



"The first man who moves in this direction will cause the death of this young gal!" roared Captain Nixon.

THE PRISONER OF THE CAVERN.

A Story of Holiday Life and Detective Adventure in the Tropics, introducing NELSON LEE and NIPPER and the Boys of St. Frank's. By the Author of "The Treasure of El Safra," "The River of Fire," "Castaway Island," etc.

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(THE NARRATIVE RELATED THROUGHOUT BY NIPPER.)

CHAPTER I.

GETTING BUSY!

"**W**HEW! Give me the desert again!" exclaimed Lord Dorrimore, as he fanned himself with his panama hat. "This heat is simply killin', by gad! If we have many more days like this I shall melt right away!"

"Well, you needn't grumble," I grinned. "We're jolly lucky to have all the comforts that this ripping yacht can afford—including iced lemonades and shady awnings. I reckon we're having quite a decent time."

Dorrie nodded.

"But when is it goin' to end?" he asked. "It's all very well to talk, but by the look of things at present, we stand a good chance of stayin' here until we all grow white beards!"

There was, perhaps, a certain amount of excuse for his lordship's pessimistic utterance. Sir Crawford Grey's steam yacht, *Wanderer*, was not exactly in a position to follow out the designs of her builders.

To be quite frank, she was not floating at all, but was firmly wedged in between two masses of towering rocks, and she was as solid as a house. Yet the vessel was very little harmed.

She had been thrown on to the rocks during a storm, and we had all believed that she would break up. But the little bay was sheltered, and when the sea calmed down, we found that the *Wanderer* was almost intact. But she was so firmly jammed that Captain Burton, the skipper, was unable to do anything to free her—to get her out to sea again.

The *Wanderer* carried a big party of holiday-makers—twenty of us belonging to St. Frank's. Handforth and Co., and Pitt, and Grey, and Tregellis-West, and all the principal fellows of the *Remove* were on board. Watson's sister was with us, too, and three other young ladies.

And, although our position was serious, we managed to keep our spirits up very well,

considering. The disaster did not seem to be a real disaster, and a great many of the fellows could not realise that there was very little chance of our being seen or rescued—and that our escape from the rocks would only come about by our own efforts.

The vessel had been run aground on a tiny island—a bare mass of rocks sticking out of the sea, without a square inch of vegetation upon the whole surface. We had named it Castaway Island, and it seemed that it would be our residence for some time to come.

The place was avoided by all shipping, for the rock was treacherous, and it was very seldom that any boat passed in close proximity. How was it, then, that we had managed to get ourselves into such a fix?

Captain Burton was not to blame.

During the height of a storm, which had raged at night, Captain Nixon had overpowered the first officer, and had taken the wheel—unknown to a soul. And Nixon, who knew exactly where he was, deliberately sent the yacht on to the rocks—believing that it would be totally wrecked.

But Providence had decreed otherwise.

The yacht, by some miraculous chance, had driven in between two walls of rock without harm, and she had finally jammed herself without much damage. Captain Nixon had jumped overboard—and his foul work was quite serious enough, even as it was.

For we were quite helpless. The storm had wrecked our wireless transmitting instrument, and we could send out no messages whatever. So we were compelled to rely solely upon our own resources.

It was Nixon who had done his utmost to kill the lot of us while we were travelling across the African desert, in search of the treasure of El Safrá. Nixon had failed miserably in his designs, and the treasure was now reposing securely in Sir Crawford Grey's cabin safe. Nelson Lee reckoned that the jewels were worth anything up to three hundred thousand pounds—so we had good reason to be pleased with ourselves.

But Captain Nixon had not finished. He had concealed himself on board the yacht with the result I have just mentioned. We were marooned on a bare island, and we had been in that position for well over a week.

But the island was not quite so bare as we had first imagined. For Handforth and Co. had discovered an amazing collection of caves and caverns, which extended far into the rocks.

It was only natural, perhaps, that Handforth should lose himself, and his chums with him. Edward Oswald Handforth could always be trusted to get himself into an unwholesome mess.

However, he had been rescued, but not before the gov'nor and I and some others had met with a startling adventure. We learned, in fact, that Captain Nixon was alive, and that he occupied the dark caves and caverns.

Nor was the rascally skipper alone. The most astounding feature of our discovery was that Nixon had secured the support of four wild-looking creatures who scarcely looked like human beings—four men with long, tangled hair and coarse beards.

"There can be no doubt," said Nelson Lee, when discussing the matter, "that those four men are the survivors from some wreck. Possibly they have been on this rock for months, feeding on fishes and birds. Nixon was the first to find them—and he won them over by promises of big rewards. In any case, we need not fear the rascals—they are quite powerless."

The gov'nor had said that several days earlier, and we had seen nothing whatever of Nixon since. No doubt the rascally skipper was biding his time. I could not believe that he was willing to throw up the sponge.

Full precautions were taken, of course.

At night four men were constantly on the watch, and it was impossible for anybody to climb on board the yacht unseen. And we remained there, day after day, without any change in the situation.

The weather, which had been somewhat unsettled, changed. The skies became cloudless, the winds dropped, and the sun blazed down with all its tropical fury. For three days we had sweltered—for three days and nights. For even darkness brought very little relief.

Lord Dorrimore's remark made me grin. I did not think there was much prospect of our remaining on Castaway Island until we grew white beards. I had more confidence in Nelson Lee than that.

"Don't you worry, old son," I said, with the easy familiarity of friendship. "Trust the gov'nor to think of some wheeze."

"He's thinkin' of one now," said Dorrimore lazily. "Somethin' about that aeroplane, I believe. But it's a frightfully tough proposition. I don't see how it's goin' to be done!"

"It can't be done," put in Handforth, who was sitting near by. "How can the aeroplane get off the ground? We might just as well

expect the giddy yacht to fly. It's a hopeless wheeze."

"Don't be an ass, Handy!" said McClure.

"Eh?"

"I told you not to be an ass——"

"If you're looking for a thick ear, Arnold McClure, I'll soon find one for you!" snapped Handforth. "I'm blessed if I'm going to be spoken to——"

"Peace, children!" exclaimed Dorrimore severely.

"But Handy is an ass, sir," said McClure. "He seems to think he knows more about aeroplanes than Mr. Lee does. He's too jolly fond of passing his fatheaded opinions!"

Handforth glared.

"You—you rotter!" he shouted.

Out went Handy's foot, and his toe neatly tapped the cross bar of McClure's deck-chair. The bar jerked out of its slots, and McClure collapsed on to the deck with a crash and a roar.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Ow!" howled McClure, as he bumped. "Yarrah!"

"Serves you jolly well right!" grinned Handforth.

"Dear me! What has happened?" inquired Nelson Lee, strolling under the awning. "You appear to be in trouble, McClure."

"It—it's nothing, sir," gasped McClure. "Handy acted like an ass, that's all—he's always playing the giddy ox! He's been trying to make out that he knows more about aeroplanes than you do."

"Indeed!" said the gov'nor calmly.

"Not—not exactly that, sir," said Handforth, turning red. "I was only saying that it isn't possible to use that blessed aeroplane. Everybody knows it. The thing's impossible!"

"Nevertheless, Handforth, I shall make every endeavour to succeed," said the gov'nor sweetly. "Possibly my judgment is all at fault, and it is quite likely that I may fail miserably. I shall be gratified if you will give me the benefit of your sound and reliable advice."

We all chuckled, and Handy went redder.

"Oh, I say, sir!" he protested. "I—I didn't exactly mean——"

"You're finished, old son," I broke in. "You'd better dry up while you're safe. The gov'nor knows what he's doing—and he can get on without your criticism. You're a great man when it comes to scrapping, but you have your limitations."

Nelson Lee smiled.

"Yet there is something to be said for Handforth," he remarked, taking a seat. "The task before me is a formidable one—Yea, Dorrie, I'll have a cigarette. Thanks, old man! You don't appear to be worrying."

"Why should I worry?" asked his lordship languidly. "I leave that to other people. An' I know you're here. When you happen to be knockin' about, Lee, there's no need to worry. I've got tremendous faith in you."

"I hope I shall live up to my reputation," chuckled the gov'nor. "But, seriously, this

is a tough proposition. The aeroplane is a splendid machine, I'll agree, and it is in perfect order. But there are difficulties."

"Tons of 'em," I agreed.

"If we take the machine ashore and assemble it, we shall merely be wasting time," went on Nelson Lee. "There is not a straight stretch of ground of any description. The rocks are all rough and uneven. There is no sand—no beach. To get into the air would be impossible."

"We all understand that, sir," remarked Pitt.

"Therefore, my scheme is to convert the aeroplane into a seaplane," said Lee. "It sounds fairly easy—but it won't be. Strong floats must be constructed. Fortunately, we have an ample supply of material, and many willing hands to perform the work. The difficulty will be in assembling the whole machine."

"We can do it on the deck—what?" suggested Dorrie.

"And then tip the machine into the sea?" asked the gov'nor. "No, old man, it wouldn't do. The seaplane must be assembled on a level with the water, so that it can easily be floated. As you know, it is a heavy machine, and we cannot haul it about exactly as we would like."

"That's just what I meant, sir," said Handforth. "You might be able to make the floats, but where can you put 'em on?"

"The only feasible plan that I can think of at the moment is to construct a large raft—mainly composed of our boats," said Nelson Lee. "When everything is ready these will be launched, and the aeroplane will be assembled. At the right time it will be a comparatively simple task to roll the seaplane off the raft into the water. One or two boats will be swamped, perhaps, but their recovery will be easy."

"That's a stunning idea, sir," I declared.

"Rippin', begad!" said Sir Montie Tregellis-West. "I never thought of that, you know—I didn't, really. It's simply amazin' how brainy Mr. Lee is!"

"Why, it'll be a dead cert., sir!" said Handforth admiringly. "A raft! And then push the giddy aeroplane off it! There's nothing to go wrong in a wheeze like that! It's fine!"

"There are many possibilities of disaster," Nelson Lee reminded us. "Our floats, even when fitted, may not be suitable, and it may be impossible to get the machine to lift. And if a storm happens to blow up while we are at work on the raft the aeroplane will be entirely destroyed."

"That's looking on the worst side, sir," I put in. "Dash it all, we've had so much bad luck, that it's about time a change came. What will you do when you get the machine into the air—providing it is possible?"

"I shall perform some scouting duty," replied Lee. "And within an hour, probably, I shall sight a steamer or a sailing vessel. If the sea is calm I shall descend, and explain the position. It will then be a

matter of a few hours before we are all homeward bound."

"Oh, fine, sir!"

"Ripping!"

"But you must not count your chickens before they're hatched," said the gov'nor. "I have every hope of succeeding, but it is never safe to be too sure. The work of constructing the floats will commence early to-morrow morning."

"That's the way, sir," I said. "There's nothing like getting busy on the job."

And, sure enough, there were scenes of great activity on deck when we emerged from our cabins the following morning. Half the crew was engaged in sawing and hammering and planing—with the ship's carpenter acting as foreman. Nelson Lee was superintending the whole proceedings.

Getting the aeroplane into the air seemed to be our only chance of deliverance, and everything depended upon this work being accomplished thoroughly. Captain Burton did not overlook the fact that although our position was secure at the moment, it might not remain so.

The sea was calm and untroubled. But if a violent gale happened to spring up—and such an event was by no means improbable—the seas would dash themselves against the helpless yacht with appalling force. And, once she freed herself from the rocks, nothing in the world could save her—during a storm. She would be dashed to pieces in next to no time.

So those responsible—particularly Nelson Lee and Captain Burton—worked with anxious minds. The juniors and the girls were quite light-hearted, and regarded the affair as a first-rate holiday adventure.

Dorrie took everything as a matter of course—he always did. If death had been hovering over his head, he would have smiled in the same languid fashion. It was really impossible to upset his sublime urbanity.

"Thou art easy of mind, O my father!"

Dorrie, who was laying back in the lounge, smoking, opened his eyes and beheld the massive figure of Umlosi, chief of the Kutanas. Umlosi was not happy on board the yacht. He loved an active life, and he felt terribly cramped.

"What's that, old coalbox?" asked Dorrie politely. "Easy in mind? Of course I am! Why shouldn't I be, you gloomy beggar? You've got a face as long as a violoncello!"

Umlosi shook his head.

"Thou art speaking strange words, N'Kose," he exclaimed. "Methinks thou art pulling my leg—as Manzie, the nimble one, would say. Wau! Have I not reason to wear a face that is long? Even as the night is black, so are my thoughts. I like not this great floating kraal—"

"Wrong!" said Dorrie. "We ain't floatin'—I wish we were. That's just the trouble, old man. If we were floatin' we could easily skip back to Africa and land you on your beloved soil. We could plant you back among your lions, elephants, and centipedes

and mosquitoes—if that's what you're banking after."

Again Umloai shook his head.

"Thou art pleased to be light of tongue, O N'Kose," he said. "Wan! It would be well if we could be back in the great forests. But that is not to be—yet. Umtagati, he of the great magic, will fly ere long through the great skies, even as the bird on the wind. And Umtagati will meet with success."

"Good!"

"But thou art wrong in supposing that all will then be smooth," continued Umloai. "Mayhap you have memories in your mind of the white man with the heart of a serpent? Mayhap you remember that he is still at liberty?"

"Meanin' our friend, Captain Nixon?" asked Dorrie.

"Thou art surely jesting, my father," rumbled Umloai. "That man is thine enemy, and he is dangerous. I have seen—and I know. Mine eyes have not been idle to-day, or yesterday. And I have seen much."

"Well, it's only natural," said Dorrie. "You can't expect to go about with wide-open eyes an' see nothin'—"

"Thou art jesting still, N'Kose," interrupted the Kutana chief. "I have seen, I tell thee. Listen, O my father. The white man of murderous deeds is even now watching this scene. He is observing all."

"Spyin', you mean?"

"It is even as thou sayest, N'Kose," agreed Umloai.

"Well, I don't see anything particularly excitin' in that," said Dorrie. "We can't do anythin' to prevent Nixon lookin' on, if he wants to. Not that he'll see much to give him any satisfaction."

"It is well that we should be of great care, my father," said Umloai, shaking his head. "I warn thee that all will not be well unless we keep a sharp eye open for the wiles of that treacherous creature. He and his companions will do much to bring harm to all living on this kraal that should float."

"You got it right that time, old man," said his lordship. "It should float, but it doesn't. Still, we may get out of the mess one day. Umtagati is gettin' busy in earnest—an' you know what that means."

But Umloai shook his head again, and did not seem particularly easy in mind. Lord Dorrimore was as urbane as ever. But, somehow, Umloai's warning had sunken deep into his mind.

And Dorrie was quite convinced that Captain Nixon would attempt further mischief at the slightest opportunity.

CHAPTER II.

HANDFORTH'S LATEST!

THAT evening found the work on the floats considerably progressed. Nelson Lee reckoned that it would be completed by the following day—that is, the work of controlling the floats.

There would still be a great deal to do

after that, but the chief thing would be accomplished.

The glass was high, and there was every prospect of a long spell of fair weather. But in that region there was no telling how soon a change would come. And the sooner the work could be done the better.

Meanwhile, our party was compelled to remain on board. There was nothing to be gained by going ashore. Moreover, Captain Nixon had possession of the island. He was quite at liberty to keep possession of it.

And there was a little diversion that evening, too.

Edward Oswald Handforth was the cause of it.

"I say, have you noticed something?" inquired Pitt, approaching me as I stood against the rail, gazing into the calm sea.

Pitt was grinning, and I wondered what was in the wind.

"I've noticed all sorts of things," I replied.

"About Handy, I mean," chuckled Pitt.

"Noticed something about Handy?" I asked. "Well, he's just as big an ass as ever, and he is as clumsy as a porpoise—"

"I don't mean that, you ass!" grinned Pitt. "Not so long ago he avoided the girls as though they were poisonous. Before we started the voyage he made a bit of fuss because the girls were coming at all. And now he seems to be smitten on Miss Violet. Haven't you noticed it?"

I chuckled.

"No, I'm blessed if I have," I said. "Smitten on Tommy's sister, eh? You must have made a bloomer, Pitt. Handy's the last chap in the world to fall in love! The very idea is humorous!"

"That's just the joke of it," said Pitt. "Look at him now! I'm jiggered if he isn't hovering about her chair like a wasp round a jam-pot!"

I turned, and gazed down the deck. Violet Watson was sitting in a wicker chair, reading a book. The other girls were below somewhere. But, just near by, Edward Oswald Handforth was leaning against the rail, apparently completely absorbed in the seascape.

But as I watched he turned, and regarded Violet searchingly. A puff of wind came along and blew the girl's handkerchief off the arm of her chair on to the deck. Handforth pounced upon it like a terrier after a rat.

"What about that?" asked Pitt, grinning.

"Well, it certainly looks suspicious," I agreed. "Handy isn't usually so jolly polite to the young ladies. Oh, my hat! This'll be a joke, my son. Fancy Handy falling in love! But I must say I admire his taste. Violet is the prettiest flower of the bunch!"

"I wonder what Watson will say?" asked Pitt.

Watson said quite a lot when we met him a minute or two later.

"Handy in love with my sister?" he said warmly. "What rot! Why, it's impossible! I don't believe Handy will ever fall in love; but if he tries any of his rot on Violet I'll soon tell him something! Cheek!"

"Don't get ratty, you ass," I said. "It's not a crime to fall in love with your sister, I suppose? You ought to take that as a compliment. And it'll be a huge joke if there's really something in it. I vote we put it to the test."

"How?" asked Pitt.

I soon told him how. But it was necessary to obtain the help of two or three other juniors. They had all noticed that there was something wrong with Handforth. It had been coming on all day—for two or three days, in fact.

"I'm blessed if I can understand the chap," remarked De Valerie. "He's been a bit moony of late. I spoke to him only a few minutes ago, and he said something about brown eyes!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"I can't see anything to laugh at," said De Valerie, looking round.

"That's because we haven't told you what Handy's complaint is," I chuckled. "You've all noticed something different about him. Well, Pitt jumped to the solution. Handy has succumbed to the charms of Miss Violet."

"What?"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"It's a fact," I went on. "At least, it looks like it. And we're now going to put it to the test. You'd better clear off, Watson."

"What the thunder for?" demanded Tommy.

"Well, we don't want to offend you," I replied. "And we should offend you if you remained with us during the experiment. We shall mean nothing, of course, but it'll settle the question."

Watson walked off, and I looked across at Handforth.

"I say, Handy!" I called.

He took no notice, but stared across the sea.

"That's another sign!" I murmured.

"Handy!" I roared.

Still he took no notice.

"I think somebody is calling you, Handforth," said Violet, laying her book down.

Handforth spun round like a top—although the girl's voice had been a mere murmur compared to my shout.

"I—I beg your pardon, Miss Violet!" stammered Handforth.

"I believe Nipper is calling you," said the girl, smiling.

"Rats to Nipper—I—I mean I'll see what he wants!" said Handforth, with some confusion. "Were you calling me, Nipper?"

"Yes," I replied. "Just a word, old man."

Handforth marched across to the spot where I was standing with Pitt, Tregellis-West, and the others.

"Well?" demanded Handforth.

"My dear chap, you needn't bark at me," I said sweetly. "I was just wondering if you'd care to come down below—"

"No thanks!" interrupted Handforth promptly. "I'm staying on deck."

He commenced marching off again, apparently oblivious of the fact that his actions were tremendously transparent. But I

reached out my hand and grasped his shoulder, checking him.

"Just a minute, Handy," I said. "There's no hurry. What's your private opinion of Fenton's sister?"

Handforth stared.

"Maggie Fenton?" he said, with a sniff. "Why, she's a giggling little fathead—that's my opinion of her!" He seemed to remember himself. "All girls are silly, of course," he added with elaborate carelessness. "As you chaps know, I don't care a snap of the fingers for any girl!"

"Yes, I've noticed that," I said drily. "Now, Christine's sister isn't so bad—a jolly nice girl, in fact. She's the pick of the bunch on board."

"Well, rather!" agreed Pitt. "Talking about girls, if there's one girl I can't stick, that's Violet Watson! Of all the proud little prigs she takes the biscuit! I pity Watson!"

Handforth's eyes blazed.

"You—you insulting rotter!" he roared.

"Eh?" gasped Pitt.

"What the dickens do you mean by saying beastly things like that about the nicest girl——" Handforth paused, and turned crimson. "I—I mean, it's a bit off to speak of a girl like that, Pitt!" he concluded lamely.

"A bit off?" I chimed in. "Why? There's nobody to hear us, and Violet's nothing to us. Do you like her?"

"Oh, she's not so bad—for a girl," said Handforth with a forced sniff. "I don't care a button about girls, as you know. But I must say that Violet is rather better than the average."

"She's so jolly stuck-up," remarked De Valerie, catching the idea.

"Stuck up?" snapped Handforth. "Rot! Sheer rot! Violet's the prettiest girl on board, and if you say she's stuck-up, I'll punch your head!"

"Well, I'm blessed!" said De Valerie.

"Of course, I'm only saying that in—in a general way," went on Handforth, remembering himself again. "I'd say the same if you insulted any girl. I can't bear to hear a girl insulted, especially behind her back."

"You'd better punch your own nose, then," I remarked.

"Eh?"

"Didn't you refer to Maggie Fenton just now as 'a giggling little fathead'?" I asked politely. "If that's not an insult, what is it?"

Handforth coloured more than ever.

"Maggie is different," he said. "Dash it all, you can't call her a girl! She's a kid—a silly infant! Now, Violet is a real girl! Just look at her eyes; did you ever see such a glorious brown? And her hands! They're the smallest hands I've ever seen! Her ears are like little shells, and—and—— Oh, rot! What do we want to jaw about girls for?" he added hastily. "The subject always gives me a pain. I'm fed up with this conversation."

"Come below, then," I said. "We want you to—— Hi! Wait a minute!"

But Handforth had gone. He marched straight across the deck, and took up his position within a few feet of Violet. She looked up at him, smiled, and went on reading her book. She evidently knew the state of affairs just as well as we did, and I expect she enjoyed the situation.

"Well," I said. "What's the verdict?"

"Guilty!" declared De Valerie.

"He's got it badly," said Pitt, with a nod.

"He's smitten hard."

"And he thinks we don't notice anything," I grinned. "That's the joke of it, my sons! He thinks we're all innocent. And yet he goes about advertising the fact every second; he's getting worse and worse. This morning he only had a mild attack; he's serious now."

"Handy, too!" exclaimed McClure dazedly.

"Handy in love! Fan me, somebody! It's the last thing on earth I should have supposed. Oh, my only aunt! Won't Churchy and I chip him in the cabin to-night?"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"You'd better go easy," I said warningly. "When a fellow's in love he's not responsible for his actions, you know. If you're not careful, Handy'll punch you before you can think!"

"We'll be careful," grinned McClure.

There was another sign at dinner-time. Handforth had always been seated between Church and McClure. As it happened, Violet's place was next to McClure's, and Handforth sat in McClure's seat.

"Here, I say," said McClure, when he entered the dining-saloon. "What's the idea, Handy? You're in my place——"

"It doesn't make any difference, I suppose?" snapped Handforth. "One place is as good as another, you see! I'm not going to get up now—— As a matter of fact, I'll always keep this seat in future. It's—it's more comfortable!"

McClure grinned.

"Oh, I don't mind much," he said. "I'm not making a fuss, anyhow."

There were very few people present who did not notice the change which had come about in Handforth. He hardly touched his own food, owing to his anxiety to pass Violet everything she needed. He wouldn't allow the stewards to pass a thing, if he could help it.

And yet, all the time, Handforth was under the impression that he had not changed in the slightest degree. He didn't notice that he was causing general amusement. Miss Violet herself was more charming than ever, but she gave Handforth no direct encouragement. He didn't need any!

After dinner the girls went off together, and Handforth hung about miserably. Nothing seemed to interest him. When I spoke to him he snapped me up in a second. When Church and McClure attempted to carry him off, he knocked them both flat.

He had been waiting for nearly an hour before Violet appeared, and then Miss Christine and Miss Church were with her. Handforth was disgusted, and he went below without a word, and pretended to bury himself

in a book in the reading-room. It was Watson who politely pointed out to Handforth that he was holding the book upside-down, a hint which Handforth didn't seem to appreciate.

He was still unusually quiet when bedtime came. Church and McClure, who knew all about it, had been chuckling to themselves all the evening. It was extremely rich, to their minds.

McClure himself had, on an earlier occasion, made one or two remarks concerning Miss Violet—admiring remarks. And Handforth had jumped upon him in a moment, accusing him of being in love. And now the one and only Handy was suffering from the fever himself.

Handforth commenced undressing slowly, and it was quite obvious that his thoughts were far away—but perhaps not so far away, after all.

"Those floats are going ahead all right, Handy," remarked Church, after a while. "I expect they'll be finished by to-morrow. And then, if Mr. Lee gets the aeroplane into the air, we shall stand a chance of getting home."

Handforth took no notice.

"I was talking to you, Handy!" said Church loudly.

"Eh?" said Handforth dreamily. "Her eyes are like the stars; they shine with the glory of Mars——"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Handforth started.

"Don't bother me!" he roared. "Dry up, you asses!"

"That's hardly a compliment, Handy," said McClure. "Mars always shines red, you know, and it's hardly nice to call anybody's eyes red—— Hi! Look out, you silly ass—— Yow!"

McClure sat down on his bed with a jar.

"Don't bother me, I say," roared Handforth. "I don't feel in the mood to hear your harsh voices! Go to sleep!"

"Well, there's no need to get violent!" said McClure. "What's the matter with you, old chap? I think you ought to go along and see Dr. Brett! What you need is medicine of some kind!"

"Medicine!" repeated Handforth. "Me!"

"Yes, rather," said Church. "You're ill, Handy."

"Ill!"

"You hardly ate anything at dinner——"

"Rot!"

"And you're not yourself at all," went on Church. "Your face is flushed, and there's a feverish look in your eyes. It's my belief that you've got an attack of malaria coming on. There's something wrong, anyhow."

Handforth looked alarmed.

"Have—have you really noticed anything?" he asked huskily.

"Of course we have," said McClure.

"You've changed."

"Changed!"

"You're not yourself——"

"Not myself?"

"You're somebody different——"

"Somebody different?"

"You must be ill——"

"Ill!"

"Do you think you're a parrot?" inquired Church. "All you can do is to repeat everything we say, you silly ass."

"Silly ass!" said Handforth dazedly.

"Well, it's a good thing you know it," remarked McClure. "I've known one or two chaps to get it rather badly, but you fairly take the bun!"

"Get it!" snapped Handforth. "Get what?"

"Just as if you don't know!" said McClure. "What's the good of beating about the bush with us, Handy—your own pals? There's no reason why we shouldn't be straightforward with ourselves. Both Church and I can see that you've fallen head over heels in love with Violet——"

"You—you—you blithering idiot!" roared Handforth, snatching up a pillow. "Say that again! Why, you thundering jackass! I'll—I'll smash the stuffing out of you! I'll pitch you overboard!"

"Here, hold on——"

But Handforth was aroused. He rushed at his two chums, hitting out left and right. The pillow was cast aside, and Handforth used his fists with tremendous effect. The noise which proceeded from that cabin was appalling.

"He's mad!" gasped Church. "He's off his——Yaroooh!"

Handforth was not inclined to stand any more nonsense. In vain his chums called upon him to calm down. In the end they were pitched headlong out of the cabin, and they sprawled in the passage only half clothed.

The door slammed, and the key turned.

"Oh, the idiot!" gasped Church. "What the dickens shall we do now? We're locked out—and somebody might come along——"

"Great pip!" panted McClure. "I haven't got any trousers on!"

Something certainly had to be done, and the two juniors hammered upon the door of their cabin with frantic energy. Handforth, within, maintained a stony silence.

"Let us in, Handy, you lunatic!" hissed Church. "Clurey left his trousers in there! We must go somewhere——"

"You can go and eat coke!" snapped Handforth.

I opened the door of my cabin, and looked out.

"What's all the row about?" I inquired. "Hallo! You fellows don't seem to be wearing a great deal! What's the idea of going about the ship in a state of undress? You'll be spotted by somebody——"

Church and McClure rushed up, and plunged head first into the cabin.

"Handy's locked us out!" explained Church. "The silly ass went for us like a bull goes at a red flag!"

"You mentioned something about love, I'll bet!" I exclaimed. "I warned you not to get his temper up——"

"How the dickens did we know he'd go off like—like a firework!" said McClure wrathfully. The silly idiot. He's half dotty. Haven't you got anything to say, Watson?"

"What should I say?" asked Tommy, who was in bed.

"Well, she's your sister——"

"That's not my fault," said Watson. "Besides, she hasn't even looked at Handy—she needs something better to look at, I reckon! If he continues his tricks to-morrow, I expect she'll tell him off!"

"My hat! I hope so," said Church fervently.

But that prospect did not alter the existing situation. And it was not until I had argued with Handforth—with the woodwork of the cabin between us—that he opened the door, and allowed his chums to enter. He glared at them as they sneaked in.

"One word!" he said grimly. "Just one word, you rotters, and I'll pitch you out again. Not a sound from either of you, mind!"

And Church and McClure, who were quite anxious to get into bed, took very good care not to even whisper. They did their utmost to breathe quietly. When Handforth was in this kind of mood he needed humouring!

CHAPTER III.

SOMETHING LIKE A JAPE!

NELSON LEE was looking very satisfied towards tea-time on the following day.

He had reason to look satisfied.

The construction of the floats, under his direction, had been completed. There were three of them. Two large ones for the main 'plane, and a small one to be affixed to the tail.

They were wonderfully-made articles, considering the speed with which they had been designed, and the material which had been available. There was no doubt whatever that the floats would fulfil their purpose once they were fixed.

"I reckon they're splendid, sir," I remarked, after examining them. "But this is only half the battle, isn't it? They've got to be fixed on yet—and that'll be a bit of a job."

"I am feeling quite optimistic," said Nelson Lee. "The weather is fine, and it promises to keep fine. To-morrow the raft will be constructed, and on the next day the aeroplane assembled. Let me see, to-day, I believe, is Tuesday. I hope to have the machine ready for flight by Thursday evening, or Friday morning."

"That'll be quick work, sir," I remarked.

"No quicker than is necessary, my boy," said the gov'nor. "Until some help is obtained we are utterly without hope. And the only means of fetching help is to make use of the aeroplane."

"That's quite right, old man," put in Dorrie. "I suppose it'll be easy to find a ship somewhere near?"

"If I can once get the machine to fly, I have no doubt that I shall find a ship within a few hours," said Nelson Lee. "Failure

with the aeroplane must mean failure altogether."

"I'm willing to bet anything that you won't fail," I said. "But what about Captain Nixon, sir? He's given no sign, and Sir Crawford is beginning to think that he's plotting some deep scheme."

Nelson Lee smiled.

"Sir Crawford is naturally rather anxious," he said. "But I don't think Captain Nixon will be fool enough to attempt any tricks with the yacht. He is responsible for her present position, and he attempted to kill four or five of us less than a week ago. He will not dare to show his face."

"In any case, we've got plenty of guards about," said Dorrie comfortably. "Nixon can't do anythin' by daylight, an' at night the yacht is watched fore and aft. Nixon won't bother us."

And Dorrie's opinion was shared by nearly everybody.

It seemed that nothing could be done until Friday, at the earliest; for, even if the aeroplane was ready on the Thursday evening, Nelson Lee wouldn't attempt to fly her until the morning.

So, until then, there was nothing to be done—so far as the younger members of the party were concerned, at all events.

During the day we watched the operations; but in the evening we had nothing to do except find our own amusements. And the chief amusement at present was Edward Oswald Handforth.

All that day he had continued to show marked attention to Violet. It was so obvious that nobody could help noticing it. As for the girl, she was rather amused, I believe, and was too ladylike to give Handforth any direct rebuff. Besides, she rather liked him. Nobody could help liking Handy.

After tea that evening he was to be seen hovering about the deck in the near vicinity of Miss Violet's chair. He had been her shadow all day long, and she only needed to mention any little errand, and Handforth was off like a shot.

"My sons, this is too good to be missed," said Reginald Pitt, talking to a group of fellows down in the common-room. We called it the common-room, but it was really a large cabin which had been set aside for the especial use of the juniors.

"What's too good to be missed?" asked Watson.

"Handy."

"Oh, he's fairly off his rocker!" said Watson. "Why? I can't make out why, you know. What the dickens is there in Violet to send any chap off his rocker? She's only an ordinary sort of girl——"

"You say that because you're her brother," I put in. "Brothers can never appreciate their sister's charms. You can take it from me, Tommy, that Violet is a jolly nice girl—and pretty, too!"

"Great Scott!" gasped Watson, alarmed. "Are you catching it, too?"

I chuckled.

"You needn't be afraid of me. I like

your sister tremendously, but I don't happen to be an ass of Handforth's variety. You'll generally find that a fellow who swears that he hates girls is the first one to succumb. All the symptoms are more violent. But what were you saying, Pitt?"

"During tea," said Pitt, "a mighty idea came across my brain. We've got nothing to do this evening, so I vote we have a little amusement. Look here, Watson. You know that frock of your sister's?"

"Which frock?" said Tommy. "She's got dozens! That's what I can never understand, you know. I'm content with two suits, and one giddy hat. But girls want hundreds of different blouses and frocks, and goodness knows what else!"

"We can't be expected to understand girls," grinned Pitt. "They're queer creatures and they like all sorts of different clothes. The frock I'm referring to is that one she was wearing last night. It's a ripping thing—with prominent black stripes."

"Oh, I know," said Watson. "What about it?"

"Do you think you could borrow it for an hour or two?"

Tommy Watson stared.

"Borrow it?" he repeated.

"Yes."

"But what the dickens for?"

"I want to wear it," said Pitt calmly.

"You—you want to wear it!" yelled Watson.

"Exactly."

"You must be mad, Reggie!" put in Jack Grey. "What on earth are you talking about? How can you wear one of Miss Violet's frocks?"

Reginald Pitt was quite calm.

"You may remember, some months ago, that I played a little trick upon everybody at St. Frank's. I don't like to remind myself of it, because I was a bit of a beast at that time," he said quietly. "The dodge was a pretty rotten one——"

"You needn't go into that," said Grey. "All that's forgotten by now, Reggie. You're one of the best——"

"Thanks," said Pitt. "I was going to remind you, though, that I pretended that I had a sister, and then came to the school dressed up in girl's togs. Everybody was diddled."

"My hat!" I exclaimed, with a smile which broadened. "I can see the wheeze! Pitt, my buck, it's the best jape of the voyage! Oh, my only topper! If you can only work it it'll be worth quids!"

"Work what?" asked Watson testily. "What's the good of talking in riddles? Why can't you say what you mean, you duffers?"

"Nipper's guessed right—so why can't you guess," said Pitt. "I'm pretty decent at make-up, and we've got plenty of amateur theatrical props on board. My idea is to disguise myself as Miss Violet. Then I'll sit on deck, and let old Handy make love to me!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Everybody howled.

"You—you ass!" grinned Watson. "The wheeze is all right, but it couldn't be worked. Handforth's not so blind as all that! Dash it all, he couldn't mistake you for my sister, even if you were dressed in one of her frocks!"

"I don't mean to attempt the dodge in daylight," said Pitt. "We'll wait until it's nearly dark, and then I'll sit out under the awning alone. That's the idea of the striped dress. Handy will recognise it in a tick. And he won't suspect anything. Why should he? We'll take care that Violet is somewhere else at the time. I needn't talk in anything but a whisper. Besides, you seem to forget that Handy isn't himself just now. The dodge can be worked as easy as pie!"

"I believe it can!" I exclaimed. "There'll be no harm in trying it, anyhow. And if it succeeds it'll be a lesson which Handy will remember for weeks. He'll be the laughing-stock of the whole giddy ship."

"He deserves to be, too," said Watson, with a sniff.

"But do you think Miss Violet will consent?" asked Grey doubtfully.

"My dear chap, she won't have a chance to consent or refuse," replied Pitt. "We needn't tell her about it until afterwards. Watson can easily bone that frock without anybody knowing——"

"Can I?" said Tommy. "I don't think!"

"You're her brother——"

"That doesn't make any difference," said Watson. "She's sharing a cabin with Christine's sister, and I should be hoofed half across the ship if I was found in there by Lady Helen. No, my sons, Vi will have to be let into the secret. You needn't worry. She's a sport, and she'll agree in a second."

"Well, you go off and see about the frock," said Pitt briskly. "You might bring a silk wrap, or something, too. I can wrap it round my face, you know, and disguise myself a bit."

Watson went off, and he found his sister chatting with Agnes Christine. Handforth had retired to another part of the deck, but he was still watching the fair one, and waiting for an opportunity to serve her.

"I say, Vi, just a word," said Watson. "You don't mind, Agnes, do you?"

"Not a bit," said Miss Christine. "Don't mind me!"

Violet joined her brother.

"What's the matter, Tom?" she asked. "I can see there's something special on, by that gleam in your eye?"

"It's about Handforth," grinned Watson. "I suppose you've noticed that he's rather sweet on you——"

"The silly boy!" said Violet, blushing slightly. "Fancy him acting in that way, Tommy! I feel quite uncomfortable, sometimes. I like Handforth immensely, but it would be silly to encourage him——"

"Of course it would," agreed Watson. "So we're going to have a little joke at his expense. I want you to lend me that striped frock of yours."

"Indeed, I won't!" said Violet warmly. "The very idea! What in the world do you mean, Tom? What do you want my frock for?"

Watson explained, and Violet's pretty eyes twinkled merrily.

"Oh, how lovely!" she exclaimed, clapping her hands with glee. "But I wish I could be there!"

"That's impossible," said Watson. "You'll have to smuggle yourself away somewhere, so that Handy won't know the difference. The best idea will be for Pitt to get into your frock, and be below. You can go below, and we'll keep Handy jawing. Then, when Pitt comes up, he'll think you've been down to change your dress. He can't possibly guess the truth, anyhow."

Ten minutes later Watson came below, triumphant. He had brought the required articles with him, and Pitt and I and Jack Grey lost no time in going off to Pitt's cabin. The other fellows were sent on deck.

"If we all stick below, Handy will guess something," I declared. "So you chaps had better buzz off. Some of the fellows had suggested that I should play the trick on Handy; but it was Pitt's idea, and, in any case, Pitt was more suitable, for he was slimmer. I couldn't have worn the frock, for one thing."

A full hour was occupied in preparing Pitt for the joke. And when he was finished the result was astonishing. He looked exactly like a girl—and he looked remarkably like Violet, too. This was because he wore her frock. His face, of course, was not like her's in the slightest degree. But that wouldn't matter. In the dusk Handforth wouldn't have a chance of seeing clearly.

"You'll do!" I said approvingly. "It's nearly dark enough now. Wait down here until you get the word. Tommy will come down when his sister comes; and we'll keep Handforth engaged."

The programme was carried out easily enough.

When the shadows were growing very dim, Miss Violet rose from her chair, and went below. Handforth was about to follow—probably under the impression that the girl was bound for the drawing-room. But Church and McClure and two or three others stopped Handforth on the way, and kept him talking.

The electric lights were blazing below decks, and the piano was playing a waltz in the drawing-room. And then, in the dim light of the deck, a slim figure appeared, and tripped daintily across to an easy-chair under the awning. It was very dim there, but the figure could be seen, owing to the distinctive stripe of the frock.

Handforth was gazing over in that direction, and we could all see that our presence irritated him.

"Well, I suppose we'd better get below," I said. "Coming down, Handy?"

"Not just yet, thanks," said Handforth carelessly. "It's cool on deck, you know."

and I hate being stuffed up. I'll stay here for a bit."

"Just as you like," I said.

We all went down the companion-way noisily, but within two minutes we crept up again, and silently made our way round to the rear of the awning. We wouldn't have missed the fun for worlds.

Handforth was standing against the rail, pretending to be interested in the stars; and under the awning sat the pseudo Miss Violet. There was nobody else on deck, in that particular portion, at all events. We were there, but we were unseen. There were about ten of us altogether.

"Not a word!" I breathed. "And, for goodness' sake, don't laugh. Whatever you hear, keep quiet, or you'll give the whole show away."

"Dear old boy, we'll be like mice," said Sir Montie softly.

Pitt was acting his part well. A silken wrap was placed loosely over his wig, and it hung down on both sides of his face. A dainty fan concealed the rest of his features. If I had known nothing of the trick, and I had come on deck at that moment, I should have sworn that the person in the chair was Violet.

Handforth was slow; even now that he had an opportunity, he was not taking advantage of it. Perhaps he required an opening. Pitt soon provided one, for he dropped a magazine with a flutter.

"Oh!" he murmured, in a girlish voice.

Handforth was round in a moment, and he hastened across the deck, and picked up the magazine from the floor. The actual test had now come. Handforth gave the magazine to his "fair" companion.

"I—I think you dropped this, Miss Violet," he said nervously.

"Oh, thank you, Handforth," said Pitt, in a soft whisper, which could easily have been mistaken for Violet's voice. "You shouldn't have troubled yourself, really. I wasn't reading."

"No, I suppose not," said Handforth. "It—it's rather too dark, isn't it? I say, aren't the stars ripping. Have—have you ever examined them?"

"Not particularly, Handforth," said Pitt. "Won't you sit down in this chair here? That's right! Draw it a little closer."

Handforth sat down, and edged his chair somewhat nearer.

"This is awfully sporting of you, Miss Violet," he said huskily.

"Don't call me 'miss'," murmured Pitt coyly. "And I don't see why I should call you Handforth, either. Isn't your name Edward?"

"Yes!" gasped Handforth.

"Do you mind if I call you Edward?" whispered Pitt.

"Nun-no," said Handforth. "I—I shall be delighted, Vi-Violet! It's jolly good of you to treat me like this, you know. I—I've been waiting for a chance to speak to you. I—I think you're the most ripping girl I've ever met!"

"Oh, Edward!" said Pitt shyly.

"It's a fact!" went on Handforth, growing bolder. "I've met a good few girls, but I'd always thought that girls were silly, and all the rest of it. But you're so jolly different to every other girl!"

"Yes, I suppose I am!" murmured Pitt.

We nearly burst our sides as we listened.

"And there's no reason why you should sit so far away, Edward," went on Pitt. "That chair will come nearer, won't it? Bring it quite close to mine—so that it touches. We can talk so much better, then."

Handforth's heart was beating fast. He was amazed at his own audacity—and still more amazed that Miss Violet should treat him with such kindness. It was beginning to dawn upon Handforth, in fact, that his love was reciprocated.

"Ah, that's better—ever so much!" said Pitt, in the softest of soft whispers. "Isn't it fortunate that we are alone? I don't want any of those horrid boys here now. Edward! It is so lovely to be alone with you."

Handforth blushed furiously.

"Is—is it, really?" he asked breathlessly.

"Yes, of course!"

"Do you really like being alone with me?" asked Handforth.

"I think it is heavenly!" lisped Pitt.

"Oh, I say! I—I hardly know what to say!" exclaimed Handforth nervously. "I didn't know you'd be so—so—"

"Loving?" asked the false Miss Violet.

"Did you think I hadn't noticed, Edward? And did you think I didn't feel towards you as you feel towards me? Oh, it is simply glorious to know that one is loved by somebody!"

"Oh, my hat!" gasped Handforth.

"Especially by somebody so handsome—so big and strong!" went on Pitt, with admiration in his voice. "What splendid eyes you have, Edward. They are such a delicate shade of blue, with just a touch of purple now and again."

Handforth was quite speechless. He didn't know what to say, and he was so excited that he could only sit and quiver. This was altogether more than he had anticipated, and he hardly knew how to cope with the situation.

"I—I—I—" he murmured lucidly.

"You must not be shy!" whispered Pitt.

"We are alone, and we might not have another chance like this for a long while. I'm going to be very kind to you, Edward. You—you may kiss me if you like!"

Handforth swallowed hard.

"I—I— You—you— Oh, great pip!" he gasped frantically.

This was too much altogether! She had offered to let him kiss her! The progress was altogether too rapid for Handforth, and his nerve gave way. He simply hadn't the courage to remain.

He rose from his chair and fled.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

With one mighty yell we let ourselves go.

It was wonderful how we kept ourselves in check for so long. We simply held our sides and roared.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Oh, talk about a pantomime!"

"It was worth hundreds of quids!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Handforth paused as he fled along the deck. He couldn't possibly fail to hear that terrific yell of laughter which rang out in his rear. And Edward Oswald was utterly horrified.

Somebody had been listening.

He turned round, and his blood rose to fever heat. Was it possible—was it conceivable—that Miss Violet had made herself a party to such a trick. All Handforth's love was swallowed up in the indignation which surged within him. He guessed that the listeners had been there unknown to the girl; and it was his intention to commit wholesale slaughter.

Pitt was on his feet by this time, grinning from ear to ear.

Handforth came up, and stood before him with clenched fists.

"Did—did you know that all these cackling idiots were here, Miss Violet?" he asked in a quivering voice.

"Of course I did, Edward, you prize chump," said Pitt calmly, removing his wig. "Don't you think the stars are lovely, Edward?"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Handforth nearly fainted.

"Why—what—what——"

"How did I strike you as a girl?" asked Pitt, in his ordinary voice. "Oh, Handy, how could you refuse me? Why couldn't you give me a kiss——"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"You—you spoofing rotter!" roared Handforth, the truth dawning upon him with a flood of horrible reality. "It was you all the time! And—and I thought that—Oh, great pip! If you're alive after I've finished with you, it'll be a wonder!"

He dashed at Pitt, but he was intercepted by many hands, and firmly collared.

"Only a joke, old son," I said cheerfully. "There's no need to get wild about it. You've given us the best entertainment of the year! The way you talked was quite a revelation! We didn't know that you could use such pretty words!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Handforth felt that he would give all he possessed for the deck to open so that he might be swallowed up. As that was impossible, he chose the only other course. And he dived below, amidst further shouts and laughter, and locked himself in his cabin.

Edward Oswald Handforth's love spasm was effectively cured!

CHAPTER IV.

CAPTAIN NIXON ACTS

AFTER two days had elapsed, Handforth felt that he could look the other fellows in the eye without resembling a beetroot. For twenty-four hours he had scarcely been seen, but hunger had compelled him to emerge.

He braved the smiles which greeted him. It was rather a surprise to find that he was not chipped unmercifully—as he had expected. But we had all agreed that the joke was over. It would have been unfair to carry it on any longer.

And on the evening of that second day—the Thursday—other important events were claiming our attention.

The great two-engined aeroplane had been assembled on the roughly-constructed raft which was floating near the stern of the Wanderer. The floats had been affixed, and the machine looked very business-like.

There was some excitement aboard when it was known that Nelson Lee meant to launch the seaplane without delay. And after that, providing she floated well, he would give her a trial flight.

The launching itself was a comparatively easy matter. Special slips had been constructed on the raft, and the machine's own engines, when she opened out, assisted greatly in getting her into water.

The raft was partially submerged during the process, but this was not of much account. Nothing had been harmed. And when the seaplane was floating on the surface of the sea she seemed to be perfectly balanced, and looked fit for anything.

"My hat! The gov'nor's made a fine job of her," I remarked admiringly. "She's splendid! I'll bet she'll get off the water at the first attempt. And she'll land just as easily, too."

"Let's hope so," said Pitt.

Nelson Lee and Lord Dorrimore were already on the machine, and the engines were running evenly and well. Darkness would soon be coming on, and there was only just time for a test flight.

On board, we were all lining the rails, watching. And we saw the propellers whizz round at an increased speed, and we heard the throbbing roar of the motors. The big machine swept away across the sea, her floats causing cascades of foam. She careered along for several hundred feet.

Then she jumped into the air, touched the water again, sending up showers of spray, and finally lifted clear. A second later she was rising rapidly, and then she came sweeping over the yacht five hundred feet above.

"Hurrah!"

Everybody cheered—the boys, the girls, and all the members of the crew. It was a cheer that rang out with triumph and joy. Nelson Lee's experiment was a success; the aeroplane was converted into a seaplane.

After rising to a height of a thousand feet, Lee throttled down the motors, and glided once more to the surface of the sea. He

alighted perfectly, without straining a single strut.

"I am more than satisfied," he declared, when he came aboard. "In any ordinary sea she can get up or alight with ease. Tomorrow morning I shall start on my search for assistance."

"Shall I come with you, sir?" I asked eagerly.

"No, Nipper, I think not," said the gov'nor. "There is no telling what may happen to the aeroplane, and I should not feel justified in allowing you to take any risk. I shall merely take Mr. Clive with me—and he will act as navigator."

And this was the plan which was decided upon.

On the following morning, soon after breakfast, the aeroplane was finally tuned up, and Nelson Lee and Mr. Clive took their places. The first officer had been ill for some little time, but he was now quite himself again, and as eager as a schoolboy to accompany the gov'nor on the flight.

"I've no doubt that we shall be back within three or four hours," said Nelson Lee. "But if not, you must not worry. Sighting a few sailing vessels will not satisfy me. I want to obtain the help of some big steamers, if possible. For I believe that, at high tide, there is just a chance of floating the Wanderer safely into deep water. All she requires is powerful tugs to pull her free."

The start was quite uneventful. As before, the machine got off the water quite easily, and circled about for some time until she attained a good height. Then, with a final dip of her tail, she sped away across the ocean.

"Well, they've gone," said Dorrie. "An' now all we can do is to wait until they come back. It's my belief we sha'n't see anythin' more of them——"

"Eh?" I gasped.

"Until to-night," said Dorrie calmly. "They won't be able to pick up ships in an hour or two. So don't you boys get impatient. You've got to wait until this evenin' before you get excited."

We were all settled to the fact that a fairly long wait was necessary. And, in order that the time should pass quickly, we occupied ourselves in various ways. Cricket was indulged in—for there was plenty of space on the deck to play the great game in a restricted manner.

Lord Dorrimore amused himself with a shot-gun. There were plenty of seagulls and other birds about and Dorrie was a fine shot. And it was while he was engaged upon this recreation that an incident occurred which was to lead to very dramatic consequences.

One of Dorrie's shots brought down two birds right on the deck. Another bird fluttered down slowly, and finally came to rest on the rocky shore, where it flapped its wings helplessly.

"Oh, the poor thing's injured!" exclaimed Violet indignantly. "I think it's a cruel

shame to shoot the poor, harmless birds like that! I expect it's in terrible pain now!"

Dorrie looked concerned.

"I'm awfully sorry, Violet," he said apologetically. "I didn't mean to do the job so badly as all that. Perhaps the poor beggar will die within a minute or two. There's nothin' I hate worse than maimin' a bird or an animal. I like to either kill it, or miss it outright."

"I don't think you ought to shoot them at all!" said Violet warmly.

She continued to watch the shore, but the bird still fluttered about helplessly. Quite obviously, it was wounded, but not dying. It seemed that one of its wings had been broken.

"I want to go ashore at once!" said Miss Violet firmly.

"Eh?" asked Dorrie. "You want to go ashore?"

"Yes, I do!"

"But, my dear young lady——"

"I mean to rescue that poor bird, and to bind its wounds," declared the girl.

"It wouldn't let you do it," said Lord Dorrimore patiently. "It isn't a tame chicken, you know. It would peck frightfully——"

"Oh, you're not going to make any excuses?" said the girl, with scorn in her voice. "Will you please take me ashore, Lord Dorrimore? If you won't, I'll ask somebody else—somebody who is more humane!"

His lordship sighed.

"I'm perfectly willin' to go," he said. "But I don't think you ought to come, Violet. I will rescue the bird for you——"

"Indeed, I shall come!" declared Violet firmly.

She could be quite imperious when she liked, and Dorrie was not the fellow to ignore the requests of a lady. There could be no possible danger, for Dorrie meant to take several members of the crew with him—and they would all be armed. Even if Captain Nixon was watching, he would have no opportunity of acting.

And so the boat set out from the yacht's side, Miss Violet looking very concerned.

The bird was still in the same position, but it was quite alive. The rocks in all directions were deserted and bare, radiating the heat of the blazing morning sunshine. The whole scene looked very peaceful.

"You'd better let me get the bird for you," said Dorrie calmly. "It's got a beak as powerful as wire-cutters——"

"Oh, I'm not afraid of it," said Miss Violet. "Besides, it'll know that I mean to help it, so it will let me pick it up."

"Will it?" said Dorrie. "By gad! That's a surprisin' piece of news. You must allow me to differ, Miss Violet. That bird will be quite savage, and—— Good gracious! There's a wilful little minx for you!"

The bows of the boat had touched the rock, and, on the instant, Violet sprang ashore. Dorrie was in the stern, so it was not possible for him to forestall the girl's intention.

2



1. "I-I think you are the most ripping girl I have ever met" said Handforth
2. "I should advise you to put your hands up, Captain Nixon!" rapped out Nipper, removing his wig.

She was running across the rough rock to the spot where the injured bird was lying. She was some little distance away already.

"Let me get ashore! Quick!" exclaimed Dorrie quickly. "There's no tellin' what that confounded bird will do!"

But before his lordship could set foot on the rock something of a very startling nature occurred—and it was not connected with the injured bird.

As Violet was approaching the spot, a short, burly figure shot out from behind some rocks. By taking four long strides the figure reached the girl, and the next moment two powerful, horny hands were grasping her shoulders.

"You'd best hold still, missy!" snapped a voice.

"Oh!" shouted Violet, in alarm. "Let me go—"

"Captain Nixon!" roared Dorrie, white with alarm and anger. "You infernal scoundrel! Take your fingers off that young lady! Take them off, you cur, or I'll shoot you as you stand."

Captain Nixon laughed harshly and pointed a revolver at Miss Violet's head. She gazed at it, terrified.

"The first man who attempts to move in this direction will cause the death of this charming young gal!" roared Captain Nixon. "That ain't a hollow threat, mind! I mean what I say! One move, mind you, and she'll die!"

CHAPTER V.

THE PRISONER OF THE CAVERN!

VIOLET WATSON was a strong, brave girl, but to be in the grasp of a brute like Captain Nixon utterly terrified her. And the knowledge that a loaded revolver was pointed at her head was more terrifying still.

She fainted in Nixon's arms.

"You confounded cur!" shouted Dorrie more furiously. "Release that young lady at once—"

"You can give those orders to those who'll obey!" yelled Nixon. "Don't forget what I told you! This revolver's still handy, and it might go off. If you want this gal to be safe, you'd best remain still!"

And to Lord Dorrimore's horror, Nixon commenced moving off backwards into the rocks, carrying Violet with perfect ease in one brawny arm. The cunning rascal took care to place the girl between himself and the boat's party.

To shoot was impossible, for it was just as likely that a bullet would hit the girl. Not a man dared shoot.

And Dorrimore was compelled to witness the galling sight of Miss Violet being carried away by that rascally skipper. She was absolutely in his power, and nothing could be done to help her—at the moment.

Nixon disappeared into a crevice amongst the rocks—and Lord Dorrimore became active at once. He sprang forward, in-

tending to dash to the rescue. He only covered about ten yards.

Crack!

A bullet whizzed past his left ear, and he paused. There would be no sense in getting himself killed; he couldn't help the captured girl in that way. So Dorrie stood quite still.

Another shot came, and it was quite obvious that the only safe plan was to retire. And Captain Nixon had got Miss Violet in his clutches!

The situation was serious!

And, meanwhile, Nixon was penetrating one of the long tunnels which honey-combed the hill. He proceeded down it for some little way, and did not pause until he had carried his fair burden into a large, irregularly-shaped cavern. Then he placed her down, and left her.

Ten minutes elapsed and then the girl opened her eyes. For some moments she did not know where she was or what had happened. Then, in a flood of remembrance, she realised the truth.

"Oh!" she murmured, rising unsteadily to her feet.

Violet saw that she was in a cavern, with irregularly formed rock walls. High up in the roof was a long slit, and at the very top of it the sky was visible. The cavern was lighted naturally—by the light of day. But the place was very dim and gloomy, nevertheless.

The girl looked about her nervously.

She thought she saw a shadowy form over in the other corner of the cavern, and she crouched back against the wall, terrified. She knew that Captain Nixon had three wild-looking men with him—three men who had been on the island before the arrival of the party.

They were probably castaways who had been thrown on the rock during a storm. And they had been compelled to remain. Nixon had found them, and he had probably promised them large rewards if they helped his own schemes.

Was it one of these men who lurked in the shadows?

Brave as the girl was, she felt utterly unnerved just then. To be in that awful cavern, in the power of these ruffians, was enough to strike terror into any girl's heart.

A sound came to her ears, and a moment later Captain Nixon himself entered the cavern from a narrow opening in the wall. He gazed across at her and nodded cheerfully.

"Ah, missy, I'm glad to see that you're well agin," he remarked. "How are ye feelin'? Better, I hope?"

"Oh, you brute—you brute!" panted Violet.

"Steady!" said the captain. "What have I done? Come now! What have I done to deserve that? I've handled you careful, and I haven't touched you, my fine young lady! That sounds a bit Irish, but you know what I mean. I ain't touched a hair of your head—not to harm it!"

Violet controlled herself with an effort.

"Why are you keeping me here?" she asked steadily. "What good will it do you to hold me a prisoner? Let me go, Captain Nixon—let me go! If you don't you will be terribly punished—No, don't come near me! I shall scream——"

Nixon laughed.

"You can scream all you like, missy," he said. "It won't alter nothing. Your sweet voice can't be heard. An' you needn't think that I mean to play any silly tricks. I've got you here for a purpose—understand?"

"What—what purpose?" asked Violet tremblingly.

"Oh, nothin' that'll hurt you," said Nixon. "When you came ashore I just hugged myself with joy. If your friends on the yacht act sensibly you won't be touched. But if they prove obstinate—well, I'm afraid that things'll be different. But I just want to tell you that you needn't be afeared."

Nixon laughed softly and walked away again.

The girl crouched back against the wall, her heart beating fast. She knew well enough that there was no escape for her. What could she do against this armed ruffian—to say nothing of his confederates?

And, meanwhile, consternation reigned on board the Wanderer.

The boat had returned to the yacht—but we knew the truth long before it arrived, for we had seen the whole incident from the deck. And we were all in a state of excitement and concern.

"Miss Violet kidnapped!" panted Handforth—"kidnapped by that horrible ruffian! Oh, my goodness! Something will have to be done! Why didn't Dorrie shoot the beast?"

"He couldn't," I said. "He held Violet in front of him, and Dorrie didn't have a chance to shoot. I don't know what the dickens we can do!"

Watson paced about nervously.

"My sister!" he exclaimed. "We must go ashore at once, and——"

"The boat's just alongside," called out De Valerie.

There was a rush at once, and we all collected round the accommodation-ladder. Dorrie came on board, looking much paler than usual. And there was a grim gleam in his eyes.

"The brute!" he exclaimed—"the tricky brute!"

"Can't we do anything, sir?" asked Watson huskily.

"I don't know—yet," said Dorrie. "I must speak to the captain and to Sir Crawford. Something must be done certainly."

Dorrie went off, and was soon in deep and earnest conversation with Captain Burton and Sir Crawford Grey. They knew the facts, and they were vastly worried. But what could be done?

What prospect was there of rescuing Violet from those dark caverns and tunnels? The task was well-nigh impossible. Captain Nixon had scored, and he had scored heavily.

Yet the whole incident had been unfore-

seen. The rascal could not have made any plans beforehand. He had simply taken advantage of the circumstance, and had captured Miss Violet on the spur of the moment.

Her imprisonment meant a great deal to the yacht's party, for Nixon would undoubtedly use the girl as a lever to gain his own ends. Dorrie was at his wits' end; and so were the others.

"I really do not know what to do," said Sir Crawford Grey anxiously. "It is terribly unfortunate—terribly alarming. The dear child must be rescued without delay, and yet—and yet I do not see how it can be done. It is appalling to think of her—that sweet girl—in the hands of such vile ruffians!"

"And this happens when Mr. Lee is away?" growled Captain Burton. "We must act in some way, that is certain."

"Perhaps Nixon will act first," suggested Dr. Brett grimly. "I am expecting him to make a move, at all events. And I do not think you need alarm yourselves. Nixon will not dare to harm the girl."

"By gad, I wish I could believe you, doctor!" said Dorrie. "But I'm frightfully alarmed. I've been wrackin' my brains——"

"The boys seem excited about something," interrupted Sir Crawford.

A moment later they were gazing down the deck. Tommy Watson was dancing about frantically, and several other juniors were equally excited. I was there, but I remained quite calm.

The cause of the commotion was the sight of a figure on the shore.

It was Captain Nixon.

He was standing in full view, waving a large square of white material—which was obviously intended to serve as a flag of truce. He continued to wave it as he stood there.

"We must see what he wants," said Brett promptly.

"Rather!" agreed Dorrie. "You'd better come with me, old man."

Within three minutes the boat was off, containing Lord Dorrimore and the doctor and several members of the crew. All were fully armed and ready for treachery. But it was important that Nixon should be heard.

The boat reached the rocks and rested there.

"You don't need to come no nearer," said Nixon calmly. "I reckon we can talk nicely like this. An' I might as well point out right at once that you'd best not try any tricks. That gal is in the hands of my mates, an' if anything happens to me—well, something'll happen to her. For one thing, you won't see her no more. So I ain't frightened of all that display o' guns!"

"For the moment, Nixon, you have the advantage," said Dorrie grimly. "Tell us in as few words as possible what you want."

"Well, the fust thing I want is a cigar an' some cigarettes," said Nixon coolly. "'And 'em over, my lord."

"Infernal impudence!" snapped Dorrie.

But he was not in a position to refuse, and he tossed over to Nixon two cigars and a handful of cigarettes. The captain caught them and soon lighted one of the cigars. He puffed away at it with great enjoyment.

"Ah, that's a real treat!" he exclaimed. "Now I can talk a lot better. The idea o' this parley is that I'm keen upon makin' a bargain. Understand? That gal is in my possession, an' you can have her back—on conditions."

"What conditions?" demanded Dr. Brett.

"I wasn't aware that I was speakin' to you," said Nixon rudely. "My conversation is addressed to his lordship. You can have the girl back, but my conditions will have to be carried out fust."

"You must tell us what they are," said Dorrie.

"Well, to begin with, I want two boat-loads of food delivered. You can send a general cargo—I ain't particular about that. As long as it's good foodstuff it'll be all right. That's the fust demand."

"Oh, so there are others?"

"You can bet your sweet life on that," said Nixon. "I shall want a case of whisky, an' also somethin' which you brought out of the El Safra oasis."

"I knew it!" murmured Dorrie.

"In other words," said Nixon pleasantly, "you've got to deliver over to me that there treasure. An' you mustn't play no tricks, neither. You've got to send everything—savvy? The whole collection."

Lord Dorrimore nodded.

"That is very interesting," he said smoothly. "An' do you really expect that we shall meet these—er—reasonable demands of yours?"

Nixon shrugged his shoulders.

"If you don't meet 'em—well, you'll be sorry for it," he said. "You can think it over, my lord. I ain't tellin' a lie when I say that if the stuff isn't delivered it'll mean the death of that little gal. I've got no grudge against her, but she just happens to be a lever. If you don't do as I order she will never see you agin, an' you'll never see 'er."

"You confounded scoundrel!" roared Dr. Brett.

"Maybe I am," said Nixon. "But you all know it by this time, so I don't take that as an insult. I set out on this trip with the intention of gettin' that treasure—an' I mean to have it, too. I ain't particular about scruples. It won't do me any harm if two or three of you get killed in the process—it'll only do you harm. So you'd better take heed o' what I say."

"It is impossible for me to give you a definite answer now," said Dorrimore. "I must consult with Sir Crawford Grey—"

"You needn't be scared," said Nixon. "I'm prepared to allow you a certain amount of time to talk things over. I'll give you three hours exactly. You can decide sooner, if you want to—the waving of a white flag will be all the signal I shall need. Three hours is the time limit."

"And what if we make no move?"

"At the end of three hours my prisoner

will cease to live—that's all," said Nixon, with perfect calmness. "That sounds callous, don't it? Well, I dare say it is callous. But I'm hardened. By jinks, there's one thing I was nearly forgettin'—an important thing, too!"

"Would you like us to deliver the yacht, for example?" suggested Dorrie.

"I reckon you're bein' sarcastic," replied Nixon. "No, my lord, I don't want a useless old hulk like that. But you'll have to bring me ten rifles an' a thousand rounds of ammunition."

"No!" said Dorrimore firmly. "I'll give you my answer to that straight away. You won't get a single cartridge—"

"Then the gal will die!"

"Don't keep up that same yarn!" snapped Dorrimore. "You're rather good at bluffing, Captain Nixon. At the same time, we'll consider your terms, an' we'll let you know something before three hours have elapsed."

"That's a promise," said Nixon. "I knew I could rely on a gent like you to act fair and square. Don't forget that the gal's life hangs by a thread. An' that thread is in your hands. So be careful."

Nixon turned away, and the boat made its way back to the yacht. When Dorrie and Brett came aboard they were at once surrounded, and they briefly explained what Captain Nixon had demanded.

"He wants the treasure!" I exclaimed. "That's what I expected all along. And it seems to me that he'll get it, too."

"Get it!" shouted Handforth.

"Yes."

"But it's worth three hundred thousand!" I nodded grimly.

"Isn't Miss Violet worth more than that?" I asked.

"Rather!" said Handforth promptly. "She's—she's worth millions, and—Ahem!"

Handforth paused, turned slightly red, and was glad that all the other fellows were busily engaged in conversation.

"Of course, the treasure will have to be sacrificed," Watson declared. "Dorrie had better hand it over at once, so that we can get Vi back. Then it'll be easy to get the treasure again."

"Will it?" I asked grimly. "Nixon is a cunning beggar. He won't release Violet until those rifles and ammunition are handed over. And what then? With those caves he'll be able to defend the island against a hundred."

"My hat, yes!" said Watson. "Then—then we shall have to lose the treasure altogether."

"My dear chap, do you think that Nixon will keep his part of the bargain if we keep ours?" I asked. "Do you think he'll release Violet as soon as he gets the stuff he has demanded?"

"Of course he won't," said Pitt.

"That's my idea," I agreed. "Nixon will make fresh demands, and there'll be no end to the affair."

"Well, it's a jolly good thing he didn't capture two of the girls," remarked De

Valerie. "He'd have had a double lever then."

"He didn't capture two, so what's the good of talking," snapped Handforth. "We've got to settle this problem!"

Handy apparently thought that it was his business to decide the affair, and he exercised his mighty brain to the utmost limit—not that exercising it had much effect.

But De Valerie's remark, unimportant though it seemed, had suggested something in my own mind. I stood quite still for several minutes, thinking deeply. Then I looked round with a gleam in my eye.

"I say, you fellows," I exclaimed, "supposing one of the girls got into a boat all by herself——"

"Eh?"

"There's a little canoe all ready," I went on. "Supposing one of the girls got into that canoe and drifted ashore——"

"What the dickens——"

"She'd be captured by Nixon, wouldn't she?" I asked.

"I suppose she would," said De Valerie. "Nixon would welcome the chance of making another capture. But as there's no possibility of anything like that happening I don't see why you should waste time."

"I'm not wasting time," I said grimly. "As a matter of fact, it is going to happen, my sons. And I'll tell you how!"

And I drew my chums round me.

CHAPTER VI.

A PERILOUS UNDERTAKING!

"THE idea isn't mine, strictly speaking," I began. "It really belongs to Pitt!"

"To me?" said Pitt, staring.

"Exactly," I replied. "You may remember that you played rather a neat little trick on Handforth the other evening, when you dressed up as Miss Violet——"

"Here, I say!" growled Handforth. "What's the idea of raking that up? I don't see the sense in——"

"Wait until I've finished, Handy," I put in. "I'm sorry if I've touched a sore point, but it can't be helped. My idea is to disguise myself as a girl."

"What!"

"And go ashore——"

"Great pip!"

"Pretending to be helpless——"

"My hat!"

"That's the wheeze," I went on. "Don't you see?"

"No, I'm blessed if I do," said Watson.

"Who could you impersonate?"

"Nobody in particular."

"But——"

"Nixon doesn't know what girls there are aboard," I said. "As long as I look like a girl it'll be sufficient. I needn't pretend to be anybody else. And I think I'm fairly good at disguises."

Everybody grinned.

"Fairly good!" echoed Pitt. "What about the time you had the nerve to come to

St. Frank's as a new boy? Nobody detected that, and I'm jolly certain that you can disguise yourself as a girl without the slightest trouble."

"Well, I dare say he could," said De Valerie. "But what's the idea?"

"I shall get myself captured," I explained.

"Get—get yourself captured?"

"Exactly."

"You must be dotty!"

"Mad!"

"Clean off your rocker!"

I looked round me with a smile.

"If you'd only think for a minute or two, you wouldn't make those remarks," I said. "I shan't deliberately go ashore, you duffers. If I went out in a boat, paddled to the shore, and landed, Nixon would be suspicious in a moment. I shall have to drift ashore by accident. See?"

"Not exactly," said Watson bluntly.

"Well, I've got an idea how it can be managed," I said. "The whole thing must be planned and engineered thoroughly if it's going to be a success. And once I'm ashore, captured, I shall almost certainly be placed with Miss Violet."

"That'll do you a lot of good, won't it?" asked Christine. "Why, you'd both be in the same position. You'd be hopelessly in the cart, with no chance of rescue."

"That's what it looks like, doesn't it?" I said. "But Nixon won't expect his second prisoner to carry revolvers on him, will he? And he won't expect her to be equipped with an electric torch, and——"

"My—my only hat!" gasped Watson. "You—you brainy bounder! Of all the ripping ideas! Why, it's stunning!"

"But—but——"

"Let me explain it with more detail," I said to the others. "I shall drift ashore in a boat, and it'll seem to everybody that I'm a frightened, helpless girl. Nixon will think that luck has played into his hands again. He'll capture me, and I shall scream for help. But I shall be taken into those old tunnels before anybody on board can do anything. It's almost a dead cert that Nixon will put me with Miss Violet, thinking that we're both girls. Well, the very instant I find her, I shall act—and I shall shoot, if necessary."

All the fellows were enthusiastic.

"But it'll be frightfully risky, dear old boy," declared Sir Montie, with an anxious note in his voice. "You'll have a shockin' time of it, you know. I don't altogether think that I shall approve——"

"In that case, old man, I'm afraid I shall have to earn your displeasure," I said calmly. "It'll be awful if I have to undertake the job without your approval—but perhaps I shall survive!"

"Pray don't rot, dear fellow," protested Montie.

Having practically settled the details in my own mind, I lost no time in laying the whole project before Lord Dorrimore, Sir Crawford Grey, and the others. At first they were

inclined to scout the very idea as preposterous.

"My dear lad, it is quite impossible—quite," said Sir Crawford gently. "You are excited, and I do not blame you for getting these wild ideas."

"But it's not wild, sir," I said calmly.

"Surely it is, Nipper," said Sir Crawford. "Such a subterfuge could be easily worked with Handforth—in the gloom of the evening. But this is no joke. This is grim reality. We have to cope with a very serious situation—"

"That's my idea, sir," I said. "I'm quite certain that I can work the whole game successfully. It only needs plenty of cheek and nerve."

"Well, you possess both those qualifications," said Dorrie drily. "An', what's more, by gad, I believe you can work the wheeze, too!"

"Really, Lord Dorrimore—"

"I'm serious, Sir Crawford," said Dorrie. "I know what a smart young bounder Nipper is. An' when it comes to disguises he's a masterpiece. Absolutely a masterpiece!" Dorrie repeated, patting me on the back.

"It's a go, then?" I asked eagerly. "Don't forget that we've got under three hours. We shall be compelled to give up a lot more than the treasure before we see Miss Violet again. It may be days before Nixon will give his prisoner her freedom—"

"Heaven forbid such a possibility!" exclaimed Sir Crawford huskily. "But Nipper is certainly right. We have no guarantee that Nixon will keep his part of the bargain. The chances are that he will do nothing. Yes, the only way is to act immediately—and to act with decision."

So, after a few further minutes of conversation, I hurried away to get prepared for the great adventure.

Personally, I was quite in love with the prospect. I didn't think of the danger at all. I was to set out on a piece of real detective work, and the thought of it thrilled me.

I had no difficulty in borrowing all the girls' clothes I needed. I performed the work with record speed, and my disguise was complete at the end of an hour. Meanwhile, other preparations had been going forward.

Two of the girls had been paddling in the neighbourhood of the yacht, in a little canoe. It was almost certain that somebody was watching the scene. And the watcher would think nothing when he observed the two girls board the yacht, and another girl get into the canoe by herself.

"Wonderful—wonderful!" exclaimed Sir Crawford, when I presented myself in his cabin. "Amazing, in fact! And is this—this young lady really Nipper? I cannot believe the evidence of my own eyes! An astoundingly clever disguise! Dear, dear! Upon my soul!"

Sir Crawford was certainly struck, and the

others all agreed that my make-up was top-hole. And I must admit that when I looked at myself in the glass I didn't see myself at all.

"Everything is ready," said Dorrie briskly. "I don't like you going, Nipper, but just at present we're all ready to try anything. Miss Violet must be rescued—that much is certain."

"I am very anxious indeed," declared Sir Crawford. "It seems terribly wicked of us to allow this brave lad to go into such danger while we remain here, in safety. I am not at all sure that we have done right in giving our consent—"

"My dear Sir Crawford, don't let that worry you," interrupted Dorrie. "Mr. Lee has sent Nipper on many an errand far more perilous than this. And the young bounder has always come out on top. I've got an idea that he'll win through on this occasion."

"Thanks," I said. "I've got that idea, too, Bertie. Captain Nixon is only a crude sort of crook, and the best way to deal with him is to pit cunning against cunning. And I think we'll succeed in getting the better of him."

There was no time for further discussion. Perilous or not, I had commenced the thing now, and it was my intention to go through with it. Even if I failed there wouldn't be much harm done.

I had a small revolver concealed about me, an electric torch, and several other articles which might come in useful. I was attired in a light summer coat-frock—I think that's what they call them—and I didn't look at all dusty. Some of the fellows declared that Handforth would have fallen in love with me if he hadn't known the truth. Incidentally, there were three or four noses punched on that occasion.

The canoe was only a small one, and I tripped down the accommodation ladder, and stepped into the little craft. For some few minutes I cruised clumsily backwards and forwards, as though I were a mere novice in the art of paddling.

When I was about midway between the yacht and the shore I had an accident—or what seemed to be an accident. The water in that little bay was quite calm and peaceful, with no more ripple on its surface than disturbs a tiny lake.

In turning, I dropped my paddle. Frantically, I looked over for it, but purposely jerked the canoe so that I could not reach it.

The current, such as it was, was carrying me steadily towards the shore. I knew that it would do so—the whole success of the plan depended upon that. For some few minutes I pretended to ignore the shore altogether.

And I drew further and further away from the paddle, and nearer the shore.

Then suddenly I seemed to realise that I was drifting on to the rocks.

"Oh, help!" I screamed.

I half stood up in the canoe, staring about me wildly.

"Help, help!" I screamed again. "I've lost my paddle, and I'm drifting to the shore! That horrid man will get me! Please, please help me!"

I made enough noise for a dozen, and even if Nixon had not been watching, he must certainly have heard me.

There was no sign of anybody on shore.

But, from the direction of the yacht, came many shouts. A great commotion was caused, and I saw that a fairly large boat was being got ready with all speed. But the members of the crew tumbled over one another, and delayed themselves.

Meanwhile, I was getting nearer and nearer to the shore.

"All right, Phyllis!" shouted Dorrie in loud tones. "We'll soon have you safe! Try and paddle with your hands—keep the canoe away from the rocks!"

It was all very realistic. I was in a panic, and they seemed to be in a panic. And when I paddled with my hands I made a frightful bloomer. I twirled the canoe round, and it went the wrong way!

Before I could remedy the defect, I'd hit the rock. Of course, this was what I really meant it to do. But it seemed to an on-looker that the whole thing had come about by accident.

The boat from the ship was already on its way, Lord Dorrimore shouting to his men to hurry up, but it was still a good distance off.

And then, to my terrific joy, Captain Nixon appeared with two of those wild-looking men whom he had found on the island.

"Collar 'er!" rasped out Nixon. "What a piece of bloomin' luck!"

"Help—help!" I shrieked.

Before I could escape, Nixon and his men had seized me, and I was rushed over the rocks towards the tunnel entrance.

"Got you, my fine lady!" panted Nixon.

"Oh, you beast—you brute!" I panted frantically.

"Them sort o' compliments don't hurt me a bit," grinned Nixon. "I'm surprised at you, missy—I'm real surprised! Just fancy you losin' your paddle, and driftin' ashore!"

"Oh, let me go—let me go!" I wailed.

"You'll go when your friends pay up," said Nixon. "This'll mean another ransom! I sha'n't be content with the fust bargain. Two prisoners—two lots of booty!"

"Oh, I'm so frightened—do, please let me go!" I exclaimed weakly. "I—I didn't mean any harm—"

"I don't say as you did, miss," said Captain Nixon. "And you won't come to no 'arm here, unless your friends refuse to obey my orders. It all depends upon them whether you get back safe or not."

He pulled at my arm.

"Now, come along, my gal!" he said.

"Where—where are you taking me to?" I asked, horrified.

"You're goin' to join your little gal friend," said Nixon, to my secret joy. "I

wouldn't be so cruel as to place you apart. You'll be nice company for one another. An' you won't be so lonely, neither. Before night, if everything goes well, you'll be safe an' snug on board the yacht agin."

"Oh, I do hope so! You wouldn't be so cruel as to keep us here for long," I said tearfully.

I was like a limp rag, and Nixon had no difficulty with me whatever. As I had suspected, he had been duped in the most complete manner. He had swallowed everything, right from the very start.

And he fondly believed that he had two girl prisoners—two helpless creatures who could do absolutely nothing.

But Captain Nixon was to learn his mistake!

After going along the tunnel for some little distance we took a sharp turn to the right, and then entered a curiously-shaped cavern. A slit was in the roof, admitting the daylight.

And as we entered, a slight form rose from the other side of the cavern, and stood staring at us.

"I've brought you a companion, my lady," said Nixon genially. "She'll be nice company for you—"

"Oh, is that you, Ethel?" exclaimed Violet, running over towards me. "However did you get— Oh! But you are not Ethel! I—I don't think I know you—"

"Yes, you do, Miss Violet!" I roared, jerking off my wig, and pulling the revolver out of my dress with a swift movement. "I'm Nipper, and I've come to get you out of this hole!"

Captain Nixon staggered.

"Why, what—" he began.

"I should advise you to put your hands up, Captain Nixon!" I rapped out sharply. "I'm not inclined to stand any nonsense. If you attempt to touch me, I shall shoot! Don't forget that."

Nixon recovered himself.

"You—you cunning young whelp!" he exclaimed frantically, letting fly a string of oaths.

Miss Violet flushed, and I clenched my teeth.

"Close that foul mouth of yours!" I shouted. "Another word, Nixon, and I'll shoot you!"

"You—you—"

The captain was quite incoherent, and he hardly knew what he was doing. Perhaps he thought I wasn't in earnest, for he pulled out a revolver and pointed it at me, snarling fiercely at the same time.

Crack!

It was not Nixon's weapon which spoke. My bullet entered his arm, and the revolver went crashing down. Nixon himself, howling with pain, danced over to the other side of the cavern.

"Now, Miss Vi!" I said sharply.

"Oh, Nipper, I—I—" she began.

"No time for talking," I whispered.

"Please come with me!"

We hastened down the tunnel, and from

behind we heard the stamps and roars of Captain Nixon as he gave chase.

Crack!

Again I fired, and this time the bullet hit the floor; it was only my intention to frighten the rascal, and I certainly did that; for he gave up the pursuit.

But we were not out of the wood yet. In the dim light of the entrance-cave I saw two figures. I knew that they belonged to Nixon's companions—and we had to pass them.

"We must charge!" I murmured. "Follow me closely!"

I didn't want to hurt the fellows—they were probably harmless enough, under ordinary circumstances. And so, with a series of fiendish yells, I dashed forward, firing my revolver straight out into the open.

In that confined space the noise was terrific, and it was hardly surprising that the fellows were staggered. Violet and I were past them before they knew what was in the wind.

And as soon as we were out in the open I fired my revolver three times in the air. But those on the watch had heard my previous shots, and a boat was already dashing across from the yacht.

"Hurrah!" went up a perfect roar. "He's done it—he's rescued Miss Violet! Good old Nipper!"

CHAPTER VII.

HOMEWARD BOUND ONCE MORE.

"HURRAH!"

H "Three cheers for Nipper!" The shouts rang out as I stepped into the boat, Violet with me. The girl was looking flushed and excited, but she had obviously come to no harm. Owing to the promptness of her rescue, she had scarcely had time to get frightened.

She and I sat in the stern of the boat as we rowed to the yacht.

"I—I don't know how I shall ever thank you, Nipper," she said, looking at me with grateful, sparkling eyes. "Oh, you were splendid—you were wonderful! The way you settled that terrible man was glorious!"

"I had to shoot him through the arm—it was the only way," I said. "And I thought it better to act at once, without any delay. I had my chance then—and I always believe in taking chances when they appear!"

"I don't know what I can say——"

"Please say nothing at all," I interrupted. "Captain Nixon has been beaten, so you needn't worry in the slightest degree. You can be quite sure that he won't have another opportunity of collaring a prisoner! He's found two at a time rather too many for him!"

When we got on the yacht I hardly knew whether I was on my head or my heels. Weirdly dressed as I was, I was hoisted up, and carried round the deck in triumph. Dorrie was roaring with delight, and Sir Crawford beamed.

"I knew you'd do it, my lad!" roared

Dorrie. "Good business! You deserve half a dozen medals for the way you lost that paddle of yours! It was one of the best bits of work I have ever seen!"

"Good old Nipper!"

I was certainly the hero of the hour—although I didn't particularly care for assuming that role. It was rather too energetic for my liking! And then came further excitement.

I was glad, because it shifted the attention of the fellows from me.

"Look—look!" bawled Handforth suddenly. "You chaps are making so much noise that we didn't hear it! Look, you asses!"

Considering that Handforth had been making most of the noise on his own account, it was rather "nervy" on his part to speak in that way. However, we didn't mind. For there, soaring into view out of the sky, came the seaplane!

Nelson Lee was returning.

Nothing else mattered once he had been sighted.

We all waited eagerly for the great machine to alight upon the water. It did so, landing gracefully, with scarcely a splash. Less than ten minutes later, Nelson Lee and Mr. Clive were on board.

"Well, sir?" roared a dozen voices.

"Dear me! I cannot speak to you all at once," said the gov'nor. "If you'll allow me—— Good gracious! What on earth are you up to, Nipper? What have you got into that extraordinary costume for?"

"Oh, there's been some excitement to-day, sir," I said calmly.

"Miss Violet was captured by Nixon, sir," said Handforth.

"What?" shouted Lee.

"But Nipper rescued her——"

"Oh!"

Nelson Lee was surprised and relieved. And he insisted upon hearing the chief details of the affair before he told us a word. He was delighted when he had heard all.

"Oh, cut it out, sir!" I protested, when he commenced praising me up. "I've been hearing nothing else but that sort of stuff ever since I came back! And there was nothing much in what I did, anyhow."

"Modesty is a great virtue, Nipper," said the gov'nor. "You have acted in the most chivalrous and courageous manner, and we all must join in thanking you for the great service you have rendered——"

"Oh, my hat!" I groaned.

Everybody roared, and the cheers were renewed.

"Haven't you done anything, sir?" I demanded warmly. "Or have you come back here empty-handed?"

"I have certainly returned empty-handed," said Nelson Lee. "The seaplane is a large one, but I didn't think it was capable of the task of carrying a fifteen thousand-ton steamer, so I've allowed it to come on in its natural element."

"You've arranged things?" asked Dorrie delightedly.

"Yes," said Nelson Lee. "A liner will be off the island during the night——"

"Hurrah!"

"Oh, good!"

"Rescue at last!"

There was further excitement.

"There are two ships coming," went on Lee, when he could make himself heard.

"One is this liner, and the other a tramp steamer of considerable size. I could have obtained help from smaller vessels, but I wanted all the power I could manage to gather."

"Why?" I asked.

"Because there is a slim chance that the Wanderer can be towed clear of these rocks," said Nelson Lee. "Her keel, I believe, is quite clear. She is simply jammed, and with sufficient power, and high tide, there is just a chance that she can be floated away. In that case we can return home without shifting our quarters."

There was much joy on board that evening.

Whether the yacht was salvaged or not, we should all be bound for home on the morrow, for the liner was booked for Plymouth. She was coming out of her way, but the expense was of no importance.

Unless the yacht was saved at once she would never be saved at all.

And, after much dancing and singing and general jollity, we all went to our cabins, and when we awoke in the morning we found two big ships almost within shouting distance of us. They were standing by, waiting for the tide.

"What's the betting?" asked Pitt, as he came on deck. "Shall we get off, or shall we break in half when they start pulling?"

I grinned.

"Well, we sha'n't break in half," I declared. "I can safely tell you that. The hawsers will probably snap once or twice, but there's no telling. All we can do is to follow the example of a once famous statesman, and—wait and see."

"Oh, we shall do the trick all right," declared Handforth confidently. "We've had so much good luck this week that it can't possibly change now. I'm a great believer in luck. We shall get off, you mark my words."

But actually it was all a matter of guesswork. And when the time arrived for the real test, there were still many doubts.

All Sir Crawford's guests were taken off the yacht. We all transferred to the big liner. For there was just a chance that there would be mishaps, and Captain Burton would not have anybody but his own crew on board.

We rather enjoyed that visit to the liner, too, for we were the heroes of the occasion.

The operations were watched with great interest.

And at length the critical moment arrived.

The hawsers were all fixed, the tide was at its full, and both the great ships commenced tugging with all their power. The Wanderer's own engines, too, were churning away.

It was an anxious time.

For several minutes nothing happened. The hawsers twanged and shivered under the terrific strain

Then, with a sudden grinding noise, the yacht shifted. She heeled slightly, dipped her stern, and then plunged forward, the spray shooting from her stern in cascades.

The sudden jerk snapped two of the hawsers like cotton. But a terrific roar arose from hundreds of throats.

"She's off!"

"She's towed free!"

And that was the actual truth! The Wanderer had been rescued from her position on the rocks of Castaway Island.

"There you are!" shouted Handforth triumphantly. "What did I tell you?"

"Well, you needn't crow!" said McClure. "You're not the only one who thought that the yacht would go free."

An examination of the yacht proved that she was watertight. One or two of the plates had leaked while she was jammed, but the engineers had repaired that during their enforced idleness.

And when we all went on board again, Mr. McBride, the chief engineer, was looking as pleased as Punch. He stood on the deck, rubbing his hands lovingly with a piece of cotton-waste.

Everybody was in a good humour, in fact. The ships which had helped us so well did not wait. They continued their own voyages that same day, but not until a little addition had been made to the passenger-list of the liner.

Nelson Lee was determined to settle with Captain Nixon once and for all. He led a large party ashore, all fully armed. And although nobody could be seen, Lee was quite sure that eyes were watching.

"Come Nixon!" shouted the giv'nor. "I will give you one chance to surrender. If you come out now, without causing any trouble, you will be escorted home to England——"

Crack!

A revolver bullet whizzed past Nelson Lee's head, and it was quite evident that Nixon was still murderously inclined. But a little surprise came then, for the three men who had been his companions came running into view.

"We surrender!" shouted one of them.

The wretches were only too willing to give in. But Nixon was not captured until many of the tunnels had been traversed. And then it was rather a risky business, for the rascally skipper showed fight.

However, Nelson Lee succeeded in the finish, and Nixon was placed on board the liner, to be put in irons and taken to England straight away. The other three, as we had surmised, were men from a shipwrecked British vessel. They had been on the island for some months.

Nixon had found them first, and he had told them many lies, and had promised that if they stuck to him they would be rich men when they got back to England. They were more fools than knaves, and their punishment was certain to be light, if, indeed, they received any punishment at all.

The Wanderer steamed away from Castaway Island in glorious weather. The sea-

plane had been stowed away on board again, having served its purpose well. And we were a merry party when we started off on the homeward trip.

"Well, we had a good few adventures while we were on that giddy island," remarked Watson, as we stood by the rail watching the last of the rock. "In fact, we've had a lot of adventures ever since we started the voyage."

"But we've got to the end of them now," said De Valerie, and I don't think I'm sorry. I was craving for adventures before we started, but a fellow can have too much of a good thing!"

"Don't you be too sure," I said. "There's no telling what might happen in these waters. We might be sucked into the sea by a whirlpool——"

"That's cheerful," said Handforth.

"Well, it's a fact that volcanic disturbances on the ocean bed sometimes cause a tremendous whirlpool," I said. "Still, I don't anticipate anything of that sort. But there's no telling."

And, as it happened, our homeward voyage was not to prove so uneventful as we imagined. We didn't get sucked under by a whirlpool, or anything of that kind. But we went through an adventure which, if not terrifying, was certainly most alarming and unusual.

Fate had evidently decreed that we should pass through as many dangers as possible before arriving back at St. Frank's!

THE END.

NEXT WEDNESDAY

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TO MY READERS

What a host of experiences the boys of that holiday party will have to relate to their parents and their less fortunate chums at St. Frank's who were unable to go. They knew that they would see strange lands and peoples, that they would have a rattling good time, but that some of their number should have nearly perished on more than one occasion, no-one had counted upon. Happily, they had all come through safely, and once more the "Wanderer" is homeward bound. But their adventures are by no means at an end, as will be seen in another stirring narrative next week, entitled "The Sea of Doom."

The new serial, by Robt. W. Comrade, "In Trackless Space," is something quite new in the realm of adventure. It tells of a wonderful journey to the solar planets by means of a marvellous airship, the invention of the age. You must not miss it. The first instalment begins next week.

If any of my readers wishes to write to me about "The Nelson Lee Library" or any other matter, he is cordially invited to do so and is sure of a ready response from his old friend,

The EDITOR.

GRAND NEW SERIAL TO COMMENCE NEXT WEEK.

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 the small party of defenders makes a brave stand against overwhelming odds. At length the situation becomes critical.

(Now read on).

CHAPTER 28.

How Chanka Held the Ledge—The Fate of Ralph Taverner—The Death of the Masai—The Destruction of the Dwelling—On to Safety—Down the Stream to the Bana—On the Homeward Track.

ALL looked in wonder at the Masai. How could he talk in a cheerful strain, offering encouragement to his companions, when the situation was so desperate?

"What do you mean?" asked Mr. Carne. Again Chanka rattled his spear against his

shield, and pointed into the murky gloom below him.

"All will be well with us," he reflected. "Do you and the others go inside, Bhagwan, and hurry on to the place where is the steep rock you have spoken of. If I live I will join you there, but not until I have made such a fight that there will be none with courage to pursue us."

"You would hold the ledge while we escape? Is that your meaning?"

"Wah, I have said!"

"It is impossible, Chanka! It would be madness!"

"No, Bhagwan, my words are good. I am a warrior of warriors, with the blood of ancient kings in my veins. I will stand against these black dogs, and I will smite them hard. You will see. And now go, all of you. Be quick, for time presses."

Mr. Carne made no further protest. He had been led to think that the Masai's daring plan might succeed, and the lads were of the same mind.

"Let him try it, father," said Alan. "He can at least delay the enemy, and that will be greatly to our advantage."

"He is as brave as a lion," declared Dick. "and he will have a long reach with that huge spear of his. I am afraid he will be killed, though."

Leaving Chanka outside, the rest of the party went a few paces inside of the mouth of the cavern, and Mr. Carne took from a shelf on the wall the things that had been put there a year or so before—the rope ladder, the torches of resinous wood, and the cork bottle filled with matches.

When he had set one of the torches alight he handed the remainder of them to Dick and Alan, and gave the rope ladder to Jan Swart. Lorna was frightened, but calm, and the little Hottentot, who was not a bit afraid, would have lent assistance to Chanka had he been allowed to do so.

"No, it would be too risky," Dick told him. "You must come with us, Jan, lest you should be killed. We will have need of you in the long journey to the coast, when

there will be many perils to contend with."

The fugitives ought to have departed at once, while they had the opportunity. But the attack had now begun, and it was such a wonderful sight, so thrilling a spectacle, that the fascination of it kept Mr. Carne and his companions rooted to the spot, though they should have been on their way to safety. Grouped within the cavern, in comparative shelter at one side of it, they witnessed all that occurred by the red flare from the burning torch. They could see plainly, as the floor of the subterranean passage had an upward slant. The Arabs and Bajangas were mounting the rugged track, which was so narrow, and so densely skirted by bushes, that they had to advance by twos. The larger band which had gone towards the house must have included all those who had guns, for amongst this smaller force, which had approached by the northern borders of the valley, there was fortunately not one with firearms. Moreover such weapons as they had were of short length, and the advantage was with the Masai, who was on a lofty perch, and had his great shield and spear. His voice rang loud above the clamour. With one hand he protected his body with the shield, and with the other he dealt blows in rapid succession. One by one he picked off the enemy as they came within range of him, driving the barbed point of his spear through their ribs and throats, hurling them back to fall writhing and bleeding in their death agonies, with hurried shrieks on their lips.

"Wah, wah you dogs!" Chanka shouted again and again. "Wah, it is thus a warrior gives battle to the howling curs of the jungle!"

The path was soon choked with the dead, but still the savages ascended over the bodies of the slain with ferocious yells and still they dropped, spitted like larks, as the Masai's long spear lunged at them. At length there was a lull in the attack, and now the spell that had gripped them had broken, the fugitives realised that they had been wasting precious time. They did not think they had anything more to fear, however.

The enemy had suffered heavily, and it was not likely that they would have the heart to make another attempt.

"Delay no longer, Chanka!" Mr. Carne called to him. "Come with us! You have done enough!"

"No, I have not finished yet!" Chanka replied in a booming voice. "Why have you stayed here, Bhagwan, when I bade you go? Hasten on, all of you, and I will come as soon as I have—"

"Look, father!" interrupted Alan.

"Look!"

"By heavens, it is that scoundrel Taverner!" Dick exclaimed.

The evil, swarthy face of Ralph Taverner, stamped with hatred, had just loomed out of the darkness a little way down the path. He had been with the party, and had been lurking in the background, while the Arabs and Bajangas attacked. He mounted over

the heap of dead, into the glow of the torch, until he was within three yards of the edge of the rocky shelf, and then he stopped, and whipped out a revolver from his belt.

"You black devil!" he cried in a fury. "I'll have a reckoning with you now!"

"Come on, white man!" Chanka shouted at him. "Come and be killed, dog that you are!"

What happened next was so swift and sudden, done and over in so brief a time that Mr. Carne and his companions looked on in stupefaction instead of using their weapons. Nor had they any chance of doing so effectively, for from where they stood they could not have fired at the villain without hitting the Masai. Ralph Taverner had discharged his revolver in rapid succession, emptying the six chambers of it; and every bullet penetrated Chanka's tough shield of rhinoceros hide, and pierced his body.

The great warrior was mortally wounded. He staggered and reeled, swaying to and fro, but by a hard effort he kept his feet, and by a more strenuous effort he lifted his huge spear, held it poised for an instant, and hurled it from him with what strength he had left. He did not miss the mark. The heavy weapon struck Ralph Taverner in the breast, and with such force that the steel point of it went clean through him and came out of his back. He dropped like a log, his hand tearing feebly at the haft of the spear. Chanka bellowed with triumph, and then, after a vain attempt to keep his footing, the shield slipped from his grasp, and the death cry of his tribe burst from his lips. He fell with a mighty crash, and at the same moment the ledge of rock yielded to the strain and snapped off, toppling down upon the corpse-choked path in a shower of broken stones, and taking the body of the Masai with them. The splendid warrior had died a hero's death, fighting to the last. And now, having witnessed the end of Chanka, and the richly-deserved fate of Ralph Taverner, the little group of fugitives thought of themselves. The torch was burning low, and when a couple of others had been hurriedly lighted from it, and Mr. Carne had given the word to start, a tremendous shattering explosion was heard. All gazed from the open, across the wide valley, and for a few seconds they saw a dazzling, blood-red glare, and faintly heard the sound of falling debris.

"That's done it!" exclaimed Alan. "The house has been blown to bits, and I dare say a lot of the Arabs and Bajangas were in it!"

"No doubt they were, my boy," his father replied. "If so, Tib Mohammed must have been with them, and he has met with his death. It is a great satisfaction to me to think that he has. And now to make our escape," he added. "We must not waste any more time."

"The danger is over, sir," said Dick. "Chanka killed a lot of those black fiends who attacked him, and the rest of them

(Continued on page iii of cover.)

must have had enough of it. And what's more, I don't believe they can climb up to the cavern now that the ledge has been broken off."

Mr. Carne shook his head.

"I am not so sure of that," he answered. "I am afraid we shall be pursued by our enemies. They won't be able to follow us very far, though. We can depend on that."

With heavy hearts, deploring the loss of the gallant Masai, the fugitives pressed on their way. They heard a clamour behind them as they threaded the subterranean passage, and it had swelled a little louder and nearer, telling that the Arabs and Bajangas were groping in darkness in chase of them, when they came to the edge of the sheer drop of twenty feet. They were not long delayed here. One end of the rope-ladder having been made fast to a projecting spur of rock, and the other lowered into space, the two lads descended hand over hand, each clinging to a torch, and they were followed by Lorna and her father and Jan Swart. All reached the bottom in safety, and when they had jerked the ladder free of its hold above, they hastened on through the continuation of the cavern. They felt that they were safe now. They were pretty sure that at least some of their enemies would blunder into a death-trap, and so it happened; for when they had gone for a short distance, with the faint clamour still ringing in their ears, they heard heavy bumping sounds, and a babel of yells and shrieks. In the pitch darkness a number of the savages must have toppled headlong down the precipice, and the remainder, warned in time, had halted on the brink. There was nothing to be feared from those who had fallen from so great a height. Some of them had certainly been killed, and the others must be so badly injured that it was impossible for them to hold to the pursuit.

The cries of distress gradually ebbed, and they had faded to silence; when, at length, after they had traversed the passage for a quarter of a mile, the fugitives emerged from a cleft into the open. They had come through the lofty barrier of cliffs, and close in front of them, bathed in dim moonlight that shone through the clouds, was the brawling stream that flowed along a narrow valley which led to the Bana River.

There were two canoes here, lying in a hollow space between big boulders that were screened with bushes; and they were still in sound condition, though they had been exposed to the weather for several years. Both were not needed. The bottom of one was smashed in, so that it could not be used for pursuit. The other was launched from a sandy spit, and with Mr. Carne and his daughter seated in the middle of it, with the Hottentot crouched at their feet, and Dick and Alan wielding the paddles from the stern, the slender craft sped rapidly down the winding stream, which flowed in a deep channel.

Nothing was seen of the Somali servants

who had escaped by the water passage, so they had doubtless landed somewhere before they had gone far. As for the Arabs and Bajangas, it was to be presumed that Tib Mohammed had been killed, and that those who had survived the explosion had returned to the Arab stronghold and to the Banjanga village.

Be that as it may, the fugitives were not pursued. Having travelled down the Bana for a week, by day and night, they landed one evening on the right bank of the vast stream. They went into camp for the night, and the next morning, in good health and in fairly cheerful spirits, they set their faces to the south, and began their long journey back to civilisation. What food they had brought with them from the valley was all gone, but they could shoot game on the way, as they had firearms and ammunition; and they also had the sack of diamonds, which were worth a considerable fortune.

"We have much to be thankful for," said Mr. Carne, as the march was begun. "We have eluded our bloodthirsty foes, and we can be sure that we will see no more of them. Thousands of miles of the Dark Continent lie before us, a trackless wilderness that is to a great extent unexplored, and on our journey we will be in peril from wild beasts and savage men. Yet I believe that with the help of Providence we will live to see England again. I have the feeling in my heart."

THE EPILOGUE.

Out of Perils into Safety—Back to England—A Joyful Re-union—Dick Selby Sails for Home—The Promise of the Future.

MANY months after they had set forth from the Bana River, Mr. Carne and his companions arrived in safety at Mombasa, and in the course of a few days they sailed from there for home, leaving Jan Swart behind them. It was on a summer morning that they landed at Liverpool, and when the train on which they travelled rolled into the London terminus that evening, Mrs. Carne, who had been waiting there in response to a telegram, was clasped in the arms of her dear ones. With tears in her eyes, speechless with emotion, she embraced them one by one—the husband from whom she had been so long separated owing to a misunderstanding, the son whom she had sent to South Africa to fight for his country, and the daughter who had been torn from her when she was little more than a baby.

It was a joyous reunion, and Dick Selby shared the happiness of his friends. He was their guest for a week, and then he sailed for New York, but not with the intention of remaining there. He meant to come back shortly to Lorna, whose heart he had won; back to marry the lovely English girl, and take her back to an American home, where in future years the memories of the house in the African jungle, and of the savage Arabs and Bajangas, would be to them like the shadows of dreams.

THE END.

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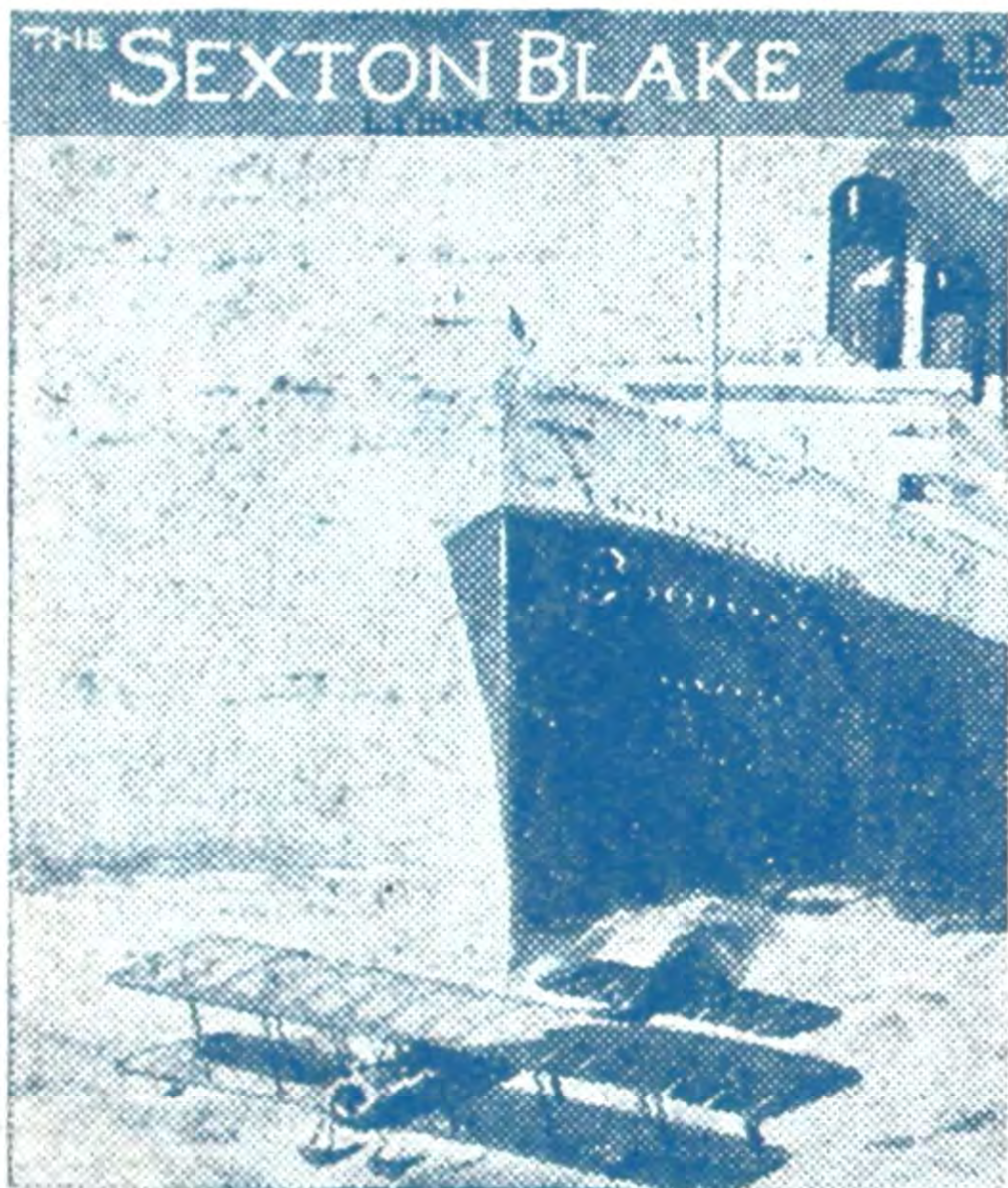
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