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Miss Agnes was held struggling in a slimy tentacle of some hideous monster of the Sargasso Sea.

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DON'T



The Sea of Doom

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 River of Fire," "Castaway Island," "The Prisoner of the Cavern," etc., etc.

(THE NARRATIVE RELATED THROUGHOUT BY NIPPER.)

CHAPTER I.

A HOLIDAY OF MISHAPS.

REGINALD PITT sipped his iced lemonade.

"We shall get home in heaps of time," he remarked. According to the skipper's reckoning, we shall have about ten days at home before getting back to St. Frank's for the new term."

"After a jolly fine holiday, too," said Handforth. "A thumping fine holiday, in point of fact. We've had more adventures crammed into these few weeks than most people get in all their giddy lives."

"Well, that's true enough, Handy," I agreed. "It's been a holiday of mishaps, in a way of speaking. And yet we've come out on top in the finish. Everybody is safe and sound, we've got the treasure, and Captain Nixon is where he deserves to be—under arrest, and in irons."

"Begad! It's really surprising, dear old boys," murmured Sir Montie Tregellis-West, raising the panama which had been reposing over his face. "Here we all are, as merry as anythin', an' steamin' along as though we were on a pleasure cruise down the jolly old Thames. An' only last week we were marooned, with very little prospect of gettin' back to civilisation."

"Yes, it's been a queer sort of trip altogether," I observed.

We were chatting under the awning on the deck of Sir Crawford Grey's steam-yacht, *Wanderer*. The skies were sunny, the sea was blue, and the heat was tremendous. But we were all happy and content.

There were quite a number of St. Frank's juniors on board—Handforth and Co., Pitt, De Valerie, Christine, and a number of others. We were all the guests of Sir Crawford Grey, who had taken us out, originally, to Africa.

Lord Dorrimore was on board, too, to say nothing of Umlosi, the giant chief of the Kutanas. He was booked to be put ashore at Tangier, which would be our first port of

call. Umlosi was not in love with the English climate.

Nelson Lee was with us, of course, and Dr. Brett, of Bellton, was on board, too. The other members of the party included Lady Helen Tregellis-West—Sir Montie's respected aunt—and four very charming girls.

It had indeed been a holiday of mishaps, as I have said. Right from the start we had met with adventures which had not been foreseen. This was mainly due to the activities of Captain Nixon, who had attempted to obtain the treasure which had been the object of our voyage.

That treasure was safely stowed in Sir Crawford's state-room. And it will be easily understood that our voyage had been a success when I mention that the treasure was worth at least three hundred thousand pounds. It was Sir Crawford's intention to divide it up; everybody on board would have a share.

The original plan had been to pay visits to the Canary Islands, to Madeira, and to the Azores. But, owing to delays and difficulties, there was not sufficient time to carry out that programme.

We should certainly stay a few days in Madeira, and perhaps a day in Tangier, but after that we should make for England, home, and beauty—and, incidentally, for St. Frank's.

For nearly a fortnight we had been marooned on a rocky islet in the Atlantic, and it was really astonishing that we were making the homeward trip on board the yacht. For, thanks to Captain Nixon, the vessel had been jammed on the rocks.

At first we had believed that nothing would prevent the *Wanderer* from breaking to pieces. But the sea had calmed, and before it grew boisterous again we were successfully towed into deep water.

The yacht had suffered to a certain degree; some of her plates were warped and bent, but she was sound internally. The chief engineer, Mr. McBride, had reported that the engines were not working with their old

vigour, but they still had plenty of power.

Possibly something had got a bit out of place, owing to the force of the impact. But a month or two in dry dock, when she arrived home, would put everything right. There was no earthly reason why we shouldn't complete the voyage in her.

We were nearing the end of our trip now, and I think we were all rather glad. We should be pleased to see the green hills and valleys of England again. At the start we had all wanted to get out to sea—to the tropics. But now, having had our taste of adventure and excitement, we wanted to see home again.

"My only hat! Shan't we have a lot of things to tell the other chaps on the first day of term!" remarked Handforth. "Just think of it! I'll make their giddy hair stand on end when I tell 'em about that adventure of mine amongst the cannibals!"

Watson grunted.

"Rats!" he said bluntly.

"Eh?"

"They weren't cannibals, you ass!"

"Well, they looked like it!" said Handforth. "I don't see why you want to raise any silly quibbles! And those blacks were murderous rotters, anyhow. They'd have eaten me if they'd had half a chance."

"Not likely!" said Pitt, shaking his head. "That tribe doesn't eat pork!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Handforth rose to his feet, and rolled up his sleeves.

"Are you calling me a pig?" he demanded wrathfully.

"My dear chap, I didn't mention the word!" grinned Pitt. "But if you choose to jump to conclusions—Hi! Look out, you duffer—Yaroooh!"

Handforth delivered a punch which sent Pitt flying over backwards in his chair. Pitt didn't mind much, but Handforth did. For Pitt happened to be holding a glass of lemonade, and the liquid shot out and swamped Handforth thoroughly.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Grooch!" gasped Handforth. "Oh, my goodness!"

"I don't like to see those dirty habits of yours, Handy," I said severely. "Why can't you drink lemonade like a human being—instead of dipping your face into it?"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Handforth glared round at the grinning circle, and then fled. He did so because two of the girls were strolling over to see what the fun was about; and Handforth had a horror of being laughed at by the young ladies—particularly by Violet Watson. For, privately, Handy was rather sweet on her.

But Edward Oswald was quite right in what he had said. We should have plenty to tell the fellows when we got back to St. Frank's. Our adventures had been numerous. We were all quite certain that they had come to an end, and that our homeward voyage would be uneventful.

But, as things turned out, we were not to be so lucky.

Towards the evening of that day we all noticed that the sky had assumed a leaden aspect, and the sun hung like a disc of copper. There was no wind, and the sea was flat and oily, with a long, treacherous-looking roll.

"Looks like a storm of some sort, sir?" I remarked, as I met Nelson Lee on the promenade deck after tea.

"Yes, Nipper," agreed the gov'nor. "The glass is tumbling rapidly, and the captain is of the opinion that we shall run into a violent thunderstorm before long—something in the nature of a cyclone, perhaps."

"That's cheerful, sir," I remarked.

"There is no reason why we should be alarmed," said Lee. "The yacht is quite capable of weathering any ordinary atmospheric disturbance. And she is quite seaworthy, in spite of her recent troubles."

Lord Dorrimore strolled into view.

"It's Fate—that's what it is," he observed. "As soon as we get nicely started we seem to be booked for another bag of trouble. But we haven't got Captain Nixon on board this time, so we might survive."

Nelson Lee smiled.

"It is quite possible that we shall only get the tail-end of the storm," he said. "In any case, it will make little difference. You boys must all get below at the first sign of the storm breaking; we don't want anybody washed overboard."

But the juniors were rather anxious to remain on deck. We had not encountered a storm of this kind hitherto, and it was undoubtedly an imposing—if awe-inspiring—spectacle.

It wasn't long before the sun became merged into the mists near the horizon. And the sky looked like bronze. The very air quivered with heat, and not a puff of wind smote our cheeks, except that which was caused by the yacht's own motion.

"Who was talking about a storm?" said Handforth, looking round him. "What rot! Why, there's no wind! And the sea's as calm as a giddy millpond. You could float a paper boat on it!"

"These tropical storms are queer merchants, Handy," I said. "They come upon you all at once—after kidding you that everything is all smooth. But you'll see a change before long."

And I was quite right.

Before an hour had elapsed there was a very great change indeed. Far away across the sea we could see a white line, and it was coming nearer and nearer. It was a line which stretched across as far as the eye could see.

"My hat!" I exclaimed. "We shall catch it in a minute or two. There you are! We're all ordered to go below!"

Mr. Clive, the first officer, came hurrying along the deck, and the captain was shouting out his orders from the bridge.

Everything of a movable nature had

already been taken below, or securely lashed down. The awning had vanished long since. It would certainly have vanished at the first puff of the storm, otherwise.

"I say, what nonsense!" exclaimed Handforth warmly. "What's the idea of sending us below now? There's nothing to be scared about, that I can see. That line over there is only a little foam——"

"It's nearly as high as this deck!" I exclaimed grimly. "There'll be a frightful wind in a minute or two—and we shall be tossed about like a cork. You'd better hold tight to anything you can grab."

We were all hustled below, and we had not long to wait before the storm struck us with all its force.

The yacht seemed to lift right out of the sea, and we were pitched and tossed about in all directions. But, owing to the skilful navigation of Captain Burton, we were not harmed by that first onslaught.

But we struggled on laboriously, and the storm seemed to become worse and worse as the minutes went by. The rain pelted down in solid sheets, and the blackness was like that of midnight.

"I can see that some of us won't want any dinner to-night!" remarked Christine, with a grin. "The ship's rolling in the most awful manner. It's a wonder to me how she keeps afloat."

"She'd be a rottenly-constructed old tub if she didn't weather an ordinary tropical storm," I said. "There's nothing very unusual about this little picnic. It'll blow itself out before the morning."

"But it'll take us out of our course," said Pitt.

"Yes, I suppose it will," I exclaimed. "We're fighting against it, more or less, and it's certain that we shall be held back a bit. I don't know where we should get to if we ran with the storm."

We all sat down to dinner at the ordinary time. But several fellows decided not to eat when the food was placed before them. Soup was off the menu that evening—or it certainly would have been on the table, and probably into our laps.

Everybody was quite cheerful, and the captain came down once to report that everything was all right, although he expected the storm to last throughout the night. It was a very severe blow.

After he had gone we continued the meal, and there were many jokes about the pitching of the yacht. Good humour reigned supreme, and there was no thought of danger in any mind.

And then, abruptly, came a change.

"In the mornin' we shall find the sea lookin' it's best," Lord Dorrimore was saying. "The sky will be as blue as Miss Violet's eyes——"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Vi's eyes are brown, sir!" grinned Watson.

"By gad! Is that so?" inquired Dorrimore mildly. "I'm frightfully sorry, an' I apologise to Miss Violet's eyes——"

Crash!

A jar ran through the vessel which shook everybody in the saloon. I was pitched nearly out of my chair, and Handforth slid gracefully into McClure's lap. The two crashed to the floor, and there was plenty of other confusion.

"Good heavens!"

"What's happened?"

"We've struck a rock!"

"Oh, my hat!"

There were many shouts and yells. We were all looking rather scared and startled. And I noticed that the floor no longer throbbed with the steady motion of the engines. Immediately after the crash there had been a grinding roar, but it had quickly ceased, and now all was quiet.

"Don't get excited, boys, please," said Nelson Lee calmly. "I don't know what has happened, but a panic will not mend matters——"

"We've struck a rock, sir!" shouted somebody.

"I hardly think so," said the guv'nor. "However, if you all wait, I've no doubt that a message will soon be sent down to us."

Nelson Lee was doing his best to restore calmness. But that crash had alarmed everybody. It had been no slight impact: in fact, it had not seemed like an impact at all.

And before we could make many surmises Mr. Clive appeared.

"There's no danger, ladies and gentlemen," he said smoothly.

"Thank goodness!"

"What's happened, sir?"

"Have we struck a derelict, or something?"

"Have we been in collision?"

"By George!" roared Handforth. "We must have struck an iceberg!"

"You silly ass!" hissed McClure. "There aren't icebergs in these waters!"

"We have struck nothing," said Mr. Clive. "The accident, however, is rather serious, although there is no immediate danger. The chief engineer reports that the propeller-shaft has snapped like a carrot."

"Oh, my goodness!"

Nelson Lee rose to his feet.

"Is the propeller lost?" he asked.

"We don't know yet, sir," said the first officer. "But Mr. McBride thinks that it hasn't dropped away. We can't do anything, except run before the wind, with the storm. She'll ride it out, but we shall be taken a long way out of our course."

"Another delay," said Dorrie. "Well, as long as we're afloat, it doesn't matter much. But I hope we don't get blown ashore somewhere."

"There's no danger of that, Dorrie," said Nelson Lee. "We shall probably be blown more into the region of the southern Atlantic."

Before many minutes had passed everybody was feeling comfortable and safe. We were quite helpless, of course, but there was no danger. The yacht was being blown along, and nearly all the crew were working

like fury, constructing a sea-anchor. This was to be thrown overboard, so that the vessel would be able to keep head with the wind.

"We might broach-to if we don't get the sea-anchor over quick," I said. "I don't know a great lot about these things, but I think I'm right there. But I wonder why the propeller-shaft went?"

It was the chief engineer's opinion, we learned, that the shaft had been somewhat weakened by the force of the impact when the yacht had been flung between the rocks on that little islet. She had been got off safely, but the strain had affected her.

Given good weather, we should have got home all right. But that violent storm had put too great a strain upon her. And the propeller-shaft had snapped in half, leaving us helpless.

For two or three hours nobody felt inclined to go to bed. But after that it was fully recognised by all that there was no danger of any sort. And we all retired to our cabins, and slept in the ordinary way.

I was one of the first out when dawn was breaking. I felt at once that the storm had abated considerably. The yacht was now rolling sluggishly, and did not pitch at all.

I took a glance out of the window as I dressed, and then stared hard. The light was not particularly good, but the appearance of the sea was extraordinary. I stared again, and then rubbed my eyes.

"What the dickens!" I muttered vaguely.

I wondered if I was still dreaming. As far as my eye could see there was nothing but a great expanse of yellowy-green vegetation! The sea had vanished. It was as though we were drifting through a land of weeds.

And yet we were in mid-Atlantic!

"What on earth can it mean?" I gasped aloud.

I was only half-dressed, but I dashed out of the cabin and hurried on deck, feeling sure that my eyesight must have been playing tricks with me. The vessel was hundreds and hundreds of miles from land. And yet — I stared round with renewed amazement.

Yes, the yacht was actually surrounded by dense masses of coarse, slimy-looking weed. In no direction could I see the faintest sign of the blue of the sea. And the yacht was embedded in the stuff.

For a few minutes I stared, fascinated.

At first sight it seemed that the whole landscape—or seascape—was solid. But then I noticed that the surface, in every direction, was in motion—undulating. It rose and fell in regular swells.

I caught sight of Nelson Lee, and hurried along the deck. The gov'nor was chatting with Captain Burton and Sir Crawford Grey and Lord Dorrimore. They appeared to be holding a conference, in fact.

"I say, gov'nor!" I exclaimed, hurrying along the deck. "Where are we? What—what's the meaning of all this?"

And I waved my hand, indicating the weed.

Nelson Lee turned, and I saw that he was looking rather troubled.

"Surely you need no telling, Nipper?" he asked. "You know well enough that we were carried along throughout the night by the storm—helpless and unable to direct our own course. We have drifted into that somewhat dreaded area which accumulates dense masses of this Gulf weed——"

"Great Scott!" I gasped. "Are—are we in the Sargasso Sea?"

Lord Dorrimore nodded.

"In it up to our necks, my son," he said smoothly.

CHAPTER II.

THE OCEAN OF WEED.

DORRIE did not seem to be particularly upset, but Captain Burton and Sir Crawford Grey were both looking very concerned and worried.

"Yes, Nipper," said Nelson Lee, "unfortunately, Dorrie is right. We are caught in the meshes of the Sargasso, and we are drifting deeper and deeper into its deadly embrace."

I stared round with wonder.

"We must have drifted into this region during the night, sir," I remarked. "That storm was to blame, of course. But can't we do anything? Can't we get out into the open sea again?"

"By gad, I hope so!" said Dorrie mildly. "I'm not exactly pinin' to finish my days in the midst of this frightful-looking stuff. But I'm not at all nervous. We've been in so many tight corners since we started on this trip, that I regard this further adventure as a mere picnic."

Captain Burton grunted.

"I'd like to share your view, Lord Dorrimore," he said. "But it strikes me that we're in the worst difficulty that any ship could find herself in. Our shaft's broken, and we can't shift a foot in either direction—not under our own steam, at all events. We're as helpless as a lifeboat without oars!"

"Trust McBride," said Dorrie confidently. "He'll fake up something—never fear. Within two or three days he'll have the propeller working again——"

"Very possibly, Dorrie," interrupted Lee. "But that is hardly the point. Within a few days we shall be so engulfed in the weed that a dozen propellers would not help us—in fact they would be a hindrance. No screw could possibly turn, with its blades choked by this thick, tenacious growth."

"Then we're in a lively hole," said Dorrie smoothly. "A fine piece of news to welcome a fellow when he turns out of his bunk, by gad! Well, it's none of my business—so I'll leave all the worryin' to you. Just at present I am rather anxious about breakfast."

And his lordship strolled off, quite unperturbed.

"I think you'd better finish dressing, Nip-

per," the gov'nor remarked. "You don't appear to have completed your toilet before coming on deck. You need not be alarmed—just now, at all events."

"I'm not alarmed, gov'nor," I replied. "I'm just a bit bowled over—that's all. The Sargasso is a terrible place, according to all I've heard, and if we really get locked in the weed, we shall never be able to free ourselves. And that means living on the yacht until the rations are exhausted, and until we die of starvation."

"Your picture is not very encouraging, Nipper," said Nelson Lee, with a faint smile. "I do not think our plight is quite so bad as that—"

"But isn't this a place where ships of all sizes and conditions are drawn together by the currents?" I asked. "I've heard that there are hundreds of wrecks choked up in the Sargasso weed—ships as old as the hills, tramp steamers, and even liners of great size."

"There is truth in what you say, my lad, but most of the vessels caught in the weed are derelict," said Nelson Lee. "They have drifted here after being abandoned by their crews. Few people have actually been within the Sargasso itself—"

"Few people have escaped to tell the tale—that's what you mean, sir," I exclaimed grimly. "Just imagine it! A sailing ship getting entangled; she drifts into the weed, helpless. Then she is drawn deeper and deeper into the net—until there is no escape. The average ship doesn't carry food to last more than three or four months. And then—well, starvation and death."

"I sincerely hope that we shall not meet with that fate, Nipper," said Nelson Lee smoothly. "Mr. McBride has already reported that the propeller has not been lost; and he and his men are even now hard at work."

"Well, that's good news," I said. "When will the engineers get done, sir?"

"It is impossible to say for certain," replied Nelson Lee. "We must wait."

"And, meanwhile, we are stuck in this weed," I grunted. "What does the captain think, sir?"

Captain Burton answered for himself.

"I think that we have a slim chance of getting out into the open sea again," he exclaimed. "The weed has got right hold of us, Nipper—and there's no sense in minimising our danger. Even if the propeller shaft is repaired, it will be a patched-up job. And I'm not very confident that a shaft in that condition will stand the strain. These weeds are as strong as hawsers, and if they get wound up round the propeller blades—"

"Really, captain, there's no need to imagine disaster—let us wait until it actually happens," put in Nelson Lee. "Personally, I think that we shall conquer the Sargasso."

When I went below again I did so with the full realisation that our position was grave. Captain Burton was more serious than I had ever seen him, and he was, as a rule, a most

optimistic man. For him to be fearful of failure proved quite conclusively that things were in a bad way.

I found Tommy Watson and Sir Montie Tregellis-West still in their bunks. Sir Montie was just sitting up and rubbing his eyes. He reached for his pince-nez, donned them, and eyed me with interest.

"Dear fellow, is anythin' the matter?" he asked mildly.

"What do you mean?" I said. "Have you seen anything?"

"I've seen nothin' except you—since I woke up," replied Montie. "But you are lookin' so appallin'ly serious that I'm rather anxious. Has somethin' else happened? If we are sinkin', please say so, an' I will—"

"No, we're not sinking, old son," I broke in. "But we seem to have fallen out of the frying pan into the fire."

"Eh? What's that?" growled Watson, turning over, and blinking. "Time to get up yet?"

Tommy sat up in bed.

"Hallo!" he went on. "We don't seem to be pitching so much—the yacht's hardly got a roll, even. We must have left that storm behind pretty smartly. But what's wrong with you, Nipper?"

"Dear old boy, that's just what I'm wonderin'," said Montie. "Nipper has been sayin' some frightfully queer things. For example, he mentioned that we have fallen out of the fryin'-pan into the merry old fire!"

I pointed to the cabin window.

"Have a look outside," I said shortly.

Sir Montie raised his eyebrows, and then leisurely walked to the window. For a few moments he stood there, staring. Then he turned his head and gazed at me like a fellow in a dream.

"Begad!" he murmured dazedly.

"What's the matter, you ass!" demanded Watson, hurrying to the window. "I can't see— What the merry dickens! Great pip!"

"Well, what have you got to say now?" I asked grimly. "I'm not very surprised at you chaps being startled. I nearly had a fit when I got up, about twenty minutes ago. We sha'n't be homeward bound yet awhile."

"But—but what is it?" gasped Watson. "We—we seem to be on dry land!"

"Extraordinary—it is, really!" observed Montie.

"We have drifted into the region which lies somewhere between 40 and 75 degrees west, and 20 and 35 degrees north," I went on. "I remember that much, anyhow—and this region is known as the Sargasso Sea."

"Oh, my only hat!" said Watson. "The Sargasso! I've heard about it, you know, but I never dreamed that I should see it! How—how the dickens did we get into it? It's startling!"

"No, it isn't," I said. "We weren't very far off when that storm started, and we were absolutely unable to help ourselves. Driven by the storm, with our propeller useless, we couldn't steer our course. The result is,

we've got mixed up in all this weed; and it'll be something like a miracle if we get out again."

"Let's go on deck!" said Watson excitedly. "Shove your clothes on, Montie—never mind about getting donned up—"

"Have you seen it?" bawled a voice.

Handforth had burst in at the doorway, and he was looking flushed and excited.

"Have you seen it?" he repeated. "We're surrounded by water-cress, or something!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"It's no laughing matter!" roared Handforth, glaring at me. "The sea's vanished! What the thunder can it mean? If we ain't careful we sha'n't get out into the open again!"

"You needn't shout, Handy," I said. "We know all about it. We've drifted into the Sargasso, and our only hope of escape lies below."

"Below?"

"In the engine-room," I explained. "If old Mac can get that propeller shaft patched up we might be able to force our way into the open sea. But if there's much further delay we shall be too deeply embedded in the weed."

Handforth looked startled.

"Supposing we can't get out?" he exclaimed. "We might have to stop here for months—until some ship comes along to rescue us!"

"There's not much prospect of that," I said seriously. "If any other ship came here, Handy, it would be in the same plight as ourselves. No vessel would deliberately steam into this weed. If we can't help ourselves, there's not much chance of anybody else helping us."

"Well, that's lively!" said Handforth, as he bustled off.

Fifteen minutes later we were on deck. All the juniors were there—Pitt, and Christine, and De Valerie, and all the rest. We stared out across the weed in a fascinated kind of way.

There was no sign of a break anywhere. The stuff lay on the surface, practically hiding the water from view. It was ugly-looking weed—coarse and tough, with gigantic cords.

And the air was filled with a heavy, dank smell.

"Oh, Tom, whatever can it mean?" asked Violet Watson, touching her brother's arm. She had just come on deck with the other girls, and they were all amazed and rather frightened.

"We're in a pickle, sis," explained Watson. "There's no sense in minimizing the danger. This is the Sargasso Sea, and it's quite likely that we shall be trapped for good in this awful Gulf weed!"

"Oh, dear!"

"You silly ass!" said Handforth wittingly.

"Kh?" asked Violet.

"I—I was speaking to your brother, Miss V," stammered Handforth. "That's a fine

way to cheer you up, isn't it? Don't take any notice of him—he's talking rot! There isn't a ha'porth of danger. Is there, Nipper?"

"Well, it's hardly the time to pass any opinion just now," I replied cautiously. "I believe we shall get out all right, but it's not certain. The great majority of ships which enter the Sargasso never get out again."

"Well, I don't mind betting that we see the open sea again before twenty-four hours have passed," said Handforth, winking at me violently. "There's no danger at all. We're as safe as houses."

Handforth was endeavouring to calm the young ladies, and he fondly imagined that his wink had not been observed. But it was probably seen by a couple of deck hands, who were standing right forward. When Handforth winked he did so in a manner which could not possibly be mistaken.

"It's very good of you to attempt to comfort us, Handforth," said Agnes Christine, "but we should like to know the real truth. Are we really trapped? And must we really stay here all the rest of our lives?"

But Handforth was not in the position to answer that question, and presently Nelson Lee came along, smiling and cheerful. Lord Dorramore was with him, and Dorrie seemed to imagine that everything was serene.

"We get some changes, don't we?" he asked languidly. "This weed is all very well, but the smell isn't all I should desire. It reminds me of swamps, an' nasty things of that kind. But it's all right for a change."

"I expect that you young people are all rather concerned," smiled Nelson Lee. "Well, you mustn't be. It would be foolish for me to state that our position is not fraught with a certain amount of danger. On the whole, however, there is every prospect of the yacht reaching safety before long."

"Oh, good!"

"Splendid, sir!"

"You may think that I am saying this merely to comfort you," went on Nelson Lee. "But that is not the case. If there was absolutely no chance of saving the yacht I should be the first to state the fact bluntly. But the engineers are progressing well with their work, and they hope to be finished within a couple of days."

"Oh, my hat!"

"Not before then, sir?"

"A repair of such magnitude cannot be accomplished in a couple of hours, my lads," said the gov'nor. "At first Mr. McBride thought that we should be delayed a week, but he is now more optimistic. And we have made a further discovery with regard to the weed itself."

"A discovery, sir?" I asked.

"Exactly," said Lee. "You will have observed that the yacht is moving all the time—she is getting further and further into

the weed. And yet there is no apparent disturbance of the weed itself."

"Yes, I noticed that, sir," said Handforth. "I thought we were all floating together."

"No, Handforth, you couldn't have thought that," said the gov'nor. "If you look over the rail, you will see that we are moving past the weed—not with it. And observations taken from the bows prove that we are actually in a kind of channel."

"A channel, sir?"

"We are forcing it open as we progress, and it closes continuously," explained Lee.

"It is quite natural, and the captain is convinced that if the yacht can drift down this channel, it can be propelled back. So, upon the whole, there is no need for you to become alarmed. Breakfast is now ready; and I want you all to go below and enjoy a hearty meal."

The gov'nor's words had a big effect.

At breakfast time we were quite a merry party. If Nelson Lee and the captain could be confident and optimistic, it was up to everybody else to follow their example. It was believed that the day would be monotonous and uninteresting. But this did not prove to be the case.

The weed was the same in all directions, without a change. It heaved in regular waves, almost invisible until one concentrated one's attention upon it. A test seemed to prove that the weed itself was many feet thick, and so closely tangled that it looked almost solid.

On one occasion we caught a welcome sight of the sea again. The yacht drifted out of the invisible channel, and floated into a smooth lake—a clear patch in the midst of all the weed.

But it was only for a brief space. The stuff closed round us as though drawn by magnets, and once more we were enveloped. And still we drifted on—deeper and deeper into the ocean trap.

It was getting on towards noon when the first bit of excitement came. Down below we could dimly hear the clang of metal as the engineers worked. Hammers were busy, and the sound was a comforting one.

A shout from one of the men for'ard caused us all to jump to our feet. And when we looked we saw that the man was pointing over towards south. We stared, and then we saw what had attracted the look-out's notice.

"A ship!" bawled Handforth excitedly. "Gimme the glasses, somebody!"

But I was already using the binoculars. In the far distance a ship had appeared out of the haze. Focussing my glasses upon it, I saw that it was an old sailing vessel.

"It's a derelict!" I announced.

"Oh, rats!"

"Well, you didn't expect to find a ship sailing here, did you?" I asked. "We shall see plenty of derelicts before long, I expect—some of them hundreds of years old."

"I read a story about the Sargasso Sea once," said Handforth. "It was all about a

party of chaps who came to explore. They found Spanish galleons, and iron-bound boxes filled with doubloons and pieces-of-eight—"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Well, that's nothing to laugh at," I said. "It's quite possible that there are Spanish galleons knocking about in the Sargasso. There are never any rough seas here, remember, and those stoutly built ships would keep afloat for centuries. And it's just as likely that some of them contain treasure."

"These galleons I was reading about were simply chock-full of money—gold," said Handforth. "But the chaps had an awful job to get it, because those old ships were inhabited by Spaniards, who defended the stuff."

"Spaniards!" grinned Pitt. "Do you mean to say that the crew lived for centuries, you duffer?"

"I'm only telling you what was in the yarn," growled Handforth. "They were the descendants of the original crowd—emigrants, or something. And they spoke half Spanish and a kind of gibberish—and they went about wearing nothing but seaweed, and they'd grown fins on their backs, and scales all over their giddy bodies—"

"That's about enough of that yarn!" I interrupted, with a grin. "That's fiction: this is real life. If you expect to find a tribe of fish-men here, Handy, you'll be disappointed."

Handforth grunted, and gazed through the glasses at the derelict. We were nearer now, and we could see that the ship was a fairly big schooner. A few remnants of sail-cloth were hanging in shreds from her spars and masts. She was a scene of utter desolation and ruin, and seemed to be fixed firmly in the weed. We, of course, were still drifting slowly along the ever-opening channel.

And other ships came within sight before long. Steamers, with their sides red with rust, with funnels falling to pieces; old-fashioned sailing-ships in various stages of decay. Everything was deserted and silent, and the whole scene made us all feel subdued.

All that desolation was impressive. I could imagine those stately ships keeping to their course; I could see them caught in a sudden storm, and blown into the treacherous embrace of the Sargasso. Many of the ships, no doubt, had been abandoned before they were drawn into the vortex of the great sea of weed. But others, similar to our own case, had taken all hands with them.

If we could only have explored those hulks, we should probably have found skeletons on many of them—the skeletons of the crews who had died of thirst and starvation. It was not a pleasant thought.

We had food enough on board for at least six weeks. But of what use would that be if we could not escape? Six weeks of life, and then a slow and horrible death. Fortunately, we should never be in need of water. In these modern days most steamships carry a distilling apparatus, and fresh water is always obtainable from the sea itself, the salt being removed by the special process.

And so we waited, interested in all we saw—we waited anxiously, and with doubt in our hearts.

CHAPTER III.

THE PORTUGUESE HULK.

TOWARDS evening it was noticed that the yacht had practically ceased to drift. The weed had closed in upon her, and she remained practically stationary. At all events, an old hulk several hundred yards distant remained in the same position after an hour had passed. We got no nearer to it.

"I defy anybody to find that channel now," said Handforth, as he leaned over the rail. "We're trapped, and we can only get out by sheer force. Just look at this weed—it's as strong as dry land!"

There were three or four of us by the rail, and we looked down with interest. The weed was certainly thicker and more solid here. The surface was quite dry and chippy, proving that it had been exposed to the sun for many days.

"Well, it does seem pretty strong," I admitted. "But that's all the worse for us. But we don't want to guess at anything yet. Let's wait until the propeller gets going again."

"I'd give half-a-quid to be on that ship," said Handforth, gazing across at the old hulk. "It's a Spanish galleon, I believe, and there might be some doubloons——"

"Spanish galleon be blowed!" I interrupted. "She's not Spanish, and she's of a much later date, too. It's no good wishing you could be on her, Handy; there's no way of reaching her."

"But it would be simply ripping if we could explore the ship!" said Handforth.

He gazed across at the hulk with longing eyes. In spite of his matter-of-fact habits and ways, Handforth was always keen on romance, and if he could take part in any adventure out of the common he was in the seventh heaven. The thought of danger never entered into his head.

The ship we were gazing at was several centuries old, by the look of her. She was built high out of the water, and her masts had long since dropped away in decay. Her wooden sides had rotted away in many places, and it was quite likely that her decks were unsafe to walk upon.

It was all very interesting, but our pleasure was greatly marred by the uncertainty of our predicament. If we had positively known that escape was quite possible and easy, we should have enjoyed our stay in the Sargasso Sea greatly.

But we were haunted by the fear that we should be compelled to remain there—for good. And until the experiment was made with the repaired propeller-shaft, we were not likely to indulge in much exertion.

But Handforth was more energetic, and he only thought of the moment. It was not

his habit to look ahead, or to worry about anything which the future might have in store.

At the actual moment, all his interest was centred upon the wreck which lay nearest to us. There were others dotted about in all directions, but Handforth didn't care about them. Some of these were big steamers, and one appeared to be a great liner, fairly modern.

There was quite an amount of conjecture regarding her identity, and Nelson Lee imagined her to be a big passenger-boat which had been abandoned in mid-Atlantic in a sinking condition. It frequently happens that a ship does not sink when her captain expects her to.

Handforth and Co. got by themselves, far astern. They were quite alone at the moment, for Handforth was bent upon an experiment, and he didn't want any other fellows to be on the spot.

"What's the idea of bringing us here?" asked Church curiously.

Handforth looked round mysteriously.

"What price an exploring-trip?" he asked. "Just we three—eh?"

"Oh, don't be an ass——"

"Are you talking to me, Walter Church?" roared Handforth.

"You know jolly well I'm talking to you," said Church impatiently. "How can we go exploring? Answer that question! We can't force a boat over this weed, and we can't throw a rope——"

"But we've got feet," interrupted Handforth firmly. "It wouldn't take us five minutes to dodge across the weed to that old hulk. Are you game? I may as well tell you that I'll punch your noses if you don't agree to come! There's no danger!" he added, with delightful frankness.

McClure shook his head.

"You must be dotty, Handy," he declared. "This weed may look strong enough to stand the weight of a steam-roller, but it isn't. We should sink in no time if we tried any games of that sort."

"Rot!"

"Besides," went on McClure, "even if we didn't sink altogether, we should flounder along up to our knees, and I'm not anxious to get soaked, if you are. Chuck up the idea, Handy."

"Are you coming, or are you not coming?" demanded Handforth.

"Not!" said Church and McClure in one voice.

Their leader glared.

"And you call yourselves my supporters!" he said witheringly. "A fat lot of support I get from you, don't I? You're willing to let me go out on to that weed, facing unknown dangers——"

"You just said there wasn't any danger," interrupted Church. "And, if it comes to that, we're not willing to let you go. It's all rot! You might get sucked under, or something. The weed wouldn't bear your weight, Handy."

"Oh, it wouldn't—eh?" snorted Handforth. "We'll see about that, you rotters! I'll show you!"

"Don't—don't be such an ass——"

"Go and eat coke!" snapped Handforth.

He had set his mind upon making the trip, and only sheer force would have kept him back. Church and McClure were quite ready to apply force, but Handforth was too quick for them.

He dodged over the rail, grasped a rope which was dangling there, and quickly lowered himself over the side. His chums leaned over and stared down at him. They were rather alarmed.

"Come back, you ass!" hissed McClure anxiously. "You'll ruin all your clothes——"

"Rats!"

Handforth touched the weed at last, and, rather to his own surprise, he did not sink. He held securely on to the rope, and allowed the weed to take his weight by degrees—which proved that even Handy himself had been a trifle uncertain about the experiment.

He stood quite firmly, released the rope, and then floundered forward a pace or two. The dense weed bore his weight without giving a sign of subsiding. But it was very awkward to walk upon.

"There you are, you bounders!" said Handforth triumphantly. "What did I tell you? It's as safe as houses. Come on down, before anybody spots you, because I don't suppose we should get permission."

"You'd better come back, Handy," said Church. "Look at your white shoes—they're all over that slimy green stuff——"

"Do you think I care a rap about shoes?" snorted Handforth. "If you don't want to come, stop there. I don't care—rats to you!"

And Handforth scrambled across the weed as fast as he could go. Nobody had noticed his absence except his own chums. And it certainly seemed that he would reach the hulk without mishap.

He covered well over half the distance in perfect safety. And then, with amazing abruptness, he vanished! Church and McClure, watching, were horrified to see their leader plunge feet foremost through the weed.

"He's gone!" gasped McClure, turning pale.

"Oh, my only aunt!" panted Church. "Look! He's come up, thank goodness! I thought he was going to be sucked down! Quick—we'd better scramble across to him and lend a hand."

Church and McClure lost no time in swarming down the rope. They didn't want to call for help, because, if possible, they were anxious to get Handy back to the yacht unobserved.

The weed was certainly firm near the yacht, and Handforth's chums made their way across it without any difficulty whatever. But they soon observed something which was invisible from the deck of the Wanderer.

They found themselves crossing small portions of clear water. The weed became

patchy, and it was quite evident that Handforth had blundered through without realising it.

And he was now clinging to a large portion of weed which was rapidly separating itself from the rest. Quite a respectable gap of water was to be seen, and Church and McClure paused.

"This is what comes of trying to be clever!" said Church warmly. "A fine mess you've got yourself into now, Handy! We shall all be soaked to the skin!"

"Don't stand there jawing!" snapped Handforth. "Come and give me a hand!"

But it was easier said than done. Church and McClure saw that the gap of water was widening all the time, and they were obliged to flounder their way round and approach Handforth from another direction.

They succeeded in getting across the gap, but even then they had a great amount of difficulty in hauling their leader clear. For this patch of weed, instead of being hard and firm, was decidedly soft and spongy.

It was impossible to keep upright, and the juniors expected to plunge through at any moment. However, they all sat on the surface at last, and Handforth was not looking particularly happy.

"How the dickens was I to know the rotten stuff would give way?" he exclaimed defiantly. "It's all very well for you chaps to make a fuss——"

"You wait till we get back to the yacht!" panted Church. "By jingo, we'll make a fuss then, you—you linnatic! My clothes are ruined, and this awful stuff has made me feel absolutely ill!"

"I say!" gasped McClure abruptly. "Look what's happened!"

The portion of weed upon which the trio were seated had become entirely separated from the rest. They were upon a little island of it, and the water between them and the yacht was now many feet across. The weed, in short, was constantly shifting, but this was only noticed when one got to close quarters.

"We can't get back!" went on McClure. "We're being taken straight towards that old wreck!"

"Are we?" exclaimed Handforth. "Oh, good! That's just what we wanted. There's nothing to grumble at, after all!"

Church and McClure could think of nothing to say in reply to that remark—nothing which could adequately express their feelings. They wanted to get back to the Wanderer, but didn't see how it could be done.

The patch of weed was moving slowly towards the ancient hulk. It joined up with the weed which surrounded the rotten vessel, and Handforth decided to make a move. He rose unsteadily to his feet.

"Follow me, my sons!" he said briskly.

In a series of hops, jumps, and floundering leaps he reached the hulk, and grasped the woodwork. He pulled himself on board, triumphant. Church and McClure, feeling that they would be safer on the ship, followed

their leader's example. And they were soon beside him.

"Fine!" said Handforth. "We've done it, my sons! Now for the exploring stunt! We might find some pieces of eight, too! Think what a sensation we should cause if we went back to the yacht loaded up with pieces of eight—with our pockets bulging with gold!"

"Fathead!" snapped Church. "Pieces of eight weren't made of gold!"

"Rot!"

"They were silver coins, worth about four bob," said Church. "It's really the old Spanish piece, or peso—or, to bring it down to your understanding, a giddy dollar!"

"If we weren't standing on a rotten flooring, I'd give you a punch on the nose!" said Handforth warmly. "This deck is like paper."

I can feel it bending as I put my weight on it—Whoa! That was a near one!"

A portion of the bulwark crumbled away in Handforth's grasp, and he jerked himself back. It was soon found, however, that the main portion of the deck was quite sound, and it easily bore the weight of the three juniors.

Even Handforth made no attempt to explore the interior of the vessel. He was quite ready to do so at first, however. As soon as he put his foot on the companion-ladder it fell with a crash, breaking into atoms.

"Don't go down, you idiot!" said Church. "The whole floor will smash through, and you'll be drowned in the bilge!"

"I'm not going," said Handforth. "You don't take me for an ass, I suppose?"

His chums didn't answer; it was safer to remain quiet on that point. And Handy looked round eagerly; he wanted to accomplish something. He saw that one of the masts was still upright—a third of it, at least projected from the deck.

"I'm going to climb that mast!" said Handforth crisply.

"Look here——"

"Dry up, you bounder!"

Handforth picked his way carefully through the wreckage and rubbish, and arrived at the foot of the mast. Then he swarmed up, higher and higher. At last he reached the top, and took a seat there, quite calm and cool.

"There's a fine view from here," he panted. "Hallo! I can see another ship now—it's a long way away, behind that rusty-looking liner. You can't see it from the deck, and it can't be seen from the yacht, either."

"Never mind about the ship," said Church. "Come down!"

"But this looks like a good one," said Handforth. "It's a steamer. She's stern down, and her bows are sticking out of the wood; it's a wonder she hasn't sunk. Fancy all these wrecks being here! There must be hundreds of 'em, really! It makes a fellow think—Why, what the——"

Handforth paused, and gasped.

"What's the matter now?" demanded McClure.

"I—I must be mad," panted Handforth huskily.

"Great Scott!" said Church. "Didn't you realise it before?"

But Handforth took no notice of his chum's sarcasm. He was staring out beyond the rusty liner. And as he watched his excitement grew.

"I can see somebody moving!" he roared. "Yes, there they are—two or three figures! They're moving!"

Church and McClure looked scared.

"Come down, Handy!" pleaded Church. "You—you must be getting fanciful, or something! You know as well as we do that all these wrecks are empty and desolate. There's not a soul within a hundred miles of the yacht——"

"I tell you I can see figures!" howled Handforth, shifting his position violently. "I can't say exactly what they are, but—Whoa! Help!"

Crash!

The mast-stump was not capable of standing that violent movement, and the rotten woodwork gave way, collapsing upon the deck with a thunderous roar. It was a marvel that Handforth did not plunge through the plank.

He landed somehow, and was not even hurt. That crash, however, had been distinctly heard aboard the Wanderer. Handforth's shouts had been heard, too, and a good many fellows hurried to the stern of the yacht, and were just in time to see Handforth collapse. I was amongst the witnesses.

"Well, I'm hanged!" I exclaimed. "What on earth will the idiot be up to next? It's Handforth—on that old Portuguese hulk! And Church and McClure, too! How the dickens did they get there?"

"They must have walked!" said Pitt. "I didn't think the wood was strong enough to bear all that weight!"

Nelson Lee came along, and he frowned when he saw what was in the wind. Dorrie was there, but Dorrie only chuckled.

"Upon my soul!" exclaimed the gov'nor. "What next will Handforth be up to? The reckless young rascal might have killed himself! There are two other juniors with him, too. Does anybody know how they got there?"

"We didn't see anything of it, sir," remarked Watson. "The silly asses must have slipped off while we were all below. Handforth was sitting on the stump of a mast, shouting like mad, but the thing collapsed."

Nelson Lee turned to one of the deck hands.

"Fetch me a megaphone," he ordered briefly.

The man grinned and hurried off, returning after a long interval with a big megaphone. Nelson Lee put it to his mouth.

"Handforth!" he shouted.

"It's all right, sir," came Handforth's voice. "Nobody's hurt—only a bit of wood fell down."

Handforth's voice was tremendous, and he needed no megaphone to aid him, as

Nelson Lee did. We stood in a group, watching and listening, rather amused by the whole incident.

"Come back to the yacht at once!" shouted Lee.

"We can't, sir," bawled Handforth. "We're soaked and there's a big stretch of water dividing us from the weed near the yacht, but I think we can swim it, if you'll stand by in case of accidents, sir."

"I will bring ropes," shouted Lee.

He placed the megaphone aside, frowning.

"That boy is always doing something. There is no telling what perils lurk in this weed. I would never have allowed the boys to go across if I had known."

He hurried away, in order to obtain ropes. But before the gov'nor was anything like ready, Handforth and Co. had made a start. Having received one soaking, it made very little difference whether they received a second. And the water was quite warm. The three juniors plunged in and struck out for the opposite side of the pool. Within a few moments they reached the weed.

Hauling themselves up, they were soon scampering across the weed towards the yacht. And Nelson Lee knew that it would be unnecessary for him to lend a hand. Two minutes later Handforth and Co. were on deck, soaked through, but unharmed.

They were greeted by a chorus of derisive cheers.

"Disgusting. I call it," remarked Pitt loudly. "I don't believe in people who bathe with all their clothes on!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"It isn't the right thing," went on Pitt. "Besides, think of the extravagance! Three flannel suits ruined, to say nothing of a few watches and socks and white boots, and——"

"You silly ass!" roared Handforth. "Do you think we went into the water on purpose?"

"Be quiet, boys," said Nelson Lee sternly. "Handforth, it was very wrong of you to leave this yacht without telling me. I can quite understand that Church and McClure are not to blame—you led them into this affair."

"That's right enough, sir," admitted Handforth. "As a matter of fact, they came to my rescue. I slipped into the giddy water, and they buzzed down to haul me out. Then we found ourselves floating on a patch of weed, and we drifted to that old hulk and crawled aboard."

"You are very lucky to escape so lightly," said the gov'nor. "It is quite an easy matter to be trapped under the water by this weed. You had better go along and change your things——"

"Half a tick, sir!" interrupted Handforth. "There's another ship right over there—beyond that big liner wreck. We can't see it from here, but I saw it when I was up that mast."

"Yes, Handforth, there are quite a number of wrecks——"

"But this one is different, sir," went on

Handforth quickly. "I saw figures moving about on the deck——"

"What?"

"Figures, sir—men," said Handforth. "They were walking about——"

"Nonsense!" interjected Lee. "Don't be absurd, Handforth!"

"But I did, sir! I saw them——"

"Gammon!"

"Rats!"

"Tell that to the marines!"

"Ass!"

The juniors voiced their opinions quite frankly, and Handforth glared.

"Don't you believe me?" he roared.

"No!"

"All right!" snorted Edward Oswald. "I know what I know, anyhow! I saw two or three figures on the deck of that ship—and they were moving about. You think I imagined it, but I didn't."

"I think you made a little mistake, Handforth," said Nelson Lee smoothly. "You must surely realise that it is impossible for human beings to be alive on a ship in this place of desolation and decay. Use your own wits, my boy——"

"That's what I have done, sir," interrupted Handforth, "and I'm still convinced that I saw real figures."

He and his chums went off to change their clothing, and we all went back to our various pleasures. Handforth's delusion—as everybody believed it to be—was not discussed for long.

Handy was too well known as an excitable, imaginative fellow; nobody was ready to credit that he had actually seen anything. Too often had he spread a story—quite in good faith—which turned out to be largely an invention of his own fertile imagination.

But, in spite of firm opposition, Handforth persisted in his story. And he was only silenced at last by being squashed against the wall and threatened with dire punishment unless he dried up.

So Handforth, to save trouble, dried up

CHAPTER IV.

THE MONSTER OF THE DEEP.

"I'LL no say that we're feenished, Mr Lee, but we're gettin' on verra weel," said Mr. McBride, wiping his hands on a piece of cotton waste. "It's been a tough job, an' I'll hae ye know that the wee propeller will soon be turnin'. But I'm thinkin' the wee shippie will hae a hard fight to get clear o' this awfu' weed."

"I've no doubt about that, Mr. McBride," agreed Nelson Lee. "But it is something to learn that the work is proceeding apace. When, in your opinion, do you think we shall be able to get a move on?"

The chief engineer scratched his chin.

"Weel, not before to-morrow morning," he replied. "We shall be working through the night. I'll hae ye ken it's been a lig

job. At one time I thought we should never be done."

When McBride spoke in that way it was always safe to assume that the job was a very sound one indeed. And the yacht would certainly be ready for her fight for freedom by the morning.

The news was not long in getting round. Tea was over, and the dusk of the evening was beginning to settle. Everybody was feeling somewhat subdued. The weed and the sight of the many stark wrecks cast a feeling of oppression over the whole party. It was not a joyful setting for the yacht.

"Thank goodness we shall be able to try our luck before the sun sets again!" I exclaimed fervently. "If we get out of this all right I shall think we're all blessed in some way. It's a comfort to know that Umlosi is optimistic."

The Kutana chief, who was on board with us, had not taken much interest in the voyage. Umlosi did not care for the sea—he liked the big forests of Africa, and it had been our intention to set him ashore at Tangier. But that cyclone had altered everything for us, and for him.

"Wau! It is even as thou sayest, Manzie," said the black giant who was standing near me. "N'Kose, my father, would have you believe that I am even as the pessimist. But when the sky is bright I am light of heart."

"Well, the sky's bright enough now," said Handforth, gazing at the heavens.

"Thou mistake me, O youth of the great clumsiness," said Umlosi gravely.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Are you calling me clumsy?" demanded Handforth warmly.

Umlosi smiled broadly.

"Were I to call thee gentle, I should surely be lying," he replied. "Thou art even as the elephant, O Handforth. But it is well. I like thee. Thou art a mighty fighter, and a great warrior."

"Good!" said Handforth, nodding.

"The sky is bright even as I spoke a moment ago," went on Umlosi. "I am not frightened by this gigantic growth of accursed weed, which covers the surface of the wondrous waters. Ere long we shall escape from its clutches. Mayhap we shall have trials and troubles; but we shall win through. I have spoken."

"And that's the right stuff to speak, too, old son," I said approvingly. "Of course we shall win through. But it's put an end to all our other plans. I doubt if we shall be able to get back to St. Frank's in time for the new term."

"Oh, that doesn't matter," grinned Pitt. "If we're a week or two late, it'll be all the better."

"Hear, hear!" said the other juniors heartily.

We were all feeling in better spirits that evening, and, at my suggestion, we decided to hold an impromptu boxing display. We were, therefore, quite busy down in our own large cabin, which we called the common-room.

Meanwhile, the deck was quiet and almost deserted. The men were in the fo'c'sle, for there was nothing for them to do at the moment. The officers were below, and the engine-room staff was hard at work.

Agnes Christine and Violet Watson had the stern of the yacht to themselves. They had taken deck-chairs there, and were busy at some fancy-work or other. I don't know what it was, fancy-work being out of my province. But I have an idea that they were working with coloured silks, or something of that kind.

The two girls were quite cheerful. Ethel Church and Maggie Fenton were below, helping Lady Helen—Sir Montie's aunt—with some other feminine task.

"I think we shall get out of this terrible weed all right, don't you, dear?" asked Violet, as she laid her work down. "Mr. Lee seems quite confident, and Lord Dorrimore is just as jokey as ever."

"Oh, he'd be jokey if the ship was sinking!" said Agnes. "But I do think that we shall manage it all right, and we shall start to-morrow, by the look of things. Why, you're not going below, are you?"

Miss Watson had risen to her feet, and she nodded.

"Only for a moment," she replied. "I've run short of pink——"

"But I've got some here, you silly," said Agnes.

"It's not the right shade," said Violet, shaking her head. "I've got heaps of it in my cabin, and I sha'n't be a jilly."

She tripped off, leaving Agnes Christine working away alone. It was very quiet on deck, and the girls would not have been there, only they were working with colours and they needed all the daylight they could get.

Violet got her further supply of silk, and was leisurely walking down deck when she was startled to hear a terrified scream. She knew, in a second, that it was Agnes who had cried out.

"Oh, what can have happened?" she murmured.

Another scream came—louder and more urgent. Violet ran forward down the deck with all her speed. She came within sight of the two deck-chairs. Both were empty, and Agnes was close against the rail.

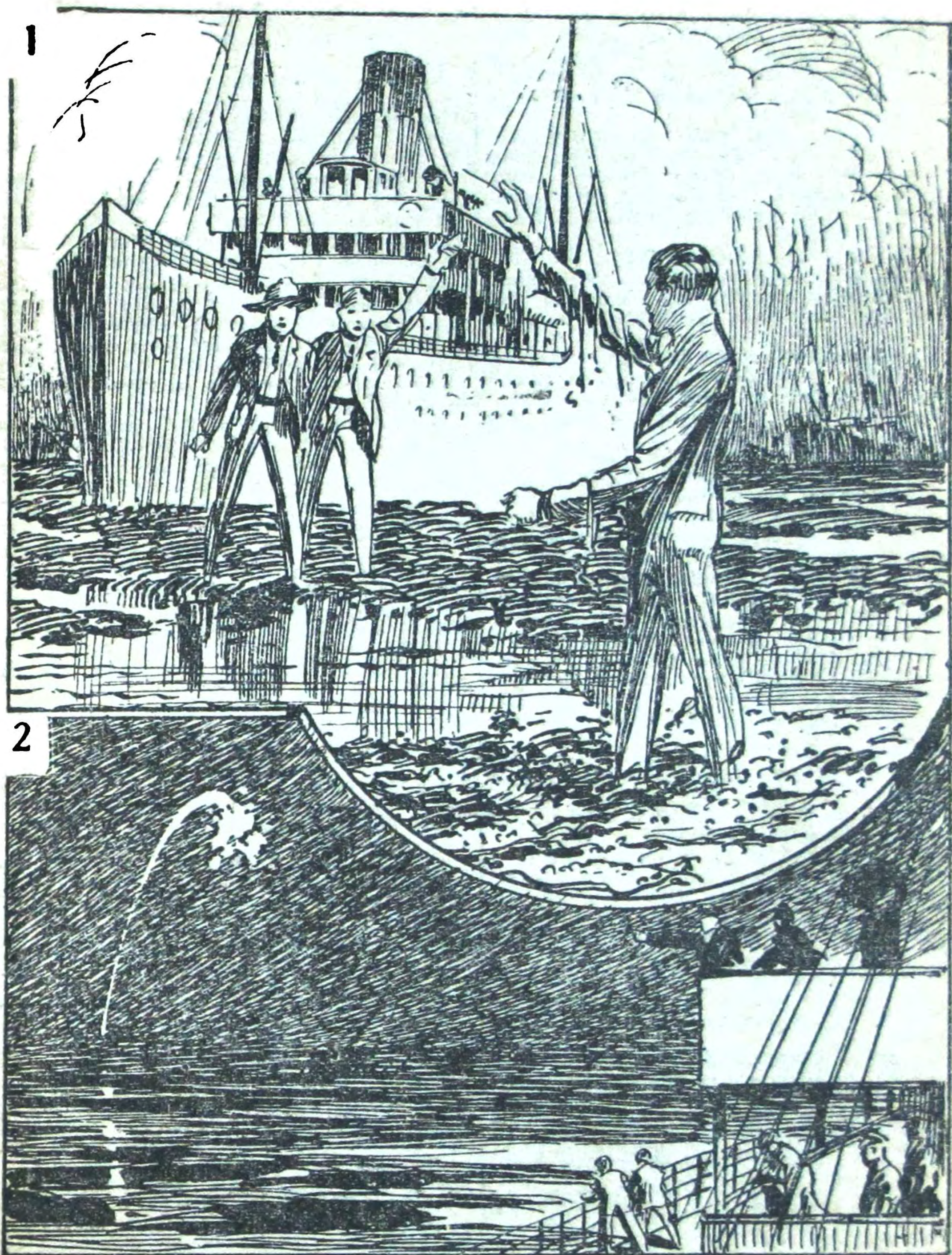
Violet paused, almost overcome with horror.

For she saw something awful. A long, slimy tentacle was projected over the rail, and the end of it was coiled around Agnes's shoulders! The tentacle was of enormous size, and it quivered as it moved.

"Oh, Violet! Help me—help me!" screamed Agnes pitifully.

Violet ran forward again, but even as she did so, Agnes was raised high in the air. For one awful moment she remained poised above the other girl, and then she was drawn down over the stern of the yacht into the weed.

"Help, help!" shrieked Violet frantically. She looked round wildly, for she, alone,



1. Don't stand there jawing! Come and give me a hand!" snapped Handforth, as the gap of water widened between them.

2. The trail of fire curved in the heavens and was followed by a burst of stars. It was a signal of distress!

could do nothing to aid her unfortunate companion. The first scream had been heard, and members of the crew were tumbling out of the fo'c'sle, officers were coming on deck, and practically every junior scuttled pell-mell up the companion.

But Nelson Lee was the first to arrive on the scene.

"Mr. Lee, you must do something!" panted Violet, clutching at his coat. "Agnes has been drawn down by some terrible monster! I—I saw her lifted right into the air by something which looked like a thick rope—"

Nelson Lee dashed to the rail.

I did so at the same moment, and a dozen other fellows followed my example. And what we saw made us gasp with sheer horror.

Miss Agnes was struggling in the grip of a long, greeny-black tentacle which stretched across the weed like some sea-serpent. At first I thought the thing was a gigantic conger-eel.

But then I saw something else.

Fully twenty yards away something huge lay on the surface of the weed—something with two horrible-looking eyes. And there were several other tentacles wriggling over the weed in the direction of the yacht.

"It's an octopus!" exclaimed Pitt huskily.

But he was wrong. The creature was not an octopus—and it is impossible for me to give the frightful monster a name. It was something peculiar to the Sargasso perhaps. Or, again, it might have been a deep-sea creature which had been flung to the surface by some volcanic disturbance on the sea bed.

At all events, the thing was ghastly. Its body was like some huge gas-bag, only half inflated. It heaved and billowed as we watched, and the whole surface of the weed quivered under the monster's weight.

And there was Agnes in its clutches!

I didn't waste a second. I don't know what I thought, but I only knew that a very sweet girl was in dire peril of being drawn down to a shocking death. And I went clean over the rail in one jump.

"Begad!" shouted Sir Montie. "Dear fellow, it's madness—"

"Clear out of the way, there!" bellowed Handforth.

He came charging down after me—for Handforth's pluck was of the finest quality. He must have known that horrible danger existed, but he didn't care a snap of his fingers for it. As for me, I didn't think of danger, so I can't possibly claim that I did anything plucky.

And our efforts were utterly useless.

I managed to reach Agnes's side. She was still conscious, and there was a light of terror in her eyes which almost drove me into a frenzy. So far, she was unhurt. The tentacle was clutching her so that she could not move, but it had done her no actual harm.

"Keep calm, Miss Agnes!" I panted. "We'll soon have you free!"

I grasped at the foul thing which encircled her, but I might just as well have attempted to pull a telegraph pole down. It didn't shift; my efforts made no impression whatever.

Handforth joined me, and we both did our best. Then I gave a shout of warning. Another tentacle was wriggling across the weed. I dodged, but Handforth was caught up like a straw in the wind.

He gave a yell of pain as the thing crushed him, and then he began kicking and punching with all his strength—which proved that he was not hurt very much. Before I could do anything a third tentacle grasped me.

It caught me round the waist, pinning one arm to my side. For a moment I thought that my arm would break; the monster was quite capable of using far more power if its ugly will decided upon it. It was merely playing with us so far—confident, perhaps, in its superiority.

Handy and I fought for our lives, but Agnes remained still, and perhaps hers was the most sensible course. For while she remained motionless in the monster's grasp, Handforth and I were whirled about until we were half dazed.

I really and truly thought that my last minute had arrived; I thought that we should all three be drawn down into the sea beneath the weed. But the seconds passed, and still we remained prisoners—but unhurt.

On deck a tremendous commotion was going on.

The juniors had been ordered back, and Nelson Lee, Mr. Clive, Captain Burton, and Dr. Brett were preparing for an assault. They swarmed over the sides armed with sharp hatchets.

Their first care was for the girl.

And didn't we know it!

Slash! Slash!

The hatchets fell fiercely, and it was like striking rubber. Only after persistent effort did the rescuers succeed in cutting through the awful tentacle. It relaxed, and Miss Agnes was freed. Instantly she was caught up by willing hands and carried to the deck.

But Handforth and I had been going through it. Perhaps the monster felt pain. At all events, we were swung up and beaten down upon the weed several times. It was a mercy the stuff was soft and spongy, otherwise we should have been battered to death. Even as it was, we were bruised and temporarily blinded and dazed. It was a horrible experience.

And I have no doubt that both Handy and I would have perished but for a brain wave which had attacked Lord Dorrimore. He had not sprung over the side with the others, for he was intent upon trying a daring experiment.

The commotion was at its height, and our danger was at its worst, when Dorrie performed his trick.

I have forgotten to mention that Umlozi was amongst the fighters. He wielded his

hatchet with tremendous strength, and as soon as Miss Agnes was freed, he transferred his attention to me.

But before he could even strike one blow a tentacle came shooting across the weed, and even the mighty Umlosi was lifted off his feet and raised helplessly into the air.

Nelson Lee was at his wits' end, and in his heart he believed that our rescue was impossible. At any moment he expected to see the monster sink beneath the surface, drawing us with him.

But this did not happen.

And then, with a mighty roar, something happened. A powerful rocket had been hastily fixed to the rail. This was Dorrie's idea. The tremendous firework was pointed straight at the weed-creature's body.

Sizz-z-z-z!

The fuse went off rapidly, and then a roar followed as the rocket rushed at its target. Fired in the ordinary way, that rocket would have risen to a tremendous height. Fired at the monster, it struck its target with truly appalling force.

And, as it struck, it burst. There was a blinding glare of coloured sparks, and a report which deafened nearly everybody. A dense cloud of smoke obscured the whole scene from the view of those on board.

But Dorrie's experiment was successful.

As the rocket struck the creature, I felt the tentacle which held me tighten. I thought I should have been crushed; but then the thing quivered, and suddenly became limp. I rolled free, half-sinking into the weed.

A dull plop near by announced the fact that Handforth was released, too—for he had been held aloft. Umlosi had been freed first, and the black giant was far more startled by the firework than by the monster.

We never saw the thing again.

Quietly, without making a sound, it slipped beneath the weed and vanished from view. When the smoke cleared it was no longer to be seen—it had gone back to its native element.

But there was no telling when it would come up again. Perhaps it had been hurt, but it was far more likely that the firework had only scared it. And this, considering the blaze of fire and the report, was not very surprising.

Handforth and Umlosi and I staggered over the weed to the yacht, and we were hauled up by eager, thankful hands. A mighty cheer arose from everybody on board—a cheer which was almost a sob in some cases.

"How's Miss Agnes?" I gasped, as I fell aboard.

"She's fine—hardly hurt at all!" exclaimed Christine, with glowing eyes. "It was wonderful of you fellows to dive over like that. I was going, too, but Mr. Lee wouldn't let me. She is nearly herself again."

This was an exaggeration, for Agnes was pale and trembling. She smiled at us, however, and bravely declared that she was un-

hurt. But she was hurried below by Lady Helen, and we saw no more of her that night.

"That was a ripping idea of somebody's," I said enthusiastically. "I'll bet you thought of setting that firework off, governor!"

"You're wrong, Nipper," said Nelson Lee. "It was Dorrie's scheme."

"Good for you, Dorrie!" I said heartily.

"What nonsense!" said his lordship. "There was nothin' in it. Everybody was doin' somethin', so I thought I might as well take a hand. We might as well have fired peashooters at the thing as revolvers—it wouldn't have taken any notice. And we couldn't have used the one-inch gun at such close range without killin' everybody else."

"Your idea was the only possible solution, Dorrie," said Nelson Lee. "The rocket did no harm to anybody else, but it certainly harmed the enemy. But you must come below, boys, and Dr. Brett will examine you."

"We're all right, sir," said Handforth.

But we were compelled to go below; and, actually, we needed medical attention. Our bruises were many, and we were suffering from more than one nasty scratch. But there was no serious injury to be mended.

The whole experience had been terrible, and Handforth shuddered when he realised that he and his two chums might have been attacked by the sea-monster when they visited the old hulk.

Strict orders were given that nobody was to venture upon the weed again, and several men were posted on different quarters of the deck, keeping a sharp look-out for any return of the unwelcome visitor.

CHAPTER V.

THE LIGHT OF MYSTERY.

NIGHT had come on.

The stars overhead were brilliant and gorgeous. Not a cloud was in the sky, and scarcely a breath of wind stirred. It was a perfect night in every way, and it was not marred by the clanging of metal which echoed from far below. That sound was like music to our ears.

The engine-room staff was beating its own record for work. The men were only snatching sleep at short intervals—just a nap now and again. And the stokers were willingly doing everything in their power to assist.

After dinner the incident of the fight with the monster was still almost the sole topic of conversation. Both Handforth and I had enjoyed our dinner immensely—even surprising ourselves.

For we had expected to be in bed. Umlosi was not hurt at all—at least, he wouldn't admit that he was. His muscles were like bands of steel, and he laughed when he was asked if he had any bruises.

Miss Agnes, of course, was in her cabin, and many were the inquiries which were sent down. All reports which the other girls brought made us feel content. For Agnes was sleeping peacefully, and would probably be home again in the morning. But I fancied that a week would pass before she fully recovered.

Nelson Lee and I strolled on deck after dinner. Handforth and Co. were there, too; but all the boys were ordered to keep well amidships, and were strictly forbidden to approach the rails.

"What a glorious night, guv'nor," I remarked. "We're having a few adventures on this trip, aren't we? It's a marvellous thing to me that we escape from every peril as we do. It makes me all the more confident that we shall get out of this horrible place of weeds. The Sargasso isn't exactly a spot where a fellow can spend an enjoyable holiday."

"Well, hardly," agreed Nelson Lee. "Yes, Nipper, I think we shall be all right. An hour ago I was down below, and I can assure you that McBride is making a splendid job of the repair. He calls it a botch, but it is really a wonderful piece of workmanship."

"I don't want to interrupt, old man," said Dorrie, coming up, "but perhaps you'll tell me what that flickerin' light is over there. It can't be a star, because stars don't flicker—they twinkle. An' it can't be a fire, because we're the only inhabitants of this portion of the globe."

"Which light, Dorrie?" asked the guv'nor. His lordship drew us aside, and then pointed away towards the hulk of the derelict liner, which loomed dimly in the semi-darkness of the starlit night. And, sure enough, a ghostly kind of flicker appeared to come from the rear—from a spot invisible owing to the liner's bulk.

"It is certainly curious," admitted Nelson Lee.

"It's flickerin'—do you see?"

"Yes, of course," said the guv'nor. "Quite remarkable, in fact. I am at a loss to account for it, Dorrie. Yet there must be some natural explanation——"

"I say, you chaps."

It was a roar, and the voice was Handforth's. We all knew that Edward Oswald was highly excited, and he came rushing down the deck.

"What's wrong?" shouted Pitt. "That monster again——"

"Blow the monster!" exclaimed Handforth. "There's a light over there—beyond that big ship! Can't you see it?"

"Well, I'm blessed!"

All the juniors saw the flicker.

"I'll bet all my pocket-money that there are some people over there!" went on Handforth. "That's where that steamer is lying—where I saw some figures moving about! They've lit a fire to attract our attention."

"Oh, rot!"

"Don't talk out of your hat, Handy!"

But Nelson Lee looked at me rather curiously.

"Can it be possible that there is something in Handforth's wild story, after all?" he asked. "That light certainly resembles the glow of a fire, and it is in the exact spot that Handforth named this afternoon."

I shook my head.

"There can't be anybody, sir," I declared. "This is a place of death and desolation. And how can we make sure, anyhow? We can't go over the weed, and we can't see that ship from here—it isn't even visible from the masts. There's no way of finding out."

"I will agree that we cannot venture across the weed," said Nelson Lee. "Under ordinary circumstances it would be impossible at night—and it would be madness to attempt such a thing when we know that some awful monsters may be lurking about. But there is another method, Nipper."

"What's that, sir?"

"We can fire one or two rockets, and note the result," said Nelson Lee. "If the flicker remains just the same, with no alteration, we can be sure that it is not caused by human agency. For an answer of some kind would certainly be made."

"That's a fine idea, sir," I exclaimed enthusiastically.

"By George, rather!" said Handforth.

"Hear, hear!"

All the juniors had been listening eagerly to Nelson Lee's words, and there was quite an amount of excitement on board. The firing of the rockets would be entertaining alone. And the possibility that they might be answered was decidedly attractive.

"What rockets will you send up, sir?" I asked.

"Oh, spectacular ones—merely for the purpose of attracting attention," said Nelson Lee. "I will send down for them at once."

Several rockets were soon on hand, and the juniors gathered round eagerly as they were prepared.

A rocket had been used only a few hours earlier, but the ones which were now fired were being put to a very different purpose. The first one went up with a glorious roar, and burst high above the yacht in a shower of coloured stars.

The next was of a similar nature, but there were several loud reports high in the air, accompanied by flashes of blinding light. One more was sent up, and the display was quite interesting.

And then we waited—watching that flicker of mysterious light.

For several minutes it remained the same. There was no change whatever, and we were forced to the conclusion that the flicker was caused by some purely natural phenomenon which would never be explained.

And then came the astounding surprise.

Everybody held their breath when a trail of fire rose high into the sky from some spot fully two miles distant. The trail

formed an arc in the heavens, curved round, and then a burst of stars followed.

"A rocket!" roared Handforth.

"Oh, my goodness!"

"It was a real rocket!"

"A signal of distress!"

"Was that imagination?" bellowed Handforth triumphantly. "I knew I saw some figures this afternoon! And yet everybody shut me up, and said that I was talking nonsense! And I was right all the time!"

"I beg your pardon, Handforth," said Nelson Lee smoothly. "It was I who characterised your story as nonsense! It is only right that I should apologise."

"Oh, go easy, sir!" protested Handy. "I don't want you to apologise!"

"There goes another!" yelled Somerton.

"My hat!"

Another rocket soared high—a signal of distress!

There was no longer any doubt in any mind that other human beings were entrapped in the weed in addition to ourselves. Handforth's eyesight had not played him false; he had actually seen figures on the deck of the distant derelict.

And while we watched a third and fourth rocket went up. Without delay Nelson Lee sent up several in reply, indicating that we had seen, and that we understood. But it was impossible for us to go to the rescue.

"We must do something, sir!" exclaimed Handforth excitedly. "We can't leave the poor people in the lurch!"

"We shall certainly do something, Handforth—but not until the morning," interjected Nelson Lee. "The strangers will not expect us to, for they probably know of the perils which would beset us if we attempted to cross the weed during the hours of darkness."

"Then there's nothing doing, sir?" I asked.

"Not at present, Nipper."

And we all realised the wisdom of the governor's decision. It was really impossible to act in any way until daylight came. Two more rockets were sent up in the distance, and we answered them.

But, after that, everything remained quiet and still.

Many of the juniors wanted to stay on deck, but they were advised to go to bed, and to get up, if they wanted to, at dawn. For there would certainly be nothing worth seeing until then.

I went to bed with Sir Montie and Tommy, and we were all rather excited. We didn't feel so absolutely cast out from the world. There were others in that dreaded Sargasso Sea.

"It's a big surprise," I remarked, as I got undressed. "I could hardly believe my eyes when I saw that answering rocket go up."

"I wonder who the dickens they can be?" said Watson. "Some old tramp steamer, perhaps, that was blown into the weed by the same gale that brought us here."

"Or it might be a sailin' ship," suggested Sir Montie. "Some remnants of a crew who came along ten or twenty years ago, begad!"

"I suppose they've been feeding on seaweed?" I suggested, with a grin.

"Begad! I forgot that, dear old boy," said Tregellis-West.

"Besides, they're on a steamer—Handy saw it," put in Watson. "It seems more likely that the ship was blown into the Sargasso Sea."

"It's no good making guesses," I interrupted. "They'll all be wrong, I expect. The best thing is to wait until we know something for certain. Conjectures are always unsatisfactory."

"Good gracious!" exclaimed Montie. "Your arm is in a frightful state, Nipper—it is, really."

I looked at my arm. The flesh was bruised considerably, and my ribs, on one side, were very sore.

"I'm all right," I said, donning my pyjamas. "Bruises aren't serious, anyhow—and I might have had a collection of broken bones. I reckon we got off very lightly, considering everything."

"Rather!" agreed my chums.

We did not take long in settling down to sleep. I timed my alarm-clock to awaken me at dawn—and I knew that it wouldn't fail. My alarm-clock was not an article of cogs and springs. It was my own mind. I had the knack of awakening at any minute I liked to set. It was very seldom indeed that the mechanism failed; and then it was only by a minute or two.

Soon after dawn had broken I awoke, and commenced to fulfil a series of promises I had made before retiring. I awakened Sir Montie and Tommy, and then went along to the other cabins, rousing all the other juniors.

For about the first time on record they were all willing to turn out without a grumble. And scarcely more than ten minutes later we appeared on deck in a bunch. The sky was looking glorious, and everything was fresh.

Nelson Lee had not turned out yet, and the only people on deck were two or three members of the crew, who were on watch, and Mr. Clive, the first officer, who was on the bridge.

"Any sign of anything yet?" I called up.

"Not yet, Nipper," replied Mr. Clive. "You boys are out early this morning. I'll warrant you're not so lively at St. Frank's!"

We grinned, and gazed across the seaweed in the direction of the liner—behind which had appeared the rocket signals. But we could see nothing now. The vast expanse of weed was looking more desolate than ever.

And we found that our early rising was unrewarded. For an hour we wandered about the deck, and nothing happened. Nelson Lee and Lord Dorrimore appeared, and soon after

that Dr. Brett and Captain Burton turned out.

"It's a fraud, sir," I grinned. "We've been here for an hour, and there hasn't been a movement."

Nelson Lee smiled.

"Well, I dare say you can do with a little less sleep for once in a while," he said. "I hardly expected anything to happen—"

"I see strange figures, Umtagati!" interrupted Umlosi abruptly. "See, they come from afar, across this place of accursed weed!"

All eyes were fixed upon the spot to which Umlosi pointed. His eyes were like needles, and for several moments we looked in vain. Then I made out one or two dots moving on the weed. Two or three shouts announced the fact that other fellows had seen the dots, too.

"They're human figures!" shouted Handforth.

This was not a very startling announcement, for we had not expected to see a pack of dogs coming across the weed. The progress of the strangers was very slow, and fully twenty minutes had passed before we could see that they were twenty in number—all men.

I focussed my binoculars on the approaching group, and I saw that the leaders wore shabby uniforms with brass buttons. Many of the other men appeared to be in rags. And their progress was so slow because they were all wearing flat pieces of board fixed to their boots.

This was evidently a device to prevent them from sinking into the weed, and it naturally had the effect of delaying their progress considerably. Even the engine-room staff had left all important work for a brief space in order to witness the arrival of the strangers.

The whole yacht's company, in fact, was on deck.

Miss Agnes was there, looking somewhat pale, but she smiled cheerfully when inquiries were made concerning her health.

"I think we'd better get another bunch of rockets ready," remarked Dorrie. "That gentleman with the long arms might take it into his head to come to the surface again."

"I fancy he's scared completely away, Dorrie," said Nelson Lee. "And it is now broad daylight, and I don't think he will appear. It was dusk when he attacked the yacht, remember."

Very soon conversation ceased altogether, and we all watched the approach of the mysterious twenty men. At last they came near enough to be hailed, and Captain Burton raised the megaphone to his lips.

"Ahoj there!" he shouted. "What nationality are you?"

We strained for the reply, but we needn't have done, for all the twenty men answered as though in one voice.

"British!" they roared. "Hurrah!"

"They're British!" yelled Handforth excitedly. "Well, this fairly takes the giddy biscuit!"

CHAPTER VI.

OUT INTO FREEDOM.

CAPTAIN BURTON was standing at the top of the accommodation-ladder when the first stranger climbed laboriously up to the deck level. He was a man with a grey beard, and his blue reefer suit was shabby and worn. The brass buttons were dull, and there were signs of more than one patch in the threadbare material. But the man was clean-shaven and spruce.

"This is a queer place to meet strangers, but you're heartily welcome," said Captain Burton warmly. "This is Sir Crawford Grey's yacht, and Sir Crawford himself is standing beside me now!"

The bearded man took a deep breath.

"It's the most wonderful thing that ever happened," he exclaimed, in a deep voice. "We reckoned that we were lost for good, and we hadn't the faintest hope of ever seeing another human face."

"Perhaps it would not be as well to celebrate too soon," put in Sir Crawford gently. "For this vessel is trapped in the weed, and there is no certainty that we shall get free, although we hope to do so."

"She's floating on an even keel, at all events," said the stranger, "and my craft is stern down, with her bows clear of the water—thanks to those accursed Hun pirates!"

"Oh, indeed!" said Nelson Lee. "I suspected something of the sort. I gather that your ship was torpedoed, and that her propellers were shot away?"

The man nodded.

"Steering gear and everything," he declared. "We didn't sink, but we drifted into this little packet. My name is Captain John Richmond, and my ship is the Halldale, bound for Swansea—although she'll never get there now."

"Well, Captain Richmond, it gives us great pleasure to meet you in this way, and to welcome you on board our yacht," said Sir Crawford Grey. "If we succeed in getting you into the open sea again, our trials and perils will be fully repaid."

"That's a nice thing to say, sir," said Captain Richmond. "I'd just like to know how the war is going on, if you don't mind telling me—"

"The war!" echoed Dorrie, grinning. "My dear man, the war's a memory! It was over months an' months ago—last year, in fact!"

Dorrie's words were heard by all, and a great cheer went up from Captain Richmond's men.

"Hurrah!"

"You're a bit late," chuckled Lee.

"It's the first we've heard of peace, anyhow," said the captain. "The Allies won, of course?"

"Of course," agreed Dorrie. "Hands down, in fact."

"And the Huns have been whacked!" said Richmond. "By George! It's good hearing, and no mistake!"

"You mustn't call 'em Huns now," grinned

Dorrie. "It wouldn't be polite, old man! Diplomatic relations have been restored. Prussianism is dead. I suppose it'll remain dead just as long as the Huns—or—the Germans—are kept nicely in order by us. They need lookin' after, by gad!"

It appeared that the *Halldale* had been torpedoed in the Atlantic over eighteen months earlier. For a year and a half Captain Richmond and his crew had been outcasts in the desolation of the Sargasso Sea! Our coming had been like a wondrous act of Providence.

"But how on earth did you manage to live—twenty of you?" asked Nelson Lee. "How did you find sufficient food, captain? You are all looking well and hearty, I must remark."

Captain Richmond smiled.

"We could have lasted out for another two years," he declared. "You see, Mr. Lee, we were carrying a large cargo of food to England; we were one of the food ships the Germans delighted to destroy. Our cargo was mixed, but it was mostly tinned stuff—meats, fruits, and even vegetables. There were a few thousand cases of tinned Irish-stew aboard, so we even had cooked potatoes!"

We could understand how the twenty men had existed so easily, and why they were looking so well fed. The fact that their ship had been carrying food was their salvation.

All the men were made welcome on the yacht. They went forward, and Captain Richmond and his officers were invited aft. And, soon after the excitement had died down, there came a fresh interest in life.

The repairs to the propeller-shaft were completed.

Steam was up, and the *Wanderer* was to attempt the great feat. Would she succeed in getting herself free from the dreadful embrace of the Gulf weed? That was the question which was in everybody's mind.

The great danger was the possibility of the weed becoming entangled in the propeller. If that happened it would be necessary to send men down in order to clear away the obstruction.

We were all on deck when the great moment arrived.

The engine-room telegraph sounded, and almost at once the deck commenced to vibrate—a sensation we had almost forgotten. The vibration was slightly greater than before, but the engines were running smoothly.

Slowly and reluctantly the yacht moved forward. As she did so the weed parted, and we ploughed our way along.

But only for a short distance did we keep straight ahead. We very soon found ourselves slowly moving into the clear pool of water—an expanse which widened as we entered it.

The weed surged and heaved with the wash caused by the yacht, and then we edged round until we were heading in the direction Captain Burton had chosen as the most likely avenue of escape.

Twice we made the attempt to get out of the pool, and on each occasion we simply forced our way against the tenacious weed, and there was no prospect of getting through.

After having reversed engines for the third time, we all noticed that the weed had parted considerably just over the starboard bow. And at the fourth attempt we edged our way into the channel which was thus revealed.

We all feared that it would only be a trap, and that we should proceed no further than a few hundred feet before we were again stopped.

But our fears were unfounded.

The yacht continued to force her way along the channel, the weed parting as she forced her way through, inch by inch, and yard by yard. And as we progressed, so the weed closed up again in our rear, leaving no trace of our journey.

The hours passed, and we all began to hope that our task would not be so difficult as we had imagined. But then, at mid-day, the great propeller became clogged, and a halt was necessary.

I was a tough job to clear the weed from the blades, and three men, who were slung down on special cradles, were occupied for over two hours. But the propeller was cleared at length, and again we progressed.

"If the screw gets choked like that pretty often we shall be weeks before we get out," I remarked after luncheon. "Still, we're progressing, and that's the main thing. Better be slow than not progress at all."

"Yes, rather, dear old boy," said Sir Montie. "But I have an idea, you know, that we shall soon be gettin' on better. I remember, as we were comin' along—when we were driftin'—the weed wasn't half so thick."

"That's quite right, old son," I agreed. "The greatest trial will be in getting out of this thick patch. It's no good worrying, and it's no good guessing. We can only wait until the result is known."

During the remainder of that day we continued at the same rate of speed, and when darkness set in we seemed to be as closely surrounded by the terrible weed as ever. Many of the fellows were beginning to look disheartened.

"Back up, Christine," I said, slapping him on the back. "There's no need to pull that long face."

"There's no sign of the open sea!" growled Bob Christine.

"Did you expect us to get out of the weed on the first day?" I asked. "Why, if we do it in a week we shall be lucky."

But most of the juniors went to bed that night silent and gloomy. Even Tommy and Sir Montie were not quite themselves. I remained cheerful, for no fatal check had occurred, and it seemed to me that there was every prospect of our meeting with ultimate success.

In the morning, when the fellows roused themselves, the *Wanderer* was again nosing her way through the weed. By midday she had gone forward quite a distance, and nothing had happened to mar her progress.

except another choking of the propeller. This had soon been cleared.

And during the afternoon it was generally noticed that a change had come about in the appearance of the weed. It was not of the same colour, but darker and far less coarse.

And then came the most welcome sight of all.

A clear patch of sea was visible on our port side. After another hour we ran out of the weed into a quiet lake of sea, only to encounter the weed a mile further on. And now, as luck would have it, it seemed to be thicker than ever.

Night found us in another clear stretch, and here we remained until the next day.

With small stoppages now and again, we continued. Nothing happened to stop us altogether. And during that first day the spirits of the whole company on board were raised to the highest pitch.

For we steamed almost continuously through clear channels. By skilful piloting the yacht was able to keep clear of the weed for miles on end. Skirting round little islands of the treacherous stuff, we pressed on.

The speed of the yacht was increased, and when evening came of that day it was a definitely established fact that we had conquered. We had escaped from the dreadful clutches of the Sargasso! On the fourth day we sighted the weed on every hand until midday.

And then we lost it for hours at a stretch. We would come upon a small isolated patch here and there. But night found us absolutely clear, and no further prospect of seeing the Gulf weed again.

And we commenced our homeward trip. It was impossible for the yacht to go at her normal speed—at all events, Captain Burton would not attempt to run her at such a rate. He was afraid of the propeller-shaft, sound as the job had been. And so we made for home at a pace which was little over half-speed.

But we didn't care a jot.

Our perils were really over at last, and even if we should arrive late, and long overdue, it wouldn't matter a farthing.

"I call it jolly decent," said Handforth. "According to the captain's reckoning, we sha'n't get into port until the new term has started. We shall certainly have a week at home——"

"Shall we?" I put in. "Don't you believe it, Handy. You'll be lucky if you get two days at home—if we don't arrive in England until the new term has started. You can't have two giddy holidays!"

"Well, it's all serene, so I don't care," said Handforth contentedly. "But, by George, I shall be thundering pleased to see the shores of old England once again. What do you chaps say?"

"Rather!" said the chaps heartily.

"I'm not altogether sure that I'm sorry the propeller-shaft broke," I exclaimed. "We've seen the Sargasso Sea—the sea of doom—and because of our visit we've saved twenty fine men who would have perished!"

"Yes, it's a good thing the accident happened," said Pitt slowly. "Perhaps it was providential. Who knows? In any case, we've been to the Sargasso, and we've rescued some helpless victims of German piracy. So I think we can reckon that everything in the garden is lovely!"

And everybody said "Hear, hear!"

CHAPTER VII.

THE RETURN OF THE WANDERERS.

"CHEEK—absolute cheek!"

It was Hubbard, of the Remove, who made that statement.

"Unadulterated nerve!" declared Doyle. "They're not content with spending the blessed summer holidays at sea, but they haven't got the decency to get back in time for the new term!"

"It's the limit!"

"Rather!"

The discussion was taking place in the lobby of the Ancient House at St. Frank's. It was the second day of term, and a number of Removites were somewhat warmly discussing the non-return of the yachting-party.

The Ancient House was somewhat empty—a most unusual state of affairs at the beginning of term. Two prefects were missing, and quite a host of Remove fellows; in fact, all the most important members of the form.

"Lucky bounders!" said Griffith. "That's what I call 'em! I don't see why you fellows should get wild about it. It's jealousy——"

"Rot——"

"Of course it's jealousy," went on Griffith. "If you were in the same position you'd be only too pleased to keep on the holidays for a few days longer. I know I should, anyhow."

"Yes, but when are the bounders coming back?" asked Owen major. "That's the question. Mr. Lee's absent, too, and old Crowell is looking after us for the time being. I asked him when the party would turn up, and he didn't know. I don't think the yacht's got into port yet."

"They've had trouble, haven't they?"

"So we hear?" said Owen. "Got caught in a storm, or something, and drifted a long way out of their course. I know the Head had a cablegram from Sir Crawford Grey yesterday."

It was only natural that the subject should be largely discussed. With so many juniors absent, the Remove passage looked deserted and empty. And those fellows who had come back felt lonely.

There was nothing further known that day, but after prayers the following morning Dr. Stafford addressed the whole school in Big Hall.

"Boys, you will all be interested to know that Sir Crawford Grey's yacht reached London two days ago, and all the boys who are at present missing will reach Bellton by the afternoon train to-day——"

"Hurrah!"

"Is Mr. Lee coming too, sir?"

"Yes, Mr. Lee is also coming," said the Head. "It is unfortunate that the party could not get into England a week or two sooner, in accordance with the original plan. But, considering everything, it is providential that they have returned at all. For the yacht met with many perilous adventures."

"Oh!"

"It is not my intention to go into any details; you will doubtless learn the whole story from the boys themselves when they arrive," went on the Head. "It is sufficient for me to say that the yacht was cast upon an island, and the whole party was marooned for a considerable time before escaping. After that they had the misfortune to run into a violent storm, resulting in the breaking of a vital piece of machinery. Helpless, the yacht drifted into that dead region of the Atlantic known as the Sargasso Sea. The party only escaped by a seeming miracle, and it is wonderful that they have been able to arrive in England only a few days late. They have had some amazing adventures."

The Head only said a few words more, and the school was left to talk about the news.

There was a feeling of general satisfaction throughout both Houses, and it was universally decided that a great crowd should go down to the station to meet the returning wanderers.

Morning lessons that day were rather a fiasco. Lessons were never very much of a success during the first week of term, in any case; it generally took the juniors a week to shake down after the holidays.

But on this particular day there was practically nothing doing. The Remove, in particular, was no Form at all. All the principal juniors were missing, and the others were not at all inclined to work.

Mr. Crowell was only too pleased when the time came for him to dismiss the class. After-noon lessons were just as bad, and the Form-master breathed a sigh of great relief when he got rid of his unruly charges.

"Thank goodness!" exclaimed Griffith, as he tumbled out of the Form-room with the others. "I should have gone dotty if I'd stopped in there another ten minutes. If the Head had had a spark of decency, he would have given the chaps a half-holiday to-day."

"You can't expect the Head to have any sense on a subject like that," remarked Owen major. "Well, we've got heaps of time to get down to the station. The train doesn't get in before a quarter-past-five."

Removites were not the only fellows who made a pilgrimage down to the little station in Bellton. A good many members of the Sixth went, too, in order to welcome Fenton and Morrow and the other prefects.

By five o'clock one might have supposed that the station was suffering from a siege. The platform was packed, and there were crowds outside, too. And everybody was in a good humour.

Meanwhile, the London train was bringing

the absent ones speedily towards their destination. I was among the crowd, and we were all in the best of humours, as healthy as sand-boys, and as brown as berries.

"Well, we've had a jolly fine holiday, and we shall have a bit of a job to settle down to the school routine again," I remarked. "Still, it's good to be back in England again. I'm fed-up with foreign parts for a bit."

"Same here," said Pitt. "Give me St. Frank's!"

"We've had a lot of fun there, in our time," remarked Watson; "and I expect we shall have a lot more, too."

"Rather!"

Since our arrival in port, all the fellows had been home—or, at least, they had seen their people—for some of them had stayed in London. There had only been one brief day before it had been necessary to return to St. Frank's.

We had parted from Lord Dorrimore in London—and from the girls, too. They had to go to their own schools. Old Umlosi had left us when we called at Tangier, on the homeward voyage.

Our exploits had not yet appeared in the newspapers, but several reporters had been interviewing Dorrie and Sir Crawford Grey and the gov'nor, so it was pretty safe to assume that a lurid version of our travels would soon appear in print.

The one fact that we had saved Captain Richmond and his men was sufficient to give us prominence. Not that we wanted any. Handforth was one of the chief fellows who had voiced the idea to be excellent. He had even offered to send a reporter one of his photographs—an offer which was promptly accepted, much to Handforth's gratification.

"I expect there'll be a few fellows to meet us at the station," remarked De Valerie. "That is, if they know about our arrangements. I'll bet the Remove has been gnashing its teeth for a couple of days. The chaps will be as jealous as monkeys because we've had two days extra holiday!"

Shortly after that we drew into Bellton Station. I had my head out of the window as the train rolled in.

"Great Scott!" I gasped.

"What's the matter, dear old boy?"

"There's half the giddy school waiting on the platform," I grinned—"and the other half is outside!"

"Oh, my hat!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Well, the more the merrier," said Handforth. "Isn't it right that we should be honoured? Think of the adventures we've been through! Why, I don't suppose any other fellows have had a tenth of the excitement we've experienced!"

The train came to a standstill, and then came the rush.

"Hurrah!"

"Welcome back to St. Frank's!"

There were very many shouts, and for a time I hardly knew whether I was on my head or my heels. I was rushed down the platform, rushed through the booking-office,

and rushed down into the station yard. All the others were rushed out in the same way—even including Nelson Lee.

It was not until a quarter-of-an-hour had elapsed that the excitement began to die down. Then we were released, flustered and ruffled, but quite good-tempered. Nobody was hurt, but several of us were rather battered about.

"Boys, you really should control yourselves!" protested Nelson Lee genially. "I have strong objections to being turned upside-down!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Sorry, sir!"

"It is all very well to be sorry," went on the guv'nor. "Three minutes ago I was tipped from the shoulders of several unstable juniors, and I am quite sure that I have lost all my loose cash. However, I am very pleased to be back amongst you all——"

"Hurrah!"

"We're pleased to have you back, sir!"

"And I've no doubt that we shall get on well during this term," continued the guv'nor. "Some of my boys will find it hard to don harness again, but they must make up their minds firmly. I wish to thank you for your very nice welcome——"

But Nelson Lee was interrupted by another series of cheers, and after that we all got up to the school somehow or other. Everything was looking exactly the same as when we had left, and it was hard to realise that we had passed through so many stirring adventures since we had taken our departure at the commencement of the summer vacation.

Everybody told us that we were tremendously brown, and we were honoured when we learned that a tremendous feed had been prepared in the junior lecture-hall. It was a great success, and one might have supposed that a scene was being rehearsed to represent the Tower of Babel.

A dozen or more fellows were relating our adventures in different parts of the room, and the listeners were constantly shouting inquiries and making interjections. However, it was all over at last, and we once more went to our own studies.

"Well, it's jolly good to be back," I said, as I sank into a chair in Study C. "I wonder how we shall fare this term."

"Blow the term!" yawned Watson. "I want to get to bed!"

But that term was to prove one of the most remarkable we had ever experienced, had we only known it. And one of the principal reasons for the queer state of affairs which was to result was due to a fellow who was at that very moment seated in the armchair in Study M.

That study belonged to De Valerie and Somerton. And those two juniors went along after the banquet in the lecture-hall, and they naturally expected to find Study M empty and deserted.

But the electric-light was glowing, and a stranger was seated in the apartment. De Valerie and Somerton eyed him curiously. He was a slim boy of about fifteen. His skin was sallow. His hair was jet-black, and his eyes were almost piercing in their intensity. At a glance it could be seen that he was a foreigner.

"Good-evening!" said De Valerie politely. "I suppose you are aware of the fact that this study belongs to us?"

The new boy didn't even smile.

"It belongs to me as well," he said, with scarcely an accent. "You, no doubt, are Somerton and De Valerie? I am pleased to see you. You are quite welcome to share this study with me."

The original owners stared.

"That's awfully jolly decent of you!" said Somerton sarcastically. "Your generosity, old chap, is quite overwhelming. And who, if I may venture to ask, do you happen to be?"

"My name is Titus Alexis," said the new boy.

"You don't say so!" exclaimed De Valerie. "You sound like a character out of Julius Caesar! If you've been appointed to this study, you're welcome to remain, but if you've planted yourself here, you'll get the order of the boot!"

It was soon found, however, that Titus Alexis had been placed in Study M by Mr. Crowell; he was there for a fixture. He was a Greek, and De Valerie and Somerton were not exactly pleased with their new study-mate.

When they grew to know him better they were even less pleased!

THE END.

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The Finding of Robert Gresham.

"**D**E dinnah am sarbed, Massa Frank." "Right, Abbie; we'll come at once," replied Frank Hillsworth, nodding to the huge negro who stood respectfully on deck.

The place was a secluded spot on a Central African river. The time, evening. The sun had already sunk to the level of the tree-tops, and in less than an hour the short African twilight would be swiftly followed by night. The small steam yacht had dropped her anchor some half hour previously, and now everything looked peaceful and at rest. Birds of every conceivable description and colour flew overhead, and settled on the twigs and branches.

On the vessel anchored near inshore two young fellows were sitting under an awning, smoking and chatting. They were Frank Hillsworth and his bosom chum, MacDonald Guthrie, a Scot. They were both rich—the sons of millionaires—and had everything in this world they wished for. At present they were on an expedition up river with their old college friend, Professor Montague Palgrave, a renowned scientist. He was below at the moment.

The only other person on the tiny yacht besides those just mentioned was an American negro, whom they had picked up a year before in Alabama. He was a huge man, standing well over six feet in height, and had become greatly attached to Frank and his chum. His name was Pete Coleborn, but he was invariably referred to as "Abbie," a nickname which had stuck to him ever since he had entered their service. On his announcing that dinner was waiting, Frank rose to his feet and tossed away the end of his cigarette.

"Well, Mac, we'd better get below," he said, stretching himself.

"That's so," Mac answered briefly. "Though, I tell ye, I shallna be long down in the stuffy cabin; it's mair refreshin' on deck in my way of thinkin'."

With that they adjourned below. The professor was already seated, and he looked up genially as the two entered the room.

"You're late, my boys," he cried. "Sit down and commence, for I assure you it won't be so long before I'm out of this oven!"

He wiped the perspiration from his high forehead, and took a gulp of lukewarm lemonade. He was right. The saloon was almost unbearable, despite the ports and skylight being wide open. The scientist was a small man, short and slim. He wore his hair rather long and his chin was clean-shaven, though a large military moustache grew on his upper lip. He had a broad, intellectual forehead and shrewd, merry eyes. This was the first real holiday he had permitted himself to indulge in for over five years, and he was enjoying himself immensely.

Dinner was very soon over, and the trio retired to the comparative coolness of the deck, where Abbie was already sitting, solemnly holding a fishing-line overside in the evident endeavour to get a bite. He had no bait on his hook, so could hardly expect to have many catches. It amused him, however, and that was the main question. The twilight was now rapidly darkening into night, but the full moon promised to disperse the darkness with its silvery rays, for it was due to rise soon after sundown. The mosquitoes buzzed about them incessantly, and nets were an absolute necessity.

On the marshy shore thousands of glow-worms could be seen, and the air was filled with the voices of grasshoppers and the croaking of frogs. Frank and his companions listened to these sounds uninterestedly; they had heard the same scores of times before. Suddenly the voice of the old bull hippopotamus thundered out, and immediately afterwards hundreds of finch-like birds and weavers made their appearance at the river for their evening drink. Their flight was accompanied by a weird humming noise, which, the first time Frank had heard it, had considerably startled him. Then came guinea-fowl and pigeons; after them a score of violet-crested cranes, bringing with them that peculiar creaking noise, not unlike the sound of unoiled wheels. Whichever way the occupants of the yacht turned their eyes saw the gleaming lights of the fireflies, swaying to and fro, like fairy lanterns. Near the shore an old striped hyena commenced howling, and far away could be heard the cry of two jackals as they answered back.

Suddenly this peaceful scene was broken

by the voice of Abbie, the negro, who called out to the others. Frank and Mac hurried to the spot where the nigger sat, and inquired what the trouble happened to be.

"Jest yo' look out dere, sah," cried Abbie, pointing to the water a few yards away. "Can yo' make out what dat ting is?"

Frank looked at the spot indicated, and saw, slowly floating down stream, a bottle—a leather bottle—with the stopper securely screwed in, and apparently filled with air, for it was drifting on the sluggish tide like a miniature balloon, and three parts out of the water.

"By Jove, that's curious," cried Frank, staring at the thing. "I wonder what the deuce it can be?"

"I'm no sae certain that it doesna contain a message," exclaimed Mac excitedly. "There'll be no harm in taking it oot o' the watter, anyway."

"Good idea," said Frank, "though I'm rather doubtful about there being a message inside. Here, Abbie, hand over that rod and line; I'll try to hook it."

The nigger did as requested, and looked on with a grin overreaching his liberal features. Frank Hillsworth grasped the rod and swung the line out, but succeeded in missing the bottle by a few inches.

"Ye'll need tae be sharp, Frank," exclaimed the Scot. "The bit thing'll be oot o' reach in a minute."

This was true, for the leather bottle was slowly but surely drifting past the yacht. Frank made another endeavour to get the thing, and, by a stroke of luck, this time the hook caught. He cautiously drew his line in, and a moment after the mysterious object was in his hand. Had it slipped off the hook this story, in all probability, would never have been written. They all collected round it, the professor having joined them. The thing was an ordinary drinking bottle, such as they themselves possessed, and it was doubly secured by cords bound round the neck. Amid some little excitement Mac got out his pocket-knife and cut through them. The air rushed out of the mouth as he unscrewed the stopper, and held it bottom upwards. The scientist laughed.

"Has it turned out a 'frost' after all?" he queried, as nothing appeared.

"I don't know yet," Frank returned. He took the knife and slashed the bottle down, and put his hand into the cavity. Then, "By Jove!" he exclaimed excitedly. "Mac was right. Look here!"

He held up for inspection a piece of dirty rag, on which some pencil tracings could be distinguished. Mac and Professor Palgrave looked at it curiously. It was not more than eighteen inches square, and on closer inspection they found it to be a handkerchief.

Frank bent over it, and then looked up with flushed face.

"It's in English," he told them, "and I can read it quite distinctly. Look at this."

They craned their heads over his shoulders, and Frank commenced to read the scrawl.

It was faint in the extreme, but, nevertheless, quite readable.

"If, by any chance, this falls into the hands of a white man, I pray Heaven that he will do all in his power to help me. I am an Englishman, and am in the hands of a band of six cannibals belonging to the Sayepi tribe. They intend to torture me to-night. I realise that it will be useless to hope I shall be spared; but even if they half kill me I have something to tell which is of great importance and which might mean great changes in the world's history. I shall throw this over the side of the canoe I am in, and pray that it may reach a Britisher's hands, so that he can reach me before I die. My captors intend camping to-night at the junction of this river and the Baldini.—ROBERT GRESHAM, Feb. 29th."

There was a brief silence as Frank finished reading; Mac slapped his thigh excitedly.

"Hech, mon, 'tis the twenty-ninth tae-day," he cried. "The brutes may be torturing the puir beggar this verra moment—'tis tae-nicht, he says!"

"And the camping-place he refers to is only ten miles further on," broke in the professor, eager as anybody. "Abbie, get steam up immediately, and we'll see if we can't rescue the poor fellow. There are only six blacks to contend with, it seems."

Abbie scuttled below, and soon, while they were still talking to one another excitedly, the tiny funnel began to belch forth dense masses of smoke. Half an hour later they were steaming full speed up-river, the professor and his younger companions cleaning their rifles and revolvers in readiness.

It took them an hour and a half to complete the journey, and then they sighted the spot where the waters of the Baldini joined forces with the larger stream. On the shore close to them the occupants of the yacht could see the flames of a camp fire blazing, and the silent, moonlit night was made hideous with the howling and screaming of natives. From the sound it would have been pardonable for a stranger to believe there were fully two score of the cannibals, but Frank and Mac were used to the African natives, and knew that, on occasion, they could kick up a truly appalling din. The gentlemen on the shore were keeping up their reputation at the present moment.

Frank was steering, and the professor and Mac on either side of him, all three looking grim and businesslike. Abbie was doing his duty below, in the hot and steaming engine-room, sweating from every pore. His jovial black face was streaming and glistening as he popped his head above deck to get a breath of fresh air. Frank twirled the wheel round, and drove the yacht close in-shore, among the weeds. He touched the little bell, and Abbie shut off steam and reversed. Then he came on deck and cast the anchor overside. They were so close that they could leap to the bank without the aid of a gangway.

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"Walk as silently as possible," whispered Frank, "and when you spot the Sayepi just blaze away at them, and we'll ask questions afterwards. This isn't a time for play-acting, and we want to frighten the brutes off. If there's only half a dozen, as this fellow Gresham says, we'll soon settle their hash."

"I'm thinkin' we'll need tae be carefu'," Mac commented, as they jumped ashore. "We dinna want to kill the puir man himself."

The fire was quite close now, and a few yards brought the yacht's crew in sight of it, Abbie having armed himself with a heavy piece of iron from the stokehold. They paused for a moment to gaze on the scene before them, and then broke into an involuntary exclamation of horror. The poor Englishman whom they had come to rescue was lying with his back strapped to a tree, while one of the Sayepi had just placed a band of red-hot iron round his naked thigh. They saw Gresham open his mouth to cry out; then he recovered himself and shut it like a trap. But Frank could see that his eyes were shining with an unusual brilliance, and that he was not far from the borders of madness. His chest and legs were a mass of livid, raw burns, and it was a wonder the man was conscious at all. He must have possessed a frame of iron and a constitution equal to two ordinary men's to bear the agony.

Even whilst a native was on his way from the fire, holding in his hand another white-hot piece of metal, Frank, who had taken charge of the affair, gave the word to fire.

Crack! Crack! Crack!

The three rifles spoke simultaneously, and three men dropped dead. The rest, numbering about a dozen—evidently the band of six had been reinforced—gazed about them in consternation and drew their spears. Reckless of the consequences, Abbie, his eyes blazing with fierce anger and loathing, made a dash towards them, swinging his rod of iron, and yelling at the top of his voice. He was amongst them almost before Frank and Mac could realise it, and in a moment the iron in his grasp was swinging round, dealing death liberally.

Four men fell under it before they knew what had hurt them, their skulls smashed in like eggshells; and the remainder, undecided what to do, stampeded towards the very spot where the professor and his companions lay concealed. Seeing that Abbie was out of the line of fire, they pulled their triggers, and three more of the inhuman monsters fell writhing to the ground.

"Don't let the others escape," cried the professor. "If they do, they will only bring another band down upon us before the night's out."

Frank fired twice in quick succession, and two minutes later the entire party, numbering sixteen armed warriors, lay stretched on the grass, sleeping their last long sleep. They had paid dearly for their evening's sport. Taken by surprise as they were, they had no opportunity to even use their weapons, and it is not surprising that they fell so easy a prey to the up-to-date Winchester rifles.

After the racket which had been disturbing the forest the place seemed strangely silent. Even the usual night sounds, which are always heard in the African forest, were hushed and seemed absent. Frank shook himself and swung his repeater over his shoulder. It was the signal for Mac and the scientist to do likewise, and they followed him to the tree-trunk to which Gresham was secured, Abbie bringing up the rear, looking satisfied with himself; for he dearly loved a "scrap," and he had just been indulging to his heart's content.

The prisoner, seeing that he was to be rescued, had swooned off, and was now quite unconscious, breathing faintly. Mac tenderly cut the ropes, and then helped to carry the poor, burnt body to the yacht, where they placed him in the best bunk. The professor carefully and gently washed the wounds which covered Gresham's body, and then applied a soothing ointment, finally wrapping him up in bandages. When this was completed he seemed to be breathing more easily, so they left him and collected on deck.

"We'd better get back down-river as quick as this old tub'll take us," suggested Frank, as he lit a cheroot. "I shouldn't be at all surprised if our shots were heard by some neighbouring village or other. Perhaps at this very moment they are hurrying to the spot to investigate."

"Probably," said the professor gravely.

He turned, and called to Abbie.

"Yes, sah?"

"You'd better get up steam and take us back down the river with all possible expedition. Stop for nothing. It's a matter of life and death, and we must reach a doctor."

"I guess de steam am already up, sah, so we'll soon hab dis heah little boat under way," returned the negro cheerfully, diving down below.

Ten days later Frank Hillsworth, Mac Guthrie, and Professor Palgrave were collected round the bed of Robert Gresham, at the main hotel in Kazyati, a little river settlement, some five-and-twenty miles from the scene of the rescue. The tortured man had lain in bed for over seven days, and was now strong enough to see his preservers. He had first regained consciousness the day after his coming on board Frank's yacht, but had been so weak and in such agony that to speak was an impossibility. Now, however, owing to his iron constitution, he was rapidly gaining strength and for the first time was allowed to speak to his rescuers, who, so far, had only seen and attended him. When they entered the room his eyes rested upon them with grateful thankfulness. For a moment he did not speak, then he cleared his throat.

"My friends," he exclaimed huskily, and taking Frank by the hand. "My dear friends, I should say—before I lay before you what I intend to, I must tell you that it will be useless for me to try to express to you my thanks. I could not put my thoughts into

(Continued on p. iv of cover.)

the adequate words—words that would describe my feelings towards you."

He paused for a moment, and Frank and Mac made as if to say something, but Gresham waved them into silence. "Had you been in my position," he went on, "had you undergone the fiendish tortures which I have undergone, then, and only then, would you have understood the great regard in which I hold you. Had it not been for your intervention, where do you suppose I should have been now?"

"Dead!" Mac said briefly, and to the point.

"Ah, I thought you would say that," exclaimed the sick man. "But you are wrong. I should have been far from dead: I should have been alive. Those fiends—they cannot be called human beings—intended torturing me until I was all but dead. Then they would have stopped, and waited until I was almost well again. Then again they would repeat the process till the time came when they had driven me into a raving maniac—mad with pain and agony. When that came about I should no longer be a human being—so altered by their torturing should I have been that men would have taken me for some wild denizen of the forest."

Gresham paused, and the others could hardly repress a shudder as they realised what would have been his fate if left in the hands of the Sayepi cannibals.

"But we will banish these unpleasant subjects from our minds," Gresham said with a

smile. "Since you have done me this great service I will show you what I can do to express my gratitude—for, remember, never had a man a greater reason for living than I have. I am an inventor. I am not very rich, and so have been unable to do everything I should wish. In return for your kindness I intend to take you into my confidence and tell you my secret—such a secret that will startle the whole civilised world!"

Gresham took a sip of water, and Frank looked at the professor questioningly. What was coming next?

"To put the matter briefly, my invention is a vessel—an airship, in fact—the like of which has never before been produced."

"But there are numerous airships in the world at the present moment," said Frank.

"Those?" said Gresham scornfully. "What are they, anyhow? Perhaps I was wrong in saying my invention was an airship. It is two things—an aeronef and a projectile in one. My vessel is one that is destined to fly through the realms of trackless space!"

"Space!" the professor echoed excitedly—he was an enthusiastic amateur astronomer. "My dear sir, what do you mean to imply? You surely cannot have produced a vessel that will fly to—to the moon or the planets?"

"That is the case," returned Gresham gravely. "My ship will find no difficulty in reaching Mars or Venus!"

(To be continued.)

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