

# The Mystery Boys and Captain Kidd's Message



VAN POWELL

Wm. Stearns

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## The Mystery Boys And Captain Kidd's Message

The inert colored man was lifted over the gun-wale. (Page 200)

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**[\(Page 200\)](#)**

# THE MYSTERY BOYS AND CAPTAIN KIDD'S MESSAGE

By VAN POWELL

*AUTHOR of*  
"The Mystery Boys Series," etc.

Series Logo

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## THE MYSTERY BOYS THRILLING STORIES IN FAR DISTANT LANDS By VAN POWELL

The Mystery Boys and the Inca Gold  
The Mystery Boys and Captain Kidd's Message  
The Mystery Boys and the Secret of the Golden Sun  
The Mystery Boys and the Chinese Jewels  
The Mystery Boys and the Hindu Treasure

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**THE MYSTERY BOYS AND  
CAPTAIN KIDD'S MESSAGE**

# CHAPTER I

## NICKY AND THE VOODOO WOMAN

“What is the matter with that colored boy?” whispered Nicky Lane to his comrades, Tom and Cliff, “Look! He stares up at the sun and then he watches us as if he expects something to happen.”

Cliff and Tom lifted their heads from the shallow pit in which they were digging. A glance toward the top rail of the fence around the field showed them a black-faced boy of about ten, perched there. As they stared at him he looked away.

“He’s only curious to know what we are doing,” Tom declared.

“All these Jamaica colored folks are,” Cliff added. “They can’t understand why we want to find old relics.”

“But why does he look up at the sun?” Nicky persisted. “See! He’s doing it now.”

The boy gave a glance toward the sun, about two hours high, and then resumed his intent stare toward the trench. Nicky leaned on his spade handle and glowered back.

“Do you suppose he expects us to be sun-struck?” Cliff suggested. “Only it isn’t hot enough yet, and we’re not working hard.”

“I don’t know,” Tom declared, “but I wish I did. He seems to be fidgeting and nervous.”

“I’m going to find out!” exclaimed Nicky. Of the trio of chums he was the most excitable and impulsive. As he dropped his spade and strode toward the fence, its occupant tumbled off; scrambling to his feet he ran out of sight around the side of an old, ramshackle cabin in a corner of the enclosure.



“That’s a funny one,” Cliff observed when Nicky returned.

They discussed the strange actions of the colored boy for a moment but since there was no explanation they went back to work.

Nicky Lane was on a holiday with his two bosom companions. The Amadale Military Academy, which they all attended, had been closed because there was an epidemic of “flu” in the suburb of a mid-Western city in which the school was located.

Most of the students had gone to their homes. Cliff Gray lived with his Aunt Lucy in the very suburb most affected by the epidemic; Tom and Nicky were boarding there also. Cliff’s father, whom the boys had helped to rescue from detention among some Incas of Peru, in an old hidden Inca city among the Andes, was, at this time, exploring and studying in the island of Jamaica, among the West Indies. He was a great scholar and a student of old civilizations and was writing some chapters of a book on the Carib Indians, the original inhabitants of the islands when Columbus discovered them.

Cliff’s Aunt Lucy thought it would be wise for Cliff to join his father, to be well away from danger of infection; because the three chums were inseparable, consent was easily secured for Tom and Nicky to go with him. The three friends had been residing on a plantation in the heart of the island for nearly a week. There, with Cliff’s father and a young man, Clarence Neale, who was securing Carib relics for a great Museum of Indian History in New York, they tried to help out by searching for Carib pottery and ornaments. Jamaica had a great lure for them, for Nicky, a “pirate bug,” called Jamaica “Pirates’ Paradise!”

This interest was not due to any desire on Nicky’s part to be a wild, fierce seadog, sailing from some port with letters of marque, to pillage unprotected ships. The days for such things lay far in the past and although Nicky was excitable and impulsive he was, at heart, a very steady, sincere boy, a true American living up to the ideals of all that American boyhood means.

But in Nicky’s family there was an old paper which was a direct message to one of his ancestors from no less a person than the alleged pirate, Captain Kidd!

Naturally Nicky, scarcely more than fourteen, was elated when he knew that he was permitted to accompany Cliff Gray, with their comrade, Tom, slightly older than either, to the island which had once been governed by a reformed pirate, in

the heart of the West Indies where once piracy had flourished.

They found very little more than legends and old tales to whet their interest. Piracy had given place to commerce on the seas, as sailing ships had surrendered to steam. And so, instead of digging for buried treasure, on the sixth morning of their visit, they had found themselves digging carefully in a corner of an uncultivated field, to unearth broken bits of earthenware, possibly some small ornaments, or other relics of the Caribs who once roamed the island.

Digging early to avoid the mid-day heat during which everybody was quiet and inactive, they had discovered the unaccountable interest of the colored boy and when he had scuttled away they returned to their work wondering a little about it.

“When we rescued your father from the Incas and got some of their gold the whole business started with a mystery, Cliff.” Tom referred to an adventure during the previous summer in which they had explored a hidden city in Peru and gone through many exciting escapades.

“Wouldn’t it be odd if that boy started up a new mystery?” Nicky suggested. “We’re right in the heart of mystery land. Voodoo—piracy in the past—and—and everything!”

“Look—but don’t let him see you!” Cliff nudged his comrades. “By the right side of that old cabin—there’s our ‘boy-friend!’”

Sure enough, the ebony face protruded around the old shack that stood in the field, not far from their trench.

“Listen, fellows,” whispered Nicky, “there is something queer about this. How can we get hold of him and make him tell us what he expects is going to happen. He’s just looked up at the sun again!”

“You pretend to chase him,” Tom advised. “When he disappears and is out of sight I will go the other way and head him off.”

Nicky promptly started toward the boy, who ran away around the cabin. Tom lost no time in taking a direction around the other side of the shack. There was a shrill yell of fear and the sound of a scuffle, and back came Nicky and Tom, almost dragging a terrified colored boy.

Cliff joined them close to the cabin.

“Now,” said Nicky, “we’re not going to hurt you. But you tell us what made you look at the sun and then watch us!”

The boy was silent. Suddenly he began to wriggle and to struggle and all three took hold of him. They did not intend to harm him but his actions had their curiosity fully aroused.

“Here! White boys! Let that colored boy alone, do you hear!”

A shrill, cracked voice came from the cabin. The three white chums hesitated, looking at one another and then at the cabin.

In its doorway stood an old, bent woman, who seemed to be all skin and bones. Her face looked like crinkled, black parchment, dry and wrinkled. Her hands were skinny and had long nails and clawlike fingers. She leaned on a stick and made them all think of pictures of witches they had seen. Her eyes blazed at them.

A little frightened by the old crone’s evident fury, they let go of the boy who scuttled past the woman into the shack.

“We didn’t hurt him,” Nicky said defiantly. “He was—” and he told her how the boy had acted. “We wanted to know why he did it,” he ended.

The woman scowled at them.

“You know very quick,” she said in her shrill, cracked tones. “You go away or sun make you very sick in the head!”

“Ho!” cried Nicky, “will it? Who says so?”

“Sh-h-h!” Tom nudged him. “Don’t you remember what Cliff’s father told us about Voodoo on these islands?”

“Yes, I do,” Nicky answered under his breath. “But I’m not afraid! Why does she want us to go away? What is there in this field that she doesn’t want us to see?”

“It’s Voodoo, I tell you!” Tom urged. “These old Voodoo witches can enchant

people.”

“Do you really believe that?” demanded Nicky. The old woman was fumbling and tugging at an old bag, dirty and of some queer animal or reptile skin, as he spoke.

“Well—” Tom hesitated, “I know they say it’s only the effect on ignorant minds that makes Voodoo hurt people.”

“Well, it can’t hurt me!” declared Nicky, “And, as I say—why would she want to ‘voodoo’ us—white fellows and strangers?”

“I think Nicky’s right,” Cliff declared. “She must have some reason.”

“Listen,” whispered Nicky, excitedly, “one of you run and bring Mr. Gray or the other man—Mr. Neale. Let’s get to the bottom of this. I’ll give you any odds you like that she is trying to drive us away because something’s hidden in this field—maybe—maybe——”

“Treasure!” gasped Cliff and ran like a deer for the older members of their party. Treasure!

## CHAPTER II

### ONE HALF OF A CIPHER

That the old crone was very much “worked up” was easily to be seen. Tom and Nicky, watching uneasily, saw her fumble in her old bag and draw out with her bony fingers three queer objects.

These were small figures, made rudely of clay or mud. Tom and Nicky started and stared at them. They were made in the shape of small human figures, with heads a little larger than peas, and with dented places to mark out the arms and legs.

“What do you think those things are?” Tom whispered. “I don’t like this. Remember what Mr. Neale said about this woman?”

“Yes,” Nicky answered softly. “He said Ma’am Sib is a Voodoo woman and that the colored people are afraid of her. But I’m not! I want to see what she is going to do.”

That was quickly seen. She laid the little objects in a row on the doorsill; all of them had their tiny heads pointed out from the shade of the roof, so that the heads were in the sunshine.

She scowled at Nicky and Tom, then muttered under her breath and glanced up toward the sun, then back at the boys.

“I know it’s just imagination,” Tom told his chum, “but I feel sort of queer——”

Nicky made a practical suggestion.

“I think she’s trying to scare us away by making us believe that she has bewitched us or something,” he said, “It’s something that the sun will do to us. If you’re uneasy, go and stay in the cabin shade at the side.”

Tom looked sheepish and uncomfortable, but after hesitating for a while his fears overcame his good sense and he went out of sight.

Nicky did not follow; instead, he made an unexpected move.

Quick as a flash he leaped forward, bent and made a scooping movement of his fingers. When he dodged back out of reach of the irate old woman's cane, his hand was closed over the mud images.

"I'll keep these," he said, trembling a little with natural uncertainty as to the outcome of his bravado.

"Here comes Cliff with Mr. Neale!" called Tom from beside the cabin, while the colored boy poked his head out through the door and made his eyes roll in his excitement.

Cliff and the young archaeologist were climbing the fence. They hurried over and confronted the woman.

"What does this mean, Ma'am Sib?" asked Clarence Neale quietly. He showed no anger, only curiosity. The old woman looked up at the tall, clean-cut young fellow, not much more than twenty-two or so, and frowned.

"White boys not to dig! I order them to go yesterday. They come back! I—" she made a gesture toward Nicky who unclosed his hand. The moisture of his palm was already breaking up the shape of the figures.

"Cliff's father told us about the Egyptians doing this like this," Nicky said. "They used to make little images of wax, he said, and put spells on them to injure the magicians' enemies—then when they stuck pins in the wax, or burned it, the enemies were supposed to suffer with pain. But I didn't know they did that sort of thing in Jamaica."

"Sometimes," Mr. Neale admitted. "But why did you come back to dig when Ma'am Sib ordered you away?"

"It isn't her field," Cliff answered. "I asked father. And, besides, there is another trench started. See! Over there." He pointed to the digging that had been done at a point closer to the cabin."

“Can they really hurt you—these voodoo people?” Tom asked. “I began to feel sort of uneasy——”

Mr. Neale spoke quietly in reply. “The boy was told to do as he did so as to suggest an idea to you,” he explained. “You see, all sorts of magic depend on our being afraid. We are afraid of things we do not understand. Because we don’t understand them we think ‘maybe they do have power to hurt us.’”

“It’s just the same as if I came to Tom some morning and looked at him as if something was wrong, and then asked him what’s the matter,” Cliff said. “He’d wonder and then begin to think that something was wrong and he would begin to feel sick, if he kept thinking about it long enough.”

“Exactly,” Mr. Neale replied. “Voodoo depends on ignorance and fear. Because people are ignorant and afraid, their own minds work against them. Tom let himself imagine there was danger——”

“I knew it,” Tom said, shamefacedly, “but it got the best of me.”

“But why did she do it?” demanded Nicky. “Not just because we didn’t obey her and stop digging——”

“I claim there must be something hidden here that she knows about and she tried, the way she is used to doing, to drive us away,” Cliff declared.

“There isn’t anything buried here that I have heard about,” Clarence Neale responded. He turned to the woman, “Ma’am Sib, what induced you to try to frighten these friends of mine?”

“Perhaps I can help you?” inquired a voice behind them. So absorbed had they all been in the discussion that they had not noticed the arrival of a slender colored fellow of nineteen. He stood just back of them, smiling pleasantly. He was as black as ebony, with perfect, white teeth which showed in strong contrast when he gave his good-natured smile. He spoke without the Southern Negro’s dialect, as is the custom of all the Jamaica inhabitants whose speech is often of the very best English, with only a few colloquial bits of dialect.

Mr. Neale turned. He recognized the grandson of old Ma’am Sib.

“Your grandmother has been voodooing my young assistants, Sam,” he said

pleasantly. “They were digging and she must have thought that voodoo was easier than the natural way—to come and ask me to keep them away.”

The young Negro shrugged his shoulders. He had been sent to a school in the United States and he was better educated than was his ancient grandmother.

“No harm is done, anyhow, sar,” he replied. “I ask you to forgive.”

“Done!” answered the white man, “but I am curious to know just what is so important that she should take that sort of measure to drive off our digging comrades.”

“She thought that there was something buried here,” explained the colored fellow. “She knew that I have been doing some exploring in my spare time. But I found what I was looking for—and I was so disappointed that I did not even bother to tell her, sar.”

“Disappointed?”

“Yes, sar. There is an old legend in our family and my grandmother had told me and I was searching for a letter. When Captain William Kidd traded between New York and these islands, before he was really a pirate, he was much friends with our Governor. In those days the Governor was kind to pirates. He let them come into harbor and he did not give them to the law for punishing.”

Nicky and his friends became alert. Nicky thought of the old paper so carefully preserved by his family, although no one thought it would ever amount to anything. Cliff and Tom were intensely interested because this was becoming a living story, linking the present with the old, piratical days and their natural love of adventure was whetted by the suave words of the colored man.

“You may not know about Captain Kidd,” Sam continued. Nicky knew a great deal but he remained silent, listening eagerly. “He was really not as bad as the story books have made him. He was not one of the terrible pirates. But he did wrong and finally he was made a prisoner in America, and was kept in prison until he could be sent to England to be tried.”

He became very earnest and they all drew closer.

“While he was in prison he sent a letter to his friend, the Governor of Jamaica,



who had a house not far from this place. That was the owner of this field and his family holds it yet. We are descendants of old family servants of that Governor. Well, sar, the letter came one day and the Governor began to brag about finding great treasure soon; one of my race who was his body-servant thought the letter must tell about the treasure and so he stole it. But he became disgusted and buried the despatch box. I do not know why. At least, I did not know why until I dug it up last night!”

They were all tense with suspense as he reached into his pocket and pulled out a folded paper. Holding his hands around it until he made sure that it was the right one, his eyes rolling with the colored race’s love for being the center of the interest, he slowly opened the paper, holding it down low so that they could all see the surface.

It was dirty and brown with age and the ink on it was faint and faded to a faint brownish tint.

They all craned their necks.

What they saw was disappointing, as Sam had said. There were three small, irregular shaped circles toward the top of the paper, in such a relation to one another that if a line had been drawn between each pair so as to connect them, they would have been at the points of a triangle.

At one side, and a little lower down, was the regulation, old-fashioned representation of a compass to show direction.

Further down, there was part of a word which they made out to be “per.” Still further down, was a mass of tiny dots and marks, too faint to be given any meaning, they were not in the form of letters, but were just like the blotches that break out on the skin during measles-here, there and everywhere. But at the left side they went right to the edge of the paper, and there was a very dim line starting there and running a little way in among the blotches.

Just beneath was a nautical bearing: “25—30—13 N.”

“You can see,” said Sam, his finger running along the left hand edge, “this paper is torn off. It is only half of a cipher, sar.”

Mr. Neale, Cliff and Tom nodded.

“So it is of no good.” said Sam, but he returned it to his pocket. “It may come that the other half will be found. I hope so.”

Then he turned and looked, with surprise, toward Nicky.

“Can it be,” muttered Sam, “that Ma’am Sib’s voodoo has worked, after all?”

Nicky was turning somersaults and rolling about like a boy who has gone mad!

## **CHAPTER III**

### **A "MYSTERY BOYS" MEETING**

Watching Nicky's contortions, Ma'am Sib began to see pictures in her mind of herself in jail and she became more afraid than she had made the boys.

She knew that the open practice of voodoo was against all laws and she had not really meant to do any more than frighten the boys off. But Nicky's actions caused her to dread the consequences to herself. But Tom and Cliff, understanding their comrade, had different thoughts. When Tom looked at Cliff he saw the latter calmly but determinedly scratching his left ear. Tom instantly folded his arms!

Tom hastened to Nicky and grabbed his chum between two somersaults.

"Cliff's calling for a council," he whispered. Nicky became at once a very sober and quietly normal young fellow.

The three chums were the sole members of a secret order which they named from the fact that each of them had a mystery in his life; so their secret order was called "The Mystery Boys."

Nicky, to begin with, had in his family the supposed message from the former pirate, William Kidd. Tom's mystery had to do with the fact that his sister had never been located after an attack on a Mexican mine by bandits; after which no trace of the girl, living there with her father, the mine superintendent, had ever been found. Cliff had solved his mystery the summer before; his father, studying Inca civilization, had been held prisoner by Incas of the old Peruvian race, in a city hidden among the Andes; a letter had reached Cliff, and he, with Tom and Nicky and a history instructor from Amadale, and with "Quipu Bill" whom they had met in Peru, had discovered and rescued the old scholar and had secured some Inca gold at the same time.

The purpose of the secret order was to be able to exchange ideas in the presence of other people who were not members of the clique, without the outsiders knowing about it. The Mystery Boys had made up their order for the purpose of helping one another in every way, but in secret. Their motto was “Seeing All, I see nothing; Knowing All, I know nothing; Telling All, I tell nothing!”

In order to have help in rescuing Cliff’s father, the order had added the young history instructor, a Mr. Whitley, and “Quipu Bill,” but after the thrilling adventures among the Incas, wherein the secret signals of the order had served the members in many “tight” places, Bill went off to a ranch in the West, and the instructor returned to his classes; both retained membership, but not actively.

Cliff’s signal to Tom had been a call for a secret communication, and Tom, folding his arms in sign of agreement, quickly urged Nicky to silence. Cliff understood Nicky’s wild capering.

Nicky, very sober, came up with Tom to rejoin the group.

“I was just cutting up,” he said. “I was letting off steam because it struck me as funny that Ma’am Sib went to all that trouble to scare us away from a map or a cipher that had already been found and that wasn’t any use anyhow!”

Mr. Neale accepted the explanation; it seemed a natural action that Nicky had indulged in, thus explained. Ma’am Sib was greatly upset and began to beg them not to pay any attention to her “spell.” Its effects were all removed, she declared. They agreed and as it was clear that young Sam was eager to have them cause no trouble for his grandmother, the boys and their older friend forgave the old voodoo woman and hurried away.

Mr. Neale returned to his conference with some colored men who were excavating near the plantation house where the white people had their headquarters. Tom, Cliff and Nicky could hardly wait to get off by themselves. As soon as they succeeded, Nicky turned to his companions.

“I saw you signal to me to say nothing,” Nicky told Cliff. “It was all I could do to hold in.”

“I know it,” Cliff replied. “You ‘go off the handle’ easy, anyhow. I guessed what made you get so excited, and I didn’t want you to talk until we had had a meeting of our Order.”

“Nicky’s ‘message’ from Captain Kidd has something to do with it,” Tom guessed.

“Something?” Nicky said. “Everything! Why, that half of the cipher would fit in with a half that my uncle has!”

“Honestly?” cried Tom. “Hooray! We’re off again for adventure!”

“Not yet,” Cliff counseled. “There are some things to decide. First of all, half the cipher is in New York—or with Nicky’s uncle.”

“Don’t worry about that,” Nicky laughed. “I got him to let me take a tracing of it. I held the paper against a lamp shade and traced over it. Here’s the ‘other half of the cipher!’ See what you make of it.”

He dragged a leather billfold from his coat pocket and extracted a neatly folded paper. The others stared at it.

“Was the original torn down on the side where this jagged line shows?” demanded Tom.

“Yep!” responded Nicky, “and you see it’s on the side opposite to where Sam’s paper is ripped away. I think they’d just fit together!”

“So do I,” Cliff agreed. “But even if you have this half, there are things to consider; but let’s see if we can remember the other piece and sketch it on this envelope,” he drew a letter from his pocket. “Here—here’s a pencil!”

They got to work. On the sketch Nicky had already made there were several dots at one side, toward the top. Below them was the word “Dip” and under that were more of the little straggley blotches with a faint line starting at the left hand side and close to a small cross marked “Reck.”

“That word ought to be ‘wreck’ I think,” Nicky suggested. They nodded. “And here, you see, is a nautical direction—but I don’t think it’s the same as on the other paper.”

“It isn’t!” Cliff stated. “The other was some degrees North Latitude, but this is West Longitude. Now—what was the set of figures on the other map?”

Nicky shook his head.

“I recall—let’s see—was it thirty degrees and twelve minutes——”

“You’re away off,” Tom broke in. “It was twenty-five degrees and twelve minutes and thirty seconds.”

“No,” Cliff argued. “It was—no, it couldn’t have been twelve degrees North—that would be in South America, I think—anyway, if I recall my map, it wouldn’t be where the pirates used to go.”

“I wish we could remember it,” Nicky said. “Then we could go and get the treasure.”

“Maybe,” Cliff hesitated. “Maybe not. It would be like stealing to take any treasure by using the part of the map we don’t own.”

“But Sam doesn’t own it by right!” Nicky urged. “It was sent to the Governor of Jamaica and stolen from him. Then Sam found it.”

“But there must be part of the Governor’s family still alive,” Tom said, agreeing with Cliff’s attitude, “and if Captain Kidd sent the map in two parts so that both his friends would be sure to share in his treasure, we have no right to take the other fellow’s share!”

“That’s so,” Nicky agreed. “Anyhow, Sam has no right to it either.”

“But he has part of the map!” Tom reminded Nicky.

“What ought we to do?” Nicky questioned.

“I guess it’s a case for older heads to decide,” Tom suggested. “Cliff’s father \_\_\_\_\_”

“Yes, we can ask him,” Nicky agreed. “How about letting Mr. Neale know about it?”

“I like him,” Cliff asserted. “He’s honest and he knows a whole lot about these islands. And he could help us a lot. My father could advise us but he wouldn’t want to go on any adventure; he had enough of that with the Incas.”

“Then there is Nicky’s uncle, who has the real map,” Tom reminded his chums.  
“How about him?”

“Let’s tell Cliff’s father first,” Nicky urged. “Then we can do as he says.”

It was agreed that this was the best way out. They found the old scholar sorting some broken bits of pottery. These had been taken out of old mounds of refuse, centuries old, where the Carib Indians had thrown their cast off and broken utensils. Mr. Gray, by reason of his wide experience with such things, and with the help of the young archaeologist, had become proficient at the art of piecing the broken bits into their original places so that many valuable objects were rebuilt, or, at least, reassembled.

After he had heard their story, Mr. Gray deliberated for a while and then he gave them his opinion.

The boys admitted its soundness and decided to act upon it that very evening!

## CHAPTER IV

### CAPTAIN'S KIDD'S GHOST

Seated around the supper table in the plantation house, the chums could hardly contain their impatience while the colored servant removed the dishes. The abrupt twilight had passed into deep, dark night. A kerosene lamp on the table threw weird shadows on the wall and left uncanny mysteries in the dusky corners.

The table, moved near the window to get the cooler evening breeze during the meal, was finally cleared.

“Do you feel funny?” asked Tom, looking around the room. “Maybe it’s on account of that voodoo stuff this morning, but for some reason I feel kinda nervous.”

“It’s just your mind—your imagination,” laughed Cliff.

Mr. Gray quietly told Clarence Neale why the boys had decided to act on his advice, to initiate the young collector into their mystic order. They had half of a cipher, he explained, and there was reason to believe that Sam had the other half. Then, in order to carry on a search, if they agreed that it was advisable, the young fellows would require a cool, older head to guide them, and perhaps a stout arm to help them. “I can carry on your work here, Clarence,” Mr. Gray finished his explanation. “If you want to try your hand at a different sort of digging.”

“If it’s a choice between potsherds”—he referred to the bits of pottery which were thus named—“or treasure, count me in for adventure every time!”

Using a watch charm of Cliff’s which his father had made from an ancient Egyptian scarab, or sacred beetle, suitably mounted, Nicky gave Clarence Neale the oath of allegiance, which also served as their motto. Clarence Neale with his



face serious and with a sincere manner, took the vow.

“I see what it means,” he added. “Seeing All—that you show me—I see nothing that I let others know I see; Knowing All—all of your plans—I know nothing, if anybody asks me; Telling All—that is, letting you know everything I know—I tell nothing, of our plans or mysteries, to any outsider.”

“That’s it exactly,” Nicky exclaimed. “I knew you would be the right sort. Now, we will postpone the initiations and secret signs until tomorrow when we have more time. Now we want to tell you about our map.”

He drew out his copy and the drawing of Sam’s half which Cliff had made from memory. They all bent over them on the table.

“I am very glad that you have taken me into your councils,” Clarence Neale declared. “I know something about this section. It is very easy to see that it is some part of the Florida coral archipelago, what we used to call Ten Thousand Islands, stretching up along the Gulf coast from down toward Cape Sable. I used to fish in those waters.”

The chums were delighted. Here was a real mate and a fine aide.

“Just how did this half come into your family’s possession?” asked the young man.

“Well,” Nicky explained, “you see, Captain William Kidd was supposed to be a mighty pirate and a fearful one. History and story books don’t agree, there. I’ve studied a lot about him because I am pretty much a ‘bug’ about him, on account of this map.”

“Well,” smiled Mr. Neale, “I don’t blame you. I know a bit of the old fellow’s true history too. He was in the regular trade for quite a while, and ran from these Islands to New York with his ship, and he was as honest as any, I guess. That must be the time that he made friends with the Jamaica governor.”

“Yes,” Nicky took up the talk. “He traded with the West Indies during King William’s War, and it was after that time that the citizens of Antigua gave him a bark of the same name. And in 1690 he got a commission from the English—what do you guess for?”

“To despoil and break up pirate bands,” exclaimed Cliff. “You’ve told us, Nicky—but go ahead. Tell us again. It’s interesting, and especially right now.”

“Why, you could imagine we were in the cabin of a ship, right now,” broke in Tom, “all except the windows. Look at the heavy timbers of the room, and the oil lamp and—s-sh-h-h! What’s that?”

They all stared at him. Tom’s eyes had become round with fear. He was usually of a very level headed type, and not likely to get himself upset; but the voodoo had preyed upon his imagination and this, with the excitement of the treasure map’s discovery, had made him more sensitive to excitement than usual.

He stared through the open window. They all turned their eyes that way.

“What is it, Tom?” demanded Nicky in a hoarse whisper.

“I thought I saw a face—in the shadows—outside the window,” Tom said shakily.

Nicky was up and out of the room like a flash. Cliff, losing no time, raced in the other direction. They went scuttling around the house, from front and back, meeting under the dining room window.

“Nobody here—not a sign!” called Cliff reassuringly.

“Nobody in sight,” Nicky agreed. “Tom, who was it—what did the face look like?”

“I don’t know,” quavered Tom. “It looked like—it was white—it was like a—ghost!”

“Pull yourself together,” said Mr. Gray quietly. “There aren’t any ghosts. Your imagination is keyed up. Perhaps you saw some bird fly past with the light on its wings and your excitement made you see the rest.”

“Come in, boys,” called Clarence Neale, “I am sure there was no occasion for fright.”

The two searchers returned.

“Brace up, Tom,” said Cliff, not unkindly. “Nobody was running away and nobody was in sight. You don’t want us to think that you really believe in ghosts!”

“No,” said Tom, sheepishly, “I don’t. I said it looked like one.”

“Well,” laughed Mr. Neale, “we have ‘sort of interrupted’ Captain Kidd, haven’t we?”

“Maybe it was his ghost!” grinned Nicky. “I hadn’t thought of that.”

Mr. Neale and Cliff’s father gave warning shakes of their heads and Nicky apologized for joking at Tom’s expense.

“The poor old fellow wasn’t so bad—there’s no reason for his ghost to walk, even if there was such a chance,” Mr. Neale said. “You know he sailed off in the *Adventure Galley* to execute his commission, but pirates were few and far between, and he sailed around the Cape of Good Hope. You know, that real and terrible pirate, Thomas Tew, was one of those he was sent to capture or to punish—but he never found him. His crew became mutinous because there was so little to do and it was during a fight that Kidd struck his gunner, William Moore, and killed him. It was really for that act that the man was captured when he finally returned to America, and he was sent eventually to England to be tried for the killing of Moore, rather than for piracy, although he did do a little ‘pirating’ on his voyages.”

“It was while he was in prison,” Nicky took up the story, “he sent for one of my ancestors, a New York merchant, and told him about the treasure. He said—it’s all preserved in writing in my family—he said that while cruising in the Gulf, during his trading and before he got his commission from England as a privateersman, he was blown by a heavy wind quite near what we call the Florida Keys. When the weather calmed there was a signal flying from a coral rock and the Captain took off onto his ship several castaways from a wreck. They told him they had been on a Spanish treasure ship, transporting gold and silver bars from the Spanish settlements in Central America when the hurricane wrecked their ship. Captain Kidd said he had looked for the treasure but there was no sign of any, and so he thought they were telling falsehoods.”

“Then why did he draw a map—if that was what the map was about!” Cliff interrupted.

“The man he had saved—one of the survivors—gave him the map when he was injured by a sabre wound and was dying. He said the men had managed to swim ashore to some of the smaller Keys when the ship ran onto some needle-like coral and began to break up. But they got a couple of boats overside too, and when it was calmer, and the ship was breaking apart and falling away into the water, they got many chests of the treasure into the boats and rowed along into the keys and hid the chests on an island that was in the map.”

“I see,” said Mr. Neale. “Probably, by that time, some of the other members of the crew had gone back and found the chests.”

“Maybe,” Nicky said. “You see, when the ancestor was given the map, he took a passage on a ship to come and find the Jamaica governor, but his ship was besieged by pirates and he was taken by them—and it was years before he got off their ship and back to civilization—that’s a story by itself, but I can’t stop to tell it to you now. Anyhow, he got back, but he had no more taste for the sea and when he died he passed on his map and the story, but nobody else ever tried until my uncle got the paper. He made a trip down here and found out just what Sam told us—that the governor’s paper had been stolen. So, of course, he gave it up.”

“Now, what do you propose to do?” asked Clarence Neale.

“Mr. Gray thinks we ought to talk to Sam and offer to share with him fairly for the use of his part of the map. He’s on his way here, or ought to be. I left word with Ma’am Sib to tell him to come.”

“Perhaps he hasn’t returned to get the message,” Mr. Gray said.

“Or,” said Nicky, unable to resist a little malicious prod at Tom’s fears, “or maybe the ghost got him!”

Before Tom could make a reply they heard the patter of swift feet racing along the path to the house; a voice cried out, shrill and excited, “Help—masters—help! De ghost——!”

With a common impulse they all leaped to their feet. In their excitement not one of them stopped to catch up the map. They moved closer together, Tom clutching Nicky’s arm and staring wide-eyed at the door.

Into their midst scampered the ten-year-old colored boy of the morning

experience. His face was ashy colored under his dusky skin, and his eyes rolled wildly.

“Masters—masters!” he panted. “Save me—” He lifted a finger, and pointed it shakingly toward the doorway. They all stared in that direction, and even Cliff felt the hair prickling on his head.

“There—there! It’s chased me—it’s coming—” the boy gasped.

Clarence Neale leaped past the frightened child, and on a sudden impulse Nicky, feeling a strange hunch, swung part way around toward the table. He meant to reach for the map, forgotten in the instant of excitement.

In his turn he gave a gasping cry.

Their map was gone!

## **CHAPTER V**

**“NOTHING SHALL STOP US!”**

Nicky wasted no time going around through the door. He scrambled to the windowsill and leaped out into the darkness. Springing clear of the bushes which were planted close to the house, he landed on his feet and looked hurriedly about him.

Nothing was to be seen!

As soon as his eyes became used to the dark he strained them in every direction. But there was nothing to reward his eager eyes.

Finally, after poking around in the brush just beyond the clearing in which the house stood, he returned to his friends. The colored boy was recovering slowly from the effects of his terror. Tom, too, had regained some of his usual steadiness, though he seemed to be much more excited than either of his chums. The older men had discovered the absence of the map but had thought that Nicky took it.

“No!” he panted, still laboring under his excitement and his exertions in running from one dump of brush to another, “it was gone when I looked around before I jumped through the window.”

“But where did it go?” demanded Cliff.

“That’s the puzzle,” replied Clarence Neale.

“De ghos’ done taken it!” gasped the small colored boy.

“Nothing of the sort! There aren’t any ghosts!” declared Mr. Gray.

The boy stared. “Yes, they is!” he retorted. “I seen it! It was white! It——”

“Where did you see it?” Nicky asked quickly.

“By de window, sar!”

“Was it looking in?”

“It was comin’ to’ds”—toward, he meant—“to’ds me!”

“What is all this?” a new voice spoke. The owner of the plantation, a rough, stocky Englishman with a bronzed face, stood in the doorway. He had been out on another of his many properties for several days and had, apparently, come back in time to discover the excitement without understanding its meaning.

Mr. Gray explained the boy’s fright without mentioning the loss of the map. Nicky, about to speak, saw Cliff make a gesture which unmistakably was the Mystery Boys’ signal for silence; he closed his lips and waited.

“These colored people are afraid of shadows,” said the plantation owner. “Run along home, boy. Nothing will hurt you!”

“No, sar, Mister Coleson, sar, I dassent go in de dark alone!”

“The natives of this island are full of legends and stories about ghosts,” Mr. Coleson explained to the group. “Why, I have even heard them declare that the ghosts and spirits of the old pirates appear at times. Joe, my overseer, here on the plantation, says he once heard where treasure was hidden and he decided to try to get it. But when he got near the place his superstitions got the best of him. The way he tells about it, he saw pirates, in red bandana head cloths, with glittering cutlasses, and smoking pistols, stalking toward him. Naturally, being a coward, he ran. Of course,” he added, “I’m only telling you what he said. Personally, I think the fellow built it all up in his mind!”

“Oh—sar!” broke in the colored boy. “No! I see dem, too! I see Cap’n Kidd in my dream, de odder night. He come and he say ‘Boo!’ an’ wake me up!”

Clarence Neale laughed.

“That shows how easy it is to believe in ghosts if you hear about them and think about them all your life!” he told Tom. “This lad even dreams about them.”

“Captain Kidd, eh?” repeated the Englishman, laughing and then becoming half serious. “Well, if there’s any truth in superstition, the old boy must be watching over some of his treasure that is threatened!” He winked toward Clarence Neale, but neither Tom nor the colored boy saw it and both thought he was quite serious.

“Don’t, sar—please, don’t!” begged the boy, beginning to snivel. “He say ‘Boo’ at me. Den I mus’ have see him, tonight again!”

“Well,” said the Englishman, “I’ll leave you people to argue with this little scare-cat! I’m tired and I think I will turn in!”

He said goodnight and went to the quarters he occupied.

“Wasn’t Sam to come here?” asked Mr. Gray.

“Yes, he was—” began Cliff; he paused, and glanced at Nicky. The latter opened his eyes wider as the thought struck him too.

Could Sam have had anything to do with the “ghost business?” Sam had half a map; he saw Nicky, earlier, displaying his excitement when the map was shown. Maybe he had become suspicious, followed them, overheard something; perhaps he had even listened at the window.

They discussed the strange disappearance of their map, stated their suspicions, brought up the question of Sam’s possible guilt.

The colored boy, not understanding, stood with his eyes rolling, afraid to depart.

“There is an easy way to settle the question, and, at the same time to dispose of this boy’s fears,” suggested Clarence Neale. “I will walk home with him!”

That seemed to be the best course and so Mr. Neale, reassuring their dusky charge, put a hand on his shoulder and gently urged him from the room.

“I don’t care much for this situation,” said Mr. Gray. “It seems to me that some human agency is at work, trying to frighten you lads. I assure you that there is no ghost. Whatever Tom may have seen, and whatever the boy saw, there is a human being behind it. And no ghostly hands took your paper!”



“I think that way too,” Nicky declared, and Cliff nodded his agreement. Tom also gave a rather lame assent.

“Anyhow,” stated Nicky, practically, “if there was a ghost—if Captain Kidd did watch!—he sent part of the map to my own ancestor. He wouldn’t want to scare us! If he scared anybody, or took a map from anywhere, he would go after the colored fellow, Sam. His half of the cipher wasn’t rightfully his, the way mine is.”

“But there is no ghost,” repeated Mr. Gray. “If you ever get the true facts you will see that some person is at the bottom of this.”

“Sam, most likely!” declared Tom, entering into the spirit of the discussion and reassuring himself.

“No,” said Mr. Neale, coming in, his arm around the shoulders of the colored man they had just named, “no—Sam isn’t at the bottom of it.”

They looked at Sam. He was weak and shaken, and slumped down in a chair, rather limp and groggy.

“I found Sam out by the gate,” Mr. Neale explained. “He had been knocked out, actually, by a blow. He was on his way here, he managed to tell me. He thought he saw something light-colored near the house and he stopped by the gate. But whatever—whoever—it was, disappeared behind the house and he stood a moment wondering. Then he heard the voice in the house, here, and wondered whether to come in or to wait. Before he guessed what was happening, some one was behind him and struck him. That is all he remembered.”

“No ghost did that!” exclaimed Nicky.

“I don’t—know,” Sam said, weakly. “They tell, on the island, that ghosts have terrible power. I never did believe much in it, but—I don’t know—now!”

“Well, I do know!” declared Mr. Neale defiantly. “Your part of the map is gone, of course!”

“Yes, sar—yes——”

“Of course! Does that seem like the work of a ghost?”

“It might be!” Sam said uncertainly. He drank the water Nicky had brought him, and seemed to be pulling himself together, but his age-old instinct of fear was beginning to triumph over his education.

“At any rate,” Mr. Gray summed up, “whatever and whoever did these things, the result amounts to this: neither Sam nor we have any clue to the treasure——”

“You wouldn’t let that stop you, would you?” demanded Nicky.

“I wouldn’t, if Father would let us go on,” Cliff stated.

“Nor I,” agreed Clarence Neale. “We can remember the map closely enough—we know the longitude—we could even cable Nicky’s uncle and get the original if necessary——”

“But we don’t remember the latitude on Sam’s half,” said Cliff. “Unless Sam does——”

“When he gets over his bump—it won’t be serious—he will be able to help. Anyway, we know in a general way that the place is somewhere in the Florida Keys, about twenty-five degrees and some minutes of North latitude and we all recall the longitude—and one-half of the map had the phrase ‘dip’ and the other ‘per’—put them together and they mean ‘Dipper.’” Mr. Neale sketched on a bit of envelope the picture of the constellation know as “The Dipper.”

“There!” he said, triumphantly. “Doesn’t that show you the same little marks that were on the two maps?”

Nicky, Cliff, Tom and Mr. Gray nodded.

“Well, then, we can find that set of islands,” declared Mr. Neale, “and, if Mr. Gray would carry on my work here, I, for one, would vote to go ahead!”

“Here too!” cried Nicky.

“Same for me!” stated Cliff, giving his father an imploring look.

“I’m with you,” Tom chimed in, not as aggressively, but with his will power overcoming his uncertainty.

“I’d go if you would let me,” said Sam, while Mr. Gray bandaged a lump on his head after it had been disinfected and washed. “I know where I could get a sloop with a little engine to kick it along if the wind failed——”

“That would be fine!” exclaimed Nicky. “I vote we take Sam in!”

“Share and share alike!” cried Cliff eagerly. “That is, our part of whatever we find! Of course we’d give some to the governor’s family if we can find them.”

“We’d have to keep it secret—our plan!” said Nicky, earnestly. “We’d have to pretend to be going——”

“To cruise for Carib relics on smaller islands!” broke in Clarence Neale, as excited as his younger companions.

“Fine!” agreed Nicky. “Is the sloop big enough, Sam? Where is it? What’s it like? Is it seaworthy for a cruise like this?”

Sam said “yes” and described the one-masted, thirty-foot boat with its heavy duty motor. “Maybe close quarters to sleep in,” he said, “but she has shorely got a good name for treasure hunting!”

“What?” demanded all three chums in unison.

“The *Treasure Belle*——”

“Oh!” cried Nicky. “With a name like that we simply must get her! Mr. Gray, you can’t refuse us permission.”

Three eager youths pleaded. The older man, counseled and reassured by Clarence Neale, finally agreed.

“Hooray!” Nicky exulted. “Treasure bent in the *Treasure Belle*! Nothing can stop us!”

Tom, a little silent, hoped that nothing could!

## CHAPTER VI

### ON THE WAY TO THE KEYS

The *Treasure Belle*, when they inspected her with Sam and Mr. Neale, disappointed the chums. She lay, careening to one side, in a place on the shore of a small ship basin. Her hull, originally painted white, was a mixture of grays and browns, streaked and dirty. Her cabin, when they crawled into it, was musty and cramped, up in the bow, with no head room and with its bunks both narrow and uninviting.

“Quite a difference between her name and her looks,” smiled Clarence Neale. Nicky nodded and Cliff, standing on deck, pointed toward a cluster of boats moored in deeper water.

“Why can’t we charter a boat like that one?” said Cliff, indicating a fairly trim looking cruising launch, about thirty feet long, with a raised cabin whose windows had neat little drapings at each side, whose paint showed little wear. Where the *Treasure Belle* had no bright work, her hardware being discolored and rusting, the other craft showed signs of constant attention.

“That’s a private boat, and not for hire, sar,” explained Sam. “She belong to a white man. He use her for run to Cuba. I hear it told he is a politician of Cuba, and he stay here because he is not so well liked in his island. But they say he run there by night for some reason and keep that boat only for that.”

“Maybe he would charter her to us if he didn’t need her,” urged Nicky. “She’d be a lot nicer.”

Sam, at Mr. Neale’s suggestion, took them to the office of the ship basin owners but they got no encouragement. The *El Libertad* was not for hire or charter. He gave the party the address of her owner readily enough but without enthusiasm.

When Mr. Neale returned from an interview with Senor Ortiga, he shook his

head.

“*El Libertad* is not to be ours,” he said. “Senor Ortega told me that he is having the engine overhauled and is waiting for parts—even if he would let us have her, which he did not seem inclined to do, it would be a month before she would be ready, he said.”

“This *Treasure Belle* look poorly,” Sam said. “But she is Bahama built, sar, and she’s sturdy, and seaworthy.”

“She looks like a tub with a sail,” said Tom.

“Yes, sar, but she has very light draught,” Sam urged. “She can go in channels between the cays, and if she get aground her hull is strong and not easy to break. That *Libertad* is very thin hulled, and draws eight inches more water.”

“Well, we can’t have her, anyway,” Nicky decided. “We’ll have to make the best of this one and let the name make up for the drawbacks.”

“My cousin own her,” Sam stated. “I have not told him why we charter her, and for the cruise to get relics that I say we use her for, he let her go very cheap, sar.”

They made the necessary arrangements with Sam’s cousin and work was started on the sloop. She was close to thirty-two feet in length, wide in her beam and squatty looking, but her engine, though a heavy duty make and not very fast, was in perfect trim. Her canvas was also neat and complete.

While the paint was scrubbed and the dirty interior of the cabin made presentable and as comfortable as possible, Sam, who was a good sailor and knew the sloop well, gave Nicky, Tom and Cliff many lessons in rope splicing, handling the sails, and, without actual practice in steering he explained the method of holding a small craft on her course. Sam was the only addition to the party, as, with Mr. Neale, who was sufficiently good at navigation to handle a small boat on the comparatively landlocked course they would take, it was felt that the boys would make a sufficient crew, standing watch-and-watch.

Few supplies were put aboard. They did not want people to suppose they were going to be on a desolate series of coral reefs for their cruise; to buy much food would arouse curiosity, because they could get fresh supplies on any of the islands of the Bahamas or the Virgin Islands they were hinting that they would

visit.

On a bright, clear morning Cliff bade goodbye to his father, the others shook hands with Mr. Gray, and with the *Treasure Belle's* engine thudding away without a skip, they maneuvered the sloop out of the small basin and laid a course for Cuba, steering for the Eastern end of the island rather than to their true course toward the Western end, so as to make it seem that they were bound toward the Eastern group of islands, after touching on the large island for some work Mr. Neale pretended must be done there to verify some reports of Carib relics to be found in the jungles.

But by noon, with the jib and mainsail spread to the steady breeze, they shifted the tiller and brought the *Treasure Belle* around again on a course that would enable them to round the Western nose of Cuba and then sail Northeast to the coral islets which clustered in a long fringe along the Florida Gulf coast, at its lower portion.

“Without a map we will have to take some chances,” Mr. Neale told Nicky, Tom and Cliff. “But we can come pretty close to a guess at the point where we must anchor.”

“Where our half of the map showed the crossmarked ‘reck,’” Nicky asserted.

“Yes,” agreed Mr. Neale. “We will hunt for a spot where there could be a set of conditions like those we know.”

“You mean that there must be needles of coral deep enough for a Spanish galleon to have gone aground and broken up,” Cliff suggested. “Then two islands with a channel deep enough between for a heavy boat to use.”

“Right,” nodded the captain of the vessel, for that post had been given to their older comrade. The Mystery Boys had given Mr. Neale his initiation into the secret gestures with which they could communicate without letting outsiders guess that they were doing so.

“Then we will work in through the keys with the light-draft, glass-bottomed boat we are towing,” the captain went on. “If we fail to find islands in a formation like the Great Dipper, we can work North and South alternately until we do.”

“And then, the treasure!” exulted Nicky.

“I’m not so sure,” Cliff said. “Centuries have passed since it was put there. The map didn’t show whether the treasure was buried or not.”

“I don’t see how it could have been,” Tom declared. “That coral is too hard to dig in. They’d have had to blast to get a place deep enough to bury it. I imagine they just lowered the chests into the water, maybe in a little cove or where there was a hole deep enough to conceal the chests.”

“We will have to see,” Mr. Neale agreed. “First we must find our Great Dipper.”

They made the end of Cuba without any difficulty, rounded it and set the tiller for the new course, sailing more slowly as they lost the direct force of the steady breeze and had to keep rather close-hauled. They did not use the engine, preferring not to employ it any more than was essential. It might help them off if they ran onto a reef, and they proposed to save their supply of gasoline for such an emergency.

At last, under a glorious sunset, with its rose and coral, its great, vivid bands of green and vivid gold lighting up a few fleecy clouds near the horizon, they sighted the low, long cluster of islets.

Not a thing had occurred during the trip to cause uneasiness. Sam had been both courteous and respectful, without being servile. Like most Jamaica colored people he felt himself to be the equal of the race of lighter color, as far as education and morality could be compared. In the matter of his color of skin he felt, with justice, that the teaching of the Bible, and of the United States Constitution, that all men are equal, in the sense of all being created by the same Great Creator, was a true teaching.

Being sensible boys, Nicky, Tom and Cliff made no distinction in the matter of Sam’s color. As long as he preserved the same habits of decency as they did, as long as he “acted white,” as Nicky put it, they were too finely bred to treat him like an ignorant heathen, as so many rather ignorant people do in their relations with men of dark, or yellow skin. They looked at the intelligence and the inner man, and not alone at the tint of the skin.

Sam felt the decent attitude and responded. He never tried to be above his station but he acted as an equal wherever his education enabled him to do so, and accepted gracefully the superiority of Mr. Neale’s training, Nicky’s deftness with a fish spear, Nicky’s eyes having been quickened and trained by archery and

other sports. Tom's superior speed as a runner had been proved on the beach before they sailed, as had Cliff's supremacy in wrestling. But there was no color line drawn, and that made the cruise more pleasanter.

"The Keys!" cried Nicky from the bow.

They all lined up around the mast, and, just before the twilight and its afterglow left the long reach of islets looking like ghostly shapes on the water, they cast anchor.



## CHAPTER VII

### AN UNCANNY SUMMONS

The spot where the *Treasure Belle* came to anchor was just at the lowermost point of the archipelago of coral islets. The solid land which had Cape Sable for its most Southern tip had been passed and lay to their left, while the first of the Keys was dimly visible as they looked off in the opposite direction.

A council was being held on the decked-over top of the stuffy cabin. Sam was not there. He had taken the dinghy, with its glass bottom, and was just out of earshot toward the inner bay, fishing to secure their morning meal.

“I have been thinking a great deal about our next course,” Mr. Neale stated. “One reason that I anchored just here is this: It is a deep enough channel between the mainland and the Key for us to navigate the *Belle* without danger of grounding or running onto a coral ‘needle.’ My intention has been to sail along the outer side of the archipelago; but I wonder, now, what you think of trying the inside channel, between the mainland and the Keys.”

“We’d miss the place where the wreck was marked, if we go the inside way,” objected Nicky.

“True,” admitted the captain, “but, on the on the other hand, fellows, we would come to a point opposite where we think that should be, and we’d work outward from the inner channel.”

“But we’d miss the route we marked down, from memory, the way it was on our half of the map. That took in at least two of the Dipper islands,” Cliff reminded him.

“Here is my reason for wanting to do something else,” Mr. Neale said quietly. “If we go the outer way there may not be a safe anchorage in case of a storm. You will remember that the old galleon was supposed to have been wrecked on

‘needles’ and I can assure you that those sharp, coral spikes are no pleasant thing to have under your hull in any sea that lifts the sloop and drops her down hard.”

“I know another good reason,” Tom chimed in. “We don’t suspect Sam of having anything to do with stealing our map—because he was hit on the head and his map was taken——”

“So he says!” corrected Nicky. “We haven’t any proof, and he’s the only one we can think of who would have had any reason——”

“But we don’t actually suspect him,” Tom insisted. “He hasn’t made a suspicious move or done a wrong thing since we started out. But what I meant to say was: We don’t suspect him, but we do know that somebody has the maps—both halves, probably.”

“I see what you are driving at,” Cliff declared. “If somebody else is after the treasure, we would be right in sight if we anchored in the outer place; and we’d be a sort of ‘marker’ for them.”

“That was my idea, also,” said Mr. Neale. “And if Sam did have anything to do with the loss of our map, a change in our plans may cause him to betray some emotion. We can’t suspect him, but we can’t exonerate him, either.”

“Not yet,” agreed Nicky, and Tom and Cliff shook their heads.

“I vote for the inside channel,” Nicky added.

“So do I!”

“I do, too,” Cliff completed the vote.

“Then, tomorrow, we will pilot the *Belle* through by using the dinghy ahead to look out for coral,” Mr. Neale said.

“Let’s not mention it to Sam in the dark,” Nicky urged. “His face will show his feelings better in the morning and we will surprise him.” It was agreed to take Nicky’s way.

“Look—over there!” Tom said under his breath; he clutched Cliff’s arm, and pointed. They all turned.

“Do you mean on that little Key—where the single tree is—that bluish light!” Nicky demanded.

“Yes! Isn’t it queer? See—Mr. Neale! It’s—it’s moving!”

Tom’s clutch on Cliff’s arm tightened.

On the small expanse of coral at some distance, countless years had spread a thin upper covering of mold and dust until enough earth was deposited to support a small, stunted palm tree. As the four looked a strange, bluish radiance, seeming to be on the ground itself, showed the lower part of the tree trunk in relief against its faint glow.

The light seemed to move about within a narrow radius.

“It can hardly be phosphorus,” stated Mr. Neale, keeping his voice low and his words calm to prevent any growth of superstitious fear.

“What is it, then?” whispered Tom.

“Sam may be over there,” Nicky gave the logical explanation. But as he spoke they heard the swish of Sam’s oar and the grate of the dinghy coming alongside on the port side.

“Don’t say a word,” cautioned Cliff. “See if he mentions it.”

Sam did mention the light, and at once!

“I don’t like that, sar,” he said to Mr. Neale, as he paid out the dinghy line and looped it over a stern cleat of the sloop. “I tell you, sar, I was educated not to believe in ghosts, sar, but we are right in the place where all the pirates hid gold and laid in wait for ships. If not the English and Spanish and French, then the Bahama buccaneers and the ones that started up their trade from Cuba before they were wiped out for all time.”

“Nonsense!” said Mr. Neale, rather sharply. “Pull up that dinghy, Nicky. Want to come along? We’ll see what it’s all about, eh?”

“No, sar—don’t you!” exclaimed Sam.

Tom also whispered to Nicky. The latter, rather surprised at his formerly cool chum, who had kept his head admirably during their adventures among the Incas, was about to make a retort that would shame Tom, but he shut his lips, for once controlling his impulses.

“There is nothing to fear,” declared the captain and Nicky echoed his words stoutly, as did Cliff. Nicky and Mr. Neale rowed away.

It was a short row to the islet, although they proceeded slowly because of the darkness and the proximity of coral under the water. The light disappeared before they reached the island. They could see quite plainly in the starlight that there was nothing on the small coral Key except the palm tree.

“Strange,” observed Mr. Neale.

“Maybe it was just some odd reflection of light from a star on the coral,” Nicky said. “Only—it moved!”

“Perhaps our imagination helped,” Mr. Neale said, and that was the explanation he insisted upon when they returned to the *Treasure Belle*. The others accepted it, Cliff calmly, Tom rather silently. Only Sam objected.

“No star, sar!” he declared. “We would still see the light—and no star is blue. But——”

He drew closer to the little riding light which was on the mast and which they used as their only illumination that evening. “Back in my island there is a story, sar, that when a treasure is in danger ghosts appear to scare people away and when a treasure is not being guarded by ghosts there is a light hovering over the spot where it is buried!”

“Well, that is great!” declared Nicky eagerly. “All we have to do then is to go there tomorrow and get the treasure!”

Although neither Tom nor Sam fully agreed that there was nothing to menace their personal welfare, they retired with the others. Sam curled up, as usual, in the cockpit, and the three chums laid themselves on the roof of the cabin, on blankets, their air pillows inflated and under their heads.

They did not discuss the matter of the light. It did not appear again and Nicky

and Cliff dropped off to sleep. Tom, lying awake, battling with himself mentally, trying to make his common sense defeat his instinctive apprehension, started and almost thrust Cliff over the low rail with the violence of his motion.

From somewhere about the hull of their sloop came three distinct taps! Rap! Rap! Rap!

“What was that?” whispered Tom.

Mr. Neale, seated near the tiller, half dozing, answered, as Cliff and Nicky stirred and came awake.

“Probably drifting wood or possibly we are almost on a coral reef—or the anchor cable may have rubbed and made the noise. There is not a thing!——”

“Look!” gasped Nicky—“Look! In the water! Light—bluish light, moving away.”

Everyone was fully awake and staring in every direction. Cliff located Nicky’s indicating finger, followed the direction, saw a swirl of phosphorescence in the water.

“Maybe a shark!” he declared, “a shark came up to investigate us, looking for food, I’ll bet!”

“That was it!” declared Mr. Neale. “Go back to sleep.”

“There’s the light again!” Tom quavered. Even Cliff and Nicky felt chilling prickles run up and down their spines at Tom’s tone. Sam looked and slumped down, hiding his face in the cockpit.

“Hit’s—hit’s—ghos’es!” he shuddered, forgetting his educated diction in his terror.

“Mr. Neale, let’s go and see—” begged Nicky.

“Let me go too?” urged Cliff, “Nicky went last time.”

“Wait till mornin’—please, sar, wait!” pleaded Sam. “Doan’ leave us here for the ghos’es to git us, sar!”

“Now—right now, we go!” stated Nicky. “We’ll settle this thing once and for all. If you aren’t strong enough to fight off a ghost, Sam, I’m sorry for you.”

He had the dinghy alongside. Cliff and Mr. Neale clambered in and held the rail of the sloop until Nicky slipped into the dinghy’s bow. Tom, knowing the small boat had its full complement of passengers, and realizing that his own timidity had made him an enforced companion of a terrified Negro on the sloop, strove to drive away his fear.

“Can you whistle, sar?” urged Sam. “Dey says whistlin’ keeps off ghos’es!”

“Then you try, too,” ordered Tom.

Both puckered their lips and essayed a shrill whistle. It came out each a quavery, hissing failure that the ones in the boat, pushing away from the sloop, peered and chuckled.

“Get yourself a tin whistle,” laughed Cliff, and even Tom had to chuckle at his own tremulous muscles.

It seemed as though the dinghy was away a long time; the queer light shone for awhile but suddenly vanished.

After a wait there came a hail.

“What do you think we found?” called Nicky, excitedly.

Tom couldn’t guess. When they all assembled and the riding lantern was hauled down to show their discovery better, Tom gasped.

“Right where the light had been, we found this!” stated Nicky, showing a rusted, broken and almost completely disintegrated old can, such as vegetables are preserved in. From it he drew an old, torn slip of some sort of thin leather or parchment. Time seemed to have eaten into it, or else the washing of the water had rotted it.

Nevertheless, faint, distinguishable marks were on it.

“Why, it’s a message or something!” exclaimed Tom.

“Dat’s what the light was for,” said Sam, his teeth chattering. “It marked where the can was, sars.”

“Well, it did us a good turn,” Nicky stated joyfully. “Read it, will you, Mr. Neale?”

Their captain put the parchment very close to the light.

They almost held their breath, waiting in a thrill of eagerness.

“I declare!” he cried, “it looks as old as the can—and yet—and yet—this is a message to us!”

“It is?” shouted Nicky.

“Listen!” He bent closer, holding the dim lettering almost against the lantern globe.

“This is what it says. ‘Treasure—found—long ago. Dig under tallest of three trees on Crocodile Key in Card Bay for more!’”

“Hooray!” Nicky exulted, “one treasure gone and another to be found!”

“Where did it come from?” Cliff asked. “I know how we found it, but I mean, how did it get there?”

“Maybe it was left here for some buccaneers who knew about the other treasure,” Tom hazarded a guess.

“I know the answer,” Nicky cried, “this isn’t meant for us. There may have been a treasure hidden on that key; somebody got it and either took it where this says, or else knew of another one and left this word for the ones who would come for the original one.”

“But—the light!—” began Tom.

“Well,” laughed Nicky, “if ghosts want to be as friendly as to light a beacon, I’m their friend! Thank you, ghosties!”

“Sh-h-h!” whispered Sam. “Please, sar—don’t!”

“But they did us a favor,” said Nicky. “They gave us a much better ‘lead’ than the one we had. I say it again.”

He faced the little key and cupping his hands, sent out a hail.

“Ghosties—thank you!”

Even Nicky was electrified in the next instant.

From somewhere—they could not say where—came a sepulchral, gurgling answer.

“You—welcome!”



## CHAPTER VIII

### CROCODILE KEY

Like a jackrabbit, Sam, in two moves, dived into the cabin. His first jump took him from the deck to the cockpit; his body hardly landed, facing astern, before he doubled on himself, snakelike, and shot himself through the narrow door.

Tom was on the point of following; but his fear of his comrades' laughter was greater even than his dread of the unknown. Sam's comical appearance brought a shout of laughter from Cliff and Nicky; even Mr. Neale was compelled to chuckle. Tom, therefore, mastered his impulse and remained on the cabin roof.

"Now what do you suppose that was?" Cliff wondered, after they relieved the tension of the momentary start of instinctive terror by a good laugh at Sam.

"I must give it up," answered Mr. Neale, "but I am inclined to look for some human agency before I admit any supernatural cause."

"It—it didn't sound like—anything human!" Tom said with a shiver.

"Have you heard so many ghosts that you know what they sound like?" asked Nicky with a chuckle. Tom shook his head.

"I don't feel much like investigating in the dark," Cliff went on.

"I don't see what there is to investigate," Nicky added.

"I'll take the dinghy in the morning and look for some evidences of human causes," declared Mr. Neale. "Perhaps a Seminole Indian may be around here, fishing—or something. Or some white resident of the mainland, with a sense of humor, is playing a joke on us."

"This message doesn't seem like a joke," Nicky defended. "It looks real to me.

See how rusted the old can is—why, it’s almost like paper—and the parchment is awfully old.” He indicated, by the dim lantern, how frail the edge of the sheet was by tearing it.

“I think it’s real,” Cliff agreed. “Don’t you, Mr. Neale?”

Their captain and mentor hesitated.

“There are several strange points to consider by daylight,” he commented. “If we had found it by chance I should consider it genuine; but the light—and the ghostly voice—those make me suspicious.”

“But—look!” argued Nicky, “it gives a definite place, and tells about a landmark to show where to dig for treasure. Our map wasn’t even clear about the channel or where the treasure was hidden.”

“However,” Mr. Neale said, “it came to you in a logical way. The new one did not. I cannot account for that bluish light but it is surely not supernatural.”

“I’ve heard of very old things, decomposing, giving off light,” Cliff declared. Mr. Neale nodded and since there was really nothing to be gained by any long argument, they finally became calm enough to lie down again, Mr. Neale agreeing to stay awake and watch until dawn.

Not much sleep was possible; nevertheless they all dozed some, and their dreams were, to say the least, thrilling.

However, as is usual with any form of terror of supernatural things, the coming of the sunshine dispelled their timidity. True it was that the coral showed no footprints and the water told no story of the previous night’s incidents. They remained unexplainable.

Sam served a breakfast of fish, with bacon and some turtle eggs he had found the evening before, and during the meal their procedure was discussed.

Nicky, Cliff and Tom were for giving up their indefinite search, among a multitude of islets, and trying for the new treasure trove, and Sam agreed with them with the words, “Anywhere, sar—anywhere but hereabouts! It’s bad lucky, so it is!”

Mr. Neale, outvoted, gave in.

“I hunted crocodiles for the Museum of Natural History one winter,” he stated, “I did not secure a really successful specimen—all I got was a giant turtle head, and part of the skeleton of some great snake; the crocodiles were too shy to be caught or even shot.”

“Don’t you mean alligators?” asked Tom, who knew some natural history.

“No,” replied Mr. Neale. “Mostly the saurians of Florida are of the alligator family; but in some southerly parts of the Florida bays there are to be found certain species that are different from the alligators and more closely allied with the crocodile species. I really believe it would do us no harm to delay our search here for a while. There is delightful fishing and a great deal of fun—good bathing, sponge fishing, crawfish catching and so on—to be had.

“Card Bay,” he went on, “is a curious slip in the parchment; it is really Card Sound—a sheet of water about six miles by two and a half. But possibly when this parchment was put where we found it—if it is genuine—the names were different.”

Up came the anchor and instead of running into Whitewater Bay to go up the channel—if they could find one—inside the islets, they swung the *Treasure Belle*’s bow southward, and ran slowly down to round the land of the nose named Cape Sable, and then beat easterly along the coast, finding snug harbors behind keys or in some of the many small bays, to lie to during the nights.

The trip was fairly uneventful.

There was one time when they thought they would not find the right channel and almost went aground in a narrow passage between two mangrove-covered points. Rather heavy wind made steering hard as they rounded Southeast Cape, the lowest part of the Florida mainland, even before that; but Sam was a good man at the tiller and they had little to fear, being quick and alert to obey his quiet commands to haul on the ropes, to swing the mainsail or to take an additional reef in their canvas.

They skirted the shore of lower Matecumbe, and stared interestedly at Indian Key.

“That is where the Seminole Indians killed a Doctor Perrine,” Mr. Neale explained. “During the Seminole War that happened. His children hid in a turtle pen. They escaped. Really, it was a miracle!”

It was a high island of about ten acres, and in the plentiful water around it they ran quite close to its high banks in passing.

That evening they anchored after running between two points where the draught was very slight and only by judging the color of the water were they able to starboard, or port, the helm a trifle, moving slowly, to avoid the shoal or the more dangerous coral itself.

They anchored just before sunset and so beautifully clear was the water that the sponges growing on the bottom were plainly visible, in the cross light, as Tom and Nicky rowed the glass bottomed dinghy slowly around on the smooth water.

“Isn’t this great” exclaimed Nicky. “See those sponges! How many kinds do you know, Tom?”

“Well, I know them by name, but not by sight,” Tom responded. “I have read that the marketable kinds are the yellow, the sheeps-wool, the gras—and I think one is called the glove. But there are more kinds that aren’t any good to sell, and they have to be recognized or else you’d get a lot that aren’t salable. There is the loggerhead, for one, I remember—and the potato sponge. And there are some that are spiny, and they hurt your hands if you grab them.”

“They don’t look like what we see in the stores,” Nicky commented. “They are sort of the same shapes, but they are black, and Mr. Neale says they feel like india-rubber to touch and they are smooth, with little craters or holes in the top—look! There’s a beauty. Is that a salable one, Tom?”

Tom peered down through the boat’s transparent bottom.

“I’ll bet it’s a sheeps-wool one,” he declared.

Nicky stood up and began to fling off his clothes.

“I’m going to dive for it!” he exclaimed. Tom, fired by his enthusiasm, and with the spirit of rivalry, began to “shuck” his clothes. It became a race toward nakedness—with no one but their comrades to observe, they often plunged into

the limpid, translucent water in nature's swimming suit. Cliff, observing them from the sloop, began to emulate their hasty disrobing. But Sam put a stop to their plan.

"Why?" demanded Cliff, rather warmly. "We're not afraid of sharks!"

"No, sar," called Sam, "but you are liable to dive crooked or if your foot slips you may go in backwards—and a cut from that sharp coral isn't to be chanced, sar." He showed Cliff a deep scar under his woolly hair, and Cliff, alarmed, called for his comrades to desist—until daylight, at least. They agreed reluctantly, and, looking down more carefully Nicky confided to Tom that he was glad they had. Overlooked in their excitement, they were able in calm study to observe a long, arrow-like frond of coral extending upward at an angle so close to the sponge that it must have been struck by any but a most expert diver.

Green turtle, cooked by broiling beside a good beach fire, as the Indians did it—a tasty meat, and equally good when made into a sort of stew of the whole creature's flesh, was eked out by a four pound crawfish caught by Nicky from a veritable crawling mass of these lobster-like shellfish in their bay. Corn-pone, or cornbread made the southern way and baked in ashes, a process learned by Tom during a summer camp, in the South, made a fine dinner that night and they ate the more lustily for the realization of their narrow escape earlier in the evening. "It doesn't pay to leap before you look!" declared Nicky as the chums settled down to sleep that night.

After rather eventless days, during which they passed many bays, inlets, keys and reefs, they sighted Key Largo, one of the most fertile of the few larger Florida Keys, beat along its shore, ran along past Whaleback Key, and finally slipped to the end of what the natives call Barnes' Sound, and through Jewfish Creek, a narrow and deceptive passage connecting the larger sheet of water with what the natives call Little Card Sound, although the Geodetic Survey charts give different names to both major and minor waters.

The opening of Jewfish Creek was deceptive because mangrove trees grew so closely that it looked like an impassable place until Mr. Neale, who had used it previously during his crocodile hunting expedition, took command and piloted them through cleverly.

"Little Card Sound!" exclaimed Nicky—with considerable eagerness. "Now—"

where is Crocodile Key?”

“I never heard of it,” Mr. Neale replied. “But——”

“Yonder—yonder!” cried Sam, extending his arm toward a point on the distant shoreline. “That may not be a key, sar—but there shorely are three trees in a row!”

“So they are!” agreed the captain, jamming over the tiller as the sloop heeled in the breeze and swung her bow toward the trees.

“But they are on the shore—not on a key,” objected Tom.

“Coral may have closed a channel during the years,” Mr. Neale explained. “Then earth covered it. That is, granting that our message is genuine.”

“The trees prove it!” Nicky cried. “Now, all we have to do is to wait till tomorrow and then——”

“Dig for treasure!” cried Tom and Cliff, together.

## **CHAPTER IX**

### **BLACK CAESAR'S BUCCANEERS**

Once the anchor was dropped and the sails furled, and everything made ship-shape for an indefinite stay, the chums lost no time in tumbling into their dinghy and rowing the several hundred yards to shore.

They wanted to inspect the small inlet opposite which they had anchored, and, before the light faded, to get an idea of what sort of a place lay beneath those three sentinels standing their silent guard over the treasure buried so long ago.

The mouth of the inlet was dark and gloomy when they reached it and Tom, using the oars, let them trail in the water until the snub-nosed boat lost way.

“It looks pretty spooky in there,” he said.

“Oh, pshaw!” exclaimed Nicky, “pull, Tom. There aren’t any spooks!”

“But there are snakes—and plenty of them,” Cliff came to the rescue of the oarsman. “Mr. Neale warned us, and it’s getting close to sunset. We might not see them—the snakes!”

Nicky gave in and they drifted close in to the narrow waterway. The shore was heavily matted with a jungle of undergrowth, above which the larger growth, some small mahogany, mangrove and other trees towered.

“This may be just a lagoon, not an inlet. If it’s a—er—like a strait, you know,” Nicky urged, “then’s there may be water enough on the far side to make this a key. In that case—we’ve got the very place mentioned in the message!”

“We’d better wait till morning to make sure,” Cliff said, and after many speculations as to which side of the trees the treasure lay under—the message had not said—they rowed back to the sloop.

“There’s another boat—I think it’s making for the *Treasure Belle*,” said Cliff. Looking across the small distance, the others saw a rowboat coming from around a point, making at leisurely speed for the spot they had their bow pointed toward.

“I wonder who they are?” Nicky speculated.

“I guess they wonder that about us,” Tom hinted.

They were aboard when the other small craft slipped alongside. In the rowboat was a tall, rangy, and very thin and hawk-faced white man and a plumb, grinning darkey of the true southern type, ready to break into a guffaw at the slightest joke; he was quite a contrast to the Jamaican, Sam. Although Sam had a pleasant smile, his face never broke out, as Nicky put it, “like the sun bu’sting through a cloud,” as did that of the darkey whom his white companion called “Pomp” to shorten his real name, which was Pompey.

“Howdy, strangers,” greeted the white man as their boat grated and came to rest at the side of the sloop. “Right pretty name your boat’s got—*Treasure Belle*. Reckon maybe you named her that a-purpose. Reckon maybe you come here-’bouts to make her live up to hit!”

“Come aboard, won’t you?” Mr. Neale responded. “We’re glad to have company and get acquainted.” The white man clambered to the cockpit and produced a corncob pipe, filling it languidly as he lay sprawled on a long cushion at the side of the engine.

“I’m Nelse Carford,” he explained and introductions were exchanged. “I got me a right nice little piece of ground up beyond the point. You-all mus’ come to visit me. Here for the night—or on special business?” It struck Nicky and his comrades that he eyed them all closely as he asked the question.

“Thank you—we would be glad to visit you soon, if we remain.” Mr. Neale took it upon himself to be the spokesman. “We are just sailing around among the bays and the keys, giving the boys a bit of fun—an epidemic of ‘flu’ closed their school this December.”

“I see,” nodded Nelse, apparently better pleased than before. “I thought it mought—” his word for “might”—“mought be you was after some treasure, seeing what the craft is named.”



Nicky opened his mouth, but Cliff kicked his shin gently and Nicky subsided. But Nelse had caught his expression.

“I reckon it mought be your aim to git some if it was right handy though, hey?” he grinned. Pompey, in the rowboat, holding to a rail alongside the cockpit, guffawed, “Sho’ nuff!” he chuckled. “White boys sho’ nuff do dat!”

“Would you blame us?” Cliff demanded with a grin.

“Course not,” Nelse answered. “Hits right natural. And you’re ’most what mought be said to be in the pirates’ an’ wreckers’ haunts, too. Not fur away to what they call Black Caesar’s Creek—they do say that old pirate was a terror. An’ all around—just beyond, is a regular ships’ graveyard—why you kin right near see ribs and rudder posts, an’ bits of keel sticking up, from here. Not quite, but you near-’bout kin see ’em. They’s just away yonder.” He gestured in the general direction of the lower neck of Biscayne Bay and the Fowney Rocks light.

“Tell us,” said Nicky, before Cliff could warn him again, “is that called Crocodile Key?” He indicated the land at their bow.

Nelse started. He almost dropped his pipe. Then he straightened. Nicky felt eyes that were suddenly very piercing, boring at him in the deepening twilight.

“How come you ast that?” demanded Nelse.

Mr. Neale took things in hand before Nicky could commit himself further.

“Somebody told them there was such a place nearby, and I had a notion I’d try for a croc’ if that is so,” he declared.

Nelse sat up straight and bent forward while Pomp’ in his boat subdued a cackle of laughter and became very serious, an expression that made his plump face look ludicrously like a monkey’s.

“Listen!” ordered Nelse, sharply, “for your own sakes, keep away f’om that place yonder—’specially at nights!”

“Why?” said Tom, his voice beginning to get weak.

“Because!” declared Nelse, “they say that Black Caesar buried some treasure there one time. And——”

“All the more reason——” began Nicky.

Nelse silenced him with a curt shake of the head.

“And——” he took up his talk, “Black Caesar was the meanest and most brutal pirate that ever lived! They say, if anybody comes to try to git his treasure, him and his mates appears—ghos’s, you know! An’ woe betide them what they puts their spell on!”

Sam had retired, shuddering and groaning, to the cabin. Pomp’ began to look over his shoulder. “Mas’ Nelse,” he quavered, “come on, suh—don’ talk no moah ’bout dat! Le’s git on home—please!”

Nelse nodded. “You see, I reckon,” he said. “Ever’body here-’bouts believes hit.”

“Have you ever seen the pirates—are they real or spooks?” asked Nicky.

“Comin’ home, late, one night, bein’ becalmed in a sail boat—I see ’em. Loading chests o’ treasure in the moonlight! Bet you I never want to see ’em no more! No, suh!” Pomp’ gasped.

“And,” added Nelse to his servant’s tale, “next day after Pomp’ told me—he was near-’bout scared out o’ his clo’es—I took me a rifle an’ went onto that land ’side o’ the inlet, there—where you see that bit o’ rock under the mangrove—an’—an’—they had been some man there, it looked like he had been tryin’ to locate somethin’ and started to dig for it—but—he—won’t—never—dig—no mo’!”

The three chums shuddered in spite of themselves.

“Hurt?” asked Mr. Neale.

“Beyond hurtin’——” said Nelse solemnly. He refused an invitation to stay for supper, complied with Pomp’s pleading and tumbled into his boat.

“If I was you,” he said in farewell, “an’ had any idea o’ tryin’ for what I reckon

may be hid on that strip o' land—I'd up sail an' away quick's the wind 'ud take me!"

"Yes, sar!" mumbled Sam in the cabin.

"But whatever you do," called Nelse, "if there is any spooks—doan' try for to bother 'em none—they's more to them ha'nts—" his word for ghosts "—than most folks knows, I reckon!"

"Well, you won't get me there," declared Tom.

The slow, idle evening gave them plenty of time to recount their feelings and to argue to and fro about ghosts, spooks, ha'nts, and buccaneers' apparitions in particular. Sam, refusing to come forth even to cook supper, took no part. He crouched in a corner, muttering some charm or spell of protection taught him by Ma'am Sib, no doubt, till Cliff called, "Oh, Sam—shut up!"

"All that talks doesn't scare me," Nicky declared, "nor Sam, either, even with his witch-charms. I'd sort of like to see——"

That very second he had his wish!

## CHAPTER X

### SAM SHOWS HIS TRUE COLORS

On shore a queer light appeared. It was queer in more ways than one. It was of a peculiar green, an uncanny green; it was not the light of a lantern, shining all around; it seemed like a small window lighted up with an uncanny glow—and it was where no window could be. The light seemed to be moving, very slowly, when Cliff discovered it and without a word directed his comrades' attention toward it.

While they stared, the light came slowly closer to the shore—and yet it did not seem to be carried—it glided along almost imperceptibly.

Tom, with a nervous clutch on Mr. Neale's arm, indicated the open water of the Sound. Across it a boat was moving, slowly, steadily, toward them.

Yet, although it came steadily along and they could see the men as dim, ghostly shapes, the oars made no sound as the forms in the boat plied them—bend! straighten!—bend! straighten!

The light had stopped moving and seemed to hang, a queer window of illumination, above the water on which its gleam was reflected faintly. The boat came toward them. In its bow a figure stood—and what a figure! In the dim star-gleam it seemed gigantic. Not a sound accompanied the slow progress of the strange craft.

“He's got something in his hand!” gasped Nicky.

The man, as the boat came to within thirty feet of the sloop, raised his arm.

“It's a sword—” whispered Tom.

“No! A cutlass!” Cliff breathed.

The ghostly figure, its head tied up in some sort of cloth, its face a white blur under the white head covering, made a menacing gesture, as of one thrusting at them, with the implement in his hand.

Then he lifted the cutlass and with it pointed away toward the passage between the mangroves where they had come into the Sound.

“Go away, or you will suffer!” his gestures seemed to say.

His boat, still without a sound, like a wraith on the water, swung away toward the light.

Hardly breathing, the chums watched.

“Boat, ahoy!” called Mr. Neale.

There was no response. Like a craft of dreams the boat moved off and they saw it progress steadily to shore.

The light, green and gruesome, seemed to grow larger and brighter, and it turned slightly so that it lighted up the shelving bit of sand at the mouth of the inlet.

Onto this small beach, with no sound that could be heard, the boat-load of wraith-like figures debarked.

They seemed to be all white, like ghosts, in sheets or some sort of glimmeringly pale garments. They bent toward the boat in the glow that made them seem like luminous, greenish shapes of evil.

“Look!” breathed Tom, “they’re lifting a chest!”

They were! A chest or box of treasure was being shifted to the sand. Several others followed, still without answer to Mr. Neale’s repeated hail.

Sam, who had refused to leave his retreat in the stuffy cabin, began to whimper. Through a port-hole, at their captain’s hail, he had stolen one glance. It was enough!

Tom, too, was demoralized; but he dared not speak; only by the shaking of his hand on Nicky’s arm did his terror show.

On shore there seemed to be a ghostly argument—suddenly, in the greenish glow, knives flashed out, were lifted, were plunged into action! Yet no sound of a fight came across the water.

Figures dropped! Forms strove, hand in hand, knives upraised and driven downward!

And at one side, a little above the rest, and sharply silhouetted as a tall form in white, stood the one who must be the leader, his cutlass held ready, but making no move.

And then, all but one of the contending silent figures was down! The survivor of the battle turned and rushed toward his chief—the glow disappeared and the silence, the darkness, closed down more eerily than ever!

“Where are they—what are they doing?” gasped Nicky.

Mr. Neale was drawing in on the line that secured the dinghy.

“I’m going to see,” he said.

For once there were no volunteers for the investigation!

Tom begged his chief not to go, but Mr. Neale, with a word of encouragement, assuring them that he felt that the strange scene had more than supernatural explanation, rowed away.

The wait seemed interminable. They heard his oars squeal in the rowlocks, saw the dinghy reach the shore and lose way; then there was a silence and an absence of movement. They could not make out what Mr. Neale was doing.

“I wish I’d gone along, now,” Nicky said.

“I ought to have gone, too—he might need help.” Cliff seconded his chum’s tardy return of courage.

But the dinghy was returning!

“It’s queer,” Mr. Neale said when he had transferred himself to the cockpit, “I couldn’t find a thing!”

“Couldn’t find—no boat—nothing?” quavered Tom.

“Not a thing!”

There was not much sleep that night and they were all glad to see the sky begin to turn gray, then lighter, in the East, as dawn came.

Sam came out sullenly to prepare breakfast. Their supplies were very low for they had laid in only a small store, to keep up their pretence of cruising among islands where food was plentiful. At several points of the shore they had secured yams, corn flour and other necessities, but the meal, with a lean larder and a morose, intimidated cook, yielded little zest or nourishment for even such good appetites as the Mystery Boys usually possessed.

“I’m going to suggest that you fellows go ashore,” Mr. Neale said. “I’ll set you on the beach—and be careful about snakes! Then I’ll take the dinghy and go around the point to see that chap we met last night. There is more behind this than we see just now.”

“Don’t you think?—” began Tom.

“I think a good deal,” the captain replied, “but ghosts are the very last explanation I will accept!”

He put Nicky and Cliff on the bank of the inlet, noting that by daylight the sand and undergrowth was trampled and muddied.

“No ghosts did all this,” he said. “There is a human agency at work and I want to find out why all this trouble was taken—to scare us.”

He went back to the sloop, ordered Sam to pull himself together, and took Tom aboard the dinghy. When he landed the third of the comrades Mr. Neale, repeating his warning about snakes, bade them reconnoiter and find all the signs they could, against his return. Then he rowed off toward the point around which Nelse had said he had a plantation.

“Funny Nelse didn’t come back this morning,” Cliff observed.

“Maybe he is in the scheme—whatever it is—to scare us,” Nicky mused. “Remember how anxious he was at first, till we said why we are here—and then

how emphatic he was about danger?”

They did. As they looked about there were plenty of signs to show that human agencies and not ghosts had produced the strange scene the night before.

Not only was the ground trampled, but on one mangrove root that bent upward and curved into a sort of prong, they discovered a strip of cloth that looked like part of a bed sheet.

But there was no sign of the chests of treasure!

“It’s a queer thing!” Nicky declared. His chums agreed.

“Say!” exclaimed Tom suddenly, pointing toward the sloop, “what’s Sam doing? Look—he’s hoisting the mainsail!”

Sam was doing exactly that.

“Ahoy—Sam!” hailed Nicky through cupped hands.

Sam did not answer.

“Sam! Sam!” shouted all three. They saw the colored man turn and look toward them. Then he picked up a small megaphone that was part of the boat’s equipment and roared at them.

“I’m going away from here, sars! Yes, sar! Going from here!”

“He’s been scared almost crazy!” declared Cliff, “but he can’t go away——”

“——And leave us—and Mr. Neale!” cried Tom.

Nicky began kicking off his shoes. As he doffed coat and cap, his chums followed his example. Together they plunged into the water and swam lustily toward the *Treasure Belle*.

It was a race against Sam’s swift movements.

The sail was up. The anchor came in with a groan of its chain. Cliff, a few strokes in the lead, redoubled his efforts.



The *Treasure Belle* began to move through the water, taking a puff of wind in the early morning gusts.

Nicky and Cliff desisted from their effort. Tom, desperate, seemed fairly to race toward the stem of the moving slope—but her pace accelerated. She stood away toward the neck through which she would apparently head out toward Biscayne Bay and the open water.

From the stern Sam waved a hand in farewell!

## CHAPTER XI

### ONE MYSTERY IS SOLVED

Swimming dejectedly back to their small bit of beach the chums took off their soaked clothes and hung them in the sun to dry.

“Well, here we are!” observed Nicky ruefully.

“Well, here we are!” mimicked Cliff. “Don’t you like it? I thought you were fond of mystery and adventure!”

“Whether I am or not, I’m getting it!” Nicky admitted. “But this was more than I bargained for.”

“Same here,” exclaimed Tom.

“I see,” Cliff grinned at them. “You two are—sort of—arm-chair adventurers. You like to have the thrills without the hardships. Just look at us!” he declared. “We couldn’t be deeper in adventure if we tried to dig our way in! Right in the midst of treasure-land! Stranded and deserted on the edge of an awful swamp— isn’t the Big Cypress Swamp north of us? Surely it is! Without food! Drenched and helpless. What more could you ask?”

“I see what you are aiming at,” Nicky grinned back. “We must take it as it comes and make the best of it.”

“That’s it,” Cliff agreed. “You know we’re not so badly off. Mr. Neale will come rowing along in the dinghy and then we’ll all crowd in and be rescued—what a story we’ll have to tell our grandchildren.”

They were compelled to laugh at his tone and his ludicrous words. It made them all feel better.

Meanwhile, Mr. Neale had reached Nelse's place and been greeted by Pomp' who assured him that he was welcome to wait until Mars' Nelse came back with his canoe—having gone “off yonder,” Pomp' said with a vague wave of his hand toward the Sound.

Waiting on the rude little dock, Mr. Neale caught sight of the *Treasure Belle* standing away for an opening into bigger water.

It astonished him and rendered him helpless to act! He knew that he could not hope to overtake her with his dinghy, and Pomp' assured him that there was no faster boat within reach.

“I 'spect dat black man f'om Jamaica done got de skeer under his wool and run off wif de white chill'un,” he observed.

“No—he's gone alone,” Mr. Neale stated. “I left the boys on the shore by the inlet.”

He leaped in to the dinghy and began to row down the shore line; it was no time to wait for Nelse. He must see whether the boys were where he had left them or if they had managed to return, by swimming, before Sam got the boat under headway.

He was forced to conclude that they were either voluntarily going with Sam or that they were under some compulsion on the sloop.

Certainly they were not on the shore!

He beached the dinghy and sat in it, considering. Where were his charges? Why had they let Sam get away if they had reached the sloop?

As a matter of fact, the chums were having an adventure they had not counted on.

Hardly had they decided to wait for their chief when a thought had struck Nicky. “If we were detectives, now,” he mused, “we could find out what all this mystery is concealing.”

“Well, we have nothing better to do,” Tom suggested. “Let's try our hand at 'detecting!'”

“Good idea!” Cliff agreed. “First off, that boat, last night, didn’t come back into the Sound. And there’s signs enough that real people were here. Where did they go? Where did they take the boat? And what did they do with the chests?”

“That’s easy!” Nicky declared. “They went up this little river, and they either put the chests back in their own boat or in another one, that had that funny light on it.”

“But where did they go, then,” demanded Tom.

“Up the inlet, I said,” Nicky retorted. “We can’t get through the mangroves and the tangle of brush, but a boat—or boats—could go up as far as that bend yonder.”

“I wonder what’s beyond the bend,” reflected Tom.

“Let’s see—while our clothes dry!” Nicky urged, slipping into the water.

“No—wait!” called Cliff. “Look out for water snakes!”

“Or—crocodiles!” added Tom.

“I will,” laughed Nicky, turning and swimming slowly up the inlet.

They watched him anxiously. He waved an arm reassuringly and in a hundred easy strokes was at the point where the inlet turned out of their sight.

“Don’t go around there by yourself!” called Cliff.

“It’s just the same, around the bend,” Nicky said as he trod water for an instant. Then he swam out of their sight.

“Nicky!” called Tom anxiously.

There was a moment of silence, then a faint answer came. The place seemed suddenly to be spooky and queer.

Of a sudden there was a sharp, low cry, and then silence.

Tom and Cliff looked at each other.

“Nicky!” shrilled Tom.

They strained their ears.

There was no answer!

With one accord, never pausing to think of personal danger, knowing that Nicky was not the sort to play a joke, that if he failed to answer their hail he must be in peril, they slipped into the water and used their utmost effort to reach the bend.

Hardly had they left the tiny beach when a Seminole Indian, with an almost expressionless face, emerged from a clump of heavy bushes through which he had been calmly, stolidly observing them for a half hour.

That was why, when Mr. Neale arrived ten minutes later, no clothes hung in the sun to furnish a clue to the presence of the boys.

As the two chums reached the bend and could see around it they suspended their strokes and stared!

Nicky was not in danger at all!

But he was evidently too stupefied by what he was regarding to have heard their call; or, perhaps the dense growth had dulled the sound. At any rate, they paddled hastily forward until they could climb out beside their comrade.

“Why didn’t you answer?” demanded Cliff, his anxiety shifting to a natural anger at the fright Nicky had given them.

“Oh! Golly! I guess I was too surprised to hear you!”

Nicky lifted an arm and waved it at the scene before them.

On the shore a light canoe of cedar, hollowed out of the virgin wood as the Seminoles create their water craft, lay upturned.

Beyond that there was a spot cleared in the heavy brush growth, and there were piled cases and crates, perhaps fifty of them!

It did not require the stenciled black letters at the visible ends of certain cases to

indicate the truth to the chums. An old ship's lantern of the sort used at the starboard and port sides, with a screen of green glass over its front indicated where the previous night's uncanny glow had come from. But the cases themselves told more.

"Rum runners!" gasped Nicky.

"We ought to have guessed," Cliff said. "Nelse is one of them. That's why he tried to scare us away. This is a nest of them. I suppose they can run up from the islands—especially Cuba—get their large boat hidden from the Government patrol on some dark night, in among the keys, and then ferry the cases over here in smaller boats."

"But what good does that do them?" Tom wondered. "How do they get the cases to market?"

"I guess the Seminole Indians, or maybe half-breeds, work with them. It must be the Seminoles because they know the waterways in the Big Cypress Swamp and the Everglades, and I don't think many white men do—they didn't up to recently, anyhow, according to a book on exploration I read." Nicky made the statement excitedly.

"Even if we never find any treasure," he added, "there must be a big reward for breaking up trade like this. It's wicked. It's against the law and the Constitution, and even if there wasn't any reward we will have to try some way to get word to the Government boats."

There was a slight stir in the grass and scrub behind and to the left of them.

When, with one accord, they turned, a Seminole Indian faced them.

"Hello!" said Nicky, a little uneasily.

The man made no immediate reply. Instead, he lifted an arm and beckoned, then pointed toward a narrow trail beyond the clearing.

Nicky looked at Cliff, and both consulted Tom with their eyes. They all read a common intention; they would swing about and rush to the inlet and swim back to the shore.

The Indian divined their purpose; with a snakelike movement he stepped to a point preventing the move. His hand touched something bright and sinister at his belt.

“Se-lof-ka-chop-kaw!” he said, Seminole dialect for “My knife is long!” He partly unsheathed the weapon.

Silently the chums took the trail, their captor following close.

And two hundred yards away Mr. Neale sat by the shore, wondering!

## CHAPTER XII

### MODERN PIRATES

Picking up the bundles of their clothes, the Seminole herded the chums along the trail; its limestone-coral hurt their tender, bare feet while they had hard work to avoid the deep, searing gashes which saw grass makes.

They came after a few minutes to a small open glade, almost bare of soil; here the Indian made a sharp, guttural sound. They turned.

Gesturing to them to sit, he said “A-pok-es-chay,” or “All sit down!” They read the gesture but not the words. However, because of their condition they preferred to stand. After he tossed their clothes to the ground the Indian signed for them to spread the garments to dry again and then, turning, he walked swiftly out of sight.

“This is a nice fix,” said Tom. “What will Mr. Neale do when he sees the sloop gone and doesn’t find us?”

“He will think Sam has made off with us—or that Tom has been so scared that he helped Sam,” Nicky declared.

As a point of truth, Mr. Neale at almost that moment gave up his waiting vigil, and with dejected shoulders bent to the oars for a long, grilling pull across the Sound. His purpose was to try to reach some revenue guards or others who could help him to overtake the *Treasure Belle*.

They were not to meet their chief again for some time!

They dressed when their clothes were dried. The first effort they made to retrace the way down the trail was met by the appearance of the Seminole; he was on guard if not always visible.



Seated, dejectedly idle, the chums waited. A brief exploration by Cliff toward the side of the trail they had not traversed yielded no way of escape. It ended at another water path, this one going off from what might be a transfer and landing dock, off toward the North.

“That’s where the Indians come with their own canoes,” Cliff told his companions.

“But where do they take the liquor?” Nicky wondered. “Up at the north of the Everglades there isn’t anything much.”

“Just the place to load trucks, I suppose,” Cliff surmised.

The afternoon dragged. They were not fed and no offer was made by the Seminole to converse. He seemed not to understand Nicky’s attempt to address him in English, but shook his head, waved the youth back and touched his belt significantly.

Night came and still they were in their uncomfortably hard position, and growing very hungry indeed.

“If he means to starve us, why I’m going to make a break as soon as it gets pitchy dark,” Nicky whispered.

But as soon as it got pitchy dark there came a peculiar call from the dock where Indians were supposed to arrive, and the young adventurers soon found themselves the center of a small group of the Indians, one about their own age, but not at all approachable. With the green-glassed ship’s lantern to show them, their captor made an explanation in his guttural dialect and then left the younger member of the party on watch while, with the others, began transferring the cases from the further end of the trail to the dock, and thence, the chums inferred, to canoes.

Cliff tried to establish conversation with their young guard.

“No-chit-pay-lon-es-chay!” he said. They did not comprehend that he ordered them to lie down and sleep, and kept eagerly arguing that they were hungry, pointing to their open mouths, in the dim light, and rubbing their stomachs.

“So-toke-kee-aw-mun-chee!” he said, holding out his hand, palm up. He meant,

“Give me money,” but they had none and so the negotiations were suspended.

Finally, when, as Nicky declared, their backbones were shaking hands with their stomachs, a new voice was heard on the trail.

Preceded by their earlier captor, bearing the lantern, whose queer light he threw full in the chums’ faces, there came a squatty, burly, ape-like white man, with a jutting jaw, sharp, mean eyes, but with a quirk of a smile at one side of his twisted mouth.

“Ho!” he said, in a deep rumble, “thought you cleared out this morning. Saw the craft up anchor!”

He made a gesture that sent the Indian away; the lantern, set down as he left, gave the scene a weird green light.

“Well, my lads,” began the man, “how’d you come to stay here, when the sloop sailed?”

Nicky told him about their colored man and his terror of the ghostly boat the night before.

“Ho-ho-ho!” laughed their new acquaintance. “Scared him, did it? We aimed to scare the whole passel of you—we went to enough trouble.”

“Why did you want to scare us?” demanded Nicky eagerly.

The other did not answer. He seemed to be deep in thought.

“When are you going to feed us?” demanded Tom, more practically. Fearful though he might be in face of the unknown, he was no coward when face to face with a situation he could understand. And hunger was such a situation.

“No eats! Hum—well—” The man rubbed a stubby, brownish beard, reflectively. “We can’t starve you—we aimed to drive you away, but that didn’t work—still, no use to starve you till we know all we want to——”

He made a sign, as if he had decided on his course.

“Go ahead, back down the trail,” he ordered. Nicky, Tom and Cliff lost no time

in complying.

Following, with the light, he directed them to the inlet where most of the cases were now being carried away. He spoke rapidly to the Seminole who seemed to be the leader of the Indian faction, gave him some coins, and then ordered the three chums into his boat—the same one, for all they knew, which they had seen the night before.

“Now I see how they got away after scaring us,” whispered Tom as the crew of four stoutly-built white men used their oars as paddles, working the boat further along the inlet until they came to a point where they made still another turn and went down another narrow stream toward the Sound.

“Just ‘ring-around-a-rosey,’” Cliff declared. “That makes the spot those three trees are on an island—a key—after all!”

“But we’ll get no chance at any treasure, there,” said Nicky dejectedly.

Apparently the nearest of the crew thought this was important enough to call to the attention of his captain. He turned and repeated Nicky’s words, with a guffaw.

“Treasure, hey?” cried the bearded white man. “Who told you there was treasure there?”

“Why—” Nicky stammered, hesitated, then decided that it could make no difference anyway whether he told it all or not—with Mr. Neale unaccounted for, with Sam and his sloop gone, with their own selves captive, what chance had they for treasure? They’d be lucky, he thought, to be set ashore, marooned like old-time sailors—and spared a worse fate!

He told of finding the old can on the islet.

“Hum-m-m!” mused the man, clearing his throat. “Maybe you won’t find a treasure—but, anyhow, you’ll get a square meal—then, we’ll see!”

“Where are you taking us?” demanded Nicky, once more brave.

“Why, to our floating palace. Maybe—who knows—maybe it’ll turn out to be a treasure hunt, after all. In that case the boys’ll welcome it for a change from hi-

jacking!”

“Hi—hi—” Cliff gasped.

“Hi—jacking, he said,” Tom explained.

“I know it,” Cliff shivered, “and that makes it worse.”

“Worse than being in the hands of rum-runners?”

“Worse! I’d say so! Hi-jackers are pirates if ever anybody was. The rum-runners bring contraband, and illegal liquor, into the States against the law. But the hi-jackers are men who hold up their boats and trucks and steal from them.”

“I hadn’t heard about them,” said Nicky.

“Well,” said Cliff under his breath as their boat scudded over the waters of the Sound toward a small island near the upper end, “well, it would be bad enough to be caught by people who break the law; but the ones who prey on them are about the roughest and toughest people in the world. They are modern pirates and no mistake!”

“Well,” said Nicky, shrugging his shoulders, “we’ll get through somehow, and anyway—we eat!”

Behind the island they found a trim, beautifully built, low, rakish craft. She was a power boat, about sixty feet long—a little more, perhaps. She lay low in the water and was of such a dull color that she could scarcely be seen in the dark.

They touched her side at a hanging ladder.

“Up you go!” said the man, under his breath. Then, to someone at the rail, “Here’s three young recroots, Don Ortiga!”

“Don—” Nicky gulped. “What’s the matter?” whispered Tom.

“Ortiga—” Nicky returned, “that’s the name of the man who owned that other speed boat, back in Jamaica! Now—I wonder——”

## CHAPTER XIII

### THE MYSTERY BOYS DECIDE

“What do you wonder?” asked Tom, when the chums were herded into the small forecandle in the bow, vacant at the moment.

“The man who owned that boat, back in Jamaica—the *El Libertad*—was named Senor Ortiga,” Nicky answered. “I wonder if this one is the same fellow.”

“But this isn’t the *Libertad*,” Tom objected. “It’s a bigger boat and it isn’t white.”

“And that fellow called this man ‘Don’ and not ‘Senor,’” Cliff added. “They may be relatives. Mr. Neale saw the man in Jamaica—he would know. I wonder where he is!”

As he expressed this wondering about their chief, the latter was holding a conference with a Government Revenue Officer in the tiny cabin of a very swift little revenue cutter which was cruising among the reefs and keys, in search of the very hi-jackers and rum-runners among whom the chums were quartered.

The revenue cutter was on patrol duty, but so far its quarry had, by virtue of a system of signals from allies on shore, eluded capture; with its gray hull, its absence of lights, its quiet and speedy engines, the light-draught craft had been able to slip into hiding while its cargo was transferred to shore, whence the Indians in the extensive gang would convey it in their canoes to a northern point in Florida where trucks could receive the cases of illicit liquor.

“I wish there was some way for us to capture these fellows,” said Tom. Now that he knew that there was nothing ghostly or unnatural about the band, he was his usual, cool, calm self. Nicky and Cliff echoed his wish, in low tones. But they had no time for speculation or planning. The ape-like man appeared in the forecandle companionway and beckoned abruptly.

They followed him along a narrow deck to the dark cabin and went in. After passing through heavy sacking, double-thick, which served to block the passage of the least rays of light to the outer world, they found themselves in a long, quite roomy cabin, with a small electric dome light giving enough light to show the heavy black curtains tightly fastened over the circular ports, or windows. Well furnished with several easy chairs of rattan, with bunks that folded into the woodwork of the side walls and left a cushioned seat for use when they were not open, and with a veritable arsenal of automatic revolvers, rifles and knives of many shapes on the shelves of a cupboard at one end, the cabin looked both comfortable and dangerous.

A tall, slender man was replacing some weapon in the cupboard.

He turned as the chums entered; their guide stood blocking the doorway behind them.

The occupant of the cabin was of a Spanish type, with dark skin and sharp, black eyes, as black as his smoothly brushed hair. His movements were abrupt and nervous and his voice, when he spoke was curt and rather high in pitch, though kept at a low level of volume.

“Sit!” said the tall man, motioning toward the wall benches; the chums obeyed while the tall one dropped into a rattan chair and regarded them steadily.

“You came here to get buried treasure,” said the man in the chair. “Who told you there was treasure here?”

Nicky became the spokesman and related the story; he told how they had been cruising toward the Ten Thousand Island Archipelago.

“For why?” demanded their inquisitor sharply.

Nicky was about to open his lips; his eye caught a gesture of Tom’s. While leaning forward, chin on hand, elbow on knee, as if listening alertly, Tom was scratching his left ear absently. Cliff was folding his arms.

It was the secret sign-manual of their order—the Mystery Boys—by which Tom signified a call for a communication by gesture and Cliff, by folding his arms, indicated his agreement. Nicky folded his arms at the same instant, and then saw Tom grasp his coat lapel in his left hand.

That sign meant the third section of their secret oath—"Telling all, I tell nothing!"

Nicky clasped his hands on his knees, a sign that he agreed.

It all took place without apparent meaning and in a very brief time so that, although he made a sign of impatience, the tall man and his companion, leaning against the wall by the companionway, seemed to discern no hidden meaning in Nicky's delayed answer.

"Come! Answer! Why were you among the islands?"

"I was trying to figure out why we were there," Nicky replied, a candid look on his face. "You see, we had the 'flu' back at our school and we went to Jamaica to join this boy's father—" he made a gesture toward Cliff and continued. "A young fellow was helping Cliff's father collect old relics of the Indians and he brought us up to those islands in a sloop with a colored pilot—just for a lark on our part. I think he meant to get a canoe and maybe take us with him up the Harney River to the edge of the Everglades—or into them, to collect some things from the Seminoles."

That was a part of Mr. Neale's plan, if they did not find the treasure, or, perhaps, even if they did; so Nicky told the truth, though not all of it. Cliff unclasped his hands as if signifying that Nicky had done well.

"Si—yes, that is reasonable," commented the tall man. "What then?"

Tom made no gesture, which Nicky correctly judged to mean that as long as he had told the man by the companionway about the can and the parchment he might as well repeat the story.

He did.

"Does that agree, Tew, with what they told you?"

At the name, Tew, Nicky started a little. In the early days of piracy, as his studies had told him, one of the most notorious of the old sea barons, Thomas Tew, had made piratical history; could this man be a descendant? Could he be filled with the same daring and ferocity?

“It agrees, cap’n,” responded Tew. Don Ortiga leaned back, tapping the arm of his chair nervously while he thought.

The chums sat in silence, their three pairs of arms folded in sign that they were still in secret communion and waiting. After a long silence during which he considered them shrewdly, the Spaniard spoke.

“I do not believe it! Do you, Tew?”

“Sounds ‘fishy’ to me,” answered the apelike fellow. “First of all, them three trees on that little key ain’t more’n fifty years old. And my folks, and Nelse’s folks, has lived about these waters for more time’n that and there ain’t been no treasure buried that I ever heard of—not in the last fifty years!”

“So! Again, Tew,” the Don ignored his young captives in the intentness of some point he was trying to make, “again, a tin can would have rusted away and crumbled, or sank into the soil. You know that most of those islets are not really built up from the coral foundation. They are mostly thickly matted vegetation, roots and so on, with a thin covering of soil; if you stamp hard on many of them you can shake them.”

“I know that,” agreed Tew. “Besides, from what these fellows claim, there was a funny light and something knocked on their boat—if you was to ask my opinion, cap’n, I’d say I think these lubbers is makin’ it up out o’ the whole cloth!”

“We are not!” defended Nicky sharply.

Don Ortiga regarded him steadily for a while, then nodded.

“What was the message on the paper?” he asked suddenly.

There was no help for it. All three chums realized that. If Nicky hesitated their captors would be certain that he was inventing a message. Then there was no telling what might happen to them! The men who had them as captives were hijackers, the lowest form of seafaring marauders. One of them had a name indicating descent from the old pirate stock. The truth—and the truth quickly—seemed to be the only course open to Nicky.

His glance toward his friends showed them with both hands in coat pockets—“Tell the truth!” that meant.



“This is the message,” Nicky declared without delay, all that swift querying and decision having occupied only the time it took for him to understand the question, a split second.

“This is the message,” he declared, “Treasure found long ago. Dig under tallest of three trees on Crocodile Key for more.”

Tew rushed close to his captain.

“Crocodile Key!” he almost shouted; then he lowered his voice. “Nobody knew that name but us—” he stopped, his face working with what the chums took to be anger and surprise.

“Yes—yes—somebody did!” he gasped. “Cap’n—your brother——”

Nicky exchanged glances with his comrades. In their eyes he read the same thought that was in his mind. They had given these men some clue that proved to them that the message was a false lead and—more—had told them who prepared it! Don Ortiga had a brother. That must be the Senor Ortiga—or might be, Nicky thought. If the message was a false lead, then it had been deliberately placed where they found it, to mislead them. Yes, and not only that, but deliberate methods of making it seem supernaturally discovered had been used—the light and the raps on the hull of their sloop!

“Yes,” Don Ortiga was saying, “my brother—Rodriguez—these boys say they were in Jamaica—that is where he gets the rum he brings to the keys in *El Libertad*.”

The whole mystery was beginning to become as clear to the chums as it seemed to their captors.

“These fellows say they left Jamaica to go to the archipelago,” Tew took up the reasoning. “For pleasure? For relics? My eye! No! They knowed somewhat about a treasure—and so did your brother.”

“But he didn’t—” Nicky cried incautiously in his excitement, and then stopped, too late.

“There was a treasure!” Tew exulted, and his eyes took on a bright avaricious glitter. “Cap’n, these boys know somewhat about a treasure on them islands.

Recall? Ships has been wrecked there—in the old days there was a story about a Spanish——”

“I know,” broke in the Don, bending forward, making jerky, excited movements of his fingers and with snapping eyes. “A ship laden with gold bars! It was never discovered—the gold! The ship broke up, and parts of it were picked up in the Gulf of Mexico.”

In spite of themselves, at this verification of the old map and message of Captain Kidd, the chums took fire from their companions.

“Senor Ortiga must have knowed about it—or learned that these lads did,” Tew went on, never questioning the chums, taking it for granted that his logic was sound. “He must of saw them sail in a slow sloop—he had a fast cruiser. He beat them to the islands and took a chance he could send them somewhere else while he searched. He picked our place—But why? They’d discover us. He’d know that!”

Don Ortiga sprang from his chair; his hands were clenched, his eyes sparkled with an angry light.

“He sent them here because he has a grudge for us ever since we bought a faster boat and a bigger one and took his trade away from him!” he cried in a fury, but remembering to keep his tones fairly low.

“Well,” began Tew, after a moment, “here’s how I tote it up! We can get more out of a chest of treasure than we can from a hold full of rum, and with no fightin’. These lads must know where the gold is—we don’t! So we can use them! At the same time we can get revenge on your brother for sendin’ them where they might of found out about our racket and told the revenue men——”

The chums saw what was coming; their arms were folded again and they were waiting, trembling a little with the excitement. What decision must they make? What decision could they make? Was there any way out? They could see none!

“Put it up to ’em!” urged Tew. “Will you ‘throw in’ with us, takin’ a small share, or will we put them in the hold till we get what they know—we have ways!” he added with a meaning glare, “and when we get the treasure we’ll—well, whatever you decide, Cap’n—I know you can think up some pretty interestin’ ways to get rid of folks we don’t need——”

Nicky made a gesture; his right hand rubbed his nose, from his eye to his lips, as if removing a smudge; Cliff and Tom answered his sign, "Shall we say 'yes'?" by nodding.

"What's your say?" demanded Ortega. "Tell all or——"

Nicky stood up.

"Share-and-share-alike!" he demanded with a defiant effort that seemed to please Tew. Don Ortega nodded, "Share-and-share!"

"Deal out our cutlasses an' bandanas," said Nicky with affected ferocity. "We're with you till the last man walks the plank!"

## CHAPTER XIV

### THE CHASE

Although Nicky had put a brave face on a bad situation, all three chums realized how grave was their danger. Their word had been accepted without question and they were given the freedom of the ship, after its crew had been summoned to the cabin and a vote taken. Only one member, the engineer, put in a word of dissent to Don Ortiga's suggestion that they start at once for the archipelago.

"There's that revenue cutter," he reminded his mates.

"Her!" said Tew, sneeringly. "Ain't we got plenty of ways to show her our heels?"

Nicky and his fellows wondered what these ways might be. They were to discover at least one of them.

They were given a plentiful meal in the cabin; the hi-jackers fared well, evidently, for the meal comprised fresh eggs, four apiece, fresh milk, since none of them cared much for coffee, white bread, corn pone as a second choice, and rice pudding.

The cook was an affable, smiling colored man from Miami, the flourishing tourist resort in Florida, who found his share of illicit gain more alluring than the wages of an honest chef in a hotel.

Besides the cook and Don Ortiga and his first mate, Tew, there were four deck hands who also rowed the boat with muffled oars and padded oarlocks, and who helped to load and unload what they carried; also there was the engineer and Nelse. The latter, they found out later, was only aboard for a certain purpose, not one of the crew.

While they noted the precision machinery for driving the boat, and saw the novel

way in which the exhaust was deadened by being run through a large pipe through a sheathed channel in the hull, into a specially devised muffler which completely broke up the explosive force of the spent gases and silenced their noise, the chums marveled at the pains that had been taken to make a once innocent pleasure yacht into a craft suited for breaking its country's laws.

Nicky reiterated his wish that they could do something to bring the lawbreakers to justice, but Tom, again cautious, urged him not even to think of it just then.

Mr. Neale, their chief in the beginning of the expedition, had overhauled Sam's sloop with the aid of the revenue cutter's men, had learned Sam's side of the story, found Sam contrite but afraid to return, had discovered that the United States men could take no action against the Jamaican, and let Sam go his way rejoicing. The revenue cutter then returned toward the keys in order to land Mr. Neale at a base from which he could carry on his search for the missing boys.

But the cutter did not get there that night.

Nicky, Tom and Cliff stood on the foredeck of the hi-jackers' ship as the anchor was quietly drawn up and the engines began turning over, their twin-four cylinders thudding with little outward noise.

"Here we go!" Nicky whispered. "Off on our first piratical cruise."

"Off to be shot," Cliff corrected, "if that revenue cutter they spoke about ever see us."

"They wouldn't shoot us," Nicky protested.

"They wouldn't mean to," Tom agreed. "But they will chase—and this boat will run. That means a shot across the bows and more if we don't 'heave to'—which this crew won't do if they can see a chance to escape."

"What are they 'advertising' for, then?" demanded Cliff. His comrades stared at him; for answer to their unspoken question he pointed upward.

Looking toward the tip of the short spar that served for a signal mast and for the radio aerial for the small receiving set with which the cabin was equipped, capable of tuning-in short wave stations and the Navy broadcasts of weather, signals, and so forth, they all saw a small electric bulb glowing finely into the

dark night.

“Well—I’ll be—switched!” gasped Tom. “Now why should they show a light?”

“It’s the law—” began Nicky, but he stopped, realizing that these men, all of whom were silent but fierce-looking, obeyed no law as to lights or other rules of the seaways.

The lookout just forward of their group was staring toward the horizon as they nosed gently forward out of a small strait between a key and a section of the bay shore. He turned and made some sort of signal with a tiny, blinking flashlight in his cupped hands.

Instantly the wheel went hard over, the vessel swung in a long curve and began to straighten her wake as speed increased on a straightaway run down the shore.

“I see her,” Nicky whispered, directing his chum’s gaze. “There’s a boat and she’s heading for us.”

Far off across the water there came a dull report. At the same instant Nelse came on deck, gazed for a moment, said “Couldn’t be better!” to Don Ortiga, and walked aft rapidly, while the captain stood watching him. Nicky left the group, took the other side of the cabin and slipped along the deck. To his amazement Nelse was dropping into a small boat that was towing. A deckhand pushed a long, slim pole, with something at its tip, into the small boat.

Nelse lifted the pole which looked like a rather long fishing pole, and seemed to be stepping its butt in a place in his forward thwart.

Forward Tom and Cliff watched with straining eyes, as did the Don. Another vivid, but distant flash was followed by a dull report and there came a faint “plash-thunk!” in the water far ahead.

At the same moment a sailor loped forward.

“All clear, sir,” he muttered.

Don Ortiga turned, lifted a hand. Tom, his eye cocked aloft, saw that their masthead light disappeared instantly. He turned to see if Cliff had noticed it, and then saw what Nicky, at the stern, had already guessed.

Nelse's boat was a decoy. His stout pole once firmly stepped his ty-line was dropped off the cruiser's stem, and as the masthead light winked out he, in some fashion—it was too dark for Nicky to see how—completed an electrical circuit to a small, similar light on his pole, so that, if the cutter missed the light for an instant she would pick it up again and yet it would be the decoy and not the real ship she would thereafter pursue.

“But what will happen to Nelse?” Nicky wondered when he rejoined his friends and gave them his information.

“He will row into some little inlet, unship his pole, maybe pull his boat up on shore and hide.”

Don Ortiga furnished the information.

“But haven't they seen us?” demanded Nicky.

“We are low and gray and hard to see. It remains to be learned,” the captain replied. He watched for an interval while their boat with only her propeller thrash to carry a message of her direction, held on swiftly.

The ruse had failed. They could see the cutter holding a course slantwise to their own! They must have been seen in spite of the camouflaging color.

Tew was with Ortiga.

“There's a chance—in the channel to port!” he grunted.

“Take it!”

Then began the most breathless and thrilling half hour or more that the chums had ever been through.

Swinging sharply on her heel, so to speak, their lithe greyhound doubled back into a narrow lip between two clumps of cocoanut or mangrove, it was too dark to see which they were; it seemed as though she were running smash into the land but there was a way that opened thinly before her scudding bow.

Once the keel groaned and rasped on coral, and once a bough was snapped on a tree leaning far over the water by the short mast.

Then they were in open water. Would the cutter know where they went? Would she follow?

They squared away and ran, full speed, down the Sound, and with keel almost aground, shoved—literally grated their way—over a bar and into the outer waters again.

And the cutter had not followed!

She had done better! Anticipating some such double-back among the waterways, she had eased her way and lay beyond the reef. With a word of muttered anger, the captain rushed for the pilot house in the forward end of the cabin.

The small cannon on the revenue cutter spoke with its sharp bark but the phantom cruiser did not heave to. Instead her engines fairly shook her hull in their race for freedom.

Fast as she was the revenue cutter was not fast enough to overtake the other. Her gun spoke, but at a distant range and on a bad target—the tail of a flying ship without lights is no easy thing to hit in the dark!

The cutter dropped back slowly and then, sure that they were no longer in sight of her watchful crew, the hi-jackers flung their tiller hard a-starboard, heeled with the swerve and their speed, heard the grate of coral on one side, and—were again in a hidden cove!



## CHAPTER XV

### DISASTER!

Clearly the churns saw that, although the hi-jackers had escaped for a time, they were really trapped. The *Senorita*, their cruiser, if she lay where she was until dawn, must be discovered.

Within the Sound, reached with such daring and risk, there was no safety, now that Uncle Sam's watchdog had their scent, so to speak.

But, with the perversity which Nature seems sometimes to show, the elements played a card in favor of the evil-doers. Heavy rain squalls came up, and the wind blew the water in sheets that made a perfect screen for a slipping, silent gray shape.

Captain Ortiga took quick advantage of his fortune. The gray *Senorita* nosed out into Little Card Sound, crossed its end, skirting the shore, and, again at the outlet, nosed quietly, slowly out toward freedom. In the downpour it was unlikely that they could be sighted and the propeller thrash would be deadened by the wind and waves.

"I have a scheme," whispered Nicky, as the chums stood at the bow, straining their eyes hopefully into the downpour, themselves heedless of the rain that stung their faces. Tew, with surprising kindness, had loaned them oil-skins from the "slop chest" or supply reserve.

"What is your plan?" queried Tom, lips close to Nicky's ear.

Three heads drew together.

"I was in the little steerman's cubby at the front of the cabin, just now," Nicky said. "I saw the place where the electric buttons are set. They control the electric lights."

“I see what you mean,” Cliff broke in. “You want to get in there and work the electric lights.”

“Yes. Then the cutter will see us.”

Tom raised an objection. “If she chases us again,” he declared, “she will fire until she hits us.”

“That’s right,” Cliff agreed. “This time she won’t give up until she captures—or sinks us!”

“It’s a risk, I know,” Nicky admitted. “She won’t know we are on board and she will have a right to sink these fellows. But it would be one way to help to capture \_\_\_\_\_”

Tom spoke practically.

“What good will it do us to have this boat sunk?” he asked. “In this rough water we wouldn’t have a chance to be picked up, maybe.”

“I guess it is too dangerous,” Nicky admitted.

“Better wait,” Cliff suggested. “We will get our chance. The right must win or there wouldn’t be any justice in the world!”

They watched eagerly for any sign of the cutter but Captain Ortiga stood well out from land before he swung west. The chums saw that the chances for the cutter to discover them were remote and went back into the cabin where they were assigned to berths.

But if the weather had seemed to aid the wrong side, there was another card to be played and it came as a surprise.

Instead of lying-to, close to land, the cutter had stood out to the deeper channels also!

There came a warning call from the man on watch on top of the cabin, echoed by the one at the bows. “Hard a-port!” was the call, “something ahead!”

The boys dashed again to the deck.

They quickly discerned the dim shape toward which the *Senorita* had been directly advancing.

Had they, too, been sighted?

The *Senorita* swerved from her course, and made almost a right angle to her former course, though, of course, on a wide curve!

That swung them in toward land, again, for it was the safer way. Then, on a quartering line, partly on the true path and partly drawing toward land, they held steadily on.

There came across the water a vivid flash, but the wind swept away the cutter's voice as her cannon spoke.

"Full speed ahead!" was the order to the engineer.

The *Senorita* trembled and strove, and behind her the cutter, her headway increasing, again took up the chase.

"But she's behind us now, and she may have to turn around—I couldn't see which was her bow, she was so far away," Cliff said.

"I'm half afraid we'll show her our heels," Tom whispered. "And I'm half glad. If we can get to an island or close enough to swim to one, they can sink her and welcome!"

Nicky agreed.

From the stem they watched the chase. Several shots were fired at them, but they could guess, by the diminishing light of each succeeding flash, that they were drawing away from the cutter.

"But she won't give up," Nicky proclaimed. "She will hang on like a bulldog."

"I wonder why Don Ortiga doesn't give up the run for the archipelago and stand out to sea?" Tom said.

Captain Ortiga had a different plan. He knew that the Government boat would never give up, and he wished to use that very point for his own advantage. He

planned to make the other boat very sure that he would continue along the Cape Sable coastline. He wished them to follow.

Therefore, to the chums' amazement, he caused the mast light to be switched on, and even reduced their speed a little, so that the cutter would pursue, but would be just out of dangerous range.

"Why is he doing this?" Nicky wondered. "Let's find out! We're part of his crew, aren't we? He ought to tell us."

Cliff laughed at Nicky's assumption that they were real hi-jackers, but the trio trooped into the cabin. They found Mate Tew there, going over some of the weapons in the arsenal.

"Well, my hearties!" Tew explained, "it's this way. Don Ortega's got a grudge ag'inst them Government snoopers! He hates 'em!"

Don Ortega, Nicky mused, seemed to have a grudge against almost everybody—the government men, his brother—who else?

"He's going to lure them where he can—do—what he plans—" He did not make the plan clear but the chums felt that it was a very serious danger into which their countrymen, pursuing their duty, were being led.

"We'll run up along them islands," Tew went on, "to the mouth o' the Shark River. O' course it ain't rightly the mouth o' the river, out there in them islands—it's just a channel through 'em opposite the Shark—that's about fifteen miles back, at the mainland edge."

"What good will that do?" Nicky inquired earnestly.

"Well, we'll have the *Senorita* well in the mouth o' the river, come dawn! Then we lands, see? Then we waits. O' course they'll run up along the islands and if they miss us, well an' good—but if they turn and come into the inner channel and spot us, they'll put a crew onto the deserted *Senorita*, and keep some on their cutter—and then—we'll spring a little surprise!"

There was little sleep for the excited chums during that night. It was quiet enough, and uneventful; but they were so excited and "worked up" that they could not stop discussing the situation long enough to fall asleep.

They made good progress and when the sound of running feet and low orders came, they all rose from their bunks and ran on deck.

“You’re sure you know the channel?” Tew was asking, as they came up to him and Captain Ortiga.

“Yes,” replied the latter, shortly. “You stand by to pass the word quickly to the man at the wheel.”

The first faint dawn light was visible in the East. Ahead were dim blotches on the water; to the right lay many other gloomy shapes. There seemed to be a wider space off the bow at one point. The order was given, the vessel swung her course toward the break and, still at good speed, bore on.

The dim islets closed in on each side.

“Starboard a point,” called the captain from the bows, his eyes probing the dark, just faintly glimmering water, “starboard a point!”

“Starboard a point!” relayed Tew.

“Starboard a point it is!” the helmsman, at his little wheel, drew down the spokes to the side.

“Port—port two points!”

“Port—two points!”

“Port two it is!”

“Hard a-port! Hard a-port—quick!”

“Hard a-port—quick!”

There came a shout of dismay, a call from the pilot.

“Tiller rope’s broken!”

“Stop the engines—hard a-starboard—hard over—reverse her!”

There were shouts, cries, dismayed questions, a jangle of a bell.

The whole fabric of the vessel seemed to shudder as if in the grip of an earthquake. The engines had not been stopped and reversed in time. The captain shouted and at the same instant there was a rasping rending sound—a sickening sound—a tearing, grinding, splintering as the ship tore her side on coral—and stopped, settling gently on her side!

## CHAPTER XVI

### CAPTAIN NICKY TAKES COMMAND

There was every kind of excitement on the *Senorita*! Men rushed this way and that; they came together in excited groups, spoke quickly together, separated.

“The cutter’ll be on us any minute!” said a deckhand.

“This is no place to stand ’em off!” grunted another.

“Great captain, dat Don!” grumbled the cook. “Know de channel! Huh! Look whah we’s at!”

“Lower the tender!” called Tew. “We’ll get away. Grab what you can!”

“Bettah we do dat!” agreed the cook. “Ashore we gits tuh hide; heah dey kin shell us out-a de watah!”

Tom gripped Nicky’s arm. “Come on!” he cried, “let’s get there so they won’t forget and leave us!”

“No!” urged Nicky. “Wait—come on with me!”

“What for?” demanded Cliff. “Where are you going?”

“Come on!” Nicky demanded of his chums. “We don’t want to go.”

“Don’t want to go—” began Cliff. Then he followed Nicky.

The self-appointed leader went hastily down into the forecastle. His two comrades followed, wonderingly.

“I don’t see—” began Cliff.

“Look at it this way,” begged Nicky. “If we go with them we are in their hands, aren’t we? When the cutter has come and gone, without finding anything but the wrecked boat, these men will want to make us tell them where the treasure is supposed to be. Then they’ll desert us!”

“That’s good common sense,” agreed Cliff.

“Yes, it is,” Tom nodded.

“Let them go in the tender,” Nicky pursued his argument. “Then we can take possession of this boat, and when the cutter comes we can signal, and then— isn’t there some reward for claiming salvage on a boat, some way?”

“You’re going to get a treasure out of this adventure somehow, aren’t you?” laughed Tom. “I never saw such a money-grabbing fellow!”

“Whether I do—we do—or not,” Nicky defended, “we are safer here than with those hi-jackers. If the cutter doesn’t come, we have all the food and things— maybe the arsenal. We can stand them off and——”

“Instead of them making us toe the mark, we can make them do it!” Cliff cried, fired by Nicky’s eagerness.

“That’s it!” Tom agreed. “Nicky has the right idea!”

The tender, which was used with muffled oars according to need, had by that time been lowered over the slanting side of the *Senorita*.

“But suppose she sinks!” a new thought came to Cliff.

“The channels can’t be very deep, even at the deepest, between these islands,” Nicky asserted. “I think she has settled onto the rock now. If she starts down we can almost jump onto that island—and we won’t be as badly off as in the hands of hi-jackers!”

Gathering most of their weapons and some supplies and dropping them into the boat, the crew hurriedly rowed away on the course toward the distant mainland and the mouth of the Shark River where they could hide for a time.

Tom, Cliff and Nicky assured that the ship was completely deserted except for



themselves, came on deck and from the points of vantage watched the departure without disclosing themselves.

The cutter, in the meantime, had pursued to the best of her speed during most of the night, but when the *Senorita* rounded the western end of Cape Sable and was, for the time, out of sight of her pursuer, a man on the cutter sighted what he took to be her lights again.

They were not, however. A coasting schooner, of the old type, blown somewhat off her course, had hove in sight.

Naturally, not being aware of the true facts, and supposing that the quarry had doubled on her course to escape them, believing that her masthead light—which the schooner's light, from the rear, closely duplicated, was that of the *Senorita*, the cutter changed her course.

By dawn she overhauled the schooner, saw her mistake and lay to, her commander and Mr. Neale and the others completely baffled.

Had they been pursuing that schooner all the while?

At the same time Nicky was delivering an oration, on the silent, stricken *Senorita*.

“Now, fellows,” he said, “we have to organize. We're the captain, and crew, and cook and cabin boy, all in three. Which is which? If the cutter doesn't come, we have to make plans. Those men will come back. They may not be able to use this boat again but they will want to find out what we know about the treasure before they leave—and they may do something to us after we've told. We 'signed on' in a way as pirates—hi-jackers.”

“And, sure enough, we are hi-jackers!” exclaimed Cliff. “We've taken a whole ship!”

“That's so!” said Tom. “Well, I move that the Mystery Boys nominate the acting chief for this year of their order as Captain in this emergency.”

“Second the motion!” cried Cliff.

“All in favor!” grinned Nicky. “But Tom has the cooler head and you, Cliff,

know more than I do.”

“Aye—just the same—you’re elected!” laughed Cliff.

“I’ll volunteer to cook,” Tom offered.

“Then I’m crew and cabin boy,” chuckled Cliff.

“What are your orders, cap’n?” asked Tom with assumed deference, touching his forelock in approved nautical fashion.

“Of course we all are captain, really,” Nicky stated. “But just while we’re in no danger, I’d say we ought to see what weapons the men left, and where the food is and how badly broken the hull is.”

“That’s one job for each of us,” Cliff agreed. “I’ll round up the artillery. Tom will cook, so that leaves the captain the rightful duty of estimating damage to his ship!”

“Then we may try to repair her,” grinned Nicky, “and sail, and sail the seven seas, and spread our sails to every breeze and take our captives as we please \_\_\_\_\_”

“Only we have no sails!” Cliff reminded him.

“Well, then, we’ll gaily man our ocean rover and swiftly turn her engines over and if we’re chased—if we’re chased——”

“We’ll run for cover!” suggested Tom, chuckling.

“‘Rover’ doesn’t rhyme with ‘cover’ but let it go at that!”

Then, with the spirit of youth and daring alert in their strange situation, they departed for their several tasks.

Over a plentiful breakfast, helping to make up for the fast of the long day on the island, they compared notes. There was a long rent in the vessel’s side, below waterline, Nicky reported, not easily to be repaired even if they could float the ship at all. Plenty of canned food and some fresh supplies, Tom stated. Five automatic pistols, two rifles and a small signaling cannon was Cliff’s list of

weapons. "So far, so good," said Nicky. "What next?"

From a little beyond the ship came a hail.

The chums became tense.

"You're captain," his chums told Nicky. "Go and parley!"

## CHAPTER XVII

### A PARLEY AND A PLAN

“Ahoy, *Senorita!*” came the second hail. Nicky scrambled from his wicker chair and started for the companion door; Tom looked at Cliff and then, catching his eye, glanced at the arsenal. Cliff nodded.

“I don’t know if the rifles are loaded,” Tom commented, picking one up and breaking the breach—with a shake of his head closing it. “They aren’t. But they may come in handy.” They carried the weapons as they came on deck.

Nicky had taken a position beside the little wheelhouse, watching the tender, manned by Tew and one sailor, come around the islet close to which their boat was careened against the coral.

“Hello!” hailed Tew, catching sight of Nicky. “You boys got lost in the shuffle! Thought you was overboard maybe. We’ll take you off. We are hidin’ on a good island—we can climb the trees and be safe when the cutter comes.”

Cliff and Tom ranged up beside Nicky.

“We’re not going, are we?” whispered Cliff. Nicky shook his head.

“Stay away!” he called. “We aren’t going to leave here.”

Cliff and Tom, rifles held in a menacing position, ranged up beside Nicky. The sailor stopped rowing, allowing the tender to drift about fifteen feet from the *Senorita*. Tew muttered some unpleasant word.

“You don’t want to be there when the revenue men come,” he said. “If you do, we don’t mean you to be!”

He spoke to the sailor, but in face of two rifles, the man said something under his

breath and Tew nodded.

“Look here!” Tew called, “if they get you you’ll tell where we are! That won’t do! Come—be sensible—we’ll get you one way or another. Come decent, and we won’t harm you—but come you will!”

“Is that so?” exclaimed Nicky defiantly. “Well we won’t! You’d better go away!”

Tew and the sailor held a short conference. At Tew’s gesture the sailor poised the oars, while Tew tugged at a weapon in his belt. Tom leaped up onto the cabin roof, to have a better place from which to pretend to cover the sailor, but an inspiration came to him and he acted upon that instead.

Pretending to glance by accident toward the larger expanse of the open Gulf he dropped the rifle, and waved his arm, then dragged out a handkerchief and waved that wildly.

“Here she comes!” he shouted. “Cutter—ahoy!”

With a common fear Tew snatched up a second pair of oars as the sailor, with a mighty heave on one oar, began to swing his tender in a circle; then both began to row away around the islet with all their strength, while Nicky and Tom, seeing Cliff’s deception, and knowing that it had succeeded because the men thought they could see from the cabin top what was invisible on the water line, leaped up beside their comrade and began to hail and to wave their arms.

The tender was quickly out of their sight, and yet they kept up their shouting, until, at a sign from Cliff, they desisted.

“Well, that’s over—for the time!” Cliff said thankfully.

“But we’re worse off than ever,” Tom added. “They’ll watch——”

“No they won’t!” Nicky argued. “They’ll hide. We are not so badly off. We can load the guns and if we have to we can shoot over their heads when they come back after us!”

“But they have guns, too,” objected Cliff.

“Well,” Nicky proposed, “let’s fix the cabin so we can take refuge there,

barricade it. There's all the food for a long siege, and we can command the doors from those portholes."

Tom caught their arms, and with a swift whisper and a nod toward a moving figure on the islet, caused them to begin to wave their hands and to beckon, all looking out toward the Gulf.

Tom had espied a creeping figure, low on the ground. Tew, with some purpose in his mind, had landed on the islet and crept across to the side nearest the stranded vessel. Cliff covered him and called softly, "Stay where you are, Mr. Tew!"

The figure on the ground flattened and stopped.

"I won't hurt you—I wa'n't goin' to hurt you!" he called softly. "How clost are they?"

"About half a mile off the coast," Nicky answered, hoping his untruth would be forgiven under the circumstances.

"I just wanted to warn you—if you let them take you off, don't say nothing about us—and then no harm'll come to you. But if any of us gets nabbed—we'll take care not all are—we'll hunt you down if it takes all our lives!"

"All right!" called Tom quickly, neither agreeing nor refusing.

Tew waited a moment, then seemed to decide that he had better not stay there since they had discovered him and he could not watch. He crept back out of sight at the far side of the islet, behind its small, tangled trees and bushes, and the chums turned again to their plan.

"One of you go down and see if the cabin doors can be fastened," Nicky urged. "Tom—you go! Cliff, can't that skylight on top of the cabin be battened down?"

"Yes—there's a covering—but——"

"I know it won't help once they get on top—but having it fastened would make it take longer to get to us. And we'd have the light switches and could light the mast light if they come at night."

Tom returned to the deck.

“Either of you got a screw driver blade on your jackknife?” he asked. “I closed the cabin door, but the lock sticks and when I wrenched at the knob to open it again, the screw was loose that holds the knob to the shackle, and it just turned in my hand and I had to screw in the threads with my finger nail to get it to turn at all.”

“I have one,” said Cliff, but as he produced his knife he went on, “but I’d like to have you listen to a different plan.”

“All right,” agreed Nicky and Tom.

“The trouble with the cabin is that they can come at it from the after deck, at the blank rear bulkhead back of the engines, and we can’t cover the decks.”

“That’s so,” Nicky conceded.

“So I think we ought to do some other way,” Cliff urged. “And I wish you’d tell me what you think of this: Suppose we take it for granted that they won’t come back for at least an hour—they will scatter and hide because they don’t know but that the cutter may be coming. In that time we can swim over to that island with the heavy trees, after we’ve dumped the guns into the water and flung things around to make them think the cutter’s men have searched a little.”

“That’s a corker!” exclaimed Nicky. “Much better than my plan. They will think the cutter took us off and we were too scared to tell where they were, and then they won’t come back or bother us any more.”

“That’s my idea,” Cliff nodded.

They lost no time carrying it out. Tossing a good deal of dunnage out of cupboards, to simulate the result of a hurried search for liquor or evidence, and dropping the rifles overboard where they showed on the clear bed of coral, as they supposed the officers would do, the chums, carefully making certain by shinning up the short mast that no boat was within immediate range, leaped over the side.

The deeper channel was not wide; they made for an island on the far side, and there, wading up through the ooze covered bed-stone, they got on fairly firm ground and selected good spots in which to lie in case of need for hiding.

Then, by turns, they took up a watch toward the Gulf, alternating with a look once in a while toward the channel and the wrecked boat.

But for some reason the hi-jackers did not return. All day the chums watched, but without result.

“They must have decided that we went away, or they are afraid that a rowboat might be cruising among the islets,” Cliff said. “I wish we had brought something to eat!”

“I thought of it,” Tom said, “but I guessed that they would come back before night and then leave us alone. And no cutter has shown itself. Well—shall we swim back before dark?”

“No,” counseled Cliff, “let’s wait. They may come back after dark.”

Night closed down clear and with the stars very bright it was possible to watch easily. And, about eight o’clock, Tom, on guard, whispered to attract his comrades. They all made out the tender creeping quietly toward the careening hulk across the channel from them.

“If only we could get their boat—” Cliff mused.

“Well, maybe we can!” exclaimed Nicky. “Let’s swim back closer and see what we can see!”

“But if they discover us—” objected Tom.

“They aren’t looking for us, I feel sure,” Cliff said. “They won’t be watching the water in this direction. They are getting their food and things, it is most likely.”

Going carefully, using a stroke that sent them through the water with little sound, they soon came close enough to see clearly the situation. One man sat, apparently waiting, in the tender, at the forward quarter; the chums held their breath and let themselves sink to the lowest point they could, till their feet touched the bottom, when they discovered him. But, either because he was half asleep, or from confidence that there was no one around, he sat slumped in the stern, and did not appear to notice anything unusual.

Treading water, catching finally the low rail where it almost dipped into the



limpid water, at the shore side of the listing boat, Nicky, Cliff and Tom drew close together.

There was no one on deck. From the cabin came sounds of voices.

“I’m going to see—” whispered Cliff, and he began to climb up cautiously onto the deck. Nicky and Tom followed his example, but remained at the rail as he made a peremptory gesture to them to “stay back!”

Cliff crept closer to the cabin and when no one appeared and his courage rose, he became bolder and slipped on his wet feet to the cabin doorway. He listened a moment and then crept back to his chums and whispered rapidly.

Taking Cliff’s screwdriver-bladed knife, Tom went to the rearward door, into the engine room, and with the knife removed the screw from its knob, leaving the inner side of the door with no means of opening it. Then he “stood by,” watching, listening.

In the bows, hiding his face, using as gruff an imitation of Tew’s voice as he could, Cliff hailed the man in the boat in a low tone. “Come into the cabin, you,” he said. Then he hurried away.

Presently those in the cabin—Don Ortiga, Tew, their sailors and the cook, were surprised to see the boatman appear in their midst.

Before they could question him or get his inquiry as to what they wanted, the door behind him slammed as did the engine room door.

There was confusion, then oaths, then excited stamping; of course the time it took them to discover that they were trapped was not long; nor did it take overlong to get the knob back onto the door after an excited hand wrenched it away. But the time was enough.

When the infuriated members of the hi-jacker band finally raced up the deck toward their tender, they found the dipped end of a rope as a memento.

The Mystery Boys, well away and out of sight around the island, were rowing the captured tender with all their strength.

“We can’t——claim salvage!” panted Nicky. “But we are out of the grip of those

men—and we have a boat—we’re free men again!”

“And there’s a light—a boat or something, up the coast,” cried Tom. “Nicky, pull hard on your port oar—you too, Cliff.”

“Right-o!” they answered with a will, pulling the tender on a swinging curve. “We’ll pull for it. It may be the cutter!”

It was stationary, and not very far away; but as they neared it they saw that it was not the cutter.

It was another cabin boat, lying, apparently, at anchor.

Cautioning his chums not to hail until they knew whether it was a suitable craft for their rescue, they drew slowly closer.

From the vessel came a gruff hail.

“I’ve got you covered!” it cried. “Two of you put your hands up, and one pull your boat up alongside till we have a look!”

“Out of the frying pan—” breathed Cliff! He and Tom elevated their hands and Nicky, with reluctant strokes, drew close to the bow. Tom discerned a name in glimmering gold against white paint.

“Fellows,” he whimpered, “it’s that boat we saw in Jamaica!”

It was—*El Libertad!*

## CHAPTER XVIII

### A SURPRISE!

“That’s a nice way to welcome mariners!” exclaimed Cliff as they came alongside; the colored man on deck merely grunted.

“Pass your line!” he said.

When they clambered onto the small aft deck they saw that their new captor was a large, heavy, but lithe-looking negro.

“I wanted you to go away, before,” he said, more pleasantly. “When I saw you this time I wouldn’t take chances on letting you go!”

“What do you mean by that?” Nicky demanded.

“Oh!” replied the man, “it’s this way: we got the maps back in Jamaica, and got *El Libertad* ready. When you tried to hire her Senor Ortiga let your chief think she was laid up waiting for machinery—but before you were ten miles away we started for the archipelago.”

“Then I suppose it was one of your crowd who tried to scare us with the blue light and rapping on the sloop,” cried Nicky.

“It was me,” he answered, not very grammatically. “I used a blue ship’s flare we had on the boat, burned in a box so you only saw the light and not the flame. Then I swam out under water and hit the sloop and then coaxed you back to the island with another flare.”

“So it was you who put the message there,” Tom exclaimed, feeling somewhat ashamed of his terror of the past, now that a perfectly natural explanation made it all seem so easy to understand.

“I put it there, but Cap’n Ortega, he planned it—with the man who got the maps.”

“And who was that?” demanded Nicky.

“You’ll see,” declared the colored man. “Come this way!”

He led them into the cabin, a much smaller one than on the *Senorita*, since the *Libertad* was a narrower, shorter vessel.

Under the ceiling electric dome two men sat at a table, playing some game of cards. The man facing them was of Spanish type, not as tall or as excitable as his brother, but clearly related to the hi-jacker they had just before their escape been able to imprison in his own cabin.

He looked up and as the man whose back was toward them did so and made a half turn on his folding seat, all three boys started and their jaws dropped.

“Mr. Coleson!” gasped Nicky.

It was Mr. Coleson all right—the owner of the plantation where they had stayed in Jamaica.

“Hello, young fellows!” he replied briskly, swinging further around in his chair. “So you came back!”

They were still speechless with surprise.

“I’m rather glad you did,” Mr. Coleson went on. “Did you find any treasure?” He turned a grinning face to wink at Senor Ortega who frowned heavily at the boys.

Nicky shook his head. “You know right well we didn’t!” he declared. “You sent us away to have a clear field here.”

“Nevertheless I gather that there is treasure buried in such spots,” said Mr. Coleson. “You might have found some.”

“We found something else, though,” said Nicky, fixing a meaning look upon the Spaniard.

“Liquor! Of course!” Rodriguez Ortega agreed shortly. “How did it happen that my beloved brother didn’t put an end to you—I rather expected that he would!”

Tom was caressing his left ear rather hurriedly; Nicky, lips half open, suddenly recognized the sign of their secret call for a council, or for silence, and folded his arms.

Cliff took up the answer to Ortega.

“Your brother,” he said, meaningly, “has a better use for us!”

Ortega leaned back, scowling, looking sharply at the trio.

“Just what does that mean?” he demanded.

“You’ll see!” Cliff said. Ortega pursued the inquiry but with Cliff the others remained stubbornly silent. They saw that Cliff’s plan, for some reason they did not yet grasp, was to puzzle the two men. Nicky, to get away from the subject, turned on the estate owner.

“How did you come to be on this boat?” he asked.

Mr. Coleson, smiling a little, answered readily. “Quite simple. You see, I have the maps!”

“How’d you get them?” Tom broke in.

“Equally simple, my lad. I was not far away when I observed your little difficulty with the voodoo woman, and being curious, half intending to interfere, I came closer, just beyond the heavy fringe of brush near the cabin. From there I overheard enough of your talk with Sam to become interested. I followed you three and since you held your supposedly secret meeting quite close to my own windows I overheard some more.”

The trio of chums felt sheepish. For once their mysteries had been carelessly pursued; they had talked openly instead of by signs, as they all recalled clearly on looking back upon that day of many excitements.

“Knowing the island superstitions, it was easy to frighten the child—the little negro boy—I merely held a handkerchief over my face as I crouched by the

dining room window, watching for a chance to get the map you were discussing. My white suit accomplished the rest.”

He had worn a light suit, as did most of the people of Jamaica, the youths recollected.

“I was sorry to have to strike Sam, but I saw that your part of the chart was insufficient and so I took the balance from Sam.”

“It’s all very easy to see, now that you explain it,” said Nicky, ruefully recalling that they had attached some ghostly importance to perfectly ordinary causes. Nicky also recalled that Mr. Coleson had, himself, that night, mentioned the ghosts—for his own purpose, it now became clear!

“I suppose you climbed into a window after you got our map,” said Tom, vowing mentally never to accept a single ghostly bit of evidence again as long as he lived.

“I did better than that,” replied Mr. Coleson, appearing to take a grim delight in explaining how easily he had hoodwinked them. “I merely crouched beside the white part of the house, back of the shrubbery. You looked all about except right behind you, that time!”

“But see here!” cut in Ortiga, “what is it that my brother has use for you for?”

Again the chums became silent; actually, there was no answer but they pretended mystifying knowledge, in a way paying back the debt they owed Mr. Coleson and the colored man for the blue light and old tin can.

“Well, it doesn’t matter—now that we shall use you first!”

“Use us?” cried Nicky. “Use us for what?”

In his turn Ortiga smiled enigmatically.

Mr. Coleson spoke. “You see, boys,” he said, “we have the maps, and we have cruised among the islands for days—but we haven’t located the Dipper Islands—and, of course, no treasure is found. You must have the clue we lack. We will share with you after you help us to find the treasure.”

“Supposing we won’t help?” inquired Nicky defiantly. “It’s ours by right. And, suppose we don’t even know a clue?”

“In the first case, we will find ways to make you tell,” snapped Senor Ortega, with a clenching fist crumpling the hand of cards he held. “In the latter case—we won’t believe you!”

Nicky turned with helpless dismay to his two chums. They still had their arms folded.

“Say nothing!” was the sign Tom made and Nicky nodded.

“I suppose my brother has learned from you about the treasure,” said Ortega, rising. “That is what he would use you for. Well—we will be just a little ahead of him—as usual!”

For once, as they sprawled on the cushioned side seats which had to serve as bunks, the three comrades admitted to their own secret selves, although not to each other, that there seemed to be no way out of this dilemma. For once their self-reliance was a very small spark, indeed!

“But the right always wins out somehow,” Nicky consoled himself. “If it didn’t then the world would have been smashed up long ago!”

Then, a little braced by his trust, he dozed.

## CHAPTER XIX

### CAPTAIN KIDD'S MESSAGE

When they awoke the three comrades found their clothes, soaked by their swim the night before, dry enough to put on. There was very little conversation during breakfast, but immediately after the meal Senor Ortiga drew from his pocket the two halves of Captain Kidd's map, laid them on the folding table and summoned the boys to his side.

There were the two halves of the real map, together for the first time in Nicky's sight.

The two halves fitted exactly when Mr. Coleson held them together. They showed the complete sign of the Dipper, with small islands indicating a very close resemblance to the real constellation of the heavens, as the chums saw it at night. Beneath them, the two separated syllables formed, as they had inferred, the name Dipper.

The faint line, zigzagging among the small and irregular dots below, ran from the wreck to a point at what was the eastward of the reproduced constellation; but the line ended without pointing to any particular islet.

"There's your map," Mr. Coleson said. "Now, lads, you can see that it means very little. It shows the point where the wreck occurred many years ago. It shows a channel that must have been used by the castaways in transferring the treasure."

"But," Don Ortiga broke in, irritably, "we have located the islands that make the Dipper—they lie inward about half way between the Gulf side and the inside channel. And we have dug every one of them over, torn roots apart, plumbed with leads and grappled with hooks——"

"And all we've got for our work," Mr. Coleson growled, "is the ache in our



backs.”

“There is nothing on the chart to indicate where the treasure was put,” Ortega commented. “Unless you know something about it that we do not see.”

“Do you?” demanded Mr. Coleson.

His look penetrated the eager interest of the boys and he thought he saw something in Nicky’s expression that meant more than it showed.

“You—Nicky, aren’t you?—you know something,” he declared. “Now, what is it?”

Cliff and Tom also saw a strange expression in Nicky’s eyes.

As a matter of fact, Nicky had just recollected a part of his family’s legend that had not come into his mind before for the reason that it was not written down anywhere and had been told to him only once by his uncle.

Nicky, glancing at his two young companions, wanted to smile. Both were making vigorous efforts to make him realize that they were signaling; each scratched a left ear almost wildly. It was the call for a secret communication.

Nicky folded his arms and stood, pretending to pore over the map, his brows knitted. He was watching for the next sign, although he already sensed what it would be.

His guess was correct. Cliff was making the sign to call for the part of their oath that said “Telling All, I tell nothing!”

Nicky, deliberately, grinned at his chums.

Turning to Mr. Coleson Nicky made a flat statement.

“Yes,” he said, “I do know something!” Everyone bent forward. Ortega and Mr. Coleson had eager, intent faces; Cliff and Tom were anxious and worried. With the key to a treasure in his grasp, was this impulsive comrade going to “tell All,” or “tell nothing?”

Nicky grinned, a little maliciously, it seemed to Cliff.

“Mr. Coleson,” he said, “you’ve got us ‘in your power.’ It’s no use to try to fib to you.”

“You’d better not!” snapped Senor Ortiga, while the colored man, listening in the after cockpit, rolled his eyes and shook his head and Mr. Coleson bored Nicky with piercing eyes.

“I’ve got to save my friends and myself,” Nicky declared. “If you will promise \_\_\_\_\_”

“Oh! Certainly!” broke in Senor Ortiga, impatiently. “You will get what is coming to you! Let us have the secret!”

Nicky’s chums were so far forgetting their usual poise that they shook their heads vigorously, but Nicky seemed not to notice.

“When Captain Kidd was in prison, as my family remembers the story, he sent for one of my grandparents—great-great-great, I guess it was! And he said——”

“Yes! Yes! What?”

“He said, ‘Here is half a map, and I am giving it to you——’”

“Never mind all that!” rasped Mr. Coleson. “Get to the point!”

Nicky nodded.

“Look!” he said, and traced the faint line with his finger. They followed his movement in fascinated eagerness. “You see, it finally runs around the top of the islands, the North part, and then straight as an arrow, points South!”

“Yes. We see that!”

“Well, the message Captain Kidd gave was, as well as I can repeat it—‘At the end of the line, in the lowest part of the Dipper!’”

“‘At the end of the line, in the lowest part of the Dipper!’” Ortiga repeated. He snatched the map and pulled it closer. He studied it.

“The line points South,” Nicky said, “so I suppose Captain Kidd meant to dig or

search down at the part that is the lowest part on the chart. That would be—” He fished out a stubby bit of pencil and placed its tip on the Westernmost of the lowest islands, drew a slim line from it to the one opposite, at the East, prolonged the line until it was at a point below the end of the faint line already on the chart. Then he made dots to prolong that one until they met.

“That’s it!” exclaimed Senor Ortiga, leaping up in such excitement that he threw over his chair and almost upset the table. “We did not think of that place. We dug all the islands, but this is far better.”

“Come—Jim, get the boat ready! We will go at once!” cried Mr. Coleson.

“As for you fellows,” said Senor Ortiga, “we can’t take you; we can’t trust you with the *Libertad*. So we will tie you until we return!”

In spite of vigorous protests, the powerful men quickly overcame opposition, bound ropes around the boys’ arms and legs, knotted them, dropped the helpless bundles unceremoniously on the cabin floor, and hurried to climb into their own rowboat and the tender which had brought the chums. The quick orders, followed by a rhythmic splash of oars and voices dying away gradually in the distance was the story their ears told.

“You’re a nice one!” said Cliff, sourly.

“Why?” said Nicky, wrenching futilely at his well-trussed arms.

“After we’d signalled, and all,” Tom cut in. “Tell all, and tell nothing—oh, yes! Then you tell all!”

“What would you have done?” demanded Nicky.

“Gave them a false direction!”

“Would you?” asked Nicky and worked again on his bonds.

## **CHAPTER XX**

### **NICKY CHANGES A WORD!**

Cramped and aching in every muscle, the chums struggled uselessly throughout a long and irksome day. The ropes were tied too securely to be loosened; they would not stretch.

It was almost twilight when they heard the returning sweep of oars and the grate of the boats alongside.

“Jim, see if those lads are still safe, and let them stretch a bit,” came a voice the chums recognized as that of Mr. Coleson. Jim, the colored Jamaican, came into the cabin with leisurely slowness and they saw, from his downcast face, the answer to a question in the minds of at least two cramped prisoners.

He was frowning and his whole bearing was dejected. They had found no treasure!

This was borne out by the faces of the white men when they came in and dropped heavily onto the cushioned side seats. “Look here,” said Senor Ortiga, morosely, fixing Nicky with a cold glare, “are you sure you remembered that message correctly?”

“I’m sure,” said Nicky, rubbing his arms and legs to get the blood into circulation again, still seated on the cabin flooring.

“Well, then,” said Mr. Coleson, “it’s all a myth, or someone has been ahead of us.”

“Repeat that message,” commanded Ortiga, not convinced.

Nicky, looking him in the eyes, did so. ““At the end of the line, in the lowest part of the Dipper,”” he stated.

“And you say that’s the truth?”

“It’s the truth——”

“The whole truth?”

“Yes—and ‘nothing but the truth!’”

“Well, we searched the bottom where those lines join, and then we rowed over to the two islands, went over them again, and then searched the bottom between them—that’s the ‘lowest part of the islands,’ too,” stated Mr. Coleson.

Neither Nicky, Cliff nor Tom cared much. Their bodies were too sore, too tired from staying in one position, too full of aches, to enable them to give much thought to treasure.

Almost nothing was said as Jim prepared supper, for which the chums were waiting as eagerly as their weary bodies allowed. A low-voiced conference was held between the white men, but it was not until the meal was ended, Cliff lifting his cup with cramped arm and hand, Tom feeling his feet prickle as circulation fed the life fluid to them, Nicky feeling as though he had been trussed up for years, that Senor Ortiga delivered the result of the conference.

“We noticed that the tender you came in was marked from the *Senorita*,” he stated to Tom. “We rowed down the inner channel a way, wondering how you came to be in it!”

“We found the wreck,” added Mr. Coleson.

“Again my dear brother failed to get ahead of me!” snapped the Spaniard, glowering. “But that is aside from the point, which is that we are through here.”

“Then you’ll take us back to Jamaica with you?” asked Cliff.

Ortiga shook his head.

“You have the tender,” he replied. “We will put some food in it and let you use it to get to wherever you want to go. Do you suppose we want to get mixed up with the American Government for tying up its younger citizens? Not we! But we won’t set you adrift or maroon you. We’ll let you have the tender and some

food.”

It was almost half an hour later that Cliff, Tom and Nicky, seated in the tender, with a few days' supply of canned foods in her bottom, saw the anchor of *El Libertad* come up, heard the pulsing throb of her single, four-cylinder speed motor, and watched her swing in a graceful curve into the wide waters of the Gulf and lay a course Southward.

“There she goes,” said Cliff morosely. “Now we'd better lay to, on some island for the night, and then start rowing for civilization.”

“I half wonder if they found the treasure, after all,” said Tom, “and just acted the way they did to ‘steer us off’ and wait till we get away.”

“No,” said Nicky.

“No?——”

“No. At least, if they did, I'll bet the treasure was moved up to a new place.”

“What do you mean?” demanded Cliff sharply.

“You see,” said Nicky, “I did tell the truth—the whole thing and nothing else except the truth. But——”

He grinned at his chums in the dull light. “I saw your signals, even though I would have done what I did without them.”

If they had suddenly been touched by a “live” electric wire the other two could not have jumped more, or assumed more interested and amazed expressions.

“Tell us what you mean!” cried Tom.

“Well,” said Nicky, enjoying their suspense, “I told them exactly what Captain Kidd was reported to have said—except for one word that I changed. It didn't change the real meaning, but I had a sort of flash of something inside, whatever it was, and I thought maybe if I changed that one word I could fool them—lead them on a false scent, and still tell the truth.”

“What word was it you changed?” cried Tom, and Cliff echoed the question in

slightly different words but with no less eagerness.

“Repeat the message!” demanded Nicky. Cliff spoke.

“At the end of the line, in the lowest part of——”

“Wait,” commanded Nicky. “What did you say after ‘in’?”

“The lowest part,” replied Cliff.

“And what is ‘the lowest part’ of a dipper?”

Tom saw it first.

“The bottom!” he almost yelled.

“That’s it,” nodded Nicky. “The way I remembered it said ‘in the bottom of the dipper.’ So I changed the word to ‘lowest part’ so I could make it seem that the two islands at the lowest part of the sketch were the ones it meant.”

“Then it was easy to draw the lines,” Tom agreed. “Nicky—I’m ashamed of myself for being angry and for not trusting you!” He made the admission manfully, and extended his hand. “I ask your pardon!”

“You ought to!” declared Nicky, but he grinned to take the sting out of his words.

Cliff was not behind Tom by more than a sentence. He, too, told his chum how sorry he was that he did not trust him. Nicky was glad to grip hands with both and to forget their former distrust.

“I didn’t pretend to notice because I wanted you both to act as though you were mad at me. It would make them believe I was telling the truth, I thought,” he explained.

“Let’s row in and see what the real ‘in the bottom of the Dipper’ looks like,” he added. “I’m nearly wild to see the real treasure spot, even if we can’t locate anything there.”

But Cliff counseled caution.

“Those fellows aren’t quite out of sight yet,” he declared, “and they might be watching. If we pretend to row along the same way they are going, until it gets dark, they will believe we have given up too.”

“That’s good sense,” Tom agreed. “When it’s so dark they can’t see us, even if they come back, we can swing in and camp out on some island. Then, if they get soft-hearted and return to pick us up, they won’t suspect anything.”

This was agreed to and they rowed along easily for about an hour. There was no sign, strain their eyes as they might, that the *Libertad* was anywhere else than on the first leg of her journey to Jamaica, so they pulled to the shore of an islet that had a small grove of cocoanut or mangrove trees—it was too dark to know which—and, though their couch was not very dry and rather too full of matted roots for comfort, the expectation of the morning’s find, and their own athletic training, enabled them to make the best of what they had.

Sunrise found Nicky awake and alert. He shook his comrades.

“Up—up, daisy, the sun is in the sky!” he cried, “and we—we, daisy, for treasure we shall try!”

“That’s good sense but terrible poetry!” laughed Cliff.

“I don’t care,” Nicky replied, “Tom, cook up some ham, and a rasher of bacon, and about twenty eggs and some cocoa.”

“Where do you expect me to get them?” demanded his chum, laughing.

“Charge them!” Nicky exulted. “Charge them at the nearest store. Our credit ought to be good. By noon we’ll have gold enough to pay the National Debt!”

“Hooray!” responded Cliff, “gold—gold—gold!”

And by eight o’clock they were in the tender.

“Treasure bound!” Nicky grinned.



## **CHAPTER XXI**

### **IN THE BOTTOM OF THE DIPPER!**

First of all, of course, it was necessary for Tom, Cliff and Nicky to discover the key islands which formed the Dipper. This was not easy, because the channels between the islets were, in many places, too shallow for even their light-draught boat to navigate.

They had no definite idea just where to locate the Dipper, except that the charts had shown it, and the white men had mentioned it as being about midway between the inner and the outer boundaries of the archipelago.

Many trials they made before they found a channel that ran far into the crowded outcroppings which showed above the shallow water.

Every time they would locate what seemed to be a straight and a deep waterway, it would shoal up at one end and they would have to make a detour, sometimes of several islands, to find water they could use.

“I declare!” said Nicky, “it makes me think of a day my New York cousins took me for an automobile ride on Long Island. They were repairing roads, and every fork or crossroad we came to, it seemed, they had a sign, ‘Detour!’”

“And now we ‘detour!’ again,” laughed Cliff, piloting from the bow, “to the left, this time, Tom—Nicky—easy!”

They turned into a new channel, and so, time after time, even retracing their course occasionally to get back to deeper water, they made slow progress.

No delay daunted them; no shoal “made their pluck run aground,” as Nicky explained it. To the continual detouring was added the handicap of the difficulty they had in recognizing what would look like the Dipper constellation from above. “If we had an airplane, now,” Tom argued, “we could spy it in a second.”

“Right, again—pull slowly,” Cliff cut in; and so the morning wore on and they began to feel as though they had rowed half way around most of the archipelago.

But the longest way ’round is said to be the shortest way through, and the chums found it so.

“Look!” exclaimed Cliff, from the bow, “back water, fellows! And look ahead. I believe we’ve found it!” Tom and Nicky swung on the seat and stared over their shoulders. Hard as it was to be sure, because other islands, a little closer or further away complicated the general pattern, they felt that, at last, they saw the Dipper.

“But there’s an island almost in line with two of the lower ones that wasn’t on the map,” objected Tom.

“That’s so,” said Cliff, ruefully.

“Anyway, here’s a good channel, and we’re going South again—back toward where we started,” Nicky argued. “Let’s——”

“Back water! Back water!” ordered Cliff. But they had given a swift impetus to the small craft as Nicky and Tom bent to the oars and with a dull grating sound the bow up-ended a little, as it ran onto a shelf of the bedrock limestone, into which the coral formed itself.

Tom and Nicky narrowly escaped toppling over backward and Cliff saved himself from a plunge onto the shoal only by gripping the thwart with both hands as the boat stopped sharply.

“Well—here we are!” said Nicky, settling himself. “Come aft, Cliff, so we can lighten her bow and maybe we can pole off and back out—it’s too narrow a channel to turn around in!”

Cliff stood up to do as his chum counseled; but he remained standing, his eyes fixed, his body becoming tense.

“What’s the matter?” cried Nicky. “See anything?” asked Tom.

Cliff lifted a hand, pointing dramatically.

“Come here Nicky—Tom!” he urged. “Easy, so as not to tip the boat! Do you know what? That is the Dipper, and we have run aground right where the line would show we ought to stop in the chart—and yonder is ‘the bottom of the Dipper!’”

Excitedly his fellows scrambled over the intervening seat and crouched at his side.

“That’s right, I do believe!” agreed Nicky. “The reason the line stopped is because the channel stopped. This is where they must have come to a standstill in the old boat—those castaways!”

“Yes,” added Cliff, “they couldn’t go any further. And the bottom is level here. We could climb out and walk along it.”

“It’s just the place to unload chests of treasure,” Tom agreed. “If only there was some place to hide it in——”

“What about that?” cried Nicky, pointing straight ahead. “There on that islet that’s really at the bottom of the Dipper.”

“But it said ‘in’ not ‘at’ the bottom of the Dipper,” reminded Tom. Nicky nodded, scrambling out into the shallow water. Cliff followed, and Tom delayed only long enough to draw the nose of their tender far enough onto the shelf of limestone to prevent any chance of a slight current drifting it out of easy reach while they walked along carefully on the coral bed, avoiding jutting prongs and dodging the menacing little spaces into which a foot could slip so as to twist an ankle.

“We’re in the bottom of the Dipper, at least,” Cliff declared after a few minutes of cautious wading.

“I don’t see anything to write home about,” Tom said morosely, wincing from the pain of a slightly twisted foot. “All our trouble—for what?”

“Stand here a minute,” urged Nicky. “Let’s think. Now, fellows, you know that the treasure wasn’t buried yesterday. Maybe the whole top of the archipelago has changed since the castaways’ day. But this looks like the place they told Captain Kidd about, and unless some one else has taken it away, their treasure ought to be here, if we just know how to locate it!”

“That’s the trouble,” said Cliff, “how?”

“It’s no use,” called Tom, who had moved a little beyond his two companions, at the side of the tiny islet. “Some one has been here already!”

They moved up to his position and observed with dejected eyes the signs of a previous visit by others; roots were chopped in half; the signs were very fresh. At one place, very close to the edge of the small, root-matted surface, a hole had been chopped completely through the mass. Further into the brush there were signs of another such spot.

“That settles it,” Cliff grumbled. “Some one has beaten us.”

“Look out, Cliff,” cried Nicky, just behind his friend. “Don’t step back. Here’s another channel—right at the bottom of the Dipper part—it runs along what is the bottom, between the islands.”

“It’s only a hole, maybe——”

“No, it’s a channel,” persisted Nicky. “See—yonder, the color of the water looks different from the shoals. It runs——”

“It only goes to the lower island,” declared Tom, studying the water, and gently lowering himself, testing till his foot found the bottom. “It’s only about three feet deep, and——” he waded carefully away, and then returned. “It stops just by the other island, the South one. But there’s another channel beyond a reef there.”

“Then whoever came here didn’t use a boat,” Nicky suggested. “My guess is that those men waded up to here yesterday, and dug or chopped until they were sure they couldn’t find anything.”

“How do you know they didn’t come from where our boat is?”

“Because,” Nicky explained, “the chopped places are all on the outside part, nearest the gully—it isn’t really a boat channel, it’s only a gully.”

“Well, that doesn’t help us any,” Tom was still dejected and the more so because of his slightly injured foot. “I move we give up.”

But Nicky had climbed up onto the low, small islet, and, his body sprawled over

the rooted, matted growth, was poking and probing.

“Yes,” he said, after a moment, “I guess we might as well. If there is any treasure, it’s too well hidden to discover. I say we might as well wade back to the boat and get some lunch.”

“Then we had better find our way out before dark—it took all morning to get in here,” Cliff suggested. Nicky, as nearly erect as the small, tough roots under foot would make it safe to be, began to push and work his way straight across the islet. Only his head and shoulders appeared above the low, young growths.

“I hate to give up,” he said, as his comrades started to pick their way back along the bed of the reef. “This island may not have been here at all when the—” His words ceased. There came a crackling and rending of wood. Nicky cried out!

Cliff, turning, saw Nicky disappearing!

Forgetting his ankle, with a cry, Tom, who also swung about, scrambled and plunged toward Nicky.

The latter was almost out of sight, near the edge of the islet, prevented from going lower by two roots, over which he had with quick presence of mind flung his arms.

“I—I fell—through!” he gasped as his chums made their way to the edge of the islet. “It’s a hole under the roots! Be careful, fellows, don’t slip or break through; the coral may be thin over it. It may spread further around than you think!”

With all the caution that their fear for Nicky permitted his comrades got close. The reef held.

“Listen,” cried Nicky, breathlessly, “I’m not hurt. Fellows—” He made a beckoning motion with his head, “I’ve—we’ve—found it!”

“The treasure?”

“The treasure! I’m sure of it. I fell through—and I can just touch something—like bricks—with my shoes!”

They had to go around the islet and approach Nicky from behind. The surface of

the thin coating of land, held up and bound together only by its interwoven roots, was shaky enough, but they did not break through, and finally, by dint of much tugging, heaving and puffing, they drew Nicky back far enough so that he could scramble free and sprawl, gasping, half-laughing, on the surface by the jagged hole he had just left. Cautiously Cliff protruded his head.

“I see something!” he whispered, as if some one might hear——

“The island wasn’t as big or as high,” Tom said, peering too, “when the castaways brought the chests here. They buried them—they must have used picks to break a place in the coral.”

“Then they must have covered it over with boards and pulled the roots and earth over it—or else the wind and the birds have brought seeds and the islet has grown over the place,” Nicky added. “The boards were so rotted and the roots were so weak that my weight broke through!”

Like three active puppies digging a hole for bones, the chums pushed and scraped, tugged and tore at the roots; the weaker ones gave way and soon they had quite a goodly sized opening uncovered.

“There’s something down there!” gasped Cliff. “Gold bars, maybe! The chests must have been thrown away.”

“Now the puzzle is—how can we get close enough to tell?” Nicky said, in an eager voice; he was none the worse for his experience.

“Could one of us make a dive?” Tom speculated. All three were on their knees, heedless of the sharp coral bits, peering intently through limpid water into a mysteriously dark depression.

“I could almost touch bottom; where I was,” Nicky exclaimed. “Tom, you hold one arm, Cliff, you brace and hold the other. I’ll let myself down——”

“Don’t bother,” came a sharp voice, unexpectedly, from behind them.

They looked up, startled, dismayed. Quickly their eyes took in the scene. Just back of their own tender lay the boat of *El Libertad*. Quietly it must have been sculled up, while their attention was focused on Nicky and his find. Close behind them, smiling in a half sneering way, was Mr. Coleson, with Senor Ortiga beside

him.

“We thought you might have misled us,” Mr. Coleson said. “We took the logical step to give you a free hand, and here you have exercised it—for which we are very—very grateful.”

“As for the treasure,” added Senor Ortiga, “never mind diving for it. Here comes Jim.”

“No, never mind,” added Mr. Coleson. “We will attend to it!”

## CHAPTER XXII

### GOLD—GOLD—GOLD

“What are we going to do about these lads?” asked Mr. Coleson as the colored man, Jim, went back to the boat for several spades and an axe.

“They will help—won’t you?” said Senor Ortiga with a pleasant look that surprised the chums. “Just because they fibbed to us we can’t tie them up again! It was perfectly natural for them to want all the treasure for themselves. We felt the same way!”

“So we did,” replied Mr. Coleson. “After we roped them up for a whole day I can’t say that I blame them. Very well. Here is Jim. Let us clear away the roots and see what we have.”

Under the changed attitude of the white men, Nicky, Tom and Cliff fell to with a will. The axe helped, the spades were very useful; eager hands made the work seem a delight. After all, there would be probably be plenty of gold—or whatever it might be—for each to have a good share.

When they had cleared away a good portion of the earth and the matted undergrowth clinging to the crumbly soil, they saw, as soon as the mud they had created was settled, a fairly wide, and not very deep fissure in the coral beneath.

Probably, they decided, the castaways, in the days they had been there, had taken advantage of a naturally formed depression in the limestone formation, perhaps had widened it somewhat with picks.

At any rate, when the moiled water had cleared, they beheld a mass of metallic bars, thrown in, helter-skelter.

Mr. Coleson, being the tallest, lowered himself onto the top of the mass and found that his chin was just above water. By taking a deep breath, holding it, and



plunging, naked as he was, beneath the surface, he could get down, for a brief time to the hoard of metal.

After his first plunge he came up, and sputtering till he rid his nostrils of water, he held up above the water a bar, which Senor Ortiga almost snatched from him in his excitement.

They all crowded around to look.

Ortiga scraped the dirt and slime, accumulated partly from their recent digging, from the bar and gave an exultant cry.

One and all they echoed it.

“Gold—gold—gold!” shrilled Nicky.

Down again plunged Mr. Coleson, to emerge above the surface with a second bar which was eagerly grasped by Tom. It weighed, he guessed, about ten pounds, and was, when examined, what appeared to be pure gold of very fine quality, not very large, for gold is heavy metal.

“The Spaniards used to melt down the Inca images and ornaments,” Cliff recalled. “Then they would ship them to Spain in galleons. There must be a lot of this gold—isn’t there, Mr. Coleson?”

“Yes—a lot!” he answered.

All resentment vanished from the hearts of these strangely united enemies under the impulse of a common gold madness. Mr. Coleson dived under, several times, bringing up bars similar to those already found. Then it was decided that they had better take what they had, go to the *Libertad*, and wait till daylight for full boatloads.

“People have been lost in these islands—among the twisting, blind channels,” observed Mr. Coleson. “We laid down markers on the islands as we came in, each time, and we had better row out before it gets too dark to see them.”

So they all returned to *El Libertad* and spent an excited evening, hardly daring to sleep for fear they would wake up to discover that their treasure was only dream-gold. But it was solid, in the morning light, gleaming with its yellow luster when

they scraped the surface. They had found a treasure for which men might easily struggle and battle, kill and be killed.

The next few days were full of hard work; nevertheless, it was work that brought no complaints.

The recovery of the golden bars was necessarily somewhat slow because only one man could work in the pit at a time. Mr. Coleson, Jim and Senor Ortiga took turns, but most of the diving fell to Mr. Coleson, for as they brought up more bars the level of the bottom fell lower by their removal, and the shorter people were totally under water when they tried to secure the bars, and had to dive, grab a bar, thrust themselves upward and be caught by those who waited.

But, one late afternoon they had exhausted the contents of the hole as far as gold was concerned. There were several large objects, presumably golden placques or perhaps they were silver; but they were too heavy to be dislodged, much less to be lifted to the surface.

All of the company agreed that it was hardly worth while to try for them any longer, and the white men, with Jim, began to pick their way over to the two boats, both filled with their last load of wealth. But Nicky motioned to his chums to delay for a moment.

“Mr. Coleson had a despatch box of some kind almost at the surface, just a little while ago,” he told them. “Let’s make a try to get it again. He dropped it because he said it probably contained only papers.”

“What do we want with papers?” argued Tom. “We can come back some time and get it.”

“It may have the log of the old ship in it, or papers about the cruise,” Nicky argued. “Cliff’s father would like them more, I think, than the gold. He could write a whole history about the Spanish times in America from them, maybe.”

Cliff, being the oldest and strongest, decided to do the diving. Divesting himself of clothing which he hung on the remaining bushes on the rim of the islet they had not disturbed, he plunged.

On his first rise he clutched an ancient ornament, something like part of a figure of a god, but it was of some stone, not of gold; he was about to throw it aside but

Nicky took it. "It might be a relic, like those we found in the Carib diggings," he suggested.

Cliff made several tries, and finally brought up an old, and very much rusted bronze box, of very curious workmanship, with a handle at each end. It was badly eaten away by oxide and Cliff urged Tom, who took it, to handle it with care. Then Cliff was helped up onto the water-covered bedrock and reached for his clothes.

"Why—" Nicky, turning toward the boats, gasped. "What are they doing?"

"They're putting gold from our boat into theirs!"

As Tom made the exclamation he started toward the distant boats; the two white men and the colored Jim were loading up their boat.

"What are you doing that for?" cried Tom.

He, as well as his slightly injured foot would allow, hastened over the coral. Cliff, his clothes carried in a rough, quickly snatched bundle, ran too. Nicky scrambled ahead of him.

But before they could get to the boats they saw Jim take the oars out of their boat, climb into his own, and thrust it rapidly backward—there was no depth to turn it around—down the channel.

"We'll leave these oars on the island at the bend," called Senor Ortiga. "We don't want to leave you here to starve. Swim down or push your boat ahead of you and swim till you get the oars; then follow the markers; we'll leave them, too. We don't want to desert you, but we must. By the time you get out we can be safely away!"

Nicky and Cliff fought their way over the coral as fast as they could, stumbling into crevasses, almost falling as their incautious feet struck rises; but they saw that it was wasted effort.

They returned, to assist Tom.

Once the three were in their boat, far down the channel they saw the other boat turn and disappear around a bend.

“It will be dark, before we get there,” cried Tom, and he began to shudder and to forecast dire difficulties, but Cliff bade him, rather sharply, to stop.

“Remember what the teacher said, last term, about being afraid?” Nicky reminded Tom. “He said that when we became afraid we deadened our common sense and made pictures of dangers that wouldn’t exist at all unless we thought they did. He said it wasn’t what was dangerous that hurts us, but what we thought might happen. So—Tom—snap out of it!” He spoke rather curtly and slangily, to impress Tom the more quickly. Tom saw the sense in the rebuke and reminder and grinned sheepishly.

Meanwhile, a hand on the stern thwart, Cliff was thrusting with his feet, swimming, and pushing the boat ahead at a slow rate.

They finally reached the distant island and found the oars.

“Had we better stay here till daylight?” questioned Cliff.

“No,” Nicky declared. “They have our gold, and they mustn’t get away. They have a heavy load and they may get stuck in the channel for their greediness. We can see the papers they stuck on sticks to mark the channel. Let’s get on as far as we can.”

Tom agreed with him, not especially caring to stay amid the spooky, silent islets all night.

They had hard work in the swiftly closing darkness, but by using their eyes sharply and by going ahead slowly, as their escaping enemies must also do, they finally saw clear water ahead.

“Hooray!” cried Nicky. “I think I see them still in the rowboat! Pull hard, Cliff and Tom, we can get there before they get away!”

But as he said it there came a hail, sharp and eager from the shore of the island at the mouth of the channel.

“Help! Help!”

Tom and Cliff held their oars, surprised, listening.

“Boat ahoy! Help!”

“Somebody’s on that island!” Nicky declared. Mechanically responding to a call for aid, Tom and Cliff swung the tender’s nose toward the island. Their way took them very close.

“Boys—Master Cliff—Master Tom—Master Nicky! It’s Sam!”

The figure they could discern against the trees waved its arms.

“Quick, pull in close,” cried the tall figure, wading into the water to meet them. “My boat’s gone. Take me in. We can git to the other boat before they get away! Hurry, please, sars!”

It was only an instant before he had caught the approaching gunwale and was tumbling in. “Now,” he cried, “give way, sars!”

“Sam!” cried Nicky, at the bow, pumping the black hand. “I never was so glad to see anybody in my life. Grab those oars! We’ll get them yet!”

But they were fated to act otherwise.

## CHAPTER XXIII

### MAROONED

After a quick handclasp with the other two, Sam counseled delay. “Better to tell me what has happened to you,” he said. “There are men hiding on that ship, waiting till the men in the boat get all their dunnage on board——”

“Dunnage!” interrupted Nicky. “Sam—it’s gold!”

Sam’s eyes rolled with excitement.

“They went and found it!” he gasped.

“We did, and they took it away from us,” Tom explained.

“Who’s hiding?” Cliff asked.

Sam suggested that they had better tell him their story first, and he laid on the oars and listened as they gave him a brief history of their adventures.

In his turn he told them his story.

“When I got my head full of crazy scares,” he said, “I left you on Crocodile Key, and sailed for the open water. Later on a revenue cutter overhauled me. Mr. Neale was with the men.”

“Then he was all right?” Nicky asked.

“Yes,” Sam replied, “all right, and mad. When he found out what I’d went and done he gave me an awful talking to, and then they turned the cutter about and went back to look for you.”

After that, Sam explained, his conscience bothered him, but he decided that the

boys must be all right, and so held on his course toward Jamaica. But during the late afternoon clouds gathered, wind came up, rain squalls blew over and his work was cut out for him.

“I judged it was a ‘judgment’ on me from On High,” Sam declared. “I had more’n I could do, handling the sails to get them down, and all I could do I couldn’t get them reefed quick enough——”

“And you lost your boat?” broke in Nicky.

“No, sar,” Sam replied. “Wait—let me tell you. I had to run before the wind and when daylight came and the wind dropped I was so wore out with a sight at the tiller that I just fell down and slept. I let the *Treasure Belle* drift.”

When he had awakened, he went on, he did not know where he was, but from the direction in which the wind had blown, he guessed that he must be well into the Gulf of Mexico. He trimmed his sails and with the old, heavy-duty engine for a kicker, he set a course Eastward. It brought him, in time, within sight of what he discovered to be the lower end of the Ten Thousand Island archipelago, almost opposite to the wrecked *Senorita*.

“I saw somebody making a signal with a flag, and the flag at the masthead was upside down—a sign of distress,” Sam pursued his story, “I ran close in and found out that the *Senorita* was a wreck.”

“We were on it when it happened—but we told you. Go on,” said Tom. Sam finished quickly.

“There was a colored cook, a Spaniard, a man named Tew, and some sailors and the engineer,” Sam concluded. “They offered me money to take them aboard the *Treasure Belle*. I did, but instead of going back around Cape Sable, they took me and tied me up and threw me in the little cabin. They talked about capturing a boat or something and the first thing I knew, they had passed the *Libertad*, here, and went on beyond during the night. That was at night—last night. They hauled the *Treasure Belle* out of sight between two islands, a little North of here. There they laid quiet all today. One man swam off from my sloop and came back and they all talked. Towards evening they started the engine, came down, hauled alongside and got on board the *Libertad*. They had untied me and told me to swim onto one of the islands and stay—or starve, for all they cared. Then they held guns on me until I swam to the Key. They said if I warned anybody I saw,

they'd pepper me full of lead. So I hid, and when I saw two white men and a Negro rowing towards *Libertad*, I didn't dare to say anything. But nothing happened to them, and when I saw your boat I guessed it was safe to hail, because the men on the *Libertad* must be hiding and couldn't hurt me. And so I found you."

"And I'm glad of it," said Tom.

"I'm right sorry sars, for what I done, and I'll try to make it up to you," Sam said.

"It's all right," Nicky stated. "We won't hold it against you. But you didn't say what happened to your sloop."

"They put two sailors into her and sailed her away down the coast," Sam replied. "To tell somebody something about bringing up some cases or something like that. I couldn't hear much. They talked about lots of things—Indians and sharks and—oh, lots!"

"But why don't we row to the *Libertad*?" demanded Nicky.

As he spoke the reason became apparent. Jim, in the boat, handed up onto the deck to the white men the last bars of gold.

"Come aboard," was presumably his order; the chums and Sam were too far away to hear. They did see sudden flashes, hear a subdued commotion, hear splashes in the water. Guns were being fired, and people were shouting.

Almost immediately, before the shots died down, in fact, they heard the roar of *El Libertad's* motor, saw her swing to her anchor, and, as it lifted from the coral, turned in a wide sweep, while shots flashed their spurts of flame through the darkness from her stern.

Then she swung onto a Northerly course and disappeared swiftly beyond an island at the Northern side of the channel.

"They've shot those men who took our gold," Nicky declared. "Sam, and Cliff, row there, quick! We ought to try to pick them up—maybe they're badly hurt." Sam and Tom dipped their oars with a will.



Cliff having donned his clothes, of course, before he took the oars as they rowed out from the treasure islet, took the tender's light tiller from the floor where it lay while they navigated the shoal water, shipped it and its attached rudder, and steered so that the rowers could put more force into their strokes and thus cover the water more quickly.

They soon reached the spot, and saw several figures struggling with a third.

Sam and Nicky hailed. An answer came, "Jim, here, was knocked overside when he tried to scramble onto our ship. Help us get him to shore. His head hit the coral, we think! They sank the rowboat."

They pulled close and with some difficulty the inert colored man was lifted over the gunwale and dropped into the tender's bottom. Then Mr. Coleson, with a smarting flesh wound in his arm, and Ortiga, who was too busy expressing an unfavorable opinion of his renegade brother to examine his hurts, seemed to have escaped with a scratched hand.

They began to row toward the island but Nicky made a suggestion.

"Let's pull for the wrecked *Senorita*," he urged. "There's most likely to be a medicine kit on board her, and food as well."

It took quite a while to get back down the shore line to the point almost opposite the Shark River where the *Senorita* had grounded; but when they got there Nicky's prophecy proved to be correct and Senor Ortiga, when the surgical and medicinal appliances were brought, made an examination of Jim, and then dressed a rather bad scalp wound, bringing its edges together with surgical thread after washing it with antiseptics.

Jim came to himself before the bandaging was completed. Though weak and a little bit uncertain in speech, he was in no way permanently injured in his brain. Rest would restore his usual vigor and help nature to heal his hurt.

Weary and discouraged, because there was nothing to be done toward the recovery of their lost treasure, the chums, after a midnight meal, threw themselves onto bunks in the engine room, preferring these to more comfortable wall berths with the two white men who had done them so mean a turn.

Sam elected to stay with his own companions, and Jim was put in the forecastle

to be alone while he rested.

“I certainly am grateful to you for saving us, just now,” said Mr. Coleson as they separated for the night.

“After the way he acted, he ought to be,” Nicky confided to his comrades, when they were alone.

They slept peacefully, thoroughly wearied by hard work and worn down by the nerve tension of the last few days.

It was Sam who shook them awake.

“That man, Coleson, wasn’t so grateful, after all,” he said when the chums had rubbed some sleep out of their eyes in the early dawn. “The tender is gone. The two white men—gone too!”

“The ungrateful—” began Nicky. But what would calling names do for them? Certainly it wouldn’t help any.

“We are not on an island, and we’ve got food,” Nicky observed, recovering his usual trust in the eventual justice of life. “But we are marooned! And yet—and yet, I’ll say it again—we’ll come out best in the long run. You wait and see!”

## **CHAPTER XXIV**

### **“A NEEDLE IN A HAYSTACK”**

To say that Clarence Neale, the leader at the start of the Mystery Boys' adventure, was worried would be a tame statement of the truth. Clarence Neale was more than that. He felt that without intending to do so he had shirked a responsibility.

Mr. Gray, the scholar and writer, had entrusted Cliff to his care on an adventure that promised to be merely a cruise; Nicky Lane, and Tom, had come under his protection without permission from their relatives; and not one of them was with him, nor was their whereabouts known to him.

No wonder the young archaeologist, himself not too far from boyhood to recall what dangers its headstrong impulses lead to, dreaded many dire things.

Two things he knew definitely. The boys were not on Crocodile Key, nor did any boatman or native in Little Card Sound or on its shores know a thing about them. The second point he was sure about was that they were not on Sam's sloop. He had overhauled that in the government cutter and made sure.

Where were they?

A lieutenant in charge of the patrol had set him ashore where a government sub-station of the patrol service enabled him to use the telephone, to communicate with other stations. Not a sign of the boys resulted from his several calls.

“No word?” asked the young lieutenant later in the afternoon.

Mr. Neale shook his head dejectedly, climbing aboard the cutter.

“I can't see anything to explain it except that the lads must have gone inland, and become lost,” he asserted. Lieutenant Sommerlee discounted such a suggestion.

The outcrop of coral on which they landed while he went to interview Nelse and Pompey, was cut off by water too deep to wade; they would hardly dare swim to the further shore; it was swampy as could be seen from Crocodile Key if they took pains to look, he declared.

“I suggest that you come aboard again,” Lieutenant Sommerlee invited, holding to his own idea, without stating it, that the boys had been taken off the key by some fisherman. “I have word that a band of hi-jackers is somewhere around and I have to watch for them; we can easily hail the different natives as we pass up and down the coast and see which one rescued the boys.”

Clarence Neale accepted the invitation and was on board the cutter when, that night, she pursued, and lost touch with, the *Senorita*.

It was Lieutenant Sommerlee’s notion that the *Senorita*, if it was she, had turned tail and run for her home port in Cuba. He was ready to give up the search for her, and the more so because of a growing intensity of interest in the boys.

Naturally, not knowing they were on the *Senorita*, or that she had gone into the archipelago, neither Mr. Neale nor the lieutenant thought of such a thing as looking for the adventuresome trio in those waters. It seemed almost certain that they must have hailed some small boat, and on being taken aboard, had found no means of communicating their plight, or of getting back.

But as day followed day, the idea had to be given up. There was no spot that the cutter had not touched, where the boys could possibly be. Unless they had been taken off on a coasting sloop—but none had been seen in Little Card Sound, nor would it have excuse for being there. Of course the few who knew the truth about the *Senorita* and her hiding place on the day that the boys had been missed, kept their mouths tightly closed.

“I cannot imagine what has become of them,” Mr. Neale said, with anxiety in his voice and deep wrinkles of worry on his forehead.

“Oh, they’ll turn up, as boys do, and usually safe and sound,” the lieutenant said.

One of their men sighted a sail and gave her position. Lieutenant Sommerlee gave orders; the helm was shifted and a course was laid to intercept the vessel, not because the boys might be on it, but to hail it and see if any news had been picked up somewhere.

As they came within better sighting distance, Lieutenant Sommerlee handed Mr. Neale his binoculars.

“Didn’t you say Sam’s sloop we overhauled was going back to Jamaica?” he asked. Clarence Neale nodded. “I told Sam he was discharged, as far as our party was concerned,” he acknowledged.

“Look!” ordered the lieutenant. Mr. Neale lifted and focused the glasses.

“Great—guns!” he cried. “That’s the *Treasure Belle*, now, as sure as I live!”

They lost no time in laying alongside and hailing.

But Sam did not answer. Instead one of two men spoke through the deepening twilight.

“Sam—why he’s sick in the cabin. We’re taking him to a doctor!”

“Sam—sick,” Mr. Neale said to the cutter’s officer, “but we left him on the way to Jamaica the afternoon before the squall. How did these men get on his boat?—and——”

“And why are they bound Eastward along the coast when he ought to be nearly to Jamaica by now—here, heave to!”

The sail came down with a run—the men were careless sloopmen or very ignorant of a single-masted boat and her handling. The cutter swung in a circle and ranged up beside the sloop.

It was practically dark, for the twilight is short in the season, and the men sat with their heads well covered. But if this was a ruse to escape detection of their identity it failed. Lieutenant Sommerlee motioned to a patrol member, and the man caught the rail of the *Treasure Belle* and clung so that the boats lay sides-to.

The lieutenant stepped across the rails, and made his way to the cabin. At the same instant the two men stood up, but before they could carry out their intention—which might have been to plunge over the side and take chances of swimming away and escaping in the dark—the young officer had his pistol trained, drawing it as he whirled.

“Throw up your hands!” he snapped, “and sit down again!”

“Sam,” called Mr. Neale, clambering into the cockpit of his old sloop, “where are you?”

“Ain’t no one there,” said one of the men. “Lieutenant, will you promise us a fair break if we tell you the truth?”

“Yellow-livered, of course,” he said. “I guessed you would try that.” He went close, called for a flashlight and trained it on the two anxious sailors. “Ho! You—‘Runty’—you, too—‘Jack O’ the Keys.’ What are you doing in this sloop? Where is Sam—but I may as well tell you that you are under arrest right now, and if you expect any leniency, which I won’t promise at this moment, you had better say what’s on your minds.”

Then they told him. He, and Clarence Neale, learned of the escape of the *Senorita*, as well as of Nelse’s part in that, and in the hi-jacker’s plans, in which Nelse figured as a receiver for their stolen cargoes, since he owned Crocodile Key; they also learned of the wreck, of the boys’ ruse, and escape, and of the latest escapade, as far as the men knew it.

Full speed for the archipelago, was the present order, after the two sailors had been handcuffed and two of the cutter’s crew took over the *Treasure Belle*, to sail her to the patrol base until Sam could claim her.

“It looks as though there’s a fire up yonder,” said Lieutenant Sommerlee, as the cutter doubled the Westermost nose of Florida, “See the light in the sky?”

“I hope the boys aren’t in any danger!” cried Clarence Neale.

None of the crew, neither Mr. Neale, the lieutenant, nor Uncle Sam’s sailors, could resist a cheer of delight when they got close enough to see that the fire was merely a great heap of wood, on a small islet near the channel to Shark River.

They sent up a rocket at the first verification of this fact, and urged their speedy engine to its fullest power as rockets began to burst in the sky, blue, green and red flares showed and a dull boom from a signaling cannon floated across the water to them.

It seemed an age, but was not so very long, before the chums were leaping,

skylarking, dancing, standing on their heads, slapping one another on the back, adding a slap or so for delighted Sam.

They had collected wood, cut parts from the wrecked vessel, made a signal fire on the islet, and kept it burning all day, and into the night, since the discovery that they were marooned, that morning. The purpose was to create a smoke smudge during the day, and a light at night, with the certainty that some coasting vessel or other ship must see it and come closer to investigate.

The rockets and colored flares were the signal stores of the *Senorita*, used more as fireworks for the celebration than with any other purpose, for the signal rocket of the cutter had been read by Sam as the patrol's own signal.

"Thank Heaven you boys are safe!" cried Mr. Neale for the tenth time, pumping Nicky's hand again and again, sharing fist-cuffs impartially between the shoulderblades of Cliff and Tom in his elation.

"And thank Lieutenant Sommerlee too," said Cliff. They did.

"But now," said Nicky, soberly, "what to do about the gold!"

They had, of course, told all their adventures.

"Now that you are all right," Lieutenant Sommerlee said, "I feel that we shall have to let the gold wait. What I am interested in is not gold but—hi-jackers!"

"And pirates," added Cliff. "Don't forget they are in a stolen boat—the *Libertad* belongs to one Ortiga, and the other one has it."

"But, Lieutenant," protested Nicky, "if you get the hi-jackers we'll get the gold. They have it!"

"That is true," agreed the officer. "At the moment I am puzzled about the course through which we can secure either men or gold."

Nicky jumped up eagerly.

"When the *Senorita* was running away," he reminded his chums, "remember that Tew told us they would hide up in Shark River?"

“I do,” agreed Cliff.

“And Sam, when they took his sloop, thought the men said something to the two on her about bringing liquor cases or cases of liquor, and something was said about sharks——”

“That’s so!” Sam exclaimed.

“I believe they’ve gone into Shark River——” Nicky declared.

“But we are at the mouth of the channel into Shark River,” objected Tom. “And they captured the *Libertad* North of this place, and turned North again from there.”

“They may have doubled back; Nicky defended his idea.

“I think there is a more likely solution,” suggested the lieutenant. “They went to the channel at the opening of the Harney River, above; there they could go back into the inner channel—above Whitewater Bay, and down that, again, to the landward entry into the Shark.”

Plans were discussed, ideas proposed, until far into the night. In all that the chums proposed, they figured; in those their elders discussed, they did not.

But because of the crew’s depletion by the departure on the sloop of two of her fighting patrols, and because neither Sam nor Mr. Neale was an expert with a rifle or pistol, the more vigorous plans for pursuit and capture had to be shelved in favor of more adroit measures.

And so it came about that a plan partially suggested by Nicky and elaborated by the lieutenant, in which the boys must figure, was the one to be adopted.

And again the Mystery Boys were adventure bound.

“But,” said Cliff, as a new thought struck him, “those hi-jackers must have seen our lights—we made plenty of excitement.”

“Yes,” agreed Tom. “They may have seen them—then, they will either turn and run across the Gulf, or somewhere else, or they will unload the treasure in Shark River and hide it in the Everglades.”



“Once it’s hidden there, any effort to find it would be like looking for a needle in a hay-stack!” declared Mr. Neale.

“Then let’s hurry!” cried Nicky, and from that instant all was activity on the stranded *Senorita*.

## CHAPTER XXV

### IN THE EVERGLADES

In order to see how Nicky's plan was, the picture that he had in his mind must be understood. This was Nicky's mind picture:

The hi-jackers, after capturing Sam's sloop, had sent her, with two men aboard, to make contact with their Little Card Sound headquarters. Nelse was there and from what he had heard and pieced together, Nicky supposed that the two men on the *Treasure Belle* would find Nelse, and have him go, or send Seminole Indians, across the inland waterways, to take to the hi-jackers some liquor cases in which to conceal the treasure bars.

When they captured the *Libertad*, the hi-jackers had left three men floundering in the water; for all they knew or cared, these men might have been wounded. The *Libertad's* own boat had been sunk by bullet holes during the fight, which was why the boys had been left without a boat when Senor Ortiga and Mr. Coleson had fled the *Senorita* in the tender.

Under such conditions the hi-jackers had started North in *El Libertad*, the night previous to that on which the cutter arrived.

They would hardly go to the shores of the Southern States bordering the Gulf of Mexico, Nicky decided, because they would be afraid of having the gold discovered: it was in bars and had been loaded into the *Libertad* without any provision for its concealment and transportation later on.

The hi-jackers would probably go, Nicky argued, into the inner channel of the archipelago and then lay up in the Shark River, that small stream having its source at the edge of the Everglades. It was the most Southerly place they could get close to the Everglades, and the Seminoles, bringing the cases to put the treasure in would come up the inland way through part of Big Cypress Swamp, along the rim of the Everglades, and meet them. That was the only way Nicky

could see for the hi-jackers to do, because they had no small boat and could not go any closer to the shallow water of the Florida swamp than the draught of *El Libertad* would permit.

They could not have had enough gasoline in the tanks to risk a very long voyage; that was the reason he did not think they would try to get to the Southern States and risk themselves in strange waters with no way to carry the gold from the vessel to their Northern headquarters, wherever that might be.

With all of this the older heads of the party agreed.

Their first plan, then, was to get the *Libertad* pocketed and surrounded; this they must do before the treasure could be hidden.

Without a small boat it was not probable that the hi-jackers could get into the Everglades, but they might know the Seminoles and might be able to get hold of a canoe.

A day, and a good part of the night before had passed since they went away in the *Libertad*, but Lieutenant Sommerlee and Mr. Neale decided that they had probably gone into the Shark River and laid up. They had no reason to be afraid: they left the *Libertad's* owners in the water; they left three boys and a Negro in another rowboat. There was not much danger, from their way of looking at it, in anything that these people could do.

If they had seen the signal smoke of the day or the fire and the rockets and lights at night, it would be too late for them to run out in the *Libertad*; and, unless they had already hidden the treasure, they could not very easily do so in the darkness. They would be more apt to believe themselves well hidden, and would not make any move before daylight, because they would be waiting for their two men in the sloop to get Southeast and bring help from inland. They did not know, of course, that the men had been captured.

First of all, Sam and a patrol sailor went over the side of the *Senorita*, in the dark, with ropes under their arms and fastened to the rail. They searched about on the reef at the side of the ship where Nicky and his chums had thrown the rifles and pistols. Lieutenant Sommerlee did not think that these had been in the water long enough to be severely damaged or made useless; he wanted them for a purpose.

Sam and his companion by dint of much searching brought up both submerged rifles and several pistols.

They were set to work cleaning and drying and oiling them at once.

“Cliff,” ordered Lieutenant Sommerlee, taking command, “you—with Sam and Jim and one of my sailors, will stay on the *Senorita*. Jim has had a night and a day to rest in and he is pretty strong again. You four are the guardians of this Shark River channel.”

“If they try to run out past us we must try to prevent that,” Cliff agreed.

“Yes,” nodded the commander. “My boatswain, Jack, will be with you and, for the sake of discipline, you must all obey his orders. He has a cool head and is a fine shot. Four of you ought to be able to block this channel if the hi-jackers try to run out here.”

“We will!” agreed Cliff, feeling the importance of his share in the blockade.

“The rest of us will start at once in the cutter,” the lieutenant continued. “We will tow our own light dory, and when we reach the inner mouth of the Harney River, Mr. Neale, Nicky, and one of my men who has been into the Everglades, will drop off in the dory and go up the Harney River as fast as they can by night. By submerging a flashlight in the water, training its beam on the bottom, and rowing carefully they can get almost to the head of the stream, where it has its source at the rim of the Everglades. From there, as soon as dawn comes, my man will direct the course South along the rim of the Everglades to the nearest point he sees fit to the Shark River. The Harney starts a few miles North of the Shark, at the rimrock, and by sending the boat there, we can block the Everglades side and stop any Indians who may come there from Big Cypress.”

“And we will stop them, never fear!” declared Nicky stoutly.

“I know that you will,” said the lieutenant with a smile. “The cutter will proceed carefully down the inner channel. I will be in command, and will lie-to close to the bank, not far from the Shark. Unless the hi-jackers rush out I will do nothing until we are all in position. We shall need some signals.”

“Have you any smoke-rockets on the cutter?” asked Nicky. “They would make enough light to be seen at night, and smoke to see by day.”

“We have,” answered a sailor. “Plenty of them.”

“Then we will take four,” Nicky suggested. “How will we use them?”

“One at night will call for help. One right after the other at night will call urgently for help. Do not use them for any other purpose tonight, and I will be watching the sky over the 'Glades.”

“All right, sir,” said Nicky in proper nautical deference. “Then, when we get into place at the inside end of the Shark, shall we signal?”

“No,” replied the lieutenant. “But if you see that there is no boat in the Shark River at all, send up a rocket, wait a minute and then send up a second. Watch for the same signal in reply; if you do not get it, repeat with your other two rockets. If the boat is there, make no signal unless the men are escaping. In that case, send up three rockets in quick succession, as fast as you can.”

“How shall we be able to set them up?” asked Mr. Neale.

“You will find clumps of tall saw-grass almost everywhere; it is from four to eight or nine feet high, and you must be careful not to let its sharp edges gash you, but it is strong enough to support a rocket in an upright position while you set and light it.”

Hasty repetition by each member of the party of plans in which they must participate, the arranging of signals from the cutter, and of others from the *Senorita*, completed the arrangements.

Cliff, with Jim, Sam and the boatswain, Jack, busily getting the recovered arsenal into good shape again, saw the cutter disappear into the gloom.

The run up the channel into the Harney River was without event, and since Lieutenant Sommerlee had cruised in those waters, making a chart for the U. S. Geodetic Survey, he knew the safest way, and finally, with tense, thrilling nerves, Nicky dropped into the light dory with Mr. Neale and a sailor called Brownie because his last name was Brown and he was a short, fat, jolly little man. With whispered directions from the cutter's commander, they pushed off and with Mr. Neale at the oars and Nicky in the stem, Brownie being at the bow to give the course up the rapidly narrowing stream, they slipped into a darkness that seemed to close down about them like a curtain.

By following the lieutenant's directions they made steady progress as far as their boat dared go in the dark, feeling-out the channel with the tip of their flashlight under water so they could see the coral bottom of the river. Finally they stopped, tied to a heavy root and got such sleep as they could, curled up on their hard seats.

At about four-thirty, before dawn cut through the heavy tangle of trees, intertwined overhead, Brownie awoke his companions and they ate their hardtack, and picked the bones of a chicken from the cutter's recent purchases, cooked the night before on the *Senorita*; this they washed down with cocoa from tin cups, cocoa hot out of a thermos bottle.

The hot liquid helped to drive away the night chill, and Nicky declared that he felt fit for anything.

"That's good," chuckled Brownie. "We're going to have to stand in shallow water and walk in it, too. We must drag our dory up over the rock bed here at the rim of the Everglades."

In spite of the cold of the water, fed by the overflow from the Everglades which, themselves, are renewed by many streams that spout out cold and clear, from holes in the limestone, they dragged and tugged and laughed softly as they slipped, until, when the dory was over the rim, and into fairly good water, they were quite warm from their exertions.

"Here we are!" said Brownie softly, with a wave of his hand. "Here we are—in the Everglades!"

## CHAPTER XXVI

### NICKY DOES SOME SCOUTING

“While we rest,” Brownie said to Nicky, “take a good look around. There’s not so many white boys who get to see the Everglades. It’s a sight worth seeing, just at daybreak!”

It was. Nicky stared about, and turned in surprise.

“Why, I thought,” he said, amazed. “I thought the ’Glades were all swamps. They’re not, at all!”

“Many a one has the wrong idea,” retorted Brownie affably. “In truth, the ’Glades are just flat bedrock, mostly, under a couple of feet of water, and with a very thin soil that the grass hangs onto. Down South’ard, you see, where the trees are, that’s Big Cypress. That’s all swamp, I admit, and bad to get into. This would be as bad if you got lost in it, and that wouldn’t be so hard, would it?”

Mr. Neale agreed with him, while Nicky, standing upright on the forward thwart, forgot his wet feet in the beauty and strangeness of the scene before him.

At the Eastern edge of the ’Glades, the sun was rising, casting its slanting, golden rays across a great expanse of grass, and more grass, and yet more grass.

That grass was no such growth as is usually understood by the name. It was tall, some clumps of it reaching up as high as ten feet. There were several kinds, but most predominant was the terrible saw-grass. Its stiff uprightness, and its rasping, cutting edges would make of it, Nicky decided, a formidable barrier for anyone who tried to go through it.

Brownie agreed with his voiced idea.

“I went with another lieutenant across the ’Glades, back a couple of winters

ago,” he said. “It took us months. It’s not so many miles, but, as you can easily see, the grass grows in big clumps, and it is so high that you can’t spy ahead and find the channels. There are channels, but they are a good deal like the ones you tell about in those Ten Thousand Islands. Some of them run into blind ends and shoal up; others are blocked by the saw grass—and if anybody wants the job of trying to hack a way through some of these clumps of saw grass, they aren’t named Brownie.”

Nicky, and Mr. Neale, could readily see how difficult it would be to cut a way through: the edges of the blades could inflict such deep gashes in the hands that only by the most careful work could one cut at them, and then only in heavy gloves which would, in a short time, be cut through. Even boots, Brownie said, were not thick enough to withstand much work in passing through the grass.

“In places,” he added, “we had to wade and push our canoes—we had two specially built canoes, and we made a survey while we crossed. The grass tears at leather and rubber boots and in almost no time it gets through. Look across! See, about half way, there is a long clump of grass—almost like land! Well, it’s just grass, and it is so long and so thick that it took us a couple of weeks, going South, to get down around it. In covering five miles straight across we made more than forty miles of travel. You see, we’d go fifty feet and run into a dead end, or into a bend that took us to grass; then we’d have to go back and search out another way. Back and forth, around and back, through and back, we went. I tell you, it was no lark!”

They were rested, and with water enough to float their dory, they turned her prow toward the distant line of trees which marked the Big Cypress Swamp and sculled carefully, winding along the comparatively open way at the edge of the rim of the ’Glades.

The Everglades are really a sort of inland sea, very shallow and thickly studded with clumps of the terrible, high grass. Around the table land of the shallow sea, which rises gradually toward its center line, something like a low crest of a long underwater hill, there is a rim of somewhat higher rock which keeps the water in.

The water seems to be replenished by streams or springs coming up through fissures in the rock; its drainage is to the open sea and the bays inside the outer reefs, through rivers like the Shark and the Harney on the West side, and the Miami on the Eastern slope.



Sculling carefully, and keeping a sharp lookout, the trio in the light-draught dory progressed steadily as the sun rose higher. It was still very early.

“I doubt if the hi-jackers are awake yet,” said Brownie. “They probably feel that they are well hid.”

“What’s that—ahead?” queried Nicky, standing, carefully balanced, in the stern. He sat down and helped Mr. Neale to steady their craft while Brownie rose at the bow and spied over the grass at one side.

“I swan!” exclaimed Brownie under his breath, turning to his companions. “It’s—a boat.”

He turned and stared, under his cupped hand.

“I can make out—why! It’s the *Senorita*, printed on the bow.”

“The *Senorita*!” exclaimed Nicky softly. “That’s the tender we had taken away by Mr. Coleson and Don Ortega’s brother—the one they called Senor Ortega.”

“Then they must have rowed in at the Harney yesterday, and come around behind the Shark,” stated Mr. Neale. “I wonder what they intended to do?”

“Oh, I’m not worrying about what they intended,” Brownie answered, “I’m anxious about what they’re doing now—what has happened to them. We ought to know. It might upset our plans.”

“There’s nobody in the boat, or in sight,” Nicky whispered as they very slowly worked the dory closer. The empty tender lay with its nose to the rock and heavy fringe of underbrush, grass and small trees at the ‘Glades’ rim.

“I know what!” Brownie said, when they were quite close. “That boat is moored to a root on the rim-line. It’s about opposite an old Indian trail, too. A trail leads down beside the Shark. You can’t hardly make out the mouth where the water escapes from the ‘Glades, the trees and brush is so thick. But it’s there, and the Indians have a sort of portage, about opposite where the tender lays.”

“We ought to do some scouting,” suggested Nicky. “Let me!”

Mr. Neale objected. Brownie, also, said that he had better do it.

“You’re too stout,” Nicky urged, “and Mr. Neale is not a woodsman. I’ve spent two summers in the woods, one up in Maine and one out in the Sierras. I can go quietly and come back without letting anyone know I’m around.”

He pleaded so eagerly and the danger seemed so slight, if he kept his head, as he promised to do, that they finally agreed, and he was allowed to land on the damp, matted growth at the nose of the dory as she swung close to the tender. Nicky listened carefully to instructions from Brownie and warning from Mr. Neale.

“And be especially watchful about snakes,” Brownie said. “There aren’t so many in the ’Glades, but in the heavy growth there are plenty. But if you keep your eyes open—and here!—take this pistol, in case of need!—you can generally avoid them. If you fire three times, quickly, we will come to help you. If you fire at a snake, we’ll come, too, of course, but the three shots is to show that it is help you need, of any kind.”

The trail was almost blind, being little used, and Nicky was hard put to it to discover his way sometimes; but Brownie had told him where to look for Indian signs on the trees and lower tangle, and what sort of ground to avoid, and he made a fairly quiet and very slow progress.

Almost so suddenly as to be a total surprise, he came to the end of the trail. Thick brush and heavy tangle of every sort of vine and creeper was just ahead; but through it his quick eyes discerned the glint of sun on rippled water, and the white reflection of a boat’s bow!

There, moored close to shore, so that one could step from it to the heavy roots at the edge, lay the *Libertad*!

Nicky stayed where he was and looked and strained his ears. He moved cautiously to one side and got a better view. He could see the forward deck, and there crouched the two Ortiga brothers, the one they called the *Senor* and the other, the *Don*.

Their voices were low, but they came clearly to Nicky.

“Let’s call a truce,” *Senor Ortiga* was saying. “You and I have fought and won, back and forth, times without number. Now there is enough gold in this boat to make us rich—and more back in the islands. Let’s bury the hatchet!”

“It is buried, amigo,” his brother agreed. “Now I suggest that we also bury the treasure, out in the ’Glades, and disappear for a while.”

“That would do but for one thing. We can’t trust our men. If they know where it is buried they will come back and steal it—or you——”

“Yes,” snarled the other suddenly angry again. “Or I—or you! Bury the hatchet! Oh, yes!”

“Our original plan—your plan—is best, after all,” said the other brother. “We will wait until the Seminoles come and pack the treasure in cases when it is divided—then it will be ‘each man for himself!’”

“I will go back to the rimrock and see if there is any sign of the Indians,” said Senor Ortiga, rising. Nicky looked about quickly. He must get back and warn his companions so they could, all three, hide before the Senor arrived.

And as Nicky turned, his blood turned to ice in his veins.

Lying along a low bough, not ten feet from the ground, with its steady, unblinking, bright, beady eyes fixed on him, lay a moccasin, a large specimen of the ’Glades snake family!

Instinctively, and with the impulsiveness that characterized his movement at many close corners in life, Nicky lifted the pistol and fired!

As his finger pressed the trigger he realized that, in the old adage, “the fat was in the fire.”

He had upset all their careful plans!

## CHAPTER XXVII

### IN THE ENEMY'S HANDS

It was not the bullet from Nicky's pistol that did damage—it missed the moccasin by a good foot; but the sound, pounding through the still morning air, warned and wakened the hi-jackers.

Nicky did not dare risk a run past the snake which, in spite of the pistol shot, had not moved, except to lift its head angrily.

From the position by the boats Mr. Neale and Brownie heard the reverberating thud of the exploding powder. "He's in trouble," said Mr. Neale. "But he isn't calling for help!" answered Brownie. They listened, but no further sound came. "Guess he got it," said Brownie.

But then their ears were assailed by a triple succession of sharp explosions. This time it was the summons, without chance of mistake!

Breaking through the tangle, heedless of cuts and scratches, the sailor and the young collector of relics fought their way along the faint trail.

Nicky had aimed the pistol at the snake, even as he pressed the trigger in the call for aid; but his hand shook so that he made no effect on the reptile which, alarmed by the sound, slipped in a long, sinuous curve to the trunk of the tree. Nicky drew a long breath. But at the same instant that he heard the crash of bodies in the trail, he heard, behind him, feet thudding up from the waterside.

Turning, he lifted the pistol desperately in the faces of the two Ortiga brothers; but they were too close. As one knocked the weapon high in the air it exploded its fifth cartridge.

At the sound the men on the path beyond sight of Nicky gave a hail; at the same instant stout, powerful arms closed around Nicky, his opened lips were rudely

smothered in a coarse hand and he felt himself, struggling, kicking, trying to bite, propelled toward the water.

“Fling him in and let’s get away!” cried Don Ortega.

“No,” panted his brother, with a wicked word as Nicky teeth closed on his flesh and he snatched his hand free. “Make him a hostage! Hold him. Here—ahoy, the ship! Give a hand!”

Nicky tore and fought but against two powerful men. His fourteen years, his athletic prowess, were little help to him. His strength was in no way equal to theirs. From the *Libertad* came excited voices.

From the trail broke cries and the sound of Brownie’s automatic barking as he caught sight of the men; but Mr. Neale stayed his hand, catching a view of Nicky in the group.

Before they could get there and intervene, Nicky had been flung to willing hands, had been thrust back into the cabin, an engineer was rocking the flywheel of *El Libertad*, her motor took hold with a roar and a tremble of the hull, Don Ortega and his brother had thrown themselves onto the bow deck, clinging to the rail, and then scrambling down out of range, and, backing down stream, *El Libertad* was beyond the leap of Brownie which fell short and sent him plunging down onto the coral bottom.

Mr. Neale shouted to Nicky; he was helpless, having no weapon. Nicky could not answer; he was surrounded, his mouth was being tied securely with a handkerchief rudely thrust between his lips.

*El Libertad* backed slowly but surely down the stream.

From the bank Brownie, sputtering and soaked, hailed.

“*Libertad*—ahoy!” he cried. “Stop or we’ll sink you!”

“With what—your fat?” cried a lusty sailor with a roar of laughter. “If you shoot you’ll hit your boy—see, here he is!”

Screening behind Nicky, whose bound form they lifted into view, the evil sailors sent a defiant guffaw back to the men on the bank.

“Get the rockets!” panted Mr. Neale, tearing back along the trail, “the cutter won’t know what’s happened. Send up rockets!”

Brownie dashed back with him, and while Mr. Neale was fumbling to set the rockets, and dropping a packet of matches into the water in his helpless eagerness, Brownie was tugging at the light dory with all his strength, trying to shove it over the rimrock into the shoals at the head of the Shark; his idea was to row down after the vessel and so to be on hand if any help could be rendered. Mr. Neale had to ask for matches; but finally the fuses hissed and rockets roared up from the heavy roots into which their sticks had been thrust, to break into puffs of white, heavy smoke—the warning of attack!

On the *Libertad* a hasty conference was held. Nicky was not invited to attend the conferees, but was bound quickly and thrown unceremoniously into a corner of the cabin floor, to await their further need for his protecting body.

Whispers, gruff laughs, sharp negatives to suggested action, were all that Nicky could catch. Finally, however, he heard Don Ortiga order the engineer to put on full speed astern, and back went the white boat down the Shark, a man at her stem to call the channel to the tillerman.

“We’ll use him as a blind, say he’s been hurt and we want to deliver him up,” Nicky overheard a man confide to the engineer who was necessarily absent from the conference. “That will hold their fire.”

“Whose fire?” asked the engineer, wiping gasoline from the lower edge of the carbureter, which seemed to be leaking.

“The cutter must be laying outside,” the sailor declared. “One man on the shore was in uniform. They must have tried to surround us. Lucky for us, the lad fell into our hands!”

“Yes,” said the engineer coarsely laughing. “If they offer to hurt us we can shoot him—or whatever we like!”

At the head of the Shark River Mr. Neale was helping with the dory; its keel grated and rubbed, offering resistance. They lifted and bumped it along until it seemed safe to leap in; but the added weight plumped it down onto the coral again and they had to tumble out and push once more. Then Mr. Neale leaped in, Brownie gave a shove and fell onto the stern on his chest, and clambered aboard.

They caught the oars and gave way with insane eagerness.

On the *Libertad* Nicky lay in his corner.

“Let us go—if they don’t—we’ve got him——”

“Sort of tight corner,” Nicky said to himself, and with all the cunning at his command he kept his face impassive to the chance sight of a passing sailor while, under him, cramped as they were, he tugged fiercely at the hurriedly made knots, his jaws aching from the wedge of soiled linen crushed between his teeth, his body bent toward one end—liberation!

## CHAPTER XXVIII

### TWO IN THE TOILS

Early in the morning Tom, on board the cutter with Mr. Sommerlee, his engineer and two of the patrol, decided that a brisk bit of exercise would be just about the finest appetizer he could desire.

There had been no signs at all of any excitement, although Tom had taken his turn with the others at watch while the cutter lay anchored a stone's throw beyond the mouth of the Shark River.

While Lieutenant Sommerlee got the dry-alcohol stove lit up for their hot cocoa and fried eggs, Tom saw no harm in a brisk swim to the mouth of the river and back. Accordingly, while the sun was giving Nicky his first view of the 'Glades, Tom lowered himself from the cutter's stern, not caring to risk a dive in the poor light, and struck out gaily for shore, wondering, as he swam, how Nicky's party was getting along, back there beyond the heavy growth that fringed the inner channels.

Crawling out on a root, Tom slapped the early morning chill of the water out of his body, and rested before returning to the cutter.

He wondered, as he lolled on the roots, whether *El Libertad* was actually hiding in the river or not. He half wished that he had asked Mr. Sommerlee for permission to swim up the river a ways; it might help them to discover the truth; they had no small boat and would not wish to risk having the cutter discovered before the landing party had its position and gave a signal.

"I think I'll swim up the river a few strokes," Tom decided. "Nicky swam a ways in Crocodile Creek and we discovered the liquor stores; it won't hurt me to do a hundred yards and back."

Accordingly he slipped down into the limpid stream, and against a slight current



that did not tire him at all, he pulled his lithe, muscular young body along steadily. But when he lifted his head to glance ahead he saw nothing; nothing, that is, but water and low-clustered tree roots on the banks, tall grass, and leaves meeting in a heavy tangle along the banks and, far beyond him, meeting overhead. The *Libertad* was too close in, behind a tangle of weed and grass, to be visible from his low point of vantage in the water.

Suddenly his ears were assailed by a distant thud—like a shot!

Tom listened. There was the deep silence of the morning over all of Nature. “Perhaps an Indian is out hunting—or a white man has just shot his breakfast,” Tom mused, and deciding that he had gone far enough he swung lazily, and then set off with brisk strokes.

Then he beached and stood up on a ledge of sandy coral reef. The three signal shots bore their triple crash through the woods, followed by Nicky’s final shot.

“That sounds more like fighting than hunting,” mused Tom. “I wonder if our land party has made contact! I guess I had better go back to the cutter and see if they have noticed any rocket signals.”

He turned and began to swim back.

He had gone further than he had intended to, however, and he felt pretty well tired out by the time he came back to the river mouth; so, deciding to rest and to hail the cutter and ask for information, he drew himself up on the root.

He saw a flurry of activity on the cutter; quite clearly he had been totally forgotten in some new excitement. The motor was running and Lieutenant Sommerlee, eyes fixed on the far reaches of the river was maneuvering, backing and turning to bring the cutter broadside to the channel. Tom turned to look back up the stream he had recently swam in, and saw, afar, the white spot that would soon become *El Libertad*, backing out because she could not turn in the channel.

Mentally, Tom summed up the situation quickly; if he tried to swim out to the cutter he would interfere with the lieutenant’s plans, and perhaps be in the line of fire if the white vessel continued to approach. He would surely be in line of fire from her stern if he tried to swim to the cutter.

Yet, naked and white against the dark foliage, he would be just as much of a

target, and quite as noticeable, on his foot.

Hastily, but warily, remembering saw-tooth grass and snakes as very real menaces to unshod feet and an unprotected body, Tom melted into a thicket of heavy creeper and leaves, and with his eyes peering through his green lattice, he saw the white boat crawl out into view.

Then he saw something more. Nicky, still gagged and bound, was up on the after deck, held there by the arm of a man who cleverly kept as much of his person below the coaming of the after cockpit as he could.

Tom compressed his lips to hold back his first impulse to call out.

How had Nicky gotten into that predicament? What was he doing in the hands of the enemy? He was prompted to shout to Nicky; then sober second thought told him that this might endanger Nicky, and it would certainly draw attention to himself, not very desirable to a white-skinned boy, minus his clothes, and menaced by a pack of men evil enough to treat his chum so rudely.

Tom held his position and watched.

Evidently it was the intention of the hi-jackers to have Nicky discovered and recognized by the crew of the cutter. Such was, in fact, their aim. Mr. Coleson, compelled to expose a portion of his arms in order to keep Nicky in view, did not like his place nor the rough treatment the boy had received. While he had, it is true, helped to tie the boys on a previous occasion, and had then deserted them in their tender, and, later, with Senor Ortiga, had stolen the tender in order to chase the hi-jackers, he had not in any of this actually intended any violence toward his youthful captives or—as they later became—rescuers!

It irked him, and went against his sense of decency, weak though that was, to have Don Ortiga cold-bloodedly crouch beside the engine with a pistol in his hand, holding it trained on Nicky, and, as Mr. Coleson made no doubt, ready to fire with deadly aim.

Tom, on the shore, took in Nicky's plight. Being elevated above the water edge, he was able to see downward beyond the coaming of the cabin sides, and he observed Don Ortiga's position and its menace.

Still he held his lips pressed together. A warning would do no good; silence

could do no harm.

From the *Libertad* the hoarse hail of Senor Ortiga came across the water. The *Libertad* had lost way and drifted very slowly stern-first out of the mouth of the river. Those in the cutter caught the hail also, and the hand Lieutenant Sommerlee had partly raised to call for full speed across the oncoming stem, was suspended in midair.

“There’s a gun trained on this boy,” cried the younger Ortiga. “We have his life in our hands. We mean to get free and if you stop us or fire or try any tricks, the boy pays for it!”

The position into which the *Libertad* had drifted was stern-out, so that the cutter was on her quarter, and to the side farthest from Tom’s hiding place.

In that position, totally unsuspecting of his presence, no one on *El Libertad* was paying attention to his side of the river mouth.

Two ideas, two courses of action, sprang into Tom’s mind. The first was this: he recalled that when the trio had lain, tied hand and foot on the floor of the *Libertad*’s cabin, the drip-drip of the gasoline from a leaky carbureter gasket had become very noticeable.

He recalled that Mr. Coleson had mentioned it to Senor Ortiga, that night when they had returned from their fruitless hunt, and said he must fix it. The idea Tom had was that if he could manage to get on board, unobserved, and loosen the carbureter or destroy it, the white boat would be powerless to escape. But the men were all congregated at the stern, all except the steersman, up in the cubby where the wheel was located, at the forward end of the cabin.

The second idea grew from the first: in the bow was the main gasoline tank; a pipe line of copper ran along, close under the edge of the cabin flooring, and up forward there was a petcock in the line, so that the flow of what Mr. Coleson, in his English fashion, called “petrol” could be cut off in case of a break in the line. “Now,” decided Tom, “if I could get aboard and turn that cock without my action being discovered, the engine would stop as soon as it sucked the compression tank dry—about a tenth of a mile. Then they’d have to surrender or be starved out, and we could signal for help, and certainly pick them off. Maybe, with Cliff, I could plan to get Nicky free first! I’m going to try it!”

Tom made as little noise as he possibly could, climbing out of his retreat; if he was discovered, he must be shot!

But they were all busy listening to some plea or argument from the lieutenant. Tom made his dip into the water without apparently attracting the least bit of notice.

He waded softly, as far as he could, then with deft, quiet strokes, drew steadily, if slowly, closer—closer—closer!

If only they all kept out of range below the cockpit and cabin coaming! Evidently, in spite of the danger to Nicky, none of the desperate crew cared for a chance shot from the cutter. They stayed low.

Tom reached the side of the almost inert white hull; with only a slight drift taking her gradually past the cutter, she was evidently being permitted to lie still until the drift got her out of the way of the cutter, or far enough into open water so that she could be turned and steered in a forward run.

Tom, huddled close under the hull, holding to the loop of the anchor rope which hung down, listened. As he came on he noticed that the cutter was edging up, and that Nicky had been dragged off of the after deck. Tom believed that he knew why. They had threatened to do something to Nicky in order to stop the cutter from edging up.

A shrill cry from the *Libertad*, right over his head, made Tom almost let go of his rope; then he realized that to him it did not sound like Nicky's voice! They were frightening the lieutenant with a falsified noise, the cry of a falsetto voice among the crew.

He could not see, clinging under the hull, but he guessed that the ruse had succeeded; he guessed, also; that, if ever, now was his moment to act.

*El Libertad* had drifted at least a boat's-length back from the river mouth; probably most of her crew would be looking toward the cutter which must, by the changed position, be off her forward beam. Tom lifted his hand until he could loosen it from the rope without letting the cable slap the side, then dropped back into the water, pulled alongside the hull toward the stern, and there reached up and caught the rail with one hand.

Would he be seen?

Slowly he drew the other hand to the rail. Nothing happened. He suppled his muscles and then with all their aid working in the slow, upward pull, he drew his eyes level with the deck.

They were all forward, intent on something—Nicky or the cutter!

Tom pulled himself up higher, made an effort, and by ill fortune, on the instant of success, slipped on the wet rail, and plumped down in a heap in the cockpit, aft.

## CHAPTER XXIX

### ONE LAST HOPE!

Nicky, held, as he was, between two pairs of strong arms, with Mr. Coleson on one side of him and Tew on the other, saw that Lieutenant Sommerlee, with his two patrols in the cutter, was “in a fix.” It was plainly to be seen that the naval man did not dare to open fire, because of the threat to Nicky; nor did he dare to approach.

The lieutenant had prolonged the parley, making offers and trying, by threat, by pleading, by persuasion, to induce the desperate crew of *El Libertad* to see reason, to give themselves up.

Nicky had somewhat loosened the rope around his wrists, but he did not let this be known because he knew that he could not make his escape and he wanted to save his strength for a surprise at a more advantageous time.

Tom, flopping his wet, naked body onto the after deck and tumbling unceremoniously into the cockpit, turned every man’s attention in that direction.

“So help me!” shouted Tew, “it’s a mermaid—no, a merman—what’s come floppin’ aboard.” He released one of Nicky’s arms and crawled aft. Don Ortega still kept Nicky covered with his weapon, a menacing glow in his eyes. All of the crew crouched because they did not want to risk the chance of an unexpected shot from the cutter. Crawling to where the engineer was rocking the flywheel, getting the engine to start again, Tew confronted Tom.

“What brought you aboard?” he demanded.

“I came to be with my chum!” declared Tom. “If you’ll let me get Mr. Coleson’s jumper out of the engine locker, I’ll thank you.” Tew nodded and Tom secured the jumper with which to cover his body.

Lieutenant Sommerlee saw the naked body land on *El Libertad* and realized that it was Tom's, but did not see why the boy had deliberately gone into danger.

However, as attention seemed to be distracted from him he seized the opportunity to make a sign to the man at the cutter's engine and that sailor, with careful hand, advanced his throttle, so that the engine got more gas and picked up. The cutter began to nose in to closer quarters with the white boat.

At the same time Senor Ortiga drew a weapon and pointed it toward Tom.

"You come forward," he commanded. "Tew—or somebody—tie him up."

"All right, if you think I can do any harm," said Tom quietly, "but take that handkerchief out of Nicky's mouth. What can he do by talking that can hurt you? It's simply cruelty to gag him!"

"Take it out!" snapped Don Ortiga. "We don't intend to be cruel, but you fellows are interfering with us and we are going to use you to cover our escape—then we will see what to do with you later."

"All right," agreed Tom, pretending to extend his arms toward Tew.

"Keep away!" shouted Senor Ortiga to the cutter.

But she had headway and was coming on. Lieutenant Sommerlee had decided that he must risk the possibility of harm to the boys—he held that they would hesitate a long moment before they would stain their hands with a crime against life.

In that he was right, because the most hardened criminals are really cowards and, unless maddened or morally perverted, they will be more afraid of death than of imprisonment, and will weigh their chances of escape to the last instant before actually committing a major crime.

Nicky, seeing that his chance might have come, suddenly wrenched his shoulder out of the grip of the sailor, at the same instant giving the sailor a thrust with his hands, and ripping them free of the rope. The sailor staggered, being off balance in his crouching position; he cannoned against Don Ortiga.

Tom, fastening the strap of the jumper he had donned, saw Nicky's move, and,

being upright, saw Lieutenant Sommerlee rise in the cutter and take aim at one of the men.

With a catlike leap he sprang against Tew, knocking him off his feet against the engineer; the two men clutched one another for support.

Tom, his plan of action made sure, had seen a wrench lying on the floor. For this he reached; he got it in his hand and arose. He turned toward the engine. The wrench rose in the air and came down with all Tom's force, sidewise, toward the carbureter.

But Tew had divined his purpose and with a superhuman effort caught the swinging arm and by his superior strength diverted the blow enough so that it clanged harmlessly against the water-cooling outer casing of the motor.

Tom, seeing the futility of his blow, released the wrench.

As he sprang back there came a report from the cutter.

But at the same instant Don Ortiga fired back, crying "Down—flat—everybody!" They all crouched.

"Jump—Nicky!" cried Tom. "Jump overboard."

Nicky leaped onto the cushioned side seat and tried to elude the gripping hands. Tom, on his end of the cabin floor, made a similar effort. The engine roared as contact was made, and the *Libertad*, gathering headway, swung her nose and made straight for the cutter.

Lieutenant Sommerlee and his two men were firing, but while woodwork in the cabin window sashes flew in splinters, they had to fire carefully so as not to touch the two boys.

Tom and Nicky were struggling, each caught by the legs. They strove manfully against the heavy odds, but while the men dared not show their heads, or expose their bodies to the fire from the cutter, they could drag at the boys in safety.

The uneven struggle lasted only a moment and the boys were lying, pinioned, panting, helpless on the cabin floor.



The *Libertad*, veering suddenly, made a sweeping curve, turning aside from the cutter. In the position which the cutter was faced, coming head-on, she had to pass astern of the *Libertad* before her men could control the tiller and turn her rudder.

Nicky and Tom, lying on the floor, could not see; but they heard the foul words of the *Libertad*'s crew and saw the flashes of their weapons. Directed against the three in the cutter, their superior fire was a menace that Lieutenant Sommerlee could not overcome; before he could, under the circumstances, get the cutter around, *El Libertad* was racing, full speed, for the channel that led outward. The cutter came on, but the *Libertad* had the headway and the advantage of her straight course while the cutter had to swing in a wide circle before she could take full advantage of her speed.

"You boys will be sorry for what you tried," grated Don Ortiga.

"We're sorry now," said Tom shortly. "We are sorry that we tried to get away."

"Yes," panted Nicky, "we ought to have succeeded."

He turned his head toward Tom, his lips shaped words, but only Tom, reading his lips, got the message.

"There's only one hope," Nicky's lips formed, "Cliff!"

## CHAPTER XXX

### CLIFF PLAYS HIS PART

Cliff, on board the stranded *Senorita*, with Sam and Jim and the naval patrol sailor, Jack, knew nothing of the exciting events that had just occurred.

Nor did he guess that an escaping white boat full of desperate men was laying its course to pass his station.

Tom's effort to destroy the carbureter had drawn the attention of the crew to the engineer's repeated assertions that the leaky old carbureter was wasting gas, and that they ought to be sure they had enough to run the channel and escape.

"But where can we get any more?" said Senor Ortiga.

"On the wrecked *Senorita*, of course," snapped his brother. "Her tanks are almost full."

"But with the cutter coming, how can we stop for gas?" demanded Tew.

"Easy," said a sailor, and revealed a plan.

Of all that Cliff was ignorant. He, with Sam, Jim and the sailor, had stood watch-and-watch through the night and up into the day.

But nothing had altered the monotony.

But excitement was coming, and coming fast!

Nicky and Tom had been unceremoniously roped and flung into the open cockpit aft of the engine compartment. The cockpit was a low step higher than the cabin flooring, but its coaming and sides were so high that all the two chums could see was the sky and, when they ran close to an islet, the tops of the trees where these

grew near the water.

The cutter had been delayed for a moment to pick up Mr. Neale and Brownie, who had rowed with all their might and had sighted the cutter in time to hail her and to be taken aboard. Lieutenant Sommerlee wanted Brownie, a good shot, and Mr. Neale would be able to play a part if hand-to-hand fighting came about.

He sent Brownie forward and bade him scan the water closely as they put full speed on to chase the *Libertad*, long since passed out of view beyond the first island of the archipelago.

“I suspect they will try to do something to delay us,” the lieutenant said. “They may drop something in the channel, for there is one place where it is very narrow and quite shallow, and almost any large object—an anchor, sticking up on the coral, would crush our bow planks at the speed we’re making.”

Brownie kept a sharp watch, and soon discovered, as they approached the narrowest and shallower part of the channel, something dark on the bottom.

“Cliff and Jack and the colored men will stop them I hope,” said the commander as they slowed and drew near to the submerged danger.

“They will, if they can do it,” Brownie said. He dropped over the bow and discovered that his commander had foreseen exactly what had been done; the *Libertad*’s anchor had been cut loose, and, with some spare engine parts, had been flung from the white boat’s stern into the channel with the hope that the cutter would run onto them and be entirely disabled, before they were noticed.

While the damage was averted, it took time to lift the heavy metal under the water, and to displace it.

Meanwhile Cliff sat on the slanting deck of the *Senorita*, with Jack and Sam, while Jim hung close above them on the top of the cabin, his eyes fixed on the distances of the channel.

“What will you do if they come in daylight?” Cliff looked up at him to ask.

“Shoot at the waterline and let the water in,” said Jack.

“But they’ll shoot back,” objected Cliff.

“That’s the chance we have to take,” Jack answered.

“We might load up the signal cannon with some slugs, or something,” suggested Jim. He had begged Cliff’s pardon for his part in the tying-up and other maltreatment aboard the *Senorita*; Jim was not a bad being at heart; he had been employed by Senor Ortiga and Mr. Coleson and had only done their bidding, with no animosity or cruelty in his actions. Cliff had readily forgiven him. Jim, thus made happy, was just as determined to help the side of right and justice as he had been, before, to earn his pay honestly, as he saw honesty and his duty to his employers.

“The cannon wouldn’t carry the slugs any distance,” said Sam.

“But they’d have to pass within three feet of us,” said Jim.

He pointed overside to the channel, where the deep water was at the side of the wrecked vessel. “This boat ran onto coral because her tiller rope broke, remember! There’s plenty of water, and they can pass us, but they’ll have to steer close.”

Cliff nodded.

“If you fellows won’t think I’m bossy,” he said, modestly, “and if Jack won’t be mad and think I want to be the leader, I’d like to say something.”

“Go ahead,” said Jack. “Always open to good ideas, buddy!”

Cliff expounded a plan: his first idea was that to fire at the vessel, if she ever came, would bring about firing in response. If they could in some way lure some of the hi-jackers onto the *Senorita*, without their own numbers being endangered, several of them might board the other boat and destroy her steering gear, or even capture her.

Jack liked the plan better than he did his own.

“I’m for it,” he said. “If you can get them to stop—if they come out at all, and if they get past the cutter, which I don’t see how they can!”

“Jim, they know, is on board,” Cliff said. “My plan would be for Sam, and you, Jack, and me, to hide behind the cabin where they couldn’t see us, and have Jim

hail them, if they come close enough and slow up enough to let him jump aboard—and they might not. But if they didn't, Jim could be up forward on the cabin, and keep their attention on that end of the boat, and when they come abreast maybe one or more of us could run around the after end of the cabin and jump aboard.”

“Pretty wild chance,” commented Sam. “But it's better than risking our necks standing up to be shot at—we'd have at least the chance of surprising them, and if we got aboard——”

“There's a rocket!” cried Jack. “And another——” They all scrambled onto the cabin and stared toward the distant coast. Three puffs of smoke hung in the air, low over the trees.

“Nicky's signal—or the cutter's,” Cliff cried. “Be ready for—for anything!”

The wait was tedious. Their nerves were taunt and their voices when they spoke briefly were rather shrill and shaky. They did not know what was happening or what might happen. Would they be called on, really, to try to stop a band of hi-jackers? It seemed very easy when they discussed it in calm security; but with those signals shredding into nothing in the air, the reality and seriousness of their position came home to them all.

The time seemed endless, but finally Jim, alone on the cabin roof, whispered down, without moving enough to disclose the fact to his oncoming adversaries, “here she comes—*El Libertad*—and a-hummin'.”

“How many on her? Who can you see?” asked Cliff, tensely.

The white craft came ahead at her full speed. After a brief wait Jim answered Cliff. “I see my old boss, Senor Ortiga,” he said, “and Marse Coleson! And some other men—why, it's the men who used to be in business with my boss, only they turned hi-jackers. Yes, sar, there's Don Ortiga, the brother—and Tew—and all o' them, the very ones we sent you to with that message in the can.”

“I know,” said Cliff. “Never mind, now—hail them, aren't they near enough?” Being under the cabin wall for concealment he was not able to see.

“Now they are,” said Jim softly and sent a hail across the water.

“Take me off, stop and take me off—Master Coleson, it’s Jim!” he shouted. There was no answer. The white boat, as he reported in low tones, between hails, was slowing up, and coming closer, losing way—stopping. Jim, to carry out his part, sprang down from the cabin.

Cliff, Sam and Jack crouched; they were no longer able to tell what was happening, but they knew that Jim would call out “Bless you for saving me!” if he got aboard and then they could act quickly, knowing that the boat would be opposite their end of the cabin.

Instead, another voice came, loud and clear.

“We’ll see about taking you off; we’re stopping! We need gas.”

“How’d you get gas?” asked Jim, from the deck rail. “You ain’t got no way to pump it from one tank to the other!”

“Yes we have,” called the voice. Cliff thought it sounded like Tew. “We got a hose rigged to our bilge pump, and we’ll pump with that.”

The white boat scraped along the *Senorita*’s tilted side, and men swarmed over onto her deck; the crouching three heard their boots scabble, thud and clump about. They were forward, and Jim had run along the forward end of the craft to continue his talk. The after end of the *Senorita* was, therefore, beyond the after rail of the shorter boat.

Cliff inched his way around the aft side of the cabin until he could peer forward, taking a big chance, but feeling that he must see.

Jack, and Sam, creeping close behind him, waited in suspense.

Cliff took a swift peep and ducked back.

“They’re stretching a hose to the *Senorita*’s forward tank,” he breathed. “There are some men on the *Senorita*, and—let me look again!”

He protruded his head again, and then he thought he heard a low whistle.

Cliff turned, looking down toward the stern of the white vessel.

There, trussed up like two turkeys, in the cockpit of the *Libertad*, lay Tom and Nicky, the latter grinning a little sheepishly.

Cliff turned to his companions. His voice came in swift, whispered words. Jack nodded.

“We’ll do it!” he answered, hoarsely. “Inch as close as you can and we’ll be behind you. You take the cockpit, and free your chums. I’ll race forward, shooting, call Jim to help, and try to prevent the others from getting off our wreck. Sam, you shoot—in the air, in the water—anywhere; but shoot, load again and shoot—holler and try to scare them if you can’t hit them!”

“All right,” said Sam. Cliff inched along the deck. He was in plain view, now, from forward on the *Senorita*, or from the *Libertad*.

But the trio in the cabin of the latter vessel were deep in conversation, and the men were busy with the hose.

“Start your bilge pump!” called a sailor. Tew, on the white boat, bent and engaged a clutch; there was a heavy grind of gearing and the slow pulsation of a pump.

“Now!” whispered Cliff, and dashed for the rail.

“Look out—we’re caught!” yelled a man, on guard atop the *Senorita*’s cabin, watching for the cutter. He fired at Cliff, but Sam, reaching a black arm over the cabin studding, yanked his leg, threw him off balance, and spoiled aim. Shooting, yelling, Jack charged up narrow deck, Sam at his heels.

Cliff leaped and landed beside Nicky!

## CHAPTER XXXI

### NICKY IS A HERO!

Things happened so fast and so thick that no one could have told a story of all that went on. Cliff, landing on all fours, beside Nicky, was up on his knees in an instant, tugging his knife from his pocket, ripping open its blade.

He slashed at Nicky's rope, and loosened it; again he slashed and then, at a warning cry from Tom, he looked over his shoulder, but too late.

Nicky, frantically tugging to loosen the cut rope, saw Tew coming but was as helpless as Tom.

Cliff dropped his knife and tried to get up, to turn, to ward off the blow. Tew, his face working in a rage, his whole, muscular frame behind his stout arm, drove a fist at Cliff's head. Cliff instinctively threw up his arm. The fist crashed against it, flung him by its force against the cockpit thwart, and Cliff felt sick and faint, struggled to rise, saw the world turn black, big and little pinwheels whirl before his eyes, and sank in a heap.

Tew turned, and raced back to his engine. Nicky, his whole being burning with a fire of fury, tore at his rope and began to loosen it.

On the *Senorita*, the man atop her cabin was firing at Sam and Jack but they, under the shelter of the cabin, were crouched low, scampering up the deck, loading their pistols.

The men forward with the hose, taken by surprise, without their weapons in their hands, scattered, several leaping into the water and making for the islet close at hand.

Jim had already leaped into the forward cabin of the *Libertad*, and with his pistol aimed toward the deck of the vessel just above, was warning off those who



wanted to leap down. They stopped, not daring to leap.

Nicky got his arms free, threw the rope impatiently off and bent over Cliff. His chum lay inert, stunned by the shock as his head had struck the wood in his fall.

Nicky turned, to look for the knife, to free Tom.

On the cabin top the man on watch gave over firing and shouted a hoarse warning!

“The cutter!” he roared, “she’s coming!”

Full speed up the channel came Lieutenant Sommerlee’s craft, with Brownie, the lieutenant and the two sailors forward, Mr. Neale at the tiller, aft.

The men on the *Senorita* leaped to the water, Jack and Sam coming from concealment, standing erect, ordering them to surrender and firing at their heads as they scrambled for the islet and cover on the farther shore.

In the cabin of the *Libertad* the two men, Mr. Coleson and Don Ortiga, called to Senor Ortiga, who was on the deck of the *Senorita*, and at the same time a rifle ball, from the man on the cabin, aimed quickly at Jim, cut into the flesh of the colored man’s arm and he dropped his weapon.

Without an instant’s hesitation, Senor Ortiga leaped upon him, landed in the cabin, bent double, knocking Jim aside, and began to reach for the wheel, as Tew, leaping for the spark lever, advanced the spark, and at the same time threw the gear lever out of mesh with the bilge pump and into the gear with the engine propeller shaft.

As the engine took the spark and began to roar, Mr. Coleson, his face white, leaped past Tew to get to the cabin windows and thus to jump out into the channel and take his chance on swimming clear.

Nicky made a lunge past Tew, to stop Mr. Coleson, but his foot caught on the hose, still connected loosely to the bilge pump, and tore it free. There came the gurgle of the gas still in it, as it flowed over the floor in a trickling, spreading pool.

Nicky missed his catch, and saw Mr. Coleson leap free and plunge overside into

the channel.

From the cutter came hails and shots.

On the *Senorita* Sam and Jack had captured one man, and were firing at the islet.

Nicky felt himself caught by the nape of the neck as he tried to recover his balance. With his face white with rage, Don Ortiga brought Nicky upright and sent him, with the full force of his strong arms, toward the forward cabin. Then, as Nicky sprawled in a heap, Don Ortiga turned on his brother, just arising to face him.

“This is your fault!” he grated. “If you hadn’t come in and left your boat to be discovered——”

“Be still!” cried his brother. “Where is the gold—we must get it away—some of it!”

“It is safe!” growled Don Ortiga.

“Then let’s go away from this spot!”

“I shall go. You shall stay. Here and now we settle an old score,” cried Don Ortiga. Nicky saw him unsheathe a knife, and at the same instant Senor Ortiga, seeing his danger, leaped to grip the arm holding the knife.

Nicky, rushing past Tew, who was steering the craft, its momentum increasing with every turn of the propeller, tried to trip Don Ortiga, but the other man leaped aside, thrust at him with a foot, and at that instant Senor Ortiga caught the wrist of his hand holding the knife and a battle ensued that made Nicky gasp.

Amid the shouts and the shots from the cutter, amid the cries of men being caught or being fired at in the water, with the craft making steady way under Tew’s guidance, those two brothers strove and strained, fighting wordlessly for the possession of that knife.

Nicky was held spellbound for an instant.

Then, with a cruel trick, Don Ortiga lifted a knee and caught the brother he hated in a vital spot and Senor Ortiga, with a groan, relaxed his hold on the knife.

Don Ortega stepped back, his face a mask of hate and fury.

His brother began to recover, for the blow had not been delivered with enough force to be permanently damaging.

“And now, as I said, we settle old scores!” hissed Don Ortega.

With a hand that shook he extracted a cigarette from a case in his pocket, staring in meditation on his evil plan while his brother, groaning and white, gained his balance.

Don Ortega scraped a match roughly against its box, lit his cigarette and then, flicking his match carelessly, loosed it.

Nicky cried out shrilly.

“The gas!” yelled Nicky. “Get away! The gas!”

Senor Ortega sensed the danger, and so did his brother. Both acted; the Don leaped back to the cockpit and began to scramble to its side, his brother trying to crawl out of the window.

It all happened in a fraction of a second—the match was in the air, the men were escaping, Nicky was leaping back toward Tew for he saw what was coming.

Tew, as the match landed, yelled in terror and began to climb from the cabin to the forward deck and there leaped into the water.

As he did so there was a flash, a roar and a seething, boiling pool of flaming gasoline covered the cabin floor around the engine!

Nicky, whose first instinctive impulse had been self-preservation, instantly thought of his chums in the cockpit—of Tom, bound—of Cliff, perhaps still insensible.

The men were being rounded up, by shouting navy men and those who helped. But of this, of the effort of Mr. Coleson to escape, of his capture, of the capture of the Don and of his brother, Nicky knew nothing.

His whole mind was fixed on one purpose.

He must get through a lake of seething flame to his chums!

The cockpit was a bare few inches above the floor level of the engine compartment, and so the gasoline had not spread; but the flame was licking the sides of the cabin, flaring through the windows, and, fanned by the speed of the vessel's movement, bellied out aft over the boys.

Nicky was almost thrown off his feet as the *Libertad* thrust her nose, unguided by human hand, against the side of the coral, and with a jolt stopped.

Nicky gained his equilibrium and leaped for the foredeck; there he climbed swiftly atop the low cabin and began to run along its length.

As he ran he shouted wildly to Lieutenant Sommerlee and Mr. Neale.

They heard him and the cutter swung her nose toward the beached vessel with its cabin blazing.

Nicky saw flames leap up through the windows and lick at the roof and blow over it in the light breeze. It was hot to his feet, still he went on, a handkerchief over his face, crouching low as he ran.

He stopped, at the after end, for a sheet of flame was bellying out. But it subsided, and taking what might be his last chance, he leaped onto all-fours beside Tom.

Cliff was moaning, stirring. Nicky shouted again to those in the cutter and Mr. Neale leaned far over the bow, to reach the white stern at the very first instant.

With seething flame behind him, threatening to belch out over him at any instant, with the cockpit edge beginning to burst into flame, Nicky found Cliff's knife and sawed Tom's bonds. Then, cutting down the ropes between his legs so he could stand and work, Nicky let Tom help his own final escape while he tugged and worked to get Cliff in his arms.

"Be still," urged Nicky. "It's all right!"

Sam and Jack had seen the fire occur; with a common impulse they had leaped into the *Senorita's* cabin to get the patent fire extinguishers always kept in an engine room. With these they leaped back to the deck and alongside the flaming

cabin as Nicky crossed it.

Turning the extinguishers upside down to break their containers and allow the chemicals to fuse and mix and create pressure and a spouting flow of watery gas, they turned the short nozzles onto the cockpit and cabin. There was the roar and hiss of chemicals meeting their flaring enemy.

There came a great puff of smoke and flame, but Nicky, just in time, on the edge of the cockpit, with Cliff in his arms, leaped!

He struck the water, and began to swim, holding Cliff's head up!

Tom, freeing himself at the same time, sprang into the water and paddled to his chums.

The cutter came alongside and they were drawn from the water.

And then, with a violent roar as the fire found the gas line and fresh fuel, the fire blazed up again.

"The tank—the aft tank!" cried Jim, leaping from the cabin floor where he had, with his hurt arm, been trying to get the *Libertad's* extinguisher into play. "The tank! Get away!"

He leaped into the water and swam off, and at the same time, with a glorious feeling that some High Power had held back the end until all were safely away, Nicky, in the cutter, saw *El Libertad's* stern burst into a mass of fire, sparks and rending wooden splinters.

Her stern, literally blown to bits, sank, blazing and hissing, into the channel, leaving her still blazing with her nose on the coral.

There was nothing to do about it.

"But the treasure—" gasped Cliff, who had come to himself somewhat, with a good sized bruise on his temple. "It will all be melted."

"Let it melt!" cried Nicky. "As long as you and Tom are safe!"

And, with no further word than a tight grip of Cliff's hand, Nicky watched

wordlessly the blazing pyre of all their seeking.

“The gold won’t burn,” Lieutenant Sommerlee consoled the boys.

“And there is more in the coral ‘safe, ’” said Mr. Neale.

They laid off all that day, watched the embers sink down to the water’s edge, saw the last spark die, and then plumbed the wreckage for the treasure, hoping that in a state of molten yellow blocks it would be brought up. But no golden bars were there, nor could a single glint of melted metal be discovered, though Sam, Jim and Brownie dived with a will and almost tore the charred insides out of the *Libertad*.

“Where can it be?” mused Mr. Neale.

They questioned their captives, but all were silent. With a fierce grimace of hate Don Ortiga told them they would never find it.

But Nicky held on firmly to hope!

## CHAPTER XXXII

### HOW VOODOO BROUGHT SUCCESS

Jamaica's Blue Mountains, looking with their lordly heads over the wide expanse of a sunlit sea, discerned a white sail. That was no unusual sight to them; but this particular sail seemed, in some way, to be more important than the rest.

It was. Under its wide, unreefed expanse, three youths, a colored and a white man watched eagerly for the closer signs of the island's harbor at Kingston.

In time they landed, and, after a while, they had secured a conveyance and were whirling out through the lazy streets, noticing with delight the familiar sights, the indolent colored people on the streets and in the shops, the family "flitting" or moving, its colored woman heading the procession with the dining room table balanced on her head, its legs sticking aloft, the family stuff piled within its upturned top; while the children bore their respective loads and the man of the family, as usual, stalked along behind—carrying nothing!

"It's great to see the cactus again!" grinned Nicky, noting the great plants by the wayside when they left the city and rose into higher ground, seeing cactus plants many feet high, sometimes making a veritable forest with their close-set ranks.

In time Mr. Gray, Cliff's father, greeted them on the old plantation. They had cabled from Florida before sailing back in Sam's *Treasure Belle*.

Many were the greetings exchanged, and long were the tales that had to be told. Nelse and the hi-jackers were in prison.

"Mr. Coleson was let go free," Nicky explained. "I guess the naval patrol did not want to get into any trouble with the British—or the authorities in Jamaica."

"It would have brought about complications," said Mr. Neale. "I understand that

Mr. Coleson won't return to Jamaica."

"He cabled me," said Mr. Gray. "He asked me if I wanted to buy this plantation."

"Will you?" Cliff asked his father, the scholar who wrote many books about ancient civilizations.

"No, sar," broke in Sam, smiling his bright smile. "But Sam will."

"So that's how you will spend your share of the treasure?" asked Nicky.

"Part of it," agreed Sam.

"But you haven't yet told me how you discovered it," Mr. Gray said. "You stopped at the point where you failed to bring it up from the burned vessel."

"Well," said Nicky, "we 'worked' a little voodoo, sort of, didn't we, fellows?" Tom and Cliff nodded.

"You see, if the treasure wasn't in the burned boat somebody must have hidden it," Cliff took up the explanation. "Nicky suggested that we make an experiment. He thought that as long as Don Ortiga declared, up and down, he knew nothing about it, and Senor Ortiga and Mr. Coleson said the same, it might be that somebody else had hidden it during the night. Mr. Coleson, who was sorry for what he had done, tried to help us, and we believed his statement."

"Yes," said Tom. "So Nicky got Sam and Jim, the colored boys, and made them tell all they knew, or guessed, about voodoo."

"He certainly was clever, sar," broke in Sam. "He found out that we had heard of people 'divining' from tricks, and that night we had a voodoo affair on the after deck of the *Senorita*."

"Yes," Cliff took up the tale, "Nicky got Lieutenant Sommerlee to get the sailors and Tew together on the deck, then he and Sam and Jim put on a regular show, making believe they were going to find out who knew about it. They had a smoky fire, and took bits of hair off the heads of the sailors and burned them. Tew acted as though he was afraid of it all—he was superstitious. So he refused to give us his hair and then Sam, here, pretended to slip up behind him and snip some off with a knife. And that made Tew nervous, but what we really burned



was some of the other sailors' hair—only Tew didn't know that. Then Sam leaped up and pointed to Tew, and said: 'You know, sar,' and Tew broke down and showed by his face that he did.

"And do you know where it was?" demanded Nicky, unable to repress himself any longer. "He had waited till they were all asleep, the night before they were caught, and he had dropped the bars, one at a time, into a pool beside the boat. We found them there.

"And Lieutenant Sommerlee took us around to Miami, and we stayed there several days, unloaded the gold bars, had the bank assay and value them, and deposited—oh, a heap for everybody!"

"And of course the hi-jackers were sent to prison," Tom added.

"Has anyone been found belonging to the old Governor's family who should rightfully share in our find?" asked Mr. Neale.

"Yes," said Mr. Gray. "An old, widowed lady, and she will be very glad of the money for she is poor."

The boys were glad for her, and unselfishly voted to add a little from their plenty to help the lady. Later she refused to take more than a fair part, for that, she said, would keep her in easy circumstances for the rest of her life.

While the boys were adding details of their adventure and discussing what they might do with some of the gold, and Mr. Neale and Mr. Gray were comparing notes on the gold figures and silver placques of a looted Inca city which had been secured later from the treasure key, a knock came at the door and Ma'am Sib, the old voodoo woman, came in with a goggle-eyed boy of dark skin and about ten years old.

"Who sen for Ma'am Sib?" she demanded in her high, querulous tones. "Did you, white sirs?"

"We did," Nicky stated. "We, the three members of a secret order as powerful as any in the world."

She looked at him sharply to see if he was joking or trying to make her feel ridiculous. Oddly enough, Nicky was really serious.

“This won’t be a lecture, Ma’am Sib,” Cliff added. “But we want to show you something about voodoo that even you won’t guess about. If you can tell us how it’s done, we’ll be glad.”

She looked at him curiously.

Nicky, very serious, nodded to Tom who rose and walked slowly over to the window.

“It’s just a roundabout way to do her a favor,” Mr. Neale whispered to the mystified father Cliff was winking at. “There’s no harm.”

Tom was unostentatiously moving aside the curtain on a small chest of shelves in which various relics were stored.

Cliff came close to Ma’am Sib.

“Ever see anything like this before?” he asked. He laid on the table before the shriveled old crone a small, rude figure, cut out of stone, very much discolored, with its legs broken off, and having a hideous face and arms that stuck down without any hands to finish them off.

The old woman stared.

“Why—why—let me see! I know that—I seem to remember——”

“Oh, no,” laughed Nicky. “Don’t strain your memory, Ma’am Sib. That is one of the ancient Gods of an old Central American tribe. We got hold of it—well, never mind,” he did not wish to say they had found it in the despatch box with treasure, recovered later from the locker of the burned *Libertad*, and that they supposed the Spanish Inquisitors had taken it from the Indians. “It’s a powerful god.”

“I—I seem to see—” began the crone, rolling her eyes toward the ceiling.

“Oh, no, you’re not as old as this god,” Cliff told her. “But it has strange powers and we are going to show them to you.” She shivered and drew back but Nicky smiled gaily at her.

“It won’t hurt you,” he said. “Now you stand it up in front of you—prop it

against this book! Now, make a circle in the air in front of it, and then draw a circle around it with your index finger on your left hand, and then say —‘Abacca-abbaca-brab!’ three times and see what happens—it won’t hurt.”

The woman looked at Sam. He was grinning, but he nodded for her to do it. She hesitated and then, taking some bits of queer stuff from a bag she had, muttering some charm to protect herself from evil, she made the circles and muttered the words of Nicky’s fol-de-rol.

There came a thump, and a small bar of gold fell onto the table. Tom had flung it adroitly, of course, but she fixed her eyes and stared as if she would pop her eyes out.

“How—how—” she stammered.

“Want to know how it was done?” demanded Nicky.

“I’ll give you this gold if you tell me,” she said.

“I see,” began Tom.

“I know,” said Nicky.

“I’ll tell—” began Cliff. But suddenly all three saw that Mr. Neale, whom they had long before taught their secret signs, was making a sign which they all interpreted to mean, “Seeing All, I see nothing; Knowing All, I know nothing; Telling All, I tell nothing,” the oath of the Mystery Boys. Nicky grinned and nodded.

“This is it,” he said. “Once you made three clay figures of us and stuck their heads in the sun; they brought us good luck so we brought this god to give you some of it.”

And that was all she ever found out.

THE END

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## Transcriber's Note

- Silently corrected obvious typographical errors.
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