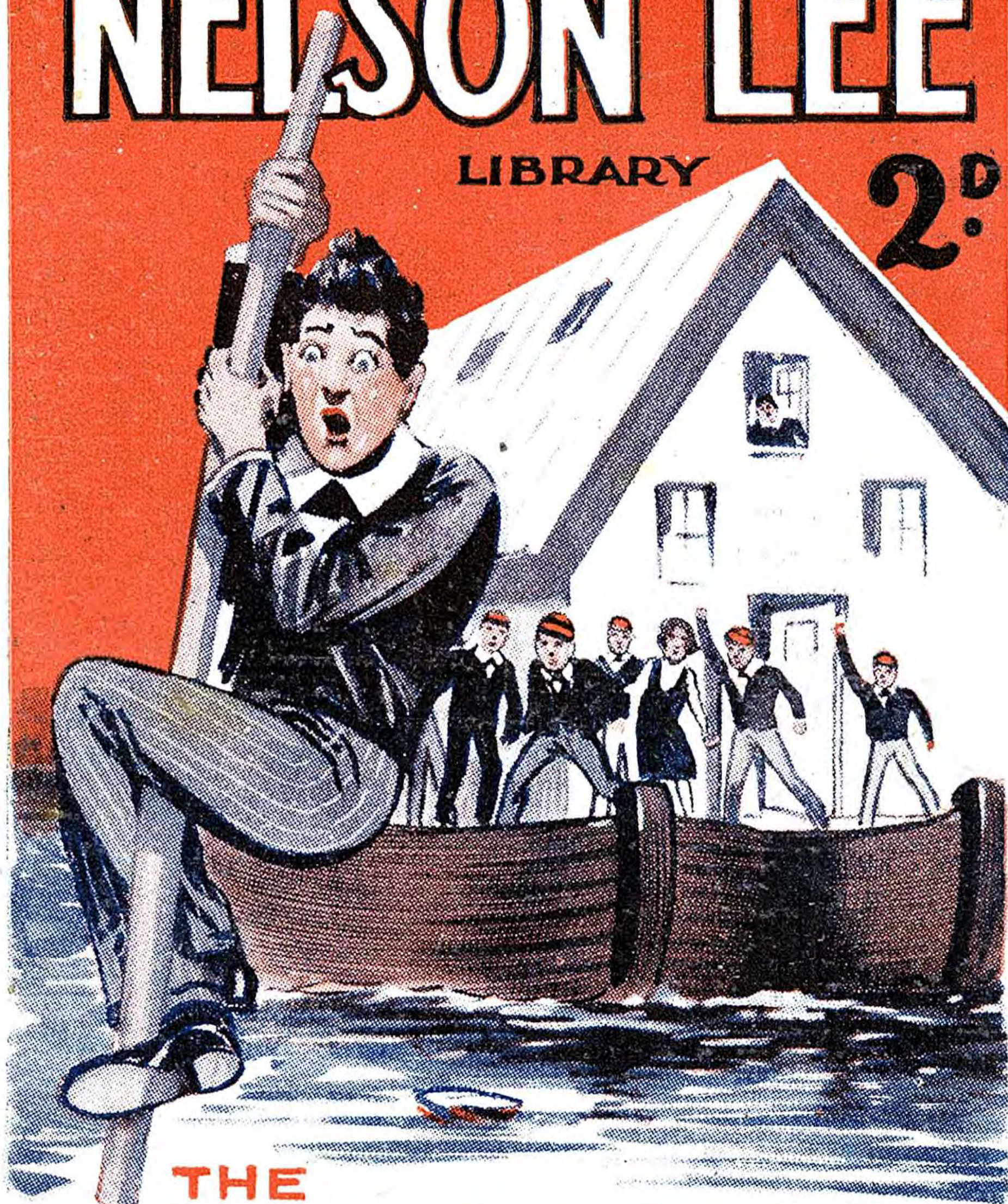


THE BOYS OF ST. FRANK'S **ADRIFT IN AN ARK!** LONG COMPLETE STORY WITHIN!

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THE FLOATING SCHOOL!

A Stirring Story of School Life and Rousing Adventure.



The juniors were silent as their helpless craft rushed headlong towards the jagged stonework of the broken bridge. In a few moments now their fate would be decided !

*Handy's Home-made Ark!**All at Sea at St. Frank's!*

THE FLOATING SCHOOL!



By EDWY SEARLES BROOKS

The Boys of St. Frank's are up to their necks in thrills in this breathless long complete story of school life and adventure.

CHAPTER 1.

HANDFORTH'S ARK!

"**L**AND-HO!" sang out Reggie Pitt cheerily.

"We don't need telling that, you funny ass!" said Edward Oswald Handforth, frowning. "It's one thing to see land, and it's another thing to reach it! This craft is only crawling along at about a mile a day!"

"Well, she was your idea," said Pitt.

"I know that—but that doesn't alter the fact that we're going along like a funeral," replied Handforth. "Nearly eleven o'clock, too. Why, I was expecting to be in the train, bound for home, by this time."

"We shall be lucky if we get into a train by this evening," said Church, with conviction. "We're supposed to be making for Bannington, aren't we? By what I can see, we've been going round in a kind of circle for the last four hours!"

"Blame the eddies and the currents," said Reggie Pitt. "This is a pretty hefty proposition, this ark, and she doesn't answer to the helm as well as she might."

Handforth frowned.

He was feeling just a little gloomy. Things had not turned out as he had expected. His ark, of course, was a wonderful craft, but, all the same, it was a difficult thing to handle her. And as for getting speed, one might as well have tried to infuse liveliness in a snail.

Handforth's ark, to be exact, was on its way.

It was on its way to Bannington, but it insisted upon taking an extremely roundabout course, and had already drifted about two miles off the route. However, not many of the passengers were grumbling. It was quite a pleasant adventure, and all the future prospects were pleasant. If the journey took a little longer than they had hoped, it couldn't be a calamity.

It was a somewhat windy April morning.

An early spring morning, with a rawness in the air which seemed to indicate that March had left some of its influence behind. The sun was trying to break through a series of ragged, doubtful-looking clouds. All the weather prophets in the party were convinced that rain was very close.

Practically the entire St. Frank's Remove and Fourth Form were on board, to say nothing of Willy Handforth and his fag chums. And six of the Moor View school-girls figured on the passenger list, too.

And here they were—over a hundred souls—progressing slowly and sedately across a turnip field, several hundred yards from the main Bannington road. Actually, the turnip field was ten or twelve feet beneath the keel, and the main road was equally retiring. The great floods spread in every direction, and dry land was only visible in the distance.

A mile away, the swollen River Stowe was mainly keeping to its settled course. The current here was strong, with a grim, relentless pull. The main anxiety of the voyagers was to keep their craft well away from this swift current. She seemed to have a tendency to drift nearer and nearer, but by continuous hard work the ark was kept clear.

And what an extraordinary vessel!

In a way, she was startlingly reminiscent of the traditional picture of Noah's Ark—a huge structure, floating serenely on the flood, with many windows, a picturesque thatched roof, and with figures toiling at the clumsy oars.

As a matter of fact, the foundation consisted of two large river barges, lashed side by side, and forming one solid base. The superstructure was nothing more romantic than the big old wooden barn which had once stood at the corner of the St. Frank's playing fields.

These three units, welded together, as it were, formed the complete ark, and without question she was an imposing-looking vessel. The Stowe Valley had certainly never seen anything like her before.

There were cosy cabins in the barges, and the decks of both craft formed a kind of lower floor, with many windows looking out upon the sides. And, above, there was the great loft of the barn. Now, however, it was dignified by being termed the upper deck. This loft was full of St. Frank's juniors.

Fatty Little was in full charge of one end, where he performed culinary wonders with tinned salmon, corned beef, and such-like delicacies. Breakfast, in fact, was not long over.

Up the other end of the loft were piles of mattresses and blankets. A ladder led down to the lower deck. And, if one wished to, it was possible to go down the hatchways of the twin barges and get to the little cabins. But these were reserved solely for the use of the lady passengers.

Irene Manners, Doris Berkeley and Marjorie Temple occupied one suite, as it were,

and Mary Summers, Winnie Pitt and Violet Watson were the proud possessors of the other. They all thought it very sporting of the boys to give up the only "luxurious" living quarters for their benefit. For down in these cabins there were real stoves, and cooking was quite a jolly adventure. There was crockery, too—real cooking utensils, and everything. Irene & Co. were certainly having the best of it.

Aloft, the boys were compelled to rub along as best they could without knives or forks or crockery. Not that this really mattered. Everybody expected to be out of the flood zone within a few hours, and a few inconveniences were trifles light as air.

After the recent events at St. Frank's, this little voyage was a picnic.

For the old school was flooded out, and everybody had been compelled to seek refuge on the upper floors. Such floods as these had never been known in the whole history of the district—particularly at such a late date. It was almost spring, and such weather had never been known.

But St. Frank's had responded nobly to the occasion. Not only had the school carried on with coolness and resource, but they had even found accommodation for the girls of the Moor View School. At first, the marooned boys and girls had half-starved, but then two barges had been salvaged from the flood—and one had contained a full cargo of general provisions and grocery.

It was these two barges which now served as the foundations of the ark. Handforth had first got the idea, but it had been Dick Hamilton's ingenuity which had made the thing possible.

And in the early dawn that morning, the ark had set forth, its crew hoping to reach dry land.



CHAPTER 2.

SLOW PROGRESS!

T. FRANK'S was without masters—an extraordinary state of affairs, considering the gravity of the general situation. But things were not so bad now as they had been.

The entire staff, by a curious coincidence, had been cut off from the school at the outset, and had not been able to get back owing to the widespread inundations. Dr. Stafford, the headmaster, was seriously ill, and Mr. Nelson Lee, of the Ancient House, had matters in hand. Even now he was organising strong relief parties.

But the Removites had thought it a good move on their part to do their own bit by sailing away on the ark. The six Moor View girls had elected to go with them—quite against the orders of Miss Broome, their senior mistress.

The party had set out lightheartedly, certain that all their troubles were now over. After

all, what lay ahead? A gentle cruise on the flood to Bannington, and then a journey home. When they returned to St. Frank's again the floods would have subsided, and the old school would be itself.

It was so perfectly simple.

But the ark, unfortunately, was having a say in the matter. Clumsy and cumbersome, she steadfastly refused to be hurried. And to navigate her with any accuracy was proving to be out of the question.

"How are we going, Nipper?" asked Tommy Watson, as he joined Dick Hamilton at the stern, where Dick was wielding a long sweep. "Have we travelled a hundred yards during the last hour?"

Nipper paused in his labours.

"Yes, I believe so—backwards!" he replied. "See that oak-tree over there? An hour ago it was behind us. Now it's in front. Isn't that good enough?"

"Begad! I think it's frightfully rotten!" said Sir Montie Trégellis-West. "Can't we do somethin', dear old boy?"

"We're doing all we can," replied Nipper. "We're keeping her out of the main current, anyhow; but if we get to Bannington before dark, we shall be magicians, and not bargees."

"Before dark!" said Watson. "Oh, corks! And I thought I should be home by this evening."

"Never mind, Tommy boy; it's all in the day's work," said Montie cheerily. "Isn't it my turn to have a whack with the oar, Nipper? We're all takin' our share, you know."

There were only four of the heavy barge oars, and all of these were manned. The juniors were supposed to be propelling the ark towards Bannington, but, as a matter of fact, they were scarcely holding their own against the side currents.

One barge, alone, would have been a handful for these schoolboys. A barge is no light vessel to manoeuvre, particularly a big barge. And here there were two of them, lashed together as one. Their unwieldy clumsiness was aggravated enormously.

It would have been very different on an ordinary waterway.

The boys could have dealt with the ark quite easily if they had had banks to guide them, banks to hug. They could have had towing ropes out, as barges are supposed to have.

But here, on the bosom of the flood, it was a very different matter. There was no land within miles, and it was proving very difficult to keep the ark on any definite course. They thought they were going in one direction, and were rowing to that effect; but the treacherous side currents were carrying them off here and there and nullifying their efforts.

Nipper had feared something of this sort from the start, but even he had not anticipated such trouble. However, there was really nothing to worry about. The ark was under full control, and she was almost im-

perceptibly moving on her true route. Unless something untoward happened, Bannington would be reached towards the evening.

So Nipper wasn't concerned. It only exasperated him to realise that they would be many hours behind their schedule. They had started out at dawn with the object of reaching land by midday. A lot of fellows had scoffed at Nipper for insisting upon such an early start; but they weren't scoffing now. The junior skipper seemed to have an almost uncanny faculty for anticipation; but it was really nothing but good judgment. That was why he was so annoyed now—because his judgment had been at fault.

"We're all right so long as we keep going," he said when Reggie Pitt joined him. "We shall probably roll into Bannington after dark, but who cares?"

"I don't, for one," replied Reggie. "Our main idea in leaving the school was to relieve the congestion there—and we've accomplished that, whatever happens to us. In the years to come, when we dangle our children on our knees, we'll be able to tell them of our wonderful adventures in the ark. The only thing is, we haven't brought the animals."

"Oh, haven't we?" said Handforth indignantly, as he came into view. "I've just found out that Willy's brought all his giddy pets!"

"Splendid!" said Pitt. "Then we're a true ark, after all. Hallo! Rain!"

"Of course, it would rain!" said Handforth, glancing up.

The sky had become more overcast, and a sharp shower broke. There was more wind, too—a sharp, buffeting breeze which threatened to strengthen as the day progressed. Nipper didn't like it, and said so.

"If it had to blow, why couldn't it blow the other way?" he asked. "This wind's dead against us—and just think of the resistance we offer! A hulking great structure like this! It's too bad!"

"Do you think it'll delay us?" asked Handforth.

"If it gets much stronger, it'll blow us still further out of our course, and make any sort of headway impossible," replied Nipper. "It only shows you. We make all our plans, and then the weather tries to dish us!"

"Oh, it's not so bad as that!" said Handforth, with his usual cheery optimism. "This wind will blow itself out in an hour, and then the sun'll shine. I'm going along to help with the port oar, amidships."

He went down the narrow deck. There was just room for him to walk, with the edge of the starboard barge on one side, and the barn wall on the other. Amidships, he turned through a big doorway, and passed inside.

Normally, this would just be the deck of the barge, but now Handforth found himself in a big enclosed space, with the second barge lashed to her companion. There were windows all round, and another doorway opposite.

Handforth encountered Church just opposite one of the cabin hatchways, and Church was standing there in an attitude of attention.

"What are you listening for?" asked Handforth, halting.

"I thought I heard a scream from one of the girls," said Church.

"A scream?"

"Well, it sounded— 'There you are!'" said Church. "Did you hear it that time?"

"I'm not deaf!" said Handforth tartly.

The scream, in fact, had been heard over half the ark, and a moment later Irene Manners and Doris Berkeley came flying up the companion. They were looking flustered and rather indignant.

"Rats!" ejaculated Irene breathlessly.

"What?" asked Handforth, staring.

"Rats!"

"But what's the idea of saying 'rats' to me?" asked Edward Oswald blankly.

"I wasn't!" panted Irene. "I didn't mean it in that way. There are rats in this barge! Doris and I were cooking, and a terrible-looking rat came out of a hole and glared at us!"

Handforth smiled indulgently.

"Nothing to be scared of," he said. "Practically every barge is swarming with rats, especially down in the cabins."

This, considering the nature of the fair passengers, was a singularly tactless remark, but quite characteristic of Handforth. Church attempted to repair the damage.

"Don't take any notice, girls," he said hastily. "These barges are practically new, and rats only infest old boats. You must have imagined it."

"We didn't!" insisted Doris. "Goodness knows, we're not timid. We don't jump on chairs at the sight of a mouse. But a rat's a different thing, especially a huge one like this. Oh, Ted, be a sport and kill it for us! I've never seen such a monster!"



CHAPTER 3.

RATS!

EDWARD OSWALD HANDFORTH nodded with keen pleasure.

"You bet I will!" he said promptly. "I'm not afraid of rats, and I'll soon grab this one, and chuck it overboard. One of you'd better come down and show me the hole."

"I'm not going down there again!" said Irene firmly.

Handforth looked at her, rather pained.

"I never thought you were so jolly nervous!" he said, staring.

"I'm not nervous!" denied Irene. "All right, I'll come down with you!"

Handforth grinned.

"I thought that would do the trick," he said calmly.

"Why, you horrid wretch!" cried Irene, with indignation.

But she didn't try to get out of it. She followed Handforth down into the little living-cabin. It possessed an odour all its own—a kind of mixture of tar, stale tobacco smoke, grease, and paraffin oil. But there was no denying that it was a cosy little place.

"Well, where's the rat?" asked Handforth sceptically.

Irene was still on the stairs.

"I saw it over in that corner—just against that hole," she said, pointing. "It may have gone in now— Oh! There it is! Oh, the beast! It's on the table, eating the cheese!"

"Well I'm jiggered!" said Handforth.

A huge rat was in possession of the tiny cabin table, and it was gazing at Handforth out of its dark little eyes, and seemed in no hurry to escape. Edward Oswald cautiously grasped one of the fire-irons from the stove, and raised it aloft.

At that moment an avalanche descended the stairs. It shot past the startled Irene, hurled itself against Handforth, and wrenched the iron away.

"You dangerous maniac!" cried the avalanche indignantly.

"What the dickens—" began Handforth.

"You young ass, Willy! What's the idea of hurling yourself down here—"

"I came to save Rupert's life!" roared Willy.

"Rupert?"

"Yes, Rupert!" snorted the Third Former. "Poor old Rupert!" He turned to the rat, picked it up, and fondled it. "Just going to bash your brains out, old man! That's what he was going to do!"

Handforth's amazement had changed to wrath.

"Is that—that little beast Rupert?" he asked fiercely.

"Yes, it is!"

"Then what the dickens do you mean by putting your beastly reptiles down here to scare the girls?" asked Edward Oswald. "It's a jolly good thing I didn't kill it! I was just going to slosh!"

"Church told me you were down here, killing a rat, and I nearly had heart failure," said Willy. "As if this little beauty could scare anybody! Look at him, Irene! Did you ever see such a corker?"

He handed the rat to Irene, and Rupert clung to her dress before she could realise what was happening. The rat crawled on to her shoulder, and Willy grinned.

"Now then, Rupie, sit up!" he ordered cheerfully.

The unfortunate Irene was transfixed. She may have been indifferent to mice, but she was undoubtedly scared stiff when it came to rats. Her face was pale, her limbs immovable.

"Oh!" she breathed helplessly.

Rupert very obediently sat up, and there was something extremely comical in that huge rat sitting on its haunches, on the girl's shoulder. Willy shook his head.

"Well, what is there to be frightened about?" he asked. "You girls seem to think that rats are worse than rattlesnakes! Old Rupie is one of my best pals—as friendly as you like. If you tell him to get on to your other shoulder, he'll do it like a shot."

"But—but won't he bite?" asked Irene fearfully.

"Bite!" scoffed Willy. "He'll bite his dinner, but he wouldn't harm a hair of your head. Stroke him, and make pals. He's a friendly little beggar."

"Well I'm blowed!" said Handforth.

Irene was taking Willy at his word. In fact, there was something about Willy which nobody could quite understand. He compelled people to do all sorts of things that they had never intended doing. And when Irene stroked Rupert, the rat raised no objection, but, on the contrary, snuggled cosily into a fold of her dress.

"Why, he's harmless!" cried the girl.

"Listen to her!" said Willy. "Of course he's harmless. Haven't I always told you so? And look at old Ferdie, here! He and Rupie are the best of pals."

He withdrew another animal out of his side-pocket, and put it on the table. Then he took Rupert, and placed him on the table, too. The pair gazed at one another, sniffed once or twice, and then friendly relations were established.

"But—but that's a ferret!" ejaculated Handforth.

"What did you think it was—a tiger?"

"But ferrets kill rats!"

"This ferret doesn't kill this rat!" retorted Willy. "They're like brothers. Haven't I trained them to be? I was wondering where the dickens Rupert had got to, by the way. I'm jolly glad I found him."

"Well, it's uncanny—that's all I can say," declared Irene. "I've never heard of a rat making friends with a ferret. It's—it's not natural."

Willy looked at her rather pityingly.

"You might as well say it's not natural for a cat to be friendly with a dog," he retorted. "They're enemies, aren't they? I mean, strange cats and strange dogs. And yet heaps of families keep both a cat and a dog."

"Why, Miss Bond's dog often let's the school cat sleep in the kennel!" said Irene in wonder. "I'd never thought of that!"

Willy collected up his two pets and departed, rather pained that such ignorance could exist. At the top of the hatchway, he paused. The plaintive tones of Archie Glenthorne were making themselves heard on the deck, further astern.

"I'm not a frightfully particular chappie," Archie was saying, "but, dash it, it's a bit blue at the edges when I find a snake absolutely worming its way up the good old bags!"

"A snake?" came several voices.

"A frightful, dashed snake!" insisted Archie. "I mean to say, that sort of thing

is too ripe for words. I felt something clammy on the good old shin, and when I shook the member, out fell a few yards of eely wriggleness. I can tell you, old companions, it fairly shook up the Glenthorne liver! Absolutely shook it like a jelly!"

"Must have crawled out of one of the holds," said somebody. "It's a lucky thing it didn't bite you."

"I'm not so dashed sure that I'm not poisoned!" complained Archie unhappily. "Of course, I heaved the atrocity overboard——"

Willy gave a wild, anguished yell. He dashed down the deck in despair and grabbed at Archie.



CHAPTER 4.

NOT ACCORDING TO
SCHEDULE!

"GOOD gad!" gasped Archie Glenthorne.

Willy was clutching at him feverishly.

"What's that you said?"

he shouted in distress.

"I mean to say——"

"Where's Sebastian?" demanded Willy.

"What? Oh, I see what you mean!" said Archie. "Sebastian! Awfully sorry, old lad, but I don't remember seeing the chappie. In fact, I haven't been introduced to him. Never met the dear old scout."

"I mean Sebastian—my snake!" roared Willy.

"Oh, rather!" said Archie, flustered. "You mean to say—— Good gad! The snake, what? The foul thing I heaved into the wet and watery waste? You don't mean to absolutely assure me that this blighting Sebastian was one of your pets?"

"If you've chucked him overboard, Archie, I'll never recover!" declared Willy grimly. "And, what's more, Sebastian will come back and haunt you to the end of your days!"

"Oh, I say, not that!" ejaculated Archie, horrified. "The good old Glenthorne ghost is bad enough; but, dash it, it'll be somewhat frightful to have phantom snakes appearing in the offing at intervals!"

"You needn't worry, Willy," grinned Reggie Pitt. "Archie was too startled to aim properly. Here's your precious Sebastian—I put him in my pocket for safety."

"Oh, thank goodness!" said Willy, as he took the reptile.

"I wouldn't do it for everybody," went on Reggie. "I'm not partial to snakes myself, but I've met Sebastian before, and we're properly introduced. I understand that he never bites his friends."

"He can't bite anybody—he's harmless," said Willy, looking very relieved. "I've only got to find Septimus, and I shall have the lot."

"Septimus?" repeated Archie, glancing round with apprehension. "Odds stars and turns! You don't mean to say there are other wild things roaming the habitation?"

"Only my squirrel," said Willy.

"Well, this thing is supposed to be an ark—and it seems to be living up to its name," chuckled Fullwood. "But I can't understand what Noah's been doing to let the animals out of their quarters."

"Some silly fathead let them escape!" said Willy indignantly. "I smuggled them aboard before we started, you know. I brought them over from the Ancient House, and put 'em in one of the cabin lockers. How was I to know the girls were going to occupy the state-rooms? Of course, I took them out on the quiet, and put them in a trunk."

"A trunk?" repeated Pitt. "But there aren't any trunks on board."

"There's one," said Willy. "It's up the end of the deck, in a dark corner."

"Absolutely!" agreed Archie. "That's mine! Great gad! You don't mean to absolutely say—Imposs! It couldn't be done, laddie! The good old trunk is full of my clothes."

"It was," agreed Willy. "But I heaved all that rubbish out."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"I haven't hurt them, of course—I piled them in a corner. I had to find something for my pets, so you needn't start grumbling, Archie. I believe somebody was ass enough to trample on some of your collars, but I don't suppose they're very dirty."

The swell of the Remove uttered a moan of anguish.

"This," he bleated, "is too much! I mean to say, the good old wardrobe! Absolutely heaved out to make room for—"

Words failed him, and he staggered off to examine the wreckage. His worst fears were realised, and he felt that life had lost all its brightness.

"Odds wreckage and ruin!" he groaned. "The good old shirt's absolutely worthless! Socks, ties, waistcoats—positively no better than rags and tatters! This is one of life's hardest blows!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Callously enough, the other fellows failed to show a spark of sympathy. Perhaps Archie had exaggerated the damage. After all, Willy had taken a liberty in emptying the trunk, but he had stacked the contents in a neat pile, and none of the other fellows could see any damage whatever. But the fastidious Archie considered his property to be in a fit condition for the rag-bag.

Leaving Willy to search the decks for Septimus the Squirrel, Handforth went out through the doorway, and fulfilled his original intention of helping with one of the port oars. He found three juniors heaving on it laboriously, and they were glad of

Handforth's help. All the fellows took it in turns to share this very necessary labour.

Nipper was standing by, and he was looking across the flood with an anxious expression on his face. It was pouring now—coming down in sheets. But within the ark, scarcely anybody noticed it, for there was ample protection. That old barn was very weather-proof.

"Anything wrong?" asked Handforth, glancing at Nipper.

"The wind," replied Nipper briefly.

"Oh, we'll beat it!"

"That's just the trouble, Handy—the wind's beating us," said Nipper. "It's getting stronger, too. We expected to get to Bannington by rowing at these oars—and pushing the old ark across the flooded meadows."

"We are doing it, aren't we?" asked Handforth.

"No, we're not," growled Nipper. "We're veering off down the valley—and all our efforts don't make things better. It sounded quite easy, didn't it? Fix up the ark, get it afloat, and drift lazily over the flooded fields to the high ground near Bannington."

"It's not so easy as it seemed," admitted Handforth.

"One little thing is enough to upset our schedule—and that one little thing has happened," continued Nipper. "This wind is holding us back. This old barn is such a handful that it's difficult enough to manage in any case—and now that we've got the wind, we're done. There's such a lot of resistance. We're being blown out of our course all the time."

"Well, nobody's blaming you for it," put in Nick Trotwood. "We all came of our own accord, and we'll take everything as it comes. We shall get through, I expect."

Nipper didn't reply. He was looking down towards Bellton—or where Bellton usually showed. At present the pleasant little village was practically hidden beneath the all-encroaching waters. Only a roof showed here and there. And close to it ran the raging torrent of the river. The ark was idling along over the meadowland, where the water was eight or ten feet deep.

But Nipper was getting really worried.

He had noticed that the ark was getting nearer to that main flow; not dangerously close yet, but the wind was undoubtedly serving the adventurers shabbily.

And just then his anxiety was shifted to a different quarter. The fear of getting into the torrent was shelved. For Nipper had distinctly felt a curious quiver. It ran across the deck, and caused the ark to hesitate for a moment. Then it swung round by the stern, turning an almost complete circuit.

"By Jove!" said Nipper, pursing his lips.

"That's done it!"

"What's happened?" asked Handforth, startled.

"We've run aground!" replied Nipper grimly.



Willy saw Handy just about to bring the poker smashing down at the rat; the fag flung himself between Handy and his victim. "Thank goodness!" Willy gasped. "I've got here in time to save Rupert's life!"



CHAPTER 5.

HANDFORTH GETS LEFT!

"GROUND!" echoed a dozen voices.

Fellows were leaning out of the upper windows—for many extra openings

had been provided. They were all looking excited, for that jar had made itself felt on the upper deck even more than below. Other juniors were running down the ladder, and crowding on to the barge decks.

"How can we be aground?" demanded Handforth. "The flood's ten or twelve feet deep!"

"I know it is—in most parts," replied Nipper. "But I seem to remember— Yes! Can't you recognise where we are? This is one of those fields which adjoin the main road. There's a hillock at the corner of this field, and we've run into it. It doesn't look much of a slope at ordinary times, but it's enough to give us a lot of trouble. The wind's driving us on to it harder, too."

Reggie Pitt nodded.

"Yes, I know the spot now, I can recognise it," he said. "The water's only four or five feet deep here, I expect. Let me see, when was this ark built?"

"Friday, of course," said Handforth.

"Sure?"

"I ought to know, it was my idea."

"I thought I was right," said Reggie

solemnly. "Friday—the first of April! It's playing us a proper All Fools joke."

"You silly ass!"

"Reggie's about right," said Nipper. "This old ark has been fooling us all the time. I'd forgotten that it had been built on the first of April. Of course, that explains it!"

"Rats!" retorted Handforth, with indignation. "Just because we're stranded, there's no need to blame me. It's all very well to be funny about the first of April—"

"That's all right, Handy," interrupted Nipper. "The only thing is to get busy, and heave ourselves off. We'll take all the oars, and use them as punt-poles."

"It's about the only way," agreed Pitt. "And if the flood's falling—good-night! We shall be stranded here for keeps. And, although I'm greatly attached to this ark, I think I'd rather have the school. We mustn't let this thing happen, my lads!"

"The flood's not falling; I only wish it were!" said Handforth. "Come on; let's get going! Bring the oars, and we'll soon get her free."

Handforth felt responsible, in a way. The idea of the ark had been his, and if the clumsy craft became stranded in mid-flood, the laugh would certainly be on him. And the majority of the juniors were undoubtedly liable to hold him to blame. Schoolboys are not always just.

So Handforth was very anxious to see the ark floating once more. It would be a terrible fiasco if it remained stuck here. This

spot was even more lonely and isolated than St. Frank's.

A sure proof of the flood's devastating effects was the fact that no other living souls were to be seen. Once or twice a boat had been spotted in the far distance, but now the entire vista was desolate and barren. The inhabitants of Bellton, Edgemore, and all the outlying cottages had been compelled to desert their homes and flee. Only the size and strength of St. Frank's had saved the school.

And here was this ark—miles away from its starting-point, miles from Bannington, and hopelessly stranded on a shallow. The situation was not pleasant, no matter how one looked at it. And the presence of the six Moor View girls only increased Nipper's worry. He liked to have them there, but he had no wish to make them suffer a lot of hardships.

So the efforts to refloat the ark were strenuous and hearty.

But it was no easy task. At the bottom of the water the ground was muddy and soft. Those long oars dug right in. There was nothing solid upon which to rest the levers. The boys heaved and pushed, but they only dug the oars deeper and deeper into the bottom.

The ark resisted every effort. And by now the wind was increasing, and noon had come and gone. The day was going, and practically no progress had been made. If anything, the ark was farther from Bannington than it had been at the start.

And just that wind was the cause!

It was an extremely galling thing, because Nipper had actually relied upon the wind to help them. On the previous day it had blown from the opposite quarter, much to Nipper's satisfaction. It was just the irony of things that the wind should now have veered completely round. The ark offered a big expanse, a strong resistance. And this was quite sufficient to nullify all the efforts of the young bargees.

And this fresh problem was simply tantamount to adding insult to injury. Luck could not have been worse. Nobody was to blame. It was just a case of plain ill-fortune.

And then came a change.

Nipper was the only one to see it—the only one to recognise the possibilities. It was in times like this that his best qualities came to the fore. He was a born general, and his judgment was remarkably sound.

Everybody knew that the wind was strengthening, but they didn't take much notice of its direction. But Nipper saw that it was coming in gusty volleys and changing its quarter. And the ark, sluggishly answering, was swinging round on the flood. Only the bows were aground, the stern being free to move. And the ark was swinging round now.

"It's our only chance!" shouted Nipper, as he felt the wind strengthening. "She's

moving, and if we all give an extra heave, we might manage to get her off. The wind's helping us now, and before long it may hinder us again."

"Jingo, you're right!" said Pitt keenly.

"Hi! More help!" roared Handforth. "Come on, everybody!"

The juniors renewed their efforts. And after they had heaved for ten solid minutes Nipper gave the order to cease. It was obviously useless. Even with the help of the wind they could do nothing. The twin barges were stuck fast.

"Well, what about it?" asked Handforth, breathing hard.

A voice sounded from somewhere above.

"Don't you fatheads want anything to eat? Never mind about those oars now—lunch is ready!"

Fatty Little's thoughts never rose above food. And it astonished him that so many of the juniors should bother themselves with the ark when there was a feed ready for them. In Fatty's opinion, it was against all reason.

"Well, it's no good, we'd better go and eat, I suppose," said Nipper. "We'll have another try later on. There's one consolation—we can feed in comfort. There's no fear of drifting away!"

"Every cloud," said Reggie, "has its silver lining."

They went up to the loft, and indulged in a hearty meal. Irene & Co., of course, joined them, and there was plenty of cheery joking and laughter. Hardly one of those care-free schoolboys guessed that the situation was likely to become really grave. Nipper had his suspicions, but he kept them to himself.

By the time the meal was over the afternoon was well on its way, and the sky was clearing away. But the wind was high, and there was no question that the outlook was threatening. There was stormy weather ahead.

"We'll have another shot," said Nipper briskly. "We can't stick here all day, that's a certainty. I've thought of another idea, and it might work. Where's young Willy?"

"Here," said Willy. "Right on the spot."

"You brought that paddle-boat of yours along, didn't you?" asked Nipper.

"Yes, it's on the deck, aft," replied Willy. "We thought it might be useful one way and another."

"Well, there's a chance it might be useful now," said Nipper. "I want you to take a cable, and sling it round those two big trees astern. They look strong enough. Bring the rope back, and then I'll get about twenty of the fellows on it, and all hauling."

"And another twenty in the bows, shoving on the oars, eh?" said Fullwood. "That ought to do the trick, you chaps! How the dickens does he get these ideas?"

Willy went off, taking Chubby Heath and Juicy Lemon with him. The boat they used was a home-made contrivance of their own.

It had been constructed from a clothes-chest, and was driven by paddles, the power being supplied by a pedalling apparatus of Willy's own design. The little craft splashed off across the flood, taking a heavy rope cable. Within ten minutes the thing was fixed up.

Twenty fellows got to work, hauling on the line with all their strength, and the pull they exerted was considerable. This was obvious, for the two heavy trees, which rose well above the flood, shivered and shook as the pull was exerted.

In the bows, Handforth and a number of others were digging the oars into the bottom like punt-poles.

"She's going!" yelled somebody. "She's slipping off!"

"Hurrah!"

"We've got her afloat again!"

"Easy—easy!" panted Church. "Out with the oar, Handy—we're moving!"

"Come on—another heave, and make certain of it!" roared Handforth, who was never satisfied.

Church and the other juniors who were on that oar backed away as the ark slid into the flood. Handforth did his final heave alone—and paid the penalty.

The oar was stuck firm in the mud, and Edward Oswald, as he exerted his full strength, found the ark slipping away from under his feet. Aghast, he realised that he had left it until too late.

"Whoa!" he howled. "Help!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

A perfect yell of laughter went up. The ark was floating, Nipper's new scheme having succeeded. So everybody was feeling triumphant and happy. And Handforth's predicament was decidedly funny.

The great barge-sweep was stuck upright in the ploughed field, and as the ark drifted further away, and as Handforth couldn't let go of the oar without dropping into the flood, he was stretched out almost horizontally, his feet just gripping the barge.

But even Handforth wasn't made of elastic. There came a time when something had to happen. With a wild yell, he found his feet slipping into nothingness, and he clutched with his hands for dear life.

The next moment the ark deserted him completely, and left him there, clinging desperately to that upright pole, with nothing but cold water all round him.



CHAPTER 6.

FACING THE NIGHT!

TICK it, Handy!"

"Keep there, old man—Willy will rescue you in his paddle steamer!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"I always knew that Handy reminded me of something," said Reggie Pitt, with a sudden start. "Of course, it's all plain now! He's in his natural element. A monkey on a stick!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Hi!" hooted Handforth. "Come back!"

"Sorry, but we're not going to get stranded again just to rescue you, Handy!" shouted Fullwood. "So long! Hope you're enjoying the view!"

The ark was twenty yards away by now, and Handforth was in a desperate plight. There was nothing perilous about it, of course, for he was a good swimmer, and it would be nothing to him to catch up with the ark. But Edward Oswald had rooted objections to swimming just after lunch, particularly in his full clothes, and in this icy water.

"Help!" he roared. "Come back, you rotters!"

Handforth felt thoroughly indignant. It was his ark, and these callous rotters were heartlessly deserting him. His precarious perch was failing him, too, and he knew that it could not last much longer. It was slowly but surely sagging over, as Handforth's weight caused it to loosen its grip in the mud.

"All right, Ted!" sang out a voice. "I'm coming!"

Willy's little paddle-boat came swinging round from the starboard side of the ark, and the grinning juniors watched with interest. There was much speculation as to whether Willy would be in time.

"Two to one on the pole!" grinned Reggie Pitt. "Willy doesn't stand a chance of winning this race!"

"Good gad, no!" said Archie, in horror. "The dear old boy's absolutely slipping into the turbid torrent! I mean to say, how absolutely ghastly! How frightfully frightful!"

"There he goes!" said Church. "Well, he asked for it!"

The pole won by about two yards. For Willy's boat was still that distance off when the pole suddenly slewed over and deposited Handforth with a terrific splash into the flood.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Tally-ho!" gasped Archie. "I mean to say, yoicks! To the rescue, what? Poor old chappie! I mean, could anything be more tragic? Could anything be more unutterably poisonous?"

"Rats!" said McClure. "He's in no danger!"

"No danger!" ejaculated Archie. "But, dash it, what about the good old raiment?"

Archie's thoughts always flew to clothes first. They were as much a religion with him as food was with Fatty Little. His heart bled for the unhappy Handforth; but it bled in vain, for Edward Oswald wasn't thinking of his clothes at all. He had far more thought for his dignity. In front of Irene's very eyes this disaster had happened! It was tragic.

Willy & Co. nearly suffered the same fate as Handforth—for the latter, in attempting to get aboard the paddle-boat, tilted it over until it gave a wild lurch and nearly capsized. The watchers were sadly disappointed

when Willy succeeded in averting the calamity.

"You can jolly well swim for it!" he said warmly. "You're like a giddy elephant getting into the boat! Sorry, old son—there's nothing doing! Full speed ahead, you chaps!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Handforth's cup was full as the boat sheered off and left him to swim back to the ark. Willy & Co., in the meantime, devoted themselves to the important task of rescuing the drifting oar. They couldn't afford to lose a valuable thing like that.

As Willy shrewdly remarked, they had picked up the one object which mattered. Handforth seemed to be a secondary consideration.

Archie Glenthorne's cup was filled, too—tor Handforth, after dragging himself aboard, helped himself to one of Archie's spare suits, and donned it as though it were his own. In vain the unhappy Archie begged and pleaded.

"Dry up!" said Handforth coldly. "I'm surprised at you, you selfish rotter!"

"But, laddie, listen! That suit——"

"I haven't any change of my own, so I've got to have somebody else's," snapped Handforth. "D'you expect me to go about with wet things, like a drowned rat? Blow you! Go and curl yourself in a corner and play with your tail!"

"Good gad! He takes me for a dog!" ejaculated Archie, pained. "Absolutely a dashed bow-wow! All the same, dash it, the first section of that advice strikes me as being the absolute stuff to give the troops!"

And Archie Glenthorne went to a corner of the loft, laid himself on a mattress, and drowned his sorrows in sleep.

The ark was now moving steadily over deep water, and the rising wind was doing far more to speed her progress than the oars. And it was progress in the wrong direction. The ark, in fact, was being carried relentlessly towards the centre of the valley—into the raging current.

Nipper acted promptly.

He noticed that they would drift past the sturdy stump of a great oak-tree, which was protruding from the water like a massive sentinel. And as they passed, ropes were slung about it and secured.

The ark was anchored—moored to that tree by half a dozen stout cables. She swung there, her progress checked.

"Well, we're in a nice pickle now," said Nipper, after the ropes had been made thoroughly secure. "It's nearly evening, and there's no chance of getting to Bannington, or dry land anywhere. As far as I can see, we shall have to stay here for the night!"

"The night!" exclaimed Irene, wild-eyed.

"Afraid there's nothing else for it," replied Nipper, shaking his head.

"Oh, but—but——" began Mary.

"If we try to carry on now, we shall only get into trouble," said Nipper, without specifying the actual danger. "In the morning, perhaps, this wind will have dropped,

and then we shall be able to make progress. So let's make the best of things, and smile. What price a concert up in the barn, after tea? Let's all be merry and bright!"

"Hear, hear!"

"Well, we're game," said Irene, smiling. "But we didn't expect this, did we? There's no danger, is there, Nipper?" she added, giving him a sharp look.

But Nipper was perfectly frank.

"As long as these ropes hold we're as safe as a bank," he replied. "It's only a question of delay—and that's one of the fortunes of war. Perhaps it's all the better, really, because we may be able to get to dry land at a really respectable hour."

And so Handforth's ark, and all its occupants, made things snug for the night. The evening was closing in, and the weather was getting rough. But everybody felt perfectly secure in their sturdy haven.



CHAPTER 7.

ADRIFT!

THE evening meal was a great success.

Somebody had been thoughtful enough to bring a supply of candles, and everybody occupied the big loft—everybody, that is, with the exception of four fellows who kept watch on the outer decks below. They couldn't quite understand why this watch should be necessary, but Nipper insisted upon it, and the juniors took it in turns.

"You never know what might come drifting down on the flood, and we've got to be prepared for action," explained Nipper. "Perhaps I'm a careful old stick, but don't forget that caution never costs anything."

And the others said no more. Nipper's authority was supreme just now, and he never found it necessary to give orders. The fellows were only too willing to do all he asked without question.

"It's a jolly good thing we brought all these mattresses and blankets," remarked De Valerie, after the remains of the food had been cleared away. "I suppose we'd better be getting some sleep before long. Will you girls be all right down in the cabins?"

"Of course we shall," replied Doris. "It's almost as though they had been made for us. They're lovely and cosy, and there are three bunks in each. We shall be perfectly all serene."

Down in those cabins, Irene & Co. would at least be quite to themselves, and away from all danger. And the boys would, of course, sleep on the mattresses in the loft. The ark was like a real boat, with special accommodation for all. But the girls rather wondered what Miss Broome would say if she could know they were destined to spend the night on the flood, anchored here, amid

this desolate waste, and with only a crowd of schoolboys as escorts. The good lady would probably have fainted on the spot.

The concert which Nipper had suggested hardly materialised. The trouble was, nobody had brought any musical instruments. Jack Grey was quite an expert on his banjo, and Levi could play the violin fairly well. Webb was proud of his prowess as a trap-drummer, and Griffiths could produce music of sorts from a flute. Handforth was convinced that his trombone playing was a masterpiece; other fellows held quite a different opinion. But as none of these instruments had been brought along, the concert petered out before it had actually begun.

Somebody started singing, but the howling of the wind so drowned his efforts that it was generally agreed that it would be far better to go to bed, and get a good sleep, in preparation for the morrow.

So, in the early evening, not long after darkness had shut down, the candles were extinguished, and the juniors wrapped themselves in their blankets. Irene & Co. retired to their cabins, and the ark grew quiet for the night.

Nipper went to sleep with the others, leaving four fellows on the watch. He also left instructions that he should be called after three hours, in order to take his own turn.

It seemed to Nipper that he had only been asleep ten minutes before somebody shook his shoulder. He sat up and blinked into the light of one of the barge lanterns.

"Hallo!" he said quickly. "Anything wrong?"

"Not that I know of," said Reggie Pitt. "It's time for our spell, that's all. Handforth and Church have just gone down, and the watch on deck is turning in."

"By Jove, have I been asleep three hours?" said Nipper.

"You have. It's half-past ten," said Reggie. "Blowing great guns, and more dirty weather in the offing. The skipper, he blew a whiff from his pipe, and a scornful laugh laughed he!"

"If you feel in the mood for reciting, don't trot out the 'Wreck of the Hesperus!'" said Nipper severely. "We don't want to hear anything about wrecks to-night."

Reggie grinned, and they went down to the deck of the barge. The wind was indeed blowing hard, and the ark could be felt straining at her cables, and the woodwork was creaking considerably. The two barges grated slightly as they rubbed against one another, but everything was snug, on the whole.

"It's dark," said Nipper, staring out across the flood.

"Black as your hat," agreed Reggie. "Perhaps the moon'll come up later, but just now we're hemmed in by what the novelists call Stygian blackness."

Two figures loomed up out of the night and came within the circle of radiance cast

by the lantern. They were Handforth and Church.

"Oh, here you are!" said Handforth.

"Yes," said Nipper. "The others gone up? We didn't meet them."

"That's because they turned in five minutes ago, as soon as Churchy and I came down," replied Handforth. "Well, things don't look any too good. Shouldn't be surprised if we have some excitement to-night."

"Rats!" said Church. "Don't take any notice of him, you chaps. He's been trying to put the wind up me, but it won't work."

"You never know!" said Handforth portentously. "The ark's all right, of course—as safe as a battleship—but what's going to happen if some heavy wreckage comes drifting down and biffs into us?"

"We're big enough, and strong enough, and ugly enough to stave off a few bits of odd wreckage," said Pitt. "We're not likely to have anything big, unless, of course, Willard's Island gets adrift, and hits us."

"Willard's Island is all flooded!" said Handforth, staring.

"Never mind," said Nipper, as he took the lantern up and directed the light across the black water. "By Jove, it's black! Can't see half a dozen yards, even with this lantern."

The light shone on the rippling waters. The surface was all ruffled and torn by the wind. Something was floating out there, just a few feet from the side of the ark—an odd piece of planking. Nipper looked at it curiously, and slightly altered the direction of the light.

"Rummy!" he said, frowning.

"What's rummy?" asked Handforth.

"Can't you see that piece of plank?"

"Yes, of course. What about it?"

"Nothing—except that it oughtn't to be there," replied Nipper in a worried voice. "I hope there's nothing wrong. I don't like the look of this at all. And yet it's impossible!"

"What's impossible?" demanded Handforth, bewildered.

"Why is that bit of wreckage there?" asked Nipper. "Look! It's level with us all the time!"

"Anything startling in that?"

"If you'll think for a tick, you'll realise that it's not merely startling, but alarming!" replied Nipper grimly. "By Jove, this is serious!"

Handforth scratched his head. Nothing stirred within.

"Blessed if I can see what you're getting at!" he said gruffly.

But Nipper had hurried off to the stern. Arriving there, he leaned over as far as he could, and held the lantern high. The cables were stretched out, as before, and he could faintly see, in the vague distance, a dull blur—the great oak-tree to which the ark was moored.

"Everything seems all right," muttered Nipper, lowering the lantern. "And yet—Hallo!"

He switched the light round suddenly and directed it upon a wicket-gate which floated nearly alongside.

"What's the matter with you?" demanded Handforth, coming up with the other two juniors. "What's wrong, you ass?"

"Look at that gate!"

"Gate?" said Handforth, staring. "Are you going over that business of the plank again? What's the matter with the gate?"

"It's floating with us—that's what's the matter!" rapped out Nipper.

"Eh?"

"You ass, we're anchored, aren't we?" said Nipper. "That being so, why are these bits of wreckage floating alongside? Why don't they drift past on the flood? If we're fixed securely to that oak-tree, this wreckage ought to vanish from sight before we can give it a second look. But it's keeping pace with us all the time!"

Reggie Pitt took a deep breath.

"If you ask me," he said, "it looks beastly unhealthy!"



CHAPTER 8.

DEADLY DANGER!

HANDFORTH realised the truth at last.

"By George, you mean we're adrift?" he asked blankly.

"It seems like it, although I hate to believe it," replied Nipper. "Yet it's the only explanation for these— Look there! That's settled it, once and for all! We are adrift!"

"Great Scott!" ejaculated Church.

They stared at a high poplar-tree which projected out of the flood like a black ghost of the night. It slid past the ark in a most uncanny fashion, and vanished amid the gloom.

"We're going down river—down the valley!" shouted Nipper. "Don't you understand? Instead of being safely anchored, we're drifting, and it's an absolute certainty that we're being drawn into the strongest pull of the current. Something's got to be done—and quick!"

"Oh, my hat!"

"Adrift!"

"But—but, the mooring ropes——"

"They're still here!" interrupted Nipper. "There's only one explanation, as far as I can gather. We've pulled that oak-tree up by the roots, and we're towing it behind us! Instead of being anchored to the solid ground, we're simply anchored to a floating log!"

"Then it's a dirty trick," said Reggie firmly. "I've always believed that the good old British oak could be relied upon. And here it's let us down! It's tricked us!"

"It's our own fault!" snapped Nipper. "We ought to have anchored to something more substantial. Well, it's no good standing here, you fellows—we've got to do something. This is serious."

"That tree looked strong enough," growled Pitt. "Besides, there was nothing else for miles. It's this wind—blowing so hard that the old barn caught it, and the tree gave up the struggle in despair."

Nipper nodded, and stood for a moment, thinking hard. The others hardly seemed to realise the acute nature of the peril. They spoke lightly. Handforth, indeed, was inclined to be optimistic.

"Oh, well, we shall have to see what Santa Claus brings us," he said. "Perhaps it's all for the best."

"All for the best?" shouted Nipper.

"Of course. We might go ashore——"

"You idiot!" interrupted Nipper angrily.

"Eh?" gasped Handforth.

"Can't you understand that we're drifting right into the river?" demanded Nipper.

"And what's going to happen then? Unless we can check the ark before she gets beyond our control, we shall go over the weir."

"The weir?" yelled Edward Oswald.

"By Jove!" murmured Pitt. "Sounds cheery!"

"There'll be nothing cheery about it if we hit that weir!" replied Nipper grimly.

"The chances are that we shall just fall to pieces—like a house that's been hit by an earthquake. This ark is sturdy enough to float on the flood, but it wasn't made for shooting rapids!"

"But what can we do?" asked Church desperately. "Adrift! And we fooled ourselves that we were as safe as a house! What asses we were to leave St. Frank's! Oh, what fatheads!"

"It's no good saying that now!" growled Nipper. "Fate's been against us, that's all. When we started out, nobody could possibly have foreseen all this. We've just got to cope with it as best we can."

"We'd better keep it mum," said Handforth. "Let's get to the oars, and do what we can to shove the old ark out of the current. No need to alarm everybody else."

Nipper turned to Pitt.

"Reggie," he said, "go to the loft and shake everybody up! Tell them not to get alarmed——"

"But I said——" began Handforth.

"Never mind what you said, old man—the chaps have got to be roused!" insisted Nipper. "We need all hands on this job."

"But the oars can't be manned by more than a dozen fellows!" protested Handforth. "The others will be in the way! It'll only add to the confusion!"

"Better wake up just a dozen," suggested Pitt.

Nipper shook his head.

"It'll be killing work—and the oars will have to be relieved every two or three minutes," he replied. "Besides that, I shall want a crowd fore and aft with ropes."

"Ropes? What for?"

"We'll try to get a rope round another tree as we drift by," replied Nipper keenly. "Anything to check this blind progress. Go on, Reggie—don't waste a second! You don't seem to realise the danger!"

Pitt was off like a shot, and Nipper hurried amidships to get the oars ready. He stared out at the inky blackness. Another tree loomed up, drew alongside, and vanished astern. The ark was drifting more rapidly now.

There came a crashing of wood—a smother of tangled branches swept by the deck, and Nipper was nearly knocked overboard. Scratched and torn, he tried to pull himself back. The smashing and splintering ceased.

"What—what was that?" shouted Handforth, grabbing at him and hauling him to safety.

"Nothing much—we ran into the top of a tree—passed clean over it," replied Nipper grimly. "We shan't come to much harm if we only collide with trees. But we might go head-on into a house at any minute!"

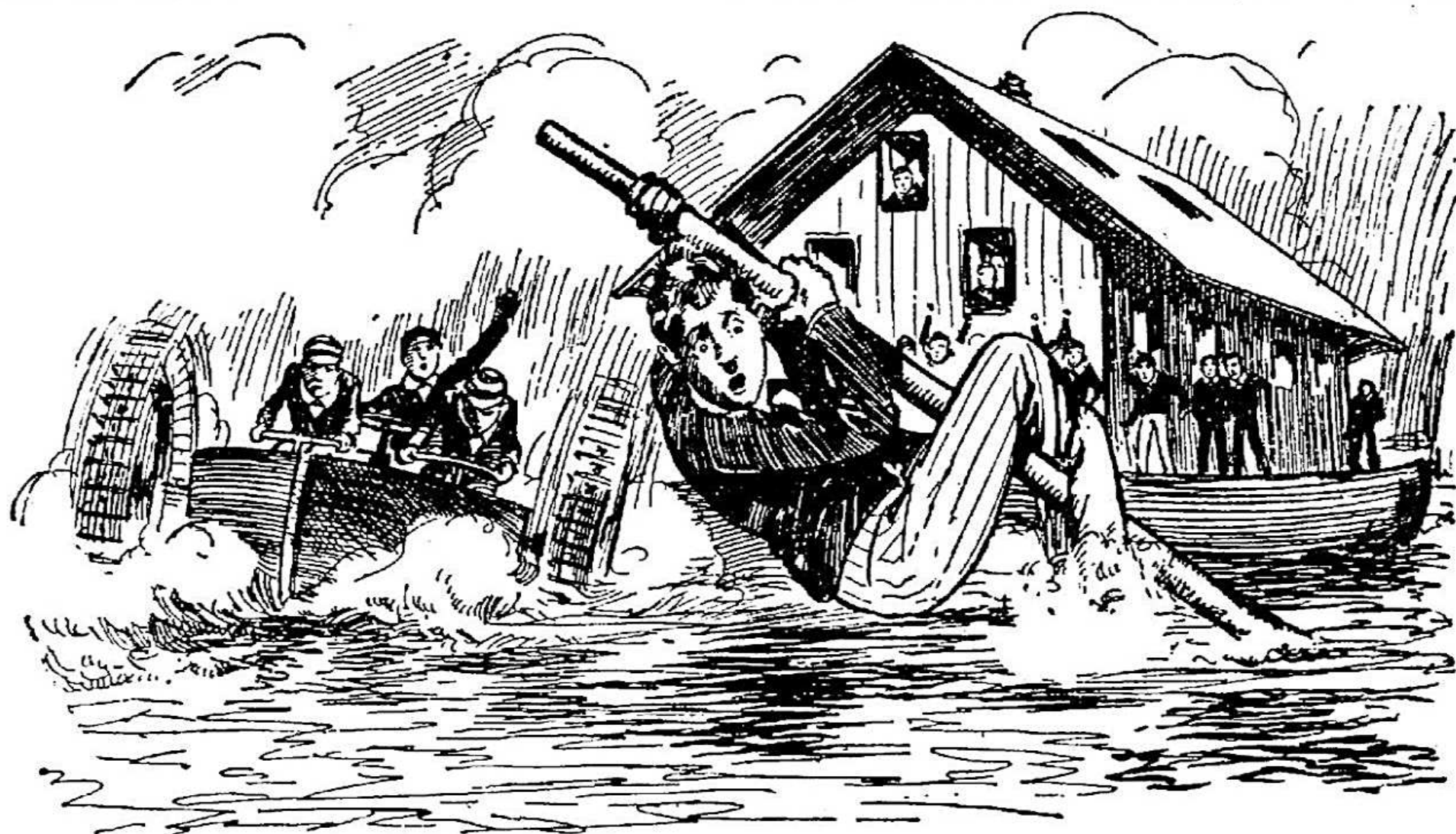
"Oh, my hat!" said Handforth, staring into the night.

earlier, because the ark had stranded—but just now such a thing would be their only salvation.

The night was inky black. The sky was completely covered with heavy clouds, and, so far, the moon had not risen. Towards midnight the silvery crescent would rise, and would probably diffuse a small amount of light through the cloud pall. But now there was absolutely nothing to alleviate the intense blackness.

Gazing ahead, Nipper could see nothing. The swirling of water sounded continuously, and the ark was creaking and groaning as she rocked a little to the force of the current. The wind came down in gusts, and seemed worse than it actually was. It was this darkness—this progress into the Unknown—which caused such an alarming effect.

At any moment the ark might foul some-



Willy and Co. came splashing past the ark in their home-made motor-boat. But before they could reach Handy, the pole slewed over and deposited him into the murky waters of the flood.



CHAPTER 9.

ALL HANDS ON DECK!

NIPPER had not exaggerated the danger.

The ark was sweeping down on the flood at a good speed now, and it seemed unlikely that the oars would be able to check this headlong progress. It would, indeed, be quite impossible to beat the current direct. But Nipper was planning to bring all his oars on one side of the ark, and he hoped to force the cumbersome vessel diagonally out of the stream. If this could only be done, she would probably get into one of those back-eddies, and she might even drift upon a shallow, and get aground.

Everybody had been very dismayed,

thing solid. A farmhouse, perhaps, half-submerged by the flood. Such a collision would effectually stop the ark, but it would probably wreck it, too. The barn was only jammed upon the two barges, and held there by her own weight. Any sudden shock would have a disastrous effect.

And then, again, there was the weir.

Further down the Stowe, between Bellton and Bannington, this weir was a pleasant enough picture in the summer-time, with the water trickling lazily over its edge, like a miniature waterfall. The juniors had often passed through the lock at this spot.

But now, with the river swollen into a raging torrent, that weir would resemble a roaring rapid. And if the ark got hopelessly caught in the main current, nothing could save her from plunging over the weir!

Juniors came hurrying down upon the decks, sleepy, excited, and bewildered. This night alarm had put fear into them. They had gone to sleep, secure in the knowledge that their haven was safely anchored.

"Don't get excited, you chaps—don't make a noise!" exclaimed Nipper. "We're adrift, and we've got to do our best to push the old ark into the shallows. I want a dozen of you at these oars."

"Are—are we in danger?" asked several startled voices.

"Yes, we are," replied Nipper.

"Oh, my hat!"

"We—we might capsize at any minute!"

"Great Scott!"

"It's all Handforth's fault!" complained Hubbard. "It was his idea to leave St. Frank's on this rotten, ramshackle ark of his! We shall all get killed now—that'll be the end of it!"

"We ought to have stopped at the school!"

"Rather! We were safe there, anyway!"

"Stop that!" shouted Nipper curtly. "You were all eager enough to come when you thought there was no danger, so don't whine now that we're up against a bit of trouble."

"Who's whining?" asked somebody indignantly.

"I heard a lot of complaints, anyhow," snapped Nipper. "We're drifting on the flood, and we've got to work hard. And the longer you talk, the less chance we shall have of getting into safety. It's a case of all hands to the pumps—so pull up your socks!"

Thus urged, the juniors set to with a will. The oars were manned, and each one was used as a brake. They were all put outboard on the starboard side, and the juniors heaved their weight and strength against the current. The clumsy, lumbering ark swung reluctantly round, and rocked ominously as she came broadside to the current.

"Look out! We're collapsing!"

"Ease up, you chaps!"

"Oh, crumbs!"

The two barges were rocking against one another, and the barn was groaning loudly as the foundation heaved. If there had been one vessel to carry the barn, all might have been well. But the Araminta and the Penelope were just lashed together, side by side, and they were able to grind their sides together without let or hindrance. The barn, therefore, was swaying from side to side in the most ominous fashion.

There was another grave danger. The lashings might give way, and, if this happened, there would be a real tragedy. For the barges would simply part company, allowing their load to crash over with deadly consequences. The schoolboys would be flung into the flood. It was a grim prospect.

Again and again, Nipper examined the lashings, and satisfied himself that they were secure. The alarm was general now, and everybody was wide awake.

After that first wave of excitement the fellows had calmed down. They were now working with a will, and every possible effort was made to thrust the ark out of the

danger zone. But the all-surrounding darkness was confusing. Nobody could tell what was being accomplished.

The girls had been forgotten. In any case, they were down in the barge cabins, and quite safe, whatever happened to the barn. But Irene & Co. were no longer asleep. They had been told nothing, but it had not taken them long to guess—particularly after Doris Berkeley had been almost flung out of her bunk.

"There's something wrong!" she said as she lit a candle.

Irene and Marjorie were sitting up, looking rather white. The barge was rolling heavily, and there were vague, distant sounds of creaking and groaning. And voices could be heard, too—shouting voices that were filled with urgency.

"Let's go up and see," suggested Marjorie practically.

"Yes, and we'll see if Mary and the others are all right," added Irene. "Oh, I say! We're rocking like a cross-Channel steamer!"

The girls, of course, were fully dressed, and they ran up the little companion, and immediately found themselves in the midst of a confused turmoil. Figures were running everywhere, and the darkness was so intense that only the faintest outlines could be distinguished. Overhead, the barn was creaking alarmingly. The swirl of the flood waters filled the air, and the wind was blustering in through the open windows.

Irene led the way towards the other barge, which was so closely alongside that it was an easy matter to step from one deck to the other. At least, it had been an easy matter until now. But, as Irene stepped across, she felt the other deck heave up, and she almost fell. Just then, Mary and Winnie and Violet appeared before her. They, too, had come up to see what it all meant.



CHAPTER 10.

THE PERIL OF THE WEIR.

NIPPER collided violently with a group of figures as he ran hurriedly from the starboard side of the ark, across to the other deck.

He pulled up rather grim. He couldn't see this group, but he could detect perfume—and that was enough.

"What are you girls doing up here?" he asked.

"Is that you, Nipper?" came Irene's voice. "What's happening? We felt the barge rocking, and——"

"Is there any danger?" came Mary's voice.

"Can't we help?" asked the business-like Doris.

"Yes, you can help by getting below again, and staying there until everything's quiet," replied Nipper briskly. "It may not be very serious, so don't get alarmed. We're adrift."

"Oh, -my hat!"

"That oak-tree failed us—and we're now sailing merrily down the Stowe," continued Nipper. "All the chaps are working hard to shove us into the area of the flooded meadows. It'll be quieter there, and we can wait until daylight."

He spoke lightly, but the girls were not deceived.

"But just at present we're right in the river?" asked Mary quietly.

"Well, I'm afraid we are——"

"And you can't get us out of it?" said Doris. "Tell the truth!"

"Look here, girls, I'm not trying to fool you," said Nipper earnestly. "There's a bit of danger—I'm not denying it. If we can't get out of this current we shall have to accept the inevitable, and do the best we can to steer the old ark down with her head to the tide, as it were. Then, if we hit something, the shock won't be so much. We've tried to swing her off, but the current is too strong for us, and we can only get her round broadside. And that makes things worse—particularly if we hit something."

"But—but what do you suppose will be the end of it?" asked Doris.

"I'm jiggered if I know!" said Nipper frankly.

"Isn't there a weir down below?"

"Of course, you would think of that!" growled Nipper. "We're liable to go over it, and that's why I want you to get below. You'll be safe there. We don't know where the weir is, or anything. We may be a mile from it, or only twenty yards."

"But do you think the ark will stand it?" asked Mary fearfully.

"I don't know—but I hope she will," replied Nipper. "She was only constructed to float leisurely on the calm water. This rough treatment is more than we bargained for. But if we get over the weir safely, I expect we shall be all right. Even better off, perhaps."

"How better off?"

"Because we can drift into the bank somewhere below, and that means dry land," replied Nipper. "A mile walk, and we shall get to Caistowe, over the hills. So, you see, everything has its compensations."

"We've got to get over the weir first!" said Doris.

"Don't worry about that—we'll pilot her through the rapids all right," said Nipper confidently. "Now, be sports, and go below into your cabins. I'm wanted, and I can't stop another instant. But I shan't leave here until you've promised——"

"All right—we'll go," said Mary promptly. "Come on, girls."

But this time they all went down into one cabin, and sat there, listening eagerly and rather apprehensively.

"Of course, he was spoofing us," said Doris.

"Spoofing us?"

"Of course he was," said the girl. "He spoke as if going over the weir would be just a little picnic. But I know Dick all right—

he's always ready to make light of everything."

"I believe you're right," said Irene, nodding. "Oh, I say, won't it be dreadful if that barn collapses? Those poor chaps'll be crushed and thrown into the flood——"

"It's no good meeting trouble before it comes," interrupted Mary. "I think we ought to be doing something, you know. It seems so weak to sit down here, just looking at one another."

"We promised Dick——" began Irene.

"No, we didn't," interrupted Mary. "We just said that we'd come down here. We didn't make any promises at all. I vote we sneak up and see what's doing."

"Hear, hear!" said Violet. "Come on!"

In the meantime the desperate juniors were realising more forcibly than ever that they were helpless against the combined powers of Nature. All this trouble had come from the one mishap of the uprooted oak.

The tree had failed them, and now their position was getting worse and worse with every moment that passed. Nobody liked to admit it, but the truth stood out and almost struck them.

The ark was swinging down the Stowe, beyond all control!

That was the literal truth, and everybody knew it. They confined themselves to the task of keeping the ark head on, for she rode much easier that way. Any slewing round or getting broadside on to the current meant a recurrence of that deadly rocking.

This night reminded the juniors of that first dreadful night of the floods. The wind howled, and the blackness was confusing and bewildering. As a matter of fact, the wind was a mere breeze compared to the hurricane which the schoolboys' excited imaginations conjured up. There was a fresh wind, true enough, but nothing more. It was the general effect which made the conditions seem so much worse.

They heartily wished they were safe at the old school, where the foundations were solid and immovable. There, at least, they had been well protected. They wondered, in amazement, why they had left. Wasn't Nelson Lee organising big rescue parties? It seemed a sheer madness for them to have ventured away on this crazy ark.

These were the sensations now. But when the ark had sailed, nobody had had the slightest fear or the faintest inkling of danger. It had seemed such an easy, reasonable thing to do—to float across the floods and reach dry land. But the actuality was proving very different.

The whole idea had been to avoid the main river. Indeed, if Nipper had believed that there had been any danger of getting into the current, he would have vetoed the whole adventure. But this mishap had dismayed him as much as anybody else.

He was in the bows, lantern in hand, staring out into the flood. He could see nothing—except the dark, turbid waters.

What of the weir? Were they near it? Or was the fear totally unnecessary? Perhaps the flood was so high that the weir had ceased to be a peril? Nipper was filled with uneasy dread.

He tried to calculate.

They had been adrift for nearly half an hour, and Nipper was certain that their original mooring-place had not been more than three miles from that weir. Perhaps only two miles. At the speed the ark was making, they ought to have been over it ten minutes ago.

"No, it's impossible to judge," decided Nipper at last. "We seem to be tearing down at a terrific pace, but I shouldn't be surprised if we're only just pottering. It's so jolly difficult to judge in this blackness. Everything seems a lot worse than it really is."

This was sound enough reasoning, and Nipper began to gain heart a little. Perhaps, after all, they had magnified the dangers. No doubt the ark would jam herself into a spinney or something, and get held up. Or perhaps she would swing off on one of those queer side eddies, and become stranded on a bit of rising ground. There wasn't any reason to fear the worst. It was simply ridiculous to have any fears about the weir. Those misgivings had arisen in the first general excitement—

"Great Scott!" ejaculated Nipper, aghast.

He held himself still, staring ahead, his ears acutely on the stretch. Somehow the sound of a thunderous roar came to his ears. Perhaps it was only imagination—No, it was growing louder.

Then, just ahead, he glimpsed a swirl of foaming water. The roar increased, and Nipper started back, his heart jumping.

The weir was immediately ahead of them!



CHAPTER 11.

OVER THE TOP!

HERE was scarcely a minute in which to act, but Nipper did the best he could. His one thought now was the preservation of life—of the safety of the boys and girls.

"Inside—everybody!" he yelled, running madly down the narrow deck. "The weir! We're practically on it! Inside!"

"What?"

"You—you mean—"

"Quick!" thundered Nipper. "Drop everything and get inside!"

"But the oars—" began Handforth.

"Pull them in if you can, but if not, let them go!" snapped Nipper. "Get inside—or you'll all be washed overboard!"

Fortunately, the fellows took the advice on the instant. They all crowded in as the ark began to sway and rock with truly ominous force. She was gaining speed—tremendous speed.

And Nipper knew why. It was the stretch of river just above the weir, where the current naturally grew fiercer. His order that everybody should get inside was a wise one, for he foresaw what might happen. The plunge—and a roaring wave of water over the decks. Nobody would be able to withstand such an onrush, and they would be swept overboard. There was even a fear that the twin barges might plunge deeply under and founder. True, they were lightly laden in themselves, but that barn easily made up for this. The barn was a heavier load than the barges were wont to carry, taking into consideration the human cargo.

"Down into the holds!" Nipper was shouting.

"Down into the holds!" echoed dozens of voices.

The hatches were off, and the big holds were practically empty—easily capable of accommodating the crowds of boys. These river barges had been built with a maximum cargo capacity, and down below those hatches there was tremendous space.

Everything was happening in seconds.

The ark was rocking even more violently, and Nipper's anxiety to get everybody into the holds was based on a very real fear. The barn might capsize! And down in the cargo space, well below the deck level, they might be safe. The old building would probably tear herself free, and topple into the water, leaving the barges safe. But there was grave danger for anybody who remained on deck.

Snatching up a hurricane lamp, Nipper led the way into the hold.

The crisis came before a dozen juniors had dropped through the hatches.

With a sickening lurch the nose of the ark dipped down. For an instant it seemed that the whole structure was going to overturn, head foremost. And then came pandemonium. Water rushed through the doorways, and surged up in blinding cascades between the two barges. It swept everywhere, foaming and hissing angrily.

Many of the juniors were horrified. They thought their last minute had come. Everything was dark, and they had to rely upon their ears and their sense of touch. It seemed that the ark had plunged beneath the surface.

As a matter of fact, it had.

After that dreadful lurch she had dug her nose into the boiling turmoil below the weir. The barn swayed over, the woodwork shrieking in protest. How it remained fixed was a mystery. But the acute danger only lasted for a bare minute. And then it was realised that the ark was rushing onwards again, more speedily now, but still one unit.

They had gone over the weir in safety!

It seemed incredible, but it was true. And now they were rushing down the lower reach of the river, towards Caistowe—towards the mouth. The danger was over. Undoubtedly

"THEY'RE ALL FRESH!"

"What a lot o' beauties, eh? Just caught 'em! I've had a real day out, I have; been down the river with a rod I made myself. I spent all the morning reading the REALM—comes out on Wednesdays, you know. I couldn't sort of fish and read as well, so I got dug into the yarn about Jack, Sam and Pete—and talk about laugh! They say Pete's a champion mirth-maker—a proper old side-splitter,' I call him! All the chaps in my footer club read the REALM now; some of 'em say Pete's real, an' some say he ain't!

But I don't care one way or another—he keeps *me* laughing! I reckon hearin' me chuckle must ha' put the fish in a good humour. Because when I dropped the old hook, up the little beauties came—sort of falling over one another to bite. Yes, I've had a corking day—always do o' Wednesdays, when the REALM comes out. It's worth tuppence of anybody's money!"



Every
Wednesday

The Boys
REALM
OF SPORT & ADVENTURE

Price
Twopence

the ark would now drift off into a shallow, and come to rest.

Nipper, with his lantern, was hurrying round the outer decks again. Everything seemed snug and taut. No ropes had given way, and the superstructure was nobly standing up to the strain. Little waves were dashing up, and splashing over the low deck. The barges were riding easily, and only swaying occasionally. The river broadened down here, and there were many curves. There was every reason to expect that the ark would escape from the current, and veer off into the shallows.

"Everybody all safe?" asked Handforth, encountering Nipper at the stern.

"I hope so," replied Nipper. "Anyhow, we're out of the worst trouble now. Handy, why did we come over the weir in one whole piece? It's a mystery to me!"

"Never mind—we're over," said Handforth. "And it's all for the good. Why, if we could only get ashore here, and out of the flood zone, we should be able to walk into Caistowe to-morrow. By George! Just think of it! I've almost forgotten what it's like to walk on dry land!"

"Yes, it'll be a novel experience," replied Nipper. "Later on, after Easter, we shall remember all this, and grin. These things always seem funny later on.

"They don't seem particularly funny now,"

replied Handforth. "I want to know what we're going to do. We're still going pretty blindly, and we ought to steer the old ark——"

"There's no chance of steering her," interrupted Nipper. "We're absolutely at the mercy of the river, and we shall have to trust to luck. We're bound to get into a side current before long. Anyhow, there's no immediate danger—and we ought to take the roll-call."

"The which?"

"I want to know if everybody's safe."

"Of course everybody's safe," said Handforth. "Do you think we shouldn't have heard anything if one or two of the chaps had fallen overboard?"

But Nipper was not satisfied with surmise. He got a number of juniors to go round, calling out all the names. Nothing could be done, of course, if there were any missing.

Irene & Co. now came up, and even ventured on deck. The danger was considered to be all over. Spirits rose. The excitement had been quite intense, and there was now a natural reaction. Most of the fellows were feeling a little bit shaky, but they were enormously relieved.

"We'd better stick on these lower decks now," declared Nipper. "I don't anticipate another emergency, but it's just as well to be on the alert. We're still travelling at high

speed, and I'm none too sure of this barn."

"The barn's all right," declared Fullwood. "If she'll stand the strain of coming over the weir, she'll stand anything. Why, before we know where we are we'll be near Caistowe."

"By Jove," said De Valerie, "we might be able to get into the town to-night!"

This was an indication of the general optimism. Most of the voyagers were of the firm opinion that the adventure was over, and that it would only be a matter of an hour or two before they reached civilisation.

Nipper was more concerned about a safe anchorage. Civilisation could wait until to-morrow. And luck, which had been so much against them all to-day, now seemed, at last, to favour them.

Nipper noticed a curious vibration.

"Hallo!" he said, holding his lantern over-side and looking at the water. "What's that rummy scraping? I believe we're out of the main current already, and— Yes! Feel that?"

"We've gone ashore!" went up a yell.

"Hurrah!"

The stern of the ark swung round, rocking. And the bows remained stuck—wedged on some wreckage, or a shallow, or some other obstruction. Nobody cared. There was only one fact that mattered.

Their headlong rush down the river had been checked!



CHAPTER 12.

A NEW MENACE!

HANK goodness!"

Nipper breathed that exclamation very fervently. The ark had stranded, and was safe. The flood

waters were now swirling noisily, gurgling against the sides, swishing by, and doing their utmost to tear the twin barges free. But they held.

"Hadn't we better get some ropes out, and make the anchorage even safer?" asked Reggie Pitt. "We don't want another experience like that last one! We're jolly lucky to be safe, and we can't expect jam every time."

"Jam!" snorted Handforth. "We've had a fat lot of jam, haven't we?"

"Well, we got over the weir safely," said Church.

"That's nothing!"

"Well, opinions differ—"

"What about all the bad luck we had before that?" demanded Handforth. "What about stranding on that hill?"

"Personally, I'm not so prejudiced against stranding as I was," said Reggie Pitt. "After looking at it from every angle, I think it's a fine thing. Good luck to the old ark for going aground!"

"H'm! You're right there, of course!" admitted Handforth. "But where are we? That's what I want to know!"

Reggie Pitt considered.

"Well, at a rough guess, I should think we're on Mount Ararat," he replied.

"Mount Ararat!" echoed Handforth, staring.

"Isn't that where Noah's Ark stranded?" asked Reggie. "Mount Ararat. A volcanic mountain with a double peak, known to the Armenians as the Massis, to the Persians as the Koh-i-nuh, and the Turks as the Aghri Dagh. In other words, the Mountain of Noah. In 1840, there was an earthquake in the region of Ararat—"

"Dry up!" howled Handforth.

"Eh?"

"Do you think this is a geography lesson, you funny chump?"

"Sorry!" grinned Reggie. "My mistake! I thought you were asking for information regarding the point where we're stranded. Being an ark, it must go aground on Mount Ararat, or it's taken the wrong turning!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Handforth gave a disdainful sniff. He wasn't feeling so light-hearted as these other fellows. He saw no reason for merriment.

"Fatheads!" he said tartly. "We're stranded somewhere between Bellton and Caistowe. That's how I figure it."

"Marvellous!" said Fullwood admiringly. "Considering that the weir is a mile below Bellton, Handy's deduction is little short of genius."

"Oh, rats!" snapped Handforth. "I'm trying to be serious, and you fellows can't do anything else but cackle. We've got to drop an anchor overboard! That's the best way to solve the difficulty."

"By Jove—yes!" said Reggie Pitt.

"I'm not grumbling about Nipper's leadership," went on Handforth magnanimously. "I don't mind admitting he's been pretty smart. But everybody knows that it was a potty idea to moor a heavy thing like this to a mere oak-tree! The only way to be absolutely safe is to drop the anchor."

"It sounds good," agreed Pitt. "As far as I can see, there's only one snag, Handy. Where's the anchor?"

"Eh?"

"Where's the anchor?"

"The anchor?"

"That iron thing with two prongs on it like an oversize in fish-hooks," said Reggie. "I think it's very careless of you, Handy, to hide the thing away like this. All this trouble might have been avoided."

Handforth uttered a gasp.

"By George! There isn't an anchor!"

"Go hon!"

"No anchor!" went on Handforth, his voice rising indignantly. "Well, of all the crazy things! What's the good of a ship without an anchor? The owners of these barges ought to be ticked off!"

"I don't profess to be an expert on barges, but I don't believe they have anchors," said Reggie. "Not these flat-bottomed river barges, anyhow. They're generally hitched on to a bollard."

"Hitched on to a which?"

"A bollard," said Dick. "At least, I think it's a bollard—one of those short, thick posts you see on quay sides. Anyhow, what does it matter? We haven't got an anchor—and that's all we're arguing about."

By this time, Nipper had learned, to his satisfaction, that everybody was safe and sound and only a trifle wet. The ark seemed secure, and all peril was over.

"We'd better all go to bed," he decided. "All of us, that is, with the exception of the four watchmen, as before. There's no sense in staying up at this hour. We shall have to wait until morning to find out exactly where we are."

"It's jolly exasperating," said Tommy Watson, gazing out into the blackness. "We may be only ten yards from dry land. For all we know, there might be houses within half a mile."

"How about some scouting?" asked Willy Handforth. "I'm game to take out my paddle-boat and do some investigating."

"Oh, are you?" said Chubby Heath coldly. "If you're afraid of a little exercise—" began Willy.

"You can dry up, because you're not going!" interrupted Nipper.

"Caesar hath spoken!" murmured Willy.

"You young ass, d'you think I'm going to let you risk your life in a swift current like this?" growled Nipper. "I don't care if we're only a couple of feet from dry land! Nobody's going ashore until we can see where we are. We've had enough anxiety in this darkness!"

"The moon ought to be up soon," said Pitt hopefully, as he glanced at the sky. "By Jove, the clouds are breaking up, too! I can see stars! And the wind is a lot less than it was."

Nipper looked at the stars.

"It's going to be a fine day to-morrow," he announced. "But you're wrong about the wind, Reggie. I don't think it's any lighter now. It seems so, because there's no danger —"

He broke off, and stood fixed, lantern in hand.

"Feel that?" he added suddenly, and with a note of anxiety in his voice.

"Feel what?"

"That grating vibration again," said Nipper sharply. "If we're getting adrift once more, I'll—"

"Adrift!"

"Oh, I say! Chuck it!"

"Be cheerful, Nipper!"

But Nipper was leaning overside. He said nothing more, but ran up the deck towards the front. Everybody else had taken it for granted that they were safely ashore. But Nipper had been on the qui vive for the very thing that now appeared to be happening. At any moment, another change of the current might free them.

And there was danger here—a danger that Nipper had not realised until he gave the matter full thought. He had had time for full thought during this brief lull.

And he remembered that the river ran between high banks in the neighbourhood of Caistowe, finally going through the town by means of a deep causeway—and thence into the harbour, to merge with the sea.

What if the ark got into that gorge? The flow there was probably raging with tremendous force, owing to the confined nature of the banks. And there was a big stone bridge in Caistowe, where one of the principal streets crossed the river.

What would happen to the ark if it got carried down and hit that bridge?



CHAPTER 13.

PERIL!

NIPPER'S anxiety was acute.

He had already established the fact that there was nothing but water all around the ark as far as the lantern gleam would penetrate. There was nothing round which a rope could be hitched. So they had been compelled to sit tight and hope for the best.

And now the ark was shifting!

Within a minute Nipper's worst fears were realised. Hitherto the water had been swirling past. But now the current seemed to be much slower, and finally to cease altogether. This was obviously because the ark was going with it once again. The superstructure was rocking gently, and the creaking continued as loudly as ever before.

"Well, here's a pretty kettle of fish!" said Nipper grimly. "Just when we thought we were safe, we're off again!"

"Great Scott!"

"But can't we do something?"

"What can we do?" asked Dick. "This is just about the limit! Why couldn't the barges have sense enough to stick tight, where they were safe? There's not one chance in a hundred of stranding again."

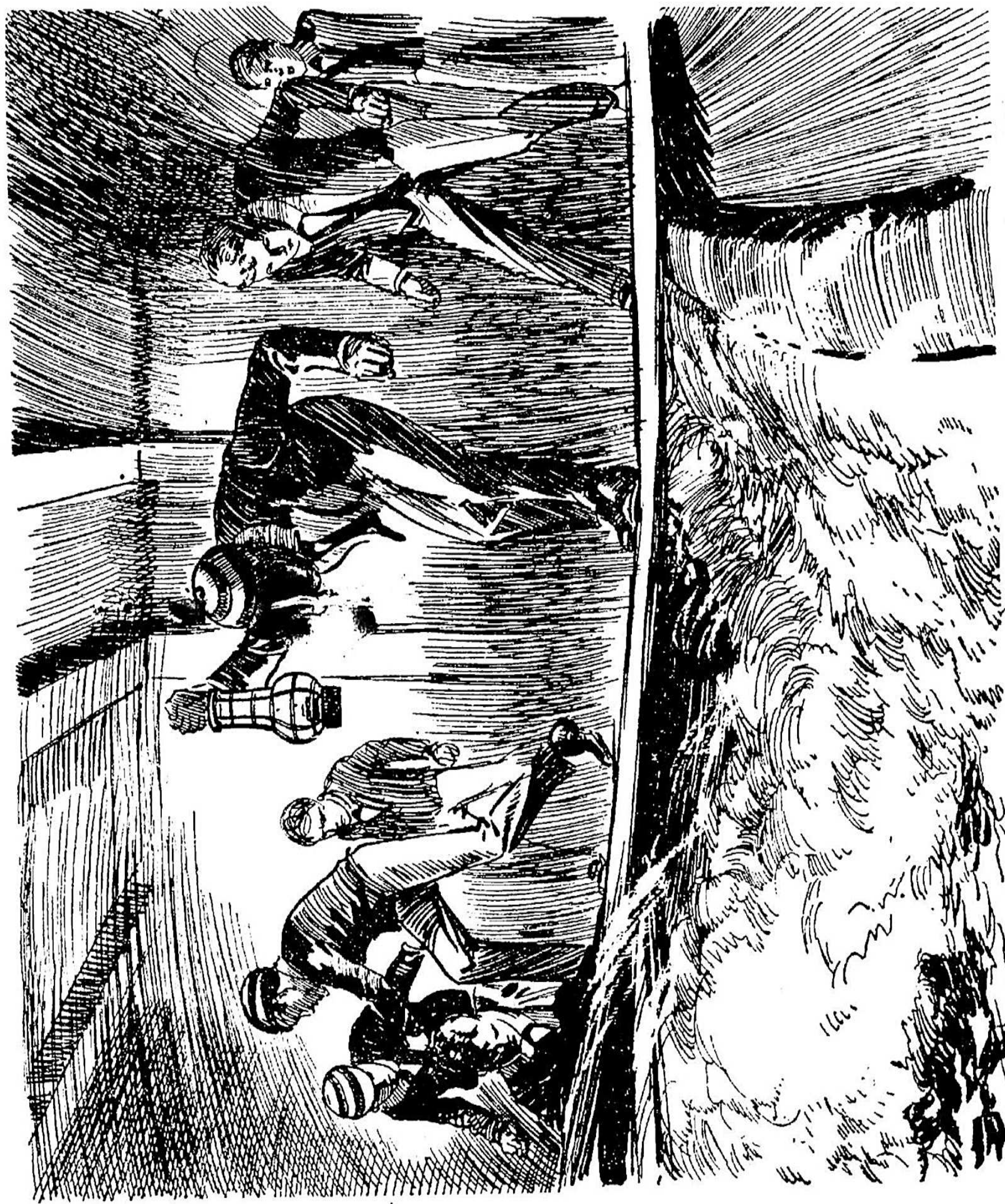
"It's too thick for words!" said Handforth indignantly. "This morning, when we wanted to make progress, we went ashore, and it took hours to get off! And now, when we wanted to remain stuck, we drift away without any of us lifting a finger!"

"It's enough to make us say things," remarked Reggie Pitt. "If we were real barges, the night wouldn't be black, but blue!"

"There's the moon!" said Church, pointing.

They looked. The moon, getting towards its last quarter, had appeared from behind a thick cloud-bank, and the boys were able to see, for the first time, a faint indication of their whereabouts. They looked round them eagerly.

Accustomed to the darkness, their eyes were keen. The moon was shedding a soft light down on the flood, and a silvery reflection was shimmering across the water. The surrounding blackness was now dispersed,



By the light of Nipper's lantern the juniors could see the water surging up between the two barges. Then, with a sickening lurch, the nose of the ark dipped down and she plunged over the weir!

and it was seen that the drifting ark was in a comparatively narrow stretch of the flood. Two or three hundred yards away to starboard a hill rose, with 'rees plainly silhouetted against the skyline. The land looked exasperatingly near—black and sinister, perhaps, but nevertheless alluring.

"By George!" said Handforth tensely. "We might have landed!"

"Impossible," said Nipper. "We were a good way from the shore, even when we were stranded. There are hills on the other side, too—the valley gets narrow here."

"What a beastly piece of luck!" said Reggie Pitt. "What the dickens are we going to do? I may be wrong, but it seems to me that we're getting back into mid-stream."

Nipper nodded.

"Yes, it's pulling us," he said. "We'd better get the oars out as quickly as we can, and see if we can do something. There's a chance of seeing now, and that'll help us. Anyhow, it's our only chance."

"Only chance?"

"Yes."

"Only chance of what?"

"Being saved from a nasty wreck!" said Nipper.

"I don't see there's anything to worry about," put in De Valerie. "After all, there's only Caistowe ahead, and once we're through the town—Ye gods and little fishes! The bridge!"

"Exactly!" observed Nipper. "If the old barn hits that bridge, there won't be an old barn! Come on—let's do our best!"

So once again the oars were thrust out, and every available effort was made. But it is doubtful if the boys could have controlled even one of those barges—for a barge is a clumsy enough vessel to handle even in a gently flowing stream. In a flood torrent it becomes a heavy, awkward, lumbering hulk.

And here there were two barges—with a barn on top!

So the effort was futile almost from the start. True, it was possible to turn the ark's nose by concentrated effort on one side, but this only made the position worse. For the whole structure turned broadside, and threatened to capsize. It was far better to keep her head to the river.

"It's no good—we may as well give it up," said Nipper at last. "There's a chance that we shall go ashore again, but a very slim one. And we'd better prepare for the worst. Reggie—Handy—Val! Go round among the fellows, and tell them quietly that there's danger."

"I say, do you mean that?" asked De Valerie, staring.

"Yes, I do!"

"Real danger?"

"If you want it straight—horrible danger!" said Dick anxiously. "Can't you feel the river getting swifter every minute? It'll be



By the light of Nipper's lantern the juniors (with a sickening lurch, the nose of

like the Niagara Cataract farther down the gorge."

"Phew!"

"Oh, crumbs!"

"And by the time we sweep through the town we shall be roaring along like an express train," went on Nipper. "There's going to be a nasty, messy collision when we get to the bridge!"

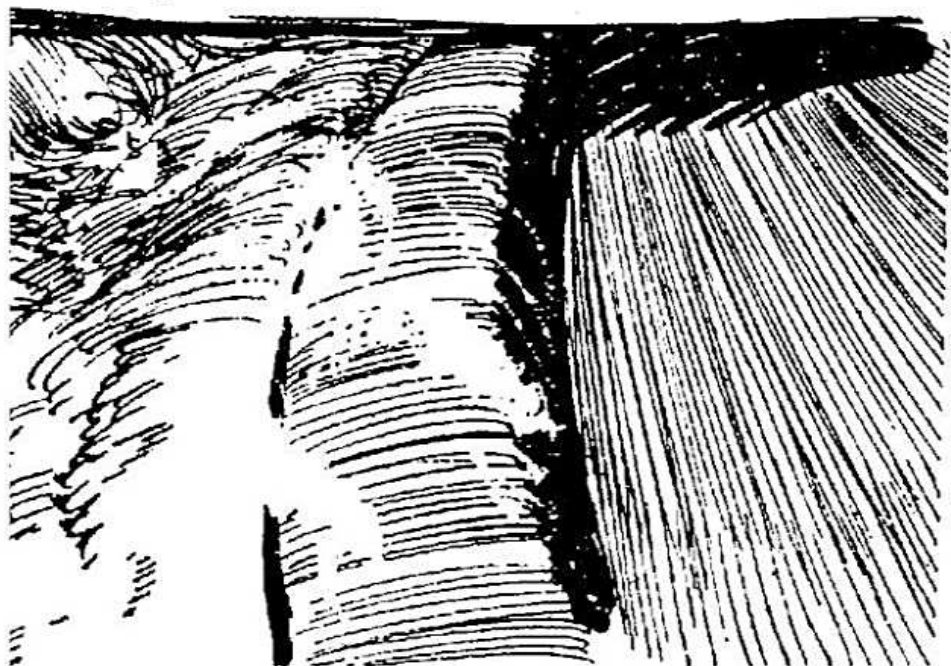
"Oh, my hat!"

"But—but can't we do anything to avert it?" gasped Handforth. "It's—it's horrible! Standing here, I mean, and talking about it, and doing nothing!"

"If there was something to do, I'd do it!" retorted Nipper. "Let's hope there's still a little space under the bridge—it's a pretty high one, so we ought to stand a chance. We might scrape under."

"Barn and all?"

"Of course not. The barn will be simply



surging up between the two barges. Then, in and she plunged over the weir!

ripped off as the barges shoot under," replied Nipper. "That's why we've all got to get into the holds—and, what's more, close the hatches down after us. The air will be filled with splintering wood, and there's no sense in asking for trouble. We shall just have to take the chance!"

"Life's full of novelty!" sighed Reggie Pitt. "Half an hour ago we thought we were going to be capsized at the weir, ten minutes ago we kidded ourselves that we could go to bed; and now we're rushing headlong into a pretty little collision with the Caistowe town bridge!"

He spoke lightly, but he realised, as clearly as any of the others, that the whole situation had become perilous.

And the occupants of the ark did everything they could for their own safety. It was thoroughly recognised now that the ark was beyond control. It was in the very centre

of the stream, and gaining speed. The turbulent waters were tumbling down towards the sea, their fury increased by the narrowing of the valley. Farther up, the floods could spread out over the fields and meadows. But here the banks came right down, and the waters were hurtling onwards at tremendous speed.

It would be all over within a minute or two.

Nipper and one or two others remained on deck, watching. They could see the lights of Caistowe—friendly lights gleaming out from the windows of houses—streets lamps shining like beacons on the hillside. This upper part of Caistowe was all on the slope, with the river far down in the gorge.

"Looks peaceful enough, doesn't it?" asked Fullwood. "It's a glorious night now—practically all the clouds have gone. And Caistowe hasn't even been touched by the flood!"

"Beats me why we can't swim for it, or something," said Handforth, as he looked longingly at the shore, as they went tearing past.

"You couldn't swim for it here," said Nipper gruffly. "If you jumped into the river you'd be carried down, just the same as the ark. I wonder what people will say if they can see us shooting down like this? They won't know what sort of ship this is!"

They swung round the final bend of the river, now careering along at a speed that might have exhilarated them but for the dread that was in their hearts. The town bridge was now less than a quarter of a mile farther on. Rows of houses were already appearing up on the steep sides of the gorge, and a little in advance the grassy banks gave place to a concrete causeway. The moonlight revealed the whole scene.

"Come on, we'd better slip below—quick!" said Nipper.

"Just a minute!" shouted Pitt, staring ahead. "Am I seeing double, or what? The bridge isn't there!"



CHAPTER 14.

THE LAST STRAW!

"NOT there?"

"No!" shouted Pitt.

"It's gone!"

"Great Scott!"

The juniors all stared down the causeway. They knew it well—for there were not many portions of the St. Frank's district that had escaped their attention. And Reggie's statement seemed perfectly true.

The moon was hanging in the sky, directly ahead of them, and the reflection in the water was unbroken. Where the bridge had once been, there was now nothing but open river.

The ark went hurtling down the causeway. "I say, thank goodness!" ejaculated

Nipper. "The bridge has gone! That means we'll get through safely——"

"Hurrah!"

"Perhaps the whole bridge is submerged!" gasped Handforth. "It might be only a foot under the surface, and we shall——"

He broke off, realising that it was unnecessary to complete his remark. For he could now see the jagged stonework, where the bridge had crumpled up. The ark was practically on the spot.

Nipper held his breath.

Would they foul some of that demolished masonry? The barges, fortunately, were flat-bottomed, and—— But further thought was unnecessary. Similar to Handforth, Nipper had not had time to conclude. The ark had swept past, and was still afloat.

During that brief glimpse, the juniors had seen no sign of anybody. They had seen a street lamp or two, but it was practically midnight, and the town was asleep. They went hurtling on, out beyond the causeway—and into the very harbour.

"Hurrah!"

"We're safe—we're safe!"

By this time the fellows were rushing up from the holds, crowding on the decks and at the windows. Once again danger had been averted. This was indeed a night of alarms and excursions! As soon as one peril was passed, another seemed to crop up.

"Caistowe!" shouted Buster Boots excitedly. "We're practically in the harbour, too—and it won't take us long to get ashore. There aren't any floods here, and we shall be able to sleep in a hotel to-night!"

"Good egg!"

"Yes, and go home to-morrow!"

"Hurrah!"

The cheering continued, and fellows were laughing over nothing. They were so relieved that they felt light-headed. The floods were left behind for good. That much was certain. And the good old ark had brought them safely through—safely to harbour, in more senses than one. For here was Caistowe Harbour, stretching to the left of them.

"Well, what about my ark now?" roared Handforth triumphantly.

"She's a wonder, old man," agreed Church.

"Rather!" said McClure.

"I knew from the start that we should get through," declared Handforth. "We've been a bit longer than we intended, but that's nothing!"

"And we've come to Caistowe, instead of Bannington—but that's nothing, too," agreed Reggie Pitt. "In fact, it's an improvement. Bannington's flooded, and Caistowe isn't. Oh, for the feeling of solid land beneath my feet!"

"I feel as if I've been on a world's voyage!" grinned Jack Grey. "What a lark!"

What a yarn to tell the other chaps at St. Frank's! Won't they be jealous when they hear everything!"

"When you fellows have finished going dotty, perhaps you'll lend a hand!" sang out Nipper from somewhere. "I suppose you know we're heading straight for the Channel, don't you?"

"What!"

"We've got to steer the old hulk round and get her alongside one of the quays!" shouted Nipper. "Won't the fishermen be surprised in the morning when they find this lot in dock!"

Many willing hands helped. The ark was now well into the harbour, and riding with serene steadiness. The long concrete pier stretched out towards the sea, affording full protection. In this sheltered spot boats were always safe. The river entered a little further along, and the ark had drifted round very conveniently.

At least, so the juniors thought at the time.

The oars were got into action, and the fellows laughed and joked as they pulled hard at them—endeavouring to get the ark across the harbour towards the nearest quayside.

"It's the rummiest thing that ever happened!" grinned De Valerie. "We built this thing to get to Bannington, and now we find ourselves in the giddy sea!"

"You can't call this the sea," said Owen major. "There's hardly a ripple—and there isn't so much movement on the boat as there was on the flood. I say, Mr. Lee's here, you know! Here, in Caistowe! Won't he be pleased to welcome us?"

"I'm not so sure about that—but we can risk his wrath," said De Valerie. "Heave ho! We're going jolly slow, aren't we?"

"What does it matter?" grinned Hubbard. "No danger now!"

"Everything, in fact, is safe and sound," said Jarrow, as he helped at that particular oar. "We thought we were going to be drowned, and now the only prospect ahead of us is a good supper."

"Don't talk about it!" said Hubbard, licking his lips. "I suddenly remember that I'm jolly hungry."

"There's nothing like hunger for making a chap energetic," agreed Jarrow in his rumbling tones. "It's a kind of spur. In just the same way, a spur makes a horse go faster. Which makes me wonder how we're going to gather up the threads of football again. What with our playing fields being flooded——"

"How the dickens do you get football into the conversation?" asked De Valerie.

"We were talking about spurs, weren't we?" said Jarrow. "I've seen the Spurs playing two or three times, and they're very hot. I'm wondering if we shall be able to get some good hot tea when we go ashore. Or perhaps coffee will be better——"

"Let's leave this chap to work on his oar alone!" said Hubbard tartly. "If we stay here, we'll all be talked into a stupor! Once Jarrow gets started he never stops!"

ANSWERS

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De Valerie was staring across at the distant quay.

"It's rummy!" he said, frowning. "Look! We're further away than ever!"

"What!"

"It's a fact!" declared Val. "And yet we're all pulling as hard as we can heave! What's the giddy idea!"

And they suddenly noticed that there was now no laughter aboard. A great deal of the chatter had ceased, and what there was came in a murmur. More hands were pulling at the great sweeps. The ark laboured heavily, and the dark waters of the harbour surrounded them. And now a faint swell was making itself felt—a soft rising and falling.

The quay, which had seemed so friendly, was getting farther away. And this in spite of the fact that the juniors were rowing towards it with all their strength. They had seen no other boats about them—no sign of activity. A good deal farther away, the twinkling lights of some moored steamers were visible, but they were remote.

"What do you make of it, Dick?" asked Reggie Pitt, as he took a breather at one of the oars.

"It's a pretty nasty theory, but we've got to face it," replied Nipper. "We're being carried out to sea."

"Great corks!"

"The tide must be going out—that's the only explanation that I can offer," continued Nipper. "Isn't it just about the last straw? How many more times are we going to be swindled to-night?"

Handforth stared rather dazedly.

"You—you don't mean that!" he ejaculated. "Carried out to sea! Why, it's impossible!"

"Impossible or not, we're creeping nearer and nearer to the mouth of the harbour!" growled Nipper. "Before long we shall be out in the bay."

"Don't you think we'd better yell for help?" asked Pitt.

"I'd thought of that—but we're too far off," replied Dick. "Besides, what about all the terrific cheering about ten minutes ago? I should have thought that was enough to arouse the whole town! But there's no sign of a boat, or anything, to come out to us. You see, it's midnight, and if some of our yells were heard, we were probably mistaken for a group of rowdies, or something. Down here, in the harbour, it's utterly deserted after dark. We can yell, but I don't think it'll be any good."

They did yell—lustily.

The whole party raised their voices, and made the night hideous. But by this time the relentless tide had taken them beyond the harbour mouth, and Handforth's ark was beginning to heave laboriously up and down to the swell of the English Channel.

What lay ahead now? The problems of this adventurous night were apparently never ending.



CHAPTER 15.

INTO THE CHANNEL!

INCREDIBLE! That was the only word to be used. Amazing as the earlier adventures of the ark had been, this latest caprice was utterly startling in its possibilities.

Any normal person, being told that such a company of schoolboys were unexpectedly to drift down the mouth of the Stowe into Caistowe Harbour, would have said, in no uncertain terms, that there was no possibility of them being in peril. He would have declared that the schoolboys would be heard and rescued in a very brief space of time.

And yet the ark, with its cheering inhabitants, had aroused no stir in Caistowe whatever! Not a friendly light gleamed on the water—not a boat could be seen putting out from the quayside.

There was one reason for this utter deadness which the juniors did not realise at the time. Caistowe was practically bereft of boats. Furthermore, a large section of the quay was demolished.

That terrible hurricane which had swept St. Frank's on the day of the bursting reservoir had dealt Caistowe the worst blow the town had ever received; not only small boats, but large fishing craft had been battered to matchwood during that storm.

The harbour, which was considered to be one of the safest along the entire South Coast, had betrayed those who trusted it. For the mountainous seas had smashed over the concrete pier, wrecking a large portion of it, and all the small craft sheltering in that refuge were wrecked.

And that had been only a few days ago. Caistowe had hardly yet recovered from the blow—was still dazed, in fact. A good many of her able-bodied citizens were in other parts, all having been roped in to help in the alleviation of distress. And at midnight, in any case, this particular part of the town was black and deserted.

So the ark drifted out—unnoticed.

Nipper was staggered. If somebody had suggested to him that this might occur, he would have laughed at it. It seemed utterly fantastic. Within reach of safety—at one time a stone's throw from land—and here they were, being carried out by the tide. They had no boats on board, in which to escape—Willy's cockleshell did not count—and the distance was too far to swim.

"It's—it's ridiculous!" shouted Handforth desperately. "We must get ashore! We can't drift out like this!"

"But we're doing it," said Church.

"Yes, but—but— Oh, rot!" said Handforth thickly. "It's all piffle! Let's shout again!"

"If it was no good before, it's even less good now," said Nipper. "We're practically out of earshot, anyhow. We shall have to

attend to our own problems—and they look like being pretty ugly.”

“Ugly?” asked Watson.

“Not to say hideous,” said Reggie Pitt. “I’ve got you, Dick. You’re thinking of what might happen after we’re well out?”

“I’m thinking that this ark was made to float on a calm flood,” replied Nipper. “What’s going to happen if we really get carried out to sea? The tide’s on the ebb, and running strongly. We’re helpless!”

Handforth looked at the big oar in disgust.

“What’s the use?” he shouted. “I don’t believe these beastly oars have any effect at all!”

“They have all the effect their size permits!” retorted Nipper. “When you come to think of it, it’s a tall order to expect this hulk to be affected by a few oars! You might as well try to pull a rowing boat upstream by using a pair of broom-handles!”

“Just about as effective,” agreed Reggie. “You’ve hit it, Nipper—right on the knocker. These two barges are too big a handful, and that’s the simple truth. By Jove, we’re shifting now, too; we’re getting right out into the bay, and veering off down-Channel.”

“Oh, but there can’t be any danger!” exclaimed De Valerie. “After the way we came over that weir, and then got through the causeway on that raging flood, this is nothing!”

“It’s nothing—now,” agreed Nipper significantly.

“You think things might get worse?”

“I don’t think anything about it, and if you use your wits for a minute, you’ll agree with me,” said Nipper. “We’re leaving Caistowe right behind, but we’re only just out of the harbour, and still protected by the bay. The real struggle will come after we get out, beyond the headland!”

“We might hit the Shingle Rocks!” said somebody, startled.

“We’re not likely to do that, we’re drifting out too quickly,” said Nipper, looking out to sea. “The ebb is tremendous—helped by the wind, I expect. It would be coming off shore, of course! This old barn acts like a sail, and it’s helping the tide.”

They stood looking. Caistowe was growing more remote. The ebb was undoubtedly powerful, and everybody aboard knew how futile it was to continue at the oars. No boats appeared to be setting out, and the night itself was now getting blustery again. The moon had vanished, heavy clouds were banking up, and the wind seemed to be freshening.

The ark, plunging steadily out into the Channel, was beginning to roll and toss with a grim, ominous persistency. The air was filled with the creaking of woodwork, the splashing of the waves, and the straining of ropes.

And the ark was not yet out of the bay!

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CHAPTER 16.

TOUCH AND GO!

HANDFORTH looked rather wistfully at the distant shore of the bay. Just a little farther along they could see the outline of the cliffs. Shingle Head was visible, too, and above rose the Downs. All familiar ground. For this was a favourite camping spot in the summer-time for the St. Frank's Scouts' Troop.

"The tide might turn any minute," said Handforth hopefully. "It's quite likely we'll go ashore. And, after all, that would be better than anything. Once on the beach, we could easily— Whoa! By George! What the dickens was that? Oh, my hat!"

He had been leaning with his back against the wall of the barn. And just then one of the first really big swells of the open sea hit them—diagonally. The bows rose up, the two barges shifted drunkenly, and Handforth felt the barn wall sag behind him. The air was filled with a snapping of woodwork, and a fierce confusion of creaks.

"Great Scott!" muttered Church.

"I thought we were going to get smashed up!" said McClure, gazing apprehensively at the barn. "She'll never last, Handy! Don't forget the barn isn't fixed! It's liable to collapse any minute."

"Hark at 'em!" said Handforth.

He was referring to the juniors who had gone up into the loft—probably for something to eat. For even in this acute hour quite a number of the boys still remembered that food was on board. And now they came tearing down the ladder, shouting with alarm. Another swell hit the ark, and she heaved over to starboard until it seemed she would never stop. Then she rolled back, the waves surging with a deep, laborious rush over the opposite deck. There were more crashes.

"The loft floor is giving way!" yelled somebody.

"Stand back, you fellows!"

"She's going to smash up!"

Nipper came hurrying in—into that big space which comprised the greater portion of both barge decks.

"Don't get excited!" he shouted. "There's no danger yet. This is a wooden building, thank goodness, and it won't crumple up unless a tremendous wave hits us. But we shall have to do something."

"Yes, but what?" demanded a dozen voices.

"Sacrifice the barn!"

"What?"

"It's the only possible thing to be done," said Nipper. "If we don't do it ourselves the sea will do it for us."

There were many excited shouts, and the voices of Irene & Co. could be heard, too. The ark was now getting right out into the

open Channel, and the shore was receding farther and farther. Without doubt, the situation was becoming desperate.

There was no storm raging—or, indeed, the whole contraption would have foundered long since—but the sea was undoubtedly choppy. From the deck of a steamer it might have seemed comparatively calm. But from the level of a barge deck—almost a foot from the water-line—it seemed to the juniors that the sea was running mountains high.

The ark went diving down into a trough, tipping giddily. And then she would bury her nose into the foaming sea, and struggle out with difficulty. Already the water was bursting in through the doorways, and up between the two barges.

"Isn't it about time we were told something?" Irene Manners was asking. "It's all very well to keep us below, but we're fed-up!"

"To the neck!" added Doris firmly.

"Great Scott, girls, be good!" pleaded Nipper. "I want everybody to go below now, and there isn't a second to be lost! You couldn't have come up at a worse time—"

"Oh, but we want to have a look out on deck!" cried Mary. "It's not fair that we should miss all the fun."

"Fun!" shouted Nipper. "There'll be plenty of fun soon, unless I'm mistaken! But I don't think we shall laugh much!"

Irene dodged past two or three of the juniors and went out on the port deck. The breeze caught her hair and tossed it. Just then the moon came out, and she stood looking at the scene in amazement.

"Oh!" she ejaculated. "I knew we were drifting out to sea, of course, but I never dreamed—"

"Look out everybody!" came a sudden roar from the bows.

Two juniors ran like mad. The ark plunged down into the trough of the sea, and the fore part of the two barges vanished beneath a gigantic wave. Water surged along in cascades. The wooden walls shivered and shook, and the whole barn, weakened by her night's adventures, sagged over in an agony of stress. The juniors stood transfixed, grasping at one another, and expecting the whole structure to crash down upon them.

Then there was a roaring of water as the foaming waves swept the deck. The ark seemed to shudder, and then rode freely again.

"Another two or three like that, and we shall be sunk!" said Handforth huskily. "I don't see what we can do—"

A wild scream suddenly came from Doris.

"Irene!" she shouted. "Where's Irene?"

"I saw her on deck—"

"She's not here!" called Doris wildly. "Renie! Renie! Where are you? Oh, didn't anybody see—"

"Help!"

A faint, half-smothered cry came from the sea, astern, and away to port. Doris flung herself to the edge of the barge, and Handforth dragged her back just as she was about to dive in.

"Let me go!" she panted fiercely.

"You mustn't attempt——"

"I shall!" she cried. "Irene's out there—drowning——"

But Nipper had already plunged into the water, and Farman and Tregellis-West and Reggie Pitt had followed his example. In fact, Pitt would have been in first, only he had been hampered by the crowd. Handforth, in an agony, could do nothing but hold Doris—and it was Irene who was in danger!

"Here, take her!" he gasped. "Don't let her go!"

"All right; I'll keep quiet!" said Doris steadily.

The next second Handforth was in, and in the moonlight he could see the other swimmers dotted about. They were calling desperately. The water was icily cold, and already the boys were numbed.

"Irene!" shouted Handforth, a hand clutching at his heart.

"We can't find her!" came a hail from Pitt. "We thought she was over that way, but——"

"Ted!" whispered a faint, far-away voice.

"Great Scott!" gasped Handforth.

He plunged off madly, and would have gone right past Irene in the gloom. But she clasped at his jacket, and he spun round.

"Oh, thank goodness!" he said. "Renie!"

The girl was nearly exhausted, for the water was so cold that it numbed the limbs in an instant. And Irene had been wearing a heavy woollen coat on top of her ordinary dress.

"All right, you chaps," roared Handforth, "I've got her!"

"Hurrah!"

That cheer came from the ark. The swimmers closed round Handforth, and Nipper helped with Irene. It was no light task, getting back to the ark, either. For it was drifting steadily, and Nipper was filled with wild fears. From here he could see the crazy structure reeling over, and he knew that a crash would soon be inevitable.

Somehow they managed to reach the side of the Penelope, and many willing hands dragged them on board. Irene was seized by the other girls.

"Take her below and wrap her in blankets, Doris!" exclaimed Nipper breathlessly. "Don't waste a second! Val, rush up to the loft, and get all the blankets you can carry!"

"We've got some——" began Mary.

"Not sufficient!" replied Nipper. "Hurry, Val! Don't trouble about anything else, but come down at once. The barn's going, and we shall all founder unless we act like lightning!"



CHAPTER 17.

SAVED!

MARY SUMMERS grasped at Nipper's soaking wet arm.

"You must change, too, Dick," she said concernedly. "You must——"

"I can't—there isn't time!" shouted Nipper. "Sorry, Mary, but you'll have to go. Everybody else—get into the holds!"

"Yes, but——" began Owen major.

"Don't argue!" roared Nipper. "Get below for your lives!"

That his urgent tone was necessary was obvious, for at that moment another of those big waves struck the ark, sending her heeling over to the accompaniment of splintering woodwork and straining ropes. Two or three loud snaps had already warned Nipper that the lashings which bound the two barges together were parting. Even the smaller waves were alarming enough—but these big ones, which seemed to come at regular intervals, were terrific. Every one seemed to spell destruction. And, by some miracle, that fantastic ark held together.

But it couldn't last. The end would inevitably come soon. Already the barn had taken on a drunken attitude, and was five or six feet from the perpendicular, sagging over threateningly. Every board that went to her construction was protesting. Beams were falling, and rafters were clattering down on to the floor of the loft. The structure was disintegrating already, and nothing could avert a complete collapse.

And if all that woodwork thundered down upon the barges, the result would be appalling. By hook or by crook Nipper wanted to avoid this tragedy. And there was only one possible way.

In an amazing short space of time the fellows crowded down into the holds. The girls had vanished into one of the cabins, had locked themselves in, and were attending to their patient.

Nipper and the other rescuers were still wet, but they had quite forgotten it.

"Everybody down?" yelled Nipper anxiously.

"Yes!" came a roar from the holds.

He looked about him. He and Handforth were the only two left on deck. Nipper nodded. It was a signal they had previously arranged.

Instantly they ran fore and aft. Nipper hacked at the forward ropes binding the two barges together, while Handforth performed a similar service astern. It was a perilous job, for the whole superstructure might kill them ere they could escape. But somebody had to do it.

"All right?" yelled Nipper.

"Yes!" sang out Handforth. "By George! There they go!"



The tangle of branches caught Nipper and swept him off his feet. "My hat!" gasped Handforth, leaping forward just in time to grab Nipper by the arm.

They made a wild dive for the nearest hatchway, and dragged the covering over them as they were assisted down by those below. The thing now rested with Fate.

And Fate helped them considerably.

For at that very crucial moment the biggest wave yet struck the doomed ark diagonally. She did not merely stagger, but she plunged down, and the bows of the two barges swung apart at the same moment. For they were no longer held by the lashings. Only the weight of the barn hindered them from drifting apart. And the weight of the barn was insufficient.

That tremendous wave did its work amazingly.

If the boys could have seen they would have marvelled. Like the opening of some great jaws, the barges parted company, leaving a wide, seething gap between them. The forepart of the barn, splintering and crashing, half toppled forward.

Then the wave continued the good work. It heaved the Penelope up on its crest, leaving the Araminta down in the trough. For the barges had swung round broadside to the seas. The result was inevitable.

That side of the barn which rested on the Araminta dropped sheer down, and the whole crazy edifice toppled completely over amidst a truly appalling confusion of smashing, grinding, shrieking woodwork.

But the thing which Nipper had aimed for had come off! The old barn, instead of drop-

ping its entire weight upon the decks of the barges, had gone to a last resting-place in the sea. The Araminta was now a full ten yards away from her sister barge, and both were floating easily and buoyantly, as though lighthearted at being relieved of their encumbrance.

Down in the holds the juniors were fearful—and, later, they were not ashamed to admit that they had been nearly scared out of their lives. They had expected death at any minute. They had expected the hatches to be battered in by falling beams and rafters.

But, instead, there was now a silence. And the barges seemed to be lighter; they no longer plunged so sluggishly. Handforth was one of the first to speak after that crashing tumult had subsided.

"She's gone!" he muttered. "The barn's smashed!"

"Yes," said Church. "But we'd better not go up yet—"

"I'm going up!" interrupted Nipper. "You fellows stay here for a bit—until I give the signal."

The hatch was hoisted off—a difficult task, for two or three heavy beams had fallen across it. But at last they got it up, and Nipper cautiously looked out. The moonlight shone directly upon him. Overhead the stars were gleaming.

"All clear!" he shouted as he struggled out. "Hurrah! We're safe! We're safe! Come on, you chaps—nothing to worry about now!"

They came swarming out, trembling with

relief, and feeling sick with the sudden nausea of the reaction. This night was nothing but a whole series of wild excitements.

"Why, where is it?" yelled Church, staring round.

"Gone," replied Nipper, pointing. "There's a bit of the roof—just sinking now. She must have toppled clean off, and I expect it'll float along like a derelict, just under the surface. But what does it matter? We've got rid of it!"

"And I never had time to save any of the grub!" said Fatty Little sadly.

"But where's the other barge?" asked Handforth, staring round. "Great pip! The other barge has sunk! And it was full of chaps—"

"Ass! It's behind you!" grinned Nipper.

He pointed. The Penelope was not twenty yards away, and her decks were already beginning to swarm with excited fellows. Handforth took a huge breath of relief.

"Then it worked!" he said dazedly.

"Like a dream!" replied Nipper. "And look at the decks! Why, we can clear this rubbish away in ten minutes! The old barn behaved splendidly, and fell overboard in one solid chunk. I say, what a relief!"

"Yes, and you chaps had better get back into the hold, out of this cold wind!" said De Valerie. "When I got those blankets for the girls I grabbed some overcoats, too. Come on—we don't want you to catch pneumonia!"

"Just a minute!" said Nipper briskly.

He didn't look very ill. His face was glowing, and his eyes were shining. The difference in him was startling. He had accepted the main responsibility for this party, and now that he knew the danger was over, his spirits were effervescingly high. He dashed to the cabin hatch and opened it. Then he bawled down the stairway.

"Hi, girls!" he bellowed cheerily.

The door opened, and Doris appeared.

"It's O.K.—everything all serene!" said Nipper, almost singing the words. "The barn's gone, and we're as safe as a couple of liners. How's Irene getting on?"

"As warm as toast, and positively fuming because we're keeping her wrapped up in blankets," replied Doris. "We knew you'd pull things round, Dick!"



CHAPTER 18.

THE RESCUE BOATS!

DE VALERIE was looking rather anxious as Nipper cheerfully made for the hold.

"Half a tick, Dick!" said

Val. "You seem very chirpy."

"I feel chirpy," said Nipper. "I am chirpy."

"But you're not pretending that we're out of danger, are you?"

"Well, no."

"But you just told the girls—"

"I'm not pretending anything," said Nipper. "We *are* out of danger, you chump! There's nothing to worry about now, as far as I can see. Both these barges are sound, and there's not the slightest fear of us drifting on to the rocks. We shall be all right till the morning—and then the tide will have turned, and we shall probably potter ashore, further down the coast."

"Oh!" said De Valerie.

"The sea isn't rough at all."

"No, it seems to have got a lot calmer."

"You're right," said Nipper. "It seems so. But it's no different at all, really. The difference is with us. With that barn hampering us, and with the two barges lashed together, we were like a couple of chaps in a three-legged race, hampered by a sack of potatoes across their shoulders. Our legs are cut free now, and we can go."

They looked across the sea. The barge was hardly heaving at all, for, with the weight removed, she made light of the waves. Her sister vessel had drawn a little closer. Nipper got an idea.

"While I'm getting out of these wet things, you'd better heave a rope across to the Penelope. There's no reason why we should drift a mile or two apart during the night. Make it a long rope, so there's plenty of slack. Some of us will have to keep awake, and if the barges get too close, we can ward them off with the oars. There's nothing like sticking together."

Half an hour later, complete peace reigned.

Fully nine-tenths of the juniors were sound asleep—lying down in the holds in all kinds of attitudes. They were not merely physically tired, but mentally exhausted. The strain of the evening and the night had told upon them, and sleep was the best thing.

Only a comparatively few remained on deck, keeping a constant watch, in case of an emergency. The barges were keeping well together, rolling occasionally and smothering themselves with spray. But this was only to be expected. They were river craft, and not fitted for sea voyaging. But if the weather remained as it was, there could be no danger.

And so the night passed, with one or two reliefs for the tired watchers. Soon after dawn, Nipper and Watson and Handforth and Pitt were taking their spell on the Araminta. And they were glad to see the daylight come. The sea had calmed down considerably with the dawn, the wind dropping, and the sun rising out of a cloudless sky.

"By Jingo, it makes you feel good!" said Pitt. "A real spring morning, eh? Just what we needed after that giddy nightmare! It seems to be a good omen for the immediate future!"

"I think we're all right now," said Nipper cheerfully. "We're not more than a couple of miles from the shore, but I don't recognise this coast. We must have drifted fifteen or sixteen miles, I should imagine."

"All the better," said Handforth. "We shall be further from the flood zone—and I've

NEXT WEDNESDAY!**"THE SCHOOLBOY
BARGEES!"**

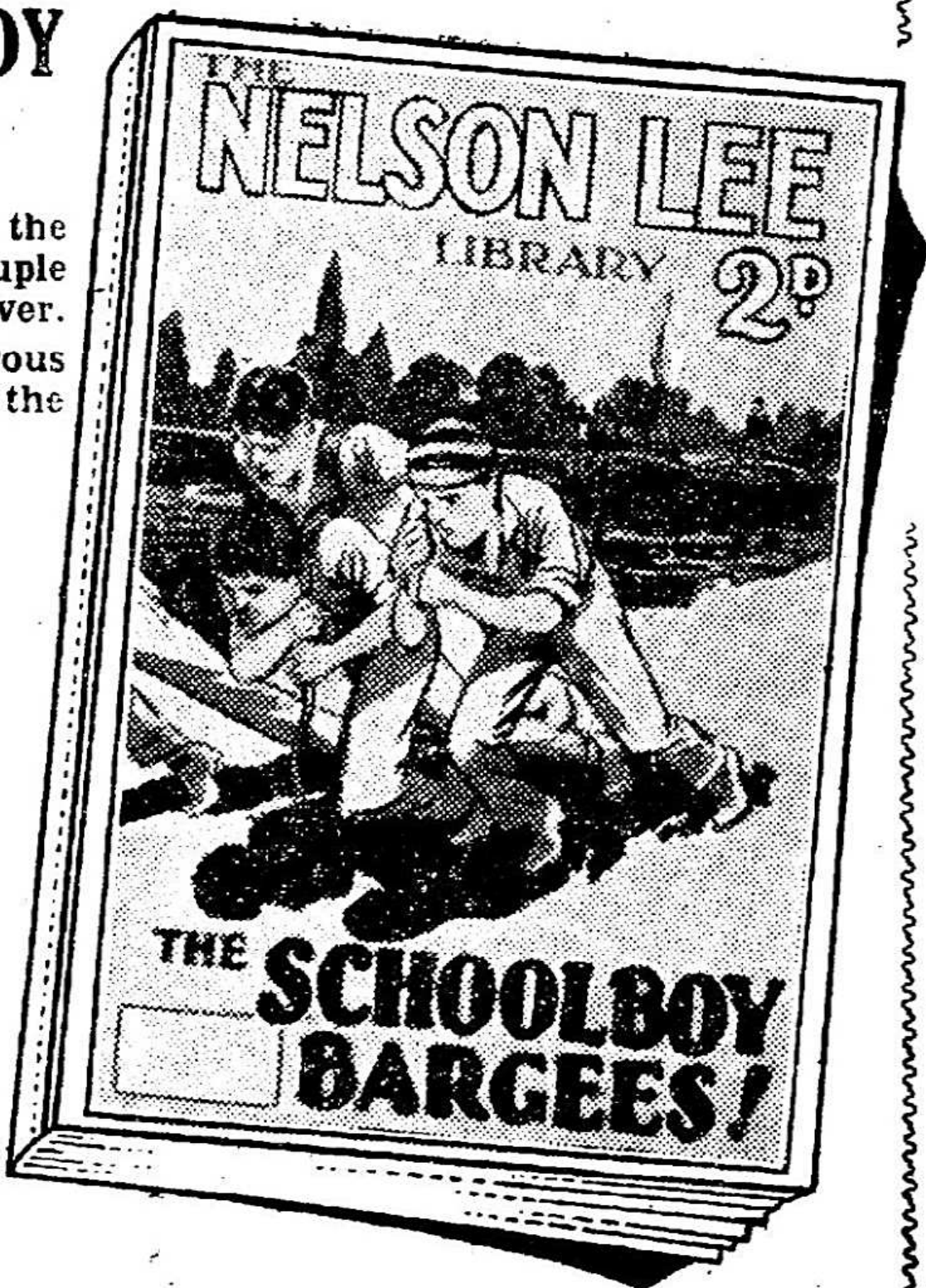
Handy and Co., Nipper, and all the famous juniors in charge of a couple of barges—towing them up the river. It's hard work—and adventurous work, too. Especially when the rightful captains of the barges turn up and try to claim their vessels.

The captains are unlucky—very unlucky! Handy is going to get salvage money for the barges, and no whiskered, bull-roaring barge captain is going to do him out of it!

There are fun and thrills in plenty coming with next week's stunning yarn. Make sure of reading it!

**"THE BURIED
WORLD!"**

Another long, exciting instalment from our amazing adventure serial.

**ORDER IN ADVANCE!**

seen as much of that as I want! I don't want to go back to St. Frank's until everything's normal again."

"It's rummy, when you come to think of it," said Pitt ruminatingly. "Yesterday morning we set out on the ark, as enthusiastic as you like, thinking we were just going two or three miles to Bannington. And this morning we find ourselves out at sea, two or three miles from shore."

"With the ark a mere memory, and a couple of barges as prizes," smiled Nipper. "All the same. I'm not saying anything against the ark. It behaved like a good 'un!"

Handforth looked pleased.

"My ideas generally pan out well," he said modestly. "Not that I expected us to end up in the sea——"

"What-ho! What-ho!" A chirrup came from one of the hatchways. "I mean to say, the good old dawn of another day. Morning, what? Odds spume and spray! Let me obtain a few mouthfuls of ozone, laddies!"

"Help yourself," said Nipper obligingly.

Archie came along the deck, cheerful and smiling. He was looking quite disreputable,

but he had resigned himself to this state of affairs. He, like the others, felt heartily glad at being alive.

"I'm not saying a word against the good old Araminta, mark you," he said, "but, dash it, the good old hold is rather too reminiscent of tar and bilge to appeal to a chappie of delicate upbringing. In other words, I feel the need for a large slab of the morning. Kindly shift up, Handy, old horse, and let me soak in a slice of the breeze."

"You can have all the breeze you want," retorted Handforth. "Which reminds me—the breeze is blowing in the wrong direction. It's hindering us. I shouldn't be surprised if we get to France before long!"

"Not much fear of that," replied Nipper. "We're on the flood tide by this time, and we're getting nearer to the shore. Not that it really matters—because I rather fancy there's rescue in sight."

"Rescue?" shouted Handforth. "Where?" He stared at the coastline.

"I can't see anything!" he ejaculated. "There's a river mouth there, but it's all empty—— Hallo! Isn't that the mouth of the River Nare?"

"Why, so it is!" nodded Nipper. "Go up one, Handy! The River Nare. H'm! That's the river that joins up with the Stowe, about eighteen miles above St. Frank's. They branch off there, and the Stowe goes to Caistowe, and the Nare comes——"

"Blow the Nare!" said Handforth. "What about that rescue?"

Reggie Pitt was already staring out to sea, and he pointed.

"There you are, Handy!" he said.

"By George, fishing smacks!" ejaculated Handforth excitedly. "That's what they are! It's a giddy fishing fleet. Oughtn't we to signal or something?"

They stood looking at the distant boats—four or five of them.

"It's no good yet," replied Nipper. "We'll wait until they get a bit nearer. They're heading in-shore a bit, so they're bound to get closer. It'll be time enough for us to make signals of distress then."

Half an hour later the barges were very different in aspect. Everybody was awake, including Irene & Co.—and, what was more, everybody was on deck. Very little of the decks were visible, for they were swarming with youthful humanity.

The girls were quite cheerful and contented, and were rather pleased that they had come. What a lot they would be able to talk about when they saw their school-fellows again! Irene, of course, had thoroughly recovered. The prompt measures had prevented any possibility of ill effects.

The fishing boats were comparatively close now, and half the fellows were waving wildly, shouting at the top of their voices at the same time. And on the leading fishing boat the skipper was having a word with his mate.

"Barges, Jem—that's what them is!" he said firmly. "Blamed if they ain't river barges, too!"

"Crowded wi' boys!" replied the mate. "Somethin' funny about this, ain't there, Bill?"

"Funny ain't the word!" said the skipper.



CHAPTER 19.

HANDFORTH'S LATEST!

"HEY'RE coming!" said Fatty Little gladly. "Look! They're waving like the dickens! I hope to goodness they've got something to eat on board!"

"You fat ass! They're loaded with fish, I expect," said Church. "You're welcome to a few cod, and one or two sole, if you like, but I'd prefer to wait till I get ashore."

"I'll bet they're Caistowe boats!" said Handforth eagerly. "By George, that would be ripping, wouldn't it? We shall be able to get back and report to Mr. Lee."

"Then everything would be in order," said McClure. "He can see us off in the train, and then our troubles will be ended. But it's too much to expect. Those boats can't be from Caistowe."

"They're Caistowe boats, all right!" put in Nipper. "You can tell that by the initials."

The fishing boats were certainly from Caistowe. They were fairly big craft, all motor driven, and they came chugging along steadily. At their present rate they would arrive within five minutes.

"What about the barges?" asked De Valerie.

"We'll abandon them, of course," said Owen major. "The giddy things are no good to us. I'm sick of barges!"

"Same here!"

"H'm! Seems a bit of a dirty trick to desert the poor beggars after they've served us so well," said Pitt thoughtfully. "I suppose these fishermen will take them in tow?"

"That's about it," said Nipper, nodding. "They'll be after the salvage."

Handforth started.

"Salvage?" he repeated.

"Of course!"

"But you don't mean to say—— Salvage!" ejaculated Handforth absently. "By George! I hadn't thought of that before! I suppose the owners will pay these fishermen a pretty good lump, won't they?"

"Sure to," said Pitt. "They're worth a lot of money."

Handforth went off down the deck, and Church and McClure, recognising some of the familiar symptoms, followed him. Edward Oswald had suddenly developed one of his thoughtful moods. His mighty brain was evidently stirring. And Church and McClure glanced at one another easily.

When Handforth assumed that expression it generally meant trouble. In other words, it meant that he had got hold of some fantastic idea that nothing short of high explosive could shift.

They found him at the stern, staring across at the coast-line.

"That's the River Nare," said Handforth dreamily. "By George!"

"We'll soon be on our way to Caistowe now, Handy," said Church in a chatty way. "Let's be getting ready——"

"Go away!" said Handforth sternly.

"What?"

"I'm thinking!"

"But look here——"

"Clear off!" commanded Handforth. "I came up here to be alone, and I don't need you fatheads buzzing round me like a couple of wasps round a dust-heap."

"We shan't sting you," said McClure. "But aren't you a bit uncomplimentary to yourself, old man?"

"Eh?"

"Well, you practically called yourself a dust-heap."

(Continued on page 34.)



BETWEEN OURSELVES

Mr. Edwy Searles Brooks
chats with his readers.



NOTE.—If any reader writes to me, I shall be pleased to comment upon such remarks as are likely to interest the majority. All letters should be addressed to EDWY SEARLES BROOKS, c/o The Editor, THE NELSON LEE LIBRARY, The Fleetway House, Farringdon Street, London, E.C.4. Every letter will have my personal attention, and all will be acknowledged in these columns. Letters of very special merit will be distinguished by a star, thus*, against the sender's name. Communications which indicate writer's age are naturally easier for me to answer.—E. S. B.

MY hat! There's such a batch of letters to acknowledge this week that I shan't have much room for answers. But all of you who expect an answer, and don't get one, will, I am sure, understand that getting a quart into a pint pot is no harder than getting two pages of answers on to one. And as there's only one page I suppose I had better dry up and get those acknowledgements done.

Gladys Howard (Beckenham), L. B. Chowson* (Durban), R. E. Denyer (Lowestoft), Sydney Smith* (Grimsby), John L. A. Rodgers (Oldham), Gladys Lake* (South Norwood), Maurice J. McGrath* (Fulham), Hilda Schofield (Manchester), J. Wilson (Lambeth), T. R. Somerton (W.1), R. E. Sims (Clapham Junction), Arthur J. Southway (South Farnborough), Terence Sullivan* (two letters—one from Huddersfield, the other from Tufnell Park), Carl Wearing (Manchester), A. Hammonds (Leeds), J. Fred Worrall (Stockport), Solomon Wollenberg (E.1), Nellie Harper (Rotherhithe), W. S. B. (Oldham), James H. Bulmer (Durham), "Fed Up" (Mitcham).

I'm afraid you'll all be the same as that last chap unless I make a pause here, and venture upon one or two comments. We'll begin with "Fed Up," and lump him together with James H. Bulmer, as they both want the same question answered. About binding the Old Paper, you two. My dear chaps, it's the easiest thing in the world. There are plenty of bookbinders in Mitcham and Durham, and you only need to take the volume, or the series (whichever you want bound), and it will be done at very low cost. Quite a good cloth binding ought to be obtainable for a shilling or two, even with gilt lettering. If you want an advertisement put in Our Paper, James H. Bulmer, you really must join the League, the members of which have free facilities in that way.

That advice about joining the League applies equally well to you, Maurice J. McGrath. That was an awfully nice letter

of yours, and I'm sorry I can't put your address in, as you ask. We must treat everybody alike, you know.

George Mackenzie (Burghead), Edward A. J. Cope (Brixton), T. B. Robertson (Edinburgh), Kenneth Smith (Hornsey), A. Webster (Walthamstow), W. Neilson (Durban), Edgar A. Mittelholzer (New Amsterdam), H. J. Johnson* (Melbourne), Lionel Moxom (Leeds), James A. Innes (Port Elizabeth), F. C. Camfield (Wood Green), Julius N. Harris (Merthyr Tydfil), E. Andrews (Penge), George Senior (Streatham), C. H. Tuckey (Southwark), R. H. Argent (Kingsland), John Chambers (Frome), Wilfred J. Lester (Chelsea), Beatrice Chapman (Ilford), J. Hope (South Tottenham), R. Potkin* (Wimbledon), William Fletcher (Wellingboro'), Arthur R. Thomas (Mumbles).

It seems that many other readers have the same complaint as you two, George Senior and W. S. B. You don't like the repetition of the main facts at the beginning of each story when a series is on the go. You say it's all dry, and that you know what has happened before. But isn't that a bit selfish? Supposing you were a new reader, at, say the third story of a series. How would you know what had previously happened unless the events were briefly repeated? And even the regular readers might like to have a reminder after a week's lapse of time. A refresher for the memory is always good. After all, you know, be fair. Have a thought for the new chums who join us every week.

No, R. Potkin, I am *not* the C.O. of the League. Great Scott! Some of you chaps will be mistaking me for the Printer or the Publisher next. Cheerio till next week!

Edwy Searles Brooks



(Continued from page 32.)

"You funny fathead!" said Handforth, turning red. "I didn't mean it that way! I'm thinking of something; I've got a marvellous idea! And I don't want to be pestered!"

"Well, let's hear the idea," said McClure. "Those rescue boats will be here in two minutes, and there's no time——"

"Two minutes!" ejaculated Handforth, looking round. "That means that I shall have to decide quickly. Look here, my sons, I'm going to take you into my confidence," he added mysteriously.

"Good man!" said Church. "Cough it up!"

"Is this barge much damaged?" asked Handforth.

His chums didn't know what he was driving at, but they gave the *Araminta* a swift "once-over."

"Considering everything, she's marvellously sound," replied Mac. "She's got some paint rubbed off her port side, and the starboard deck is a bit battered about where the wall of the barn rested. Otherwise, she hasn't come to much harm."

"In other words, she's practically as good as new?"

"Well, yes."

"Good!" said Handforth with satisfaction. "The *Penelope* is in just as good a condition. These barges are worth a lot of money. The owners will pay big salvage for them. Two or three thousand pounds, at least."

His chums stared at him, aghast.

"Two or three thousand pounds!" yelled Church.

"Well, a couple of hundred, anyway," amended Handforth.

"That's a big drop in one swoop, isn't it?" asked McClure sarcastically.

"Well, how do I know how much salvage they'll pay?" said Handforth. "Don't ask silly questions. I don't know what barges are worth, but I'm jolly certain that the salvage on this pair will be jolly well worth having. And why the dickens should these fishermen grab it?"

"They'll tow them to Caistowe——"

"Will they?" retorted Handforth. "Not while I'm alive!"

"What the dickens——"

"That's my idea!" said Handforth triumphantly. "Why should we abandon these barges? We salvaged them from the flood in

the first place, and if we return them to the owners, we naturally get the cash. My scheme is for us to stay on board and take the barges back to port. Then we collar the salvage, and everything in the garden will be lovely!"

Handforth was feeling the effects of the bright, sunny morning—the effects of the confidence that had come with the new day. And the very thought of handing over these barges to a lot of strange fishermen, who didn't deserve any salvage whatever, positively hurt him.

"You're mad!" said Church at last.

"Clean off your rocker!" agreed McClure.

"All right!" retorted Handforth coldly. "I'm going straight to Dick Hamilton, and I'm going to put the whole idea before him."

"You couldn't do better!" said his chums with relief. "It'll take Nipper about one second to slaughter it!"

Handforth pushed down the deck, and sought out Nipper. And Nipper, at that moment, was gathering a group of fellows round him.

"Listen, you chaps," he was saying keenly. "I've got an idea. Why should we hand over these barges to the fishermen? Why not salve them ourselves, and finish the adventure in style?"

Handforth nearly fainted.



CHAPTER 20.

SALVAGE!

WHAT?"

"Salve the barges!"

Handforth recovered himself rapidly as he heard the excited shouts. He went very red in the face, and rushed forward.

"That's my idea!" he bawled.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"I tell you it's mine!" hooted Handforth excitedly.

"It's quite true," grinned Church. "He's just been telling us about it. We thought it was dotty! But, of course, if Nipper gives it the O.K., it must be a top-holer."

Handforth glared at his two chums.

"Oh!" he said thickly. "So if I think of an idea, it's dotty, is it? And when Nipper thinks of the same idea, it's a top-holer? You—you faithless traitors! You snakes in the grass! You——"

"Chuck it, Handy!" said Nipper hastily. "There's not much time to decide—those fishing boats are here, and they're sending a dinghy across. We've got to settle this thing at once, so that we can be prepared."

"Well, my idea is to take the barges back ourselves," said Handforth breathlessly. "If there's any salvage going, I don't see why we shouldn't bone it for ourselves."

"Filletted salvage, so to speak," said Pitt dryly.

(Continued on page 42.)

FIGHTING A GIANT!**THRILLS BELOW THE OCEAN!**

THE BURIED WORLD!

By LIONEL DAY



**MORE EXCITING CHAPTERS OF OUR
POWERFUL ADVENTURE SERIAL!**

INTRODUCTION.

Jim Maitland lives in a small shop in Stagmore. A mysterious man named Stanislaus Cripps owes money to the shop, and Jim determines to collect it. He climbs over the wall of Widgery Dene—Cripps' estate—and drops into the grounds. There he finds an amazing machine which is something between a submarine and an airship. Mr. Cripps is on board and Jim asks him for the money. The man refuses to pay, and before Jim realises it he finds the machine in the air! It travels half over the world, then dives into the ocean. It reaches the bottom, and then, instead of resting on the bed continues going downwards! It is then floating on the surface of an underground river, and Mr. Cripps explains that there must be a sort of leak in the ocean bed and they are being sucked down to the centre of the earth. They stop the machine and come on deck. But

as they appear they are captured by several amazing giants who fall on them from the shore. Jim escapes and later saves the life of a little man called Masra. In return Masra and his daughter Tinta let him live with them. Jim finds himself among a colony of dwarf men, who are called the Kru people. They live in a vast cavern and are at enmity with the Giants—a race that is dying out. One day Jim sees a light flashing. It is Mr. Cripps signalling in Morse with his torch. He is still a prisoner, and is going to be put to death in four days. Jim determines to find the submarine and rescue him. Masra and Tinta decide to accompany him. To do this Masra has to desert from the Kru people. This he does by a strange ceremony. He hurls his spear at a rock, at the same time chanting words in the Kru tongue, which Jim can now understand.

(Now read on.)

A Desperate Signal!

THE Flying Submarine was resting on a smooth surface of rock. It measured two hundred yards from stem to stern and rose at its centre to a height of three hundred feet. Even in that moment of tense anxiety, Jim's mind was filled with the wonder of Stanislaus Cripps' invention.

He had found it again, and now all that was needed was to get on board and carry out the

instructions he had received for its navigation. With a cry of delight he rushed towards it, calling excitedly to Tinta and Masra.

"We're saved!" he shouted. "We've found the Flying Submarine!"

Racing at the top of his speed, he reached the spot in less than four minutes, Tinta and her father following close at his heels. But when at last he reached the vessel, touched the cold metal sides and stood in the shadow of its great bulk, a feeling of utter despair swept over him.

"Krim, what is the matter? Is not this that which you sought?"

Jim turned with haggard face and haunted eyes to Tinta, who had crept to his side and was regarding him with an anxious expression. How could he tell her the appalling truth? She and her father had exile themselves for ever from the homes of their people to help him find the Flying Submarine, relying on his word that once they had found it they would be masters of this buried world, and now, when they had found it, he had to confess that he hadn't the slightest idea how to get on board.

Somehow he had always figured the Flying Submarine as he had seen it last—floating on the lake, its deck almost flush with the surface of the water. It would have been so easy to step aboard in such circumstances. But the Flying Submarine, lying cast up on the land, was a very different proposition to tackle.

The deck, with its port hole that gave admission to the pilot house, was three hundred feet above his head—just sixty-five feet less than the dome of St. Paul's would have been for him if he had stood on the top of Ludgate Hill.

In that case he might have been able to climb, after much labour, to the summit of St. Paul's dome, had he been an acrobat or a steeplejack; but even the most skilled climber would have found the smooth, bellying sides of the Flying Submarine an impossibility.

When he had first seen the Flying Submarine, Stanislaus Cripp had been loading stores into her hold through a doorway immediately situated at the base of her great curved sides. But where was that doorway?

Realising the necessity for action, he turned from Tinta and began to feel along the smooth sides of the ship in the vain hope of discovering that door. To the naked eye it appeared as if there were no break in that solid mass of moulded metal.

And yet there was a door there. It was through an opening in that side that he had pursued Stanislaus Cripps in his determination to get a settlement of his mother's account for sixteen and fivepence-halfpenny. But he couldn't find it; and even if he did find it, he reflected, he did not know how to open it. All he remembered was that it opened outwards, but he looked in vain for any trace of a hinge on that smooth surface.

It was useless to try to explain to Tinta the predicament in which he found himself. He knew nothing of doors and nothing of the complicated mechanism which controlled the Flying Submarine.

It was in his mind that perhaps he might reach one of the blades of the propeller and pull himself aboard; but he realised the hopelessness of that plan as soon as he gained the end of the vessel. The beautifully-shaped, pointed bow was just one hundred and fifty feet above his head. Huge as the blade of the propeller was, it was still a hundred and thirty feet beyond his reach.

He looked despairingly at his watch. Of the twenty minutes that had remained before the coming of the Great Light, there were only fourteen left. What was he to do? To discover unaided the secret of that door was out of the question.

Only the inventor of the Flying Submarine knew how it was manipulated. If only he could communicate with Stanislaus Cripps! But the probability was that he was already awaiting death on the sacrificial stone. There was no other possible solution, however, of the problem—no other course that he could take.

Looking back, he saw that on their journey they had been moving in a curve. Now he found that from where he stood he was half-facing the great idol. He could see that huge, carven

figure with its great face staring down at him from the blue shadows of the vast vault. There was the sacrificial stone.

Of the Falta, not one was to be seen. He took hope at that discovery. If the giants had not assembled, then the probability was that their victim was still in his cage. He fingered the catch of his lamp. For some dreadful seconds there was no reply.

And then, with an intensity of relief that almost brought the tears to his eyes, he saw the answering signal. Stanislaus Cripps was still in his cage—still at liberty to communicate with him.

"How open door?"

He dared not waste time over any details describing the finding of the Flying Submarine.

"Button—Keel—"

The flashes stopped abruptly. From the distance it seemed to him that he could hear a growl of rage, and at the same moment he saw the vast figures of the Falta rise in serried ranks about the sacrificial stone.

In the Grip of a Giant!

"**B**UTTON. Keel." The two words rang in Jim's head. He remembered now that, in order to allow the Flying Submarine to rest on the ground without straining her structure, two keels were fixed on her sides at an angle. They were huge strips of metal, about twelve feet broad, and Jim recalled how Stanislaus Cripps, amongst the enormous amount of information he had hurled at him during their brief journey together, had described how these keels were constructed on some ingenious buffer plan by which they absorbed the shock of any forced, or clumsy, landing.

There was a button in the keel which, when pressed, opened the door. He had got the information he wanted; all that remained was to turn it to account.

Thrusting the torch into his pocket, he swung round to race back the hundred yards that separated him from where he had left Tinta and Masra.

Even as he did so, a sight met his eyes which quenched instantly the flame of hope that had begun to burn in his heart. Striding towards his unwitting companions from behind was one of the giants. Jim could see those blazing eyes and the vast, bulbous, slobbering lips. A great arm was stretched out; and at that his trance of terror was broken, and he cried out at the top of his voice.

"Tinta—Masra—a Falta—a Falta!"

But even as he uttered those words and sprang forward, that great hand closed about the figures of the man and the girl. He saw Tinta make a violent effort to unsling the liquid fire apparatus that she carried over her shoulder, and the giant, as if anticipating her intentions, tear it away with his disengaged hand.

The Falta was glowering down at them, the point of his great thumb almost covering one side of Tinta's pretty face. Realising that he was utterly powerless in his present position to help them—that until he could get aboard the Flying Submarine he could do nothing—Jim slipped under the bottom of the machine. Even as he did so he heard Tinta's despairing voice.

"Krim! Oh, Krim!"

Almost it sounded as if she were accusing him of having deserted her! The boy forced back the mad despair that threatened to rob him of all power of action. His only hope was to get aboard the Flying Submarine.

For ninety yards he raced under the curved

bottom of the great vessel, until he reached a spot where he saw the keels approaching their contact with the ground. Now he knew he was courting death. He must slip out of his place of concealment and face the giant.

With his heart pounding painfully against his ribs, he slid under the keel. The first thing he saw on coming out into the open was the giant's great right foot. The sight almost unnerved him. Only by refusing to look up—by desperately turning his back on that threatening danger—was he able to attempt the task which must be done. There was just a hope that, standing so near him he might avoid the giant's notice, just as an insect might crawl safely at a man's feet without being observed. Resolutely he turned his face to the keel, sliding his trembling fingers along it until he felt a little lump in that smooth surface.

It was the button he sought!

He touched it, and instantly an aperture appeared in the great bellying sides of the Flying Submarine. With a gasp of immense relief he flung himself through that doorway.

As he did so he heard a little whining grunt. Something clutched at his legs. He swung round swiftly. The giant had thrust his hand through the opening and the top joints of his fingers closed about his boots.

He tugged with all his might, but the powerful prehensile upper joints of that vast hand held their grip. Was everything going to be lost just at the moment when he had recovered possession of the Flying Submarine? He was being dragged towards the threshold of the door.

And at that desperate moment, the Fates, that had been so unkind, intervened to save him. Even as he was being dragged across the floor, his fingers came into contact with a weapon lying there.

It was an ordinary, homely axe, which Stanislaus Cripps had used to open the cases and casks which held his food supplies. Jim gripped the handle, and, reaching round, struck viciously with all his strength at the giant's wrist. He felt the metal bite into the flesh; he heard a little slobbering whine of pain, and then the grip on his foot was released.

He jumped up and, still with the axe in his hand, raced for the staircase. Even as he began to ascend that spiral he shouted encouragement to Tinta, hoping that his words would reach the girl's ears.

"I'll save you, Tinta. I'm coming to help you!"

To ascend three hundred feet by a flight of stairs at any great speed is a feat of considerable physical endurance. By the time he had reached the pilot house, Jim was dizzy and almost blind with the violent beating of his heart. But he was there—there at last.

The long search had ended!

Jim glanced at his watch. There were just three minutes left—three minutes in which to set the Flying Submarine floating in the air, rescue Tinta and Masra and speed to the aid of Stanislaus Cripps.

He braced himself for the final effort. His brain now was curiously lucid as he turned and faced the switchboard. Stanislaus Cripps' instructions were clearly imprinted on his mind. Very cautiously he moved the left-hand lever. The hand of a dial immediately in front of him began to gyrate. He saw that it registered fifty. That meant that he was fifty feet above the ground.

He glanced at the surface of the white-topped table on which the periscope recorded all that lay below the vessel. He had a vision of the giant's face looking up with a kind of hopeless perplexity. He could see Tinta, with her hands

before her eyes, and Masra, held in that giant grip. Jim clenched his teeth. Now was the moment for vengeance.

Back to the Idol!

VERY carefully Jim moved back the lever that controlled the air reservoirs. He saw the hand of the dial register forty feet. He estimated exactly the distance he had had to move the lever for each of those descents of ten feet.

With a jerk he thrust the lever back a corresponding space. The Flying Submarine sank suddenly beneath his feet. There was a slight jar. Swinging round he stared at the periscope record. The sight he saw filled his heart with elation.

Like a blacksmith's hammer, with that last drop, the Flying Submarine had struck the giant on the crown of the head, smashing it like an eggshell. He saw the Colossus reel and his legs sag.

The next moment he was lying stretched prone upon the ground. Without waiting a moment, Jim clambered up the ladder that led through the aperture in the roof of the pilot house and gained the deck. Leaning over the rail, he was just in time to see Tinta and Masra struggle from the giant's death grip.

"Tinta—Masra!" he called. "I'm coming down. You must climb in through the hole you will see. You must be quick, because I have to save my friend."

Without another word he bolted back to the pilot house and, pushing the lever to its zero point, felt the huge vessel alight on the ground. He had a vision of Tinta and Masra, as portrayed by the shadows on the white-topped table, racing towards the side of the Submarine. With his watch in his hand he waited a few moments, and then sent the Flying Submarine up into the air.

Of that crowded twenty minutes which had elapsed since his first finding of the Flying Submarine, fifty seconds remained—fifty seconds in which to get to the place of sacrifice and rescue Stanislaus Cripps from the clutches of the Falta's high priest!

Jim swung over the right-hand lever. Instantly the engines sprang into life and the great propeller began to revolve.

Taking his stand by the periscope table, he manipulated the small wheel which controlled the rudder. In a flash it seemed he had passed over that boulder-strewn ground which they had covered with such toil and labour. Now, just below him, he could see the foreshortened outline of that demon idol.

He stopped the engines, but in his experience he had forgotten the tremendous way the vessel had gathered. In a fraction of a second she had shot past the spot.

He turned her in a graceful curve, and, recalling the mistake he had made, let her slide back through the air under her own momentum. Gradually the idol came once more into view. Slower and slower the Flying Submarine moved. Now he could see the fringe of the sacrificial stone and the serried ranks of the Falta standing there, their great hands raised above their heads as it in adoration. From the open port-hole above his head came a cry like the screaming of sea-gulls.

Now, in the shadow-record, Jim could see immediately below him the white head of the high priest. He was standing there in the centre of that big, crowded space, even as he had been pictured in that mural painting that the boy had inspected. He was looking upwards, not at the great vessel, but at that faint pinprick of

light far above, which Jim had once thought a star. In one hand he held the protesting, struggling figure of Stanislaus Cripps.

Jim could see the familiar long, red, shaggy beard which flowed in a cascade over the giant's hand. The Falta high priest was standing in a posture of attention, a knife held at Stanislaus Cripps' throat, waiting as if for some signal from above. Grimly Jim told himself he should have that signal.

Estimating the high priest's height as twenty feet, Jim determined to repeat the manoeuvre which had already been so successful in rescuing Tinta and Masra. Swinging the air control lever back till it was almost at zero, he caused the Flying Submarine to descend swiftly, and then, moving the lever in the opposite direction again, he abruptly restored the vessel's buoyancy.

The effect was very much the same as that of a rubber ball bounced on the ground. He felt a slight jar, and then as the Flying Submarine sprang upwards again, the record on the white-topped table showed him the Falta high priest lying prone on the sacrificial stone, and the little figure of Stanislaus Cripps clambering for all he was worth up the legs of the idol.

At the same moment, Jim saw something else—something that amazed him. Suddenly, from far away above him a ray of vivid golden light streamed downwards. It lit first the monstrous face of the idol, turning it into a mask of horror.

Then it began to pass slowly down the full extent of that huge graven figure, illuminating, as if it had been a searchlight, the enormous arms, the massive folded hands, and finally its feet. Another moment, and in the very centre of the sacrificial stone was lit up like the stage of a theatre. But only for a moment.

The next instant the beam of light had traversed the stone, and, following the axis of that ellipse, in which the vast cavern was shaped, had passed right across the Buried World, traversed the waters of the lake, shone for a moment on the glittering cliffs beyond, and then abruptly vanished, leaving behind the dull blue, phosphorescent atmosphere!

Foiling the Falta:

Jim watched this phenomenon, spell-bound, until it had disappeared, and then he awoke to the situation with which he had to grapple. During the passage of that beam of light, the Falta had stood with bowed heads about the sacrificial stone, seeming so motionless that they might have been vast, graven statues, that they had been unconscious of the Fate that had overtaken their high-priest; or, perhaps the regulations governing this mysterious rite, forbade them to move until the passing of the great light. But as that beam vanished, they seemed suddenly to spring into movement.

Again there rose that cry like the screaming of seagulls. As if moved by one common impulse, they swarmed on to the sacrificial stone where the high priest lay crushed, the blood streaming from his battered head. The Falta crowded about his figure looking stupidly into one another's faces.

Then one of them must have caught a glimpse of Stanislaus Cripps, who was in vain attempting to climb the legs of the idol. For, reaching out his hand, he scooped him up like a man catches a fly crawling on a wall.

Jim could hear that indignant, booming voice, and it made him realise that his task was not yet accomplished. Moving the air control lever, he began to descend slowly. He had no desire to take more life than was absolutely necessary. Now that those last desperate moments had passed, when he had been forced to act, and

act swiftly, he shrank from the spilling of blood.

Singling out the giant who had taken Stanislaus Cripps in his hand, he allowed the Flying Submarine to settle on his head like some enormous beetle. For a moment the Falta seemed unconscious of its presence. Gradually Jim filled the reservoirs with air. As the weight on his head increased, the giant stooped, looking up dazedly. The next instant, with a little whimpering cry, he had dropped Stanislaus Cripps and had leapt off the sacrificial stone.

The Flying Submarine, released abruptly from its support, descended swiftly a few feet, until its buoyancy asserted itself, and during this descent it played havoc with the massed ranks of the Falta. The giants were sent reeling right and left.

As they fled, panic-stricken, they put up their hands and thrust at this strange portent that had come among them, causing the vessel to gyrate wildly. The next instant the sacrificial stone was deserted, save for one strangely small figure that stood there looking upwards, gesticulating wildly.

Jim moved the air control lever back to its zero point, allowing the Flying Submarine to settle gently on the sacrificial stone. Almost immediately, from below, there floated up the spiral staircase that familiar booming voice that Jim had never expected to hear again.

"Splendid, boy—splendid. I congratulate you!"

He rushed to the head of the stairs. In a few seconds Stanislaus Cripps' head and shoulders became visible.

He was walking slowly and breathing heavily, and when at last he reached the pilot house, he sank exhausted on the floor, leaning with his back against the wall, his red beard rising and falling with the movements of his lungs.

"Obesity, boy! Another month and I must have died of fatty degeneration! Now I know exactly how a chicken that is being fattened for market must feel."

He treated Jim to a friendly grin. Looking at him the boy noticed that he had in truth become enormously fat. A huge double chin protruded over his collar—which was quite the filthiest collar he ever remembered having seen—and his body seemed to be bursting through his worn tweed suit.

"Their idea seems to have been that when they gave their god a meal, it should be a good one—especially as they were going to dine off the victim themselves," he exclaimed calmly, in reply to Jim's look of inquiry. "I've been stuffed, boy."

He recovered himself presently and scrambled to his feet.

"You've managed wonderfully, boy. Your conduct affords an excellent illustration of what can be accomplished by mental concentration. I confess that when, a few minutes ago, I saw your signal, I thought you were going to be too late— But we can talk of all that when I have bathed and shaved and put on some clean clothes."

He glanced at the open port-hole in the roof.

"Better close that, boy. If any of these hypertrophied beings were to recover from their fright and come back, they might start throwing rocks; and if one did drop in there, it might do considerable damage."

He touched an electric button, and the great screw cap, that had remained in its place on deck all those months, slipped back into the aperture, and, revolving slowly, screwed itself into position. Stanislaus Cripps grinned at Jim.

"Now that the front door and the back door are both closed, I think I can go and attend to my toilet in safety."

OH, WHAT FUN!

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"Would you like me to cook you something, sir?" Jim inquired.

Stanislaus Cripps shuddered.

"Don't, boy! You're as inconsiderate as the steward who asked the sea-sick passenger if he would like a nice fat pork chop. I don't want to see food for days. I have been consuming, under compulsion, ten times as many carbohydrates and proteids as the human body requires. I must fast, boy."

Following him down the spiral staircase, Jim heard him turning on the water in the bath-room—an apartment differing only from the ordinary everyday bath-room in certain particulars.

The bath was on a level with the floor, and the bather descended into it by steps. The water was obtained from the reservoirs on board, which acted partly as ballast.

It was heated by electricity by an ingenious adaption of the geyser system.

Leaving Stanislaus Cripps to his ablutions, of which he obviously stood in so much need, and mentally determining to follow his example as soon as possible, Jim raced down the spiral staircase.

Stanislaus Cripps must have switched on the lights, for each floor was flooded with illumination—a glare which Jim found somewhat trying after the many months he had spent in the blue, subdued light of the Buried World. Reaching the head of the last flight, he looked down into the store-room.

An utterly unexpected scene met his eyes. Side by side, prone upon the floor, lay Masra and Tinta, with their hands clasped about their foreheads. For a moment Jim thought something must have happened to them—that possibly they had received some serious injury from the giant's rough handling, and overcome by pain and exhaustion, had dropped fainting to the floor.

"Tinta," he called, in a voice of apprehension.

To his immeasurable relief he saw the girl stir and raise her face, that looked even more strangely bleached now in the glare of the electric light. He could see a kind of horror in her dark eyes as she met his gaze. He rushed down the remaining steps and, gaining her side, dropped on his knees.

"Tinta—oh, Tinta! What is the matter? Are you hurt? Did that beastly Falta do you any injury?"

He had put his arms about her protectingly, and she cuddled closer to him, slipping her hard, warm little hand into his.

"Oh, Krim, I am afraid. Suddenly there came the Great Light, and it does not pass. It stays here. Oh, Krim, what does it mean?"

The Scientist's Plans.

S UDDENLY Jim understood, and an almost uncontrollable desire to laugh seized upon him. Of course, these Kru people had never seen electric light before. They were accustomed only to the glow of their coal fires and the perpetual blue dusk of the Inner Cavern. No wonder they had been frightened when Stanislaus Cripps had switched on the electric light.

"It is a light that we make ourselves—like your fires, Tinta. You are quite safe. Look—I will show you!"

He helped her to her feet and led her across the floor to where, on the wall, there was a switch which controlled the electric light in the store-room.

"Look, Tinta, I have only to push that up and out goes the light."

He raised the switch. As the store-room was plunged in darkness, he heard Tinta give a little cry of surprise.

"Masra," she called, "Masra! There is nothing we need fear. Krim can do as he will with the great light."

Masra, who could see more easily in the darkness, rose and came towards them.

"These are marvellous things, Krim. You must be a great magician. Where do you keep the Great Light?"

Jim realised that it was useless to attempt to make any explanation that would involve a description of how the electric light was generated.

"We make it as you make your fires, Masra, only we have learnt the art of storing it up. Look—you have only to pull that down, and you will see that you yourself can control the light."

Very gingerly Masra pulled the switch down, and his delight was intense when the powerful arc lamps in the ceiling scattered the darkness. When they had amused themselves for some time switching the light on and off, Jim asked them if they were hungry.

"We have lost the bag with the food," Tinta exclaimed despondently. "The Falta tore it from Masra's hand and we had no time to look for it."

"There's plenty of food on board, Tinta. Come along with me and I'll show you how we cook it."

Having found a tinned tongue—it bore a gummed label with the legend "Maitland, General Stores, Stagmore," which gave his heart a little queer twist—he cut some rashers of bacon.

Then he led the way up the spiral stairs, listening with a curious feeling of pleasure to Tinta's cries of amazement.

In the kitchen he showed her the electrical cooking apparatus, and made her sit by his side while he fried the bacon. Ten minutes later they were seated in the dining-room, devouring the tinned tongue and the bacon with ship's biscuits, washed down with cups of tea.

To the two Kru people, accustomed though they were to the practice of the culinary art, the food they were eating was a delightful mystery. Tinta especially licked her lips over the sugar that she found in the bottom of her teacup. It was the first sugar she had ever tasted.

"It is good, Krim," she exclaimed.

Jim was laughingly placing lump after lump in her mouth, when the door opened and Stanislaus Cripps appeared. He had shaved those portions of his cheeks that were not usually covered with hair. He had trimmed his red beard to its customary proportions, and he was wearing a brand new tweed suit of plus fours, that were obviously part of the stock that he had obtained on credit from various confiding tradesmen, for he had forgotten to remove the cardboard label stitched to the knickerbockers and coat. While Tinta and Masra stared at him in astonishment, Jim hastily rose to make the necessary introductions.

"This is Masra, and this is Tinta," he exclaimed, then, adding in the Kru language: "This is my friend whom I came to find."

As Tinta and Masra bowed gravely, with that dignity which characterised all their movements, Jim hastily explained where the visitors came from, and how he had come in touch with them. When he related the circumstances under which Masra and Tinta had left the Inner Cavern, thereby exiling themselves from home for ever in order to help him in his search for the Flying Submarine, Stanislaus Cripps took one of Masra's hands and shook it as if it were a pump-handle, clapping him, at the same time, on the back, and then, putting his arm about Tinta, kissed her on the forehead.

"I owe a great many debts, ninety-nine per cent of which I have no intention of ever paying, but this is one which I will repay if it lies in

my power. You two—I cannot get hold of your names just yet—have not only done a service to the boy here, but you have conferred an inestimable boon upon the scientific world, which would have suffered an irreparable blow had Stanislaus Cripps been sacrificed by that witless, white-haired, hypertrophied idiot."

He spoke with such vehemence, making such violent gestures with his arms, that all the chairs in the room rose in the air like leaves on an autumn day. Removing one that settled foolishly on his shoulder, he placed it under him and sat down.

"I'm glad you made use of your opportunities, boy, and acquired the language of these people. It will be of assistance to me when we visit the Inner Cavern. For myself, during the long months of my confinement, I have made some interesting studies of the Falta language. In the pocket of my other coat I have about two hundred pages of notes dealing with their language on the basis of comparative philology. Now that I shall have ample opportunity to study such archaeological remains as are available, I have every hope of establishing an important theory which I have formed as to the origin of this people."

He fingered his big red beard, and, forgetful of the fact that he was speaking to two of the Kru people, who were incapable of understanding a word he said, and to a boy, who was not even able to comprehend one out of every ten of the hard, scientific words he used, he proceeded to give a lecture.

Jim could only stare at him open-mouthed. Here was a man who had been kept caged up for many months in that nightmare world, fed under compulsion by those enormous giants for an end which he had always apparently known, who had just escaped by a hair's-breadth from an appalling death, and yet seemed quite untouched by these experiences. Either his nerves were so tough, or else his mind dwelt on a plane beyond material things Jim reflected, so that nothing had the power to cause him a moment's uneasiness. He treated life and death with the same indifference that he treated his creditors.

But one alarming fact Jim did extract from that lecture. Stanislaus Cripps referred again and again, with the same kind of pleasure that a hungry man talks about food, to the investigations he intended to make.

"We will sift this problem of the Buried World to the very bottom, boy. We will leave no stone unturned until we have found a solution to this mystery. Fortunately, owing to my foresight, we are well supplied with stores."

Jim could no longer keep back the cry of disappointment and despair that rose to his lips.

"But, Mr. Cripps, can't we go back? Surely we've suffered enough here already. Can't we find a way out?"

Stanislaus Cripps stared at him as if he thought he was temporarily deranged.

"Nerves, boy! You want a long rest! Too young, and not tough enough. Otherwise you wouldn't make such an absurd proposal. When we want to go, we can go. The road is open. When I was being held by that peculiarly objectionable Falta, who acted, apparently, as high priest—if it hadn't been for my beard, boy, the knife which he held very carelessly, might have cut my throat—I made some calculations on certain very interesting phenomena that I was able to observe."

He dropped once more into the lectures. Jim gathered that even at the moment when he was in danger of being sacrificed—when the sacrificial knife indeed was at his throat—his scientific detachment was so complete that he had made certain elaborate calculations. The light that had so puzzled Jim was simply a ray of the sun.

Apparently the walls of this cavernous world were like a huge rocky funnel. Six miles above them, the end of this funnel thrust itself into the air. On a certain day, once in the year, the earth, in its passage through space, brought the end of that funnel immediately under the sun, so that a ray was projected into the vaulted, azure atmosphere of this underworld. The Flying Submarine had only to be made sufficiently buoyant to rise and pass through that funnel into the world above.

"Our way of retreat is safe, boy. When we have acquired all the data we need, we will set out on our homeward journey, but not until then. And we will take with us, boy, the money that I have always needed. Here is gold in abundance—the cage in which I was kept was made of gold—the vessels in which the Falta cook their food are constructed of gold. We shall be richer than Croesus!"

Suddenly his face widened into a grin.

"And, boy, in consideration of the great service you did me, I will pay you the sixteen and five-pence halfpenny that you inform me, rightly or wrongly, I owe your mother."

He sprang to his feet, pushed the chair under the table, and stretched out both his arms.

"Now to work! We must anchor the Flying Submarine, boy, in case the Falta get it. We must take arms with us, and food. In my spare time at Widgery Dene, I constructed some interesting lethal weapons out of my metal. They will enable us to deal with any Falta we may meet. While I am finding a safe anchorage, you will oblige me, boy, by looking out a coil of rope somewhere among the stores. There is an anchor there too, which we shall need."

Without giving Jim a chance of protesting, he rushed out of the dining-room and bolted upstairs to the pilot house. As Jim turned, with a hopeless gesture, to Tinta and Masra, the girl laid her hand upon his arm.

"Oh, Krim, he is very ugly, but he is very great."

Jim, as he made his way to the store-room, reflected that that was, after all, not a bad estimate of Stanislaus Cripps. He was engaged in looking out the coils of rope for the anchor, when he was joined by his eccentric companion.

Opening a panel in the wall, Stanislaus Cripps displayed before the boy's eyes an amazing collection of articles constructed of his wonderful metal. Some of them were enormous machines that looked like whippet tanks—others were obviously lethal weapons of some kind.

Stanislaus Cripps made a selection of some fifty different objects from this collection, and taking them in his arms bolted back to the pilot house. Following, Jim found that the Flying Submarine had been moved from the sacrificial stone to a place some five miles away.

Lowering it to within some thirty feet of the ground, Stanislaus Cripps went on deck, and payed out the joined-up lengths of rope with the anchor at the end.

"You and your friends, boy, must slide down the rope and make fast the anchor. I will then lower the stores and follow you."

Having carried out these instructions and reached the ground, they fixed the anchor beneath a great boulder. Seeing that it was fast, Stanislaus Cripps raised the vessel until the rope was taut. Next he lowered the stores and that collection of glistening metal objects, and finally, swinging himself over the side, began to descend.

He had almost reached the bottom when, from somewhere in the gloom above, there came a sound like the roar of twelve eighteen-inch guns.

The next instant there fell upon them a shower of almost boiling rain. Pushing Tinta before him, Jim dived into cover under one of the boulders. Even as he did so he heard a cry of rage from Stanislaus Cripps. He saw that he had reached the ground, having dropped the last ten feet. Now, oblivious of that boiling cascade, he was looking upwards, his fists clenched.

There floating tantalisingly out of reach, was the anchor which he had jerked out of its place!

The Flying Submarine had escaped!

(This is a terrible disaster! Without the Flying Submarine Jim and the others would have no chance of ever getting back to the upper world! Look out for more thrills next week, and don't forget to order your copy of the NELSON LEE LIBRARY in advance!)

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(Continued from page 34.)

"This is no time for cheap humour!" frowned Handforth. "Here are these two barges, and there's no danger now. I suggest that we stay on board and pilot them back to Caistowe."

"That's just what I was going to suggest," nodded Nipper.

"Not for me!" said Owen major firmly. "I'm fed up!"

"Hear, hear!"

"It's a rotten idea, Nipper!"

"We want to go home; we're sick of this business!"

Handforth turned on the speakers witheringly.

"You—you spineless fatheads!" he shouted.

"They've been boned, too, then!" murmured Pitt.

"Leave 'em alone, Handy," said Nipper. "I don't blame them—they've had plenty of excitement. We shan't need more than a couple of dozen for this job, and I fancy we shall get more volunteers than that."

"Rather!"

"I'm game!"

"Absolutely! What- ho!"

There were plenty of eager assents.

"But it won't be such a simple matter," said De Valerie. "With only two oars on each barge, and about fifteen miles of sea to cover, it couldn't be done. These motor fishing boats can tow them easily, though, and I think it would be better to come to some arrangement——"

"No fear!" interrupted Nipper. "I'm just as keen on this thing as Handforth is. We're on the flood tide, and we're drifting towards the shore all the time. The River Nare is practically opposite—and the River Nare leads into the Stowe. Why shouldn't we let everybody go who wants to go, and then drift ashore? We can then work the barges up the Nare in the ordinary way—using tow-ropes. A dozen of us could easily haul a single barge. And think of the fun—acting as bargees for once!"

"A somewhat juicy scheme!" agreed Archie, nodding. "I mean to say, I've always thought it must be priceless to be one of those bargee chappies!"

"But what about the floods?" demanded De Valerie.

"The Nare isn't flooded," replied Nipper. "At least, not to speak of. It's not in the flood zone. And by the time we have got

the barges to the junction of the Stowe we shall be going down stream."

"There you are!" said Handforth triumphantly, as though he had mapped the whole thing out himself. "Now what have you got to say?"

"We'll come!" said Pitt promptly. "We'll chance it!"

"Hear, hear!"

"Any girls allowed?" said Irene.

Nipper grinned.

"I'm afraid there won't be enough accommodation, girls," he replied. "Awfully sorry, but I don't see how it could be done. Besides, Miss Broome is probably worrying herself ill over you, even as it is."

"Don't make us feel bad by reminding us of Miss Broome!" complained Irene. "Oh, well, I suppose you're right. All the same, we envy you!"

And so it was arranged. Only just in time, for the dinghy had already reached the Penelope, and the men in her had been talking to Buster Boots and a group of other juniors for some time, and had, indeed, learned the main facts. But if the fishermen were expecting to seize these barges, and triumphantly tow them back to Caistowe, they had counted without their hosts.

The men were practically compelled to rescue the majority of the schoolboys and the six girls. They could not refuse, indeed. Neither could they object when Nipper informed them that a certain number would remain on the barges.

Two or three of the hardy old salts shook their heads, and expressed strong views against this proposal. But it made no difference. Nipper and his companions had made up their minds, and they were not going to be persuaded otherwise.

So the majority went off in the fishing boats, safely bound for Caistowe, which they would reach within an hour or so. All the boldest spirits remained on the Araminta and the Penelope. As a matter of fact, there were exactly twenty—ten fellows for each barge. They were all filled with enthusiasm, for this salvage idea struck them as being a very sound proposition, and the prospect of being bargees for a few days had its own peculiar allurements.

And so another chapter in the history of the St. Frank's flood had come to an end. The two barges drifted towards the shore on the tide, just as Nipper had predicted. By noon, the Araminta and the Penelope were safely in the River Nare, ready to commence their trip in charge of their school-boy bargees.

THE END.

(Phew—some yarn, that, eh? There's another one like it coming next Wednesday—"THE SCHOOLBOY BARGEES!" Follow the further adventures of Nipper, Handy & Co. in this lively yarn. You can make sure of reading it if you ask your newsagent to reserve your copy of THE NELSON LEE LIBRARY.)

THE ST. FRANK'S LEAGUE

THE CHIEF OFFICER'S CHAT

ALL LETTERS in reference to the League should be addressed to the Chief Officer, The St. Frank's League, c/o THE NELSON LEE LIBRARY, The Fleetway House, Farringdon Street, London, E.C.4. Any enquiries which need an immediate answer should be accompanied by a stamped and addressed envelope

Sweeping Ahead.

THERE is unstinted admiration for the Silver Medals, and no wonder, for the new award is a handsome affair. It is up to any well-wisher of the NELSON LEE LIBRARY to obtain one of these medals. See details below as to what to do.

A Misapprehension.

There is no need to wait before you get your club going until the funds permit the hiring of a room. I advise a Westminster chum to constitute his club by getting a few pals together. It's the members who make the club, not the bricks and mortar.

Height and the Police.

"J. P." is a bit worried. He is seventeen, and wants to join the Police Force, but fears he will be too short. The qualifying height is 5ft., 10in., and there's no reason why he should not collect the odd bit of stature missing at present in the next four years. The Police won't want him until he is twenty-one. I recommend cycling—and the use of chest expanders. Cycling is a wonderful help—and it is decidedly pleasant, especially in summer-time.

Window Cards.

A Coventry correspondent makes a novel suggestion, i.e., for window-display cards, showing that a member of the S.F.L. lives in the house. I am a bit doubtful as to this idea, for a window is required for other things—the card which calls the carrier, or other useful people, also for letting in light. My supporter in the cycle town thinks journalism is a dignified profession, and he wants to join it. I wish him luck.

An Aquarium.

"Aquarius" down at Netley Abbey wants an aquarium, but funds won't permit him to buy or make a fair-sized tank. He must look out for something in this line which is offered for sale. If he will read up a little sixpenny book on the whole subject published by Routledge, and obtainable through any bookseller, he will realise that it is sheer cruelty to keep fish under conditions which are in the least unsuitable. There should be healthy growing weeds in the aquarium; there must be fresh water with continual new supplies; an aquarium must not be dark, though an all-glass affair is not essential.

A Savings Bank.

Here's a wonderful letter from Dunfermline, in which the writer puts forward the idea that the League should act as a savings bank for members! Sorry, but I cannot undertake anything of this nature. My correspondent should try the P.O. Savings Bank.

CORRESPONDENTS WANTED.

Roy Ellery, 53, Clovelly Road, Southampton, wishes to correspond with readers anywhere.

H. C. Wileman, Cleveland, Woodland Road, Colwyn Bay, North Wales, wishes to correspond with readers in Wales.

W. Kennett, Church Walk, Allestree, Derby, wishes to correspond with readers anywhere.

Fred Davies, 56, Splott Road, Cardiff, wishes to hear from readers anywhere; he is a telegraph messenger and hopes to hear from other messengers.

John H. Franklin, 3, Eva Street, Rusholme, Manchester, wants to form a correspondence club, and wishes to hear from readers who will help.

M. J. Kavanagh, 132, Oxmantown Road, Dublin, wishes to hear from Dublin readers who will assist to form a social and football club.

Milton J. Jenkins, c/o G.P.O., Stratford, Taranaki, New Zealand, wishes to hear from readers in Rhodesia who are interested in stamps.

Arnold R. Bowers, 6, Bute Terrace, Military Road, Semaphore, South Australia, wishes to hear from stamp collectors.

J. W. Lillywhite, Eden Hills, South Australia, wishes to hear from readers in England, Trinidad.

Norman Fox, P.O., Doonside, South Coast, Natal, South Africa, wishes to hear from readers interested in stamps and in mechanical engineering.

Gilbert Graham, 5, Waverley Place, Stranraer, wishes to correspond with readers in Devon and Cornwall.

P. Swaffield, 1, North Street, Bridport, Dorset, wishes to correspond with readers anywhere.

David J. Warren, 3, Finsbury Avenue, Loughborough, Leicestershire, wishes to correspond with readers keen on cycling.

F. G. Cant, 199, Northwold Road, Clapton, London, E.5, has back numbers N.L.L. to sell.

THE ST. FRANK'S LEAGUE.

The Application Form for membership of the St. Frank's League appeared in last week's issue; it will be published again next Wednesday. All holders of BRONZE MEDALS who have qualified for SILVER MEDALS, and wish to exchange their medals for the higher award, should send their medals, together with a stamped addressed envelope, to the Chief Officer, the St. Frank's League, c/o "The Nelson Lee Library," Gough House, Gough Square, London, E.C.4.

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