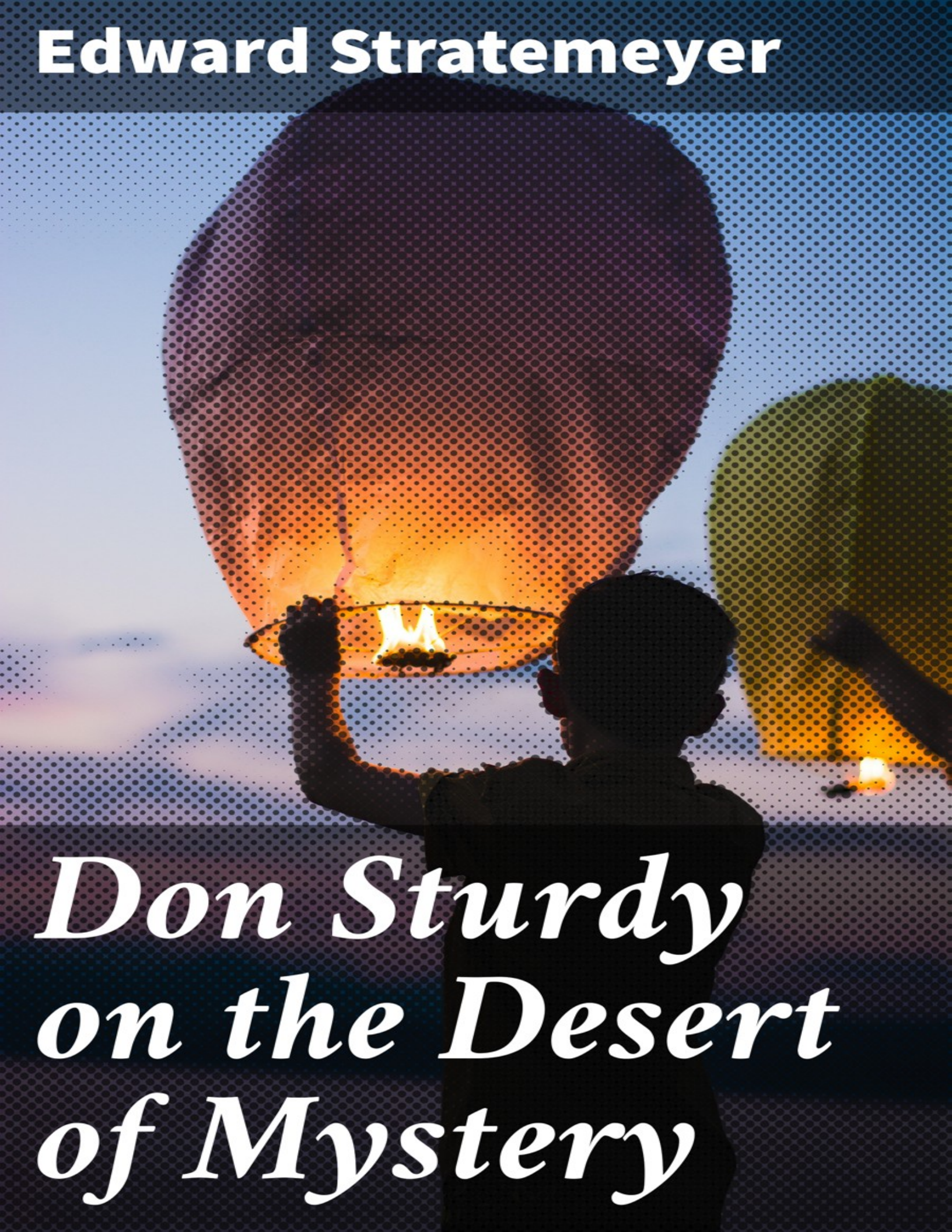
Edward Stratemeyer



Don Sturdy on the Desert of Mystery

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CHAPTER I
A Cowardly Attack

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“It certainly is a great idea, to cross the Sahara Desert by auto,” remarked Captain Frank Sturdy, as he sat on the shaded veranda of an Algerian hotel and looked out on the shimmering sea of sand stretching away to the horizon.

“I believe it has been broached,” replied Professor Amos Bruce, setting down the glass of lemonade which he had been sipping. “And whoever conceived it had plenty of nerve, supposing of course that he were willing to face the danger himself. It would be a mighty risky project.”

“That’s just what makes the idea of it so alluring,” affirmed the captain, with a smile and an adventurous glint in his eyes. “I wouldn’t give a copper for anything that didn’t have some risk connected with it. And I don’t think it would be such a forlorn hope at that. It seems to me entirely possible.”

“Y-e-s, it might be done,” assented the professor dubiously. “But it would mean a nerve-wracking journey of over two thousand miles.”

“Gee, that sounds good to me, Uncle Frank!” broke in Don Sturdy, a tall, muscular boy of fourteen, who had been listening intently to the discussion. “What a lot of wonderful things a fellow would see on a trip like that!”

“No doubt of that,” replied his uncle. “But a good many of the things you’d see wouldn’t be pleasant to look upon. Suppose something went wrong with your auto and left you stranded a thousand miles from nowhere?”

“Or suppose,” added the professor, “you were attacked by some of the many bandits that roam the Sahara? From all accounts, those fellows are mighty bad medicine.”

“But people are traveling over the desert all the time, and they get through somehow,” said Don, upon whom the idea had taken a hold that was as strong as it was sudden.

“To be sure,” agreed the professor. “But they know the desert in all its moods as no outsider can. They are seasoned to the blazing heat of an African sun. They know the signs of an approaching sandstorm. They are familiar with all the oases and wells on the route. And where their own knowledge and reasoning fall short, the instinct of the camels comes to their help. In every way they have a tremendous advantage over those who were not born sons of the desert.”

“There’s a good deal in what you say, Amos,” said Captain Sturdy. “Yet, after all, I’d back modern science against native experience and habit. It’s the outsiders, after all, who do things. Who discovered the North Pole? Not the Esquimaux, but an outsider. Who are trying to climb Mt. Everest, the highest peak in the world? Not the natives of the Himalayas, but outsiders. And I’m willing to bet that an auto expedition across the Sahara would add more to the world’s knowledge than all the contributions by Arabs since the world began.”

“It may be, it may be, Frank,” admitted the professor. “At any rate, we’ll let it go at that. It’s too hot a day to argue about anything.”

“That’s so obviously true that I’m not going to dispute it,” laughed the captain, as he settled back in his chair and

wiped the perspiration from his forehead.

It was mid-afternoon, and the sun was still beating down fiercely on the little Algerian town of Tuggurt, on the edge of the great Sahara Desert. Most of the inhabitants of the place were taking their afternoon siesta, and the group of three Americans, who had not acquired the habit of sleeping in the daytime, had the hotel veranda to themselves.

The outstanding figure of the three was Captain Frank Sturdy, who lived, when at home, in an old stone house that had been in the family for generations, at Hillville, in an Eastern State, about fifty miles from New York.

He was a big man, but the bigness lay in his great frame and his thews and muscles, for he had not an ounce of superfluous flesh on him. The natural swarthiness of his complexion had been still further darkened by the suns of many climes, for he had traveled over thousands of miles of Africa and Asia as a hunter of big game. His reputation as a fearless hunter and a crack shot was internationally known, and of recent years he had been in great request by zoölogical gardens and menageries who wished to secure specimens for their collections.

The other man of the party, Professor Amos Regor Bruce, differed widely from his companion in size and appearance. He was of small build, and had mild gray eyes and grayer hair. His profession was that of an archæologist, and he was extremely learned in his specialty. Several degrees had been conferred upon him by American and foreign universities in recognition of his contributions to science.

Don Sturdy, the boy member of the trio, was a strong, well-built boy of the athletic type, with brown hair and eyes,

unusually adept in the sports that appeal to a boy of his age. He, too, was a crack shot, this accomplishment being due to his natural aptitude combined with the tutelage of Captain Sturdy, who had spared no pains to make his nephew as good a rifleman as himself.

Don was supposed to be an orphan, due to a tragedy which, as far as any one knew, had robbed him of his parents some time before. His father, Richard Sturdy, a noted explorer, his mother, Alice, and his sister, Ruth, the latter two years younger than Don, had left the United States on an expedition on the exploring ship *Mercury*. This ship disappeared while on its way around Cape Horn, South America, and had never since been heard of. Repeated inquiries had failed to elicit any news of her, and as time passed on it was generally accepted that she had sunk, with all on board.

The blow was a terrible one to Don, who had loved his parents and sister dearly, and he had never become reconciled to it. Despite all evidence to the contrary, he still hoped against hope that somewhere they were still alive, though deep in his heart he knew how slender was the foundation on which that hope rested.

Captain Sturdy, a brother of Don’s father, had assumed the guardianship of the boy, and had done his best to take the place of his parents. Professor Bruce, who was Don’s uncle on his mother’s side, had exercised a careful supervision over his studies.

At the time this story opens, both uncles had accepted propositions from the International Museum and Menagerie Collection Corporation, with offices in London, Paris and New

York. Captain Sturdy was to collect rare specimens of animals and Professor Bruce was to secure relics of early African civilizations. Don had pleaded so earnestly to be taken along that at last, though with considerable hesitation, his uncles had consented.

The heat became less intolerable as the afternoon wore on, and the little town began to show some signs of life. The natives emerged from their mud huts, the streets became more frequented, and the flag, that had hung listlessly on the staff over the French Government building, stirred faintly in the merest zephyr of a breeze.

“Possible to live once more,” remarked the professor, with a sigh of relief, as he rose from his chair. “Guess I’ll hunt up that fellow that told me he knew something about the Cemetery of the Elephants.”

“What is that?” asked Don, with interest.

“It may be a reality or it may be a myth,” answered his uncle. “If a myth, it’s based upon the well-known fact that elephants, when they feel that they are about to die, steal away from the herd and hunt for some secluded spot where they can pass away in peace. The story goes that there’s a spot in the Sahara that contains so many elephant bodies that it’s a regular cemetery. One of the reasons for my coming here was to ascertain what basis of fact there may be in the story. Had a native tell me yesterday that he knew something about it, but he was called away before he could go into details. Ten to one he really knows nothing about it; then again he may, and I can’t afford to overlook anything that may give me a clue.”

He went along the veranda to the door of the hotel, and Captain Sturdy looked rather quizzically at Don.

“While your Uncle Amos is looking up the dead, suppose we get after something that’s a little livelier,” he suggested.

Don was instantly all animation.

“You mean hunting, Uncle Frank?” he asked eagerly.

“Just that,” assented his uncle. “I’m getting a bit rusty myself, and I know you’re anxious to try that new rifle I bought for you just before we started.”

“You bet I am!” exclaimed Don, his eyes sparkling. “What do you suppose we can get around here?”

“Nothing in the way of big game,” returned the captain. “We can’t go far from town in the hour or so we shall have before night-fall. But we may get a crack at a jackal or two, and then there’s a species of fox in this vicinity whose skin I’d like to get. So we’ll go in and get our rifles and take a little jaunt.”

They suited the action to the word, and in a few minutes were ready to start. They took no guide, for they did not intend to go far from the outskirts of the town.

“I’ve heard that game can be found sometimes in the vicinity of that sand ridge,” said the captain, pointing to an elevation about a mile away. “I’ll go toward one side of it and you toward the other, and between us we may get something to pay us for our trouble. But be sure to keep in sight of me and of the town.”

Don promised, and they parted, pursuing different routes over the soft sand, though taking care that they should not be at any time more than half a mile apart.

Don walked along, keenly alert for anything on that wide expanse that might promise him a target. Suddenly his heart gave a thump, as he caught sight of a dark object. But his elation left him when a second glance resolved the mass into several human figures.

“Just natives,” he murmured in disgust.

He looked again, and his interest quickened. A struggle seemed to be going on. Arms were uplifted as if to strike. Still he was skeptical as to the matter being one of any special importance.

“Such an excitable bunch,” he said to himself. “They go up in the air about nothing. Arguing perhaps about something that isn’t worth a hill of beans.”

He turned to go in the opposite direction, but aloud cry halted him. He could not distinguish its meaning, save that it seemed to convey an urgent appeal for help.

Don’s sight was unusually keen, and as he focused it upon the scene he became aware that two of the group were attacking a third. The latter was doing all he could to defend himself, but he was smaller than either of the others, and it was plain that he was badly over-matched.

Under ordinary circumstances, caution would have prompted Don to give a wide berth to a quarrel between natives that was none of his concern. But, as he looked, he discovered something that made him throw prudence to the winds.

The two larger ones—native Algerians, by their dress—were attacking a boy, who was not a native! A white boy like himself! Perhaps an American boy!

Don fired one shot in the air to attract the attention of his uncle. The next instant, he was rushing toward the struggling group, waving his rifle and yelling like an Indian.

CHAPTER II
To the Rescue

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At the sound of the shot the natives turned quickly, and for a moment suspended their attack, though they still kept one on either side of the boy to prevent his escape.

Don was a fast runner, and although the shifting sands offered an unstable footing he was soon in close proximity to the men, both of whom had drawn their knives and thrown themselves into an attitude of defense. The boy whom they were assailing had made a movement as though to run toward Don, but one of the men caught him and threw him roughly to the ground.

When within twenty feet, Don checked his speed and brought his rifle to bear.

“Clear out and leave that boy alone!” he shouted.

Although the natives could not understand the words, the tone and the gesture left no doubt as to their meaning. Had Don been unarmed, they would undoubtedly have stood their ground, depending upon their superior size and strength. But the weapon compelled respect, and they were fully aware that against it their knives offered but little promise of a successful outcome of a struggle.

For a moment they stood uncertainly, taking counsel with each other in a growling undertone. Then, concluding that discretion was the better part of valor and hastened toward that conclusion by a forward step and a repeated command of Don, they drew off, showing their teeth in a snarl like that of a wolf.

Don lowered his rifle and turned toward the boy he had come to help. But just then terror leaped into the latter's eyes, and he shouted in a voice that rose almost to a shriek.

"Look out! Look out! Drop!"

Like a flash, Don went down. And not a second too soon, for a sharp rock came whizzing over his head and buried itself some distance off in the sand.

He leaped to his feet to see the two men running away at the top of their speed. He threw his rifle to his shoulder and ran his eye over the barrel to the sight.

At that distance he could have brought either one of them down. But even with his finger on the trigger, he paused. Had they been running toward him he would have fired. But the danger was over, and no matter how much they deserved it, he could not shoot them down like rabbits.

As the men sped away in the direction of the town, Don rushed forward and helped the boy to his feet. The latter was panting from his tussle with his assailants and with excitement, and though he tried to speak, his words were slow in coming.

His face was bruised from blows and his clothes were torn from the rough handling that he had undergone. His hair, which was of a fiery red, was shaggy and unkempt and partly covered his face. But his eyes were blue, and Don's heart gave a leap as he recognized that the boy was white and that his features looked like those of an American.

"They were giving you rather a rough deal," Don said kindly, as he steadied the lad on his feet.

"They sure were," the boy returned in English. "And I'm mighty thankful that you came along just as you did. I was

just about all in.” The accent, as well as the slang, were undeniably American.

“So you come from the same country that I do,” cried Don, in delight.

“Sure thing,” was the reply, accompanied by a grin.

“That makes me doubly glad that I happened along just when I did,” said Don. “What’s your name and where do you come from?”

“My name is Teddy Allison, and I used to live in New York.”

“New York!” exclaimed Don. “Better and better. Why, I live only fifty miles from New York. My name is Don Sturdy. Shake.”

The two lads shook hands heartily, and were friends from that moment.

“What were those fellows trying to do to you?” asked Don, as they seated themselves on the sand to await the coming of Captain Sturdy, who, alarmed by the shot, was hurrying in their direction, though still some distance away.

“Trying to rob me,” replied Teddy, brushing some of the sand from his fiery mop of hair. “Don’t look much as though I were worth robbing, do I?” he demanded, with a wide grin. “But I have one thing worth stealing,” he went on, drawing a heavy gold watch from his pocket. “It used to belong to my father”—here a shadow crossed his face that Don was quick to notice—“and in this country, where they’d steal the pennies off a dead man’s eyes, I suppose it would seem like a fortune. These fellows had probably seen me draw it out when I was in the town, and they’ve watched me and followed me this afternoon when I came out here for a stroll.

I had noticed them loitering about, but didn't think anything about it until they closed in on me."

"I noticed you were putting up a mighty stiff fight," remarked Don admiringly.

"I wasn't going to let go of it without a struggle," replied Teddy modestly. "And that not only because of its value, but because it used to belong to my father. Of course, the odds were against me and it was only a matter of time before they would have got it if you hadn't happened along. I suppose they would have knifed me, if they couldn't have got it in any other way. Life is pretty cheap in this country. I can't thank you enough for scaring them off. They didn't like the looks of that gun."

"I'm glad it wasn't necessary to use it," returned Don simply.

"You're likely to have to use it if you stay in this country very long," predicted Teddy. "What brought you all the way from America to this jumping-off place, anyway?"

"I came here with my uncles," replied Don. "There's one of them now, coming toward us. The other's at the hotel. They're on an exploring and collecting expedition. But now let me ask you the same question. What brought you here?"

Again the shadow that Don had noted came on Teddy's face, and this time it stayed.

"I came with my father," he said. "My mother died so long ago that I don't remember her, and father was so restless after that that he was traveling almost all the time. I suppose there's hardly a place in the world that he hasn't been in at some time or other. On this last trip he brought me along."

“Oh, well, as long as your father is with you, you’re all right,” said Don, while a pain like a stab went through his heart at the thought that he himself had no father with him.

“But he isn’t with me,” explained Teddy, with a little catch in his voice.

“How’s that?” asked Don, in surprise. “You don’t mean to say that he’d leave you in a place like this all alone?”

“He wouldn’t if he could help it,” said Teddy. “He—”

“Hello, Don!” came a shout from Captain Sturdy, now within calling distance. “Are you all right?”

“All right, Uncle Frank,” Don shouted back, and, excusing himself to Teddy for a moment, he rose and ran to meet the captain.

“Sure nothing happened to you?” his uncle asked, as he came up. “It gave me a start when I heard that shot and saw you running and yelling.”

“I’m not a bit hurt,” Don reassured him. “Just had a bit of an adventure, and made a friend in the course of it.”

The captain looked a little bewildered.

“Is that the friend you’re talking about?” he asked, as his glance fell on Teddy.

“No one else,” replied Don. “What do you think, Uncle Frank, of meeting a New York boy in the Desert of Sahara?”

By this time, they had come up to Teddy.

“This is Captain Sturdy, one of my uncles I was telling you about, Teddy,” Don said, by way of introduction. “Uncle Frank, this is Teddy Allison.”

Teddy shyly reached out his hand and the captain took it heartily.

“Any friend of Don’s is a friend of mine,” he said, with a smile. “You’ve certainly met under unusual circumstances. And you seem to have been pretty badly bruised. What’s happened to you?”

“A couple of natives tried to rob me,” explained Teddy. “And I guess they’d have done it, all right, if Don here hadn’t come along with his gun and made them fly. There they are now,” and he pointed to the two figures, rapidly vanishing in the direction of the town.

The captain looked at Don with pride.

“So you drove them off all by your lonesome?” he said. “Good for you, my boy. Did they show fight?”

“They pulled out their knives all right,” put in Teddy, “and one of them threw a sharp rock at Don, just missing him. Then they ran off.”

With a few brief questions, the captain brought out all the details of the affair.

“Those rascals ought to be arrested,” he said. “I’ll report the matter to the French head of the police. Though since the natives look so much alike to our eyes, I suppose you’d have difficulty in identifying them even if they were caught. But come along now and I’ll take you back to your folks. I suppose they’re staying at the hotel.”

“I—I haven’t any folks,” stammered Teddy. “That is, white folks. I’m staying in one of the huts with a native, an Arab, Alam Bokaru, his name is.”

For a moment the captain was stunned.

“No folks!” he ejaculated. “Thousands of miles from home and only an Arab to take care of you! My poor boy! Tell me all about it.”

The kindness in Captain Sturdy's tone brought tears to Teddy's eyes and he turned away to hide them.

"Teddy was telling me just when you came up," Don broke in, to give the boy time to get control of himself, "that he was brought to this country by his father."

"And your father is dead?" asked the captain gently.

"I don't know," replied Teddy, who had by this time mastered his emotion. "He was captured by the natives, and the last I saw of him he was being taken toward some mountains. They may have killed him, or they may have made a slave of him. I don't know."

"Were you with him at the time?" queried the captain, profoundly touched and interested.

"Yes," replied Teddy. "My father started from here with a small caravan to go to the Hoggar Mountains, taking me along with him. Everything was all right for the first two weeks. We had water and provisions enough, and although it was awfully hot, we got along by sleeping in the daytime and doing most of our traveling by night.

"But one night, just as we were starting on, a party of Arabs came down on us. There were a good many more of them than we had in our party. Then, too, they took us by surprise. There was a good deal of yelling and shooting, and some were killed. In the end, they got the best of us, and our people scattered. One of the men, the master of the camels, who was fond of my father, grabbed me and carried me away to a hiding place among some rocks, though I was kicking and struggling all the time trying to get to my father. But the man said I would be killed, and he wouldn't let me go. From where we were, we saw the fellows who had been