

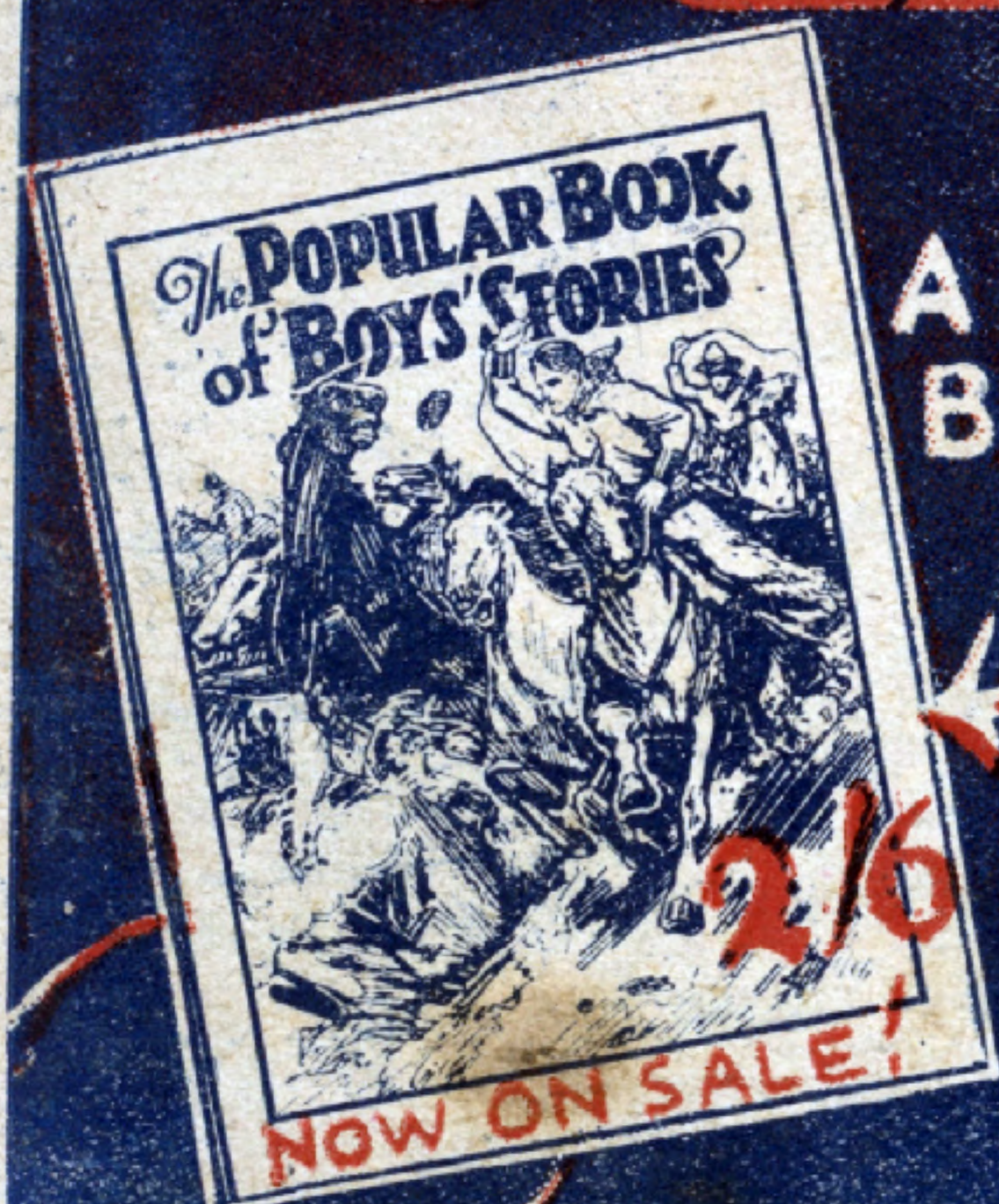
GREAT DETECTIVE-THRILLER BY E. S. BROOKS INSIDE!

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NELSON LEE'S FIGHT WITH THE SCARLET DEATH!

New Series No. 144.

OUT ON WEDNESDAY.

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THE SCARLET



CHAPTER 1.

The Rival Encampments.

THE searchlights, although small, were remarkably powerful. There were four of them, one on each side of the encampment, and their beams, sent horizontally across country, illuminated miles of ground.

It was impossible for any moving thing to approach the camp during the night without being instantly detected. For at regular intervals the searchlights were slowly moved back and forth, so that the beams swept over every yard of ground.

It was a strange encampment, situated in a strange land, and, indeed, all the circumstances were strange.

The little garrison numbered five only—a small force, indeed, to resist the grim, murderous attacks of hundreds of enemies.

Nelson Lee, the great detective, was in command. Lord Dorrimore, the famous sporting peer, was second in command. The others were Umlosi, the mighty black King of the Kutanas; Nipper, Lee's brilliant young

assistant; and last, but by no means least, Edward Oswald Handforth, of the Remove Form at St. Frank's.

There was one other person in the camp—Amanda Peterson, a sweet girl of about sixteen. She had been rescued by Nelson Lee's party from the clutches of the Black Hawk.

She was sleeping now—sleeping in the cabin of the *Sky Wanderer*, Dorrie's great three-engined aeroplane, which, crippled badly, stood in the very centre of the encampment. All around the great machine a palisade of light steel girders had been erected. There were four platforms connected with the palisades, and on these platforms were mounted the searchlights and the machine-guns.

The camp was not exactly quiet, for two of the powerful aero engines were purring. The engines had not been injured, earlier, when the great machine had been charged, and partially destroyed, by lumbering monsters. For on this *Island Above the Clouds* there lived grotesque creatures of the type that used to roam the earth in prehistoric ages.

—Face Death on the Island Above The Clouds!

DEATH!

AN
E. S. BROOKS'
THRILLER

For years the people of the lost community in the heart of the Sargasso Sea have bowed to the iron rule of Black Hawk, pirate. Then, with startling suddenness, there comes into their midst a champion—a liberator who leads them against their tyrannical master. It is Nelson Lee, the famous detective!

In order to maintain the searchlights throughout the night, it was necessary to run the engines—so that the batteries could be kept fully charged. But with that brilliant light to reveal the approach of any possible enemy; the sound of the engines did not matter. There was no chance of being surprised, either by man or beast.

The girl was the only one who was sleeping. All the rest were watchful, alert—on duty. They had all slept, in turn, during the long, hot day which had passed. They were refreshed, eager. And Nelson Lee had made careful preparations before darkness had come down; he had taken steps to render the encampment safe for the night.

"If you ask me, old man, it's goin' to be a calm an' peaceful night," said Lord Dorrimore sadly. "The Black Hawk won't dare to may any attack while we keep these searchlights goin'; and as for the Beast Men, they seem to have cleared off to the other part of the island. Poor beggars! They're scared stiff by all this hullabaloo."

Nelson Lee looked troubled.

"Do you know, Dorrie, I have no scruples about attacking the Black Hawk and his murderous ruffians—but I am genuinely hurt when I think of the Beast Men," he said. "They are primitive creatures, and, no doubt, harmless enough. By the purest chance we happened to desecrate the ground they hold, in their pagan way, as sacred. Thus we earned their enmity. But I really think these people are deserving of our sympathy rather than our enmity."

"That's all very well, guv'nor," said Nipper, who was standing by. "Didn't the brutes attack our camp? Didn't they herd the monsters together and stampede them towards us?"

"In their primitive minds they believe that we are here for the purpose of destroying them—and they acted under the inexorable law of self-preservation," replied Nelson Lee. "It is a pity that we have never had the opportunity of approaching the Beast Men peaceably, so that we could show them, by signs, that we mean no harm. These misunderstandings are unfortunate."

As Lee was speaking he was gazing across a dark section of the valley where the

nearest searchlight, for the moment, did not penetrate. He could see a flickering, lurid glow, half-hidden by intervening masses of vegetation.

"The Black Hawk's camp," muttered Lee, as though speaking to himself. "He has evidently pitched the camp near the rim of the great crater—and, in doing so, he has revealed his sense of strategy. For he thus holds the only road which leads down to the great cavern. Yet I wonder what the Hawk and his men are up to to-night. I have a mind to go scouting."

"That's a good idea, guv'nor," said Nipper eagerly. "I'll go with you."

IT has been said that the situation was strange. Surely nothing stranger ever fell to the lot of modern man!

It was Lord Dorrimore who had made the first momentous discovery—and he had made it quite by accident whilst on a flight from England to the West Indies, and after being marooned hundreds of miles out of his course during a great cyclone. He had found a lost fragment of Atlantis! Fantastic though this seemed, Nelson Lee believed that the theory was sound.

It was only a tiny land, a country extending twenty miles by fifteen miles, and guarded on every coast by sheer cliffs—cliffs that went downwards without a break, without a deviation from the perpendicular, for two thousand feet!

Try, if you will, to imagine that amazing land; a pinnacle of rock, with absolutely sheer sides, jutting up from the sea for three thousand feet! And for half that distance the pinnacle was completely enveloped in eternal mist—the thick, "impenetrable" fog which everlastingly arose from the decaying weed of the Sargasso!

That, in a word, was the situation.

The adventurers had discovered something which had remained hidden for countless centuries. Here, in the heart, the centre, of the Sargasso Sea, stood this fragment of land—its summit eternally above the clouds, bathed in semi-tropical sunshine. It was a land where people and animals and reptiles had been cut off for æons. And so they had survived in their original form. Prehistoric

man—prehistoric creatures of all kinds! And owing to the peculiarities of the island, ordinary vegetation failed to grow. Instead of grass there was a spongy, mossy growth; instead of trees there were enormous forests of dense fungus. Yet the streams were clear and pure.

And, more astonishing than anything else, there lived, in the very base of the rock, a community of comparatively modern human beings. They numbered over a thousand all told—men, women and children. They were the descendants of pilgrims—pilgrims whose ships had been forced into the Sargasso, centuries earlier, during a great storm. They had discovered the rock and had settled there. In many ways they had progressed, but, owing to their absolute isolation from the rest of the world, they still used a quaint old English form of speech.

They lived in a great cavern, the floor of which was a miniature country in itself, eight miles across. Every day, for some hours, the sun streamed into that cavern through a vast, crater-like hole in the roof; and thus the people had survived. For the life-giving sunlight had reached them and had enabled them to grow their food.

They lived mostly on the roots and grain which they managed to produce, supplemented by an endless supply of fish and birds—which swarmed by the myriad round the rock—and birds' eggs.

The adventurers had discovered that these people were in the tyrannical grip of a black-bearded ruffian named Simeon Harke, who had styled himself the Black Hawk. He had gathered all the ruffians of the community around him, and he ruled ruthlessly, cruelly. He had murdered Amanda Peterson's father, who had been a just and peaceful "king." The Petersons, in fact, had been the recognised leaders for generations. But Jonas Peterson had had no son, and so Simeon Harke had killed him and had assumed command.

It was Nelson Lee who had discovered a rock tunnel, reached by swinging over the lip of the crater on ropes, which led right down into the vast cavern. Simeon Harke had taken advantage of this tunnel, and he had brought his men, fifty strong, to the island top—his intention being to destroy the intruders from the Outer World. For, at heart, Harke was a pirate, and he resented the interference of the strangers. Moreover, he feared that his people would revolt and turn against him. He had sworn to keep his power.

But, arriving on the island top, he found the gallant little band well prepared. For Nelson Lee and his companions were armed to the teeth, and their camp was a miniature fortress. During the daylight hours the Black Hawk had not dared to attack, for Lee's camp was situated on a rise, and it commanded the countryside in every direction. So the day had passed quietly, and Simeon Harke had decided to attack after nightfall. His fury was tremendous when

he saw the searchlights blaze out—for all about the little stronghold a false daylight was created. It was as difficult as ever to make a surprise attack.

"I OUGHT to be in this!" said Handforth aggressively.

He had just heard that Nelson Lee and Nipper were about to go scouting, and he was filled with instant jealousy. He wanted to go scouting, too.

"Quite imposs., old son," said Dorrie, shaking his head. "If you go, there'll only be Umlosi and me left."

"But you can look after the camp, can't you?" asked Handforth.

"We might—at a pinch," replied his lordship gravely. "But if we're to feel perfectly safe here, we need you."

Handforth gave him a suspicious look.

"You're not pulling my leg, are you, sir?" he asked.

"My dear chap, what an idea!" protested Dorrie.

Nelson Lee and Nipper were ready to depart. They knew that there were some risks, but they were prepared to face them. There were the Beast Men, for example—and the great monsters which roamed the island during the dark hours. Yet, with the searchlights playing and the aero engines humming, it was not likely that any of the creatures would be in this vicinity. No doubt they had all been scared away—far off, to the extreme end of the island.

"All I want you to do, Dorrie, is to keep the searchlights playing away from this valley for fully ten minutes," said Nelson Lee. "That will enable us to reach the shelter of the big fungus forest. After that you can switch the lights back for we shall be under the shadow of the hillside yonder. And if the Black Hawk and his men are closely watching the camp, they will suspect nothing."

"Go ahead," said Dorrie. "But remember, be careful!"

"I'll toss you who goes!" said Handforth, turning impulsively to Nipper. "Heads it's me, tails it's you."

"Rats!" grinned Nipper. "Don't be greedy, Handy!"

"Eh?"

"You did your bit last night—when you rescued Amanda from the Beast Men," went on Nipper. "You did that job single-handed, and you did it well. Why can't you be satisfied? Dash it, it's my turn now!"

"H'm! Well, perhaps you're right," admitted Handforth grudgingly.

The sudden thought of Amanda robbed him of his eagerness to go. He came to the conclusion that it was his duty to remain—virtually by Amanda's side, to guard her. For, truth to tell, the romantic Handy had fallen head over heels in love with this sweetly pretty "pirate" maid. Lord Dorrie more had something of the same idea, and he chuckled.

"What on earth has come over you, Handy?" he asked severely. "How can you think of leavin' the camp? If you go, who's goin' to protect the damsel? Umlosi and I will be too busy with the searchlights, and lookin' after the engines, an' seeing that the guns are ready. It's your job to prowl round the camp, and keep pretty close to Amanda."

"Of course, sir," said Handforth, nodding. "I wouldn't dream of leaving the camp. It's a perfectly potty idea! In any case, there'll be no excitement in this scouting trip."

The others smiled—although they did not allow Handforth to see those smiles. And almost at once, without any fuss, Nelson Lee and Nipper stole out of the "stockade." One of the searchlights had been extinguished temporarily, so that they could get clear away without being observed. For the Black Hawk and his men possessed telescopes, and Nelson Lee was taking no chances.

But soon the searchlight was switched on again, and by now the scouts had got well away into a blind patch. They were out to ascertain, if possible, exactly what the Black Hawk was doing.

THE enemy camp was astir.

At the very moment when Nelson Lee and Nipper were setting out, the Black Hawk himself, his face thunderous with anger, was pacing up and down between two of the rough fires which had been made on the rocks, and which were fed with dried creepers and dried fungus.

It was an impressive enough scene. There were several of these fires, and round about them stood dozens of quaintly attired, sullen-looking men. They were all of big stature, bearded, picturesque in their ruggedness. At their belts hung cutlasses or knives—and those belts, just now, were well drawn in.

The camp was pitched on a rising slope of rocky ground; and, just beyond, stretched a vast gap, a chasm, fully a mile across. It was the great hole in the funnel-like roof of the cavern. And from it glowed a strange, uncertain radiance. This radiance was accompanied by a crooning, humming noise, which was caused by the heated air moving upwards past the rocks.

For down below, in the cavern, hundreds of great flares were blazing—natural gas flares, which were never extinguished. These flares dissipated the fog—that fog which clung eternally round the base of the rock. The community which lived within the cavern, however, was not troubled by the mist, and the air down there was just as clear as the air at the summit. The flares warmed the atmosphere and kept the mist at bay.

"By my bones and sinews!" burst out the Black Hawk suddenly. "It seems that these accursed dogs have baffled us, Jonathan."

"Aye, and 'tis ill work, I vow, for us to remain," said the man who was by Simeon Harke's side. "Even now, Sir Chief, the men grumble and mutter amongst themselves."

"Think ye I care?" snapped the other savagely.

"'Tis full twenty-four hours and more since any of us touched bite or sup," said Jonathan Betts. "We came not hither for a long stay, Sir Chief. Without food or drink, the men grow weary, even rebellious."

The Black Hawk grunted, but made no comment. He was a giant of a man, well over six feet in height, and broad proportionately. A great black beard festooned below a part of his forceful face. His whole being throbbed with power and vitality. At first sight one could see that he was a born leader of men. There was personality in every line of his rugged face; his eyes, fierce and bold, were the eyes of a leader. And when he walked, he walked with a natural swagger. A giant amongst men! A pirate! Just such a figure, indeed, as might have stepped out of the pages of a buccaneering adventure tale.

The man by his side, Jonathan Betts, was nearly as brawny, and he was adorned by a great red beard. But it was clear that Jonathan Betts was a mere follower. He had neither the strength of character nor the personality of his leader.

"Stab my vitals, but these strangers are cleverer than I thought them!" admitted the Black Hawk grudgingly. "They have great lights sweeping the countryside, and 'tis impossible to approach in secret. Thus we are prevented from making the surprise attack I planned. We have waited throughout the day for nought."

"And we are like to wait throughout the night, too," said the other. "And the men, with empty stomachs, are in an ill mood for fighting."

The Black Hawk glared at him.

"Let the men utter their complaints to me if they have any!" he said harshly. "Where are these grumblers, these malcontents? Bones and blood! Are they weaklings, are they women, to falter because their insides lack a day's filling?"

Simeon Harke spoke all the more savagely because he knew that his men were justified in being restive. Was he not restive himself? Was he not tortured by the pangs of hunger?

He was finding himself compelled to "sing small," and that was a thing the Black Hawk loathed. The enemy, although such an insignificantly small force, held the advantage. It was madness to deny the fact. With those great searchlights, and with modern weapons, they could defy ten times the number of the Black Hawk's men.

And to attempt any attack would be folly—indeed, little better than suicide.

"Hark ye, Jonathan, I've been thinking!" said the Black Hawk suddenly. "As you know, 'twas the strangers who discovered the way down into the cavern."

"Aye, and 'twas by chance, too," said Jonathan.

"Let that be as it may, there is but this one passage," went on the Black Hawk. "It

can only be reached by swinging over the lip of this great gap, and by laboriously swaying on the rope and leaping upon a rock ledge. The tunnel itself is so narrow, in parts, that men can only go singly."

"A perilous road, indeed," muttered Jonathan Betts, nodding.

"The strangers crept down upon us and sprang without warning," pursued Simeon Harke. "But if the tunnel is blocked, what then? Never again can they descend—unless, indeed, they lower themselves on ropes from the roof gap. And they cannot do that without us being aware of their movements, and they would thus fall direct into our hands."

"Never would they attempt such an insane move, Sir Chief."

"'Tis clear, then," said the Black Hawk, his voice full of decision. "Let us descend the tunnel. These strangers can harm us not if they are cut off from us. To attack them would mean the loss of many lives, and I can ill spare any of ye. Thus we shall descend at once, and having passed considerably down the tunnel, we will block it."

"Aye, 'tis a stout plan," said Jonathan Betts eagerly. "Block the tunnel, so that the strangers can never again descend to us? By my body, 'tis well thought of, Sir Chief!" than the Black Hawk realised, for he did not know, then, what it portended.

CHAPTER 2.

The Flying Death!

"LOOK, guv'nor!"

Nipper, in an awed voice, called Nelson Lee's attention to the thing which swung around in the air, far overhead. He pointed upwards, and Lee drew in his breath sharply.

"I think it has seen us, young 'un!"

And at the same moment he withdrew his automatic and slipped back the safety-catch.

They were approaching some projecting rocks on all-fours, for just beyond those rocks was the Black Hawk's camp. They could see the ruddy glow flickering beyond the rocks. The "wooded" country had been left behind, and here all was barren. It was necessary, therefore, to go with extreme caution. For it was possible that the Black Hawk had scouts himself on the watch.

The night was starry, and Lee and Nipper crouched down, watching that thing which swung overhead. It was of enormous size—a great, vague, reptile-like monster which fluttered round in circles, getting gradually lower and lower. It was probable, indeed, that the creature had seen Lee and Nipper.

"It is of the pteradactyl species," whispered Lee. "But what a size! In various parts of the world, I believe, the bones of prehistoric pteradactyls have been found, and some have measured as much as twenty feet from wing-tip to wing-tip. But this creature is infinitely larger, Nipper."

"They're savage, aren't they, sir? I mean, they've got teeth?"

"Enormous mouths, with deadly teeth," agreed Lee. "Got your gun ready? Better to let the Black Hawk know that we are near by than to allow this creature to swoop down and snap at us."

But the flying monster, having descended to within fifty feet—where its great flapping wings seemed to fill the whole sky—shot off at a tangent, rising high as it did so. No doubt the close proximity of the Black Hawk's camp frightened it away.

Lee gave a little grunt.

"That was ugly, young 'un," he murmured. "The infernal thing came far too close to be comfortable. By James, I'd like to get a sight of one of them in the day-time—and take a photograph."

"If we don't, guv'nor, nobody will believe us when we get back to civilisation," replied Nipper. "Think of the stories we shall be able to tell—"

And then he stopped abruptly. For he had just remembered that the Sky Wanderer was a partial wreck. There was no certainty, indeed, that any of them would ever return to the Outer World.

But these were not the thoughts for the moment. Nipper thrust them aside as he and Lee crept on.

They had little or no fear of being surprised by the primitive Beast Men. Those remarkable humans had been effectually frightened off—mainly by the strength of the Black Hawk's party.

"Easy, young 'un, easy," murmured Lee suddenly.

Black rocks loomed ahead of them, and they were able to stand upright. They crept cautiously forward, until it was possible for them to peer round the rocks.

They were looking right into the Black Hawk's camp; they could see the dying fires and the great abyss which was the hole in the cavern roof.

"Hallo, hallo!" said Lee keenly. "Our friends appear to be in full retreat."

There wasn't a doubt of it. Only a few men could be seen, and these were preparing to swing themselves over the lip of the crater on tough, black ropes made from dried seaweed.

Even while Nelson Lee and Nipper watched, the last of the men vanished from sight. And the nearly dead camp fires told the rest of the story. The Black Hawk had abandoned the position! He was returning by the road he had come.

"Hunger deprives men of their courage and determination, Nipper," murmured Lee dryly. "Apparently our friends came on this expedition in the belief they would obliterate us in the first hour."

"And now they're going back," whispered Nipper. "Jolly good thing, too! Good riddance! Shall we go forward, and let them know that we have spotted the move?"

"I think not," replied Lee. "Better to

let the Black Hawk imagine that we are in ignorance of this development."

Lee was thinking, and presently he put his thoughts into words.

"We will go back to the camp, Nipper," he said, "and we will bring Umlosi back with us—to say nothing of various materials. And we will take steps to guard the lip of the crater—so that these enemies, at least, cannot again reach the top of the island."

It has been said that great minds think alike. Here was Nelson Lee planning on exactly the same lines as the Black Hawk!

As no good purpose could be served by remaining, Lee proposed an immediate return. So presently he and Nipper were striding briskly through the gloom towards the glow of the searchlights, which showed brightly over a rim of hills in the distance. The pair, however, were now in complete shadow.

There was no need for caution this time. They walked openly, and both were feeling elated. The retreat of the Black Hawk was in the nature of a victory for the defenders.

"Now that we are freed from the immediate menace of those rascals," said Lee, "we may have a chance of establishing communications, as it were, with the Beast Men."

"Won't it be risky, guv'nor?"

"I don't like the thought of being at enmity with those primitive people," said Lee gruffly. "They have done us no harm, and we desire them no harm. It is a totally different case from that of the Black Hawk and his men. They are intelligent—and evilly intelligent. Moreover, I am very keen to go amongst this singular tribe. Perhaps you do not realise just what that tribe is, Nipper?"

"I confess, guv'nor, I haven't given the beggars much thought," said Nipper. "I mean, they've been after our blood, and we've regarded them as ruthless savages—"

"That is the wrong attitude," interrupted Lee. "This tribe, I believe, is a true throw-back, as it were, of prehistoric man. The people are not niggers, nor savages of that type. I believe they are a relic of an ancient white race—living, to-day, in the same primeval condition as their prehistoric ancestors. And it is a thousand pities that we should be at enmity with—"

He broke off, for Nipper had suddenly placed an urgent hand on his arm.

"There it is again, guv'nor," muttered the lad. "Great Scott! I'll bet the vile thing has been keeping us in sight all the time!"

They stood in a clear space, down in a shallow hollow. There were none of the fungus "bushes" near them, and underfoot there was the mossy, grass-like growth which was so pleasant to walk upon.

And, hovering overhead, a black sinister shape!

Nelson Lee nodded grimly. It was the pteradactyl. And Nipper was probably right; the flying reptile had marked them as its

prey, and had kept them in sight ever since they had first observed it.

"Better have your gun ready, young 'un," said Lee sharply. "It seems to be getting ready for a swoop."

Even as he spoke, he jerked out his own automatic. The flying monster, several hundred feet up, suddenly spread out its great wings and dived—a straight, graceful glide. And like an arrow shot from a bow, it was coming down towards the pair.

Crack! Crack!

They fired simultaneously, and, curiously enough, even as the reports sounded, Nipper realised that their friends, in camp, would hear nothing. For they were still a considerable distance away, and the purring drone of the aero-engines would drown the reports.

Snap-snap!

A shiver ran down Nipper's spine as he heard that ominous sound. The Pteradactyl, checked when only a few feet above their heads, veered off with a great hopping and dragging of its leathery wings. And the "snap-snap" had been caused by the closing of its enormous jaws.

In the starlight, Nipper caught a glimpse of teeth—great, hideous, jagged fangs. They had snapped, in fact, not six feet away from Nelson Lee—and then the creature was off again, circling into the air.

"Guv'nor!" gasped Nipper, horrified.

"Infernal thing!" snapped Lee savagely. "By Heaven! What a foul creature! Then it means business, too, Nipper! Look! It's circling again—getting ready to make another swoop! I doubt if our pistol-shot had any effect."

Nipper was startled—but he did not take his gaze from that ominous, circling shape.

"You mean—the bullets are no good at all?" he asked.

"The Pteradactyl is a species of flying lizard, and its hide, no doubt, is as tough as that of a rhinoceros," replied Lee. "And an automatic pistol is about as much use as a popgun against the rhino, Nipper. Even an elephant gun is not effective unless you happen to aim in a vulnerable spot."

Crack-crack-crack!

As Lee finished speaking he fired three rapid shots. Nipper did the same. The Pteradactyl was again attacking, and there was something horribly ferocious in its swoop. It came straight at the pair, and they caught a glimpse of the gleaming, wicked eyes; they saw the enormous jaws open, and they saw the rows of foul teeth.

"Dodge!" roared Lee.

Nipper, gulping, leapt aside. The thing came almost to the ground, and Nelson Lee moved even faster than Nipper.

Snap!

He avoided the closing jaws by a hair's-breadth, leaping aside, and at the same moment a portion of the Pteradactyl's leathery wing struck him, and he staggered. He pitched against the monstrosity's neck,

and with the speed of a striking snake, the deadly jaws swung round again.

Nelson Lee jumped—and there was only one way in which he could jump to avoid the attack. He attempted to leap clean across the creature's neck, for now it was practically on the ground level. He just failed, clutched at the neck, and he felt a heave. He clung there grimly.

"Guv'nor!" yelled Nipper, in horror.

For the Pteradactyl was rising again—its enormous wings beating the air powerfully. And there was Nelson Lee, clutching at the monster's neck, rising higher and higher with it.

"Jump, guv'nor!" shrieked Nipper.

But it was too late for Lee to jump. The detective knew that when he prepared to do so. He was fifty feet up already—and a fall would mean broken limbs, if nothing worse. Seventy-five feet—a hundred feet!

Up and up!

If there was any compensation in this dreadful position, it was the fact that Lee was completely out of reach of the Pteradactyl's jaws. While he clung to the leathery neck, no harm could come to him. But he was being taken higher and higher, and the thought came to him, with a shuddery feeling rippling down his spine, that the Pteradactyl was setting off for its own haunt—where, perhaps, there were others of its kind. Better to drop, and meet death suddenly, than to await such a fate!

"Guv'nor!" came a last despairing cry from Nipper.

The lad stood down there, helpless. Even if a bullet would have inflicted mortal injury to the flying monster, Nipper dared not fire. He could only stand transfixed, staring with sickened fear. Against the sky, with its brilliant spangle of stars, he could see the ugly black shape of the Pteradactyl, sprawling across the heavens, and he could distinguish an additional bulge at the thing's neck. He knew that that bulge was Nelson Lee—clinging there for his life.

"Guv'nor—guv'nor!" sobbed Nipper desperately.

He was almost demented with the ghastliness of the situation. It had come so unexpectedly. One moment Nelson Lee had been there, and the next moment he was gone—soaring upwards with that hateful reptile.

Nelson Lee himself kept his head—as he always kept it, no matter how perilous the situation.

For the moment he was safe. The Pteradactyl could not harm him whilst flying. And Lee instinctively knew that his weight was too much for the monster. It was flying laboriously, heavily. And, indeed, there was no doubt in Lee's mind that the flying reptile was the more discomfited of the two. It was fleeing now—frightened by the strange thing which clung to its neck.

And it was flying at random, circling, diving, and then climbing again. It took Nelson Lee all his time to cling tight; but

he jabbed his knees into that cold, reptilian neck, and he clung to what hand-grip he could find.

Once the Pteradactyl flew right across the mile-wide opening of the big cavern. And Nelson Lee, staring down, saw the twinkling, quivering lights of the great flares; he even saw one or two figures on the rock ledge, a hundred foot or so below the surface. The Black Hawk and his men were just commencing their long journey down the difficult tunnel.

Now the Pteradactyl was climbing higher, every one of its movements laboured. Nelson Lee's weight was killing. Presently, Lee became aware of the fact that another of the creatures was flying comparatively near by; they uttered strange cries, and there was no doubt that they were calling to one another. But the second one kept well away. It was uncertain.

Lee knew that a fight was going on. His strange steed was striving to keep in the air, using every ounce of its strength. But Lee's weight was too much. Gradually but surely the Pteradactyl was being exhausted. And Lee soon began to hope. The situation, perhaps, was not so bad as it had at first seemed.

For, before long, the thing would be forced to the ground. Lee knew that he would be able to jump for it at the right moment; and no doubt the Pteradactyl would be so exhausted and so terrified by its experience, that it would no longer show flight. The chances were that it would be only too glad to be rid of Lee's weight, and would fly off.

The detective's confidence returned in full as he reasoned out the position, and saw that the Pteradactyl was gradually getting nearer and nearer to the ground.

But things turned out very differently!

"By James!" ejaculated Lee, with sudden concern.

For he saw, to his dismay, that his steed was now flying out over the extremity of the island. He had not bargained for this. The ground, two hundred feet below, was left behind. He was out beyond the cliffs—he could see them, sheer and smooth, on his left. And, below—three thousand feet of space! Half-way down that dreadful drop, the clouds obscured the view—or, rather, the mist. And now, finding its burden more and more irksome, the Pteradactyl was dropping rapidly. It had apparently given up the struggle, and was diving down—down!

Already it was much too late for Nelson Lee to make any move. He was far below the level of the island top. The cliffs were at his left, not more than fifty or sixty feet away. And he was being carried downwards into the mist—down towards the tangled morass of the Sargasso.

Just when he had been hoping that the adventure might end in his favour, he found himself face to face with this new danger. At that moment, indeed, the great detective believed that his last hour had come. He was beyond the reach of his friends. It



The prehistoric bird rose high in the air its enormous wings beating powerfully. And there, hanging desperately from its neck was Nelson Lee. "Jump!" shrieked Nipper. But it was too late!

would have been impossible for Nipper to follow the flight of the Pteradactyl, and thus he and Dorrie and the others would have no knowledge of what had befallen him. Even so, they could have rendered him no assistance.

The flying reptile was making strange noises now, and Lee could see that its jaws were half-open, and it was clearly in an exhausted condition. It had carried on the fight stubbornly, but Nelson Lee's weight was telling more and more every moment.

Down they went—down— Lee suddenly found himself enveloped in thick mist. He lost all sense of distance; but he knew that the Pteradactyl's descent was becoming more and more a headlong plunge. There was a chance that they would both be crushed to death when they struck the seaweed, for Amanda had told him that the Sargasso weed was packed so tightly round the island that very little of the sea itself could be seen. For almost a mile, from any coast, the seaweed was so concentrated that it lay in jumbled masses with many hillocks, forced up by the strength of the under-current.

His thoughts were arrested by a wild screeching cry from the monster. With a last despairing effort, it brought its great wings into action, flapping madly. Yet it was a slow, laborious effort. The great reptile heeled over swerving, and for a second Nelson Lee caught a glimpse of the packed weed, just below.



The detective seized his chance—the only chance, perhaps, that he would get.

He released his grip, and the next second he slithered into space. The Pteradactyl gave vent to another raucous cry, and—

Thud!

Lee struck the weed, and he felt the stuff giving under him like gigantic sponges. He rolled over, floundered, and all around him arose a pungent, fishy, noxious odour.

The Pteradactyl had vanished, and for some moments Lee could hear the noisy flapping of its strange wings. And the sound lessened until it vanished altogether.

Nelson Lee was left alone—alone in the spongy Sargasso weed, surrounded on all side by dense mists.

In truth, it was a case of falling out of the frying-pan into the fire!

CHAPTER 3.**The Blocking of the Tunnel.**

"TIS a likely enough spot," said the Black Hawk, as he shook the perspiration from his streaming head.

He and his men had descended a full thousand feet. They were about half-way down; and at this point the tunnel widened out into a veritable cavern—a great fissure in the rock, slanting steeply, unevenly shaped, wide in some places, then narrowing, and the extremities of the fissure were lost in the black shadows.

It was a weird scene.

All those strong, brutal men, perspiring from the heat of their exertions—for it had been a gruelling, strenuous descent. The temperature, too, was high, and the air, in many parts of the tunnel stuffy. It did not improve matters to use great flaring torches; but the Black Hawk and his men had no other means of illumination. And they were already conserving these torches, for they had no desire to be left in the total darkness.

"What manner of plan do ye propose, Sir Chief?" asked one of the men.

"It should be simple enough to block the tunnel, Simon," replied the Black Hawk. "We need but to move the rocks yonder, and the tunnel, where it narrows, will thus be filled. 'Tis a spot where we might venture to heave at the rocks without danger to ourselves. For there is space here, and should there be a collapse of rock, no ill will befall us."

"Think ye it a good plan to block the tunnel, Sir Chief?" asked Jonathan Betts. "I have been thinking much during our descent, thus far. If we bar the tunnel, so that the strangers may not again descend, we also bar it so that we are no longer able to get to the island top."

"What matters?" demanded Simeon Harke sharply.

"In all these centuries we have found no way to reach the upper air—and now, when that way is found for us, we talk of blocking it," said Jonathan. "Think ye it is wise, Sir Chief?"

"It is wise because I have so decided," replied the Black Hawk promptly. "Rot my skin! What need have we, fools, to use the upper part of the island? 'Tis half a day's journey from the cavern—and a plaguey unpleasant journey at that! And what manner of place is it, after all is said? Grass which is not grass, trees which are not trees! Foul fungus and the like. Ay, and strange savage men who would seek to kill us if we were not in great strength."

"'Tis all true!" said Simon Lane, nodding.

"Like as not these savage men will themselves find the tunnel, and seek to descend upon us, in great numbers," continued the Black Hawk. "There may be a reason or two why we should leave the tunnel open; but there are a thousand reasons why we

should close it. So let there be no further idle talk."

He made sure that the last of his men had come down. Then he climbed up the steep, rocky slope to the spot where the tunnel sharply narrowed. The other men were standing below him, in the great opening of the fissure, and some held their flaming torches aloft. The air was thick with the pungent smoke from the torches, and a great many of those men were already seeming nervous.

Hungry, tired, thirsty, their one thought was to get back to their own "country." There they would be able to get food and rest. This delay incensed them. But not a man dared to challenge the Black Hawk's order.

It was found that there were some great slabs of rock, near that narrow part of the tunnel which seemed separate from the rest. They were not loose, but the Black Hawk believed they could be loosened. And if they shifted, they would crash sideways over the narrow tunnel, filling it.

"Bring ropes!" commanded the Black Hawk. "Let them be secured to these jutting rocks. Every rope must be used."

He was determined to have his way. The men had brought all the great seaweed strands with them. And they were, indeed, ropes of extraordinary strength. These were fixed round the rocky projections, and at least half a dozen of the great cables stretched down the rocky slopes, to be held by the men.

"What of the danger, Sir Chief?" asked Jonathan Betts uneasily. "If there is a greater fall than we desire, it might mean the filling of the tunnel where we do not desire it."

"Away with your objections!" roared Simeon Harke. "Pull, men! Pull hard! May my marrows rot if ye're not a cowardly crew!"

He urged them on with many a bitter taunt, and the men, grasping at the ropes, heaved with all their strength. They strained and tugged, and at first it seemed that the rock would not move. Then, suddenly, there was a rumble, a clatter, immediately followed by a crashing and thudding and thundering.

"Stand away!" yelled Jonathan Betts.

The men dropped the ropes and ran, many of them falling on the steep, rocky slope. The Black Hawk himself stood back, startled, pressing himself against the wall of the fissure. Almost immediately he was obliterated by a great crowd of flying dust. Curses and shouts sounded from every side.

Crash—rumble—crash!

"Split my windpipe!" gasped the Black Hawk.

He thought that it was his last moment. He cursed himself for his folly. He was an arrogant man, and, in his own opinion, he was always right. Others were always wrong. He had never dreamed that there would be such a cataclysm as this.

"The tunnel's falling on us—'tis death for us all!" screamed one man.

"Ay, 'tis the end!"

"Out of my way, fool!"

Floundering in the fog of dust, the men were panic-stricken.

The tunnel was being closed only too well. But at last the rumblings and crashings subsided—and the men were astonished to find themselves still alive. But as yet they could see nothing.

Crash—rumble—crash!

There was another fall, and great splinters of rock fell tumbling down the slopes, splitting as they struck, sending showers in all directions. Many of the men were cut and grazed; some had been bowled over, and badly bruised. But, miraculously enough, none of them were seriously hurt.

Again came silence—and, with it, a gradual clearing of the dust.

"'Tis a miracle!" said Jonathan Betts hoarsely.

He had kept comparatively near to his leader; but the Black Hawk, although hearing the words, made no comment. The other men had retreated to the lower section of this fissure, where it dwindled, once again, into a comparatively narrow tunnel.

"May be 'tis but a lull," came a voice through the dust. "Why does not Sir Chief command us to press on?"

"Let every man remain as he stands!" shouted the Black Hawk harshly. "When we resume the descent, I shall lead. Silence, ye dogs!"

The voices ceased, but there were still some grim mutterings. For the men were scared. They had a terrible fear—and it was not at all unnatural—that there would be a further fall of rock, and one which would envelop them all.

However, the dust had now cleared, and Simeon Harke, viewing the handiwork, uttered a shout of triumph.

"See, ye chickens!" he thundered contemptuously. "Was I not right? 'Tis well for ye rabbit-hearted poltroons that ye have a real man at your head!"

He took all the credit to himself; ignoring the fact that they might just as easily have been crushed to death, every man of them. Had the collapse of the tunnel spread nothing could have saved them from a terrible destruction. But they were lucky—and because they were lucky, the Black Hawk believed that he was invincible.

The upper part of the fissure, which had so recently shown the narrowing tunnel, was now a mass of crumbling rocks. Some hundreds of tons must have fallen, and the way to the top of the island was for ever barred.

"A triumph, my men!" shouted Simeon Harke. "For we have shut the enemy out. Never again can they interfere. For, one and all, they are cut off."

"Aye, Sir Chief, 'twas well done," said one of the men.

And further shouts of acclamation went up. These rough fellows were convinced—now—that their leader had known what he was doing.

"Never can they descend this tunnel now, good Jonathan," said the Black Hawk, turning to his lieutenant. "Even the wench, Amanda Peterson, is shut off for ever from her people. Thus we are rid of her—even as certainly as though she had been put to the death. Come!"

And he took the lead, and once more he roared with laughter at his own cleverness.

Little did he guess, even now, that Fate was preparing a staggering blow for him.

CHAPTER 4.

Nelson Lee Takes Command!

NELSON LEE was no pessimist. He had been in so many tight corners in the course of his adventurous career, that his first consideration, on finding himself in a hole, was to extricate himself from it.

He was not the kind of man to sit down and bemoan his fate. At the present moment he was inclined, rather, to send up a prayer of thankfulness for his salvation. True, his position was unenviable, but, bad as it was, it was infinitely better than it had been earlier. Riding on the back of a carnivorous flying reptile was not Nelson Lee's idea of enjoyment. He was thankful that that extraordinary voyage was over.

And he was, at the base of the great island, wallowing in a tangled mass of sodden weed. And all around him dense mist.

The cliffs were not far distant, but it was impossible to judge, off-hand, in which direction they lay. Had Lee started off at random, he might well have travelled seawards, and thus sealed his own fate.

But his brain was crystal clear, and he was not entirely unprepared for such a dilemma as this. He carried a powerful electric torch upon him, an automatic gun, and—most valuable of all in his present circumstances—a reliable pocket compass.

More than once, on the island, Nelson Lee had taken his bearings. He knew the exact position of the island. Thus, when he now switched on his torch and carefully studied the compass, he knew where to turn. And already he was planning in his mind what he should do.

He was glad that he had closely questioned Amanda the previous day regarding the great cavern and the surrounding weed. She had not been often out of the cavern, Amanda had said, but she knew that there was a great rock channel—large enough for a modern liner to pass through—which had wide ledges, like roads, at its sides. She had vividly described how the obsolete old battleship, the Porto Marlo, had been towed through this channel, with gangs of men, armed with ropes, hauling on either side.

and struggling along the rock roadways. She had given Lee, as far as she knew, the position of this channel.

On that side of the island, she had said, there was a kind of foreshore. For miles it stretched—a ledge of rock, two or three hundred yards deep, reaching from the cliff base to the deep sea, where the choked seaweed was piled up in compressed masses. At different times of the year the pressure of the weed varied. Thus, in some seasons, there was almost clear water against this great ledge, and fishing could be indulged in freely. At other seasons the weed drifted in and packed tightly—so tightly that men could walk over it, if they were so minded. But they were seldom so minded, for the weed, declared Amanda, was full of evil creatures, and all her people were afraid.

At this particular moment Lee was only interested in two things. Firstly, the position of the island and the great channel—and the wide foreshore of rock. If he could only reach that foreshore he would be able to walk along, reach the channel, and calmly make his way into the cavern community. And another idea was stirring in Lee's mind—but he kept it in the background just at present. First and foremost, he had to extricate himself from this perilous position.

There was no further danger from the pteradactyl—but there were other things.

He was soon to have grim proof of this.

Having studied the compass and set his direction, he prepared to move. He cast a light down at his feet—which were themselves embedded in the spongy, brownish-green mass. Numbers of little wriggly things, some slug-like, some rapid in their movements, scuttled away, hiding from the light beneath the weed.

For the most part the weed was commonplace enough. Typical gulf weed. Great festooned masses, with some of the "ropes" as thick as ship's cables. Smooth, slimy, tangled ropes. So tightly were they jammed together that they formed a complete carpet above the actual level of the sea. But when Lee commenced walking, he sank in at every step almost to his knees. The water, black-looking, swirled about his legs.

The sensation was unpleasant in the extreme. He felt the weed heaving and rolling over a wide area. But it was patently impossible for him to remain where he was. He had a shrewd idea that his weight, sooner or later, would carry him under. The weed was not unlike a quagmire, for he could feel a powerful pull at his feet. And the thought of being sucked down into that slimy mass steeled him to grim efforts.

He plunged on, still keeping his torch switch on. And suddenly, just to the left of him, the weed heaved as though a miniature earthquake had disturbed it; great air-bubbles bloomed to the surface, and a shiny thing came clear of the weed, and Lee shone his light fully into two baleful, murderous eyes.

"By James!" he muttered.

This thing was a crustacean of some kind, and it seemed to Lee that it was something not unlike a gigantic crab in shape. But it was as big as a car, and a brilliant scarlet in colour.

Out of the weed came an enormously long claw, and it reached forward with opened hooks.

Crack!

Lee fired deliberately—right into one of those hideous eyes. At the same second he leapt backwards, went sprawling, picked himself up again, and half-dragged himself, half-ran across the heaving, spongy weed.

In his rear there was a great commotion, and for a moment he believed that the great crustacean was after him. The weed shook over a wide area, and the air was filled with bubbling and swirling sounds. Then they gradually died away, and silence once again brooded over the misty scene.

"Phew! I hope there aren't any more of those gentlemen about!" muttered Lee.

His quick action, no doubt, had saved his life. By firing into the creature's eye he had incapacitated it—even if he had not killed it.

As he struggled on he saw a disturbance of the weed away to his left; he caught a glimpse of a great long, snake-like body. It squirmed for some moments amongst the brownish-green fronds, and then it vanished. The weed was positively alive with unmentionable sea creatures. Small wonder that Amanda's people feared to venture upon it.

It seemed to Lee that he scrambled over the spongy morass for something like half a mile. There seemed to be no end to it. He was becoming exhausted. And he was hemmed in all the time by the blanket of mist.

Once or twice he consulted his compass, and he found that he was keeping his accurate direction. As long as he carried on like this, he must inevitably come to the rocky foreshore, and—

Something suddenly loomed up right ahead of him. So abruptly had Lee come upon it that he nearly crashed headlong into the wet, glistening rock wall. The weed was piled up at its foot, and it stretched away on either side apparently for miles.

But when the detective cast the light of his torch up, his heart almost failed him. He had miscalculated! There was no foreshore here at all—nothing but the sheer, smooth cliffs, rising for thousands of feet!

He moved along, helping himself by holding on to the rock. But even as he did so he realised that he could not carry on like this for long. For here, close to the cliff, the weed, strangely enough, was less congested. Sometimes he plunged in almost to his waist; he scrambled up again, wallowed on for a few more feet, and then plunged once more.

But now he beheld, just ahead, dimly visible in the white beam, some inequalities of the rock. And Lee, who was an expert mountain climber, took heart. From some-

where in the rear he heard another upheaval, another ominous series of bubbles. Some monstrous thing had scented him, and was, perhaps, on his trail.

He gripped at the inequalities of the rock and hauled himself clear of the weed. Somehow he managed to get his feet into some niches; he obtained hand-grip higher up; and then he saw, to his joy, that there was a veritable ledge not five feet above him. This was obvious, for when he flashed his torch right up the cliff was no longer there—but mist only.

With a supreme effort, he obtained another handgrip, and pulled himself up. From behind him came a hideous sucking sound, a gurgling and bubbling, and then "plop, plop!"—something big and slithery was heaving itself out of the weed.

A shudder passed through Lee as he felt a cold and slimy thing touch his left leg. It fought to obtain a grip, and with a mighty effort he jerked himself up, gripped at the edge of the ledge, and flung himself clear upon it.

Plop!

Something fell back into the mist. Swinging round, Lee flashed his torch. He caught a vague, indistinct glimpse of gleaming eyes, of a wet, shining body. Then the thing fell back, baffled.

"I don't wonder these unfortunate people have been locked here, in the weed, for centuries!" muttered Lee. "None of them dared venture out—until they had discovered how to man and control a comparatively modern vessel. By Heaven! What a vile place! And I'm beginning to doubt if I am any better off, even now."

He rose to his feet, for he was filled with a great longing to get as far as possible from the edge of the ledge. And he discovered, to his joy and astonishment, that it was not a ledge at all, as he had at first supposed. He walked on over the rocks for quite a distance. There was solid ground beneath his feet, and all his confidence returned.

This, then, was the foreshore Amanda had spoken of. And if he carried on long enough he would soon come to the true cliffs. Once he reached them he would be able to get his bearings more accurately.

He saw the cliffs at last—rising perpendicularly in front of him. But he was safe now. He was on a great platform of rock, stretching for miles—and more than a hundred yards in width. It was like a great highway. He walked on with a swinging stride, his torchlight feebly penetrating the mist. He was cautious, even now, for he had to be aware of pitfalls. He did not want to plunge into a cleft or crevice.

The walking did him good. He was enabled to recover his balance. And whilst he walked, he turned over the big idea which had occurred to him out on the weed.

It was characteristic of the great detective to formulate a plan of action in advance. If all went well now he could ultimately come to the rock channel, and would thus

soon find himself in the cavern. He would be amongst Amanda's people. And Lee did not want to arrive there without his plan of action all cut and dried.

He was beginning to think, indeed, that his ride on the Pteradactyl had been all for the best. For he had been brought swiftly to the base of the island—he had arrived many hours before the Black Hawk and his men could get there! And that, Nelson Lee decided, was a point of paramount importance.

He had the wit to take full advantage of his position.

It was with a sense of satisfaction that he found that his calculations had not been at fault. They were, in fact, uncannily accurate. For presently, sure enough, the rock commenced to slope sharply downwards. Lee advanced with caution. It was fortunate that he did so, for suddenly there was no longer any rock ahead of him, but clear water. There was a ledge striking at right-angles to his right, and when he moved along this, he did not come to the cliff again, but found himself walking onwards. This, then, was the channel! But the thick mist prevented him from seeing anything beyond the range of a few feet.

After walking for some distance, he made a careful examination. The water, he found, continued on his left. Walking straight to his right, he presently came upon a rock wall. So this was the "roadway" through the channel. There was one, just the same, on the other side. But it was impossible for Lee to tell how wide the channel actually was. It did not matter.

His hopes were running high now, and he ventured to increase his speed. He noted, too, that the mist was thinning somewhat. His torchlight penetrated further.

"Hallo, hallo!" he muttered keenly.

He halted, and switched his light off. Instead of intense blackness ahead of him, he could see a vague glow—a glow which filled the whole area. He knew what it meant. He was getting through the channel—he was approaching the lighted cavern.

Pressing on again, he found that his heart was thudding. How would he be received?

Everything would depend upon that. If the Black Hawk's men got hold of him, he would receive but short shrift.

But that was the crux of the matter. The Black Hawk's men were with the Black Hawk himself. In his rage, Simeon Harke had taken a very powerful force, and it was any odds that there were but few of his myrmidons left in the cavern.

"Upon my word!" ejaculated Lee, aloud.

He blinked. He had walked right out of the mist into clear air. It was a remarkable experience. Glancing back, he could see the mist rolling and billowing across the great channel. The air, here, was warmer. It seemed that the circulation of it baffled the mist, and held it back.

Nelson Lee looked ahead of him, and he could not help catching his breath in. For the sight was a wondrous one.

Rolling away for miles there was a singularly fair countryside. There were bushes, and even stunted trees. Meadows—fields of growing grain! And right through this ran the sea channel, like a wide river. It communicated direct with a deep lake, in the centre of the cavern. And there, on the lake, looking grotesquely incongruous, were a number of ships. Some were old and battered, their spars sagging, their masts broken. Others had no masts at all, and were roofed over, and had evidently been made into dwellings. And outstanding amongs these vessels was a rusty-sided battleship! Actually, a steel man-of-war, with a rotting funnel, full of jagged holes. She was the old Porto Marlo, once the pride of the Parazilian fleet, and abandoned by her crew at sea when an explosion had been feared. It was obvious that the Porto Marlo, a derelict had drifted on, and had been trapped in the Sargasso weed.

The rock "road" along which Lee had been walking continued onwards, parallel with the "river." And at intervals, on the land side of this road, there were quaint houses and cottages to be seen. Further in the distance there was the township itself, a cluster of houses—and there were even commonplace-looking streets. And all round this vast cavern—the further extremity of it was over eight miles away—there were flaring gas-jets, two or three hundred feet up, in the rock. Crude burners, projecting outwards from the rock had been fashioned by these people, or by their forefathers. In the distant past somebody had discovered that this natural gas could be harnessed, and used. Since then there had been many improvements—just as things improve in advance in the great world beyond. To-day, the cavern was ringed with these gas flares, and the heat thus generated, whilst rising above the floor level, and so causing no inconvenience to the inhabitants, kept the air pure and clean, and it had the added advantage of conquering the fog.

Lee walked on rapidly now. He had a mind to know his fate. And he walked with a swinging stride, his shoulders set back, and his face calm and resolute. Here was a chance for him to bring new hope into the hearts of the downtrodden people who suffered from the Black Hawk's tyranny.

"By my skin! Who comes?" went up a sudden cry. "Look! Come hither, you men! 'Tis one of the strangers, I vow!"

A thin man, with a scraggy beard, had appeared in Nelson Lee's path, emerging from one of the cottages. And now this man was shouting and gesticulating. Others joined him. But as Lee came striding up, they fell away, uncertain as though with awe.

"Good people, I come with friendly intentions!" shouted Nelson Lee quickly.

"Ay, but whence came ye?" shouted one of the men. "Ye came through the channel

—and there is no way from the upper island by that road!"

"There is a way—because I used it!" replied Nelson Lee. "But I will tell you of that later. I am, I say, a friend. Can you tell me how many of Simeon Harke's men are loose in the cavern? Much may depend upon your answer."

A stoutish, elderly man ran forward.

"Simeon Harke's men?" he asked, in a low voice. "Faith, but there is only a handful with us! But the Hawk and his men may return at any moment. None dare take action——"

"Then I suggest that you listen to me!" interrupted Lee keenly. "How many, such as you, can be relied upon? The Black Hawk cannot be here for some hours—neither can his men. Here is your chance to rid yourselves of his ruthless power. I speak not fables, but the truth."

It was Nelson Lee's tone, his authoritative manner, rather than his words, which had such an effect. He had spoken whilst walking along, and the others were accompanying him. The throng grew, and other men—and women, too—were running up from all sides to join the excited crowd.

Nelson Lee offered no explanation of his dramatic arrival. He had come walking into the cavern as though that rock channel were an ordinary, commonplace highway. And he heard the people shouting to one another, telling of his coming. And men were looking at him in awe—women with admiration. They seemed to see something almost of wizardry and magic in Nelson Lee's advent; and the detective's air of command, too, had its effect.

The news was spreading rapidly. Before they had reached the town itself, figures were streaming from the houses, from many caves, and from the old ships which had been converted into dwellings.

One elderly man, skinny, scraggy, with his clothes hanging loosely upon him, pushed forward.

"Faith, we welcome ye, friend!" he said excitedly. "For I can judge, by your bearing, that you are not ill disposed. I am Dr. Otto, and a man of some importance in this community."

"I am glad to know you, Dr. Otto," replied the detective. "My own name is Nelson Lee, and I am here to suggest a plan whereby the Black Hawk may be robbed of his power."

"'Tis good hearing, by my bones!" exclaimed Dr. Otto eagerly.

He was a little old man with a wrinkled face, not unlike a dried apple, and the hair upon his chin was patchy and snow-white. When Lord Dorrimore had been captured by the Black Hawk he had met this queer old fellow, and he had proved his friendliness then. He had also shown Dorrie that he was in mortal terror of Simeon Harke.

"I know not how ye came, but your coming is opportune!" went on the doctor. "Ye find us active in the middle of the night,

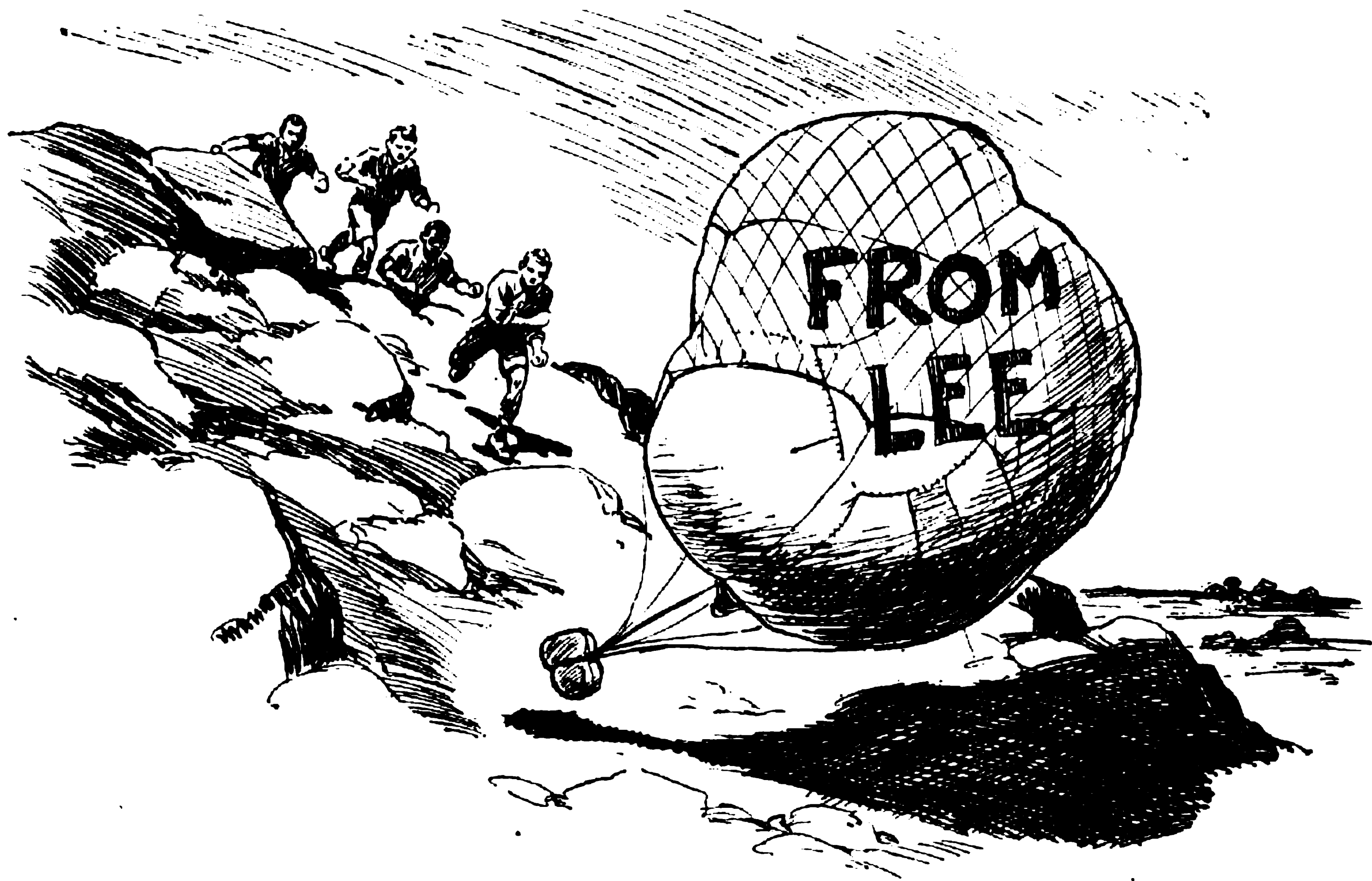
when we should be sleeping. For the Hawk and his men are away, and but a few of the dogs remain. In vain have I been stirring the good people to action. They hesitate, fearing that the Hawk may return at any moment."

"The Hawk cannot return for some hours," said Lee shortly.

Dr. Otto was a garrulous old fellow, and he evidently considered himself to be a personage of some importance. He attached himself to Lee like a leech, and talked almost without a pause. Lee gathered that the old

hokum; but he could see that it would pay him, in these circumstances, to pose as something of a magic-worker. The people would more readily follow his lead. And if he was to carry out his idea, he would need a considerable amount of help. Here was a chance to deal drastically and effectively with Simeon Harke; and after the way that miscreant had treated Lord Dorrimore and Handforth and the girl, Amanda, Lee was in no mood to take half measures.

"Listen, good people!" shouted the detective. "I bring you good news—but it is for



The crudely shaped balloon swung slowly to earth and now Nipper and Co. could see, painted on it, the words, "FROM LEE." Beneath the envelope hung a packet. "Quick, get it!" yelled Nipper, leading a reckless race over the rocks.

man had been pointing out to the others the advantages of the situation; but most of his exhortations had fallen upon deaf—or timid—ears.

Skinny of frame, scraggy of body, his heart was stout; he was ready for revolt at the first ghost of an opportunity. He had suffered much at the Black Hawk's hands; he had been insulted, humiliated, and for many months he had known that he had but to answer the tyrant back, and his ears would be sliced off. He was too useful a man to be put to death.

"Mayhap the people will listen to you, Master Lee," he said, panting from the very breathlessness caused by his incessant talk. "Ye are a younger man than I—and stronger. Like as not, too, you know much of the Hawk's movements."

Nelson Lee was essentially an honest man, and he disliked the thought of any kind of

you, yourselves, to take advantage of that news."

The detective had, by this time, mounted to the summit of some rough rock steps near the centre of the town. There was a wide clearing here, a sort of public square, and the people were crowding into it in their hundreds. There were men of all types—men young and men old; men from the queer fields of this cavern community, and men who earned their livelihood by catching and supplying fish to their fellows. The sudden departure of the Black Hawk and most of his men had caused a sensation, and nobody had thought of sleeping. The Black Hawk's continued absence—and now Nelson Lee's arrival—created a great sensation.

"Hold! What is this noisy gathering?" demanded a harsh voice. "Ye'd best all disperse——"

"The Black Hawk's men!"

The cry went up with mingled fear and resentment. Lee, with calm eyes, saw eight or nine men striding into the thick of the throng. They were big, bearded rascals, and their hands were at their cutlasses and daggers. And all of them were looking aggressive.

Nelson Lee's eyes set hard. These rascals only amounted to a handful, but such was the awe of the peaceful people that unless something drastic was done, the ruffians would gain the upper hand.

Lee leapt down from his elevated position, and he strode boldly into the very midst of the Black Hawk's men.

"Stab my vitals!" ejaculated one of the men, staring at Lee dubiously. "What want ye, stranger? If you have come here to stir up trouble——"

"That is just why I am here!" interrupted Lee curtly. "Let me remind you that you and your companions are hopelessly outnumbered. I will give you your choice. Throw down your weapons, here and now, or they will be taken from you."

"Rot me, but you speak boldly!" shouted the leader of the men. "While the Black Hawk's back is turned, you seek to stir up a rebellion! Odds blood! 'Twill earn me the Hawk's favour, I doubt not, if I remove that arrogant head of yours!"

And with one swing, the fellow withdrew his cutlass. Shouts arose from the throng; men backed away. The Hawk's myrmidons pressed to the support of the man who led them.

But they had reckoned without Lee.

The detective knew that this was a critical moment—a vital moment, not only for him, but for the people of this downtrodden community. In a flash he leapt forward, and his fist crashed into the bearded brute's face. At the same time he dived in, and by a simple ju-jitsu trick he sent the fellow heaving heavily over his shoulders. With a tremendous thud, the man crashed to the ground, and his cutlass went flying.

Without hesitating a second, Lee spun round, heaved another man across his shoulders, and sent him swinging in amongst his companions. Three or four of them went down. The others beheld Lee, with a great cutlass now in his hand, advancing towards them.

"Fools!" thundered Lee, in a voice that struck terror to the hearts of his listeners. "Drop your weapons, or the mob will kill you as you stand!"

Swish!

Lee's cutlass was making vicious sweeps through the air, and the sound of it was deadly. The men backed away in consternation. It was a brave show of brute force—but it was just the kind of display these men needed. It was the language they understood.

Moreover, Lee's example fired the people. Great shouts arose, and they came clamouring round. The Black Hawk's men retreated further, and now two or three of them hastily threw their weapons down.

"Seize them!" went up a shout. "Let them not escape! Seize them!"

There was a rush, a mighty tumult, and within three minutes Simeon Harke's men were thrown over, they were overpowered, and a great crowd of men marched them off to one of the nearer caves—where they were imprisoned.

By this time other men had come in from the "country," and the concourse in the town was getting bigger and bigger. Once again Nelson Lee leapt upon his elevated position—once again he addressed the populace.

"Good people, it is now or never!" he shouted. "The Black Hawk and his ruffians cannot return for some hours. It is your chance."

"Aye, stranger, but what can we do?" asked one man.

"'Tis simple!" replied Lee. "Barricade the great tunnel which leads to the steam cavern! 'Tis the only patch by which the Hawk and his men can return. Close it up, and they will be baffled."

Almost before the words were out of Nelson Lee's mouth, men, shouting noisily, were rushing about, seeking materials for the barricade. Nelson Lee's leadership was accepted without question.

But even Nelson Lee himself did not guess how completely the Black Hawk and his men were to be bottled up—for here, at the bottom, the great tunnel was being barricaded—and the Black Hawk himself had destroyed the other exit!

It was a situation which bristled with unique possibilities.

CHAPTER 5.

The Finding of the Beast Men.

NIPPER, gulping for breath, his chest heaving, his eyes full of stark terror, told the dreadful story.

He was in camp, and he was surrounded by Lord Dorrmore, Umlosi, Handforth and Amanda. Their faces had become pale and drawn as they had listened to Nipper's terrible and graphic tale.

"We—we thought we were coming back with good news," concluded Nipper dully. "The Black Hawk and his men are retreating—they've all gone by now. And the gov'nor and I were about half-way when—when that Pteradactyl came——"

He broke off, nearly choking.

"Take it on the chin, young 'un!" said Lord Dorrmore gently, as he laid a hand on Nipper's shoulder. "Lee is a resourceful man, an' he has got out of many a tight corner——"

"It's good of you, Dorrie, to try to comfort me," muttered Nipper, "but I am no fool. What's the good of hoping? The gov'nor was carried up by that—that monstrosity, and there's only one thing to think. He must have dropped off somewhere, and if he wasn't killed, he was horribly maimed. I keep thinking of him. I picture him lying

out there—perhaps in the midst of one of those rotten fungus forests, with broken legs, perhaps with a broken back, helpless, at the mercy of the Beast Men, and—and the monsters. And we don't even know where to look!"

"Must we wait until daylight?" asked Handforth anxiously. "Where did you see that flying thing last, Nipper? I mean, which direction did it take?"

"I was too scared to take any particular notice," replied Nipper. "It went off, carrying the guv'nor, and I believe it flew over the big crater, but I'm not sure. Anyway, it was in that part of the island—over there."

He pointed vaguely, and Lord Dorrimore and Umlosi glanced at one another. Handforth had drawn instinctively closer to Amanda, and the girl was looking frightened.

"It's a bad business, old friend," murmured Dorrie.

"Wau! Thou are weary, N'Kose, or thou wouldst be of greater confidence," rumbled Umlosi, his voice charged with scorn. "Thinkest thou, then, that Umtagati, the wizard has met his death at the hands of an unclean lizard which flies? Be thou of good cheer, Manzie, and let thy memory go back to the many wonders that Umtagati has wrought. For he is a man amongst men, and yet, behold, he is like unto the cat, for truly he possesses many lives."

Nipper pressed the great Kutana chief's ebony black arm.

"Thanks, Umlosi—your faith makes me feel ashamed of myself."

"Thy love for Umtagati is great, O Manzie!" said Umlosi. "Yet thy faith in him should be still greater. Ere long thou wilt be smiling at thy present fears, and thou wilt be acclaiming Umtagati for the wonder of his deeds. Fear not! My snake tells me that Umtagati lives, and that all is well with him."

Nipper was not in the least superstitious; but those words of Umlosi's gave him heart. It was impossible that the Kutana chief could know anything definitely; but his instinct—or snake, as he called it—was uncanny. It had seldom been proved wrong.

Yet it was impossible for the adventurers to quietly await the dawn. They decided, then and there, to go out across the countryside in various directions. They would search for Nelson Lee. Even if he was not dead or badly injured, there was a distinct chance that he was incapacitated.

The fact that Umlosi was enthusiastic to join in the search hinted to Dorrie that his words had been spoken to comfort Nipper. Very little else was said. Preparations were quickly made.

Lord Dorrimore and Nipper set off in one direction; Umlosi and Handforth in another. And as it was impossible to leave Amanda behind alone, she went with Umlosi and Handforth. The camp itself was left empty—with the searchlights directing their beams across the countryside in all directions. With those lights on, and with the motors purring,

there was little or no danger of an attack by the Beast Men. And the strange monsters of this remarkable island were kept at bay. Nothing had been seen of them to-night. They were obviously nervous of the light.

It was a hopeless search from the start. Lord Dorrimore had realised it—and he knew that Umlosi was of the same opinion. But Nipper's anguish was so great that neither Dorrie nor Umlosi had the heart to tell him the truth.

The common-sense thing to do was to wait until the daylight—when a wide, systematic search of the island could be made. Then, too, the monsters would have retreated into their secret lairs; and the Beast Men were not likely to give any trouble.

Dorrie did not lose sight of the fact that the pteradactyls were as much a menace to the searchers as they had been to Lee. If one could attack Lee, others could attack the searchers. And, in case of trouble, Dorrie had insisted upon everybody carrying a supply of handy fireworks. They were likely to be of far more service than guns. There was very little hope of killing the brutes—but it should be easy to scare them.

Even Nipper, after an hour or so, lost hope. He and Dorrie had tramped this way and that way; they had skirted the fungus forests, they had descended into valleys, they had skirted the great crater, and had gone beyond. And by now they were well out of range of the camp's searchlights. And all around them the island brooded silently and mysteriously.

"It's no good, Dorrie," said Nipper at last. "What's the use? We'll never find him."

"Dawn will soon be here," said Dorrie, glancing at the sky.

It was significant that he had given no direct answer to Nipper; and the latter was not slow to realise it.

"You believed all along that we were out on a wild goose-chase, didn't you, Dorrie?" he asked abruptly. "It's worse than looking for a needle in a haystack! Guv'nor—guv'nor!" He suddenly raised his voice and placed his cupped hands to his mouth. "Guv'nor—guv'nor!"

Lord Dorrimore almost winced. The despairing note in Nipper's shout cut him to the quick.

"In daylight, perhaps, we shall be more successful, young 'un," he said gently.

They commenced retracing their steps, and Nipper's feet dragged heavily. He felt unutterably weary. Nothing seemed to matter now. And as he walked, his thoughts were busy; again and again he lived through that dreadful five minutes, when he and Nelson Lee had battled against the pteradactyl.

"Listen!" said Nipper sharply, coming to a halt. "What was that, Dorrie?"

"I heard nothing."

"But I can swear I heard— There! It was a groan!" panted Nipper. "Over by those fungus bushes, Dorrie."

He ran, and Dorrie ran with him—but without any hope. Yet, as they drew nearer to a big clump of ugly-looking fungus, which sprouted in grotesque shape from the ground, his lordship started. Was it imagination, or had he, too, heard a sound which was uncannily like an agonised human groan?

"By the Lord Harry!" muttered Dorrie tensely.

As he moved forward, intent upon a closer investigation, he became aware of twinkling lights comparatively near by. They had come round a steep hillock, and Dorrie knew them to be the lights from electric torches. Umlosi and Handforth and Amanda.

"Help! Quick!" shouted Nipper, for he, too, had seen the twinkling lights.

And at the same moment he forced his way into the midst of the thick, spongy, toadstool-like fungus. He dreaded to see what lay beyond; yet he dared not hesitate. He had to see. His face was grim and set.

"Hold on, lad!" said Dorrie, placing a firm hand on Nipper's shoulder. "Better let me go first."

"No!" panted Nipper. "Let go of me—let go!"

His voice was fierce with the anguish which shook him. Another groan had sounded, and there was something so agonising in that sound that Nipper felt his heart faltering.

With a great effort of will he switched his electric torch on and flashed the light down into the little space behind the bruised and broken fungus. Then, suddenly, a change came into his expression; his eyes almost started out of his head; a gulp of mingled relief and amazement escaped his lips.

"Dorrie!" he gasped. "It's—it's not the guv'nor!"

"So I see," said Lord Dorrimore quietly.

He, too, was relieved. For until that second he had been convinced that they would find Lee—maimed, broken, dying. The relief was so great that his lordship, for a second or two, felt quite dizzy.

"Hallo, there! What's wrong?" came a breathless, excited voice. "Great Scott, have you found him?"

It was Handforth. He came running up with Umlosi and Amanda. They, themselves, had nothing but failure to report. But now they were filled with hope.

"No, no!" said Dorrie, turning quickly. "It's not Mr. Lee. Keep the girl back, Handy. This is not a pleasant sight."

But Amanda was already with them, and the concentrated lights of the electric torches were directed upon the figures which lay stretched in the tiny clearing in the midst of the fungus.

There were two figures—wild-looking, hairy, huddled figures.

"The Beast Men!" ejaculated Handforth, startled.

It was true. The two figures were Beast Men, and they were laid low with serious leg wounds. Yet both the wild men were conscious, and their eyes shone glassily in the

torchlights. One of them was chattering queerly, and it was evident that he was terrified. The other was in too much pain to care.

"Oh!" came a murmur from Amanda. "Poor things! We must help them! Look at their terrible wounds!"

This was the first time the adventurers had seen any of the Beast Men at close quarters, and they received something of a surprise. The two Beast Men were of great stature, and they were not nearly so bestial as the explorers had believed. Their heads were covered with shaggy hair, and even their faces were thick with hair, too. But it could now be seen that their bodies were covered by a crude sort of clothing. It was of a grassy character, brownish in colour, and it was not unlike coarse hair. Dorrie could now understand why he and his companions had believed, at first, that the Beast Men were hairy all over. They weren't. It was this peculiar clothing which gave them that appearance.

And the faces of the Beast Men, although wild, untamed, were by no means vicious or ferocious. There was a strange timidity in their expressions. They looked like shy forest creatures, fear-stricken by the nearness of the hunters.

"Poor devils!" muttered Lord Dorrimore softly.

There was something infinitely pathetic in the appearance of the Beast Men. Dorrie, going down on his knees beside one of them, discovered that the man had an ugly fracture of the right shin. The wound was open, it had been bleeding profusely, and the Beast Man was exhausted from loss of blood. That wound was a terrible sight to gaze upon. The other Beast Man was also injured in the leg, but the bone was not broken. There was a great jagged cut just below the knee, and the flesh was gaping open. Long exposure to the air and to the sun had brought dreadful consequences. The Beast Men were feverish; their wounds were inflamed. Dorrie almost shuddered as he gazed upon those swollen, festering limbs. He knew that they were bullet wounds. He remembered the attack of the Beast Men a day or two ago. The defenders had been compelled to use the machine-guns. These two, then, had failed to get clear away. In spite of their hurts, they had dragged themselves this distance, and their fellows had lost track of them. And ever since they had lain in the midst of this fungus, helpless, their wounds unattended.

"Machine-guns are filthy instruments, anyway!" said Dorrie fiercely. "So are pistols, and every other kind of weapon that can inflict such cruel hurts as this! Lend a hand, you fellows. We've got to take these poor blighters into camp, an' to make them comfortable."

"Yes, rather!" said Nipper dully.

He was still thinking of Lee, and he scarcely knew whether to be relieved or otherwise. But this discovery, and the

necessity for instant action, helped him a lot. There was something to do.

The Beast Men were suffering in other ways in addition to their hurts. Their swollen lips and tongues revealed too plainly that they were exhausted from the effects of thirst. No doubt, too, they were half starved. They had lain, helpless, for thirty-six hours.

"Wau! These men, despite their size, are but children," said Umlosi. "There is nothing of the savage in their appearance, N'Kose. If they are Beast Men, then they are like unto the timid beasts of the untrodden jungle."

With a gentleness strange in one so powerful, Umlosi lifted one of the Beast Men into his arms. He apparently did so without effort, and there was something wonderful in that sight. He strode off without a word.

His burden was only semi-conscious, and he offered no resistance. But the other Beast Man, when Lord Dorrimore and Nipper and Handforth sought to lift him, uttered low, plaintive cries of fear, and feebly struggled.

"All right—all right!" said Dorrie softly. "We're your friends. We're not goin' to hurt you."

It was his tone which allayed the creature's fears. There was something infinitely pathetic in the wildness of the Beast Man's eyes—in the dread fear which lurked there. But he ceased to struggle after he had been gently lifted, and was being carried along.

At last the camp was reached. The strange patients were carried straight into the Sky Wanderer's cabin. And here Lord Dorrimore, with his sleeves rolled up, and with the electric lights switched full on, set briskly to work with first-aid.

Handforth and Amanda were his assistants. Umlosi had gone out to keep watch. Nipper paced up and down the camp, restless and wretched. He was no longer thinking of the Beast Men; his thoughts were out there, over the dark island, and those thoughts of his were frantic.

Lord Dorrimore was a skilful amateur surgeon. He had need to be, for he had led lonely expeditions into the desolate corners of the world.

With the gentleness of a woman he bathed the ugly wounds of the Beast Men; he applied antiseptics and soothing ointments, and he dressed the wounds cleverly. He set that broken leg with all the skill of a hospital surgeon; he applied splints, and by the time he had finished, both the Beast Men were resting comfortably.

Dorrie had allowed them a small amount of water, and Handforth and Amanda were now letting the primitives take little sips. They had been given brandy, too, and although at first they seemed to think they were being poisoned, the spirit soon had its effect.

Before the dawn came the Beast Men sensed that these supposed enemies were friendly. Dorrie and his companions, in fact, had saved their lives. And soon the unfortunate creatures slept.

And thus they were left sleeping after the dawn had come—and the search for Nelson Lee continued.

CHAPTER 6.

A Shock for the Black Hawk!

NIPPER was suffering needless anguish; for at that very time when Nipper's thoughts were blackest, Nelson Lee was engaged upon a task after his own heart. He was in full command of the cavern community, and he was entering into the work in hand with an enthusiasm which communicated itself irresistibly to his followers.

Not only the men were working, but many of the women, too. Nelson Lee could not prevent them. Like a great wave, the story had gone through the great cavern, and men were filled with a hope they had not experienced for years.

The Black Hawk and nearly all his men were to be barred out!

Owing to the craftiness of this great stranger, Lee by name, Simeon Harke was to be foiled. In some miraculous way Lee had come to the cavern. None knew how—none inquired. He was here, and that was sufficient. He was the new leader, a man of character, of personality, and his avowed object was to destroy the Black Hawk's power and to restore peace and tranquility to the little community.

There was only one road by which the Black Hawk and his men could return. In the side of the cavern wall, which stretched upwards in a sheer cliff for three thousand feet, there was a great cave entrance; and the cave, towards the rear, became a wide, lofty tunnel. This led upwards to a smaller cavern, where a great geyser operated. The Black Hawk had attempted to kill Lord Dorrimore, Handforth and Amanda in that cavern. He had planned to let the geyser spurt its boiling waters upwards and envelop the victims. But they had been rescued in the nick of time. And because of that incident the Black Hawk had discovered the way to the island top.

That way led through the steam cavern. Thus, if the great cave at the bottom was barricaded, there was no method by which the Black Hawk could return.

The barricades were being erected now—and there were hundreds of people helping in the great work. Big casks were being carried up from the old ships which lay in the lake. Great oaken timbers were being carried by parties of men. Lee at the cave entrance itself, was directing the operations. He was giving instructions as to how the barricades should be erected.

It was taking shape admirably—a vast structure of timber balks and casks and other things which stretched right across the face of the cave—which, in itself, was fifty feet from side to side.

It might have been simpler to erect this barricade some distance up the tunnel, where it narrowed. But Lee had a fancy to construct the barrier here, at the very cave entrance. In this way it was a very symbol of defiance; it rose, foot by foot, a mighty thing for all to see. And the very sight of it—as Lee shrewdly guessed—put confidence and strength into the people.

Men were now standing on the uppermost timbers, heaving at ropes, hauling fresh timbers aloft. They were perspiring, they were aching from their labours, but they would admit of no weariness, and allow others, fresher, to take their places. A tremendous enthusiasm gave them extra strength.

And, meanwhile, the Black Hawk grew near.

After a night of arduous, exhausting labour, he and his men had at length reached the great steam cavern. But here, as ill luck would have it, they were compelled to wait a full hour—for the geyser had had one of its periods, and the cavern floor was flooded with boiling water. But the pirates were glad enough of the brief rest. Yet they were parched with thirst, famished with hunger, and weary from the lack of sleep and rest. They only wanted to reach the cavern proper, to get to their homes, to obtain drink, food and sleep. They were, indeed, a disgruntled, ill-tempered throng.

Their mission had been a complete failure, and they could not but realise it. All their climbing had been for nothing. True, they had seen the upper part of their island, and they were satisfied that their own territory was by far the better. Not one man amongst them desired to go back to the top. And the Black Hawk himself did not cease to point out the triumph he had achieved. The rock tunnel was blocked—and neither the strangers from the Outer World, nor the Beast Men, could get down.

It was indescribably uncomfortable in the tunnel. The men, forty or fifty of them—the Black Hawk's main force—were stretched out all along the tunnel, for it was comparatively narrow here, and it sloped steeply, too. The steam was rising from the geyser cavern, and the air was moist, humid and altogether unpleasant. But in spite of their thirst and hunger and tiredness, many of the rascals fell asleep as they sprawled.

Then, at length, came the order from the Black Hawk. The boiling waters had subsided, and the passage through the cavern was clear.

Swinging down on ropes, the men completed the last difficult section of the descent. Once out of the steam chamber, they would be in the wide, steeply descending tunnel which led—home.

"By my skin! 'Tis good to be here, Sir Chief," said Jonathan Betts, after he had made the passage through the swirling steam. "And now for food and rest! I vow I can eat enough for ten!"

"Aye, we are all in need of it," agreed the Black Hawk, in a tired voice. "But we return triumphant, Jonathan. And, having rested, we can proceed with our great plans. Hast forgotten that we are to venture forth once again on the steel ship? And the vessels in the great open sea are at our mercy—and there is much booty to be gained. Aye, and the accursed strangers can no longer hinder us."

They were walking down the wide rock tunnel, with a number of other men slightly in advance, carrying the last embers of the great torches—which, by great good fortune, had lasted out.

"Hark ye! What is that commotion?" demanded Simeon Harke suddenly. "Bones and blood! In my absence, it seems, the people make strife! We return none too soon, Jonathan!"

Jonathan Betts made no reply. He had just caught sight of an extraordinary barrier, dimly visible in the distance. It stretched right across the tunnel, blocking it. He could see great hulks of timber, criss-cross beams, old casks, and the like. And in less than a minute the Black Hawk saw the barrier, too.

"The dogs!" he shouted furiously. "May their marrows rot! They have dared to take measures to defy me!"

"Aye, and effective measure, too, I am thinking," put in one of the other men, his voice charged with alarm. "Sec, Sir Chief! The barricade stretched right across. 'Twas folly, as I always said, to leave the people—"

"Silence, fool!" thundered the Black Hawk. "Another word from ye, and I'll rip open your vitals!"

He was infuriated because he realised, surely enough, that he had blundered badly. The people were meek enough normally, but as soon as he had withdrawn his forces, they had taken definite action. Yet he could not understand. Before setting out the thought had come to him that it was unwise to take so many men; but he had dismissed the matter contemptuously. The people were intimidated, they were chicken-hearted. They would never dare to defy him. Yet—here was this evidence of a very determined defiance.

The Black Hawk strode forward grimly, his face working with savage rage. It was possible to see right through the interstices of the barricade. And as Simeon Harke grew nearer, his consternation increased.

For at close quarters he saw that the barricade was an enormous thing. It was over twelve feet deep, a great bristling mass of heavy timbers, weighing scores of tons. Men—a hundred of them—had been labouring for hours, getting the great timbers into position, hauling them up, and making them secure—propping them, jamming them tight, and making them immovable.

"Split my windpipe!" muttered the Black Hawk, aghast.

For just then the truth had come to him. He and his men were weary, thirsty, hungry.

They were in no fit condition to fight. Furthermore, they had no implements with which to batter down this barrier. So cunningly was it constructed that the men within the tunnel could not remove any of its parts for their own use.

A regular tumult was now in progress. The liberated people on one side of the barricade were shouting defiance, and the Black Hawk's men on the other side were crowding up, hoarse with alarm.

"We are trapped, Sir Chief!" said one of the men, in hoarse dismay.

"Say another word, Simon Lane, and I'll split your tongue off!" roared the Black Hawk. "Think ye that these rabbits can defy me? 'Tis only an hour of madness, and——"

He broke off, and a greyness came into his face. For at that moment he had seen, through one of the interstices of the barricade, a face.

He stared at it fascinatedly, unbelievably. For it was a smooth, clean-shaven face. Not the face of one of his people—but the face of a stranger!

And there was something in the calm expression of the stranger's eyes which brought panic to Simeon Harke. For a moment he felt that he was going mad. Had he not barred all the strangers on the island top? Yet here was one of them—down here, amongst the people, leading them! In that second it was clear to the Black Hawk that the stranger was responsible for the revolt, and for all the work which had been done.

"Well, my unfortunate friends, you're in trouble, aren't you?" asked Nelson Lee, as he came close to the barrier. "You are tired, eh? Pretty well exhausted, I suppose? It's a long, gruelling descent."

Dr. Otto, dancing with glee, was by Nelson Lee's side.

"At last we have ye, Simeon Harke!" he chirruped. "Brute and murderer! Never again will you use your power!"

The crinkled little doctor's voice awoke the Black Hawk from his trance.

"By my sinews!" he roared. "So it is revolt! Men—men! Break down the barrier! We must go through and quell this mad rebellion."

He had withdrawn his own cutlass, but the men about him looked dismayed. Their weariness had increased during the past few minutes. Their faces had become haggard. For it came to them, with a flood of consternation, that they were as far from drink and food as ever.

Nelson Lee was quite safe on the other side of the barricade. The Black Hawk and his men possessed no firearms. Bottled up in that tunnel, they were helpless.

"Let me advise you, Harke, to accept the situation calmly," said Lee. "You will only be admitted to this community after you have thrown your weapons down—and after you have fully surrendered."

"Never will I surrender!" snarled the Black Hawk. "I am the leader of these

people. You are but a stranger, an intruder——"

"Nay, nay!" went up a mighty shout from the people in the cavern. "Master Lee has saved us! He is our friend—our deliverer!"

And while the noise increased, Jonathan Betts suddenly grasped hold of the Black Hawk's arm. And Simeon Harke swung round, his face distorted with fury.

"What is it, fool?" he asked harshly.

"Have ye forgot?" gasped Jonathan. "The tunnel!"

"The tunnel?" repeated the Hawk. "Rot your heart, dog, why speak to me in riddles?"

"The tunnel is block—for 'twas you, yourself, who gave the order that it should be blocked," continued Jonathan Betts. "Thus we can neither move forwards nor backwards. We are trapped in this tunnel, and there is no outlet."

The Black Hawk's jaw sagged. He had, indeed, forgotten until that moment. There was no way of escape for them. Their predicament was as bad as it could possibly be.

Simeon Harke behaved like a madman. He raved, he almost shrieked in his fury. To reason with him was impossible—to even talk with him was equally impossible. His men stood apart, staring in consternation. They could do nothing.

He swore to have Lee's life, he threatened dreadful things. But nothing could alter the fact that he and his men were barred out.

"'Tis idle to talk with him!" muttered Jonathan Betts, speaking to two of his fellow lieutenants. "We have but to try, and he will leap at us with his cutlass."

"There is nought for us to do but surrender!" grunted one of the others. "Not a man of us is fit for fighting. And how can we fight? 'Twould be better to surrender immediately, to deceive this stranger. Then, later, perchance, an opportunity would come for us to turn the tables."

"Aye, your words are good enough, Reresby," said Jonathan. "But methinks the Hawk will listen to nothing now."

Simeon Harke was not strengthening the loyalty of his men. His wild outburst only weakened them. For it was a sign of panic—and they were near to panic themselves.

"Well?" came Nelson Lee's voice, as calm as ever, from the other side of the barrier. "Have you thought well, Harke? I understand, from what your men have just been saying, that the tunnel is blocked. Thus, you are trapped. So you have either to surrender, or to remain entrapped in the tunnel. That will mean starvation—the dread pangs of thirst. Surrender—and you shall be provided with food and drink——"

He was interrupted by another tirade from the Black Hawk. The man swore that he would never surrender. He shouted to his men, and they all retreated some distance up the tunnel. The Hawk's last words were that he would have Lee's life before the day was over.

But such talk was idle and hollow. For the Black Hawk himself knew that even if he

escaped from the tunnel, he would have a grim fight ahead of him, if he was to regain the power that he had lost. The people were now inflamed, they were in a rebellious, fighting mood. The Hawk's absence, and Nelson Lee's presence, had wrought something like a miracle.

In the great cavern, men and women were surrounding Nelson Lee, and they were acclaiming him loudly.

"'Tis as you said, good stranger!" shouted one man. "The Hawk and his wolves are helpless. At last their fangs have been drawn."

"Aye, true enough!"

"We have him at our mercy!"

"Let me suggest," said Lee, "that when these rascals come forth they shall be given a fair trial. Let Harke and his ringleaders be sentenced to life-long imprisonment, and let the rest labour on the land."

"'Tis wise counsel!" shouted Dr. Otto. "We have had enough of killing—of bloodshed. 'Twill be sufficient if we shut Simeon Harke in a cave, and keep him there. Ay, him and such ruffians as Jonathan Betts and Simon Lane and Reresby and the others. Let us prepare caves for their imprisonment."

"Ay, 'tis a good suggestion!" cried another. "Thus, when the dogs surrender, we shall be ready."

"But think ye they will surrender?" asked another doubtfully.

"What else can they do?" asked Nelson Lee. "Hunger and thirst drive men to defeat quicker than cold steel. Already they are suffering. Soon they will be clamouring to be released. And if the Black Hawk is opposed to such a move, his men will revolt amongst themselves. It will only be a matter of short waiting, my friends."

And crowds of the stronger men went off to prepare the new prisons, for the captives—when they should be in the mood to surrender. Nelson Lee himself was carried away by Dr. Otto and some others to the township—there to eat and rest.

Lee partook of a hearty meal; but he did not rest. There was something on his mind. There was something to be done.

For some hours he had been concerned. He remembered Nipper's despairing cry in the night, when he—Lee—had been carried away by the flying reptile.

And Lee knew that Nipper would be in anguish, and by this time, Lord Dorrimore and the others would be sharing his anguish. For it was inevitable that they should think that the worst had happened.

But how to acquaint them of the true position?

For Lee to reach the upper part of the island was impossible. He could not even send a messenger. Even if the Black Hawk and his men were not in the tunnel, it would still be out of the question—for Lee had learned that the tunnel was blocked. And there was no other road.

He stood in the open, looking up at the morning sunshine as it slanted down through

the great hole in the cavern roof. It was only now, many hours after dawn, that the sun was showing itself to the cavern community. And as Lee stood looking upwards an idea came to him.

"Yes, it should be possible!" he muttered. "In fact, easy. And they cannot fail to see—"

"I ask your pardon, good friend," said Dr. Otto, who was near him. "I heard not your words."

"I was really talking to myself," explained Lee dryly. "I am wondering, to tell you the



truth, Dr. Otto, how I can communicate with my friends on the island top?"

"'Tis impossible," replied the wizened little man promptly. "There is no way."

"I think there might be," said Lee.

He obtained the help of some of the women-folk, and under his direction they busied themselves with their needles, and fashioned, from the thinnest material they could supply, a crude gas-bag—in fact, a miniature balloon. The material of it was silk—obtained from one of the numerous chests from an old ship.

Nelson Lee's new friends were very mystified. They were still more puzzled when he inquired about the natural gas which leaked

through the rocks all around the cavern. This gas had been harnessed, and the flaring jets dispelled the shadows in those deep recesses where the sunlight never reached. There were some places, Lee learned, where the gas had been plugged—places where no flares had been necessary.

And it was at one of these spots that Lee caused one of the rock plugs to be removed. His improvised balloon was filled with the crude gas, and to his satisfaction it billowed out most encouragingly. He knew that the balloon itself was leaky in places, but once

swaying gently to and fro. Shouts arose from the people, for they had never seen anything like this in all their lives. And more than ever, Nelson Lee was acclaimed as a magician. Nobody knew—yet—how he had journeyed to the cavern. Lee had thought it better, in all the circumstances, to keep that secret to himself. He hated to pose as a worker of miracles, especially when the explanation was so extremely simple, but these people believed in him, they trusted him, they had infinite faith in him. Better, then, to let them think that he was a superman. In this way their courage would be kept at fever pitch, and the Black Hawk's downfall would be the more swift and certain.

CHAPTER 7.

The Surprise!

THE two injured Beast Men were so much better by midday that there seemed no object in keeping them in the camp. They had made an extraordinarily rapid recovery.

And by now, too, they had lost all their fear.

Dorrie and Handforth and Amanda, in turn, had looked after them. The unfortunate creatures had been given hot drinks, food, and their nurses were so kindly and friendly that the Beast Men responded rapidly. They were soon chattering in their own queer language, and grinning from ear to ear. And now, in the full daylight, and in this condition, they lost a great deal of their fearsomeness. They looked really human. Rough and shaggy in all truth, but by no means bestial. It was really a shame to refer to them as "Beast Men."

The inflammation and the swelling had gone from their legs—and so, too, had the agonising pain. It was this relief, more than anything else, which proved to the creatures that they were amongst friends. Indeed, they seemed to know that their lives had been saved. Another full day, under the blazing sunshine, with their wounds open and unattended, would have meant death.

But Lord Dorrimore's prompt measures had killed every trace of fever, and the strong constitutions of the patients themselves came to the rescue. Even Dorrie was astonished at the rapidity of their recovery.

The one Beast Man whose leg was not broken was soon able to hobble about, and after he had got over his awe, he was like a child, happy, inquisitive, chattering continuously.

By signs, Dorrie came to understand that the Beast Man was anxious to return to his own people. He pointed across the sun-swept countryside, and he pointed back to his companion. So Dorrie, struck by an idea, quickly improvised a pair of crutches out of two spare scraps of steel girder. And the Beast Man with the broken shin rapidly understood. He was soon on his feet, and using the crutches with surprising skill.



Slowly the vast barricade across the cavern mouth took shape as the settlers worked with feverish haste. When Black Hawk and his pirates returned they would find their way barred—barred by the orders of Nelson Lee, detective!

it had commenced its upward flight, it would continue—for the air, in the upper part of the cavern was heated, and there was a constant upward current. Thus, the balloon would inevitably be carried out of the great hole, and into the upper air. And once there, Lord Dorrimore and the others could not fail to see it.

Nelson Lee's preparations were soon complete—to the further mystification of the populace. He daubed some words on the balloon—with tar. He attached to the base of it a rope, and at the end of the rope there was a rough parcel. And at last the balloon was released. It soared upwards, the parcel

While all this had been going on, Nipper, of course, had scarcely rested a moment. He and Handforth had been out for hours, soon after dawn. They had been compelled to return, hungry, weary and disappointed.

But whilst they rested, Umlosi ventured forth—and Lord Dorrimore, too. But the conviction was growing upon them all that Nelson Lee had gone to his doom. Not a word from him since that dreadful minute—not a sign. And this utter silence, lasting for the better part of twelve hours, was only too significant.

Ordinarily, Nipper would have taken a great deal of interest in the two strange visitors; but to-day he scarcely gave them a glance. All his thoughts were for his missing gov'nor. Needless to add, Dorrie and Handforth and Umlosi were deeply concerned over Lee's fate, too.

So they were glad, in a way, to have the two Beast Men off their hands. With many grins, with many rollings of the eyes, the two queer primitives hobbled off. They had been given food just before they started, and Dorrie saw to it that their wounds were re-dressed. So they went away comfortable, more satisfied than ever that the strangers in their land meant no harm.

The adventurers scarcely saw which direction the pair took. For Nipper was anxious to make another search. They all set off together, leaving the camp to look after itself. During the daylight hours there was little or no danger of any trouble arising.

Nipper wanted this to be the most thorough search of all; and although the others felt, from the first, that it would be wasted effort, they entered into it wholeheartedly. Nipper's anguish was pitiful to see. Hour by hour he was becoming more and more despondent. He had hoped against hope at first, but now his hopes were dying; he was becoming resigned to the worst.

"If only we could find something—some clue," he said desperately. "You know what I mean, Dorrie. We know nothing. The gov'nor was carried off, and—and since then——"

"It's a tough problem, young 'un," said Dorrie gently. "There may be a whole colony of those infernal pteradactyls. On the other hand, there may be only one or two of the brutes. We don't even know where they hang out—but it's any odds that they lurk somewhere in the midst of these fungus forests."

"That's my idea, too," said Nipper. "Can't we explore some of the forests to-day? I know it's risky, but—but—— If only we could find the gov'nor's body it would be something!" he added drearily. "I should know the worst then, at any rate. Anything's better than this horrible suspense."

Lord Dorrimore made no answer. He was looking grey and haggard with anxiety himself. They all felt at a loose end. Without Nelson Lee they were leaderless. They were like a ship without a rudder.

Nothing seemed to matter now. The Black Hawk and his pirates seemed trivial, futile, absurd. The Beast Men, even, had ceased to be a menace. They weren't like beasts at all. The exploration of the island, which Dorrie had looked forward to so enthusiastically, lost all its appeal.

"Why couldn't it have been me?" Nipper burst out suddenly. "I shouldn't have mattered so much. But with the gov'nor gone——"

"No good talking like that, old son," put in Handforth gruffly. "Don't be an ass! We don't want to lose you any more than Mr. Lee. Besides, how do you know that he is lost?"

"Wise words, O thou of the clumsy limbs," said Umlosi. "For does not my snake tell me that Umtagati lives? Is he not the great Wizard? Wau! Thinkest thou, Manzie, that a foul flying reptile could——" He broke off suddenly and raised a great black arm. "Behold!" he shouted in a great voice. "'Tis a sign! Did I not tell thee, Manzie?"

They had all halted. They were staring in amazement, in fascination, at the thing which had dramatically appeared from a rocky hilltop in the distance.

They knew that that bare, craggy slope screened the great crater-like opening of the cavern. They had been there before, and they knew the route. The thing which rose into the air was no flying monstrosity, but a crazily constructed balloon of sorts.

It was very clear in the sunshine, because a large portion of the balloon was made of a reddish silken material, which shimmered in the sunshine. The whole thing was of a fantastic shape, with many bulges and depressions. It seemed to be short of gas, too. Beneath the improvised envelope dangled a rope, with something attached to the end of it. The whole balloon, after rising for some distance, shook violently, and then drifted in the direction of the adventurers, dropping as it came.

"By glory! It was sent from the cavern floor, of course," said Dorrie, his eyes gleaming. "But I didn't think those people knew anythin' about balloons! You saw how it shivered just now? That's when it got out of the hot current of air from the roof opening—it was oscillated by the change in the temperature. See, it's droppin' now."

Nelson Lee himself had reckoned upon this. As soon as the balloon had got out of the warmer air, it inevitably drifted and descended. There was no chance of it floating away and dropping into the weed.

"'Tis a wondrous-looking object," murmured Amanda, her eyes wide open. "I cannot believe, Handy, that 'twas fashioned by my people. I fear it must be some evil design of the Black Hawk."

"He doesn't know anything about balloons, either," said Handforth quickly. "By George! I wonder—— Hallo! What the—— Look there!" he burst out excitedly. "Look! There's—there's some writing on it!"

The balloon had swung round in the air, and now, sure enough, they could see some daubed letters on the envelope. It turned further, and the lettering became clear:

“FROM LEE.”

NIPPER almost reeled, and after turning deathly pale, a hot flush suffused his face and neck.

“Steady, lad!” said Dorrie kindly.

“It—it’s from the guv’nor!” muttered Nipper, hardly capable of forming the words. “It—it means that he’s safe—down in the cavern—and he sent us a message— Oh, let’s get to it quickly! The guv’nor’s alive!”

They were all wildly excited—but Nipper most of all.

After their hours of intense depression it seemed incredible that Nelson Lee could really be safe. Nipper was like one possessed—he raced across that strange landscape. Even Umlosi, who was as fleet as a hare, had all his work cut out to keep pace with the flying Nipper.

“Thou art exerting thyself needlessly, Manzie,” rumbled the Kutana chief. “Have I not said, from the first, that Umtagati is safe?”

“I can’t believe it even now!” panted Nipper. “I’ve got to be certain.”

By this time the crazy balloon had come to earth, for the gas in it was insufficient to keep it in the air. They could see the envelope, sagging drunkenly, drifting lazily across the ground, dragging the odd-looking parcel by the rope.

Nipper and Umlosi arrived together. It was Nipper who grabbed at the parcel, and feverishly unfastened the ropes and strings. For he guessed that there was a message within. The parcel was nothing but a small piece of rock, wrapped round with odd cloth. But in the midst of the wrapping a crumpled sheet of paper was found—and at the first glance at the pencilled writing, Nipper sent out a great shout of joy.

“Yes! It’s the guv’nor’s fist!” he gasped.

The others had arrived by now—and, together, Nipper and Dorrie and Handforth read those fateful words:

“Am quite safe and unharmed. Have taken charge of things down here, and the people have rallied round magnificently, and are putting up a great resistance to the Black Hawk and his men. We have barricaded the rock tunnel so that the rascals cannot get down to us—and I understand that the Hawk himself had blocked the upper part of the tunnel. So they are nicely trapped. It can only be a matter of time before they surrender. Let Amanda know that she will soon be able to take her rightful place in this little community. I advise you to remain in camp, and keep a close watch, in case the Beast Men make another attack. There’s not much you can do down here, even if you came.

I have plenty of sturdy helpers. Suggest that you come to the crater top one hour before sunset, and if I have any special news I can signal it by flashlight. You can do the same. That Pteradactyl carried me down from the weed, and I was fortunate enough to reach the island and get within the cavern. No other news.

“NELSON LEE.”

“No other news!” echoed Nipper, as he read the last words. “Oh, my hat! As if he hadn’t given us enough!”

“He’s alive—well—in command of a giddy rebellion!” gasped Handforth. “And the Black Hawk and his men are dished and diddled! By George! Did you understand that, Amanda?”

“No, no!” murmured the girl. “I fear I am dull. I cannot grasp what it all means.”

And while Handforth told her, Nipper turned fiercely upon Lord Dorrimore.

“Please, Dorrie, kick me!” he said, clutching at his lordship’s arm. “Kick me hard!”

“Anything to oblige!” said his lordship cheerfully.

“I mean it!” went on Nipper. “Oh, I’m a fool! I’m a faithless rotter! I ought to have known that the guv’nor would come out on top.”

“But that’s just where you’re wrong,” said Dorrie. “He’s at the bottom, and as for your behaviour during the past few hours, I don’t think I’ll kick you, because you don’t deserve it. It was quite natural that you should be worried silly. Now that we know the truth, I don’t mind telling you that I was nearly off my rocker with anxiety, too.”

“But you didn’t make a fool of yourself, Dorrie, like I did,” said Nipper. “Umlosi was the most sensible of us all. Never for a moment did he believe that the guv’nor was hurt. Good old Umlosi! After this, I’ll always believe in your snake—even if it prophecies that the moon is going to turn into orange marmalade!”

“Nay, Manzie, my snake is not like to whisper such nonsense,” said Umlosi reproachfully.

“Let’s go to the crater top now—and have a look down,” said Nipper, his voice full of eagerness. “By jingo! We might spot something. Couldn’t we go down on a rope?”

“Cut it out, young ’un,” said Dorrie. “Doesn’t Mr. Lee distinctly say in this note that he wants us to return to the camp? Everything’s all right down in the cavern. The most sensible thing for us to do is to go back to our base, an’ get some rest. We all need it, goodness knows!”

“You’re right, Dorrie,” admitted Nipper. “I hadn’t quite realised that I was so done up.”

Even now he found it difficult to believe the wonderful news. But the change in him was remarkable. Within the space of a few minutes he had recovered his old buoyancy; the haggard look had gone from his face, his eyes sparkled. And the same looks were

on the faces of the others. Their relief was enormous.

"Looks as if things are going to work out smoothly," commented Dorrie, as they returned towards camp. "If Lee says that the Black Hawk is goin' to be wiped up. The only fly in the ointment is that we haven't been able to take a hand in the fun. Still, we might have a chance yet. Meanwhile, there are a good few hours left before sunset, and we can all do with a long sleep. Nobody's any good without sleep."

Before they had covered half the distance Nipper and Handforth were yawning. Nipper, indeed, who had been on the move almost continuously for more hours than he cared to think of, was now feeling the reaction. He became aware, for the first time, of the painful blisters on his feet. Every limb ached abominably. He was surprised to make these discoveries—and the thought of flinging himself down to sleep, with his mind at rest, was a grateful and soothing one.

They topped a little rise, and from here they had a full view of the grassy hollow, with the tiny plateau beyond on which the camp was pitched. And no sooner had they come into full sight than they all halted; for they saw something which set their hearts thudding, which made them forget their weariness and their lazy plans for the rest of the day.

For, surrounding the steelwork palisades of the camp, were scores and scores of uncouth figures. Many of them were dancing about and capering madly, and upon the air rose an unearthly chant.

"The Beast Men!" ejaculated Dorrie, his hand instinctively going to his gun.

"Hundreds of them!" said Handforth. "Great jumping corks! The beggars must have been watching—they saw us all go—and then they made a swoop. They've surrounded the camp, and we can't get back! Can't even get to our machine-guns, or fireworks, or—or anything! And out here, in the open, we shan't stand an earthly!"



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Dorrie had already thought of this—and he was filled with inward alarm. He cursed himself for his folly in leaving the camp unattended. But in their anxiety about Nelson Lee, everything else had seemed of trivial importance. Furthermore, the Beast Men had never appeared in the open sunshine.

Cries arose on the air now; for the hairy creatures had seen the party on the top of the rise. And a great number of the Beast Men came capering and prancing across the hollow.

"They're coming for us!" muttered Handforth, drawing Amanda nearer to him. "I wish I had a stick or something. Any kind of weapon would be useful——"

"Wait a minute!" said Nipper, a strange note in his voice. "These brutes don't seem very dangerous. Not one of them is carrying a weapon, and don't you see how they are holding their hands above their heads, and waving?"

Umlosi, whose spear was ready, uttered a grunt of disappointment.

"Thou art right, Manzie," he said disconsolately. "The strange hairy men are in no way warlike. Do I not know the signs? These people are friendly disposed. They have gathered here to make us acquainted with their friendliness."

It was obvious to all of them now. The foremost Beast Men were quite near at hand, and they were chattering and grinning and gesticulating. Yet they seemed nervous to approach. They seemed shy.

Then Dorrie guessed the truth. It was not much of a guess, either, for he caught sight of the Beast Man whose leg was injured—the fellow who was not seriously hurt, and who had departed from the camp that morning. He was hobbling about, shouting to his companions, pointing to the adventurers, and grinning all over his hairy face.

"Ye gods and little fishes!" said Dorrie breathlessly. "You can see what it means, can't you? We succoured those two unfortunate blighters, an', in fact, saved their lives. We proved to them that we wished to be friendly—and we sent them back to their people unharmed. Now the other Beast Men have come along to prove their gratitude—and to show us, in turn, that they are our friends."

"It is even as Umtagati, in his great wisdom said," growled Umlosi. "Did he not tell us, N'Kose, that the wild people of this island were harmless?"

It was not long before the Beast Men came round in crowds. They were all dressed in the strange creeper garments which so closely resembled hair. And by many signs, and much chattering, they made it known that they wanted the adventurers to go with them—no doubt, to their own village.

"We'd better go," said Dorrie. "It's a ticklish business, baulking the wishes of primitive people. They might get offended—an' then anythin' could happen."

So there was no sleep for them yet awhile. Not that they did much walking. For the

Beast Men, gleefully chattering, hoisted their new friends high upon their shoulders. Even Umlosi was carried—but it took two of the Beast Men to hold him. In triumph they were all marched away.

CHAPTER 8.

The Secret Cavern!

IT was Simeon Harke's blackest hour.

The majority of his henchmen were sprawling in the wide tunnel, sleeping the sleep of exhaustion. Even the knowledge that they were trapped, that starvation stared them in the face—unless they surrendered—could not prevent them from sleeping. And the Black Hawk was all the better pleased. Sleep would do his men good; when they were roused they would be all the better fitted for action.

For even now the black-bearded tyrant had no thought of knuckling under.

He and his chief lieutenants—Jonathan Betts, Simon Lane, Reresby and one or two others—stood apart from the rest. They were not sleeping, weary as they were.

"One man!" said Simeon Harke, his voice throbbing with insane rage. "One man! Hear ye, my fine comrades? One man!"

"We hear ye, Sir Chief, but 'tis difficult enough to understand your meaning!" growled Betts.

"Difficult, is it?" jeered the Black Hawk. "Have ye brains in that head of yours, or just porridge? One man, I say! The stranger comes hither—I know not how, but he comes—and he put the fire of rebellion into the people. But for him, think ye, the people would have taken this stand?"

"'Tis true enough," admitted Simon Lane. "'Tis this man, Lee, as he calls himself, who has brought us to this pass. 'Tis foolish, Sir Chief, to blind your eyes to the thing which stares ye in the face. There is nought for us to do but surrender."

"Foolish?" grated the Black Hawk. "Bones and blood! Is it that ye are calling me a fool?"

Crash!

Without warning he swung his mighty fist round, and the man, caught unawares, went down like a log. And so terrific was that blow that he did not move.

"'Twas an unfair blow!" grumbled Reresby.

Crash!

He, too was felled. He was knocked clean over, but he was not unconscious. He half-sat up, pale and shaken.

"Any man who calls me a fool, any man who tells me that I know not what I am doing, suffers in the same way!" snarled Simeon Harke. "I tell ye there shall be no surrender!"

"'Tis bold enough to talk that way," exclaimed Jonathan Betts sharply, watching his leader closely as he spoke. "But think ye, Sir Chief, that the men will stand by ye? By this time on the morrow they will be

delirious from thirst. Ay, and ye'll be no better yourself! 'Tis the plan to starve us into surrender. And what can we do?"

"I will find a way!" muttered the Black Hawk.

"The barriers cannot be broken down—they are too strong," went on Jonathan. "Ye have seen them, so ye ought to know. And the other way? The tunnel is barred—and even if it were not, how could we improve matters by returning to the island top? Ere long this very tunnel will be filled with the steam from the great chamber where the boiling water bubbles up, and——"

"Wait!" broke in Simeon Harke harshly.

And there was something so acute in his tone that the others looked at him strangely. They could see very little, for up here, back in the tunnel, only the faintest glow of light penetrated. And none of the torches were aflame now. In the distance the men could see the great barricade, with the light of the great cavern filtering through.

"Steam!" muttered the Black Hawk, pacing up and down like a man possessed. "Steam did ye say, Jonathan Betts? Ay, ye did! Steam! Steam!"

They thought he had gone out of his mind.

"What know ye, Jonathan, of the Long Cave?" he asked suddenly, turning upon Betts.

"The Long Cave?" repeated Jonathan. "Why, 'tis the great cave further along, where much foodstuff is stored—corn, flour, and the like. Much of the strange foods we obtained by piracy, not two weeks ago, is in the Long Cave also."

"Ye have said it!" agreed the Black Hawk. "What else know ye of the Long Cave?"

"'Tis a store place for many spare weapons—weapons we have found on many ships and we have no use for," continued Jonathan, mystified. "And, seeing the nature of the cave's contents, there are great doors guarding its entry—and you, yourself, carry the key."

"Aye, aye!" muttered the leader. "And further?"

"I know not what ye mean."

"What of the black spaces at the end of the Long Cave—where nought can be stored owing to the dampness?"

"Ye mean the steam which periodically comes down——"

Jonathan Betts paused, and he stared at the Black Hawk most stupidly.

"The steam—the steam!" muttered the other. "Whence comes that steam, block-head? Is it not possible that there is a way through from the great steam cavern to the Long Cave? A crevice, perchance—a fissure in the rock. How else can the steam get there? And think ye of the possibilities. If we can but find a way, and get through, not only have we food for all the men, but we are in a great cave which has locked doors guarding it. This man Lee will not go there—neither will any of the people. Thus we can concentrate in secret, and——"

"Your tongue runs away with you, me thinks, Sir Chief," put in Reresby sourly. "'Tis easy to talk of getting in the Long Cave. But what of its accomplishment? Mayhap the steam trickles through a number of crevices no larger than a man's hand."

"Well, we shall see!" said the Black Hawk grimly. "Awaken the men! Kick them to life, and see that some torches are lighted."

"There are but one or two torches left—and they are but halves."

"Sufficient!" snapped the other. "See that they are made ready."

Something of the Black Hawk's excitement communicated itself to the others. And when the men, aroused from their heavy slumbers, were told, they, too fell to wildly hoping.

Soon the torches were alight, and the Hawk, accompanied by twenty men, entered the steam cavern. It was overpoweringly hot in that strange rock chamber. The moisture glistened on the rock walls, it lay in pools underfoot, and the very air was charged with steam. It rose from crevices, but mostly from a great yawning abyss from the further side of the chamber.

The men went round, eagerly exploring the corners and crannies. But even the Black Hawk himself was compelled to admit at last that there was not a fissure or a crevice of any kind.

Yet, when he came to think matters out, and to calculate distances, he realised—for the first time in his life—that the end of the Long Cave must be remarkably near to the steam cavern.

The cave he had in mind was a good deal further along the wall of the great cavern; but it did not cut straight back into the rock, but went at a tangent—and thus must inevitably come in his direction. It was called the Long Cave, because the front section of it was roomy and dry and made an excellent store chamber. Towards the rear, however, the cave narrowed, and the floor tilted sharply upwards, and it penetrated deeply into the rock, and at the very end there was a great deal of moisture; and at certain periods steam arose in clouds. Owing to the steam, and to the continuous heat, no man had ever ventured to penetrate the inner depths of the Long Cave.

It was for this reason that the Black Hawk had hoped. It had come to him in a flood of memory that there might be a direct link—a channel—a continuation of the tunnel. But this careful examination now seemed to give that theory the lie.

"'Tis an idle dream," grunted Jonathan Betts disconsolately.

But his leader would not yet give in. He walked slowly towards the edge of the abyss. This was a fearsome and awe-inspiring spot. The steam chamber, for the most part, had a level floor. But all along one side of it there was a great crust in the rock floor—and for some yards across, with steam arising from the depths, there was a great chasm. Far, far below, water could be heard bubbling and swirling. It was boiling water,

and at regular intervals that water welled right up, flooding the cavern itself. It was a natural geyser.

"What time is it?" asked the Black Hawk suddenly. "Look ye, Jonathan! The boiling water will not arise for a clear two hours—mayhap three. That gives us time."

"Time for what?"

"Bring one of the torches and have it secured to two ropes, so that it can be lowered—and in such a way that the ropes themselves will not burn," ordered Simeon Harke.

The torch was soon prepared. One rope sufficed, and the torch itself was fixed into a kind of cradle, so that it swung horizontally, the flame a good distance from the rope itself. Then Simeon Harke stood on the rocky edge of the abyss, and the torch was lowered into the steamy depths.

"'Tis possible that a crevice exists below this level," he explained. "If so, it can be explored."

No man would have dreamed of lowering himself into that abyss where the water boiled and surged at the bottom—but the circumstances were now desperate. The Black Hawk and his men were trapped, and here there was a possibility—a very slim possibility—of defeating the enemy.

Not only the Hawk, but many of the others stood at the rocky edge, gazing down eagerly as the torch, flaring eerily in the steam, went lower and lower. Thirty feet down—fifty—sixty—

"Ah!" muttered Simeon Harke.

He swung the torch further over to the wet, gleaming side, and there, sure enough, was a deep gash in the wall—a fissure, large enough to admit of two or three men. There seemed to be a floor to it, too, and it cut blackly into the rocks.

"'Tis a tunnel!" shouted the Black Hawk exultantly. "See, men? A tunnel leading into the rock—and, haply, communicating with the Long Cave."

"Ay, but think of the risk!" muttered Jonathan, shuddering. "To reach that opening, we need to descend ropes, and if a man should slip he would plunge down—"

"Is this a time to hesitate?" broke in the Black Hawk harshly. "If we hesitate we are lost indeed! Here, John Wren, there is work for you."

The man addressed was smaller than his companions—a wiry, lean, evil-faced individual. He came forward fearfully.

"Sir Chief, what would ye have me do?" he asked tremulously.

"Ropes will be lowered, and you will get down, enter that fissure, and explore it," ordered the Black Hawk. "You will take the torch, and—"

"No, I dare not!" gasped the other, cringing away. "What if the rope breaks? Far below the water boils—"

"Dog!" raved Simeon Harke in sudden fury. "Do ye dare to disobey my orders? I say that ye shall descend!"

John Wren set his ugly jaw stubbornly.

"Nay, Sir Chief! Never will I consent!" he exclaimed. "Strike me down if ye will, but—"

"May your marrows rot!" bellowed the Black Hawk. "So ye refuse to obey orders? Then, vermin, ye shall tell us what the bathing is like!"

And with one tremendous blow the Black Hawk swept the doomed man off the edge of the chasm.

He went over and plunged down, and one hideous, screeching cry escaped him.

Plop!

The sound came up with singular clarity to the half-stunned men who stood at the top. Then there was a dread silence, except for a bubbling and hissing. Not another cry from that unfortunate. Mercifully, he must have died even as he plunged in.

"Now!" snarled Simeon Harke, staring round. "Another man of you shall go down! You, Thomas Reed! Will ye go, or would ye prefer to follow John Wren?"

CHAPTER 9.

The Attack in the Rear.

AFTER such an example of the Black Hawk's ruthless methods, Reed raised no objections. He was trembling in every limb; he was terrified of that descent; but, at least, by going down on the rope he had a chance of returning alive.

All the other men were impressed. The majority of them were brutes, and they approved of their leaders' action. He was a man, indeed. He would not suffer cowards or rebels. They quite failed to understand that if the Black Hawk had been a real leader of men, he would have undertaken that hazardous journey himself.

Ropes were quickly made ready, and they were secured round Thomas Reed's body. The man, with trembling lips, only said one thing before he was lowered.

"Think ye that the boiling waters will rise ere I can come forth out of the fissure?" he asked, looking round appealingly. "For 'tis certain that the fissure itself will be flooded—"

"Still your fears," interrupted Simeon Harke. "There is yet two hours before the waters rise. Lower him, men!"

It was an eerie scene. There was the one flaming torch, far below, with the steam rising and curling all about it. And, at the top of the abyss, the men on the rock ledge, straining at the ropes, lowering their comrades. And above them all towered the Black Hawk.

This project was not so crazy as many of the men believed. It was, in fact, the result of careful calculation and shrewd deduction on Simeon Harke's part. No man had ever thought of looking for an opening down in that rock chasm—but in this emergency the Black Hawk was desperate. He would have looked anywhere. And if, by chance, he had

scored a bullseye, the whole situation would be changed.

It was his final throw. If this failed he would, he knew, be compelled to surrender to Nelson Lee. His men were getting into an ugly mood; their throats and tongues were already swollen by thirst, and in their madness, as like as not, they would turn upon him and take full charge.

Thomas Reed reached the fissure, and, standing there, vague in the rising steam, he looked like some monster of the pit itself. He cast off his ropes, seized the dangling torch, and freed this, too. The heat which arose from the bottom of the chasm was stifling, stupefying. The man staggered back into the crevice, and he really believed that he would never emerge from this trap alive. Yet there was a faint hope. If he could but make certain that the crevice was of no depth—that, in fact, it led nowhere—he could return, and then he would be hauled up again. He was tempted to turn back almost at once, but fear urged him onwards.

For if the Black Hawk should disbelieve, and send another man down, and the crevice proved to be of some length, then he—Reed—would be ruthlessly slain. Better to go and make sure.

He went on.

And soon he was slithering and sliding down a steep, smooth slope. The heat and smoke from his flaming torch half-blinded him. And he was horrified when he realised that the smoothness of the rock here was caused by the flooding of the tunnel. Boiling water surged through here at regular intervals throughout the day and night—week in, week out. It was impossible that this channel could lead to the Long Cave, otherwise the Long Cave itself would be flooded.

Then Reed made a discovery.

Whilst the smooth channel led straight downwards, unquestionably into the bowels of the earth—but to the very seat of the geyser—there was an opening in the rock wall to the left. And, peering through this, Reed saw that there was another narrow fissure, with a rough rock floor, worn smooth at the commencement. But the floor led upwards, and it was clear that the boiling waters, surging down the main fissure, only entered a short way, and were then baffled by the rising slope.

The man forced his way through and climbed. And it was only a short climb, for the fissure took a turn, and then there was a steep descent. There was no steam here now, and Reed caught his breath in gulpingly as he distinctly felt a current of cool, refreshing air blowing against his face.

"By my bones!" he muttered. "'Tis possible that Harke is right! There must be an opening here, or there would be no air current."

He felt safe now. He had passed through the danger zone. And his confidence returned. He hurried on, and he almost gave a cry of wild exultation as he began to recognise his surroundings. He ran now, and

very soon the flickering glow from his torch revealed numbers of casks and cases piled up against the rock walls. He was no longer in a tunnel, but in a great cave.

The Long Cave itself!

Fear had already left the man; excitement now took its place. Not ten minutes ago he had been rebellious against the Black Hawk; now he told himself that the Black Hawk was a leader of leaders. Here was a way of escape for them all! Here was a path by which they could emerge and take the rebellious people in the rear!

He fairly fought his way back, scrambling up the smooth slopes desperately. More than once he thought that he could not win through—for the return was a great deal more difficult than the outward journey.

But at last he stood upon the treacherous edge of the wet rock, with the chasm at his feet. Gazing upwards, he could see the Black Hawk far above. Men with flaming torches were standing by.

"Sir Chief!" almost croaked Thomas Reed, gazing up.

"Well, fool, what ails ye?" snarled Simeon Harke. "Ye return quickly! Methinks I must make this journey myself if I am to know the full truth."

"Nay, Sir Chief!" came the hoarse shout from below. "Ye are right! There is a tunnel, and it leads to the Long Cave! 'Tis possible for us all to escape!"

For one moment the Black Hawk was silent, almost stunned by this news, for he had never really believed that such good fortune would come his way. All the other men stood by, their faces expressive of tense and overwhelming excitement.

Then suddenly the Black Hawk broke the spell. He burst into a wild roar of noisy, triumphant laughter.

"Rot my bones! So the Long Cave may be reached?" he bellowed. "Well done, Thomas Reed! For this ye shall receive many privileges. Henceforth you can count yourself one of my close lieutenants. Hark ye, all! Let Thomas Reed be respected and obeyed, for he has my favour."

The ruffian below glowed with satisfaction. It had been worth the risk!

He was hauled up by the ropes, for already ominous bubblings and swirlings were to be heard far below, and there was a great deal more steam now than before. Evidently the Black Hawk had miscalculated. The next "eruption" of boiling water was imminent.

"We must wait, and now that we know what we do know, we can wait with calm mind," said Simeon Harke cunningly. "When the boiling water subside, then we can make the journey, and there will be time for us all to do so in safety. But tell me, Thomas Reed—tell me all that ye did discover."

Jonathan Betts and Reresby and Lane and the others crowded round. It was a short enough story that Reed told; he gave the details of the side fissure, explaining how the geyser waters flowed away down the main channel.

"And while the water bubbles up, we will amuse the fools in the great cavern who have erected the barricade," said the Black Hawk.

"Aye, 'tis an opportune moment, my men! Let us go to the barriers in force, and let us shout defiance, then we will appear to quarrel amongst ourselves, and I must quell the mutiny. Let the dogs think that most of ye are ripe for surrender, and that I, in my fury, will not permit it."

It was an excellent piece of strategy, and worthy of the Black Hawk's cunning.

Many of them, including the Hawk himself, went down the great tunnel, and, cursing savagely, they clawed at the barricades, and peered through at the many men who stood beyond on guard.

Nelson Lee himself was there, and by now the barrier had been made impregnable. Lee had received the assurance of many men that there was no possible "back door" out of this tunnel. Not a man had thought of the Long Cave, for it was a considerable distance away, and nobody associated it with this other tunnel.

"Well, Simeon Harke, are you of a different mind?" asked Lee.

"'Tis well for the people that ye are in command," sneered the Black Hawk. "Waters runs in their marrows, and but for your leadership they would be as docile as rabbits. 'Tis a fact I shall remember, Master Lee!"

"Do not provoke him, Sir Chief, I beg!" came the agitated voice of Jonathan Betts. "For is not Master Lee in a position of advantage? 'Twould be better for us to make terms——"

"Terms!" thundered the Black Hawk. "Bones and blood! Never! Get back, cattle! I am in command here—ay, in command of the entire community! Think ye that I accept the authority of this intruder?"

Nelson Lee listened grimly. A squabble arose, and it was evident that blows were exchanged. The men, apparently, were getting out of hand.

It was as well that the Black Hawk did not overdo this piece of play-acting—for a man of Lee's shrewd perception would have seen through it. It was, indeed, a risky proceeding; but it was engineered cleverly, and everything appeared natural. Arguing amongst themselves, the trapped pirates retired up the tunnel.

And Nelson Lee, who felt that it would now only be a matter of hours before the rascals surrendered, went with Dr. Otto to seek sleep. He needed sleep badly.

THE hours passed, and no sign came from the entrapped men. It was believed that they were sleeping further up the tunnel, exhausted by their long efforts. Perhaps they were quarrelling amongst themselves. In any case, this stubborn refusal to



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surrender could not continue for many hours. Throughout the cavern community, the people believed that the Black Hawk was done, and that his power had been wrested from him for ever.

But the Black Hawk was actually playing a trump card.

Soon after the boiling waters had subsided, after the geyser's next period, the Hawk himself led the way down into the fissure. Thomas Reed was with him, to act as guide. The others followed.

Two hours had elapsed before the last of the men had come down—for it was a long and tedious business. But at length they were all within the Long Cave. And by now night had come, although it made no difference to the pirates.

Here, in the Long Cave, there was food—and drink, too. For this cave contained many cases of food which had been stolen from the liner, *Torania*—on that dramatic occasion when the Black Hawk and his men had taken the old *Porto Marlo* out into the open sea, and had committed an act of sheer high seas piracy.

And amongst the many cases were some containing bottles of wine and even mineral waters—which the pirates had mistaken for wine. Food, too—biscuits, cheese, butter and the like.

In the darkness, and with great caution, dozens of the cases were broken open, and there squatted the desperate men, eating, drinking, and recovering their strength and vigour. Most of them had already slept, so the food and drink, on the top of that sleep, turned them into new men.

They were fired, too, by the spirit of their leader. He it was who had rescued them from that trap. Now they had a chance of recovering full power in the great cavern. They were an active, determined force. They were all armed, and the fight which was to take place must necessarily be a fight to a finish. If they gained a decisive victory, the revolt would be over, and the Black Hawk's power would be greater than ever.

Simeon Harke himself was fully aware of the critical nature of the situation. He was in no hurry. It would be better to wait until the night was well advanced. By then the people would be sleepy; they would be lulled into a feeling that all was well.

The Black Hawk was counting fully upon the element of surprise. It was an enormously important factor. He would make his attack in the rear—and would spring it like a bombshell.

He possessed the key which alone unlocked the heavy doors guarding the front of the Long Cave. And now he used this key, opening one of the doors ever so slightly. But he need not have been so cautious, for no men was hereabouts. The cave was situated at the end of the quaint township, and just in front, there was a wide roadway of rock, curving round. Fully three hundred yards away men were standing in groups round the great barricades. The Black Hawk

gazed upon their backs. Not a man was even looking in his direction. There was no sign of Nelson Lee—for Lee was still sleeping. He had left instructions that he was to be awakened if any fresh developments took place. But within the tunnel all was quiet—which was not surprising, seeing that the pirates were no longer there.

"Twill be easy, Sir Chief," whispered Betts, as he peered through the opening.

"Aye, we'll cut the monst'ers to pieces!" growled the Black Hawk. "Get the men ready, Jonathan! With full stomachs, they are bold enough! We wait no longer."

The word went round, and the men, eager and excited, withdrew their weapons, and gripped them with determination.

Then, at a word from the leader, the cave doors were swung open, and the whole pirate force ran out. Yet not a man uttered a cry.

So complete was the surprise that the defenders, at the barricades, knew nothing until the attackers had covered half the distance from the Long Cave. Not until then was the move seen.

And even when it was seen, the people were so staggered that they were momentarily paralysed. They could not be blamed for their scare; for they were peace-loving people, and had never really believed that their revolt would come to a hand-to-hand conflict. Moreover, the surprise was devastating.

"Faith, am I mad?" shouted one man. "'Tis the Black Hawk himself—and his men! They come with bared swords!"

"But 'tis impossible!" croaked another. "They are entrapped in the tunnel——"

"Your weapons, men!" bellowed another, more quick-witted than the rest. "'Tis no time to answer riddles! The dogs have escaped, and they attack us!"

Then, all in a moment, pandemonium was let loose.

The shouts and cries of the defenders were drowned by the triumphant yells from the pirates. Then came a great crash. The Black Hawk and his men were powerful ruffians, and they were trained, too, in the brutal art of fighting. They swept amongst the people, scattering them, maiming them, and striking terror into most hearts.

Nelson Lee, awakening suddenly, in Dr. Otto's humble dwelling, heard the conflict. In a moment he was on his feet, and in another moment he was out of the house and running.

"By James!" he exclaimed savagely.

Somebody had blundered. The barricades were intact—and yet the pirates had escaped. Then there was another way out of the tunnel! Lee, in that moment, was filled with a burning fury. He did not think that he had been betrayed, but it was obvious that the Black Hawk knew more of the cavern's secrets than the other people.

Only once did Nelson Lee pause. He had on him some rockets. He and Nipper had carried them when they had gone out on their night jaunt. And some hours earlier Lee had cleverly contrived one rocket out

of three. They were small, but intensely powerful. And he believed that by effecting the change, the triple rocket would carry to the very roof of the cavern, and emerge into the open air. He had only prepared it in the event of an emergency which he had believed would never arise.

Yet it had arisen! And his first task now was to "plant" the rocket firmly, and to light the patent releasing fuse.

With a sizzling roar the rocket shot upwards—up it went, far, far into the vague dome of the cavern. Some distance up there was another tremendous report, and the rocket, slewing off, and taking another course, continued its upward flight.

Lee did not wait to see the end—for his attention was distracted by wild shouts. He turned and saw that the people were fleeing. The Black Hawk and his men had gained the upper hand, and were in full pursuit.

And Nelson Lee saw his opportunity.

Running forward, he shouted at the full pitch of his lungs, urging the people to rally. Men were running from all the houses, they were coming up from every side. They met after converging upon the big open space in the centre of the "town."

"Hold!" thundered Lee. "Are you going to let the Black Hawk master you? Come with me—to the attack! If you fail now, you fail for ever!"

Words like these had a tremendous effect. Many of the men shouted aloud in their new enthusiasm. They rallied magnificently. And there, in that open space, the stand was made.

CHAPTER 10.

The Rocket.

MANY a long day would pass before Lord Dorrimore and his companions would forget the wild scene that eventful night, in the village of the Beast Men.

There was no question about the friendliness of the primitive natives. Lord Dorrimore, Nipper, Handforth, Amanda, and Umlosi were the guests of honour. They were placed in the centre of an enormous circle, and their hosts, grinning and chattering joyously, brought them strange foods. It would have been risky not to eat the stuff, so they managed, somehow. But it was an effort.

This happened in the afternoon, long before sundown. It was afterwards, in the dusk, that a number of great fires were lit, and the guests squatted in the centre of these fires. All around them the Beast Men made merry, dancing, capering, and, in fact, indulging in a wild orgy of primitive merry-making to celebrate this great occasion.

The village was situated about two miles on the other side of the "crater" opening. It was on rising ground, and, near by, there were many clumps of the strange fungus. The huts of the village were composed,

mainly, of dried creepers, cunningly worked together. And Dorrie was intensely interested in the stone implements of the natives. These people were singularly akin to prehistoric man.

"Can't we go yet?" asked Handforth, after night had descended.

"My dear kid, you don't understand the primitive mind," replied Dorrie, with a sigh. "I've had more than a taste of it—and I know! The beggars will keep up this prancing and capering until dawn—and if we suggest going before then, we shall offend them. An' we don't want to offend them. They're friendly now, and it will pay us to keep in their good books."

"Wise words, N'Kose," came a rumble from Umlosi, who was squatting down and accepting the situation with all the patience of his race.

"What's more," went on Dorrie, "as the night advances, the revelry will become wilder, so you'd better be prepared. There's no tellin' exactly what will happen. Our job is to squat here and take everything calmly."

It was much easier to sit there calmly now. For they knew that Nelson Lee was safe, and that all was well in the big cavern. Nipper himself felt strangely at peace with all the world. After a while he and Handforth and Amanda slumbered as they sat—and Dorrie and Umlosi did not disturb them. In spite of all the uncouth sounds around those young people, they slept. And the Beast Men were far too occupied in their revelry to take any notice.

"As long as they don't ask us to join in, they can keep it up as long as they like," said Dorrie comfortably. "Anyhow, they will have worn themselves out by the mornin', and then we shall be allowed to quietly slip off."

His prophesy was accurate. For as the night advanced, so the Beast Men became wilder and wilder in their dancing and in their antics. Many of the women, similarly clothed in creeper costumes, joined in the dancing. But no children were to be seen—they were kept within the huts. The woman, Dorrie noted, with a sense of shock, were amazingly different from the men. Their skins were undoubtedly white, and their features were by no means uncomely. Unlike the men, their faces were quite hairless, and although the hair upon their heads was allowed to grow long and unkempt, the effect was not displeasing. The women of this extraordinary tribe were more like prehistoric women than the men were like prehistoric men. They seemed to have stepped out of the pages of a natural history book.

Dorrie knew that it was impossible to judge the people at the present moment. They were under the influence of a tremendous emotion; and it would take them the whole night to get over it. Dorrie began wondering if this village constituted the whole tribe. There were far more people here than the village itself could hold. They must have come from other little settlements, which were

dotted here and there over the island. This, in fact, was a sort of gathering of the clans.

And when the revelry was at its wildest, and when Dorrie's thoughts were far away from Lee and the Black Hawk and the people of the cavern, something happened to remind him with a sharp jar.

"Great glory!" he ejaculated suddenly. "Look, Umlosi!"

"I have already seen, N'Kose!" said Umlosi unemotionally.

The thing they saw was a burst of red fire. It appeared to come from the ground itself, and for some moments Dorrie was puzzled. He had caught a glimpse of a few sparks, and the red glow changed the landscape, a mile or two ahead, into a blood-red radiance for some moments.

Then the phenomenon suddenly ceased.

"You know what that means, don't you?" asked Dorrie sharply.

And so charged with concern was his tone that Nipper instantly awoke. One look at Dorrie's face told him that something was amiss.

"What is it, Dorrie?" asked Nipper quickly.

"You didn't see the rocket, did you?"

"Rocket!"

"That's what it was," replied Dorrie, and he briefly explained.

"But—but I don't understand!" said Nipper.

Handforth and Amanda were awake now, too, and they were listening with bated breaths.

"That red glow was caused by a rocket—and it was a distress rocket!" replied Dorrie. "One thing is absolutely certain—the rocket was sent up by Lee. Why should he send it up if everything was all right in the cavern? It did not quite reach the open air—but burst just below the rim of the crater, and only the red glare appeared. And even now I can't understand how the rocket came so high."

"Perhaps the guv'nor fixed two or three of them together, or something," said Nipper shrewdly. "He had a few of the rockets in his pockets. Oh, my hat! What do you think it means?"

"Trouble!" replied Dorrie promptly. "An' what's more, we're goin' along to the rim of the crater to have a look. I've got some binoculars here—"

"So have I!" exclaimed Nipper quickly.

"Good enough! We ought to be able to see the cavern floor quite clearly through the glasses—and we shall be able to get an idea of what's happenin'," said Dorrie. "Come on! Everybody! I doubt if the Beast Men will even know if we've gone. They're beyond it now. They're in a frenzy."

The possibility that some dramatic developments had occurred in the cavern, with Nelson Lee in peril, made them all reckless. They left their places in the centre of the great circle, and such was the preoccupation of the primitive tribe that no notice was taken of the guests as they literally pushed

their way through the capering, frenzied circle. Friendly as this demonstration was, the little party was glad enough to be free of the Beast Men's village. Having passed through the outskirts of the settlement, Dorrie and his companions broke into a run.

"Think they'll come after us, sir?" asked Handforth breathlessly.

"I doubt it—and, in any case, they're not after our blood now," replied Dorrie. "Let them get on with it!"

"I wonder why the guv'nor sent up that rocket?" said Nipper. "The dickens of it is, even if we discover he is in danger, we can't do anything. The Black Hawk blocked the tunnel, so we can't get down to the lower level—and we're hardly likely to take a ride down on Pteradactyls!"

"But we have ropes," said Dorrie.

They did not do much talking as they ran. Any kind of talk, in fact, was idle. They knew nothing yet. The first thing was to get to the crater, and gaze down into that vast void.

Some of the ground was rough, but, on the whole, the adventurers met with no serious difficulties.

They came upon the crater edge suddenly. Hurrying round some projecting rocks, they found the ground sloping sharply—and there, just ahead, there was the vast void, stretching away for a full mile.

"Careful here!" said Dorrie sharply. "One slip, an' it's Kingdom Come!"

They had not been on this side of the cavern before, and the rock edge was not so safe. However, right near the edge, they found the rock to be level. And, going down full length, they wormed their way forwards until their heads were craning over the rock lip.

"Oh!" murmured Amanda, with a little shiver.

But Handforth was holding her. The sight was enough to send anybody dizzy. They were gazing straight down, through two thousand feet of space. And there, far, far below, the floor of the cavern, nearly ten miles in extent, was spread out. It was like looking down upon a great map.

"Can't see anything!" muttered Handforth.

The lake was visible, of course, and so were the rock roads and the fields and the township itself, nestling against the great rock wall. But the whole scene was hazy and blurry, owing to the heat waves which rose up from the continuously burning gas flares.

"Wau! It seemeth, N'Kose, that a battle rageth!" said Umlosi tensely. "Observe the many running figures, like unto ants."

Umlosi's eyesight was uncannily clear. Lord Dorrimore trusted to the binoculars he held. By now he had obtained the focus—and so had Nipper with his own glasses.

The scene below was brought much nearer.

Through the glasses, Nipper could see something which caused him to draw his breath in sharply. There were crowds of men in the big open space of the township,

and stretching from there in straggling mobs to the lake edge.

"They're fighting!" said Nipper eagerly. "Yes, that's it! It's the Black Hawk and his gang."

"But it's impossible!" said Handforth. "Mr. Lee said that the Black Hawk was bottled up."

"Then he must have become unbottled," retorted Nipper. "Through the glasses I can recognise them easily—I can even see their clothing and their great beards. By Jove! They're in retreat, too! There are hundreds of people against them, and they're fighting like mad!"

"Let's have a look!" begged Handforth. "Be a sport!"

Nipper passed the glasses across. What he had said was true. Under Nelson Lee's leadership, the people of the cavern had rallied, and now, in great force, they were hurling themselves upon the enemy. The Black Hawk and his men, surprised by the ferocity of the counter-attack, were giving ground. They had believed that they could quickly regain control. But they were finding that the plan, in practice, was totally different from what it had been in theory.

There was a new spirit abroad!

Many men were injured, a few killed, and the battle went on. Those far above were watching fascinatedly—for they could follow the progress of the battle fairly clearly.

Nelson Lee, fighting gamely, leading the more sturdy men into the heart of the attack, was inspiring them all. The detective had already seen something which gave him fresh hope. The ruffians were giving way—and behind them was the lake.

"Come, men!" thundered Lee. "One great charge now! We have them at our mercy! We can drive them into the lake—and that will be their finish."

"Hurrah!" went up a wild, triumphant cheer, the echo of which reached even to the ears of the watchers above.

And then came the charge—reckless, courageous, and undertaken with tremendous vigour. It was more than the Black Hawk and his men could stand. Some of them fell. Others stumbled and backed away. And in less than a minute they were all running, and the defenders, under Lee, were hot after them.

In vain the Black Hawk attempted to rally his men for a stand. There was no time—no room. They were practically at the edge of the lake, and Lee and his "army" swept on. And the desperate men were trapped. There was no retreat. In front of them the charging mob, and behind them the lake.

"Jump!" thundered the Black Hawk, as a sudden idea came to him. "Split my wind-pipe! Those of ye who can swim, swim to the great steel vessel! Those of ye who cannot swim may drown, and 'tis all ye're fit for!"

As he spoke he leapt and plunged into the water. Within a few seconds all his followers were with him, and they were swimming strongly. Tremendous shouts arose from all along the lake side, and the people believed themselves to be victorious.

It was Nelson Lee who appreciated the cunning of the Black Hawk's move.

Driven into a corner, desperate, his plans all awry, Simeon Harke had made the only possible move. His idea was to take possession of the rusty-sided old Porto Marlo!

From above, Lord Dorrimore and his companions saw exactly what had happened. They saw the Black Hawk's men swarm up the sides of the old cruiser. They were in possession.

"Well, that's the end of the battle—for the time bein'!" said Dorrie. "The Black Hawk and his crew have grabbed the battleship, and they can hold it, too. The excitement's over."

He was right.

The Black Hawk had not gained the victory he had anticipated. But he was at liberty—he was in possession of the Porto Marlo, and nearly all his men were with him. Aboard that old craft they could defy every attack.

And the situation was more interesting than ever. For it was evident that Nelson Lee and his party were not destined—yet—to bring peace to the strange People of the Mist. There was much work for them to do.

THE END.

(Nelson Lee versus the Black Hawk. Sensational scenes in next week's All-Thrilling story of Nelson Lee & Co. on the Island above the Clouds. Look out for "The Cavern of Doom!")

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A Cheery Word With Your Editor

My Dear Chums,

Mr. Brooks' detective - thrillers dealing with the adventures of Nelson Lee & Co. on the Island above the clouds are the real goods, are they not? Remarkable, says you. Simply amazing! Absolutely startling! Well, you're right there.

I told you they would be something out of the ordinary, and that was putting it mildly. In point of fact, they have turned out even more sensational than I first thought, as Mr. Brooks develops the theme through each story in the series. I am sure you are all anxious to get hold of next week's story. I don't blame you. It certainly gets you that way.

And because this series has proved such a complete success, I have decided to ask Mr. Brooks to work out an extra-special startling Christmas series. It may seem a trifle early to be thinking of Christmas when October is yet to finish, but we editors have to look a good way in advance, and fix up programmes for weeks ahead.

Of course, Mr. Brooks is jolly keen to write this Christmas series, and he is now deep in a plot, which, for Yuletide sensations and thrills, will want a lot of beating. But this is a treat about which we will talk later on. For the moment, don't miss "The Cavern of Doom," next week's detective-thriller.



Letters to the Editor
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James Whittit, 1411, Fifteen Street East, Calgary, Alberta, **Canada**, wants correspondents.

Michael Chong, 71-7, Woodhouse Road, **Singapore**, wants a correspondent.

Ronald W. H. Coles, 5, Salisbury Terrace, Frome, **Somerset**, wants to

hear from stamp collectors.

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P. Brown, 97, Bright Street, Roker, Sunderland, Co. **Durham**, wants a correspondent (15-16) in Australia, Canada, or India.

Sensation At St. Frank's! Handforth Elected Junior Skipper!

COCK O' THE WALK!



Captain of the Remove! For terms Edward Oswald Handforth has dreamed of attaining that exalted rank, And how his ambition is realised is related in this fine school story.

From Information Received.

THERE was no doubt that Oswald Handforth was perfectly serious about the forthcoming election. The Remove's jape was not only working, but progressing with undreamt-of smoothness. In spite of a score of hints, Handforth was as blind to the actual truth as ever. He fondly imagined that the election was genuine, and that he had gained the support of the voters.

Reggio Pitt had suggested that they should all promise to support Handy and vote for him, only to reveal to him after the election that he had been japed. That should have been enough to give Handy a lesson never to try such stunts as putting up for captaincy again.

But Church and McClure were uneasy. They tried hard to show to their leader the situation.

At bed-time they tried again to make him see reason.

"Once more, Handy—just once more!" urged Church, almost tearfully. "We're with you, old man—we're on your side—we're your pals!"

"Hear, hear!" said McClure. "You can always count on us, Handy."

Handforth regarded them suspiciously.

"You can't get round me like that——" he began.

"We're trying to open your eyes to the truth," said Church clutching at his leader's

arm. "Now, keep cool! Don't chuck the bed at me, or push my head through the wall! You're being fooled! The chaps are having a joke at your expense, and they haven't the faintest intention of making you skipper."

"By George!" said Handforth thickly. "So you're at it again, are you? Do you think I haven't got eyes? Do you think I was born without ears?"

"Well, no——"

"Do you think I've got no brains?"

"Yes——"

"What?" snapped Handforth.

"Er—no!" said Church hastily. "You've got brains, Handy!"

"Even a sheep has got brains!" murmured McClure.

Whether Handforth heard the latter remark or not remained in doubt, for at that moment the door of the dormitory softly opened, and a face looked in. Handforth gave it one glance, and frowned.

"Take that thing away!" he said curtly.

Teddy Long, the owner of the face, slid into the dormitory.

"What thing?" he asked nervously.

"That thing you've just brought in—that thing that people call your face!" said Edward Oswald. "They only call it that out of politeness. I'll give you just ten seconds to get outside into the corridor——"

"But—but this is urgent!" interrupted

Teddy Long quickly. "I've got some news!" Handforth regarded him grimly. Teddy Long was the sneak of the Remove, and "news" with him was merely another word for scandal. Teddy made a regular hobby of going about the school, bartering scurrilous gossip. Sometimes he made quite a little cash by this method—sometimes he received his deserts.

"News?" said Handforth ominously. "Great Scott! Have you got the nerve to come here with some of your beastly scandal-mongering? Clear out, you fibbing little worm! I wouldn't believe——"

"Oh, but really, Handy!" interrupted Long. "This—this is something special! It's the truth, too—honest Injun!"

"Honest Injun be blowed!" snapped Handforth. "You don't know the meaning of the giddy expression!"

"It's worth ten bob to you," said Teddy, instinctively backing away.

"Why, what the——"

"Or—or more!" went on Long, getting his words out so fast that they tumbled over one another. "Whack out ten bob, Handy, and I'll give you some information that'll make your hair stand on end. It's worth every penny of the money, because you'll be able to ruin the whole plot!"

Handforth forgot his grim intentions.

"Plot?" he said. "What plot?"

"This—this affair of your being elected skipper," said Teddy eagerly. "It's only a jape, you know. They're fooling you!"

Church and McClure sadly shook their heads. If Handforth would coolly swamp them with water for saying these things, what would he do to Teddy Long? The chap's life was in positive danger.

"Go on!" said Handforth, deadly calm.

"It's all a jape, you know," explained Teddy fluently—his quickness of speech occasioned by the fact that he was telling the truth for once. "Pitt and Fullwood and De Valerie and the others went round, warning us. I'm supposed to be pledged to secrecy—but I think it's a dirty trick to play such a low-down dodge on a fine chap like you, Handy! I thought I'd warn you!"

"For ten bob?" asked Handforth darkly.

"Oh, well——"

"You young blackmailer! I don't believe a word——"

"Oh, but it's honour bright!" said Teddy Long. "Listen, Handy! The chaps are making it a Form jape. They're going to spoof you up at your meeting to-morrow, and then they're going to elect you by a full lot of votes. Everybody's going to vote for you, and the idea is for you to kid yourself that you're captain."

Church shrugged his shoulders.

"There you are!" he said gruffly.

"Do you believe this piffle?" roared Handforth.

"Of course we believe it!" snapped McClure. "Haven't we been telling you the same thing for hours? But we only guessed it—we didn't know the actual truth. We weren't included in the jape."

"You see?" asked Long eagerly. "These chaps believe it, Handy! And it's absolutely true! Take my tip, and show everybody that you're not to be fooled! They're all laughing up their sleeves—and after you've been elected they're going to have a tremendous rag. It's only a spoof, you know—the Remove has decided to carry on without a skipper until Hamilton comes back. You'll be elected, and you'll be kicked out of the captaincy within ten minutes! They're simply going to make a silly goat of you—and if this warning isn't worth ten bob, I'll eat my hat!"

Teddy Long paused, quite out of breath. But he had blurted out the full information, and he waited with keen anxiety. It was quite characteristic of him to sell the Form for a few shillings.

"Oh!" said Handforth at last. "Oh-ho!"

"Well, it's a good thing to know how the land lies!" growled Church. "You're a bit of a filthy blabber, Long, but I'm not denying that I'm glad to hear the news. We suspected something like this all along, didn't we, Mac?"

"We didn't suspect it—we knew it!" said McClure.

Edward Oswald Handforth stared at them in amazement.

"You're both mad!" he said. "This chap's the biggest liar under the sun! Do you mean to say you're fooled by his rot? It's only a yarn—invented on purpose to rook me of some money. I don't believe a word of it—not a giddy syllable. This election is genuine!"

Church and McClure stared at their leader with stupefied astonishment.

"But—but can't you see?" asked Church feebly. "Handy, can't you take warning? Long's telling the truth! This election is just a jape, and if you go on with it you'll make yourself the laughing-stock of the school!"

"Instead of being Form skipper, you'll be the butt of everybody's jokes!" said McClure, nearly on the point of tears. "Give Long his ten bob, and kick him out! He's saved you from——"

"I'll show you what I'm going to do with Long!" interrupted Handforth fiercely. "No, you don't, my lad!" he added, grabbing Teddy before he could escape. "By George! I'll teach you to come here with these dotty inventions. Ten bob, eh? I never knew you were an optimist before!"

Quite helpless, Church and McClure watched. It was incredible—it was unthinkable—but it was an undeniable fact that Handforth refused to believe the truth! This wasn't one of Teddy's usual lies—it rang true. Besides, Church and McClure had the evidence of their own senses to guide them. Handforth was so obsessed with his dream of power that he was as blind as a bat, and as deaf as a post.

With pleading voices, Handforth's chums urged him to be careful. He refused to listen. They did everything within their power to convince him, but he remained unconvinced.

"Oh, all right!" said Church hoarsely. "Go to your doom! Mac and I wash our hands of you entirely—you can jolly well walk into the trap, and it'll serve you right."

Handforth wasn't listening. He was quite busy with Teddy Long. This unfortunate young gentleman was in no condition to make any loud protest. He was lying face downwards on Handforth's bed, and Handforth was sitting on the back of his head. Any sounds that Teddy uttered were smothered in the recesses of the bedclothes.

"We'll soon deal with this young blighter!" said Handforth curtly.

He was thoroughly indignant. Indeed, even if he had believed the story—even if he had been convinced—he would have treated Teddy Long in just the same way. For there was no denying that the young rascal was a black traitor, and that his present mission was the act of a worthless cad. He deserved drastic punishment.

"I'll show you how we deal with these cases," said Handforth. "Now that I'm Form captain, I'm going to be more strict than ever."

He grabbed the empty bolster-slip—the one which Church had inadvertently ripped open—and with a few convulsive movements he forced it over Teddy Long's writhing form. He tied the end of it round Teddy's neck, and the junior was helpless in the improvised sack. The bolster-slip was so narrow that he could not even move his arms.

"Now, lemme see," said Handforth thoughtfully. "H'm! This isn't quite good enough. We need— By George, I know! Church, the paste!"

"Paste?" growled Church, glaring.

"Off the mantelpiece!"

Church fetched a small pot of paste from the mantelpiece, and watched with interest. Handforth jerked Teddy Long round, and his face became liberated from the bedclothes.

"Help!" gasped the victim. "Hi! Fire! Police! Leggo— Ugh!"

Handforth stuck the paste-brush into Teddy's mouth, and the cries ceased.

"Every time you yell, you'll get another mouthful!" he said firmly.

With a number of deft sweeps, Handforth smothered Teddy Long's face with paste. Then he took a palm-full of the stuff, and rubbed it into the junior's hair as though it were a shampoo. Within a few seconds the sneak of the Remove was looking pasty in more than one sense.

"Now!" said Handforth cheerfully.

He bent down, scooped up two handfuls of the loose feathers, and tipped them over Teddy's Long's head. The result was startling.

Mr. Crowell Sees an Apparition!

"MY only hat!" said Church, grinning. That paste had done the trick. Feathers clung to every atom of Teddy Long's face and head. It was only necessary to throw the fragments of fluff at him, and they stuck. There was now

nothing to be seen but a writhing bolster-slip with a ball of feathers at the top. As a final move, Handforth took a fist full of feathers, and forced them into Teddy's mouth.

"Ten bob, eh?" said Handforth. "That's all the ten bob you'll get!"

He heaved the junior off the bed, carried him to the door, and pushed him out into the passage. He stood him upright, and allowed him to lean against the wall. Then he closed the door, and went across to a wash-basin.

"And that's that!" he said calmly.

Handforth, in fact, had been cool and deliberate throughout the performance. The leader of Study D could be either very excited and violent—or very cool and calculating. He was a fellow of extremes, and he was now in one of his latter moods.

"I'm not denying that Long deserved it, but you might at least heed his warning," said McClure. "You're being spoofed, Handy—"

"There's another bolster-slip here," said Handforth deliberately. "There's plenty more paste, and heaps more feathers. Are you going to dry up?"

"Oh, you can boil yourself!" said McClure crossly.

In the meantime, the unfortunate Teddy Long was fighting his own battle out in the deserted corridor. For the first moment or two his time was fully occupied with the task of emptying his mouth of down. He had swallowed a few feathers, and they were feeling rather rummy. And he nearly sent forth a series of wild howls, but checked himself in time. What would a master or a prefect say if one of them happened to come along?

Teddy would have no compunction in sneaking, but he had an instinctive feeling that he would be included in the possible punishment. His only safe method was to get back to his own dormitory, and induce Hubbard—who shared the room—to help him.

So far he was fairly safe. Everything was quiet, and he was at least standing on his feet. But what would happen when he tried to walk? Undoubtedly, he would topple over, and then his plight would be hopeless. At all costs he must remain in a perpendicular attitude.

"Oh, goodness!" breathed Long miserably. "What a fool I was to try anything with that beast, Handy! Well, thank goodness he's not going to be skipper! Life wouldn't be worth living if he was really elected!"

He ventured upon a hop—since this was the only possible means of progression. And, once started, he found that unless he kept it up, he would topple over. He progressed down the dim corridor in a series of hopping jumps.

And then, as one might have expected, Mr. Crowell bobbed up again. But there was no coincidence about it this time. The Form-master was coming back to see if Handforth & Co. were quiet, according to his instructions. Mr. Crowell wanted to make quite sure before he retired.

He turned the angle of the corridor, and

then he halted, his flesh creeping slightly. Mr. Crowell wasn't a superstitious man, but he was nearly startled out of his wits by the apparition which appeared before his eyes.

The lights had been turned out in the corridor, and there was only the moonbeams coming through the overhead skylights. A white figure was coming towards him in a series of weird, spasmodic hops. And the figure was certainly nothing human—a long, ghostly white thing with an enormous knob of fluffiness at the top.

"Good heavens!" gasped Mr. Crowell, starting back.

For a brief moment he simply held his breath, quite unable to form any conclusions. And then the spell was broken. The "ghost" toppled over with a very solid thud.

"Crikey!" ejaculated the ghost painfully.

"Oh!" said Mr. Crowell, his voice grim.

"Oh, indeed!"

He strode forward, annoyed with himself for being even momentarily startled.

With a snap he switched on one of the electric lights, and he gazed at the writhing form on the floor with amazement tinged with deep suspicion.

"Upon my word!" he said curtly. "What is the meaning of this? Boy, who are you?"

"Oh, help!" moaned Teddy Long, acutely alarmed. "Pup-please, sir, I—I'm Long, sir!"

Mr. Crowell made no comment for a moment. He recognised the junior's voice, and there was no need for any other identification. This was a case where two and two made four. A bolster-slip—and feathers. And not twenty minutes earlier Mr. Crowell had seen similar things in Handforth's dormitory.

"This is outrageous!" said Mr. Crowell, as he bent down and unfastened the top of the bolster-slip. "Careful, my boy. Oh, well, it cannot be helped now!" he added, as the linen ripped up, and as Teddy Long struggled free. "I presume that Handforth is responsible for this—this outrage?"

"Please, yes, sir," said the feathers.

There was no sign of a face, but a mere suspicion of a gap where the mouth was situated.

"What is this stuff—glue?" demanded Mr. Crowell angrily. "H'm! Paste, by the smell of it!" he went on, as he took a handful of the feathers from Long's head. "Of all the extraordinary tricks. I can only assume, Long, that you annoyed Handforth very greatly, for it is not like him to behave in this fashion. Come with me at once!"

Long wanted to blurt out everything, for his very first instinct, whenever he was caught by a master, was to sneak. But he had no opportunity, for Mr. Crowell grasped him by the arm, and led him towards Handforth & Co.'s dormitory. The Form-master was not ignorant of Teddy's character, and he was fairly convinced that Edward Oswald had had certain justification in taking such drastic measures.

And Mr. Crowell did not exaggerate the enormity of the "outrage," either. A little

paste would do Long no harm—in fact, it would probably do him good, since it would compel him to indulge in a thorough wash for once. And Mr. Crowell knew that Handforth had not deliberately destroyed a bolster in order to achieve his end. However, the matter could not be allowed to rest.

Lights were out in the dormitory when Mr. Crowell entered, but it only took him a moment to switch them on. Handforth and Church and McClure were in bed, and the litter had been tidied up. At least, the feathers were out of sight, although Mr. Crowell had certain suspicions as to what had become of them.

"Handforth, did you do this to Long?" snapped Mr. Crowell.

"Yes, sir."

"What for?"

"He deserved it, sir," said Handforth simply.

"That is no answer——"

"I didn't deserve it, sir!" broke in Teddy, whose face was just beginning to appear. "I came and did Handforth a good turn, and this is all I got for it! I'm all stuck, sir. I can hardly talk without my lips sticking together!"

"Let's hope they remain sealed!" said Handforth tartly.

"Come, come!" broke in Mr. Crowell. "Are you presuming to wrangle in my very presence? I want the truth, Handforth. Why did you perform this—this extraordinary trick upon the boy?"

"Sorry, sir—I can't say any more!" growled Handforth. "As Form captain, it was my duty to give him a lesson. I'm willing to take my gruel, if you're going to cut up rusty about it, though."

"I fancy I have every reason to—ahem—cut up rusty!" retorted Mr. Crowell coldly. "And what is this item of news you give me, Handforth? Since when have you been captain of the Form?"

"I'm as good as elected, sir——"

"That's just it, sir!" broke in Teddy Long excitedly. "Handforth's being fooled, sir—and I came along to warn him."

"Fooled?"

"Of course he is, sir! The whole Remove is in the jape!" panted Long. "They're going to elect Handy to-morrow, and make him believe that he's skipper—and it's all spoofo. And just because I come along and tip him the wink, he does this. I—I hope you'll flog him, sir."

Mr. Crowell stroke his chin.

"An extraordinary story," he said curtly. "Indeed, I simply refuse to discuss it with you, Long. Go off at once to the nearest bath-room, and have a thorough wash. No, sir—not another word!"

"But what about Handforth, sir——"

"I will deal with Handforth!" rapped out Mr. Crowell grimly. "Handforth, you will come with me at once to my own bed-room."

Teddy Long went off, his misery slightly tempered by the thought that Handforth was now about to "get it in the neck." And Handforth, with a grunt, got out of bed, put

on his dressing-gown, and followed Mr. Crowell.

"Well, can you beat that?" asked Church disgustedly as the door closed.

"Beat what?"

"Why even Crowell thinks the whole yarn is a fake!" growled Church. "It's as clear as daylight, and yet he can't see it. If you ask me, Handy ought to be in a cradle every night, and in a pram during the day. I'm fed-up with the dotty idiot!"

Five minutes later Handforth returned, his face set, his hands tucked under his arms. Church and McClure were sympathetic in a moment. All their animosity vanished.

"Did he lay it on thick, old son?" asked Church compassionately.

"Does it sting, Handy?" inquired McClure.

Edward Oswald Handforth untucked his hands and gave his chums a cold glance. He switched off the light and hopped into bed. The only sound he uttered was a grunt.

And Church and McClure could get nothing else out of him.

The Cream of the Joke.

JOHAN BUSTERFIELD BOOTS, the energetic skipper of the Fourth Form, broke into a chuckle as Handforth appeared in the Ancient House doorway.

It was morning—Saturday morning—and Boots and a few other Fourth-Formers were chatting near the fountain—playing the forthcoming Form match in advance vocally, and winning by many goals. They all grinned as Handforth appeared.

"Hallo, skipper!" sang out Boots.

"Vote for Handforth!"

"Elected by a staggering majority!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Handforth glared, lifted his nose, and stalked away, as though he had heard none of the sarcastic observations.

"It's no good, Handy, you'd better resign, and finish with it!" shouted Bob Christine. "They're only fooling you!"

"We've heard all about it!" yelled Clapson. "They're kidding you!"

"Poor old scout!"

Another yell of laughter went up, and Handforth set his teeth. He glanced round, and gazed coldly at Church and McClure, who had loyally followed him. They had only just come down.

"Who told you chaps to hang round me?" asked Handforth curtly.

"We—we—— Well, we——"

"I don't want you!" said Handforth. "You're not my chums any more. I've got no chums; I'm fighting this battle alone!"

"Can't we have our own opinions now?" asked Church hotly.

"Can't we think for ourselves?" snorted McClure.

"No!" said Handforth coldly. "Either I think for you, or you're not my pals. You've proved that your thinking apparatus is all rusty and wonky!"

"You—you ass!" gasped Church. "Are you still trying to make out that you're not

being japed? Haven't you heard? Everybody knows the truth now. The cat's out of the bag. And the whole thing's a frost. I don't suppose they'll carry on with it now."

"Go and eat coke!" said Handforth gruffly.

He walked away, as completely autocratic as ever. He had evidently made up his mind to take the election seriously, and nothing on earth could shift his determination.

Teddy Long, in fact, had got down earlier than anybody else in the Remove, and it had not taken him long to circulate the full story. It had been an unwise move to take him into the scheme in the first place, for he had never been known to keep a secret.

"Poor old Handy!"

Edward Oswald started. A number of fags were singing a kind of chant in the shelter of the West Arch. If Handforth had been wise he would have ignored them, but he came to a halt, and glared.

"That's enough!" he said aggressively.

"Chuck it, Handy!" grinned Dicky Jones. "We all know the horrid truth. Even if you're elected, you'll be kicked out of the captaincy in two minutes. Why not resign, and look dignified?"

"The poor old chap is still hopeful," grinned Tommy Hobbs.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Poor old dupe; can't see when he's tricked!"

Handforth made a rush, and the fags scattered, yelling with laughter. And this sort of thing went on continually, wherever Handforth went. He was chipped unmercifully and impartially by fellows of every Form and every House. In fact, the whole school was chuckling over the affair—with the exception of the Remove.

"Well, it's a dirty trick!" said Reggie Pitt, as he chatted with Fullwood and a few other fellows just before breakfast. "Somebody's been gassing, and the whole game is ruined. Handy won't stand for election after this."

"All our plans for nothing!" growled Fullwood. "We were going to have the laugh on him after the election—but this is a giddy anti-climax. It's a pity some chaps can't keep a secret."

De Valerie came up, grinning.

"No need to look so disappointed, you fellows," he said cheerfully. "Handforth's as enthusiastic as ever—he's determined to win, and he turns a deaf ear to everybody."

"You mean to say he's still keen on the election?" asked Pitt.

"Keener than ever!" chuckled De Valerie.

"Oh, rot! He's not such an ass as all that!" said Fullwood.

But before morning lessons were due to commence, the Remove was startled by the discovery that Handforth was going ahead, exactly as though the secret was still intact. He steadfastly refused to believe the obvious truth, and was pressing his campaign with even greater forcefulness than ever. New election posters appeared, and he had already made three separate speeches in the common-room, in the Triangle, and in the gym., to different groups of electors.

And in that spirit he carried on for the next few days until Monday, the day of the election, dawned.

An Overwhelming Majority.

WILLIAM NAPOLEON BROWNE, of the Fifth, shook his head.

"While admitting that Brother Handforth has undoubtedly asked for this slosh in the slacks, one must confess that it is a somewhat murky deed," he said, as he fingered a sheaf of ballot papers. "I trust that your opinion coincides with my own, Brother Willy?"

"I don't know about murky," said Willy Handforth. "I should call it a necessary deed. Ted needs these jolts now and again to bring him to earth. Goodness knows, the old ass has had enough warnings!"

"It beats me," said Buster Boots blankly. "It beats me hollow. How the dickens he can carry on with it is more than my brain can grasp!"

"We are ever ready to make allowances, Brother Boots," said Browne benevolently.

"I didn't ask you to be funny!" said Boots, turning red.

"I can assure you that nothing is further from my thoughts," said the captain of the Fifth. "But let us not waste time in needless haggling. The Remove awaits in the Triangle, and it is our duty to complete the counting, and flash the welcome message upon the silver screen."

"Same silver screen being a bed-sheet," observed Willy, grinning.

The committee was taking its time over the counting, just to give an impression that the whole thing was genuine. There was no need to count at all, as a matter of fact, for everybody had voted, and everybody had put a cross against Handforth's name. In fact, the slide for the magic-lantern had been prepared even before the poll.

In the Triangle the Remove was waiting—to say nothing of the entire Third, and the greater portion of the Fourth.

"Look out—here comes the result!"

The "screen" was fixed up on the wall of the Modern House, and the magic-lantern was installed in one of the front dormitory windows of the Ancient House. A beam shot across the Triangle, and wobbled indecisively on the ivy opposite. It was gradually brought under control, and the sheet was focussed.

"Hold your breath, everybody!" said Reggie Pitt tensely.

A titter went round, but there were no actual laughs yet. Handforth stood in state on the Ancient House steps, with Church and McClure forlornly by his side. They were numbed. Their leader was just as optimistic as ever, just as certain of real victory. It was beyond all human understanding. It was weird and wonderful.

"Hurrah!"

"Here's the result!"

A slide had just been put in, and the crowded Triangle read the following words:

"REMOVE ELECTION RESULT!"

The slide was removed, and another substituted:

"HOLD YOUR BREATH AND WATCH—
HERE IT COMES!"

The crowds chuckled heartily, and Handforth grunted. Again the slide was removed, and the result was displayed:

"HANDFORTH	...	...	...	45
PITT	...	...	...	0
FULLWOOD	...	...	...	0
Majority	...	...	...	45."

A roaring burst of tumultuous cheering rose, a pre-arranged conclusion to the rag. For a solid minute the Remove cheered to the echo, and then broke into uncontrollable laughter.

"Speech—speech!"

"Come on, Handy—speech!"

"Silence for the new captain!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Handforth, looking perfectly calm, faced the grinning throng. There was a light of determination in his eyes, too—a light that Church and McClure couldn't quite understand.

"Speech!"

"There's not much to say," declared Handforth, after he could obtain a hearing. "I'd like to thank you chaps for electing me, and you can trust me to handle the Remove tactfully and diplomatically——"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"And strongly!" said Handforth grimly. "You can trust me to stamp out every kind of caddishness, and to make the whole Form clean from end to end. I shan't be gentle in my methods—I'm going to lick the Remove into shape as it's never been licked into shape before."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Good old fire-eater!"

"I don't mind admitting I'm surprised at the majority," continued Handforth. "I expected to win by a big margin, but I never thought that Pitt's supporters would all desert him. So much the better—they've proved their common sense by plumping for me!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"The election's over, and I'm skipper from this minute," went on Handforth, changing his tone. "Some of you chaps are cackling a bit too much, and I don't approve of it. And anything that I don't approve of has got to stop! Now that I'm in power, I'm going to have things done properly. Another yell from you, Gulliver, and I'll slaughter you!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Not only Gulliver, but everybody else howled hysterically. Reggie Pitt thought it time to point out the dreadful truth—although Handforth, unless he was quite an imbecile, must know it already.

"Chuck it, Handy!" said Pitt, mounting the steps. "You know as well as I do that this is only a rag."

"A rag?" said Handforth. "Which is a rag?"

"This election."

"Do you know any more jokes?" asked Handforth coldly.

"My dear ass, be sensible!" urged Pitt. "The whole thing's just a joke. The Remove decided days ago not to have an election, and that we're going to carry on without a captain. You can't spoof me you didn't know this."

"We've had some good fun, and it's all over!" chuckled Fullwood. "You've been captain for seven minutes, Handy——"

"Just about," agreed Handforth, glancing at the clock. "And I shall be captain for the rest of the term, too—and perhaps longer. What's all this rot you're saying? A rag? A joke? A spoof election? When you've got some more funny remarks, I'd like to hear 'em!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

The crowd was more diverted than ever by Handforth's obstinate refusal to see the daylight. If ever a chap deserved to be the laughing-stock of all St. Frank's, surely Handforth deserved it!

Mr. Crowell was seen making his way towards the Ancient House steps from the direction of the gymnasium—where, in fact, he had watched the proceedings, and had listened to the entire programme. He was looking rather grim.

"One moment, boys!" he said briskly, as he mounted the steps. "Handforth, I understand that you have been elected captain of our Form?"

"Yes, sir."

"That is, temporary captain?"

"Permanent captain, sir," said Handforth promptly. "If Hamilton wants to fight me at the polls when he comes back, I shall be ready. But I've been elected by the biggest majority ever known at St. Frank's——"

"It's only spoof, you ass!" yelled somebody.

Mr. Crowell turned quickly, as though accepting the interruption as an opening.

"What was that?" he asked sharply.

"Handforth's been fooled, sir!"

"Indeed!" said Mr. Crowell coldly. "What exactly do you mean by that remark, De Valerie? The result of the election is still upon the screen yonder, and Handforth is most decidedly your new captain!"

"But it's only a rag, sir!" shouted a dozen voices.

"Let us have this quite clear," said Mr. Crowell grimly. "Did you boys vote for Handforth in the approved fashion? Did you place your crosses against his name on the ballot papers, and deposit them in the usual box?"

"Why, yes, sir!" said Reggie Pitt.

"Every boy in the Remove did this?"

"Yes, sir!"

"Then Handforth is captain of the Form—elected by his own Form-fellows," declared Mr. Crowell finally. "There can be no two ways in a matter of this sort. You have elected Handforth, and the matter is ended."

A dead, awful, stupefied silence descended upon the Remove. Even the Fourth-Formers and the fags, and the others, held their breath. Mr. Crowell's edict had come like a bolt from the blue.

Handforth's Triumph!

RALPH LESLIE FULLWOOD was the first to find his voice.

"You don't mean that, sir," he said steadily.

"I certainly do mean it, Fullwood."

"But, sir, it's only a joke!" protested Fullwood in alarm. "Handforth was so confident of being elected that we thought we'd help him by pitchforking him into the captaincy by an overwhelming majority. But it's only a rag, sir——"

"That is quite enough, Fullwood," interrupted Mr. Crowell. "I do not believe in jokes of this type—and I do not accept this affair as a joke. You have voted for Handforth, and you must abide by your voting."

"But, but——"

"Enough!" said the Form-master. "I give my full sanction to Handforth's captaincy, and from this moment he is your official captain. And I shall not sanction any other election until Hamilton returns, so you need not think that you can get out of the matter in that way. If you have been foolish enough to vote for Handforth against your own convictions, that is your own affair. An election is a serious matter, and should be treated seriously. If you choose to treat it with levity, it is fitting that you should suffer as a result of your own actions. Handforth, let me congratulate you upon your victory. If there are any points you need help with, do not hesitate to seek my advice."

With a curt nod, Mr. Crowell went indoors.

"And that," said Handforth, "is that!"

He was wearing an expression of quiet triumph, and his eyes were gleaming victoriously. Church and McClure gazed at one another, vaguely suspicious of something. At the same moment they had thought of the same idea.

William Napoleon Browne, coming out on to the steps with Horace Stevens, chuckled with quiet amusement.

"I have a lurking suspicion, Brother Handforth has got the half-nelson on the Remove," he said smoothly. "I have a second lurking suspicion that Brother Handforth commenced this double-crossing process at an earlier period. A great eye-opener for us all. Who would have suspected our own Brother Ted of such sinister cunning?"

Handforth, with his thumbs tucked in his waistcoat, was ready.

"Thought you'd fool me, eh?" he asked genially. "Well, my sons, let me tell you the truth. I wasn't fooled for a minute—but you've been fooled all the time! You didn't give me credit for such smartness, eh?"

"We've—been—fooled?" asked De Valerie thickly.

"Properly duped!" replied Handforth. "What are you going to say when I tell you that I knew that Mr. Crowell would support me?"

"You knew!" yelled a dozen voices.

"Of course I knew!" grinned Handforth. "That young sneak, Long, tried to get money out of me last night by blabbing the whole plot——"

"We know that," interrupted Pitt. "But you were still fooled——"

"Was I?" said Handforth cheerfully. "Here's something you didn't know. Long told Mr. Crowell all about it, too—and Mr. Crowell spoke to me afterwards. He told me that he didn't approve of this kind of ragging!"

"What!"

"And he told me that if you elected me, he'd make you stand by it!" said Handforth happily. "I knew this last night, you poor simpletons! So I've been pretending to keep the thing up all day—pretending to be fooled. And all the time I've been spoofing the lot of you!"

"Oh, my hat!"

"We—we've played into his very hands!"

"Oh, help!"

"Of course you've played into my hands," agreed Handforth, nodding. "Do you think I'd be such a lunatic as to tell you about Mr. Crowell's decision? Not likely! I kept that dark. And instead of you having a nice little rag at my expense, I've been elected skipper at yours!"

"Without question, Brother Horace, a thoroughbred tricker," murmured Browne.

"I'm not a spoof captain—but the official skipper, sanctioned by our Form-master," said Handforth coolly. "What's more, you're all going to know it pretty soon—even if you don't know it now! I'll teach you bounds to pull my leg! I'll show you one or two things!"

The Remove simply stared, speechless. The jape was turned against them in the most disconcerting fashion, and they were utterly and absolutely done! Edward Oswald Handforth was their Form captain!

(More surprises in next week's chapters of this Grand School Story. Don't miss them!)



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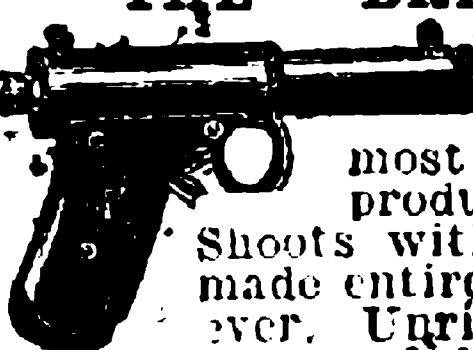
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