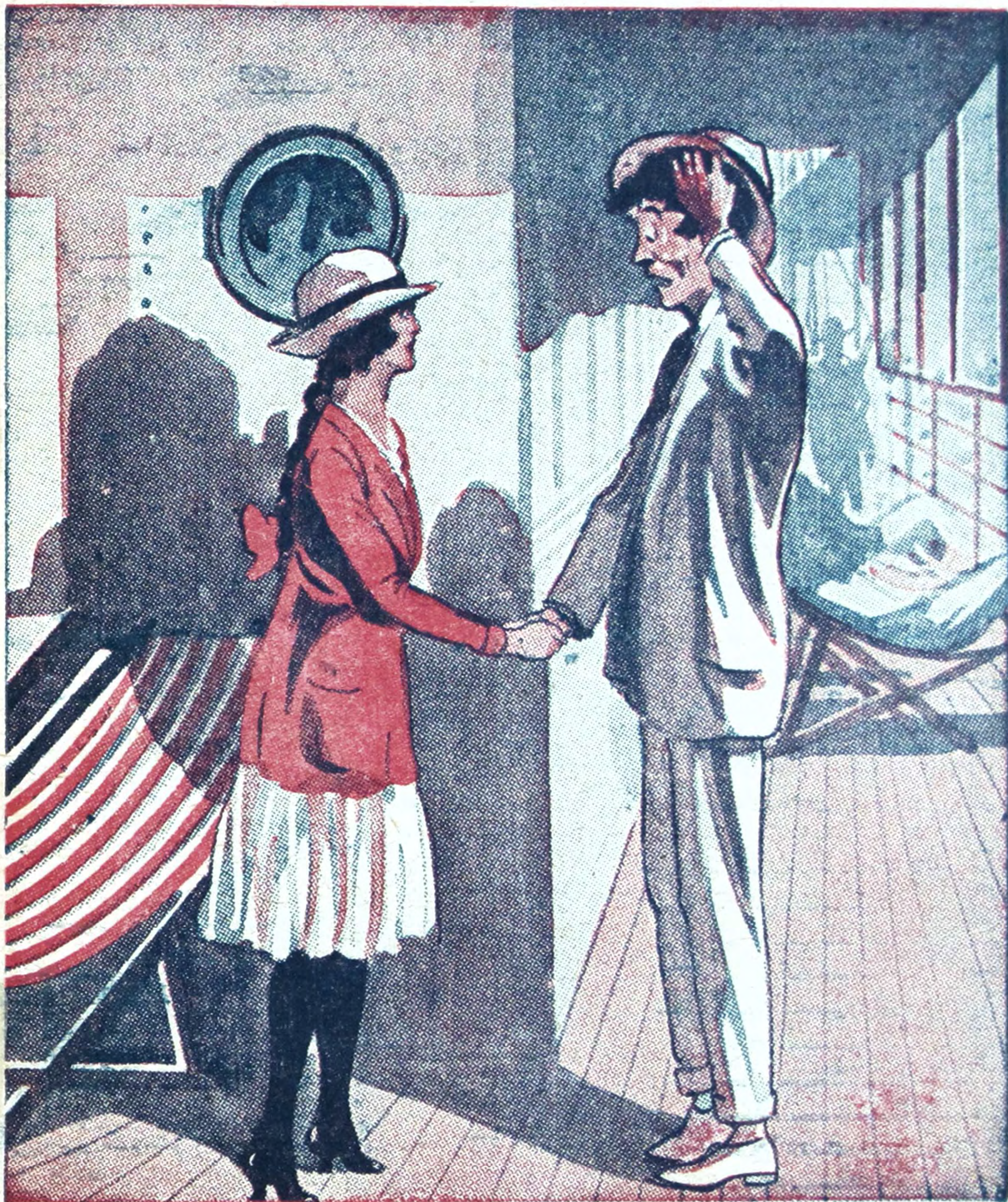


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(THE NARRATIVE RELATED THROUGHOUT BY NIPPER.)

CHAPTER I.

TROUBLE FOR ONE.

THE heat was sweltering. The sun blazed down relentlessly from a perfectly clear sky of blue. Not a cloud was to be seen—and not a cloud had been seen for several days. The sea was smooth, except for the slow, lazy rollers.

And the steam yacht *Wanderer*, ploughing her way southward, sweltered with everything else. Her decks radiated the heat; her brass-work was so hot that no hand could touch it.

Beneath the big awning which was fitted up aft a number of figures were reclining languidly in deck chairs. Being afternoon, most of the figures were asleep, indulging in a quiet nap.

Lord Dorrimore was in evidence—the exact note of his snore was particularly observed. Nelson Lee was there, too, but he was reading and smoking. Sir Crawford Grey preferred to adjourn below for his afternoon doze, for the heat on deck was rather too much for him.

The other figures beneath the awning were youthful ones, and they belonged to several members of the St. Frank's Remove. I was there, blinking idly at the sea, and close by Tommy Watson and Sir Montie Tregellis-West were sound asleep.

I sat up after a moment or two.

"Got anything handy there, guv'nor?" I asked.

Nelson Lee lowered his paper.

"Anything handy, young 'un?" he repeated inquiringly.

"Yes—to chuck at Dorrie," I said. "Isn't that a disgusting noise he's making? How does he expect us to sleep?"

"I really don't suppose he cares," smiled the schoolmaster-detective. "Dorrie is oblivious of everything at the moment; and that snore of his can't be cured. I've tried all sorts of things at different times, including cold water and pins; but it makes no difference. If you wake him up he'll only growl, turn round, and begin all over again."

"Well, I'm going to stop it if I can!" I said firmly.

And I picked up a book which Watson had been reading—I hadn't noticed it there before—and hurled it with unerring aim at the noble chest of the Rt. Hon. Lord Dorrimore.

The result was surprising. The book bounced off, Dorrie shifted slightly, and then snored away more heartily than ever. I was about to try some other experiment, when all hope of sleep was destroyed—by the arrival of Handforth.

To sleep with Handforth in the vicinity was an utter impossibility. Edward Oswald Handforth was born, I believe, for the fixed purpose of disturbing other people at every opportunity.

But Handy couldn't help it—it was just his nature. And he was one of the best chaps breathing, taking him all round. A bit of an ass, of course—that was acknowledged by everybody; but still, he was one of the best.

"Any chance of getting some sleep up here?" he demanded.

"No chance at all—now that you've come," I replied promptly.

"Oh, don't be funny!" said Handforth. "I've been in the cabin with Church and McClure, but the asses won't give me any rest. I wonder why the afternoons are so horribly hot? All a fellow wants to do is to sleep."

"We're getting into the tropics, don't forget," I said. "It won't be long before we reach our destination in Africa. And then the heat will be worse, in all probability."

"Oh, well, I can stand it," said Handforth. "Anyhow, I wouldn't have missed this trip for worlds!"

And Handforth only expressed the view of every junior there.

The trip had not progressed far yet; the *Wanderer* had taken her departure from England barely a week before. But she was already getting into the semi-tropical zone, and her passengers were fully aware of it!

Sir Crawford Grey, the father of Jack Grey of the *Remove*, was the owner of the magnificent vessel. And the object of this trip was twofold. We were all enjoying a first-class

holiday, and there was a prospect of a treasure hunt later on.

For Sir Crawford had in his possession a secret which concerned an isolated oasis in the desert. Upon arrival in Africa, it was arranged that a party should set out across the desert, and make an attempt to locate the treasure. Needless to say, I was determined to be a member of that party.

Jack Grey had invited a large number of fellows, and the yacht was like a miniature edition of St. Frank's. Removites were everywhere—and four members of the Sixth Form were also guests on board.

There were several young ladies, too. Two of them—Miss Violet Watson and Miss Agnes Christine—were the belles of the party, so to speak. They were very nice girls, and everybody liked them, with the possible exception of Handforth.

The mighty leader of Study D had been rather against the idea of girls being invited from the very start, and he treated them in the most off-hand manner. The truth was, Handy was nervous in the presence of girls, although he was one of the boldest fellows at St. Frank's. And matters were not improved for him when he found, to his horror, that the girls paid him particular attention.

"It's getting awful—that's what it is," groaned Handforth that night. "That Fenton girl fairly gets on my nerves with her fat-headed giggles! And she always seems to drop on me, too. I'm surprised at Fenton having a sister like that—the skipper of St. Frank's, too!"

Church and McClure grinned. They were Handy's chums, and they knew his little ways.

"Fenton can't help it," said Church. "She's not so bad, either—a bit plump and untidy perhaps, but she's jolly enough. Watson's sister is the best of the bunch, of course," added Church admiringly.

"What about your sister Ethel?" said Christine.

"Oh, she's not so bad," said Church, with a sniff. "A bit too fond of interfering with me, but I have to put up with that. But Miss Violet is ripping! Haven't you noticed what lovely eyes she's got?"

Handforth looked horrified.

"Go on!" he said hoarsely. "What kind of teeth has she got?"

"Why, they're like pearls," said Church happily. "And as for her ears, they're just like two little seashells——"

"You—you babbling ass!" roared Handforth.

"Eh?"

"You spoony idiot!"

"Look here, I'll punch your beastly nose if you say I'm spoony!" exclaimed Church warmly, and blushing with much violence. "I was only saying a few things about Miss Violet——"

"A few things!" snorted Handforth. "You silly ass, you've got it bad! You're in love! I suspected it yesterday, when I caught you following Watson's sister all over the giddy ship!"

"I didn't!" roared Church. "I only went down the deck after her—to give her a handkerchief she'd dropped. Rats to you! Go and eat coke!"

And Church tumbled into his bunk crossly, and turned over. His greatest desire, probably, was to avoid further questioning, and he gave some really clever snores. Not that they deceived his grinning chums. Handforth winked at McClure as he proceeded to undress.

"The ass is asleep now," he remarked. "Just fancy old Church falling in love with Watson's sister! She's not so bad; but, of course, she wouldn't even look at Churchy. What is he to look at, anyhow? Any girl would simply ignore him."

Church stirred uneasily in his sleep, and snored louder than ever.

"And this isn't the first time he's been in love, either," went on Handforth. "He was telling me about some other member of the fair sex once. My hat! He told me he loved her with all his giddy heart——"

Church awoke abruptly.

"You—you awful fibber!" he roared.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"You cackling asses!"

"Hallo! Are you awake, old son?" asked Handforth, in surprise. "We thought you were asleep——"

"You didn't think anything of the sort!" snapped Church. "And I don't call it very decent of you to tell lies like that, Handy. I never breathed a word to you about a girl I loved!"

"I didn't say you did," observed Handforth blandly. "I said a member of the fair sex. You told me you loved her tremendously—your mater, I mean!"

Church swallowed something hard.

"Go and eat coke!" he growled.

His chums grinned again, and then after that they had mercy on him—for the subject of girls was dismissed. There was not much doubt, however, that Church had been smitten by the dainty charms of Miss Violet. And Church wasn't the only one, either!

The night was very hot, and after the electric light had been switched off Handforth attempted in vain to make himself comfortable. The yacht was rolling slightly, and every now and again Handforth's head would come into contact with a post. But this was because of Handforth's weird position. He didn't lie in his bunk like any ordinary mortal, but adopted a sideways position.

"These beds ain't any good for comfort at sea," he growled after a time. "If you chaps can get to sleep, I'm blessed if I can!"

Silence.

Handforth gave a snort of disgust, and turned over again. And then, with a sudden jump, he was on the floor. He switched on the light, and there was an expression of animated excitement in his eyes.

"Wake up, you chaps!" he exclaimed, shaking his chums. "I've got an idea—a number one wheeze! Listen to me!"

"Can't you go to sleep, you nelly

bounder?" demanded McClure. "I was just dreaming about being wrecked——"

"Blow your dreams!" said Handforth. "What we want in this cabin is a hammock—three hammocks, in fact!"

"You—you ass!"

"It's a wonder I didn't think of it before," went on Handforth enthusiastically. "Hammocks, my son! That's what they use in the Navy. Why shouldn't we sleep in hammocks? Just think of the comfort!"

"Oh, don't be mad, for goodness' sake!" said Church grumpily. "Ain't these beds a lot better than hammocks? You're always getting some dotty idea into your head, Handy. Go to sleep!"

"But I don't see why a hammock wouldn't be more comfortable——"

"If you particularly want one, why don't you go into the fore-castle," interrupted Church. "They've got plenty there. A good many members of the crew sleep in hammocks. Perhaps somebody will lend you one."

Handforth's eyes gleamed.

"My hat!" he exclaimed. "That's a good idea!"

And Handforth grabbed his dressing-gown, donned it, and pushed his feet into a pair of slippers. Then he switched the light off and left the cabin.

"Well, of all the chumps!" exclaimed McClure, in the darkness. "I always thought he was an ass, but this is about the limit! He's always doing things on the impulse of the moment—instead of waiting."

"Oh, let him go," growled Church. "Good riddance to the ass!"

Meanwhile Handforth was on deck. The night was brilliantly star-lit, and the junior could not help pausing for a while to admire the sky and the reflection of the stars in the sea.

Then Handforth became aware of the fact that Nelson Lee and Lord Dorrimore were sitting in deck-chairs near by, chatting. And Handforth, who had no wish to explain matters just then, crept away for'ard.

When he arrived in the fore-castle he found it far more stuffy than his own cabin. It was a sumptuous place compared to the fo'c's'le of many ships, and was scrupulously clean. It was stuffy because of the great heat.

One electric light was burning, and Handforth looked round him cautiously. Two or three men were asleep in their bunks. But, stretched across a wide space, were several hammocks—big, roomy, comfortable articles.

Handforth approached the nearest, and saw that one of the engine-room hands was asleep in it. He shook the man without hesitation.

"Why, hallo—— What——" The man paused as he looked over the edge of the hammock. "Is anything wrong, Master Handforth? I think that's your name, ain't it, sir?"

"Yes, I'm Handforth," said the junior. "Look here, how much do you want for this

hammock? I want to take it into my cabin——"

"None o' your jokes, sir!" grinned the man.

"But I'm serious——"

"Yes, I know all about that, Master Handforth. You in a hammock? When you've got a swell bed to sleep in?" The man shook his head. "It ain't quite good enough, sir. And I want my hammock, too."

The man turned over on his side, and the conversation was closed.

Handforth felt inclined to renew it; but the man had spoken with an air of finality which was not to be mistaken.

And Handforth, after the first flush of the idea had passed, began to realise that it wasn't quite the thing. Where would he hang the hammock, anyhow? And what would Sir Crawford say?

"The old chap might be offended," muttered Handforth. "I think I'd better give it up; but I'll just try how they feel before I go."

There was an empty hammock near by, and Handforth gave a leap upwards and entered the hammock neatly. He shot out of it with far greater speed, however, and bumped to the floor with a crash.

"My hat!" he gasped. "Who did that?"

Handforth picked himself up painfully. He was not yet aware that hammocks are not articles to be dealt with lightly. It is far easier to fall out of a hammock than it is to climb into one.

However, Edward Oswald was not to be daunted. He made another attempt. And this time he exercised more caution. Two minutes later he lay full length in the hammock and gazed at the deck plates above him.

"Not so bad," he told himself drowsily. "In fact, it's jolly good. Still, I think I prefer the cabin, after all."

But Handforth meant to give the hammock a fair trial—and he did this to such good purpose that within three minutes he was in a sound sleep. It was no mere doze, but the genuine article. And when Handy really went to sleep it needed explosions to awaken him.

An hour passed, and then one of the men who had just come off duty entered the fo'c's'le. He yawned, stretched himself, and strolled towards his hammock with pleasant anticipation. But he paused when he got near to it, and stared.

"Now, who's done a dirty trick like this?" he asked himself indignantly. "Pinched my hammock! I'll soon have that chap out on to the deck!"

But before pitching the intruder out the man took a peep inside, and then he changed his mind. He stared at the sleeping junior in absolute amazement for a moment. Then his expression changed to one of wonder.

"Now, what's the kid doin' in 'ere?" the man asked himself. "It's Master Handforth, I believe. It's like his nerve to come and appropriate my bloomin' hammock! And I can't turn him out, neither."

After a moment's consideration the sailor

decided to go to the cabin which was occupied by Church and McClure. It would be better if they came along and fetched their chum. The man didn't want to get into a row.

He tapped on the cabin door softly, then loudly. And when he was invited to enter he crept in on tip-toe.

"Who's that?" demanded a sleepy voice.

"It's me, young sir—my name's Lambert," said the man. "Master Handforth's sleepin' in my hammock, an' I don't exactly know what to do. I thought mebbe you'd come and fetch him out for me."

Church gave a snort.

"The dotty lunatic!" he exclaimed. "He was talking about hammocks when he went out. All right; we'll come along and deal with him, Lambert. Don't touch the ass until we get there."

"Right you are, sir."

The man left, and Church and McClure were soon out of their beds. Then, instead of going straight to the fore-castle, they came to the cabin which was occupied by Tregellis-West, Watson, and myself.

"Wake up, you bounders!" said McClure briskly. "There's work to be done. Handforth has got to be slaughtered."

I was the first to awaken, and I turned over and switched on the electric light. I beheld Church and McClure, attired in their dressing-gowns. They were both looking rather grim.

"What's the trouble?" I asked. "Why can't you let innocent mortals sleep peacefully in their cots? Why does Handforth need such drastic treatment? If he snores too loudly—smother him!"

"The potty ass has gone into the fo'c's'le!" said Church. "He's appropriated a hammock, and he's lying there sound asleep! The chap who owns the hammock—a man named Lambert—came to us for help."

I grinned.

"Handy all over!" I said. "What a fathead! You'd better go along and tip the idiot out. You don't want help from this cabin, do you? Hold on, though!" I continued. "I've got a wheeze!"

"Begad! Who's that talkin'?" mumbled Sir Montie, blinking at us.

"Dry up, old son!" I said crisply. "Handforth has asked for trouble, so it'll only be obliging if we find him some. Do you remember that little store-room just along the passage, McClure?"

"What about it?"

"It happens to be empty," I said. "And there are hooks on both sides. When the door's closed the place is as black as ink. We'll give Handy a lesson!"

Montie consented to come, but Watson was fast asleep. So the four of us went along to the fo'c's'le, and found Lambert waiting patiently. He grinned as we entered.

"He's still asleep, young gents," he remarked.

"Of course he is," I said. "He wouldn't wake up if the boilers burst! Look here, Lambert, I want you to do without your ham-

mock during this watch. You can doss on a locker, or somewhere."

The man didn't care for the idea much—until he spotted two half-crowns in my hand. Then he grinned, and nodded.

"That's good enough, Master Nipper," he said, as he pocketed the silver.

The hammock was carefully removed from its hooks, Montie and I at one end and Church and McClure at the other. Handforth was snoring peacefully, and he gave no sign of awakening.

"Don't jerk him—and don't jaw!" I whispered. "You know where to go."

We managed to get on deck somehow, and still Handforth slept. Then he was carried down to the store-room I had mentioned to McClure. It was a dark place, with no electric light.

But the light from the passage was sufficient for our needs. We hung the hammock up across the little place, and grinned as Handforth continued to sleep—entirely ignorant of his change of quarters.

"When he wakes up he'll think he's in the middle of a nightmare," I chuckled. "Come on, my sons! We'll get back to our bunks, and leave Handy to enjoy his giddy hammock!"

And we all departed, wondering what the mighty Handforth would say in the morning.

CHAPTER II.

HANDFORTH'S PROMISE.

EDWARD OSWALD HANDFORTH yawned, stretched himself, and opened his eyes.

All was dark, whichever way he turned his gaze. He twisted round in his bed, and felt it swaying slightly. Then he sat up—and nearly overbalanced. He lay back again hurriedly.

"My hat!" he muttered. "I'm still in that blessed hammock!"

He was in the fo'c's'le, of course. But why was it dark? He listened for the breathing of the sleeping sailors. But all was still and silent. From a great distance, it seemed, he heard faint voices.

"I don't suppose I've been here long," Handforth told himself. "I'm not going to turn out in this darkness, anyhow!"

And he lay back and went to sleep again.

He would have been astonished if he had known that the time was already eight o'clock, and that everybody on board was up and about. Breakfast would soon be served in the saloon.

I was on deck with the others, and I had already made inquiries concerning Handforth. But I could gain no news. Handy hadn't shown up yet.

"Lazy beggar!" said Christine, who didn't know the facts.

"The ass was jawing at me yesterday for being late," remarked Pitt—"and I was only a minute late, too! We'll rag him when

he turns out. What price going and hauling him out of his cabin?"

"Good idea!" said Yorke.

"Come on, my children!"

"Hold on, you fatheads!" he exclaimed.

"I've a tale to unfold."

And I unfolded it. Roars of laughter followed—such laughter, in fact, that Lord Dorrimore came along the deck with the four girls to ask what the joke was about.

The joke was considered to be rich, and everybody agreed to let Handy sleep on. There was much speculation as to how long he would remain in the store-room—thinking it was still night-time.

After breakfast there was still no sign of him. He was, in fact, still in the hammock. For a second time he had awakened, and all was still dark. Yet he somehow felt strangely fresh—as though he had had his full amount of sleep.

"Still, it's no good getting up in the middle of the blessed night!" he told himself. "There's something funny about it, I believe."

He couldn't sleep after that, but lay back, waiting for daylight to come. He tried to see the first glimpse of dawn out of the doorway, and he stared at the darkness. But everything was pitchy. Not a gleam came from any quarter.

At last Handforth began to suspect that something was radically wrong, and he tumbled out of the hammock.

"Anybody here?" he asked loudly.

Silence.

Being clad only in pyjamas, he had no matches on him, and he felt his way forward gingerly. But even then he was not careful enough, for he hit the wall with his head after he had walked a yard—being under the impression that he was in the centre of the fo'c's'le.

"That's jolly queer!" he said, rubbing his head.

Then he felt a handle, grasped it triumphantly, and turned it. The door opened, and Handforth found himself looking out into a passage. The sunlight was streaming into it at the end.

"Great goodness!" gasped Handforth, dazed. "I—I'm not in the fo'c's'le at all! And yet I'll swear I went there—Hi, Pitt! Grey! Come here, you rotters! I want a word with you."

Pitt and Grey, who had just hove into view, grinned joyfully, and walked down towards the spot where Handforth was standing.

"Lazy beggar!" said Pitt severely. "The whole ship's talking about you, Handy, you slacker!"

"What's the time?" asked Handforth, in a husky voice.

"Nearly half-past eleven!"

"Ha—half-past ELEVEN!" yelled Handforth. "In the MORNING?"

"Yes, half-past eleven in the morning," said Jack Grey. "We had breakfast hours ago, and it'll soon be time for lunch!"

Handforth clutched at the wall for support.

"But—but I can't understand!" he said faintly.

"This is what comes of going to sleep in other people's hammocks," observed Pitt. "Some of the chaps didn't think you were comfortable in the fo'c's'le, Handy, so they hooked you up in that store-room—and they carried out the process without awakening you. Talk about a log!"

"I suppose you didn't know it was daylight?" grinned Jack Grey. "That store-room is dark, and —"

"You—you awful rotters!" roared Handforth indignantly.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"You japing bounders!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"You wait until I get my clobber on —"

"You'll have to run the gauntlet, Handy," grinned Pitt. "You'd better be careful, too, going about the ship at midday in your pyjamas! Don't forget that there are ladies on board —"

"I—I say!" gasped Handforth, in dire alarm. "Go and get my clobber, you chaps—don't be horribly mean, you know! I couldn't think of sneaking to the cabin with a blanket wrapped round me."

Pitt and Grey had mercy on him, and fetched his clothing. Then they came on deck and announced the fact that Handy would soon appear. And when he did appear there was a yell of laughter from all of us. Handforth didn't mind this half so much as he minded a very audible giggle from the girls.

"Sleep well, Handy?" asked De Valerio blandly.

"I'll—I'll skin you!" hissed Handforth, under his breath.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"How do you like missing breakfast?" grinned Christine.

"You—you —"

"Don't make fun of the poor chap, by gad!" remarked Lord Dorrimore. "He's appeared in good time for luncheon—an' that's somethin' to his credit, you know. An' this sea air is very tisin'."

Handforth clenched his fists helplessly.

"Whose idea was it to shift my hammock while I was asleep?" he asked, in a suppressed voice. "Whose idea was it, I say? Tell me that!"

"Well, it was my idea to begin with," I replied calmly. "Church and McClure wanted to pitch you out, but I thought of something better. To me belongs the honour of having concocted the nefarious wheeze!"

"And did Church and McClure help you?"

"Yes!"

"You—you traitors!" said Handforth, glaring at his uncomfortable chums. "You miserable bounders! You turned against your own pal —"

"Rats!" said McClure. "It was only a jape!"

"That's all, Handy," put in Church. "No need to get into a stew, you know. Why can't you take a joke in good part?"

"I'll deal with you chaps later on," said Handforth fiercely. "Just at the moment

I'm going to settle with Nipper. He thought of this wheeze, and he's got to pay."

"But, my dear chap, I didn't think you'd charge anything," I said. "And you're not hard up—"

"I'm going to make you pay!" repeated Handforth grimly. "All you fellows can hear what I'm going to say—and I challenge Nipper to a fight. If he doesn't accept—he's a funk!"

Everybody grinned more than ever.

"But I don't want to fight," I said calmly. "You see, Handy— Yaroooooh!"

I made that last remark somewhat hurriedly, because Handforth's fist landed squarely upon my chest, and I toppled off my chair and sprawled on the deck.

"Now will you fight?" demanded Handforth warmly.

"Oh, just as you like," I said, picking myself up. "If you're particularly anxious to exert yourself, Handy, I've no objection. When would you like to be licked? Now, in the afternoon, or in the cool of the evening?"

"I'll fight you after tea," snapped Handforth.

He strode away, and I grinned at the others joyfully. Only the juniors had heard what was being discussed.

"We'd better not say anything about it," I remarked. "Let's keep this to ourselves, and we'll have a bit of sport after tea—down in the reading-room, or somewhere. Good old Handy, he's worth his weight in gold!"

At lunch-time everybody took pity on Handforth, and he was not chipped any more. He recovered his good humour before tea, and I confidently expected him to call off the fight. But I was mistaken. He was more determined than ever to "lick" me for instigating the joke.

"At half-past seven, down in the common room!" he said grimly. "Don't forget the time, you bounder—and don't fail to turn up!"

I agreed. The apartment we called the common room had been set aside for the special use of the juniors. It was a large place where we could congregate, talk, and make as much noise as we pleased.

The fight was a complete secret—at present. But Tommy Watson, in a misguided moment, decided that it would be quite safe to let his sister into the know. She was to be trusted with a secret, of course.

"You see, sis, Handy's several kinds of an ass," explained Watson. "It's not his fault—he can't help it. At half-past seven he's going to have a scrap with Nipper."

"A scrap?" asked Violet.

"Yes, a fight, you know."

"Oh, but that's silly!" said the girl, looking rather concerned.

"Of course it's silly," agreed Watson. "But we don't expect Handforth to be sensible. His dignity's been injured, you see, and he can't rest until he's been avenged. That's the idea. Nipper will wipe the ass into the middle of next week; but that's the whole

joke of it. I call it a scream, don't you?"

Violet shook her pretty head.

"No, I don't!" she said decidedly. "I think it's just wicked! Oh, why do you want to fight—"

"But I'm not going to fight, you duffer!" said Watson.

"Those other boys will!" said Violet. "And I believe it's all because we girls laughed at Handforth so much. Fighting isn't gentlemanly—"

"Don't you believe it!" grinned Watson. "You're a girl, and you don't understand these things. And you've got to keep mum, Vi. Don't forget that I've told you this in strict confidence. Nobody else is to know."

"Oh, all right, Tom," said Violet, looking thoughtful. "But I don't like the idea of Nipper and Handforth fighting. Over a silly joke! It's—it's ever so absurd!"

"It'll be worth quids to see," said Watson, walking off.

His sister was still looking thoughtful when she joined Agnes Christine, her own particular friend. These two girls were the prettiest of the four. They were both dainty, charming, and altogether ripping. Ethel Church and Maggie Fenton were plainer, and more tomboyish.

"What's the matter, Vi?" asked Agnes curiously.

"Oh, nothing!" said the other girl. "But I think it's perfectly ridiculous! Fancy fighting over nothing like that! I think all boys are simply horrid—they're always wanting to hit one another!"

"But I don't know what you're talking about!" exclaimed Agnes.

"Well, I'll tell you; but you mustn't tell anybody else," said Miss Watson, lowering her voice. "Tom told me in strict confidence—and I'm telling you in confidence. At half-past seven this evening Nipper and Handforth are going to have a fight."

"But why? They're friends!"

"Being friends doesn't make any difference to a fight," said Violet. "Handforth is upset because of that joke they played on him, and he wants to hit Nipper about. But, of course, Nipper will hit him. I'm going to do all I can to stop it. And you won't tell anybody, will you?"

"Of course not!" said Agnes promptly.

And within five minutes she was telling Ethel Church—in strict confidence—all about it. Ethel was quite delighted when she heard—much to the indignation of Agnes.

"I think it's simply ripping!" said Ethel. "Oh, I'd give anything to see that fight! I suppose we couldn't be there?"

"Oh, don't be so silly!" said Miss Christine, with a frown.

Of course, Maggie Fenton knew all about it presently, and (in confidence) nearly every other guest on board was allowed to know the secret. When it reached Nelson Lee and Lord Dorrimore—via Fenton, of the Sixth—they both chuckled.

"I don't think we're called upon to interfere," smiled Nelson Lee. "Let the youngsters have some sport—it won't do them any

harm! Besides, we're not supposed to know anything about it."

"But, my good man, that won't do at all!" protested Dorrie. "I'm goin' to see this fight—wouldn't miss it for worlds, by gad! An' how can I see it if we ain't supposed to know that it's goin' to happen?"

"You'd better puzzle it out with that mighty brain of yours," chuckled Lee.

Dorrie wasn't long in puzzling it out. He managed to get me alone in the saloon after tea, and grasped me by the shoulders.

"What's goin' on, you young bounder?" he inquired.

"The ship!" I replied.

"Oh, don't be funny!" protested his lordship. "You know I ain't strong enough to stand that sort of thing. A little bird has been whisperin' in my ear that you an' Handforth are thinkin' of providin' an entertainment this evenin'—"

"Somebody's been jawing!" I broke in. "Well, it doesn't matter about you knowing Dorrie. Handforth wants to fight me, and so we've arranged a little mill down in the recreation room."

"I'll be there!" said his lordship promptly.

"What time does it start?"

"Half-past seven."

"Good!"

And Dorrimore walked off, highly pleased with himself. Meanwhile, another little private conversation was taking place—and Handforth was the victim. For, to his horror, Violet Watson cornered him in a quiet spot on deck just beyond the bridge.

The bold Handforth was amazingly nervous in the presence of girls, and he longed to get away. But there was a grim expression in Violet's eyes, and she positively refused to let Handy go.

"I'm very sorry if we upset you this morning," said the girl sincerely. "I mean, when we laughed at you—"

"Oh, that's all right!" growled Handforth.

"It's all over now, isn't it?"

"Over? Of course it's over, Miss Watson."

"And you're just as friendly with Nipper as ever?" persisted the girl.

"Yes, rather—or, at least—" Handforth paused. "That—that is to say," he stammered, "we're pals all right, but— Oh, blow! There's no need for you to worry about it, Miss Violet!"

The girl looked at him squarely.

"Are you two going to have a fight?" she demanded.

"I—I— How on earth did you know?" gasped Handforth. "I say, it's not fair of you to guess things like that! But I must give Nipper a licking for making me look so jolly silly before everybody!"

"Oh, Handforth! You can't give Nipper a— a licking!" said Violet. "It's far more likely that he will lick you!"

"Is it?" snorted Handforth warmly. "Why, you silly— Oh, crikey! I—I beg your pardon, Miss Violet! I didn't mean—"

"Of course you didn't," laughed the girl.

"But I want you to do something for me Handforth."

"For—for you?"

"Yes. Will you do it?"

"Of course!" said Handforth, rather helplessly. "I'll do anything you like, Miss Violet."

"Promise?"

"Honour bright!" declared Edward Oswald.

"Oh, I'm so glad," said Violet, smiling.

"What I want you to do is to promise me that you will not fight with Nipper this evening."

Handforth nearly had a fit.

"But—but I can't promise that!" he gasped. "I say Miss Violet—be reasonable, for goodness' sake! It's all arranged, you know! I can't back out of it now—I'm not going to, either!" he added firmly.

"Oh, but you promised me—honour bright!" said the girl regretfully. "Tom has often spoken to me about you, Handforth, and he has always said that your word was good. I didn't think you'd break a promise—"

"I—I won't!" said Handforth weakly, realising that he was completely cornered.

"If—if you insist, I'll stick to it, Miss Violet. But I didn't know you were going to ask me anything like that!"

"I want you to stick to it," said Violet firmly. "And thank you very much, Handforth. I'm ever so glad there won't be any fighting."

She tripped off, and Handforth gazed after her dreamily. He couldn't quite realise that he was really left in the lurch. It was absolutely impossible to break his word—to a girl! And it was also impossible for him to explain to the other chaps what he had done—because they'd only yell like hyenas.

Poor old Handy was in a bit of a fix, and his state of mind was rather too complex to be described.

CHAPTER III.

CAPTAIN NIXON'S VILLAINY.

MEANWHILE other events were occurring, distant from the Wanderer, which were, nevertheless, connected with Sir Crawford Grey and his guests. I think it is only fitting that I should relate those events in their proper place.

And this is the proper place.

The steamship Collindale was steaming along under the blazing sun, and her port of destination was the small African town of Agabat. This, of course, was also the port that the Wanderer was making for.

The Collindale was a cargo-boat. She was nothing much to look upon, her paintwork was dull, and her brasswork didn't glitter. But she was sound internally; her engines were excellent.

And Captain Nixon, who commanded her, was always boasting of the speed he could maintain on a long voyage. She was due to arrive in port several days in advance of Sir Crawford's yacht.

She was carrying two men who did not actually belong to her complement—although they had signed on in London. One was the purser, Simon Grell; and the other was the chief steward, Jake Starkey.

The reason for this pair being aboard was not exactly an honest one.

Simon Grell, months earlier, had been mixed up in a plot to obtain a locket from Jack Grey—Sir Crawford's son. That locket contained the secret of the treasure which the yachting party had set out to seek.

Grell knew all the facts, even to the last detail, but the man was not a rascal—although he had been at one time of day. He and Starkey, talking matters over, had decided to take no action when they learned that the St. Frank's party was setting off to find the treasure.

However, Grell had a weakness for strong drink, and he was unfortunate enough to meet Captain Nixon one evening. They were old friends, Nixon being several varieties of a scoundrel. Grell did not wish to renew the captain's acquaintance, but after he had got some whisky inside him he was not so particular.

And, in the finish, while under the influence of drink, he told Nixon the whole story. When he became sober it was too late to alter matters, for everything had been arranged.

The three in the plot were to arrange, once they were on African soil, to have Sir Crawford's party ambushed—when the secret of the treasure would be forced from them. It was quite a simple plan, and there was not much possibility of a hitch. But Grell didn't like it.

Sir Crawford had been good to him, and Grell had been living straight ever since. He wanted to live straight now, and he and Starkey were secretly determined to frustrate Nixon's plot when the right time came.

Grell was firm enough, but he found it necessary to wake Starkey up now and again. For Jake was easily led, and it had only been Grell's influence which had kept him straight during the last six or seven months.

The Collindale's voyage had been quite uneventful so far; she had met with fair weather since she steamed out of the Thames, and now she was gliding along at her best pace.

Captain Nixon was not altogether easy in mind as he paced the bridge. One or two remarks which Grell had let drop occasionally seemed to indicate that he was not very enthusiastic with regard to the scheme.

And Starkey had been in the habit of arguing with Grell when the pair were together, although Nixon had never been able to discover the subject of their arguments. The skipper was a suspicious man by nature, and he intended to set his mind at rest that evening, if it could be managed.

Accordingly, after Grell had retired to his bunk, Nixon invited Jake Starkey into the little saloon, and oiled his tongue with a dose of whisky. Jake was rather partial to whisky, and he became very amiable.

"What's amiss with Grell lately?" inquired the captain, as he handed a cigar over the table to his companion. "Seems a bit moody, don't he?"

"Oh, Simon's all right," said Starkey. "There ain't much the matter with 'im, cap'n. Him an' me git on well together."

"Yes, so I've noticed," said Nixon. "But now an' agin you seem to have a bit of a quiet argument together. Wot are them talks about, Starkey?"

Jake lit his cigar.

"Oh, nothin' in particular," he replied slowly.

"Have some more whisky, old man," said the captain, pushing the bottle over.

Jake helped himself liberally. The captain had made Grell speak by dosing him with strong drink—why shouldn't it work with Starkey? There was no harm in trying, anyhow.

They talked for some little time on general matters, and then the skipper produced a bottle of rum. Starkey's eyes sparkled as he saw it—for he liked rum more than he liked whisky, and he didn't mind mixing the two.

"Try some o' this, Jake," said the captain genially. "Take as much as you want, old man. I've got plenty more."

Starkey was in clover, and before long he was in a condition quite suitable to Nixon's purpose—although the man was not actually drunk. The captain did not go too far with his dosing.

"I reckon we'll git that treasure of Sir Crawford's," he remarked. "A nice little prize, too, Starkey—accordin' to Grell's reckonin'. We shall be able to divide up an' retire for life."

"Seems like it," said Starkey, without enthusiasm.

"You don't seem keen——"

"Keen?" echoed the other. "A blamed lot o' use bein' keen wi' Grell thinkin' as 'e does! Why, the durned fool——" Starkey pulled himself up abruptly. "But I guess we'll strike lucky," he concluded lamely.

The skipper grasped his arm.

"Look here, Jake, I want the truth from you!" he exclaimed, in a grim voice. "Out with it, man! Grell wants to call off, don't he? Wot's he been sayin' to you?"

"Nun-nothin'," stammered Starkey.

"Oh, yes he has!" insisted Nixon. "Wot you tell me won't go no further—it won't go back to Grell. Let's 'ave a quiet little talk an' understand one another. Take another drop o' that rum."

That drop completed the loosening of Starkey's tongue.

"Between you an' me, cap'n," he said thickly, "I don't altogether 'old with Simon's way o' thinkin'. We come to this arrangement in London, an' it don't seem square to me for Grell to go agin you now."

The skipper clenched his teeth.

"For you an' Grell to go—agin me?" he repeated slowly.

"Well, I ain't agin you," was Starkey's hasty remark. "Don't think that, cap'n. I'm with you right through. But Grell's got

fool ideas about bein' honest. 'E don't want to do anythink that'll 'arm Sir Crawford.'

Nixon imagined for a moment that Jake was rambling.

"But, you fool, we're all in this together," he exclaimed. "Pull yourself together, Jake, an' talk sense! Simon Grell ain't tryin' no bluff on me, is 'e? I want the truth—straight out!"

Starkey glanced at the door, and then leaned over the table.

"An' you shall 'ave the truth," he whispered hoarsely. "That's jest wot Grell is doin', cap'n—'e's bluffin' you! 'E's goin' to spoil the game as soon as we git to Afriky—an' 'e wants me to join with 'im. But I like you, cap'n, an' I'm blamed if I'll be a party to it!"

Nixon controlled himself with an effort.

"Tell me wot you mean—Grell's goin' to spoil the game?" he said.

"Well, it's like this," replied Jake. "Once we're out there, Grell means to tip Sir Crawford the wink that there's a plot afoot to git at that treasure—an' Grell's been fixin' things up wi' me this larst day or two. But, mind ye, I'm not with 'im. I'm true by you, Cap'n Nixon. An' I reckon the best thing we can do is to shove Grell ashore fust—afore we git to our own port."

"He's a traitor," said the captain fiercely.

"Ay, that's right enough," agreed Starkey. "I've told 'im so more'n once, but 'e's always talked me round. Simon's a masterpiece for talkin', as you know. But you won't let this go no further?"

"You rest yourself, Jake," said the skipper. "It won't go no further—but I'm glad I know. You'd best git to your bunk now, or you won't be fit for nothin' in the mornin'."

"Yes, p'r'aps I'd better," mumbled Starkey. "Goo'-night, cap'n!"

He staggered out of the cabin, for the whisky and the rum were now having full effect. Within five minutes Jake Starkey was sleeping like a log—and the captain was pacing his cabin with fierce strides.

"The dog!" he muttered—"the treacherous, infernal dog!"

He was quite sure that he could rely upon the truth of Starkey's story. The man had been too drunk to invent anything. And the realisation that Simon Grell was attempting to trick him nearly drove Nixon into a frenzy.

One thing was certain—the situation could not last.

Nixon meant to have it out with Grell at once. He was just in a mood for it now, and he would give Grell a piece of his mind.

The captain, having come to his decision, marched straight to Simon Grell's bunk and shook the man as he lay asleep. Grell stirred, opened his eyes, and blinked at the lantern which the captain was holding.

"What's wrong?" he asked sleepily.

"Get up!" ordered the skipper. "I want to talk to you!"

Simon Grell sat up in his bunk.

"Plenty of time for talkin' to-morrow, isn't there?" he began.

"I want to talk to you now!" interjected Nixon. "Get up, Grell, an' make haste about it. You'll find me on deck, right aft."

"But look here, Nixon——"

"I shall expect you in five minutes," said the captain.

He took his departure, and Grell lay for some moments without moving. He half-decided to ignore the order, and to go to sleep again. But his curiosity had been aroused.

What had occurred since he went to sleep?

There was obviously something wrong with Nixon, and Grell decided it would be better, perhaps, for him to obey the summons. So he dressed himself roughly, and then went on deck.

It was a glorious night. The stars were shining like glow-lamps in the purple heavens. The sea was calm, and there was hardly a breath of wind in the warm night air.

Grell lit his pipe, and walked aft.

The captain was standing against the rail, idly watching the foam which was being churned up by the powerful propeller. The phosphorus gleamed on the creamy surface like blue-green fire.

"Fine night, cap'n," said Grell, as he came up. "I'm not sorry you roused me; it's good to get a breath of fresh air. What's the trouble? You don't seem to be in the best of moods."

Captain Nixon turned, and leaned his back against the rail.

"The fact is, Grell, I want a word with you," he said. "We're alone 'ere; there's nobody about, except the second officer, on the bridge—an' he can't see us here. For several days past you haven't been yourself. An' I'd like to know what's troublin' you."

"Nothing," replied Grell. "Nothing at all—unless it's Starkey. An' he does get on my nerves now an' again."

"I ain't surprised," said the skipper grimly. "Starkey don't agree with your ideas readily enough—hey?"

"Wot ideas? Wot are you getting at?"

"I'm a man of few words—an' what I says I mean," exclaimed Nixon. "Fust of all, Grell, I want to know if you're heart an' soul with me in this idea of gettin' Sir Crawford Grey's treasure?"

"We made the arrangement, didn't we?" asked Grell.

"That ain't a direct answer. Are you with me?"

"Look here, Nixon, there's no need for us to discuss them matters now," said Grell. "You know as well as I do that our plan is cut an' dried, an' if everything goes through as it ought to—well, we shall be on velvet."

The captain nodded. Grell's non-committal answers were quite sufficient to tell Nixon that the man was playing a double game. Grell was even at pains, it seemed, not to lie.

"Yes, we shall be on velvet—if everything goes through as it ought to," agreed the captain grimly. "But I don't see how it can go through as it ought to if we've got a blamed traitor amongst us!"

Simon Grell started.

"A—a traitor?" he repeated quickly.

"That's wot I said!"

"You don't mean—Starkey?"

"No, you treacherous hound—I mean you!" rapped out the skipper harshly. "Your game is to pretend to be my pal, and to give me away at the last moment. You can't deceive me, Grell!"

The other laughed.

"Why, Nixon, wot's the matter with you?" he asked. "I guess Jake 'as ben talkin' some blamed rot to you, an' you've swallowed it—"

"It's your blamed rot that I've swallowed!" interjected Nixon. "But I don't swallow no more, Grell! You're tryin' to play dirty—and I ain't standin' it! If you tell me lies I'll durned well have you shoved in irons!"

"You'd better not try that on!" snapped Grell, angered by the skipper's threatening tones. "You an' me haven't fallen out yet, but if we do it won't be nice—not for you! An' if it'll give you any pleasure to know it, I'll tell you straight out that I'll 'ave nothin' to do with your rotten plot! Understand? You'll set me ashore at Agabat, an' I've finished with you!"

"By thupder!" snarled the captain. "You—yon cur!"

"You'd best be careful——"

"You——"

Nixon went off into a series of foul oaths, and Simon Grell's blood boiled. He swung his fist round, and it came into contact with Nixon's nose—violently.

The captain staggered back under the blow.

But he recovered himself in a moment, and swore frightfully.

"Curse you!" he rasped. "You'll pay for that, you scum!"

He hurled himself upon Grell, and the next moment the pair were struggling fiercely. Up and down the deck they rolled, neither gaining the mastery. The fight was brief, and at one point Grell had the skipper so placed that one blow would have sent him overboard.

But Grell drew back, and allowed his opponent to get clear of the rail.

"We don't want no killin' job!" he exclaimed thickly.

"Don't we?" snarled Nixon. "We'll see!"

In all probability he did not mean to do anything really murderous. But after a short tussle he landed a blow between the man's eyes which sent Grell staggering.

The small of his back hit the rail, and before he could recover his balance Nixon attacked again—and this time there was murder in his eyes.

Crash!

His fist smote Grell's chest fairly. For a second the unfortunate man hovered. He gave a wild cry, and toppled clean overside. Nixon did not even hear the splash as he entered the sea. He heard nothing.

A moment ago Grell had been there—but now he had gone, without leaving a trace.

Captain Nixon realised in a second what he had done. His rage left him, and he stood on the deck shivering in every limb. Then a panic seizing him, he wrenched out a life-belt and hurled it into the darkness.

But what was the use? Grell had been drawn under by this time—he had probably been torn to pieces by the whirling propeller.

Captain Nixon gulped in a big breath, and clutched at the rail for support. His jaw was set firmly, and his evil eyes gleamed.

"No, I'm durned if I'll stop the ship!" he muttered. "Grell fell overboard—I didn't do it! An' I sha'n't be troubled with 'im no more. 'E meant to spoil everything; but that game's finished now!"

And the captain, having come to that murderous decision, retired into his cabin to strengthen himself with rum. His nerves certainly needed steadying. For he had allowed his ship to steam on—while knowing that a human life might have been saved by stopping.

In spirit, Captain Nixon was a murderer!

CHAPTER IV.

THE INTERRUPTED FIGHT.

"BLESSED if I know what's come over Handy," remarked McClure, as he leaned against the rail of the promenade deck, with McClure at his side. "He's been mooning about for two hours past."

"It's queer," agreed Church. "Handy loves a scrap, as a rule. Even if he's sure of being whacked, he's cheerful enough. He can't be sorry he challenged Nipper—because I believe the ass thinks he'll win! So what's the cause of his gloom?"

"Ask me another!" said McClure bluntly.

The time was just after seven, and active preparations had already been made for the fight. A ring had been made in the "common-room," and the seconds had their towels and sponges in readiness.

It had been decided by a general vote of the juniors that Handy and I should wear gloves. The fight wasn't a serious one, and we didn't want to hammer ourselves about with any particular violence.

By twenty past seven the recreation room was packed, and Lord Dorrimore had taken it upon himself to preside. Everybody was delighted, of course, for Dorrie was a general favourite.

I noticed that Watson's sister was standing by herself on deck. She seemed anxious about something, and was certainly not as merry as usual. I wondered if she knew anything about the fight.

Handforth himself had not shown up yet—a remarkable circumstance in itself. For Handy was generally the first to be in evidence on such occasions. He had retired into his cabin, and had not yet emerged.

Handforth, as a matter of fact, was in a state of utter misery. He had given his faithful promise to Violet that he wouldn't

fight. It was, therefore, impossible for him to take part in the contest.

The silly ass ought to have explained that before preparations were made; but Handy couldn't bear the thought of explaining. It horrified him.

That he, who always professed to hold all girls in contempt, should have promised not to fight was more than he dare admit. He knew that it would only lead to another round of laughter—and Handy didn't feel strong enough to stand laughter of that kind.

But something would have to be done—there was no doubt about that. But what? Handy had a wild idea of pretending to be ill. He would writhe in his bunk, gasp for breath, and then faint. There was only one drawback to this scheme—Dr. Brett wouldn't be deceived for a moment.

And when it came out that Handforth had been shamming, the fellows would conclude that he funk'd the fight. So what the dickens was to be done?

Handforth paced the cabin feverishly.

"It's past half-past, you ass!" came a voice from the doorway.

Handforth turned, and found Church and McClure staring at him.

"Eh?" he gasped. "Oh!"

"Going dotty?" inquired Church. "Nipper's waiting for you—everything's ready, you chump! Ain't you goin' to fight?"

"No——"

"What!" yelled McClure.

"Yes—that is to say, no—— I—I mean—— Can't you leave a chap alone?" roared Handforth desperately. "Oh, rats! I suppose I'd better come along at once. If you knew how worried I was you wouldn't bother me like this—— My hat!"

Handforth suddenly remembered that he had made no promise to Violet regarding any other fellow; he was at perfect liberty to punch his own chums! And, just to relieve his feelings, he let out right and left.

Smack! Crash!

Church and McClure, both unprepared, received two swipes which sent them spinning. They collapsed on the deck, and roared.

"Get up, you asses, and I'll biff you again!" roared Handforth, feeling much better. "Get up, blow you!"

"Ow! Oh, my hat!" groaned Church.

"He's mad—absolutely dotty!"

"Stark raving!" gasped McClure.

"You yelled at me this morning, didn't you?" demanded Handforth. "I'd forgotten to slaughter you for it. I'm going to knock you into the middle—— Hi! Come back, you asses! What the dickens——"

But Church and McClure had fled.

Handforth followed them indignantly, and found that he was being led into the recreation room before he could realise it. As soon as he appeared there was a roar.

"You're late, you bounder!"

"Nipper's been waiting for ten minutes!"

"What's the matter with you, Handy?"

"He's gone off his rocker!" shouted McClure. "The silly ass smashed into Church and I a minute ago—and knocked us

over for nothing! I'm blessed if I know what's the matter with him."

"If you'll only keep yourselves calm everythin' will be all right," said Lord Dorri-more. "Now then, Handforth, old chap, step into the ring—— By gad! You ain't even ready!"

Handforth was still attired in flannels—collar and tie, and everything. I wore nothing above my waist except a light jersey, and I expected Handforth to come similarly attired.

There was a hush as he entered the ring.

"Look here, Nipper," he said awkwardly, and with a great effort—"I—I was hasty this morning. There's no need for us to scrap over nothing. I vote we call the fight off——"

"Off!" yelled De Valerie. "You—you ass!"

"We've been waiting all day for this scrap!"

I held up my hand.

"Give us a chance to speak," I shouted.

"If Handy wants to let matters stand, I don't mind. I never took the fight seriously, anyhow. Let's say no more about it—and have some music in the drawing-room."

There was a howl.

"No—no!"

"We want to see the scrap!"

"Rot!" said Handforth. "There's no need to fight!"

The fellows were really staggered—and disappointed. For the first time in history the mighty Handforth had withdrawn from a fight. He had every reason to know that he would be whacked in a serious tussle.

It is not my intention to boast, but all the fellows knew that I was more than a match for Handforth—and he knew it. It was hardly surprising that some of the juniors jumped to a wrong conclusion.

"Yah! Funk!" yelled somebody.

"He's afraid to fight!"

"Say, I guess that ain't the goods!" shouted Farman. "Handforth ain't the feller to quit! I'll allow it's mighty queer, an' I'm sure rattled some. But you'd best not say them things——"

"Rats! He's funky!"

Handforth let out a terrific roar.

"Funky, am I?" he bellowed. "Wait! Wait just for three minutes! Then I'll show you whether I'm funky! I'll fight all the giddy lot of you!"

And Handforth, to everybody's surprise, turned, and dashed out of the apartment. He fairly flew up the wide companion-stairway, and arrived on deck flushed and excited.

But Edward Oswald was grim now.

He caught sight of a figure in pale blue muslin, and he dashed along the deck at full speed. The dainty figure belonged to Miss Violet, and she was standing alone, watching the distant sail of a passing ship.

"I—I say, Miss Violet!" panted Handforth. "I want to speak to you!"

The girl turned.

"You are speaking to me?" she said.

"What's the matter? Have you kept your promise—?"

"Yes, I have!" said Handforth, speaking deliberately. "I couldn't tell the others, and everything was prepared. They were waiting in the ring—and Nipper was all ready for the fray. And I had to go into the ring and say that I didn't want to fight! Ye gods! I had to go and say that!"

"But that was splendid!" said the girl.

"Splendid!" gasped Handforth. "You—you call that splendid? Do you know what happened? Some of the chaps yelled out that I was afraid—they called me a funk, Miss Violet! Me—a funk! ME!"

Handforth spoke breathlessly, and with huge indignation.

"Oh, that was unkind of them——"

"Unkind!" roared Handforth. "I feel like fighting everybody! And I can't touch Nipper because of what I promised you! Look here, Miss Violet, you've got to release me—you simply must!"

"But it isn't right that you should fight——"

"Are you going to release me, or shall I break my word?" asked Handforth grimly.

"It's got to be one or the other—— I—I mean, I wouldn't break my word, Miss Violet," he added wretchedly. "But if you only knew what a hole I'm in——"

"Oh, very well, I'll release you——"

"You—you will?" gasped Handforth joyously.

"Yes, but—— Oh!"

Handforth, in his sheer delight, completely forgot himself—he forgot that he was shy. And he grasped Violet and gave her a hug which made her gasp. The next moment he was off, hardly knowing what he was doing.

He burst into the recreation room with a yell.

"Now I'm ready!" he shouted, with all his old enthusiasm. "Hold these!"

He tore off his jacket, collar and tie, and rolled up his sleeves.

"Where are the gloves?" he demanded.

"Dear me! There's a surprisin' difference all at once," remarked Lord Dorrimore. "I was just beginnin' to get bored to death, but this has bucked things up wonderfully. I thought you wouldn't disappoint us, Handforth."

"A funk, am I?" said Handy, glaring round at the fellows. "I'll tell you why I couldn't fight before. Miss Violet made me promise that I wouldn't touch Nipper—and I couldn't break a promise, I suppose? She's just released me from it—and I'm ready to sail in!"

"My sister made you promise that?" asked Watson warmly.

"Yes."

"Silly ass!" snapped Tommy.

"Yes, I was a silly ass——"

"I don't mean you—I mean Vi," said Watson indignantly. "What the dickens does she want to butt in for? Let her mind her own fatheaded business! Sauce, I call it—blessed cheek!"

I grinned. There was no other fellow present who would have spoken like that of

Miss Violet; but Watson was her brother, and he couldn't see that she possessed any particular charms.

"So that's why you backed out, Handy?" I grinned. "Well, I'm not exactly sorry; but there's no need to make it a serious fight. Let's stick to ordinary boxing rules, and make it a contest. There's no need to go on until one of us is counted out. The winner will be named by the referee after ten rounds."

"It won't last ten rounds, you ass!" said Handforth. "I shall lick you long before then! I'm just in the mood for it!"

Apparently he was, for when the referee—Dorrie—gave the word, Handforth charged in like a bull. He wasn't particularly anxious to hurt me, but he wanted to hit out. He was at his happiest when scrapping with somebody.

I backed away before his onslaught, side-stepped, and delivered a tap on his chin which brought him up with a jerk. After that he was rather more careful, and when the round finished he had not succeeded in delivering a single blow. He retired into his corner, breathless.

"It's queer!" he panted, as Church and McClure fanned him. "I didn't knock the ass down once!"

"And you won't, either, if you fight so rashly," said Church. "Nipper could have sent you to the floor two or three times if he'd liked—he had lots of openings. You'll have to be more careful if you don't want to lose."

"Rats!" said Handforth. "You leave him to me."

The second round was similar to the first. Handforth only got in one or two light touches, while I delivered a few solid punches. When he came up for the third round he was beginning to realise that he had taken on a big job.

He was, in fact, getting the worst of it, and perhaps he was rather pleased when a dramatic interruption occurred. For Morrow, of the Sixth, rushed into the apartment, his face flushed and excited.

"We've reversed engines!" he shouted. "A man has been sighted, floating in the sea nearly half a mile away!"

There was an excited buzz at once.

"A man?" asked Watson. "Is he alive?"

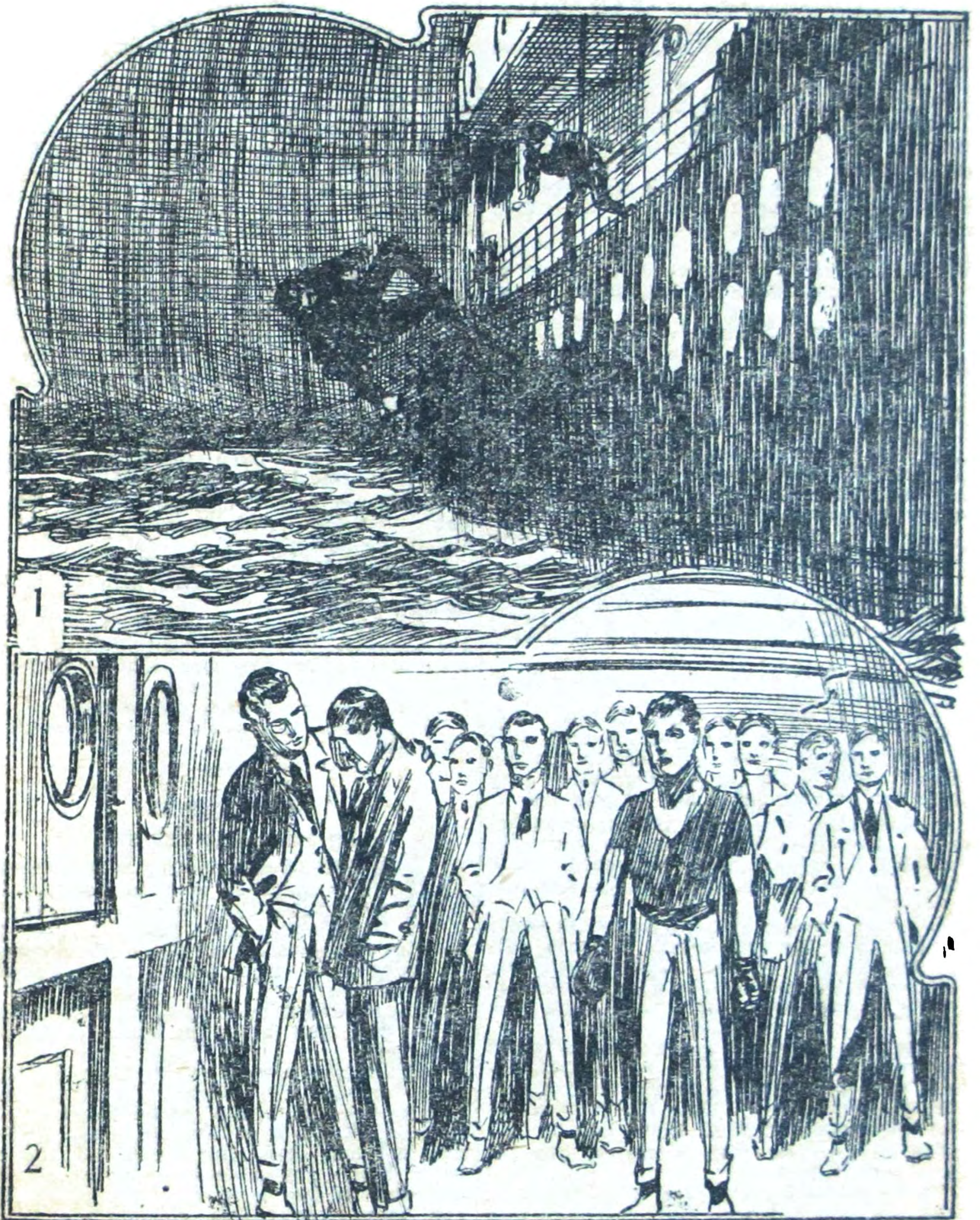
"They don't know yet," said Morrow. "But I came down to tell Lord Dorrimore——"

"It's a frightful bore, but I suppose I'd better go on deck," said Dorrie, with a sigh. "Just as this scrap was gettin' interestin', too. Handforth was on the point of bein' knocked out!"

"Nipper was you mean, sir!" roared Handforth. "Why, I should have floored him during the next round——"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"You're at liberty to try, Handy," I grinned. "But, under the circumstances, I vote we ask for the referee's decision now, and then go on deck. There seems to be



1. Groll gave a wild cry and toppled clean over the side.

2. "Now then, Handforth, old chap, step into the ring," said Lord Dorrimore.

some excitement afoot, and we don't want to miss it."

"Just as you like," said Handforth, with relief, but trying to speak carelessly. "I'm willing to go on—"

"Well, I announce Nipper as the winner," said Dorrie.

"What?" howled Handforth. "Why, you—you don't mean it, sir?"

"He was whackin' you, Handforth—"

"Oh, rot, sir! I—I mean—"

"You can't dispute the referee's decision, you ass," put in Pitt. "The contest is over—and Nipper's won!"

"I'm blessed if I'm going to agree to that!" said Handforth warmly. "We'll fight it out, and then you'll see—"

"Oh, glory!" groaned Dorrie. "I find I've made a mistake. Nipper ain't the winner—I declare that the boxin' match is a draw. How's that?"

"It'll suit me," I grinned.

"Oh, well, we'll let it rest at that," said Handforth, peeling off his gloves. "Still, it's a pity to stop just when things were getting interesting."

Everybody chuckled. It was obvious that Handforth had been getting the worst of it, but the affair was not taken seriously—so I had no objection to Lord Dorrimore's humorous decision.

"You silly ass!" whispered McClure into Handforth's ear.

"Eh?"

"You've only just saved your skin," said McClure. "If the fight had gone on you'd have been beaten to the wide! You're beaten already—"

"Oh, am I?" snorted Handforth. "I'm willing to continue—"

But nobody waited to listen to him. The fellows were already streaming on deck, and I went with the rest. Handforth, finding himself alone, came to the conclusion that there was nothing doing, and he followed.

On deck there was a fair amount of excitement. Everybody was lining the port rail, watching a lifeboat being launched. The yacht was stationary, and the sea was perfectly calm.

The boat was not long in getting off, under the charge of the first officer. Captain Burton was on the bridge, gazing occasionally through his binoculars at an object which was plainly visible some little way from the yacht.

Even with the naked eye it was possible to recognise what that object was—a big life-belt, with the head and shoulders of a man projecting through it. But the poor fellow was either unconscious or dead.

For he gave no sign whatever, but lay there motionless.

"I think we'd better get Lady Helen to take the girls below," murmured Lee into Dorrie's ear. "It's my belief that the man is dead, and we don't want anything unpleasant. Perhaps the boys had better be sent below, too."

"Eh, what's that, guv'nor?" I asked.

"I don't want any of you boys to be horri-

fied, Nipper," said the guv'nor. "And it is more than likely that the first officer's boat will bring in a dead body. You may remain on deck, of course, but the others—"

The others objected strongly, and in the end they were allowed to remain. But Lady Helen lost no time in taking the girls below—much to their indignation, for they were filled with curiosity to see the shipwrecked mariner.

We watched the boat with interest, and saw the unfortunate man hauled on board. Then the boat came slowly back towards the yacht. Very gently the still form was lifted out, and was carried up the ladder by three sailors. Captain Burton, Nelson Lee, and Dr. Brett were waiting on deck to receive the newcomer. Brett was particularly keen.

"I don't think he's dead," he remarked, just before the motionless form was laid down. "We shall soon see, at all events."

There was a silence as the man's body was gently laid down upon the deck. I got as near as possible, and the other boys crowded round. And then I uttered an exclamation of real amazement.

"Great Scott!" I exclaimed, pushing nearer. "Don't you recognise him, guv'nor? This man is Simon Grell—the fellow who used to call himself Jack Grey's uncle!"

"Bless my soul!" exclaimed Sir Crawford Grey. "Nipper must be wrong—surely! It cannot be possible—"

"Nipper is quite right, Sir Crawford," said Nelson Lee quietly. "This man is indeed Simon Grell!"

"What an extraordinary coincidence!" said the baronet. "That we should find this very man cast upon the seas—that we should rescue from the ocean a man who is so curiously connected with our own affairs!"

But perhaps it wasn't so extraordinary, after all.

CHAPTER V.

AN ALLY FROM THE SEA.

MR. BRETT was looking very pleased. "I am very glad to report," he said, "that the man is not only alive, but there is every prospect of his recovering consciousness within an hour or two. He ought to be strong enough to walk about by to-morrow."

"I'm pleased to hear that," said Sir Crawford. "Do you know the cause of Grell's condition?"

"Exhaustion—simply that, and nothing more," replied the doctor. "I should say that he has been in the sea for twenty hours at least. But it is quite warm in this region, and the long immersion would do him no harm. Thirst, and exposure to the sun, caused the man to lose consciousness. If he had not been rescued this evening I'm afraid death would have overtaken him before the morning."

"That is my opinion, too," put in Nelson Lee.

An hour had passed since Simon Grell had been picked up, and the yacht was again

steaming on her way. The excitement had died down on board, but everybody was curious to hear Grell's story when he recovered.

"Do you think the fellow is a survivor from a wreck, sir?" I asked, when Nelson Lee appeared on deck.

"There is really no telling, my boy," replied the guv'nor. "The lifebelt is marked 'S.S. Collindale,' but that really tells us nothing. I have half a suspicion that Grell met with foul play of some kind."

"Foul play, sir?" asked Watson breathlessly.

"Both Brett and I cannot account for several nasty bruises upon Grell's face," said Nelson Lee. "It is possible that he was knocked overboard; but he will tell us the truth when he recovers his wits."

"Hasn't the captain made wireless inquiries, sir?" I asked.

"Not yet, Nipper," replied Lee. "If Grell really did meet with foul play, as we suspect, it would be wiser, perhaps, to wait a little while—to wait until he explains what occurred."

There was a good deal of speculation among the fellows regarding Grell. When would he recover? Why had he been in the sea? And what connection could he have with our own affairs?

"It seems to me," said Jack Grey, "that it's more than a coincidence. Don't forget that Grell was trying his utmost—some months ago—to get hold of that locket, containing the secret of the treasure."

"By jingo, yes!"

"And he knew your pater's plans, too," put in Reginald Pitt. "I wonder if the whole thing's a plant?"

"A which?"

"A plant," repeated Pitt. "Grell might have placed himself in the sea on purpose—so that he could get picked up by the Wanderer—"

"Go easy!" I grinned. "That's drawing it a bit too long, Pitt. You can't imagine a man getting himself into Grell's condition on a thousand-to-one chance of being picked up by this particular yacht."

"But he might have known the yacht's course—"

"Even supposing he did, that idea isn't feasible," I declared. "Besides, Grell gave Sir Crawford his word that he'd live decently after that other affair. Not that Grell's word was any particular good. These surmises won't help us, though; we'd better wait until we hear the actual truth."

"At the same time, dear old fellow, it's frightfully queer—it is, really," remarked Tregellis-West, "that we should come across this particular man when we are nearin' Africa. It's my opinion that Grell is connected with this expedition in some way. I can't say how—my brains ain't capable of thinkin' much—but it's deucedly queer, begad!"

Jack Grey himself was very thoughtful. He knew Grell better than any of us, for the man had been Jack's guardian for years. When

a baby Jack had been involved in a railway accident, and his father had lost him. It was only after the lapse of many years that Jack's true identity became established, and he was known to be the son of Sir Crawford Grey, Bart.

And while that fact was being established Grell had used all his efforts to gain possession of the treasure locket. He had failed in the end, and Sir Crawford had been merciful to him, giving the man his freedom after Grell had promised to lead a decent life.

Simon Grell had kept his word; and it was because of his honesty that he had been cast into the sea by the scoundrelly Captain Nixon. It was the irony of fate that Simon Grell should have been picked up by Sir Crawford Grey's yacht.

Not that there was anything particularly astonishing in the circumstance, when everything is considered. The Wanderer was following practically the same course as that which the Collindale had taken.

Consequently, after Grell had been thrown overboard, he naturally floated about in the sea for nearly twenty-four hours, and then the Wanderer came along. And, owing to the alertness of our look-out, Grell's unconscious body had been sighted.

We were all in the drawing-room after dinner. The evening was fine, and the air was not quite so warm as it had been. So, instead of lounging on deck, the bulk of the party gathered in the drawing-room and listened to the singing. Two of the girls sang beautifully, and we enjoyed ourselves. But when Maggie Fenton obliged with a song politeness only prevented us from fainting away. And when the ordeal was over Handforth announced his intention of bursting forth into song—his idea probably being to counteract the effects of Miss Fenton's effort.

Handforth thought he could sing. But his vocal efforts really amounted to a continued bellow. After the first verse everybody in the drawing-room was remarking that the air was hot, and that the deck would be much more enjoyable. The juniors, who had no respect for Handforth, bustled out noisily.

And Handforth, who was in the middle of the chorus, caused a diversion by breaking off and yelling out that he hadn't finished.

"That's why we're going!" said Christine, with his hands over his ears.

"You—you rotters!" bawled Handforth.

He glared, turned to the piano again, and finished the chorus—in a voice which quivered with indignation. The very instant he had finished there was much hand-clapping from everybody present.

"Splendid, old man—toppin', by gad!" said Dorrie, fanning himself.

Handforth had only finished the second verse—and there were three more to come. Nobody seemed to realise that the song wasn't over.

"But look here—" began Handforth.

"That voice of yours needs polishin' up a bit, an' then you'll be able to make your

fortune," said Dorrie. "With a voice like that any fellow needn't be out of a job. You'd make a ripplin' auctioneer, Hand-forth!"

"But I haven't finished——"

"That song?" went on his lordship. "There can't be any more of it, surely? I simply couldn't stand—— I mean, we shall all be frightfully delighted if you'll sing the other verses, old man. But wouldn't it be better if you went to the other end of the ship?"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Further trouble was averted by the arrival of Dr. Brett.

"Can you come, Lee?" he asked. "Grell has recovered, and Captain Burton has already gone to him. I thought you'd like to be there, too."

"Yes, I should," said the gov'nor.

He followed Brett out, and I took good care to be close behind; for I wanted to be on the scene, too. We passed along to the cabin which had been allotted to the patient, and passed inside.

The electric light had been shaded, and the comfortable cabin was only softly illuminated. Captain Burton and Sir Crawford Grey were standing at the head of the bed, looking down at Grell.

"I'm afraid he's not very coherent yet, Brett," whispered Sir Crawford. "The poor fellow can give no answers to our questions."

"Let me see him," said the doctor.

He sat down by the patient's side, and we all watched. Simon Grell had his eyes open, and he was looking about him in a dazed, vacant kind of way. The effects of his ordeal were plainly apparent in his bloodshot eyes. His face was bandaged, for it had been badly scorched and blistered by the sea and sun.

"You cur!" muttered Grell huskily. "I won't have anything to do with that rotten scheme of yours! You ought to be in gaol, Nixon!"

"He's delirious, poor chap," muttered Dorrie.

But five minutes later, after Dr. Brett had attended to the patient, there was a change. The wild light died out of Grell's eyes, and he lay back on his pillows, breathing steadily.

Then, as he gazed from one to another of those who were collected round him, an expression of intelligence illumined his face. He bent forward, and breathed more rapidly.

"Sir Crawford Grey!" he muttered. "I reckon I must be dreaming. Mr. Nelson Lee, too! It can't be real——"

"We are real enough, Grell, I can assure you," smiled Nelson Lee. "Don't excite yourself, and make no attempt to tell your story if you do not feel strong enough. You are in safe hands."

"But—but where am I, sir?" muttered Grell.

"You are on board Sir Crawford's yacht."

"The Wanderer?"

"Yes."

"Strike me blue!" said Grell huskily.

"This is what you call a fair knock-out, sir! Picked up by the Wanderer! I s'pose I was

picked up, sir? I don't seem to remember nothing——"

"You were picked up several hours ago, Grell," put in Sir Crawford. "You were unconscious, and it was mainly owing to pure luck—and the sharp eyes of the look-out man—that you were rescued from the sea. Well, Grell, if you are surprised to see us, I can assure you that we were astounded to see you. How on earth did you come to be in these latitudes?"

Grell did not answer for a moment.

"I guess I'm going to tell you the whole truth, sir," he said at last. "By thunder! That scoundrel—that blamed murderer! He tried to do me in, and if you hadn't come along——"

"Now, Grell, don't excite yourself," put in Brett. "If you cannot remain calm I shall have to forbid you to speak until to-morrow. You are not strong yet, and you need sleep and rest."

"I'm all right, sir, thank you," muttered Grell. "An' you're right about me keepin' calm. Just now I felt like I was gettin' on fire—my brain all went round. But I won't get excited no more—and I want to tell Sir Crawford everything."

"That's the way," said the baronet, nodding.

"An' I want to tell Mr. Lee, too," went on Grell. "I don't forget how kind you gents were to me that Christmas-time; I had been working on the crook for so long. You was good to me, Sir Crawford——"

"You mean when we allowed you to go free?" asked the baronet.

"Yes, sir," said Grell huskily. "You could have sent me to gaol that time, but both you an' Mr. Lee acted like real gents. Me an' Jake Starkey didn't deserve no consideration, but you gave it to us. And I made you a sort o' promise that I'd live square in the future."

"Did you keep that promise, Grell?" asked Lee quietly.

"Yes, sir, I did," replied the man. "It ain't my place to boast—I've got nothin' to boast about, anyway—but I tell you straight, gentlemen, that I've kept my promise. I've done my best to live decently and honestly. It's been hard at times, but I've kept on the right road."

"No doubt you found it difficult at first," commented Sir Crawford. "But isn't there a feeling of satisfaction within you, Grell?"

"Bein' honest makes a man bold, sir," said Grell. "I ain't afraid to face a soul. It's a rare relief to pass a policeman without having a feelin' of fear. And a man's conscience don't trouble him if he acts on the square."

"And what about Starkey?" asked Nelson Lee. "Has he kept you company, Grell? Is he an honest man, too?"

The rescued man's face became clouded.

"I don't know," he replied. "Starkey's all right if he's looked after. But he's a weak fool, an' I've had to be strict with him once or twice. But I've made him live accordin' to my rules—until a day or two

ago, anyway. But I fancy that Jake has turned agin me."

Grell leaned forward in his bed.

"You remember that gold locket, sir?" he went on. "Well, I figger that you're settin' out to lay hands on that treasure, if you can find it?"

The others exchanged glances.

"Well, yes, Grell," said Sir Crawford, after a moment. "As a matter of fact, we are setting out to find the treasure. There is no secret about it—and you knew the facts months ago."

"Yes, that's the trouble, sir," said Grell grimly. "I wish I hadn't known the facts—then I couldn't have blabbed the whole thing to Nixon, while I was filled up with whisky."

"And who is Nixon?" inquired Nelson Lee.

"I'll tell you, sir; there's no sense in me keepin' quiet about it," replied Grell. "I've done the harm, an' it's up to me to set it right if I can. Seems to me that fate has sent us together so that I can make things straight again. But I didn't plot against you deliberately, Sir Crawford—I'll swear that."

"Are you hinting that you plotted against me at all?"

"I did, sir—when I was drunk," replied Simon Grell deliberately. "I met Captain Nixon one evening down Wapping way. I was fool enough to have a few drinks with him. Captain Nixon is the skipper of a tradin' steamboat called the Collindale—an' a blacker-hearted scoundrel don't live."

"Why did you drink with him, then?" asked Lee.

"Well, you know what it is, sir," said Grell. "We had been pals in the old days, an' Nixon didn't know that I'd changed. I meant to have just one drink—and, like a mug, I had more than I could hold. And while I was half-seas over I told Nixon all about this treasure o' yours, and we came to an agreement."

"Did you, indeed?" said Sir Crawford grimly.

"Me an' Starkey an' Nixon were in the thing together," said Grell. "The Collindale was on the point of sailin' for Agabat."

"That's our port!" ejaculated Sir Crawford.

"Yes, sir, I know—an' that's what made everything look so easy," went on Grell. "Nixon reckoned that we should get into Agabat some days afore you. And then we were to make plans to have your party ambushed—the party that's booked to go into the desert, I mean. The idea was to force the secret of the treasure from you, and go along and lift it ourselves."

"By gad!" said Dorrie. "That was deucedly sportin' of you!"

"And why do you tell us this?" asked Nelson Lee, looking grim. "Do you realise, Grell, that you are admitting yourself to be a rogue—"

"Yes, I realise it, sir," said Grell. "But I planned all that when I was drunk—when I didn't know what I was doin'. Afterwards, as soon as I was sober, I come to my senses, an' I wanted to call the thing off."

"And it was too late?"

"Yes, sir. The skipper wasn't havin' any," replied the man. "So I pretended that I was still eager to carry the game through. Me an' Starkey sailed on board the Collindale—but I swear to you, gentlemen, that my plan was to spoil Nixon's plot as soon as I could. I only sailed with him so that I could give you the tip when the time came. I don't suppose you'll believe me—"

"There is no reason why we shouldn't, Grell," interrupted Sir Crawford. "You seem to be speaking the truth."

"I am, sir—I swear I am," declared Grell earnestly. "But it's my belief that Starkey turned on me, an' come to an agreement with Nixon. Anyhow, the skipper found out my true feelings, and he attacked me on deck, in the middle of the night. It come to a fight, an' I was pitched overboard."

"Was no attempt made to save you?"

"Nixon threw a lifebelt down, but that was only because of his panic," said Grell, with glittering eyes. "The murderous dog didn't mean to save me. The ship wasn't even slowed down. It steamed on into the night, leavin' me for dead. But I managed to get hold o' that lifebelt, and struggled into it. Captain Nixon meant me to die—I'm sure o' that, sir. An' I suppose he's glad I've gone."

Grell described in detail what had occurred, and his listeners were greatly interested. They were convinced that the man was speaking the truth, for his story was quite sound.

And Simon Grell was grateful for being rescued. The incident had changed him even more—and he was all the more determined to stick to the honest path in the future. Grell was an ally now—not an enemy.

"It is very fortunate that you were picked up by this yacht, Grell," said Nelson Lee at last. "For, with your information in our possession, we shall be able to frustrate any possible plot."

"That's my idea, sir," said Grell. "I know just what the plans are—an' Nixon thinks I'm dead. Them plans won't be altered, and so we shall know what to do. By thunder! Things couldn't have worked out better!"

We were all inclined to share that view: and we were all convinced that Mr. Simon Grell was a staunch supporter. He was willing to do everything in his power to frustrate Captain Nixon's evil design.

And the Wanderer proceeded steadily on her course. Before many days had elapsed we should arrive in Agabat; and then—

Well, all sorts of things happened then.

CHAPTER VI.

'NEATH AFRICAN SKIES.

"A HOLE," remarked Lord Dorrmore languidly—"that's what it is, my sons—a smelly, swelterin' hole!"

"But it looks all right, sir," said Pitt.

"That's because you haven't been ashore,"

said Dorrie. "I have. The harbour's all right—so far as looks go. And the town itself is quite picturesque from here. But it's a shockin' place, really. Nothin' but dust an' blazin' heat, an' niggers. Still, it's better than London, any day."

I grinned.

"And Agabat is a rotten hole?" I asked.

"Yes."

"Well, if Agabat's better than London, what's your opinion of London?" I inquired blandly.

"My dear kid, when it comes to describing London, words fail me," said Dorrie. "There ain't any in the dictionary bad enough. You've either got to walk through mud an' slush in the London streets—an' be splashed all over by those horrible motor-buses—or else you've got to walk about in a swelterin' heat that ain't this kind of heat at all. Anyhow, London's no place for people who like to breathe."

The yacht had arrived at her destination. It was morning, and all the juniors, to a man, were lining the rail, taking a look at the town of Agabat. From the harbour it seemed quite a pretty place, and I was inclined to believe that Dorrie's description of it was somewhat exaggerated.

A boat would soon be going ashore—the motor launch, in fact—and I meant to go with it, if possible. The first stage of our journey had been completed. The next move was to set out through the bush, and to cross the desert to the oasis of El Safra.

Simon Grell was now quite recovered, and he had been supplied with clothing, and was looking quite smart and trim. I think he was very grateful to his rescuers for all they had done, and I shared Nelson Lee's view that Grell would always remain true and faithful.

At present he was standing with the gov'nor and Sir Crawford Grey. They were not looking at the low coastline, but further along the harbour, where a fairly large steamer was lying at anchor.

"That's the Collindale, sir," said Grell. "I don't quite know what to do about things."

"How do you mean, Grell?" asked Nelson Lee.

"Well, sir, Captain Nixon is on board that ship, and he thinks that I'm done for," went on Grell. "He's made a report by this time probably that his purser fell overboard one night, without being noticed by anybody. And Nixon means to carry those plans of his out—he means to have a shot at getting his unclean hands upon that treasure."

"I think we shall be able to deal with the interesting skipper," said Nelson Lee grimly. "During our first trip ashore, Grell, you must remain on board. I intend to make a few inquiries at the shipping office, and at other places, too. If possible, I mean to have the captain placed under lock and key."

"I hope you'll manage, sir," said Grell fervently.

"There might be some difficulty with the local authorities, that's all," said Nelson Lee. "I shall apply to the British Consul, of

course, and place all the facts before him. Nixon certainly ought to be arrested."

Further on along the deck Lord Dorrimore suddenly became interested in a long native boat, which was being paddled out swiftly and steadily towards the yacht. And Dorrie grinned as he slung his binoculars round.

"I'll bet I know who the visitor is!" he remarked.

He gazed through his glasses and then chuckled.

"Yes, there he is, sittin' at the stern, in all his glory," he observed. "The old bounder looks just the same as ever——"

"But who are you talking about, sir?" asked Grey.

"Why, the one and only chief of the Kutanas," said his lordship.

"Who?" asked Christine, staring.

"He went to St. Frank's once—so you ought to know him," said Dorrimore. "His Serene Highness, King Umlosi. He arranged to meet me here, an' he's just comin' out to keep his appointment. Umlosi always was a punctual beggar."

"Good old Umlosi!" I exclaimed. "I didn't think we should see him until we went ashore, Dorrie. I'd love to have him with us again—we've spent some fine times together, on and off."

"Remember that trip into the Libyan Desert?" grinned Dorrie.

"Yes, rather," I replied. "That time we tried to find the City of Burnished Bronze—although, if it comes to that, we did find it. And old Umlosi rescued us from certain death that trip."

We had reason to be very grateful to our black friend. On more than one occasion he had helped us out of a seemingly fatal hole. But Umlosi was modest; he always considered that his efforts on our behalf were trivial.

A good many of the St. Frank's fellows had seen Umlosi, for Dorrie had brought the Kutana chief to the old school on one famous occasion. And Umlosi was not a person to be rapidly forgotten.

"I hope he's dressed in something more than a moocha," I remarked somewhat anxiously. "He's npt particular, as a rule, I know——"

"I gave the old bounder strict instructions not to present himself unless he was wearing white drill, like any decent human being should," replied Dorrie. "If he's come to the yacht dressed only in his black skin he'll hear a good deal about it. He hates clothin', but he'll wear it if I ask him to."

We all watched the approach of the boat with great interest. It contained a large number of natives, who were all plying their paddles vigorously. And in the rear sat Umlosi—attired in white drill, as Dorrie had requested.

The chief stood up in his seat long before the boat reached the yacht's side. And he held a gigantic spear aloft, in salute.

"Hail!" grinned Pitt. "The King cometh!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"You'd better not let him hear you laughing at him," said Dorrie severely. "There'll be some nasty work performed with that spear if you touch his dignity. Umlosi believes in thrustin' first an' askin' questions afterwards."

"He wouldn't kill any of us, surely?" asked Yorke, turning pale.

Dorrimore chuckled.

"No, you needn't be afraid of that," he said. "You're guests, and Umlosi wouldn't hurt a hair of your heads."

We waited a few minutes longer, and then the boat made fast to the bottom of the accommodation ladder, and Umlosi strode up towards the deck. I couldn't help grinning as I watched him.

He was dressed somewhat weirdly.

His feet were quite bare, but his body was encased in a white drill suit with brass buttons—which Umlosi evidently considered smart. His head was adorned by a battered old pith helmet, and he wore a necktie which would have made any ordinary rainbow feel rather sick.

"Good old Umlosi!" I yelled. "How goes it?"

"Pleased to see you again, old friend," called Nelson Lee.

"You're looking blacker than ever," grinned Lord Dorrimore.

Umlosi strode on to the deck, and bowed low.

"Greeting, N'Kose, my father!" he exclaimed, in a deep, rumbling voice. "Greeting, O my masters! Thou art looking full of health, and I meet thee again with much gladness in my heart. This is a wondrous day."

His big face was wreathed in smiles as he shook hands with Lord Dorrimore and Nelson Lee.

"Thou art well-nigh a stranger, Umtagati," said Umlosi. "It is indeed glorious to meet thee again, O marvellous man with the ways of a wizard!"

"You're an old flatterer, Umlosi," laughed the gov'nor.

"And thou art modest, my master," replied Umlosi. "And thou, too, Manzie," he went on, turning to me. "Thou hast grown somewhat, but thy eye shines as brightly as ever—even as the sparkling water of the spring. Thou art filled with the health of youth, and it saddens me to think that thou hast journeyed to this fever-ridden kraal which goes by the name of Agabat."

"Why, don't you like the place?" asked Dorrie.

"It is even as the big cities thou once tookest me to, N'Kose," said Umlosi. "Wau! Thou and I prefer the open spaces and the forests, where a man can breathe the pure air. It will be a great day when he set upon our journey into the desert. Although, my father, I like it not. The desert is not of my choice."

"You can't have everything you like in this world, old son," said Lord Dorrimore.

"And I didn't ask you to come, anyhow. We can do without you, if you have a pressin' engagement elsewhere."

"My place is by thy side, N'Kose," said Umlosi. "When thou art in Africa it is my desire to be with thee. I have been longing for this day for many moons, and I am happy."

Umlosi was introduced to the other members of the party, and then he retired below with Nelson Lee and Lord Dorrimore. But not for long; because the gov'nor was anxious to get ashore in order to make full inquiries concerning Captain Nixon and Jake Starkey.

Umlosi was left on board while Nelson Lee and Dr. Brett and Sir Crawford Grey went ashore. I didn't go, after all. I stayed behind with the rest of the fellows, and we were entertained hugely by Umlosi's stories.

He told us of his hunting experiences, of his battles, and of many other things. I knew a great many of them already, but everything was fresh to the other fellows.

"A jolly decent old stick—that's what he is," declared Handforth, just before luncheon. "And he looks as though he could smash a hole in the side of the giddy yacht with one punch!"

"He's as strong as a lion," I said. "I expect we shall have him with us for a good few weeks. He's going on that trip into the desert."

"It'll be fine sport," remarked Handforth. "We might run into a sandstorm, if we have any luck."

"Luck!" I echoed. "Bad luck, you mean?"

"Rather not—good luck, you ass!"

"You've never been in a sandstorm, Handy," I said grimly. "You don't know what they're like or you wouldn't talk about good luck!"

Edward Oswald smiled.

"I've read about sandstorms in books," he said. "I should think they're ripping sport. They come up all at once, you know, just when you're crossing the desert. An' you have to shelter in caves, and all that sort of thing."

"Caves!" said Pitt—"in the desert?"

"Well, they do have caves in the desert sometimes," said Handforth. "Besides, think how refreshing the rain would be, after marching along under the scorching sun for days—"

"Rain!" I yelled. "You silly ass! How can you have rain during a sandstorm?"

"There's always rain during a storm," said Handforth stubbornly. "And I reckon it would be very cooling—"

"You wouldn't think a sandstorm cooling," I said grimly. "If a caravan gets caught in a sandstorm there is very little chance of anybody surviving. The sand gets everywhere; it chokes you, and the heat is suffocating."

"But couldn't you shelter?" asked McClure.

"Of course we could shelter," said Handforth. "If it comes to that, what's wrong with the caravan itself? You only need to

shut the door and the windows, and block up the chimney."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"What the dickens are you cackling at?" snapped Handforth.

"He thinks we're going across the desert in a giddy caravan—like the gypsies use!" grinned De Valerie. "A caravan in this instance, Handy, means a party of people—carriers and camels and all that sort of thing. There's no vehicle of any kind."

Handforth snorted.

"Rot!" he said firmly.

"De Valerie's right," I chuckled.

"Then why the dickens is it called a caravan?" demanded Handforth. "A lot of silly rot, I call it. I've a dashed good mind not to go to that oasis at all. I'm blessed if I see the fun of walking."

And Handforth stalked off, arguing with Church and McClure.

Very shortly after that Nelson Lee returned, and I managed to have a few words with him.

"Yes, Nipper, both Nixon and Starkey are in the town," he said. "I haven't been able to make all the arrangements I wanted to, but some officials are coming on board after luncheon. Grell will tell his story, and it is quite possible that those two rascals will be placed under arrest before darkness falls."

"Let's hope so, sir," I said. "We don't want them plotting to spoil our trip into the desert—"

"Just a word with regard to that trip, Nipper," interrupted the gov'nor. "I believe the boys have got an idea that they're all going. But such a thing is quite impossible. Only a very limited number will be allowed to accompany the desert expedition."

"And the others, gov'nor?"

"Must remain behind on the yacht," said Lee firmly.

"They won't like it—"

"That can't be helped, young 'un," put in Lee. "In any case, those who stay behind will be far better off than those who go. But I expect all the boys will clamour to go—and there might be a little trouble. So just drop the hint that only a few juniors will be allowed on the trip."

"All right, sir," I agreed. "And when does the trip start?"

"As soon as possible—within a few days."

"But everything can't be prepared within a few days, sir," I protested. "It takes a long time to fix up a really decent caravan—"

"You seem to overlook the fact, my boy, that Umlosi has been in Agabat for some weeks, and that he has been making very active preparations," said Nelson Lee.

"Everything is ready even now. It merely remains for our own party to get themselves together. But the first thing to be done is to remove Captain Nixon's sting; and that can best be done, I imagine, by having the rascal put under arrest. He is guilty of attempted murder, and it is certain that some action will be taken."

But events were destined to move more rapidly than even Nelson Lee suspected.

CHAPTER VII.

SLIPPERY CUSTOMERS.

CAPTAIN JAMES NIXON swore with great fluency.

He was standing on the bridge of the Collindale, having come on board only a few minutes earlier. The afternoon sun was blazing down with its full heat, and the metal work of the ship was burning to the touch. The very decks seemed to quiver, and it was a hardship to move about.

And Captain Nixon, with a telescope to his eye, swore.

He lowered the glass after a moment, turned, and beckoned to Jake Starkey, who was lounging on the deck below, in the shade of the chart-house.

"Just a minute, Jake," called the captain.

Starkey mounted the ladder and joined his chief.

"That craft over there," said the skipper grimly, "is Sir Crawford Grey's yacht, the Wanderer—"

"Well, I know that, cap'n," said Jake. "She dropped anchor first thing this morning, an' we spotted her at once."

"She's the Wanderer," repeated Nixon. "Just have a look through this glass, and tell me who you can see on deck. There's somebody standin' just agin the starboard rail, right aft. Have a look."

Starkey took the telescope wonderingly, focussed it, and took a long look.

"I can see that fellow, Mr. Nelson Lee, an' I can see the skipper, an' I can see another chap in white, and a great black feller—"

"Not them," snapped Nixon. "Look further aft."

"Why, I can't see— Good lorks!" gasped Starkey. "It's—it's Simon! It's Simon Grell himself! An' you said he'd fell overboard—"

"So he did fall overboard, darn him!" snarled the captain. "I thought he'd gone for good, Jake—so did you. I told you what happened that night; but everybody else believes that Grell fell overside when nobody was nigh."

"But it can't be him, cap'n—"

"You fool, it is him!" snapped Nixon. "He must have floated about until that yacht came along, and they picked him up. It's about the worst piece of luck that could have come to us!"

"I don't quite see—"

"Grell knows that I shoved him overside, and didn't try to pick him up," interjected the captain, breathing hard. "That means that I left him to die—and the fools or authorities will reckon that I tried to murder the chap. It means, Jake, that if I ain't careful I shall be arrested, taken to England, and shoved in gaol for ten years, an' p'r'aps more."

"That'll be 'ard lines," said Starkey sympathetically.

"Yes, for both of us!" said Nixon. "Don't forget, Jake, that you're in this with me—and Grell knows it. If I'm arrested, you'll be

arrested. And we shall both fare the same."

"But I was asleep when you tried to kill——"

"Shut that!" snarled the captain. "You're in it with me, I tell you, and if I quit you'll have to quit with me. Savvy? And that's the best thing we can do, too; but we'll quit according to our own fancy."

"Do you mean hop off?" asked the other, in a scared voice.

"Yes."

"But where to——"

"Never mind where to!" said Nixon. "Our safety depends upon how fast we get ashore and vanish. That's what we're going to do, Jake. There's no sense in stickin' here an' trying to bluff it out. Besides, there's that treasure to think about. It's a stake well worth almin' for."

Jake Starkey looked scared.

"But—but we can't skip off!" he ejaculated. "Leastways, you can't!"

"Why can't I?"

"Becos you'll do yourself in if you scoot," said Jake. "What about your master's ticket? What about your job with this 'ere firm o' shipowners? What about every bloomin' thing? You'll ruin yourself——"

"I'll have to sacrifice the lot," said Nixon fiercely.

"But why——"

"Why—why?" snapped the captain. "Because it's better to sacrifice everything an' keep my liberty, than to sacrifice everything an' lose my liberty—you fool! What chance shall I have? None! They take me, an' they'll take you. Grell bein' alive spoils everything. It's a stroke of luck for us that we spotted him on deck there. We've got to skip, Jake—now!"

"Where—where to?" asked Starkey, panting hard.

"Anywhere—into the bush," replied Nixon. "I know this part well, an' I know heaps of the niggers, too. They'll work if I pay 'em—an' I can lay my hands on a nice little pile of money just now—which ain't mine. Might as well be hung for a sheep as a lamb; that's my motto. An' with that money we can easily plan things so's that we'll get that treasure. We'll make ourselves for life, Jake. That's our game. Hang the old hooker, an' everything!"

And Captain Nixon spat on the deck to show his contempt for the vessel. The die was cast now, and there was no turning back. Simon Grell was alive, so the only course was to disappear.

Meanwhile several important persons had been on board the Wanderer, and a consultation had taken place in the captain's cabin. The net result was that Nelson Lee, Brett, and Dorrie set out for the Collindale, accompanied by the officials. The arrest of Nixon and Starkey was the object in view.

They crossed the intervening space of water in the motor-launch, and at length climbed up the accommodation ladder of the Collindale. An officer met them at the top, and greeted them warmly. The officers of the steamer were good fellows enough.

"You want to see the captain?" said the officer, when Nelson Lee had spoken for a few moments. "He's not aboard just now."

"Is a man named Starkey here?"

"No," replied the officer. "As it happens, they both went ashore not twenty minutes ago. I reckon you'll find 'em in the town somewhere. In the English hotel, I dare say. That's about the only place they'd make for."

"Did they leave the ship hurriedly?" asked Lee.

"Well, yes."

"Carrying bags or luggage?"

"That's queer, Mr. Lee," said the man thoughtfully. "I remember now that the old man was carrying a bag. But he said he'd be aboard again by this evening; so, if you'd call again——"

"No, I'll go ashore, thanks," said Lee. "You are sure that Nixon did not tell you where he was bound for?"

"He didn't say anything," declared the officer.

The party took to the launch again, and Nelson Lee was looking rather grim.

"I'm afraid the beggars have got wind of our intentions," he remarked. "They've slipped away, Dorrie. If we can't find them at the English hotel, we can be sure that they've taken to the bush—and you know what that means?"

"Do I?" said Dorrie mildly.

"It means that they'll never be captured—that they've forsaken everything," said Nelson Lee. "And it means more, too. But I'll tell you about that later on, Dorrie. I hope we'll get the rascals, though."

But they didn't.

High and low they searched. All over the sweltering town the party made inquiries. And in the finish they were compelled to admit that they had drawn blank.

Nixon and Starkey had got away.

The party returned to the yacht, looking rather tired, but grim. This failure meant a very great deal—as Nelson Lee lost no time in explaining to Dorrie and to Sir Crawford Grey.

"Nixon means to get that treasure, if it can be managed," he declared. "Accordingly, he has fled into the bush with Starkey. There the pair will make arrangements with the natives—and we may be sure that our own expedition will not reach the oasis without an adventure."

Dorrie's eyes sparkled.

"Nothin' could be better!" he exclaimed enthusiastically.

"But, my dear Dorrie——"

"Nothin' could be better," repeated his lordship calmly. "This means, in plain language, that our little party will be set upon—ambushed, by gad!—an' that there'll be a heap big number one scrap!"

"Most probably!"

"Well, what more could we want?" asked Dorrie. "We ain't afraid of these bounders, are we? Hang it all, professor, we're prepared, an' a little scrap will be rippin'. Unlasi wouldn't be happy if the trip went

through without a fight of some kind. Would you, Coal-scuttle?"

Umlosi showed all his white teeth.

"Thou art using a strange name for me, N'Kosc," he rumbled. "But thy words are even as the words of the wise man. Thou speakest the truth, O my father! A fight is as the breath of life to me—for am I not a warrior by birth? Am I not the chief of the Kutanas, the greatest fighting men in Africa?"

"Good!" said Dorrie. "That's the way, old man! What's the good of a warrior if he's got nothing to do in the scrappin' line? We ought to be grateful to that Nixon merchant. He'll provide us with the means of lettin' Umlosi release a lot of somebody else's blood."

Nelson Lee smiled.

"It's all very well to treat it lightly, Dorrie," he said. "But this thing is serious. There are plenty of blacks in this region who will fight anybody and everything for gold—or for 'fire-water.' Grell knows his men—and he will deal with them effectively. We can expect much hostility, for it is obvious that Nixon has completely escaped."

"Well, Mr. Lee," said Sir Crawford, "there is only one thing for us to do. We shall have to send out the expedition armed to the teeth, and ready for any emergency. Then we can snap our fingers at Nixon."

But the gov'nor was not looking so cheerful as usual that evening. Perhaps he realised more than we did that Nixon's escape was a great pity. The juniors, taking them as a whole, were quite delighted.

"It's simply ripping," said Pitt. "This desert journey will be enlivened by some excitement in the way of fighting with natives. I hope I go with the caravan, that's all!"

"We're all going, you ass!" said Handforth. "I can see all sorts of fun in ~~store~~ store. We might be collared by cannibals——"

"Do you call that fun, you ass?"

"Rather!" said Handforth warmly. "I've read all about cannibals, you know. They'll

keep us prisoners in a straw hut, and haul us out in the evening to be shoved into the giddy cook-pot. Then the rescue-party will come along——"

"But supposing it doesn't?" I asked grimly.

"Eh?" said Handforth, staring. "Oh, don't be an ass, Nipper!"

"In stories the rescue party nearly always comes," I went on. "But this isn't a story, Handforth. And if we were captured by cannibals it would be all up with us. There'd be no convenient rescue for us!"

Handforth shook his head.

"Rats!" he said. "I've read all about cannibals—so I ought to know. And how do you think a band of cannibals could capture all of us——"

"We're a mere handful—the whole yacht's company," I broke in. "These blacks go about in bodies of hundreds sometimes—armies of them. Impies, they call 'em. But you're wrong in something, Handy."

"No!" said McClure, in mock amazement. "Handy wrong? Impossible!"

"He seems to think that we're all going on this expedition," I said, grinning. "We're not. Only a few of us can go——"

"Well, it makes no difference," interrupted Handforth. "I shall go, of course. As one of the most important members of the party——"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"You—you silly fatheads——"

"Dry up!"

"Try to speak sensibly, Handy!"

Handforth glared, snorted, and then stalked loftily away. Somehow, he never could get the fellows to recognise his importance.

Many other juniors were anxious to go on that trip into the arid desert. But we didn't know any details yet. We had come to the end of the first trip. And the second—and the most important—was about to commence.

For that march into the desert was destined to be filled with adventures and perils which we didn't dream of at the moment!

THE END.

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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. Lorna shows Dick and Alan the subterranean passage, which she explains is their sole means of escape in case of attack. Dick's suspicions against Taverner grow stronger.

(Now read on.)

NO BETTER—IN THE DEAD OF NIGHT—DICK CAN'T SLEEP—A VISIT TO THE SICK ROOM—DICK DECIDES TO TAKE ACTION—THE STRUGGLE IN THE MOONLIGHT—ALAN AND LORNA COME ON THE SCENE—SEARCHING THE CHEST—A STARTLING DISCOVERY—WHAT IS TO BE DONE WITH THE PRISONER?—LORNA MAKES A SUGGESTION—BRIGHTER HOPES NOW.

SHORTLY after night had fallen Ralph Taverner returned from the far end of the valley, where he had been to see if there was any news, and a couple of

hours later the house was shrouded in darkness, save for a lamp that burned dimly in the sick-room, where Robert Ferguson was lying in a state of lethargy. The Somali servants were in their quarters, and the two lads were stretched on their cots in the bed-chamber which they shared.

Alan was wrapped in slumber, but Dick could not sleep. He tossed restlessly for a time, thinking of one thing and another, troubled by the ghastly suspicion which he could not get rid of. Through the windows floated the faint, muffled roar of a lion, and now and again the barking of zebras. There was an interval of silence, and Dick was about to yield to drowsiness when he heard something that quickened his senses.

He sat up in bed, listening with strained ears. He could distinguish low, stealthy footsteps. They came from the direction of the staircase, and faded away towards Ralph Taverner's chamber. The lad's suspicions had been roused.

"That's more than strange," he reflected. "It was Taverner, I am sure. Why is he moving about at this time of the night? And where has he been?"

He waited for a short interval, and then, rising to his feet, he pulled on his clothes and slipped a revolver into his pocket. With a glance at Alan, who was still asleep, he slipped noiselessly out into the passage, and crept warily along it to the sick-room.

By the glimmer of the lamp he gazed around him. On the table was a glass that appeared to have been recently used. To the bottom of it, which was wet, adhered some tiny flakes of brown sediment. Dick sniffed at it, nodded gravely, and stepped to the bed. Lifting one of Robert Ferguson's eyelids, he observed a marked dilation of the pupil. He stood there for a moment, a shadow in his eyes, his face dark and wrathful.

"By heavens, it was just as I supposed!" he said to himself. "I am certain of it. The dastardly villain! He has been here, and I know why!"

What should he do? He had better have waited, but a fiery impulse bade him take action at once, and try to obtain proof of what he both suspected and believed. With cautious tread, as silently as possible, he retraced his steps along the passage. He went by his own room, and half a dozen more yards brought him to the open doorway of Ralph Taverner's bedchamber, where he paused.

The man was there, revealed by the silvery moonlight that shone in at the window. He was standing by the bed, with a small object in his hand. For a few seconds the lad watched him, crouching in gloom. At length Ralph Taverner moved to a small chest that was by the wall. Raising the lid, he thrust into it what he was holding, and the next instant, as he was on the point of locking the chest, Dick glided swiftly into the room, with his revolver in his hand.

"I've got you, my fine fellow!" he said, in a husky whisper. "And I'm going to have an explanation from you. I want to know what you have been doing, and what you have hidden in that chest!"

An oath burst from the man's lips as he straightened up, and at once he leaped at the lad, who hesitated to fire. The weapon was torn from him, and as Ralph Taverner seized him by the throat he grappled with him. A desperate struggle began. The man made no outcry, and Dick, with the other's muscular clutch on his windpipe, could not utter a sound.

They fought almost in silence, in the glow of the moon. For a few moments they swayed to and fro, from wall to wall, straining every effort, panting for breath, eyes glaring into eyes. Finally, crashing into the bed, they recoiled from it, and fell heavily to the floor.

Ralph Taverner had struck his head against the base of the wall, and the blow had stunned him. He was helpless now, and Dick, not wanting the household to be alarmed, seized the dazed man by the collar, and hauled him to his feet. Dropping him into a chair, he bound a handkerchief tightly across his mouth.

Footsteps were approaching. A light danced through the doorway, and Alan, who had been roused from slumber, appeared with a lamp. And a moment later, as he was staring in consternation, Lorna hastened into the room. She wore a dressing-gown, and her golden hair was hanging loosely upon her shoulders. Her face was very pale when she entered, and every vestige of colour ebbed from her cheeks, leaving them as white as marble, as she saw Ralph Taverner seated limply in the chair, with the bandage across his mouth.

"I say, Selby, what the deuce have you been doing?" exclaimed Alan, who was partially dressed. "What's wrong?"

"What does it mean, Dick?" gasped the startled girl. "You woke me up. I heard the noise and got out of bed."

Dick was silent for a few minutes, breathless from his exertions. He had yielded to a sudden and hasty impulse, and now, in his excited state of mind, he was gripped by the fear that he might have made a mistake.

"There has been a row," he said hoarsely, as he picked up his revolver. "Taverner and I were fighting! He has been in your father's room, Miss Lorna, and I strongly suspect that——" He broke off, observing that his prisoner was returning to consciousness. "Have you a handkerchief, Alan?" he asked.

Alan had one, and he gave it to Dick, who drew Ralph Taverner's wrists together and tied them securely.

"What does this mean?" Lorna repeated, in agitation.

Dick shook his head. Stepping to the chest, he raised the lid and reached deep into it. And presently, after a brief search amongst articles of clothing, he found what he was seeking for. He showed to his companions a tiny pot of native earthenware that was half filled with a sticky, brown substance like paste. He held it to his nose for an instant, and knew that he had not made a mistake.

"It is poison!" he cried.

"Poison?" echoed Alan and the girl in one breath.

They gazed at Dick in incredulous amazement. There was an angry glitter in his eyes, and he was almost as pale as Lorna.

"It is just as I supposed," he said. "I have been puzzled from the first by Mr. Ferguson's symptoms. I could account for them in only one way. I was almost certain that he was being slowly poisoned, incredible as it seems. To-night, as I was lying awake, I heard stealthy footsteps moving along the passage. I went to your father's room, Miss Lorna, and saw at once that he was worse than he had been. There was a glass on the table that had just been used, and it smelt strongly of a peculiar poison of which I happen to have some knowledge, one that is made in Africa from roots and plants. I crept noiselessly to Taverner's room. He was not in bed. He was standing here with something in his hand, and when I had seen him hide it in the chest I darted in, and tried to——"

Pausing abruptly, Dick gave a brief account of his struggle with the man.

"My suspicions were right!" he continued. "This stuff in the earthen pot is a vegetable poison of a deadly nature, and it is the same I smelt in the glass. Taverner must have got it from the Bajangas, and he has been giving it to Mr. Ferguson from time to time. That is why the medicine he has been taking has not been doing him any good. By heavens, of all the infamous——"

"But what motive could he have had for wishing to kill Mr. Ferguson?" Alan interrupted.

"I can tell you what it was," Dick replied. "It is as clear as daylight. The diamonds

(Continued on p. lii of cover.)

were at the bottom of it. That is why the scoundrel wanted to marry Lorna; and when he realised that he had little or no chance of doing so he conceived the devilish idea of poisoning Mr. Ferguson, so that he could have his own way with the girl, and with the wealth she would have inherited from her father."

It was a plausible explanation, and there could be no doubt that it was correct. Alan was convinced, and so was the girl. Ralph Taverner had been listening to the denunciation of his villainy, and guilt and terror were stamped on his features. He glared at his captors, and tugged and strained at his fettered wrists. Then he sprang to his feet, and as quickly Alan flung him back in the chair. Lorna shrank from him, her eyes dilated with horror.

"I can't believe it!" she faltered. "Oh, Dick, I can't! And yet—and yet it must be true!"

"Of course it is!" vowed Dick. "You can take it from me that it is."

"And you have discovered this awful thing! What if you hadn't?"

"If I hadn't, Miss Lorna, nothing could have saved your father. Not all the drugs in the world! He would have been dead in another day or so."

"And you have saved his life, Dick! I can't tell you how grateful I am! As long as I live I'll never forget that you—"

Overcome with emotion, the girl burst into tears. The lads glanced at each other in perplexity, wondering how they should deal with the situation that had been thrust upon them. Fiendish scoundrel though the man was, they could not punish him as he deserved.

No alarm had been raised. The Somalis had not been aroused in their sleeping quarters outside the dwelling.

"What are we to do with the fellow?" said Dick. "That's the question."

"We'll have to kick him out of the valley," Alan replied. "Shall we set him adrift in a canoe, with a rifle and some food?"

"No, that wouldn't do. He would go straight to Tib Mohammed, and lead the Arabs to the secret entrance to the valley."

"So he would, Dick. You're quite right. I'm sure I don't know what we are to do with him."

It was a difficult problem, and while the lads were discussing it, a suggestion was made by Lorna, who had partly recovered from her distress.

"We will have to keep Mr. Taverner a prisoner," she said, "until my father is better. Let us put him in one of the cellars that is under the house, and take food and drink to him every day."

Dick and Alan readily agreed to this proposal, and without delay it was carried out. Ralph Taverner was not a very heavy weight. Having tightly bound his ankles, the

lads lifted him from the chair and followed Lorna, who led the way with a lamp in her hand. They descended to the lower part of the house, and from that by a winding staircase to a small cellar that was supplied with air from a grating that was in the top of one of the walls. There was a heap of straw in a corner, and the prisoner, whose eyes were glittering with a venomous hatred, was placed on this. And his captors, leaving him in darkness and solitude, ascended to the upper floor. The short African night was nearly over, and the first blush of dawn was quivering on the horizon.

"There is no need to let your Somali servants know what has happened," Dick said to the girl. "We'll let them think that Taverner is at the far end of the valley with the Masai and his companions, and that he is going to stay there in readiness for an attack from the Arabs. Don't worry any more, Miss Lorna. Your father will soon be well, I am sure. In a day or so he will be able to talk intelligibly, and in a week I'll have him on his feet again. Go back to bed now, and try to get some sleep. You can believe what I have told you."

Lorna's voice faltered when she started to speak, and with tears in her eyes, with joy and gratitude on her face, she bade the lads goodnight.

(To be continued.)

Nos.

3 & 4

JULY

15

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