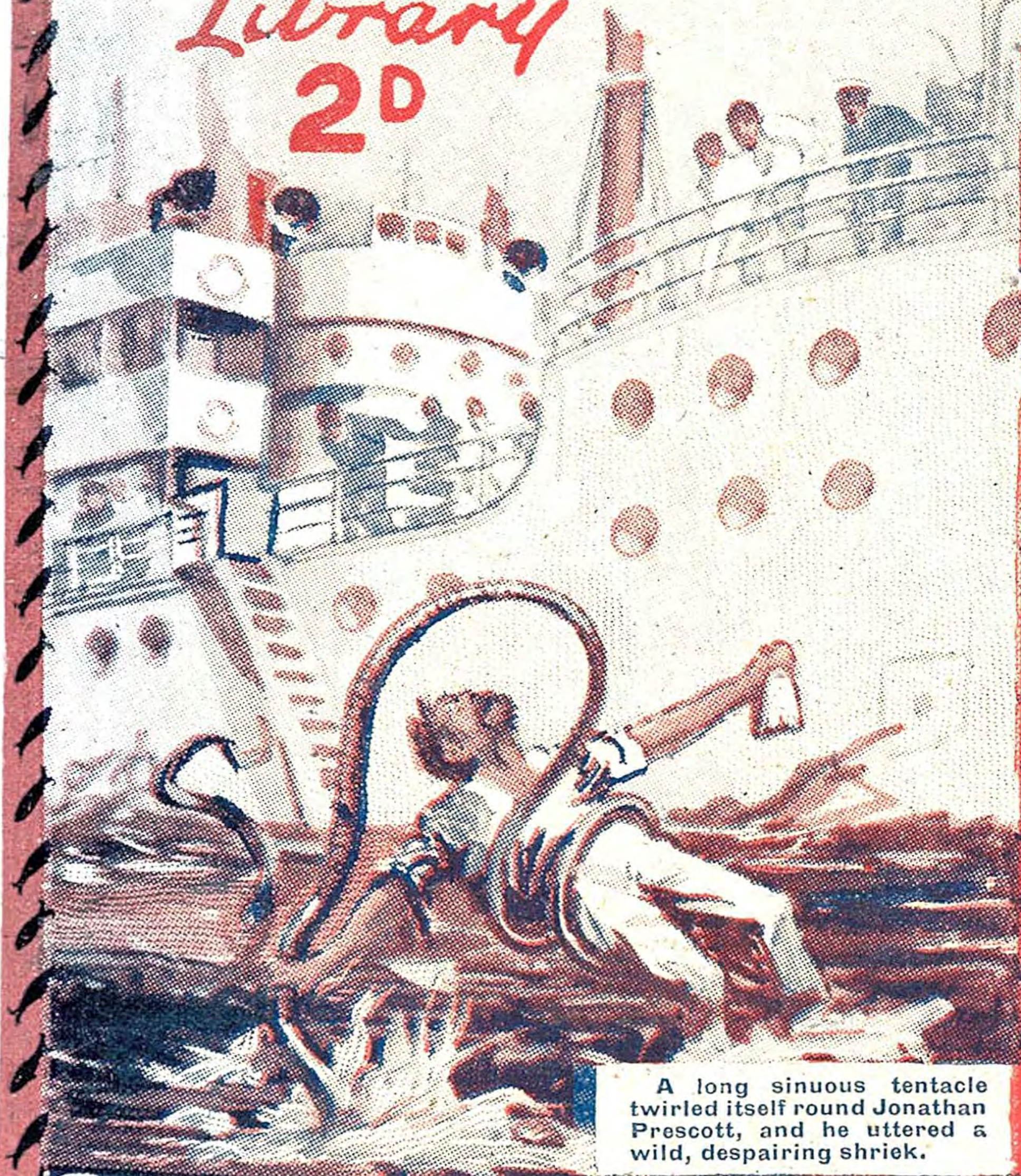


HOLIDAY ADVENTURES OF THE BOYS OF ST. FRANK'S!

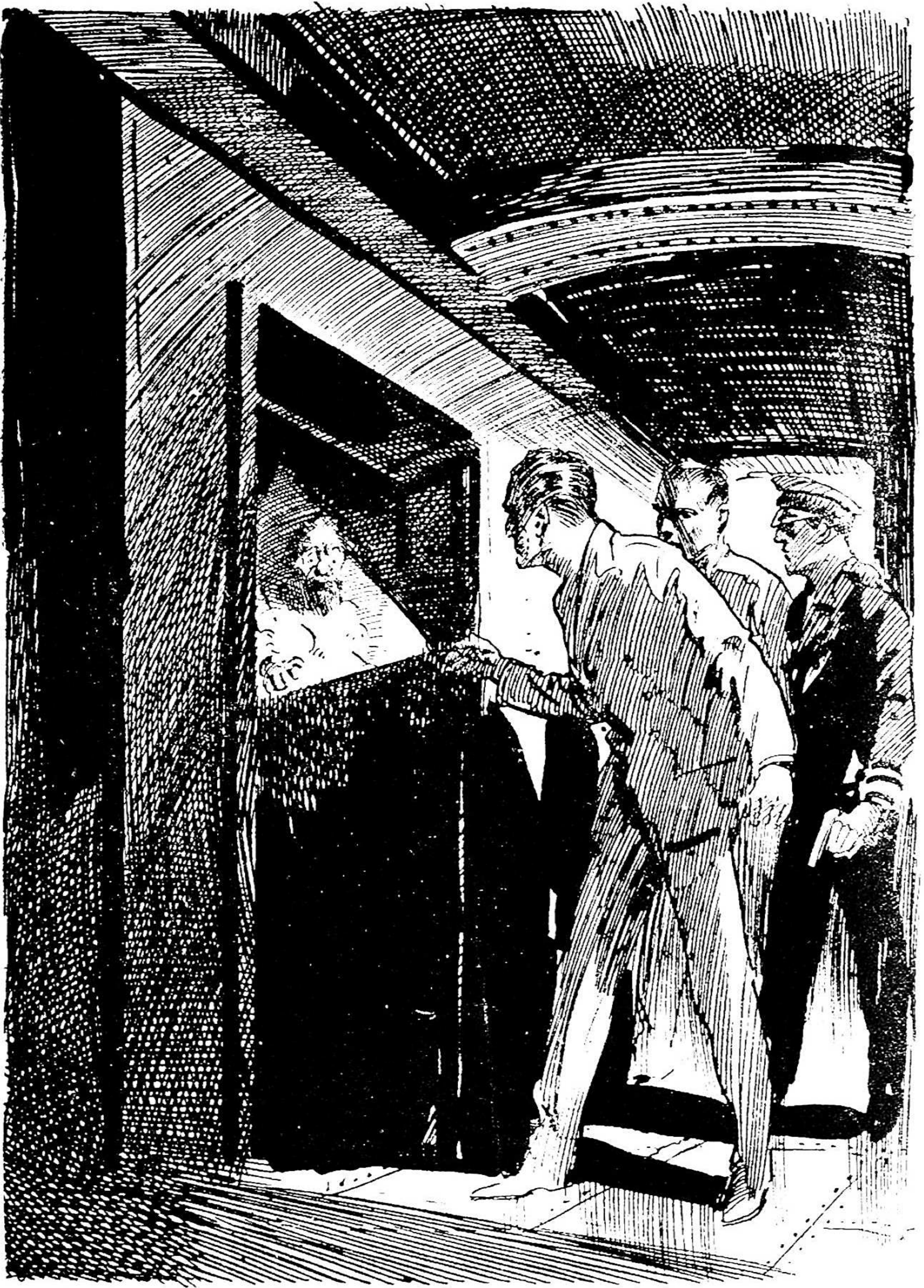
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A long sinuous tentacle twirled itself round Jonathan Prescott, and he uttered a wild, despairing shriek.

THE TERROR OF THE PACIFIC

An extra long story of the strange perils of the South Seas, introducing Lord Dorrimore, Nelson Lee and the Boys of St. Frank's.



A bright beam of light shot into the storeroom and revealed the staring, startled face of Jonathan Prescott !



THE TERROR OF THE PACIFIC!

The series of exciting adventures which have befallen Lord Dorrimore's party of St. Frank's boys on Paradise Island pale into insignificance compared with the terrible experiences narrated in this week's story, when the Wanderer weighs anchor on her eventful voyage from the Pacific homeward bound.

THE EDITOR.

By EDWY SEARLES BROOKS

CHAPTER I.

THE PROWLER IN THE NIGHT.

"B"Y George! The whole school's different!"

"Eh?"

"St. Frank's isn't the same place!" said Edward Oswald Handforth blankly. "They've shut the Ancient House up, pinched the clock-tower, and shoved it on the top of the fountain!"

"What the dickens——"

"And look at the Modern House!" went on Handforth indignantly. "They've built it like an Indian temple, with minarets and domes. Of all the botches I've ever seen this beats everything. They've even

turned the playing-fields into a lagoon, with a reef all round it!"

Church gave his leader a hard punch.

"Wake up, fathead!" he said gruffly. "What's the idea of lying there, drivelling like a lunatic? We're not at St. Frank's, Handy—we're on the Wanderer, anchored in the lagoon of Paradise Island."

Handforth opened his eyes and looked round dazedly.

"Hallo!" he mumbled. "They've made a fine mess of our study—— Eh? Oh, it's you!" he went on, rubbing his eyes. "What's the light on for? I believe I've been dreaming——"

"I'm jolly sure you've been dreaming," said Church tartly. "I was in the middle

of a beautiful sleep when you awoke me up with your prattling."

"My what?" demanded Handforth, sitting up with a jerk.

"Your piffle about St. Frank's," said Church. "If you can't dream something sensible, why dream at all? Huh! The Modern House like an Indian temple, eh? And the playing-fields surrounded by a coral reef!"

Handforth, now fully awake, stared at Church in amazement.

"That's my dream!" he ejaculated. "How the dickens did you know anything about it? This is marvellous. You must be a thought-reader!"

Church grinned.

"I'm an expert at reading thoughts—when a chap shouts all his thoughts aloud," he said drily. "Haven't I told you that you woke me up? You were talking in your sleep like a giddy public orator!"

Handforth started, and frowned darkly.

"Look here, you libelling rotter!" he snapped. "Are you telling me that I talk in my sleep? It's a rotten habit. I've never done such a thing in my life. You can't kid me like that, blow you!"

"All right—have it your own way," said Church resignedly. "It isn't worth arguing about, anyhow. I'm a thought-reader."

"Don't tell fibs!" retorted Handforth. "You can't read your own thoughts—let alone mine. It's like your nerve to wake me up in the middle of the night, and accuse me of talking in my sleep. Unless you dry up I'll give you something to be going on with."

Church grinned to himself, and settled himself for sleep again. He had gained his object, so he might as well get to sleep again. It wasn't likely that Handforth would resume his performance.

The state-room was illuminated by a single shaded electric lamp, and a glance at his watch told Handforth that there was still an hour to the dawn. Lord Dorrimore's famous yacht was lying peacefully at anchor, and deep silence reigned. Except for the usual watch on deck, not a soul was moving. All the guests were sound asleep in their cabins.

Handforth glared at Church, who was now giving a very indifferent exhibition of imitation snores, and switched the light off. McClure was sound asleep in his own bed, having remained undisturbed.

"Don't make that rotten noise!" growled Handforth, as he lay back on his pillow in the darkness. "You can't fool me with those silly snores, my lad. How do you expect me to sleep through that din?"

Church, without admitting that he was awake, reduced his breathing to a more reasonable tone, and in about thirty seconds he was asleep in real earnest. But Handforth remained wakeful.

His dream about St. Frank's had been vivid, and although it had been a hotch-potch of absurdities it nevertheless impressed him. He began to speculate on the subject. What would St. Frank's really look like? What about those new Houses they had been talking about?

"I'll bet they'll make a hash of everything," Handforth told himself disgustedly. "Stark new buildings, and everything niffing of distemper and paint. Thank goodness we'll soon be back there, all the same!"

He frowned in the darkness. It was perfectly obvious to him that he must have talked in his sleep, and he hated to admit it. It was a habit he particularly detested. The famous leader of Study D concluded that the previous night's dinner must have been too rich. Or perhaps there was another explanation. He had surprised his minor just before going to bed with a big package of sandwiches and pastry. Out of sheer concern for Willy's health, he had confiscated the snack and had demolished it himself. His nightmare was probably a kind of retribution.

Dismissing the subject, he allowed his thoughts to dwell upon the immediate future. Everything was now in shipshape. With the dawn, the Wanderer would steam sedately through the break in the reef, and set her course across the open Pacific for the Panama Canal. Then on towards England—good old England! Nelson Lee and Lord Dorrimore reckoned that the yacht would arrive in the Thames in plenty of time to allow the St. Frank's fellows and the Moor View girls to spend a few days at home before the beginning of the new term. It was a pleasing programme.

"It's a good thing the term's two or three weeks late in starting, this autumn," murmured Handforth. "We've got to thank the rebuilding and alterations for that. Irene & Co. will be late at the Moor View School, but that doesn't matter. Girls don't learn anything at school, anyhow. I'm blessed if I know why they go!"

He decided that it wouldn't be a bad idea to get to sleep again. He was just going to turn over when he changed his mind. A slight creak had sounded outside in the corridor—a faint, stealthy sort of sound, as though somebody was attempting to creep about on a dishonest errand.

There was probably nothing in the affair, but Handforth had a suspicious mind. He fancied himself as an amateur detective, and any trifling incident out of the ordinary became, in his mind, a matter for immediate investigation. He sat up in bed, his heart beating rapidly.

"By George!" he breathed. "Somebody moving about!"

Owing to the heat the fanlight over the

door was wide open, so any slight sounds were bound to come in. With one movement Handforth leapt out of bed and rushed to the door. He tore it open, and stared up and down the corridor.

He caught a glimpse of a figure just vanishing round an angle further down. There was something mysterious about the movement, and Handforth's suspicions seemed to be justified.

"My only hat!" he said tensely.

He ran down the corridor to the angle and looked round. But he was absolutely alone. There was not a sign of any other living person.

CHAPTER II.

THE UNCANNY SILENCE.



"S O M E T H I N G fishy about that, I'll bet!" muttered Handforth grimly.

"No honest chap would prowl up and down these corridors at the dead of night, and vanish like a puff of giddy smoke. I'd better investigate while the trail's hot!"

He set his jaw firmly, and then suddenly remembered that he was attired in nothing more substantial than silken pyjamas. He frowned. Delay was regrettable, but there was nothing else for it. He would certainly have to slip back to his state-room, and don a pair of slippers and some flannel trousers.

He turned quickly, and was just in time to see the door of another state-room quietly open. Dick Hamilton, of the Fourth, otherwise Nipper, emerged, fully dressed.

"Hallo! What are you doing out here?" asked Nipper, regarding Handforth with surprise. "What's the idea of wandering about in your pyjamas?"

Handforth glared.

"It was you, then?" he growled indignantly.

"What was me?"

"It was you prowling up and down."

"I don't like to disappoint you, old man, but it wasn't," replied Nipper calmly. "In the first place, I'm not in the habit of prowling, and in the second place, I've only just come out of my cabin."

"Then who was it?" demanded Edward Oswald.

"I'm no good at riddles in the middle of the night," said Nipper. "I expect it was just your imagination, Handy. There's nobody about here to creep up and down the corridors. In any case, there's no law against a fellow coming out of his room if he wants to."

"But I saw the beggar," declared Handforth darkly. "A shifty figure, by George!

I didn't have time to spot him properly, but he was up to some mischief, I'll bet. He dodged round the bend and vanished. And when I got there there wasn't a sign of him."

"Marvellous!" grinned Nipper. "My dear old Sherlock, why make a mystery out of nothing? Somebody walks past your state-room, and you conclude that he's a kind of cat-burglar, or something. Forget him, and get back to bed."

"Rats!" said Handforth. "I'm not to be choked off—"

"All right—go ahead with the investigation," said Nipper readily. "Just as you like; it doesn't matter to me. There's something far more mysterious than an unknown prowler, though. Haven't you noticed the silence?"

"Noticed the which?"

"The silence."

"What silence?" demanded Handforth.

"Listen, you chump!"

Handforth listened, staring at Nipper in astonishment.

"Well," he said at last, "I can't hear anything."

"Exactly—that's just it."

"Have you gone off your giddy rocker?" roared Handforth exasperated. "Is there anything very rummy in silence at this hour of the night? What do you expect to hear—a brass band playing?"

"No, but I expect to hear the surf on the reef," replied Nipper quietly.

Handforth started.

"Great pip!" he ejaculated. "You don't mean—"

"I mean that there's something queer going on," interrupted Nipper, his tone becoming tense and grave. "I woke up about ten minutes ago, and I suppose it was the silence that aroused me. Don't look so surprised. When a fellow is accustomed to sleeping in a continuous noise, he awakens when that noise is removed."

"But—but I can't understand it," ejaculated Handforth. "You're dotty! The reef must be making its usual roar. We're in the lagoon, and the island's all round us, and the Pacific is still there!"

"Come here," said Nipper promptly.

He led Handforth into his own cabin, where Tommy Watson and Sir Montie Tregellis-West were still sleeping soundly in their beds. The window was wide open, and Nipper went to it, Handforth following.

"Listen!" said Nipper softly.

Outside the window all was darkness, except for a reflected gleam of light along the deck. Beyond, the lagoon lay, black and mysterious—unseen. But the most extraordinary feature was the total absence of sound. If there was one never changing characteristic of this Pacific atoll, it was the continuous, everlasting murmur of the surf on the coral reef. Day and night,

month in and month out, year after year, that sound was always present. Sometimes it was loud, sometimes soft. But it was inconceivable to imagine it completely absent.

Yet, extraordinarily enough, it was absent now.

The effect was uncanny. Handforth had failed to appreciate the full significance of the thing at first, but now he was becoming more and more astonished. He stared at Nipper with wide eyes.

"But—but I don't understand!" he blurted out. "What's happened? Why is the sea so calm? I thought these coral reefs were everlastingly alive with sound? That's what Mr. Lee told us, anyhow. The waves must have got so small that they're not even breaking!"

Nipper shook his head.

"That's impossible," he replied instantly. "No power that I know of can check the ceaseless roll of the Pacific swell. I tell you, Handy, there's something horribly funny about this. I don't like it at all. I've got a feeling of oppression on me—as though something pretty beastly has happened."

Handforth made no comment, but stared out of the window again. There wasn't a breath of wind. The air was heavy and motionless. Yet, somehow, an indefinable odour of pungent rankness stole into the state-room.

CHAPTER III.

THE GREAT MYSTERY.



HANDFORTH had forgotten all about his night prowler. That investigation had dwindled into insignificance compared to this new problem. He looked at

Nipper again in the soft glow of the cabin's shaded electric light.

"I say, this is mysterious, if you like!" he muttered. "There's no sound of the reef at all!"

"I'm glad you've noticed it at last," commented Nipper.

"And there's—there's a rummy niff in the air, too," went on Edward Oswald, sniffing sharply. "Can't you smell it? A kind of dank, fishy smell. It's absolutely beastly. What the dickens is up?"

Nipper shook his head.

"No good asking me," he said quietly. "I was just going up on deck to see if any of the officers have noticed anything—they're bound to be on duty, getting ready for sailing. There's not much more than an hour before dawn, and we're due out at high tide, by sun up."

"By George, we'll both go on deck," said Handforth promptly. "Wait a tick, old son—I'll just dive into a few things. I

hope to goodness nothing happens to delay us going!"

He shot out of the cabin and went to his own. Nipper didn't awaken his chums, but went out into the corridor and waited. Perhaps there was nothing to be alarmed about—this weird silence may have some perfectly logical explanation. The sailors would possibly know.

Yet Nipper doubted. He was by no means inexperienced, and his own common sense told him, too, that there could be no ordinary elucidation of this mystery. The sound of the surf on the reef had vanished—dwindled away during the night until it was no more. What could have happened? What uncanny phenomenon could be responsible for this unprecedented occurrence?

It wasn't as though matters had been normal of late. Quite the contrary. And Nipper had every reason to feel vaguely apprehensive. It would be cruel if the *Wanderer* was prevented from taking her departure. For, within an hour or two, she was due to sail for England and home. Was Fate to step in, and detain her at the eleventh hour?

Nipper's thoughts were serious as he stood there in the corridor, waiting for Handforth. He briefly and swiftly reviewed the events of the past day or so. They had been packed with excitement and peril and uncertainty. But at last it had seemed the tension was over.

Not only had the *Wanderer* been recaptured from the clutches of Jonathan Prescott and his ruffians, but the entire enemy force had been expelled from the island, and had sailed away in the schooner *Clyde*. This was really the property of Mr. Warner Russell and Captain McAndrew, but she had been handed over to Prescott in return for all the pearls that had been taken from the lagoon by Prescott's native divers.

Mr. Russell had nothing to grumble at. These pearls, added to those taken by the *Wanderer's* men, amounted to a very comfortable fortune. Upon the whole, the adventure had ended satisfactorily, after a great many perils and periods of uncertainty. Finally, an enormous tidal wave had struck the island, and the *Wanderer* had been torn from her moorings and thrown into the shallows, where she had grounded. It had seemed that the holiday party was stranded—but through the efforts of the yacht's engineers she had been safely floated again.

This had happened only the previous evening, just before darkness had shut down. And preparations for departure were hastened, the plan being to steam out of the lagoon at sunrise, when the tide was high.

In fact, the *Wanderer* was preparing to leave at the earliest possible moment. Lord Dorrimore and Nelson Lee and Captain Burton thought it highly advisable, for another submarine upheaval might occur at

any moment. Most of the sailors were superstitious, and already regarded the island as unlucky.

There was, of course, a perfectly natural explanation. Some distance out in the vast depths of the Pacific, a submarine earthquake had happened, causing the appalling tidal wave. It was lucky, indeed, that all the members of the holiday party were alive to tell the tale. For the face of this enchanting coral atoll had been completely changed by the catastrophe. No longer was it a beauty spot, but a disordered mass of wreckage and ruin.

The pearl fishery was abandoned. And Mr. Russell was content, for there were too many risks in remaining. It was far better to get away while everybody was safe.

And now, two hours before the time of departure—with the engineers and sailors working at full pressure to facilitate matters—this fresh mystery had developed. All sounds of the surf had gone. The reef, for the first time in its existence, probably, was silent. There could be no simple explanation of this uncanny affair.

And Nipper's anxiety was justified. It seemed to him that he had been waiting for five or six minutes—but Handforth appeared, dressed, after only ninety seconds had elapsed. He was still fastening some buttons.

"Come on!" he said breathlessly. "Let's get up on deck."

"Thought you were never coming," said Nipper, as they moved down the corridor. "I thought about waking Mr. Lee, but I'll leave it until we've had a word with the sailors. I'm pretty worried, Handy."

"Worried?" repeated Handforth. "I'm jolly windy, I can tell you! It'll be just our luck if something happens to bottle us up in this rotten lagoon! At one time I thought the South Sea Islands were topping, but I've changed my opinion—give me England every time!"

They mounted the main stairway, and walked out on the promenade deck. There was very little activity here. But, vaguely, they were aware of dull clanging from far below—the sounds coming up through the engine-room ventilators. A coil of smoke was just visible against the night sky as it arose lazily from the Wanderer's funnel.

For'ard, chains clattered, men's voices sounded, and there was every indication of widespread activity. The sounds were cheering. They told Nipper and Handforth that the work was going on uninterruptedly.

The two juniors walked across to the rail, and stared out over the lagoon. Everything was black and still. Up here, the silence was even more uncanny. The air was heavy, and filled with that strange, unpleasant rankness. And the silence was only intensified by the sounds of the ship—it could be almost felt, like something tangible.

CHAPTER IV.

WHAT THE DAWN REVEALED.



NIPPER suddenly turned at the sound of voices, and his eyes lit up with eagerness as he saw the familiar figures of Lord Dorrimore and Nelson Lee pause further down the deck. Both men leaned against the rail and stared out.

"By Jove, there's the guv'nor!" ejaculated Nipper. "Dorrie, too! And we thought they were asleep, Handy! Come on!"

They rushed up rather excitedly.

"Good gad, what's this?" said Dorrie, turning. "Oh, you two! Who told you to turn out as early as this? You're losin' your beauty sleep, my lads—"

"Never mind our beauty sleep, Dorrie," interrupted Nipper. "I say, guv'nor, what does it mean? This silence woke me up, you know. What's happened? Why isn't the reef booming as usual?"

Nelson Lee glanced at Dorrie.

"It's no good, old man—we can't keep it from them," he said. "I'm not able to answer your questions, Nipper," he went on. "Dorrie and I are just as puzzled as you are. We can only wait for the dawn."

"Then something has really happened, sir?" asked Handforth.

"By the Lord Harry!" said Lord Dorrimore. "Yes, young 'un, somethin's happened all right! But what it is we don't know. Perhaps the Pacific has suddenly disappeared, and left us in this lagoon—like a match floatin' in a basin of water. The lagoon's here, anyway."

"You're just trying to be funny, Dorrie," said Nipper. "No power on earth could shift the Pacific—it's miles deep, even near the island. But it must be frightfully calm—"

"Perhaps there's another earthquake coming," interrupted Handforth excitedly. "And what's this rummy niff in the air, sir?"

"Seaweed," replied Nelson Lee quietly.

"Oh!" said Nipper, with a start. "Seaweed, eh? We saw some stray bits last night, didn't we?"

"Yes, and it seems to have increased," said Lee. "Nothing very surprising in that, of course. It's obviously drifting here with the current, and it is coming straight into the lagoon. No doubt it will be washed out again when the tide changes."

Nipper looked at Nelson Lee rather keenly. There was something in his tone which failed to carry conviction. He spoke carelessly, as though attempting to hide something.

"Look here, guv'nor, what's the idea of spoofing?" asked Nipper gruffly. "I believe you know what's happened, and you won't tell us."

"No, Nipper, I don't know," said the famous detective. "I suspect something, certainly—but there is no object to be

gained by voicing my vague suspicions. As I said before, we must wait until the dawn comes."

"But why, sir?" asked Handforth quickly. "Can't we take a boat out to the reef now? We might be able to see what's wrong at close quarters. It's so jolly rummy that——"

"There is a great amount of seaweed in the lagoon, and it would be inadvisable to take any boat across it in the darkness," interrupted Lee.

"Why, sir?"

"You are very persistent, Handforth," said Lee drily. "As a matter of fact, the lagoon is filled with lurking danger during the hours of darkness. You haven't forgotten that terrible decapod, by any chance? Other sea creatures disport themselves in the lagoon during the night-time—and with these masses of seaweed floating about there is treble danger. It is quite possible that the weed conceals horrors of which we know nothing. It isn't worth the risk, my boys—especially as dawn will soon be here."

"Then I'll tell you what, sir," said Nipper briskly. "The searchlights."

"You're late for the fair, old son," exclaimed Lord Dorrimore. "We've already tried that stant, an' it's no good. We can see the reef, an' we can see the open sea—but even with the searchlight it's impossible to distinguish anythin' wrong. The sea is amazin'ly calm, an' there's no surf—but that's all. Nothin' much to worry about."

Nipper grunted.

"All the same, you're both worrying like the dickens," he said. "You can't kid me, Dorrie. Something's happened during the night, and I'm beginning to get scared. What if we're prevented from leaving on the tide?"

"In that case, we'll stay," said his lordship drily. "But get back to bed, young 'un, an' forget everythin' else. The whole ship's company is workin' like steam, an' we're sailin' for England, home and beauty at the advertised time! That's finally settled."

But Nipper and Handforth had no intention of going back to bed. Finding they could get nothing further out of Nelson Lee and Lord Dorrimore, they went off on their own. Staring down at the lagoon was unprofitable, however, and they soon got tired of leaning over the rail.

"Let's go down the ladder and have a look at close quarters," suggested Nipper.

"Good idea," nodded Handforth. "As a matter of fact, I was just going to suggest it myself. We might even take a boat across," he added thoughtfully. "It doesn't do to take too much notice of these elders!"

He soon changed his opinion, however, when they reached the little platform at the bottom of the ladder. The water was practically at their feet, and it stretched away darkly and mysteriously into the

gloom. That dank smell was now more pungent than ever. It filled their nostrils to the exclusion of all else.

"Ugh!" muttered Nipper. "It's horrible!"

Something moved two or three yards out. There was a brief glimpse of a black object, a curious heaving of the water, and a dull plop. The two juniors were rather startled.

"By George, Mr. Lee was right," said Handforth huskily. "Did you see that? I'll bet there's all sorts of beastly things about! And what's wrong with the water? It looks dead! It's lumpy, too."

"Seaweed," said Nipper briefly. "The lagoon's choked."

They went up on deck again, vaguely uneasy. There seemed to be an atmosphere of impending disaster hovering over the yacht. It was intensified, perhaps, by the fact that hardly any of the guests were up and about.

Handforth and Nipper waited, and at last the first grey light of dawn appeared in the sky. And as the gloom was dissipated, and the day arrived, the watchers strained their eyes towards the reef.

And they saw something which filled them with dismay.

CHAPTER V.

SEAWEED, SEAWEED, EVERYWHERE!



"WELL, I'm hanged!" ejaculated Lord Dorrimore.

He and Nelson Lee were on the bridge, and they had now been joined by Captain Burton, Captain McAndrew, and Mr. Beverley Stokes. The light had greatly strengthened, and all the men were staring out in the same direction.

"This is serious," said Nelson Lee quietly. "Serious?" echoed Captain Burton. "It may be tragic! How in the name of all that's miraculous can we push the Wanderer through this mess? After a couple of yards her propellers will be fouled."

"There's nothin' like bein' cheerful," said Dorrie, with a grimace.

For some minutes nothing further was said. The daylight was increasing—the sun was already beginning to peep over the rim of the blue Pacific. The glass was high, the sky clear, and there was every prospect of continued fine weather. A more promising sunrise could not be imagined.

Far across the sea the air was as clear as crystal—the distant horizon was sharply defined. It was not until one brought one's gaze down to close quarters that the shock was received.

A vast change had occurred during the hours of night.

It was in no way connected with the weather, however. All round the island, on

every side, the sea had changed its appearance. A delightful blue in the distance, it changed into a dead, drab blackness all round the island. And the usually turquoise lagoon was thick and turbid and revolting to look upon.

"Weed!" exclaimed Lee, at length. "Tons of it—millions of tons of it! The lagoon's not only choked, but the whole island is surrounded by the stuff. Upon my soul! How was it possible to prepare for this contingency?"

"We saw a few stray bits last night, you know," said Mr. Stokes.

"Yes, but who was to guess that it would increase to this extent in a few short hours?" asked Lee. "Even Captain Burton, with all his experience, was not prepared for this."

"It's something new in my line," declared the skipper.

"Hoots, an' it's the same with masel', I'm thinkin'," put in Captain McAndrew gruffly. "I've sailed these seas for thirty years, and I've never seen the like! I'm tellin' ye, it's bad."

Down on the deck, Handforth and Nipper were no longer alone. Quite a number of other fellows had appeared—to say nothing of Irene Manners and Doris Berkeley and Winnie Pitt and Tessa Love. Everybody knew that the Wanderer would be sailing at dawn, and the guests had turned out to see the yacht make her exit through the break in the reef.

But the early risers received a big shock.

"What-ho!" ejaculated Archie Glenthorne, adjusting his famous monocle. "I mean to say, a few changes, what? Odds anchors and chains! The good old lagoon has taken on a somewhat poisonous aspect!"

"But what's happened?" asked Clive Russell, staring. "The water's choked with seaweed! Look at it! Great, rolling masses of it! And it's all round the island, too!"

"Now we can understand the reason for that silence," said Nipper quietly. "The reef is so choked with weed that the rollers are unable to break. They just surge up into the weed, and smother themselves. And it seems to be getting worse, too!"

"Yes, but where's it all coming from?" asked Tommy Watson blankly.

"The sea-bed, of course—and it's no ordinary weed, either," replied Nipper. "It's deep sea stuff—torn away, and thrown up from thousands of feet. Why, some of those stems are as thick as tree-trunks!"

"And look at the leaves!" cried Doris. "Why, they're like great slabs, yards and yards across! I didn't think it was possible for seaweed to grow as big as this!"

"All sorts of things are possible in the Pacific, Doris," said Nipper grimly. "We've found that out already! A ship can sail in these waters for years without meet-



He caught a glimpse of a figure just vanishing round an angle further down. There was something mysterious about the movement, and Handforth's suspicions seemed to be justified.

ing anything rummy—and then—in the period of a week, it can come across samples of everything that's frightful."

"We seem to have hit one of the bad spells," said Reggie Pitt.

They crowded against the rail, staring across the lagoon. There was a certain fascination in looking at this extraordinary scene. It was something they had never imagined—something they had never believed possible.

The island itself was pitiful enough—with the torn and battered groves, and the signs of wreckage. That enormous tidal-wave had wiped away all the beauty, and had left nothing but stark ugliness. Nature would put everything to rights in due course, no doubt,—and rapidly, too. But at the moment the scene was rather sad.

The island, however, was not attracting any attention from the watchers. They were looking at the lagoon—and at the sea beyond. The Wanderer was entirely surrounded by the masses of brown-black weed.

It wasn't merely floating, but choking the lagoon in vast quantities, appearing to go right down to the coral bed. Indeed, in some places, the repulsive-looking stuff was heaped up above the surface, and it was all moving sluggishly, with a kind of evil life.

The last trace of beauty had gone, and there was something about the lagoon which caused many of the watchers to involuntarily shudder. What lurking life was there in this unwholesome-looking mass?

The weed was particularly thick at the break in the reef. It was piled up, and moving slowly inwards, choking the lagoon more and more. The current, in fact, was drifting it in slowly, and in vast and ever-increasing quantities. No power on earth could stop that drift.

All round the reef, on the outer edge, the weed was lying just under the surface of the water. There was no foam, and there were no breakers. For some distance out the sea came along in slow, undulating rolls. But they all came to nothing on the island. They were dissipated by the weed.

"But—but where does it all come from?" asked Tommy Watson. "That's what I can't make out, you know. How did it get here?"

"Let's go and ask Mr. Lee!" suggested Jack Grey.

"No need to, old man—I can tell you," put in Nipper. "The thing's obvious. Don't you remember that tidal wave?"

"Yes, but I don't see—"

"There was a terrific submarine earthquake not far from here," declared Nipper. "That caused the tidal wave—and it caused this flow of weed, too. The earthquake must have loosened millions and millions of tons of deep-sea weed. It naturally came to the surface, and has been drifting on to the island all night."

CHAPTER VI.

AN ALARMING PROSPECT.



NIPPER'S explanation was undoubtedly the true one.

These vast quantities of seaweed had been thrown up from the bed of the ocean—probably from some unbelievable depth—by that submarine earthquake. And the island lying in the direct drift of the current, the weed had come all round. And there was more of it on the way, too.

It was a perfectly natural phenomenon, considering all the circumstances. But the position of the Wanderer and her party became doubtful. Would it be possible to take the yacht out through this congestion of weed?

"We're in a nice hole now," said Stevens, of the Fifth. "Just when we were about to sail for home, too! Somehow, I had an idea that it was too good to be true!

We shall never get away from this island now!"

William Napoleon Browne shook his head. "As an optimist, Brother Horace, you lack many of the most essential qualities," he observed. "Hope! Hope is the watchword! Since we can do nothing to push this weed back from whence it came, we must hope that some miracle will deprive us of its presence. Otherwise, I fear we are in the broth."

"This niff, too," went on Stevens. "It's getting worse every minute! Pah! It's sickening! Waves of it are coming up all the time, and I'm feeling absolutely bad!"

"I don't blame you, Brother Horace," agreed Browne. "I, myself, in spite of my iron constitution, feel somewhat quivery in the central region. The odour of seaweed is not exactly my favourite perfume."

"Seaweed!" echoed Stevens. "I wouldn't mind ordinary seaweed—it's got a healthy kind of tang to it. But this stuff is simply horrible. It's like—it's like nothing on earth!"

Browne nodded.

"Considering it comes from the unknown depths of the sea, I can quite agree with you," he remarked. "But we must be brave, Brother Horace, we must rise above these trivialities. Always remember that we are in the presence of some unprecedented happening which may yet ring throughout the world. You must realise that we shall achieve fame by this means."

"Who cares about fame?" growled Stevens.

"It is possible that your ambitions are dulled, but mine are not so," said Napoleon Browne firmly. "Fame is the one pinnacle I live for. And imagine the riot of excitement, Brother Stevens, when the newspapers publish our photographs—as members of the illustrious party who were present at this Sensation of the South Seas. Less fortunate people have been caught in the meshes of the Sargasso Sea. But what is the Sargasso Sea compared to this noxious vegetation? Weed, brother—just gulf weed. We are gazing upon massive growths from the vasty deep."

Stevens grunted.

"There's something in it, but I'd be a lot more comfortable if we were hovering on the outskirts—with the open sea in front of us," he replied. "It's a bit uncomfortable to realise that we may never escape."

"I am grieved that you should reveal such an utter lack of confidence in our worthy mariners and engineers," said Browne severely. "Personally, I am quite blithe. I gaze upon the scene with urbanity. For I know, in my heart, that all will yet be well."

Browne was fortunate, for the majority of the others were by no means certain. That vague sense of uneasiness was becoming general. For as the sun rose higher,

and the daylight grew stronger, the full significance of the catastrophe was more and more apparent.

A man had been sent up into the mast-head to make observations. He reported that the weed, as far as he could see, extended for miles. Some little distance out the sea was blue, but the weed was obviously under the surface. It was present in such enormous quantities that no estimate could be made. But one fact was startlingly clear.

The island stood in the very centre of the ocean current. And the weed was drifting in a direct line, choking the lagoon more and more. And this drift was something that could never be altered. It was a perpetual feature of this part of the Pacific.

"We've got to face facts, and there's an end of it," said Captain Burton grimly. "The lagoon's choked now, and it'll be piled high by this evening. What chance shall we have of getting out?"

"Couldn't we make an attempt?" asked Lord Dorrimore.

"Impossible!"

"The old tub wouldn't move far, you mean?"

"I mean that without a clear channel, the yacht can't move a hundred yards," replied the skipper. "In the first place, this weed is as thick and as tough as hardened gutta-percha, and the blunt prow of the Wanderer would simply pile it up into one conglomerated mass—as solid and as impassable as the coral reef itself. We wouldn't travel two hundred yards."

"You're right, captain," said Nelson Lee.

"In the second place," continued Captain Burton, "we wouldn't even get as far as that—for the simple reason that we should lose our propellers."

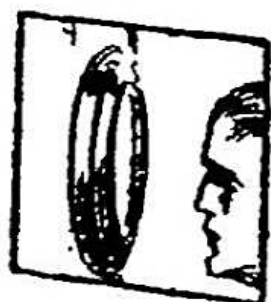
"Lose 'em?" ejaculated Dorrie.

"Lose them!" repeated the captain grimly. "Ordinary weed is bad enough—it'll foul any kind of propeller. But this stuff, with stems like oak trees, would twist our blades and probably snap the shaft. It's not worth the risk, sir. We can't move a yard until this weed has cleared."

"An' supposin' it doesn't clear?" asked his lordship smoothly. "I don't wish to be pessimistic—"

"If it doesn't clear, then we're as firmly fixed in this lagoon as any hulk in a sand-bank," replied the captain steadily. "That's the plain truth, and it's no good trying to delude ourselves otherwise."

CHAPTER VII. THE FALLING GLASS.



NELSON LEE thoughtfully stroked his chin.

"Fortunately, there is no general alarm yet," he exclaimed. "The crew is just waiting—curious and interested. The boys and girls are

rather excited, but hopeful. We want to keep the truth from them as long as possible."

"What's the use?" asked Mr. Stokes gruffly. "We're in this mess, sir, and we might as well admit it. Of all the infernal luck! Just when we were on the point of sailing for home, too!"

"It's generally the way of things, old man," said Lord Dorrimore quietly. "I've noticed it heaps of times. You make all sorts of plans, you fix your dates, an' then—zing!—somethin' comes along to upset the little apple cart. Life's full of these little snags. There's always somebody waitin' round the corner to biff you with a hammer!"

Nelson Lee smiled.

"This is hardly the moment for philosophy, Dorrie," he observed. "I quite agree with your sentiment, but we've got to deal with hard facts. If there's any possible way of escaping from the lagoon, we've got to find it."

"I'll leave all the thinkin' to you," said Dorrie. "But I'll remind you that we've got guns on board—an' heaps of ammunition. What about blowin' the bally stuff to bits, an' shellin' a passage through?"

"By James!" ejaculated Captain Burton. "That's an idea!"

"I'm afraid it's nothing but an idea," put in Nelson Lee. "Our guns are small, captain, and if we shelled this weed all day it would make little or no impression. I'll tell you why. It's coming in all the time, and as fast as we cleared a channel, it would get choked up again."

"But when the flow of it ceases, I mean?"

"There might be a possibility then, but I'm doubtful," said Lee. "And when will the flow cease? Not for days—not for weeks, perhaps. The sea is calm, and the weed is lying in stupendous masses for miles round. We've only just got the edges of it yet. And there's another point to consider—and the most important point of all."

"I'll bet it's somethin' pretty ghastly," said Dorrie.

"It is," replied Nelson Lee. "This weed is piling up higher and higher every hour. By to-night, as Captain Burton remarked, it'll be piled above the water, over the whole extent of the lagoon."

"What of it?" asked Mr. Stokes.

"This weed is deep-sea stuff—and only lives under water," replied Nelson Lee. "Exposure to the sun is fatal. And this sun, as I hardly need tell you, is calculated to create decomposition in an appallingly brief space of time. Gentlemen, within two days this lagoon will be a death-trap."

"Owing to the rotted seaweed, you mean?"

"Owing to the rotted sea-weed," said Nelson Lee grimly. "The atmosphere is already polluted to an unpleasant extent. By this evening it will be nauseous and revolting. By to-morrow we shall be in the

centre of a seething mass of fever-breeding stench. It is no exaggeration to say that within thirty-six hours the air will be utterly poisonous."

The others were startled.

"You think this—really?" asked Dorrie gravely.

"I don't think it—I know it," said Nelson Lee. "Oh, it's no good blinking at the facts, Dorrie. Even now we can't put a boat off, and every hour makes the situation worse. Refuge on the island itself—supposing we could get there—would be useless. We can do nothing but stay on board and wait for the end. Unless something unprecedented happens, we shall gradually fall into a state of coma, and die of poisoning."

"Good gad!" said his lordship. "That's pretty frightful. I always had a hankerin' to go down fightin'. There's somethin' beastly in waitin' for a slow death of this sort. Man alive, can't we make a shot at it? Can't we get the guns goin' an' see what can be done?"

"Yes, let's do something, anyhow!" urged Mr. Stokes, with set lips.

"I strongly disagree with the guns being used," replied Nelson Lee. "We have plenty of ammunition, certainly—but the supply is not unlimited. It would be a sheer waste of good shells to fire them now. Look for yourselves, gentlemen," he added, pointing to the break in the reef. "Look at the masses of weed sluggishly coming in in one continuous surge."

They looked, and were convinced.

"It would indeed be a waste of ammunition to fire the guns now," said Mr. Stokes quietly. "We can only wait until to-morrow—and then, perhaps, the surge of the seaweed will be lessened. Let us hope that there is no outbreak of fever in the meantime."

Dorrie shook himself.

"I'm goin' to order quinine all round," he growled. "Nothin' like bein' on the safe side. Pah! This stench is gettin' worse!"

Nelson Lee's evenly spoken words had carried great conviction. And they were proving sound already. The sun had scarcely got to work yet, but the exposed weed was already sending forth a strong, rank odour which promised to become an evil, noxious gas in the course of a few hours. With such a powerful sun beating upon the exposed weed, the result was inevitable. Making plans of escape was more or less a waste of time. One glance at the lagoon was enough. It would take two days, at the very least, to escape from this trap, even if the project was possible. And by that time the air would be fouled to such an extent that human life would be out of the question.

If Nelson Lee thought that the dreadful truth could be kept from the others, he was unduly optimistic. It is an old saying that bad news travels fast—and within half-an-hour the entire yacht knew the worst.

Before breakfast was over, indeed, all the St. Frank's fellows and Moor View girls were discussing the appalling situation. No matter how they looked at it, there seemed to be no hope.

And then Captain Burton made a rather significant discovery. Almost unconsciously, he consulted the weather glass. He was startled. The glass was not only falling, but positively tumbling.

CHAPTER VIII.

A RAY OF HOPE.



CAPTAIN BURTON turned to one of his officers.

"Have you seen this, Mr. Stewart?" he asked sharply.

"I have, sir," replied the officer. "Seems as though something's on the way."

"On the way!" echoed the skipper. "Good glory! I haven't seen the glass tumble like this for weeks! There's a big blow coming, that's certain. A cyclone, I should imagine."

Mr. Stewart glanced at the sky.

"No sign of anything yet, sir," he remarked. "Not that we can judge by appearances these days. When it does come, it'll probably swoop down with hardly an hour's warning. Still, I reckon it's seven or eight hours away."

Captain Burton pursed his lips.

"Seven or eight hours!" he muttered. "I wonder—Mr. Lee!" he added, raising his voice and leaning over the bridge rail. "Just a minute!"

Nelson Lee mounted quickly.

"The glass is falling, and there's evidently some bad weather coming—a storm of sorts," said the captain. "If I know anything about this part of the world, it ought to be on us before the evening. We're safe enough in the lagoon, of course—nothing can shift us out of this trap. But a good blow might mean an extra day or two of life."

Nelson Lee looked at the skipper sharply.

"By Jove, yes!" he exclaimed. "With a strong enough wind, this vile stench would be blown away. We might get enough pure air to last us a week—if the wind held all that time. Do you think it's possible?"

"Not only possible, but more than likely," replied the captain. "We've had two or three weeks of uninterrupted fine weather—an extraordinary long spell for this latitude. When a storm does come, it'll be a beauty. I'm rather glad we didn't sail this morning."

"I won't say that," replied Nelson Lee, with a smile. "I'd rather be in the midst of the worst storm blowing than in this trap. All the same, this piece of news is welcome. If the storm is going to be any—"

thing big, we ought to see a few signs of it before noon."

"Hardly as early as that," said the skipper. "There might be nothing apparent until to-night. We can live in hopes, anyhow. Better do your best to spread the news that there's some hope, Mr. Lee."

And Nelson Lee performed this task with great success.

He assumed an air of gaiety—a half-excited exuberance which was really foreign to him. And he went about the yacht, carrying the news to all and sundry. Usually, the prospect of a great storm was not exactly welcome—but now it was received with great excitement.

"By George, a storm, eh?" said Handforth. "It'll clear the air, anyhow! And, who knows? It may wash all this weed away?"

"Pigs might fly if they had wings," said Church gruffly.

"Don't you be so jolly clever!" retorted Handforth. "It's not so impossible for a storm to take all the weed away. What about that storm we had soon after we got to the island? It was enough to wipe the island off the map! And the sea was mountains high for days afterwards."

"That's right enough!" agreed McClure thoughtfully. "But I'm not so sure about this storm. It's all a yarn, I believe. Look at the sky—as blue as you like! There isn't a single cloud!"

"Which only proves your pitiful ignorance," said Handforth scornfully. "You can't judge by appearances in the Pacific! I shouldn't be at all surprised if the storm broke within half-an-hour! They sweep up by magic!"

"Hear,hear!" said Willy, joining the group. "For once, Ted, old son, I agree with you. There's a storm coming, as sure as a gun."

"Oh, is there?" snapped Handforth. "How do you know?"

"I don't need to look at the glass," replied Willy calmly. "Marmaduke's enough for me—to say nothing of Priscilla. That monkey of mine is so uneasy that he can't keep still for a second. He's scared stiff. And even Priscilla has gone right off her feed. You can't kid them, you know. They've got a sort of instinct which warns them in advance—without squinting at the sky."

"Is this a fact?" asked Church eagerly.

"Honest injun," said Willy. "They've both got the wind up properly."

"Then it can't be a yarn, after all," admitted Church.

"Rather not!" said the hero of the Third. "You mustn't take any notice of the sky. Before long there'll be a bank of clouds rise up, and then we shall get it fairly in the neck. It might even be here within the hour."

"A fat lot you know, Mr. Clever," he Handforth sniffed.

sneered. "An hour, eh? You young ass, it's impossible! It couldn't be here until this evening at the very earliest. Don't you go spreading those silly yarns!"

Willy grinned.

"All right—I'll repeat your own words, and say the storm will be here in half-an-hour," he said cheerfully. "You're a good chap, Ted, but you contradict yourself twenty times a day. Who's coming for a lime juice?"

Church and McClure accompanied Willy below—for the air on deck was stifling. There was no wind at all, and the stench from the seaweed rose in suffocating waves. Coupled with the heat, the effect was nauseating.

Most members of the holiday party were keeping below, for the cooled saloons and lounges were at least airy and comfortable. The smell of the seaweed did not penetrate so much.

"I wish I could believe the 'guv'nor," said Nipper thoughtfully, as he sat with Tregellis-West and Watson. "But it isn't like him to go about excited. He's putting it all on."

"You mean a storm isn't coming?" asked Watson.

"No, I don't mean that; but there's not much chance of the storm doing any good," replied Nipper. "The 'guv'nor knows it, but he wants to spoof everybody. It's better to keep our spirits up as long as possible."

"Begad, it's a frightfully good idea, but things will only be worse later on," said Sir Montie, removing his pincenez and polishing them. "Dear old boy, we've got to face things calmly. But I don't believe we're doomed to perish in this frightful spot—I don't, really."

The hours dragged by, and the situation remained unchanged. The sky was still blue, and the sun still blazed down, and there was no breath of wind in the air.

Upon close inspection, however, the lagoon was gradually changing. The masses of seaweed were piling up higher. And all round the reef the awful stuff was increasing in volume. Paradise Island was caught in the vortex of this cast-up refuse of the ocean bed.

CHAPTER IX.

UNSEEN HORRORS.



"I SAW something then!" exclaimed Ralph Leslie Fullwood, pointing. "Look, you fellows—over there!"

Several of the juniors were leaning over the rail, watching the sluggishly drifting seaweed. It was late afternoon now, and the air was hotter and closer than ever. But the sky was still

clear, although the sun had taken on a brazen, dull appearance.

"What did you see?" asked Reggie Pitt.

"I don't know—it looked like a fin, or somethin'," replied Fullwood. "I'll bet this weed is simply full of life. That's why they won't allow any of us to go down the ladder an' look at it at close quarters."

There was something horribly fascinating in watching the weed. The very size of it was startling. Many of the stems were twelve to fifteen feet in circumference—enormous, brown-black lengths of tough growth which could hardly be called seaweed at all. And there were enormous quantities of thick, slimy-looking leaves and tendrils.

And over the whole crawled countless horrors, most of them small. Creepy things, wormy things—in fact, every imaginable sort of life. The lagoon was seething with this activity. At first glance the weed seemed dead, but it was absolutely alive.

And now and again there would be a great upheaval, as though some huge monster of the deep was attempting to break through. At other times the weed would be sucked down into a kind of vortex, and for an instant there would be a swirl of black water.

The Wanderer was still afloat, of course, although the weed was packed round her tightly. It stretched away on every side to the inner shores of the lagoon. The effect was curious. It was as though the yacht rested in the midst of a refuse pile. It was hardly possible to imagine that she floated in water. The whole island now seemed solid, for the lagoon itself had vanished. There was only this piled up weed to be seen.

It was encroaching upon the reef, too—covering it completely in the low-lying parts, and joining up with the weed within. It was a slow, insidious process, but nevertheless certain.

"By George! Look at that!" yelled Handforth suddenly.

His call to the others was unnecessary, for they had all seen the thing. A foul-looking, scaly arm had appeared through the weed—a great limb, yards in length, with webbing between the points. It plunged wildly for a moment or two, and the weed parted.

And for an instant the watching juniors caught sight of a horrifying monster. As far as they could judge, it was something like a lizard, but a thousand times more repulsive. They only saw the head and front portion, and this alone was as big as a whale. Then with a slow movement the thing dropped back.

"My only hat!" said Pitt, with a gasp.

"Why, a thing like that could wreck the

giddy yacht!" muttered Church. "It must be hundreds of yards long!"

Everybody was shaken.

"And perhaps the lagoon is full of 'em," said Bob Christine hoarsely.

Nipper shook his head.

"Don't get scared," he said quietly. "There aren't likely to be many of that breed there, and if there are, they're pretty harmless. Couldn't you see the thing was practically dead—at its last gasp?"

"It looked alive——"

"That thing was a denizen of the uttermost depths," declared Nipper. "It can't live up here; I'm surprised that it had any life at all. These deep-water creatures are like fish out of water when they come near the surface. There's only one sort of danger."

"You mean—when they die?" asked Church.

"Yes," replied Nipper. "The rotting weed will be bad enough, but if there are many of those ghastly creatures floating in the sun—— But I can't talk about it," he added huskily. "It's too awful!"

"Let's hope the storm comes along soon," said Clive Russell.

"I don't believe there'll be a storm at all!" growled Fullwood, glancing up. "It'll be dark before long, an' there isn't even a breath of wind. The weed's comin' in faster all the time, an'——"

A shriek from down the deck interrupted Fullwood's words, and everybody gulped. There was something startling about that sound. There came a great commotion, too—shouts and wild yells.

"Come on!" gasped Handforth breathlessly.

They pelted for'ard at full speed, instinctively feeling that there was something to see. And they weren't wrong. In the bows of the yacht they beheld a grim sight. One of the members of the crew was fighting for his life—caught in the coils of a festoon of enormous black coils. They had come overside without warning, like some horror out of a nightmare.

Lord Dorrimore, Nelson Lee, and several of the yacht's men were dashing about doing everything possible. One or two hatchets were hacking away at those enormous feelers. There was a dull, sickening squelch as one of the hatchets found its mark. The severed feeler lashed about dangerously, and two of the men were nearly caught by that death dealing blow.

"What—what is it?" gasped Watson.

"Looks like another of those horrible decapods; but I believe it's something worse!" snapped Nipper. "There's no telling what this weed contains. Look! The thing's going!"

Everybody breathed a sigh of relief as the unseen monster released its hold. The victim was lying on the deck, unconscious.

And as the black feelers vanished several men were rash enough to dash to the side and look over. They saw nothing but a swirl amid the weed.

CHAPTER X.

A NIGHT OF TERROR.



DARKNESS fell—black, inky, and impenetrable.

Such darkness had never been seen on the island before. It was so intense that one seemed to be walking against something solid on those parts of the deck where there were no lights.

The Wanderer was throbbing with an unknown dread. It filled the heart of everybody. They couldn't explain what they feared, but the fear was there—tangible and solid. The vessel's lights only intensified the sensation of being in the midst of dangers.

The deck was forbidden to the juniors. After that experience of the evening the order had gone forth that everybody was to remain below. But most of the state-room windows looked out upon the deck, and groups of juniors were gazing out, hardly knowing what to expect.

The unfortunate sailor who had been caught by those black toils was still unconscious—crushed and gravely injured. Two of his ribs were broken, and his flesh was bruised appallingly. There was a feeling of tragedy in the air. But Nelson Lee had strong hopes that the man would rally and recover.

At dinner the guests assembled as usual. There wasn't a single absentee. Even the girls turned up in the great dining-saloon, wearing their best evening frocks, and attempting to appear unconcerned. They had plenty of pluck, and not one of them was showing the white feather.

Dinner was served as though nothing was wrong.

Lord Dorrimore was blithely gay, joking, chaffing, and genial. He told everybody to look cheerful, and hope for the best. And although the general run of appetites was small, most of the St. Frank's fellows managed to eat heartily. Fatty Little, indeed, packed away more than usual.

"If we've only got a couple of days to live we might as well make the most of 'em," he declared in explanation. "Besides, there's nothing like a full tummy to fortify a chap. It gives him strength and courage."

"I fear such food as you have eaten, Brother Little, would give me acute biliousness," observed Napoleon Browne gently. "But who am I to deny you your little pleasures?"

"It wouldn't be so bad if it wasn't for

this beastly whiff," said Handforth. "It's coming in everywhere, and it seems to be worse now than it was during the day. I can't make it out."

"Just a minute, everybody," called out Nelson Lee, from the end of the great saloon. "You may not take my advice, but I hope you will. I suggest that you all go to bed in the usual way and try to sleep. Nothing can be done until the morning, in any case. And you will only get your nerves on edge by remaining awake."

"But what about the storm, sir?" asked Christine. "We want to be awake when it comes."

"There is very little prospect of the storm breaking yet," replied Nelson Lee. "The glass has fallen heavily, but has steadied itself somewhat. The storm is coming, but we cannot tell when it will break. Take my advice, and go to bed. Sleep is the best of all possible cures for strained nerves."

A request from Nelson Lee was good enough. Everybody promised to turn in within the hour. Indeed, it was the best thing to be done. The decks were out of bounds, and there was no fun in sitting in the lounge or the reading-room. Even the men had no inclination for billiards or cards.

The girls were the first to go to their state-rooms. After them the boys went off in twos and threes. And at a comparatively early hour the majority of the guests were in their cabins. It was a relief to get one's clothing off. The night was hot—appallingly hot. Not a breath of wind came through the open ports, and the uncanny silence was greater than ever.

"I say, come and look here," said Nipper, in his own cabin.

Tregellis-West and Watson joined him at the window. They could see across the deck, and out beyond the lagoon. Something was visible in the darkness—the island, in fact, could be seen.

The effect was amazingly curious. The heaped-up masses of seaweed, the far-off coral, every atom of matter, in fact, was glowing with some inward phosphorescence. It was not merely upon the surface, but seemed to penetrate deeply into the heart of the weed and the coral.

And out beyond, the sea itself was shining—shining with a weird, uncanny light. It was a picture that could never be forgotten. Tommy Watson and Sir Montie Tregellis-West stared out breathlessly.

"It's—it's awful!" muttered Tommy Watson at last.

"Begad, yes!" breathed Sir Montie. "I've got a feelin', Nipper, old boy, that there's goin' to be another earthquake, or

some-thing. A frightfully awful catastrophe, anyhow!"

"It's the storm," said Nipper. "These signs are fairly common, I believe, although hardly ever as apparent as this. Listen to the other chaps. We aren't the only ones who've seen this!"

Voices could be heard at all the other state-room windows. On the bridge, Nelson Lee and Captain Burton and two or three of the others were watching, fascinated. And a change came about like magic. Even as everybody was gazing at the luminous scene there was a kind of flicker. And the intense blackness shut down just as though a vast blanket had dropped upon the island.

"By the Lord Harry!" said Lord Dorri-more. "I've seen a few rummy things in my time, but this beats the lot! Did you notice the weed? Every scrap of it was gleamin' like myriads of fairy lamps. An' now it's all black. How on earth could it snap out so suddenly?"

Nobody could answer him. But there was a general feeling of impending disaster. Everybody had gone to bed, but not a soul slept—at least, during the first two or three hours. The sensation of coming catastrophe was like a tangible thing. It was a night of terror—a night when the slightest sound caused a fellow to leap up with staring eyes and quivering limbs.

And the worst feature of the whole affair was the uncertainty. What was the immediate future bringing? What fresh perils were in store?

CHAPTER XI.

TROUBLE IN WILLY'S CABIN.



THERE was a tender look in Willy Handforth's eyes.

"Poor old Marmy!" he said soothingly. "It's all right, old son—you're safe with me. No need to get

the wind up. If you go west, I'll go with you. I can't say more than that, can I?"

Marmaduke, the little monkey, snuggled closely against Willy's shoulder, and peeped at its young master with frightened eyes. But he was considerably calmed by Willy's tone. He gave a little chatter of pleasure.

"That's the style!" said Willy cheerfully. "I don't want to upset you, Marmy, but you're a bit selfish. How can I go to sleep if you want soothing all the time? You're worse than a giddy baby!"

Chubby Heath raised his head from his pillow.

"Chuck it!" he growled. "I'm fed up!"

"Hallo, are you awake?" asked Willy.

"Awake!" snorted Chubby. "You fat-head, I haven't had a wink of sleep yet!"

"Neither have I!" came a voice from the other bed.

"There you are—Juicy's in the same fix," went on Chubby. "How do you expect us to sleep while you're talking to that beastly monkey all the time?"

"Cheer up," said Willy. "I'm just going to have a go at Priscilla."

"Look here, you rotter——"

"Don't kid yourselves," interrupted Willy severely. "I'm not keeping you awake, my sons. It's this heat, and the seaweed, and the coming storm that's keeping you lively. It's like your nerve to blame me."

"We're not scared, you ass!" said Chubby indignantly.

"We're not talking about anybody being scared," retorted Willy. "You've accused me of keeping you awake, and I'm calling you a fibber. Why, you chumps have dropped off to sleep scores of times while I've been singing at the top of my voice."

"Then you must be right," said Chubby. "If we could go to sleep in the middle of that awful din——"

"That's enough!" interrupted Willy tartly. "Another insulting remark about my voice, and I'll start singing now!"

"Help!" groaned Juicy Lemon. "Haven't we got enough tortures?"

"All right!" snapped Willy. "You asked for it!"

Callous to the appeals of his chums, he forthwith gave a rendering of "Hard-hearted Hannah," which was not only ancient, but positively painful. And Willy's singing left much to be desired. Occasionally, he wasn't quite sure of his notes, and when he forgot the words he used a few "la-las." The general effect was appalling.

Even Marmaduke grew thoroughly alarmed, and all his old fright returned. Chubby Heath and Juicy Lemon howled in anguish, and Priscilla, the parrot, observed in a loud voice that "this was a bit of all right." But she amended this by adding—"she didn't think!" Chubby hurled a pillow at Willy, Willy hurled it back, and in some curious way the fight left Willy, and Chubby and Juicy went at one another hammer and tongs.

"Good!" said Willy, after he had finished his orgy. "Perhaps you'll feel a bit tired after that. I warned you what would happen if you goaded me, didn't I? Look at Marmy now—he's gone all white at the gills!"

"It's a wonder he's still alive!" said Chubby gruffly.

The fight ended as rapidly as it had begun—mainly because Juicy's pillow had commenced emitting numerous feathers, and it was a risky business to continue. Willy's chums settled themselves down again, hot and perspiring.

ANSWERS

Every Saturday. Price 2d.

"Have a heart, old man!" pleaded Chubby, changing his tactics. "Put that beastly monkey in his box, and shove the light out!"

"No—don't put the light out!" said Juicy. "Afraid of the dark?" asked Chubby tartly.

"No, I'm not!" howled Lemon.

At the same time, he was, although he didn't like to admit it. At any ordinary time he would have scorned a light in the bed-room. But there was a feeling of unknown horror in the air to-night.

After flatly declaring that sleep was im-

"Prissy wants the light out!" observed the parrot.

"All right, if you'll only wait a minute——"

"And buck up, fathead!" said Priscilla sternly.

Willy gave her one fierce glance, and heartlessly put her cage up in the corner, where she couldn't get much air. It was Willy's one regret that Priscilla persisted in using the same terms of abuse to her master as she used to her master's friends. The parrot was quite impartial.



The fight ended as rapidly as it had begun, mainly because Juicy's pillow had commenced emitting numerous feathers, and it was a risky business to continue.

possible, Chubby Heath and Juicy Lemon dropped off within two minutes. Willy was greatly relieved, and after putting Marmaduke to bed, he gave a little attention to Priscilla. The parrot, on the whole, was taking things with a calm, lofty indifference. She wasn't quite herself, but she was in no panic.

"Might as well get to bed, I suppose," said Willy, at length.

"Good-night, fathead!" said Priscilla promptly.

"You—you disrespectful minx!" retorted Willy hotly. "How many times have I told you not to call me fathead? You can use that word to Chubby Heath and Juicy—but not to me! Understand?"

"All right, my lady—you'll learn one day!" declared Willy. "I've never been beaten by a pet yet—and you've got to go through the mill. But it's too much of a fag to give you a lesson to-night."

He threw off his few remaining clothes, and donned his pyjamas. Then he put the light out, and went to the window. Everything was still black and mysterious. The smell of the seaweed came through the opening in dank waves. But everybody was growing accustomed to the odour now, and it was not so offensive as it had been at first. It is astonishing how humanity can adapt itself to existing conditions.

"I believe that storm's going to be a fizzle," Willy told himself. "The glass fell

all those hours ago, and there's not a sign yet."

This, of course, was a mere acknowledgment of his ignorance in weather matters. There were signs in plenty, if he could only have read them. That remarkable phosphorescence had been one of them.

Willy suddenly stared intently. There were two or three lights gleaming out on deck, and the rays fell over the massed seaweed, out in the lagoon. The darkness was so thick that even these comparatively small lights threw a wide radiance.

And Willy caught sight of a moving object—dim, indistinct, and uncertain. It was like an enormous eel—but it had legs. He saw two eyes, too—eyes that reflected the light from the Wanderer, in greenish, horrid luminosity.

CHAPTER XII.

THE MYSTERIOUS FIGURE AGAIN.



"MY hat!" said Willy, taking a deep breath.

He wasn't frightened, but he was tremendously startled. There was something about that uncertain shape which caused his heart to give a leap. That awful-looking monstrosity was dragging itself sluggishly across the weed, and it seemed to Willy that the air was now filled with a greater evil. It caught him in the throat, and set him coughing.

"I say, this is a bit too thick!" he panted. "We might be on some other giddy planet! It reminds me of those awful monsters in the Lost World!"

The thing was still moving, and Willy suddenly made up his mind to move, too. He was a fellow who didn't like keeping anything to himself. He always wanted others to share in his enjoyment. It wasn't exactly a case of enjoyment this time, but he felt that his major ought to know.

Passing quickly to the door, he paused. No, he wouldn't tell Chubby Heath and Juicy Lemon. They were asleep now, and it would be too bad to awaken them. He opened the door, and silently stole out. His bare feet made absolutely no sound upon the soft pile carpet which lined the corridors.

There were lights gleaming in the ceiling all the way along, but only at rare intervals, for the majority of them had been switched off. There were dim patches.

Turning into another corridor, Willy suddenly came to a halt.

A figure was almost immediately in front of him—in the centre of one of those obscure patches. And there was something queer about it. It was a man, sure enough, but he was crouching down, and advancing slowly—stealthily. In one hand he held a weighted serviette, and it contained something bulky.

Willy stood stock still, staring.

At the first glance he knew that the figure was not one of the stewards. It was impossible to distinguish the clothing, but there was an indefinable air of dustiness and slovenliness about the man. And his stealthy advance made it clear that he was anxious to avoid observation.

Willy had come up behind without a sound. And now, instinctively, he pressed himself back into the nearest doorway. He had a mind to find out who this fellow was, and determine his business. On such an ominous night as this, the affair seemed all the more strange.

And Willy remembered that his major had spoken of a mysterious prowler the previous night. It was not much of a deduction to conclude that this was the same man. Willy prided himself that he was a better investigator than Edward Oswald, and he would reach some result.

The figure paused against a doorway, and then abruptly vanished. He had opened one of the state-room doors and had gone inside. And Willy, who knew every door by heart, pursed his lips in surprise. The fellow had gone into Mr. Warner Russell's cabin.

"Now, that's pretty queer!" decided Willy. "I'll swear the chap wasn't Mr. Russell. In any case, Mr. Russell wouldn't creep about like that. There's something fishy here, Willy, my son. Get busy!"

He moved silently forward, and at the same moment there came the sounds of a sudden confused commotion. There was a sharp cry, a thud, and then a heavy crash. Willy raced up breathlessly.

As he reached the doorway he came into violent collision with a figure that came charging out. It was a terrific impact. With one clean lurch, Willy was lifted off his feet and hurled to the other side of the corridor. He scarcely knew anything about it.

He knew that his head crashed against the wall, and he collapsed full length. Just one fleeting glimpse he caught of the man who charged into him. The fugitive's rush had been so strong that Willy had scarcely impeded him. He tore down the corridor, and vanished.

To make things worse, Mr. Russell himself came out in pursuit, and fell flying. He had tripped over one of Willy's feet, and he thudded to the carpet.

"Sorry, sir!" gasped Willy painfully. "My hat, I can't see straight! That rotter has just about knocked me silly! Who was he, sir?"

Mr. Russell sat up, breathing hard.

"It's too late to find out now," he exclaimed. "There's no hope of catching him—and I don't feel inclined to exert myself. A ten-yard run in this air is enough to make a man weak, I guess."

They both got up, and Willy's head was singing painfully.

"I was just going along to my major's cabin, sir," he explained. "I spotted the

fellow going into your room, and then I heard that thud. So I came along to join in the spree. And this is what I got!"

"Oh, so that's why you were here?" said Mr. Russell. "Well, never mind, youngster. Say nothing about this to anybody else—we don't want a lot of talk. Ten to one it was a sailor, or perhaps one of the stewards. This tension has unbalanced a lot of the fellows, and they're hardly normal."

"You think he just went in to pinch something, sir?"

"I haven't the faintest idea why he entered my cabin at all," replied Mr. Russell. "Unless— Good heavens, it can't be—"

"Your pearls, sir?" asked Willy shrewdly.

"I don't like to think it," replied Mr. Russell, frowning. "Lord Dorrimore has the highest regard for all his officers and men. They're faithful servants—honest as the day. I can't credit— Still, it's a bit significant, he added thoughtfully.

"Pearls are liable to tempt anybody, sir," said Willy sagely. "And with half the men a bit unbalanced, one of them might easily have fallen to the bait. There ought to be inquiries."

"Well, there won't be," said Mr. Russell promptly. "I'm not going to hound the poor fellow down—especially if he was hardly responsible for his actions. Fortunately, I was awake, and I spotted him as soon as he came in. But I couldn't catch the beggar—he was as slippery as an eel. Go back to bed, Willy, and say nothing about it."

"And Willy did go back to bed—for he rightly concluded that it was useless to arouse his major to look out of the window. That mysterious thing had gone long since—had vanished into the weed with all the other unknown denizens.

CHAPTER XIII.

WHAT THE MORNING BROUGHT.



"**W**HAT-HO! Morning, and all that sort of stuff!"

Archie Glen-thorne sat up with blinking eyes, and with a feeling of unusual heaviness. As a rule, he awoke, brisk and clear-headed. But the close air of the night had affected him.

"Your tea, sir," said Phipps. "Odds cups and saucers!" ejaculated Archie. "If I may say so, Phipps, you're a bally wonder! The cup that cheers, what? Just the same as though we were booked for a long spasm of life."

"At least, we are still living, sir," said Phipps imperturbably. "And I have been told that while there is life there is hope. I fancy that a cup of tea would be welcome, sir."

Archie seized it eagerly.

"Then I must observe, Phipps, that your

fancies are dashed ripe!" he declared. "Good gad! Life—strength—vigour! In other words, the cup that absolutely exudes cheeriness!"

He took two or three sips, and breathed gratefully.

"It's a dashed rummy thing, Phipps, but tea is always frightfully good, whether the weather's hot or cold," he remarked. "By the way, what about it? Watchman, what of the morning? I mean, what's the latest?"

"The morning is very cloudy, sir."

"What-ho! Rain, as it were?"

"I am told that rain is imminent, sir," replied Phipps. "Indeed, the storm may break in a very short time now. It will be a good thing when it does, for the air is becoming almost unbreathable."

"Odds life, yes!" agreed Archie. "You may not believe it, Phipps, but my nightly forty has been interrupted eight or nine times. And during these occasions the young master has absolutely wandered about the old cabin, gulping for breath. I mean, a bit thick, what?"

Having finished his tea, Archie hurried off to the bath-room, making up his mind to join the rest of the fellows at once. His usual slackness was absent. The general situation was so critical that he wanted to learn the truth as soon as possible.

As Phipps had said, the sky was dull, but the air was still as heavy and breathless as before. The rising odour from the seaweed was more pungent than before, and several of the guests were violently sick and confined to their cabins. At last, the effects were taking actual shape.

Even those fellows who were the least affected were, nevertheless, pale and had bags beneath their eyes. Already a subtle kind of poison in the air was beginning to reveal itself. Under the circumstances, this was only natural. For miles round the Wanderer was surrounded by choking quantities of rotting seaweed. And as there was no wind to carry the fumes away, life on board the yacht was becoming unbearable. The lagoon itself was changed, too.

The seaweed was massed higher. Here and there hills of it arose where some pressure of the undercurrent had forced it up. The beeches were smothered, and all the low-lying sections of the reef were obliterated. And the outer beach of the island was now choked, too.

If any of the fellows had hoped that the morning would bring an improvement they were doomed to disappointment. The situation was worse in every possible way. It seemed sheer madness to believe that the Wanderer could ever force her way out of this fearful morass of dead weed.

The task was stunning to the very mind. It was nearly two miles to the break in the reef—two miles filled with that dreadful weed, so thick and tough that it would have impeded a battle cruiser.

As for the weather, there were ominous signs.

The usual brilliance of the early morning was conspicuous by its absence. The sky was like a solid roof of cloud. There was no distinguishing mark at any point. From horizon to horizon, where all was thick and misty, the clouds extended like a huge dome. They were almost black—lead coloured. And the air was utterly and absolutely still.

Over on the island itself birds were flying about wildly—and this was a sign which Nelson Lee noted with a significant nod to Captain Burton. When the birds acted in that way it meant something.

"It won't be long now, Captain," said Nelson Lee quietly. "What's it going to be—a big hurricane?"

"Worse."

"A cyclone?"

"A cyclone of the most violent type, I believe," said Captain Burton grimly. "No ordinary hurricane would be heralded by these signs, Mr. Lee. It strikes me we're going to get the heart of it. That means a riot."

He had already given orders for every movable object to be lashed. Windows were closed, doors were fastened, and all the decks were made trim. When the storm came it would undoubtedly be a terror. There was nothing like being prepared in advance.

Breakfast was a patchy affair—for it was no longer possible to maintain a pretence of the normal. Many of the guests had no desire for food at all—the very thought of it was sickening. They felt stifled—suffocated. And that reek from the weed came inboard in ever-increasing quantities.

"It's getting darker, Ted," said Irene Manners, as she stood at the window of the lounge with Handforth and a few others. "Oh, why doesn't it break? This suspense is getting terrible!"

"It'll come before long, Renie," declared Doris. "The best thing we can do is to move ourselves a bit. Why not go along and have a look at Marjorie. She's awfully bad, poor old thing."

"Good gad!" said Archie Glenthorne, startled. "I mean to say, Marjorie! I sincerely trust the dear girl is in no serious state? I was wondering why she wasn't among the lads and lassies."

"Marjorie's all right, Archie," said Doris. "Just a little sickness. If only we could get rid of this terrible weed she'd be herself again in no time. I say, look at the sky now."

"I'm looking," said Handforth. "And, by George, there's something else! Look at those trees over there!"

He pointed excitedly. A few palms had been left standing after the great tidal wave had passed. Throughout the previous day and up till now, they had stood there like motionless sentinels, not a leaf stirring.

But as Handforth pointed they could be seen moving fitfully.

"Wind!" exclaimed Reggie Pitt.

"It's come at last!" yelled Church. "I say, let's go on deck! They can't keep us back now—there's no danger! A breath of wind is what we all need. Supposing we go and ask?"

And the whole crowd rushed off.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE ARRIVAL OF THE CYCLONE.



NELSON LEE consented at once. In full daylight there was very little danger of any unseen monster stealing on board. And the boys and girls would be quite safe if they kept to the centre of the decks. They were advised not to approach the rails.

There was a rush up the main stairway, and the deck was reached. But a disappointment awaited the eager crowd.

"There's no wind at all!" said Bob Christine. "Phew! That whiff is ten times as bad, here, too! Great Scott! Let's get down again!"

"Wait a minute—might as well have a look round," said Buster Boots.

"The wind's coming now," added Nipper.

A big gust came across the lagoon, and struck the fellows and girls almost like something solid. The unexpectedness of it was startling. In addition, it was a cold wind—an extraordinary change after the sultry heat. But the whole effect was spoilt by the dreadful reek from the weed.

"Anyhow, it's cooling!" said Handforth. "And it means that there's more coming, my sons! Let's hope it blows a gale! A jolly good hurricane will waft these niffs away."

"Listen!" said Reggie Pitt suddenly.

He held up his hand, and the others became silent. The gust of wind had gone, leaving the air as still as ever. But it seemed to the tense listeners that there was something else. A vague, indistinct murmur, as though from an enormous distance. It was like the sound of a thousand voices from miles away. It was something uncanny—indefinable.

And then another gust came, blotting out the vague sound.

"I say, did you hear anything?" asked Watson.

"Yes—but I'm blessed if I can describe what it was," said Pitt. "Hallo! They're getting pretty busy for'ard! Look at the men rushing about! I'll bet we shall get an order to go below soon. If I know any of the signs, the storm won't be long before it arrives."

With ever-increasing force, the gusts of wind came, fast upon the heels of one

another. And soon the gusts changed—they joined up, and became a long, steady wind. It was a gale within five minutes—a roaring, raging hurricane from the south. Those on deck were compelled to stand firm to avoid being bowled over.

"Hurrah!" gasped Handforth. "Take a lungful, you chaps! Glorious!"

The others needed no telling. The gale was coming fresh from the open sea, and with it came volumes of pure ozone. As though by magic, the appalling reek from the weed was blown away. Although a trifling odour remained, nobody noticed it. The change was so glorious.

The effect, too, was remarkable. The juniors noticed that their heads were cleared, and that heavy feeling left their eyes. Once again, they were beginning to hope. At last the deadening effect was passing.

Over on the island, the few remaining trees were being lashed violently. And the sea was rising. Far beyond the reef, the rollers were coming in sullenly, as though reluctant to be disturbed.

And with all this came a change in the sky.

That solid dome had disintegrated. The clouds were lower, and were now rushing northwards in a continuous, scurrying mob. Fast on the heels of one another came these black clouds, ominous and threatening—but a delight to the eyes of the watchers.

"At last—at last!" exclaimed Mr. Stokes, as he stood on the bridge. "Any chance now, Mr. Lee? If only this storm keeps on we might——" He broke off as the wind abruptly dropped. "By Jove, that was quick!" he went on. "And listen! There's that peculiar murmur again."

But it was more than a murmur now. It was growing distinct and defined, like the throbbing of a million far-distant guns. There was something utterly unearthly about the sound.

The very air was mysterious. Gazing across the lagoon, it seemed to the watchers that every atom of colour had fled. There was no longer greens and greys and yellows. Everything was the same drab, leaden hue. This place had become a kind of plague spot.

"Everybody below, please!"

Officers and men came hurrying along the decks with this order. Their tones were urgent, and most of the fellows made a quick move.

"I say, what rot!" protested Handforth. "What do we want to go below for?"

"Don't argue, Ted," said Willy. "The skipper knows what he's up to. You don't want to be blown over into that weed, I suppose?"

"Oh, all right!" said Handforth gruffly.

A tremendous burst of wind had come down on the yacht, a clear warning of what was to follow. It sent Handforth

lunging forward to the rail, and he thudded against it. He needed no second lesson.

Struggling hard, he followed the others to the main stairway. And as soon as the last fellow was gone the heavy doors were closed and locked. Every window was already being fastened, every port screwed tight. Even the anchor chains had been tautened, and an extra two hove overside.

Excitement reigned below.

The tension of the last twenty-four hours had been followed by a tension of another kind. The storm was not only welcomed, but received with open arms. Perhaps it would mean deliverance.

A submarine earthquake had trapped Lord Dorrimore's holiday party in this lagoon. Was it possible that the storm would release them from its clutches?

CHAPTER XV.

THE TERROR OF THE PACIFIC.



BOOM boom, boooooom! With a sound like the discharge of a hundred naval guns, a roll of thunder crashed out immediately overhead.

The very suddenness of it was appalling. It was the first thunder that had come, and when it arrived it seemed to deaden everybody's senses.

Like most tropical storms, this one broke in the space of a single second. It crashed upon the island as though bent upon utter destruction.

Sea, earth, and sky seemed to join together. There was absolute confusion. The whole air was filled with noise, with uproar, and the Wanderer received the first full onslaught.

But she was a sturdy craft, and very little damage was done.

Those black clouds just opened themselves and were split asunder by the blinding lightning. And rain came—such rain as one unaccustomed to the tropics could never imagine.

It fell upon the decks in a sheet—slanting from the south. Below, the groups of startled fellows and girls could hear the thudding thunder of the water as it swept overhead. The scene was far more impressive from the bridge. For in spite of the danger, Nelson Lee had remained with Captain Burton in the charthouse. Through the streaming glass they could see no sign whatever of the deck below. Everything was hidden in the blinding rain.

"We're getting it now!" shouted Lee, above the din.

"It's a cyclone—I thought so!" roared the skipper.

Already the decks were swimming with water, as though a number of great waves had swept over the yacht. Everything

beyond a radius of two or three yards was blotted out. And in rapid succession the thunder boomed and roared. The very ship shook from stem to stern at each crash.

It was an experience that even Nelson Lee would always remember, and he had passed through a good many violent storms in his time. For two solid hours there was no change, and it seemed as though this hurricane was determined to sweep down for eternity. Then abruptly came a lull.

The rain dwindled away, and the shouting of the wind grew less. Nelson Lee passed out of the charthouse and looked round. No living soul was in sight. The Wanderer's decks were deep with water, and there was a steady rushing noise as the floods raced through the scuppers. Here and there a little wreckage could be seen. Something had come adrift at various points, but in the main no big damage had been done. The yacht's wireless aerial had gone—had been torn free like a piece of cotton at the first onslaught.

"It's passing!" shouted Nelson Lee. "Here, captain!"

But Captain Burton was already beside him. Together they looked out across the lagoon. There was little apparent change in the seaweed, except perhaps that it was piling still higher. But there was a very great change beyond the reef—in the open sea.

Once again the breakers were crashing upon the coral. And the incoming rollers were steadily increasing to an enormous size. In every direction the ocean was wind-tossed and turbulent.

"Look at that!" exclaimed Lee tensely. "There's a change already; the weed's not half so thick outside!"

"But it's thicker inside!" said the captain.

This indeed was the important point. Of what use to have the sea clear beyond the reef and utterly choked within the lagoon? It was the getting out that would prove the great problem.

Lord Dorrimore came charging along the deck. He reached the bridge ladder, swarmed up, and glared at Nelson Lee.

"Like your infernal cheek!" he said indignantly. "Why didn't you tell me you were goin' to stick on the bridge? You've seen all the fun while I was bottled up below. Hallo! What the——"

Boom, boom!

An abrupt crash of thunder came again, and in a moment the storm was raging with all its former fury. The rain lashed down, and threatened to flood the ship. The wind was almost strong enough to carry the charthouse completely away.

"It seems you've come just in time to join us on our journey to Kingdom Come," said Captain Burton gruffly. "She won't

stand this for long, gentlemen. Another few gusts of that sort——"

"It's all right—the show's over!" interrupted Dorrie.

With that same abruptness as before the storm ceased. The wind completely dropped as though a pair of gigantic bellows had ceased operation, and the rain stopped. Emerging from the charthouse, the three men gazed across the island in a ghostly, curious light. It was a most unnatural effect.

"Thank heaven—it's over!" said Dorrie fervently. "I don't mind a good old storm, but when it gets to this size——"

"You're wrong, sir," interrupted Captain Burton. "In my opinion, we've only had a taste so far. The real trouble hasn't started yet."

"Hasn't started!" shouted Dorrie.

"We're in for a cyclone—the very centre of it!" exclaimed the captain, his lips set and bloodless. "If we escape it'll be a living marvel. Yes, by thunder, we're right in the very track of it. I was in one once, twenty years ago, and I never thought I'd live to meet another!"

"Good man!" exclaimed Dorrie. "He's tryin' to cheer us up."

"There's no getting away from the truth, Dorrie," said Nelson Lee grimly. "By James! Listen! Just listen!"

They stood there, tense and silent. A new sound was coming along on the air—travelling from the south. At first it was vague and indistinct, but increased with stunning rapidity. It was like the moaning of a gigantic gyroscope; it was like the humming of a vast top.

And the three men needed no telling what caused that significant sound. It was the very centre of the cyclone, like one of the celebrated American tornadoes increased to unbelievable size, coming towards the island.

CHAPTER XVI.

THE MIRACLE OF NATURE.



NELSON LEE gripped the arms of his two companions.

"Quick!" he snapped. "Below!"

"But look here——"

"We've got to get below!" shouted Lee urgently. "When that thing gets here—and it'll arrive in a few seconds—this bridge will probably be swept away at the first touch. I am rather thankful that we are caught in this weed—it may be the means of our salvation."

"By heaven, you're right!" panted the captain. "In open waters we shouldn't stand a chance—even in this protected lagoon!"

They raced down from the bridge, that droning sound throbbing in their ears, dulling their senses. They knew well enough that a second's delay might mean swift death. There is nothing so appalling as Nature in her most violent moods. The fiendish devices of mankind are feeble by comparison.

A cyclone is an extraordinary thing. It is an enormous circular storm. Like a great ring, it travels over vast tracts of ocean with incredible speed and unimaginable fury.

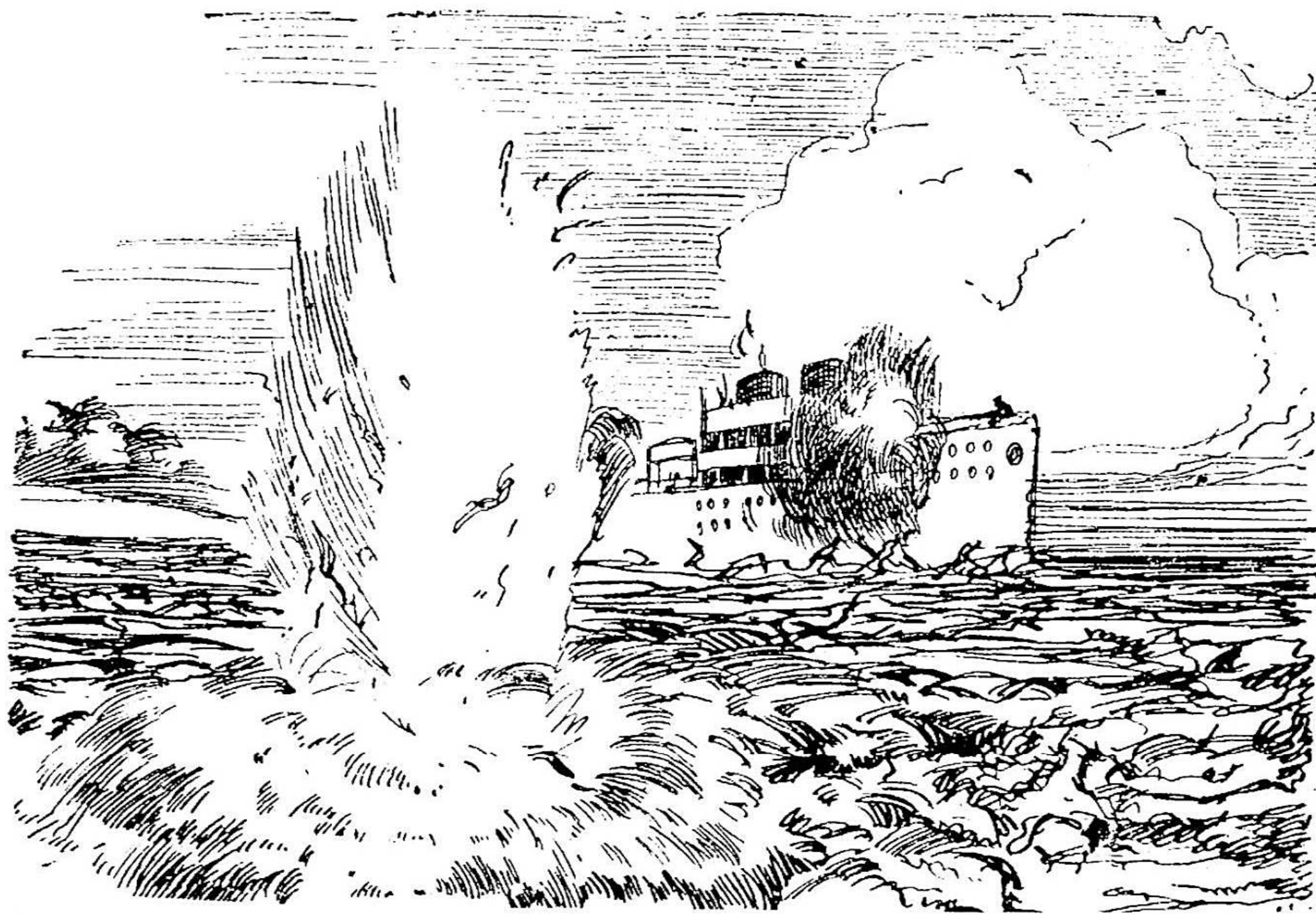
The effects of a cyclone are felt for

It wasn't merely a sound, but a shriek, a scream, a deadening havoc of ghastly sounds. Even below, protected by the sturdy yacht, it felt to the juniors as though something had hit them a blow between the eyes.

Thinking was impossible.

Outside no noise was distinguishable from another. The crashing of the bridge, as it was partially torn away, the wrecking of two of the lifeboats, and the destruction of a deckhouse were mere whispers in comparison to the yell of the storm itself.

The Wanderer not only shook, but she



The shell had been directed downwards, right into the weed. There was a confused, muffled explosion. But the weed merely heaved slightly and remained unchanged.

thousands of miles. We get them in England, when there is a spell of bad weather; but these effects are just the outskirts. Imagine the very centre—the absolute heart—of such an aerial upheaval.

Before Nelson Lee and the others reached the main stairway door their ears were well-nigh bleeding with the piercing throb of the approaching storm centre. It was sharp and intense, and could be actually felt. It was a noise which increased with every fraction of a second, shaking the very island, the lagoon, and the weed-surrounded yacht.

And then, just as the three men reached safety, the thing happened.

rocked. She heeled right over, until those in the saloon were overbalanced and sent slithering to the starboard windows. Everybody thought that the end had come, that the vessel was about to capsize. But she held herself against the mighty onslaught.

Slowly, fighting every inch of the way, she recovered, and amid the tumult from outside, came the crashing of glass near at hand. Window after window was driven completely in, and fragments of glass flew everywhere. More than one junior was cut and grazed.

But at the time nobody noticed these things.

Dignity was thrown to the winds. Even

Archie Glenthorne followed the example of the others, and crouched on the floor. It was the safest place. The wind was rushing through the broken windows, furniture was rocking, and ornaments were flying. It was one maddened conflict.

Nobody knew how long it lasted. To some it seemed that the storm raged for hours, to others it was over in a few moments. But everybody knew when the change came.

Without warning the crashing and roaring passed, grew less, and dwindled. And then peace followed, such absolute quietness and tranquillity that for a few seconds nobody could believe it.

Handforth was one of the first to get to his feet. He staggered to the window and looked out through one of the smashed panes.

"Hurrah!" he shouted, his voice breaking. "It's gone—it's all finished! My only hat! The giddy ship's a wreck!"

One by one the others went to the windows, too. There was a shout from somebody to go on deck, but Captain Burton's voice rose high above the general excitement.

"Stay where you are!" he thundered. "It's death to go on deck!"

"But it's over, sir!"

"It's not over!" shouted the captain. "We've had half of it—just half!"

"Good gad!" breathed Archie weakly. "I mean to say—"

"The centre of the cyclone is just passing over us now," went on the skipper. "In a few minutes we shall be in the middle of the opposite side of the ring, and then everything will start all over again!"

"Great Scott!"

"Odds gales and blizzards!"

Nelson Lee gripped the captain hard.

"You're right, skipper, but if the Wanderer's lived through the first half she'll probably live through the second!" he panted. "And if this tumult hasn't cleared the weed away we'll give up the last shred of hope."

"Quick—look out here!" yelled Handforth. "Great pip! Look at this!"

There was a rush, and even those who were feeling half-stunned recovered themselves. For they were beholding a miracle of nature. The centre of the storm was passing over the island.

In every direction, far away, the tumult raged. It could be heard even now, dim and vague. But here on the spot everything was peace. The air was so still that not a leaf on the island moved.

And far overhead there was something wonderful to see.

The air was not empty, as one would suppose, not thick with haze and cloud.

Up there hung countless myriads of living things, all moving with the cyclone, in the safety of this windless haven.

"It's—it's unbelievable!" exclaimed Irene breathlessly.

"But—but why aren't they killed?" asked Doris. "How is it all these birds are alive? Haven't they been through the storm?"

"No—they're travelling with the storm," said Nelson Lee. "Many of them are exhausted already—see, quite a number are falling, lured, probably by the sight of land. Heaven knows how far the majority of them have come! But instinct tells them they are safe so long as they keep moving."

"It's extraordinary!" muttered Lord Dorrimore.

It was even more than that. Not only birds passed overhead, but insects—tropical butterflies, and every imaginable kind of flying thing. They were all moving with the heart of the cyclone—protected by the very thing which was death itself.

And from every point came that murmur of the storm—now growing louder and louder. The centre was passing, and within a few moments the horror would recommence. But while the peace lasted, the watchers at the windows gazed with awe-struck eyes.

CHAPTER XVII.

IS THERE A CHANCE?



"LOOK out—here it comes!"

It was a warning shout, and nobody ignored it. For the last few minutes Lord Dorrimore's party had been fascinated by the wonder of that miracle. It was rather stunning to realise that in the midst of all this peace, there raged the most violent of all earthly storms.

As the cyclone was circular, it will be readily understood that the whole awful process had to be repeated. One side had passed over the island, and now the other side of the ring was upon it. And this, if anything, was likely to be the worst, since the effect would be longer.

It broke with the same shattering roar as before. With an ear-splitting thunder of sounds, the cyclone continued on its way. But, somehow, it didn't seem so shocking to the yacht's party. In the first place, they were prepared—they knew exactly what to expect. And in the second place they learned by their previous experience, and sought safety further down in the ship, where there was no possibility of flying glass. If the Wanderer capsized, they would be just as safe far below as anywhere else.

But she didn't capsize.

After the first hour, the wild onslaught settled down into a steady, screaming hurricane. It was still tremendous, but the decks were once again comparatively safe. Men

struggled about in the driving rain and howling wind. And they knew that there was nothing worse to follow.

The Wanderer was badly hit.

Many of her boats had been smashed like eggshells, her bridge was almost gone, and her graceful funnel half shattered. The forward mast had snapped like a carrot, and was lying in a tangle of wreckage on the deck.

But, after all, the yacht's wounds were more or less superficial. Her sturdy hull remained intact—her engines sound as ever. And there had been no loss of life. There was a general sense of relief, and the reaction was so great that sleep was the only thing sought.

When evening arrived, the storm was still blowing with stupendous violence. The howling of the wind was like some demon of the sky, and the rain swept down in lashing torrents. But there was one fact which stood out above all others. The air was clear—pure—untainted.

The Wanderer had a certain movement, proving that she was still afloat. When darkness came everything around the vessel was obliterated. The weed could not be seen. But the purity of the air was significant. The cyclone had come along, and had removed all that poison.

Even Handforth joined the others in sleeping. He had declared that he wouldn't put his head to a pillow until the storm was over, and the true position was known. But he slept soundly. Scarcely any of the fellows realised how exhausted they had been. They went to their beds in the late afternoon, and not one of them awoke until sunrise the next morning.

When they did arouse themselves, however, they were gloriously refreshed—alert, active, and full of fresh life.

Nipper was the first one to open his eyes that eventful morning. Indeed, it was the sun which awoke him. He sat up in bed, and gazed out of the window. It was a short time after sunrise, and the great golden ball was floating near the horizon, sending her blazing rays into the cabin.

"My hat!" ejaculated Nipper blankly.

In a moment he knew that he had slept since the previous afternoon. He jumped to the window, and forced it open. A cooling, grateful breeze blew in his face. One glance at the sky told him that it was clear and delightfully blue—except for one or two fleecy white clouds which were hurrying overhead—the last fragments of the departed storm.

"Hi, Montie! Show a leg there, Tommy!" shouted Nipper, turning. "We've almost slept the clock round, my sons! Up you get!"

His chums awoke, and were soon out of bed. They crowded to the window, and looked out.

"Begad, we haven't slept so long, surely?" ejaculated Sir Montie. "Look over

there! Dear old boys, what a rippin' sight!"

He pointed out beyond the reef. No longer was the sea dead and sluggish. As far as the eye could see, the ocean was raging enormously high—enormous foam-capped rollers were boiling and seething against the reef. And the sea itself was green—a delightful, healthy green.

"The weed's gone!" yelled Nipper.

"You ass—it's thicker than ever!" snorted Watson. "Look at it! The lagoon's so full of it that it looks like solid land!"

"Yes, but outside, it's vanished—there'll be no more of it choking in," replied Nipper. "That was the danger, Tommy! Don't you remember? We couldn't cut a channel because the weed was coming in faster than we could free it. But that's changed now—we might be able to fight our way out!"

"My goodness!" gasped Watson. "Let's get on deck!"

They had a race in dressing, and Watson and Nipper beat the elegant Sir Montie by several minutes. They were the first on deck, although Pitt & Co. and Handforth & Co. were soon after them.

Most of the wreckage had been cleared away, and men were already hard at work, effecting temporary repairs. The yacht, in fact, was humming and bustling with activity. The most pleasing sight of all was the spectacle of men cleaning and preparing the guns.

During the night, the storm had gone, leaving perfect tranquility behind it. And there was every prospect of a long spell of fine weather now. The sea was clear, and once it could be reached, there would be nothing to detain the holiday party any longer.

Any ordinary storm would not have washed the weed away—but that stupendous cyclone had succeeded. The sea was so high, and was running so fast, that by this time the masses of weed had probably been distributed over a thousand-mile area. All that remained was the bottled up mass in the lagoon. This had found no outlet, and the Wanderer was still embedded in its midst.

But there was hope now—and plenty of it!

CHAPTER XVIII.

SHELLING THE ENEMY.



EDWARD OSWALD HANDFORTH nodded wisely.

"It only shows that you can't jump to conclusions," he observed. "That's one of my strongest rules—never to jump to conclusions, or to do anything without considering it carefully first."

Church reeled slightly.

"Go on!" he murmured. "Any more fairy tales?"

"You dotty fathead!" snorted Handforth. "Are you trying to make out that I DO jump to conclusions?"

"My dear ass, you jump at anything!" grinned Church.

"You're dotty!" said Handforth loftily. "I was just talking about that cyclone. Anybody might have thought that it was an awful thing for us—a dangerous affair altogether. But was it? No! It was a blessing in disguise!"

"What sort of a disguise?" asked McClure. "I may be wrong, but it seemed to me that the cyclone came along pretty openly. It didn't look like anything else that I know of."

"Who ever heard of a cyclone coming along in disguise?" asked Church sarcastically. "You might think it was wearing a false beard, or something. Poor old Handy—your mind always runs in these channels—"

Biff!

"Hi! What the—" gasped Church, staggering back.

"It'll be on the nose next time, my lad!" said Handforth grimly. "You know as well as I do that the cyclone was looked upon as a deadly danger. And yet, all the time, it was the one thing which helped us. It busted up the bridge, and smashed a few boats in, but who cares? That storm washed all the seaweed away from the outer reef, and everything's all serene! It will be as soon as we cut a channel through this rotten stuff, anyway."

"I'm glad you added the last bit!" growled McClure. "That's the whole point, old man. Once we get outside we can make tracks for home. I can imagine a prisoner in Dartmoor saying that! It's getting outside that wants the doing!"

Handforth stared.

"Who's talking about Dartmoor?" he asked warmly. "I can never start an argument without you chaps drifting off into something that hasn't got anything to do with it."

"I was only making a comparison—"

"Then don't!" interrupted Edward Oswald. "We're going to get out of this lagoon within an hour or two. That's settled. Before lunch-time we shall be well on our way to England."

Handforth's optimism was proverbial, but it must be confessed that the majority of the other fellows shared his views on this occasion. Now that the open sea was clear of the weed, and there was no further risk of larger supplies drifting in, it seemed a comparatively easy task to cut a channel for the Wanderer to escape by.

But Nelson Lee and Captain Burton were not so sure.

"We can try it, of course," Nelson Lee was saying, as he stood by one of the

Wanderer's guns. "There's no further drift of the weed—it's lying stagnant, and may possibly respond to this treatment."

"I wish I could believe you, Mr. Lee," said the captain, shaking his head. "If the weed was only on the surface, it would be a simple matter—but it goes down right to the bed of the lagoon. We're like a shallow pond that has been absolutely choked and fouled with a heap of dumped rubbish."

"Anyhow, get the guns goin'," put in Lord Dorrmore briskly. "Hang it all, Lee, it was your own suggestion that we could try the dodge. You didn't want to do it while the weed was still comin' in, but—"

"I know it, Dorrie—and I'm not saying anything different now," put in Nelson Lee. "As a matter of fact, there's another idea in my head—I've already had a word with the Chief Engineer. But we'll try this stunt at once."

There was a great deal of excitement among the boys and girls. The guns were being prepared for action. There were two of these, and both had been shifted into the bows, so that a channel could be shot away in the immediate vicinity. If successful, the work could be carried on.

Boom!

The first gun discharged with a roar that startled everybody. It was a small piece of artillery—excellent for fighting hostile natives, or anything of that type. But for the present job in hand the gun was toylike.

The shell had been directed downwards—right into the weed. It plunged into the brown-black mass, and a second afterwards there was a confused, muffled explosion. But the weed merely heaved slightly, and remained unchanged.

"Look out—there goes another!" exclaimed Church.

For a full hour the guns kept at it—doing their best to blow the weed to pieces. But as the time passed, the watching St. Frank's fellows and Moor View girls lost a good deal of their optimism. As far as they could see, there was nothing to show for all this expenditure of shell.

"We might just as well be using a pop gun, Dorrie," declared Nelson Lee at last. "I was half afraid of it all the time. I'm not denying that the weed's torn and shattered below the surface. But what on earth can we do with the propellers? They'll only get hopelessly fouled."

"Couldn't we drop a depth charge, or something, and clear the stuff away from the stern?" asked Dorrie vaguely. "I believe they've got heaps of explosives down below."

"An excellent idea," declared Nelson Lee. "We'll not only clear the stuff away from the stern, Dorrie, but we'll blow the stern away, too—just to make sure of the job! I'm afraid your ideas are rather too drastic, old man. We can't take such risks."

Lord Dorrmore shrugged his shoulders.



"Don't rub it in!" he complained. "How do you expect me to know anythin' about these matters? I'm out of my depth. What does Captain Burton say?"

Captain Burton said very little. He pointed blank refused to give any order for the Wanderer's engines to be started. The yacht would probably progress for a few hundred yards, but her propellers would become fouled by the weed.

"And it's not worth the candle, gentlemen," declared the skipper emphatically. "I'm pretty sure of what I'm talking about—in fact, I know! Once our propellers

"I wish I could believe it, Brother Horace; but what encouragement is there for me to hope?" asked the captain of the Fifth. "I am no detective, neither am I a mathematician. But I should be a poor scholar if I failed in the simple task of putting two and two together. I think I am doing the sum correctly in stating that the answer is four!"

"Look here, you ass——"

"In the first place we have the gun-firing," went on Browne. "A highly entertaining performance, I will confess. It was an education in itself to observe the curious

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became fouled we should never get them free. We can't take such a chance."

"That means we're stuck as fast as ever?" asked Dorrie.

"Just that, sir," growled the skipper.

CHAPTER XIX.

NELSON LEE'S SCHEME.



WILLIAM NAPOLEON BROWNE sighed.

"All is lost, Brother Horace," he said sadly. "All is at an end! Unless I am vastly mistaken, we are already splashing about in the Ivelcon!"

"It's not so bad as that, old man——"

effects of the reports upon Professor Tucker. Even now, Brother Horace, he is wondering what has been happening. Following the gun firing, we observe a consultation of the Big Four. With what result? Can you not observe that every face is appreciably longer?"

"Why the dickens can't you say the thing's failed in simple words, instead of going into all that rigmarole?" growled Stevens tartly. "Of course it's failed! I dare say we've shot some of the weed to pieces, but it's only making things worse."

"Worse?"

"Absolutely worse!" insisted Stevens. "It's shredding up this weed, and making it a more perfect tangle mixture than ever. Once we get it round our propellers, they'll

bind up, and then the shaft will snap. I'm blessed if I know what we can do!"

All along the decks similar comments were being made. The juniors were rather dismayed. They had been expecting so much, and so little had happened. It was exasperating in the extreme to know that the *Wanderer* was seaworthy, with her engines impatient to begin work, and to realise that she couldn't move a yard. The weed was holding her as though in a vice.

There was another serious feature, too. Now that the wind had dropped, and only a gentle breeze blew, the foulness from the weed was choking the air again. And it was now more dank than ever. The sun was getting to work, and the half-rotted stuff was in ripe condition for rapid decomposition.

"We've got to get out of here within twenty-four hours, or it'll be too late altogether," declared Nelson Lee quietly. "I think we can last out until to-morrow morning, but no longer than that. The sun will have an appalling effect to-day——"

"Excuse me, sir."

The chief engineer had appeared, grimy and oily. His usual smartness was lacking. He was wearing overalls like any of his staff. And there was a grim light in his eyes.

"About that idea you suggested, sir," he went on. "I've been working it out with two of my officers, and the men are getting on the job at once. It's quite feasible, and I think we can manage it."

Nelson Lee's eyes gleamed.

"The divers will be able to fix the thing?" he asked.

"They're certain of success," replied the chief.

"Splendid! And when do you expect to get the thing through?" asked Lee. "It's no good leaving it until to-morrow or the next day——"

"By getting every hand on the job, we reckon to be ready for a trial by this evening," said the chief. "How will that do?"

"Hold on—hold on!" said Lord Dorrimore. "What's this all about, anyhow? Why haven't we been admitted into this bally secret? What's the game? What have they been up to, captain?"

"I haven't the faintest idea," said the skipper.

"It's a scheme to cut our way through the weed," said the chief, turning. "It was Mr. Lee's idea, and a practical one, too. The great danger is, fouling the propellers. If they can be protected, we might be able to get clear. Well, briefly, Mr. Lee has suggested making a kind of cage—to be clamped completely round the propellers. It'll have to be made roomy, in case of accidents—we don't want a blade to go. But a cage like that would keep the weed out——"

"By the Lord Harry!" ejaculated Dorrie. "An' can you do it?"

"They're commencing work at once, sir," replied the chief. "There's another idea,

to—to be used in conjunction with the first. We're thinking about fitting a knife-edge to the bows below the water-line, and just above it. A few rivets will hold the thing, and it'll help to cut through the weed."

"It's possible—quite possible!" said the captain thoughtfully. "But it's going to be a long job to fit that cage——"

"When the situation is desperate, we must work desperately," interrupted Nelson Lee. "It resolves itself into a matter of life or death. Either we get free of this poisonous morass by the morning, or we're trapped for good. There'll be no living after to-morrow."

The chief went off, and the story soon got about. And a continuous clanging and rattling of metal announced that work was in progress. Indeed, after the first hour or two, the engineers came on deck with all their paraphernalia. And the steel cage which was to encircle the propellers took shape on the deck itself. It was too big to be constructed below.

It seemed a promising scheme—indeed, the only practical way of defeating the weed. And it was made possible by the presence of skilled divers on board. They could go down and fix the contrivance in position. Indeed, the divers were already getting to work. Holes had to be drilled, and other preparations had to be made in readiness for the final fixing.

"Thank goodness the suspense won't be long, anyhow," said Nipper, as he and his chums stood watching. "They're going to have everything fixed by this evening, and then we shall know the best—or the worst. Until then we've just got to wait."

It was a trying period, but, as it happened, it was not destined to be entirely devoid of interest.

CHAPTER XX.

A STARTLING DISCOVERY.



CLANG-CLANG-CLANG! The hammering went on ceaselessly. Luncheon was served as usual, and everybody attempted to appear indifferent. It had been taken for granted

by all and sundry that it was a mere matter of a brief wait before the *Wanderer* would be on her homeward voyage.

A complete stranger would have been very deceived had he looked in upon the scene. Everybody seemed lighthearted and cheerful.

As a matter of fact, however, every heart was strained. The suspense was so acute that this pretended indifference was costing an enormous effort. But not one member of the party would allow himself or herself to give way. It was just an exhibition of courage.

In spite of everything that had happened the morale of the party was wonderful. When luncheon was over, the juniors trooped

on deck to watch the operations, and Mrs. Stokes persuaded the girls to stay with her in the lounge. The air, in the heated confines of the deck, was rather too awful. There was at least a measure of comfort below.

"It seems rummy that we should be held here by a lot of rotten seaweed," growled Handforth, as he leaned over the rail. "My hat, what an awful whiff! It's ten times as bad as it was! And look at the state of the stuff, too—it's going all slimy and soft. The sun's doing it's work pretty quickly."

"There's still life there, though," said Church, staring keenly. "I saw something move on the seaweed a hundred yards out. I'll bet the awful stuff is simply swarming with sea monsters and crawly livestock."

"Let's have a look at the engineers," said McClure, turning away.

The cage was already beginning to take shape, and the fellows were astonished at its huge size. A derrick would have to be employed to lower it into position. The mesh was fine—so fine, in fact, that any speed would be out of the question. The propellers would simply churn within that cage, and they would have only a small percentage of their usual thrust. But those blades would at least be free from entanglement. And it didn't particularly matter how slow the progress was. If there was any progress at all, the victory would be gained.

"It's a funny thing," said Handforth, as he watched the work going on, "Mr. Lee has carried out my scheme to the letter."

"What scheme?" asked McClure, staring.

"This protective cage, of course."

"Your scheme?"

"My dear chap, I thought of it days ago," said Handforth carelessly. "It came to me in a flood as soon as ever we were entangled. If only the propeller could be protected, we should be safe. And I was planning out the thing in every detail. Of course, you won't believe me—"

"Of course!" said his chums.

"Eh?"

"You can't expect us to swallow a yarn like that," said Church tartly. "I've never known such a robber! I'm not sure that it doesn't amount to downright burglary! You're always pinching other people's ideas and claiming them as your own! It's—it's little short of criminal!"

Handforth turned a rich crimson. He wasn't accustomed to such plain speaking from the usually long-suffering Church.

"You—you cheeky rotter!" he began hotly.

"Steady, Ted—steady!" said Willy, strolling up. "Better go easy. In this heat it's easy enough to burst a blood-vessel. What's the argument this time? Has Ted been telling you that this cage is his idea?"

"How the dickens did you know?" demanded McClure.

Willy grinned.

"Oh, it's easy," he replied. "Whenever

there's a particularly good stunt going, Ted always trots out the yarn that he thought of it first. It's just one of his little weaknesses. He can't help it, of course. The pater always says he's a bit unbalanced—"

"You'll be unbalanced when I get at you, you cheeky young sweep!" howled Handforth. "By George, I'll—I'll—"

He broke off, unable to think of any adequate words. Deeds were required here.

He made a rush at his minor, determined to teach him a severe lesson. But Willy calmly glanced round, and raised his cap.

"Hallo, Irene!" he said calmly. "I didn't expect you to come on deck this afternoon."

Handforth paused, all his fire gone. He had a horror of being caught "going for" Willy by Irene Manners. To her mind, it savoured of bullying.

"Where is she?" asked Handforth, as Willy strolled away. "Didn't he say that Irene was coming?"

"That was only a ruse to gain time," grinned Church. "Of course she's not here, you ass! And by the time you've recovered, your minor will have vanished. Aren't you up to his tricks yet?"

"My only hat!" breathed Handforth thickly.

He dashed down the deck, swung over the portside, and halted, confused, when he saw his minor calmly strolling and chatting with Mr. Russell. Willy didn't actually want to speak to Mr. Russell, but he thought it was advisable to be in good company at the moment. His major could do nothing drastic under the circumstances.

"Heard anything about that fellow who was in your room, sir?" asked Willy, a subject ready to his tongue. "I've kept a sharp look-out, but I haven't been able to discover anything."

"Good gracious, youngster, I'd forgotten all about it!" said Mr. Russell, with a laugh. "That incident happened before the cyclone—and it seems ages ago. Better forget it. I guess he is one of the crew, half off his head with the general suspense. We were all a bit rocky that night."

Mr. Russell went below, and Willy accompanied him—much to the mortification of Edward Oswald, who had been waiting to collar his minor at the first opportunity. Below, Willy dodged off to the library, and Mr. Russell proceeded to his own cabin.

He was thinking about indulging in an afternoon nap—since there was no way in which he could help the operations on deck. But he hadn't been in the cabin five minutes before he made a startling discovery.

He happened to go to the wardrobe for something, and while there he caught sight of his heavy metal cash-box—a little private safe which was always in his cabin. One glance was sufficient. The thing had been battered about and wrenched open.

"Good heavens!" ejaculated Mr. Russell, aghast.

He threw the box open, and stared within. It was empty. His entire collection of pearls had gone!

CHAPTER XXI.

NELSON LEE INVESTIGATES.



DURING that first tense moment Mr. Russell's chief emotion was one of fury against himself. He had been robbed—the pearls were stolen—and he had only himself to blame! That was the one fact which hit him between the eyes.

He knew well enough that there was a big safe in the captain's cabin, and more than once he had hesitated. Wouldn't it be advisable to put the pearls in that safe? But he had always dismissed the thought as ridiculous. What possible danger could there be in his own cabin?

His cash-box was strong, and there was nobody on board who would play the part of a thief. Moreover, the fact that the pearls were in Mr. Russell's cabin was unknown to a soul except himself and Nelson Lee and Lord Dorrimore.

Any members of the crew—if they were dishonestly inclined—would naturally assume that the pearls had been put in the yacht's safe. Thus had Mr. Russell reasoned.

And now, in a flash, he knew that he had acted foolishly.

"Gone!" he muttered huskily. "What a fool I was to keep them here! I never thought—I never dreamed— But that's no good," he went on fiercely. "There's no excuse for this idiocy! The pearls are gone—and—"

He broke off, and made a frantic search of the rest of the wardrobe. But even before he started he knew that his task was hopeless. Before he had finished he was calm again, but his face had gone pale. He stood there, gripping himself, and reviewing the situation.

What if the pearls had gone for good? True, they must be on the yacht somewhere, but it would be next to impossible to trace the culprit, and to find the precious booty. The pearls were in a washleather bag, hardly any bigger than an ordinary purse. A fortune in a tiny space. There were a thousand-and-one places where they could be hidden.

And Mr. Russell had had dreams, too. He had already made up his mind, in fact, that Clive should go to St. Frank's with these youngsters he had grown so fond of. Nelson Lee had declared that it would be possible—particularly as the school was now enlarged. There would be vacancies for any amount of new scholars.

Mr. Russell had decided to settle down in England, too. He had even persuaded Captain McAndrew to come home with

him. Those pearls would have fetched a fortune—

But what did it matter? It was by no means certain that the Wanderer would ever get out of this tangle of weed. In that case the loss of the pearls was a matter of trivial importance.

"But it's no good fooling myself!" muttered Mr. Russell, at length. "We're all hoping to get away—we're looking upon it as pretty certain, I guess. This means the crashing of everything!"

Almost without realising his movements, he left the cabin, and walked down the corridor. At the first angle he came face to face with Nelson Lee, who was hurrying down to his cabin. Nelson Lee came to a halt, and gave Mr. Russell a curious glance.

"Hallo! What's this?" he asked sharply. "Man alive, you're ill!"

"Ill?" repeated the Canadian dazedly. "No, I guess it's nothing. I'm all right, Mr. Lee—"

"You're as pale as a ghost!" interrupted Lee. "Let me take you in my cabin and give you a dose of—"

"It's not that—I'm sound enough," interrupted Mr. Russell harshly. "See here, Mr. Lee, those pearls have gone!"

Nelson Lee stared.

"Gone?" What on earth—

"They've gone, I tell you!" went on the other. "My cabin's been entered and the cash-box rifled. The bag of pearls has vanished. Can you wonder that I'm upset?"

"When did this happen?" demanded Lee sharply.

"I found it five minutes ago."

"But the theft? When did that—"

"I don't know—I haven't been to that wardrobe for a day or two," said Mr. Russell. "At least, I haven't looked at the cash-box. There have been so many other distractions that I never thought of the pearls at all. Why should I? I didn't suspect anybody of criminal intentions. May be the job was done in the middle of that cyclone."

"That would certainly have been the best time for such work," agreed Nelson Lee, pursing his lips. "The thief would have had a clear field. And it makes any investigation rather hard. A pity you didn't put the pearls safely in the captain's strong-room—"

"I was expecting that," interrupted Mr. Russell. "You're right, Mr. Lee. I'm not denying it. But I tell you I hadn't the faintest suspicion that the pearls were in any danger. A man always keeps his own property in his own room—he doesn't like to bother other people. It would have been different if this was a liner, with hosts of strangers about. My steward is absolutely reliable—I'd trust him anywhere."

"Let's have a look at the job, anyhow," said Lee crisply.

They went to Mr. Russell's state-room, and Nelson Lee pulled the curtains back, and allowed the full sunlight to stream in. Then he commenced a careful examination of the cabin—particularly the wardrobe.

There was little to be gained from the cash-box. It had obviously been smashed open by means of some blunt instrument. It was not the work of an expert. The heavy metal had been battered rudely.

"Yes, it seems as though the job was done during the cyclone," declared Lee grimly. "The thief must have made a tremendous din smashing open this box. But it wouldn't have been noticed during that uproar. He was cunning enough to choose his time well."

"If only I had found out earlier——"

"It's no good saying that now, old man," interrupted Nelson Lee. "The thing is done, and we've got to find the culprit. The pearls are on this yacht, and I shan't rest content until I recover them—and expose the thief."

CHAPTER XXII.

THE CLUE.



MR. RUSSELL watched rather dully. Now that the first shock of the loss was over, he was rather stunned by everything it meant. He watched Nelson Lee without interest, for his thoughts were far away.

"What's this?" said the schoolmaster-detective suddenly. "Surely not a clue? The thief would never be so kind as to leave—— Good gracious! Better and better!"

"What is it, Mr. Lee?" asked the other, coming to himself.

"Look here!" exclaimed Lee, indicating a mark on the edge of the wardrobe. "I'm taking it for granted that you didn't cause this?"

The mark was only trivial, but Mr. Russell saw it after a close inspection. It was a kind of black streak, and it was slightly sticky to the touch. The Canadian looked at Nelson Lee in surprise.

"What is it?" he asked.

"Tar," replied Lee. "Nothing very startling, eh? But it's tar right enough—and I judge that it must have been brushed there by the fellow's sleeve. That is a big help. We've got to look for somebody with tar on his sleeve—to say nothing of red paint and blue paint. Have a look here."

Lower down the woodwork there were two other trivial marks—so insignificant that Mr. Russell would never have seen them. Even as it was, he only detected the traces of red and blue paint by means of Nelson Lee's powerful lens.

"I'm hanged if I can understand this," said Mr. Russell.



"No!" snarled Prescott. "You'll never take me! And where I go the pearls go!" With a yell, he grasped the rail and flung himself overboard.

Nelson Lee looked thoughtful.

"Our search is narrowed down to a very small space," he declared. "It seems impossible that the investigation could be so simple—incredible that the thief should be so careless. But nothing can alter these traces."

"Even now I don't quite follow."

"Then let me explain," smiled Lee. "If we were looking for a man with a tar-stained sleeve, we might have a large amount of trouble—since that sleeve could easily have been cleaned in the meantime. But when we find the thief leaving traces, not only of tar, but of two different-coloured paints, the affair becomes simple in the extreme."

"How?"

"My dear fellow, no ordinary member of the crew would have such a mixture on his sleeve—especially on such an errand as this. You may remember that previous incident—you told me about it in confidence, although you have apparently forgotten. A man attempted to rifle your state-room before, and young Handforth was positive that

the fellow was no ordinary member of the crew. I questioned Willy about it."

Mr. Russell frowned.

"What a fool I was not to shift those pearls then!" he said bitterly. "Under ordinary circumstances, I should have done, but what with this weed, and the cyclone, and——"

"My dear man, make no excuses for yourself—there are plenty in any case," interrupted Nelson Lee. "You would have been more than human if you had acted differently. The circumstances have been entirely abnormal. But to return to our discussion of the paint clues. I am convinced that the man was no ordinary member of the crew."

"I don't see why you should come to that conclusion."

"Young Willy expressly mentioned the fact that the man was carrying a bulkily tied serviette," said Nelson Lee keenly. "That fact, alone, meant little. But in conjunction with this fresh fact about the paint, it means much. I take it that the unknown was carrying food in that serviette—he had been to the saloon to rifle the sideboard. And the fact that he required food indicates that he has stowed himself away somewhere."

"Good heavens! But——"

"And where else but in one of the store-rooms, below?" went on Lee. "We can even make a shrew guess at the exact store-room he is lurking in—for it is one which contains supplies of tar and paint. There can be no other explanation of the three varieties on the one sleeve. At all events, our first move must be to examine the painter's store-rooms."

Mr. Russell was already beginning to show his excitement. Now that Nelson Lee pointed out his train of reasoning, it seemed feasible enough. And it proved one thing quite clearly—that the thief was not only clumsy, but apparently careless of detection. He had carried out his job with an extraordinary lack of skill.

Lord Dorrimore joined in the hunt, and also one of the Wanderer's officers. The latter was necessary, since neither Lee nor Dorrie knew the location of the paint-room. The officer was able to lead them direct to it—down stairways and iron ladders, far below.

At last, in a narrow passage, where their feet clanged upon the metal floor, they came upon the door they sought. It was fitted with bolts like the other doors, but one glance was sufficient to show the bolts were not in position, although the door was closed. The fact was significant.

"Stand ready!" said Nelson Lee in a low voice.

He seized the door and pulled at it. But although it was unfastened it refused to budge. The men glanced at one another.

All doubts were now dispelled. The marauder, whoever he was, was obviously within, and he had even secured the door from the inside.

"We'll soon settle this!" said Nelson Lee grimly.

An iron bar was produced after a moment or two, and Lee managed to insert it in the chink, and then he put a powerful leverage upon it. For a moment or two the door stood the strain. Then, with a loud snapping of cord, the heavy metal portal flew open.

Instantly from within came a gasp and a shuffle. Without waiting to find the switch, Lee flashed on his electric-torch. A bright beam of light shot into the store-room and revealed the staring, startled face of the man within. Mr. Russell, craning over Lee's shoulder, uttered a shout.

"Jonathan Prescott!" he exclaimed, in amazement.

CHAPTER XXIII.

JONATHAN PRESCOTT'S LAST ACT.



"JONATHAN PRESCOTT!"

The man who had caused all the trouble from the very start—the man who had attempted to steal the pearl fishery, the man who had been sent off in the schooner Clyde with all his henchmen.

And he was here—a stowaway on board the Wanderer!

But the San Francisco shipowner was a changed man. Unshaven, unkempt, and dishevelled, he had a wild, crazy appearance. His eyes were gleaming with an intense light, and his lips were drawn back over his teeth.

"Stand back!" he snarled. "You've hounded me down, but I guess you'll never take me! I've beat you to it this time, doggone you!"

"Prescott!" shouted Russell. "I can understand now. So it was you who took the pearls! But—but how did you get on board?"

"I tricked you nicely, didn't I?" demanded Prescott with a chuckle. "It was easy. I guess I bluffed you guys well. You sent us aboard that blamed schooner at dusk, and as soon as it was dark I slipped overside and swam back to the yacht. Nobody saw me climb on board——"

"The best thing you can do, Prescott, is to submit quietly," interrupted Nelson Lee. "Under normal conditions I doubt if your escapade as a stowaway would have succeeded. But we needn't go into that now. You must regard yourself as our prisoner——"

"Never!" shouted Prescott passionately.

"I've got the pearls, and I'm going to stick to them! They're mine—mine! I had them at first, and I'm going to keep them. I always meant to keep them!"

As he spoke he dived a hand into his pocket and drew out the precious bag of pearls. He held it up gloatingly, and there was something in his very action which proved that he had taken leave of his right senses. His confinement in that dark prison, his semi-starvation, and his disappointment at being beaten at the post—everything had contributed towards his mental collapse. Even the cyclone had done its share.

"We'd better take the poor beggar!" growled Dorrie.

"Yes—let's make a rush!" muttered Nelson Lee.

But Jonathan Prescott evidently expected the move, and he forestalled them. Before any of the men could take a step forward he rushed to the attack, shouting madly, and whirling a short bar of iron. There was something so murderous about that rush that even Lee gave way. Threats with a revolver were useless against a madman of this type.

"I'll get the lot of you!" bellowed Prescott insanelly.

He blundered out into the corridor. But instead of attacking the four men with that deadly iron bar, he flung it down upon the metal floor with a resounding clang. And then he fled, shooting away with extraordinary speed, considering his bulk.

"Well, I'm hanged!" ejaculated Dorrie.

"After him!" yelled the officer. "He's got those pearls, sir!"

But Nelson Lee was already speeding away. The madman was obviously making for the deck, and Lee had no doubt in his own mind that Prescott, knowing that he would be deprived of the pearls, had determined to place them where neither party would benefit.

It was an alarming thought, and unless Prescott was captured instantly the result would be serious. There was also the danger that he would commit some dreadful act of violence. For he was obviously mad.

Although he moved rapidly, Nelson Lee gained, with Lord Dorrimore and Mr. Russell close behind. By the time Prescott reached the main stairway Lee was only just in his rear. Prescott was panting heavily, and nearing the end of his tether.

But he managed to fling himself out on deck, and he staggered across to the rail. His dramatic appearance was greeted by many shouts from the groups of fellows, who had been amazed to see this dishevelled creature charging up from below.

"I've won—I've won!" shouted Prescott in a crackling voice. "The pearls are

mine—mine! Nobody should have them but me!"

"Quick! On him!" shouted Mr. Russell hoarsely.

Clive, who was near by, turned pale. He recognised that wash-leather bag, and he knew that something awful had happened. Nelson Lee and the others threw themselves at Jonathan Prescott—a crowd of juniors rushed round at the same moment.

But Prescott was ready again.

"No!" he snarled. "You'll never take me! And where I go the pearls go!"

With a wild yell he grasped the rail and flung himself overboard. A chorus of horrified shouts went up. There was a rush for the rail, and Mr. Russell stood there, staring like a man in a dream.

"Oh, dad!" panted Clive, rushing up.

Nelson Lee, at the rail, was more startled than he could say. Prescott had plunged down upon the weed, but he had not plunged through, as one might have supposed. He was sprawling upon the thick, spongy mass, and he managed to crawl forward over the weed. He still held the bag. And he turned his face upwards, and gloatingly waved the pearls in the air.

"They're still mine—still mine!" he called up mockingly.

And then at that second something dreadful happened. A long, sinuous tentacle came up out of the weed. It twirled itself round Jonathan Prescott, and he uttered a wild, despairing shriek.

"No, no!" he screamed. "Help! Save me—"

They were the last words he uttered. In that same second he was dragged under by that unseen monster—one of the many vile creatures which infested these masses of deadly weed. And as he went under the bag of pearls left his grasp, and shot over the weed, to fall and vanish.

Nelson Lee turned away, pale and shaken.

"Can't we do somethin'?" demanded Dorrie fiercely.

"Look!" replied Lee. "What can we do?"

Dorrie started. Further words were useless. The tragedy had happened within a mere second. There was no sign of Prescott, no sign of the tentacle—nothing but the weed. The rascal had met with an appalling retribution.

CHAPTER XXIV.

CLIVE RUSSELL'S DARING.



MR. WARNER RUSSELL recovered himself with an effort as his son shook him by the arm. Clive was shaken to the very marrow by what he had seen, and he could well understand his father's anguish.

"Come away, dad!" he muttered. "It's no good standing here."

"Heaven knows I didn't want the map to meet with an appalling finish of that sort!" said Mr. Russell hoarsely. "I wish you hadn't seen, Clive. I'd have given anything to have spared you—"

"It was terrible, dad, but it was all over so quick that hardly any of the fellows had time to feel horrified. I can't even realise that Prescott is dead. Let's get below."

"Clive is right," said Nelson Lee quietly. "We are all rather upset by this tragic occurrence. No good will come of morbidly staring at the fatal spot. Boys, please go down into the saloon."

The St. Frank's fellows, thus appealed to, went without another word. Even now they could hardly appreciate what had happened. Lee turned back to Clive and his father, and he laid a gentle hand upon Russell's arm.

"Hard luck, old man—cruel luck!" he said simply.

"Oh, you mean the pearls?" asked Mr. Russell, with a start. "Yes, of course. The pearls. Poor Clive! I was going to send him to St. Frank's, too. He was longing for that!"

"Don't worry about me, dad," said Clive, with a lump in his throat. "I'm all right; I can stick anything. It wouldn't have been so bad if we hadn't seen the pearls go. But they went down in front of our very eyes!"

"The hound! The infernal—"

For a moment Mr. Russell uttered a few harsh, intense words, then he checked himself. What was the use? It was all over now, anyhow.

"Thirty thousand pounds—even fifty thousand, perhaps!" he muttered. "Lord Dorrimore says they were worth seventy or eighty thousand. And they've gone—sunk into this lagoon. Back into the place where they came from. What's the use of making any effort at all?"

He spoke with the bitterness of gnawing disappointment. He hardly noticed Clive's actions. But the youngster was gripping the rail, and staring out upon the weed—staring, staring.

"Look," he breathed huskily.

Nelson Lee gripped the lad almost fiercely.

"This won't do, Clive!" he snapped. "Come away—"

"No, Mr. Lee—no!" panted Clive. "It's not Prescott I'm thinking of. Look! That bag—that bag of pearls! It's there—lying on the weed. It didn't sink, after all!"

"Good gad!" muttered Lord Dorrimore.

They all stared, freshly shaken by Clive's statement.

"Where—where?" demanded Mr. Russell tensely. "Clive, you're dreaming. There's

no bag there. You've just seen a piece of brown weed—"

"No, it's the bag, I tell you!" shouted Clive.

"By James, the boy's right!" ejaculated Nelson Lee. "Yes, I can see it—just a little to the left, where that clump of weed— Clive, Clive! Where are you going? Come back! What on earth—"

"Stop him!" shouted Mr. Russell madly.

Clive, with set lips, had made a rush for the ladder. Before anybody could bar his progress, he sped down and reached the platform. His object was all too clear.

"Come back!" shouted his father desperately. "The pearls aren't worth it, Clive! Remember that tentacle which came up! Heaven help the boy! There'll be no hope for him now!"

Clive hadn't even heard his father's call. The pearls were there, and they meant everything in the world to his dad. To leave them on that weed, to be sucked under at the first movement of some fish, was unthinkable. There was only one chance of saving them, and that was to act on the instant. And Clive, without even thinking of the danger, leapt across the weed.

His progress was erratic. The weed was banked up in masses, and it was so thick and tough that Clive's weight was as nothing. The danger lay in the event of a slip, a plunge down into one of the many hidden crevices in that spongy mass. And there was the peril of the monsters, too.

"By the Lord Harry, he's got them!" gasped Lord Dorrimore.

Clive had. Reaching the spot, he made one grab, and caught the bag of pearls just as it was disappearing, disturbed by his own movements. Some little distance away a black thing shot out of the weed. But Clive had turned, and was bounding back, slithering, slipping, but reaching safety.

Nelson Lee and Mr. Russell were already at the bottom of the ladder. Clive slipped just as he reached the platform. He plunged, went down to his waist, and struggled up again. A second later he was in the grasp of the two men. They hauled him up, and dragged him to the deck.

"You mad young idiot!" said Nelson Lee angrily.

"Sorry, sir!" exclaimed Clive, his eyes gleaming. "I'm not hurt; just a little bit wet. But I've got the pearls. Here you are, dad—safe and sound!"

Mr. Russell was trembling from head to foot.

"They weren't worth it, Clive—they weren't worth it!" he muttered. "What are pearls to me compared to your life!"

"But I'm safe, dad!"

"Yes, you're safe—but you might have shared Prescott's fate," said his father.

"Good heavens, Clive, what made you take the risk? Don't think I'm not grateful—you acted with amazing heroism—"

"Chuck it, dad!" said Clive uncomfortably.

"Russell, old man, you've got a son to be proud of," said Lord Dorrimore heartily. "I've seen a few courageous things in my time, but that's as good as any of 'em. Good lad! You're made of the right stuff—an' I shouldn't expect anythin' else, seein' that you're from Canada!"

It had been an hour of excitement, anxiety and peril. But it was over now. And before Clive and his father had had time to get over the effects of it, there was a fresh excitement. The engineers were ready sooner than they had expected—the great test was about to be made!

CHAPTER XXV.

THE GREAT HOUR.



BOOM-BOOM-BOOOOM!

Two hours had elapsed—two hours of tense watching and waiting on behalf of Lord Dorrimore's guests. Divers had been overside, risking the mysteries of the weed. The great cage was clamped round the propellers. The knife edge had been rivetted to the Wanderer's prow.

And now, just before the evening dusk, the great experiment was about to be tried. As a preliminary, the guns were booming out—shooting at the weed again, rending and tearing the tough masses.

"What's going to happen?" asked Tommy Watson breathlessly. "Will she be able to get out? Will she cut through the weed? If we don't win through this time, it'll be too late."

"You're right, Tommy," agreed Nipper. "The stench from this mass is getting worse every hour—it's nearly overpowering us even now. But we've been fighting against it, and pretending not to notice."

His words were true. The decaying stuff was not only sending up wafts of awful odour, but gas was beginning to form—foul, poisonous gas which was destined to increase with appalling volume. Another twelve hours, indeed, and life would be impossible. So everything DID depend upon this big effort.

"What's that?" exclaimed Doris Berkeley, clutching at Reggie Pitt's sleeve. "Can't you feel? Oh, the engines are going!"

"Hurrah!"

"We're getting under way!"

Cheers rang out, and excitement grew. For the first time for many days, the Wanderer was gently throbbing with life. At sea, one would have declared that the yacht's engines were absolutely vibrationless. But after a long spell of inactivity,

one could detect an indefinable "something." Instead of being dead, the yacht was alive. There was no actual quivering—but everybody knew that the engines were at work.

"She's moving!" yelled Handforth exultantly. "Look! Look at the weed! She's moving, you chaps!"

"Odds anchors and chains, so she is!" ejaculated Archie Glenthorne. "What-ho! The good old anchor's weighed, and all that sort of thing! Heave-ho for the Spanish Main, lads!"

"Shut up, Archie, and watch!" panted Jack Grey.

"Dash it all! I mean——"

Archie paused, fascinated. It seemed to him that the whole mass of weed was drifting past the yacht. Actually, the yacht was forcing its way through the weed. The movement was slow—so slow that but for the closely packed weed, her motion would have been almost imperceptible.

Right in the bows, men were bending over, watching. That razor-edge was forcing itself into the already battered masses of choking weed. And to the joy of the watchers, the improvised blade cut its way clean through—slicing everything that barred the vessel's progress.

Astern, men were hanging in improvised cradles, almost level with the water, watching that iron cage. At the least sign of any crumpling or shifting, the warning would be given, and the engines stopped. But the work had been done well, and so far the experiment was a success.

The engineers had worked themselves to a point of exhaustion in order to get through in time for the evening tide. It was high now, and no better opportunity could be seized. Foot by foot, and yard by yard, the Wanderer was creeping to the choked-up break in the reef.

And one thing became quickly noticeable. The Wanderer's speed, instead of decreasing, became faster. After the first three or four hundred yards, she gathered strength for the fight, and charged on with grim, relentless purpose. Hopes were now becoming certainties—and the suspense was practically at an end.

Handforth danced a hornpipe round the deck, forcing Church and McClure to join in.

"Everything's all serene!" he roared excitedly. "We're cutting through—we're getting free! Three cheers for the engineers!"

"Better not shout too soon!" warned Bob Christine.

"Rats!" snorted Handforth. "It's a foregone conclusion now! We're safe! Within a few hours we shall be on our way to England!"

"And some of us will be seasick, too!" gasped Church. "Look at the sea out there—it's still running fearfully high! But who

cares about seasickness? I don't care if we get caught in a dozen more cyclones!"

All the fellows were clinging to the rail, watching the weed as it went past. The Wanderer's speed was increasing still more. The experiment was not merely a success, but an absolute triumph.

"Somebody called for cheers for the engineers just now," said Reggie Pitt. "They deserve 'em, I know—but what about cheers for Mr. Lee? It was his idea to adopt this plan!"

"Hear, hear!"

"Three cheers for Mr. Lee!"

Nelson Lee could not refrain from smiling as he heard the lusty cheers that followed. He turned to Lord Dorrimore.

"The youngsters are nearly off thier heads with excitement—and who can blame them?" he said.

"Nobody," said Dorrie. "Hang it all, I feel like yellin' on my own account."

"I would go along and restrain them, if I thought there was any possibility of failure," continued Lee. "But we're successful, Dorrie. I regard failure as very remote now. Within half-an-hour we shall be in the open sea."

CHAPTER XXVI.

HOMEWARD BOUND!



"FREE—we're free!"

Those words were uttered again and again, by scores of voices. The decks of the Wanderer were crowded—and the rails were packed.

Everybody was up, apparently. Stewards and stewardesses, cooks, and everybody excepting the engine-room staff was on deck at the moment of triumph.

The Wanderer had just passed out through the break in the reef!

And as she lifted her graceful bows to the Pacific rollers, there was a fresh cheer. The yacht dipped, rose, and passed on her way out into the choppy sea. Who cared a fig about rough weather now?

Not one of the passengers, at all events. But Captain Burton did. To tell the truth, the Wanderer's Master was very anxious, indeed. He was free from the weed, but the Wanderer's propellers were caged in that steelwork. And it wasn't calculated to withstand heavy weather.

There was, of course, only one thing to be done.

Crawling slowly, the yacht veered round to the sheltered side of the island, and at a safe distance she was brought to a standstill, and afterwards allowed to slowly drift with the current. As it was bearing her away from the island all the time, there was no danger.

Down went the divers and the workmen, and with feverish intensity, they withdrew the bolts, rigged up the derrick, and the

cage, having served its purpose, was removed. The razor-edge on the prow was allowed to remain. That could be taken away in calmer weather.

"I can't believe it—I simply can't!" said Irene Manners, as she stood against the rail, looking over at the island. "It seems impossible that we were trapped there only an hour or two ago! Somehow, I always knew that we'd escape. I couldn't think anything else."

It was moonlight now—and the tropic night was perfect. Only the heavy sea remained as a reminder of that recent cyclone. Far away, the shadowy outline of Paradise Island could just be seen—a paradise no longer, but a plague spot of absolute horror.

In one way, it was just as well. No soul on the Wanderer regretted leaving that lagoon—once so perfect. The recent adventures had filled all the boys and girls with an intense longing to get back home—to return to the peace and quietness of England. It was the right atmosphere for returning to St. Frank's. The boys were looking forward to school again.

"They're just about finished now," said Doris, as she looked towards the stern. "Yes! The engines have started again! Now we shall show some speed, my girl! Straight off for the Panama Canal—and then home!"

"It's too good to be true!", exclaimed Irene dreamily.

"That's what we've been saying for days past—but this time it's an absolute fact," declared Reggie Pitt, as he joined the girls. "I say, are you looking forward to school again?"

"Rather!" declared Irene & Co.

"By jingo, so am I!" declared Pitt. "Think of it! Football, study rags, House rows, dormitory feeds——"

"Don't!" said Doris feebly. "Have mercy on us!"

But Pitt was not the only one who was talking in that strain. Now that the tension was over, most of the fellows were discussing school—the coming term, and everything connected with it.

And it wouldn't be so long before England was reached, either. The Wanderer was the fastest private yacht afloat—a kind of destroyer for speed. She could move through the ocean like a greyhound.

Three days later the whole experience on Paradise Island seemed like a half-forgotten nightmare. The sea was now calm, the skies blue, and the voyage was progressing satisfactorily. Sailors were at work constantly, and practically every sign of the recent damage had been repaired.

Even Jonathan Prescott's fate was a shadow of the past. It had been so swift—so sudden and dramatic—that none of the witnesses had been able to get a lasting impression. They could hardly believe that Prescott had gone to his last account at the spot where he had committed his roguery.

All thoughts were now for the future. And when the Panama was reached at last, everybody felt that the trip was over. There was only the Atlantic to be crossed, and then England—London—home!

In the Wanderer, this was a mere detail—a voyage of three or four days only. Already the fellows were making preparations to pack. They were arranging what they would do when they reached England.

CHAPTER XXVII.

HOME AGAIN!



LOOK—Caistowe!" exclaimed Church excitedly.

"Where—where?"

"Can't you see the light-house?" panted Church, pointing. "There it is—on that headland! And there's Caistowe just beyond, nestling in the bay. Give the old place a cheer, you chaps!"

The cheer was given with a will.

England—and a cold, raw September morning. The English Channel was unusually inhospitable—but nobody cared. There was something rather ripping about this thick atmosphere, and the nip in the air. It was so different to the relaxing languor of the tropics.

The boys and girls, all well wrapped up, were eagerly watching the coastline, as the Wanderer sped up the Channel. And Caistowe was certainly in sight. The fellows looked upon the little town with affection—as though they owned it. Indeed, they did rather regard it as their own private property. All the Sussex coast along here was theirs.

And then, after the familiar coastline had passed astern, there came the cliffs of Kent—and then the wide Thames mouth. As though in welcome, the sun came out gloriously towards noon. The air warmed up, and the September day became reminiscent of summer.

The Wanderer continued her course up the Thames—past Tilbury, Greenhithe, and so on to the more congested reaches. At dead-slow speed, she crept further up—until, at last, she entered her berth at the London Docks.

"My hat!" ejaculated Handforth, as he looked at the drab surroundings with a fond light in his eye. "Good old London! Show me the chap who says she's foggy and grimy!"

"Better than Paradise Island, any day," said Church stoutly.

The Wanderer, her wireless restored, had sent messages home several days in advance, and her exact time for arrival had been flashed through the sky. Even the newspapers were full of the story. And reporters en masse were waiting to seize the adventurers as they landed. They crouched like hungry wolves, ready to pounce.

"Well, it's all over—and we're back safely," said Nipper, as he was waiting to go down the gangway. "By Jove, you're in for a treat, Clive, my son!" he added affectionately pressing the arm next to his.

Clive Russell flushed.

"St. Frank's, eh?" he said gladly. "By Jove. I'm as keen as mustard about it, Nipper! It's my one ambition ever since I met you fellows! And my dad's arranged it all—I shall be at St. Frank's next term! We're going to have a good time—eh, Pully?"

Ralph Leslie Fullwood grinned.

"You bet!" he replied heartily. "I've made up my mind that this term is going to be the best one I've ever spent in my life!"

And there was something about his tone which caused Nipper to look at him keenly. The old Ralph Leslie wasn't so apparent as it had been. Fullwood was greatly changed these days.

Would he slip back into his old habits as soon as he rejoined his former associates?

In any case, the leader of Study A was looking happy enough. But there were events in store for him which he couldn't even guess at! The coming term was not to be the glorious dream he had imagined! For he was destined to be put on his trial—to go through fire and water—to fight with his back to the wall!

THE END.

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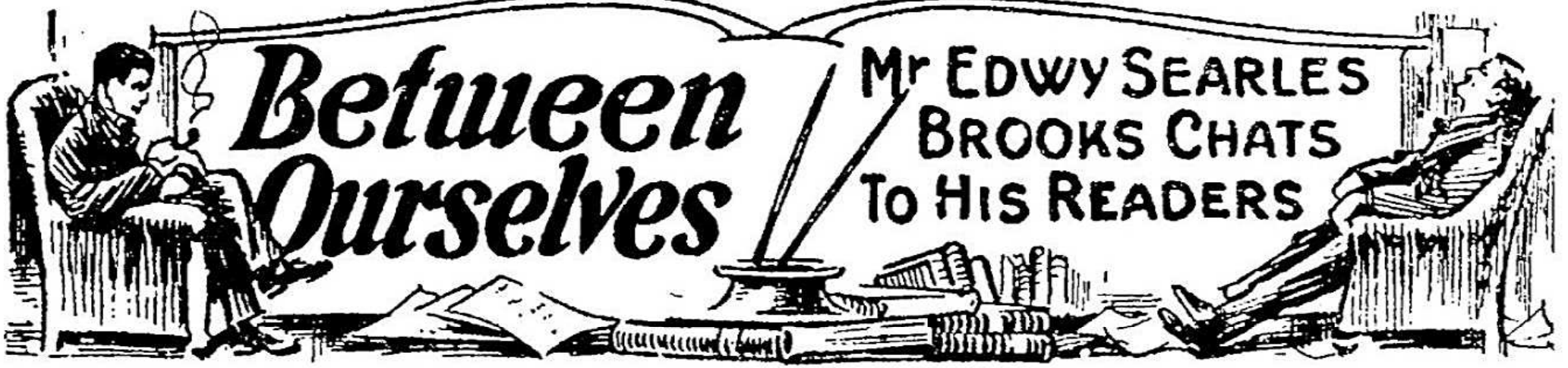
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(NOTE.—If any readers write to me I shall be pleased to comment upon such remarks as are likely to interest the majority. If you have any suggestions send them along. If you have any grumbles make them to me. All letters should be addressed to EDWY SEARLES BROOKS, c/o The Editor, THE NELSON LEE LIBRARY—THE ST. FRANK'S WEEKLY, The Fleetway House, Farringdon Street, London, E.C.4. Every letter acknowledged below has been personally read by me, and I thank each writer most heartily. But although ALL letters are equally welcomed, I am reluctantly compelled to confine my individual replies under this heading to whatever points of widespread appeal may have been raised in them.—E.S.B.)

Well, here we are again. And this time I'm going to dip into my arrears pile. In fact, I'm going to make a gallant attempt to supply as many of those overdue answers as possible. So I shall not only have to cut short my generalisations on this occasion, but also severely condense my individual replies. Indeed, I shall be obliged to adopt this course until I get up to date with you all. It's the only way in which I can possibly catch up.

Luckily, in one sense, I've only got eight letters to acknowledge this week, and six of these are from Australia. The holiday season no doubt has been responsible for the poverty of my post-bag. As it happens, this is just as well. For I shall now look for your letters to arrive at a time when I am better able to deal promptly with them.

In the meantime, I want all those whose letters I have recently acknowledged to understand that I am obliged, in common fairness, to keep them waiting their turn. In every instance where an individual reply is due it will certainly appear here sooner or later. So keep a sharp look out, all of you who have broached subjects calling for special attention. It will be a severe

trial to some of you, I'm afraid. But remember, patience is a virtue. So here's a good chance to try and cultivate it.

In my last chat I omitted to place an asterisk against the names of two overseas readers who had volunteered their services as Organising Officers for the St. Frank's League. So I'll just repeat the names here. They were FRANK LYNNE, of East London, South Africa, and MARION H. FARERO, of Lima, Peru, South America. The services of both will be gratefully accepted, and they will receive their Foundation Membership Certificates in due course, together with details of initial procedure.

Just one other little point before I acknowledge the eight letters just referred to. A good many of you have got into the habit of attaching your stamps to the exact right-hand top corner of your envelopes, leaving not even a hair's breadth of margin. This is a bad habit. Next time you stick on a stamp, just remember the post-office officials who have to obliterate it, and the receiver, who might wish to decipher the date and place of origin. And it's particularly aggravating to receive a letter from abroad, and to find all these imperfections on the envelope. When it comes to stamp collectors, these things are quite enough to hasten grey hairs.

Now for those acknowledgments.

Clifford George Leavy (Brisbane, Queensland), A Girl Colonial Reader (North Melbourne, Victoria), Roy Roberts (Campsie, N.S.W.), E. Barker (Beaconsfield, Fremantle, West Australia), F. B. Braddish (Footscray, Victoria), Leslie Sholl (South Melbourne, Victoria), W. S. Fraser (Shoreditch, N. 1), William George White (Nuneaton, Warwickshire).

I haven't forgotten any asterisks this time. As a matter of fact, up to the time I'm writing this there's been barely

time to get in the final offers of services as Organising Officers from such a far-off land as Australia. But I feel very sure that by the time this appears in print our already large list of Australian volunteers will have been considerably added to. The list for Overseas Foundation Member Organising Officers does not close here until September 12th. In other words, it's just possible that by the time this issue reaches the hands of readers abroad, in every country, there might still be left a few of the five hundred Foundation Membership numbers which we have reserved for readers in other lands. If so, now's the time to snap one up, or lose the opportunity for ever.

Well, T. Williams, I must praise your loyalty in introducing your two cousins, your brother, and your mother to THE NELSON LEE LIBRARY. It's practical appreciation which tells. Although I'm delighted to know we're getting it all over the place, it's one of those few good things we can never have enough of.

As you seem in such doubt about those other papers you are taking, A. P. Marnitz, why not drop them? Yes, drop them, and go "all out" on climbing our League ladder? You've already been made a Foundation Member Organising Officer for "The St. Frank's League." So you've got a good start. Timothy Tucker will crop up again in the St. Frank's stories—the same old fathead as ever. This'll probably happen when you least expect him.

Well, you are a chump, Solomon Arkin! Fancy going without Our Paper for six months because "they were sold out like hot cakes, and IT NEVER OCCURRED TO ME TO ORDER IT"! This IS a matter of general interest. In fact, it wants looking very seriously into. Quite possibly there are many others who have never thought of such a simple precaution. EVERYBODY, EVERYWHERE, can always MAKE SURE of receiving their weekly copy if they ORDER IT IN ADVANCE from any newsagent. And if you're buried away in some quarter of the globe where newsagents don't exist, you can always get Our Paper regularly by subscribing for it, in the manner indicated by the footnote on back of our cover. But you've more than made up for your own thoughtlessness, Solomon Arkin, by obtaining those three new readers. Hearty thanks. Keep it up. You'll have a better chance than ever of extending our circle of readers now that you're an Organising Officer for "The St. Frank's League."

That's a good idea of yours, Gafria, about having three age sections for local clubs in association with "The St. Frank's League," and I've no doubt something of the kind will be adopted when we arrive at that point. We MAY have another "St. Frank's Magazine" as well as a "St. Frank's League Magazine." Yes, the first St. Frank's story did appear in No. 112 of Our Paper. Many thanks for your interesting twelve-page letter, Gafria. And as it's the first of the kind you've ever written, I feel highly honoured.

Confound it! I couldn't say much less to that last chap, could I? Yet I'm misbehaving myself again right away. It won't do. I MUST make the replies to follow of a short, telegraphic nature, so to speak. Then, if I don't satisfy you, give me a little sympathy, and write again. Believe me, I'm trying my hardest not to prolong anyone's agony, in spite of any appearance to the contrary.

It would be a bit thick, J. Southwell, if I hadn't acknowledged your two previous letters. But as I make a particular point of acknowledging EVERY letter I receive, I don't see how this could have happened, unless your letters never reached me. I'm afraid that synopsis idea of yours, to preface each story of a series, wouldn't work. In the interests of new readers, who are always coming into the fold, it's necessary that each yarn should, to all intents and purposes, be complete in itself. As for the old readers, many of them are no doubt glad of a "refresher" after a week's wait. As to Cross Word Puzzles, these might be made a small feature of The St. Frank's League Magazine, with prizes to be competed for by League members only.

You're in a minority, James McAlpine. Most readers praise my latest stories highest, and prefer humour to sensation. At the same time, I always try to get in some excitement, as well as a few laughs. There will probably be a back number exchange in connection with The St. Frank's League. Join up, James!

Even now I haven't got down to that telegraphic style. And my space is all used up again. Well, I shall have to commence those short and sharp tactics in earnest next week, starting from my very first line.

E.S.B.

HOW TO MAKE A PINHOLE CAMERA.

By DICK GOODWIN.

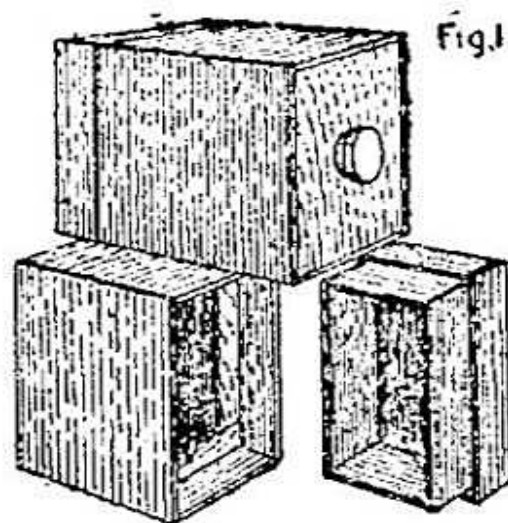


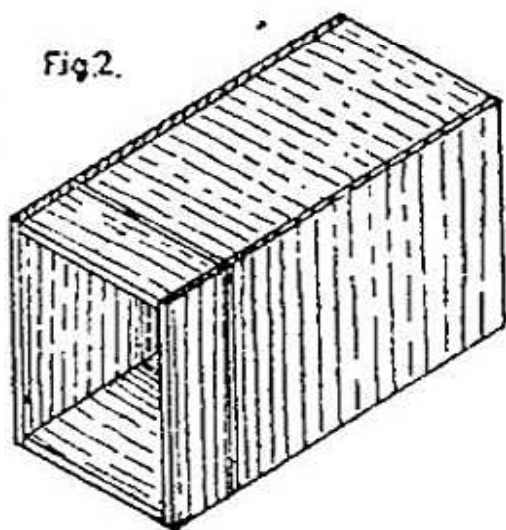
Fig. 1

A PINHOLE camera is the easiest and cheapest form of camera to make, and really excellent results can be obtained for very little expense. The camera, as shown at Fig. 1, closed and open, should be used on a stand or a table, as

longer exposures are necessary than with a lens camera, and being a fixed focus, some experimenting must be done to find the correct distance at which the picture is in focus.

Any wood is suitable if it is $\frac{1}{4}$ in. thick and will stand nailing on the edges, but alternative methods of forming the box are given so that those readers who are expert with their tools will be able to make a choice. Prepared fret-wood will be found the most suitable material, as it is already planed and smoothed, and if walnut or mahogany are chosen, the appearance of the finished work will be better than if deal or whitewood were used, although these woods will take stain and polish.

Fig. 2.



MAKING THE BOX.

First prepare a plain box, as Fig. 2 to a length of $7\frac{1}{4}$ in., a width of $5\frac{1}{4}$ in., and a depth of $4\frac{1}{4}$ in. Four methods of making it are shown at Fig. 3. A represents the simplest way and requires glueing and nailing. B is what is known as a lock corner and is composed of equally spaced notches. C is the tongue and groove joint, and D the more difficult but strongest and most effective joint, that of the dovetail. When the box has been made, one end is sawn off to a length of $1\frac{1}{2}$ in. and the sawn edges planed down to give two pieces, one $1\frac{1}{2}$ in. and the other $5\frac{3}{4}$ in. Fill in the back of the smaller piece with a piece of $\frac{1}{4}$ in. wood, and then fit in a lining, which can be of thinner wood, but it must project beyond the narrow box for a

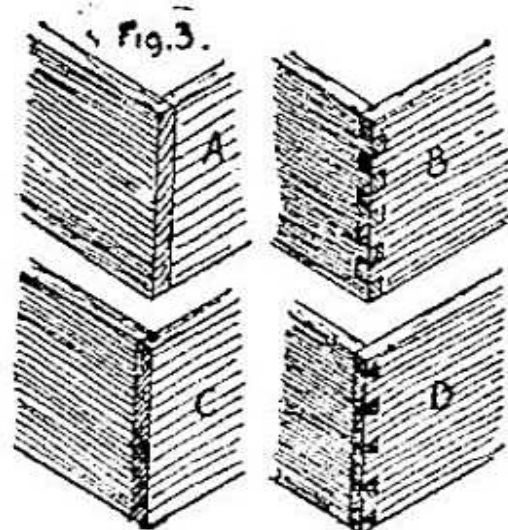


Fig. 3.

distance of $1\frac{1}{2}$ in. One end of the other box should be filled in, but a hole, $\frac{1}{4}$ in. diameter should be bored in the centre.

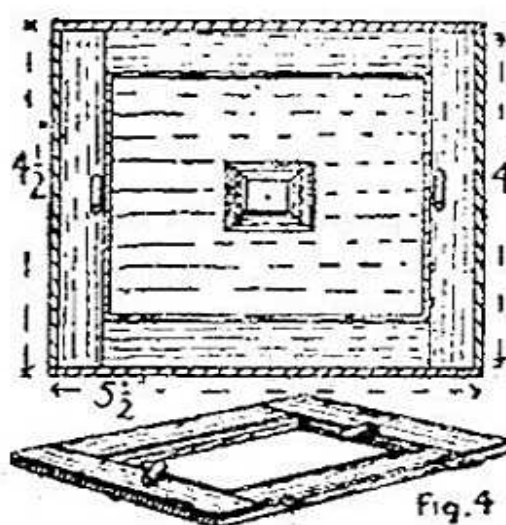


Fig. 4

THE PLATE HOLDER

The next step is to make the plate partition, as shown at Fig. 4 separately and in position. It is made of one piece of $\frac{1}{4}$ in. wood which must fit exactly inside the larger box and have an opening 4 in. by 3 in. Glue on one side four strips of $\frac{1}{8}$ in. wood so that a rebate of $\frac{1}{8}$ in. is formed inside the opening and then screw on two brass or wooden buttons, as shown. Next prepare four strips to fit inside, as in E, Fig. 5, these are glued on so that the partition will be $3\frac{1}{4}$ in. from the front.

MAKING THE PINHOLE.

The pinhole is shown at Fig. 6, and consists of a piece of tinned sheet or thin brass, about 2 in. square, as at F. Place the sheet on a piece of soft wood or lead and dent the centre with a blunt centre punch, as at G. Next take a darning needle and punch a fine hole, as at H, but the point should only just pierce the metal. To make the hole quite true, rub top, as in the enlarged section J on an oilstone to slightly flatten it, as at K. The plate is now fastened on with a piece of prepared beading, as at L, and then the front can be nailed in position. The cap is formed with a pill box, as at M, the bottom is cut out, as shown and then glued on the front of the camera.

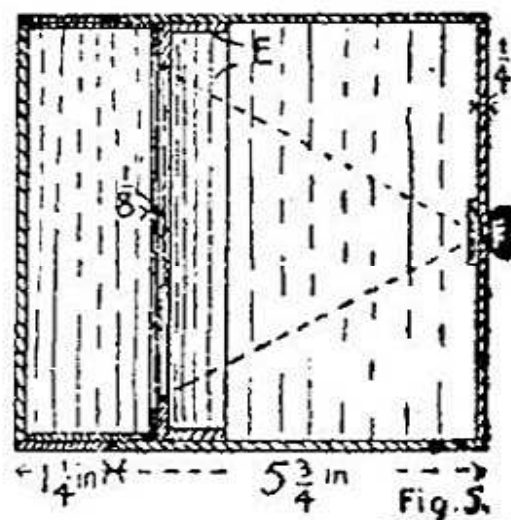


Fig. 5.

FINISHING.

The whole of the inside is now tested for light, and it will be as well to run a glue brush along all the inner joints to make sure that they are filled in. The inside is now coated with dead black; this can be made by mixing lamp-black with diluted seccotine or gum. The two cases should fit together easily and the outside be finished with polish. To use the camera, fit a $\frac{1}{4}$ -plate in the dark room, take care that the cap is on, and then it is ready for the exposure.

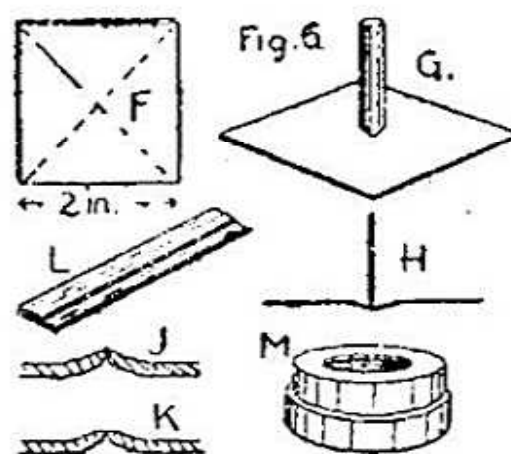
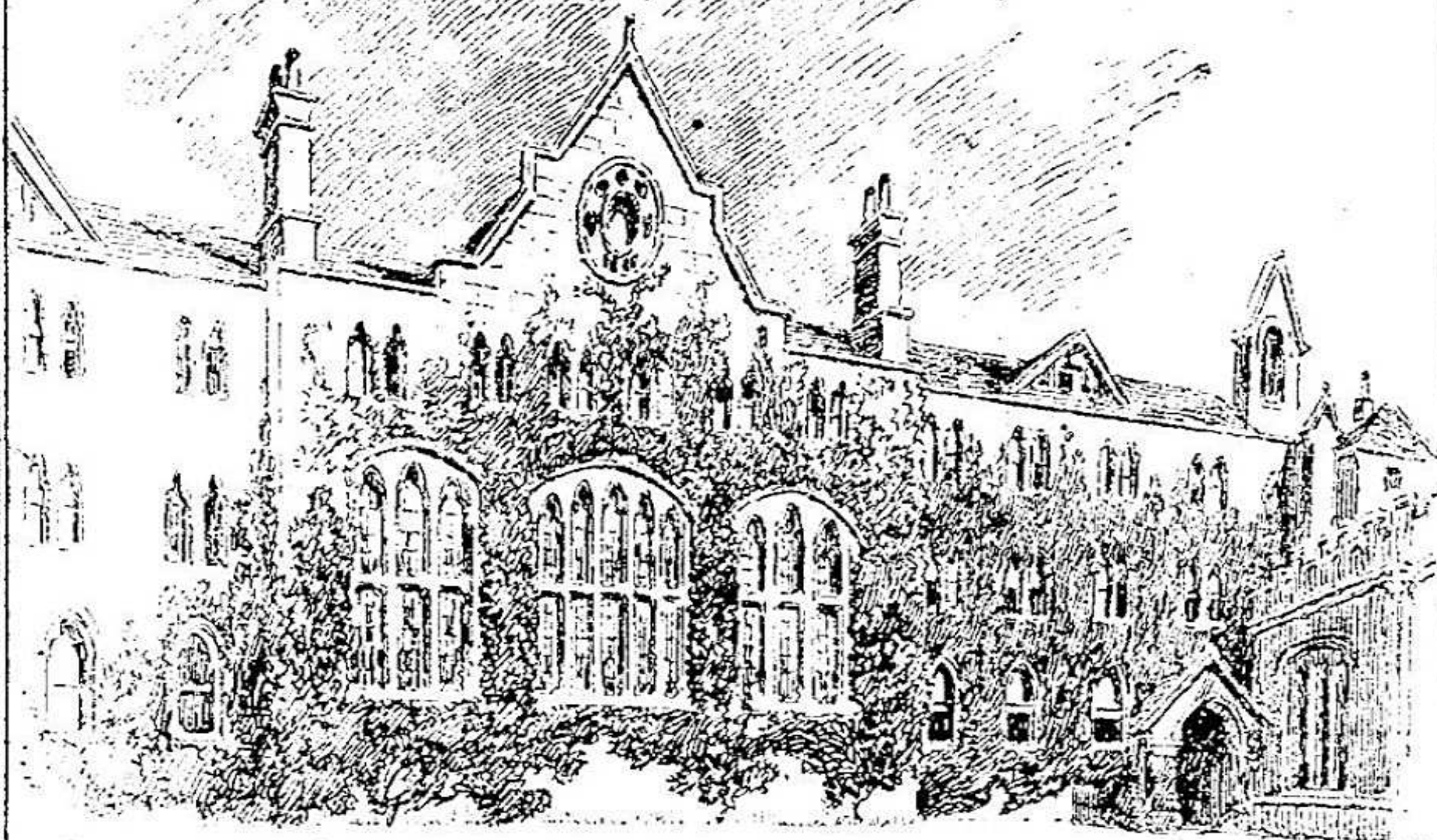


Fig. 6

OUR PUBLIC SCHOOLS

Special Sketch by Mr. Briscoe, for "The Nelson Lee Library," of
STAMFORD SCHOOL



The School, Stamford, was founded by William Radcliffe in 1532, and under a scheme of the Charity Commissioners receives the surplus revenues of the Hospital, founded by William Browne. The oldest part of the buildings, at one time belonging to St. Paul's Church, has been used as a schoolroom since 1532. Additions were made in 1830, and new buildings added in 1875. There are 200 boys at the school, and the chief games played are cricket, Rugby football, and hockey.

THE ST. FRANK'S LEAGUE

(All communications to the League should be addressed to the Chief Officer, The St. Frank's League, c/o THE NELSON LEE LIBRARY, The Fleetway House, London, E.C.4.)

My dear Leagueites and Readers,

In six weeks' time (October 24th issue), every reader of the N.L.L. will find enclosed in his copy the first of a series of free gifts, no two of which will be exactly alike. I am not going to disclose the nature of these gifts until two weeks before they are presented. But I am referring to them now in my League chat because I want it to be known that all those of my readers who have qualified as members of the League will be better able to enjoy the benefits of these gifts than those readers who remain outside the League. Readers who are still non-members should not consider any longer about becoming members. They have no occasion to consider nor even to think about it, for there is only one thing for them to do and that is **TO JOIN THE LEAGUE AT ONCE!**

We want you, every one of you, to help make the League a lasting success so that it will be a credit to the Old Paper and a worthy tribute to the famous author of our St. Frank's stories.

I am glad to be able to say that several bronze medals have been already awarded to members. Many of these happy recipients have written to say how delighted they are with the medal, that it is much better than they thought it would be, and well worth waiting for. But there will be no more delays, for we have a good supply of medals in stock, all ready to send off as soon as members qualify for them. The drawing in the next column of the bronze medal is reproduced to its actual size.

The winning of a bronze medal is a

stepping-stone to the appointment of Organising Officer. Accordingly, many bronze medallists have been created O.O.'s during the week. These new O.O.'s who have just won their spurs, are all as keen as mustard, and the pioneer O.O.'s had

better look to their laurels. The time will come when I shall have to limit these appointments in certain areas; but I want first of all to give everyone a chance to prove his capabilities as a leader and an organiser. If, after six months' continuous service, an O.O. proves his worth, he will be properly confirmed in his rank, and pre-



sented with an illuminated scroll.

Bronze medallists are now asking how they can qualify for the silver and gold medallions. They should fill in application form at Section B as before—I have adapted the wording of Section B this week so that the form can be used by members applying for any three of the medal awards. Although the silver and gold medals will not be presented until the League numbers 5,000 and 10,000 members respectively, every introduction sent in will be credited to the member's name.

Your sincere friend,

THE CHIEF OFFICER.

SOME ADVANTAGES OF JOINING THE LEAGUE.

- (1) Getting to know your fellow-readers from near at home to the most distant outposts of the Empire.
- (2) Joining local sports and social clubs affiliated to the League.
- (3) Entering for competitions run for the benefit of members.
- (4) Qualifying for various awards by promoting the growth of the League.
- (5) Opportunities for contributing short articles, stories, and sketches to the League Magazine.
- (6) Space for short notices and free adverts. for members in the above Magazine.
- (7) Advice on choosing a trade or calling in life, on emigration to the colonies, dependencies, or abroad.
- (8) An employment bureau for members of the League.
- (9) Tours to interesting places in England and on the Continent, camping-out holidays, and sea-trips, specially arranged for members of the League.

AS SIMPLE AS A B C.

INSTRUCTIONS.—Reader Applying for Membership: Cut out TWO complete Application Forms from TWO copies of this week's issue of THE NELSON LEE LIBRARY. On one of the forms fill in Section A, crossing out Sections B and C by running the pen diagonally across both Sections. Then write clearly your full name and address at bottom of form. The second form is for your new reader, who fills in Section C, crosses out Sections A and B, and writes his name and address at bottom of form. Both forms are then pinned together and sent to the Chief Officer, The St. Frank's League, c/o THE NELSON LEE LIBRARY, Gough House, Gough Square, London, E.C.4.

Member Applying for Bronze Medal: It will be necessary for you to obtain six new readers for this award. For each new reader TWO complete forms are needed, and these must be taken from copies of the latest issue of THE NELSON LEE LIBRARY at the time when the

forms are sent in. On one of the forms fill in Section B, crossing out Sections A and C, and write your name and address at bottom of form. The other form is for your new reader, who fills in Section C, crosses out Sections A and B, and writes his name and address at the bottom of the form. Now pin both forms together and send them to the Chief Officer, as above. One new reader will then be registered against your name, and when six new readers have been registered, you will be sent the St. Frank's League bronze medal. There is nothing to prevent you from sending in forms for two or more new readers at once, provided the forms are taken from the latest issue of THE NELSON LEE LIBRARY at the time when the forms are sent in.

These Application Forms can be posted for £d., provided the envelope is not sealed and no letter is enclosed.

IMPORTANT.—Complete and post off this form before the next issue of THE NELSON LEE LIBRARY is on sale. It then becomes out of date and useless.

ST. FRANK'S LEAGUE APPLICATION FORM No. 12. Sept. 12, 1925

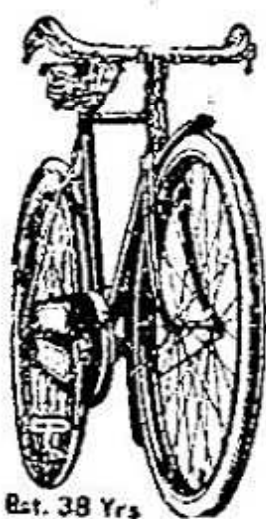
SECTION A	READER'S APPLICATION FOR MEMBERSHIP. Being a regular reader of "THE NELSON LEE LIBRARY," I desire to become enrolled as a Member of THE ST. FRANK'S LEAGUE, and to qualify for all such benefits and privileges as are offered to Members of the League. I hereby declare myself to be a staunch supporter of "THE NELSON LEE LIBRARY" and THE ST. FRANK'S LEAGUE, and that I have introduced Our Paper to one new reader, whose signature to certify this appears on second form attached hereto. Will you, therefore, kindly forward me Certificate of Enrolment with Membership Number assigned to me.
SECTION B	MEMBER'S APPLICATION FOR MEDAL AWARDS. I, Member No.....(give Membership No.) hereby declare that I have introduced one more new reader, whose signature to certify this appears on second form attached hereto. This makes me.....(state number of introductions up to date) introductions to my credit.
SECTION C	NEW READER'S DECLARATION. I hereby declare that I have been introduced by (give name of introducer) to this issue of "THE NELSON LEE LIBRARY," which I will read with a view to becoming a regular reader of this paper.
(FULL NAME)..... (ADDRESS)..... 	

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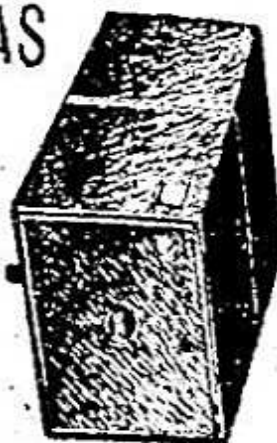
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House, Farringdon Street, London, E.C.4. Registered for transmission by Canadian magazine
post. Subscription Rates: Inland and Abroad, 11/- per annum; 5/6 for six months. Sole Agents
for South Africa: Central News Agency, Limited. Sole Agents for Australia and New Zealand:
Messrs. Gordon & Gotch, Limited; and for Canada: The Imperial News Co. (Canada), Limited.
No. 536 D/R September 12, 1925.