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ALL ABOARD FOR THE SKYLARK!

A rousing long complete Whitsuntide yarn featuring
the cheery Chums of St. Frank's.

New Series No. 108.

OUT ON WEDNESDAY.

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The three marooned juniors gazed out to sea. "There are the lights of the Skylark!" said Church suddenly, as he pointed. "Look, can't you see them?" Over in the distance, quite a long way down the estuary, twinkling lights were seen. But, unfortunately, those on board the Skylark did not know the whereabouts of these three juniors!

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ALL ABOARD FOR THE SKYLARK!



By EDWY SEARLES BROOKS

Nipper and Co., Handforth and Co., Vivian Travers, Archie Glen-thorne and a crowd of other prominent Removites are having the time of their lives on board Captain Burton's yacht, the Skylark. And then they come across a mystery! Edward Oswald Handforth, of course, is well to the fore when it comes to investigations—and he gets the surprise of his life!—EDITOR.

CHAPTER 1.

The Bo'sun's Yachting Party!

"ANY more for the Skylark?"

"Walk up, gentlemen, we're just sailing!"

"Heave-ho, my hearties!"

Laughing and shouting, the merry party of St. Frank's juniors climbed out of the boats and disported themselves on the neat, scrupulously clean deck of the sailing yacht, Skylark.

"By Jove, this is the stuff!" said Nipper heartily. "A trim little craft, a perfect day, and everybody bright and happy! We're going to enjoy this cruise, you chaps!"

"Yes, rather!" said Reggie Pitt genially.

There were a good many members of the St. Frank's Remove on the deck of the little yacht. They included such celebrities as Nipper, the junior skipper, and his chums of Study C. The famous Handforth & Co. were there, to say nothing of Archie Glen-thorne and Vivian Travers and Jimmy Potts and Fullwood. Reggie Pitt and a crowd from the West House were very much in evidence, too.

In short, the Skylark had never had such a big crew in all her existence.

It was Whitsun Monday, and the Skylark was at her moorings off Mersea Island, in the estuary of the Blackwater, in Essex. The village of West Mersea was close at hand, picturesque and charming in the May sunlight.

The whole scene, indeed, was enchanting.

In this harbour, yachts of all descriptions were at their moorings—motor-yachts, sailing yachts, yawls and every kind of thing that sailed. Towards the open sea the water was sparkling and blue. There was a tang in the air, and the St. Frank's fellows were eagerly responding to the exhilaration which breathed in the very atmosphere.

It had been Tom Burton's idea—and Tom Burton was easily the most popular fellow present.

That smiling, sunny son of the sea—popularly known at St. Frank's as "the Bo'sun"—had invited all these special guests. His father, Captain Burton, was the owner of the Skylark, and it had been originally arranged that the hearty old skipper should be in command during the cruise.

Unfortunately, Captain Burton had caught a chill a day or two earlier, and he was indisposed. There had been an alarm in the camp, for most of the invited juniors had feared that the adventure would be "off."

However, Tom Burton himself was equal to the situation. He had been brought up at sea, and what he didn't know about small sailing yachts of the Skylark type was scarcely worth learning. So Tom Burton was the skipper, and Nipper and Handforth and all the other fellows his willing crew.

"Well, we're on board at last!" said Handforth eagerly, as he looked round. "H'm! Not much of a yacht, after all!"

"Cheese it, Handy!" protested Church.

"Eh?"

"Remember that you're a guest!"

"Rats!" said Handforth. "The Bo'sun won't mind if I speak frankly—and it's not my habit to call a spade anything else but a spade! When he talked about a yacht, I thought he meant a whacking great ship—not a cockle-shell like this."

Tom Burton, who happened to be passing at that moment, chuckled.

"She may be a cockle-shell, messmate, but wait until you feel her slipping through the water under you!" he said, his face glowing. "Swab me for a lubber! You won't grumble at the Skylark when we're well under way!"

"It's like his nerve to grumble now!" said McClure tartly. "I thought he had better manners!"

"He doesn't mean it!" grinned Nipper. "Well, Tom, don't forget that we're here. It's your job to give orders, and we'll obey!"

"That's the style, shipmate!" said the Bo'sun. "I want two or three of you astern."

"Ay, ay, sir!" went up a chorus.

Tom Burton chuckled, and hurried off. He was eager to start the cruise as soon as possible. The smell of the sea was like the breath of life to him, and to feel the gently moving deck beneath his feet gave him exquisite joy.

It was getting on towards noon, and all the amateur yachtsmen were keen on a quick start.

They had travelled down from London in a small saloon motor-coach, but although an early start had been made, the morning was now well advanced.

Still, the juniors were happy enough.

It was holiday-time, and there were no restrictions. An eight-hours cruise was planned, and surely that would be enough to satisfy the most exacting sportsman.

The idea was to get back to their moorings in the late evening, just before darkness fell. Then they would get into their saloon coach, and reach London, and their various homes, between ten and eleven. It was a simple programme, and there was not much likelihood of a hitch.

For the weather was fine, there was a lively breeze, and the Skylark was trim and ready for immediate departure.

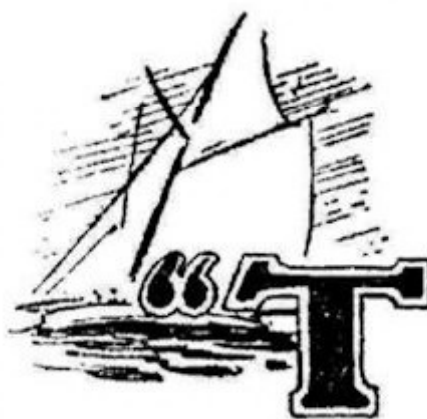
Most of the juniors had contented themselves by wearing flannels and cricket shirts—and the older the "clobber" the better.

Over half of them had now removed their shoes and stockings and jackets.

It was a schoolboy party, pure and simple, and they were out to enjoy themselves.

Handforth, of course, had to be different. He had even gone to the length of buying a yachting cap for himself, and, at first glance, one might have supposed that he was the skipper. He certainly looked the part—whereas Tom Burton, in his baggy flannels and his sweater, might well have been mistaken for the cabin-boy.

Which only goes to show that it is never safe to judge by appearances!



CHAPTER 2.

The Obstinacy of Handforth!

"THIS," said Archie Glenthorne dreamily, "is absolutely the life!"

The Skylark was hissing through the blue water, and Archie was leaning nonchalantly against the rail amidships. Overhead, the white sails were billowing out to the breeze, and the air was filled with the strumming murmur of the rigging.

Most of the other moored yachts had been left behind, and now the Skylark was heading for the open sea, swinging round in a great curve, with a cream of white foam astern.

For sheer enjoyment this cruise would have been hard to beat. Even the least susceptible junior—which happened to be Handforth—felt his heart thumping a little faster as the Skylark slid gracefully over the sunlit waters.

There was something fascinating in the tang of the air, in the feel of the deck as it heaved beneath the foot, in the sound of the swirling murmur of the waters.

The open air—the sea—freedom!

For once in a way, this merry gang of schoolboys felt utterly and absolutely free. Barefooted, dressed in little else but shirt and trousers, with their necks open to the wind, and their hair tousled, they revelled in the novelty of it. No grown-ups on board—no ladies—just themselves!

Later, they would experience the joys of swimming, and then would come luncheon, out of the ample hampers that had been brought on board.

Even Archie Glenthorne had succumbed to the fascination of the cruise. Like the others, he was barefooted, his shirt was open at the neck, and his elegant hair was unruly. Handforth was the only fellow who still wore a necktie and a cap, and he was striding about astern, apparently under the mistaken impression that the yacht depended upon him, and him alone, for a safe and successful cruise.

There was a good deal to be done first, but after the Skylark's sails were set, and with Tom Burton at the wheel, the rest was

easy. The majority of the juniors were able to lounge about at their ease.

"Glorious, isn't it?" beamed Archie Glen-thorne, as Church and McClure were passing.

"Oh, rather!" said Church.

"Good gad!" said Archie, looking closely at the pair. "I mean to say, odds spume and foam! Is there anything bothering the good old mind, I mean? Is there anything absolutely wrong, old belaying pins?"

"Oh, it's all right!" growled McClure. "We're enjoying the trip all right—who wouldn't?—but we're a bit worried about Handy."

"Oh, rather!" said Archie vaguely. "Absolutely!"

Church and McClure passed on, and when they reached Handforth, astern, they pulled him to the rail, and held on to him.

"What's the giddy idea?" demanded Handforth, staring at them one after the other.

"We're afloat now—and we can talk privately!" said Church, in a determined voice. "We can take things easily. There's nothing to do, except loll about."

"Oh, isn't there?" said Handforth, with a snort. "If I loll about, who's going to prevent the yacht from going aground?"

"Burton is the skipper——"

"Yes, but I'm giving him advice all the time," said Handforth firmly.

"Quite so!" said Church, with some haste. "But I think he'll be all right for a minute or two, Handy. We've been trying to speak to you for days—ever since the holidays began. We've never had an opportunity to get you alone."

"We want to talk to you seriously, old man," urged McClure. "You didn't mean it, did you, when you said you were going to another school after the holidays?"

Handforth's jaw became stubborn.

"Of course I meant it!" he replied. "I'm going to St. Jim's."

"But look here——"

"My pater has arranged everything," said Handforth, with an air of finality. "He went to St. Jim's, saw the Head, and everything is fixed up. As soon as the holidays are over, I'm going into the Fourth Form at St. Jim's."

"But why?" demanded Church, getting excited. "For the love of goodness, Handy, why?"

"Because I'm not trusted at St. Frank's!" replied Handforth bitterly.

"You silly ass! You know jolly well there was a mistake——"

"I can't help that!" said Edward Oswald obstinately. "I was accused of being a thief, and I was practically sacked from the school! My pater took me away, and arranged for me to go to St. Jim's. And so I'm going there!"

"But everything's all right now!" shouted McClure, in exasperation. "You cleared your name, and everybody at St. Frank's knows that you were the victim of circumstances."

"And the very same thing might happen again," said Handforth, pursing his lips. "If Dr. Stafford can believe me capable of theft once, he can believe it again. So I'm going to be on the safe side, and I've left!"

"You don't mean it, Handy!" said Church. "You can't mean it! You're only doing this out of sheer pigheaded stubbornness. Why the dickens can't you be reasonable?"

"You can talk to me until you're blue in the face, but it won't make any difference!" said Handforth. "I've made up my mind—and there's an end of the matter!"

"But think of St. Frank's!" said Church earnestly.

"Rats! I'm going to forget St. Frank's!"

"Haven't you any loyalty for your own school?" asked McClure sadly.

Handforth started.

"The old school was ready enough to biff me out—so how can I have any loyalty?" he blustered. "No! I'm going to St. Jim's!"

"And what about us?" asked Church.

"Well, you'll be able to get on without me, I suppose?" said Handforth. "Of course, it may be a bit rough on you chaps—but it's a question of principle. Besides, St. Jim's isn't so very far away, and I daresay we shall see one another two or three times during the term."

And Handforth detached himself from the rail, and walked away—as an indication that the subject was closed.



CHAPTER 3.

The Figure on the Island

CHURCH grunted disconsolately.

"What's the use?" he asked, appealing to the breeze.

"He's hopeless!" said McClure. "We can argue until we're hoarse, and it won't make any difference. Haven't we been at him a hundred times already?"

They stared gloomily at the sparkling blue of the waters. Then they turned, as Tom Burton sang out some cheery orders.

"It's rotten!" said Church, at length.

Vivian Travers, who happened to be passing, paused in his stride. The usually elegant Travers was very much like a scarecrow at the moment.

"Well, well!" he said whimsically. "Dear old fellows, aren't you enjoying yourselves? Do you honestly think that this cruise is rotten?"

"I wasn't talking about the cruise," said Church, with a grunt. "It's rotten about Handy."

"Yes, he will think that he's the skipper, won't he?"

"Oh, blow that!" said McClure. "He's not coming to St. Frank's after the hols. The babbling lunatic has made up his mind to go to St. Jim's!"

"What has St. Jim's done to deserve this?" murmured Travers, shaking his head.

"Oh, don't rot, you ass!"

"Allow me to give you a word of advice," said Travers smoothly. "Why worry about Handforth? Why not fling yourself wholeheartedly into the enjoyment of the moment. Sufficient until the day is the evil thereof!"

"What's the ass gassing about?" said Church tartly.

"Oh, I don't know," growled Mac. "You don't understand, Travers. We want to save Handy from himself. He doesn't really want to go to St. Jim's. He's only doing it 'on principle' as he calls it! We've argued with him until our voices have gone cracked—"

"And believe me, you can argue until the moon becomes Stilton cheese!" said Travers. "The more you argue, the worse he'll get. Well, well! Such innocence! Don't you know your own Handy yet?"

"It's all very well to talk——"

"Forget him!" said Vivian Travers lightly. "At least, forget him for to-day. Reserve your arguments until later on in the week. It might even be a good idea to urge him to leave St. Frank's."

"By jingo!" said Church, with a start. "It's not a bad wheeze——"

"But not to-day!" said Travers hastily. "Leave it! Let it ferment! Reserve it until the last day of the vac. In the meantime, affect a complete indifference. Can't you feel the breeze? Can't you appreciate the hiss of the spume as it slides past our mizzen deck, and swirls against our capstan boom?"

Church grinned.

"Perhaps you're right, Travers, old man," he said. "Yes, we'll enjoy ourselves. Come on, Mac. Let's go and ask the Bo'sun if there's anything that we can do!"

"And blow Handy!" said McClure firmly.

Travers smiled contentedly to himself as he watched them go.

"Land-ho!" came a hail from for-rard.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Everybody laughed—for there was plenty of land in sight.

"Where away?" shouted Tom Burton, with a chuckle.

"Two points sou'-scu'-west on the star-board side!" came the answering hail.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

The juniors stared to starboard and, sure enough, they beheld an island. Not Mersea Island itself—which they had left astern now—but a tiny patch of grassland which jutted up out of the estuary. Beyond, lay the open sea. —

"Looks like a desert island!" said Nipper solemnly.

"It is a desert island!" agreed Reggie Pitt, lowering a pair of binoculars.

There were more grins. The "island" was one of those tiny spots of land which are commonplace in the estuary of the Black-water.

It was just a grassy mound, sticking up out of the blue water. There wasn't a tree on it, and, by all appearances, the deep water went right up to the grassy banks. These latter formed miniature cliffs, three or four feet in height, all round.

In the centre of the island the ground rose slightly into a hillock, but from the deck of the Skylark nothing beyond this could be seen. Apparently there was a little hollow there. From "coast to coast" the island was probably a hundred yards long by about seventy yards wide.

"We'd better give it a wide berth, Bo'sun!" said Nipper, glancing round at the grinning Tom Burton. "There might be shoals near that coast!"

"Or a barrier reef!" said Pitt, nodding.

"Maybe you're right, shipmates!" agreed Burton, giving the wheel a turn. "It's an uninhabited island, anyhow, and——"

"By Jove! Is it?" interrupted Nipper, staring.

For, suddenly, a figure appeared. It was a most unexpected development, and all the amateur yachtsmen on the Skylark stared. There was nothing particularly startling in the incident, but it was unexpected.

Without warning, a running figure had appeared in the centre of the tiny islet; it had risen to the top of the hillock, and now the figure was waving its arms.

Indeed, there was something frantic and urgent about those signals.

"Well, I'm jiggered!" said Handforth, staring. "That chap on the island is signalling to us!"

"Good gad!"

"He's trying to attract our attention!" said Nipper, frowning. "But where the dickens did he spring from? That's what I can't understand! And what on earth can he be doing on that isolated little patch of land?"

But nobody on board could answer these questions.



CHAPTER 4.

The Mystery of the Islet!

DURING the first few moments, the juniors were only mildly interested.

They couldn't imagine who the figure was on the little island; but it seemed ridiculous to suppose that there could be anything dramatic in the incident.

Everything was so peaceful—the sunshine, the sparkling sea, the rolling hills of the mainland in the distance, and, further afield, there were the white sails of other yachts, and the curling smoke from an occasional steam vessel.

"Let's have those glasses, Reggie!" said Nipper.

"By Jove, yes!" said Reggie Pitt.

But before he could hand the binoculars over, or place them to his own eyes, Handforth let out a yell.

"Look!" he shouted excitedly.

Although the island was so distinctly visible, it was quite a good distance away. And that figure, with the urgently waving arms, was more or less indistinct. The crew of the Skylark knew that the stranger was signalling to them, but that was all.

Now, however, another change came.

For a second figure appeared, lumbering up the grassy slope from the hollow in the centre of the islet. There was something menacing about this second figure. Even at this distance, he appeared to be a burly, clumsy man.

"Well I'm jiggered!" said Fullwood in amazement.

Without hesitation, without any argument, the big figure had fallen upon the smaller. The juniors saw everything. Over went the stranger who had just been signalling. Down on the grass, with the other on the top of him.

Nipper grabbed the binoculars, and levelled them.

But he was too late. Before he could get the focus, both the figures on the island had rolled out of sight beyond the summit of the hillock. And, at the same time, a faint cry of anguish came floating across the sunlit waters. It was distinctly heard by all the juniors on board the Skylark.

"There was a shout for help!" panted Handforth breathlessly.

"It was a shout of some kind, anyhow!" agreed Pitt. "What the dickens does it mean, Nipper?"

"No good asking me," said Nipper, as he lowered the glasses, and stared at the now empty island. "But it looks a bit rummy."

"Rummy!" shouted Handforth. "Quick! Where's the boat? Luff her round, or whatever you call it, Bo'sun! We've got to investigate!"

"Heave-ho, and all that sort of thing!" murmured Archie.

But for some moments Tom Burton took no action. He remained at the wheel, and he refused to be flurried. He expected at any moment to catch sight of the figures again, but they did not appear.

What could it mean?

What was this little drama that had just taken place? And why, above all, had that figure been signalling so frantically? It now seemed certain that he had been aware of some danger and had been trying to attract the attention of the yacht. But then he had been seized, felled, and dragged out of sight.

"Hi!" yelled Handforth, swinging round to the helm. "Why aren't you changing the course, Bo'sun?"

"Steady, shipmate!" said Burton. "There's no hurry!"

"Yes there is!" roared Handforth. "There's murder being done!"

"Ha, na, ha!"

Handforth's melodramatic conclusion restored the other fellows to a true sense of

proportion. A good deal of the excitement died down.

"It's a bit queer, but we needn't get the wind up," said Nipper, smiling. "And in the cires. I rather think we ought to have a closer look."

"Just what I was thinking!" nodded the Bo'sun. "My idea is to sail round to the other side of the island so that we can see into the hollow. Swab me! It may be only a picnic party ashore there!"

"Rot!" said Handforth, his eyes gleaming. "You're all mad! I tell you that young chap was being murdered by that burly ruffian!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Handforth was drawing upon his imagination again. He only assumed that the first figure had been a young chap, and there wasn't the slightest justification for the description of the second figure. Handy had been merely going by their sizes.

"Perhaps we'd better heave-to on this side," said the Bo'sun, after a while. "The tide may be tricky further round, and we're sheltered here."

He sang out a number of orders, and in less than a minute a dozen juniors were busy with the sails.

The Skylark was hove to as she swung round out of the wind. And now she was much nearer to the island. No sign of life could be seen on it.

"We'd better take the dinghy," said Nipper briskly. "It won't take us more than five minutes to row over—and three or four fellows will be sufficient."

After a good deal of argument, while the dinghy was being prepared, Nipper and Handforth and Pitt and Travers went ashore. The others lined the rail of the Skylark, and watched with intense interest.

"Here we are!" said Nipper, as he shipped his oar.

The dinghy had arrived at the "cliff." At close quarters it was rather more formidable than it had seemed from a distance. The deep water went right up to the land, and the grassy surface of the island was six feet above.

But there were many places where an easy landing could be effected. Securing the boat, the four juniors climbed up, and found themselves standing on the grass.

"Now we'll soon find out the truth!" said Handforth tensely. "Hold yourselves ready for action, you chaps! We may have to fight for our lives!"

The others chuckled as they ran to the summit of the grassy knoll. Within a minute they had topped it, and they all paused, staring in wonder and bewilderment.

For a staggering surprise awaited them.

At their feet was a steep slope, and from this point of vantage they could see every inch of the island—every "coast."

And there was not another soul in sight! Nothing—nothing but grass and a few occasional weeds. And in all the stretch of water round the island, there was no boat.

What had happened to those figures? How had they so mysteriously vanished?



CHAPTER 5.

No Explanation!

THAT'S funny!" said Nipper wonderingly. "Funny!" echoed Handforth. "It's—it's the biggest mystery I've ever struck!"

The others were silent.

They stood there, looking over every section of the tiny island, and wondering mightily. They were, indeed, dumbfounded.

What was the explanation of this extraordinary thing?

The island wasn't really an island at all—only a grassy fragment of land, sticking up out of the estuary. The slopes were steep in the hollow, but there wasn't an inch of ground that couldn't be seen from the hillock. Every blade of grass was within sight. And there were no clumps of bushes—no trees. Indeed, there wasn't cover for a rabbit!

"Well, I'm bothered if I can understand it!" said Nipper, scratching his head. "We saw two people on this island, didn't we?"

"We certainly did!" said Travers, nodding.

"And now they've gone!" ejaculated Handforth. "But where have they gone to? They couldn't have left by boat, because there hasn't been time for them to get out of sight!"

"That's true!" said Reggie Pitt, gazing round. "There's not a boat within a couple of miles. Well, dash it, I've seen a few mysterious things, but this takes the biscuit!"

They were doubly startled, because they had been so certain that they would come across a picnic party, or a couple of harmless anglers, or something like that. They were not prepared for this blank emptiness.

"If we hadn't seen them so clearly, I should be inclined to say that we imagined the whole thing!" remarked Reggie Pitt, at length. "And it would have been different if the figures had been peaceful. But think of it! There was one of them frantically signalling to us, and appealing for help. Then the other one came along, dragged him down, and we heard a wild shout for help. It's—it's so rummy!"

"There's more in this than meets the eye!" exclaimed Handforth grimly. "By George! We're on the track of a real mystery!"

"Hardly on the track of it, dear old fellow," said Travers. "The mystery is here, with us!"

Nipper shaded his eyes against the sun, and looked closely at the water, beyond the islet.

"I suppose they're not swimming any-

where?" he asked. "Have a look, you chaps."

"I'd look with pleasure, but why trouble?" murmured Travers. "You're not suggesting, dear old fellows, that the men we saw are swimming with their clothes on?"

"H'm! I'd overlooked that!" remarked Nipper, frowning. "There certainly aren't any clothes here—Unless—unless—"

He broke off.

"Unless what?" said Pitt.

Nipper's face suddenly cleared.

"I say, what a set of asses we are!" he said, half-apologetically. "I'll bet there's a perfectly simple explanation to this affair. We're idiots not to have thought of it before."

"Well, trot out the explanation," said Travers. "Personally, I'm as much in the dark as ever. But, then, I make no claim to being brainy."

Handforth snorted.

"Rot!" he said, fearful of being deprived of his investigation. "What the dickens do you mean, Nipper? Of course there's a mystery! How can you explain it?"

"Well, we can see the whole island, I'll admit!" said Nipper. "And we don't need a microscope to satisfy us that there aren't any strangers in sight. But what about the cliff?"

"The cliff?"

"Yes, the cliff!" said Nipper, pointing. "We had to climb up about six feet, and it stands to reason that the same conditions exist on the other side of the islet. Those men aren't in sight because they're down beyond the edge of the cliff."

"Oh!" said Handforth blankly.

Travers chuckled.

"So simple!" he murmured. "And it's ten to one that you're right, dear old fellow."

"Well, anyway, we'd better make certain," said Reggie Pitt. "There's nothing like being satisfied."

They all ran down into the hollow, and made off towards the opposite side of the island.

"Half a jiff!" said Nipper. "We'd better spread out—and if one of us sees anything, he can call the others."

So they went different ways, Nipper himself going straight ahead. They all believed that they had arrived at the logical and true solution of the mystery. But even they were disillusioned.

For every cliff proved to be exactly the same as the one they had climbed up. In the end, they walked entirely round the island, two going one way, and two the other. And when they met, they all looked at one another.

"Well?" said Handforth grimly.

"I'm beaten!" admitted Nipper.

North, south, east and west, the water came close up to the miniature cliff. And the searchers had found nothing! No clothing that might have been left by bathers—no boat tucked away in a little shelter.



When Handforth saw his two chums swept overboard, he did not hesitate. Without thinking of the outcome of his foolhardy, if heroic, action, he dived in after them.

The plain fact had to be faced now. Those two figures were no longer on the island! In some strange, mysterious way they had vanished, just as though the earth itself had opened and swallowed them up!

"But where *can* they have got to?" asked Pitt, in an exasperated voice. "It's so—so silly! They haven't evaporated! They haven't swum off to the mainland! It's too far! They were here when we started off from the Skylark, and they must have been here—"

"By Jove!" muttered Nipper abruptly.

He was staring—staring out at the water, twenty or thirty yards away from the bank.

"What's the matter?" asked Pitt.

Nipper pointed.

"Look!" he said tensely. "What's that thing out there?"

For a moment or two the others looked in vain; then they sighted a little black object, bobbing about on the blue little waves. And then Reggie Pitt caught his breath in.

"A cap!" he muttered. "A peaked cap!"



CHAPTER 6.

Very Strange!

FOR a few moments there was complete silence.

"Well?" said Travers, at last.

"Oh, it's impossible!" ejaculated Nipper, shaking himself. "What rot!"

"You mean——" Handforth began, and then paused. His rugged face had turned somewhat pale.

"I don't exactly know what I mean, Handy," replied Nipper quietly. "But—but— Oh, well! Isn't it peculiar? We saw those figures on this island, and then, when we got here, they had vanished. They couldn't have gone off in a boat, because we should have seen them. They were fighting, and——"

"And now there's a peaked cap floating about in the sea!" said Pitt huskily. "Oh, my goodness! Do you think they fought, and then rolled into——"

"By George!" shouted Handforth. "That's it! Can't you see it? The last we saw of them was when they rolled out of sight down the slope. They were fighting like madmen! Well, they must have kept it up until they reached this bank, and then they toppled over and fell into the sea!"

"Well, it looks like it," said Nipper slowly. "But, by Jove, what a horrible thought! The very fact that they aren't anywhere in sight seems to prove that they're drowned!"

Almost subconsciously the juniors searched the waters—looking for some further grim clue. But there was only that cap. And this, in all conscience, was eloquent enough!

"Well, what can we do?" asked Handforth helplessly. "We can't save them, because they're not here! Besides, it seems so—so impossible! I mean, on a gloriously sunny day like this, with everything so peaceful and——"

"That doesn't make any difference, Handy," interrupted Nipper. "The most tragic things of all frequently occur in peaceful surroundings. And this theory is certainly plausible. It fits in with the facts. Those two men were fighting, and you know as well as I do that if they rolled over this cliff edge, they would drop straight down into the deep water. And if they couldn't swim— Well, ask yourselves!"

"Couldn't they have scrambled back?" asked Travers.

"Not here," replied Nipper, shaking his head. "For one thing, this bank is absolutely sheer, and there's nothing to hold on to. Besides, the tide is pulling away from the island on this side, and the poor beggars were probably unable to get the better of it. And if they couldn't swim, remember, they would soon be done. They had all their clothes on, too."

"How awful!" said Pitt huskily.

Vivian Travers slowly shook his head.

"Well, of course, I don't profess to know much about this sort of thing," he remarked, after a short pause. "I'm not a born detective like Handforth, and I haven't had your experience, Nipper. But it seems to me that there's a flaw. I may be wrong—I probably am wrong—but it has been well said that out of the mouths of babes and sucklings—"

"Oh, don't rot, Travers!" broke in Nipper. "What are you getting at?"

"Merely this," replied Travers. "We're assuming, aren't we, that those two men rolled into the sea, and were drowned?"

"Something like that."

"But how did they get here?" asked Travers.

"Get here?"

"Where," said Travers, "is the boat that brought them here? And why did they come? What object could they have in coming to a deserted patch of land like this? Unless, of course, the idea was to have a fight to the death!"

Nipper pursed his lips.

"Yes, that's a rummy point, I'll admit," he said. "Those men couldn't have swum here, and that means that a boat must have brought them. If so, where is it?"

Handforth suddenly uttered a yell.

"I've got it!" he ejaculated. "They were marooned!"

"Ah!" murmured Travers. "Splendid! No doubt a gang of pirates put them ashore, and—"

"Marooned by accident!" said Handforth coldly.

"Oh, by accident! Sorry!"

"Don't you see?" went on Handforth, who had figured it all out. "I expect they were a couple of trippers. They brought a boat out in the early morning, and they thought that it would be a pretty good idea to land on this little island for a rest. While they were

fooling about the boat drifted away, because they hadn't tethered it properly."

"By Jove!" said Nipper, looking at Handforth in admiration. "That's certainly a pretty cute theory of yours, old man!"

"It's the true explanation!" said Handforth firmly. "What else is there to think? The boat drifted away with the tide, and by this time, of course, it's probably stranded on the mainland somewhere, miles away. And ever since then, those poor beggars have been trying to get ashore!"

"That's why they signalled to us, eh?" said Pitt, surprised at the cohesion of Handforth's theory.

"Exactly!" said the leader of Study D. "There isn't a flaw anywhere. I expect the men blamed one another because the boat drifted away, and they had a fearful quarrel. In the end, they got so wild with one another that they had a scrap, and in the middle of the scrap they fell into the sea and were drowned!"

"You said there wasn't a flaw, Handy—but it seems to me that there is one," replied Nipper. "If these men wanted to leave the island so much, why did that second figure attack the first because he was signalling to us?"

For a moment Handforth looked blank, and then his face cleared.

"That's easy!" he replied.

"How do you make it out?"

"Why, they must have been quarrelling bitterly just before we came along," he replied. "They had been having a row down in the hollow, and the smaller chap managed to escape, and got to the top of the hillock. Then he saw us, and waved. The other chap ran after him, but he was too excited to bother about being rescued. His only idea was to attack the other one."

Nipper shrugged his shoulders rather helplessly.

"Well, it's all mere theorising," he said. "What's the good of it? The men were here, and now they're not here! That's the only concrete fact that we know. As far as I can see, all we can do is to get back to the yacht. It's simply a waste of time to stay here."

And the others agreed. Even Handforth had to admit that nothing more could be done on the island.



CHAPTER 7.

Off Again!

RELUCTANTLY, the "shore" party climbed into the dinghy again, and rowed quickly back to the Skylark.

They were reluctant to go, because they had failed in their mission. They had arrived at no solution of the mystery. True, there was a vague possibility that Handforth's theory was correct but, at the best, it was a long shot.

"Well, you've been long enough!" sang out Tommy Watson, as the dinghy approached.

"What have you been doing all this time, you fatheads?" asked somebody else.

"And where are those men?"

"Drowned!" said Handforth briefly.

"What?"

They climbed on board, and the dinghy was now allowed to follow astern. There were a good many scared-looking faces, as the investigators made their full report.

"It's a funny business altogether," concluded Nipper. "I really don't know what we ought to do about it."

"Well, it's pretty rotten!" said Fullwood uncomfortably. "I mean, how awful to think of those two strangers being drowned—practically within sight of us!"

"Absolutely!" said Archie, distressed. "I mean, couldn't we have done something? Dash it, it was rather up to us to rally round, and——"

"We rallied as soon as we could, Archie," put in Nipper. "We didn't waste any time in going ashore. And yet, when we got there, the men had gone. If there's been a tragedy, it's no fault of ours."

"But oughtn't we to report to somebody, or something?" inquired Church.

"That's what I was thinking," said Nipper. "How about going back to West Mersea, Bo'sun?"

Tom Burton shook his head.

"The tide isn't favourable—or the wind, either," he replied. "And, souse me, what'll be the good?"

"Well, we can tell the police," said Pitt. "Then we should feel that our own responsibility was over. If we don't do anything, our day will be spoilt. We shall have it on our consciences."

"I hardly think that, old man," said Nipper. "It would be a different thing if anything could be done. But if those men are drowned, they're drowned. And a few hours, one way or the other, won't make any difference. By going back to West Mersea, and reporting to the police, we shan't do anything to help the poor beggars."

"Just what I was thinking, messmate!" nodded the Bo'sun. "So we'll carry on, and call at Brightlingsea later."

"By George! That's the wheeze!" agreed Handforth. "We were going to call at Brightlingsea anyhow, weren't we? After a cruise off the coast, eh?"

"Yes, but now we'll call at Brightlingsea first, and have our cruise later," said Burton. "It won't make much difference."

And so the Skylark was got under way again. Her sails were set, and she bowled off, with most of the juniors looking curiously at the island as they skirted past.

Beyond the further end, it was possible to see down into that grassy hollow, and all the juniors were interested. There was certainly nobody on the island. And, although they kept a sharp look out, they found no further clues in the water. No scraps of floating clothing, or similar grim relics.

So, after the island had passed away astern, the natural spirits of the juniors re-established themselves. They became buoyant once more—laughing and happy. They were inclined to forget that uncomfortable little incident.

The juniors had done their best, and they had nothing to reproach themselves with. They saw no reason why they should spoil their cruise. After all, there was no certainty that a tragedy had occurred.

It was very hot now, and the sun was beating down out of a cloudless sky. Burton took a look at the sky once or twice—rather anxiously. But he said nothing to the others. And they, being unversed in weather lore, noticed nothing.

They were revelling in the enjoyment of a bathe.

As the Skylark slipped sedately through the water, the juniors indulged in bathing at its best. The good swimmers—and they were practically all good swimmers—were easily able to keep pace with the yacht, for she was now travelling quite slowly. Others hung on to ropes, and, generally, they had a gorgeous time.

When they came out of the water they were as hungry as hunters; so luncheon was the next thing on the agenda. By the time this meal had been disposed of, the island and its mysterious figures had been completely forgotten.

"Well, this is what I call real enjoyment!" said Jimmy Potts languidly, as he leaned over the rail, after the meal. "I wonder if we're anywhere near Brightlingsea?"

"We don't seem to have moved much," remarked Church, as he looked across at the distant mainland. "And just look at the sails! They're flapping about idly."

Handforth came bustling up.

"What's the matter here?" he demanded. "Why aren't you chaps at work?"

"What work is there to do?"

"Can't you see how slow we're going?" demanded Handforth coldly.

"Oh, I see!" grinned Potts. "You want us to blow the yacht along?"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"You silly ass!" roared Handforth. "Can't we set the sails properly?"

"They are set properly, Handy," said Church. "The Bo'sun saw to that."

"Well, I don't think much of him as a skipper!" said Edward Oswald. "We're crawling along at about one mile in twelve hours! Do you call that sailing?"

Tom Burton himself came along, having left the wheel in the hands of one of the other fellows.

"It's no good grumbling, shipmate," he said ruefully. "We're becalmed."

"We're be-which?"

"I suppose you've been too busy to notice it, what with swimming and eating!" said the youthful skipper. "But the breeze died down while you were in the water, and now there's none left."

"Yes, Handy, he's right," said Pitt. "The Skylark may be a small craft, but even a four-masted clipper couldn't make any headway without wind."

They stood there, looking out over the sea. There was a big difference now. No longer were there any refreshing little waves, whipped up by the breeze. Nothing but a flat, oily-looking surface, reflecting the brazen rays of the afternoon sun. In the distance, the mainland had become hazy, and the sunshine itself had a sinister tint!



CHAPTER 8.

Becalmed!

TOM BURTON had been the only one to notice these changes at first, and, not wishing to worry his crew," he had said nothing.

But now the altered conditions were obvious to all.

"Where are we, anyhow?" asked Handforth, as he joined the group near the rail.

"Somewhere not far from the coast," replied the Bo'sun. "Brightlingsea is over there," he added, pointing. "But, swab my decks, it's no good! We can't get there unless we have some wind."

"And when we do get it, we shall probably have it in chunks!" said Nipper significantly.

Burton nodded.

"That's just what I'm worrying about," he said, his sunny face clouding. "I think we shall be all right, messmates—the Skylark is easy enough to handle—but we shall have to be ready. It might be a case of piping all hands when the emergency comes."

"Oh, rot!" said Handforth, who always considered it a kind of duty to differ from everybody else. "There's no sign of a squall. What the dickens are you talking about, Bo'sun? The sun's shining, and there isn't a breath of wind! I've never known a more peaceful afternoon!"

"Haven't you heard of the calm before the storm, Handy?" asked Church.

Handforth made no reply. Like the others, he could not fail to be impressed by the conditions. The aspect of everything had changed during the past two hours.

The Skylark was drifting, and her sails were flapping idly and listlessly as the vessel rocked from side to side on the swell.

There were no clouds in the sky, but the sun seemed to be more golden—with a hard, brassy look. The horizon was hazy, and the very air was quivering with the intense heat.

"Wouldn't be a bad idea to have another bathe," suggested somebody.

"Better do some fishing first," said Nipper.

"Bathing isn't good, immediately after a meal. Let's try our luck with the lines, and after that we'll have another dip."

Before long, the majority of the amateur yachtsmen were busy at one task or another. Some were fishing, some decided to risk it and go in bathing.

The Skylark scarcely seemed to alter her position. She may have moved half a mile during the course of two or three hours, but not more. Occasionally a motor-boat would speed by—or a motor-yacht. But these vessels were always some distance away, and there was no earthly reason why the juniors should signal. They were perfectly comfortable, and they hadn't any fears for themselves. What, indeed, was there to fear?

"I say, do you chaps know that it's half-past five?" said Handforth, when he had dressed after his swim. "How much longer are we going to stick here, becalmed?"

"What's the good of asking us?" said Jack Grey. "We're all helpless until the wind comes."

"The heat's stifling, too," went on Handforth, fanning himself. "It was all right in the water, but now that I'm out, I feel all stuffy. Feels like a thunderstorm."

"Well, let's hope that it doesn't break while we're out here," said Church.

"Rats! The sooner it breaks the better!"

But the others were not inclined to agree with Handforth. Tom Burton, indeed, was more anxious than ever. He knew that he could rely upon his companions to help with a will if a sudden crisis arose. But the Bo'sun was surprised and dismayed by these changing weather conditions. When he had set out, there had been every prospect of a fine day, with a continuous breeze. It was just sheer bad luck that they should be becalmed out here, almost beyond the mouth of the estuary. And all they could do was to wait.

In the meantime, the signs became more ominous and more sinister than ever.

There was a curious, coppery hue in the sky, and the sun had almost vanished in the haze. It was like a red ball, hovering over the mainland. And now, slowly but relentlessly, dark, impenetrable masses of black clouds were appearing.

"I don't like it, shipmates!" muttered the Bo'sun. "Swab me! I don't like it a little bit!"

"There's nothing to be scared of, is there?" asked Fullwood. "I mean, thunderstorms are pretty commonplace at this time of the year. And even if it does blow, we shall be safe enough."

"This isn't going to be any ordinary thunderstorm," said Burton, looking at the sky. "It's something special, or I'm a derelict!"

The evening drew on, and with the failing light a premature dusk began to fall.

There was something rather terrifying in the dull, thick darkness that was enshrouding the horizon to seaward, and the mainland. And those black clouds continued to mass themselves as though in readiness for a grand attack.

Nipper and others said very little. They only commented now and again on the conditions—expressing a hope, at various intervals, that the wind would soon come. But, in their hearts, they were now getting anxious.

Darkness would soon be upon them—complete darkness.

And here they were, still becalmed. It had been all very well during the afternoon, while they bathed and fished. It had seemed very jolly then. But now it was another matter!

There was something so threatening in the aspect of the sky—something so grim looking in the sea itself—that the juniors were deeply concerned. What would happen when the storm broke? For, of course, there could be no doubt now that a storm was coming. Would they be able to get safely ashore? Would Tom Burton's skill be equal to the task?

"Listen!" said Handforth abruptly.

He and several others were leaning over the rail, watching the distant clouds.

"I didn't hear anything!" said Church.

"A kind of murmur—a sort of quivering rumble!" said Handforth. "I expect it's the first sound of the thunder."

"There it is again!" ejaculated Fullwood.

They all remained still, their ears tense. Faintly and vaguely—with a very uncertainty that was in itself alarming—came a throbbing, quivering murmur; and with it there was a flickering play of bluish light amidst those massed clouds.

The storm was getting nearer—and, judging by these preliminary signs, it was to be a very special display!

CHAPTER 9.

The Coming of the Breeze!



It was the suspense, more than anything else, that got on the nerves of the amateur yachtsmen.

They had been waiting so long, and now, with darkness almost upon them, they were irritable with suppressed excitement.

Not that there were any indication of fear.

These St. Frank's fellows were thrilled, if anything. They were filled with a vague apprehension for what was to come—but this very apprehension was in the nature of an excited anticipation. They had come out for a pleasure cruise, and, before they got back, they were to meet with a real adventure!

And the desire for adventure—for thrills—for danger—is deeply ingrained within most British boys.

"I expect it'll be a frost when it comes!" said Handforth, with a grunt. "Just a bit of a blow, a few peals of thunder, and a lot

of rain. Then we shall run into the shelter of the harbour, and it'll be all over."

"What would you rather have—a shipwreck?" asked Church, not without sarcasm.

"Not exactly a shipwreck, but something exciting!" said Handforth. "It'll be pretty tame if we only——"

"Hallo!" yelled Pitt suddenly. "Look at the sails!"

Boom—boom—boom!

The sails, sluggishly at first, were filling out—and there was something erratic and half-hearted in this movement. The canvas slatted and bellowed, and then became dead again.

"It's the wind!" said Tommy Watson excitedly. "By Jove! We're getting some wind at last!"

"Yes, we'd better be ready, shipmates," sang out Tom Burton, from the wheel. "And don't forget—smart's the word when I give any orders!"

"Aye, aye, sir!"

A long, ominous roll of thunder sounded in the distance, and the black clouds were split by a dazzling flash of forked lightning. More thunder came, ages afterwards, it seemed. The little yacht was rolling with some violence now. In the distance, the mainland, had disappeared, and the all-enveloping darkness was closing rapidly down.

Puff-puff!

The wind came. It was very uncertain to to begin with, arriving in little puffs, then dying away to a dead calm once more. But after five or ten minutes there was really a breeze; and as it was coming in from the sea, Tom Burton was pleased.

"With luck, we shall be all right now!" he said cheerily. "But we've got to be ready for squalls!"

The Skylark was moving now—hissing through the dull waters, homeward bound. Burton had decided that it would be better to get back to Mersea Island—to the yacht's original moorings. He knew all the channels, and he was well acquainted with the tides.

Boom-boom-boom!

The thunder came again—louder now, and with it the breeze strengthened. As the heavy dusk grew to complete darkness, the Skylark bowled along over the freshening sea, making her way up the estuary.

"Nothing to worry about!" said Fullwood contentedly. "We shall do it!"

"Do what?" asked Handforth.

"Get to our moorings before the real storm bursts."

"Then it's a swindle!" said Handforth indignantly. "I thought we were going to have some excitement!"

The others felt the same, in a minor degree. And yet, after all, they were glad to feel that the possibility of real danger was over.

How premature they were! For, with startling abruptness, the full force of the storm broke. It took them un-awares—at least, all of them except Burton. He, knowing the signs, had been expecting this.

The storm seemed to develop with incredible speed now. The whole sky was covered in those inky clouds, and the lightning blazed dazzlingly every few moments. Great forked tongues of bluish fire licked the heavens.

The thunder, instead of rollings, now crashed and roared like artillery. Some of these devastating claps were almost deafening, and the very deck seemed to shake and quiver from the shock.

The darkness was pitchy, and the lightning only served to make it worse. For, as each flash came, the juniors were dazzled and half-blinded.

"Here comes the wind—in earnest now!" shouted Burton suddenly.

He was right. He shouted urgent orders, and the sails were reduced. The wind came booming in from the sea, and with it arrived the rain—drenching cascades of rain. It poured down, hissing on the decks and splashing noisily. In less than a minute, everybody on board was soaked to the skin.

The Skylark plunged on, rolling and tossing, and Tom Burton, at the wheel, keenly felt his responsibility. All these other fellows were looking to him to get them out of this trouble. How would he come through the test?

"Where are we making for, Bo'sun?" yelled Nipper, into Tom's ear.

The wind buffeted round them, and the rain slashed into their faces.

"We can't make Mersea Island now!" shouted Tom Burton. "We'll never do it, shipmate! If I can, I'm going to slip into one of the backwaters, just along here—two or three miles ahead."

"We might go aground!"

"That won't matter—it might be all the better!" replied the Bo'sun. "We shall be sheltered there, and we shall be safe. The tide will fetch us off again, if we go aground."

He tried to speak confidently, but he was full of apprehension.

For he knew that the Skylark was plunging onwards almost blindly—and although he had a general idea of his bearings, he could not be absolutely sure. And the worst of the storm hadn't come yet. The wind was steady, and the rain was coming down like a deluge. Everything would be all right as long as these conditions prevailed. But Tom Burton felt that they were too good to be true.

Zzzzzh!

A crackling, dazzling flash of lightning shot down from the heavens, and seemed to strike the sea only a few yards away from the Skylark. The little yacht raced on, and the thunder crashed

And then came the crisis!



CHAPTER 10.

The Disaster!

ABOVE the roaring of the storm came a curious, indescribable sound. It was half moan, half scream.

Most of the juniors heard it, but they did not understand.

Tom Burton, however, let out a terrific bellow:

"Stand ready, shipmates!" he thundered. "It's coming—it's here! Hang on for your lives!"

"What the dickens——" began Fullwood.

But he was interrupted by the Bo'sun, who was shouting out urgent orders. The fellows leapt to the ropes, their intention being to lower the sail completely.

But before they could so, the squall arrived.

They had all heard it—that moaning scream—but only Burton had recognised its true significance. It arrived across the star-board quarter, and caught the Skylark almost broadside on.

"Look out!"

"Quick, you fellows——"

With a shrieking tumult of sound, the squall struck the Skylark, and in a second everything was confusion. The moment was made worse by the fact that a blinding flash of lightning came simultaneously, with the crashing thunder following on its heels.

Over went the little yacht, heeling giddily, and with the juniors clutching at the rails, at the mast, and at anything they could hold on to.

"We're turning turtle!" yelled somebody.

For a moment it really seemed that the brave little yacht was to founder. Over she went, until her port rail was under water, and the sea was surging in angry, triumphant cascades over her decks.

In the darkness and confusion, the horror of it all was ten times worse.

A rolling mass of foam came swirling astern, and Tom Burton was nearly lifted off his feet. But he clung to the wheel grimly, and held the yacht steady. Indeed, solely owing to his efforts, disaster was averted.

It seemed to the juniors that hours must have passed during those tense moments. With a sluggish, reluctant movement, the Skylark lifted her bows out of the seething foam, and she assumed an even keel.

Then, like a frightened thing, she raced onwards.

"Everybody all right?" yelled Burton.

"Yes, I think so!" panted Nipper, as he gulped out a mouthful of salt water. "By Jove! That was a bit tricky, Bo'sun!"

"But we're through!" said Tom Burton. "We're all right now, messmate! The squall has passed, and the worst is over!"

"What happened when that spar swung round?" shouted Pitt, running dizzily up.

"I thought I saw somebody knocked over when the sail got loose! Where's everybody? What the dickens are we going to do? Hi! Jack—Jack!"

"Steady, old man!" said Nipper. "I expect everybody's all right. But we'll hold a roll-call. That'll be the safest way."

They were able to breathe now. The Skylark was careering onwards, but she was under control, and Tom Burton had seen, to his satisfaction, that the black clouds were passing; the lightning flashes were becoming few and far between, and the thunder was distant. Peeping from under the receding clouds, the moon was showing, and with incredible suddenness the howling wind had dropped, and had now become a mere breeze.

"I thought it wouldn't last long—but I was pretty scared about it, all the same," said Tom Burton thankfully. "Swab my maindecks! But it was a pretty rough time while it lasted! We're safe enough now—and we can get to our moorings at West Mersea."

"Dashed good, laddie!" said Archie Glen-thorne with relief. "Good gad! I mean to say, I thought we were——"

He broke off as he became aware of a commotion amidships. The juniors were shouting, and there was a note of wild alarm in their voices. Archie hurried forward, leaving Burton at the wheel.

"Is anything absolutely wrong?" shouted Archie.

"Have you seen Handforth?" demanded Nipper, clutching Archie's arm. "Or Church—or McClure? Have you seen them, man?"

"Good gad! You don't mean to say—No, old scout!" gasped Archie. "That is, I haven't seen them since that blessed squall biffed into us!"

"But they must be on board!" panted Tommy Watson, his voice full of horror. "Handy! Church!"

Everybody was shouting, panic-stricken. They took no notice of the sea, or of the still-driving rain. They ran about the decks, clutching at one another, shouting the names of Handforth and Church and McClure.

"Somebody says that a chap was swept overboard in the worst of it!" ejaculated Jimmy Potts. "I didn't see it, because I was nearly half-drowned. Oh, it can't be possible that Handforth——"

"Perhaps they're below!" panted Nipper.

Several juniors dashed below, but their search was futile. The little saloon was empty, and the juniors were not to be found, either, in the other spaces beneath decks. The searchers came up, frantic and pale.

"Have you found them?" asked Pitt hoarsely.

"No, they're not up here!" said Nipper, his voice cracked with anxiety. "Haven't you found them below?"

"Not a sign of them!"

"It's—it's too awful!" muttered Nipper, horrified. "It must have happened when that spar swung round! They're gone, you chaps! Handforth and his two chums! They were swept overboard!"

"Odds horrors and tragedies!"

"Oh, my goodness!"

"It—it can't be!"

They all stared astern—out into that smother or whipped sea. Darkness lay there—black, inky darkness. And yet, somewhere out in that waste of water, Handforth & Co. were struggling for their lives! Or, far more probably, they had gone! How could they have lived in that welter? Every fellow felt as though an icy hand had descended upon him. So shortly before they had been a merry, cheery holiday party. Now, in a flash—tragedy!

Three of their number had gone—had been swept overboard at the height of the storm!

And now they were lost—lost in the murk and darkness!



CHAPTER 11.

The Haven of Refuge!

THE situation was bad—but not as bad as it might have been.

For, surely enough, Handforth & Co. were out there, struggling for their lives in that tossing water! But they weren't dead yet, and, mercifully, the three were together.

It had all happened in a flash.

So swiftly, in fact, had it taken place, that nobody else on the Skylark had seen. Yet an act of sheer heroism had been performed, had they only known it, and the rugged Handforth was the unknown hero. Never, for a moment, however, did Handforth realise that he had performed anything noteworthy.

His action had been impulsive—as all his actions were—and the thought that he might be going to his death did not even occur to him.

The squall had come, and Church, caught by a swinging spar, had been half-stunned, and swept overside. It had happened in a split second, and McClure, who had been next to him, had clutched out to save him.

And McClure, too, had toppled over into the foaming spume.

They hadn't even had time to shout out—to warn anybody else. They had been blinded and stunned by the unexpectedness of it all. Only Handforth had seen—and this brief vision had been granted to him by the flash of lightning that had come simultaneously with the squall.

He had seen his chums swept overboard, and, without a second's hesitation—without a solitary thought—he had dived after them. They were in danger, and Handforth went to their rescue. He did not shout for help, neither did he yell to the others to come. He just dived.

Even before the Skylark had righted herself the three juniors were well eastern, fighting against the whipped-up seas, and the driving rain, and the tearing wind. By providential luck, McClure managed to retain his clutch of Church, and they were

together. Then Handforth appeared beside them. Swimming strongly, he appeared suddenly out of the blackness, and a splutter of relief escaped him.

"By George!" he panted. "So here you are! I thought I'd lost you!"

"Handy!" gulped McClure. "Quick! Lend a hand! Poor old Church was half-killed!"

But this was an exaggeration. Church had opened his eyes—for the cold water had brought him round—and, instinctively, he commenced swimming.

"What—what happened?" he muttered.

"You were swept overboard, and Mac, like a brick, went after you!" said Handforth.

"I couldn't help it!" gulped McClure. "I toppled over by accident, too!"

"But you didn't, Handy!" said Church. "Good man! Oh, but you shouldn't! We shall all be drowned now! Look! Look at the Skylark! She's half a mile away!"

Treading water, they clung to one another, and stared as best they could over the surface of the choppy sea. But they could tell that the squall had gone, and they were thankful for the faint gleam of moonlight which now flooded over the disturbed estuary.

Dim, winking lights could be seen occasionally, and the chums of Study D knew that these belonged to the Skylark. She was right away from them—a clear half-mile distant. To shout would be useless, and to attempt to overtake the yacht even more useless.

"We're in a hole!" said Handforth between his set teeth. "And there's only one thing we can do. We shall have to swim for it!"

"But—but where to?" spluttered Mac, as a little wave struck him in the face.

"I don't know—anywhere!" replied Handforth. "But we've got to swim! And the only thing is to keep on swimming! Land isn't far off!"

His chums were dumb. Not far off! To the best of their recollection—and they were very hazy regarding their position—there was no land nearer than a mile. Perhaps two miles.

And although they were fairly good swimmers in still water, what could they hope to accomplish in this great, storm-tossed river mouth? It was like the open sea itself!

As they struggled there in the water, it seemed to them that the waves were mountainous. They came surging up in great successions of foam-capped horror. The juniors were blinded, smothered, choked. They could swim—yes! But for how long?

Keeping as close together as possible, they struck out. Church had received a nasty blow, but he had forgotten the effects of it by now. There was the greater danger—the looming certainty of death!

"Keep it up, you chaps!" urged Handforth, when he had a chance to speak. "Don't forget the yacht! They'll come back soon—they'll look for us!"

"There's no sign of them!" said McClure hoarsely.

"But they'll come—they're bound to come!" insisted Handforth. "And we've got to keep on swimming! It's our only chance!"

Blindly they kept up. It seemed to them that they were making no progress. They battled on against the waves—which, small though they were, seemed mountainous to the juniors.

And very soon exhaustion came.

It wasn't like swimming up the River Stowe. Every stroke was a fight; every yard gained was exhausting. As was only natural, perhaps, Church was the first to give up.

"I—I can't go on!" he muttered suddenly. "I'm done, you chaps!"

"Churchy!" shouted Handforth, in dire alarm.

Church had vanished! Silently, without another word, he had sunk, his limbs refusing to carry him further.

Handforth dived madly—frantically. But Church was there, only just beneath the surface, and Handforth and McClure between them managed to hold him up. But what hope was there?

"It's no good, Handy!" said Mac desperately. "We're done! We can't keep him up for long! We can't—"

"Look!" broke in Handforth, his voice fairly cracking. "What's that?"

He managed to fling one arm out of the water. And McClure, staring, wondered if he was going mad. Within ten yards of them something black shut out the sky. It loomed up like some menacing shadow.

Then in a flash McClure realised what it was.

A bank—land!



CHAPTER 12.

The Castaways!

WITHOUT knowing it, the three juniors had been swimming within sight of that bank of land for five minutes!

Now it was close against them—practically within reach.

Only in the nick of time had they made the discovery.

For Handforth and McClure, notwithstanding all their strength and stamina, only just managed to drag the exhausted Church to the miniature cliff. It wasn't sheer here, but sloping; and when at last they felt the solid land beneath their feet, they were on the point of giving up.

"It's all right, Churchy—we're safe now!" panted Handforth fervently.

Somehow they succeeded in dragging Church up, until they were all three sprawled on the wet grass. Safe! It seemed too good to be true. Only a few minutes earlier they had faced death. They had believed that all hope was gone. Now they were outstretched on this grass, slowly recovering. The dreadful ordeal was over.



"I'm done, you chaps!" muttered Church. Next moment he had sunk, his limbs refusing to carry him further. Handforth dived madly, frantically. But Church was there, only just beneath the surface.

Handforth was the first to sit up and to stagger to his feet.

"The Skylark!" he muttered. "She must be about somewhere! They wouldn't leave us to our fate! It's a certainty they'll come back and look—well, I'm jiggered!"

He broke off blankly.

Gazing round, he had noticed something. His eyes, accustomed as they were to the gloom, could see exactly what manner of land this was. Until this moment he had believed that they were on the mainland, and that if the worst came to the worst they would be able to struggle on and find a house or some other kind of shelter.

But now he knew the truth.

The faint beams of the moonlight showed him that they were on that tiny islet which had figured in that curious adventure of the afternoon. They weren't on the mainland at all! They were marooned! They were cast away on this isolated, bleak islet.

"Oh, my only hat!" muttered Handforth, aghast.

Thankful as he had been to find land under him, there was no denying that he was now startled. Many thoughts throbbed through his brain. It would be impossible to stagger off and find shelter. For on this grassy bank there was no shelter! Nothing—only grass! To communicate with the shore was equally impossible, and it seemed practically certain that the Skylark had gone.

Away in the distance, lights were twinkling

--the friendly lights on the mainland. But here, out in the estuary, everything was dark and drear. The wind had now dropped, the rain no longer pelted down. The skies were clearing. But what satisfaction was this to Handforth?

Something stirred near him, and he saw that McClure was sitting up. Church, too, was beginning to come round. There was nothing much wrong with either of them; they had only been exhausted by their tremendous efforts.

"I'm cold!" muttered McClure dully. "All right, Churchy—you're safe now. Nothing to worry about. Better get up as soon as you can, and move about. It'll help."

Church was dazed.

"I—I thought I'd gone!" he murmured, sitting up. "I seem to remember sinking down into the water, and—and—"

"Yes, but we were just near land, and we managed to pull you ashore," said McClure. "It's all right, old son. We'll soon find a house or something. Thank goodness we're not on an uninhabited coast! There's bound to be a cottage—"

"Don't!" said Handforth huskily.

"Eh? Why, what on earth—"

"We are on an uninhabited coast, Mac!" said Handforth grimly. "At least, it amounts to the same thing. We're not on the mainland at all. We're on that rotten little island."

Church and McClure sprang to their feet, thoroughly revived by their leader's words.

"That island!" gasped McClure, staring round wildly. "Oh, my only hat! So we are! There's no shelter here!"

"But it's land—and we ought to be thankful enough for that!" said Church huskily. "At least, we're not drowned!"

"I suppose you're right," admitted Handforth soberly. "Good old Churchy! I was feeling inclined to grumble at our luck—but I suppose we ought to thank providence that we're still alive!"

"And there are the lights of the Skylark!" said Church suddenly, as he pointed. "Look! Can't you see them?"

"By George!"

Over in the distance, quite a long way down the estuary, twinkling lights were seen. Perhaps the juniors were taking a good deal for granted by assuming that those particular lights were on board the Skylark. But they had seen no other vessel, and the probability was that their assumption was correct. Everything else afloat had sought shelter long before the storm had broken. Only the Skylark had been out in that smother.

"Yes, that's the yacht right enough!" said McClure. "But why isn't she coming back? Look at the lights, and then look at that point of land beyond! They're not moving at all! The yacht is at anchor!"

"And that means they're not coming for us!" said Handforth under his breath.

"Well, I don't suppose we can expect 'em to come!" said McClure. "They think we're drowned. And how could they hope to find us by sailing back? Ugh! The wind's cold! We shall get chilled to the marrow if we stay here!"

"But we must stay here!" said Church, shivering.

Handforth looked round, and then his eyes gleamed.

"Well, anyhow, we can get down into the hollow!" he said. "It'll be a bit sheltered there—and we shan't be so cold. But I'll tell you what!" he added, as a bright thought struck him. "Let's run right round the island two or three times—just to restore our circulations. Come on!"

He plunged his hands into his trousers pockets—more out of force of habit than anything else. They were wet and clingy. Then, as he was about to start running, he uttered a gasp.

"Here! Look at this!" he said, his voice quivering with intensity. "My little pocket electric torch!"

He pulled it out, and showed it to his chums. He pressed the button—and the torch functioned.

"But—but what's the good of it?" asked Church, amazed.

"The Skylark!" replied Handforth. "Don't you understand? We can signal! We're boy scouts, and we know morse! We can let them know that we're here!"



CHAPTER 13.

The Signal in the Night!

ON board the Skylark, consternation reigned.

Immediately after the discovery, all the juniors were pale

with horror. Another frantic search of the yacht had been made, but she was only a comparatively small vessel, and it had not been long before the juniors were convinced that their first conclusion was correct.

Handforth & Co. were missing!

"Oh, it's too awful!" said Nipper huskily.

"And we can't do anything now, you fellows! That squall happened twenty minutes ago, and they can't have kept afloat all this time!"

"But we must search!" said Fullwood desperately. "We can't calmly go back like this!"

"No, no!" shouted the others. "We've got to go back!"

"Absolutely!" said Archie, his voice quivering with anguish. "Good gad! I mean to say, poor old scouts! Absolutely left to their fate out there!"

"Yes, we'll go back—but it won't be so easy!" said Nipper grimly. "Burton, do you think we can do it?"

"We'll try, messmate!" said Tom Burton steadily.

He knew the dangers—but he made no mention of them. His heart was heavy within him—for he felt that he was responsible. This was his party; he had brought these juniors out; and now three of them had been drowned! The sunny-tempered Bo'sun was stricken.

The breeze was steady now, and the storm had gone. But nothing could alter the fact that the sea was still very much disturbed. The tides were tricky, and the currents treacherous. The darkness had given place to a faint moonlight, but this did not help Burton very much.

And then, soon after, came the added disaster.

Tom Burton did his best. Everybody did their best. The Skylark swung round, out of the wind, and by steadily tacking, the Bo'sun hoped to cover the expanse of water that had been passed during the height of the squall.

Not that there was the slightest hope of rendering any assistance to the unfortunate juniors who had been flung overboard. It was too late now. How could they hope to see anything in this faint moonlight?

These thoughts were in the Bo'sun's mind as he stuck at his post. Suddenly he was flung against the wheel. All the other juniors on the decks were thrown off their balance, and they went sprawling in every direction. From overhead came the creaking and straining of spars.

"What's happened?" went up the general shout, as the fellows got to their feet.

"We're aground!" panted Burton in agony. "Swab me! I was half expecting it! The tide's low, and I don't know these waters so well just here! We're aground, shipmates!"

"Oh, my hat!"

"That's done it!"

The Bo'sun left the wheel, and ran to the side. All the other juniors followed his example, and they stared down at the water. Not that there was anything to be seen. As far as they could tell, the water was deep, for they seemed to be a considerable distance from land.

But the Skylark had bumped into a mudbank, and there she was fast.

All efforts to shift her were futile; she remained aground, firmly stuck. And now, indeed, the schoolboy yachtsmen were helpless.

"It's the worst thing that could have happened!" said Nipper tensely. "Those poor chaps are out there, somewhere, and we can't even go in search of them!"

"It's awful!" muttered Watson.

Nobody spoke what was in his thoughts. But each fellow felt that it would be perfectly useless to return, in any case. What could they do? It wouldn't even be possible to find the bodies.

But they hardly liked to think on those lines.

They were feeling stunned and miserable. This little trip had started out so promisingly, too! Everything had been so wonderfully cheery and happy. Now, the greatest of all possible disasters had befallen them. Three of their number were dead, and the others were stranded on this mudbank.

"What can we do now?" asked Fullwood huskily. "There's no danger here, I suppose?"

"None at all, shipmate," replied the Bo'sun. "We're safe enough—we shall probably float off when the tide comes in. But what does it matter about us?"

"Nothing!" said Nipper.

"What about the dinghy?" put in Reggie Pitt. "The dinghy isn't aground, and some of us can—"

"Yes, yes!"

"Anything, just so that we can be doing something!" urged Jack Grey. "This inactivity is awful! Let's take the boat, and row back!"

They all wanted to go, but Tom Burton was firm. He, as the skipper of this craft, had full control, and he appointed Nipper and Reggie Pitt and two others to the task. But before the dinghy could put off, somebody noticed something else.

"What are those lights over there?" shouted a voice.

"Lights! Where?"

"Look—back there!"

All eyes were strained. Then a general chorus went up. A tiny, winking white light could be seen—and, amazingly enough, it was not coming from the land, but from the

open estuary! It was coming from approximately the place where the Skylark had been struck by the squall.

"But—but this is impossible!" panted Pitt, staring. "That light's coming from the sea itself! Look! There it goes again!"

"They're signals!" yelled Watson excitedly. "I'll bet those chaps aren't dead, after all! They're trying to signal to us! Somehow, they've kept afloat——"

"Don't, old man!" muttered Nipper. "They couldn't have kept afloat all this time!"

"But that light is on the sea!" said Watson. "There must be a boat——"

"No!" roared Jimmy Potts. "Don't you understand? It's that little island——"

"What!"

"It's that little island we called at this afternoon!" panted Jimmy. "Can't you make out the dim outline?"

"By Jove, you're right!" said Nipper tensely. "It's that little island sure enough! And there's somebody on there with an electric torch, or something, signalling!"

They watched with anxious, straining eyes. And in every breath there was a new-born hope!

CHAPTER 14.

Communications!



I

f Handforth & Co. had been cold and miserable, they now forgot these physical discomforts.

Handforth's discovery made all the difference.

There was probably no other junior in the whole Remove who would have carried an electric torch in his trousers pocket. But Handforth could always be relied upon to do something that the other fellows wouldn't. He switched the torch on and off, and his delight was unbounded when he found that it continued to function.

"The battery's nearly a new one, too!" he said gloatingly. "We're all right now, you fellows! We can signal—and we can get help!"

"Thank goodness!" said Church breathlessly.

"But how are we going to do it?" asked McClure. "You say that we can signal in morse?"

"So we can."

"But how do we know that anybody who happens to see the flashes will understand morse?" said Mac. "We're scouts, and we know it. But the average man or woman on shore wouldn't take any notice of a tiny flashing light out here. It's just as well to be prepared for the worst, Handy!"

"My dear, fatheaded ass!" said Handforth, in a pitying voice. "I'm not going to signal ashore. My idea is to signal to the Skylark! What about Nipper and Burton and the other fellows? Practically all of them know

morse! And you can bet they're anxious about us; so they'll be on the look out."

"That's true!" said Church. "But we don't know where the Skylark is!"

Handforth pointed.

"There she is!" he said. "What about those riding lights?"

"But it may be another yacht."

"Rats!" said Handforth. "They've anchored, or something, and they probably think that we're dead. We'll jolly soon let them know the truth!"

The chums of Study D were full of enthusiasm. Even Church was so much better now that he was quite steady. His head ached, and he felt rather weak, but otherwise he was himself.

It wasn't so very cold, either, and all three juniors were in tip-top condition. If they were rescued soon, they were not likely to come to any harm as a result of this startling adventure.

"You chaps can move about if you like—and the more you move, the better!" said Handforth. "I'm going to start signalling with this dot and dash business. I shan't say much—just enough to let them know."

And, standing firmly there on that little island, he tapped out his message. He did this by switching on and off until his thumb was aching. Some flashes were long, others brief.

On the deck of the Skylark the other members of the party were watching fascinatedly. At first they had not understood the true significance of that tiny, flashing light. Then, all at once, Reggie Pitt jumped to it. He lunged out his arm and pointed.

"By Jove! It's morse!" he yelled. "Look! Can't you see?"

"Yes!" said Nipper. "There's a word—'Hurry.' That was the word! Those flashes just now made the word 'Hurry.'"

"Who can it be?" asked Watson tensely. "Perhaps it's only some fool, just messing about. Look! Everything's dark now. There's no—"

"There it is again!" broke in Travers. "I expect the message is being repeated. So watch closely!"

And all eyes were freshly strained.

The message came:

"Safe— island— cold— hurry."

Flash by flash, this message was borne to the stranded juniors on the Skylark, and although no name had been mentioned, they knew the truth.

"Hurrah!" shrieked half a dozen voices in unison. "They're safe—they're safe!"

"Swab my decks!" yelled the Bo'sun, capering up and down like a madman.

"Quick, messmates! Out with the boat!"

"Hurrah!"

They cheered again—hysterically. It was almost too good to be true. They had believed that Handforth & Co. were dead. Now came this winking message out of the blackness—this message which told them that the missing members of the party were safe,

and on the little island. That they were cold mattered little. It was just like Handforth to put that in the message!

On the tiny islet Handforth & Co. distinctly heard those cheers, and they were joyous. Across the waters came the faint echo of the tumult, borne by the wind, which had now shifted.

"Did you hear that?" said Handforth exultantly. "They've seen—and they've understood! And now they're cheering!"

"Good egg!" said McClure. "Well, we shan't be long now, Handy! I expect they'll come across in the dinghy, and take us off."

"That's about the size of it!" said Handforth. "Upon the whole, we're jolly lucky——"

"I say!" interrupted Church. "Look there! They're signalling back!"

"By George! So they are!"

The marooned juniors watched eagerly, and they read the winking message: "Coming."

It was brief, but it was enough.

"Burrh!" said Mac, with a shiver. "This breeze is a bit chilly! I'm shivering now!"

"Well, I'll tell you what!" said Handforth. "Let's get down into the hollow. We needn't bother about running round the island now. We might trip over things in the darkness. Come on—we shall be sheltered in this hollow."

They slithered down the sloping grass, and they were surprised to find how sheltered it really was at the bottom. The breeze passed right over them, and the air seemed to be comparatively warm. There was something else, too—something that puzzled Handforth considerably.

He sniffed sharply once or twice.

"Must be my fancy!" he muttered. "But I can smell cooking!"

"Cooking!" said Church, staring.

"Sausages, or steak, or something!" said Handforth, sniffing again. "Of all the rummy— Yes, there it is! I got a terrific waft just then! What the dickens can it mean?"

Here, on this deserted islet, far out in the estuary—the odour of cooking! In a way, it was even more startling than anything else that had happened on that eventful evening. For it seemed so incongruous—so bizarre. And there was no mistake about it, either. Undoubtedly, and beyond any dispute, the air of that tiny hollow was filled with the odours of cooking!

CHAPTER 15.

The Secret of the Island!



H

ANDFORTH rose to his feet and looked round him in the gloom.

Everything was dark. Except for the rustling of the breeze,

as it stirred the grass, there was no sound. The storm had left the night very peaceful.

"Oh, don't be an ass, Handy!" said Church, at last. "It's silly! How the dickens can there be a smell of cooking out here, on this deserted spot?"

"I don't know!" replied Handforth gruffly. "Of course it's silly! But that doesn't make any difference, does it? It's not my imagination, if that's what you mean!"

"It can't be!" said McClure. "I got a waft just now, too!"

"But where the dickens is it coming from?" insisted Handforth. "We're a mile from the mainland, at least! Well, I'm blessed! Queerest thing I ever struck!"

He crouched down again, dissatisfied. Any sort of a mystery, however trivial, always interested Handforth. And this mystery wasn't trivial. There was something very remarkable about it. These three juniors were out here, isolated—

"Oh!" gasped Handforth abruptly.

He had moved away from his chums, and now, suddenly, he had come to a halt, crouching. There he was, almost on his hands and knees, rigid. There was something tense and dramatic about his attitude.

"Handy!" ejaculated McClure. "What on earth—"

"Shssssh!" came a warning hiss from Handforth. "Quiet, you idiots—be quiet!"

"But why?" gasped Mac. "What's the matter?"

But Handforth made no reply. He remained just as he was, still rigid. Church and McClure, with a hasty glance at one another, scrambled up and moved towards their leader. They found him close against the steepest part of the grassy bank. At this point it sloped very acutely. On every other side the hollow was easily negotiable, but at this point the bank came down at a sharp angle.

"What is it, Handy?" whispered Church wonderingly.

"Shush!" breathed Handy. "Look at this!"

He pointed, and for a moment or two his chums thought that he had taken leave of his senses. He was pointing down at the grass—at that damp, earthy bank.

"Can't you see?" he murmured, at length.

"See what?" said McClure, mystified.

"Have you gone crazy, you ass?"

"Look here—and for goodness' sake keep quiet!" said Handforth, his very voice trembling.

Then, in a moment, Church and McClure saw—and they understood. For the first second or two they felt breathless. They could only stare dazedly. For there, right in that grassy bank—right in the interior of the solid earth, so it seemed—a chink of light was visible!

A distinct chink of light percolating through into the outer air. It was such an extraordinary discovery that Church and McClure could be forgiven for their earlier doubts regarding Handforth's sanity.

"But I don't understand!" breathed Church, at last. "What—what does it mean?"

"Jiggered if I know!" said McClure blankly. "But—but there must be a cave, or something, under here! A sort of secret place, hidden away behind this bank! Oh, but it's so—it's so impossible!"

"Is it?" said Handforth, a fierce note of triumph in his voice. "By George! We've hit something big here, you chaps!"

"Eh? Something big?"

"Yes, rather!" murmured Edward Oswald. "Smugglers!"

"Oh, my hat!"

"Smugglers!" repeated Handforth, rolling the word round his tongue with enjoyment. "Don't you understand, you fatheads? This is a smugglers' den!"

For a moment or two Church and McClure were breathless. They had forgotten their damp condition; they had forgotten the rescue party from the Skylark. This new excitement had driven everything else out of their minds.

And here was Handforth, talking of smugglers! Whenever he hit upon anything strange or unaccountable of this nature, his mind leapt to thoughts of smugglers or gangs of criminals.

"Oh, come off it, Handy!" protested McClure, after he had regained his breath. "There's no need to jump to conclusions—"

"What else can it mean?" broke in Handforth. "Here, on this island—which looks empty and deserted—there's a hidden cave, as this light proves! And the smugglers are cooking their evening meal, too!"

"But—but—"

"It's no good arguing!" said Handforth fiercely. "The thing is as obvious as daylight!"

"Are you sure they're not coiners?" asked Church, with a hint of sarcasm.

Handforth started.

"By George! That's an idea, of course!" he said. "Coiners! You may be right, Churchy! Smugglers or coiners—it doesn't matter much which! But here they are, hidden on this island. And we've stumbled across their lair!"

Even to Church and McClure, who were not usually given to such dramatic flights of imagination, the affair looked suspicious. Honest men, surely, would not hide themselves away in this strange fashion? Perhaps, after all, there was something in Handforth's theory!

"I—I say!" murmured Church, after a few moments. "I've just thought of something!"

"What have you thought of?"

"Those men this morning!" said Church. "Don't you remember? We saw them on this island, Handy—and then, when you came over to the place and explored it, there was nobody to be seen. You thought they must have been drowned."



As the Skylark slipped sedately through the water, the seniors indulged in bathing at its best. The good swimmers were easily able to keep pace with the yacht. Others hang on to ropes and, generally, they had a gorgeous time.

Handforth jumped.

"Of course!" he said exultantly. "They were the smugglers! They must have been having a quarrel amongst themselves. Then they saw us coming, and bolted down into their secret cave. My only hat! We're on the track of a big gang!"



CHAPTER 16.

The Surprise!

THE chums of Study D were very startled.

It certainly seemed likely that a logical explanation of that queer incident in the earlier part of the day had been found. The remarkable disappearance of those two figures was now no longer a mystery. If there was a hidden cave on this islet—and there certainly seemed to be—then there was no longer any cause for mystification.

But what could it really mean? Was there anything in Handforth's sensational suggestion? For once Church and McClure were inclined to half agree with their leader. This little island was isolated from the mainland—it was out here in the estuary. An ideal spot, surely, for a smugglers' resort.

"You chaps keep back!" warned Handforth. "I'm going to make some investigations!"

"But what can you do?" asked Church, in alarm. "Look here, Handy, we'd better keep out of it! The other fellows will be along soon, and——"

"That's just why I'm going to make the investigation!" interrupted Handforth grimly. "I'm not going to let them grab the credit for this discovery! By the time they arrive, we'll be in possession of all the facts! This is my find, my sons! Understand? Mine! I don't want to boast, but I think you'll admit that I was the chap who made the discovery?"

"We're not denying it," said McClure impatiently. "Of course you made the discovery. But do be sensible, Handy. It'll be a lot safer if you wait——"

"Half a jiffy!" interrupted Church. "I'll see if they're coming!"

He ran up the opposite slope, and reached the top of the grassy mound. Searching across the sea, he thought he could detect a little black blur some distance away. It seemed quite windy up here, after the shelter of the hollow, and the breeze cut through Church's sodden clothes like a knife. He shivered, and turned back into the hollow.

"They're coming!" he panted, as he reached his chums. "I think there's a boat

out there now. I can't see very clearly——"

"Well, never mind them!" said Handforth. "The longer they are the better! Now, the first thing to do is to find the secret door!"

He went down on his hands and knees, and searched the slope. There was only one tiny glimpse of light from within—but it was enough. It wasn't a crack or a crevice—but a



As the Skylark slipped sedately through the water were easily able to keep pace with the yacht.

sort of little pin-point of radiance, and it could only be seen when one crouched exactly opposite to it. This explained why the chums of Study D had not seen the point of light earlier.

Handforth brought out his electric torch, and switched it on. But if he expected to make any discovery, he was disappointed. The beam of light only confused him. For,

as far as he could see, the earthy bank was unbroken. It was covered with coarse, shaggy grass, like every other inch of ground on the island.

"H'm!" muttered Handforth, as he switched off the torch. "The door must be somewhere else! Probably round the other side, hidden under one of the cliffs. The best thing we can do is to scout round, and —"

"Look!" yelled Church frantically.

But Handforth needed no bidding. Without warning, a portion of the bank had swung open, and a shaft of light shot out into the hollow—a glare of yellow intensity. With it came a wave of warm, cooking-satu-

Handforth jumped. The figure, he could see, was that of a rough, desperate-looking man, attired in wide trousers and a blue jersey. His face was rugged-featured, and his hands were horny.

"Oh, my hat!" ejaculated Handforth, with a gulp.

"You'd best come inside, young shaver!" said the man bluntly.

He seized Handforth by the shoulder and, with a heave, sent the junior pitching forwards into the mysterious interior of the bank. With one accord Church and McClure leapt forward.

"Let him go!" panted Church desperately. "You—you rotter—"

"More of ye—eh?" interrupted the man harshly. "How many, hey? How many?"

"There's three of us!" said Church excitedly. "You'd better be careful what you do—"

"Come along—the pair of ye!" interrupted the man. "Inside!"

He was evidently an individual of a few words. He grabbed Church and McClure before they could even attempt to run. One after the other they were bundled through the narrow doorway. Their captor followed them, and then came a dull, sinister thud. Church, who was the last to enter, stared round. No sign of any doorway now—nothing but a blank wall, more like the wall of a ship's cabin.

"Trapped!" gasped Handforth, in a hollow voice.

They stood there, blinded by the light from the lamp which swung from a beam overhead. And there, at the place where the door had been, the big man in the jersey stood with folded arms. His eyes, from under bushy eyebrows, were regarding the three juniors with steady intentness!

CHAPTER 17.

The Place of Mystery!



YOU'RE wet!" said the man, at length.

"Never mind about that!" gasped Handforth, recovering his voice. "Where are we? What do you mean by dragging us in here like this? But you needn't think that I'm spoofed! I know what you are! You're smugglers! You're afraid that we shall tell the police, and so you've captured us!"

"But you won't keep us for long!" shouted Church excitedly. "There's a bo—"

He broke off abruptly as he caught Handforth's warning glance. After all, there was no need gratuitously to explain that a boat-load of other fellows was coming along.



alged in bathing at its best. The good swimmers opes and, generally, they had a gorgeous time.

rated air. The most distinctive odours were frying sausages and hot coffee.

A narrow doorway had revealed itself—a low, mysterious doorway. It seemed as though a piece of solid earth had rolled back. And there, half-obscuring the light, was a figure.

"Now, then, my young beauty, what's your game?" demanded a harsh voice.

"Well, young gents, we'll see about it!" growled the man. "Smugglers, eh? Maybe you're right—and maybe you ain't! 'Tain't for me to say. My name's Ben Jarvis, and it seems like you youngsters need some attention. Off with them wet things!"

"Look here——"

"Off with 'em!" ordered Mr. Jarvis harshly. "Here, Jake, come and lend a 'and, you lazy young himp!"

A second figure appeared from the mysterious recesses at the back of this place of wonder. He, too, was dressed like Ben Jarvis—in a rough jersey. He was much younger, and he possessed a shock of untidy hair. He was looking frightened and startled.

"I don't reckon we ought to 'ave brought 'em in!" he said tentatively.

"I don't want no lip from you, Jake!" said the big man angrily. "Come 'ere, an' do as you're told! Help these boys to get out their wet things!"

Handforth & Co. were bewildered. Everything had happened so quickly. Even now, they were only just growing accustomed to the bright light from the lamp; and they could see, to their fresh stupefaction, that they were now apparently within the cabin of an old-time ship.

Yet this could not be so, for they knew well enough that they were behind that grassy bank on the island. Still, it looked like the cabin of a ship, with bunks and lockers, and with oak beams overhead. On one side there was an oil stove going, and the air was filled with appetising odours.

What could it mean?

Outside, a plain grassy bank! Inside, a superbly-furnished ship's cabin!

"Now, my lads, you'd best explain yourselves!" said Ben Jarvis, as he forcibly seized Handforth, and commenced wrenching off the junior's coat. "Come along, now—no nonsense! What was you doin' on this island?"

"Go and eat coke!" retorted Handforth. "I'm not going to answer any of your questions! You're a smuggler—and this is your den! As soon as I get free, I shall tell the police——"

"Cheese it, Handy!" broke in Church. "There's no reason why we shouldn't explain how we got on the island." He turned to the man. "We were out with a crowd of other fellows, in the Skylark," he said quickly. "We were caught in that thunderstorm, and I was washed overboard."

"Lucky for you you wasn't drowned," commented Jarvis bluntly.

"I should have been drowned if McClure

here and Handforth hadn't jumped in after me," said Church. "All three of us were struggling about in the water for ages. Then we found this little island, and—and crawled ashore. We thought it was deserted."

"Yes, but you can't fool me!" said Handforth. "I saw that chink of light, and I knew jolly well that there was something mysterious about the place! Who are you? What do you mean by collaring us like this?"

"You'd best ask no questions, my lad!" replied Jarvis, frowning. "Finish gettin' them things off, an' we'll put 'em in front o' the stove to dry. You're like to take your death o' colds."

He turned and beckoned to the youth.

"Get some o' them spare blankets, Jake!" he commanded. "Step lively, my lad!"

Handforth & Co. were hastily undressing now. There seemed to be nothing else to do. This man, Jarvis, was a determined-looking individual. And there was no denying the fact that the juniors were trapped. A fight, in this confined space, would have been futile. Quite apart from that, they were not feeling like a fight.

Indeed, now that they were in this warm atmosphere, they all felt weak and shivery, and it struck them as being an excellent idea to get out of their clothes, and to wrap themselves in warm blankets. This smuggler, whatever his failings, undoubtedly had the right idea.

"Now then, you sit yourselves down on that locker!" said Jarvis, at length, when the three juniors were wrapped in blankets. "You're pretty near the stove there, an' it won't take you long to get warmed up. Jake, lend me a 'and with these clothes. The sooner they're dried, the better!"

"You ain't goin' to let 'em stay 'ere, are you?" asked Jake, staring.

"We shall 'ave to wait until the chief comes!" returned Ben Jarvis.

Handforth started.

"The chief!" he muttered. "By George! I knew it! These chaps are only underlings! The smuggler-chief has been away on business, I expect—probably grabbing some of his spoils! Oh, crumbs! We're in the soup properly!"

But Handforth was in no way scared. Yet he was thrilled through and through. He was willing to admit that these smugglers were humane—they were acting like good Samaritans—but nothing could alter the fact that they were crooks. And he—Handforth—had discovered their lair!



CHAPTER 18.

Another Mystery!

"FUNNY!" said Reggie Pitt, frowning.

"Can't you see them?" asked Nipper.

"Not a sign!" said Reggie, as he strained his eyes.

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He was standing up in the rear of the dinghy, gazing searchingly at the little islet which was now immediately ahead. The other fellows in the boat were Nipper, Travers, Tommy Watson and Archie Glen-thorne. They were pulling at the oars steadily, and they were glad because their destination was nearly reached.

"I can't understand why they're not watching for us!" said Reggie Pitt, frowning. "There's not a sign, you fellows!"

"Well, we know they must be there," said Nipper, as he pulled at his oar. "Give them a hail, Reggie! I expect they've gone down into that little hollow for shelter."

"That's about the size of it, dear old fellows," observed Travers.

Reggie Pitt raised his voice, and let out a lusty hail.

But there was no response. The figures of Handforth & Co. did not appear on the island. There was nothing there—nothing except darkness and emptiness.

"It's not like Handy!" said Nipper, puzzled. "I should have thought he would have been yelling like the dickens by this time."

"Hi, Handy!" shouted Pitt.

Still there was no reply. For the first time since they had started out from the Skylark, the rescue party became uneasy. What did it mean? Why was there no response from the island?

It was impossible that they could have been mistaken. They had read those morse signals correctly.

"Safe— island—cold—hurry."

The message had been perfectly plain and straightforward. Handforth & Co. were safe, and they were on the island. Why, then, did not the chums of Study D make themselves apparent? Where were they?

"Well, we shall know in a minute!" said Nipper, as the boat-nose rammed into the bank. "Steady, you chaps! It won't take us half a tick to get up here, and we mustn't forget to fasten the boat, either."

Within a minute, the rescue party had landed, and their anxiety was greater than ever. Handforth & Co. had not yet shown themselves.

On the journey from the yacht, Nipper and his companions had been very cheerful; they had laughed and joked, and had been generally gay. For it seemed to them that everything was all right.

But now an uneasiness had stolen over them. A doubt was in their minds. Had they, by some incredible mistake, mis-read that winking message? They each told themselves that such a thing was impossible—and yet—and yet—

They had come well prepared. Every available coat had been brought so that these could be wrapped round the soaked trio. Nipper had even provided himself with a wooden stake, so that he could push it into the ground, and tie the dinghy's painter to it. Nipper had only done this

because he believed in doing things properly. But he had supposed, all along, that Handforth & Co. would scramble into the boat as soon as ever it touched land.

"It's frightfully puzzling, dear old sportsmen," said Archie, as he gazed round. "I mean to say, Handforth isn't the kind of chappie to hang back, what? It's so frightfully rummy, if you know what I mean!"

"Oh, but, hang it, they must be on the island!" protested Tommy Watson. "We saw those signals, and we know that they came from the island. Besides, we answered, and said that we were coming."

They ran across the grass, and, within a few seconds, they reached the top of the little slope. They could now look down into the hollow—right across the island, to the spot where the moonlight fell upon the estuary, beyond.

And they all stood there, silent—their hearts beating rapidly.

"Good gad!" ejaculated Archie, at length.

"They're not here!" panted Reggie Pitt.

"Queer, dear old fellows—decidedly queer," said Vivian Travers, shaking his head. "But, then, we never know what to expect from Handforth!"

"Yes, but confound it, Travers, even Handforth couldn't do much on this island!" said Nipper, tense with anxiety. "Where can he have got to? Oh, the idiot! What was the good of him signalling to us like that, and then going off somewhere? He must have got our answer. We signalled that we were coming—"

"Yes, but there were no more signals from the island, to show that our message had been received," put in Pitt keenly. "Perhaps they thought we hadn't read their message—"

"But what difference does it make?" insisted Nipper. "We know they fell overboard, and we know that they got to this island safely. They wouldn't be mad enough to leave it again. They couldn't swim ashore from here. Handforth may be a reckless idiot, but he's not crazy enough for that!"

"Then where is he?" asked Watson huskily. "And where are the others?"

"We'd better search the island!" replied Nipper. "They're probably sheltering somewhere—perhaps along the opposite bank. Come on, Tommy—we'll cut straight across. You other three spread out, and work your way round the other banks, and as soon as those fatheads are spotted, let out a yell. I tell you they must be here somewhere."

The rescue party divided up and went various ways. They searched every inch of the "coastline," they shouted until they were hoarse, and in the end they came together again. There was but one result of their efforts. They had established beyond all reasonable doubt that Handforth & Co. were no longer on the island!

And the rescuers were torn with renewed misgivings and anguish.



CHAPTER 19.

Very Strange!

NIPPER tried to think clearly. Handforth & Co. had been washed overboard, and everybody else on the Sky-lark had believed them to be dead. Then those flashing signals had come from the island, and despair had turned to hysterical relief. Yet now that the rescue party had reached the island, Handforth & Co. were conspicuous by their absence.

What could it mean?

Had there been some ghastly blunder? Certainly there had been no names mentioned

in that morse message. Was it possible, then, that the juniors on the yacht had read a message from somebody else? There was just a bare possibility that there was another island further out, and that winking light had come from this second island. If so, it hadn't referred to Handforth & Co. at all! The St. Frank's fellows weren't the only people who could read morse. Out here, especially in this estuary, there were probably heaps of natives who knew—

"Oh, but it's silly!" muttered Nipper, biting his lip. "Handy sent that message! I know he did—I'm sure of it!"

But when he looked round at that bleak little moonlit scene, his doubts came back with redoubled force.

What could be the curse of this island? All those juniors remembered that earlier episode. They had clearly seen two figures

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on the island, and yet when they had arrived, those figures had apparently vanished into thin air! And now Handforth & Co. had disappeared just as mysteriously!

"They're drowned, after all!" said Watson huskily. "Oh, my goodness! After all our hopes, too!"

"Odds tragedies and frightfulness!" said Archie in a bleak voice. "I mean to say, dash it! Not that, laddie! Absolutely not that! Perhaps the chappies tried to swim ashore, or some such——"

"Don't you believe it, Archie," put in Travers. "Those three chaps had quite enough swimming before they hit this island, I'll wager! They wouldn't want any more of it. As far as I can see, there's only one possibility—and that's precious slim."

"What is it?" asked Nipper.

"A boat of some kind must have passed while we were on our way here," replied Travers. "They saw Handforth and the other two chaps on the island, and so they took them off."

"By jingo, that's a possibility!" said Pitt, grasping at the slightest straw. "But, if so, where's the boat?"

He scanned the estuary closely in all directions.

"Oh, I know there's nothing in view," said Travers. "But motor-boats aren't particularly uncommon in these waters, dear old fellow. I'm not saying that this is an explanation, but it strikes me as being possible. It seems to be about the only way in which the chaps could have got away."

But there was no conviction in Vivian Travers' voice. He knew well enough that his theory was at fault. For instance, why hadn't Handforth & Co. asked their rescuers to come along in the motor-boat and meet the dinghy for the Skylark? It was obviously the one thing that Handforth would have done.

"We can't stand here like this!" said Pitt desperately. "Perhaps they're here after all. There may be some crevice or cave that we haven't seen."

"I don't think so, old man," said Nipper quietly. "We explored the place this afternoon, remember."

"But there must be something!" insisted Pitt. "Let's all yell together—one tremendous shout. If they are here, they're bound to hear us, and they might answer. Oh, I know it's a dotty idea, but anything is better than standing here like this!"

So they all raised their voices.

"Handy!"

It was a terrific bellow, and it awoke the echoes of that little islet. And then they waited tensely, never expecting to hear any definite reply.

"Hurrah! The chaps are here!"

Faintly, dimly, mysteriously, Handforth's voice sounded to them. It seemed to come from the very earth—almost from beneath their feet! Yet, at the same time, there was something so unreal about that sound that

not one of the juniors was convinced that he had really heard anything.

"Good gad!" breathed Archie.

"Did—did you hear Handy's voice just then?" asked Tommy Watson shrilly.

"By Jove, yes!" panted Nipper. "I—I thought I heard——"

"Then, dear old fellow, there can't be any doubt about it," said Travers. "If we all heard it, then it's a cert! I had a horrid notion that my imagination was at work, but——"

"Let's shout again!" said Pitt breathlessly. "Oh, crumbs! What the dickens can it mean? Where are they? Handy's voice seemed to come out of the very earth!"

They shouted once more at the top of their voices.

And now, although they couldn't swear to it, they believed that they heard a faint, muffled commotion. There was no actual shout in Handforth's voice, but a confusion of sounds. Nipper, as he stood there, staring intently, suddenly uttered a gasp.

"I believe I've got it!" he shouted thickly.

He ran down into the hollow, and he stood looking about him—keenly, searchingly. Then, by the merest chance, he caught sight of that tiny chink of light. It is true that Nipper had been looking for some secret opening, for he had conceived the idea that there was a hidden cave here. But he was hardly prepared for that chink of light.

"Here, you chaps!" he shouted. "Quick! There's something funny about this! There's a light showing here—right out of the ground!"

"Oh, my hat!"

"Where—where?"

They all ran up, and they stared blankly as Nipper pointed. And now, distinctly, they could hear a confusion of voices.



CHAPTER 20.

The Escape!

WITHIN that queer reproduction of a ship's cabin, Handforth & Co. were tense and excited.

Everything was so mysterious—so unreal. It bewildered their senses to be pitchforked into this remarkable adventure immediately following their narrow escape from drowning. Even now they felt inclined to pinch themselves in order to see if they were dreaming.

They sat on the locker wrapped in blankets, and their clothing was drying in front of the powerful oilstove. The air in that cabin was stuffy, and now it reeked of rank tobacco smoke. On the other side of the central table sat Ben Jarvis, grim, silent and menacing.

Jake, the youth, was attending to the clothes, turning them over when necessary, and changing them about.

"So you found out the secret, my hearties, did you?" said Jarvis suddenly. "Well, we'll see what the chief has to say about it! It won't be long before he's here, and then, by thunder, you'll know all about it!"

Jake looked round sharply, and stared at the elder man.

"As for you," thundered Jarvis, pointing, "get on with your work! No questions! Understand? No lip from you!"

Jake gasped, but said nothing.

In the momentary silence that followed a sound came from outside, penetrating into the depths of that hidden cave very eerily.

"Handy!" came the sound.

Handforth leapt up.

"Hurrah! The chaps are here!"

In a flash Ben Jarvis was on his feet, too.

"Be quiet, darn you!" he snarled. "What the thunder—Who's out there?" he went on savagely. "More of you school kids, eh?"

"Yes, a whole crowd of 'em!" said Handforth gloatingly. "They've come here to rescue us—and it won't be long before they get us out of here!"

"They'd best not try any tricks!" snapped Ben Jarvis harshly. "And it's time the chief was here, too! Great crayfish! If the chief comes and finds the island swarmin' with boys, he'll settle the whole crowd of 'em!"

"Gimme my clothes!" panted Handforth desperately. "I'm going to get out of here! Come on, Mac! Buck up, Churchy! We're not going to stay here, prisoners! There are only two of 'em against us, and——"

"Keep back, darn you!" snarled Jarvis threateningly.

But he made no attempt to interfere. Handforth & Co. scrambled into their half-dried clothes with lightning-like rapidity. They were rather astonished to find that they were not molested.

Ben Jarvis stood on the other side of the cabin table, watching them under his bushy eyebrows. Perhaps he was only waiting—waiting for reinforcements to come.

He, being a sensible man, realised that a fight in this confined space would be disastrous. Practically everything in the place would be wrecked if it came to a prolonged struggle. And, after all, Jarvis had the upper hand—since he alone knew how to get out of this place.

"Where's the door?" panted Handforth fiercely. "Look here, you rotter, you've got to show us the door!"

Ben Jarvis laughed contemptuously.

"Have I?" he retorted. "I ain't takin' no orders from you, young shaver!"

"By George! You'll pay for this!" said Handforth fiercely. "You're just waiting until the gang come along."

"Ay, mebbe!"

"You can't fool me now!" went on Edward Oswald. "There's a whole gang of you, and this place is your headquarters! You're smugglers, and your chief is the ring-leader! I expect they've been out on a raid now, and they'll soon be here with their spoils!"

"Ay, mebbe!" said Jarvis again.

"But you needn't think that we're done!" went on Handforth. "A crowd of our chaps are outside, and they're going to tell the police if you don't let us out——"

"The police!" croaked Jarvis, starting back.

"You've got us—but you haven't got them!" said Handforth triumphantly. "Rescue—rescue! Hi! Rally round, Remove!"

He suddenly raised his voice, and Church and McClure, in their excitement, joined him. They shouted for all they were worth.

From outside came the answering hail:

"Hurrah! We're here, Handy!"

"Crikey!" came a gasp from Jake. "'Ere, dad, you'd best open the door! These young gents are liable to cause trouble——"

"Ay, so they are!" said Ben Jarvis, coming to a sudden decision. "You're right, Jake! Yes, I'll open the door and let 'em out!"

He took out a big watch, and looked at it. As he did so, a slow smile overspread his rugged, weatherbeaten features.

"The chief!" he said tensely. "It's exactly time that he was here! They'll all be along. Jake—an' then these young gents will be sorry for themselves! It's a dark night, and the estuary is lonely."

"What—what do you mean?" gasped Church, staring.

Jarvis laughed loudly.

"There's been a storm—an' you boys have been out in a yacht!" he gloated. "What's goin' to 'appen if you're all found floatin' in the mornin'? There'll be no questions asked—there'll only be an inquest! Accidents are always 'appenin', my lads!"

As he spoke, he pulled a hidden lever, and a waft of the night air came into the cabin. Handforth & Co. saw that a part of the wall had swung back, revealing a black cavity.

From outside came a confused shouting.

"Come on!" yelled Handforth. "Now's our chance!"



CHAPTER 21.

The Fight!

LIKE a charging bull, Handforth blundered out of the "cabin."

Church and McClure were at his heels, and they were bewildered and dazed by the sudden darkness. But the next moment they were surrounded by Nipper and Travers and the others.

"Oh, thank goodness!" panted Church, as he realised the truth.

"Quick—let's get away!" shouted McClure.

"The gang's coming, and they're going to drown us all——"

"Steady!" said Nipper. "What on earth



At the place where the door had been, the big man in the jersey stood with folded arms. His eyes, from under bushy brows, were regarding Handforth and his two chums with steady intentness.

"Trapped!" gasped Handforth, in a hollow voice.

"It's a good thing you chaps have come!" broke in Handforth fiercely. "You're all wanted! How many of you?"

"Five!" said Nipper. "But, my dear chap——"

"That makes eight of us!" snapped Handforth. "Well, we can put up a good fight! These people here are smugglers!"

"What!"

"Good gad!"

"I say, dear old fellow, draw it mild——"

"They're smugglers!" roared Handforth excitedly. "This is their lair! There are only two of them here now, and that's why they let us escape! But the gang's coming, and——"

"Listen!" interrupted one of the others.

They all fell silent, startled by his tone.

Thud—thud—thud!

"What's that?" gasped Church.

"A motor-boat engine, by the sound of it!" said Nipper quickly.

"The gang!" yelled Handforth.

He was so excited that he could hardly speak coherently. As for Nipper and the other rescuers, they were bewildered. They had been amazed enough to see that chink of light, and to realise what it meant.

But now, to see Handforth & Co. charging out like this, not only alive, but absolutely full of energy, took their breath away.

"We thought you fellows were drowned!" said Watson.

"Well, we're not drowned!" replied Handforth. "We're very much alive! And we've found this smugglers' den, and we're going to expose it to the police! And don't forget that I'm the chap that made the first discovery!"

"Yes, but look here!" broke in Nipper. "Keep calm, Handy! How the dickens do you know they're smugglers? There might be some mistake! You know what an ass you are for jumping to conclusions——"

"You fathead!" roared Handforth. "They've admitted it! And they've said that if the gang gets hold of us, they'll chuck us all in the sea! They'll pretend it was an accident, and——"

"Look out!" broke in Church. "The motor-boat's here—and the men have landed!"

The chums of Study D were in a better position to know the truth than the other fellows. They had heard Ben Jarvis—they had seen his glowering face, and his burning eyes. To Nipper and the others, the whole story seemed fantastic. But there could be no denying that the motor-boat had arrived, and that men were appearing over the grassy slope.

"Wait a minute, Handy!" gasped Nipper. "Why are you so sure of this? These men don't seem to have hurt you—and they've sheltered you, and——"

"Yes, I know that!" admitted Handforth breathlessly. "In a way, they're not such bad sorts. They gave us blankets, and dried

our clothes. So we shall have to go easy with 'em. All the same, they're smugglers, and we've got to do the right thing!"

"They're coming!" broke in Church.

Handforth turned, and saw the approaching figures. There were several of them—dim outlines against the sky, on the top of the slope. They had paused there, irresolutely, obviously taken aback by the sight of all these schoolboys.

"Now's our chance!" yelled Handforth. "Come on, Remove! One rush, and it'll be over! We've got to collar these smugglers, and make a good job of it! But look out for revolvers! They're probably armed to the teeth!"

He ran to the attack, and the others, feeling that there was nothing else for them to do, followed his example. Since he had called upon them to back him up, they felt bound to do it. So, in a great charge, the juniors swarmed up the slope.

"Here, what the dickens——"

A new voice had sounded, but it did not utter many words. For Handforth had charged him and Handforth's right had thudded into the man's chest. He went over with a terrific crash, unprepared for that charge.

"All right, if it's a fight, I'm game!" sang out another voice. "Any old thing you like, Fireirons! But you might have given us the tip that you were staging a battle!"

"I don't know anything about it, you infernal idiot!" said the man who had been knocked down. "Here, confound you—Who are you? What's the meaning of this? What the deuce do you schoolboys think you're up to? Whoa! Ease up, there!"

Handforth was in the thick of it.

"Buck up, St. Frank's!" he yelled. "There are only three or four of them! Down with the smugglers!"

"Yo gods and little fishes!" gasped one of the enemy. "Smugglers, what? That's a new one, Fireirons!"

Nipper charged in, and grabbed Handforth by the arm.

"Cool down, Handy!" he shouted. "You've made a mistake, I tell you! These people aren't smugglers! Haven't you got any sense, you impulsive idiot?"

"Not—not smugglers!" gasped Handforth.

"Of course they're not!" nodded Nipper. "Can't you see that they're dressed in flannels and blazers? You've made one of your usual idiotic mistakes! I say, I'm frightfully sorry!" he added, turning to the newcomers. "It's this chump of a Handforth! He's always making bloomers like this!"

And the fight ended abruptly.

Handforth, to his stupefaction, saw that the "enemy" merely consisted of three young fellows, and they were all attired in flannels and blazers. In no circumstances could they be mistaken for desperate smugglers!

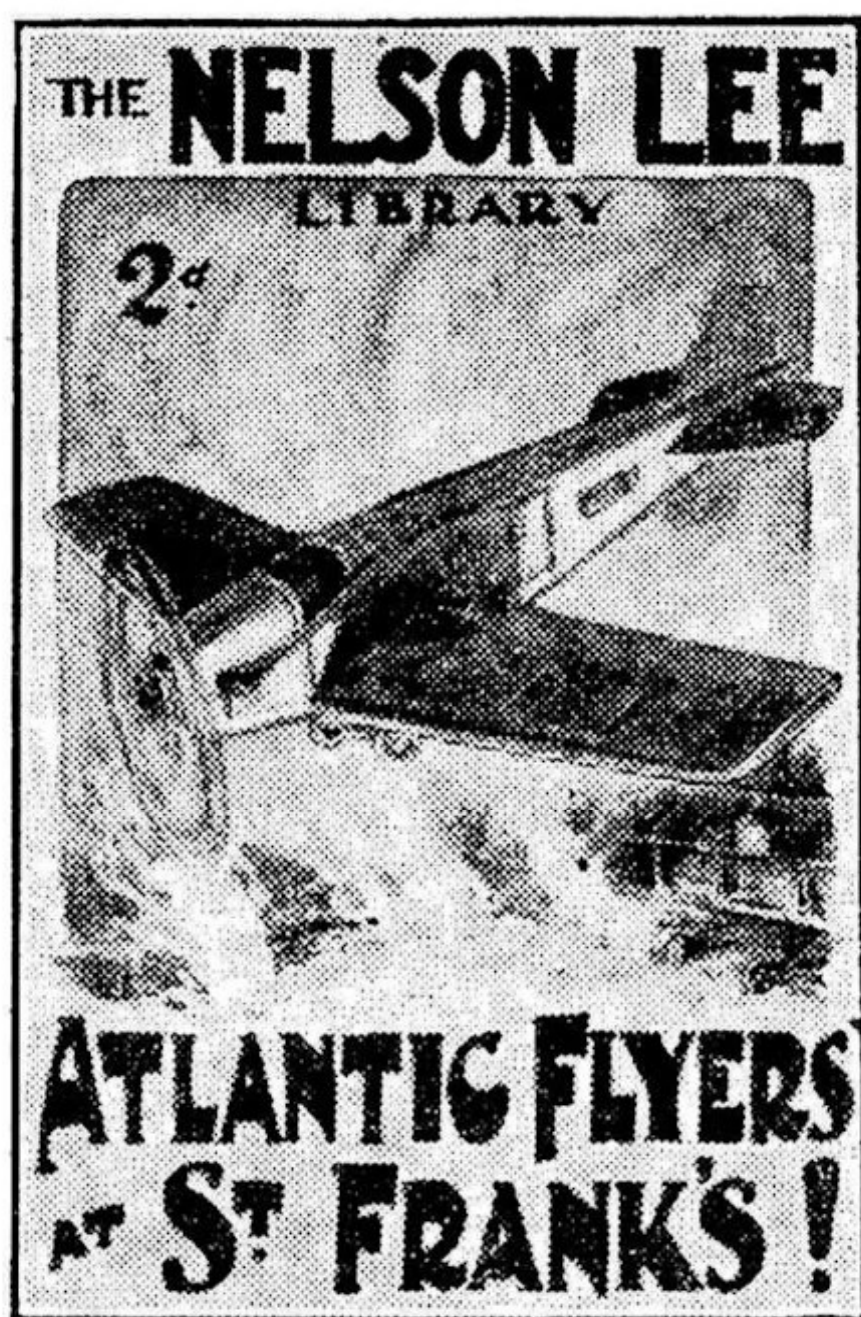


CHAPTER 22.

Handy Isn't Satisfied!

"JARVIS!" sang out the young fellow who had been called Fireirons by one of his friends. "I say, Jarvis, you horny-handed old ruffian! Where the deuce are you? And what's the meaning of all this hullabaloo?"

NEXT WEDNESDAY! ~~~~~



Ben Jarvis appeared in the doorway of the queer cabin, and his face was now wide with grins. In his rear, the youth Jake was splitting his sides with laughter.

"Sorry, Mr. Andrews!" said Jarvis apologetically. "I simply couldn't 'elp it. Mebbe I was wrong, but it seemed too good to be wasted!"

"Well, what's the joke?" demanded the other, striding forward. "At least, you might let us share it with you!"

"Just a minute!" said Nipper. "Before we go any further, do you mind telling us who you are?"

"No. in the slightest," said Fireirons, grinning. "My name's Andrew Newland—although I don't suppose that conveys much to you. I might mention, though that my father is Sir Joshua Newland, the banker."

"Great pip!" breathed Handforth faintly.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

The other St. Frank's fellows yelled with laughter.

"At the same time," said Andrew Newland politely, "I'm rather interested to know who you boys are. You see, this is my island—my own property, as a matter of fact—and I'm not accustomed to having it swarming with schoolboys at this hour of the night. What's the game? If it's worth

"But even now I'm a bit mystified."

"If it comes to that, so are we," smiled Travers. "Handforth—he's the chap with the funny-looking face—was absolutely certain that you were all smugglers."

"Not guilty!" grinned one of Newland's companions. "We're only harmless undergrads."

"Undergrads!" murmured Handforth. "Oh, crumbs!"

"And Fireirons is the son of a millionaire, as you probably know," went on the 'Varsity man. "Can't we straighten this thing out quickly? I might mention that we're waiting for our supper. We ought to have been over here a couple of hours ago, but the storm stopped us."

Andrew Newland and his friend listened with gleeful interest while they heard the story—first from Handforth & Co., then from Ben Jarvis, and finally from Nipper and the others.

"I don't wonder that you were puzzled this morning," said Fireirons, at length. "I rather pride myself that my seaside 'bungalow' is a bit of a novelty. You see, I bought this island, and there was a sort of cave right in the middle of it. Well, it struck me that that cave could be usefully converted."

"But there was no sign of it!" protested Watson. "We didn't see any cave."

"No; I had it converted," said Newland, with a grin. "It was my fancy to have a freak kind of place—some of my friends will tell you that I'm a freak kind of fellow. Well, anyhow, I had the interior of that cave made into a ship's cabin, with everything complete. And the door shuts up solid, without leaving a trace. When it's closed, it looks like a part of the grass bank."

"But what about windows?" asked Travers.

"Oh, the windows are the same," replied the millionaire's son, with a chuckle. "They've got shutters over them, and they can be concealed in just the same way. You see, during the winter months the whole place is closed up, and with these shutters, and with the special door, the place is waterproof. When summer-time comes round again, everything is snug and tight. Not a bad wheeze, when you come to think of it. Besides, it's quiet. We don't get people bothering us."

"I suppose that's a hint, eh?" chuckled Nipper. "Well, we're awfully sorry, Mr. Newland, and we'll clear out as soon as we can get into our boat. I dare say you'll be glad to get rid of us."

"Here, hold on!" broke in Handforth, recovering his old aggressiveness. "There are one or two points that need explaining! I'm not satisfied with this story!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Good old Handy!"

"I tell you, I'm not!" roared Handforth. "It's all very well for Mr. Newland to tell

“ATLANTIC FLYERS AT ST. FRANK'S!”

Great is the excitement amongst the fellows at St. Frank's when they learn that Archie Glenthorne's two brothers have started on a flight from Canada to England in an attempt to beat the world's longest non-stop flight.

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Nothing more is heard of them, and at last everybody is forced to come to the conclusion that the two brothers, like so many of their brave predecessors, have failed; have perished!

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laughing at, I'll laugh. But, at the moment, I'm hanged if I can see the joke.”

“We're St. Frank's fellows,” said Nipper quickly. “We were out on a yacht, and we got caught in the storm, and three of our chaps were washed overboard in the squall. They managed to get on to this island, and we came along to rescue them.”

“That's right enough, sir,” said Ben Jarvis, touching his forelock. “Me and Jake, here, took 'em in, and 'elped to dry their clothes.”

“If you youngsters come from St. Frank's, you're all right!” said Newland heartily.

us that he's the son of a millionaire, and all the rest of it, but how does he account for the behaviour of Jarvis?"

"Eh?"

"The behaviour of Jarvis?"

"Here, dry up, Handy——"

"Yes, the behaviour of Jarvis!" repeated Handforth firmly.

Fireirons turned to Ben Jarvis, and motioned him forward.

"It's your turn again, Ben, old son," he said. "Kindly come along and explain your actions—whatever they were! What have you been up to, you old rascal?"

And all eyes were turned upon the grinning face of Ben Jarvis.



CHAPTER 23.

The End of a Perfect Day!

HANDFORTH was by no means prepared to leave yet. "In the first place," he said, after the fashion of a cross-examining counsel, "what about this afternoon?"

"Yes, what about it?" said Fireirons mildly.

"This man—this rough-looking merchant——"

"You'll pardon me, I am sure," interrupted Newland, "but Jarvis happens to be a faithful old servant of mine. Known him since I was a kid. He used to serve on my father's sailing yacht, and you mustn't say anything against him. He's true blue."

"I'm not saying anything against him, but I want to know what it all means," insisted Handforth. "This afternoon we saw him chasing this other fellow, Jake——"

"His son," murmured Fireirons.

"Well, we saw him chasing his son, and we came on to the island to investigate," continued Handforth. "But when we got here we couldn't see any sign of them! We can understand that now—but why was Jake signalling to us? And why was the place all shut up, and hidden? If everything is straight and above board, why the secrecy?"

"Why, inded!" said Newland. "Jarvis, enter the witness-box!"

"It's nothin', sir," chuckled Jarvis. "Ye see, young Jake was botherin' me no end this afternoon. A rare young monkey he was. Wanted to go ashore, an' I wouldn't let him take the boat out——"

"What boat?" broke in Handforth. "There wasn't a boat here."

"There's another little secret receptacle farther along," explained Fireirons gently.

"It holds a boat. You see, we're not in the habit of swimming backwards and forwards."

"I wouldn't let the young rip use the boat, sir, and he was in one of his rare tempers,"

explained the old salt. "So he signalled to this 'ere yacht. Well, naturally, I dragged 'im back, an' took 'im inside. I wasn't standin' no such nonsense from my own son!"

"Quite right!" said Fireirons with approval. "Jake, I'm surprised at you!"

"I didn't mean no 'arm, sir!" muttered Jake sheepishly.

"And I thought it just as well, sir, considerin', to shut the door, an' close the window-shutters," went on Jarvis. "I thought, mebbe, these young gents would be rather too interested. And I thought if I closed everything up, they'd soon sheer off."

"And that's what we did—although we were jolly puzzled," said Nipper, smiling.

"That's all very well," said Handforth obstinately. "But what about to-night?"

"Well, the place was shut up to-night, young sir, on account of the storm," said Jarvis. "As soon as I 'eard your voices outside, I opened the door, an' brought you in."

"Yes; and you kept talking about 'the chief,' didn't you?"

"Meaning me!" murmured Newland. "It's a habit of Jarvis' to refer to me as 'the chief.' One of his little fads. You see, I'm his boss."

Jarvis chuckled throatily.

"The young gent made up 'is mind as we were smugglers, sir," he explained. "Well, bein' a generous-hearted sort o' man, I thought I'd keep it up a bit. Never dreamin', o' course, as the young gents would set on you!" he added, earnestly. "The young gent was so positive that we were wrong 'uns that I 'adn't the 'eart to explain things to 'im. I'm sure you'll excuse me, sir, for 'avin' my little joke?"

Handforth was looking blank.

"What!" he gasped. "Do—do you mean to say that you were spoofing me?"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Poor old Handy—always having his leg pulled!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"It was all his own fault," said Church gruffly. "He called Jarvis a smuggler, and all sorts of things like that! I don't wonder that the old chap fooled him! Handy absolutely asked for it!"

"Well, well!" murmured Travers. "If it comes to that, doesn't Handy always ask for things? It'll be just the same next term, when we get back to St. Frank's——"

"Will it?" broke in Handforth. "That's just where you're wrong! I'm not going back to St. Frank's!"

"Oh, come off it!"

"I'm not!" roared Handforth. "Particularly after this! I'm not going to be a laughing-stock for you rotters! I'm going to St. Jim's, and——"

"Well, can't you settle your troubles elsewhere?" broke in Fireirons genially. "Since everything is so nicely explained, and now that we're all pally, what about saying good-night? Of course, you're welcome to stop here if you please."

(Continued on page 34.)

THE JUNGLE SCHOOLMASTER!

No—he's not a lion! He's Ulysses Piecombe, the manager of the famous Blue Crusaders. The Blues are on a close-season tour in the heart of Africa and Piecan—as they call him behind his back—is in charge of the First League team. He's a crank and there's not a dull moment for anyone when he's about. There are some live wires in the team, too. For instance, Fatty Fowkes. He weighs sixteen stone and is the best goalie in the League. Between the posts, in a scrap or at meals you can't beat him! Then there's "Tich" Harborough, the midget schoolboy winger. Watch him grease down the wing and put across a lightning centre! And Ben Gillingham, the sturdy bow-legged back. He's a tough chap is Ben, but he's grit all through. Pal up with them in



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"No, thanks—we'll go!" smiled Nipper. "And I'm jolly glad to know that everything has turned out so well. You're a sportsman, Mr. Newland, for taking it so nicely."

The St. Frank's fellows then took their departure from that queer little islet, with its hidden "bungalow." Everything that had seemed suspicious now became childishly innocent. After all, if this millionaire's son chose to build his summer retreat so queerly, whose business was it but his own? Besides, the idea was a jolly good one, as all the St. Frank's fellows agreed. They would have loved to have had such a place for themselves.

In due course they arrived alongside the Skylark, and they found that the yacht was still firmly aground.

The rail of the craft was lined with juniors, who had seen the rescue party coming up, and now a bombardment of questions assailed Nipper and his companions.

"You've been a jolly long time, you chaps!"

"Whatever have you been doing?"

"How's Handy and his chums?"

"Let's get on board first, you asses!" grinned Nipper. "And then we'll tell you all about it."

Eagerly the juniors were assisted from the dinghy, and then those who had remained on board the Skylark gathered round them in a chattering clump.

"Come on, get it off your chest, Nipper, lad!"

And Nipper got it off his chest. As was only natural, perhaps, Handforth wanted to have his say, too, and Church and McClure also kept interrupting with remarks. But at last, bit by bit, the whole story came out, and everybody screamed with laughter at the way Handforth had been taken in by the cheery old salt, Ben Jarvis.

Edward Oswald, however, took it all in good part. Truth to tell, he and Church and McClure could not help thinking how they had very nearly been drowned in the storm-swept seas, and how lucky they were to be alive and kicking now. They were feeling no ill effects from their adventure at all, no doubt due to the prompt measures taken by Ben Jarvis in the underground cabin.

"Poor old Handy!" chuckled somebody. "How thoughtless of those undergrads not to have been real smugglers. Think of the headlines in the paper to-morrow. 'Handforth the hero! Single-handed famous schoolboy captures desperate band of smugglers!' Think how wonderful it would have looked!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Pack it up, you idiots!" snorted Handforth, turning red. "Let's talk of something else. I say, Bo'sun, how much longer are we likely to be stuck here on this rotten mudbank?"

There were more chuckles at that. Evidently Handy wanted to forget about the incident as quickly as possible.

"Souise me, shipmate, but I reckon we

shall be aground here for an hour or so yet," replied Tom Burton.

"An hour or so!" said Handforth indignantly. "And anyway, you're a fine kind of captain. If I'd been skipper of this yacht we shouldn't have run aground. You see, you can't do without me. Everything went all right while I was here to keep an eye on you, but the first minute I'm away you're helpless!"

"Cheese it, you ass!" said Nipper. "It wasn't the Bo'sun's fault. It happened when we were turning the Skylark round to come and look for you, if you must know."

"Huh!" snorted Handforth, and not being able to find a suitable retort to Nipper's remark, then said: "Look here, you obey my orders and we'll be off this mudbank in a few minutes. Take no notice of the Bo'sun. He doesn't know what he's talking about. It's only a question of arranging the sails——"

"Ha, ha, ha!" laughed the juniors, who knew that Handforth had hardly any ideas of how a yacht should be managed.

"It's no good, I tell you, shipmate!" chuckled Tom Burton. "The cleverest skipper in the world couldn't get this craft afloat again until the tide turns, and that'll be some time yet. Souise my scuppers, I vote we go below and get some grub!"

"Hurrah!"

"Jolly good idea, Bo'sun!"

"Come on, then, my hearties!"

And, led by Tom Burton, the juniors crowded below.

Some brainy fellow unearthed a portable gramophone from where it had been thrown during the squall, and, as luck would have it, it seemed to be unhurt. A further search revealed the whereabouts of some unbroken records, and very soon the strains of a popular dance tune filled the little cabin.

Everybody was happy. Time flew quickly. Then Tom Burton, who had gone on deck, poked his head in the saloon and announced that the tide had turned and that the Skylark would soon be able to float again.

And thus, eventually, weary but happy, the party got back to West Mersea—to the yacht's moorings.

The day was over. Whit Monday had been eventful and exciting, and not a single member of the party could grumble, taking everything into consideration.

An hour later, they were in their saloon coach, on their way back to London—tired and contented.

Many of them slept. But Church and McClure, at least, remained wakeful. They were thinking about Handforth—and about the next term. For now they knew for certain that Edward Oswald Handforth had definitely decided to go to St. Jim's.

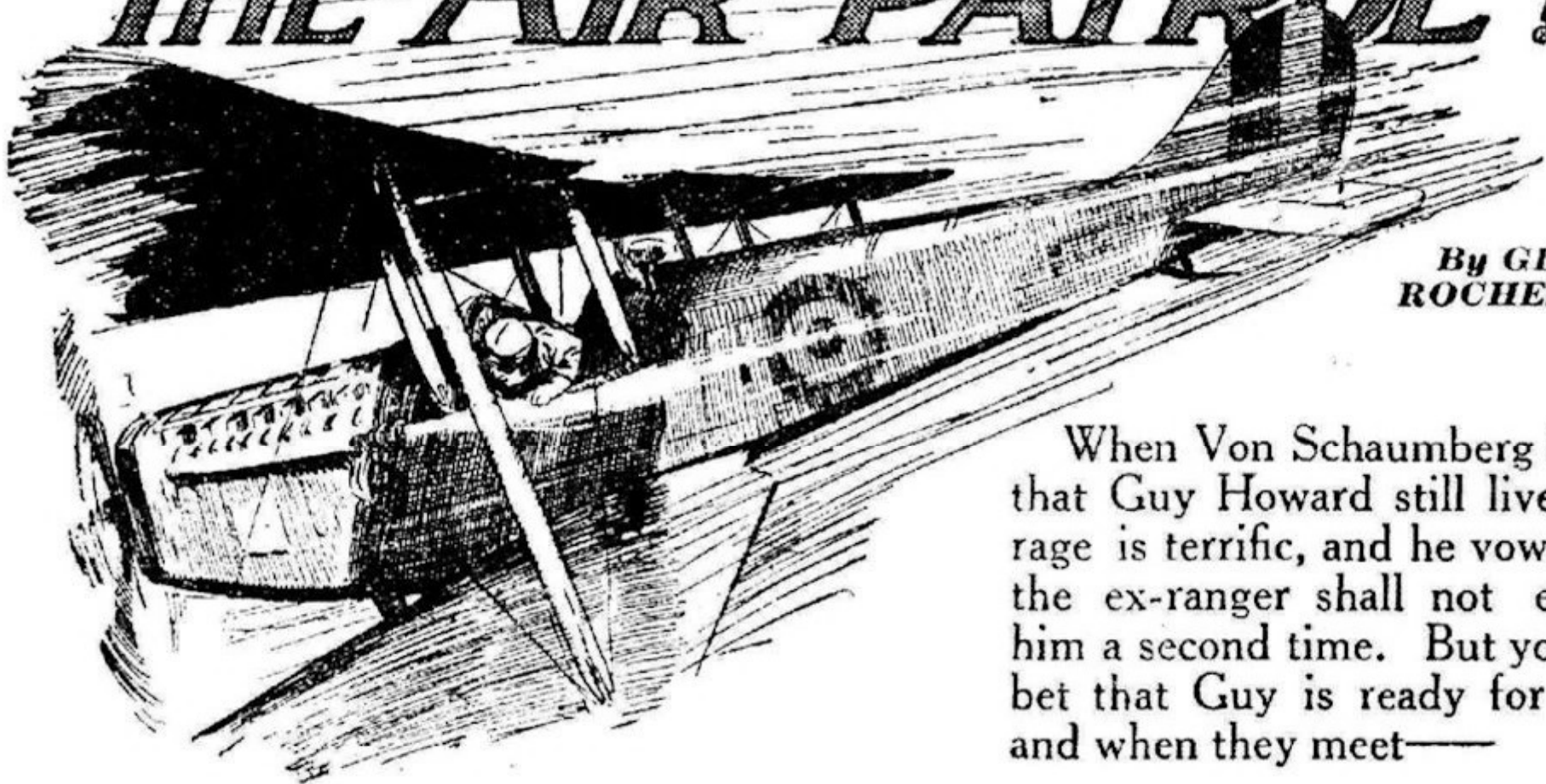
And they viewed the prospect with misgiving!

THE END.

("Atlantic Flyers at St. Frank's!" is the title of next week's grand long complete yarn, and it will grip you from the first chapter. Look out for it!)

This Fine Serial Gets More Thrilling Every Week!

THE AIR PATROL!



By GEO. E.
ROCHESTER

When Von Schaumberg learns that Guy Howard still lives, his rage is terrific, and he vows that the ex-ranger shall not escape him a second time. But you can bet that Guy is ready for him, and when they meet—

WHAT'S ALREADY HAPPENED:

GUY HOWARD, youngest and most intrepid "scout" in the Atlantic Rangers—whose duty it is to guard the air routes between Britain and America—is attached to Aerodrome D, one of the six huge floating aerodromes placed across the Atlantic Ocean. Just recently the big bullion and passenger-carrying air liners have been attacked by air pirates, whose leader is VON SCHAUMBERG. The headquarters of the pirates is unknown. Guy has sworn to exterminate them, and Von Schaumberg, on his part, has vowed vengeance against Guy for killing one of his confederates. Guy obtains a roving commission, and, discovering the pirates' headquarters, succeeds in capturing Von Schaumberg, but he is released by Vorzetzen, the pirate leader's chief lieutenant.

Von Schaumberg tells his companion that soon he will "strike in a manner which will startle the world!" They both disappear then—Von Schaumberg being under the impression that Guy has been killed in a fight—and nothing more is heard of them. In recognition of his services, Guy is promoted to commander of Atlantic Airway's new super-airship, Z.X.1. Meanwhile Von Schaumberg has had built a huge airship, and, with the idea of revenge, he appears over England. He blows up Aerodrome D, and sends a spy named Kurz to get information concerning the launching of Z.X.1. When Kurz returns, Von Schaumberg asks him who is in command of Z.X.1. "Guy Howard!" replies Kurz.

(Now read on.)

In The Airship's Cabin!

"WHO?"

The word came hoarsely from Von Schaumberg's lips. Kurz took yet another step backwards.

"Howard?" he replied weakly. "Guy Howard?"

Then Von Schaumberg was on him, gripping him savagely by the throat, glaring at him with blazing eyes.

"You lie, you hound!" shouted the pirate chief. "Howard is dead—shot down in flames by my own gun!"

"No—no!" Kurz clutched desperately at the strong fingers pressing so cruelly about his throat. "He lives! I—I've seen him."

"You lie, I say!" thundered Von Schaumberg, and shook the wretched Kurz like a terrier shaking a rat.

Vorzetzen leapt to his feet, and laid a restraining hand on his chief's arm.

"Steady, man!" he said sharply. "You'll choke him!"

"Aye, choke the durned lie in his throat!" shouted Von Schaumberg.

"Howard is dead—dead, I say!"

Weakly Kurz shook his head and rolled wild, appealing eyes towards Vorzetzen.

"Let the man alone, you fool!" cried Vorzetzen, tugging frantically at Von Schaumberg's hands. "Hear what he has to say!"

Some sanity then flowed back to Von Schaumberg. He released his grip, hurling Kurz from him. That individual crashed to the floor and lay there, moaning and groaning, massaging his neck with shaking fingers.

Then slowly he regained his feet and propped himself drunkenly against the table.

"It's true, I tell you," he said hoarsely. "Howard was not killed when you shot him down in flames. He is alive, and has been appointed to the command of Z.X.I."

"You are positive of this?" snapped Vorzetzen.

"Yes. Yes, I've seen him, I tell you!" croaked Kurz. "There is no mistake."

Von Schaumberg clenched his hands.

"That hound!" he gritted. "And I thought he was dead. We left him for dead."

Then he fell to pacing up and down, his bearded face working with fury. Vorzetzen and Kurz watched him in silence. Then suddenly he halted, and shook a clenched fist.

"But I'll get him!" he screamed. "I swear it on my oath! I'll get him when that cursed airship of Atlantic Airways goes on her trial flight to-morrow. She will never return—never return!"

He slumped heavily into a chair drawn up at the cabin table.

"Vorzetzen," he said hoarsely, and his first wild fury seemed to have passed. "Let every machine be thoroughly overhauled, and every gun tested. See, yourself, to the oiling of the bomb-dropping gear on every machine. There must be no mistake to-morrow."

"Very good!" replied Vorzetzen and, saluting smartly, he turned towards the cabin door.

"You, Kurz!" went on Von Schaumberg. "Come here—sit yourself in that chair, you fool! Now tell me all you know, all you have learned since you left us ten days ago!"

The Trial Flight Begins!

THAT same night, the armed guard on duty at the great shed which housed Z.X.I. was reinforced by soldiers from Larkhill Camp. In front of the aeroplane hangars stood six R.A.F. fighting scouts. Ever since the order had been given to prepare Z.X.I. for battle, they had been waiting, ready to take the air at a moment's notice should danger threaten from above.

Till the dawn, mechanics, gunners, engineers and armourers worked in an eleventh hour effort to complete the arming of the giant airship.

It was shortly after dawn when the great iron doors of the shed rumbled

back, and the tractor cables were connected. Guy, who had been astir since midnight, stood talking with Sir Seton Milvain, Major Lockyer, and two officials from the Air Ministry.

"On this trial flight, Howard," said Sir Seton, "you will, as arranged, be escorted by six Air Force fighting scouts. As it is most advisable that you keep in constant touch with your escort, you will not endeavour to attain a greater altitude than twenty thousand feet."

"Very good, sir," replied Guy.

"You will carry out a comprehensive test as to climbing angles, speeds, turning radius, and fuel consumption. You will return at your discretion, but not later than twenty-four hours from the time of taking off."

"Yes, sir. I understand," replied the boy.

"You carry twelve fighting scouts in your hull. At fifteen thousand feet, covered by your escort, you will carry out launching operations and continue with them until you are satisfied that each pilot is reasonably proficient at both taking off and re-connecting."

Sir Seton paused, then went on impressively:

"She is coming out now, Howard. I have just one last command. If you are attacked or threatened with attack, you will at once return to the base, here. Z.X.I. is not yet fitted to meet an armed airship on equal terms. We dare not undergo the risk of engaging her in a battle. You understand?"

"Yes, sir."

"Then good-bye, boy, and good luck!"

Guy took Sir Seton's outstretched hand, then turned towards where Z.X.I. was being slowly drawn from her shed by the powerful tractor.

It seemed somehow incredible to Guy that he was in command of that mighty airship. Yet, now that the moment had come, he felt strangely calm and collected. There was no one about to see Z.X.I. leave her shed that morning, save her crew, a handful of officials, the air station staff, and a few gaping rustics, who were early astir.

Well indeed had the secret of her trial been kept. Kurz had ferreted it out, of course. But then, Kurz was a past-master in the art of acquiring information and, given sufficient cash, he could work wonders.

There is little need to go into details here as to how he had discovered the date of the trial. Suffice it to say that maybe

a certain engineer watching the airship that morning could have thrown some light on the matter. But he, talkative fool that he was, would have protested in perfect truth that he had parted with the information to one whom he had merely taken to be an amiable busy-body of an artist with a well-lined pocket wallet.

Different now was Z.X.I. to what she had been ten days ago. A steel gun-platform had been fixed on the top of her mighty hull. On it were mounted six quick-firing anti-aircraft guns, which could, when necessary, be lowered into the hull by means of an hydraulic lift.

Her lounges and dining saloons had been stripped of all but essential fittings and lined with bullet-proof plating, scarce thicker than a wafer, in which had been cut shuttered gun-ports.

A special bullet-proof car had been slung behind the main gondola, and in it

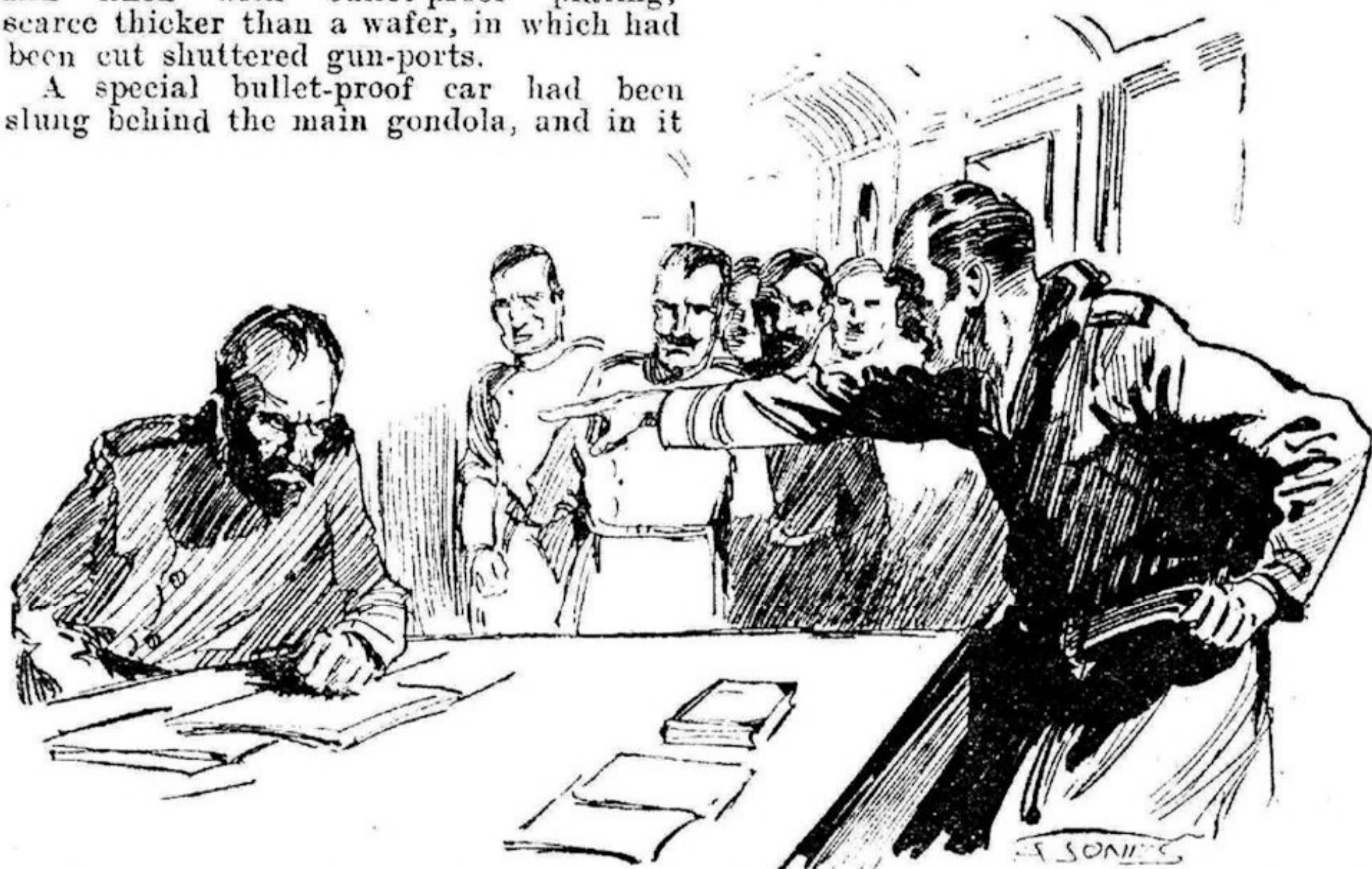
Fraser, the pilot, was already in his padded seat, fumbling with the controls. There was a glint of excitement in his eyes as he looked up at the young commander.

"Ready, Fraser?" asked Guy quietly.

"Yes, sir."

"Right! Better give the taking-off signal."

Fraser pressed a button on the dashboard in front of him. The stillness of the early morning was broken by the raucous blare of an electric siren, and the watching men below surged backwards. Then the eight 959 h.p. hydrogen-kerosene engines roared into life. The mighty bulk of the airship strained and quivered at the



Vorzetzen flung out a pointing finger at Von Schaumberg. "He has the soul of a rat, that chief of ours!" he cried angrily.

was stored the ammunition for the guns. There was also accommodation for the high explosive bombs, which it might be necessary for Z.X.I. to carry when she set out in earnest after Von Schaumberg.

The eight huge gas-bags in the forward portion of the hull had been separated by thin plating enclosed in asbestos, thus reducing to a minimum the risk of explosion. The eight gas-bags aft had been similarly treated.

Guy was the last man to ascend the steel ladder which led up to the gondola. Then, waiting till the ladder had been drawn in and the trap-door clanged shut, he made his way to the control cabin forward.

tempered steel rods which held her to the runway clamps.

Fraser leaned forward in his seat and his fingers pressed on a switch. The rod-couplings snapped open, the roar of the engines rose to a high pulsating, thunderous rhythm, and the gigantic airship soared majestically into the air.

At three hundred feet her nose went up and she commenced to climb, driven by her thundering engines. Colossal indeed she looked as, turning on the climb, she headed eastwards towards the North Sea.

Then the pulsating beat of her engines was drowned in the roar of those of the six fighting scouts. The fast little machines shot forward across the Plain

and, taking the air in a steep upward climb, wheeled into V-shaped formation above the parent craft, Z.X.I.

The Rift Within the Lute!

"YOU see her, Vorzetzen?"

Von Schaumberg's voice was harsh, triumphant. His airship, hovering at thirty-five thousand feet over the eastern borders of Salisbury Plain, merged with the blue, and was invisible to the naked eye of anyone on terra firma.

"You see her?" he repeated, his powerful glasses focused on the mighty bulk of Z.X.I. far below. "She's heading for the open sea!"

"Yes, and she is accompanied by an escort of fighting machines!" replied Vorzetzen grimly.

"Well, what of it?" purred Von Schaumberg, "My friend, you are not afraid?"

"For myself—no!" replied Vorzetzen dryly.

Von Schaumberg whipped his glasses from his eyes, and wheeled from the cabin window to face his lieutenant.

"What exactly do you mean?" he demanded.

Vorzetzen shrugged his shoulders.

"I mean," he retorted, "that it is madness to attack that airship when she is accompanied by an escort!"

"Madness?" echoed Von Schaumberg.

"Yes," rapped the other, "and you know it! You dare not risk losing any of your machines."

"The fact that Z.X.I. is accompanied by an escort makes no difference to me!" snarled Von Schaumberg. "I have sworn that she will not return from this trial, neither shall she!"

"Then how do you propose to attack?" asked Vorzetzen quietly.

"You will lead six of our fighting machines in a downward dive on that escort when Z.X.I. is over the North Sea!" snapped his chief. "The advantage of height will be yours, and also—I guarantee—the advantage of speed! You will engage those escort machines. Another two of my aeroplanes will follow on your tails, and they will carry high explosive bombs with which they will blow up Z.X.I."

"But you are sending your whole squadron!" exclaimed Vorzetzen. "I repeat—it is madness!"

"And I say it is not!" shouted Von Schaumberg. "If you do your job properly the whole hull of Z.X.I. will be left unguarded by the escort machines and thus exposed to our bombs. What do I care about the cost so long as she is sent down in flames and, with her, that hound, Howard?"

"I know you care nothing about the cost!" replied Vorzetzen bitterly. "Your own life will be in no immediate danger—"

"Be careful, you dog!" warned Von Schaumberg gratingly, and took a menacing step forward with fists clenched.

"I am being careful!" retorted Vorzetzen, albeit his face was pale. "Careful of the lives of the men I lead. No one but a fool would attack Z.X.I. under the conditions of her trial. Wait till she takes the air without an escort, as she must do, if she wishes to attain any altitude, and we will have her at our mercy."

"I will not wait!" blazed Von Schaumberg.

"No, you will not wait!" said Vorzetzen quietly. "To satisfy your fanatical hatred of Guy Howard you propose to send your pilots to what might well mean their deaths! I refuse to lead the squadron!"

There was a moment of tense silence in the cabin, broken only by the muffled rumble of the quietly running *Stahlfeder* engines. The two men faced each other; one very pale, but with head erect, the other with fury blazing in his eyes. Then, with slow, terrible deliberation, Von Schaumberg spoke.

"What did you say?" he demanded.

"That I refuse to lead the squadron!" retorted Vorzetzen.

"Very good!"

Von Schaumberg turned on his heel and, striding to the cabin table, he picked up the short length telephone which connected with the control cabin, for'ard.

"Zuchtlos!" he said harshly, speaking to the pilot. "Keep your height and follow that airship below us."

He laid down the receiver and, crossing to the door which led into the lounge, he threw it open.

"Kurz," he rapped, "tell the mechanics to get the machines ready for launching. Two will carry high explosive bombs—the others, five thousand rounds of ammunition for their synchronised guns."

Kurz, seated in a basket-work armchair, leapt to his feet.

"Yes, sir!" he replied.

"And then I want to see you here with the rest of the squadron!" snapped Von Schaumberg. "Here—in my cabin!"

The Treachery of Von Schaumberg!

SLAMMING the door shut, Von Schaumberg strode to the cabin window. He was breathing jerkily, and his fingers were clenching and unclenching. The fury in his eyes gave also some token of the towering passion he was in.

"What do you intend to do?"

Vorzetzen spoke quietly, steadily.

"You will see what I intend to do!"

Von Schaumberg flung over his shoulder.

There was silence then, as he stood with glasses pressed to his eyes, watching the great airship of Atlantic Airways far below.

Z.X.I. was driving eastwards and, keeping pace with her thirty thousand feet above, went the pirate airship. As Von Schaumberg watched they passed over Reading, the silver ribbon of the Thames glinting in the sun of early morning.

A knock at the door brought him wheeling round, and six pilots followed Kurz into the cabin.

"Men!" said Von Schaumberg harshly. "As you know, Z.X.I. is, this morning, undertaking her first trial. It is my intention to attack her by means of the machines which I carry. She is, unfortunately, escorted by six fighting scouts. This fact has caused your leader, Vorzetzen, to refuse to attack."

The pilots were silent, glancing curiously at Vorzetzen.

"Consequently," went on Von Schaumberg, "it is necessary for me to find another leader for my squadron. Before doing so there is a little point which I wish to bring to the notice of Vorzetzen."

He paused, then continued almost purringly:

"It is that I carry neither mutineers aboard this airship nor passengers!"

The pilots shuffled their feet uncomfortably. They disliked a snarling Von Schaumberg, but infinitely more so did they dislike and fear a purring one. There was drama, tension, in the air, and everyone of them was supremely conscious of it.

"Vorzetzen," went on the pirate chief, "has served me faithfully and well—up to this moment! Once we did quarrel, but that is now forgotten. In view of his faithful service to me, I will give him one more chance. I ask him, here in front of you, will he lead the squadron to the attack?"

He turned to Vorzetzen, standing rigid and erect by the cabin table.

"What is your answer?" he snapped.

For a long moment Vorzetzen was silent, looking full into the eyes of his chief.

"Von Schaumberg," he said, and a strange new tone seemed to have crept into his voice, "you say that once we quarrelled. Yes, we fought with our fists, you and I, because I said you were a skulking coward who lay snug and safe at your Arctic base whilst your men—my comrades—went to their deaths in order to serve you! But you bested me in that fight, and your glib tongue did the rest."

He wheeled on the watching pilots, and flung out a pointing finger at Von Schaumberg.

"Yes, he talked me round and I followed him again, fool that I was!" he cried. "He has the soul of a rat, that chief of ours! This morning he asked me to lead an attack, which can only end in disaster and death for some of you! And for what purpose? Solely that he might the sooner avenge himself on Howard, who smashed him in the Arctic! What cares he whether you live or die, as long as his own ends are served?"

He swung on Von Schaumberg.

"My hand, as well as yours, is against the world!" he cried. "Prove to me and my squadron that your plan for an immediate attack is sounder and saner than mine—which is to wait until Z.X.I. takes the air without an escort—and I will lead the squadron. Show me that this attack is not engendered solely by your desire to get Howard at the earliest opportunity. But you cannot. What care you for these men's lives as long as your own ends are served?"

"It is for me to command," said Von Schaumberg harshly. "For you—to obey!"

"Then I refuse!" cried Vorzetzen. "You never lead us yourself where danger

(Continued on next page.)



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threatens, you yellow livered cheat! No. You skulk in safety whilst we——"

Bang!

A wisp of smoke drifted slowly upwards from Von Schaumberg's pocket. Vorzetzen swayed on his feet, spun round, and crashed to the floor.

The pilots stood staring, frozen into immobility by the suddenness of the tragedy—by that treacherous shot from the pocket.

Slowly, step by step, Von Schaumberg advanced till he stood looking down at the prone form of his lieutenant. Vorzetzen's eyes flickered open. He looked up into Von Schaumberg's bearded face, and his bloodless lips twisted into a bitter smile.

"How like—you!" he whispered huskily. "Treacherous to—the end! And I—your own familiar friend—if you had but—listened! That attack—is madness—as you will learn——"

The words trailed away, and Vorzetzen's head fell limply back. He was dead.

Slowly Von Schaumberg turned away. His sombre eyes, in which all passion had died, dwelt on the staring, silent pilots.

"Stand by your machines!" he said hoarsely. "Kurz, you will lead the squadron!"

The Alarm!

Z.X.I. passed out to sea at twelve thousand feet over the North Foreland. Her hydrogen-kerosene engines, thundering in perfect rhythm, were driving her forward at ninety miles per hour.

Above her, in perfect V-formation, droned the six Air Force fighting scouts. The fresh dope on the great envelope of the airship glistened in the morning sun. A perfect picture, indeed, she made to the watchers on the ground below.

Fraser, in the pilot's seat, was grinning delightedly.

"She's wonderful, sir!" he said to Guy, standing near him.

The boy smiled at the enthusiasm in Fraser's voice.

"You find her easy on the controls?" he asked.

Fraser nodded.

"Look, sir," he said, and turned the control wheel the fraction of an inch.

Far out on the stern, the giant rudders slid silently in their sockets, and the compass needle on the dashboard in the control cabin swung correspondingly.

"It's joy-riding, sir!" chuckled Fraser. "She's got the heavier than air machines licked to a frazzle!"

"Right-ho!" laughed Guy. "Keep her climbing, Fraser. We'll carry out air-

plane launching operations at fifteen thousand feet."

He passed out of the control cabin on to the promenade deck. Below, visible through the huge triplex glass windows, were the glittering waters of the North Sea. Southwards lay the Gull lightship, and beyond, the white cliffs north of Dover.

Guy lingered a few moments, then made his way to the lift, which led up to the look-out cabin situated high in the nose of the airship.

The man on duty saluted smartly as Guy stepped into the small, triplex-glass roofed cabin.

"Clear morning and not a cloud in the sky, sir!" he said.

Guy looked upwards, staring into the blue. Then he stiffened. Far, far above him, there had come a glint—such a glint as sun would have made on shining metal. In a moment it was gone, but Guy, keeping his eyes on the spot where it had shown, stretched out his hand.

"Give me your glasses!" he said.

"Yes, sir," replied the look-out man, and thrust his glasses into Guy's hand. "If it's that flash you've seen, sir, I've noticed it myself once or twice, but couldn't make anything of it."

With the glasses pressed to his eyes, Guy swept the blue arc of the sky above him. He could pick up nothing in that vast range at first. Then something dark flashed across the lens—and was gone.

An instant, and Guy picked up the object again. It was a squadron of five black single-seater machines, roaring down on the airship from a terrific altitude.

Guy did not hesitate a moment. He leapt for the switch which controlled the alarm siren; then, as the raucous blare rang out above the thunder of the airship's engines, he dashed from the look-out cabin!

The Attack!

GUY'S duty was to save the airship at all costs. No matter if it savoured of running away, he had received orders from Sir Seton Milvain to avoid a fight, and he meant to carry out those orders.

"We're attacked, Fraser!" he cried, dashing into the control cabin. "Take her down, man!"

Fraser wheeled in his seat, staring blankly for the moment in utter bewilderment.

"Here—let me!" rapped Guy, and almost sent Fraser sprawling as he thrust him out of the pilot's seat. But it was no time for nice measures.

Gripping the control wheel, Guy pulled hard on the lever which operated the huge elevator fins. The nose of the airship dropped, and her great bulk tore seawards at an angle of forty-five degrees.

The control wheel spun round in Guy's hand, and Z.X.I. swung shorewards on that wild downward dive. Her hydrogen-kerosene engines were thundering at full revolutions, but her strong duralumin framework had been designed and built by master-craftsmen, and well withstood the strain of the sudden shoreward swing.

At two thousand feet Guy brought the airship on to an even keel. Her speedometer was registering one hundred and twenty-five miles per hour as she drove towards the land.

"Take her, and keep her going at full!" rapped Guy, and, handing over to Fraser, he dashed back to the look-out cabin.

Above the giant airship roared two of the Air Force scouts. They had received orders, before taking-off at Stonehenge, not to leave the airship in any circum-

stances whatsoever. The remaining four were fighting desperately at twelve thousand feet with four of the pirates. The fifth pirate machine was spinning seawards in flames, obviously shot down by one of the Air Force scouts.

Guy watched with glasses pressed to his eyes. He knew now that the metallic flash which he had seen far up in the blue, had been the glint of sunlight on Von Schaumberg's airship.

As he watched he saw an Air Force scout and one of the pirate machines go hurtling seawards, locked together. They had crashed into each other in mid-air.

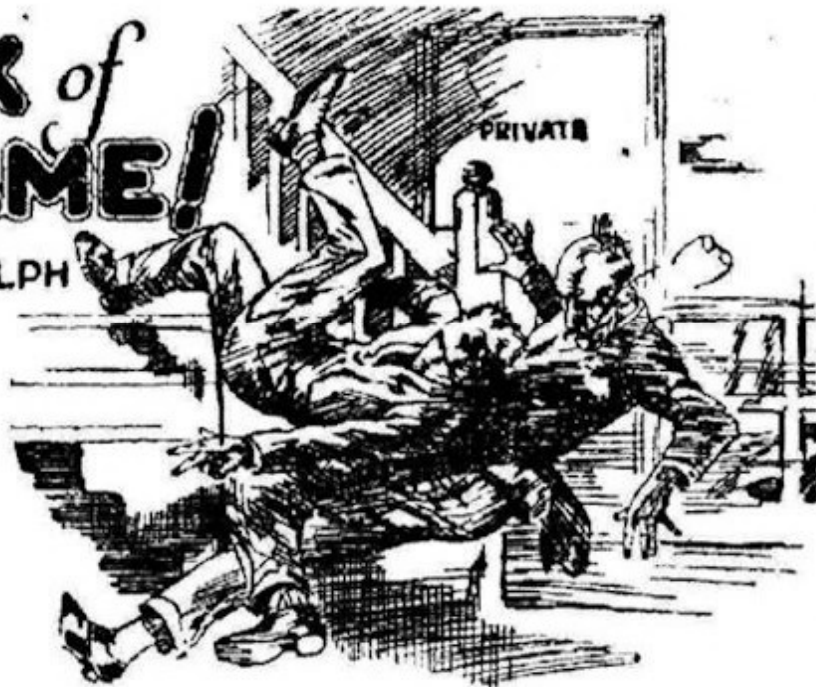
Then, from out of the blue, came two more pirate machines. They avoided the battling airplanes as they tore with grim purpose straight towards the mighty bulk of Z.X.I. They were the two machines which Von Schaumberg had detailed to bomb the airship whilst the others engaged the escort!

(Another exciting instalment next Wednesday, boys!)

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B

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C

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INSTRUCTIONS.—Reader Applying for Membership. Cut out TWO complete Application Forms from Two copies of this week's issue of THE NELSON LEE LIBRARY. On one of the forms leave in Section A, crossing out Sections B and C. Then write clearly your full name and address at bottom of form. The second form is for your new reader, who fills in Section C, crosses out Sections A and B, and writes his name and address at bottom of form. Both forms are then pinned together, and sent to the Chief Officer, The St. Frank's League, c/o THE NELSON LEE LIBRARY, Gough House, Gough Square, London, E.C.4. **Member Applying for Bronze Medal:** It will be necessary for you to obtain six new readers for this award. For each new reader TWO complete forms, bearing the same number, are needed. On one of the forms fill in Section B, crossing out Sections A and C, and write your name and address at bottom of form. The other form is for your new reader, who fills in Section C, crosses out Sections A and B, and

writes his name and address at the bottom of the form. Now pin both forms together and send them to the Chief Officer, as above. One new reader will then be registered against your name, and when six new readers have been registered, you will be sent the St. Frank's League bronze medal. There is nothing to prevent you from sending in forms for two or more new readers at once, providing that each pair of forms bears the same date and number.

Bronze medallists wishing to qualify for the silver medals can apply in the same way as for the bronze medal, filling in Section B. Every introduction they make will be credited to them, so that when they have secured the requisite number of readers they can exchange their bronze medal for a silver one.

These Application Forms can be posted for 1d., providing the envelope is not sealed and no letter is enclosed.

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You are offered free hints on holidays, whether walking, biking or camping.

You can qualify for the various awards by promoting the growth of the League.

If you want help or information on any subject, you will find the Chief Officer ever ready to assist you.

NOTICE!

The St. Frank's League has now attained such proportions that we are compelled to discontinue the offer of gold medals in connection therewith. The silver and bronze medals will still be available, however, as heretofore, to those who qualify for them in accordance with the rules.



Our Weekly Pow-Wow

By
The Editor.

Your Editor welcomes letters from all his readers; send him one now. Address it to: The Editor, "Nelson Lee Library," Fleetway House, Farringdon Street, London, E.C.4.

Cheerio, Whitsun!

AS I write my Chat this week I am wishing, in common with millions of others, that the sun may shine merrily on holidaymakers this Whitsuntide. May the camping fires of countless campers burn brightly. In short, may everybody have a jolly good time, amidst the yellow gorse, by the sea, up-river, and everywhere else.

The next item on the programme concerns our new serial, which starts in a fortnight's time. This will be found a rousing successor of those which had gone before. Look out for a treat, a story with a thrill of the fine old pervasive sort, which is there at the start, and remains pleasantly in evidence right away to a triumphant finale. You won't say I have over-shot the mark when you get to close quarters with the first chapters.

Breaking the Ice!

Amongst the innumerable letters I get, one comes from a chirpy little village in Cheshire, famed for cheese, the cat with the smile that would not come off, and other excellent things. The writer runs back in memory—a non-stop run—to a breakfast-table ten years since, when the "Nelson Lee Library" was the topic of the talk. The writer says the family party were all silent enthusiasts for the yarns of Handy, and so they remain. They never wrote to say what a lot they thought of E. O. and the whole crush, but the ice is broken at last. Loud cheers for the author. There you have the keynote of a magnificent letter, and what better?

A Matter of Economy!

By the way, it goes against the grain with me that some of the letters I receive do not get answered straight away, but I do

my best. There is splendid work being done all over the country on behalf of the League. Clubs are swinging along. I get a few complaints about difficulties in the way of hiring club-rooms. This is the great "bass" question, but it seems to me that a good club can be carried on without much expenditure. It's the members who make the club, and chums can meet and fix up sporting events, or discuss matters of mutual interest without running into expense.

"Roll Up!"

Thos. G. Mercer, 1, Sweden Grove, Waterloo, Liverpool, has a club on the books which promises great things. He has the offer of a comfortable club-room. Roll up, Liverpoolians. This Leagueite has done big things both for the S.E.L. and the "Nelson Lee Library."

Round the World Awheel!

An interesting letter reaches me from D. Holt, 103, Aston Lane, Perry Barr, Birmingham. The writer aims at a cycle tour round the

world, and he wants to know the ropes, how such a trip could be organised, and the likeliest route. This is an ambitious scheme, and wants some considerable backing, but cyclists have skimmed across the world ere now—the famous writer, Foster Fraser, amongst the number—so why not again?

Books At Brighton.

G. Phillips, 53, Ashford Road, Brighton, has started a Lending and Reference Library with meetings once a fortnight in a room he has chartered for this admirable purpose. I anticipate a rush of members.

Wealth At Wembley!

F. S. writes from this well-known spot, to tell me that he has just started work, and

LEAGUE MEMBERS PLEASE NOTE!

From now onwards all correspondence appertaining to the St. Frank's League must be addressed to: St. Frank's League, 5, Tallis House, Tallis Street, London, E.C.4.

OUR WEEKLY POW-WOW!

(Continued from previous page.)

means to be one of the six richest men in the world. He asks for the names of the lucky half-dozen, but the question is a difficult one. Wealthy people are not over-fond of the fact being made known. Some of them prefer to live in retreat like the modest violet, and you can't blame them for this, considering the number of letters a rich individual is bound to get. People write to them advising them in kindly fashion how to spend their cash, and offering to relieve them of some of the anxiety which is, we are assured, inseparable from the possession of enormous riches. My correspondent's best friend tells him that money does not bring happiness, but I am not going to say the same, not without a few qualifications. The power of wealth may bring the best sort of happiness imaginable since there is here the ability to help others. And by helping others one does not mean just handing over cash, but assisting the less fortunate to get on through their own work. I appreciated the Wembley letter because it contained the real goods, namely, the spirit of hardworking ambition. Some rich people are the most miserable blighters conceivable. They do not know how to spend money in the right way. The more is no use to them, nor anyone else. They live in dread of losing some of it. There was a rich man to be seen walking round town years ago dressed like a time-expired scarecrow. He did not dare to spend his pelf. A new suit of clothes made him shiver. He pinched himself in his food, and would never have dreamed of spending a bright week end by the sea. Sometimes immense wealth produces freaks of this sort. But I hope my Wembley chum will make money, and I fancy he will, but even if he only makes a modest competence, he can be rich as Croesus of old if he plays the game all right and proper to the end.

CORRESPONDENTS WANTED.

Ernest Bell, 5, Park Road East, Ashington, Northumberland, would like to correspond with readers, especially those in the Colonies. He also wishes to buy Nos. 529 to 536 N.L.L. Smith Thompson, 40, Gale Street, Princetown, Bradford, Yorks., wants to hear from Terence Sullivan.

Samuel Louis Ellison, 83, Donore Terrace, S.C. Road, Dolphins Barn, Dublin, has N.L.L.'s for sale from the "Flood" series onwards. He also wants to correspond with readers in Palestine, Japan, India, and Highlands of Scotland.

James D. Brooks, 6, Park Terrace, School Road, Knowle, Bristol, wants correspondents in or near Bath interested in dealing with a view to arranging spins.

Miss Nora C. Milne, White Hart, Hayes End, Middlesex, wishes to hear from girl readers only.

Horton Blackman, 132, Carmichael Street, Georgetown, Demerara, British Guiana, South America, wishes to correspond with members interested in bookkeeping, business methods, and foreign affairs.

William McNally, 52, Campbell Street, South Shields, wishes to correspond with readers in India, Australia, and England; interested in sketching.

Frank W. Pinkerton, 46, Lodge Lane, Hyde, Cheshire, wishes to correspond with readers in Canada, U.S.A., South America, Australia, and at home.

N. R. Halton, Parkgate, Coniston, Lancs., offers N.L.L. for sale, 513-568 (old series); also new series.

M. Kaji Mohamed, Portonovo, South India, wishes to correspond with readers in South America, South Africa, and the West Indies.

Fred E. Pyman, 10, St. Mark's Street, Peterborough, wishes to hear from stamp collectors (especially in his district) who will join his club.

Gordon Wilson, 39, Villiers Avenue, Mortdale, N.S.W., Australia, wishes to hear from readers residing near Sydney who are keen on camping out, and would join a club for this purpose.



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