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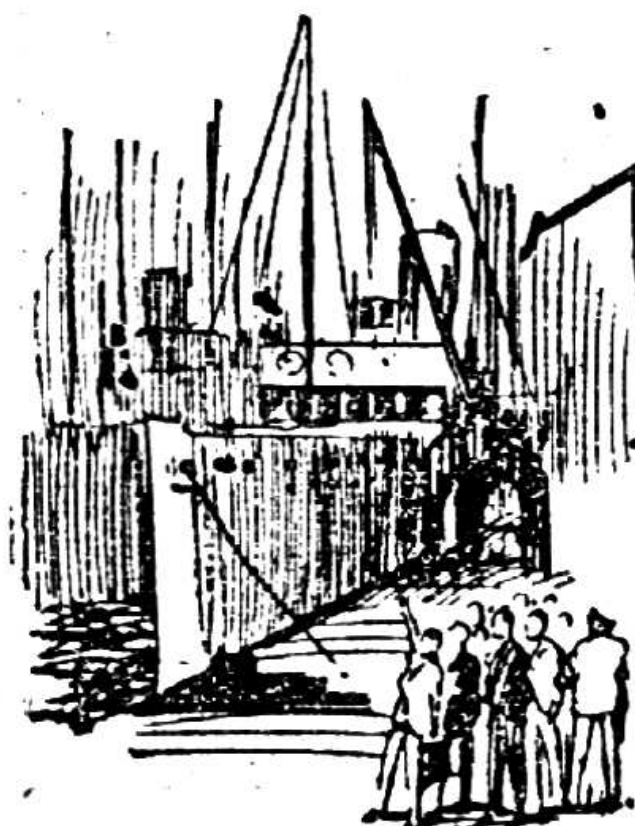
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The Return of the Wanderers

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(THE NARRATIVE RELATED THROUGHOUT BY NIPPER.)

CHAPTER I.

CIVILISATION AGAIN!

"HURRAH!"

That cheer rang out joyously from a great many juvenile throats. Handforth, of the St. Frank's Remove, led the cheering, and he was tremendously excited.

"Hurrah!" he roared, again and again. "Civilisation in sight, my sons! We shall escape from the swamp, and we shall be all serene! We shall get back to St. Frank's for the new term, after all!"

"Hurrah!"

"The youngsters are gettin' rather excited, by gad!" remarked Lord Dorrimore calmly.

"Let them cheer—I like to see it!" said Nelson Lee, with a smile. "Upon my soul, Dorrie, I did not hope for anything so wonderful as this. Frankly, I must confess that I was extremely despondent. I had almost given up hope."

"Same here, old man," said Dorrie. "Why, only a couple of hours ago, I was practically certain that we should never get out of this swamp, and that we should all bid good-bye to Mother Earth before darkness came again!"

Both Nelson Lee and Lord Dorrimore were speaking seriously. And they had every cause to, for we had been passing through some extraordinary adventures

just recently. I was feeling altogether too delighted and relieved to say much. I could hardly believe that everything was coming all right—that we should soon be back in civilisation.

But even this is not quite correct.

We told ourselves that we should return to civilisation at once—but we should really return to the wild forest land of Brazil. Wild as this country was, however, and even though it was populated by savages, we looked upon it as civilisation.

For we had just come out of the land of terror and wonder: we had left the land of the Arzacs. We had taken our departure from the amazing city of El Dorado, leaving that place crumbling into ruins, in the throes of terrible earthquakes and volcanic eruptions.

That tract of land was entirely surrounded by a deadly and terrible swamp—a swamp which extended for hundreds and hundreds of miles; and we had started to cross this swamp, in sheer desperation.

A channel had appeared—a wide opening of water, and, upon hastily constructed rafts, manufactured for us by the Arzacs themselves, we had commenced the perilous crossing.

And then, after the terrible day, night had come, and we had discovered that the channel had closed, imprisoning us within the terrible embrace of the poisonous swamp.

We had given up hope—all of us. But then another miracle had happened; another upheaval of earth had taken place, far below. And the swamp had heaved and rocked, and a great wave of water had come tearing across the swamp, lifting our rafts upon its crest, and hurling them onwards.

—And now we were practically floating along a wide channel of water, and the dry forest lands were ahead of us—quite near, in fact. Within a couple of hours we reckoned to be on dry ground, and then it would not be a very difficult matter for us to go across country and to strike the River Majarra, where Lord Dorrimore's steam yacht, *The Wanderer*, was at anchor.

And so we were all extremely light-hearted.

Many of the juniors, in fact, hardly knew what to do with themselves. After all the perils we had passed through—after the nightmare adventures of the past twenty-four hours—it seemed almost impossible that we were coming to a period of quietness. Even as I allowed my mind to go back over the happenings of the past few days, I could hardly believe that everything had actually occurred. It seemed like some dream—some strange hallucination. But I knew very well that it was all true—that we had just escaped from a country which was filled with wonders from end to end.

But had that land of the Arzacs survived?

This was a point which I could not answer. We had left El Dorado hastily—we had left that wonderful city crumbling into ruins, and with volcanic eruptions converting the peaceful city into a perfect inferno, and somehow I feared that El Dorado, and the Arzacs themselves, would be completely wiped out, so that no trace of them would remain.

But there was not much time for us to think of the Arzacs just now, for we were fully occupied with our own affairs. It soon became necessary to keep a very sharp look-out for a decent landing-place.

For we were now practically alongside the solid country. The channel through the swamp had become a river, and, on either side of us, there were wooded banks.

"It is quite easy to understand what has happened," remarked Nelson Lee. "This flow of water has opened up the swamp, and it has found its own channel

now—joining up with a tiny creek, which has now become a swiftly flowing river. I think it will be just as well if we allow ourselves to float along this river as far as possible."

"That's my opinion, too, old man," said Lord Dorrimore. "An' we're goin' in the right direction, I believe. In any case, this forest is impenetrable, an' I don't much fancy the task of forcing a way through. As long as we can keep to the river we shall be all right."

"But we might be going right away from the Majarra, Dorrie," I put in. "In that case, we shall find that we have a tremendously long journey——"

"No, Nipper; we are going in the right direction," said Nelson Lee, who had been consulting a small compass. "I think if we keep to our present course we shall not be far wrong. According to my calculations, the Majarra is, roughly, sixty miles from this present spot, and as long as we are travelling along on the rafts it will be all for the good."

Luck was certainly with us, for throughout the day we continued to pass along that river, the rafts behaving quite decently, on the whole. It was necessary, of course, to have men posted at all points, in order to keep the clumsy affairs away from the banks, for the river twisted and turned in all directions. And now and again we came to some rapids, down which we shot at break-neck speed. On more than one occasion, in fact, we half expected to be flung off into the water.

But these little incidents, after the excitement we had already passed through, were quite insignificant. They did not even make us excited. And, by the evening, we had covered at least forty miles, and now Nelson Lee calculated that we were only about twenty-five miles from the Majarra itself—from the spot where *The Wanderer* was moored.

I wondered whether we should find the yacht still there, or whether the Comte de Plessigny's men would have taken her away. There was certainly this contingency to reckon with. It was quite possible that our late enemy had played such a trick upon us. We did not know what had happened to the count now, but we believed—and with every reason—that the scoundrel had met his fate over the swamp, for, escaping in Lord Dorrimore's airship, the count had

been caught in a sudden storm, and we had seen the airship tilt up, and then it had driven onwards with the wind, apparently to certain destruction.

As I have said, however, we had no time for thinking of such things. We had our own troubles to contend with, and we made light of them.

When evening came we camped in a broad clearing beside the river. And I suddenly remembered that I was enormously hungry. The other juniors were hungry, too; all the members of our party, in fact, were feeling the effect of the journey now.

We did not possess one morsel of food between the lot of us. We had left El Dorado in a great hurry, and nothing had been brought. But everybody was extremely cheerful, and there was not much fear of us being overtaken by starvation, in any case, for there were all manner of wild fruits to be found in the forest.

The girls were particularly cheerful and brave. They were delighted with the way everything had gone, and they looked forward with great pleasure to the thought of getting once more on board *The Wanderer*—back to civilisation. For the present they were in charge of Lady Helen Tregellis-West and Miss Janet Kerrigan. Fires were blazing in all directions, and the scene was quite cheerful. Captain Burton was talking with the members of his crew, and he was optimistic.

The juniors, led by Handforth, were performing a kind of triumphant dance in the centre of the clearing, surrounded by the fires. They looked like so many Indians executing a war-dance. There was only one fellow who was not included in the scene, and that fellow was Fatty Little, of the Remove.

Fatty was ill—at least, he told us he was ill. He certainly didn't look it, but he ought to have known better than us. He complained, in a hollow voice, that he was surely but slowly dying from starvation.

Personally, I didn't very well see how this could be, for Fatty looked extremely healthy. His cheeks were ruddy, and he was the very picture of robust health. He sat on the grass, munching some berries which had been found near by. They were not particularly luscious, but they were wholesome; he was ready to eat anything at such a time as this.

Lord Dorrimore came strolling in

from the surrounding forest. He was looking quite cheerful, and he was smoking one of the last cigarettes he possessed. And in his hand he held a huge object which appeared to be of considerable weight; it was round, and it looked like an enormous coconut, only it was a different shape.

"Feeling hungry, Fatty?" he inquired cheerfully.

Fatty Little groaned.

"Hungry, sir!" he repeated, in a hollow voice. "I—I've passed that, sir! I'm starving, you know! By to-morrow morning I shall be a corpse!"

Lord Dorrimore grinned.

"Don't you believe it, my son!" he said. "I think you'd be able to survive if you were compelled to go without food for about three months! You've got enough blubber on you to last a tremendous time. Good gracious! What's the matter? What are you looking so gloomy about? Everythin' has turned out rippin'ly, an' we're as safe as houses!"

"Rather, sir!" said Handforth, coming up. "And by to-morrow we shall be back on the *Majarra*—we shall be back on the yacht. By George! We'll have a jolly good feed then, I'll bet!"

"Don't!" moaned Fatty Little.

"Eh?"

"Don't make me think of it!" said the fat boy. "It's—it's awful to talk about grub when we haven't got any!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"And you chaps laugh!" said Fatty, in tragic tones. "You stand there and laugh at me! Where are your hearts? Are they made of stone? I didn't think you were capable of standing round somebody who's dying, and laugh——"

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared the juniors.

"Look who's dying!" grinned Reginald Pitt. "Did you ever see anything so pitiful?"

"Well, I've got somethin' decent to eat here," remarked Lord Dorrimore calmly. "If you will wait——"

"Something to eat?" roared Fatty Little, jumping to his feet with extraordinary agility—considering that he was dying. "Did—did you say something to eat, sir?"

"By gad!" exclaimed Lord Dorrimore. "That was remarkably good, Little! Considerin' that you're on the point of peggin' out, you really ought not to spring about like that—it's most

unwise! You'll strain somethin', an' then the end will come swiftly!"

Everybody grinned, and Fatty gave a gulp.

"I—I'm feeling better now, sir?" he exclaimed eagerly. "Did—did you say you had something to eat—"

"Yes, my lad—here it is!"

And his lordship held out the object which was grasped in his hand.

"What—what's that, sir?"

"A Brazil nut!" said Lord Dorrimore.

"A which?"

"To be more correct, a good many Brazil nuts!" said Dorrie.

"That — that thing?" exclaimed Handforth, staring. "That thing's a Brazil nut, sir?"

"Exactly."

"It's no good trying to pull my leg like that, sir!" grinned Handforth knowingly. "A Brazil nut, indeed! Do you think I haven't seen 'em? I've eaten thousands of Brazil nuts! I haven't had any since we've been out here; but that's because we haven't had time to look for any. But you can't kid me that that thing's a Brazil nut!"

"No?" smiled Dorrie. "You seem very certain, my boy!"

"Well, anybody would be certain!" said Handforth. "Fancy calling that big thing a Brazil nut! We all know that Brazil nuts are little things, about two inches long, with rough shells, and all nobbly!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Poor old Handy!" I grinned. "Don't you simply love to air your ignorance?"

Handforth glared.

"Ignorance!" he roared. "What do you mean, you ass?"

"Well, you ought to know that Brazil nuts grow in cases," I exclaimed. "They don't hang on the trees just as we see them in the shops in England. Brazil nuts are taken out of a kind of gourd—a big outer shell, which is crammed with the nuts like sardines are packed in a tin. You break the outer shell, and then all the nuts are revealed."

"Gimme one!" gasped Fatty, fairly dancing with eagerness. "I love Brazil nuts—and they're a ripping food!"

"I quite agree with you, my lad—they are," said Lord Dorrimore. "An' it may interest you to know that about eight members of the yacht's crew are at present out in the forest, gathering as

many nuts as they can lay hands on. They will be here presently, and then we shall hold a nut-cracking competition. We shall have a fairly decent supper, after all—fresh Brazil nuts and sparkling water. What could be better?"

"And—and is that thing really a Brazil nut?" asked Handforth. "Well, I'm jiggered! I thought they were little things—I thought they grew in clumps, you know. No wonder I couldn't spot any on the trees when I was looking!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"You were lookin' for the wrong sort of thing, Handy!" chuckled Lord Dorrimore. "Well, we'll sample this one, an' see what it's like. Personally, I think it will prove to be A 1. Who's got a hammer?"

Nobody possessed such a useful article; but there were plenty of big stones to be found, and very soon there was a great chorus of crackings and hammerings. And, before long, a large supply of delightfully fresh Brazil nuts was on hand. And we all enjoyed the feed tremendously, for we were hungry, and the Brazil nuts were satisfying.

"Not exactly up to a Savoy table d'hôte," remarked Lord Dorrimore, after we had finished; "but I suppose the vegetarian tribe would rave over a supper of this kind, by gad!"

"Not much to rave about!" muttered Fullwood. "Personally, I'm longin' for a decent feed again—real, good old English food—steak and potatoes an' greens, an' all that kind of thing. I'm fed up to the neck with all the messes we've been eatin' lately. An' these Brazil nuts to finish up with are just about the limit!"

"Oh, rather!" agreed Gulliver.

"Anybody might think we were monkeys!" exclaimed Bell, with a sneer.

Lord Dorrimore evidently caught the last few words, for he smiled genially at the Nuts of the Remove.

"Now you come to remind me, by Jingo!" he exclaimed thoughtfully. "Now you come to remind me, my sons, there is some slight resemblance. In a fairly dim light it would be quite easy to mistake you for monkeys!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"That's one for you, Fully!" said Handforth, with a glare.

"Oh, I'm not grumblin'!" said Fullwood. "I'm only sayin' that I'm about fed up with this kind of life. We came

out to the Amazon for a holiday adventure. Well, we've had one—sn' I'm not sayin' a word against it. We shall take a tremendous story back with us to England. By gad! Won't the papers come out in huge headlines over our little adventures among the Arzacs!"

"Yes, and if the papers told the truth, they'd say a few words about you and Gully and Bell!" said Handforth. "A miserable set of rotters—that's what you are! When everything was going all right, you were as merry as larks. But when things went wrong—when it seemed that we should be left in El Dorado for good—you were full of grumbles and sneers and growls. You wanted to blame everything on to Lord Dorrimore, and you acted like the rotters you are. It'll be many a long day before you come on another trip with us!"

"Hear, hear!" exclaimed many of the other juniors.

Fullwood and Co. had nothing to say, but looked very savage.

"Now, boys, this won't do!" put in Nelson Lee, smilingly. "We have got out of our troubles exceedingly well, I consider, and there is no time now to commence squabbling. Some of you, perhaps, were rather despondent—and I am not at all surprised at that. I was extremely downhearted myself at one time."

"But you didn't start blaming Lord Dorrimore for dragging you into the trouble, did you, sir?" inquired Reginald Pitt pointedly.

"Well, no——"

"Then that's altogether different, sir," said Pitt. "You worked like a good 'un to help us out of the trouble, but those three rotters made things worse——"

"Now, Pitt, we must finish with all this kind of thing," smiled Nelson Lee. "We must be very thankful that we have escaped, and that everybody is alive and well. And now I think we will get some sleep before dawn, for we must be off at the first sign of daylight."

And so the argument was finished then and there. But Fullwood and Co. were not in very high favour with the rest of the fellows. For they had acted in a decidedly caddish manner all along, and Lord Dorrimore knew their characters now, although at the beginning of the trip he had been somewhat deceived.

We slept well, for we had had a very tiring time. In fact, I found it diffi-

cult to remember when I had last slept. Such a tremendous lot had happened, such an enormous amount of adventure had been crammed into a short space of time, that I found it very difficult to obtain a proper perspective of things. Anyhow, we all slept like logs until dawn came.

We had no beds, of course, and no blankets. We simply slept out in the open, surrounded by the camp fires. But we were so tired that we didn't care anything about blankets or anything of that nature. All we wanted was sleep.

However, the camp was quite a model one, considering the circumstances. Nelson Lee had charge of everything, and he arranged the whole business so carefully and smoothly that everybody was delighted. And in the morning, when the sun was just gaining warmth, we set out on our journey through the thick forest towards the Majarra.

The distance was only just over twenty miles, according to Nelson Lee's calculations. But he reckoned that it would take us at least six hours to reach the river, at the spot where the Wanderer had been left moored.

"Six hours!" exclaimed Handforth, when he heard. "Why, it won't take us all that time, you chaps! It's only just over twenty miles, and we can walk three miles an hour. I'll bet. We can walk four miles an hour easily."

"Well, even then, that'll only be twenty-four miles in the six hours," said Pitt. "Besides, we can't walk so fast as that in this bush. It's just about seven o'clock now. And if we reach the Majarra by half-past two or three I shall think we're jolly lucky!"

"And so shall I!" I put in. "Personally, I don't believe we shall reach the yacht until this evening!"

And so we started off on the last lap of our journey towards civilisation.

CHAPTER II.

ROGUES IN PERIL.

THAT journey through the forest was one of the most interesting trips of the whole holiday. We were all in very high spirits, and we were all extremely interested in the many wonders and marvels that we came across at almost every turn.

It is really impossible for me to go into any details concerning the sights we saw on that trip. Insects, snakes, wild animals—all these we encountered in plenty. Flowers in the most marvellous profusion compelled us to halt in sheer admiration every now and again. And the gigantic trees of the forest were staggering in their enormously overpowering size. We seemed to be mere puny specks compared with the marvels of the forest.

And it must not be supposed that we had an easy time of it.

The very opposite was the case. It was not merely a walk through the trees, through the delightful glades one might picture. For the main part of the journey we were compelled to fight our way along. We had to force our way through thick undergrowth, and through dense masses and grasses. It was a terribly trying journey for the members of the yacht's crew. For these staunch, strong individuals led the way. And they cleared the path for the remainder of the party.

The girls, of course, were almost lost. They had quite an easy time of it, considering. And, for that matter, so did we. The real hard work was left to the strong men of the party.

Monkeys chattered at us in scores as we passed along. Strange birds with gorgeous plumage flew out of the trees on every hand, as we disturbed them by our movements. And as we went along we were light-hearted and happy. We were going back to Lord Dorrimore's yacht. We were going back to peace and quietness—at least so we supposed. But before we gained that peace and quietness, we were destined to pass through one or two more exciting adventures.

We were rather surfeited with thrills—we had had enough excitement and adventure and peril to last us for quite a long time. And now all we wanted was to get back on the yacht and to steam once more into the mighty Amazon—into the track of other steamers. There we could see fresh faces; we should be able to enjoy the last week or two of our holiday to the full.

By two o'clock in the afternoon we had only traversed about fifteen miles of our journey. So Nelson Lee's calculation was rather out—as he admitted. We were all come to the conclusion that we should not reach the Majarra until the

evening. And we should be very lucky if we arrived by dusk.

Towards the latter part of the afternoon, we came upon signs of human habitation. Now and again we passed through miserable native villages—Indian villages, squalid and dirty and untidy. And there was one rather remarkable fact which we noted.

In every one of these native villages we saw no men—except old, decrepit individuals who were past active life.

There were boys and girls and women in plenty—but no able-bodied men were to be seen.

These Indians were not at all hostile—they could not very well be, considering that we were a large party, and well able to take care of ourselves.

Besides, as I have said, the men were absent. Where were they? Where had all these Indians gone to?

We attempted to interrogate some of the natives in two or three of the villages, but we could get no satisfaction. They did not understand—or they pretended that they did not understand. At all events, we only saw women and children and old men. The active members of the tribes—the warriors, as it were—were absent.

"It's rather astonishin', old man," remarked Lord Dorrimore, just after we had passed through another village. "It strikes me that all these fellows are on the warpath. What do you think?"

"It is possible, of course," replied Nelson Lee. "I imagine that the Indians are engaged in a battle somewhere, and it may be that they are simply out hunting. It is rather difficult to tell."

Umlosi shook his head.

"Wau! Be thou prepared for trouble, my master!" he exclaimed, in his rumbling voice. "Methinks there will be great doings ere long. I am not of the pessimistic mind, but I fear that we shall meet with further perils ere we return to the places of civilisation. It is a grim omen—these warriors being absent from their homes. I like it not, and I would warn thee to be careful, and to keep thine eyes well opened!"

Dorrie sighed.

"More trouble!" he exclaimed, in a resigned voice. "Well, we're havin' about enough adventure on this trip to last us the rest of our lives. When I get back to England, I think I

shall take a huge house in the country, miles from anywhere, and settle down to a quiet life."

Nelson Lee grinned.

"Yes, Dorrie, I can just imagine you doing that!" he chuckled. "I'll guarantee that you don't remain in England for more than a month. And then you'll go gallivanting off into some out-of-the-way corner of the earth where you'll probably get killed by savages!"

"It's quite possible," agreed Lord Dorrimore. "After the journey home on the yacht, I shall be about fed up with the quiet life, and I shall be yearning for some more excitement. An' Umlosi will come with me, too—that's takin' for granted, of course, that we ever get across to England!"

"We shall go through anything now," I said. "After all the perils we've passed through—after all the dangers we've survived—I don't think anything could do us any harm now, Dorrie. As for these Indians being absent from their villages, I don't think it means much. These natives aren't hostile towards white men, are they?"

"Oh, no!" exclaimed Lord Dorrimore. "Not a bit of it, my son. They're not at all hostile!"

"Why, do you mean that they are, sir?" asked Tommy Watson.

"Some of them are so hostile that if they got a chance they'd put the whole lot of us into a boilin' pot!" said Lord Dorrimore grimly. "That's about the truth of it, my lad, although I don't want to scare you. Many of these Indians in the back regions of the Amazon forest are cannibals. They're regular savages of the worst type. Luckily, we've got a large party, an' it is extremely unlikely that we shall be attacked. But you can take it for granted that we're safe!"

We continued our journey, feeling rather uncertain, and very anxious to obtain sight of the Majarra. We should all be very glad when we arrived at our destination.

Evening was drawing near when Umlosi declared that he smelt water. I always knew that he had a pretty good kind of a nose, but I hadn't been aware that it was capable of this. None of the others could notice much difference in the surrounding forest. It seemed almost exactly the same to us. But Umlosi was positive, and his statement was justified about half an hour afterwards.

For, almost without warning, we came to the end of the thick, dense forest, and there right in front of us, lay the River Majarra.

The spot was unfamiliar to us, and it was clear that we had come upon the river at a higher point than we had reached before, when we had been on the surface of the water on board the yacht.

"Now, the great question is, how far are we from the Wanderer?" exclaimed Dr. Brett. "If we have two or three hours' march, it seems that we shall have to camp here for the night, Mr. Lee. And camping on this spot would be far more difficult than——"

"There's no need for you to worry, my dear Brett," interrupted Nelson Lee. "Unless my calculations are entirely at fault, the Wanderer is only a couple of miles down the river, just round the bend. We ought to be able to get there quite easily within an hour. And that will just suit us nicely, for I imagine there are about two hours of daylight left."

"That's about it, old man," agreed Lord Dorrimore. "By gad! I shall be jolly pleased to get back on board. There are heaps of cigars down in my cabin, an' a few thousand cigarettes. Ye gods and little fishes! To think that I've been existing on two cigarettes a day for the last week! It's a wonder to me that I haven't pined away an' pegged out long before this!"

"Well, I don't suppose you'll have to wait much longer, Dorrie," smiled Nelson Lee. "I shall enjoy a good cigar myself; but I think I am no worse off for the loss. Smoking is a luxury, and by no means a necessity. As a matter of fact, smoking is distinctly harmful to the constitution. I dare say we should both feel better if we threw it up for good. Now's our chance—after growing accustomed to being without the weed for so long."

Lord Dorrimore shook his head.

"Not me, old man!" he replied firmly. "I may be a wicked sinner, an' I'm quite content to let my health suffer a bit, but I'm not going to be without a cigar or a cigarette. And, if it comes to that, I haven't grown accustomed to bein' without, for I've managed to eke out my supplies somehow or other. But there's no need for us to stick here jawin' about smokes. Let's get busy on the journey once again."

We found it impossible to follow the river bank. To be quite truthful, there was no river bank. The trees ran right down into the water, and the ground was soft and spongy and treacherous. The only possible method of going up the river was to force our way through the dense undergrowth six or seven hundred yards away from the river, and then we went on our journey following the river parallel.

Under the vast canopy of the forest, it was now growing very dim, and the beasts of the night were becoming active. We could hear strange cries coming from all sides, and the birds were becoming silent. The last portion of our journey was distinctly wearisome, and we were heartily glad when Nelson Lee determined to turn off to the right in order to reach the river bank once more, for he judged that we should now be very close to the spot where we had left the *Wanderer*.

And so, in the fast fading light of the day, we pressed on through the dense jungle, until, at length, we came out into the open once again, with the wide river stretching out in front of us. The *Majarra* was only a tributary of the Amazon, but was a considerable river, nevertheless.

We came upon the river quite suddenly, bursting out into full view of it from between the thick trees. Many members of the party arrived before I did—before any of the juniors did, in fact. And we saw them pause, and we heard many exclamations of astonishment.

"By the Lord Harry!" I heard Captain Burton exclaim. "What's this? What's happening over there, Mr. Lee? There's some devilry afoot, or I'm no judge! Umlosi was apparently right when he told us to look out for trouble!"

Tommy Watson and Sir Montie Tregellis-West looked at me in rather a puzzled way.

"Begad! What can it mean, dear old boys?" murmured Sir Montie. "Trouble? I thought we were gettin' to the end of all our worries, begad! I really don't think I could survive another night in the open. I don't, really. Just look at my clothin', Nipper, dear boy. I feel more like a tramp than anythin' else. I simply must have a change of linen, an' a new suit, an' some new socks, an' a fresh pair of shoes, an'——"

"Dry up, Montie!" I interrupted. "There's some grim business afoot, by the look of things!"

I pressed on, and my chums hurried after me, with all the other juniors. And then, as we came within full sight of the river, we paused, and stared out across the still, placid water.

A rather startling sight met our gaze. There, a little to the left of us, lay Lord Dorrimore's yacht in midstream. She was looking splendid—a sight for sore eyes, indeed. It was simply gorgeous to see the *Wanderer* again. Apparently she had not been touched, and she lay there, with her white decks trim and tidy, and with everything on board in perfect order. But there seemed to be nobody on board. The decks were deserted—the bridge was deserted. And the yacht lay there in the quiet water, calm and untroubled.

But, although we were so tremendously pleased to see her again—to see that very tangible link of civilisation—we hardly gave the yacht a glance. For our attention was claimed by something else—something which was taking place immediately opposite us, on the far side of the river.

The yacht, being a little on the side, our view was not obstructed, and we could see right across the river to the other bank. And it was there, in a little clearing that the scene was taking place which attracted our attention. The whole space was filled with a horde of yelling, dancing Indians—savages of a very fierce type, and they were evidently enjoying themselves hugely in their own particular way.

"My only hat!" muttered Tommy Watson.

"Dear old boys, this is shockin'—it is truly appallin'!" exclaimed Sir Montie, in a grave, quiet voice.

Not many of the others spoke, for they were held spellbound by the spectacle which lay before them. I didn't feel like speaking, either, for the sight which I beheld was decidedly startling.

The whole scene on the other bank of the river was illuminated by great flaring torches, which were burning everywhere, bound to stakes of wood which were placed in the ground. These torches gave a great light, which flickered up and down in the most eerie manner.

The Indians, half-naked, dancing round about the torches, looked like so many demons as they went hither and thither.

At first, I could not fully understand what their game was, and why they were so excited. I merely thought that they were holding some kind of festival, and they were enjoying themselves as a kind of preliminary before the feast. And then, quite suddenly, I became aware of the actual truth.

Right in the very centre of the clearing, there were six extra large wooden stakes erected—stakes which rose to the height of about seven or eight feet. And bound to these thick stakes there were figures—figures which at first I took to be merely wooden images, or something of that kind.

But then, as I watched, I saw one of the figures move, and then, gazing more intently, I became aware of the truth. And I think I went a shade paler as I watched, and I clenched my fists. For I recognised those figures as men—six white men!

"Good heavens!" I muttered. "Do—do you see, gov'nor?"

"Yes, Nipper, I see quite plainly!" replied Nelson Lee. "And I think I understand, too!"

"Well, I don't understand, sir!" I exclaimed. "Why are those men bound there in that way? What does it mean, sir?"

"Well, Nipper, you know as well as I do that the Comte de Plessigny left several men in charge of *The Wanderer*. The count had a small vessel of his own—a steam launch called the *Sunbeam*, and that vessel was in charge of a man named Captain Snagg, and he had a companion called Cradley, I believe. There were some others—half-breeds, and so forth. They were obviously in charge of *The Wanderer*. Well, something of a very drastic nature has occurred."

"I imagine it has!" said Lord Dorrimore grimly.

"These Indians are probably the fellows who assisted the count in attacking the yacht, before we went on our journey to El Dorado," went on Nelson Lee. "The Indians probably returned for some reason, and they swarmed over the yacht, turning against their former

masters. It is quite clear to see that the savages are intoxicated."

"Drunk, do you mean, sir?"

"Undoubtedly, my boy," replied Nelson Lee quietly. "These Indians are drunk, and there is only one explanation to be made. They took possession of the yacht, and they managed to get to the stores—the spirit stores. They have been drinking heavily—brandy, whisky—anything in the nature of fire-water. These native Indians are quite easy to handle, I believe, if they are dealt with properly. But it is quite apparent that they have been dealt with in the very opposite direction. And they have got drunk—and now they are deadly dangerous. As you see, they have made the six white men prisoners, and they are now holding a kind of dance. In their present condition there is no telling what they will do."

"I think it is fairly obvious what they intend to do, Mr. Lee," remarked Dr. Brett pointedly.

Nelson Lee nodded.

"Yes, we are left in no doubt as to that point, doctor," said Nelson Lee. "These unfortunate rogues have had the tables turned upon them in a most uncomfortable manner. And now they find themselves in a very perilous predicament."

"Do you think the Indians mean to do them any harm, sir?" inquired Handforth.

"My dear lad, cannot you see?" asked Lee. "Those stakes are high, and underneath them you will observe large piles of brushwood, and twigs and other inflammable material. What can it mean? Simply that these Indians are dancing round their victims before putting them to death!"

"Bogad!"

"Oh, my only hat!"

"Do—do you mean that these men are to be burnt at the stake, sir?" asked Reginald Pitt, horrified.

"That, I believe, is the intention of these Indians," replied Nelson Lee. "The savages intend to roast their victims alive—horrible as it may sound. The situation is desperate, and it seems that we have arrived in the nick of time. At any moment these intoxicated fellows may set fire to that brushwood—and then there will be no chance whatever for us to save Snagg and his men."

Fullwood sniffed.

"It seems to me that they don't

deserve to be saved!" he exclaimed. "They were quite content to let us die in that swamp——"

"That is not the way to look at things, Fullwood," interrupted Nelson Lee sharply. "These men may be rogues, but they were only in the pay of the Comte de Plessigny, after all. And, even taking it for granted that they are scoundrels, we simply cannot remain here and see them done to death in this brutal, fiendish manner. We must do everything possible to rescue them. Retribution of a terrible character has overtaken the wretches, but we cannot allow this scene to proceed."

"Rather not!" said Lord Dorrimore. "Of course we cannot allow it to proceed. But I shall be awfully obliged, Lee, if you'll tell me how we can put a stopper on the game. That crowd of Indians is a pretty considerable one, and we don't happen to possess any firearms. I'm willin' to do anythin' possible to help those poor brutes on the other side—but I don't fancy bein' tied to one of those stakes on my own account. Mind you, I'm quite game for anythin' that's in the wind, but I'm hanged if I can see what we can do."

"Well, we must do something, Dorrie—we must make some effort to go to the rescue," said Nelson Lee. "And there is not a second to be lost. By what I can see, these Indians are nearly ready to roast their victims, and once those fires are started, no power on earth will be able to save the white men from a ghastly death."

Somehow, as I stood there, I felt extremely helpless. What could we do? How could we go to the aid of Captain Snagg and his men? How could we prevent these yelling, intoxicated Indians from doing their foul work?

CHAPTER III.

THE ROUT OF THE INDIANS.

NELSON LEE was looking very grim.

"I feared that something of this kind had happened, Dorrie," he exclaimed. "When we passed all those villages, bare of their male inhabitants, I suspected that the brutes were on the warpath. We must not waste time in talking, but we must act without the slightest delay!"

"Exactly," said Dorrie. "But how are we goin' to act?"

"There is only one thing to be done," went on the gov'nor grimly. "The Indians are totally unaware of our presence—they do not know that we have arrived, and they are therefore unprepared for any attack. I do not suppose they are even keeping a watch, so we have everything in our favour."

"Do you propose that we should swim across the river?" asked Dorrie.

"My dear man, that would be impossible."

"So I thought," said his lordship. "We might start, but I believe there are a good many caymans about this region—an' we should only get about a hundred yards before we were converted into so many suppers. What's your idea, old man?"

"We must get across to the yacht—as many of us as possible," said Nelson Lee. "You will observe that the yacht is much nearer the opposite bank than it is to this. It is, in fact, quite close to the terrible scene which we are now witnessing. If we can only get on board the yacht, we shall be able to take effective measures to rescue our unfortunate fellow creatures. Happily, it will not be difficult for us to get across to the yacht."

"It would be quite easy if we had wings," said Dorrie.

"My dear man, I wish you would be serious!" exclaimed Nelson Lee. "You have apparently failed to see a good many canoes lying among the trees against the water two or three hundred yards to our right. I do not pretend to know why they were left there, or anything of that sort. But I do know that they will come in useful, and that we can use them as a means of transporting a good many of our number across to the yacht. It would be as well, in fact, to get everybody across, if possible—for we shall be fairly safe once we are on board."

"We'd better not go too openly, Mr. Lee," put in Dr. Brett. "If once we are seen by these Indians, we shall probably be surrounded within a few minutes, and then it will be a battle for life, indeed!"

"Yes, it will be necessary to maintain extreme caution," said Nelson Lee.

It did not take the gov'nor long to arrange matters. It was really remarkable how quickly he obtained a grasp of

the situation, and how he mapped out our course of procedure.

Mr. Hudson, the first officer of *The Wanderer*, was placed in charge of the operations, and he was given instructions to take the party over to the yacht as quickly and as silently as possible, transporting them in batches—the ladies and the girls first, the juniors second, and then the other members of the party.

Nelson Lee, Dorrie, Captain Burton, Mr. McNab, and several others went in advance. They seized two or three of the canoes, and paddled silently and swiftly across the intervening space of water to the yacht's side.

Very fortunately, I was able to get in one of the lots, too—and Sir Montie Tregollis-West, and Tommy Watson were with me. We smuggled ourselves in somehow, and I was tremendously pleased, for I did not want to miss anything.

It was fortunate that the yacht was much nearer the other bank, for the great bulk of the vessel completely hid our movements. The Indians were on the other side of the river, and they were surrounded by the flaring torches. It was really impossible for them to see anything beyond that great circle of flaring light.

And, being intoxicated, they were too excited and mad to keep any watch. They apparently considered themselves quite safe from any attack, and they were proceeding with their orgy with unrestricted violence and insanity.

Our task, therefore, was not such a difficult one after all. I suppose we could have been far more reckless, and we should not have been discovered.

At all events, we stepped up on board the yacht without our presence being known to the Indians. And, once upon the deck, I felt absolutely secure. I wanted to yell—I wanted to shout with joy at being once more on the planks of the good old steam yacht.

It seemed that there was to be no end to our life of excitement. We had just escaped from *El Dorado*, we had come across that terrible swamp, and we had traversed the forest. And now that we had arrived on board *The Wanderer*, we found that fresh troubles were brewing, and it was necessary for us to act instantly and with precision.

The excitement was all the greater

because we had assumed that we should have a very quiet time once we arrived on the *Majarra*. It did not seem that we should have much quietness yet!

Nelson Lee, who was on deck, turned to us as we mounted the accommodation ladder.

"I should advise you boys to remain well in the background," he said in a low voice. "There might be some danger—these Indians are probably armed with poisoned arrows, and I cannot afford to let you undergo any risks. So you must remain well in cover, my lads."

"Leave it to me, sir," I said softly. "I'll see that we come to no harm!"

Nelson Lee nodded, and crept forward to the other rail of the vessel. From this point of vantage, he could gaze right across the water to the bank of the stream, where the scene was being enacted.

"We'll remain in cover—I don't think!" I murmured to my chums. "We're going to find a place where we can watch everything, my sons—and we're going to join in the tussle, if we can possibly find a way. I wouldn't miss this for anything!"

"Rather not!" said Tommy Watson.

"Dear old boys, I am ready to help in any way I can!" said Sir Montie. "But, really, I don't see what we can do. And, if it comes to that, I don't see what Mr. Lee can do either!"

"You'll see soon," I said. "The gov'nor isn't the kind of man to sit still and do nothing!"

We crept along the yacht's decks, until we were well forward. And then, crouching low, we at last arrived at the rail, our movements being concealed by a number of odds and ends that were lying about. And there we stood, against the rail, watching the scene. And, in our present position, we were able to see the whole affair much more clearly.

For, of course, the yacht was quite near to the bank, and we were raised above the level of the river. Thus we could gaze right down upon the river bank, and we could see everything below us.

The Indians were now yelling more fiercely than before. They were dancing in a mad, frenzied kind of way. The torches were blazing and smoking, and the whole scene was positively demoniac.

I could not help feeling extremely sorry for Captain Snagg, Mr. Cradley, and the others. There they were, tied to the very top of those great posts. They were secured in such a way that it was impossible for them to move. And, beneath them, lay the piles of brushwood—all ready to be ignited when the savage Indians took it into their heads to roast their victims.

And, even as we watched, we saw something which brought a gasp to our throats. For several of the Indians were tearing down some of the torches, and they were now rushing down towards the centre of the clearing, brandishing the torches above their heads, dancing, and shouting at the tops of their voices. Their intentions were obvious.

"Dear old boys—they're goin' to set fire to those piles of twigs an' things now!" exclaimed Sir Montie, in a husky voice. "We're too late—we can do nothin'! Oh, begad! Those poor chaps are goin' to be killed!"

Tommy Watson clenched his fists.

"We must do something—we must do something!" he exclaimed desperately.

"We can't do anything, Tommy," I put in. "We can simply stand here and watch; but I can't believe that the gov'nor will remain idle, too. Look! They are getting ready!"

Rather to our relief, the Indians were not setting fire to the bonfires yet. They were dancing about, and the torches were being waved up and down and round, sending sparks out by the myriad. It was evidently a kind of final frenzy before the actual roasting business commenced.

But Captain Snagg and his companions were in ghastly peril.

At any moment those fires might be lighted, and then the flames would leap upwards, and we should witness a horrifying spectacle. The flames, leaping upwards, would kill the unfortunate men in no time—but they would suffer terrible agony during those moments.

And I felt sick as I gazed upon the scene, for somehow I felt that it would be impossible to render assistance in time.

And then, just when I was beginning to feel hopeless, I felt a faint throbbing in the deck of the yacht. At first I hardly noticed it, and I did not give it serious thought. But then the throbbing became rather more pronounced, and I knew at once that an engine had started.

An engine!

"What—what on earth can that be?" I asked, in a husky whisper. "Don't you feel it, you chaps?"

"That—that throbbing?" whispered Watson.

"Yes!"

"Dear old boy, I'm puzzled!" murmured Sir Montie. "I felt it a moment or two ago, an' I have been wonderin'—"

"By Jingo! I've got it!" I exclaimed, my heart giving a sudden leap. "Don't you remember?"

"Remember what?" asked Watson. "The engines can't have started yet, you ass! Steam isn't up, and it takes hours to light the furnaces—"

"But it doesn't take hours to set a petrol motor going!" I broke in. "Just one turn of the handle, and there you are! The fire hoses are operated by a special engine—a petrol engine down below. I wouldn't mind betting anything you like that Mr. MacNab has got busy on the job—he's started that petrol motor, and the idea is to put the fire hose into operation!"

"Begad!"

"My only hat! What a scheme!" said Watson. "Why, even if they set fire to that brushwood, it might be possible to put it out—"

"Exactly!" I exclaimed. "That's the wheeze, I expect. There you are—what did I tell you?"

I pointed along the deck, and there we saw several figures struggling up from one of the hatchways with a couple of strong hose pipes. These were rushed to the rail, and they were held in position, ready. Nelson Lee was in charge of one, Lord Dorrimore in charge of the other.

And, just at that moment, the thing we expected took place. The Indians rushed forward with their torches, and they thrust them deep into the masses of brushwood.

"Look!" gasped Watson. "Oh, my goodness!"

At first, only smoke appeared from those piles of wood, but we knew that at any moment they might burst into flame—and then—

I waited and watched, wondering if the gov'nor would act in time; and across the water came the sound of voices—English-speaking voices.

"You curs—you infernal devils!" roared the voice of Captain Snagg,

hoarse and shrill with fury and desperation. "This is murder! You'll be made to pay for this—you'll be wiped out—"

"What's the good, captain—what's the good of talking?" came the voice of Cradley. "We've got to stand it—we've got to die now, and it won't do any good to grumble!"

"Well spoken!" I muttered. "I didn't think those rotters had enough pluck! They're taking their medicine like men!"

"They'll be killed—they'll be burnt up!" muttered Watson, horrified. "Oh, can't something be done—"

"Something is being done!" I exclaimed suddenly.

Even as I was speaking, the piles of brushwood under three of these stakes burst into flame—not big flames, but slow, licking tongues of fire, which crept up the post towards the victims who were bound above.

And, simultaneously, came a hissing roar near by, and we saw two great streams of water come hurtling out from the yacht's side.

The hoses were powerful, and those streams of water went right across the intervening space, right into the clearing.

Swish! Swish!

The columns of water struck two or three groups of the yelling Indians, knocking them flying—yelling with fright now. The other Indians paused, turned round, and all stood still. They were amazed; they were taken by surprise, and they hardly knew what to do.

And those streams of water went splashing on to the burning wood, extinguishing the fires almost at once. The white men had hardly been scorched.

And then pandemonium reigned.

The fires were put out, and the six victims tied to the wooden stakes were saved—for the time being. Those columns of water from the hoses were now being played upon the Indians themselves, and the savage beggars did not appear to like the experience. They rushed about, shrieking and shouting and in a state of panic. Many of the torches were still burning, and we could see everything that was happening with great distinctness.

"Hurrah!" roared Handforth, rushing across the deck. "That's the stuff to give 'em, sir!"

I heaved a little sigh of relief, for

Handforth's voice told me a lot. I knew, for example, that the ladies and the girls were on board, since the juniors were not due to come until afterwards. Mr. Hudson had apparently been busy, and he had been transporting his cargo of human beings across the water to the yacht.

Within a moment or two I discovered that almost every member of the party had been brought—only three canoe loads remained, and these were even now on their way over the water to the yacht's side. They would certainly arrive before any attack could be made by the Indians.

For it was certain that the Indians would show some resistance.

It was not likely that such a great horde of savages would stand by and accept defeat without a scrap. The brutes did not lose much time.

Having got over their first surprise, and having realised fully that they had enemies to contend with, they set to work. Bows and arrows were produced from seemingly nowhere, and the natives released flights of their deadly weapons almost at once.

The arrows came hurtling against the yacht's side, some falling on deck, and everybody was ordered to take cover, for these arrows were poisoned, and one touch would probably mean death.

Fortunately, the aim of the Indians was very wild. They were intoxicated, and they hardly knew what they were doing in their excitement. The greater part of their arrows went completely astray, and either flew harmlessly overhead, or smashed against the yacht's side near the water line.

And it must not be supposed that the enemy had everything all his own way. Rifles had been brought up from below—rifles in plenty, with enough ammunition to last for twenty-four hours, if necessary, and a raging fire was poured into the ranks of the Indians.

Crack! Crack! Crack!

The rifles spat out viciously, and a hail of bullets went charging across into the savage horde. The range was short, and it was almost impossible to miss. Many of the Indians went down, shrieking and yelling, and making the most terrible noise imaginable. The whole business was appalling.

The girls, of course, were safe below—Nelson Lee would not allow them to remain on deck. For one reason, he did

not want them to be in any danger, and, for another reason, he was determined that they should not witness this terrible scene.

The battle raged fiercely.

But it did not last long—it was impossible for it to last long. It was so fierce and so deadly that only one possible thing could result. Everything was in our favour—we held the yacht, and two dozen men were firing repeater rifles as fast as they could inject the cartridges. The Indians were falling in dozens, and their companions were not long in getting into a terrific panic.

Personally, I did not feel one single qualm as I looked at the scene. The Indians were brutes—savages—almost inhuman in their bestial cruelty, and it was almost a pleasure to see them falling. In any case, it was their lives or ours—and there was only one choice in a matter of that kind.

We were very pleased to see that Captain Snagg and his men were unmolested. They were still tied helplessly to the stakes, but they were in no danger now, for the fires were extinguished, and the Indians themselves did not seem to take any notice whatever of their late victims. They were too excited concerning the battle that they had apparently forgotten their original purpose.

A good many of the savages charged down into the water, and got into their canoes. Then they came storming towards the yacht, yelling, screaming, and defiant.

But they were soon taught a lesson.

Not one of the canoes were allowed to get within fifty feet of the yacht. A deadly fire was poured into the frail crafts, and a good many of the Indians fell writhing into the water—never to rise again.

The battle, as I have said, was short and sharp, but it was quite exciting enough while it lasted.

Finally, after finding that it was absolutely impossible to get anywhere near the yacht, the remaining canoes sped off down the stream, their occupants thoroughly scared, and their only thought was to get as far away as possible.

Those Indians who had remained on the shore were also seized with panic, and they fled into the forest. And the only Indians who remained on the scene were the dead and the dying.

"I think that's about settled their

hash, old man," remarked Lord Dorri-more complacently. "They've all scooted, I think—the whole job lot! Quite a pretty little squad, wasn't it?"

"I think luck has been with us, Dorrie," said Nelson Lee. "We are distinctly fortunate in getting out of the battle without a single casualty. So far as I know, nobody on board the yacht has been hit."

"That's not very surprisin'," said Dorrie. "Those darned Indians were so drunk that they couldn't see straight, you know. We've done a few of them in, but that's all they're fit for."

"Wise words, O, N'Kose!" exclaimed Umlosi. "Thou art indeed right, my father. These savage people are but vermin, and it is better that they should be exterminated. I am sore at heart, N'Kose, since it was impossible for me to take part in the fighting."

"It's just as well you didn't try, Umlosi," said Nelson Lee. "If you had ventured to go ashore with your famous spear, I do not think you would have done much damage, for you would have been pierced by at least two dozen poisoned arrows before you got near enough to strike a blow. However the affair is over, and I think we may send a party ashore at once."

"That's the idea!" said Lord Dorri-more briskly.

And, without any further delay, a party was got ready to go ashore, in order to cut down the victims.

CHAPTER IV.

HOMeward BOUND.

SIR MONTIE TREGELLIS WEST adjusted his pince-nez.

"It's rather a peculiar position, when one comes to think of it, dear old boys," he remarked. "We've just been savin' the lives of Captain Snagg an' his confederates—an' only a few days ago they were hand-in-glove with the Comte de Plessigny, an' they were all plannin' to get us put out of the way for good."

"It's a case of returning good for evil, Montie," I remarked. "And, in any case, I don't suppose Captain Snagg had much to do with our former misfortunes. It was the count who planned everything, and Snagg and his men simply carried out orders. In any case, we shall probably hear the truth soon."

Quite a large party had gone ashore, including Nelson Lee, Lord Dorrimore, Dr. Brett, Colonel Kerrigan, and others. Everybody was armed to the teeth, for it was quite possible that some of the Indians were lurking in the bush a little way back.

But this did not seem to be the case.

After the party had landed, Nelson Lee and Lord Dorrimore led the way from the river bank towards the spot where the six great stakes were thrust into the ground. Everything was still and quiet—a strange contrast to the tremendous din which had been proceeding so shortly before.

"I think the beggars have gone," remarked Lee. "There is no ambush about this, you know—no trickery. We scared the life out of the rotters, and now they've cleared off for good, in my opinion. At the same time, it will be just as well to cut down these fellows, and get them on board the yacht without any waste of time."

"That is my idea exactly," said Nelson Lee. "One cannot be too sure with these savages, Dorrie. On the yacht we shall be quite safe, since it will be possible to keep a strict guard, and we can defend the vessel with comparative ease."

The light was not very bright now, for many of the torches were burning themselves out, and others were mere smouldering stumps.

Nelson Lee and Dorrie approached the stake on the extreme left side—the stake upon which Captain Snagg was securely tied. He looked down at them with a strange light in his eyes as they approached.

"Thank Heaven you came in time, sir!" exclaimed the captain, in a subdued voice. "I thought it was all up with us—I felt the heat rising up just when those hoses got into play. By gosh! It was wonderful, sir—it was an amazing exhibition!"

"We apparently arrived at the right moment, Captain Snagg!" said Nelson Lee grimly. "Probably you were extremely astonished to see us—since you imagined that we were quite helpless a good many hundreds of miles away. But your employer, the count, was somewhat unfortunate in his scheming; his plans did not work out as they were intended to work out."

"I reckon I'd like a word with you, sir, as soon as I get down from this fix,"

said Captain Snagg. "Mind you, I ain't going to try to excuse myself in any way. I know I've done wrong, and I know I'm in for trouble now. But I deserve it. And I'm grateful, sir—I'm grateful for being saved from a death that would have been ghastly. I'm afraid poor Cradley is about finished!"

It was not long before Captain Snagg was cut down, and then the others were released, too.

Captain Snagg was as hard as nails, and he had passed through the ordeal without showing much effect. Cradley, his mate, was looking at least twenty years older, and his hair had turned positively grey, although it had been without a single grey strand less than two hours before. The other men were natives of Brazil—that is to say, Spanish-speaking individuals, who had been scared out of their wits. Two of them, in fact, were unconscious; sheer terror had overtaken them, and they had swooned. The other two were like a couple of children—sobbing and whimpering and trembling from head to foot with the shock of it all.

"Now then—now then!" exclaimed Captain Snagg. "Pull yourselves together! There's no danger now, and there's no reason why you should act like babies. It was a bit of a stiff ordeal, I know; but it's not the first narrow shave I've had with cannibals!"

"They will be all right presently, Snagg," said Nelson Lee. "I should advise you to bring them on board the yacht as soon as you possibly can. There is just a possibility that the Indians may return, and we do not want to give them any chance of hurling their poisoned arrows at us from the cover of those trees."

The captain nodded.

"That's right enough, sir. These Indians are treacherous brutes, at the best," he exclaimed. "Some of them—further down the river—are decent enough types of humanity, but these up here are regular devils! By thunder! We're grateful—we're so grateful that it's absolutely impossible for us to express what we think. You saved our lives, you came at the right time, and rescued us from a terrible death!"

"I thought it was all up with us!" muttered Cradley. "That fire was alight, and the flames were leaping up towards my feet——"

"Man alive, you've gone as grey as

a badger!" interrupted Captain Snagg, staring at Cradley in a wondering manner. "You're grey, man, and only an hour ago your hair was as brown as a squirrel's!"

"It's a wonder I'm not dead—or insane!" said Cradley. "You may have had adventures with cannibals before, man, but I've not! I hope to Heaven I never have another experience like this! It'll finish me!"

Cradley and Captain Snagg were, of course, quite British. The other men were Spanish speaking ruffians—two of them being half-breeds. And their courage had not been able to stand up to the test. Two of them were unconscious, as I have said, and the other two were utterly bowled over, and incapable of lifting a finger to help themselves. They were transferred to the yacht as soon as possible, and then Captain Snagg thrust out his hand towards Lord Dorrimore.

"I don't suppose you'll take it, sir, but I mean it!" he said quietly. "I've been a dirty dog, I've been a skunk! But you saved my life, and I'd like to thank you!"

Dorrie took the captain's fist at once. "That's all right, old man," he said. "I'm not the kind of fellow to bear malice. We came along an' saw you in difficulties, so we lent a hand—that's all! There's no need to make a fuss about it!"

Captain Snagg seemed to swallow something.

"I reckon this has been a lesson to me that I sha'n't forget for the rest of my life, sir!" he exclaimed. "After you have taken us down the river and given us over into the hands of the authorities, I shall have time to think about it all, and I shall never cease to be grateful."

"After I've handed you over to the authorities—eh?" said Dorrie.

"Yee, sir; we expect that," said Snagg. "After what we did the other day—after we attacked your yacht, and acted like the pirates we are, it's only right to expect that you'll have some sort of satisfaction. It was that count fellow who drove us on to it. He paid us well, and he led us to understand that you and your crowd were a set of rogues. I'm not trying to excuse myself, sir—nothing I can say will do that. After the way we treated you, it would have been only right if you had left us to

die. But you didn't do that. You came to our rescue at considerable risk to yourselves——"

"Nonsense!" interrupted Lord Dorrimore. "There was hardly any risk attached to it, man. By the way, what has become of your own steam launch, the Sunbeam?"

"She is some way down the river, sir, moored against the bank."

"Anybody on board?" asked Dorrie.

"No, sir."

"What do you propose to do about her?"

The captain shrugged his shoulders.

"Well, sir, it's hardly a question of what I propose to do," he exclaimed. "I reckon we've forfeited all right to set foot on that vessel again. I want you to thoroughly understand, sir, that I'm not trying to whitewash myself in any way. I know I've done wrong—a darn lot of wrong—but I am very thankful that nobody has come to any real harm, and that that scoundrel has been beaten by you. And if there's anything I can do, sir, to prove my gratitude, I'll do it. Just say the word, sir, and I'm your man!"

"And I'm another, sir!" put in Mr. Cradley stoutly.

Lord Dorrimore grinned.

"Well, you don't seem to be such bad sorts, after all," he exclaimed. "I'll tell you what I'll do. You can remain on board this vessel for the night. I reckon you can do with a good sleep. Then, in the morning, you have my full permission to get back to your own launch, and to go about your own business."

Captain Snagg stared.

"Why, sir, do you mean that you're going to let us go?" he inquired.

"Exactly!"

"But—but we acted like pirates——"

"So you said before," interrupted Lord Dorrimore. "However, this little affair now has made a difference. I'm not a vindictive fellow, and everything has turned out all right. You can get back to your own boat in the morning, and the authorities will never know anything about the affair."

"By thunder!" exclaimed Captain Snagg. "You're a brick, sir! You're a real white man!"

"We—we don't deserve it, sir!" put in Cradley, in a low voice.

Dorrie nodded.

"Quite true, you don't!" he agreed



The ruffians were quite incapable of lifting a finger to help themselves, and were soon transferred to the yacht. (See page 16.)

calmly. "You deserve something far more drastic. But we don't all get what we deserve in this world. I'm willin' to overlook your little naughtiness, and there's an end of the matter. You'd better get below as soon as you can, an' find some grub. Possibly you're hungry. I have already detailed one of the stewards to look after you."

Captain Snagg and his men were altogether too overcome with gratitude to say much. They had expected to be put in irons, and to be handed over to the authorities at Manaos. And, instead, they were to be allowed to go free, and to return to their own vessel.

We all slept like tops that night, and it was a supreme joy to be in cabins once more, with clean sheets, blankets, and with every modern luxury and convenience.

"After all, my dear boys, this is better than bein' in El Dorado!" remarked Sir Montie Tregollis-West, as he lay luxuriously back on his soft cushion. "It was quite decent bein' among the Arzacs for a time, but I don't think I should fancy it for good, begad!"

"Rather not!" said Tommy Watson. "We've got back to civilisation, and soon we shall be once more upon the Amazon itself, and then we shall steam down the river, out into the Atlantic, and then for home!"

"Home?" I echoed. "Home and—St. Frank's!"

"Dear old boy, please don't!" exclaimed Sir Montie. "Don't bring St. Frank's into it now. It reminds me that we've got to go back to work—to the new term, you know. I wonder if we shall arrive in time?"

"I reckon we shall just about do it," I said. "Well, that's all the better. We've had a summer holiday crammed full of interest and excitement from beginning to end, and we've had really nothing to complain of. Dangers, mysteries, wonders, and goodness knows what else, all packed into those few weeks!"

And so we went to sleep peacefully, and with perfect comfort. And in the morning we arose to find the sun shining gloriously, and the Majarra looking delightful. Captain Snagg, Cradley, and the other four men had already departed, and we were not likely to see them again. But I had an idea that they were converted—they would not be likely to undertake any shady work again. Lord

Dorrimore's treatment of them had taught them a lesson which they were not likely to forget.

We didn't make a move that day. We simply took it easy, lolling about the decks, discussing our recent adventures, and enjoying ourselves generally.

Of course, all the members of the yacht's crew were extremely busy. They had not worked so hard since they had left British shores. The yacht was being cleaned, turned upside down, and put into perfect trim for the return trip.

Steam was got up in the boilers, and when evening came, the good old Wanderer was spick and span from stem to stern, steam was up, and she was ready to drop down the river at any moment.

In fact, everything was all serene. Our party was intact, and our mission had been successful. Colonel Kerrigan was in our midst, and he would return to England with us—there to tell his wonderful story.

A huge feast of rejoicing was held that night, and Fatty Little covered himself with glory. He demolished more grub than he had ever demolished before in the same space of time. He simply beat his own records—and that was a somewhat marvellous proposition.

The girls were lighthearted and joyous. We had dances, singing, playing, and goodness knows what else. We all enjoyed ourselves so much that when we retired to our cabins we were thoroughly tired out. And we knew that in the morning we should start on our trip down the river—we should start away for the Amazon and for the Atlantic. We should be homeward bound before another twenty-four hours had elapsed. We were leaving the land of mystery behind us, and we were booked for St. Frank's.

During that evening—I mean at the end of the evening, when a good many of the juniors collected together—there was some discussion concerning the Comte de Plessigny. Had he escaped? Or was the count dead?

"Personally, I think the count died," said Handforth. "Don't you remember how we saw the airship tilt up in that sudden storm? I wouldn't mind betting anything you like that the airship came down in the swamp, or in the thick forest, and the rotter was killed on the spot. In any case, we're not likely to see or hear of him again."

"That's just about my opinion," said Reginald Pitt. "There's no reason why we should talk about the count. We've finished with him. Rats to the count!"

"Hear, hear!"

"I've been thinking about the Arzacs and El Dorado," said Jack Grey seriously. "It makes me feel a bit rotten, you know. Those Arzacs are quite decent people—peaceful and kindly and good-natured. It seems a rotten shame, the way the city was smashed up by that earthquake. I only hope that the place was not entirely demolished."

I shook my head.

"It's really impossible for us to form any opinion, Grey," I said. "We don't know what happened after we left the country. When we took our departure we were in a tremendous hurry, and the volcano was then erupting at its worst. Earthquakes were happening, too, and there is every reason for us to suppose that the entire city was demolished, and the whole race of Arzacs obliterated."

"How awful!" said McClure.

"Terrible!" echoed Church. "It—it makes me feel a bit off colour, you know. And all that gold, too! Think of it—thousands and thousands of tons of pure gold! I wonder if any of it will ever be recovered?"

"You can bet your boots there will be plenty of efforts made to find it!" I said. "In fact, when we get back to England, not even Colonel Kerrigan himself will give the locality of this El Dorado. For it would mean that hundreds of expeditions would start out at once—all with the object of getting that gold. Still, it's no good talking about those things now. We have finished with El Dorado, and we are now back on board the yacht. It all seems like a strange dream—a kind of nightmare. The best thing we can do is to go to bed, and think only of the future."

"That's the ticket!" said Handforth. "And to-morrow we shall be en route for England—for St. Frank's!"

CHAPTER V

THE RETURN OF THE WANDERERS.

ENGLAND!

The Wanderer was steaming up the Channel, and there, not far distant, lay the white cliffs of old England. They were a welcome sight to the members of the party, who

had just returned from tropical climes to the old country. The promenade deck of the yacht was lined with juniors and with the others. They were all delighted to find themselves so near to home once more.

"Ain't it great?" exclaimed Handforth, looking round with gleaming eyes. "My hat! It's jolly decent to go away for the summer holidays—to go out into foreign places—but it's a top-hole to come back again! It will be a rare treat to see London once again!"

"Rather!" said McClure.

"We'll have a fine old time!" put in Church.

"I don't know so much about that," I exclaimed. "You fellows seem to forget that this is the first day of term at St. Frank's. We shall be late in arriving as it is. There won't be much time to spare when we get to London."

"Why, we're not all going straight to St. Frank's, are we?" asked Do Valerie.

"Well, not at once, of course," I said. "The gov'nor will arrange everything with Dr. Stafford, and we shall probably arrive at St. Frank's about three or four days late. That will give us all a day or two at home before getting back to school for the new term."

"By jingo!" exclaimed Somerton. "It doesn't seem possible that we have met with so many startling adventures. Now that we're back in English waters again, I can hardly believe that we actually went to El Dorado, and that we were prisoners in the hands of the Arzacs, and that we were in the thick of that tremendous fight on the city walls. It seems like an episode out of an imaginative adventure story, and not a slice of real life!"

"Yes, it wants a bit of swallowing," I agreed. "Well, we did go through all those adventures, and everybody in England will soon be talking about it. We shall be famous—our names will be sent broadcast all over the world!"

"Good!" said Handforth. "I suppose they'll mention me?"

"Well, it's just possible—if one of the reporters happens to forget himself," I remarked calmly. "But it's not likely that we shall figure much in the reports, Handy. We shall simply be mentioned as a crowd of juniors from St. Frank's. The people who will receive all the public attention will be Lord Dorri-

more, Mr. Lee, Colonel Kerrigan, and Captain Burton."

"To say nothing of the Comte de Plessigny!" put in Tommy Watson.

"Oh, yes, he'll come in for a good bit of publicity, I've no doubt," I agreed. "And I wouldn't mind betting that the British public—and the public of the whole world, in fact—will regard us as a set of extra fine yarn spinners. They won't swallow our story, you know. They'll think we've made three-parts of it up, particularly as El Dorado has been demolished."

"I hear that Colonel Kerrigan intends to go all over the country, lecturing," put in Reginald Pitt. "That's rather a decent idea, you know—and he'll make a good bit of money out of it, too. Rather more money than T. T. will, I imagine!" he added, with a chuckle.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

We all joined in the laugh. For Timothy Tucker, of the *Remove*, had been very little in evidence during the journey home. He had stuck tight to his cabin, and after some little time we had discovered that T. T. was busily preparing a large number of lectures. And those lectures, he declared, he intended giving when he arrived back at St. Frank's. It was his idea to delight all the other members of the various *Forms* by recounting our adventures from the start. But it was very doubtful whether Tucker would get any audiences.

Nelson Lee came strolling along the deck, and he smiled at us.

"Well, boys, we're near home once again!" he exclaimed. "By the way, within a very short time we shall be passing Caistowe."

"Caistowe!"

"Oh, ripping!"

"When shall we sight the sea town, sir?"

"In about ten minutes time from now, I imagine, when we have turned that headland," said Nelson Lee. "Caistowe lies just beyond, and it would be rather interesting to look at the water from the sea."

There was an immediate rush for the yacht's rail, for the juniors were all eager to catch a glimpse of the seaside town of Caistowe, which was situated only three miles from St. Frank's on the Sussex coast. We had been there many a time, particularly during the hot weather, for bathes. It was almost like

home to the majority of the juniors, and they were eager to catch a glimpse of the place.

Just as Nelson Lee had said, soon after we passed the headland we came within sight of the little fishing town, with its small pier and its straggling houses along the promenade. Everything was familiar to us, and we gazed at Caistowe with a kind of affectionate regard.

And when we had passed by and were once more proceeding along the Channel towards the mouth of the Thames, the juniors were excitedly discussing what they would do when we arrived at Tilbury that evening.

But they need not have troubled to discuss the matter, for Lord Dorrimore had already made full and complete plans.

We had stopped for an hour or two at Weymouth, and from that town Lord Dorrimore had sent out a tremendous batch of telegrams, instructions for all sorts of people. And when we arrived in London we should find all sorts of things prepared for our reception.

I knew what the scheme was, and I was quite pleased about it. There would be a kind of gathering of the clans in Lord Dorrimore's town house in Kensington. Parents would be there, brothers, sisters—in fact, any relatives who liked to come. And there would be a tremendous reception—feasting and merry-making, and all the rest of it. Dorrie was preparing a welcome home for the party, and it was to be a regularly gorgeous affair.

We arrived at Tilbury just at about seven o'clock in the evening, and it was a great moment when we stepped off the gangway on to solid ground—on the shores of old England once again. There was much cheering on the part of the juniors, and everybody was light-hearted and gay and happy.

We found a special train waiting for us, a train which had been ordered by Dorrie. It took the whole party straight up to London without a stop, and when we arrived at the terminus we found other surprises.

A whole fleet of motor-cars was waiting outside ready to take us all to Dorrie's town residence. That ride through London was one which was long remembered by us all.

It was a glorious evening, mild and

fine, with hardly a breath of wind. Overhead the stars were gleaming, and the streets of London were a blaze of light.

We threaded our way through the traffic, past motor-buses, taxi-cabs, and all the other vehicles which used the roads. Through the City itself, then up Fleet Street, through the Strand, across Trafalgar Square, up Haymarket into Piccadilly Circus, and then straight on to Dorrie's place in Kensington.

And when we arrived we found the house blazing with light from roof to basement. Scores of people were there waiting for us.

Sir Montie Tregellis-West's guardian was present, Handforth's pater, and many other parents were in evidence. Brothers and sisters galore, and all sorts of friends. It is quite impossible for me to go into full details regarding that wonderful evening.

All I know is that we enjoyed ourselves tremendously, and that we were the heroes of the hour.

Reporters swarmed round the place like bees round a honey-pot. They would not be satisfied until they had interviewed Nelson Lee, Lord Dorrimore and Colonel Kerrigan. The Pressmen obtained a large amount of information, and they went off happy. In the morning it was quite obvious that the newspapers would come out with flaring headlines regarding the marvels of El Dorado and the other wonderful things we had discovered.

We all stayed the night in Dorrie's town house, and then the next morning every member of the party—I mean the juniors and the girls—they all went off to their various homes for a day or two before returning to St. Frank's. Nelson Lee and I remained with Dorrie, and we were glad of the short period of rest and quietness.

As I had guessed, the morning papers came out with tremendously exciting stories concerning our trip up the Amazon and up the Majarra. The whole of England was talking about us—the whole world, as a matter of fact, since the story was flashed over the cables in every direction of the compass.

Personally I was rather anxious to get back to St. Frank's. The new term had started and there was really no reason why we should remain away for long. Nelson Lee was required, being the

Housemaster of the Ancient House, and the Remove, of course, would be rather bare with so many members absent. But all this would be adjusted within a few days, for it was agreed upon that we should return by one train on Wednesday morning.

It was now Monday, and all the fellows knew of the plan. We were to meet at Victoria at a fixed time, and then we should travel down to St. Frank's on the same train, arriving in one lot, so to speak.

On the Tuesday Nelson Lee found time to visit his rooms in Grey's Inn Road, and everything there was in perfect order and spick and span, for Mrs. Jones, our worthy housekeeper, had neglected nothing.

We had one or two visitors, the most welcome of them all being Chief Detective-Inspector Lennard, of Scotland Yard.

"It's great to see you back again, Lee!" exclaimed the C.I.D. man, as he lolled back in one of the easy-chairs in the consulting-room. "We've been rather lost without you, you know. By what I can see of it, you thrive on peril and excitement. I've never seen you looking better, and as for Master Nipper here, he looks almost disgustingly healthy."

I grinned.

"That's the result of the sea air," I explained.

"The result of jolly good feeding and splashing about!" said Lennard grimly. "And now, instead of getting straight into harness, as you ought to, you are both off to St. Frank's to simply waste your time down there doing nothing. I can tell you frankly, Lee, it's a bit disappointing."

Nelson Lee chuckled.

"I'm awfully sorry, old man, but we rather like St. Frank's," he said. "Besides, there is quite a lot of detective work to be done down there, if necessary. I can assure you, my dear fellow, that Nipper and I have done more in the detective line since we went to St. Frank's—"

"It won't do, Lee—I can't follow it!" protested Detective-Inspector Leonard. "Look what's been happening recently while you've been away!"

"Well, what has been happening?" I put in.

Lennard stared.

"Don't you know?" he asked.

"We weren't aware that anything particularly startling had taken place," put in Nelson Lee.

"It only goes to prove how you got out of the run of things if you go gallivanting about to these out-of-the-way corners of the world!" sniffed Lennard. "I suppose you know that Scotland Yard has its hands full up at the present, so full up, in fact, that we hardly know where we are?"

"Well, Scotland Yard is usually busy," I remarked. "The official detective force takes such an enormous time to find a clue and to get on the track of a criminal, that it is always full up with work. Of course, if it was a really efficient force, half the members would have nothing to do!"

The chief-inspector grinned.

"It's a good thing I'm accustomed to your cheek, my lad," he said. "But, seriously, there has been some pretty lively trouble of late, Lee. A crime wave has been sweeping right over the country, from north to south, and from east to west. The number of robberies, frauds and murders which have been taking place is simply appalling!"

"H'm!" said Nelson Lee. "I am sorry to hear that!"

"Of course, you understand why it is, guv'nor!" I put in. "All the criminals knew that you were out of the country, and so they took advantage of the fact — Whoa! Look out!"

Whizz!

A book, deftly hurled by Nelson Lee, missed my head by a few inches and thudded on the floor.

"I don't want any of your sarcasm, my lad!" said the guv'nor sternly. "Well, Lennard, how do you account for this crime wave? What theory have you got concerning it?"

The chief-inspector scratched his head.

"As a matter of fact, there's only one theory that we can really adopt," he said. "It is generally acknowledged at the Yard that these crimes are the work of one gang—one huge organisation. It seems to me that a great many crooks have got together and banded themselves into one concern. And they are operating in different parts of the country simultaneously. In many towns people are almost afraid to go out at night, and

houses are not left unprotected for any money."

"How is it down in Sussex?" I inquired. "Any trouble there?"

Lennard nodded.

"Oh, yes; you'll probably find some when you get to St. Frank's!" he said grimly. "Bannington and Helmford have been visited two or three times recently by these new criminals. There has been quite a lot of trouble in Bannington, I hear. Several big burglaries and other criminal activities. It will be rather interesting if you happen to get on to the track of something down there."

Nelson Lee nodded and smiled.

"Yes, it will, Lennard," he agreed. "As a matter of fact, you have quite whetted my appetite. I have been on holiday so long that I am now anxious to get to work seriously—to do something in the detection line. Perhaps, as you say, I will have an opportunity. And it is always more interesting if I am dealing with a man, or a band of men, who are worthy of serious attention."

The chief-inspector was in perfect agreement, and very soon afterwards he took his departure. Nelson Lee was looking rather thoughtful, and I wondered if anything would come of what Lennard had said. Should we find ourselves mixed up in some criminal investigation?

It was quite probable, of course, and I do not mind admitting that I was rather anxious for something of the sort to happen. Life at St. Frank's would be very dull after our recent startling adventures, and if some mystery happened along, it would help to liven things up and make life worth living.

Dorrie was with us in the evening, and he was as smiling and cheerful as ever.

"Back to school to-morrow—eh?" he exclaimed, patting me on the back. "Well, my lad, I dare say you'll have a quiet time now. Rather too quiet for me, though. I don't think I should fancy your job, Lee."

"I don't think you would, old man," smiled Nelson Lee. "I'll guarantee that you do not remain in England for long. You may remember that you threatened to buy an old country house, and to settle down—"

"I think I must have been dreamin' when I said that," put in Lord Dorrie.

more, with a grin. "Settle down? Ye gods and little fishes! Not likely, old son! London's a fine place, but it's too noisy and dusty and uncivil for me. The English countryside is the finest place in the world when a fellow wants quietness and rest. But I'm full of springs—I want to be moving about all the time or I shall go rusty. That's me all over, as you know. If I sit still for long I grow irritable and nasty tempered, and generally crochety. I don't suppose I shall be in England for more than a fortnight, at the most!"

"Oh, it's got down to a fortnight now!" I chuckled.

Dorrie nodded.

"As a matter of fact, I've been looking up some rather interesting details concernin' a region of Africa where there is some rippin' elephant hunting to be had," said his lordship. "Umlosi is quite keen on the trip, mainly because he wants to get back to his own country. I'm keen on elephant huntin' too, and a spell of that kind of sport would suit me down to the ground. So in about a fortnight's time Umlosi an' I will take our trunks and we'll set out for Africa."

"I thought you'd do something of that kind, Dorrie," chuckled Lee. "You're the most restless beggar I've ever come across in all my life. If you return from this trip in one whole piece I shall be surprised. Every time you go out into the wilds I never expect to see you again. And yet you always turn up, like a bad penny!"

"That's just the way of the world," said Dorrie, lighting a cigarette. "The useless, no-good-to-anybody people always survive, and cause more trouble. But the really good chaps—the people with brains an' with energy—they generally peg out in some insignificant little way. I suppose I shall live until I'm about two hundred, because I'm no good in this world, an' I'm not likely to be. I'm simply roamin' about, causin' all sorts of trouble wherever I go. An' I suppose I shall keep on doin' it until somebody thinks it about time to exterminate me!"

We grinned, and Dorrie puffed at his cigarette. He was quite keen about this trip to Africa. Having just got back from the most exciting trip of his life, he wanted to go straight off elephant hunting! It was just like Dorrimoro's character all over. He was a sportsman

to his finger-tips, and he was one of the best fellows breathing.

We bade him good-bye that night, and we also bade Umlosi good-bye. The giant Kutana chief was very solemn, and he expressed an earnest wish that we should be able, at some future time, to come out to Africa and to visit his own land, the land of the Kutanas. Umlosi promised us a welcome which would make our eyes open, and which would be remembered by us for evermore.

The very first thing in the morning—Wednesday morning—Tommy Watson and Sir Montie Tregellis-West arrived, and we managed to go out on a little shopping expedition before turning up at Victoria in order to meet the other fellows. We were, in fact, just a little late, and we only arrived in time to get into the train as it was about to move out of the station.

However we managed it, and we were soon speeding on our way towards St. Frank's. All the juniors who had been in the holiday party were on that train, and it was rather good that we should arrive in one clump, for we should cause a kind of sensation.

Of course, a good many of the juniors had written to their friends at St. Frank's, saying what time the train would arrive and giving all the other details. So it was fairly certain that a pretty decent crowd would be waiting on the little platform at Bellton to give us a regular royal welcome.

I lolled back among the cushions in the compartment, and I regarded my fellow passengers with contentment.

"Back to St. Frank's!" I exclaimed. "Well, I'm rather glad of it; it'll be fine to get back to the old-school again. The football season is just starting, and I mean to have a whole lot of fixtures for this season. We're not going to have a single date vacant, if I can help it. And I'm going to whip the team into such good form that we shall beat every giddy school we play against!"

"That's the idea!" said Handforth. "I've been thinking about football myself. If you like, Nipper, I'll be centre-forward—"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Declined with thanks!" I grinned.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"What's the giddy cackle about?" demanded Handforth. "If anybody can

show me a better centre-forward than myself, I'll give him five bob!"

"Done!" said Pitt. "Here he is!"

Pitt pointed to me.

"Five bob, please!" grinned Pitt.

"You—you silly ass!" said Handforth witheringly. "I'm ready to admit that Nipper is a jolly fine centre-forward—a first-class player, in fact. He's one of the best centre-forwards I have ever seen in all my life. But if you try to say that Nipper is better than I am, I'll punch your nose! I can play centre-forward just as well as Nipper!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Well, that's one way of singing your own praises!" grinned De Valerie. "I suppose you mean us to apply all those nice things about Nipper to yourself? You're a magnificent trumpet player, Handy—particularly when the trumpet happens to be your own!"

"You—you——"

"Now then, no squabbling!" I grinned. "Handy will be placed in his old position—where he is really good. He'll be goalkeeper."

Everybody was ready to admit that Handforth was not to be beaten at goal-keeping. He was a first-class custodian, and he knew it. But, although he was aware of this fact, he still cherished the kind of belief that he would shine as centre-forward. And he was about the last fellow in the Remove whom I would select for such a position on the field.

However, it was hardly the time for us to discuss football, and I decided to leave such matters until later on—until we had settled down for a day or two. And we continued our journey to St. Frank's, happy, content, and with everything all serene.

We all expected that we should find life at the old school rather dull after the many excitements and perils we had passed through. But we did not know that very shortly after our arrival we should find a brand-new mystery already waiting for us.

And it was to be a mystery which would tax all of Nelson Lee's ingenuity to unravel!

CHAPTER VI.

THE MYSTERIOUS NEW BOY.

"HURRAH!"

"Here we are! Bell-ton!"

"Jump out, you fellows—jump out!" roared Handforth.

"I want to feel what the platform is like again!"

"By jingo! Ain't it great to be back again?"

"Rather?"

We all tumbled out on to the little platform, and then we became aware of the fact that scores of juniors were waiting outside, in the little courtyard. They had probably been forbidden to come on the station, for they would have overflowed the little platform. They set up a terrific roar as soon as they saw us, and cheer after cheer rang out.

"Hurrah! Hurrah! Hurrah!"

The fellows yelled themselves hoarse, and when we passed through the booking office, and came out into the open, we received a bit of a surprise. Not only were there a large number of juniors, but a great many seniors, and practically half the village!

We were very much in the public eye—and this was mainly because of the startling accounts of our adventures which had been appearing in the newspapers. Every single member of the Remove was there, including the College House fellows, led by Christino and Co.

Then there were some members of the Fifth Form, and practically every fag in St. Frank's. Not only these, but Brewster and Co., of the River House school, were present, and we were surrounded by a jabbering, yelling mob. They pressed round us, yelling for information, and trying to shake our hands.

It was a welcome we had hardly expected.

"Good old Nipper!" roared Bob Christine, grabbing my fist. "By jingo! We're glad to see you back again!"

"Rather!"

"Hope you enjoyed yourself, old man?"

"Give us your fist, Nipper!"

"I think I require about two dozen," I grinned. "Well, you chaps, we're all delighted to be back, and it's fine to see you all again. We had some ripping adventures, and we've got a lot of things to tell you."

"I should think you have," said Owen major. "We want to hear all about it—all the details, you know. We're not going to be satisfied with what we've seen in the newspapers."

"Rats!" put in Armstrong. "I don't believe what it's been saying in the newspapers! A lot of exaggerated piffle."

that's what I call it! Giants nine feet high!" he sniffed. "Gold lying about by the ton! Prehistoric monsters! What utter rot!"

"Well, it happens to be true, you silly ass!" roared Handforth. "We saw it with our own eyes—we saw everything! I suppose you don't think we're all liars, do you?"

Armstrong stared.

"Do—do you mean to say that those newspaper reports are actually true?" he gasped.

"Of course they're true!"

"Well, my only hat!"

"True in every detail!" put in Tommy Watson. "And, what's more, the newspapers haven't been told half! We can tell you of all sorts of wonderful things we saw—and we're going to tell you, too; but first of all we want to get to the school, and we want some tea!"

"Hear hear!" said Fatty Little promptly.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Well, we've had a long journey, and hardly a scrap of anything to eat on the way!" said Fatty. "Personally, I'm famished, and I'm not going to wait until we get to the school before I have anything to eat. There's a tuck-shop in the village, and I propose——"

"You—you glutton!" said Handforth. "You can't eat anything else, after that terrific feed you had in the train—sandwiches, pork pies, tarts, custards, jam puffs and goodness only knows what else!"

"That was only a snack!" said Fatty.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Same old Fatty!" grinned Augustus Hart. "We thought he'd come back a bit thinner, we thought that the tropical climate would take some of his fat down, but we're wrong. He seems to be fatter than ever!"

"Good old Tommy!"

Somehow or other we managed to force our way through the crowd, and then we started on the journey through the village to St. Frank's. The natives of Bellton seemed to regard us as queer specimens from a bygone age—at least, they looked at us in that way. They stared and stared in the most solemn manner, and with an expression of awe. And behind us came all the little urchins of the village, shouting and making a terrific din.

The procession was a long one, headed by Christine and Co. and the other members of the Remove. It was a tremendously noisy affair, and in the bustle and excitement Fatty Little failed to break his journey at the tuck-shop. He tried valiantly to get through the crowd, but he could not do so. And he was indignant during the remainder of the journey.

He informed several fellows near him that he would not be able to survive—that he would collapse in the lane before he arrived at the school. But those juniors behind him did not allow Fatty to collapse. They were quite ready to prod him up if he showed any sign of lagging.

And so, at last, we arrived at St. Frank's, at the dear old school. Everything was looking just the same as ever. Nothing had altered during the summer holidays, except that the grass had grown somewhat longer in the Triangle, and the trees were now beginning to look brown, and they were taking on their autumn coat.

Warren, the porter, was standing outside his lodge, and he regarded the whole proceeding with suspicion and disapproval. He guessed—and he was probably right—that there would be a good deal of work for him to do in the way of tidying up after the juniors had finished in the Triangle. Warren maintained that boys were simply created to cause other people work. And possibly Warren was not far wrong!

Before we reached the steps of the Ancient House, we were brought to a halt by the appearance of Mr. Crowell, the master of the Remove. A cheer went up at once from all the members of the holiday party, for this was the first time we had seen Mr. Crowell for a great many weeks.

He had not been at St. Frank's during the term previous to our departure for Brazil. For Mr. Crowell had had a breakdown, and he had gone away for a complete change and a rest. Now, after the summer holidays, he had come back, looking as well as ever—in fact, better than ever—and quite robust and strong.

"I am extremely pleased to see you back again, my dear lads!" said the master of the Remove. "According to all the reports I hear, you have met with some extraordinary adventures, and it is extremely fortunate that you have all

returned safe and sound. You must be thankful for your good luck!"

"We are, sir!"

"Rather!"

"And we're terrifically pleased to see you back again, sir!"

"Thank you, my boys—thank you!" said Mr. Crowell. "I have no doubt that we shall get along very nicely together this term—that is, if you behave yourselves as you ought to. I dare say we shall soon settle down to the regular routine of things."

"Oh, rather, sir!" said Handforth. "We're going to be tremendously good this term. We're not going to commit any japes, we're not going to play any tricks, and we're going to be good little boys generally!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"I suspect that you mean me to take that remark as a joke, Handforth," smiled Mr. Crowell. "It would not be natural for you to refrain from japes, as you call them. However, I will not spoil your pleasure by remaining here any longer. You may, of course, do pretty much as you like for this evening. I shall turn a deaf ear to any particular noises I may hear coming from the juniors' studies and from the common-room. It is an exceptional occasion, and I must therefore be exceptionally deaf!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Good old Mr. Crowell!"

"Give him a cheer you chaps!"

"Hurrah!"

Mr. Crowell was quite flattered, and he retired into the Ancient House looking rather confused. He had not been cheered very often, and he was quite delighted to hear himself cheered now. He was quite popular and that little speech of his had made him ten times more popular. A master who turns a deaf ear to noises on a special occasion is always regarded as a brick.

"Good old Crowell!" exclaimed Handforth. "I think his holiday has taken some of the acid out of him. Let's hope he remains like it all the time, although I'm afraid he'll get soured before long."

We were about to enter the Ancient House in a body, when we were stopped by a shout from the steps. In the place where Mr. Crowell had just been standing, there was another figure. A slight, queer-looking figure, with a somewhat powerful head surmounting it. The head

was set slightly on one side, and two big glasses looked down at us.

"One moment, my dear friends! I beg of you to spare me one moment!" exclaimed the face.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Clear off, Tucker! This is no time for speeches!"

"We can't listen to your rot now, T. T."

Timothy Tucker blinked down at the crowd, and he raised his hand aloft.

"Why didn't you leave it behind?" inquired Augustus Hart. "Why didn't you drop it into the Amazon, and allow it to sink gently?"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"My dear friends, I am addressing you now on a most important subject!" shouted Timothy Tucker, in his shrill, but powerful voice. "As you are all aware, I was one of the fortunate individuals who went on this trip to the Amazon River, who went beyond the Amazon over a wonderful swamp, and from that swamp into the land of the Arzacs. I was among that party, and I saw many strange and wonderful and marvellous sights. I wish to impress upon you, my friends, that all the theories of modern scientists will undergo a complete change when these facts are revealed to the world. We have witnessed things which have not been seen since the days of prehistoric man——"

"Dry up, you ass!"

"I'll give you two ticks!" roared Handforth. "If you don't clear off those steps by that time, I'll bowl you over!"

"Really, my dear Handforth, I must beg of you to remain serious!" exclaimed Timothy Tucker severely. "You are fully aware of the fact that I prepared many papers and——"

"One tick left!" said Handforth.

"Really, I protest!" said T. T. "I protest, my dear sir! This is perfectly outrageous. The position is this—I have prepared many papers and lectures during the voyage home from the Amazon. I have made ready, in fact, a full series of speeches—lectures—which I intend to deliver in the lecture hall within the Ancient House——"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"I would ask you to remember, that this is a serious matter—and not one for hilarious laughter!" went on Tucker. "My first lecture will be delivered this evening at eight o'clock precisely, and

everybody is welcome to attend. The lecture, I may say, will be merely an introductory one, and will be of two hours duration—providing the masters will allow you to remain that time."

"We sha'n't allow ourselves to remain any time at all, my son!" grinned Hart.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"It's likely we're going to stand there and listen to your rot, ain't it?" asked Owen major. "We don't want any of your lectures, Tucker—we'd rather be excused, Thanks!"

"Nothing doing, my son!" said Hubbard.

Tucker looked rather pained.

"My dear friends, I wish you to understand—Dear me. What is the meaning of—Dear, dear, dear! You are astonishingly rough, my dear sir! I must request you to—"

Tucker was swept aside, and the juniors passed into the Ancient House, roaring with laughter. They certainly did not take T. T. seriously. It would have been better, perhaps, if they had done so, for I had glanced at one or two of his lectures, while I had been on board the yacht, and I had been rather impressed. Tucker was a bit of an ass in many ways, but when he got on his hind legs and delivered a speech, he was in his element. And in that line he was undoubtedly a winner. And the lecture struck me as being a very business-like article, and it would certainly prove of very great interest to all those people who had not been on the voyage with us.

But it seemed to me Tucker's programme was not likely to be carried out. He was taken as a joke, and anybody who is taken as a joke is not very successful.

How we managed it, I hardly know, but at last Sir Montie and Tommy and I managed to find our way back to Study C, in the Remove passage. We entered that well known apartment, and we looked round. Everything was the same, except for a rather remarkable tidiness. However, this would soon be remedied, for within a day or two Study C would be in its usual untidy, comfortable condition.

"Same old place!" I said. "By Jove! It's good to be back, you chaps. It's not much of a room, after all—distempered walls, and furniture of a nondescript order. But it's our study—it's our little den—and we love it."

"Begad, rather!" said Sir Montie. "It's a fine little show, Nipper, an' I wouldn't change for worlds. I propose we have a nice quiet little tea here before long—we don't want a noisy crowd, begad!"

I nodded.

"My idea exactly," I said; "but I think we can invite a couple of chaps—say, Hart and Nicodemus Trotwood. We can jaw to them during the tea, and they'll be interested. Besides, Hart mentioned something about inviting himself to tea—so I think we can fix it up."

"Might as well," said Tommy Watson. "We'll get something extra decent in, too. We've got plentiful supplies of cash, and Mrs. Hake has got plentiful supplies of grub."

It was not tea time yet, and, after we had had a wash, we sallied out and had a walk round the school, just as though we had never seen the place before. But there was a certain amount of interest in just walking about, looking at the old places. After being so long under tropic skies, it was very fine to be back in England—to be back at St. Frank's, where we knew every hole and corner, and every twist in the roads and pathways. We went to the playing fields, and inspected Little Side.

The grass was in splendid condition, and everything was looking spick and span. The pavilion had been repainted, and the goalposts and nets were up in readiness for the football team. It made me feel quite eager to look at them.

We were stopped continually, of course, because everybody wanted to ask us questions regarding our trip.

"If you want to know any information, my dear chaps, all you have to do is to attend Timothy Tucker's lecture this evening," I said blandly. "He'll explain the whole position, and he'll go into all sorts of details regarding the bird life, insect life, animals, fishes, flowers, palms, trees—"

"Dry up, you ass!" grinned one of the fellows. "We don't want to hear Tucker's rot!"

"It's not rot," I said. "I can give you my word that he is going to deliver some really interesting lectures—and to prove it, I mean to attend them myself, although I know all that he's going to jaw about. I've seen the rough drafts of those lectures, and I know he's on a good thing—he's got the real stuff!"

I was really trying to do Tucker a

good turn, because I wanted the fellows to realise that he was in earnest, and that his lectures would indeed be good. But hardly anybody took any notice of me; they thought that I was pulling their leg, and Timothy Tucker's prospects for the evening were not very rosy.

Tea time came before long, and we passed into the Ancient House once more, and went along to Study C. It did not take us long to prepare the feed, and, when the kettle was singing merrily, and the tea was just about to be made, Augustus Hart and Nicodemus Trotwood arrived. They were smiling and cheerful.

"Good business!" said Trotwood. "I see you've got some of Mrs. Hake's special beef patties—they're absolutely top-hole. Where do we sit?"

"Anywhere you like," I replied. "Take your seats, and help yourselves to the grub; it's all here to be eaten, remember. Who says tea to begin with?"

Everybody said tea, and we were soon sitting down to a very comfortable meal, the five of us. Hardly four minutes had elapsed before Hart commenced.

"Now, about this trip of yours," he said, taking a bite out of a piece of bread-and-butter. "We want to hear more about it, you know——"

"All you've got to do is to attend Tucker's lecture!" I said smoothly.

"You—you silly ass!"

"I mean it!" I said. "In any case, if you don't like to take that tip, you can do the other thing. Give the trip a rest for the time being. I want to hear all about St. Frank's. Has anything fresh happened here? What about new fellows? Anybody of any note come along? We've got heaps of time to talk about that trip."

"There's only one new fellow of any importance," said Nicodemus Trotwood. "and I suppose you've heard about him. I'm referring to Goodwin."

"Goodwin?" I repeated. "Never heard the name before, here."

"Dick Goodwin, you know," said Hart. "He's the new fellow in the Remove. He's got the end study all to himself."

"Oh, I didn't know it," I said. "You seem to forget that we've only just arrived, and we've hardly been able to get a word in edgeways. Dick Goodwin,

eh? I rather like his name. What sort of a fellow is he?"

"He's mysterious," said Hart.

"He's what?"

"Mysterious—a rather runny chap altogether," said Hart. "He comes from Yorkshire, I believe—Yorkshire, or Lancashire, or Lincolnshire——"

"That's a bit vague," I said.

"Well, he comes from the north—that settles all argument," said Hart. "He doesn't talk with much of a dialect, only when he's excited. Upon the whole he's a fairly decent sort of fellow, I believe; but he's so jolly quiet and reticent that we've hardly had a word with him. He keeps to his own study practically all the time."

"Quiet, eh?" said Tommy Watson. "Chaps from Lancashire or Yorkshire aren't usually quiet, according to a'l my knowledge."

"Well, this chap's different," said Hart. "He's been a mystery ever since he arrived—he was here on the first day of term, you know. He was here when everybody else arrived, and I believe he actually came a day before anybody else."

"That was strange, wasn't it?" I asked. "Why did he come in that way?"

"Goodness knows," said Trotwood. "He's a chap of about your size. Nipper, with fair hair, and a slightly freckled face—rather decent looking, you know."

"Fair hair!" echoed our other guest. "Rot! It's ginger!"

"Well, it doesn't sound nice to say that a chap's got ginger hair," chuckled Hart. "I suppose it is a bit reddish, now I come to think of it. Anyhow, he's got the end study all to himself, and it's a kind of Bluebeard's chamber."

"Begad!" said Sir Montie, nearly dropping his teacup.

"It's a fact" went on Hart. "I'm not exaggerating. Nobody's allowed in that study, and many of the chaps have tried their utmost to get a glimpse inside when Goodwin goes in, but they can't do it."

"Why not?" I asked.

"Because he's got a thick screen fixed up just inside the door, so that even when the door's open, nobody can see into the room. And the door is fitted with a patent lock of the most expensive kind, and whenever Goodwin goes in he lets himself in with a key!"

"Well, I'm jiggered!" said Watson.

"It certainly seems a bit strange," I remarked. "What's the idea of it?"

"Nobody knows!" said Trotwood. "Some of the fellows were a bit wild about it at first, and they said that they would complain to the Head, and have Goodwin change things. But when we spoke to one of the prefects about it, we were told that the Head knew all about Goodwin, and had actually given him permission to have the lock placed on his door, and the screen inside, and all the rest of it."

"Well, it's certainly out of the common," I said, "and that makes me all the more interested in this new chap. So the Head has given orders that this kid is to be left alone?"

"Exactly," said Hart. "Not only that, but the Head has put up a notice, saying that no boys are allowed to enter the end study under any circumstances whatever. If the Head receives any intimation that Dick Goodwin is molested or interfered with, the culprits will receive a public flogging!"

"Whew!" I whistled. "That's a bit steep, you know! This Goodwin chap seems to be a bit of a puzzle. Have you questioned him personally?"

Hart nodded.

"Of course we have!" he said. "We've asked him all sorts of things; we've bumped him, in fact, and tried to force the information out of him, but he won't say a word. He remains as mum as an oyster. He simply says that there is a particular reason for nobody seeing into that study—and there you are. He practically lives there, you know."

"Doesn't he go in to lessons?" asked Watson.

"Of course, he attends class," said Trotwood, "but as soon as the Remove comes out of the Form-room, Goodwin goes straight off to his study, and locks himself in. I stood outside once, with two or three of the other fellows, and we heard mysterious tappings going on inside—metallic tappings, and all that sort of thing."

"Mystery upon mystery!" I grinned. "This is getting quite interesting, you chaps. And what about the window, may I ask? Isn't it possible for anybody to take a free squint through the glass?"

Nicodemus shrugged his shoulders.

"It's not an easy matter to look through frosted glass, is it?" he said.

"Frosted glass?" echoed Watson. "Why, all the study windows are plain."

"Not the windows of the end study," said Hart. "When we came we found that frosted glass had been put in, in place of the ordinary stuff. Not only that, but at night there are thick curtains drawn across, and it's absolutely impossible for anybody to spy upon Goodwin when he's in his study."

"H'm! I shall have to interview this chap," I said. "Mind you, I'm not going to pry into his affairs—although I'll admit quite frankly that I'm curious. When a fellow locks himself into his study, and makes it absolutely impossible for a fellow to see him, he naturally makes everybody else curious. Metallic tappings, you said? I wonder what on earth the chap can be doing in there?"

"Goodness only knows!" said Hart. "Well, there's no need for us to talk about Goodwin all the tea time. Let him rest—you'll have plenty of chances to see him later on. Let's talk about your adventures on the Amazon."

And so, for the next half-hour, we enthralled our two guests by stories of our adventures. But I could not help thinking, every now and again, of that mysterious study at the end of the passage. What did it contain? Why had the Headmaster allowed Dick Goodwin to have that study to himself, and to make such a mysterious chamber of it?

Soon after tea I had an opportunity of meeting the new fellow. We were just going along the passage, on our way to the lecture hall—to see how many people were attending Tucker's speech—when we saw a rather well-built junior coming down the passage from the opposite end. We knew him at once by his red hair and by his freckled countenance. He was not at all bad-looking, and he was sturdy.

"The new chap!" muttered Watson.

"Yes, so I see," I said. "Hallo, Goodwin! How are you?"

"Ay, I'm quite well, thank you," said the new boy, with just a faint suspicion of a dialect.

"Well, I'm Nipper—skipper of the Remove," I said.

"Ay, I've heard about thee!" said Dick Goodwin, nodding. "I've no doubt we shall get on well together, Nipper."

"There's no reason why we shouldn't," I said. "You look a pretty

sturdy chap; any good at football?"

"Ay, I'm fairly handy with my feet," said the new boy.

"I shall have to give you a trial——"

"Nay, I sha'n't have time for that," said Goodwin quickly. "I like football, but I sha'n't be able to indulge in it at St. Frank's. I shall be busy all the time."

"Busy?" I repeated. "Busy at what?"

"Busy at lessons—and busy at my own work," said the new boy vaguely.

"I sha'n't have much time to spare."

"You're quite sure of that?" I asked.

"Ay, I'm quite sure," said the new boy, passing on.

We looked after him, and we wondered. Goodwin seemed to be quite a decent fellow, but there was certainly something mysterious about him. We passed on to the lecture hall in rather a thoughtful frame of mind.

And when we arrived, we found Timothy Tucker making his great speech to an almost empty hall. True, there were twenty fellows present, and they were all extremely interested; but it was very disheartening for T. T., after he had been expecting a packed audience.

However, he was delivering his lecture vigorously and thoroughly—just as though the whole school were present. He was wise in doing this, for he greatly impressed the few who were present, and when he had finished he got a tremendous round of applause, and everybody was delighted, including two or three prefects who had dropped in towards the last.

"Splendid!" exclaimed Edgar Fenton, the captain of St. Frank's. "Upon my word, I didn't think that Tucker had it

in him. I'm very sorry I didn't come here at the beginning of his lecture!"

And a good many other fellows were sorry, too—for the word soon got about the school that Tucker's lecture had been a great success, and that Fenton himself had been enormously interested in it.

T. T.'s praises were sung all over the school, and he was so delighted that he volunteered to deliver the lecture again on the following evening—to make a fresh start altogether.

The fellows now knew that Tucker, in this instance, was quite serious, and that it was not merely a joke. And, on the following evening, the lecture hall was packed almost to suffocation. A great many seniors were present, and even one or two masters. Timothy Tucker was in his glory, and he lectured as he had never lectured before. He told his audience all about our earliest adventures on the Amazon, and concluded by intimating that his other lectures in the series would embrace the whole story of our adventures among the Arzacs.

It was quite certain that in future all Tucker's lectures would be extremely well attended—and he was making a charge of sixpence for every member of the audience, the whole proceeds to be devoted to providing clothing for the Indians on the Amazon!

However, the Head probably meant to devote the money to a cause nearer home.

Meanwhile, I was greatly interested in Dick Goodwin, the new boy. Somehow, I felt that before long there would be developments—I knew that we should be provided with something unusually interesting in the very near future.

And I was certainly right!

THE END.

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THERE! Oh, dash it! That means my luck's out—and going to be out all day! I know! It always does!"

The boy picked up the big brass head-lamp, which had lucklessly slipped from the edge of the bench as he was giving it a final rub, and surveyed its cracked glass ruefully.

"Mr. Spence will think I was careless—just as I was trying to win his good opinion, and doing it, too," he murmured, in a rather bitter undertone. "And it means a bit stopped out of my money every week till a new lens is paid for. And goodness knows I don't get enough for myself as it is, to buy decent clothes, or save a few shillings against rough times. A bit of jolly hard luck!"

"A bit of downright clumsiness, I'd call it, if you was to ask me. What did yer want to go and drop the thing for? Nobody touched yer."

The boy put down the damaged lamp, and turning, faced the speaker.

This was a shabby-looking individual in a rusty black frock-coat, worn, rather oddly, with a fancy red waistcoat, grease-spotted brown trousers, an out-of-date bowler, and once white, but now extremely dirty, tennis shoes with rubber soles. He was a man of about fifty; he had looked much the same for the last ten years, or as long as the boy could remember; always shabby, always badly in need of a shave, a wash and brush-up; and always with that odd trick of listening over his left shoulder as if he suspected that someone was dogging him behind. He had never known Uncle Ben to be any different.

For a moment they looked at each other in silence. Or, rather, the boy looked at the man; for Benjamin Pawley never looked anyone straight in the face with those little, beady black eyes of his.

"Downright clumsiness I'd call it," he repeated.

"It was not," said the boy. "You startled me! I had no idea that you were here! You move so silently in those shoes! Like, like a—"

"A thief! That's what you goin' to say, eh?" said the man, with a nasty light in those little black eyes. "Nice sort o' thing to say of yer old uncle as 'as come a mile to bring yer a nice 'ot dinner, and just because he 'as to wear something easy-fitting on account of tender feet. Like a thief! That to yer old uncle! And that's gratitude! Oughter be ashamed of yerself, young Lin!"

He wiped an imaginary tear from his eye with the ends of the cloth tied round the basin he carried. He put this down on the bench and shuffled away, muttering:

"Called a thief to my face because I don't stamp like a 'orse, or wear a bell or blow a whistle to let his lordship know I'm comin'! Called a thief to me face!"

There was a very ugly look on that sallow, crafty face just then. But Lin Fleet did not see it. Picking up the basin, he made for a corner of the big glass-roofed shed, under which cars of every description stood in rows, for sale or hire, or, in the back rows, awaiting repair.

Here, behind the last row of the invalid and disabled cars, was Lin's corner. It was almost his home; for his hours at the big garage were long. He got there early and left late, and except for an occasional errand, was seldom out of the place.

It was not particularly cosy or home-like, that corner of the big draughty shed, with a packing-case for a table, and a couple of empty petrol tins for a stool; but Lin had come to prefer it to what, by a stretch of the term, might have been called his real home. For he lived with Uncle Ben and Aunt Harriet; and, as will presently appear, they were not exactly a pleasant pair to get on with!

He had always lived with Uncle and Aunt Pawley, as far back as his memory carried. He seemed never to have had any parents, like other boys. He could not remember a father or a mother; and when he reached the age when he knew that he must have had both, and asked for information about them, he was curtly told that they were dead—died ever so long ago, when he was a mere squalling brat. And always the uncle with a frown, or the aunt with a sniff, would add the dark and disquieting

warning, "that he'd better not ask questions!"

That served to put him off whilst he was a mere child; but he was a boy now—turned fifteen—and he meant to put that question again some day; and to get an answer, too!

The thing was constantly in his mind; he was always thinking it over. A mystery about one's birth is a very absorbing subject to brood over!

But Lin was not thinking about it just then. He was hungry, and the basin in the cloth was decidedly attractive.

Taking the bit of soap he kept on a ledge under the bench, he went out into the yard to wash his hands at the big tap to which the hose was attached when "sluicing down."

The workmen and drivers had better accommodation for personal cleanliness. A washing bowl, with hot and cold water, towels, etc., were provided for them, in a small out-building at the back of the yard, known as the men's "cabin." The door of this place was usually kept locked; the key hanging on a nail in the workshop. This was because the men—or some of the younger and smarter ones—changed their clothes in there before going in to the workshop, leaving their street-going garments—often with a watch, a bit of valued personal property in the shape of a silver cigarette-case or vesta-box, and sometimes even money in the pockets—hanging there on a row of hooks facing the door.

The door of the cabin had not always been locked; only lately, since the thefts began.

This trouble began to be heard of, most unluckily for Lin, soon after he got taken on as "odd boy" at the garage. Hints of loose change, and various items, large or small, missing from the pockets of the garments left in the cabin, began to be quite frequent. The new boy was not openly accused. Most of the men seemed to like him, and were friendly; and even the one or two whom he hadn't got on with so well seemed to stick at calling young Lin a thief. He hadn't the look of one, with his bright, open expression, and clear, frank, grey eyes.

Yet Lin knew that he was suspected. Two or three of the younger men, who claimed to have been the worst victims of the unknown thief, complained to Mr. Spence, the manager; and Ted Barker, a young fitter, who had been "down on" the new boy ever since Lin had declined to leave the garage in working hours, to carry notes to his—Ted's—girl, at a laundry half an hour's walk away, dropped broad hints as to who the thief was.

Mr. Spence had refused to take the hint. But a lock and key was fitted to the door of the cabin, and Lin was told to keep out of the place.

As a matter of fact, he had never entered the cabin, or even wished to. But that order wounded his pride. He felt it like an insult. He would not have gone in there if it had stood wide open all day long! He had learnt

to hate the place, and regard the locked door as a slur upon his character.

He never went near that part of the yard if he could help it, and so did not know that, with the carelessness usual in such matters, the key was as often as not left sticking in the lock by the last to use it.

As the very sight of the place galled him, he had taught himself not to look that way. And he would not have done so that morning, but for the curious behaviour of "Ginger," the big tom cat that had long made the garage his home.

Ginger had the freedom of the cabin, where he usually slept, and where—being a favourite with the men—there was generally a paper of scraps put on the floor for his dinner. Ginger was not bothered by the locked door. He came and went by the little window, which was always half open.

It was the rattling of this window, and a slight scrambling noise, that caused Lin to look up, as he knelt by the hose-tap rinsing his hands. He saw Ginger leap down from the little sill, and scoot across the yard, tail up and back bristling with every sign of scare or indignation.

"What's up with old Ginger?" thought the boy. "On the warpath? No, there's no other cat about, or dog sneaked into the yard. Looks more as if something had scared him out of that place. Can't be one of the fellows. He's not scared of them. And besides, they're not out of the workshop yet for another ten minutes. Queer though, for old Ginger was scared!"

His eye travelled from the window to the door of the little building. It was pushed close to, but not quite shut. And—the key was in the lock.

He thought of the supposed thefts, and a sudden suspicion darted into his mind; a suspicion so strong that it almost took away his breath.

He softly crossed the yard to the door of the cabin, pushed it noiselessly a little wider, then suddenly sprang in, gripping his uncle's right wrist.

The latter, who had his back to the door, rummaging among the row of garments that hung along the wall, turned with a sharp gasp of startled alarm, dropping the watch and chain he had in his hand with a crash to the stone floor.

When he saw who had detected him the startled and alarmed look on his sallow face changed instantly to one of black and bitter rage. He wrenched his wrist free and raised his clenched hand as if to strike the boy in the face. Lin did not flinch, his eyes flashed scorn and contempt rather than fear. For one moment they stood thus, without a word. But the threatened blow did not fall.

A bell clanged at the other side of the yard; the "knock-off" bell for the men's dinner-hour.

(Continued on page III of cover.)

"Say a word about this, you spyin' young whelp," hissed Benjamin Pawley, "say a word about this, and I'll—"

He finished his threat with a malevolent glare sideways at the boy out of the corners of his little black eyes, and then shuffled rapidly and noiselessly out of the cabin and vanished from the premises.

Lin did not waste a single glance upon him. The shame and bitterness of the discovery fairly overwhelmed the boy. If the thing was known he was bound to share his uncle's guilt. It would be called a "put-up job" between them.

He picked up the watch, which was still going and seemed to have come to no great harm by its fall. He knew who it belonged to, Ted Barker—the fellow who had been down on him from the first! That was unlucky; but if only he could slip the watch back in Barker's pocket before it was missed!

That brown jacket—that was Ted Barker's he remembered—and the watch must have come from a pocket in the waistcoat hanging underneath.

If he had only been cool, just his ordinary self, it would not have taken him many moments to have slipped the watch back and got clear of the place. But he was agitated, trembling. His hands shook, his fingers seemed all thumbs, and fumbled quite stupidly in trying to get the long and slippery double chain, with a complicated bunch of coins and "charms" attached to it,

through the buttonhole where he thought it ought to go.

And he never managed it after all; but was suddenly seized by the collar, and violently swung round with the watch and chain dangling in his hand—to find himself face to face with its owner!

It was a big triumph for Ted Barker, and he made the most of it.

"Caught yer red-handed!" he crowed, with all the delight of an amateur detective who has made a hit. "Always said yer was the thief! Knew yer was! There's 'thief' stamped on yer face!"

That was too much for Lin. All his pent-up feelings seemed to burst at once in a thunderclap of indignant rage. He was a mere boy, and Ted Barker a young man topping him by a head and shoulders. But he didn't think of that. He hit out, and with such force and fury that Ted Barker shot out of the open door and measured his length on the stones of the yard outside!

There was no light. Mr. Spence, the manager, suddenly appeared.

Mr. Spence was not a bad sort—he had been very good to Lin. But he was a busy man, and the case looked plain and simple to him. Ted Barker told his story. Lin was silent. He felt that there was nothing to say. No defence was any good.

Ten minutes later he left the place—sacked without a character!

(To be continued.)

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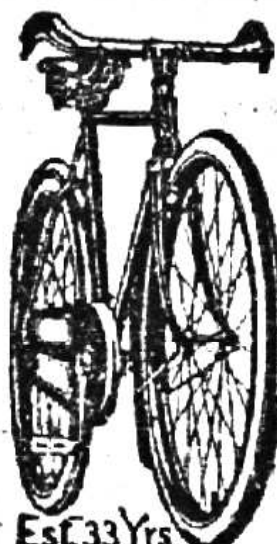
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