Grand New Schoolboy Adventure Series Begins This Week!

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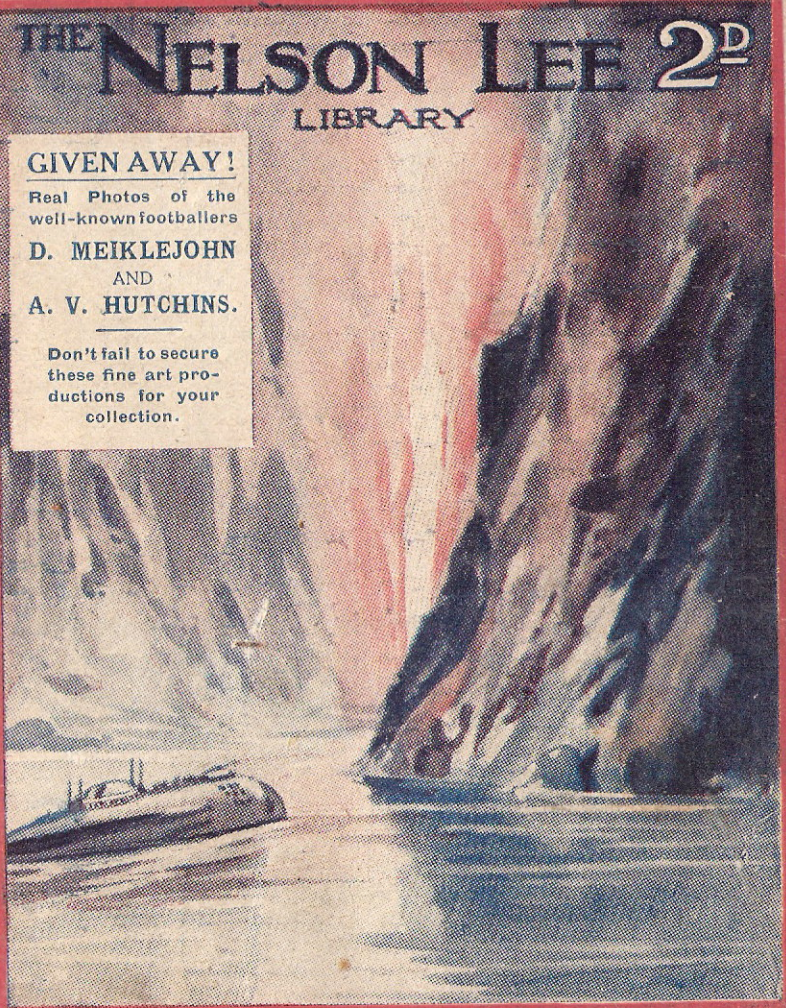
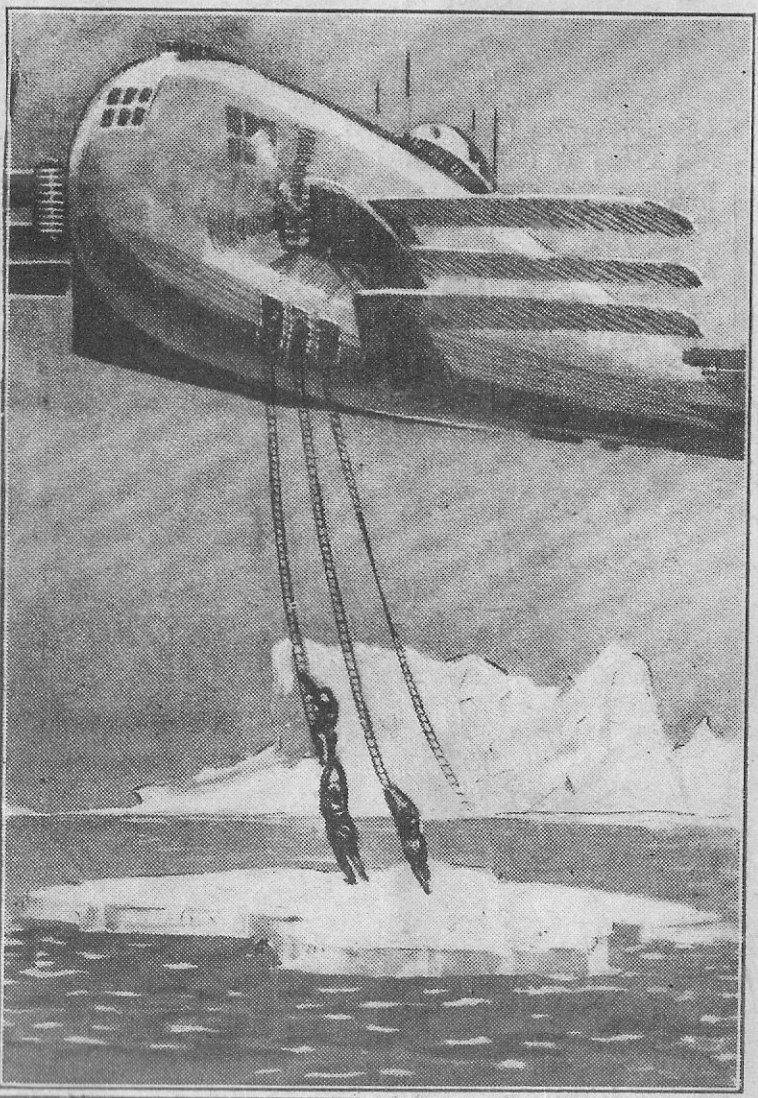


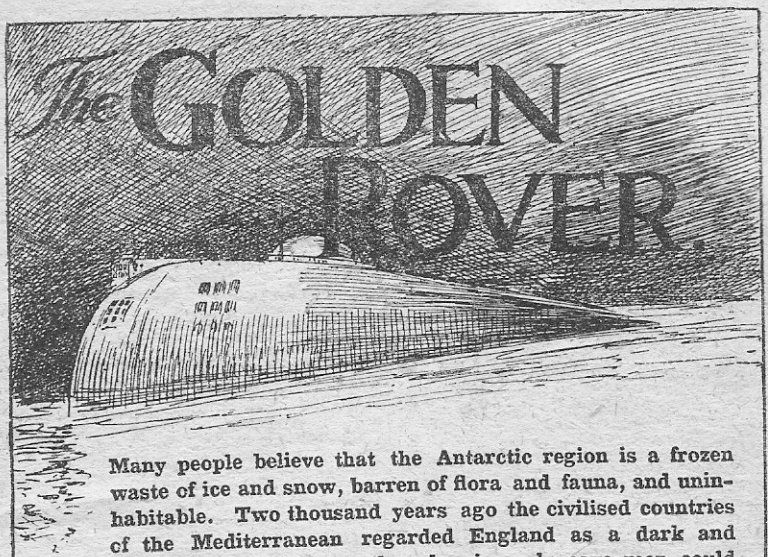
THE GOLDEN ROVER!

A Fascinating Story of a journey to the Antarctic in a Giant Aeroplane, featuring the Boys of St. Frank's, etc.

No. 375 EVERY WEDNESDAY AUGUST 12, 1922



McClure grabbed the trailing rope ladder. At exactly the same moment Church and Handforth seized the other trailing rope ladder.



The GOLDEN ROVER.

Many people believe that the Antarctic region is a frozen waste of ice and snow, barren of flora and fauna, and uninhabitable. Two thousand years ago the civilised countries of the Mediterranean regarded England as a dark and misty land of the north, wherein only cave-men could dwell. But for the Gulf Stream, England would be a land of snow and ice, because of her northern latitude. In this new series the author assumes that there is a hot stream flowing through an unexplored part of Antarctica, and that here is to be found a wonderful new country, abounding in surprises and strange things. The story of the journey in the gigantic aeroplane is described in the following pages.

(*THE NARRATIVE RELATED THROUGHOUT BY NIPPER.*)

CHAPTER 1.

SOUTHWARD HO!

ARCHIE GLENTHORNE lolled back with supreme ease on the soft lounge.

"Well, Phipps, here we are," he remarked genially. "I mean to say, here we absolutely are, don't you know! On the old airship, staggering into unknown realms, and all that sort of rot!"

"Quite so, sir," said Phipps.

"Rather priceless, what?"

"Yes, sir."

"I mean to say, buzzing through the atmosphere at about two hundred and sixty-three miles in the bally old hour, and all that," said Archie. "Lightning superseded, and what not! The fact is, old bird, we're having some dashed rapid changes, what with one thing and another, and this and that!"

"Undoubtedly, sir," agreed Phipps. "During the past few weeks we have cer-

tainly passed through some extraordinary adventures."

"Absolutely," said Archie. "In fact, a chappie hardly knows whether he's standing on his bean or his old pedals! You get me, Phipps? You gather the trend? Does the young master make himself clear?"

"Quite, sir," replied Phipps, with the utmost gravity. "I am convinced that very few young gentlemen can boast of having passed through experiences such as those which have fallen to our lot."

Archie adjusted his monocle.

"Dashed good, Phipps!" he said, clapping his hands. "I mean to say, brainily put, and so forth. Fallen to our lot, don't you know. I like that—absolutely! You're a wonder, Phipps."

"Not at all, sir," said Phipps. "Have you any special instructions for this morning, sir?"

"Not that I know of, old dear."

"Very well, sir, I will attend to a few matters in the cabin," said Phipps.

Archie Glenthorne's valet bowed, and retired from the saloon. This apartment was roomy and luxuriously furnished and fitted. There were mirrors on the walls, soft carpet and rugs on the floors, easy chairs, lounges, and every comfort that human ingenuity could devise.

It was difficult to realise that this saloon was merely one apartment in a gigantic aeroplane—a veritable leviathan of the air. For the Golden Rover was indeed the most astounding air craft that had been devised by the skill and handiwork of man.

She was more than an aeroplane—she was a liner of the sky. With her big saloon, state-rooms, cabins, engine room, kitchen and numerous other compartments, she was miles ahead of any other flying machine that had ever been invented or even thought of. And she was the result of Mr. Raymond Gray's labour.

At the present moment the Golden Rover was speeding serenely over the ocean at a height of about fifteen thousand feet. The sun was shining in through her windows and portholes, and the whole craft throbbed slightly from the effect of the pulsating engines.

Archie was quite comfortable on the soft lounge. Over on the other side of the saloon a number of St. Frank's juniors were standing in a group, chatting. There was Handforth arguing somewhat energetically with Church and McClure. Reginald Pitt and De Valerie were talking with Christine and Co. And they seemed quite matter-of-fact, and took everything merely as though speeding through the upper air was an everyday occupation.

"Personally, I think we're jolly lucky," Church was saying. "I'd rather be on this trip any day than go back to school. St. Frank's is all right, but give me a first-class trip in an airship!"

"Hear, hear!" said McClure.

Handforth sniffed.

"Nothing to make a fuss about," he exclaimed. "I've been in an aeroplane before this. Of course, I'll admit that the Rover's a regular stunner, but there's no need to keep jawing about it. I want to know if you chaps are ready for a game of chess?"

"We don't want chess now," said Church.

"Must do something to pass the time," said Handforth. "I'll take the pair of you, and whack you to smithereens!"

"Oh, yes," said McClure sarcastically. "The last time we had a game I had you whacked in four moves."

"What!" snorted Handforth warmly. "Why, you babbling ass! If you hadn't moved your queen's rook I should have had you checkmate——"

"Oh, for goodness' sake don't argue," growled Church. "It's nearly lunch time, and——"

"Eh? Lunch?" said Fatty Little, pausing as he was passing by. "Great bloaters! I'm nearly starving, you know!"

Handforth gave him a withering glance.

"It's a wonder the giddy airship keeps afloat," he exclaimed. "Blessed if I know why we brought you along, anyhow. As soon as we get to the Antarctic we shall have to turn back—because all the grub will be gone!"

Fatty grinned cheerfully and walked away. He was quite accustomed to chaff of this kind, and never took offence. I came into the saloon a few moments later, and looked round at the fellows.

"Enjoying yourself?" I enquired, pausing next to Archie.

"Absolutely, old scream," said Archie. "I mean to say, this, as it were, is the life! Positively the bally old life for Archie! Every time—twice! There's nothing to beat it, if you know what I mean."

"A jolly, fine lazy time, eh?" I grinned. "Nothing to do all day except lounge about and eat and sleep!"

"Absolutely!" agreed Archie. "In a dashed nutshell, darling! I might even say that I sha'n't care a bally ha-penny if the trip proceeds onwards for a matter of years. No strife—no trouble—no noise——"

"Yaroooh!" came a howl from the other side of the saloon.

Crash! Bang! Biff!

"Ow—you!"

"No strife, no trouble, no noise!" I said, grinning.

"Gadzooks!" gasped Archie. "Have we capsized, old tulip!"

"Not yet," I chuckled. "It's only Handy trying to shove Church through one of the walls. Hi, you asses, stop it! Do you want to upset the balance?"

Handforth had concluded his argument in the manner which was most usual with him. Finding that his chums would not agree, he had brought round his famous right—with somewhat disastrous consequences to Church's face. Church now lay on the floor, moaning feebly.

But this, of course, was a bit of a pose. Church was hurt, but only in a minor degree. It was just a little exhibition of tact to lay on the floor and moan. This averted further trouble, and it also had the effect of softening Handy's heart. He was an extremely easy fellow to soften.

"Well, it was your own silly fault," he growled. "If you don't want to get hurt you shouldn't argue with me. Good! Here comes Snowball! We'll ask him how long lunch is to be."

A door at the end of the saloon opened, and the Negro cook of the Golden Rover appeared. He was attired in spotless white, with a chef's cap perched upon his woolly head.

In a moment he was surrounded by juniors.

"How long before lunch, Snowball?" demanded Fatty eagerly.

"Hope you've got something good!"

"We're famished!"

"Golly!" You'se all plumb 'cited!" grinned Snowball. "But you don't need to do no worryin', young massas. Guess de luncheon am comin' on right now, widin fi' minutes. Gee! I guess de air ob de hebens make de appetite grow 'most turrible!"

"My hat! You're right!" said Reginald Pitt.

"Sure, I'se right, sah!" grinned the nigger. "An' I'll be a hull heap obliged if yo' young massas will 'low me to set de tables."

They permitted him to get on with his work, and watched with eager interest. I strolled off through one of the passageways towards the navigating chamber. Here Major Barrance was in control, and he was chatting agreeably with Nelson Lee and Lord Dorrimore.

Mr. Raymond Gray, the inventor and owner of the Golden Rover, was fast asleep in his state-room—for he and Major Barrance were the vessel's pilots, and they had all their work cut out. Either one or the other was always on duty.

It was the same with the engine-room staff, consisting of two members. These were Jock McGregor, the chief, and Hawkins, his mechanic. Hawkins was a little Cockney, and not much to look at. But he was a clever engineer, and could be left in charge of the engine-room with confidence.

But what of this extraordinary airship? Where was she bound for? Why did she carry a large number of St. Frank's juniors? I don't suppose it is necessary for me to explain matters very fully—because I've already done so.

But I might just as well set down a few facts. If you've read them before it doesn't matter, because it'll serve to refresh your memory. And if you don't know anything about the business, a few words are necessary.

The whole party of us numbered twenty-four all told—twenty-four, that is, excluding the ship's own company. These numbered five. And the Golden Rover was capable of accommodating double this total.

Our own party had been experiencing some rather wonderful adventures in the South Seas of late. On a tropic coral island we had fought cannibals and cyclones and volcanic eruptions. However, we had escaped with our lives—thanks, largely, to Mr. Raymond Gray and his aeroplane. In the nick of time he had swooped down from the upper air and had carried us off.

And now we were setting off for the Antarctic regions—as a matter of fact, we had set off a couple of days earlier, and were well on our way. We had left the tropic zone behind, and were swinging towards ice and snow. But within the great body of the Golden Rover we were hardly aware of changes of temperature. For she was automatically heated, and the atmosphere within her solid walls was adjusted according to requirements. By an extremely clever device the temperature usually registered about sixty-five degrees, which was neither too hot nor too cold.

Lord Dorrimore's steam yacht, the Wanderer, in which we had come out to the tropics, had been sent back in charge of Captain Bentley. We should have gone back, too, if the guv'nor had had his way. For he declared that we ought to return to St. Frank's in time for the Autumn term. And he would have packed us all off, too.

But Mr. Raymond Gray had stepped in, and had kept us on board the Golden Rover whether we liked it or not. We did like it—because we were bound for a wonderland of the South, and all the fellows were eager to do the trip.

Mr. Gray pointed out that we should learn far more by going on this trip than by poring over lesson books at school. So Nelson Lee had to agree. And once having given his word, we were safe. And Mr. Gray soon found the Wanderer and alighted on the sea near by.

Most of us went on board and gathered together all sorts of belongings. We had to obtain change of linen and socks, and so forth. And Archie, of course, needed at least, half-a-dozen suits—and so did Sir Montie Tregellis-West. Another reason why we came to the Wanderer was because Mr. Gray thought it would be as well to obtain added food supplies. So a considerable quantity was packed away on the Golden Rover. And then, fully equipped, we set off on the big journey to the South Pole.

In the Wanderer it would have been a very long journey, but in Mr. Gray's airship it did not seem anything like so formidable. For the Golden Rover was capable of travelling at two hundred and fifty miles an hour with ease. This meant covering a distance of six thousand miles in twenty-four hours, if all went well. So the long trip really became a short one. Distances can only be measured by the time it takes one to cover them.

As Mr. Gray pointed out, we could go on this adventure, stay in the Antarctic two or three weeks, and still arrive home almost at the same time as the Wanderer herself. So, in a way, we should be wasting no time.

But this was assuming that the Golden Rover met with no mishaps. We had no reason to assume that she would, since she had been thoroughly tested, and was absolutely airworthy and seaworthy.

The aircraft was not one of the fantastical turnouts that one reads about in sensational fiction. It was simply and purely a development of the modern aeroplane. She was, in fact, a gigantic triplane, built on well-known lines, but she fairly bristled with new inventions and ideas.

Her enormous size was the fact which attracted one at first. She was absolutely stupendous, and a mere human being felt something like an insect when standing beside her. Her engines were of ten thousand horse power, and they worked like velvet. Only the faintest throb went through the frame of the huge craft when the motors were running all out. They revolved with the smoothness of oil engines.

And the whole vessel was constructed of metal—a bright, golden-coloured metal which was a member of the aluminium family. Mr. Gray had been experimenting for years, trying to obtain a metal which would suit his purpose. He had succeeded beyond his dreams.

When one considers that even an ordinary aeroplane of the twin-engine type—a thing made of wood and canvas—can carry thirty or forty passengers with ease, it can easily be understood how the Golden Rover was able to carry vast stores in addition to her passengers. Weight, and weight by the ton, made little difference to her. She had the engine power to lift tremendous amounts. And she was constructed on a new principle whereby she could take to the air at low speed, and touch the ground—or water—at almost walking pace.

And we were off to this strange wonderland of the Antarctic. It was no myth. Nelson Lee and Dorrie and I had been there before, so we knew.

We had been with Raymond Gray and his nephew—Major Barrance—on their previous trip, a year or more earlier. We had met with strange adventures in the south, but had been compelled to leave the place owing to the activities of enemies. So we were very anxious to return now.

And our return was much better equipped, since on the previous occasion we had been flying in a much smaller craft. The Golden Rover was merely a development of Mr. Gray's original ship, the Flying Fish.

Somewhere down in the icy regions of the South there was a great cavern amid the mountains—a cavern miles long, and with a domed roof which reached to a thousand feet. Here there were forests and strange animals. Here illumination was provided by a great fountain of dazzling fire. We had only explored a small section of this remarkable place.

Entrance was obtained by means of a warm river, which flowed out through the cliff side, amid the ice and frozen waste. And within the cavern itself the atmosphere was humid, which accounted for the growing vegetation. No doubt the earth's crust was thin in this spot, and some volcanic action was the reason for the consistent warmth.

Personally I was intensely delighted with the prospect of paying another visit to the wonder cavern. We had not been able to explore a quarter of that extraordinary place during our first visit. We had, indeed, only penetrated a comparatively short distance into the cavern. We had been unable to see what lay beyond the central fountain of fire.

Now, however, we had no enemies to worry us, and we should be able to devote all our time to exploration. The juniors, of course, regarded the whole affair as a jolly fine addition to the holiday. They had revelled in the thought of travelling in the Golden Rover. But already the novelty had began to wear off, and they were beginning to complain of the monotony. Boys are a restless crew, as everybody knows.

About the only fellow who was entirely and absolutely content was Archie Glenthorne. He didn't care a jot as long as he was able to lounge about at his ease. He had Phipps to wait on him, he had all the suits he desired, and he was able to display himself in all his splendour.

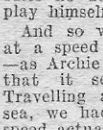
And so we progressed—rushing southward at a speed which was somewhat staggering—as Archie himself might have put it. Not that it seemed particularly swift to us. Travelling at such a height and over the sea, we had no means of telling what our speed actually was.

But we were getting nearer and nearer to our destination.

Little did we realise what startling events were destined to occur!

CHAPTER II.

THE LAND OF ICE AND SNOW!



"ICE!" said Tommy Watson eagerly.

We were standing in the navigating chamber, which was situated right in the forefront of the Golden Rover. This part of the aeroplane projected out beyond the wings, and so we had a clear view of everything that lay ahead and below.

The navigating chamber was surprisingly large and roomy, with a glass dome overhead, and a great circular glass in the very front. This glass was unbreakable, and almost as tough as steel.

"By Jove, you're right!" I exclaimed. "We'll have a closer look."

I reached for a pair of binoculars, and adjusted them. Then, gazing right ahead into the far distance, I could see where the sea became broken, and where large masses of ice lay in irregular patches. And beyond there was a dim haze of whiteness.

We were nearing our goal. It seemed a long journey, although, actually, we had been travelling for only just over two days. At full speed, the Golden Rover could have accomplished the whole distance in twenty-four hours. But, of course, it would have been very unwise to work the engines at their maximum power. So we had taken things smoothly and easily—descending to the ocean on one occasion during a severe windstorm of the upper air.

And so, taking matters calmly in this way, we had progressed until we were now coming upon the pack-ice which skirted the Antarctic continent. Only comparatively little is known of this great icebound tract of land. It is generally presumed to be land covered with an immense ice sheet. Some portions of this continent are known, and have been explored.

The South Pole, in fact, has been reached by two different expeditions—by Amundsen in December, 1911, and Scott in January, 1912. But only a very minute tract of Antarctica has actually been traversed. The world knows little or nothing concerning it.

So far as we were able to tell, this hot cavern we were in search of was really some distance from the South Pole itself. But it was situated in the Antarctic continent. Mr. Gray had all the figures of latitude and longitude at his disposal, and we should have no difficulty in locating the warm river which led into the cavern—providing, of course, that the river still existed.

"Yes, we're getting pretty near to the end of our trip now," I remarked, as I laid the binoculars aside. "I shouldn't be surprised if we encounter clouds and mist before long. That will rather upset things."

"Don't you worry about that there, Master Nipper!" said Hawkins, the mechanic, who had come up on an errand. "Crikey! Clouds and mists don't worry the chief. He don't care wot comes along. It's all the same wiv 'im!"

"You mean Mr. Gray?" I asked.

"'E ain't the chief!" said 'Orace—as he was generally known. "I mean Mr. McGregor. 'E's a rare one if you like! Nothin' don't upset 'im! We can be in the middle of a blinkin' thunderstorm, an' 'e wouldn't mind. It don't matter wot 'oles we get into, 'e'll pull us out!"

"It seems to me that the pilot has more responsibility," I remarked.

"I ain't sayin' nothin' agin that!" agreed 'Orace. "The guv'nor's a fair nivvy, an' no herror. But I reckons as we can't do much wivout the engineer. We're done brown if the engines gives aht."

"Not much fear of that," said Tommy Watson.

"Fear on it?" repeated 'Orace. "Why, love a duck, them hengines is the best things wot was ever turned aht! They ain't never missed fire once since they was shoved into the old 'bus. They tick over like they wos watches!"

'Orace was very enthusiastic about the power plant of the Golden Rover. A year earlier he had been a mechanic in the Royal Air Force, and he had also served for several years in the workshops. He was a rough diamond, but what he didn't know about engineering was hardly worth learning.

He hurried off almost at once, for Jock was off duty at present, and the engine-room was looking after itself. This was quite a usual state of affairs. When flying high in calm weather, the Golden Rover could be left practically unattended—she could fly herself.

Lord Dorrimore lounged into the navigating room a few minutes later, and nodded genially as he caught sight of us over by the observation window.

"Well, young 'uns, how goes it?" he asked. "Enjoyin' life? Or are you gettin' bored stiff?"

"I am longing to get into the mysterious cavern," I replied. "My hat! What a change from last week, Dorrie! Then we were half-cooked with the heat on Lagoon Island. And now we're within sight of ice!"

"Yes, and before long we shall be stewin' again!" said his lordship. "These rapid changes of temperature will play the very dickens with us if we're not careful. Accordin' to my recollections, the interior of that cavern is somethin' like a special brand of Turkish bath!"

"Well, it doesn't make much difference to us in here," I said. "I think it's marvellous, the way we have an even temperature on board. It doesn't matter what it's like outside, we're always comfortable here."

Lord Dorrimore nodded.

"We thought the Flying Fish was a pretty smart machine, but this beats it into a cocked hat," he observed. "Hallo! What's this? Fog descendin', by the look of it."

He nodded towards the window, and I looked out to see that the whole view had become obscured by thick mist. Major Barrance was in control, and without delay he telegraphed instructions down to the engine-room. The great propellers whirled round faster, and the Golden Rover soared upwards with tremendous thrustfulness. She was running all out, and Barrance was attempting to get above the cloud bank which we had penetrated.

"I thought we should have something like this before long," I said. "I remember the last time we came into these regions we were delayed again and again by fog and clouds. I suppose the ice and the cold had something to do with it."

We watched with interest, and presently Nelson Lee joined us. Outside there was nothing to be seen except dull blankness. The whole aircraft was wrapped in an impenetrable white blanket. We could see the moisture forming on the metal work outside—which seemed to indicate that the mist was not so cold as might be expected.

After a while Major Barrance eased the engines, and soon he stopped them altogether. And the Golden Rover swept downwards in a smooth, graceful glide. Finding it impossible to get above the clouds, the major was now descending beneath them.

We were up at about fifteen thousand feet, and I went across and glanced at the dial which registered the height. We were descending quickly, and within a few minutes the indicator told me that we were now only nine thousand feet above the sea.

And still we went lower, and the mist continued to swirl round. The sensation was quite peculiar. Although we were gliding downwards, nose first, we had no actual sensation of this. We seemed to be hovering almost stationary, on a level keel. This was because there were no objects in view with which we could judge the perspective. On a small aeroplane—crossing from London to Paris, for example—it is sometimes highly dangerous to get into a thick fog-bank.

But I felt no sense of danger here. Somehow, this machine was so big—so sturdy—that the very idea of peril seemed out of place. One felt just as secure on the Golden Rover as one feels in a huge liner like the Majestic.

"This is jolly queer!" muttered Tommy Watson. "We didn't see any sign of these clouds five minutes ago. They must be pretty low, too—— My only hat! What—what was that?"

He clutched at me as the navigating chamber lurched giddily round. For a second we had a horrid, sinking sensation at the pit of our stomachs, and although Tommy did not know what this implied, I did. We were dropping—dropping like a stone! I staggered quickly across and stared at the dial.

The needle was falling back rapidly. Six thousand—five thousand—four thousand!

We were slipping down towards the sea with the rapidity of a bullet. And I glanced at Major Barrance and saw that his jaw was set firmly, although there was no sign of alarm in his eyes.

I wondered what on earth had happened.

"We are dropping at a fearful speed, sir!" I muttered, touching Nelson Lee's arm. "Unless we pull up very quickly there won't be time to avert disaster. What can it mean?"

"Probably we have entered an air-pocket, Nipper," replied Nelson Lee grimly. "That is the only explanation that suggests itself to me. A gigantic air-pocket which gives us no opportunity of flying in the normal way. And this craft, as you know, is of enormous weight."

"Yes, she'll need some pulling up!" I said huskily.

Major Barrance had moved the telegraph lever. The engines throbbed with enormous power. And the whole navigating room quivered and shook in every inch. The vibration was appalling. But it was only for a moment, for the major quickly shut the engines down again. It was obviously quite useless to run the motors. The propellers were whirling round in such rarefied air that they had no thrust. They failed to grip the air, and in consequence the engines raced like mad.

Another glance at the dial told me that we were now only two thousand feet above the sea. But still we rushed down—still we plunged through the impenetrable cloud of mist. At first I had not felt any alarm—but now I became aware of the fact that my pulse was beating rapidly. I think I went a shade paler. Tommy Watson was looking rather groggy.

For we knew only too well what would happen if we hit the sea. We should be smashed to atoms—for we were in the very nose of the aeroplane, and would receive the full brunt of the shock.

And those in the main part of the body would probably perish, too. I have generally noticed that danger comes along in the most unexpected way—just when a fellow is convinced that everything is all right. We had never dreamed of anything like this happening. I stared out into the white blanket of fog with a dull feeling of helplessness.

And then, in a flash, there came a change.

I happened to glance at Tommy. Then I looked back out of the window. And there, startlingly close, were icebergs and the rippling sea, and vast ice floes, stretching away for miles.

We seemed to be right upon them—and we were rushing down at an appalling speed. But it seemed to us that the icebergs and the sea were rushing upwards.

"Great goodness!" gasped Watson. "We—we're going to crash!"

"Not yet, young 'un!" said Major Barrance calmly.

And there was a note of relief in his voice. For he had instantly felt a difference in the controls. The great wings of the Golden Rover had obtained a grip, and now were were coming to an end of our headlong descent. The major touched one of the levers, and the nose of the great machine leapt upwards, and I grinned with relief and delight.

"Good!" I panted. "We're all serene now!"

We had come out of the air pocket a thousand feet above. And now the Golden Rover was under full control again. But only in the nick of time. Another minute or two of that fearful descent, and nothing

could have saved us from destruction. Even now, we were perilously near to the ice.

Just beneath us, stretching away to the distance, lay a huge field of smooth ice. Sea lay to the left and also to the right. This great sheet of ice was probably floating—a great mass of pack-ice. Over to the left a towering iceberg reared its head out of the sea. It was like a mountain—and it rather staggered the mind to realise that about nine-tenths of the berg lay beneath the water. What an enormous size the whole thing actually was!

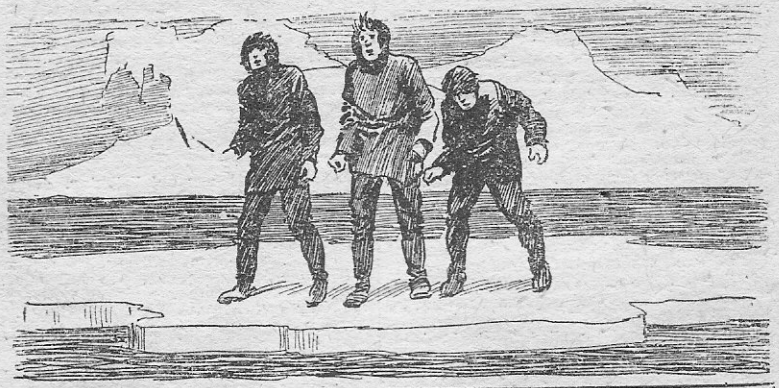
I expected to feel the Golden Rover soaring upwards to a safer altitude. But to my surprise the engines were completely cut

This, after all, was a most sensible scheme. To continue flying with the controls badly strained would be a mistake, and as it had been possible to land here without trouble, the major had seized the opportunity.

It would now be easy enough for the engineers to venture outside and to get busy with spanners and other tools. After such a headlong descent something was bound to be weakened.

I hurried down from the navigating chamber and went along the central passage towards the saloon. I ran into Archie Glenthorne as he came out of his stateroom. Archie was yawning.

"What ho!" he observed. "I mean to



Handforth could do nothing. The ice floe was drifting further and further away from the main body.

off, and now we were floating down under wonderful control.

"We're not going to land, surely?" said Tommy Watson.

Before I could reply there came a slight jar. And then the Golden Rover swung slightly round and came to a complete stop. The major had brought her to rest on the ice—serenely proud of her own efficiency.

"I think she needs a rest after that!" remarked Barrance as he left the controls. "By Jove! But I don't mind admitting I had the wind up for a few minutes, Mr. Lee!"

"It was certainly a very trying time," agreed the guv'nor. "But what is your exact idea in landing, Barrance?"

"I rather fancy I felt the elevator controls straining to an uncomfortable extent," replied the major. "After coming out of that pocket we were shooting down at about the speed of a respectable thunderbolt. The strain on the controls was terrific, and I think they felt it, too. It'll be just as well to have a look at them in peace and comfort and make the necessary adjustments."

say, what's the idea? On the bally old ground—what?"

"Well, hardly on the ground, Archie—we've come down on the ice," I replied. "A few adjustments needed. You see, we struck an air pocket, and came down with more speed than comfort, and a few wires got strained."

"Absolutely!" agreed Archie. "Well, I mean to say, something else got strained too, don't you know. The old internal department. I was indulging in forty of the best and sweetest, old bird. In fact, I was dreaming about this and that, when—zing! The most dashed sensation in the old stomach!"

"I'm not surprised," I grinned. "I felt it, too."

"Bally frightful, if you know what I mean," said Archie. "There I was, old scream, fairly gasping. Sending out loud supplies of the good old S O S to Phipps. But the blighter hasn't turned up. I mean to say, I thought huge quantities of biliousness had romped into the offing!"

"A fellow always gets that sensation when he drops through space," I explained. "There's no need to worry, Archie. We're all right now."

"Absolutely," agreed Archie. "The inner chappie is feeling sturdy once again. The frightful sensations have ceased, and what not! All the same, it makes a lad feel most dashed windy, and all that. Quite pipped, in fact. You gather the trend, sweet one?"

"Oh, I haven't got time to waste here!" I grinned. "How about a run across the ice, Archie? Feeling fit?"

"What ho!" said Archie promptly. "That is to say, absolutely not! There is nothing, as it were, doing. A bally run across the ice—what? But, my dear old lad, hardly the glad rags for the game, so to speak. A chappie needs several waggon loads of furs, and all that kind of rot!"

"Plenty of furs in the store-rooms," I said briskly. "Come on."

I hurried on and left Archie gazing after me and adjusting his monocle. I had no time to waste in waiting for him to make up his mind. Here was an opportunity to take a breath of fresh air—the crisp, icy air of the real Antarctic. I hurried into the saloon, and found the other juniors gazing eagerly out of the window.

"Here's Nipper!" exclaimed Handforth. "I say, you ass, what's the meaning of this? What's the idea of landing here?"

"A few adjustments to make," I replied. "Didn't you feel the way we came down just now?"

"Like a stone!" replied Reginald Pitt. "We all clung to one another and wondered what the end would be like. I thought we were going to knock the South Pole down! What was the cause of it?"

"Ass!" said Handforth. "As if you don't know! Anybody with a grain of sense can tell that the airship got out of control, and wouldn't stop! I expect the elevators jammed, or something like that!"

"Wrong!" I said. "We hit an air pocket and couldn't do anything till we came out of it. So we've landed on the ice for a bit, and I dare say we shall be allowed to go out for a run. Who's game?"

All the fellows were only too eager to agree, and in a short time we had received Nelson Lee's permission to go out. But before doing so we all donned thick furs. There were good supplies of these in the stores—for Mr. Gray had prepared for any emergency.

And, muffled up to the eyes, we trooped out. The door in the side of the body was opened and the steps lowered. We descended, one after the other, until we stood upon the crisp, crackling ice.

The air was as sharp as needles. At first it caught us in the throat, and we felt glad of the furs. But we soon grew accustomed to it, and we thoroughly enjoyed the experience.

Only a week previously we had been near the Equator, and further heated by volcanic eruptions. This was a contrast, indeed. But we soon adapted ourselves to the changed conditions.

Some little distance from the Golden Rover we were able to stand back and look at her from afar. The air-craft was certainly a wonderful piece of work. Her glittering wings and body were just the colour of gold, and she looked superb as she rested there upon the ice.

And there was much to interest us in the general scene. The sea was not far distant—visible in many places, for we were only just on the edge of the pack-ice, and in the distance, towering icebergs reared their snowy heads towards the cloud-filled sky.

"This is ripping!" declared Handforth. "Come on, you fatheads, we'll have a giddy race across the ice! I'll bet I reach that hummock before any of you fellows!"

"Better not go too far, old man," I said warningly. "This ice may not be very secure on the edges. So steer clear of the water. Keep——"

But Handforth was not listening. He had already started off, and he suddenly found that he was running alone. Church and McClure had remained behind, for they were watching with interest the movements of Jock McGregor and 'Orace, as the pair did acrobatic stunts near the tail of the Rover. So huge was the air-craft that the engineers looked quite small high above.

Handforth pulled up short and turned.

Crash!

He turned a bit too quickly and he slithered along on his back, and then hit his head a fearful thud upon the ice. He was not quite accustomed to the new conditions yet and he sat up, roaring.

"Yaroooh!" he howled wildly. "You—you deserters!"

"Draw it mild, Handy!" said Church. "We didn't ask you to biff over like that! It was worth seeing, of course! You did it beautifully——"

"It was your giddy fault for not coming!" growled Handforth. "I've a jolly good mind to punch your silly noses! But there's not time—we're going along to the edge—I want to have a look at the water!"

"Nipper says it may not be very safe," objected Church.

"Rats!" sniffed Handforth. "What does he know?"

"Well, he's been here before——"

"That doesn't make any difference," interrupted Handforth. "I'm going—and so are you chaps. Do you think I take any notice of Nipper?"

"You never take any notice of anybody!" said McClure. "That's why you're always finding piles of trouble. If you only took

good advice when it was given you wouldn't——"

"If you're asking for a thick ear, Arnold McClure, you'd better say so!" roared Handforth. "I'm not standing any rot from you chaps! We're going on this run—and don't you forget it! Are you coming quietly, or shall I give you a taste of this?"

He displayed one of his fists very prominently, but it did not look so formidable as usual, because it was enclosed in a great fur glove. But neither Church nor McClure cared to argue. And, in any case, they would be obliged to go, because they could not let Handforth go by himself. He would probably end up in falling in the sea, or something pleasant like that.

Whenever Church and McClure knuckled under to their leader's threats it was not because they were afraid of him, but because they wanted to look after him. He was an extraordinary fellow for getting into trouble.

And so the three of them set off across the ice to a distant hummock. From this spot, so Handforth declared, they would be able to view the whole scenery. And they might even be able to get a near look at the sea. There was no earthly reason why they should gaze upon the sea at close quarters, but Handforth thought there was.

They had not proceeded very far before Church noticed that there were cracks in the ice. These cracks stretched right into the distance, and in some places they seemed to move slightly, accompanied by a grinding, scraping noise. The sign was not a very healthy one.

"Look here, we'd better go back," said Church. "This is only floating ice, you know, and for all we know it might be thin. Besides, there's just a chance it'll split all up, and chuck us into the sea."

"We can swim, I suppose?" said Handforth tartly.

"We can swim in ordinary water—but not in this!" said McClure. "Besides, what about these furs? They'd drag us down, and the water's so cold that we shouldn't be able to move a limb, and in five minutes we should be dead!"

"Rot!" said Handforth. "I've been in cold water before to-day!"

It was quite useless to argue. He walked on, and Church and McClure were obliged to accompany him. They had an uneasy inkling that something disastrous would occur. And their fears were well founded.

For, abruptly, they felt the ice beneath them heaving slightly. It was as though some giant hand had given it a push. They were now some distance from the Rover, and comparatively near to an open channel of sea water.

Crack!

It was a terrific report like a thousand rifles going off at once. The sound came from near by, and Handforth and Co. jumped with the sudden shock of it. And they felt the ice heaving beneath their feet.

"Great Scott!" gasped Handforth. "What—what was that?"

"Goodness knows!" said McClure hoarsely.

"Oh, my only hat!" yelled Church. "Look—look there!"

He pointed and his chums could see a gap of sea-water only a few yards away. It had appeared between them and the Golden Rover. Already it was about three feet wide, and the sea was splashing up roughly, as though greatly disturbed.

"The—the ice has cracked!" shouted Church in alarm. "That was the cause of that report just now. This chunk has split off from the rest. Quick! Unless we get back at once we shall find ourselves cut off!"

The other two juniors stared at the gap of water in a fascinated kind of way. They ran towards it, and when they arrived they found that the channel was now well over eight feet across, and widening every second.

Wildly they gazed up and down. The channel stretched away on both sides. At a glance it could be seen that a large patch of ice, about thirty feet across, had separated itself from the main floe.

To be exact, Handforth and Co. were cut off from the Golden Rover, and this chunk of ice was rapidly drifting away into the open sea! By now the gap which separated them was twenty feet across.

"I knew what would happen!" shouted Church huskily. "Oh, you ass! We—we can't get back!"

"Quick—we shall have to jump it!" yelled Handforth.

He rushed forward, but Church and McClure grabbed him, and held him back by sheer force. He was quite capable of making an attempt to leap the gap. And this, of course, would have meant almost certain death. For Handforth would have plunged into the water. The deadly coldness of it would have clutched him as though in a vice, rendering his limbs incapable of action.

For a moment he struggled, and then he realised that his chums were right.

"How—how was I to know that the rotten ice would break?" he growled. "I say, you chaps, I'm fearfully sorry, you know. I'd no idea we should get into a mess like this. But don't worry—leave things to me."

This was not much consolation. Handforth could do nothing. The icefloe was drifting further and further away from the main body. It was already like a floating island, completely separated by black, deadly-looking water.

And, quite abruptly, the three juniors were flung down. The ice heaved and rocked as it was caught in a strong current. And then the three hapless juniors were borne rapidly away. They were in a serious plight—and the danger was of a deadly nature.

CHAPTER III.

THE WONDER CAVERN.

ARCHIE GLENTHORNE stood on the ice, and stared.

"I mean to say, frightfully rotten, what?" he exclaimed mildly.

"Eh?" said Pitt. "What's rotten?"

"It seems to me, dear old laddie, that the three chappies in the offing are asking for a huge consignment of trouble," said Archie. "Kindly observe the——"

"My goodness!" shouted Pitt, starting. "Handforth and Co.! They seem to be cut off from us! The silly asses, to go wandering out there! Nipper told them to keep fairly close, too."

Nelson Lee, from the top deck of the Golden Rover—which was something like the deck of a submarine—had seen the great portion of ice break off. He shouted down to me urgently, and I saw the trouble at once.

Just as Reggie Pitt and Archie came dashing round the Rover, I started off with Watson and Montie and some others. We ran as hard as we could pelt to the cracked edge of the ice floe.

But it was hopeless to reach the spot in time.

When we arrived the gap was a hundred yards across, and Handforth and Co. were being carried out at an astonishing speed. Already they looked quite small. But in the still atmosphere we could hear their voices distinctly.

"Tell Mr. Lee to do something!" came Church's voice. "We shall be killed soon! I believe this chunk of ice will soon break up!"

"All right—sit tight!" I yelled. "Don't try to move. Stick in the middle, and wait!"

This was really the only advice I could give. For the life of me I could not see what could be done. Handforth and Co. on that sheet of ice were being carried further and further away every minute. Even if we had a small boat it would have been impossible to carry it across the ice and launch it in time. And before long the chums of Study D would be completely out of reach.

We dashed back to the Rover at full speed and found things in a big state of activity. Nelson Lee came hurrying towards us.

"Get inside, boys!" he exclaimed urgently. "We will do our best to rescue those unfortunate youngsters, but they are in a very perilous position. Everything depends upon speed. You must waste no time."

We needed no second bidding. We rushed into the airship as quickly as possible, and Nelson Lee brought up the rear. And the very instant we were all inside the door was tightly closed.

The engines started, and the Rover moved forward.

She gathered speed across the ice and took off in an astonishingly short space. Skipping over the ice, the aircraft rose higher and higher. All the juniors were at the windows, staring down excitedly.

But Nelson Lee and Lord Dorrimore and Mr. Gray stood upon the upper deck. They were well wrapped up in furs, and they needed them, too. For with the machine in swift motion the air cut like a knife. But it was necessary for them to be out in the open—if Handforth and Co. were to be rescued.

Major Barrance was in control, and he was causing the Golden Rover to fly at her lowest speed. The wings were so constructed that it was possible to fly so slowly that in a fair breeze—and flying against it—the machine could almost hover. But here there was no breeze to speak of.

The great aircraft passed over the ice at a height of about fifty feet. And soon she was over the sea, and making direct for the patch of ice upon which Handforth and Co. were being carried away. Apparently, the tiny floe had been caught in some ocean current, for it was travelling very rapidly. And the sea all round its edge was dashing up in masses of biting spray.

I knew that it would be useless to descend into the water. The juniors could never be rescued in that way. Besides, such a move would be altogether too risky. We could never take such a chance. One of these ice floes crashing into the Golden Rover would crack her like an egg-shell.

There was only one method by which Handforth and Co. would be saved. They needed no instruction—the very preparations which had been made were obvious.

Trailing down from the Rover's body there were two rope ladders—one from either side. These were actually skimming along the water. Major Barrance was heading the Rover precisely over the ice floe. If Handforth and Co. would grab the rope ladders and maintain a hold, all would be well. If they failed to hold, nothing on earth could save them. For they would fall back into the sea and perish. The situation was even more perilous than most of the fellows realised.

But Handforth and Co. were filled with wild hope.

"Hurrah!" yelled Church, his voice nearly cracking with anxiety. "The Rover's coming—and they are hanging down some rope ladders!"

"We shall never be able to grab hold!" gasped McClure. "We can't do it—or, if we can, we can't hold on!"

"It's the only chance, anyhow!" exclaimed Handforth. "We've got to hold—we've just got to! Rely on me, you chaps; I'll see that you don't come to any harm. It's all right, my sons!"

Handforth spoke with his usual confidence. He was an amazing optimist, and even when things were looking as black as ink, he was

always cheerful. At present things did not appear to be very rosy.

The Golden Rover swept nearer. She looked a tremendous thing, so near the sea, and it spoke volumes for her design that she was able to fly so steadily at such a low speed.

There was one thing which both Nelson Lee and Major Barrance had counted upon. The current which had gripped the ice floe was a rapid one, and by flying in the same direction as this current, the travelling speed of the aeroplane was greatly diminished. That is to say, when it actually passed over Handforth and Co. it seemed to them to be flying quite slowly.

But, even so, it would be a fearfully difficult task to grab the rope ladders and to maintain a grip.

"You go for that one, Church," roared Handforth, pointing. "We'll grab this."

There was no time for any reply. The Rover was practically overhead. Church gave a tremendous leap, and the next second it felt as though his arms were pulled out of their sockets.

But he had grabbed the trailing rope ladder—and he clung to it in sheer desperation, dangling only by his hands. At exactly the same moment Church and Handforth seized the other trailing rope ladder. Handforth managed to secure a firm hold, but McClure's hand slipped. The next moment he would have fallen, but Handforth grabbed his arm, and held on for sheer life.

"Catch hold of the rungs, you ass!" he panted. "Quick—quick!"

With a last desperate effort McClure succeeded. It was well he did so, for the sea was beneath them now. But it was Handforth who had saved him from a ghastly death—and Handy had done so at terrible risk to himself. For the extra strain might well have torn his own grip away.

But now the danger was over. They were both clinging tightly to the rope ladder. And this was being hauled up as quickly as possible by Nelson Lee and Dorrie. Within three minutes the half-frozen juniors were on deck. Church had managed to crawl up his own rope ladder unassisted.

Without a moment's delay they were taken into the interior of the aircraft, and then down into the saloon. And they were practically none the worse for their adventures once the numbness had worked off. And by now the Rover was soaring up into the sky.

Handforth was very subdued for quite a time. He had received a pretty severe lesson, but it is very doubtful if he would learn anything by it. In all probability he would be just as reckless again at the first opportunity.

Church and McClure felt rather done up after their experience, and they took things very easily during the rest of that day. It was remarkable that they had been rescued at all, and still more remarkable that they were scarcely wetted in the process.

"I do not intend to say much to you, boys," exclaimed Nelson Lee afterwards. "But it was only by the remarkable skill of Major Barrance that you were able to be rescued. I hope that you will not be so foolhardy on another occasion."

"No, sir," said Handforth meekly. "It was my fault—my fault entirely!"

"I am quite ready to believe that, Handforth," said Nelson Lee. "By what I can understand, you took Church and McClure with you against their will. It only proves that you should not attempt to——"

"All right, sir, don't rub it in," said Handforth gruffly. "I know it was my fault, and I'm awfully sorry. I won't do it again, sir."

"You will certainly not have another opportunity of getting yourself cut off an ice floe," said Nelson Lee drily. "But there will probably be other ways for you to display your recklessness. You must curb your propensity for rashness, Handforth."

Handy took it very meekly, and at the time probably he felt subdued. But later on he argued with several fellows that there had never been any real danger, and it was a lot of rot to make a fuss. But it was just like Handforth to make no mention whatever of the fact that he had saved McClure from certain death. The fact didn't even strike him.

But McClure knew it right enough, and he told everybody. In fact, he said such a lot about it that Handforth threatened to punch his nose unless he shut up.

By the evening, however, the incident was almost forgotten. For we had been making big headway during the past three or four hours. Mr. Raymond Gray was in command, and he was fairly certain that we were almost at the end of our journey.

And, sure enough, we came within sight of our destination just at about tea-time. Snowball, in fact, had served the meal in the saloon when Lord Dorrimore strolled in to announce that a dark streak had been observed towards the east—a streak in the vast whiteness of the ice.

For a long time, now, we had been flying over immense ice-fields, with comparatively little sign of land. Here and there a peak had come into view, proving that beneath this ice crust there was land.

But now things were different.

We believed that we were near a coast line, but it was really difficult to tell owing to the all-covering ice. At all events, when I hurried up into the navigating room I found that Dorrie's words were correct.

We were flying at a height of about a thousand feet, and taking things quite easily. The engines were only just purring, and the Golden Rover was cruising along at about a hundred miles an hour—less than half speed. And in the distance I could see a black line quite distinct from the surrounding whiteness.

"It's the hot river!" I exclaimed eagerly.

"Yes, Nipper, I think it is," said Mr. Gray.

"Do you intend to land here, sir?" I asked.

"I think it will be far better to descend straight into the river itself," replied the inventor. "We shall then lie still for the night—or, at least, the number of hours which usually represent a night. But in these latitudes night and day are rather difficult to distinguish."

We had not gone far before we found that our hopes were correct. The great black line turned out to be the warm river which flowed from the great cliffs. Right in front of us, many miles distant, huge hills and cliffs rose up to the sky, their summits being hidden in the clouds.

But, on the ground, all was clear and distinct, and we could see where this remarkable river flowed out from the black tunnel. A kind of haze lay upon the surface of the water. This haze was really steam, for the water itelf was hot—but not hot enough to prevent us alighting on its surface. The temperature was rather less than that of an ordinary bath. But the water was unable to freeze, for the current was swift.

From previous experiments, Mr. Gray knew that the stream was deep and broad. There was ample water to accommodate the Golden Rover in comfort. But there was just a possibility that a peculiarly tenacious weed would choke parts of the river. Not that this would stay our progress.

Tea was forgotten for the time being, and all the fellows crowded to every available window and gazed out. And at last our flying home came gently to rest upon the dark waters of this remarkable river.

The juniors were amazed.

"I've never seen anything like it in my life!" exclaimed Pitt wonderingly. "Here, right in the middle of all this ice and snow! It seems impossible that this water can be here without freezing!"

"But it surely must freeze in time?" said Armstrong. "It can't keep hot for long in this atmosphere."

"But, my dear chap, it's never the same water in one place," said Pitt. "The stream is flowing rapidly, and just here—near the exit—there's no chance of the river freezing up. Miles away, where it cools down, it finally freezes over, I believe and goodness only knows what happens to it after that."

"Well, it doesn't matter to us, anyway," said Christine. "We're not concerned about where the water flows to. We're interested in where it comes from. When shall we go into the tunnel?"

"Not until the morning," replied Pitt. "That's what I hear, anyway. We're all going to have a jolly good sleep first, and then the Rover will submerge, and we shall go on the last stage of the journey—through the tunnel and into the cavern. It ought to be exciting."

The Golden Rover was resting serenely in the water. And the temperature within had already increased somewhat—for the heat of the water outside made its effect felt within. Not that it could do any harm. And when we went on deck we found the atmosphere by no means chilly.

For the river was broad, and the heat which rose from it in the centre completely nullified the icy coldness of the air itself. Along the banks of the river we could see rocks and stones. And just a little way up from the bank lay the ice.

It was a really surprising spectacle.

I had seen it all before, of course, and so had Nelson Lee and Dorrie. Nevertheless, we were greatly interested, for the whole scene brought back memories of our earlier adventures.

Should we have better luck in the cavern this time? That was the question we asked ourselves—but time alone would be able to give an answer. And when we went to sleep, an hour or so later, we had lively anticipations for the morrow.

It seemed that I had only been in bed a short while before it was time to get up. I had slept like a top, and so had most of the others. But Jock Macgregor had not been idle this morning. For the Golden Rover had now changed her aspect and her character. She was no longer an aeroplane, but a submarine.

The wings had almost vanished. The outlying sections had been folded back, and now only the stumps remained. The propellers, too, were different. They were now suitable for work in the water. Mr. Gray had constructed the Rover with amazing ingenuity.

And soon after a good meal the vessel started forward slowly and cautiously, with Mr. Raymond Gray himself at the controls. And when we were within a short distance of the tunnel opening the Rover submerged. She slid down into the depths of the hot river—down, down, until the waters lapped over her deck plates, and we disappeared right below the surface. It was a very interesting experience.

There was plenty of depth to accommodate the vessel. When Mr. Gray had built this craft he had a full knowledge of this river, which it was required to navigate. And so, although the Rover, was immensely large, she had plenty of space.

But Mr. Gray took her forward with extreme care, travelling only at a mere crawl. We were now ten or fifteen feet below the surface, and all the electric lights were blazing at full power. And out in front of the vessel two immensely powerful beams of light were making the dark water almost clear.

These searchlights were of great penetrating power, and everything immediately in front of the slowly moving craft could be seen. There was no peril of butting into an obstacle by accident. From the observation window we could see trailing masses of weed on either side, springing up from banks. And strange-looking fish constantly swam to and fro in front of our line of vision.

Some of these fish were small, and some immensely large. And they were not at all like the fish we had been accustomed to seeing in the tropics. They had been gorgeously coloured, and wonderful to look upon. But these fish, for the most part, were ugly and repulsive. How they could live in such hot water was surprising. They were more like monsters than fish, and were certainly not known to science.

And now and again some huge thing would come wriggling out of the deep shadows—some fearful-looking object with feelers and suckers. And then, before we could obtain a clear view, it would slither back into the shadows again. We were all fascinated as we stared out through the glass.

And these monstrous things were some slight indication of what we might find within the cavern itself. They were living creatures which were not known to the world. And we were well aware of the fact that something extra large might turn up—something which might even menace our safety. There was no telling what extraordinary things lurked in these waters.

And then, at last, we were in the tunnel itself—passing right beneath the mountainous ridge, which towered for thousands of feet above. We were on our way into the cavern of wonder.

The journey was a long one—not in distance, but in time. For we proceeded at the same slow crawl. We progressed yard by yard. There was no need to hurry—no need to risk damage to the Golden Rover by dashing through the tunnel at a reckless speed.

And then, at last, after what seemed an age, the searchlights in front revealed the fact that the low roof of the tunnel had vanished. And when the searchlights were switched off a subdued light penetrated into the navigating chamber. A curious, greenish light. This came through the water above, and proved that we were through the tunnel and actually in the cavern itself.

And then I watched eagerly and intently as the Rover slowly ascended to the surface. At length the great domed roof of the navigating room rose above the surface, with water streaming down its curved glass.

And the front window rose from the water, too. We stared through eagerly and expectantly.

CHAPTER IV.

AN AMAZING DISCOVERY!

"WELL I'm jiggered!"

"My goodness!"

"Great pip!"

"Look—look at the trees!"

"And the roof—hundreds of feet up!"

The juniors had come streaming on deck as soon as permission had been granted. And now they were standing there looking about them with amazement written on every face. For this sight was one which took their breath away.

It was all very well to visit tropical islands, with cocoanut palms, and mangrove swamps, and all that kind of thing. But, after all, the fellows had read about coral islands and palms and swamps. But this was something which they could not even picture in their minds. It was beyond the imagination.

To me it was not new. I had seen it before, on that other famous visit. Nevertheless, I was almost as much interested as all the other fellows. For it was even fresh and new to me.

Far overhead stretched the domed roof of the cavern. Immediately over us the roof was only two or three hundred feet high. But further into the centre of the cavern it rose steeply until it soared away to an almost unbelievable distance. We could see it right up there, looking like a bank of clouds. And the whole place was illuminated almost as clearly as though daylight found a way in.

The cause of this illumination was not apparent from the deck of the Golden Rover. We only knew that a tremendously bright light was gleaming and glowing beyond the forest land, which grew almost down to the water's edge. Just here there appeared to be a little clearing, with coarse grass growing near the banks of the stream. But a little way back the trees commenced.

We could see everything as distinctly as though the sun was shining. The coarse grass was most peculiar in texture and character. It was almost black—and the trees, too, were similar. They were utterly still, for no breath of wind stirred in this strange world. And the leaves were thick and solid, almost after the fashion of fungus.

All the vegetation somehow reminded me of seaweed. It was not at all like the fresh, pure green stuff of the outer air. It was the very opposite of charming and lovely. As we looked round, we couldn't help feeling chilled in some kind of way—although the temperature itself was very high. We were, indeed, perspiring in the humid heat.

But the whole scenery looked repulsive and sinister.

"Ugh! I don't think much of it!" said Tommy Watson. "It's jolly wonderful, I know, but there's something awful about it, too. I've got a kind of feeling that some

horrible thing might come shooting out from those trees!"

"Fathead!" said Handforth. "Nothing can hurt us here. Besides, I don't suppose there are any animals at all in this place. They couldn't live. The whole show is dead——"

"Look—what's that?" yelled Church suddenly.

He pointed to the river bank. Between the thick reeds a small black object was writhing up from the water.

For a moment we caught a glimpse of strange-looking legs and a flat, wicked head. Then the thing had vanished, leaving scarcely a movement behind it.

"The whole show is dead, is it?" I said grimly. "That's just where you make a bloomer, Handy. You'll find out that there are more queer animals in this place than there are in the whole of the African jungle. We are safe enough on board the Rover, though. But it's not very safe to go into these forests!"

"I wouldn't mind risking it," said Handforth.

"There you are—I knew it!" growled Church. "After he promised Mr. Lee, too! As soon as he gets a giddy chance he'll buzz off and get himself eaten by a horrible monster!"

"Yes, and he won't be satisfied unless we're eaten with him!" said McClure.

"You needn't worry—Handy won't be allowed to do any exploring," I said. "I expect we shall all be kept here, whether we like it or not. The guv'nor's not taking any chances."

Nelson Lee had come up in the rear.

"You are quite right, Nipper," he said. "I shall go on a little exploration trip presently—with Dorrie and one or two others. But all you boys must remain on board. Or, at least, within a few yards of the ship. We don't want any casualties."

I didn't say anything. I would very much like to go on this trip, but I thought it better to remain behind. For if I went, there would certainly be a lot of jealousy on the part of the other fellows. And, after all, there would be plenty of opportunities later on.

We did not do anything in a hurry. Our passage through the tunnel had occupied three or four hours, and now the next thing was to partake of a hearty meal. Snowball had it all ready, for he had been busy in his kitchen for some time past.

So far everything had gone very smoothly. We had met with no mishaps whatever. Under Mr. Raymond Gray's skilful hand, the Rover had been brought through the black tunnel in perfect safety.

And now here we were, actually within the wonder cavern itself. It was just possible that the Rover would be able to travel down stream for a considerable distance. But both Nelson Lee and Mr. Gray thought it advisable to anchor the ship at this spot, for the time being.

And the nature of this trip of Nelson Lee's would be to find out if the river was navigable further down. It was impossible to endanger the Golden Rover by experiments.

She was our sole means of returning to civilisation. If anything happened to her we should be lost—possibly cut off for ever. The South Pole had been discovered, and there was no reason why any expedition should come down into this barren waste of snow and ice.

Rescue might never come to us if we were entrapped in the cavern—entrapped, that is, by some disaster to the Rover. Thus, before going down stream in the vessel, it was necessary to find out if the way was clear.

We were all surprised to find Jock McGregor and 'Orace hard at work after we had finished our meal. They were carrying sheets of yellow metal out into the open from one of the store-rooms.

The Rover was now hitched up alongside the river bank, and it was quite possible to jump ashore from her deck. It seemed that the two engineers were blessed with the strength of Hercules, judging by the size and thickness of the metal plates they were carrying.

But they were made of the same metal which had been used in the construction of the parent ship. For these plates were the parts of a small but very serviceable motor-boat. It was so designed that it could be taken to pieces or erected by a very simple process.

The engine was a tiny little affair, but quite capable of developing a good power. Within a couple of hours the motor-boat was all ready for service, her engine buzzing softly and evenly.

We watched the preparations with interest. Nelson Lee was going with Dorrie and Phipps and Major Barrance. Mr. Gray would remain with us and the two engineers. There was no fear that any harm would occur at the base.

"How long do you think you'll be, guv'nor?" I asked.

"It all depends, but you need not be alarmed if we do not return within three or four hours," replied Nelson Lee. "We are fully alarmed, and if we meet with any strange monsters we shall despatch them without hesitation. And take care, boys—do not get up to any rash tricks. Keep near to the ship all the time."

And then, soon afterwards, they started off.

Nelson Lee was at the wheel, and the little motor boat went gliding down the wide river in mid-stream. Close observations were kept all the time, and the four explorers were vastly interested in all they saw.

For quite a long time the river wound in and out through the strange forest land,

with very little change in appearance, but it was noticed that the light was becoming brighter.

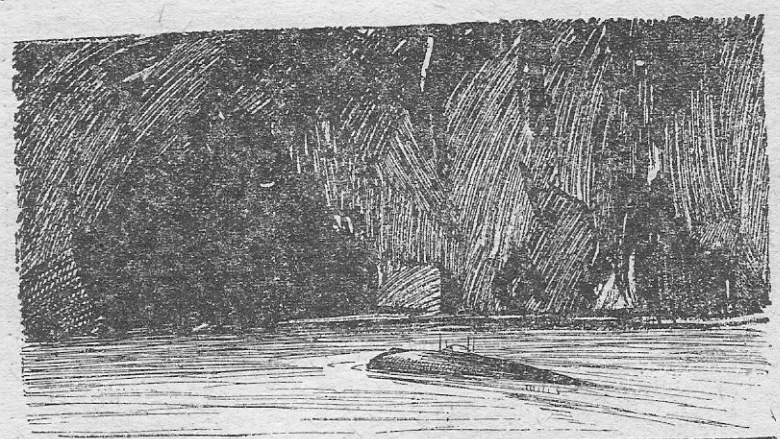
And then, after a wide, sweeping bend had been taken, a remarkable vista came into view. All in the boat stared before them in fresh wonder. They were now getting towards the centre of the cavern, and suddenly, coming round this bend opened up before them a scene which had hitherto been completely hidden.

The forest trailed away from this point, and the river wound its way through a bare valley, where only a few patches of grass grew in the black-looking soil, and towards

"Yes, it is certainly very remarkable," agreed Nelson Lee. "There appears to be very little change, Dorrie. Our last visit to this place was disturbed by a volcanic disturbance—but it does not seem to have altered the place in any important degree."

"As far as I can see, everythin' is exactly the same," said Dorrie. "I dare say a few of these trees got frizzled up, but they've had time to grow again by now. An' that volcanic disturbance seems to have wiped out the animals."

"We may see some yet," said Major Barrance. "I rather fancy I saw a movement in the forest only a few minutes ago. What



And when we were within a short distance of the tunnel opening, the Rover submerged.

the very middle of this barren space there was a deep depression—situated about a quarter of a mile from the river.

And this depression was a kind of basin of liquid fire. It was so dazzling, that even at this distance it was almost painful to the eyes. And from the very centre of the basin a stream of fire spurted up like a thin fountain. It was as though a mighty charge of magnesium was being ignited. The column of fire was blinding in brilliance.

And it rose straight up with tremendous force to the arched dome of this underground world. And the top of the fountain, striking the roof, burst out into lurid showers of fire.

In this way the whole cavern was flooded with light—subdued towards the outer edges, but blazing brilliant in the centre.

"Extraordinary, sir!" exclaimed Phipps in a hushed voice

shall we do, gentlemen? Go straight on or——"

"I think we'd better continue for some little distance, at all events," said Nelson Lee. "It appears to me that the current here is somewhat stronger. We also want to find out if the river continues at the same breadth all the way along. So far, the Rover can easily navigate the course."

"An' if it can't, we can take to the air!" said Dorrie. "I'll admit she's pretty large to be buzzin' round in this coop, but I don't think she'd come to any harm. But the river would be best."

The engine was accelerated again and the little motor-boat pushed its way on against the current. The river continued to be wide and ugly. The banks were the same all the way along—lined with the reed-like grass, and with no variation of the scenery.

But soon there came a surprise.

The boat had only progressed about half

a mile when the river widened out in two distinct forks. One led through an impenetrable mass of forest, where the giant leaves entwined overhead like a bower, and the other turned off through a barren valley. Again the explorers paused.

"Well, this is something new, anyhow," said Nelson Lee. "I suppose we had better take the open route—that is, the fork to the right. That close forest may hold unknown perils, and I would suggest that the open river is more suitable for navigating the Rover.

The others agreed, and so the right hand branch of the river was taken. It led away through open country. But now it could be distinguished that the cavern was narrowing down again. The travellers, in fact, were coming to the far end of it. It was not so large as they had first imagined. From the other side it had seemed deeper and longer. But now there could be no doubt that the domed roof came down sharply. Perhaps there would be no outlet on this side.

The light was strong and powerful here, for that central fountain of fire was in view all the time. And the heat was much greater, too. It was like being in a tremendous hot-house. Near the basin of fire it could be seen that all the vegetation was missing. The ground was scorched and powdery.

And then, suddenly, Phipps pointed.

"Look at that, sir!" he said, with a catch in his voice.

They looked. Out from a belt of the strange woodland a peculiar-looking object had emerged. At first sight it appeared to be a gigantic tadpole. It was very similar in shape and form. The thing was greenish in colour—a great lumbering, frog-like monster, with enormous bulging eyes. At close quarters a creature of this kind would have been a formidable proposition. But the explorers were sufficiently far off to feel safe.

The thing was twelve or fifteen feet high, and double this length, and as they looked at it it opened its mouth and emitted a strange, hollow roar. Lord Dorrimore levelled his rifle.

Crack!

The report rang out sharply, and they could see the monster jump slightly. Then, with a swish of its mighty tail, it vanished into the forest.

"Tickled him a bit, anyway!" said his lordship calmly. "An' that makes me think, you know. Supposin' the frightful thing had been close up? Bullets don't seem to harm it much. That would be deucedly awkward!"

"It would!" agreed Lee. "Perhaps it will be better not to fire unless we are compelled to. We don't want to precipitate trouble, Dorrie."

They did not see any sign of any other animals. And soon the barren banks began to slope steeply upwards, until the river was running through a kind of cutting, and then, just as they turned a bend, they found that this was practically as far as they could go.

For they became aware of a low, booming roar. The current was swifter, too, and they came within sight of a low, foaming waterfall. Masses of steam and spray were rising. The waterfall was between ten and twelve feet high——quite small as waterfalls go, but more than sufficient to bar further progress—both for the motor-boat and the Golden Rover, and beyond this fall the rock wall came down at quite close quarters.

"We shall have to turn back and explore the other route," said Nelson Lee. "It is obviously impossible to continue any further up this stream."

The others agreed and they turned the little motor-boat round and shut off the engine.

The current was quite sufficient to carry them along. They'd only just started when Lee noticed that Phipps was staring back along the river. He appeared to be gazing at the surface of the water.

"What can you see, Phipps?" asked Lee.

"I don't quite know, sir," said Phipps, "but I thought I saw something floating on the water."

They turned the boat round slightly by the use of the rudder, so that they lost way somewhat, and now the others could see that something was certainly floating down on the current. It appeared to be coloured blue and red—and this, in itself, was remarkable.

At length the object swirled round on an eddy and came quite close. Then Nelson Lee reached out a hand and grasped it. He dragged into the boat a sodden piece of highly-coloured material.

And they all stared at this object in staggered amazement. Even Nelson Lee betrayed his surprise. Quickly he squeezed the water out of the thing and held it up.

"By gad!" said Dorrie. "A tunic!"

"It seems to be a cross between a tunic and a blouse!" exclaimed Lee quickly. "Undoubtedly this has been worn by a human being—and a highly-cultivated human being at that. What on earth can it mean?"

"I say, this is extraordinary!" exclaimed Major Barrance. "What's the thing made of, Mr. Lee? Cotton, wool, or what?"

"It is certainly made of wool," replied Nelson Lee, "and it is dyed in the most distinctive colours, as you can see. The material was woven on a hand-loom, I should imagine, and the workmanship is most excellent. One does not see this kind of material in England nowadays."

"But, man alive, don't you realise what this means?" demanded Dorrie.

"I realise that this discovery is the most amazing one that we have ever made," replied Nelson Lee quietly. "We are in this mysterious cavern, where strange monsters lurk, and where one would never dream of finding civilised human beings, and yet, down on the current of the river, comes

this tunic! The fact that it has floated down the river proves that it originally entered the water at some place far beyond—and much further into the unexplored region."

"But—but it means that people must be there!" exclaimed Barrance.

"It would seem that that is surely the case," agreed Nelson Lee. "Indeed, there is nothing else to think. The thing is amazing—startling, and it is a mystery which we must solve."

"How?" asked Dorrie.

"Perhaps, if we take the other bend of the stream we may find some solution," said Nelson Lee. "But I can assure you that I shall not rest content until I have probed the secret of this astounding riddle."

The coloured tunic!

Where had it come from? What did it mean?

CHAPTER V.

HANDFORTH AT IT AGAIN!

HANDFORTH grunted.

"It's all piffle!" he declared warmly. "Why the dickens should we stick here? I want to go into that forest and have a look round. In fact, I'm jolly well going to do it."

"Look here, Handy——"

"Be sensible, old man——"

"If you chaps kick up a row I'll jolly well wipe you up!" hissed Handforth threateningly. "I don't want the other follows to know—so don't yell. We're ashore now, and it won't take us two ticks to slip into the forest."

Church and McClure looked thoroughly exasperated. They had never imagined that their leader would want to go off on any more foolhardy escapades. The narrow escape on the icefloe ought to have taught Handforth a lesson that he would never forget, but it appeared to have slipped his mind already. His chums reminded him.

"Do you mean to tell me that you want to go off exploring?" asked Church.

"Yes."

"By ourselves?"

"Yes."

"But look here, Handy, don't be an ass!" said Church persuasively. "You can't mean this—you're just trying to pull our legs. Didn't Mr. Lee say distinctly that we were to stay near the Rover?"

"Well, I'm not suggesting that we should do anything else," replied Handforth. "I call a mile near. We can easily bunk into the forest here, and do a bit of exploring on our own. And we shall still be within sight of the giddy ship. At least, nearly within sight."

"But it's wrong—and it's potty, too," objected McClure. "Don't forget what happened when we went away from the others on that chunk of ice. Our bit split off, and we only just escaped with our lives!"

Handforth sniffed.

"That's got nothing to do with it," he declared. "You're not trying to make out that a chunk of this forest is going to split off, I suppose!"

"No, but——"

"But rats!" interrupted Handforth. "It's no good grumbling or objecting. I'm not going to argue about it—and I don't think I'll slosh you, after all. You can go to the dickens! I'm fed up with you! You call yourselves my pals, and yet you're always ready to desert me!"

"We're not——"

"Don't you call it deserting me to growl whenever I suggest anything?" asked Handforth witheringly. "Don't you call it deserting me to object when I suggest that we should do some exploring? Blow you! Dash you! Eat coke! Eat anything you jolly well like! I'm going alone."

Church and McClure looked alarmed.

"You can't go alone," said Church quickly.

"Can't I?" snapped Handforth. "Well, of all the nerve! You object to coming with me, and after I've let you off, you calmly say I can't go alone! Perhaps you'll give me permission to breathe!"

Church and McClure gazed at one another in helpless exasperation. If there was a more unreasonable fellow than Handforth in the world, they would have to go thousands of miles to find him. They wanted to choke Handy off the exploring stunt, and they had refused to go.

And instead of kicking up a row, as usual, he had calmly turned round and declared that he would go on his own. It was almost impossible to tell what Handforth would be up to next.

"It's all right, Handy—you can go if you like," said Church.

"Thanks awfully!" said Handforth. "I'm crying with joy!"

"Oh, don't rot!" growled Church. "If you choose to go, we can't prevent you——"

"I know that!"

"We can't hold you back——"

"You'd better try it, and you'll see what would happen!"

"At the same time," went on Church, "you ought to consider us. We've asked you not to go on this trip, and as our pal, you ought to agree. Don't be a rotter, Handy! We want you to come on board to show us how to make something."

"Make something?" repeated Handforth suspiciously.

"I—I mean, we want a game of chess!"

"If you think you can spoof me, you've made a bloomer!" said Handforth tartly. "Chess! Likely, ain't it? I'm fed up with these objections! I'm going—and I'm going alone! If you chaps dare to follow me, I'll make you pay for it!"

Church looked round anxiously.

"And if you shout to any of the other

fellows I'll never call you my chum again!" went on Handforth. "I'll kick you out of Study D, and I'll refuse to speak to you for a whole year."

And he stalked off without another word, leaving Church and McClure standing there, looking after him.

"Oh, the born idiot!" exclaimed Church, clenching his fist. "The lunatic—the mad fathead! It doesn't matter what we do, he objects. He'll go into the forest and lose himself, or get eaten by an elephant, or something."

"We can't let him do it," said McClure firmly.

"You mean we'll go with him?"

"Of course," replied McClure. "It's the only thing to do. We can't allow him to go off on his own, so we've got to follow. I think the best thing will be to sneak after him, and just keep him in sight. He'll only cause a row if we join him."

"Yes, that's a good idea," said Church.

They looked round, and saw that they were unobserved at the moment. Pitt and Jack Grey and De Valerie and a few others were on the river bank, examining the grass, and generally lounging about. Nobody had been taking much notice of Handforth and Co. And so the three of them were able to sneak off without being observed. Church and McClure hurried after their leader as quickly as possible.

And they soon found that he had gone between a row of the strange-looking trees, and was penetrating deeper into the forest. On all sides these trees grew to a towering height, their great forked branches spreading out on all sides in still, silent ugliness.

"I don't like this at all," muttered Church. "It's enough to give you the creeps!"

"And look at the leaves, too," said McClure. "Great, fat things as big as tables! And they're three or four inches thick."

He took hold of one of the leaves and exerted some pressure. The leaf was fat, and the end of it snapped off like a carrot. And the raw edge of the piece that the junior held oozed out drops of greenish moisture. There was a dank, nasty smell, similar to fungus.

"Ugh! It's horrible," said Church. "I don't think much of this forest!"

Almost before they could realise it they had walked into Handforth's arms. He had suddenly appeared from behind a big tree. He had obviously been lurking there with a set purpose. "Oh, just what I thought!" he exclaimed tartly. "Spying on me, eh?"

"I—I——"

"We—we——"

"Dry up!" snapped Handforth. "It's no good making excuses. You're a couple of miserable rotters! Spying on your leader as though you were his enemies! I sha'n't forget this in a hurry——"

"You rotter!" said McClure hotly. "We were following you because you're our friend. We didn't want any harm to come to you. Supposing you're caught alone by some queer monster? What chance will you stand? We've come along to help you if anything happens."

"Jolly kind of you," said Handforth. "I'm most awfully obliged. Buzz off! I don't want you! Understand?"

Church and McClure breathed hard.

"All right! Do as you jolly well like!" exclaimed Church fiercely. "We've done our best—we don't care! Go and eat coke!"

He turned away, and Church followed his example.

"Of course, now you're here, there's no reason why you shouldn't come with me," said Handforth carelessly. "I'm not trying to persuade you, of course. I don't care what you do. But—well, it's rather rotten for a chap to be in a place like this all by himself."

Handforth looked anxious for a moment. As a matter of fact, he had been feeling somewhat strange amid his peculiar surroundings. And he had been immensely relieved to find that Church and McClure were near by. And now he was anxious that they should come with him.

They agreed without further demur.

And so the trio penetrated further into the forest. Handforth promised his chums that he would turn back after about five minutes. He only wanted to have just a look into the forest to see what it was really like.

They walked off, examining the trees and bushes with great interest. And here and there they would come upon some queer-looking insect or other. There were far more insects than they had believed.

They lurked in all sorts of odd corners—black, squat-looking things with short legs. There were others like centipedes, and any amount of slug-like objects. Some of the trees were fairly infested with these latter.

"Well, I don't think much of this place," said Handforth. "It's certainly amazing, and all that sort of thing, but it's not pretty. I sha'n't care much if we clear out within a couple of days. If we do that, and set out for England, we shall be home before the Wanderer."

"Hark!" said Church quickly. "What was that?"

"I thought I heard something just now ——"

He paused, for at that moment the juniors turned swiftly round, and saw the trees shaking and quivering away to the right. The three chums watched expectantly, wondering what the reason for that disturbance could be.

"Great Scott!" muttered McClure hoarsely.

A head had appeared—a horrible, reptilian head with small, beady eyes. Projecting from the slobbering mouth there were two yellow tusks, and a suspicion of awful teeth could be seen.

And after the head came a body. But this latter astounded Handforth and Co. more than they could say. According to the size of the head, they had expected to see some animal about the size of a bullock. But the body towered up to about twenty feet, and it came crashing through the trees, cracking and splintering them as though they were giant mushrooms. Indeed, these trees did somewhat resemble mushrooms in texture.

The creature's head was low down in the body, and then its back humped to a tremendous height. Suddenly it paused and stood stock still, as though turned into stone. Obviously it had either seen Handforth and Co. or had scented them. They certainly scented the monster.

The air in the vicinity had suddenly become charged with a loathsome, earthy smell. And then the creature moved forward again—this time much more quickly.

"Help!" gasped Church. "Run—run like mad!"

Handforth nodded, and started off. He pelted away as hard as he could in exactly the opposite direction to the Rover. There was no doubt that he fondly imagined that he was taking the right course. Church and McClure knew differently. But there was no time to call him back, and it was impossible to desert him.

So they pelted after him.

And in the rear came the loathsome monster, thundering along, and snorting and hissing. Glancing back, Church caught a glimpse of that horrible sloppy mouth, and he felt almost sick at the sight of it.

He pictured to himself the horror of being caught in those jaws. And it nearly made him feel faint and giddy.

The juniors had the advantage, for the creature was cumbersome and heavy. The boys, on the other hand, could nip between the trees at express speed. And they raced on and on. And still the thing came behind them.

They knew that to pause would be fatal. Handforth was looking wildly and hopefully for the river, and for the Golden Rover. He wasn't likely to find either, since they were getting further and further away all the time.

But the character of the forest changed a bit soon—and this was all against the juniors. For the trees grew thin, and in places there were wide, open spaces. And here and there were banks of ground, covered with coarse, seaweed-like grass.

Suddenly Handforth paused, and pointed.

"In there—quick!" he panted.

And his chums saw what he meant.

There was a small aperture in one of the banks—a hole about three feet in diameter. It seemed to be the entrance to a tunnel, and was quite large enough to admit their bodies. But the horror which followed would be unable to penetrate such a small space.

They dived in, one after the other, and found that the tunnel went deep into the earth. They were immensely relieved at this, for they had half feared that the place would not be a refuge.

"Oh, thank goodness!" breathed Church. "We ought to be safe here, anyhow!"

"Let's hope so!" whispered McClure.

"The giddy nerve of it!" snorted Handforth. "Having the sauce to follow us! Why, I've a jolly good mind to go out and punch the thing in the eye!"

But Handforth didn't attempt anything so rash. He remained in cover, and kept peering out as far as he dared. And the peculiar monster remained in the vicinity of the hole for three or four minutes. Then, evidently giving up the idea, lumbered away and disappeared into the forest.

"Oh, good!" breathed Handforth. "We're safe, you chaps! It's all serene! The blessed thing's scooted! Afraid of us, I suppose!"

"Not likely!" said Church. "I don't think it's got enough brains to wait until we come out. It seems to be more of a reptile than an animal, and it's got about as much sense as a frog!"

The juniors were just thinking of emerging from their hiding-place, when they became aware of a peculiar scraping noise in their rear. They paused, startled. And then McClure, in the further end of the little tunnel, uttered a startled scream. His chums gulped.

"What—what's the matter?" shouted Church.

"Some—something touched me!"

They scrambled out of the hole in double quick time, and once clear, they faced about and gazed at the tunnel entrance.

CHAPTER VI.

WONDER UPON WONDER!

HANDFORTH AND CO. held their breath. Then, from the tunnel, there emerged an extraordinary snake-like reptile. It was not particularly large, but it was long and sinuous, and it possessed eight or nine short, stumpy legs on either side. There were long feelers projecting from the head.

The thing was like a gigantic centipede. It was fully six feet long, and a most ugly customer to meet. The juniors did not think it necessary to wait in the vicinity to make closer acquaintanceship with the gentleman.

They turned about and scooted. And they had to chance whether they ran into their former friend of the slobbery mouth. And it was more than probable that they would meet other dangerous living things. Handforth began to feel rather sorry that he had come out exploring. But he was generally like that. He never saw the foolishness of anything until it was too late.

"I was an ass to come!" he growled. "That's the result of taking notice of you chaps!"

"What!" gasped Church and McClure faintly.

"Well, it was your idea——"

"You—you awful rotter!" yelled Church. "We only came to look after you—and it's a good thing we did, because you'd have been eaten by this time."

"Rats!" growled McClure. "These monsters don't eat leather!"

Handforth pushed up his sleeves.

"My hat!" he said, breathing hard. "Leather! I'll show you——"

"Cave!" roared McClure. "Bunk!"

They bunked—not because anything was coming, but because McClure wished to avoid trouble. And so they pelted on for a few hundred yards through the trees, and then came to another breathless halt. By this time Handforth had forgotten the insult.

"Blessed if I can understand it!" he said. "We ought to have come upon the Rover long before this. I know we didn't come all this way——"

"You dummy!" snapped Church. "We've been coming away from the Rover all the time—and we're a tremendous distance from it now. We've got to go back on our tracks——"

"Rats!" said Handforth. "To get to the Rover we've got to keep on in this same way, and we're bound to strike the river in a minute or two. You've only got to trust to me, and you'll be all serene."

"Look here, do be sensible, Handy!" exclaimed Church. "I tell you we're going the wrong way. The longer we go on in this direction the further we shall get away from our starting point."

"Of course!" agreed McClure.

Handforth shook his head firmly.

"I'm in charge of this trip, and I never lose my sense of direction," he declared. "We'll keep on this way, and we'll be back at the Rover in next to no time. Come on!"

Church and McClure gave it up. They knew, in fact, that they would only make matters worse by arguing. In a short time Handforth would find out the mistake for himself. They would have to chance to luck whether they met any further monsters. So they walked on.

They had seen no sign of the central fountain of fire. This was because they had unconsciously taken a route near the wall of the cavern. And the fiery fountain was hidden from them by the masses of fungus-like trees. But there was plenty of illumination—that strange, dreamy, subdued light.

The three juniors were quite warm, for the atmosphere was moist and humid—it was, indeed, very much like the interior of a conservatory. And Handforth and Co. hoped against hope that they would soon catch sight of the river. There could be no mistake once they found it.

It would only be necessary to follow it in the direction of the current, and they were bound to come upon the Rover. But there seemed to be no sign of the river—no trace that it existed.

This was not surprising, for, as Church and McClure knew, every step took them farther away from the strange water-course. They kept their eyes wide open for any other strange animals or reptiles. But, fortunately, the forest seemed to be more open here, and there was no life.

None, that is, except for strange insects which crawled in and out of holes—pools of moisture with slimy crawly things in them. But there was no danger from these. The juniors were not feeling so alarmed.

They emerged from the trees, and then saw before them a long stretch of unwooded land. It was undulating, and covered with tall, thick weeds which grew in profusion. The forest grew up sheer on either side of this peculiar highway. And at the extreme end there seemed to be a kind of white glow.

"Now!" said Church. "Are we going the right way or not? We didn't come across anything of this sort before. It proves that we're taking the wrong direction. The fact is, we're lost."

"My hat!" muttered McClure. "We may never find the Golden Rover again."

"Don't be such asses!" exclaimed Handforth. "Even if we are lost, it won't take us long to find ourselves again. We've only got to work round in circles, and we're bound to come to the river."

"I'm glad you admit we're lost!" grunted Church. "That's one thing, anyhow."

"I don't admit anything of the sort!" retorted Handforth. "As long as you're with me you're not lost. I'll see the thing through!"

"Well, what shall we do now?" asked McClure.

"Go down this clear stretch—and see what's at the end," replied Handy. "I'll bet anything that we find the river."

"But it's a long way——"

"That doesn't matter—we're going!"

It was useless to continue the conversation, so Church and McClure followed their famous leader. It did not look so very far to the end of this unwooded stretch—but it was certainly over a mile.

They were not anywhere near the centre of the cavern, but towards one side, for the roof was only two or three hundred feet above them, and it sloped down sharply to the left. And in the distance, where that whitish light could be seen, the roof came right down, and it really seemed to be the far extremity of the cavern. They couldn't go much beyond that point, anyhow.

Church and McClure were pleased when they realised this. Handforth would be com-

pelled to turn back, for he would be barred from further progress by a wall of rock.

And so the juniors hurried on—at least, they went as quickly as possible. It was not easy to hurry through that coarse, seaweed-like vegetation. In places the ground was spongy and soft, and decidedly boggy.

But they made progress, and the end of the cavern came nearer and nearer. But the time was slipping by, and the three juniors hardly had any realisation of the hour. They did not exactly know how long they had been out on this exploration trip. Yet, as a matter of fact, they had started off from the Golden Rover nearly three hours earlier.

But here, of course, there was no sun to guide them. The light remained constantly the same—the temperature the same.

They continued walking on, and yet when they looked up and gazed at that whitish patch, it seemed to be as far away as ever. It proved to be a tedious, tiring journey—and it was all the more exasperating for Church and McClure, because they knew that it was all a sheer waste of time. They would have to come back on their own track.

And they would be tired before they even got to the end of the cavern. The journey back would certainly be wearisome and trying.

But to reason with Handforth was out of the question. He wouldn't listen to it. He had made up his mind to go to the end of this treeless stretch of ground, and nothing would shift him from his purpose.

Occasionally, Church or McClure would let out a loud, penetrating yell. And they would all pause and listen. But there were no answering sounds from any direction.

And during the whole of this time the youthful explorers were half-expecting to see some weird and wonderful creature dashing to the attack. But, fortunately for them, this part of the cavern did not seem to be infested with any monstrosities.

"Well, we're nearly there, anyway," said Handforth, at last. "Good egg! We've only got to go a little distance now, and we shall find the Rover. She can't be far away."

His chums made no comment. There was no sense in agreeing when they didn't believe in it. And disagreeing would only start an argument. Silence was the better course.

They walked on, the ground being harder here. The coarse, spongy vegetation was breaking up, and only lay in patches. Between these patches there was rough, rock-strewn ground. Indeed, the whole scene was one of desolation and wild ruggedness.

There was nothing beautiful in the picture—nothing that would cause anybody to pause and admire. Indeed, it was far more likely that one would shudder. There was something indescribably unpleasant about this strange cavern.

But at length, weary and perspiring freely, the juniors plunged into the thick forest land once more. Through the trees, in the distance, the strange white light appeared to be growing brighter and brighter. The juniors wondered what it could be, for it was much clearer than the greenish glow of the cavern.

And now the others could see that something was certainly floating down on the current. It appeared to be coloured blue and red, and this in itself was remarkable.

And almost without warning they emerged from the tree belt, and saw before them the rocky cavern wall. It rose up stiffly, like a formidable cliff. But it was not entirely enclosed, as they half-believed it would be. Right in front of them yawned a low-roofed tunnel. It was strangely formed, for while being fully thirty yards wide, it was no higher than six feet. And Church trembled in every limb with excitement as he stared.

"Daylight!" he shouted thickly.

"What!" gasped McClure. "Oh, great Scott!"

"Daylight!" yelled Handforth. "But—but it can't be!"

"It is!" insisted Church, flustered with excitement. "Daylight—here! And—and we're in the far side of the cavern. What can it mean, you chaps? We entered by that river tunnel, and this place leads out on the other side."

Even Handforth was compelled to admit the truth of this.

"By George, I believe you're right!" he exclaimed. "We must have been coming wrong, after all! Of course, I had an idea that we were going in the wrong direction——"

"You had an idea?" gasped Church. "Why, you ass, you said that——"

"Blow what I said!" growled Handy. "What does it matter, anyhow? We're making discoveries. We came out to explore, and we're jolly well doing it, too! We're going through this opening, my sons!"

They all stared through the curious rock formation. It was quite a remarkable place. The floor beneath that strangely wide arch

was quite smooth, and the arch itself was so evenly formed that one could hardly believe that the thing was natural. Yet, of course, it was.

There was no question about this outlet being on the opposite side of the cavern to where the Golden Rover lay. According to all that Handforth and Co. had heard, there was only one way of getting into this cavern—and that way was also the only exit. It was through the big river tunnel. In many places the water practically filled this tunnel, so that only a submersible boat could attempt the journey.

But what was this?

Here, in the very opposite side of the cavern, there was a low tunnel which led to daylight beyond. The space was so low that even a motor-bus could not have passed through. Yet there was plenty of room for an ordinary human being. In fact, crowds could have marched through abreast, for the tunnel was so wide.

The juniors were very excited, for they had never expected to make any discovery like this. The cavern lay at the base of a vast mountain—and this wide tunnel, evidently, led out on the other side. At all events, Handforth and Co. determined to pass through in order to discover what actually lay beyond.

"Come on!" said Handforth. "We'll soon get through here!"

He was right, for the distance was not so very great. And he and his chums ran along at the double. They expected the air to be cold and piercing outside—they expected to feel the atmosphere to change as they went along.

But nothing like this happened.

The temperature remained practically the same. And then, at last, after travelling about half-a-mile—for the tunnel was longer than it had seemed—they approached the exit.

By what they could see full daylight lay out there, but it was impossible to gain any view for the great masses of rock rose up. But there appeared to be no snow and no ice.

At length the three juniors emerged from the tunnel mouth.

The daylight was dazzling at first, and they all stood there, gazing about them and wondering. The most remarkable fact of all was that the air was soft and warm. No biting breeze, and no chill.

Overhead the sky seemed to be quite blue, and in little patches there were touches of green.

"Well, I'm jiggered!" said Handforth.

They had expected to see a long vista of ice hummocks, and so they were very surprised at the actual truth. Right in front

(*Continued on next page.*)

of them arose big masses of rock formations—wild, grand and rugged.

And a little to the left there appeared to be a deep cleft, through which one might pass. The juniors moved towards this as though impelled by a common impulse. They hardly dared wonder what would reveal itself next.

They passed through this cleft, and then, finally, and without warning, they turned a great pile of rock, and saw before them a vast stretch of country—a landscape which stretched away for dozens and dozens of miles. And so clear was the atmosphere—so sparkingly transparent—that they could see right into the distance.

And they stood there agape.

For this sight was the most amazing wonder of all!

CHAPTER VII.

THE LAND OF MYSTERY!

"WE—we must be dreaming!" muttered Church in an awed voice.

"Yes, it can't be true," said McClure. "It can't be true! We're right down near the South Pole, and there's only snow and ice here! This—this must be a vision—a mirage, or something."

But Handforth was a practical soul.

"Rats!" he said. "It's real enough."

"But—but——"

"It's no good asking me to explain it, because I can't—but it's here, in front of our eyes," interfrupted Handforth. "You can't get away from it. It's a terrific discovery, my sons. Think of it! Our names will go down in history as the first white people who found this new land!"

Church and McClure were not interested in the future.

They gave all their attention to the extraordinary scene which was unfolded before their gaze. It was hardly surprising that they had been ready to believe that they had been dreaming. It seemed too absolutely impossible to be true.

They were standing on fairly high ground. Green, sloping hills led downward from this spot—downwards into a valley which was surely the loveliest picture the human eyes could gaze upon.

Far away to the right, and far away to the left, vast and massive hills arose—mountains, with dazzling snowpeaks, and with the topmost heights completely enveloped in thick clouds. Curiously enough, these clouds seemed to cling about the mountain tops alone—for over the centre of the valley the sky was clear.

Right in the dim distance, too, and facing the three staggered juniors, there were other mountains, and these were obscured in clouds at their summits.

Church turned round and gazed upwards.

"My goodness!" he said faintly.

The sight rather appalled him. One generally feels puny and insignificant when gazing upon the monstrous wonders of nature. A man will get this impression when he is viewing the world-famous Colorado Grand Canyon.

But this was even more stupendous.

Behind the juniors reached up precipice after precipice—the sheer rocks rose up into the sky to thousands and thousands of feet. It made the mind dizzy to gaze. It seemed that the mountain cliffs reached to the very stars. And even now the top was invisible, owing to cloudy masses.

In a word, the juniors were standing in a kind of basin. This basin stretched away before them in a great oval space to the extent of sixty or seventy miles. This was only a rough estimate. Perhaps the distance was nearer a hundred. And the basin appeared to be fifty miles broad.

It must not be imagined that the juniors could see all this. But they were standing several thousand feet above the level of the actual valleys, and thus they were able to obtain an uninterrupted view. And the air was so clear that they could see for dozens of miles.

Like some dim, shadowy ghosts the mountains on the far side of the basin were visible. They were a stupendous distance away—but visible.

Apparently there was no break in this surrounding ring of mountains. The basin was entirely and completely shut in. But this, in itself, was not so very remarkable.

One may expect to find creations of nature such as this in the unexplored regions surrounding the South Pole.

But the thing which was astounding—which staggered the human mind—was that the whole landscape was green—beautifully, delightfully green! And Handforth and Co. could see stately green trees growing in profusion further down the slopes. There were forests—deep, rich woods. There were large tracts of meadowland, with bright patches of colour here and there. And in many different quarters the juniors could see blue ribbons wending their way through the green. Rivers—rivers, big and small. Most of them were the tributaries of a great stream which passed through the very centre of the valley, and which lost itself in the tremendous distance. It was a picture to bewilder the mind.

"Oh, my goodness!" muttered Church. "How can it be, you chaps? Here, down in the Antarctic, you know! Why isn't it cold? Why isn't everything frozen up? Where's the snow and ice?"

"Goodness knows!" replied Handforth. "But don't forget that this river we can see is the same one that flows through the cavern. It must be, because it couldn't find an outlet anywhere else."

"Well, what of it?"

"Well, that river's warm—hot, in fact,"

said Handforth. "Perhaps all the other rivers are hot. That accounts for the vegetation, and the absence of snow and ice. And it accounts for the warm atmosphere."

"By jingo, so it does!" said McClure. "I can see some figures!"

"Figures!"

"Yes—men!"

Church was fairly shaking with excitement, and he pointed a quivering figure.

"Figures!" he repeated. "They're men all right—and I wish to goodness I had a pair of binoculars. Those figures are six or seven miles away, if they're an inch!"

The other fellows could not pick out the figure at first, but when they did they stared intently. Several dots could be seen crossing a green field. And although they were far away there was no doubt that they were figures walking upright. They could not be animals.

And, as the attention of the juniors had been directed in this particular spot, they saw things which had previously been lost in the general scenery. They were able to pick out certain details.

The first familiar sight they saw was a column of smoke arising. McClure pointed it out, and immediately afterwards he discovered where the column of smoke was coming from.

"It's a building!" he declared. "Can't you see, you chaps? That little red spot? It's a real building—and I'm blessed if it doesn't look like an ordinary English house!"

"Oh, rot!" said Handforth. "It couldn't be!"

At the same time, his heart was throbbing rapidly. Certainly that red spot, with the column of smoke rising from it, looked very much like a brick building. But how could it be—here in this wild and unknown spot? It was altogether beyond reason and rhyme.

Handforth quickly made up his mind.

"We've come so far, we might as well go a little further," he declared. "Besides, I've been thinking. There's the river over there—only a mile or two away. We can't see where it enters the cavern, because of the rocks. But there's probably another tunnel, and we've only to get to the river and we shall be able to see a bit more. It ought to be easy to follow the river right back to the airship. That's the way we'll go."

His chums agreed. It was, after all, better to do this than to go back into the cavern by the same way as they had emerged. For they would only lose themselves once they had returned to the sinister place, with its nightmare-like forests and loathsome reptiles.

By getting to the river they stood a good chance of finding the Golden Rover. And so, thrilled and wondering, they set off down the slopes towards the river. Here the ground was rocky and very rough. But about half-a-mile lower down the grass began, and it would also be necessary to pass through a stretch of woodland. The three juniors were eager and intent.

They walked quickly, and when they came to the grass they examined it with great interest. It was coarse, tough grass, but very similar to what one might find in other parts of the world.

And when they came to the trees they looked at these with added interest. The trees grew up to a great height—fine, stately trees with full foliage and strong trunks.

The trees grew thicker until the boys found themselves passing through a kind of forest. They did not attempt to skirt this wood, but went right through the centre—for they knew, from their observations above, that on the other side they would come out near the river.

"I'm getting past being surprised," exclaimed Church. "This wood's very much like an English forest. Creepers, and ferns, and all the rest of it. And have you noticed the insects, too? I spotted a bee just now."

"Hallo!" said Handforth. "What was that? I—I heard—— Great pip! Look there—quick!"

He yelled out, and pointed.

Church and McClure caught sight of some little object bounding into a hole in a sand bank.

"A rabbit!" gasped Handforth blankly.

"Oh, it couldn't have been——"

"It was—I'll swear it!" interrupted Edward Oswald. "A jolly, fat rabbit! But fancy rabbits being here—it's more than a chap can believe! My only topper! I'm beginning to think it's a dream, too!"

Church and McClure had an idea that Handforth had imagined something—that the little animal he had seen was a native of this strange country, and not a rabbit at all. But Handforth was positive on the point.

And in a few minutes Church and McClure were convinced, too. For they themselves distinctly saw two young rabbits bounding away as they approached. Was not this amazingly strange?

But Handforth and Co. had by no means come to the end of their astonishing discoveries. They presently found themselves emerging on the other side of the wood. And there, three or four hundred yards below them, at the foot of the gentle slope, lay the broad, gently-flowing river.

There were trees, similar to willows, lining its bank. Great water-lilies grew, with rushes and reeds. The river was a hundred yards wide at this point—a splendid stream.

But the juniors only gave it a glance.

For Handforth suddenly pulled at his chums, and drew them back into the shelter of a thick bush. His eyes were gleaming, and his face was flushed with tremendous excitement.

"Didn't you see?" he hissed.

"Eh?"

"See what?"

"Two—two figures coming along!" breathed

Handforth. "I'll swear they're men—about a mile away, and coming in this direction!"

Church and McClure looked at their leader blankly.

Then they all crouched down on their hands and knees, and pushed through the bushes. For the first time they saw that a kind of footpath skirted the forest on this side. Without a doubt, it was not a freak of nature—but a well-trodden path. In the opposite direction, the pathway could be seen for over a mile, when it lost itself in another clump of forest-land.

And, coming along this path, were two figures!

They had been invisible until now because they had probably been in the further wood when Handforth and Co. viewed the scene at first. And now they were in the open—actually coming along this pathway.

"Don't you understand?" breathed Handforth. "They'll pass here—within six feet of us! If we crouch here, as silent as statues, we sha'n't be seen. We shall be able to get a good look at 'em!"

All three were throbbing with excitement. Their hearts were thumping against their ribs. And the figures came nearer and nearer—although the juniors could not see them now, for they dared not emerge from cover.

But, after a while, they could hear a murmur of human voices! It was true, then! People did live in this extraordinary basin amid the endless ice! But what manner of people were they?

Then Handforth and Co. found out.

Staring out through the little spaces between the bushes, they caught sight of two human beings. They were men—powerfully built, and, most staggering of all, they were attired in civilised clothing!

The men were white, and they looked almost English in appearance. One possessed a rugged, clean-shaven face, and the other was bearded. But this beard was trimmed, and the moustache pointed at the ends.

Both the men were attired in knee-breeches and stockings, and they wore boots which looked very similar to European footwear. And the upper parts of their body were covered with gaily-coloured tunics—loose garments after the fashion of a smock, with a belt round the centre. And upon their heads they wore wide-brimmed hats made from some kind of straw.

The vision of these two civilised white men appearing was almost too much for the juniors. They nearly gave themselves away by uttering startled exclamations. By great efforts of will-power they stifled their voices.

And then the two figures came nearer. Handforth and Co. clutched one another, gazing out through the thick foliage, and lying as still as mice. And their ears were on the stretch.

The two figures came nearer, and both appeared to be thinking. For they did not speak. But then, just as they were going by, the clean-shaven man gave vent to a deep-throated, hearty laugh.

A head had appeared—a horrible, reptilian head, with small, beady eyes. Protruding from the mouth and from the head were two yellow tusks.

"Thou art surely morose to-day, Walter!" he exclaimed, slapping his companion on the back. "Cheer up, friend! Make thyself agreeable, for thou hast naught to worry thee!"

The other man grunted—and they had passed beyond the vision of Handforth and Co. The three juniors lay there, nearly exhausted. For the wonder and amazement which filled them, almost bereft them of their wits.

"English!" said Handforth feebly. "Did—did you hear? They—they spoke in English, you chaps!"

But Church and McClure had no voices left.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE EVE OF WONDERFUL THINGS!

SIR MONTIE GREGELLIS-WEST shook his head.

"I can't understand it, dear old boys," he said. "But you know what a reckless bounder Handforth is."

"Yes!" I said, frowning. "It's pretty evident that he's gone off with Church and McClure, and I expect the asses have lost themselves! After all the lessons they've had, too!"

"Oh, Handy's dotty!" growled Tommy Watson. "He ought to be chained up!"

We were standing on the river bank close by the Golden Rover. Nelson Lee and Dorrie and Major Barrance and Phipps had not returned from their trip down the river. And

now we had suddenly discovered that Handforth and Co. were missing.

Somebody had noticed that everything was very quiet. And quietness was most unusual with Handforth about. It had then come out that Archie had seen the chums of Study D sneaking off into the strange forest.

"The bally chappies staggered off into the offing, as it were," explained Archie. "I mean to say, Handforth legged it with considerable speed and agility in amongst the old vegetation. And the other two laddies trickled after him."

"That's just what would happen," I said. "Church and McClure wouldn't go wilfully. Handforth buzzed off, and I suppose they thought they might as well look after him. They're probably eaten up by this time."

"How frightfully frightful!" said Archie. "Eaten, what? Devoured by sundry monsters, and all that sort of thing! Dash it all, I hope nothing like that has happened to the poor coves!"

"So do I!" I said. "But there's no telling."

"I mean to say, how about it?" asked Archie. "What about gathering the lads of the village together, and staggering forth on the rescue party stuff? Anything doing, old bird?"

"I don't think we'd better make a move without permission," I said. "First of all, we'll tell Mr. Gray; and the guv'nor might be back any minute."

Mr. Raymond Gray was terribly concerned when he heard the news. He came off the Golden Rover, and marched up and down the river bank, trying to examine the ground. A good number of juniors looked on. And we were discussing the possible fate of Handforth and Co., when a loud hail came from the Rover's deck.

"Say, dere, Massa Gray, sah!" yelled Snowball. "Dere's sure a boat coming' up de stream right now. Jus' yo' look, an' see fo' yo'self, sah!"

There was a rush for the bank, and then, in a few minutes, the little motor-boat glided in towards the river bank and touched. Nelson Lee stepped out—and saw at once that something unusual was afoot.

He was informed of the position.

"This is really most exasperating!" exclaimed the guv'nor curtly. "It is always Handforth and his two chums who get into trouble! We must form a search-party at once and go after them!"

"Good!" I exclaimed. "It ought to be pretty easy, sir. Handforth and Co. are bound to have left tracks behind them, sir, and Umlosi's the boy!"

Umlosi was on the bank with us.

"Methinks, it will be easy, O Manzie," he said, smiling. "For the ground is even as sponge, and does betray every mark. It needs not a clever tracker to follow the trail of the three white masters."

"Yes, Umlosi, you'll have to come with us," declared Nelson Lee. "And it won't do to delay this matter. Those boys may be in serious trouble—for it is an undoubted fact that the cavern is inhabited by big monsters. I expect they've lost their way, and are merely wandering about."

"May I come, sir?" I asked eagerly.

"Yes, Nipper—and three or four others, if you wish," replied the guv'nor.

He turned to Lord Dorrimore.

"Say nothing about the tunic," he murmured. "Advise Barrance and Phipps to keep quiet, too. We don't want to cause unnecessary excitement. There will be plenty of time to make investigations later."

"Right you are, old man!" said Dorrie. "I get you."

Nelson Lee and his party had come straight back to the Golden Rover after finding the tunic. It had been the guv'nor's intention to go off on a trip down the other branch of the river. But that idea was abandoned now. The most important thing was to find Handforth and Co. as quickly as possible.

And in a short time eight of us set out.

The search-party consisted of Nelson Lee, Lord Dorrimore, Umlosi, Pitt, Jack Grey, Montie, Watson, and myself.

Umlosi led the way, for he was an expert tracker. But the signs on the ground were so visible that I should have had no difficulty in following the trail single-handed. We were able to make good progress, and we easily tracked Handforth and Co. in their wanderings.

We came to the little opening where they had sought refuge from the monster, and at first we thought they were still in there. But a brief examination of the spot showed us that the three sets of footprints still led onwards. Now and again we caught sight of some movement among the fungus-like trees.

Once a great monster appeared—perhaps it was the one which Handforth and Co. had fled from. Dorrie and the guv'nor and Major Barrance all fired at the thing at once.

We didn't know whether it was killed or hurt, or whether it was uninjured. For it lumbered away, crashing through the trees. Perhaps the rifle reports had only scared it.

And then, after that, we came upon the wide stretch of unwooded land which led towards the end of the cavern, with the whitish light in the distance. It soon became fairly evident that Handforth and Co. had gone straight along this way.

"Upon my soul!" The impertinence of the young rascals!" exclaimed Nelson Lee. "I am astonished that they should have the audacity to go off on an exploring trip like this!"

"Handforth's got nerve enough for anything, sir," declared Pitt.

There's no need for me to go over the whole thing again. We followed exactly the same course as Handforth and Co. Naturally, we should do, since we were tracking him.

And we met with the same surprises.

We came upon that strange, low tunnel, with the daylight at the end. Even Nelson Lee was greatly astonished. And we all hurried through at top speed. We wondered more than ever.

And then, after that, we emerged into the warm daylight, went round the rocks, and saw the great panorama of the wonderful basin. We stood there in a group—absolutely enthralled.

"What can it mean, sir?" I asked. "Here—near the South Pole! All this green stuff, and the warm air!"

"It is very extraordinary, my boy," replied Nelson Lee. "But really I do not think that this scenery is the most remarkable thing we shall discover. The whole adventure is developing into something more wonderful than the human mind can imagine."

Nelson Lee had got a pair of powerful binoculars to his eyes.

And he suddenly became rigid, and stared straight forward. And when, at last, he lowered the glasses, I could see upon his face an expression of stupified wonder. I had seldom seen that look before.

"What is it, sir?" I asked.

"Look, Nipper—just over that belt of woodland!"

The guv'nor handed me the binoculars, and I levelled them. And, gazing at the point indicated by Lee, the section of landscape in that direction sprang into close proximity. The tiny, insignificant objects became clear-cut and distinguishable. I could see everything clearly.

And what had appeared to be a number of coloured rocks to the naked eye turned out to be something different. This spot, let me add, was about six or seven miles from where we stood.

"Good Heavens!" I muttered huskily.

"Well, Nipper?" snapped the guv'nor.

"It—it can't be true, sir!" I gasped.

"Then you cannot believe the evidence of your own eyes," said Nelson Lee. "I do not pretend to know what it can all mean, but I am thoroughly bewildered. I do not mind admitting it."

I continued to gaze through the glasses. Those coloured rocks, I repeat, had sprung into acute prominence, and I could now see precisely what they actually were.

I saw a white ribbon of road, with green grass bordering the sides. And there were red-roofed cottages! Cottages with walls that were apparently white-washed, and with neat little windows and doorways! I saw figures moving about—men—children!

And I saw something else—and surely this was a trick of the vision?—which looked exactly like an old-fashioned English inn, with a swinging sign suspended from a great post. In fact, I was looking upon a little village, nestling between two wooded tracts of country. And, through the binoculars, I could distinctly see that all the land in the neighbourhood was cultivated. There were fields and meadows, and all were even and well cared for.

I lowered the binoculars, and the scene became minute in the distance.

"What—what can it mean, guv'nor?" I panted. "There's a village there—and fields, and a road. It's not a savage place at all—but civilised! I—I can't believe that we're really here!"

"Let me look!" gasped Watson. "Gimme those glasses!"

The juniors were buzzing round like flies. They all took a turn at the binoculars. We shouted with amazement and fresh surprise. The fellows could not keep themselves in hand.

All sorts of exclamations were shouted, and they wanted to hurry off on a tour of investigation. Lord Dorrimore was so thunderstruck that he hardly had anything to say.

"It's no good askin' me anythin'!" he exclaimed when I spoke to him. "I'm dazed, young 'un. The whole bally thing's too much for me! But I've got an idea that if you pinch me I shall wake up!"

"Look, sir—I can see some figures quite near by—close to the river!" yelled Pitt, suddenly.

Nelson Lee seized the binoculars, and levelled them. There were three figures, certainly, and they were no more than two miles away. They seemed quite distinct, compared with the others.

"Splendid!" exclaimed the guv'nor. "They are Handforth and the other two boys!"

"Hurrah!"

"They're found!"

"Let's rush down there, sir!"

Nelson Lee nodded.

"Yes, we will go at once," he declared.

And so, without wasting any more time, we hurried off down the slopes towards the wooded sections of the country. And we tried to keep Handforth and Co. in sight all the time. We lost them now and again—but when we finally emerged from the woodland we saw the three figures moving along by the river bank. They were too far distant to be attracted by a shout.

Lee raised his rifle and fired a shot into the air.

The three figures at once turned round and stared.

And we all waved and danced about. Handforth and Co. stood quite still for perhaps a minute. Then they came rushing towards us at top speed. And we moved forward to meet them.

At last they came up, hot, breathless, and excited.

"You reckless young rascals!" exclaimed

Nelson Lee severely. "What do you mean by going off without permission——"

"Oh, draw it mild, sir," gasped Handforth. "We went exploring—and we found this wonderful place. We were the first to find it, sir—don't forget that!"

"I do not deny——"

"Did you see the men, sir?" shouted Church excitedly.

"What men?" we all yelled.

"Why, two chaps came by not long ago," panted Church. "And—and they weren't savages at all, but they were dressed in decent clothes!"

"What?"

"Dressed in ordinary clothes?"

"Impossible!"

"I didn't say ordinary clothes," exclaimed Church. "They weren't ordinary clothes—but the men were wearing boots and stockings and queer-looking breeches, and—and tunics! Things that looked like smocks, and nicely coloured and woven with some woolly stuff."

"Well, I'm blessed!"

"It's—it's too funny to be true!"

We all stood round, staring at Handforth and Co. and staring at the general scenery. So many surprises had come during the last hour that we scarcely knew whether we were on our head or our heels.

We had entered that cavern on board the Golden Rover expecting to find some remarkable things. But never had we believed that anything so stupendous as this would come to our gaze.

Handforth was calm now, and he looked round steadily.

"But I've got the biggest surprise of all, yet," he declared. "I'm jolly well going to stagger you!"

"Indeed, Handforth!" said Nelson Lee.

"Yes, sir—I'll stagger you, even!" said Handy. "About half-an-hour ago we were crouching in some bushes just against that belt of forest. And these two men came by. We heard them speaking."

"Oh!"

"And they used English!" declared Handforth exultantly. "English, sir! We heard 'em as plain as anything!"

Nelson Lee drew his breath in sharply.

"Are you trying to fool me, Handforth?" he asked.

"It's true, sir—we all heard!" shouted McClure.

Nelson Lee half turned, gazing dreamily over the wonderful landscape.

"English!" he murmured absently. "And I saw a village with my own eyes! What marvellous thing is this? What discoveries shall we make next? Surely this is almost beyond belief!"

And it was!

We could scarcely imagine that this thing was true. Nelson Lee decided that no further investigation should be made at present. He considered that it would be better for our party to be intact. He decided, in fact, that we could not do better than enter this strange country in the Golden Rover.

And so we all returned post-haste by the way we had come. And the next thing was to get on board the Rover and come down the river—and make our entry into the Southern Wonderland in style!

We knew that we should have many marvellous surprises—but we did not have the slightest inkling of the stupendous truth!

THE END.

Editorial Announcement.

IMPORTANT.—All correspondence relating to "The Nelson Lee Library" should be addressed to The Editor, "The Nelson Lee Library," The Fleetway House, Farringdon Street, London, E.C.4.

My Dear Readers,—Who knows what wonders lie hidden among the mountains of unexplored Antarctica? The existence of a hot stream in these regions would undoubtedly have a remarkable effect on the climate in its vicinity. Assuming this to be the case, the author proceeds to show in next week's story, "The Kingdom of Wonder," how a band of English adventurers, like the Pilgrim Fathers of The Mayflower, might have founded a colony in this distant land, and in course of time developed it into a prosperous nation.

"The Case of the Racing Tipster" is the title of next week's short, complete detective story of Nelson Lee and Nipper.

Your sincere friend,

THE EDITOR.

Nipper's Magazine

No. 38. EDITED BY NIPPER. August 12, 1922.

MY DEAR CHUMS,—Who would have believed it possible for a country, as beautiful and as warm as England to exist, tucked away in the South Polar regions?

At first I felt that my senses were deceiving me. I knew there must be a natural cause, which, when one comes to think of it, is no more wonderful in its effects on climate than the well-known Gulf Stream, stretching across the Atlantic Ocean, and without which, England would be as cold and desolate as Labrador.

Many interesting facts about the Gulf Stream will be found in this week's article, which will help to explain how it is possible for countries in a cold and bleak latitude to be temperate and habitable by the influence of a warm ocean current.—Yours to a cinder,

NIPPER (The Editor).

THE GULF STREAM.

HOW IT BENEFITS WESTERN EUROPE.

IT is to this mighty ocean river, a thousand times greater in volume and more rapid than the Mississippi, or even the Amazon, that North-West Europe owes much of its prosperity and well-being. In winter it warms the north-westerly winds that blow across the Atlantic, which in turn modify the extreme cold otherwise prevailing in our northern latitude. In another way it adds to our prosperity by enabling shipping which follows its course to make the voyage across the Atlantic in three-quarters of the time it would take were there no currents.

ITS COURSE.

The Gulf Stream derives its name from its source in the Gulf of Mexico, where it becomes heated by the tropical sun and emerges through the Strait of Florida to the Atlantic at a temperature not less than 86 degrees F. From an average width of 37 miles and a mean depth of 200 fathoms, this gigantic marine river gradually expands and spreads over the Atlantic, but with a proportionate decrease in depth and temperature as it reaches Western Europe.

NOT UNLIKE A LAND RIVER.

At the commencement of its career across the ocean, the Gulf Stream is not unlike any ordinary land river. Its banks and its bed are of cold water and it erodes on one side, while it deposits alluvium on the other.

WHY THE GULF STREAM RETAINS ITS HEAT.

Compared with land, water is a slow conductor of heat, and, on this account, the cold water bed over which the Gulf Stream flows prevents the heated water from becoming absorbed in the bed of the ocean. Without this protective bed of cold water the Gulf Stream would rapidly lose its high temperature and Western Europe would be deprived of its warm climatic influence.

WHEN IT MEETS AN ARCTIC CURRENT.

Close to the Bank of Newfoundland, the Gulf Stream, in its south-westerly course, encounters a polar current, which from September to March drives the Gulf Stream towards the south; but from March to September, the Gulf Stream pushes the Arctic current northwards. Where these two currents pass each other side by side, their line of demarcation is quite distinct to the eye, the friction of the two opposing currents producing a series of eddies, whirlpools and short waves. The flotsam and jetsam are here whirled round at the meeting of the currents. Another distinguishing feature of the Gulf Stream is its beautiful azure colour, due to the small proportion of salt in its composition.

A LIKELY CLUE FOR COLUMBUS.

The Gulf Stream crosses the Atlantic at an average speed of 24 miles a day. Here and there in its progress will be found floating trunks and branches of trees which are finally thrown on some coast of Europe. Our ancestors of the Middle Ages used to believe that these mysterious remnants came from the fabulous island of St. Brandon, and probably the illustrious Christopher Columbus obtained a clue of the existence of the New World from the vegetation carried along by the Gulf Stream.

ANOTHER LINK WITH THE NEW WORLD.

In more ways than one the Gulf Stream is an important link between the Old and the New World. For, besides conveying tropical warmth to Western Europe, it acts as an aerial conductor of tempests, and in this respect has earned for itself the names of "weather-breeder" and "storm-king."

ITS JOURNEY TO THE NORTH POLE.

As to how the Gulf Stream completes its journey to the North Pole is open to conjecture until the Polar region has been sufficiently explored to enable us to study its hydrological laws.

Brief Notes about "Our" Footballers

Being a short account of the careers of the famous footballers whose photographs we are presenting to readers with this number. Specially written for "The Nelson Lee Library" by "Rover."

D. MEIKLEJOHN.

ONE of the men to keep a watchful eye upon in Scottish football is David Meiklejohn, the sturdy Rangers' defender who, unless my judgment is at fault, has a brilliant international career before him. Meiklejohn, it will be remembered, was given his regular place in the Rangers' League team three seasons ago, when Jimmy Gordon, one of the most famous footballers Scotland has ever known, retired. David has since shown that he has all the ability to uphold the glorious traditions Jimmy left behind him, and he has now come to be looked upon as the natural successor to his sterling predecessor.

For David has proved his worth. He is still young—he is only 22 years of age now, as a matter of fact—but he is still developing amazingly. Last season he was given his cap against Wales, and also represented the Thistle team in the inter-league match against the Irish League—the initial honours of a store which will grow until it equals the record of Jimmy Gordon himself, unless I am much mistaken.

Meiklejohn was born at Govan, within a few minutes' walk of the famous Ibrox Park ground, and the Rangers were fortunate in snatching him up while he was still young. It is questionable, despite his youth, if there is a half-back in Scotland to-day who can justifiably claim to be his superior, for David knows all there is to be known about defence and is a shrewd kicker as well as a tough fighter. Though half-back is his favourite and regular position, he has, on one or two occasions, been known to play in the full-back line.

Height, 5 ft. 9 ins; weight, 11st. 7 lb.

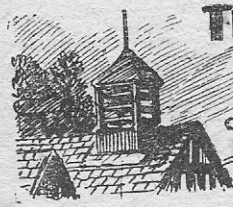
A. V. HUTCHINS.

ARTHUR VICTOR HUTCHINS the stalwart full-back of the London "Gunners" has yet to earn his first cap, but there is no doubt, if he progresses next season as he has progressed during the last two seasons, that he will get it. He has already earned one or two distinctions as a matter of fact, for during the last but one period of active football he was given a show in an international trial match, and last season he was also selected to represent the Football League against the representative team of the Army.

Hutchins came into the world at a little place just outside Southampton called Bishop Waltham, but it was as a member of the Croydon Common Club that he began to shine as a footballer. When the war broke out he signed on for the Navy, and while stationed in London he assisted the Arsenal in war-time games. The "Gunners" at once saw that in Hutchins a new star was rising, and when signing on time came, after the war, they took steps to induce him to adhibit his signature to their forms.

Arthur did, and since then he has proved himself one of the most valuable servants in the side, rarely missing a match, except in cases of indisposition or injury, and generally proving the wisdom of the club's action in being the first to recognise his talent. He is a fearless player, possesses a hefty kick, and can always be counted upon to do his best. The only thing lacking at present in his football composition perhaps, is pace.

Height, 5 ft. 10 ins.; weight, 12 st. 6 lb.



THE HOUSE OF THE CLANGING BELL!

or The Case of the White Lead Substitute

A Story of Nelson Lee & his Assistant Nipper.

CHAPTER I.

THE FOG ON THE MOOR—THE LEGEND.

"JOVE, guv'nor, what's that?"

Nipper, assistant to Mr. Nelson Lee, the famous London detective, had pulled up in his stride and clutched at his friend's arm.

Nelson Lee stopped short, too, his breath momentarily checked, and his keen eyes trying to pierce the clinging, blanket-like fog before him.

From no great distance an eerie sound had floated over the desolate moor—a cry, long drawn out, which had arisen to an agonised scream, then died away into a sobbing, shuddering moan.

Nelson Lee was one of the coolest of men, but even he had been startled.

At one moment a grave-like silence had prevailed, a silence made more gripping and intense because of the dense yellow mist which hung upon the still night air. The next, without warning, that terrible cry had rung out, sounding like the wailing of a lost soul in bitter torment. It was uncanny, weird.

"What was it, guv'nor?" Nipper asked again, his voice husky because of the choking fog he had for the past hour been inhaling.

"I don't know, my lad," Nelson Lee answered gravely, and could Nipper have observed his face, he would have seen that there was a deep and puzzled line between his brows. "If only we had some idea of where we were, one might be able to give a guess. Listen! We may hear it again."

But, although they stood motionless in the fog for several minutes, every nerve on the alert, their ears tensely strained, no repetition of the strange sound came to them, and, slipping his arm through that of Nipper, to obviate the danger of losing one another, Nelson Lee moved forward in the direction whence he believed the cry had come.

People will tell you that you should endeavour to enjoy every moment of a holiday, and, as a general rule, Nipper and Nelson Lee were in agreement with the idea. But, though they were holiday-making just now, they saw nothing to be hilarious about in what was happening to them to-night.

All through the spring and early summer Nelson Lee had been working at unusually high pressure and iron-nerved, iron-constitutioned though he was, he had begun to grow weary and jaded beneath the strain. Thus, when matters had slackened down a little, and Nipper had suggested a fortnight in Devon, Nelson Lee had protested but feebly; then succumbed.

Liking the thought of roughing it a little, and "doing" for themselves, they had taken a tiny, furnished cottage near Dartmoor Forest and the Great Bittern Moor, and for a week they had lazed and thoroughly enjoyed the quiet, solitude and change, the weather being all that could be desired.

Even earlier this evening all had been bright enough as they had set out for a long tramp over the moor. But when some five or six miles from their cottage, with the deepening of the shadows a heavy mist had come rolling inland from the sea, and, thickening with incredible speed, had enveloped them and caused them entirely to lose their sense of direction.

"I'd like to know what the cry was, guv'nor. It may have come from someone in need of help for some reason," said Nipper, as he strode along blindly beside his friend.

"We'll try to find out, Nipper," Nelson Lee answered. "The trouble is, however, that we cannot see an inch before our noses, and if someone is, perhaps, in dire need, we might pass within a foot of them and be unaware of the fact. Hallo-o-a!" he shouted, his cupped hands to his lips.

For a second or two they stood still and waited. But only an utter, almost awe-inspiring silence answered them, and, taking from his pocket an electric torch and directing its light before them, Nelson Lee walked on again, with Nipper at his side.

"Help!"

There was no mistaking the cry that, some five minutes later, rang out from quite close at hand.

"Hallo! Where are you?" Nelson Lee shouted, again pulling up.

"Here! Help, help—for heaven's sake!" sounded the desperate voice. "Help! I'm in a mire, and sinking!"

Nelson Lee realised that the appeal came from the right, and only a yard or so away. He swung round in that direction, and, treading warily, and sharply warning Nipper to do likewise, in case they themselves should

also become engulfed, he advanced with his torch playing upon the grass at their feet.

"Look out!" Nelson Lee suddenly rapped; and Nipper saw, even through the fog that hazed the light, that the hue of the grass had become a bright green. "We are on the brink of the mire!"

He raised his voice. His shout was answered in an even more desperate key. Swinging round the beam of the torch, Nelson Lee could dimly make out the outline of a man's figure buried almost to the waist in the treacherous, sucking ooze of the morass.

"Hold on! Don't struggle!" he cried. "We'll have you out in a second or two! Quick, Nipper!" as he fell to his knees on the very edge of the mire. Put your arms round my waist, lad, and tug for all you're worth!"

Nelson Lee stretched out his strong, lissom arms and got his hands under the arm-pits of the sinking stranger. He began steadily to pull, whilst, in his turn, Nipper tugged at him.

It was a hard, thrilling tussle for the next minute or so, but, little by little, the detective and his assistant triumphed over the greedy, deadly mud that sucked at its escaping prey. There came a final protesting "squelch!" as Nelson Lee gave a mighty wrench that brought the stranger floundering on top of him.

"I have to thank you for saving my life," the man said, as, after they had picked themselves up, he fumbled for Nelson Lee's hand and gripped it warmly.

"Don't mention it," Nelson Lee laughed. "It's an ill wind, you know, and, but for your stepping into the mire and shouting, both my friend and I might have wandered into it. Have you the least notion of where we are?"

"Not the ghost of one. I am a complete stranger to these parts, and absolutely lost," was the other's reply. "I started to walk across the moor from Fenbridge Station two hours ago, the fog overtook me, and I imagine I have probably been wandering round in a circle. I do not expect I shall be able to reach my destination to-night now, but sincerely hope to find somewhere where I can get put up. Are you also lost?"

"Absolutely!" Nelson Lee confessed, with rather more cheerfulness than he felt. "We had better cling together and hope for the best, I think."

This programme was carried out, and the trio were exceptionally fortunate in stumbling into a tiny moorland hamlet, which boasted of an inn, some half an hour later.

The innkeeper, a typical, brawny old man of Devon, with longish white hair, made them welcome, and insisted upon loaning the stranger a spare suit, whilst his own was cleansed and dried.

As he returned to the small bar-parlour where Nelson Lee and Nipper were enjoying hot coffee, for the first time the detective had an opportunity of studying him.

He saw a man of thirty, or thereabouts, who, despite the rough, ill-fitting suit he now wore, had the stamp of refinement and breeding about him. The deep bronze of his skin suggested to the detective that he might recently have come from abroad.

"By the way," Nelson Lee said suddenly, "I suppose you did not happen to—well, scream, when you stepped into the mire?"

"I certainly did not. I hope I am not exactly a coward," the other retorted a trifle sharply.

"I scarcely thought you would be the type of man, from the look of you, if you will pardon my candour," the detective said, with a half-apologetic smile. "But I asked the question because, not long before you called for help, both my friend and I heard what sounded like a cry of absolute fear or dreadful agony."

"Yes; I heard that sound, too," the stranger nodded. "I must confess it gave me quite a turn. What do you think it could have been?"

Nelson Lee have a helpless shake of his head, but the landlord, who was in the act of passing coffee to the bronzed young man, made reply.

"It might ha' bin the cry of a bittern, gentlemen," he said. "We hear one still, very occasionally, an' this bird might ha' bin disturbed by somethin'. But there be many strange sounds on the moor by night—aye, an' many strange stories about it, too."

"I hope you've a frisky ghost you can tell us about, landlord," Nipper remarked, grinning, as he held out his cup for it to be replenished.

"Ah, ye laugh, young gentleman," retorted the landlord, "but there's bin happenings; for instance, away at the old place across the moor called the Priory in the past that no one can hope to understand. There be a bell in one of the towers which rings at times without human hands touching it, an' the toll of which brings death to a member of the family."

"'Tis a very old place, ye understand," he went on, warming to his subject. "It dates back to the sixteenth century, when it was a monastery, as its name still suggests. The king of that period—Henry VIII. I think it be—told a favourite knight, Sir Roger Hartropp, that he could have the place if he cared to go there an' turn out the monks, an' Sir Roger, being a headstrong and devil-may-care man, went to the Priory an' routed them. The head monk, Father Anthony, defied Sir Roger and his soldiers, and refused to leave. By Sir Roger's orders he was beaten with the flat of the soldiers' swords, and finally run through. The story goes that, though he uttered no word, as he lay dying, he fixed his eyes upon Sir Roger, an' perhaps cursed he and his—if a monk would curse anybody. Anyway, his spirit is said to have haunted the Priory from that day to this, and it's a fact, gentlemen, that some mysterious agency rings the old bell up in the south tower to warn the Hartropp family that a member is going to die."

"It tolled without a soul touchin' it three days before old Sir Marmaduke Hartropp was thrown in the hunting-field and broke his back—according to my father; and, in my time, it did likewise one snowy night near to Christmas, ten year ago, and exactly three days later Sir Marmaduke's successor, Sir George Hartropp was accidentally killed whilst cleanin' a gun."

He paused, and slowly shook his head.

"Well, well, it can toll only once more to herald the death of a Hartropp," he said. "For there's only one member of the family left now, supposing he's still alive—another Sir Roger, who went abroad when quite a boy, an' has not bin heard of, they do say, for years."

He glanced at the stranger whom Nelson Lee and Nipper had saved from the mire. He was leaning forward in his chair, his lips parted, and a curious gleam of mingled curiosity and excitement in his steady steel-blue eyes.

"The story has interested you, sir?" the landlord suggested, with a smile.

"And rather naturally," the stranger answered gravely. "You see, I happen to be Sir Roger Hartropp, the last surviving member of the family!"

CHAPTER II.

THE BELL!

SIX men, three of whom carried lanterns, made their way through the dense moorland fog.

Four of them were farm labourers who had been in the bar of the inn, and the remaining pair were Nelson Lee and Sir Roger Hartropp. Nipper, who walked beside the detective brought the party up to seven.

It had been a strange coincidence that had brought the young man who was the last of the old Devon family to the inn that night in time to listen to the landlord's story. To Nelson Lee and Nipper, who had introduced themselves, Sir Roger had given his confidence.

He had heard of the death of his father, Sir George Hartropp, soon after it had occurred ten years before, but, being on the road to success in a mining venture in Arizona, Roger Hartropp had remained to make his pile ere returning to the land of his birth.

The landlord had told him that for years the Priory, the home of his ancestors for four centuries, had been practically shut up and untenanted, only a caretaker, employed by the solicitors for the estate, being there.

As there had proved to be no real sleeping accommodation at the inn, Sir Roger had solicited the aid of the local men to guide him to the Priory, which lay a short distance back in the direction whence he and Nelson Lee and Nipper had come.

He had begged the detective and the lad to share whatever hospitality he might have to offer. He was a man who hated fuss in any shape or form, and the idea of seeing hunting flying, and to be greeted by cheering villagers, had not appealed to him. He had, therefore, made his homecoming a surprise one.

One of the labourers carried for him some cold meat, wine, and other supplies, purchased from the inn, so that he and his guests would at least not retire hungry.

"It be only a step now, zur," announced one of the guides. "Old Reuben Munney, the caretaker, will be mightily surprised when ye knock him oop, and——"

His words ended in a gasp, and, like his fellow labourers, he pulled up, and stood transfixed in superstitious fear.

From out of the fog ahead had sounded the doleful tolling of a bell!

CHAPTER III.

THE HOUSE OF MYSTERY.

"MY heavens! You heard, Mr. Lee—you heard?"

It was Sir Roger who broke the tense silence that had fallen upon the little party. He was not a nervous man by any means, but the weird and unexpected sound, coming, as it did, hard upon the heels of the legend told by the innkeeper, had sent an eerie chill through his veins.

"It was the bell—the bell that is supposed to be rung by ghostly hands before a Hartropp dies," he said, his fingers gripping hard upon Nelson Lee's arm. "What can it mean?"

"That the caretaker has chanced to touch the rope attached to it, I expect, Sir Roger," Nelson Lee said, as he shook off the sensation of awe that for the moment had threatened to grip even him. "Let us go forward and investigate, anyway."

The farm labourers were inclined to hang back, but Nelson Lee contrived to urge them on by laughing at their fears. They, however, wished the trio "good-night" with almost ludicrous haste when the drive gates of the Priory were reached.

By the aid of one of the lanterns they left with him, Sir Roger led the way up the drive. They reached the worn and crumbling steps leading up to the main entrance of the historic old place, of which they could see practically nothing, because of the fog.

Sir Roger found a bell-pull, and tugged at it, setting a cracked bell echoing hollowly through the house. There was a considerable delay, then shuffling footsteps sounded on the opposite side of the oaken door; it was opened a few inches, and a quavering voice demanded ungraciously to know what they wanted.

"I am the owner of the house—Sir Roger Hartropp," that young man said, a trifle sharply, as he pushed open the door and entered the lofty, oak-panelled hall.

"Sir Roger!" gasped the palsied and white-haired old man in seedy black clothes, who

backed before the visitors. "Impossible! I had no idea——"

"It's not impossible. I am Sir Roger Hartropp, and I can show you letters and other documents to prove my statement, if you wish, my man," the young owner of the Priory said. "In fact, you had better glance over them. I realise that my coming must be a big surprise to you—er—Munney?"

The hands of the old man shook like aspens, as, having taken the papers Sir Roger held out to him, he adjusted a pair of horn-rimmed spectacles to examine them.

Watching him keenly, Nelson Lee became sure that, as well as proving a surprise, the unexpected home-coming of his young master had left him terribly agitated. Why? Nelson Lee wondered.

"By the way, Munney," Sir Roger said, as, seeming satisfied, the caretaker returned the credentials he had proferred, "what made the bell here ring just now?"

Nelson Lee noted that the old man caught his breath in sharply, and that the pallor of his lined and wrinkled face became more pronounced.

"You must have been mistaken, Sir Roger," he faltered. "The bell? It has not been sounded for years, to the best of my knowledge."

"Do you mean to say, then, that you did not hear it?" the man from Arizona asked. "It rang right enough. It was heard by both myself and six other persons who were with me at the time."

"I—I certainly did not hear it, sir," the old man persisted almost doggedly. But Nelson Lee felt that he lied, and he became more and more mystified, his professional interest aroused.

How had the bell been tolled, unless Munney for some reason had tugged at the rope which was probably attached to it? And if he had done so, perhaps accidentally, why did he not admit the fact? That an agency not of the living world had been responsible, Nelson Lee's common sense refused to allow him to credit.

"That bell ringing was a rummy business, guv'nor," Nipper said, when, some hours lated, he and his friend were undressing in a gloomy, oak-panelled bedroom they were to share, preparatory to seeking repose. "If there had been any wind to stir it, it could be explained away. As it is, old parchment-face surely must have yanked at the rope."

"I must confess that I am a little puzzled, Nipper," Nelson Lee said. "In the morning, I mean to go up to the tower where the bell hangs and take a look round. Good-night, my lad. Don't let thoughts of spooks spoil your rest."

"No fear, guv'nor," Nipper laughed, as he slipped into his bed. "Will you blow out the candle, or should I bung one of my boots at it?"

Nelson Lee declined the offer, and snuffed the wick between his finger and thumb. He sat in his bed, enjoying a last cigarette, and thinking for some quarter of an hour; then prepared to sleep. But hardly had he begun to doze off, than a sound startled him back into wakefulness.

It was a muffled cry from somewhere in the

Nelson Lee stepped forward and examined the chain, and a gleam of interest crept into his eyes as he saw that it had been recently snapped.

lower regions of the stately old pile. It was followed, as Nelson Lee sat up, alert and listening, by a faint noise like the closing of a door.

Nipper was aroused, and Nelson Lee slipped on some clothes, relit the candle, and passed, barefooted, into the corridor outside the room. Just as the detective had told Nipper what he had heard, another door opened, and Sir Roger, also holding a lighted candle, made his appearance.

"Ah! Then you have heard that cry, too, Mr. Lee!" he exclaimed. "What could it have been?"

"I think we had better ask Munney, if he is in his room—which I doubt," Nelson Lee answered a trifle grimly. "Let us see."

They made their way to the door of the room occupied by the caretaker, which was at the farther end of the corridor. After they had knocked, rather to Nelson Lee's surprise, old Rueben Munney opened the door and peered out at them.

"A cry? I heard nothing, gentlemen," he declared, as they questioned him. "It's because you're not used to old houses like this. There's often queer sounds in them at night."

"Are you sure there has been no one in the house besides yourself and us?" Nelson Lee asked sharply; and he thought that the old man gave the slightest of starts.

"Goodness me, no, sir!" he exclaimed, however. "I've lived the life of a hermit here, never having a visitor for year upon year."

Once again Nelson Lee felt sure that the man spoke falsely, but he did not tax him with his suspicions. He merely wished him "good night," and, like the rather puzzled Sir Roger, returned to his room with Nipper.

On the following morning they discovered that the fog had dispersed. Immediately breakfast was over, Nelson Lee asked permission to inspect the tower where the bell was situated. The detective noticed that when Sir Roger demanded the necessary keys from old Munney, the man seemed to display a trace of reluctance in handing him the bunch.

After ascending a winding staircase, Nelson Lee, Sir Roger, and Nipper found themselves upon a sort of landing, where the doors of two chambers faced them. One was open, and in it was an old frayed rope connected with the bell. The other was locked, but one of the keys gained them admission, and they found themselves in a low, square room with stone walls, floor, and ceiling, lighted by one tiny, closely-barred window.

At one time it had doubtless been the cell of one of the long-dead monks. But as his eyes fell upon a rusty chain attached to a stout staple in the wall, Nelson Lee guessed that, after the holy men had been expelled from the place, the cell had been used for more sinister purposes.

Nelson Lee stepped forward and examined the chain, and a gleam of interest crept into his eyes, as he saw that it had been recently snapped. The next moment he had stooped and gathered up from the floor a few crumbs of bread, which he displayed to Sir Roger and Nipper.

"We have stumbled upon a mystery, a dark and terrible mystery, without much doubt," he said gravely. "There has been a prisoner here quite recently. I think I can understand now the scream we heard on the moor, when we must have been quite near this place, also the cry in the night and the sound of a door being closed. Unless I am mistaken, it was then the captive, whoever he was, was removed elsewhere. Come below. I am going to do my utmost to find out where he has been taken."

Outside one of the rear doors of the old, ivy-clad house, Nelson Lee found on a neglected path, which the heavy fog of the previous night had left damp and muddy, the footprints of four persons. There were signs that a scuffle had taken place, then one set of footprints vanished, as if one of the quartette had been picked up bodily and carried between the others.

He traced the impressions across the grounds to a door in one of the high, surrounding walls, which proved to have been left unfastened. As they passed out, the detective, Sir Roger, and Nipper found themselves on the open moor. As luck would have it, the grass here was patchy, and, though it was no very easy task, Nelson Lee followed the footprints over a rise and onwards for a hundred yards or so.

After that the grass grew thicker, and, with all traces of the footprints gone, they had to trust to luck. They pressed on for nearly a mile, and then, far away over the deserted moor, came in view of a wooden structure, which was falling into decay, and which looked as though it might be a shepherd's hut, now disused.

Nelson Lee placed his fingers warningly to his lips. Making no sound, they crept up to the place and peered through a chink in one of its rotting wooden walls. Nelson Lee's jaw set hard and his hands clenched at what he saw.

Seated upon a three-legged stool, and held in the grip of two evil-looking ruffians, was a thin, white-haired old man. A fourth man stood before him, and was gripping him by the wrist and applying a vice-like instrument to his hand—a thumb-screw!

"Now, your secret, or I'll give you some more of what you had last night," the man standing before the prisoner threatened, with an oath. "Are you going to speak?"

"No!" the prisoner retorted doggedly, though he shrank in fearful anticipation from the coming torture. "You may kill me, but you will benefit nothing. I will never tell you what you want to know."

A groan broke from him as the broad-shouldered scoundrel confronting him tightened the thumb-screw. With his eyes blazing with indignation, Nelson Lee suddenly flung open the door of the hut and went into it

like a whirlwind. His bunched left crashed under the chin of the torturer and sent him thudding prone upon his back with a dislocated jaw.

His companions, who had uttered startled cries, made to spring upon the detective, but they were tackled by Nipper and Sir Roger, who had followed close upon Nelson Lee's heels. Sir Roger struck a revolver from the hand of the first, and sent him staggering with a blow over the heart. Nipper ducked, and, seizing the legs of the second man, jerked him off his feet and brought him down.

As the trio essayed to pick themselves up they found Nelson Lee steadily covering them with an "automatic."

"Go to the inn, Nipper, and get a message through to the police at Newton Abbot," Nelson Lee rapped. "They are wanted here, and you might ask them to hurry. I'll look after these brutes until they arrive."

Sir Roger had taken the thumb-screw from the hand of the white-haired man, and, as he rose unsteadily to his feet and pulled himself together, the earnestness with which he thanked his rescuers was almost pitiful.

"That man, Amos Stern," he said, pointing to the burly villain whom Nelson Lee had felled, "was once my partner in a business at Exeter, which manufactures white lead. My name is Andrew Jackson, and the business is known as Jackson and Company. He robbed me, and I severed my connections with him. Soon afterwards I discovered a process by which a substitute for white lead can be made, and, somehow, he must have got to know of it. The substitute is equally as good as genuine white lead, yet it can be produced at something like a quarter of the cost, and there is a fortune in it. One night, before I had had time to protect my invention, I was working in my private factory. Without warning, Stern and these two ruffians he has hired as his accomplices burst in, attacked, and kidnapped me.

"They took me to the old house on the moor, where I have been for three terrible weeks. For they have not hesitated to torture me to try to make me disclose the formula of my discovery, so that they might patent it and rob me of the fruits of my labours. The caretaker there is a relative of Stern's, and was paid well to allow them to make use of the house to keep me a prisoner."

"Last night they came to the chamber in the tower where I have been imprisoned and tortured me until I was driven almost insane, and screamed with the pain. I pretended to swoon, then wrenched at the chain which held me to the wall. It was old and rusted, and snapped, and I contrived to rush past them. They were quickly at my heels, and, although I seized a bell rope, dragged upon it and rang the bell, in the hope of bringing aid, no one could have heard."

Nelson Lee smiled, as he glanced significantly at Sir Roger.

"Someone did hear, Mr. Jackson," he objected. "That is how we come to be here. As soon as the police arrive to take these abominable scoundrels off our hands, we will return to the Priory and rope in old Munney as well. I hate the thought of a man of his years going to gaol, but, by gad, in this case it is richly deserved!"

THE END.

The NEW USHER

BEING THE FURTHER ADVENTURES OF Tom Tartar at School

EVERY BOY SHOULD READ THIS ABSORBING STORY OF SCHOOL LIFE, WHICH HAS ONLY JUST STARTED!

FIRST CHAPTERS.

Mr. Achilles Chopps, the new tutor, arrives at Wrasper's School. There is something mysterious about him, for he will allow no one to enter his room, where he plays sweet music at night on a kind of harmonium. Mr. Chopps' uncle comes to stay at the school, and there is a growing suspicion that he is in league with his nephew in some sinister plot connected with a terrific explosion in the neighbourhood of the school.

(Now read on.)

CHAPTER XXI.

A Night of Mystery.

"WHAT did you find?" asked Sam Smith eagerly.

"What I half expected to find," answered Tom. "Chopps has a mechanical instrument, which he sets going to cover his absence. It is constructed something like an ordinary musical-box; but the sound has to pass through silk, which softens it and gives the music that curious weirdness we have often wondered at. It's a beautifully-made instrument, about three feet long, and has an arrangement of glass pedestals, which unscrew, and which help to give that richness of tone."

"But where has Chopps gone?" asked Hammerton.

"I don't know for certain," said Tom, "but I have an idea which may or may not be correct."

And then he told them of certain suspicions he had long entertained about Chopps, and a long discussion ensued, which lasted until they had been some time in bed.

Sleep that night did not come so readily as usual; indeed, it seemed as if they would not sleep at all, and Tom reckoned it was close upon midnight when Willie Gray gave out the first gentle snore.

"It really is time to get off, boys," he said, "so don't talk any more."

"All right," said Sam; "but I have not a wink of sleep in me. I feel just as if something were going to happen."

"Something has happened!" said Tom, sitting up suddenly. "Listen!"

Outside the wind was blowing great guns, but high above the roar of the elements was heard the shouting of men, followed by the report of firearms.

Out of bed leaped the boys—all who were awake—and ran to the window.

Nothing was visible—there was so little light that any object a few yards from the window could not be seen at all.

The sounds of conflict ceased, and only the howling of the wind and the rustling of the trees broke the stillness.

"It's all over, whatever it was," said Hammerton.

"Tom," whispered Willie Gray.

"What is it, old fellow?"

Gray was shivering, and he held Tom by the arm

"I suppose it's ridiculous of me," he said, "but I can't help it. I feel that somebody is lying dead in the road just by the gate there."

"Rot!" said Sam Smith scornfully. "You're in a funk, Gray!"

"Strikes me, Sam," put in Hammerton, "that Gray isn't the only one that's in a funk!"

"What do you mean by that?" demanded Sam, bridling up. "Do you mean to insinuate that I——"

"Oh, shut up, you chaps!" interposed Tom. "None of us would care to be out in the road just now, so there's no use in accusing each other of funkiness. The fact is, we all of us feel a bit shaky. Personally, I don't believe anybody's lying dead in the road—Willie's got too much imagination. Go

back to bed, all of you. I'm going to slip on my things and sit here a bit."

And, such was the ascendancy which Tom had over them, that they obeyed.

Sam Smith, lying with his head upon his clasped hands, kept his eyes upon the dim outline of Tom sitting by the window, until sleep overcame him. One by one, the other boys dropped off.

It was more than two hours later when Sam woke up again, and, his thoughts instantly reverting to the recent happening, he looked towards the window.

He could see nobody sitting there now.

"Tom!" whispered Sam softly.

Not getting an answer, he slipped out of bed and crept across to the window. The chair Tom had occupied was empty.

From there Sam felt his way to Tom's bed, and found that unoccupied, too.

"He's gone out," muttered Sam. "Wonder what the time is?"

As if in answer to him, the school clock at that moment began to strike.

One—two—three!

A feeling of alarm crept into Sam's heart, and it was not allayed when the words of Willie Gray recurred to him: "I feel that somebody is lying dead in the road!"

"That's just how I feel now," thought Sam. "Wonder where Tom's gone to?"

Sam crept back to bed, and lay there, worried and anxious, until the clock struck four.

Ere the sound had died away he heard the handle of the dormitory-door softly turned, and somebody went into Tom's cubicle.

Sam lay still, and listened intently.

Judging by the sounds he heard, it was Tom who had returned. The rustling of his clothes as he took them off, was clear enough. Then came the creak of the bed as he slipped quietly between the sheets.

"It's Tom right enough," thought Sam to himself. "I won't ask him now what he's been doing—I'll tackle him in the morning."

And with a mind at rest he was soon asleep again.

"Any corpse in the road?" was Sam's question as he and Tom on the following morning were going downstairs.

"You know I went out?" Tom asked, with a curious smile.

"Yes."

"There was no corpse or anything like it that I could see. But I saw somebody hiding."

"Who was that?"

"Chopps and that uncle of his. I heard them coming down the road, and had just time to dodge behind the buttress of the wall, when they came up, panting as if they had been running."

"I should like to see Uncle Josiah run," said Sam, as he took down his cap from the peg in the hall.

"He can run, in my opinion," said Tom, as he followed Sam's example. "What are you going to do?"

"What you do."

"Let's go for a walk. I've got a sort of general leave just now. We had better not go out together, or we shall have a score after us. You leave by the garden gate and meet me in the cricket-field."

They were amongst the earliest down, and succeeded in getting away unseen.

"We will go down the lane by Miss Smatterly's school," said Tom. "It's quiet there, and the girls won't be about so early."

The lane proved to be quite deserted.

It was not much frequented at any time, and just at that moment there was absolutely nobody about.

Tom took Sam's arm, and they walked up and down.

"Sam," he said, "I overheard something last night that gives me a bit, but not much, of a clue."

"From those two?"

"Yes, but wait and let me tell my story. They stopped by the gate panting, as I said, and Chopps was the first to get back his breath.

"'Josey,' he said, 'wasn't it like their mad recklessness?'

"'It was,' said his uncle; 'they don't stop to think.'

"'They came here, of all places,' muttered Chopps, 'to row among themselves. But one of them won't row any more.'

"I heard nothing else," concluded Tom, "for they opened the gate and walked in. Now, what do you think of that, Sam?"

"It looks as if somebody had been hurt," replied Sam, breathlessly.

"Willie wasn't far out neither," said Tom. "But if there was a corpse at the gate it was taken away."

"Tom, something ought to be done."

"Tell me what, Sam, and I'll do it. But to go and say to Chopps, 'Where is the man who was killed in the fight?' would be rather jumping at conclusions—wouldn't it? We saw nothing, you know."

"But overheard a lot, Tom,"

"That's nothing, and we don't know where to look for the dead man—if there is one—so, Sam, we must be patient and wait."

"But I think I would tell Ralston."

"All right. Let's go and see if he is up."

On going to the cottage where Ralston lived they learnt that he went away on the previous evening and had not returned.

His landlady knew no more than "the man in the moon" where he had gone to.

This was disappointing, and as it was getting on for breakfast time Tom and Sam had to go back to school.

"I'll look him up by and by," Tom said.

As they entered the house they encountered Perks, who looked at them with a keen, inquiring glance.

"Yes," said Tom, "we've been out; would you like to know all we've said and done?"

"I didn't mean to be rude, Master Tartar," replied Perks, shrinking back, and faltering a little in his speech

Tom walked in and Sam followed him.

Perks waited until they had gone into the breakfast-room, and then strolled into the hall.

He met Chopps coming down, and was about to say something to him, when the usher pushed him aside.

"Not here, you fool!" he said.

Perks recoiled from him as if he had received a blow, and Chopps, humming an air, walked in to breakfast.

In due time he addressed himself to Tom.

"You do not look quite yourself this morning, Tartar," he said. "Haven't slept quite so well as usual—eh?"

"No," replied Tom; "I was rather a long time getting to sleep. Some noisy people outside disturbed me."

"Ah! I heard something of that, too," said Mr. Chopps lightly. "Sounded to me as if some of our festive villagers had been imbibing not wisely, but too well."

Some of the boys had a bad time of it at Mr. Chopps' hands during morning school. The usher was in a distinctly bad temper, and dealt out impositions lavishly.

School over, he went to his room, and found to his annoyance that his pseudo uncle was not there.

In an irritable frame of mind he rang the bell for Perks, and asked him what had become of "Mr. Josiah."

"He went out about ten o'clock, sir."

"Where to?"

"I don't know, sir."

"Get out of my sight."

Left to himself Chopps paced up and down the room, muttering anathemas on the head of his relative.

"The fool—the ass!" he said. "Going to have another of his periodical breakings-out, I suppose.

"If so, he may blurt out something that will do a lot of mischief."

After a while he put on his hat and walked down to the village inn. The landlord stood by the door.

"How do you do?" he said. "Have you seen my uncle pass this way?"

"I saw him, sir, let me see, why just arter eleven o'clock," was the reply. "Not to deceive you, sir, he came in and had some warm rum. He complained of a cold in his head."

"Did he stay?"

"No, sir; he drank it up sharp and went out."

"Which way did he go?"

"I didn't notice, sir."

Chopps thanked him and walked on through the village, back by the lane, and round to the cricket field. He saw nothing of his missing relation.

There was a chance that he might have returned in his absence, but on going up to his room he found he was not there.

"Confound the idiot!" he muttered, as he sank into a chair; "where is he?"

CHAPTER XXII.

Queer Happenings at the Quarries.

TWICE during that day Tom went to the lodgings occupied by Mr. Ralston, but on each occasion the latter was out. At about half-past seven in the evening, however, Tom's third visit was more successful. Ralston had returned, and was just finishing a belated tea.

He appeared to be rather tired, and there was a disappointed look on his face. But he greeted Tom cordially, and then said with a smile:

"Burning with curiosity—eh?"

"Something near it," admitted Tom.

"Well, I'm sorry, but I'm afraid I shall have to leave you at fever-heat a little longer! Do you mind?"

"Not if it is necessary."

"It is. Not that I would not trust you personally, but men like myself make it a habit to keep our plans close."

"Have your friends gone?" asked Tom.

"Not exactly gone," was the reply. "They have left the village, but are still in the neighbourhood."

"May I ask one question, Mr. Ralston?"

"You may, but I don't promise I will answer it."

"Was the information brought by Noddy Berrill of any use to you?"

"Oh, yes," said Ralston; "but we have such artful customers to deal with that, whatever comes to us, seems to be known to them. Don't ask me any more questions—I cannot answer."

"Well, I won't," said Tom, rising; "but it is very tantalising."

"Never mind that, Tartar," said Ralston. "We shall get the upper hand before long. Are you going?"

"Yes," said Tom; "I may as well go back. Good-night."

"Good-night, my lad."

And Tom left the house and returned to the school.

On the following day—which was Saturday—the boys were at liberty to do as they liked with themselves, provided they did not wander too far afield.

"You must all be in before dark," Mr. Wrasper warned them.

And one and all promised to obey his injunctions.

As the quarry boys knocked off at one o'clock, Tom knew that he would be able to see Noddy Berrill. He met him about half a mile from the quarry.

McLara and Sam Smith went with Tom.

"What about those fellows at the quarry?" asked Tom.

"Vanished as they came," replied Noddy, "in the most mysterious way; they didn't leave a rag behind them."

"Jolly queer!" said Tom.

"Yes," agreed Noddy. "It's such a strange business altogether that I sometimes think I must have dreamt I saw them."

"We are going on to the caves," said Tom. "Perhaps we may find something to give us a clue."

"I wouldn't if I were you," replied Noddy. "Some of the men were talking about it to-day, and I heard Bob Dimpson say: 'That's the sort to let alone, boys, unless you want to bid good-bye to your friends.'"

"You didn't hear why?"

"I asked, and they told me it wasn't boys' business, which is one way of admitting that it was wrong.

Noddy went home to wash and dress, in the orthodox Saturday afternoon fashion, and Tom and his friends forged ahead.

By the time they reached the quarries the works were utterly deserted.

The sky was leaden-hued, with low-flying clouds, and a cold wind was blowing—not at all an interesting afternoon to wander about the stone-covered wastes.

Tom led the way over the broken ground, stepping from rock to rock as active as a mountain-goat, and seemingly as careless in his movements.

Sam and Johnny did not get on quite so well, and between them they had several slips and falls.

Tom was making his way to the cave, which he had selected, in his mind, as the particular one.

Suddenly he was pulled up by an exclamation from McLara.

"Look ahead, Tom!"

Tom looked ahead, and saw two men emerging from the cave.

Each carried a bundle and a stick, and they had the appearance of two workmen on the tramp for work.

They came straight towards the boys, and McLara suggested a judicious retreat.

"What for?" asked Tom.

"Oh, I don't know," returned cautious Johnny, "except that it's safer.'

"Safe or not, I don't budge," said Tom.

The men came on, and as they drew nearer there was nothing very terrible in their appearance.

"Got a copper to help two men a bit?" said the foremost.

"You really want it, I suppose?" said Tom.

The man laughed, and showed a lot of white, even teeth.

"Should I ask for it, master, if I didn't?" he asked.

"I don't know," said Tom. "Here are a few pence."

The man took the money, dropped it carelessly into his pocket, and, without a word of thanks, moved on.

His companion, a short, thick-set man, with the broadest and plainest face Tom had ever set eyes on, followed him.

Ere he had gone far he stopped and turned.

"Hi!" he said

Tom, who was walking on, pulled up and faced about.

"Don't you think it's time for you young fellows to be going home?" said the man.

"All in good time," replied Sam.

"I hain't speaking to you," said the man, "but to your pal, Tom Tartar."

"You know my name!" exclaimed Tom.

"Can't you hear I do? Is that anything wonderful, when everybody in the country knows it? My lad, you can't do the things you do without being known. I say it's time for you to be going home—d'ye hear?"

"I am going a little further first," said Tom.

He had come there to visit the cave, and no tramp's warning would drive him away.

So he went boldly up to the mouth of the cave, and was about to enter it when a terrific explosion took place.

Whether inside the cave or out he could not tell, but down he went to the earth as if he had been shot.

Johnny and Sam went down, too, both yelling murder.

All around there was a dense, suffocating smoke, which theatened to choke them.

"Get up," gasped Tom, "and out of it!"

He laid hold of the coat-collar of each, and dragged them for a few yards.

Then he became giddy and exhausted, and fell again.

He felt as if it were all over with him then, and in broken tones he called on the others to rise and flee.

No answer came from either, and feebly turning his head he saw them close behind, lying still upon the dirty ground.

"Is this death?" he asked himself, and then a dimness came over his sight, and he lapsed into unconsciousness.

Tom could not have lain there very long when he slowly began to awake from his stupor and stare about in surprise.

Though only dimly conscious of things around him he could recall recent events, and his first thoughts were for his friends.

They, too, were recovering, and Sam, in a sitting position, was carefully feeling his nose, like a youth who has received a blow thereon, and is wondering whether the blood has begun to flow.

"Are you chaps hurt?" cried Tom.

The usual cheery ring in his voice was gone, and a harsh croaking was in its place.

"I feel as if I had received a cricket-ball here," replied Sam. "Johnny, how are you?"

"Beastly," growled Johnny; "tingling all over, as if I had been whipped."

There was an unpleasant odour lingering in the air, and from out the mouth of the cave a faint smoke was still slowly issuing.

Inside all was still.

"A sort of spirit business," said Sam, disgusted. "An infernal trick of someone."

(Continued on page iii of cover.)

(*Continued from page 40.*)

"Come out, you skulkers!" called Tom.

There was no answer.

The skulkers, if any were there, preferred to remain in the cave.

"We had better go home," said Johnny McLara. "I feel beastly sick."

There was no doubt about it. He and Sam both looked very queer, and Tom was a bit shaken up. So, for once, they were obliged to confess themselves defeated, and beat a retreat.

Ere they got quite clear of the quarry, the sound of laughter behind caused them to stop.

It was not easy to tell exactly from whence the sound came, for the place was full of echoes, which were naturally misleading.

"It's no use talking about this at school," said Tom, as they resumed their way. "Half the chaps wouldn't believe us, and the rest would say that we ought to have gone into the cave to find out who it was."

"As they, of course, would have done!" said McLara sarcastically. "But it's beastly annoying to have been smoked out! Nothing very heroic in that!"

There was not; so they prudently decided to say nothing about the affair.

At Tom's suggestion they decided to return to the school by way of the park.

By making a slight detour, they got to a stile that led to a path through one of Sir Claude Freshly's preserves.

The public were expected to keep to the path, so as not to disturb the game, and Tom and his chums were careful to obey this unwritten law.

But there were others in the wood that afternoon who disregarded it.

A short distance inside the wood the sound of wrangling voices was heard, and without much difficulty the mellifluous tones of Bartholomew Bouncer were recognised.

"I tell you again," he was saying, "that if there is such a thing as law and justice, you shall suffer for this indignity!"

"Out you go, all of you!" returned a gruff voice, which Tom knew belonged to Sir Claude's head gamekeeper. "Them boys o' yourn are a lot o' rampajus young demons, and they've got what they desarved!"

A sudden turn in the path now brought the wrangling party into view.

It consisted of three keepers, Mr. Bouncer, and a dozen or so of his pupils.

Prominent among the latter were Hautieboy Snacks, Raddles, and Winks—all three weeping as they tenderly rubbed those portions of their anatomy which had just previously made the acquaintance of the head keeper's ground-ash stick.

(To be continued.)

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