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Crash! Lee's fist smashed into the Arab's face.

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(THE NARRATIVE RELATED THROUGHOUT BY NIPPER.)

CHAPTER I.

THE OASIS OF ZAMBI.

"**F**IRST class!" said Handforth appreciatively.

"Rather!" agreed Tommy Watson. "You can't buy oranges like these in England! It's ripping sport, picking the giddy things off the tree."

They were sprawling in the shade of a big palm-tree, and I was with them. Sir Montie Tregellis-West and Jack Grey and Tom Burton and Nicodemus Trotwood were also there.

At a little distance, Fenton and Morrow, of the Sixth, were chatting with Dr. Brett, the medico of Bellton village. All this sounds very much like a description of St. Frank's—except for the palms.

As a matter of fact, we were a good many miles from the old school.

We were on the oasis of Zambé, far into the scorching desert. The African sun blazed down from a sky of deep blue, and the air was quivering with heat. And we were taking our ease in the shade.

Not many days before we had taken our departure from Sir Crawford Grey's steam yacht, the *Wanderer*, which was anchored in Agabat bay, on the coast. And we had not reached Zambé without adventures.

For we were after treasure.

It was a treasure which was buried in the sand of an isolated oasis known as El Safra, several days' march from Zambé. Sir Crawford had learned of it through a golden locket which he possessed. And he had come on the quest during the summer holidays—and a crowd of St. Frank's fellows were his guests.

Most of the chaps had been left behind on the yacht; it hadn't been possible to bring the lot. Lord Dorrimore was with us—to say nothing of Umlozi, the redoubtable chief of the Kutanas.

We had experienced some trouble with a rascal named Captain Nixon. He knew that we were treasure hunting, and it was his genial intention to lift it for himself. With a companion known as Jake Starkey, the rascally skipper had done his utmost to obtain the secret of the treasure.

There was just a chance that Nixon had come to the oasis of Zambé, but this was not probable. In any case, we should soon know of his arrival, if he actually did come, and we should be prepared to receive him.

Nelson Lee and Dorrie and I had arrived by aeroplane. We had started on the machine from the coast, and had had a successful flight. The machine was a big, twin-engined biplane, and she carried sufficient fuel to carry her for at least a thousand miles. So far she had not done two hundred; so we had plenty of reserve "juice." Her engines developed seven hundred horse-power.

And the juniors—myself included—were enjoying oranges in the shade of the palm trees. Upon the whole, we should be glad when we saw the yacht and civilisation again. The oasis of Zambé was rather too remote for our liking.

Nelson Lee was already making active preparations for the next stage of the journey, we should probably start on the morrow. And after dusk had fallen that evening we were discussing the position in our camp.

The gov'nor was in his tent, chatting with Dorrie and Dr. Brett.

"Yes, there was an Arab caravan in this afternoon," Brett was saying. "A pretty ruffianly lot they looked, too! But your surmise was wrong, Lee. Nixon wasn't with them—I watched the whole motley crowd come in."

Nelson Lee nodded.

"I thought there was a possibility of Nixon attempting to get here by that means," he said. "I am glad there is no

sign of him, Brett. But are you quite sure of it? I wanted to have a look at that caravan myself—"

"You would only have wasted your time," interrupted the doctor. "Nixon is not on the oasis, and I fancy we have finished with the brute. He won't trouble us any more, Lee."

"It doesn't particularly matter if he does," put in Lord Dorrmore. "The beggar can't do any harm now, old man. If he couldn't beat us with hundreds of blacks behind him, he couldn't do much by himself—what?"

"Well, we will leave Nixon, and discuss more important affairs," said Nelson Lee, lighting a cigarette. "Our plans are made for the start—and I think we have come to a firm decision, Dorrie, to have both parties sent to El Safra. That is to say, Nipper will come with you and I in the aeroplane, and the others will go by foot under Dr. Brett's guidance."

"Yes, that's right," agreed Dorrie. "But it seems a beastly waste of time, you know—for poor old Brett, I mean. It savours of playin' a mean trick on him, makin' the poor chap trudge through the sand—"

"Don't you worry about me, Dorrie," smiled Dr. Brett—"or the boys, either. We shall quite enjoy the trip. The distance is not great, we have excellent camels, and our water supply will be more than adequate."

Nelson Lee smiled.

"Dorrie's argument is that we shall succeed on the aeroplane," he said. "And I've no doubt we shall. And then it will seem rather a waste of time for you others to come on by caravan. But we must consider our personal safety first. If anything goes wrong to the aeroplane we shall be helpless. Once down, it is practically certain that we could not rise—and there is no guarantee that we can find a landing-place on the El Safra oasis."

"Well, we can have a look round, and fly back," observed Dorrie.

"That is what we shall do if I can find no suitable stretch of ground," said Lee. "I don't see the fun of taking a brand new aeroplane out there and deliberately leaving it. That is why it will be better for Brett to come along on foot. He will certainly get there; and if we all complete the trip, so much the better. And Brett will make the start to-morrow, early."

"That's quite satisfactory," said the doctor, nodding.

Nelson Lee knocked the ash from his cigarette.

"Sir Crawford's gold locket, which I have in my pocket here, contains the clue to the treasure in Arabic writing," he said. "You have a copy of it, Brett. Well, there is no precise instruction with regard to the route we shall take from here—and these natives know very little of El Safra. For, although it is comparatively near, it is never visited. I don't suppose a dozen Arabs on this whole oasis have ever been to El Safra. But there

is one old fellow who lives some little way from here who might be useful to us," went on Lee. "Very shortly I mean to walk down to his place, in order to question him. He might be able to give us some information concerning the best route to take."

There was nothing particularly startling in what Nelson Lee had said; but it afforded great satisfaction to a lurking figure who crouched at the back of the tent, unseen and unheard.

It had been there for some time, and was the figure of an Arab, attired in loose clothing of a ragged, dirty nature. His face was dark and bearded, and his eyes gleamed in the starlight.

"Good!" he muttered. "By jinks, it's a chance!"

This certainly did not sound very Arabic—and, as a matter of fact, the man was none other than Captain John Nixon!

He was in Zambé, after all!

But how had he managed to get in without Nelson Lee being aware of the fact? The fault—if, indeed, there was any question of fault—was really Dr. Brett's. For he had watched the arrival of the Arab caravan, which had straggled into the oasis from the desert during the afternoon.

Brett had seen only Arabs—and no white men.

But he had looked for the white men in European attire; he had not scanned the others very keenly. If Nelson Lee himself had been there, he might have noticed that two of the desert men wore their clothing awkwardly.

These two were Captain Nixon and Jake Starkey. They had joined the caravan on the other side of the river, paying the Arabs a big sum to be allowed to go, disguised as they were.

All Nixon wanted was to get into Zambé before the start was made for El Safra. And he had already met with success. He had overheard something which was of great importance to him.

Hurrying along, he was soon within a grimy little tent, which had been erected beneath some trees. A light showed within, and Nixon entered. As he did so he uttered an exclamation of fury.

"What the thunder does this mean?" he demanded.

"Eh?" asked Starkey, who was in the tent. "What's wrong, old man?"

Nixon glared at him.

"Why are you wearin' them clothes?" he asked harshly. "Didn't I tell you to keep them Arab togs on until arter Lee and his lot had gone? An' here I find you dressed as usual—"

"Well, what was I to do?" growled Starkey. "We've worn these clothes under the Arab things all the time—well-nigh killin' us with suffocation. And just arter you left, when I was taking a walk round, some kids swarmed round me, jeerin' and laughin'. They knew I wasn't no Arab, so I thought it best to change."

"You'll think it best to change back agin," snapped Nixon.

"It don't matter to-night," said Jake. "I'll wait till the morning. But where've you been, cap'n?"

Nixon sat down, and his eyes glittered.

"I've been outside Lee's tent," he said. "I didn't hear nothin' of any particular interest at fust—except that Lee and the others ain't got the faintest idea that we're on the spot—that's why I was so wild when I see you like this. Then I heard something else, Jake."

"Wot, something good?"

"Sure! It seems that Lee keeps that gold locket on him," exclaimed the skipper, bending forward. "It tells everything—the position of the treasure, and all we want to know."

"But we can't lay hands on it."

"We might be able to if we're smart," went on Nixon. "Lee's going out afore long—he's comin' right down this way, to visit an old feller who knows the route to El Safra."

"How does that help us?"

"All we've got to do is to make arrangements accordin'," said Nixon grimly. "Them Arabs we came with ain't particular—and their knives are sharp! I'm going along now to tip them the wink—and to spend a bit more gold on 'em. Then we can sit down and watch. That locket'll be ours within an hour."

Jake Starkey got up from his stool.

"What's the idea?" he asked slowly. "Are you meanin'—murder?"

"No need to call it that——"

"Are you suggestin' that we should have Nelson Lee knifed?" asked Starkey, his voice quivering.

"We can't afford to take no chances now, and that locket means everything to us," said Captain Nixon. "Mebbe the Arabs won't kill him—although it don't matter a cuss to me if they do. What I want is that locket."

Starkey took a deep breath.

"Them Arabs won't make no bloomer," he said—"they'll kill!"

"Well, it can't be helped——"

"I don't hold with it, cap'n," interrupted Starkey decidedly. "D'you hear? I ain't agreein' to murder! I come in with you because I thought we could lift this treasure without much trouble. But I don't go so far as murder—not me! No, Nixon, that game won't do! You'd best drop it."

Captain Nixon swore.

"Drop blazes!" he snapped. "If you don't like what I plan, Starkey, you can do the other thing. P'r'aps you'd like to get back to the coast on your own?" he sneered. "You can go wi' pleasure."

And Nixon strode out of the tent, leaving his companion looking fierce and pale. Jake Starkey was not such an utter scoundrel as Nixon. He was easily led, and had been Nixon's willing tool.

But a point had now been reached when Starkey revealed his own determination. He didn't believe in committing murder. But

what could he do? Nothing! If Nixon persisted, Starkey was helpless.

For quite a time he sat in the tent, thoughtful and grim. Meanwhile, Nixon was performing the little ceremony he had discussed with Starkey—he was making arrangements with his Arab friends.

And everything had to be done swiftly, too. Nelson Lee emerged from his own tent, glanced up at the stars, and lit a fresh cigarette.

"I don't suppose I shall be long, Brett," he said.

"All right—I'll be here."

Nelson Lee went off, moving along the sandy track at a brisk stroll. The old fellow he wished to interview lived some little distance away. And, as luck would have it, Lee's path would lead him almost directly past the tent occupied by Captain Nixon and Jake Starkey.

Things did not go smoothly that night.

The plan which had been arranged by the captain went decidedly wrong, in fact. And it came about mainly because of Starkey—although he was quite an unconscious factor in the little drama.

Starkey felt that he would like some fresh air, and he walked out into the night, in order to take a stroll. That is what it amounted to, and practically nothing else.

Jake walked along thoughtfully, never dreaming of danger. But four Arabs were lurking behind a clump of trees—waiting for Nelson Lee. They were expecting to see a man in European attire—and they saw Jake Starkey.

The mistake which followed was not surprising.

Starkey suddenly found himself confronted by two menacing figures. He turned in alarm, and there were two more behind him.

"Now then!" he began. "What the dickens—Oh, help!"

The four had made a rush at him, and Starkey dodged—in vain. He was seized, flung to the ground, and his horrified eyes saw the gleam of a knife in the starlight. And Starkey realised the truth.

These men were Nixon's hired assassins!

And they had mistaken him—Starkey—for Nelson Lee!

More than ever Jake realised the villainous nature of his companion. For it seemed that his own life was to be sacrificed. But help was near at hand, if Starkey had only known it.

Nelson Lee, striding along, did not fail to hear that very English appeal for help.

And the great detective broke into a swift run, on the instant. He arrived just as the Arab's knife was about to descend.

Crash!

Lee's fist smashed into the man's face, and he went over. Another blow sent a second man staggering. Starkey managed to get to his feet, and he was just in time to help.

For two minutes the pair fought like tigers. Then the Arabs, defeated and badly bruised, fled in disorder. They disappeared

into the darkness, and Nelson Lee eyed his companion curiously.

"Rather a narrow shave!" he remarked.

"By thunder, sir!" panted Jake. "You— you saved my life! I reckon I owe you more than I can say! God bless you, sir! The way you tackled them dirty heathens was a sight for sore eyes!"

Nelson Lee smiled.

"Am I right in assuming that your name is Starkey?" he inquired.

Jake started.

"No, sir!" he gasped. "My—my name's Brown. I—I—"

But he turned on his heel and fled, knowing full well that he was incapable of lying at that moment. And Nelson Lee stood watching him with a queer smile playing round the corners of his strong mouth.

"Quite a novel situation," he murmured. "I have saved the life of our friend, Jake Starkey. The fellow seems grateful, too. I wonder if he'll still stick to Nixon? It is something to know, at all events, that the rascally pair are in Zambi. And I fancy that attack was meant for me—and not for Mr. Starkey."

Lee went on his way, more alert now. And his thoughts were very busy. And while he walked towards his destination, Jake Starkey crawled back into the tent. He found it empty and deserted. The lamp was low, and Starkey let it remain low. He sat down on a stool, shivering—not from cold, but because of the narrow escape from death which he had just had.

"Saved by Nelson Lee himself, too!" he muttered. "By glory! What'll Nixon say when I tell 'im? But I sha'n't have to—I dare'n't!"

And, still greatly perturbed, Jake waited for the return of his leader and chief. And, somehow, Starkey's feelings towards Captain Nixon were not as they had been. Jake's eyes had been opened.

He seized the opportunity while he was alone to consider his position. He had virtually agreed to the attack upon Nelson Lee, for it had been Nixon's idea—and he was Nixon's confederate.

But those Arabs, under the captain's orders, had been intent upon killing Lee outright—and they had nearly succeeded in killing Starkey. It was an excellent object-lesson for the man.

He was made to realise what his companionship with Nixon entailed. But for Nelson Lee, he—Starkey—would have been killed. It was not very surprising that Starkey should feel bitter towards his accomplice, and grateful to Nelson Lee.

"But I mustn't do nothing yet," Starkey told himself. "Wot a blamed fool I was not to stick by old Orell's side! He's along o' Nelson Lee's lot, an' he ain't got a thing on his mind. An' I'm here—bound 'and and foot to Nixon, the murderous 'ound! But even if I do agree with him by word o' mouth, it don't say I'll agree in spirit! An' mebbe my time'll come afore long!"

Starkey was unable to meditate further.

for less than a minute later the flap of the tent was thrust aside, and Captain Nixon appeared. One glance was sufficient to tell Jake that the skipper's temper was not of the best quality.

The interview was not likely to be pleasant.

CHAPTER II.

CAPTAIN NIXON'S SCHEME.

"YOU durned fool!"

That was Captain Nixon's greeting as he entered the tent. His face was flushed, and his eyes were glittering with vicious fury. Starkey did not care to return that fierce gaze.

"Wot's wrong, cap'n?" he asked, faltering.

"What's wrong?" snapped Nixon. "Don't play that game with me now, Jake—I ain't in the mood for nonsense! A fine blamed mess you've made o' things, ain't you? A fine muddle—you dolt!"

"Mess?" said Jake nervously—"muddle? I don't catch on, cap'n?"

Nixon sat down, and swore with much vehemence.

"It failed!" he said. "Them Arabs came back with black eyes an' bruised noses—and they reported that they weren't able to do the trick. An' why? You ought to know why, hang you!"

"It wasn't my fault, cap'n——"

"Don't make no excuses to me," snapped Nixon harshly. "Like a fool, you went out for a walk—just when them Arabs was expecting a white man to pass. You might have known that they'd mistake you for Lee——"

"I never thought nothin' about it," confessed Jake.

"That's no sort of excuse," growled the other. "You've got to tell me what happened. By what I can hear, you was nearly knifed when Lee come along and sent them Arabs flyin'."

"That's right," agreed Starkey. "Lee saved my life."

"Pity he hadn't got something better to do," said Nixon sourly. "It would ha' been a good thing if you'd been finished off, Jake; you ain't fit to bring on a tricky bit of business o' this sort!"

"I didn't know there was goin' to be no murder in it," growled Jake sullenly. "As I said afore, I don't 'old with that game, cap'n. It ain't what I bargained for. But we're in this now, and we've got to go through with it. If I've made a mess o' things, I'm sorry. Mebbe it was thoughtless o' me to go out; but there ain't no real 'arm been done, that I can see."

Nixon swore again.

"No harm!" he snapped. "What about Lee? Ain't you an' me been tryin' to keep our presence in this durned place a secret? Lee's seen you now, an' everything's mucked up!"

"Lee didn't know 'oo I was," said Jake. "It was too dark, an' my face was all

browned up. I skipped off as soon as the thing was over—before he could say a word. He don't know we're here, Nixon—you needn't be afeared."

"Well, that's not so bad, I'll admit," said the captain. "But are you sure of this, Jake? Are you sure Lee didn't recognise you?"

"Positive!" lied Starkey.

Nixon seemed to be satisfied, and Jake was rather surprised—and certainly relieved. He had no intention of telling his companion that Nelson Lee had recognised him within a few seconds. Starkey also kept to himself the fact that he would have greatly welcomed the opportunity of going over to the other side.

But it was impossible just then. Starkey could not turn traitor to Nixon on the oasis of Zambi—for Nixon would certainly take prompt measures with his Arab friends to have a terrible revenge. And Jake set quite a store upon his none too valuable skin.

For a long time he and Nixon sat in their tent—until the night was well advanced. Outside everything was quiet and still. The silence, indeed, was almost oppressive—it could be felt.

After some food Nixon was feeling better, apparently. For his frown had vanished, and had been replaced by a cunning, evil smile. It was a smile which made Starkey feel uncomfortable.

"I've been thinkin'," said the captain at last. "An' what's more, old man, I've got a scheme. It's a scheme that's worth ten o' that other one. If it can be worked I reckon we'll find things easy. But it'll be a risky game, and it'll need careful handling."

"Are we both in it?" asked Starkey.

"No; I don't want no help from a muddler like you!"

"That's a pity," said Starkey. "I'd like to do my bit."

But Jake was glad, nevertheless, to be out of anything that was likely to be murderous. Jake Starkey was not a man who believed in violence. He had never deliberately hurt anybody in his life; and it was rather a shock to find himself now associated with a man who was at heart an assassin. But Jake could not get out of his position easily. It was necessary to be patient.

"You see, old mate," went on the captain, lighting his pipe, "It's not Brett or that black fellow we're afraid of—or the boys. They'll be easy to tackle. It's Lee we've got to be careful about—although it ain't much use tackling Lee alone. That kid Nipper is a bit of a hard nut, and Lord Dorrimore ain't such a fool as he looks. Them are the three we want to be rid of."

"Mebbe," said Jake. "But we can't touch 'em, cap'n. We couldn't even get near enough to—"

"We don't need to get near," interrupted Nixon. "In the morning, Lee and Nipper and Dorrimore are settin' off in that blamed aeroplane—which ruined our plans, by the way, when we was away back in the forest.

I'd give a heap to see that aeroplane a pile o' ruins."

Jake looked startled.

"You—you ain't suggestin' that we should destroy that flyin' machine?" he asked.

"It's a good idea; but I've got a better one," said Nixon. "I don't see no reason why Lee himself, and the other two, shouldn't be destroyed with it!"

"You mean to kill 'em—all?" asked Jake hoarsely.

Captain Nixon rose to his feet.

"Accidents always will happen," he said grimly. "And accidents to aeroplanes ain't anything new. That's all I'm goin' to say now, Jake. You'd best get some sleep. I'll tell you what I've done—after I've done it. So-long!"

The captain took his departure, leaving Jake staring after him with a feeling of horror within his breast. What was Nixon bent upon doing—or attempting? Starkey had a terrible idea that his chief had murder in his heart.

And Starkey was not far wrong.

For Nixon's scheme was to tamper with the aeroplane! How could he do such a thing, when the machine was closely guarded? The men who were on duty were Arabs, it is true, but they were well paid, and were trustworthy enough.

The machine itself stood on a wide, open piece of ground. There was no shelter for it, of course—and it needed none. Our tents were in fairly close proximity, and the Arab guards were easily within hail.

There were six of them stationed about the aeroplane. Why should the gov'nor or I anticipate any trouble? Our preparations for guarding the machine had, indeed, been fully adequate.

But we were not prepared for Captain Nixon's trickery.

The skipper had visited this part of Africa hundreds of times—he had lived on the coast for months on end, and he knew quite a number of native lingos. It was not difficult for him to masquerade as an Arab. His speech did not betray him, and when he was attired as now it was difficult to imagine that he was a white man. Even the Arabs themselves were sometimes deceived.

Under cover of darkness, Nixon hoped to gain the upper hand. But he was not foolish enough to imagine that he could overpower the six men single-handed—by the application of force.

Nixon's scheme was much more subtle.

He had taken care to remove a small glass tube from a medicine-case, which had been lying in the tent. Nixon knew a good bit about drugs and medicines, having sailed on ships which carried no doctors for years.

This little tube, together with a bottle of wine, completed Nixon's supply of materials.

There was nothing very elaborate about his plan. He hoped to gain success by a very simple device. If it failed, he had other plans in mind; but they would be more difficult.

It was just as well to try the simplest first. The captain made his way to the wide space where the aeroplane was lying, with no attempt to conceal his movements. He approached the machine from a quarter which would not bring him near the tents of Nelson Lee and his party.

And he was still some little distance from the 'plane itself when a dark figure rose from the grass, and accosted him in Arabic. Nixon replied in the same language—pleasantly and softly.

He assured the guard that he was merely curiously interested in the white men, and their wonderful carriers that flew. The genuine Arab did not suspect that the newcomer was a white man himself.

For Nixon's Arabic was perfect, and it was too dark for anything to be seen very distinctly.

The first step in the captain's game had been accomplished with ease. He had succeeded in getting into friendly conversation with one of the guards. Two others strolled up before long, and Nixon's hopes began to rise.

He was led round the aeroplane, having expressed a wish to see it at close quarters. And by the time twenty minutes had passed he was on good terms with all six Arabs. By way of reward for their cordiality, Nixon suggested that they should drink wine with him.

The offer was accepted without delay, and the rascal produced his bottle.

All the men drank—except Nixon himself. The captain pretended to do so, but he knew more about it than the others did; and Nixon was not anxious to go off to sleep for half an hour or so.

For, of course, the wine was drugged.

It was not poisonous, or even dangerous. The wine which the Arabs had imbibed would keep them quiet, Nixon reckoned, for about twenty minutes or half an hour—certainly not longer. And they would feel no bad effects afterwards.

Within a few minutes the effect became apparent.

The men's talk became drowsy, and one after another dropped off—until all six were helpless. Nixon eyed them with exultant satisfaction. He could hardly believe that his simple dodge had succeeded.

"By jinks!" he muttered. "I never had an easier game afore! An' Mr. Nelson Lee reckons that he's smart!"

The captain chuckled gloatingly.

Then he moved forward like a shadow towards the aeroplane. His sneer at Nelson Lee afforded him satisfaction, no doubt, but it was an undeserved jibe. For Lee had taken all the precautions that were necessary. How could he possibly suspect that six Arabs would not be able to look after the aeroplane? And nobody thought that an attempt would be made to tamper with the machine.

Nixon lost no time in climbing into the big fuselage, or body. He had never actually flown, but he knew the main workings of an

aeroplane—having, on one occasion, visited an aeroplane factory in England. A foreman there was a friend of his, and Nixon had had everything explained to him. That knowledge was now likely to prove very useful to him.

It did not take him long to weaken two of the main controls—two vital sections of the machine. They were small, no doubt, but all-important. According to Nixon's calculations, nothing would happen when the machine rose from the ground, or while she was climbing.

Disaster would overtake her and her occupants when her nose was dipped in order to descend.

It was then that the captain's foul handiwork would come into operation. The rush downwards of the aeroplane would cause the controls to snap like twigs. As a result, the machine would be unmanageable, and it would crash to the ground—to be totally destroyed.

Captain Nixon chuckled more than ever as he laid himself down in the midst of the drugged guards. To vanish would naturally create suspicion. He must be one of the last to awaken.

It would then be assumed by the Arabs that they had all dozed off for a few minutes under the influence of the wine. No report of the incident would be made, naturally, and no examination of the aeroplane would result.

Nelson Lee would ascend in the machine, he would fly off—and nothing more of it would ever be seen. For it would crash to splinters far out in the desert. And Nixon would have everything his own way—for only Dr. Brett, Umlasi, and the boys would be left to be dealt with.

Everything happened exactly as Nixon anticipated. The Arabs woke one after another. The first two stirred themselves only a few minutes after Nixon had laid down. These men shook their companions—who were already recovering. They all awoke—and, except for being somewhat drowsy, they felt all right.

Nixon himself was still there, and he was allowed to sleep for another ten minutes. But at last he roused himself, and slouched off into the darkness, after a few more words with the unsuspecting guard.

Nixon reached his own tent in safety. The lamp had been turned low, and Jake Starkey was lying on his mattress, asleep.

The skipper eyed him with an evil smile.

"Yes, mate, we've got the trick finished now all right," he murmured. "One of the neatest jobs I ever did, too. The way them Arabs took that wine was a real treat—just like babies, they was!"

Starkey stirred in his sleep, and opened his eyes.

"Hallo! That you, cap'n?" he murmured.

"Yes, it is me," said Nixon. "An' I must remark, Jake, that it don't seem as if you've been particularly busy! While you've been sleepin' here I've been doin' useful work—

work that'll mean success for us!"

Starkey sat up.

"That so, cap'n?" he said, yawning. "Useful work? You don't mean to say that you've bin settin' them Arabs on to kill——"

"I've made no arrangements with anybody," interrupted Nixon. "This time, Jake, I'm working on my own. I know the job's done right then. An' this job is just about the neatest you ever heard of."

"I ain't 'eard of it at all yet," said Starkey.

"Well, you're goin' to hear of it now," went on Nixon, in a low voice. "Just listen to me, Jake. That there aeroplane, accordin' to all I can understand, will fly off into the desert soon arter daylight. I don't mind tellin' you that I've monkeyed about with some o' the wires and levers——"

"You—you've tampered with 'em?" gasped Starkey.

"That's exactly what I mean," agreed the other. "When that aeroplane starts comin' down she'll fall to bits! Nothin' won't happen while she's going up—an' that's the beauty of it! The smash won't happen until they've got right out into the desert. And then they'll be killed——"

"But Nelson Lee's goin' on that machine," said Jake.

"O' course he is!"

"An' Nipper——"

"Sure!"

"An' Lord Dorrimore——"

"You've got it right every time," nodded the captain.

"An' they'll all be killed?"

"Every one of 'em!"

Starkey had turned pale beneath his tan, and there was an expression of horror in his eyes.

"You—you don't mean it, cap'n," he muttered. "By glory! You can't mean to kill that innocent kid——"

"Innocent blazes!" snapped Nixon. "Nipper is well-nigh as dangerous as his blamed master——"

"Wot about Lord Dorrimore?"

"Well, he ain't so bad, I'll admit," said the other. "But I'm makin' a clean sweep—do you see? If that lord-feller likes to go on the trip—well, he'll have to stand his chance with the others. An' as there ain't any chance at all, there ain't much hope for him. Them three are doomed—an' a good riddance! We can easily get the better o' them other blighters."

And Captain Nixon removed some of his clothing and laid down on his mattress. Within a few minutes he was asleep—his conscience by no means troubled. But Jake Starkey was wide awake.

He was horrified, and sleep was impossible.

you'd be the best one to get done in."

He glared down at the sleeping figure of Captain Nixon. It enraged Starkey to see the man sleeping there, as though he had nothing on his conscience to worry him. Yet the skipper had deliberately planned the deaths of three people.

"Wot am I goin' to do?" Starkey asked himself feverishly. "If I got ag'inst the cap'n it won't take him long to finish me off. He's a murderous dog, an' if I was to walk out of this tent an' lay all the facts afore Mr. Lee, Nixon'd know by the mornin', an' I should 'ave a knife atween me ribs afore I could say 'Jack Robinson.' An' I ain't hankerin' arter death yet awhile."

Jake was in a dilemma, and he knew it.

What course should he take?

Could he allow the captain's dastardly plan to go on? The very thought of it appalled him. And yet his only other course was to lay himself open to the skipper's venom.

And then Starkey had another thought.

Was there no intermediate way? Wouldn't it be possible for him to give the warning in secret—in such a way that Nelson Lee would know the truth, and that Nixon would remain in ignorance of the informer?

Jake racked his wits to think of a method. And it wasn't long before he arrived at a solution. His eyes gleamed as he gazed down at Nixon to see if the man was sleeping soundly.

"I'll do it!" muttered Jake. "An' if you rumble the wheeze—well, you can blamed well do your worst. Anyhow, I ain't goin' to see them good people be sent to death by a swine o' your sort!"

It did not take Starkey long to find an odd piece of plain paper in one of his pockets. Then, with the stump of a pencil, he wrote down a few words. They satisfied him, and he carefully folded the paper up into a narrow spill, and tied it round with a piece of string. He had no envelope, and he wished to make the "letter" as private as possible.

He placed it in a handy pocket, and then reclined on his mattress again. He did not sleep, however, but waited for the dawn to break. Daylight came at last, and Jake remained in the tent until there were signs of activity outside.

But just as he was about to emerge, Nixon stirred and yawned.

"You up, Jake?" he asked. "Bit of a change, ain't it? I generally have to shake you to a jelly afore you get fully alive!"

"I—I couldn't sleep, cap'n," said Starkey.

"Thinkin' of Nelson Lee's fate?" exclaimed the captain. "You're a chicken-hearted hound, Starkey—that's your trouble. I don't s'pose you can help it, so I won't say nothin'."

"I ain't chicken-hearted," growled Jake. "I'm agin murder—that's all!"

Nixon scowled.

"Don't make such a free use o' that word," he snapped. "An' don't be such a pig-headed fool! Ain't we lookin' arter our-

CHAPTER III.

HANDFORTH'S MEMORY.

"**M**URDER—that's wot it is!" muttered Starkey huskily. "It's nothin' less than 'orrible murder! You blamed skunk! I reckon

selves this trip? What's to happen if we let this chance slip by?"

"We might lift the treasure wi'out killin' Lee——"

"What happened the last time—back in that forest?" demanded Nixon. "We had the bunch prisoners, an' everything was O.K. Then Lee come along in that aeroplane. Lee come along an' messed up everything! He won't do it no more—I'll see to that, Jake! We can't afford to lose the game now. We've staked everything on it, an' victory ain't goin' to be snatched out of our hands!"

Jake grunted and turned away.

"Do as you like, cap'n," he growled. "I can't alter you."

An hour had elapsed before Starkey found the opportunity for which he was waiting. Nixon went out of the tent, and walked away towards the town of Zambi—for the camp was on the outskirts.

Zambi was a large town, but the oasis was ten times larger. It was a mass of green amid the everlasting drab of the desert.

Jake walked about until he sighted a small Arab boy. After some little difficulty he managed to make the urchin understand that he was to take the note to the camp of the white men.

The boy went on his errand, and Starkey breathed a sigh of relief.

"It's all I can do, any'ow," he muttered. "I 'ope to 'eaven that the note gits into Mr. Lee's 'ands afore the start! They're makin' ready now, and there ain't much time to waste, by wot I can see."

Starkey was right. The aeroplane was already being prepared for the flight to El Safra, and there was much activity in the camp.

I was standing by the aeroplane, watching Nelson Lee at work—for there were various little adjustments to make before the start. Tommy Watson was there, too. But the other juniors—Handforth, Tregellis-West, Grey, Burton, and Trotwood, were still in the camp—probably waiting for breakfast.

Umlosi was bustling about, busy with his Arabs. And Dr. Brett was by no means idle. For the start was to be made that morning—the start across the desert. Nelson Lee had obtained all the information possible concerning the location of El Safra, and he and Brett reckoned that the oasis ought to be found without much difficulty.

"You've got the best of it, you boulder!" said Watson, thumping my back. "Haven't you got room for Montie and I in this machine? It's big enough, goodness knows!" he added, gazing up at the giant twin-engined biplane.

"It's big enough to take a dozen passengers—or even twenty—under ordinary conditions," I replied. "She's got engines of seven hundred horse-power, and her nominal speed is about ninety miles an hour."

"If the giddy thing is capable of taking twenty, I don't see any reason why we shouldn't all go by air," exclaimed Watson—"Umlosi and Dr. Brett, and all the other chaps——"

"My dear old son, must I explain everything to you again?" I asked patiently. "I've already pointed out the facts to Handforth—twenty or thirty times. This aeroplane is a big one, and it can carry a large number of passengers. But for this particular trip the normal passenger-carrying space is taken up by extra petrol tanks——"

"Yes, I know that," said Watson.

"Then what the dickens are you jawing about?" I demanded. "There's enough petrol on board even now to carry the machine well over seven hundred miles. At a pinch, and with favourable winds, she might be able to do nine hundred, if the engines are run economically. I don't suppose we shall use half the amount of petrol we are carrying; we shall arrive back at the yacht with a four-hundred-mile supply left. But it's far better to carry too much than too little. One never knows, Tommy. It's better to be safeguarded. So that's why only three can go by aeroplane. We could take four, no doubt, and I'll ask the gov'nor if you can come——"

Watson shook his head.

"No jolly fear!" he said. "I wouldn't go without Montie—or the other chaps."

"Then that settles it," I said. "You can't all go—so the best thing is to leave the arrangements as they are. And you needn't worry. You'll be in El Safra some time to-morrow—it's only a short trip."

"You'll be there an hour or two after you start!" said Tommy Watson—"and that's allowing for going out of your way, too."

Nelson Lee was busy with the engines, seeing that everything was in trim. And, meanwhile, Edward Oswald Handforth stood outside his tent, regarding the whole scene about him with much interest.

And while he was standing there a dirty little Arab boy came up hesitatingly, paused, and stared at Handforth.

"Well, kid, what's wrong with you?" asked Handforth.

The dusky child made no reply.

"Lost your tongue?" asked Handforth, being apparently under the impression that his words could be understood. "If you stand there staring at me, you cheeky boulder, I'll give you a thick ear!"

The boy approached, rather to Handforth's surprise, and held out his grubby hand. Handforth saw that a small roll of paper, tied with string, lay in the open palm.

"What's that?" asked Handforth curiously.

He walked forward, picked the roll of paper up, and was about to unfasten the string when he saw some faint pencilling on the edge. He examined it closely, and then made out the words: "For Mr. Nelson Lee—Urgent."

"I wonder who the dickens this is from?" Handforth muttered. "Look here, kid, you've got to tell me——"

Handforth paused and stared.

"Why, the young ass has gone!" he exclaimed, gazing after the running figure of the Arab boy. "I wonder if this is some

"giddy trick? In any case, I'd better take the note to Mr. Lee."

And Handforth started off from the camp to the flat stretch of ground where the aeroplane was standing.

But Handforth didn't reach the spot at once.

He was just passing another tent when Sir Montie Tregellis-West emerged with Jack Grey and Tom Burton.

"Shan't be long before we're off now," remarked Grey. "Of course, if any fellow likes, he can stay behind in Zambi until the party returns. What are you going to do, Handforth?"

"Oh, stay behind, of course," said Handforth sarcastically.

Sir Montie raised his elegant eyebrows.

"Begad! You ain't serious, dear old boy?" he asked mildly.

"Of course I'm not serious, you prize ass!" said Handforth. "I wouldn't miss the trip for quids. We didn't have a sandstorm on the first desert journey, and it's quite likely that we shall be lucky this time."

"Lucky?" asked Grey.

"Yes."

"To run into a sandstorm?"

"Of course," said Handforth.

"Shiver my tops'ls!" grinned Tom Burton. "You've got queer ideas about sandstorms, messmate! Why, if we run into a cyclone of that kind we shall be capsized with all hands!"

"Rats!" said Handforth. "I've often read about sandstorms, and I reckon it would be a ripping experience. Sand everywhere, you know. It fills the air, and chaps have a difficulty in breathing. But it doesn't last long, and they say it's a glorious feeling to breathe the fresh air afterwards!"

"That sandstorm wasn't a very bad one," said Grey. "And don't forget that it only happened in a story, Handy."

"Yes, but it was taken from real life—"

"Very likely," interrupted Grey. "But you've got to remember that in a story the author can make the storm blow over before anybody gets killed or hurt. In real life it's different—sandstorms aren't always so obliging."

"Oh, rats!" said Handforth. "In this part of the desert they don't last long."

"They never last very long," said Jack. "But whole caravans—numbering hundreds—have been completely wiped out before now—in the space of ten minutes or so. The African simoom is a terror."

"The African which?" asked Handforth.

"Simoom."

"That's wrong, you ass," said Handy. "It's simoon."

"Well, I've heard it called a simoom—"

"It doesn't matter to me what you've heard it called," argued Handforth. "I know what I'm talking about, and I say the right word is 'simoon.'"

"Begad! It doesn't really matter which," observed Sir Montie. "Personally, I consider that Jack is correct—"

"Bosh!" snapped Handforth. "Look here, we'll ask Dr. Brett—he ought to know!"

The doctor was near by, and he was called.

"Which is right, doctor—'simoom' or 'simoon'?" asked Jack Grey, grinning. "Handforth says that 'simoom' is wrong."

"So it is wrong," said Handforth.

Dr. Brett chuckled.

"Another argument, eh?" he asked. "Well, as it happens, you're both right!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"How can we both be right, sir?" asked Handy, staring.

"The word can be spelt in two ways—that's all," smiled Dr. Brett. "You can please yourselves which one you use—and I hope we shan't have an experience of one. I've never been in a simoom, and I never want to be."

"But think of the excitement, sir!" protested Handforth.

"And think of the danger to the whole caravan," said Brett grimly. "A sandstorm is the terror of the desert, Handforth. But we don't want to discuss such a subject. Breakfast is ready—"

"Oh, good!"

So the matter was dropped—and Handforth completely forgot to deliver that vital note to Nelson Lee. He had placed it in his pocket soon after meeting Sir Montie and the others; and it was there still.

Perhaps Handy could not be blamed.

He did not know the nature of the note, and it did not strike him that it was important. It is little things, such as this, that sometimes amount to a matter of life and death.

We were a merry party at breakfast.

"Well, boys, we start on the last stage of the trip this morning," said Nelson Lee smilingly. "If any of you feel inclined to stay behind here in Zambi, you are at liberty to do so."

"Rather not, sir!"

"We're all going on to El Safra!"

"To the treasure, begad!" murmured Sir Montie.

"The treasure!" smiled Lee. "There might not be one, Montie."

"We can look for it, at all events, dear old boy," said Tregellis-West, helping himself to the pepper. "I—I mean, Mr. Lee! Begad! Sorry, sir!"

Nelson Lee chuckled.

"There is no reason why you should not call me 'dear old boy,' Montie," he said genially. "We are not at St. Frank's now—and I should regard it as a compliment."

"But it's frightfully familiar, sir," protested Montie.

"Nonsense!" said the gov'nor, as we all grinned. "Well, our plans are made—so far as any plans can be made. Dorrie and Nipper and I start in the aeroplane within the hour; and you others will come on at a slower pace—"

"At about half a mile an hour, instead of a hundred!" muttered Handforth.

"Our object will be to locate the oasis."

went on Lee. "We shall do so easily, I imagine, for I shall fly at a big height, and the desert will be visible for scores of miles. We shall land on the oasis of El Safra, if there is a suitable landing-place——"

"But our machine can land almost anywhere, sir—even in the soft sand," I broke in. "She's fitted with special wheels, and runners."

"Quite so, Nipper," agreed Nelson Lee. "But the sand may be bumpy and uneven, and I shall not risk a smash. We need not discuss the point, however. If we make a landing as I believe we shall, we shall make camp at once, and search for the treasure. To-morrow I shall ascend in the aeroplane, and look out for you good people."

"That's topping, sir," said Fenton.

"You, of course, will see the aeroplane," went on the gov'nor. "So you will have a guide, and it will be easy for you to arrive at your destination. After a short rest at El Safra we shall return here—and thence across the desert again to the coast."

"Quite a nice little programme," said Dr. Brett.

"Thou art confident, O Umtagati," put in Umlosi, in his deep, rumbling voice. "It is well that thou should be so."

"Hallo—hallo!" said Dorrie. "Is the coal-box goin' to be cheerful for once? He generally sees blood an' bones, an' red mist swim before his eyes before we start on a trip into unknown territory. But this time he's confident. Bravo!"

Umlosi revealed his perfect white teeth in a broad smile.

"Thou hast mistaken my meaning, N'Kose, my father," he said. "It is well that Umtagati, the wizard, should be confident. For I fear that this journey will be filled with evil and dangers——"

"Oh, my hat!" groaned Dorrimore. "I've started him off!"

"Nay, N'Kose," said Umlosi gravely. "I but speak what is in my mind. Ere we return to the great ship of N'Kose Grey, which even now is lying at rest, we shall pass through many, many adventures—thou more than I. For thou art travelling in the big machine which flies even as the bird. And thou wilt fly far into strange countries before the end comes."

"The end?" I asked, staring. "Do you mean the end of us?"

"Nay, Manzie, I mean not that," rumbled Umlosi. "Thou wilt live."

"Well, that's something," I said. "But I don't believe in all this business. You're a giddy fraud, Umlosi. You don't know what's going to happen any more than we do!"

"Doesn't he, though," said Dorrie. "I've been with the old rascal in the darkest parts of the African forest—I've been with him in Borneo, and goodness knows where else. An' he generally manages to foretell things. Not accurately, of course, but he gives a hazy outline, just to make me comfortable. He sees fights an' gore—an' then I know there's trouble comin'. Another time he sees blue skies an' heaps of huntin'—an' then it's all

serene. Oh, he's hot stuff! I suppose it's his bally instinct."

"Well, if his instinct is right this time, we shall fly into strange countries," I observed. "That doesn't sound very cheerful. But, of course, El Safra will be a strange country to us—so Umlosi's right in any case."

And that, probably, was the true explanation of the Kutana chief's "visions." He never foretold anything definite; and when a party starts out into unknown country there is generally a good deal of adventure. So Umlosi, the cunning old scoundrel, made himself into a prophet on the cheap. But we all knew him and his little ways—and we all admired him. He was the real goods.

After breakfast there was much activity.

Nelson Lee did not mean to waste any time. The aeroplane was all in readiness, and Dorrie, the gov'nor, and I were not long in taking our places. The others stood by, ready to watch the start.

There were two other white men watching also.

Captain Nixon and Jake Starkey were both on the look-out—Jake with his mind filled with apprehension, and Nixon quivering with triumph and gloating. At last he was to see the last of his chief enemies!

"There they go, Jake!" he said at last. "By jinks! They'll never come down again alive! It's the finish of 'em!"

"You murderous dog!" muttered Starkey.

"Eh? What's that?"

"Oh, nothin', cap'n!" growled Jake, turning away.

The big biplane rose beautifully from the ground under Nelson Lee's guidance. She soared aloft, and those below waved farewells. Dorrie and I were both leaning out of our seats, watching the ground.

And after rising to a height of two thousand feet, Nelson Lee directed the machine's nose due east—for that was our direction. We were soon over the desert, and the oasis of Zambezi grew smaller and smaller.

Those who were left behind felt rather lonely after our departure. We had gone into the unknown.

"Well, we've lost sight of 'em," said Handforth at last. "We shall be starting soon. I suppose?"

"Within an hour, I think," said Tommy Watson.

"Good!" exclaimed Handy. "We don't want to hang about here— Why, what the— Hallo! Great pip!"

He stared dazedly at something which he had just taken from his pocket.

"What's that?" asked Watson.

"Begad! It looks like a piece of paper," said Sir Montie mildly.

"It's—it's a note!" gasped Handforth. "Oh, my goodness! And Mr. Lee's gone! I ought to have given it to him——"

"That dirty-looking scrap of paper?" yelled Watson. "What the dickens are you talkin' about, you silly juggins?"

Handforth glared.

"Are you calling me a juggins?" he roared.

"Yes, I am!" snapped Watson.

"I'm dashed if you're not right, too!" admitted Handforth abruptly—much to the others' surprise. "I am a juggins—I'm a forgetful jackass, and a burbling lunatic!"

The juniors grinned.

"Well, I'm glad you know all this, Handy," remarked Grey. "We've known it for years, but——"

"Oh, don't rot now!" said Handforth, looking worried. "I don't know who this note is from, and I don't suppose it's important—although it is marked urgent; but I feel pretty rotten because I didn't give it to Mr. Lee before he left."

"But who could send Mr. Lee a note in this place?" asked Grey curiously.

"How do I know, you ass!" demanded Handforth. "In any case, it was your fault, Grey, that I forgot it."

"My fault!" exclaimed Jack.

"Of course it was! Didn't you start that argument about the simoom——"

"No, I didn't!" said Grey. "You started it, you duffer! You can spell it with five 'o's' if you want to—it doesn't matter to me. If that note was given to you to deliver to Mr. Lee, you ought to have done it. You'd better let Dr. Brett see it now."

The doctor was not far off, and the juniors were soon talking to him. Handforth lost no time in explaining how he had received the note, and how it was that he had forgotten to deliver it.

"Well, it's very curious," said Brett. "I'd better read it, and see what the trouble is. Who it can be from is beyond me."

He slipped the string off, and unfolded the paper. Then, as he read, his face became pale, and a look of terrible worry entered his eyes. The boys could easily see that something was wrong.

"What is it, sir?" asked Grey quickly.

"My dear boy, I don't know—I hardly dare to think!" exclaimed Dr. Brett huskily. "Great heavens! Your memory, Handforth, might probably cost Mr. Lee and those with him their lives!"

Handforth stared.

"I—I—I don't understand, sir," he stammered.

"Read this note—yes, all of you," said the doctor hoarsely. "It is from that man Jake Starkey——"

"But he isn't in Zambi, sir."

"He is, Watson," exclaimed the doctor quickly. "Mr. Lee encountered him last night—he actually saved the man's life—and it seems that Starkey is grateful. For he has sent a word of warning in this note."

"A warning against what, sir?"

"You'll see if you read," said Brett. "Mr. Lee and I took all precautions against Captain Nixon, and I was especially warned to keep on the alert. Lee did not even imagine that any attempt would be made to tamper with the aeroplane."

"Oh, my hat!" panted Jack Grey.

He and the others seized the note and read it. It was quite short, and the writing was bad. But it was clear enough, and it ran as follows:

"Mr. Nelson Lee,

Nixon has weakened the controls of the aeroplane. I couldn't stop him. For heavens sake look at everything before you start flying. I felt I had to warn you. Thank you for saving my life.

JAKE STARKEY."

"Don't you understand, boys?" asked the doctor. "Starkey sent this note without Nixon being aware of it—he did not dare to let his confederate know what he had done. So he sent the message in the hands of a small native boy—imagining that it would get into Mr. Lee's hands at once."

Handforth was as pale as a sheet.

"And so it would have done, sir, if my memory hadn't been so rotten," he exclaimed, breathing hard. "Oh, I—I don't know what to say——"

"We are all quite certain, Handforth, that you are not to be blamed," put in Brett softly. "You thought the note of no consequence, and so you did not give it the attention it deserved. This warning is now useless, since it has arrived after the aeroplane has left."

"But she flew beautifully, sir," said Watson.

"Exactly," agreed the doctor. "But you must remember that there was no particular strain. It is when the aeroplane is diving that the danger will be greatest. And then, of course, the machine will crash to earth——"

"Don't talk about it, sir," panted Handforth huskily. "Can't we get off at once? They might be forced to descend, and we shall be able to help them."

"We will go at the earliest possible moment," declared Brett.

The news soon spread through the whole party. And for a certain time consternation reigned. But in the bustle of starting out into the desert the worry was somewhat forgotten.

But everybody was filled with anxiety. And Dr. Brett, at least, feared the worst.

CHAPTER IV.

THE TREASURE OF EL SAFRA.

SAND—more sand—and still more sand! That is all that I could see when I looked beyond the wings and tail of the aeroplane itself.

We were flying over the desert, with the great sands below us, and with the sun shining out of a cloudless sky above. We were high up, and the air was quite delightfully cool.

This, at all events, was a comfort, and we appreciated it. The big biplane had been flying for nearly an hour, but she had not kept to a straight course. Nelson Lee had zigzagged a good deal, and we were all keeping our eyes well open for the first sight of El Safra.

"It's time we caught sight of something, isn't it, sir?" I asked at length.

"Yes, we ought to be within sight of El Safra by this time," said Nelson Lee. "I don't think the oasis is much more than a hundred miles from Zambi—it might be a great deal less, in fact."

"Then why haven't we spotted it?"

"Because we haven't flown in the right direction, I presume," replied the gov'nor.

Of course, this was no ordinary conversation. I was sitting in the cockpit beside Nelson Lee, and for some little time I had been controlling the big machine. For she was fitted with dual control. Lord Dorrimore sat behind, in luxury and comfort. I found that the biplane answered my touch beautifully.

Even at such close quarters Nelson Lee and I found it necessary to yell at one another, with our faces close together. There was a telephone, if we had cared to use it. But we didn't want to be hampered by having the receivers strapped to our ears, and all the rest of it.

"She's going wonderfully, sir," I said admiringly. "These engines are spankers, aren't they? All British, too! That's the stuff to give 'em, sir!"

"The machine would not be going so well, Nipper, if Captain Nixon had had his way," said Nelson Lee calmly. "I said nothing about it before the start, because I did not wish to cause any alarm."

"You didn't say anything about what, gov'nor?"

"This machine was tampered with during the night," said Lee grimly. "I don't know if Nixon takes me for a fool, but I am certainly not foolish enough to start on a flight across the desert without giving the machine a thorough examination beforehand."

"Great Scott!" I ejaculated. "Do you mean to say that Nixon and Starkey monkeyed with the controls, sir?"

"I'm not sure about Starkey—I fancy he had nothing to do with it; but Nixon certainly did monkey with the controls, as you put it," replied Nelson Lee. "Nixon also laboured under a false impression that I should commence this flight without even running my eye over the machine. I spent three solid hours this morning, Nipper, satisfying myself that all was right."

"And what damage did the rotter do?" I asked.

"Practically no actual damage," said the gov'nor. "I was able to make things right very quickly—once I had located the exact places where Nixon had been at work. The machine is perfect now."

So Dr. Brett and the others need not have been so concerned regarding our safety. Nelson Lee would have told the doctor all about it if he had had any suspicion that Starkey had written that note. But how was the gov'nor to guess such a thing?

Starkey, it seemed, was not such a bad fellow, after all. And Simon Grell, who was with Brett's party, was very pleased—except for the fact that the gov'nor and I and Dorrie seemed to be in danger. Grell

knew that his former friend was only too anxious to escape from Nixon's influence.

"I say, sir," I remarked, "what a murderous ruffian that chap must be!"

"Nixon, you mean?" said Lee. "Yes, Nipper, you are quite right. Nixon is certainly a dastardly scoundrel. Last night he sent a gang of Arabs to knife me, and to-day he wanted to see this machine crashed—or, at least, he wanted us to crash far out in the desert, beyond all help!"

"And should we have crashed—if you hadn't spotted the damage?"

"I hardly think so, Nipper," replied the gov'nor. "Nevertheless, we should have been in grave difficulties, and I doubt if I could have brought the aeroplane safely to earth. We should probably have had a shaking, and the machine would have been useless."

"Well, it's a good job you've got sharp eyes, sir," I exclaimed. "But what's wrong with the sky?" I went on. "It's beginning to look a bit sickly, isn't it? Look at that yellowish haze!"

Nelson Lee glanced up.

"There is probably an atmospheric disturbance over towards the north," he said. "I don't think it will trouble us yet awhile, Nipper. But you were talking about sharp eyes just now. Where are yours?"

"My eyes?" I asked. "Why— Oh! I see what you mean, sir!"

For there, clearly visible in the distance ahead, was a break in the desert. A rock-like hill jutted out of the everlasting sand, and near it there were distinct signs of green. I could even make out the waving heads of a few palm-trees.

"El Safra!" I exclaimed.

"Undoubtedly," said Nelson Lee. "It is the only oasis in this region—and it is a spot which is always avoided. There is no drinking water in El Safra, my boy—so it is useless for caravans to visit the place. It is right out of the track of all the recognised caravan routes."

I became aware that Lord Dorrimore was waving his arms wildly, and shouting to us. He had seen the oasis, too, and was trying to attract our attention—believing, apparently, that our own eyes were useless.

"All right, Dorrie," I yelled. "We'll be there in a jiffy!"

I wasn't far wrong, for we were soon soaring in circles round the oasis. It was a very small affair, being no wider than a mile at any portion, and about half a mile across, on the average.

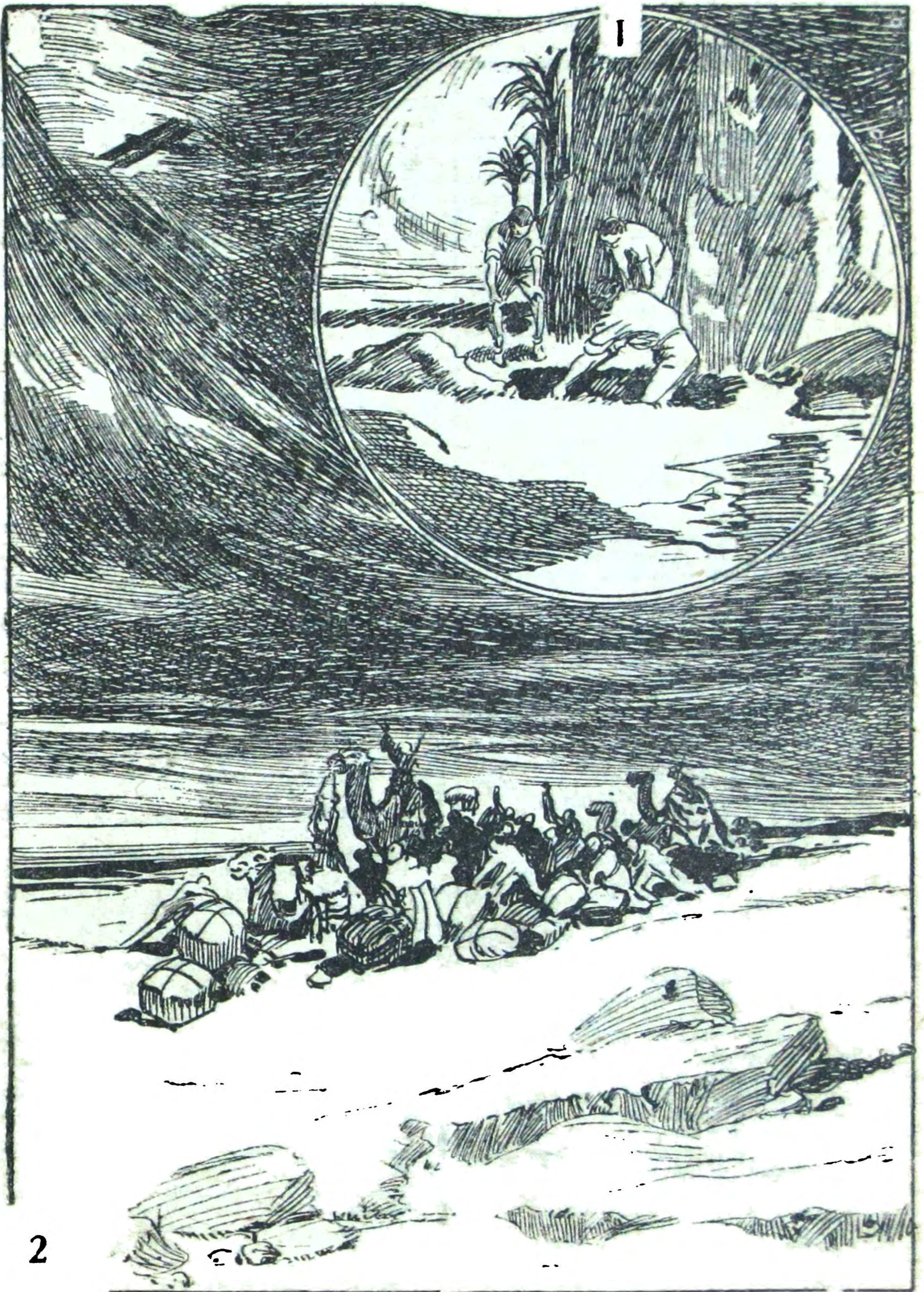
The rocks rose sheer out of the sand at one place, forming a high wall. And in a hollow, sheltered by the rocks, grew palm-trees and coarse grass and vegetation. It was undoubtedly a place to avoid.

Nelson Lee switched off the engines, and allowed the big biplane to glide down towards the oasis.

"Do you think we can land, sir?" I asked.

"I don't know; but we shall soon find out," Lee replied.

Two hundred feet from the ground the engines were switched on again, and the



1. Nelson Lee's fork had struck something hard in the soft sand.
2. In a second, it seemed, the terrible simoom was upon the adventurers.

throttle was opened just sufficiently to give the aeroplane "way." We roared along, examining the ground intently.

Then round we came, and again the engines were silenced.

"We'll chance it, Nipper," said the guv'nor.

We glided lower and lower, struck the ground gently, bumped jerkily over an uneven patch, sprang into the air again, and then came down with a flop which strained the wires considerably.

"By gad!" said Dorrie. "That's done somethin', hasn't it?"

But Nelson Lee was too busy to reply. He had not allowed the engines to stop, and they were now opened up again, and we "taxied" over the ground towards the high wall of rock.

We found that the surface was much better further on; indeed, there would be no difficulty in taking off, when the time came. And it was a comfort to know that our rather heavy landing had done no damage.

"Well, we've got here," I said, as I climbed to the ground. "My hat! Isn't it terrifically hot?"

"Did you expect to find icebergs here, young 'un?" asked Dorrimore. "This place is a rotten hole, you know. It's a wonder to me that anythin' lives here—any vegetation, I mean."

"There are a good many similar places dotted about the various African deserts," said Nelson Lee. "I don't think this oasis is really called El Safrá. Either Sir Crawford Grey named it, or it was christened by the poor fellow who died of thirst, after concealing his treasure of precious stones."

"Yes, there's the treasure to look for, sir," I remarked. "I suppose you've brought that locket with you?"

"No, Nipper, I have not," said Lee.

"Then we're helpless!" I shouted.

"Upon my soul!" chuckled the guv'nor. "Here's somebody else who takes me for a simpleton! I have not got the locket, Nipper, but I have the directions—translated into English—in my pocket-book. Brett has the same, so there is not much prospect of our missing the prize—if it really exists."

Before starting on the search, we refreshed ourselves with sandwiches and draughts of cold water. There was a plentiful supply of water on board—and we needed it, too.

"There's something wrong with the sky, sir," I declared, after a while. "It's not so blue as usual, and the sun looks ill. And the air's positively awful—as heavy as lead."

Nelson Lee nodded slowly.

"Yes, I'm afraid there's something coming," he said. "Our friends on foot will be in the thick of it, too. What a piece of infernal luck if they are hit by one of those simooms."

"Oh, it won't be as bad as that, sir," I said.

But I wasn't so sure.

The search for the treasure was not particularly exciting. According to the meagre instructions which had been scratched upon

the locket, the loot was to be found buried in the sandy earth at the foot of a rock "which was quite round," and with "the top of a table." The exact spot was on that side of the round rock which faced the open desert.

Now these instructions were by no means explicit. There might be scores of round rocks, for all we knew. But the directions were there, and we could not alter them.

However, the task proved to be simple.

We had not been searching for more than fifteen minutes when Nelson Lee stood upon a slab of stone, and pointed.

"Where are our eyes?" he asked. "Look at that rock, Dorrie!"

"By jingo!" said Dorrie. "That looks a likely fellow—eh?"

The rock which Lee had pointed out stood quite alone, and isolated from the other jagged spikes. Owing to the dull background, however, we had not seen it easily. Approaching, we saw that the rock was, indeed round, and the top was perfectly flat—similar to a giant tree which has been cut down half-way up the trunk.

"That's it, for a cert.!" I declared.

"Facing the open desert," said Nelson Lee. "That can only be this way."

We had brought tools with us, and the guv'nor and I were soon at work. Dorrie stood looking on, and giving advice—which, of course, was not needed, even if it had been sensible.

"Hot work, sir," I panted at last.

"We may have to dig much deeper—" began Lee. "But wait! What is this?"

I paused, as his fork struck something in the soft earth. The next moment we all scrambled round. Nelson Lee was holding a goatskin water-bag—such as are carried by camels across the desert.

And this bag was not empty, although it contained no water.

"Open it, sir!" I exclaimed huskily.

"Steady, young 'un—steady!" was Lee's calm remark. "Don't get excited. This water-skin certainly looks promising, but we must not be too sure. Have you got a knife handy?"

"Here you are, sir," I said promptly.

"This bag is not in a very excellent condition," went on the guv'nor drily, "so we shall do no harm in slashing it open. Dear me! We sha'n't want your knife after all, Nipper. The skin is so rotten that I can tear it."

The bag practically came apart in his hands, and the next moment we were staring at a pile of glittering stones which lay revealed. Some of them were cut, and some uncut, but all were without settings.

"Diamonds!" ejaculated Dorrie calmly—"diamonds an' emeralds—an' rubies, by gad! An' they're prize sort of rubies, too!"

"My hat!" I gasped. "Are they genuine, sir?"

Nelson Lee examined several of the stones very closely before he replied. Then he looked up and smiled.

"Yes, Nipper, they are certainly genuine."

he replied. "These rubies are among the best I have ever seen. The whole collection is not much more than a pocketful—and a small pocket at that; but it is extremely valuable."

"How much do you reckon the stones are worth, sir?" I asked.

"It is a difficult matter to decide off-hand," replied Nelson Lee. "But these jewels would certainly be worth three hundred thousand to any enterprising diamond merchant of Hatton Garden. With these to handle, he would probably make over a hundred thousand profit himself, in addition."

I whistled.

"That's not far off half a million," I exclaimed, with a deep breath. "Well, dash it all, it was worth all the risk to bag this prize, sir."

"It was, indeed," agreed Nelson Lee. "I had no idea it would turn out to be so magnificent. Fifty thousand was the utmost I had allowed myself to hope for. This trip will add greatly to the riches of the whole party—for Sir Crawford intends that we shall all participate in the sharing."

Nelson Lee took charge of the treasure. He slipped the whole collection of stones into a leather bag, and placed it in his pocket. Then he took a piece of chalk from his pocket, and approached the rock pillar.

Upon it he scrawled, in plain letters:

"Treasure recovered by us. All hopes exceeded. Do not trouble to search. We are quite all right. NELSON LEE."

"What's that for, sir?" I asked.

"We may not be here when the other party arrives—although I fully expect we shall be," replied the gov'nor. "However, this chalking was a short task, and it may save Brett a lot of trouble if we don't happen to be on the spot. To-morrow we shall scout round—and there is just a possibility that we shall get lost!" he added, with a smile.

It was also possible that Nelson Lee suspected something else. The weather was looking very curious, and there was no doubt that something unpleasant was brewing. Even if we didn't catch it, the other party might.

We had practically decided to make a little camp when the sun became much duller, and we were all aware of a most curious moan which came out of the distance. There was no wind, and the silence was absolutely terrible. That moaning sound seemed to be isolated, somehow, from the silence of the desert.

"It is caused by the wind, Nipper," said Nelson Lee. "A terrible wind, which is blowing along many miles distant from here. Possibly it will miss us altogether. Let us hope so."

"We don't want it," said Dorrie lazily.

"But we might get it, all the same," I remarked.

And we did.

Not half an hour had elapsed before the storm was upon us. But it was not much of

an affair—not half so bad as I had anticipated. The wind had sprung up suddenly, and almost before we could look round the air was thick with clouds of sand.

But we were saved by the high masses of rock which jutted up from the ground. The storm came across the desert in such a way that the rocks kept us and the aeroplane in a kind of vacuum. We only received a few eddies of the actual storm, and suffered scarcely any discomfort.

And it was over less than ten minutes afterwards.

It passed across the desert like a tornado sweeps the country in parts of the United States. But this was altogether quicker in action. With the passing of the storm the sky cleared, and the sun shone with all its usual brilliance. It was now evening, and the sun was low.

"Well, that wasn't much to shout about," I remarked. "It wasn't half so bad as a good old thunderstorm in the Old Country."

"You overlook the fact, Nipper, that we were fortunately placed," said Lee. "Had we been on the open desert you would not have said that the storm was light. Ten minutes of that is enough to wipe out a whole caravan—and I am rather worried about our friends."

"Perhaps it didn't strike their path at all, sir."

"Perhaps not; but, in any case, I intend to take action at once," said the gov'nor. "We will go up in the aeroplane, and scout round. We have an abundant supply of petrol, and the flight to Zambi itself is nothing much. We will certainly go up immediately."

And all preparations were made.

But, meanwhile, the other party had, indeed, met with grave trouble.

We in El Safra had not felt the sting of the simoom; but they, on the open desert, had a different story to tell.

CHAPTER V.

THE TERROR OF THE DESERT.

"**P**ERHAPS they're all dead by this time!" said Handforth gloomily.

"Oh, don't be so jolly gloomy," growled Watson.

"How can I be jolly, you ass, if I'm gloomy?" demanded Handforth, who was always ready for an argument. "I wish you'd speak decent English!"

The truth was the whole party was in a state of "nerves." The uncertainty regarding the fate of Nelson Lee, Dorrie, and myself had caused everybody in Dr. Brett's party to be worried and anxious.

If they had only known that the gov'nor had detected Nixon's villainy!

But they didn't know, and their greatest wish was to arrive at the oasis as quickly as possible. Therefore the camels were urged to go their fastest—and this was not a very easy task. For camels are obstinate brutes, and will only go if the fit takes them.

The march was quite successful during the greater part of the first day. Brett reckoned to be at El Safra by the following morning, if all went well. It seemed, however, that all would not go well.

For the sky began to look ominous soon after midday had passed.

"Wau! I like not the appearance of the sun, my master!" exclaimed Umlosi, who was riding next to Dr. Brett at the head of the expedition. "Methinks there is trouble not far distant. I am sorely disturbed in mind."

"There's a sandstorm brewing somewhere, Umlosi," said Brett. "But it will very probably miss us altogether. Let's hope so, at all events."

Through the afternoon the party continued its trek across the endless sands. And the air became hotter and more humid. Everybody was in a state of discomfort, but the water supply was plentiful. And this eased matters a lot.

When the sun was getting low in the heavens the first real sign of the approaching trouble became manifest. The camels were irritable and restless—although, of course, there was nothing very remarkable in this. Camels are never particular about their manners.

But just at present they were more obstinate than usual, and it was quite clear that they knew more about the weather signs than we did. The Arabs with us, who had been plodding along calmly all the afternoon, advised a halt.

"What's up now?" demanded Handforth, who was with the other juniors. "What the dickens do we want to stop here for? We're not going to camp now—there's hours of daylight left."

Simon Grell, who was near by, looked at the sky.

"I reckon there's something bad on the way, sir," he remarked. "I don't like the look of the sky at all. We're going to have a change for the worse—an' I reckon it'll be a mighty quick change."

"Oh, it's nothing, surely?" said Grey.

But the Arabs knew more about it than the St. Frank's juniors. The horizon on all sides had vanished into a thick coppery haze, and it was difficult to say where the sky ended and where the desert began. They seemed to be merged.

And the sun, low down in the heavens, had taken on an ominous, bronze hue. The sky itself was dull yellow.

"I fear that disaster will overtake us, if we do not make all haste to afford ourselves protection," said Umlosi solemnly. "It is not my wish to cast gloom over all, but these signs in the heavens are too plain to be ignored. We are in a strange country, and I like it not."

"It isn't very pleasant, I'll agree," said Fenton.

"Ere long this dreadful calm will vanish, and then a wind, even as the breath of a dragon, will come sweeping down upon us,"

said Umlosi. "Thou art wise, my master, in making preparations."

"It'll be a sandstorm, I'm afraid," said Brett. "And they are ugly customers in this region. We shall be lucky if we come out of it unhurt."

"Wise words, O man of medicine," said the Kutana chief. "Even as thou sayest, the luck will be great if we all live to see another dawn."

"Cheerful boulder, isn't he?" grunted Morrow.

"Well, I don't suppose he's far wrong," said Handforth.

"My father once told me about a sandstorm, my dear friends," put in Nicodemus Trotwood. "He was travelling in the Libyan Desert—which is a long way from here—and he nearly lost his life."

"Let's hope you don't lose yours, Nicky," said Handforth.

He was to remember those words not very long afterwards.

The juniors tried to appear careless and unconcerned. But, of course, they were all rather scared. And the signs in the sky were really enough to scare anybody. And they had been in Africa long enough to know that a simoom is a dreadful phenomenon—an awful experience to pass through.

It was a comfort to know that sandstorms are, as a rule, of short duration. They are frequently quite long enough, however, to kill every member—animal and human being—of a large caravan.

The terrible heat, and the suffocation caused by the fine sand, is always the reason for death. The fine sand is driven with appalling force by the high winds—and there is no shelter in the open desert.

Great hills of sand are moved completely during a simoom. And woe betide a party which happens to be near—for the sand will come and bury them many feet below the surface. And death, in that case, is inevitable.

The preparations were swift. Each member of the party was provided with a huge, closely-woven canvas bag, the top of which could be sealed. Air was admitted through a specially constructed filter. And in each bag, near where the head would lie, was a flask of pure water, with a valve-cap. The water was quite intact, but by simply sucking at the mouthpiece one could obtain the precious fluid.

And the party only just got into their bags in time. If the sand came in huge quantities they would all be buried alive—but that would have to be chanced. They were far safer, protected from the blinding sands.

The sun had disappeared completely, and premature twilight had fallen—a deep, dense gloom. And the heat was almost suffocating, even before the storm struck the party.

The roar of the storm became louder and louder—and then, all in a second, it seemed, the terrible simoom was upon the adventurers. It took them by surprise, even though they had been expecting it.

It seemed to rage for hour upon hour.

The heat had increased almost twenty-fold, and life seemed impossible. And the wind—like the blast of a dynamite charge—was absolutely scorching. The air was filled with clouds of fine, choking sand. The clear atmosphere of the desert was changed into a nightmare of fog—a fog caused by the sand.

Nobody really knew what happened, for nearly every member of the party became dazed and bewildered. But for those flasks of water, placed so handily, it is probable that several members of the expedition would have choked to death.

But the storm was over at last.

And it had not really been one of the worst of its type. The Arabs, who were well accustomed to such delightful episodes, were not particularly worried. They seemed little the worse for their adventure.

But the boys and Simon Grell were nearly unconscious when the storm had passed. Brett was dazed, but he had all his wits about him. As for Umlool, he was disgusted with the whole thing—and really none the worse.

Everybody's clothing was filled and choked with sand. Their hair, ears, and noses were filled right up. Everybody and everything was smothered. If the storm had lasted much longer death would have been certain.

"Well, my hat!" gasped Handforth, shaking the sand out of his ears. "If this is a sandstorm, then that storm the chap wrote about in the book was a giddy picnic! He didn't know anything about simoons."

"Are you keen to go through another one, Handy?" asked Morrow.

"No jolly fear!" said the redoubtable leader of Study D. "Not me! Once is enough for anybody, I should think. It's a wonder we ain't all dead! Can't we have a bath somewhere?"

They really needed a bath; but all they could do, under the circumstances, was to strip themselves and drink their fill of water.

It was difficult to see, for the sand had entered their eyes, and everything was blurred and indistinct. But it was glorious to know that the storm had passed, and that the danger was over.

Grey and Watson declared that they saw curious flashes of lightning near the ground, before the storm actually commenced—they saw the flashes in the distance. That lightning had probably been caused by the friction of the sand on the air.

"It lasted about two hours, didn't it?" gasped Watson chokily.

"Two hours!" exclaimed Dr. Brett. "You may be surprised to know, Watson, that the storm only commenced twelve minutes ago!"

"Oh, you must be mistaken, sir!"

"The actual simoom was not longer than five minutes in duration," said the doctor. "It seemed like hours, didn't it? But now that it is all over we can soon get on the march again—and I judge that we shall have a cool, clear evening."

"That's comforting, anyhow, sir," said Watson.

It was really surprising how quickly the

storm had passed. The sky had become clear again, and the evening sun was shining with much brilliance. The spirits of the party rose greatly.

And then came a dreadful shock.

"I don't see Trotwood," said Brett, a few minutes later, looking round him. "Do you know where he is, boys?"

"Trotwood!" echoed Handforth. "Why, I'd forgotten all about him! He was here when the storm started——"

"You need not tell us that, Handforth," interrupted the doctor. "Perhaps the poor lad was overcome by the heat, and he might still be in his bag. We must look for him."

"Begad!" exclaimed Montie, with much concern. "I hope nothin' has happened to the dear fellow. It would be shockin' if——"

But Tregellis-West did not finish his sentence—he was really afraid to.

And an immediate search was made for Nicodemus Trotwood. Everybody was quite certain that he would be found within a few minutes. But the minutes passed, and still there was no sign of the missing junior.

And then the anxiety gave place to real concern. Search as they would, they could find no trace whatever of the junior! It was surmised that he had become partially buried in the sand.

And the immediate neighbourhood of the caravan was searched closely and diligently. All to no purpose.

A great deal of excitement was caused by the appearance of the huge biplane. Nelson Lee, Dorrie, and I were in that. But, owing to the curious atmospheric conditions, we did not see the caravan.

But they saw us—and they also saw us dip down and disappear behind a great hill of sand, a mile or two away. Before any determined effort could be made to reach the spot the aeroplane soared up again, and made off in the opposite direction.

It was mysterious, but the party was greatly relieved in one sense. For they knew that the aeroplane was in perfect working order, and that Captain Nixon's vile plot had failed.

But Nicodemus Trotwood had gone. The sandstorm had not passed without claiming a victim. The only possible explanation was that he had been buried deep in the sand, and that death had come swiftly.

Until darkness descended the search was continued, although everybody knew that it was hopeless. The very fact that Trotwood was not visible proved beyond question that he had perished—for he could not live under the sand.

And when the caravan moved onwards once more they were a downcast collection of human beings. All the spirit had been taken out of them. One member of the party had been claimed by the desert, and the shock was terrible.

Dr. Brett scarcely knew how he could break the awful news to Nelson Lee. But he had done his best to protect the lives of

all those in his charge. And no man could do more than his best.

But it was a ghastly affair, and Dr. Brett was looking years older as he led the party onwards towards El Salra.

CHAPTER VI.

OUT OF THE TRYING PAN.

NELSON LEE turned his head. "Ready?" he shouted. "Go ahead, gov'nor!" I roared. "Everything's O.K.!"

The engine roared with all their enormous power, and the great biplane moved swiftly across the somewhat uneven ground, and then took off beautifully—far better than we had hoped for.

"Excellent!" shouted the gov'nor.

There was still a few hours of daylight left, and our idea was to fly over the desert, searching for a sign of Brett's party, which, we believed, had walked right into the arms of the simoom.

It was a glorious sensation to be flying over that grim plain of sands. Modern civilisation had conquered, and the deserts were no longer impassable. And it exhilarated me to feel that the great sand plains were no longer places of slow and tedious travel.

The sky was not quite so clear as we should have liked it, and from above a rather curious phenomenon was apparent. There was a kind of haze over the ground, and objects were rendered dull and well-nigh invisible unless we were passing immediately overhead.

Yet the haze was only visible in patches.

And we found that at a thousand feet a stiff wind was blowing, although all was now calm on the ground. So Nelson Lee descended fairly low, for we didn't wish to be blown out of our course.

We searched for a considerable time, the engines running at half power. But we saw nothing, there was no sign of any human beings on those baking plains. And we were almost beginning to think of going back.

We had travelled a good distance from the oasis, and we should be in a fine way if we were compelled to descend now.

"In order to get back, I shall have to climb high, so that we may see our objective," said Nelson Lee. "It will be quite visible from here, Nipper, if we get up to five thousand feet."

"But we must search for——"

I paused, and caught my breath in.

The ground beneath me was hazy, and everything looked drab. But, as we were flying over a kind of sand valley, the floor of which was perfectly plain and smooth, I saw a human figure!

"Stop!" I yelled. "Stop, sir! There's somebody down there!"

"Yes, I saw him, my lad," said Lee.

He banked the machine over, and we swung round. Then, dipping lower into the sand valley, we recognised the figure as that of

a schoolboy. He was certainly one of Dr. Brett's party.

"Great Scott!" I yelled. "Where are the others?"

I was filled with concern; but Nelson Lee was wondering if it would be safe to land. It did not seem that it would be—until we all three noticed that the boy below was walking without his feet sinking in.

There was a considerable stretch of smooth surface, and Nelson Lee shut off the engines and glided down. As it turned out, we landed perfectly. It was as though we had descended upon a specially prepared lawn.

And then we saw that the boy was Nicodemus Trotwood!

"Thank heaven you have come, sir," he panted huskily.

"How is this, Trotwood?" asked Nelson Lee, as he looked down. "Where are all the others?"

Trotwood was certainly looking bad. His eyes were bloodshot, and his face was sickly in hue. But he managed to climb up the chassis, and scrambled into the passenger seat where Dorrie was lounging.

"Out with it, young man!" said his lordship, with a queer note in his voice. "What has happened to Umloot? Where is Brett? Where are the others?"

"I—I don't know, sir," said Trotwood, terror in his eyes. "A sandstorm came upon us, and we all got into bags for protection. But mine didn't close properly, and in the thick of the storm I was nearly suffocated."

"What did you do?" asked Lee.

"I staggered about for some time, sir," said the junior. "I don't remember much. The air was so thick that I didn't know anything. I just dragged myself along, helped by the wind. Then I tripped, and rolled deep down into a hollow. The storm went over me after that, and I was saved."

"But what did you do when the simoom had passed?"

"I wandered about, sir, and I was still wandering when I saw you," said Trotwood. "That's all I know, Mr. Lee. I—I must have lost myself; but the others can't be far off, unless—unless——"

"They're all buried?" asked Lee quietly.

"Well, I don't think that has happened; but we must make certain."

"How air?" I asked huskily.

"We shall ascend to a great height, wind or no wind, and it will be possible for us to see the desert in every direction—and far more satisfactorily than aimlessly flying about near the ground," said the gov'nor. "We are fortunate in having such a fine stretch of sand just here."

"There are plenty of stretches the same, sir," I said. "We needn't have been scared about being forced to come down in the desert. This old bus is capable of anything—she's a ripper!"

The engines were still ticking over, and after opening the throttle Lee taxied the machine for some distance, turned, and then opened right out. We took the air without trouble, and soared aloft.

Trotwood was almost beaten, and he had collapsed beside Dorrie, who was busily administering brandy and water. Meanwhile, the gov'nor and I were eagerly searching the ground beneath us.

We found that the haze was not so apparent when we got high up. But after reaching an altitude of a thousand feet the wind was really bad. Not particularly strong, but gusty.

It sent the aeroplane reeling over from side to side, and Nelson Lee had all he could do to keep us on an even keel. Higher and higher we rose, and then our terrible fears were allayed.

For, right away in the West, the haze was clearer, and through it we could see many tiny dots in the desert. Quivering with excitement, I seized the binoculars, and applied them to my eyes.

The little dots sprang into camels and human beings. I could even distinguish the white people from the Arabs.

"I can see Brett!" I jerked out. "Yes and there's Grell, and old Umlosi, and Fenton, and Morrow!"

"Good!" said the gov'nor. "But what about the boys?"

"There are five, sir—that's all of them," I ejaculated, with great relief. "That means to say they're all O.K. Thank goodness! Steer over in that direction, sir, and let 'em see us."

"It sounds easier than it actually is," said Lee grimly.

For the wind was getting more gusty with every minute that passed. And we now began to experience a new sensation. Clouds seemed to be forming, for we continually passed through masses of mist.

In order to avoid these, Nelson Lee rose higher. And by the time we had attained another two thousand feet the desert was lost. All we could see was thick masses of misty cloud banks a thousand feet beneath us. But we were flying in comparatively calm air.

"I'm afraid we've got ourselves into a fix, Nipper," said Nelson Lee. "We can only steer by compass now—and it is certainly hopeless for us to find the caravan. However we know that all are safe, so it does not matter much. Our main concern is to locate the oasis."

"Perhaps these clouds will disperse soon, sir," I said hopefully. "Anyhow, wouldn't it be as well to dive through them?"

"Perhaps you are right, young 'un," agreed the gov'nor.

And so we dived down rather steeply. But before we actually reached the cloud banks something seemed to take hold of our machine underneath, and to pitch it over sideways.

Dorrie and Trotwood were nearly flung out, and I only just managed to save myself in the nick of time.

The aeroplane tipped over, rolled on its wing tips in a most sickening manner, performed a nose dive, and then Nelson Lee

managed to get her back on an even keel—with the wind behind us.

And what a wind!

It pushed us along at a speed of about two hundred miles an hour—and I am not exaggerating. It was a roaring gale, and none of us had been ready for it. I suppose it was an after-effect of the simoom, but only affecting the upper air. On the desert a dead calm reigned, probably.

We swayed terribly, dipped this way and that, and bumped about in the most terrifying manner. Lee attempted to climb the machine higher, but the wind was altogether too violent.

To descend into the cloud during that gale would have been madness, so we could only continue as we were going. And we were travelling away from the oasis all the time.

Once Nelson Lee tried to turn, so that we should fight against the wind—and so get back to El Safra. But that once was quite enough. Before the turn was half made the wind took hold of us.

The giant machine was lifted like a straw, in spite of the fact that the engines were running "all out." Over we went, and we should have performed something like a loop if the gov'nor had not been smart; and looping on such a machine is not exactly a safe game. A twin-engined biplane is not made for "stunting," like a bantam scout.

We got back to our proper position with difficulty, and then continued our headlong flight.

"Where the dickens shall we get to, sir?" I asked at last.

"Heaven alone knows, my boy," said Nelson Lee. "But we shall have plenty of petrol, in any case. We are using very little now—I have throttled down considerably—and two of the tanks are still quite full. No matter where we get, we can easily fly back to Zambl, or direct to the coast. The great difficulty will be in landing—and darkness will soon be on us."

"We're in an unholy mess!" I declared. "Who on earth dreamed that this little tornado was raging up here!"

Another ten minutes elapsed, during which time the speedometer indicated that we were travelling at one hundred and eighty miles an hour. It was the wind which was carrying us along.

But, while there was still a fair amount of daylight, we noticed that the gale was losing its strength. And the clouds looked thinner, and more filmy.

"We'll chance it again!" said Lee grimly.

He was anxious—and this was not surprising. Our height was about eight thousand feet, and the clouds were only two thousand feet below us. And once more we dived downwards.

This time all went well.

The wind was now merely a high breeze, and not very bumpy. We dived down rapidly, and struck the clouds. Through them we plunged, and for a while we were flying through dense fog.

Then, as quickly as we had entered, we

emerged on the under side. And now I could tell that the air was almost dead calm. The wind was only blowing above the cloud-bank.

But a tremendous surprise awaited us.

"Great goodness!" I yelled, staring downwards.

For, as far as the eye could reach, there stretched mile upon mile of dense forest country! A river, looking like a silver band, lay almost beneath us, and here and there were patches of clear grassland.

Of the desert there was not the faintest sign!

"By gad!" shouted Dorrie. "That oasis has grown, ain't it?"

Nelson Lee turned to me and smiled. There was really no reason for us to be alarmed. We were safe, the others were safe—and Lee had left a message at El Safra for Dr. Brett.

"It is easy enough to realise what has happened," shouted the gov'nor. "That wind carried us along at an appalling pace, and we have left the desert behind, and are now over the dense forest. Owing to the clouds, we could not see where we were being taken; and our instruments have not been on their best behaviour, owing to the atmospheric conditions."

"But what shall we do, sir?" I gasped.

"Land, of course—and make an attempt to discover our location," replied Lee. "We must also make camp for the night. The short twilight will soon be here—and we must not be slow. I dread to think of our predicament if we do not land in the daylight!"

"We should come down into these trees, sir," I said. "My hat! We'd better get down as soon as we can—it's getting dark already!"

And so, after flying along for a mile or two further, we sighted something which pleased us immensely.

A river flowed serenely along, and upon one bank of it stood a large native kraal. The other side of the river was bare—a beautiful stretch of smooth grassland.

"As good as Brooklands, sir," I shouted. "And a village handy, too! We can dig with the giddy chief to-night, and ask directions."

"Exactly!" said Nelson Lee. "And there will probably be a few white men in a large settlement of this kind."

We saw numbers of excited blacks running backwards and forwards. And Nelson Lee lost no time in making his landing. For we did not want the grassy meadow to become filled with humanity. If that happened, we should have to seek another landing-place.

But it didn't.

We swept down, and touched the grass lightly. A short run forward, and we were at a standstill.

"Rippin'!" said Dorrie admiringly. "You're a top-hole pilot, Lee. But where the dooce have we got to? I'd be awfully obliged if you'd tell me."

"Perhaps we shall know before long," said Nelson Lee, as he descended to the ground. "We must be thankful that we

are safe, and that the aeroplane is unharmed. We have been very lucky."

"Rather, sir," I agreed. "And the others are all right, too. They'll find your message on the oasis, and they'll return to Zambl. So there's no need to worry at all."

But I spoke rather too soon!

Even as we were about to move away from the biplane a swarming crowd of nearly naked blacks came rushing towards us. They certainly did not look as though they had been in very close contact with civilisation.

Trotwood was close to me, and he was quite calm. He had recovered from the effects of his terrible experience to a certain extent. His simple-looking face was showing colour again.

"Quite a handsome throng, my dear Nipper!" he murmured.

"They're not so bad as they look," I said reassuringly.

But the blacks charged at us, yelling like fury. They all carried spears, and for a moment I thought that it was all up. The savages did not use their weapons, however. They saw that we were unarmed, and they simply flooded rounded us. The next moment we were parted, and each of us was held by a jabbering, excited mob. And then Nelson Lee's voice came to my ears.

"Make no attempt to resist them, boys," he shouted. "I'm afraid we have fallen out of the frying-pan into the fire. These blacks are known as the Beejee tribe, and they have never been subdued. They are hostile, and we must be careful. I recognise their lingo. Keep your heads, and trust to me!"

Almost immediately afterwards we were hustled away towards the kraal. And I cannot say that we were very cheerful. For I knew that our position was bad. The Beejees were known to me by repute, and I had heard all sorts of blood-curdling stories concerning them.

They were cannibals, and their favourite recreation was to sacrifice every white man they could lay hands on. So it did not seem that the gale had blown us to a very healthy spot!

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CHAPTER VII.

THE ATTACK WHICH FAILED.

MEANWHILE gloom had settled upon Dr. Brett's party.

The caravan, struggling on, reached the oasis of El Safra just before noon on the day following the terrible sandstorm. And now another anxiety was added to their troubles.

For the night had passed, and also many further hours of daylight, and yet we had not returned in the aeroplane. What did it look like to them at El Safra? The party half believed that we had been compelled to descend in the desert, owing to the darkness, and that we had crashed.

"The whole position is bad, boys," said Dr. Brett gravely. "We saw the aeroplane last night, and it went into the distance.

Shortly after that the sky became overcast with thick clouds; and it seems only too certain that Mr. Lee lost his bearings, and was compelled to descend."

"It's—it's awful, sir," said Watson miserably. "What's happened to poor old Nipper? If the machine was all right it would have been here before now—the weather's been glorious all day!"

"And we were growling about our luck, because we didn't go in the aeroplane!" said Handforth, his voice husky. "It seems to me we're the lucky ones to be here—safe and sound."

Everybody believed, in fact, that some terrible disaster had occurred. And, apart from the fate of the aeroplane, there was Nicodemus Trotwood to remember. Nobody in Brett's party knew that Trotwood had been picked up. And he had been given up as dead long since. Not a shadow of a doubt remained regarding his fate. Dr. Brett was absolutely positive that Trotwood was buried beneath the sand—and everybody else was positive, too.

"Yes, poor old Nicky has paid dearly for his trip," said Watson sadly. "Poor old son! He was one of the best, too! I can't make out how he was buried. All the rest of us were all right."

"Things do happen like that, dear old boy," said Sir Montie, shaking his head. "You read of boatin' accidents, where five or six people—all rippin' swimmers—are thrown into the water. An' all of them get saved except one. An' that one, as likely as not, is the best swimmer of all. It's fate, begad!"

"Well, it's terribly cruel," said Handforth soberly. "It's ghastly—that's what it is! I—I feel like blubbing—and I ain't ashamed to say so, either! I shall be thankful when we get back to the yacht. Heaven knows, this rotten treasure has cost enough lives—four at least!"

"Including Mr. Lee and Nipper!" said Grey, with a gulp.

"I—I don't believe it!" burst out Watson. "I don't believe that Nipper's dead! It's—it's too awful! I say, let's ask Umlosi! He seems to know a lot about what's happening in other places."

So the Kutana chief was consulted.

"Thou hast asked me strange questions, O white youths," he said gravely. "I am not permitted to know what is passing beyond the reach of my vision. But my snake tells me that—"

"Your snake, Umlosi?" asked Grey curiously.

"He means his instinct," said Watson.

"My snake tells me that all is not lost," went on Umlosi, unperturbed. "I see my master, Umtagati—I see N'Kosee, my father—I see Manzie, the nimble one. And I see them living and active. I do not see them lying cold in death. Nay, it is early to despair. Be thou of good heart, and all may yet be well."

"Good old Umlosi!" said Handforth huskily.

And the Kutana chief's words had undoubtedly cheered the juniors up considerably—although it was rather a false cheer which inspired them. For in their hearts they were ready to fear the worst.

They wanted to get back to Zambé, and back to the yacht. They felt lost—isolated—out in this dreadful desert. Dr. Brett's plan was to start the homeward journey at daybreak on the following morning. Everybody needed a rest, and Brett would not hear of returning earlier.

Nelson Lee's chalked message had been read. And it was understood clearly that the treasure was on the aeroplane. Thus, there was no object in Brett's party remaining. If disaster had befallen the machine, Brett argued, its occupants would make straight for Zambé, and not for El Safra. So the doctor refused to give up hope until Zambé had been again reached.

Some further excitement was brewing, however, quite unknown to the party.

For Captain Nixon was not quite beaten yet. He fondly imagined that the aeroplane had gone to disaster, and that he only had Brett's party to deal with. As it had turned out, his calculation was right. Dr. Brett was not likely to get any support from Nelson Lee!

The journey across the desert had not been difficult. Nixon and Starkey had undertaken the trip, accompanied by two dozen outcasts of the desert—a mixed lot, including Arabs and Bedouins.

Nixon's plan was to attack Brett after the treasure had been recovered from the sand. It was quite a simple idea, and Nixon saw no reason why it should not work. He had gone so far in the matter now that he could not abandon the treasure without making a last final attempt to seize it.

And so it came about that the encampment on the oasis of El Safra was disturbed that night. The plan was to surprise Brett and his party, to seize them, and to overpower them before they could offer resistance.

Then the treasure could be taken, and the rest would be easy. Nixon would certainly make sure that his victims would not reach Zambé again until he himself had had time to get away.

Dr. Brett had been warned by Nelson Lee to keep strict watch and guard. But Brett was careless in his worry—and he could hardly be blamed. He considered the possibility of an attack to be very remote, and did not even trouble to post a man on the watch.

Why should he?

How was it possible for anybody to come out of that bare desert with hostile intentions? Truth to tell, the doctor was so concerned in mind that all else seemed of little or no importance. Had he remembered, he would have posted a watchman. But Brett sat in his tent, smoking and thinking. He wondered how he could return to the yacht; he wondered how he could break the terrible news to Sir Crawford Grey. The baronet would go nearly mad when he learned of the

terrible fate which had befallen so many of his guests.

And, meanwhile, the hostile party was preparing to act.

On the outskirts of the oasis they hovered. The lights of the encampment were visible, and everything was peaceful and quiet. Nixon had already given his orders, and he was highly pleased with himself.

"We're going to win to-night, Jake," he said, rubbing his horny palms together. "There can't be no bloomer—it's a dead cert! All we've got to do is to overpower the whole crowd and lift the booty!"

Jake Starkey grunted.

"Without any killin'?" he asked.

"You fair make me sick," snapped Nixon. "What difference does it make now? Lee an' them others are finished, an' it don't matter to me if these heathens settle the other crowd. They've got their orders, an' it ain't likely that they'll ask questions fust. They'll use their blades, Jake—an' be polite arterwards."

"Yes, I s'pose it's the best way," said Jake slowly.

"Glad to find you're learnin' a bit of sense," said the skipper. "What we've got to do is to creep for'ard through the darkness—slowly and deliberate. Then, at the right moment, we'll spring."

"Fine!" said Starkey.

Shortly afterwards the attack commenced. From all sides the Arabs crept forward towards the encampment. Jake went forward with them. But now his chance had come. Alone, he did not stick to the general plan.

He moved forward swiftly, like a snake wriggling through the grass. And he succeeded in reaching the only tent where a light showed. A moment later he crawled in beneath the canvas—fearful of opening the flap.

"For 'eaven's sake, sir, listen to me!" he gasped, in a husky whisper.

Dr. Brett started up out of his chair, startled by the face which had suddenly appeared under the canvas. And the doctor's hand flew to his revolver, and he remembered, abruptly, Nelson Lee's warning.

"What the thunder——" he began.

"Not so loud, sir—not so loud!" hissed Starkey. "I ain't an enemy, sir—I'm betrayin' my own side, an' you've got to listen!"

"Speak up, then—quick!"

"Nixon and two dozen cut-throats are

creepin' towards the camp at this moment, sir," gasped Starkey. "They mean—murder! That ain't my game, an' if I can save you an' the boys I don't mind if I die for it—I ain't much use, anyhow! I was a fool ever to leave old Simon Grell!"

"Starkey, you're a man!" said Dr. Brett warmly. "You have come forward, at the risk of your own life to give me a warning. I know that you are speaking sincerely, and you will never regret this night's work!"

Solely owing to Jake Starkey's timely information, Dr. Brett was able to get his forces together. Umlosi, Grell, and Brett and Starkey formed quite a formidable defence. The boys were not allowed to participate, although Fenton and Morrow held themselves ready.

Then, at the right moment, six great flares were ignited—roaring magnesium things which turned the night into day. Each flare was made to burn for half an hour, and they had been especially brought for use in the event of a night attack.

Every one of the attackers was revealed with startling distinctness. There was no cover, and the whole murderous force was exposed.

"Fire!" roared Brett.

Crack! Crack! Crack! Crack!

Five or six revolvers spat out their venom, and the shots were continued. All the bullets were aimed high, and they flew harmlessly into the night. But the attacking Arabs were scared out of their wits—and they flew, without even attempting to make the attack.

Captain Nixon fled, too—and he knew the worst. Starkey had betrayed him! It would be useless making any further attack—even if he could get the Arabs to do so. For the party was now on its guard, and would not be caught napping again. Captain Nixon, in spite of his blind fury, had sense enough to know when he was beaten.

His last card had failed—and he was almost mad with a lust for revenge.

I need scarcely add that Dr. Brett's party reached civilisation again in safety, and that Nelson Lee, Dorrie, Trotwood, and I escaped from the hands of the Beejees. But before we did so we passed through some very exciting adventures. All came right in the finish, and everything was all serene.

But that episode deserves to be told, complete in itself.

THE END.

NEXT WEEK!

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A Tale of the Adventures of an English Lad and a Young American in the
Wild Heart of Africa in Quest of a Mysterious Valley.

By **ALFRED ARMITAGE.**

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

THE FIRST CHAPTERS.

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

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

DICK SELBY and his native servants. Alan and Dick become great pals. They witness the death of an old man named John Hammond, who tells them a wonderful story of a house in the jungle, where an English girl is kept captive. The chums set out to find this mysterious house situated in the Hidden Valley. They meet with a series of adventures, including attacks from the Bajungas, 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. Lorna shows Dick and Alan the subterranean passage, which she explains is their sole means of escape in case of attack. Dick discovers that Taverner has been slowly poisoning Lorna's father with drugs. The would-be murderer is overpowered and imprisoned. He manages to escape and it is feared he will give away the secret of the subterranean passage to Tib Mohammed. The sick man recognises Alan Carne as his son.

(Now read on.)

— — —

The Fateful Moment — Lorna Finds a Brother — Lifting the Veil from the Past — Days of Suspense — An Ominous Discovery — Arrangements for Flight — The Danger Signal — The Lads Join the Defenders.

"YOU are my son!" the sick man repeated, leaning more forward. "You are! I know you are!"

The moment for which Alan had been waiting, the moment which he had been putting off until a more suitable opportunity

should arrive, had come at last, forced thus unexpectedly upon him. An overpowering wave of emotion surged into his heart, and he could scarcely see for the mist that was before his eyes.

"Yes, father!" he cried. "Yes, I am Alan, your own son!"

He slipped his arm around Robert Ferguson's neck, and kissed his haggard cheek; and then, dropping to one knee by his side, he clasped his hand and looked up at him.

"Father!" he said hoarsely. "Dear father! How glad I am that fate had brought us together! Glad for myself, glad for your sake—and for my mother's sake! How foolish, how blind you were! It was all a misunderstanding, a terrible mistake! It was your hot temper and mother's, your hasty action, that separated you! She never did you any wrong, not in thought or in deed! She could have explained, but you stubbornly refused to listen to her, and she never had another chance to tell you the truth. If you only knew how she has suffered, how bitter her regrets and remorse have been, because she concealed from you what she should have told you at the first. All these years she has been waiting, longing, hoping to hear from you and Lorna, fearing that you were both dead, yet clinging to the belief that you were alive, and that some day you would come back to her! Yes, father, you wronged her! I can prove that you did! She gave me a letter for you when I left England! I have carried it about with me, guarded it carefully, on the slim chance of meeting you in Africa! Mother had an idea that you might have hidden yourself in this wild country because you were always so fond of it! I have been out here myself for years, fighting for Britain, a prisoner of German soldiers! And after many adventures and long wandering, Providence guided me to this lonely valley, where you and—"

Interrupted by the sound of footsteps, the youth sprang to his feet and swung round. In the doorway stood Dick Selby and Lorna, with blank consternation on their faces. There was a moment of silence, and then, to

her amazement and indignation, the girl was clasped in Alan's arms. He strained her to him, in spite of her struggles, and pressed his lips to hers.

"My little sister!" he cried. "It is true, Lorna! Quite true! I am your brother!"

"So that's the way of it!" exclaimed Dick Selby. "I congratulate you, old chap! I guess it isn't much of a surprise to me, though! It's been sticking in my mind all along that you were some sort of a relative of Mr. Ferguson and his daughter!"

The girl was speechless with bewilderment, and her cheeks were scarlet. Alan released her, and gripped his chum's hand.

"Yes, that's the way of it!" he said. "My father and sister! They have been lost for years, Dick! This is the happiest hour of my life!"

The sick man had been looking on with dim eyes, a strained, wondering expression on his features. Alan drew his sister into his arms again and kissed her, and then, turning to his father, he fumbled in his pockets and took out the thin parcel wrapped in oilskin which he had had in his possession for many long months.

He gave it to Robert Ferguson, who undid the wrapper, and found within a sealed envelope that was addressed to himself. He tore it open with trembling fingers, and for some few minutes he was silent while he read the letter that it contained. And when he had finished, tears were rolling down his cheeks, and there was a look of remorse in his eyes.

"If I had only known!" he said. "If I had only known! How blind I was!"

He was so deeply moved, so distressed by what he had just learned, that for a time he could not speak. And at length, when he had partly recovered from his emotion, he told the whole story.

It was all new to Lorna, for, with the exception of some vague, childish memories, which were like dreams, she had no recollection of the past. For her life had begun in this hidden valley in the wilds of Africa, and she listened with rapt interest to the narrative.

Her father's real name was Harold Carne. She had been born in London, and she had lived in a big house in a square, with her brother and her parents, who were in more than comfortable circumstances, until she was nearly three years of age. And then had fallen the black shadow that had separated husband and wife. Harold Carne had been led to believe that his wife was disloyal to him, that she was unworthy of his affection. Being a man of fiery temper, he had refused to listen to her explanation, had sneered at her denials. He paused for a moment when he had got to that point, overcome by his feelings again.

"It was many years ago, yet I can recall it as distinctly as if it was but yesterday," he continued, addressing Lorna. "In my hot passion, convinced that I was in the right, I did as wicked and cruel a thing as any man could have done. I was rich, and there was nothing to hinder me. A couple of hours

after the quarrel, on the evening of that same day, I left my home. I carried you off with me, child, and left Alan with his mother. I remained in London for a day or so in order to settle my affairs. I drew a large sum of money, and arranged with my solicitor to pay my wife a liberal allowance in quarterly instalments. And then I sailed for Africa. I had been there twice before my marriage, hunting and exploring, and the country had an irresistible fascination for me. I had always felt that I would like to live there, far from the noisy, bustling world.

"There is no need for me to relate everything. It would be too long a story. I had plenty of money, and with money almost anything can be done, even in savage lands. I bought supplies of all kinds, got together a party of trusty Somalis, and trekked far up into the interior until I found this lonely valley. Here I made a home for you and myself, Lorna; and here you have lived all these years, growing up from childhood to girlhood in ignorance of your early life. There were times when I regretted my hasty action. Now and again doubts troubled me. I imagined that I might have made a mistake, and was tempted to return to England. But my stubborn nature prevailed, and I let matters rest as they were. And now, after all the years that have gone by, kindly fate has brought my son to me with this letter, from which I learn that——"

Harold Carne broke off for a moment, and his features twitched painfully as he glanced at the lad.

"It was a terrible mistake, as Alan has said," he went on, striving to speak calmly. "I was in the wrong, Lorna. I had no cause for grievance against your mother. She behaved foolishly, as she admits herself, and that was all. The man who roused my suspicions, and stirred my jealousy, was her brother. He was a penniless vagabond, a worthless fellow, who had led a dissolute life, and had on several occasions been in serious trouble. He had just been released from prison when he appealed to my wife for assistance, and she was ashamed to tell me, fearing that I would be angry with her. She met him once or twice without my knowledge, and gave him money. It came to my ears that she had been meeting somebody, and that led to the stormy scene which drove me from home in hot anger, and made me an exile in this wild land. If only I had known, child! No words can tell how bitter are my regrets, my sorrow and remorse! My heart aches when I think of what might have been. But I thank heaven that it is not too late to make amends. In the future I may find happiness and forgetfulness. My wife is waiting for me in England, longing for me, willing to forgive my cruel treatment of her, and welcome me home. She is ready to forgive me, Lorna, though I tore you from her, and deprived her of your love all these years. We

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will go back to her, you and I and Alan, as soon as we can——"

The man's voice faltered and choked. He drew Lorna into his arms, and gazed at his son with a wistful smile on his face. Dick clapped his 'chum on the shoulder.

"I'm glad everything has come right!" he exclaimed. "It was mighty queer, wasn't it, that we should have found our way up here! I congratulate you, Alan! You are a lucky chap to have such a jolly sister!" he added, flushing as he glanced at the girl.

In their new-found happiness, in the joy of this wonderful revelation of the past, Alan and Lorna had forgotten the events of the night, and the shadow that darkened the horizon. It was Dick who first mentioned the subject, and Alan, at a word from the girl, disclosed to his father all that had happened since he had arrived at the valley with the young American and Jan Swart.

Mr. Carne listened in amazement and horror, and when all had been made clear to him there was a gleam of fury in his eyes. He started up from his chair, and sank down again, trembling with indignation.

"That scoundrel Taverner!" he cried—"the man I liked and trusted! My illness was due to him! He deliberately, fiendishly poisoned me! I—I can hardly believe it! There must be some mistake."

"No, sir, there isn't!" declared Dick Selby. "I knew from the first, from my knowledge of medicine, that you were being poisoned. And the finding of the stuff in Taverner's room was absolute proof of his guilt. And so was his flight. If he had been innocent he wouldn't have bolted off to the enemy, as he did last night."

"Yes, that's true," Mr. Carne assented. "I'll have to believe in his villainy, I suppose, incredible though it is! If I could get my hands on him now I would shoot him! What a pity he has escaped!"

"It is more than a pity, sir," said Dick, who had learned of what had occurred from Lorna before he had entered the room with her. "There can be no doubt as to what Ralph Taverner will do! He wants his revenge, and he wants the diamonds. He has probably joined the Arabs and the Bajangas by now, and he will guide them to the secret entrance. That is the danger."

"There won't be any danger. Chanka and the Somalis could hold the pass against a force of a thousand men. Tib Mohammed and his wicked crew will not be able to break in."

"I am not so sure of that, Mr. Carne. There are not many of the Somalis, and Tib Mohammed has a large party with him. They may not be in the neighbourhood as yet, but they soon will be."

Mr. Carne shook his head.

"There is no danger," he repeated.

"Don't talk like that, father," urged Lorna. "Alan and I believe that we are in great peril, and so does Dick. What a terrible thing it would be if we were all to be killed, and I would never see my mother again! I want to go home to her, and you are just as anxious to go."

"So we will, dear; but not at once. There are matters to be settled here first. We will wait until the Arabs have attacked and been beaten, and then we will quietly depart."

"No, no, father. I beg of you to go without delay! It will be dangerous to wait! Why should we? Let us escape by the cavern through the cliffs to the stream on the other side of them, and float down to the Bana River."

Mr. Carne shook his head again. His dogged nature had been roused. It would be cowardly, he declared, to take to flight, and let the Arabs and Bajangas raid the valley without firing a shot at them.

But when Alan and Lorna had argued with him, and Dick had joined his entreaties to theirs, he was led to take a more reasonable view of the situation.

"Very well," he said reluctantly, "perhaps you're right, Lorna. Though I doubt if we are in peril, I dare not run any risks. I must get you and Alan safely home to your mother, and it is a heavy responsibility. I will tell you what I am willing to do. The Somalis who are guarding the water-gate will remain where they are. But if we are attacked it will be by the secret passage at the top of the valley, and we will arrange with Chanka to have a big fire in readiness to light at any time, and to discharge several guns if Tib Mohammed and his men should put in an appearance. Meanwhile, we will make our preparations for departure, and if the danger-signal should be given by the firing of guns, Lorna and I will at once cross to the cavern in the cliff. And you and your friend Selby, Alan, will hasten to the other end of the valley with what servants are at the house, and help the Masai and his natives to defend the pass against the Arabs and Bajangas. Should the enemy break through—which I don't expect—you will light the fire as a signal, and you and all of the rest will join Lorna and myself as quickly as you can. And we will then go through the cliffs to the stream beyond them, and travel down to the Bana River in the canoes that are ready. That plan ought to satisfy all of you. We will be prepared for escape, and, should it come to the worst, it will be easy for us to get away, provided my instructions are obeyed. I am confident, however, that we have nothing to fear from Tib Mohammed and his band of Arabs. Even if they do break into the valley they will not find the diamonds which I have collected, for I shall take them with me. And now leave me, please. I am very tired. It has been too much of a strain for me, and—and——"

Exhausted by his efforts, Mr. Carne leaned his head back and closed his eyes. He was already asleep, and, with a finger on her lips, Lorna drew Dick and her brother from the room.

"We will have our breakfast now, Alan," she said, "and then I will ride up the valley and tell Chanka what he is to do. I had better not lose any time, for the Arabs and

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Bajangas may attack the pass during the day."

The apprehensions that were felt by Lorna and the two lads, and by the sick man as well, kept them in a state of suspense for three days. They were prepared for departure, and at the top of the valley a great heap of brush and wood had been collected in readiness to be lighted at any moment.

But the Arabs and Bajangas did not appear, and Somali scouts who were sent out failed to discover any trace of them in the immediate neighbourhood. It was to be presumed that they were still on the march from Tib Mohammed's stronghold, and that Ralph Taverner had gone in that direction, and had fallen in with them. And that he would show them how to get through the cleft in the hills could not be doubted.

Meanwhile, Mr. Carne had been steadily improving. He regained strength so rapidly that, on the second day, he dressed and came downstairs, feeling almost as well as he had been before his illness. During the third day he was in cheerful and confident spirits. He repeatedly expressed his belief that Tib Mohammed and his men would not be able to force the pass, even with Ralph Taverner's guidance, and Dick and Alan were rather inclined to agree with him.

But as they were all seated at supper after dark that night Lorna suddenly jumped up from the table, as if something had occurred to her, and hurried from the room. And a few moments later she returned with a white and agitated face.

"They are gone!" she gasped. "I just remembered them, and went down to see if they were still there!"

She pressed her hand to her bosom, panting for breath. The lads stared at her in bewilderment, and so did Mr. Carne.

"Gone?" he exclaimed. "What are you talking about?"

"The hand-grenades!" replied the startled girl. "You know! You had them brought from the coast, thinking that they might be useful should we ever be attacked by savages. They were in the cellar. In a sack. But they are not there now! Ralph Taverner must have taken them with him when he escaped!"

"You are sure that they are not there, Lorna?"

"Of course I am, father! I tell you they are gone!"

"Good heavens, what a calamity! If Taverner has taken the grenades with him, and the Arabs and the Bajangas make use of them, it will be utterly impossible for Chanka and the Somalis to hold the pass! At least, I fear so! The advantage will certainly be with the——"

"Listen, father!" interrupted Alan. "What's that?"

All sprang to their feet, looking at one another in dismay. From the farther end of the valley, throbbing on the still air, came the muffled discharge of guns. It was the danger-signal! Tib Mohammed and his band had attacked!

(To be continued.)

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