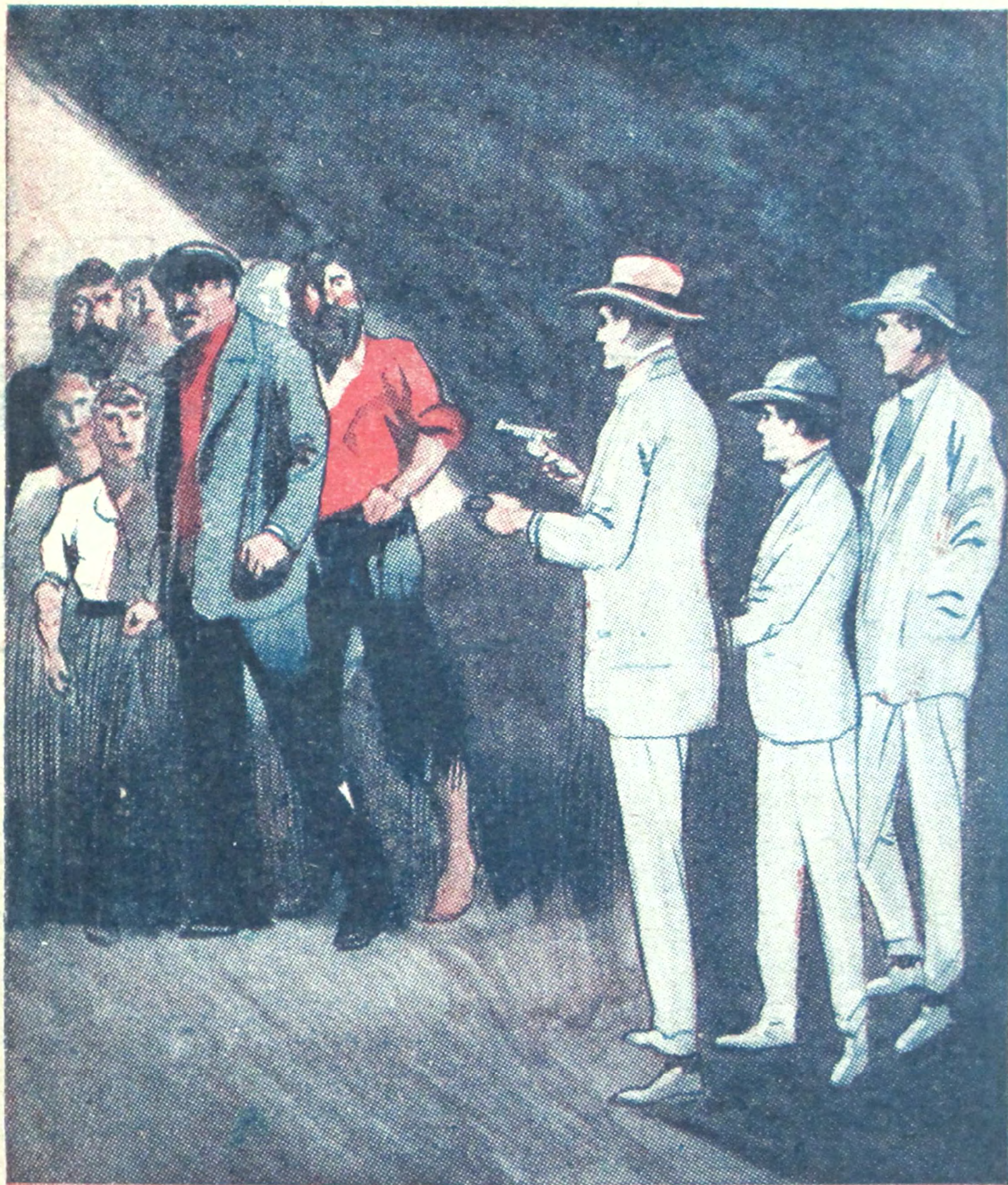


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Nixon swung round to find himself covered by Nelson Lee's revolver.

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(THE NARRATIVE RELATED THROUGHOUT BY NIPPER.)

CHAPTER I.

ON THE ROCKS.

"O-O-OH! O-O-O-OH!"

That somewhat remarkable exclamation was uttered by Edward Oswald Handforth, of the St. Frank's Remove. Handforth was lying in his bunk, on board Sir Crawford Grey's yacht, the Wanderer.

And Handforth did not seem to be enjoying himself.

The cabin was pitchy dark, and outside the wind howled furiously. The rain hissed down in unbroken sheets. Church and McClure, who also occupied the cabin, were in their respective beds—trying to keep there.

The yacht was rolling badly, and it was difficult for any of her passengers to obtain even a small amount of comfort. The vessel had got into the track of a violent tropical storm, and it was raging with all its fury.

"O-o-oooh!" groaned Handforth again.

"Can't you keep quiet, you ass?" growled Church. "Anybody might think you were dying! Don't make that awful noise!"

"Guggrooooh!" said Handforth.

"O-o-oooooh!" came a moan from McClure's bunk.

Church sat up wrathfully, and nearly tumbled head first to the floor. He only saved himself by clutching at the bed-rail. He had been trying to sleep for two solid hours, and hadn't gained a wink. His chums had not allowed him to obtain any slumber.

Church was not seasick. The storm had left him unaffected, although, strangely enough, he had never been to sea before. And he couldn't understand why McClure and Handforth were making such a noise.

"Why can't you dry up, you rotters?" he shouted. "Never heard such a beastly fuss over a bit of sickness! You'd still roll in

your bunks if the blessed yacht was sinking. I believe!"

Handforth struggled up.

"Sus-sinking?" he gasped wildly.

"That's what I said—"

"Thank goodness!" exclaimed Handforth. "Oh, relief at last!"

"You—you idiot!" roared Church. "The yacht isn't sinking—"

"You just said it was!" groaned Handforth. "Oh, I wish we'd all go to the bottom! I don't want to live any more. If this is living, I'd rather be dead! Carry me away and drop me overboard! O-o-oooh!"

Handforth had another spasm, and he writhed convulsively. If Church had ever experienced anything of the same nature, he would have sympathised. As it was, he only regarded his chums with contempt.

And Handforth and McClure were not the only victims of mal-de-mer that night. Tommy Watson was down, but Sir Montie Tregellis-West and I, who shared the same cabin, were quite unaffected.

Morrow, of the Sixth, was in the throes, and several juniors in other cabins—Yorke and Grey and Christine—had bad attacks of sea-sickness. The others were, on the whole, all right.

There were sixteen of us on board the yacht—sixteen members of the Remove, that is. In addition, there were three or four seniors, and a party of four girls, in the care of Lady Helen Tregellis-West.

All the girls were ill on that night—and that wasn't to be wondered at. Even Lord Dorrimore, who had sailed nearly every sea on the globe, was not exactly himself. And Nelson Lee was somewhat amused.

It was fortunate, perhaps, that Dr. Brett was all right, for he found a good many patients on his hands. The storm had struck us while we were on our way from a small

port on the West African coast to the Canary Islands.

Our trip had been filled with adventures so far. Our object in coming out had been to discover a treasure, which was buried on a small oasis in the desert. We had succeeded in finding the loot, and it was now safely stowed away on board.

Our chief trouble had been in connection with a scoundrel named Captain Nixon. This man had set himself out to get the treasure for himself. He had failed, of course; but, unknown to us at the time, Nixon was on board the Wanderer.

He had failed to get the treasure, but now he was anxious for revenge. It was rather remarkable that he should want to revenge himself upon us, for we had done him no harm. His plans had gone wrong, but that was no reason why he should desire to bestow his venom upon the yacht.

Perhaps the man was half crazy, owing to his failures. He had sacrificed everything—his position and his job—to make a bid for the treasure. Having met with bad luck, he had now nothing to look forward to. He was dishonoured and discredited, and he cared little what became of him.

And he was on board the yacht that stormy night!

Captain Nixon meant mischief. He would have been comparatively harmless if he had been a man ignorant of the sea. But he not only knew the sea, but these waters were perfectly familiar to him; he had sailed them hundreds of times.

And he decided to take advantage of the storm. His plan was to exact a terrible vengeance.

While Handforth and McClure were groaning in their bunks—and while a good few other juniors were groaning, too—Captain Nixon was stealing up from his place of concealment below.

He had taken very little food since the yacht had left port. Unable to show himself, he had half starved. And this condition did not tend to make him any sorer. His mind was set upon one thing.

If he failed, no harm would be done—for it would have been necessary for him to expose himself without delay. And if he succeeded, he would have the satisfaction of knowing that he had sent his enemies to a terrible doom.

The yacht was tossing about heavily in the rough sea. The decks were awash almost continually. But the vessel was a stout little craft, and she was easily capable of weathering the storm successfully.

On the bridge Mr. Clive, the first officer, was at the wheel. He was a very capable man, and Captain Burton was satisfied in leaving the yacht in his hands. The skipper himself was in the chart-house, wakeful and alert. But the night was so black, and the rain came down with such fierceness, that it was impossible to see out into the night.

And all sounds were drowned in the howl of the gale.

Nixon reached the deck without difficulty.

There was not much fear of his being seen, and, even if this did occur, recognition was impossible. He stole along the deck, dodging the waves and the spray until he arrived at the bridge ladder. Up this he climbed with the agility of long experience.

Once upon the bridge he crouched low.

Mr. Clive, at the wheel, was up to his eyes in oilskins, and he was intent upon his work. He had no time to look round, and he certainly feared no attack. He had no reason to suspect treachery of any sort on the Wanderer.

And then, abruptly, Nixon sprang.

He carried a short chunk of iron in his hand, and this was brought down with a thud upon the head of the first officer. Mr. Clive sank without a sound, completely stunned—and, indeed, severely injured.

Nixon, with a low exclamation of triumph, sprang to the wheel and grasped the spokes. Within a few seconds he had the yacht under perfect control. Mr. Clive was lying immediately below him, and, by degrees—for it was impossible to leave the wheel for more than a moment at a time—he took off the oilskins from the unconscious man, and donned them himself.

Then he pushed Mr. Clive out of the way—out of sight. If the skipper happened to come out, he would never know that the man at the wheel was not Mr. Clive. Nixon had performed his scoundrelly work well.

Captain Burton had been on the bridge continuously for eight hours, and he had no intention of retiring to his cabin until the dawn came. The captain had already had the wheel in his own hands for five consecutive hours. Yet he did not sleep; he remained watchful.

But how was he to know that the man at the wheel had been changed? How was he to know that the yacht was altering her course? He did not glance at the instruments; he trusted to Mr. Clive, who was a splendid navigator.

Nixon was a splendid navigator, too.

He knew exactly where he was, in spite of the storm. A glance at the illuminated compass and an examination of the other instruments was sufficient. He had sailed along this course more times than he could keep count of, and his object in gaining possession of the wheel was a terrible one.

Nixon cared nothing for his own life now. If he could send every soul on the yacht to destruction, he was quite willing to be destroyed himself. He didn't care. He didn't value his own life.

He knew well enough that somewhere to the northwest a small, rocky island lay in the midst of the raging sea. The yacht, on her original course, would have passed many miles clear of that treacherous rock.

But Nixon, with the wheel in his hands, steered the vessel straight for that dangerous, jagged mass.

As the night wore on, the clouds thinned as they scudded across the sky, and the moon showed out now and again from between the cloud-banks. And the sea, rough and

tumultuous, lay revealed, tossing on all sides.

This was unfortunate.

For it enabled Captain Nixon to see his course—it enabled him to cast the yacht upon the rocks more accurately. And it was not so very long before the time arrived when the dreadful moment was at hand.

Across the sea, Nixon could see the island. An inexperienced man would have noticed nothing in that gloomy expanse. But Nixon, who knew what he was looking for, plainly saw the white streaks of foam, as the sea dashed itself impotently against the black crags.

The island did not rise very high out of the sea, and the noise of the waves smashing against its shore was drowned by the whistling of the wind and the dashing of the water against the yacht's side.

Under the guiding hand of the madman—for Nixon was undoubtedly mad for the time being—the stout little vessel charged through the seas straight towards the fate which was awaiting it.

The end was not long in coming.

Nixon was terribly afraid that Captain Burton would emerge from the chart-house at the most awkward time. If this happened, Captain Burton would be flung off the bridge without the slightest compunction—flung off into the raging sea. Taken by surprise, he would have no time to resist.

Fortunately, the captain did not emerge.

And Nixon stuck at his post. By now the island was well within sight, even in the dense gloom. It was near at hand, and looked much higher now. Black masses of rock rose sheer from the sea.

Grasping the wheel, Nixon set his teeth, and guided the vessel straight at the rocks. It was too late now to avert the disaster. There was no time to turn—no time to reverse engines.

A great wave came up behind the Wanderer. She was lifted giddily upon its crest, and carried onwards towards her fate with relentless force. The actual moment had arrived, and Nixon—his foul work completed—released the wheel, and stared into the blackness ahead, clutching at the bridge rail.

The yacht was right upon the rocks—between them, in fact. Nixon wondered if he was dreaming. For the vessel had not yet struck. She was sweeping on between walls of blackness, as though guided by some unseen hand; she was being carried through a narrow gully into a hidden bay.

And then the disaster came.

Through those walls of rock the yacht charged, into comparatively calm water. For a few seconds she swept along, and then—
Cr-r-r-rash!

She came to a full stop, abruptly and without the slightest warning.

The Wanderer had struck!

She was jammed in the rocks—wedged firmly. And the seas broke over her stern, and swept the aft decks. Captain Nixon, with a wild laugh, flung open the door of the chart-house.

Captain Burton, flung to the floor by the

force of the shock, had pulled himself up, and he turned, his face expressive of alarm and consternation. He was amazed to see that wild, dishevelled figure.

"Now, Burton, you hound!" snarled Nixon. "What have you to say now? Your ship is piled up—do you understand? Before the morning she will break into pieces, and you will all be beaten to death on the rocks——"

"You infernal rogue!" roared Captain Burton.

He rushed forward, and there is no telling what he would have done had he reached Nixon. But the latter dodged back, gave one wild glance round, and then dived cleanly overboard—to what seemed certain death.

Captain Burton, filled with great alarm, gazed round the bridge—and saw the motionless figure of Mr. Clive. And then the captain understood. He realised how this terrible disaster had come about. Meanwhile, there was consternation below.

The crew had tumbled out of their quarters, and there was a general rush for the deck.

Engineers and stokers came piling up from below—for they had felt the force of the concussion more than anybody.

And in the cabin everybody was awake.

Church, who had been unable to get any sleep, was sitting up in bed at the time of the crash. He had a few desperate ideas of getting cold water and flinging it over his groaning companions.

And then the crash had come.

Church was flung clean out of his bunk, and he hit the floor with a thud which shook every bone in his body. He knew at once that something dreadful had occurred. The motion had ceased; the yacht merely quivered and shook as the waves struck her. She no longer rolled.

The engines were stopped, too.

"Good heavens!" shouted Church, jumping up wildly. "We've struck something! We must be on the rocks!"

"Oh, good!" said Handforth wearily.

"I'm not joking, you idiot!" gasped Church frantically. "We're wrecked, I tell you! Get up, Handy, for heaven's sake!"

He rushed out into the passageway, leaving the door wide open. And Church collided with a figure which had just emerged from another cabin. That figure belonged to me.

"Oh, my hat!" panted Church. "Is that you, Nipper? What's happened?"

"I don't know!" I replied grimly. "But it seems that we've piled ourselves up on the coast somewhere. The ship will be in pieces before long—in a sea of this sort!"

I rushed up on deck, and the first man I saw was Nelson Lee.

"Are we badly aground, sir?" I asked.

"I've only just come up, Nipper—I don't know anything yet," replied the governor. "But the water seems strangely calm, and I'm puzzled. Don't let anybody else come up on deck, if you can possibly help it."

Lee rushed up to the bridge, and sprang up the ladder with the agility of a monkey. He found Captain Burton still there.

"How did it happen, captain?" asked Nelson Lee.

The skipper took a deep breath.

"That brute—that foul scoundrel!" he roared. "This is Nixon's work, Lee! Nixon overpowered Mr. Clive, and steered the yacht on to the rocks of this island! I don't know what to do—I feel so guilty——"

"Nonsense!" interrupted Lee sharply. "One fact is certain, Burton—and that is that you are blameless in this matter. But what is the extent of the damage? Don't you think it would be wise to get everybody ashore?"

"I intend to have the boats lowered at once," replied Captain Burton. "The yacht seems fairly secure at present, but she may break away at any moment—and then she will probably go to pieces."

"What became of Nixon?"

"He jumped overside—he is probably dead by this time," replied the other.

There was no further time for conversation. Nelson Lee went down to calm the passengers as they came on deck. The crew were ready, each man at his station. And very smartly the boats were got ready.

Each one was filled swiftly and speedily—the girls and the women going first. Then the boys were sent off in another boat, but I didn't leave the yacht until the gov'nor went.

There was no excitement and no panic.

One reason for this was that there seemed to be no danger. The yacht was quite still, in a comparatively calm sea, and no difficulty was experienced in lowering the boats and getting them away.

The yacht, as far as I could judge, had, by some miraculous trick of the sea, plunged through the narrow opening into the hidden bay. How she had got through in that sea was a mystery which would never be solved. But she had got through it, and she was wedged firmly and secure.

Her stern was exposed to the waves, but the water ahead was quite smooth. And the boats glided through this stretch of water to the shore. There was some little difficulty in landing, for rocks abounded everywhere, and there was no sign of sand or of a beach.

After an hour had passed the whole ship's company had been safely landed. And then we waited for the dawn to break—we waited to see the yacht break away and fall to pieces.

Everything was in a state of confusion and chaos. But we were thankful that no lives had been lost—with the possible exception of Captain Nixon. And it would be only justice if he had gone to his doom!

CHAPTER II.

IN A TIGHT FIX.

DAYLIGHT came at last.

And with the dawn the storm passed. The sun shone out with glorious brilliance, and the gale died down to a mere breeze. The sun shone down

from a sky of deep blue, with a few fleecy white clouds at intervals.

The sea had calmed a lot, and only a steady roll remained to remind us that the storm had raged during the night.

It was a curious spectacle on that island.

Within that small bay the yacht blocked up the exit. The vessel, indeed, was in such a position that she was practically invisible from the open sea outside. And the water within the bay was now smooth and still. Only the tiniest waves broke upon the rocks near the shore.

The encampment on the rocks was quite a large one. Under the direction of Nelson Lee, Lord Dorrimore, and the others, there was no confusion now. The men's camp was presided over by the second officer. The girls and stewardesses were in the care of Lady Helen Tregellis-West, and they were provided with hastily erected tents.

The St. Frank's party had to put up with this comfort. The air was quite warm, so nobody suffered much from the cold. And nobody had received a drenching, owing to the calm state of the sea.

Those fellows who had been seasick had recovered with surprising rapidity. The sudden excitement and the necessity to act had worked wonders. And they were on dry land again, with something solid beneath their feet.

Dr. Brett had already examined Mr. Clive. The first officer was still unconscious, but the doctor was confident of bringing him back to health eventually. He had received a nasty blow.

There was no food ashore, of course. The main thing had been to save every life. But with the coming of day, a great many of us became aware of a keen appetite. The juniors did not seem to regard the disaster as very grave.

"Not at all a bad experience!" declared Handforth, who was feeling so much better that he didn't mind where he was. "Shipwrecked, by George! What a pile of yarns we shall be able to tell the fellows when we get back to St. Frank's!"

"If ever we do get back, dear old boy," said Sir Montie. "This seems to be the most frightful mishap of all. The yacht's a wreck, begad. I've been expectin' her to fall to pieces—I have really!"

Dorrimore came bustling up.

"How are you feelin', boys?" he asked cheerfully.

"Hungry, sir."

"Good!" said his lordship. "You'll have plenty of grub before long. Some of the men are goin' aboard the yacht, an' they'll bring back heaps of grub. It's a good thing the ship didn't break up in the night—or we should have gone hungry. There doesn't seem to be much to eat in this bright spot."

He glanced up at the bare rocks which frowned down from every side. Not a vestige of vegetation was to be seen. As far as we could see, the island was nothing more than a bare rock.

We watched the boat put off for the

yacht, which was only a few fathoms away from the shore. The tide had gone out considerably, and it was easy to see that the Wanderer was well aground.

"Yes, we're in a tight fix," I said grimly.

"Not so tight as we were in during that sandstorm on the desert," said Handforth, with a wise nod.

"I don't know about that," I went on. "We're right out of the track of ships, by what I can understand. This place isn't an island at all really—it's only a bare rock, and it is always avoided by shipping. I don't suppose we shall see a sail for months."

"Great Scott!" exclaimed Church.

"We're—we're marooned!" said Handforth.

"Something like it," I agreed. "Anybody could see that the yacht is done for—she can't get out of this fix. In fact, she might crumble to pieces before our eyes—and before the day's out, too."

Sir Montie regarded me through his pince-nez.

"What about the wireless, dear old boy?" he asked mildly. "Surely we can call for assistance and be taken off!"

"By Jove, yes!" I said. "Fancy me forgetting that! Our position isn't so bad, after all. We're all safe and sound, and Sir Crawford can easily bear the loss of the yacht.

If it came to that, his share of the treasure will cover everything, so it won't be a dead loss, after all."

"That's one way of looking at it," remarked Pitt. "But just fancy that brute of a Nixon being on board!"

"He must have sneaked on the yacht while we were at Agabat," said Christine. "It's a queer thing to me that Captain Burton wasn't more alert. Just fancy him allowing the yacht to be piled up like this!"

Tom Burton flushed.

"Souise me!" he exclaimed. "I don't reckon it's fair for you to criticise my dad, messmate——"

"Of course not!" I put in sharply. "Dry up, Christine. Captain Burton is not to blame in the slightest degree, and I'll punch the head of anybody who breathes a word against the bo'sun's father."

Nobody breathed a word.

And the subject was dropped, for we were all anxiously watching the yacht, waiting for the food to come along. Some clothing was necessary, too. Some of the fellows had tumbled into the boats with nothing on except pyjamas and dressing-gowns.

And the girls and the ladies were not visible at all. They were still in their tent, and I judged that scantiness of attire was responsible for this. In the haste of getting ashore nobody had cared particularly about dress.

But these things righted themselves fairly rapidly.

After a rough-and-ready breakfast, two boats set out for the yacht, one containing Dr. Brett and several men, with instructions to obtain ample supplies of clothing; and the other containing the captain, Nelson Lee, Dorrie, and the second officer. Their object

was to ascertain the actual extent of the damage.

It was a marvellous piece of luck that the yacht was still whole and capable of being approached. But for that, we should have been in a bad way, indeed. We had, at least, the free use of the food and other necessities.

Both parties were soon back. And by the time the girls had emerged from their tent Nelson Lee was on his way back. We all crowded round eagerly as the boat touched the rocks.

Nelson Lee had come back alone, the captain and Dorrie having remained on board.

"Well, sir?"

"I have some comparatively good news," said the guv'nor. "Everybody can get back on board the yacht; we can still use the vessel with safety while the weather remains calm."

"Hurrah!"

"But what's the damage, sir?"

"Isn't she flooded out below?"

"Curiously enough," replied Nelson Lee, "the damage appears to be slight. It is a miraculous fact, but the actual damage to the hull is insignificant. She is only taking in a very small amount of water—an amount which can be pumped out without any trouble."

"Then we can steam away again, sir?" asked Christine.

The guv'nor shook his head.

"No, my boy," he said. "The yacht is firmly jammed in between the rocks. She might be able to get free with assistance from tugs or other vessels, but never by her own steam. Alone, we are helpless."

"But we can use the yacht to live in?" I asked. "Well, that's something, anyhow. How long will our supplies last, sir?"

"A month, at least—without any strict rationing."

"Then we're as safe as houses," I declared. "A shipwreck of this sort isn't so bad. It's rather an adventure, in fact. We've only got to use the wireless, sir, and we shall be picked off within twelve hours."

"Precisely, Nipper," said Nelson Lee calmly. "But unfortunately our wireless installation is useless."

"Useless?"

"Yes," said the guv'nor. "When the vessel struck the delicate instruments were utterly ruined—so far as the transmitter is concerned. We may be able to receive messages, but we can send nothing; and that, of course, is all that really matters."

"Can't repairs be effected, sir?"

"I'm afraid not—the electrician and the wireless operator both agree that nothing can be done," said Lee. "That means, of course, that the only way is to remain here until we can attract the notice of some passing vessel. And that may not occur for weeks."

This was rather startling, but nobody seemed to mind much. The knowledge that we could continue to live on the yacht was an excellent piece of news, and everybody

was satisfied with it for the time being.

Before the morning was over Nelson Lee and some others went over the island, exploring. When they came back they reported that there was not a yard of green stuff to be seen anywhere.

The island was not more than two miles long by a mile broad—just a bare rock set in the midst of the ocean and out of all communication with the world. Captain Nixon had been cunning when he selected that island as his goal.

The island had no name, and it was not even regarded as an island on a chart. It was simply marked down as a lump of rock. But it was not long before the juniors gave the place a name.

"We've been cast away on this place," remarked Pitt. "Why not call it Castaway Island?"

"That name's as good as any other," I said. "It doesn't make much difference, anyhow. You can call it Australia, if you like."

"It's hardly big enough, old boy," said Sir Montie gravely.

Luncheon was served on board, quite in the usual style. In fact, we might have been calmly at anchor, for all the difference there was to be seen. The knowledge that we were utterly helpless did not disturb the spirits of many members of the party.

Mr. Clive was going on well, and there was really nothing to be worried about. What had happened to Nixon was something of a puzzle, but it was generally believed that he was drowned, and that his body had been washed away.

For some time after lunch we strolled about the decks, discussing the situation. And then somebody suggested that we should go ashore to explore the island. There was nothing else to be done—amongst the junior members of the party, at all events—and a party of us soon set out.

We did not worry ourselves much about how we were to be rescued, or when. Some of the juniors regarded the affair as part of the holidays. The yacht seemed so sound and secure that they could hardly believe that she would never be able to get afloat again unless she received strong assistance from other vessels. And even then the question was doubtful.

Tregellis-West and Watson and I were among the shore party. Handforth and Co. came, of course—it wouldn't have been complete without the heroes of Study D. Pitt was there, and Jack Grey, and two or three others.

"I vote we climb to the highest spot and have a look round from there," I suggested. "Mr. Lee tells me that the whole island can be seen from the top of that hill."

"Let's climb it, then," said Pitt.

We did not lose much time in setting off. It was stiff work and decidedly warm. The rocks were baking, owing to the heat of the brilliant sun. And the air itself quivered with warmth.

"This is a rotten job!" growled Handforth. "I don't think much of climbing

these beastly rocks, anyhow!"

"You're at liberty to go back, if you want to," I said cheerfully. "We didn't beg of you to come, Handy—and I'm not sure that you're strong enough, in any case."

"Not strong enough?"

"After last night, I mean."

"You—you silly ass!"

"Well, you were a bit off colour, you know," I said. "The way you threw good food away, Handy, was disgraceful."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"A fellow can't help being seasick, I suppose?" demanded Handforth. "I've got over that now—I feel as fit as a fiddle. And when it comes to climbing, I'll beat any of you!"

But he didn't.

He was one of the last to reach the top of the hill. From there we could see over the whole expanse of Castaway Island. It was bare and grim, without a single speck of green to relieve the monotony.

"Beastly place!" said Pitt.

"It's a bit thick, being wrecked on an island of this sort," said Handforth, with a sniff. "I've read stories about people being wrecked on coral islands—with palm-trees and beautiful rivers and birds, and all that sort of thing. An island of that sort wouldn't be so bad."

"You won't find many coral islands in this part of the world, Handy," I said. "We're not in the Pacific, remember, and it's just as well, perhaps. We don't want to be marooned for months on end."

McClure grinned.

"It wouldn't be so dusty," he said. "We should escape St. Frank's and the giddy lessons."

"Give me lessons," I said grimly. "You won't say that after you've been here a week, my son. Wait until the novelty has worn off, and then you'll feel almost inclined to set out in an open boat—By Jingo!"

"What's the matter?" asked Watson.

"The aeroplane!" I ejaculated.

"My only hat!"

"That's a ripping idea!"

"Rather!"

I had suddenly remembered that we had on board a large twin-engined biplane. It was the machine which had carried Nelson Lee, Dorrie, and I into the desert, and it had proved its worth, too. At present it was stowed below in sections. But it could easily be assembled.

"The gov'nor could fly about in all directions," I exclaimed. "It wouldn't take long for him to locate a ship—Oh, but it couldn't be done."

"Why couldn't it?"

"Where the dickens is the machine going to start from?" I asked.

"There's not a square inch of flat ground here," said Pitt, nodding. "The machine could never get off—"

"Unless she had some floats fitted to her," I put in keenly. "She could be converted into a seaplane, perhaps—it oughtn't

to be a very difficult job. But the gov'nor will know all about it."

"Where's Handforth got to?" asked De Valerie, looking round.

Handforth, Church, and McClure had climbed away down the rocks, and we could see them moving along towards the level of the sea. At one point they paused, and then we lost sight of them.

As a matter of fact, Handforth and Co. had entered a kind of cave. Once inside they could see practically nothing, for the darkness was intense after the brilliance of the sunlight.

"Oh, there's nothing here," said McClure. "Let's be getting on!"

"Wait a minute, you impatient beggar," said Handforth. "Look at the end of the cave, there," he added, pointing. "It looks to me like the end of a tunnel or something. Who's got some matches?"

One or two boxes were produced. These were struck, one after the other—at least, the matches were struck, and the light thus given revealed a doorway—and quite a natural one—which led, seemingly, into the very heart of the hill.

Handforth considered for a moment.

"We're going to explore this place properly," he declared. "You chaps row back to the yacht and bring some candles. We won't tell anybody about the idea, and then we'll give them a bit of a surprise—see?"

"Yes, but look here——"

"Well?"

"I don't care about going back to the yacht——"

"Are you going to start grumbling, Walter Church?" roared Handforth. "If you don't want to go, say so, and I'll go myself—only I'll punch you until you can't stand before I go!"

"Oh, I don't mind going," said Church untruthfully.

And he set off—to return in about twenty minutes with half-a-dozen candles in his pocket. Handforth nodded with approval as he saw them.

"And now to explore the giddy cave!" he said briskly.

CHAPTER III.

LOST UNDERGROUND.

HANDFORTH and Co. plunged into the cavern.

It was quite a large affair, once they got inside, and it was really delightfully cool, after the heat which prevailed outside. Church and McClure were fully convinced that there would be nothing doing.

They had an idea that Handforth's belief that a tunnel existed was a mere fancy. But they were soon to find that they were wrong.

For, by the aid of the candles, they saw that there was actually a dark opening which led out of the cave into the hill. How far it penetrated, however, was another matter.

"I'll lead the way," said Handforth briskly. "You chaps can follow on behind. And don't start pushing, either. There might be some giddy holes, and I don't want to pitch down one of them. Perhaps you'd better go first, McClure——"

McClure grinned.

"I wouldn't dream of depriving you of the honour," he said gracefully.

"Oh, all right!" growled Handforth.

They all entered the tunnel, in single file.

It was about five feet high, by three feet wide, and was evidently natural in formation—a kind of fissure extending into the hills, and the walls were of solid rock.

After progressing in a short distance the tunnel sloped steeply downwards, but not too steeply, and the explorers had no difficulty in continuing their journey. The air was quite pure.

The roof of the tunnel varied greatly. Sometimes it was so far up that nothing could be seen; and at other times it descended until the tunnel was no higher than four feet, and the trio had to crouch in order to pass through.

And once or twice the space was so narrow that it was only just possible to squeeze past, between the two walls of rock. But they continued their way, greatly interested. The tunnel seemed to go on for ever.

"I say," exclaimed Church, at last, "don't you think we'd better turn back?"

"You ass!" said Handforth witheringly.

"Yes, but——"

"But rats!" said Handforth. "We've hardly started yet. The air's as cool as anything down here—and I always was keen about exploring caves and tunnels. I reckon it's ripping sport!"

"But we might get lost——"

"Piffle!" interrupted Handforth. "You're in my hands, ain't you? You don't suppose I lose my way? I hope I'm not such an ass as that. Besides, there's only one exit so we can't go wrong."

"Oh, all right," said Church. "Go ahead."

And so they went ahead. The tunnel still continued to slope downwards; but at last it grew more level. A kind of cavern was entered—a bare, pitchy black space, with a high roof and a rough floor. Jagged pieces of rock hung about on all sides. Standing in the middle of this cavern, the juniors felt strangely isolated and alone.

The silence of the place was deadly.

And the shadows cast by the flickering candle were weird and distorted. It was a somewhat uncanny experience. The tunnel was not so bad, but this big cavern seemed to make the juniors nervous.

"Let's get back!" muttered McClure.

"There—there might be animals in here of some kind—and snakes. We're absolutely isolated, you know—we shouldn't be heard if we yelled at the tops of our voices."

Handforth sniffed.

"If you're afraid, I'm not," he said. "Go back now? Not likely! Why, we've hardly started yet!"

"Started yet!"

It was the echo which came back in the most eerie fashion from the rocky walls.

"My hat! Did you hear that?" asked Church. "Uncanny, ain't it?"

"I suppose you've never heard an echo before?" demanded Handforth. "Don't be so jolly scared, you ass!"

He led the way forward before there could be any more argument. On the other side of the cavern there were two or three tunnels, it seemed, and Handforth picked one out at random, and plunged into it.

The air was still fresh, and Handforth saw no reason why he should not continue the exploration. He was quite sure that he would be able to find his way out into the open once again.

And down the tunnel the three juniors went, one behind the other. At intervals other openings would be passed—and all of them were natural formations. The hand of man had never touched these grim, cold walls of rock.

The tunnels appeared to be endless, and the juniors were really amazed. It was certainly a most extraordinary experience, and one they had never reckoned upon encountering.

At last Handforth himself began to realise that it would be just as well, perhaps, to find the open air again. They could easily enter the caves a second time, if they wanted to. And Handforth had found out that he and his chums had been underground for over an hour.

Two of the candles had gone, and the third one was over half-finished.

"Well, it's jolly interesting," said Handforth. Perhaps we'd better be thinking of getting back now. We shall have something to tell the other chaps when we see them. I'll bet they haven't had an adventure of this sort."

"I'm getting hungry," said Church. "It's about time we got back. We shall be late for tea, even then."

Handforth gazed longingly into the tunnel ahead.

"I'd like to explore the whole place, though," he said. "Still, it can't be done all at once. We can bring some of the other chaps next time."

They turned back, and both Church and McClure were greatly relieved. They had had quite enough of these caverns and tunnels to last them for one trip; and they were vastly anxious to catch sight of the blue sky again.

They continued the journey over the ground they had already traversed. The floor was so hard that there was no possibility of any footprints being seen; the boys had to rely solely upon their own judgment and memories.

Ten minutes passed, and the trio had continued walking for some time without speaking. Then an opening was reached, and two tunnel mouths stared them in the face. Handforth came to a halt.

"I don't remember these two," he said.

"Yet we must have come down one of them — Oh, yes, I know. We came down the left one; I remember seeing something dark as I came by. It must have been this other tunnel."

McClure shook his head.

"You're wrong, Handy," he declared.

"Eh? Who's wrong?"

"You are," said McClure. The tunnel we came down was the one on the right-hand side—"

"Rot!" interrupted Handforth. "It was the other one."

"What's your opinion, Churchey?" asked McClure.

"Why, we entered this place from the right-hand tunnel," said Church.

"That's what I think—"

"And you're both wrong," interrupted Handforth. "You asses don't know what you're doing. Follow me, and you'll be all right!"

"I tell you—"

"Oh, don't make a fuss!"

"Yes, but supposing we go wrong?" asked Church. "How the dickens are we going to get to the open if we plunge down the wrong tunnel? We might go on wandering about for hours."

Handforth sighed.

"I wish you wouldn't be such a giddy lunatic!" he exclaimed. "If we're wrong, can't we come back? Leave it to me, and you won't be disappointed. I'll have you both out of these tunnels within ten minutes."

And Handforth, in order to bring the argument to a close, strode down the tunnel which he believed to be the one they had used before. Church and McClure, knowing that it was impossible to reason with their leader, followed him.

They walked on in silence for some little time. Church and McClure were frankly uneasy, and they did not attempt to conceal the fact. Handforth appeared to be quite at his ease.

But secretly Handforth was uneasy, too.

There seemed to be no end to the numerous fissures which criss-crossed through the very hill itself.

They went everywhere—this way and that—and the further the juniors progressed the more they seemed to find.

"I don't remember this narrow place, anyhow," said McClure, after a while. "I'm jolly certain we didn't come this way, Handy! You must have made a bloomer, after all. Why, we can hardly squash through that opening up there."

Handforth came to a halt.

"I believe you're right," he said reluctantly. "We must have branched off at the wrong place, somewhere—"

"At that tunnel we told you about," said Church. "The only thing is to go back and take the right one, as McClure and I said all along."

"Oh, all right," grunted Handforth.

They went back with the intention of making their way into the right tunnel. But

somehow, they couldn't find that place again, no matter how they tried. They went down tunnel after tunnel, and with each turning they took they lost themselves more hopelessly.

By this time Church and McClure were not only uneasy, but positively alarmed. The fourth candle had been burnt, and only two remained. When that was used up, the trio would be left in pitchy darkness.

And what hope would there be for them then?

Lost in these tunnels, wandering about without any light? The possibility of such a thing, quite remote at one time, now became acute. Handforth and Co. had lost themselves underground!

"This is simply rotten!" said Handforth. "There must be a proper tunnel somewhere. I vote we try this one. I seem to recollect

"You don't, Handy," interrupted Church. "It's your fancy, old son. It's impossible for us to remember anything really distinctive. We shall have to go on, and trust to luck."

"That's all we can do," said McClure.

"I'm blessed if you chaps ain't getting frightened," said Handforth, with a laugh which was meant to be cheery—but which only sounded hollow and false in the ears of his two chums.

On they went again, wearily this time, but with a feverish hope that they would be able to reach the glorious open air once again. The fifth candle at last burnt out, and Handforth lighted the sixth—the last.

"We're lost!" muttered Church huskily.

"Don't be an ass——"

"It's true!" said Church. "What's the good of trying to deceive yourself, Handy? Why not admit it at once? We're lost, and I don't see how we can get out of these—these catacombs!"

"Hallo!" said Handforth. "This light seems to be flickering a bit. There might be a draught—and that would guide us. Come on, my bucks—follow your uncle, and keep smiling. There's nothing to worry about."

But Church and McClure were greatly worried, and they did not mind their leader knowing about it.

They had very little faith in getting into the open space before the last candle burnt out. It seemed impossible that they could be successful. The endless tunnels terrified them.

Whichever way they turned they were confronted by a different fissure. And the more they tested, the less chance they had of finding the right one. And the last candle was burning away relentlessly.

They came to a halt at length, from sheer weariness and alarm. All were looking somewhat pale.

"I—I say, this is rotten, you know," muttered Church huskily. "I've heard of chaps being lost in some disused mine-workings, or something of that sort; but this fairly takes the biscuit."

"And we don't know what to do, either,"

said Handforth. "I vote we have a bit of a rest, and a jaw. I've got plenty of matches—and we can blow the candle out, and sit in the dark."

"That's a good idea," said McClure. "I'm dead beat."

The candle was blown out, and the three helpless juniors squatted themselves down on the floor of the tunnel. They were now in utter darkness, and it was a darkness which seemed something solid.

"I wonder what the other chaps are doing?" asked Handforth, at length. "I suppose they're wondering what's become of us. That's rather rich, ain't it?"

McClure grunted.

"Blessed if I can see anything particularly rich about it," he said. "I'd give all my giddy pocket-money for a year to come if I could only be with Nipper and those other chaps now."

"Rather!" agreed Church. "Same here."

"Oh, don't be so potty," growled Handforth. "Chucking your money about like that! You seem to think that we're in a mess, or something. There's no need to be alarmed. Trust to me, and——"

"We have been trusting to you," said Church, rather bitterly. "If we hadn't trusted to you we should have taken the right tunnel. What's the good of kidding yourself, Handy? We're in a frightful hole, and you know it."

"But we shall be rescued——" began Handforth.

"How?" demanded Church.

"Why, there'll be a search-party, of course."

"There might be—but that doesn't mean to say they'll come here," went on Church. "You seem to forget that we didn't tell anybody where we were going. Those other chaps haven't the faintest idea what became of us. So how will they search in here? I tell you, we're in a rotten fix."

Handforth was bound to confess it.

"Yes, we are," he said. "But I haven't given up hope yet. Let's light that candle again, and have another shot."

A match spluttered, and the solitary candle was lighted. The juniors were glad of its welcome radiance, for this darkness was terrifying and unnerving. Rising to their feet again, the trio set off.

They walked quickly now—frequently they ran. For the more ground they could cover the more chance there was of finding the exit before the candle burnt out. But luck seemed to be dead against them.

They tried tunnel after tunnel, and they only succeeded in getting themselves more hopelessly entangled in the maze.

But they were determined not to give in yet. On and on they went, dragging their feet wearily over the rough ground. And then, at last, the candle gave a splutter in Handforth's grasp, flared up, and died out.

The explorers were left in utter darkness.

"Good heavens!" muttered Handforth huskily. "We're done now!"

"I—I expect we shall wander about until we drop of sheer exhaustion," muttered Church. "And then we shall die—of hunger and thirst! Oh, what fools we were to come into this awful place."

"It's no good going on like that," said Handforth, fighting to remain calm. "It was my fault, of course—I oughtn't to have been such an obstinate ass. I want you to forgive me—"

"Oh, dry up," growled his chums.

"But it was my fault—"

"Rats!" said McClure. "We needn't have come unless we'd liked. How were we to know that we should lose ourselves like this? If we had thought it possible we shouldn't have come into the tunnel at all. We're all in the same boat—and it seems to me that it'll sink before long!"

Although they had no light, the juniors wandered about in the darkness, clinging to one another rather desperately. They were so weary that they could hardly drag their limbs along—but it was a weariness born of despair rather than of sheer physical weakness.

It seemed to them that hours and hours passed. And, at last, with their mouths parched with thirst, they sank down in the tunnel. They were done. They were hopelessly lost in the old fissures far beneath the ground.

And rescue seemed impossible, for they had told nobody of their projected trip, and nobody would know where they had gone. The other fellows were not even aware of the fact that a cavern existed. So no hue and cry would be raised in that direction.

If Handforth and Co. did not escape by their own efforts, it seemed most unlikely that they would escape by the efforts of others.

Utterly tired out and worn, the three unfortunate juniors huddled together in the inky tunnel, and were soon sleeping fitfully. They were waiting for anything that might turn up. But in their hearts they had a dreadful fear that they had looked their last upon the sun and upon the blue sky.

CHAPTER IV.

TO THE RESCUE.

SIR MONTIE TREGELLIS-WEST pursed his elegant lips.

"Dear fellows, I think this island is a frightfully beastly place," he said, in firm tones. "It's nothin' but rocks an' things of that sort. No green stuff, no rivers, an' not a trace of animal life."

"Yes, it's a bit of a hole," I agreed. "But we're not compelled to live on it—and that's one comfort. Thank goodness the yacht is still intact—even though it is wedged into the rocks."

We were on our way back to the vessel after our little exploration tour. It was getting towards evening.

"Where did Handforth get to, by the

way?" asked Pitt. "Handforth and Church and McClure? I haven't seen the asses for ages."

"They were standing near a hole in the rocks," I said. "That was hours ago, before we went to the other side of the island. I believe they went into the rocks; but I expect they're on the yacht by this time."

When we arrived on board, however, we found that Handforth and Co. had not yet turned up. Everybody else was on board, however. So Handy and his chums had the island quite to themselves.

"Silly asses!" said Watson. "Fancy staying there all this time!"

When we went in to tea, Nelson Lee asked where the other three juniors were. He was somewhat surprised when he heard that Handforth and Co. were still on the island. The others were surprised, too.

"But where can they be, all this time?" asked Violet wonderingly.

"Blessed if I know, sis," said Watson. "But there's never any telling what Handy will do. He's a queer merchant. Don't worry about him. He'll turn up with Church and McClure before long."

"I do hope so," said the girl.

But after tea there was still no sign of the missing ones.

Everything went on very much as usual. The life of the yacht was not altered because we were compelled to remain there, wedged in the rocks. We were lucky to be on the vessel at all.

Umlosi was looking rather thoughtful when I came across him on deck, in the gathering dusk.

"Well, Umlosi, what do you think of things?" I asked. "How do you like being shipwrecked?"

"Thou art pleased to be humorous, O Manzie," said Umlosi. "How can the great floating kraal be wrecked when it is still whole? It is strange that we are here to speak of this matter. For, surely, it was thought by all that we should plunge into the great waters."

"Well, we were rather afraid of it," I agreed. "But we're still safe and sound, Umlosi, and so much has happened on this voyage that I'm beginning to think that we're 'tagati.'"

Umlosi smiled.

"Even as thou sayest, Manzie," he rumbled. "The great ship is surely bewitched. Mayhap thy father, Umtagati, will work some great magic, and set the rocks back, so that we may again travel over the great waters."

"I wish he could," I said. "But I'm afraid—Speaking to me, sir?"

"Yes, Nipper, I am," said Nelson Lee, who had just come up. "I am becoming somewhat concerned about Handforth and his two friends. They are still absent, and I am beginning to fear that some accident has befallen them. Where were they when you saw them last?"

"Oh, near a kind of opening in the rocks!" I replied.

"H'm! There can be little doubt as to what has happened," said Lee grimly.

"What do you mean, sir?"

"One of the boys came on board this afternoon, and secured a supply of candles," explained the gov'nor. "It seems certain, Nipper, that the three boys went on a tour of exploration. There must be a big cavern in the rocks; and I am afraid that Handforth and Church and McClure have fallen into some treacherous gully, or cleft."

"And what will you do, sir?" I asked.

"We must search for the missing lads," replied Nelson Lee. "Dorrie and I are going and you can join in the search, if you wish. It would be unwise to leave the matter until after dark."

"The silly asses!" I exclaimed. "Fancy getting lost!"

It was decided that Montie and Tommy and I should accompany the gov'nor and Dorrie on their little exploration tour.

We were provided with something better than candles, to illuminate us on our way. Carrying powerful electric-torches, there was not much fear of us getting lost in the darkness.

But we took a supply of candles, too, in order to be on the safe side. There seemed little doubt that Handforth and Co. had got themselves into a pretty bad mess. This, of course, was not very surprising.

"Trust Handy to get himself into trouble," said Tommy Watson. "It's a wonder to me how he's survived so long; he's such a clumsy, reckless ass, that he ought to have fallen overboard weeks ago!"

"It's all very well to joke about it," I remarked. "Church and McClure are included in this outing, my son. And Handy isn't a bad sort, although he is an ass. It'll be awful if——"

"Dear fellow, pray refrain from speculating," put in Sir Montie. "It is quite probable that we shall find the bounders behind a rock, arguin' over somethin' of utterly no importance."

I chuckled.

"It would be characteristic, anyhow," I observed. "Come on—the gov'nor and Dorrie are ready."

In addition to the torches and candles, we had a supply of thin, strong rope with us. And without further ado we entered a boat, and were rowed ashore. The rest of the party on board took very little notice. They did not realise that our mission was a serious one.

"Now, Nipper, I want you to lead us to the spot where you last saw Handforth," said Nelson Lee briskly. "You are quite sure that you can pick out the identical place amongst the rocks?"

"Oh, yes, gov'nor," I replied. "It's just up there—where that dark patch is. I believe there's a cave there."

We scrambled over the rocks, and soon arrived at the entrance to the fateful cavern.

It looked black and sinister in the fading light, but Nelson Lee led the way within, switching on his electric torch.

"Quite a decent sized place," he observed. "One would not suspect that it existed. And, unless I am mistaken, there is a narrow opening at the rear—which seems to lead further on into the rock."

"Looks like it, old man," said Dorrie. "Shall we explore?"

"Most decidedly."

They went forward, and I followed with Sir Montie and Tommy. And in a very few moments we discovered that there was actually a tunnel leading right away into the heart of the hill. For some way we proceeded down the tunnel in single file, Watson bringing up the rear.

"Amazin'—amazin'!" muttered Lord Dorrimore, who was just in front of me. "That's what it is, by gad! Who in the world took the trouble to bore out these bally tunnels? An' what's the good of 'em, anyhow?"

Nelson Lee laughed.

"My dear Dorrie, pray don't air your ignorance so openly," he said. "These tunnels were not made by the hand of man—they are quite natural. The fissures seem to extend right into the centre of the island—which is all of solid rock. We have passed one or two side openings already, and I am afraid our task will be difficult. There is really no telling which direction the boys took."

"Can't you see any tracks on the ground, sir?" I asked.

"None, Nipper," replied the gov'nor. "The rock is solid, and tells us nothing. However, we may meet with more success further on; and I think it is safe to assume that Handforth and his chums proceeded down this direct tunnel."

"They might have branched off——"

"Quite so, Dorrie; but it is more likely that they did not," said Nelson Lee.

And we continued our search—all of us rather amazed, and certainly interested. We had never suspected the existence of these catacomb-like tunnels. It was a feature of the island—which came new to us.

"Jolly queer sort of place, isn't it?" murmured Watson. "It would give me the creeps to be in here alone. It's all right with Mr. Lee and Lord Dorrimore; but I'd be scared out of my wits if they weren't here."

"Dear boy, I wouldn't go so far as to say that," remarked Sir Montie. "The presence of Mr. Lee and Dorrie is frightfully comfortin', I'll agree. But there's nothin' here to make a fellow nervous, begad!"

"Handforth wouldn't be nervous, anyway," I remarked. "I expect he came in here with Church and McClure, and, like asses, they advised him to turn back, and get out into the open again."

"Why were they asses for advising that?" asked Watson. "A jolly sensible suggestion, I should say!"

"My dear fathead, don't you know Handy

well enough by this time?" I asked. "If Church and McClure pressed Handforth to turn back, it's safe to reckon that he plunged further and further into the tunnel. Handy always does the thing other people ask him not to do. Church and McClure ought to have pressed him to go on—and then he would have turned back."

"Handy's a frightful ass," said Montie.

We were quite ready to agree with our noble chum; but that expression of opinion did not alter the fact that Handforth and Co. were lost, and it was quite safe to assume that they had lost themselves underground.

Suddenly I thought of something.

"I say, guv'nor!" I shouted.

"Well, my boy?"

"Handforth had candles," I went on. "It's quite likely that he dropped some of the grease here and there—and that would show, wouldn't it?"

"It would," agreed Nelson Lee. "And it might interest you to know, Nipper, that I have already seen several splashes of candle grease in this tunnel. Indeed, there is one splash right in front of me now."

I grunted.

"And I thought I'd given you a good tip!" I growled.

We continued our way onwards, and at irregular intervals we found traces of candle grease, freshly dropped. Nelson Lee had no intention of getting into the same predicament as the unlucky Handforth and Co.

We should have no difficulty in finding our way to the correct exit; for the guv'nor carried a stick of chalk, and at every turning or opening he marked the wall, indicating our course by roughly-drawn arrows.

But of Handforth and Co. we saw no sign.

No matter which way we turned, no matter which tunnel we searched we found nothing. And after a while we lost all traces of the candle grease. We were on the point of going back, in order to penetrate a different fissure, when Nelson Lee made a somewhat startling discovery.

The tunnel was fairly wide, and we were not obliged to walk in single file. Lee had bent down, picking something from the floor. He was now examining it very closely in the palm of his hand.

"What have you got there, sir?" I asked.

"Tobacco, Nipper," said the guv'nor, in a curious voice.

"Eh?"

"Begad!"

"Fancy those bonnders coming in here to smoke!" muttered Watson.

"You are wrong, my lad," said Nelson Lee grimly. "This tobacco is what they call plug, and is mostly used by sailors. And this portion here is obviously the half-charred remnant knocked out of a pipe. Handforth and his chums do not smoke—and under no circumstances would they smoke a pipe of this strongest of strong tobacco."

"Then—then what does it mean, sir?" I asked in amazement.

"Obviously that a man has been down this passage at no very distant date," replied the guv'nor. "This tobacco is still moist, and is not even stale, as it would be if it had been lying here for months."

"By gad! This is gettin' rather interestin'!" remarked Dorrie. "Have we hit upon the dwellin' of some cave man?"

Nelson Lee shook his head.

"A cave man would not smoke ship's tobacco, Dorrie," he said. "And don't forget that Captain Nixon jumped overboard after sending the Wanderer on to the rocks. And the sea within the little bay was not very rough."

"Do you think Nixon's still alive, then?" I asked.

"The possibility is by no means a wild one," replied Lee. "And Nixon would naturally get somewhere out of the way—and where could he hide better than in these tunnels? I'm becoming rather worried."

"You think he might have collared Handforth and Co., sir?" I asked. "It's just possible, but they're pretty hefty fellows—especially Handy. Nixon couldn't have licked the three of them."

"Nixon would not be content to fight cleanly," said Nelson Lee quietly. "And foul play would soon mean defeat for the three juniors. I don't say that this has actually happened—but we must hasten our movements."

"Just a tick, sir," I said. "How could Nixon light a pipe after swimming ashore, and getting soaked to the skin?"

"That's a poser, old man," murmured Dorrie.

"Not at all," said the detective. "Quite a number of ship's officers, who are obliged to be on deck in all weathers, carry their tobacco and matches in a water-tight case. Nixon was probably no exception."

We turned back, but we had hardly proceeded a hundred yards before Nelson Lee paused again. He bent down, and finally went upon his knees on the floor. He stared at a yellowish spot.

"We missed this coming along," he remarked.

"An' what is it?" inquired Dorrie.

"A spot of candle grease."

"Then Handforth must have been this way—" began Watson.

"No, Watson," put in the guv'nor. "Not Handforth."

"But you said candle grease!" I remarked.

"There are many kinds of candles," said Nelson Lee. "Handforth and the boys with him were using the ordinary white wax candles; but this is a distinct spot of tallow."

"But—but I don't understand—"

"Neither do I, Nipper," said the guv'nor. "Nixon might have been using a tallow candle, certainly—for this grease was dropped very recently. The really surprising thing is that an impression is to be seen on the tallow, which indicates that somebody stepped upon it after it had hardened. And the impression is that of a bare foot. A

2



1. Cr-r-r-rash! The Wanderer had struck between the two great masses of rock.

2. We only took three steps into the tunnel, and then down, down we went!

mere scrap, of course, but unmistakable."

"Then Nixon must have walked in these passages without any boots or socks!" I exclaimed. "That's queer, sir—considering how sharp the rocks are."

"I am puzzled, Nipper," said Lee. "And I am beginning to think that there were other human beings present in this tunnel—in addition to Nixon."

"And in addition to Handforth and Co?"

"Yes."

"But—but it's impossible!" I gasped. "It couldn't be, sir."

"Perhaps we shall find out for certain before long," said the gov'nor. "At all events, we shall continue our exploration."

"We passed down the tunnel until we reached a spot where there were two openings—one clearly marked with an arrow, showing the way we should go. But Lee turned down the other tunnel first."

"We might as well be thorough," he commented briefly.

"After we had proceeded down the tunnel some little distance a halt was called. It was a narrow fissure, and the roof abruptly came down until it was necessary to stoop. And it was here that Nelson Lee paused."

"Mind your heads!" he warned. "The rocks are very jagged—Hullo! What is this? What have we here?"

The gov'nor was directing the light of his torch upon the low roof of the tunnel. There were many ugly projections, and upon one of these I saw a tiny wisp of something, sticking to the rock.

"Human hairs!" exclaimed Nelson Lee keenly. "There is a stain of blood, too—proving that somebody caught his head very severely. And these hairs are decidedly interesting."

"By gad," said Dorrie, "they're deucedly long, Lee! They must be the hairs of a woman!"

"What!" I yelled.

"Dorrie is wrong," said the gov'nor. "These hairs are from a man's head. They are coarse and unusually long. Nixon is dark, and turning grey. But these hairs are quite auburn."

"Then whose can they be, sir?" asked Watson blankly.

"I don't know, my lad—but I do know that my first surmise was correct," said Lee. "Perhaps Nixon has never been here—but I can say for certain that other men have. It is startling in the extreme; but we must not get excited. This island, it seems, is not so barren as we first supposed."

"Well, my hat!" I muttered. "This is a rum go! We came here to find Handforth and Co., and we find traces of long-haired strangers, who smoke ship's tobacco! This is a mystery, my sons!"

"Dear old boy, it's a frightful mystery," declared Montie. "I ain't a coward, but I'd feel a lot safer out in the open—I would, really."

"What about 'me?'" growled Watson. "I'm bringing up the rear—and I keep thinking that something is going to spring on me

from behind. This rotten place is giving me the creeps!"

And then, before we could discuss the matter any further, the gov'nor snapped out his light and uttered a warning.

"Quiet—all of you!" he hissed. "Switch off your lights!"

All the torches were extinguished, and we were in pitchy darkness.

"What's the idea, sir?" I breathed.

"Come here—cautiously!"

We all moved up until we were in a clump. Nelson Lee had halted at a spot where two tunnels formed a junction. We did not need telling this; for, amazingly enough, we could see down the second tunnel—although all our torches were out. A dim light was glowing far down the tunnel!

And, as we stood quite still, holding our breath, we faintly heard the sound of human voices.

But not the voices of Handforth and Co.!

CHAPTER V.

THE FIGHT IN THE CAVERN.

MEANWHILE, dramatic events had been taking place.

Handforth and Church and McClure, dazed with alarm and despair, lay huddled together in the darkness for what seemed to them an eternity. They had certainly been rather tired, and the rest did them a lot of good.

It was cool down in the tunnels, however, and after a while the three lost juniors became rather chilled. Their condition was a grave one. Hopelessly out of their bearings, with no light save a few matches, they had practically no chance of reaching the open air in safety.

"I—I say, Handy," muttered Church at last.

"Eh? Did you speak?"

"I'm getting as cold as ice!" said Church. "Don't you think we'd better get a move on, Handy? I don't suppose we shall get anywhere, but we might as well try—and it's better than lying here, to perish with cold!"

"Yes, we'd better walk on," said McClure. "There's no telling—we might strike lucky, after all."

Handforth made a peculiar noise.

"I—I don't know what you chaps think of me!" he muttered brokenly. "It's all my fault! I was mad to bring you down here. And now we shall all be killed! We shall all die of starvation——"

"Oh, rot!" said Church. "I haven't given up hope yet. That rest has done me a lot of good, and I don't feel half so rotten now. Buck up, old son!"

"By George!" exclaimed Handforth, in a changed voice. "We're a fine set of funks! Squatting down here and giving way to despair! We ought to be wandering about—trying to find our way out into the open. Come on! I'm ready!"

So, their spirits revived, they rose to their

feet, and Handforth struck one of his precious matches. The light was blinding after the intense blackness, but the juniors were able to see down the tunnel.

And they started off slowly, clinging to one another, and Handforth leading the way. They had no real hope of getting out under the sky; but anything was better than sitting still.

How long they wandered in that fashion they never knew. Handforth afterwards declared that he and his chums walked along the tunnels in pitchy darkness for six solid hours on end. But this was a big exaggeration.

Possibly they felt their way along the dark tunnels for two hours—but not for longer. And then they received their first gleam of hope. Handforth, who was leading, noticed that the walls of the tunnel fell away, and he could feel nothing with his outstretched hands.

"Hold on!" he said huskily. "There's something queer here. Just wait until I strike a match!"

The flare of light showed that the trio had entered a big cavern, far underground. The other side of it was beyond the circle of light cast by the match. And then Handforth gave a startled gasp.

"Did—did you see it?" he asked faintly.

"See what, you ass?" panted Church, in a scared voice.

"Why, a tub—a wooden tub——"

"A tub!" snorted Church. "I thought you'd seen a skeleton or something! You gave me quite a turn, you duffer!"

"But—but you don't understand," ejaculated Handforth. "It was a tub—made by human hands! How could such a thing get into this cavern? It proves that somebody else must have been here!"

"My hat!" exclaimed McClure breathlessly. "We might be near another exit—a cave, or something! Perhaps this cavern was used by smugglers, hundreds of years ago! Strike another match—quick!"

Handforth was about to do so, but he paused.

A dim, flickering light had become visible on the further side of the cavern; it was so subdued that the juniors would not have noticed it but for the intense blackness which surrounded them.

They waited, their hearts beating rapidly.

And the light grew stronger as they watched, until it flickered clearly upon the grim walls of the vast chamber. And voices were heard, too. Some human beings were coming down one of the passages!

"Oh, my goodness!" panted Handforth. "A—a rescue party! They've come to save us, after all! Thank heaven!"

He was about to rush forward, but his chums grabbed him.

"Let's wait here," exclaimed McClure. "There'll be no room in that giddy tunnel—and we shall want to hug everybody!"

"By George, yes!" said Handforth. "Mr. Lee, I expect—and Lord Dorrimore and Dr. Brett, and all the rest of 'em! Keep your

pecker up, you know. Don't let 'em see that we've been scared!"

They waited, their hearts filled with thankfulness.

And the light grew brighter, and the voices became louder. Handforth and his chums were so excited that they did not notice anything strange at first. But, just before the approaching party stepped into the cavern, Handforth began to have a suspicion of the truth.

"Those voices!" he muttered. "They don't seem familiar——"

"The tunnels echo, you ass!" said Church.

"Yes, but—— Oh, great pip!"

Handforth fairly staggered; and his chums gave cries of amazement and alarm.

For the party which entered the cavern was not a rescue-party, after all! A man led the way—a burly-looking man, attired in rough, seafaring garb.

But the juniors hardly glanced at him.

They were staring at the four others.

For there were five men altogether. The sailorman was normal, but his companions were weird and wild in appearance. They all wore long, straggling beards, and their hair was long—so long that it nearly reached their shoulders! They were dressed in rags and tatters, and their feet were bare.

Then Handforth gave a roar.

"Nixon!" he shouted. "Captain Nixon!"

"Oh, corks!"

"Well, I'm blessed!"

The juniors stared at the men, and the men stared at the juniors. Captain Nixon—for the leader of the party was, indeed, that rascally individual—uttered a string of oaths which would have made a Billingsgate fish-porter blush.

"Some o' them blamed boys!" shouted the skipper. "How in the name o' thunder did they get into this place?"

"Off the ship, are they?" asked one of the wild men.

"Yes, durn them!" snarled Nixon. "Didn't I tell you to be careful? They're spyin' already! They'll go back an' bring Leo an'——"

"We'll kill 'em fust!" put in one of the others.

Handforth and Co. listened as if in a dream. It was a tremendous shock to find that they were not to be rescued by their friends, after all. But they had been so long alone—they had given up hope for such a time—that they were not at all frightened. It was a relief to be in the company of other human beings, and to see the welcome light of a candle. The juniors felt quite content at the moment. Their position was not as bad as it had been.

And Handforth recovered his nerve rapidly.

"You awful scoundrel!" he said warmly, glaring at Nixon. "You murderous rotter! You tried to smash the yacht on to the rocks, and we thought you were dead! How did you escape—and who are these chaps? They look as if they'd just stepped out of Barnum's show!"

Captain Nixon scowled, and then grinned.

"You ain't far wrong, kid," he said. "They do look a rummy crew, don't they? But these friends are my friends—savvy? An' you'd best keep a civil tongue in your head, young shaver! I won't stand no lip——"

"We want to get into the open again," put in Church eagerly.

The skipper nodded.

"Yes, I dessay you do," he said. "But you'll get into the open air agin when it pleases me—an' not afore. Savvy? You've got to tell me how things stand. What damage was done to the old hooker when she struck? She seems fairly sound, but I'll bet she's full o' water——"

"The yacht is hardly scratch——" began McClure.

"Shut up, you ass!" roared Handforth. "Don't tell this murderer anything! I'm not going to answer his questions, anyhow! Rats to him!"

Nixon swore again.

"Catch 'old of the young dogs, mates!" he snarled.

"Hi!" roared Handforth. "Don't you touch—— Leggo! Take your filthy paws off me! You—you rotters! If you don't leggo—— Ow! Yaroooh!"

Edward Oswald sat down abruptly, with two men on the top of him. Church and McClure, although they fought gamely, were soon dealt with. Their attackers were possessed of brute strength.

"Hold 'em down!" said Nixon harshly. "We'll teach the young whelps!"

Handforth and Co. could do nothing; they were helpless.

And they were utterly startled and amazed. The events of the last few minutes had taken their breath away. It was splendid to be out of that awful darkness, and to see other human beings; but this was rather too much of a good thing.

Nixon was a desperate rascal, and he was quite capable of sending the juniors back into the tunnels—to lose themselves and perish in the darkness. The boys were helpless against such odds.

Who were the strange-looking men—the four who were with Nixon?

Where had they come from? Obviously they must have been on the island for some time. But it was altogether astounding. How could those men have lived on the bare rock? And why had they not hailed the yacht with gladness and enthusiasm when it first appeared on the scene?

Captain Nixon, it seemed, had found the men first, and for some extraordinary reason they were supporting him. It was a puzzle which Handforth and Co. could not fathom.

"You've got to do as we tell you, my young shavers," said Captain Nixon grimly. "I ain't standin' any nonsense. There's a little matter concerning the treasure—what was brought from the African desert. You've got to tell me where that treasure is hidden. Speak up!"

The juniors maintained a stony silence.

"I give you ten seconds!" said the skipper.

"You can give us ten years if you like!" snapped Handforth warmly. "If you think we're going to betray Mr. Lee and Sir Crawford Grey and Lord Dorrimore, you're jolly well off-side!"

"Hear, hear!" said Church stoutly.

"Rather!" muttered McClure.

"And you can put that in your pipe and smoke it!" said Handforth, with relish. "I don't suppose it'll taste very sweet!"

Nixon laughed harshly.

"Very brave, ain't you?" he sneered. "But we'll see about that, my young cubs! You'll change your tune afore long—when me an' my pals here get busy. I reckon you kids need a lesson!"

Handforth and Co. said nothing. They sat still and silent while Nixon talked in low tones with his four wild-looking companions. They were certainly British, and this was all the more astonishing. They appeared to be sailors, but they must have been living a solitary life on the island for a considerable time.

At last Captain Nixon came to a decision.

"Now then, move yourselves," he ordered sharply. "I'm goin' to give you a choice, my lads. You can either speak up, or you can get shoved into the tunnels agin—further down, where there ain't any chance of escape. I dessay you'll be in a different mood arter twelve hours!"

Handforth and Co. were startled; but they were even more startled a second later.

"I'm sorry to upset your scheme, Captain Nixon, but I'm afraid it cannot go on," exclaimed a well-known voice. "You will please remain quite still. I can assure you it will be healthier to do so."

Nixon swung round, gritting his teeth.

For there, just within the cavern, stood Nelson Lee! A revolver was held in the great detective's right hand, and the next moment a white beam of light shot out across the cavern. Owing to the glare, Nixon could no longer see the detective, who held the electric torch.

"You—you interferin' swab!" roared Nixon furiously.

"Hurrah!" yelled Handforth, in a cracked voice. "It's Mr. Lee! We're rescued! Hurrah!"

"Keep your pecker up, Handy!" shouted a voice.

"My hat! That's Nipper," gasped McClure.

"Good old Nipper!"

I could not help grinning, although the situation seemed to be fairly serious. I was just behind Dorrie and the guv'nor, who had entered the cavern. Tregellis-West and Watson were with me, and we were all curious and on edge.

We had little suspected that we should come upon such a scene as this. We were prepared to see Nixon, and we had hoped to find Handforth and Co. But the other four men took us completely by surprise. Who on earth were they?

They stood in the full glare of our electric torches, surrounding Nixon and the boys. Big men they were, with hairy faces and with

clothing which was nothing but rags and tatters. They were all dirty, and most repulsive in appearance.

"By gad! Who are these gentlemen?" inquired Dorrie politely. "I don't remember seein' them on board the yacht—an' yet they couldn't have come from anywhere else. It's frightfully mysterious——"

"I ain't afraid o' your durned gun!" shouted Nixon abruptly. "What the thunder do you mean by comin' here and interferin' in an affair what don't concern you? Clear off while you're safe!"

"Thanks!" said Handforth—"we will!"

Nixon had not been addressing the trio of Study D; but they lost no time in scrambling up and dashing over to our side of the cavern. They charged into us, and Montie and Tommy were nearly sent flying.

"Begad! Pray be careful, dear fellows——"

"That you, Montie?" gasped Handforth. "Oh, my hat! What a time we've had! But we're all right now——"

Crack!

It was the guv'nor's revolver—and that shot, curiously enough, was to bring disaster upon us. Nixon had suddenly pulled a square tin from his pocket; and he flung it with all his strength at Nelson Lee's electric torch.

His aim was bad, however, and the tin struck the guv'nor's right wrist, tearing the skin rather severely. Lee's hand jerked, with his finger on the trigger, and the weapon naturally exploded.

Crash!

The bullet struck the rock just behind Nixon and his four strange companions. And the rock splintered, and scores of small chunks fell to the floor with a clatter.

Nixon twirled like lightning.

"Now's your chance!" he roared. "Come on!"

He grabbed up several chunks of rock, and hurled them viciously across the cavern. We had not been prepared for such an onslaught, and the guv'nor had no time to use his revolver.

The very first piece of rock hit him on the head, and he staggered forward, dazed and dizzy. Dorrimore met with a similar fate. As he was charging, a jagged piece of rock struck him on the shin. He stumbled, crashed over, and was instantly pounced upon by two of Nixon's men.

There was now a tremendous uproar proceeding.

The only light was that of the flickering candle. I rushed forward, ably supported by my chums and Handforth and Co. Handforth received a swinging blow from Nixon as he came up; and poor old Handy went over, nearly stunned.

The rest of the fight was short and sharp.

With the odds now heavily against us, we could do very little. We hammered away until we could hammer no longer. Heavy blows were rained upon us, and at length we were beaten into surrender.

Within three minutes our own rope was

used to bind our hands—and there we were, the prisoners of Captain John Nixon!

We had found Handforth and Co. and a pile of trouble in one swoop!

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CHAPTER VI.

THE UNDERGROUND LAKE.

CAPTAIN NIXON laughed pleasantly.

"Quite a nice little bunch of you!" he remarked, as he calmly lit one of Nelson Lee's cigarettes. "Ah! That's not so bad! I haven't had a decent smoke for days. Much obliged, Mr. Lee, for the gift!"

The guv'nor said nothing. Nixon had annexed Nelson Lee's cigarettes—case and all—a few moments earlier. We were all sitting in a clump, with our wrists bound. Nixon had not thought it necessary to secure our ankles.

"You walked right into our hands," went on Nixon. "Rather a pity you used that gun of yours; it provided us with a few handy bits of rock. But if you keep nice and quiet I sha'n't do no harm to ye!"

"You frightful rascal!" exclaimed Dorrimore. "You talk about doin' no harm! An' yet you have been tryin' to kill us for weeks past—ever since you arranged that ambush in the forest. You've failed all along, an' you'll fail now. An' you'll finish up, by gad, by spendin' a number of years in gaol!"

Nixon laughed again.

"Think so?" he said. "Mebbe you're right, my lord; but I'd lay heavy odds that you're wrong! I've had a few setbacks, but this time I'm certain of winnin' through. Understand? I ain't taking any more chances. I've got the lot of you now—an' I'm going to keep you where you won't do no harm."

"In—in these tunnels?" gasped Church.

"Oh, somewhere better than that!" said Nixon. "I'm out for victory now, an' with the yacht's crew robbed of your services, I reckon I can deal with the situation easily. There ain't no law on this blamed island—except my law. An' what I says goes—every time!"

"You have certainly gained the upper hand for the moment, Nixon," said Nelson Lee smoothly. "But you must not deceive yourself. There are still many formidable persons on board the yacht, and you will not find your task easy——"

"You don't know what game I'm goin' to play," interrupted Nixon. "An' I don't feel inclined to explain, neither. So I'll just put you all in a safe place—where you can't do no harm."

"You—you murderous rotter!" roared Handforth.

"It ain't fair to call me that," said Nixon. "I ain't a hard man, and I don't mean to harm a hair o' your heads. In fact, I'm going to show you a nice little exit, an' you can get back to your friends."

Nixon laughed softly to himself. Then he took Nelson Lee's revolver from his pocket, and levelled it.

"Up you get—all of you!" he ordered. "If there's any mutiny, I'll shoot!"

"Rats to you!" said Handforth fiercely. "I'm not going to take any rotten orders from a beast of your stamp! Go and eat coke!"

Nelson Lee rose to his feet.

"Boys, you must obey Captain Nixon," he said quietly.

"But—but—" began Handforth.

"I am serious, Handforth," said Lee. "Obey everything."

"That's what I call sensible," remarked Nixon. "Lee's got a good respect for his innards—he don't want to feel a bullet gettin' mixed up with his heart and lungs. It wouldn't do 'em no good!"

The guv'nor gave me a meaning glance. Captain Nixon was absolutely callous, and he had proved on several occasions that he was capable of murder. He certainly would not hesitate to use that revolver. With the slightest excuse, he would shoot, and one death would be followed by others. Humiliating as it was, we could do nothing but obey the orders of this desperate rascal.

When we were upon our feet he regarded us with a queer smile on his rugged, cruel-featured face. His four companions stood by, looking on with great interest, and whispering occasionally among themselves.

"Now then!" said Nixon. "You'll go down that tunnel—straight in front of you. And the fust feller that jibs will fall in his tracks. March!"

Nelson Lee led the way, with Dorrie by his side. We entered the tunnel, and Captain Nixon brought up the rear, forcing us along like a herd of cattle. As the guv'nor had said, our safest plan was to obey.

And then something startling occurred.

Nelson Lee and Dorrie, who were walking in front, enveloped in darkness, suddenly gave two sharp gasps. There was a slithering noise, and then a dull, far away splash. I guessed the truth in a second. There was a hole in the floor of the tunnel! And the guv'nor and Dorrie had plunged into it unknowingly! Captain Nixon had deliberately forced us into the terrible trap.

"March!" he roared.

But Montie and Tommy and I hesitated. We were next, and we feared to take that unknown plunge into the depths. We halted, shivering with horror. Not a sound came from ahead or below.

"If you don't march within three seconds I'm going to shoot!" snarled Nixon, in a voice which could not be mistaken. "It don't make much difference—except that this death will be a bit quicker!"

"We must go on!" I whispered huskily. "We can't allow ourselves to be shot down like dogs. Come on, you chaps!"

"Dear fellow, I'm ready!" said Montie quietly.

Crack!

Nixon's revolver went off with a roar, and a terrific yell came from Handforth. I fully believed, in that moment, that poor old Handy had been shot dead. And I walked forward with Montie and Tommy on either side of me.

We only took three steps, and then down we went.

The fall was not sheer at first. We slithered down a sloping shelf of rock, surrounded by utter blackness. Then we dropped sheer. Down, down! It seemed a terrible drop.

Splash! We struck water, and plunged under, unhurt. I don't exactly know what happened, but I felt myself being hauled along and the cords binding my wrists unfastened. And then, when I rose to the surface, I heard other splashes, accompanied by gasps.

"Oh, my hat!" said somebody. "Where are we?"

"Is that you, Handy?" I spluttered.

"Yes."

"I thought you'd been shot——"

"That beast fired his revolver right against my ear," said Handforth. "I'm scorched, I believe, and I'm as deaf as a post—I can't hear a thing!"

Naturally, this was an exaggeration, and I took no notice of it. I was swimming round in little circles. The water was not very cold, and it was only about ten feet deep. But, as far as I could judge, we had all plunged into a small underground lake, or pool, with smooth rock sides. Death seemed inevitable, sooner or later.

"Are you there, Nipper?" came Nelson Lee's voice. "Are the other boys there?"

We could not see, of course, but it was soon discovered that we were all present—and all unhurt. Captain Nixon had gone—even he was not brutal enough to watch us perish.

"Is there any chance for us, sir," I panted.

"I don't know, Nipper," replied the guv'nor. "I've already been round the walls of this pool. They are sheer, like those of a well, without even a crevice. There is no escape that I can see."

"We're in a frightful mess—that's all about it!" exclaimed Lord Dorrimore. "I hope all you fellows can swim decently? If not, I can support a couple of you for a bit. Just say the word."

It was good of Dorrie, but we were all strong enough at the moment. And Nelson Lee, who knew that our position was as bad as it could possibly be, lost no time in making investigations.

Nixon had sent us into this black lake because he reckoned that we should die within an hour. There was no escape, he considered, and there would be no trouble with our dead bodies. We should just vanish for ever. It was the easiest way to get rid of us.

"Have you noticed a curious fact, Dorrie?" asked Nelson Lee keenly.

"I've noticed several, old man," said his

lordship. "For instance, I'm wet through, an' I've swallowed pints of salt water——"

"That is the curious fact!" said Lee grimly. "This water is salt! In fact, it is sea water!"

"Then—then it means that this cavern is supplied by the sea!" I gasped. "There must be an outlet, sir! Perhaps it's underneath——"

"I intend to find out," said the gov'nor.

He proceeded to dive, and after four or five unsuccessful attempts he found a seaweed-choked cavity near the floor of the pool. Regardless of the consequences, Nelson Lee forced his way through. It seemed ages before he completed the passage. Then he rose swiftly, bobbed out of the water, and took in a deep breath.

He could see daylight!

Lee murmured a word of thankfulness. He was in an outer cave, and he could hear the sea breaking on the rocks. He could see the daylight through a low opening. There was a chance for us yet!

The night had passed during our search in the old tunnels. Nelson Lee judged that the tide was coming in, and although the water was calm within the cave, there was not a second to be lost.

He dived again and forced his way through the slimy passage—which, actually, was very short—and again reached us in the inner pool. We were all thankful to see him again, for he had been absent so long that we had feared that the very worst had happened.

"Well, sir?" asked three or four of us.

"Our position is not so serious, after all," said the gov'nor in a whisper. "Don't shout—Nixon might be within earshot. This cavern is connected with an outer cave, and we can all escape—if you boys can negotiate the dive successfully. A passage leads into safety."

"Oh, thank goodness!" muttered Handforth.

"An' I was beginnin' to wonder how many lawsuits there'd be in connection with my property," said Dorrie. "I haven't made a will, an' there might be some squabbles——"

"You can talk about that later, Dorrie," said Lee briskly. "Follow me!"

I don't exactly know how we got through that passage. It needed a bit of finding, to begin with—and although Dorrie and I and Montie were good divers, the other fellows were not so expert.

However, with assistance, and after swallowing varying quantities of water, we all succeeded in reaching the outer cave. McClure was nearly done for once, for he became entangled in the seaweed, but he was freed by Nelson Lee, who acted promptly.

We could see the welcome daylight, and after a short rest we determined to get out into the open with no loss of time. Our adventure had been a startling one, but it was turning out all serene now. Filled with hope, we followed the gov'nor.

The roof of the cave was only just over our heads, as we swam. At high tide, in all

probability, there was no exit at all. The cave was flooded right out, and it would have been impossible to swim from the underground lake to the outer air itself without collapsing en route.

But the under-water swim, in the present circumstances, was not very terrifying. And we all accomplished it safely, and with ease—in spite of the fact that we were tired.

"Thank goodness!" gasped Handforth, as he struck out for the cave exit. "Daylight at last!"

"I thought we were never going to see the sky again," said McClure huskily. "Doesn't it look glorious? And fancy it being daylight now. I thought we were still in the middle of the night."

We passed out of the low exit, one behind the other.

Nelson Lee had climbed on to a pile of rocks, and he sat there in the sunlight, dripping, but cheerful. And he ticked us all off as we emerged into the open, nodding with approval.

"Dorrie, Nipper, Tregellis-West, Handforth, Watson, Church, McClure!" he exclaimed. "Seven of you—that's right. We've all managed to get out—and we have much to be thankful for." /

"What a frightfully cheerful fellow Captain Nixon is!" remarked Dorrie. "First of all he tries to finish off the lot of us by wreckin' the yacht; an' then he amuses himself by playin' this game. The way he chucked us into that shaft was quite enter-tainin', by gad!"

"Nixon meant us to be killed," I said grimly. "He thinks we all pegged out within ten minutes——"

"And he's now congratulating himself that we're dead," said Handforth. "By George! When I meet that rotter again, I'm going to punch him until he can't stand straight! The cad! The awful rogue!"

"Still, we've escaped," I said cheerfully. "That's the main thing, my sons. It ought not to be such a hard job to capture Master Nixon, and to put him neatly into irons. What do you say, gov'nor?"

Nelson Lee shook his head.

"It won't be so easy," he replied. "All those tunnels and caverns are like a maze and it will be no easy task to rout Nixon out. We might lose ourselves again, if we ventured into——"

"But Nixon might lose himself, too, sir."

"I hardly think so—for he has the guidance and help of those four mysterious-looking men who attacked us," said the gov'nor. "They know the tunnels by heart, I presume."

"Who can they be, sir?" asked Watson.

"Really, Watson, it is a difficult question to answer," said the gov'nor. "I should say that the men are castaways from some wrecked ship—they have lived on the island for a good few months, it would seem. Nixon must have encountered them quite early—and he lost no time in poisoning their minds against us. So they are enemies. But why they should listen to Nixon, and

why they should be hostile, are matters which need much attention. The affair is a mystery."

"Quite so," said Lord Dorrimore. "An' so is a sausage."

"Eh?"

"Sausages are mysteries, an' I believe they're on the menu for breakfast this morning," explained Dorrie calmly. "If we're goin' to investigate any mysteries to-day, I can tell you the kind we'll start on. I'm starvin'!"

The guv'nor chuckled.

"All right, Dorrie," he said. "We'll get to the yacht at once. We seem to be quite isolated round here, amid these rocks. But if we climb over that ledge yonder, we shall probably be able to get a better idea of our position."

And, without further ado, we followed the lead of Nelson Lee and Lord Dorrimore, and made off across the rocks.

CHAPTER VII.

THE MYSTERY OF CASTAWAY ISLAND.

"QUEER—infernally queer!"

Dr. Brett made that remark as he stood on the yacht's deck, leaning against the rail. He was gazing towards the rocky shore. But his gaze met nothing except those frowning walls. No human being was visible.

"Yea, Brett, it is decidedly unsettling!" exclaimed Captain Burton. "Broad daylight, and still no sign of Mr. Lee or his party. What can have become of them? Why should they have remained on the island all night?"

Brett looked thoughtful.

"They went ashore, captain, in order to find out what had become of Handforth and two other juniors," he said. "It seems that Mr. Lee is finding his task a difficult one. And I am beginning to get anxious."

"You cannot be more anxious than I am, Brett," declared Captain Burton. "The search-party's long absence proves quite clearly that something of an alarming nature must have occurred. It seems that we are never to be free of perils and anxiety. This voyage has not been at all smooth."

The doctor nodded grimly.

"Smooth!" he echoed. "Well, hardly. We're high and dry on the rocks, in a manner of speaking, and I'm hanged if I can see how we are to get afloat again."

"It might be possible," said Burton musingly. "She's a good little ship, and the force of the impact scarcely strained her. If we could only get her into the open water we should be able to make port. But it can't be done, Brett. Even at high tide, there is no tendency of the yacht to lift. She's quite fast—and as long as the sea remains calm she will come to no harm. But if we have some more heavy seas—well, it won't be long before the vessel is in pieces."

"That's not very cheerful, anyhow," remarked Brett. "However, we might be able to receive help from some passing ship—Hold on! Didn't I see somebody moving against the rocks just now?"

"Where?" asked the skipper, taking his glasses.

"Just over towards the left of the bay."

The two men looked intently. And they certainly did see a figure. It was impossible to tell who it was, or what it was—until it turned round, and faced the yacht. And as it did so something white fluttered.

The man stepped down towards the sea, still waving the white rag.

"What on earth is the meaning of this?" muttered the captain. "That man is not Lee, or Dorrie, or—Why, good heavens! It's Nixon—Captain Nixon himself! That vile wretch is alive, after all!"

"Well, I'm hanged!" shouted Brett.

They both stared at the shore more alertly than before. Captain Nixon had come to a halt, and he was waving the white rag continuously—obviously to attract attention. And Brett suddenly jumped to the truth.

"He wants us to accept that as a flag of truce!" he exclaimed. "The impudent rascal! No doubt he is on the point of starving, and—By jingo! I wonder if Nixon knows anything about our party?"

Captain Burton looked grave.

"We can't afford to risk it," he said. "We can't ignore this man, Brett. Under the circumstances, we had better go ashore without delay—just you and I. It is fortunate that everybody else is still below."

The captain was referring to Sir Crawford and his guests. It was still early morning, and nobody had emerged from their cabins as yet. The crew were all asleep—for the ordinary work of the yacht was at a standstill.

Just at the moment Brett and the captain had the deck completely to themselves. A boat was lying alongside, in the smooth water. And in less than a minute the pair had tumbled into it, and were pulling for the shore.

They were both armed, and knew well enough that they could tackle Captain Nixon easily.

Nixon waited with a grim smile upon his lips, and he seemed to be amused as the two men climbed out of the boat and approached him. With elaborate politeness, he removed his bedraggled cap.

"Good-morning, gentlemen!" he exclaimed.

"You foul hound!" roared Captain Burton, with righteous indignation. "I'm going to take you in my hands, and I'm going to crush—"

"What about this?" demanded Nixon, displaying the ragged handkerchief he had used as a white flag. "Ain't you going to respect this flag, Captain Burton. I thought you was a Briton!"

Burton clenched his fists.

"I won't touch you," he muttered, holding himself back with an effort. "But I'll

tell you to your face, Nixon, that hanging is altogether too good for you—you murderous dog!"

"Thanks!" sneered Nixon.

"You tried to send every soul on board that yacht into Eternity!" thundered Captain Burton. "You began by seriously injuring my first officer, and then you pile my ship on the rocks. One day, John Nixon, you'll be punished for that act!"

"Mebbe," said Nixon carelessly.

"Not content with that, you have the startling audacity to approach me," went on Burton. "Well, what do you want? If you expect me to give you food, you'll expect in vain. A hound of your calibre deserves to starve!"

Captain Nixon laughed harshly.

"We'll see about that!" he exclaimed. "You won't have everything your own way, Burton—nor you, neither, Dr. Brett. It so happens that I'm in a position to dictate now——"

"To dictate!"

"That's what I said, an' my orders must be obeyed!"

"Your orders!" roared Captain Burton. "Upon my soul! The man must be mad, Brett—absolutely mad!"

"I have suspected it all along," nodded the doctor. "Nixon, you had better calm yourself. I will examine you——"

"You'll go to blazes!" snapped Nixon. "I'm not standing no nonsense—understand? You're just wondering what the game is? Well, I'll explain. Last night a party of five came ashore—a party consisting of Mr. Nelson Lee, Lord Dorrimore, Nipper, and two other boys. They'd come ashore to search for three other young varmints, what had got lost."

"Well?" snapped Brett.

"It so happens that all them gentlemen walked into a little trap," continued Nixon calmly. "They're prisoners—every man of them. And you'll never find them, even if you search for a solid month."

Captain Burton and Dr. Brett were greatly startled. There was a ring of truth in Nixon's statement. Indeed, the very fact that he knew everything proved that his talk was not idle.

And here was an explanation of the party's long absence!

Dr. Brett and Captain Burton could do nothing but accept Nixon's statement as the truth. In any case, it would have been risky to ignore the man. He stood watching calmly, and with a sneer on his face.

"Well?" he said, at last. "Scared you a bit, ain't I? I don't wonder at it, with Mr. Nelson Lee and Lord Dorrimore in my hands—well, I guess I've got the drop on you!"

And Nixon laughed triumphantly.

As a matter of fact, he firmly believed that we had all died a miserable death by now. The callous brute, however, was determined to make capital out of our disappearance.

"You may have got the drop on us for

the moment," said Dr. Brett grimly. "Well, what are your terms? Are you prepared to release your prisoners?"

"Certainly—at a price."

"I don't believe your story!" thundered Captain Burton. "I don't believe that Mr. Lee and all those others would fall into a trap! The job couldn't have been done single-handed——"

"Then perhaps you'll tell me where the little party has got to?" sneered Nixon. "Perhaps you'll tell me why they ain't turned up? You don't seem to understand, Burton, that this island is no more solid than a blamed honeycomb. It's full of cracks an' tunnels—and I was ashore before anybody else. When Lee and his party came along I was ready—and they all walked into the trap before they knew it. An inviting-looking tunnel, an' a slab of stone all ready to drop. In they goes, the whole crowd, and down comes the stone! Savvy? Was it an easy job? Don't ask me such foolish questions!"

And Nixon spat contemptuously into the sea. His brief account of what had happened—or, rather, what he wanted his listeners to believe had happened—was convincing enough.

"They're prisoners," he went on. "They can't get out until I let 'em out. If you handle me now you'll be a durned Hun! You'll be violating the white flag! You can't do it, Captain Burton. You'll have to agree to my terms, or them pals of yours will starve."

Captain Burton took a deep breath.

"What are your terms?" he demanded.

"I want three boatloads of food brought ashore," he said—"sacks of flour, sugar, tea, jam, tinned meat, and all things o' that kind. Three boatloads cram full. As soon as the stuff is handed over, I'll keep my side o' the bargain."

"What guarantee have we got?" asked Brett sharply.

"My word of honour."

"I'm afraid that won't suit us—but we are hardly in a position to choose," said Captain Burton. "I will speak with Dr. Brett for a moment before giving you my final answer."

"I give you two minutes," said Nixon truculently.

Burton and Brett drew aside, and looked at one another with faces which were expressive of their secret alarm.

"What is to be done, Brett?" asked the captain huskily. "I don't like to believe this scoundrel's story; but what else can we do? Mr. Lee has not returned, and it is clear that something bad has happened. And if we accede to Nixon's demand, and hand over the food, we shall seriously shorten our own supplies."

Brett nodded.

"It's difficult," he said. "And even after we have handed over the prize, we have no guarantee that Mr. Lee and the others will be released. To deal with a man of this

sort is well-nigh impossible. Having gained his first victory, he will make other demands—he will probably refuse to release his prisoners until we have handed over the treasure of El Safra."

"By thunder!" exclaimed the captain. "You're right, Brett! Nixon has been after that treasure all the time. But he wants the food first—it is a ruse. Our plan must be to refuse point-blank."

"Exactly," said Brett. "It is the only course."

They turned back to the waiting scoundrel.

"I have decided," said Captain Burton grimly.

"You give in?"

"I do not!" snapped Burton. "I will have nothing to do with your plan, Nixon. You will not get one particle of food—"

"By jinks!" snarled Nixon, taken by surprise. "You won't hand over? I'll show you what I'm made of! If that stuff ain't on the shore within an hour, Lee and all the others will be killed like yaller dogs—and you'll see their bodies floatin' around the yacht! Them's my last words!"

"You daren't—"

"Bah! Didn't I dare to send the yacht on the rocks!" roared Nixon. "I don't care what happens now! You've got to agree, or—or—"

The words died away in Nixon's throat, and his face went deathly pale. He stared with horrified gaze over at the rocks towards the left. Then a hoarse cry of terror came from between his lips.

He turned on his heel and fled—fled as though a thousand devils were on his track. Captain Burton and Dr. Brett were amazed, and they turned to see the cause of Nixon's terrible fright.

And there, in full view, stood Nelson Lee!

"Mr. Lee!" roared Brett, running forward. "Thank goodness!"

In a few moments we were all in view—a sadly bedraggled and weary crew, but

all whole and cheerful. Dr. Brett and the captain were strangely excited, it seemed, and for a time we didn't understand.

But Nelson Lee soon explained, and then there was a fresh surprise for those on board the yacht.

By the ordinary breakfast-time, Handforth and Co. were sound asleep in their cabin. Tregellis-West and Watson sought their bunks, too—for they had had no sleep during the night—but I felt quite brisk.

There was a certain amount of consternation when Nelson Lee explained to all that Captain Nixon was still a dangerous man, and that there were four other enemies upon the island—four wild-looking men, whose presence on Castaway Island was a singular mystery.

"I intend to discover the truth as soon as possible," said Nelson Lee, talking to the company in general. "There is another plan I have in mind. We have the aeroplane on board, and the crew will soon be set to work constructing floats, so that the machine may be converted into a seaplane. Our position is not quite so bad, after all, and I think I can safely guarantee that we shall all be homeward bound within a fortnight."

"Hurrah!"

"There was a good deal of handclapping from the girls, and everybody was feeling in a good humour. But, at present, the whole ship's company were prisoners on Castaway Island. And it seemed that we had not yet done with Captain John Nixon—although I really fail to understand how he could do us any further harm."

But what was the mystery of that strange rocky island, with its many underground tunnels and passages?

We were destined to fathom that little matter in a very short space of time—but not before we had passed through a further period of peril and excitement! Our summer holidays were certainly proving to be adventurous!

THE END.

TO MY READERS.

Our famous detective, NELSON LEE, has been up against a few desperadoes in his time, but I doubt whether he has ever had to contend against a villain at once so cunning, so daring and ruthless as Captain John Nixon. Again at large, he is plotting another dastardly scheme of revenge. Of this we shall learn in Next Week's Story, entitled, "THE PRISONER OF THE CAVERN," when the mystery surrounding the four wild-looking men of the catacombs will be unfolded.

Next week I hope to be able to announce the title of a splendid new serial.

The EDITOR.

GRAND NEW SERIAL TO COMMENCE SHORTLY.

THE HOUSE IN THE JUNGLE; OR, JOHN HAMMOND'S DELUSION.

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 Bajangas, led by Tib Mohammed, a noted slave dealer. After crossing a lofty range of mountains, they suddenly come upon the Hidden Valley, where they meet Lorna Ferguson, her invalid father, and a man named Taverner, who is discovered to have attempted the murder of Ferguson by poisonous drugs. Overpowered and imprisoned, he escapes, and it is feared he will disclose the subterranean passage to Tib Mohammed. The sick man rallies, and recognises Alan as his son. Ferguson's real name is Harold Carne. Wrongfully believing his wife to have been disloyal, he came to Africa to forget his troubles. Alan gives him a letter which discloses the truth, and Harold Carne is persuaded to return to his wife. The expected attack begins, and after bravely defending the pass, Dick and Alan make for the cavern to find no trace of Lorna and her father, whom they were to rejoin there.

(Now read on).

Grave Fears—The Invasion of the Valley—What Can Have Happened?—A Welcome Cry—Why Mr. Carne Delayed—On to the Cavern—The Situation is Critical.

THERE was good reason for Chanka's grave words, and for the apprehensions that had gripped the lads. Mr. Carne and Lorna had no preparations to make, and if they had observed

the signal fire—as, of course, they had—they would have been ready to start at once with Jan Swart and the Somali servants. They had not very far to go, and they should have arrived at the cavern a quarter of an hour ago. What, then, could have delayed them? What peril, if any, could they have encountered? It was impossible that any of the Arabs or Bajangas could have already got to the dwelling.

"Wah, it is bad!" the Maasai repeated. "Some evil has befallen them!"

There was a sickening fear in Alan's heart, and Dick, knowing how he felt, put his hand on his shoulder.

"Don't worry," he said. "Your father and sister will turn up before long. They couldn't have travelled as rapidly as we did, you must remember."

"Yes, I know that," Alan assented. "They should be here by now, though, even if they had moved slowly."

"Well, the only explanation I can think of is that your father has been taken ill. The excitement might have brought on a sort of a relapse."

"I have been thinking of that myself, Dick. We'll have to hurry over there and see what's wrong. Or we may meet them on the way."

"Yes, that's what we'll have to do. But if we don't meet them coming, and should have to go as far as the house, we probably won't be able to return to the cabin."

"No, I don't suppose we will. Listen, Dick!"

The Arabs and Bajangas, after swarming through the hills and past the signal fire, must have split into two parties. To the right, along the side of the valley, could be heard a swelling clamour which indicated that some of the enemy were approaching from that direction, and from other confused sounds, on the opposite side, it appeared that another band of the raiders was moving towards the dwelling.

"Things are serious," said Dick. "We can't wait here. We must decide quickly what to do."

"There is only one thing for it," Alan declared. "We must dash over there, and if it should be too late for us to return, we'll all have to escape by the water passage. Come along."

Without any further delay, followed by Chanka, they scrambled down amongst the bushes to the base of the cliff and struck across the valley.

For two or three hundred yards they hurried on, now traversing timber and scrub where they were in black shadow, and now emerging in open spaces that were steeped in the red glare of the fire that was still burning to the westward. At length, to their relief, they heard a shout from not far in front of them.

"They are coming!" Dick said eagerly. "That was Jan's voice!"

They pressed rapidly on, calling as they ran; and when they had gone a few more yards, and had burst from a clump of trees, they met the fugitives. Mr. Carne was leaning heavily on Lorna, and by the glow of the fire it could be seen that he looked white and ill. The girl was carrying the leather bag that contained the diamonds, and Jan Swart was burdened with a couple of rifles and the two sacks of food. There were only the three of them. They were not accompanied by the Somali servants.

"Ah, here you are!" cried Alan. "I have been terribly worried. I couldn't imagine what had happened!"

"Father wouldn't come at once," Lorna told him. "He remembered something he wanted to do, and we waited for him. Then he was taken suddenly ill as we were about to start, and we had to wait again until he was able to walk."

"Yes, that is what delayed us," said Mr. Carne. "You needn't be worried, my boy. I am better now and will soon be quite all right. I exerted myself too much, I dare say. I was determined not to leave until I had——"

"You can tell us later, father!" Alan interrupted. "There is no time to be lost if we are to escape by the cavern, for some of the enemy are pushing in that direction."

The lads had stopped, for only a few seconds, and they now retraced their steps as rapidly as they could. They could not travel very fast, for Mr. Carne was weak and faint. Alan and Lorna helped him along, holding his arms. The Masai strode in front, and Dick brought up the rear with the Hottentot, whom he had relieved of a part of his burden. Alan gave his father a brief and thrilling account of the fight with the Arabs and Bajangas, and of the means by which they had forced the cleft in the hills and put the defenders to rout. Mr. Carne's eyes blazed with wrath as he listened.

"So you were right about Taverner!" he exclaimed. "I heard the grenades exploding and knew what it meant. What a fiend that man is! How basely he has repaid my kindness to him! I wish you had shot him. But there is a chance of his being punished as he deserves, for I have ignited a slow

fuse which connects with a cask of powder that is stored in the cellar under the dwelling. It will burn for half an hour or so, and when the house is blown to fragments, as it will be, Ralph Taverner may be destroyed with it. He would have hastened there at once to get the diamonds."

"And he would have taken Tib Mohammed and others of the raiders with him," said Alan. "I hope they will be in the house when the explosion occurs. But where are the servants?" he added. "Why did you leave them behind?"

"The cowardly dogs fled," replied Mr. Carne. "They failed me at the last, when I needed their assistance."

"Yes, they deserted us," Lorna told her brother. "They were frightened by the lighting of the signal-fire, and when a couple of the Somalis came with the news of the defeat, just as we were ready to start, the servants went off with them to the lower end of the valley. They meant to get away in canoes through the water passage, and they must have done so by now."

"I don't like that," Dick put in. "If the Somalis have fled out to the Bana in those canoes we may find ourselves in an ugly fix."

"What do you mean, my boy?" asked Mr. Carne. "Surely we have nothing to fear. There are other canoes in readiness for us by the stream beyond the cliffs."

"But there is a likelihood of our being headed off from the cavern, sir."

"I don't think so. Tib Mohammed and his band have no knowledge of the cavern, so they must be advancing towards the house."

"No doubt some of them are, but not all. Alan and I heard a part of them approaching by the north side of the valley."

"Then they must have changed their course, Selby. I don't hear any sounds of danger in front of us."

The fugitives had got to within a hundred yards of the cliff, and they now stopped to listen. To the westward the light of the signal-fire had faded to a dim glow. From over on the south side of the valley floated a vague clamour which appeared to be close to the dwelling, but on the opposite side all was quiet. Of a sudden, however, the Masai lifted a warning hand. And at the same instant Jan Swart spoke.

"I hear a noise, Baas," he said in a whisper to Dick.

"What of you, Chanka?" Mr. Carne inquired. "Have you also heard something?"

The Masai nodded.

"Wah, bad mens come!" he replied.

"Are they close by or at a distance?"

"They not close yet, Bhagwan. Move very softly, same as lions."

The keen ears of Chanka and the Hottentot had caught some sound which was inaudible to the others. Unless they had been deceived, which was not likely, a band of the Arabs and Bajangas were stealthily and noiselessly skirting the northern rim of the valley. But what could have brought them in this

(Continued on p. iii of Cover.)

direction? Why had they separated from their companions?

"There's something queer about this," said Alan. "Has Ralph Taverner any knowledge of the cavern, father?"

"No, I have never mentioned it to him," Mr. Carne answered.

"But he may have heard you and Lorna speaking of it on some occasion."

"It is possible that he did, my boy, I will admit."

"Then that accounts for it, father. Taverner knows all about the cavern, and he is quietly leading some of the enemy there to prevent us from escaping through the cliffs."

The Masai lifted his hands again and Jar whispered that he could still hear the sounds. The girl was pale with terror.

"Oh, what are we to do?" she asked, clutching at her brother's arm. "There doesn't seem to be any hope for us."

"It isn't so bad as that," Alan replied. "Don't be frightened. It would be useless for us to strike across to the water passage, since the Somalis have fled in the canoes that were there. But we will have time to escape by the cavern, I think. We haven't much farther to go."

"Come along, then," urged Dick. "Every minute is precious."

The little party had stopped for no more than a few seconds. They pressed on again, wondering if peril lurked ahead of them, dreading lest they should fall into an ambush. Chanka led the way, and Mr. Carne, who had recovered his strength, walked without assistance. From far behind them across the valley they could hear the shouts of the bloodthirsty raiders who were presumably sacking the house.

They moved swiftly and warily, hearing nothing to confirm their apprehensions. The silence remained unbroken, except for the murmur of the wind, until they had reached the base of a cliff. And when they had scrambled up the rugged trail and gained the flat ledge of rock they felt that they had nothing more to fear.

"We are safe at last, thank goodness!" panted Dick.

"Yes, we're all right now," Alan replied. "Jan and the Masai must have been deceived. I don't believe any of those black ruffians came this way, after all."

"But we had better not waste any time," said Mr. Carne. "It is a considerable stretch through the cliff, and there is a drop of twenty feet to be descended. A rope ladder is in readiness for that purpose. It is on a shelf inside, and there are also matches in a tin box and a couple of torches I have prepared for flight. I foresaw that some day we might be compelled to—"

"Wah!" broke in Chanka. "Wah, they come, Bhagwan!"

As he spoke a burst of frenzied yells rent the air, and the fugitives, who were still grouped on the ledge, beheld a sight that filled them with consternation. Down in the valley, from out of the dense cover that fringed the northern side of it, swarmed a

band of at least a score of Arabs and Bajangas, who had been stealthily approaching. It was so dark that they were not distinctly revealed, and it was impossible to tell if Ralph Taverner and Tib Mohammed were with them. They were within thirty yards of the foot of the path that ascended the cliff, and with a bloodcurdling clamour they rushed towards it, brandishing their weapons and looking up at the little group on the ledge, whom they had perceived.

"Come, all of you!" bade Mr. Carne. "Don't be alarmed, Lorna! These scoundrels won't follow us through the cavern!"

"I am afraid they will, father!" declared Alan, as he unslung his rifle. "I am sure they will! We'll have to make a stand here and fight!—If we don't—"

Chanka interrupted the lad with a word. He tapped his great spear against his shield and pointed to the narrow path that shelved down steeply from the ledge and was overgrown with bushes.

"Wah, it will be well with us!" he declared. "You will see, Bhagwan!"

(To be continued.)

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