Below the Sahara: or, Frank Reade, Jr., Exploring an Underground River, With His Submarine Boat.

By "NONAME."

Horrified, Frank sprang to his side. "My soul!" he cried. "What is the trouble, Brosseau? You are hurt?"

"I—am just a bit faint—I'll be all right soon!" declared the savant. "It is only a flesh wound!"

"A wound!" ejaculated Frank. Then something hissed past his ear.
BELOW THE SAHARA;

OR,

Frank Reade, Jr., Exploring an Underground River, With His Submarine Boat.

A MARVELOUS STORY OF THE GREAT DESERT.

By "NONAME,"

Author of "In White Latitudes," "The Lost Navigators," etc., etc.

CHAPTER I.

THE FRENCH SYNDICATE.

One day, Frank Reade, Jr., the distinguished young inventor, who scarcely needs an introduction to the reader, so world-wide is his fame, received a cablegram from Paris, via London, which gave him a great surprise, and was the means of his entering upon a series of adventures, the like of which probably human being has never experienced.

When he received the cablegram, he had just put the stores aboard his new submarine boat, the "Venture," with the view of starting at once upon a deep sea trip.

For he had long since solved the wonderful problem of submarine navigation and perfected a deep sea boat in which he could remain for an indefinite time at the bottom of the sea.

The cablegram, however, had the result of completely changing his plans as we shall see. Thus it read:

"No. 14 Rue de Montmartre, Paris.

"Frank Reade, Jr., Realstown, U. S. A.—The French Government at the instigation of the Egyptian department has granted a charter to the Great Sahara Exploration Company, of Paris, France. Capital, fifty million francs. The mouth of an underground river which empties into the Niger has been discovered and it is believed that by tapping this at certain intervals, a system of irrigation can be established which will redeem nearly the entire desert and make of it the most productive and fertile region on earth. Our representative with full power to act, Monsieur Pierre Brosseau, is at this moment on board the La Gascoyne on route to New York to confer with you in regard to the possibility of chartering your submarine boat and your personal services for a thorough exploration of this underground river. We hope to be able to enlist your sympathy and support, and any favors you may confer upon M. Brosseau will be duly appreciated by your humble servants.

"Respectfully the undersigned,

"M. Honoree La Chatillon,

"M. Hugo La Vontanie,

"M. Gaspard R. Moulie,

"M. Bertrand Legrand."

"Board of Control and Honorable Commissioners of the Great Sahara Exploration and Colonization Company of Paris, France."

"P.S.—M. Brosseau should arrive in New York by the 22d, in the morning."

It is hardly necessary to say that Frank Reade, Jr., was not only interested but surprised as he read this message from a foreign land. He was surprised that the honorable commissioners of the French company should consider seriously such an apparently hair-brained scheme. He was interested because the exploration of an underground river would afford him just the element of adventure and risk which he was looking for.

"An underground river below the Sahara," he muttered. "That will afford plenty of scope, I vow! I can see no better way than to adopt the scheme—at least, I will have a serious talk with M. Brosseau when he arrives."

So he touched a bell, and the next moment a diminutive darky appeared in the door of the private office. He grinned and ducked his head, saying:

"I've heah, sah. Wha' kin dis chile do for you, Marse Frank?"

"Pomp," said the young inventor, sharply, "where is Barney?"

"He am jes' outside, sah."

"Tell him to come in with you."

"Alright, sah?"

The door disappeared. In a few moments, however, he reappeared, and behind him came a sturdy son of the Emerald Isle, with a shock of brick red hair, and chock full of fun.

"I have just received the cablegram and explained the

These two colleagues or companions were Frank Reade, Jr.'s most trusted servants. They had accompanied him upon all his great expeditions to all parts of the world.

Two live wire, jollier rascals, the sun never shone upon.

"Al yer service, sir?" exclaimed Barney, scraping profoundly.

"'Not exactly!" exclaimed Frank, scraping profoundly.

"'Hold on!" rejoined Frank, "I can see no better way than to adopt the scheme—at least, I will have a serious talk with M. Brosseau when he arrives."

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cruise. Frank had studied up all the maps and charts of the Sahara, and then he could locate the spot even where the submarine river entered the Niger.

Frank had wired a friend in New York to meet Brosseau at the wharf and place him aboard a train for Headstown. He would arrive sometime that evening.

Frank's carriage was at the depot, and when the distinguished savant arrived at it, Frank's palatial residence. Here the dinner table was spread and he was received cordially.

M. Brosseau was a tall, fine-looking type of the Parisian, with urban manners and a faultless dress. In a few moments he was fast friends with the young inventor.

Later in the evening they repaired to the library and discussed the Saharan region.

The result was that when M. Brosseau retired Frank took his hand, and said:

"I may carry your people in the morning that we shall start within the week for the mouth of the Niger, or the west coast of Africa."

Brosseau was delighted, and no doubt kept happily that night. The next morning he sent the cablegram.

Then he went down to the machine works with Frank to take a look at the wonderful submarine boat.

This rested in a tank, or large basin in the great yard of the works. This was connected with a lock and gates into a canal which led down to the river below which was navigable to the sea.

Upon construction the Venture was launched into the water and then it floated, waiting for the disposition of its owner.

Frank led his visitor aboard the Venture by means of a gangway, and then he proceeded to describe it while M. Brosseau listened with the deepest of interest.

"You will see," said the young inventor, "that the model of the Venture was left in the charge of that gentleman mostly called in the field. There is no great depth of hold and the beam is wide. This is intended to assure the ship's steadiness and seaworthiness while under water."

"I have never seen a vessel of this model before," M. Reade, said the Parisian.

"Well, it is not a common type," continued Frank; "the hull of the Venture is of thin but strong steel. It is essentially water tight in all parts, the doors and windows to the cabin having flanges of rustproof steel."

"Amidships is the turret or round cabin with windows looking all ways. You will notice the bell moulded receivers over this turret. The turret is of the great weight in the body from which the hull is expelled by pneumatic pressure when it is desired to raise the boat from the ocean depths. Also on the forward part of the turret is an observatory tower with plate glass windows all around it.

"This curious turtle shaped structure in the stern with the tubes in it, is to accelerate the sinking of the boat when the lower valve in the tank is open and the boat is under water. It admits water to the tank to sink or raise the boat, or in other words to change or regulate its altitude while under water. Without it the boat would either go straight to the bottom or else to the surface.

"The engine of the Venture is, of course, consisting of powerful dynamo fed by a system of storage of which I have the secret. The engine and dynamo room is in the forward boat. It is a piece of art, there is no doubt about it. The key is on the key board by means of which an operator can regulate the boat at his pleasure. Over the pilot house you will see a powerful electric searchlight aircraft for night work of whatever distances under water."

"Now for the interior of the boat. There are all necessary compartments for sleeping, eating, cooking, stores and machinery. Five peculiarly decorated state rooms aboard the Venture."

"How do we manage to find sufficient air while under water for an extended time? Easy enough! Here is our chemical generator which, filled with the necessary chemicals, can generate enough pure air, disseminated in tubes throughout the ship to support human life an indefinite length of time. Yes, the Venture can maintain a fair rate of speed under water. She is lowered or raised by the filling or discharging of the great tank which extends along her keel. This is the submarine boat in all its parts."

"I am instructed and charmed," declared M. Brosseau, eloquently.

The young inventor pointed to no one but an American genius could have brought it to such a degree of perfection."

CHAPTER II.

HELLO FOR THE SAHARA!

FRANK smiled at the accuracy of M. Brosseau's decision, so characteristic of a polite Frenchman.

Then they sat down at a table in the cabin and began to study a number of charts.

Brosseau was thoroughly familiar with the Sahara region and quite able to give all directions as to how to reach the mouth of the undergrown river.

He had explored parts of the Niger country which he declared he had never before been visited by a white man.

"The Niger," he declared, "is like no other river in the world for diversity of variety of characteristic. At one time it flows through deep walled canyons and over great rapids. At another time it is completely lost in a labyrinth of marshes and lowlands where it is possible to find that true channel. Also these regions are peculiarly deadly to human life."
I canyon from a height of land near by. The river here eyes were fixed upon the slowly moving boat.

The tiger sometimes was seen crouching in the chill.

thronged. The tiger sometimes was seen crouching in the hot tropical nights in hammocks while the Venture swung spread.

widening of the river.

out upon the deck under white awnings, trying to escape the intense widening.

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gradually left behind.

rapidly

length

tell the true course. But finally all believed that they had struck at

Volumes might be written descriptive of that sail of the Niger, the like of.

This was

Leagues

of

And now began the real difficulty of finding the true channel of the river.

Leagues of winding lagoons and straits were passed through ere at length Frank fut convinced that he was in the true Niger. The current was so extremely sluggish that it was very difficult to tell the true course. But. finally all believed that they had struck at last the right channel.

It required fully two days of careful exploration to pass through the Niger delta. Then the true river was spread to view. And the wandering navigators of this river from the Gulf of Guinea to the Gulf of Siam

No effort was made to communicate with or make the acquaintances of the natives on the river banks. The submarine boat, as rapidly as possible, sailed up on the Niger. The hour

Barney was much excited. He exclaimed in a low, tense voice. "On your lives, friends, we are attacked!!"

"What?" ejaculated Frank, upon his feet in a moment. Then he too beheld the astounding spectacle.

But no time must be lost. It was necessary to act and instant.

ly.

With horrid yell the black crew made a rush forward. Brosseau had already reached the cabin door, Frank leaped into the pilot house, and Pomp went down the hatchway into the engine room, closing the steel trap after him.

All was done in the twinkling of an eye, but it was not a moment too soon.

The keen javelins rattled against the doors and windows, and the next moment the black horses were trying to force their way into the cabin.

They certainly had possession of the deck. But this did not, by any means, mean the capture of the boat. In vain they tried to force their way into the cabin and the pilot-house. The steel doors resisted them.

While the voyagers had now recovered their self-possession and were able to take measures to overcome their assailants. Yet this did not relieve the situation of some risk. Had the blacks been able to force a window or door in that moment the venture might have been successless. But luckily they did not.

And while M. Brosseau was desperately wondering how they were to meet the emergency, Frank was at Barney's shoulder.

"How deep is the channel?" asked he.

"Thirty feet, sir."

"Not deep enough. Put on speed," commanded the young inven-

tor.

Then he watched the sounding-dial eagerly, while the boat swiftly ran into deeper water.

Frank's purpose was obvious. If he could reach the deeper water in time, all would be saved. If the blacks forced a window or door before them, all would be lost.

Forty-forty-five feet the dial registered. Then fifty was recorded. This would leave the tops of the masts out of water, but these could be lowered by an automatic device.

"Now!" said the young inventor, "I think we can shake them off!!"

Barney pressed the tank lever. The next moment the boat began to settle. Down it went with a plunge.

The blacks were left lying floundering in the mud of water. Being perfect swimmers of course they did not drown.

But there were crocodiles in plenty in that water and before they were able to scramble into their canoes a number of them fell victims to the crocodiles.

When the Venture went down of course it was into deep waters. But not for long.

A minute touched an electric button and in a moment the interior of the air-ship was ablaze with light.

From the windows of the Venture all could look out into the depths of the river and see objects quite plainly within a wide ra-

dial.

"Hurrah!" cried M. Brosseau, delightedly. "We gave them a surprise, I'll warrant!"

"You are right," agreed Frank. "And no doubt it was a surprise."

"I suppose, however, none of them are likely to drown."

"They need fear only the crocodiles."

And at that moment Pomp pointed through the cabin window, crying.

"Golly! Dere am one ob dem gwine to make a fat meal fo' de returnin."

A monster crocodile was seen darting away into the depths with one of the blacks in his jaws. The sight was a fearful one.

The Venture continued on for some ways under water. Then Frank ordered Barney to go again to the surface.

The Venture leaped up into daylight. This time it was seen that they were well out into the lake, and the canoes were but specks in the distance.

The decks were quickly dried by the fierce rays of the sun, and the Venture was enabled to continue on her way as quietly as if nothing had happened. But, despite this, there had been a moment when the situation was critical.

Now, the incident was over, the voyagers were buoyant in spirits, and on the whole relished the spice of the affair. Yet it was decided said, henceforth, to proceed cautiously. All that day they sailed across the great lake. At nightfall the shores began to contract, and they anchored for the night in a narrow gorge.

Brosseau was much excited.
"We have made grand progress," he declared. "I think by tomorrow noon, we will reach the mouth of the Sahara river." This announcement created some excitement and much interest. Barney and Pomp were delighted. And as Brosseau had predicted, the next day the Venture diverged from the true channel of the Niger, and entered a tributary which extended to the northeast. And now the country began instantly to undergo a change. "They will all be in the verge of the Great Desert. Under a high hill of granite called the Talma Mount the river emerges from its subterranean course. We shall then enter upon our trip below the Sahara."

But the rank vegetation of the tropics was no longer present. There were barren plains, rocky ravines, with only clumps of palms here and there as an oasis. Everything pointed to the approach to the Great Desert. Animal life was rarely seen, but a number of times wildly clad horsemen were seen galloping across the plains, and when questioned the French savant would shrug his shoulders, and say: "We do not want their acquaintance. They are worse than the Bedouins, and to fall into their clutches would only mean robbery and death." "I have heard that the lower verge of the desert is infested with fierce tribes of bandits and barbarians," said Frank. "Are they always nodding in the dunes?"

"By no means!" replied Brosseau. "Some of them are organized into communities and have built walled cities, from which they make a business of the trade in slaves. They are encountered for prey. Any caravan or traveling party is at any moment liable to an attack from them."

"Tough!" exclaimed the young inventor, "the Government of the Soudan, or at least of Egypt, ought to take measures to exterminate the wretches!"

"Ah, that would not be easy. They are well fortified and are very hard to defeat. It would be impossible for an army to exist in this barren region, and only a large army could hope to give them fair battle."

"Then they are almost unsailable!"

"Just so. But far as you and I are concerned, we are content to let them alone. They will some day eat each other up."

"Ah, but will they not interfere with your project of colonizing the Sahara?"

"As soon as we can establish our system of irrigation and reclaim the desert, we can support men enough to hold them at bay and eventually exterminate them. Oh, we apprehend that they will give us much trouble.""Hunted lay the desert, and her high arched caverns. This was the threshold of an unknown world, a region never before visited by man! Who could tell what wonders might lie beyond!"

The Venture crept nearer to the entrance. Then Frank turned on the search-light and sent its rays full into the dark depths. They showed the black walls of the cavern arch, and a hundred yards farther on, a blank wall of rock. This was an abrupt angle in the passage.

What was beyond, could only be determined by entering, so the Venture glided ahead.

"Take your last look at the sky for a long while," cried Frank. "There's no telling when we may come out here." Involuntarily all obeyed, and the next moment they were in the dark cavern. On glided the Venture and turned the angle.

This only showed another bend, and this being turned, showed another, and so on into the depths of the cavern. For hours the Venture crept on, deeper and deeper into the bowels of the earth.

They had traversed this mighty area of water, and passed through the surface of the water and the roof of the cavern, but suddenly the roof of the cavern began to lower.

"This is different! Frank that it would be well to ship the two masts, which was done, they being lowered to the deck. As they proceeded, the roof of the cavern seemed to constantly lower.

Finally there were boulders and then a sheet between it and the roof of the cavern. Frank gave the signal. "We shall have to travel under water now," he declared; "it is lucky for us that we have a submarine boat else we could go no farther!"

Barney sank the boat, and the voyagers now for the first time saw the bed of the underground river. It was not so easy picking the way along under water, for the current was at times very powerful, and it required all the strength of the engine to drive the boat ahead. This, of course, made progress slow. The only way of reckoning the hours of sunset and sunrise now, of course, was by means of the chronometer. For fully three days the submarine boat grooped its way through the passage.

This began to wax less some as well as monotonous, and M. Brosseau declared:

"It is very strange that we do not meet with some change. Is there no subterranean chamber or cavity anywhere on the course of this river?"

"We have traveled one hundred miles," declared Frank, "and if we were to encounter such a change it is full time."

"I have noted one peculiar fact," he added.

"What?"

"The force and volume of the water has not decreased a particle."

"That is true."

"It is easy to see what that implies!"

"That it is a big river and that we are yet a good ways from its source."

"Just so!"

"Well," declared Frank, vigorously, "we will follow it to its sources if it takes a lifetime. Once undertaken we will not abandon a project!"

"I am glad that is your resolution, Mr. Reede. But indeed I cannot believe that we will ever long reach some part of the river which will enable us to again go to the surface!"

"There is no doubt of that!"
"Ah!"

Both men gave a violent start. Barney from the pilot house shouted down into the cabin.

"Shure, sir! Mi Mis Frank, wad yez cum here quick?"

Both Frank and Brosseau, with one leap, bounded into the pilot house. A strange glare of light blinded them.

"What?" cried Frank in amazement.

"Shure, sor, it's mighty hard to tell, but I should say it was a feare under the water."

"A fever," shouted Brosseau. Then he and Brosseau rushed to the window and shaded their eyes. An astounding scene met their gaze.

A shutter, one of the last from the tellous channel passage. They could see that there were in some large body of water, probably an underground lake or sea.

But the surprising thing was the fact the to the right there was a broad face of stone, and against it there blazed a dazzling light. The search-light was focused far away into the depths of the lake, but Frank, nevertheless, shut it off to make sure that it was not the cause of the illumination.

But it was easy to see that it was not, for the light against the wall was now more powerful than ever. It covered a space of many square yards, and was as if the rock was luminous.

"That is queer!" declared Brosseau. "What do you make of it, Monsieur Reade? It cannot be real fire."

"Certainly not," replied Frank. "We will get nearer."

Barney edged the boat nearer to the rock. It was now seen that the light was emanating and yet constant. Brosseau gave a cry.

"I see it now!" he shouted; "it is phosphorus!"

"Phosphorus!" exclaimed Frank. Yes, the precipitation is very powerful. In that rock there are all the necessary chemicals to make the phosphorescent light."

"But the water, sor?" asked Barney.

"Faisaw!" exclaimed the savant; "it is the water which brings out the phosphorescence, doesn't if you would see the rock as luminous if it were not for the water."

It was truly a curious fact of nature. The voyagers regarded it for some time with interest.

But other wonders now claimed their attention. The submarine boat was turned away.

The strong river current was not now felt at all. So the Venture easily guided on her way through the waters of the underground lake.

The search-light was now used to its full limit. The far depths of the lake were brought to scrutiny.

Frank proposed to first explore the bed of the lake. Then they must know, if he believed that the cavern chamber was high arched and far above the surface of the water.

The bed of the lake seemed to consist of hard gravel and there was no sign of aquatic growth, but and few fish, these being small. But as the boat crept on the sandy floor, Brosseau suddenly exclaimed:

"Waht, Monsieur Reade, I believe I have made a discovery!"

"Ah!" exclaimed Frank. "What may it be?"

"As near as I can guess there is a section of very even stone pavement under us, monsieur!"

"Stone pavement!" cried Frank, somewhat excitedly. "And what is of greater importance is the likelihood that it could only have been laid by human hands."}

CHAPTER V.

THE SUBTERRANEAN ISLE.

This most astonishing declaration of Brosseau's gave Frank a genuine shock. For a moment he knew not what to say.

"Not until the Frenchman had spoken again impatiently did he recover himself."

"If you please, monsieur, I would like to investigate, if you will kindly stop the boat!"

"Most certainly!" declared Frank, coming out of his spell; "you gave me a great surprise, Brosseau!"

Then he motioned to Barney who brought the boat to a dead stop. Then it was lowered and rested on the bottom.

The search-light was focused upon the bed of the lake contiguous to the subterranean discovery. For a certain fact a line of stone pavement existed just under the boat. It extended far into the distance, was about forty feet in width and seemed to have been once used as a street or road. Here was an astounding discovery.

It was plain that some human hands could have laid that pavement. In this case a startling fact was proved.

This part of the subterranean river had once been above water. It had even afforded a home for human beings. These facts were undeniable.

But on the other hand, were these unknown beings cavern dwellers, an underground race who had never seen the light of the sun? Or were the cavern once been above ground and on the level of the Upper Sahara? All these questions presented themselves.

The greater problem it was indeed hard to imagine. Brosseau was a man of science and of wide knowledge, but he owned himself puzzled.

"It is beyond my ken," he declared. "It exceeds all the wonders I have ever discovered. But let us look on further. We may find an explanation."

The watery path was made for feet and went ahead swiftly. The paved roadway was followed carefully and subjected to the closest kind of a scrutiny.

It extended for a long ways under the underground lake. Then it came to the eye of our voyagers be a stagnant pool.

They had all the while been ascending, and now, to their amazement, actually came up from the depths of the lake to its surface.

For the lake was mere, the roadway did the same, and an unknown area of land lay before the discoverers, under the high roof of the mighty cavern. This island in the subterranean lake, for such it seemed to be.

And as the search-light flashed across it, another startling fact was revealed. This was that there were ruins of ancient buildings upon the land. Here was indeed a home for human beings.

"By jove," exclaimed Frank, "we have indeed hit upon a wonderful discovery! This is proof of the existence at one time of a subterranean race of people."

"I discredit that," said Brosseau.

"What," exclaimed Frank, in surprise, "in face of all this evidence?"

Brosseau nodded.

"I do not believe that an underground race would have raised such buildings," he declared. "In the first place they never needed them, for the roof of this great cavern is sufficient cover. All knowledge of cave dwellers, which I have ever gained, will bear out this supposition.

"Ugh!" exclaimed Frank in amazement, "how are you going to explain the presence of these ruins here? How could they have been transported here from the light of day?"

"It looks very strange," said Brosseau, "but there is surely some natural and rational explanation. We will find it before we get through!"

"Do you fancy that an earthquake could have accomplished this?"

"Or that such revolution of water must have done it? There are many strange things under the sun!"

"I will admit that," said Frank, "but I must own that this puzzling!"

"There are many theories concerning the Sahara," said Brosseau. "One favorite one is, that it was once the bed of a mighty ocean. This was the earth's crust rose and the waters departed into the Atlantic and Indian oceans."

"This is all seemingly logical until one recalls the fact that in all the Sahara no signs of former marine life, not even a tiny fossil shell can be found. If it were once the bed of a great ocean, then many of these bits of evidence would certainly have to be found."

"My theory is that once upon a time the region of the Sahara was a fertile and well populated land. But some great evolution of nature swept an ocean of sand, as shifting as snow, across it. This increased so rapidly that the inhabitants were obliged to abandon their cities and towns and flee to some distant quarter of the world."

"This created the Great Desert, which kept expanding until it had covered a region fully as large as the United States of America. It has driven civilization, barbarism, and all else from its borders. Those who travel the Sahara now do so at the risk of life."

"Then this ruined town must far antedate the Sahara itself," said Frank with interest.

"Certainly," agreed Brosseau, "it far antedates it. Truly it is a wonderful discovery, and proves much of the hitherto vaguely known history of the Sahara."

"I should say so! But enough of this. What say you if we take a turn ashore and a look over the subterranean island!"

"Delighted!" cried Brosseau. "I am yours to command."

Preparations were quickly made; the scientist took his geological tools with him. But neither went armed, for it was not deemed necessary.

The submarine boat was able to approach near enough to the jutting shore to throw out a plait. They crossed and stood upon the shores of the subterranean island. It was a curious sensation. They would have been in utter darkness but for the search light.

This, however, threw a powerful glare across the island. Frank led the way over the rocks to a firm spot of earth.

A wonderful scene was spread to view.

There were ruins of what an astonished voice declared to be a town of some considerable size. These were fast crumbling into dust.

This was evidence of their extreme antiquity. Thousands of years of the burial dusts had found them in their burial.

It was a wonderful thing to reflect upon and Brosseau was deeply impressed. He made copious notes and also secured a number of valuable specimens.

But there were no remains of human beings or their utensils or any other article. Nothing save the crumbling stone and the outlines of ancient houses.

The fate of these ancient people was a sealed book. It would never be known.

The fate of the subterranean isle was damp and oppressive. It affected the two explorers not a little, and finally it was deemed advisable to return to the Venture.

Barney, as they had decided upon this move a startling thing happened. Suddenly and without a moment's warning they were in utter darkness.

Frank clutched Brosseau's arm.
"What is that?" he ejaculated. "Can you see?"

"Not a thing!"

"What has happened?"

"The search-light has become extinguished. That leaves us in the dark!"

"True!" cried Frank, "but the boat and her lights—my soul! We are lost. The boat is probably suffering."

For a moment the two men were horror-struck as this possibility dawned upon them.

It certainly meant their doom if such was the case. But they clung to hope.

"The light may have become extinguished temporarily," said Frank. "Brosseau and Pomp would not go off and leave us here. It will flash up again soon."

But Brosseau was incredulous.

"I don't believe it," said he, with a shrug; "did you hear anything like a muffled explosion when the light ceased?"

"I have a faint remembrance," said Frank, "but what could have explained the success of their undertaking?" "Oh, a hundred things may have happened. Who can tell? Have you anything like an idea of the points of the compass?"

"The light was last seen. If we can keep a straight course we can reach the gang plank—that is—"

"What?"

"If the boat is yet there."

Each drew a deep breath. But it was no use for squeamishness. They were desperate men who depended on the success of their undertaking. Should they fail to reach the gang plank or find it gone then they might face a fearful fate.

But the time to be careless. Nor would their fate be long delayed for there was nothing on the isle upon which human beings could subsist. Straight on they kept, feeling their way in the pitchy darkness. It was a tedious and fearful climb. But they kept on and soon after clambering over some rocks, Brosseau said:

"Thank heaven! I can feel the water, Monsieur Renée. We have reached the shore!"

"Then shout!" said Frank. "Barney and Pomp should hear us."

And shout they did with the energy of the ghoulish place. But no answer came. Nothing could be seen or heard. All was the silence of the tomb. The two men were dazed. What had happened? What had befallen to the Venture? Where had it gone and what had become of Barney and Pomp? Frank never had known them to fail him before.

Certainly they had not left in the submarine boat of their own volition. Frank knew this. Something had undoubtedly behinled the craft. But what could it be?

This was the serious question.

And to add to the horror of their situation an appalling discovery was made. The water in the lake was rising.

Every moment it encroached upon the shores of the subterranean isle. They were facing the awful fate.

In that case what of the two explorers? It would mean a fearful death by drowning.

It was not to be, however. Frank and his companion were obliged to keep constantly changing their positions. And higher yet the water ran. Frank began to get anxious. It was a really fearful thing to die like this, powerless to avert the awful fate.

CHAPTER VI.

BARNEY AND POMP IN A QUANDARY.

But what happened to the Venture, and why had they taken her sudden and mysterious departure? This is no doubt the problem which most interests the reader at this juncture.

After Frank and Brosseau had departed, Barney and Pomp were left to the performance of a number of quite arduous duties. Pomp was in the cooking galley and Barney in the engine room.

After a time the Celt thought he would just run down and see the cooks. A few moments, and perhaps accept an invitation to sample some of his cooking, which was always par excellence.

"Hi, how yo' is, Marse Frank?" cried the coon pleasantly as the Celt approached. "I done for yo' wad show up afore long."

"An' phoy did yez think that, naygur?" asked Barney.

"Ah done reckon yo' git a bit hungry an' hab to'n somethin' to eat. Here. Hab some crackers round here if yo' likes dem, an' dere am a bit ob brandy in dat flask on de shelf. Yo' am bery welcome, sah."

"That's a brick yez are, naygur, to anticipate me wants!" declared Barney, stirring his cheek full of the crackers and washing it down with the brandy.

"Dis is yo' work, marse, yo' u'me got, sah," averred Pomp, "fo' all yo' am bound to abuse me so much."

"Be me sowl, ye're laborin' under a disillusion there, sorr!" cried Barney, generally abuse Pomp to the bottom of his throat.

"Dat am n'right," snarled Pomp. "Wus'yo' fo'nt dat frog-eatin' Frenchman fix'n on dat island, eh?"

"Blimey on yer'n, marse!

Shure I hope he'll lead Marse Frank into no koid a'brabble."

"Huh! Yo' leane Marse Frank be. He done able to take keer o' hisse', an' don' yo' neber fear about it. I knows dat fo' a fact," said Barney, "bes'bar, there's no man so smart but he's bound ter git in danger'!

"Wus' am yo' down here den if yo' hab any ob dem kin' o' thoughts? Yo' ought be up in de pilot house, sah, ready fo' a sightin' o' de boat en' you mudder didn't tell yo' so?"

To tell the truth Barney did feel secretly uneasy. He quickly got upon his feet.

"Yez may be roight, naygur," he agreed. "I'll be aifter goin' up, shure—tare an' 'ound! phaw is that?"

There was a sudden terrific crash over their heads. The submarine craft had plunged and swayed and shook from stem to stern. Then there was a settling sensation, water swirled over the decks and the boat sank.

A moment awful horror seized upon Barney as the possibility of the doors being open occurred to him. In such an event they would be drowned like rats in a trap.

Pomp sprang forward and the two clutched each other. In that moment they expected to see the great volume of water come rushing into the cabin.

The Celt hoped come.

The boat had suddenly come to a step. It had no doubt reached the bottom. They were safe.

For both men were too weak to act or speak. Then Barney managed to recover himself sufficiently to say:

"Howly murther! Phawt the divil was it, naygur?"

"Somebun' hab run aginst de boat and made it sink, I should tink!"

"Shure, there's no doubt yez are roight, naygur. We'll quick fol' out o' this mess."

With which the Celt sprung up the stairs and into the pilot-house. A glance told the truth.

They were at the bottom of the lake. What more they were had slid away from the shore far enough so that they were in very deep water.

This was an unexpected and demoralizing discovery. For Barney had not yet ascertained the cause of the boat's sinking, and much feared that it was owing to some serious damage.

"Whus' kib yo' see, chief?" asked Pomp, dourly. "We ain' sprung no leak, hab we?"

"Not unless it is in the tank, to be shure!" declared the Celt.

"An' den—?"

"Wus' ye right, shure, we're stuck, an' here we may be likely ter stay for-iver!"

"I should tink yo' wud jes try fo' to fu' out 'bout boat, dat quick, as ef ye ca'n!"

"I mean to, sor!" retorted Barney, "be jaber I ain't got mesil' turned around yet!

Then there's a droppin' a vault in the water in the tank!"

"The coon's eyes opened wide. "Whus' am dat yo' say?" he cried. "Whus' make de boat sink den?"

"Begorsa, that's phaw! I'd loike to know mesil'!"

"Golly! I done wish Marse Frank was here," said Pomp, dolorously. "He berry quick fin' out whus' de mattle is!

"Well, be ain't here, yes black sap," growled Barney; "shure mebbe ye's kin tell phaw's the matter yezself."

"Huh! if I was de engineer I done reckin' I cud, retorted Pomp.

Under other circumstances there would have been a wrangle then and there. But Barney knew that the seriousness of the situation would admit of no trifling. So he said nothing but went up again into the pilot-house.

It occurred to him to start the engines and see what the result would be. So he pressed the electric key.

There was a buzzing of the dynamo, the boat swayed and rocked a tribe, but nothing more. It seemed in the clutch of some powerful hand.

Barney turned to the search-light and swung it about so that the glass beam upon the rear deck of the boat. Then he beheld an astounding explanation of the whole thing.

There upon the rear deck was an enormous black mass. In fact the stern of the boat seemed to be made from stem to stern.

"Tare an' 'ounds," gasped the Irishman, "that's phaw is doin' the hull business! Shure, phaw is it?"

A closer inspection of the stern that the Venture's stern was completely buried in a vast mound of earth and rock. This seemed to have fallen upon the boat's stern, and weighing so heavily had acted to press it into the bottom of the lake.

But from whence had come this landslide? Then Barney remembered that the subterranean cavern had, of course, a roof, from which this huge mass had doubtless become detached, and falling had carried the Venture down.
The discovery by Frank and Brosseau that the water was rising over the isle was a startling one. They were for a moment un-able to understand the phenomenon.

Then Frank said:  

"Brosseau, we are lost, unless we can find a way to return to the Venture!"

"Per Dieu! You don't mean that, Monsieur Rendeau!"  

"Yes, I do. There is no doubt but that at periodical times this isle is covered with water. We shall drown!"

Agast with this incontrovertible evidence, the savant was speechless. He sank down upon a shelving rock and felt sick and faint. Some time elapsed.

Frank had been arraigning his gage to catch some glimpses of the Venture or her lights. He could not even venture an accurate guess as to what her fate had been.

In the meantime, that desperate affair of the isles had been finished, for Brosseau and Pompe had never deserted their post for any light reason. Frank could think of nothing but that the boat had sprung a leak, for the same principle as the generator aboard the Venture was at work. That think was confirmed by the pooling of water upon the deck. But Frank did not go at once into the cabin. The result was easy.  

"What!" exclaimed Brosseau, "that experience was like a nightmare! I would not care to repeat it!"  

"Indeed no," agreed Frank; "it was most unpleasant."

"But what would be the result if the entire roof of that cavern should fall and choke up the river?"

"You are a geologist," said Frank; "you should be able to tell."

"I have no doubt of it," agreed Frank; "but do you think this river continues all of its course below the Sahara?"

"By no means. We are apt at any moment to emerge upon some part of its course above ground. The Sahara rivers have that pecu- larity of appearing and disappearing. Many a well hole or water hole in the desert, is but a breathing hole for an underground river. Now you can see the possibility of our scheme of regenerating the Sahara. Suppose we tap this river, dam its course, and throw it above ground
and through a hundred different sandy valleys, what a change there would be. The desert would then truly be made to bloom like a rose."

"There is logic in your theory," agreed Frank; "I hope you will succeed. All what is this?"

Frank pressed back the electric lever and brought the Venture to a full stop.

There was abundant reason for this. It could be seen that the river here divided itself about an island, and if this was a meeting of two rivers—one tributary to the other.

The problem for our voyagers was to cross the river without moving it. They were not far from the island and stood at the mouth of the tributary.

"Which shall it be, Brosseau?" asked Frank; "it shall be for you to decide."

"Indeed, I cannot say," replied the Frenchman. "Certainly the course to the right looks as good as that to the left."

"Then let us try the right," cried Frank. "We can do no more than experiment at any rate."

"Very good, M. Reade!"

So the submarine boat went to the right. The current now became much stronger.

In fact it required all the power of the engines to stem it. It ran with almost race-horse speed.

For two days the Venture struggled on against this adverse current and the whole under water, for the stream quite filled the underground passage.

Then, on the third day after having traveled seventy miles as Frank reckoned, they came into a more sluggish current, and knew that they were upon higher ground.

M. Brosseau was in the observation tower, where he had the opportunity to make a searching discovery. Far ahead he saw a gleam of light, for they were now traveling on the surface of the river.

He instantly shouted:

"Mon Dieu! Come quick, M. Reade. I have a discovery!"

Frank sprang into the tower at once. Brosseau pointed through the plate glass windows.

"Do you see?" he said.

Frank gave a mighty start.

"Daylight?" he exclaimed.

"Oui, monsieur!"

"It is coming out of the subterranean river!"

"That is the truth, monsieur. We shall soon behold the light of day once more."

"It hardly be said that any in the party regretted this. It would certainly be a grand relief as well as a delight to see the light of day once more."

So the spirits of the voyagers were high, and Frank cried:

"Put on all speed, Barney. Let us get there as quickly as possible."

CHAPTER VIII.

THE OASIS.

Burr Barney needed no further incentive. He taxed the dynamos to their utmost.

And the Venture sped forward with great speed. Every moment the patch of daylight grew larger.

"Be me sowli!" cried the Celt, "it will be like a glimpse of Para­

Levant. Can you see the sun on the sky wanting more? Phat do you say, nagur?"

"Golly, I see ob de same 'pinyan, chile," declared the coon. "I jes' know for de real势力 once mo."

"Well, I'll agree that you shall have a chance," declared Frank, "if we find that we are in a safe locality."

This was joyful anticipation for Barney and Pomp. And on raced the Venture.

As the opening was approached a vista opened beyond to the gaze of the voyagers.

There was a broad expanse of water showing a lake, or widening of the river, at least. The shore, dimly distant, showed a line of waving palms.

"An oasis, beyond a doubt," declared M. Brosseau; "but we shall soon see."

And this proved a fact. The submarine boat suddenly shot out into open air and the scene spread before the voyagers for a moment blinded them.

The Souudan sun beat down hot and pitiless upon the lagoon or basin of water, which was surrounded upon all sides by grassy slopes and green palms.

The glare of light it was which blinded the voyagers. But this was so overcome.

Then the looked about them with deep interest.

That this was an oasis or water hole in the mighty desert there was no doubt. The fringe of palms about it hid the great sea of sand from view at that moment.

Brosseau was eager and excited.

He took in all the points of the compass and began to enlarge upon the possibilities of irrigating canals being built out from this very oasis.

"Millions of acres can be flooded by these subterranean rivers," he declared. "I am now better satisfied than ever of the practicability of the scheme. By the way, M. Reade, I should much enjoy being set ashore by and by. I would like to take a look at the desert."

"Your wish shall be gratified," replied Frank; "and as soon as you please."

"Well, I suppose the sooner the better."

"Very well!"

The Venture was steered in nearer the shore. Then a gangplank was thrown ashore, and touched the sand.

The Venture drew so little water that this was always easy to accom­plish, and saved the launching of a boat.

"Eyle!" said Frank. "We shall make sure that the oasis has no other occupants. If we were spied by a troop of Bedouins now, they might make it disagreeable for us."

"This is quite right," agreed the savant; "it is well to proceed with care."

So Frank and Barney, armed with rifles went ashore first. They took a look through the palm grove.

There was plenty of evidence of visits to the oasis. There were remains of former camps and the debris of a caravan, but nothing more. No living being other than themselves was visible.

This settled the matter.

The submarine boat was safe at its anchorage, so even Pomp came ashore. Then exploration of the oasis was made.

As the opening marks showed that this was a common stopping place for desert travelers. Many a caravan had blended its thirst in this pool, beyond a doubt.

It was nice and cool under the shade of the palms and by the water. But beyond the fringe of palms, the mighty expanse of glistening sand extended as far as the eye could reach.

It was a mighty spectacle, and showed what an enormous part of the earth's surface was taken up by deserts of sand or dust.

"But it shall be reclaimed," declared Brosseau, enthusiastically.

"You shall see. France will have a mighty empire here yet!"

"Well," said Frank, "as well as I can figure, we have traveled a long way under this waste of sand. We must be well into the heart of the desert."

"Yes," agreed Brosseau, "and our theory of the ramiication of these rivers below the Sahara, is proven correct."

"Is that all, then, that our mission calls for?" asked Frank.

"By no means. We have not yet been able to judge the extent. Moreover, we must determine the best spot for pervading the main channel of the great Sahara River!"

"That will be a bit difficult, won't it?" asked Frank.

"I think not, with the aid of the submarine boat and your­self."

"I hope we shall be able to accomplish all purposes."

"I have no doubt of it!"

Barney and Pomp had been gathering dates from the palms and otherwise enjoying themselves. In fact, the voyagers had been so deeply engrossed in this part of the oasis that they had given no thought to any other part of it.

And so it happened that they did not see a body of horsemen coming up on the other side out of the desert.

They were fierce-looking Arabs, and their hawk-like visages were sunburned almost to Ethiopian blackness, while their horses staggered in their gallop.

They were armed to the teeth, and were plainly a lawless crew of Bedouin plunderers, in quest of prey. Though they were also unaware of the presence of others in the oasis.

So that they rode down to the edge of the pool to water their horses before they became aware of the fact. Then they saw the Venture floating near the opposite shore.

For a moment the Bedouins rubbed their eyes in sheer amazement. They were the last people they believed we could not see a body of horsemen coming up on the other side out of the desert.

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They were armed to the teeth, and they were plainly a lawless crew of Bedouin plunderers, in quest of prey. Though they were also unaware of the presence of others in the oasis.
The Arabs quickly made a circuit of the lagoon. They drew rein by the plank which led to the deck of the Venture.

It was an unexpected surprise to them to meet with no resistance or to encounter no person. For a moment the sheik was puzzled.

He dismounted from his horse and approached the plank. Suliman, the sheik's valet, followed him. "There seems to be nobody within this strange boat, noble brother," he said.

"Right, Sheik," replied Suliman, "it is likely that they are all asleep, perhaps in some other part of the oasis."

The suggestion seemed to give the sheik an inspiration. He turned and shouted:

"Hyder, you and a dozen of good men scour the palm grove. Bring all you find to me alive. Do not slay them, or it will cost you your life!"

He hastened on the deck of the Venture.

A score of men were with him. A more villainous looking crew could not be imagined.

The sheik opened the cabin and passed in. The result was to him a most startling surprise.

The cabin was richly furnished, and to him seemed a palace. He looked about with glittering eyes. Where was the good Genii which had put this prize into his grasp?

With the sanction of the true Arab he proceeded to take possession of his prize. His men would have ransacked the boat, but he forbade it saying:

"This is given Mahmoud by Allah for his palace!" he declared. "In it we shall sail to those regions in the center of the earth where the skies are of Jasper and the mountains of Onyx and pearl. Great is Allah, the true Magi." He blessed the casks.

The servile followers bowed to the deck. And thus the noble Mahmoud took possession of the Venture.

It was impossible not to notice that the unsuspecting real owners of the craft were still at the verge of the desert listening to M. Brosseau's visions of a reclaimed Sahara. Barnev was enraged at the whole affair. He dismounted from his horse.

"I am the Sheik of the Bedouins," he declared, "and a mighty dignitary, whose orders! Let us see first what these men have done to us."

"Steady!" cried Frank, commandingly; "don't fire a shot without my order! Let us see first what these fellows want!"

The Bedouins had drawn rein and Hyder, their leader, was making a salam on his saddle.

CHAPTER IX.

MAHMOUD ALL GETS A DUCKING.

Frank had acquired a smattering of the Arabic language during a sojourn of one or two months in the oasis of Dakar. He therefore managed to partly understand the words of the Bedouin lieutenant.

"In the name of Sheikh Mahmoud, I call upon you to surrender. It is the will of the Sheik, the Sublime, that you shall surrender. Frank gathered this much and then made reply:

"Who is Sheikh Mahmoud?"

"The chosen of Allah, prince of the sun and lord of the desert," replied Hyder, grandiloquently; "throw thyself upon his most gracious mercy, noble sire!"

"Zounds!" cried Frank, angrily, "give my throat to an assassin's knife. I warn you not to interfere with us. We have the Sultan's ukase, and he will have your head if you trouble us!"

Hyder only grinned.

"The Sultan is a good ways from here," he said; "he rules not the Bedouins!"

"Well," cried Frank boldly, "you shall not block our path! Be off and tell your sheik that we will not accept his terms!"

But Hyder sat statue-like on his horse. There was a grim smile on his lips.

"My master's commands I must obey in the name of Allah!" he said.

"I am told to bring you to Mahmoud alive!"

Frank saw that argument was out of the question. The fellow was quite unreasonable.

"What shall be done?"

He realized the gravity of the situation; in fact, that it was most desperate. He was anxious to get back to the Venture immediately.

A chill came over him as it occurred that possibly the rascal crew had taken possession of the Venture.

"My soul!" he exclaimed as he turned to Brosseau, "I believe we are ruined! We ought not to have left the Venture unguarded!"

"Do you believe that it is now in their possession, M. Reade?"

"I fear so."

"Then we are lost!"

"That looks to be the truth. However, we can make a fight—"

"Against such odds? It would be madness. We might kill a few of them, but we would be sure of death in the end."

This was true as Frank could plainly see. The guns of the Bedouins already covered them.

Certainly the situation was most desperate; what could be done? Frank weighed the question slowly.

Hyder had grown impatient and spoke to two of his men who knew the language and advanced. They talked to his companions, and said:

"There are only two things left for us to do; sell our lives or surrender! Which is best?"

"It is better to lose one's head than to be hanged," Hyder replied.

"You're right," said Brosseau gravely, "and on the whole I believe it is best to surrender!"

"You do?"

"Oui, monsieur;! Why do you think so?"

"There is the only chance for life. We will not doubt be taken before this sheik. He may give us our freedom. At any rate we may get a chance to turn the tables on him."

Frank drew a deep breath.

"Brosseau," he said, "You are right. We will surrender!"

So Frank held up his hand to Hyder and said in broken Arabic:

"If we surrender, I promise you my word in honor."

"I can make none, sire," replied the Bedouin, "but my master the sheik is a merciful man. You need not fear him," Frank bowed and said:

"Then we will surrender!"

"Effendi is wise!"

In a few seconds their arms were taken away from them and behind their backs they were tied with heavy chains.

When they came to the shores of the lagoon they saw that the submarine boat was in the possession of the motley crew.

Frank disclaimed all knowledge and all interest in the affair.

"That will do them little good," he reflected. "They could never operate the machinery."

But yet they might destroy it as well as the crew, as he well knew. This was the exigency to be feared. But the young inventor's brain was busy revolving a strategic plan.

If only some opportunity would now offer itself, how quickly he would be able to turn the tables. The best that could be done now, however, was to cling to hope.

And this he never abandoned.

The prisoners were taken over the plank aboard the Venture. Here the situation favored a little of the comical. The Sheik had installed himself in the cabin, upon an improvised throne, in the shape of a plush easy chair. His lieutenants were grouped about him like the court favorites of a king.

And the prisoners were received as if they were vassals of some mighty dignitary, whose word could cut off their heads, which latter was literally true.

"By Jupiter!" thought the young inventor; "here is a pretty how do you do! What will be the end of it?"

The Sheik received the prisoners with pompous dignity. Frank was the only one who could speak Arabic, so he banished the others to the after cabin, in which they were placed and the door closed upon them. Thus this young inventor was therefore much disappointed when he learned that the voyagers were not from any subterranean kingdom, with its skies of Jasper and mountains of Onyx and Pearl in the desert.

"We are travelling under the protection of the Sultan," declared Frank, "and it would be better for you, sheik, not to molest us."

"Bah!" ejaculated Mahmoud, contemptuously. "The Sultan has no power over the Arab of the deserts. But Effendi shall lose his head if he does not serve Mahmoud truly."

Frank affected servility.

"In what can thy servants please thee, sheik?" he asked.

"You shall be master of this, my ship," declared the sheik. "I also would like to sail down the underground river and into the Niger. My men know not how to sail this boat. On this condition I will grant thee thy life."

"The sheik is gracious," replied Frank, still playing his part well. "I will accept his generous terms."

Mahmoud arose.

"Then let the start be made at once," he commanded. "Hyder, see that the horses are well tied and ten of my best men abide with me on this voyage. Then thou and the others go back to the tents of our people in the valley of Kedar and wait my return. Go!"

Hyder prostrated himself and then sped away.

A few moments later ten only of the armed Arabs stood on the deck of the Venture. Now, more than ever, Frank felt sure of his ability to turn the tables.

Hyder and his men galloped away with the horses. Frank went in to the pilot house and started the boat.

Then Mahmoud came out of the cabin to see the passing scene. As the boat glided across the smooth waters he was delighted. It was a novel sensation for him, for his life had been spent in the saddle, and he knew nothing of boats. He was beside himself with joy.

And so were his companions. They hastened to arrange a seat
for him under one of the awnings. But his security was a fancied one.

For in the pilot house Frank Reace, Jr., was chuckling at his suc-
cess in having so skillfully duped the wily Arab. He held it in his
power at this moment to at once rid himself of his captors.

One of the Arabs had gone into the cabin after something for
the sheik. When he emerged, this placed all of the racially gang on
deck.

Frank laughed outright as he pressed the key which closed the
windows and doors. It was not to be supposed that Sheikh Mahmoud
knew that the Venture was a submarine boat.

"Safe!" Frank exclaimed, "all of you!"

With which he opened the tank valve. There was a rush of water
—the boat swayed and went down.

Frank, Sheikh All and his throne, all were swept over-
board like chaff.

The transition must have been a startling and inexplicable one to
them. They floundered in the deep water of the lagoon, and such as
managed to gain the shore, saw the Venture a moment later re-emerge
and glide away into the upper cavern from whence issued the waters
of the lagoon.

And this was the last they saw of it.

Sheik Mahmoud's brief dream of grandeur was dissipated all in one
brief and startling moment.

For our voyagers it was an unfortunate escape. Their captor was
one fully capable of beholding them all upon impulse, so they were
likely to be out of his reach.

Barney was so delighted that he stood on his head, and Pomp
likewise.

"Bejabers, I thought we wore food for the buzzards thin," he cried.

"Sheik, I believe they won't!"

"You're right, churl! I done fou' dis chile's goose was cooked fo' a
suttin' fact!"

It was a close call," laughed Frank. "And yet we fooled them
easily enough in the end."

"We all owe our lives to you, Monsieur Reade!" declared Brosseau.

"I had given up all for lost!"

"It never would have been so, said Frank. "I know that we would
be all right when he appointed me to sail the craft."

"Be jabers, it's the first wash some av thim have fer one whistle,"
declared Frank, "Of that I'm mighty sure!"

But the submarine boat had new entered once more upon her sub-
terranean voyage. It was necessary to once more make use of the
electric lights. The passage now grew narrower and soon the boat was
between narrow walls. But after some hours traveil through this sort of
passage, they once more expanded, and finally the Venture glided into
water, which seemed to be another submarine lake.

This covered an area of many acres, and it was somewhat before the
Venture came to its end. Then once more the voyagers were
in the river.

CHAPTER X.

STRANDED.

For days the Venture glided onward through the subterranean river
without any material change or incident worthy of note.

The morning breeze succeeded beyond Brosseau's most sanguine expectations. Yet he had never once thought of turn-
ing back.

He had a resolute desire to penetrate to the very source of the Sa-
haran river. Where this could be he could not even hazard a guess.

The immense volume of water had not decreased a particle. It still
swayed and passed in a stream.

"There must be some immense reservoir somewhere in the heart of
the desert," declared Frank; "its supply seems inexhaustible."

And what a curious thing it was that such an arid region there
should be so much water," said Brosseau. "It is only another argu-
ment in favor of reclaiming the Sahara."

"In which I hope you will succeed," said Frank; "though it looks
to me like a mighty project."

Days passed into a week. Still the source of the Sahara River
seemed as far away as ever.

But the morning of the beginning of a new day, for day was only
known by the chronometer, there came a change. Again Barney spied
light ahead.

Once more there seemed a likelihood of spending some time in the
open air. The voyagers were not sorry.

The cavern arch enhanced greatly as they traveled on. It was full
fifty feet in the clear when suddenly daylight shied its radiance about
the boat.

As soon as the voyagers became accustomed to the light, they saw
that the expanse of a mighty inland sea was about them.

Abersheed beheld beyond measure, Brosseau gazed upon the spectacle.

"Mon Dieu!" he exclaimed, "this is on no map of the Sahara! Are
we in another world, Monsieur Reade?"

"Well, this is a surprise," replied Frank; "there is certainly no
record of the existence of such a body of water in this part of the
world!"

Only the southern coast of this mighty sea could be seen. Every-
where else land was out of sight.

A dim haze like that of the ocean hung upon the horizon. Certain-
ly this this great inland sea must cover hundreds of square miles.

There was an evident discovery. There was no record of such

a body of water in any history or upon any chart. This must be un-
explored territory.

However, our voyagers were not sorry to accept it as such. To
them belonged the honor of first discovery.

The Venture sailed on into the unknown sea. Then Frank suggested
the bearings he took.

"I have some curiosity to know just where we are," he declared.

"Good!" cried M. Brosseau, "that is to be approved of."

"We brought our bearings and began to make his reck-
oning. Somewhat later he announced.

"We are almost upon the twentieth parallel of North Latitude and in
the very heart of the Sahara."

"Then there is no human habitation within many hundreds of
miles!"

"Certainly."

"Good," said Brosseau, rubbing his hands delightedly. "The re-
clamation of the Sahara is certainly feasible. See what a reservoir
of water this is to draw from."

"It would seem inexhaustible," replied Frank.

"Certainly!"

The Venture sailed on for some hours across the great seas, but yet
no northern coast have in view. Frank was mightily puzzled.

"It is very queer," he declared. "Certainly this part of the desert
has been reached by explorers. Why no mention of this lake has been
made is strange!"

"Not at all," declared Brosseau, stoutly. "What more logical than
that we have been mistaken for Lake Tchad, which is only a few
degrees below us?"

"Do you imagine such a possibility as that the underground system
of water may also be connected with Lake Tchad?" asked Frank.

"It is not improbable," replied Brosseau, "but to establish that
fact would be gaining a great point. Now, you can see what it means
to have acquired a thorough knowledge of the underground topog-
raphy of the Sahara!"

"Indeed I do," agreed Frank, "it really means a great deal!"

But the day was drawing rapidly to a close.

The sun went down into a cloud of haze like a red ball of fire.
On the desert there was no twilight. So it was at once dark.

The haze seemed to resolve itself into mist, which hung over the
great lake, making a most profound blackness.

Even the search-light could penetrate it but a short ways, so that
Frank decided to anchor and wait for the break of another day.

The air was exasperatingly dense. The voyagers did not sit out
late upon the deck and retired early.

Pomp was left on watch.

The darkly passed the deck until a couple of hours past midnight
when he was relieved by Barney.

The Celt several times went to the rail and looked out into the
water. He saw its glistening surface as he supposed and looked for
nothing more.

But one fact impressed him curiously. For some reason or other
the boat had ceased to sway and rock with the motion of the lake.
To be sure this motion had been a gentle one, yet it was percepti-
ble. But it had ceased.

"Bejabers, the say I'm mighty sure," muttered the Celt, and then
dismissed the matter from his mind.

The hours passed, and toward morning the mist began to lift.

The Celt saw a white, glistening expanse about him.

"Be me now, how can you look at this?" he muttered and rubbed
his eyes. Then he went to the rail.

One glance was enough.

And about pealed from his lips. It was like a trumpet call.

"Tare an 'ound!" he screamed. "Pawt the divil has done all
this! Shure there's no wather to be seen at all—at all!"

His loul cry had aroused Frank, who, however, had been just
about to come on deck. The young inventor suddenly appeared on
the scene.

"What is the matter, Barney?" he cried.

"Shure, sor, yez kin see fer yezilf!"

Frank gave a start of amazement.

"On my word," he exclaimed, "that is inexplicable. What has hap-
pened?"

He rubbed his eyes and looked again and again. There was no
 denying the fact; his sight did not deceive him.

The lake was gone!

In its place was a vast expanse of dripping sand, rapidly turning
to powder in the heated rays of the sun. The lake had mysteriously
vanished.

The submarine boat rested in the midst of this expanse, which ex-
tended as far as the eye could reach on either hand.

For some moment Frank gazed in astonishment.

It seemed to him that it must be all a strange dream. He tried to
arouse himself from it.

But the stern reality was there.

The lake was gone, and they were stranded in the midst of the
great Sahara.

At this moment Frank heard a gurgling exclamation at his shoulder.

He turned to see Brosseau gazing wildly about him.

"is it true!" gasped the savant; "do I see aright?"

"You do!" replied Frank; "the big lake is gone!"

"And we are stranded?"

"Yes!"
sun. Then a long line of white, like the foam crest of a tornado at sea, came sweeping across the desert sands.

By Jove! exclaimed Frank, we are going to get a howler!

But they had rescued the voyagers from the awful death blast. The submarine boat could be sailed hermatically, and the chemical generators furnished plenty of good, pure air.

But for this they would have been stifled as thousands of others had been before. But the great blast of powder had sliced a shroud about the boat until it was nearly buried.

The storm lasted but a short while, but in that time it was safe to say that many a desert traveler—many a caravan passed out of existence.

The submarine voyagers considered themselves lucky to have escaped. But as some wonderful thing, there was something before the air was sufficiently lowered in temperature to render it safe to go out on deck.

In the meanwhile Frank had been doing some deep thinking. He had been but one result. It was hard to think of abandoning the Venture and its valuable electrical machinery and furnishings, but human life depended upon it.

And that weighed heavier in the scale. Frank's plan was at once seized with avidity by the others.

The largest portable boat on board was got out. This would carry the four explorers eastward as fast as the winds would assist them. But Frank did more. He loaded one of the smaller boats. These were packed with the provisions upon an improvised drag or sled, and dragged to the ropes they set fort. A tender farewell was taken of the submarine boat.

It was an impressive moment. There was a great uncertainty about the venture they were making. They might never reach the river. But it was the only recourse left them. If they failed they could be no worse off.

It was slow and toilful work, hauling the heavy load over the sands, but the four persevered manfully.

At night they camped under some dune with the broad canopy of Heaven for a roof. Early in the morning they would be again astir.

It was a week of laborious traveling and singing hopes, before they finally came in sight of a long line of green against the horizon.

The river! exclaimed Frank. With feverish earnestness they pressed forward. At times it seemed as if the distant break in the white sands was only a mirage. But hope kept them up.

And they were nearly insane with joy when they reached the banks of the stream, and were able to bathe in its waters and drink their fill.

That night they slept sweetly on the green turf. The next morning at an early hour the boats were rigged and launched. The stores were placed aboard, and then with the smaller boat in tow they pushed out into the silvery sea.

The current took them resistlessly along, and they were en route for the Niger and for home.

But the prospect was not yet as yet an absolutely and terrifying one. There were hundreds of miles to travel yet through dark underground streams, over rough and dangerous rapids before they should even reach the Niger.

And the voyage down that mighty river bade fair to be even more dangerous.

But Frank said: It may be that we can devise a way to cut across from the Kene to the coast. If so, we will save that time.

We trust that maybe we can do it, declared Frank. I am anxious to repay to our syndicate in Paris. We shall endeavor to make reparation for the loss of your submarine boat, M. Reade.

By no means said Frank. I do not expect that. The loss is mine.

But it was in our interest. If you had not come into the Niger country you would not have lost your boat.

No, I assumed that, declared Frank. No, I ask no indemnity. I might have lost the boat in any other part of the world. You are in no way responsible.

But I am sure our syndicate will feel morally guilty if they do not make reparation.

But Frank protested that he would receive nothing of the kind. There were many good and sufficient reasons for his decision.

But by this time the two boats had reached the mouth of the underground river. One plunge, and the light of day was left behind them.

There was no alternative now. They could not go back.

But as well die in the underground channel as in the sands of the Sahara. It could only be death in any case.
But Frank clung to hope. He knew that the chance alone might eventually take them out of the dark depths. It was only a question of time and chance until such time.

And he could see no reason why the provisions should not hold out. There was need of one thing, and this was to keep the boats always in the water.

If they should collide with any spur of rough jetting from the wall of the passage there was always danger of capsizing. This was peril enough.

Frank had brought an electric lantern and storage battery from the submarine boat. This was placed in the bow.

Either Barney or Pomp were always at the rudder. In this way accidents were guarded against. In sluggish parts of the stream the paddles were used. Thus the downward journey was made.

And still on through the cavern passages the boat ran.

Days passed into weeks.

The voyagers had been in darkness, relieved only by the one electric light, for so long that they had grown chalky white, and felt weak and debilitated.

Brosseau even had quite a serious ill spell, and all felt depressed by the damp atmosphere and gloom.

"It seems to me," said Frank, one day, "that we ought to be somewhere near that oasis and the lagoon where we gave Mahmood Ali his bath."

"Indeed, that is true," agreed Broesseau. "When we got there I shall feel as if the worst of the journey is over."

"From there to the Niger we should make the run in a week. The current is very swift."

"And once in the Niger——"

"Home!"

It was a magic word and revived the drooping spirits of all. But it had one bad effect.

It caused Barney who was at the tiller to, for a moment, forget his nerve. He lost his grip on the handle, but for an instant. A catastrophe was the folloing.

Unknown to the voyagers a rock approached the surface just here. Had Barney kept his original course he might have run safely by.

But he veered just enough, and the bow of the boat striking the rock swang about, the current whirled the other end against the opposite wall of the passage and—presto!

All were in an instant in the water. The boat turned upside down, and stores and all went to the bottom.

The other boat broke its bold and went flashing down the current and out of sight.

The four voyagers were in the current swimming for their lives. Only a miracle seemed likely to save them.

A worse disaster could hardly have befell them. Both boats were going pell-mell beyond their reach. What was to save them? Frank swam by Brosseau's side. Luckily the Frenchman was a water dog.

Barney and Pomp were adepts and could not be drowned. The Celt gave a shout:

"Shore I'm goin' down the stream after the boats!" he cried, "If I can catch them I'llcam back!"

"We might as well do that!" cried Frank, "let the current take you. Come on all!"

The order was followed, and all made for the shore.

It was easy to float in the swift current. But what was to be the end of it all?

They could not hope to float forever in that current. Strength and human resistance must give out sometime.

And then, what? All depended upon overtaking the boats. But though they drifted on for so what seemed an interminable distance not a sign of them was seen.

CHAPTER XII.

THE CARAVAN—THE END.

Again it seemed as if death in its most grisly awful form was about to fold its dread pinions about the voyagers.

What could they hope for swimming in that shoreless underground river? To escape? It seemed hardly likely.

Already despair had begun to fall upon the drifting men, when Barney gave a loud joyful cry.

"Beggars' we're saved, you see!"

A glimmer of light burst upon the view of all. The swift realization came with it.

"Heaven be praised," said Frank, fervently, "it is the lagoon!"

"The lagoon!" screamed Broesseau. "We are saved!"

Desperately they swam now. Every moment the circle of light became larger.

Then they drifted out finally into the open air. The daylight was blinding but it was grateful.

The still calm waters of the lagoon with its circle of green palms were like a green oisle of Paradise. Words fail to express the sensations of the voyagers.

It did not take them long to crawl out on the sands, where they sank down exhausted. The air was close and stifling, the sun a fierce blazing fire.

But they were safe, and once more in the light of day. This was enough to know for the present.

For some while all lay in the sands recovering strength and reason.

Barney was the first to recover.

The Celt saw the lowboat intact with its load of provisions out in the lagoon.

"Beggars," he exclaimed; "I'm affer thinkin' it wud be well to bring that ashore."

So he plunged in and swam out, and drew the boat ashore.

This revived the spirits of all.

They had lost the larger boat, but this one with the most of the stores, including their rifles and ammunition, was spared them. This was a matter for consolation.

As they were wet to the skin and much exhausted, it was decided to remain in the oasis for a time. Their clothes soon dried in the sun, and after a bit of something to eat and drink, all felt refreshed.

This was the familiar spot where they had defeated Mahmood Ali and his Bedouins and the circumstances were recalled with some interest.

"I wonder if any of the wretches are lurking about here now?" ventured Broesseau.

"That is highly improbable!" said Frank, "there would be little likelihood of their expecting to ever see us again. The Bedouins never stay long in one place!"

"Ugh!" exclaimed the Frenchman. "I dread going back into that underground river again!"

"We have the alternative!"

"What?"

"The desert."

"How far do you reckon it would be to travel from here to the sea?"

"Perhaps fifteen hundred miles!"

Barney shook his big head.

"Ah!" he said, "it is out of the question. The best thing we can do is to drift on down to the Niger."

Unless we could find some safe method of crossing the desert to some friendly Arab town in the interior. There is the city of Warno but a few hundred miles distant. Thence we could travel with caravans down to the slave coast.

"Let us start for Warno at once!" cried Broesseau, eagerly.

"Ah, I fear it would be hardly practicable!"

"Why not?"

"We are here and that city are many tribes of hostile Arabs. We could never get there without a powerful bodyguard."

"That disposes of that then," said Broesseau, with a sigh of disappointment. "Well, what shall we do? Start at once!"

"Let us take a look about the oasis first!"

"And fall into the patches of Bedouins again?"

"I hardly think there is any danger of that," said Frank, "but we will keep our eyes open!"

"I am agreeable!"

Taking their rifles with Frank and Brosseau scurried through the oasis. It was deserted beyond a doubt save by their party.

But just as they reached its eastern verge both gave an exclamation of surprise.

The sight which met their gaze was a surprising one.

Out on the glistening sands, and extending as far as the eye could reach was a train of horses, elephants, camels and men.

All glittered with fine saddles and silver and gilt. The trappings of the beasts were all of the finest sort.

While alongside the train rode armed detachments of soldiers. It was like a vision.

"A caravan!" ejaculated Broesseau.

"It is that," agreed Frank.

"What a monster!"

"And a rich one!"

"I should say so; it must have come from some far end of the desert, perhaps from Cairo! They are coming to this oasis!"

"Where do you think they are bound?"

Frank and Brosseau exchanged glances. The same thoughts ran in the mind of each.

"They cannot be foes to us," declared Frank.

"By no means," said Brosseau. "We can join their train and travel on with them to some point of safety."

"It will be slow."

"True—but safe."

Back to the lagoon they went. The matter was laid before Barney and Pomp.

"I'm ready to do jest what Marse Frank says am best," declared Pomp.

"Beggars, the same here," declared Barney.

"Very well," said Frank, "we will have a talk with the leader of the caravan.

A few moments later the advance guard of the caravan entered the oasis. They were surprised to find our adventurers there, but were friendly, and Frank learned that the leader of the caravan was a rich merchant named Ali Spir.

He made up later on his powerful Arabian charger. He was a man of strong personality but cordial manners.

The result was that horses were readily purchased, and our voyagers became a part of the caravan.

Warno was the destination of the caravan. This suited Frank to a certainty.

There were a thousand souls in the caravan and as many heavily
laid horses, camels and elephants. It was a very imposing array, and the Germans were quite taken with the caravan as a whole. When they told him of their experiences with Mahmoud Ali, he said that he had information that the robber sheik meant to attack the caravan in a little mountain, pass some fifty miles farther on.

"But we are ready for him," said the Cairo merchant. "We have a body guard of janizaries sufficient to whip a dozen bands like his." The caravan rested in the oasis for two days. This gave the animals a chance to recuperate from the long journey across the desert. Then the start was made.

On the way it was met by the Janizaries José and Mahmoud; the former was obliged to use a pack horse, their stores being laden upon it. Then the long march was begun.

It was by no means devoid of interesting features. Ali Shir was kindly disposed toward our voyagers, and they were taken into his train. He traveled with quite a retinue as is the custom of the wealthy Arab.

In his train were dancing girls and break bottles of Turkish wine, and a general merry making would follow. But as they drew near the Dhar mountains some feelings of apprehension were experienced, for it was at this point that the attack from Mahmoud Ali was expected. It was known that Ali Shir's caravan was the richest which had crossed the desert in many years. There was no doubt but that Mahmoud would turn out his largest force.

Before the rich stuff commenced, there was a large sum in gold and silver intended for the public treasury at Warna. It was this sum which excited the cupidity of Mahmoud more than any other thing. Jealousy was his vice.

He would make a stern bid for it, and savage fighting must follow.

So the fierce looking Janizaries sharpened their seimeters and loaded their long Arambas. Ali Shir was made ready for trouble.

The Dhar mountains had already appeared on the horizon. That night the caravan camped just under their shadow. But it was known that Mahmoud would not attack the train out on the level plain. It was his trick to wait until they were well into the hills.

The defile through which they must pass was narrow and deep. There was an admirable opportunity for an ambush.

But Ali Shir was not to be easily entrapped. His first move was to send a bodyguard, as a sort of skirmish line, ahead in the early morning hours.

This passed through the defile without hindrance. Mahmoud was waiting for the train itself.

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