

Boy Scouts in Southern Waters eBook

Boy Scouts in Southern Waters

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Page 1

A COLLISION IN THE FOG

"Wow! Look at that one! That's a monster!"

"That must be the ninth wave."

"What do you mean by the ninth wave, Jack?"

"Why, Arnold, don't you know that every third wave is bigger than the two preceding it and that every ninth wave is bigger than the preceding eight?" queried Jack Stanley.

"No, can't say that I ever knew that," replied Arnold Poysor leaning out of the pilot house of a sturdy motor boat plowing her way through the waters of that part of the Gulf of Mexico known as Mississippi Sound. "But I do know," he continued, "that if the Fortuna takes many more green ones over her bow, we'll have to get something other than oilskins to keep us dry!"

"Gee, I wish this fog would lift and let us find out where we are!" put in a third member of the part. "This is fierce!"

"It's thicker than the mush we used to get in that South Water Street restaurant when we were fitting out in Chicago!" declared the first speaker. "That was a bum place to eat!"

"Never mind the eats!" replied the one addressed as "Jack." "Just you keep that Klaxon going. You know we're on government waters here and the pilot rules require us to keep a fog signal sounding once every minute. We had hard enough work to convince the United States Inspectors that the Klaxon would make a perfectly good fog signal. Let's not fall down now on the job of keeping it going."

"I'd hate like everything to have a collision!"

"So would we all!" declared the first speaker.

Four boys were standing in the pilot house of a sturdily built and splendidly equipped motor boat that was being rolled and tossed by the, waves driven from the Gulf of Mexico before a southerly wind. Great banks of fog were rolling inland before the wind—fog so thick it was scarcely possible to see a boat's length ahead.

The boys were all dressed in suits of oil skins under which might have been seen neat khaki Boy Scout Uniforms. If their jackets had been exposed one might have distinguished medals that betokened membership in the Beaver Patrol, Boy Scouts of America. Other insignia indicated to the initiated that the boys had won distinction and were entitled to the honors in Seamanship, Life Saving, Stalking and Signaling. On the

jacket of the one addressed as “Jack” were insignia that betokened his rank as Scout Master and also as Star Scout. These had been won by sheer merit.

All four were manly young fellows of about seventeen and, though young, their faces gave evidence of alert natures thoroughly reliable and ready for any emergency.

Their vessel, the Fortuna, appeared fully equal to any task that might be expected of her. Trimly built and graceful, yet solidly and staunchly constructed, she rode the waves like a thing of life. Her engines, which by common consent had been reduced to half speed in deference to the law, worked perfectly, driving the powerful hull through the water easily. Just now she met the oncoming waves, driving into them with a good deal of spray about the bows.

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Jack Stanley, Scout Master of the Beaver Patrol of Chicago, Boy Scouts of America, was Captain of the Fortuna. His father was president of a bank in Chicago and had requested Jack and his chums to take the Fortuna from Chicago to Southern waters where they would later on be joined by the banker for a cruise among the islands and points of interest in that vicinity. Jack was a fine, manly lad who well deserved the honors bestowed upon him. His companions were equally clean and worthy young boys who were members of the Beaver Patrol and who all were devoted to Jack.

Harry Harvey, an orphan, worked as messenger for one of the large telegraph companies. He had seen a great deal of life and was far older than his years. Tom Blackwood worked as an inspector in one of the great department stores of State Street while Arnold Poysor was an apprentice in a printing establishment and was possessed of an ambition to become a great journalist.

Without doubt it would have been difficult to find four more congenial lads than the crew of the Fortuna. Widely different in their appearance they still gave one the impression that they all belonged to each other. There was the same fearless, honest look in their sparkling eyes, the same erectness of carriage, the same confident walk that bespoke clean, ambitious, well-trained lives.

Just now they were all anxiously gathered in the pilot house eagerly on the lookout for any possible danger that might be threatening them from out the dense fog being swept inland by the wind. Harry was at the wheel while Jack stood with his hand close to the switchboard that governed the engines pulsating below. Tom and Arnold were leaning half way out of the open windows heedless of the fog and the spray that now and again fell in sheets over the pilot house as the Fortuna thrust her nose into a large wave.

"Great fishes!" ejaculated Tom. "I'd like to have a collision with some eats right soon. I'm nearly starved and drowned and several other things! I haven't eaten since we left Mobile!"

"Score one for Tom!" cried Harry. "He washes the dishes next time! Remember our bargain, old Scout," he continued. "Do you remember what we agreed to do when we left Chicago?"

"Could I forget it with your melodious Klaxon working overtime?" queried Tom. "Great Fishes isn't slang, though! Ask Jack."

"How about it, Jack?" asked Harry. "Does he wash or not wash, that's the question. Fair play here—let the umpire decide!"

Before he spoke, Jack pressed the button that actuated the Klaxon. When the raucous noise of the fog horn had died away he turned to the two disputants with a quizzical look and said:

“You’d be more careful of your language if your mother were here, wouldn’t you, Tom?” and then, as a look of triumph on the face of exultant Harry was about to be followed by a shout of rejoicing, he continued. “And I’m sure that when Harry makes a mistake we’ll all be as considerate of his feelings as we are able. But Tom washes the dishes as a penalty for using slang!” he announced in a tone of pleasant finality that was unmistakable.

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"Who's going to be cook this next watch?" asked Arnold.

"It's my work, by the schedule," replied Jack, "but if you lads will excuse me now, I'll do double duty later on. I hate to leave the deck even for a few minutes. I don't feel at all easy!"

"Why, what can make you uneasy?" put in Harry.

"I don't know," Jack answered. "I suppose it's only a notion due to indigestion after eating some of Tom's cookery, but I have a sort of uneasy feeling that something is going to happen and I want to be on deck when it comes. That's all!"

"Well, I'm about starved and so if this portentous calamity will please postpone its arrival until I get my lunch, I'll be much obliged!" remarked Arnold. "I'll go get dinner. I follow Jack on the cooking schedule. What'll it be, gentlemen?"

"More of that fine Red Snapper!" quickly answered Harry.

"If you boys can wait long enough, I'd like some of those famous biscuits Arnold knows so well how to make," added Tom.

"And I," said Jack, "would like a double portion of both of those and a cup of that excellent coffee we bought at Mobile."

"Wee, Mong Sewers! Zee Chef departs!" announced Arnold disappearing down the stairs leading to the cabin from whence in a short time the aroma of delicious coffee was wafted up to the three boys in the pilot house, each striving to peer farther into the fog which seemed to be getting thicker each passing moment.

"Seems to me I hear the booming of the surf on a jagged and rock bound coast," remarked Harry after an interval of silence following the wail of the Klaxon fog signal being sounded at regular intervals.

"Harry, you ought to be serious once in a while!" admonished Jack. "There are no rocks down in this part of the world. Everything is sand and lots of it. Besides the real coast is over here to our starboard hand side. You can't hear any surf there!"

"Maybe so, but I can hear what I believe to be the pounding of waves on a shore, just the same!" stoutly insisted Harry.

"Listen a minute," exclaimed Tom raising a hand for silence.

"There!" cried Harry after an interval. "There it is again!"

"Jack," Tom asked turning to his chum, "can you get it?"

With his face a trifle paler than was his wont, Jack nodded his head and with his lips closed tightly peered into the fog.

“Great Wigglin’ Pollywogs!” ejaculated Tom. “If we’re into a surf the Fortuna had better give up now! We can’t ever expect to get out of that sort of a mess with this little rabbit!”

“Two times heavy on the dish washing for Thomas!” gloated Harry. “But we’re not into the surf yet a while! Listen!”

His hand was held up again for silence. From the cabin came the sound of the clock striking the hour in nautical fashion.

“Five bells!” announced Jack.

“Let’s see,” mused Harry. “I never can get used to that.”

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"Ten thirty," Tom put in, "if it was a railroader; half past o'clock for you Dutchmen," he added with a chuckle, wrinkling a freckled nose at Harry and winking at Jack.

"All right!" assented Harry. "Log a surf heard at—how many bells? Oh, yes, five bells in the morning. Log Tom Blackwood for uncivil language to an officer and for refusing duty under fire!"

"Hark, boys!" commanded Jack "We may be getting into a mess and it's no time for joking and carrying on like that!"

"You're right, Jack, as always!" assented Tom. "Just to show that I'm serious, I'll joke no more until this fog lifts!"

"Here, too!" declared Harry. "But look at Rowdy! What's the matter, Rowdy, old chap?" he continued as a great white bulldog came up the ladder from the cabin. "What ails you?"

The bulldog was evidently excited about something for the hair on his shoulders and neck was standing straight up while from his throat issued a low fierce growl scarcely audible above the noise of the tumbling waters. His every action bespoke antipathy to something. Raising himself upon his hind legs, the dog rested his paws upon the window sill of the pilot house. He peered eagerly into the white shroud of mist that enveloped the motor boat.

"He hears that surf, too!" declared Tom. "He hears it!"

"I don't believe it's surf he hears," Jack stated. "He looks just like he did back there in Mobile when we found that black browed fellow trying to board the Fortuna.

"Good old Rowdy!" soothingly murmured Tom reaching over to give the dog a pat. "What do you see, boy? Tell your friend."

"Looks to me like it might be a person he scents!" Harry stated. "Only it isn't a likely place for a person to be out in this mess!"

"We're out in this mess, aren't we?" objected Tom.

Jack's hands swiftly traveled over the switchboard seeming to find as if by instinct just the right levers. The engines stopped and then reversed full speed! The Fortuna shook and quivered from stern to stern. She fell off slightly into the trough.

"On deck!" shouted Jack. "Here's a collision."

Tom and Harry were on deck instantly. Jack leaned against the switchboard and groaned. The next instant came a crash!

CHAPTER II

CRIPPLED BY THE STRANGER

With a lunge the Fortuna struck a dark object riding the crest of an oncoming wave. Jack stood against the switchboard scarcely daring to look while Arnold came crowding up the companion-way his face blanched and eyes staring. Harry and Tom were on the forward deck looking along either side of the plunging boat.

“What did we hit?” queried Arnold in a shaking tone.

“I don’t know,” replied Jack. “Whatever it was, we don’t seem to be sunk yet, though. Maybe it was just a few floating boards washed adrift from some vessel.”

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"What did you see, boys?" Arnold called out to his companions on deck. "Did we hit something or did it hit us?"

"Looks to me as if we had run down a row boat and cut her right in two!" declared Tom. "I was sure I saw the stern of a boat just sinking here on the starboard side."

Jack reeled against the wheel, covering his face with his hands. Despite his efforts a groan escaped him. Arnold sprang toward his chum and put an arm about his shoulders with a friendly air.

"What's the matter, Jack? Are you hurt?" he asked solicitously.

"Only inside" replied Jack. "I'm sure I saw a man in a row boat loom up out of the fog just before we struck. The shudder that ran through the Fortuna told me only too plainly that we had hit something more than a mere board or two. I can't bear to think that we've run down a man out here in the Gulf! It's too bad!"

"Maybe it was only an empty boat, Jack," comforted Arnold. "Did you hear anyone cry out or see anything of a man overboard?"

"No," was Jack's answer, "I didn't. I just felt that something was going to happen and then we struck the boat. I guess it's all right and we'd better get the Fortuna with her nose into it or we'll roll the engines off their beds. This is surely a choppy sea!"

Suiting the action to the words Jack reached for the levers on the switchboard just as Tom and Harry returned to the shelter of the pilot house dripping from the sheets of spray that had come aboard while the vessel lay rolling in the trough of the sea.

"Great Wiggling Pollywogs!" exclaimed Tom, "this is sure a nasty piece of weather! I'm glad I'm on top and not sloshing around in the Gulf right now. Bet that fellow in the boat is wet all right."

"Hark, Tom!" cautioned Harry. "You mustn't talk like that."

"I'm going back to finish my cooking," announced Arnold. "We'll all be hungry enough to eat a raw dog. And speaking of dogs," he continued pointing at the white bulldog still holding his position at the pilot house window, "what's the matter with Rowdy?"

"Rowdy scents something he doesn't like," explained Tom.

"I wonder," began Jack and then without finishing his half begun sentence he dashed madly from the pilot house and flung himself into the bow of the yacht now gaining headway under the impetus of the engines. Flat on deck he fell and crawling to the rail peered eagerly over the side. His friends saw him turn an agonized and pleading

glance in their direction and then reach far over the rail of the vessel. In an instant Tom and Harry were by his side eager to be of any possible assistance to their chum.

"What is it?" began Tom, but Harry motioned him to silence.

"Sit on his legs!" he commanded and Tom with a flash of comprehension obeyed unquestioningly. His weight on Jack's feet enabled the captain to lean far over the rail and grasp the wrists of a clinging figure gripping with the tenacity of despair the links of the cable that still hung from the hawse pipes.

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Harry, too, leaned far out and in his eagerness to be of help nearly lost his balance and all but plunged into the sea.

“Steady!” gasped Jack. “Slow and steady now or he’s gone!”

With a mighty heave the two boys dragged the figure to a level with the rail and then Tom left his post and came to their help.

It was now but a short task to get the rescued person on deck, but he was so chilled and exhausted that he could not stand.

“Let’s put him below as quickly as we can, boys,” Jack suggested. “Arnold has some hot coffee already cooking and that’ll help him as much as anything we can do. Easy with him, now, maybe he’s hurt.”

With tenderness and skill the boys who had been trained to care for injured persons helped the visitor who had boarded their vessel so strangely and all unannounced down the companion-way into the cabin where he was speedily given a change of clothing followed by a steaming cup of fragrant coffee.

Jack again assumed command in the pilot house while Arnold took up his interrupted preparations for the meal.

“Be sure you fry an extra big piece of that Red Snapper for the new lad,” directed Tom as he prepared to go again to the pilot house. “He’s about half starved and pretty near used up, I guess!”

“You know I’ll take care of him all right!” replied Arnold. “I’m sorry we broke his boat up like that but I guess we can all take a knot out of our neckties today. Wasn’t it lucky he caught the cable, though? I’m delighted that we were able to save him!”

“Of course, we couldn’t be blamed for running into him,” said Tom. “I’m glad we rescued him from his awful predicament and now we’ll have to be extra good to him to make up for it!”

So saying he passed up the companion-way and into the pilot house joining Harry and Jack at their ceaseless vigil.

Busily engaged with his work in the kitchenette, Arnold was quite surprised to observe the door leading into the after cabin open softly. It admitted the newly found stranger. He had been given spare clothes belonging to the boys and looked little the worse for his rough experience of only a short time before. His eyes were black and piercing and might have been pleasant were it not for his disagreeable habit of not looking directly at the one with whom he was talking. His glance roved about the place taking in every detail yet never resting long in any one place.

“How do you do?” pleasantly queried Arnold resolving to be congenial in spite of his instant distrust of the other. “I’m sorry we ran you down and ruined your boat, but I’m glad we got you aboard in time to save your life. It was a lucky accident.”

Advancing in his frank and friendly manner he held out his hand in greeting. The stranger at first drew back, then as if thinking better of his resolve, he thrust forth his hand for a quick handshake, almost instantly releasing Arnold’s grasp.

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"What is your name, may I ask?" questioned Arnold.

"Carlos Madero is my right name, but they call me Charley," was the lad's almost surly response. "I live at Pass Christian and work on a shrimping schooner. My boat is gone now."

Arnold busied himself with the operation of the stove for a moment to regain his composure, for the fellow's manner had angered him immediately. Presently he turned and said:

"My name is Arnold Poysor. I am from Chicago and so are my chums. We are down here for a vacation and pleasure trip. We're sorry we smashed your boat, but if you'll accept it, we'll give you the one we're towing behind us. We bought it in Mobile."

"All right!" replied Carlos. "You ought to do that much."

Arnold now prepared the table for dinner and calling his companions to eat he introduced them to Carlos as they entered the cabin. Jack remained at the wheel while the others ate.

All the boys tried to make pleasant conversation for the newcomer but he greedily devoured the food set before him in a ravenous manner. His conversation was little better than monosyllables. At last the boys in despair gave up the effort of entertainment and fell to discussing their situation amongst themselves. They recounted the incidents of their trip down the Great Lakes, through the Erie Canal and down the Hudson River, their pleasant run down the east coast of the United States to the Florida Keys, past the Dry Tortugas and up to Mobile.

To all of their conversation Carlos listened intently, eating in silence, but keenly alert to every word that was said. Finally as the talk lulled to an occasional remark he looked up and said:

"What are you here for, anyway?"

"I told you," replied Arnold, "we're here for a pleasant vacation trip. We'll be joined later by the father of the boy at the wheel and then we expect to go on up the Mississippi to our home at Chicago. Didn't you believe me at first?"

"No," bluntly replied Carlos, "I didn't."

"All right," laughed Arnold, "we'll forgive you this time."

To relieve the tense situation Tom sprang to his feet saying that he would go and relieve Jack at the wheel while his friend ate.

Once in the pilot house he was met with a questioning look from Jack who was holding the wheel with one hand and Rowdy with the other. The dog was struggling wildly to free himself.

"What's the matter with Rowdy?" questioned Tom wonderingly.

"I'll never tell you," Jack panted, "he's been trying to get down into the cabin like all possessed ever since dinner was called. I've had my own sweet time to keep him here."

"Maybe the poor tyke is getting hungry like the rest of us human beings," ventured Tom. "Rowdy, are you hungry?" he asked.

Rowdy's reply was a glance from bloodshot eyes toward his friend, then he launched himself against the door leading to the cabin emitting growls that were unmistakably vicious.

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"That's pretty near talking, Jack!" Tom stated.

With a knowing look Jack assented and pointing with his thumb toward the newcomer's direction nodded his head once or twice. Securing a length of small line Jack made Rowdy fast to a ring bolt in the pilot house floor and then went into the cabin for his dinner.

He had no better success in his effort at conversation with the stranger than his chums had met and shortly gave over trying to be pleasant. Making a hurried meal he again hastened to the pilot house where he assumed charge of the craft, for the fog was still thick.

Arnold in an effort to be friendly asked Carlos to inspect the Fortuna from the interior, which offer was quickly accepted.

"Here," explained Arnold, standing near the bulkhead separating the pilot house from the cabin, "is the forward part of the vessel. I suppose you'd call it the forecabin, but we have the fuel tanks, chain locker and lazarette here. On occasion we can use this space for extra bunks, but with the Pullman berths in the cabins we don't often need the room for anything but storage."

"Where is your gasoline?" asked Carlos displaying some interest.

"In tanks right up in the eyes of her," replied Arnold glad that he was interesting his visitor. "Then you see the engines amidships here with a berth on each side. The switchboard is in the center of the pilot house so the stairways are on each side of the engines. In the next compartment aft are more berths. Then still further aft, you see are the kitchenette on one side and the wash room on the other. Aft of that is the after cabin that we use as a dining room. With the folding berths we can accommodate twelve people easily. It makes a fine home, all right."

"Can I go to sleep?" inquired Carlos. "I'm right tired."

"Sure you may," declared Arnold. "Take the after cabin and make yourself comfortable. I'll go up forward and let you sleep."

So saying he joined his companions in the pilot house and reported to them the result of his effort to placate their visitor.

For half an hour the Fortuna breasted the waves plunging through the thick fog. Anxiously the boys peered ahead ever alert.

Directly the vibrations of the motors grew fainter. The boys glanced at each other wonderingly. Rowdy tugged at the rope that confined him and growled savagely. Jack's face went white as he reached for the switch. He looked at the other boys in wonder.

The Fortuna's engines came to a dead stop!

CHAPTER III

A MYSTERIOUS MESSAGE

"Pull off the hood over the engines," cried Jack to Harry who was quickly down the companion-way, "and see if the wires from the magneto are disconnected. I made a new clip while we were at Mobile and maybe it has broken and cut off the current."

"Phew!" ejaculated Tom who was preparing to follow Harry below. "I'll bet something's broke loose all right. Smell it?"

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"Sure enough I smell gasoline strong!" declared Jack.

"Some odoriferous, whatever that means!" cried Arnold. "Smells like the gas house up near Goose Island in the North Branch of the Chicago River," he added holding his nose.

"Switch on the electric lights and see where the gasoline pipe has broken loose," suggested Jack. "It seems to me the feed pipe must have become broken. That's an awful smell!"

"I'll venture there are gallons of gasoline in the bilge right now!" averred Harry. "Better open the windows a bit and let it air out in here. Suppose you get the bilge pump to work, Tom, and I'll try to find the leak."

"Sure, I'll pump the bilge," assented Tom. "Just look here at the stuff slopping up through the floor boards," he continued. "It surely looks as if we'd lost some fuel."

"That's funny," declared Jack. "I wonder how it could have happened. The pipes were all right when we fitted out and nothing we have done since could have injured them."

A shout from Harry announced a discovery. He was backing out of the compartment under the pilot house floor and just forward of the engines. As he appeared his face was the picture of rage.

"What's it?" queried Tom. "Don't hold your breath that way, you're apt to choke if you do," he laughed.

"Where is the fellow that opened that drain cock?" shouted Harry shaking his fist in the air. "Someone deliberately drained our gasoline into the bilge. I found the drain cock wide open!"

"Nobody opened it," asserted Jack. "We were all in the pilot house since dinner watching the fog and we couldn't reach the pipe."

"I hate to say it, Jack, but we were not all in the pilot house," answered Tom. "Maybe it isn't fair to the chap, but that fellow we nearly run over doesn't look good to me. I rather suspect him."

"Hush, my lad," Jack warned. "A good Boy Scout doesn't accuse anyone until he has proof, and we have no proof yet of his guilt."

"All right, Jack," unwillingly replied Tom, "but I can't help feel the way I feel, can I? He didn't impress me very favorably."

“And then, look at Rowdy!” put in Harry. “He spotted the fellow when he was still hanging on the cable and he tried to get back into the cabin all the time to eat up his visitor.”

“Well, let’s go back and wake him up and see what he knows,” suggested Jack. “Maybe he can put up a good story that will satisfy even you chaps. I can hardly believe anyone would do a thing like that. He has no motive for attempting to cripple us like this.”

The boys moved with one accord toward the after cabin. The Fortuna rolled viciously in the trough of the choppy sea, making their footing extremely unsteady. Jack swung open the door.

Starting back in amazement he bumped into Tom who was following closely. Harry was at their heels peering over their shoulders.

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"Where is he?" gasped Jack wonderingly. "Where did he go?"

"The bird has flown!" declared Tom in a tragic tone.

"Bag and baggage!" asserted Harry.

True enough, not a sign of the stranger remained except the pile of water soaked garments in which he had been clothed when first brought into the cabin. These lay in a heap on the floor.

"Maybe he's out on the after deck," ventured Jack still hopeful.

"Let's see," answered Tom. "If he is there, I'll cook and wash dishes and scrub decks for a week on end!"

The after deck was empty. The visitor was nowhere in sight.

"Well, it looks as if he had come up out of the sea like a modern Neptune and like Old Neptune has gone back into it again," Jack said, his voice shaking. "You don't suppose the fright he had turned his head and made him commit suicide, do you?"

"Suicide your tintype!" stoutly scorned Tom. "Do you think that fellow would commit suicide in a rowboat?"

"What do you mean?" questioned Jack wonderingly.

"I mean that our young pirate friend got one perfectly good square meal of food, one entire new outfit of clothes and one rowboat from this bunch of kindergartners. Then he opened the drip cock in our fuel tank and sneaked out the back door and is gone."

"Good night," vociferated Harry. "It's as clear as mud! Look at what that young villain has done! Why, he's a thief!"

"Easy now," admonished Jack. "We mustn't call him names. Maybe things look black for him, but it may come out all right."

"Yea-ah!" scorned Tom. "When I can see the back of my neck it will. That guy's crooked! That's what I believe."

"Me, too!" declared Harry. "I vote with Rowdy. He's usually pretty near right when it comes to reading character!"

"Well, anyhow, this won't get us anywhere, and the Fortuna is rolling like a loon. Let's see if Arnold can find bottom in the bilges yet and then we'll connect up the spare tank and start out."

“Second the motion,” declared Tom. “We ought to get going.”

Suiting the action to the word the boys returned to the cabin to find Arnold replacing the pump. The air was still heavy with the odor of gasoline but Jack deemed it safe to operate the engine, since the windows were to be left open giving a plentiful supply of air, thus preventing danger of an explosion.

Tom was about to replace the hood over the engines after they had been started when his eye caught sight of a piece of paper lying on the floor. Hastily he kicked it aside and was about to pass to the pilot house when Harry called his attention to the paper.

“Nice housekeeper you’d make,” he taunted, “kick the dirt back under the couch and let the sweepers get it! Why don’t you pick it up?”

“Guess I will,” replied Tom shamefacedly. “I was in a hurry.”

“What is it?” asked Harry. “Let me see it.”

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"Sure, read it," Tom answered. "Read it aloud and we'll all hear."

"What's this?" gasped Harry. "Listen, you fellows! Here's the secret of the whole thing! Hear this!"

"Well, read it," impatiently cried Arnold. "I'm dying to hear."

"Get the Fortuna and crew!" read Harry. "They know about the Spanish Chest. They're after it. Sink them if you have to."

As he finished reading he glanced at each of his chums in amazement. Their faces were pictures of dismay and amazement.

"What does that mean?" Arnold cried in tones of wonder. "What does it mean when it says, 'Get the Fortuna and crew?'"

"The last part explains that," answered Jack. "It means that some one or more people are after us and will sink the Fortuna if they have to in order to 'get' us. It listens like desperate characters were following us all right. We must remember our motto, boys, and 'Be Prepared.' We know they're after us."

"Yes, 'Be Prepared' for what?" questioned Tom. "Who're after us and why? What does that mean about the Spanish Chest?"

"I see it's time to let you fellows in on the whole thing," declared Jack. "I had hoped it would not be necessary to say anything for a long while yet for the moon isn't full until nearly a week from now, but this has precipitated matters. Now, listen!

"You all know Lawyer Geyer of Chicago. His offices are in the Masonic Temple. He and my father are very close friends—in fact they were schoolmates. Lawyer Geyer offered me a commission for him and fitted out this vessel and is paying our expenses. He also offered us half the reward if we were successful."

"What reward?" interrupted Arnold. "Why don't you hurry?"

"Keep still, rattle-head!" admonished Tom. "He's hurrying."

"Well," continued Jack, "it is said that years and years ago the Spaniards had a fortress built on what is known as Biloxi Bay. It seems they wanted to fortify this section of country and built a fine place there. As time went on and the country became settled, this fort was quite a refuge for settlers in times of trouble. It is said that once a commander of the fort was wicked enough to turn against his own people and that he incited the Indians to rise against the settlers. After they had taken refuge in the fort he got them to put all their gold and jewelry into his strong box which was a stout oak chest, and then he planned to get away with it."

“The piker!” cried Tom. “I think he should have been shot.”

“He was,” continued Jack, “or so the story goes. Some say he was shot by his own people who discovered his treachery and some say he fell defending the fort and incidentally the gold against an attack by Indians. But whichever way it happened, report says that the gold was buried in the fort by the survivors and has never been unearthed since. Many people have tried to get it, but it is reported that a curse hangs over this wealth and that no human being will be permitted to recover it, unless related to the officer.”

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"Is that why Lawyer Geyer sent us after it?" asked Harry.

"I don't quite get your meaning," Jack said.

"Well, you said no human being would be permitted to get the coin and then you said Lawyer Geyer sent us after it and—"

"I move we throw him overboard—he's a scoffer!" declared Tom.

"Second the motion," replied Jack laughing. "Sit still a while and listen to me. The worst is yet to come."

"Go on, Jack!" breathlessly urged Arnold. "Tell the rest."

"Well here's the curious part of the story," Jack continued. "It is said that only at certain stages of the moon and tide can one hope to find this chest of treasure. Also it is reported that only one who is of Spanish descent can hope to find it."

"Well, that lets us in," stoutly averred Harry. "Tom, here, is Spanish and so am I. How about you, Rowdy?" he went on addressing the white bulldog to whom he gave a friendly slap.

Rowdy responded with an affectionate attempt to "kiss" Harry's face and then endeavored to distribute his favors to the others.

"Seriously," Jack continued, "I have little faith in the project. Lawyer Geyer seems to half believe the story, however. He was down in this country a while ago on some real estate business and while here got the tale from some source that he considered fairly reliable. So he fitted out the expedition and is willing to take half the proceeds, whatever it may be, for his share."

"But it looks as if we are being opposed from the very start," objected Tom. "Look at this visitor and the note he left. That must indicate that there is a gang working against us. I'm a peaceful, orderly citizen and not at all inclined to start anything."

"Yes, he is!" laughed Arnold. "Look at the way he put the rollers under the gang of thugs at our camp at Mackinac Island!"

"Now, boys," continued Jack, beckoning Arnold to silence, "if any one of you wants to go back, he can have the chance. We're going to Pascagoula and also to Biloxi. At either place one can get the Louisville & Nashville railroad for home. Think it over. If you want to try for the Spanish Treasure Chest, stick. If not, you are at liberty to go home at any time we make a port."

At that instant the lads were startled to hear the hail:



“Launch ahoy! Keep off!”

“Port your helm,” commanded Jack to Arnold who was at the wheel.

Dimly the boys made out the bulk of a schooner on their port bow, her sails slatting and rigging flying as she came up into the wind. As the Fortuna fell off they looked at the schooner and saw the main boom swinging across the deck, strike a man standing near the rail.

“Man overboard. Give me a line,” cried Arnold, springing over the rail without stopping to divest himself of his clothing.

CHAPTER IV

THE HOLE IN THE BOAT

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Harry dashed to the rail and seized the ring life preserver from its beackets. As Arnold rose to the surface and reached out for the unfortunate man from the schooner, Harry flung the ring-buoy with unerring aim. It fell true, and within Arnold's reach.

Gradually pulling in the line, Harry and Tom drew their chum to the side of the Fortuna. The figure in his arms appeared perfectly lifeless. Quickly they prepared to take both on board.

"Make a bowline in a bight in that line," directed Harry. "Pass it down to Arnold and let him send us up the man first."

"Right-o," responded Tom, quickly preparing the line.

It was but the work of a moment to securely fasten the line about the man's limp form and in another moment he was safely on deck. Arnold followed, coming over the rail like a monkey.

First aid to the drowned was administered rapidly by the boys who prided themselves upon their proficiency in this art.

"Looks like a nasty bump he got on the coco, too," commented Tom. "How'd they happen to sneak upon us so close?" he added.

"Humph!" grunted Harry. "We all forgot to keep the Klaxon going while we listened to that fairy tale about the Spanish Treasure Chest. Maybe they forgot to blow their fog horn also, and there you are. Natural result of neglect. That's easy."

"Where are they now?" queried Arnold peering about in the fog.

"I believe that as soon as they saw we were picking up this chap," Jack replied, "they filled their sails and away they went. Certainly they are not here now."

"Hush, boys, he's coming to," declared Tom, watching the newcomer anxiously for signs of returning consciousness.

"Sure enough," assented Harry. "I tell you that little trick of pulling a fellow's tongue out isn't near as good as turning him face down. Look how easily this chap came around."

"We'd better get him in and get him to bed as soon as we can, boys," admonished Jack. "He needs a warming up."

"I'll start the electric heater and percolate some coffee for both of we rescued persons," declared Arnold. "Lucky I hadn't put on my oilskins after getting dinner," he added.

Quickly the boys carried the stranger to the cabin and put him into one of the berths. There every care was bestowed to make him comfortable and easy, while Arnold prepared the coffee.

"Lay right there and don't try to talk," advised Arnold. "I'll stay with you and see that you don't want for anything."

"That's kind of you," replied the stranger. "What vessel is this, if I may ask before you make me keep quiet?"

"This is a gasoline pleasure launch," replied Arnold.

"Oh, thanks," replied the stranger. "Now, I'll rest a while."

In the pilot house the boys discussed the incident that had so nearly resulted in a collision. They were all excited and beginning to feel the strain upon their nerves.

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"This is getting to be one of our usual strenuous trips," announced Jack. "I declare we never go anywhere, it seems, but we dash head foremost into excitement and trouble. The only thing we need now to start us right is to discover a Boy Scout or two out here and we'll be prepared to go ahead and have some adventure."

"Never mind, Captain, we'll find the Boy Scouts, all right. Don't think our luck will turn yet. Just remember the horseshoe I picked up on the street in Mobile," urged Tom.

"Yes," Jack assented, "that's a fact. And, by the way, where did you put that horseshoe? I haven't seen it since."

"I hung it up on the switchboard lamp bracket," said Tom.

"Well, it isn't there now," declared Jack.

"What's that isn't there now?" asked Arnold at that moment climbing the companion-way from the cabin.

"Tom's horseshoe," Jack replied. "He says he hung it on the lamp over the switchboard and now it's gone."

"Oh, that," scorned Arnold. "That was just a little bit of a mule shoe. That wasn't a real full-sized horse shoe."

"All right, Smarty," bridled Tom. "Just tell us where you threw it overboard and we'll make you go dive for it."

"It was swinging around and making so much noise I took it down and hung it on the bracket there by the compass," replied Arnold pointing to the missing article hung over the place indicated.

"Good night," cried Jack. "Here we've been trying to steer a compass course in a thick fog all the way from Mobile with that thing there! No wonder we've been hoodooed."

"Why, what's the matter?" innocently inquired Arnold.

Jack's answer was to take the horseshoe from its resting place and make as if to fling it overboard. He restrained himself, however, and turning to Arnold said quietly:

"Look here, young man, you evidently do not know how sensitive a thing the compass is. But if you had done a thing like that on some vessels they would have thrown you overboard. You have rendered the compass useless and we have been steering by a crazy instrument. Your horseshoe hanging there has deflected the needle to such an extent that we cannot even guess where we have been going."

"I'm sorry," contritely answered Arnold, "but I didn't understand it that way. I won't do that again, that's sure."

"Thanks, awfully," scornfully answered Tom. "Maybe now you'll agree that the thing is bigger than you imagined at first."

"You're right," was Arnold's reply. "A little thing can be mighty big in some cases. I'll remember this for a long time."

"Boys, I believe the fog is thinning out somewhat," announced Harry. "Maybe the old horseshoe is bringing us luck after all."

"I believe you're more than half right," responded Jack.

"We'd better be on the lookout for breakers and things inside as well as outside," declared Tom. "Remember what that Carlos de Sneakodorus Madero did to us when our backs were turned."

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"Sure enough, we ought to set a guard on this fellow," agreed Harry. "I'll volunteer to go and 'red up' the cabin as the Dutchman says, and incidentally keep an eye on his royal joblots."

The boy descended to the cabin and in furtherance of his design walked to a locker and extracted an automatic pistol which he placed in a convenient pocket. He then busied himself about the place in small tasks that always kept him within sight of the rescued man.

No effort was made by the stranger to engage the boy in conversation, however, and he worked away undisturbed. Occasionally the bulldog would enter and after sniffing suspiciously at the prostrate figure of the rescued man would emit a low growl of disapproval and retreat. He was not disposed to be friendly.

On one of his trips to the forward cabin Harry noticed the clothes belonging to the newcomer lying on the floor where they had been dropped when he had been put into the berth. Thinking to care for them by straightening and drying them, the boy picked up the first garment in the pile. It was a vest and as he raised it a collection of small articles fell from the pocket to the floor.

Among the contents was a metal match box which fell and slid across the floor, striking, on the locker as it dropped.

"Well, that's too bad. The gentleman will have wet matches, I guess," thought the boy. "I'd better empty those wet ones out and give him some dry ones against his waking and needing some."

What was his amazement, however, upon opening the box to find instead of matches, a clipping from a newspaper. Harry was about to thrust it back into the box again when a printed word caught his attention and held him for a moment motionless. The word was the name of their vessel, the "Fortuna."

Hastily glancing through the headlines, Harry uttered a quick cry and dashed forward to the pilot house.

"Boys! Jack, Tom, Arnold," he cried excitedly. "What do you think of this? Here's some more of this mystery for us."

"What do you mean, mystery?" queried Tom, scoffingly.

"Just listen to this! Here's a newspaper clipping evidently from a Chicago paper which tells about our fitting out the Fortuna for the cruise to the Gulf of Mexico and also hazards the guess that we are young and adventurous spirits evidently seeking the buried treasure on the Gulf Coast."

“Does it say that we are after the Spanish Treasure Chest at the old Fort on Biloxi Bay, that must be dug up in the full of the moon on a rising tide with not a word said?” asked Tom.

“It does say that our destination is Biloxi and that we are known to be daring lads,” replied Harry. “But that is not all.”

“Let’s have it, Harry,” cried Jack. “I’m anxious to hear all.”

“There’s a pencil notation across the paper that says: ‘Get these fellows at any cost.’ That’s mighty encouraging.”

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"Say, fellows, this is getting uncomfortably tight! I don't like it a little bit," declared Tom. "Here we are peaceable Boy Scouts out for a little pleasure trip and all at once it begins to rain adventurous spirits from any old place and each of them is posted to make away with us and all seem to be protecting this old Spanish strong box. I wish they'd go away and let us pursue the even tenor of our way unmolested."

"So do I," Jack replied. "But they seem to feel otherwise and so we'll have to take them as they come. We'll remember our motto and 'be prepared' to accept whatever they may have to offer."

"Is this fellow going to open the drip cock on our spare gasoline tank?" asked Arnold. "If he is, I'm going down to mount guard over him right now! Once is enough and too much is plenty."

"I don't believe he knows what vessel he's on yet," declared Harry. "He asked me and I gave him an evasive reply."

"Fog's lifting, Captain," announced Tom who was at the wheel.

"Sure enough, it is," joyfully cried Jack. "Now maybe we can get a bearing and know where we are. Do you see land anywhere?"

"I see smoke," declared Harry. "What does a sailor say when he sees a smoke? Should he say 'smoke ho,' or 'sail ho,' or what?"

"I don't know, I'm sure," Jack answered with a laugh.

"And now I see two 'smoke ho's,'" cried Tom. "That means that some Boy Scout is in trouble and wants help."

"Maybe it means that a steamer is over there and the 'ash cats' are busy while the firemen are putting in more coal."

"I don't believe it!" declared Tom. "See that fringe of pines along there and see the smoke rising from the sand beyond them. It surely looks like two signal smokes to me! How about it?"

"Let's put on some more steam and run over in that direction to discover who may be making the smokes," suggested Jack.

It was voted a good idea and accordingly the Fortuna was headed in the direction of the smokes with increased speed of the motors. Every moment now the fog was lifting and objects could be more clearly distinguished on the land which lay not a great way off.

"We can't get in very much closer here," declared Tom, "I see bottom now, I believe. We'd better slip along shore until we're about opposite the smokes and land in a small boat."

"All right," agreed Jack. "What do you say, boys?"

"Good idea, I say," offered Harry. "Who do you suppose it is making the smoke? Wish it were someone from Chicago."

"Maybe it would be a good idea to see how our passenger is getting on," suggested Arnold. "I believe I'll slip down and see."

He stepped down the companion way and in a moment the boys heard him shout excitedly back:

"Somebody come here, quickly. The Fortuna's taking in water fast. It's up over the floor boards now and the engine is throwing it around in great shape. Our passenger's gone!"

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CHAPTER V

WIG-WAGGING A WARNING

Tom and Harry quickly followed their chum to the cabin, where their eyes were greeted by the sight of water rising above the floor of the forward compartment.

"She's started a butt!" declared Tom with a tremor in his usually cheery voice. "She's started a butt and we'll have to beach her or she'll sink right out here in the Gulf of Mexico!"

"No, she won't!" snapped Harry. "Get the hand bilge pump going and I'll start the power pump with the electric light engine!"

Quickly the directions were followed. Tom and Arnold speedily assailed the rising water with the hand pump, while Harry started the gasoline engine that operated their dynamo, connecting it to the power pump. Together the two agencies gained on the rising flood that threatened to swamp the sturdy Fortuna. Eagerly the boys plied the handle of the pump, keeping an eye upon the bilge.

Harry went about lifting floor boards and peering here and there in an effort to discover the source of the great leak.

"Ha!" he shouted from the after cabin. "Here's the trouble! Come here, you fellows, and bear a hand. Get something to plug this hole in the Fortuna's side. This is sheer murder!"

Trusting the power pump to keep abreast of the incoming water, Tom and Arnold deserted their post at the hand pump and sprang to assist their chum whose cries told them that something had been found.

The sight that met their eyes was a startling one.

Harry had removed the floor boards from the center of the cabin and was reaching down to the bilge. A spray of water squirted up into his face drenching him thoroughly.

"Get something to plug this hole!" he gasped. "I'm drowning!"

Looking about hastily for means to plug the hole, Tom offered a jacket he had picked up from the locker. Arnold seized a fid from another locker. Harry shut his eyes, turned his head side-wise and gasped for breath. Reaching out for the jacket he took it from the hand of his friend and tried to push it into the hole through which the water was pouring steadily. His efforts were fruitless.

“Here, take this,” urged Arnold. “This fid will plug a big hole and jam it tight, too. Is it a butt started?”

Harry took the fid from his chum. Quickly he inserted the pointed end into the hole he had been trying to cover with his hand.

“Give me a hammer or something to knock with and I’ll try to drive this into the hole. It’s not a butt, it’s an auger hole!”

“An auger hole?” both boys gasped in horror.

“An auger hole!” repeated Harry, his lips set and white. “Just a little more and we’d have been beyond all help. I think this idea of helping unfortunate castaways is getting to be a good thing.”

“Why, who on earth could have been so cold-blooded as to have bored a hole in our vessel?” cried Arnold. “Surely it wasn’t the man whose life we just saved a short time ago!”

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"I came into this cabin," asserted Harry "and could hear the rush of water. I thought the leak must be here. Of course, I thought at first that we had started a butt in the rolling a while back, when our friend Carlos Sneakodorus Madero boarded us and left us."

"But that seems impossible," incredulously offered Tom. "The Fortuna was built at Manitowoc where they have a reputation of doing first class work and she hasn't had rough handling at all."

"It was impossible!" cried Harry. "Just as I knelt to raise the floor board I saw that auger lying there. Then as I raised the board, I saw a handful of white chips float up through the hole."

"And then you saw the stream of water?" queried Arnold.

"That's all there is to it, except the fact that the life-belts are pulled from their places on the ceiling," answered Harry.

"Sure enough, they're down in a heap," declared Arnold.

"And if you count them," Harry continued, "I'll wager my next meal that you'll find one missing. I can also guess who is wearing it at this moment if he hasn't thrown it away!"

"Do you mean the man we picked up—the man who was knocked off the schooner?" breathlessly queried the younger boy.

"That's the man we want!" announced Harry. "And maybe I won't do a thing to him when I lay hands on him. Boy Scout or not, I'll put a dent in his dome that'll hold coffee like a saucer!"

"Will that fid hold?" questioned Tom examining the spot.

"No, I don't think it will," was Harry's reply. "We'd better get a plug of that soft pine in the lazarette, then when it gets soaked it'll swell and hold tight. This fid's made of hard wood. It may hold all right for a while, but it'll work loose just when it should hold. If you'll get the pine, Arnold, I'll make a plug."

Arnold hastened to bring the wood while Tom looked to the pumps and examined the cabin for further damage.

"He got an automatic or two from the locker in the kitchenette," he announced returning to the after cabin after his search.

"If he took those two lying on the lower shelf," announced Harry, "he got only one automatic! That's a joke on him."

“What do you mean by that?” Arnold asked returning with the desired piece of wood. “If the man took two, he took only one!”

“Because” explained Harry fitting the plug into place, “the other is a flashlight made in the shape of an automatic.”

Laughing over the joke unconsciously played upon himself by their late visitor, the boys repaired to the pilot house where the gravity of the situation was repeated to Jack, who had been at the wheel controlling the movements of the Fortuna and keeping a lookout.

“I was examining the coast a moment ago with the glasses and saw what I took to be a man wading ashore back of our present position,” explained Jack. “He looked as if he had on a life belt, but I couldn’t be sure because I couldn’t hold the glasses steady and handle the boat, too. Suppose one of you take the glasses and see what you can make out along the shore line in both directions.”

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Tom took the binoculars, mounted to the cabin roof, and swept diligently the shore line in both directions.

“What can you make out?” inquired Jack from the pilot house.

“I see a fellow just as you described, only he’s not wearing a life belt. He seems to be crossing the strip of beach sand to the fringe of pines a short distance inland. I don’t see any automatic flashlight in his hand, though!” whimsically announced the watching lad. “Then on the other hand, I can see two smokes that look like a Boy Scout call for help and between the two fires I can see a Boy Scout running back and forth and waving his hat.”

“How do you know he’s a Boy Scout?” challenged Harry.

“Well, if he started Boy Scout signals, he’d be a Boy Scout, wouldn’t he?” replied Tom. Besides, he’s red headed like Arnold and homely like Harry and kind hearted like Jack and good like Tom. That’s enough for me.”

“You’re just right, that’s enough for you!” declared Harry. “You may throw on your shovel—you’ve got a load.”

“Honest, now, Tom,” put in Jack, “what’s the straight of this? Quit your nonsense! We must be serious.”

“All right,” agreed Tom. “What I said is all so except the foolishness. I can’t see what the boy looks like. I can just make out a figure between the two fires. It looks slight like a boy. That’s all I can make out. There are some trees over there just this side of the fires, and it looks as if we could make a landing close up to the fires. There seems to be a little bay there.”

“Thank you,” said Jack in a tone of relief. “We’ll run close in and try to find out what’s the matter. Maybe the stranger can help us get our bearings. Lucky the fog lifted when it did or we would have piled up high and dry on this beach!”

As the Fortuna approached the little bight indicated by Tom, they discovered that there would be plenty of water to enable the Fortuna to run close inshore and permit of their landing easily. Tom and Harry busied themselves with clearing away one of the metal boats carried on the cabin roof and preparing to lower it when the Fortuna should come to rest. Upon completing their task, Tom stood up for another view of the beach which they were approaching.

“Look, Jack!” he cried. “Can you see the boy over there wig-wagging at us? Isn’t that the Boy Scout wig-wag?”

“Sure enough, it is!” declared Jack excitedly. “Take this flag and answer him. You’re in a good place up there.”

He passed the flag up to Tom as he spoke. All four lads watched with intentness the figure on the beach, while Tom prepared to reply to his further signals with his flag grasped in both hands.

“He’s got two flags, I believe,” announced Tom.

“He’s going to use the Semaphore code, then!” declared Jack.

“There it comes!” cried Harry. “He’s calling us! Answer him.”

“All right, Scout!” assented Tom. “Here comes the message!”

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"Right arm at head, left arm down in front—that's 'D,'" announced Harry who was watching with the glasses. "Then right and left both down and diagonal to the right—that's 'A.' Next both arms diagonally down away from the body—that's 'N.' Oh, he's telling us his name—Dan! Hurray! He's introducing himself!"

"Here comes the rest," cried Harry excitedly, "both arms diagonally downward and to the left—that's 'G.' Now the right down in front and left diagonally up and out from the shoulder—that's 'E.' Next both arms out horizontally from the body—that's 'R.' Why, that spells 'DANGER!' What does that mean?"

"Search me!" declared Tom. "I'm not a bit surprised, though for we've been in danger ever since we left Mobile. Anything goes here. I'd thank him to tell us some news, though."

"Well, here comes some more!" announced Jack who had shut off the power, permitting the Fortuna to ride the smooth waters of the little bight without headway.

"Here's some more!" cried Arnold, who has again taken the glasses. "Left arm over head, right arm diagonally down—that's 'K.' I learned that code last fall. Here's another. Left arm up from the shoulder diagonally and right down in front—that's 'E,' and he repeats it. Then right out horizontally and left straight up from head—that's 'P.' Next, right out horizontally and left diagonally up and across the breast—that's 'O.' Now the left is out horizontally, and the right down in front—that's 'F.' He repeats it. Why, that says 'DANGER, KEEP OFF!' What does he mean?"

"Maybe he means what he says," suggested Jack. "Answer him, Tom, and tell him we're coming ashore. Arnold and Harry, will you get the boat overboard and we'll go ashore to see what's up. Better take your automatics and see that the boat is properly equipped."

"Right-o, Captain!" cried Tom. "I'll do my best."

The boat was quickly brought around and Arnold, Harry and Jack prepared to go ashore. As they pulled away from the Fortuna, Harry cautioned Tom to watch the plug in the after cabin and keep dry.

As the boat approached the shore the stranger on the beach frantically made signals indicating that he wished them to return to the Fortuna at once. Putting his fingers to his lips he glanced about as if in alarm and then put out his hand in a gesture of caution.

"I'll bet there's some monkey business going on somewhere!" ventured Harry. "Why should he send up smoke signals for help and then tell us to keep away because of danger. He's kidding us!"

“I think I can see someone running toward us through those trees and bushes over there!” announced Arnold standing and pointing.

A figure broke from the cover of the bushes indicated just as Arnold spoke. It was the figure of a man. He stopped a moment.

Tom from the Fortuna gave a wild cry and waved his arms.

A shot rang out and the strange boy on the beach fell forward.

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CHAPTER VI

A MAROONED BOY SCOUT

Rushing ashore in the small boat, the boys paused scarcely long enough to draw their craft to a safe position on the beach before they raced to the spot where the stranger had fallen.

They were abreast as they approached his prostrate form lying face down in the sand. With one accord they stooped to examine him. Jack rolled the body over tenderly searching for the mark of the villain's bullet but found none.

Slowly the prostrate boy opened his eyes staring about in amazement. Jack supported his head while the two chums stood by anxious to be of assistance in rendering aid to the fallen lad.

"Where are you hurt?" questioned Jack tenderly.

"Nowhere!" replied the lad. "I heard a shot just as I tripped over something in the sand and then the next thing I knew you had me. What happened, anyway? Who shot and at what?"

"I don't know the fellow's name, but he was at one time a passenger on our boat, I believe. He is a villain if ever there was one!" replied Jack with some warmth.

"Maybe it's the same fellow I know!" declared the stranger. "But may I ask to whom I am indebted for the pleasure of this call?"

Jack introduced himself, and then his two chums. In turn the stranger gave his name as Frank Evans of the Bob White patrol of St. Louis. The boys now started toward the rowboat, keeping a glance around for foes as they walked.

"Hadn't we better get your things from on shore if you go with us?" asked Arnold, as the boys approached the boat.

"I haven't a thing of my own here!" declared Frank. "If we except, of course, my fire stick and the remains of a flounder."

"A fire stick and flounder!" cried Arnold. "Where are they?"

"Up there by that old bit of wreckage," replied Frank. "You see, I had nothing but my pocket knife when I landed here, and haven't had much chance to import goods since my arrival."

“How long have you been here?” queried Harry. “We thought you must be in desperate need from the looks of the fires.”

“I think this is the third day,” replied Frank. “Yesterday I slept most of the time while the schooner was standing off and on, and the day before that was the day they put me ashore. I’ve had a rush with the pirates that infest these waters under the guise of honest working fishermen. They’re a bad lot, too,” he added.

“Pirates?” gasped the three members of the Fortuna’s crew.

“That’s what I’d call them,” replied Frank. “You see, my chum and myself came down the Mississippi River in a gasoline launch. She was a beauty—a thirty-footer. She had a trunk cabin over three-quarters of her, and an open cockpit aft. We had her fitted up in pretty good shape, too. We wanted a little pleasure trip, so we made up our minds we’d bring the launch down here and if we got a good chance

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we'd sell her. My Chum, Charley Burnett, and I are the same age—seventeen last October—and we built the boat last winter. When we got through the Lake Borgne Ship Canal below New Orleans, we ran against a lot of rough fellows who tried to steal our boat. We held them at the point of a gun and ran away from their tubby old boats. Then when we got a little farther along the coast—to Bay St. Louis—we were warned to turn back.

"Warned to turn back?" repeated the boys in chorus. "By whom?"

"A black browed chap who gave the name of Wyckoff, and who said that he wouldn't have anyone fooling around the Spanish Chest but those who rightfully should share the treasure. We didn't know what he meant, and told him so, but he wouldn't believe us."

"The Spanish Treasure Chest!" gasped Jack. "What about it?"

"I don't know anything about it!" stoutly asserted Frank.

"We've heard a little about it," volunteered Jack, "but nothing definite. We would like to know more and to know why these fellows should oppose your coming to this vicinity."

"I've told you all I know about that part of the story," declared Frank. "Now you know as much as I do in that line."

"What did this Wyckoff look like?" asked Harry eagerly.

"He's black—I don't mean that he's a negro,—but he's one of these fellows with a blue-black beard that never can be shaved clean because it shows black under the skin. Then he's got a shifty eye and a sneaky look about him. Then, too," he added with a smile, "he's got a smashed nose where my fist landed when he put me ashore here. I certainly handed him a beauty that time!"

"Good for you," cried Harry, clapping Frank on the shoulder.

"What was the cause of that?" asked Jack, "did he hit you?"

"Well, to make a long story short," Frank continued, "he and his gang kidnapped Charley and me from the 'Spray' two nights ago. Where they've got Charley I don't know. They put me ashore here without a thing to eat or drink and with nothing to make a fire with. As I was shoved ashore and before the boat got away, I ran up and landed on him. They were on a schooner of which Wyckoff seemed to be captain. I hope they haven't made away with Charley."



"If Charley is as resourceful as you, he's all right," consoled Jack. "I admire your grit and ability. How did you get a fire?"

"I made a fire stick as all Boy Scouts can and took a shoe lace for a bow string. I had hard work getting the first tiny blaze, but after that I've kept a bed of coals covered with sand as a reserve. I found a piece of wreckage and used part of it for a shelter. One part had a long spike in it and that I sharpened by scraping it on some of the shells. Then I got a piece of fat pine that had washed ashore and made me a torch. With this sharp spike and the torch I went fishing at night and got three dandy big flounders."

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"What's a flounder?" asked Arnold intensely interested.

"Well," explained Frank, "a flounder is a queer sort of a flat fish. He's dark on top and white on the bottom. He swims on his side and has his two eyes on the one side of his head unlike any other fish. When the tide comes in he comes close inshore and burrows down into the sand to wait till a minnow floats by. He reaches up and snaps Mr. Minnow and then goes on to another good spot. If you take a bright light you can walk right up to the flounder without alarming him. Then before he knows what is coming, you thrust a spear down through his head and you have him."

"Did you get yours that way?" eagerly asked Arnold.

"Not the first one," replied Frank with a laugh. "I just scared the first one. And I'm afraid I forgot for a minute that I was a Boy Scout. I was mighty hungry and that fellow looked so nice and fat I just felt as if I simply had to have him."

Jack's arm stole inside Frank's and a pressure of sympathy told the Bob White that a Beaver understood his former trouble.

"I move we go and get Frank's fire stick and bow," Harry suggested, "and then put out the signal fires and hit the trail for the mainland. It is getting along in the afternoon and I'm hungry and if we make Pascagoula tonight, we'll have to go some."

"Second the motion," declared Arnold. "But where does Pascagoula lie from here? Where is this place, anyway?"

"We're on Petit Bois Island, I think," replied Frank. "At least, one of the men suggested that I be put ashore on Petit Bois and the rest agreed, arguing that I would stay here only a short time before some fishermen would visit the island and find me."

"Then in that case," Jack stated, "Pascagoula lies just about northwest of us. If our compass hadn't been disarranged by the horseshoe, we'd have been in the harbor by this time," he added.

"Your compass disarranged by a horseshoe?" queried Frank.

"Yes," was Jack's laughing rejoinder. "Did you ever hear such a tale? And it was lucky for you it happened. There's a case of a horseshoe being lucky for you when you've never seen it yet!"

After Jack had related the tale of the horseshoe and its relation to their present situation, Arnold suggested that they visit Frank's camp and then go aboard the Fortuna. This met the approval of all the boys. A trip to the wreckage disclosed the fact that Frank had made his bed on the hard, smooth sand with a fire in front of him for protection from the chill winds of the night.

“Here’s the fire stick,” exultantly cried Arnold. “Gee, won’t I have a great story written about this adventure when I get back to little old Chi. Sherman Street won’t know me when I arrive.”

“Hurray,” cried Harry who had wandered a short distance from the others. “Hurray, I’ve found the horse that belongs to the horseshoe! Here he is buried upside down in the sand.”

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Hastening to the spot indicated the boys saw what looked to be a horse's foot upside down in the sand. So startling was the resemblance that Jack and Arnold were completely deceived for a moment, but Frank's laugh soon indicated that they had been mistaken.

"What is it?" asked Arnold eagerly. "Gee, but I see so many new things here I don't know which to write a story about first."

"Better not write any story about this," admonished Frank. "The wonderful phenomenon you see before you, my friend, is not a horse at all. It is merely a crab shell from which the crab has gone."

"A crab shell?" repeated Arnold in wonderment. "A real crab?"

"Sure enough," declared Frank. "The underside of the shell has exactly the same outlines as the under side of a horse's foot. This fellow has projecting from the heel a spikey tail that is hard and sharp at the end. The whole thing, as you see, is dried and hardened by exposure to the weather. The crab has been gone a long time."

"I'm going to take it along," asserted Arnold. "I'll put it in my locker and make a collection of things I pick up. I'd like to see a flounder now so as to recognize one the next time I see it."

"I have a fine big fellow at the place I had my fires," Frank answered. "We'll go over there and see how he's getting on. I got him last night. I think he must weigh as much as three or four pounds."

"Tell me some more about this Spanish Treasure Chest," Jack said as the boys turned toward the site of Frank's camp. "I'm anxious to know everything you overheard anywhere that would have a bearing on the matter from any viewpoint. It's interesting."

"I can't tell you any more than I have. I know these fellows objected to our visiting this locality because they seemed to believe that we were trying to get something that belonged to them and they were ready to employ force if necessary to keep us out," Frank said.

"We know they are a desperate gang," Jack admitted. "Our own experiences show that. They also believe we are here on the same mission and already they have attempted to disable and sink our boat."

Frank stopped in alarm. Glancing hurriedly about he grasped Jack's arm and in a trembling tone entreated him to leave the vicinity at his earliest opportunity. Jack's answer was a negative shake of his head. His companions also indicated their disapproval of the course.

“Well, here’s the flounder,” announced Frank at last picking up a fine specimen of that denizen of the Gulf waters. “He’s a beauty.”

The boys gathered about the fish admiring and investigating the peculiarities already mentioned by Frank. At last Harry spoke:

“But he wouldn’t be good raw and you had to have a fire. I’m always interested in seeing fire produced from a stick.”

“Oh, that’s not so difficult,” Frank answered; “watch me.”

Kneeling on the sand he grasped his fire stick in his left hand after placing the bowstring in position. With a shell over the upper end of the stick, he sawed away busily for a moment. A tiny wreath of smoke eddied away from the lower end of the stick.

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"Hurray," cried Harry, "You're fetching it. I can see it coming around the bend. Just look at that, boys. I can see it coming."

"Put up your hands," came a coarse voice from the rear.

Startled, the lads with one accord jumped to their feet to see their guest of a short time previous pointing an automatic at them.

"Drop that gun," came an order in Tom's ringing voice.

CHAPTER VII

THEIR PIRATE PRISONER

With an exclamation of surprise and alarm all eyes were turned in Tom's direction. With a steady hand he was leveling an automatic pistol at the head of the outlaw who now dropped his pistol hand to his side without, however, relinquishing his hold upon the weapon. His shifty eyes were closely watching the boy.

"I'll not tell you again!" warned Tom. "Once is plenty."

"Yes, I heard you the first time!" gritted the outlaw, opening his hand and permitting the weapon to drop to the sand. "You wait! You Yankees can't come down here and have your own way always."

"We won't argue that point just now," was Tom's rejoinder. "Right now, you'll please put your hands up over your head." Then as the outlaw obeyed, Tom added—"Way up with 'em. Pick me a star or two out of the sky. Keep 'em up there and watch a comet while one of my friends goes through you for souvenirs of the occasion."

As Jack stepped forward to search the captive, Frank took a closer look at the dark face and bruised nose, then cried out:

"Why, Wyckoff, how did you get back here?"

"Is this your friend Wyckoff?" questioned Jack, turning to Frank before continuing his task of searching their involuntary guest.

"This is the man who warned me back and who marooned me on this lonely island!" declared Frank with some heat. "I know him!"

"That settles it!" stated Jack in a determined tone. "He's going to get all that's coming to him if I have a vote here!"

“Here, too!” chorused the others. “Here’s where he gets his.”

“Remember, boys, we’re Boy Scouts!” cautioned Jack. “No harsh measures will be permitted. Justice may be necessary—no more.”

A murmur of approval that ran around the little group showed that the boys heartily favored Jack’s sentiment in the matter.

Under cover of Tom’s leveled automatic Wyckoff, for it was he, remained passive while Jack searched his pockets, producing therefrom the missing flashlight made to imitate an automatic pistol, a watch, a purse with some coins inside, a vile smelling pipe with a pouch of tobacco, a stubby lead pencil and a note book partly filled with figures and memoranda. Apparently there was nothing of value.

“Aside from the flashlight and the real automatic pistol, I can’t find that he’s taken anything of our property,” Jack said when the search was completed. “I guess we’d better return his own property to him. We don’t want his money and wouldn’t use his pipe.”

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"Now let's tie him up!" Arnold suggested. "I think it would be wise to sew him down to the sand. He's a slippery fellow."

"Good idea!" laughed Frank. "But tying is better all round."

"What shall we tie him with?" asked Tom. "I have nothing."

"Why, come to think of it," Harry put in, "how did you get ashore, anyway? Last we knew of you, you were guarding the Fortuna."

"While you lads were up the beach after that horseshoe crab," explained Tom, "I sat on the roof of the cabin with the glasses. I thought I saw a figure stealing along in the shelter of those pines to the eastward of this spot and after a while I made him out. The glasses showed that it was our last visitor on board the Fortuna. So I knew he'd bear watching, as they say, and I went below to get a gun for emergency. When I came out again, he was real close, and I saw what he intended to do. I simply started the engines, slipped the cable and ran the Fortuna high and dry on shore, tumbled over the bow and arrived in time to checkmate his little game. I'm glad, too!"

"So are we!" heartily agreed the boys with one accord.

"But what are we to do with this chap?" queried Jack. "It rather worries me. He's apt to be a white elephant on our hands."

"It would serve him good and right," began Arnold, "and be only justice, too, if we marooned him on this very island where he left Frank. I think that's the best way out of the whole thing."

"Let's set the chap down by the fire," Tom suggested, "while we argue it out. There's still a little raw edge on the wind."

Tom was right, and although the fog of the morning had gone, the air was still damp and the wind from the Gulf was heavy with moisture that chilled the boys when not in motion. Accordingly, following the lad's suggestion, they directed their steps toward one of the fires kindled earlier by Frank. There they seated themselves while Tom with one automatic and Jack with another watched Wyckoff.

"Perhaps the prisoner at the bar may have a suggestion in the premises," ventured Frank. "We want to be square with you, Wyckoff, even if you have treated us exceedingly unkind."

"I want you fellows to take your gear and go back north!" shouted Wyckoff in an angry tone. "I'll fix you yet for this!"

"We have a right to be here," Jack put in, "so long as we don't harm anyone. We are merely tourists out for a pleasure trip."

"You lie!" almost screamed Wyckoff. "You're after the Spanish Chest, but you shall never have it! It belongs to me!"

In his excitement the prisoner almost forgot himself and shook his fist at Jack threateningly, rising to his feet meanwhile.

"Sit down!" Tom's voice, although calm, carried a world of meaning to the excited man whose glance toward Tom took in the unwavering blue muzzle of the Weapon in his captor's hand.

"Suppose for the sake of argument that we were after this mythical chest of treasure whose value has been without doubt multiplied many times in the retelling of its story," Jack argued, "does that imply that we are committing a crime against you? Have you any more claim on the chest that you mention than we have?"

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"Yes!" shouted the angry Wyckoff. "I am a lineal descendant from the Spaniards who buried it. It is mine because it is in the family. I don't know what word you educated Yankees would use, but it is mine because it belonged to my father's father's father."

"I know," spoke up Arnold; "you mean you have inherited it?"

"Yes, that's it," agreed Wyckoff. "Besides that, you will never be able to get the treasure. It is cursed to anyone but a person of Spanish blood. I am part Spaniard and it is mine."

"Well, we might consider going back in the face of such argument," said Frank, appearing to agree with Wyckoff, "but what did you do with my chum? I won't go away and leave him, you know."

"Your partner and your boat are both safe," declared Wyckoff. "When we know that you are ready to leave, we'll bring you all together again, but not before. You'll never see him again otherwise."

"Why, what would happen to him?" questioned Frank in amazement.

Wyckoff drew his thumb across his throat with a suggestive move.

The boys shuddered as they grasped the significance of his meaning. Their glances, met and instinctively they shrank away from the prisoner, who seemed to enjoy their discomfiture immensely.

"I've heard great tales about this treasure chest since I came down here," stated Frank at last. "What is this I hear about the one who discovers the chest having to keep very quiet while he's digging? Is there anything at all in that story or not?"

"It is said," stated Wyckoff, "that the one for whom the treasure is destined must not utter a word while digging for it. Also, he must come with clean hands. You understand what I mean? That is why you boys are yet alive. My hands have not yet been—"

"Well, if they have not," interrupted Tom indignantly, "it is no fault of your own, old chap. You surely tried your level best to put the Fortuna and her crew under the water. Take it from me!"

"And yet he raves about his clean hands, the dirty scoundrel!" cried Harry. "Why, if we were only afloat, we'd make him walk a plank!"

"That reminds me," Tom put in. "The Fortuna lies on the beach unless she's worked herself loose, and it may be some job to get her off."



“Suppose you stay here and mount guard over the prisoner,” suggested Jack, “while we go back and look after the vessel. We’ll return when we’ve gotten everything ship shape and Bristol fashion.”

“Suits me fine!” declared Tom. “And I hope this angelic prisoner tries to escape while you’re gone! That would be fine!”

“Tom, you’re bloodthirsty, I believe!” laughed Jack indulgently. “I know the provocation is severe, but remember that you’re a Boy Scout.”

“You wouldn’t leave me on this island, would you?” inquired Wyckoff when the boys had departed for the boat. “That would be cruel.”

“But you marooned Frank here, didn’t you?” asked Tom angrily. “Why would it be any worse for you than for him? Tell me that.”

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"I told the men to leave him provisions and matches. I have no matches nor provisions. I cannot make a fire with sticks, as he did," replied the prisoner in an humble and whining tone intended to placate.

"Well," Tom considered, "we might leave you some matches and some grub. You could find plenty of wood hereabouts, couldn't you?"

"There's plenty of wood here if one could work it up," replied Wyckoff. "The storms have washed ashore thousands of pieces of planks and timbers of all sorts. Why, once I came out to one of the islands and found a fine boat washed ashore by a storm. It was perfectly sound and tight, too. There's plenty of timber here to make one rich if he could only salvage it and get it to market."

"Then if we leave you a box of matches and some canned goods," Tom argued, "you'd be a lot better off than Frank was."

A shout from the direction of the Fortuna indicated that something was taking place there. Wyckoff glanced hastily in that direction. Tom's first impulse was to look that way, also, but his training stood him in good stead. By a magnificent effort of will he kept his eyes fastened on the prisoner, who stared intently toward the Fortuna as if fascinated by what he saw. Thus they sat for a moment or two. Then Tom regained his composure. Wyckoff glanced out of the corner of his eye narrowly at his guard. Tom laughed.

"You didn't want the provisions badly enough to wait for them, did you, you old fox?" he taunted. "You wanted me to look away for a minute and then you'd have gone looking for provisions alone."

"You do me an injustice, lad," replied Wyckoff meekly.

"All right; I apologize; but the gun is in working order just the same, and don't you forget it. It's still on the job."

Wyckoff's glance was baleful and full of venom as he controlled himself with a visible effort. Hatred seemed to ooze from him as he sat quiet very much against his will.

Another shout from the boat gave with its note of triumph a message that the boys were meeting success in their efforts to get the Fortuna off the beach. Wyckoff looked intently that way.

"Ha!" he ejaculated. "They're fetching it! Good boys!"

In spite of his resolve to keep his eyes on the prisoner, Tom's gaze wandered for an instant to the sight viewed by Wyckoff.

That instant seemed to be the object of the outlaw's vigil.

The boys on the Fortuna had, by dint of great exertion, managed to work the yacht from her resting place on the beach where Tom had driven her in his mad race to rescue them a short time previously. Because of the short distance traveled, the momentum of the boat had not been sufficient to drive her far up on the beach, so it was not a difficult matter to get her afloat again. The powerful motors tugged and pulled and at last they were again afloat, but minus their anchor.

Frank offered to dive for it, and, divesting himself of his clothing, went overboard in the clear water of the little bight where the anchor and cable could be seen lying on the bottom.

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The shout of triumph voiced by the boys when the Fortuna floated free was echoed when Frank came to the surface after having bent on the line he carried to the end of the chain cable. He was nearly breathless when he reached the surface, but willing hands pulled him over the stern of the rowboat in which the boys had searched for the lost anchor. Soon he recovered his wind.

Peace seemed never to reign for long in the Fortuna. Scarcely had the boys shouted in victory over the recovery of the anchor than they heard a shot from the shore. Harry, from his position on the pilot house, gesticulated and pointed inland in a frenzy.

CHAPTER VIII

JACK STRICKEN BY A BULLET

"What's up now?" cried Jack from the rowboat.

"That villain has shot Tom and is running away across the island!" cried Arnold from his position. "Tom's lying on the sand!"

"Great Double-Barreled Wiggle-Headed Pollywogs!" ejaculated Harry. "Excuse my French, but this is too much. If he's killed Tom, I'll resign from the Boy Scouts for a few minutes. I will so!"

"Pull for the shore, boys!" urged Jack. "Get into your clothes, Frank!" And then, before either of his orders could be obeyed, he seized the oars and pulled the boat with lusty strokes toward the beach, intent on capturing the outlaw if possible. Great sobs escaped him as he worked manfully at the oars.

Each boy at that moment was mentally blaming himself for the tragedy he was sure would await their arrival at the scene of the campfire. Each one felt that he should have remained to guard the captive outlaw who was so evidently desperate because of his situation.

But Jack's exertions were unnecessary. Before the rowboat reached the sand, a flash of white had appeared over the bows of the Fortuna, a great splash of water gave evidence of a heavy body launched from the deck, and a commotion betokened a swimmer in action.

"Good old boy!" cried Frank with a sob in his throat.

"That never was Arnold!" cried Harry aghast at the thought of his chum venturing into the water alone on such a quest.

“Not on your life!” Jack protested. “That was our one and only. Old Rowdy is on the job with both feet. He’s going ashore for business, too. I believe that dog actually knows things!”

“Heaven help that poor wretch if Rowdy gets to him first!” cried Harry. “Rowdy has more enthusiasm than caution, and he’s apt to get rough. I wouldn’t be surprised to find Wyckoff all strung around the island in small pieces when we get there.”

In a short time the nose of the rowboat grounded on the beach.

The three boys leaped out and raced quickly to their fallen chum. Tom was struggling to rise from his prone position. Far across the sands the fleeing figure of the outlaw was being rapidly overtaken by the enraged bulldog, who sensed the situation and who apparently was determined to overtake and punish the escaped prisoner.

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"Are you hurt, Tom?" queried Jack in a shaking tone.

"I guess so," Tom replied in a dazed manner. "No, I don't think I am," he corrected himself. "That is," he continued, "I don't know just what happened. I heard you cry out, and as I turned to look, the explosion took place. What happened, anyway?"

"From the look of your jaw, Wyckoff must have landed a sweeping kick just where the knockout nerve is located," explained Frank.

"Try to shut your teeth," suggested Harry. "If you can shut your teeth all right, nothing serious is to be feared."

Tom made the effort, but winced with pain. A grimace stole over his countenance and his hand went up to the injured jaw.

"That hurts, doesn't it?" solicitously inquired Jack.

"Not much," bravely protested Tom. "The most trouble is that I can shut the front teeth, but the back ones don't seem to meet by half an inch or more. The jaw must be dislocated."

In spite of their sympathy the boys could not restrain a laugh.

"I guess that if your front teeth come together your back ones meet," Jack assured the injured boy. "Let's look for Wyckoff."

"You mean let's look for Wyckoff's remains!" Harry tried to put in, but he was stopped by a gesture from Frank.

"Let's not make it any more horrible than it is. That man is desperate and I'm afraid of him," he whispered as they helped Tom to his feet and started away in the direction taken by the outlaw.

"I can't see him anywhere," Harry asserted. "I'll bet Rowdy has eaten him up body, boots and breeches. Serve him right, too!"

"We're the bloodthirsty bunch!" declared Jack. "It must be some quality in the atmosphere down here. This is the old region infested by Captain Kidd and his buccaneers. They must have left something in the way of a piratical germ in the atmosphere."

"Maybe so, but I'd like to find that dog just now," stoutly declared Harry. "He's had one big meal even if the quality was poor."

"Follow his tracks," suggested Frank. "That's easy in this sand. See, here they go. My word, but he was taking long jumps."

"He left in such a hurry that he didn't take my automatic," declared Tom. "I guess when he hit me or kicked me I must have closed on the trigger and started the thing going. He left without waiting to take the gun away from me. I'm glad of that, too."

"I see him!" joyfully shouted Frank, who was slightly in the lead. "Here he is, and Rowdy is mounting guard. Good old dog."

It was even as Frank had said. Rowdy had overtaken the fleeing villain and brought him to earth. Now he was walking about the prostrate form, occasionally stepping in and taking a nip at an arm or a leg. Wyckoff, thoroughly cowed, was begging and whining at a great rate. At the approach of the boys he begged piteously.

"Let him get up, Rowdy!" commanded Jack. "Now, Wyckoff," he ordered when the dog had permitted that worthy to regain his feet, "You 'bout face and back to the campfire on the double quick. It's getting toward evening and we can't lay around here all night waiting on you. We want you for a little while yet."

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Wyckoff's appeals for mercy were piteous. All the way to the campfire he begged that the boys would show him mercy, but no response was made. Rowdy trotted along beside the outlaw with a satisfied air. Now and again he would look up at Wyckoff's face and then make as if to take a bite of the man's leg. At such times Wyckoff would involuntarily quicken his gait until cautioned by Jack to go more steadily. This was very hard for him to do, for he was frightened.

"Frank," Tom asked when the little party arrived at the fire, "did you see anything of a boat on shore here during your visit?"

"Come to think of it, I certainly did," replied Frank. "It is a dandy, too. I had made up my mind to try to drag it to the water and row to the mainland if no one came soon, but your arrival drove all thoughts of it from me. It is back here just a short distance."

"Wyckoff was telling me that boats were sometimes washed ashore on these islands. That reminded me of it. I wonder if it wouldn't be a good idea to ask Mr. Wyckoff to drag the boat to the water for us. He's been very obliging and I don't want to overwork him without paying him for his trouble," Tom added sarcastically.

"Hurrray!" shouted Jack. "The very thing! And that may replace the one we brought from Mobile and gave to that other fellow,—what was his name? I never was much of a hand to remember names."

"I know—Carlos de Sneakodorus Madero!" announced Harry.

"Well, he got a boat from us, and it's only right we get one from his boss," asserted Tom. "Did you know your hired man stole our boat?" he inquired, turning to Wyckoff, who looked very humble.

"No, sir," replied that worthy. "I know the young fellow, but he is not hired by me. I don't know what you mean about his stealing your boat. I never told him to do such a thing!"

"All right; you've got a story coming, then. You just ask him when you see him again. He'll tell you," was Tom's information.

"Lead us to the boat, Frank," requested Jack. "Mr. Wyckoff seems to be just crazy to help us launch the rowboat."

Frank led the way to where a pile of great timbers and plank had been cast up by the angry waters during a recent storm. There, resting on top of the heap of lumber and timbers, was a fine skiff apparently sound and whole. By some curious freak of the storm it had been gently deposited there and left to rest while great ships had been sorely wrenched and even wrecked. The boys lost no time in removing the skiff with Wyckoff's help. To drag it along the yielding sand was a harder task. All were

thoroughly winded when at last the skiff floated in the waters of the bight where lay the yacht.

“Whew!” panted Frank. “That’s a big job for five. I’m glad I didn’t tackle it alone. I certainly would have been tired.”

“Let’s leave Rowdy to guard Wyckoff while we get things in good shape on board and then we’ll leave Wyckoff here!” suggested Tom in an aside to Jack. “I think we’d better leave him some grub, too. It wouldn’t be right to just turn him adrift here alone.”

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"What, after he kicked you like that?" inquired Jack.

"Yes," Tom replied. "A Boy Scout never holds a grudge."

"Good for you, Tom!" cried Jack, extending his hand to meet Tom's in a hearty grip.

"Those sentiments make me glad that you are a member of the Beaver Patrol. I wish they were all like that!"

No time was lost in preparing the boats for the proposed trip to the mainland. The afternoon was well spent and the boys were tired and hungry. Their day had been a most strenuous one.

Arnold was already preparing coffee and pancakes in the kitchenette when the boys arrived with the newly discovered skiff.

"We'd better get the anchor aboard," suggested Harry, "and then hoist the steel rowboat into her chocks and lash her fast. The skiff we can tow behind us as we did the other if it's agreeable."

"Right-o!" sung out Tom, who had nearly forgotten his swollen jaw under the excitement of the moment. "I see the oar we tied onto the line that Frank fastened to the cable. It's right over there."

In a short time the anchor was brought aboard and lashed fast. The rowboat was slung into place and made secure, and nothing remained but the disposing of Wyckoff to occupy the boys at the island.

"How about it, Wyckoff?" called Harry from the deck of the Fortuna; "do you want some grub, or can you rustle for yourself?"

A torrent of abuse was the outlaw's reply.

"Watch out or I'll sic my little dog onto you!" warned Harry.

"Let's not aggravate him any more than we have to," cautioned Jack. "Take him some grub and throw it onto the beach. Then be quick about getting back, for it's getting late. It's three bells now!"

Harry rowed ashore with some canned beans, meats and blueberries.

Keeping at a respectful distance from the shore he tossed the cans to a position where they could easily be recovered by the outlaw. He whistled to Rowdy, who came aboard the skiff with a rush, and then pulled for the Fortuna with a lusty stroke.

Scarcely was he well aboard before Jack at the switchboard had started the engines and the Fortuna pointed her nose away from Petit Bois Island and headed for the mainland.

Frank was lost in wonder and admiration as the boys showed him about the Fortuna. He exclaimed over the conveniences and went into raptures over the kitchenette and washroom.

“We cooked on a furnace on the Spray,” he said regretfully. “Here you’ve the gasoline and electric coils. Electric lights and electric stoves and electric starter on the engines. It is fine!”

“What’s a furnace?” inquired Arnold eagerly.

“It’s a sort of a bucket made of fire clay,” answered Frank. “It has a division about half way down. Charcoal is put in on top and lighted and the draft comes up through a hole in the side. The natives and negroes down here use them quite extensively. They don’t like iron stoves and ranges because they don’t know how to use them.”

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"Let's see if Wyckoff is keeping up his campfire," suggested Harry. "I'll wager he's too excited to even think about supper."

When the boys reached the deck they saw Wyckoff capering and dancing about on the beach wildly. He was waving his arms in an evident effort to attract attention. A schooner was approaching from the west.

"Yacht aho-o-oy!" came a faint hail across the water.

Jack at the wheel held a steady course and reached a hand toward the switchboard. His lips were tightly closed. Again the hail came across the tumbling waters, but no reply was made.

A shot rang out from the schooner. The boys could see the bullet ricochet from wave to wave and pass in front of the Fortuna.

Another shot was fired. Glass tinkled. Jack fell to the floor.

CHAPTER IX

A NIGHT ATTACK

"Oh, Jack!" cried Tom, stooping over the boy lying prone upon the pilot house floor. "Oh, Jack, speak to me!"

Unguided by a hand at the wheel, the Fortuna fell off into the trough of the sea and began to roll broadside on. Another shot came from the schooner, but it went wild. The boys crowded about the form of their fallen chum and tried to lift him to his feet. Frank was the first to give attention to the boat.

"They're gaining on us!" he cried. "Which switch controls the power? Let's get away from here before they kill us all!"

"Those levers in the center of the board," directed Harry, "govern the spark and fuel. Someone get the wheel. Steer due northwest for a while until we get straightened out!"

Frank whirled the spokes of the wheel rapidly and brought the Fortuna up to her course, while Harry quickly operated the switches that gave new impetus to the engines. Soon the Fortuna was cleaving the waves at full speed. Clouds of spray were thrown far aside as she mounted the crest, and every plunge into the trough brought a torrent of water over her bows. Her graceful lines offered little resistance to her progress. She leaped forward like a thing of life, rapidly leaving the schooner far astern.

Another shot was fired from the pursuer, but fell far astern of the flying motor boat. Apparently those aboard the sailing vessel realized the hopelessness of further effort, for they turned and headed back for the island so recently left by the boys.

No sooner had the Fortuna been put under full speed than, leaving Frank at the wheel, the others carried Jack into the cabin, where he was laid upon a bunk. Swiftly Tom tore away his jacket and shirt, exposing a chest with well-developed muscles standing out prominently. The strong, lithe figure of the boy gave striking evidence of the beneficial result of constant and well-directed physical exercise. Just now he lay limp and inert.

"Where is he hit?" queried Harry, appearing with restoratives from the medicine chest. "Is he bleeding much?" he continued.

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"Funny thing, I can't find any blood at all!" declared Tom. "It's a peculiar thing, too, for if he was hit hard enough to knock him down the bullet must have entered his body!"

"That's a strange thing, isn't it?" spoke up Arnold.

"Strange is no word for it!" Tom asserted. "I'm just all at sea literally as well as figuratively. This is the strangest part of our queer experiences during the past few hours."

"Let's get his clothes off and examine him closely," suggested Arnold. "Maybe the bullet hit him from a ricochet."

"Wise little Scout!" commended Tom. "You've got a great head on those shoulders! I'm glad we brought you along."

Before he had ceased speaking, Tom had begun to divest Jack of his upper clothing. With the assistance of Harry and Arnold, he removed the jacket and shirt in a short time.

"There's nothing here at all!" he cried in amazement.

"What's that bruised looking place over his heart?" asked Harry. "Seems to me it is discolored somewhat there."

"Sure enough!" cried Arnold. "Give him first aid for drowning. That may start his heart action. He isn't shot after all!"

"Hurray!" responded his chums in chorus, quickly putting into action the suggestion of Arnold. They worked quickly and effectively, their training standing them in good stead at this time.

Before many seconds had passed, Jack opened his eyes, gasped weakly and then sat up on the edge of the bunk. Blinking his eyes, he put his hand over his heart. Arnold shouted for pure joy.

"Hurrah, Frank!" he cried up the companion-way, "Jack is coming to! What do you think of us for life-savers?"

"You can't mean it!" incredulously protested Frank.

"Well we just do mean it and I for one am awful glad!"

"So are all of us glad!" declared Tom. "I was worried for a while. It looked as if you were going to stay out, Jack!"

The boys were capering about in glee over Jack's recovery though his smile was still a trifle wan and drawn. Slowly, however, his strength returned. He accepted and drank with eagerness the cup of steaming coffee proffered by Arnold as a restorative.

"Thank you, Scout!" smiled Jack. "You're a master hand at the cooking! What hit me? I felt quite a blow."

"You were shot," declared Harry. "The pirate schooner shot at us, you remember, and then they had to shoot you, but we can't find any hole where the bullet went in. You're only bruised."

"Ha!" exclaimed Jack. "I see it now! The bullet hit the automatic I had put in my breast pocket. I never carried it there before and don't know why I should have put it there this time."

"Well, it's a lucky thing you varied from your habit!"

"Let's see if the bullet is in the pocket yet," Harry said.

A search of the jacket revealed a hole, in the outer cloth where the bullet had entered. Inside the pocket were the automatic and several slivers of lead, fragments of the shattered missile.

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"Jack," Harry said with a shiver, as he grasped his chum's hand, "that was a mighty close shave. I'm glad it terminated so well."

The silent grasp that Jack returned spoke louder than words of the bond of friendship that existed between the boys.

"Come, come," bustled Harry, "Jack will be getting hungry. Whose watch is it in the kitchenette? I was on last, I know!"

"Yes, you were!" declared Arnold in mock anger. "You are always just off duty when there's work to do! We know you!"

It was decided that Harry must prepare supper, for the boys were all famished after their hard day's work.

"You'll have to check down a little if I cook!" asserted Harry. "This isn't a battleship, and the pirates are far astern."

"Good idea," Jack assented. "Check her down, Tom, and save fuel. After that Madero's wasting of our gasoline, we'll need all we have. He didn't seem to care for expense a little bit!"

The suggestion was followed, and shortly the Fortuna was traveling at a more moderate gait, taking the seas easily without shipping water on her forward deck. Frank was enthusiastic over the arrangements, declaring that each feature was exactly as he would have wished for it himself. The searchlight and cabin lights operated by the dynamo below decks were sources of pleasure.

Harry was soon busily engaged in preparing a bountiful supper for the boys who were ready to do ample justice to his skill in the kitchen. Harry felt justly proud of his ability as did the others, who sat down to a supper of broiled Red Snapper with a mushroom sauce helped out by fried potatoes, hot baking powder biscuits and excellent coffee. Frank had opened a tin of marmalade which disappeared rapidly before the young appetites.

Frank had been relieved at the wheel by Arnold who loved to be entrusted with the management of the boat.

While the boys ate, a glorious sunset graced the western sky. Long spears of light flashed up through misty, veil-like clouds, seeming to invite the boys to the West, as if holding out to them promises of great things in store.

Silently the boys gazed in rapt wonder. At last with a deep sigh, Frank broke the silence that had seemed to hold all the boys.

“Isn’t that grand?” he asked. “For that one could almost willingly repeat what we’ve been through today. I like sunrises and sunsets and storms and calms and all the phenomena of nature.”

“I like trees and flowers most of all!” declared Tom.

“And I like live things—birds and squirrels and such!” Arnold declared. When I grow up, I’m going to be President and have a law passed that it’s a crime to rob nests and kill squirrels and things like that. I’d rather let them live!”

“Well, I belong to an Audubon Society at home,” Frank stated. “I think it’s fine to study the birds and their habits and intelligence. We study about other creatures, too. I am learning a lot about the creatures of the wild out-of-doors. It’s interesting.”

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"Here's good old Rowdy coming to get his share," cried Tom, slapping the bulldog on the shoulder. "There's a funny old chap. He'll take all sorts of mauling from any of us boys or from anyone whom he likes, but let a person whom he distrusts point a finger at him, and he's at their throat in a minute. He is very partial!"

"Yes," Jack assented, "and it's remarkable what a judge of character that dog is, too! He can select the good from the bad about as unerringly as one could wish. Sometimes he will make friends with perfect strangers and we find afterwards they are good people even though first appearances were against them. Again he will take a dislike to some mighty fine looking folks, but we learn that they are villains under the surface in the long run."

"Rowdy," Frank challenged, "are you going to take a shine to me or not? Be mighty careful, now, for I'm very anxious about it."

For answer the dog who had been in the center of the floor sprang up to Frank's lap in an endeavor to "kiss" the boy's face. His weight projected so suddenly upon the lad resulted in upsetting him, and boy and dog rolled to the floor in a mass. Rowdy thinking a new game was on began pulling the boy about until all hands were arrested by a cry from Arnold, who still remained at the wheel.

"Land Ho!" came his cry down the companion-way. "Land on the starboard bow. All hands on deck!"

"Sure enough!" cried the lads. "There's a light, too!"

"I'll wager that's Pascagoula," Tom said. "Pretty near time we were there by the way the Fortuna went through the water when the schooner was chasing us. I wonder where we can tie up!"

"Let's shove her along and try to get in before dark," was Jack's suggestion to which the others readily assented.

As the Fortuna entered the harbor the boys kept a sharp lookout for a promising berth for the night. Not until they were well past the bridge over which the Louisville & Nashville Railroad crosses the river did they find a place that looked suitable.

"Let's not tie up to a dock," suggested Harry. "Let's anchor."

This seemed the most feasible solution and was acted upon.

A position was chosen apart from the busy docks and well over toward an unoccupied section of shore. A goodly length of cable was paid out and a stopper put in place. The boys then prepared for retiring without further attempt at getting acquainted with the town or its inhabitants, leaving that for the morrow.

Leaving the doors between the cabins opened for ventilation and convenience in visiting after they were in their bunks the boys soon disposed themselves and prepared to pass a restful night.

“Wouldn’t it be better to set a watch?” asked Arnold.

“I don’t think it necessary,” declared Harry. “It’s safe here.”

“Sure it’s safe, but I feel uneasy just the same,” Arnold protested. “There’s no knowing what’s going on in these ports.”

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It was voted, however, that no watch was necessary so the boy composed himself to sleep drawing the blankets closely to his chin.

Scarcely had he gotten into a quiet sleep before Rowdy came to his bunk and insisted on making himself a bed fellow of the boy.

At last everything was still. Only the heavy breathing of the tired boys gave evidence of life aboard the Fortuna as she rode to her anchor, swinging with the currents and wavelets. Her riding lights were burning brightly, fed from the storage batteries below decks, and everything to the passer by betokened peace.

Once Rowdy lifted a watchful eye and growled menacingly. Arnold stirred uneasily in his sleep and threw an arm over the dog.

Suddenly a shriek of agony pierced the air with startling distinctness. Shriek after shriek followed intermingled with cries of distress. The boys bounded from their beds in alarm.

CHAPTER X

FIRST AID AND AN ESCAPE

"Oh! Oh! Oh!" came the cries of pain. "Oh! Oh! Oh!"

Quickly Jack's hand stole toward the switch that controlled the overhead lights. Instantly the cabin was a blaze of light.

"What's the matter?" cried the boy looking toward the source of the disturbance. "What's going on here, anyway?"

Rowdy bounded off his bed and dashed toward the forward cabin with a vim and energy that bespoke ill for someone.

"Here, Rowdy," commanded Arnold, "come here, sir."

Slowly the dog returned to his master's side. The hair on his shoulders was standing straight on end while hoarse growls issued in thunderous tones from his throat around which the muscles tightened in anticipation of a desperate struggle with an enemy.

"There's someone in there," declared Harry in a tone of discovery. "Somebody came aboard while we were asleep."

"Sure enough," scorned Tom rumpling Harry's usually smooth hair. "What did you suppose was making all that noise, friend?"

“Well, there is someone in there,” stoutly maintained Harry.

“Hush, boys,” commanded Jack. “Let’s see who it is.”

Automatics were produced from under pillows and the boys moved forward to investigate. The cries still came loudly.

“Who are you and what do you want?” questioned Jack.

“Oh, help me, help me,” groaned the figure lying at the foot of the companion-way.

“Help me, I’m hurt badly.”

“Where are you hurt?” inquired Jack solicitously bending over the prostrate form curled in a heap. “I’ll help you if I can.”

“My foot, oh, my foot,” wailed the stranger. “It’s cut off.”

“Look at the blood,” declared Frank. “Good gracious, that’s a bad wound. Wonder how he got it. How did he get aboard?”

“There’s something sticking into his foot,” cried Harry. “Look at that thing projecting from his foot. No wonder it bleeds.”

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Frank and Jack exchanged glances and then at the whispered command of Frank, Jack quickly sat on the head of their visitor while Tom and Harry threw themselves upon his leg. Frank stooped, grasped the foot with one hand and with the other wrenched quickly at the thing that was protruding through the foot of the boy.

A shriek of agony told of the pain he had caused. Frank shook his head in pity at the suffering he had brought about. He glanced at the object he held in his hand, then sat down upon a locker and gave vent to shout after shout of laughter. The boys gazed in open mouthed wonder at the spectacle. Frank's laugh was hearty.

"Frank," cried Jack wonderingly, "what's the matter? Have you gone plumb crazy or are you enjoying this boy's suffering?"

"Neither," asserted Frank. "I think we'll give a little first aid and then thank Arnold here for catching the thief."

"Thank me?" queried Arnold. "I didn't catch him."

"Yes, you did," declared Frank. "But now to help him a bit."

"How shall we treat the foot?" asked Tom gazing ruefully at the deck, now becoming crimson under the stain of blood.

"Get a basin and then some hot water," directed Frank. "I think we'd better wash this out first and then put in some disinfectant. Have you got something to cleanse the wound?"

"Surely have," was Tom's confident answer. "Got a whole chest full of dope here. Help yourself to anything you want!"

"Let's put in a lot of turpentine," suggested Harry. "That's good for snake-bite and other things. We've got plenty of it, too."

Frank took charge of the injured lad, bathing and cleansing the wounded foot. He prepared to bandage the member after giving it a liberal application of turpentine. As he was about to put the bandage in place Harry offered another suggestion.

"Let's put on some of that fat salt pork. I got a rusty nail in my foot once and that's what they put on me."

"Did it work?" asked Tom. "I mean the pork, of course."

"Of course it worked," stoutly maintained Harry.

"All right, then, put on a slice of pork. It surely can't do any harm and may draw out the poison from the foot."

"What poison?" queried Arnold. "What did he step on?"

"I told you," stated Frank in a positive tone, "that Arnold captured this fellow. When you know the facts, you'll agree."

"Let me mop up this smear on the floor," suggested Tom, bringing hot water, "and then we'll all listen. Who's the Sherlock?"

"Take cold water, Tom, for that spot on the floor," was Frank's suggestion. "If you don't the place will be discolored."

"Sure enough, I guess I'm getting old and forgetful," laughed Tom. "We've had enough excitement today to make me forget most everything, I guess. Tell you what, I'm sleepy, too."

"Now tell us how you happened to say that Arnold caught this chap," Jack demanded of Frank when the stranger had been placed in a comfortable position and the boys had gathered in the after cabin. "I thought Arnold was in the bunk when it happened."

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"Well, boys," began Frank producing the object he had taken from the visitor's foot, "Arnold discovered the horse buried upside down in the sand on Petit Bois and he insisted on bringing the shell."

"All as plain as mud," shouted Arnold. "I left the horseshoe crab shell in the forward cabin. It must have got kicked about during the evening and left with the tail sticking straight up. When this fellow came down the steps, he landed on it kerplunk."

"Right-O!" declared Frank. "At least," he continued, "that's my deduction. If anyone has a better explanation, let him give it."

None was offered, however, the boys seeming to agree that Arnold's explanation had been correct. They all waited to hear further from Frank. He noticed their hesitation and continued:

"I think it would be a good idea to go and interview this lad. He looks to me like a tough customer here for no good."

This suggestion met with instant approval. The boys crowded forward eagerly. One or two automatics were displayed.

"Hello, what's this," questioned Harry, picking up an object from the bunk beside the visitor who was lying on his side.

"Why, it's a piece of raw meat," he exclaimed. "Where did that come from? We haven't any beef aboard, have we?"

"Not that I know of," answered Arnold. "It's only a small piece. Give it to Rowdy. He needs a lunch."

"Stop," shouted Jack. "Don't give that to Rowdy."

"Why not?" Arnold questioned in a surprised tone.

"Maybe this chap brought it aboard for that very purpose!"

"What a numbskull I am," scolded Arnold. "Here I might have killed our best friend. I must get the habit of thinking."

"How about it, friend?" queried Jack shaking the stranger by the shoulder. "What have you got on the meat?"

"Nothing," stoutly declared the newcomer, keeping his face turned toward the bulkhead. "I have nothing on it."

"I see," scorned Jack. "You intended to bring the meat aboard to use for a sandwich for yourself. You were about to use our kitchenette for a while, then you would have gone on peaceably."

No answer was vouchsafed to this sally and Jack continued:

"You might as well make a clean breast of the whole matter. We know you. You were aboard our boat once before. We are several gallons of gasoline short because of your kindness. 'Fess up, now."

"I guess I know a way to make him talk," declared Frank. "Come here until I suggest a method that I hope will be effective."

Frank and Jack withdrew a little from the group about the berth holding the stranger. After a moment's consultation they returned and Jack again addressed the injured boy in a friendly tone:

"Come, now, Carlos Madero, or whatever your name may be, we want to treat you right, but we're going to have some information if we have to wring your neck to get it. We don't care about doing you any harm, especially since you're already wounded, but you will have to explain your presence here at this hour of the night. Why did you come aboard barefooted and unannounced?"

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"I am not afraid of your threats. You can't do anything to me. Besides, you're Boy Scouts and you wouldn't harm me."

"Never mind about that just now," interrupted Jack. "We can protect ourselves even if we are Boy Scouts. You'll learn that."

"Sure he'll learn it," chimed in Tom. "He'd better not monkey too far with this crowd. We'll make him eat that meat."

"God idea," declared Jack. "Arnold, please start the coils and fry this chunk of meat for our friend. He's hungry."

With these words, Jack drew an automatic and displayed it for the benefit of the visitor. He had no intention of using the weapon, but felt it might have a salutary effect. In this he was right.

"I can't eat it," cried the boy. "It's poisoned."

"Ah, ha," gloated Jack. "I thought so."

"Oh, please let me go away," begged the lad. "I'll promise not to do anything against you again. I'll never bother you at all."

"We don't want to do anything rash," Frank suggested. "We won't harm you if you'll agree not to injure us, but we must know why you came aboard tonight as you did and what your purpose was."

"Wyckoff made me," groaned the boy covering his face with his hands. "There," he cried sitting up in bed, "now I've told, he'll kill me sure. Oh, I'm in trouble now."

"Not so you could notice it," gritted Jack, taking a firmer hold on his automatic. "If Wyckoff tries any of his dirty tricks around here, we'll fill him so full of holes he'll leak straw."

"You don't know him," shuddered the boy. "He's a desperate man. He shot a nigger once just because the fellow disputed Wyckoff about a match. He's a bad, bad man. I know him."

"And still he had the nerve to tell us on Petit Bois that his hands were clean," scornfully declared Jack. "He makes me sick."

"Oh, have you seen him?" questioned Carlos.

"He didn't tell me that! He just told me what I must do."

“What did he tell you to do?” inquired Frank not unkindly.

“He said that in the after cabin of this boat under the floor boards I would find a plug driven into the skin of the boat to fill an auger hole.

“He directed me to remove that plug carefully and swim ashore. I was not to awaken you but to get away quietly.”

“Well, you surely were the pussy-footed little sleuth,” declared Harry. “It would have been impossible to hear you more than forty or fifty miles away. There’s nothing the matter with that voice of yours. I know an auctioneer who could use that noise.”

“Don’t rub it in, Harry,” advised Tom. “The poor lad is having troubles of his own right now as it is. He’s all in.”

“He brought it on himself,” maintained Harry. “He wasn’t invited aboard. If he’d stayed away, this never would have happened.”

“I know,” soothed Tom, “and you’ll find that most of the troubles we get into are caused by our own acts. I’m sleepy. Move we postpone this third degree business until morning.”

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"Second the motion," declared Harry. "Let's set a guard over the prisoner and go back to sleep. I'm all in, myself."

The suggestion met with the approval of all the boys. They were tired after their long and strenuous day and needed rest badly.

Arnold, feeling elated because his crab shell had been the means of trapping the midnight visitor, volunteered to act as guard during the first watch. He stoutly maintained that he was not sleepy and would be only too glad of the chance to watch.

The poisoned meat was thrown overboard and quiet reigned again.

Frank awoke and stretched himself. Then he reached across to the bunk occupied by Jack and shook that worthy by the arm.

"Let's get up and visit the hospital," he suggested, springing up.

Arnold sat sleeping on the bunk. The prisoner was gone!

CHAPTER XI

AN ELUSIVE BOB WHITE

"Hey," cried Jack grasping Arnold roughly by the shoulder, "Where is your prisoner? You're a pretty guard, you are."

Sheepishly Arnold glanced around, now thoroughly awake.

"Has he gone?" he asked in a wondering tone. "Where is he?"

"Yes, indeed, he went hours ago," asserted Frank. "He was lying here sleeping and a big side wheel boat pulled up with a band playing. They tied up to the Fortuna, fired a salute of twenty-one guns in honor of royalty and then the band filed through the cabin, one at a time, playing their instruments as hard as they could blow. The invalid got up and walked away with them and after another salute of twenty-one guns, the steamer pulled away upstream."

"They did not," protested Arnold stretching himself.

"Well, if they had, it wouldn't have affected you in the least," declared Jack. "We were all tired out and none of us heard him get away. Even Rowdy didn't say anything against it and when Rowdy keeps quiet things are pretty still. He's a light sleeper."

“How about it, Rowdy?” inquired Arnold caressing the bulldog. “You’ll stick up for me, won’t you, old pal?”

Rowdy’s stumpy tail wagged ecstatically as Arnold lavished affection upon him. He endeavored to “kiss” all hands, but this was discouraged. The boys dearly loved their pet but objected to “kisses.”

“Anyhow,” decided Arnold, “Rowdy never would have let the chap get away if he had thought he was here for harm. So that means the boy is all right! He may have come here a bad boy, but he went away a good one or Rowdy never would have let him go. So there!”

“There might be something in that, too,” admitted Jack.

“All hands on deck for a bath,” sang out Tom. “I feel dirty!”

“Let’s run out of the harbor and get some clean water,” Harry proposed. “This river looks pretty thick to me.”

All the boys thought the idea a good one and accordingly the anchor was lifted and the Fortuna put out to sea a short distance.

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The morning was a glorious one. Old Sol cast his rays upon the sea which gave them back broken and shattered into a thousand shafts of shimmering light. The air was cool and clear. Here and there in the distance a white sail like a fleeting gull marked the position of a sailing vessel, while a smudge of smoke from a steamer far away to the west lent a touch of color.

No time was lost by the boys in starting the pump. Soon a stream of water from the hose was playing on the deck. All hands seized brushes and scrubbed the decks industriously until they shone in spotlessness. Then the hose was turned on the crew, each boy in turn enjoying hugely a shower bath of sea-water. After splashing about to their hearts' content someone mentioned breakfast.

"Let's run out a ways and see what we can catch," cried Arnold. "I'd like a broiled fish for breakfast."

Accordingly the lines were made ready and in a short time Tom announced a bite. His catch proved to be a Spanish mackerel of good size. No time was lost in cleaning the prize.

"Now, while the cook prepares breakfast," Jack said, "I think we'd better get back into harbor. I'm dubious about that plug in the Fortune's side and think we'd better have her out on the ways for a new plank if necessary. Let's get back."

"Right you are, Captain," declared Harry. "I'm cook this morning, while Jack must wash dishes! He said lots of slang yesterday."

"Now you mention it, I'll plead guilty," laughed Jack.

With laughter and gay spirits the boys could scarcely wait for breakfast. Harry was an adept at the kitchen as his friends all were willing to testify. He threw his whole soul into the task as he did with everything he undertook. Today was no exception.

"My only regret," stated Frank as they were seated about the breakfast table at last, "is that I didn't find you fellows sooner."

"The pleasure is mutual, I assure you—we assure you," stated Tom. "We've enjoyed your society immensely and hope we'll find your chum shortly. He can't be far away."

"Wyckoff wouldn't be so desperate as to do him harm, would he?" queried Harry. "I can't believe he would make way with him."

"I don't know," replied Frank in a dubious tone. "Wyckoff has given evidence that he's a mighty mean sort of a chap."

“Speaking of Wyckoff,” put in Jack, “I believe that’s the schooner that chased us away from Petit Bois yesterday. Look there.”

All hands looked in the direction indicated by Jack and saw a schooner just putting out of the harbor. On her decks stood several roughly dressed men lounging about in attitudes that bespoke anything but the smart sailor. They were unkempt and untidy in appearance and were generally a pretty undesirable looking group.

“If that’s the same vessel,” Frank declared, “I’m glad she didn’t catch us! They’re a hard looking collection of desperadoes.”

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"She's tacking so as to come close aboard of us," declared Tom. "Shall I shift the course, Jack?" he inquired.

"I don't think so," answered Jack. "Of course under the pilot rules of the United States, a power boat under way must keep clear of a sailing vessel. She has the right of way and seems to be taking it. But we can easily dodge her with our powerful engines."

Closer and closer came the schooner until it seemed that she would surely collide with the motor-boat. When scarcely more than a length away from the Fortuna, the schooner was brought sharply about on the other tack. As she came about a clear cut whistle sounded shrilly in the morning air:

"Bob White! Bob, Bob White!"

"Gracious!" cried Frank springing to his feet. "The Bob White."

Instantly he was on deck sending ringing across the water his answer to the challenge of his Patrol:

"Bob White! Bob, Bob White!"

The men on the schooner laughed coarsely as the boy waited for an answer to his challenge. The two vessels were drawing farther apart now. Their voices were indistinguishable, but once more came the call:

"Bob White! Bob, Bob—"

Suddenly the call stopped as if a hand had been placed over the face of the one making the cry. The crew of the Fortuna stared at one another in wide eyed wonderment. They all were thinking rapidly and each seemed to have formed the same conclusion.

"Shall I follow them, Captain?" asked Tom addressing Jack.

"I'd like to," Jack replied, "but I don't think it wise. It may be that Charley Burnett is aboard that, schooner and that the schooner is the one that chased and fired at us yesterday. We are not sure of either supposition. If he's aboard, he's still alive. If he was not on board and one of the crew did the whistling, we would have our trouble for our pains and be laughed at and perhaps insulted into the bargain. We'd better wait a while, I think."

"But maybe he is there and wants to get off," declared Arnold.

"Possibly," agreed Jack. "But in that case if we were to attempt to rescue him by force, that crew is too powerful for us to overcome unless we run alongside and shoot them

down mercilessly. We are not prepared to do that just yet, I hope. What's your idea concerning, this, Frank?" he continued addressing his friend.

"It's pretty hard to say it, but I really believe you're right, Jack," answered Frank holding out his hand. "You are right."

"Thank you," said Jack. "I believe this thing will come out all right without any serious harm to your chum or to us."

If Jack could only have looked into the future he might not have spoken so confidently nor have believed his own words so much.

The run back to the harbor occupied but little time. Arrived there Jack at once went ashore to arrange for hauling out and repairing the Fortuna. He found the marine railway without difficulty but was unable to secure accommodations for his motor boat at once. Every berth was full but one would be empty later in the day.

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When Jack reported again aboard the Fortuna the boys agreed that the best thing to do would be to wait for their chance at the ways.

All felt that it would be far safer to replace the plank through which Wyckoff had put the auger hole in his dastardly attempt to turn the boys from their course.

"It will give us a chance to examine her bottom," Jack argued, "and we can see how the barnacles like her. I believe that I'll get some copper paint and give the hull a coat while she's out."

"Hurrray," joyfully cried Arnold. "Then I can say truthfully that I'm a marine painter! Won't that be fine."

"There are many things you might say truthfully," agreed Harry in a tantalizing tone. "Of course I emphasize 'might.'"

"Boys, boys," cautioned Jack. "Have a joke, but don't let it go too far. We must constantly remember our motto and no one can 'Be Prepared' to resist the many temptations of life unless he is constantly in training. Sunshine and pleasant skies are best."

"I think those chaps are like a lot of young animals," Frank observed. "They must have a certain amount of tussle and wrestle in order to develop their muscle. They'll need a lot of it later on."

"No doubt you're right," Jack laughed. "Maybe I'm a little too severe. I hope not. I love the boys and want them to be men in every sense of the word. They're good boys all of them."

"When will we get off the ways again, Captain Jack?" asked Harry, after surveying the town and shipping through the glasses.

"We can't get on until late this afternoon, so that means we won't get the carpenter work done until tomorrow some time," Jack replied. "Possibly we'll be able to put her into the water again tomorrow night, if everything goes along well. After the carpenters replace the plank, I want the caulkers to search the seams for soft places in the oakum and after that we'll paint her."

"Well, then, if it's agreeable to you, Harry and I want to go up the river for a fishing trip. We haven't had a chance to catch fish for a long while and that mackerel this morning gave us the fever. We can't be of any use here today so let us go."

"I can't see any objection to that at all," replied Jack. "I should be real glad to have a mess of fresh fish and if you'll promise to return before dark you may go for the day."

“Captain, we’ll vote you a leather medal,” declared Arnold.

“Yes,” agreed Harry, “and not only that, but we’ll fetch him back a mess of fish that’ll keep the crew busy for a week.”

“Let’s go over and see the ship carpenter. He can tell us where the good fishing spots are and what bait to use,” Harry suggested.

“While they are over there getting information, let us put up a lunch for them,” Tom said. “I’ll pack a lot of sandwiches and put in a can of coffee and some pickles. That ought to last them.”

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In a short time the boys returned and taking tackle and lunch set off up the river in the boat found on Petit Bois Island. Gaily they waved their hands at their comrades as they rounded a bend.

During the remainder of the day Jack, Tom and Frank were about the shipyard watching the carpenters at work on various vessels of small tonnage drawn up for repairs. After dinner they went uptown to purchase the necessary paint and to arrange for an additional supply of canned goods with which to stock their larder.

"Let's get some vegetables for supper," Tom said as they visited one of the stores. "It will surprise the boys when they get back all tired and hungry. They'll like that."

Well loaded the lads returned to the shipyard. As they neared the place where their vessel was now lying on the ways, Jack stopped short in his tracks. He turned a startled glance toward his companions. Alarmed, they eagerly crowded closer.

"What's the matter, now?" inquired Tom in a whisper.

"I just saw Wyckoff sneaking behind that shed," Jack replied.

CHAPTER XII

SAVED BY A STRANGER

"Look, Harry," Arnold cried as they rowed along. "See the palm leaf fans all growing in bunches on shore there."

"Those must be what they call 'Palmettos,'" answered Harry.

"Are they good to eat?" was Arnold's query.

"Not that I know of," Harry replied, "unless some native animal here wants to commit suicide. They are rough and have barbs growing on the leaf stems. They do resemble palm leaf fans with streamers on the edge. We won't bother them, though."

"Surely not," responded Arnold. "But look at that tree with all the gray washing hanging on it. Looks for all the world like all the kitchen mechanics and pot wrestlers in the world had hung their dirty dish cloths on it to dry. And there's another—and another—and another," he exclaimed.

"I know what that is," announced Harry. "That's the Spanish moss we've heard about! At last, we're getting closer to the Treasure Chest. At least we've found something Spanish."

“Pull in toward the shore,” requested Arnold. “I see a spot I think would be ideal for a fishes park. I can almost imagine I see numbers of young fish sitting around on the benches in the shady spots right now. They look so cool and comfortable!”

“I wonder if any of them are hungry enough to take a little lunch,” mused Harry, pulling as close to the bank as he could.

“Try and see,” advised Arnold. “I’m going to drop a line to a big young fellow I’ve heard about and see if he will answer.”

Both boys laughed quietly at the conceit. Their day started finely and augured well. Preparing their tackle they lost no time in lowering an alluring bait to the finny denizens of the water.

Evidently the fish were hungry for not many minutes passed before Harry felt a tug at his line. He began reeling in rapidly.

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"Oh, what a whopper," exclaimed Arnold peering over the side of the boat. "It's as long as my arm and big as a good sized stove pipe, I believe. One or two like that will be enough."

"Thanks," panted Harry. "Wait till I get this one."

Skillfully the lad drew the fish to a point where he could be sure of landing it without danger. Then he waited for his chum to assist with the landing net. The fish was a beauty.

"What shall we call it?" proudly questioned the lad.

"Well, I should call that No. 1," gravely replied Arnold. "He looks like a fellow I used to know by the name of 'A. No. 1.'"

"Good," cried the delighted Harry. "Now you go after his cousin. Get Mr. No. 2, and do it quickly."

"Here he comes," declared Arnold. "I knew I spit, no, spat—what should I say, spitted or spatped?—on that bait just right."

"You watch out or he'll walk away with the bait and all."

"Bingo," yelled Arnold. "I got him."

Harry laughed to see the way Arnold was struggling to keep the fish. For a short time it looked as if the fish had Arnold. At last after a long battle the fish was exhausted and gave up.

"That's a better one than mine," was Harry's generous comment.

"They're just about as nearly twins as it's possible to get them," asserted Arnold. "And they're both beauties. It's nearly noon by my watch, so I vote we go ashore and build a fire. Some fish for dinner wouldn't go bad at all. What are these, Bass?"

"I don't think so," objected Harry. "See that red spot just at the root of their tail? Well, the natives call that redfish."

"All right," agreed Arnold, "fresh redfish will go mighty fine. And I'm hungry enough to eat a big one myself."

"You're always hungry, Arnold," declared his chum.

"No more often than the rest of the crew. I notice they all eat when the eating is good. And I'd pity the chicken that had to live off the table scraps from our festive board," declared the boy with emphasis. "We're noted for being table finishers."

"I notice we all brought our appetites along," admitted Harry.

"Let's land near that oak tree that leans out over the water," suggested Arnold. There are three tall pines growing a short distance from the oak and that'll make a good landmark if we walk about."

"The very thing! You haven't forgotten your instructions in scouting, have you? That idea is a good one."

"Then we'll go up from the river a ways, make a little camp and eat dinner. Maybe we can see some of the wild creatures of this country. It would be interesting to watch them at play."

"I'm agreeable. We've got the whole day before us. Isn't it fine to know that you don't have to get back at any certain time, but can just loaf along if you wish or work hard if you like?"

"Glorious," agreed Arnold. "Just now, however, you'll want to work hard, I know, for we're going to have a grand feed on redfish. That means you'll please get the wood while I clean the 'piece de resistance' of our dinner. The boys put up a nice lunch."

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Not far from the tree where they landed the boys found a suitable spot for their camp. A fire was soon blazing merrily over which the fish cooked with an appetizing odor.

"The boys laughed when I brought this pan along," remarked Arnold. "They evidently didn't believe I would have need for it."

"They'll like that fine big fish we take home, I'll wager."

"After dinner, let's gather some of that Spanish Moss and take it to the Fortuna. I wonder if it wouldn't make good mattresses."

"They say the negroes and some of the whites down here do just that. They bury it in the ground a while then pack it into a mattress and have a fine bed. It must be buried in the earth for a time, though, they say. It is funny looking stuff isn't it?"

"It surely is. But what is that green plant up there? It looks as if the oak tree were all dead except that one sprig of green. Strange that it should keep only one twig alive."

"I believe that's mistletoe growing on a limb of the oak."

"I guess you're right. And down there at the foot of the tree I see a quail. He's humped over and seems to be trying to make himself smaller all the time."

"Hush, man," Harry protested. "Quails don't grow down South as far as this! They're a Northern bird."

"Then maybe I don't know what a quail is," retorted Arnold.

"I don't mean that," replied Harry, "but it seems strange to think of quail being here. I always had an idea that quail humped themselves under the shelter of a corn shock with snow blowing around their toes and nearly freezing them to death."

"Maybe you're right. They tell me the natives call these birds partridges. Just the same, I'll venture to say that I can call them out of cover. Want to see me try it?"

"Sure. Go as far as you like. We won't shoot them, though."

"Certainly not. We have all we need for food except maybe a rabbit. Watch me toll them on."

Both boys were very quiet for a few minutes, then Arnold sent out a plaintive "Bob White" call. In a few minutes he repeated the cry. This time an answer came and directly both boys were delighted to observe the little bright eyed bird that had responded stepping out from the shelter of a clump of grass.

“Too bad to disappoint him,” declared Arnold, “but it is getting on towards the shank of the afternoon, so let’s take a walk around and then get back to the town. The Fortuna is probably on the railway by now. I wish the others could have been with us this glorious afternoon. It has been fine so far.”

Leaving the river the boys walked slowly along scanning closely the vegetation on all sides and keeping an alert eye open for the feathered and furry denizens of the forest.

A rabbit scurried across their path and hastened with great leaps down the path. The boys laughed to see the patch of white tail go bounding down the old trail along which they were walking.

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"I'll choose the next one," declared Harry. "Rabbit stew for supper wouldn't go so bad! It would help out on canned goods."

"All right, Harry," responded Arnold. "We'll make the limit one rabbit apiece if you don't mind. We'll have a good supper at that. There's no use taking home more than we can eat soon."

"Here's mine, then," announced Harry taking quick aim at a fleeing cotton-tail. "I'll choose this one right here."

As a tribute to Harry's excellent aim the rabbit bounded high in the air and then rolled over and over lying quite still after falling to the earth. His career had been stopped instantly.

"I hope I can do as well," was Arnold's pleased comment.

"There's your chance," announced Harry. "See him?"

"Come here, rabbit," cried Arnold taking quick aim.

At his shot the rabbit bounded into the air, falling as had Harry's. But instead of lying quietly where he had fallen the rabbit struggled and ran limping away. It seemed impossible for him to go rapidly, however. He managed to get away just too quickly to be caught. The boys hastened after their quarry in an effort to end its struggles as much as to secure the game.

Their chase led them to a low spot where rank grass was growing. The dead stalks of the previous year's growth were fallen to the earth, making a dense mat of dried stubble.

"Small chance of finding him in here, Harry," was Arnold's comment. "We might as well give it up and go on back to the boat."

"I don't like to do that," protested Harry. "He might be right under foot for all we know. Let's kick around a little. Why, what's this?" he continued stooping to pick an object from the ground. The next moment with a scream he jumped backward.

A great snake had lain directly under his feet but now was coiled in a mass. Its tail was whirring angrily while the great triangular head waved slowly from side to side.

Fascinated the boy stood as if rooted to the spot.

Arnold was in direct line with Harry between himself and the snake, so dared not shoot. Harry's automatic had dropped from his nerveless fingers at the first alarming whirl of

the vibrating rattles. Unable to make a sound or move a muscle the lad stood entirely unnerved while the great reptile prepared to strike.

Arnold fired two quick shots from his automatic, hoping to attract the attention of the snake from its intended victim. His hope was not in vain. At the sound the snake seemed to hesitate a moment as if undecided what to do. Evidently its attention had been attracted from Harry.

Elated at his success, Arnold fired twice more, but this time the angry buzzing recommenced. It seemed as if there was no hope whatever for the lad who stood with the sweat now pouring from his face. To this day he says that he can distinctly remember a little drop of sweat trickling down his nose and pausing at the tip before it splashed to the earth. He declares that it seemed a lifetime while he stood there expecting momentarily to feel the deadly fangs dart into his body and leave their fatal poison.

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He protests that so fascinated was he by the awful horror of the situation that he can describe accurately every marking and every detail of the great snake as it lay there coiled for the blow that would prove fatal to himself.

Almost fainting, Harry heard the two shots that caused the snake to momentarily lower its head and cease its buzzing rattles from sounding.

Hope rose within his breast as he noted this action, yet he could not move from the spot. His feet seemed leaden.

The next instant the snake again raised its head and the second shot fired by Arnold seemed to increase its anger for it recommenced with more vigor than before the sharp buzzing of its rattles. In desperation, Arnold emptied his automatic into the ground at his feet, but without effect upon the snake.

A rifle shot echoed through the forest. The rattler lunged forward.

CHAPTER XIII

A FRUITLESS SEARCH

"Surely that can't be Wyckoff," declared Tom. "He wouldn't be around here at this time of day. Couldn't you be mistaken?"

"I don't think so," stoutly protested Jack. "He seemed to be poking his head around the corner of that shed and when he saw I noticed him, he dodged back. I am quite sure it was he."

"Well, I think he has his nerve to be sneaking around the yard at this hour. Why can't he go on about his business instead of hounding us all the time, I'd like to know," indignantly stormed Frank. "He's about the poorest specimen of humanity I know."

"He thinks he's well within his rights," argued Jack. "I don't like him, but I must admire his 'stick-to-itiveness.'"

"Whatever that is," put in Tom. "If he'd stick to it and dig up his good-for-nothing old treasure chest himself instead of barking at the moon, we'd all be better off. But here we are at the good old Fortuna. My, my, how she looms up out of the water."

"She certainly does look big when one can get a view of the hull below the water line," agreed Jack, with a note of pride.

For some time the boys walked around the vessel, noting her fine lines and examining the hull for possible defects. They found nothing that they considered worthy of repair

except the hole through which their plug projected. Jack examined with minute care the outboard end of the shaft log and the propeller.

"Here comes the watchman," announced Frank as the boys paused at the foot of the ladder before going aboard the motor boat.

"Let's stop and have a word with him," Tom said. "Maybe he's a pretty decent sort of chap. At any rate it won't hurt to get acquainted. He can likely tell us something about the man you saw."

"Agreed," announced Jack. "By all means, let us cultivate the acquaintance of the watchman. We may need him in our business."

Accordingly when the watchman arrived in the course of making his rounds the boys spoke pleasantly to him, finding him quite agreeable. In fact, he was inclined to visit at some length.

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He was glad to exchange ideas with the boys upon learning that they were from the North. Their tales of adventure with the motor boat seemed quite fascinating to him. They related some of their adventures on Lake Michigan and Lake Superior, in the mining region, where they had been on special duty during the strike of mine employees and then detailed some features of their trip South that had so nearly resulted in disaster.

An hour passed quickly away before the boys realized that it was getting late. Jumping up from their seats they declared that they must prepare supper and make ready for their chums who were expected momentarily. With an expression of good will the watchman prepared to make his rounds of the yard.

Just as he was about to move away Jack asked:

"Oh, by the way, do you know a man named Wyckoff who lives in this vicinity somewhere? He's a man of medium build and has one of those peculiar blue-black beards that can never be shaved quite clean because the skin is so clear, the black roots of the whiskers show through. He also is carrying a smashed nose just now."

"I cain't seem to reckomember of any sich man," deliberately replied the watchman. "What did youall say he done?"

"I don't know what he does regularly. I think he's a fisherman and shrimper betimes. Possibly he does odd jobs when he's not fishing. He seems to be quite a handy man at any job."

"No, I don't believe I can place him," replied the watchman with a note of regret in his voice, as if he were sorry for his lack of knowledge concerning the man sought.

"Oh, well," lightly answered Jack, "it's no matter. He's probably from some other town along the coast. Don't worry about it."

"Are you going to stay aboard tonight?" asked the watchman in leaving. "If you wanted to take a run uptown to the show I'll be mighty glad to watch your vessel right close while you're gone."

"Thank you for the offer," Jack replied as he prepared to mount the ladder leading to the deck above him. "You are very kind."

He was about to add that they would remain aboard the vessel, but caught himself and for no accountable reason answered:

"We were figuring on going uptown after supper. If you happen to be in this part of the yard you might keep an eye on the little wagon."

“And, by the way,” he added, “here’s a piece of change for your trouble. It’s not much, but if you try hard you can spend it. Most business places are glad to get them.”

“Thank you, boss, thank you,” eagerly cried the watchman.

Jack knew by his manner that the piece of money was the object of his offer, but tried to avoid letting the man see that.

Rowdy was unable to negotiate the ladder and consequently had to be carried up by Tom. At last they were all aboard, supper was under way and the Fortuna was bright with lights from her storage batteries. Jack decided it was best not to start the engines because of the danger of displacing the shoring.

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Supper was eaten and still the fishermen had not returned.

"Let's turn off the lights and maybe that watchman will think we have gone uptown if we are quiet," suggested Jack.

"All right," agreed Tom. "Can we keep Rowdy quiet, too?"

"Sure you'll be quiet, won't you, old chap?"

Rowdy's answer was an attempt to "kiss" his friend.

For some time the boys sat in silence, hoping every moment for the return of their friends. It was growing dusk and Jack was becoming anxious. Just as he was about to speak, Rowdy seemed to stiffen as if pointing something. The hair on his shoulders rose on end, while a scarcely audible growl escaped from his throat.

Although the boys sat in the shadow of the pilot house and were indistinguishable to anyone below in the shipyard, they could still see each other. Jack touched Frank and Tom lightly and then using the sign language employed by mutes he said to them:

"Rowdy sees or smells something he doesn't like."

"I see it, too," signaled Tom. "It's that watchman friend of yours. He's coming back to see if we left some of our supper."

"He was a hungry looking chap," wigwagged Frank. "I'd like to feed him up a little and put some fat on his ribs once."

"It would take a mint of money to buy the grub," Tom's fingers spelled out. "He's what the livery stable owner would call a hard keeper. He needs a dose of something. I don't like him."

"Rowdy doesn't like him either," Jack's fingers were working. "But who is that other chap beside him? Hush! They're coming this way as sure as I'm alive. Is he bringing the family?"

"Wait a minute," spelled out Frank. "I wish I could talk."

"Why?" asked Jack. "Aren't you talking?"

"Yes, after a fashion, but those chaps can't understand this. I'd like to tell the watchman what a liar he is and to ask Wyckoff where my chum Charley Burnett is. If he didn't answer, I'd make him."

"I see," Jack replied. "But have patience. We'll get him."

"Here they come," announced Tom. "Both of 'em, hungry hounds."

"Listen," signaled Frank. "Get this if you can."

The watchman and Wyckoff, for it was he, were talking in low tones. Only an occasional word was audible to the three watchers on the motor boat. It was evident that Wyckoff had been drinking and was inclined to be a trifle quarrelsome. The watchman was doing his best to restrain Wyckoff from some act upon which he seemed determined. They were using harsh words but still talked in a low tone.

Finally Wyckoff turned and left the yard, followed by the protesting watchman who slammed the gate after the retreating figure.

"There, that's over," sighed Tom. "What did you get out of it?"

"Just this," stated Jack. "The watchman is a liar and Wyckoff was not here for any good. He intends mischief of some sort."

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"My idea exactly," cried Tom. "He's probably gone up town to hoist aboard a cargo of 'Dutch Courage.' Then he'll come back here with some of his cronies and let the Fortuna go into the water with a splash! That'll be the end of the Fortuna."

"Let's hope not," Frank answered. "If he does that, we'll have the law on him and he'll be railroaded to the penitentiary so quick he won't even stop to say good-by."

"If I see him when he's doing it, he'll go so far it would take a young fortune to send him a postal card," gritted Tom.

"Possibly it would take all the wealth in the Treasure Chest," laughed Jack. "Our Tom is getting to be some bloodthirsty, himself."

"Well, what'll we do?" asked Tom. "I hate sitting still."

"I think it would not be a bad idea to go look for the boys," replied Jack. "It may seem foolish, but I feel that they are in trouble and need us. Maybe a couple of us could go and the other stay here with Rowdy to guard the Fortuna. It's hard to decide what to do."

"Let's not separate any more," begged Tom. "We're split up enough as it is. Let's all go or else all stay."

"All the lockers are securely fastened so no one could take much if they came aboard," argued Frank. "I'm in favor of remaining together if we can. If we only had a lantern to take with us."

"We've got an acetylene headlight such as they use on motorcycles," Tom declared. "That would be a dandy thing."

"Let's go, then, before Wyckoff comes back with his friends."

Accordingly the boys secured automatics and the acetylene headlight. They hurriedly packed a bundle of food, borrowed one of the boats of the shipyard and started upstream to look for their chums. In a short time they discovered the skiff moored at the leaning oak. The big fish were duly admired by all.

"They've been gone quite a while," announced Tom. "See how hard and dry that fish is. They forgot to put it overboard."

"Evidently they didn't intend to stay long," suggested Jack.

"Look at Rowdy. You didn't know he was a bloodhound, did you?"

"Go it, boy," urged Jack. "Find Arnold. Find Harry."

The bulldog circled about the spot where the boys had eaten dinner, lost the scent, picked it up again, again dropped it and finally started away in dead earnest. Hastening along the boys had hard work to keep up with him. Through forest and glade, across swampy places and over ridges the dog led the lads ever at a swift pace. Once in a while he stopped to give vent to a fierce growl.

At length the boys becoming exhausted called a halt.

“Make Rowdy rest a while until I get my breath,” protested Tom.

“He seems to know pretty near where he’s going,” Jack said.

“Yes,” agreed Frank, “and I have an idea that he’s trailing the boys. The point that worries me is whether we can find our way back to the tree where the boats are tied.”

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"I think so," replied Jack. "When we left the river we struck straight back for a little distance then turned directly to our left and have followed nearly a straight course since. I have seen the stars every little while and I'm sure I could find my way back."

"We're going against the wind, aren't we?" questioned Tom.

"Yes, what little wind there is," replied Jack, "Why?"

"Oh, nothing. I just get foolish notions in my head, that's all."

"What's the foolish notion, now, Tom?" queried Jack in a kindly tone. "Tell us what it is, man. Maybe it is worth while."

"Well, just notice Rowdy, here. He's mighty uneasy and has been snuffing into the air for some little time. Just now as I took a deep breath I thought I smelled smoke and with it came an odor of burning flesh. It was too heavy to be merely the remains of a dinner thrown into a fire. I was just thinking that some accident—"

"I don't think so," replied Jack. "At least we won't think that until we have to. It just can't be so," he added.

"It's getting mighty dark in here," stated Tom. "I wish it would lighten up a bit. That's a fire ahead there."

"Whar y'all gwine?" A giant negro barred the path.

CHAPTER XIV

TWO BEAVERS IN PERIL

Neither Harry nor Arnold is quite clear as to just what happened after the rattlesnake made his leap at the charmed boy.

They both are agreed on one point, however. Whenever the subject of marksmanship is brought up, they invariably agree that the man who fired the shot from his rifle that afternoon was the best crackshot they ever saw. His skill surely saved Harry's life.

What really happened was that a stranger, passing through the forest at the moment of the boys' predicament, heard the shots from Arnold's automatic. As the reader knows, the snake, Harry and Arnold were in direct line with Harry between the snake and Arnold. Therefore Arnold was unable quickly to shoot the snake. He tried to distract the attention of the reptile by creating a disturbance, but, as we know, in this he was unsuccessful. The temporary diversion was sufficient, however, to enable the stranger to grasp the situation as he came through a clump of palmettos.

Swinging his rifle to his shoulder he fired, seemingly without taking aim. His bullet sped true to the mark and severed the head of the now thoroughly angered rattler. He was just in time, for already the muscles of steel had started to launch the death dealing fangs.

It was not to be wondered at that Harry and Arnold should feel extremely grateful to the stranger. As he approached they both stepped forward and embarrassed him by the profuse thanks offered.

“Now, boys, don’t say another word,” he protested. “I like to kill them varmints. It pleased me a heap to be able to he’p youall.”

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"But we feel that you saved Harry's life, just the same and we want you to understand that we feel under deep obligations," Arnold insisted. "Another moment and it would have been too late."

"Well, I guess it would," acknowledged the stranger. "That's a leetle the biggest snake of that partic'lar kind I ever seen."

"He's big enough to be in a show," declared Harry.

"How'd you like his skin?" inquired their new found friend.

"No, thank you," protested Harry. "I've seen quite enough of him. I couldn't enjoy that skin a bit. But you may have it."

"Thanks. Believe I'll just pull that hide off. I might be able to sell it. Some feller'll be along from up No'th and buy it."

"Why, we're from up North," was Arnold's rejoinder. "Let me introduce my chum and myself before you handle that snake. Shake hands with Harry Harvey and my name is Arnold Poysor. We're from Chicago down here on a pleasure trip in a motor boat."

"Glad to meet you," replied the fellow. "My name's Lopez. They call me Pete when I'm to home. How'd youall like to come over to my house for supper? I live just a piece from here."

"Thank you, but we'd better be getting back," replied Harry. "Our friends will be expecting us shortly, and it's quite a ways back to the shipyard where our boat is on the ways for repairs."

"Only a little ways," asserted Lopez. "I know a short cut through a bayou that'll take you there in less than half an hour. Youall better stay. I'm goin' to have mutton for supper, and my nigger shore knows how to cook mutton. He's a fine cook."

While Lopez urged the boys to stay, he was busy with the carcass of the dead snake and soon had the skin deftly removed. His entreaties for the boys to visit his home were insistent. The boys felt that they owed him such a large debt that they could not decline, although they preferred to proceed in the opposite direction. At length they yielded to the urgent invitation. Lopez started away at a good gait through the forest, closely followed by his new guests, who found some difficulty in keeping pace with him.

"I'm gwine to have mutton for supper," explained Lopez, "and I want to get down to my sheep as they are passin' through a little draw back here a piece. They always go through there about this time."

After a short time the party came to a draw through which ran a small stream of clear water. Here they saw a flock of perhaps two hundred sheep feeding slowly along. All were headed in one direction.

"I see a young wether," Lopez announced as the party drew up beside a giant pine. "Shall I pick him off?"

"Go as far as you like," replied Harry. "I don't know one from another. They all look alike to me."

"See those two drinking by that big dead stub," Lopez said. "Which one shall I take, the one with black on his face or the white?"

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"Take the black faced one," replied Arnold. "He's fatter."

"Here goes then," stated Lopez seeming hardly to take aim before pulling the trigger. "The black faced one was what you wanted."

His shot was successful. The black faced sheep fell in his tracks. Lopez swung quickly forward, picked up the sheep and started away with his burden over his shoulder.

"Come on, now," he urged. "The rest of the flock'll go home all right and I want to get to the cabin right soon and get supper."

The boys wondered at his haste to leave the spot. Arnold looked quickly at Harry and exchanged questioning glances, but spoke no word. Harry's hands were busy with the mute language, however.

"Looks mighty suspicious," he telegraphed to his chum.

"Just what I was thinking," declared Arnold in reply.

"We'd better keep our weather eye open," was Harry's next suggestion. "Maybe those are his sheep and maybe they are not."

"You're the wise boy," Arnold agreed. "I mistrust him."

During this time the three travelers had been making good progress. At length they came out into a small clearing in the center of which stood a log cabin surrounded by every evidence of shiftlessness and neglect. A gunnysack did duty as a window and curtain also. The chimney at the end of the building was of sticks and clay while the roof was of "rived" shingles.

At the approach of Lopez and the boys a large negro stepped out to meet them. His face was black as ebony while his teeth were pearly white. His grin was expansive.

"Deed Boss, I'se powerful glad to see you," he began.

"Shut up," commanded Lopez. "Take this sheep and get some supper on the way just as quick as you can and not a word out of your head. I want you to get supper and I'll do the talkin'. Hear?"

"Yaas, sir, Boss. I done hear you. I sure can get supper."

"Now, boys," stated Lopez with a large, hospitable manner that was intended to be ingratiating, "help your se'fs to whatever you find. Doright, here, will soon have things goin' for supper. Let's set out on the gallery while he's fixin' up things."

Accepting the invitation the boys disposed themselves upon the “gallery,” as the veranda is called in that country. They noticed that Lopez continued to hold his rifle. Only glances could be exchanged, however, for Lopez seemed to be watching them.

In a short time the negro announced supper and all went inside. A rough deal table contained broiled steaks from the sheep, while sweet potatoes roasted in the embers of the fire were handed around by the servant. The crude arrangements led the boys to again glance at one another in wonderment.

“Take right holt, boys,” urged Lopez, setting the example.

The boys were hungry enough to need no second invitation. Surely the mutton was done to a turn and the sweet potatoes were the most delicious the boys had ever eaten.

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After supper Lopez swung round to the boys and demanded:

"What youall here for, anyhow? Give it to me straight."

"Came here for supper," parried Arnold. "And a mighty good one it was. We'd like to hire that cook of yours for the boat."

"You won't need no cook on the boat if you Don't tell me the truth," almost shouted Lopez, with a gleam of hatred in his eye.

"Why, what's the matter?" cried Harry, springing to his feet.

"I'll show you what's the matter," gritted the enraged man. "You think you can come down here and steal what rightfully belongs to us and take it away up North, don't you? I'll show you."

"Why, what do you mean?" cried Harry. "I don't understand."

"Don't you lie to me," shouted Lopez, making as if to strike the boy. "Don't you lie to me! I know what you want."

"Well then, what do we want?" questioned Arnold indignantly.

"Youall want that Spanish Treasure Chest, but you won't get it," savagely vociferated Lopez. "That chest belongs to us."

"Well then," cried Harry with some heat, "why don't you go on and get it instead of annoying a party of boys who are here for a pleasant outing. You make me tired. You act foolish."

"Don't you insult me," almost screamed Lopez. "I'll let Wyckoff settle with you for this. You see if I don't."

"Wyckoff don't worry me any," boasted Arnold with a great deal more composure outwardly than he felt inside. "I don't care a snap of my finger for Wyckoff. He couldn't lick a postage stamp."

"We'll see about that!" shouted Lopez. "Doright," to the negro, "fetch that cord and tie these fellers up. Then you stay here and watch 'em while I go see what Wyckoff wants to do with 'em."

"Yaas, sir, Boss!" replied the negro. "Mah name's Doright 'case Ah always does de rightest Ah knows how. I sure does, Boss. Ever'body what knows me says dat! Ah'm a Doright nigger!"

“Shut up,” snapped Lopez. “And stay shut, too. Don’t you go talkin’ to these boys while I’m gone, or I’ll get Mammy Judy to put a conjure on you that’ll turn half of you white and the other half green. Now you remember that, or I’ll fix you!”

“Yaas, sir, Boss,” replied Doright in a shaking tone.

Quickly he obeyed the commands of his master, securely fastening the boys’ arms behind their backs with lengths of cord. He then indicated a bed on the floor of the cabin as a place where the boys might rest if they chose.

“Now you stay out here on the gallery and keep your eyes open,” commanded Lopez. “I won’t be gone more’n an hour if I can find Wyckoff and we’ll see what he wants done with these robbers!”

After he was gone Doright took up his post on the gallery. He persistently refused to reply to the boys’ questions, and after a time they refrained from trying to elicit any information.

“Looks like that villain Wyckoff was out after us and means business!” Harry ventured. “He seems to have lots of help!”

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"I guess this is one of those Spanish moss beds you were telling about, Arnold," Harry said, walking over and kicking the bed.

"Looks like it," replied Arnold, "but just now the springs in the Fortuna berths would suit me a whole lot better. I'm homesick."

"And I'm going home," declared Harry with emphasis.

"How are you going?" queried Arnold. "We can't get away from the negro outside. He's guarding the very door."

"I'll show you how we'll get out. I'm going to burn these cords off my arms, and then I'll set fire to the cabin, and when Doright rushes in, we'll rush out. Before he knows what's up, we'll be away in the woods. I'd like another piece of sheep, though!"

"Funny they brought it in here," commented Arnold. "I'll bet Lopez stole it. He was in a mighty hurry to get here and then brought it inside the cabin. He should have left it outside."

"We won't argue about that now," replied Harry kicking the remains of the fire about. "I'm going to get loose first thing!"

Arnold protested vigorously, but to no avail. Harry maintained that Tom had been kicked and Jack had been shot and therefore a burn or two on his part should be borne unflinchingly. He found considerable difficulty in getting the fire applied to the cords without also burning his own flesh. At last he was triumphant.

Quickly he loosed Arnold. He then threw the remains of the fire into the middle of the mattress. A burst of flame followed. In an incredibly short time the whole end of the cabin was blazing.

Doright horrified fled to the edge of the clearing where he felt safe. Arnold dashed out of the cabin in terror. Turning to find Harry gone he rushed back, entering just as the gallery fell.

CHAPTER XV

A SURPRISE AT THE FORTUNA

"What's it to you where we are going?" demanded Jack, as he elbowed his way past the others and confronted the giant.

"Look here, white folks," began the negro, "Ah don't want no trouble, but youall mustn't go rangin' aroun' thoo mah place like this here 'thout 'splainin' yourselves. This is mah fahm."

"Yes, it is your farm," cried Frank. "You've got as many farms as a hen's got teeth! All your farms are in your mind!"

"Nemmine about dat, boys," grinned the black. "Jes' youall tell me where youall's gwine, else mebbe somepin' gwine happen!"

"You're right, something's going to happen, and that mighty suddenly!" was Jack response. "This'll happen to you!"

He swung his arm up. Tom expected momentarily to hear the report of an automatic. Instead he saw the negro's face lighted brilliantly by the dart of flame from the imitation automatic which was fitted as a searchlight. The powerful electric light blinded and dazzled the man on whom it was thrown.

"Now, look here, fellow!" began Jack in a threatening tone. "If you don't stand one side and tell me your name at once, I'll put this light square on your foot and that foot'll wither up and tomorrow this time, it'll drop off. I could do that to your head, too, if I wanted to. But you will probably not make it necessary for me to do so. At least, I hope not."

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"Lordy, Boss," stuttered the now thoroughly frightened man, "Don't youall point that there thing mah way no mo'. Ah don't like hit—Ah pointedly does not. Youall needn't be afraid of me."

"Nobody's afraid of you, you big lummix!" declared Tom, now coming forward. "What's your name, anyhow?" he demanded.

"Mah name's Doright Abraham Jefferson Davis Canaan. Ah don' know de rest ob it. Ah 'spects dey done forgot to tell me all."

"Well it's a good thing your shoulders are broad enough to carry that much of a load," laughed the boys. "That's enough."

"Now then, Doright Whatsyourname Canaan," Jack began, "can you tell us where we are? It is dark in these woods and we don't know this country at all. Tell me where we are at."

"Well, sah," began the darky, "Youall is 'bout half way to West Pascagoula. Yaas, sir, Boss, dat am a sure 'nuf fac'."

"Good! That's enlightening!" Frank put in. "Now tell me is there a place nearby. I mean does anyone live near here?"

"No, sir," replied Doright. "Ah can show youall where they was onct, but they haint there no mo'. Done moved!"

"Lead on, Doright," commanded Jack, "and be careful on what road you set your feet. We have lost our two comrades and we are trying to find them. Our noble dog here has trailed them thus far, and he'll help us find the boys, but you can do it more quickly."

In answer, Doright turned and beckoned the boys to follow. He led them in a short time to the site of the cabin in the clearing. There the lads found only a few smoking pieces of timber and a huge bed of embers. Tom's nose was sniffing suspiciously.

"Do you get it again?" asked Frank. "I do, and it's plain as can be in here. Seems mighty funny, too!" he declared.

"It is peculiar," agreed Tom. "I can get the odor of burned flesh as plain as day. I wonder what this fellow knows."

"Doright," demanded Frank, pulling his automatic from his pocket and presenting it muzzle foremost towards the giant, "tell us what happened to the boys. Tell it quick and straight."

Quaking with fear, the negro told of the call of the boys late in the afternoon; of his preparing supper; of the rage of Lopez; of his command to tie the boys; of his own sleepiness when thinking the boys were safe and of finding the cabin afire.

He maintained that he had remained as long as it was possible to hope for the boys' safety, and then had started off in search of Lopez or Wyckoff to give them the news.

His fear was so genuine and his grief over the fact that he had been unable to do anything to save their chums so intense that the boys could not find it in their hearts to chide him further.

"Never mind, Doright," Tom exclaimed laying a hand on the broad shoulder of the negro. "We believe you did all you could and that you tried to live up to your name and to do right. Don't grieve."

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Rowdy had been ranging about the clearing while the conversation had been going on. He did not seem to take a dislike to Doright, but rather ignored him. This fact was commented on by the boys.

"Jack," Tom spoke at length, "do you know what I think?"

"No, Tom, I do not," replied Jack. "You think so many things it's hard to keep track of them all. I wish I might. What is it?"

"I don't believe the boys ever were in that cabin at all."

"Oh, yes, dey was, Boss!" protested Doright. "Ah seen 'em."

"Then they got out!" stoutly maintained Tom.

"Where are they now?" asked Frank. "And how do you explain that odor of burning flesh? There's a mystery here somewhere."

"There always is a mystery when the Beaver Patrol goes out on a hike," declared Tom. Look at the dense, dark mystery that surrounded us while we were in the Copper Country. Look at the mystery about our visit to Niagara Falls. We simply blunder into mystery every time we stir a foot! Mystery is our regular schedule!"

"Yes," agreed Jack, "but we always solve the mystery. This is going to be no exception to the rule! We must solve it!"

"Maybe Doright can explain something about this thing," suggested Frank. "Doright!" he called. "Can you tell me what makes such a smell of burning meat around here? What is it?"

"Deed, Boss, Ah cain't tell youall what it is. Ah don' know!"

"Not much use quizzing him!" declared Jack. "We can't search the ruins now. The embers are too hot. If the boys were in there when it fell, we can investigate and find their remains tomorrow. For the present, I move that we go back to the Fortuna!"

"Second the motion!" agreed Frank. "What do you say, Tom?"

"Might as well, I guess," Tom stated. "It's no use sticking around here! We can't do anything until daylight, and the embers of the fire cool off. I move we get Doright here to show us the way back to the boats, and then we'll row back to town."

"Agreed!" cried Jack at once. "Doright, do you remember the big oak that leans out over the water maybe two miles from here?"

“Deed Ah does, Boss!” declared the darky. “Mighty good fishin’ right by dat oak! Sure knows dat place mighty well!”

“Well, if you’ll take us there and then row us down to the town where our vessel is lying, we’ll pay you well for the trouble and give you a good supper and breakfast. Will you do it?”

“Sure Ah will,” replied Doright. “Ah’d be right smart proud to he’p youall. Is you ready to go right now?” he added.

Having satisfied themselves that there was nothing to be gained by lingering near the spot, the boys decided to start for the Fortuna at once.

They all hesitated a moment when leaving the clearing, looking back with lingering gaze at the spot where the cabin had stood. A lump was in each throat as they trudged wearily along in the wake of Doright the giant negro as he led them through the forest.

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At length he came out into the clearing near the big oak the boys had described. They pressed eagerly forward as the river was neared. In their desire to return to the Fortuna they were but expressing the desire of every heart to return to its home when trouble comes. Tonight the boys carried aching breasts. They believed that on the morrow they would be called upon to perform sad offices for their two friends who had been victims of a mistake.

"I'll take the big boat with Doright, and you two lads can take the little skiff that the boys used," suggested Jack, who was in the lead. "That way we can make better time, I think!"

"What's the matter with all of us going in the big boat and towing the skiff behind?" questioned Tom. "I don't want to be alone just now. I'd much rather keep together if it's possible to do so."

"How about it, Doright, can you pull the boat with all of us in it?" Jack asked. "You know it's one of those big shipyard scows!"

"Guess Ah kin, Boss," grinned Doright, in reply. "Ah'll try hahd!"

"All right, then, let's be in and away at once."

"Sure!" cried Tom who was now in the lead, and who had reached the live oak. "Sure thing. All hands and the cook get aboard!"

"Something's happened!" cried Jack. "That sarcasm is so evident in Tom's voice I just can't believe everything is all right."

"Why, nothing at all could have happened," cried Frank. "We've had more than our share of hard luck already. First you boys got off your course with a horseshoe too near the compass. Then you meet a boy who tried to let your fuel leak away. Then you meet the man who bores your ship full of holes, then you find me and we get disturbed by the possibility of Charley's being on that fishing schooner and now the boys have disappeared. It is not possible that someone has stolen our boats. It just couldn't happen. It mustn't happen."

"Well, it's the very thing that did take place," Tom answered. "Now it's a weary wait until they bring the boats back or else we'll walk back to town. I think we'd better start walking now."

"Come on, I'm game," declared Frank wheeling in his tracks. "Does Doright know the way back to town by the pedestrian method?"

"Sure," answered the one mentioned. "Ah knows every hook and crook around these here parts. I've been borned and raised yere."

“Then show us the way to town,” entreated Jack. “We’re tired.”

“Ah kin beat walkin’,” replied Doright. “Ah’s got a boat.”

The boys capered about in high glee at the prospect of a boat ride so handy. Their enthusiasm was contagious and Doright actually hurried as he went away to the place where his boat was hidden.

In a short time he returned and the boys embarked. The boat was a flat bottomed affair, made for fishing purposes, and was to be noted because of its rugged and simple construction, rather than for being a thing of beauty. Doright handled the craft with skill.

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"Now then, engineer," Tom cried flinging himself full length in the bottom of the boat, "let out a link! We're going home!"

Doright's application to the oars quickly brought the party to a point where they could distinguish the riding lights of the vessels at anchor in the river. As they were passing the mouth of a little bayou, Frank declared he saw people in a boat near the entrance. In explanation Doright told him that many people were out for fish at that hour, seeming to think the fish fed at certain hours, hence were more easily captured.

In a short time Doright's muscles had forced the ungainly looking craft to a point where it was necessary to use care in navigating the stretch of water if collision with shipping was to be avoided. His skill born of long practice was very evident. Arrived at the shipyard Jack tossed the black a dollar saying that they were grateful for the help he had rendered them.

Unchallenged the boys approached the Fortuna. They expected at least a hail from the watchman of the yard. None came.

"Ah," observed Jack stooping over a prostrate figure near the foot of the ladder leading to the deck of the Fortuna, "he sleeps."

"What's the trouble with the watchman, if it is he?" asked Tom.

"It is the watchman," Jack answered with a tenseness of expression, "and he's struck with bottle paralysis. I wonder if the Fortuna is all right, or has that Wyckoff had the run of things a while."

"Let's get aboard quickly," suggested Frank, "and look about."

"Up we go," cried Tom. "Easy, lads, the ladder's shaky."

Jack in the lead stepped inside the pilot house and down the companion-way. As he reached the cabin below, his chums heard him stumble. Quickly they reached for the light switch.

"Who left that bundle there?" asked Jack. "What's in it?"

"I didn't," declared Tom; "open it up and see what's inside."

Jack tore off the wrapper. Aghast he stared at his friends.

CHAPTER XVI

RESCUE AND CAPTURE

As Arnold rushed back into the burning cabin the gallery roof fell, effectually blocking the doorway, thus preventing escape again.

“Harry,” cried the frightened boy. “Harry, where are you?”

Through the pall of smoke and amid the hiss and crackle of flames came the reassuring call that put new life into the lad.

“Here I am over here in the corner. Come here a minute.”

“But, Harry,” urged Arnold, “come on out of here. We’ll be burned as sure as fate. What makes you stay here, anyway?”

“I’m going now,” declared the boy. “I forgot something that was left here and came back to get it. That’s all.”

Both boys now moved toward the one window of which the cabin boasted. The roof at the opposite end and directly over the bed where the fire had started was now weakening and threatened to fall.

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"Up with you now, Arnold," cried Harry. "Let's make time."

"You first," gasped Arnold. "You're burned and have had more smoke than I. Go ahead or I won't stir a step."

"All right," smiled Harry. "It's a good thing the breeze is favorable. We'll make it all right now. Wonder where Doright is."

"Never mind Doright," said Arnold, drinking in great draughts of fresh air. "Doright can take care of himself for all of me. I want to get back to the boats and the Fortuna. Let's be going."

"I'm with you," Harry agreed with a satisfied chuckle.

"What's the matter now?" asked Arnold. "I can't see what should amuse you in all this trouble. I'm worried."

"I can't tell you what makes me feel so happy, but I just imagine that we've done a good stroke of business tonight."

"In burning down a man's home?"

"Yes and no. I can't tell you any more for I don't know."

"More mystery, eh? Well, so long as we're hot-footing for home you may save the mystery. Come on, now, let's go."

The boys lost no time in starting for the place where their boat had been left. A short conference in the shadow of a clump of palmettos was held. They were agreed as to the direction, although it lay in a different quarter than the road by which they had entered the clearing. Here the boys' woodcraft stood them in good stead.

Soon they were out of the light cast by the now fallen walls of the burning cabin. Just as they felt safely away from the clearing and thought it safe to speak above a whisper a coarse voice called them to halt. They were confronted by a tall man.

"It's that man Lopez," gasped Harry. "He's got back quickly."

"What do you want?" questioned Arnold angrily. "Say it and be quick about it. We haven't time to stand here all night."

"Now, don't get gay, young rooster, or I'll cut your comb."

"It is Lopez," whispered Arnold. "He's still angry, too."

“Put up your hands,” commanded Lopez, for it was he. “Keep ’em up,” he added. “I’ll fix you all for this. You done burned my cabin and it’s got to be paid for. I’ll settle you.” Then lifting his voice he called, “Doright! Doright! Come yere.”

“Comin’, Boss,” quavered the still frightened negro.

“Doright, did these fellers set fire to my cabin?”

“Yaas, sir, Boss. Dey sure done hit,” replied that worthy.

“We might as well arrest ’em now as any other time, then,” declared Lopez. “Take this gun, Doright, and if they try to run, shoot.”

“Yaas, sir, Boss,” grinned the darky. “Ah sure will shoot.”

“Now, boys, get going,” commanded their captor. “Walk right up, too, for we’re a long ways from home and I’m tired.”

“How did you happen back so soon?” queried Harry. “I thought you had gone to town to talk with Wyckoff about hanging us.”

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"I done change my mind," answered Lopez. "I forgot something at the cabin and now hit's done burned. I have an idee I'd better shoot youall right now for that trick. Yes, sir, I just believe so."

Knowing his quick and hasty temper as they now did, the boys were not unprepared for anything that might happen. Gritting their teeth they marched bravely on even though they felt that at any moment the erratic man behind them might send a bullet into their backs. They resolved, however, to show no fear.

Not far along the path they were halted by Lopez, who whispered a short consultation with Doright. In a moment he ordered the boys to one side of the road for some distance where he compelled them to lie flat on their faces and commanded them to absolute silence on pain of instant death. He kept his rifle at their ears.

"Doright," he ordered, "go back up to that there path and see what them folks wants. If they're strangers let 'em go on. If they're the fellers I think they is, toll 'em along and lose 'em. You'll know where to find me at the factory if I lose you now."

"Yaas, sir, Boss," grinned the negro. "Ah'm named Doright."

Arnold and Harry were compelled to lie with outstretched arms and fingers digging into the sand while their comrades parleyed with Doright in plain hearing of their place of concealment. Neither dared to make a sound or in any way attract the attention of their friends. Lopez was swinging the rifle muzzle slowly back and forth.

After Doright and the other, party had proceeded to the destroyed cabin Lopez compelled his prisoners to get to their feet and walk ahead of him in the path.

"We'll have a nice little boat ride, boys," stated Lopez in a pleased tone of voice. "We're going to have a pleasant trip, too."

No answer was made to this remark by either of the boys. Their silence seemed to anger Lopez, for he upbraided them for their sulkiness. His moods changed quickly. Frowns tramped the heels of smiles. One moment he was gay, the next in despair.

Arrived at the leaning oak he compelled the lads to untie both boats, towing the small skiff that had been brought by Harry and Arnold behind the big scow rowed by their friends. Into this scow he put the boys and then seated himself, rifle in hand.

"Grab a root and growl, now," commanded Lopez. "I'm ridin' this trip. And mind you," he continued, "you better row quiet. No splashin' and bangin' around with them oars."

"We'll row as well as we can," replied Harry. "A Boy Scout always does everything he undertakes as well as he knows how."

"You're great Boy Scouts, you are," sneered Lopez. "If I had a boy like you, I don't know what I would do with him."

"You couldn't have a boy like us," declared Arnold with some heat. "You know heredity exerts a wonderful influence on boys."

This sally, luckily, was lost on Lopez for his knowledge of English was limited to say the least. His mind, ever alert, caught the sarcasm in the boy's tone, but he hesitated about showing his ignorance by asking questions concerning the meaning of the big word. He contented himself with abusing the boys in vile language.

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Pulling manfully at the oars the captives sent the scow through the water at a good rate of speed, rapidly shortening the distance between themselves and the town. Ever and anon Lopez cast a backward glance over the stern. Finally he commanded the boys to pull in closer toward the shore. His voice assumed a brisker tone with a note of anxiety in it. He was visibly excited.

"Lopez," announced Arnold, "I see a light behind us. It's gaining on us. I've seen it for two or three minutes. What is it?"

"Hush up about lights, boy," commanded their captor. "Youall don't see no lights. They ain't no lights there at all."

"But I did see a light," insisted Arnold in a positive tone.

"No, you never," repeated Lopez. "Don't make no difference if you think you saw a light, they ain't no light there."

"Oh, I get you," Harry put in. "That's another of those mysterious 'because' reasons. Or as the fellow said, 'It's so if I say so even if it ain't so.' Is that it, Lopez?"

"Yes," snapped Lopez. "Now git to work at them oars and send this boat along or it'll be the worse for you."

Thus urged, the boys bent to the oars with renewed vigor. Their efforts sent the boat along at a rapid pace. Finally as they were becoming exhausted, Lopez commanded them to head directly in shore. They did so, but instead of running ashore, shot up the entrance to a narrow bayou. Inside, Lopez commanded them to lie flat in the bottom of the boat. They heard directly the sound of approaching oars.

"What's that coming, Lopez?" questioned Harry.

His answer was a thrust of Lopez's foot in his ribs and again he felt the muzzle of the rifle creep along his spine.

With the talk and laughter of their chums ringing in their ears, Harry and Arnold were compelled to lie silently in the scow, while the other party passed them a second time that night without being aware of their presence.

"Looks like we better get up and go to work," announced their captor after the sound of the oars and talk from the other boatload had died away. "We've got a long ways to go yet," he added.

"Let's take it a little easier, if you please," requested Arnold. "My arms are nearly pulled out of their sockets."

“All right, my hearties, take your time now. I just wanted to get into clear while the others went past us,” replied Lopez.

In a short time the boys were amongst the shipping on the river. Here they were directed to row alongside a deserted wharf. Lopez guarded them while they made the boat fast and then prepared to take them up into a rough looking quarter of the town. Just as they were preparing to leave the wharf a boat was heard approaching from down stream. Lopez stopped, then gave a peculiar whistle.

What was the boys' surprise to see Doright row up alongside the wharf, make fast his boat and come ashore.

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"Doright," Lopez commanded. "Youall come with me while I fix these young rascals and then I want you to come back here and take that shipyard man's scow back to him and take that skiff back to the shipyard, too. Somebody might want them boats again."

"Yaas, sir, Boss," was Doright's unvarying reply.

The boys were marched a short distance up the deserted street to a disreputable looking shanty. Here they were forced inside and compelled to enter an inner room.

"Doright, get a piece of rope and tie these young fellers."

"Haint got no rope, Boss," announced Doright. "No rope here."

"What'll we tie 'em with?" inquired Lopez.

"Don't know, Boss," replied the darky. "Dey don't need tyin'."

"Oh no, they don't," Lopez replied sarcastically. "They didn't need it up in the woods, neither. That's why they burned my cabin down. Now I haint got no home no more'n a rabbit."

"Haint got no rope, Boss," dolefully declared Doright.

"Here, take this gun while I cut up their snake skin," cried Lopez, turning over to the negro his rifle.

He proceeded to remove from an inner pocket of his jacket the skin of the snake that had so nearly ended the life of Harry. Cutting this into strips he quickly bound the boys' arms and made them sit down on a bench. Next he prepared to leave the room, taking Doright also.

"If you are good boys and don't try to burn this place," he said from the doorway, "I'll bring you something to eat by and by."

After he had closed the door the boys sat talking over the events of the day. They were agreed that the day had been a most strenuous one and that a little sleep would be welcomed. As they prepared to lie on the floor for what rest they might get, Harry gave vent to a chuckle of laughter. Arnold was all attention.

"What is it, Harry?" he queried. "What's the joke?"

"If that man only knew what he had been missing, he wouldn't have gone away so cheerfully," replied Harry with another chuckle.

“I don’t seem to get you,” declared Arnold. “I think you might tell—” He paused. “What was that noise?” he asked.

“I didn’t hear any noise,” replied Harry sitting up.

Through the wall came the plaintive cry, “Bob, Bob White.”

CHAPTER XVII

WHAT BURNED IN THE CABIN

“Why, that’s blasting gelatine,” Jack declared. “One stick is enough to blow the Fortuna to pieces. Here are one, two, three, four, five, six—six sticks of high powered explosive lying right next to our engines. Where would the good ship have been if that stuff had let go? I tell you, fellows, this looks serious.”

“Serious is no name for it,” declared Tom. “I’m scared.”

“Wonder where he got it?” mused Frank. “It’s dangerous stuff for common folks to have. They don’t sell it at the stores.”

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"No doubt he stole it from someone who is using it for stumping, or some such work as that. He couldn't buy it," said Tom.

"But look at this fuse," Jack cried. "It looks as if it had been lighted. Sure as you're a foot high it has been lighted."

"Why didn't the stuff go off then?" queried Tom.

"I don't know," Jack admitted. "I'm going to pull the end of the burned fuse out of this stick and see what's the matter."

Suiting the action to the word, Jack slowly extracted the end of the fuse from the stick of gelatine in which it had been thrust.

"Ha, Ha," he laughed with a motion as if to slap his thigh. Startled, he caught himself in time. The laughter died away.

"What's the matter, Jack?" inquired Frank.

"I almost dropped one of the sticks," replied Jack.

"Well, what of it?" innocently Tom suggested.

"Nothing of it," Jack gruffly responded. "At least, I might say nothing of the Fortuna and her crew if I had dropped one of the sticks. They're only about an inch in diameter and seven or eight inches long, but one of them is enough to blow this vessel into chunks and the six would have blown her to little pieces."

"But why would dropping it to the floor have done damage?" persisted Tom. "I thought it had to have fire to explode it."

"That's where you're wrong," Jack explained. "Most people have the same idea. Evidently that was also the idea of the villain who planted this stuff here, for he neglected to put a cap on his fuse."

"What's a cap?" Tom eagerly asked. "I don't know about this."

"I couldn't help but notice it," Jack scorned. "Well, it's just this way—You see, dynamite will burn without exploding. A very little jar, however, sometimes is sufficient to set it going and explode it. When setting off a charge, a cap containing some fulminate of mercury is put over the end of the fuse. That stuff will explode from fire. When the fuse burns down to the cap, the cap explodes and the jar of its explosion sets off the dynamite. See?"

"Thanks," gratefully replied Tom. "Now I'm enlightened. Then the reason the Fortuna is still here is because the guy forgot to put his cap on his fuse? Am I now correct?"

"Right you are, Tom," answered Jack. "Are there any further questions? If not, the class in explosives is dismissed."

"One more, Professor, if you please." Frank had the floor. "What shall we do with the stuff? We don't want to keep it aboard."

"That's a problem," Jack announced. "We can't merely throw it overboard; nor we can't leave it in a fence corner. I'll confess I'm puzzled to know how we shall get rid of it."

"Let's leave it until morning," Tom suggested. "Just now I'm so worn out I can't think. I wish we had Wyckoff here, I'd put it in his pockets and then climb a telegraph pole with him and throw him down good and hard. When he landed it would explode and he'd get his."

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"Sure," laughed Frank. "Listen to the bloodthirsty Thomas. What do you suppose would be going on up the pole all that time?"

"Well, I'd be there watching for Wyckoff and when the explosion blew him up, I'd reach out and slap his wrist as he went sailing by."

"Well, he isn't here and probably won't be here for some time, either. We'd better get to sleep," Jack stated. "Tomorrow bright and early we'll get those carpenters at work. One plank is a short job and then it'll only be a few minutes work for all hands to slap on the copper paint and into the water she goes. We should have the Fortuna afloat before noon if everything goes well."

"Hurray!" cried Tom. "Then we'll go up to the cabin—"

His voice lost its ringing, cheery tone as he thought of what they might find at the cabin. No one could speak for a few minutes.

At last they composed themselves for slumber in the after cabin that the boys liked so well. It was fitted up with souvenirs of their various trips. Here a pair of wings from a great snowy owl that Tom had shot. There a stuffed porcupine that caused such a commotion in their camp in the Canadian wilds of Georgian Bay. Here were the jaw bones of a giant muscalonge that had taken the bait at sunrise one morning as Harry was trolling from a skiff in northern Michigan. So on it went with various trophies of the hunt and chase. The room was their parlor, where they gathered for a pleasant evening and where they preferred to spend the night.

Rowdy curled on a rug in the middle of the floor. One eye was open. Ever as he slept or dozed his limbs twitched convulsively and he moaned and muttered in his fitful unconsciousness.

No disturbance wakened the boys that night. They slept soundly as only healthy, hearty boys can sleep when their minds are filled with pure thoughts of sport and active out-of-doors life. As yet they had not been tainted with the many things that go to disturb rest. Their everyday training at the Beaver Patrol club rooms had been along right lines. Their Scout Masters were all young men of high ambition whose purpose was to teach their younger scouts that highest, noblest lesson—that man is here for a purpose and that purpose is not a selfish one. Thus far their teaching had not been in vain.

With the early beams of the morning sun Jack was awake.

"Come on, boys," he cried. "We'll have to bathe in a pint bowl this morning. No hose for us today."

"Well, if we can't have a shower bath, let's take a quick cold sponge and then have a little setting up exercise," suggested Tom.

Their actions were a revelation to the watchman who was now just recovering from his stupor of the night before. His brain was still so befuddled by the liquor that he could not at once understand what was going on about him. His surprise pleased the boys.

“What’ll we have for breakfast?” asked Tom, and then added, “Suggest something easy, for I’m cook, you know.”

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"Pancakes," cried Frank. "Those you made when we were leaving Petit Bois were just about the best I ever ate."

"Pancakes it is, then," agreed Tom dashing to the kitchenette, where he proceeded to prepare a breakfast of delicious pancakes and coffee. A few freshly boiled shrimp added to the feast were welcomed by the boys. A passing fisherman had offered them to Jack at just the right moment. The boys did ample justice to the feast.

Leaving the foreman to superintend the matter of replacing the plank where Wyckoff had bored the hole in his dastardly effort to sink the Fortuna and her crew, the boys took a boat from the Fortuna and rowed up to the leaning oak. From thence it was easy enough with Rowdy's aid to trail the route to the site of the cabin in the clearing.

The embers had now cooled sufficiently so that the boys could search in the ruins. For a moment they hesitated to explore the ashes, fearing what they might find. At last they plucked up their courage and began a thorough search. The task was not a pleasant one.

"What's this?" cried Tom. "Boys, I declare I smell burned flesh. That odor hangs around here something fierce."

"Well if that big Doright was telling the truth," Frank argued, "the boys got out of the cabin and were safe last night. How about it?"

"You can't tell anything by what that fellow said," Tom replied. "He just saw that we were worried about the boys and wanted them to be safe, so he said they were safe. That's all there is to that."

"He's considerable of a child," Jack announced. "They all are."

During this time Rowdy had been circling the spot where the cabin had stood, occasionally sending up a doleful howl.

"Watch Rowdy," Tom declared. "If he isn't an indication that something happened here last night, I'll miss my guess."

"Well, I don't believe that what you mean did happen," Jack contended. "If it was so, Doright would have acted differently. He was very composed when we saw him and that bluff he put up about this being his farm showed that he knew where the boys were all the time."

"Then what do you suppose happened to them?" Tom's voice broke.

"I don't know. They're around here somewhere. Of that I'm sure. They are not far away," Jack stoutly contended.

“What do you think Frank?” was Tom’s almost tearful query.

“I think we’d better not make up our minds until we get some better evidence than a smell or a negro’s word. Let’s keep digging.”

Accordingly the boys vigorously attacked the plan they had in mind of stirring about through all the ashes in search of a clue to the whereabouts of their chums. At last a shout from Tom proclaimed a discovery. His friends rushed to his side.

“Right here by the chimney.” Tom broke down. “There it is.”

“Now, Tom,” half scolded Jack. “Brace up, boy! Suppose it were reversed. Would you want them to squall over you?”

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"I can't help it," the boy answered. "I am not squalling, but I feel badly to lose a chum like those boys were. So do you, too."

"I sure do," answered Jack poking about Tom's discovery. "I'd feel awful to lose a good friend even if he was a black sheep."

As Jack spoke he held up on the end of a stick a small tuft of wool which had adhered to the end of his staff. With it came the odor of burned flesh again. Jack smilingly pulled Tom's sleeve.

"The boys are safe," he said, exhibiting the wool. "It was a black sheep that burned. Arnold and Harry are not black sheep."

"Good, oh, goody," cried Tom, capering about. "That's just fine."

In a short time the boys finished their search now fully convinced that whatever might have happened to Harry and Arnold they were not now in the ruins of the burned cabin.

"Now let's get Rowdy to help us track the boys to wherever they went," suggested Tom. "I'd like to find 'em."

"Good idea," responded Frank. "Let's do that. Here, Rowdy."

"Fine," declared Jack. "Just the thing, if he'll do it."

But the boys were doomed to another disappointment. Rowdy, after being put on the scent by Tom, circled about a while and then started off in the direction of the leaning oak. Although the boys tried to drive him off that trail a number of times, the bulldog persisted in following that route or none. At last they yielded.

Straight back to the oak went Rowdy. There he stopped and gazed over the water for a moment, then let out a howl that echoed and reechoed across the water.

"Well, here goes back to town," cried Jack. "That dog is all right to do some things, but he isn't much use, of course, as a bloodhound. I can't blame him but he's really no use in that line."

Rowdy felt keenly the disgrace that was heaped upon him. He slunk into the stern sheets and hid behind Frank's legs.

Once more at the shipyard the boys began to think of dinner. Before their preparations could be started, however, the foreman of the work on the Fortuna announced to them that the little vessel was all ready for the water. The plank was repaired, the boat all painted and ready for launching. Nothing was needed except a full crew.

“Let’s get her into the briny, then,” Jack ordered. “We’ve had long enough visit ashore. Let’s get out to sea again.”

“I’m with you there,” declared Frank. “It was too bad we were forced to come here at all. I want to be on my way and find the boys. They must be somewhere near here. May be they are purposely hiding.”

“Hello, there’s your boat back,” cried Tom to the day watchman. “And as I live, there’s our Petit Bois skiff,” he shouted.

“That’s the boat the boys had last night,” ejaculated Frank.

“Say,” the watchman called, “Wyckoff was lookin’ for you.”

“What did he say he wanted?” asked Jack.



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CHAPTER XVIII

SHANGHAIED!

"We ought to answer that signal," declared Harry. "Maybe there's a Boy Scout needs help in the next room."

"Remember your motto," cautioned Arnold. "Be Prepared for trouble and for enemies as well as to help someone."

"We haven't had much chance to help anyone so far today," asserted Harry. "This may be just the chance to take the knot out of our neckties, so I'm going to take a chance. We can't afford to be too careful. If we were in trouble, we'd want help."

"That's so," admitted Arnold. "Go to it, then. I'm with you."

"Let me roll over and get on my feet and I'll slap, slap, slap on the floor with my foot," declared Harry. "That'll be easy."

"Why don't you whistle 'Bob White,' at him?" queried the other.

"Because we're not allowed to use the call of another Patrol. If he's a Bob White, he can't in reason howl like a wolf or bark like a dog or slap, slap like a beaver. You understand that."

"Sure I do," admitted Arnold, "but I overlook things sometimes."

Harry now succeeded in rolling over onto his face and from that uncomfortable position rose to his feet. He balanced himself against the wall while he raised one foot and gave three distinct slaps on the floor with the sole of his shoe. Both listened sharply.

"Bob, Bob White," came the answering call through the partition.

"Who's there?" called Harry in a voice trembling with excitement.

"Bob White, St. Louis," came the muffled reply.

"Good gracious," was Harry's startled comment. "Bob White, St. Louis. Then they've got Jack and Tom and Frank cooped up here."

"That's awful," groaned Arnold. "What shall we do?"

"If it is really a Boy Scout, we'd better try to help him."

"If we only were not tied. How can we get loose?"

“There’s only one way that I can see,” stated Harry. “If you will rise to your feet so that I can get at your hands with my teeth, I’ll try to untie that rope that holds you. Then you can untie me.”

“But that isn’t a rope,” protested Arnold. “That’s a snake skin and it’s off the snake that nearly struck you. You wouldn’t think of biting on that. You just couldn’t do it. I couldn’t.”

“That’s what I thought, so I suggested that I do it.”

“What do you mean?” flashed Arnold. “I guess I can do anything you can. I’ve never been stumped yet and I shall not begin now.”

“Never mind the argument, let me get at your bonds.”

“Not yet. I’ll untie yours, but you’re not going to untie mine with your teeth. Tom got kicked in the jaw, Jack got shot and you got your wrists cruelly burned on this trip. It’s no more than fair that I should have some of the discomforts of this experience.”

“Well, then, hurry up. That fellow may be in trouble.”

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But a few minutes were required for the boy with his strong, white teeth to so loosen the knot hastily tied by Lopez as to render possible the free movement of Harry's arms. After swinging his hands vigorously a few moments to restore circulation, Harry then performed a similar office for his chum, but not, however, with his teeth. The experience was almost too much for Arnold, who for a time threatened to be ill from the suggestion of biting the thongs.

When both were freed they next gave their attention to the lad on the opposite side of the partition. Their signals had been constantly answered with the plaintive, "Bob, Bob White." "This door's locked on the other side," declared Harry, after trying the latch. "I'll bet it's got a bar across."

"Then the only thing to do is to batter down the partitions," declared Arnold. "Is it lath and plaster, or just boards?"

"They don't need to use plaster in this warm country."

"Well, then," Arnold continued, "We'll have to knock a hole in the boards. What can we get for a battering ram?"

"Here's this bench. It's heavy and solid. Let's try it."

Not many blows of the bench swung in the strong arms were required to batter loose enough of the partition to permit the boys to crawl through into the next compartment. There they found a boy of about their own age. He was dressed in a khaki uniform and medals and badges on his jacket proclaimed him a Boy Scout. Prominently displayed were merit badges proclaiming that he had attained proficiency and qualified for the honors of Signaling, Seamanship, Camping and Stalking.

"Hello, here. What's this?" cried Harry, who was first through the opening. "Why, this poor Bob White is tied hard and fast."

"Sure enough," was Arnold's comment. He followed fast on Harry's heels and was at the prostrate boy in a moment. It was a short task to free the lad of his uncomfortable fetters and help him to his feet. "Sure enough," repeated Arnold. "Poor Bob White."

Their ready sympathy proved almost too much for the stranger.

"Won't you come over and visit us?" was their invitation.

"Thanks, I'll be glad to do so," was the reply.

"I was just a bit lonesome in there, to tell the truth. I'm better now."

"What shall we call you other than Bob White?" asked Harry.

“My name is Charley Burnett,” answered their new friend. “I belong to the Bob White patrol of Boy Scouts in St. Louis.”

“And you came down the Mississippi in a launch called the ‘Spray,’ and were set upon by a gang of thugs and pirates!” cried Arnold. “How am I for a mind reader or clairvoyant?”

“You’re just fine,” declared Charley following the lads into the front room. “I wish I were half as good. I certainly do.”

“What would you do if you were?” inquired Harry.

“I’d go into a trance and see if I could locate my chum.”

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"You don't have to do that," declared Arnold. "Just cross my palm with a piece of silver and I'll locate him for you," he added with a laugh. Then pretending to take an imaginary piece of money from Charley, he went on, "Your chum is on a boat called the 'Fortuna.' He is in the hands of friends who wish him well. He has been seeking diligently for you but cannot find you. Where have you been?"

"Well," laughed Charley, amused at the joke, "I've been sailing around and around and around. Most of the time I have been on a shrimping schooner on the Gulf. This morning the men aboard of her said that I was dangerous, so they were going to put me out of the way. They brought me here and tied me up. That's all."

"Didn't you whistle 'Bob White,' at us when we were coming into the harbor here?" inquired Harry breathlessly. "I know you did."

"Maybe I did," admitted Charley. "I whistled 'Bob White,' at all possible and impossible times until they threatened to kill me."

"The brutes. I almost believe they'd dare do anything."

The tender sympathy that was evident in the tones of his new found friends proved almost too much for the fortitude of the late captive. It was only with a great effort that he restrained the tears.

"Well," at length Harry decided, "if you lads are rested, I move that we get busy, break out of here and go back to the—"

A heavy footstep sounded on the gallery outside the door. Lopez and Doright entered through the door. Doright carried a tin pail. He was followed by Lopez with one of the boys' automatics in his hand. His face darkened instantly when he saw the lads.

"You sure are tough customers," declared he. "I guess, Doright, you all better go get them old slave chains. They won't break them."

"Yaas, Sir, Boss," replied the negro hastening away.

"If you're hungry, better get at that grub while you got the chance," offered Lopez. "In a minute that nigger'll be back with the irons, and then you won't be runnin' around loose."

Urged on by their hunger the boys lost no time in attacking the tin pail. It contained but "grits," a small hominy, cooked with a piece of bacon, yet never it seemed to the lads had they tasted better food. Only the merest crumbs remained when Doright entered bearing an armful of clanking chains. These he threw on the floor.



“Make ‘em fast,” ordered Lopez, keeping the muzzle of his automatic pistol ever trained on the group before him. “Put them leg irons on good and tight. Make sure of your work this time.”

Obediently the negro clamped the irons tightly about their ankles. Then drawing a longer chain through the leg irons he lifted a board from the floor to pass the long chain under a heavy hewn joist.

A padlock securely fastened the ends of this longer chain and thus the boys were shackled beyond hope of releasing themselves.

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"Now, just to make sure, we'll leave Doright on guard and he'll have a gun in his hand. He likes to shoot, too. And he knows how."

Never had the voice of the outlaw sounded so coarse and disagreeable as now when hope seemed gone. His villainous face lighted with evil triumph as he surveyed the plight of his captives.

"Looks like old times," he gloated, "only now you boys are wearing irons that have graced the leg of many a slave. And there's a black boy guarding the white boys now. That's funny."

Throwing back his head he gave vent to peal after peal of laughter.

"What are you expecting to do with us?" inquired Arnold, who was longing to get at the throat of his jailor.

"Well, Wyckoff hasn't decided yet," replied Lopez. "He has found out that it's a mighty uncomfortable job keeping prisoners and feeding them. He couldn't keep this other boy on the schooner for it was too public. When you came chasing into port, he got scared. I was uncomfortable, too. If you had hailed me then, I guess I'd have let you take the boy off the schooner. When we got Wyckoff, though, he said it wouldn't do. Youall will never have a chance at the Treasure."

"No? Just wait and see what happens," taunted Arnold. "They say there's many a slip between the cup and the saucer. Watch us."

"You are right, I'll watch you," declared the outlaw. "When we let you go this time, you'll say Good Bye for keeps."

"You can't let things come any too swift for us," boasted Harry. "We are from Chicago, and if you've ever been on a Halsted street trolley at six o'clock of an evening, you'll know what we live on. Send along your hard times. We eat those things."

"Maybe," gritted Lopez. "You boys better sharpen your teeth."

With this he left the cabin with instructions to Doright to watch the boys and not permit any talking or communication.

Doright was at least faithful to his trust. After one or two attempts the boys gave over trying to engage the negro in conversation. Becoming cramped in their sitting positions, they shortly stretched themselves on the floor and presently were fast asleep. Awakened later by a rough hand on their shoulders, they sat up in bewilderment. The chains on their legs soon apprised them of their location and surroundings. Lopez stood over them.

“Unlock ’em, Doright,” he commanded. “Get the hand irons on ’em first and watch out, for they’re tricky. They may get you.”

The boys were marched out of the little cabin and down to the river, where they boarded a boat under the direction of Lopez.

Doright at the oars had plenty of work to pull the craft with its heavy load. At last they approached a vessel lying at anchor in the stream. Lopez’s hail brought an answer immediately.

“Up you go,” commanded the outlaw to the boys, as Doright loosened the shackles. “Over the rail with you now and no monkey work.”

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So deeply loaded was the schooner—a large three-masted vessel—that the boys had little difficulty in reaching her rail and vaulting it. Arriving on deck they found an officer and two or three members of the crew standing ready to receive them.

“Well, here are the three men you wanted,” stated Lopez to the officer. “I had hard work gettin’ them, but they wanted a vessel bad so I signed ’em on. Now to settle up if you please.”

“Take these men forward, Johnson, and break ’em in,” commanded the mate, passing some money over to Lopez. “Get a jump on ’em.”

A tug took the schooner in tow. As she passed the shipyard Charley whistled, “Bob White.” The mate’s fist descended on his head.

CHAPTER XIX

TREACHERY EXPOSED

“He didn’t say,” replied the watchman. “He left this letter.”

Proffering an envelope to Jack the watchman passed on to his duties. Apparently he had lost all interest in the missive.

Jack looked blankly at his comrades. He held the letter in his hand unopened, while the others crowded closer.

“Open it up, Captain,” urged Tom. “Let’s get at this mystery at once. We’re usually shrouded in so much mystery you could cut it with a knife. What’s the good news? Is the treasure discovered?”

“Quit your joking, Tom. This may be more serious than we think. Wyckoff is not writing letters for the fun of it. He means business.”

“I can testify to that,” declared Frank. “He surely does mean business. This treasure stuff is actually real to Wyckoff.”

“And that’s what makes him so dangerous,” Jack mused. “He’s really deluded himself into thinking there is a treasure and that it should rightfully belong to him. Therefore he gets desperate when he imagines anyone is trying to take it from him. He’s bad medicine.”

“Well, let’s get at the letter,” cried Tom impatiently.

“Yes, open it up, Jack, and let’s hear what he has to say.”

“Well, here it is,” Jack replied unfolding the paper. “He says: ‘For the last time, go back. Your pals are put out of the way and you are next. The treasure belongs to me and I’m going to have it.’”

“That’s a pretty ‘howdedo,’” declared Tom as Jack’s voice ceased. “I suppose he thinks a Boy Scout will up and go right home.”

“Evidently he doesn’t believe any such thing, but just to be on what he calls the safe side, he’s sent this warning.”

“What did he sign it? Does he leave any address for an answer?”

“Not an address,” declared Jack. “It’s a pretty poor thing to scare a lot of Boy Scouts with, but I suppose it was the best he could do. It wasn’t quite up to his standard of boring holes in boats, though. This is rather mild for Wyckoff.”

“That reminds me,” announced Tom. “We’d better have them drop the Fortuna into the water as quickly as we can, for she won’t improve any where she is and we may want to make a quick getaway.”

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"Bright boy," Jack responded. "We'll do that same and then go uptown for some more supplies. I wonder where we can get some gasoline. We ought to have a wagon load of the stuff."

"Yes, we surely need it and if we get any more of that Madero lad on board we'll need to have a wagon go along with us."

"Wonder where he is now," Frank mused. "He certainly was a great lad. He didn't look so bad at heart. He looked to me as if he had gotten into bad company and didn't know the way out."

"He's a bright fellow, surely," agreed Jack. "Now let's get to work. Where is the foreman? We'll need him first."

In due course the necessary steps were taken and the Fortuna was again in the water. Not even an expert could have discovered the place where Wyckoff had bored the hole that so nearly cost the lives of the lads aboard the trim craft. She was again seaworthy.

A trip to the business part of town was made to select necessary supplies and order a stock of fuel. This occupied the better part of the day, for the lads were careful in their buying. They were well posted as to value and refused to allow the local merchants to overcharge them for any goods.

At length the supplies were all aboard and stowed in their places. The gasoline wagon had driven away and the boys felt more confident with full lockers and gasoline tanks.

"We're ready for a night's rest and a long cruise," declared Tom, as the boys sat down to a supper of fried fish, sweet potatoes and coffee. A bone from the nearby butcher shop had been provided for Rowdy who lay upon a newspaper spread in a corner of the cabin, munching in peace. His manner recently had been quite composed. Everything about the Fortuna seemed to speak of peace.

How little the boys knew what a few more hours held in store for them. How unfortunate, indeed, were they that the knowledge of future events was withheld. They might not have enjoyed the supper so much had they been aware of all that was to transpire.

Discussing the events of the past few hours, speculating upon the possible location of their chums, making plans for the future, the boys sat late about the table. Rowdy fell asleep over his bone. At last Tom jumped up, declaring he would wash the dishes if the others would sweep and put the cabin to rights.

Busily the boys went at their tasks and soon the Fortuna was once more "Ship shape and Bristol Fashion," as Jack loved to say.

“What do you suppose Wyckoff meant when he said our pals are out of the way and we are next?” questioned Frank, a trifle uneasily, as his mind traveled back to the last time he had seen Charley and his launch the “Spray.” “Do you suppose he meant—”

“Nothing of the sort,” interrupted Jack. “Unless it was an accident, I can’t believe that those villains would make away with the boy as you mean. I think he is alive and well, but being detained by Wyckoff and his gang until they have a chance to make another effort for this mythical treasure. Then the lads will be free.”

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"Oh, I hope so," fervently declared Frank. "If anything should happen to Charley, I could never forgive myself for bringing him down here with me. His parents would be prostrated with grief."

"I believe you'll find it to be as I say," Jack continued.

"Sure thing," cried Tom. "Those fellows may be pretty rough amongst their own neighbors, and do things that are mighty bad, but when they get amongst outsiders, they know that an inquiry would be made to trace the chaps who disappear. All three boys are safe, I really believe. At least, I'll require positive proof to the contrary."

Presently the boys prepared to retire. They felt quite satisfied to know that their home was once more afloat. Jack declared he rested better when the vessel was rocked by the waves.

None of the lads slept soundly. Rowdy seemed to have lost his composure of a few hours earlier and paced up and down the cabin.

Occasionally one of the boys would start up from his bunk and wander about to peer from the windows or pilot house. The moon light flooded the town and river, turning the rigging of the ships into silver and glittering in dazzling bits of light from the rippling waters. Deep black shadows were cast by every object.

Thus up and down the boys were passing a restless night.

"Get up fellows," called Tom at length. "Here's a pretty sight. A schooner—I think she's a three master—is leaving town. See the fountain of sparks from the tug's smokestack. What a sight it is to see those sails going up. I wonder where she's headed for."

"Look at the man away up there in the top," cried Jack.

"And there goes another up the main rigging," put in Tom. "The sails go up slowly somehow. I guess she's short handed."

"Maybe she's like many another vessel that my father has told me about," offered Frank. "He has often told me of ships that left port with only two or three sober hands besides the captain and officers. When they were once outside the harbor and had been dropped by the tug, the mate would go to forecastle and rouse out the hands. If they were drunk, he'd beat them until they were sober."

"What a terrible thing," cried Jack in horrified tones.

"And then he sometimes has told me of fellows who were shanghaied aboard vessels against their will and kept below until so far away that swimming back would have been suicide."

“Why didn’t they complain when they once got ashore?” asked Tom. “I should go right to the American Consul at the port.”

“Well, maybe they felt that if they did they would have had fair treatment and maybe not. You know a captain of a vessel is king on board his boat when they are at sea. He might log a man for mutiny and the chap would be glad to run away from the vessel when he landed.

“It must be a tough life on those deep sea craft in spite of all the fine stories we read. I don’t want to go to sea.”

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"Right you are, Tom," cried Jack. "But look at the chap, he's headed right in for us. I do believe he'll be on us in a minute."

"Sound the Klaxon a little," said Frank. "Maybe he'll sheer off. Why not switch on the lights? He might see them."

Quickly this suggestion was followed. Not a moment too soon it seemed, for the tug crew had evidently been watching the vessel they were towing and had not noticed the Fortuna. A whirl of the spokes by the pilot brought the tug on a course away from the motor boat, but the schooner had headway enough so that she came right on. By the narrowest margin she cleared the Fortuna.

The boys breathed easier as she slipped past them, her bulk looming large beside the vessel they occupied.

"What was that?" asked Jack, holding up a hand for silence.

"I didn't hear anything," declared Tom. "What do you hear?"

"I thought I heard it, too," cried Frank. "The Bob White call."

"Where could it have come from? It must be that some of the men around here use that whistle," Jack decided. "We've heard it before."

Although the boys discussed the matter thoroughly they could not decide where the call could have been sent from and finally again composed themselves for sleep, after extinguishing all but the riding or anchor light gleaming at the head of their signal staff.

Morning was just breaking when they were again aroused. This time a tap at a window brought Rowdy to attention and made Jack spring to his feet in alarm. In a boat sat Doright, the negro.

"What do you want?" demanded Jack. "Can we do anything for you?"

"No sir, Boss, youall caint do nothin' for me," answered the negro, rolling his eyes upward. "Mebbe youall kin do something for them pardners of yourn! They done gone away."

"Gone away!" gasped Frank, now joining Jack. "Gone away!"

"Yaas, sir, Boss, dey done goned away on a ship named the 'Walkfast.' I done holp Mister Pete put 'em on board."

"Where is this ship now?" demanded Frank crisply.

"She done lef' a hour or two ago," answered the negro. "If youall wants to know where she gwine, go ax de man at de custom house."

"That's a sensible thing to do," declared Jack. "Take this fellow aboard, while I go up to the custom house and find where the ship Walkfast was bound for and if this chap is not lying, we'll take a little cruise for an appetizer. Don't let him get away."

In a few minutes Jack came running back breathless. He made haste to get aboard, signaling for the boys to hoist the anchor.

Not a second was lost in getting the Fortuna under way with her nose pointed out to sea. After the engines had been set whirling Jack recovered his breath and explained that the vessel had been the schooner "Quickstep," that had so nearly wrecked the Fortuna. Her clearance was for New York and she was heavily laden with lumber.

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"We can make about three miles to his one," Jack explained. "We're about three hours behind him so we ought to catch him in about an hour or so from now unless he steers a course different from that taken by other vessels. He's heading for the Dry Tortugas."

"Shall we boost the engines a little?" urged Tom.

"No; better let them go as they are," replied Jack. "Every machine has what I'd call an 'economy notch.' Beyond that on either side more work may be done, or less, but at the expense of straining the engines or fuel or something. They're doing excellent work right now, so let's not disturb them. It won't be long now."

The minutes seemed to drag like hours, however, to the boys. The glasses were constantly used by Tom, who was perched on top of the pilot house, sweeping the water for a trace of a sail.

"I see her," he shouted. "I mean Ship Ahoy. No, Sail Ho."

Directly the Fortuna overhauled the vessel they pursued.

"I want to speak to your captain," hailed Jack.

"Keep off, or I'll shoot," replied the mate at the rail.

"Bob, Bob White," came a whistle from the rigging.

CHAPTER XX

RESCUED AT SEA

"Bob, Bob White," replied Frank from the Fortuna. "Oh, there you are, Charley. Thank God. Oh, come down and come aboard."

"Yes, he'll come aboard," vociferated the mate in a coarse voice. He was a brutal looking fellow, to whom the boys instantly took a violent dislike. "He'll stay where he is and so will you."

With these words he drew from the pocket of his trousers a revolver of old style, but of aspect fully as vicious as its owner. It was of large calibre, and from the way in which the mate handled it he was evidently familiar with its use.

But Jack was not to be daunted so easily. Stretching the truth a bit, perhaps, he replied to the threat of the mate:

“Oh, well, if you feel like bucking the government, go ahead. I can’t sink you with this craft, or you’d be at the bottom in a jiffy. But you know what it means to disobey orders of an officer.”

At this the fellow perceptibly weakened. But because the members of the crew had overheard his threats and feeling like so many cowardly bullies do that he must make good his word, even though in the wrong, he again shook the menacing revolver and shouted:

“You fellows keep off or I’ll shoot. You can’t steal my crew. I’m a bucko mate, I am. You better sheer off.”

“Drop that gun, you villain!” cried Charley Burnett, high up in the schooner’s rigging. At his words the mate turned.

Instantly a ringing voice from the Fortuna called out:

“Now I’ve got the drop on you! Let that gun go and tell the captain I want to talk to him or I’ll have to shoot.”

Tom was perched on top of the Fortuna’s pilot house with a rifle in his hands, the muzzle pointed straight at the mate.

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When the coward saw that he was indeed covered by a weapon in the hands of a determined person, his grasp on his own means of offense loosened, permitting the revolver to drop to the deck.

Seeing that he was for the time worsted he tried to cover his confusion with a grin that was more of a snarl.

“Better send for your captain and be quick about it,” cried Jack impatiently. “We can’t afford to burn up good gasoline chasing you. Move quickly and it will be better for you.”

Ungraciously the mate dispatched one of the hands to call the captain who appeared on deck directly in a not very good humor.

When he saw the boys in their neat uniforms, however, and observed the trim appearance of the craft alongside his own vessel, his manner changed. He approached the rail and hailed:

“Launch, Ahoy! What can I do for you?”

“I must speak with you on important business, Captain.”

“All right, sir. If you’ll bear off a little, I’ll heave to and you may come aboard. I’m heavily laden and on short time, but I’ll spare you a few moments if you can be brief.”

In a short time the schooner lay quietly upon the water, with the Fortuna ranged alongside. Fenders had been put overboard by the Fortuna’s crew in order to protect the paint on the launch.

Jack was received by the captain, who met him with a smile and hearty handshake of welcome. The situation was soon explained by Jack, who won the captain’s heart by his straightforward, manly appearance and by his directness of speech.

“So we’ve got some of your chums who have been shanghaied?” queried the captain, when Jack had finished his recital.

“It looks that way, Captain,” Jack announced.

“Well, what are you going to do about it?” inquired the master of the sailing vessel in a tone intended to be severe.

Jack was watching his new acquaintance closely and thought he detected just the suspicion of a twinkle in the captain’s eye.

“He’s playing for time to try me out,” thought the lad rapidly. “He wants to see what I’ll do in case of refusal.”

Outwardly he gave no indication of what was in his mind, but appeared to be pondering the situation deeply. At length he said:

“Captain, I’ll have to leave it up to you. We want our chums who are aboard your vessel. I don’t know what the marine law is nor whether we’d have a right to seize them by force if we were able. So I think I’d better leave it to you. What shall we do, Captain?”

“Well, when you put it that way,” replied the Captain, reaching for Jack’s hand and seizing it in a hearty grasp, “I think you’d better take the lads and with them my apology. Will that do?”

“Captain, you’re a brick,” shouted Jack, forgetting for a moment in his enthusiasm the difference in their rank. The next moment he was all confusion over his breach of etiquette.

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Laughing, the captain preceded him up the companion-way and called to the mate. He then ordered the boys who had been shipped aboard the "Quickstep," released and turned over to the captain of the Fortuna. This was done much to the mate's disgust.

There need be no doubt as to the heartiness of the greetings that passed between the separated members of the Beaver and Bob White Patrols once they were united again. Introductions followed hastily.

As the "Quickstep" sailed away on her course again, the crew of the Fortuna gathered on top of the cabin and waved a farewell, cheering until they were hoarse. At length Jack called them below.

"How about some eats?" queried Tom. "I'm so empty I'd make a first rate drum. I declare I haven't had anything to eat in weeks."

"Rubber," shouted Harry. "Stretch it. You mustn't fib."

"Well, I mean it seems that long," declared Tom. "Who'll be the cook? Shall we run slowly until breakfast is ready?"

"That's a good idea," Jack answered. "Let's run under a check until breakfast is over, then we'll make good time straight for Biloxi."

"Hurray, we're homeward bound," shouted Tom. "Hurray again!"

"Shower bath first," cried Arnold, dragging out the hose.

What a glorious morning that was. Doright laughed until he could laugh no more to see the antics of the boys who took turns holding the hose on each other. The sun was just up clear of the horizon ushering in a day that promised to be beautiful. Only a slight swell was running on the Gulf giving the boys an excellent opportunity for a shower bath on deck. They availed themselves of the opportunity and frolicked about to their heart's content.

At length the boys produced the brushes and proceeded to scrub the Fortuna until she shone—as Tom put it—"like a new bottle."

Jack volunteered to act as cook, drafting Arnold to assist because of the extra number of mouths to be fed. Doright stayed about the kitchenette, taking in every detail of the splendidly equipped boat. To his eyes, unaccustomed to anything of the sort, the vessel was splendid beyond compare. He was charmed.

Presently breakfast was served. All did ample justice to the shrimps, sweet potatoes and chicken gumbo that Jack had prepared. The excellence of the coffee was remarked by all.

At length the boys, having eaten their fill, spread the remains of the breakfast for Doright. He had been serving as the boys ate.

"If there isn't enough breakfast for you. Doright, we'll make some pancakes for you," Jack offered in a friendly tone.

"Thankee, Boss. Ah guess there's more'n Ah kin eat," protested Doright. "Ah haint no heavy eater, nohow. Ah just lunches."

Leaving the negro to satisfy his appetite and wash the dishes, the boys repaired to the pilot house for a conference. There detailed explanations of all that had happened since Harry and Arnold left for a fishing trip were made, while Frank Evans and Charley Burnett told their story of the incidents in which they had been concerned.

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"I'm puzzled over two things," stated Jack at length.

"What are they?" queried Arnold. "Ask me, I can tell you."

"First, I'm puzzled over the sudden turn of front in Doright."

"That's a fact," was Tom's rejoinder. "He has turned his coat mighty sudden. I wonder what caused him to do it. Let's ask him."

This was no sooner proposed than it met with instant favor. Doright was called from his labor to join the meeting.

"Doright," Jack began in a kindly tone. "We have had reason to believe that you were opposed to us in times past. We knew that you were working against us and that you helped make prisoners of these lads here. Now what we want to know is, why should you turn about and tell us when they were just being put out of the way?"

Breathlessly the boys all leaned forward to catch the story.

"Well, sir, Boss, hit's jess like this here," began Doright. "Mah name's Doright Abraham Jefferson Davis Canaan. Ah fergit the rest. Ever sense Ah was little Ah been told by mah mammy to do right—Doright! Dat's mah name and Ah tries to do right."

"Thanks," smiled Jack. "Now tell me why you changed so."

"Well, sir, Boss, Ah jest seen that these yere boys wuzn't no men. Ah wuz willin' to let Lopez take the boys and shet 'em up an' all that. But when hit come to puttin' of 'em aboard a bucko schooner, Ah says to mahse'f, Ah says: 'Doright, dat haint right.'"

"Yes, and what then? Why didn't you take them off the ship?"

"She done gone. So Ah jest says to Mister Pete—dat's Lopez—Ah says, 'Mr. Pete,' Ah says, 'youall better git them boys back,' an' Mr. Pete he done fotch me a clip over the haid with his'n gun an' Ah specs Ah got a bump right there now. 'Course Ah done hit Mr. Pete then and so Ah come on down to see youall. Mr. Pete he won't come to for a long time. Don't no-body come to for for a long time when Ah hits 'em. Ah don't know mah own strength dey tells me."

"So, that was it, eh?" observed Frank. "Conscience got to hurting a little and we owe the presence of this united band of Boy Scouts to our friend Doright. Boys, I move three cheers for Doright! Give them real heartily now, as if you meant it."

The ringing cheers went echoing across the waters of the Gulf, bringing a grin to Doright's black face. He scarcely caught the entire meaning of this tribute, but he sensed the import of it.

"I think we'd better give Doright a little souvenir," Frank suggested. "Doright, what would you like to have best of all?"

Doright considered deeply, scratching his head meanwhile. At length he looked up with a smile spreading across his face.

"Ah reckon I'd like best to jes' cook an' clean upon this here boat. She sure am a fine boat and Ah wouldn't be in the way a littlest bit. Ah could sleep down in here by the engines or on deck."

"All right, Doright," answered Jack. "We'll have to consider the matter a while. We'll let you know later. You may go now."

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After the negro's disappearance toward the cabin, the boys again gathered about Jack, eager for the next development.

"After Doright's lucid explanation, I think we have reduced our troubles to just one," he announced in a tone of finality.

"Just one trouble on earth," shouted Harry. "Oh my!"

"And what, pray, might that be?" queried Frank.

"That is just the question of whether or not there really is a treasure and if there is whether or not it is getatable, and whether Wyckoff and Lopez and their gang of rascals will make us the trouble they have been trying to make if we endeavor to get the chest."

"Well," speculated Charley, "if there isn't a treasure, there might just as well be one for Wyckoff and Lopez and their gang believe there is one, and they're ready to fight to the last breath to get it."

"They're surely scrappers," Arnold announced. "We know that."

"Yes," agreed Harry, "they're scrappers from the very word."

"Look at what we've had to contend with before we fairly start."

"What I'm worried about," Jack announced, "is that although Lawyer Geyer gives minute instructions about everything else he doesn't give any information as to the site of the chest. The fort must have been an acre or so in extent, yet he doesn't say whether it was buried in this corner or that, or out near the wood shed or what."

"We'll have to dig it all up," laughingly declared Frank.

"I can fix that," boasted Harry. "I know exactly the spot where we should turn the first shovelful of earth."

CHAPTER XXI

A FRIEND AND AN ENEMY

"Yes, you know all about this business," scorned Arnold. "I'll wager you were there when the stuff was buried."

"No I wasn't there, but I know where to dig just the same. I can tell you within two feet of where the chest was planted."

“Harry,” Jack said soberly, “this is getting to be almost too serious a matter to joke about. If you have any information that would be of help to us, let’s have it, but don’t joke us.”

“I’m not joking,” bridled Harry. “I’ve got some information that I believe to be pretty near the exact thing we’re looking for. I got it from a man who wouldn’t have parted with it for his right hand if he’d known about it, so I think it is all right.”

“Where did you get it and what does it look like?”

“I got it in the cabin in the woods that was burned down. When Lopez left us that time to go for Wyckoff in order to have his captives appraised and disposed of, I remembered that I had seen him just before supper step over to a chest in the corner of the room. He unlocked the chest, took an envelope from his pocket, put it in the chest and dropped the lid. It was a spring lock for he didn’t lock it again, but tried it to see if it was fast.”

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“So, of course, you picked the lock and stole his time card.”

“Wait, Tom,” cautioned Jack. “Let Harry finish his story.”

“So, of course,” went on Harry, “when we were getting loose I forgot all about the paper until the place was afire. Arnold went out of the cabin and I was at his heels, but remembered the envelope. I wanted that badly just then, so I snatched up a great piece of firewood and with a few blows shattered the top of the chest. It had a tray that was nearly empty except for the thing I sought. There it lay, ready for me to take. So, of course, I took it. I stuffed it inside my jacket while we climbed out and then in the darkness I put it into an inside pocket where it has been ever since. Lopez forgot to search us very diligently or he would surely have discovered it.”

“What does it look like and do you think it has any information we could use?” inquired Jack, intensely interested.

“I don’t know what the thing inside is made of,” answered Harry producing the article. “It looks like leather of a peculiar kind and on it are black marks. If it were not for one thing, I’d have passed it up entirely. Over in the corner are the words—‘Biloxi Bayou.’ Then the rest was as clear as mud.”

“Let’s take a look at it,” requested Arnold. “We all want to see what it’s like. If it was left by a Spaniard, it’s no use to us, for we can’t read Spanish and when Harry says he read it, I can’t believe he knows what he’s talking about. He can’t read Spanish.”

“I can read this all right,” protested Harry, “and so can you. It’s very simple. Here’s a mark and there’s a mark and that’s all.”

He now spread the chart open above the binnacle so that the boys all might look at it. As he had said, it was a piece of soft Spanish leather left white by the dyer but now yellowed and darkened somewhat with age. In rather uneven lines were traced roughly the location of certain objects intended obviously to be trees. Certain of these were ranged in line like the range lights used by mariners when entering or leaving a harbor. At a spot where two lines of ranges crossed, which was evidently near the water’s edge, was a rough sketch of a box. Evidently no words were needed.

“I see it all as plain as day,” declared Arnold. “This old chap selected a spot at the intersection of two ranges using big trees—maybe live oaks—then he dug a hole and buried the chest. It is right where the tide comes up so no one would think of looking there for it! He was a wise old chap.”

“Then we’ll have to go there when the tide’s out.”

“No, I don’t think so. I have another idea,” Jack put in, “but it’s so foolish that we better forget it. Anyhow, I believe the fellow tried to say that the box was buried just at the high water mark.”

“All right, let it go at that,” returned Harry. “If the box is there and the trees are there, that’s all we want. We can get it.”

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"If Wyckoff and his gang don't get there first."

"What I want to know," Charley spoke up, "is what makes this line and the others, too, so uneven. They are soaked right into the leather and looks as if the ink hadn't run evenly."

"Frank," queried Jack, "what do you make of it?"

"I'd hate to say right out," Frank answered, "but it looks to me like the old Don had run out of ink and used a little red ink from the arm of one of his trusty followers. A little hot water would set it and turn it black so it would never fade."

"That's horrible," shuddered Tom. "I don't like to think of such a thing. It makes me shivery all over just to think of it."

"Well, we'll get over to Biloxi as soon as we can and look over the ground. When we think we've located the treasure, we'll just shove a spade into the sand and up'll come the dollars."

"Sure, Tom, you've got it all doped out to a dot."

"Where are we now? Seems we ought to be nearly to Biloxi by this time. We've been hitting up a pretty good pace."

"We've got a long ways to go yet. There's Pascagoula over there on the starboard side now. We ran some little distance to the east."

"Sail ho," sung out Charley who was keeping a lookout from the top of the pilot house. "I see a man in a row boat."

"Where away?" asked Jack.

"Almost dead ahead! He's not rowing very hard."

"How shall I head to pick him up?" Jack questioned.

"Just a trifle to starboard. There. Steady as she goes."

In a short time the Fortuna driven by her powerful engines came up to the rowboat. As the boys approached the lone occupant of the skiff all were eager to see who it might be.

"Some early morning fisherman," ventured Arnold.

"He isn't fishing," declared Harry. "He's resting on his oars."

Harry now mounted to the pilot house roof and took the glasses.

"I know that chap," he cried. "Better starboard your helm and go to port of him. We don't want to get any closer to that chap."

"Who is it, Harry?" asked Jack.

"Little Simple Simon Sorefooted Carlos Madero at your service."

"He got run over once by getting in the way of this vessel. I wonder if he's trying it again," mused Jack, holding the Fortuna on her course. "We've got crew enough now so that we can mount guard over him day and night if we want to. Let's pick him up and see what he knows. We can easily tow his skiff along."

"Sure! Let's pick up a shark or two! Let's explode some dynamite in the cabin. Let's drill holes in the ship. Let's anything."

"Now don't get sarcastic, if you please. Madero didn't do all those things. He tried something once and didn't make it work."

"Yes, and he got a sore foot, too! He's out here for more."

Answering the hail from the Fortuna, Madero, for it was he, asked to be taken aboard. He seemed weak and unable to help himself. When his condition became apparent the boys were all sympathy. They quickly helped him over the rail and then took his boat in tow.

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"What's on your mind, Madero?" laughed Jack. "How are you?"

"I want first of all to tell you fellows how sorry I am I ever did anything to harm you. I believed that you were some terrible creatures come down here to rob and pillage and torture the natives. I had been told by Wyckoff that if you caught me alone you would not hesitate to kill me. He made me believe I was doing something creditable when I attempted to destroy your boat."

"Well, that's all right, Madero. We forgive you."

"And I want to say that I came aboard your boat the other night to finish what Wyckoff and I both had failed to do earlier. When you boys were so kind to me after my accident I hadn't the heart to hurt you. I returned to Wyckoff and refused to do any more. He then had me taken back into the country and put into the chain gang where the negro criminals are worked on the public highways."

"The brute," exclaimed the boys almost in chorus.

"And when I made a trifling mistake," went on Carlos, "the foreman had me stretched over a log and whipped like an animal. My back has been bleeding badly and I hoped I might find you to help me again if you can bring yourselves to do it. I don't deserve it."

"Sure, we'll help you if we can," stoutly maintained Harry.

"How did you happen to be away out here?" asked Jack.

"When I got away from the chain gang, I went to the shipyard and asked for you. The foreman is furious. He says you jumped your bill. I found out that you had headed to the eastward and I at once concluded you had pursued the schooner. Then I thought you'd be coming back, headed for Biloxi. So I waited."

The boys now tenderly removed the clothing from Madero's bruised and bleeding back. Cruelly had the lash torn the flesh. Their first aid chest was speedily opened and soothing lotions and ointments applied. Their work was skillfully and quickly done.

Madero's gratitude knew no bounds. He could scarcely restrain the tears as he tried to thank the boys for their kindness.

"Do you happen to know anything about what the gang did with our launch, the 'Spray'?" inquired Frank. "I hope she's not lost."

"I think you'll find her at Biloxi," answered Carlos. "They were going to take her there and hide her until this matter had blown over. They might have repainted her and sold her under some other name after a while, but at present she's there, I believe."

“That’s good news,” declared Charley. “I like that boat.”

“And you want to watch out,” Carlos added, “for a shrimping schooner of those fellows. They have left Pascagoula already this morning and are headed for Biloxi Bay. They are determined that you shall not, under any circumstances, beat them to the treasure.”

“So there is a treasure?” asked Jack. “Do you think there is really a treasure hidden there, or is it all talk?”

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"I don't know," replied Carlos. "They believe the story."

A berth was now turned over to Madero and he was urged to lie down and take what rest he could. As he curled up in the berth, Rowdy came in, jumped up on the berth and curled up beside the newcomer. Not a sign of antagonism did the bulldog exhibit.

"Well, you're all right now," declared Harry. "That bulldog's our acid test. When he thinks a fellow is all right, that settles it."

"That is very comforting," declared Carlos. "I hope Rowdy and I become great friends. He's a nice dog."

"How's the foot?" inquired Harry. "I forgot to ask before."

"Great," declared Madero. "You boys are fine doctors."

Just at dusk the Fortuna drew into Biloxi bay. The boys had decided that a few fish would be required for supper and had run out some distance from shore where they threw over their lines with good success. Several Spanish Mackerel graced the bag as a result of their efforts. They were justly proud of their catch.

Charley and Frank were elected cooks for the evening. With Doright's assistance they soon had a fine supper prepared. Fresh mackerel with a package of Saratoga chips was the piece de resistance, but the table did not lack for comforts. It was noticeable that their appetites were increasing. All were feeling in prime condition.

Just before supper was served the Fortuna was tied up alongside the wharf of the shrimping factory where the fishing vessels landed their cargoes. The electric lights were turned on, presenting a cheerful scene as one viewed the craft from shore. Night was falling rapidly and the boys were glad they had reached port.

Rowdy interrupted the peaceful scene by growling and moving about uneasily. He ran whining from one door to the other.

Madero, who was sitting at the end of the table, glanced up from his plate to peer out of a window. With a gasp he fell back.

"There's Lopez!" he cried, pointing through the window.

CHAPTER XXII

A DESPERATE ATTEMPT

Doright was standing near the door. Rowdy's excitement now increased to a high pitch. He dashed madly to and fro in the cabin.

"I saw the fellow's face for a minute," cried Jack. "Open the door, Doright, and let Rowdy out. He wants to meet his friend."

"Go on, dog!" whispered Doright, obeying Jack's order.

Quick footsteps sounded on the wharf. A man was running away. Rowdy lost no time in scrambling on deck and from there to the wharf. In a moment came a shriek, followed by a shot. The boys shivered in apprehension. Their pet was alone in the dark and a shot had been fired. It seemed as if they must go to his assistance.

Not many minutes passed before the boys felt the Fortuna rock as a body landed on the deck. Rowdy burst into the cabin.

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"Look at the boy!" shouted Arnold. "Good old Rowdy! Good dog!"

"What's that he has in his mouth?" inquired Charley.

"That, my friend," explained Arnold, who sat near Rowdy, "is what every dog gets when he runs fast—pants."

"Stop your joking, Arnold," cautioned Jack. "Look at that bloody ear of Rowdy's. He's been shot. That's some of Lopez's work."

At once a rush was made for the white bulldog. Rowdy seemed to pay little attention to the lacerated ear, pierced by the outlaw's bullet, but paraded the cabin exhibiting the cloth proudly.

"I do believe he got a piece of Lopez's trousers!" declared Jack exultantly. Then giving Rowdy an approving slap he continued, "There's one time Lopez got a reminder his presence wasn't wanted."

"True enough," agreed Frank, "but he may return when things have quieted down, and when he comes back he may be prepared to do serious damage. That gang is desperate and will hesitate at nothing."

"Let 'em come," boasted Arnold, jumping up from his position on a locker where he was trying to cajole Rowdy into parting with the souvenir which he had brought aboard the Fortuna.

"Yes, let 'em come," stoutly agreed Harry. "There are enough of us here so we can stand watch and watch tonight and be prepared to keep off all intruders. And we'll use force, if necessary, too."

"It's a problem," Jack said thoughtfully. "I'm sure I don't know what to do. Those fellows may contemplate and execute serious damage to the Fortuna and to her crew. Again, they may be so near the treasure they'll only think of remaining near that to guard it."

"By the way, Jack, where is this fort? Rather, where was it?"

"As nearly as I am able to determine just now, it was located on the north side of that point that lies on the east side of the bay. There's a bayou sets up to the eastward from that point and it is on the chart here as 'Fort Bayou,' so I think that must have been the place. Anyhow, that's the place to which I have been directed."

"Here it is," cried Charley, who had been examining the chart. "Here it says, 'Old Spanish Fort.' It's just where you said it was."

"Then we'll go over there in the morning, if you like."

“Let’s go over there tonight,” urged Tom. “There’s going to be a fine moon and we’re all interested, so we won’t sleep any.”

“Sure! That would be fine,” scorned Harry. “All of us go across the bay looking for this old treasure and Wyckoff will have a free hand to come in and sink the good ship Fortuna.”

“We can draw straws and leave a watch here,” suggested Tom.

“And Wyckoff or Lopez throw a stick of dynamite over on deck and up in the air they’d go! Why not take the Fortuna along?”

“I don’t think there’s water enough over there,” Jack objected.

“Well, then, I’ll tell you what we’ll do,” began Harry, “we’ll all of us hold an election. Let Doright in on it and Carlos and—”

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"Yacht Ahoy!" came a hail from the wharf.

"Answer him, Tom, you're nearest the door," suggested Jack.

"Ahoy there, what do you want?" called Tom.

"Is that the Fortuna?" queried a heavy voice.

"Yes, sir," answered Tom. "What do you want?"

"I'll come aboard, if you please!" replied the stranger.

"Better wait a minute until we can size you up," cried Jack, stepping into the pilot house and switching on the searchlight, which he trained upon the man standing on the wharf. "We're not unprepared for callers and we want to make sure, you know. What do you want?"

"I guess when you see this," laughed the man, exhibiting a star under his coat, "you won't object to my coming aboard. I am sorry to say," he continued in a tone of mock seriousness, "I am a United States Marshal. May I come aboard now?"

"Yes, sir, you may," declared Tom. "But you must excuse us for our precaution. We've been through some trying experiences and it's no wonder we feel we must protect ourselves."

"Got away from Pascagoula in a hurry, didn't you?" smiled the stranger introducing himself as Roger Harrison.

"Yes, we did," stated Jack, introducing the other boys. "We got word from Doright, here, that our friends and our friends' friend had been shanghaied aboard a schooner and so we went after them and got them, too," he proudly stated.

"Well, boys, it seems to me it would have been real easy to stop and pay your shipyard charges when you were coming back."

The boys all gasped. In the excitement of rescuing their chums the matter of settling their bill at the shipyard had been crowded out of their minds. All were amazed and regretful.

"What can we do?" questioned Jack. "I'll jump on a train and go right back there and pay them. When is the next train?"

"Don't be in a hurry. Hear the rest," said the Marshal.

"Is there anything worse?" wailed Jack. "I feel real cheap."

“Nothing that you can’t get out of, I guess,” replied Harrison. “Those fellows were indignant when you slipped away so hurriedly and were about to telegraph Key West to look out for you when a man named Wyckoff approached and said you were headed for Biloxi. They couldn’t believe it but he swore it was so.”

“And so you came down here to get us?” queried Jack.

“I’m stationed at Gulfport, a short distance west of here,” replied Harrison. “They wired me there and wanted to libel your craft. You know the United States protects merchants and workmen by seizing the vessel if their bills are not paid.”

“But we’ll pay it!” stoutly protested Jack. “We have the money.”

“I haven’t the least doubt of it,” declared Harrison. “It was only a matter of oversight under the exciting news you got. But tell me,” he went on, “how did Wyckoff know you were headed for this place? He seemed very positive about your destination.”

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Then Jack gave Harrison the whole story. He omitted nothing that the boys considered of importance, even showing Harrison the map. At the conclusion of the recital Harrison looked serious.

"Well, boys," he said at length, "you've stumbled onto what seems to be a reality, but I always considered it a myth. For years the report has been circulated that there was such a treasure and this man Wyckoff and Lopez claimed to be blood descendants of the officer who buried it. The name on that map would seem to bear them out. But tonight or tomorrow night will be the only time you'll have to get at the treasure for another year, if the whole tale is true."

"How's that?" breathlessly asked the boys.

"I can't explain the whole thing, for I never attempted to memorize details, always believing the story a fairy tale, but as I recall it, the moon and tide must both be just right—something like the moon is tonight and the tide will be in a short time—and then the ground around the chest softens up and the chest comes to the surface for the rightful heir to reach out and get it."

"If there's anything at all in that," asserted Jack, "I'll bet the thing lays in a bed of quicksand. When the tide is just right it softens up and boils. Then any solid substance may be thrown up to the surface. Maybe someone has seen a piece of log or some driftwood at some such time and that's the way the treasure story started."

"But I have the map," declared Harry excitedly. "What do you make of that? You'll have to go some to explain that."

"I guess that's so," sheepishly admitted Jack. "I forgot that."

"Until tonight," stated Harrison, "I never had much faith in the story, but this map as a climax to other things is convincing."

Rowdy, who had been lying on a berth with Arnold, now slipped to the floor. His whole body became tense and rigid while the hairs on his back rose on end. A low, menacing growl issued in subdued notes from his throat. His attitude was threatening.

"Watch the dog," whispered Jack. "Look at him."

"Someone's coming," announced Arnold. "He does that only when he gets near someone who's a sneak or pirate or something."

"Goodness, I'm glad I'm not a pirate," declared Harrison.

"Get a leash on him," ordered Jack. "He's been shot once tonight and that's enough. Get your guns unlimbered, boys."

"I'll keep a lookout on the water," volunteered Frank.

"And I'll watch the wharf," said Tom. "I wish, though," he continued, "that the lights were off. I could see better."

"Turn the switch, Charley," was Jack's request. "It's at your hand there on the bulkhead. It's the middle one."

"I see him," whispered Tom. "It looks like Wyckoff."

"Slide the door open a crack," Harry suggested, "and get the drop on him. If he starts anything, shoot him in the legs!"

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"He's laying down a bundle," whispered Charley. "It's only a small package. I wonder what he's going to do."

For answer, Wyckoff, for it was none other, deposited the small package described by the boy on the bow of the Fortuna. He knelt on the wharf a moment leaning over toward the boat. The boys were unable to see him well because of the curving lines of the vessel.

"Good heavens!" exclaimed Charley, starting from his post toward the bows. "He lit a fuse and has started away!"

"Come back from there," cried Jack in a tone of authority. "Come back from there! Do you want to get blown into bits?"

The boys rushed forward to seize their chum and drag him to a place of safety. He kept on undaunted. Harrison gazed in open mouthed terror from one to the other. All seemed horror stricken at the situation. Rowdy tugged fiercely at his leash.

All could now see clearly the sputtering fuse attached to the package lying on the forward deck. From the gentle manner in which Wyckoff had handled it they guessed its contents. None knew better than the intrepid lad approaching the parcel what the result would be were he a second too late. Even as he hurried forward a chill seemed to run through his veins with the thought of what might happen were he not able to reach the package in time.

Harrison often declares that never to his dying day will he forget the coolness and excellent nerve displayed by Charley as he approached the sputtering fuse on the other end of which lay lurking probable death for the whole party. He says that out of all his varied experiences none stands forth with more distinctness than does the one through which he passed that night on the Fortuna.

Doright was paralyzed with terror and sank limply to the floor, resting his head on a bunk and praying as he never had prayed before for deliverance. His voice was gone, but his lips worked convulsively while his face took on a drawn and haggard expression seeming to visibly shrink together, leaving great pouches beneath his eyes and lines through his cheeks. He gasped for breath.

In his haste Charley stumbled over the free end of the bow line, made fast to the deck cleat. It had been coiled loosely, leaving the free end trailing across the deck. Quickly he was up.

Lunging forward again, his arm outstretched, the boy tried to grasp the package that was still just out of reach. He made a last fierce lunge and grasped the thing. He stood upright. A shower of sparks flew from the end of the shortening fuse.

CHAPTER XXIII

AT THE SPANISH FORT

There is no doubt that Charley's bravery and quick action saved the Fortuna and her crew. With a mighty effort he flung the package far from him. It fell into the waters of the bay with a splash. The next moment a muffled roar was heard and a vast column of water was flung skyward. The Fortuna rocked in the waves.

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"Man overboard!" cried Tom, who had been nearer Charley than any other member of the crew. "Throw me a ring buoy!"

He was over the side in a flying leap. He had paused but an instant to gauge the spot where he believed he would find the other lad. Charley's effort to throw the dynamite as far as possible had resulted in his losing his own balance. The severe motion of the Fortuna had completely upset him and he had fallen overboard.

Instantly all was activity and bustle. Ring buoys hung in beackets at either side of the pilot house. A long line was attached to each. Jack tore one of these free preparing to throw it to his chum when he should rise to the surface.

"Can he swim?" queried Harrison anxiously coming up the companion-way. "If he can't, he'll be in a bad way in this mess!"

"They both are Boy Scouts with medals showing proficiency in the art!" declared Harry. "We can all swim," he continued.

"Hurrah, then it won't be so bad! I'm hoping the explosion hasn't stunned the boys," cried Harrison hopefully.

"There they are," shouted Frank. "Can you see them?"

"I see them," Jack answered, throwing the ring buoy with true aim. "Stand by to help them aboard. Charley needs help!"

Dashing the water from his face, Tom seized the ring buoy and with its assistance supported Charley's face free of the surface until drawn to the side of the Fortuna and relieved of his burden.

First aid methods were speedily applied. Charley was placed face down upon the deck, where the boys took turns applying the means of resuscitation known as the Shaefer method. Harrison stood by in wonder observing every move. At length he became discouraged.

"I'm afraid, boys, it's no go," he said. "He doesn't seem to be coming around at all. The explosion must have hit him hard."

"He may be a long time coming, but we're going to keep at it in relays until we're all exhausted. He gave himself for us and we're prepared to do the same for him. He's done his good turn today."

"You're right, boys; he certainly has," declared Harrison. "Now, I'm bigger than you lads and if you'll show me how to do the work, I'll help. Maybe I could squeeze more water out of him than you."

Under Harrison's manipulations directed by the boys, Charley presently showed the flicker of an eye. They worked faithfully over him for a considerable time and were at last rewarded by having him on the road to recovery from his enforced bath and attendant experience. He had fallen into the water just as the explosion came.

"Well, Wyckoff won't plant any more dynamite here this evening I hope," declared Frank. "That's the second attempt on the Fortuna tonight and I'm going to take the first watch. We'll see if he does any more while I'm on guard. I'm tired of this."

"It must be getting on into the shank of the evening—I see the moon. What is the hour?" asked Jack from the forward deck.

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As if in answer to his query the marine clock chimed two bells.

"Two bells," called Harry. "Nine o'clock for landsmen."

"We'd better be getting over to the fort if we're going," urged Arnold. "We should not wait around here all night."

"Wait a minute," advised Jack. "I think we'd better deliver to Mr. Harrison the bundle of dynamite we found aboard the Fortuna at Pascagoula. We don't want it aboard here and we have no safe place to put it. He'll know what to do with it, won't you, Mr. Harrison? You understand these things better than we."

"If I had my way, I'd touch it off in the bay here so it would be out of harm's way," declared Harrison stoutly.

"But we have no fuse," objected Jack. "If we just drop it overboard the stuff may cause damage later on. I don't know what to do."

"Let's get a fuse and cap somewhere and take the stuff over to the fort," suggested Harry. "We can find this place shown on the map where the treasure lies and dig a ways into the sand, plant the 'soup' and blow a hole big enough to take out a wagon load of treasure. That's the best way to get rid of it."

"Let's put it to a vote," suggested Jack. "All in favor say—"

A chorus of "ayes" carried the point. The boys were in favor of anything that savored of excitement. Their experience with the outlaws for the past few days had so nerved them up that any adventure would have been welcomed. The prospect of finding the treasure lent added zeal to the proposed journey across the bay.

"We'll need a shovel or two anyway," said Frank as the boys hastened to make ready for the trip. "Where can we get the tools?"

"Sure enough," cried Tom. "I hadn't thought of that before. I would have been just foolish enough to go on over there and not take a shovel with me at all. There's an exhibition of brains for you."

"I guess you were no worse off than any of the others," Harry declared. "We were all in a hurry to get started."

"Will Doright and Carlos go with us?" inquired Tom.

"We may need them," Jack replied. "Do you want to go, Carlos?"

"Maybe I wouldn't be of any help," Carlos ventured hesitatingly. It was evident that he felt timid about joining with the others.

"You'd be the best kind of help," stoutly asserted Arnold, pushing Rowdy towards the negro. "Take him, Rowdy," he added with a laugh.

"Ah is not in trouble wid mah feet," protested Doright. "If youall wants valuable help, jes' call on me. Mah name's Doright."

"And we'll leave Rowdy here to guard the boat so Wyckoff and his gang don't get aboard," suggested Harry, drawing on his jacket.

"You will not," cried Arnold. "Rowdy goes with the crowd."

"We can't all get into the boat," protested Jack. "How shall we manage that? Counting Mr. Harrison and Rowdy and Doright and Carlos and Charley and Frank and Arnold and Tom and Harry and myself, there's ten of us. That's four more than the boat will carry."

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"I think I can fix you out in good shape," suggested Harrison, now becoming thoroughly interested. "I saw several of those big flat bottomed oyster boats a ways back as I came to your vessel some time ago. I believe with a little persuasion I could get one."

"Will it take us all?" inquired Harry anxiously.

"I believe it will and more, too, if necessary."

"Then let's get it and be away. I'm getting nervous about the delay. I can understand why Wyckoff gets excited at strangers."

Accordingly Harrison departed in quest of the large boat he had seen. In a short time the boys heard the sound of oars and discovered him rowing the skiff towards the Fortuna.

"I have the boat all right," he cried as he approached the vessel, "but there is no painter. We haven't a thing to make fast with."

"We've got plenty of line," asserted Jack. "Tom, suppose you hand up a length of that half inch stuff in the lazarette."

"Here's a long piece coiled up. Will that do?" asked Tom.

"Sure," asserted Harrison. "Anything that's long enough. If it's too long we'll let the end drag," he added with a laugh.

"Now the shovels and we'll be all right," cried Arnold.

"The man who had charge of the boats has gone after a couple of shovels," replied Harrison. "By the time we're aboard, he should be here. He hasn't far to go. Are all of you ready?"

"All ready," declared Jack. "The doors are locked, the kitten out, the clock wound and everything is snug and comfy."

"He knows how to close up shop," asserted Harry. "Go a voyage with him and see if I'm not right! I've sailed with him."

"And the cap and fuse for the dynamite?" asked Frank.

"Here in my pocket," replied Harrison. "I got it from the watchman. He wasn't inclined to let me have it as first, though."

"Gee," said Harry. "I'd like to be a United States Marshal."

"It is not altogether a pleasant business," smiled Harrison. "There are times when we have disagreeable tasks like the one I had this evening. Then there are other tasks that are pleasant like another one I anticipate I may have later on this evening."

"Are you after someone else, too?" queried Arnold.

"Well, yes," admitted Harrison. "But I don't know whether or not I will be able to locate them. That will, of course, be seen."

"If we can be of any help to you, just let us know and we'll be ready to render any assistance possible," offered Jack.

"Thank you, boys; I appreciate your kind offer, and you may be able to help me if my suspicions are correct."

"Why, what has Wyckoff been doing?" inquired Tom.

"Who said it was Wyckoff?" laughingly replied Harrison.

"Well, it seems to be mighty plain that it is he."

"Possibly it is he," admitted the Marshal. "There have been some shady deals carried through down here lately. Some smuggling and a bad wreck and one or two other things that the United States Government feels should be explained. Someone must explain."

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"Well, we'll help you all we can when the time comes," cried Tom heartily. "I'm sure we'll do that."

"Here comes somebody on the wharf," declared Arnold with a hand on Rowdy's collar. "Wonder who it is now?"

"That's the watchman," said Harrison. "He's got the shovels."

As the watchman delivered the implements to the Marshal he was requested to keep an eye on the Fortuna. This he promised to do.

"I have an idea," explained Harrison in parting, "that the parties I am expecting to call will be across the bay, but in case they should come, hold them even if you have to resort to violence."

"A few more and we'd have a load," remarked Jack as the skiff with its unusual cargo pulled away from the Fortuna. I'm glad there are enough boys to go around so we can have one to each oar."

"We have got a crowd, sure enough," admitted Frank. "Did you bring a gun with you in case something might turn up?"

"Indeed I have," replied Jack. "I am pretty sure the others have theirs, too," he added. A vote of the crowd showed he was right. Every member of the Fortuna's regular crew had an automatic.

A short time only was required for the passage across the bay, between the supports of the railroad bridge and around the point to a spot as near the fort as Harrison deemed best to approach.

"Hello," cried Tom shaking out the line he had brought for a painter, "there are two pieces here. One is short and the other a long one. I may as well use only the short one."

"Better take the other with you," suggested Jack. "Someone may pass while we're away and think they could use it."

"Good idea," assented Tom. "I'll keep it with me."

Not far from where the boys landed they discovered the time-worn earthworks of what had once been the old fort. Trees nearly a foot in diameter were seen growing on the former breastworks. Everywhere one could see that the fort had been long unoccupied.

Harry immediately proceeded to search for the trees that had been used as ranges when the map had been made. He was not long in finding what he sought. His feet

were almost in the waters of the rising tide when the spot where the treasure was supposed to be was located. All were visibly excited. The prospect was alluring.

“Shall we start to dig a hole here?” asked Tom, shovel in hand.

“Make a little hole and we’ll touch off the dynamite.”

A short time sufficed to bury the explosive in a good location.

“Let’s all stand back now and see what happens,” cried Tom.

“Mr. Harrison, show Harry how to light it,” requested Jack.

“Stand back; here come Wyckoff and Lopez.”

CHAPTER XXIV

DEFEATED BY GREED

Loaded with men, a boat was approaching from the westward. Standing in the bow were Wyckoff and Lopez, the two principals in the efforts to drive our friends from that neighborhood.

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Although the moonlight rendered outlines indistinct to the extent that it was impossible to see the exact expressions on their faces, the boys could all determine from their tense attitudes that they were intensely wrought up by their mission there.

A warning hand was extended by Wyckoff toward the rowers. One of the negroes had been clumsy with his oar. The noise of the splash evidently grated on Wyckoff's nerves. His very attitude bespoke a nervous energy pent up and on the point of bursting forth.

By his side stood Lopez, his trusty rifle in hand. As they saw the weapon, the boys who had seen him use it in times past knew that his skill with the firearm was marvelous indeed. They knew it would fare ill with anyone upon whom he trained it.

"Wonder why they've brought their gang," cautiously whispered Harry into Jack's ear. "They've been mighty exclusive until now."

"Hush," cautioned Jack in a very low voice. "These others are simply negroes they have picked up somewhere to do the digging. These are not men who might thwart the Wyckoff and Lopez purpose."

"Better be careful about your talking," cautioned Harrison. "If all the story is true it will be necessary to dig the treasure in silence if it is to be recovered at all. Any noise breaks the spell if it occurs before the chest is fully out of its cache."

"We won't make any noise, you can be sure of that," declared Harry. "We've seen that man Lopez shoot. We know how he does it."

Evidently the men approaching the shore had been fully cautioned in regard to the necessity for quiet. The crew sprang out and dragged the craft high and dry on the sands, then removed the shovels.

"They mean business all right," declared Arnold in Harry's ear. "See how Lopez herds those field hands along with that rifle."

"He just poked one fellow in the back with it," answered Harry. "The lad just stumbled a little and Lopez jabbed him in the back. I'll bet that fellow's too scared to dig much."

"Look at the fellow," excitedly whispered Jack. "He's going right to the spot where we located the treasure. He's got the map in his head, all right. He knows just where to dig."

"Gee," shivered Tom, "I'm mighty glad this clump of palmettos here is between us and them. With the bright moonlight they'd see us a mile away. Wouldn't Lopez have a fit if he saw us?"

Luckily Lopez and Wyckoff were too much occupied with their own affairs to investigate the neighborhood for possible spectators. They immediately put the men shoveling sand at a great pace.

"I hope they don't dig it up all at once," declared Tom. "Look at the way they go at it," he cried. "See them spear their shovels into the ground without using their foot at all."

"Hark your loud noise," hoarsely whispered Jack in a warning tone. "You'll have the whole gang down on us if you're not careful."

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"I forgot," explained the humbled Tom. "But that's a funny way to dig. Don't you think so, Mr. Harrison?"

"That's the way they dig down in this country of pure sand."

"Well, all I've got to say is that when I dig—"

What Tom said might have been interesting if it had been heard. But just at that instant a shot rang out from the group of workers. The boys stared in amazement horrified at the thought of what might have happened. In an instant their worst fears were confirmed.

Their startled eyes beheld the negroes dragging one of their number from the excavation under the watchful eye and threatening muzzle of Lopez's deadly rifle. One of the unfortunate negroes had thoughtlessly broken his resolve and had spoken. He had paid dearly for his mistake. Under the stern command of the rifle muzzle the others renewed their task, glancing apprehensively at the man behind the grim weapon whose messengers were all messengers of swift and certain death. They were visibly affected.

Instinctively the boys drew their automatics while Harrison possessed himself of his revolver and made ready to use it if necessary in self defense. No one could guess the result should Lopez discover their whereabouts. Their position was now seen to be a most dangerous one, for they lay but a few yards beyond the rim of the excavation in which the men were working. Lopez was opposite.

"If that man ever sees us here," whispered Harry, "we're gone."

"You're right, we're gone," declared Arnold. "That man don't think any more of shooting a man than he did of shooting that big snake. He's absolutely bloodless, I believe."

"Look at Wyckoff down in the excavation walking back and forth and around," Tom said pointing to the figure mentioned.

"He surely isn't going to let anything get past him," agreed Jack. "He walks round and round and round as the men dig."

"And they are digging at a rapid pace, too," Frank put in. "At that rate they ought to get the treasure before long."

"I'm a little afraid," Harrison dissented. "It looks bad."

"What looks bad? The two men may quarrel."

"There's always a possibility of that," agreed Harrison, "but I wasn't thinking of that. It looks to me that the sand will probably be softened by the rising tide. If so, they can't remain in the excavation to dig for the treasure at all. They must quit."

"If that happens, I can see some more dead niggers," Tom asserted. "That man Lopez seems to be itching to shoot someone. If he is foiled in his last desperate attempt to get that treasure, I can see trouble ahead for someone who is near him when it happens."

Wyckoff now came out of the hole to join Lopez on the rim of the crater made by the toiling negroes. Without saying a word he evidently asked Lopez for something to drink, for he made a motion as if drinking from a cup, Lopez without taking his eyes off the workers jerked his head in the direction of the boat.

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"Now what?" asked Frank in wonderment. "Is he thirsty?"

"I don't think so," replied Arnold. "I believe he's going after something to stimulate the shovelers. They look as if they were getting a little winded. See them slacken down."

Wyckoff returned shortly carrying a jug. This he passed down to the men in the pit. Eagerly they reached for the jug, draining great draughts of its contents as they paused briefly.

With renewed vigor the work was again taken up.

"If this keeps up," declared Arnold fretfully, "those fellows will have all the coin in a minute and not leave any for us."

"Keep your temper," Jack cautioned. "Something may happen—"

The lad was interrupted by a blinding flash, followed by a roar as if one of the old Spanish cannons had exploded beside them.

A shower of sand fell over the boys concealed behind the clump of palmettos. Instinctively they all drew closer their fellows.

The ground shook beneath them while all around it seemed to be raining sand. As they looked at the spot again they could make out but two figures standing. Wyckoff and Lopez were on opposite sides of the pit. The negroes were nowhere to be seen.

Wyckoff's face was cut and bleeding while Lopez seemed to have had his clothing bodily torn from the upper part of his body.

"What do you know about that?" queried Jack. "What was it?"

"An earthquake," suggested Charley, "or a volcano."

"Volcano nothing," stoutly corrected Arnold. "That was the dynamite that Wyckoff planted on the Fortuna in Pascagoula and Jack stumbled over it and brought it here and we planted it a moment ago."

"I shouldn't wonder if you're right," agreed Harrison. "It must be that one of the negroes struck it just right with his shovel."

"But where are the negroes?" asked Frank.

"I can't see a one. How many were there in the first place?"

"Six," answered Tom. "I counted 'em. One was put out of the way by the villain Lopez. That left five in the pit."

"I wonder where they are now," speculated Harry. "They have gone out of sight anyhow. Maybe they're all killed."

"If they are, I wonder just how much we'll be at fault," Jack mused soberly. "I think we should have warned them that we had put the dynamite there," he added thoughtfully.

His words had a depressing effect upon the whole party. They felt keenly the possible responsibility for the death of the five men who had been striving to earn an honest dollar by hard work. Seeing the effect his expression was having upon his comrades, Jack endeavored to correct it, but the boys were all very sober.

Rowdy, who had been trying to make himself very small indeed, now emerged from his hiding place again to join the watchers.

"I wonder if the explosion has enlarged the hole any," Tom ventured. "If it has it may make the work lots easier for us."

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"You speak as if we were going to be next on the program," Arnold laughed quietly. "Don't be too sure. Things may slip."

"Well," disputed Arnold, "suppose that Wyckoff doesn't do as Lopez wants him to do, what then? What's to hinder Lopez shooting Wyckoff and getting the treasure chest himself? Tell me that."

"How does that let us in?" queried Frank.

"Well, if they are down and out, don't we get busy?"

"I suppose so, but I believe this treasure has had enough blood spilled over it now. I'm getting rather scared about it."

"Look there," cried Jack in a tone that was almost audible to the two men at the pit. "It looks as if Wyckoff were going to dig. He's a plucky chap all right. We must give him credit for that."

Wyckoff had searched the vicinity and found a shovel. This he was now preparing to put to use. He was in the pit in another moment and began throwing the sand out. Then he paused!

"That sand's wet," declared Arnold, who had observed closely.

"Tide's away up and probably has seeped through the little sand intervening," declared Harrison. "I expected it."

"Why, look at him," hoarsely urged Frank. "He seems to be floundering about. Can it be he's in trouble?"

"It would look that way," declared Tom. "I wonder why Lopez don't come to his rescue instead of standing there with his rifle."

"He isn't in any danger," declared Arnold. "He's just wading around in the soft sand that was loosened by the explosion."

"Don't you believe it," urged Tom rising to his feet. "I believe the man's in serious trouble. It looks like quicksand."

"If Lopez would let us, I'd be in favor of helping him."

"I'll tell you what I'll do," volunteered Tom. "I'll make a running noose in this line I brought along. You boys cover Lopez with your guns and I'll go as close as I can and lasso Wyckoff. We can all get hold of the line then and maybe we'll be able to pull him out. It wouldn't be right to leave him there to go down."

At that moment Wyckoff seemed to realize his danger. He was, indeed, caught in the treacherous quicksand. No doubt the sand had been loosened by the explosion to such an extent that although quiet heretofore, it was now “quick,” and was working to draw into its depths any object unfortunate enough to be in its grasp.

Like a thing of life the sand sucked and pulled at Wyckoff’s feet. He felt himself being drawn into the terrible danger.

“Help. Help,” he cried, flinging his arms toward the firmer ground. “Pete, give me a hand! I’m going down.”

For answer Lopez flung his rifle up. A spurt of flame was his answer. Horrified, the boys expected to see Wyckoff drop. To their amazement Lopez had missed. Then they saw Wyckoff throw his knife straight at Lopez. It struck the man in the forehead.

CHAPTER XXV

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THE TREASURE

Lopez staggered back a pace. His rifle fell from his grasp as he tottered backward and lay prostrate beside the spot where also lay the negro that had earlier suffered at his hands.

Wyckoff's desperate aim had been true. The knife had sped straight to its mark and buried its point in Lopez's brain. He was beyond all help. But Wyckoff still struggled frantically.

Tom had been busy meanwhile with the length of line brought from the boat. It had not been intended for such a purpose, but now the boys were glad they had brought it with them.

All with one consent dashed from their position and ran toward the unfortunate outlaw, now nearly frantic. As they approached he looked up at them. Seized with a fit of coughing, he fell partly forward. Then the boys knew from the blood that gushed from his mouth that Lopez's last bullet had found its mark.

Tom, undaunted, prepared to throw his lasso. As he did so Wyckoff again straightened in a mad effort to tear himself from the terrible sands. Then the boys witnessed a curious sight.

It seemed that the depression into which they looked formed a sort of bowl partly full, like a bowl of porridge, with Wyckoff struggling in it at the side nearest their position. As they looked, the contents of the bowl seemed to heave and boil, then turn over and over. Wyckoff started down more rapidly while the boiling sands at the other side seemed to rise.

Tom quickly flung his noose. His aim was distracted, no doubt, by the excitement through which he had just passed. Instead of encircling the unfortunate wretch below, he threw the noose beyond. It fell spread widely on the boiling sands. It was in such a position that Wyckoff could not reach it. He made a despairing effort to grasp the rope and then, as the sands about him were boiling and seething, he sank lower and lower. At last with a shriek he disappeared and the boys saw him no more.

Tom groaned. His effort to save the man who had done so much to bring disaster upon himself and his chums was now beyond his reach. Although Tom had been doing all that he possibly could to help Wyckoff, he still felt keenly the humiliation of his defeat.

Jack, who stood near, laid a consoling hand upon Tom's shoulder. His emotion was equal to that of his comrade. All were awed.

It was Carlos who brought them to attention again.

“Look there,” he cried. “Look at that chest.”

The boys stared in spellbound amazement at the curious sight.

Exactly in the center of the noose of rope lying now half buried in the boiling sands rose the end of a box or chest. It plainly showed evidence of age. A gasp of astonishment went around.

“Pull in on the line,” urged Carlos. “There’s your treasure.”

Like one in a trance, Tom obediently pulled on the line. The noose tightened about the chest. Tom dragged with all his might but was unable to move the object. He glanced at the others. They seemed unable to move, but gazed with staring eyes at the sight.

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"Tail on here, my hearties," cried Tom. "Give us a hand."

Almost instantly the others awoke to the situation and now every hand was grasping the line and all were pulling manfully.

Inch by inch they gained. The chest was dragged slowly through the boiling sands to the pitside, where it was necessary to raise it to firmer ground. The boys dared not go close to the edge for fear of starting the sand caving. Their backs were straining under the burden. Their hands were burning from their grasp on the line.

"Pull!" gasped Tom, throwing every ounce of his weight into the work. "Pull," he gasped again.

The games in which his comrades had indulged hardening their muscles were now becoming of benefit to them. The tugs-of-war were showing their practical value. No similar number of boys of equal weight could have exerted the power that this group did with their trained ability to pull all together and keep pulling all the time.

But even as they pulled and felt victory nearly within their grasp they realized that the sand was mightier than they. Their strength could last but a little while, whereas that of the quicksand was constant. The strain was telling on them. It seemed as if only a few more pounds on the rope would swing the balance in their favor. And that help was near.

Dashing from the clump of palmettos where he had remained, Rowdy came bounding over the intervening space. His fear was now gone and when he saw the boys at the pit he seemed to overcome his terror that had been so apparent at the time of the explosion.

To his canine mind the boys were playing a game that he liked. A tug of war was his pet diversion. Losing no time, Rowdy dashed for his favorite position at the end of the rope.

Seizing the line in his strong teeth he settled back on his haunches and pulled and growled in an ecstasy of glee. His aid was of no small measure. A great mass of active muscle, he lent much to the effort that was being applied to the line.

"Hurrah," cried Tom scarcely above a whisper. "It's coming. Just a little more now and we'll have it. Pull, boys, pull."

The lads needed no urging. Every one was doing his best. And they were rewarded by seeing the end of the chest appear above the rim of the pit. It slid over the mound of sand and settled on a firm spot. Rowdy capered and leaped among the boys who had flung themselves prostrate on the sand. His joy was unlimited.

“Let’s get at it, boys,” cried Tom. “Bring me an axe and I’ll knock it open. I’m the original safe cracker.”

“What if we put it into the boat and take it aboard the Fortuna before we meddle with it,” suggested Jack. “We can’t get anything more out of the pit tonight and I feel like getting away from this place. It seems as if I can feel the ghosts of all the departed Spanish and Indians and others who passed away at this spot during the last seven hundred years. I move we go back.”

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"Second the motion. It's carried," cried Tom. "Back we go."

The boys lost no time in securing their own skiff and felt no compunction against using the boat brought by Wyckoff and Lopez.

Into the larger of these the chest was loaded. The boys of the Fortuna went along as personal bodyguard with Rowdy to share the honors. Harrison and Carlos with Doright took the smaller boat. In a short time they were again on the west side of the bay and had the lights aboard the Fortuna glowing.

"I guess, Mr. Harrison, we've been rather fortunate after all," began Jack. "It has seemed sometimes as if we were not going to get out of some of our troubles, but they all manage to end somehow. How can we get rid of that libel?"

"I think I can fix that for you," replied Harrison. "I haven't served the papers yet, you know, so if you get the money to the shipyard people early in the morning, I'll hold off a while."

"Thank you," heartily responded the lad. "When we get this cover pried off, we'll hand you a bucket or so of gold for the bill."

As the lads were prying off the cover of the wonderful chest a hail came from the wharf.

"Launch, Ahoy."

"Now what?" petulantly cried Harry. "Always some interruption."

"I think I know that voice," cried Jack. "Ahoy there, Dad."

"Hello, Jack. Have you got anything to eat?"

A hearty laugh followed the question. Jack's father, for it was indeed he, knew the appetites of the Fortuna's crew.

"Sure we have," cried the delighted Jack. "When did you arrive?"

"Just now," declared his father. "Mr. Geyer and I came down to see if you needed any help and have just walked down from the railroad. Your 'bus line," he added with a wink, "is not running."

"Oh, I'm so glad you got here," Jack replied.

"Are we in time?" queried Mr. Stanley.

“No, not in time to be of help when we needed you most,” Jack answered; “but Rowdy took your place. Now we’re just getting ready to count the money. Want to help?”

“What?” questioned Mr. Stanley. “Surely there was nothing to that story about the buried treasure. Geyer,” to his companion, “look at what these boys have unearthed. Isn’t that astounding?”

Introductions all round were followed by a hearty lunch of fish, sweet potatoes, canned fruit, corn pone and coffee prepared by Doright, who had been at once assigned to the task upon the return of the treasure hunters.

Upon opening the chest it was found to contain a quantity of gold and other coins, as well as a number of jewels in settings. Mr. Geyer, the attorney, who was versed in those matters, informed the boys that the coins were of great value because of their age and excellent condition. Collectors, he said, would be glad to pay far in excess of their original face or intrinsic value.

The gems were beyond his ability to estimate, although he felt sure they would return a handsome sum.

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"How much do you think we ought to get out of it?" Jack asked.

"Well, after I get my share for outfitting the venture," replied Mr. Geyer, "I think there ought to be as much as fifty or sixty thousand dollars—perhaps more."

"Hurrah!" shouted Tom. "That's pretty near ten thousand apiece. That's quite a bit of money."

"You mean fifteen thousand apiece," corrected Charley.

"I mean what I said—ten thousand," declared Tom. "If this crew of pirates lets you and Frank get away without sharing the spoils, I'll never sail with them again; so there!"

"Nor I," declared Jack.

"Nor I," stoutly agreed Harry.

"Nor I," chimed in Arnold. "Rowdy isn't saying a word."

So, laughing and at times half crying, the boys talked over the matter while they did ample justice to the meal Doright had prepared. Jack's father and Mr. Geyer offered to take charge of the recovered treasure, and with Mr. Harrison for a guard they felt safe in taking it to a place of security after daylight.

With the treasure off their minds, and with the outlaws who had attempted their lives out of the way, the boys tumbled into their bunks on the Fortuna and slept the clock around. Their nerves had been at high tension for some days and they welcomed the opportunity to rest and recuperate from the strain.

Carlos was helped to a good position with a lumber company in which Mr. Stanley was interested, while the boys voted to buy Doright a cabin and piece of land whenever he was ready to settle down.

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