed the captain. "But you'll be a fool if you do. The game's easy—dead easy. I don't see 'ow we can fail. I never thought you was so nervous."

Grell didn't reply for a moment. He was thinking. He had unwittingly committed a grave blunder, and he was finding it impossible to remedy matters. But he was quick-witted, and he came to a swift decision.

"You really don't think there is any risk?" he asked.

"None at all."

"Then we won't say no more," exclaimed Grell. "We'll let things stand, Nixon. I'll be aboard later on."

He took his departure, and returned to Jake Starkey. He found that individual looking somewhat glum. But Starkey revived a good deal when he heard the result of Grell's interview.

"So I shall go as chief steward, arter all?" he asked.

"Yes."

"Well, that's all right—I don't mind so much about anything else," said Starkey. "I s'pose it means that we've got to go through with it?"

Grell nodded.

"We've got to go to Africa, anyway," he said. "Nixon's a brute, an' he wouldn't care a toss if we backed out of it—he as good as told me that he'd be glad, so that he could have all the treasure for himself——"

"The graspin' 'umbug!" said Starkey warmly.

"So we're goin' with him, simply because

we can't do anything else," continued Grell. "The harm's done now, Jake, and we should only make things worse by stayin' behind."

"Couldn't you give Sir Crawford a warnin'?"

"They may have sailed by now—anyhow, we haven't got time," said Grell.

"So it means that we've got to carry on—an' take a 'and in this game, although we don't want to?" asked Starkey.

"It means," said Grell deliberately, "that we shall undertake the trip—but not as Sir Crawford Grey's enemies!"

"But—but——"

"We shall pretend to be in with Nixon," went on Simon Grell. "Pretend to be, mind you! Nixon's a rascal, an' I don't mind deceivin' him. When the time comes for us to get busy—well, Jake, I reckon we shall get busy in a way that'll give the skipper a pretty ugly jar!"

CHAPTER VI.

A RACE THROUGH THE NIGHT.

EDWARD OSWALD HANDFORTH descended heavily from the train when it slowed down against the platform in Victoria Station. It was late at night, for the train had been a slow one.

And the tedious journey had made Handforth's condition of mind even more upset. His eyes were suspiciously red as he strode down the platform, carrying only a small handbag.

He looked a somewhat forlorn figure in his flannel suit and straw hat. He was dressed in readiness for the holiday which, it seemed, he was never to enjoy. Poor old Handforth was in the last stages of deep depression.

In the station yard he procured a taxicab, and bade the driver take him to his father's house in the West End. And during the drive Handforth remained still and listless.

He hardly knew where he was being driven, and was rather surprised when he found that he had arrived home.

He didn't even waste time in paying the taxi-driver; and that individual stared after his fare somewhat indignantly—and waited. Handforth meanwhile was hammering at the huge knocker on the door.

It was opened at length by a stout and imposing-looking butler.

"Hallo, Wilkins!" said Handforth dully. "How's the mater——"

"Bless my heart and soul!" exclaimed the butler, startled. "If it's not Master Edward!"

"Didn't the pater tell you I was coming home?"

"No, Master Edward——"

"He didn't?" said Handforth, staring. "But—but——"

"I understood that you were on a steam yacht, Master Edward," said Wilkins. "The master gave me to understand as much, at all events, sir. I'm glad to see you looking so well, Master Edward——"

"Oh, rot!" said Handforth irritably.

"I'm feeling beastly, Wilkins—and don't keep calling me 'Master Edward.' I suppose the pater's in the library?"

"No, sir—he's out with Lady Handforth."

"Out!" gasped Handforth. "Out with the mater?"

"Yes, Master Edward."

"But—but—— Great pip!" Handforth almost staggered. "But isn't the mater ill, Wilkins?"

"Lor' bless you, sir, no!" said the butler. "What made you think such a thing? The mistress was never better in all her life, not that I know of."

Edward Oswald took a deep breath.

"Then it's a dirty trick!" he exclaimed hotly. "A rotten, low-down trick—although the pater did work it! Fetching me home by wiring a faked——"

Handforth turned abruptly as a big limousine glided up.

He waited for a second or two, and then he saw his father and mother step out of the handsome vehicle. Handforth rushed down to meet them, his feelings rather too much for him. He had come home because his mother was ill—and here she was as well as ever, apparently just home from a theatre!

"Good gracious!" exclaimed Sir Edward Handforth. "Edward! What on earth are you doing here, my boy?"

"What—what am I doing?" roared Handforth. "That's a nice thing to say, pater! After sending me that wire——"

"Hush, Edward—hush!" interrupted his mother. "You mustn't shout in that way. We thought you were with Sir Crawford Grey's party. Has anything happened, Edward? You must tell us why you are here."

Handforth felt almost incapable of saying anything, and he followed his parents into the house. He was relieved to find that his mother was well; but now he realised that his journey had been for nothing. He had been tricked into coming home—tricked out of the sea voyage. And his own father was, without a doubt, the culprit!

Sir Edward led the way into the library, followed by Lady Handforth and Handforth junior. The electric light was switched on, and then Sir Edward faced his son wonderingly.

"Now, my boy," he said. "Why are you here? We are pleased to see you, of course, but we hardly expected——"

"Hardly expected to see me!" shouted Handforth. "Not after sending me that wire, pater? Oh, what a mean thing! I didn't think you were capable of it, dad! You know I wouldn't come unless you put something of that kind—that bit about the mater!"

"What is the boy talking about?" said his mother, in astonishment.

"Perhaps he knows—for I am quite certain that I do not," exclaimed Sir Edward. "I shall be most delighted, Edward, if you will explain the meaning of all this rigmorole. What telegram are you referring to?"

"Didn't you send me a wire?" gasped Handforth.

"No, my boy, I did not."

"Oh, dad, I didn't think you could tell whoppers—"

"You had better be careful, my boy!" interrupted his father sternly. "I don't want to lose my temper with you. I sent you no telegram, and I cannot understand what you are driving at."

"What about this, pater?" said Handforth breathlessly.

He fumbled in his pockets, and at length produced the crumpled form. Sir Edward took it, and read the words upon it in astonishment. Then he passed it to Handforth's mother.

"Extraordinary!" he said. "I am afraid Edward, that you have been brought to London needlessly. I did not send you that telegram, and I know nothing whatever about it."

"Great Scott!" panted Handforth. "Then—then it was a trick of somebody's!"

"Obviously."

"It seems to me, Edward," put in his mother, "that you have been made the victim of a little practical joke."

"A—a joke!" said Handforth, in a hollow voice. "Oh, yes, mater—it's a lovely joke! I've come home, and the Wanderer sails in three or four hours' time—soon after dawn. I'm left behind!"

"Surely you will be able to join the vessel before she leaves?" asked his father.

"How can I, dad?" asked Handforth desperately. "I can't send a wire—it wouldn't be delivered. And there's no train to get there! The yacht isn't calling at any other port, and I can't do a thing. I'm left behind—and I've been swindled out of my holiday!"

"We shall have to see about that," said Sir Edward briskly. "I want to find out who sent this telegram to you, Edward. It was a base, contemptible piece of trickery—a most cruel subterfuge. Thinking that your mother was ill, you came home at once. I cannot imagine who can be the culprit. The telegram, I see, was handed in at Charing Cross fairly early in the evening. Cannot you suggest anybody who would play such a dodge?"

"I cannot think of a soul," said Handforth.

"Nobody who knew your plans, and who owes you a grudge—"

"My only aunt!" roared Handforth. "Fullwood!"

"My dear boy!" protested his mother mildly.

"Fullwood!" shouted Handforth, his eyes blazing. "I'll bet my last quid that Fullwood sent that wire!"

"And who is Fullwood?"

"One of the chaps of St. Frank's," said Handforth. "He's a cad, and he wanted to come on the yachting trip; but I spoilt his game. He must have sent that wire, pater."

"A mere schoolboy—one of your own Form fellows?" asked Sir Edward. "Impossible, lad—quite impossible."

"But Fullwood hates me like poison, and I upset him the other day," said Handforth

grimly. "He knew all about our plans, and I know for a fact that he's staying in London just now. He sent that wire as a kind of revenge."

"But I cannot see much revenge in an action of that sort," said Lady Handforth.

"My dear mater, you don't know Fullwood!" said Handforth. "He meant me to come home by the last train, so that I should miss the yacht in the morning. I spoilt his game, and ruined his chances of joining the party, and this must be his idea of getting his own back. The cad—the awful rotter! I'll half-slaughter him when I see him—"

"Dear me! You mustn't use such outrageous terms!" interrupted his father. "But it seems that you are right, my lad. If this boy is of a vindictive nature I can imagine that he would not hesitate at such a trick."

"Vindictive!" said Handforth bitterly. "Fullwood is a serpent, pater. It would be a fine thing if somebody would stamp on him! And now I'm done—he's messed everything up for me!"

Handforth sat down and stared before him. His cheeks were flushed now—the worry had left him. And Handforth was furious. He had been duped and deceived by the cad of the Remove—and the yachting party would sail away without him. There was nothing to be done.

He couldn't communicate with the yacht before it sailed, and there was no train until the morning.

"I'm done!" said Handforth miserably. "Oh, mater, isn't it awful? Owing to that cad I'm going to be left behind!"

His father smiled.

"Perhaps it is not too late, even now," he said. "There may be no train, and it may be impossible to telegraph—but there are such things as motor-cars, Edward."

Handforth jumped up, excited in a moment.

"Motor-cars!" he panted. "You—you don't mean—"

"I will instruct Gates to get the fast car ready at once," said Sir Edward briskly. "Caistowe is not so very far, after all. And with luck you may be able to get down there before the Wanderer sails. We will try and foil this malicious attempt to spoil your holiday."

"Pater, you're a brick!" said Handforth enthusiastically.

There was still a chance yet!

But there was not a second to be lost if Handforth was to gain his end. He waited impatiently while the car was being got ready. The wait was only short, but it seemed like hours to Handy.

Gates, the chauffeur, was soon round from the garage with the car. And then Handforth took a hurried farewell, and hustled out into the car. He was all excitement again now. For there was a chance that he would be in time!

"Now, Gatey, you've got to buzz like the wind," said Handforth briskly. "Don't bother about speed limits, or anything like

that. Shoot along at sixty miles an hour all the way!"

The chauffeur smiled.

"That's all very well, Master Edward, but it can't be done," he said. "I'll go as quickly as possible, but the master has told me not to take any big risks."

"Don't take any notice of what the pater said," interrupted Handforth. "You buzz for all the old car's worth!"

"Very good, sir," said Gates. "I hope that off-side tyre at the back stands up all right—that's all. I was going to change her to-morrow, but there's not time now. I think she'll stand up all right."

And then, with Handforth seated beside the chauffeur, the race through the night commenced.

No particular speed was made in London itself. But after the metropolis had been left behind, Gates opened the throttle of the car, and she fairly roared. It was a fast automobile, and the head-lamps were of the best quality; they cast a beam of light ahead which turned the night almost into day.

But before the journey was barely half completed the first streaks of dawn were in the sky. Handforth looked up very anxiously, for he knew that the Wanderer would lift her anchor before sunrise.

"Can't you go faster?" he shouted desperately.

"Impossible, Master Edward," said the chauffeur. "She's doing over, forty now! I'm afraid of that back tyre."

"Oh, she'll hold up."

The car gave a sudden jolt, swerved over the road, and then Handforth was aware of a great amount of jarring and bumping. With extreme skill the chauffeur succeeded in bringing the car to a standstill in safety.

"That was a near 'un, sir!" he panted.

"Why, what's happened?"

"That back tyre's gone!" said Gates. "It's a good thing we wasn't doing fifty, Master Edward! If we had been you wouldn't have reached Caistowe yet awhile. You might have gone to a very different place!"

Handforth jumped out of the car and gazed through the darkness at the off-side back wheel.

"It's flat!" he exclaimed. "What the dickens are we going to do now? We're done, Gates, I sha'n't be able to get there!"

The chauffeur smiled.

"There's a spare wheel on the other side, sir," he said. "I don't suppose it'll take us more than fifteen minutes to fit her on. If you'll help me I shall be all the quicker. Do you mind if I have a cigarette, Master Edward?"

"You can smoke ten if you want 'em!" said Handforth, "but hurry up!"

Twenty minutes had elapsed before the spare wheel was fitted to the entire satisfaction of the cautious Gates. And then the journey through the night was resumed. But now it was really a journey through the dawn, for the skies were no longer dark. In the east the light fleecy clouds were already reddening.

Handforth was not likely to forget that ride for a long time to come. If there had been no particular hurry there would have been no mishaps at all, in all probability. Delays on the road generally occur when a fellow is particularly anxious to get to his destination swiftly.

And after another ten miles had been covered, the engine abruptly developed trouble. Two plugs were missing at the same time, and it was impossible to continue without giving them attention.

"Just a matter of luck, sir," said Gates, as he pulled up. "It's the first time I've had plug trouble for weeks. But I don't suppose we shall be delayed above a few minutes."

Handforth fumed as Gates got out and lifted the bonnet.

"It's Fate, that's what it is," said Handforth bitterly. "I don't reckon I shall ever get to Caistowe, luck's dead against me. And I sha'n't be able to go on the sea voyage, after all."

Gates located the trouble very quickly, but it took him some little time to remedy it. But it was done at last, and then the pair climbed back into their seats, and the journey was renewed.

Daylight had come now in earnest, and Gates allowed the car to go for all she was worth. It was a swift, exciting run. Several times Handforth thought that he was going to be pitched over a hedge. But Gates was a clever driver, and he never took any really bad risks.

"Thank goodness!" panted Handforth, as the car fairly roared down a long hill into a country town. "Bannington at last! Caistowe's only three or four miles further on, Gatey. If you do the trick I'll give you a quid!"

"You mustn't tempt me, sir!" grinned the chauffeur. "I might take some big risks if you do!"

"I don't care what risks you take," roared Handforth.

But within a few minutes he was rather sorry that he had urged Gates to make further efforts. For, as they rushed down a long hill at a speed which was not exactly safe, an incident occurred which came dangerously near to disaster.

Gates was new to the road, and it seemed to him that the lane led straight on, while, as a matter of fact, it took a sharp turn to the left. It was only a waggon track ahead, and the light white-painted gate in front of it looked exactly like a portion of the road until one was right upon it.

"Look out!" yelled Handforth abruptly. "Round to the left!"

The chauffeur gasped.

He knew well enough that there was no time to pull up, and he saw with his own eyes, now, that danger lay ahead. To turn the bend was impossible, for such a turn would have involved an absolute smash.

So Gates did the only thing possible. He drove straight on, and the car met the flimsy gate squarely.

Crash!

They tore through it as though it had been made of paper, jolted wildly over the rough waggon track for twenty or thirty yards, and then came to a stop. Neither occupants were hurt in the slightest degree. "Good Heavens!" said the chauffeur huskily.

"You—you ought to have gone round the corner!" gasped Handforth. "Look at those mudguards, Gatey!"

"That's what I am looking at, sir," said Gates. "There'll be a fine old row when the master sees the state of this car. But I'm thankful it ain't any worse. We might have been killed, Master Edward!"

"We went through that gate like a clown through a paper hoop!" said Handforth. "But we can't stop here, you ass! Turn the car round, and get on the road again! All these delays will ruin everything."

"It's faster to go not quite so quick, sir, if you know what I mean," said the driver. "I shouldn't have took that bit so fast if you hadn't urged me. These country lanes deceive a fellow, especially in this light."

With some little difficulty the car was got back into the lane. And then the journey to Caistowe was resumed. But Gates was driving more cautiously now. He didn't want any more mishaps on that one journey.

"You'd better see the owner of that gate on your way home," said Handforth. "Give him the pater's name and address, it'll be all right. And buck up, for goodness' sake! You can go faster than this, I know!"

"This" was fully thirty-five miles an hour, and Gates did not feel justified in opening the throttle any further.

But all things come to an end in time, and, at last, the small town of Caistowe came in sight, and the car glided through the streets towards the sea-front. All was quiet, for the hour was still very early. Scarcely a soul was about the empty streets.

Handforth was standing up in the car now, waiting to obtain the first glimpse of the bay—of the spot where the Wanderer was anchored. The front was reached, and Handforth looked across the bay with eager eyes.

"Oh, my hat!" he yelled. "She's gone!"

The Wanderer was no longer at her anchorage!

Buoyed up with the highest hopes a moment before, poor Handy was now in the very depths of despair. His race through the night had been for nothing. He had arrived in Caistowe only to find that the yacht had sailed!

CHAPTER VII.

OFF FOR SUNNY CLIMES.

IT was an awful blow for the junior.

And he sat back in the car, half dazed and too stunned to say another word. Gates, meanwhile, was gliding alone towards the actual sea-front. The man uttered an ejaculation and pulled up.

"There she is, sir!" he exclaimed.

"Ah?" gasped Handforth. "Where—where?"

He jumped up like a Jack-in-the-box, and stared wildly out across the bay. And then he saw the Wanderer steaming very slowly out towards the headland. The vessel was some distance from the shore, but it could only have started on its voyage a very short time earlier.

"Oh!" said Handforth, greatly excited. "She's—she's still in sight, Gates! What can we do?"

"Well, I don't know, Master Edward," said the chauffeur. "She's too far off to send signals, and it wouldn't be any good going out in a rowing boat. She's only going slow, but we couldn't catch her."

Handforth knew that the man's words were only too true. It seemed that there was no way of getting into touch with the Wanderer—even though she was still clearly within sight.

And there was nobody to ask—nobody to seek advice from. The only sign of any human being on the whole front was a boatman far down on the beach. A bicycle was propped against one of the promenade seats—obviously the property of the boatman.

"Just wait here for a minute, Master Edward," said the chauffeur. "I'll run down to that man there, and ask him a few questions."

"He can't do anything," said Handforth desperately.

"He might be able to, sir."

And Gates left the car and hurried down the steps on to the shingle. Handforth stared at the yacht as though fascinated. It was so near, and yet so far! Within sight, but out of reach!

"What luck!" groaned Handforth. "What awful, rotten luck!"

He could think of no means whereby the yacht could be reached—no means whatever. But the chauffeur was not quite so barren of ideas as the excited Handforth. Gates knew that a rowing boat would be useless.

But perhaps there was a motor-boat to be hired. If so, it would not take long to overtake the slow-moving yacht—for the Wanderer had gathered no speed yet. Gates was bent upon making immediate inquiries.

But Handforth received no such brain wave. It seemed to him that all hope had gone. The yacht had commenced her cruise, and there was now no means of reaching her. She would not call at any other British port, and it would be quite impossible to get on board.

Sir Crawford would have waited if he had had the slightest notion that Handforth was likely to return. But he had taken it for granted that Handforth was at home, and would remain at home. It would have been foolish to delay departure on the mere off-chance that Handforth would turn up again.

For some few minutes Handforth watched Gates as he made his way down the beach to the solitary boatman. Then the junior's attention wandered over to the bicycle. From

there it went to the yacht; and then again to the big bluff headland which jutted far out beyond the bay. The Wanderer would soon be rounding that headland, and fairly close to the shore, too.

Handforth suddenly gave a big start.

His face was flushed, and an expression of excitement and joy came into his eyes. For he had thought of something at the last moment—he had formulated an idea which promised success.

A boat was useless, and there was no means of communicating with the yacht. Only a desperate measure could possibly succeed—and this was indeed a time for desperate measures, for Handforth was wildly anxious to get on board.

"That bike!" he muttered feverishly to himself. "It wouldn't take me long to ride upon to the downs. Then I could shoot over the grass towards the headland and reach it before the yacht gets there."

The very possibility thrilled him.

"Then—then I can jump into the water and swim the rest," Handforth told himself. "The distance isn't far, and they're bound to spot me. By George! It's a chance! I'll take it, too!"

Even Handforth, famous for harebrained ideas, had surely reached the limit on this occasion. His scheme to get on board the yacht was a wild one. But just then Handforth was capable of anything.

He didn't particularly care what he did. He only knew that the yacht was there—mocking at him—and that all ordinary means of getting at it were useless. So something startling had to be done.

Had he been less excited, Handforth would not have attempted the preposterous undertaking. But he didn't consider the possibility of failure. He only saw that he would probably succeed.

It didn't strike him that the odds were all in favour of his swimming far out from the shore, and then being unnoticed. He would be unable to get back, and would perish.

That was the most likely event to result from the adventure. But Handforth did not consider the odds. He was impulsive to a degree—impulsive and reckless. And the thought of danger never entered his head.

"I'll make a shot at it!" he told himself excitedly.

The next second he was out of the car and made a dash for the bicycle. Gates, at that moment, was just entering into conversation with the boatman. But Handforth did not see this.

He seized the bike and leapt into the saddle. It was quite an old jigger, and it did not run very smoothly either. But it was a vehicle by means of which Handforth could gain speed.

And he pedalled away towards the hill which led on to the downs; he pedalled with all his strength. He knew the whole district thoroughly, having visited Caistowe on many an occasion with his chums.

The tide was in at present, and the headland jutted out right into the sea. The

cliff at the extreme end dropped sheer—but it was not high. Handforth was quite a good diver, and he reckoned that it would be easy for him to take a header into the sea, and to strike out for the yacht.

It would seem to be close, of course, but Handforth was not likely to find out that appearances are deceptive until he was actually in the water. The foolishness of his scheme was all the more apparent when it is remembered that with full tide there was no way ashore, except by swimming right round into the bay itself—a strenuous task even for a champion.

Handforth rode on grimly and with set teeth. There was a footpath leading on to the downs, and he was soon pedalling the bicycle up this at full speed. The footpath vanished soon afterwards, and Handforth took to the grass.

It was short and smooth, and the bicycle moved across it without much reduction of speed. The headland seemed to be bigger than usual, for Handforth rode on and on and still he did not reach the end.

The downs rose high at one point, and then dropped away towards the cliff-edge. But for this, the cliff would have been a very high one. And, breasting the rise, Handforth saw to his joy that the Wanderer had not yet passed.

She was steaming sedately, and the desire to be on board was stronger than ever in Handforth's breast. He put renewed effort into his pedalling, and fairly shot down the long slope towards the cliff edge.

He had gained a speed of fully twenty-five miles an hour before he realised that the edge was only a short distance off.

"Oh, my hat!" muttered Handforth quickly.

He applied the brake—for the bicycle was only fitted with one. It made a great deal of clanking noise, but there was no appreciable difference in Handforth's headlong speed!

He had not had occasion to use the brake until this moment, and now he made the awful discovery that the brake was as good as useless.

"Great Heavens!" he gasped. "I—I——"

He looked round him wildly. There was no space in which to turn, for the headland went almost to a narrow point, and the cliffs were converging on both sides of the racing cyclist.

If he swung round he would go over the edge—if he kept straight on he would go over the edge!

Handforth clutched at the brake with all his strength. But it was useless. And the next moment, before he could think again, the worst had happened.

The bicycle ran clean over into mid-air, carrying Handforth with it. If the scene had been performed especially for a thrilling film "stunt," it could not have been managed better.

Down—down—down!

Handforth was falling rapidly. The bicycle had already detached itself, and was tum-

bling towards the water within a yard of Handforth himself.

Splash!

Machine and rider struck the waves together, but, fortunately, Handforth did not come into contact with the bicycle. He hit the water feet foremost, and plunged straight down into the green waves.

To his astonishment, he was hardly hurt, and when he came to the surface, spluttering and gasping, he struck out automatically.

But now the yacht seemed to be miles away. From the level of the sea Handforth was able to obtain a much more accurate idea of the vessel's distance from the shore. And for the first time it struck Handforth that the swim would be too much for him.

But it was too late now!

Handforth struck out strongly—since this was the only thing he could do. Waving would be a waste of time and energy.

But, unknown to Handforth, others had been watching at the time. And these others, I need scarcely add, were the juniors on board the Wanderer itself. I was there with the others.

We had all tumbled out early, in order to see the start. It was a really glorious morning, the sun shining down upon the sparkling sea with a heat which promised to become baking later on in the day.

The girls had been there, too—they weren't to be outdone. Even Lord Dorrimore turned up, and the start was made with great success. The only thing which marred the whole performance was the gloomy attitude of Church and McClure. Those two juniors were grieving over their absent leader.

"We can't blame the poor chaps," remarked Watson in a low voice. "I'm feeling a bit rotten myself, you know. Poor old Handy! It's a rotten pity he couldn't be with us."

"Well, he won't be with us now—that's certain," remarked Christine. "We've started, and we don't call anywhere until we get to France, or Spain. Handy's out of the running."

After the actual start had been made some of the fellows went back to their cabins—and the girls went, too—for the hour was absurdly early. The girls would not have come out at all, only they were anxious to prove that they were capable of equalling the boys.

After half an hour had elapsed there were only a few juniors left—and, of course, several members of the crew. Dorrie was enjoying a cigarette on the bridge with Nelson Lee and Captain Burton.

"Dear fellow, don't you think we might as well get in?" suggested Tregellis-West, yawning. "I didn't really want to get up, but it was impossible to allow the girls to have the laugh on us."

"Rats!" I said. "I'm not going back to my bunk now. Once I'm up, I'm up. Going to sleep after you've risen is a mug's game. But don't let me stop you—"

"Begad! What's that over there, dear boys?" asked Montie abruptly.

He pointed over towards the headland, and

we all followed the direction he indicated. The downs looked quite a long way away, for a big stretch of water intervened. But on this clear morning things could be seen distinctly at a distance.

And we all saw a cyclist shooting down the slope towards the cliff edge. It was impossible to recognise him; but we could all see that his movements were extraordinary. We watched, awed.

"The silly fool will go over the edge!" gasped Watson.

"He will unless he pulls up pretty smartly," remarked Pitt.

But it seemed that the cyclist was not attempting to pull up. His speed was not diminished, and he made no attempt to swerve—not that swerving would have done much good then.

"He's going over!"

"The chap must be mad!"

The shouts went up as the cyclist neared the edge. And, as we watched, he dived clean off the cliff, bicycle and all. Rider and machine dropped swiftly down towards the sea.

"Oh, my hat!"

"He's over!"

"The silly ass will be drowned!"

I gazed at the water steadily. But we were too far off to see any sign of the apparent madman. The juniors with me were looking rather scared; the whole incident had been totally unexpected.

I turned quickly, and rushed towards the bridge.

"Guv'nor!" I yelled.

"It's all right, Nipper—you needn't get excited," called Nelson Lee. "We all saw what occurred—and Captain Burton had already stopped the vessel."

A moment later some brisk orders were being shouted out. Several members of the crew came running aft, and there was quite a stir of excitement.

The first officer, with three or four men, made for the motor pinnace—which was capable of being dropped into the water from its davits at a moment's notice. The fellows crowded round.

"Stand clear, boys," said Nelson Lee, as he came running up. "We're off to see if that poor fellow can be rescued."

"May I come, sir?" I asked eagerly.

I didn't wait for the guv'nor to refuse, but scrambled into the pinnace before it was lowered. The other fellows were not quite daring enough, and they were left behind.

The motor was started almost a second after the boat touched the water. And before I could take my breath, we were speeding away in the direction of the cliffs.

There was no sign of the unfortunate cyclist. Nelson Lee stood in the bows of the pinnace, scanning the water through a pair of binoculars.

"Yes, I see him!" he exclaimed after a moment. "The fellow is swimming strongly—Ah! He's waving now. A little more to port, steersman."

We swung round slightly, and increased our speed.

"Shall we save the chap, sir?" I asked.

"I think so, Nipper—I'm sure of it."

"Must be a lunatic, Master Nipper," remarked one of the men. "Didn't you see the way he came down that slope?"

"I believe his brakes failed to act," I said, "although why the fellow should be cycling on the downs at this hour of the morning is a bit of a puzzle."

"I can see him now, quite clearly," said Nelson Lee. "He appears to be youthful—a mere boy. Why—upon my soul—No, I must be mistaken, surely!"

"What's up, sir?" I asked.

"The person we are about to rescue, Nipper, is none other than Master Handforth," said Nelson Lee calmly.

"Handforth!" I yelled.

"Without a doubt."

"But what was he doing——" I paused, and stared. "Oh, but I can understand now," I went on. "I thought the chap must have been mad—and everybody knows that Handforth's dotty!"

"How the lad came to be here is a mystery," said Lee. "And it is truly amazing that he should dive into the water from the top of the cliff. I'm at a loss to understand the incident."

A minute later the motor was stopped, and we glided towards the swimmer, who was now waiting for us "treading water."

And he certainly was Edward Oswald Handforth.

"I'm all right, sir!" he gasped, with a note of triumph plainly audible in his voice. "No need to hurry—I'm not hurt a bit, and this bathe is making me feel as fresh as a daisy."

"Are you off your chump, Handy?" I roared.

He didn't reply until he was hauled aboard. And then he looked up at me, and gave a taint grin.

"There's nothing wrong with me, Nipper, my son," he said. "Everything's all serene—and I'm coming on the trip, after all. I don't care what's happened—I'm as happy as a giddy king!"

"Handforth, you have acted very foolishly," put in Nelson Lee. "Why did you dive over the cliff in that reckless manner?"

"I couldn't help it, sir—the blessed brake refused to work," said Handforth, who was quite calm. "Perhaps it was just as well, because you might not have seen me if I'd dived in the ordinary way."

"But why are you here?" I asked. "I thought your mater was ill——"

"It was a trick—a mean, rotten trick!" panted Handforth. "My pater didn't send the wire at all. It was only worked so that I should be left behind at the last minute—and I'll bet a quid that Fullwood sent the telegram off. It was a hoax, you know."

We could get no connected story out of Handforth until he had been taken aboard. Then, after a change into dry things, he seemed as hale and hearty as ever. His fall and his swim had done him no harm at all.

There was a bit of a sensation when the news got about that Handforth had returned in such a strange manner. And Handforth, much to his liking, was the hero of the hour.

He told his story many times, and Nelson Lee could hardly help smiling when he heard it. By hook or by crook Handforth had meant to get on board the Wanderer—and he was there.

Nothing else really mattered. Captain Burton, of course, was compelled to communicate with the shore—or Handforth's fate might have caused enormous worry and trouble.

"You bounder!" exclaimed McClure heartily. "We thought you'd gone for good, Handy—and now you've turned up again—after creating a sensation."

Handforth nodded his head firmly.

"I can't help the sensation," he remarked. "I've won—and that's all I care about. I'm going on the trip, after all—and everything in the garden is lovely. That cad Fullwood didn't know his man when he tackled me!"

And Handforth, mightily pleased to be back, felt more than compensated for his trials. The trip had really commenced—and the party was complete.

What adventures awaited us?

THE END.

"'NEATH AFRICAN SKIES"

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By **ALFRED ARMITAGE.**

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

THE FIRST CHAPTERS.

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

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

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

(Now read on.)

NO BETTER—A TRIP ROUND THE VALLEY—THE SECRET CAVERN IN THE WALL ON THE SUMMIT OF THE CLIFFS—MOVING OBJECTS—AN ALARMING DISCOVERY.

THE next morning, at breakfast, when Ralph Taverner was informed that Dick Selby had studied medicine, and that he proposed to try his skill on the sick man, he expressed great satisfaction. He admitted that he had little or no knowledge of medicine himself, and said that the young American would probably be able to effect a speedy cure. He seemed to be sincerely pleased, and as far as that was concerned neither of the lads was at the time inclined to mistrust him, judging that his passion for Lorna was the only thing they

would have to be on their guard against. Several days slipped by, but Robert Ferguson did not improve. Quinine in regular doses, and other drugs that were valuable in cases of fever, did not make him any better. He had grown a trifle weaker. He still remained in a state of mental lethargy, taking no interest in anything, and seldom able to speak with clear intelligence.

The symptoms were baffling. They puzzled Dick, who could not account for them with what knowledge of medicine he had. He began to feel very anxious, and he could not conceal his apprehensions from Lorna, who was much distressed herself, though she bravely tried to hide her feelings.

It was to distract her from her sad thoughts that, when they had been in the house for three days, the lads reminded her of her promise to take them on a tour through the valley, which she readily consented to do. They spoke of the matter at breakfast, and shortly afterwards the three set off, Dick and Alan on foot, and the girl mounted on her pet zebra. She seemed to be in more cheerful spirits. The cool, fresh air brought a brightness to her eyes and tinged her cheeks with rich colour.

"We will go round by the east," she said, "and return the other way."

Bearing to the right when they had left the house, they held along the base of the cliffs to the water-exit, where the Somalis were posted, and, having stopped for a brief chat with them, they worked round by the north side of the valley, and in a distance of a mile they stopped at a place that interested the lads. It was a gully from which flowed a crystal spring, and on the sloping banks were the deposits of blue clay in which the diamonds had been found.

"My father has dug up a great many of them," said Lorna, "and there must be many hundreds more, if not thousands."

She spoke in an indifferent tone. Knowing nothing of the world and its pleasures, wealth was to her a matter of unconcern. For another mile she led the way on, keeping her steed to a wall. Then she dismounted, and,

bidding the lads follow her, she slipped into a dense fringe of bushes, and ascended steeply for thirty or forty yards. She emerged from the thickets with her companions, and they found themselves on a ledge that gave access to a cavern in the face of the granite rampart. The mouth of it was low and narrow, and it was so closely overhung by bushes that it could not have been seen from below.

"Why have you brought us here?" asked Alan. "Just to show us this cave?"

"To show it to you, and to tell you about it," the girl replied. "It is more than a cave. It is a subterranean passage. It goes through the mountain wall, dropping sheer at one place for twenty feet, and it comes out on the north side of the valley, by the bank of a stream that flows seven or eight miles to the eastward, and empties into the Bana River. On a shelf close inside the entrance are torches, matches in a tin box, and a rope-ladder."

"What's the idea?" Dick inquired. "Are the things there for an emergency?"

"Yes; that is what my father had in mind," Lorna answered. "He had always been afraid that some day Tib Mohammed and his Arabs would raid the valley, so it occurred to him, after he discovered this tunnel in the cliff, that in time of need we could escape through it and travel down the stream that leads to the Bana. That was why he put the rope-ladder and the other things on the shelf. And he also has a cask of powder in a cellar under the house, so that it could be destroyed if the Arabs were to come."

"Well, it isn't likely that they will be able to break in. Not with Chanka and the Somalis on guard."

"No, I should think not. It would be very difficult. The Arabs might come through this passage if they knew it; but I'm sure they don't. Only my father and I know. He hasn't even told Mr. Taverner. It is our secret, and now I have confided it to you. I have been more worried about Tib Mohammed than my father has been, and if he wasn't ill I should try to persuade him to leave his home in the wilds and take me to——" The girl broke off; her face clouded. "Come, we will go," she added.

Descending through the path by the thickets, the three resumed their journey, bearing westward through rows of trees and grassy glades. And in the course of another hour, having swerved to the southward, they reached the exit that was at the farther end of the valley. Here the towering wall of rock was split by a cleft that ran from the bottom to the top, and was scarcely more than half a dozen yards in width. It turned sharply within, and the continuation of it was hidden by a dense undergrowth and jutting boulders.

Lorna whistled, and the whistle was a signal to Chanka. The bushes were presently parted, and the big Masai warrior strode forth, carrying his shield and spear. He could speak a little English, and when he had been

introduced to the lads he smiled grimly at Dick, recalling the night when he had made so ferocious an attack on him in Tib Mohammed's camp.

Questioned by the girl, Chanka told briefly of the means by which the secret entrance to the valley was protected. He had twenty Somalis under him, and they kept watch by day and night. They were posted on rocky ledges to right and left of the cleft, and at a distance of some yards above the level of it, so that they could shoot down at the Arabs should they come in force, and could also roll large stones on them.

The Masai was of the opinion that there was nothing to be feared. He believed that Tib Mohammed and his men would not be able to find the entrance, and he was confident that, if they should by chance discover it, they could be easily prevented from getting through.

Dick and Alan would have liked to penetrate to the cleft, but Lorna did not suggest it. Chanka saluted and went back, and the little party, holding on their way, circled round to the south side of the valley, and on towards the house. It was now drawing near to noon, and when they had travelled for a mile and a half, and were at no great distance from the dwelling, the girl again dismounted.

"We are not in any hurry," she said. "Before we go home to luncheon I will show you a splendid view, if you don't mind climbing. It will be well worth the trouble."

They had stopped at the base of the cliffs, and by a narrow and precarious path, which zigzagged this way and that, Lorna and her companions ascended higher and higher, until at last they gained the flat summit of the mighty rampart of granite. The view that met their eyes was indeed a majestic one.

Behind them, far below, lay the hidden valley. At their feet, down in the dizzy depths, flowed the Bana River, its sluggish channel visible to east and west. To the southward, across the stream, was the great expanse of jungle, a sea of waving, undulating green that melted so imperceptibly into the horizon that one could not tell where the forest ended and the sky began.

The three stood there for a little while in silence, impressed by the scene. Taking his binoculars from the case that hung at his side, Dick focussed them to his eyes, and swept them at a wide range from left to right. He held them stationary, giving a slight start. There was a grave expression on his face. With a low word, he handed the glasses to Alan, who trained them on the spot that his chum indicated to him.

"By Jove, I see what you mean!" he murmured. "Arabs, aren't they?"

"Yes, and black savages as well," Dick assented.

They would have kept their discovery from Lorna, but she insisted on taking the glasses. She raised them to her eyes, and what she

(Continued on p. iii of Cover.)

saw drove the colour from her cheeks. Far up the course of the Bana, a distance of three or four miles, a number of figures had appeared from the jungle, on the south bank of the stream, and were moving along the edge of it in the direction opposite to the valley. There were at least a hundred of them, some clothed in garments of blue cotton and white turbans, and others wearing waistcoats and plumes of feathers. The sun glistened on rifle-barrels and on spears and shields. For a few seconds the girl watched them, then lowered the binoculars with a tremulous hand.

"Tib Mohammed and his men!" she said, drawing a deep breath.

"That's who they are, without a doubt," Dick replied.

"And there are others with them!"

"Yes, they are Bajangas, the ruffians from whom Alan and I escaped. They have come from their village with old Tib and his slavers."

The discovery was not a surprise to Dick and Alan, nor was it to Lorna, for they had told her of their adventures on their way to the valley, and of what they had witnessed in the Bajanga village. She was badly frightened. She looked anxiously at the lads, and gave the binoculars to Dick, who gazed through them again.

"They are moving westward, and on foot," he said. "There are no canoes at the spot where they came out of the forest, and I don't suppose there are any near. It is just as Alan and I suspected, Miss Lorna. Tib Mohammed has paid the Bajangas to help him, and the whole party, I should think, are going to the stronghold of the slavers. Do you know where that is?"

"Not exactly," the girl replied; "but it is a good many miles from here, somewhere up the Bana."

"On which bank? The right or the left?"

"It is on the west bank, Dick. So I have heard my father say."

"Then they have a long march before them. They are on their way now to the stronghold, of course, to join the rest of the slavers. They will have a palaver there, no doubt, before they come in this direction to search for the entrance to the valley. That won't be for a day or so. It is not likely that they will find the secret entrance, and even if they should find it your Masai and the Somalis will be able to stand them off. There is nothing to be worried about at present, and I don't believe there will be any reason to be alarmed later, all things considered."

"Do you really think so?" asked Lorna.

"Why not?" Dick answered evasively.

"You remember what Chanka said? He was quite confident that there was nothing to be feared."

Be that as it may, there was certainly no immediate danger. Dick was not as sanguine as his words had implied, and Alan, too, was doubtful as to the future. They glanced at each other significantly. Strengthened by the tribe of Bajangas, Tib Mohammed and his

slavers would have at their disposal a force of two or three hundred men; and should they discover the entrance to the valley—as possibly they would—they might succeed in breaking through, in spite of Chanka and the Somalis.

But the lads did not care to speak of their fears to Lorna. She was apprehensive enough as it was. The three stood there on the top of the cliff, gazing westward, until the Arabs and their black allies had vanished round the bend of the stream, and then, in sombre spirits, they descended to the bottom of the steep and rugged path.

"I had better tell Chanka at once what I have seen," said the girl, as she swung to the back of her zebra. "You go on to the house and have your luncheon. I will return in an hour or so."

She rode away at a gallop towards the upper end of the valley, and Dick and Alan bent their steps in the opposite direction. They had enjoyed their outing, but it had been spoilt for them by the appearance of the Arab slavers and the Bajangas, and both felt very uneasy with regard to the future. And more than that weighed on their minds. They were afraid that there was little or no chance of Robert Ferguson's recovery.

Two days had passed since the tour of the valley, and the shadow that had rested on the house had deepened. Robert Ferguson was weaker, and it was evident that his hold on life was a very precarious one. The symptoms that had puzzled the young American, and still puzzled him, were more pronounced. They could be attributed to only one cause, his knowledge of medicine told him, yet he was loath to believe in that. The thought of it appalled him. But almost at the first the suspicion had taken a grip of him, and now he was strongly inclined to think he was right.

Meanwhile there had been the other haunting shadow—the dread of the Arabs and the Bajangas. They might still be at Tib Mohammed's stronghold, or they might be marching eastward. At all events, scouts who had been sent out had reported that they were not anywhere in the neighbourhood. Chanka and the Somalis were keeping a vigilant watch for them at the secret entrance, and the smaller band of Somalis were equally vigilant at the water exit, though it was not at all likely that an attack would be made there.

The second day was a sad and gloomy one for Lorna and her friends. The girl was afraid that she was going to lose her father, and Dick, fearing the worst himself, had not been able to hide his anxiety from her.

(To be continued.)

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