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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK FIRE ISLAND ***

G. Manville Fenn

"Fire Island"

Chapter One.

Wild Times.

"Do I think it would be wise to put on a life-belt, Mr Lane?"

"Yes."

The words were shouted into the ear of one of the speakers, and yelled back as, like others about the vessel, they clung to the side, now to be raised high, now to be plunged down again, as the *Planet*, with only a rag or two of storm canvas set, rode over a huge wave and seemed as if turned into some new and ponderous kind of diving apparatus about to seek the wonders at the bottom of the eastern seas. But after her tremendous plunge right into a hollow she rose again, shook off the water which deluged the deck and staggered on.

Just then a dimly seen figure sidled up to the two speakers, held on tightly, and shouted—

"I say, Mr Rimmer, isn't that man steering very wildly?"

"Who's to steer tamely, sir, in a sea like this? Man has enough to do to keep from being washed overboard."

The newcomer nodded and took a fresh grip of the top of the bulwark as a sea came over the bows again, and swept along the deck, leaving them breathless and panting, with the water streaming from oilskin and mackintosh.

"Don't you want to put on a life-belt, too?" shouted the first speaker, as in the darkness of that terrible night his words seemed to be snatched away as soon as uttered.

"Yes; it would be safer; where are they?"

"Bah! Nonsense! Look down there. Suppose you had on a life-belt, what could you do in such a sea? You'd both be knocked to pieces or have the breath choked out of you in five minutes. Stick to the ship while you can. That's good advice."

"Is there any danger?" shouted the young man who was nearest the last speaker.

"Of course there is. No one could be in such a tornado without being in danger."

"But shall we be wrecked?" asked the fresh-comer.

"Heaven only knows, sir. We're all amongst the islands and reefs, and if one of them is in our way nothing can save us."

No words were spoken then for some time, and every man on board the *Planet* brig, which after a short stay at Singapore was off on a voyage of discovery along the coast of New Guinea, clung to bulwark, shroud and stay, or sheltered himself the best way he could from the waves which, like the wind, seemed ready to pluck them from their hold.

Everything possible in the way of navigation had been done when the frightful storm came on, after scant warning in the way of a falling barometer. Then nothing was left for the unfortunates on board but to hold on and wait for the end of the hurricane as they were swept along swiftly in its course.

Three days before, they had been sailing gently within sight of the towering volcanoes of Java. Now, as Mr Rimmer,

the chief mate, said, they were “anywhere,” the wind having veered round as if blowing in a vast circle, and all government of the brig being pretty well at an end.

Matters had been bad enough while it was daylight. When darkness came on the little hope which had remained was pretty well quenched; and Oliver Lane began to think of the home in England that he might never see again, and of how different the reality of the expedition was from all that he had pictured in his rather vivid imagination.

When the trip was planned, and he obtained permission to join it through the influence of his father, a famous naturalist, he saw himself sailing amid glorious islands, with gorgeous tropical foliage hanging over seas of intense blue, glittering like precious stones in the burning sunshine; coral reefs seen through transparent water with their groves of wondrous seaweeds, and fish of brilliant tints flashing their scale armour as they swam here and there. Then, too, his thoughts had run riot over the shore trips among lands where the birds were dazzling in colour, and the insects painted by nature’s hand with hues impossible to describe; but, instead of these delights to one of eager temperament, they had encountered this fearful storm. The captain and man after man had been disabled, and for the rest as they tore onward through the spray, mist and darkness, grim death seemed to be just ahead, for a touch upon one of the many reefs which studded those seas meant instant destruction, since no boat could have been lowered to live.

“Never say die,” shouted Ezra Rimmer, the mate, in his ear. “We may ride it out.”

Oliver Lane made no reply. He was half stunned by the deafening roar, and his mind after the many hours of suffering had grown confused; but as the last comer twisted a line about his waist and secured it to the belaying-pins close at hand, the mate went on shouting a few words from time to time as he tried to make out their unfortunate companions.

“These storms end suddenly,” he shouted. “Don’t understand ‘em—electricity or something to do with the volcanoes. Keep a stout heart, sir. If we do have to die, I don’t think it will be very bad. Hold tight whatever you do. As aforesaid, ‘Never say die.’”

Oliver Lane turned his head to him and tried to make out the expression on the face of a man who could speak so coolly about death. But it was too dark, and turning back to the companion who had joined them, he reached his arm farther round the shroud he was clinging to and touched him.

The young man raised his drooping head.

“Where’s Drew?” shouted Oliver Lane; but the wind bore away his words, and he yelled out his question again.

“Cabin!” came back in a temporary cessation of the turmoil of roaring wind, hissing spray, and creaking and groaning of the vessel’s timbers.

Oliver Lane tried to ask another question, but the wind caught him full in the face with such force that for a few moments he could only gasp and try to recover his breath, while directly after the vessel gave so tremendous a pitch and roll, he was jerked from his footing and hung by his hands with the sensation of having his arms jerked from their sockets.

But the young Englishman had been engaged in similar struggles for hours, and recovering himself he shouted, “Panton?”

“Hullo!”

“Is Drew hurt?”

“Yes. So am I.”

“So we are all, Mr Panton,” yelled the mate. “If we get through this we shall all be covered with bruises, let alone broken ribs and other bones—Yah!—Hold on.”

The advice was not needed, for the two young men with him had suddenly seen something grey loom up in front, and taught by experience that it was a mass of foaming water, they clung for dear life, sheltering themselves as well as they could beneath the bulwark as the wave curled over and thundered along the deck with a hideous crashing din that literally stunned them. When it had passed over Oliver Lane shook his head and tried with his smarting eyes to get rid of the water and make out whether his companions were safe.

To his horror Arthur Panton was hanging from the belaying pin to which he had lashed himself, with his head down and his hands close to his feet, apparently lifeless, while the mate was gone.

It is good medicine for the mind to see others in peril, for it rouses to action the best feelings in our nature and subdues the love of self.

In an instant Oliver had forgotten his own sufferings, and, holding on by one hand, he tried to raise his companion to his old position, but for a few moments in vain. Then the reaction came, and the young man made a brave effort to assist, and soon after he was upright and clinging with his arms over the bulwark, gasping heavily to recover his breath.

Oliver Lane’s next movement was to help the mate, whom he could dimly see lying across the deck half buried and wedged in amongst ropes, gratings, and the smashed-up wreck of one of the boats, which had been torn from the davits by the weight of the water.

He had to crawl to him, and then dragged away a great tangle of rope and several pieces of broken woodwork before the mate moved. Then he began to struggle, dragged himself out by the help of Oliver Lane's hands, and crawled back with him to the side, where he crouched down under the bulwark.

"Nice lark this, sir," he groaned.

"Much hurt?" shouted Oliver Lane.

"Tidy," came back. "Don't know yet, sir. Hah! Don't think I could stand much more of it, nor the old *Planet*, neither."

These words were uttered during a temporary lull. Then the wind came along with a fiercer rush than ever, bearing with it a perfect deluge of spray in great stinging, blinding drops torn from the surface of the waves, and forcing all on board to shelter their faces from its violence.

There was no more possibility of making one another heard for the furious blast. Every nerve and muscle had to be devoted to the task of holding on, and in this way hour after hour of that awful night slowly passed away till one and all of the crew strained their eyes, though vainly, for the coming of the day.

"At last!" shouted the mate.

Oliver Lane looked up in his direction, so thoroughly exhausted and weak that he could not comprehend the meaning of his companion's words. Then by slow degrees he began to realise that the wind was falling fast, though the vessel was labouring as much as ever.

Then he managed to grasp the fact that it was some time since the deck had been flooded by a wave, and with a faint gleam of hope crossing the darkness which had enshrouded them, he said with an effort—

"Lulling a little?"

"Lulling?" cried the mate. "You couldn't have talked to me like that a couple of hours ago."

"Then we have escaped?"

"I don't know yet. All that I know is that we are getting through the storm, and the sooner it is daylight the better I shall be pleased."

Some hours passed. The wind had died out and the sea was rapidly going down, but a strange feeling of uneasiness had come upon the occupants of the little vessel. Visit after visit had been paid to the cabins, and the watches which had been consulted and doubted were now acknowledged to be trusty and truth-telling, for the chronometers supported their evidence and announced that it was well on toward noon of the next day. Though to all appearance it was midnight of the blackest, dense clouds shutting out the sky, while the long-continued darkness had a singularly depressing effect upon men worn out by their struggle with the storm.

Arthur Panton, the mineralogist of the little expedition, had pretty well recovered from the battering he had received, and he at once gave his opinion as to the cause of the darkness.

"I cannot speak learnedly upon the subject," he said, "but these terrible storms, as Mr Rimmer says, do appear to be somehow connected with electric disturbances, and often enough these latter seem to be related to volcanic eruptions."

"And you think there is a volcanic eruption somewhere near?" asked Lane.

"I do not say somewhere near, for the wind may have brought this dense blackness from hundreds of miles distant but certainly I should say that one of the many volcanoes in this region is in eruption."

"If it were, sir, we should be having fine ashes coming down upon us," said the mate, gruffly, "and—"

"What's that?" cried Panton, holding up his hand.

"Thunder," said the mate, as a deep, apparently distant concussion was heard.

"No, the explosion from some crater," said Panton. "Hark!"

Another deep muttering report was heard, and soon after another and another.

"Only a bad thunderstorm," cried the mate. "There, let's go and get some food, gentlemen, and see how our friends are. I daresay we shall be having a deluge of rain before long, and then the sun will come out and I can take an observation."

He led the way to the cabin, where the steward had prepared a meal and retrimmed the lamps, going about with a scared look on his countenance, and turning his eyes appealingly from one to the other as the thunderlike reports kept on; but, getting no sympathy from those to whom he appealed silently, for they were as nervous as himself, he sought his opportunity and, following Oliver Lane into a corner, he began,—

"Oh, sir, the destruction's awful."

"But the ship is sound yet, and making no water."

"I mean my china and glass, sir," said the man, "I shan't have a whole thing left."

"Never mind that if our lives are saved."

"No, sir, I don't; but will they be saved?"

"Oh, yes, I hope so."

"But it's so dark, sir. Oh, why did I leave London with its safety and its gas? Why am I here, sir? I want to know why I am here?"

"Because you were not a coward," said Lane.

"Eh? You're not joking me, sir."

"No, I am serious."

"Then thank you, sir. You're quite right. That's it, I'm not a coward, and I won't say another word."

The man nodded and smiled and went about his work, while Lane turned to a young man of seven or eight and twenty, who sat evidently suffering and looking pale and strange in the sickly light.

"I say, Lane," he said, "is this the end of the world?"

"Not to-day, Mr Drew," cried the mate: "Is no end to the world, it's round."

"To-day! It's noon, and as black as night."

"Mr Rimmer thinks we are going to have a tremendous rain storm now," said Oliver Lane, wincing with pain as he sat down.

"Then it is going to be a rain of black ink."

"Oh, no, sir, heavy thunderstorm and then the light will come. The clouds look almost solid."

"But surely that cannot be thunder," cried Oliver Lane, excitedly. "Hark!"

"No need to, sir," said the mate, smiling. "It makes itself heard plainly enough. By George!"

He sprang from the table and hurried out on deck, for a roar like that of some terrific explosion close at hand was heard, and Lane and Panton followed, expecting to see the lurid light of a fire or the flash of lightning forerunning the next roar.

But all was blacker than ever, and the sailing lights and a ship's lantern or two swung to and fro as the vessel rose and fell on the unquiet sea.

"What do you make of it, Smith?" cried the mate to one of the watch.

"Can't make nothing on it at all, sir," said the man, taking off his cap and scratching his head, while his face, like those of his companions' had a peculiar scared aspect. "'Tar'nt like a thunderstorm, cause there ar'n't a drop o' lightning."

"*Bit*, matey," said one of the man's comrades.

"Get out," growled the first man, "how can it be a bit, Billy Wriggs, when yer can't touch it? I said a drop and I mean it."

"Don't argue," said the mate, sharply. "Do you mean to say, all of you, that you saw no flash?"

"Not a sign o' none, sir," said the first man. "There?"

Another fearful detonation came with startling violence to their ears, and as they stood upon the deck the report seemed to jar them all in a dull, heavy way.

"Warn't no flash o' lightning there, sir."

"No, I saw no flash," said Oliver Lane, uneasily.

"No, there aren't been none, sir. Lightning allus flickers and blinks like, 'fore you hear any thunder at all."

"These dense black clouds might hide the flashes," said Lane.

"No," said Panton. "I should say that a flash of lightning would pass through any cloud. I don't think it's thunder."

"What, then, a naval action going on?"

"No war," said the mate, "it must be thunder."

Another detonation, louder than any they had heard before, made the ship literally quiver, and the men pressed together and turned their startled faces towards the mate as if for help and protection.

"World's coming to a hend," muttered one of the men.

"If I was skipper here," said another, "I'd just 'bout ship and run for it."

"Where to?" said Wriggs.

"Can't run your ship out o' the world, matey," grumbled the first sailor who had spoken, while the mate and the cabin passengers stood gazing in the direction from which the detonations seemed to come, and tried to pierce the dense blackness ahead. "Sims to me as there's something wrong in the works somewhere. I never see anything like this afore."

"Nor you can't see nothing like it behind, matey," said Wriggs. "It's like playing at Blind Man's Buff shut up in a water tank."

Another awful roar, ten times as deafening as that of the loudest peal of thunder, now struck them heavily—short, quick—sudden, but there was no echoing reverberation or rolling sound as with thunder, and now convinced that it could not be the effects of a thunderstorm, the mate turned to his companion, and said,—

"It's a big volcano hard at it somewhere, gentlemen, and these are not rain clouds shutting us in, but smoke."

"But what volcano can it be?" said Lane, as a peculiar nervous tremor attacked him.

"You tell me whereabouts we are, and I'll tell you what burning mountain that is. If you can't tell me, I can't tell you. Wait till the clouds open, and I'll get an observation. First thing, though, is to make sail and get away."

He knew the folly of his remark as he spoke, for the wind had completely dropped now, and it was noted as strange that no rush of air came after each explosion. There was the heavy concussion and then a terrible stillness, the air being perfectly motionless, and this appearing the more strange after the frightful tornado through which they had passed. Silence absolute, and a darkness as thick as that of the great plague of Egypt—a darkness that could be felt. And now, making no headway whatever, the vessel rolled heavily in the tossing waves, which boiled round them as it were, as if there were some violent disturbance going on far beneath the keel.

"I never see nought like this," whispered the first sailor Smith, as if he were afraid of his words being heard. "Ship's going it like a dumpling in a pot."

"And I never felt anything like it, gentlemen," said the mate in a low awe-stricken tone. "But we mustn't show any white feathers, eh, Mr Lane? Ah, Mr Drew, come to give us your opinion?"

This to the gentleman they had left in the cabin.

"I have come to bring terrible news, Mr Rimmer," said the fresh-comer, gravely. "A few minutes after you had left the cabin, Captain White rose suddenly upon his elbow. 'Fetch Mr Rimmer,' he said; 'no: don't leave me. He can do no good. It's all getting dark. Tell Mr Rimmer to do his best but I know he will. Stay with me to the last, Mr Drew.' I should have run and called for help, but it was all too plain, Mr Rimmer. He was dying, and directly after he sank back on his pillow, gave me one sad look as if to say good-bye, and all was over."

The terrible silence seemed to be more profound at this announcement, which came like a chill upon the little group already sufficiently unnerved.

The silence was broken by the mate, who said, softly,—

"God be merciful to him, and take him unto His rest! We've lost a good captain, gentlemen, and I a very faithful old friend."

Another deafening roar came from ahead. Away to the east it appeared to be one minute—to the west, south, north, the next, for the needle of the compass was all on the quiver, and appeared as if it followed a wandering magnetic attraction in the air.

Silence again, all but the hissing and splashing of the troubled sea, and the creaking of the beams as the brig rolled slowly from side to side.

The crew were all grouped together close by the mate, who had succeeded to the command of the little vessel, and as he stood there gazing over the side, thoughtfully, the three young men glanced at each other, and then at the man who had their lives in charge.

At last the mate turned, and the light of one of the lanterns shone full upon his haggard countenance.

"There's no doubt about it, gentlemen," he said, "we're near some volcano in a terrible state of eruption, and there is nothing to be done but wait. I am perfectly helpless till we get light and a breath of air. Ah, here's a change. There's no doubt now. I was wrong; we have got something to do."

For as he spoke the thick darkness suddenly became blacker; inasmuch as before it was all overhead, now it appeared to have gradually settled down upon the sea and obscured the light of the lanterns. For plainly enough there was the convincing proof of their being in the neighbourhood of some volcanic disturbance in the mighty band which runs through the Eastern Archipelago. The air became suddenly full of a thick, fine ash falling softly upon the deck, and to such an extent that the gangways were thrown open and the crew were set to work to sweep the powder off into the sea.

Here too, a strange effect was produced, for the ship gradually began to roll less violently, the soft fine ash which fell being sufficiently buoyant to float, and it became so thick that the rough waters were quieted, and the surface was

rapidly covered with a thick coating of floating ash.

At first this dust settled softly down upon the deck, then it came down more thickly, lodging on the yards and sails, every rope and stay, too, taking its load till it was filled up so that it could bear no more, and consequently every now and then avalanches of ash were started from on high and came down with a soft rush and a heavy thud upon the deck.

This rapidly accumulated, and the men had to work harder and harder shovelling it to the gangways where others threw it overboard, where it fell silently and without a splash.

“Work away, everyone,” cried the mate. “It will soon be all down, and then we shall get light.”

But the fearsome detonations continued, and it was evident that at every discharge fresh clouds of the volcanic dust were formed, and the darkness remained as profound as ever.

“This can’t go on,” said Oliver Lane, in a husky whisper to his nearest companion as they both paused breathless, dropping with perspiration, choked, and blinded by the volcanic dust.

“I hope not,” was the reply. “It seems to fall more quickly than we shovel it off.”

“What’s that?” cried Lane excitedly, and a low murmur full of horror and despair, arose from the ship as men threw down shovel and broom and made for the boats, for following close upon another of the awful explosions there was a sudden rushing noise, evidently in the opposite direction, and the vessel quivered from stem to stern as if it had suddenly, and without warning, struck upon a rock.

So startling was the concussion that the immediate conclusion was that she was going down, and it was not until a couple of similar concussions had been suffered that it was realised that the blows were shocks communicated through the water, which was once more in a fearful state of disturbance.

“We’re in for it now, gentlemen,” said the mate, in awe-stricken tones. “Look out!” he roared, directly after.

“Hold on everyone, rope and stays.”

His words were hardly heard, for there was once more a deafening roar apparently somewhere ahead, and almost simultaneously a heavy sea struck them astern, making the vessel heel over as the wave swept the deck, and as she recovered herself another and another deluged her, and for the moment it seemed as if she must sink.

But the buoyant vessel rose again as the falling ashes were succeeded by cinders which came rattling and crashing down, literally bombarding the deck, while to add to the horror the black darkness began to give place to a blood-red lurid glare. Toward this they were now being drawn, slowly at first, then faster and faster: as, after the three waves that had struck the vessel, another came towering on astern, threatening to engulf them, but plunging beneath the stern, lifting and bearing them along upon its tremendous crest with a rush and deafening hissing roar. Faster and faster, and on and toward the deep glow now right ahead.

Oliver Lane was clinging to the fore shrouds and awake to the fact that his two friends, Panton and Drew, were at his side, for their faces loomed out of the black darkness, lit up by the blood-red glow from which now came a perceptible sense of heat. The next moment they were joined by the mate, who yelled to them, his voice plainly heard over the hiss and roar,—

“Earthquake wave! It’s all over now.”

He said no more, and they all clung there, with the vessel still balanced accurately upon the huge crest and borne on at almost express speed.

In his agony of despair and horror Lane now glanced to right and left to see by the blood-red glow the rolling hill of water upon which he rode spreading out to right and left, while from the clouds above it was as if the whole of the firmament were casting down its stars in one great shower of light as the fiery stones came rushing, hissing into the sea and many of them crashing upon the doomed ship.

Death was upon them in its most awful form, and as the young man was conscious of two hands gripping his arms, a voice close to his ear shouted,—

“The end of all things, my lad; we can never live through this!”

Chapter Two.

A Bit of Blue.

As if to endorse these words there was once more a deafening explosion, the blood-red glow toward which they were being driven suddenly flashed out into a burst of light so dazzling that all present covered their blinded eyes; a spurt of fiery blocks of incandescent stone curved over and fell into the boiling sea, and as the occupants of the deck were driven prostrate by the shock which followed, silence and darkness once more reigned.

“Much hurt, sir?”

Oliver Lane heard those words quite plainly, and lay wondering who it was that was hurt, and why he did not answer

so kindly an inquiry.

Then, as a hand was laid upon his shoulder, he grasped the fact that it was the mate who was speaking, and that he was the object of the sailor's solicitude.

"I—I don't know," he said, making an effort to sit up, and succeeding. "Whatever is the matter? My head aches a good deal."

"No wonder, my lad, seeing how you were pitched against the mast. But you won't hurt now. I doctored it as well as I could. It bled pretty freely, and that will keep the wound wholesome."

"Bled?" said the young fellow wonderingly, as he raised his hand, and found that a thick bandage was round his forehead.

"Yes; we were all thrown down when she struck, but you got the worst of it."

"She struck?—the ship? Then we have all been wrecked?"

"Well, yes," said the mate, giving his head a vicious kind of rub; "I suppose we must call it a wreck. Anyhow, we're ashore."

"And it isn't so dark?" said Oliver, rising to his feet and feeling so giddy that he caught at the nearest rope to save himself from falling.

"No, it isn't so dark, for the clouds are passing away. We shall have daylight directly."

"Morning?"

"No; it's quite late to-morrow afternoon," said the mate grimly.

"But I don't hear that thundering now?"

"No; it's all over seemingly, thank goodness," said the mate, as his injured companion looked wonderingly up at the thick, blackened clouds still hanging overhead, and listened quite expectant for the next terrible detonation. "I began to think we were going to be carried along full speed into some awful fiery hole on the top of that wave, and that when we struck the water was going on to put out the fire, and I suppose it did."

"What?" cried Lane, looking round him, and then at the mate, to see if he were in his right senses.

"Yes, you may look, Mr Lane," he said. "I'm all right, only a bit scared; I know what I'm saying, and as soon as it get's light enough you'll see."

"But I don't understand."

"No, nor anybody else, sir, but Nature, who's been having a regular turn up. I s'pose you know that we were in for a great eruption?"

"Yes, of course."

"And somehow mixed up with the storm, there was an earthquake?"

"No, I did not grasp that, only that we were being carried toward a burning mountain; but I don't see any glow from the volcano now."

"No; it's all out, and I ought to have said a sea-quake. It seems to me it was like this: a great place opened somewhere, out of which the flame and smoke and thunderings came, till it had half spent its strength, and then the sea mastered it, and ran into the great hole and put out the fire, but it took all the sea to do it."

"I say, Mr Rimmer," exclaimed Oliver Lane, staring hard at the mate, "did you get a heavy blow on the head when we came ashore?"

"No; I had all my trouble before the shock came that sent you down, I mean when we struck I'm as clear as a bell now, sir, and know what I'm saying."

"But the sea—I don't hear any waves now. There are no breakers, the deck is not flooded, and yet you say we are ashore?"

"You can't see any breakers, and they can't," said the mate, pointing to a group dimly seen through the gloom clustered together and looking over the vessel's side, "because it's as I tell you, the earth opened with that eruption, and the seas all ran down the hole."

"Mr Rimmer!"

"That's right, sir. We're ashore, but it's on the bottom of the sea."

"Nonsense!" cried Oliver Lane.

"Oh, very well, look over the side, then. Where's the water? I've been looking and listening, and there isn't a drop to be heard; it's too dark to see anything yet. Now, listen again."

"I can hear nothing," said Oliver.

"No, not a splash, and the great volcano is put out. That isn't smoke which makes it so dark, but steam rising from the big hole in the earth."

"Oh, impossible!" cried Lane.

"All right, sir, then make it possible by explaining it some other way. But, as far as I can make out, our voyage is over, and we've got to walk all the way home, and carry our traps."

"Wait till it gets light," said Lane confidently, "and you'll see that you are wrong. Who's that, Drew?"

"Yes. Are you better?"

"Oh, yes, only a little giddy. Where's Panton?"

"Over yonder. I say, what do you think of this? Isn't it awful! You know we are ashore."

"Mr Rimmer says we're on the bottom of the sea, with all the water run out."

"Well, it does seem like it, but that's impossible, of course. We're not in a lake."

"I don't know where we are gentlemen," said the mate, "only that I feel like a fish out of water, and I'm quite in the dark."

"Wherever we are," said Drew, "we have been in the midst of an awful natural convulsion, and if we can escape with life, I shall feel glad to have been a witness of such a scene."

"I'm thinking about our poor ship, sir," said the mate. "She's of more consequence to me than Nature in convulsions. Oh, if these clouds would only rise and the light come so that we could see!"

"It is coming," cried Lane. "It is certainly clearer over yonder. How still everything is!"

Scree-auh!

A long-drawn, piercing, and harsh cry from a distance.

"What's that?" cried Drew.

"Fish," said the mate, drily. "Found there's no more water, and it's going to die."

"Mr Rimmer," cried Lane, "what nonsense!"

"Nonsense? Why, I've many a time heard fish sing out when they've been dragged on board."

"That was a bird," said Lane, as he shaded his eyes to try and pierce the gloom around them. "There it goes again."

For the cry was repeated, and then answered from behind them, and followed directly after by a piping whistle and a chirp.

"We're ashore with birds all about us," said Oliver Lane decisively. "We were carried right in by that earthquake wave, and the water has retired and left us stranded."

"Have it your own way, gentlemen," said the mate. "It's all the same to me whether my ship's left stranded at the bottom of a dry sea or right away on land. She's no use now—that's plain enough."

Just then the darkness closed in again, and save for the murmur of voices in the obscurity, the stillness was terrible. So utterly dark did it become that anything a yard away was quite invisible, and once more, suffering one and all from a sensation of dread against which it was impossible to fight, the occupants of the deck stood waiting to encounter whatever was next to come.

Oliver Lane was at the age when a youth begins to feel that he is about to step into a fresh arena—that of manhood, but with a good deal that is boyish to hold him back. And in those moments, oppressed and overcome as he was by the long-continued darkness, he felt a strong disposition to search out a hand so as to cling to whoever was nearest, but he mastered the desire, and then uttered a sigh of satisfaction, for Drew, his companion, suddenly thrust a hand beneath his arm and pressed towards him.

"Company's good," he whispered, "even if you're going to be hanged, they say; let's keep together, Lane, for I'm not ashamed to say I'm in a regular stew."

"So's everybody," said the mate frankly. "I've been through a good deal at sea, gentlemen, but this is about the most awful thing I ever did encounter. I wouldn't care if we were only able to see what was to happen next."

A cheer broke out from the crew at that moment, for right overhead the blackness opened, and a clear, bright ray of light shot down upon the deck, quivered, faded, shot out again, and then rapidly grew broader and broader.

"Blue sky!" yelled one of the sailors frantically as a patch appeared; and in his intense excitement he dashed off into the rapid steps of a hornpipe.

"Bravo, my lads!" cried the mate, who was as excited as the men. "Cheer again. Three cheers for the bit of blue!"

The men shouted till they were hoarse, paused, and then cheered again, while Panton turned now to where his friends were standing with the mate, and with the tears welling in his eyes, began to shake hands with first one and then another, all reciprocating and beginning in their hysterical delight to repeat the performance double-handed now, as the light grew broader and clearer. A soft, warm mellow glow, which grew and grew till the huge dense steam clouds were seen to be rolling slowly away in three directions, in the fourth—the north evidently, from the direction of the golden rays of light—there was one vast bank of vapour, at first black, then purple, and by degrees growing brighter, till the men burst forth cheering wildly again at the mass of splendour before them. For far as eye could reach all was purple, orange, gold and crimson of the most dazzling sheen, then darkness once more; for the sun, of which they had a momentary glimpse, was blotted out by the rolling masses of cloud which were floating away.

But it was the darkness of an evening in the tropics. The light had been, and sent hope and rest into their breasts, giving them the knowledge of their position as they lay stranded upon an open plain with the terrible convulsion of nature apparently at an end.

Chapter Three.

"Just Nowhere!"

"One must eat and one must sleep," said Oliver Lane, "even if a fellow has been knocked on the head and nearly killed."

Every one was of the same opinion; but though there were a few attempts at jocularity, the mirth was forced, and all knew that they were trying to hide the deep feelings of thankfulness in their hearts for their safety, after passing through as terrible an ordeal as could fall to the lot of man.

There was another reason, too, for the solemnity which soon prevailed; the captain lay dead in the cabin—the man who not many hours before was in full possession of health, and now sleeping calmly there, beyond sharing the hopes and fears of those whom he had left behind. Consequently, men went to and fro as if afraid of their steps being heard, and for the most part conversed in whispers for some time, till the question arose about keeping watch.

"There's only one thing to keep a watch for to-night," said the mate to Oliver,—“savages.”

"If there are savages here, would they not have been drowned, Mr Rimmer?"

"Perhaps—or burned to death. Then there's nothing to watch for."

"Not for the wave that may come and carry us back to sea?"

"No; that would be too long a watch, sir. Such an eruption as we have encountered only comes once in a man's lifetime. I'm in command now, and I shall let every poor fellow have ten or a dozen hours' good sleep, and I am so utterly done up that I shall take the same amount myself."

The consequence was that all through that natural darkness of night dead silence reigned.

But not for ten or a dozen hours. Before eight of them were passed, Oliver Lane was awake and on deck, eager and excited with all a naturalist's love of the wild world, to see what their novel surroundings would be like.

The sun was shining brilliantly; low down in the east the sky was golden, and as he raised his head above the hatchway, it was to gaze over the bulwarks at a glorious vista of green waving trees, on many of which were masses of scarlet and yellow blossom; birds were flying in flocks, screaming and shrieking; while from the trees came melodious pipings, and the trills of finches, mingled with deep-toned, organ-like notes, and the listener felt his heart swell with thankfulness, and a mist came before his eyes, as he felt how gloriously beautiful the world seemed, after the black darkness and horrors through which he had passed.

Then everything was matter-of-fact and ordinary again, for a voice said,—“Hullo! you up? Thought I was first.”

"You, Drew? I say, look here." Sylvester Drew, botanist of the little expedition, shaded his eyes from the horizontal sunbeams, and looked round over the hatchway as he stood beside his companion, and kept on uttering disconnected words,—“Beautiful—grand—Paradise—thank God!” By one impulse they stepped on deck and went to the bulwarks, to stand there and look around, astounded at the change.

From where they had obtained their first glimpse of their surroundings they only saw the higher ground; now they were looking upon the level—a scene of devastation.

For they were both gazing upon the track of the earthquake wave, and all around them trees were lying torn-up by the roots, battered and stripped of their leafage, some piled in inextricable confusion, others half buried in mud. Some again had soft white coral sand heaped over them. Here, the surface had been swept bare to the dark rock which formed the base of the island or continent upon which they had been cast; there, mud lay in slimy waves, some of which were being disturbed at the surface by something living writhing its way through the liquid soil.

"Might have given a fellow a call," said a voice, and Panton came up to them. "You fellows are as bad as schoolboys; must have first turn."

"Never thought of calling you," said Drew.

"Not surprised at you," said Panton to Oliver Lane, "you are only a schoolboy yet; but you might have called me, Drew."

"Don't take any notice, Oliver, lad," said Drew. "Panton always goes badly till he has been oiled by his breakfast."

"My word!" cried Panton, as he grasped the scene around them. "Look here, Drew! Look at the earth bared to its very bones. Volcanic. Look at the tufa. That's basalt there, and look where the great blocks of coral are lying. Why, they must have been swept in by the wave."

"Don't bother," said Drew. "I want to make out what those trees are in blossom. They must be—"

"Oh, bother your trees and flowers! Here, Oliver, lad, look at the great pieces of scoria and pumice. Why, that piece is smoking still. These must be some of the fragments we saw falling yesterday."

"Can't look," said Oliver, "I want to know what those birds are, and there's a great fish in that muddy pool yonder, and, if I'm not greatly mistaken, that's a snake. Here, quick! Look amongst those trees. There's a man—no, a boy—no. I see now; it's alive, and—yes—it's some kind of ape."

"Well, we can't go on fighting against each other, with every man for his own particular subject," said Drew, "we must take our turns. We've been cast on a perfect naturalist's paradise, with the world turned upside down, as if for our special advantage."

"Yes," said Panton; "we could not possibly have hit upon a place more full of tempting objects."

"But what about our exploration in New Guinea?" said Oliver.

"This may be the western end of that island," said Panton. "But where's the volcano that has caused all this mischief?"

"Yonder," said Oliver, pointing, "behind the cloud."

The others looked at a dense curtain of mist which rose from the earth, apparently to the skies, and hid everything in that quarter, the desolation extending apparently for a couple of miles in the direction of the curtain, beyond that the ground rose in a glorious slope of uninjured verdure, and then came the great cloud of mist or smoke shutting off the mountain, or whatever was beyond.

"But where is the sea?" said Oliver.

"All run down through a big hole into the earth, I say," said a deep voice. "Well, gentlemen, how are you?"

"Ah, Mr Rimmer, good morning," cried Oliver, shaking hands. "How are your hurts?"

"Oh, better my lad, and yours?"

"Only a bit stiff and achy. But who's to think of injuries in such a glorious place?"

"Glorious!" said the mate, screwing up his face. "Look about you. Everything's destroyed."

"Oh, yes," said Drew; "but in a month it will be all green again and as beautiful as ever!"

"Except my poor brig," said the mate. "Why, she's regularly planted here in the mud and sand, and, unless she strikes root and grows young vessels, she's done for."

"But where is the sea?" cried Oliver.

The mate looked round him and then pointed south-west.

"Yonder, if there is any," he said.

"How do you know?"

"Trees all standing in the other direction, and yes, there are others out that way," he said, pointing. "It's plain enough, the wave swept right across this low level. You can see how the trunks lie and how the rocks and the shells have been borne along. Far as I can make out the wave has cleared a track about a dozen miles wide. May be twenty. Why, you gentlemen seemed to be quite pleased."

"Why not?" cried Oliver. "It's grand. Look at the work cut out for us. We want all the British Museum staff to help."

"Better have my crew, then, for there's nothing for us to do. The brig's fast settled down on an even keel. I say, Mr Panton, kick me or pinch me, please."

"What for?"

"Because I must be asleep and all this a dream. No, it's real enough," he said, sadly; "wait till I get a glass."

He went back to the cabin and returned directly with a telescope.

"I'll go up to the main-top," he said, "and have a look round."

The three naturalists were too much taken up by the endless objects of interest spread around them to pay much heed to his words, so that he had mounted to the main-top and then to the topgallant masthead before his words took their attention again, just too, as plainly enough they could make a huge animal of the crocodile kind slowly crawling along the edge of a pool about a quarter of a mile away.

"Here you are, gentlemen," the mate shouted.

"Yes, what is it?" cried Oliver, in answer to his hail.

"You can trace it all from here with the glass. There is some sea left."

"So I suppose," said Panton drily.

"Lies about four miles away to the east-'ard, and the land's swept right up to us, and then away north-west for a dozen miles, I should say, to the sea on that side."

"Can you make out the mountain?"

"No; there's nothing but cloud to the norrard. I expect it's there, and not very far away."

"And how far-off is the nearest sea?" asked Oliver.

"'Bout four miles."

"And what do you make this out to be—an island?"

"Can't say, sir. Island or peninsula. Can't be mainland. But I shall be able to settle that before long."

He reached the deck just as the men were coming up from the forecabin, and they were soon at work swabbing the planks, squaring yards, shaking out the sails to dry, and getting the vessel in order just as if she were at sea, while the cook and steward attended to their work as coolly as if nothing had happened.

At mid-day the mate had taken his observations and marked down their position on the chart just where the map showed a broad blank in the Arafura Sea.

"But are you right?" said Oliver, as he followed the mate's pointing finger.

"As right as my knowledge of navigation will let me be, sir," said the mate quietly. "That's where we are."

"But where is that?"

"Just nowhere, sir."

"But—"

"We're very cunning, sir, and think we know the whole world and everything there is; but now and then we find out that we are not so clever as we thought, and that there is just a little more to learn. I said that we were nowhere just now, which isn't quite correct, because we are here; but it strikes me that we're in a spot where no civilised vessel ever was before."

"What, right on shore?" said Oliver, smiling.

"No, sir, I didn't mean that. I meant no vessel ever touched here before, or it would have been marked down in the chart. Savages have been, perhaps. Maybe they're here still, but they have been frightened into their holes by the eruption."

Oliver looked out of the open cabin window as if expecting to see a party of the people coming, but he only made out something living in one of the pools left by the flood wave.

"I'm very sorry, gentlemen, the captain and I undertook to cruise with you along the New Guinea coast; but man proposes and—you know the rest. Here we shall have to stay till some vessel comes in sight to take us off, and to that end I propose that to-morrow morning we begin to make expeditions to the coast, and set up a spar here and there with a bit of bunting showing for a signal of distress."

"No, don't—that is—not yet," said Oliver, excitedly. "No place that you could have found would have equalled this."

"If we have no more eruptions," said Drew.

"And earthquake waves," added Panton.

"I think we have been most fortunate," cried Oliver.

"Oh, well, if you're satisfied, gentlemen," said the mate, "I'm sure I am. You mean to begin looking for your bits of stone and butterflies then, here?"

"Of course," cried Oliver; "and we can live on board just as if we were at sea."

"Oh, yes," said the mate drily; "and you'll always be able to find the brig. She won't stir just yet, and there's no need to lower down an anchor. Very well, then, gentlemen, so be it; and now, if you please, we'll go down and make our way across yonder where those trees are standing, and do our duty by our poor dead friend."

Silence fell upon the group at this, and an hour later the whole of the crew were standing upon an eminence about a couple of miles from the ship, where the earthquake wave had passed on, leaving the beautiful trees and undergrowth uninjured, and save at the edge they had escaped the storm.

Here in the wonderful solitude, where the sun's rays fell in silver rain upon the newly turned black earth, the dead captain was laid to take his long last sleep; and sad, but still lightened in heart, the party returned to the *Planet* to talk over their plans for the morrow, when the first exploration of the unknown land was to commence.

Still weary from the shock and exertions of the past days, bed was sought in pretty good time, and Oliver Lane lay in his berth close to the open cabin window for some time in a half dreamy fashion, inhaling the soft warm air, and fancying now and then that a puff of hot sulphurous steam was wafted in through the window. Then he listened to a dull low singing and murmuring noise, quite plain now in the distance as if steam was rising from the ground. Anon came a loud splashing and wallowing as of some large beast making its way through water, and this was followed by a series of heavy blows apparently struck on the land or liquid sand. Gasping sighs, the smacking of lips, and then again hisses and noises, which made the listener ask himself whether there could be dangerous beasts about, and whether it was wise for the mate to have a couple of stout planks laid from the gangway down to the sand in which the brig was bedded.

But somehow these things ceased to trouble him. The noises were undoubtedly caused by fishes or crocodiles, which would not come on board, and he dropped off to sleep, and then awoke, as if directly, to lie staring at the dim cabin lamp against the roof, and wonder what was the meaning of the heavy feeling of oppression from which he suffered.

"Was it a nightmare?" he asked himself. Certainly there was something upon his chest, and it was moving. He could feel it plainly stirring all over him, and he was about to give himself a violent wrench when something passed between his eyes and the cabin lantern—something so horrible that it froze all his faculties into a state of inaction. For he saw distinctly the glistening of burnished scales, and a serpent's head at the end of an undulating neck, and directly after a forked flickering tongue touched and played about his face.

Chapter Four.

Snakes.

"It's only a dream-nightmare; but how horribly real," said Oliver Lane to himself, as a feeling of resignation came over him, and he lay there waiting for his imagination to be darkened over by a deeper sleep.

For there was an utter cessation of all sense of fear, and in quite a philosophical fashion, he began to think of how clear it all was, and how his mind could occupy mentally the position of a spectator, and look on at the vivid picture in which his body was playing so important a part.

"I know how it is," he thought; "I asked myself this afternoon whether the writhing creatures I saw moving about in the mud were sea-snakes, and directly after I began looking away among the trees, and wondering whether there were any big boas among their branches. One generally can trace one's dreams."

And all the time the weight upon his chest increased, and the pressure grew more suffocating, while the serpent's head played about his lips, touching them from time to time with its moist, cool tongue.

He felt then that, in accordance with all he had read, the monster would now begin to cover him with what the wild beast showman call "its serlimer," and then proceed to swallow him slowly, till he lay like a great knot somewhere down its distended body, while the reptile went to sleep for a month.

"And that wouldn't do for me," thought Oliver, as he felt quite amused at the thought. "I want to be up and doing; so, as all these horrible nightmare dreams come to an end, and as writers say, just at the most intense moment—then I awoke, I think I've had enough of this, and that it's time I did wake up."

At that moment a shudder ran through him, and he turned cold. A deathly dank perspiration broke from every pore, and he lay absolutely paralysed.

He was awake. He knew it well enough now. No nightmare could be so vivid, and in no dream was it possible for him who had it to, as it were, stand aside from the sufferer, as he had imagined. Yes, he was wide awake, and this great reptile had nestled to him for the sake of heat, after being half drowned by the flood. For after undulating its neck for a few moments longer, it lowered its crest, and in place of seizing him with its widely distending jaws, let its head sink down upon his throat and then lay as if enjoying the warmth from his body, and about to settle off to sleep.

What to do?

It was plain enough; so long as he lay perfectly still there was nothing to fear, for the reptile's visit was neither inimical nor in search of food. It had evidently glided up the plank slope and through the gangway to escape from the chilling wet ground, then made its way into the cabin and found the young man's berth pleasantly attractive. But Oliver felt that the slightest movement on his part might incense the creature and rouse within it a feeling that it was being attacked and a desire to crush its aggressor.

He knew well enough how wonderfully rapid the motions of a reptile were, and that in all probability if he stirred he

would the next moment, be wrapped with lightning speed within its folds, and crushed to death.

The muscular strength of these creatures was, he knew, prodigious; even an eel of two or three feet long could twine itself up in a knot that was hard to master, hence a serpent of fifteen or twenty feet in length would, he felt, crush him in an instant.

Oliver Lane lay sick with horror. The weight upon his chest grew unbearable, and the desire to cast it off stronger minute by minute, as he lay motionless, with his oppressor quite invisible now.

Panton was in the berth above him, Drew upon the other side of the cabin, and along the beams there were guns and rifles hanging ready for use, while a faintly heard tread overhead told him that the watch was on the alert. But though help and means of defence were so near and ready, they seemed to be too far-off to avail him much, and hence he still did not stir.

Twenty or thirty feet he felt the creature must be, and of enormous thickness. They could not, then, be upon an isle, he thought, for such a creature must be an inhabitant of the mainland. But what could he do, with the weight increasing now? He could not possibly bear it much longer, for the reptile must be far longer than he had first imagined—forty feet at least.

At last, after vainly hoping that the serpent might grow restless and leave him, he felt that he must make some effort, and determined to call to his comrades for help.

But he hesitated, for what would be the consequences? The monster would be aroused by the noise and the first movement he made; and if it did not attack him, it would seize Drew or Panton, who would wake up in complete ignorance of the danger at hand. They could not use their guns there, in the narrow cabin, and the serpent would be master of the field.

No; he dare not call for them to help him, nor speak till some one came into the cabin, for in all probability Mr Rimmer was on deck and would come down soon.

A hundred wild thoughts flocked through Oliver Lane's brain, as he lay there half-suffocated, and felt how hard it was to have escaped from the terrible dangers of the volcanic eruption to find his end in the embrace of a loathsome serpent.

At last his mind was made up to what seemed to be the only way of escape. He determined to try and collect his energies, and then, after drawing a long deep breath, suddenly heave the monster off him on to the cabin floor. This he knew—if he were successful—would enrage it, but at the same time it might make for the companion-way and escape on to the deck—to attack the watch!

He hesitated at this for a few moments, but self-preservation is the first law of nature, and the watch would hear the alarm and be able to ascend the rigging, out of the creature's reach.

"I must do it," thought Oliver, "before I become too weak, for he's sixty feet long if an inch," and beginning softly to draw in a deep breath, he felt, to his horror, a slight gliding motion on the part of the reptile, as if the heaving up were making it uncomfortable.

Oliver Lane lay motionless again, gathering force for his great effort. His mind was now wonderfully active, and the serpent had grown to fully a hundred feet long. Feeling that it was sheer cowardice to be passive, he was about to make a desperate effort to throw off his incubus, when there was a shout on deck, answered by Mr Rimmer's voice, evidently in a great state of excitement, but what was said could not be made out in the cabin. In fact, Oliver had his own business to mind, for at the first sound from the deck the serpent raised its head, and he could see its tongue quivering and gleaming in the light, and the neck wavering, while the whole of its great length began to glide over him in different directions, as if every fold was in motion.

The noise on deck increased; there was the sound of yells and shouts; then came a crack, as if someone had struck the bulwark a heavy blow, which was followed by the quick trampling of feet and the mate's voice giving directions.

By this time the serpent's head had been lowered, and as the movement of its body increased, Oliver knew that the reptile was gliding down from the berth on to the cabin floor and to endorse this came the feeling of the weight passing off from his chest.

"What is it? What's the matter?" cried Panton, waking up, and, directly after, Drew asked what was "up."

"Don't know," cried Panton. "Where's Lane? Hi! Lane, old chap, wake up! There's something wrong on deck."

He made a movement to swing his legs out on to the floor and Oliver tried hard to utter a word of warning, but he could not. His tongue was tied—the power to speak utterly gone; and he could only lie there, feeling the last folds of the serpent glide out of his berth as his friend lowered his bare feet, and then uttered a yell of horror, and dragged them back again, just as, consequent upon his action, a quick rustling sound was heard.

"What is it?" cried Drew, excitedly.

"Snake—serpent!" groaned Panton. "I put my feet right upon its back."

"Ugh!" grunted Drew, drawing back his own feet as the quick rustling sound went on. "Look! There it goes out of the door. A monster. Where's Lane?"

"Here!" sighed the young man in a voice which he did not know for his own.

"Look out! Big snake!"

"I know it," panted Oliver. "Woke up—on my chest."

"Here, get a gun, someone," cried Panton; "the brute must be in the companion-way in ambush."

But no one stirred.

"I say, Lane, can't you reach a gun without getting out of bed?" said Panton, in a piteous tone of voice. "They're over on your side."

"Yes; as soon as I can get my breath," replied Oliver. "I'm rather giddy and stupid yet."

"I don't know about giddy," grumbled Drew.

"Then you think I am the other thing?" said Oliver, rather huskily. "All right; but if you had had that great brute upon your chest this last hour, you would be stupid."

"Oh, I beg your pardon, old fellow!" cried Drew hastily. "I really didn't know. But, I say, what is going on upon deck?"

The answer came at once from Mr Rimmer, who hurried into the cabin.

"Here, gentlemen, for goodness' sake come on deck!" he cried, as he snatched down a double gun. "We've got a visitor there."

"Yes, I know—a great serpent," said Oliver.

"Eh!—how did you know?" cried the mate, as he examined the piece to see if it was loaded.

"Lane has had it in bed with him."

"What! That's nice! Look sharp, gentlemen; bring your guns and I can promise you some nice shooting, though it's rather dark. The brute has taken possession of the deck, and we've been hitting at it with hand-spikes, but every crack only made him wag his tail and hiss at us. There; hark at them; they must have got him into a corner."

For the shouts and the sound of blows came again, louder than ever.

"There, I'm off; but make haste; and mind how you shoot, for it's rather dark—only starlight."

The young men hurriedly slipped on their trousers, and each took a double gun and proceeded to load.

"Swan shot?" suggested Oliver. "It's a huge brute."

"Never fired at a snake in my life," said Panton; "but I owe this brute something for scaring me. Ready?"

"Yes, ready," was the response; and they all stepped up on deck to go cautiously forward with their pieces at full cock to where the noise and confusion were still going on.

"Hi! Look out!" cried Oliver, as they advanced, and, raising his piece, he fired at something shadowy which he made out by the light of the stars gliding slowly along beneath the bulwarks.

The gun flashed, and the report was followed by a loud hissing, and a violent blow, as if some enormous whip had been lashed at the three, who were thrown to the deck, their legs being swept from under them.

"Hi!—this way," cried the mate from forward. "We've got him here."

They sprang up and hurried forward, Oliver recharging his piece with a fresh cartridge as they went, but only in time to hear another report, for the mate fired, and the men uttered a shout as a more violent scuffling noise arose.

"That's settled him," cried the mate. "Here, get the lanterns down; we'll soon have him out of that. Big one, isn't he?"

This to Oliver, who looked down at the deck to see, heaving and throbbing as if there were plenty of life in it still, about seven or eight feet of the tail part of a great serpent, the rest of the reptile being down in the fore-castle, into which it was making its way when the mate gave it a shot.

"Yes, the brute!" cried Oliver excitedly. "It woke me by crawling into my berth."

"Well, he won't do that again. Smith had a cut at him with an axe, and I a shot. Now, then, lay hold, some of you, and let's haul the beggar out."

The men hesitated, but the mate ejaculated and seized the tail, which immediately twitched and threw him off, making everyone laugh.

"Oh, that's nothing," said the mate, taking a fresh grip. "I know I gave it a death wound. Come along, lay hold, you're not afraid of a snake?"

Two of the men came up rather unwillingly, and, seizing hold together, they gave a sharp drag and drew it out, writhing and twining still, and beating its bleeding head upon the white deck.

"Shall I give it another shot?" cried Oliver excitedly.

"Waste of a good cartridge, sir," said the mate. "It is nearly dead now. Muscular contractions, that's all."

"Ahoy! Hi! Look out!"

"Oh, murder!" shouted someone.

"Why didn't you speak sooner, mate?" cried another from where he lay close up under the bulwarks. For the wounded serpent had suddenly lashed out with its tail, and flogged two of the men over with its violent blows.

"I say, sir," said the first man, "hadn't I better cut his muscular contractions off with a haxe afore he clears the deck?"

"No, no, Smith, don't do that," cried Oliver, "you would spoil its skin."

"Well, sir, but if he don't, he'll spoil our'n," said the sitting man.

"That's a true word, Billy Wriggs," said Smith, in a grumbling tone, as he began to rub himself. "If I'd my way, I'd chuck the beggar overboard."

"What's the good o' that, matey, when there arn't no water? You can't drown sarpents in dry earth."

"Hi! Look out!" shouted the men in a chorus, for the reptile began to beat the deck again, as it twisted and twined and flogged about with its muscular tail, which quivered and waved here and there, sending the men flying. One minute the creature was tied up in a knot, the next gliding here and there, as if seeking a way to escape.

Gun after gun was raised to give it a shot, but its movements were so eccentric, that the best marksman would have found it a difficult task by daylight; there in the shadowy darkness it would have been impossible.

No one present had any hesitation about giving the brute a wide berth, and at the end of a minute or two it uncoiled itself and lay in undulations, showing its length pretty plainly.

"That was its flurry," said the mate, advancing now, and the men came down from the shrouds, the top of the galley, and out of the boats where they had taken refuge; "but perhaps we had better pitch it over the side till morning."

A low murmur arose from the men.

"What's that?" cried the mate sharply. "Are you afraid of the thing?"

"Well, sir, not exactly afraid," said Smith respectfully, "only you see it arn't like handling a rope."

"Yah!"

A tremendous shout or rather yell from away aft, and the sailor who had taken refuge in that direction, now came running forward.

"What's the matter, Wriggs?" cried the mate.

"Seen his ghost, sir," groaned the man, who looked ghastly by the light of the lanterns.

"What?" cried the mate, as the three naturalists headed the shout of laughter which rose from the crew.

"Ah, you may laugh," grumbled the man, wiping the perspiration from his face, "but there it is all twissen up by the wheel and it made a snap at me as I got close up."

"You're a duffer," roared the mate. "Look here, my lads, he has seen the big hawser."

"No, sir," cried Wriggs, striking one hand heavily into the other, as a burst of laughter arose. "I see that there sarpent's sperrit twissen up round the wheel and the binnacle, and if you don't believe me, go and see. Ah! Look out: here it comes."

The man made a dash to get right forward out of the way, but, in his excitement, tripped over the body of the serpent lying gently heaving upon the deck, went headlong, yelling in his fear, and rolled over and over to the side.

But little attention was paid to him, the men thinking of nothing else but retreating, for from out of the gloom aft, and making a strange rustling in its serpentine course, a reptile, largely magnified by dread and the gloom, came gliding towards them with its crest raised about eight inches from the planks.

For a moment or two, as the men hurried away, the little party from the cabin stood staring in wonder.

"Run, gentlemen, run," shouted Smith. "He'll be orfle savage. T'ain't a ghost, it's t'other half. I knowed I cut him in two when I let go with the haxe."

"I know," cried Oliver, excitedly.

"Yes, sir. It's t'other half, sir," yelled Smith, who had swung himself up on one of the stays, where he clung like a monkey. "Shoot, sir, shoot, or it'll grow out a noo head and tail and be worse and more savager than ever."

"Yes," said Oliver to himself, "I'll shoot," and he fired both barrels of his piece as soon as he had a chance.

The effect was instantaneous. One moment the monster was writhing itself into a knot, the next it had rapidly untwined, and was gliding over the bulwarks, the later part rolling over rapidly, like a huge piece of cable, dimly seen, as it was carried down by an anchor.

"That's him," cried Smith; "but you didn't kill him, sir, or he wouldn't have got over the side like that. It was best half on him. My: what a whopper!"

Oliver ran to the side, followed by his friends, but they could see nothing below in the darkness, only hear the rustling noise of the beast writhing farther and farther away, the sound ceasing at the end of a minute, when they turned inboard.

"You didn't kill the other half," said Mr Rimmer, laughing.

"No, I wish I had," cried Oliver. "That was the beast that startled me. These things go in pairs, and the one you killed there was the second one come in search of its mate. Is it dead?" he continued, giving the long lithe body of the reptile upon the deck a thrust with his foot.

The answer came from the serpent itself, for it began to glide along under the bulwarks once more, making now, blindly enough, for the gangway, and as no one seemed disposed to stop it, the creature disappeared through the side and down the sloping planks to the earth.

"Look at that!" said Smith to one of his mates, as he lightly dropped on deck, "young Mr Lane thinks that's another sarpent, but we knows better, eh, lad? I chopped that there beggar clean in half, and one bit went forrard and t'other went aft."

"Yes, that's it," said Billy Wriggs, "and it was the head half as went aft."

"Nay, it was the tail," said Smith. "This here was the head bit."

"Now, what's the good o' bein' so orbstinit, mate," said Wriggs, reproachfully. "Think I don't know? I tell yer it was the head bit as went and twissened itsen round the binnacle and wheel, a-lying in wait for us poor sailors to go there and take our trick, when he meant to gobble us up. Don't matter how long a sarpent is, he can't bite you with his tail end."

"No; but he could sting with it; couldn't he?" said another man.

"Well, yes," said Smith, thoughtfully, "he might do summat o' that sort. If so be as we finds him lying dead. But I doubts it. Them sort o' beasts, mates, is full o' bad habits, and I shouldn't a bit wonder if this here critter crawls right away into the woods and lay hisself neatly together to make a fit, and then waits till it all grows together again, like graftin'."

"Think so, mate?" said Wriggs.

"Ay, that I do. Nat'ral hist'ry's the rummiest thing as I knows on, and that there young Mr Lane, as is a nat'ralist by purfession, knows a wonderful lot about it. Talk about conjuring; why, that's nowhere. I see him one day take a drop out of a bucket o' water on a slip o' glass and sets it on the cabin table."

"Why, you don't live in the cabin," growled one of the men.

"Yes, I do, mate, when he asts me to carry him in a bucket o' water, so now then! Well, matey, he goes then to a little m'ogany box and he takes out a tool like a young spy-glass, and sets the slip under it, and shoves his eye to one end and screws it about a bit, and then he says, says he, 'Now then Smith, would you like a peep into another world?' 'Yes, sir,' I says, 'I should.' 'Then just clap yer hye here,' he says, and I did, and there you could see right into a big sea, with a whacking great brute lying in the bottom, like a sugar hogshead, with a lot o' borcome structures got their heads in, and their long tails all waving about outside. He said it was a fusorior or something o' that kind, and all in that drop o' water, as looked as clear as cryschal when he took it out o' the bucket. Ah, he can show you something, he can."

"I know," said Billy Wriggs, "it was a mykreescope."

"Dessay it was," said Smith. "It might ha' been anything. It's wonderful what there is in nat're, my lads. Pity though as a man's hands and legs and arms don't grow again, as some things does."

"Tchah! They don't," said Billy Wriggs.

"What? Why, they do, lots of 'em. Don't lobsters' claws grow again, and lizards tails, and starfishes arms? What yer got to say to that? Mr Lane tells me that there's some kinds o' worms as when you cuts their heads off they grows again, and their tails too. There we are, though—to-morrow morning."

The man was right, for day was breaking, and, after the manner of the tropics, where there is scarcely any dawn, the sun soon rose to light up the desolation around the ship, where the earthquake wave had swept along, piling up sand and rock with heaps formed of torn-up trees, lying near the pools of water which remained in the depressions of the sand.

"Swabs," cried Mr Rimmer, coming forward, and buckets of water being fetched, the unpleasant stains left by the wounded serpents were soon moved, though the shot marks remained.

While the men were cleansing the deck and removing the traces left by the storm, a little party of three, all well

armed, set off to try and trace the serpents and to get a truthful knowledge of their size, the darkness having given rather an exaggerated idea of their dimensions. In addition, if found dead, it was proposed to skin them for specimens, and to this end Smith accompanied them, declaring his willingness to master his fear of the reptiles and help in any way.

Before leaving the ship they took a good look round, at what promised to be a beautiful resting-place, as soon as the vegetation began to spring again, as it was certain to do in that moist tropical heat. Then taking it for granted that the serpents would make for cover, the steps of the little party were directed towards the nearest trees, a clump upon a broad elevated spot which had escaped the devastations caused by the wave and not many hundred yards from the ship.

"Seems rum, gentlemen," said Smith as they shouldered their guns, and strode off with a wonderful feeling of elasticity and freedom, after their long cooping up on board ship.

"What does?" said Oliver.

"The brig, sir. Ups and downs in life we see. Here was she built ashore, launched and then goes on her voyages, and then all at once she is launched again t'other way on, as you may say, and run up on land to stay till she dies."

"Unless we dig a canal back to the sea and float her, Smith," said Oliver.

"Zackly so, sir, but you'd want ten hundred thousand niggers to do the work."

"And the weekly wages bill would be rather big," said Drew.

"Look out," said Oliver, who was bending down and carefully examining the ground.

"What for?" asked Panton, cocking his piece.

"The serpents. Here is some dried blood."

"And here's a mark, sir," added Smith excitedly. "One of the bits come along here."

"Yes. I can see another mark," cried Panton. "Look." He pointed to what resembled the impression that would have been made by a large yard laid in a patch of half-dried mud in a depression, for either going or coming, a serpent had evidently passed along there.

The trees were close at hand now, and covered a far greater space than they had imagined. The spot was rugged too, with great masses of stone, which showed amongst the trunks and undergrowths, while opposite to them there was a black cavernous rift, as if the rock had been suddenly split open, all of which had been previously hidden by the dense growth.

"This is going to prove a lovely place," said Oliver eagerly.

"Ah! Too late. Did you see it?"

For a bird had suddenly hopped into view over the top of a bush, and, before the young naturalist could bring his gun to bear, darted out of sight among the foliage, giving those who saw it the impression of a vivid flash of fiery scarlet passing rapidly before their eyes.

"You're all right now," said Panton. "There are plenty of birds."

"Yes, and so are you two," replied Oliver. "Look at the rocks and trees."

"Hi! Gents, look out," cried the sailor. "Here we are."

The gun-locks clicked as the man started back after pointing before him at the narrow opening in the rocks, and upon Oliver carefully advancing, there lay just visible some dozen feet within the gloomy rift, about ten or a dozen inches of a serpent's tail, the reptile having taken refuge in the cavernous place.

"Here's one of them evidently," said Oliver, holding his gun ready.

"Yes, sir, tail end of him."

Oliver laughed.

"Have it your own way. But come along, Smith. Here's a chance to distinguish yourself. Step forward and lay hold of the end, and pull the thing out. We'll cover you with our guns."

"You don't mean it, sir, do you?"

"Indeed, but I do."

"Well, sir, begging your pardon, as a man as wants to do his duty, it ar'nt to be done."

"All right, I'm not your captain, but if you will not, I must!"

"No, no, you'd better not," cried Panton.

"Pooh, the brute's dead, or nearly so. Will you go, Drew?"

"What, and pull that thing out of its hole? No. If it was a strange plant."

"Yes, or some wonderful mineral, but a huge snake. Ugh!"

"Hold my gun, Smith," said Oliver. "I mean to have that fellow's skin, but I expect he will be pretty heavy."

He handed his gun to the sailor, and stepped cautiously forward, separating the tangle of creepers, which hung down from above, and clambering over loose fragments of lava-like rock, found that he was at the entrance of what was evidently a rift penetrating far into the bowels of the earth, while a strange feeling of awe came over him, as he now became aware of low hissing and muttering sounds, evidently from somewhere far below.

"Quick's the word!" said the young man to himself, and stepping boldly in he seized hold of the serpent's tail with both hands, and at his touch galvanised it into life, for it gave a violent jerk, which dragged him off his feet. At the same moment, the loose blocks of stone beneath him gave way, and to the horror of his companions, there was a rustling sound as of an avalanche being set in motion, Oliver uttered a loud cry as he disappeared; then came a hollow booming roar, a whispering echo, and all was still.

Chapter Five.

Lane's Escape.

"Lane!" shouted Panton, hurrying forward toward where his friend had disappeared.

"Mind! take care!" yelled Drew. "Here, you Smith, run back to the ship for ropes and help."

"And leave him like that, sir?" cried the sailor. "Not me; I'm a-going after him, that's my job now."

The man stepped quickly forward to where Panton had paused, holding on by a mass of lava, and peering into the huge rift.

"Hold on a moment, sir," cried the man, who had now set aside his dread of the serpents, and placing his hand to his mouth, he sent forth a tremendous "Mr Lane, ahoy!"

His voice echoed right away into the depths, and set some fragments of stone falling with a low whispering sound but there was no reply.

"Mind!" cried Panton, excitedly, and seizing the sailor's arm, he jerked him away so roughly, that the man caught his heel and fell backwards over and over among the stones and creeping growth at the mouth of the rift, while Panton himself beat a rapid retreat.

"I see him," grumbled Smith, "but I warn't going to him now," and he rose to his knees, as the wounded serpent so rudely seized by Oliver Lane glided by him, hissing loudly; "I say, never mind that thing now, gents. Come and help Mr Lane."

A couple of reports came close upon his words, for Drew had fired at the escaping serpent, which now writhed in amongst the bushes, evidently in its death throes.

"Why, here's t'other bit under me," said Smith, as he rose to his feet and looked down at where, half hidden, the other serpent had crawled back to its lair to die. In fact the man had fallen upon it, and its soft body had saved him from a severe contusion.

But somehow the horror of the reptile was gone in one far greater, and, trembling with eager excitement, Smith began to make his way cautiously inward again, stepping carefully on till a stone gave way, and fell rattling down what was evidently a very steep slope.

"I shall have to go down," muttered the man, "I can't leave the poor lad there. Ah, that's right!" he cried as Panton's voice rang out,—"Ropes. Bring ropes."

"Yes, I may as well have a rope round me," muttered Smith. Then loudly, "Mr Lane, ahoy!"

There was no answer, and he called again and again without avail. Then a thought striking him, he got out his matchbox, struck a light, lit several, waited till the splints were well ablaze, and let them fall down burning brightly, but revealing nothing.

"I can't stand this here," he muttered, and feeling his way cautiously, he lowered himself down till he could get good foothold, and was in the act of descending farther, when steps approached, and the mate's voice was heard in company with Panton's.

"Here, one of you, run back for a lantern," cried the mate as he hurried to the mouth of the chasm. "Ahoy there, Mr Lane; Smith!"

"Ahoy it is, sir," came from below.

"Hold hard, my lad, and make this rope fast around you. Know where Mr Lane is?"

The man made no answer for a minute, as he caught and secured the rope about him.

“No, sir, I can’t make out, but I’m a-going to see,” he muttered between his teeth—“I mean feel, for we’re having nothing but darkness this voyage.”

“I’ll send a lantern down after you directly, my lad. Ready?”

“Ay, ay, sir. Lower away.”

“No, better wait for the light. It is like pitch down there.”

“Ay, ’tis, sir, but that poor lad’s waiting for help.”

“Yes, I know, my man, but you must try to see where he is. Hi! anybody coming with that light?”

“Yes, the man’s coming,” cried Drew.

“What’s that?” said the mate, sharply, as he leaned over the yawning hollow, rope in hand; “that peculiar odour?”

“What, that smell, sir?” said Smith. “I dunno, sir, it’s like as if someone had been burning loocifers. Why, of course, I struck some and let ’em fall.”

“Ah, that’s better!” cried the mate, as a lantern was handed to him by Panton; and, passing the free end of the rope through the handle, he ran it along till it was all through, and he could let the light glide down to the sailor.

“That’s all right, sir. Now, then, shall I climb or will you lower me down?”

“Try both, we’ll keep a good hold. Heaven help him, I hope he has not gone far. Take hold here. No, Mr Panton, let the men. They are better used to handling a rope. Now, then lower away.”

Smith began to descend with the lantern, and, as the mate and Panton gazed down, they could dimly make out that below them was a wide jagged crack, descending right away; while in front, a portion of the crack through the stone ran forward at a gradual slope, forming a cavern.

“Keep a sharp look out, my lad. Ah! mind! don’t kick the stones down.”

“Can’t help it, sir. It’s all a big slope here, with the stones waiting to go down with a jump.”

Proof of this came directly, a touch sending pieces bounding and rushing down in a way that must have been fatal to anyone below.

The mate uttered a low ejaculation, and Panton drew in his breath with a peculiar hiss, as they heard the fragments go on bounding and rebounding below in the awful darkness, while the peculiar odour which the mate had noticed came up more strongly now.

“See him?” cried Mr Rimmer.

“No, sir. Lower away.”

“Lower away, my lads. Here, you Tomlin, run back and get a couple more lengths. Quick.”

The man darted off, and his comrades lowered away, while Panton and Drew stood with their heads bent and eyes strained to catch a glimpse of their friend in the dim light cast by the lantern now far below.

“It’s all one slope, sir, right away down,” cried Smith.

“Yes, can you make out the bottom?”

“No, sir. Don’t seem to be none. Lower away.”

“Ahoy. Help!”

The cry was faint, but it sent a thrill through all gathered at the mouth of the chasm.

“Ahoy!” roared Smith, as he violently agitated the rope. “All right, my lad, coming. Aloft there with the line. No, no, no, don’t lower; haul. I’m too low down now.”

The men gave a cheer, and began to haul up till the mate checked them.

“That right?” he cried to the sailor.

“Little higher, sir. Couple o’ fathom. He’s on a bit of a shelf, ’cross a hole, and I shall have to swing to him.”

“That do?” cried the mate in the midst of the breathless excitement.

“Yes, that’s about it, sir. Now, then, make fast. I’m going to swing.”

“Right!”

Then the lantern began to pass to and fro, like a pendulum, and at every thrust given with his feet by the swinging

man, the loose blocks of lava and pumice went rumbling and crashing down, sending up whispering echoes and telling of a depth that was absolutely profound.

"Can you manage?" shouted the mate.

"Yes, sir. That was nearly it," came from below. "This time does it."

They saw the light swing again a couple of hundred feet beneath them. Then it was stationary, and every man's breath came with a catch, for all at once the stones began to glide again; increasing their rush till it grew tremendous, and the watchers felt that all was over, for the light disappeared and the odour that ascended was stifling.

"Haul! Haul!" came from below, sending a spasm of energy through all at the mouth as they pulled in the rope.

"Steady, steady, my lads," cried the mate. "Got him?" he shouted.

"Ay, ay! Haul quick!" came in a stifled voice, and the mate and his companions felt a chill run through them as they grasped the fact that Smith was either exhausted or being overcome by the foul gas set at liberty by the falling stones.

"Haul steady, my lads, and quick," said the mate, as he went down on one knee. "No; walk away with the rope."

His order was obeyed, and the next minute he was reaching down as the dimly seen lantern came nearer and nearer, revealing Smith's ghastly upturned face and the strange-looking figure he held. Then, almost flat upon his chest, the mate made a clutch, which was seconded by Drew, Panton aiding, and Oliver Lane was lifted out of the chasm and borne into the open sunshine, slowly followed by Smith, as the men cheered about the peculiar-looking figure—for clothes, face, hair, Lane was covered with finely-powdered sulphur, in a bed of which he had been lying.

"Better get him back to the brig," said the mate.

"No, no!" cried Oliver, rousing himself. "I shall be better directly; I struck my head against a block of stone, or one of them struck me. It was so sudden. They gave way all at once, and it was hardly a fall, but a slide down. I was stunned though for a few moments."

"A few moments!" cried the mate with a grim laugh. "Why, my lad, we were ever so long before we could make you answer."

Oliver looked at him wonderingly, and then turned and held out his hand to Smith.

"Thank you," he said. "It was very plucky of you to come down and fetch me up."

"Oh, I dunno, sir," said the sailor in a half-abashed way. "Course I come down; anyone on us would. But it ain't a nice place, is it?"

"Nice place!" cried Panton, who was full of eager interest as he examined the fine sulphur clinging to his companion's clothes. "Why it must be one of the old vents of the mountain. You can smell the gases here."

"You could smell 'em there, sir," said Smith gruffly. "'Scaping orful. Thought they'd be too much for me. Felt as if I must let go."

"I'm better now," said Oliver, rising and drawing a long breath. "I say, Mr Rimmer, I'm very sorry to have given you all this trouble."

"Don't say a word about it, sir; but don't go tumbling into any more of these holes."

"Not if I can help it," said Oliver, smiling. "But the serpent—what became of it?"

The mate laughed and shrugged his shoulders.

"We've got them both out here," said Drew.

"Both bits, sir?" asked Smith eagerly.

"Both nonsense, my man: both serpents! There were two. Here they are, pretty well dead now."

Oliver forgot all about the sickening blow he had received, and his narrow escape, in his eagerness to examine the reptiles which had caused so much alarm, and his first steps were to ask the men to put a noose around each, and draw them out into the open.

There was a little hesitation, but the men obeyed, and the two long tapering creatures were soon after lying in the sun.

"Hadn't you better come and lie down for a bit?" said the mate.

"Oh, nonsense!" cried Oliver good-humouredly. "Just for a crack on the head? I'm right enough, and I want to take the measurement of these things before they are skinned."

"As you like," said the mate. "Then we may go back."

"That looks as if I were very ungrateful," cried Oliver, "and I'm not, Mr Rimmer, believe me."

"Believe you? Why, of course I do, my lad," cried the mate, clapping him warmly on the shoulder.

"And you don't want me to lie up for a thing like that, do you?"

"I want you to take care of yourself; that's all, sir. There, don't give us another fright. I daresay you'll find plenty of other dangerous places. But what did you say, Mr Panton—that great hole was a vent of the mountain?"

"Yes, undoubtedly."

"What mountain, sir?"

"The one that was in eruption."

"Yes, but we don't see one!"

"We see its effects," said Panton, "and I daresay we shall see it as soon as that line of vapour begins to clear away."

He pointed to the long misty bank in the distance, which completely shut off the view beyond the stretch of forest to the northward.

"Well then, gentlemen, as I have a great deal to do on board, I suppose I may leave you?"

"Unless you'd like to stop and help skin Lane's snakes?"

"Not I," said the mate merrily. "There, don't get into any more trouble, please."

"We'll try not," said Panton; and after the men had neatly coiled up the lines, they went back with the mate, all but Billy Wriggs, who offered to stop and help skin the snakes.

"You don't mean it, do you, Billy?" whispered Smith. "Thought you was too skeered?"

"So I am, mate; but I want to be long o' you to see their games. It's unnatural like to be doin' dooty aboard a wessel as ain't in the water."

"But you won't touch one of they sarpen's?"

"Well, I don't want to, mate; but it's all in yer day's work, yer know. I thought you said it was only one in two halves?"

"So I did, mate—so I did—and so it ought to ha' been, 'cording to my ideas, and the way I let go at it with a haxe. But there, one never knows, and it was in the dark now, warn't it?"

"Seventeen feet, five inches," said Oliver, just then, as he wound up his measuring tape, "and sixteen feet, four—extreme lengths," as Panton entered the sizes in Oliver's notebook for him.

"Hark at that now!" said Billy Wriggs in a hoarse whisper. "Why, I should ha' said as they was a hundred foot long apiece at least."

"And, arter all, they ain't much bigger than a couple o' worms."

Five minutes later the two men were hard at work skinning the reptiles; the example set by Oliver in handling them shaming both into mastering the repugnance they felt, and first one skin and then the other was stretched over the limb of a tree to dry; while the bodies were dragged to the cavernous chasm, and tossed down "to cook," as Smith put it.

Meanwhile Drew had been busy examining the trees and plants around; and Panton had been fascinated, as it were, by the place, picking up fragments of stone and sulphur-incrusted lava—when he was not listening to a low hissing, gurgling sound, which told plainly enough that volcanic action was still in progress, somewhere in the depths below.

"There!" cried Oliver. "I'm ready. Where next?"

"Are you fit to go on?" asked Drew.

"Fit? Yes. Let's get to a pool and have a wash, and then I'm ready for anything."

"Some water over yonder, sir," said Smith, pointing to where the sun flashed from a spot beyond the trees.

"Then let's get to it," said Oliver. "What do you say to exploring onward toward the mist bank?"

"I say yes, and let's go through it," cried Panton. "I want to look at the mountain. What's the matter, Smith? See anything?"

The man held up his hand.

"Hinjun, sir," he whispered.

"Eh! Where?" cried Drew, cocking his piece.

"Just yonder, sir, past that lot of blocks like an old stone yard; I see one o' their heads peeping over, and they've got

a fire, cooking something, I should say, for—phew! they can't want it to warm themselves, for it's hot enough without."

They looked in the direction pointed out, and there, plainly enough, was the light, fine, corkscrew-like wreath of a pale blue smoke, rising slowly up beyond quite a wilderness of coral rock, swept there by the earthquake wave.

Chapter Six.

Hot Springs.

"Tommy Smith, old matey," whispered Wriggs, "why warn't you and me born different?"

"That 'ere's a question for your godfathers and godmothers, Billy, as stood sponsors for you when you was born. But what d'yer mean?"

"Why, so as to be like these here gents and have plenty o' money to spend in tools o' all kinds."

"Ay, 'twould ha' been nicer, I dessay, matey."

"Course it would. You see they allus has the right tackle for everything, and a proper pocket or case to keep it in. Look at Mr Panton there, with that there young double-barrelled spy-glass of his'n."

"Ay, they've each got one-sidy sort o' little barnacle things as they looks through to make bits o' stone and hinsecks seem big."

"Now, we wants to wash our hands, don't us?"

"Ay, we do, matey," said Smith, raising his to his nose.

"Mine smell a bit snakey and serpentine, I must say."

"Steam or smoke?" said Drew.

"Both, I think," replied Panton, closing his glass.

"Then the savages has got the pot on and it's cooking," whispered Smith. "I hope it don't mean a mate."

"Whatcher talking in that there Irish Paddy way?" grumbled Wriggs. "Can't you say meat?"

"Course I can, old mighty clever, when I wants to. I said mate."

"I know you did, Tommy, and it's Irish when you means cooking meat."

"Which I didn't mean nothing o' the sort, old lad, but mate. I meant, I hoped the savages hadn't got hold of one of our messmates and was cooking he."

"What! Canniballs?" whispered Wriggs, looking aghast. "Why not? There's plenty on 'em out in these 'ere parts, where the missionaries ain't put a stopper on their little games, and made 'em eat short pig i'stead o' long."

"Come, my lads, forward!" said Oliver, who seemed to have quite got over his adventure.

"Beg pardon, sir," said Smith, "we ain't got no weepens 'cept our jack-knives; had we better scummage up to 'em?"

"Skirmish? Oh, no; there is nothing to mind."

"That's what the farmer said to the man about his big dog, sir, but the dog took a bit out of the man's leg."

"But that wasn't a dog, Smith, it was a cat."

"What, out here, sir, 'long o' the savages? Think o' their keeping cats!"

"No, no, you don't understand. There are no savages here."

"Why, a-mussy me, sir, I see one looking over the stones yonder with my own eyes."

"You saw a big, cat-like creature, with its round, dark head. It must have been a panther, or leopard, or something of that kind."

The sailor looked at him and scratched his ear.

"Mean it, sir?" he said.

"Of course I do. Come along."

Oliver went on after his two companions, and the sailors followed.

"How about the canniballs, Tommy?" asked Billy Wriggs with a chuckle.

"Here, don't you spoil your figger-head by making them faces," said Smith, shortly. "I was right enough, so own up like a man."

"You says, says you, that it was canniballs as had got a pot on over a fire, and that they was cooking one of our mates."

"Loin! how I do hate a man as 'zaggerates! I only said I hoped it warn't. It's you as put the pot on."

"I didn't!"

"Yes, you did, old lad, and I dessay I was right arter all, 'cept as it was only one canniball, and he'd got four legs 'stead o' two."

Billy Wriggs chuckled again, and then smelt his hands, looked disgusted, and scooped up a little moist earth to rub them with.

"Look sharp, they're close up," said Smith, "and I want to see about what fire there is, and how it come."

"I know; it's one o' they red hot stones as come down and it's set fire to something."

A minute later they were within fifty yards of the rising vapours, when Wriggs roared,—“Look out!” and began to run.

For there was a peculiar rushing noise close overhead, followed by a duet of hoarse cries, and they had a glimpse of a couple of great, heavily-billed birds, passing close to them in the direction of their leaders.

Oliver took a quick shot at one and missed, the smoke hiding the second bird, and they passed on unharmed.

"Hornbills!" he cried, excitedly. "Come, we shall be able to collect here."

"Hear that, mate?" whispered Smith, "hornbills, and can't they blow 'em too?"

They stepped in among the stones and found the cat-like creature's lair just beneath one of them, and plenty of proofs of how it lived, for close around lay many of the brightly-coloured feathers it had stripped from different birds.

"Evidently preyed upon these," said Oliver, eagerly, picking up some of the feathers to examine.

"Hear that, Tommy?"

"Yes."

"Ain't it gammon?"

"No; nat'ral histry's all true, lad."

"But I never heard o' cats being religious. I've heard o' their being wicked and mischievous enough for anything."

"'Ligious! Why, what have you got hold of now?"

"Nothing. You heard him too. He said as the cat prayed on them feathers."

"Get out. Don't be a hignoramus. Wild cats is beasts o' prey."

"He said beasts as pray, and I don't believe it."

"And I don't believe your head's properly stuffed, mate. Yes, sir," he continued, as Oliver spoke. "You call?"

"I said if you want to wash your snakey hands, here's a good chance."

The sailor stepped down into a hollow, above which a little cloud of vapour hung over a basin of beautifully blue water, enclosed by a fine drab-coloured stone. It was not above a foot deep, save in the centre, where there was a little well-like hole, and a dozen feet across, while at one side it brimmed over and rippled down and away in a tiny stream, overhung by beautifully green ferns and water-plants, which were of the most luxuriant growth.

"Looks good enough for a bath, gentlemen, when you've done," said Smith.

"Try your hands first," said Oliver. "But wait a moment," and he took a little case from his pocket, and from it a glass tube with a mercury bulb.

"Look at that!" whispered Billy Wriggs. "Tools for everything, mate. What's he going to do—taste it first?"

"I dunno," said Smith, watching Oliver Lane attentively, as the young man plunged the mercury bulb in the water, and held it there for a few moments, and then drew it out.

"Go on, my lads," he said. "Like some soap?"

As he spoke he took a small metal box out of his pocket, and opened it to display a neatly fitting cake of soap.

"Look at him," whispered Smith to his companion—"ay, tools for everything. Thank-ye, sir," he added as he took the soap, stepped down close to the edge of the basin, and plunged in his hands, to withdraw them with a shout of excitement.

"What's the matter?" said Drew, laughing.

"It's hot, sir. Water's hot!"

"Well, my lad, it is a hot spring. There's nothing surprising in that. We're in a volcanic land."

"Are we, sir?" said the man, staring at him. "And is this volcanic water?"

"Of course."

"But where does it get hot, sir?"

"Down below."

"What! is there a fire underneath where we are standing?"

"Yes; deep down."

"Then where's the chimney, sir?"

"Out beyond that smoke and steam, I expect. There, wash your hands. It's not hot enough to scald your hard skin."

"No, sir; take a deal hotter water than that; but if you'll excuse me, gents, I'll get away from here, please. It don't feel safe."

"Give me the soap," said Lane, handing his gun to Panton.

"There, Smith, my lad, a man who comes to such a place as this mustn't be frightened at everything fresh he sees."

"Oh, I'm not frightened, sir, not a bit," said the man. "Am I, Billy?"

Wriggs grunted, and this might have meant anything.

"Only you see, sir," continued Smith, "it seems to me as it's a man's dooty to try and take care of hisself."

"Of course," said Oliver Lane, as he laved his hands. "What beautiful soft, silky hot water. We must come here and have a regular bathe. It is nicely shut in."

This to his companions, while Smith stood looking on in horror, and turned to his messmate.

"Look at him, Billy! Ain't it just awful? Come away 'fore we gets let through, and are boiled to rags."

"Hold yer tongue," growled Wriggs. "You'll have the gents hear yer. Ask 'em to let us go back."

"You'll have to analyse this water, Panton," said Lane, as he went on with his washing. "There must be a deal of alkali as well as carbonate of lime in solution."

"Strikes me, mate, as it won't have us in slooshum?" whispered Smith. "Don't ketch me slooshing myself in it."

The water assumed another shade of blue where Oliver Lane was washing, while Panton chipped off the petrification formed round the basin, and Drew examined some peculiar water-plants which grew just where the hot water issued to form the little stream.

"Be a fortune for anyone if he had it upon his own land in England," said Panton. "Can you see where the spring rises?"

"Yes, down here in the middle, there's quite a pipe. This must be similar to what we read about, connected with the geysers?" said Oliver. "Here, you two, don't be so cowardly. Come and wash. Catch!"

He threw the soap to Wriggs, who caught it, let it slip from his fingers, and it went down into the beautiful blue basin of water with a splash.

"There, fetch it out!"

Accustomed to obey, Billy Wriggs stepped forward, plunged in his hands, caught the soap, and kept his fingers beneath the surface. "Why, it's lovely, matey!" he cried reproachfully to Smith. "Here, come on."

"Oh, very well," was the reply, and the sailor approached the basin. "What's good for you's good for me, mate. Who's afraid? Well, I am!"

He was now kneeling, and was in the act of plunging in his hands, when there was a low gurgling noise, and, as if by magic, the water in the basin was sucked rapidly down the round central hole that had been almost invisible, leaving the basin perfectly empty.

"Nearly lost the soap," said Billy Wriggs.

"And I ain't got the wash," cried Smith, in an ill-used tone.

"Beg pardon, sir, what time'll it be high water again?"

Bang! Roosh!

"Murder!" yelled Smith, throwing himself backward and rolling over, for with an explosion like that of steam, the water gushed up from the central hole, playing some twenty feet up in the air, filling the basin and deluging Wriggs before he could escape, and then dragging him back towards the central hole, down which it began to run, while the man roared lustily for help.

Chapter Seven.

A Crocodile.

As soon as he could get upon his feet Smith ran as he supposed for his life, but his messmate's call drew him back and he ran as quickly to his help. Too late though to render any assistance, for Drew, who was nearest, leaned forward and caught Wriggs' hand, stopping his progress toward the centre for the moment, and then his feet glided from beneath him on the smooth, sloping tufa and he too went down, and had to be aided by Oliver and Panton, who drew both out just as Smith reached the edge of the basin.

"Why don't yer mind!" roared the latter, excitedly. "Want to lie down there in the hot water and drowned yerself?"

"No, matey, can't say as I do," growled Wriggs, shaking himself as he edged farther and farther away. "But this here's about the dangerousest place as I was ever in as I knows on. Been dowsed a good many times in my life, but not like this here. Got yourselves very wet, gentlemen?"

"Oh, no, only splashed," said Oliver. "Here, you two had better get back to the brig."

Smith looked at his messmate.

"Feared, mate?" he said.

"Eh?" replied Wriggs, rubbing his ear well. "I dunno 'bout feared now. I'm werry wet."

"Then go back and change your things," said Oliver.

Wriggs scratched his head now and hesitated.

"Beg pardon, sir, I couldn't help letting go, 'cause I thought we was all going to be sucked down that hole, and yer couldn't tell whether yer was coming up again; and though I'm a tidy swimmer, I never tried hot water; but if so be as you don't mind, me and my mate'd rayther go on along with you."

"But you're so wet, my lad."

"Well, sir, that'll only be a job for the sun to dry us, and it's been a good wash for us and our duds too."

"Oh, if you don't mind," said Oliver; "I don't think it will hurt you. What do you say, Wriggs?"

"I didn't say nothing, sir; I was only squeezing the hot water out o' my trowges."

"But do you mind being wet?"

"No, sir. I was born aboard a canal boat, and often tumbled in and had to be fished out by my father with the spitcher. I rayther like it."

"That's right, Billy. You don't want to go back, do you?"

"No, matey, I want to continue on my travels, and see this here cur'us land; only if we air to have another advenster I should like it to be a dry 'un, if it's all the same to the gents."

"Then come along," said Oliver, "you'll soon get dry."

"Oh, yes, sir," said Smith; "but if it's all the same to you, sir, I should like to know how that there thing works."

"Ah! that's more than I can tell you," replied Oliver, looking at the basin, which was once more clear blue, and as smooth as if it had never been disturbed. "It's a geyser, of course."

"Yes, sir," said Smith, as Oliver looked at him as if expecting he would speak; "I thought it was some'at o' that sort."

"And such things are not uncommon in volcanic countries."

"Arn't they though, sir?" said Smith, with a puzzled expression. "But it warn't byling hot."

"Oh, no, not within some seventy degrees."

"Then how come it to byle over, sir? Ain't that rather cur'us?"

"Yes, very curious indeed."

"Yes, sir, and this seems to be a rather cur'us place."

"Yes, Smith, and very grand and wonderful. We have been extremely fortunate to get ashore in such a naturalist's paradise."

"Paradise, sir?" said Smith, with rather a curious look. "Well, sir, I shouldn't have called it that."

"Look here," cried Oliver to his two companions, "shall we wait and see if the geyser plays again?"

"Oh, no," said Drew, "I want to get forward. We shall have plenty more opportunities, and this forest ahead looks grand."

"Yes, come along," cried Panton, rising from chipping a piece of rock. "Look here, this is evidently volcanic and full of iron. The mountain must be tremendous. Do you think it is always shut in by those clouds?"

"No," said Drew; "depend upon it they are caused by the late eruption. That tremendous roar was the end, and I fancy it was caused by the water rushing in from the sea. This is only the steam rising. Here, Lane, you have fallen into the right place and can fill the British Museum if you are industrious."

They were now coming to the end of the barren tract made by the earthquake wave sweeping the rock in places bare, in others covering the surface with *débris* of coral sand, rolled pebble and shell from the sea; but before reaching the band of verdure which stood at the top of a slope, they had to pass two or three depressions in which mud and water still lay, and upon reaching one of these they found to their surprise that it was *far* more extensive than they had anticipated. For there before them stretched acres upon acres of a muddy lagoon, dotted with islands, and evidently alive with fish swept in from the sea.

"Hi! look-ye there, Billy Wriggs!" cried Smith, excitedly. "See that?"

"Course I can, matey; it's water."

"Well, I know that, stoopid, but look what's in it. Over yonder on that bank—there close alongside o' that lump o' white rock."

"What of it?" said Wriggs. "Only a trunk of an old tree."

"Ay, four-legged 'un, with a head and tail, having a nap in the sunshine. Why, it's one o' them eft things as we used to ketch with a worm in the ponds when we was boys."

"Get out! You go and play tricks with some 'un else, matey," said Wriggs, contemptuously. "Think I don't know no better than that?"

"You are a clever one, Billy, and no mistake," growled Smith. "I never did see a chap more ready not to believe the truth. If you hadn't been born a Christian, mate, nobody wouldn't never have converted you, and you'd ha' been a regular heathen savage all your days."

"Go it, matey! Much more on it? Let's have it all while you're about it."

"You shall, Billy, because a good talking to'll do you good, and knock some o' the wanity out of you. You see, you don't know everything."

"And you do, eh, Tommy?"

"Nay, not quite," said Smith, giving his head a roll; "but I do know as that's one o' the same sort o' things as I used to see lying in the mud as I was once going up to Calcutta. That's a halligator, matey, on'y some folks calls the big uns crockydiles, and the niggers out there muggers, 'cause they've got such ugly mugs."

"What! do you mean to tell me as that log o' wood with the rough bark on it's alive?"

"Yes, all alive O!"

"Get out," cried Wriggs, scrutinising the brute searchingly as it lay about fifty yards away. "That there's a trunk of a tree with all the branches rubbed off. Well, I never did!"

For at that moment the reptile crawled a little further from the water, raised its head, and looked to right and left, and then subsided again in the hot sunshine, sinking partially into the mud.

"Rummy sort o' tree that, eh, Billy?" said Smith.

"Sort o' tree!" cried Wriggs, in a tone of thorough disgust. "Why, I call it a himposition. What does a thing mean by going on like that? I could ha' sweered as it warn't alive."

"Hold your row, the gents is a-going to shoot."

They stood watching, for Drew had been busy changing one of the cartridges in his gun for another containing a ball.

"It's of no use to shoot it," said Oliver, "and I don't think you could hit it in a vital place."

"I'm going to try," said Drew quietly, as Panton followed his example.

"Yes," said the latter, "if we are to stay in this island or whatever it is, we can't afford to share the place with a creature like that. These things are very dangerous."

"Hist! Tommy," whispered Wriggs, excitedly, "he can hear what they says, and he don't believe they can hit him and hurt him. Did yer see him smile?"

"Well, I call it a laugh, matey. Yes, they've got a nice open sort o' countenance, them crockydiles. What a time it must take 'em to clean their teeth of a morning!"

"Ay, and to pick 'em after dinner. Would one o' them tackle a man?"

"Yes, or a cow either. They've got a way of—I say, just look at him."

Wriggs was all attention, and the three naturalists as well; for, after opening its mouth and displaying its tremendous gape, the reptile slowly turned round so as to face toward the water from which it had crawled, and then subsided, lying so close and still in the sand and mud that it more than ever resembled the trunk of some old tree.

The position now for a shot was not so satisfactory, as it in all probability meant the disappearance of the reptile at its first plunge; but all the same Drew raised his piece and gave his companions a sharp look, Panton raising his double gun as well for the next shot.

But Oliver held up his hand.

"Don't shoot," he whispered. "I want to watch the brute for a few minutes. Let's see."

He had a reason for speaking; naturalist-like, he never lost an opportunity for observing the habits of the different creatures he came across, and he had noticed a couple of crane-like birds coming stalking along from the far side of the bank on their long stilt-shaped legs. Like everything the wrecked party had encountered, the birds seemed to know no fear of man, acting as if they had never seen such a being before. Hence they were coming straight over to the side opposite to the little party.

Oliver's little double glass was out in a moment, focussed and fixed upon the objects, while, with all a naturalist's love of the beautiful, he feasted upon the bright eyes, drooping crests, and lovely grey and white plumage of the two birds which showed in every way their wonderful adaptability for the life they led.

"Look here," said Panton, "we want to shoot that loathsome reptile."

"And I want to look at the cranes. If you fire you'll scare them."

"Shoot them, then," said Drew.

"No, no, don't, or you'll startle the crocodile. I don't want to shoot them," said Oliver; "I want to study their habits a bit, and they'll go into the water here close to us."

Just then the second crane, which was stalking gravely behind its companion, stopped short, and uttered a warning cry. It was too late. Simultaneously, the crocodile, which had been cunningly watching the bird; made a scythe-like blow with its tail, and swept the foremost, broken and helpless, into the lagoon. Then, springing up as the second bird took flight, the reptile was making a rush for the water, when Drew's gun spoke out, and Panton's followed with such good effect, that the crocodile's progress was checked, and it swung itself round to lie with its tail in the water, thrashing about, and raising a muddy spray, which spread for far enough, spattering upon the water like so much dirty rain.

"Just sarves you right, my smiling beauty," cried Smith, excitedly. "Strikes me you won't break no more birds' legs for some time to come. Hit him again, sir."

Drew's second barrel was fired as he spoke, for the reptile was gradually working round, as if to plunge into the water, but the bullet it now received in the side of the head checked it, and a fourth from Panton made it sink down almost motionless, save that it made a few feeble snaps with its jaws.

"And I'm precious glad on it," said Billy Wriggs, who had taken the most intense interest in the affair. "Like me to walk in and fetch out that there bird, sir?" he continued, pointing to where the crane floated upon the surface of the lagoon.

"I should like the bird," said Oliver, "but I don't think it would be safe for you to wade in, Wriggs. Perhaps it will float ashore."

"I'm so wet, sir, a drop more water won't hurt me."

"I was not thinking about your getting wet," replied Oliver, who was intently watching the bird, which was apparently quite dead, "but of the risk of your encountering another crocodile."

"What, in there, sir—in the water?"

"Yes, I daresay there are several about."

"Oh," said Wriggs, softly, "I didn't think of that," and he stood scratching his head, and wrinkled up his face, as he looked at the prostrate reptile.

"Didn't yer know as they was amphibilious animals, Bill," said Smith, in a low voice.

"What's amphibilious animals?" growled Wriggs.

“Things as gets their living in the waters, and sleeps outside.”

“Oh, that’s it, is it?” said the sailor, thoughtfully. “And what would one o’ they chaps do, if he was to meet my legs? He couldn’t hit out with his tail in the water.”

“No lad, he’d hoperate with his head.”

“Then I don’t think, Tommy, as we’ll come here when we wants a swim, eh?”

“No lad. Strikes me that—I say; look ye there!”

The appeal was needless, for every one was looking toward where the light breeze and the spreading rings caused by the lashing of the crocodile’s tail had carried the dead crane, which Oliver was longing to get as a specimen of bird life unknown, he believed, to science, for all at once, there was a faint, rippling movement visible close to it, then a violent agitation. A long, lithe creature suddenly made a dart partly out of the water, and quick as lightning, they saw its yellowish folds wrapped round the bird, which was directly after borne down out of sight.

“Sea-snake, I think,” said Oliver, eagerly, in answer to his companions’ questioning looks.

“Hear that, Billy?” whispered Smith, giving his friend a nudge.

“Oh, yes, I hear,” growled Wriggs; “says he thinks it’s a snake, but it warn’t. I see it, and it was a heel. Didn’t yer see how it tied itself up in a knot round the long-legged bird? I say, I mean to set a night-line, and ketch that gentleman. Heels is about the best fish to eat as swims.”

“But aren’t you going to wade across and fetch the crocodile over, Billy?”

“No, matey, I aren’t. ‘Cause why? It’s much safer ashore.”

Chapter Eight.

Into the Mist.

The lagoon was skirted, and after rather a toilsome ascent among rocks half smothered in creepers, the edge of the forest was reached, and a halt called under the shade of a great fig-tree, among whose small, ripe fruits a flock of brilliant little scarlet and green lorries were feeding; and here, seated about on the great, projecting roots, the party partook of a delicious meal, feasting their eyes at the same time upon the prospect around. For, from the elevation at which they now were, they were able to look right over the low land that had been swept by the vast wave, to where there was another slight elevation clothed with trees.

As far as they could see, the low ground was spread with scattered blocks of coral and lava, while here and there, little bright patches told of shells that had been ground and polished thin by the action of the waves, and now showed their glistening, pearly material.

Another look to the left across blocks of white coral, and over pools slowly evaporating in the hot sunshine, showed the course the ship had taken from where the sea beat against the reef-girdled shore. It was all plain enough; that was the edge of the land, with a belt of calm, blue water, and beyond that, as far as eye could reach to right and left, a barrier reef of coral, upon which the great billows curved over, flashing in the sun, and crested with their soft, white foam.

“It seems beyond belief,” said Oliver at last. “Who could imagine that our vessel could be borne right inland here and set down upon an even keel almost uninjured?”

“And without the smallest chance of ever sailing the sea again,” said Panton, quietly.

“I say, look here, you two, we’re not going to settle down here like so many Robinson Crusoes, are we!” cried Drew.

“Only just so long, I say, as it will take us to make complete collections of the natural history of the place,” said Oliver, “for I begin to be in hopes that the land is quite new, and that no one has ever set foot upon it before.”

“Then you think it is an island?” said Drew, who was eating with one hand, collecting specimens of plants with the other.

“If he doesn’t, I do,” cried Panton, taking out a little bright steel hammer and beginning to chip at a block of stone held fast by one of the roots of the big tree under whose branches they were seated. “Look at this—slag. I say that we are on a volcanic island, formed by a mountain rising out of the sea and pouring out its streams of lava, and throwing up its blocks and stones and cinders.”

“What about the coral, then? The place is covered with scattered blocks.”

“Oh, those were carried in by the great wave,” continued Panton. “Once an island like this is thrust up from the bottom of the sea, the coral insects soon begin to be busy and build all round it. Look at the reef yonder.”

“Then you think the volcano is in the middle of the island?” said Drew, taking out his pocket lens to examine a tiny blossom.

“That doesn’t follow,” said Panton, oracularly, as he chipped off a fragment of lava, which fresh fracture glistened

brightly. "The mountain may be just at the edge of the island, possibly on a cape. I should say this one is, and cut off from sight by that wall of mist, which seems to be rising from a gulf extending right across. What are you men muttering there about tools?"

"Beg pardon, sir," said Smith, "I only said to my mate as you gents seemed to have tools for everything."

"There," cried Oliver, "time's getting on, and I want to reach that mist, get through, and see what the place is like on the other side. Ready?"

For answer the others sprang up, all being eager to see more of the country upon which they had been so singularly cast, and for the next hour they were fighting their way through the dense forest, every cut and slash they made with their pocket-knives to rid themselves of creeper and thorn, destroying growth which was of intense interest to Drew, while Panton damaged his shins over blocks of stone he longed to chip, while dislodging insects and scaring birds and quadrupeds, of which Oliver got but a glance.

They were constantly stopping to mop their faces, for the heat was tremendous, and their progress very slow, but still they got on, some open patch caused by the falling of a great tree rotted away by age, or strangled by some creeper, giving them light and a breath of the soft sea air overhead.

Everything here was beautifully green and fresh, the eruption having left it unharmed, till, at the end of another tedious hour's work over gradually rising ground full of jagged rifts and tumbled together stones, which told of a convulsion of nature far back in some distant age, when, in place of towering forest trees all must have been absolutely bare and level. Smith, who was in front, cutting and slashing with his jack-knife, uttered a shout.

"Land ho!" he cried, for they were evidently nearly through the sea of verdure, the sky showing beneath the huge branches.

"At last!" cried Oliver, who was panting with the exertion, while his companions' faces were torn and bleeding. "We must get Mr Rimmer to let the men cut a way through here."

"Now then!" shouted Wriggs from somewhere ahead just then. "None o' them tricks. D'yer hear?"

"Come, come, my man," said Drew, sternly, "keep to your work. This is no time for playing."

"All right, sir, but please speak to Tommy Smith. Man don't want big nuts chucked at his head."

"Who's a-chucking nuts?" cried Smith, indignantly, and he began to force his way back into sight of his companions.

"Why, you did, and hit me just now."

"Sweer I didn't!" cried Smith. "Here, hullo! Drop that, will you? Who was that?"

A great nut, half as big as a man's head, had struck the speaker on the shoulder.

"Why, there's someone up in that tree throwing at us!" said Drew.

"Yes, I see him," cried Wriggs, "that big tree, just where it's getting light. Here, I see you: leave off will yer?"

"It's the natives, sir," said Smith, in a warning voice. "Get your guns ready, they'll be shooting pysoned arrows directly."

"I see him plain, now, sir. He's only a little black chap. Yes, there's two on 'em. Well, upon my word, if they aren't two monkeys!"

Another big nut came with a crash through the branches and, before Oliver could check him, Drew raised his gun and sent a shower of shot peppering through the leaves over the heads of the two occupants of the great tree, with the result that two large apes went swinging from bough to bough, chattering indignantly, and disappearing at once.

"You shouldn't have done that," cried Oliver. "I wanted to have a look at the creatures."

"I daresay you'll have plenty more chances, for, if this proves to be an island, they can't get away."

"But the fact of there being large creatures here, proves that it is not an island," said Oliver.

"Not a bit of it," said Panton, oracularly. "There are plenty of islands peopled with animals, because they were occupants of continents now submerged. Look at Trinidad, for instance. That was once the north-east corner of North America, and all her flora and fauna are continental."

"Oh, I say, don't be so horribly scientific," cried Oliver, "let's get out into the open where we can breathe. Look at the butterflies in that sunshiny patch. Really we have dropped into a land of wonders."

"And stinging insects and thorns," said Panton. "I say, what was that rustling away through the leaves?"

"Snake, sir, big 'un. I see his tail wiggle," cried Smith.

"Better be careful," said Oliver, gravely, "there may be poisonous snakes about the edge of the forest. Ha! What a relief!"

For he had suddenly stepped out through a dense curtain of a creeping plant into the bright sunshine, to find that for

some distance in front the earth was clothed with a low, bush-like growth; then there was a broad, blackish grey stretch of land, and again beyond that the veil of vapour rising right across their way to right and left.

The little party stood out for a few minutes looking round, with the portion of the island or peninsula they had left cut off now by the forest which rose right behind them like a huge green ridge of verdure. Then, full of excitement, they began to advance through the low bushes toward the long line of white vapour slowly curling like a bank of clouds, for the one desire now among all was to stand face to face with the mountain which had partially burned up the face of the beautiful tropic land.

It soon became evident that they were traversing a stretch of newly springing up trees, for everything was of a young and tender green, but after a time there was a parched, dried-up aspect; then they came upon withered patches, and by degrees the vivid green gave place to a dull parched-up drab and grey, every leaf and blade of grass being burned up or scorched by heat and some destructive gas.

They hurried across this desolate band, for the wall of mist was but a short distance in advance, and a curious feeling of eagerness attacked the party, even to the two sailors. For beyond that curtain was evidently the centre of the mysterious volcanic force which had been answerable for their presence there, and doubtless upon passing through the vapour behind which it was hid, they would be able to grasp their fate; whether a certain amount of journeying would bring them to the habitations of men, or show them that they were shut up in some unknown isle.

"Come along," said Drew, "and let's know the worst."

"The worst!" cried Oliver. "You mean the best?"

"Well, we might be worse off," said Panton, laughing; "but be careful, all of you. This steam, or whatever it is, may be rising from some great gulf, and mists are rather confusing. Shall I lead?"

"By all means," said the others, and he stepped out for a few yards, and then, to the surprise of Oliver, who was next, it was as if they had entered the mist unconsciously, though it was thin to a degree, and the only effect was to make Panton look magnified, so that twenty yards farther on he had grown as it were into a giant.

Oliver looked back and saw that those who followed had the same aspect.

"Don't see any rift or chasm," said Panton; "but come cautiously, for the ground feels soft and spongy."

His voice sounded distant and strange to Oliver, who said loudly,—

"Is it bog, or are we getting on volcanic soil? I say, take care, the ground's quite hot here." For he was conscious now of a peculiar reeking as of steam, but his voice sounded as if it had been thrown back in his face, and, growing slightly uneasy, he turned round and called to those behind him,—*"Take care how you come."*

He stopped short, for there was no one in sight, and, turning sharply, the dim, giant-like figure which had represented Panton was invisible.

"Hi! Panton, where are you?" he cried, in doubt now whether he had turned completely round, and in his excitement he made a fresh step or two, then, feeling that he might have gone wrong, he tried to return, but only to become confused as he was conscious of the heat growing stifling, of a strange ringing in his ears, and either of a peculiar dimness of vision or the sudden thickening of the mist.

Then, with his heart beating heavily, he tried to raise his voice as he shouted with all his might,—

"Panton!—Drew! Where are you?"

There was a low hissing sound apparently rising from somewhere by his feet, otherwise all was silent as the grave.

Chapter Nine.

Beyond the Curtain.

Oliver Lane's sensations were for the moment horrible. He knew now that the steamy vapour into which they had penetrated must be full of gas perilous to human life—that the emanations from the volcanic soil were asphyxiating, and he completely lost his head, and tottered feebly here and there.

But in a few moments this passed off, for he made a desperate effort to command himself, knowing full well that if he did not act his case was hopeless. His only chance was, he knew, to rush out through the mist into pure air. But which way? He had lost all idea of the direction by which he had come; he dare not stoop down, and try to trace his foot-prints, because of the vapour being certainly more dense and dangerous closer to the surface, and all that was feasible was to make a rush, chancing whether it was forward into greater danger, to right or left, hoping only that his instinct would lead him back by the way he came.

Strong now in his intention, he drew a hot stifling breath, set his teeth and ran for a few yards; then staggered a few more, growing blind, and feeling that his senses were fast leaving him. Then his brain throbbed, a peculiar trembling weakness came over him, and, almost unconsciously, he tottered along a few steps more, reeled, and fell heavily upon the ground.

His senses did not quite leave him, for he knew that he was trying to crawl through what seemed to him to be

something like soft liquid opal, with its wonderfully bright tints before his eyes, bluish, golden, creamy, fiery, and pale, then there was a darkening around them as if he were crawling into shadow; and again, directly after, as it appeared, he could see a bright glow, toward which he involuntarily struggled, for it was an instinctive effort now to preserve his life. And as he crawled onward, the glow grew brighter, he could breathe more freely, and the light gradually assumed the hue of bright sunshine, where he fell passive beneath the dense foliage of a huge tree.

Everything was very dreamy now for a time. His head throbbed and felt confused, and a sickly, deathly sensation made his brain reel. By degrees this passed away, and he lay gazing at the strange opalescent something through which he felt that he had passed, and by degrees he realised that he was watching the great curtain of mist made glorious by the sunshine, and easily understood now why, in his strange semi-insensibility, this had seemed to be a liquid through which he had crawled while breathing the strange mephitic air.

"Then I did go in the right direction," was his next thought, as he still lay feeble and languid, and as if regaining his senses after taking some powerful opiate.

He felt a kind of satisfaction at this, and luxuriously drew in great draughts of soft warm air. For it was a delight to breathe freely, and lie there without making any exertion. The trees were so green and bright, and the flowers of such delicious tints, especially those he could see climbing up and up, and spreading their wealth of blossoms in one spot, till that was one lovely sheet of colour.

"It doesn't matter."

These words pretty well expressed Oliver Lane's thoughts for some time before he attempted to move. The past, save and except the dim memory of his having been in some trouble in a mist and losing his way, had no existence for him, and the young man lay there in a state of the most intense egotism, utterly prostrate, but supremely content.

Then all at once there was a change.

He felt a sensation of discomfort, and his hand began to stray about him, and he found that his double-barrelled gun, slung by a strap across his shoulders, was beneath his back, and the lock was pressing against his ribs.

He changed his position so as to lay the gun beside him, and the movement shot an acute pain through his head.

It did more; it sent a pang of mental agony through his brain; and he scrambled up to his knees, to bend down, pressing his hands to the sides of his head as if to keep it from splitting apart as he recalled all now, and stared wildly about him in search of his companions.

The sensation of selfish enjoyment had all passed away, and he was in full possession of his faculties.

He had found his way back, then, out of the mist, but where were they?

No; he was wrong; he had not found his way back as he fancied at first, for where they entered the land around was burned up and bare; here everything was glorious with tropic growth; there were lovely butterflies, inches across the wing, and metallic in tint; brightly plumaged birds, too, were darting past his eyes. He must have passed right through the mist to the farther side and reached the place they sought.

He involuntarily turned, and there, about a couple of miles away apparently, and rising far up in the clear blue sky, with a huge ball-like cloud suspended above the conical top, was the great volcano, bare, stern, and repellent, without a scrap of verdure to relieve the eye. It stood up tremendous in height, and in his rapid glance Oliver Lane could see how all round had been blackened, or charred into a greyish ash-colour, save in two places, where broad blackish bands reached from a chasm near the top of the crater, right down the sides, till they were hidden by the tall trees still standing, and apparently spreading from the gentle eminence upon which he knelt for about a mile.

Where, then, were his friends, he asked himself, and recovering his feet now, he had to seize the nearest bough and hold on, for a sudden giddiness assailed him, and he nearly fell. But this passed off in a few moments, and he stood looking round to see if they too had passed through.

But as far as he could see, he was alone in an open jungly spot, teeming with all that was bright and beautiful in nature, and shut off from his companions by the curtain of mist they had set out to pierce.

He hailed and hailed again as loudly as he could, and a faint cry answered him, but a few repetitions made him aware of the fact that it was only his own voice, echoed back from the mountain-side, and a strange sense of loneliness and despair attacked him now.

For as he recalled his own adventure, it was evident to him that he had had a very narrow escape from suffocation, the mist being evidently a volcanic exhalation, rising from the earth in a long low portion extending for miles in a curve, perhaps being the extent to which the mountain had reached in some far-off time; in fact, there might have been an old crater here only a little raised above the sea.

But he shook off the despondency, and fought back the idea that his companions might have been overcome by the escaping gases, and forced himself to believe that if they were not somewhere on his side hidden from him by the trees, they had safely made their way back to the side from which they had started.

He knew he had no grounds for all this, as they must necessarily have been as much confused and overcome as he, but he came to the conclusion which he wished to be true, and after mounting to the highest bit of ground in his immediate neighbourhood, he hailed again and again, listening patiently in the intervals for some reply.

There was a musical piping whistle twice, and once he was aware of a curious grunting sound from some trees away to his right, and this was repeated on his hailing again. Then all was silent once more, and he stood, now looking round, now watching the line of mist from which he hoped to see his companions emerge.

There were moments when he felt convinced that they had reached the same side as he, and he set to work hurrying here and there as fast as the tangled growth of the pathless forest would allow, hailing from time to time, but all in vain, and at last, dripping with perspiration, panting and exhausted, he leaned against a tree.

He had something else to combat now besides weariness, a terrible feeling of depression, for the thought would keep on coming with constant recurrence that his friends had perished in the mist.

He mastered this thought as the feeling of exhaustion passed away, and was ready to laugh at the sense of dread caused by his loneliness. For, as he told himself, it was probably all imagination respecting his friends, and there was nothing to mind. He was only separated from the vessel by a comparatively short distance, and sooner or later an effort would be made to reach him. It might not be possible to pass through the foul gases, but surely the long line of mist could be circumvented; and he climbed to the highest point he could then find to try and see its ends.

There was nothing to fear, for he had his gun, plenty of ammunition, and a little provision left. The place was wonderfully beautiful, and offered a tempting number of objects to a naturalist, as soon as he could make himself sufficiently calm to begin to investigate.

And it was in the above spirit, feeling quite certain that sooner or later he would see a party coming in search of him, he began to examine, turning his attention first towards the huge volcano, which rose up grim and forbidding away to the north, with the globular cloud poised over its highest part, which seemed as if cut right across in a slope.

Once he could turn his thoughts from the idea of peril, he began to be interested and eager; for he was in the position so dear to a lover of nature, there in a land surrounded by bird and insect forms for the most part entirely fresh to him.

But there were other things to think of first. Principally, there was that important discovery to make whether they were surrounded by the sea, and to try and find this out he sought a higher point than any he had yet mounted, and, taking out his little glass, followed the face of the mist till it reached the glittering waters of the sea, and then tried to trace the coastline towards the volcano.

This he was able to do with pretty good success, but as his glass was directed to the lower and eastern slope of the mountain, he found that he was as wise as ever, for the base of the mighty cone completely shut off all view in that direction.

Turning to the mist again, he followed its edge to the west as far as he could reach, but the inequalities in the surface balked him here, and he could not make out the sea in that direction.

He closed his little glass and turned to the mist curtain, that mysterious dim line glistening with opalescent colours, and determined as a last resource to walk quietly as close to it as he could, before the gases began to affect him, then to draw back a few yards, take a few deep inspirations, so as to fully inflate his lungs, and then rush straight through; for he argued to himself, if he could pass through once unprepared and taken by surprise, he could certainly reverse the action.

In this spirit, and so as to get a little encouragement and inspiriting for another task—in other words, so as to enjoy the feeling that a way of retreat was open to him—he walked back toward the depression along which the vapour rose, examining every step of the way, and noticing that by degrees all growth ceased as he approached, and that the ground gradually grew softer and then spongy to the tread, as if he were walking over a bog.

The air remained very clear and good to breathe as he went on nearer and nearer, seeing now that the fumes rose softly all along one jagged line such as might have been formed by the earth opening right before him. But there was no opening. As far as he could penetrate the dim mist, the earth looked perfectly level, but the vapour rose from it as it does or appears to do from a swampy meadow on a fine autumn evening; and it was evident to him that he might try and dash through without fear of running headlong into some chasm.

Just then, as he stood gazing down at the bottom of the curtain, the idea struck him that perhaps there had been a wide rift right across to right and left; that it had been filled up by volcanic matter, and the vapour was caused by this lava or hot liquid mud slowly cooling down.

Convinced that this must be so, he had full endorsement of the correctness of his theory, for on lifting one foot to go on, he found that the other was sinking slowly, and a little further investigation showed him that a faint thread of vapour was rising from the spot where his heel had been.

The meaning of this barren space, and the reason for the earth feeling spongy, was plain enough now, and he knew that he was walking over so much half-fluid volcanic pitch, whose surface was slightly hardened and formed the elastic springy band.

If it gave way!

The thought was enough to make the stoutest shudder, and feeling now that his safety lay in movement, he took a few more steps towards the vapour, finding himself, before he was aware of the fact, and without the slightest mistiness being visible, within its influence.

He started away in alarm, for he was suffering from a slight attack of vertigo, which did not pass off for a minute or

two, and he walked, or rather staggered, back, with the tough elastic film over which he walked now rising and falling with an undulatory motion beneath his feet.

“Only as a last resource,” he muttered, as he breathed freely once more; and he could not repress a shudder as he stepped once more on solid ground, plainly enough marked by the abounding growth, and grasping fully how horrible a quagmire of hot slime was hidden by the partially hardened crust over which he had passed.

Turning his face now toward the mountain, he hesitated for a few moments, and then determined, as the distance seemed so short, to try and do something now he was there; and in the intent of climbing a few hundred feet up its side so as to get a view beyond, he marked out what seemed to be the most open way, and started for the foot of the great slope.

Chapter Ten.

A Night in the Forest.

It required no little steady determination to attack that ascent. Oliver’s nerves had been terribly shaken by that which he had gone through. The heat was intense beneath the trees, where hardly a breath of air reached him, and it was impossible to keep off the sense of loneliness and awe brought on by the knowledge that he was in the home of Nature’s most terrible forces, and that the huge mountain in front, now looking so calm and majestic, might at any moment begin to belch forth showers of white-hot stones and glowing scoria, as it poured rivers of liquid lava down its sides. At any moment too he knew that he might step into some bottomless rift, or be overcome by gases, without calculating such minor chances as losing his way in the pathless wilderness through which he was struggling, or coming in contact with some dangerous beast.

But he set his teeth and toiled on, dragging thorny creepers aside, climbing over half-rotten tree-trunks, whose mouldering bark gave way, and set at liberty myriads of virulent ants. Once or twice he grasped leaves which were worse than the home-growing nettle. But he struggled on, though, with the feeling growing stronger, that if he got through the patch of forest before dark, it would be as much as he could manage, for the difficulties increased at every step.

Suddenly he stopped short, and caught at the nearest tree-trunk to save himself from falling, for the giddiness returned, and he stood panting, trying to master the horrible sensation by drawing a deeper breath. Then he clung more tightly to the tree, and knew what this sense of vertigo meant; for it was no vapour that had overcome him, but the sensation of the earth heaving beneath his feet, with a strange quivering, as if some vast force were passing, and a dull muttering, as of subterranean thunder, made the tree quiver in his grasp.

A few seconds later, as he waited for a repetition of the earth-tremor, knowing now full well that he had for the first time experienced a couple of earthquake shocks, there came from away in front a deep heavy boom, following a strange rushing sound, evidently from the summit of the volcano—the huge safety-valve from which the pent-up forces of the earth escaped to the open air.

Oliver struggled forward a few yards into a clearer spot, where he could just catch a glimpse of the crater of the mountain, and, as he had expected, there was the great globe-like cloud riven into rags of vapour, while dark-looking bodies were falling in various directions about the summit.

As he gazed, the rain of falling fragments ceased, and the torn-up flecks of cloud seemed to be drawn slowly together again by the currents of air on high, first one and then another coalescing, as the tiny globules of spilt mercury glide one into another, till all are taken up. And it was so here, the mysterious attraction blended the flying vapours into one great whole, which floated above the mouth of the burning mountain.

“And I might have been somewhere on the slope, when that burst of stones was falling,” thought Oliver. “Still, I might climb up a hundred times, and no eruption occur. I’m getting cowardly, instead of being accustomed to the place.”

He smiled to himself as he marked the top of the mountain, and aimed as straight as he could for its side, before plunging again into the bewildering maze of trees, whose wide-spreading foliage made all beneath a subdued shade.

But a dozen steps had not been taken before he stopped short, with his heart beating, and listened eagerly, for a distant shout had fallen upon his ear, coming as he felt sure from behind him, and to the right.

Then there was utter silence for a few seconds, before a second shout arose, to be heard plainly enough, but away to his left.

His heart sank again, and the hope died out. That was no cry uttered by one of his companions, but came from a savage, or some wild beast, which he could not say, but he suspected that it must be from one of the apes of which they had seen specimens that morning.

There it was again, rather a human cry, such as a boy might give vent to in a wood, when calling to his fellows, and a few moments afterwards the sound was repeated.

Whatever animals they were who called, they were answering each other, and certainly coming nearer.

The remembrance of the strange-looking face he had seen peering through the leaves directly after the great nut had struck Wriggs, came back to Oliver as he resumed his arduous journey, now finding the way easier where the bigger trees grew, now more toilsome where there was an opening caused by the fall of some forest monarch, which had rent a passage for the sunshine, with the consequence that a dense mass of lower growth had sprung up.

In these openings, in spite of heat and weariness, the young naturalist forgot all his troubles for a few brief moments in his wonder and delight, till the knowledge that he must push on roused him once more to action. For there before him were in all their beauty the various objects which he had come thousands of miles to seek. Beetles with wing cases as of burnished metal crawled over leaves and clung to stems; grotesque locust-like creatures sprang through the air, through which darted birds which in their full vigour and perfect plumage looked a hundred times more beautiful than the dried specimens to which he was accustomed in museums and private collections. Here from a dry twig darted a kingfisher of dazzling blue, not upon a fish, but upon a beetle, which it bore off in triumph. Away overhead, with a roar like a distant train, sped a couple of rhinoceros hornbills, to be succeeded by a flash of noisy, harsh-shrieking paroquets, all gorgeous in green, yellow, crimson and blue, ready to look wonderingly at the intruder upon their domain, and then begin busily climbing and swinging among the twigs of a bough, whose hidden fruit they hunted out from among the leaves.

One tree close at hand was draped with a creeper of convolvulus-like growth, hanging its trumpet-shaped flowers in every direction, ready for a number of glittering gem-like birds to hover before them, and probe the nectaries for honey or tiny insects, with their long curved bills. So rapid in their movements were some of these, that their insect-like buzzing flight was almost invisible to the watcher, till they hovered before a blossom in the full sunshine, when their burnished, metallic plumage, shot with purple, crimson, and gold, flashed in the sun's rays, and literally dazzled the eye.

Oliver was in the home of the sun-birds, the brilliant little creatures which answer in the old world to the humming-birds of the new, with their crests and gorgets of vivid scales.

"It's grand, it's wonderful," he muttered, with a sigh. "But I must get on."

He forced his way through these openings, with the birds so tame that he could easily have knocked them down with a stick, or caught them with a butterfly-net. But leaving his collecting for a future time, he pressed on, satisfied with the knowledge that he was in the midst of nature's wonders, for the farther he progressed the more was he impressed with the conviction that he and his companions had happened upon a place which exceeded the most vivid paintings of his imagination, so rich did it reveal itself in all they desired.

The progress he made was slower and slower, for he was nearly at the end of his forces, and the matted-together tangle seemed in his weakness to grow more dense. Where there was opening enough overhead he could see that the sun was sinking rapidly, and he knew that it would be dark almost directly it had disappeared.

"It is hopeless," he said to himself; "I shall never get out to-night;" and with the idea forced upon him that he must be on the look-out for a resting-place, or an opening where he could light a fire, and, if possible, at the foot of some tree, in whose branches he could make himself a shelter, he still toiled on.

This proved to be a less difficult task, for before long, as he crept beneath the tangle of a climbing cane-like palm, he saw that it was more light ahead, and in a few minutes he reached one of the natural clearings, close to a huge short-trunked, many-branched fig. There was dead wood in plenty, shelter, and fruit of two kinds close at hand, while, greatest treasure of all, a tiny thread of water trickled among some ancient, mossy fragments of volcanic rock, filling a little basin-like pool with ample for his needs. To this he at once bowed his head and drank with avidity, sublimely unconscious of the fact that a tiny, slight, necklace-like snake was gliding over the moistened rock just overhead, and that a pair of bright gem eyes were watching his every motion from the great fig-tree, where its branches rose in a cluster from the trunk.

"Hah!" sighed Oliver, as he rose from his long deep drink. "What a paradise, but how awfully lonely!"

He noted then that the top of the mountain was in view, but apparently no nearer; and setting to work he soon collected enough wood for a fire, and lit it as a protection, before gathering some of the little figs and some golden yellow fruits from a kind of passion-flower, both proving agreeable to the palate. These supplemented by the food he had in a satchel, formed a respectable meal, which he ended as the last light died out; while before him as he sat by his fire there was a great glowing ball of light high up, one which resolved itself into the cloud, evidently lit up by the glowing lava within the crater.

"A nice companion for a traveller," said Oliver, half aloud. "Now, then, for my cool lofty bedroom in the tree-fork. I wonder whether I shall sleep?"

His inner consciousness said immediately "No;" for as he made his way in among the buttress-like roots of the tree to try and climb up, there came from within a few feet of his face a deep-toned snarling roar.

Chapter Eleven.

A Fight with Fate.

"Aren't had a drop, sir. Swear I aren't," cried Smith.

"Silence man, silence," said Panton, as he sat upon the burnt-up earth, holding his head with both hands, while Wriggs staggered about close at hand, laughing idiotically.

"But I can't, sir," cried Smith, in a whimpering tone. "If I'd been ashore somewhere and met mates, and we'd been standing treat to one another, I wouldn't keer, but I'm sober as a hundred judges, that I am."

"Will you be silent, man? I want to think," said Panton, as he rocked himself to and fro.

"Yes, sir, d'reckly, sir, but don't you go thinking that of a man. I know I can't stand straight, for all the bones has gone out of my legs, and soon as I move I go wobble-wobble like cold glue."

"Yes, yes, I know, I'm unsteady, too," said Panton impatiently.

"But is it fits, sir? And do they take you like that?"

"No, no, my man, I suppose it's the gas."

"Gas, sir," cried Smith, looking round stupidly. "What's it been escaping again? Gammon, sir: they aren't got no gas out here. I say, Billy Wriggs, don't make a hexhibition of yourself. Keep quiet, will yer?"

"I can't, mate. It's a rum 'un, it is. What have the guvnors been givin' of us to drink?"

"I d'know, Billy. But do stand still."

"I can't, mate, my legs will keep going and gettin' tangle up like one along o' the other, and knocking themselves together."

"Then lie down afore I hits yer."

"You won't hit me, Tommy," said the man, with a silly laugh.

"Tell yer I shall. You aggravate me so, doing that there."

"Will you two men leave off talking?" cried Panton, angrily. "I can't think. Your words buzz in my brains like a swarm of bees. Ah, I have it now. Where is Mr Lane?"

"Mr Lane, sir?" said Smith, feebly, as he looked round, and then with his eyes staring and blank, he began to feel in his pockets.

"Yes, yes, man. Where is he?"

"I d'know sir. I aren't seen him. Where's Mr Lane, Billy? You got him?"

Wriggs chuckled as if he had been asked the most ridiculously comic question he had ever heard.

"I d'know, matey," he said. "It's o' no use to ask me."

Smith lurched at him with his fists clenched, as if about to strike, but the intention was stronger than the power, and resulted in the sailor blundering up against his mate, and both going down together, and then sitting up and staring at each other in a puzzled way as if they found it impossible to comprehend their position.

At that moment Drew came staggering toward them out of the mist with his gun over his shoulder and his head down as he gazed at the ground, looking as if at any moment he would fall.

"Ah!" cried Panton, excitedly. "I had quite forgotten you, Drew."

"Eh?" said the botanist, stopping short. "Someone call?"

"Yes; I—Panton. Come here."

"He's got it, too, Billy," said Smith. "I say, what's the matter with all on us? Was it that water we drunk?"

"No, I aren't drunk!" cried Wriggs, suddenly dropping his good-tempered idiotic manner. "If you says I'm drunk, Tommy Smith, I shall hit yer. Smell that!"

He placed a big tarry fist close under his messmate's nose, and then, as if amused thereat, he began to laugh again.

"I never said such a word, Billy," said Smith, taking the big fist, opening it out again, and clapping his hand into it loudly before pumping it affectionately up and down. "I said it was the wa— *tlat tlat tlat*—Oh, I say, matey, I am thirsty."

"Eh?" said Drew, dreamingly, in answer to a question. "Where's Lane? Yes, where's Lane?"

"Ah!" cried Panton, starting up now, and looking wildly round. "Yes, I understand, I think. It was the gas—the volcanic gas in that mist. For heaven's sake rouse yourself, Drew. Lane's in there still, and we must fetch him out. Here, all of you come and help."

He made for the pale, misty curtain before them, but only tottered a few steps, and then fell heavily upon his face with a groan.

"He's deal worse than us is," said Smith, who was now beginning to think more clearly. "Billy, old man, it was that water we drank, and the natives have been pysoning it to kill the fishes, and killed us instead."

"Eh! What!"

"Native savages been trying to pyson the fishes, and pysoned us instead, matey. I said it afore, Billy Wriggs—I says it again, and I'll go on saying on it for a week if that'll do you any good."

"I'm all right, matey. I'm all right, Tommy. But what do the native savages want to pyson the fishes for? Never did the savages any harm."

"Billy Wriggs, you'd better get a noo head, mate, and send this one to be cleaned."

"Ay! You're right, mate, for this here one won't go at all. Feels as if some'un had been sifting sea-sand into the works. But what had the fishes done?"

"Nothing. Pyson 'em to float atop, and ketch 'em to eat. Now come and help sooperior officers as have tumbled down all of a heap."

As he spoke, Smith rose from the ground to which he had fallen, and reeled toward Panton and Drew, slowly, and as if he could only see them dimly at a distance, while Wriggs followed his example, and came on in a zigzag, idiotic way.

Suddenly Smith stood up erect, and uttered a hoarse cry, as he stared wildly at his companions.

"Here!" he yelled. "Help! I know now. Mr Lane. He went in there with us, and he aren't been out. Come on!"

His strength and honest manly feeling had come back with the flash of light which had illumined his brain, and rushing straight for the mist, they saw him begin to grow bigger as if looked at through a magnifying glass, increasing in size till he was monstrous, indistinct and blurred, and then completely disappear.

The man's cry and subsequent action roused them, and all staggered after him with their power of thinking clearly returning, and with it a feeling of horror as they grasped the fact that two of their party were now lost in the strange belt of vapour, whose fumes had so strangely overcome them.

"We must help them," cried Panton wildly. "Come on: follow me."

He started for the mist before them, but before he could reach it, Smith staggered and reeled out, striking against him, and then catching his breath as if he had been held under water, or as a man rises to the surface after being nearly drowned.

"Stop!" he panted, with his eyes seeming to start out of his head. "You can't go. A man can't breathe in there. I'll try again, d'reckly, gentlemen, but—but! oh, the poor, brave, handsome lad! I—I—"

The big, strong, rough fellow's voice became indistinct, and the sobs rose to his throat, nearly choking him in the weakness he vainly strove to hide.

"Come, come," said Panton hoarsely, as he supported the man, Drew trying hard the while to shake off the effects of the vapour and be of some service.

"He liked him, gents," growled Wriggs, an the strange intoxication seemed now to have passed off.

"Yes," cried Smith, hysterically. "Course I did, gentlemen, and I'm going in again to try and fetch the poor lad out. But," he continued feebly, "you can't breathe in there, and it takes hold on yer somehow and sucks the strength out of yer. It's like when poor Joe Noble went down in the hold among the foul air, and it killed him right off at wunst."

"There, hold up," said Panton, firmly now. "I'll go this time."

"Yes, sir, and we'll go together and take hold of hands," cried Smith.

"Ay, all on us," growled Wriggs, "and take hold o' hands and fetch him out afore we've done."

Drew said nothing, but as Wriggs caught hold of Smith's hand, he seized Panton's, and, moved as if by one mind, they stepped quickly forward, feeling at the end of a dozen paces that there was a difference in the air they breathed, which grew thicker as their sight became less clear and their motions more heavy.

But hand clenched hand with more convulsive violence, and in step they kept on till first one and then another reeled and staggered, and it was only by turning suddenly round and stumbling back over their track that they were able to reach the free fresh air before, to a man, they staggered and fell to the ground.

Panton was the first to speak.

"I'd try again," he groaned, "but I have not the strength."

"Ay, and I'd go, sir, but it's as I said!" cried Smith piteously. "Think he can be alive yet?"

"Heaven only knows," sighed Panton, as he tried to sit up, but sank back again, while Drew turned his face toward them and gazed at his companions with a strangely vacant expression that in its helplessness was pitiful to see.

"Tommy!" gasped Wriggs suddenly, as he lay flat on his face, "hit me, will yer, matey—hit me hard. That there feeling's come all over me again, and I don't know what I'm a doing, or what I'm a saying. It's just as if I'd been struck silly and my legs had run away."

"Try—try again, Smith," groaned Panton. "Give me your hand. I think I am stronger now."

"Not you, sir," replied the sailor. "Here, hi! Billy Wriggs, whatcher doing on?"

For the man had slowly raised himself upon his feet again, and was tottering toward the mist.

"I'm a-going, matey, to fetch that there young natooralist out o' yonder if I dies for it: that's what I'm a-going to do."

He spoke in a low muttering growl, and the man's looks and actions as he reeled and groped his way along were those of one stupefied by some strong narcotic.

"But yer can't do it, lad," cried Smith, rising to his knees. "Come back."

"I'm a-going to fetch out that there young natooralist," muttered Wriggs, as he staggered on.

"But I tell yer yer can't," shouted Smith.

"Quick, let's try again," said Panton, struggling to his feet once more, and now with Smith also erect and grasping his hand, they two came on in Wriggs' track, just as Drew rolled over quite insensible.

They did not advance a dozen paces, for Wriggs, who had tottered on strong in his determination to do that which his nature forbade, gave a sudden lurch and fell heavily, head in advance, and the others knew that he must be within the influence of the mephitic vapour.

It was hard work to think this, for, as Smith afterwards said, it was like using your brain through so much solid wood; but in a blind helpless fashion they tottered on, and, bending down, each caught one of the man's ankles, and dragged him back by their weight more than by any mechanical action of their own, each movement being a kind of fall forward and the natural recovery. The result was that step by step Wriggs was dragged from where the vapour was inhaled till Drew was reached, and they sank upon the bare burnt earth again, bewildered, and lacking the power to think, as if the mists had gathered thickly in their brains, and they could do nothing else but lie and wait for the return of strength.

Chapter Twelve.

The Help that Came.

Hours passed, during which the little party lay utterly exhausted and overcome, sunk in a deep sleep, which partook more of the nature of a swoon. They were only a few yards away from the mist, and in such a position that, had a breeze arisen to waft it toward them, the probabilities were that they would never have awakened more.

It was Panton who first slowly opened his eyes to look round and gaze wonderingly at his companions, then at the golden mist, whose deeper folds were orange and warm soft red.

For it was evening, and as he turned toward the sinking sun it was some minutes before it occurred to him that it would be tropic night almost directly after, and that his companions should be roused. At the same moment came the recollection of why they were there, but without the strange confusion from which he had before suffered, the long sleep having carried it off.

The others started into wakefulness at a touch, and stood staring at him helplessly.

"Are you ready to try again?" he said in a low voice full of emotion.

"Yes," came spoken simultaneously.

"Then come on, we must find him now."

He took a step or two forward, and the others followed, but a moment later Smith seized him by the arm.

"No, sir," he cried. "It won't do, and I should be no man if I let you go."

"Loose my arm!" cried Panton, angrily. "Recollect, sir, who you are!"

"I do, sir," said the man stoutly; "but you're not my officer, only a passenger; and if our poor old captain was alive, or if Mr Rimmer was here, he'd say I was quite right."

"What do you mean, sir?" cried Panton, whom the exposure to the mephitic gases had left irritable and strange.

"I mean, sir, as it's my dooty to stop you from going to sartain death, and you may say what you like, and call me what you like, but me and my mate, Billy Wriggs, is going to stop you, so there."

"Such insolence!" cried Panton angrily.

"All right, sir. You're going to do as I do, aren't you, Billy?"

"Course I am, Tommy. And you give in, sir. He's got a horful long head has Tommy Smith, and what he says is right; we aren't going to let you go."

"Cowards!" cried Panton angrily.

"That's right, sir, you just go on like that a bit, and call us names. It'll ease your mind ever so. We don't mind, do we, Billy?"

"Not us," growled Wriggs. "He's right, sir. Give it to us."

"Brutes!" cried Panton, as the darkness began to approach with wonderful speed. "Here, Drew, we must go together. We cannot desert our comrade at a time like this."

"No," said Drew, "it would be the act of cowards if we could do anything; but the men are right. You cannot go."

"What? You side with them? Cowards! Yes, worse. How could we ever face his friends unless we had striven to the last?"

"We have striven to the last, man. Look! In a few minutes it will be black night, and to attempt to plunge into that horrible vapour would be madness, weakened and overwrought as we are."

"I thought so," cried Panton. "The poor fellow has but one who will make a fight for him."

"Stop!" cried Drew, clinging to his arm.

"Let go!"

"I say you shall not."

"Let go, or take the consequences," cried Panton furiously, and he raised his gun as if to strike at his companion with the butt.

"Here, Smith, Wriggs, help me, he is half mad. He must not, he shall not go alone!"

"Then come with me, cowards!" cried Panton.

"No, sir, we aren't a coming to see you die," said Smith quickly, as he seized the hand which held the gun. "Now, Billy, ketch hold behind."

The struggle began, but it was a vain one. No one present was gifted with much strength; but it was three to one, and as the darkness fell the four shadowy forms looked dim and strange, writhing here and there, Panton striving hard to free himself from the restraining hands as he made a brave fight, but gradually growing weaker till, all at once, Wriggs, who had retained his position behind during the struggle, suddenly clasped his hands round the poor fellow's waist, and lifted him right from the ground.

"That's got him," he growled. "Now, Tommy, you get hold on his legs, and we'll lie him down."

"Right!" cried Smith, and in this ignoble way Panton would the next minute have been thrown down, had not a shout suddenly come out of the gloom behind them.

The effect was magical.

Smith let go of Panton's legs, and Wriggs unclasped his hands to place them to his mouth and give forth a tremendous yell.

"Ahoy! Ship ahoy!" he cried.

"Ahoy!" came from very near at hand, followed by a couple more distant calls, and another so faint as hardly to be heard.

"Ahoy! Here away!" shouted Smith, and the next minute there were footsteps, and a familiar voice said,— "Where are you?"

"Here!" cried Drew eagerly.

"Thank goodness!" cried Mr Rimmer. "Found you at last. I was afraid something had happened to you, gentlemen. Ahoy!"

His shout, intended to rally his followers, was echoed four times, and as soon as he had replied he turned to the breathless party.

"Hallo, gentlemen, been running?" he cried. "I didn't like to leave you longer for fear anything might have gone wrong, so I came on with half a dozen men. How plaguey dark. Hallo! Where's Mr Lane?"

There was an ominous silence and Mr Rimmer repeated his question.

"Don't say anything has happened to the lad," he cried.

Then Drew spoke and told him all.

"What, and you stand there like that without making another try!" said Mr Rimmer fiercely.

"There! You hear?" cried Panton. "I'll go with you, Mr Rimmer. The poor fellow must be saved."

"By acts, Mr Panton, not by talking," said the mate, sternly. "This way, my lads," he cried, as first one and then another of the *Planet's* crew hurried to his side. "Here's fresh work for you, I've found some of the party, but young Mr Oliver Lane's missing. Volunteers to find him?"

"All on us, sir," came eagerly.

"That's right," said the mate. "Now, then, which way did he go in?"

"Mr Rimmer, you don't know the danger!" cried Drew.

"No, sir, nor don't want to till after the job. Now, then, point out the nearest spot as far as you can recollect."

"I think I can guide you," said Panton.

"Hold hard, please, sir, just a moment," cried Smith. "You don't know what it is, sir, as you're going to do."

"Silence, sir! who spoke to you?" snapped the mate. "Wait till your advice is asked."

"Tommy Smith's quite right, sir," growled Wriggs.

"Silence, sir."

"Right, sir, but I stands by my mate," growled Wriggs.

"Now, then, Mr Panton, I am waiting. Quick!"

"I cannot let you go into that terrible danger without making another protest," cried Drew. "Mr Rimmer, we have done everything that man could do in the way of trying to save the poor lad's life."

"Possibly, Mr Drew, but I have not done all I mean to do. Now, then, Mr Panton, forward."

The gentleman addressed stepped forward at once, and with the mate and the six men who had accompanied him close behind entered the curtain of mist, invisible now save as increasing the darkness and shutting out the sparkling stars.

"No, no, don't you go, Smith," cried Drew just then, as the sailor made a movement to follow the others.

"But he'll think I'm scared, sir, if I don't go," cried Smith.

"Ay, I am coming, too, Tommy."

"No; it is utter madness," cried Drew. "Stand here both of you, ready to help them when they come out."

"Mean it, sir?" cried Smith.

"Yes, of course, man."

"Hear that, Billy. Well, the mate didn't tell us to come arter him, and they're safe to come back."

"Ay, they air—if they can," said Wriggs gruffly.

"Ah, if they can, mate. That's a true word," cried Smith, "Hi! Look out. They've had enough of it a'ready."

For at that moment one of the sailors ran staggering back through the darkness and fell heavily.

"Help, someone, help!" came in the mate's voice, and by a tremendous effort he too staggered out, half bearing, half supporting Panton, and both falling heavily before they could be supported.

"Hi! All of you this way!" roared Smith, but his words were evidently not heard. However, they were unnecessary, for first two together and then three, the party of sailors tottered out overcome by the fumes, only one of them being sufficiently master of himself to sit down and hold his head; the others fell prone on the dry burnt ground.

"They'll believe us now," said Smith with a dry laugh.

"Man, man, don't talk. Try and help them," cried Drew. "Hah, look here."

"Can't, sir! too dark."

"Feel those men whether they have water-bottles with them; Mr Rimmer here has."

"Right, sir. Here's one."

"Give them water, then," cried Drew, setting the example and pouring some of the cool fluid between the lips of first Panton, and then of the mate. But it was some minutes before it had the slightest effect, and there was a time when it seemed as if a fresh calamity was to be added to their other trouble.

But first one and then another began to mutter incoherently before sinking into a heavy sleep, the mate, who was the most vigorous man present, having the hardest fight of all, and when he did cease babbling as he lay there in the darkness there was a coldness of hand and weakness of pulse that was startling.

Then came a weary time of waiting in the darkness beneath the glittering stars till all at once Smith suggested that he should light a fire.

"We don't want it to warm ourselves, sir," he said, "but it'll make the place more cheery like and keep off the wild

beasties if there are any about.”

“Where are you going to get your wood from, matey?” growled Wriggs.

“Ah, I never thought o’ that, mate. There aren’t none about here, that’s certain.”

“And you don’t want none,” cried Wriggs, for suddenly the mist was lit up by a bright glare of light and above it the globular-looking cloud became illuminated as if from some burst of light below. “That’s good enough to see by, aren’t it?”

Drew rose to his feet to stand gazing wildly at the bright illumination which showed plainly enough the overcome men lying in uneasy attitudes as they had fallen.

The two sailors sprang to their feet, for there was a quivering motion of the earth, whose surface heaved as does a cloth held at the corners and shaken. The next moment there was a tearing, splitting sound running apparently toward them, and by the reflected light, there, plainly enough, a rift could be seen opening slowly, more and more widely, and evidently going straight for where Panton lay.

“Earthquake!” shouted Drew. “Quick! help!!” But the two men stood shivering and helpless as if unable to stir, and the fate now of the young geologist and the mate seemed to be sealed.

Chapter Thirteen.

Billy Wriggs’ Baccy-Box.

It was dull, heavy, slow-going Billy Wriggs who saved their lives. One moment he stood scratching his head, the next he had made a rush like a bull, thrown himself down on his side, and somehow managing to get a good grip of the mate’s waistband, had swung him over towards Smith.

“Run him farder away,” cried Wriggs, and he shuffled himself then to Panton just as the rift opened widely.

There was a quick rustling sound, and a dull thud as Panton was gripped hard—flesh as well as clothes, and swung over the sailor into comparative safety.

But it was at the man’s own expense, for he began to glide downward in a slow, gradual way, first his legs, then his body, till only his chest was visible as he dug his fingers into the ground and tried to hold on.

At such a time it might have been expected that the man would shriek out in agony and despair, slowly subsiding as he was into a rift which promised a death so horrible, that those who looked on were paralysed for the moment beyond affording help; but Billy Wriggs’ words did not indicate suffering or terror, only a good-hearted friendly remembrance of his messmate, for he shouted out as if by way of farewell,—

“Tommy, old mate, I leave yer my brass baccy-box.”

The words galvanised Smith into action. He had seized and dragged Panton away in time, but as he saw his companion sinking into the crack which grew slowly longer and wider, he stood with his eyes staring and jaw dropped till the words “baccy-box” reached his ears. Then he made a rush to where Wriggs’ head and shoulders only remained above ground, stooped quickly, and seized him by his thin garment, and held on, checking further descent and gazing wildly at his messmate, whose rugged features upturned to the red glow of light appeared to be singularly calm and placid.

“Steady, mate,” he said mildly. “Don’t tear my shirt.”

“Won’t !!” cried Smith, savagely. “Where’s that their box?”

“Breeches’ pocket, mate.”

“That’s you all over,” snarled Smith, as his hands got a better grip, first one and then the other, and his voice sounded like an angry growl between his set teeth. “Promise—a chap—a box—and then—going to take it with yer. Yer would, would yer? But yer just won’t.”

“Let me take my skin, then,” cried Wriggs. “Don’t tear it all off,” as he winced beneath the savage grip which checked his descent.

“Nay I weant, mate,” growled Smith. “I wants it, too, and hold tight, Billy, the deck’s giving way. Heave ho!”

Smith threw himself backward as he made a tremendous heave, and none too soon, for a great patch of the earth at the side gave way where he stood. But he had thrown all a strong man’s force into one mighty effort, and as Drew stood trembling and helpless, he saw the two men clasped in each other’s arms, rolling over and over into safety, just as a horrible fume rose from the rift which now ran on in a zigzag split, like a flash of lightning in shape, and as rapid. Then followed a sharp report as of subterranean thunder and the earth closed again.

“Would yer bite—would yer bite!” grumbled Wriggs, as he stared at the earth.

“Well, of all the onsartain dangerous places as ever I was in,” said Smith, in a low growl, “this here’s about the worst.”

"Ay, 'tis mate," said Wriggs. "Sea's safest arter all. I say, though," he continued as he softly rubbed himself about the ribs, "might ha' took hold of a fellow a bit easier, Tommy. You've made me feel all loose."

"Sarve yer right, chucking yerself down like that. Why, if it hadn't been for me, you'd ha' been nipped fast there. Now, then, where's that there 'bacco-box? Hand over."

"Nay, I said I'd leave it to yer, mate. I was making o' my will. Going to use it a bit longer, mate, but I'll give yer a quid."

"What an escape, my lads," panted Drew, who now came up and shook hands with them both warmly.

"Well, it weer pretty close, sir," said Wriggs, as he went on gently rubbing his sides. "But I'm beginning to think as Tommy Smith had better ha' left me alone. His fingers is as hard as a brass statoo's. But there, mate, I forgives yer. How's the gents, sir?"

Drew shook his head, and after the mate and Panton had been carried some little distance from where the earth had split open and re-closed, the party seated themselves in a despondent state to watch the golden cloud which hung high in air, like a huge ball of liquid fire, and lit up the place while they waited for morn.

Panton and Mr Rimmer both seemed to be sleeping heavily, and one of the sailors remained similarly affected, but their state did not appear now to be so alarming after the past experience, and Drew contented himself with satisfying himself from time to time that they were breathing comfortably, while he waited and thought sadly about their young companion.

"If I could only feel satisfied that we had done everything possible to save him," he said to himself, for his conscience reproached him for idling there when he might have perhaps schemed some way of dragging him out from the mist.

Just about the time when his spirits were at the lowest ebb he became conscious of the fact that the two sailors, Smith and Wriggs, were engaged in an argument with one of the rescue party, and he listened to what was said.

"Look-ye here," growled Smith, "what's the good o' you talking that way? You see how it was; yer couldn't hardly breathe, and what yer could breathe warn't fresh hair, but a rum sort o' stuff as comes out o' the earth and knocks yer over 'fore you knows where you are. I never felt nowt like it, did you, Billy?"

"No; and never wants to smell it again. Yer didn't feel it, yer smelt it, lads, and then you was nowheres. Say, Tommy."

"What is it?"

"Wonder what it's like down below, inside like. You hauled me out 'fore I'd half a chance to find out."

"Why didn't yer say yer wanted to see? Then I'd ha' let yer go."

"Nay, you wouldn't, Tommy," said Wriggs, with a chuckle. "Be too warm, wouldn't it?"

"But what I was saying, mates, was as I don't think we tried hard enough to find Mr Lane. We ought to have done something."

"Ay; but how are you going to do it?" said Wriggs, shortly, just as the man's words had gone like a pang through Drew's breast, making him feel that even the men were judging him adversely. "That's the worst o' you clever ones: you says, says you, 'We ought to do some'at,' but you don't say what."

"That's a true word, Billy Wriggs," cried Smith, clapping his messmate on the shoulder, "they don't say what. Why, 'fore you chaps come, Mr Panton and Mr Drew—"

"And Tommy Smith," growled Wriggs.

"Well, I did try a bit, mate, and so did you, till we couldn't do no more. I don't believe a hangel could ha' done more than Billy did."

"Oh, I say, mate," grumbled Wriggs, modestly.

"I says it again, 'could ha' done more than Billy did.' But it's like this here, mates, the onpossible's just a bit too hard for a man to do, and whether he likes it or whether he don't, he's got to put up with it, and that's what clever people calls flossify."

"And quite rightly, my man," said Drew, coming close up. "Smith and Wriggs behaved like brave, true men, my lads."

"Easy, sir, please. We only tried same as you did."

"You think, then, that we tried everything that was possible to save my friend?"

"Think, sir? Why, Billy and me's sure on it, eh, Billy?"

"Sartain."

"Hah!" ejaculated Drew, "you have done me good, my lads, for my heart felt very sore and my conscience reproached me cruelly for not doing more."

"It's all right, sir," cried Smith, cheerily. "You wait till the morning comes, and then we shall see a way o' sarcumventing this gas, as you calls it, and I daresay we shall find Mr Lane somewhere all right on t'other side."

"If I could only feel that, I could rest till morning," said Drew.

"Then just you feel it, sir," said Smith. "It's what I feels strong."

"So do I, sir, now," put in Wriggs. "If Tommy Smith mays so, it's all right."

Drew tried to think that it was, but the pleasant, hopeful sensation would not come, and he sat now with the men, now beside the mate and his friend Panton, waiting for the morning, the first hints of its approach being in the gradual paling of the golden light from the cloud over the volcano, and the appearance of the softer, more natural glow, that came in the east, bringing with it a more diffused light, and the hope that rides in with the dazzling rays of a new day.

Chapter Fourteen.

Cheap Lodgings and Cats.

Oliver Lane's double gun gave forth two sharp clicks as his thumb pressed back the cocks, and then, raising it to his shoulder, he waited, with his eyes searching among the thick leaves of the fig-tree, and trying to penetrate the orchids which clustered where the trunk forked and sent forth a dozen or so of minor boughs.

But the snarling sound had ceased, and there was not the slightest rustle among the leaves to indicate the spot where the animal was hidden. But in imagination he could see some big, lithe, cat-like creature crouching there in the tree-fork, ready to spring, its head looking flattened with the ears drawn down, teeth gleaming in a fierce snarl, eyes flashing with green phosphorescent-like light, and sharp claws alternately protruded and withdrawn.

All this was pictured by his active brain, but there was nothing visible save a gleam here and there, where the light from a fire-fly shone faintly from some leaf.

A minute passed, all eager watchfulness, and at the slightest rustle indicating action on the part of the animal Lane would have drawn trigger. But all remained still, and the young man asked himself what he had better do.

There were other trees about, but not one which offered such a satisfactory lodging, so easy to reach.

"One oughtn't to mind a cat on the premises," he laughingly said to himself at last. "It would keep away nuisances, but this is too much of a cat, and wants to have all the bed to itself."

He hesitated about firing into the tree to scare the beast, partly from the idea that it might irritate it into springing and taking him at a disadvantage, for as he stood there the light was behind him, so that he must be plain to his invisible enemy; then, in the smoke, he would be unable to make out his foe, and there would be no chance or time to take aim with the second barrel, and he knew what the result would be—the brute seizing him with teeth and claws, holding on fast while it tore him with its hind legs, as a cat does a rat.

"A miserable end at the beginning of one's life," thought Lane. "Discretion's the better part of valour," he muttered. "I'll go back and find another tree."

He stood for a few minutes longer, in the utter silence, listening for some movement from his enemy, but there was none. Then he began to hope that it had stolen away, and he moved slightly—drawing back to go in search of fresh lodgings. But at the first step there was a savage growl, such as might have been uttered by a magnified cat, and his fingers moved to press the trigger, as he stood firm, with the butt of the piece pressed to his shoulder, and his cheek against the stock.

The snarling ceased and all was dead silence again, while, oddly enough, the old story of the Irish soldier came to Lane's mind:

"Please, sor, I've caught a Tartar prisoner."

"Bring him along, then."

"Please, sor, he won't come."

"Then come without him."

"Please, sor, he won't let me."

For, in spite of his excitement and its accompanying alarm, Lane could not help smiling at his predicament. He knew that if he beat a retreat the beast would spring at him, and taking into consideration the fact that he would be better off if he took the offensive and advanced, he at once acted upon the latter course.

Taking a step forward, there was another savage snarl, and he aimed, as nearly as he could guess, at the spot whence it came, and waited, but the animal did not spring.

He moved forward again and there was another snarl—a pause—a slight movement—another snarl and a scratching noise, which meant the tearing at the bark of the trunk upon which the animal crouched.

"I must fire," thought Lane, and bending forward again, the snarling was resumed and he drew trigger.

Almost simultaneously with the shot there was a fierce yell, and the young man received a tremendous blow in the chest, which knocked him backwards right amongst the thick growth; then came a loud rustling, the sound of the animal dashing through the tangle of undergrowth, and then all was still.

"Killed, or escaped wounded?" muttered: Lane, as he gathered himself up, and stood with his gun ready to deliver the contents of the second barrel. But at the end of ten minutes or so there was no sound to break the silence, save a peculiar rending, tearing noise at a distance, followed by a rumbling boom, as of thunder under ground, and a sensation as of the earth quivering beneath his feet.

This passed away, and feeling safe for the moment, Lane opened the breech of his piece, threw away the empty cartridge, and replaced it with one containing heavy shot before stepping up to the tree, and climbing up the trunk easily enough by the help of the cable-like parasite which enlaced its great buttresses.

He had not far to mount, for the main trunk ended about twelve feet from the ground, and after a little feeling about amongst the dense orchid growth, he soon found a position where he could sit astride, and support his back in a comfortable half-reclining posture, perfectly safe from all risk of falling, so that there was every prospect of a good night's rest.

"I hope they will not fidget about me very much," he said to himself, as he thought of his companions. Then, utterly tired out, and with his perceptions somewhat blunted by fatigue, he gave his friends the credit of thinking that he would be able to take care of himself, and leaned back.

"Jolly," he muttered. "Cheap, comfortable lodgings if it don't rain, and the leopard, or whatever it was, does not come back to turn out this trespasser. Hah! how restful and nice. Can't fall: but I'm not going to cuddle this gun all night."

He began to feel about for a place where he could lay the gun down safely, and at the end of a minute his hand touched something warm and furry, which began to stir about and utter a whining, mewling noise.

He snatched away his hand in dread, then extended it again to begin feeling his discovery.

"Pups!" he exclaimed. "Kittens I mean! Two of them; fine fat ones, too. They're harmless enough if their mother does not come back," and going on patting and feeling the little animals, he fully realised now the reason for their mother's ferocity, though he felt that it might have been their father.

"No," he said, half aloud, "it must have been the mother, for she would make her nursery somewhere in hiding, for fear that papa should want to play Saturn, and eat his children up."

The cubs whined softly a little, and nestled their soft heads against his hand. Then they sank down in the nest-like hollow of a decayed limb of the tree and went to sleep, while Oliver Lane found a tough vine-like stem behind which he was able to tuck his piece safely. And a few moments after, regardless of volcanoes, earthquakes, tidal waves, foul gases, and ferocious beasts, the young naturalist went off fast asleep, and did not stir till he heard, mingled with his dreams, the shrill shrieking of a flock of paroquets, which were climbing about among the smaller branches of the tree high overhead, and feasting upon the fast ripening figs.

Chapter Fifteen.

Plutonic Action.

It took Oliver Lane some time to pass from a sound sleep gradually through half-waking dreams to the full knowledge of his position, and then, albeit somewhat cramped and stiff, feeling rested and bright, he lay back listening to the calls and answers of the birds, and watching them with a true naturalist's intense delight. For there he was in the very position he had longed to reach, right amongst nature's gems in their own abode, full of life and vigour. He had seen these birds before, but as attractively-plumaged dry specimens. Here they were hanging, crawling, and climbing about, busy, with every feather in motion, their eyes bright, and beaks and claws all abloom with colour. Now their feathers were tightly pressed to their softly-curved bodies, now standing almost on end, giving the birds a round, plump aspect that was delightful when the sun gleamed through, and flashed from the golden green, bright scarlet, or vivid blue, with which they had been painted by nature's loving hand. Others were entirely of a beautiful green, all save their heads, which glowed with a peach bloom, while, again, others bore the same leafy uniform, and, for decoration, a dark collar, and long, pencil-like-produced feathers in their tails.

There was the gun close at hand. Lane had but to take it from beneath the creeper which held it fast; but, at this time, it never occurred to him that he might secure two or three splendid specimens for the collection he sought to make, so occupied was he by the action of the flock in the tree.

It was all delightful to him to watch the soft, easy, deliberate way in which the paroquets climbed with beak and claw, hooking on with the former, and then raising one foot with its soft, clasping, yoke-toes to take a firm hold before bringing up the other; then, holding on by both, and swinging gently to and fro, the beak was set at liberty, and the bird hung head downwards, to feast upon some luscious fig.

"If they only had a sweet note, instead of their harsh scream," thought Lane, "what lovely creatures they would be."

He sat there watching them for about an hour, but far from satiated, for there was always something fresh to see, and the birds were so tame, that he often had them within a few feet of his head, some soft, round-headed creature turning itself on one side to gaze at him with its keen eye as if in wonder, before going on with its feeding, satisfied

that it would not be hurt.

Then the delightful scene came to an end with the climbing birds and the foliage lit up by the horizontal rays of the sun, for, all at once, there was a deafening explosion, and, shrieking loudly, the flock took flight, while Lane sat there appalled, listening in expectation of another report, the former having evidently come from the mountain; but, as he listened, there was in place of the explosion, a loud hissing, and then a loud, heavy pattering, accompanied and followed by thud after thud, and he knew, though he could not see for the dense foliage, that a volley of heavy stones and masses of pumice had been fired into the air, to fall from various heights back to earth on the mountain slopes.

"Ah, I must go and see that," he said to himself, as he seized his gun. "Not my department, but none the less interesting. I wish Panton was here."

A soft, whining noise took his attention then, and, glancing beside him, he saw that the cubs which had been his companions all night were straining about, climbing over each other, and falling back, evidently wanting their morning meal.

"And I suppose I have killed their mother," thought Lane, as he bent over and patted the two furry animals. "Poor little things! I must come back and get them, and take them with me to the ship, if I can cross the belt of mist. First of all, though, the mountain—I must go up that as far as I can climb."

So, descending and shouldering his piece, he strode to where the ashes of his fire lay and then brought his gun down to the present, for there was a quick, rustling sound to his left, and he caught a glimpse of glossy, spotted fur, as an animal passed amongst the dense undergrowth. Then, before he had time to fire, had he felt so disposed, a huge, lithe, cat-like creature bounded on to the trunk of the tree he had just left, uttering a strange, purring cry, and disappeared in the orchids which clustered about the fork.

"Then I did not shoot the mother," thought Lane. "So much the better."

Then, as all was still and no danger to be apprehended there, he shouldered his gun and strode off towards the more open ground, which he reached at last, forgetful of everything but the intense desire to try and ascend the cone-shaped mountain which stood before him, capped with a dense pall of smoke and steam.

After tramping about an hour, the sight of trickling water down amongst some stones suggested to him the fact that he had not broken his fast that morning, so sitting down upon a block of stone, he brought out the remains left in his wallet and ate them, stale as they were, as he looked round him, finding that he had climbed to higher ground than he expected; but though he looked eagerly toward the part where the ship must have lain in the middle of the wave-swept plain, everything was cut off by a dull, misty appearance. Not the clearly marked band of sunny haze he had seen from low down on the level therewith, but a foggy, indistinct state of the atmosphere.

Away to his right, he feasted his eyes upon the enormous mass of stone and ash which towered up in a beautifully regular curve, with apparently nothing to hinder him from walking up the steep slope to the crater, into which he felt an uncontrollable desire to gaze.

"I ought to get up to the top in two or three hours," he thought, as he mentally mapped out his course, seeing nothing likely to hinder him but rough blocks of stone dotted about in all directions. Nothing in themselves, but ominous of aspect when he took into consideration the fact that they must have been hurled upward from the mountain, and fallen back on the slope in all probability white-hot.

"One will have warning," he thought, "and there may be no more fall to-day."

Finishing his last mouthful, he took out an india-rubber cup, and stooping down, filled it from the trickling course, raised it to his lips, and then spurted out a mouthful in disgust, for it was hot, bitter, salt, and had a most objectionable odour.

"Ugh!" he ejaculated, "mustn't depend on you." Then giving another glance round, he shouldered his gun, and commenced the ascent, leaving all vegetation behind him, and soon finding that his way lay over loose scoria and finely-powdered pumice, into which his feet sank at every step.

But as the difficulties and steepness of the ascent increased, so did the desire to climb higher and see more of the volcano, and also more of the country into which fate had brought him. Once a few hundred feet higher, he felt he would be able to set all doubts at rest as to whether they were surrounded by the sea; and to get this proof Oliver Lane pressed on.

After a time he got more into the knack of climbing without slipping back so much, but the sun was getting higher, and its beams grew warm, while he was conscious of a sensation as of heat striking upward from the ashy substance of which the slope was composed, and at last, to gratify his curiosity, and to clear away a doubt, Lane stooped down to lay his hand flat upon the ash, and snatch it away again, for it was quite hot.

For a moment or two after this, he hesitated, but there above him rose the cone with its crest of smoke, and apparently nothing to hinder him from climbing steadily to the top, and from thence getting a bird's-eye view of the country round.

That was enough to start him on, and setting himself manfully to the task, in less than half an hour he found that he had reached an atmospheric band where the breeze blew pleasantly cool and invigorating. The cloud over the summit of the cone had floated away, and all was clear and bright as he resumed the ascent, feeling now that an hour would bring him to the top, when all at once he fell upon his knees, and then threw himself at full length. For the mountain quivered beneath his feet, and produced a giddy sensation as the surface rose and fell in waves, whilst

almost simultaneously there was a terrific roar, and he saw a dense cloud driven out from above, and ascending to a tremendous height, as if shot out by an internal explosion.

His first feeling was, that he must turn and rush down: his second, that it would be madness to stir, for the side of the mountain was opening and shutting in a network of fissures, and the next minute, the cloud which he had seen blasted upwards proved itself not to be so much mist, but a storm of ashes and scoria mingled with huge masses of rock, which now curled over like a fountain, and were falling back in all directions.

Oliver Lane tried to anchor himself to the shifting ashes as he lay there, feeling that his last hour had come, for darkness was now added to the other horrors, and the mountain-side was in strange quivering motion, gaze wildly whichever way he would.

The fall of a mass of glowing cinders, so close that he could feel the scorching heat against his cheek, roused Oliver Lane to the fact that it was more dangerous to stay than to rush down-hill, running the gauntlet of the falling shower; and, after a moment's hesitation, he turned and ran for his life. The white-hot stones and cinders fell around him as he bounded down, having hard work to keep his footing, for at every leap the loose scoria gave way as he alighted, and slipped with him in an avalanche of dust and ashes from which he had to extricate himself.

Once he had pretty well dragged himself out when the ashes for far enough round began to glide downward, the thick haze of volcanic dust around adding to his confusion, while every step he took in his frantic efforts to keep on the surface resulted in his sinking more deeply till he was above his waist in the loose gliding stuff and awake to the fact that it was scorchingly hot.

But all at once, as despair was beginning to enfold him in a tighter hold than the ash and cinder, the gliding avalanche suddenly stopped, and as it was not like the Alpine snow ready to adhere and be compressed into ice, he was able to extricate himself and slide and roll down for some distance further.

Then all at once he found that he was in the sunshine again, and that the stones had ceased to fall and the mountain to quiver; while, as he gazed upward, it was to see that the dark cloud was slowly floating away, giving him a view of the edge of the crater where it was broken down for some distance in the shape of a rugged V, and just at the bottom, every now and then, there was a bright glow of fire visible. The glow then sank completely out of sight, but only to rise up again, and this was continued as the young naturalist watched, suggesting to him the fact that the crater must be full of boiling lava which rose to the edge in its ebullitions and then dropped below the rugged wall.

Ten minutes later the glowing stones which had fallen, looked black and grey; the cloud was at a distance, and there was nothing to indicate that the beautifully shaped mountain ever presented another aspect than that of peace.

Oliver Lane stood looking up with the longing to ascend to the edge of the crater growing strong once more, but he was fagged by his exertions, bathed in perspiration, and aware of the fact that an intense glowing heat rose from the surface all around him, while the air he breathed seemed to produce a strange suffocating effect when he turned his face from the wind which swept over the mountain slope.

In a few minutes he decided that it would be madness to persevere, and that it would be wise to wait until the volcano was in a more quiescent state, for at any minute there might come a fresh explosion from the mouth from which he might not be able to escape so easily.

He looked longingly round to try and make out something of value to report as to their position, but the mountain shut everything off in the direction lying north, and he was reluctantly about to continue his descent when he felt the stones beneath his feet tremble again. Then came a report like that of a huge cannon, and what seemed to be an enormous rock shot upward for hundreds of feet, hung for a moment or two in the clear air, and then fell back into the crater.

That was enough. A burning thirst and a sensation of breathing something which irritated his lungs, awakened him to the fact that he must find water, and, regardless of the heat, he once more began to hurry downward toward the level plain from which the mountain curved up in so beautiful a cone.

Oliver Lane soon found that he was not returning upon his steps, and though apparently not far from where he ascended, it was plain enough that, even if they had not been obliterated by the falling ash and cinders, the fragments flowed together again like sand. A greater proof still was afforded him in the fact that about a quarter of a mile lower down his farther progress was checked by a rugged chasm running right across his path, apparently cutting him off from the lower portion and extending to right and left farther than he could see.

He approached it with caution, but found that he must not risk a near approach, for he set the loose scoria in motion, and it trickled on before him, and went over out of sight with a rush.

Anchoring himself as well as he could against a huge block of lava, he paused to consider whether he should go to right or left, and then shrank away with a shudder, and began to climb back as fast he could, for, slight as had been his bearing upon the block, it had been sufficient to start it off, and, to his horror, it went on gliding down about twenty yards, and then dropped over the edge.

He stood listening, in the hope of hearing the block stop directly, as proof of its being only a few feet down, and passable if he lowered himself and then climbed the opposite edge; but a full minute elapsed before he heard a dull, echoing roar, which continued for some time, and, after a pause, was continued again and again, giving terrible warning of the depth, and his own insignificance upon that mountain slope.

He now had his first suggestion of panic—of how easily, in the face of so much peril, anyone could lose his head, and rush into danger, instead of escaping the risks by which he was surrounded. For his strong impulse now was to start

into a run, and to begin to ascend the slope diagonally. But at the first dozen steps, he found he was loosening the ashes, which began to glide toward the chasm faster and faster, and that if he continued with so much energy, there would soon be a swift rush, which would carry him with it into the awful gulf.

Warned by this, he stopped, and then proceeded cautiously, going nearly parallel, but increasing his distance as far as was possible.

The intense heat of the sun combined with that which radiated from the mountain-side was exhausting to a degree; his thirst grew almost unbearable, and he fully realised the imprudence of which he had been guilty in attempting the ascent alone. The only thing now was to extricate himself from his perilous position, and, after a halt or two to collect himself and try to make out how much farther the rift extended, during which he hesitated as to whether it would not be wiser to go back and try the other way, he started onward again, slowly and steadily, becoming conscious of a peculiar puff of stifling vapour, which he felt sure must come from the gaping rift below.

And now the idea came to him that it was impossible that the chasm could have been there when he ascended, but had opened during the fresh eruption in which he had so nearly been overwhelmed.

At last, when his sufferings from the heat were growing unbearable, and his head swam with the giddy sensation which supervened, the rift appeared to close in about fifty yards further on. He sheltered his swimming eyes, and endeavoured to steady himself, as, with sinking heart, he tried to make out whether this really were so, or only fancy. But it seemed to be fact, and, pressing cautiously on, he lessened the distance, and then stopped appalled, shrinkingly facing a way of escape to the lower part of the mountain, but one terrible enough to make the stoutest-hearted shiver. For the chasm came to a sudden end, and recommenced two or three yards farther on, leaving a jagged, narrow strip of lava extending bridge-like from side to side.

"I dare not," he muttered, as he approached slowly, noting the shape, and trying to make out how far down the mass of rock extended, so as to see whether it would prove firm, or only be a crust which might give way beneath his weight, and then— He shuddered, for he knew that whoever ventured upon that narrow pathway did so facing a terrible death.

He looked wildly forward to see if the gap still went on to any distance, and he could trace it till it was lost in a hot haze.

"I must do it," muttered Lane, for he felt that if he kept on longer upon the upper edge, he must soon sink and perish from heat and exhaustion.

Knowing that if he stopped to think, he would grow less and less disposed to venture, and taking one long eager look at the green trees far below in the distance where there would be shelter and refreshing water, he gathered himself together, and walked slowly and steadily over the yielding ash and cinders to the beginning of the bridge.

Chapter Sixteen.

The Descent.

Hope came with the first step, for it was upon hard slippery rock, and gathering courage from this, the young naturalist kept one foot firm, and stamped with the other to try whether the rock was brittle and likely to give way.

But it seemed firm, and fixing his eyes upon the other side, Oliver drew himself up erect and walked boldly on to the narrow bridge, profoundly conscious of the fact that there, on either side where he dare not look, the walls went down almost perpendicularly into a gulf too awful to ponder on, even for a moment.

Onward slowly, step by step, with the glistening crisp bridge some yards wide where he started, but as he went on, it grew narrower and narrower, while the farther side of the gulf which had appeared so short a distance away when he was high up and looking down, now looked far-off to his swimming eyes.

The giddy feeling increased as he neared the middle, and then he stopped short, and dropped upon his knees. For suddenly, with the profound gulf on either side, there came a loud resonant crack, and a piece of the lava split away and fell.

Lane knew that he ought to have rushed onward now, literally bounding across, but the horror of his position, as he felt that the frail bridge was giving way beneath his feet unnerved him, and he could not stir, but knelt there seeing the rock before him seem to rise and fall while he listened for what seemed as if it would never come, the echoing roar when the mass which had fallen struck below. Even if the lava on which he knelt had followed, he would not have stirred, only knelt there gazing at the remainder of the bridge in front as it undulated, rising and falling slowly, while the fume which arose from the chasm added to the giddy swimming in his head.

At last! A deafening, reverberating roar, and Lane clutched at a piece of the rock, and closed his eyes, feeling that all was over, but opened them again directly to see that the bridge before him was not undulating, and he knew that it was an optical illusion due to the heat and the giddiness from which he was suffering.

Nerving himself once more, he rose cautiously, and holding his gun across him with both hands, as if it were a balancing pole, he stepped cautiously forward a dozen steps or so, feeling the brittle, glassy rock quiver beneath his weight; and then with the lower side, and safety, not a dozen yards away, he was unable to contain himself, and springing forward he nearly ran, ending by making one great bound and landing safely as the whole mass over which he had passed gave one crashing sound and fell.

Oliver Lane dropped on his knees a few yards from the edge he had left behind, and gazed wildly at the broad opening till a terrific roar arose from the depths below.

For some moments his senses must have left him, and he was hardly himself when he rose to his feet and reeled and staggered downward. But this passed away; his consciousness fully returned, and no longer acting upon the blind instinct which urged him to escape, he began to hurry on more steadily toward where, far below, he could see the green trees, and as his dry lips parted he, in imagination, saw clear, cool water waiting to quench his awful thirst.

But during the next two hours his progress grew more and more mechanical, and there were times when he went on down and down the loose slope like one in a dream. There, though far below, was the object which guided him, a glistening thread of silver water from which the sun's rays flashed, and down by which he fell at last to bathe his face in its cool depths and drink as he had never drunk before.

It was as if he had imbibed new life when he finally drew away from the water and lay gazing up at the mountain slope, and the summit whose highest parts were hidden in the rounded cloud of smoke and steam which rested there. Danger was apparently absent, and Oliver Lane felt ready to imagine he had exaggerated everything, and been ready to take alarm without sufficient cause. He was ready now, in the pleasant restful feeling which came over him, to laugh at what he mentally called his cowardice. But this passed off in time, and he knew that he had not only been in grave peril, but that even now his position was far from free of danger, it would soon be night again, he was without food, and that line of mist was like an impassable wall between him and his friends.

As he arrived at this point in his musings, he tried to spring up, knowing that he must make an energetic effort to regain them.

But there was very little spring in his motions, for though the cool draught of water had been delicious, and reclining there restful to a degree, the moment he stirred every joint moved as if its socket was harsh and dry, so that he would not have been surprised had they all creaked. He began to walk with pain and difficulty, with his mind made up as to what he should do. For there below him to his right was the long line of mist, and his object was to keep along parallel with it till he could pass round the end, which must be somewhere toward the shore, over which they had been carried inland. Once there, he would be able to reach his friends who ought, he felt, to have made some effort to find him in a similar way to that which he now proposed trying himself.

"And by the same rule," he said half aloud with a bitter laugh, as he shifted his gun from one shoulder to the other, "I ought to have gone at once to try and reach them instead of attempting such a mad adventure all alone."

It was too late for repentance, and he tramped wearily on, trying to make out in the lower ground upon which he gazed down to his right, the dense forest and the huge fig-tree in which he had passed the night. He laughed the next minute as he saw the impossibility of his search, for he looked down upon the rounded tops of hundreds of such trees rising like islands out of a sea of golden green shot with orange in the glow of the sinking sun.

Before long he found that he must be on the look-out for another resting-place, and that as there would not be time to reach the band of trees at the foot of the mountain, he must find some patch of rocks on the slope along which he was painfully walking. Then, finding that he had left himself but little time, he halted by some greyish cindery blocks whose bases were sunk in volcanic sand, and hungry and faint with thirst, he threw himself down to lie looking up at the golden ball of illumined steam floating above the top of the volcano high up in the wonderfully transparent heavens till the light began to fade away, and then suddenly went out, that is to say, seemed to go out; for, in spite of hunger, thirst, and weariness, Oliver Lane's eyelids dropped to open as sharply, directly, as it seemed to him, and he lay staring with dilated eyes upward at the object he had last seen.

But it had changed, for the cloud, instead of looking golden and orange, as it glowed, was now soft, flocculent and grey.

"There it is again," he said, excitedly then. "I thought it was part of my dream."

Chapter Seventeen.

Friends in Need.

He was quite right; it was solid reality, and he was looking at the broad back of a man standing a few yards away, with his hands to his mouth, and who now sent forth a tremendous shout, which was answered from a distance before the man turned, and stepped quickly to his side, displaying the rugged features of Billy Wriggs.

"Ain't dead, are yer, sir?" he cried, sinking on one knee. "Here, have a drink."

He placed his water bottle in the young man's hand and watched him.

"No; dead man couldn't drink that how," he said softly. "Go it, sir; I'll fill it up again. Take a reg'lar good deep swig. Fine stuff, water, when you're thirsty, so long as it aren't hot water, and all bitter and salt. Go it again, sir," he cried, as his rugged face softened into a weak grin of satisfaction. "Ahoy-a! Ahoy! This way."

This last was a tremendous roar through his hands, sent in the direction of the forest below, and as soon as it was answered, the man turned again to Lane.

"Only to think on it being me as found yer, sir. I do call it luck. I come out o' the wood, and I says to myself, 'I shouldn't wonder, Billy, old man, if Muster Lane's over yonder, among them rocks, for it's just the sorter place to make a roost on,' and I come along, and see yer fast asleep, and here yer are, sir, not a bit dead, are yer?"

"No, no, I'm all right, Wriggs, only so stiff, I can hardly move."

"Course yer are, sir. But never you mind about that. You wait till Tommy Smith comes up, and us two'll give yer a real 'poo, sir—none of yer sham 'uns—and make yer jyntes as lissom as injy rubber. Why, sir, we begun to think you was a goner. How did yer get here?"

"Tell me first how you got here."

"That's me as will, sir," cried the man with alacrity, as he keenly watched Lane's efforts to rise, and lent him a hand. "Yer see, we couldn't get through that steam as runs all along across the low land."

"Was any one the worse for getting through?" cried Lane, eagerly, and Billy Wriggs scratched his ear.

"Well, sir, yer see, none on us weren't none the wuss for getting through, 'cause we didn't get through; but lots on us was all the wuss for not getting through. My heye! Talk about too much grog when yer ashore, it's nothing to it. It's the tipsyest stuff I ever swallowed. How did you manage, sir?"

"I—I don't know; I struggled through it, somehow, and then fell down insensible."

"Onsensible, course yer did, sir. It knocks all the gumption out on yer 'fore yer knows where yer are. Ahoy! mate! This way, Tommy. Here he is!"

The trees below them had been parted, and, all scratched and bleeding, Smith appeared, and as soon as he caught sight of Lane, he slapped his legs heavily, turned round, and yelled aloud.

Then he ran up at a trot, grinning hugely.

"That's you, sir," he cried, "and I'm glad on it. They said as we should only find yer cold corpus, and 'No,' I says, 'if we finds his corpus at all, it won't be cold but hot roast. There's no getting cold here. But I knows better. Too much stuff in him,' I says. 'He'll sarcumwent all the trouble somehow. Master Oliver Lane aren't the lad to lie down and give up,' and I was right, warn't I, Billy?"

"Ay, mate, you was right this time."

"Course I was, Billy; but yer needn't ha' been in such a hurry to find Mr Lane all to yerself. But yer allus was a graspin' sort o' chap, Billy."

"You're another," growled Wriggs; "but don't stand hargeying there. Here's Mr Lane that stiff he can't move hisself, and he wants us to give him a real 'poo."

"Whatcher mean, mate?"

"Well, a shampoo, then."

"Hold on. Don't you try them games, mate, for you was never cut out for the work. He thinks that's a joke, Mr Lane, sir. But do you want your jyntes rubbed a bit?"

"No, no, I shall be better directly," cried Oliver. "Oh, yes, I can walk. Only a bit stiff. Where are the others?"

"Coming through that bit o' wood, sir, where it's all thorns and fish-hooks. Mr Rimmer's there and your two messmates."

"But how did you get through the mist?"

"We didn't, sir. We got a boat down to the shore, launched her and rowed doo north for a bit, and then landed and come along hunting for yer. Why, that there mist goes right down the shore and out to sea, where you can smell it as it comes bubbling up through the water."

"But how did you get a boat down?" cried Oliver. "It must be a good two miles."

"Nay, sir, seemed to us like a bad four mile," grumbled Wriggs.

"Yah! not it, Billy. Oh, we did it, sir. Took the littlest, and the carpenter made a couple o' runners for it out of a spare yard, and so long as we picked our way she come along beautiful. Yer see we meant to do it, and o' course we did it, and here we are."

"Ahoy!" yelled Wriggs again, and an answer was heard from close at hand, as Panton suddenly came into sight.

"Found him?" he shouted, but he caught sight of his companion at the same moment, and rushed, out of breath and streaming with perspiration, to catch Lane's hands; his lips moved as he tried to speak, but not a word would come.

"Ahoy!" yelled Wriggs again, and Smith followed his example after turning his back to the two young men.

A minute later Drew came into sight, and then Mr Rimmer, and somehow, he, too, seemed to be affected like Drew and Panton, for he could only shake hands and try to speak, but not a word came.

"Lost all my wind," he cried, at last, but in a husky, choky voice. "All right now, and jolly glad to see you again, sir. Hang it, what's the matter with my throat? I know: it's those nuts I picked as we came along. Phew! how hot it is."

"Lane, old chap," whispered Panton, "we thought you'd left us in the lurch."

"That we did," said Drew, blinking his eyes, and then blowing his nose very loudly. "But, I say, are you all right!"

"Yes, only stiff and very hungry."

"Hungry?" cried the mate. "Hi! who's got the prog bag?"

"Them two's got it, sir," said Wriggs. "Here they come." As he spoke a couple more men came into sight, and deferring all farther questioning till Lane's hunger had been appeased, they descended to where the nearest water trickled amongst the rocks, and were soon all seated enjoying an *al fresco* meal, the rugged lava forming table and chairs, and the abundant growth of ferns giving a charm to the verdant nook, and sheltering them from the sun.

"Well, all I can say is," cried the mate, "that you've had a very narrow escape, sir, and, thank heaven, we're all here to tell you so, for there were moments when I thought that it was all over with us. But, phew! how hot it is."

"Yes," said Panton, "a steamy heat. We ought to be getting back to the boat. It will be cooler towards the sea. What's the matter, Drew?"

"I was examining these ferns. How curious it is."

"What, their withering up so?" said Lane. "Yes, I was noticing it. Are they sensitive plants?"

"Oh, no!" cried Drew, "those are the mimosa family. But look here, you can see them fade and droop as you watch them; I suppose it is in some way due to our presence here."

"Watcher fidgeting about, Billy?" said Smith, just then. "It's hot enough without you playing the fool. Shuffling about like a cat on hot bricks."

"That's just what is the matter with me, matey," grumbled Wriggs. "Just you put yer hand down here. This here rock's as hot as a baker's oven."

"So's this here," said one of the men who had carried the provisions. "Hadn't we better go 'fore there's roast man for brexfass?"

"Really, gentlemen, it's uncomfortably hot here," said Mr Rimmer, and just then there was a peculiar tremor beneath them, and a shock as if they were upon a thin crust which had received a sharp blow from beneath.

They all started to their feet, and the first disposition was to run.

"Don't leave your guns!" roared Panton, and each man snatched up his piece. The next moment they fell prostrate and clung to the nearest rocks, for the earth began to sink beneath them, and the huge stones upon which they had been seated a short time before glided away.

"Quick!" cried Lane, as the surface, which had been nearly level, now hung down in a precipitous slope. "This way!"

He set the example of climbing upward, and they reached a level spot again just as there was a sharp crack, a deafening roar, and from out of the vast chasm, which had opened, there was a rush of fire, and smoke rose suddenly towards where they clustered.

Chapter Eighteen.

Smith turns Turtle.

The rush of smoke and fire passed away as rapidly as it had come, but the slope newly made ran down to where the light of day was reflected back from a dim mist which bore somewhat the aspect of disturbed water, but the earth, being quiescent once more, no one displayed any desire to make an examination of the opening, but at once gave it what the mate called a wide berth.

"Let's get back to the boat," he said. "You must be pretty well done up, Mr Lane."

"Well, I am stiff," said Oliver, stooping to give one leg a rub, "but I feel refreshed now, and I was thinking—"

He stopped short and gazed back at the mountain with its glistening cloud cap and smooth slope of ashes dotted with blocks of lava and pumice, the latter flashing in the sunshine, and the whole having an alluring look which was tempting in the extreme.

"What were you thinking?" said Panton; "not of climbing up again?"

"Yes, I was thinking something of the kind. It seems a shame, now we are on the slope, not to go right up and see the crater and the view of the whole island which we should get from there?"

The mate gave one of his ears a vexatious rub, and wrinkled up his forehead as he turned to give Drew a comical look.

"Yes; what is it?" said that gentleman.

"Oh, nothing, sir," replied Mr Rimmer. "I was only thanking my stars that I wasn't born to be a naturalist. For of all the unreasonable people I ever met they're about the worst."

"Why?" said Oliver, innocently.

"Why, sir!" cried the mate; "here have you been missing all this time, and by your own showing you've been nearly bitten by snakes and clawed by a leopard, suffocated, swallowed up, stuck on a bit of a bridge across a hole that goes down to the middle of the earth, and last of all nearly scorched like a leaf in a fireplace by that puff which came at us. And now, as soon as you have had a bite and sup, you look as if you'd like to tackle the mountain again."

"Of course, that's what I do feel," said Oliver, laughing. "So do we all."

"I'll be hanged if I do!" cried Mr Rimmer. "The brig isn't floating, I know, but she stands up pretty solid, and I feel as if I shall not be very comfortable till I'm standing upon her deck."

"But we've come on a voyage of discovery," said Panton.

"Yes, sir, that's right enough, but we seem to have begun wrong way on. We want to discover things, and, instead, they keep discovering us. It's just as if we'd no business here and the whole island was rising up against us."

"But this is such an opportunity," pleaded Oliver. "We are, as I said, on the slope of the mountain, pretty well rested, and I think I may say that we are all eager to go up."

"No, sir, I don't think you may say that," replied the mate, grimly. "I'm pretty tired, and I've had a very anxious time lately."

"Well, we three are anxious to try the ascent."

"Oh, yes, I'm ready," cried Panton, eagerly.

"And so am I," cried Drew; but there was a want of earnestness in his words. "Let's start at once."

"Yes, gentlemen, back to the brig, please, and have a good rest. We're none of us fit to-day."

"But we must ascend this mountain."

"Of course, sir, if it will let us," said the mate; "but let's come prepared. I'm with you at any time, and I should like to do it, but what I say is, let's go back to the brig and have a day or two's rest, and while we're waiting make our plans and get a stock of food ready. Then we shall want plenty of light, strong line and a bit of rope ladder, and it would be wise to let the carpenter knock us up a light, strong set of steps of ten or a dozen foot long, the same as the Alpine gentlemen use. Then we could start some afternoon."

"At daybreak, some morning," cried Oliver.

"Let me finish, sir," said the mate. "Start some afternoon and carry a spare sail and a hitcher or two in the boat. Then we could get round the mist, land, walk as far as we like that evening, and then light up our fire, and set up a bit of a tent. Next morning, after a good night's rest, we could start fair, and do some work before the sun gets hot; for the mountain will be quite warm enough without the sun. There, gentlemen, what do you say to my plan?"

"Carried unanimously," cried Drew, and Panton and Oliver remained silent and ready to acquiesce, for the arrangement certainly promised well.

The next minute they were on their way back down to the lower ground, where before reaching the forest patch below they came upon the remains of a group of what must have been well-grown trees, which had been so calcined that though the trunks retained their shape, they were so fragile that a kick given by one of the men brought the first down in powder which partly rose in a cloud, the remainder forming a heap of ashes.

This was the more curious from the fact that within twenty yards there was a clump of vegetation evidently of greater age, growing in full luxuriance. But the reason was soon shown by Panton, who after a few minutes' examination pointed to a narrow, jagged rift in the earth, running for twenty or thirty yards, and whose sides upon their peering down showed that fire must have rushed up with such intensity that in places the rock was covered with a thick glaze, such as is seen upon earthenware.

"Strikes me, Tommy Smith—" said Wriggs, after he and the other men had had their turn at examining the earth crack.

"Well, what strikes yer, and whereabouts?" replied Smith, turning to give his companions a wink as much as to say, "Hark at him and don't laugh."

"Hidees, Tommy," said Wriggs, "and they hits me in the head—hard."

"Well, then, matey, let 'em out again and tell us what they mean."

"Tommy, my lad, you're trying to be werry wise and to show off, but don't do it, mate. This here aren't a place for cutting jokes and making fun o' your messmate. What I says is—this here place aren't safe, and the sooner we digs a canawl and takes the old *Planet* out to sea the better it'll be for all consarned."

"I knowed it," said Smith, oracularly. "I felt sure as something werry wise was a coming. How many spades have we got aboard, mates?"

"Not none at all," said one of the men.

"No, not one," said Smith. "I once heard some one may as it would take a long time to cut through Primrose Hill with a mustard spoon, and I can't help thinking as it would take as long to make our canal."

"Now, my lads, what are you doing?" cried the mate.

"Only just taking a sniff at the hole here, sir," replied Smith, rising from his knees.

"Well, and what can you smell—sulphur?"

"No, sir, it's more of a brimstone smell, just as if somebody had been burning matches down below in the back kitchen, sir. Now, my lads, forrard," he whispered, for the mate had turned and gone on after the others.

In a very short time the mountain was forgotten in the many objects of interest encountered at the edge of the forest, each naturalist finding, as he afterwards owned, ample specimens connected with his own especial branch to last him for weeks of earnest study. But at the suggestion of the mate they pressed on, and, choosing the easiest line of route they could find, they at last reached the shore where the boat lay upon the coral and shell-sand high up out of reach of the tide.

She was soon launched, the party half lifting, half pushing, as they ran on either side, and then as she floated, springing in and gliding off over a lovely forest of coral and weed only a foot or two beneath the boat's keel. Every spray was clearly seen, for the water was perfectly still and limpid in the lagoon, while a mile out the sea curled over in great billows and broke with a dull, thunderous roar upon the barrier reef which stretched north and south as far as eye could reach, but with a quiet space here and there which told of openings in the coral rock, gateways so to speak leading out into the open sea.

The sun beat down with tropical force, but the gentle breeze from the ocean rendered the heat bearable, and a feeling of combined restfulness and pleasure came over Oliver Lane as he watched the wondrous transparent tints of the billows as their arches glistened in the sunshine before striking the coral reef, and breaking into foam which flashed and sparkled like freshly-cut gems.

Turning from this he could feast his eyes upon the brilliantly scaled fish which glided in and out amongst the branching coral and bushy weed which formed a miniature submarine forest of pink, blue, amber, scarlet, and golden brown. Gorgeous creatures were some of these fish when they turned over a little on one side, displaying their armour of silver, gold, and orange, often in vivid bands across steely blue or brilliant green. Twice over, long, lithe sharks were seen hurrying out of their course, each of a dingy grey, with what Wriggs called a "shovel nose," and curious tail with the top of the fork continued far out beyond the lower portion.

But there was the shore to take his attention, too, and to this he turned eagerly as the shrieking and whistling of a flock of birds met his ear, and he saw them flying along over the far-stretching grove of cocoa-nut palms which curved up in a curious way from the very sand where at certain times the sea must have nearly washed their roots.

"Hold hard a moment," cried Oliver, suddenly, and the men ceased rowing, sitting with their oars balanced, and the boat silently gliding over the smooth surface of the water, making a tiny shoal of fish flash out into the sunshine from where the bows cut, and look like sparks of silver.

"What is it, sir?" said the mate.

"I want to know what that noise is. Didn't you hear it, Drew?"

"Yes, I heard something which seemed to come from the trees there, but it has stopped now."

"Men's oars in the rowlocks," said Panton.

"Oh, no. It was not that," cried Oliver. "It was just as if someone was making a noise in a big brass tube. Ah, there it goes."

Just then from out of the grove of palms about a hundred yards to their right came softly and regularly just such a sound as he had described.

Phoomp, phoomp, phoomp, phoom, soft, clear, and musical, rising and falling in a peculiar way, as if close at hand and then distant.

"Native brass band practising," said Drew, merrily.

"Puffs of steam from some volcanic blow hole."

"Music: must be," said the mate. "There's an instrument called a serpent. Perhaps it's one of them playing itself."

"I don't know what it is," said Oliver. "Shall we pull ashore and see?"

"No, no, not to-day," said the mate. "Let's get back."

"There's a turtle just ahead, sir," said Smith, from the bows.

"A turtle?—a dove!" cried Oliver. "Perhaps it was that."

"I meant a turtle souper, sir," said Smith, with a grin. Then to the mate, "If you'll steer for her, sir, I'll try and catch her, she's asleep in the sunshine."

They all looked to where the olive green hued shell of the floating reptile could be seen, and with two of the men dipping their oars gently to keep the boat in motion, and Mr Rimmer steering, they softly approached, while Smith leaned over the gunwale with his sleeves rolled up over his brawny arms ready to get hold of one of the flippers.

"Hadh't you better try a boat-hook?" said Oliver, softly.

"Too late; let him try his own way, sir," whispered the mate. "Turn it over if you can, Smith."

The man dared not answer, but leaned out as far as he could, anchoring himself by passing one leg under the thwart as they went on nearer and nearer, every eye strained, lips parted, and a feeling of natural history or cooking interest animating the different breasts.

"Got her!" cried Smith, suddenly, as he made a quick dip down and seized one of the turtle's flippers with both hands. "Hi! one on yer. Help!"

Wriggs made a snatch at and caught the man's leg, as there was a sudden tug and jerk, a tremendous splash, and then, as the boat rocked, Smith's leg was dragged from its holding and he disappeared beneath the surface.

"Gone!" cried Wriggs, "and I did git tight hold on him, too."

"Pull!" shouted the mate, and as the oars dipped sharply the boat followed a little wave of water, which ran along in front, and out of which Smith's head suddenly appeared, and directly after his bands grasped the gunwale of the boat.

"Where's the turtle?" cried Oliver, laughing.

"I did get a hold on her, sir," panted Smith; "but she went off like a steamer, and dragged me underneath. Ah! there she goes," he continued, as he looked toward where the little wave showed that the turtle was swimming rapidly through the troubled water.

"Here, quick, in with you!" cried Oliver, excitedly, as Smith made a jump and climbed—or rather tumbled in—over the side, and none too soon, for the back fin of a shark suddenly appeared a few yards away, and as the man slowly subsided into the boat there was a gleam of creamy white in the water, and a dull thud up against the bows.

"The brute!" cried the mate, as the shark glided out of sight, and then displayed its back fin again above water. "A warning that against bathing."

"Yes, and a very narrow escape!" cried Panton.

"Sarves me right, sir," said Smith, standing up in the bows to wring himself as much as he could without stripping. "Comes o' trying to make turtle soup of t'other thing."

"Pull away, my lads," said the mate, smiling.

"If it's all the same to you, sir," said Wriggs, "mightn't us try and ketch that Jack shark for trying to kill our mate?"

"Oh, yes! if you can do so, by all means; but not to-day. Now, gentlemen, look just ahead. What do you say to that?"

"It's where the mist bank runs into the sea," cried Lane, excitedly; for there, to their right, the vapour rose up among the cocoa-nut trees which just there seemed to be half dead, while all around the boat the clear water was in a state of ebullition, tiny globules of gas running up from below, and breaking on the surface.

"Runs right away to the reef," cried Panton.

"Ay, sir, and perhaps far enough beyond," said the mate. "Pull hard, my lads, and let's get through."

"The coral seems to be all dead," said Drew, "and there are no weeds."

"Not a sign of fish either," said Lane, whose face was over the side. "Plenty of great clam shells, but they are gaping open, and the occupants dead—ah!"

He drew his head back sharply, for he had been suddenly seized with a catching of the breath.

"Get a sniff of it, sir?" said Smith, who was now close by.

"I breathed it, too," said Drew, "but the gas does not seem to be so powerful here above the water."

"No," said Panton. "I could just make out a crack or two through the coral. We're clear now."

"Yes," said the mate, looking back at the effervescing water, "and the bottom is alive again."

He was right, for the peculiar display of animal and vegetable growth was plain to see once more. Great sea slugs crawled about on the bottom with gigantic starfish, and actiniae of vivid colours spread their tentacled blossoms.

"Best way this of getting through the mist, eh, Lane?" cried Panton.

"But there is no mist over the sea," said Lane.

"No, I suppose the passage through water makes the gas invisible," said Panton. "Isn't this somewhere near where we started, Mr Rimmer?"

"No, sir, 'bout a mile farther on. Keep a look-out and you'll see the opening in the cocoa-nut grove, and the marks of the boat's keel upon the sand."

They were not long in reaching the spot, and there the boat was run right up over the soft beach in among the tall stems of the nearest cocoanuts, and carefully made fast.

"But suppose savages come and find it?" suggested Oliver.

"Strikes me, Mr Lane," said the mate, "that we're the only savages here. Now, gentlemen, who says a drink of cocoa-nut milk, and then we'll make haste back to the brig."

There was ample store swinging overhead, and after a couple of tries, a man succeeded in climbing one of the tall, spar-like trees, and shaking down ample for their light lunch. A couple of hours later they had traversed the wave-swept plain, and reached the brig, where they were heartily welcomed by the portion of the crew left in charge.

"But what's the matter?" cried the mate. "You all look white about the gills."

"Had a bit of a scare, sir," said one of the men. "All at worst, it was just as if the brig was an old cow a trying to get on her legs. For she was heaved up, shook herself a bit, and then settled down again, just as she was before."

"Not quite, my lad," said Wriggs. "Speak the truth whatever yer does. She's got a cant to port since we went away."

He was quite right, the *Planet's* deck was no longer level, but had a slope, and the masts, instead of being perpendicular, slanted slightly towards the horizon.

"Yes, Tommy Smith. Wet as you are," whispered Wriggs, solemnly, "I must tell yer the truth, it's as they say quite dangerous to be safe."

Chapter Nineteen.

A Startler.

The strangeness of their position grew hourly to the crew of the *Planet* brig, and again and again the mate proposed plans for extricating themselves.

"It will take time," he said, "but it would be far better than attempting the trip in open boats. I have had it over with the carpenter, and he thinks that we could build a small lugger—decked—of about the size of one of the Cornish mackerel craft. What do you gentlemen say to that?"

"I say it's a capital idea," said Oliver, and his companions endorsed his opinion.

"So I thought," said the mate. "It will take a long time to tear up enough of the old brig, and to get the material down to the shore, but we shall all work with a will. I thought that we might make a hut under the cocoa-nut trees just opposite one of the openings in the reef, and as you agree that it's a good plan, I propose beginning at once. Then we could sail east, west, or north, to one of the settlements."

"But what's the hurry?" said Oliver.

"Eh? Hurry? Why, we're wrecked, sir, and I want to get afloat again."

"But we don't," cried Oliver. "We could not be in a better place for our studies, and we shall want you to let us have the men to go with us upon expeditions and carry our collections."

"But isn't it rather too cool to sit down patiently here with our ship wrecked?"

"I haven't found the place very cool, Mr Rimmer," said Panton, smiling.

"I didn't mean that kind of coolness," said the mate, heartily. "But it fidgets me about my vessel. See how she's canted over. I should not be surprised to find her some day sunk out of sight."

"But you couldn't find her if she was sunk out of sight," said Drew, merrily.

"No, no, of course not. How you gents do catch me up."

"Look here, Mr Rimmer, don't you worry," cried Oliver. "Let the vessel be for a bit while we collect. When we have exhausted the place we will all join you heart and soul in any plan to get away; but, dangerous as the island is, I don't want to leave it yet."

"Nor I," said Panton.

"Nor I," cried Drew.

"All right then, gentlemen. Then we'll stay as we are for the present, only something must be done about fresh provisions."

"I'll start at once shooting, and we can eat all the birds I kill. I only want the skins."

"And I daresay I can collect a good deal of fruit and some form of vegetables that may be useful," said Drew.

"That's good, gentlemen. But first of all, I think we ought to do some fishing."

"Good," said Panton. "Why not net one of the big pools?"

"First reason, because we have no drag-net, sir. Second, because there are things in those pools that would tear any net to pieces and take the men who used it as bait."

"Yes, there are crocodiles, I know."

"Yes, sir, and a kind of sea-serpent thing in plenty."

"What!" cried Panton, with a laugh.

"Oh, I don't mean sea captains' sea-serpents, sir; but fellows of five, six, or seven feet long. There are plenty of them out in these seas, and some are poisonous, too. No, I don't think we'll try the pools, for did we catch any fish I'm afraid they'd be sickly and unwholesome. I propose getting the lines and going to the shore, rowing out to one of those patches of rock just at the opening of the reef; and trying our luck there."

"I'm ready," said Oliver, "and we might perhaps get hold of a turtle. We ought to slip a noose round one of the flippers if we see one again."

"That's right, sir, we will. A good turtle would be worth having now."

"When do you propose going?" asked Panton.

"To-day, if you are all willing," said the mate.

"I'm willing enough if the others are," cried Oliver, "for it will be a treat to examine the strange tropical fish."

"What about bait?" asked Drew.

"Oh, a bit or two of salt meat will do to begin with," said the mate. "I daresay we can catch one or two with that. Then we shall be all right. There is no better bait than a bit of fresh fish to tempt others."

"Plenty of shell fish, too, in the lagoon," suggested Oliver.

"Of course, I had forgotten them. An hour's time? Will that do?"

"Capitally," they cried.

"Then I'll go and see about the tackle and some bait for ourselves."

In less than the suggested time the little party, with four of the sailors to help row and carry the provisions out, and any fish they might catch, back to the ship, were on their way to the shore.

It was a couple of weeks since Oliver's return, and the eagerness to ascend the mountain was as strong with him as ever; but the attempt had been put off for the present, and in the interval plenty of collecting had been going on, and the mate had enough to do to make things what he called snug.

They passed a couple of pools on the way, and it was evident that they were rapidly drying up, for the shrinking of the water was visible at the edges, and the presence of crocodiles plain enough.

"Will not these places be very offensive when they dry and the fish die?" said Drew, quickly.

"No, sir, the crocs won't leave any fish to die, and before long they'll begin travelling down to the sea."

The shore was reached at last, and all eagerly laid the cocoa-nuts under contribution, the cool, sub-acid milk being most refreshing. Then the boat was run down over the sand by the sailors, launched, and they put off across the calm lagoon, only pausing twice for a few of the soft molluscs to be fished up to act as bait.

A quarter of an hour later the boat was made fast to a mass of coral upon a bare patch of fairly level rock some fifty feet across. It was close to an opening in the reef, where the tide came rushing in and the water was roughened and disturbed, beside possessing the advantage for the fisherman of going down at once quite deep, where they could throw out their lines right into the opening.

Three of these were soon rigged up and baited by the men, Smith devoting himself to Oliver Lane, who stood ready to throw out his lead sinker.

"Aren't you going to fish too, Mr Rammer?" he asked.

"Not if you can get any, my lad; I'm going to lash this big shark hook on to the end of a long pole and gaff all you catch."

Oliver laughed.

"You don't expect that I'm going to catch anything big enough for you to want a hook like that to haul it out?"

"Why not? We haven't come to catch sprats, sir. Strikes me that if the fish bite, you'll find you get hold of some thumpers. I've fished in these waters before, and I remember what sort of sport I had out in Fiji. Ready?"

"Yes," said Lane, who had just covered his hook with the tough mussel-like mollusc he had drawn out of a shell.

"Throw in just out yonder, then, right in the opening of the reef where the waves come in."

Oliver gave his lead a swing and brought it heavily in contact with Smith's head.

"That aren't fish, sir, that's foul," grumbled the man.

"I beg your pardon, Smith," cried Oliver, confusedly.

"My fault p'raps, sir. Try again. All right: line's laid in rings so that it'll run out."

Oliver gave the lead another swing and loosed it with so good an aim that it fell twenty yards away right in the swift current rushing through the opening in the reef.

"First in," he cried. "Look sharp, you two."

"Mind, sir, quick!" cried Smith, as the line began to run out rapidly, and the man seized the end so as to check it.

"Precious deep," said Oliver, catching at the line in turn, and in an instant feeling a ring tighten round and cut into his wrist. "Why I've hooked one already—a monster. Here, Smith, come and pull."

"Quick! all of you: lie down!" shouted the mate, excitedly, and he set the example.

"What is it, what's the matter?" cried Panton.

"You're to hold me," said Oliver. "I've got hold of a whale, and it will tug me off the rock. Help, please, it's cutting into my arm."

"Never mind the fish," cried the mate, angrily. "Don't you see? Lie close all of you and they may pass us."

He pointed as he spoke, and the little party now saw the cause of his excitement, for half a mile away, just coming round a point masked by a clump of cocoa palms, was a large canoe with outrigger, upon which three or four men were perched so as to help balance their vessel, which, crowded with blacks, was literally racing along a short distance from the reef, impelled by its wide-spreading matting sail.

"Friends," said Panton, excitedly.

"If we were on board our brig and at sea," said the mate, "but as a shipwrecked party they are foes."

Chapter Twenty.

Strange Sport.

Those were exciting moments, especially for Oliver Lane, who, as he lay there with arm outstretched, was very slowly and painfully dragged over the coral rock toward the sea. Every one's attention was so taken up by the great canoe, that for the moment he was forgotten, and, in spite of his suffering, he felt that he must not yell out for help, for fear of being heard. But just as his position was growing dangerous as well as exciting, Smith saw his peril, and throwing out one hand, took a grip of the line.

"Hadn't I better cut him adrift, sir?" he whispered, huskily.

"No, no, hold on fast," replied Oliver. "That's better. I'll hold, as well."

For the help relieved his wrist from the strain that was cutting into the flesh.

"Don't you leave go, sir," said Smith, hoarsely. "I can't hold him all alone."

"Silence there!" said the mate. "Sound travels across the water."

"I don't see that it matters much," said Panton, softly. "They must see us, for they're evidently coming straight for this opening into the lagoon."

"I don't know," replied the mate. "If they are, they may be friendly, but if they are not, we haven't so much as a gun with us, and these mop-headed beggars are a terribly bloodthirsty lot. They think nothing of knocking a man on the head, and eating him."

"Raw?" said Panton.

"No, no, they make a kind of stone oven, and roast him first."

"Oh, murder!" sighed Wriggs. "Just as if a man was a pig."

"Will you be silent, sir, and lie still? You too, Mr Lane, and that man with you. What is the matter?"

"We're being dragged overboard, sir," grumbled Smith. "Got a whale, or some'at o' that kind;" for Oliver was silent, his teeth were set, and he had all his work to do holding on to the line.

"Don't speak and don't move more than you can help," whispered the mate. "I want you all to lie here as if you were so much of the coral reef. Now then, Smith, get your knife out and cut the line."

"What, and let that there critter go, sir? He's a fine 'un, maybe it's salmon."

"Silence. Out with your knife."

"Can't, sir. If I let's go with one hand, it'll take Mr Lane out to sea. It's all we can do to hold on."

"Mr Drew, you're nearest. Keep flat down and crawl to where you can reach the line and cut it through."

Drew made no reply, but as he lay there flat on his face, he took out his knife, opened it, and began to creep along the dozen yards or so toward where Lane and Smith lay perspiring in the sunshine, now getting a few moments' rest, now fighting hard to hold the great fish as it tugged and dragged vigorously in its efforts to escape.

"Sims a pity, sims a pity," muttered Smith. "Better take a hold, too. Phew! Look at that!"

For there was a tremendous whirlpool-like swirl in the disturbed water, and a jerk that promised to dislocate their arms.

At the same moment Drew was reaching out to cut the line, but, just as his blade touched the stout cord in front of Lane's hand, the tension ceased.

"He's coming in shore to see who it is has got hold of the line," whispered Smith.

"No: gone. Broke away," said Lane, huskily, and then they lay motionless, watching the on-coming canoe, as it rushed over the sea a couple of hundred yards or so from where the great billows curled over upon the coral reef. Now it would be plainly visible with the dancing outrigger, upon which the nearly naked blacks were seated, riding up and down as if upon a see-saw, now it would be hidden by a crest of sparkling spray, which flew up as a larger wave than ordinary struck the reef. The speed at which it was going was tremendous, and so clear was the view at times that the little party on the rocks could make out the great gummed heads of the savages, and see the water glance from the paddles of those who steered.

Freed entirely from the strain of the fish dragging at the line, Oliver Lane now had leisure to watch the great canoe, and he at once began to count the number of the enemy, making them to be either thirty-nine or forty powerful-looking blacks, several of whom had ugly-looking clubs, while others bore spears or bows and arrows.

On they came toward the opening in the great reef; and as they approached, the canoe was steered farther out, evidently so that she could be headed for the passage and sail through. And as Oliver Lane watched he began to wonder what would be his next adventure—whether the savages would be friendly, or if they would attack the small party who were unarmed.

They were not long in doubt, for at the speed at which the canoe sailed, she was soon in a position for heading in, and all the time the party on the rock lay wondering that the savages made no sign. Some of them, if they had seen the party, would certainly have gesticulated, pointed, or made some show of being surprised, but they sailed on just at the edge of the troubled water, made a sweep round, and then, just as Lane felt sure that the enemy would come rushing through the opening with the fierce tide, and float on into the calm water of the lagoon, the mate exclaimed,

"It was to keep from being swept in by the rush of water. They're going right on south."

"Hooroar!" muttered Wriggs. "I sha'n't be meat to-day."

"They wouldn't ha' touched you, Billy," whispered Smith, softly. "Too tough."

"Think they'll turn back, Mr Rimmer?" said Oliver, after a few minutes' relief from the mental strain.

"I'm sure they will, sir," said the mate, harshly, "if you will persist in talking."

Smith gave his mouth a pat with his open hand, and winked at Wriggs, while the mate went on more softly,—

"You do not consider how sound is carried over the water. There! did you hear the creaking of their bamboo mast and the crackling of the matting sail?"

These sounds were clear enough for a few moments, but the boom of the breakers smothered them directly, and the party lay watching the canoe as it glided on rapidly south till it was quite evident there was no intention of landing, the savages shaping their course so as to pass round the great point a mile or two distant, and as if meaning to make for the west.

Then by degrees the long, slight vessel with its matting sail grew more and more indistinct as it passed into the silvery haze caused by the waves breaking upon the reef; but not until he felt perfectly certain that they were safe, did the mate give the word for the fishing to begin again.

"This puts another face upon our position, gentlemen," he said. "They did not see us this time, but once they know that there is a vessel ashore inland, they'll be after it like wasps at a plum, and we shall have our work cut out to keep them off."

"They must come from the shore north of the volcano," said Lane. "Don't you think so, Mr Rimmer?"

"No, sir, I don't, because I fancy that this must be an island, and if it is, and plays up such games as we have seen, no savages would stay upon it. But we shall see as soon as we have had our expedition."

"Which we ought to have been having to-day," said Panton, "instead of coming fishing."

"If we had been up north to-day, those gentlemen might have seen us," said the mate.

"And if they had," said Drew, who was holding his hook for one of the men to bait, "it strikes me that we should have had no more fishing."

"Well, as we have come fishing, gentlemen, let's see if we can't take back a good bagful for the hungry lads at the brig."

"Ready for another go, Mr Lane, sir?" said Smith.

"Oh, yes, I'm ready, but we don't want such a big one this time," replied Oliver, and once more he threw in the lead, a fresh one, for the great fish they had hooked had broken away, carrying with it hooks, snooding, and all.

Three lines were soon in now, and the party of fishers waited full of expectancy for the first bite, but for some time there was no sign.

"Haul in, sir, and let's see if the bait's all right," said Smith.

Oliver followed the suggestion, and dragged in the hook perfectly bare.

"Something's had that," he said.

"Mine's gone too," cried Panton, who had followed suit, and directly after Drew found that his bait was also gone.

Fresh baits were put on, and they threw into the rushing water again, watching their lines as they were swept to and fro by the coming and retiring waves.

"Seems as if there only was one fish, Lane," said Panton, "and you've given him such a dose of hook and lead, that he has gone for good."

The words were hardly out of the young geologist's lips, before he felt a sharp tug.

"Here's one!" he cried, and beginning to haul in fast, he soon had a bright silvery fish of eight or ten pounds' weight splashing and darting about at the top of the water.

"Dinner for one," said Drew.

"Good for half a dozen, I should say," cried the mate, laughing. "That's right, sir, don't stop to play him. Haul him in quick."

"Murder!" cried Panton. "Look at that."

For as he was drawing in the fast tiring fish level with the surface, there was a sudden gleam of gold, silver, and green, a rush and a check, as a long twining creature suddenly seized the fish, and quick as lightning, wrapped itself round and round it in a knot, doubling the weight, and adding to the resistance by lashing round and round with a flattened tail, whose effect was like that of a screw propeller reversed.

"Eel! Snake! Whatever is it?" came from different voices, as Panton ceased dragging on his fish.

"Go on! Have him out," cried the mate.

"No, no, steady," said Oliver. "I think it's a sea snake, and I believe that some of these creatures are poisonous."

"But it wouldn't bite out of water," cried Drew.

"I wouldn't chance it," said Oliver. "Shake and jerk your line, and it may let go."

Panton followed the advice, and after a few sharp snatches he shook off the creature, but the fish was gone as well.

"Taken the hook?" asked the mate.

"No, that's all right."

"I've got one," cried Drew, and a fresh struggle began, while Panton was busied in rebaiting. A few moments later, a bright golden-striped fish was at the top of the water. "Look here, this is something like. I mean to—Oh!"

For just as he had his captive about twenty feet from where he stood, a great wide-jawed sharkish-looking creature sprang out of the water, describing an arc, seized Drew's fish, and was gone.

"Oh, I say," he cried, "we shall never get a dinner like this."

"Follow my example," said Oliver quietly. "I have one now, a heavy one, too. Nothing like the first I got hold of though," he continued as he hauled away. "But it's a fine fellow."

"Haul in as quickly as you can," said the mate. "Don't lose this one."

"Just what I am doing," said Oliver between his teeth, as he hauled away rapidly, and soon had the head of another of the silvery fishes above water. "Now, Smith, be ready. Eh? Well, you, Mr Rimmer, with that hook. Now then, gaff him."

"Gaffed," said the mate, for instantaneously there was another rush in the water, a splash, and Oliver drew out the head of his prize, the rest having been bitten off as cleanly as a pair of scissors would go through a sprat, just below its gills.

The young man turned a comically chagrined face to his unfortunate companions.

"I say, this is fishing with a vengeance," cried Panton.

"Starvation sport," said the mate.

"Tommy, old lad," whispered Wriggs, "I have gone fishing as a boy, and ketched all manner o' things, heels, gudgeons, roach and dace, and one day I ketched a 'normous jack, as weighed almost a pound. I ketched him with a wurrum, I did, but I never seed no fishing like this here."

"Nobody never said you did, mate," growled Smith.

"Well, we did not come here to catch fish for the big ones to eat," said the mate. "Have another try, and you must be sharper. Look here, Mr Lane—No, no, don't take that head off," he cried, "that will make a splendid bait. Throw it in as it is."

Oliver nodded, threw out the hook and lead again, and saw that the bait must have fallen into a shoal right out in the opening, for there was a tremendous splashing instantly, a drag, and he was fast into another, evidently much larger fish.

"Now then, bravo, haul away, my lad," cried the mate. "You must have this one. Ah! Gone!"

"No, not yet," said Lane, who was hauling away, for a huge fish had dashed at his captive but struck it sidewise, driving it away instead of getting a good grip, and in a few moments the prisoner was close in, but followed by the enemy, which made another dash, its head and shoulders flashing out of the water, close up to the rock. Then it curved over and showed its glittering back and half-moon shaped tail, as it plunged down again, while Lane had his captive well out upon the rock, looking the strangest two-headed monster imaginable, for the hook was fast in its jaws, with the head used for a bait close up alongside, held tightly in place by the beaten-out end of the shank of the line.

"Well done: a fifteen pounder," cried the mate, as the captive was secured, the sailors hurriedly getting it into the biscuit bag they had brought, for fear that it should leap from the rock back into the sea.

Five minutes after Drew hooked another fish, but it was carried off by a pursuer and the hook was drawn in bare. Almost at the same moment Panton struck another and then stamped about the rock in a rage, for before he could get it to the land it was seized by a monster, there was a tug, a snap, and hook, snood, and lead were all gone.

"We must rig up some different tackle, gentlemen," said the mate. "You want larger hooks, with twisted wire and swivels. Got him again, Mr Lane?"

"Yes, and—ah, there's another of those sea snake things. Yes, he has carried it off. My word! How strong they are."

"All right, try again, sir. Use that fish's head once more."

"But it's so knocked about. Never mind: stick it on, Smith."

"Stuck on it is, sir," said the man, and it was thrown in, but some minutes elapsed before it was taken, and then not until it was being dragged in, when a fish seized it, was hooked fast, and another struggle commenced, during which, as a snake dashed at it, Oliver gave the line a snatch and baulked the creature. But, quick as lightning, it was at it again, seized it with its teeth, and was in the act of constricting it, when the maddened fish made a tremendous leap out of the water, dragging the writhing snake with it, and again escaping its coils, while, as Oliver made another snatch, he drew the two right out on to the rock, running a few paces so as to get his captive right into the middle.

The effect was that the snake was dislodged, and a panic set in as the creature, which was fully six feet long and thick in proportion, began to travel about over the surface of the rock with a rapid serpentine motion, everyone giving way till it reached the side and glided into the water once more.

"Why didn't yer get hold of his tail, Billy?" cried Smith. "Yer might ha' stopped it. Dessay them sort's as good eating as heels."

"I should, Tommy, only I thought you wanted to have a mate. But I never see no fishing like this afore."

"Look here, Mr Rimmer," cried Oliver, just then, and he pointed to the large handsome fish he had taken, showing

that a half-moon shaped piece had been bitten clean out of its back by the sea snake. "Do you think this will be good now."

"I should not like to venture upon it," replied the mate, and, after the bitten piece had been cut thoroughly out, the rest was utilised for making attractive bait, with which they had more or less sport—enough though to enable them to take back full sixty pounds of good fish to the brig, but not until the boat had been run ashore and carefully secured and hidden in the cocoa-nut grove.

Chapter Twenty One.

Seeking Black Shadows.

That evening and the next day were devoted to careful investigation of the shores, three parties being formed and sent out well armed, to see whether the crew of the canoe had landed farther to the south, or round on the western coast. The orders were that if the enemy was discovered, the search parties were not to show themselves if they could avoid it, but to fall back at once to the ship and report what they had seen.

Those who stayed behind had the duty of doing everything possible in the way of putting the brig in a state of defence. The superintendence of this task was undertaken by the mate, Oliver giving up the expedition, which he would have liked to join, so as to stay and help Mr Rimmer.

They worked hard together. Wriggs and Smith, who both volunteered to stay as soon as they knew that Oliver was not going, toiling away till it was felt that nothing more could be done; and the conclusion was come to that, unless an attacking party of savages came provided with some form of ladder, they would be unable to mount to the deck. The bobstay having been removed, the gangways fortified, all this, with the commanding position the defenders would occupy, rendered the brig a thoroughly strong little fort, almost impregnable so long as the enemy did not think of enlisting fire in their service when they made their attack.

"Plenty of guns, plenty of ammunition, water and provisions in abundance, and enough British pluck to fight, I don't think we shall hurt much, Mr Lane. But let's hope that they will not come."

As sunset neared, first one and then the other search parties came back with the same report—that they had examined the offing from the highest points they could reach, and also from the shore; but there was no sign of any canoe or of the blacks having landed.

The next day the search was repeated, and again upon the following day, from the end of the mist bank right round the coast; but they were alone upon the strange land, and it was evident that the savages in the canoe must have been journeying right away to some distant spot, and in all probability they would never be seen again.

This being so, it was resolved to combine in one expedition the search for the savages on the other side of the mist and the ascent of the mountain, from up whose slope it was hoped that the glasses would sweep the shore all round, proving whether there was a native village, and at the same time setting at rest the question of their being upon island or mainland.

The opportunity was favourable, for, though the soft steamy cloud floated over the land as before, shutting them off from the mountain slope, the volcano had been for days perfectly quiet—there had been no explosions, no subterranean rumblings or shocks, everything pointed to the fact that the eruption was at an end, and the mountain settling down into a state of quiescence.

"I should like to go with you very much," said the mate. "I've had a short ladder knocked together for mounting steep bits and making a bridge over rifts and cracks, and I have a kind of longing to see what a crater is like."

"Well, you are coming, of course," said Oliver.

"No, I'm going to stay and take care of my ship. Why, if I went with you I should take it as a matter of course that a canoe would land close to our boat, and the savages come straight across to the brig and plunder her. It would be sure to happen if I went away."

"Nonsense!" cried Oliver, laughing.

"Ah! you may call it so, young gentleman, but I know how these things will happen. No, I stop by my ship, and if the beggars do come, the men and I will make a stiff fight of it till you folk come back to help me drive them to their canoe."

No persuasion would alter the mate's plans, but he eagerly forwarded those of the naturalists, and arranged for Smith and Wriggs to bear them company, even offering two more men, but Panton was of opinion that the smaller their number was the more likely they were to be successful, and the next morning they started—a well armed party, Wriggs and Smith carrying a ladder and little tent, the others the food and water.

Then in due time the boat was reached and rowed along the lagoon till the end of the mist and the effervescent water were passed, and at last, a good mile farther than the attempt had been before, they put ashore, drew up their boat in the cocoa-nut grove which went on far as eye could reach, and, with the men shouldering the traps after the boat had been hidden, they started over fresh ground for the slope.

The route was plain enough if they could follow it, for there, high above them, was the balloon-like cloud of steam and smoke floating over the crater, the only mist in the pure blue sky, and looking dazzling in the sunshine as a film

of silver.

"I don't see why we cannot easily do it," said Panton, as he shifted his gun from one shoulder to the other. "What we have to do is to avoid the thick forest and make at once for the slope of cinders and ashes. Then we can zigzag up. It looks no distance to the top, and we could do it easily to-night."

But the mate's plan was considered the best: to get some distance up and pitch their tent at the edge of the forest at its highest point, and then have their good night's rest and start upward as soon as it was daylight.

They carried out this idea, skirting round the dense patch of forest, and getting above it to the open ground, where they had to wind in and out among rifts and blocks of lava which formed a wilderness below the ash slope. Then, going close to the forest edge, they soon found water, a couple of little sources bubbling out from among the rocks, and oddly enough within a few yards of each other, one being delicious, cool, and sweet, the other so hot that they could hardly immerse their hands, and when it was tasted it was bitter and salt to a degree.

While the two men set up the tent and made a fire to boil the kettle, a short expedition was made by the three young naturalists, it being a settled thing that there was to be no collecting next day, but every nerve was to be strained to reach the mountain top.

The ash slope ran up rapidly from where they stood, as they shouldered their guns and looked about them, and naturally feeling that they would have enough of that the next morning they turned down among the lava blocks for a short distance and then paused before plunging into the forest below.

From where they stood they were high enough to see that there was not so much as a bush above; all was grey, desolate, and strange, and the wonder to them was that the trees beneath them had not been burned up in one or other of the eruptions which must have taken place. Possibly, they felt, the sea winds had had some effect upon the falling ashes and hot steamy emanations and driven them from the forest, but it was a problem that they could not explain, and it was given up for the instant and left for future discussion.

There were other things to see that hot late afternoon, each full of wonder and beauty, and appealing to one or other of the party, each man finding enough to satisfy even his great desire for knowledge; and in turn, and with plenty of tolerance for each other's branch of study, they paused to examine incrustations of sulphur, glorious orchids, and bird and beetle, gorgeous in colour, wonderful in make.

But nothing was collected, only noted for future exploration, and, growing faint, hot, and weary after an hour's walking at the edge of the forest, they turned to retrace their steps, when Panton stepped upward for a few yards to try the edge of a little slope of fine ash—for the heat there was intense.

To his surprise the ashes into which he plunged his hands were quite cool, and yet the air around was at times almost suffocating.

"Must be a downward draught from the mountain top," said Panton at last, and then he looked sharply round, for Oliver had suddenly cocked his gun.

"What is it?" asked the others.

"Look out. There's something or somebody tracking us just inside the trees. I've seen the leaves move several times, but always thought it was the wind."

"Hallo! Hark!" cried Drew, excitedly. "Don't you hear?"

It was nearly sunset, and the little party knew that they had about an hour's walk before they could reach camp. The darkness was fast approaching, but they stopped short to listen.

In vain for a few minutes, and they were about to start again, when the sound that had arrested Drew's attention was heard plainly now by all—a long, low, piteous cry as of some one in agony, and in the great solitude of the mountain-side the cry was repeated, sending a chill of horror through the bravest there.

Chapter Twenty Two.

Tommy Smith's Ghost.

"Must be one of the men," said Oliver, excitedly. "Come on."

"But that thing you saw below there among the trees?"

"We can't stop about that. It's some kind of great cat. I'll try this."

He raised his gun and fired quickly in among the trees to scare the creature, whatever it might be, and there came in response a snarling yell, followed by a crashing, as of the animal bounding away through the undergrowth.

Directly after there came from high up a second report, as if from a minor explosion of the volcano, but it was evidently only the echo of the gun.

There was another sound though, which was far more startling and awe-inspiring, and made the three young men draw together and stand gazing upward, waiting to find which direction would be the safest in which to flee.

For, directly after the echo, there was a strange whispering noise as of cinders sliding one over the other a long distance away and right up towards the crater above their heads.

As naturalists they knew on the instant what this meant, and it struck all in the same way—that it resembled the falling of a little hard granulated ice in a mountain—the starting of an avalanche. And as the ash and cinder, with the vitrified blocks of stone, lay loose on the mighty slope, they felt that it was quite possible for the firing of the gun to have caused an avalanche of another kind.

In a few seconds they knew that this was the case, for the whispering rapidly increased into a loud rustling, which soon became a rush, and directly after increased to a roar; and now, for the first time, they began to realise how vast the mountain was in its height and extent, for the rushing sound went on and on, gathering in force, and at last Drew exclaimed, as he gazed upward at an indistinct mist apparently travelling down towards them,—

“Come on; we shall be swept away.”

“No, no,” cried Panton and Oliver, almost in a breath; “We may be as safe here as anywhere. Perhaps we should rush into more danger.”

And now the warm, ruddy glow of the setting sun was obscured by rising clouds, which they at once grasped were dust; a semi-darkness came on, and through this they had a glimpse of the mountain-side all in motion and threatening to overwhelm them where they stood.

It was hard work to master the feeling of panic which impelled them to run for their lives, but fortunately they had strength of mind enough to stand fast while the tumult increased, and, joining hands, they kept their places with hearts throbbing, half-suffocated by the dust which now shut them in, while, with a furious roar, the avalanche of cinder, stones, and ashes swept by, not twenty yards from where they stood, and subsided amidst the cracking of boughs and tearing up of trees at the edge of the forest.

It was like the dying sighs of some monster, the sound they heard directly after growing fainter and fainter, till there was the mere whisper made by trickling ashes, then even that subsided, and they stood in a cloud of dust, listening while it slowly rolled away. At last, as they gazed downward, there, below them, to the right, was a huge opening torn into the forest, with broken limbs, prostrate trunks, and great mop-like roots standing up out from a slope of grey cinders and calcined stones.

“What an escape,” muttered Oliver. “Warning: we must not fire again near the mountain.”

“Hark!” cried Panton. “There it is again.”

For, from a distance, came a long, low, mournful shout, and directly after it was repeated, and they made out that it was the familiar sea-going *Ahoy*.

“It’s only one of the men,” said Oliver, and, putting his hand to his mouth, he was about to answer, but Panton checked him.

“Will it bring down another fall?” he whispered.

“No, no. There can be little fear of that now,” said Oliver. “All the loose dusty stuff must have come down,” and he hailed loudly; but his cry had, apparently, no effect, for it was not answered.

“Come on,” said Panton, after a few moments’ pause in the awful silence, which seemed to be far more terrible now, after the fall; and in the gathering darkness they started off, with the edge of the forest on their right to guide them. But the first part of their journey was not easy, for they had to climb and struggle through the ash and cinders, which had fallen, for a space of quite a couple of hundred yards before they were upon firm ground.

Then, as they stopped for a few moments to regain their breath, there was the mournful, despairing *Ahoy!* again, but though they answered several times over, there was no response till they had tramped on amidst increasing difficulties for quite a quarter of an hour—that which had been comparatively easy in broad daylight, growing more and more painful and toilsome as the darkness deepened.

Then, all at once, after a response to the mournful *Ahoy*, there came a hail in quite a different tone.

“Ahoy! Where away?”

“All right! Where are you?” cried Oliver.

“Here you are, sir. Here you are,” came from not a hundred yards away, and directly after they met Wriggs.

“It’s you, then, who has been hailing,” cried Oliver. “Why didn’t you answer when we shouted?”

“Did yer shout, sir? Never heerd yer till just now. Thought I should never hear no one again. Got lost and skeered. But I’ve found you at last.”

“Found us, yes, of course. What made you leave Smith and come after us?”

“Didn’t, sir. He left me and lost hisself, and I couldn’t find him. It was soon after we’d lit a fire. He went off to get some more wood and there was an end of him.”

“What, Smith gone?”

"Yes, sir. He's swallowed up in some hole or another, or else eat up by wild beasts. I couldn't find him nowhere, and I couldn't stand it alone there among them serpents."

"Serpents? What, near our camp?" said Drew, who began to think of their adventure in the cabin.

"Yes, sir," said Wriggs, who was all of a tremble from exertion and dread. "I stood it as long as I could, with 'em hissing all round me, and then I felt as though if I stopped alone much longer I should go off my chump."

"What?"

"Go raving mad, sir, so I shoved some more stuff on the fire, and as soon as it began to blaze and crackle there was a bigger hissing than ever, and the serpents all came rushing at me, and I ran for my life and to try and find you."

"Come along," cried Panton. "We must get back and find Smith."

"You never will, sir," said Wriggs, dolefully. "Poor old Tommy's gone. I expect it was the snakes. They must have smelt as it was we who skinned their mates. I had a narrow escape from 'em."

"Did you see them?" asked Oliver.

"Well, sir, I didn't zackly see 'em, but I could hear 'em all about me awful."

"Then you are not sure they were snakes?"

"Not sure, sir? Why, that I am. Nothing else couldn't keep on hissing at you but snakes and serpents. Oh, lor! it's a horful lonesome place, I was a shivering all down my back. Why, not long ago, while I was coming along hailing of yer, I heard a mountain come sliding down like thunder, and shooting loads o' stones."

"You've been scared, Wriggs," said Oliver, as he hurried the man back. "Tell me again."

"What, 'bout being scared, sir?"

"Nonsense, we mustn't be scared at a noise; I mean about Smith wandering away."

"Aren't nowt to tell, sir, only as he went to get some more wood, and the serpents caught him. Swaller a feller up whole, don't they, sir?"

"Serpents do swallow their food whole," said Oliver.

"Ah, that accounts for his not answering when I shouted. Of course, I couldn't hear him or him me if he was swallowed down into some long thing's inside."

"There, that will do," said Oliver, impatiently. "I say, Panton, are we going right?"

"Must be; the edge of the wood is below us on the right."

"But everything looks so different."

"Yes, looks dark," said Drew. "But we ought to be pretty close to the place now."

"I'm afraid we've turned up too much among the rocks. It will be horrible to be lost now. I wish we had not come," said Panton. "We ought to be resting ready for our work to-morrow."

"All right: we've passed the opening into the forest," cried Oliver.

"How do you know?"

"Look back a little, and you'll see the gleam of the fire. There, look."

For, as they stopped and glanced back, there was a sudden blaze of light from some fifty yards below them, as if the fire had fallen together and flashed up.

"I thought we couldn't be far away," continued Oliver.

"Look, look, sir," whispered Wriggs, stopping short, and catching the young man's arm.

"What at? The fire? Yes, I see it."

"No, sir, close to it. There, it's a-moving. Tommy Smith's ghost."

"Ahoy, ghost!" shouted Oliver, as he caught sight of the figure.

"Ahoy it is, sir," came in stentorian tones. "Seen anything o' poor Billy Wriggs, sir? He's wanished."

"Mussy on me, Tommy," shouted Wriggs, running forward to grasp his comrade's hand, "I thought you was a dead 'un."

"Not so bad as that, messmet," said Smith shaking hands heartily, "but I had a nasty tumble down into a sort o' crack place, and it reg'lar stunned me for a bit, and when I come back you was gone."

"But did you hear 'em?" said Wriggs, in a husky whisper.

"Who's 'em?" said Smith.

"Serpents."

"What, a-hissin' like mad?"

"Ay."

"'Tarn't serpents, Billy, it's some hot water holes clost by here, and every now and then they spits steam. Fust time I heerd it I thought it was a cat."

Half an hour later all were sleeping soundly, only one having his slumber disturbed by dreams, and that was Wriggs, who had turned over on his back, and in imagination saw himself surrounded by huge snakes, all in two pieces. They rose up and hissed at him while he struggled to get away, but seemed to be held down by something invisible; but the most horrible part of his dream was that some of the serpents hissed at him with their heads, and others stood up on the part where they had been divided, and hissed at him with the points of their tails.

Chapter Twenty Three.

Up the Mountain.

The sun was shining upon the globular mist which floated high up over the top of the mountain when Panton woke and roused his companions, and while the men raked up the embers, added wood to get the kettle to boil, the three young companions walked to the spring for a bathe, by way of preparation for an arduous day's work. Here they found, deep down in a crack among the rocks, quite an extensive pool, into which the hot spring flowed, and a journey of thirty or forty yards among the rocks, exposed to the air, was sufficient to temper its heat into a pleasant warmth, whose effects were delicious, giving to the skin, as it did, consequent upon the salts it contained, a soft, silky feeling, which tempted them to stay in longer.

"It wouldn't do," said Panton, withdrawing himself from the seductive influence of the bath. "It would be enervating, I'm sure."

"Yes, let's dress," cried Oliver, and soon after they were making a hearty meal, gazing up at the great slope they had to surmount, and noting as they ate, the sinuous lines which appeared here and there upon the mountain-side, and which they knew, from experience, to be cracks.

"Must dodge all of them, if we can," said Panton with his mouth full. "If not, Smith must lay the ladder across for a bridge."

"But, I say, Lane," said Drew, after gazing upward for some time in silence, "didn't you lay it on a bit too thick when we found you?"

"Yes," said Panton, "about the difficulty of the climb. Why, it looks nothing. Only a hot tiring walk. I say, we ought to be peeping down into the crater in an hour's time."

"Yes, we ought to be," said Oliver, drily. "Look sharp, my lads, eat all you can, and then let's start. The tent can stay as it is till we come back. We'll take nothing but some food and our bottles of water. You carry the ladder, Wriggs, and you that long pole and the ropes, Smith."

"Ay, ay, sir," said the men in duet, and a quarter of an hour later Oliver, as having been pioneer, took the lead, and leaving the rugged rocky ground they planted their feet upon the slope and began to climb.

"Don't seem to get much nearer the top," said Drew at the end of two hours, when he had proposed that they should halt for a few minutes to admire the prospect, in which Panton at once began to take a great deal of interest.

"No, we haven't reached the top yet," said Oliver, drily.

"What a view!" cried Drew. "Oughtn't we soon to see the brig?"

"No," replied Oliver; "if we cannot see the mountain from the vessel, how can we expect to see the vessel from the mountain? Ready to go on?"

"Yes, directly," said Panton. "You can see the ocean, though, and the surf on the barrier reef. But I don't see any sign of savages."

"Phew! What's that?" cried Drew, suddenly.

"Puff of hot air from the mountain, or else from some crack. There must be one near."

Oliver looked round and upward, but no inequality was visible, and they climbed slowly and steadily up for some hundred yards before Panton, who was now first, stopped short.

"I say, look here!" he cried. "We're done, and must go back."

Oliver joined him, and then gazed away to the west.

"This is the great crack I told you about," he said, "but it is much narrower here."

"And not so deep, eh?" said Panton, with a slight sneer.

"That I can't say," replied Oliver; "deep enough if you could look straight down. Here, Smith, let's have the ladder. Will it reach?"

The two men came up with the light ladder and pushed it across to find that it was long enough to act as a bridge with a couple of feet to spare.

"But it looks too risky," said Drew, while the two sailors glanced at each other and scratched their heads as they wondered whether one of them would be sent forward to try the ladder's strength.

"Yes, it looks risky," said Oliver, coolly, "but we have to do it."

"No, no," said Panton warmly, "it is too bad. I was disposed to chaff you, Lane, because you threw the hatchet a little about your adventures. It would be madness to cross that horrible rift."

"Hear, hear," said Smith, in an undertone.

"As aforesaid," said Wriggs.

"We're going across there," said Lane, coolly. "It's the nearest way up and only needs care."

"But, oh! poof!" exclaimed Drew, "you can smell a horrible reek coming up."

"Yes, that's what we keep getting puffs of as we climb. Give me the end of that coil of line, Smith."

"Ay, ay, sir."

"Will it bear me?"

"Half a dozen o' your sort, sir. It's quite noo."

"Good," said Oliver, securing the end tightly about his chest.

"Then you're going to venture?" said Panton.

"Of course, and you're all coming, too. But you'll hold the line and if the ladder breaks or I slip off, you'll hang on and drag me out?"

"Of course. But—"

"Never mind the buts," said Oliver, smiling, and just then, piqued by his companion's banter, he would have crossed had the danger been far greater.

"I say," cried Drew, "won't the sides crumble in from under the ladder?"

"Not likely," said Oliver, coolly; "there's a little ash at the edges, but just below it is solid lava rock."

"Yes, that's so; and this is a huge crack formed in the cooling," said Panton.

"Ready!" cried Oliver. "Hold the rope so that there is no drag upon me, but be ready to tighten."

No one spoke, and Oliver walked to the ladder, placed one foot upon a round, leaned forward, and looked down.

"You can see here," he said, without turning his head, "it goes down till all is black darkness. Now then, let the rope slide through your finger. Ready?"

"Yes, all right."

Then, to the horror of all, instead of going down upon hands and knees, and crawling across, Oliver stepped boldly on upright from round to round, till he reached the centre, where he stopped short, for the slight poles of the ladder had given and given, sinking lower, till it seemed as if they must break. Oliver knew it well, and had stopped short, expecting to feel the check of the rope, which grew moist in the hands which involuntarily tightened around it. The party in safety watched with starting eyes, and breath held till, after a pause of some seconds, which appeared to be prolonged into minutes, the bending ladder began to spring and creak again, as, with his balance regained, Oliver stepped on, round by round, and then reached the other side. Only about a dozen feet, but to all it seemed like a horrible, long journey of the greatest peril.

"Lane, lad," cried Panton, excitedly, as soon as his friend was over, "what madness to go like that!"

"Shouldn't have thought me a coward and a boaster, then," said Oliver, sitting down about three yards from the edge of the chasm, and unfastening the rope from about his chest. "But it isn't safe to come like that; I nearly lost my balance, the ladder bends so. Besides, it will bear you better if you distribute your weight and come on all fours."

"It's not safe even to do that," said Drew, sharply.

"As aforesaid," grumbled Wriggs.

"Oh, yes," said Oliver, smiling, "you can fasten the rope around you Alpine fashion, and I shall hold one end; the others will hold the second end, so that we shall all have you safely enough."

"All right," said Drew, shortly, and he made a loop, passed it over his head and shoulders, tightened it, and advanced.

"Now then, draw in the line."

This was done, and with Oliver sitting with his heels firmly against a projection of the rock, and hauling in foot by foot, and the others giving, Drew went down on hands and knees, gripped the sides of the ladder, and crawled across, the wood cracking a good deal, but not bending nearly so much.

"There," said Oliver, as Drew unfastened the rope, "now you can help me hold, and Panton can come over."

"I'm going to walk across," said Panton, firmly.

"No, you are not, man," cried Oliver; "you will crawl. We must run no risks to-day."

Panton grumbled, but obeyed, crawling across in safety after coming to a standstill in the middle and losing his nerve as he gazed down between the rounds.

Then Wriggs came, and Smith was left to run as much risk as Oliver, for he had only rope holders on the farther side, but he went across boldly enough and without hesitation, the rope being steadily gathered in, and when he was over he took a good grip of the ladder and drew it across as well.

"I beg your pardon, Lane," said Panton, in a voice that only his companion could hear. "It was only banter, but I ought to have known better."

"All right, old fellow," cried his companion. "There, say no more."

The sun was growing intensely hot now, as Smith shouldered the ladder, and they once more started up the slope, which rapidly grew steeper, so stiff indeed was the ascent that Oliver, who led, after trying the zigzag approach and finding it too difficult, bore away to the east, making the ascent more gradual, and as if the intention was to form a corkscrew-like path round the upper part of the mountain.

"We've done wrong," he said, after a couple of hours' struggle upwards, "we ought to have gone to the west, and then by this time we should have been in the shade instead of roasting here."

They had paused to have a bit of lunch and rest, for the heat was intense now, and the cracks or rifts in the mountain slope more frequent, but they were not half the width of that which had been just crossed, and as the party had grown more confident they took each in turn readily enough.

"We must make the best of it now," said Panton, "and I can't help thinking that we are doing right."

"Why?" asked Drew.

"It seems to me that it would be impossible to get up to the crater edge on account of these horrible hot gases which rise from the cracks. We had better aim at getting round to the other side, and looking out from there as high up as we can climb. We shall know then whether the place is an island. What do you say, Lane?"

"The same as you do. I've been thinking so for an hour. You see, the ashes get looser as we climb higher, and the mountain steeper. What looked easy enough from below proves to be difficult in the extreme, and if we go much higher I feel sure that we shall set loose a regular avalanche and begin sliding down altogether."

A quarter of an hour later they started off again somewhat refreshed, but suffering terribly from the volcanic heat radiating from the ashes as well as from that from the sun, but they pressed on steadily, rising higher and gradually getting round the north slope, though the farther they tramped over the yielding ashes, the more they were impressed by the fact that the mountain was ten times greater than they had imagined it from below.

At last, late on in the afternoon, Oliver stopped short.

"We must get back before dark," he said. "Those chasms have to be passed. What do you say, shall we go now?"

His proposal was agreed to at once, and they turned to have a good look round. Above them towered the truncated cone looking precisely as it did from the place where they had started that morning, and, while Oliver adjusted his glass, Panton took out a pocket-compass, and Drew, a watch-like aneroid barometer.

"I can see nothing but the barrier reef just as it was when we started. Where are we now?" said Oliver. "Nearly north-east, are we not? and sea, sea, sea, everywhere, nothing but sea in this direction."

"We are looking due north," said Panton, as the needle of his compass grew steady.

"What, have we after all got round to the other side?"

"Seems so."

"Then the place is an island."

"Unless it joins the mainland somewhere west," said Panton.

"As far as I can see there is no land north or west. If we are on the northern side now we must be able to see it at this height. How high are we, Drew?"

"Just over four thousand feet, and I should say the mountain goes up quite two thousand more, but it is very deceiving. Then we are upon an island?"

"Hurrah!" cried Panton.

"I don't see where the hurrah comes in," said Oliver, quietly, "but I'm glad that our journey has not been without some result."

"I should have liked to get to the top though," said Panton, looking upward wistfully.

"I say, you two," said Drew, "we were to give a good look round for the niggers."

"I've been doing so," said Oliver, whose eyes were still at his glass, "and there isn't a sign of a hut, boat, or savage. Nothing but a barrier reef shutting in a beautiful lagoon, and the cocoa-nut palms fringing its edge."

"What about the lower slopes?" asked Drew.

"Dense forest for the most part, cut through every here and there by what looks like old lava streams, which reach the lagoon, and form cliffs."

"Then this side of the island is better wooded than the other?"

"Evidently, and there are two little streams running down from the dark chaos of rock, that look to me different from the rest of the mountain. You have a look, Panton."

The latter took the glass and stood sweeping the mountain slope for some minutes, during which Smith and Wriggs sat down, and lit their pipes for a restful smoke.

"All plain enough, as far as I can judge, my lads. That dark part in the most wooded district is an old volcano, and this that we are on seems to be quite new and active. I should say this island has been quiescent for hundreds of years before it burst out into eruption, and sent up this great pile of rock and ashes. Now then, what next?"

"Back to the tent before we are overtaken by the darkness," said Drew.

"Can we do it?" said Oliver.

"We're going to try. Now, then, all down-hill over the soft ash, I daresay we shall be able to slide part of the way."

"No," cried Oliver, emphatically, "it must be fair walking. If we start a slide of ashes and cinders, how are we to stop when we come near one of the crevasses?"

"Or to avoid being buried?" said Drew, "Steady work is the thing."

He had hardly spoken these words when, as if resenting their presence, a roar like thunder came from the crater, and a huge cloud shot up into the clear sky, to curve over like a tree, and as they turned and fled once more, a rain of ashes commenced falling. The darkness of which they had had so terrible an experience, threatened to shut them in high up on that mountain slope, while at any moment in their retreat they were liable to come upon one of the openings that ran deep down into the volcano's fiery core.

Chapter Twenty Four.

An Interesting Failure.

One of the rifts was crossed in the dim twilight, another was avoided by making a circuit, and another by walking along its edge till it narrowed sufficiently for them to spring across, and after one of these bold leaps, Smith, who bore the ladder, said to Wriggs,—

"Feel 'sposed to take to a noo line o' life, messmate, if we ever gets back home?"

"Dunno. What sort?" growled Wriggs.

"Hacerybat and tumbler by appointment to her Majesty."

"What d'yer mean, Tommy?"

"Why, arter this practice we can do anything: balancing on poles, crawling desprit places on ladders, hanging from ropes, and standing over nothing with yer eyes shut. Feel a tug, Billy, when we jumped that last bit?"

"Tug? No. I on'y felt as if I was a bit a' iron, and there was a big loadstone down in the hole, trying to pull me in."

"Well, that's what I meant—a tug."

"Bah! there's only one kind o' tug—a steam tug, and there's none here for a man to feel."

"What, aren't there a tug-o'-war?"

"Not here, messmet. But I say, I don't stomach this here darkness. It's like being at work in the hold. Mind!"

"All right, I see it coming, mate," said Smith, as a great lump of cinder fell close to him. "Didn't touch me."

"Miss is as good as a mile, mate, eh? But don't it seem as if someone up above was heaving these stones at us because we are not wanted here."

"Come along, my lads!" cried Oliver, halting for them to hasten up. "Take my gun, Smith, and I'll carry the ladder for a bit."

"Not me, sir, begging your pardon. This here ladder's about the awkwardest and heaviest ladder as ever was for his size."

"Then let me rest you."

"No, sir. I've got used to it now. You couldn't carry it. Could he, Billy?"

"Not much, lad. We're all right, sir. You go on and show us the way. If you manage, we can."

"Better let me rest you, my lad."

"Thank-ye, no, sir, Billy and me lays it down in the dust now and then, and sits on the edge for a rest. We're doing pretty comfortable, and only wants to get down to the tent to tea."

"All right, then."

The darkness increased for a while, and they came dangerously near being struck by stones several times over, but escaped as if by a miracle. Then just as they were approaching one of the worst of the gaps, the cloud of smoke and ashes floated gradually away, they obtained a glimpse of the bright blue sky and were able to cross the crevice in safety, though conscious all the while that a great body of suffocating vapour was now rising from the depths below.

The rest of the descent to the great rift was made in the bright afternoon sunshine, every nerve being strained to get that passed before darkness fell, and as Wriggs, who came last this time, reached the edge where the others were hauling in the line they all set up a hearty cheer, and gathering up the rope, set off as if refreshed, for the dangers of the ascent were at an end.

"An hour will do it," cried Oliver. "Then a warm bath, a good meal, a night's rest, and we shall be all right."

"But we did not get to the top," said Panton.

"Well, what of that? We've found out that we are upon an island, and we have left something else to do another day, for we must get to the edge of the crater before we've done."

"And now what next?" said Drew, as they tramped on down the soft ash bed, after carefully mapping out their course to the hot-spring camp.

"Food and rest."

"No, no, I mean about our proceedings."

"Let Mr Rimmer construct a boat if he likes. It will keep him busy, and take I daresay a couple of years. During that time we can collect a cargo of specimens, and thank our stars that we have fallen in such good quarters."

In spite of marking down the trees and rocks where the hot springs lay, the natural darkness of night made their task by no means easy. Objects looked so different, and after they had reached the end of the ash slope, the inequalities of the surface were so great that they lost their way several times over, and at last it was decided to lie down and rest under the shelter of a huge tree, when Smith suddenly exclaimed,—

"Why, this here's where I got some of the firewood last night."

"Nonsense," said Panton pettishly.

"It was somewheres here as I broke a big branch off, one as was dead."

"If it were, you would find the stump," said Panton.

"Course I should, sir, and here it is," growled the man.

"What!" shouted Oliver. "Then the tent must be close by."

"Round at the back of a big mask o' rock, sir, as is the hardest and sharpest I ever broke my shins again. It ought to be just about where Billy Wriggs is a-lighting of his pipe."

"Want me, matey?"

"Yes. Look if there's a lot o' rock behind you."

"Ay, I am a-leaning again it."

"There you are, sir! I'll go on and light the fire and set the kettle to boil," said Smith, and ten minutes after there was a ruddy blaze lighting up the rocks and trees; a good tea meal followed, and forgetting all perils and dangers, the little party lay down to rest and enjoy the sound sleep that comes to the truly tired out.

Chapter Twenty Five.

"Pot First."

The night passed peaceably enough, and though every now and then there was a violent hissing from close at hand, it was not noticed till just at daybreak, when Smith, who had grown brave and reckless with knowledge, drove his elbow into his messmate's ribs.

"All right," growled Wriggs, drowsily, "but t'arnt our watch, is it?"

"Watch? No, rouse up, my lad. Steam's up."

"Eh? What? Steam?"

Css, came loudly from a crevice in the rocks so suddenly and sharply, that the sailor sprang up in alarm.

"Oh," he grumbled, directly after, "it's them hot water works. I thought it was a snake."

"Who said snakes?" cried Drew, waking up.

"I did, sir, but it ain't. It's to-morrer morning, and we're getting up."

"I have raked the fire together, sir, and put the billy on to byle," said Smith,—“not meaning you, messmate.”

"Time to get up?" cried Oliver, and he sprang to his feet. "Come on, Panton, who's for a bath?"

They all were, and coming back refreshed partook of a hearty meal which exhausted their supplies, all but the condiments they had provided, and necessitated an immediate return to the brig.

"Only it seems a pity," said Oliver, as the cries of birds could be heard in different directions, while butterflies of bright colours darted here and there, and the trees were hung with creepers whose racemes and clusters of blossoms gladdened Drew's eyes.

"Yes, it seems a pity," said Panton, taking out his little hammer and beginning to chip at a piece of rock.

"There is so little to be seen close to the brig," said Oliver thoughtfully, as he took out his handkerchief and began to polish a speck of rust from the barrel of his double gun.

"And I haven't collected half so much as I should like to have done," said Drew.

"Think Mr Rimmer would be very uneasy if we stayed here for the day and did a little collecting?"

"Not he," said Panton. "But what about prog?"

"I'll shoot three or four pigeons," suggested Oliver.

"Three or four, why, I could eat half a dozen for dinner."

"Think so?" said Oliver, smiling; "I doubt it."

"But I'm getting hungry again already, although I've just breakfasted. I say, though, surely we could shoot enough for our dinner. What do you say, Drew, shall we stop till evening and collect?"

"I'm willing."

"What do you say then, Lane?"

"By all means, this forest land at the bottom of the volcano slope is swarming with good things. We'll stay about here all the morning, and after dinner begin to work back to the boat. So long as we can reach it by the time it grows dark we shall be all right."

"Yes, there's no fear of making a mistake when once we get into the lagoon," said Panton. "I could find my way to the boat-house blindfold."

"Boat-house?" cried Drew.

"Well, the cocoa-nut grove," said Panton, laughing. "Then, of course, we can easily find our way to the brig. I say, I'm precious glad that we have seen no signs of the niggers. It would have been very awkward if we had found that they lived here."

"Instead of our having the island all to ourselves," said Drew.

"But this must once have been part of some mainland," Oliver remarked, thoughtfully. "Apes and leopards would hardly be found upon islands unless they have been cut off by some convulsion of nature."

"This must have been cut off by some convulsion of nature," said Panton quickly, and then, as he pointed upward toward the volcano, "and there's the convulser ready to do anything. There, come along, no more scientific discussions. Let's collect, but, first of all, we must think of the pot."

"Are we coming back here?" asked Drew.

"Decidedly," cried Lane. "We'll make this camp still. Make up the fire, Smith, and you two can come with us till we have shot enough for dinner and then come back here and do the cooking."

"Right, sir," replied Smith. "Come along, Billy."

The fire was well drawn together and replenished with fuel, and then, shouldering their guns, the party started; but upon Oliver Lane glancing back he called a halt.

"Here, Wriggs," he cried, "we don't want that ladder, nor those ropes, Smith."

"Don't yer, sir?"

"No, we are going along the edge of the forest. Take those things back."

The ladder and ropes were taken back and then a fresh start was made, the explorers keeping well to the edge of the forest for several reasons, the principal being that they could easily get out toward the barren slope of the mountain, and the travelling was so much easier as they formed a line and beat the undergrowth for specimens and game.

"Pot first, you know," said Panton, "science later on. Are we likely to get a deer of any kind, Lane?"

"No," said Drew decisively.

"Why not?" said Lane. "We have seen that there are leopards, and leopards must have something to live upon. I should say that we may find some small kind of deer."

"Leopards might live on the monkeys," said Panton.

"Perhaps so, but I'm prepared for anything in a place like this. What's that?"

"I can hear one of them steam engyne birds coming along, sir," said Wriggs, from behind.

"What birds?"

"One of them rooshy rashy ones, sir, as you called blow-horn-bills, and makes such a noise with their wings."

"Hornbills without the blow, my man," said Lane, laughing. "Look out, all of you. Hornbills are fruit-eating birds, and would be good roasted."

There was the sharp clicking of gun-locks as the rushing sound of big wings was heard four times over; but the birds passed to right or left to them, hidden by the trees, and all was silent again, till after a few hundred yards had been passed something got up in a dense thicket and went off through the forest at a tremendous rate.

"Lane, man, why didn't you fire?" cried Panton reproachfully.

"Because I have a habit of looking at what I shoot, and I never had a glimpse of this. Did you see it, Drew?"

"I? No."

"Please, sir, I just got one squint at it," said Smith. "You did, too, didn't you, Billy?"

"I sin it twice," said Wriggs. "It was a spotty sort o' thing, and it went through the bushes like a flash."

"It must have been a leopard, then," said Panton.

"No," said Oliver decisively, "not that made the loud crashing noise. One of those great cats would have glided away almost in silence. I fancy that it was some kind of deer. Keep on steadily and we may hunt up another."

But they tramped on for quite an hour, without any such good fortune, though had their aim solely been collecting specimens, their opportunities were great. For at every opening sun-birds flitted here and there, poising themselves before some blossom which they probed with their long curved bills, and sent forth flashes from their brilliant plumage like those from cut and polished gems. Every now and then too, thrush-like birds flew up from beneath the bushes—thrush-like in form but with plumage in which fawn or dove colour and celestial blues preponderated. Mynahs and barbets were in flocks: lorries and paroquets abundant, and at last Lane stopped short and held up his hand, for from out of a patch of the forest where the trees towered up to an enormous height, and all beneath was dim and solemn-looking as some cathedral, there came a loud harsh cry, *waark, waark, wok, wok, wok*, and this was answered several times from a distance.

"Only some kind of crow," said Panton, "and we don't, as the American backwoodsman said, 'kinder hanker arter crow.'"

"Kind of crow? yes, of course," said Oliver impatiently. "That's the cry of the great bird of Paradise. Come along quietly, we must have some specimens of them."

"No, no," cried Panton. "If we fire at them good-bye to any chance of a deer. Steal up and have a look at them, we shall have plenty more chances."

Oliver was strongly tempted to fire, for just then a bird skimmed down from on high into the gloom beneath the trees, and they had a glimpse of the lovely creature, with its long, loose, yellowish plumage streaming out behind as if it were a sort of bird-comet dwelling amongst the trees. Then it was gone, and the young man consoled himself with the thought that had he fired the chances were great against his hitting, and it would have been like a crime to let the bird go off wounded and mutilated to a lingering death.

He thought this as they stood listening to the cries of the birds, harsh, powerful, and echoing as they rang out in all directions.

"Not the kind o' bird as I should choose for his singing, eh, Billy?" said Smith, suddenly breaking the silence of the gloomy spot.

"Well, no, Tommy, can't say as I should either for the sake o' the moosic, but there's a deal o' body in it."

"I wish we could get hold of something with some body in it that we should care to eat."

"There's a something upon that tree yonder, sir," said Smith, "one o' them little black boy chaps. See him, sir?"

"I can," whispered Drew. "It's quite a large monkey."

"He'd eat good, wouldn't he, sir?" said Wriggs.

"Yes, for cannibals," said Oliver, shortly, as he took out his double glass and focussed it upon a black face peering round a tall, smooth trunk, quite a hundred feet from the ground. "Look, there's another. But time's running on. Hadn't we better get back into a more open part and begin collecting?"

"If you wish me to die of starvation," said Panton. "I can't work without food."

"Then for goodness' sake let's get on," said Oliver, pettishly, and he hurried beneath the tree where the first monkey had been seen, and as he passed a good-sized piece of stick whizzed by his ear and struck the ground.

"See that, Billy?" said Smith.

"Ah, I see it."

"Lucky for that little nigger as they're a good-hearted Christian sort o' gentlemen. If they warn't he'd go home to his messmates peppered all over with shot, and feelin' like a sore currant dumpling."

Another half-hour was passed of what Oliver dubbed the most aggravating natures for beautiful specimens of bird, insect, flower, and mineral abounded, while the whole of their attention had to be devoted to providing food.

"I don't believe there are any deer to be had," he cried at last, and then he stopped short in the sunny grove, where they had halted to take a few minutes' rest. "What's that?"

"I was going to ask you," said Panton.

For the peculiar noise they had heard upon a former occasion came from a short distance away, deep-toned, soft, and musical, as if a tyro were practising one note upon a great brass instrument.

"Quick, come on," whispered Oliver, excitedly, and leading the way he signed to his companions to come on abreast, and in this form they went on cautiously in the direction of the sound, till Drew suddenly took a quick aim through an opening, and fired both barrels of the piece in rapid succession.

Instantly there was a tremendous beating of wings, and a little flock of half-a-dozen large, dark birds rose up, affording Oliver and Panton each a shot, with the result that a couple of the birds fell heavily.

Then the two men behind cheered, there was a rush forward through the thick growth, and four of the huge crowned pigeons were retrieved—lovely dark slate-coloured birds, which looked with their soft, loose plumage and beautiful crests, nearly double the size of ordinary farm-yard fowls.

"Now," cried Oliver, triumphantly, "back with you to the fire, and pluck and cook those. We will be with you in a couple of hours' time. But I say, Panton, you won't eat half-a-dozen?"

The two men seized a bird in each hand, grinning with delight, and started off for the edge of the wood at a run, but Smith stopped and turned.

"Byled or roast, sir?" he cried.

"Roast, of course," said Oliver. "You have nothing to boil them in."

"Byling spring, sir."

"Nonsense, man. Off with you. Now," he continued, as the two sailors disappeared, "specimens. A little way farther,

and then turn back.”

Chapter Twenty Six.

Danger Signals.

Oliver suffered from a sensation of disappointment during those next two hours, for he regretted not stripping the skins from the magnificent fruit pigeons, but, as his companions said, he had no cause to complain, for he secured specimens of two beautifully feathered birds of Paradise, of an exceedingly rare kind. In addition he had a couple of brilliant scarlet and green lorries, and half-a-dozen sun-birds, while Drew's collecting box and pockets were full of specimens, and Panton perspired freely beneath his burden of crystals, vitrified rock, and pieces of quartz. Several of these contained specks of metal, and proved satisfactorily that in spite of volcanic eruption and the abundant coral, the nucleus of the land on which they stood was exceedingly ancient, and evidently a part of some continent now submerged.

Smith met them as they approached camp and announced dinner, and in spite of the absence of bread and vegetables, no meat was ever more enjoyed than the roast Goura pigeons, nor greater justice done to the viand.

“Now then for the brig,” said Oliver, decisively. “We must not stop by the way, for the sun will soon be getting low. Mr Rimmer will be coming after us if we are not there in good time, and we've a long tramp yet to get to the shore.”

“Collect as we go?” said Drew.

“Oh no, let's be content with what we have. I shall have enough to do to preserve mine.”

“And I to arrange my little lot,” said Panton. “Here, Smith, carry a few of these.”

“Certeny, sir, but there's heaps of as good stones close to where the brig lies.”

“Never mind that, I want these.”

“All right, sir,” said the man, cheerily, and with a bag of stones and the ropes, and with Wriggs at his side shouldering the ladder, the little party started back, discussing the results of their expedition, and the fact that though they had not climbed to the crater, they had half explored the great mountain. That, and the fact that there were no savages to be seen, they felt was news enough for the mate, while, as to themselves, they were all three more than satisfied with their finds.

The long tramp in the forest before dinner and the dinner itself made the journey back to the shore of the lagoon where they had left the boat seem doubly long, but they reached it at last, just as the west was one glory of amber and gold, and the globular cloud high up over the crater appeared of a rosy scarlet. The long fringe of cocoa palms, too, seemed as if their great pinnate leaves had been cut out of orange metal, and reflected as they were in the glassy water of the lagoon, a scene of loveliness met the travellers' eyes that made them soon forget their weariness, and set to with a will to drag the boat over the sand, and then launch it in the mirror-like sea.

“Now for a gentle pull back,” said Oliver. “Shall we do it before dark?”

“No; and there is no moon.”

“Never mind, we can easily run the boat in among the trees, and avoid the coral blocks and the pools as we walk to the brig. Crocs are pretty active of a night, so let's give them a wide berth.”

“Yes, we must,” said Panton, “for I daresay they'll be getting hungry as they finish all the fish left in their larder.”

“If it had not been for those reptiles in the pools they would have been getting offensive by now.”

“And when they have cleared them out, you think the crocs will journey down to the sea?”

“I haven't a doubt of it,” replied Panton.

“Then I hope they will not have begun their journey to-night, for I'm too tired to care about meeting enemies.”

Their row along the narrow lagoon was glorious with the cocoa-nut grove on one side and the reef with its tumbling billows and subdued roar on the other. Then, as the sun set, the long mirror they traversed and the backs of the curling over breakers were dyed with the most refulgent colours, which grew pale only too soon. When the darkness closed in, the croaking of reptiles and night birds rose from beyond the grove, and the breakers grew phosphorescent and as if illumined by a pale fire tinged with a softened green, while the foam resembled golden spray as it was dashed over the coral sand.

The sailors were relieved from time to time as they rowed on with the stars spangling the still water, so that in the distance it was hard to tell where sea ended and sky began; and at last, dimly seen against the sky, three tall trees marked the spot where they ran up the boat.

“Sure this is right?” asked Oliver, as the sharp prow touched the soft, white sand.

“Oh, yes, sir, this is right enough,” replied Smith. “Here's our marks that we made this morning when we ran her down.”

There was the faintly marked furrow, sure enough, and, all taking hold of the sides, the boat was run up easily enough over the soft, loose sand and then in amongst the smooth, round, curved trunks of the cocoa-nut trees till her old quarters were reached, and the painter secured to a stout stem.

"No fear of tide or wind affecting her," said Oliver; "but how dark it is under these trees. Look here, Smith, I don't think you men need carry that ladder on to-night. Leave it here. It will be ready for next time we try the ascent."

"All right, sir," replied Smith.

"I don't know, though; perhaps it will be as well to bring it along. We'll help you if you get tired."

"I sha'n't get tired o' carrying a thing like that, sir," said the man, with a laugh. Then he shouldered it at once and the start was made for the brig.

They reckoned upon it taking a good hour in the darkness, what with the care they would have to exercise to avoid half-dried pools, scattered fragments of coral rock, and the many heaps of snag-like trees half buried in sand and mud, but when as near as they could guess an hour had passed they were still some distance from the brig and suffering from a feeling of weariness which made them all trudge along slowly and silently in single file.

Oliver was leading with his gun over his shoulder, the piece feeling heavier than it had ever felt before and as if it was increasing in weight each minute.

Smith was behind him with the ropes over his shoulder, and Wriggs now bore the ladder, coming last.

For some minutes they had been walking in utter silence, their footsteps deadened by the soft sand, and a terribly drowsy feeling was coming over Lane, making him long to lie down and sleep, but he fought it back and strained his eyes to gaze forward in search of obstacles, knowing as he did that the others were trusting him to pick out the best road and keep them out of difficulties.

But it was very dark in spite of the stars, and hard to make anything out till, all at once, he saw a misty and strange-looking form run by, about twenty yards ahead.

"What's that?" he said to himself, and then he started, for Smith caught his arm, and whispered,—

"Mr Lane, sir? See that?"

"Yes, what was it? Was it a deer?" and he involuntarily lowered his piece.

"Two legged 'un, sir, if it was," said the man, softly. "Will you call a halt? I think it was a hinjun."

"Nonsense. One of our men, perhaps," said Oliver, testily. "Don't say that and scare them. We're close up to the ship now."

Bang.

The sharp report of a piece came from about a couple of hundred yards farther on.

"There; I knew we were close up to the brig. Mr Rimmer fired that as a signal to let us know the way in the darkness. I'll fire him one back."

The lock clicked and Oliver raised the muzzle to fire, when a ragged volley came from ahead, followed by a savage yelling, and as the sounds struck a chill to every heart there was utter silence. Then came a flash and a bright gleam, which grew brighter and brighter, developing into the sickly glare of a blue light, while as they stood there, fearing to advance, all grasped the meaning of the light.

The brig had been attacked by the Indians. A gallant defence was being made, and the blue light had been thrown out to show where the enemy lay.

Chapter Twenty Seven.

An Awkward Scrape.

The first impulse of Oliver Lane was to drop down flat upon the sun-baked sand and earth, so as to protect himself from being seen in the glare of the blue light. His example was followed by the others, whose thoughts reverted also to the possibility of a bullet intended for the enemy, hitting a friend.

And there they lay listening after the dying out of the yells, and watching the glare from the blue light as it lit up the surroundings of the brig, and then sank lower and lower till all was darkness as well as silence.

Judging from what they heard, Mr Rimmer and his men were safe enough so far, and had been aware of the Indians' attack. But what was to come next?

The watchers asked themselves this question as they lay close together listening for the slightest sound, waiting for a solution of the little problem which had so much to do with their future: Had the enemy seen them when the light was burning?

Long-drawn-out minutes passed as they waited in the darkness, now hopeful, now despondent, for Oliver felt a touch

on his arm simultaneously with a soft, rustling sound, and the *pat, pat* of naked feet going over the sand.

The message of danger was silently telegraphed by a touch to the others, and every weapon was grasped, those who had guns slightly raising the muzzles, while Smith took out his jack-knife to open it with his teeth, and Wriggs, to use his own words—afterwards spoken—“stood by” with the ladder, meaning to use it as a battering-ram to drive it at any enemy who approached.

But the sound passed over to their right, and all was silent again.

“Hadn’t we better creep up to the ship?” whispered Oliver.

“And be shot for enemies?” replied Panton, in the same tone.

“They haven’t seen us, so we had better wait till morning.”

“And then make ourselves marks for spears and arrows.”

“Better than for bullets. I’d rather a savage mop-headed Papuan shot me, than Mr Rimmer did.”

“Hist! Silence!” whispered Drew, who had crept closer. “Enemy.”

He was right, for footsteps were heard again, coming from the direction of the brig, and it seemed like a second party following the first, till it occurred to Panton that this might be the same party returning from passing right round the vessel.

But they had no means of knowing, and a few minutes later they all lay there asking themselves whether they would not have acted more wisely if they had fired a volley into the enemy when they first came up, and followed up the confusion the shots would have caused by rushing to the brig.

“They would not have taken us for the enemy then,” said Drew.

But the opportunity had gone by, and to add to their discomfort, a low, murmuring sound indicated that the savages had come to a halt between them and their friends.

For a good hour the party waited in the hope that the enemy would move away, but it soon became evident that they had settled down for a permanent halt, and the murmur of voices came so clearly to the ear that all felt the danger of attempting to speak, lest they should bring the enemy upon them.

Somehow, in spite of his being the youngest, Drew and Panton fell into the habit of letting Oliver Lane take the post of leader, and when after a long and wearisome period of waiting he whispered his ideas, they were accepted at once, as being the most sensible under the circumstances.

Oliver’s plan was this: to gradually creep back from the position they occupied, until they felt that they were out of hearing, and then to bear off to their left, and gradually get round to the other side of the brig, which would thus be placed between them and the enemy.

The greatest caution was necessary in the presence of so wary a foe, and it was not until this had been duly impressed upon the two sailors that Oliver began the retrograde movement so slowly and softly that his companions could hardly realise the fact that he had started.

Panton followed, then Smith and Wriggs, and Drew brought up the rear.

They had all risen and followed one another in Indian file, almost without a sound. But the murmuring that was made by the Papuans came softly through the darkness, as if the savages were engaged in a debate upon the subject of how they had better make their next attack.

Then all at once there was a sharp crack, for Oliver had stepped upon a large, thin shell, which broke up with a fine ear-piercing sound, that must have penetrated for a long distance.

That it had reached the spot where the Papuans were was evident, for the murmuring of voices ceased on the instant.

“Down. Lie down,” whispered Oliver. “They will come to see what the noise was.”

They lay down upon the soft sand, listening with every nerve upon the strain, but not for long. Before many seconds had passed, there was a peculiar soft, rattling sound such as would be made by a bundle of reed arrows, secure at one end and loose at the other. This noise came nearer, and then at a little distance, as they held their breath, it seemed as if a shadow passed by, and then another, and another.

Oliver’s hand which held his gun trembled, not from fear, but from the nervous strain, and the knowledge that at any moment he might, for the first time in his life, be compelled in self-defence, and for the protection of his companions, to fire upon a party of savages, and so shed the blood of a human being.

He stretched out his left hand as the third shadowy figure went lightly by, and touched Panton’s arm, to have the extended hand caught and pressed warmly.

This was encouraging, and told of a trusty friend ready to help. Then they lay there upon their breasts for some minutes, gazing in the direction taken by the enemy, while the impressive silence continued. At last came a quick, sharp pressure of the hand, which seemed to imply—Look out! Here they come.

For at that moment, the quick, soft beat of feet came again, and three shadowy figures passed so close to them that it seemed impossible for them to remain unseen, but their clothes assimilated so with the sun-burned sand and earth that the enemy passed on, and in a minute or two the murmuring of voices arose once more.

"Come on," whispered Oliver, and he rose quickly, while the word was passed to the others, and they recommenced their retreat, taking every step cautiously.

It was not an easy task, for there was no judging distances by any object, and hence Oliver had to walk straight away into the darkness, till he guessed that he was far enough distant. Then he began to veer round to his right, and he had hardly done this, when from somewhere behind came a sharp sound, best expressed by the word *Thung!* accompanied by a sharp whizz.

No one needed any telling what had produced that noise, for it was evident that one of the Papuans had hung back to keep watch, and hearing if not seeing, he had sent an arrow in the direction by which the party was retreating.

Oliver halted for a few moments with the thought in his mind which took the form "poisoned," and he listened for some exclamation from one or other of his companions indicating pain, or the sound of a fall. But all was still. The others had given up to him as leader, and when he stopped they halted, and when he moved on again they followed, in full expectation of another arrow whizzing by.

But none came, and increasing his speed now and trying as well as he could to move in a curve large enough to carry him round to the other side of the brig, Oliver pressed on.

"Oh, if only they would burn another blue light," he muttered, as striving to pierce the darkness ahead, and with his gun across his breast ready for instant action, he went on and on, with all kinds of curious thoughts occurring to him as his pulses beat heavily, and even his brain seemed to throb. Stories he had read and heard of people who were lost moving in a circle and getting back to the place from which they had started troubled him, others of people wandering about in the dark and going over the same ground, and of others walking right into the very spot they sought to avoid. These and similar thoughts made him break out into a cold perspiration, and wish that Panton had taken the lead.

But all the time he was steadily walking on in the direction he believed to be correct, till he felt at last that he must be level with the brig, then passing it, and again that he must be well on his way now, and that it was time to turn more sharply round and get up to the other side of the vessel. Then—*Splash!*

He drew back with a chill of dread running through his frame, for he had reached the edge of a pool, and there was no water within half a mile of the spot where the brig lay.

"What is it—water?" whispered Panton.

"Yes, I have come wrong."

"No, you haven't, only kept straight on instead of bearing more to your right."

"But I thought I was bearing well to the right," whispered Oliver.

"So did I—too much, but you see you were not. This is the half-dried-up pool, where there are three crocos. I saw them the other day."

"It can't be."

Splash, splash, splash, splash!

Four heavy blows given to the surface of the water by the tail of a great reptile, for the purpose of stunning any fish there might be close at hand.

"Yes; you're right," said Oliver. "Then we ought to bear away to the right now?"

"That's it. Go on."

Fortunately the ground was open now, and there was nothing to dread but the scattered blocks of coral which it was too dark to see, but Oliver stepped out boldly, chancing a fall over any of these obstacles, and for the next ten minutes or so he made pretty good progress, and felt sure that he was going right, for he every now and then stepped short with his right foot.

"I must be near the brig now," he said to himself, and after gradually slackening his pace he stopped short and listened, in the hope of hearing some sound on board the vessel, and to his great joy there was a whispering not far away. Reaching out his hand, he touched Panton, and then placing his lips to his companion's ear he said,—

"Can you hear that?"

"Yes, some one talking."

"Well, I make it out to be on the brig. What are we to do next?"

"Creep a little nearer, and then wait for morning. If we go too close, the next thing will be a shot in our direction."

"Hark!"

"What is it?"

"Listen. Isn't this peculiar?"

Panton was silent there in the darkness for a few minutes, and then with his lips to Oliver's ear,—

"I say," he said, "isn't this rather queer?"

"What? I don't understand you."

"If that's people on the brig she's coming nearer to us; I thought at first that the wind might be bringing the sound, but it isn't. The sound's coming closer."

"Mr Rimmer is down, then, patrolling round with some of his men. Be careful, or they may shoot."

"Not he. Mr Rimmer wouldn't leave his wooden fort in the darkness. Listen."

"Yes, you're right. Whoever it is, is coming this way."

"It's the enemy, then, and we must retreat again."

"But which way? What are we to do? We must be near the brig at daybreak, so that as soon as it is light we may make a rush for it."

"We ought to be, but we mustn't be within sight of Mr Papuan at daybreak; for, so near as we are, we shall have some of his arrows quivering in us. I don't know that I am very much afraid of a wound as a rule, but I am awfully scared about having a poisoned arrow in me. I don't want to die of locked jaw."

"Hist. Back," whispered Oliver. "We must go somewhere, for they're coming on, and it sounds like a good number of them."

Talking was quite plain now, and those who spoke were evidently full of confidence, for one man spoke in a loud voice, and a chorus of agreement or dissent arose, otherwise the enemy must have heard the whispering of the little party, which now retreated steadily, but with the result that Oliver grew confused, for he felt that he had entirely lost all sense of direction, and letting Panton come up abreast he told him so.

"Don't matter," said the latter. "You've evidently been going all wrong, and no wonder. Nature never meant us to play rats and owls. But I daresay we shall get right after all. I wish there were some trees so that we could shelter under them, and—"

"But there is nothing for a long distance but those barren rocks a quarter of a mile from the brig's bows. If we could reach them."

"Yes, where do you think they are?"

"I can't think. I don't know, only that they must be somewhere."

"Yes, that's exactly where they are," said Panton, with a little laugh. "Somewhere, unless the earth has swallowed them up, but where that somewhere is I don't know, nor you either, so we're lost in the dark."

"Hush, not so loud, the daylight cannot be very far-off now."

"What? Hours. I don't believe it's midnight yet."

"There, I told you so," whispered Oliver, a few minutes later, "there's the dawn coming and the sunrise."

"Nonsense, it's the moon; but look here, oughtn't we to be facing the east now?"

"Yes, according to my calculations," replied Oliver.

"Your calculating tackle wants regulating, for so sure as that's the moon rising over yonder we've been working along due west."

"Tut, tut, tut!" ejaculated Oliver, as he gazed round at the faint light on the horizon, "and I did try so hard. But that must be the dawn."

"Then it has got a good, hard, firm, silvery rim to it. Look! That's uncommonly like the moon, isn't it?"

Panton pointed to where the edge of the pale orb came slowly above the horizon, looking big, and of a soft yellowish tarnished silver hue.

"Yes, it's the moon sure enough," said Oliver. "I'm all wrong. We shall be able to make out where the brig is, though, when it gets a little higher."

"And the niggers will be able to make out where we are, and skewer us all with arrows, if we don't look out. Hadn't we better all lie down?"

"No, no, let's aim at getting back on board. We shall be stronger there, and it will be a relief to Mr Rimmer to have us all back again safely. Better wait. I can't hear the enemy now, and in a few minutes we may be able to see the brig."

What do you say, Drew?"

"All right."

Chapter Twenty Eight.

In a Fog.

"Look-ye here, old mate," growled Wriggs to his companion, "I'm getting jolly well sick o' this here job."

"Why, yer ungrateful beggar, what are you grumbling about now? You had too much o' them joosety pigeons, and it's been too strong for you."

"'Tarn't that," growled Wriggs, in a hoarse whisper. "It's this here ladder."

"What's the matter with the ladder, mate? Seemed to me to be a nice light strong 'un when I carried it."

"Oh, yes, it's strong enough, messmate, but it makes me feel like a fool, Tommy."

"Why so, Billy?"

"'Cause I'm having to go cutting about here like a lamp-lighter as has lost his lantern, and ain't got no lamposties near. Blow the old ladder! I'm sick on it."

"Give us hold, and you take these ropes," said Smith, "I never see such a fellow for grumbling as you are, Billy. You'd only got to say as you was tired, and I'd ha' took it at once."

Wriggs chewed and spat on the ground, but he made no other movement.

"Well, are yer going to ketch hold o' these here ropes?"

"No, I aren't going to ketch hold o' no ropes. Cause why? It's my spell with the ladder, and I'm a-going to carry the ladder till it's time to give it up."

"Well, you are a horbstnit one, Billy, and no mistake."

"Look-ye here, are you going to keep your mouth shut? 'Cause if you're not, I'm a-going to get funder away afore the Injuns begins to shoot. I don't want no pysoned arrows sticking into me."

"Course you don't, mate. Look-ye here, if I was you I'd stand that there ladder straight up, and then go aloft and sit on the top rung. You could rest yourself, and be a deal safer up there."

"Chaff!" growled Wriggs. "Chaff! Better hold your tongue, Tommy, if yer can't talk sense. What does young Mr Oliver say—Forrard again?"

"Yes."

"Oh, all right, then, I don't mind. I'll go off 'lone with the ladder if he likes. Where's the Injuns now?"

"Dunno. But they ain't Injuns, Billy; they're savygees, that's what they are."

"Why, I heered Mr Oliver call 'em pap you hans. But there, I don't care. Call 'em what you like, so long as I can get rid o' this ladder and rest my soldier."

"Then why don't you put it over your other soldier, Billy, or else let me carry it?"

"'Cause I shan't, Tommy, so there you have it, sharp."

"You men will be heard by the Papuans if there are any lurking about," whispered Oliver just then. "Silence, and keep close behind us."

As the moon rose higher it was not to shine out bright and clear, for there was a thin haze floating over the sea, and consequently, as the softened silvery light flooded the wave-swept plain, every object looked distorted and mysterious. Tree-trunks, where they lay together, seemed huge masses of coral rock, swollen and strange, and the hollows scooped out by the earthquake wave appeared to be full of a luminous haze that the eye could not penetrate, and suggested the possibility of enemies being in hiding, waiting to take aim with some deadly weapon, as soon as the light grew plain enough for the returning party to be seen.

But out in the open, as far as they could make out, no lurking savages were visible, and as the light spread more and more, unless hidden by some shadowy hollow, there was no danger close at hand.

This was satisfactory and encouraging, the more so that though they all listened with every nerve on the strain, there was now not a sound to betray the enemy's whereabouts.

On the other hand, in spite of the light growing stronger, there was no sign of the brig, and, worse still, everything looked so distorted and hazy, not one familiar object to enable them to judge of their position.

"It's just like looking through a big magnifying glass," whispered Oliver, "at the point when everything is upside down and distorted from being out of focus."

"Perhaps so," said Drew, "but we're not looking through a magnifying glass."

"I wonder that you, a man who is always using a microscope, should talk like that," replied Oliver. "We are not looking through a glass, certainly, but we are piercing a dull transparent medium, caused by water in the form of mist floating in the air. I don't want to be conceited, but my idea was quite right."

"Quite," said Panton, "only this is not a good time for studying optics. What we want is knowledge that shall bring us to the brig without being shot at by our friends."

"Hear that, Tommy," whispered Wriggs. "We're going to be shot at now in front by Muster Rimmer and the others, while the savages shoots at us behind."

"Well, if we can't help it, Billy, what's the use o' grumbling?" returned his mate.

"'Cause I've got this here ladder. What's the good of a ladder when you're being shot at?"

"None as I sees, Billy."

"'Course not. Now, if it had been a good stout plank, there'd be some sense in it."

"What, you'd shove it behind yer when the niggers was shooting harrers?" said Smith, thoughtfully.

"O' course."

"And afore yer when Muster Rimmer was lettin' go with his revolver or a gun."

"Right you are, mate. That's it."

"Might keep off a harrer," said Smith, thoughtfully, "but bullets would go through it like they would through a bar o' soap."

"Yah, that's where you allers haggravates me, Tommy. I knows you're cleverer than I am, but sometimes you do talk so soft."

"What d'yer mean?"

"I mean what's the good o' you hargying whether a bullet would go through a thick plank or whether it wouldn't, when it's on'y a split pole and so many wooden spells. Don't you see it ain't a board but on'y a ladder; and I'm sick on it, that I am."

"Then let me carry it."

"Sharn't!"

"Will you two men be quiet?" said Oliver in a sharp whisper. "Do you want to betray our whereabouts to the enemy?"

"It aren't me, sir, it's Tommy Smith keeps a-haggrywating like."

"I aren't, sir! it's Billy Wriggs a-going on about that ladder as he's got to carry."

"Well, it is a nuisance to be carrying a thing like that about all night. Lay it down, man. I daresay we can find it again in the morning. Now follow us on quietly."

Oliver joined his companions, and the two sailors were left a little way behind.

"Now, then! d'yer hear?" whispered Smith. "He telled yer to chuck that there ladder down."

"I don't care what he telled me, Tommy. He aren't my orficer. I was to carry that there ladder, and I'm a-goin' to carry that there ladder till my watch is up."

"Yah! yer orbsnit wooden-headed old chock."

"Dessay I am, Tommy, but dooty's dooty, and ship's stores is ship's stores. I've got to do my dooty, and I aren't going to chuck away the ship's stores. That sort o' thing may do for natralists, but it don't come nat'ral to a sailor."

"You won't be better till you've had a snooze, Billy. Your temper's downright nasty, my lad. I say, what's that?"

"Which? What? Wheer?"

"Yonder, something fuzzy-like coming along yonder."

"Niggers," whispered back Wriggs. "You can see their heads with the hair standing out like a mop. But say, Tommy, what's that up yonder again the sky?"

"Nothin' as I knows on."

"Not there, stoopid: yonder. If that there ain't the wane on the top of our mast sticking up out of a hindful o' fog, I'm

a Dutchman."

"Talking again?" said Oliver, angrily.

"Yes, sir, look!" whispered Smith. "Yonder's the brig."

"Can't be that way, my man."

"But it is, sir, just under that bit o' fog. See the little weather-cock thing on the mast?"

"Of course! Bravo! Found."

"Yes, sir, and something else, too," growled Wriggs. "Look yonder behind yer. Niggers—a whole ship's crew on 'em and they're coming arter us—there under the moon."

"Yes," said Oliver sharply. "Now, then, for the brig. Sharp's the word."

"Where is it?" asked Panton excitedly, as he too caught sight of the undefined hazy figures of the Papuans beneath the moon.

"There in that patch of fog: the top mast shows above it. Altogether: run."

They set off at full speed, nerved by a yell from the savages, when, all at once, the thin mist which had hidden the ship was cut in half a dozen places by flashes of light. The dull reports of as many rifles smote their ears, and as Oliver uttered a sharp cry, Wriggs went down with a rush, carrying with him the ladder, which fell crosswise and tripped up Panton and Smith, who both came with a crash to the ground.

Chapter Twenty Nine.

The Value of a Ladder.

A yell of triumph rose from the savages, and they stopped short to send a little flight of arrows at the knot of men struggling to their feet—no easy task, for Panton's right leg had gone between two of the rounds, and as he strove to get up he jerked the implement, and upset Smith again.

"Don't—don't fire," cried Drew, who rushed forward, and none too soon; for the clicking of locks came out of the thin mist. "Friends! friends!"

A cheer rose at this; but it was answered by another yell, and the savages came on now at a run.

"Hurt, Lane, old chap?"

"Don't talk: forward, all of you."

Somehow or another the little party, hurt and unhurt, rose to their feet, and ran hard for the brig, fortunately only a short distance away, but their speed did not equal that of the arrows winged after them, and one of the deadly missiles struck Panton in the shoulder, making him utter an angry ejaculation, stop, turn, and discharge both barrels of his gun at the advancing enemy.

"Don't; don't stop to do that," groaned Oliver. "To the brig, man—to the brig."

He spoke in great pain, but the two shots had their effect, for they checked the advancing enemy for a few moments, and gave the flying party time to struggle to the side of the brig, but utterly worn out and exhausted. Then a terrible feeling of despair came over them as they looked up and saw that if the savages came on their case was hopeless, for the gangway was fastened up and sails had been rigged up along the bulwarks as a protection against an attacking foe, while to open out and let down steps would have taken many valuable minutes, and given the enemy time to seize or slay.

"Quick, my lads, throw them ropes. Hold on below, there; we'll soon haul you up."

Oliver saw that long before they could be dragged up it would be all over with them, and he placed his back to the vessel's side, meaning to sell his life as dearly as he could, while the others followed his example, feeling completely shut out from the help they had sought.

"Fire over our heads, sir," cried Drew, "we must not wait for ropes."

"Yes. Guns, all of you," cried Mr Rimmer, as the savages came on in the moonlight, winging arrow after arrow, which stuck in the ship's side again and again.

"Hooray for Billy Wriggs!" yelled Smith just then, as his comrade came panting up last.

"Here y'are gents," cried Wriggs, and with steady hands he planted the ladder he had been so long abusing right up against the side. "Now, then, up with yer, Mr Oliver Lane, sir."

"No, no; up, Drew."

"Quick: don't shilly-shally," roared Mr Rimmer. "Now, boys, fire!"

A ragged volley came from overhead as Drew ran up the ladder, and then leaned down to hold out his hand to Panton, who went up more slowly, with an arrow sticking in his shoulder.

"Now, Smith," cried Oliver.

"No, sir. Officers first," was the reply.

"Confound you, you'll be too late!" roared Mr Rimmer, and Smith sprang up as the savages came on with a rush, and, literally driven by Wriggs to follow, Oliver went up next, while Wriggs followed him so closely that he touched and helped him all the while, the ladder quivering and bending and threatening to give way beneath their weight.

The next moment the mate's strong hands had seized Oliver's sides and pitched him over the sail cloth to the deck, while, as Wriggs got hold of a rope and swung himself in, the ladder was seized and dragged away as a trophy taken from the enemy, the savages yelling wildly, and then increasing their rate of retreat, as a fresh volley was sent after them.

"Oh, murder, look at that!" yelled Wriggs, excitedly, as he climbed up and looked over at the retreating foe.

"Tommy, old lad, see here. The beggars! Arter my troubles too, all the night: they've carried off my ladder, after all."

The moon was now high above the mist, and bathed the deck with the soft light, veining it at the same time with the black shadows of stay, spar, yard, and running rigging.

"Don't fire, lads," cried Mr Rimmer. "We mustn't waste a shot. Wait till they come on again. Now, gentlemen, thank God you're all back safe again. Eh? Not safe? Don't say anyone's hurt."

"Yes, Lane's hurt, and Panton."

"So's Billy Wriggs, sir," said Smith.

"Course I am, mate, so would you be if you'd slipped your foot between the ratlines of an ugly old ladder, and broke your ankle."

"Why, I did, Billy, right up to the crutch, and snapped my thigh-bone in half," growled Smith.

"I'll see to you as soon as I can. Here, two of you carry Mr Lane down into the cabin."

"No, Mr Panton first," said Oliver. "He's worst."

"Don't stand on ceremony, gentlemen," cried the mate, angrily. "Mr Drew, are you all right?"

"Yes, sir."

"Then take command here. You have your gun, keep a sharp look-out, and no mercy now, down with the first of the treacherous dogs who comes near."

"Right. I'm ready," said Drew; "but pray see to my friends."

Oliver was already on his way to the cabin hatch.

"You trust me for that, sir," said the mate. "Steady there. Ah! An arrow! Here, quick; down with Mr Panton."

The men who had lifted him from the deck, panting with fear and horror, were quick enough in their actions, and the two young men were soon lying one on each side of the cabin floor.

"You shall be attended to directly, Mr Lane," said the mate, hurriedly. "You're not bleeding much. Here, Smith, hold this cloth tightly against Mr Lane's arm."

He hurried to Panton's side, and turned him more over upon his face, showing the broken shaft of an arrow sticking through the cloth of the young man's jacket. Then quickly taking out his knife, he did not hesitate for a moment, but ordering Wriggs to hold the cabin lamp so as to cast its light upon the broken arrow, he inserted his knife, and ripped the light Norfolk jacket right up to the collar, and across the injured place, so that he could throw it open, and then serving the thin flannel shirt the young man wore in the same way, the wound was at once laid bare, and the extent of the injury seen.

"Can't ha' gone into his heart, sir," said Wriggs, respectfully. "'Cause it's pinting upwards."

"Yes," said Mr Rimmer, "imbedded in the muscles of his shoulder. Poor fellow, best done while he's fainting."

It was rough surgery, but right. Taking hold of the broken arrow shaft, of which about three inches stood up from the wound, which was just marked by a few drops of blood, Mr Rimmer found that it was held firmly, and resisted all efforts to dislodge it without violence, so judging that the head was barbed, and that tearing would be dangerous, he at once made a bold cut down into the flesh, parallel with the flat of the arrow head, and then pressing it gently up and down, he drew the missile forth. He followed this up by carefully washing out the wound with clean water, and finally, before bandaging, poured in some ammonia.

Just as he gave the final touches to the bandage, Panton came to, and looked wildly round, his eyes resting at last upon the mate's.

"You have taken out the arrow?" he asked.

"Yes, and made a good job of you, sir," said the mate, cheerily. "I didn't think I was such a surgeon."

Panton grasped his arm, and whispered hoarsely,—

"Tell me the truth. That was a poisoned arrow, was it not?"

"How should I know?" said the mate, roughly. "It was an arrow; I've taken it out, bathed the wound, and what you have to do, is to lie still, and not worry yourself into a fever by fancying all kinds of horrors."

"But these men poison their arrows, do they not?"

"People say so," said the mate, bluffly, "but it doesn't follow that they do. Now, then, I've got to attend to Mr Lane. You've had your turn."

He bent down over Oliver, and began to remove the bandage which Smith had passed round the upper part of the young man's left arm.

"Thank goodness it isn't in the body," said the mate. "I thought it was at first."

"No, sir," said Smith. "He was all wet about his chest, and I thought he'd got it somewhere there, but it's a nice, neat hole right through his arm, and here's the bullet which tumbled out of the sleeve of his jacket."

He handed the little piece of lead to the mate, who took it quickly, held it to the lamp and then drawing his breath sharply between his teeth, he slipped the bullet into his pocket before slitting up Oliver's sleeve, and examining a couple of ruddy orifices in the upper part of his arm.

"Hurt you much, sir?" he said, cheerfully.

"Hurt?" cried Oliver, angrily. "Why, it throbs and stings horribly."

"So I s'pose. But you mustn't think that this is poisoned. No fear of that."

"I did not think so," said Oliver, shortly. "I wish I knew who it was that fired at me."

"Well," said the mate, drily, as he bathed the two wounds where the bullet had entered and passed out right through the thickest part of the arm, carefully using fresh water and sponge, "I don't think that would help the places to heal."

"No—ah! you hurt! Mr Rimmer, what are you doing?"

"I was trying to find out whether the bone was injured."

"Is it broken?" said Oliver, who was wincing with pain.

"No, the bullet never touched it, sir. There's only a nice clean tunnel through your flesh to heal up."

"Nice clean tunnel, indeed!" said Oliver, whose deadly faintness was giving way to irritability, caused by the sharp pain. "I only, as I said before, wish I knew who shot me. How could a man be so stupid?"

"Well, I'll tell you," said the mate, as he softly dried the wounds. "If people come rushing out of a fog in company with a lot of yelling savages, they can't expect other people to know the difference. The fact is, my lad, I fired that shot, for it was a bullet out of the captain's gun."

"You, Mr Rimmer!"

"Yes, my lad, and I'm very thankful."

"What, that you shot me?"

"Yes, through the arm instead of through the chest, for I couldn't have doctored you then."

"I say! Oh! What are you doing?" cried Oliver.

"That's right, have a rousing shout if it will do you good, my lad," said the mate, whose fingers were busy. "But that's right, don't shrink," he continued as he went on with his task, which was that of plugging the two mouths of the wound with lint—

"Hallo! What is it?"

A sailor's head had appeared inside the cabin door.

"Mr Drew says, sir, as the savages are coming back, and would you like to come on deck?"

"Yes, of course," said the mate hastily. "Go and tell him I'm coming."

"Yes, sir."

The man disappeared, and the mate turned to Smith.

"Here," he said, "carefully and tightly bind up Mr Lane's arm, so that the plugs cannot come out."

"Me, sir? Don't you want me to come and fight?"

"I want you to obey orders," said the mate, sharply. "There, you will not hurt, Mr Lane; and as for you, Mr Panton, don't let imagination get the better of you, sir. I'll come down again as soon as I can."

"You won't hurt, sir," said Smith, with rough sympathy, as he took up the bandage and examined the injured arm by the light of the lamp. "But he can. All very fine for him to say that, after ramming in a couple o' pellets just as if he was loading an elder-wood pop-gun. Look here, sir, shall I take 'em out again?"

"No, no," said Oliver, trying hard to bear the acute pain he suffered, patiently.

"But they must hurt you 'orrid, and he won't know when the bandage is on."

"Tie up my arm, man," said Oliver, shortly. "It is quite right. That's better—Tighter.—No, no, I can't bear it. Yes: that will do. How are you getting on, Panton?"

"Badly. Feel as if someone was boring a hole in my shoulder with a red hot poker."

"So do I," said Oliver; "and as if he had got quite through, and was leaving the poker in to burn the hole bigger."

"Serve you right."

"Why?"

"You were always torturing some poor creature, sticking pins through it to 'set it up' as you call it."

"But not alive. I always poisoned them first."

"Worse and worse," said Panton, trying hard to preserve his calmness, and to master the horror always to the front in his thoughts, by speaking lightly. "That's what I believe they have done to me, but they've failed to get me as a specimen."

"Haw, haw, haw!" laughed Smith.

"Quiet, sir!" cried Oliver. "What have you got to laugh at?"

"Beg pardon," said the man, passing his hand across his mouth, as if the laugh required wiping away, "but it seemed so comic for the natives to be trying to get a spessermen of an English gent, to keep stuffed as a cur'osity."

"Ah, they wouldn't have done that, Smith, my lad. More likely to have rolled me up in leaves to bake in one of their stone ovens, and then have a feast."

"Well, they aren't got yer, sir, and they sha'n't have yer, if me and Billy Wriggs can stop it."

"God bless you both, my lads," said Panton huskily. "You stood by me very bravely."

"Oh, I don't know, sir," said Smith bashfully. "People as is out together, whether they're gents or only common sailors, is mates yer know for the time, and has to stand by one another in a scrimmage. Did one's dooty like, and I dessay I could do it again, better than what I'm a doing here. My poor old mother never thought I should come to be a 'orspittle nuss. Like a drink a' water, sir?"

"Yes, please, my mouth's terribly dry."

Smith looked round, but there was no water in the cabin, and he went out to get some from the breaker on deck, but he had not reached halfway to the tub, before there was a sharp recommencement of the firing, and he knew by the yelling that the savages were making a fresh attack.

The sailor forgot all about the wounded in the cabin, and running right forward, he seized a capstan bar for a weapon, and then went to the side waiting to help and repel the attack, if any of the enemy managed to reach the deck.

But evidently somewhat daunted by the firearms and the injuries inflicted upon several of their party, the savages did not come too near, but stood drawing their bows from time to time, and sending their arrows up in the air, so that they might fall nearly perpendicularly upon the deck. Many times over the men had hairbreadth escapes from arrows which fell with a sharp whistling sound, and stuck quivering in the boards, while the mate made the crew hold their fire.

"Firing at them is no good," he said, "or they would have stopped away after the first volleys. Let them shoot instead and waste their arrows. They'll soon get tired of that game. So long as they don't hurt us, it's of no consequence. All we want, is for them to leave us alone."

"But it does not seem as if they would do that," said Drew, to whom he was speaking.

"Well, then, if they will not, we must give them another lesson, and another if it comes to that. We're all right now in our bit of a fort, but it seems queer to be in command of a ship that will not— Hah! Look at that!" he cried, stooping to pull from the deck an arrow which had just fallen with a whizz. "You may as well keep some of these and take 'em home for curiosities, sir. There's no trickery or deceit about them. They were not made for trade purposes, but for fighting."

"And are they poisoned?" said Drew anxiously.

"Best policy is to say no they are not, sir. We don't want to frighten Mr Panton into the belief that he has been wounded by one, for if he does, he'll get worse and worse and die of the fancy; whereas, after the spirits are kept up, even if the arrow points have been dipped into something nasty, he may fight the trouble down and get well again. I say, take it that they are not poisoned and let's keep to that, for many a man has before now died from imagination. Why, bless me! if the men got to think that the savages' weapons were poisonous, every fellow who got a scratch would take to his bunk, and we should have no end of trouble."

"I suppose so," said Drew. "But tell me, what do you think of my companions' wounds?"

"Well, speaking as a man who has been at sea twenty years, and has helped to do a good deal of doctoring with sticking plaster and medicine chest—for men often get hurt and make themselves ill—I should say as they've both got nasty troublesome wounds which will pain them a bit for weeks to come, but that there's nothing in them to fidget about. Young hearty out-door-living fellows like yourselves have good flesh, and if it's wounded it soon heals up again."

"Yes, I suppose so."

"Of course, sir: when you're young you soon come right. It's when you are getting old, and fidget and worry about your health, that you get better slowly. Hah! there's another stuck up in the mainsail. That won't hurt anybody."

"But tell me, Mr Rimmer, when did the savages come and attack you?"

"I was going to ask you to tell me why you were all so long. I was just thinking of coming in search of you, expecting to find that you'd gone down some hole or broken your necks, when one of the men came running up from where he had been fishing in that nearest pool—for the crocs and things have left a few fish swimming about still. Up he comes to the gangway shouting,—'Mr Rimmer, Mr Rimmer, here they are,' he says. 'Good job too,' says I. 'Are they all here?' 'Quick, quick,' he says. 'Get out the guns,' and looking half wild with fear, he began to shut up the gangway and to yell for some one to help him pull up the ladder. I thought he was mad, and I caught hold of him as the men came running up. 'Here, young fellow,' I says, 'what's the matter with you; have you got sunstroke?' 'No, sir,' he says, 'but one of their poisoned arrows whizzed by my ear. Don't you understand? I was fishing and I'd just hooked a big one when a croc seized it, and nearly dragged me into the water. Then, all at once, I looked up and let go of the line, for there was a whole gang of nearly naked black fellows, with their heads all fuzzed out, and spears and bows and arrows in their hands. They were a long way off on the other side of the pool, but they saw me, and began to run as fast as ever they could, and so did I.'"

"Enough to make him," said Drew.

"Yes, and it didn't want any telling, for the perspiration was streaming down his face, his hair sticking to his forehead, and you could see his heart pumping away and rising and falling. Next minute we could see the rascals stealing up looking at the brig as if they expected to see it come sailing down upon them; but as soon as they made sure it was not going to move, they came shouting and dancing round us, and in the boldest way tried to climb on board."

"Well?" said Drew, for the mate stopped.

"Well? I call it ill, sir."

"But what did you do then?"

"Oh! the game began then, of course. I told the men to tell them that nobody came on board except by invitation; but they didn't like it and insisted upon coming."

"But could they understand English?"

"No, not a word."

"Then how could you tell them?"

"Oh! that was easy enough," said the mate with a droll look. "I made the men tell them with capstan bars, and as soon as a black head appeared above the bulwarks it went down again. I didn't want to fire upon the poor ignorant wretches, who seemed to have an idea that the brig was their prize, and that everyone was to give way to them, for they came swarming up, over fifty of them, throwing and darting their spears at us, and shooting arrows, so I was obliged to give them a lesson."

"Have you killed any?" said Drew.

"Not yet. I found that hitting their thick heads was no good, so I served out some swan shot cartridges, and sent a lot of them back rather sore."

"It checked them, then?"

"Yes, for a time, while we ran up that canvas and cleared away everything that made it easy for them to swarm up over the bulwarks. But they're so active that one's never safe."

"Hark! what's that?" cried Drew. "Someone called 'help!'"

"It came from the cabin. Come along."

"Who's there?" said Drew.

"I left Smith with them, but he's here," panted the mate, as he passed the sailor, who was hurrying back horrified by the cry he had heard.

They were just in time to see the cabin window blocked up by black heads, whose owners were trying to force their way in, while a couple of fierce-looking wretches had their clubs raised as if about to dash out the brains of the two injured passengers.

There was no time to take aim. The mate and Drew both drew trigger as they entered the cabin, when there was a savage yelling, the place filled with smoke. Then as it rose, Oliver Lane and Panton could be seen lying half fainting upon the cabin floor, and the open cabin window was vacant.

"The brutes!" cried Drew, running to the window to lean out and fire the second barrel of his piece at a group of the Papuans.

"Mind!" roared the mate, as Drew passed him, but his warning was not heeded in the excitement. The need, though, was evident, for the young man shrank away startled and horrified as half a dozen arrows came with a whizz and stuck here and there in the woodwork, and two in the ceiling, while a spear struck off his cap, and then fell and stuck with a loud thud in the cabin floor, not a couple of inches from one of Oliver Lane's legs.

"Hurt?" cried the mate, excitedly.

"Yes—no—I can't tell," said Drew, whose hands trembled as he reloaded his gun.

"But you must know," cried the mate, seizing his arm and gazing at him searchingly.

"No: I don't know," said Drew. "Something touched me, but I don't feel anything now. I am certain, though: I am not wounded."

"For heaven's sake be careful, man!" cried the mate. "We have shelter here and must make use of it. We are regularly besieged, and how long it will last it is impossible to say."

As he spoke he dragged the little narrow mattress out of a bunk, and, signing to Drew to take hold of one end, they raised it and placed it across the window to act as a screen, while Mr Rimmer thrust out one arm, got hold of a rope, and drew up the dead-light which was struck several times before he got it perfectly secure.

"Oh, you're there, Smith," he said, turning to the sailor, who, now feeling very penitent, was down on one knee holding a panikin of water to Oliver Lane's lips. "How came you to leave the cabin, and with that window open?"

"I didn't, sir. Window was shut fast enough when I left it, and I only went for some water for the gentlemen to drink."

"And nearly sent them to their graves?" cried the mate.

"Will you come on deck, sir, please?" cried one of the men, who had come to the cabin door with his face looking drawn and scared.

"Yes. What is it?" said the mate.

"There's a lot more on 'em just come up, sir, and we think they're going to rush us now."

"Yes. Come on, Mr Drew. You, too, Smith. Quick, they're attacking."

For there was a terrific yelling, and the sound indicated that it must come from quite a crowd.

They rushed on deck and none too soon, for, at the first glance Drew obtained, he could see that the savages had surrounded the brig, and that many of them bore small palm trunk poles whose purpose was evident the next moment, for a dozen men rushed forward and laid them from the earth to the bulwarks, sinking down directly to clasp the little trees with their arms while as many of their companions leaped up, took as high a hold as they could, and then began to swarm up toward the deck.

"It's all over now," muttered Drew, and he took aim at a man who seemed to be the leader.

Chapter Thirty.

An Invalid Defence.

The shouting and yelling was so plainly heard in the cabin, that Oliver tried to raise himself up, but sank back with a sigh of pain, for the rough usage he had met with from the Papuans had made him lie back half fainting and speechless. But he was conscious of the words shouted by the seaman to the mate, and of the latter's orders as he ran out of the cabin.

Oliver groaned as he lay back upon his couch, listening to the sounds of the impending strife.

"It is too hard to be left alone and helpless here," he muttered. "I wouldn't care if I were strong enough to go and help."

"You there, Lane?" came in feeble tones from the other side of the cabin.

"Yes. How are you?"

"Bad. But what's that noise? That shouting?"

"Papuan attacking the ship."

"Oh, yes," said Panton faintly. "I remember now. They followed us and shot me down. Ah! I should have liked to have one turn at the fellow who drew a bow at me. Hark! they're fighting."

"Fighting! Yes; and oh! it is dreadful to have to lie here and not be able to help."

"Yes, I should like to help our fellows," sighed Panton, "Drew is there, I suppose?"

"Yes, of course. Hark! they've begun firing."

They lay listening for some minutes, and then Panton suddenly exclaimed,—

"I'm weak and faint as can be, but I can't lie like this. Look here, Lane, old chap; if those blacks get the best of it, they'll come down here and murder us."

"Without mercy," said Oliver, with a groan.

"Well, wounded men have helped the fighting before now. Don't you think you and I could do our little bit now?"

"I don't feel as if I could raise an arm," said Oliver, "but I'll have a try."

"So will I. It's of no use to lie here fancying one has been wounded by poisoned arrows. I shall think of nothing but paying those fellows out. The guns are there on that locker."

"And the cartridge bags with them," said Oliver.

"Then here goes."

"Hist!"

"What is it?" whispered back Panton.

"Some one is trying that window."

There was no mistake about the matter, for the grating as of a great piece of wood was heard, followed by a cracking sound like the point of a spear being inserted in a crevice so as to wrench open the dead-light.

The young men looked at each other, and Panton reached out his sound arm, setting his teeth hard as he tried to master the agony he felt in his effort, and succeeded in grasping one gun.

The rest was easy: by its help he drew the other within reach—their own guns which had been thrown down there when they were brought into the cabin. In another minute he had the cartridge satchels as well, and pushed one and his gun to Oliver. They both examined the breeches to see that they were properly loaded, listening the while to the crackling, wrenching noise.

Meanwhile the sounds from without increased. There was plenty of firing going on from the deck, answered by savage yelling and the dull sounds of blows, as arrow and spear kept on striking the woodwork and flying over the protected bulwarks to the deck.

"Haven't got a foot on board yet," whispered Panton, faintly.

"No; it sounds as if they were climbing up, and our fellows kept knocking them backward. Oh, if I were only strong enough to go up and see."

"I'd give anything to be there," said Panton, with his eyes brightening.

"I say," said Oliver, hoarsely; "does it come natural to fellows to want to kill as soon as they get hurt and fighting's going on?"

"I suppose so. It seems to take all the fear out of you, and you don't care for anything. I say—look out!"

For at that moment there was a sharp splitting sound at the cabin window, the dead-light fell over with a sharp crack, and as a couple of savage grinning faces appeared, Oliver held out his gun with one hand as if it had been a pistol, and without attempting to raise his head from the rough pillow on which it lay, drew trigger.

The effect was instantaneous. One moment the two Papuans were there, the next they were gone, and a heavy thick smoke rose towards the ceiling.

"Hit them?" said Panton, excitedly.

"Must have hit them, or they wouldn't have dropped. But some of the pellets were sure to go home, for it was loaded with small shot."

"You were too quick for me," said Panton, huskily, as Oliver reloaded, opening the breech as the gun lay across him, only one hand being at liberty for the task.

"Think they'll come again?" said Oliver, through his teeth, for the recoil of the gun had horribly jarred his injured arm, and there were moments when he felt as if his senses were leaving him in a swoon.

"Yes, they'll come again, and I must have a shot this time. Am I loaded with small shot too? I forget. My head is so horribly muddled."

"Yes, I think so. Look out. I'm not ready."

Panton was looking out, and he, too, saw the top of a mop-headed savage's fuzz begin to appear softly over the edge of the window, then dart up quickly and bob down again, after its owner had made a quick observation.

"Don't fire; he'll come back."

Lane was quite right, for a hand holding a spear was raised now, the weapon poised ready to be hurled into the cabin. Then the head of the holder appeared and bobbed down once more.

"Too quick, don't fire," said Oliver, hoarsely. "Wait, and we'll fire together."

"No, no," said Panton, faintly. "I must have this one."

Up came the bead again sharply, the spear was poised, and, holding on by the sill with one hand, the savage drew back to give force to his throw, which was intended for Panton, who lay there as if in a nightmare, completely paralysed, feeling that he ought to fire to save his friend, but unable to hold his gun steady for a moment, and to draw trigger.

At last. *Bang!* A terrible yell; the spear dropped on the sill, the point was then jerked upwards, and struck the top of the window as the savage fell headlong, leaving the opening clear once more.

"Did—I hit him?" said Panton, faintly.

"Yes, he went down at once. Quick, load again. Another will be up directly."

He was quite right, but Panton did not stir; he lay back senseless, the recoil of the fired piece having sent so agonising a pang through him too that he turned sick and fainted dead away; and this just as a couple more spear-armed savages dragged themselves up and began to climb through. In fact, one was dimly seen half in before Oliver could shake off his feeling of lethargy and steady the gun for another shot.

The report sounded deafening in the confined cabin, filling it far more with smoke, which Oliver lay trying hard to penetrate as he wondered at the silence which had now fallen.

The window was open and no enemy was to be seen as the smoke slowly rose and floated out through the door, carried by the current of air which set in through the window, and as there was no fresh alarm the young naturalist lay listening, till all at once steps were heard, and the mate's voice saluted him,—

"Well, how's the wound? Hear all our noise and firing?"

"Yes," said Oliver, slowly, "I heard."

"But, hallo! what's the meaning of this? I thought that dead-light was put up? and what! Guns?"

Oliver told him what had happened, and the mate caught his hand.

"And we were so much taken up by our own firing that we did not hear a sound of yours?"

"Have you beaten them off?" asked Oliver.

"Yes, they've drawn back for the time," replied the mate. "Then if you two had not helped in the defence of the brig, they would have got in?"

"I suppose so," said Oliver; "but, pray see to Mr Panton."

The request was necessary, and it was some time before he recovered sufficiently to answer when spoken to, then falling into a sleep that was broken by feverish dreams.

Chapter Thirty One.

The Scouting Party.

Mr Rimmer felt great unwillingness for anyone to leave the brig, but at the end of forty-eight hours, during which no sign whatever had been seen of the enemy, he felt that some investigations must be made to see whether they had left the island or were lurking somewhere near, in one of the patches of forest, waiting for an opportunity to take the occupants of the brig at a disadvantage.

"And we know what the consequences would be, gentlemen, if they did."

These words were spoken in the cabin where, in spite of their injuries, both Oliver and Panton eagerly took part in the little discussion.

Ever since the attack had ceased careful watch had been kept after the windows had been made thoroughly secure and no one had left the deck of the brig. But such a condition of affairs was proving terribly irksome, besides cutting off the opportunities for obtaining fresh fish and meat.

The idea which found most favour was that the enemy had gone back to their canoes and paddled away, but this had to be put to the test, and various were the plans proposed, but none seemed to possess qualities which commended themselves to the mate.

"No, gentlemen," he said, "I think my last idea will be the best; I'll start before daylight to-morrow morning and steer for the sea, so as to make out whether they have a canoe on the shore. If there is not one, they must have gone."

"And what is to become of us and the brig if you are unable to get back?" asked Oliver rather indignantly.

"Well," said Mr Rimmer with his eyes twinkling, "that would be rather awkward for both of us, squire, but we won't look at the worst side of the case, but at the best. I'll come back if I can."

"But I agree with Mr Lane," said Panton. "I don't want to be selfish, but there are two things against you, Mr Rimmer, you would be deserting your ship and crew as captain, and your patients as doctor. No, sir, you must not go."

"Two things against me, eh?" said the mate. "And what do you say, Mr Drew?"

"The same as my friends, sir. It is quite impossible for you to go."

"Three against me, eh? What are we to do, then; stay in this wretched state of uncertainty, unable to stir a yard from the brig?"

"No," said Drew. "I shall go. I'll take Smith and Wriggs. I'm used to those two men, and they're used to me. I'll start before daylight."

"That's good," cried his friends.

"Yes," said Mr Rimmer, "that's good, and I'll agree that it is the best thing that can be done. But you'll have to be very careful, sir, and at the least sign of danger begin to retreat. Look here, take this old boatswain's whistle, and if you are pressed in any way, blow it as soon as you are near the brig, and we'll turn out and come to your help."

"Thank you, Mr Rimmer," said Drew, cheerfully, "but I hope I shall not have to use it."

A good breakfast was ready a couple of hours before daylight, and Mr Rimmer himself called Drew up, doing everything he could to further his object, even to taking four men well armed and making a long circuit of the brig, while Drew and his two companions were partaking of a hearty meal to fit them for their task.

"Can't see any enemy, sir," Mr Rimmer said as he came back and found Drew waiting impatiently. "That's right, sir, make straight for the shore, and I'd go first and see whether the boat's safe before hunting to the south for the niggers' canoe. I'd keep in the cocoa-nut grove all the way. It will shelter you all, and you'll be able to see well enough whether there's anyone in the lagoon, for that's where their canoes are sure to be."

"Then you think there's more than one?" said Oliver.

"Oh, yes, sir, I should say there are two at least. Those big outriggers that hold forty or fifty men each. There, Mr Drew, off with you, please, and don't get to fighting except as a last resource—so as to escape. I won't come with you part of the way, it's better that you should be off alone. You two lads," he continued as they reached the deck, and turned to Smith and Wriggs who were standing in the darkness very proud of the rifles with which they had been armed, "I look to you to bring Mr Drew back safely."

"Ay, ay, sir, we mean that," said Smith. "Eh, Billy?"

"Ah," came in a deep growl. "That's so."

Mr Rimmer walked to the gangway and took a long steady observation, as far as the darkness would allow. Then turning to the leader of the little expedition,—

"Off with you, sir."

Ha! ha! Ow, ow, ow! came from a couple of hundred yards away—a hollow, diabolical kind of mocking laugh which sent a chill through the listeners.

"Hear that, Tommy?" whispered Wriggs as he caught his companion's arm.

"Ay, mate, I heerd it. They're a laughin' at us, and it's as good as saying as they'll go and light a fire, and have it ready to cook the lot."

"Gahn!" growled Wriggs. "I know now, it's one o' them stoopid-looking Tommy soft sort o' howls, as Mr Oliver Lane shot at one day. You know, lad, them big, all of a heap sort o' things, all duffie and fluff."

Just then the cry was repeated at a distance, and soon after farther off.

"Why, it's an owl!" cried Drew.

"I thought it must be a bird," said the mate.

"Yer may well call 'em howls," said Wriggs. "That's just what they do doos."

"I hope that's what it is," whispered Smith, shaking his head. "I've heered howls often enough, Billy; but I never heered one as could laugh like that."

"Whatcher think, then, as it was one o' they blacks?"

"Ay, or, if it warn't that, one o' they hissing things as lives in the burnin' mountain. I've heerd 'em before now a pretendin' to be steam when yer went to look for 'em."

"Now, my lads, off with you!" cried the mate, and they hurried down from the side, joining Drew with arms shouldered, and a minute after they had disappeared in the darkness on their way to the sea.

Chapter Thirty Two.

Nature's Warnings.

That hot sunny day passed with Oliver Lane and Panton seated in wicker chairs, under a sail stretched out as an awning, for they both declared that they could get better out in the air sooner than in the stuffy cabin. A regular watch was kept on deck, and, in addition, a man was stationed in the main-top, where a doubly folded sail had been rigged so as to form sides, and to act as a protection in case he were seen by the enemy and made a mark for their arrows; but nothing particular occurred. All around looked very beautiful, for nature was beginning to rapidly obliterate the devastation caused by the eruption and the earthquake wave. There was heat and there was moisture, with plenty of rich soil washed up in places, and these being three of her principal servants in beautifying a tropic land, they had been hard at work. Trees, whose roots had been buried in mud and sand, were putting forth green buds, the water was pretty well dried away, and in places the bare earth was showing faintly, bright patches of a tender green, while bird and insect, wonderful to see, were darting about like brilliant gems.

As the two young men sat there weak and faint, but with the happy sensation of feeling that they were, if only at the beginning, still on the road back to health and strength, it seemed to them as if the events of the night when they returned from the expedition to the volcano might have been a dream. For the blacks had scared them on that day when they were fishing, and again during the absence of part of the crew. Then they had disappeared as suddenly as they appeared, and possibly they might never come again.

Oliver thought and said so to Mr Rimmer, who, with a double gun resting in the hollow of his left arm, had joined them, for he spent nearly the whole of his time on deck.

"Perhaps you are right," he said. "I hope it is so. We did give them a terrible peppering. I don't think anyone was killed, but they took away enough shot to make them remember us by."

"Poor wretches," said Oliver. "They don't understand the powers of civilisation."

"Poor wretches, indeed!" said Panton, giving a writhe. "I don't feel much pity for them. Murderous thieves."

"They are," said the mate, "some of them, and it's wonderful what conceit the black beggars have. But we must not be too hopeful, for there's no trusting savages. They jump into their canoes and they are here, there, and everywhere in a few hours. Let's hear what report Mr Drew gives us when he comes back."

"Hang the savages!" said Panton, pettishly.

"Must catch 'em first, sir," said the mate, laughing.

"They seem to have put a stop to everything," said Oliver, joining in with a smile. "But we'll forgive them if they'll only keep away and let us go on with our work, and," he added with a sigh, "it is such a lovely place, and there is so much to do."

"Yes, it's glorious," said Panton, as his eyes slowly took in their surroundings. "Now, too, that the volcano's calming down, everything promises that we shall have had a glorious expedition."

"Lovely, sir," said the mate, drily. "What about my poor ship?"

"Yes, that is bad, but I wouldn't mind losing a brig for the sake of reaching so wonderful a country."

"Ah, that's where I don't agree with you, sir," said the mate. "The place is very glorious, and it's grand to get to a new country—where—"

"Look! look!" cried Oliver. "Mr Rimmer, your gun! Those birds with the long loose tails!"

"Eh? Well, I didn't pull their tails and make 'em loose, sir. More likely the monkeys."

"You've lost the chance," cried Oliver, pettishly. "Didn't you see? They were a kind of bird of paradise that I don't think I have seen before."

"Those were, sir?" said the mate, looking after the birds. "Well, I should have said they were a kind of crow."

"Well, so they are, but very beautiful, all the same. You might shoot a few birds for me, and I could sit and skin and preserve them, then I should not feel that I was losing so much time."

"Wait till Mr Drew comes back, sir, and begin in earnest to-morrow. I'll shoot all I can then, and the men will be very glad of the birds without their skins, for they're longing for fresh meat, and if we can, we must have another turn at the fish."

"And we can't go," sighed Oliver. "I am so longing to study up those wonderfully-marked fish."

"You'll never get through all you want to do if we stay here for years," said the mate, smiling. "But look there, I must have that."

He pointed over the side to where a handsome little roe-deer had come trotting forward away from some half-dozen companions which had halted and were gazing wonderingly at the brig, while the one which had advanced, evidently more daring or more carried away by curiosity, came on and on till it was about fifty yards from the vessel. Here it stood at gaze, so beautiful a specimen of an animal, that Oliver felt, naturalist though he was, and eager to collect, it would be a pity to destroy so lovely a creature's life.

There it stood in full view, profoundly ignorant of the fact that its life was in danger, while the mate hurriedly exchanged the shot cartridge in one of the chambers of the gun for a bullet. Then, laying the barrel of his gun upon the bulwark in an opening between two pieces of the sailcloth rigged up for defence, he said, softly,—

"This skin will do for a specimen, too, won't it?"

"Yes, of course," said Oliver, eagerly.

"That's right, sir, and it has a beautiful head."

He took careful aim as he spoke.

"That's dead on the shoulder," he said, softly, and then he fired, the young men having the satisfaction of seeing the little buck go bounding away like the wind after its companions, who went off at the flash of the gun.

"Missed him," said Panton, rather contemptuously.

"Couldn't have missed," said the mate, sharply. "I took such careful aim. Wait a moment or two, and you'll see it drop. It was a dead shot."

"Then you didn't kill its legs, too," said Oliver; "they're lively enough. How the little thing can run."

"I tell you it's a dead roe-buck," said the mate, sharply.

"Then why does it keep on running?" said Panton.

"That's the vitality left in it," said the mate. "It will soon drop. I'll go after it at once. It can't run far."

As he was speaking he hurriedly threw open the breech of his piece and drew out the discharged cartridge.

"Hullo!" he cried.

"What's the matter?" said Oliver.

"Well, hang it all!"

"Why don't you speak?"

"It's enough to make any man speak," cried the mate, angrily. "Don't you see this is only a blue cartridge and number six shot? I pulled the wrong trigger. Here's the bullet cartridge in the other barrel."

"Then you only tickled the buck," said Panton, laughing. "Why, at fifty yards that shot wouldn't go through the skin."

"Humph!" said the mate, "so much the better for the buck. What a pity, though; there goes a delicious dinner of good fresh venison."

"Never mind, you may get another chance."

"I don't know. If this is an island, there are not likely to be a great many, and once they are shot at they will become shy. See anything, my lad?" he cried to the man in the sheltered top.

"No, sir, not a sign o' nothing," replied the sailor.

"Keep a sharp look-out."

"Ay, ay, sir."

The mate turned to the wounded passengers.

"These fellows generally have an idea that their officer is as blind as a mole, and that they are as cunning as the

cleverest man who was ever born. Now that fellow thinks I don't know he was asleep at his post."

"Was he?" said Oliver, rather anxiously.

"To be sure he was. If he had been awake he would have seen those deer and given warning, seeing how all the men are longing for a bit of fresh meat."

"Well, it seems probable," said Panton.

"No seem about it, Mr Panton. He was fast asleep, sir, till I fired. Then he woke up and was all eagerness. Now if I was not a good-tempered, easy-going sort of man, do you know what I should do?"

"Haul that bit of sail down and let him take his chance of getting an arrow in him for his neglect."

The mate walked away, and ordered another man aloft to take the culprit's place, the offender receiving a very severe bullying, and being sent below.

The day wore slowly by, and as it grew towards sundown, Mr Rimmer began to walk faster about the deck with a growing anxiety which was shared by Drew's two companions.

"I don't know who'd be in command!" he said. "Here have I just got through one worry because you didn't return, had a sharp attack from savages, and had you two badly wounded; and now off goes Mr Drew and gets himself lost. Here has he been away all these hours, and he might have been back in six. There, I know how it is. The niggers are out in force, and have got between them and the brig as sure as can be, that is if they haven't been killed before now. It will be dark directly, and as sure as fate we shall have another attack to-night. Wish I hadn't let him go."

"He'll be too cautious to get into a trap," said Oliver, whose face looked drawn and old with anxiety.

"He'll mean to be, sir, but the blacks have a cleverness of their own, and it's hard to get the better of them, civilised as we are. Tut, tut, tut! It would be madness to start in search of them without knowing which way to go."

"Yet, they would be as likely to come from the west as the east."

"Of course, and from the north as from the south. There, I've got blue lights ready, and the men's arms are lying to hand. If they don't come soon, and the blacks make their appearance instead, I'm afraid they will find me vicious."

"Let's try to be patient," said Oliver.

"Patience, sir! I've none of that left. Now then, I think it's time you gentlemen went below."

"Not yet," said Oliver. "It is so much cooler here, and if we went below we should be fidgety, and fretting horribly. There goes the sun."

For as he spoke the great glowing disk of orange light dipped below the horizon, great broad rays shot up nearly to the firmament, which for a few minutes was of a transparent amber; then all rapidly turned grey, dark grey, pale purple, purple, and almost directly black, covered with brilliant stars.

"No moon for three hours," said the mate, as he looked round at the black darkness, when the silence was suddenly broken by a chorus of croaking, roaring and chirruping from reptile and insect. Then came the strange trumpeting of birds; the splashings of crocodiles, accompanied by roaring barks and the flogging of the water with their tails. Once there was the unmistakable wailing cry of one of the great panther cats answered at a distance, while from the north there came every now and then a flickering flash of lightning evidently from the clouds hanging heavily over the huge crater. Then for a few moments silence, and a soft moist coolness floated by the watchers, followed by a heated puff, suggestive of a breath from the volcano, and they were conscious of a dull quivering of the deck.

"Wasn't thunder," said the mate. "That was a grumble down below."

Almost as he finished speaking there was a dull muttering, soon followed, not preceded, by flash after flash.

"Like a storm upside down," said Panton. "Not likely to have rain, are we, with the sky clear?"

"Likely to have anything," said the mate, "round the foot of a great volcano."

Ha ha ha, haw haw haw!

"Bah those birds again," said Panton, as the peculiar laughing hoot of a great owl was heard, raising up quite a chorus from the nearest patch of forest, but silenced by another muttering from below.

"We're going to have some terrible trouble, I'm afraid," said the mate. "The volcano's waking up again, and the birds and things know it. What's that?"

"Rushing of wings overhead," replied Oliver.

"Yes, the birds know, and are getting out of the way. Hark at those tiger things, too, how uneasy they are! I'd give all I've got, gentlemen, if Mr Drew and those two fellows were safe back on deck, for we shall have a storm to-night."

"But we are not at sea," said Oliver.

"More we are!" replied the mate. "Pon my word, I was going on just as if I expected we were going to fight the

waves. But I wish we were. I'd rather have solid water under me than boiling rock."

"Quick! look out," cried Oliver excitedly as there was a rushing trampling sound in the distance, evidently coming nearer. "It's the savages we shall have to fight, and they're coming on again."

They listened in the midst of an appalling stillness, while the whole deck seemed to be quivering, and the vessel gave two or three ominous cracks. There was another flash, then a boom, and a momentary blinding glare of light, while the coming trampling for a moment ceased, but only to be resumed again, as every man grasped his weapon, and felt for his supply of ammunition, feeling that in another minute he might be face to face with death.

Chapter Thirty Three.

The Cat did it.

The quivering continued, and the earth beneath the vessel throbbed in slow pulsations. The vivid flashes and thunderous growls as of distant explosions went on, and the rushing sound of many feet came nearer and nearer as the occupants of the brig strained their eyes to pierce the transparent darkness to get a glance of their enemies, and then all stood wondering; for after rising to a certain pitch, the rushing sound began to die away gradually. Then followed a vivid flash and a heavy boom as of some huge gun, and as it died away they were conscious of a stillness that was terrible in its oppression, the quivering beneath their feet ceased, and then startling and clear, from right away to the westward, came the piercing note of the boatswain's pipe.

"Drew!" cried Oliver, joyously.

"Yes, that's he," said the mate, "and he wants help. There, take charge of the deck, Mr Panton. I must go and bring him. Volunteers here: six men."

Twelve sprang to his side, and he selected half a dozen, all well armed and ready to face anything.

As they moved to the gangway where others held the ladder ready for them to descend, the shrill note of the whistle was heard again.

"Draw up the ladder as soon as we're down, my lads," said the mate, "and stand ready to make a rush to help us when we come back, for we may be hard pressed."

"Ay, ay!" came readily from the rest of the crew, and the next minute the little rescue party was off at a trot, leaving Oliver Lane and Panton feverish and excited as they writhed in their weakness and misery at being compelled to lie there inert, unable to stir a step to the help of their companion.

All was still as the footsteps died out. There was no rushing sound of an enemy at hand, the explosions and flashes from the volcano had ceased, and once more it was a calm tropic night.

But the shrill whistle could be heard at intervals of about a minute, sometimes sounding closer, sometimes apparently at a great distance.

"Won't them black beggars hear 'em, sir?" said one of the men, drawing near to where the two young naturalists sat. "Seems to me as if it would be a deal better if Mr Drew kept that pipe in his pocket."

"There are no blacks to hear them," said Panton, quietly.

The man started.

"Beg pardon, sir, but me and my mates heered 'em a-rooshin' along."

"We all thought we did," said Panton; "but Mr Lane and I have come to the conclusion that the sounds we heard were made by animals and birds startled by the explosions at the burning mountain, and flying for safety to the lower part of the island."

"Why, of course," said the man, giving his knee a slap; "there was a regular flapping noise with it, and a whizzing just as if there was swarms of great bees going along like mad. Well, I'm glad o' that, because if we did have to fight again, I don't want it to be in the dark."

"There goes the whistle once more!" said Oliver excitedly, as the note rang out very clearly now, but for a long time, though they strained their ears, there was no farther sound, and they grew more and more uneasy till all at once there was a heavy thud as of some one falling.

Then silence again, and a great dread fell upon the listeners, whose active brains suggested the creeping up of treacherous blacks to brain people who were in ignorance of their presence.

But it was only a momentary dread, for the whistle chirruped shrilly again, very near now, and directly after there was a cheery "Ship ahoy!"

"Mr Rimmer's voice," said Oliver, excitedly.

"Yes," cried Panton, "cheer, my lads. Answer them."

There was a roaring hail from the brig, and in a few minutes the tramp of footsteps was plainly heard, and dimly seen

figures emerged from the darkness, looking grotesque and strange.

"Down with the ladder, my lads," cried Mr Rimmer, and directly after, the rescue party and the explorers climbed on board, two of the men panting with exertion, and dropping to the deck the carcasses of a couple of little bucks.

"That's what made them so long," said Mr Rimmer, merrily. "They had shot all this good fresh meat, and it has taken them hours to bring it along. Here, cook, set to work on one of them at once, and let's all have a hot grill for supper. Two of you hang the other up here in the rigging for the night."

"But what news, Drew, of the blacks?"

"None at all. We found the marks where two great canoes had been dragged up over the sands, and the foot-prints of those who launched them again. Not a sign of them beside."

"And our boat?"

"All right. Looks as if it had not been touched," said Drew. "Hear the grumblings of the volcano?"

"Yes, plainly enough."

"And the rush of quite a large herd of scared animals? They nearly ran us down and would, if it had not been for the shelter of some rocks. I am glad to get back. We had an awful job to carry those two little bucks."

There was a merry supper that night, and on the strength of Drew's information, the watch was somewhat relaxed, while it was late when they assembled for breakfast that morning.

"Eh? What's that?" said Mr Rimmer, as the cook and Smith came to the cabin door.

"Want you to come and have a look, sir," said Smith.

"Look? What at? Is anything wrong?"

"Well, sir, seems to me as it is a little bit not quite what it oughter be," said Smith.

"There, don't talk in riddles, man," cried the mate, and he strode out to the deck, followed by Drew—Panton and Lane following to the door to see.

Smith led the way to where a group of the men were standing, some with buckets and swabs, but waiting before using them until their officer gave orders.

The sight that met the eyes of the new arrivals was not pleasant, but it was startling, for there was a patch of blood upon the deck, and signs of something bleeding having been dragged for a few yards to the starboard bulwarks, and then drawn up and over them, the ugly stains being on the top of the rail as well.

"I don't quite understand it," said the mate, hoarsely. "Who was on the watch?"

There was a dead silence.

"Someone must have been. Does it mean that the poor fellow has been assassinated?"

"A-mussy, no, sir," said Smith, grinning, "don'tcher see, sir? That was our other supper, as we hung up there to use to-night when t'other was done. The buck we brought home."

"Oh!" exclaimed the mate. "How absurd. But what's become of it?"

"It's gone, sir."

"Well, we can see that, my lad. But how has it been stolen?"

"Yes, sir, that's about it. In the night. Must ha' been the cat."

"The what?"

"Well, sir, you see, I don't means the ship's cat, because we ain't got one, but I means one o' them great spotty big toms as lives in the woods here."

Taking their guns, the mate and Drew followed the trail, which was plainly enough marked from the side of the brig, the round soft foot-prints showing out in the light patches of sand, the fore paws well-defined and the hind partly brushed out, showing that the body of the deer had been dragged over them. Here and there, too, dry smears of blood were visible on the rough coral rock, where the animal had probably rested, and then dragged the carcass on again in its progress toward the nearest patch of forest.

"The brute must have followed me," said Drew, "attracted by the blood which no doubt dripped as we came along, and when all was quiet followed the scent and then come on board."

A quarter of a mile farther on the trail ceased, and it was plain enough why, for the soft sand was plentifully marked with foot-prints, and in one place bits of fur and smears of blood showed that there had been a fierce fight with tooth and claw, while broken bones and bits of hide with the short sharp horns pointed to the fact that the fight had been followed by a banquet, after which the leopards or panthers had trotted steadily off to the forest, the track of three or

four of the great cat-like creatures being plainly marked.

"No use to go hunting them," said the mate. "They go on stealing away from tree to tree, and we should never get a shot."

They shouldered their guns and walked back, talking about the rushing and trampling noise of the preceding night, Drew having heard something of it from a distance and attributed it rightly to a sudden panic amongst the animals startled into headlong flight by the eruptive action of the volcano.

Oliver and Panton were watching them from the bulwarks against which they leaned, using their small binoculars to watch the proceeding of their companions, and both low-spirited and looking dejected at having to stay on deck through the weakness produced by their wounds.

Drew saw it as he came on board and related their experience.

"Come, I say," he exclaimed at last, "don't look so down-hearted."

"All very well for you," said Oliver, "you can get about. We're prisoners."

"Only for a little while. It may be my turn next," said Drew.

"A little while!" said Oliver, sadly.

"Yes; your wound is getting better fast."

Panton groaned.

"And yours, too," said Drew smiling.

"Yea, that's right, grin," said Panton, sourly. "You'd laugh if I were dying."

"I don't know about then," replied Drew, "but I can't help laughing now."

"Brute!"

"No, I'm not, I was only laughing at your irritability and petulance. Sure sign that you are getting better, my lad, isn't it, doctor?"

Mr Rimmer gave the speaker a good-tempered nod.

"Oh, yes," he said, "Mr Panton's coming right again, fast. Nice healthy appearance about his wound, and Mr Lane's, too. When the sea fails to get me a living I think I shall set up as quack doctor. Come, gentlemen, you are getting better, you know. Not long ago you were on your backs; then you managed to sit on deck; then to stand for a bit, and now you have been here for ever so long watching us. That don't look as if you were going back."

"No," said Oliver, "but I feel so weak, and it seems to be so long before we get strong."

"Oh, never mind that, my dear sir, so long as you are travelling on the right way. Patience, patience. Let's get a few more days past, and then you'll be running instead of walking, and getting such a collection together as will make us all complain about the smell."

Oliver smiled sadly.

"Ah, but we shall," cried the mate. "That's what I like in Mr Drew's collecting, he presses and dries his bits of weeds and things, and then shuts them up in books. Mr Panton's work, too, is pleasant enough only lumpy. I shall have to get rid of the brig's ballast and make up with his specimens of minerals to take their place."

"Then you mean to get the brig down to the sea again?" said Oliver sharply.

Mr Rimmer took off his hat and scratched his head, as he wrinkled up his forehead and gazed with a comical look at the last speaker.

"I didn't think about that," he said sadly. "Seems to me, that the sooner we set about building a good-sized lugger the better, and making for some port in Java."

"No, no," cried Oliver; "there is no hurry. This is an exceptionally good place for our purpose, and we can all join hands at ship-building when we have exhausted the natural history of the island."

"Very good, gentlemen, but in the meanwhile I shall strengthen our fort a little, so as to be ready for the niggers when they come again. I'll get the carpenter at work to rig up planks above the bulwarks with a good slope outwards, so that they'll find it harder to climb up next time they come."

"Do you think they will come?" asked Panton, evincing more interest in the conversation.

"Oh, yes, sir," said the mate thoughtfully, "such a ship as this would be a prize for them, and we shall have them again some day, as sure as a gun."

Billy Wriggs smells Mussels.

That day and during the many which followed the shipwrecked party had plenty of proof of the truth of their theory about the animals and birds migrating from one side of the island to the other in consequence of fright caused by the eruption, for birds came back singly and in little flocks, many of them passing right over the brig on their way to the forest-covered lower slopes of the burning mountain.

It was the same too with insects, while from time to time a roe-buck or two would trot across the wide opening, perhaps, to stand and gaze up at the peculiar-looking object in the middle of the wave-swept plain, but always ready to dart off on any attempt being made to approach them with a gun, for already they were learning the meaning of the report.

Oliver and Panton tried hard to be patient and bear their lot, but they often fell to and had a good grumble and murmur. But soon, as the days went on and they could walk about the deck with less exertion and suffering, they brought up their guns and sat waiting by the bulwarks for the brightly painted birds as they flew over, Panton helping largely to increase his friend's store of preserved specimens, securing for him several remarkably good lories and brilliant metallic cuckoos. The pot, as Panton called it, was not forgotten either, several large bustard-like birds being shot as they raced across the plain, besides wild duck and geese, which at times passed over in plenty.

At last the happy day arrived when the mate suggested that the patients should make an effort to get a little way from the ship, and with eyes brightened the two young men were helped down the steps in spite of their irritable declarations that they could do better alone.

Oliver drew a long deep breath as he gave a stamp upon the sand.

"Hah! That's better," he sighed. "Well, Panton, how do you feel?"

"I don't know. So weak yet, but—yes, I am better, a good deal. I say, couldn't we make a little expedition somewhere, say as far as that cavern where the sulphur hole goes right down into deep strata?"

"No, no, let's keep out in the fresh air."

"That's better, gentlemen," said the mate, descending in turn from the deck of the brig, which now looked quite like a fort with its breastwork of new planks. "Puts strength into you, don't it, to get out here?"

"Oh, yes," cried Panton, "now one has got over the first bit of it. I felt as if I was too weak to walk down, but I'm coming round now. Hi! One of you two go and get me my gun and the cartridges. Shall he bring yours, Lane?"

"Yes, I think so," said Oliver rather dubiously though, as Panton shouted to "One of you two," which proved to be Smith, who was standing looking out of a sheltered loophole with Wriggs.

"Think of going shooting?" said Mr Rimmer.

"Yes, a short trip would not hurt us, would it?" asked Oliver.

"No; do you good if you walk steadily and don't go too far. You'll go with them, Mr Drew?"

"Only too glad," said that individual, "I'm longing for a bit of a trip. But hadn't we better send out scouts first?"

"Yes, of course," said the mate, "we mustn't be taken by surprise. That's the worst of being down here on so flat a place, you can't make out whether there's any danger."

Hailing one of the men directly, he sent him up to the main-topgallant cross-trees with a spy-glass to carefully "sweep the offing," as he termed it, and then as Smith brought down the guns with a very inquiring look which said dumbly but plainly enough, "You won't leave me behind, will yer, gents?" the mate spoke out,—

"Let's see, you have been with these gentlemen before, Smith?"

"Yes, sir, me and Billy Wriggs," cried Smith excitedly.

"Humph. Like to have the same men again, Mr Lane, or try some fresh ones?"

"Oh, I say stick to the tools you know," said Oliver, smiling at Smith.

"Yes, let's have the same men again," put in Panton.

"Hi! Wriggs," said the mate—"down here."

Wriggs came down smiling all over his face, and after a certain amount of scouting had been done, and the man at the cross-trees had turned his telescope in every direction in search of danger, and seen none, the little party started once more, the mate accompanying them for a few hundred yards towards the south-west.

"I'd make for the sea," he said, "but don't go too far."

"I can walk that distance easily," said Panton. "The stiffness has gone out of my legs already."

"Glad of it," said the mate drily; "but it isn't the walking down to the sea."

"What is it, then?" asked Panton, who kept on turning his head in different directions to take great breaths of the

warm spicy air.

"The walking back," said the mate. "There, take care of yourselves, and be very careful; mind, Mr Drew, they are not to go too far!"

"They will not want to," said Drew, smiling, and the mate gave them all a friendly nod, left them at the edge of the forest, to the south of the plain, and they at once began to move forward beneath the boughs which sheltered them from the ardent sunshine.

It was a glorious morning, and to the prisoners newly escaped from confinement the sight of the forest with the long creepers which draped the boughs with dewy leaf, tendril, and brilliant blossom seemed brighter than ever, and, once more all eagerness, the collecting began.

Panton, who grumbled a little at there being nothing in his way, devoted himself to helping first one and then the other of his companions, picking some fresh leaf or flower for Drew, or bringing down an attractive bird for Oliver.

As for the two sailors, they were as pleased as schoolboys, and had to be kept back from plunging into the forest and complicating matters by losing themselves. They had not gone far before Smith uttered a shout, and on the party hurrying up he was ready to point in the direction of a piled-up clump of rocks.

"What is it?" cried Oliver.

"Deer, sir, two on 'em! They was just by that bit o' green stone nibbling away at the grass; but as soon as I hailed you they just lifted up their heads, looked at me, and then they were gone."

"Of course," said Oliver, quietly. "Next time draw back so that they can't see you, and come and tell us quietly."

"Right, sir, if you think that's the best way, only t'other takes least time. They might be gone before I could get to you and back again."

"Perhaps so; but you see they are sure to be gone if you shout."

The deer were missed; but a couple of bush turkey were soon after secured, and followed by the successful stalk of a wire-tailed bird of Paradise and a couple of gorgeously plumaged paroquets. Then followed the capture of beetles in armour of violet, green and gold, a couple of metallic-looking lizards, and a snake that seemed particularly venomous, but proved to be of quite a harmless nature.

So interesting was the walk that, in spite of the heat, no one felt tired, and they wandered on and on, forgetful of time or distance. The part traversed was perfectly new to them all, and when, at last, they had been walking for a couple of hours, and with one consent sat down to rest and partake of the lunch provided for the occasion, it was felt that, though they could not see it, they must be near to the sea on that side; so after a brief halt it was decided to push on along the side of the opening for another half-hour, and try whether they could reach the coast.

"But it's for you to decide," said Drew.

"It ain't far, sir," interposed Wriggs.

"Let us decide, please," said Drew, rather stiffly.

"Certeny, sir."

"But what makes you think we are so near the coast?" said Oliver. "It is so flat we can see nothing."

"No, sir, you can't; but me and Tommy Smith have been at it for some time, whenever we gets a puff o' wind."

"Been at what?"

"Sniffin', sir. Every now and then you gets it a smellin' o' hysters. Next minute it's mussels, and directly after it's cockles all alive o'!"

"And sea-weed, Billy Wriggs."

"So it is, messmate, but I didn't say nowt, cause sea-weed's such common stuff."

"Yes, he's right," said Drew. "I can smell the sea quite plainly."

"Like mussels, sir?" said Smith.

"No," replied Drew, smiling. "It's more like sea-weed to me, my lad."

"That's it, sir. All the same," growled Smith. "Means as we're close to the shore, anyhow. I kept on a-listening, 'specting to hear the sea go *boom, boom* on the reef; sir, and thinking about the sharp rocks going through the bottom of a ship."

Wark, wark, wok, wok, wok!

The now familiar cawing cry of the paradise bird came from close at hand, and, with his eyes glistening, Oliver made a sign to the rest to remain where they were. Then, softly cocking his piece, he stole in through the thick bush-like tangle which extended for a few yards before the tall forest tree-trunks rose up to spread branches which effectually

shut out the sun and checked all undergrowth while they turned their leaves and flowers to the sun, a hundred and fifty or two hundred feet in the air.

“Hadn’t I better foller him, sir?” said Smith.

“No; he is more likely to get a specimen alone,” replied Drew. “We’ll go on round that corner where the forest edge seems to bend away to the south, and wait for him there.”

He indicated a spot about a hundred yards farther on, and the party walked slowly along till the bend was reached, when as they caught a puff of the soft warm air from which they had been sheltered, Smith suddenly threw up his head, expanded his nostrils, as he drew in a deep breath and exclaimed,—

“Hysters!”

“Nay, lad,” cried Wriggs, who had followed his example.

“Mussels!”

“It’s both on ’em, matey,” cried Smith. “Hear that?”

Everyone did hear “that”—the deep, heavy, dull, booming thud of a roller, as in imagination they saw it come running in like a wall of water to strike on the reef; curl over in a brilliant, many-hued arch, and break in thousands of sheaves of diamond spray.

“It can’t be more than a mile away,” said Drew, quickly, as he began to look about for a spot where he could throw himself down and rest while they waited.

“No,” said Panton; “the wave must have swept along here and spread off a little to the south, clearing the forest away to the edge of the lagoon. Yonder’s the still water; I can just catch the gleam of it and the long roll of the breakers farther away. Hah it’s nice here. How fresh the sea air smells!”

“Salt,” said Drew, quietly.

“Any objection to me and Billy Wriggs going and having a dip, sir?” said Smith, respectfully.

“Yes—now,” said Panton. “Mr Lane may be back directly, and we had better keep together; perhaps we shall all go down to the sea when he joins us.”

“Thank-ye, sir, all the same,” said the sailor—“whether we gets what we wants and whether we doesn’t,” he added to himself; as he walked away. Then aloud,—“Billy, my lad, it aren’t no go, and we’ve got to stop dirty till we all goes down to the sea together. So let’s you and me, matey, begin to look for cooriosities. How do we know as we mayn’t find dymons and precious stones, pearls, and silver and gold, all a-lying about waiting to be picked up and put in your pockets.”

“Gammon! I wants a bit o’ pig-tail, matey,” replied Wriggs. “Let’s go along here to that there bit o’ stone, where we can sit down and talk without their hearin’ on us. Come on.”

He led the way, and, in a few yards, the beautiful lagoon, hidden before by an irregularity, lay spread out before them like a sheet of blue and silver, spreading for miles along the western shore.

“Smell the mussels now, my lad?” cried Wriggs triumphantly.

“Hysters, I tells yer!” cried Smith, excitedly, as, with a leap like a panther, he sprang right upon his messmate’s back, sending him down heavily upon his breast with Smith lying flat upon him.

Wriggs screwed his head round to look in his companion’s face, which was only a few inches away.

“Whatcher do that there for?” he asked, plaintively.

“Can’t you see, stoopid?” growled Smith. “Look.”

He pointed straight away to where, about half a mile distant, a couple of large canoes, crowded with men, were coming swiftly along the smooth waters of the lagoon, their occupants apparently aiming for a point opposite to where the two sailors lay.

Chapter Thirty Five.

By the Skin of their Teeth.

“Murder!” said Wriggs, in a low voice.

“That there will be, Billy, if them chaps don’t let us alone. Look here, mate, it aren’t their island; they lives somewheres else, or they wouldn’t want a boat—bah! I don’t call them holler logs boats—to get here. Who are they, I should like to know? Just a-cause we’re ashore, and can’t get our ship afloat they think they’re going to do just what they please with us. But we’ve got guns, Billy, and we know how to use ’em, mate, and if they think as they’re going to collar off all there is aboard the *Planet*, they’re jolly well out of their reckoning, eh, Billy?”

Smith had by this time shifted himself to his messmate's side and was looking at him earnestly, but Wriggs did not stir, he only rested his chin upon his hands and stared hard at the two canoes.

"Now, then, d'yer hear what I said?"

Wriggs gave a short nod.

"Well, say something, then. What'cher thinking about?"

"I was a thinking, Tommy, as it warn't no use for you to go on talking, when we ought to be toddlin' back and telling the three gents as we're in a mess."

"Well, there is something in that, Billy. What d'yer say, then, shall we run and tell 'em?"

"No, Tommy; if we gets up and begins to run, them crystal minstrel chaps'll see us, and come arter us like hooray. We oughter congeal ourselves back again."

"How are we to, when there aren't no trees to congeal behind?"

"This how," said Wriggs. "I'm off. You foller arter me same way."

As soon as he had done speaking, he laid his gun close down by his side and began to roll himself over and over with such rapidity that he was some yards away before Smith thought of imitating his action.

"Well, this here is a rum 'un," he grumbled. "I never thought when I come to sea as I should have to turn myself into a garden roller. But one never knows!"

He began rolling himself as fast as he could after Wriggs, and at last, after they both had to correct several divergences from their proper course, they approached the two friends, who were seated beneath a tree.

"Look, Panton!" cried Drew, excitedly.

"What at?"

"Those two fellows. They must have found and been eating some poisonous kind of berry. They've gone mad."

"More likely been breathing some bad volcanic gas. Here, I say, you two, what's the matter with you?" he cried, as Wriggs rolled close up to him, and stopped to lie with his mouth open, staring, but too giddy to speak.

"I thought so," said Drew. "We must get them back to the ship and give them something."

At that moment Smith rolled up, and lay giddy and staring.

"Here, you two: can't you speak? What's the matter with you?"

Wriggs pointed at Smith, as much as to say, "Ask him," and when the friends looked in his direction, Smith nodded at Wriggs.

"We must get back," cried Panton. "Ahoy-y-y-y! Lane! Ahoy-y-y-y-y!" he shouted.

"Don't, sir! don't!" cried Wriggs, in a choking voice.

"Why not?" cried Drew. "What's the matter with you? Here, try and get up."

"No, no, sir," they cried in duet.

"Then, what is it?"

"Niggers, sir," gasped Smith. "Comin' ashore!"

"Quick, close under cover!" said Panton, and all crawled under the shade of the nearest tree.

"Now, where are they?" said Panton.

"You can't see 'em from here, sir, but we saw the whole lot on 'em in two canoes, a comin' on like steam, and they'll be here afore many minutes have gone."

"Quick, then!" cried Panton. "Here, you are best at it, Smith. Hail Mr Lane as loudly as you can."

The man stared at him.

"Hail him, sir, with that there lot o' black ruffians just landing! Why, it's saying to 'em, 'Here we are, my lads; come an' catch us.'"

"Of course! You are right," cried Panton, excitedly, as he stood wiping his face. "But what are we to do?"

"Two of us must try and track him," said Drew. "Do you think they heard me shouting before?"

"Dunno, sir. On'y hope as they didn't, that's all, sir," said Wriggs.

"Perhaps they did not," said Drew, hurriedly. "But look here, Lane can't have gone far, he was too weak to make much of a journey. Here, Wriggs, come with me. You two keep quite close in hiding."

At that moment from one of the trees at the edge of the forest, there rang out the hoarse, cawing cry of one of the paradise birds, and directly after they saw that a little flock had taken flight, and were crossing the open land to make for the forest, far away toward the slope of the mountain.

A sudden thought inspired Drew, and signing to his companions, he put his hands close to his lips and gave vent to a very fair imitation of the bird's note. In fact, so close was it, that they saw a couple of birds in the little flock wheel round and come back over their heads, till evidently detecting that it was a deceit, they flew off again.

"There; what's the good of that, man?" cried Panton, angrily. "You couldn't deceive them."

"No, but I may trick poor Lane. He'll think it is some of the birds, and come back eagerly to try and shoot one."

"Bah!" ejaculated Panton; but Drew took no heed of his impatient, angry manner. Putting his hands to his mouth again, he produced a capital imitation of the bird's call note, and then stood listening.

There was no rustling of the undergrowth, though, nor sign of an eager white face peering out of the dim twilight among the great shadowy tree-trunks, but a noise arose from the distance, which sent a thrill through every one present, and made all strain their ears in the direction of the shore, for it was the murmur of a crowd.

It was a strange, awe-inspiring sound, suggesting a horrible death at the hands of merciless savages, and, acting under one impulse, the two sailors glanced at Panton, and Drew saw plainly enough their startled look of horror, as they turned and ran as hard as they could go back along the edge of the forest toward the brig.

"The cowardly hounds!" said Panton, between his teeth, and he involuntarily cocked his gun. "I could find it in my heart to send a charge of shot after them."

"Let them go," cried Drew, bitterly. "We must hide here in the forest. They will warn Mr Rimmer, and perhaps it's best."

He finished his speech with the loud *wok, wok, wawk* again.

"Do stop that abominable row," cried Panton, whom the weakness had made irritable. "You'll bring the niggers straight to us."

"I sha'n't stop it," said Drew, coolly, and he repeated the call. "There!" he cried triumphantly, "that was it, exactly."

"Pish!" said Panton.

"I told you so," said Drew, excitedly, as the murmur of the approaching Papuans came nearer, and at the same moment there was a rushing of wings, as half a dozen large birds perched in one of the trees and gave proof of the exactitude of the botanist's imitation by answering loudly, as if to say, "Who was it called?"

Meanwhile Smith and Wriggs had run as hard as they could go for about a hundred and fifty yards, and then, once more moved by the same impulse, they pulled up short.

"Woa hoa! Woa ho a ho!" said Smith, in a deep, smothered voice.

"Avast below there," cried Wriggs, panting hard. "Stopped 'em at last, Billy," said Smith. "Ay, and mine too, Tommy; I never see such a cowardly pair o' legs afore, did you?"

"Yes, matey, mine's the worstest, for they begun it and started youn. Think on 'em, running away and taking us along with 'em, leaving one's officers in the lurch like that."

"Ay, 'nuff to make a man wish as they was wooden legs, Tommy, eh?"

"Or cork, messmet. But don't jaw, Billy. Let 'em have it. Make the beggars run as they never run afore. Come on back again."

The two men took hold of hands and ran back as hard as ever they could go to where Panton and Drew were standing, and as they came up the flock of Paradise birds flew off again, and the murmur of the Papuans' voices sounded very near.

"Then you thought better of it," said Panton, fiercely.

"Nay, sir, never thought at all," replied Smith, stolidly. "Did you ever see two pair of such legs as these here?" and he gave his thighs each a tremendous slap, Wriggs following his example.

"What do you mean?" said Panton, roughly.

"*Wawk, wawk, wawk, wawk, wawk!*" cried Drew, with his face turned to the forest.

"That we didn't, sir," said Smith, indignantly. "They took the bit in their teeth and bolted just like hosses, and run; there warn't no walk about it, or I wouldn't ha' minded it so much. But we pulled up as soon as we could, didn't we, Billy?"

"Ay, mate, that's so," growled Wriggs. "But hadn't we better stow under kiver? Them charcoal chaps is getting

precious nigh."

"What! are you going to stop?" said Panton.

"Yes, sir, course we is," said Smith, in an ill-used way. "We couldn't help it if our legs warn't under control. You don't know, p'raps, but I do, and Billy Wriggs too, what trouble a man's legs'll get him in. Why, I've known Billy's legs take him ashore to a public-house, and then they've got in such a nasty state o' what Mr Rimmer calls tossication, that they couldn't stand. Didn't they, Billy?"

"Ay, Tommy, they did, lad," growled Wriggs; "but speak the truth, messmate, and don't keep nought back. Yourn was just as bad."

"Wuss, Billy, ever so much, and I was quite ashamed to take 'em on board again. Oh, murder! Look-ye there!" Smith exclaimed, in a hoarse whisper, and he dropped down flat.

"Legs again!" growled Wriggs, following his example, one that the others were not slow to adopt, for all at once the heads of several spears came into view, and hardly had the little party crept well under cover before there was a sudden burst of voices, and they could see the black faces of a crowd of Papuans advancing.

There was very little cover, and, to the horror of all, they saw and heard that the enemy had what the military would term flankers out, in shape of a couple of men at each end of their line; and while the main body kept along out in the open, the scouts at the right forced their way through the undergrowth and among the trees at the edge of the forest.

Those were crucial minutes, and both Panton and Drew felt that at any moment they might be seen, for two naked figures came nearer and nearer through the trees, till their white eyeballs and glistening teeth could be seen plainly, and as Panton crouched there, with his piece convulsively clutched in his hands, he felt certain that one of the men saw him plainly, and was striding to get nearer, so as to be within reach for a deadly thrust with his spear.

On and on he came, glaring straight before him, holding his weapon carefully poised, and in utter ignorance of how near he was to death, for at the slightest gesture Panton would have drawn trigger and shot the savage in his track, a charge of bird shot at so short a distance being as effectual as a bullet.

"It will be an enemy the less," he thought, and at one instant he had determined upon firing and making sure before the man thrust at him with his spear.

Just then there was a faint crack as of a twig being sharply broken, and the savage turned quickly round to stand in an attitude of attention, poised spear in one hand, bow and arrows in the other, ready to throw or strike as the need might be.

Panton and his companions lay and crouched there, breathlessly, all trembling with excitement, not with dread. For the same thought as now invaded Panton's breast came to Drew's—that it was Oliver Lane, attracted by the imitation of the bird's cry, making his way back into a horrible trap.

As if moved by the same muscles, two barrels rose slowly to a horizontal position, and fingers were upon triggers ready to press the mechanism and pour the deadly contents into the savage the moment he raised his hand to strike or took step forward to get a better aim.

Never was man nearer death, for all thought of the danger to self was non-existent. All the two young men had in their minds was that poor Oliver Lane must be saved, and, if guns had carried truly, the black would have fallen.

The shots would have brought the enemy upon them with a rush, but neither thought of that, and so they waited, watching the naked back of the savage, above which appeared his head, with the hair gummed and matted out to a tremendous size, somewhat resembling the cap of a grenadier officer, though looking larger in the forest gloom.

But no further token of another presence was heard, and after waiting, watchful and alert, for the next sound, the savage looked about keenly, and then turned, gave a sharp look round, and continued his course, seeming as if; with all his acuteness, the cracking stick had so taken off his attention that he completely overlooked the danger within a few yards of where he stood.

Just then there was a low call from the main body of the enemy, which the man answered, and the next minute he had, with his companions, passed on out of sight, leaving the hidden party at liberty to breathe freely.

Chapter Thirty Six.

Tommy Smith as a Forlorn Hope.

"What an escape!" exclaimed Drew at last.

"Yes," said Panton, wiping the cold perspiration from his brow, "for him, too."

"But what next?" exclaimed Drew. "I'm thinking about poor Rimmer. Can't one of us get round through the forest before them, and warn them on board the brig? It will be horrible for them to be surprised."

"You know we can't get through these trees," said Panton sadly, "and it would take a day if we could. But Rimmer won't be surprised."

"No, I hope not," said Drew. "We ought to have sent a man back to warn him."

"We meant to go ourselves, only we couldn't leave poor Lane in the lurch."

"No," said Drew, with a sigh. "Do you think it's safe yet to imitate the birds again?"

"No, I don't," said Panton, sharply. "You'll bring the enemy back upon us if you do that. Now, then, at all hazards we must go in search of him. I'm afraid he has broken down from the exertion."

"No, he hasn't," said a voice in a low tone, and to the intense delight of all, Lane raised his head from the ground, so that they could see his face all torn and bleeding, from its owner having had to force his way as he crawled through the dense creepers at the edge of the forest.

"Thank heaven!" cried Panton, and he let his head drop down upon his hands in his weakness produced by long suffering and over-exertion.

"Then you saw the savages?" said Drew, excitedly.

"Yes. I was creeping in this direction, to get a shot at some of the paradise birds which I heard calling, when I came suddenly upon a black, and in endeavouring to crawl silently away, a piece of wood snapped under my hand and made the man turn toward me. I had to be perfectly still for a long time before he went on. Are there any more?"

"Fifty at least, so the men say," replied Panton, recovering himself. "But are you at all hurt?"

"Only scratched and done up. I feel so weak. But what are you going to do?"

"Crawl back through the edge of the forest till we are near the brig, and then wait till night—if we escape notice. Seems the best way."

"And then," said Oliver, "if they make an attack on the brig, we can take them in flank or rear, perhaps scare them off."

"Beg pardon, sir," said Smith. "It's only a sort of a kind o' disgestion like as you can do or no, but them beggars has left their boats. How would it be for us to go down to the shore and grab one and sink t'other? Then we should be free to sail away where we liked."

"Without provisions, compass, or water?" said Panton, drily.

"And leave our friends in the lurch?" said Drew.

"O' course," said Smith, scratching his head. "That's the wust o' my dis—suggestions; there's allus a screw loose or suthin' wrong about 'em, so as they won't hold water."

"Allus," said Wriggs, solemnly.

"Deal you know about it," growled Smith. "Don't you get a shovin' your oar in that how. P'raps you've got a better hidear? 'Cause if you have, let it off at once for the gents to hear. I on'y said what I thought."

"Quite right, Smith," interposed Lane. "Don't be cross about it, because the idea will not work."

"Oh, no, sir, I ar'n't cross and I ar'n't a-goin' to be cross, but I don't like it when Billy Wriggs will be so jolly clever and get thinking as he knows every blessed thing as there is in life. He don't propose any good things, do he?"

"No, Tommy, I don't," said Wriggs, quietly. "It ar'n't in my way o' business. Ropes and swabbing and pullin' a oar or setting of a sail's more in my line, mate."

"That will do," said Oliver, firmly, and somehow, though he was yet weak and rather helpless from the injury he had received, he dropped at once into a way of taking the lead, unchallenged by either of his elder companions.

"Now, then," he continued, "is there any better plan? Silence! Then we'll try the one we have before us, and follow cautiously in the savages' track."

"How do you feel, Lane?" said Panton in a whisper, as they two stood together during a halt.

"Tired and hot."

"So do I, but I didn't mean that. Do you feel mighty?"

"Fighting? No; not at all. Rather, as if I should like to run away."

"That's frank," said Panton.

"Well, it's the truth. I'm weak and done up, and I don't think I'm one of the fighting sort. It doesn't seem nice either to shoot at human beings, but I suppose we shall have to."

"Yes, it's their lives or ours, my lad; but as you say, it's not nice. You won't think me a coward, will you, if I tell you that I feel just the same as you do?"

"Hush! don't talk," whispered Drew, who was a little way in front, keeping a sharp look-out, "I don't think they are far

ahead. Ready to go on?"

"Yes," said the others in a breath, and the toilsome march was resumed, Drew, as the lightest and most active, going in front, the two sailors following, and Oliver Lane and Panton, as the weakest of the party, bringing up the rear.

The sun beat down with tremendous force, but the heat was forgotten in the excitement, as, forced by circumstances to imitate the savages, the little party crept cautiously on, taking advantage of every bit of cover and keeping well in under the shade of the trees at the edge of the forest. At any moment it was felt that they might come upon the rear of the enemy, when, if undiscovered, the aim was to remain in hiding. If seen, Drew proposed to wait until there was any attack, and then fire; the others to follow, taking their cue from him, and without hurrying, following one another, so as to give those who fired first time to reload and continue a steady fusillade. This, it was hoped, would drive the savage crew into confusion and enable the party to get on to where they would be opposite to the brig, when they could rush across without running the risk of being fired at by their friends, who would have had fair warning of their approach and be ready to help them.

These were their plans, but everything depended upon the Papuans, who had unaccountably disappeared.

For it seemed to all that they ought to have been overtaken some time before, whereas they had for some time seen no sign of them, nor heard so much as a whisper.

All at once, when they were still quite a mile from the brig, and while Oliver was being tortured by opportunities for acquiring magnificent specimens of butterfly and bird of which he could not avail himself, Drew stopped short, and let the others come close up to where he was crouching beneath the huge leaves of a dwarf palm.

"I dare not go any further," he whispered, "for I feel certain that we are walking right into a trap."

"Why?" asked Oliver. "You say you have neither seen nor heard anything of them."

"I can't tell you, but somehow I feel as if they are lying in ambush, waiting for us, and I can't lead you on to your death."

These words acted like a chill to all, and for the full space of a minute there was utter silence. Then Oliver spoke.

"I feel so weak and helpless, that I do not like to make proposals," he said, "but how would it be to try and play boldly?"

"How?" asked Panton.

"By taking the initiative and attacking."

"Madness," said Drew.

"I don't know that. Our shots would let Mr Rimmer know that we are in danger. It is too far-off to make him hear the boatswain's whistle. As soon as he knew he would come to our help, and we should have the enemy then between two fires. They would be scared, and either throw down their arms or take to the woods."

There was silence again after these words, and then Panton spoke.

"Won't do, Lane," he said. "You speak as if you were as strong as Smith or Wriggs here, and all the time you are as helpless and weak as I."

"Yes," said Drew. "It is like being only three to attack fifty."

Oliver was silent, for he felt the force of his companion's remark.

"Like to send me or Billy Wriggs on ahead, gentlemen?" said Smith.

"What for, man?" said Panton, impatiently.

"I don't quite zackly know, sir, but I've got a brother as is a soger, and he was a tellin' me that when they fight the niggers up in the hills, where they shuts themselves up strong behind stone walls, with lots o' big ones ready to chuck down on them as comes to attack, they sends some one fust, and calls him a f'lorn hope. I don't quite know what good it is, but I'll go and be a f'lorn hope if you like, or so would Billy Wriggs here. P'r'aps he'd do butter, sir, for he's a more mizz'able-looking chap than me."

Panton smiled.

"It's very good and brave of you, my lad," he said.

"Oh, don't you make no mistake about that, sir," said Smith, shaking his head. "I'm only a sailor, and not a soger, and not brave at all."

"Speak the truth, Tommy," said Wriggs, in a tone of protest.

"Well, that is the truth, Billy; I ar'n't what you call a brave chap, and I can't fight a bit till some one hurts me, and then I s'pose I do let go, 'cause you see I feel nasty and sawage like, but that ar'n't being brave."

"Don't you believe him, gents," growled Wriggs; "he is a brave chap when his monkey's up. You can't hold him then."

"Yah, don't talk stuff, my lad," said Smith, bashfully. "How can a chap be brave as has got two legs as runs away with him as soon as he's scared?"

"Hush!" whispered Drew, "we are talking too loudly. Look here, Lane, and you, Panton: we had better wait for the darkness, and then take our chance of making a dash for the brig."

"And spend all these weary hours in this heat without water. It would be horrible."

"Lie down, and try and pass the time in sleep, while we watch."

"She's at it again, sir," whispered Wriggs, with bated breath, as he made a clutch at his messmate and held on tightly, for a curious heaving sensation, as of a wave passing beneath them, was felt, followed by a deep booming roar from northward.

"Ay," whispered Smith, "and if she'd suck one o' them big waves ashore and make a clean sweep o' these charcoal chaps, she'd be doing some good."

"That's so, messmate," growled Wriggs, "for black-skins as can't live in a beautiful country without wantin' to kill and eat their neighbours, oughtn't to be 'lowed to live at all, that's what I says about them. Here, hold tight!"

He set the example by throwing his arms about a young tree, for there was a peculiar rushing sound as the earth quivered and the trees of the forest bent over and seemed as if stricken by some tremendous blast, though all the time there was not a breath of air.

Then they became conscious of a black cloud rising over the forest beyond the clearing, as if the precursor of some fresh eruption.

"I say, Billy," whispered Smith, "oughtn't this here to scare them savages?"

"I should say so," replied the other; "all I know is that it scares me."

"Hist—hist!" whispered Drew, as he pointed forward and signed to the others to lie close, for from out of the edge of the forest, about a hundred yards in front, a black head was thrust forth from among the trees.

It was a strange and incongruous sight. Between the hiding party and the black scout of the savages there ran a high wall of dazzling green of many tints, bright flowers hung clustering down, the dazzling sun shone from the vivid blue sky, and every now and then bird and butterfly of effulgent hue flitted before their sight; while there, just beyond this strip of glorious beauty, there was the hideous black grotesque head of the Papuan, evidently scanning the side of the forest back towards where they were hidden.

The next minute he had drawn back, but only to spring out with a shout, brandishing his club, while his cry was taken up by fifty throats, as with a roar the whole band rushed into sight, and dashed down towards where the little party lay.

Chapter Thirty Seven.

Earth's Mystery at Work.

Oliver Lane's hands trembled and then became steady as the fierce-looking rout of nearly nude savages came rushing on. No words were spoken in those few brief moments, but it was an understood thing among them all that they were to hold their fire till the Papuans were close upon their hiding place, and then to draw trigger together, in the full belief, or rather hope, that the volley they would deliver would check the enemy, and the following fire from the second barrels complete their discomfiture.

And so during those moments, as Oliver Lane and his companions watched the on-coming rush—moments which seemed to be drawn-out to quite a reckonable space of time—all waited with levelled piece and finger on trigger for the sudden swerve in amongst them as the savages dashed along the open ground with eyes dilated, teeth gleaming, and a fierce look that betokened little mercy.

But the swerve in amongst the trees never came, no weapons were raised by the on-coming foe, and, to the astonishment of the waiting party, the savages dashed by like a human whirlwind till they were some fifty yards onward toward the sea, when they stopped short and wheeled round to stand looking back as if for the enemy from whom they had fled, while Oliver and his party still crouched there, wondering what was to happen next.

Then came the explanation of the savages' action. They were fleeing from an enemy, but it was no human foe. Nature was at work once more. There was a peculiar vibration of the earth, a cracking, rending sound, and the earth opened in a jagged rift which ran on steadily toward the enemy, passing the edge of the forest where the friends lay, and starting the Papuans on again in headlong flight toward their canoe. Then came a deep rumbling from the opening, a hot gush of steamy air and a violent report from away in the direction of the volcano, and silence once more deep and profound.

No one spoke for some minutes, as they all strained their ears to catch the returning tramp of the fleeing savages. Then the horror and dread were turned into mirth, perhaps a little hysterical on the part of Oliver and Panton, for Wriggs suddenly rose to his knees, made a derisive gesture with one hand, and then placed it to the side of his mouth and yelled out,—

"Yah! Cowards!"

"Yes, that's it, Billy," said Smith, rising to his knees as well, and brushing away some of the insects which were investigating his person. "They were all scared because the mountain grumbled a bit. What would some of the beggars have done if they'd been where we went the other day?"

"Ah, what indeed!" growled Wriggs. "I don't see as we've got much call to be feared o' such a set as them."

"Think they'll come back?" said Oliver.

"Well, not till we've had plenty of time to reach the brig," replied Panton, "so let's get on at once. I say, look at old Drew!"

Oliver turned his head to see, with surprise and some amusement, that now the imminent danger had passed, the naturalist had re-asserted itself, and their companion was eagerly collecting specimens of the wonderful parasitic plants which clustered over a decaying tree-trunk. Then his own instincts were aroused by the beauty of at least a dozen tiny sun-birds, perfect gems of colour and brilliancy, which were flitting and buzzing almost like insects about the same blossoms, to probe the deep richly-tinted throats with their long curved beaks.

"These are quite fresh," he said, "I must have a couple of specimens."

In his eagerness he opened the breech of his gun to substitute fresh cartridges containing the smallest shot he had, but Panton arrested him.

"Don't fire," he said, "they may hear you and come back."

Phut!

A peculiar sound like a jet of air suddenly shot out of the crack in the earth close by.

"What's that?" cried Panton, excitedly.

"Don't azackly know, sir," said Smith; "but I see a puff o' thin, bluish-looking steam come up out of that bit of a split there."

Panton forgot all about his companions' firing, and ran to the edge of the rift to find that it was not above a foot across, and that a hot flush of steamy air was being forced out with a faint singing noise, while, to his astonishment, the narrow crack which ran to right and left quite out of sight was now gradually and quite perceptibly closing up.

He could see down for a few yards and noted an efflorescence of sulphur rapidly forming on the sides, but this grew fainter and fainter, and was soon lost in the bluish darkness.

"Wonderful! wonderful!" he muttered, as he sank upon his knees and laid the barrel of his gun across to watch the rate at which the crevice closed up, while he bent over from time to time to gaze down, the act necessitating the holding of his breath to avoid inhaling the hot fume.

"I should just like to see one o' them charcoal chaps do that, Billy," said Smith.

"Yah! Them!" exclaimed Wriggs, contemptuously. "Why, matey, I'm ashamed o' mysen. That's what's the matter with me."

"Shamed, what on?"

"Being afeard on 'em. For allus speak the truth, Billy, my poor old mother used to say, and I will now, that I will, and I don't care who hears me."

"Spit it out, then, Billy. There's nothin' like the truth nowheres. What are you been saying as warn't true?"

"Same as you did, messmate. I said as it was my legs as run away, 'cause they was feared."

"Well, so they was, warn't they? I know mine was."

"Nay, not you, Tommy. It warn't my legs as run away with me, it was me as run away with my legs from them black-looking tar-swabs, and I'm ashamed on it, that I am. Now, then, what have you got to say to that?"

"Nothin' at all, Billy," said Smith. "But just look, she's shutting her mouth again."

"Who is?" said Wriggs, staring about. "I can't see no she's here."

"Old mother earth, arter trying to swaller that lot o' niggers, only they was too quick for her."

There, plainly enough as he spoke, was the opening, but it was closing more rapidly now, and a minute later the two sides touched after a violent hissing noise, while one edge was several inches above the other, marking where the rift had been.

"Ready?" said Oliver just then.

Panton rose to his feet, and, shouldering their guns, the little party marched steadily back toward the brig, which they reached without adventure soon after dark, the latter part of their way having been guided by a lantern hoisted

right up to the main truck for their benefit.

"Take that light down at once," were Oliver's first words as he climbed the side.

"Well, yes, I was going to take it down," said Mr Rimmer, "but it did you some good, didn't it?"

Oliver explained the reason, for there had been no alarm of savages at the brig.

Mr Rimmer uttered a low whistle.

"So near as that, eh?" he said. "Well, we were quite ready for them; but, my dear lads, what a narrow escape for you. There, welcome back. I shall be rather chary of letting you all out of my sight another time. Get down into the cabin and have a good meal and a rest; I'll join you as soon as I can."

He left the returned party and busied himself in seeing that all lights likely to be visible from outside were carefully extinguished and the men posted ready in case of an attack when the enemy had recovered from their fright; but they had evidently received too great a shock to return that night, and at last half the men were sent below and later on several more, but the mate stayed on deck till morning came without there having been the slightest alarm.

Chapter Thirty Eight.

Tommy Smith's Treasure.

After a little consultation in the morning it was decided to lead out a strong well armed party to make sure whether the enemy was down by the lagoon, for the state of uncertainty seemed worse than the danger likely to be incurred in an advance and careful retreat. The mate determined to go himself, and selecting four men with Smith and Wriggs they set off, leaving Drew in charge of the ship.

The expedition proved to be quite uneventful, and the scouting party were back soon after noon, having been right down to the shores of the lagoon and searched it well from the highest point they could find without there being a sign of a canoe.

From that day forward for quite two months, the occupants of the ship ashore enjoyed perfect peace, and no sign was seen of an enemy. It was evident that the natural childish fear and superstition of the blacks had kept them away from the island, but all the same no fishing or shooting excursion was ventured upon without the feeling that the party might return to find the savages making a fresh attack, or being in possession of the brig. Consequently no precautions could be relaxed on board, and not a step was taken without every one being armed to the teeth.

The change during that time had been wonderful. Vegetation was so rapid in its growth, and seed spread so quickly, wind swept, that the traces of the earthquake wave were pretty well obliterated by bright young growth. Many of the pools had dried up, but four of the largest kept fairly well filled with brackish water, evidently supplied by some underground communication with the sea, possibly merely by slow filtration through the porous coral rock, sufficient, however, to keep them fit habitations for fish and reptiles.

On board the brig the carpenter with three aides worked hard at the lugger being constructed. This was to be hauled down to the sand, and then slowly taken down to the sea on rollers in a cradle specially constructed for the purpose.

"Give us time," said Mr Rimmer, "and we'll have a light boat that will take us from island to island till we get to some civilised port. But first of all we must sail round where we are."

"There's no hurry," said Oliver, "but get the lugger done, and then make another, for we shall want plenty of room for our specimens if we go on like this."

For in spite of having to work as it were with one eye on the look-out for danger, and the other for specimens, each of the three naturalists rapidly increased his collection. Oliver Lane filled case after case with series of the splendid paradise birds which came and went in the most unaccountable manner. For days together they would be plentiful, then for a whole week it seemed as if they had forsaken the island and taken flight to some other spot invisible from the highest points to which they had climbed, but known well to the birds.

And there the choice, carefully prepared skins lay in their cases, well dried and aromatic with the preserving paste which kept insect enemies at bay. Here would lie the great bird of Paradise, all cinnamon, metallic green and buff, with its loose plumage and long wire-shafted feathers. In another case a series of the lesser bird. Then Lane found a few of the beautiful metallic rifle bird, all glossy purple green. The standard wing with its elongated tufts of green upon its breast, and from each shoulder a pair of long, gracefully curved, white willow-leaved feathers standing almost straight out at times, while at others they lay neatly down along with the larger quills.

Another day in his favourite hunting ground at the foot of the volcano slope he had the good fortune to shoot a bird of which he had read and never seen. It was the king bird of Paradise, monarch for its beauty and not from its size.

Drew and Panton were out with him collecting, the one plants, the other crystals, and running to him on hearing him whistling, they were ready to laugh at his excitement over his one bird, a little fellow somewhere about the size of a thrush, but with an exceedingly short tail balanced by a couple of beautiful curled plumes at the end of their wire-like, exquisitely curved feather, starting above the tail and crossing just at its end.

But their ridicule soon turned into delight as they gazed at the wondrous display of tints, beautifully blended, so that no two colours jarred. But it was not only in its hues that there was so much fascination to the eye, for all three gazed

in wonder at the peculiar appendages which added to the strangeness and beauty of this bird.

But there was no end to Oliver's bird treasures now, and knowing the interest he took in the beautiful creatures, every man on board tried his best to add to his stores by means of trap and gun, the mate encouraging the use of the latter, so that the men might be quite at home with it.

"Here y'are, sir," said Smith, "right sort, and nothing wrong in it, 'cept a spot o' blood on its back, over two o' the feathers. I was going to pull 'em out and bring him quite clean, on'y you're so perticler about every feather being there."

"How could it be perfect without?" said Oliver.

"Oh, I dunno, sir. Birds got so many feathers in 'em that nobody'd miss fifty or sixty, let alone one or two. Why, many's the time I've seen 'em pick out lots themselves, specially ducks."

"I daresay," replied Oliver, "but don't you ever pick any out; I can always wash away the blood."

"All right, sir, but ain't yer going to look at it, and what Billy Wriggs got, too?"

"I will directly," replied Oliver. "Wait till I've turned this skin."

"Oh, yes, sir, we'll wait," said the sailor, and he dropped the butt of his gun to the earth, and stood holding a bird he had shot, while Oliver was seated by an upturned cask, whose head formed a table just under the brig's bows, where, with a large piece of canvas rigged to a stay, he worked in shelter, skinning his specimens for hours in the early morning and late evening.

"Looks gashly nasty, now, sir," said the man, after a few minutes' watching, while Oliver carefully painted over the wet, soft, newly-stripped-off skin of a bird with the aromatic poisonous cream he had in a pot. Now the bristles of the brush sought out every crease and hollow about where the flesh-denuded bones of the wings hung by their tendons; then the bones of the legs were painted, the young man intent upon his work—too much so to look up when the two sailors came round from the other side of the vessel. Now the brush ran carefully along the skin, so as not to smirch the feathers at the edge; now it was passed along the thin stretched neck and up to the skull, which had been left whole all but the back, where brains and eyeballs had been carefully extracted, leaving nothing but the paper-like bone of wondrously delicate texture and strength. Here the brush was sedulously applied with more and more cream, which shed a pleasant odour around.

"Pyson, ain't it, sir?" said Wriggs, at last.

"Yes, my man, dangerously poisonous," said Oliver, as he worked away.

"Wouldn't do to set me that job, sir," said Smith.

"Why not? You could soon learn."

"'Cause I got a bad habit, sir."

"Lots!" said Wriggs, laconically.

"Here, don't you be so jolly fond o' running down your messmate, Bill. 'Course I've got lots a' bad habits—everybody has—don't s'pose I got more more nor you, mate."

"Dessay not, Tommy," said Wriggs, with a chuckle.

"What I meant was as I've got a bad habit a' poppin' my fingers in my mouth every now and then, when I'm doin' anythin', so as to get a better hold. Some chaps spit in their hands—Billy here does, sir."

"Ay, mate, that's a true word," growled Wriggs.

"Well, that's a deal nastier than just wettin' the tips o' your fingers, ain't it? Would it hurt me if I did, sir?"

"Most likely be very dangerous," said Oliver, as he busily tucked some cotton wool into the cavities of the eyes, and then into the empty skull.

"What's he doin' that for, Tommy?" whispered Wriggs.

"Stuffin' on it to keep the skin from s'rivellin', mate. Can't yer see?"

"Yes, that's it," said Oliver, as he worked away. Then, laying the wing bones together, so as to keep them a short distance apart, he proceeded to bind a little of the cotton fibre round the leg bones before wiping his fingers, carefully feeling for the bird's claws, and drawing them out from among the soft feathers where they nestled, and restoring the skin to its place so that it fitted well over the wool.

"Look at that, now, Billy. There y'are, regular pair o' natural legs again. Wonderful thing, bird-stuffing! Hope we don't worry you, sir, talkin'."

"Oh no, talk away," said Oliver smiling, as he made up a little egg-shaped ball of cotton wool of the size of the bird's body, which dangled upon a hook at the end of a string. And then he took a pinch of the wool, doubled it, and thrust the doubled part into the skull, leaving enough to form the bird's neck, followed up with the loose egg-shaped pad which he laid upon the tied together wing bones, and then, with a clever bit of manipulation, drew the skin over the

pad, gave the bird a bit of a shake, and, as if it had been some conjuring trick, every feather came back into its right place, and to all appearances there lay a dead bird before him on the head of the cask.

“Three cheers and a hextra hooray!” cried Smith. “Ain’t that wonderful, Billy? You and me couldn’t ha’ made a bird like that.”

“No,” said Oliver, laughing, “and I couldn’t have furled the main-topgallant sail like you two could.”

“Well, sir, that’s true enough,” said Smith; “but if you wouldn’t mind me astin’, ‘What’s the good o’ pysonin’ a bird when it’s dead?’”

“I don’t,” said Oliver, as he busily smoothed feathers and fitted the bird’s folded wings close to its sides, giving a pinch them in their here and a pinch there before confining places by rolling a strip of paper round, and fastening it with a pin.

“What I do is to poison the skin, so that it may be fatal to any mischievous insect that might wish to eat it, and make the feathers fall out.”

“Why o’ course, Tommy,” growled Wriggs, “anybody could ha’ know’d that.”

“You didn’t, Billy,” said Smith shortly.

“Well, I can’t say as I did quite, mate, but I do now, and I shan’t never forget it. But what’s he doin’ o’ that for? It won’t ketch cold now.”

“No,” said Oliver, laughing, as he fitted a little cone of paper on the bird’s head by thrusting it with the beak right down to the end. “That paper cap is to hold the bird’s head well down upon its shoulders, so that it may dry in a natural shape. Birds’ necks fold so that they always look very short.”

“And what bird may that be, sir?” said Wriggs.

“A pitta—or ground thrush.”

“A mercy on us!” said Smith. “It’s a wonderful place this. Thrushes at home is all browny speckly birds, and this here’s blue and green.”

“Yes, birds have brilliant plumage here, my lads. Now, then, what have you got for me? Anything good?”

“Well, that’s for you to say, sir. Now then, Billy, out with yours first.”

“Nay, let’s see yours first, matey.”

“Come, come, I’m busy. We’re going for a fresh excursion to-day. Now then, Wriggs, what is it?”

“It’s a little squirmy wormy thing as he ketched, sir, just as it come outer its hole to curl up in the sunshine. Pull it out, Billy. He’s got it in his pocket, sir.”

Wriggs slowly thrust in his hand and drew out a little thin snake, which moved slightly as he laid it on the table.

“He says it’s a wurm, sir,” put in Smith, “I says it’s a young come-structor.”

“What’s that?” cried Oliver in a startled way. “Nonsense, it is full grown.”

“Couldn’t ha’ took long growing to that size, sir,” said Smith, grinning, as he held the bird he had shot behind him.

“But, my good fellows, don’t you know that this is a very dangerous viper?”

“What, that?” said Wriggs contemptuously, “there ain’t nothin’ on him.”

“There isn’t much of a wasp,” said Oliver, “but his sting is poisonous enough.”

“That’s true, sir, specially it you gets it near yer eye. But you don’t mean to say as that little chap’s got a sting in his tail?”

“Absurd! Vipers have poisonous fangs—two.”

“What, in their tails, sir?”

“No, man, in the roof of the mouth. I’ll show you.”

“But do you mean as that chap would ha’ bit us and stung us, sir?” said Wriggs anxiously.

“Of course I do, and you’ve had a very close shave. How did you kill it?”

“Well, sir, he wouldn’t let us kill him, but kep’ on wrigglin’ arter Billy here had trod on his tail, and we didn’t want to quite scrunch him, because you’re so partickler. He got a bit quiet, though, arter a time, and then Billy nipped him at the back o’ the head and put him in his pocket.”

“Look here, when you find a snake with a diamond-shaped head like that, you may be pretty certain that it is venomous.”

The two sailors scratched their heads in unison while Oliver turned the little viper's head over, opened its mouth, and made it gape widely by placing a little bone stiletto which he used in skinning the smaller birds within, and then with the point of a penknife he raised two tiny fangs which were laid back on the roof of the reptile's mouth, and which, when erect, looked like points of glass.

"There!" he exclaimed, "those are the poison fangs. They're hollow and connected with a couple of exceedingly small glands or bags of poison, which shoot a couple of tiny drops of venom through the hollow teeth when they are pressed by the animal biting."

"But you don't call that 'ere a hanimal, sir?" said Smith, as he wiped the perspiration from his forehead.

"What is it, then?" said Oliver, laughingly quoting from an old book—"a vegetable?"

"Well, no, sir, but it does look some'at like a sort o' liquorice stick as the boys used to buy to chew when we went to school."

"It looks more like what it is," said Oliver, "a very dangerous viper, and I warn you both to be very careful about meddling with such things again."

"But you see it was such a little 'un, sir," said Wriggs, apologetically.

"None the less dangerous, and you've had a very narrow escape," said Oliver. Then noting the men's disappointed looks, he continued—

"But I'm very grateful to you all the same. It was very thoughtful of you, Wriggs, and I am glad to have it to add to my collection."

"Then you won't chuck it away, sir?" said Wriggs, brightening up.

"Throw it away—a rare specimen of a poisonous snake? Most decidedly not. I shall put it in my tin of spirit, and preserve it carefully."

"Seems most a pity to waste good liquor on such a wicious little beggar, don't it, sir?"

"By no means," said Oliver, smiling. "There, I hope I shall have the pleasure of showing it to one of our best zoologists. Now, Smith, let's have a look at yours."

"Well, yes, sir," said the man addressed, as he still kept his hand behind him. "You may as well see it now. Me and Billy here seed my gentleman three or four mornin's ago."

"Four, Tommy. Allus make yer knots tight."

"Weer it four, Billy? All right, then, four mornin's ago, just as it was gettin' light, an' I says to him, I says, 'Now that's just the sort o' bird as Muster Oliver Lane would like to have to stuff,' didn't I, Billy?"

"Well, it warn't quite in them there words, Tommy, but it meant that 'ere."

"Don't you be so nation perticler about a heff or a gee, messmate. If it meant what I says, wheer's the harm?"

"Allus speak the truth, Tommy. Allus speak the truth," growled Wriggs.

"Come, come, I want to see my bird," said Oliver. "Go on, Smith."

"That's just what I wants to do, sir, on'y Billy Wriggs here he is such a haggravatin' beggar. If yer don't speak your words to half a quarter of a hinch, he's down on yer."

Wriggs chuckled, and his messmate went on, but frowned and scowled at him all the time.

"Well, sir, I hups with my gun to shoot him, for Mr Rimmer says we're never to go about anywhere now without loaded guns 'cause of the hinjuns—but bless your 'art, afore you could say 'Fire' he was off over the trees, and I was that aggravated as never was, for he was a fine 'un."

"There, what did I say, Tommy?" growled Wriggs. "Let him have it all."

"Look-ye here, messmate, are you a-goin' to tell the story, or am I?"

"Well, you'd better go on, Tommy, as you began it, on'y you gets driftin' to the lee so, instead o' sailin' ahead."

"Look here, you'd better do it yoursen," cried Smith.

"No, no, go on, man," said Oliver.

"All right, sir," grumbled Smith. "Well, Billy Wriggs says as he was sure he come there to feed of a morning, and pick up the wurms, and that if we got up early and waited there, we should see my gentleman again. So we says nothin' to nobody, did we, Billy?"

"Not a word, messmate."

"And gets there very early nex' morning, but he'd got there afore us, and *Chuck*, he says, and away he went, 'fore I'd

time to think o' shootin' at him. But never mind, I says, I will be ready for yer to-morrer mornin', and we gets there much sooner, and waited in the dark. We hadn't been there more'n a minute before we know'd he'd been afore us, for we could hear him querking an' cherking to himself all in a low tone, just as if he was a-saying, 'There's a couple o' chaps hangin' about to get a look at my feathers, and I just aren't goin' to let 'em.'"

"Yes, it were just like that," said Wriggs, giving his head an approving nod.

"Ay, it weer, Billy, and my heye, sir, how we two did try to get a glimpse of him. But bless yer 'art, sir, it was that dark as never was. He didn't mind, for we could hear him flickin' about in the trees, and flying down on the ground, and then makin' quite a flutter as he went up again, and talkin' to hissen all the time about us."

"You're a long time getting to the shooting, Smith," said Oliver.

"That's a true word, sir. We was, for it got light at last, and both me and Billy had our guns ready to pop off, but he warn't there then. Not a sign of him. Oh, he was a hartful one! He knowed what we was up to, and he goes and gets there in the middle o' the night, has what he wants, and then off he goes all quiet like before we could see."

"But you did shoot it at last?"

"Ay, sir, I did, but not that mornin', which was yesterday, you know. For, Billy, I says, this here game won't do."

"Ay, you did, Tommy."

"You and me ain't goin' to be done by a big cock-sparrer sort o' thing, is we? and he says we warn't, and we'll keep on earlier and earlier till we do get him."

"Well, and what did you do?" asked Oliver, smiling.

"Goes in the middle o' the night, sir, to be sure, and there we was as quiet as could be; but we didn't hear nothin' till just afore sunrise, when there was a *cherk, cherk*, and a bit of flutterin' just as we was makin' up our minds as he was too artful for us. Billy, he gives me a nudge and shoves up the gun and takes aim."

"But you couldn't see the bird?" said Oliver.

"No, sir, not yet, but I wanted to be ready so as to get a shot at him the moment he showed hissen, and then if I didn't recklect as I hadn't loaded the gun arter giving it a good clean up yes'day, 'cause it were getting rusty."

"That's so, and I did mine, too," said Wriggs.

"You might ha' knocked me down with a feather, sir," continued Smith.

"Nay, nay, speak the truth, Tommy," growled Wriggs, reprovingly. "No feather as ever growed wouldn't knock you down."

"Will you be quiet, Billy Wriggs? Who's to tell the gentleman if you keep a-sticking your marlin-spike in where it aren't wanted?"

"Come, come, I want to see my bird," cried Oliver, who was amused by the sailor's long-winded narrative. "If it takes so much time to shoot one bird, how long would it take to shoot a flock?"

"Ah! I dunno, sir," said Smith, solemnly.

"But you got this one?"

"Ay, sir, I did."

"We did, Tommy! speak the truth."

"Well, *we* did, then. I shot him, sir, and Billy goes in among the bushes and picked him up."

"Gettin' scratched awfully," growled Wriggs.

"Then you did shoot it," said Oliver, "without powder or shot?"

"Nay, sir, I lowered the gun down, shoved in a fresh cartridge, and waited like a stone statty."

"Two stone stattys," said Wriggs, solemnly. "Speak the truth."

"Yes, sir, neither on us moved, and I don't think as we breathed for ever so long, till it humbugged that there bird so as he couldn't stand it no longer, and he bobs right up on to a high bough so as to peep over and see whether we was there."

"And were you?"

"Yes, sir," said Smith, very solemnly, "we was, and he soon knowed it, for bang says my gun, down he come. Billy, as I says afore, goes and picks him up."

"Yes," said Oliver, laughing; "and after all that long rigmarole, I suppose it is something I don't want. Now, then, don't keep it behind you like that. Let's see what it's like. Come, don't be so childish."

"All right, sir," said Smith, giving his companion a wink, and then with a flourish he swung round a shapely-looking Pitta—a hen-bird of very sober plumage—and banged it down on the head of the cask.

"Well, upon my word," cried Oliver, indignantly. "Here have you two chaps kept me all this time spinning a miserable yarn about a bird that I began to hope was a fine specimen worth having, and then you bring out this!"

"Yes, sir, won't it do?" said Smith, winking at Wriggs once more.

"There, be off with you, and take the rubbishing thing away," cried Oliver, wrathfully. "All your cock and bull story about that."

"Yes, sir," cried Smith, with a peculiar chuckle and a wink at Wriggs; "but that there warn't the one."

As he spoke, Smith very carefully and slowly brought his hand round again, holding a bird in the most perfect plumage suspended by a thin ring of brass wire, which had been thrust through the nostrils, and Oliver uttered a cry of joy.

"Ahoy, Drew! Panton! come here, quick!"

"What's up?" came from the deck, and as there was the hurried sound of feet, the two sailors nodded and winked and gave each his leg a slap.

"What is it?" cried Panton, eagerly, as he ran to where his brother naturalist stood gloating over his treasure.

"A gem! A gem!" cried Oliver.

"Then, that's in my way, not yours," said Panton. "My word, what a beauty! That's quite fresh."

"To me, but I know what it is. The Golden Paradise bird. Isn't it exquisite? Look at its colours and the crest."

"That's what took my attention first of all," said Drew, who had now joined them, and they all three gloated over the wonderful specimen which glowed with intense colours. There were no long loose flowing buff plume; for the bird was short and compact, its principal decoration being six oval feathers at the end of as many thin wire-like pens, three growing crest-like out of each side of its head. The whole of its throat and breast were covered with broad scale-like feathers of brilliant metallic golden hue, looking in the sunshine like the dazzling throat of a humming bird vastly magnified; while, seen in different lights, these golden scales changed in hue like the plumes of a peacock, becoming purple or green. A pure satiny white patch glistened conspicuously on the front of the head, before the place whence the six cresting feathers sprang. This covering stood out the more strongly from the fact that at first sight the bird appeared to be of a dense black, but at the slightest movement it glowed with bronze metallic blue, and an indescribable tint, such as is sometimes seen in freshly-broken sulphur and iron ore.

For some moments no one spoke, and with tender touches Oliver turned his bird here and there, so that the sun should play upon its glistening plumage at different angles. Now he was carefully raising some feather which was slightly out of place, now raising the six crest feathers through his hand, and bending over it as if it were the most glorious object he had ever seen.

"Seems a sin to attempt to skin it," said Oliver at last. "I shall never get those feathers to look so smooth again."

"Oh, yes, you will. Go on," said Panton, "and get it done. The weather soon makes a change."

"Yes, I must carefully preserve this," cried Oliver; and Drew sighed.

"I've worked pretty hard," he said, "but I have found nothing to compare with that in rarity or beauty."

"Then you think it'll do, sir?" said Smith, with his face shining with pleasure.

"Do, my man! I can never be grateful enough to you both for finding it."

"Worth long rigmarole, eh, sir?" said Wriggs with a chuckle.

"It's worth anything to a naturalist, my man."

"What is?" said Mr Rimmer, coming up; and the bird was held up for his inspection.

"Another kind of bird of Paradise?" he said.

"Yes, isn't it lovely?"

"Very, gentlemen, but I want to talk to you about launching our lugger, she's getting well on toward being ready."

"Ready?" said Oliver. "Oh yes, of course. But don't hurry, Mr Rimmer, we shan't be ready to go for some time yet."

"Mean it?" said Rimmer, smiling.

"Mean it!" cried Oliver, looking up from his bird. "Why, you don't suppose we can go away from a place where such specimens as this are to be had. I can't."

"No," said Panton, quietly, "since I got better I have been finding such a grand series of minerals that I must stay if I possibly can. What do you say, Drew?"

"It would be madness to hurry away."

"And what about the niggers?" said Mr Rimmer, who looked amused.

"They haven't worried us lately."

"But the volcano? Really, gentlemen, I never feel safe from one day to another. I am always expecting to see the earth open and swallow us up."

"Yes, we are in a doubtful position," said Panton, thoughtfully, "and never know what may happen, living as we are, over fire."

"And hot water," said the mate, smiling. "One of the men has just found a little spring, where the water spurts up at boiling point."

"Well," said Panton, "it will be convenient. There, Mr Rimmer, get your lugger launched, and we'll explore the coast, but don't say anything about our going away for months to come, for we must make some more efforts to get right up to the crater edge before we give up. Besides, we have not half examined the land yet."

"No," said the mate, "we have not half examined the land yet. Very well, gentlemen, you came on purpose for this sort of thing, so it's not for me to say any more. I'm anchored pretty safely, that is, if the earth don't give way, and let the brig through. I'll, as I've said before, get my lugger finished and launched. She'll lie snugly enough in the deepest part of the lagoon if the blacks will keep away, and I shall gradually load and provision her, ready for when we have to go will that do?"

"Yes, splendidly," said Oliver. "There, don't say any more about it, please, for I want to skin my bird."

Chapter Thirty Nine.

Panton shows the Way to Wonderland.

"You were so precious proud of your ornitho superbo, or whatever you call it, that you seemed to fancy yourself head cock discoverer and chief boss of the expedition," cried Panton one morning, as he returned in a great hurry, after being out for some hours with Smith and Wriggs.

Oliver, who, helped by Drew, was busily packing layers of dried bird skins in a case, looked up laughingly.

"What is it?" he cried. "What have you found—diamonds?"

"Oh, no, nothing of that kind. Come on and see."

"In five minutes I shall be done. Then we'll come. But what is it?"

"Wait till you get there," responded Panton, wincing slightly, for he had just felt a sting in his newly-healed wound.

"All right," said Oliver. "Now, Drew, another layer of paper, then this lot of skins, and we'll fasten the lid down."

"Why not leave it unfastened till your other lot are dry?"

"Because if I do, the ants will make short work of them. In with the rest, lightly. Now the lid."

This was clapped on, a good solid deal lid made by the ship's carpenter, with holes bored and screws in them, all ready, and as soon as it was on, Oliver, with his sleeves rolled up and the muscles working beneath his clear white skin, attacked the screws, and soon had them all tightly in their places. Then a rope was made fast, the word given to those on deck, and the chest was run up in no time.

Five minutes later Oliver was equipped in light flannel jacket and sun helmet, his gun over his shoulder and all ready for action.

"Going for a stroll?" said Mr Rimmer, as they stepped down from the deck to where he was superintending the planking of the lugger, whose framework had been slid down on a kind of cradle, where it now stood parallel with the brig, it having been found advisable to get her down from the deck for several reasons, notably her rapidly increasing weight and her being so much in the way.

"But suppose the enemy comes and finds her alongside? They might burn her."

"They'd burn or bake us if we kept her up here," said the mate, shortly, "for we should not have room to move."

So there it was, down alongside, rapidly approaching completion, the men having toiled away with a will, feeling how necessary it was to have a way open for escape, and working so well that most of them soon began to grow into respectable shipyard labourers, one or two, under the guidance of the ship's carpenter, promising to develop soon into builders.

The mate was very busy with a caulking hammer in one hand, a wedge in the other, driving tar-soaked oakum between the planks so as to make a water-tight seam, and as the young men came up he wiped his steamy brow with his arm, and looked at all with good-humoured satisfaction.

"Yes, we're going to inspect a discovery I have made," said Panton, importantly. "Like to join us?"

"Well, I should like," replied the mate, "and I think I—no: resolution for ever. Not a step will I take till I've got the *Little Planet* finished. She's rough, but I believe she'll go."

"When you get her to the sea."

"Ye-es," said Mr Rimmer, with a comically perplexed look in his bluff English countenance, "when we get her to the sea. You don't think she'll stick fast, do you, Mr Lane?"

"Well, I hope not," said Oliver, "but when I get thinking about how big you are making her, I can't help having doubts."

"Doubts?" said the mate, sadly, as if he had plenty of his own.

"Yes—no," cried Oliver, "I will not have any. We will get her down to the sea somehow. Englishmen have done bigger things than that."

"And will again, eh, sir?" cried the mate. "Come, that's encouraging. You've done me no end of good, sir, that you have. There, off with you, and get back to dinner in good time. Crowned pigeon for dinner, and fish."

He attacked the side of the lugger with redoubled energy, his strokes following the party for far enough as they trudged on due south to an opening in the forest not yet visited by either Drew or Lane, and the latter, as he saw the abundance of tempting specimens, exclaimed,—

"I say, what have we been about not to visit this spot before?"

"Had too many other good spots to visit, I suppose," said Drew; "but, my word! look at the orchids here."

"Bah! That's nothing to what you will see, eh, Smith?"

"Yes, sir, they'll stare a bit when they gets farder on. Me and Billy's been thinking as we should like to retire from business and build ourselves houses there to live in, speshly Billy."

"Speak the truth, mate, you was the worst," grumbled Wriggs.

"You was just as bad about it, Billy. Didn't you say as it would be grand to have a house to live in, with b'iling water laid on at your front door?"

"Nay, that I didn't, Tommy. How could I when there warn't no front door and no house built?"

"You are so partickler to a word, mate. It was something of that kind."

"Nay, Tommy."

"Why, it was, and you says you'd want a missus, on'y you didn't know as how a white missus'd care to come and live out in a place where there warn't no pumps, and you couldn't abide to have one as was black."

"Well!" exclaimed Wriggs indignantly, "of all the 'orrid yarns! Why, it were him, gents, as said all that. Now, speak the truth, Tommy, warn't it you?"

"Now you comes to talk about it that way, Billy, I begin to think as it were; but it don't matter, let's say it was both on us."

"How much farther is it to the wonder?" asked Oliver.

"About a mile," replied Panton. "There, curb your impetuosity and don't be jealous when you get there."

"Jealous! Rubbish! Look, Drew!" cried Oliver, as a huge moth as big across the wings as a dinner plate flapped gently along the shadowy way beneath the trees, now nearly invisible, now plainly seen threading its way through patches which looked like showers of silver rain. "Who can be jealous of another's luck when he is overwhelmed with luck of his own?"

"Hi! Stop! None of that!" cried Panton, catching Oliver by the arm, as he snatched off his sun helmet and was dashing forward through the forest.

"What's the matter?"

"That's what I want to know. Are you mad to go dashing off, hat in hand, after a butterfly here in this dangerous place, as if you were a boy out on a Surrey Common?"

"Bother! It isn't a butterfly."

"What is it, then?"

"The grandest Atlas moth I ever saw."

"I don't care, you're not going to make yourself raging hot running after that. I want you to come and see my find."

Oliver stood looking after the shadowy moth as it went on in and out among the trunks of the trees till it reached a tunnel-like opening, full of sunshine. Up this, after pausing for a moment or two, balanced upon its level outstretched wings, it seemed to float on a current of air and was gone.

"You've made me miss a glorious prize," said Oliver sadly.

"Not I. You couldn't have caught it, my boy. Come along."

Oliver resigned himself to his fate, but gazed longingly at several birds dimly seen on high among the leaves, and whose presence would have passed unnoticed if it had not been for their piping cries or screams. But he soon after took a boyish mischievous satisfaction in joining Panton in checking Drew every time he made a point at some botanical treasure.

"No, no," cried Oliver, "if there is to be no animal, I say no vegetable."

"Because it's all mineral. There, be patient," said Panton. "We haven't much farther to go, eh, Smith?"

"No, sir, on'y a little bit now. Either o' you gents think o' bringing a bit o' candle or a lantern?"

"Candle?" cried Panton in dismay. "No."

"What, didn't yer think o' that rubub and magneshy stuff, sir?"

"The magnesium wire? Yes, I brought that."

"Well, that's something, sir, but we do want candles."

"And we must have some. Here, Smith, you must go back," cried Panton.

"Right, sir, on'y shouldn't I be useful to you when we gets there?"

"Of course, very: but we can't do without a light."

"No, sir, that we can't. How many shall you want?"

"Ask for half-a-dozen," said Panton, "and be as smart as you can."

"Half-a-dozen, sir," said Smith, "that all?"

"Yes, be off!"

"But Billy Wriggs's got more'n that tucked inside his jersey, if they ain't melted away. Air they, Billy?"

"No," said that gentleman, thrusting his hand inside his blue knitted garment. "The wicks is all right, and they're gettin' a bit soft, but there's nothing else amiss."

"Well done, Smith," cried Oliver, who by this time pretty well knew his man. "You thought we should want some, then?"

"Course I did, sir. We ain't got cat's eyes, and we can't see like them speckydillo chaps as we hear going about in the woods o' nights. So I thought we'd bring some dips, and if we didn't want 'em we could only bring 'em back again."

By this time they were ascending a rugged slope, and painfully climbing in and out among huge rocks, whose structure told of their being portions of some lava eruption. Water trickled here and there, overhung by mosses of loose habit and of a dazzling green. Tree ferns arched over the way with their lace-work fronds, and here and there clumps of trees towered up, showing that it must have been many generations since fire had devastated this part of the island, and the huge masses of lava had been formed in a long, river-like mass, to be afterwards broken up and piled by some convulsion in the fragments amongst which they clambered.

"Wonderful! Wonderful!" cried Oliver.

"Grand!" exclaimed Drew. "Look at the Nepenthes," and he pointed to the curiously metamorphosed leaves of the climbers around, each forming a pitcher half full of water.

"I want to know how you discovered it," said Oliver.

"Oh, you must ask these fellows," replied Panton.

"It were Billy Wriggs, sir, goin' after a bird I'd shot in that robuschus way of his'n, and when I follered him and see what a place it were I was obliged to come on."

"Why, we must be getting up toward an old crater," cried Oliver. "There has been a volcanic eruption here."

"Then just be a bit patient," said Panton, laughing. "Only up as high as that ridge," he continued, panting, "and then we're close at hand."

It was hot and toilsome work, but the party were in so lovely a natural garden that the toil was forgotten. For the trees of great growth were farther apart up here, leaving room for the sunshine to penetrate, with the result that the undergrowth was glorious, and the rocky dells and precipices magnificent.

"Straight away. Up to the top here," cried Panton. "Come along."

He was foremost, and had reached a tremendous piled-up wall of masses of mossy stone, whose crevices formed a gorgeous rockery of flowers and greenery, wonderful to behold, almost perpendicular, but so full of inequalities that offered such excellent foot and hand hold that there was very little difficulty in the ascent. He began at once seizing creeper and root, and was about half way up, when there was a snarling yell, and a great cat-like creature sprang out of a dark crevice, bounded upward and was gone, while Panton, startled into loosening his hold as the brute brushed by him, came scrambling and falling down, till he was checked by his friends.

"Hurt?" cried Oliver, excitedly.

"Hurt!" was the reply, in an angry tone, "just see if you can come down twenty or thirty feet without hurting yourself."

"But no bones broken?" said Drew.

"How should I know? Oh, hang it, how I've hurt my poor shoulder again."

Irritation, more than injury, was evidently the result of the fall, for as he knelt down to bathe a cut upon one of his hands, Panton exclaimed,—

"One of you might have shot the brute. Only let me catch a glimpse of him again."

"There wasn't time," said Oliver. "But don't you think we had better give up the excursion for to-day?"

"No, I don't," cried Panton. "Think I've taken all this trouble for nothing," and, rising to his feet again, he took his gun from where he had stood it, and began to climb once more in and out among the pendent vines and creepers till he was at the top, and the others followed, but did not reach his side without being bitten and stung over and over again by the ants and winged insects which swarmed.

"There, what do you say to that?" cried Panton, forgetting his injuries and pointing downward.

His companions were too much entranced to speak, but stood there gazing at as lovely a scene as ever met the eyes of man.

For there below them, in a cup-like depression, lay a nearly circular lake of the purest and stillest water, in whose mirror-like surface were reflected the rocky sides, verdant with beautiful growth, the towering trees and spire-like needles which ran up for hundreds of feet, here and there crumbled into every imaginable form, but clothed by nature with wondrous growth wherever plant could find room to root in the slowly decaying rock.

"Glorious, glorious!" exclaimed Drew, in a subdued voice, as if tones ought to be hushed in that lovely scene, for fear they should all awaken and find it had been some dream.

Panton gazed from one to the other, forgetful of his fall, and with a look of triumph in his smiling eyes, while Oliver let himself sink down upon the nearest stone, rested his chin upon his hand, and gazed at the scene as if he could never drink his fill.

As for the two sailors, they exchanged a solemn wink and then stood waiting with a calm look of satisfaction as much as to say: "We did all this; you'd never have known of it if it had not been for us."

"Come, lads," cried Panton at last, "we must be getting on. You see now how it is there is so much clear water trickling down below. What a magnificent reservoir!"

"It seems almost too beautiful," sighed Oliver, rising unwillingly. "Who could expect a place like this with a burning mountain only a few miles to the north?"

"And think," added Panton, "that this is the crater of an old volcano that once belched out these stones and poured fire and fluid lava down the slope we have just climbed."

"It almost seems impossible," said Drew. "The place is so luxuriantly fertile. Are you sure you are right?"

"Sure," said Panton, "as that we stand here. Look for yourselves at the perfectly formed crater filled with water now as it was once filled with seething molten matter. Look yonder, straight across there where the wall is broken down as it was perhaps thousands of years ago by the weight of the boiling rock which flowed out. Look, you can see for yourselves, even at this distance, the head of the river of stone. Chip any of these blocks, and you have lava and tufa. That block you sat on is a weather-worn mass of silvery pumice inside, I'm sure, though outside it is all black and crumbling where it is not covered with moss."

"But for such luxuriance of growth here all must have been barren stone."

"Barren till it disintegrated in the course of time, and, by the action of the sun, rain, and air, became transformed into the most fertile of soil. Why, Lane, you ought to know these things. Look there, how every root is at work breaking up the rock to which it clings, and in whose crevices the plants and trees take root, grow to maturity, die, and add their decaying matter to the soil, which is ever growing deeper and more rich."

"Hear, hear," growled Wriggs in a low tone, and Panton frowned, but smiled directly after as he saw the sailor's intent looks.

"Well, do you understand, Wriggs?" he cried.

"Not quite exactly, sir," said the man. "Some on it, sir; and it makes me and my mate feel that it's grand like to know as much as you gents do."

"Ay, ay," cried Smith, taking off his hat and waving it about as he spoke. "Billy Wriggs is right, sir. It is grand to find you gents with all your bags o' tricks ready for everything: Mr Drew with his piles o' blottin'-paper to suck all the jooost out the leaves and flowers, and Mr Lane here, with his stuff as keeps the skins looking as good as if they were alive, and, last o' hall, you with your hammer—ay, that's it!—and your myklescrope and bottle o' stuff as you puts on a bit o' stone to make it fizzle and tell yer what kind it is. It's fine, sir, it's fine, and it makes us two think what a couple o' stoopid, common sailors we are, don't it, Billy?"

"Ay, Tommy, it do, but yer see we had to go as boys afore the mast, and never had no chances o' turning out scholars."

"But you turned out a couple of first class sailors," said Oliver warmly, "and as good and faithful helpmates as travellers could wish to have at their backs. We couldn't have succeeded without you."

"So long, sir, as their legs don't want to run away with 'em, eh, messmate?" said Smith with a comical look at Wriggs.

"Ay, they was a bit weak and wankle that day," said Wriggs, chuckling.

"Never mind about that, my lads," cried Panton, who had been busy breaking off a bit of the stone on which Oliver had sat—a very dark time-stained blackish-brown, almost covered with some form of growth, but the fresh fracture was soft glittering, and of a silvery grey, as pure and clear as when it was thrown out of the crater as so much vesicular cindery scum.

"Yes," said Drew, examining the fragment. "You are right. Well, I say thank you for bringing us up to see this glorious place."

"And I too, as heartily," said Oliver. "We must come up here regularly for the next month at least; why, there are specimens enough here to satisfy us all."

"Quite," said Drew, "and I propose we begin collecting to-day."

"And I second you," said Lane.

"And I form the opposition," cried Panton. "Do you suppose I made all that fuss to bring you only to see this old crater?"

"Isn't it enough?" said Oliver.

"No," cried Panton excitedly. "This is nothing to the wonders I have to show. Now, then, this way. Come on."

Chapter Forty.

A Grim Journey.

Panton plunged at once down the slope as if to go diagonally to the water's edge, and his companions followed him in and out and over the blocks, which were a feast for Drew, while at every few steps some strange bird, insect, or quadruped offered itself as a tempting prize to Oliver, but no one paused. The gathering in of these prizes was left till some future time.

It was as the others supposed, Panton was descending to the water's edge, reaching it just where the crater rose up more steeply and chaotically rugged than in the other parts.

"Look out!" he cried, loudly, and, raising his piece, he fired at the great leopard-like creature which had evidently taken refuge here, and now bounded out with a fierce growl, and away along the rocks by the edge of the lake.

The bullet sent after it evidently grazed the animal, for it sprang into the air and fell with a tremendous splash into the water, but scrambled out again, and went bounding away, while, instead of following their comrade's example, Oliver and Drew stood listening, appalled by the deep roar as of subterranean thunder, which ran away from close to their feet to die away in the distance, and then rise again—a strange reverberation that seemed to make the rocks quiver upon which they stood.

"We must have him some day," said Panton, stepping right down on a stone, whose surface was just above the level of the water; and now, for the first time, Oliver saw that there was a slightly perceptible current running on either side of this stone, the water gliding by with a glassy motion, this evidently being the outlet of the lake; and on joining Panton he found himself facing what resembled a rugged Gothic archway at the foot of the stony walls, where a couple of great fragments of lava had fallen together.

"Why, it is a cavern!" cried Oliver, as he bent forward, and tried to peer into the darkness before him.

"A cavern? Yes; Aladdin's cave, and we're going to explore it," cried Panton. "Now then, Smith, five candles, please, and all lit ready for us to go in and see what there is to be seen."

Smith walked right in, stepping from stone to stone for a few yards, and then leaping off the block on which he stood

in midstream to the lava at the side; and, upon Oliver following him, he found that he was standing upon another stream, one which had become solid as it cooled, while the water which now filled the cup-like hollow had gradually eaten itself a channel in the stone, about a quarter of the width of the lava, and this flowed on into the darkness right ahead.

“What do you think of it?” cried Panton.

“Wet, dark, and creepy,” said Oliver, as he listened to a peculiar whispering noise made by the water as it glided along in its stone canal, the sound being repeated in a faint murmur from the sides and top.

Then *scritch-scratch* and a flash of light which sank and then rose again, as the splint of wood, whose end Smith had struck, began to burn strongly.

“Now, Billy! Candleses!” cried the sailor, and light after light began to burn, showing the shape of the place—a fairly wide rift, whose sides came together about twenty feet overhead. The floor was wonderfully level and some forty feet wide, the stream being another nine or perhaps but eight, but widening as it went on.

As soon as the candles were lit Smith held up three, and Wriggs two, right overhead, so as to illuminate the place, and Oliver and Drew gazed with a feeling of awe at the sloping sides which glistened with magnificent crystals, many of which were pendent from sloping roof and sides, though for the most part they were embedded in the walls.

“Well, is that wet, dark, and creepy?” cried Panton.

“It is very wonderful,” replied Drew. Oliver said nothing, for he was peering right before him into the darkness, and trying to master a curious feeling of awe.

“This is something like a find,” cried Panton, triumphantly.

“How far does it go in?” said Oliver, at last.

“Don’t know. We are going to explore.”

“Will it be safe? This may lead right down into the bowels of the volcano.”

“I think not,” said Panton, “but right away underground somewhere. Once upon a time when the volcano was in action it overflowed here or cut a way through the wall, and then the fiery stream forced its way onward, and was, no doubt, afterwards covered in by the stones and cinders hurled out by the mountain. Then, of course, after the volcano had played itself out, and the lake formed in the crater, it in turn overflowed, and the water ate its way along, as you see, right in the river of lava, which it followed naturally downwards.”

“And do you want us to follow the stream naturally downwards?” said Oliver.

“Of course. I’ve only been in about fifty yards, but it is certainly the most wonderful place I have ever seen. Look here.”

He picked from a crevice a great bunch of soft dark brown filaments, somewhat resembling spun glass.

“What’s that? Some kind of fibre?” cried Drew. “But how does it come here?”

“Is it fibre?” said Panton, smiling.

“No; too brittle. It is glass.”

“Yes. Obsidian—a volcanic glass.”

“But it looks like the result of glass-blowing,” said Oliver.

“Right; so it is. Volcanic glass-blowing. This must have been driven out of some aperture in the burning mountain during an eruption, steam acting upon flint and lime when in a state of fusion.”

“But where are you going to get your flint and lime from to make a glass like this?” said Oliver.

“Who can say? From the interior of the earth, or from deposits made by the sea.”

“I don’t see that,” said Drew.

“Indeed! Why, haven’t you silicious sand, the lime from the coral and shells and soda from the seaweeds of thousands of years. Plenty from that supply alone, without calculating what may be beneath us. Now then, forward: I’ll lead, and we had better all go carefully, in case of there being any chasms. As far as I’ve been the floor was all like this, smooth and just faintly marked by a grain formed by the flow.”

He took a candle, and, holding it high above his head, led the way, closely followed by Oliver.

“No fear of our losing our way,” said the latter. “We have only to keep on by the side of the stream, and then notice which way it flows. If we go against it, we must be right in coming back.”

The way widened as they progressed, and was to a small extent down-hill, but not sufficiently so to make the water rush onwards, only sufficient for it to glide along in a glassy smooth fashion, keeping up the same mysterious whispering which grew as they went on into the darkness, not seeming to be louder, but so to speak as if there were

more and more of this strange murmur extending onward and onward to infinity.

Once they all stopped to look back at the light which shone in through the cavern's mouth, and looking dazzlingly bright as it played upon the water gliding in softly from the lake, but soon growing softer and opalescent, and gradually dying away. Five minutes later, when Oliver turned back to look again, he found that they must have unconsciously descended, for there was only a faint dawn of light upon the roof of the cave, and a minute later all was black.

"Now," said Drew, with an involuntary shiver which he turned off as being from the temperature. "What are you going to show us? for it's getting chilly here."

"One of the wonders of the world," replied Panton. "Look at the crystals here."

"Yes, but we saw them before."

"Then look at the incrustations of sulphur here. These must have been here for countless ages. Look, too, how it is heaped against this wall."

"Yes, wonderful, but we saw plenty of sulphur when you came up out of that hole where you first went down, if you remember, and brought plenty up."

"Yes," said Oliver. "Can't you show us something more like what must have been in Aladdin's cave, gold, silver, and precious stones?"

Panton held up his light as they turned round a bend of the rocky side on their left, and pointed to the coloration of the rocks and the half loose fragments, which still clung in their place, while other bits had fallen down.

"There," he said, "those are as bright as anything in Aladdin's cave."

"And as valuable?"

"That depends on the value people put upon them. From a geological point of view, and the study of the formation of crystals by volcanic heat they are priceless."

"But how much farther are you going?" said Drew.

"As far as the candles will let us," said Panton. "Hallo!"

His voice was echoed from a distance as loudly as he had spoken, and the "Hallo!" went reverberating away in the gloom.

"We must be in a big opening," he said, and again his voice echoed, and then went on repeating itself and dying away.

Panton thrust a hand into his pocket and brought out a roll of magnesium wire, gave Wriggs his gun to hold, and then lit one end which flashed out into a brilliant whitish light, surrounded by dense fumes of smoke, and illuminating the vast hall in which they stood, for here the tiny river ran in a wide-spreading plain of smooth lava which must at one time have been a lake of molten stone, now hard, cold, and dry, save where the water glided on like so much steel in motion.

As the magnesium wire burned out, the candles which were getting short looked like so many yellowish sparks in the midst of utter blackness, and it was some minutes before even Panton showed any disposition to stir. But at last the eyes of all began to lose the dazzled sensation caused by the white glare, and Panton proposed that they should go on.

"What for?" said Drew. "There are specimens enough for you here without going farther, and the place seems to be all alike."

"Oh, no: all variety. You are not afraid, are you?"

"Well, I don't know so much about that," replied Drew, quietly. "I have no wish to seem cowardly, but it is not very pleasant moleing along here in the darkness. I keep expecting to step down into some bottomless pit."

"If we come across one, you'll see me go down first. But hark! What's that?"

"I don't hear anything," said Drew.

"Don't you, Lane?" cried Panton.

"Well, yes, I fancy I can hear a dull sound as of falling water."

"There must be a cascade, then, farther in. Come on, I must see that. I've got some more wire."

Holding his candle well on high, he strode boldly on over the lava stream, his two friends feeling bound to follow him, while Smith and Wriggs came last.

"How do you feel, Tommy?" whispered the latter.

"Bad," was the laconic reply.

"Don't seem no good in going no furdur, do it?"

"Not a bit, and these here candles'll be out d'rectly. Hold hard, please, sir, we've got to light up again."

Oliver heard his words, and hailed Drew, who in turn called to Panton. But the latter was just at an angle where the lava stream swept round to the left, and there was a reason why he did not hear the call, and they saw him disappear round the corner with his light.

Drew hastened his steps and followed, catching sight of him for a moment, and then losing him again, for Panton's light was extinguished, and Drew stood peering forward in an agony of dread, feeling certain that their companion had dropped down into some horrible crevice in the lava; while he had suddenly himself stepped from almost perfect silence into a part of the cavern where his ears were smitten by a fearful din of falling water.

The next minute, in an agony of spirit that seemed too hard to bear, his outstretched candle lit up Panton's face, which was farther illumined by the lights the others bore.

"My light's burned out," cried Panton, placing his lips close to Drew's ear. "I say, what a row the water makes."

The effort to speak grew troublesome, and signs were resorted to. Fresh candles were lit, and in spite of an objection raised by Oliver, Panton was for going on again.

"We must see the falls now we are so near," he shouted. "We can't be many yards away. We'll come better provided with lights another time."

Starting on again, but going very carefully, Panton continued his way onward pretty close to the edge of the smooth river which ran now several feet below the level on which they walked. And as he held out his candle, so as to clearly see the edge, the light gleamed fitfully from the black glassy surface of the stream.

All at once Panton found himself at an angle of the rock, where a second stream joined the one by which they had come, and as the others joined him, it seemed as if their progress was at an end. This second stream was a surprise, for it was larger than the one by their right, and coming as it did almost at right angles from their left, it was puzzling as to whence it could come, for it did not seem possible that it could have issued from the crater lake.

And there they stood in a noise that was now deafening, holding their lights on high, and trying to pierce the black darkness in front, but of course in vain.

A peculiar fact struck Oliver now, as he stood pretty close to the lava edge of the angular platform upon which they had halted, and this was, that the flames of all their candles were drawn away from them toward where the water of the conjoined streams must be falling in one plunge down into some terrible gulf. He knew at once that this was caused by a strong, steady current of air setting towards the falls, and in his uneasiness he was about to point out to Panton that their candles were rapidly burning away, when the latter suddenly lit his remaining piece of magnesium wire, and the next minute they were all straining their eyes, and now looking into a misty glare of light, right in front—evidently the mist rising from the churned-up water—or now upon their grotesque black shadows, cast by the white-smoked magnesium upon the floor and the ceiling far above.

But there was no sign of the water itself, only the conformation of the lava stream whose edge could be seen upon the other side of the second river at least thirty feet away.

"What's to be done?" said Panton at last, as the magnesium burned out and all was once more black darkness.

"Get back," said Oliver, with his lips to his friend's ear. "The candles are guttering away terribly, and we must not be left in the dark."

"No," yelled Panton, "that wouldn't be pleasant. Hang it, all my candle's done."

Time had gone faster than they had expected since the second candles were lit, and turning to Oliver he said, sharply,—

"There, you lead the way back. It isn't far if you step out. Forward!"

Oliver wanted no telling, and he started back, but did not begin to breathe freely till the angle of the rock wall was passed and they found themselves again in silence, just too as another candle began to flicker.

"Hullo!" cried Oliver, glancing back. "What does this mean?"

"What?" said Panton.

"The number of lights. Yours is gone and this one will be out directly, but there ought to be three more. Drew, Smith, ourselves. Here, where is Wriggs?"

There was no answer, and in a strained, excited voice, Smith shouted,—

"Hi, Billy lad, where are yer?"

There was a whispering echo, but nothing more till Oliver spoke,—

"Where did you see him last?"

"See him, sir, why yonder, where the magneshy was burnt. Billy ahoy-y-y-y!"

But there was no answer, and they stood in a little group appalled by the knowledge that their lights would not last many minutes longer.

"Here—quick, Smith, you have some more candles?" cried Oliver.

"Not a blessed one, sir. Billy Wriggs has got what there is left in his jersey."

The truth forced itself upon them now with horrifying force that they had done wrong in making this attempt so badly provided, and in trusting so fully to Panton, who in his eager enthusiasm had gone too far.

One thought was in every mind, would they ever be able to find their way out of this terrible darkness when the last ray of light had failed?

Chapter Forty One.

In the Gross Darkness.

Panton's conscience smote him, and he could not speak, for he felt that he was to blame for their trouble. But Oliver Lane rose to the occasion.

"Quick," he said, "all candles out but one. Keep yours, Drew, and the other can be relit when it burns down."

In an instant there was a darkening of the scene of gloom, and the young botanist held up his dim yellow light a little higher.

"Now, then, what's to be done?" he said, huskily. "Hail—hail, all together," cried Oliver, and he was obeyed, but the echoes were the only answers to their cries.

"Poor old Billy! Poor old Billy!" groaned Smith.

"Silence, there!" said Oliver, sharply. "There is only one thing to do. You must get back to the entrance as quickly as you can, and then make for the brig to fetch lights and ropes."

"But it seems so cruel to go and leave the poor fellow without making farther search."

"You cannot make farther search without lights," cried Oliver, angrily. "Quick! you are wasting time. Go at once while your lights last."

"And when the lights are all out, what then? How are we to find our way?"

"By touch," cried Oliver. "One of you must creep along by the side of the river and feel the way from time to time."

"Come along, then," cried Panton, "but it does seem too hard to go and leave the poor fellow."

"He's not going to be left," said Oliver, quietly.

"What do you mean?" cried Panton.

"I am going to stay."

"Then I shall stay with you," said Panton, firmly. "I'm not going to leave you in the lurch."

"You are going to do as I tell you," raged out Oliver. "Go, and don't lose the chance of saving the poor fellow's life. Quick! Off!"

"Let me stay with you, sir," growled Smith.

"No, man, go!" cried Oliver, and without a word, Drew led off with the others following and the faint rays from the candle shining on the rocky wall, with a very feeble gleam. Then as Oliver watched, it appeared like a faint star on the surface of the water, making the young man shudder at the thought of some terrible subterranean creature existing there ready to attack him as soon as the last rays of the candle and the steps had died out.

This did not take long, for roused to make quick effort by those stern, emphatic commands, the sadly diminished party hurried on, with Oliver watching them as he stood still for a few minutes, and then moved slowly farther away from the little whispering river, extending his hands till they touched the rocky wall against which he leaned.

He listened to the footsteps growing more and more faint, and watched the faint yellow star, until it died right away, gleamed faintly into sight once more, and then was completely gone, leaving him in total darkness, and face to face with despair, and the knowledge that the fate which had snatched away his companion so suddenly, might at any moment be his.

For what was it? Had he slipped and fallen into the stream, and been swept away before he could rise to the surface, and cry for help? Had he inhaled some mephitic gas which had overcome him? Or was he to let superstitious imagination have its play and believe that some dragon or serpent-like creature had suddenly raised a head out of the dark waters, seized him, and borne him down? It was possible, and a shudder ran through the young man's frame as he pictured the great serpent-like object suddenly darting itself at him, wrapping him in its folds as he had seen the constricting sea-snakes seize their prey, and at once drag them out of sight.

He shuddered at the thought, and in spite of a strong effort to command his nerve, the horror of thick darkness was upon him for a few minutes, and a mad desire came over him to shriek aloud, and run frantically in what he believed to be the direction of the entrance, though a movement or two which he had made had robbed him even of that knowledge, and for the moment he felt that he had lost all count of where he was.

He came to his natural self again, with his hands tightly over his mouth to keep back the cries which had risen to his lips.

“As if I were a frightened child in dread of punishment,” he said, half aloud, in his anger against self, and from that minute he grew calm and cool once more. Feeling about a little over the face of the rock as he turned to it, he found a place where he could seat himself and rest for a time. And now he knew well enough that he must be facing the stream, and that all he had to do to reach the entrance was that which he had bidden his companions do, creep along by the side, and dip in his hand from time to time, so as to keep in touch with the water.

“As a last resource,” he said, softly, “as a last resource,” and then he began to think of how necessary this would be, should he have to seek the daylight alone, for he recalled how, though the place was a mere passage at times through which the lava stream flowed, there were spots where it opened out into vast halls, whose sides and roof were beyond the reach of the artificial light they had used, and in these places he knew he might easily lose himself and with this loss might fail in his nerve, and perhaps go mad with horror.

He shuddered at the thought as he recalled the sensation through which he had fought his way, and determining to be firm and strong, he turned his attention away from his own sufferings to those of the man for whose sake he had stayed.

“And it was to help him and give him encouragement that I stopped,” he said to himself, with a feeling of hot indignation against his weakness. “Then I must not stay here, but go back towards where we missed him.”

He sat thinking for a few moments as to his plans, and then, feeling certain that when help came, those who returned would follow right on, he concluded that it would be better to go back to the junction of the two streams once more, and stay there, striving from time to time, in spite of the deafening noise, to make the lost man hear.

“It will encourage him, for I will not believe he’s dead,” said Oliver aloud, and then, in spite of himself he shivered, for his voice went echoing strangely along the great hollow. But he mastered this unpleasant feeling, and determining to be strong, he raised his voice and uttered a loud “Ahoy,” listening directly after to the wonderful echoes, which seemed to fly in all directions, repeating and blurring each other as it were, into a strange confusion till the last one died out.

“Not pleasant,” thought Oliver, as he listened, and then when all was silent once more he made a start for the river’s edge, and reaching it began to follow it down. This, by walking slowly, did not prove very difficult, for the water had cut the bed in which it ran so straight down through the lava that there was quite a well-marked angle, which he could run his right foot along and make his way without stooping, save at rare intervals.

As he went on with his eyeballs aching from the strong natural effort to see through the darkness, his mind would keep wandering away to the glory of the sunshine without, and how beautiful were light and life, and how little appreciated till a person was shut off from their enjoyment.

Travelling slowly on in this way for how long a time he could not tell, he at last became conscious of the fact that he must be nearing the place where they had turned off nearly at right angles and plunged from silence into the deafening roar of echoes formed by the noise of falling waters. For there it all was plainly on the ear, but as it were in miniature, and Oliver stopped short, thinking.

“Shall I be doing wisely in going forward after all?” he said to himself, and he hesitated as he thought of one of the main objects of his being there—to try and let poor Wriggs know that he was not forsaken and that help would soon be at hand.

“My voice can never be heard in all that din,” he said to himself, and before going farther he uttered a loud shout, and listened to the echoes, one of which struck him as being so peculiar that he shouted again with the repetition sounding even more peculiar.

His heart began to throb and his hopes to rise, for he felt convinced that the “ahoy” was an answer to his call, and in a wild fit of excitement and joy he said to himself,—

“It must be. Now, let’s try if it is after all only an Irish echo.”

“Ahoy!” he cried. “Where are you?”

There was utter silence for a few moments, and then he heard a cry sounding so wild and strange that it seemed to freeze the very marrow in his bones.

Chapter Forty Two.

A Lonely Vigil.

Oliver was too much startled for a few moments to move or speak. Then making an effort to master his dread, “It’s an Irish echo,” he said. “Poor Wriggs, he is making his way towards me. Ahoy! this way.”

"Comin' sir," came plainly enough now, but directly after every echo seemed again blurred and confused like a picture reflected in agitated water. But the sound was certainly very near, and each shout and answer came closer, till at last the man's steps were plainly heard in a slow shuffling fashion, as he evidently carefully extended one foot and then drew the other up to join it.

"Where are you?" cried Oliver at last, for the steps were now very close, and his voice, like the man's, sounded strange and confused by the repetitions from roof, wall, and water.

"Clost here!"

"Hold out your hand," cried Oliver, as he extended his own. "Ha! That's good," he said, with his heart leaping for joy at the warm strong grasp he received. "Thank Heaven you are safe!"

"Thank-ye, Mr Oliver Lane, sir. But my word it are black, Hold of a coalin' screw's nothing to it."

"Where were you?" said Oliver, as he clung to the man's hand.

"Oh, clost along here by the waterside, sir."

"But did you fall in? No; you are not wet."

"Oh, no, sir, I never fell. I'm dry enough."

"Then how came you to hang behind, and cause all this trouble and alarm?"

"'Cause company's good, they says, if you're going to be hanged; and as you wasn't, sir, I 'adn't the 'art to let you stop all alone here in the dark."

"Why, it isn't Wriggs, then?"

"Nay, sir, that's for sartin, I on'y wish as how it was."

"Why, Smith, my good fellow! Then you stopped back to keep me company?"

"That's so, sir, and I thought it would be best. You see it'll be bad enough for two on us to wait, but for one all alone in a coal-cellar like this, it's too horful I says to myself, and so I just hung back, and here I am, sir."

"Oh, Smith, my good fellow!" cried Oliver, who felt moved at the man's act.

"It's all right, sir. You and me can talk about birds as you've skinned, and about some o' those tomtit and sparrer things as I've seen about, and meant to shoot for yer some day. And when we're tired o' that, we can ask riddles and sing a song or two, or play at chucking one stone at another, or into the water. It won't be so much like being all alone in the coal-cellar, shut up for a naughty boy as I used to be when I was a little 'un."

"Smith, I can never feel grateful enough for this," cried Oliver.

"Gammon, sir; Pretty sort of a chap I should be if I hadn't ha' been ready to stop and keep a gent like you comp'ny a bit. Don't you say no more about that there, sir."

"I must, Smith, I must," said Oliver, huskily.

"Then I shall be off till you've done, sir; and you'll have to say it to the heckers as allus answers, 'Where'?"

Oliver pressed the man's hand, and Smith gave a sigh of relief.

"Any use to offer you a bit o' good pig-tail, sir?" he said. "Werry comfortin' at a time like this."

"No, thank you, Smith, I don't chew."

"I doos," said Smith, giving a grunt or two, which was followed by the click of the knife being shut after using it to cut a quid, and then by the sharp snap of a brass tobacco box. "Werry bad habit, sir, but I don't seem able to leave it off. I say, sir, what about poor old Billy? Don't say as you think he's drowned."

"No, no, I hope and pray not," said Oliver.

"That's right, sir. I don't believe he is. Stoopid chuckle brain sort o' chap in some things; and talk about a bull being obstinit, why, it would take a hundred bulls biled down to produce enough obst'nacy to make one Billy Wriggs. He wouldn't get drowned; I've known him tumble out o' the rigging over and over, and be upset out of a boat, but he's only picked his self up and clambered in again, and been hauled into the boat when he was upset. While one day when he were washed overboard—and I thought he had gone that time, for you couldn't ha' lowered a boat in such a sea—I'm blessed if another big wave didn't come and wash him back again, landing him over the poop so wet as you might ha' wrung him out wonderful clean, and if he'd only had a week's beard off, he'd ha' looked quite the gentleman."

"Poor fellow, we must save him somehow."

"Tchah! Don't you be down-hearted, sir, you see if he don't turn up all right again. Reg'lar bad shillin' Billy is. Why, you see how he went on when he went up the mountain and into holes and over 'em and into hot water. He allus comes out square. He can't help it. No savage couldn't kill Billy no matter what he did, and as for this here game—oh,

he'll be all right."

"I hope so, Smith," said Oliver, with a sigh.

"Well, sir, it don't sound as if yer did. You spoke in a tone o' voice as seemed to say I hope he's jolly well drowned."

"I can't help feeling low-spirited, Smith."

"Course you can't, sir, but you just cheer up and I'll try and tell you a yarn o' some kind."

"No, no: not now."

"But I feel as if I'd like to, sir, a reg'lar good out an' outer—a stiff 'un, cause just when I got to the biggest whopper in it, I should expect to hear Billy behind my back in that solemn and serus voice of his a-saying, 'Speak the truth, Tommy, speak the truth.'"

"If I could think that, Smith, I'd say go on, but I cannot. Here, let's talk about him and his accident."

"I don't think there's been no accident, sir, yer see he aren't a haccidental sort o' chap."

"Well, about his disappearance."

"Disappearance, sir?" said Smith. "I aren't no scholard, but I don't see as how a man can disappear in the dark. That aren't nat'ral, is it?"

"No: of course not, a blunder of mine, Smith. Do you feel cold?"

"No, sir, on'y just comf'able. Watcher think o' doing?"

"I did mean to go right to where we stood looking down over the water toward the falls, so as to be near poor Wriggs, but our voices would be quite drowned."

"Might take a walk there, sir, all the same," said Smith, "an' then come back, you know. But I say, sir, you don't think there's no underground sort o' wild beasties here, do you?"

"No, Smith, nothing of the kind."

"No big sort of worms as might twissen round yer and pull yer into their holes?"

"No, Smith, I think we shall have the place all to ourselves."

"And no t'other sort o' things, sir?"

"What do you mean?"

"Well, sir, I don't quite azakly know, but it comes natral like to be feared o' being in the dark, and one has heard o' bogies and ghosties and that sort o' thing."

"Did you ever see anything of the kind?"

"Well, no, sir, I never did, but I've heerd chaps say as they've seen some rum things in their time from sea serpents downwards."

"As to sea-serpents or some kind of monstrous creature similar to the old saurians—"

"Sawrians, sir,—do you mean sea sawrians?"

"Sea and river; the crocodiles whose remains we find as fossils. There is plenty of room in the sea, Smith, and, as a naturalist, I am quite ready to believe in something fresh being discovered. We have seen small sea-serpents, and there is no reason why there might not be big ones, but as to what you call bogies and ghosts, for goodness sake throw over all those silly superstitious notions."

"What, don't you believe people ever comes back arter they're dead?"

"On purpose to frighten the living? No, Smith, I do not. It is an insult to the greatness of nature and the whole scheme of creation."

"Well, sir, speakin' as a man as couldn't help feelin' a bit uncomfortable here in the dark with on'y one looficer in his pocket, it does me good to hear you say that, though it is a bit higher up than I can quite reach with my head. You've made me feel a deal better, for it aren't nice to think as there's anything o' that sort to upset you when the place is quite bad enough without."

"Of course it is," said Oliver. "Come on now. Shall I lead, or will you?"

"You, please sir, and what do you say to keepin' hold o' hands?"

"I was going to propose it. Here's mine."

Smith grasped the extended hand, and Oliver started off at once, making his way cautiously to the edge of the river, and then, as a boy might along the kerbstone of a street, he kept on passing his right foot along, till at last they stood

in the profound darkness, listening to the thundering echoing roar of the falling water reverberating from the hollow roof and rising and sinking in booming deep diapasons till there were moments when it seemed to their stunned ears like a burst of strange wild giant music.

They stood for long enough together there, feeling that they were quite at the edge where the water-worn lava formed an angle, thinking, with many a shudder, that if poor Wriggs had fallen from where they stood, they could never by any possibility see him again.

At last Oliver drew his companion back, and, placing his lips to the man's ear, shouted to him that it was of no use to stay there, and they had better return to the portion of the cavern round the angle where they could speak to each other.

"You be leader going back," said Oliver.

"But I aren't sure which way to go, sir," shouted back Smith.

Oliver placed his lips close again.

"Keep your left foot on the edge and slide it along as we go."

"But suppose it's wrong way, sir?" suggested Smith.

"It can't be," cried Oliver again. "If you keep your left foot on the edge of the rock, every step must take us back toward the entrance."

Smith tightened his grasp and began, but so clumsily, that at the end of ten minutes he slipped, fell, and gave so violent a jerk to Oliver's arm that the latter nearly lost his hold, and, for a few moments, the sailor's fate seemed sealed. For he lay motionless with both legs over the edge, while all Oliver could do was to hold on, with his heart beating heavily, and the roar of the cavern seeming to be multiplied a hundredfold. He could not shout, for his throat felt dry, but he knew that if he did, his voice would not be heard, and he waited till Smith recovered himself a little, then made a struggle, and managed with his companion's help to get on his legs again.

Then the slow movement was resumed, with Oliver conscious of the exertion and shock by the twitching, beating sensation of the pulses in the sailor's hand.

At last, after what seemed to be an endless length of time the sudden silence which fell upon them told them that they were somewhere about their resting-place, and drawing back from the edge of the little river, Smith sank down upon the lava with a groan.

"Oh, murder in Irish!" he said. "I thought I was gone, sir. I was feeling along with my left hoof, when my right suddenly give a slip on a bit of rock as seemed like glass, and there it was slithering away more and more. If you hadn't ha' held on, you might ha' told 'em to sell off my kit by auction when you got back."

"I thought you were gone too, Smith," said Oliver, with a shudder.

"Yes, sir, it was werry 'orrid; and do you know, I fancy that's where poor old Billy slipped and went down."

"Possibly," said Oliver, and seating himself they talked at intervals for hours in the tomb-like silence of the awful place, till a peculiar drowsy feeling stole over Oliver, and he started back into wakefulness with a shudder of horror, for it suddenly struck him that he was beginning to be influenced by some mephitic gas once more, such as had affected them along the line of the mist at the foot of the mountain.

"Smith!" he cried excitedly, "do you feel sleepy?"

A low deep breathing was the only reply.

"Smith! wake up!" he cried; but there was a want of energy in his words, and five minutes after his efforts had grown feeble in the extreme. In another, he too had succumbed, not to a dangerous soporific vapour, but to the weariness produced by long exertion, and slept as soundly as his companion, and as if there was nothing whatever to fear.

Chapter Forty Three.

Smith has a Startler.

Oliver Lane was dreaming of pleasant gushing streams, in which swam fish of glistening colours, deep down in the soft shades, when the sun appeared to come out suddenly and dazzle his eyes, so that he could not bear it, and he sprang up to find Mr Rimmer leaning over him, holding a lantern.

"That's better, sir!" he cried. "I was beginning to be afraid that you had breathed bad air."

"I—I—what time is it?" said Oliver confusedly. "Anything the matter?"

"Matter!" said the mate. "Here, Smith, my lad, rouse!"

"Rouse up it is, sir!" cried the man, scrambling to his feet. "My trick? Eh? Oh, all right. Just dropped asleep."

"I couldn't for the moment recall where I was," said Oliver, "Thank goodness you have all come. We could do nothing,

and sleep overcame us at last.”

“Then you have heard nothing of poor Wriggs?” said Panton, who was one of the group that surrounded them.

“Nothing,” replied Oliver.

“And never will, I’m afraid,” said Mr Rimmer.

“Don’t say that,” cried Oliver, who was full of excitement now. “Have you just come?”

“Yes, and found you both lying here asleep, as if nothing were wrong,” said Drew, who, like the others, carried a lantern. “We had a terribly long struggle to get out of the cavern, for our last piece of candle soon came to an end, and then it was very hard work to get back to the ship in the dark.”

“Dark? Was it evening?”

“Black night,” said Panton.

“Then what is it now?”

“The sun was just upon rising as we left the crater lake and came in,” said the mate, “and that’s two hours ago, full.”

Smith gave his leg a slap to express his astonishment, and the mate offered them both food and water, which had been thoughtfully provided.

“By-and-by,” said Oliver. “I’m not hungry now. Come on, and try and find that poor fellow.”

He held out his hand for one of the lanterns, and leading the way, which was comparatively light now, as the sailors who had been brought held their lanterns well up, he soon reached the corner, passed it, and saw that they were in a very spacious cavern. Then the second stream was reached, and they all stood together gazing out toward where the cascade formed by the union of the two rivers plunged down.

But nothing was visible save blackness and wreathing vapour, which gleamed in a grey ghostly way some distance in front, and to try and see better some magnesium wire was burned.

This vivid white light showed that there was a black dripping roof some fifty feet overhead, and the water of the two streams gliding rapidly away from below the angle on which they stood, covering one whole side of the visible cavern with water, and increasing in speed till it disappeared beneath the rising mist caused, of course, by the falls.

There the lanterns were swung about over the water, and shout after shout was sent forth to be lost in the torrent’s roar, till at last the mate turned away and signed to the party to follow him.

He led them back to where the noise grew hushed, and they could speak once more.

“There is nothing more to be done, gentlemen,” said the mate, sadly. “The poor fellow must have gone over somewhere along that rocky edge. I saw several places where it was as slippery as ice, and he has been swept into the depths. Ugh, the whole thing makes me shudder.”

He was right: they all knew nothing more could be done, and they tramped back over the smooth lava stream.

“And I feel to blame for it all,” said Panton, as he walked between his friends. “Who could have foretold that such a terrible calamity would happen to us? It is too horrible to bear.”

At last there was a faint gleam of light upon the water, followed by a flash, and then the lanterns were extinguished, for the blaze of sunshine could be seen playing upon the lake and the Gothic archway of the cavern’s mouth fringed with creepers and ferns, while like some curious silhouette, there for a few moments upon one of the rocks just level with the water, those which had served for stepping-stones, was the figure of a large graceful leopard as it stood gazing into the cavern, but turned and bounded away directly.

The light was hardly bearable for a few minutes, as the party issued out to climb the walls of the ancient crater, and then descend on the other side, but eyes soon grew accustomed to the change, and Smith uttered a deep sigh full of mournfulness.

“I never see nothing look so beautiful before,” he said to Oliver, “but oh, if poor old Billy Wriggs was here to see it. He wouldn’t say to me, ‘Speak the truth, Tommy, speak the truth,’ for them’s the truest words, sir, as I ever said.”

They reached the side of the brig, hot and weary, to find all well, and as they parted on the deck Smith turned to Oliver.

“I’m a-goin’ down to have a good heavy wash, sir, ’fore I has any breakfast, and then I don’t think as I shall eat any, for it’s hard lines to ha’ lost one’s mate.”

“Hard indeed, Smith,” said Oliver, sympathetically. “Poor fellow! but I think we did all we could.”

“Heverythink, sir, I say,” replied the man, who then went slowly below into the forecabin and rushed out again, looking horrified, scared, and yelling loudly.

“Hallo!” cried Mr Rimmer, running forward. “What’s the matter now?”

Smith could not speak, but stood with his lips quivering and his eyes round and staring.

"Do you hear?" cried the mate, angrily. "Why don't you speak?"

The reason was patent to all. The poor fellow could not utter a word, but stood pointing wildly down through the fore-castle hatch.

Chapter Forty Four.

A Tongue in a Knot.

Oliver and the mate immediately made a sharp rush for the opening, and the first uttered a cry of astonishment as he got down into the men's place, for there, dimly seen by the faint light shed by a great disc of glass let into the fore part of the deck and well cemented with pitch, was a man in one of the bunks sleeping heavily, while in a tone indicative of his astonishment, the mate exclaimed,—

"What, Wriggs! You here?"

"Ay, ay, sir," shouted the man, rising so suddenly that he struck his head a violent blow against the floor of the bunk above him. "I say, don't wake a man quite so hard!" he grumbled, and then, as he recognised the speaker, "Beg pardon, sir, didn't know it was you."

"Why, how did you get here?" cried Oliver.

"Get here, sir? Oh, I walked it, and was that bet out that I tumbled in at once. Tommy Smith got back?"

"Yes, and all of them," cried the mate. "Here, pass the word for Smith, and tell him it isn't a ghost."

"I'm here, sir," said a gruff voice as the hatchway was filled up by a body which darkened the light. "Is it alive?"

"Tommy ahoy!" cried Wriggs hoarsely. "I got back fust."

"But how?" cried Oliver. "You did not pass us and come out the way we went in."

"No, sir; I went out t'other way by the back door."

"Is he all right—alive?" cried Panton, in a voice full of hysterical excitement as he scrambled down, followed by Drew.

"He seems to be," said the mate. "Are you sure you're alive, Wriggs?"

"Yes, sir, I think so."

"But how was it?" cried Oliver.

"Ah, that's a queshtun, sir," said the man, rubbing one ear. "I don't quite know, on'y as I was walking along arter you one moment, and the next my legs seemed to run down a slide and I was in the water."

"I thought so," cried Oliver.

"I did holler, but there was such a row nobody heered me, and afore I knowed where I was I seemed to be going down with five hundred millions o' chaps sousing buckets o' water on my head till I was most stifled, and then I was going on again."

"Going on where?"

"Oh, I dunno, on'y as it was all dark and the water just deep enough to slide me along over the bottom which was smooth as glass."

"Ah! the trough cut by the water in the lava stream," cried Panton, "continued right on after the fall."

"Yes, sir, that's it. I continued right on arter the fall till I got rayther sick on it and tried to get out fust one side and then the other."

"And did you?" cried Oliver.

"No, sir, I just didn't, for it was all as slipper as slither, and as soon as I tried, the water seemed to lay hold on me and pull me back and send me on again."

"And did you keep on like that?"

"Oh, no; I got up sometimes and tried to walk, and other times I went along sittin'."

"But didn't you try to come back?"

"Try, sir? What was the good? Why, the water did just what it liked with me, and wouldn't even let me try to swim. Do you think I could ha' got back up that waterfall? Bless your 'art, sir, seems to me as if you might as well try to get up to the moon."

"Never mind that," said Oliver, excitedly; "tell us about what followed," and then he turned his head sharply, for Smith was rubbing his hands down his legs and chuckling softly now in his intense delight to see his messmate back safe and sound.

"Told you so—I told you so," he muttered.

"Course I will, sir," said Wriggs. "Well, you see the water kept carrying me along in the dark, and as fast as I managed to get up it downed me again and began to stuffyate me, only I wouldn't have that, and got up again and tried to stand. But it warn't no use, the bottom was too slithery, and down I goes again in the darkness, thinking it was all over with me, but I gets the better of it again, and on I goes sailing along, sometimes up and sometimes down, and a-swallowing enough water to last me for a week."

"Yes, go on," cried Oliver.

"Right, sir, I'm a-goin' on," said Wriggs. "Where was I?"

"A-swallerin' the water, Billy," said Smith, interposing a word or two.

"So I was, Tommy, lots of it. I kep' on swallerin' that water till I didn't swaller no more 'cause there warn't no room. So, of course, I left off, and went bobbin' up and bobbin' down, sometimes goin' head fust and sometimes legs fust. Oh, it was at a rate! And it was as dark as pitch, and you couldn't get out this side nor t'other side neither."

"Well, go on," said Mr Rimmer, impatiently.

"Yes, sir; and there I goes, getting in a puff o' wind now and then when I has a charnsh, and the water a-rooshin' me along and the bottom all slithery, and sometimes I was heads up and sometimes toes, and the water kep' a carryin' of me along so as I couldn't stand straight nor sit down nor kneel nor nothing. But on I keeps again, on and on and on, and sometimes I was down and—"

"I say," said Panton, "wasn't it a very long way?"

"Yes, sir, a mortal long ways, and sometimes the water got me down when I tried to swim and sometimes—"

"Yes, yes, yes," cried Oliver, for the mate was roaring with laughter; "but you've told us all that over and over again. We want you to get to the end."

"That's what I wanted to do, sir," said Wriggs, "but there didn't seem to be no end and the water kep' a—"

"My good fellow, that isn't the way to tell a story," cried Oliver, impatiently. "Now, then, get on: we've had enough of that. The water swept you along a dark cavernous place where it had cut a way through the lava, and you couldn't keep your feet."

"That's it, sir. You can tell it ever so much better nor me. Go on, please."

"How can I?" cried Oliver, as there was a general burst of laughter at this. "I was not there, so how am I to tell your story?"

"I d'know, sir; but you seems to know ever so much more about it than me, for it was so dark and the water kep' a-rooshin me along—"

"Right to the entrance, where the stream swept you out into the open air, but before you got there you could see the light gleaming along on the top of the water, and this increased till you found yourself in' the full glow of daylight where the stream rushed out and down toward the sea."

"Why, did you tumble in too, Mr Oliver Lane, sir?" cried Wriggs, staring open-eyed.

"I? Of course not," cried Oliver.

"But that were just how it was, sir. How did you know?"

"I only supposed it was like that, my man."

"Well that's a rum 'un, for I was washed right out with a regular fizz at last, like a cork in a drain."

"And where?" said Mr Rimmer.

"Oh, over yonder somewheres, sir, and I warn't long scuffling ashore, for there was two black fins out, and I knowed as Jack shark's shovel nose warn't far in front."

"Was it in the lagoon?"

"Yes, sir, that was it, and then I gets all my things off and wrings 'em, and lays 'em out ready for the sun to shine on when it come up, while I covers myself all over with sand, which was as nyste and warm as getting between blankets."

"But I thought you said you were swept out into the broad daylight," cried Oliver.

"No, sir, it was you as said that: I didn't. I couldn't cause it was the moon a-shining, and the stars and some o' them flying sparks in among the trees."

"Well, you've got a rum way of telling a story, Wriggs," said the mate. "What did you do next?"

"Oh, I snoozed on till it was quite warm, and my clothes was dry, and then I takes my bearin's and steered off through the woods for port."

"Did you see any of the blacks?" said the mate.

"No, sir, and didn't want to. It was black enough for me in that hole underground, to last me for a long time yet. Don't want any more black, sir, yet, thank-ye."

"Well, you're safe back," said Panton, "and no one is more glad than I am, though we did have all our trouble for nothing, and you may thank Mr Lane and Smith for staying there in the dark waiting till lights were fetched."

"Did Mr Lane do that, sir?"

"To be sure he did."

"And Tommy Smith stopped too, sir?"

"Yes, to keep him company, though we thought once we'd lost him too."

"Much ado about nothing," said the mate drily. "You gentlemen lead me a pretty dance. What's the next thing, Mr Panton—do you want to go down the crater of the volcano?"

"Yes, if it is possible," replied the young man, so seriously that there was a general laugh, and soon after Wriggs was left to finish his sleep, while Panton retired to the cabin to number and make notes about a few of the crystals which he had brought back in his pockets, but thinking of how that cavern might be turned to use.

Chapter Forty Five.

Smith has a "Sentiment."

Mr Rimmer gave way, and a few days after an expedition was made to try once more to mount right up to the mouth of the crater. Taking advantage of what had been learned in former expeditions, the little party followed their last plan, rowed beyond the poisonous mist, landed, and after securing the boat as before, they made for the old camp, reached it and spent a delightful evening watching the faint glow upon the cloud which hovered over the mouth of the crater, and then gazed at the scintillating fire-flies, which upon this occasion made the low growth at the edge of the forest below them alive with sparkling lights.

Long before daylight they were on their way, with the air feeling cold and numbing as they climbed the loose ash and cinders which formed the slope. The great cracks in the mountain-side were successfully passed, and by sunrise they were high enough up to get a glorious view over the island, while a couple of hours after, a point was reached which enabled them to trace the greater part of the coast line and learn by the barrier reef with its white foam that without doubt they were upon an island.

"Now, then," cried Panton, after a brief halt for refreshment, "how long do you say it will take us?"

"Two hours," said Oliver, gazing up at the remainder of the slope, and thinking of how quiescent the volcano was: for save an occasional trembling or vibration under foot, all seemed still.

"One hour at the most," said Drew. "Come on."

"I say the same," cried Panton. "Come on."

Oliver proved to be nearest as to time, for they all referred to their watches when the above words were spoken, and again, when, after a long weary scramble over the yielding ashes, from which came breathings of hot, stifling air.

"Two hours, forty minutes," cried Drew. "I couldn't have thought it."

The hot, gaseous emanations had really seemed to be like breathings, and as they neared the top, they were conscious, as they paused again and again, of the mountain seeming to pant and utter sounds like weary sighs.

As they mounted higher, the heat began to grow suffocating, and it was at last so bad that Smith and Wriggs pulled up short and looked hard at their leaders.

"Well?" cried Oliver.

"Think it safe to go any furdur, sir?" said Smith.

"Safe or no, we mean to get to the top now we've mounted so high. Why do you ask? Want to stop?"

"Well, sir, you see Billy Wriggs been thinking for some time as it was getting werry dangerous, and he'd like to go down."

"Speak the truth, Tommy, speak the truth," growled Wriggs.

"Why, I am speaking the truth, Billy," cried Smith, in angry remonstrance. "Didn't you say over and over again as it

was werry dangerous?"

"Nay, I said it was dangerous, I didn't say werry."

"Oh, well, that's nigh enough for me, messmate."

"You two had better stay here while we go to the top," said Oliver, quietly. "Ready, you others?"

"Yes," said Panton. "Forward," and they started upward again, but stopped directly, for the two sailors were trudging up close behind them.

"I thought you two were going to stop back," cried Oliver.

"Not me," said Smith. "Billy Wriggs can, if he likes."

"What?" cried the latter, "and let you get puffin' and blowin' about havin' done my dags. Not me, Tommy, old man. I'm a-goin' right up to the top, and I'll go as far inside as he will, gen'lemen."

"Come along, then," cried Oliver, and the slow trudge, trudge was resumed in zig-zags, till Smith halted once more, and stood wiping his steaming face.

"Beg pardon, sir," he said, "but if you look uppards, you can see as the smoke hangs over toward us."

"Yes, what of that?" said Oliver.

"Well, that means wind, though we can't feel none. Wouldn't it be best, 'stead o' doublin' back, if we was to go right on now, so as to get higher and higher, and more round to windward?"

"I'm afraid that it will be the same all about the mouth of the crater," said Panton, "but we'll try."

It was a simple expedient that they ought to have thought of before, and Smith proved to be correct, for as they wound on slowly upwards the heat grew greater, but they began to be aware of soft puffs of wind, and at the end of another half-hour, they had climbed to where a steady soft current of cool air blew against them. This made the final part of the toilsome ascent so bearable that as they reached a glistening vitreous stream of greyish hue which looked as if the crater had brimmed over and poured down this molten matter, Oliver leaped upon it and ran for a couple of hundred yards. Then he disappeared suddenly, and horrified the rest, who followed as fast as they could go.

But there was no cause of alarm. As they reached the top of the slope there stood their companion some twenty feet below them on the rugged, jagged and fissured slope of the crater gazing down at a dull glistening lake of molten matter, but so covered with a grey scum that it was only from time to time that a crack appeared, out of which darted a glare so bright that it was visible in the full sunshine, while a tremendous glow struck upon their faces, making their eyes smart as they gazed at the transparent quivering gas which rose up from the molten mass.

A stronger breeze was blowing here, bearing the heat away, otherwise it would have been unbearable, and they made their way on the chaos of cindery rock which lay about in blocks riven and split in every form, some glazed by the glass of the mighty natural furnace, some of a clear vesicular silvery grey, while a hundred yards or so distant and about fifty lower than where they stood, the lake of molten matter lay about circular and apparently half a mile across. The rim of the gigantic cup which from below had looked so regular was now seen to be broken into a thousand cracks and crevices, some going right down through the greyish ash and pumice nearly to the edge of the lake.

No one spoke, it was as if they were too much stricken by awe, as they gazed at this outlet of the earth's inner fires, wondering at the way in which solid rock was turned by the intensity of the heat into a fluid which now in places they could see was in a state of ebullition, and formed rings flowing away from the boiling centre like so much water.

Then, all at once, as if moved by the same set of nerves, they all turned and fled, for without the slightest warning, a part of the lake shot up some fifty feet in the air, like some great geyser, but instead of boiling water it was fluid rock of dazzling brightness even in the sunshine. Then it fell with a sound of hideous splashing, and as they turned to gaze back there was a little rising and falling, and then all was still once more, and the surface rapidly scummed over and grew silvery and dull.

"I wouldn't have missed this for anything," cried Panton, breaking the silence as they stood watching the lake, and then, amid many expressions of wonder and awe at the grandness of the scene, they began to make their way along the well-defined rim of the crater. But slowly, for inside there was not a level space, all being a chaos of riven and scattered masses of slag, obsidian, and scoria, ragged, sharp and in part glazed by the fluid rock.

"It aren't what I thought it would be, Mr Oliver Lane, sir," said Smith, scraping the perspiration from his face with a thin piece of the obsidian which he had picked up, while Wriggs followed his example for a few moments and then threw his piece down.

"What did you expect?" said Oliver.

"On'y a big hole, sir, running right down into the middle o' the world; and I thought we should be able to see into the works."

"Works! What works, man!" said Oliver, smiling.

"Why, them as makes the world turn round; for it do turn round, don't it?"

"Of course, but not from any cause within."

"I say, Tommy, mind what yer at with that there bit o' stuff," growled Wriggs.

"Why?"

"It's sharp as ragers. I've cut my cheek."

"Sarve yer right for being so clumsy. You should use it like this here."

"Well, I did, matey."

"I'm blest!" cried Smith, throwing down the piece of volcanic glass, and dabbing at his nose, whose side was bleeding slightly.

"Cut yoursen?"

"Ay: didn't know it was so sharp as that."

Wriggs chuckled heartily, and the little party moved on as well as they could for the great fissures about the rim, some of which went down into profound depths, from whence rose up strange hissings and whisperings of escaping gases, and breathings of intensely hot air.

There was so much to see, that they would willingly have gone on trying to follow the edge all round, but before long they had warnings that the whole of one side was impassable from the vapours rising from the various fuming rifts, and that it would be madness to proceed; and at last as Panton was pressing his friends to persevere for a few yards farther, they had what Smith called "notice to quit," in a change of the wind that wafted a scorching heat toward them, which, had they not fled over the side and down the outer slope for a short distance, would have proved fatal.

It was only temporary, though, for the fresh cool air came again, and they stopped, hesitating about returning.

"We ought to have thought of it sooner," said Panton.

"Never mind, I'll climb back to yonder," said Oliver, pointing. "That seems to be the highest point. Come with me, Smith," and he began to climb the ascent once more, closely followed by the sailor.

"Whatcher going to do, sir?" cried the man, as Oliver took out what seemed to be a good-sized gold watch.

"You'll soon see," replied Oliver, as he toiled upward.

"But can't yer see what's o'clock down where they is, sir, just as well as up yonder?"

Oliver laughed, and kept on making for a conical rock needle, evidently the remaining portion of a mass of the crater edge when it was fifty feet or so higher, and being wider had remained, when other portions were blasted away by the terrific explosions which had occurred.

"Yer not going to climb up atop there, are yer, sir?" said Smith.

"Yes, you stay below," said Oliver. Finding that, as he had expected, it was an intensely hard miniature mountain of vitrified scoria, and tolerably easy of ascent, he began to climb.

"He aren't my orsifer," muttered Smith, "and I shan't stop back. I should look well if he had an accident. So here goes."

As Oliver mounted, he climbed after him, till they stood together, right on the conical pinnacle, with only just room for them to remain erect, the great boiling crater below on one side, the glorious view of the fairy-like isle, with its ring of foam around, and the vivid blue lagoon, circling the emerald green of the coast. There it all was stretched out with glorious clearness, and so exquisite, that for a few moments Oliver was entranced.

Then the fairy-like vision became commonplace, and Oliver started back to everyday life, for Smith said gruffly,—

"Better see what's o'clock, and come down, sir, for that there big pot's a-going to boil over again."

Even as he spoke there was a roar, a great gush upward of fiery fluid, and a sensation of intense heat, while the pinnacle upon which they stood literally rocked and threatened to fall.

"Quick! get down," said Oliver, taking out the watch-like object once more, glancing at it, and then replacing it in his vest.

"Comin' too, sir?"

"Yes, all right; five thousand nine hundred feet."

Smith stared, but went on descending, followed by Oliver, while the glow shed upon them was for a few moments unbearable. Then the huge fountain of molten rock ceased playing, the glow scorched them no longer, and they scrambled and slid down in safety to where their friends were waiting, and commenced their descent after taking their bearings as well as they could.

"What did you make it?"

"Just over five thousand nine hundred."

"And we've got nearly all that distance to go down," said Drew. "I'm tired already."

But there was no help for it, and they toiled on down among the crevices in safety, and finally reached the brig, but not till close upon midnight, rejoicing, in spite of their weariness, upon a great feat achieved.

"But it caps me, that it do," said Smith in the fore-castle.

"What does?"

"Why, for that Mr Oliver Lane. I knows as we say they gents has got tools for everything, but I never knowed as there was watches made as could tell yer the time and how high up yer are all at once. Well, there is, and I see it all, and it's quite right. I mean to have one of them watches, and I asked Mr Oliver Lane about 'em. He says you can buy 'em in London for thrippenten apiece, and I think he says as they was made by a woman, Mrs Annie Royd, but I aren't quite sure."

"But yer can't afford to give thrippenten for one of they things," growled Wriggs.

"How do you know, matey? Mebbe I can, my lad."

"What yer want it for?"

"See how high yer are up when yer climbs mountains. I mean to say it would be grand."

"Ah, well, I don't want one o' them," said Wriggs, thoughtfully.

"What do you want, then?"

"One o' them things as yer looks through into a drop a' water and sees as what yer drinks is all alive."

"Not you," said Smith, contemptuously; "what you wants is plenty more water in big tanks in our hold, and if I was Mr Rimmer, cap'en of this here ship, I should make some, and keep 'em full."

"What for? Swimmin' baths?"

"Swimmin' great-grandmothers," growled Smith, contemptuously. "No, my lad, I've got a sort o' sentiment as one o' these days the niggers'll come and catch us on the hop, and if so be as they do, and we keep 'em from gettin' in here, do you know what it'll be?"

"Stickin' knives and harrers in us, if they can."

"No," said Smith, laying his hand upon his companion's shoulder and placing his lips to his ear, with the result that Wriggs started away with his face looking of an unpleasant clay colour.

"Think so, mate?" he gasped.

"Ay, that I do, Billy. They will as sure as a gun." Oddly enough, just about the same time as the two sailors were holding this conversation, a chat was going on in the cabin respecting the lugger and how to get her launched. Like Smith, the mate seemed to be suffering from a "sentiment," and he was talking very seriously.

"I did not see it before," he said, "but it all shows what noodles we are when we think ourselves most clever."

"Interpret," said Panton; "your words are too obscure."

"I mean about the lugger," said the mate. "I went well all over it in my mind before I began her, and saw that it would be much easier to build her here where everything was handy than to carry the materials down to the edge of the lagoon."

"Of course," said Oliver. "That would have been very awkward, for the men would have had to go to and fro morning and evening."

"But," said Panton, "a hut might have been run up for them to sleep in."

"Which means dividing a force already too weak. If the blacks make another serious attack upon us we shall have enough to do to hold our own here together, without having part of us defending a flimsy hut, which they would serve at once as they will us here if we don't take very great care."

"Eh? How?" said Oliver, startled by the mate's manner.

"Burn us out as sure as we're alive."

Chapter Forty Six.

A Novel Launch.

The idea was revived again by the mate.

"That's a pleasant way of looking at things," said Panton.

"Horrible!" exclaimed Drew, with a shiver.

"Yes, we've had enough of fire from the volcano," said Oliver, with a glance in its direction, forgetting as he did that it was invisible from their side of the mist.

"We have, gentlemen," said the mate, "but that will be their plan. We may beat them off times enough, but so sure as they set thoroughly to work to burn us out, we're done for, sir."

"You think so?"

"No, I don't think. We're as inflammable as can be, and they've only got to bring plenty of dry, fierce, burning wood and pile it up, and there we are as soon as they set light to it. They can have a good feast then."

"What?" cried Drew.

"Feast, sir. There'll be plenty of roast men done to a turn."

"Don't!" cried Oliver. "You give me quite a turn."

The discussion arose one morning some weeks after the ascent to the crater, and when, after a tremendous amount of collecting, the three naturalists had owned that it was getting on toward the time for helping Mr Rimmer a little over the preparations for getting away from the island.

"Really, Mr Rimmer," Oliver said, "I am ashamed of my selfishness."

"Eh? What have you been doing selfish, my dear sir?" was the reply.

"Thinking of nothing but my own pleasure."

"Pleasure, sir? Why, I haven't seen you playing any games but a bit or two of chess with Mr Panton."

"I mean in thinking of nothing else but my collecting."

"Why, that was your work, sir."

"It is a pleasure to me, and I have thought of nothing else."

"And quite right too, my lad. You came out on purpose to make a collection, didn't you?"

"Well, yes."

"And you've made a splendid one, sir. I never saw such birds and butterflies and beetles before, let along the snakes and things."

"Yes, I have been grandly successful," said Oliver; "certainly."

"And so have your friends. You're satisfied, I hope, Mr Panton?"

"More than satisfied," cried that gentleman. "I've a wonderful collection of minerals, and I've picked up some grand facts on volcanic and coral formation."

"Oh, yes," cried Drew. "I'm satisfied, too. I'm only afraid that you'll have to build another boat to carry my specimens."

"All right, we'll build one if it's necessary, but we've got to tackle this one first. Everything's done that can be done before she's in the water. No likelihood of another earthquake wave, is there, sir?"

"There might be one at any time," said Panton; "but it might be five hundred years."

"And it would be tiresome to wait as long as that, eh, sir?" said the mate, with a droll twinkle of the eye.

"Yes, you'd better get her down to the sea first. What do you mean to do?"

"Begin to-morrow morning, gentlemen; and if you would be so good as to let the birds and stones and flowers alone now, and help me till we get the *Little Planet* afloat, I should be obliged."

"You know we'll all do our best, Mr Rimmer," said Panton. "You've helped us whenever we have hinted at wanting a hand."

"Why, of course, sir, of course," said the mate, interrupting the speaker. "It's all right: turn for turn."

"But why not begin to-day?" said Oliver.

"To be sure," said the others.

"I didn't want to be hard upon you, gentlemen, and so I thought I'd give you a day's notice, but if you would all tackle to at once, why, I should be glad."

"Then as far as we're concerned," said Oliver, "the lugger's launched."

"Thank you, gentlemen, all of you," said the mate; and then drily, "but I don't think we shall get her in the water to-day."

There was a hearty laugh at this, but they were all serious directly, and the question of the launching was taken up.

"Two miles to the lagoon," said Oliver; "it's a long way."

"Yes, sir, but every foot we get her along, will be one less."

"Of course," said Oliver. "And do you think your plans will work?"

"I hope so, sir. We'll give them a good try first, before we start upon another."

They went down over the side and stood directly after examining the lines of the well-made little vessel, which was about the size of a Cornish fishing boat, and now that the greater part of the supports had been knocked away, and she could be seen in all her regularity, compliments were freely given to her builder and architect.

"Well, I'm not ashamed of her, gentlemen," said the mate. "All I'm afraid of is that we shall weaken her a bit in hauling her along over the runners."

"Have you got your runners made?" said Drew.

"Have I got my runners made, sir?" said the mate with a chuckle. "I've got everything ready, grease and all for making 'em slippery, and under her keel a bit of iron as smooth as if it had been polished. Look here!"

He pointed out the curve and finish of the keel, which was so contrived that the vessel was quite on the balance, and a couple of men could easily rock her up and down, while to keep her straight and prevent her lopping over to one side or the other, an ingenious kind of outrigger had been contrived out of a couple of yards, which rested on the ground, and were kept there about four feet from the keel. These two were well pointed and curved up a little in front, and gave the lugger the appearance of riding in a sledge-like cradle.

Moreover, a capstan had been rigged up, half a cable's length away, and as soon as a rope had been attached to a hole low down close to the keel, word was given, the capstan was manned, the sailors gave a cheer as the stout cable secured low down beneath the lugger's bows gradually tightened, strained, and stretched, quivering in the bright morning sunshine, but the vessel did not move. Then a halt was called while the mate re-examined the well-greased runners, and then gave the word for the men to ply their capstan bars once more.

But still she did not move, and a despairing look began to gather upon the mate's brow, till Smith sidled up to Oliver and said,—

"I've jest whispered to Billy Wriggs to go round t'other side, sir, along o' Mr Panton, and if you and me and Master Drew was to do the same here, I dessay we could start her."

"Yes, what are you going to do?" asked Oliver.

"Just ketch hold here, sir, and we'll give her a bit of a rock. Once she's started, away she goes."

As the sailor spoke, he took hold of the yard rigged out on one side to keep the lugger upright, the others did the same on the other side, and as the cable was tightened once more with a jerk, which gave forth a musical deep bass twang, Smith shouted, "All together!" and with his companions, he began to give the hull a gentle rocking movement from side to side.

Then a tremendous cheer arose, and as every man tugged and strained, the vessel began to move, so little that it was almost imperceptible, and Oliver's heart sank at the thought of two miles to go at that rate; but in less than a minute, as she was rocked a little more, she gained momentum, the men at the capstan strained and cheered, and away she went, slowly and steadily, on and on the whole half cable's length.

"Now right up to the capstan," cried solemn, heavy-looking Wriggs; and as she came to a stand, and the men took out their bars and began cheering again in the glorious sunshine, with the coral rock and sand reflecting the brilliant light, and the rapid tropic growth glowing in its most vivid golden green, the rough sailor took off his straw hat, dashed it down upon the ground, screwed up his face into the most severe of frowns, folding his arms tightly across his chest, he gave a kind of trot round to form a circle, and then turned into the middle, stopped for a moment, gave three stamps and a nod to an imaginary fiddler, and started off in the regular sailor's hornpipe, dancing lightly and well, but as seriously as if his life depended upon the accuracy of his steps.

"Hooroar! Brayvo, Billy!" yelled Smith, bending down and beginning to keep time by giving a succession of ringing slaps on his right thigh, and in an instant the whole crew joined in slapping and cheering, while the mate and his passengers joined in the hearty laugh.

"Go it, lad!" "Brayvo, Billy!" "Lay it down, lad!" came in a rugged chorus, and Wriggs danced on with wonderful skill and lightness, putting in all the regular pulling and hauling business right to the very end, which was achieved with the most intense solemnity of manner, amid tremendous applause.

"Capstan!" he shouted as he stopped, and then he was the first to begin loosening the piece of mechanism which had to be taken up and refixed strongly with block and stay a whole cable's length, this time farther on towards the sea.

"Slow work," said the mate, as he turned from superintending to wipe his face and give his companions a nod full of satisfaction; "but we're half a cable's length nearer the lagoon, and if we only did that every day, we should get her afloat in time."

"It's grand," cried Oliver, whose face was streaming from his exertions. "I feel quite hopeful now."

"Hopeful? Yes," cried Panton. "We shall do it."

"If we are not interrupted," said Drew.

"If we are," said the mate, "we must make a fight for it. There's the watch up in the top to give us warning, and the arms all lie ready. At the first alarm everyone will make for the brig's deck, and I daresay we shall beat our visitors off."

"But when we get farther away?" said Drew.

"Don't let's meet troubles before they're half way," said the mate, smiling. "Perhaps the blacks may never come again. Let's hope not."

"Amen," said Panton, and then everything was forgotten in the business on hand, all trusting to the careful watch kept from the brig, and working like slaves to get the capstan fixed to the bars driven in between crevices in the bed rock, while stays were fixed to blocks of coral, which lay here and there as they had been swept by the earthquake wave.

The consequence was, that by noon, when the great heat had produced exhaustion, the capstan had been moved three times, and, thanks to the level ground, the lugger had glided steadily nearly as many cables' lengths nearer the sea.

"Do it?" cried the mate, suddenly, as they sat resting and waiting till the men had finished their mid-day meal. "Of course we shall do it."

"Well," said Oliver, laughing, "no one said we shouldn't."

"No," said the mate, "but someone might have thought so."

"Why, you thought so yourself, Mr Rimmer," cried Panton, merrily.

"Yes, I suppose I have been a bit down-hearted about getting her to sea, and it has made me slow over the finishing. But after the way you gentlemen have buckled to, it goes as easy as can be."

"How long do you reckon we shall be?" asked Drew.

"Getting her down, sir? Well, I used to say to myself, if we can manage it in two months I shall be satisfied, but I'm beginning to think about one now."

"Why, we shall do it in a week," cried Oliver.

"A week?" cried the others.

"Well, why not? If we go on as steadily this afternoon and evening as we have this morning, we shall manage to get her along a quarter of a mile, and that's an eighth part of the distance."

"We shall see," said the mate. "We have had all plain sailing so far."

"Yes, but the men get every time more accustomed to the work," said Drew, "and we ought to do more some days."

"Of course," said Panton. "My anxiety is about the blacks."

Work was resumed then, and by dark they all had the satisfaction of feeling that fully five hundred yards of the long portage had been got over, and, as Oliver said, there was no reason whatever why they should not get on quite as far day by day.

There were plenty of rejoicings there that night—"high jinks," Smith called them—but by daylight next morning every man was in his place, and the lugger began to move again.

And so matters went on day after day, in a regular, uneventful way. There were tremblings of the earth beneath them, and now and then a sharp cracking, tearing sound, as if some portion of the rocky bed below was splitting suddenly open.

At times, too, a heavy report was heard from the direction of the mountain, generally followed by the flight of birds, making in alarm for the south, or the appearance of some little herd of deer, but these matters, like the lurid glow which shone nightly in the clouds above the volcano, had grown so familiar that they ceased to command much attention, and the work went steadily on.

It had to be checked, though, from time to time, for there were occasions when difficulties arose as to the proper fixing of the capstan from the want of hold in the rock, or the failing of blocks to which ropes could be secured, necessitating the driving down of crowbars into some crack in the stone.

At these times, when Mr Rimmer knew almost at a glance that some hours must elapse before the half-dozen for

whom there was room to work would complete their task, advantage was taken of the opportunity for a hunting expedition in the nearest patch of forest, or for a party to go down to the lagoon, cross it to the reef, and spend the time with better or worse luck fishing with lines, or collecting the abundant molluscs which formed a dainty addition to their food.

And at last, a month of exactly four weeks from the day they began, the lugger stood up near to the end of the two-mile land voyage, close to the sands, with the cocoa-nut grove beginning on either side, just at the edge of the land which had not been swept by the earthquake wave.

That afternoon there was a desperate fight with the soft, yielding sand, into which the well-worn bearers and blocks used under the lugger's keel kept on sinking so deeply that it seemed as if fresh means must be contrived for getting the boat quite to the water's edge.

"I'm about done," said Mr Rimmer, as he stood with a huge mallet in his hand; "this sand gives way directly. We shall have to get her back and make for the cocoa-nut trees, but I doubt whether they will bear the strain if we get a cable and blocks at work."

"But look here," said Oliver, "I'm not a sailor, but it seems to me—"

He stopped short, and Mr Rimmer looked at him smiling, but Oliver remained silent.

"He thinks it would be a good plan to put some preserving soap on the lugger," said Panton laughing.

"No, I don't," said Oliver, "but I was thinking that it would not be a bad plan to drag the brig's anchor down here, and get it out in the lagoon, and then fix up the capstan on board the lugger and work it there."

"No," said the mate, "it would drag her bows down and wedge her more fast."

"I had not done," said Oliver.

"Well, what would you do then?" asked the mate.

"Dig a trench just a little wider than the keel, right away down to the shore, and let the water in at high tide."

"It would all soak away."

"At first," said Oliver. "After a time it would be half sand, half water, and yielding enough to let the keel go through like a quicksand."

"He's right," cried Mr Rimmer, and the men set to work spending two whole days digging what resembled a pretty good ditch in the sand, and leading from the embedded keel right out nearly to the edge of the water.

While this was going on one of the brig's anchors was lowered down into the dinghy and laid across a couple of pieces of wood, then, with a couple of planks for the keel to run upon, each being taken up in turn and laid end on to the other, the anchor was got right down to the lagoon, dropped about fifty yards out after being attached to a cable, another was knotted on to this, and again another to the last, and carried through the lugger's bows to where the capstan was fixed.

At high tide the little remaining sand was rapidly dug away, and the water began to flow in; the capstan was manned, and a burst of cheering rose; for as fast as the bars could be worked and the cables in turn coiled down, the new boat was drawn through the sand and out till she was head over the anchor, with a clear foot below her keel.

"You'd better take command, Mr Lane," said the mate, shaking hands warmly. "I ought to have thought of that, but it was beyond me. There we are, then. Now, all we have to do is to load her up with your treasures and plenty of stores, and then make for some other island, and from one to the other until we can get to a civilised port."

"Why not make another lugger, so as to have everything you can belonging to the *Planet*?"

"And give you gentlemen more time to collect?"

"Exactly."

"Well, I don't see why not," said the mate, thoughtfully. "It grieves me to have the good old vessel stranded here with no end of valuable stuff in her; and now that we shall soon have the means of getting away when we like, I think I might as well set the men to work at another."

"But you'll get the rigging and stores on board this one first," said Panton.

"Of course," replied the mate; "but there is another thing to think of, gentlemen."

The others looked at him inquiringly.

"When this boat is ready and properly laden, she cannot be left without a crew on board."

"On account of the blacks," cried Oliver. "No, it is impossible for her to be left."

Left in the Lurch.

The question of building another craft remained in abeyance for a time, all attention being given to the furnishing, the decking, rigging, and other fittings of the *Little Planet*. Then the cases of specimens were got down and placed on board, Panton's first, for they took the place of ballast. Then all necessary stores and water were stowed away, with compass, instruments, and everything ready for an immediate start.

"We shall be packed pretty close," said the mate; "but I propose that we land whenever we have an opportunity, so that we shall not feel the confinement quite so much."

"Then, now that all is right, we may go on collecting?"

"Yes," said the mate, "and I think instead of attempting to build another it would be wiser to half-deck over our two best boats and store them ready. I can't help feeling that it will be safer, and that if we try to save too much we may lose all."

This was finally settled, and a crew selected for the lugger under one or other of the passengers, each taking the command for a week.

This went on for a month, when one day the mate said,—

"Look here, gentlemen, I want a holiday. I've worked pretty hard, and I think it's my turn to go on the new expedition. What do you say?"

"It is only just," they chorussed.

"Then I propose taking the lugger and sailing round the island—as we believe it to be—and then I shall learn something about the prowess of our new craft and see how she can sail."

"That's quite right, Mr Rimmer," said Panton. "Eh, Lane?"

"Of course; we have been horribly selfish in letting him keep on at work for us while we have been taking our pleasure."

"Which again was work, gentlemen, work," replied the mate, good-humouredly. "But all the same, my dear fellows, there will not be much pleasure in this trip. I want to see whether our craft is seaworthy before we are compelled to take to her in real earnest. It would be rather awkward if she began to open her seams as soon as any strain was put upon her by the sails and a heavy sea. Believe me, I would not go if I didn't think it right."

"My dear Mr Rimmer," said Oliver, "do you think we do not know that?"

"But it's like leaving you all in the lurch."

"Nonsense," cried Panton; "we shall be all right. How long will you be gone?"

"I can't say. Two or three days. Perhaps altogether."

"Eh?" cried Drew, in dismay.

"The *Little Planet* may prove untrustworthy, and take me to the bottom, gentlemen," said the mate, calmly. "Who knows?"

"Suppose we don't make the worst of it," said Oliver. "We know what a sailor you are."

"Well, I grant that I am, gentlemen, and ought to be," replied the mate. "I was brought up to the sea, but I never tried my hand at ship-building before."

"Never mind, you've done wonders," cried Panton. "When shall you start?"

"To-morrow, about mid-day. That will give me time to make a few preparations. Let's see, I must have some fighting tools and powder."

"Of course. How many men will you take with you?"

"Three. That will be enough to manage the sails. I shall take the helm. You, gentlemen, will take command, of course, and see that the watches are kept regularly."

Oliver nodded as much as to say, "you may trust us," and after a little more discussion of the mate's plans, the three men were selected and sent down to the boat to take the places of two men who were in charge.

They sat for long enough in the cabin that night, looking out through the open window at the lightning flickering about the volcano cloud, and the fire-flies flitting about the nearest patch of green growth, while every now and then a faint passing quiver told that the action below was still going on, though its violence seemed to be past, and the disturbance gradually dying out, perhaps to wait for years before another outbreak. There was a feeling akin to sadness as they sat talking, for they had all grown so intimate that the parting on the morrow promised to be painful. But the mate saw how they were all affected, and tried hard to cheer them up, rising at last to take a final look round before they retired for the night.

Oliver's sleep was terribly disturbed. He dreamed that the blacks had come with no ordinary weapons, but each

bearing a bundle of dry wood which they piled-up round the brig and set on fire, and as the flames flashed in his eyes he started up in bed to see that the cabin was vividly illuminated, but only for a moment or two at a time, and he knew that it was from the electricity which played about the mountain top.

He was glad enough when daylight came, and after a bathe in the spring where the bitter water was just comfortably hot, he felt refreshed and took upon himself the duty of sending off the rifles, guns, and ammunition, which would be needed on the voyage.

These were entrusted to Smith to carry down to the lagoon and put on board, and at last the hour arrived for the mate to start, Panton being left for that day in command at the brig, while Oliver and Drew started, gun on shoulder, to see Mr Rimmer off.

Very little was said during the walk, and the young men's spirits sank low when they reached the coral sands where the lugger, with sails all ready for hoisting, lay on the pleasantly rippled blue lagoon.

"Capital," cried Mr Rimmer. "Just wind enough to take us well out through the opening in the reef."

As he spoke he waved his hand, the dinghy put off from the lugger, and a man rowed to the shore.

"Good-bye," cried the mate, quickly. "Only a pleasant trip, my dear sirs. I'll soon be back. Shove off."

"It is to avoid showing that he is nervous about his voyage," said Oliver as the man obeyed, and the little boat skimmed away toward where the lugger lay hanging on to a buoy, formed of a little keg anchored to a huge block of coral in the deepest part, by a great noose which had been cleverly dropped around the rock. And then as they stood leaning upon their guns, the dinghy reached the lugger and was made fast, the mooring rope was cast off and the men began to hoist the first sail, when Drew suddenly uttered a cry of horror.

"What's the matter?" exclaimed Oliver.

"Look! look!" was the reply.

Oliver already saw. A great war canoe was being paddled down the lagoon from the north, another was approaching from the south, and from out of the haze made by the booming breakers, a third came on toward the opening through which the mate had arranged to pass to the sea.

The two young men stood paralysed for a few moments, before Oliver raised his gun to give a signal of alarm.

But he lowered it into the hollow of his arm, as he felt that it was unnecessary, for the mate must see.

"Look," cried Drew. "He's coming back to take his luck with us," as they saw that the canoes were being paddled rapidly to lay their crews on board. For the sail hoisted had filled, and the second was being raised while the mate at the helm was steering the lugger as if to bring her close to where the young men stood.

"That's right, come ashore, we'll cover you," roared Oliver, and then he uttered a groan, for the lugger curved round when close to them, and then rushed through the water toward the opening in the reef.

Oliver's heart sank.

"Discretion's the better part of valour," he muttered, "he's going to leave us all in the lurch."

Chapter Forty Eight.

A Wet Race for Life.

These were harsh and cruel words to use respecting the man who had shown so much true manliness of disposition; but there are times when we all show what a great deal of the imperfect there is in our natures, and this was one of those times with Oliver, who, judging by the mate's acts, formed the conclusion that, seeing their case was desperate, and a way out to save his own life, he had, in sudden panic, fled.

"Seems like it," said Drew, sadly. "But quick, lie down. No, let's get behind here."

The need of concealment was pressing, for they were standing out upon the open sands, and, with a feeling of despair and misery attacking him, Oliver followed his companion to where some huge fragments of madrepore coral lay a few yards from the water's edge, affording them a place where they could hide, and, at the same time, observe what was going on out in the lagoon, where matters were growing exciting.

"Better have come back and fought it out with us," said Drew, bitterly, as they saw that the blacks were straining every effort to cut off the lugger before it reached the gap in the barrier reef; while, evidently seeing the situation of affairs, those who were in the canoe outside were, like the occupants of the lugger, though from a different side, rapidly approaching the opening.

"They'll cut him off before he reaches it," said Oliver, excitedly. "Can we do anything to help him?"

"No, nothing, we are too far-off," said Drew, sadly. "How could he be so foolish?"

"And why don't he give up the helm to one of the men? Either of them could steer; and he could throw the blacks into confusion by firing a few shots."

But after a little show of excitement on board, Mr Rimmer stayed by the helm; while the two canoes, from north and south, with some twenty paddles on each side, made the blue water flash like diamonds, as they threw it up with their spoon-shaped implements, sending their canoes along at a tremendous rate.

"They'll cut him off, they'll cut him off," cried Oliver, excitedly. "Oh, why don't he fire at them?"

He paused breathless, watching the exciting scene of the lugger careening over, as she raced through the water.

"My word, she sails well," said Drew.

"Splendidly," cried Oliver. "But don't, don't talk about the boat. Look at poor Rimmer, he stands up there as if brave as a lion. I wish I hadn't said that about him, and yet it's true enough, he's running away like a cur. But it's no good, my friend, they're too much for you; they'll cut in just before you get to the opening, and be aboard of you like a swarm of wasps. Oh, Drew! it's horrible!"

"And all our specimens, the work of months, gone."

"Hang the specimens!" cried Oliver. "I'd give a hundred times as many to be on the lugger now with our guns. A few good shots, and we could save him."

"Yes. Shall we fire now?"

"Pooh! Shall we throw a few handfuls of sand into the water, or two or three stones? Look! there they go; they're going to drive their prows right into her, one on each side, and with their length, speed, and weight, they'll crush in her planks like a matchwood box. I can't bear, to see it. It's horrible."

"I can't; but I must look," cried Drew, piteously.

"Yes, we must look and see the worst," groaned Oliver. Then stamping his foot: "Why are we not there to help him?"

He ceased speaking, and stood leaning forward, with his eyes just above the edge of the rock, gazing, fascinated by the scene before him. There were the four vessels all clear in the brilliant sunshine, three of them with their prows aimed straight at the fourth, which appeared to be doomed as it glided along with its sails well filled, rushing now for the opening before it, and the sea.

Closer and closer the canoes on either side, gliding along, with their dark sides flecked with silver, and their black crews toiling on with wondrous exactitude, on and on with increasing speed, while the third canoe slackened, and suddenly was thrown right across the opening, as if to block the gateway leading to freedom. On either side the huge breakers glided in softly, and then, as they reached the reef; rose, curled over, glistening with green, blue, and gold, as they hung for a moment or two on high, and then crashed down into sparkling gems, from which diamond dust seemed to rise in a soft vapoury cloud.

But still the collision did not come. The distance was greater than the watchers had allowed for, and in those exciting moments time seemed to be long-drawn-out.

"Now it's coming," cried Oliver, at last. "Good-bye, Rimmer, I liked you, after all. Ah!"

His last ejaculation was quite a wild exciting cry, for the distance between the prows of the two canoes, and the sides of the lugger grew less and less, and then they seemed to strike and go right through her, while imagination painted her crew struggling in the water, to be pierced through and through by the spears of the savages.

"Hurrah!" shouted Drew suddenly, and a film of mist which had been blurring Oliver Lane's eyes, suddenly cleared away, for though the two prows had seemed to go through the lugger, there she was still racing on for the gap, while the two canoes partly crossed behind her stern after she had dashed between them, and their occupants were curving round to go in chase, crossing and taking up their positions on either side astern.

"Escaped for the moment, but it's all over," cried Oliver, "they'll take her now, she can't get away. Look, what is Rimmer going to do? Oh, it is madness."

Madness or no, the mate's decision was plain enough to them now, and it was evident that he had some faith in the strength of his boat, for onward she was rushing straight for the side of the great sixty-foot long canoe which blocked the way. One minute the watchers saw her rise up on one of the rollers that came pouring through the opening, the next she was nearly lost to sight, but only to rise again upon another, being suspended in equilibrium for a few moments and then careening over, she dashed down a slope of water, right on to, and as it were, over the long narrow canoe and then off and away to sea.

Oliver Lane could hardly believe it for the moment, but it was all true enough, there was the *Little Planet* sailing away, while through the opening in the reef the great canoe floated bottom upwards, and the white foamy water was seen to be dotted with black heads, whose owners were swimming for the wreck of their vessel, or to the two canoes which approached them.

"Three cheers for Rimmer," cried Drew, excitedly.

"A hundred if he had played fair," said Oliver, sadly. "But there it is. You see: he *has* left us in the lurch."

"Well, yes, I suppose so. It was very plucky, though, and self-preservation is the first law of nature."

"And the last exception in civilisation," said Oliver, bitterly.

"Perhaps so, but I hope he'll get our specimens safe to England."

"And I wish he had shown himself a better man."

"No time for discussion," said Drew, quietly, as he watched the canoes. "They're picking up all their wet ones. My word, how the beggars can swim. Now, then, what have we got to do?"

"Make for the cocoa-nut grove in order to be under cover, and then keep along under the trees for the brig, so as to give the alarm."

"Yes, they won't be long, I suppose, before they come ashore. Will you lead, or shall I?"

"Go on," said Oliver. "Better crawl right on your breast, or we shall be seen."

"As we most likely shall be, whether or no."

"Never mind, off!"

Drew dropped flat upon the sand, and, dragging his gun after him, began to crawl as fast as he could towards the cocoa-nut grove where the boat was hidden, and fortunately the distance was only short, for the sun beat down with tremendous force and the glistening coral sand was already growing very hot.

"I was never meant for a snake," said Drew, as he painfully dragged himself along. "Ugh, you little wretch!" he cried, and thrusting forward his gun, he passed the muzzle under a little short thick viper, which lay basking just in his way, sent it flying, pitchfork fashion.

"Poisonous," said Oliver, who noted where the flat, spade headed little serpent fell. "Looks wonderfully like an asp, such as they have in Egypt. Go on faster."

"Can't," grumbled Drew, but he did exert himself, and soon after rose with a sigh of relief, well hidden by the grove of trees.

"No, no," cried Oliver. "Never mind the canoes. Rimmer's all right now. Why, Drew!"

"Yes?"

"Smith must have been in the lugger and gone off with him."

"Smith?"

"Yes, he took down the guns and ammunition. We've lost our best man."

They had plenty of opportunity now for keeping under cover, the trees having rapidly sent out young shoots along the edge of the forest where they could, since the passing of the earthquake wave, enjoy plenty of sunshine, and hurrying forward, the pair were not long in catching sight of the masts of the brig.

"Keep up," said Oliver suddenly, for soon after they had reached to within sight of home Drew had suddenly stopped short. "What's the matter?"

"Don't you see?" was the answer. "Quick, keep well under cover."

"What for?"

"Look at the mainmast! There's a danger signal flying."

"Then they have caught sight of the blacks coming on in the distance, and it is a warning to us to look sharp."

"It's a warning to us to keep off," cried Drew, excitedly; "and there goes another."

Oliver started, and his heart sank, for he saw that at which his companion pointed—a puff of white smoke fired from the foretop, and directly after there was a dull report.

"Look! look!" he too cried, now excitedly, as he pointed between the leaves, for, not half a mile away, and pretty close to the brig, black figures were visible, first two or three, then more and more.

"Got here before us," said Drew in a despairing tone.

"No, some more of the black scoundrels must have landed on the other side of the island."

Chapter Forty Nine.

Smith's "Narrow Squeak."

"Lane, old chap," said Drew, "can't Panton turn on the fireworks?"

"What do you mean?"

"Poke up the volcano and get up a good eruption, so as to sweep these wretches away."

"He seems to have already done it," said Oliver, bitterly. "Haven't you noticed that the ground has been all of a quiver for long enough?"

"No, too much worried over getting away. I wish a good blow up would come."

"As bad for us as for the blacks, man. But what are we to do?"

"I don't know. What do you say to keeping on along the edge till we are opposite to the brig, and then making a rush as you did before?"

"Seems our only chance."

"Or wait till dusk and then try?"

"No, they want our help at the brig as badly as we want theirs. I think we had better creep on slowly. If we are seen, we must let the enemy come close, and then give them four barrels and rush. They'll cover us from the brig."

The plan was decided upon, and keeping along the edge of the forest, they went cautiously on, sensible now that the tremulous motion of the earth was on the increase, while in addition there came a short sharp report from the mountain.

"Won't this scare the niggers?" said Drew as they stopped to reconnoitre.

"It doesn't seem to," replied Oliver, as they peered between the trunks of some newly-sprung-up palms. "They're taking it coolly enough."

The blacks were in fact walking about, now gazing toward the brig, now along the opening toward the sea.

"Why, I know," cried Drew; "they're waiting for their friends whom we saw. When they come there'll be a general attack."

Oliver was silent for a few moments, as he stood watching the movements of the blacks.

"That's it," he said at last. "Then our plan is to get to the brig at once."

He led on now till they were as near as they could get, and as they stood in the dark shadow of the forest the question was, had the enemy sense enough to invest the vessel and plant sentries all round? If they had, the difficulties were greatly increased; and to solve this problem, Oliver made his companion wait, sheltered by a great tree, while he crept right to the edge to investigate.

"You'll come back?" said Drew.

"I will if I am left alive," said Oliver, quietly, and then he turned his head and was in the act of drawing out his little glass to watch the actions of a couple of sun-birds playing merrily about in a narrow sunny beam of light, but he checked himself; half-laughing the while. "Use is second nature," he said, and, leaving his gun with Drew, he went down on hands and knees and crept cautiously along, dislodging beetles, lizards, and more natural history specimens in a few yards than he would in an ordinary way in a day.

In a few minutes he was at the extremity of and beneath a great bough, with the brilliant sunshine before him, the darkness of the forest behind. There, in front, rising above the low growth and a quarter of a mile away, was the brig, with the look-out in the top and a head showing here and there, one of which he made out by his glass to be Pantons', while it was evident enough that they were well on the *qui vive*.

To Oliver's great joy there was not a black in sight on his side, though plainly enough beyond the vessel, they were hanging about in groups and all well armed.

As he lay there, sweeping the various objects with his glass, partly for signs of danger, partly for places of shelter to which they could creep, going from one to the other till they were near enough to make a rush for the brig, he marked down quite a series. There, a short distance their side of the brig, were the heaps of wood rejected in the making of the lugger; a little nearer a shed-like construction of bamboo and palm leaves, erected to shelter the men who were adzing and planing the planks. Then, nearer still, there was a high tuft of newly-grown-up grass. Again, nearer, a hollow, once full of fish, but long since dried up, and, nearer still, a freshly-grown clump of bamboos.

"If we can crawl to that unseen, we're all right, and we must risk it at once," said Oliver to himself, and then his heart seemed to stand still and a horrible feeling of despair came over him, for he suddenly made out a slight movement and jerking amongst the bamboo stems, and, fixing his glass upon the spot, there, plainly enough, were the soles of a man's feet—a scout evidently, lying extended there, watching the brig.

Oliver swept the bamboos on both sides for others of the enemy, but all was so still and the space was so small that he came to the conclusion at last that there was only one foe concealed there, and with pulses beginning to throb now from the exciting thought which came upon him, he backed slowly and silently away and made haste to rejoin Drew.

"Well?" said the latter, excitedly.

"Hist! Sound travels," whispered Oliver, and he hurriedly told all that he had seen.

"The brute!" said Drew. "He is, then, between us and safety."

"Yes."

"Well," said Drew, sternly, "I would hurt no man if I could help it, but that black would not hesitate to kill us and our friends, and in addition to saving our own lives, we may perhaps help to save those of the others. Lane, old fellow, do you think we could creep up behind and stun the wretch?"

"That was the idea that came to me," said Oliver, hurriedly. "I don't want to, but we must."

"Yes," said Drew, firmly, "we must."

"And at once."

"Come on, then," said Drew. "No firing; the butts of our pieces."

Oliver nodded with his brow all in wrinkles, and directly after they crept to the spot from which Oliver had caught sight of the feet among the bamboos, and once more, lying flat down, he examined the edge nearest to him, and then handed the glass to Drew, who scanned the spot carefully.

"Strange how the insides of the palms of a black's hands and the soles of his feet grow to be nearly white," whispered Oliver, whose natural history propensities always came to the front, even in times of peril.

"Yes," said Drew, returning the glass, "and I only wish their hearts would wear white, too—the murderous wretches. Ready?"

"Yes, both together, and when we are sheltered by the bamboos from the blacks we must rise, take a few quick steps forward together and club the wretch."

"Exactly. No one can see what we do for the canes, and all we want to do is to stun him."

"Agreed."

The next minute they were creeping silently and cautiously over the sand, keeping their heads well down and gradually nearing the feet, which, even as they grew closer, remained the only portions of their enemy's body visible. Every moment they expected to see him take the alarm, and if he did, and attacked them, they would club him if they could, but it was fully expected that he would take flight, and in that case, they determined to follow rapidly, and take their chance of getting on board.

But the man was so intent upon his duty of watching the brig, that he did not hear; and as they came on and on there were the toes twitching and jerking about uneasily, and the bamboos amongst which he lay gently waved.

Twenty yards, ten yards, five yards, and now brig and savages were hidden by the giant grass. Oliver turned to Drew, whose face was deadly pale, and their eyes met. Then together they rose, bending in a sloping position, held their guns by the barrels, and, keeping step, advanced foot by foot, raising their pieces as they nearly reached the tall greeny stems and then paused and hesitated, for the same question was mentally asked by both,—

"How can we reach to strike this man on the head when we are standing close to his feet?"

The same idea came again to both: "We must strike twice."

Then a second plan occurred to Oliver, and making a sign to Drew that he should deliver the blow, he softly laid down his gun and reached forward to seize one ankle, and suddenly drag the man back.

Drew took a fresh hold of the barrel of his piece, and raised the butt to strike, as Oliver's hands hovered within a few inches of the man's ankles.

"I shall have to charnsh it, that I shall!"

The two young men stood as if paralysed, and it was some moments before Oliver could whisper huskily,—

"Smith!"

The feet were snatched out of sight in an instant, there was a loud rustling, and then a face was thrust out of the bamboos above where the man's feet had been, and just as a bellowing roar came from the mountain and the earth trembled beneath their feet.

"Why, gentlemen; you?" whispered Smith, for it was indeed he.

"Yes: we thought you were on board the lugger, and nearly killed you."

"Then that was a narrow squeak, gentlemen. And I've been thinking as I was going to be baked instead. I was on my way with the guns, when I ketches sight of a drove of these here ugly black pigs, and they chevied me, but, fortunately, I'd got a good start, and run in among the trees, where, somehow or other, they couldn't find me, and at last they give it up, and here have I been tryin' to crawl within reach of the brig, so as to make a run for it, and get aboard."

"Our plan, too, Smith. We were on our way," said Oliver, "when we saw your toes."

"And I was going to kill you for a savage, when you spoke," whispered Drew.

"Then I'm glad I did speak, sir. My old dad used to say it was a bad habit to think aloud, but it don't seem to be so arter all."

"We can't do better than creep on," said Drew.

"Yes, and now's our time," said Oliver, excitedly, for a loud shouting was heard, and on peering through the waving bamboos, they could see a party of about a hundred of the blacks coming down from the sea, while those who were on the other side of the brig started off running to meet them.

"Quick, all together!" cried Oliver, and flat on their faces, and crawling whenever there was no cover, the three began to make their way toward the vessel, reaching patch after patch of bush unseen in the excitement—the blacks' attention being so much taken off—till the shed, and then the heaps of wood were reached.

"Now for it!" whispered Oliver. "Jump up and run!"

His order was obeyed, and their sudden appearance was as startling to Panton, and the crew of the *Planet*, as to the blacks who were now a couple of hundred yards on the other side, but who now ran back, yelling furiously.

"Quick, ropes, and haul us up!" shouted Oliver, and a terribly long space of time elapsed, or seemed to, before three ropes were cast over the bulwarks, and seized.

"Haul away!" roared Smith, "or they'll have us, lads!" and it was a very close shave, for, as they were run up, the savages reached the brig's side, and seizing the ropes, began to drag, expecting to pull the fugitives down.

But by this time they had seized the bulwarks, and as a spear and club were thrown, swung themselves over on to the deck, to help in a kind of game of French and English, ending by their jerking the ropes out of the blacks' hands, and sending them to the right about, with a volley from the ready guns.

"My dear boys," cried Panton, wringing his friends' hands as soon as he was at liberty. "I was afraid I was left in the lurch."

"Why?" said Oliver.

"No, no, I mean that you were all killed. Where's Mr Rimmer?—don't say he's dead."

"I would almost rather have to say so," said Oliver, "for he seems to have forsaken us."

"Gone?"

"Yes; in the lugger, and run for it."

"To get help, or come back in the dark to help us."

"That's what I want to think," said Oliver, "but it is so hard to do so, after what I have seen."

"Never mind that now," cried Panton, excitedly. "The niggers are reinforced—so are we, though, thank goodness—and before long they'll make a big attack. We've had two or three little ones, with no particular luck on either side. Ready to fight?"

"Of course."

"Then take a station, and mind this, we can't afford to show mercy. It's war to the knife, our lives or theirs."

They soon had abundant evidence that this was to be the case, for before they had much time to think, there was a loud yelling and the brig was surrounded by a gesticulating mob of savages, who advanced, sending their arrows sharply against the sides of the vessel, shaking their war clubs, and making fierce darts with their spears wherever they imagined a white to be crouched.

This went on for an hour or two, and as no real danger threatened so long as they did not attempt to scale the sides, the firing was withheld, and Panton and his lieutenant, Oliver Lane, contented themselves with finishing the elaborate arrangements made against attack by the mate with a plan or two of their own, which consisted in filling some small preserved fish tins with powder, adding a piece of fuse, and keeping them ready for lighting when the right moment came.

It came long before evening, for at last, satisfied that they would not be able to frighten the defenders of the brig into a surrender, the blacks made a furious attack, crowding to one side more especially, and trying to scale the bulwarks.

And now, as the arrows came in a shower over the attacking party's heads, firing became general, and watching their opportunity just as matters were getting very critical, the place of every man shot down being taken by a dozen more, Oliver and Panton both held the ends of the fuses they had prepared to the candle in a lantern. They saw that they were well alight, and then, as calmly as if there were no danger whatever of the contents exploding, bore them to the side, with the men shrinking away, and cast them over, right into the most crowded part of the attack.

A fierce yelling followed, and in place of running away, the poor ignorant wretches crowded round these strange-looking missiles which had been sent into their midst.

The next minute there was a terrific roar, followed almost directly by another which seemed to shake the ship, and then a complete stampede, the blacks who were uninjured helping their wounded comrades off to the shelter of the forest, and leaving many dead behind.

"Saved!" cried Panton. "They won't face that again."

"Yes, they will," said Oliver sadly. "Depend upon it, this is only a temporary scare."

"Then we'll get ready some more for them. I'm growing bloodthirsty now, and we'll defend the brig to the last."

The men cheered at this, and watched with interest the making of fresh shells, but the afternoon wore on and evening came without a sign of a black, and at last hopes began to be entertained that the enemy had fled, so they all partook of a hearty meal.

"It's the darkness I dread," said Oliver, soon after sundown, as he and his friends stood together watching all around, and now and then mistaking shadows for coming enemies.

It must have been two hours after dark, though, before there was any fresh cause for alarm, and it arrived just as Panton had confidentially said,—

"Some of us may sleep, for there'll be no attack to-night."

"Beg pardon, Mr Oliver Lane, sir," said a voice at their elbow.

"Yes, what is it?"

"Billy Wriggs, sir. Ever since he had that swim in the black cavern, his hyes has been like your little glasses. Here, Billy, tell the gents just what you says you see."

"Undred niggers a crawlin' along like harnts, sir, each one with a big faggit on his back, and if they arn't a comin' to burn us out, I'm a Dutchman."

Chapter Fifty.

The Great Peril.

It was the terrible danger foretold by the mate, and dreaded by Oliver, coming when Mr Rimmer was away with his men, and unable to help his companions.

For the sailor's eyes, long trained to watching through the darkness, had told the truth, there were the blacks slowly advancing, armed with those simple but deadly weapons, bundles of the most inflammable materials they could cut in the forest. There they came, stealing along in a line, crawling like insects toward the bows of the ship, with all a savage's cunning, for they were pointed toward the west, whence the night breeze now blew strongly, and in utter silence first one and then another thrust his load close against the vessel and passed on into the darkness.

For a few minutes, the besieged gazed down over their breastwork of planking bewildered by the danger. They might have fired and shot many of their assailants, but they knew that would not save them, for the whole party kept persistently piling up the faggots, and though Oliver and his friends did not know it, passing round the brig to go back straight from the stern to the spot whence they had issued from the forest to fetch more faggots, so that there were soon two lines, one coming laden toward the bows, the other returning from the stern.

"Buckets," said Oliver, suddenly. "Form lines to the water tanks."

The men leaped with alacrity to the task, and in a very short time the buckets were being filled and passed along to where Smith and Wriggs bravely mounted on to the bowsprit and poured the water down upon the increasing heap.

"Give it a good souse round, Billy," said Smith, "and wet all yer can."

"Ay, ay," was the reply, and *splash, splash* went the water, as the buckets were passed up and returned empty, producing a great deal of whispering from below, but no missiles were sent up, and the blacks worked on with the advantage that their supply was inexhaustible, while that of the unfortunate defenders was failing fast.

"Water's done," cried Drew, suddenly, "only a few more buckets."

"Save them, then," said Panton, sharply.

"Yes," said Oliver, "Now, then, Panton, try one of your shells to blow the heap of faggots away."

"Good," cried Panton, and he ran to get one of the powder-filled tins just as a couple of fire-flies of a different kind were seen to be gliding toward the vessel from the nearest point in the forest.

"No," said Oliver, addressing Smith, who had not spoken, but after hurling down the last bucket of water had seized his gun once more. "Those are not fire-flies but fire sticks."

"Yes, sir, they're a-goin' to light us up, so that we can see to shoot some of the beggars, for up to now, it would ha' been like aiming at shadders. Is it begin, sir?"

"No, wait till Mr Panton has thrown down the powder."

Smith drew a long breath, and just as the two bright points of light disappeared under the faggot heap, piled now

right up among the tarry stays beneath the bowsprit, Panton came up with his lighted fuse.

"Now," he said, "down by the side or right atop?"

"Down beside it, or it will do more harm to us than to them."

"Here goes," said Panton, and steadily giving the fuse a good puff which lit up his face, he pitched the shell gently, so that it should roll down beyond the faggots, and they watched it as it went down and down with the fuse hissing and sputtering as it burned.

"Now, then," cried Oliver, "down: everyone flat on the deck."

"No go," said Panton sharply. "I heard the fuse hiss: it fell right in the water beneath."

At that moment one of the dry, freshly-thrown faggots, of those the blacks kept on steadily piling up, began to blaze, then to crackle and roar, and directly after a blinding, pungent smoke arose, and set dead on the bows and over the deck, driving the defenders away.

The next minute the pile was hissing and roaring with increasing fury, and, as the surroundings were illumined, the blacks could be seen running now, each with his faggot, which he threw on to the heap, where the fire grew fiercer and fiercer, and licked up the water which clung to the lower layer, as if it had been so much oil.

"The powder, the powder!" yelled Wriggs.

"It's of no use, my man," cried Oliver, "it would only increase the fire."

"Hadn't we better shoot some of the beggars down, sir?" said Smith.

"What would be the good?" replied Oliver. "Even if we killed a dozen or two we should be no better off. Now, every man be ready with his gun, in case they try to swarm on deck."

He motioned his devoted band a little back, for Panton somehow resigned everything into his hands now, and there by the bright light they drew away aft, facing outward, ready for their first assailant.

But attack now seemed to be far from the intentions of the enemy; they had delivered their assault, and with patient energy they kept on pertinaciously bearing more and more faggots to the pile, even when the task had become unnecessary. For the great sheets of flame curved over the bulwarks, and the unfortunate defenders had the mortification of seeing that the boards and planks, all carefully nailed up under the mate's directions, were so much inflammable matter to feed the flames, which began to roar now like a furnace, as the bowsprit, with its well tarred ropes and stays, caught, and the figure-head and fore part of the vessel were well alight.

"On'y one thing'd save her now, Billy," said Smith, coolly.

"What's that, mate, blowin' of her up?"

"Nay, a good header into a big wave."

He was quite right, for moment by moment the furnace-like heat increased, and the fire could be seen burning slowly up the stays toward the fore mast, with drops of burning tar beginning to rain down on the deck.

"Anyone got anything down below he wants to save?" cried one of the men, as they were gradually beaten back, and there was a movement towards the fore-castle hatch.

"Stop!" shouted Oliver. "Are you all mad? The cabin there is in a blaze."

It was too true; the forepart of the brig was well alight now, and the flames eating their way slowly and steadily toward the stern.

"Be ready, all of you," said Oliver, the next minute.

"What are you going to do?" asked Panton.

"Throw one of the small kegs into the fire. Then, as it goes off, we must all drop down from the gangway, and fight our way to the south opening in the woods. I daresay we can get some distance under the cover of the smoke and confusion."

"Good," cried Panton. "It is our only chance. This vessel will be a pile of ashes in an hour's time."

That was evident to all, for the heat was growing tremendous, and even as Panton spoke the flames were running rapidly up the rigging of the foremast, which promised soon to be in a blaze right to the truck.

The smoke, too, was blinding, but when they could get a glance over the side, there were the blacks still silently toiling away, hurling on the faggots of wood which were licked up in a few moments, as with a crackling roar they added to the fierceness of the blaze.

And now, without a word, the little keg of powder was got up from the stores where it had been carefully stowed along with the cases of cartridges and the captain's tiny armoury.

Panton went with Smith to bring it up, the latter carrying it and placing it upon the deck while the sparks and flakes of

fire flew overhead in a continuous stream, some of them lodging upon the furled sails, forming specks of fire which soon began to glow, telling that before many minutes had elapsed the main mast would become a pyramid of flame.

"I don't know how it's to be done now," said Panton. "No one could go near enough to the fire to fling it in."

"I'll scheme that, sir," said Smith, "if you'll let me."

"No," said Oliver, "I will not let any man run risks. Stop: I know," he cried.

"How?" asked Panton.

"Stand ready there, right aft," said Oliver. "Get plenty of ropes over the stern rail, and we must escape there when the powder explodes."

"But how will you manage with the keg?"

"I'll show you," said Oliver, and while ropes were made fast to the belaying-pins and stays, and cast over the stern in a dozen places, he took Smith and Wriggs with him bearing one of the longest planks that could be torn down above the bulwarks. The end of this was rested upon the cover of the deck-house, seven feet above the deck, the other thrust forward to where the flames were eating their way along, and showing that below, the forecastle and hold were rapidly becoming a furnace of fire.

"Now give me the keg," said Oliver, and Smith handed it up to where he climbed on the deck-house, and it was placed there on end, the young man's figure showing up in the brilliant glow of light, and offering an easy mark to any savage who liked to draw a bow.

But no arrow came flying, and Oliver, whose plan was now grasped, sent his companions aft to the ropes, to stand ready to save themselves when the critical moment came. Every man was well armed, and his pockets and wallet crammed with cartridges, and the orders were as soon as they had dropped from the stern to follow Panton as he led them towards the opening in the wood, some hundreds of yards from the spot whence the line of blacks still brought their faggots.

"For goodness' sake be careful," cried Panton, turning to where Oliver stood. "You'll act at once, will you not? the heat here is stifling."

"Directly you get back to your place. Then I shall join you, and Drew and I will form the rear guard. Now, then, off with you, and God help us."

Panton reached up to wring his hand, and then, with the mainmast overhead already beginning to burn, he ran aft.

There was no time to spare, for the fire was creeping astern with wonderful rapidity, and, after a glance downward at the deck, Oliver lifted the keg and held it carefully balanced upon the top of the sloping plank, whose lower end was now just beginning to burn. For the space of quite a minute he held it with a fire in front scorching his brow, and the sparks rushing overhead on what was now a fierce wind. Then, when he had it perfectly balanced to his satisfaction, he let go with both hands, and the keg remained stationary for an instant. Then it began to roll down the plank faster and faster, and ended by literally bounding off the burning deck as it reached the bottom of the plank and plunging right into the fiery furnace that had been the forecastle.

Oliver stayed till he saw the keg disappear, and then swung himself down and ran to where his friends were waiting.

"Over!" cried Panton, and the men dropped from the stern, just as there was a tremendous roar and a rush of flame; sparks and burning pieces of timber rose from the forepart of the ship, followed by the burning foremast, which fortunately fell over toward the bows, sending the blacks flying.

"All here?" said Panton, in a low voice, but no one spoke, and for a few minutes the darkness seemed intense, as huge clouds of smoke rolled up from where the fire had blazed so fiercely. "Then off!" but before they were far on their way, the flames burst forth again with fury, lighting up the open flat across which they retreated, and a yell arose.

"Now, steady," cried Panton. "Double. When I cry halt, we'll turn and give them a volley. Then another run, loading as we go. You there, Lane?"

"All right."

They ran till the blacks began to press them, halted, checked the enemy with a volley, ran on loading, and turned again, the evolution being so successful that at last they reached the opening in the forest without losing a man. Here they gave the enemy another volley, reloaded, and now in single file, led by Panton, entered the dense shades.

"Where to?" said Oliver to Drew.

"Safety, I hope," was the reply.

"Safety. We have not a scrap of food, only ammunition. Yes, we have," he cried more cheerily, "stout hearts and plenty of faith. We can easily keep the enemy at bay, too, along here."

An End to Difficulties.

Daylight found the little party steadily advancing, but the blacks were in pursuit, and Oliver passed along the line to have a short conference with Panton, leaving Drew, Smith, and Wriggs to form the rear guard.

"Glad to see you, old fellow," said Panton. "I was afraid I had said good-bye when you were left with that powder keg."

"But I haven't a scratch, only a little burn. What are you going to do?"

"Get to the shore if I can, and try and find and take possession of their canoes."

"Impossible," said Oliver, decisively. "Look here, we are on the way to the old crater. Let's get to that natural fort. Once up there and inside the great volcano wall we can easily keep these wretches at bay, and they cannot burn us out there."

"No, but—"

"We must give them a severe lesson, and beat them off. It is our only chance."

"Anything for the best," said Panton. "Very well, then, I'll turn off, and we'll hold that piece you remember where it was so steep, and—"

"Yes, just where the leopard sprang out."

"Good," cried Panton, and he went on at the head of the men, while Oliver halted till Smith and Wriggs came up with Drew.

"Speak the truth, Tommy," Wriggs was saying. "Yer can't be hungry enough to eat a black, so don't tell no lies."

"Where are we for?" said Drew, anxiously.

"The old crater, to make that a fort."

"Hooroar," said Smith, in a low voice. "Splendid. Billy, old chap, that place was just runnin' in my head, as being a good spot for a fight."

"Then the sooner we are there, the better," said Drew, "for the wretches are close behind."

"And going to shoot," said Oliver, raising his piece, and firing back both barrels rapidly, the buck shot with which they were charged breaking through the leaves and twigs and eliciting a savage yell.

"He's got it, Billy," said Smith, "and sarve him right."

Some little trifle later, after being much harassed, the retreating party were offering themselves as prominent marks to the blacks, as they climbed up the outer slope of the old crater, but very soon after they began to reach shelter, and at last they lined the top of the mouldering wall, while the blacks hesitated to approach, for the deadly powers of the whites' guns had become more and more acknowledged. Hence the fugitives were glad to rest a little, and refresh with water from the lake and such scraps of food as they happened to have, though the refreshment was principally black-looking pig-tail tobacco, Smith and Wriggs having their pipes and beginning to smoke.

The hours glided on, and at first every now and then an arrow was shot with bad aim into the natural fortification, but by degrees these were less frequent, and at last the only sign made by the enemy was a little group of men armed with club and spear watching them from the bottom of the slope.

"What do they mean to do?" said Oliver. "Starve us out?"

"Seems like it," said Panton. "Well, it won't take long, unless we can live on water. Wonder whether there are any fish below here in the lake?"

"If there are, we have no means of catching them," said Oliver, sadly. "I'm thinking that our only chance is to assume the aggressive now, and drive them off the island."

"I'm afraid there would not be many of us left to do the driving, before we had finished," said Panton.

Boom! Crash!

"Ah, if you would erupt in real earnest, and frighten the black ruffians away, you would be doing some good," he continued, as the volcano made itself evident.

"Hi, look out!" cried one of the men. "They're coming on again." For a sudden movement was visible in the group below them, and they had hardly seized their weapons to bring them to bear, when Smith suddenly uttered another warning shout, as he came back from the edge of the lake to which he had descended for a drink.

"All right, we see them," cried Oliver.

"No, you don't, sir!" yelled the sailor. "Look! look yonder."

A chill of despair ran through all as they glanced in the direction pointed out by Smith, for there, coming rapidly

round by the edge of the lake, were some fifty of the enemy, who had evidently kept their attention while a part of their force had managed to penetrate the dense forest, to where they could scale the crater wall nearly on the opposite side, and then descend to the lake, so as to come and take them in the rear.

"What shall we do, face both ways and fight?" said Panton.

"Madness!" cried Oliver. "There's hope for us yet. This way."

He began to descend rapidly, and then led the party along by the side of the lake, leaping from stone to stone, till he reached the spot where the waters flowed out slowly into the cave.

"In with you, quickly!" he cried; but some of the men hesitated. "Lead the way, Smith, and we'll cover you. Quick!"

Smith plunged in, and now his messmates followed, and so hardly were they pressed that the foremost blacks came bounding up just as Oliver and Panton backed slowly in, keeping their pieces towards the entrance, and firing twice as some of the enemy began to follow.

These shots and the darkness checked them, and they vented their disappointment by howling with rage, and sending arrow after arrow splintering against the roof or rocky sides, and making the hollows echo dismally.

With a little care, though, sufficient distance was soon placed between the fugitives and their pursuers, while a bend in the passage-like entrance protected them from the arrows, which were deflected as they struck the walls, and after a time these ceased, and all waited for the next development of the attack.

"They will not dare to come in here," Drew said; "these people are too superstitious to enter such a hole."

"Not when they have lights," said Oliver, sadly. "Smith, can you lead the men farther in? You know the way. Forward."

It was time, for all at once bright rays flashed from the surface of the little river, and shone upon the rocky walls, as with shout and yell the blacks once more came on, and though shot after shot was fired they still pressed forward, evidently determined to avenge the deaths of so many of their party.

But the burning wood they bore helped the retreating party, and rendered the bearers plain objects for the marksmen, while the deafening roar of echoes after every discharge had its effect, and checked the savages more than seeing one or two of their number drop.

But still they came on, forcing the little party back till the sharp bend was reached, and all passed round into absolute darkness and the fearful roar of the falling waters.

"They'll never come along here, surely," said Panton, with his lips to his companion's ear, as they slowly retreated, backing, hand in hand, and guiding themselves by one passing his foot along the edge of the river's bank.

It was a vain hope, for lights soon flashed round, and the great cavernous place was more and more lit up, the shadowy black figures darting here and there, and sending an arrow whenever they fancied they could see one of the sailors.

"Our last chance," shouted Panton, excitedly. "We must stand at bay yonder, on the point, and sell our lives dearly. We'll wait till they come close up, and then begin sending volleys, half firing while the others reload. What do you say!"

"That is what I thought," said Oliver, "but would it be possible to go on?"

"What, past the falls? Impossible."

"It's that or death," said Oliver, sternly.—"Yes? What is it?"

"I says, would you like me to show 'em the way now, sir?" yelled Wriggs in his ear, for he had edged up unseen.

"What, down there, man?" said Oliver, with a shudder, as he looked over into the darkness. "Impossible."

"Which it aren't, sir, for I've done it."

The burning pieces of wood increased in number now, lighting up the huge cavern weirdly, and the blacks were not a hundred yards away, and approaching cautiously.

"What do you say, Panton—fight or run that horrible risk and retreat?"

"I'd say fight," replied Panton, with a shudder, "but we should not beat them off. They'd never dare to follow here. Let's try it. Wriggs got through, why should not we?"

"Yes, go on," cried Oliver. "You cannot talk to the men, and it's as well they do not know the danger. Lead on, Wriggs, and Heaven help us all."

It was as he said, no one but Smith fully realised what the dangers were, and though they were staggered by the noise and horrors around them, the men knew that there was a way through, and, following their comrade's example, they lowered themselves down over the edge of the rock and dropped, the stream seeming less repellent than the ferocious enemy.

One by one they dropped down, disappearing directly as if suddenly snatched away, till only Smith was left with the three friends, and his action was suggestive, for he held out his hand to each in turn, shook that placed within it, and then, grasping his gun, lowered himself over the edge.

The blacks were very near as Drew followed the man's example, and then Panton shook hands with Oliver.

"Good-bye, or *au revoir*," he cried, and turning, he jumped boldly forward into the darkness.

A loud yell arose now, for the lights showed Oliver standing on the brink, and, lowering their spears, a dozen savages rushed at him, but he stepped off the rock edge, descended quickly for some distance, and then plunged into the rushing water, which seemed to rise at him, seize him, and bear him along at a rapidly increasing rate, but with his head above the surface, and the echoing roar of falling waters striking his ears with stunning violence. Then he felt himself suddenly shot out as it were into space, suffocated by the rushing torrent, which poured down upon him, and faint, bewildered, and exhausted, whirled round, and beaten down here and there. At last his face was above the surface, and he was being borne rapidly along a shallow stream, just as Wriggs had described, with its smooth, glassy bottom.

Hope sprang up within his breast once more, for he could breathe again at such times as he could get his head above the rapids; what was more, he could fight for his life against an enemy more merciful than the cascade over which he had been dashed.

But it was a terrible struggle for breath in the darkness of the vast tunnel through which he was being hurried, and though from time to time he touched smooth, water-worn rock, he could get no hold.

At length, after how long he could not tell, he became conscious that the now swift, smooth stream was growing shallower, and recalling the sailor's words, after many efforts he managed to gain and retain his feet, wading onward, and sufficiently recovered to listen for the sound of pursuit, of which there was none.

The noise, too, was dying out. There was a deep, murmuring roar, and the low, whispering rush, but that was all.

And now the confusion in Oliver's brain seemed to clear off. His efforts to preserve life so far had been instinctive; from this moment there was more method. He began as he groped along to make use of the gun to which he still clung, as a staff, but he had not taken many steps onward in the way the water pressed and which he knew must be toward daylight when self was forgotten, and the thought of his comrades made him feel ready to sink helplessly once more and let the stream carry him where it would.

Panton—Drew—the two rough sailors who had been such faithful companions—the rest of the crew? Was he the only survivor?

"Ahoy-y-y-y-y!"

A long-drawn, hollow, echoing hail came from a distance out of the darkness, and it was repeated again and again, before he could command himself and reply. For his throat seemed to be contracted—relief—joy—gratitude to Heaven, combined to make him, in his weak exhausted state, hysterical, and his answering shout was feeble in the extreme.

But it was heard, and another hail came, which he answered with more vigour, and the knowledge that help was not far away nerved him to fresh efforts. These were encouraged by hail after hail, hoarse, hollow, and terrible, as they were repeated, till all at once a voice sent a thrill of delight through him, for he recognised it, and its words,—

"Where are you, sir? This way."

"Here! Who is it?" cried Oliver, hoarsely. "Smith?"

"Ay, ay, sir! Both on us. Me and Billy Wriggs. Hah! I got yer. Three cheers, Billy, and give it throat. Why, we began to think you was nabbed by the niggers or else drown dead."

"Success to yer, sir," came in a hoarse voice. "Wait till we gets him out, Tommy, and then we'll cheer, ho!"

"Mr Panton—Mr Drew—the others?" cried Oliver, as he clung to the man who had grasped him by the arms.

"Oh, they're all right, sir."

"Nay, nay, speak the truth, Tommy," growled Wriggs, whose hoarse voice sounded awful in the black echoing darkness.

"Don't you be so nation tickler, Billy," cried the other angrily. "Well, they aren't quite all right, being as you may say regular washed out, but they've all alive 'o!"

"Far as we knows, sir," interposed Wriggs. "But you step forrard, sir, and lets get out o' this here waterworks' pipe."

"Is—is it far to the light?" asked Oliver.

"Not it, sir. Clost here."

"Speak the truth, Tommy, speak the truth," growled Wriggs.

"You won't be happy, Billy, till I gives you one on the nose. Well, sir, it aren't so werry far, an' fore long you'll be able to see the light a shinin' in, where Billy here stood up to his knees a ketchin' on us all as we come down stream, and

settin' on us all in a row, on a bit of a shelf to dry a bit, 'fore we went any furdur."

"You helped, Tommy."

"Well, yes, soon as I'd let about two barrels o' water run out o' me."

"Speak the truth, Tommy."

"Oh, well, one barrel, then," cried Smith, angrily. "I'll say half a pannikin, if you like. Yes, sir, I helped a bit, and counted us as we was ketched, and then as you didn't come, Billy and me come arter yer and here yer are."

"Which is the truth, Tommy, lad, so stick to that."

They journeyed on till there was a faint dawn of light on ahead, which grew lighter and lighter as they waded forward, till the water, lava and pumice of the arched-over roof became visible. Then there was a hail which was answered, and at last in the twilight the figures of their comrades could be seen seated on the lava edge of the subterranean river, one standing in the middle, evidently gazing anxiously toward the inner portions of the cavern.

In all thankfulness hands were grasped, and then the party waded on, wash, wash with the rapid stream, now not knee deep. The light grew stronger and stronger, till at last there was a bright flash along the smooth water, a sharp bend was turned, and some hundred yards before them there was a low arch laced with ferns, opening out upon blue water and sunshine.

This was approached in silence and with great caution, fresh cartridges were placed in the well-drained guns, though doubts were felt as to their being of any use, if the savages knew of the exit of the waters, and were lying in wait.

But all was still, and as they crept on with Panton and Drew now taking the lead, and all feeling as if light were the great reviver of all, the opening was approached, and they stepped out into the daylight where the little river ran on along its narrow path in the jungle—a path they followed for a time, the growth being too dense on either side for the dry land to be sought.

Then all at once Panton halted, and held up his hand for silence.

There was no need, for they had heard voices from somewhere forward, and in despair they stood gazing out at the sunlit lagoon, feeling that a more desperate fight than ever was before them now when they were utterly exhausted, and their ammunition probably spoiled.

"Ah! Thank Heaven!" cried Oliver, springing forward through the water with all his weakness gone, and now the men cheered frantically. For there in front gliding into sight, and not a hundred yards away, was the lugger with two men visible, and these heard and returned the cheer.

As in Oliver's case every one forgot his weakness and exhaustion, in his efforts to wade out toward the lugger which was steered to meet them through the warm sunny water, and they climbed on board.

"Where's Mr Rimmer?" was Oliver's first question.

"Just close handy somewhere," was the reply. "He landed an hour ago, sir, to try and find some way through the forest, so that we could come across to-night and get to you at the brig."

"Ahoy! Look yonder!" cried Panton, and he waved his hand to a figure on a point about a mile along the lagoon, signalling with his hat at the end of a bamboo.

The helm was put down, and the lugger glided softly over the smooth water between the thickly wooded shore and the surf-beaten reef, to where Mr Rimmer waded out to meet them.

"You see, he had not forsaken us," said Oliver, in a whisper to his friends.

"Ah, at last," cried the mate, springing on board, and eagerly grasping the young men's hands. "I was getting in despair about you."

"And we about you," said Oliver. "I thought you had left us in the lurch."

"Just what I should do," said the mate, grimly. "How was I to come to your help with a pocket knife and a marlin-spike? Those were all the arms we had."

"What?" cried Oliver. "Where were the guns that Smith brought?"

"Never brote none, sir," cried Smith. "Didn't I tell yer the niggers cut me off, when you found me with my toes a-sticking out of the bamboos?"

No other explanation was needed, for the mate soon told them how he had sailed round the island, and been trying again and again to communicate. The next question was, what was to be done?

That was soon decided. The brig was by that time a heap of ashes, and it was madness to think of attacking and punishing the savages; so after a hearty meal, and some rest, the lugger was anchored for the night in the sheltered waters of the lagoon, prior to an early start next morning for one or other of the isles to the east.

But they were not destined to rest in peace. Soon after midnight, the water began to be disturbed, the mountain burst into a frightful state of eruption, and the sea rose and fell so that there was every prospect of their being cast

on the island, high and dry once more.

There was plenty of light for the evolutions, so hoisting sails which looked orange in the glow, they ran for the first opening they could find in the reef, passed through in safety, and stood out to sea, where they lay to a few miles away, watching the awfully grand display of fire, rising fountain-like from the volcano, down whose sides golden and blood-red water seemed to be running in streams.

All that night the lugger rocked with the terrible concussions, succeeding each other without half a minute's interval, and when the sun rose the glasses showed a great smoke rising from a desolate-looking shore, at one end of which the mountain, about half its former height, was pouring forth clouds of ashes and covering the sea thickly as far as eye could reach.

The glorious groves and bright scenery were gone, destroyed in a few hours, and the strange convulsions which kept on occurring, rendered it necessary to run as rapidly as could be for safer waters and brighter skies.

As the day went on an island was reached, and an addition made to their provisions and water. A few days later they were at the British port in New Guinea, where they once more provisioned for their run south to get within the shelter of the Great Barrier Reef.

Brisbane was made, and then Sydney, from which port a passage was taken for home, where all arrived in safety with the grandest set of Natural History specimens ever collected in one voyage.

"I do wonder what became of those blacks," said Panton, one evening when they were dining with Captain Rimmer, to celebrate his appointment to a fine vessel in the China trade, in which he was to start the following week, and in which he had laughingly offered them a cabin for three.

"Nothing would please me better," he had said, "and you will find your old friends Smith and Wriggs with me as boatswain and his mate."

But appointments at scientific institutions kept the three friends at home, and it was in the course of conversation that Panton alluded to the blacks.

"Ah, and I wonder what became of all those wondrous butterflies and birds?"

"And the wealth of vegetation?" said Drew.

"Swept away, sir," said the captain, "swept away. Strange things take place where there are burning mountains."

"But out of the ruins fresh natural glories grow," said Panton.

"Yes," said Oliver, "and I suppose all things are for the best. But I should have liked to go with you, Captain Rimmer, to see Fire Island once again."

The End.

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