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"The
LAND
of the
LOST!"

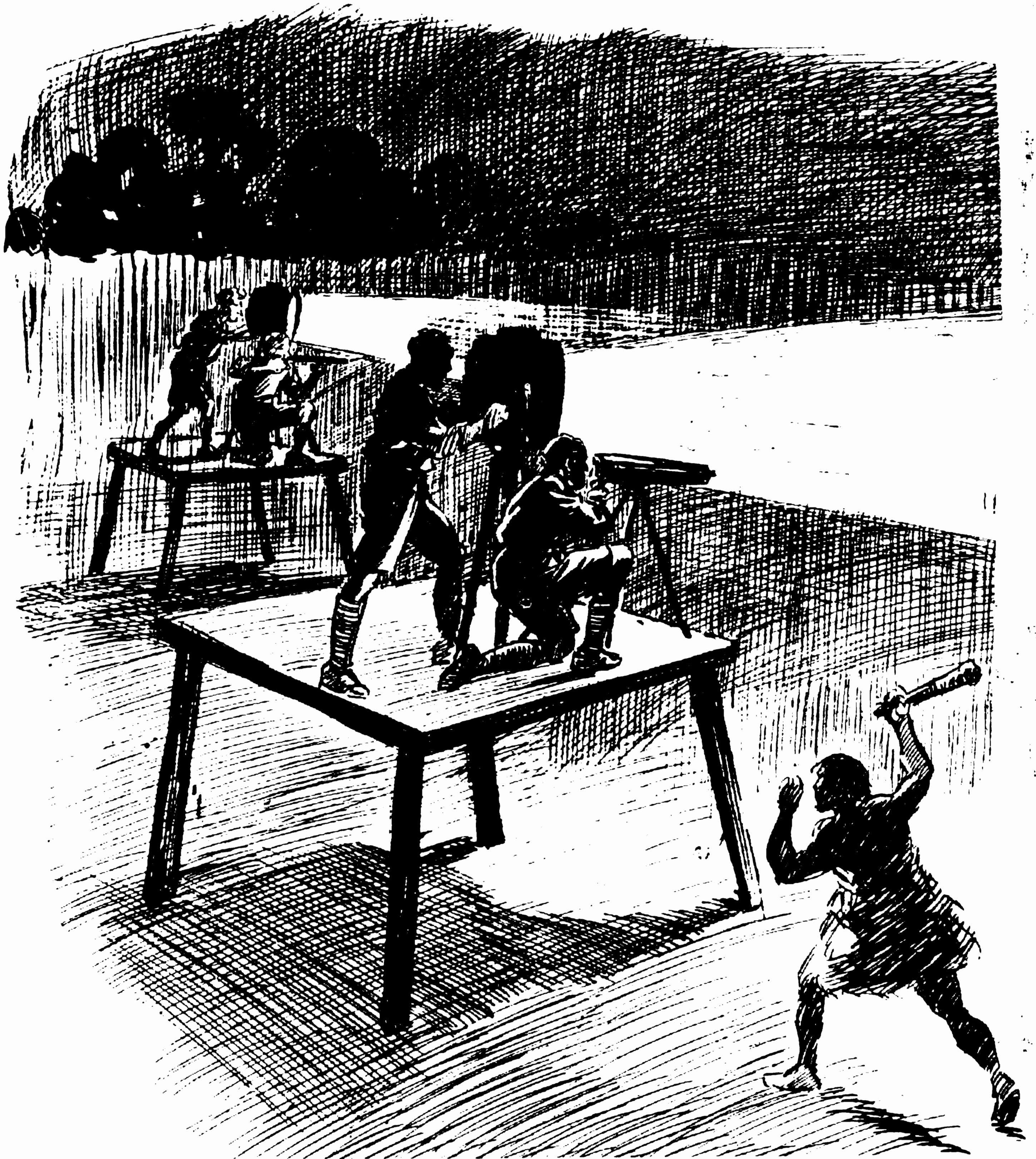


New Series No. 143.

OUT ON WEDNESDAY,

October 15th, 1932.

The LAND of the LOST!



CHAPTER 1.

The Amazing Island.

THREE figures, bare to the waist, their bodies streaming with perspiration, stood in the full glare of the blistering semi-tropical sun. And around and about them, gleaming in the sunshine,

stood a great circular palisade of steel girders.

"It's not yet noon, and our defences are once again intact," said Nelson Lee in a satisfied voice. "Well done, Nipper! You worked like a Trojan! And well done, too, Umlosi! You, indeed, performed the work of half a dozen men!"

. . . Dealing With Their Astounding Adventures in the Heart of the Sargasso Sea!

"'Twas but child's play, Umtagati, my master," said Umlosi, with a shrug of his great black shoulders.

"And what next, guv'nor?" asked Nipper eagerly. "You insisted upon this work being done—and it's done. But what about poor old Dorrie, and Handy? They're in the hands of the enemy."

"Wise words, O Manzie!" rumbled the Kutana chief.

These three were alone within the steel "stockade." Through the lattice-work of the steel girders a long, fair vista of rolling countryside was visible. The sun was beating down upon the landscape mercilessly. Yet the temperature was not oppressively hot,



Marooned on an island three thousand feet above the sea—surrounded by terrifying prehistoric monsters, savage cave-men and ruthless pirates! Such is the plight of five stalwart adventurers—Nelson Lee & Co!

The great detective nodded.

"Perhaps it would be sensible, for us, after a night without sleep, and after a morning of intense labour, to rest for a while," he replied. "But I do not think you feel like resting, Nipper—or you, either, Umlosi. Therefore I am going to suggest that we should take a hasty meal and then go straight to the scene of action."

"Good egg!" said Nipper breathlessly. "I couldn't sleep, anyhow. Let's be doing something."

for the altitude here was more than two thousand feet above sea level.

Standing there, on that rising hillock on which the camp was pitched, it was difficult to believe that the land ended abruptly and sheerly only a few miles distant—no matter in which direction one looked.

For this was an island—an island which jutted up steeply from the sea to a height of three thousand feet. There were cliffs on all sides—smooth, unscaleable, sheer cliffs. And, a thousand feet down, everything was

obscured by impenetrable mist. Even the sea was hidden—and no man on that island had ever seen the sea.

For the mist was eternal: it was the moist, impenetrable mist which arose from the festering weed of the Sargasso Sea.

The three toilers had a quick rub-down, and then they had food. Fortunately, there was a plentiful supply of clear, fresh water on the island. There were many streams; and Nelson Lee, having tested them, was satisfied that they were of the purest spring water.

They had their meals in the cabin of the Sky Wanderer—Lord Dorrimore's powerful three-engined monoplane. She was a masterpiece of aircraft, and it was in this machine which the redoubtable Dorrie had made the great discovery.

He had found the Island Above the Clouds.

An island which had been lost for endless centuries—hidden in the heart of the Mist Zone which marked the centre of the Sargasso. Ships which entered the Mist Zone and penetrated sufficiently far for the crew to see the cliffs of the island were never able to get out again. Thus, those mariners who were trapped were trapped for good. And those ships which escaped from the Sargasso never came near enough to discover the island. So it had remained unknown.

Nelson Lee was convinced that this jutting pinnacle of land was, indeed, a fragment of the lost continent of Atlantis. And he had been eager enough to join Lord Dorrimore on a trip of exploration. Nipper had come as a matter of course—and Edward Oswald Handforth, the burly Removite of St. Frank's, had managed to persuade Nelson Lee to take him, too. For it so happened that Handforth had been on a liner with Lee and Nipper at the time of Lord Dorrimore's discovery.

But, alas, the Sky Wanderer was a proud and graceful vessel no longer.

Her undercarriage was smashed; there was a great gaping gash in her hull, and both mighty wings were crumpled and torn and twisted. The tail of the vessel lay slantwise, broken off, shattered.

And here were these adventurers, cut off from civilisation, on this unknown land, and two of them, at least, were in the hands of the bloodthirsty pirates!

A strange tale, indeed—but, unfortunately, it was true.

THESE five adventure-seekers had been full of satisfaction when they arrived. Lord Dorrimore was a celebrated big-game hunter, and he knew well enough that there was plenty of big game—and of an extraordinary type—on this Lost Island.

Everything was extraordinary here. Even the grass was not grass, but a spongy, mossy

growth. The bushes and the trees, whilst looking like bushes and trees, were actually a fungoid growth, and only obvious for what they were at close quarters. There were dense forests of these growths—and within them the air was foul and noxious. The only vegetation of a normal kind was an enormous amount of tough, cable-like creeper.

Then there were primitive humans living in the valleys of this strange land—Beast Men, they were called. They were a type of humanity such as lived on earth in the distant prehistoric era. Animals, too—such great monsters as diplodoci. Pteradactyls, triceratops and iguanodon.

Added to these startling facts, it was known to Nelson Lee and his companions that there was another race of people living here, on this great crag, but they were living in caverns, below, apparently in the everlasting mist.

For Nelson Lee's liner had been held up by the most amazing pirates who ever sailed the seas. Rough, bearded men, speaking quaint English, but using a derelict Parazilian battleship as their pirate craft. These pirates, having sacked the liner of her food stores and furniture, had sailed off.

And when Nelson Lee had heard Lord Dorrimore's story of the Lost Island, he had put two and two together. He believed that the pirates came from this land. Thus he had been eager enough to enter upon the adventure.

Their first task, upon arrival, had been to erect a strong palisade entirely around the Sky Wanderer—as a means of protection. There were searchlights on special platforms, machine-guns—and even large numbers of fireworks, to be used for the purpose of scaring animals away in case they approached perilously near.

But all in vain!

For the irrepressible Dorrimore, on the very first night, had ventured out with Umlosi. And because of that rash action, the pair had fallen into the hands of the Beast Men. Handforth had trailed them, and he had succeeded in cutting Umlosi's bonds, only to be captured himself.

And he and Dorrie had been lowered on great lengths of the creeper down through the roof of a great cavern which reached from the base of the island to the very summit. There was a crater-like opening on a hill-top a full mile across—and here it was that the grim adventure had taken place.

Nelson Lee and Umlosi and Nipper, attempting to save their companions, had been compelled to leave the camp unattended. And when they returned, in the dawn, they were in time to find a number of the Beast Men driving some of the great animals near—and these animals had been deliberately stampeded, so that they crashed into the Sky Wanderer and wrecked it.

That was the situation on this hot, sunny morning.

THEY set off without delay, and they were fully laden.

Lee had little or no fear of leaving the camp now. For during the daylight hours there was not much danger of an attack. Both the primitive humans and the great animals were essentially creatures of the night. At least, they had vanished with the dawn.

In any case, it did not matter so much now—for the damage was done. The great aeroplane was wrecked.

They carried every scrap of rope available—and Lee had brought a great amount with him in the 'plane. All three were loaded.

"I don't quite see what you're going to do, guv'nor," said Nipper. "There's enough rope here for you to descend to the very bottom of the cavern. But what's the good of that? You'll only fall into the hands of the Black Hawk and his gang."

The words sounded peculiar in Nipper's own ears. To talk of a picturesque ruffian known as the Black Hawk was fantastic. This man was the leader of the pirates—the "king" of the lost community.

"No, Nipper, I shall not attempt to descend to the floor of the cavern," replied Lee. "But I have a mind to descend a certain distance—perhaps half-way down. And that, you know, is something like a thousand feet. I shall take powerful binoculars with me. And, no doubt, I shall be able to get a very good survey of the entire floor of the cavern—and I might be able to see something which will help us."

"I can't believe it, you know," said Nipper, as they walked. "All this land! We might be in the heart of a great continent—and yet we know that the cliffs are comparatively near, on every side. And, beneath us, a vast hollow—a cavern."

"One of the greatest caverns in the world, I should say," replied Lee, nodding. "According to my estimates, last night, when I had a good look, the floor of the cavern reached eight miles from end to end. The roof tapers up like a great funnel, until it is no more than a mile wide at the opening. Yet I have no doubt that an excellent amount of sunshine gets into the cavern daily, carrying with it heat and the necessary rays for the health of the people who live there. That is one of the points I wish to make clear to-day. From the dangling rope, I hope to gain a good view of the people—and from that view I may judge of their character."

They were walking across undulating country, but soon the ground became rougher. There was no longer any of the moss-like grass. It became patchy, and finally disappeared altogether. They were soon walking over rough, rocky ground, which rose steeply.

"Be careful, now," warned Lee abruptly.

His caution was necessary. For, unexpectedly, they came across a great chasm in the ground, ahead. It was not apparent until the very last moment. Now, stretching away before them for a full mile, was—nothing. A vast, black void, with rough, sheer sides.

All was peaceful now. It was difficult to believe that during the hours of darkness a hundred or more of the Beast Men had capered round the rim of this void, dancing a mad devil-dance.

Nelson Lee went down upon his hands and knees, and then upon his stomach. He wormed his way forward until his head was overhanging the abyss.

"I'm with you, guv'nor!" said a voice near him.

"Be careful, young 'un," said Lee warningly.

They found themselves gazing into blackness—but, twinkling vaguely and eerily, were a number of tiny spots of fire, like stars.

"You see," murmured Lee. "They are the great flares, which I believe to be fed by a natural gas."

"But why do they use flares, guv'nor, if there is daylight?" asked Nipper.

"It is my theory that the flares combat the fog," replied Lee. "It is the flaming jets, in fact, which keep this cavern clear. And you must realise that the full daylight only gets into the cavern at mid-day. For some hours after dawn, and for some hours after sunset, the whole floor of the cavern must be wrapped in gloom. The flares dissipate that gloom."

"By Jove, that's about the size of it, sir!" breathed Nipper. "But it's mid-day now, and we can't see much."

"That is because our eyes are accustomed to the bright sunshine—and because the sunshine itself is streaming past us," replied Lee. "It will be very different after I have descended on the rope, below the edge of the rim."

He made his preparations forthwith. The rope, although slim, was stout. It was, indeed, of sufficient strength to carry three men. Lee constructed a kind of cradle, in which he sat. Round his shoulders he wore a strap, and he carried a pair of powerful binoculars in the satchel.

"Now to make our survey," he said. "Are you ready, Umlosi? Perhaps Nipper had better give you a hand—"

"Nay, Umtagati," broke in Umlosi, his teeth showing in a wide smile. "Methinks I am strong enough to carry thy weight."

And Nelson Lee commenced the descent—little dreaming of the discovery that he was to make within a very few minutes.

CHAPTER 2.

The Tunnel of Mystery.

IT was an uncanny sort of experience.

No sooner had Nelson Lee dropped below the rim of the "crater" than he lost all sense of realities. There was no longer any landscape in sight. And he studiously avoided looking up, for he did not wish to dazzle his eyes. He concentrated his gaze downwards.

And he was sinking slowly into a black void, and the air currents, as they ran upwards, past him, were hot and dry. They were accompanied by an incessant crooning and humming—caused by the air currents as they eddied upwards past the rocks.

Fifty feet down, Lee was able to see much more clearly. Spread out far below him was a quaint landscape, but only dimly visible. He could see a lake, on which ships rested. He could see a great water-channel, and little rabbit-hutches which were really dwelling-houses of considerable size. There were big patches of land, too, which looked like cultivated fields. And this is undoubtedly what they were. Lee noted that they were situated in the direct line of the sun—so that they would have the maximum amount of sunshine daily. And although the base of the island, outside, was perpetually enshrouded in mist, the base of the island inside was clear. The flares were responsible for that.

Lower and lower.

As Lee descended, the sloping wall of the cavern receded from him. On this particular side, however, it was nearly perpendicular for a space, and although he was over two hundred feet down, the sloping rock wall was not more than forty or fifty feet from him. On the other side, of course, it was a mile away.

"All right, guv'nor?" came a voice, startlingly clear, from above.

Lee did not look up, but he knew that Nipper was lying flat on his face, looking over the edge.

"Yes, young 'un," replied Lee. "You be careful what you're doing. I'm a lot safer than you are."

"I'd give quids to be down there with you' guv'nor—"

"Wait!" interrupted Lee suddenly. "Tell Umlosi to hold me here for a spell."

Nipper gave the necessary order, and Nelson Lee remained there, suspended. He had caught sight of something in the rock face opposite to him. It had not been noticeable until he was below the level of it.

What he saw was a deep, black fissure, with a flat ledge leading inwards. It was, indeed, a great gap wide enough to take a carriage and pair.

"This looks interesting," he murmured. "But at this distance I cannot see—"

He broke off as an idea came to him.

"Tell Umlosi to raise me up about twelve feet," he called, without raising his eyes. "I'll sing out when he is to stop."

"What's the idea, sir?"

"Never you mind—do as I have told you."

Nipper did so, and after Lee had been drawn up for some feet he gaye the word. He was now nearly level with the fissure—just a foot or so higher.

"Good!" he called. "That will do. Now, Nipper, don't be alarmed—I'm going to indulge in a swing. And don't crane your head over that rim to see what I am doing. It's dangerous."

"All right, then—but tell me what your game is," retorted Nipper.

"I suppose I'd better—or you'll kill yourself," growled Lee. "I have discovered a deep fissure here, with a wide ledge. I have a mind to explore it—and the only way I can get to it is to swing to and fro until I can touch it with my feet. You'll know if I land safely, because I shall disappear on one of the swings, and won't come back."

"But, guv'nor!" gasped Nipper. "Supposing you fail to catch hold?"

"What of it? Don't be a young ass! I shall only swing back, shan't I? There's no danger!"

"By jingo! I'd forgotten that!" said Nipper, with relief.

He watched eagerly as Lee commenced swinging himself to and fro in much the same way as children operate a homely swing. Backwards and forwards—backwards and forwards—and with every swing Lee grew nearer and nearer to the receding wall of the cavern. He was swinging like a great pendulum.

Nipper watched enviously. He decided that it must be great fun. Then, at last, he gave a gulp. Nelson Lee had vanished towards the wall on one of the swings, and he had not returned.

"All right!" came a voice. "Slacken the rope somewhat. I'll give Umlosi a tug when I am ready to be swung out again."

Umlosi was aware of what had happened by reason of the sudden loss of weight. In order to be on the safe side, Umlosi warped the rope round a great rock near by. He had no wish to be taken suddenly by surprise.

Nelson Lee, fully two hundred and fifty feet below, had reached his objective. He was standing on a wide ledge, and, before him, there was a great fracture of the rock. A tunnel, to be exact, penetrating deeply.

Nelson Lee cautiously walked forward, now flashing a powerful torchlight. He was surprised at the extent of the tunnel.

He had not progressed ten paces, taking care to leave the rope slack behind him, when he came to a stop. The tunnel sloped steeply, and right downwards at an acute angle—but not so steeply that it could not be easily negotiated. Lee flashed his torchlight down it—and there appeared to be no end.

"By James!" he muttered.

He wondered if there could be a way right down to the very base of the cavern. Why not? It was quite possible. And all sorts of startling possibilities came into the great detective's mind.

The one great drawback to any rescue effort was that he and his companions could do nothing without the enemy seeing their movements. But what if they could get to the floor of the cavern by a secret way? Then, indeed, they would have the advantage.

With characteristic promptitude Lee came to a decision.

He would explore this tunnel—now. He would take this course in preference to descending lower into the cavern—for it was more than likely that the Black Hawk and his men would see. But there was little or no chance that he would know of Lee's movements at this height.

"Nipper!" he called.

"Hallo, guv'nor!" came Nipper's voice in reply. "You're all right, then?"

They could not see one another, owing to the overhanging rocks.

"Of course I'm all right," replied Lee. "I have found a tunnel here, leading right down into the rocks. But I need some extra rope—a rope that I can carry with me. Do you think you could bring it down to me?"

"You bet I can, sir!" replied Nipper.

"Very well; I shall hang on to this rope—just to be on the safe side. Tell Umlosi to secure it at the top. You can come down on another rope. Bring a spare coil with you."

Nipper soon came down, although he had little thought that he would be indulging in that swing this morning. Nearer and nearer he came to the ledge, and at last Lee was able to reach out a hand and pull him in.

"Good lad!" said the detective. "Now, I think, you had better be pulled up again. You and Umlosi can wait until you get my signal."

"Here, I say, chuck it, guv'nor!" protested Nipper. "I've told Umlosi that he's to wait until he gets the signal, anyway. Let me do this exploring with you. Umlosi doesn't need me up there. He can look after himself."

Lee's eyes twinkled.

"I expected something of this sort," he said dryly. "All right, young 'un. Perhaps you'd better come. And while we're about it, we'll rope ourselves together—in case of accidents."

Very carefully they unfastened their lifelines and secured them to the rocks, well within the tunnel. It was necessary that they should be secure, too; for if they got loose, there was no possible way in which they could reach the summit again.

"Umlosi!" called Lee.

"I am here, Umtagati!" came the reply.

"Secure both ropes to the rocks, and wait until you get our signal," said Lee. "In the meantime, keep your eyes well opened. Don't forget we have enemies abroad."

"Needless words, my master!" replied Umlosi. "I watch closely, and I have my spear at hand."

With Nelson Lee leading the way, the pair ventured into the tunnel. They both had electric torches, and there was, therefore, a good light.

"Of course, it may prove to be a mere myth," said Lee. "It is a great distance to the bottom, young 'un—and at any moment we may come across a blind end. Still, there's nothing like making certain."

"And if it does lead right down to the bottom—what then?" asked Nipper. "I say, we might be able to rescue——"

"We'd better not waste any time by discussing such matters," broke in Lee. "Let's see where we get to first."

With great caution they descended the steeply sloping tunnel. In one or two places they found themselves slithering and sliding; but the walls were fairly narrow, and they were able to steady themselves by their hands.

Presently they came to the end of the great sloping drop, and the tunnel now turned upon itself and became a fissure of such size that the full extent of it was lost in the blackness. However, it sloped down gradually, and the rock at their feet was not unlike a mountain path.

They continued downwards, and after a while the fissure narrowed again, becoming a tunnel so small that they could scarcely worm their way through. In fact, Lee began to lose hope.

"It looks bad, Nipper," he said. "If this narrowing process goes on much longer, we shan't be able to get through at all. And that's the most likely thing, let me tell you."

"There's a tremendous draught coming up here, sir—and it's quite cold, too," said Nipper. "That's a good sign, isn't it?"

"The draught may come through a hole that would not admit a rabbit," replied Lee.

They were both glad to find, soon, that the tunnel widened out again, but it became even more steep. Only the fact that it was narrow enabled them to ease themselves down.

But they knew that they were descending lower and lower. Already they had dropped at least five hundred feet. The tunnel now doubled upon itself again, shooting down at a long tangent, where the slope was more gradual. There was a strong current of air coming upwards—growing stronger, in fact, as they descended. Nelson Lee made certain, ere he ventured upon a further stage, that they could easily retrace their steps.

Thus they progressed, their hopes rising higher and higher as they themselves got lower and lower.

And now the draught was so great that it whistled about their ears, and sometimes made them gasp. Unexpectedly they came upon a level stretch, and when they got to the end of this, they were compelled to fight their way against the tremendous wind. And here they met with their first great disappointment.

For the tunnel ended abruptly. At their feet yawned a wide hole, black and impenetrable. It was a dozen feet across, and at the far side there was a blank wall of rock. The air was shooting up here with terrific velocity. And when Lee bent over, flashing his torch, the light failed to reveal any bottom.

"This looks bad, young 'un," he said, frowning. "Truc, we have some rope. Per-

haps I had better lower you. But don't take any chances."

"No need to be so jolly scared of me, guv'nor," protested Nipper. "I'm not reckless, am I?"

It was curious he should be saying that as he leaned far over the edge of the pit. Perhaps he was more venturesome than he should have been by reason of the great upward draught—for it tended to steady him.

"Mind what you're doing, you young ass!" said Lee sharply.

"It's all right!" grinned Nipper. "This wind is pretty nearly blowing me backwards, and—Hi! What the—Woah!"

Unaccountably enough the ferocity of the draught suddenly lessened, and Nipper, who had been relying upon it, found himself pitched forward. Before he could clutch at anything, before even Lee could reach out a hand, Nipper had gone.

He had plunged down into that black void.

"Nipper!" roared Lee.

Nipper gulped, but he could not reply. He was experiencing the most extraordinary sensation of his life. He had expected to fall sheer—perhaps for a hundred feet or so, crushed, battered and broken-limbed, upon the rocks.

But something else happened.

To his stupefied amazement, he was floating down as though held by a parachute. The air rushed past him, buffeting him, and he continued to float. And then, in a flash, he knew the truth.

The upward air current was so great in strength that it defied the laws of gravity. The current was not strong enough to hold Nipper in mid-air, but it prevented him from falling sheer. Down he floated—down, down into the mysterious, impenetrable blackness.

And then—thud-crash!

Nipper struck something hard, rolled over, and yelped as he cracked his elbow. But in a moment he was on his feet, forgetting the pain. His torch was flashing, and he was clutching at the rocks near by.

"Nipper!" came a shout from above.

Nipper stared up, and found himself looking into a chimney-like opening, with a light winking at the top. It was two hundred feet up, if it was an inch.

"I'm all right, guv'nor!" he gasped. "Rummiest thing that ever happened! I didn't fail at all—I floated!"

"Thank Heaven for that!" came Lee's comment.

Nipper explored. He found a great, wide tunnel leading downwards at a gentle angle. There was another fissure, close by, and it was through this that the wind roared—a trick of the rocks, no doubt. Where the wind came from Nipper could not imagine, and he did not bother about it. By stepping aside, into the wide tunnel, he was quite clear of the great draught.

An idea came to him, and, stepping back to the foot of the shaft, he gave a great leap upwards.

"My only sainted aunt!" he gurgled.

What he had expected to happen had happened. His upward leap carried him a considerable distance, and the tremendous current of air took him up and up.

Nelson Lee was genuinely startled to see Nipper come up out of the void, as though on a lift. The detective clutched, and a moment later Nipper was safely beside him.

"How's that, sir?" grinned Nipper.

"You—you reckless young jackass!" almost gulped Lee. "What do you mean by giving me these frights?"

"But it was easy, guv'nor!" laughed Nipper. "Don't you see? This air current is jolly handy! Come down with me—it's a glorious experience. And down there the tunnel leads onwards, and it looks pretty good to me."

CHAPTER 3.

The Black Hawk's Prisoners.

CLANK-CLANK! Clank-clank!

"Well, Handy, old chap, I never thought we should come to this," said Lord Dorrimore ruefully.

"Reminds me of some tales I've read, sir—tales of old-time pirates and buccaneers," said Handforth. "By George! What an adventure!"

"You seem to be enjoyin' it!" said his lordship.

"Anyhow, sir, it's exciting!" said the burly schoolboy.

They were in a hapless plight. Round their ankles they wore crude iron clasps, and they were padlocked into position. And between each ankle there were long leg-chains, with three-inch links. As if this was not enough, their wrists were tethered in the same way. And they were clanking along the rock road of the cavern township.

Round and about them, laughing in derision, and uttering insulting remarks, were a number of heavily-bearded men. They were picturesque-looking ruffians in their quaint clothing, and in their bare feet, with splayed toes—proving that they had never known footwear.

There were other people, too—more refined people, who looked on more in pity than in triumph. Lord Dorrimore and Handforth were beginning to realise, in fact, that the greater number of these people were gentle and kindly. But they were completely under the sway of Simeon Harke, otherwise the Black Hawk, and his ruffians.

There was much to see—which, ordinarily, would have fascinated the prisoners. It was the Black Hawk's whim that they should be allowed their liberty. They were permitted to walk just where they willed—but always with those leg-irons and manacles on their ankles and wrists. To attempt any escape would have been madness. They could not, indeed, even run. It was difficult enough to walk.

There were houses on either side of them—quaint, old-fashioned looking dwellings, half-

timbered. There were even shops to be seen, and, farther along the road, there was the rock shore of the big lake. And there, preposterously incongruous in this setting, lay the old Porto Marlo, listing to starboard. She was a battleship—of a type now obsolete. Yet, in her day, she had been a proud enough vessel, the pride of the Parazilian fleet. Her sides were rusty, her superstructure falling to pieces. But there stood the big guns, and some of them, no doubt, were in working

blotted out by the sunshine. Yet, at night, the flares were so effective that the whole cavern was bathed in a soft, mellow radiance.

"It must be about midday, accordin' to the sun," said Dorrie, glancing upwards. "Ye gods and little fishes! This is too marvellous for words."

"I keep on thinking that we shall soon wake up," said Handforth.

"I've been in some queer spots on this old earth of ours—but this licks everythin'!"



Through the pirate stronghold Dorrimore and Handforth stumbled, their long leg chains clanking at every step, whilst the crowd of jeering pirates drove them on!

order. Her engines were capable of being used, for she had sailed through the Sargasso weed, and out into the open sea—as recently as ten days ago, too. Fixed to her bows there was a great steel knife-like arrangement—and, to her stern, a crude cage. This latter was fixed so that her propellers should be protected from the weed.

There were other vessels there, too—vessels of all ages, some of them grouped together, with gangways between. People lived in them. And over all this strange scene the sunshine streamed. It was coming in through the mile-wide hole in the roof, two thousand feet above. The effect was most curious. Half of the cavern was bathed in dazzling sunlight, and the other half was in gloom. All round, two hundred feet up in the rocks, flares were burning. But these were utterly

said Dorrie, pausing in sheer wonder. "This great cavern. It's—it's inconceivable! If ever we get back to civilisation, think of the sensation we shall cause. What a discovery!"

Handforth did not appear to be paying much attention. He was gazing at some women and girls, who were gathered about one of the houses, looking on with troubled faces. They were quaintly dressed, in old-fashioned garb. They wore long skirts and laced bodices—like the womenfolk in England in Elizabethan times.

Some of them were hard-featured, but others were gentle-looking and refined. Many of the men, too, cast looks of compassion upon the prisoners as they clanked past with their guard.

"What's on your mind, young 'un," asked Dorrie, giving Handforth a curious look.

Handforth started.

"Oh, nothing!" he said, turning red.

"Hallo, hallo! What's the blush for?" asked Dorrie. "I saw you givin' the glad eye to the ladies just now——"

"I wasn't!" protested Handforth warmly.

"I—I was looking for Amanda—— I—I mean——"

"Eh?"

"She's a girl, sir—the most lovely girl in the world!" burst out Handforth breathlessly.

"Good glory!"

"She brought me my food last night!" went on Handforth. "And she told me all sorts of things, too——"

"Better go easy, young 'un!" warned Dorrie suddenly. "If that girl told you anythin' against the Black Hawk, you'd better hold your tongue. Our guards are drawin' nearer—and your voice isn't exactly a zephyr."

"A which?"

"Never mind," murmured his lordship dryly. "I wouldn't offend you for worlds."

They walked on for some minutes in silence, and Lord Dorrimore was intrigued by his young companion's confusion. They had been separated during the night, and since being brought together again they had had no opportunity of exchanging notes.

And now, to-day, they could see that their capture had caused a great sensation throughout the community.

Most of the people appeared to be uneasy—as though fearful of some threatening disaster. Only the rough, burly, coarse-featured minions of the Black Hawk were at their ease.

"Well, young 'un, what's the yarn?" asked Dorrie pleasantly, when he was satisfied that there was no danger of their being overheard. "What's all this about a lovely girl? I had no such luck last night. My grub was brought to me by a woman, I'll admit, but she was middle-aged, an' notable, chiefly, for her lack of conversation. In fact, she didn't say a word."

"This girl did," murmured Handforth, his eyes burning. "She told me that her name was Amanda—Amanda Peterson, and she said that her father, Jonas Peterson, used to be the ruler in this funny place. She's an orphan—no brothers or sisters, or mother, or anything."

"What happened to her father?"

"He was beheaded—by the Black Hawk."

Handforth came a bit nearer.

"The girl told me that his name is Simeon Harke, and that he's only a common sailor," he murmured. "He and his ruffians sprang a surprise one day, killed a lot of people, and beheaded Amanda's father. Then they seized power, and since then they have been ruling the roost. And the girl's people, for generations back, have been the leaders. She's really a sort of—of princess, you know. And if the Black Hawk can be robbed of his power, she'll inherit her birthright and become the ruler."

Dorrie looked at the schoolboy shrewdly.

"I hate to cast any doubts, old son, but, you know, this sounds very much like a fairy-tale," he said gently. "Are you quite sure that that girl was tellin' you the truth?"

"I'm certain of it, Dorrie," replied Handforth earnestly. "Oh, I know I can be easily spoofed," he went on, with unaccustomed frankness, "but I wasn't spoofed this time. Every word she said came from her heart. And she's looking to us to help her—to save the whole community. All these unfortunate people are in the power of the Black Hawk."

Lord Dorrimore looked troubled.

"Afraid the young lady is relyin' upon a couple of broken reeds," he said. "Or, if not broken, distinctly hampered. What can we do, Handy? It strikes me that the position is just about helpless——"

"By George, there she is!" said Handforth suddenly.

Lord Dorrimore found that the burly junior schoolboy was staring across a projection of rock which overhung the lake. And, standing there, as graceful as a young goddess, was a girl of about sixteen. At the very first glance Dorrie nodded approvingly. Handforth had not exaggerated. Amanda was a real little princess.

Only for a moment did she turn her face fully in the direction of the two prisoners; and Dorrie saw the expression of compassion, of dawning hope, in her eyes. And it seemed to him that as she noted their condition, the hope died.

"Hold! Stab my vitals!" came a coarse, roaring voice. "Let our guests be brought to my cave. I am in the mood to talk."

The captives glanced round. There could be no mistaking the voice of Simeon Harke—alias the Black Hawk. He was standing on an elevated rock path, where the sun's shine fell full upon him. Over six feet in height, proportionately broad, picturesquely attired, this man was eloquent of strength and brutality. There was something else, too; he exuded a kind of magnetic force. Even Lord Dorrimore felt the influence of it. The Black Hawk was no common ruffian. He ruled because he was a born leader of men.

"Aye, Sir Chief, we bring them!" said one of the guards hurriedly.

Men always sprang to obey the Black Hawk's orders. His very voice set them in a flutter. And presently Dorrie and Handforth were being forced along, back along the road they had traversed, until they reached the great entrance of a big inner cave. The interior was surprising.

For not only was this illuminated by a great flaring jet of natural gas, but it was furnished with lounges and easy-chairs and carpets and other pieces of furniture which had been looted, not a fortnight since, from the transatlantic liner Torania. And the modern furniture, in this setting, looked profoundly incongruous.

"Now," said the Black Hawk, "we will talk."

He had seated himself on one of the most comfortable lounges; and this, in turn, was set upon a great platform of stout ship's timbers. It was, indeed, a kind of throne; and it was clear that the Black Hawk fancied himself a great deal. Ranged about the platform, as a kind of honour, were half a dozen brawny, bearded men.

"Now, may my marrows rot if I'm in aught but a good humour," said the Black Hawk with a great laugh. "Let the captives be brought hither, so that they stand facing me."

Lord Dorrimore and Handforth were pulled forward.

"Is there any real necessity for this indignity?" asked Dorrie, indicating his manacles. "With so many of you at hand, must we remain chained, like galley-slaves?"

"By my bones, 'tis an oversight!" declared the Black Hawk. "Hey, you louts, strike off the irons! But first feel carefully in the pockets of our smooth-faced friends, lest they should be carrying weapons."

The search was quickly made, and it proved barren, and the manacles were unfastened.

"I deem it prudent, my good friends, to exercise these precautions," said the bearded giant, as he grinned widely. "I and my people live in a strange, hidden corner of the world; but of late we have learned much. No longer are we content to remain buried in the great weed, hidden by the everlasting mists. We go forth, and, by my sinews, we learn much! And one thing we have learned is that men of the Outer World may carry small pistols, mechanically controlled, which are capable of dealing death."

He bent farther forward.

"I am minded to make ye an offer," he continued. "If I let you live—if I give you your complete freedom—will you take your orders from me and accept my undisputed leadership?"

"Well, of all the——" began Handforth.

Then he stopped, for he had felt a warning nudge from his companion.

"If we are destined to spend the remainder of our lives with you, why, then, it is for us to accept the conditions we find," said Dorrie calmly. "If that will satisfy you——"

"Nay!" broke in the Black Hawk, shaking his great shaggy head. "I do not suggest that ye shall be as the other people—simple-living and obedient to my will. Ye are from the Outer World, and perchance you will prove of great worth. The lad is not of much account. But you"—and he pointed to Dorrie—"you, I judge, are a man of leaning and influence. What know ye of explosives and guns and the like?"

"I know somethin'," said Dorrie cautiously.

"'Tis well," said the Black Hawk. "Out yonder, on the lake, we have a modern vessel of war, armed with great guns."

"Yes," burst out Handforth, "and you know how to handle the guns, too! Didn't

you come alongside the Torania and loot her, and——"

"Aye, by concocting various appliances, and by taking advantage of the cunning weed-tides, we succeeded in getting the war vessel into the open sea," interrupted the Black Hawk, now very earnest. "Maybe ye do not realise that it took us years of work to cut a channel in the weed, and to get the war vessel through the rock tunnel and into the lake. And after that we were like children, playing with a new toy, discovering things by accident rather than by design. Six men were killed when we at last succeeded in firing a gun, and a vast gap was blown in the wall of the cavern. Bones and blood! 'Twere thought, at the time, that the hour of doom had arrived."

"Aye, aye!" came a murmur from many of the others.

Lord Dorrimore could appreciate their feelings. Tinkering with the old Porto Marlo, these men had taken grave chances.

"I betray but a small secret when I tell ye that 'twas mainly by luck that we found the weed again and returned to this cavern," went on the Black Hawk. "We know but little of these modern instruments. You, my friend, on the other hand, are a man from the Outer World, and 'tis like that ye know a deal of modern ships and their equipment."

"Well, as a matter of fact, I know a lot," said Dorrie.

"'Tis good hearing!" shouted the Black Hawk. "Then ye shall join us—ye shall be made captain of the pirate vessel. Ere long we will venture forth again, upon the open sea, and we will obtain further prizes. What say ye? If you have your liberty, will you undertake to obey my orders——"

"Pardon me for interruptin', but the general idea seems to be that I shall become a pirate?" asked Dorrie. "You want to make use of any practical knowledge that I may possess? An' we are to roam the seas, pillagin' and looting. Now, that is not my idea of a contented life at all. In a word, I refuse the commission."

Simeon Harke scowled at that, then he rose to his feet and drew himself up to his full height.

"So!" he thundered. "Stab me, but know ye what it means to thwart me?"

"Somethin' unpleasant, I dare say," replied Dorrie steadily.

"It means death!" shouted the Black Hawk. "Men have but to set their will against mine, and they are destroyed. Fools! Do ye not realise that you are in my power? There is no hope of help from your friends, for they are far beyond your reach. Do as I say, and you shall be accepted on an equality with ourselves. Refuse, and I'll rip your heads from your shoulders!"

Handforth looked at his companion with glowing eyes, and with his face flushing. It was a dreadful alternative. Either they had to turn pirates—or suffer death! But Lord Dorrimore was as cool and collected as ever.

"Why go into these details?" he asked. "Why, indeed, think of loot and pillage? If this warship can be taken through the weed again—and I do not doubt it—I am willing enough to act as navigator. But I suggest that you take everybody belonging to this community as passengers—men, women, and children. Why do you think of stayin' here? Here is your chance to join the great outer world."

"Of course!" burst out Handforth excitedly. "It's our chance to get away, too. You'll cause a tremendous sensation in America—and in England. In fact, all over the world. You'll be able to make pots of money——"

"And what of my power?" broke in the Black Hawk, with a cunning leer. "What shall I be in the outer world? I shall be just one of many—a creature to be gazed upon in curiosity by the idle masses."

The answer silenced Handforth—for he realised, in a moment, that there was a great deal of truth in the Black Hawk's statement. If these people ever escaped from the Sargasso Island, they would be like fish out of water—a people without a country, without trades, without the qualifications, even, for earning their living.

"Even supposing we could not get the war vessel out into the open sea," went on Dorrie. "There is my great flyin' machine on the upper part of the island. If you will but help my young friend and myself to rejoin our companions, we can fly away—yes, and return with a great fleet of the same flyin' machines. We can rescue every one of you."

"No!" said the Black Hawk curtly. "'Tis a plan which sounds ill in my ears. For in the Outer World I shall be but nought—perchance, even, brought to account for piracy on the high seas. But here I am the supreme ruler—the monarch—and if men displease me, I behead them. Nay, this island with its cavern, and with its surrounding mist and weed has served me all my life, and it shall serve me still. I have no craving to travel."

And now Lord Dorrimore was silent. For he was able to see the situation from Simeon Harke's point of view. Here the man was king, and if he did but consent to go forth to the Outer World, his power would be wrested from him at one blow.

CHAPTER 4.

The Black Hawk's Claws.

"WHY not put it to the people—and let them take their own choice?" asked Dorrimore. "Let those who are loyal to you remain. Let the others depart."

"Loyal!" The Black Hawk roared with savage laughter. "None but my own trusted men are loyal. The rest!" He spat viciously. "The rest would rend me limb from limb if they had but the opportunity."

"How many people are there under your control?"

"We number more than a thousand," replied the Black Hawk proudly. "Ay, well may ye look surprised! There is more than a handful in this community! A thousand strong—and more. And I command two hundred strong and determined men. Enough to man the pirate vessel—with many left over to keep the rabble from revolt during the vessel's absence."

"May I ask how you came here?" asked Dorrie. "Your people, I mean—your ancestors?"

"'Tis a story I have no patience to relate now," replied the other, with a shrug. "Tis said, however, that our ancestors came hither, many centuries ago, in three great pilgrim ships which were driven from their course in a mighty storm. Those ships, by strange chance, found themselves locked in the weed, and at no great distance one from the other. Then it was that the great rock island was found, and here our people settled—since there was no escape from the weed. At intervals, I have been told, other ships have drifted in, some containing foreigners, but our language has remained unchanged. No ship from the Outer World, containing living men, has been trapped in the weed for over seventy years. Perhance some vessels have been near, but the mist has hidden them, and we have known nought of their presence. Ye may well understand, then, that it was a great day when we set forth in the ship of war, in an endeavour to get beyond the mist and the weed. That we succeeded, as I have said, was due to luck rather than judgment. But when we venture out again, we hope to gain even greater prizes. What say you, my friends? It is for you to consent."

"No, you'll never make me a pirate," said Lord Dorrimore calmly. "I came to this island to explore it. I came peacefully. You have thought fit to treat me as an enemy and to make me a prisoner. But I am makin' no bargains with you."

"Good egg, sir!" muttered Handforth.

"Stab my vitals!" roared Simeon Harke. "Ye still remain obstinate, then?"

"You can't scare us with your bluff," retorted Handforth, with a sniff. "You're only an impostor. The real ruler of your people, as you know, is Amanda Peterson, and——"

He broke off as the Black Hawk leapt forward with a wild, savage cry. For one moment it seemed that the man was about to strike Handforth to the ground—to kill him with one deadly blow. But he checked himself.

"So!" he snarled. "How comes it, my young friend, that ye know aught of Amanda Peterson? What fools have been talking?"

"Tis said, Sir Chief, that the girl herself carried food to the young prisoner yesternight," said one of the other men. "I know not who permitted her——"

"Enough!" shouted the other. "So the girl herself talked, did she? May my bones rattle and rot! She shall suffer the fate of her father!"

"No, no!" panted Handforth. "Her father was beheaded. You murdered him! You dirty, rotten pirate! You gathered all the scum of the community and overthrew Jonas Peterson's rule and——"

Crash!

The Black Hawk's mighty fist thudded into Handforth's face, and the plucky youngster went sprawling, senseless. Dorrie, quick as he was, had not been able to intercept the blow.

"Take them away!" shouted Simeon Harke. "Take them to the cavern of ten thousand deaths! There they shall die—ay, the girl, Amanda, shall be sent to join them, and thus share the same fate. Take them!"

Handforth, still unconscious from the blow, was dragged away. For a moment, Lord Dorrimore thought of resisting—but only for a moment. What was the use? It was any odds that he would receive a cracked skull for his pains; and he came to the conclusion that it would be far wiser for him to retain a clear head and a sound body.

Thinking thus, he allowed himself to be dragged along. Handforth was carried—although, by now, the burly youngster was rapidly recovering from the effects of the brutal blow.

Men, carrying flaming torches, led the way. They were taken up a long, winding rock tunnel—a tunnel which penetrated deeply into the island, rising acutely, so that it was difficult, at times, to make headway.

The tunnel was quite straight, and it was, indeed, a natural fissure of the rocks. Up it went—up and up. And soon the Black Hawk's men were streaming with perspiration.

"'Tis an ill thing," muttered one of the men. "Simeon, methinks, acts rashly in thus killing the strangers."

"Aye, he becomes bold these days," murmured another. "'Tis ill that these strangers should be put to the death. For, like as not, their friends, on the island above, will seek to avenge them."

"Mayhap by now they are victims of the Beast Men."

"Nay; Thomas Lorne, not an hour since, saw figures, far above, dangling on ropes," said the other man. "Already these people from beyond the weed seek to make trouble."

The words, muttered amongst the men as they laboured upwards, were not intended for Lord Dorrimore's ears. But they fell upon his lordship's ears, nevertheless—and the sound was like music. The news heartened him immeasurably. Nelson Lee, then, still lived—and, characteristically, Lee was taking action.

But Dorrie's thoughts were not allowed to wander further. For the destination had been reached. He and Handforth were now within a strange cavern amongst the rocks—and it was really an opening out of the great fissure.

The prisoners experienced something of a shock; for as they were carried across the level rocks, they felt that they had walked straight into the hottest room of a Turkish bath. It was well-nigh unbearable—a heavy, clinging, moist heat. Indeed, the very air was misty with steam.

And the rocks, under their feet, dripped with moisture. The rock walls, where the flames from the torches illuminated them, glistened wetly.

Dorrie now saw that he and Handforth were being forced along a wide rock ledge. On one side the rocks rose steeply, but on the other side of the ledge there was a chasm, black and mysterious. From the depths arose thin wisps of steam.

Evidently Dorrie and Handforth were not the first victims, for, driven deeply into the rocks, were a number of great wooden stakes. And fixed to these stakes there were some heavy chains. The hapless pair, forced against the stakes, were chained up. And there they stood, upright, their backs to the wet rock wall—and, facing them, that abyss, with the steam curling lazily upwards.

Now came the Black Hawk, his face evil and leering.

"Thus suffer the fools who resist my will!" he said mockingly. "'Tis not too late, even now, my friends. Throw in your lot with me, and agree to obey me in all things, and ye shall be set free."

Dorrie looked at Handforth doubtfully. For the boy's sake——

"What of Amanda?" asked Handforth suddenly.

The evil light in Simeon Harke's eyes strengthened.

"She dies whether ye consent or no!" he replied. "The maiden has been seized, and is being brought hither without delay. She shall be chained to one of these posts—and share these thousand deaths with you."

"Then you can go to the deuce!" snapped Dorrie angrily. "Do your worst! But I'm tellin' you you're makin' an almighty big mistake, my friend. This power of which you boast will be taken from you—you will be humbled."

"May your marrows rot, but you have a deal to say!" snapped the Black Hawk. "Know ye the fate that will soon overtake ye?"

He burst into a roar of brutal laughter; and while he was so engaged, other men appeared, and Handforth's heart leapt into his mouth when he saw the slim, graceful figure of Amanda amongst them. The girl was looking calm and proudly disdainful.

"Oh, my goodness!" muttered Handforth wretchedly.

He strained at his chains, but he only succeeded in hurting himself. There was no possible hope of escape.

Amanda was dragged forward and chained to the very post alongside Handforth. He dared not look at her—yet he knew, all the while, that her own eyes were turned compassionately upon him. The men finished

their hateful task; they left her cruelly chained. Then, at an order from the Black Hawk, they retired.

"The girl, she perishes!" said Simeon Harke. "I have a mind to let the lad go, too. But you, my friend, still have a chance."

He was looking at Dorrie, and Dorrie returned his gaze with steady contempt.

"Ye have the best part of an hour for the making up of your mind," continued the Black Hawk. "Know ye what this cavern is?"

"I am not interested," replied Dorrie.

"No? Then ye soon will be," shouted the other. "Far below, amongst the rocks, there is a great natural spring. And the waters of that spring boil like a vast cauldron at intervals of six hours."

"Great Scott!" muttered Handforth in horror. "A geyser!"

"I know not the name of which ye speak," said the Black Hawk. "Slowly, foot by foot, the boiling water arises out of the darkness, out of the chasm. Rot my bones, but it is a slow, agonising advance! I shall return, my good friend, when the boiling water is approaching the ledge. Then shall ye give me your final answer."

"You can have it now!" retorted Dorrie. "I am staying here, with this girl and this boy."

"Brave words—now!" sneered the Black Hawk. "But when ye see the boiling water lapping up—then, perchance, terror will seize ye, and a change of tone may result."

He strode off, laughing noisily. And Lord Dorrimore was sick with horror. He was not so concerned about his own fate. And he knew exactly what the "thousand deaths" were.

This natural spring of boiling water was, indeed, a geyser. The water welled up at regular intervals, flooding the cave. It would rise over their feet—scalding, boiling water! It would mount to their knees, their bodies—The thought was too hideous. Dorrie was stunned.

They were in darkness now, for all the men had gone, carrying their flaming torches with them. But they could still hear the raucous, bellowing laughter of the pirate chief.

WHEN the Black Hawk reached the end of the tunnel and emerged into the immense sunlit cavern, he received something of a shock. For the air was filled with the angry voices of men and women.

He halted abruptly at the sight which met his gaze.

Gathered about the "township" were crowds of people. Many of them had come, hot-foot, from the "countryside." For, for some miles across the cavern floor, there were cultivated fields and even trees were growing—real trees, and real grass and real plants. And many of these simple people worked on the land. But the news of the Black Hawk's action had spread far and wide, and

the people had come hurrying in. None of them had a great distance to travel.

"Stab my vitals!" swore the Black Hawk. "What means this?"

"The people are angry, Sir Chief," said one of the other men. "They were like to be indifferent to the fate of the strangers. But when you seized the young wench, Amanda Peterson, then you set fire to a powder train which is like to result in a great explosion."

"So they would revolt!" thundered the Black Hawk. "Bones and blood! Men—men! Let fifty men come at once! Let them seize a dozen of these rebels and behead them in the eyes of the rest! That, perchance, will quell the rebellion."

"Such ruthless taking of life would but fan the flame," said the man who had spoken first.

"Are ye daring to question my orders, Jonathan Betts?" growled the Black Hawk.

"I side with Jonathan over this," said another man boldly.

"And I, too!"

"Aye, and I!"

The Black Hawk regarded them with baleful eyes.

"My own men!" he snarled. "Jonathan Betts—Richard Moore—Simon Lane—Arthur Reresby—my own men! What ails ye? Are you in revolt, too?"

"The people are angry because you seek to kill the strangers—and the girl, Amanda," said Jonathan Betts, who was a big giant of a man with a great red beard. "Have ye forgotten, Sir Chief, that the wench is the daughter of Jonas Peterson? Kill her, and your power will be at an end. For the people, not matter what ruthless methods you adopt, will rise up and crush you."

Simeon Harke stood there, his rugged face working evilly. Even now he could tell that it was a critical hour. The mass of the people, usually so peaceful, were looking ugly. The tumult was increasing minute by minute.

"We have been talking, Richard and Simon and I," said Jonathan Betts suddenly. "Think ye, Sir Chief, that it is wise to kill these strangers? What know ye of their companions—and of the deadly weapons they may possess? Would it not be better to use cunning instead of force?"

"What mean ye by that?" demanded the Black Hawk in a surly voice.

He seldom took advice from his lieutenants—and when he did do so, it was with a grudging spirit.

"Would it not be a clever thing to release the strangers—aye, and the girl, too," said Jonathan quickly. "Affect an amiable mood, good Simeon."

"By my bones, ye grow over-familiar!" snapped Simeon Harke.

"Were we not boys together?" retorted Jonathan, with some impatience. "But as ye will. Heed my words, Sir Chief! Liberate these prisoners, and tell the strangers that they may go free. Let them communicate with their friends on the island roof above."

Then, perchance, the others strangers will come down to join us."

"Aye, and we shall thus trap them all!" said the Black Hawk, quick to grasp the cunning of the scheme. "Haply ye are right, Jonathau. But the girl—she has talked ill of me—"

"What then?" broke in one of the other men. "Think ye that none talk ill of ye? Let the girl free—and later, when the people are calmed, she might easily fall into the lake. Have not people met with accidents before now?"

The Black Hawk showed his teeth in an appreciative smile.

"'Tis well said!" he shouted. "They shall all live."

With a great swinging stride he went down amongst the rebellious people. And they, in spite of their anger and indignation, fell away before him—such was the overpowering strength of his personality.

"Listen, ye dolts!" thundered the Black Hawk. "What means all this noise and commotion? Get back to your homes and to your work. I but jest with the strangers—aye, and with the wench, Amanda, too. My men have already gone to release them."

"'Tis a wise decision," said a thin, scraggy man, with a much wrinkled face, who pushed himself forward. "For, assuredly, the people grow angry and violent."

"Tell them, then, good Dr. Otto, that all is well," laughed the Black Hawk. "I seek to make friends with the strangers. Henceforth they shall be honoured guests in our midst. And, by my sinews, the wench, Amanda, shall be honoured by sitting next to me at the great feast I shall prepare."

In this way the people were calmed; but when the Black Hawk turned into that tunnel, to once more mount to the cavern of a thousand deaths, his face was charged with cunning and ruthless evil.

CHAPTER 5.

The Thousand Deaths!

SELDOM in his life had Nelson Lee been so excited as he was at this hour.

Yet the great detective revealed no trace of that excitement. Nipper, who was fairly bubbling over, wondered why his celebrated "guv'nor" was so calm—even indifferent.

For well over two hours now the pair had been descending. They believed that they had reached a spot which was not far above the level of the great cavern floor. And although they had met with one or two disappointments, they had overcome all difficulties.

They were still descending. It was Lee's hope that they would be able to emerge somewhere. Yet there was always the danger that this tunnel, this fissure, missed the cavern altogether, and lost itself in the very bowels of the earth.

But that was a pessimistic point of view; and both Lee and Nipper were full of optimism.

"It's almost too good to be true, guv'nor," said Nipper, when they paused for breath at one spot. "The tunnel's pretty narrow here, but it's still going downwards. And it's safe, too."

"Yes, the very fact that the air is so pure proves that there is an outlet," said Lee. "There might be many outlets, in fact; for the rocks, all the way down, have shown crevices and splits."

"One thing I can't understand is the heat," said Nipper, mopping his brow. "It's been getting worse for some time now. Haven't you noticed it?"

"I was wondering when you were going to speak about it," replied Nelson Lee. "There is a peculiar quality about the heat, too, Nipper. It is damp—moist."

"As steamy as a Turkish bath," agreed Nipper.

With Lee leading the way, flashing his torchlight, they continued their descent lower and lower. At no place was the tunnel so small that they were forced to squeeze their way through. On the contrary, it was of great depth and width, and in many places the roof receded, in jagged, irregular ridges of rock into the blackness.

But as they descended, the moist, steamy heat increased. Nelson Lee said little, but he was convinced that there was a hot spring hidden amongst the rocks, somewhere below. And he was fearful lest it should prove an impassable barrier. It would be cruel, indeed, after descending so far, to be baffled on the last lap.

But the detective had had too many disappointments in life to worry on that score.

"Phew! This is getting a bit thick, guv'nor," muttered Nipper, fairly panting. "I'm soaked to the skin! If it gets much hotter, we shall collapse."

"Steady, Nipper!" came Lee's voice suddenly, with a sharp note in it. "And you'd better prepare yourself for a disappointment."

Nipper slithered down to the detective's side; and he uttered an exclamation of chagrin as he saw what Lee's torchlight revealed. A wall of rock, stretching across the tunnel, from side to side! It was a dead end!

There were a few crevices, and one quite respectable fissure; but there was certainly not room enough for them to squeeze even an arm through. Overhead the tunnel roof sloped down, and it was not four feet above them.

"Oh, guv'nor!" said Nipper limply.

His voice was eloquent of his intense disappointment. In that moment he could think of no words to express himself. He just squatted on his haunches, staring dumbly, miserably.

"Well, young 'un, we had to be prepared for this," said Lee. "Of course, it's the very deuce, but we shan't improve matters by bursting into tears."

"Here, chuck it, sir," protested Nipper.

"I was speaking metaphorically, you young ass!" retorted Lee. "But I can't blame you for being touchy. This is really enough to make a saint weep."

"And the worst of it is, there's no other tunnel," growled Nipper. "We spotted one or two side fissures, as we came down, but they were all too narrow, or shallow. This means that we've got to climb all the way back to the top. Phew! Isn't this heat stifling? It's worse than ever. Now I know what a dumpling feels like when it's shoved into the steamer!"

"Yes—there's quite a lot of steam here," said Lee, holding his light nearer to the one big fissure. "Look here, Nipper!"

Nipper looked. Little coiling wisps of steam were drifting upwards. They caused miniature rainbows to magically form round the light beam, showing all the colours of the spectrum. Lee was holding the bulb of the torch right in the fissure, so that the light penetrated deeply downwards, when he suddenly became absolutely rigid. Nipper saw the difference in a flash. But he did not know what it was which had caused Lee to act in that way. The detective was bending forward, his ear right in the fissure.

And he was willing to swear that he heard, faint and illusory, a girl's voice utter the words: "Look! A light—a light!" It was one of the most remarkable experiences which Lee had ever encountered.

He believed, indeed, that his imagination had played him false. The thing, on the face of it, was incredible—

"By George, you're right!" came another voice—and now Lee so far forgot himself as to give a violent start.

"What is it, guv'nor?" demanded Nipper breathlessly.

"Either I'm mad, or I heard Handforth's voice just now!" replied Lee steadily.

"What!"

Nipper clutched at the detective's arm, and his eyes were ablaze.

"There's only one answer to that, sir!" he went on. "You did hear Handy's voice! You're not the man to hear things that aren't there! Hi, Handy! Dorrie!"

Almost unable to contain himself, Nipper reached over Lee, and placed his face against the fissure, and yelled at the top of his voice.

"I'm likely to be boiled as red as a lobster, but if that's not Nipper, I'm Robinson Crusoe!" came a familiar voice. "But, by the Lord Harry, where is he?"

THERE had been very little conversation amongst the three prisoners in the "cavern of a thousand deaths." That place of horror was well named! For a luckless prisoner, chained to that rock wall, would indeed suffer a thousand deaths before unconsciousness came to put him out of his miseries. For if that boiling water seeped up, and rose inch by inch over the chained victim, the tortures would be indescribable.

And Lord Dorrimore and Handforth were left in no doubt as to the truth. For Amanda, in a horror-charged voice, whispered to them of more than one wretch who had suffered the penalty—at the Black Hawk's hands. The man was ruthless.

"Isn't there any possible way of escape?" asked Handforth desperately, for the twentieth time. "These chains aren't locked. I noticed, when they were put on that there weren't any padlocks, or—or anything!"

"I noticed that, too," said Dorrie, from out of the darkness. "There are half links which hook into great iron staples. But those half links can only be lifted clear by other hands. It's no good, Handy, old boy. Those links are out of our reach, and——"

He broke off, for a sudden wave of steam, almost scalding in its heat, drove over him. He heard, too, a low, ominous bubbling and gurgling from somewhere apparently far below.

"The water's rising—it's coming up!" muttered Handforth. "Oh, the devils! Why couldn't they kill us straight away, and get it done with?"

"Steady, old thing!" said Dorrie. "That's not like you."

"I—I'm sorry, sir," came a mutter from Handforth. "Rats to them! They're not going to make me scared! And they won't get a yell out of me, either."

They were silent for some moments, and, in spite of the heat, their flesh crept as they heard the deadly, sinister bubbling and gurgling of the rising geyser. Boiling water—seeping up, rising, eager to spread over them and——

"Look! A light—a light!" cried Amanda suddenly.

"Poor girl!" groaned Dorrie. "She's becomin' hysterical—— Good gad! Is she, though? Handy! What's that up there?"

They were all staring upwards now—up into the stygian blackness of the cavern roof. And a white ribbon of light, moving up and down against the rock wall, on the far side, caught their eye.

Then it was that they heard Nipper's voice; Dorrie yelled in response, wild with excitement.

And from below them, with an angry, hissing gurgle, the boiling water rose with a deadly rush.

NELSON LEE and Nipper, their hearts throbbing, were in an agony of suspense. But, as yet, they did not know the full horror of the situation.

"They're down there somewhere, guv'nor," said Nipper. "And we can't reach there! That's the cuss of it!"

"Dorrie!" shouted Lee, with his mouth quite within the fissure. "Nipper and I are here—but I'm afraid we cannot get down. There is no way out of the tunnel. Can you hear me?"

"Yes—an' it's a pity you couldn't be a bit more cheerful!" came Lord Dorrimore's reply. "We're in a beastly pickle. Chained

to a rock wall, an' there's a bally boilin' geyser bubbling up almost at our feet, and about to envelop us."

"Good heavens!" exclaimed Lee, horrified.

"What is it, guv'nor?" asked Nipper.

But Lee did not reply. He had leapt up,

"It moves—moves!" exclaimed Lee exultantly, as he pressed on the rocks. "Here, Nipper—help me!"

With all their strength they shoved, and now Lee could distinctly feel the rock not only trembling, but rocking, as though the base of it were insecure. And it was the



One by one the pirates appeared over the lip of the crater, their drawn cutlasses gleaming in the sun. Down in the valley, Nelson Lee & Co. were totally unaware of this new peril—a surprise attack by Black Hawk's ruthless horde!

and now he was clawing at the rock wall in front of him. For, during those past few minutes he had been using his eyes as well as his ears. And he had seen that this great slab of rock was surrounded, on all side, by crevices and fissures. It was streaming with moisture, too. For hundreds of years, no doubt, that moisture had slowly but surely, with inexorable purpose, been doing its work.

end, or blind section of the blank end of the tunnel.

From the other side—the cavern side—men might have searched ten thousand times without finding any outlet. Only from the upper end was it possible to guess that there might be a way through. And even that would not have been discovered but for the chance sighting of Nelson Lee's torchlight through the fissure—and the additional chance of

Dorrie and Handforth and Amanda being imprisoned in the cavern at that particular time. Providence, it seemed, was taking a hand in this grim game.

"It's shifting!" panted Lee, exerting every ounce of his great strength. "Harder, Nipper—harder! We're doing it! But, for Heaven's sake, be careful! We don't want to tumble through after it—if it becomes really loosened!"

"But, guv'nor!" panted Nipper. "If it falls it might crash Dorrie and——"

"We must chance that!" broke in Lee grimly. "For if we do not break through, they will be scalded to death by the boiling waters of the geyser."

Every inch gained meant a tremendous expenditure of energy. The famous pair, heaving with their shoulders, clutching at the rocks, gaining leverage with their feet, were putting forward a terrific effort. And, inch by inch, the rock was moving.

In one brief pause, Lee made an examination with his torchlight. He saw that the slab had shifted a matter of seven or eight inches—inwards. And it was now possible to obtain better leverage. The further that rock went back the easier it could be moved. Yet, even now, there was no telling when the end would come—or how. It was any odds, indeed, that the rock would suddenly jamb, and refuse to budge another fraction. That was the fear which beset Nelson Lee's mind like a deadening drug.

Effort! Greater and greater effort!

"She's moving, guv'nor!" almost croaked Nipper. "By jingo! She fairly slid back then!"

"Both together, now—and keep a tight hold of the rocks!" came Lee's voice. "One—two—three! Heave!"

They applied themselves to it with tremendous courage. The rock shifted, grated, jammed, hesitated, and——

"Look out!" shouted Lee.

In the nick of time he saved himself, and with his other hand he grabbed at Nipper and hauled him back just as the lad was about to topple into nothingness.

Craaaaaaash!

The great piece of rock had fallen, and, moreover, it had fallen for some considerable distance. It struck, far below, with a splintering, thunderous crash, the noise of which echoed and re-echoed throughout the cavern.

"Dorrie!" gasped Nipper.

He flashed on his torch. Nelson Lee's light was already streaking downwards. The pair found themselves on the edge of a rock lip, right in the heart of the roof of the cavern. Forty feet below them the rock floor was scarcely visible, owing to the masses of steam which came billowing upwards—now shooting through the recently made opening as though it were a chimney.

"Look! There they are!" muttered Lee, with a catch in his voice.

He had switched his torchlight round. And, like ghosts amidst the steam, three figures could be seen chained to the rock wall,

farther along. As yet none of the boiling water had reached them.

But on the other side of the cavern floor Lee could see a terrible sight. There was a great gap—normally, no doubt, a deep chasm. But now the water had come seeping up, and the surface of it was bubbling and heaving. As soon as it reached the rock ledge, it would overflow and——

"The rope, guv'nor!" shouted Nipper. "Let me down!"

Nelson Lee did not argue. The danger of a descent was hideous. But Nipper was the only one who could make it. Lee could lower Nipper down—but Nipper could not have lowered Lee.

In a moment a rope was round Nipper's waist, and the rope was slithering burningly through Lee's hands.

CHAPTER 6.

The Way of Escape.

FATE played a strange trick.

At the moment neither victims nor rescuers realised it, but that falling slab of rock had jammed hard in an angle of the geyser cavity. The boiling water had been about to overflow the ledge, and to engulf the victims. But, owing to the jammed rock, the water was diverted. It was rushing away on the opposite side of the floor. But it was only a temporary salvation. Yet it sufficed.

Nipper, lowered at last, ran forward like a hare. He had forgotten his exhaustion, his lack of breath. He only saw those helpless prisoners chained to the wall.

And such was his sudden fear that he was not even surprised to see the girl. All he knew, in that breathless second, was that he had no file or cutter on him. And his first glance had told him that the chains were massive.

"Well done, young 'un," said Lord Dorrimore steadily. "We haven't much time, I fancy. Better free the young lady first."

"But—but the chains—— Oh!" burst out Nipper.

He had just seen the half links and the great staples. By reaching upwards, and heaving at the chains, he unhooked the cunningly contrived links. Chain after chain clanked away. Amanda, free, behaved splendidly. Instead of swooning—as many girls would in such dire circumstances—she sprang to Nipper's assistance. It was she who unhooked Handforth's chains. Nipper, meanwhile, freed Lord Dorrimore.

Bubble-bubble! Gurggle-gurggle!

The boiling water, as though furious at being robbed of its prey, was making more noise than ever. Flashing his light round, Nipper saw the main body of the geyser water—and it was heaving and seething like a cauldron.

"Quick—this way!" gasped Nipper.

They stumbled across the rocks—in the nick of time. For they were able to reach higher ground, and as they leapt, so the boiling water went flooding across the rock ledge they had just vacated. Steam enveloped them, so that they looked misty and unreal. And the suffocating heat was such that their senses were reeling. But for the clear draught through the cavern, indeed, all of them would have succumbed.

"Here's the rope!" said Nipper breathlessly. "You first!" he added, pulling at Amanda's arm.

Without a word the girl clung to the rope.

"O.K., guv'nor!" shouted Nipper. "Pull away!"

And he and Handforth and Dorrie stood looking up, their hearts in their mouths, as Amanda was hauled up the rock face to that rock ledge, far above. She did much to help herself, too, gripping at every projection, setting her small feet on every tiny ledge.

"Don't trouble about us!" called Dorrie. "Fix the rope at your end, Lee—we can swarm up. It will be quicker, too."

Nelson Lee had already realised this, and as soon as Amanda was safely by his side he hitched the rope round the rocks, and gave the signal.

Handforth came next—although he had been willing enough to stand at the bottom, with the boiling water perilously near and argue. Nipper and Dorrie had been compelled to literally force him on to the rope. But once on, he swarmed up, hand over hand, like a monkey.

Then Nipper—and, exhausted as Nipper was, he made the ascent nearly as quickly as Handforth. For he had seen the streaming water not far away. And Lord Dorrimore was still down there.

Indeed, Dorrie would have been trapped but for the fact that the rope was secured at the top. For when the danger threatened to overwhelm him he grabbed at the rope whilst Nipper was still climbing, and heaved himself up to a higher ledge. And the boiling water, heaving below him, swept past, baffled.

A few minutes later Dorrie himself was at the top, and his first action was to clasp Lee by the hand.

"It's like a dream—a nightmare!" said Nipper, falling back against the rock, all his strength now sapping away. "I can't believe—"

"Hush!" warned Dorrie suddenly. "Down, everybody! Out with those lights!"

He had been glancing downwards, and he had seen the ruddy, flickering glow at the big cavern entrance. In a moment Lee and Nipper switched off their torches. They all crouched down behind the cover of the rocks. For they knew what Lord Dorrimore's warning meant. The Black Hawk's men were coming—and it would be infinitely better for those brutes to be left in ignorance as to the fate of the victims.

Lee, peeping over the rocks, saw the Black Hawk himself stride into the cavern—for, at

that end, the rocks were higher, and there was no actual danger of being enveloped in the boiling flood. Behind came a number of burly ruffians, carrying great flaming torches over their heads. It was an impressive, picturesque sight.

"By my bones!" came the Black Hawk's roaring voice. "So ye thought I meant to leave ye to die? 'Twas but a jest, my friends. A grim jest, perchance, but I was minded to test your courage—"

He broke off abruptly, for at that moment he had seen the loose chains hanging against the wall—and the water heaving beneath. In that moment Simeon Harke knew that he had miscalculated the time. What was more, his victims had gone!

"Bones and blood!" he swore violently. "'Tis impossible! How came they to get free? And where are they? Hi, you lubbers! You scum! Forward with the lights!"

"The water, Sir Chief!" gasped one of the men. "It rises before its time, methinks! 'Tis death to advance!"

The men ran forward as far as they dared, and now the blazing, smoking lights from their torches revealed the empty cavern.

"They have gone!" muttered Jonathan Betts in an awed voice. "Split me, but this is a miracle!"

"Gone!" thundered the Black Hawk. "But how came they to release themselves from the chains? Where are the men who secured them? May my vitals wither, but some of you fools blundered!"

"Yet there is but one way out of this cave, Sir Chief," said Jonathan. "And that is the way we have come—and we did not pass a living soul. Thus, they must still be here. And as they are not in sight, it follows that the boiling water has claimed them."

Simeon Harke glowered.

"So it would appear!" he muttered. "Yet there would surely be some sign?"

He stared round, his active, cunning brain far more acute than those of his companions.

"They are dead, think ye, Jonathan?" he muttered. "But, by my bones, I am not so sure!"

NELSON LEE turned his head.

"They are going," he whispered. "It is safe to show yourselves now."

Nipper was far too exhausted to move, but Handforth and Dorrie, craning their heads over the rocks, caught a glimpse of the flaming torches as they vanished into the tunnel. The Black Hawk and his men, knowing full well that the geyser water would soon well up over the cavern floor, had made haste to depart.

"And they think we're dead!" said Lord Dorrimore, with a contented sigh. "Well, that's all to the good."

He turned to the girl, who was sitting back against the rock wall of the tunnel, her face pale, her eyes filled with mingled shyness and wonder and timidity.

"Lee, old man, let me introduce Miss Amanda Peterson," went on Dorrie. "The Black Hawk intended to murder her—and for that, alone, I mean to get him. She is the daughter of the man who was the rightful ruler of the cavern community."

"You're not going to get him, Dorrie!" said Handforth, almost fiercely. "Not likely! He's my meat! The cur! I'm going to smash him to bits——"

"This is hardly the time to argue the point," put in Lee dryly. "Well, Dorrie, it's good for us all to be together again. But I'm telling you that luck played a big part in the game."

"You'll forgive me if I say 'rats,' won't you?" asked Dorrie. "Look at poor old Nipper! Absolutely 'all in.' And why? Because of luck? No; because of the marvellous efforts you an' he made to save us."

Dorrie's shrewd glance had seen that Lee himself was well-nigh spent. This rest in the tunnel, indeed, was an absolute necessity.

"I'm better now, Dorrie," muttered Nipper, sitting up. "Oh, my goodness! I thought the gov'nor and I were never going to shift that rock!"

Lee was standing at the brink of the chasm, casting his light down. And now he saw that the level of the boiling water had spread all over the cavern floor. The detective could scarcely refrain from shuddering.

"Perhaps this young lady can give me some information," he said, turning to Amanda. "Do you know anything of this geyser?"

"'Tis a strange word to me," faltered the girl. "I know not what you mean."

"The boiling water, down in the cavern," explained Lee. "Do you know anything of it? Do you know how long it will be before the boiling flood subsides?"

"I have heard it said that the cavern of a thousand deaths is filled with water for two hours, after which the water sinks back," said the girl. "But I am only telling you of what I have heard. I believe, indeed, that the water does not rise more than a foot or so; else it would assuredly pour down the long tunnel, and enter the great cavern itself."

"A very sensible conclusion," said Lee approvingly. "The water, then, only seeps up for a foot or two—but quite sufficient to cause an indescribably horrible death. Then it subsides, after a period of two hours. That gives us a splendid start. For the enemy, even if he suspects, can do nothing yet."

"But those brutes will never guess the truth, gov'nor," said Nipper. "None of them saw us—and they know nothing of this opening up here. They won't even see it."

"I believe that the Black Hawk is more cunning," retorted Nelson Lee grimly.

They rested awhile, and during that period they exchanged stories. Lord Dorrimore was earnest in his keen regrets; for he realised that it had been his rashness which had

brought about the whole string of misfortunes.

"Perhaps it was all to the good, Dorrie," said Lee at length. "At least, you and Handforth have had a brief sojourn amongst the pirates—you know something of the truth. And we have this young lady with us, to give us a longer story at leisure. Yet we know sufficient already to be quite certain that we must break the Black Hawk's power and free the people from his tyranny."

Dorrie was delighted. Lee had said nothing of getting back to civilisation. But, then, Lee had not yet told his lordship of the disaster which had befallen the noble Sky Wanderer. Lee hadn't the heart to make that revelation yet.

Now that the crisis was over, every one of the adventurers felt the reaction. They were weak and tired. Every movement was a labour. But they did not flinch. It was essential that they should get out of this overheated tunnel.

Thus the climb commenced.

It had been comparatively easy for Nelson Lee and Nipper to descend, but that upward climb was a real torture. The only relief they obtained was the gradual dropping of the temperature as they got further and further away from the geyser zone.

Hour after hour dragged by. The day lengthened, and grew near to its close. The knowledge that the glorious open air awaited them gave them strength. They pressed on. They climbed the tunnel where it was narrow, where it was wide; they mounted that queer place where the wind rushed upwards at such terrific velocity. And, at length, they came out upon the high platform, a hundred feet or so below the rim of the great "crater." And there were the ropes, just as they had been left.

"Oh!" exclaimed Amanda, in awe and dread.

She was gazing down into the great abyss—staring into the cavern. Far, far below, she could see the lake, and the "countryside," the fields, the houses, the twinkling lights of the natural flares. From this height it was all familiar—but so very different.

"You're not going back there until you can go as queen of all your people!" whispered Handforth, who was apt to indulge in fanciful dreams. "We're going to square accounts with the Black Hawk."

"Nay, good friend; you have obtained your freedom, and now you must keep it," replied the girl softly. "'Twould be madness to return, after what has happened! For the Black Hawk would not let you slip through his fingers a second time."

Lord Dorrimore was gazing upwards at the ominously sloping rocks.

"I've been wonderin' how we go from here?" he asked, turning to Lee. "Do we swarm up like monkeys?"

"We left Umlosi in charge above," replied Lee. "But that was many hours ago. We can only hope that no ill has befallen him."

He gave the signal, tugging on the ropes,

and it was with relief and satisfaction that an answering tug immediately came. The faithful Umlosi was still on duty.

"I am here, Umtagati, my master!" came the voice of the Kutana chief.

"It is well, old friend!" called Nelson Lee.

"I have wondrous news. N'Kose is with me. And also the handy one with the clumsy limbs."

"Wau! Thy news renders my day of vigil a mere minute," replied Umlosi.

Amanda, as before was the first. She was securely fixed into the rope cradle, and then, swinging outwards, she was suspended over that great void—to be hauled upwards by Umlosi. No doubt the great African received a big surprise when he saw that fair vision come into view above the rocks. For he had known nothing of her presence.

The boys went up next, then Dorrie, and, finally, Lee. And now it was growing dusk. The sun was low, and sinking, indeed, beyond the rim of the island. It had been a strenuous, exciting day.

Yet there was one glorious outcome of that day. The party was once again intact.

"Thou art in no measure called upon, Umtagati, to tell me of the labours of your journey," said Umlosi. "For have I not eyes? Can I not see the deep lines of weariness upon your face?"

"Yes, it's been a strenuous day, Umlosi," agreed Lee. "But, thank goodness, we are back by dusk. We can get within our camp before darkness descends."

Handforth, as he stood looking round at that now familiar scene, was almost too full for words. He had not expected to see it again. Even Nipper felt particularly light-hearted.

As for Amanda, she could only stand and gaze in absolute bewilderment.

"Queer sort of countryside, isn't it?" asked Handforth. "I mean, all those trees in the distance. They're not really trees, you know, but a kind of fungus—"

"I look not at the trees—but at the sun," said Amanda softly. "I have been told that the sun sinks in the sky; but this is the first time I have ever beheld the amazing sight."

"My only sainted aunt!" ejaculated Handforth. He had forgotten that Amanda had always lived in the cavern. Those people only saw the sun when it was at its height. Beyond the cavern walls, out on the rock ledges, through the tunnels, there was nothing to be seen but the impenetrable mist and the ugly, tangled masses of the Sargasso weed. This sight, therefore, must indeed have been a marvellous one in the eyes of the girl.

Nelson Lee was anxious to get back to the base camp. Darkness would soon be upon them, and sleep was necessary—for everybody. They had had a gruelling day—and a tiring night before that. They were, indeed, almost dropping from exhaustion.

"You have all the ropes, Umlosi?" asked Lee wearily.

"That's all right, guv'nor—I've seen to it," said Nipper. "We'd better not leave any of the ropes here, had we? Those Beast Men might get hold of them—and they're valuable."

They would have preferred to have left the ropes behind, for they were heavy. But each carried a heavy burden, and thus they set off down the rocky hill, and across the valleys, towards the base camp.

It was Nelson Lee's tiredness which was responsible for the seemingly trivial misunderstanding. At any ordinary time he would have made certain with his own eyes that every rope had been removed. Nipper and Handforth and Lord Dorrimore were equally tired—equally indifferent. Their one thought was to get to the camp—and sleep. Now that there was no longer any imminent danger, they were ready to fall upon the rocks and sleep as they lay.

And none of them realised, as they walked, that one rope had been left—a rope which was attached to the rocks above, and which dangled far down into the cavern.

"There's something I must tell you, Dorrie," said Lee abruptly. "There's some bad news about the Sky Wanderer."

"However bad the news is, I can stand it," growled Dorrie. "For, whatever has happened, it's my fault. I know it, old man. Don't spare me."

Lee told the story. In brief, he explained how the Beast Men had stampeded a herd of monsters, and how the monsters had crashed into the great aeroplane, reducing her to wreckage.

"It's mighty bad," said Dorrie glumly. "Looks as though we're booked to spend the rest of our lives here, eh? Well, who cares? I'm too tired to worry."

Yet, when the steel palisades were reached, and Lord Dorrimore saw the crippled and listing 'plane, he uttered a sharp cry of consternation. The Sky Wanderer, once so proud, looked utterly forlorn.

"Well, it seems me right," said his lordship. "All this has happened because of my childish eagerness to explore. Why couldn't I have waited until daylight? I've dragged you all into the mess."

"Yet there are compensations," said Lee, with a smile. "As a party, we are once again whole, and our experiences have taught us much."

"We shall be ready next time," said Dorrie fiercely. "An', by glory, we shall be the ones to give the orders!"

CHAPTER 7.

The Black Hawk Acts!

DOWN in the cavern community the people were afraid.

The Black Hawk, in all his period of iron rule, had never been so grim, so ferocious. Men fled before him as he approached. Women and children kept

within doors, and whispered with bated breath as he passed.

Even his own henchmen, lusty, burly pirates like himself, quailed at his glance.

There had been peace in this simple little land until Simeon Harke had seized the reins of power; there had been peace afterwards, even. The lives of the people had been made harder, but the normal routine, more or less, had gone on as usual. Then had come the great preparations with the old warship, the *Porto Marlo*—and after that the great voyage of discovery. When the vessel had come back, laden with loot, there had been mixed feelings. The people tasted foods they had never even heard of.

But the coming of the strangers to the rock island made a vast difference. The Black Hawk sensed that they were after him—to bring him to justice. And now that Lord Dorrimore and Handforth had escaped, he was mad with rage and disappointment. The girl, Amanda, meant nothing. He scarcely gave her a thought.

He did not believe that the captives had perished in that steam cavern. He was convinced that they had escaped—by some modern method of which he knew nothing. From the first he had been suspicious—he knew that there were many wonderful things in the great Outer World, of which he and his people were in ignorance. It was for this reason that he had kept such a close watch on the prisoners.

Now they had gone, and the Black Hawk was fearful lest they should work some further magic. He half expected them to appear mysteriously, dramatically—and to appear with some new marvel to encompass his destruction.

"I was a fool to leave them unattended!" he snarled for the twentieth time. "By my bones, no sooner are they beyond range of our eyes than they escape from their chains and disappear!"

"Perchance they were aided in some way," said Simon Lane.

"Ye talk like a fool!" retorted the other. "They were aided by some modern devilry of which we know nought. Not a man of mine went near that cavern after we departed. That I have ascertained. And what help—human help—could have come to them by other means? Yet they were not chained, as we had left them. Neither could they have broken the chains. They escaped us, Simon, and they escaped us by some method in the steam cavern. But owing to the flood of boiling water, we could not even make an examination. But we go there soon. Aye, we go when the flood subsides."

It was this period of waiting which rendered the Black Hawk so infuriated.

He knew the peculiarities of the geyser, and when, at length, the necessary time had elapsed, he and a number of his men strode up the steep tunnel with many flaring torches.

Some of the men were looking half frightened. Living all their lives amid such surroundings, they were superstitious—and

their superstitions included not merely those which are common amongst all seamen, but those which were commonplace in England centuries ago.

These people, isolated so completely, had retained their superstitions. They were steeped in them. And they read something



Chained to the posts in the great cave, Dorrimore
the steady rise of the boiling water—water that was
fate to which Black Hawk

of wizardry or witchcraft in the unaccountable disappearance of the captives. They hesitated, indeed, to enter that hot, moist, mysterious cavern.

"'Tis ill work, Sir Chief," muttered one of the men uneasily. "Would it not be better to avoid this accursed spot?"

"Are ye women?" sneered the Black Hawk. "Ho! By my sinews, but this is

fine talk from full-grown men! What have ye to be afeared of?"

They said no more, but walked stolidly onwards. The Black Hawk himself was the first man to enter the steam cavern. The boiling waters had subsided by now—but only just. The rock floor, inside, was dripping



And his two companions watched with horrified eyes and soon gush over them. This, then, was the terrible work had condemned them!

wet, and steam was rising in volumes. But it was dissipated to a considerable extent by the flaring torches. The men spread themselves out at the Black Hawk's command, and the torches were held high.

"'Tis a vast mystery, I vow!" said Jonathan Betts, as he examined the chains. "Not a link broken. Yet I'll swear they could not have released themselves."

Simeon Harke was standing on a rocky projection, looking round closely. He was examining every corner of rock. For he could not believe that his victims had escaped him. He thought to find them here somewhere, lurking in a crevice. No doubt they would be dead, killed by the steam. But, at least, he would have the satisfaction of finding their bodies. He wanted to be sure.

The Black Hawk was keener, shrewder, than his men. He was, indeed, in many ways, a man of unusual intelligence, and had his environment been different, he would have risen to great heights.

"See!" he exclaimed suddenly. "Split my windpipe! But what means that?"

He was pointing, and those men nearest to him followed the direction, but were in no way enlightened.

"I see nought," said Jonathan.

"Are ye blind?" shouted the Black Hawk. "What of that cavity—that hole? See ye not a black space, like a tunnel entrance?"

"Faith, yes," said Jonathan. "But 'twas always there——"

"'Twas always there!" mimicked the Black Hawk sneeringly. "Ye are a greater fool than I ever believed, Jonathan Betts! When last we entered this cavern there was no such gap as we now see."

He was full of sudden suspicions—as well he might be. And, swinging round on some of the other men, he bellowed his orders.

"Get ye back! Bring ladders!" he thundered. "Aye, and ropes! Bring more torches! My prisoners are not so far away as it may seem."

Men ran to obey his orders. There was, of course, an unavoidable delay, and the Black Hawk fumed up and down, cursing. And in the course of his perambulations he came upon the great slab of rock which had fallen, and which had jammed between the rock ledge and the wall.

"See!" he shouted. "This rock was not here until to-day! It has fallen—and thus we know why the strange cavity is now revealed. 'Twas in that way the dogs escaped."

It seemed an age before the men came with the ladders and ropes. One ladder was set up with some difficulty, and then the Black Hawk mounted. He reached the ledge above—and he emitted a mighty roar soon afterwards—for he had walked onwards into what was obviously a tunnel. And he was not unaware of the strong current of air which drifted past him.

"Come up!" he shouted, returning to the ledge. "Bring torches!"

Other men mounted, and it was not long before they discovered that the tunnel went upwards apparently for ever. And soon the Black Hawk came to a halt, and his cunning eyes were aglow.

"Rot my skin!" he exclaimed. "I begin to smell something! Ye remember, Jonathan, the talk about the strangers? One was seen to-day, was he not, swinging from a rope, high in the cavern?"

"Aye," replied Jonathan Betts. "But he did not descend far, Sir Chief."

"And why not?" said the Black Hawk. "Is it not clear that the man found an opening in the cavern side? See! He swung into it, on the rope! He found the tunnel, and descended. Perchance he had others with him. We know that there are a number of these men from the Outer World. So they come down the tunnel, they find the great rock loose, and they tumble it over."

"By my skin!" exclaimed Jonathan. "Think ye, then, that 'twas the strangers' friends who saved them?"

"Aye, who else?" retorted Simeon Harke. "They came, and they rescued their friends and took them back to the upper island. Thus we know how they escaped from their chains. And what they can do—we can do!"

Never had the Black Hawk looked so intense as he looked now.

"Come!" he said abruptly.

He dismounted the ladder, and without another word to his men he hurried down the long, sloping tunnel until at length he was back in the great cavern. The Black Hawk's first task was to obtain a powerful telescope. He ordered his immediate companions to fetch other telescopes. They took up advantageous positions—and every telescope was focused on the great opening of the cavern, three thousand feet above.

That Simeon Harke was a seaman was proved by the fact that he did not close one eye when he was gazing through the telescope. He knew better than that.

He was watching. There had been movements up there during the morning. He reckoned that it would take the captives and their rescuers some hours to mount the steep tunnel to the surface. There was not one chance in a thousand that they had reached the end of their journey yet. So he was waiting, and concentrating his attention upon that mile-wide crater.

And his efforts, after an hour, were rewarded.

By now there was no trace of sunshine within the cavern. For the sun had sunk fairly low in the sky, and only a dim, diffused daylight entered. The cavern itself was now made bright by the flares. And so comparatively small was that opening in the roof, and so dim the sky, that stars were already twinkling. Yet, in the outer air, not a star, of course, could yet be seen.

"Ah!" exclaimed the Black Hawk abruptly.

He had seen. Tiny figures, looking like specks, had appeared on a rock ledge, close under the great outlet. And, focusing his telescope carefully, Simeon Harke had little or no difficulty in recognising the figures. One of them—the first to swing out on a rope, and to be hauled upwards—was clearly that of a girl.

Amanda Peterson! She had escaped with them—she was leaving her people and joining these men from the Outer World! The Black Hawk gritted his teeth with fury. For he smelt mischief.

He saw other figures mounting. To the naked eye they were practically invisible; but through the telescopes they stood out in relief.

"So! They have escaped—they are safe!" shouted the pirate chief. "Listen, men! Prepare great numbers of torches; have ropes made ready; strap on your cutlasses and knives! We go into action!"

"But 'tis impossible!" protested Jonathan. "Talk ye of giving battle to the strangers? But how can we get up yonder?"

"As they went, so can we go!" replied the Black Hawk. "In all these centuries we have never found a way to reach the upper surface of our island. Hear ye that word, my comrades—*our* island! What right have these strangers to walk upon it? 'Tis ours! 'Tis our birthright—delivered into our keeping by our ancestors. And we go to drive these strangers out—aye, to kill them in battle! And, in so doing, we shall gain our first sight of the outer air—a sight that none of us has seen, except that once when we ventured forth upon the war vessel."

There were crowds of men round him now, and they were all excited. Even the peaceful people—those who had suffered from the Black Hawk's tyranny—were agog with the news. There was a way through to the upper part of the island! And the strangers had discovered it! It was they who had found the way!

"Do ye not remember what the man of the smooth face said?" went on Simeon Harke. "He talked of a great number of the flying machines. If these strangers get away, they will return—aye, and return in vast numbers. But I say that they shall not return—for never shall they leave the island!"

And thereafter there were great movements down in the cavern. Men by the score made ready, and the activities were feverish.

CHAPTER 8.

The Night Attack!

THE base camp was all quiet.

Night had descended upon the great plateau, and overhead the stars were twinkling in their myriads. Not a breath of wind stirred. A more peaceful scene could not have been imagined.

Within the steelwork palisades the adventurers slept. Amanda had been made comfortable in the aeroplane's cabin, and she slept like a child, exhausted by her long exertions.

Nelson Lee and Nipper and Umlosi slept, too—heavily, for their tissues were in sore need of recovery. Soundly as Lee slept, however, the slightest unusual noise would have aroused him to instant wakefulness.

And outside, in the stockade, Lord Dorrimore and Handforth were keeping watch. At least, Lord Dorrimore was. Handforth slept—although the burly youngster had already had an early spell. But Dorrie had given

him the wink, and had advised him to snatch a little more sleep. Normally Handforth would have indignantly refused, but to-night he was only too grateful.

Thus the sporting peer was in sole charge of the camp—and after his recent experiences he was not likely to take any further chances. Tired as he was, he was intensely wakeful. It was vitally necessary for a close, alert watch to be maintained.

And so the hours passed—with Dorrie smoking cigarette after cigarette, and pacing steadily up and down, his ears on the stretch, his eyes straining. But never a suspicious movement or sound came to him.

Midnight at last.

And almost on the stroke of the hour Dorrie touched Handforth by the shoulder and gently shook him.

"Wake up, young 'un!" murmured his lordship. "Mr. Lee will be coming on duty in a few seconds, with Umlosi."

"Eh? Hallo! The steam!" gasped Handforth. "The boiling water will get us—Oh, my hat! I—I thought for a moment—"

"That's all right," murmured Dorrie. "It's midnight, and here comes Mr. Lee."

When Lee and Umlosi joined them, comparatively fresh, Handforth was on his feet. He felt guilty, yet he was so tired that he longed for a chance of falling back, once again, into slumber. And now it was his spell "off."

"Nothin' to report, chief," said Dorrie. "Or should I say 'Sir Chief'? All quiet on the Western Front."

"Wau! Quiet, maybe, but methinks there is mischief afoot!" rumbled Umlosi.

He was standing in the open, sniffing the air like a great hound. His nostrils were dilating, and the others watched him with quick alarm. The moon was just rising, and the feeble light from it, supplementing that from the stars, revealed Umlosi fairly clearly.

"What is it, old friend?" asked Lee keenly.

"I know not, Umtagati—but I smell a strange and noxious smell!" said Umlosi. "Listen! Canst thou not hear a soft, thudding murmur?"

So keen was Umlosi's sense of smell that he was aware of the danger long before the others. But now that they were definitely suspicious, they did detect an unpleasant, musty odour in the atmosphere. It was not the smell of the fungus which grew upon this island. It was animal-like—fetid, nauseous. And the sounds were becoming stronger now—a soft thudding, accompanied by rustlings—

"There's no sense in being in doubt like this!" said Dorrie abruptly. "Why not switch on the searchlights? Good glory, we don't want the Beast Men to take us by surprise, do we? That's about the size of it, Lee! The beggars are creepin' up in the darkness like shadows."

Nelson Lee nodded. And a moment later he and the others were leaping for the little platforms on which were mounted the

machine-guns and the searchlights. With a simultaneous blaze the searchlights sprang into life, and the great white beams spread out over the countryside.

"Look!" yelled Handforth.

He saw a great herd of hideous-looking monsters, each one of them measuring not less than twenty-five feet. They had great scaly backs, heads not unlike those of rhinoceri, but with the addition of two great horns sticking outwards above their eyes.

"Triceratops!" ejaculated Lee, recognising the species. "By Heaven, a herd of triceratops, Dorrie! And look! Behind them are the Beast Men! They are trying the same dodge as they worked once before—they mean to drive the herd on to us."

Now that the element of surprise was destroyed, the great shaggy island men were shouting and storming in their queer chattering tongue. And the herd, already frightened by the searchlight, stampeded. Many of them were veering away from the camp, yet others, driven by the Beast Men, came straight onwards.

Zizz-zizz—zizz!

Great rockets, fired automatically, hissed out from the top of the stockade, leaving showers of sparks in their rear.

Boom-boom-booom!

The great fireworks exploded, and tremendous cascades of coloured fire spread out in every direction. The Triceratops veered off, emitting strange cries, and soon they were thundering away in absolute terror. Yet it had been touch and go during that brief minute. For had the monsters charged into the camp, everybody would have been trampled to death in the rush.

"By gad! These Beast Men are cunning!" said Dorrie, wiping his brow. "Handy and I hadn't the ghostliest notion that anythin' was afoot."

"Wau! The danger is not yet over, N'Kose!" said Umlosi. "See! 'Twas but a ruse!"

"By James, he's right!" said Lee. "The Beast Men themselves are attacking now—hundreds of them! The stampede of the monsters was a piece of strategy—in order to distract our attention. This is serious. They're coming in deadly earnest."

As he spoke he had swung one of the searchlights round. And the cold beam revealed great numbers of the giant Beast Men. They were hurtling themselves upon the camp, running up with great loping strides, shrieking, shouting, and uttering all manner of hideous cries.

"It'll have to be the machine-guns, Lee!" said Dorrie. "It's our only chance."

Umlosi, by this time, had grasped his great spear, and he was dashing into the fray, reckless of the consequences—for he was, first and last, a warrior.

Nipper was on the scene, too. It was a case of all hands to the pumps.

With a stuttering, staccato rattle, two of the machine-guns awakened into life. Nelson Lee and Lord Dorrimore were not keen upon

killing the savage primitives who were attacking; but unless they were held off, it would mean death for every member of the sturdy little band.

"It's our lives—or theirs!" said Dorrie grimly. "We can't hesitate, Lee."

"Aim low!" retorted Lee. "If we wound the beggars, and put them out of action, it will be just as effective. Don't forget, Dorrie, that this is their island—and we are intruders. It's a pity they could not be friendly towards us—for we mean them no harm."

"That's all very well," growled Dorrie. "This is no time for flyin' the white flag. They wouldn't understand it, anyway! Ye gods! Look at 'em! They're like animals!"

In a frenzy of abandoned fury, the Beast Men were charging. It was a terrifying sight. The frantic creatures were no longer scared of the searchlights and the fireworks. They had discovered that the lights could not hurt them; and even the bursting, booming fireworks left them more or less un-

scathed. With their courage regained, therefore, and with their confidence restored, they charged.

Crack-crack-crack!

Nipper and Handforth, armed with rifles, fired coolly. They did their bit without hesitation. For they knew that if the Beast Men succeeded there would be no hope. These creatures were bent upon utter destruction.

"We've got to show them, once and for all, that we're their masters," said Lee grimly. "After that, perhaps—when the fact sinks into their primitive minds—they will leave us alone."

The battle was short and sharp—and terrible while it lasted. The machine-guns put in deadly work. Dozens of the primitives, hurling themselves madly at the steel palisades, were mown down like corn before the reaper. They fell, screaming and writhing. But not in one instance was any man



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killed. Their injuries, for the most part, were flesh wounds and minor fractures.

But while they were kept back in one spot, they swept up in another. And it was an anxious time for the five gallant defenders.

Suddenly something like a hundred of the Beast Men, in a solid mass, rushed at the defences. The creatures in the forefront, unable to check themselves, were sent hurtling upon the steel palisades. The tremendous weight of the Beast Men in the rear carried them on—and the palisades bent, shivered, and finally broke. The unfortunates in the forefront were battered and crushed. But a breach had been made—and the Beast Men came pouring through right into the very heart of the enclosure.

"That's done it!" said Dorrie gruffly.

He swung his machine-gun round, and now it was his intention to kill. It was their own lives or the lives of some of these animal-like humans. There was no choice in the matter.

"Wait!" ejaculated Nelson Lee sharply.

For he had swung one of the searchlights round, and the white beam revealed the great, glistening figure of Umlosi. The Kutani chief, spear in hand, was doing deadly work.

"Pigs! Vermin!" he bellowed. "Ye are not even warriors! Pah! Rather would I fight against jackals!"

His flashing spear rose and fell. And at every thrust a man died. With that spear, Umlosi was deadly. Yet, against such odds, he could not hope to keep up the fight for long. Four of the Beast Men, hurling themselves at him from the side, took advantage of their superior position.

"Stand back, Umlosi!" roared Lee. "We're going to fire—and we don't want to kill you—"

"Wau! Thinkest thou, Umtagati, that I am in any danger?" retorted Umlosi, with contempt. "I fear not these insects!"

Swinging round, he drove his spear home again. One of the Beast Men fell, uttering a screaming death cry. With the agility of a monkey, Umlosi bent downwards and shot forward. He tripped another Beast Man, rose upright, and catapulted the creature with amazing strength right over his shoulders. The primitive fell amongst his kind, and a number of them collapsed, falling back.

In the same moment, Umlosi leapt clear, and—

Zurrrr-putt—putt-putt-putt-putt!

Nelson Lee's machine-gun ripped into action. The Beast Men fell on all sides. Others, bewildered and stupefied by the fate of their comrades, fell back. During those brief moments it had indeed been touch and go. But now the breach had been sealed. The Beast Men were in retreat. Lee grabbed his machine-gun, leapt down from the platform, and in a moment he was standing in that broken gap of the palisade.

And the searchlights revealed the running, loping figures of the enemy. In all directions the Beast Men were in retreat. Many of them were dragging wounded comrades.

Others, injured, were slowly and painfully limping away.

A flood of rockets, fired horizontally, hissed and sizzled across the countryside. And the bursting maroons, sending forth numbers of dazzling coloured lights, sounded like the exploding of shells.

"Everybody safe?" sang out Lee, a sharp note in his voice.

"Think so!" replied Dorrie. "You all right, Nipper?"

"Yes, rather!" replied Nipper, from the other side of the enclosure. "Handy's here, too. Both of us untouched."

"Thank Heaven for that!" said Lee, wiping his moist brow. "In all this confusion I was half afraid that something might have happened to the boys."

"I say!" exclaimed Handforth, with sudden alarm. "What about Amanda? Poor kid! I hope she didn't see everything!"

"Poor kid, indeed!" said Nipper, unable to repress a smile. "She's a year or so older than you are, Handy."

"Rats! She's a girl, and fighting of the sort that took place five minutes ago isn't for girls to see!" said Handforth gruffly. "Anyway, I'm going into the cabin to have a word with her—to give her the tip that everything is all over."

"I'll come with you," said Nipper.

"Eh? Now, look here—"

But Handforth broke off. After all, Amanda was his friend, but he possessed no monopoly in that friendship.

They went into the big, comfortable saloon of the Sky Wanderer. All was dark. They had half expected the girl to be standing in the doorway, but she was not there.

"Amanda!" called Handforth softly.

There was no reply.

"Amanda!" called Handforth, his voice becoming sharper and louder.

Still there was no reply.

Alarm swept into the faces of Handforth and Nipper. Casting all scruples to the winds, they ran into the cabin where Amanda had been sleeping—for the Sky Wanderer was provided with some very neat little sleeping cabins, reached by a door at the end of the saloon. And in a moment Handforth and Nipper knew the truth.

Amanda had vanished!

CHAPTER 9.

Handforth's Lone Trail.

"IT looks very serious," said Nelson Lee gravely.

"But—but where can she be, sir?" panted Handforth, who was frantic. "She wouldn't have gone out on her own, and—and— Oh, goodness! You don't think that those Beast Men—"

He broke off, his thoughts too terrible to be put into words.

Following the dramatic discovery, Nelson Lee and Lord Dorrimore had been told, and

the Sky Wanderer had been quickly searched. Every inch of the enclosure had been searched, too. But Amanda, unquestionably, had vanished. And it was clear that the girl had vanished during the intensely hot minute when the fighting had been at its worst.

"I saw her, once—standing at the cabin door," said Dorrie. "In fact, I was goin' to warn her to get back, but some more of those brutes came charging up, an' I had to give them my attention. What do you make of it, Lee?"

"I'm afraid there is only one possible conclusion to arrive at," replied Nelson Lee, in a troubled voice. "You remember that a number of the Beast Men penetrated right into the camp? Umlosi dealt with some of them, but others got past him. I can only conclude that the girl was seized then."

"Oh!" muttered Handforth, horrified.

"She must have been quickly silenced, and smuggled out through the girders of the palisade, on the other side," continued Lee. "Perhaps this explains why the Beast Men made such a sudden and unexpected retreat."

"By glory! I believe you're right there!" said Dorrie sharply. "Now I come to think of it, a tremendous chattering went up for a minute. Didn't you hear? The devils were tellin' one another about the capture—an' the retreat was ordered."

"It looks like it," said Lee, nodding. "And if that is the case, Dorrie, they have not killed the girl."

"How do you know that, sir?" asked Handforth, wide-eyed.

"Because there is every indication that they are holding her as a hostage," replied Lee. "No doubt they intend to use her, later, as a lever. It is an unfortunate situation!"

"But can't we do something, sir?" asked Handforth excitedly. "Can't we go out and hunt——"

"Not in this darkness," interrupted Lee sharply. "Beyond these palisades, the Beast Men have all the advantage. They know the country—every inch of it. We are strangers. We should merely deliver ourselves into their hands. No, we must wait until daylight, and then, perhaps, we can get the girl safely back."

Handforth thought that it was a mad idea. His own plan was to dash out, then and there, and search.

"It's no good, old man," said Nipper gently, as he led Handforth away. "The guv'nor's right."

"He's not right!" burst out Handforth passionately. "He's wrong! He's horribly wrong! Oh, my only hat! I—I can't bear to think of that girl in the hands of those beasts! What will they do to her?"

"Better not think of it at all," replied Nipper quietly.

"How can I help thinking of it?" groaned Handforth. "It was owing to me that Amanda came with us. We saved her from the Black Hawk and his gang! Saved her

for what? To deliver her up into the hands of these savage devils!"

He had worked himself up into a fine pitch of excitement and fear—fear for the girl.

"Think of what happened to Dorrie and me!" he went on. "The Beast Men were going to sacrifice us, weren't they? They were going to drop us to death down the crater. By George! Perhaps that's what they'll do to Amanda!"

He was tortured by his thoughts. And, quite suddenly, he came to a decision. In his heart, he knew that Nelson Lee was right. It would be sheer insanity to venture forth now, in the darkness. The only hope was to wait until the daylight came.

Yet Handforth was not ruled by any dictates of common sense. Some sort of instinct told him that Amanda was in deadly peril—that she would, indeed, be dead by the morning. Unless she could be rescued now she would never be rescued at all.

Yet there would be no sense in the five adventurers throwing their lives away in a vain effort to save the one. Even Handforth could see that. But the thought did not deter him.

He wandered away from Nipper, his hands thrust deeply into his trousers-pockets. He appeared to be mooching about in a state of utter dejection. But he was acting a part. And at the first opportunity he slipped away behind the broken tail of the aeroplane so that he was out of Nipper's sight—for he had half a suspicion that Nipper was watching him.

Nelson Lee and Dorrie and Umlosi were standing in a group, talking earnestly. They did not see him. And with a sudden dash, he reached the palisades, wormed his way between two girders which had been bent, and he had gone.

Crazy though the project was—though he knew it to be—he was setting out on a lone trail. He would never have received permission to venture forth like that. So he had gone stealthily, secretly. And once away, he ran like a hare.

Having reached the bottom of the rocky slope, he found himself in the valley, where clumps of fungus grew like bushes—and where, in the distance, a veritable forest of the stuff reared itself against the starlit sky. There was sufficient light for Handforth to see the ground. He was a good boy scout, and he had a fair knowledge of scout-craft. His trained eye quickly detected the confused tracks on the mossy, grass-like surface. The Beast Men had gone this way—a whole herd of them, and many of the wounded had been dragged.

Handforth was assisted by this fact. He could see the marks distinctly. The dragging of the wounded provided him with his trail.

Handforth gave no thoughts to his own peril. He had ever been madly reckless. The one thought which did burn through his mind was that Amanda had been captured by those hairy animal men and was even now in their power. How he was to rescue

her he did not know—he did not think. He walked on, his attention fixed to the ground, picking out the tell-tale signs and marks.

At any moment he expected to hear shouts from the camp. He expected to see the searchlights blaze out, and he was ready to drop flat behind some of the fungus bushes. For he was fully resolved not to take any notice of any orders. He was out, and he would carry on!

But no searchlights blazed; no shouts sounded. Evidently, Handforth's absence had not yet been discovered. He pressed on quickly, running at top speed between clumps of fungus. And he could not help noting that the general direction of the retreating Beast Men was towards the "forest." Those dread creatures were lurking somewhere within the black and mysterious recesses of the giant fungoid growths. Even at this distance, Handforth could smell the queer, unpleasant odour which the fungus emitted.

He perceived, after a while, that he had taken the wrong direction. For when he looked upon the mossy ground, he now saw no tell-tale marks. And just ahead of him there was a broad, silent stream. The surface reflected the stars, and the water looked black and ugly. Occasionally a ripple, caused by heaven alone knew what, disturbed the placid surface.

The stream was far too wide for Handforth to jump, and he ran along the bank for some distance, seeking a spot where he might ford. Failing that, he might chance the swim. He was reckless enough, even for that—knowing, as he did, that the streams of this amazing island were likely enough to be inhabited by deadly reptiles.

Yet he would waste valuable time if he retraced his steps. The forest lay only just beyond the stream, the rim of it rising up in a straight black line at the top of a grassy slope.

"Hallo!" he muttered suddenly. "What's this? By George, here's a piece of luck!"

He halted at the river bank. Just ahead of him there was a great log, half submerged, and it stretched across the black river almost from bank to bank. Handforth judged that he could easily leap to the opposite shore from the end of the log. And if he kept his balance—

"Rats!" he muttered doggedly. "It's the best way."

He made up his mind quickly. He ran upon the log, and found, too late, that it was slippery and extraordinarily spongy. He had expected it to be hard; but his feet almost sank in as he walked along, striving hard to keep his balance.

And then an alarming thing happened.

The log, without warning, rose out of the water!

"Jumping jellyfish!" gurgled Handforth, his feet slipping from under him.

Somehow he managed to dig his knees into the "log." He clutched at some leathery,

scale-like objects, and secured a hold. And now, to his bewilderment, he found himself twenty or thirty feet in the air.

And he knew the truth. It was not a log he had walked upon, but a long neck of a vast monster which had been wallowing in the stream—perhaps, even, sleeping. But now it was lumbering out of the water, making strange noises, and Handforth could hear, rather than see, its enormous tail lashing in fury.

He was convinced that the creature was of the brontosaurus type, and it was anything between sixty and seventy feet long. Handforth was clutching about midway along the enormous neck—and that neck was raised high, and now Handforth could see the repulsive head, some distance in front of him. He even caught the gleam of the baleful eyes.

The burly St. Frank's junior had had many strange experiences in his time—but never in his wildest dreams had he ever expected to take a ride upon a prehistoric monster!

He was in a terrible quandary. He dared not release his grip, for the fall to the ground, alone, would probably break a limb. And even if he managed, with his usual luck, to alight unhurt, he would be horribly near the great, stamping feet of the brontosaurus. The creature might even attack him open-mouthed. He even forgot Amanda in the dire extremity of his peril. The thought of that vast cavern of a mouth filled him.

What a fool he had been in venturing out! Mr. Lee had been right.

Then his thoughts were shattered. The brontosaurus, now out of the water, was moving its head backwards and forwards, and the great neck was swaying and swinging. Handforth clung on desperately. The creature uttered terrifying noises, neither screams nor bellows, but something between the two. And with a sudden panic—for the brontosaurus, no doubt, was even more frightened than Handforth—the great creature charged.

With thudding strides it went hurtling towards the fungus forest, up the slope. Handforth never knew how he clung on. Only those leathery projections on the creature's neck saved him. In the faint moonlight he looked a mere tiny dot upon the enormous neck of the brontosaurus. He tried to press himself close, and he really did believe that his last minute on earth had arrived.

He became aware of strange, new sounds. It was not like the crashing of bushes, but a soft, squelchy, disgusting sound. The air became charged with a pungent smell. Then he knew what it meant. The brontosaurus was hurling itself into the fungus forest.

Then the end came—as unexpected as it was dramatic.

Some distance within the "trees" there was a sharp drop, a gully. And the brontosaurus stopped suddenly and Handy was sent hurtling over its neck. Then it turned and charged back along its own tracks.

Squelch!

Handforth expected to crash to death at the very bottom of the ravine; but he found himself, instead, plunging into the very centre of an enormous toadstool-like growth which bore the brunt of his fall.

As he sat, the fungus split up. He sank into the midst of it—and the sensation was extraordinary. It was like dropping into a great pile of feather beds. So completely was his fall broken, in fact, that he was not even bruised. He picked himself up amid a clinging mass of brownish-black fragments, all soft and spongy and giving forth an intense and nauseating odour.

"Great pip!" he gurgled, staggering away. He was dizzy with the smell. Yet he managed to keep his wits about him. The stuff was evidently not poisonous. With his mind still in a daze, he stumbled out of the ravine, and unexpectedly he came into a big clearing of the fungoid forest. The moonlight was streaming down. Something was lying on the mossy grass, and there were great creepers reaching towards it—long, quivering tendrils, and—

"Amanda!" shouted Handforth, with joy and horror mingled.

"Oh! Oh!" came the girl's gentle voice. "Can it really be you? Oh, please help me! Those dreadful savages left me here——"

Handforth leapt to her assistance, his own startling adventure forgotten. Fate had

brought him to this spot—fate in the gigantic shape of a brontosaurus! That was the thought which flashed through his mind as he ran to the girl's help. It was another example of Edward Oswald Handforth's colossal luck.

"Oh!" he gasped, with fresh horror.

He was standing over her now. And even in that dim light he could see that the girl was cruelly bound with a number of the tenacious dried creepers. But that was not all. Something far worse met Handforth's gaze.

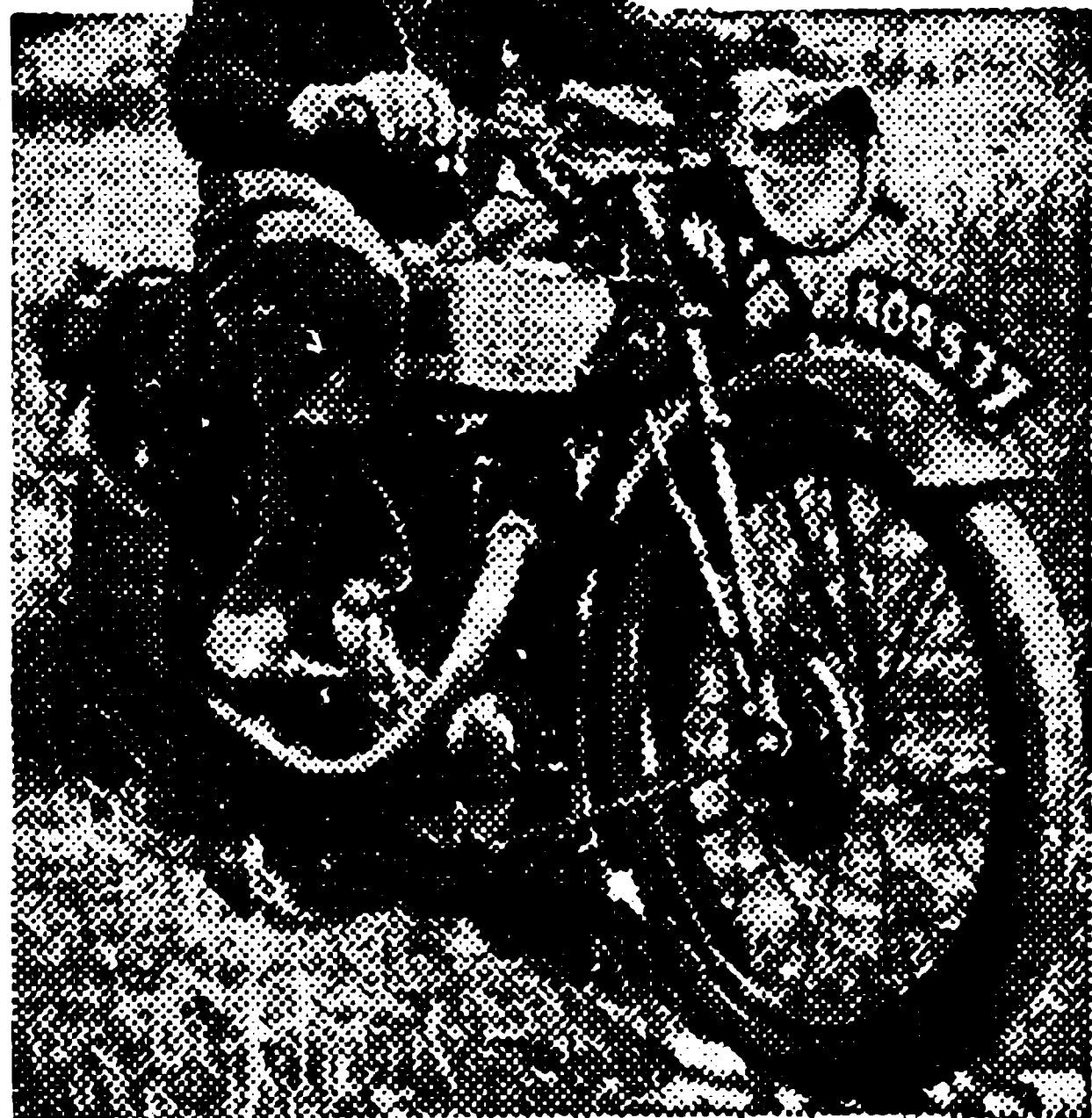
The great tendrils of the living creepers which festooned the fungoid growths were reaching down. They were attaching themselves to Amanda's bare arms, to her face and neck. Suckers! Deadly, diabolical, hideous suckers!

So this was the fate the Beast Men had left her to! A victim of the vile, blood-sucking creepers which abounded in these noxious forests! Even as Handforth whipped out his clasp-knife and slashed through some of the suckers, others came squirming down, quivering, as though full of vindictive intelligence. Two or three of them attached themselves to him, and he felt sharp, stabbing pains.

Slash-slash-slash!

As he cut through the tendrils they lashed and writhed, and black liquid oozed from the cut sections. He took no notice of the

JACK of all TRACKS



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creepers which were clutching at him. He cut the girl's bonds, lifted her into his arms, and ran.

The tendrils which were attached to him stretched out, quivering, and with loud "plops," the suckers were compelled to relinquish their grip.

Amanda had swooned in his arms. Somehow he got out of that dreadful forest, and within his heart he was sending up a prayer of thankfulness.

CHAPTER 10.

Other Enemies!

"**B**Y my flesh and bones and marrow!"

The Black Hawk gave vent to that picturesque exclamation as he stood on the rocks a few feet from the lip of the great crater. By his side stood Jonathan Betts; and the two burly ruffians were awed and impressed by the sight which spread itself before their eyes.

The moonlight was soft and mellow, and overhead the purple sky was spangled by a million billion stars. The landscape was dark and mysterious; but little valleys could be distinctly recognised, with clumps of woodland—or so it appeared from a distance—and gleaming little streams. But no sign of human life or animal life.

It was a scene, indeed, of absolute tranquillity and peace.

This was the first time any of the cavern men had beheld the upper surface of their island. And even the Black Hawk, crude ruffian though he was, was silenced for a few minutes.

"I like not the look of it, Sir Chief," muttered Jonathan uneasily. "'Tis a land of darkness and mystery."

"It shelters our enemies, and their great machine which flies," replied Simeon Harke. "Therefore we shall advance and find them and exterminate them."

The cavern men had reached the top of the great tunnel after hours of strenuous climbing. Then, to the Black Hawk's satisfaction, they had found a single rope dangling. Jonathan Betts had tested the strength of that rope, and he had been the first to climb. Then he had assisted his chief.

Now the two men hauled up a number of other stout ropes, which their comrades had in readiness. These were soon made fast. And up swarmed the pirates—ten of them—twenty—thirty—fifty.

A formidable company, all armed to the teeth.

"Stay!" exclaimed the Black Hawk, his voice quivering with exultation.

Far in the distance there was a glow, a reflection of whitish light streaming upwards. The source of that light was hidden by an intervening hill, but the rays projected over the hilltops, and there could be no mistaking the import. There, in that direction, was the camp of the strangers!

"Do we go at once, Sir Chief?" asked Simon Lane eagerly. "Or think ye 'twould be wiser to wait until daylight?"

"Nay, fool! In daylight they will have the advantage; but in darkness the advantage is with us," replied the Black Hawk. "Come, men! We shall advance with caution—and there is no need for speed. Soon the moon will go down, and then our advantage will be even greater."

ON a rising knoll of ground not more than a mile away from the Black Hawk and his men, but hidden by intervening fungus, two figures were bent low. The girl, Amanda, was stretched on the ground, and Handforth was kneeling beside her.

He had fetched her some water, and her terrible experience had left her weak and faint. But she was rapidly recovering now. Handforth's confidence, his bluff heartiness, had their effect. The girl was gaining strength every minute.

"If I attempt to thank you, my good friend, I shall not be able to find ready words—" she began.

"Oh, cheese it!" muttered Handforth uncomfortably. "It—it was nothing, Miss Amanda. We found out that you were missing, you see, and I sneaked out without any of the others knowing. But it was only by sheer luck that I found you. I'm not claiming any credit. A hundred men might have searched in vain—and I happened to blunder to the very spot where you were trapped. I'm usually lucky like that," he added cheerfully.

"Think you that we can get back to the camp?" whispered Amanda. "Oh, Handy, I am frightened here! The darkness, the strangeness of it all! And the thought of those terrible Beast Men—"

"Hush!" warned Handforth, with a half gulp.

His quick ears had heard some faint sounds not far distant—some small stones or fragments of rock had been disturbed. And now, as he looked across towards the "woods" he saw numbers of black, stealthily moving figures. And his heart leapt.

The Beast Men!

The dreadful creatures had discovered the truth, and were about to attack! Handforth stared about him wildly. Not far away, just beyond an intervening hill, he could faintly see the strange glow from the great opening in the cavern.

"They're after us, Amanda!" he breathed. "Do you think you can walk—or run?"

"Yes, yes!"

"No good trying to get to the camp—too much of that fungus in between us," went on Handforth. "Our only chance is to reach the crater. There are heaps of rock there—and we can find cover. And—and—By George, I've just remembered! There's a rope left there, I believe, and we can even get down it and hide in the tunnel. Mr. Lee and the others will find us in the morning."

They were off without another word. Leaping suddenly to their feet, they ran. For some moments there was no movement from the creeping figures—no violent movement. But after the fugitives had covered a hundred yards or so the Beast Men seemed to realise that their victims were escaping them. The truth dawned upon their animal intelligence, and with low, chattering cries they gave chase.

"Faster—faster!" panted Handforth, his own terror nearly as great as the girl's. "They're after us now, and they mean business!"

Amanda had recovered most of her strength now—and panic gave her more. Both she and Handforth were young and active. They ran like hares. The Beast Men, towering giants, were clumsy in their movements. Thus the youngsters gained, and the drama continued.

Running hard, Handforth happened to glance sideways—more at Amanda than anything. But on the top of a distant line of hills he saw, silhouetted against the sky, a great number of figures. They were moving slowly. More of the Beast Men! Handforth could not tell whether they were coming or going—but it was any odds that they were coming. Handforth fancied that he saw the faint moonlight gleaming on weapons which the creatures carried. And this was a new phase. Handforth had not known until now that the Beast Men used metal implements. But there had been no mistaking those gleams.

There was no time for a second look. The crater was now in full sight, and not far ahead—up a long, rocky hillside. The glow from it arose in the darkness, and with the glow came that strange, crooning sound which the adventurers had previously noted. It was caused by the warmed air rising upwards past the rocks of the outlet.

At last, the rim of the crater! Handforth leapt straight for the spot where, he fancied, a rope had been left. Yes, there it was! And, behind, the Beast Men were now in full pursuit. The air was filled with their chattering cries—and now there was a savage note in those sounds. For this crater, in the eyes of the Beast Men, was sacred.

"Grab hold!" panted Handforth.

The girl was ready. She swung herself down the rope—a plucky enough deed.

"You come, too!" she called up anxiously.

Handforth knew that he had better. If he waited for the girl to reach the bottom of the rope, and swing like a pendulum to the platform, he himself would be captured. So he slithered over the rim of the crater, and went down after her.

So they clung to the rope nearly at the end of its length. And below them there was space—over two thousand feet of it! A grim, terrible ordeal for a full-grown man with nerves of steel. And these youngsters were accomplishing it with uncanny skill. Handforth's admiration for the girl was tremendous.

It was he who commenced swinging; and, gazing upwards at the outer extremity of the swing, he saw hairy, bestial figures overhead. He redoubled his efforts—for a terrible thought had come to him.

The Beast Men were about to cut the rope! It was, indeed, the obvious thing to do. If those creatures had possessed a knife, Handforth and Amanda would have perished.

But the brutes were delayed. They used a heavy chunk of rock with a sharp edge. It jagged through the rope, and Handforth could hear the "thud-thud-thud!" of the rock as it hammered down upon the rope.

They were still swinging, and most of the strands had been parted. They were on the inward swing now, and the strain on the rope was great!

Twang!

The rope parted—it had parted at the exact end of the swing, and the schoolboy and the girl were hurtled forward. Amanda struck the platform, fell, and rolled over. Handforth hit the edge, and with a despairing effort he clutched at a projection of rock and saved himself from toppling backwards. He reeled away, sick with the shock of it. And Amanda, quickly on her feet, pulled him farther back into the black tunnel.

"Oh, we are safe!" she whispered, making no mention of the ugly bruises and grazes from which she suffered.

"Crumbs! I thought it was all up!" muttered Handforth. "Are—are you all right?"

"Aye! And we are beyond the reach of those dreadful things."

CHAPTER 11.

Handforth, the Detective!

AND, above, the Beast Men were chattering and muttering amongst themselves. In their animal-like way they were satisfied. They believed that their victims had gone hurtling down to death.

But suddenly a change came over the creatures. From afar a queer wailing cry had sounded. It seemed to be a sort of signal, for there was an immediate hush. Again came the cry—it was repeated, and there were some additional sounds. A message, no doubt, was being communicated.

Unquestionably the primitive men had just discovered the presence of the Black Hawk and his men. And there was a general move. The Beast Men were frightened. They ran in all directions, scattering and making for the fungus forests.

"Phew! It's been an exciting hour," muttered Handforth, as he stood on the ledge below, with his companion. "But, by George, it's been worth all the risk!" he added happily. "I—I mean, saving you, and—and everything! Here we are, together, and we're all right now. Mr. Lee will find us when it's daylight."

"But think you so?" asked Amanda timidly. "The rope is no longer hanging over the rocks, and there will be nought to show what has become of us."

"That's true," admitted Handforth, with a start. "They'll have no reason to search here, will they? And we can't possibly get up without ropes. No good shouting, either. And we can't go down the tunnel to the cavern, or the Black Hawk will grab us. H'm! It's a bit awkward."

But his characteristic optimism came to the rescue.

"Still, what's the good of worrying," he went on. "We're safe now—and I vote we get some sleep—until daylight. I'll try and find you a comfy place."

He had no intention of going to sleep himself. He meant to keep watch. But he saw no reason why he should explain that to Amanda.

He had an electric torch on him, and he now switched it on. And the first thing he saw was a great, rough, twisted rope, which was secured to some neighbouring rocks. Not far off there were other ropes of a similar nature, and all of them were fastened. The last of the Black Hawk's men had left them like that before he had been hauled up to join his comrades.

"Funny!" said Handforth, frowning.

He knew that his own party had not left the strange ropes here. A sudden chill came into his heart. The Beast Men, then, had found a method of getting down—

"Great Scott!" ejaculated Handforth suddenly. "This isn't rope at all—it's dried seaweed!"

"Oh!" cried Amanda, running up to him.

Her eyes were wide open—and in them there was a light of stark fear.

"What is it?" asked Handforth quickly.

But the girl said nothing. She seemed to be petrified. And, at the same time, Handforth's own wits worked rapidly. He had always prided himself upon being something of a detective. And now was his opportunity to make one or two deductions.

"My only sainted aunt!" he exclaimed. "Seaweed! And there's no seaweed at the top of the island—the Beast Men can't get hold of any, can they? Then these ropes must have come up from below—from the cavern! We didn't bring them, so it proves beyond question that the Black Hawk's men have been up here. They've discovered the tunnel!"

"Aye, the same thought came to me!" whispered Amanda, finding her voice. "'Tis the kind of rope my people have used for endless years. The women make it from the seaweed, after it has been dried. I have, indeed, made much of it with my own hands."

Another thought came to Handforth—and it was like a dazzling flash of illumination.

"Did you spot those figures on the skyline, as we were coming along?" he asked. "I thought they were Beast Men at the time——"

"Nay, I saw no figures," whispered Amanda. "I was far too terrified!"

"But I saw them; and I wondered, rather, because I saw gleaming weapons in their hands," went on Handforth. "But now I understand. They weren't Beast Men at all, but the Black Hawk and his rotten pirates! The weapons I saw were bared cutlasses and swords!"

"Oh, it cannot be true! They could not have discovered the way up."

"But why not?" asked Handforth quickly. "We didn't fill up that hole in the steam cavern. We couldn't. The Black Hawk must have found it; and then he followed us. Don't you see what it means? He and a great number of his men are advancing on the camp—they mean to attack before the dawn. We're the only ones who know of it—the only ones who can give the warning."

He came to a quick decision.

"You must stay here, Amanda—you're safe here," he continued. "I'll climb up one of these seaweed ropes and get to the camp. I know the country better than the Black Hawk, and I can get straight there. By George, there's just a chance I shall be in time!"

"If you go, Handy, I shall go, too!" said Amanda quietly.

"But, look here, old girl—I mean——"

"I dare not stay here alone," she broke in. "Perchance other men will come up the tunnel. What then? They will find me. Don't you see? Alone, I shall be at their mercy. Rather would I come with you."

"There's something in that, too," muttered Handforth. "All right, then. But to tell you the truth, I'm scared of you climbing up the rope. It's a terrible ordeal for a girl. A lot worse than lowering yourself, I mean. I'm not sure that you're strong enough——"

"Foolish boy!" whispered Amanda. "I will show you."

And before he could stop her, she had unfastened one of the ropes, gained a secure hold; and then she allowed herself to swing out. Handforth's heart leapt into his mouth. He had a horrid feeling that the rope might break, or become unfastened at the summit. But it did neither. And Amanda, to his joy and wonder, commenced climbing with a graceful agility. Hampered though she was by her skirts, she made excellent progress.

"What a girl!" muttered Handforth, his eyes glowing.

In a moment he had freed one of the other ropes, and he, too, was climbing. He had made up his mind to get to the top first—not because he had any idea of racing her, but because he thought it possible that the Beast Men might still be there. So it was essential that he should get to the top first.

But so agile was she that they both climbed to safety together. And it was with great relief that they found themselves entirely alone. All their enemies had vanished.

"They think they've killed us—and so they went," said Handforth exultantly. "By

Ge 34, what luck! And look at all these seaweed ropes, Amanda. I know I'm right about the Black Hawk and his men. And unless we can give the camp warning, it'll mean death for all our friends."

"Aye, 'tis truly spoken," said the girl, clinging to him. "Simeon Harke will have no mercy. He means to kill! And 'tis a favourite sport of his to strike savagely and in the dark."

Handforth thought of that other fight. The defenders had beaten off the great animals merely with fireworks, and the Beast Men had been repulsed, too. But if these armed pirates made a surprise attack, the story would be vastly different. For the men were not primitive creatures, but grim, skilled fighters, armed with cutlasses and daggers. They would make short work of the four lone defenders. For they would probably make a quick rush, and to get to close grips before Nelson Lee or Dorrie could bring the machine-guns into operation.

"Come on!" muttered Handforth. "We've got to hurry. I say, Amanda, this is awfully rough on you——"

"Talk not so foolishly," laughed the girl. "Am I not with you? And because I am with you, I have no fear—and I even enjoy the excitement of it all."

At any other time Handforth's heart would have raced and he would have gone hot with confusion. But now his thoughts were all for his comrades in the camp; and, warmed though he was by the girl's words, he merely pulled at her arm.

"Come!" he urged.

They ran hard. As they crossed one of the shallow valleys, with many fungus forests near at hand, they kept a sharp look-out. But they saw no Beast Men. And, indeed, the strange countryside was unusually quiet. The moon had fallen so low that it hung in the sky, near the horizon, like a pallid golden crescent. Its rays, casting long, faint shadows, slanted across the land.

Handforth and his companion climbed a low, mossy hill. On the top of it there was a little fungus wood, and, skirting this, they came within sight of the base camp. They did not expect to see it in the darkness—but

Handforth, at least, knew its exact position. He was surprised to see lights twinkling. He took them to be tiny beams from pocket torches.

"I expect they've been out searching for us—or they're just about to start," he whispered. "Anyhow, I'm glad to see that they're moving about. If only we can get there——"

"Look!" whispered Amanda, pulling at his arm. "Do you see something down in the hollow?"

She pointed. And Handforth caught his breath in sharply. About midway between them and the camp, in the hollow, numbers of figures were moving stealthily forward. It so happened that the moonlight slanted right down into this shallow valley; and Amanda had caught a glimpse of a sword-blade gleaming here and there. But for the moonlight, indeed, the Black Hawk and his men would not have been betrayed.

"Oh, but what can we do?" whispered the girl. "They are much nearer than us—and it is clear that they are preparing to make a rush. We can never get there in time."

"I've got it!" exclaimed Handforth exultantly.

The Black Hawk and his men had their backs to this hill, and Handforth had little fear that the white spot of his electric torchlight would be seen. Anyhow, he chanced it. He flashed the torchlight on, and he proceeded to use long flashes and short flashes; and he waited, trembling, watching intently.

"But I do not understand," murmured the girl in bewilderment.

"This is what they call the Morse Code," replied Handforth. "I'm a Boy Scout, you see, and so I know the Morse Code pretty well. If they happen to spot this light in camp——"

He broke off, for, far away, another light was twinkling. It was Morse!

"Hurrah!" yelled Handforth. "They've seen!"

He clicked the switch on and off. "D-a-n-g-e-r!" he morsed.

Then he waited, and the reply came: "Where?"

Handforth morsed: "Black Hawk and men attacking. Switch on lights!"

Before he had completed the message a sudden blaze of searchlights burst forth. They swept the entire valley, and with loud cries of consternation the Black Hawk and his men leapt to their feet. For they had been crouching low, approaching like Red Indians, almost on their stomachs. But concealment was now impossible. Handforth's warning had arrived in the nick of time, for, but a minute later, the enemy would have made their grim swoop.

Boom-boom!

Two maroons were fired—horizontally. The reports sounded like those of high-explosive shells. Then, right where the Black Hawk and his men were standing, the second explosive came—devastating in their sharp, ear-splitting reports.

FREE MODEL STEAMSHIP

Have you got your free model steamship yet? If not, then you must start collecting the blue and white labels from Libby's famous tinned fruits to-day. When you have twelve of these labels send them with your name and address to Libby's, 8, Great Tower Street, London, E.C.3., and you will receive the numbered parts of the model steamship with instructions for building it yourself.

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Next Week's Programme.

Next week's detective-thriller by E. S. Brooks continues the startling adventures of Nelson Lee and his companions on the Island Above the Clouds. The title of the story is "The Scarlet Death!" and it is packed with thrills from beginning to end. You'll enjoy it.

Also included in next week's programme are further chapters of our great school story, "Cock o' the Walk!" in which Edward Oswald Handforth gives St. Frank's a shock. Handy has long wanted to be skipper of the Remove. Well, in next week's chapters he realises his ambition.

READERS' PRIZE JOKES.

Motorist's friend: "I say, what was that place we whizzed through then?"

"Motorist: "Oh, Winchester."

"Friend: "Was it? Good! I'd often wanted to see Winchester."

(J. Thorpe, 4, Bolton Road, Wednesfield, Staffs. A Penknife.)

"How is the new recruit getting on, sergeant?"

"Well, sir. I've taught him all I know and he still knows nothing."

(G. Savage, 11, Tytherton Road, Holloway. A Pocket Wallet.)

"Look! They're bolting!" yelled Handforth triumphantly.

It was true. The Black Hawk and all his men were running—running madly, with terror at their heels. And Handforth and Amanda, hand in hand, racing in the opposite direction, reached the camp. They were seen long before they arrived—seen in the glare of the searchlights.

"Handy!" came a great yell from Nipper. "Oh, you boulder! We thought you were dead!"

Handforth and the girl ran into the stockade, and immediately they were surrounded by Nelson Lee and Lord Dorrimore, Nipper and Umlosi.

"Jiggered if I can understand why we're not dead!" panted Handforth. "Oh, my goodness! I've had a ride on a Brontosaurus, and we've been chased by Beast Men."

A farewell party was being given to one of the staff of a big store who was starting in business on his own.

The manager presided, but he was not accustomed to public speaking. Beginning his speech, he said:

"Ladies and gentlemen, our young friend is—er—about to paddle his own canoe—er—let us hope—er—he will have a level road all the way, and the—er—courage to overcome the mountains of difficulty—er—he will meet, so that he may climb to the top of the ladder—er—that others may follow in his footprints."

(S. W. Block, 133, Route Amiral Courbet, Shanghai, China. A grand prize.)

Vanman (after knocking down butcher's boy): "I'm sorry, my lad; are you all right?"

Boy (after picking up contents of basket): "I dunno. Here's me liver and ribs, but where's me kidney?"

(J. Menton, 30, Upper Liffey Street, Dublin. A grand prize.)

"Can you imagine," said the teacher at the natural history lesson, "anything worse than a giraffe with a sore throat?"

"Yes, sir," a boy answered. "A centipede with corns."

(E. Storey, Lansdowne, Wharf Road, Crowle, nr. Scunthorpe, Lincs. A Penknife.)

Master: "Willie, what is the Royal Mint?"

Willie: "Please, sir, what they put over the lamb at Buckingham Palace."

(G. Marsh, "Southfield, Bloomfield Road, Bath. A Pocket Wallet.)

"If you came back alive, Handforth, I meant to scold you severely," said Nelson Lee. "But Amanda's presence forbids me. You have saved her, and that alone proves that your lone effort was justified. Well done, my boy! We're all proud of you!"

And then and there Handforth learned that his comrades, in camp, had been searching far and wide—and had even given it up as a bad job.

Handforth and Amanda, in their turn, told their story. And so the dawn came—the dawn of a new day!

THE END.

(What new and strange adventures await Nelson Lee & Co.,—marooned there on the Island Above the Clouds? Don't miss next week's Great Detective - Thriller; "The Scarlet Death!")

COCK O' THE WALK!



Says Edward Oswald Handforth, the "live-wire candidate": "I've got this election in the palm of my hand—the other candidates don't stand an earthly."

But Handy's rivals have something to say about that!

Vote for Handforth!

"**R**ATHER a tactless remark, old man," said Church. "I mean, after they'd promised to vote for you, it was hardly the game to use threats. And you can't believe a word they say, either. We warned you that most of the chaps will try to pull your leg."

"But they said 'honour bright,'" said Handforth, aghast.

His chums looked at him wonderingly. It amazed them that he could credit the honour of such out-and-out cads. But, as a matter of fact, Handforth was right for once. Forrest & Co. had been quite sincere. Handforth's election would suit them down to the ground—for they took it for granted that the whole Remove would be in a state of chaos as soon as Handforth took the reins—and this would give them more scope for their own peculiar fancies.

"Oh, well, we can't bother with 'em!" went on Handforth, at length. "Let's have a shot at the other chaps."

They looked into Study B, but Hubbard and Teddy Long were absent. Study C not only contained Sir Montie Tregellis-West and Tommy Watson, but Reggie Pitt and Jack Grey, too, the two West House juniors had been visitors for tea.

"Good!" said Handforth, as he surveyed them. "I'm canvassing!"

"There's nothing like it," agreed Reggie Pitt.

"I want you chaps to promise me your votes," continued Handforth.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Chuck it, Handy!" grinned Church. "You can't expect to get Pitt's vote, can you?"

"Why not?"

"Well, he's one of the candidates——"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"If Pitt has the interests of the Remove at heart, he'll vote for me!" said Handforth firmly. "And that applies to you other fellows, too. As soon as I'm captain, I'll take charge of the footer, organise the general sports, institute lectures, and fix up boxing campaigns."

"We believe it," said Tommy Watson, nodding. "Especially the boxing campaign business. In fact, there'll be so much boxing if you're elected that there'll be no time for anything else!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Well, can I rely on your votes?" asked Handforth.

"Dear old boy, you can rely on anythin' you like," said Sir Montie.

"Good!"

"But that doesn't meant to say you'll get the votes," went on Tregellis-West. "Begad!

Rolliking Adventures Of The Chums Of St. Frank's!

You're frightfully welcome to rely on us, but it'll be risky. Why not save a lot of trouble by standin' down?"

"Because I've made up my mind to be Remove captain—and nothing is going to stop me," replied Handforth. "Determination is the one force which ensures success. I'm going on with this campaign like a meteor sweeping through the heavens, and before I've done I shall forge my way through turbulent waters to victory."

"You may be right," said Pitt, "but I've always understood that meteors forge their way through space."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"I'm out for the captaincy, and nothing will be allowed to stand in my way!" snorted Handforth. "I'm doing some canvassing at present—just to make sure of your votes. Are you going to say 'Yes,' or shall I wipe up the floor with you?"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"I'm waiting!" said Handforth ominously.

"Yes!" said the four juniors in one voice.

"That means you'll vote for me, eh?"

"It means that we're willing to agree to anything if you'll only clear out and leave us in peace," said Reggie Pitt blandly.

"Being one of the candidates I can't very well vote at all—but I can safely promise you that Tommy and Montie and Jack—our friends on my right and left and northern flank respectively—will give you their votes."

"What's that?" said Jack Grey. "You silly ass——"

"And that," said Reggie, "is a promise."

"Really, old boy——"

"Hang it, Reggie, look here——"

"A definite promise!" declared Pitt. "So you can go away, Handy, and forge your way through turbulent waters elsewhere."

Handforth beamed.

"Good!" he said heartily. "I told you I was out for blood, didn't I?"

"We knew you were out for something, but we didn't think it was quite so lurid as blood," said Reggie. "Still, as long as you get your requirements from some other study, we shan't mind. Tommy, you'd better fetch Handy a pail."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Handforth went out of Study C, and gazed triumphantly at his chums.

"Well?" he asked.

"It beats me," said McClure flatly. "Old Pitt absolutely promised those votes, too. The funny thing is, I can't see where the catch comes in."

"Catch?" repeated Edward Oswald. "My hat! When will you fellows realise that I'm forging ahead——"

"Through turbulent waters to victory?" asked Church. "All right—we understand, old man. Let's continue the pilgrimage. Study E next, eh? I'll bet we shall find Archie asleep."

They looked into Study E, and found Archie Glenthorne sprawling languidly on the

lounge. Alf Brent, his study mate, was face downwards on the hearthrug, his chin resting on his hands, and with a book in front of him.

Reggie Pitt's Little Scheme.

"**W**HAT-HO!" murmured Archie dreamily. "Visitors, what?"

The genial ass of the Remove roused himself slightly, waved a languid hand, and adjusted his monocle.

"I mean to say, guests, and all that sort of thing," he went on. "Be good enough to arouse the old tissues, Alf, and do the honours."

Alf Brent glanced up.

"It's only Handy!" he grunted. "Clear off, you disturbing fathead! I've just got to an interesting point."

"Good gad!" said Archie, starting. "I mean, odds slights and slurs! A somewhat foul method of welcoming the good old laddies, as it were. Kindly take a chair, Handy, old turbine! Take a couple of dashed chairs, and make yourself absolutely comfortable."

Handforth sniffed.

"I haven't come here to make myself comfortable, or to sit down, either," he said curtly. "I'm canvassing. You've either got to promise me your votes for to-morrow's election, or I'll chuck the pair of you out of the window!"

"Absolutely!" said Archie, nodding.

"Are you going to give me your vote, or not?"

"Who? Me?"

"Yes, you!"

"Oh, absolutely!" said Archie promptly.

"Absolutely what, you fathead?"

"I mean to say, you want the best votes—we have them!" said Archie cheerily. "Anything to oblige, laddie. Good gad! Nobody comes to Archie in vain, what? I mean, votes! How many, old traction-engine? Say the good old number, and I'll proceed to deliver the goods!"

"You dithering idiot!" snorted Handforth. "I only want one vote from you. And I don't want it now, either!"

"Then why wreck the good, old peace in this foul fashion?" asked Archie. "I mean, how about it, Alf? The lad barges in, and interrupts our fruity hour of repose, and I'm dashed if he wants these dashed votes at all! Somewhat ripe, in a way of speaking."

"Oh, don't answer him!" said Alf gruffly.

"Let him wander on!"

"Absolutely," agreed Archie. "I wish he dashed well would!"

"Would what?" demanded Handforth.

"Wander on," replied Archie, with a wave of his hand. "I mean to say, there it stands, laddie, just behind you—the ever-open door. A bit too much ever open, by gad! I can feel sundry blasts whistling round the ankle department."

"Come on, Handy!" said Church.

"Rot!" said Handforth. "These chaps haven't promised——"

"If this is your idea of canvassing, I'm going to chuck it!" interrupted Church crossly. "You can't come into the chaps' studies and threaten to slaughter them unless they vote for you. That's not canvassing—it's intimidation. You wouldn't like to win this election by Red methods, I suppose?"

"I don't care whether they're red or green!" retorted Handforth, missing the point. "I'm going to win. Archie will look green in a minute if he doesn't give me his promise—and there'll be plenty of redness, too," he added, pushing up his sleeves.

"Better fetch that pail, Mac?" suggested Church.

Archie slowly rose to his feet.

"Alf, old sparrow, it appears that a slight amount of bother is indicated," he said, in distress. "I mean, is this our study, or not? Do we allow this frightful invasion by frightful frights? It seems to be that something ought to be done about it. What-ho! The battle-cry goes forth!"

"Good old Archie!" grinned Brent, rising. "That's the style."

But before any actual trouble could start, a further invasion took place. Reggie Pitt came in, followed by Jack Grey, Tommy Watson, Tregellis-West, Fullwood, Russell, and De Valerie.

"Good absolutely gad!" gasped Archie, starting. "I mean, help! Odds hordes and multitudes!"

"It's all right, Archie—nothing to fear," said Reggie crisply. "Has Handy been pleading for your votes at the poll?"

"Pleading is right!" said Alf Brent, grinning. "In about another ten seconds his pleadings would have developed into a riot. We were just going to chuck him out!"

"Absolutely on the cold line!" said Archie.

"Well, don't upset the poor fellow like that," said Pitt. "Promise him your votes at once, and finish with him. Life's too short to bother over a mere vote or two. These other chaps have promised."

"In that case, we'll agree, too," said Brent, scenting something.

"Absolutely," said Archie. "What-ho! Rely on us, laddie!"

"Is this honest Injun?" demanded Handforth suspiciously.

"Positively official and guaranteed to be jewelled in every hole," said Pitt, nodding. "So now you're free to go and forge through another chunk of that turbulent water of yours!"

Handforth & Co. retired, victorious. At least, Handforth felt victorious. Church and McClure had a shrewd idea that there was something fishy about this affair. Reggie Pitt was renowned as a japer of no mean quality, and the rash manner in which the fellows were promising Handforth their votes was too good to be actually true.

But as soon as Handforth & Co. had gone, Pitt's companions grabbed him.

"Now, you ass, what's the funny idea?" demanded Jack Grey grimly. "What the dickens do you mean by making us promise to vote for that hopeless ass?"

"Out with it, Reggie!"

"What's the wheeze!"

Reggie Pitt pulled himself away.

"Can't you have pity on the poor chap?" he asked severely. "Can't you see how anxious he is to get the majority and be elected captain? Why not do him a good turn?"

"And vote for him?" gasped Tommy Watson.

"Why not?"

"I can think of a hundred reasons why not—but one's enough!" retorted Tommy. "He'd make the worst Remove skipper in St. Frank's history! Do you want the other ninety-nine reasons?"

Reggie grinned.

"That one's enough, but let's keep cool," he said calmly. "Here's the point. As far as I can understand, this election is a one-man affair. If it wasn't for Handy, there wouldn't be any election at all."

"That's right," agreed Brent, nodding. "The Remove is quite content to get along without a skipper until Dick Hamilton comes back."

"Of course," said Watson indignantly. "Dick might turn up next week. Where's the sense of having all this fuss?"

"Exactly," agreed Pitt. "That washes out the election altogether. Therefore, why shouldn't we spoof old Handy, have a heap of fun to-morrow, and solemnly give him every vote there is? He wants votes—let him have 'em!"

The Plot.

THE other juniors looked at Pitt wonderingly. A few smiles became apparent; chuckles followed, with wide grins here and there.

"Spoof him, eh?" said Fullwood happily.

"Up to the neck!" nodded Pitt. "The whole Form has decided that no election is necessary, but Handy has practically forced the thing by setting himself up as a candidate. But why should we pander to him by standing against him? Let him get all the votes—let him be elected!"

"And then have a good howl at him afterwards, eh?" said Jack Grey. "My only hat! What a jape! Imagine Handy's face when he sees the figures!"

"Something like this: 'Handforth, 45; Pitt, 0; Fullwood, 0!'" chuckled Reggie. "And then, after he's fully convinced himself that he's skipper, we'll tell him the gentle truth."

"I shall have my camera ready for that moment!" grinned Watson.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Won't it be a bit of a dirty trick?" asked Archie. "I mean, the poor old lad will absolutely crumple up like a toy balloon when you shove a pickaxe into it!"

"He'll soon recover," said Pitt confidently. "Handy's got marvellous powers of recupera-

tion. Besides, he deserves it. Look at the way he's going about, upsetting everybody with his tommy-rot, and taking it for granted that he's going to be elected. He's asking to be spoofed."

"Well, that's true enough," admitted Brent. "It'll be the joke of the season, too. He'll be skipper for about two minutes, and then he'll learn that the election was bunkum from start to finish. Perhaps it'll teach him a lesson not to be so arrogant."

Reggie Pitt grinned.

"I'm not complaining of Handy's arrogance," he replied. "He wouldn't be Handy without it. It's one of his chief charms, my sons—and you can't deny that he's a jolly useful chap in a scrap. Handy's quite all right as he is, and he was sent straight from the heavens as a subject for japing."

"Of course, he's a hopeless chump, but isn't this expecting a bit too much?" asked Fullwood. "Even Handy will smell a rat, I'm afraid. He can't be idiot enough to expect a sweeping victory of that sort. And the whole jape will be ruined if he suspects things in advance."

"Yes, that's a point," said Jack Grey thoughtfully.

"A somewhat jagged snag, what?" said Archie.

"It would be, if we went to work in the wrong way," said Pitt. "But we've got to go round and give everybody the tip. We've got to get the whole Remove in this affair secretly. Although secrecy won't be so very important with Handy. He's so full of the election that he won't see the red light when it's right in front of him."

"But what's the idea of giving the tip?"

"Well, my idea is to do the thing by a gradual process," replied Reggie shrewdly. "For example, he's holding a big meeting to-night, and nobody meant to go. The thing was a joke. Handy's expecting the Remove to turn up, but the Remove has decided that it doesn't matter."

"Of course," nodded Fullwood.

"My plan is for everybody to turn up," said Pitt. "We'll treat him as a joke at first, and then pretend to be impressed by his spouting. See the wheeze? By the time the meeting's over, about half of us will be enthusiastic supporters. At least, that's what Handy will think."

"A sort of insidious business, old boy?" asked Tregellis-West.

"That's the idea," agreed Reggie. "Then, to-morrow, there's the footer match against the Fourth, and we shall win. We'll give Handy all the credit, and at his final meeting—he's going to hold one just before the poll, I believe—we'll work up a marvellous scene of enthusiasm. In that way he won't have a chance of smelling a rat—he'll think that his eloquence has done the trick."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"By Jove!" said Watson. "That's a brainy scheme, if you like!"

"The poll will be at seven o'clock," continued Reggie, grinning. "It'll only take

ten minutes to count the votes after all the ballot papers have been shoved in the box, and I'm going to suggest the formation of a special committee to count the votes, and announce the result. An independent committee, you understand."

"Chaps outside the Remove, you mean?"

"Yes, young Handforth of the Third, Boots of the Fourth, and Browne of the Fifth—they ought to form a good independent committee," said Reggie. "In the meantime, the whole Remove will gather in the Triangle and await the result. Browne can announce it from the Ancient House steps. Just imagine old Handy's excitement when he hears!"

"Why not rig up a magic lantern, and throw the result on a screen?" suggested Fullwood. "We might as well do the thing in the approved style."

Pitt saluted him.

"A sheer stroke of genius!" he said respectfully. "That's the best yet! Up comes the row of figures on the screen—with old Handy well at the top! My only hat! Isn't it worth a bit of trouble?"

"I wouldn't agree if it was anybody else—but with Handy it's different," said Tommy Watson. "He's so jolly sure of himself that it'll be a good lesson to him. Perhaps he won't be so cocksure next time."

Within half an hour everybody in the Remove had been informed, and everybody fully agreed that the jape was a top-holer. A tremendous amount of interest became apparent in Handforth's election campaign, and, in place of apathy, there arose a feeling of tremendous enthusiasm.

Even football practice was curtailed, and Handforth could see many signs of rapidly-increasing interest. In order to make the affair look thoroughly genuine, Reggie Pitt and Fullwood were holding impromptu meetings in the Triangle, and their audiences had been especially primed in advance to appear hostile.

"Didn't I tell you I'd wake things up?" demanded Handforth, as he stood on the Ancient House steps. "Pitt and Fullwood are getting windy. They thought it was going to be a walk-over for one or the other of 'em, but now they're compelled to hold meetings."

Church and McClure looked rather puzzled.

"It's fishy," said Church, at length. "I believe there's some sort of game on. Anyhow, you'd better go easy—and be prepared for leg-pulling. Everybody's getting ready to spoof you."

Church and McClure had not been admitted into the secret—for it was generally felt that they would stand loyally by their leader, and probably give him the straight tip. But they were keener than Handforth, and could read the signs accurately.

But Reggie Pitt had reckoned on this—and he had reckoned, too, on Handforth's propensity for discrediting everything that his chums said.

"Rats!" said Edward Oswald promptly—a clean enough justification for Pitt's assumption. "There's no spoof about this. The other candidates are waking up, that's all. And they'll need to wake up, too, if they're going to get any votes. My aim is to make a clean sweep."

"There's nothing like being thorough," agreed McClure. "At the same time, you mustn't be too optimistic, Handy. You're liable to come an awful cropper if you take things for granted. I tell you there's something on."

"The chaps are getting ready to pull your leg," insisted Church.

Handforth regarded them coldly.

"And do you think that I shall be fooled?" he asked, with a sniff. "When my leg's being pulled, I shall know it. And if any of these fatheads try that game, they'll soon be sorry! Wait until the big meeting. I've got my speech all ready, and it's going to knock everybody flat. Anyhow, I've made up my mind to be skipper, and nothing's going to stop me."

Church and McClure managed to escape, and they hovered round a meeting which was presided over by Reggie Pitt. A number of Ancient House fellows were collected round, and they appeared none too friendly.

"Rats!" yelled somebody. "No West House chap for us!"

"Hear, hear!"

"You need a captain who'll conduct the Remove with force and judgment!" Pitt was saying. "You can trust me——"

"We'd rather have Handy than you——"

"After all, Handys' an Ancient House chap!"

"Rather! Good old Handy!"

"Get down, Pitt—you're out of the running!" sang out somebody else. "Look at the way Handy's been conducting his campaign. Dash it all, the chap deserves some support! I've a good mind to vote for him."

"Same here!"

Church and McClure drifted away, and glanced at one another.

"Rummy!" said Church, shaking his head.

"Thundering rummy!" agreed McClure.

"In fact, too rummy to be real!" said Church. "We're supposed to go and repeat all that to Handy, you know. There's a jape afoot—and Handy is the goat. But what's the good of telling him?"

"No good at all," agreed Mac.

"What's the good of warning him that he's being spoofed?" asked Church, in despair.

"He'll only turn on us, and say we're dotty. The best thing we can do is to wait until the big election meeting, and see how things go. I've got an idea that we shall have a surprise."

And so Handforth prepared for his big speech, sublimely unconscious of the actual truth. His chums suspected it, but he wouldn't listen to them. The more convinced they became, the more ridicule Handforth heaped upon them. So they left him to his fate.

The Big Election Meeting.

MR. CROWELL pulled Handforth up in the Ancient House lobby some little time later.

"What is all this commotion, Handforth?" he asked irritably.

"What commotion, sir?"

"For the last fifteen minutes boys have been dashing about in the most noisy manner," complained the Form-master. "If you are in any way responsible I must warn you——"

"Why, it's an election meeting, sir," said Handforth indignantly. "You can't expect the fellows to keep calm during the campaign, sir. But it won't last long—I shall be captain by this time to-morrow evening."

"Oh, indeed?" said Mr. Crowell, raising his eyebrows. "You seem very sure of yourself, Handforth. You appear to take it quite for granted that you will gain the majority vote."

"It's a foregone conclusion, sir."

"I am not sure whether to be pleased at the prospect, or to be alarmed," said Mr. Crowell dryly. "However, if you are elected by the Form, the Form must necessarily abide by its choice. But I am afraid that your optimism, Handforth, is greater than your judgment."

"Hear, hear, sir!" grinned Fullwood, as he came by. "Has Handy been saying that he's certain to be elected?"

"Handforth has no doubt whatever," replied Mr. Crowell.

"Ah, well, time will show," said Fullwood, with a sigh.

"If you're going to start any rot——" began Handforth indignantly.

"Tut, tut!" said Mr. Crowell, frowning. "You must curb your temper, Handforth. And let there be less noise about the passages. Just because your Housemaster is away, you appear to be taking advantage of the fact. Personally, I am at a total loss to understand why a temporary Form captain should be elected—but perhaps you know your own business best. I wouldn't dream of interfering."

He nodded, and walked off, and Fullwood chuckled.

"It does seem a bit dotty, doesn't it?" he asked.

"What seems dotty?" demanded Handforth.

"Why, having this election—just to select a temporary skipper," said Ralph Leslie Fullwood. "Dick Hamilton may be back within a few days——"

"What's it got to do with Dick Hamilton?" asked Handforth curtly. "After I've been elected, I shall remain skipper for good."

"Oh!"

"No temporary rot for me!" went on Handforth. "If Hamilton wants the captaincy back, he'll have to seek re-election—and I shall fight him at the polls. Naturally, he won't stand an earthly chance."

"Good old Handy!" grinned Fullwood. "Never say die!"



The bolster descended upon Handforth with a thud, and burst, smothering him in a shower of feathers—just as Mr. Crowell peered round the door of the cubicle. “Good gracious—what—Handforth!” he ejaculated.

He strolled away, highly amused, and Handforth glared after him. Church and McClure came up, looking worried.

“Funny fathead!” said Handforth. “Where’s the joke?”

“That’s what we’ve been trying to find out,” said Church. “There’s a joke somewhere, though. Take my tip, Handy, and go easy. Go jolly easy. There’s some game afoot, and the more cautious you are the better. Be particularly wary at this meeting. It’s my belief the chaps are going to turn your meeting into a rag.”

“It’s a cert,” declared McClure. “The lecture hall is filling up—and nobody would dream of going unless there was a rag in the air.”

Handforth stared.

“Nobody would go?” he repeated. “What about my speech?”

“Oh, well——”

“You babbling lunatic!” roared Handforth. “Are you suggesting that the chaps are only turning up because they’re going to rag me? A fat lot of faith you’ve got! A fine pair of lieutenants—I don’t think! This meeting is going to be my biggest triumph—I can feel it in my bones!”

“There’s no accounting for your bones!” said Church crossly. “If you won’t listen to sound advice, you can jolly well take everything that’s coming to you! But Mac and I warn you——”

“I don’t want any warnings!” interrupted Handforth. “You can keep ’em!”

He made his way to the lecture hall, and Church and McClure followed behind, sadly shaking their heads.

The lecture hall was about a quarter full, and for a moment Handforth felt a pang of disappointment. But a second glance showed him that the Remove was there in full force, even to the last fellow. And he couldn’t expect any of the other Forms to be interested in the Remove election. After all, these were the chaps he wanted.

“Hurrah!”

“Here comes Handy!”

“Three cheers for the hot candidate!”

Handforth swelled visibly as he strode towards the platform. But Church and McClure gave one another significant glances. There was something rather theatrical about this round of welcome. There was a false ring about it.

“Speech, Handy!”

“Hear, hear!”

“They’re just kidding him!” growled Church, with rising anger. “It’s too bad—pulling the leg of a mere infant! That’s all he is when it comes to a meeting of this sort—a giddy baby in arms!”

“Better tell him so,” suggested McClure. “I’ll come and see you in the sanny afterwards—or else send some flowers to your funeral!”

Handforth experienced a slight sensation of gratification as he faced the Removites. His optimism had led him to expect a hearty

welcome, but he had scarcely anticipated such a rousing, whole-hearted reception as this.

"Gentlemen of the Remove——" he began.

"Hear, hear!"

"I stand before you this evening as the champion of right," went on Handforth vigorously. "The Remove needs a new skipper, and I am determined to fill the post. I want your votes, and any chap who refuses to give 'em to me will have to put on the gloves——"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Rot!" shouted Tommy Watson. "You can't get votes by intimidation!"

"Yah! Take your threats somewhere else!"

Handforth started. He suddenly realised that he had departed from the tone of his prepared speech, and he hastened to repair the fault.

"I'm only joking, of course!" he declared.

"I don't want any votes that aren't given freely and willingly. That's understood. My object is to show you why you should vote for me, and why it will be in the best interests of the Remove that I should be skipper!"

"Hear, hear!"

"In the first place, I'm the chap who ought to have been skipper terms ago!" roared Handforth. "I've always been squashed out of it—shoved into the background by jealousy! But this is my chance to come to the fore, and show the Remove that I'm the only possible skipper!"

"It's no good, Handy—you're too violent to make a good leader!"

"Violent, am I?" bellowed Handforth.

"Who said that? I dare him to come up on the platform! If he comes up, I'll pulverise him!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Oh, he's not a bit violent!" grinned De Valerie.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Handforth turned red.

"That's only a figure of speech!" he said hastily. "Remember, I want your votes—I ask for your votes—and, what's more, I'm going to have your votes! I'm going to show you why it's your duty to plump for me! I'm going to show you why you should put your crosses against my name on the ballot papers! Handforth for the Remove—Handforth for Freedom and Peace!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"I don't want to say anything against Dick Hamilton," continued Handforth. "He's one of my best friends. I wouldn't dream of saying a word against him behind his back. But where has he led the Remove? Where? That's what I ask you! He's led it into a state of decay and spinelessness!"

"Oh, go it, Handy!"

"He's allowed the Remove to drift into slipshod methods," continued Handforth grimly. "And what's the result? Instead of our Form being the most important at St. Frank's, it's hardly any better than the Fourth! The Remove hasn't done anything big for terms!"

"By Jove, he's right there!"

"The Remove hasn't raided the River House chaps, or japed the Fourth, or proved itself in any way!" went on Handforth indignantly. "What's become of our famous reputation? Where's our backbone? We haven't got one now! We're backboneless—we're absolutely drifting into obscurity! And I'm going to alter all that—I'm going to bring that backbone from the blackness of the depths, and shove it in the limelight!"

"Why not try the X-rays?"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"I'm going to train that backbone and bring it to the front!" roared Handforth.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"It'll be a rummy kind of backbone if it's in the front!" grinned Reggie Pitt. "But perhaps you know best, Handy. It's your scheme!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"I mean to make the Remove famous throughout the land!" thundered Handforth. "Elect me skipper, and I'll show you the way to fame! Obey my orders—adopt my ideas—and the Remove will start upon a career of glory such as it never knew before! I'm the man for the job! The Fighting Remove! The Invincible Conquerors! The Form that Never Fails! Vote for me, and I'll make these things possible!"

A Success!

"HURRAH!"

"Good old Handforth!"

The Remove cheered vigorously.

Such fellows as Reggie Pitt, Jack Grey, Fullwood and De Valerie knew how much to believe of Edward Oswald's "gas." They supported him heartily—as per arrangement. But there were many of the lesser juniors who were really worked up by Handforth's picture of a fighting Remove. They had come to this meeting in order to laugh at him—and they were already half-inclined to vote for him in real earnest.

"You can't do it, Handy!" sang out somebody. "Dick Hamilton will be back before you can get that programme into running order!"

"Hamilton doesn't come into the business at all!" roared Handforth. "He's held the reins too long. When I'm skipper, I shall remain skipper—and if Hamilton wants an election he can have one! And I shall rely upon you fellows to give me your votes again. I shall get 'em, too—because I have proved my worth!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Good old optimist!"

"I've set my heart on this thing, and I'm not going to rest until I've won!" continued Handforth earnestly. "I'm out for victory—and you can give it to me by letting me have your votes to-morrow night. Always remember that the other candidates are mere make-shifts. They only mean to carry on until Hamilton comes back. But I'm no make-shift—I'm determined to be permanent skipper, so if you don't give me your votes,

you'll be jolly sorry for yourselves. I shall make another speech to-morrow evening, and then I'll give you an outline of my policy —"

"We've had a hint or two already, old man!"

"By the sound of it, we're going to be a regiment—not a Form!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"What about the football, Handy?"

"That's one of the points I shall discuss to-morrow!" replied Handforth promptly. "We shall play the Fourth to-morrow afternoon, and I shall be goalie. I thought about playing centre-forward, but I shan't interfere with the present team."

"Marvellous!"

"What's come over you, Handy?"

"The team's been selected by Pitt, and it'll save a lot of trouble if he gets his own way over it," continued Handforth. "It's not worth while messing about—I can make all the alterations I need after I'm skipper."

It was a deliberate action, and he put the jug down, sat on the edge of the bed, and unlaced his shoes.

"Now you can cool off!" he said tartly.

"All right—wait!" Church gurgled. "Just you wait!"

"Why wait?" asked McClure. "What's the matter with you now?"

He spoke indignantly, for Handforth's action had been entirely unwarranted. It was a bit thick for him to act like this when his chums were only giving him a timely word of warning.

"Slosh him, old man!" urged McClure warmly. "I'll do it, if you like. I've never known such an obstinate, pig-headed, blundering——"

"Watch me!" said Church, with sudden grimness.

He swept up the bolster from his bed, swung it round, and caught Handforth such a terrific swipe on the side of his head that

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Church and McClure were surprised to hear their leader voicing these sentiments. They had repeatedly urged him to let Reggie Pitt's team stand—but he had ridiculed them. Now he was adopting their suggestions, and firmly believed they were his own.

The Remove cheered him to the echo, and there were hardly any dissenting voices. The meeting broke up amid general enthusiasm.

"Well, it beats me!" said Church blankly. "They can't seriously mean to elect the ass?"

"Impossible!" said McClure. "Life won't be worth living if he's skipper. My only hat! He's hard enough to manage now, goodness knows! What will he be like if he becomes Form captain? Study D will be more like a boxing booth!"

"He won't be elected!" growled Church.

"I tell you it's a spoof—and the poor fat-head doesn't realise it! I'm blessed if I'll enlighten him, either—he'll only punch my nose for suggesting such a thing!"

All the same, Church was the first to sound a note of warning as he and his chums undressed in their dormitory. Handforth gave him one look, and compressed his lips.

"That's enough!" he said curtly. "I've heard more than I want to hear! The Remove is with me, so you needn't start any of your nonsense!"

"They're fooling you, Handy!" said Church earnestly. "Don't you think that Mac and I are on your side? We want to warn you——"

Swish!

Handforth lifted a water-jug, and swilled the entire contents over Church in one sweep.

the amazed leader of Study D reeled over sideways, and sat down with a jarring thud.

"Take that!" said Church breathlessly.

"It's all right—he's taken it!" nodded McClure, with satisfaction.

"My hat!" gasped Handforth, blinking round. "What the—— Who the—— You—— I'll jellify you for that!"

Thud!

Church did not wait to be jellified. Handforth was in a very advantageous position, and Church was still very wet from his drenching. He swung the bolster round again, and brought it down with all his force upon Handforth's head.

The bolster was a good one, but it had been made for a certain purpose—and that purpose did not include the violent use to which it was now subjected. It naturally protested, and burst. Edward Oswald Handforth completely vanished amid a smother of white feathers.

"My goodness!" gasped Church, reeling away.

And, naturally, at that very moment Mr. Crowell looked in. He would look in at such a crucial moment. The Form-master had an unfortunate habit of appearing just when he wasn't wanted.

"Good gracious!" he ejaculated blankly.

"Corks!" said Church, in dismay.

It looked like a particularly thick snow-storm for a moment, and then Handforth arose from the midst of the whirling feathers, spluttering and gurgling. He had his mouth half-full of them, so that he could scarcely be blamed for the incoherency of his utterances.

"This is disgraceful!" said Mr. Crowell, recognising all the signs. "You three boys not only quarrel continuously during the day-time, but it appears that you must use violence in your very bed-room!"

"It was my fault, sir," said Church quickly. "I—I didn't know——"

"Precisely!" interrupted Mr. Crowell. "You didn't know that I was coming into the room, eh? I can well believe that, Church. And you didn't know that this action would cost you two hundred lines, did you? But it certainly will!"

"That's not fair, sir!" said Handforth warmly. "I'll take those two hundred lines, if you don't mind. I swilled Church with water, and he only tried to get his own back. I'm the chap to punish, sir."

"It appears that you are both deserving of punishment," declared the Form-master. "I am not sure that McClure is not equally involved, but I will give him the benefit of the doubt. You other two will take two hundred lines—and you must clear this litter up at once, and be in bed within ten minutes. Let me hear no more disturbances from this room."

Mr. Crowell nodded curtly, and went out.

"Now!" said Handforth, in a suppressed voice. "Now, you insubordinate rotters! You're just as bad as Church, Mac. You egged him on to do it!"

"Yes, and I'll egg him on again!" said McClure coldly.

"Is this the way to treat your Form captain?"

"To treat whom?"

"Your Form captain!" roared Handforth.

McClure looked round the room, and shook his head.

"Can't see him!" he said calmly.

"I'm your Form captain!" snorted Handforth fiercely. "You needn't pretend to be so jolly innocent! I've got this election in the palm of my hand, and the other candidate don't stand a ghostly chance. And I'm going to show you—this very minute—how a Form captain acts when his subjects rebel!"

"Subjects, eh?" snapped Church. "What do you think you are—a lord?"

"Yes!" retorted Handforth promptly. "Lord of the Remove!"

(Further exciting chapters of this fine School Tale in which Reggie Pitt and Co. receive the shock of their lives, and Handy realises a dream, next week!)



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