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Wilmer M. Ely**

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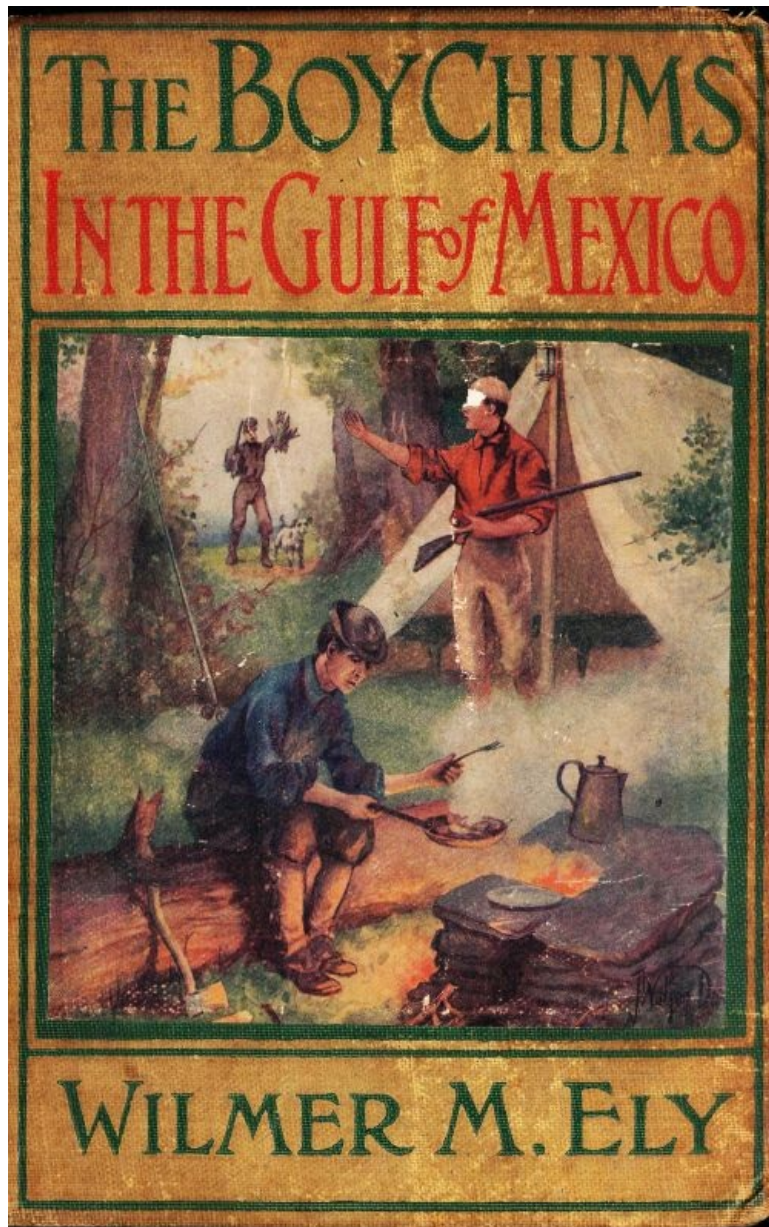
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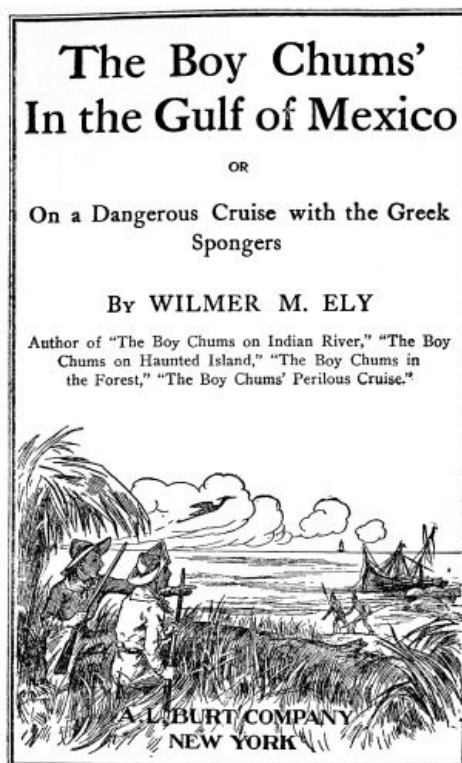
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\*\*\* START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THE BOY CHUMS IN THE GULF OF  
MEXICO \*\*\*





**"Charley leveled his gun and sent sixteen shrieking bullets just above the wheelman's head."**



[1]

# **The Boy Chums In the Gulf of Mexico**

OR

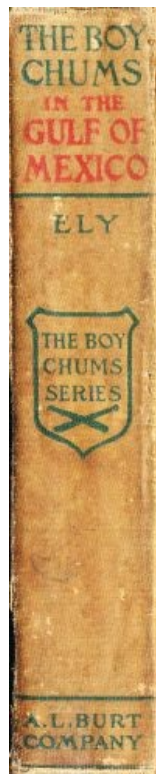
On a Dangerous Cruise with the Greek  
Spongers

By WILMER M. ELY

Author of "The Boy Chums on Indian River," "The Boy  
Chums on Haunted Island," "The Boy Chums in  
the Forest," "The Boy Chums' Perilous Cruise."

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## THE BOY CHUMS IN THE GULF OF MEXICO

### CHAPTER I.

"It's just like stepping suddenly into a strange country. I am glad we came even if we decide not to go into the business."

The speaker, a sturdy, manly-looking boy of eighteen, was one of a party of four persons who were strolling along a street in the Greek section of Tarpon Springs, a small Florida town, located on the Anclote River, a few miles from the Gulf of Mexico. His companions were a boy about his own age but of less robust appearance, a little negro lad with a good-humored intelligent face, and a middle-aged, heavily-bearded, blue-eyed man whose tattooed arms and rolling gait told of a

life spent on tossing seas and whose confident bearing and air of authority stamped him as one above the rank of a common sailor.

Those who have followed The Boy Chums through their many adventures will recognize in the little party their old friends Charley West, Walter Hazard, Captain Westfield and the Bahama lad, Chris, who lately returned from a perilous trip along the Atlantic beach searching for wreckage, and now seeking some promising venture in which to invest the Fifteen Hundred Dollars they earned on that voyage. [4]

"You're right, Charley," agreed the other boy. "I didn't know before that there was a sight like this in Florida. Here's a bench. Let's set down and rest a bit. I am tired from walking."

"Golly, I reckon dis nigger's tired some too," chimed in the little darkey, "I'se dun had de toothache in mah legs for most an hour, but I'se had to keep up wid you-alls. Don't dare let you white chillen prognosticate 'round a queer place like dis alone."

The seat selected was a long bench standing on the edge of the sidewalk, its back to the sandy street. The four seated themselves at one end and gazed around with eager interest at the strange scene, unconscious of the curious glances bestowed upon them by a large, deeply-tanned man, who, seated on the other end of the bench, was languidly whittling on a piece of white pine with a large sheaf knife.

The scene was one to arouse more than passing interest. Up and down the sidewalk hurried swarthy-faced, powerfully-built men of all ages and appearances, but all possessed of the same clear-cut features and straight noses. Singly and in groups of two and three, they hurried past, picturesque in their bright-colored clothing with gaudy sashes knotted about their waists. About all clustered an air of energy and bustle uncommon to sleepy Florida towns. [5]

Built up close to the inner edge of the sidewalk was a row of large buildings startling in their coats of bright yellow, red, blue, and green paint. Stretching away, close together in the distance, they gave one the impression of a gigantic rainbow. Through their wide-open doors and windows the interested onlookers could gain a plain view of the interiors, from which came the confused jangle of foreign tongues. To the right of where the little party sat was a busy grocery store, its windows filled with strings of dried garlic, strange-looking cheeses, queer nuts and fruits and a multitude of eatables strange to American eyes. To the left of them was a tobacco factory, the whirling machines shredding up the huge brown leaves into hair-like fibers and binding them up into pound packages. Directly before them was a great hall filled with little tables around which were seated groups of the regular-featured men, playing cards, eating, or puffing at strange pipes, with a small hose for a stem, the smoke passing through great glass vessels partly filled with rose water before it reached the smoker's lips. [6]

"That's the fifteenth place of that kind I've counted to-day," remarked Charley West. "From their numbers, one would imagine that these people did nothing but eat and play cards."

"I'd like to try one of them pipes," said Captain Westfield, wistfully. "I'll bet they give a good, cool smoke."

"Let's go in and get dinner," Walter suggested. "I am hungry as a wolf and that food smells mighty good. You can try a pipe after we eat, Captain."

The man at the end of the bench shifted his position closer to them.

"Strangers here?" he enquired.

"Just came in this morning. We're looking into the sponge business a bit," replied the Captain.

Charley eyed the tanned man closely. There was a sinister expression to the fellow's face, and his eyes shifted uneasily away from the lad's level glance. The keen-witted boy was not favorably impressed with the stranger's appearance, but the man's cordiality drove away his faint feeling of distrust.

"I'll go in with you then," he offered. "Those fellows don't speak much English and you would have a hard job making them understand what you wanted. I know a little Greek and may be able to help you out a bit." [7]

"Much obliged to you," said the Captain, gratefully. "We don't understand a word of their lingo. I'll stand treat to the dinner if you'll eat with us."

"It's a go," agreed the stranger, quickly. "Come on. My name's Robert, Captain Roberts," he volunteered when the little party were seated around one of the tables, "I'm a retired ship's master."

Captain Westfield introduced himself and his companions. "As I said, we are lookin' into this sponge business a bit, but it's hard to pick out the proper course from these twisted-tongued furriners," he said. "Do you happen to know anything about it?"

"I used to be in the business myself," Captain Roberts replied promptly. "I made enough money in it to quit the sea for good."

"Then I reckon you're the very man to give us a few pointers. Is there as much money in it as one hears tell of?"

"More," declared the other. "These Greeks are getting rich off sponging. It is not anything unusual for a schooner's crew to clear up three or four thousand dollars from a single trip. It takes quite a bit of money to make a start, though."

"We have got a little change in our clothes," said the Captain, modestly. "Do you reckon a person could get started good on a Thousand dollars?" [8]

"That would do nicely," declared Captain Roberts, "and I can tell you just how to lay it out to the best advantage, but let's order dinner first. We can talk while we are eating."

He beckoned to a dark-skinned, ill-favored waiter and gave an order in low-pitched fluent Greek.

The waiter was back almost instantly with a tray-load of steaming dishes which he placed upon the table. The boys could not determine the exact nature of the strange viands, but they were too hungry to be critical, and attacked the food with hearty appetites.

"This mutton stew is delicious," Charley declared as he took another helping. "I don't know as I ever tasted anything better."

Captain Roberts grinned. "You don't want to make any guesses about Greek food," he declared. "That isn't mutton, but just tough old Billy-goat, fattened on a diet of tin cans. These fellows have the knack of fixing up such things so they can't recognize them themselves. Just wait till the coffee is served. You'll say you never drank any better. But let's get back to that sponging business now, Captain."

He and Captain Westfield were soon plunged in a tangled maze of talk about schooners, diving boats, sponges, and divers.

The boys gave but little heed to the discussion for their attention was partly diverted by the unusual scene around them. [9]

"It's just like being in another country," Walter whispered to his chum.

"Yes, but I don't like the attention we seem to receive," Charley replied. "Those fellows are staring at us as though there was something wrong in our being here."

The Greeks gathered around the other tables indeed seemed more than casually interested in the little party. They stared frequently at them and their new acquaintance, and exchanged significant glances and low words with each other.

"I guess we appear as odd to them as they do to us," Walter said, carelessly. "There is a man who is not a Greek. That fellow leaning against the end of the counter in the corner."

The man indicated was unmistakably an American. He was short, heavily-built and had a determined, aggressive face. He was engaged in a heated discussion with the proprietor of the cafe and his heavy face was flushed with anger. As the boys gazed curiously, he brought down his clenched fist on the counter with a force that shattered some of the dishes piled upon it.

"You needn't smirk, grin, and make excuses," he thundered at the suave, smiling Greek. "You've got to pay me that bill you owe me. It's been standing for months and I happen to know that you are making money all the time, hand over fist. It's no use pretending you don't understand me," he shouted, as the smiling Greek shrugged his shoulders. "You know what I say. If you don't come up with the money by to-morrow night I'll close up this place and have you prosecuted for obtaining goods under false pretences. And it will not be any use for you to try your nice little Greek trick of a knife in my back in the dark. I go heeled and I don't go to sleep when I walk this street. The fellow who tries that trick on me will stop enough lead to start a cartridge factory." [10]

He turned and was walking towards the door when his glance rested for a moment on the boys and their companions. His glance swept swiftly over each member of the little party. He paused, hesitated a moment, then turning, walked swiftly towards their table.

Captain Roberts rose hastily at his approach. "There's a friend of mine over there," he said hurriedly, "who I want to speak to. I'll be back in a minute."

The approaching stranger noted his departure with a grim smile. He stopped beside the Captain and stood gazing down for one brief minute.

"Are you fools or strangers?" he demanded, crisply.

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## CHAPTER II. MR. DRIVER.

THE stranger's smile robbed his words of their hardness.

"Strangers, yes," Charley replied, "Fools, no."

"No offense intended," said the man, quickly. "Strangers will sometimes take advice but fools will not. My advice to you strangers is to keep out of places like this and not to make friends with other strangers. I don't suppose you know who that man is who just left you."

"He's a retired sea captain," said Captain Westfield. "He was giving us some pointers about the sponge business. Mighty pleasant an' obligin' fellow. Mighty fair-spoken."

"Bless your simple little souls," exclaimed the stranger. "He's no captain, active or retired. He's the runner for this place. Lucky you haven't any of you drank your coffee yet. You'd be waking up in some alley bye-and-bye with your heads aching from knock-out drops and your pockets turned inside out. My, but you were easy."

"I don't reckon any one would dare do such a thing in broad daylight," Captain Westfield declared. [12]

"It's been done in this place a dozen times. And the victim's kicks never did any good after it happened, for there was always a dozen Greeks ready to go on the stand and swear that it was only a case of drunkenness on the victim's part. Better get out of here."

The humbled little party arose and followed their conductor out to the sidewalk. As they passed through the crowd they could not help but notice the wrathful glances the sitters bestowed upon the one who had cheated them of their victims.

"I guess we have acted pretty green," Charley admitted, as they passed outside, "but we were so eager to learn about the sponge business that we forgot caution. Besides, one does not look for such tricks in a little town like this. It's not like a big city where one has to be always on his guard against strangers."

The stranger favored the members of the little party with a closer scrutiny than he had yet bestowed upon them.

"So you are figuring on going into the sponge business, eh?" he asked.

"We may try it a bit if we find out that it pays as well as we have heard tell of," answered Captain Westfield, cautiously, "but it's mighty hard to find out anything definite about it from these Greeks." [13]

"Oh, there's big money in it all right," said their new friend. "You might make a go of it. You are a pretty husky, determined-looking lot and would soon get on to the Greekish tricks. It's a risky business, though. I don't advise anyone to take it up."

"We've encountered a few risks in other lines," said Charlie, modestly. "We are willing to take a few chances if there's money enough in it to tempt us."

The stranger pulled out his watch and looked at the time. "My name is Driver," he remarked. "I own a store over on the next street in the American section. Business is slack at this time of day and I will show you around a bit, if you wish. My clerks can look out for the trade for an hour or two."

"No need of thanks," he said as the Captain accepted his offer gratefully. "If you decide to go into the sponge business, you will need lots of provisions and I hope to sell them to you. We Americans do not get any of the Greek trade and we are always glad to secure a new customer. Now I suppose you want to know about the profit side of the business first. Well, I can not give you exact figures but I know that all engaged in the business are making big money. All these big buildings you see have been built out of sponging, and they do not represent a hundredth part of the money made out of the business. There is an enormous amount sent back to Greece every month through the post-office and bank here. I know Greeks who landed here only a few years ago with nothing but the clothes on their backs—and those were mighty poor—that are wealthy men now and they made their fortunes out of sponges. Oh, there's big money in it all right. But you can look into that part of the business closer later on. Now, I want to show you something of the sponges themselves. We will go down to the harbor first." [14]

The interested little party followed him as he led the way along a soft sand road flanked by scrub palmettos.

Their guide paused beside one of the several large buildings standing close to the road. "This is a clipping shed," he said.

The building was open on one side and was filled with a crowd of old men, women and young boys, all Greeks. Before each was a pile of rough sponges from which they were clipping the spoilt parts with great shearing shears. In one corner, a man worked over a big screw-press, pressing the severed fragments of sponges into huge compact bales.

"That part isn't important enough to waste much time looking at," Mr. Driver said, as he turned away. "Come on and I'll show you something worth seeing."

As they followed along behind their guide, the boys became sensible of a strong, pleasant, appetizing odor in the air, an odor which grew stronger as they advanced. A turn in the road brought them suddenly upon the source of the odor. On the shore of a quiet little land-locked harbor, blazed dozens of small camp-fires over which sat great iron kettles. On pieces of canvas laid upon the ground were piles of fresh beef and mutton. Over each pile worked several Greeks [15]

cutting the meat with the sheaf knives into tiny squares about an inch in size. Other Greeks were dumping the little square pieces into the kettles, while still others kept the contents stirred and the fires under the kettles burning briskly.

"They are putting down the meat for their next voyage," explained Mr. Driver. "They roast it in its own fat, put it into stone jars, and pour the fat over it. As soon as the fat cools and congeals it forms an air-tight covering which keeps the meat from spoiling."

"If it tastes half as good as it smells, it must be delicious," Charley remarked.

Chris viewed the cooking operation with professional jealousy. "Golly, I bet dey can't cook like dis nigger," he declared, "I spect dem kettles ain't none too clean noway."

Captain Westfield gave but scant attention to the trying-out process. His interest was centered on the big fleet of schooners anchored near shore. They were over a hundred in number and were of all sizes and designs. They made a pretty sight lying gracefully close together in the little harbor. But the old sailor soon strolled on to where groups of Greeks were building and repairing boats on the shore. He inspected their work with a critical eye, but he was soon lost in admiration.

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"Lads," he exclaimed, "I never saw such workmen before. They are turnin' out tight, neat seaworthy little crafts with no tools but a saw and a hatchet. Ain't those queer lookin' crafts though."

The boats were about thirty feet in length, sharp at both bow and stern, and of enormous depth for their size. True to their love for bright colors the Greeks had painted each plank a different hue and the little vessels looked like floating rainbows.

The captain viewed their single masts, which inclined aft at an angle of forty-five degrees, with deep-sea scorn.

"It's clean against Nature for a mast to be set that way," he declared. "It ain't regular or ship-shape."

"Those small crafts are used as diving boats," Mr. Driver explained. "They carry a big square sail, but most of them are equipped with engines also. They are great sea boats and will ride out a gale almost as well as the schooners."

His explanations were interrupted by loud talking close at hand and the little party, full of curiosity, hastened to the spot from which the uproar came.

[17]

In the center of a circle of curious onlookers, a large man wearing a marshal's badge was slipping a pair of handcuffs on the wrists of a slender boyish-looking young fellow.

"No need to put those things on me, Mr. Officer," the lad was protesting, passionately. "I'll go along with you without any trouble. I've only acted within my rights and all I want is a fair trial."

"Anything you say can be used against you at your trial," cautioned the marshal.

"I don't care, I admit I shot two of those treacherous Greeks. It was the only thing to do. When it came on to blow a gale, they refused to cut the cable, and work the schooner. It was a case of making them obey orders and get her off before the seas or lose my ship. I only wish I had shot more of them. They have been laying for me ever since to slip a knife into me and chuck me overboard. I haven't dared take a wink of sleep for three days and two nights."

"Poor fellow," said Mr. Driver, as the marshal led away his protesting captive. "I expect it happened just as he says—an open mutiny, compelling him to shoot—but every Greek in his crew will go on the stand and swear that it was a case of cold-blooded murder. Fortunately, the judge is wise to Greek methods and the law deals gently with commanders."

"He looked mighty young to be a captain," said Captain Westfield.

[18]

"It's this way," Mr. Driver explained, "the law compels the Greeks to have an American captain for each schooner and diving boat, and they hire the youngest and, therefore, cheapest man that they can get. It's a dog's life, out alone for months with a gang that doesn't speak a word of English. As long as the captain is content to be a mere figurehead he can get along without serious trouble, but the minute he runs counter to their wishes there is a row. But time is flying, and I must get back to the store. If you will come back with me I'll introduce you to a man who knows more about sponging than another American in the country."

"Just a moment, lads," said the Captain, as they turned to go. "Which of those schooners do you like the best?"

The two chums unhesitatingly indicated a beautiful two-masted, snow-white schooner that seemed to rest as loftily on the water as a floating swan. The grace and beauty of exquisite lines marked her out from the many shapely schooners surrounding her. In large gilt letters on either side of her bow was her name "Beauty".

"She's my choice too," declared the Captain. "I wish we owned her. I ain't never seen a prettier model."

## CHAPTER III. PREPARATIONS.

[19]

As soon as they got back into town, Mr. Driver hunted up the man of whom he had spoken, and, introducing him to each of the little party, hurried back to his store.

Mr. Williams was a young man still in his twenties. He was a stocky, well-built young fellow with an intelligent face, determined manner, and a short, crisp way of speaking. He sized up the little party with one quick appraising glance as Captain Westfield stated their errand.

"If you are not willing to stand hardships, dirt, discomfort, and danger, you want nothing to do with sponging," he declared.

"We can stand anything that it pays us to stand," Charley replied, quickly.

"Well, that's the right kind of spirit," approved the young man, "but, of course you don't any of you realize what you will have to meet. I've seen others start in with the same confidence and get cold feet before the first trip was over. It isn't any nice, ladies' pink-tea business. It's a game for real men, but if the men are the right kind, they get their reward for what they endure, all right, all right. I landed here with an empty pocket and emptier stomach, and now,—well, I am not a John D. Rockefeller yet, but I've got enough laid by to keep the wolf from the door for a good many years. Better men than I have done better than I have. It's like everything else, the best man wins, and wins something worth winning, but, as I have said, it's no business for nice, tender, little Willie boys, it's a man's game."

[20]

Charley grinned in sympathy with the reliant, independent spirit of the young fellow which was close kin to his own traits. "We left off our short pants last summer," he observed, gravely, "we are fast learning to dress ourselves, and the Captain there can even comb his own hair."

"Good," chuckled the other, "I guess *you* will pass muster anyway, so I will give you some idea of what you will have to expect. First, there is the loneliness. For three months at a time you'll be at sea without another soul to talk to, for there are very few of the Greeks who speak English. With a party like yours it would not be so bad for you would be company for each other, but for the American captains who go out alone with a crew of Greeks, it's awful. I've known some to go crazy for sheer loneliness, and few ever make a second trip,—I'll never forget my first experience. Second, sponging is a dirty business, the stench from dying sponges will upset any but the strongest stomachs. Third, there are the dangers, storms, accidents, and troubles with the crew. I have never had any serious trouble with my own men, but then I understand their lingo and that counts for a good deal, and, besides they all know me around here and know that I will shoot first and explain afterwards—that counts for still more."

[21]

"All that is interesting, but it ain't to the pint," said Captain Westfield. "The question is what can one make off a trip. I reckon them little things you're telling about is just details."

"I'm afraid you'll find them pretty serious details," Mr. Williams said with a laugh, "but you are right, the money point is the main thing. That's the only thing that has kept me in the business. Well, I had considerable *bad* luck last trip but I cleaned up three thousand dollars. I've been doing better than that."

The chums looked at each other with expressive faces while Mr. Williams' keen black eyes twinkled as he watched them.

"I seed a schooner down at the harbor," observed Captain Westfield, carelessly. "She was a pretty looking little craft and her name just seemed to fit her—'The Beauty'. If she's good an' sound an' for sale, I might be willing to give a thousand dollars for her."

Mr. Williams laughed, "You are not the first sailor who has fallen in love with the 'Beauty'. She is the finest ever. She has led the sponging fleet for three seasons. Many have tried to buy her but couldn't. You are in luck, however. Her owner died last week and I have just received a letter from his widow asking me to find a purchaser for her. You can have her as she lays for thirteen hundred dollars, and she is dirt cheap at that."

[22]

"Will you hold that offer open until ten o'clock to-night?" asked the captain, "we will want to talk it all over a bit."

Mr. Williams agreed to his request, and, after thanking him gratefully for his information, the little party took their departure.

"Back to the harbor," said the captain as soon as they were out of hearing. "I want to take a good look at the 'Beauty'. If she is anyway near as good as she looks from a distance she's worth at least twenty-five hundred dollars. Why we could make a tidy sum by buying her, sailing her around to Jacksonville, and selling her again."

They soon arrived at the harbor again where for a quarter they hired a young Greek to row them out to the schooner.

They found the little vessel all that her name implied. She was about sixty-five feet long and broad for her length. She looked more like a gentleman's yacht than a sponging vessel and they were all delighted with her appearance. But pleased as they were with her on deck, they were

[23]



even more pleased with her below. There, they found a large main cabin with swinging lamps, hanging sideboard, easy chairs, and comfortable furnishings. Opening into the main cabin were found roomy staterooms, two on a side, furnished with large bunks containing springy mattresses. Instead of the small portholes, common with crafts of her size, each stateroom was provided with windows of heavy glass to admit air and light.

Up forward at the foremast was the forecabin, or crew's quarters. It was large, comfortable and well equipped with bunks. Aft of it was the cook's galley, containing a good stove and plenty of pots, pans and kettles. Everything was exquisitely neat and clean. But Captain Westfield was not content with a mere survey of cabin and furnishings. He unfurled several of the sails and examined the canvas closely. He tested the strength of rope after rope. He climbed aloft and looked over blocks, stays, and running gear. Lastly, he descended into the hold and examined all that was visible of the vessel's ribs and planking.

"She's as tidy a little craft as I ever saw," he declared, when he at last rejoined the boys back by the wheel. "She ain't over six years old an' her sails an' rigging are all new. She's worth twenty-five hundred dollars of any man's money if she's worth a cent. All we have got to do it to buy her and carry her around to some lively port an' we can make twelve hundred dollars as easy as finding it."

[24]

"What's the use of selling her right off if we buy her," Walter suggested, "Surely a few months' use will not lessen her value to any great extent. Why not make a couple of trips sponging in her. I am anxious to have a try for some of that big money they all talk about. We will never have a better chance than now. At the worst, we would only lose the price of a few months' provisions, we would still have our vessel worth far more than we paid for her."

"You've hit the nail right on the head," the captain exclaimed, delightedly. "That's just what I've been studying over, but I reckoned I'd wait an' see if either of you boys proposed it."

Charley hesitated before agreeing to his chum's proposal. "I confess, I am not so anxious to try the sponge business as I was," he remarked. "First, we know nothing about it ourselves, and would have to depend entirely upon hired help—which is a bad thing to have to do in any business. Second, I don't like the Greeks, I don't like their appearances, I don't like the reputation they have, and I don't like the idea of being with a gang that doesn't understand English."

"Bosh," Walter replied, lightly, "we will get along all right with them. It isn't like one lone man being out with them, there are four of us and they wouldn't dare start trouble with so many. As for making them understand, why we can hire a man as interpreter. I believe it's the best chance to make money we've had yet."

[25]

"And I too," Captain Westfield agreed. "I reckon we'd be foolish to let such a chance slip by. That young fellow Williams says he's made considerable."

"But he made several trips and learned the business before he went into it on his own hook," Charley objected. "However, I am not going to hold back if the rest of you want to try it."

"Good," exclaimed the captain, "we will go right back and settle the deal with Williams. We'll make money off the schooner if we don't off the sponging."

They found Mr. Williams still in his office. The thirteen hundred dollars was paid over and they received a bill of sale for the 'Beauty', one diving boat and everything the schooner contained.

"You've got a good boat at a mighty low price," he said. "There is no reason why you shouldn't make well with her, if you just use common sense. Doubtless, you have heard lots of hard things about the Greeks, but I don't believe they are half as bad as they are painted. Half of the trouble captains have with them comes from their not understanding each other. Get a reliable man to translate your orders, and you will get along all right although you will find it a hard life. I wish I could help you select your crew but I have to go to Tampa to-morrow, and will not be back until the fleet sails. We will see each other again on the sponging grounds, if not before. I wish you the best of luck until we meet."

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The now tired little party bade the hustling young man good-bye and repaired to the small hotel where they engaged rooms and meals.

After supper Charley unpacked his valise and got out the silver-mounted revolver presented to him by Mr. Weston. He noted its calibre and sauntering down to the hardware store purchased several boxes of cartridges of a size to fit. He gave a couple of boxes to Walter who possessed the exact duplicate of his weapon.

"That's my first preparation for our trip," he said laughing.

But, although he spoke lightly, he was troubled by vague misgivings that their new venture was not going to be the smooth sailing his companions believed. For one thing, he doubted if rough, blunt, quick-tempered Captain Westfield was just the man to successfully handle the suave, oily, treacherous Greeks.

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## CHAPTER IV. THE START.

"WE have got to get a move on us," Captain Westfield said as the four chums gathered together at the breakfast table. "I've been out enquirin' around this mornin' an' I've larned that the sponging fleet sails in two days. Of course we don't have to go with the fleet, but, bein' as it's our first trip an' we're green at the business, I reckon, we had better keep with the crowd an' learn all we can. I've been up to see the United States Commissioner an' got charts of the sponging grounds an' took out papers for the ship. We're all officers on the papers, lads. He put me down as captain of the schooner, Chris is mate. You, Charley, are captain of the diving boats, an' Walter's chief engineer."

"I don't want to be no mate," Chris protested. "I wants to be de cook. Dat's schooner's got a powerful fine galley an' a sight ob pots an' kettles. Golly! I reckon dis nigger can fix up de grub better dan any of dem ignorant furriners. A mate ain't no manner ob count on board a little ship. De captain's always blamin' him for somethin' or udder an' de crew always hates him. He's always in trubble wid one or the udder. Now de cook's always his own boss, he don't hab to stay out nights in de cold an' de rain an' ebbery one is powerful perlite to him, 'cause dey wants to keep on de bes' side ob de one dat handles de grub. I'd rather be a cook dan an ole mate any day."

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"But you don't know how to rig up their queer furrin dishes, lad," the captain explained. "They ain't used to eatin' grub fixed up good like you fix it."

"Golly! I reckon dat's so," agreed the little negro, pompously. "I spect dey doan know much 'bout cookin'. Reckon dey wouldn't eat any more ob der own if dey got a taste ob mine."

"That's the trouble," the captain agreed craftily, "an' we don't want to spoil them. Besides, I reckoned you'd like to be mate. Why, I was at sea ten years before I got a mate's berth. I reckon your folks on Cat Island would be mighty proud to hear that you were one an' was wearing a blue suit with big brass buttons, an' a cap with Mate on it in big gilt letters."

"Golly! I nebber thought ob dat," exclaimed the little negro, delightedly, rising hastily from the table. "I'se goin' to buy dem clothes right now an' hab my picture took in 'em an' send 'bout twenty ob dem to de folks on Cat Island."

"You got around that pretty neatly, Captain," Charley said, as soon as Chris was gone. "I expected him to insist upon being cook. He thinks no one else can do it so well. But, seriously, don't you think we are all rather young to be ship's officers. Men are quite apt to resent having to take orders from mere boys."

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"The law requires that those four offices be filled by Americans an' we can't afford to hire men to fill the places. Chris will be under my orders all the time an' will be mate only in name. But you boys are already smart sailors an' I expect you to be real officers on your boats. If you weren't on the papers proper you might have trouble with your men, but the fact that you are regular commissioned officers will make smooth sailing for you. Any refusal to obey your orders would be mutiny."

"Very well, Captain," agreed Walter. "What do you want Captain West and I to do next?"

"Just lay around an' enjoy yourselves this mornin', I guess. The first thing is to get a fellow who talks Greek an' to hire a crew. I want to pick them out myself. As soon as we get them there will be plenty to do stockin' up with grub an' water. Better spend the time lookin' over your new command an' pickin' up what you can about the business."

The advice was good, and, as soon as they had finished breakfast, the boys hastened down to the harbor to inspect the diving boats they had acquired with the purchase of the 'Beauty'. Upon a close inspection, they were delighted with their new commands. The little vessel was quite new and its model promised great seaworthiness. Besides the huge square sail it carried, it was equipped with a ten-horse power gasoline engine. Its rig was different from any the boys had ever seen, and they spent several hours studying it, and making themselves acquainted with the working of the engine.

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"I believe I can handle it by myself now, if I had to do it," Charley declared, at last. "The engine may give us a little trouble at first, but we will soon get on to it and it's likely there will be several Greeks in the crew who know how to run it. Now, the next thing is to settle on a name for our craft."

"I thought of calling it 'Flora'," Walter said, with a little sheepish smile.

"And I was thinking of naming it 'Ola'," declared Charley promptly.

After a spirited debate over the two names they held in such esteem, the two lads at last came to a compromise by agreeing to call their little ship "The Two Sisters". This decided, they rummaged around in the lockers until they found paint and brushes with which they proceeded to letter on the bow of their crafts the name chosen.

As soon as this task was finished, they returned to the village and made a round of the shops purchasing clothing for their trip, pricing provisions, and learning all they could from the various

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merchants about the Greeks and the sponge business.

They were passing a little photo studio when Chris' voice hailed them from inside. It was hard for them to refrain from laughter at the figure the little negro presented.

A common blue suit had been too tame a color for Chris' brilliant-loving soul. He was clothed in a pair of baggy yellow trousers, many sizes too large for him, a coat of vivid scarlet hue, and a cap of deepest purple. But in spite of his brilliant attire, his little ebony face expressed deepest satisfaction. On a chair beside him was a great pile of finished tin-types and the Greek proprietor, beaming at the unusual rush of business, was just adjusting his camera to take another.

"Why, what do you want with any more of them, Chris?" Walter exclaimed. "You've got enough already to supply everyone on Cat Island."

"Dey ain't no good," replied the little darkey, mournfully, "I 'spect dis man doan know his business."

Charley examined one of the despised tintypes. "Why, they look just like you," he declared.

"Dey's just black an' white," protested the little negro. "Dey doan show de colors at all."

The chums turned their heads aside to hide their grins.

"That's a Greek camera, Chris," Charley said with a wink at Walter. "You can't expect it to take American colors. I tell you what to do. Just write at the bottom of each picture: Pants, yellow; coat, scarlet; cap, purple." [32]

"Golly! I nebber thought ob dat," exclaimed the little darkey, brightening. "But it hain't like habbing de colors show," he added, mournfully.

The three were making their way back to the hotel when their progress was arrested by piercing screams coming from the rear of a large Greek restaurant.

The boys hesitated and looked at each other.

"Sounds as though someone was hurt pretty bad," Charley commented, "but I guess we had better go along about our business. We are likely to get ourselves into trouble if we meddle with things in this section," but as he spoke the screams rang out afresh. The chums looked at each other; there was no need for words between them.

"Well, it's foolish, but here goes," Charley exclaimed.

A narrow alley led into the rear of the building and down it has hastened followed by his two companions.

A minute's walk brought them to the scene of the screams.

In a little back yard stood a small Greek boy about thirteen years of age. He was clad only in short trousers and his bare back and legs were covered with angry welts. Above him towered a dark, scowling Greek, who was swinging a heavy cowhide whip, while at each descent of the cruel, stinging lash the lad's screams rose in piteous protests. Clustered around was some dozen men and boys looking on with unconcern. [33]

Charley caught the Greek's arm as it rose for another blow. "Stop that, you big brute," he cried, trembling with anger. "You have no right to beat a little fellow like that, no matter what he has done. If you hit him another blow, I'll have you arrested."

"He won't understand you, Charley," Walter cautioned.

But the Greek did understand. He turned a look of the deepest hate on the plucky lad. For a second he seemed in the act of striking him with the heavy whip, but Charley did not flinch. "Try it, if you dare," he cried.

The Greek lowered his upraised arm. "Why should I not strike him?" He demanded savagely, but in perfect English. "He is mine, I pay his fare all the way from Greece. All day he plays on the street and brings home no money. I will beat him if I wish."

"You will not," declared Charley, firmly. "If you do, you will be arrested very quickly. Lad, if this man attempts to beat you again, you come to us; you will find us on board the schooner 'Beauty'. If she is not in the harbor you go to Mr. Driver who owns the store, I will tell him about you and he will see that you are not abused. Do you understand what I say?" [34]

"Yes sir, I speak English good," the little lad replied proudly. "He teach me so I can beg the pennies."

The Greek's manner had suddenly changed. His frown disappeared and he wore a smile that he endeavored to make pleasant.

"The noble young gentleman need not worry," he said, smoothly, "I love the boy and already regret having whipped him—he is very bad. But it shall happen no more."

"It had better not," Charley replied shortly, as he turned away. "Come on, Walt, I am going to speak to Mr. Driver about it now."

Mr. Driver listened to the lad's story with a very grave face. "I'm afraid you boys have made a dangerous enemy," he said. "That Greek is Manuel George, and he is a very bad character. He was arrested once for the murder of another Greek, but they could not prove the charge against him although everyone believed that he had done it. You want to be very careful as long as you are in Tarpon. I will gladly have him arrested if the boy makes any complaint to me."

The boys found the captain waiting for them at the hotel. "I've had the best of luck," the old sailor declared. "I found the very Greek we need to make our orders plain to the crew. He talks English as good as you or I. I did not lose any time in gettin' his name on the ship's papers. He promised to meet us here at the hotel this noon. There he comes now."

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The chums exchanged a glance of dismay, for approaching their table, bowing, smiling, and as suave as though they were his dearest friends was Mr. Manuel George.

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## CHAPTER V. THE START.

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THE captain introduced the boys to the Greek who beamed upon them as though nothing unpleasant had ever passed between them. The lads met his smiling advances with a cold silence which the captain noticed with puzzled concern.

As soon as he could do so without attracting too much notice, Walter drew the old sailor to one side. "We don't want anything to do with that man," he declared, and he hurriedly told about the whipping and repeated what Mr. Driver had said.

Captain Westfield looked troubled. "I wish I'd known that two hours ago," he said. "He's signed on with us now an' if I try to get rid of him he can make a lot of trouble for us. We have got to take him along. If we don't, he's liable to libel the schooner an' cost us no end of money and delay."

Walter's face showed his anxiety and concern.

"He said he was going to bring a boy along with him to act as cabin boy," said the old sailor after an uncomfortable pause. "Maybe it will all work out for the best. He won't be able to abuse the lad on the schooner, an' I don't see how he can make us any trouble. All he's to do is to make our orders plain to the men, it ain't as though he was an officer over them."

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"Well, if it can't be helped, we have just got to make the best of it," Walter agreed, "I am going to keep a mighty close watch on him all the time, though. We will talk more about it later on. He keeps glancing at us as though he knew we were talking about him."

As soon as he got the chance, Walter told his chum what the captain had said.

"I don't like the idea of that fellow going with us," Charley declared, "but if it has got to be, we had better start in by treating him friendly. It won't help matters any to quarrel with him."

That was sound sense and the boys at once began to treat the Greek pleasantly, in spite of the dislike they felt for him.

There was no doubt but what the fellow understood his position thoroughly. With his able assistance, the captain, in a short time, secured a full crew of fifteen men, including four professional divers who brought their queer looking suits with lead shoes and heavy helmets along with them. The boys were pleased with the appearance of the men. They were well-built, husky fellows and looked to be capable sailors. They were much alike in looks, all being broad-shouldered and swarthy with clean-cut features and straight noses. One alone seemed to differ greatly from the rest. He was a tall, powerful, handsome fellow with unusually small hands and feet. He seemed to be shunned by the others and left very much to himself. He was evidently a good sailor and when the captain set his new crew at work to getting the schooner ready for sea he performed his part with a quickness and intelligence that won the old sailor's approval.

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As soon as the work was well under way, Charley and Walter, taking the interpreter with them, went back up town to purchase their stores. The bulk of their purchases were made at Mr. Driver's store, but there were many articles that he did not carry in stock which they had to buy at the Greek stores. Manuel directed them as to the kind of food their crew were accustomed to. The bulk of the stores consisted of ripe black olives in small kegs; queer looking cheeses, rice, black flour and an abundance of tea and coffee. The boys bought three whole beeves and four lambs, directing that all their purchases should be sent down to the schooner at once.

"Whew," whistled Charley as he paid the last bill, "we have only got five dollars left of our fifteen hundred."

"Don't you care," Walter replied, confidently. "We will have a couple of thousand dollars anyway coming to us when we get back, and still have the 'Beauty' besides."

The boys next visited the hotel and got their valises and belongings which they carried down to their new floating home.

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They found that the Greeks already had the meat cut up and sizzling merrily in the great iron kettles.

The new crew were a quick and willing lot and before dark the last article was stored aboard, and, with the diving boat towing along behind, they dropped the schooner down the river to the mouth and anchored for the night just outside amongst a great fleet of schooners lying ready for an early morning start for the sponging ground.

Long after they had eaten their supper and all of the crew but the anchor watch had retired to the forecabin, the four chums sat on deck admiring the beauty of the scene around them. A thousand lights twinkled from the fleet and high in the air ahead of them the great lantern of the Anclote lighthouse on its little island of barren rock.

Captain Westfield awoke the boys early next morning, "Hurry up on deck if you want to see the prettiest sight you ever saw," he said. The lads hustled into their clothing and followed him up the ladder. As they gained the deck they paused with exclamations of deepest admiration.

It was blowing a stiff breeze and the blue water of the Gulf was dancing and sparkling with white-crested waves. Around them was the fleet all under sail, their snowy canvas towering high above their shapely hulls. Some lay with sails slatting, still clinging to their anchorage while their brightly attired crews worked over windlasses, reeling in the dripping cables. Some already under way lay hove-to in the open Gulf waiting for their fellows; while still others, anchors tripped and sails drawing, heeling over to the brisk breeze, darted away, sending the water tossing and foaming from their bows.

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The boys drew a long breath of pure delight at the beautiful picture.

"It's grand," Charley cried.

"Aye, lad," agreed the captain with satisfaction. "There's no place like the sea for beautiful scenes. But thar ain't a ship in the whole fleet as pretty as our own. Just watch her now."

The old sailor gave a few short orders which the interpreter repeated to the crew. A dozen of them sprang to the windlass, while others stood by the halyards, ready to hoist the big jibs the second the anchor broke ground. The "Beauty's" huge main and foresails were already hoisted and her cable hove short.

The men at the windlass shouted some words.

"Anchor broke," translated Manuel.

"Up helm," commanded the captain, "give her the jibs."

The great sails mounted their stays, the "Beauty's" head played off, and, careening over 'till her lee rail touched the water, she surged through the waters like a thing alive.

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The chums watched the foam sweep past in transports of delight.

"My, but she's fast," Walter cried.

"Aye, lad," the captain agreed, joyfully. "I ain't never seen a faster, except maybe Black Sam's schooner. We'll have to shorten sail in an hour if we don't want to run away from the rest of the fleet."

The boys watched with delight as the Beauty overhauled and passed schooner after schooner.

As she surged past a large black-hulled vessel with three diving boats in tow, a man on the stranger's deck waved his cap and shouted,

"Good luck to you. Better keep with the fleet."

"That's Mr. Williams," Charley exclaimed. "I am glad that we are going to be near somebody we know."

"Yes, it is Mr. Williams," affirmed Manuel, who was standing near. "But here is my little boy to say that your breakfast is ready."

"What is your name?" Walter enquired of the little fellow as they all followed him below. "I could never remember that," he said, when the lad replied with a very long Greek name. "I guess we will have to call you Ben for short."

The band of chums were very hungry and they seated themselves around the table before the steaming cups of coffee and waited impatiently for the food to be brought on, but the little Greek lad took a position behind their chairs and waited.

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"Hurry up, Ben, and bring the breakfast," the captain ordered.

"Breakfast there," the lad replied.

The old sailor repeated his order but Ben replied as before.

"I reckon he don't understand," the captain remarked, "Go up and tell your father, owner, or whoever he is, to come down."

The lad was back in a minute with the smiling Greek.

"We want our breakfast," the captain explained, "the boy don't seem to understand."

"He understands all right, but, I see the cook does not comprehend. It is the custom to have coffee only in the morning on sponging ships."

"Nothing but coffee for breakfast?" roared the old sailor.

"We eat but one meal a day and that at night," the Greek explained. "If the rest of the crew ate the divers would want to eat also, and that would be fatal for them. The stomach must be empty when they descend to the bottom in deep water, otherwise they die."

"Well, they can't see us eat an' I want my three square meals a day," said the hungry sailor. [43]  
"Right saving plan for us though if they only eat once a day."

"They eat the whole three meals in one," the Greek said with a smile. "I will speak to the cook at once and he will soon have something ready for you."

In a very short time they were served with a substantial meal to which they all did full justice. As soon as it was finished, they returned to the deck where they learned that the "Beauty" was already so far in the lead of the fleet that sail had to be shortened.

With Manuel's aid the boys picked out their crews for the diving boat. They found that many of the Greeks were familiar with gasoline engines and they selected one of the youngest and most intelligent-looking for an engineer. The four divers were, of course, allotted to their boat, but besides them they had to have two men to work the air pump and two others to tend to the life-lines, which made a crew of nine, besides the young officers, and would leave only Captain Westfield, Chris and the cook and five men on board the schooner.

The divers at once began preparations for their future dangerous work. They examined pump and air hose very carefully, for a slight leak in either one would mean death by suffocation beneath the surface. They brought out their diving suits and went over them inch by inch for possible rents or tears. Many of the suits were old and covered with a multitude of rubber patches. The boys were amazed that their owners would dare descend in such worn suits, but Manuel assured them that the patches were so cunningly put on that not only would they exclude water, but they would outlast the suit itself. [44]

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## CHAPTER VI. FIRST TROUBLE.

 [45]

ONE of the sailors Charley had selected for his crew was the tall handsome fellow whom the others seemed to shun.

"I can't understand what the rest have against him," the young captain remarked to his chum. "He seems very quiet and well behaved, and he is every inch a sailor. I would ask Manuel about him but it is bad policy to discuss one of the crew with another. It always makes trouble. Likely, Manuel would lie about him anyway, he seems to hate him, look at him glaring at him now."

The Greek was leaning against the railing staring at the sailor who was coiling down a rope near him. Suddenly the Greek addressed the man in a low savage tone. The sailor's face grew red with anger, and he replied shortly in a few hissing words. With a bound, the Greek cleared the space between the two and struck the sailor full in the mouth. The man reeled back against the main mast, but, recovering himself in a second, sprang for his assailant. The Greek leaped to one side and whipped out a long wicked knife. [46]

Before he could use it, Captain Westfield, belaying pin in hand, rushed in between the two.

"Put up that knife," he roared. "I'll do what fighting there is to be done on this ship."

The Greek shot one quick glance at him, venomous with hate, then he glanced beyond him at the two lads who waited expectantly with hands on their pistols.

"He cursed me," he said sullenly, as he slowly replaced the knife in his pocket.

"When anyone curses you, report it to me an' don't take the law in your own hands. I'm master of this schooner, an' you might as well understand it right off. Tell that fellow just what I've told you."

The sailor's face darkened as the Greek spoke to him rapidly, but he turned slowly away and walked forward.

"That's a bad beginning," Charley remarked to his chum. "I wish we had never seen that Greek. I believe he insulted that sailor. The fellow was behaving himself and tending to his own business."

He repeated the remark to the captain a little later.

"I reckon you're right, lad," agreed the old sailor, "that Greek seems to be a trouble-maker but

he'll find he's got the wrong man to deal with. I've handled too many crews of tough roughnecks to be bested by a dirty furriner."

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"I'll bet he will keep you busy with complaints," Walter said. "How are you going to get at the truth of it if he does complain about the others of the crew?"

"You'll see, I reckon, he will try something like that but I'm ready for him."

Sure enough, in less than an hour the Greek approached the Captain.

"I hate to trouble you, but I must complain as you have directed," he said suavely. "The cook, he is very abusive, I tried to instruct him about your meals but he answers me with vile names."

"Bring the cook aft," Captain Westfield commanded.

Manuel escorted the bewildered-looking cook aft with a look of sly triumph on his face.

The captain looked the man over appraisingly. He was a broad-shouldered, well-muscled fellow. He spoke to him briefly but the cook shook his head. He could not understand.

The old sailor picked up a rope and spread it in a big circle on the deck.

"This insulting of you has got to be stopped right off," he declared, addressing the interpreter. "Give me your knife."

The Greek surrendered his weapon.

"Now both of you get inside that ring and fight it out to a finish," he ordered. "Lick him good for calling you names."

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Manuel's face fell, and, turning he spoke rapidly to the cook. "He has apologized and my honor is satisfied," he declared.

"All right," the captain said with a wink at the grinning boys. "Next time any one insults you, I am going to make you give him a good licking in a square fist fight. I'm not agoing to let any of the crew swear at you and call you names—it ain't right."

"I guess we won't have any more complaints from him right off," he chuckled as the disappointed Greek retired forward.

"I'm afraid we're going to have more or less trouble through not understanding their language," Charley said, gravely. "I don't believe he had a bit of trouble with the cook. He was just aiming to have you punish the fellow and get you disliked by the crew."

"I can handle him all right," the captain declared, confidently. "If he gets troublesome I'll iron him and put him down in the hold. I reckon I can make the rest understand what I want done by signs, though it would be mighty awkward if a gale struck us."

The old sailor soon left the boys in charge of the deck and went below to write up the log and look over the charts.

"If this wind holds we'll be on the edge of the sponging grounds by night," he said when he returned. "I didn't realize before how big they are. Why, they reach clear from Cedar Keys to Cape Sable, about seven hundred miles."

[49]

"One thing that has puzzled me is that all these schooners seem to come from Key West," Charley remarked, "'Of Key West' is lettered on the stern of every one of them."

"Key West used to be the headquarters for the sponging business in the old days," the captain explained. "They used to gather sponges different from what they do now. A schooner would take out about twenty small boats an' a crew of forty men. When she got to the sponge grounds, the small boats would scatter out around her, two men in each boat. One man would do the sculling and the other would lean over the bow with a water glass in one hand—a pail with a pane of glass for a bottom—and a long pole with a hook in the end in the other. When he spied a sponge on the bottom through the glass he'd have the other stop sculling and he would hook it up with his pole. It was slow, hard work, but they made money at it until the Greeks came with their expert divers. They could not compete with them so they either sold or leased their schooners to the Greeks and went out of business."

The old sailor's explanation was interrupted by a howl of "Oh, Golly!" from the cook' galley forward and Chris, dripping with water, bounded out of the open door of the little structure, and rushed aft.

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"I want you to put dat cook in irons, Massa Captain," he cried. "He's done 'saulted his superior officer."

"What did he do to you," the captain asked with a twinkle in his eye.

"Threwed a hull pan of dirty, nasty dishwater obber me. I was jus' tellin' him how he had outer do, an' tryin' to show de ignorant man how to cook, when—slosh—he let fly dat big pan full all obber me."

The dirty water was streaming from the little negro's brilliant clothing and his face was streaked with purple from his cap.

The captain checked his desire to laugh.

"The cook did just right," he said, gravely. "You've got no business in his galley. A cook is always boss there. Even the Captain seldom interferes with him."

Chris seemed inclined to protest indignantly, but the old sailor continued.

"How would you like to be cook an' have some one poking around an' tellin' you what to do?"

"Golly! I reckon you is right," the little darkey admitted, "I wouldn't stand such doin's. 'Spect dough dat my good clothes is all spoiled. Dat water was powerful greasy." [51]

"Better dry them out and lay them away," Walter suggested. "They are too fine to wear at sea. You had ought to save them 'till we get in port."

Both boys were glad when Chris accepted the suggestion. They could see that the crew regarded the little fellow in his gay apparel with a contempt and ridicule that the plucky, loyal little lad did not deserve.

Under her shortened canvas, the "Beauty" had dropped to the rear of the fleet. Late in the afternoon the schooners ahead began to shorten sail. Soon one rounded up into the wind, dropped anchor and lowered sail. A mile further on another one anchored, a mile beyond another took in sail, until at last the whole fleet was strung out in a long line reaching many miles North and South.

The captain held the "Beauty" on her course until the last schooner was passed then anchored, lowered sails and made everything snug.

"We are on the sponging grounds," he explained to the boys who had been puzzled by the fleet's maneuvers. "To-morrow we make our first try as spongers."

As soon as their supper was finished the boys strolled forward to view the crew at their meal.

The Greeks ate in groups of four. Each group had a great tin pan filled with some kind of stew. This they divided into four equal portions with their big spoons, all eating from the same pan. [52]

The stew, black bread as hard as a rock, and ripe olives constituted their meal, but the boys, hearty eaters themselves, were astounded at the amount of food each Greek disposed of.

"I never dreamed a man could stow away so much grub," Charley remarked. "They are not eating three meals in one, but six."

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## CHAPTER VII. SPONGING.

 [53]

THE morning sun rose over a scene of bustle and activity. From the hundred schooners strung out two or three hundred diving boats with sails hoisted and engines chugging.

The young officers were up and away with the earliest.

"Go slow," Captain Westfield cautioned them as they stepped aboard their craft. "Keep your eyes open an' learn all you can. Don't give any orders unless they are absolutely needed. But if you have to give them an order make them obey it, don't let them trifle with you. You can take Manuel along if you want to, I reckon I can manage to get along without him."

But the boys declined the offer. They had both taken a great dislike to the suave, smiling Greek.

The Captain had given their crew general instructions before they left the schooner and the young officers had but little to do but signify by waves of their hands which direction they wished to go.

All places looked alike to the inexperienced boys, and as soon as their craft was a quarter of a mile from the schooner, Charley signed to his crew to anchor and proceed with their work. [54]

The divers at once prepared for their descent to the bottom. The lead was first hove to find out the depth of the water, which proved to be about thirty-five feet. Before donning their waterproof suits, the divers tested the air pump carefully and examined the air hose minutely, for upon these two things their lives would depend when once they sank beneath the surface. While they were putting on the strange looking suits and heavy leaded shoes, the crew slung short ladders over the sides. The divers put on their headpieces last of all, these were large globe-shaped coverings of metal with two heavy glasses in front through which to see. But two divers were to descend at a time. Their places would be taken by two others at the end of two hours, which is about as long as one can safely work at a time beneath the surface. Those in reserve assisted their companions in adjusting the heavy headpieces. As soon as the helmets were on they screwed in the air hose, and connected the other ends to the pumps. A line by which to lower and raise them was fastened around each diver's body and he was then assisted onto the ladder, for it was almost impossible for them to move in their cumbersome suits and lead shoes. As soon as they had been helped to [55]



the lowest step on the ladder, each was given a large basket to which a long line had been fastened, and they were slowly and gently lowered to the bottom.

The young officers watched their operations with eager interest. What impressed them most was the vigilant care shown by the divers remaining on board. One took charge of the tub in which the air hose was coiled and paid it out carefully as the diver sank, the other held the life-line instantly ready for the jerks which would signal to him the wishes of the one below. Not once did either's eyes shift or his attention waver from his task.

"It's easy to see that this is a dangerous business," Walter remarked.

"Yes," his chum agreed, "I am beginning to see that Mr. Williams was right when he said sponging was a man's game. It certainly takes nerve to descend like those divers have, knowing that there is nothing between them and death but that little air hose. But have you noticed how they are treating that strange handsome fellow? They all seem to be afraid to have him near."

The mysterious sailor had approached the men working the air pumps, apparently with the purpose of helping with the pumping, but the pumpers drove him away with menacing gestures and upraised fists. He moved over near the coiled air hose but the diver in charge of that met him with a torrent of fiercely-uttered words and he slunk dejectedly forward, and, seating himself by the mast, buried his face in his hands. [56]

"Poor chap," Walter remarked, "he seems to be hated by the whole crew. I wonder what is the reason."

"We will find out, I guess, when we meet up with Mr. Williams again," his chum replied. "He will likely know, or be able to find out quickly from some of his crew. But look, we are about to see our first sponges."

There had been a couple of quick jerks on the life-line. The diver holding it called to one of the crew who seized the line that had been attached to the basket, and began hauling it carefully in hand over hand.

The boys leaned over the side, eager for the first glimpse of their future cargo. When the basket came into view they both uttered an exclamation of disgust and disappointment.

Instead of bright, clean, yellow sponges with which they were familiar, the basket was heaped with what looked like huge lumps of dirty mud.

The man dumped the contents out on deck and lowered the basket down again.

"What greenies we are," Charley said as he glanced at his chum's crestfallen face. "We might have known if we had stopped to think, that sponges have to be cleaned and cured before they look like those we saw on shore. I expect that pile is worth a lot of money in spite of its unattractive appearance." [57]

Five times did the basket appear loaded to the brim before the divers' two hour spell below expired. As soon as their time was up they were hauled aboard, their suits removed and the other two took their places.

"Whew, but I am getting hungry," Walter exclaimed as noon time drew near, "and we came off from the schooner without bringing a lunch with us."

"I am glad we did," Charley said. "It's all right having our meals regular when we are on board the schooner and out of sight of the crew, but it would hardly seem right to eat now before these hungry fellows. I guess we can stand it to go without dinner if they can stand it to go without both dinner and breakfast. Besides, I don't believe I could eat any lunch if we had it. Whew, but that smell is getting awful."

The hot sun was getting in its work on the rapidly increasing pile of sponges on deck. Adhering to them were multitudes of muscles and little fish which were beginning to send forth a fearful stench.

"I am beginning to realize that a sponger's life is anything but a bed of roses," Walter laughed. "It's easy to understand now why they only eat one meal a day."

The novelty of the diving operations soon wore off and the boys, to pass the time, busied themselves with an attempt to learn something of the Greek language. They selected the engineer for their teacher. He was a young fellow with an intelligent, good-humored face and seemed to take great interest in their efforts. Touching different parts of the boat and engine the boys repeated the English names for them. The young fellow grasped the idea instantly and repeated the names in Greek, laughing heartily over their attempts to pronounce the words after him. [58]

In this manner the time passed quickly and pleasantly and the lads were delighted with the rapid progress they made.

"At this rate we will be able to speak the language a little in a week's time," Charley declared. "I'm—" but he never finished the sentence.

From around them rose cries that brought the lads springing to their feet.

The crew were all crowded against the rail staring as if fascinated over the side, while the diver holding one of the life-lines was hauling it in with feverish energy.

As the boys sprang to the rail, the diver's headpiece appeared above the surface. One glance, and they understood the reason for the sudden commotion—from the metal helmet dangled a short piece of severed air hose.

The luckless man was quickly dragged aboard, the head-piece quickly removed, and his rubber clothing cut away, but his eyes were closed and his face purple—he was dead. A long, weird, prolonged wailing came from his shipmates which arose and fell strangely, like the strains of the mournful death march. [59]

The two chums gazed at each other with pale, horror-stricken faces.

"Poor fellow," Walter murmured, "His life went out like a candle in a gale. Alive one minute, dead the next. What could have cut that hose?"

"Chafed against a sharp branch of coral or bitten in two by a shark," Charley replied, sadly. "Well, I guess it means the last of our sponging, the other divers will hardly want to go down after such an accident, and I don't blame them."

But, to his amazement, as soon as the wailing chant ceased, one of the remaining divers began coolly to prepare to take the dead man's place.

"My, but those fellows have got nerve," he declared, admiringly, but he stopped the man as he began to put on his diving suit and by signs ordered the crew to get up anchor and return to the schooner.

"It's only a couple of hours to dark and we have had enough for one day anyway," he remarked to his chum.

When the diving boat reached the schooner his shipmates prepared the dead man for burial. The body was sewed up in stout canvas and a piece of iron fastened to it. It was then gently lowered over the side and sank slowly beneath the waves. [60]

With its disappearance all vestige of gloom disappeared from the crew. The dead man's scanty belongings were brought forth and auctioned off to the various bidders, and an hour after the crew were chatting and laughing with each other as cheerfully as ever.

"Mr. Williams was right, this is a man's game, and a game for rough, fearless men only," Walter remarked thoughtfully, for a second time.

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## CHAPTER VIII. TROUBLE.

AFTER the crew had eaten their supper and rested a bit, the captain had them transfer the sponges from the diving boat to the deck of the schooner. The sponges made quite an imposing pile which the old sailor surveyed with satisfaction. "You've done well to-day," he remarked, "if every day's work is as good we'll have a valuable cargo before our three months are up. I reckon, that's all of two hundred dollars' worth of sponges in that heap."

"Are you sure that you know how to clean and cure them right?" Charley enquired.

"I don't, but Chris knows that part of the business from A to Z. Where he comes from the people live by sponging and pearl fishing."

"Golly, dat's right," observed the little darkey. "I'se helped my daddy fix sponges many a time. First off, you'se got to beat de mud out ob dem wid sticks, den you got to let dem lay foah a day or two to die, 'cause dey's alive jus' like fishes. When dey's good an' dead, you puts dem in nets an' hangs dem ober de side for de water to wash dem out clean. Den you dry dem out on deck an' string dem out on strings 'bout two yards long. Dat makes dem all ready for market 'cept for clipping de bad parts off of dem, which is done on shore. Dar ain't nothin' 'bout fixin' up sponges dat dis nigger doan know." [62]

Just then a small boat came alongside the schooner and the boys hastened to the side to welcome the two men it contained. They were the captain and mate of the schooner anchored nearest to the "Beauty". Both were young fellows hardly out of their teens. They introduced themselves as Steve Ward, and Ray Lowe.

"We thought we'd drop over and have a little chat with you," said Ward, who was the captain. "You, of course, don't realize it yet, but an American face looks mighty good amongst this army of Greeks, especially after one has been out for a month or two. We all start out together but before the season ends we get pretty widely scattered and to meet up with another schooner with an American aboard is like coming across a long-lost brother. This is my fifth trip and I am getting pretty well hardened to the loneliness now, but the first time I was out I nearly went crazy. After we parted from the rest of the fleet, it was worse than being alone on a desert island, for I had the misery of seeing others talk, laugh and enjoy themselves without being able to understand a

word. When, at last, we came across a ship with someone aboard I could talk to I nearly cried for joy. It seemed so good to be able to understand and make myself understood once more." His glance fell upon Manuel George, who was leaning against the rail, and his gray eyes narrowed.

[63]

"What made you bring that fellow with you?" he asked.

"We had to have someone along who could talk their lingo," Captain Westfield replied. "Do you know him?"

"I don't know anything good of him," said the other shortly. "I came near killing him once and I've always half regretted that I didn't do it. It was on my first trip," he explained. "It was just such another case as that young fellow's who was arrested the other day. Although I was captain, the Greeks owned the schooner, and, because I was young and inexperienced, they got the idea they could run over me and do as they pleased. Manuel was always stirring them up and encouraging them to disobey orders. One day I had some words with him about it, and,"—the young fellow's face darkened—"well, he carries a bullet in his leg yet. The others set on me and I had to lock myself up in the cabin. Likely, they would have got me in the end and thrown me overboard to feed the sharks, but we happened to come across another schooner and they had to let me go."

"He don't want to try any tricks with me," Captain Westfield declared. "I got him to talk their lingo but had him sign on as one of the crew. If he tries to act up, I'll put him at the hardest work on the schooner."

[64]

"Well, keep your eye on him," advised the other. "He has never made a trip yet without making trouble. He's a mighty bad egg and as sly and cunning as he is mean."

The two men remained for over two hours, and from them the little party learned many new and interesting things about their new business and about the Greeks.

"We have no reason to complain of a dull trip so far," Charley said, when the two Americans had left. "Only two days out and one of our crew is dead, another is supposed to be on the watch to make us trouble, and a third is a mystery worth solving, judging from the way the others treat him. If things keep on as they have started, we will have a voyage exciting enough to satisfy anyone."

If the lad could have known of the exciting events soon to follow close on each other's heels, he would have had even less reason to complain of dullness.

The next day's sponging was the same as the first. They seemed to have happened upon a spot where the sponges were unusually plentiful. The basket came frequently to the surface loaded with the big mud-covered masses and by nightfall the diving boat's deck was well covered. All day the two lads persisted in their attempt to learn the Greek names for the things about them. By night Charley was able to direct the operation of getting under way for the schooner. Of course, he was yet unable to construct sentences in Greek, but he could call the Greek names for sails, anchor, and different parts of the rigging and the crew managed to guess the rest. Though it was a crude and imperfect way of giving orders, it succeeded better than the slow, imperfect signs he had been obliged to depend upon before.

[65]

"If we keep on as fast, we will be able to make them understand us well within two weeks," he declared gleefully.

It was still light enough for them to see distinctly when they reached the schooner, and they looked about them with regret as they climbed aboard. Her snow-white decks were filthy from the pounding out of the sponges, and bulwarks, sails and rigging were spattered with the foul mud, while the strong, rank odor of dead fish hung heavy in the air.

Chris and the captain had just knocked off work. Their faces, hands and clothing were black as soot. The old sailor's face showed set and stern through its coating of mud. He said little until all were washed up and seated around the supper table.

"Well, lads, I reckon our troubles have begun," he remarked, grimly. "Manuel an' I had a row to-day."

"What about? How did it come out?" the boys questioned, eagerly.

"I told him to help us with the sponge cleaning and he refused to do it. When I insisted he flew into a rage, cursed me, an' shook his fist in my face. I couldn't stand for that an' he's down in the hold now with the irons on him."

[66]

"Well, I feel easier with him there than with him mixing in with the crew," Charley declared.

"My row with him ain't the worst of the matter," the old sailor said gravely. "I called on the crew to help me iron him and they all pretended they didn't understand my sign, but they knew what I wanted all right. I had to handle him alone an' we had quite a struggle before I got the best of him." He rolled up his sleeve and showed an ugly-looking cut on his arm. "He came near getting me with his knife an' I had to give him a couple of taps with a belaying pin. That cut don't amount to anything, but what worries me is that the crew stood around an' watched him try to kill me without interfering—it's a mighty bad sign."

"That does look bad," Charley agreed, anxiously. "I guess we had better keep him a close

prisoner and not let any of the crew go near him, he might try to stir them up and make things hot for us."

"But that means that someone will have to guard him an' carry his meals to him. It wouldn't do to have one of the Greeks do it, I reckon."

"No," Charley agreed, thoughtfully, "but I believe I've got the very man for the job—that handsome fellow the others seem to hate so. Manuel tried to kill him and he is not likely to be easy with him." [67]

The mysterious sailor was at once sent for by Ben. As soon as he came the captain loaded a tray with food and a bottle of water and signed for him to carry it and follow him. Charley and Walter accompanied the two.

As they passed along the deck on their way to the hold, they met angry glances and frowns from the crew.

The mysterious sailor was very intelligent and they soon made him understand that he was to guard the prisoner. He grinned with enjoyment and, seating himself a little way from the Greek, took out his long keen sheath knife and laid it handy beside him.

The prisoner's face grew black with rage at sight of his guard, but he maintained a sulkily silence.

"I guess he's safe enough now," the captain said as they returned to their cabin. "I believe that fellow will guard him faithfully. They seem to hate each other like poison—I wish I knew the reason for it."

"It would not seem so strange if the hatred was confined to him and Manuel, but all the others seem to share in the feeling," Charley remarked. "It seems very queer to me."

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## CHAPTER IX. MANUEL'S RELEASE.

 [68]

BEFORE the boys left the schooner next morning, the guard they had set over Manuel approached the captain, and by signs and gestures intimated that the prisoner wished to speak to him.

Manuel's sullen demeanor had entirely disappeared and he looked humble and penitent.

"I wish to make my most humble apologies to you, noble captain," he declared. "All night long I have thought over my hasty actions with shame and regret. You were right and I wrong. I will work hard at whatever you set me to do, and in the future you will have no cause to complain if you will set me at liberty."

There were tears in the fellow's eyes and his voice trembled as he spoke.

"Stop that blubbing," said the blunt old sailor, who detested tears in men. "I reckon, if you are sure that you've learned your lesson an' won't try to act smart again, I'll set you free; but the minute you try to start any trouble again, I'll put you down here for keeps."

As he removed the irons from the prisoner, the strange sailor burst into a torrent of passionate speech. [69]

The captain paid no attention to him for he could not understand a word of it, but Charley, who was watching closely, saw Manuel give the fellow a quick glance of sly triumph.

"I'm afraid you have made a mistake in setting that fellow free, Captain," the lad said, as they returned to the deck. "I believe it would have been wiser to have kept him in irons until we could touch some port and put him ashore."

"I never feel like being hard on a man when he's sorry for what he has done," the old sailor replied. "I guess it will make the crew feel better tempered to have him set free. I'm going to put him ashore at the first port we touch. In the meanwhile we'll keep him hard at work an' keep a eye on him all the time."

"Perhaps we had better take him with us and put him to work at the pump," Walter suggested. "That's good hard work."

Charley approved the suggestion, for in spite of the Greek's seeming repentance, the lad did not trust him in the least and thought it wisest that he and the captain should be kept separated for awhile after their quarrel.

Manuel went at the hard labor at the air pump with a willingness and cheerfulness which seemed to show the sincerity of his repentance. At first, he seemed inclined to talk overmuch with the rest of the crew, but Charley cut short his talkativeness with a curt command. [70]

"I believe that fellow is a regular Jonah," he confided to his chum during the noon hour rest.

"Yesterday and the day before we got lots of sponges, but we haven't taken in enough this morning to pay expenses."

"I guess this part of the ground is getting worked out, perhaps," Walter replied. "I've noticed several schooners pulling up anchor and getting under way."

His surmise proved correct for during the afternoon many of the fleet passed them headed North. Evidently others were finding the ground as poor as they did.

Late in the afternoon the captain recalled them to the schooner with a signal previously agreed upon,—a flag hoisted to the foremast head.

"I reckon we'd better be getting under way," the old sailor said when they got aboard. "I want to keep with the fleet an' all the schooners seem to be getting under sail. I've noted the course they are takin' an' with this wind they'll be a long ways from us if we wait until morning. I hailed one of the captains and he said they intended to sail all night an' anchor an' get to work early in the morning."

By the time the sails were all hoisted and the anchor tripped, it had grown quite dark so the schooner's great side-lights of red and green were filled, lit, and lashed to the foremast shrouds, for, with so many boats around them every caution must be taken to avoid running one down, or being run down themselves. The crew was divided into three watches. Of which Walter was to have charge of the first, from eight to twelve o'clock. Charley to have command of the second, or middle watch, from twelve to four o'clock, while the captain would take the third, or morning watch, from four to eight A. M.

[71]

The breeze held steady and strong and the night passed away without any exciting incident.

The boys were up again at first peep of day, expecting to have to start out with the diving boat as soon as the sun arose. But, when they gained the deck, they found the "Beauty" still swinging along on her course and the captain pacing the deck greatly perplexed.

"It's mighty queer, but thar ain't one of the fleet in sight," he exclaimed as he caught sight of the lads. "I don't understand it at all. Go aloft, Charley, an' see if you can see any of them."

The lad swung himself into the shrouds and made his way up to the mainmast cross trees, but, although he gazed all around, his eyes met nothing but the broad expanse of the blue sparkling waters.

"Maybe we've run them all out of sight during the night," he suggested when he regained the deck, but the old sailor shook his head.

[72]

"The 'Beauty's' mighty fast, but she's not speedy enough to do that," he declared. "Some of those schooners were ten miles ahead of us when we started. Besides, I shortened sail as soon as I took my watch, because I did not want to get in the lead."

"Perhaps we have dropped away behind the rest," Walter said, but the others knew that that was impossible. The "Beauty" was far too fast a boat to be left so far behind.

The Captain examined the log. "We have come a hundred and ten miles," he said. "Do you reckon either of you boys could have made a mistake in the course during your watch?"

"We didn't vary a quarter of a point from the direction you gave during my four hours," Charley declared. "I kept watch of the compass most of the time and the needle held steady at North."

"I was careful about that, also," Walter said. "We were headed exactly North during my entire watch."

"Well, that compass is true," the captain declared. "I tested it carefully before we left port. I reckon thar's only one explanation; the fleet must have changed their course during the night. We'd better heave-to until noon when I can take the sun an' tell exactly where we are at. It ain't no use trying to pick up the fleet again, now they are out of sight—it would be like hunting for a needle in a hay stack."

[73]

The crew were immediately set to taking in sail and in a few minutes the little ship was lying head to the wind under reefed foresail sail.

When the noon hour drew near, Captain Westfield brought his instruments on deck and prepared to take an observation of the sun. As soon as he secured it he went below to work out their position on the chart.

When he reappeared his face wore a very puzzled expression. "Heave the lead and find out how deep the water is an' what kind of bottom," he said, briefly.

Charley took the lead, a heavy cone-shaped piece of lead, slightly hollowed at the bottom, and with a long line attached to the small end. Filling the hollow end with soft soap, he dropped the lead over the side and let it sink until it struck the bottom. Then he pulled it aboard again, noting carefully the water mark on the line and examining the soap to which some particles of the bottom had adhered.

"Depth, six fathoms, (36 feet) bottom, soft gray mud," he announced.

The captain strode back to the compass and stared at it with a puzzled frown on his face.

"We're forty miles from where we should be," he said as the boys gathered around him, "Sure neither of you boys made a mistake in the course last night?"

[74]

"Sure," declared both lads positively.

The four puzzled over the strange situation in silence for several minutes. Then the captain with his knife loosened the screws and removed the compass' face of glass.

"I wonder how that got there," he suddenly exclaimed.

Cunningly placed, so as to draw the magnetic needle West of North was a small bright iron nail.

"It couldn't have got there by itself," Charley declared, excitedly. "It must have been put there by someone while we were all at supper last night."

"I guess there is no doubt as to who that someone was," with an inclination of his head towards Manuel who, standing a little ways off was watching them closely. The Greek, as soon as he saw the attention he was receiving, turned and strolled carelessly forward.

The captain pondered gravely, "I don't see what his object was," he said, at last. "If we held on that course long it would only have carried us further out into the Gulf, so he couldn't have been aiming to get us wrecked."

"He planned to get us separated from the fleet," Charley declared. "Do you think we could find it again, captain?"

The old sailor shook his head. "There's no telling where we are now," he said, gloomily, "we might hunt for days without coming across them. If that fellow did put that nail there to make us lose them, he's succeeded all right."

[75]

"What had we better do, captain?" Walter asked, anxiously.

"Well, we aint got no real proof that the fellow put that nail thar so we can't do anything with him. It might have been in thar all the time, though I'm willing to take an oath that the compass was true when we left port. Thar ain't much chance of picking up the fleet again an' I don't reckon we'd better waste time trying it. The lead shows we are still on the sponge banks an' I reckon we'd best just get to work, say nothing, an' keep a close watch on that oil Greek chap."

The "Beauty" was anchored accordingly, sails lowered and furled, and everything made snug. As soon as that was done, the boys ordered their crew into the diving boat and, running out a little ways from the schooner, gave the signal to resume the diving operations.

By sheer accident, they had chanced upon a spot rich in sponges and the lads watched with satisfaction the steady reappearance of the lowered basket.

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## CHAPTER X. A RASH RESOLVE.

[76]

THE boys watched Manuel closely throughout the entire afternoon, but they could detect nothing amiss in his manner or actions. He did his work willingly and cheerfully, humming a tune most of the time, apparently he was at peace with himself and the world.

They were not the only ones who watched the Greek closely. Whenever the lads glanced at the handsome sailor, they found him gazing intently at the suspected man, much as a cat watches a mouse, ready to spring at its slightest movement.

The boys kept well apart from the crew, watchful for any threatened outbreak on their part. But the men seemed so cheerful, willing and contented that they soon grew ashamed of their distrust.

Once the handsome sailor approached them respectfully, hat in hand, and, halting before them, spoke rapidly in a low voice. The lads shook their heads to show that they did not understand, and, with a look of helpless resignation on his face, the fellow returned to his work.

"I wish we could understand what he says," Charley said, wistfully. "He, evidently, has something important he wishes to tell us."

[77]

"We will be able to make out what he says before long," Walter said, cheerfully. "We are learning lots of new words every day."

"Yes, we are getting along pretty well," his chum agreed, "but we are not picking up the language near as well as Chris. It's really wonderful how fast he is learning."

The little negro and the Greek boy had become great friends and Chris, naturally quick witted, was learning with astonishing rapidity to talk to his new chum.

"It's the best day we've had yet," Charley declared as they returned to the schooner in the evening. "We have got as many sponges this afternoon as we have during any entire day."

Captain Westfield was elated over their success. "It's turned out all right after all," he said. "We've stumbled upon a mighty rich part of the banks, an' I reckon, we ain't lost the fleet either, as we feared, thar's some twenty sails coming up from the South'ard."

The vessels, which the boys had not noticed before, were approaching rapidly, coming before the stiff breeze. Before dark settled down, they were plainly visible but the eager watchers could not recognize any of them, they seemed larger schooners than any they had seen in the fleet. The strangers anchored for the night near the "Beauty" and the captain got out his night glass and studied them carefully. [78]

"They ain't any of the fleet," he declared with keen disappointment. "They're Spanish smacks from Cuba. They fish around this coast regularly every season."

"Well, they'll be some company, anyway, as long as they stay near us," Charley said, cheerfully. "I can speak Spanish if I can't Greek, we can go over and call on them in the morning. I'd like to go to-night, but I feel too tired out to move."

Soon after supper, Manuel approached Captain Westfield, respectfully.

"We would like to go aboard the schooners, if you will permit," he requested. "We are nearly out of tobacco and the Cubans always carry a lot for which we can trade."

The old sailor thought for a few minutes. "You can go," he said, shortly, "you an' one man. Take the dingy. I don't want the diving boat used. An' be sure you're back aboard early."

The Greek thanked him effusively for the permission, and, calling one of his shipmates, the two got the schooner's little boat over the side and sculled away for the nearest smack.

"They have got plenty of tobacco," growled the captain, as soon as the two were out of hearing. "Thar was enough sent aboard at Tarpon to last them for months. I reckon he's figuring on deserting, that's why I let him go. I'd be willing to lose the boat and the other man to be well rid of him." [79]

It seemed that the old sailor was correct for when eight o'clock came Manuel had not returned.

"After what happened last night, I don't reckon it's wise to leave the deck alone," the captain said as the boys prepared to retire to their bunks. "One of us had ought to keep watch to see that no one monkeys with the wheel or compass."

Walter offered to take the first watch from eight to twelve, and, leaving him pacing back and forth aft of the mainmast, the others retired to rest.

Charley was awakened by a vigorous shaking and his chum's voice calling to him to get up.

"My watch so soon," grumbled the lad sleepily, "Seems like I just got to sleep."

"It's only eleven o'clock," said Walter in excited tones, "but Manuel came aboard an hour ago very drunk. He must have brought liquor with him for they are all raising merry Ned in the forecandle now. The captain and Chris are on deck. Hurry up, there's likely to be trouble any minute."

Charley slipped hastily into his clothing and securing his revolver ran on deck. His three companions with revolvers in their hands were ranged across the deck just aft of the mainmast. From the forecandle, forward, came an uproar of shouting, cursing, and fighting. [80]

The old sailor was blaming himself, bitterly. "I'd ought to have thought of it," he exclaimed, "Augudent is cheap as water in Cuba an' those smacks always carry a lot of it to trade off for other things. What an old fool I was."

"What shall we do?" Charley asked.

"Nothing, but let 'em fight it out amongst themselves an' keep 'em from crowding aft on us. Our lives wouldn't be worth a pinch of snuff if we went down to quiet them. If any of 'em tries to come aft of the mainmast, shoot him."

The words were hardly out of his mouth when a figure burst out of the forecandle and came running aft followed by several others staggering, shouting and cursing.

The captain raised his pistol and took deliberate aim as the flying man drew near.

"Stop, or I'll shoot," he commanded.

Charley knocked aside his upraised arm. "Let him pass," he cried, "it's the strange sailor, they have been trying to kill him."

The handsome fellow was bleeding from a dozen knife wounds, and was breathing short and heavily. As he reached the little party of chums, he turned about and faced his pursuers. It was evident that he did not lack courage.

The pursuing Greeks stopped short at sight of the little band stretched across the deck with leveled revolvers. For a minute they seemed about to dash forward regardless of consequences, but, after a moment's hesitation, with a volley of curses they turned and slunk back to the forecandle. They were yet sober enough to realize the danger of open mutiny. [81]

"I don't think they'll try to bother us," said the captain with a sigh of relief. "They ain't drunk enough for that yet, an' I reckon they've about drank up all their liquor by now. It wouldn't last long amongst so many of them."

The strange sailor had sunk to the deck in a dead faint, and, leaving the boys to guard the deck, the Captain and Chris carried him below, and, laying him in one of the bunks, hurried back to their companions.

"He ain't going to die," the old sailor informed them. "He's just weak from loss of blood. I didn't take time to look him over close, but I counted nineteen knife cuts on his body an' likely thar's some I didn't notice."

"We will have to keep him back aft with us. They would likely kill him if we sent him back to the forecandle, for he is unable to defend himself now," Charley said, and his chums agreed with him.

The uproar in the forecandle continued for a long time then gradually subsided. Evidently, the crew had disposed of the last of the liquor and its effects were slowly wearing off.

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Not until four o'clock, however, did the last noise cease, and the little party of chums remained on deck until the sun rose, ready for any violence from the drunken Greeks. Daylight found them pale and tired from their long, anxious vigil.

"Better go below, lads, and have a good nap," the captain advised. "They have all quieted down and there is no danger of trouble for the present. They are going to feel mighty sick and weak from the drink."

"I'm not going to give them a chance to sleep off their bad feelings," declared Charley, grimly. "My crew have got to turn to and work as usual. I'm going to turn them out as soon as Ben awakes."

When the little Greek lad appeared, looking pale and frightened, Charley sent him below to rouse Manuel.

The lad, apparently, did not relish the task but he went, and, after a long time, reappeared accompanied by the Greek.

Manuel plainly showed the effects of the liquor. He looked sick and haggard and one eye was much discolored from a blow he had received. He was ready, however, with an excuse for the night's disorder. "I did my best to stop the noise and trouble, and it was thus I received a blow in the eye."

"You were drunk when you came aboard," accused Walter.

[83]

"I took a drink on the schooner," admitted Manuel, "only one little drink. It was foolish, for I am unused to liquor and it went to my legs, but my head was clear. I regret the disorder of the others."

There was no doubt in the minds of the captain and the boys that he was really the author of all the trouble, but they could not prove it and Charley dismissed him with a curt command to call the crew.

They were a sick-looking crowd when they were at last collected on deck. All showed the effect of the liquor and many were the black eyes and bruised faces. Their fighting humor seemed to have departed, however, and they went about their tasks quietly, sullenly, and listlessly.

After they had finished their morning coffee, Charley ordered his crew into the diving boat and set out for the spot where they had found so many sponges.

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## CHAPTER XI. A MYSTERY.

[84]

THE two boys kept well apart from the crew, and watched closely for any signs of threatened trouble, but, although the men looked sullen and ugly enough for any kind of act, they seemed much subdued and went about their tasks quietly saying little, even to each other.

"I guess we are giving ourselves a lot of worry without cause," Walter remarked, softly. "Those fellows seem quiet enough now. It was the liquor that made them act as they did last night, but they have drank it all up now and I do not believe we will have any more trouble with them."

"I wish I could agree with you," his chum said, gravely, "but I can't. I believe in the old Latin proverb—'in vino veritas'—there is truth in wine. I've always noticed that when a man gets intoxicated, he reveals just the kind of man he really is. If he is naturally quarrelsome when sober he is sure to want to fight when drinking. If he is good-hearted and kind when sober, he is generally good-humored when drunk. Liquor seems to destroy a man's caution and make him reveal his real character. Now these fellows showed plainly their feelings towards us last night when they were drinking. To-day they are sober and more cautious, but I believe they feel just

[85]



the same towards us. It only needs some real or fancied wrong to bring their hatred to the surface again. I believe if we had a clash with one of them now we would have a first-class mutiny on our hands; but, I guess, we had not better do any more whimpering. They will suspect that we are discussing them and it will not improve matters any."

For awhile the sponges came up from below every half hour, but towards noon a full hour went by without the basket making its appearance. The lads, at last, became somewhat alarmed at the delay.

"Do you suppose they are in any trouble down below?" Charley enquired of Manuel.

The Greek shook his head. "They would have signaled if anything had been wrong. There, they are signaling now."

There came several jerks on the life-lines and the Greeks in charge of them pulled the divers up and into the boat. The men had been below for only an hour and the boys were puzzled to account for their coming up before their time had expired. When their head-pieces were removed the lads could see that the divers were greatly excited. They spoke rapidly to those around them, and a hum of excited conversation arose from the before listless crew. [86]

"What's the matter?" Charley demanded of Manuel, who seemed to be the most excited of all.

"It is nothing," was the quick reply. "The men grew faint for a minute but they will be all right soon. That often happens to one when diving."

The Greek's excitement was too great for such a trivial cause and Charley decided promptly that he was lying.

In a few minutes the divers resumed their head-pieces and prepared to descend again. As they stood on the ladders one of the crew handed one of them a coil of light rope to the end of which was attached a piece of light wood.

"What does he want with that buoy?" Charley demanded, sharply.

"There's a bad hole in the bottom which he wishes to mark so that there will be no danger of his blundering into it," replied Manuel promptly, but, again, Charley decided that the fellow was lying.

"There's something in the wind," he remarked to Walter. "The crew seem greatly excited, and Manuel, I am sure, is lying."

A strange change had suddenly taken place in the crew's manner. Before, they had been silent, sullen and listless, now, they were animated, their eyes glittered with excitement, and they chattered back and forth like so many magpies.

Manuel evidently noticed that the boys were watching them closely, for he addressed them in a low tone and their chattering ceased. They resumed their work with something like a return of their former manner, but it was easy to see that their sullenness was now assumed. [87]

The lads turned their attention to the course the diver was taking, and watched for the appearance of the buoy which would show the whereabouts of the bad place on the bottom. The bit of wood soon floated into view not a hundred feet from the boat.

Apparently, the divers were still suffering from their faintness, for it was a long time after they descended before the first basket load of sponges appeared, and it was nearly an hour before the second one was hoisted aboard.

"We are not getting many to-day," Walter grumbled. "If we don't do better pretty soon, we had better move and try another place."

"There is something queer doing," Charley declared. "Just watch those life-lines and see what you make of it."

The ropes which were fastened to the divers showed plainly the direction taken by the men below. The lines were kept faintly taut to permit of the signals being clearly felt, and their slant gave an accurate idea of just where the divers were working.

Walter watched for awhile, a puzzled frown gathering on his face.

"Why," he exclaimed, "they are right on that bad part of bottom, and they haven't stirred for the last fifteen minutes." [88]

The lads continued to watch the tell-tale lines. For another fifteen minutes the ropes remained motionless, then from their twitching it became evident that the divers were once more moving around. In a short time thereafter, the usual signal was given and two baskets of sponges were hoisted up.

"That's got me puzzled," said Charley, as the peculiar performance was repeated. "I guess we had better appear not to have noticed it. The crew is not looking at us in a very friendly way."

The attitude of the Greeks seemed to be growing hostile. Many were the unfriendly glances they cast at the two lads and the boys could hear their names repeated in the low-toned conversation going on.

The two lads retired to the bow where, though they effected to be taking their ease, they kept on the alert for the first signs of trouble.

Though nothing happened to further arouse their fears, it was a trying situation and both were glad when the time came to return to the schooner.

They found the captain and Chris both tired from a hard day's labor cleaning sponges. The wounded sailor was sitting back by the wheel, looking somewhat pale and haggard, but not a great deal the worse for his many wounds.

"His troubles' been sorter praying on his mind all day," said the captain. "He got a hold of my pad and pencil this morning an' he's been drawing pictures of the fight and other things—here's one of them." [89]

The old sailor produced a crumpled piece of paper from his pocket.

Walter examined the sketch closely. It was not without a certain cleverness and was better than one would expect of a humble sailor before the mast. It depicted a struggle between two groups of men. In one of the groups, the lad could recognize some of the faces of the Greeks, who, armed with knives and clubs, were assailing the other party. As the lad bent over to examine the other group more closely, he uttered an exclamation of surprise. At first glance there was nothing startling about those whom the Greeks were fighting, but a second glance showed something familiar about the figures composing it. He passed the sketch to Charley.

"What do you make of it?" he asked.

"Why, that little group is intended to represent us," his chum exclaimed. "See they are just four in number. That big one with the beard is meant for the captain and the little one for Chris, the other two are you and I. Why, the likeness to us is quite striking when you look at it closely."

"I believe he intended this for a warning to us," Walter declared. "Where are the rest of the things he drew, Captain?" [90]

"I threw them all away, I didn't reckon they meant anything," the old sailor replied, regretfully.

"Well, never mind," said Charley cheerfully, "we will get him to draw them over again. He seems a very intelligent fellow. I wish he could talk so as to tell us what the crew are saying now. Just look at him."

The strange sailor was leaning forward listening eagerly to the buzz of conversation going on between the Greeks. The diving boat's crew seemed to have conveyed the excitement under which they had been laboring all day to their shipmates who had remained aboard the schooner. Groups of two or three were gathered here and there, talking eagerly together.

Walter called the little Greek lad to him.

"What are the men talking about, Ben?"

The little fellow hesitated before replying. It was plain that he was greatly troubled and frightened. "They talk about nothing much," he stammered.

Walter was pressing him with further questions when his chum interfered.

"It's hardly fair to make him tell," he said. "It might cause him a lot of trouble. His uncle is glaring at him now, as though he would like to kill him."

There was nothing to be learned by watching the crew's actions, so, signing to the wounded sailor to follow them, the four chums descended to the cabin where the Greek cook had supper waiting for them. [91]

Charley was unusually quiet during the meal, but when the Greek cook and Ben had at last retired carrying the dishes with them, he arose and closed the cabin door.

"Captain," he said as he returned to his companions, "I am going down in a diving suit to-morrow."

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## CHAPTER XII. IN A DIVING SUIT.

 [92]

THE old sailor stared at Charley as though he feared the lad had taken leave of his senses.

"Why, you must be crazy," he exclaimed. "You don't know anything about that kind of diving."

"I fancy there is not much to learn about it," Charley replied. "I've been watching the divers closely and it appears very simple. The main thing seems to be to keep the air hose clear. I've been wanting to go down ever since the first day, and the strange way the crew have acted to-day has decided me to try it. I want to see what it is that has so excited them."

"It's a fool notion and I ain't going to let you do it," the captain stormed, but Charley only

grinned, cheerfully.

"It's no use scolding, Captain, I've quite made up my mind to try it. I've been thinking it over the whole day."

"I say you sha'n't do it," roared the old sailor. "I'll put you in irons first, I'm captain of this schooner."

"But I'm captain of the diving boat," Charley reminded him with a grin, "If anyone interferes with my doings on my own ship it's mutiny, you know." [93]

"Walt, say something to get him out of that fool notion," pleaded the old sailor, helplessly.

Walter turned to his chum with a twinkle in his eye, "If you go down, I'm going too," he said, decidedly.

"You're two young lunatics," the captain declared, wrathfully. "You're bound to always run yourselves into danger whenever you get a show. Neither one of you will ever live to see twenty."

But, although he fumed and threatened for a long time, the matter ended, as was always the case when the boys had determined upon a thing, in his, at last, giving a grudging consent to their plan.

Chris had followed his little friend Ben on deck as soon as he finished his supper, but soon after the discussion was ended he returned below grumbling.

"Dat white child ain't no fitten company to-night," he declared. "He acts plum scart to death an' won't talk none tall."

"You go up and stay around the wheel, 'till we come up," the captain ordered. "I thought you were there all the time or I'd been up myself, I don't want none of those fellows fooling around the compass."

When Chris had retired, still grumbling, Walter brought out a pad and pencil and handed them to the sailor who had been watching their faces closely during their animated debate. [94]

The man seized them eagerly and bending over the pad began to draw slowly with awkward, clumsy fingers. When the sketch was finished he tore off the sheet of paper and handed it to Charley whom he seemed to recognize as the real leader of the little party.

The lad examined the sketch with eager interest. "He must be a very cheerful sort of fellow," he remarked, as he passed it to his chum. "First, he prophesies a fight with the crew, and, now, he has got us all shipwrecked. Can't say much for his skill with the pencil though; that hulk does not look much like our pretty 'Beauty'."

The rude sketch pictured a forlorn, dismayed wreck, covered with seaweed and with one side badly stove in.

The sailor had immediately commenced upon another picture which he soon passed over.

The boys looked it over but could not decide what it was intended to represent.

"It looks like a box full of crackers," Charley said with a grin. "Well, if he's decided to have us shipwrecked, it's thoughtful of him to provide us with something to eat."

But the sailor did not seem to regard it as any laughing matter. He watched their expressions with a face full of concern, and, when Walter shook his head to show that he did not understand the sketch, he laid aside the pad with a heavy sigh. [95]

"He has given it up," Charley said. "We had better go to bed, I guess we have a hard day ahead of us to-morrow."

Chris was recalled from the deck and Walter took his place while the others turned into their bunks and were soon fast asleep. At midnight he awakened Charley and at four o'clock Charley was relieved by the captain. The watches passed away without any alarm, but one thing struck both of the lads as being curious. All during their watches three or four of the Greeks remained on deck instead of seeking their bunks as they usually did right after eating supper. They sat around up by the forecabin smoking and talking quietly together and the boys came to the conclusion that they were merely wakeful from the effects of the liquor they had drunk the night before.

The boys looked longingly at the tempting breakfast served by the Greek cook, but as they had decided to make the descent to the bottom that morning they were obliged to be content with a cup of coffee.

The captain and Chris followed them aboard the diving boat. "We're going with you," the old sailor explained. "It's a risky thing you're planning to do an' I'd be too nervous and anxious about you to stay on the schooner. She will be all right without us for a little while." [96]

Manuel seemed to note the presence of the captain and Chris with satisfaction. Before the boat was shoved off from the schooner, he called the cook to the rail and conversed with him a few minutes in low tones.

But his satisfaction changed to frowning anger when the boys began to don the diving suits.

"You are foolish to attempt to go down, young sirs," he said, angrily. "It is dangerous, very dangerous."

"We are the only ones at all likely to suffer," Charley replied shortly. "Tend strictly to your pumping, when we think we need advice, we will ask you for it."

Before his head-piece was adjusted, he found opportunity to whisper to Walter. "We won't be able to talk when we get below, so I want you to follow me and do just what you see me do."

"I will," promised his chum. "My, don't these things feel queer. I can hardly lift my feet, they are so heavy. They make me feel helpless as a little baby."

The divers adjusted the helmets to the lads' heads and, assisting them to the rail, helped them down the ladder, and lowered them gently to the bottom.

Charley laughed to himself as he caught sight of Walter in the clear water. His chum looked like some strange monster in the grotesque diving suit. He waved his hand to him and Walter placed one great paw over his helmet where his mouth was supposed to be, to show that he was endeavoring politely to stifle a laugh. [97]

But the boys' merriment at each other's grotesque appearance was quickly lost in admiration of the strange scene about them.

It was as though they were standing in the midst of a beautiful garden. Here and there were patches of soft white bottom, like winding paths amongst the marine growth. On every side of the bare places rose lace-like sea fans of purple, yellow, and red, and feather-like sea plumes swaying gently to and fro to the motion of the water caused by the lads' descent. At their bases lay scattered multitudes of shells of every conceivable shape, size, and hue, while, towering far above the riot of color, rose mighty trees of snow-white coral among the branches of which hovered golden, silver, crimson, and every shade of fish, great and small, their fins flashing gracefully as they darted to and fro.

For some moments, the lads stood motionless drinking in the beauty of the wonderful garden, but they had not descended merely to admire and Charley, after a long look around, hauled gently on the life-line until he had some hundred feet coiled neatly at his feet. Walter, though not comprehending his chum's plan, followed his example. The ruse was to serve a two-fold purpose, first to lead those on the diving boat to think that the two were a considerable distance from the boat, and, second, to deceive them as to the real direction taken by those below. [98]

As soon as Walter had got his life-line neatly coiled down, Charley turned at right angles from the spot and moved slowly forward for the place where he calculated lay the supposed bad place in the Gulf's bottom.

He was surprised to find that he could walk with perfect ease and comfort. The suit, which had been so heavy and cumbersome above the surface, now rested on him lightly as a feather. He could have walked with considerable speed had it not been for the care he had to take to keep his life-line free and clear from the numerous branches of coral. He watched Walter anxiously to see that he used the same care with the rope upon which their very lives depended and he was relieved to see that his chum used every possible precaution.

Although the water was clear as crystal, neither lad could see far ahead at that depth below the surface for it was too far for the sun's light to penetrate brightly. Charley was almost upon the rope with its floating buoy above before he perceived it. He moved forward now with the greatest caution for, if Manuel's statement was true, a hasty step might plunge him suddenly into a nasty hole or a dangerous patch of quicksand. But the bottom did not seem any different from that over which they had passed. The rope was fastened to a branch of coral where there was no indication of a hole or quicksand, but, a little beyond where the rope was fastened, the lad could see dimly a large black mass rising up from the bottom. Towards it he slowly made his way, followed by his chum. [99]

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## CHAPTER XIII.

### A CLOSE CALL.

[100]

CHARLEY'S eyes were becoming accustomed to the semi-gloom and a few steps forward gave him a clear view of the dark object. One glance, and he turned to his chum with a cry which was lost in his muffling helmet.

Before the two lads lay the wreck of a once stately ship, her masts broken short off and a great gaping hole in her side. She had evidently lain long in her bed amongst the coral and sponges for long tendrils of sea moss streamed out from her barnacle-covered sides.

Someone had been there before them for the moss and marine growth had been scraped from the vessel's stern revealing the name, "Golden Hope".

Charley turned from the spelling out of the indistinct letters to see his chum beckoning to him

wildly and he hurried to his side.

Walter was stooping over an opened box partly filled with what had once been shining gold pieces but which were now tarnished and almost unrecognizable in their coat of gray slime. The box had been recently torn open as was evident from the freshly-splintered wood. [101]

Charley sat down on the box's edge and did some rapid thinking. The crew's excitement was now accounted for. They had not come upon a rich bed of sponges as he had suspected but had discovered a treasure such as men for ages have fought, struggled, and died to attain. The half emptied box showed that the divers had already begun to remove the gold. For a moment, the lad was puzzled to know how they had been able to bring up what was missing without its being seen. There were no pockets to the diving suits and they could have carried but a few pieces at a time in their closed hands. A moment's reflection, however, brought him to the only possible explanation; the gold must have been sent up in the sponge basket hidden amongst the lumps of mud from which it could have been removed by the crew without much risk of discovery. But it was not the removal of the gold which gave the quick-witted lad the most concern. The amount taken by the Greeks was likely but a mere trifle when compared with that which remained. It was the effects the discovery of such a treasure would have upon an already unruly crew that he feared. As he had said to Walter but the day before, he believed it needed but a trifle to fan the Greeks' growing discontent into open mutiny. Here was riches enough to tempt the most steady band of sailors and it was but reasonable to suppose that it would tempt the lawless Greeks to deeds of violence and bloodshed. These thoughts surged through the lad's mind in far less time than it has taken to tell of them. He would have liked to have talked the matter over with his chum and settled upon the wisest plan to follow, but that was impossible below the surface and signs were useless to convey exact ideas. He must decide alone upon their immediate course of action and trust to Walter's quick wit to fall in with what he decided upon. [102]

Arising he turned to his chum and laid one finger across his lips. Walter nodded his ponderous head-piece to show that he understood the sign for silence regarding their discovery.

Taking up his sponge basket, Charley retraced his steps to the spot where they had descended followed by his observant chum. Here the sponges grew in abundance and he at once began to fill his basket, an example which Walter immediately followed.

As he bent over to tear up an unusually large sponge he became suddenly sensible of an agitation of the water near him. Straightening up, he stood frozen to his tracks with fear and horror. Not ten feet from where he stood lay a gigantic shark, its belly gleaming white through the clear water. Its little green eyes were fixed upon him with a wicked unblinking stare. He let the basket drop from his grasp and flung up his arms with an unreasoning instinct to protect his head from the impending attack. At his sudden movement the great fish darted away. Evidently, it was equally as frightened of the strange unknown monster it had encountered. [103]

The shock had left the frightened lad weak and trembling and he had to rest a few minutes before he could resume the filling of his basket.

As he placed the last sponge in the basket he turned to signal to his chum to ascend, but Walter was already gone, his figure, grotesque in the diving suit, was already well up from the bottom and shooting up with astonishing swiftness. At the same moment Charley became aware of a strange sickening sensation. He was choking and gasping for breath. Before he could realize what had happened the frightful sensation had passed and he was able to breathe fully and freely, and he felt himself being pulled swiftly to the surface.

In a moment he was hoisted above the surface, hauled aboard the boat and his helmet removed. The captain, white-faced and shaken was leaning against the mast his revolver in his hand. Chris, ashen-hued, and a sailor, was still pumping faintly. Close beside the air pump lay Manuel in apparent unconsciousness.

"What's happened?" Charley cried.

"Manuel keeled over in a fit or something," said the captain, brokenly. "I thought you would both be dead before we could get you to the surface. It seemed ages before I could get Chris to the pump and the fellows to hauling you up. They seemed to move mighty slow 'till I threatened to shoot. They maybe didn't understand what I said but the sight of the gun made 'em more lively," he concluded, grimly. [104]

Charley walked over to the prostrate Greek and stood gazing down at his upturned face.

"He has no business to faint when he's working the air pump," he said savagely. "I guess I'll kick him a good hard one in the face for punishment."

The manly lad had no such intention of carrying out such a brutal threat but he wanted to test whether the treacherous Greek was, as he suspected, really shamming.

The prostrate man's features twitched, he sighed heavily and rolled over on his side, Charley's suspicions were confirmed.

"Captain," said the lad distinctly, "if anything happens to Walter and I when we are below the surface, I want you to shoot this man without the slightest hesitation. He is the only one who can understand your orders and he must be made responsible for our safety."

"I'll shoot him the first time anything goes wrong," the captain declared wrathfully, as he caught the wink of Charley's eye. "I feel like killing him now, for the fright he gave me."

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The shamming Greek did not seem to relish this threatening talk. He showed signs of surprisingly rapid recovery. In a few minutes he was able to sit up and look around.

"I am overjoyed to find you both alive," he said faintly to the two boys. "Everything grew suddenly black before me when I was pumping and I knew no more. It is my heart, it troubles me at times. You young gentlemen must go down no more, it is too risky."

"We have had enough of it for to-day, but we may try it again to-morrow," Charley replied, cheerfully. "It is very beautiful and interesting down below."

"I hope you avoided the bad place on the bottom," said the Greek, anxiously. "The divers say it is a dangerous hole."

"You must think we are fools to venture near such a place," said Charley, indignantly, and the man looked greatly relieved.

Above all, the prudent lad wished to keep the crew from thinking that he and Walter had come upon the treasure. As long as they believed them ignorant of its existence they would likely continue the work of secretly removing it without open violence.

He could not talk over the matter with his chums without danger of being overheard, and he was forced to appear unconcerned and look on with indifference while the divers sent up basket after basket of sponges, in every load of which he was convinced was hidden several hundred dollars of the gold coins.

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He greatly admired Walter's manner. The lad chattered over the beautiful gardens they had seen below without a hint in his voice or manner of the secret they had stumbled upon.

From time to time the crew shot glances of scowling suspicion at the little group, but they were evidently reassured by the boys' cheerfulness and apparent unconcern.

It was like sitting beside a powder mine with a lighted fuse in it, and both lads were greatly relieved when the long day dragged away to its close and the diving boat was headed back for the schooner.

They were met at the schooner's rail by the cook who seemed greatly excited and who greeted them with a torrent of rapidly spoken words.

Manuel listened with a look of sadness, real or assumed, on his face.

"He says," he interpreted swiftly, "that the wounded man went suddenly crazy this morning and flung himself into the sea."

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## CHAPTER XIV. THE DISCUSSION.

[107]

THE chums looked at each other in silent comprehension. There was not a doubt in the mind of either that the sailor had been made away with during their absence from the ship. They recalled Manuel's talk with the cook before they left the schooner and the look of satisfaction in his face when he learned that they were all going on the diving boat. Even the captain was not slow to grasp the horrible truth.

"It's a terrible business, but don't let on that you suspect them," he whispered. "We've got to have a long talk and decide what it's best to do." To Manuel, he said, curtly, "I reckon, it's the fellow's own business if he wanted to drown himself, so you ain't got no cause to grieve. Better divide his things up amongst the crew."

Although they were eager for a talk alone, the four lounged carelessly about the deck, striving to appear unconcerned, until the Greek boy summoned them to supper below. They talked cheerfully until the cook had retired bearing the empty dishes with him. Then Charley arose and noiselessly closed the cabin windows and door so that their words would not reach the deck. Returning to his seat, he called the pale-faced little Greek lad to him, and, resting his hand on his head, said kindly,

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"Ben, we are not going to repeat anything you say to us, and we want you to tell us just what has been troubling you the last few days."

The little lad burst into tears, "They'll kill me," he sobbed, "they'll kill me."

"They will never know you told us," Charley assured him. "We will never let anyone know you told us."

"They are going to kill you all," faltered the boy as soon as he could control his sobs.

"Why do they want to kill us," Charley questioned.

"My uncle makes them mad. When you give orders he adds lots of bad names and swear words to them. He tells the crew that you always take that sailor's part. He tells them you're going to have them all put in jail when you get back to Tarpon. He tells them you love that sailor and hate Greeks."

"But why did they hate that sailor so?" Walter questioned.

"He Turk," explained the lad. "Greeks hate Turks."

The chums glanced at each other in swift comprehension. They knew of the deadly hatred that existed between the two races. A hatred that had led to the bitter war in which the Greeks had been badly beaten. They understood now why the handsome sailor had been shunned by all his shipmates. They could see, too, how the wily Manuel had used their defense of the man to arouse the crew's resentment against them. The cunning Greek had woven about them a net of lies which it would be impossible to explain away. [109]

"Then they find gold," Ben continued, "that makes them crazy. Manuel tells them to leave you alone if you don't find out about the money, but kill you if you do."

"The infernal rascal," exploded the captain. "He goes in irons and down in the hold to stay 'till we get to port."

"Don't do that!" cried the alarmed Greek lad. "They kill you right off if you do."

"One thing more," said Charley, as the little fellow's tears began to flow afresh. "Who killed that sailor?"

But Ben did not know although it was evident that he did not doubt that the man had been killed.

Charley waited until the lad had dried his tears, then let him go with the caution to tell none of the crew that he had told them.

"We are in the tightest fix of our lives," he declared, when Ben had gone. "It seems, from what he says, that we are safe so long as they do not suspect that we know anything about the gold but I fancy that Manuel suspects that we have found it and I do not believe we can count on their being willing to let us reach port alive. The question is, what had we better do." [110]

"I don't understand all this talk about gold," said the captain.

The boys hurriedly told of the discovery they had made while the old sailor listened with sparkling eyes.

"Boys," he exclaimed, when their tale was concluded, "you've found what will make rich men of us all. I remember the excitement caused by the loss of that ship. It happened twelve years ago. For months tugs and steamers were scouring the Gulf searching for her. She had cleared from New Orleans for New York with two million dollars in gold aboard."

"She might as well contain two million toothpicks so far as we are concerned," said Charley, impatiently. "I'd give up every cent of it willingly to be safe in port this minute."

The captain, brought abruptly back to a realization of their desperate situation, thought deeply for several moments before he spoke. "We had ought to be able to hold our own against them fellows," he, at last, observed. "We are well armed and I don't believe they have got any weapons except their sheaf knives which ain't no good except at close quarters." [111]

"It is not open violence but treachery that I fear," Charley explained. "We have had two samples already of the way they work. First in that stoppage of the air hose and, second, in the making away of that sailor. No, that Manuel is too cunning a rascal to risk open rebellion when he can accomplish his ends without any personal risk."

"Why not let them continue to get up the gold and hide it as they have been doing?" Walter suggested. "We can pretend that we do not know what is going on. Then when we get to port we can turn them over to the authorities and recover the money without any trouble."

Charley shook his head doubtfully. "That will not do," he said. "I am as convinced as I am that I am living, that we would never reach port alive. Manuel is too wise to take any chances and he knows that they could not remove such a large amount of gold from the schooner without arousing suspicion. I believe he has entrusted the crew to spare us for the present only because he thinks that some of the fleet might happen along and grow curious if we were all missing. Besides, it is doubtful if any of them know enough about navigation to sail the 'Beauty' home. Us boys, he probably will not hesitate to remove at any time if he can give the act the appearance of accident, like what occurred to-day. The captain, he will likely permit to remain alive until near port. He will have a long story made up to account for our disappearance and the gold will likely be well hidden amongst the ballast from where he can remove it without exciting comment so long as we are not on board." [112]

The lad spoke confidently for he was putting himself in the place of the cunning Greek and reasoning just what he would do in a like position.

"I've got it," exclaimed the captain in triumph. "When they are asleep we'll batten down the forecandle hatch on them and keep them there until we get to port. We four can work the

schooner in, I guess."

"I tell you, you don't realize what a cunning rascal that fellow is," Charley declared in reluctant admiration. "He has provided against just such an attempt. I did not understand the reason for it last night, but I noticed that all during my watch on deck there were three or four men hanging around the deck up forward. It's a great stake they are playing for and they are not taking the slightest chances."

"I noticed the men hanging around," admitted the captain, "but I didn't think much of it at the time. Let's have your plan, if you've got one, lad."

"I'm afraid we can't get out of this hole without some violence and danger," Charley replied. "I have been thinking over it all day and this is the only thing I can think of that seems to offer any hope of success. First thing in the morning Walter and I must descend to the wreck again and bring up enough gold to pay off the men when we get to port. It's a risky thing to do, but it is necessary to carry out my plan. You see," he paused to explain, "the men were shipped for three months and they could demand pay for that time. We haven't got the money and we have not gathered up enough sponges yet to make up so large an amount. They could tie the schooner up for their wages and make us a lot of trouble and expense, a thing Manuel would be sure to do."

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"But they have got a lot of gold which belongs to us, already," Walter suggested.

"We would have hard work to prove that it is ours, and it would mean a lot of delay," replied his chum quickly.

"Go on with your plan, lad," said the captain, who perceived that Charley had thought over all sides of the question with his usual clearness.

"After we have brought up the money. We will use their own plan for bringing it up without its being noticed—we will hang around and let them go on with the work as usual all day, for it would not do to fight it out on the diving boat. When we get back to the schooner at night, we will bring matters to a head. We will make them get up anchor and sails and head back for Tarpon. There's bound to be trouble and plenty of it but we'll be prepared for it and Tarpon is only two days' sail. What do you think of the plan?"

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He did not have to wait long for a chorus of objections.

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## **CHAPTER XV. A DESPERATE PLAN.**

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"I DON'T see that your plan is any better than mine," Walter objected.

"To tarry along while they remove the gold would give them time enough to remove us one by one," Charley replied, "While by doing as I have suggested they will have but little chance for treachery, and, although we will be sure to have trouble with them as soon as we order them to get up anchor, I think we can manage to keep the upper hand of them for the short time it will take to reach Tarpon."

"Golly, dis nigger plum hates to run off an' lebe all dat gole," Chris observed.

"We'll come back for it," Charley declared. "As soon as we have paid off the Greeks and got rid of them, we'll pick a crew of Americans and hurry back."

"And while we are wasting time in getting a new crew, the Greeks will have spread the news and a dozen boats will be here before we can get back."

"You forget that the captain is the only one who knows where we are by the latitude and longitude. Without knowing that, fifty boats might hunt for a month without seeing that little buoy. It would be like looking for a needle in a haystack."

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"Hang that pesky Greek," exclaimed the captain. "He asked me this morning for the schooner's position, an' I gave it to him."

Charley's face fell, "That fellow seems to think of everything," he sighed. "But it's hard to get an exact position by latitude and longitude alone, isn't it, Captain?"

"A navigator is lucky if he hits within four or five miles of the place he's aiming for. Of course it can be done if one is extra careful, but I could not swear to our exact position on the chart now, 'though I reckon I could come within a couple of miles of it."

"Good," Charley exclaimed, "I guess, we can make it impossible for them to find the wreck again, if they should manage to get back before us. It will mean a little change in my plan, though. Instead of getting off to-morrow night, we will have to wait until the next morning." He hastily outlined his amended plan, which, after they had discussed it carefully, his companions agreed was as promising as any they could think of.

They had hardly finished their discussion when there came a knock at the cabin door and Manuel entered, smiling.



"I wished to enquire if the young gentlemen intend to go down in the suits again to-morrow?" he said, suavely.

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"We haven't decided yet," Charley said, carelessly, "Why do you wish to know?"

"Because, if you are, the air hose had better be greased. If it is left dry for long the rubber sometimes cracks and makes leaks."

"Then have it well greased," the captain ordered.

"I guess he's afraid of being shot if anything happens, an' is taking every precaution," chuckled the captain when the Greek had retired.

"Perhaps," agreed Charley, doubtfully, "but, I confess, I am afraid of that fellow. I'll certainly look over that hose carefully before I go down to-morrow."

When they ascended to the deck, which they had forgotten to have watched in the excitement of their discussion, they found Manuel and two of the divers busily engaged in greasing the rubber air hose with bacon slush from the cook's galley.

Charley's was the first watch on deck and, long after his companions had retired to their bunks, he paced back and forth aft of the main mast pondering thoughtfully over the plan he had suggested. It was the best he could conceive under the circumstances but he realized that its execution would be attended with the gravest dangers. Most of all, he dreaded the proposed descent to the bottom for the gold. He was convinced that Manuel had hit upon some scheme to get rid of him and Walter without danger to himself. Again and again the lad's thoughts came back to the greasing of the hose. If the operation was so important, why had the divers not done it before—They were not the kind of men to take any unnecessary risks in their dangerous work below the surface. He had often noted the care with which they had examined hose and pump before each descent.

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But, while the lad puzzled over the matter, he did not neglect to keep a watchful eye upon the three or four Greeks who lingered on the forward deck. If he had needed any reminder of the peril of their situation, it would have been found in the sight of those watchful, restless figures.

Near the end of his watch, he gave vent to a low exclamation—He had discovered the reason for the greasing of the hose. For a few minutes he was appalled by the cunning fiendishness which had prompted the act. The two hoses lay coiled close together in great heaps on deck. Sauntering over to them, the lad stooped over each pile for a second, then, straightening up, he resumed his slow steady pacing.

At midnight he awoke Walter to take his place. "I've solved it," he told him.

"Solved what?" asked Walter, sleepily.

"Their reason for greasing the hose."

"What is it?"

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"To attract sharks and lead them to bite it in two."

"The fiends!" Walter cried as the devilish ingenuity of the plot dawned upon him. "What are you going to do about it?"

"Nothing, until we are ready to descend," his chum replied, "then it will be too late for them to practice another surprise for us."

"Are you sure you are right," asked Walter, doubtfully. "They are not sure that we are going to descend, you know."

"I think Manuel feels pretty confident that we will. If we fail to do so, he likely will find some excuse for replacing the greased hose with new ones. You can bet, he's got it all figured out. He is the brainiest villain I ever met up with. Better hurry on deck now, and keep a close watch out. There's no telling what other scheme he's got hatched up."

Although he retired to his bunk at once, Charley lay long awake. The morrow would be filled with danger and his nerves were already growing tense for the struggle which he foresaw. The Captain had relieved Walter on deck before he at last fell into a troubled slumber from which he awoke just as day was beginning to break.

By the time it was light enough to see, he was up and dressed and making preparations for the carrying out of his hazardous plan. From the lazarette, he procured a long coil of light rope which he placed in one corner of his cabin. He next opened up his valise and got out the ammunition he had purchased in Tarpon and a small, but excellent pocket compass. These he placed in his bunk where they would be handy if needed quickly.

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When breakfast was over, the diving boat was brought alongside and all got on board except the cook and four men left to take care of the schooner and clean the sponges gathered the previous day.

"We have decided to go down and have one more look at those sea gardens," Charley told Manuel when the sponging ground was reached. "They are beautiful enough to invite another visit."

The Greeks' face expressed satisfaction. "They are beautiful," he agreed, "but the young gentlemen are rash to go down. Let the divers take the risks—they are paid to do it."

"We will be very careful," Charley said, cheerfully. "Walt, we had better look over the hose before we go down, the divers always do."

The greased hose had been recoiled in the tubs and the boys proceeded to overhaul them, foot by foot, searching them closely for cracks or punctures.

Walter was puzzled to comprehend his chum's plan. After what he had discovered, surely he did not intend to risk using the dangerous things, but he was well enough acquainted with Charley's shrewdness to hold his tongue and keep his face from betraying his uneasiness. He felt sure that there was a good reason for his chum's actions. He had but just reached this decision when he came upon a gapping hole in the hose. It looked much as though it had been cut in two with a sharp knife. [121]

"Here's a bad place," he announced. "It's lucky I found it. Air can't be pumped through this thing."

"And here's a hole in mine, too," Charley declared in accents so surprised that no one would have dreamed that he had made both slits the night before to serve as an excuse for the rejection of the dangerous hose. "We can't use either one of them, we'll have to get out the new hose."

Manuel's face for a second was a picture of bewilderment and baffled rage, but in a moment he was again suave and smiling. "I don't see what can have made those cuts," he declared. "They can be patched in a few minutes, however. It would be a pity to throw away such hose, it is as good as new except for those two little places which can be speedily fixed."

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## CHAPTER XVI. TOO LATE.

"No patched hose for me," Charley said, decidedly. "If the divers want to risk using it, they can."

It was not just the reply the wily Greek had expected and he hastened to answer.

"You are right, it does not pay to take risks. I will get the new hose and put it on."

But Charley was ahead of him. He did not intend to give the wily Greek any chance to play tricks with the new hose. He brought it out from the lockers in which it was kept and, after examining it carefully connected it to the air pumps and helmets. Before putting on his head-piece, he tried the air pump also. It proved to be in perfect working order and sent the air gushing through the hose. Manuel fastened the life-line below his arms, but Charley called the captain to adjust the heavy helmet over his head.

As soon as his feet touched the bottom, Charley moved forward for the wreck, Walter at his side. Neither lad wished to remain below a second longer than was necessary for they fully realized that they were running a terrible risk in descending at all. They found the box they had discovered the day before entirely empty, the divers had brought another out from the wreck's hold and broken it open. The gold was in twenty dollar pieces and in a few minutes the lads had transferred several hundred dollars from the box to the baskets. It was hard to resist taking more but the risks were too great to permit it. Quickly hastening back to the patch of sponges, they tore up several baskets full of the mud and covered fungus and, making a slit in each with their sheaf knives, stuffed in the coins. It was the very plan the divers had followed but Charley had decided that they would not be looking for the adopting of their own trick. As soon as the last coin was hidden and the loaded sponges placed in the basket with others on top of them to complete the load, Charley signed to Walter to ascend and stood watching him until he had been drawn to the surface, then he gave the signal to be drawn up himself. He was raised a few feet up from the bottom then he sank quickly back to the place from which he had risen and he saw the end of the life-line dangling in the water twenty feet above his head. *It had been pulled loose from his body.* [123]

Charley stood for a moment looking at it in terrified dismay while his quick brain took in the awful significance of his position. Frightened as he was, he could not but admire the quickness with which Manuel had hit upon another scheme for his undoing after that of the greased hose, had failed, for he had not a doubt that the Greek had fastened the life-line to him in such a manner that it would pull loose with a hard jerk. He was in no immediate danger of death for the air hose still connected him with the surface and the fresh air still came gushing in a welcome stream into his helmet, but a moment's reflection convinced him that this was not all of Manuel's scheme, for the Greek would know that the captain and Walter would soon become uneasy over his delay and would start an investigation which would quickly reveal that the life-line was no longer attached to him. Clearly, the Greek had another card up his sleeve which he would soon play and Charley waited for it with every nerve strained to keenest tension. He felt longingly of the air hose, wondering if the frail tube would hold for him to pull himself up to the surface by it, but he quickly decided that it would not stand the heavy strain and to break it would mean his [124]

instant death. Keeping one eye on the life-line so tantalizingly out of his reach he moved slowly forward until he stood beneath the diving boat which showed like a dim shadow above him. Suddenly a thrill of horror went through him, the diving boat was slowly drifting away—Manuel had played his trump card. In a flash the terror-stricken lad comprehended the situation. Some one of the Greeks, under Manuel's instructions, had stealthily severed the cable, relying on the boat's slow drift being unnoticed by the captain and Walter until it had dragged apart the frail air hose. But, just as Charley had given up all hope and waited for the parting of the hose which would mean his death, the dangling life-line was jerked up out of sight,—his companions had discovered a part at least of his plight—upon their next actions depended his life or death.

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The next few seconds seemed like hours to the helpless lad, then a dark speck appeared in the water above him quickly growing in size until he could see that it was Chris fighting his way downward with long steady strokes and following the air hose in his descent. The little negro was nearly exhausted when he reached the bottom. Thrusting the end of the line he had brought into Charley's hand, he turned upward and shot to the surface like a rocket. Charley whipped the line about his waist and gave the signal to pull up. He was swiftly pulled to the surface, hauled aboard the boat, and his helmet removed. Chris, breathing heavily, was standing by the mast, the water dripping from him. Walter and the captain, pale with fear, stood close beside him.

"Thank God, you're safe, lad," cried the old sailor, tears in his eyes. "We feared the air hose would part before Chris could get to you. We had just pulled on the life-line and found it had come loose from you when we discovered the boat had gone adrift. I reckon, she must have chafed her cable in two against a sharp piece of coral. Queer how everything happens all at once that way, sometimes."

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It was clear the simple old sailor did not suspect that the trouble was anything but an accident, and Charley hastened to reply,

"All is well that ends well, but I've nearly had the life scart out of me. I don't think I'll ever want to go down again."

He was watching Manuel closely as he spoke and he noted with satisfaction the expression of relief on the Greek's swarthy face. If he could only keep him from thinking that he knew anything about the gold and had not discovered his treachery, he hoped to be able to avoid open violence until they were prepared and ready for it. He was convinced that the Greek was too cowardly to risk the danger of being shot in open mutiny so long as he thought himself unsuspected and free to scheme their removal without danger to himself.

The diving boat was worked back to her old position, another anchor dropped, and donning their suits the divers resumed operations below. When they came to the surface at the end of their two hour trick below they seemed strangely excited and conversed eagerly with Manuel and the rest of the crew. Charley was for awhile puzzled to account for their excitement, but 'ere long the solution came to him. Like all plans intended to deceive, his had contained a fatal defect.

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"Walt," he whispered to his chum, "those chaps have noticed that some of the gold has been removed from that box. We are in for trouble, now, I fear." The Captain and Chris were warned to be on their guard but it seemed that the warning was unnecessary, the excited talk amongst the crew soon ceased and the fresh divers quietly prepared for their descent.

But in spite of the quietness, there was a tension and earnestness in the crew's manner which made the anxious little party of chums feel that they were standing at the edge of a powder mine which might explode at any minute.

"I would rather have open fighting than this awful waiting," Walter whispered.

"We will have that soon enough," said his chum, grimly. "It will come as soon as we try to make them get the schooner under way."

The long anxious day at last drew to its close, anchor was got up on the diving boat, and she was headed back for the schooner.

As they passed a large piece of driftwood covered with large black birds with very long necks, Manuel pointed at them, "Those are fine eating," he said wistfully. "If the young gentlemen could kill a few it would give us all a great feast."

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Walter looked at Charley who nodded assent, for he was not loath that the Greek should witness their skill with the revolver.

Both boys had practiced often with their revolvers and were better than average marksmen. Their pistols were automatics, a style of weapon with which even the unskillful can shoot fairly accurately. Walter fired six shots in as many seconds, killing four birds and wounding one. Charley fired four shots at the same time, killing two birds and crippling a third. The rest of the birds took flight before the boys could shoot more. The captain and Chris emptied their pistols at the flying flock without success.

The diving boat was run alongside the dead birds and they were picked up by the crew. Manuel seemed delighted, "The young gentlemen are wonderful shots," he declared.

## CHAPTER XVII. OUTWITTED.

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THE chums hastened below when the schooner was reached for they were eager to talk over the next move to be made.

"Things have got to be brought to a head right off," declared the captain when Charley had acquainted him with his suspicions of Manuel's foul play. "It's rank foolishness to linger along and give them more chances to work out their devilish tricks. It's better to have trouble with them right now while we are prepared than to wait and perhaps have them take us unawares."

"Thank goodness the time for action is close at hand," Charley agreed, "I could not stand this anxiety and suspense much longer. Let's go over our plan once more and make sure that we each know our parts so that there will be no hitch when we come to carry them out. Now as soon as we have supper Chris and I will get into the dingy and pretend that we are going to row around for fun. We will pull back and forth until it gets good and dark, then we'll gradually work out to that buoy. We will cut it adrift, take it aboard, pull due East from the schooner for a mile and anchor it again. That will throw them way off the scent if they should manage to get back here again before us, while it will tell us just where to look for the wreck. That part is easy, the trouble will come when we get back to the boat. First thing we had better do is to stretch several ropes across the deck from rail to rail just forward of the mainmast. That will delay and bother them if they should try to rush us in a body. The next move will be to get Manuel aft and get the irons on him. We had better get him down here in the cabin to attempt that. As soon as we get him helpless, we will carry him up and make him give our orders to get up anchor and get sail on the schooner. He's too great a coward to encourage his shipmates to make a rush for us so long as he is in our power. They may try it in spite of him, however, when they realize that the gold is going to be lost to them. If they do we will have to fight them off while Chris tends to the wheel. We don't want any bloodshed if we can help it but we mustn't let them get aft of the mainmast, they would make short work of us if it ever came to close quarters. Do you all understand now what we have to do?"

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His companions nodded.

"Then we had better reload our pistols, fill up our cartridge belts, and get ready," he continued. "I'll get the ammunition."

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But in a moment he was back from his cabin, his face pale and grave.

"How many shells have you got left in your pistol?" he demanded.

"One," Walter replied, while Chris and the captain broke open their weapons to show only empty chambers.

"I have got three shots left, that makes four altogether," Charley said, hopelessly. "All the rest of our ammunition has been stolen out of my bunk."

His companions grew as grave and pale as himself at the announcement. With only four shots left they were practically helpless in the hands of the Greeks.

"There is just one chance left," Charley declared, desperately. "We have got to get Manuel in our power and try to control the crew through him. It may work and it may not, but it's our only hope. Chris, go tell him we want to see him here in the cabin."

As soon as the little negro had gone, Charley brought out a pair of handcuffs from his grip and placed them in his pocket. "When I give the signal, get them on him," he said. "I'll lock the door so that he cannot get out or the crew come to help him. He'll likely put up a fight and we'll have to watch out for his knife, but the three of us had ought to be able to handle him. But hush, here they come now."

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Footsteps sounded on the companionway stairs, the cabin door opened, and Chris appeared, closely followed by the Greek. The little negro stepped inside but Manuel paused on the threshold and swept a keen glance over the assembled party. Perhaps some instinct warned him of his danger, perhaps he decided that the time had come for his last treacherous move. With a quick leap, he sprang back through the open doorway, slammed the door to, and bolted it outside, and the little band of chums were prisoners in the cabin of their own ship.

Charley leaped from his chair, but he was too late.

"Outwitted," he cried as he sank back into his seat. "Beaten at every point of the game. What fools, what bunglers we are." There was as much chagrin as fear in his exclamations. To be so badly beaten after all his vigilance and careful planning was hard to bear.

His companions sat silent with despair. So suddenly had it all happened they had not yet had time to realize that they were completely in the hands of the Greeks who could do with them as they pleased.

Charley flipped open his pistol and handed one of his remaining cartridges to his chum, "That gives us two apiece," he observed, "although I doubt if we will either of us need them." He retired to his cabin and reappeared with a blanket and a book. He spread out the blanket on the floor

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and stretching himself out on it prepared to read. "Might as well get what enjoyment we can," he said. "There's nothing we can do, so we might as well take it easy while we may."

"How can you be so careless?" his chum exclaimed, "any minute they may come down upon us."

"Little danger of that," the other replied, coolly. "They know we've got four shots left yet. What would be the use of their taking chances when they have got everything in their own hands."

But his companions could not view their position with the same hopeless resignation. While he read on apparently unconcerned, they discussed plan after plan for escape from their prison and perilous situation, only to reject one after the other as wildly impracticable. At last they abandoned the discussion in despair.

"Better turn in and try to get a good night's rest," Charley advised them calmly. "I will keep watch for the first four hours, although I don't believe there's the slightest use of it."

"I'm too hungry to sleep," Walter declared. "I wonder why they do not send us down our supper."

"Bless your simple little soul," his chum exclaimed, "They do not intend us to have anything to eat. I thought you understood that."

His companions looked at each other in dismay. This, the greatest of all their perils, had not before occurred to them. They understood now the awfulness of their position. All the food and water were stored forward. The Greeks had only to let them alone and they would slowly die of hunger and thirst.

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"They will not get us that way," declared Walter, desperately. "Before I'll die of hunger and thirst I'll set the schooner on fire."

Charley nodded approval. "I've been thinking of that myself," he said. "A quick death is better than a slow torturing one. But there is plenty of time to talk of that. While there is life there is hope and I have a feeling that something is going to turn up to help us out of this scrape. I've just happened to think of one thing that's in our favor."

He was prevented from explaining the new hope which had occurred to him by a knock on the cabin door and Manuel's sneering voice enquiring,

"Are the gentlemen quite comfortable?"

"Quite," Charley assured him, calmly. "Much more comfortable than you and your mates will be when the law reckons with you."

"There is no law at sea but the law of the strongest and most cunning," the Greek said, smoothly. "But I bear a proposal from my shipmates for your distinguished consideration."

"State it," replied the lad, briefly.

"You are all in a bad position," stated the Greek with oily maliciousness. "You were cunning but not cunning enough or our positions would now be reversed. We have only to do nothing now and you will all die. It would sadden our hearts to lose such loving friends but we would strive to bear up bravely under the blow. But why should you all die when we are willing to spare one. All that one would have to do would be to take an oath to be faithful and true to us and do as we bid him. Not only would his life be spared, but he would receive a share of the great wealth we have discovered."

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"Why are you so very generous in your offers?" Walter demanded, sarcastically.

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## CHAPTER XVIII. IMPRISONED.

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"WE need one of you," explained Manuel, with startling frankness. "Perhaps we could get along without but it does not pay to take chances. There is a government cutter which patrols the banks to see that the sponging vessels are complying with the laws. She may come upon us accidentally any time and it would be awkward explaining why we continued to work without American officers. It would very likely get us into trouble. But if one of you takes the part of the captain and shows the papers and explains that the rest have died from fever, all will go smoothly."

"I suppose you have decided which one of us you want?" Charley asked, curiously.

"Any one of you will do, but we prefer you. You have brains enough to realize where your own interests lie. It is easier to handle a smart man than a fool. Consider the chance we are giving you, on the one hand slow, painful, certain death; on the other, an honored position, great wealth and safety—we are generous indeed."

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"But how do you know that I will play fair?"

"The moment you joined us you would be as liable to the law as the rest of us," Manuel said calmly, "We would live or hang together. You would not dare to trifle with us, and I should watch you closely all the time."

"Here is my answer," declared Charley, whose indignation had been steadily rising at the cold-blooded proposal. "If you would all keep your part of the agreement,—which I am convinced you would not do, I'd die rather than join such a pack of dirty murderers."

"You are a bigger fool than I thought," replied the Greek calmly. "I will leave you to consider the matter better. Hunger is a great persuader, and I am in hopes that you will soon see where your best interests lie. Good-night, gentlemen, good-night, may your dreams be of the pleasantest."

"He's evidently somewhat worried," said Charley, hopefully, when the Greek's mocking voice had ceased. "He believes, I guess, that there is a good chance of the cutter coming upon him or he would not make such a proposal, although he would not keep his part of it any longer than the danger lasted. Our only hope is to keep up our strength and spirits as long as possible. There is a chance that the cutter may come along before it is too late. Better all turn in and get some rest while you are still not too hungry to sleep. I will call one of you to take my place as soon as my four hours are up, although I do not believe that they will trouble us."

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The lad was right in his belief. The night passed away without any alarm and they were able by turns to get some little sleep. With the coming of daylight, they crowded to the windows and searched the dreary waste of waters for sign of smoke or sail, but found none. The crew were going about their work in cheerful unconcern. Leaving a half dozen men on the schooner, the balance got aboard the diving boat and sailed out to the sponge ground where they could be seen working steadily all day bringing up the gold from the bottom. The prisoners suffered much during the long day from their increasing hunger and thirst.

At night the diving boat returned to the schooner and the dispirited watchers could see that the crew had not wasted their day by any means. Both sponge baskets were nearly full of the gold coins.

"We've got to do something, I don't care how desperate it is," declared Captain Westfield. "Anything is better than this keeping still and suffering. By to-morrow this time we'll be too weak to do much and thar ain't no certainty that the cutter will come along this way at all. I'm in for doing something, no matter what."

Charley turned from his gazing out of the window, "Look here, Captain," he called, softly. "Speak low," he cautioned as the old sailor crept to his side, "we don't want them to hear us on deck."

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"Geewhilkens!" whispered the old seaman in swift comprehension, "they've left the diving boat fastened right under our windows."

"God grant that they may not think to move it," the lad replied, trembling with excitement. "We can do nothing until it gets dark and they retire to the forecandle."

Walter and Chris were quickly made acquainted with the suddenly-offered chance of escape and their joy knew no bounds.

Then followed hours which seemed like days to the breathless, anxious watchers. The Greeks ate their supper and lounged around the deck talking and laughing. It seemed as though they would never retire to their bunks. But at last their voices gradually ceased and silence settled down upon the schooner. Charley cautiously opened one of the big windows and swung it outward, then climbing softly toward the opening, lowered himself to the diving boat's deck. The Captain, Walter, and Chris followed. Not a word was spoken for each realized the terrible risk they were running. As soon as all were crouched motionless aboard, Charley, with his knife, severed the rope which bound them to the schooner and the boat drifted slowly away from the ship's side.

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No one moved until the schooner was at last lost in the darkness.

"Start up the engine," said Charley, as he took the helm, and Walter slipped down amongst the machinery. After a few minutes' fumbling in the darkness, he crept back.

"There's no gasoline in the tank," he announced.

"Everything seems against us," Charley sighed. "Well, get sail on her. We will have to do the best we can."

In a few minutes the great square sail was spread, and, leaning over, the little craft sent a line of foam rippling from her bow.

"They'll have hard work finding us in this darkness," exulted the captain as he took the helm from Charley. "I reckon, we'd better shape a course for the nearest port,—that's Judson. As soon as we get thar, we can telegraph to all the ports along the coast to watch out for the schooner. We've got 'em now, I reckon, lads, they'll have to put in somewhere sooner or later, an' they'll be nabbed. I feel just like yelling for joy."

The rising spirits of the little party were helped by Chris' discovery of a couple of loaves of

stale black bread, and part of a bottle of ripe olives in one of the lockers. They made a meagre but very welcome repast upon the uninviting food.

But their joy over their lucky escape was soon dampened by the threatening appearance of the Western sky. A heavy bank of clouds was slowly rising there from which came flashes of lightning and the rumble of distant thunder. [141]

"I reckon, it ain't nothin' but a thunder squall," the captain assured them. "Thar ain't no call to be uneasy, this is a mighty seaworthy little craft. I reckon, we could ride out a right smart gale in her if we had it to do."

Before they ran much further the captain gave the order to lower and reef the great sail. When hoisted again, it was only a tiny patch of canvas, as compared with its former size.

"Thar's only one thing for us to do when that squall strikes us an' that's to scud before it," the old captain declared. "We can't heave her to under that sail. Luckily, the way it's coming won't blow us out of our course much."

They had not long to wait for the storm to burst. The wind soon descended with a violence that threatened to bury the diving boat in the seas it brought with it. But the little craft had been built to stand just such weather, and, quickly gathering headway, she darted away before the gale. With the wind came the rain in great driving, blinding sheets. The boys hailed its appearance with joy. They spread out their jackets, bits of sail, and even their hats to catch the precious drops. In a short while they had secured enough to quench their intense thirst. This done, they gathered around the captain at the helm ready to render any assistance in their power. There was little they could do for the old sailor would trust no one but himself to steer in the heavy sea-way. As the hours passed by without showing any abatement of the storm, it became evident to his companions that he was growing anxious. [142]

"I don't like the way it's hanging on," he declared. "We must be making at least twelve miles an hour and, at that rate, we will have the land close aboard before daylight. Crawl forward, Charley, an' keep a sharp look-out, the sky is clearing some an', I reckon, you can see a few hundred feet ahead."

The lad obediently worked his way up into the bow, and bracing himself against the anchor bits, peered ahead into the darkness. He could make out nothing at first but the heavy foam-flecked, tossing water. He sat watching intently till, at last, Walter crawled forward to take his place. He had only got part way back to the stern when there came a cry from his chum,

"Hard down! hard down!"

With true seaman's quickness, the Captain jammed the long tiller over and the little craft, escaping broaching in the trough of the seas by a miracle, shot up into the wind—a second too late.

"Hang on for your lives!" the old sailor cried. [143]

Black masses loomed out of the darkness to leeward. A great wave picked up the helpless boat and flung it with crashing, breaking timbers, upon the rocks.

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## CHAPTER XIX. WRECKED.

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THE boys had obeyed the old sailor's order, and, though greatly shaken by the shock, they retained their hold on the boat.

"Quick, get on the rocks," shouted the Captain. "She'll pound to pieces in a jiffy."

Fortunately, the boat's bow had been driven up on the ledge nearly out of the water. The boys dropped over the side followed by the old sailor, and, though beaten and bruised against the sharp rocks succeeded in struggling out upon the one which reared itself above the water. They glanced back to where the boat had struck, but, short as had been their struggle out, it had witnessed the destruction of the staunch craft. Only that portion of her bow lodged upon the reef remained intact, the balance of her hull was a mass of twisted, splintered, broken planks.

Great as was the danger from which they had escaped, their present position was still far from safe. The slippery rock afforded but insecure footing and it was frequently swept by the larger seas. At such times, they had all they could do to keep from being swept off its slimy surface. [145]

"I reckon, we've struck on a reef," the Captain said, anxiously. "It all depends upon the tide whether we are safe or not. If it's low tide, now, high tide will cover this rock so deep that we'll not be able to hang on to it."

It soon became evident that the tide was still rising, though slowly. The waves began sweeping over the flat rock with such violence that the tired, wretched, anxious, little party could hardly maintain their footing. To the right and left of them, rose other higher masses of rock, but they did not dare to attempt to reach them through the darkness and the boiling surf. Wet, cold,

hungry, and wretched; they clung to their insecure refuge until day began to break in the East. With the coming of light they strained their brine-smarting eyes to discover what manner of place it was upon which they had been thrown. The outlook was not reassuring. They were, as the Captain had surmised, on a point of low-lying reef, most of which was constantly wave-swept by the monstrous surges. To the East of them, lay a low, marshy shore dotted here and there with small islands covered with cedar hammocks, but between them and the islands was at least two miles of foaming water. The boys gazed wistfully at the longed-for land.

"We can't make it," Charley said, sadly. "Chris might, perhaps, be able to swim it, but it would be a long swim for the rest of us at any time, and, tired and weak as we are now, it would be impossible. We will have to stick it out here until the storm goes down a bit, then, try to fashion some kind of a raft out of the planks of the diving boat." [146]

"We can't be far from Judson," said the Captain, with an attempt at cheerfulness. "A boat may come by an' pick us up any minute."

But the boys were not cheered by any such prospect. They knew that the chance of any boat being out in such weather was very small indeed. One fact, however, gave them a little hope; the tide was undoubtedly falling. It had evidently been almost at its height when they had landed on the rock.

"I wish we had something to eat," Walter sighed, "we have had nothing but a little bread in two days. I begin to feel weak all over."

Chris gazed thoughtfully at the water on the shore-side of the rock. "I reckon, I might find somethin' down dar," he observed. "I'se goin' to try it anyway. You white chilluns has sho' got to hab somethin' to eat."

Although the water was somewhat smoother to the lee of the rocks, it boiled and foamed there threateningly and the boys endeavored to dissuade the plucky little negro from the attempt, but their objections only made him the more determined.

"Golly! you chilluns doan know what a diver dis nigger is," he said, proudly. "You jes' stay still an' watch him now." He removed his clothes, handing them to Charley to hold, slipped over the side of the rock, and sank down beneath the surface. He was gone so long that the watchers had begun to grow anxious when he reappeared, blowing like a porpoise. In one hand, he held tightly clenched, a big stone crab and a large conch. [147]

"Take 'em," he exclaimed, "I'se goin' down again. Dar's heaps more of dem on de bottom."

He continued diving until he had brought up six more conchs and two more crabs, then he crawled out on the rock completely exhausted, and held up one foot for their inspection. There was a tiny puncture in the sole of it from which the blood was slowly trickling.

"I reckon, I'se goin' to hab some trubble wid dat foot," he observed, gravely. "Ole Mister Stingaree gib me a dig dar. He warn't much bigger dan a plate, but der horns are powerful poison."

His announcement sent a chill of fear to the hearts of his companions, for they all well-knew the dangerous character of the flat, horn-tailed fish which lurks on the bottom in Florida waters. The Captain did not lose a second in whipping out his sheath knife and cutting open the puncture which he washed out thoroughly with sea water. He then made Chris sit on the edge of the rock and hang his foot over in the water.

The plucky little negro bore the operation with unflinching cheerfulness. "I sho' wish you'd open up one ob dem conch for me, Massa Charley," he observed. "If dis ting's goin' to make me sick, I wants to be dat much ahead." [148]

Charley quickly broke open one of the conchs and gave him the meat,—a big lump of tough flesh, almost sufficient for an entire meal. He also opened several others for the Captain, Walter, and himself, upon which they made a hearty and strengthening, if somewhat tasteless, meal. Chris ate but little of the tough meat, he soon pushed it away from him with a weary little sigh.

"I doan want no moah," he said, quietly. "I'ze gettin' berry sick. Reckon ole Mister Stingaree dun got dis nigger for sho'."

His little ebony face soon took on a dull-ashen hue and he began to vomit violently; passing from these spells into a heavy stupor, the mysterious subtle poison from the stingaree was getting in its work. His grieving companions watched him in helpless suspense, there was nothing they could do to relieve his sufferings.

"We can't let him die like this," Charley cried, as the little sufferer twitched in spasms of pain. "I am going to try to reach shore and find help. He has taken bigger risks for us many a time."

Neither Walter or the Captain tried to stop him. They would have gladly offered to make the attempt in his place but he was the strongest and best swimmer of the three. [149]

He removed his jacket and shoes and with a last good-bye, plunged off of the rock and headed for the distant shore. He had not gone more than twenty yards when he stopped with a cry of joy.

"Come on," he called back, "the water isn't more than three feet deep here. There's only a deep place near the rocks and you can get across that easily."



But he had to return to help them get Chris across the deep narrow channel, for the little negro's struggles in his spasms threatened to drown his helpers. At last, the dangerous stretch of water was safely crossed, and, leaving Walter and the Captain to half float and half carry Chris between them, the lad waded ahead, picking out the shoalest and smoothest path to the shore. They arrived there spent and panting and sank down for a moment to recover their breath. It was not an inviting-looking place where they had landed. A low rock-strewn marsh, covered with tall, rank grass stretched away before them for two or three miles before it met the higher, heavily-wooded mainland. Here and there the marsh was dotted with small, island-like clumps of dark green cedar trees, and, picking up the light, little negro in his strong, young arms, Charley headed for the nearest of these, followed by his exhausted companions. The passage was made with difficulty; low needle-pointed rocks strewed the way, and here and there lay pools of soft, boggy mud, tenanted by repulsive, swollen looking moccasins. It needed care to avoid the one without stepping on the other, but, at last, the patch of high ground was reached and, laying his burden beneath a wide-spreading cedar, Charley turned to his companions.

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"We have got to work quick if we are to stand a chance even of saving him," he said, crisply. "Walter, get in to the mainland as quick as you can and bring me all the palmetto berries you can find,—hurry. Captain, let me take your flint and steel and then get me a lot of soft mud from the marsh."

Tired though they were, the two hastened away to execute his orders, while Charley worked swiftly to carry out the plan he had formed while coming ashore. It was a heroic one, but rough measures were the only ones it was in his power to apply. Hastily gathering together a pile of dead cedar limbs, he lit a fire with the flint and steel. While it was blazing up, he stripped off his belt and, tying it above Chris' knee, with a stick twisted it tight until it was embedded in the flesh, shutting off the flow of blood from below to the heart. He next heated a small stone in the now blazing fire and applied it while hot to the swollen wound. The smell of the crisping flesh sickened him, but he doggedly stuck to his task until he judged the wound was sufficiently cauterized. Chris lay mercifully lost to the pain in a deep stupor. The lad had just finished burning the wound when the Captain returned with his jacket full of soft mud, and, emptying it out, hastened back for another load. Charley heaped a lot of rocks upon the fire, and, as soon as they were hot, ranged them close on each side of the wounded limb, heaping the soft mud on top of them until he had formed an air-tight mound over the leg. He now had a great poultice of hot mud of great drawing power, the danger was that Chris might be attacked by other spasms and succeed in working his leg out from the hot covering. To prevent this, the lad tore his shirt up into strips and, binding the little negro tightly, piled stones around the encased leg so that it could not be easily moved.

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## CHAPTER XX. HUNTING HELP.

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CHARLEY next cut off small branches of cedar and placed them under the unconscious little fellow's head and back so that he might rest as comfortably as possible. This done, he sat back breathless and exhausted and waited impatiently for Walter's return.

Captain Westfield surveyed the young physician's work with hopeful admiration. "If Chris lives, it will be you as has saved his life," he declared.

"He has saved mine more than once," Charley replied, "but I am afraid he is not going to live. I don't like this deep stupor he has fallen into. I wish Walter would hurry."

Walter had been hurrying as fast as he could, and he soon appeared bearing a hatful of ripe palmetto berries. His riddled shoes and bleeding feet told of reckless running over the sharp rocks.

Charley smashed the ripe berries between two stones, catching the juice in his cap. Chris' teeth were tightly set, but he managed to pry them apart with his knife blade and forced some of the sticky liquid down his throat.

"I don't know whether it will help him or not, but I am in hopes it will," he said, as, tired out, he sat down by the little fellow's side. "Those berries make a powerful tonic and stimulant, and I believe that is what is needed. The poison seems to have deadened the heart's action and brought on that stupor. A few minutes will tell whether it is going to do any good."

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It soon became evident that the rude remedies were performing their mission well, the sufferer's pulse, which had grown slow and feeble, quickened, and his little face began to lose some of its ashen hue.

As soon as he became sure that a change for the better was taking place, Charley arose from his brief rest.

"I am going to find help," he declared. "We must get him to some place where he can have proper attention. How far do you think we are from Judson, Captain?"

"Not more than twenty miles to the north of it, I judge. Maybe not more than ten miles. But you

must not dream of starting yet awhile, lad. You must rest for a bit, an' have something to eat first."

"And I am going with you when you start," Walter declared. "Something might happen to you amongst those slippery rocks and awful bog holes. The Captain can do all that can be done for Chris while you are gone."

There was no disputing the wisdom of both suggestions and they busied themselves with the first proposition, the finding of something to eat. This demanded more time and trouble. Another trip had to be made down to the water and considerable searching was necessary before they could collect enough of crabs and shell fish to make the full meal that their hunger craved. Their rest they gained while their dinner was roasting in the coals. [154]

Their rest, meal, and Chris' steadily improving condition, put them all in better strength and spirits, and the boys were cheerful when they bid the old sailor good-bye and made their start in search of help.

"We'll be back as soon as we can get back, Captain," Charley said, "but you don't want to worry if we take longer than you expect."

"I reckon, I'll keep too busy to have much time for worryin'," the old sailor replied. "Jes' be careful, lads, an' get back as soon as you can."

He watched until the rank marsh grass hid the two lads from sight, then busied himself with making the camp a little more comfortable for himself and his sick companion. Chris' welfare was the first thing to claim his attention. With his sheath knife he cut armful after armful of marsh grass and added it to the rough couch Charley had fashioned for the little negro, converting it into a soft, comfortable bed. The low-hanging cedar boughs formed a kind of rude shelter over the little lad, but the captain was not entirely satisfied with it. The rainy season was near at hand and heavy showers might be expected at any time. A thick layer of marsh grass placed over the lowest cedar limbs quickly made the covering more to his satisfaction. This done, he paused for a brief rest and to decide what should be his next task. Although, he knew that the port of Judson could not be more than twenty miles away, he realized that, owing to the necessarily slow traveling amongst the sharp rocks and bog holes, it might be at least three days before the boys could succeed in getting back with help. His duties, then, would be the care of Chris, the providing of food for them both, and the gathering of firewood. Water was luckily plentiful, there was an abundance of it in a cup-like depression near the center of the island. [155]

In a Northern country with no weapons but his sheath knife, these tasks would have seemed almost impossible of accomplishment, but the captain was not discouraged. The first thing, of course, was to see that the little negro's marked improvement was not checked. Heating more stones in the fire, the old sailor piled them around the mound of mud covering the wounded leg. Then, as the berries Walter had brought were nearly exhausted, he decided that the next thing of importance was to lay in a fresh supply. He found the trip to the mainland slow and dangerous. Where the way was not strewn with sharp-pointed rocks, it was dotted with forbidding-looking sink holes of soft, slimy mud. Rank-growing marsh grass covered the whole, making it extremely difficult to pick out a safe passage through the dangers. At last, however, he gained the mainland where he found the oily black berries growing in greatest profusion. He gathered his jacket full of them and then sat down on a fallen log to rest a minute and look around. It was an inviting spot in which he found himself. The land rose up from the marsh to form a high, sloping bluff through which trickled a stream of clear, reddish water. [156]

The bluff was covered with a dense growth of palms, satinwoods, bays, rubber trees, and low-ground palmettos. It was an ideal place for a camp, and the captain eyed it regretfully, wishing that it was possible to bring Chris there from the little marsh-surrounded island. But that was impossible until the little fellow was able to walk and he dismissed the idea with a sigh. He was just gathering up his jacket of berries to leave when a noise in the undergrowth close at hand made him sink back to his seat on the log. The brushes before him parted suddenly and a large deer stepped out into an open place not twenty feet from where he sat. For a full two minutes, he and the timid animal remained motionless, looking directly into each other's eyes, then the old sailor pulled out his sheath knife and sprang for it with some wild notion of securing it for food, but the deer leaped lightly away a few steps and stopped again as if in deepest wonder and curiosity. The captain sheathed his knife with a sigh. "I reckon, you don't know how wicked men are," he addressed the graceful animal. "Guess you ain't ever seed many men or you wouldn't be so powerful tame. Some steaks from you would taste right good, but you ain't aiming to let me get close enough for that. Well, good-bye, old fellow, I hope I'll meet you again sometime when I've got a good gun." [157]

Saying which, the old sailor picked up his burden and headed back for the island, the deer gazing after him in innocent-eyed wonder.

He had nearly reached the little camp when a scream from Chris sent him forward at a run, regardless of rocks and sink holes.

The scene that met his gaze as he burst into the little clearing chilled him with horror and dismay.

Attracted, no doubt, by its warmth, two huge, swollen-looking moccasins had crawled up on the little heap of mud and now lay with their flat, ugly heads within a few inches of the little

negro's trembling body.

"Don't move an inch, Chris," he shouted, as he broke off a dead limb from a cedar tree.

The caution was useless, for, bound as he was, hand and foot, Chris could only lay and stare in horror and helplessness.

A couple of well-aimed blows from the stick killed the two poisonous, sluggish serpents, and, dragging them to the edge of the island, the captain pitched them out into the marsh. [158]

"They ain't very pleasant visitors," he remarked as he returned to his helpless companion, "but I reckon, they've done you a heap of good. You was laying like a dead man when I went ashore and now you look right pert and lively."

"Dey's too sudden an' powerful medicine," grumbled Chris. "Dis nigger might jes' as well die as be scart to death. Golly! how my leg does burn and smart. Please take dat stuff off ob hit, Massa Captain, an' unloose my han's."

But the old sailor feared to remove the mud poultice, dreading another relapse. However, he untied the little negro's hands, upon his promise that he would lie still and not move. He was delighted with the change in the little lad. Whether the shock from the snakes, or, what was much more probable, the continued effects of the palmetto juice had done the work, the stupor which had frightened them all was entirely gone, and the patient soon declared himself decidedly hungry.

Cutting a stick and laying it within Chris' reach so that he would have the means of protecting himself from other possible visitors, the Captain departed in search of food.

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## CHAPTER XXI. THE CASTAWAYS.

It was lucky for the captain that he was wise to the resources of the Florida coast. A stranger to the country would not have known where to look for food and would likely have soon perished of hunger. Although he had no other weapon than his sheath knife, he went about his task with the air of a man who was confident of success. Before leaving the island, he cut a long, straight cypress pole and sharpened one end to a keen point. With this in his hand, he made his way down to the Gulf. The tide was high again but there was a mass of rock some two hundred feet from shore which protruded a couple of feet above the water. Removing his shoes, he waded cautiously out, prodding the bottom before him with his pole and picking his way carefully to avoid stepping on a stingaree.

The rock reached, he perched himself on its edge and sat peeping down into the water which was clear as crystal. He had not long to wait. In a few minutes a fish swam slowly past close to the rock, and, taking careful aim, the old sailor dove his rude spear down with all his force. Its point struck just behind the fish's head, passing entirely through its body. It died without a struggle, and the captain lifted it out upon the rock with a shout of triumph. It was a beautifully-specked sea trout about three feet in length and weighed at least twelve pounds. Although there was plenty of other fish within sight, the trout was enough for their present needs and, scaling and washing it carefully, the captain waded ashore with his prize. But he was not yet quite satisfied. Laying his fish down upon a bunch of clean sea moss, he examined carefully the muddy beach near the water's edge. Here and there, tiny jets of water squirted up from the mud, and, where they seemed to be most numerous, he began to dig. In a few minutes he had unearthed a couple of dozen large clams. With these and the fish, and a huge armful of moist sea moss in his arms, he made his way back to camp where Chris was eagerly awaiting his return. [160]

"I sho' wish I could get up from hyah," mourned the little negro. "Golly! I reckon, I'd show you how to cook dat fish so dat you nebber could eat nuff ob hit."

"You jes' lie still thar," commanded the captain. "I'm a Cape Cod man, an' thar ain't any cook living that can show a Cape Cod man how to cook this kind of grub. You just watch and learn somethin'."

Chris watched him with professional jealousy and interest. He firmly believed that no one on earth could cook as good as he but he reluctantly admitted to himself that the old sailor made his preparations with considerable promise of success. [161]

First, he scooped out a hole in the ground about three feet deep and two feet square and kindled a small fire in the bottom upon which he placed a layer of small rocks, as soon as it was going good, then, he paused to remark regretfully,

"I wish we had some potatoes. I never heard of a clam bake yet without potatoes."

"Dar's something jes' as good as 'taters," declared Chris, pointing to a low-growing plant. "Jes' you dig up some ob dem roots an' try 'em. Hit's wild cassava, an' hit taste jes' like Irish 'taters."

The captain dug down with his sheath knife and unearthed several tubers a couple of feet in length and about three inches in circumference. He regarded them dubiously, but, on Chris'

repeated assurances that they were good and wholesome, he cut off several pieces and washed them carefully. By the time this was done, the fire in the pit had burned low, and the stones were smoking hot. Cutting several broad, green, palmetto leaves, he laid them on the stones and spread over them a thin layer of the moist sea moss. Upon the moss he laid the fish and over it spread another layer of moss upon which he placed the clams, covering them with more moss, upon which he placed the cassava, and, piling a thick layer of sea grass over the whole, built a small fire on top of it. Then he sat down and watched the fire while he and Chris waited hungrily the slow cooking of their meal. At last, the captain declared that it must be done. The fire on top was raked away, the contents of the pit were taken out and placed upon green, clean palmetto leaves, and the two castaways fell to with appetites sharpened by their long wait. And what a feast it was,—the clams cooked to perfection in their own juice, the fish juicy and delicious, the cassava snow-white and mealy and all rendered doubly delicious by the salt spicy taste of the seaweed in which they had been cooked. And what a joy it was to feel that the worst of their troubles were over. Chris getting better, the boys soon to be back with help, all the worry and anxiety they had suffered past, the next few days to see them all safely back in Tarpon, where they would all wait in comfort and safety, ready to claim their ship when the Greeks brought her in, and, after that, they would return for the gold and with it they would secure the many things they had longed for all their lives.

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Surely the prospect was bright enough to make the two lonely castaways chatter brightly, cheerfully, and hopefully over their evening meal. They could not see the dangers, worries, and misfortunes yet to befall them, and it was well they could not for it would have robbed the two of the happiest hour they had had in many days.

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At last, the feast was over and Chris had paid the cook the highest compliment of which he could conceive.

"Golly! Massa Capt., you cooked dem tings might nigh as good as I could have done."

Although there were many things which the captain wished to do, darkness was fast coming on and he had to complete his final preparations for the night. First, he cut a lot of small boughs which he piled up under the shelter close to Chris to serve as his own bed. This done, he gathered piles of wood which he spread in a circle around the big cedar and set on fire to protect them both from chance visits of snakes during the night. By the time this was finished, it was dark and he crept in under the shelter close to his dusky little companion in misfortune, and, after a short, simple prayer full of thankfulness for their deliverance from the dangers that had threatened them, he quickly fell into the deep sleep of total exhaustion. But sleep did not come so readily to Chris. He had slept, or been unconscious, much of the time since his accident and the stimulating effect of the palmetto medicine helped to drive slumber away from him. He lay very quiet to avoid disturbing the old sailor's rest, but, try as he would, he could not get to sleep. At last he gave up the attempt and lay with eyes wide open looking out at the stars and the twinkling camp-fires. From the marsh about came strange noises of the night, the croaking of multitudes of frogs, the cackle of marsh hens, the squawking of cranes, and the rustling of the marsh grass in the wind. Slowly the circle of fire died down, smouldered and went out. Only the big main camp-fire was left a glowing mass of embers.

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Suddenly the wakeful little negro's ears caught another sound mingled with the voices of the night,—a slow, heavy, creeping noise. For a time he lay quiet listening, his hearing strained to the utmost to catch the new strange sound. He waited until there was no doubt that it was close at hand and steadily drawing nearer, then, he reached over and shook his snoring companion.

"Wake up, Massa Captain," he cried, "dar's some wild beast a creepin' into de camp."

"I hear it," agreed the captain, instantly wide awake. "Jes' lay still, lad, an' don't be frightened. I'll stir up the fire a bit, that will run it off."

He arose from his couch and strode boldly for the smouldering fire.

"Look out!" Chris yelled, suddenly, "Foah de Lawd's sake, look out!" His keen eyes had caught a glimpse of a black shape passing between the old sailor and the mass of glowing embers, but his warning came too late,—the captain was upon the moving shape before he saw it.

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A swishing noise rent the air, a loud thud, the old sailor was knocked backward several feet flat on the ground, and, with a loud, sharp bellowing, the mysterious visitor glided away into the darkness.

"Is you hurt? Is you hurt, Massa Cap?" cried the terror-stricken lad.

"A little bit, a little bit," called back the old sailor, his voice hoarse with pain.

He came creeping back into the shelter on hands and knees.

"It was a big bull alligator," he explained, painfully. "Must have been twelve feet long. It caught me a fearful blow on the legs with its tail. I hope thar ain't no bones broken but it feels as though thar was."

A close examination proved his fears groundless, but the terrible blow had done all but break the bones. In spite of the pain, however, he crawled forth again and replenished the fire, but he was faint and giddy with pain before he succeeded in getting back into the shelter and stretched out on his couch once more.

"I reckon, I'll be all right by morning," he said, hopefully, "but I don't calculate I'll be able to sleep any more to-night, my legs hurt too bad for that. Don't make any difference though, I 'low I've had enough sleep for one night—it can't be more than a couple of hours 'till daylight."

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It proved to be even less and with the coming of light he removed his trousers and examined his limbs anxiously. He had indeed received a terrible blow from the prowling monster, both legs were bruised and swollen where the tail had struck it and it seemed a miracle that the bones had not been broken. It caused him exquisite pain to rise upon his feet, but there was work which had to be done, and, in spite of his suffering, he must do it. So, hiding his pain as well as he could, he prepared to sally forth to secure food for the day.

But in spite of all his efforts he could not entirely hide his intense suffering.

"You jes' lay down an' let me go out an' find grub, Massa Cap," Chris pleaded. "I feels jes' as well as can be again now."

But the sturdy old sailor would not listen to his pleadings.

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## CHAPTER XXII. ANOTHER DANGER.

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"DAR's one thing I want you to do 'fore you go projectin' off," said the little negro. "I wants you to cut me some ob dem palmetto buds. I'se goin' to braid you a hat. Hit's a plum wonder dat you ain't got sun struck goin' bareheaded like you is."

"I ain't had time to remember that I lost my hat when we were wrecked. I'se been so worried an' busy," said the captain. "Now you speak of it, my head does feel sort of dull an' heavy. I hope the boys will think to cover their heads with something—this sun does beat down right hot."

"Mass Charley will sho' rig up some kind ob hat," Chris declared, confidently. "'Sides dey's both young an' can stand a heap more sun den what you kin. You jes' be mighty careful dis mornin' an' by noon dis nigger will hab a fine hat fixed for you. I'se done made lots ob dem on Cat Island."

There was a few young cabbage palms scattered over the island and the captain cut out several of the buds with his sheath knife and placed them beside the little negro, then, knotting up the ends of his bandanna handkerchief to form a turban, he took his spear and started for the shore.

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Chris watched his slow, faltering, painful steps until he was out of sight then began on his proposed task. The buds were really young fresh leaves yet unfolded, soft and pliable, yet very strong. He shredded them into strips about half an inch in width until he had accumulated quite a pile; then, taking four of the pieces at a time, with deft, skillful fingers, he wove them into a braid about an inch in width.

In a couple of hours, he had a string of braid several yards long.

The fashioning of the braid into a hat, without needle and thread and while lying flat on his back was a more difficult task, but he attacked it with cheerful energy, using the point of his knife for a needle and small strips of palmetto for thread. At last, his task was completed, and, although the hat was grotesque in shape and appearance, it was soft, strong, and light, and would prove an effective protection from the fierce rays of the tropic sun. The little worker was not yet satisfied but at once set about the manufacture of a basket from the same material realizing how useful it would be for the carrying of clams, fish, and other things.

He was still engaged upon it when the captain came stumbling into camp bearing a large fish and several dozen more of the clams. The old sailor's face was red, his movement weak and uncertain, and his breathing heavy and labored, while he was trembling violently from head to foot. He sank down in the cedar's shade and wiped his flaming face.

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"I reckon, I've got a touch of the sun," he said, feebly. "I feel weak and dizzy. I'll lie down in the shade for a bit an' it will pass off. Don't be worried, lad, it will pass off in a jiffy."

But pass off it did not. By the end of half an hour the sturdy old seaman was lying unconscious, his breath coming in short, wheezy gasps.

Chris watched him for a while in anxiety and fear. He knew that it might be dangerous for him to move his wounded leg but all thought of his own danger was lost in the fear that the stricken old sailor was dying before his eyes. He attempted to pull his leg out from the mound but could not move it. The heat of the stones had baked the mud hard. With great effort he raised himself into a sitting position, and, with his sheath knife cut and dug away frantically at the baked mud until he had the leg uncovered, then, severing the bandage above his knee, he attempted to rise but could not move the injured limb. He fell back and viewed it with frightened dismay. It was not a pretty sight for it was a mass of blisters where the hot mud had clung, and a large bluish swelling marked the place where the stingaree's horn had entered. The tight bandage, shutting off the blood supply for so long, had rendered it paralyzed and useless. Although the breaking

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blisters caused him exquisite pain, he fell to rubbing the numbed limb briskly with both hands until the blood crept slowly back into the veins. At last, he was able to gain his feet and by resting most of his weight on his uninjured leg managed to limp over to the unconscious sailor. Luckily, he had been raised in a torrid country where sunstrokes were of frequent occurrence. He knew just what to do and he did it quickly and surely. His first act was to raise the unconscious man's head and place a high pillow of twigs beneath it. Then, stirring the smouldering fire, he placed several large stones in the glowing coals. While they were heating he removed the captain's shoes and bathed his hot head and flushed face with cool water, and tearing his shirt to pieces, wet it and bound it around the sufferer's head. By the time this was done, the stones were hot, and, rolling a couple up in his jacket, he placed them at the captain's feet, then, seated by his side, he awaited the result with fear and trembling. A terrible dread gripped his heart that the remedies had been applied too late, for the old sailor had all the appearance of a dying man. Thirty minutes dragged slowly away without apparent change, then, slowly, the old sailor's breathing grew less labored and his face began to lose some of its fiery hue. Chris hailed these favorable signs with joy as indicated that the crisis had been safely passed, but his joy was somewhat dampened when the hours passed by without the stricken man showing signs of consciousness. He seemed to pass from his stupor to a deep sleep from which the little negro dreaded awakening him. It was evident that the old seaman was in for a long spell of weakness from the heat stroke he had suffered. There was nothing more his little companion could do to relieve his sufferings and he remained seated by his side watching him anxiously until the waning of the afternoon warned him that it was time to partake of food and make preparations for the night. He had eaten nothing since the night before and he was conscious of a sense of growing weakness. The fish the captain had caught was already tainted from the heat and the little negro felt too weak as yet to venture forth to secure more, so he dug up a few of the cassava roots which he roasted in the coals. These, together with a handful of palmetto berries, constituted his supper. As soon as it was finished he began his preparations for the night. Slowly and painfully, he gathered together broken limbs to keep the circles of fire going until daylight came again. By the time this was accomplished and the fires lit he was weak and trembling from pain and exhaustion and was glad to crawl onto his couch by the captain's side. The old sailor roused into momentary wakefulness at the noise of the snapping twigs.

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"How you is, Massa Capt.?" demanded the little negro, eagerly.

"Weak, mighty weak. Feel as though I couldn't lift my hand to my head, but I will be all right by morning, I reckon. I guess, we have got no cause to worry now. The boys will be back to-night or early in the morning at the latest. How do you feel, lad?"

"Fine," lied the little negro, cheerfully. "Jes' you go back to sleep again. I'll keep de fires up all right."

With a sigh of satisfaction, the captain closed his eyes and was soon sound asleep again, but there was no such rest for his little companion. Twice Chris hobbled out and renewed the fires. The third time he had to crawl forth on hands and knees. His wound was again swelling rapidly and he could no longer bear his weight on the injured limb. He tried vainly to sleep. The wounded leg throbbed with intense pain which gradually crept over his whole body, making him feel sick and faint all over. He understood the reason for his sufferings. Some of the poison still left in his wound had, with the removal of the tight bandages from his leg, found its way back into the blood and was coursing through his little body poisoning as it went.

"Golly!" he remarked, grimly, to himself, "if dem white chillens doan get back wid help an' medicine by mornin', I reckon dis nigger ain't agoin' to see Cat Island and his old mammy no moah. An' if Chris gits plum helpless what's goin' to become ob Massa Captain wid no one to tend to him. He tinks he'll be all right in de mornin' but hits goin' to take a powerful long time for him to get real peart again."

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The long night dragged slowly away. Occasionally the little negro crept forth and replenished the fires, the balance of the time he lay quiet listening for cry or sound that would tell of the boys' return, but nothing fell upon his strained hearing but the croak of frogs, the bellowing of alligators and the strange night noises of the marsh.

At daylight the captain awoke and attempted to rise, but, although he was greatly improved, he was yet too weak to stand erect.

"You jes' lie still," Chris counseled him, "dar ain't no call for you to go projectin' around none. I'se goin' out an' git somethin' for us to eat."

Although it cost him intense pain, the little negro managed to walk erect until he was out of the old sailor's sight, then he dropped down on hands and knees and crawled painfully down to the shore.

The touch of the cool salt water helped the throbbing pain in his leg and he succeeded in wading out to the rocks where he was not long in spearing a large, fat mackerel. With this, he returned to the camp, for he did not dare in his growing weakness to search for clams or other food. He found the old sailor asleep again, and, cleaning the fish he broiled it over the coals. As soon as it was done he awakened the sleeper.

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"Hyah is youah breakfas' all nice an' hot," he announced. "You want to eat a plenty ob hit. I'se agoin' to lay down a spell. I didn't sleep berry good last night."

## CHAPTER XXIII. THE RELAPSE.

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CAPTAIN WESTFIELD ate heartily of the delicious fish. Much to his delight, he found that, except for the extreme weakness following his heat prostration, he felt unusually well. He wisely decided not to invite a relapse by getting up at once, and, as soon as he had finished eating, he lay back upon his couch and quietly fell asleep again. It was midday when he awoke feeling much better and stronger. The first thing that met his gaze as he gained a sitting position was Chris lying in the same position in which he had first flung himself. He called to him several times but the little negro lay still and motionless. Thoroughly alarmed, he crawled over and surveyed the unconscious lad. The sight of the enormously swollen leg and a few minutes' fingering of the dark little wrist told him what was the matter. The slow pulse beats showed that the subtle poison, released from its confinement by the removal of the bandage, had found its way to the plucky, loyal, little heart.

The captain sat down by the little fellow's side and dashed the stinging tears from his eyes.

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"He's killed himself for me," he moaned. "If he had laid still just as he was he would have been all right. But, God bless him, he risked his life for a poor, old, worthless hulk like me. An' thar ain't nothing I can do to save him now."

Although he had but small faith that it would do any good in such a desperate case, he hastily crushed out a cupful of juice from the palmetto berries and forced it down Chris' throat, then, resuming his seat by his side, he watched to see if the powerful stimulant would have any effect.

As the hours dragged slowly away he rejoiced to see that the lad's condition apparently grew no worse. Encouraged, he crushed out more of the juice and administered it at regular intervals. "I believe he's got a good fighting chance to pull through. If the boys would only get back with some whiskey an' drugs, now, I reckon, we could save him. I wonder what can be keepin' them so long. They've had plenty of time to make Judson and back."

But the afternoon wore away without sign of the rescuers, and a new fear crept into the old sailor's worries. Something must have happened to the two boys. Late in the afternoon, he left Chris long enough to hurry down to the shore in quest of fish or clams for supper. He found the rock from which he had fished completely submerged and a heavy surf thundering far up into the marsh. Under such conditions it was impossible to secure fish or clams, and he returned to camp hungry, disappointed, and with further cause for worry. The heavy surf indicated another storm in the Gulf which might reach where they were. If it did, it would render their position still more uncomfortable and dangerous. A heavy blow would continue to cut off their supply of fish and clams and would likely flood the low-lying marsh shutting them in on their little island. If Chris had been well enough to walk, the captain would have at once moved camp to the mainland, but that was impossible now. By sunset his fears were in a fair way to be realized. The wind was steadily increasing in force, and, blowing out of a clear sky, gave promise of still greater violence. Supperless and worried, the old sailor watched the night fall with but one thing to cheer his drooping spirits—Chris was evidently slowly improving. Likely much of the poison had been drawn out from his wound by the hot mud and the balance remaining had been overcome in its paralyzing effects by the powerful stimulant. The lad's pulse was slowly growing stronger and it was clear that the crisis had been safely passed.

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The old sailor was too worried about the absent lads to compose himself to sleep. Already, the surf was sending up small wavelets far into the marsh. If the boys were returning the way they went, their journey would be fraught with perils.

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The sky was covered with fleecy clouds but they disappeared with the rising of the moon and by its bright light he could see far out on the water where the huge waves broke foaming white on the outer bar.

Suddenly he gave a shout that made Chris stir in his stupor; "The boys! The boys!" he cried in delight.

In the broad path of moonlight, a small schooner appeared feeling her way through a passage in the reef under close-reefed sails.

"They must have someone aboard that knows the reef," he mused as he watched the little ship cautiously weaving her way in between the dangerous rocks.

She held steadily for the shore until she was scarce two cable lengths from it, then, she shot up into the wind, her anchor was dropped, and her sails lowered.

The captain was down on the shore, heedless of the flying spray, when the anchor hit the bottom.

"Walt! Charley!" he roared at the top of his voice.

There was no answer and he hailed again.

"Ahoy! Shore!" came an answering hail from the schooner. "Who air yo' and what do yo' want?"

The captain was silent for a moment with disappointment. It was not the boys after all, but any help was welcome at such a time and he made haste to reply.

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"We're two shipwrecks in bad shape an' need help. Who are you?"

"The Hattie Roberts, sponger, from Key West. Stan' by, an' we'll send a boat."

While the strangers were launching a boat, the captain had time to observe that the schooner's decks were piled full of small boats and that, small as she was, she carried a crew of at least thirty men.

"An old style, pole an' hook sponger," he decided. "I didn't reckon there was any of them left. I 'lowed the Greeks had run 'em all out of business."

Manned by half a dozen men, the little boat came tearing through the waves towards the shore. Flung up by a huge roller, she grounded almost at the captain's feet. The instant she touched bottom, her crew sprang over the side and drew her up safely beyond the reach of the next roller. Even by the dimmed light of the moon, the old sailor could see that the new-comers were dark-skinned men with heavy coarse features. He recognized them without the aid of the peculiar accent as Conchs,—a kind of mixed race belonging to the Florida Keys.

"Whar's yo's companion?" demanded one, who from his air of authority was evidently the captain.

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"He's on a little island just a little ways from here. I'll have to get one of your men to help me down with him."

"All right, Sam here will go with yo'. Step lively, we have got to pull out from hyar quick. There ain't as good anchorage as I 'lowed to find behind the reef. We'll have to make foah a better harbor."

The captain, with the sailor detailed to help him, was hurrying off on their mission when the Conch's skippers curiosity caused him to stop him in spite of the preciousness of time.

"How did yo's git hyah in such a fix," he demanded.

"Been sponging with a Greek crew. Crew mutinied. We escaped in a diving boat. Got wrecked in the night on the reef out thar," replied Captain Westfield, briefly.

"Sponging with the Greeks!" snarled the Conch with an oath. "Then the Greeks can help yo' out of yo'r fix, by all that's Holy, I won't. Hyah, Sam, jump aboard with yo'."

"You are not agoin' to desert us?" cried the captain in bewildered consternation. "For the love of humanity, man, what do you mean?"

"I mean that I won't raise a finger to help any mons who deals with the Greeks—blast 'em," cried the Conch, fiercely. "They've ruined us an' our people. We used to be a happy an' prosperous race a'fore they came with their diving suits an' tramped all over the bottom of the Gulf. Killing the little baby sponges with their iron shoes, an' stripping the bottom clean as a Conch's floor. We've been run out of the business, an' they did it. We've lost our homes, an' they caused it. Our families don't have enough to eat an' wear any more, an' they are the reason—curse 'em, curse 'em, curse 'em."

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"But you are leaving us to certain death, man!" pleaded Captain Westfield, "The water is rising over the marsh, already."

"An' it will be flooded inside of ten hours," declared the Conch with cruel satisfaction. "All aboard mons an' shove off."

Captain Westfield grasped the gunwale of the boat and tried to hold it while he reasoned and argued with the fanatical Conch, but the infuriated man rapped his knuckles with an oar and gave him a shove with the blade that sent him struggling backwards. By the time the old sailor recovered his balance, the boat had been shoved off and was out of his reach. He shook his clenched fist at the Conch's receding figure.

"You'll pay for this," he shouted. "No good will come to you after such a trick." But it is doubtful if the Conch even heard his voice above the roar of the wind.

The captain stood watching grimly until the boat reached the schooner's side, and her close-reefed sails were hoisted, her anchor broke and she headed to the South inside the line of reef. When she had faded away into the night, he turned back for the camp filled with disappointment and dismay.

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## CHAPTER XXIV. THE FLOOD.

As the old sailor made his way back to the island, he was alarmed to see how rapidly the water was rising over the marsh. He splashed knee-deep in the water at every step and it was easy to



see that it still continued to rise with astonishing rapidity.

His first act on reaching the island was to move the camp to the highest knoll of ground, already the lowest lying portions of the island were submerged. Chris had regained consciousness though he was still too weak to move without assistance. He watched the old sailor's preparations with evident interest and looked at the rapidly rising water with evident anxiety.

"If dat water doan stop comin' up, we is sho' goin' to hab a hard time gettin' anythin' to eat," he observed. "Can't get ober dem rock no way when dey is covered wid water, sho' to break a leg in one ob dem holes."

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"The Lord will watch out for us, lad," encouraged the captain. "Look at all that He has brought us through. He has never deserted us in our hour of need."

"Golly! I reckon dat's so," agreed the little darkey, thoughtfully. He remained quiet for a few minutes then said quaintly, "'Spect's we oughter ask him to look out foah Massa Charley an' Massa Walt. I'ze getting plum anxious 'bout dem two white chillins. Dey had oughter been back long 'fore dis. Massa Charley's mighty clever, but I 'spect dat it wouldn't do no harm to ax de Lawd to help him out a bit if he's in trouble."

"No one can do without the Lord's help, Chris," the captain said, gravely, "an', I reckon, them lads need it powerful bad. Something pretty serious has happened, I 'low, to keep them from coming back. We'll ask the Good Lord to watch out for them an' protect them."

The old sailor knelt by the little negro's side and in simple seafaring language prayed that the Heavenly Father would watch over and protect the missing ones.

The simple steadfast faith of the old seaman and the trusting little negro filled them with a sense of security and peace. They doubted not that their humble petition would be answered and that now a Heavenly Eye was watching over them and their absent companions and that a Divine Hand would guide them through their trials and danger. They stretched out on their leafy couches and went fast to sleep, while the storm raged and howled around them and the rising water crept slowly up on their little island.

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It was broad daylight when they awoke and looked about them. It was a wild and terrifying scene that met their eyes. The marsh between them and the sea was completely submerged and covered with rolling white-caps. Far out on the reef they could see the mighty rollers flinging their spray forty feet in the air when they struck the sunken rocks. Of the island, none remained except the high sands and knoll upon which was their camp. Between the island and the mainland was two miles of swirling, foaming water.

"Can't get to shore, no ways, now, Massa Captain," Chris observed. "You had oughter gone in las' night when you had a chance an' left dis nigger behind."

"The Lord will look out for us, lad," said the old sailor cheerfully. "I don't calculate that the water's going to rise high enough to cover this knoll we are on an' as soon as the wind drops a bit, the boys will be back for us with a boat. It's just a matter of being patient for a little while. We may get a little bit hungry, but, I reckon, we can stand that without grumbling."

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"Sho' we can," agreed Chris, bravely. "Tho' hit do seem like I was gettin' powerful hungry already. Ain't dar none of dem cassava roots dat we can get at?"

A close search revealed that most of the patch of tubers was covered by the rising water. A few plants however still showed on the little knoll and these the captain dug at once. There was only a scant half peck of the roots but that was better than nothing.

The old sailor kindled a little fire and roasted all the roots in the coals.

"We might as well have one good full meal," he observed, "I never did take much stock in this idea of going on short rations when grub is scarce. I always 'lowed that one good feed would carry a man further than a dozen pesky little ones that only tantalize the stomach."

But the roots shrank greatly in the cooking, by the time the skins were removed, there was but little left for the hungry castaways. They still felt empty after their meal was finished.

The day dragged wearily away with no sign of abatement of the storm. The water continued to rise slowly, but so slowly that the two anxious watchers were not without hope that the little knoll on which they were would escape the overflow. Their position was by no means uncomfortable. There was no rain and the weather was so warm that the wind did not cause them to suffer any from cold. Aside from their growing hunger and their anxiety about their missing companions, they were quite comfortable. Chris, in fact, was in better shape than at any time since they had been cast on shore.

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"I don' reckon dis storm can las' berry much longer," he observed, cheerfully, when the sun went down in a perfectly clear sky. "Dar ain't no clouds to back up de wind an' hit's bound to play out 'fore long."

"That's just where you're wrong, lad," said the captain. "A gale from a clear sky is the worst of all. I ain't ever seen many of them but what I have seen were all hummers."

The two sat looking out on the gloomy waste of waters until the moon, now at its full, rose and

lit up the wild scene about them almost as brightly as day. At last they tired of the wild, gloomy, disheartening scene, and, after a short prayer together, stretched out on their couches. Chris was almost instantly asleep but the captain lay long awake, his mind full of their helpless situation, and, of anxious conjectures as to the fate of the two absent lads. His own position and that of his little companion was such as to awaken his deepest fears. So long as the storm continued, their rescue by land or Gulf was impossible. No boat could live amongst the rocks and raging waters which now surrounded them. His long experience told him that the storm was likely to continue at least two days longer.—He had seen similar gales blow for an entire week without a let up. Even after the gale was over, it would take some little time for the waves and water to subside. At the best, they would suffer greatly from hunger before their rescue would be possible. But, to do the old sailor justice, his thoughts were not so much of their own situation as of the absent lads. He could only hope and pray that they had not started to return by water before the breaking of the storm.

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As he lay motionless musing, his ear caught a low grating sound as of heavy objects drawn on coarse sand. He quickly sat up on his couch and looked around. In the bright moonlight he could see large dark objects moving over the white sand.

"'Gators, an' a regular drove of them," he exclaimed. "Wake up, Chris! Wake up!"

The little negro struggled up into a sitting position, still half asleep.

"What's de matter, Massa Cap?" he inquired.

"Look at them 'gators, thar's dozens of them. We've got to have a fire mighty quick an' stick close to it."

Chris greeted the sight of the dark objects with a cry of joy.

"Oh, Golly! De Good Lord's dun answered our prayers. Dem's turtles."

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The old sailor sprang to his feet and would have dashed for the nearest object if the little negro had not restrained him.

"You sho' scare dem all away if you do dat way," he cautioned. "Jus' wait till dey gets to layin' an' you can walk right up on 'em."

The huge creatures crept steadily on up the shelving knoll. Their progress was slow and clumsy, and their lower shells dragging over the sand had made the grinding noise the captain had heard. They crept up to within ten feet of where the two watchers lay, then, they halted, and, with their hind flippers began to dig deep holes in the soft sand.

"Dey lays der eggs in dem holes an' covers dem up wid sand," Chris explained in a whisper. "Dey each lays mighty nigh two hundred eggs. De warm sand hatches out de little turtles."

The two castaways waited until the great sea hens had begun to lay, then Chris arose and walked directly for them without any attempt at concealment. The turtles did not pay the slightest attention to his approach.

"We'll take dese two smallest ones," he announced. "Dey will be de tenderest. Jus' grab de shell wid me, Massa Cap, back by de hind flippers an' we'll flop 'em over on his back. Keep youah eyes an' mouth shut."

But the old sailor was too excited to heed the advice. He grabbed the turtle's shell and heaved, then staggered back spitting and coughing with mouth, eyes, and ears full of sand, which the creature with it's flippers sent flying in a cloud about it.

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Chris waited until he had relieved himself of the stinging sand and this time the captain, following his advice, kept mouth and eyes tightly closed. A few seconds sufficed to turn the two turtles on their backs where they lay helpless.

There must have been at least thirty turtles in the bunch but the castaways contented themselves with only turning the two, any more would have been useless slaughter. Those unmolested quickly completed their laying, covered the eggs and retreated to the water.

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## CHAPTER XXV. THE FLOATING HATCH.

THE castaways lost no time in rejoicing over their good fortune. The Captain hastily kindled a fire while Chris, with his sheath knife, proceeded to butcher the smallest of the two turtles. Much experience had made the little negro expert at the work and in a few minutes he had severed the two shells and cut off several thick steaks from one of the hind flippers. Then, squatting before the fire, each impaled a steak on the end of a pointed stick and toasted it over the coals.

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How good the steaming juicy meat tasted to the two hungry ones. Steak after steak was broiled and eaten before their ravenous appetites were satisfied and they could eat no more.

"Midnight is a sorter unusual hour for a feed," Captain Westfield observed, "but, I reckon, we

will sleep none the worse for it. I 'low, we ain't got to lay awake none worryin' about food now. Thar's meat enough to last us for two weeks at least."

"An' maybe, Ole Mister Gale will blow hisself out," said Chris, hopefully, as, yawning sleepily he stretched himself again on his couch.

It was broad day when the castaways awoke from the heavy slumber which had followed their hearty midnight supper. They found the gale still blowing with undiminished violence and the sky still brightly blue. One thing, however, gave them great satisfaction, the water had ceased to encroach upon their little knoll. It had evidently reached its height.

After a hearty breakfast of turtle steaks, the two proceeded at once to dress and cure the turtles, for they well knew that under the sun's heat the fresh meat would soon spoil.

They had neither salt nor smoke house with which to cure it, but they went at the task with sure confidence in the result. The meat was first cut away from the shells and skinned, care being taken to remove every particle of the greenish-colored fat. Then, cutting across the grain, the meat was divided into thin strips and spread upon leaves to dry in the hot sun. It only remained for them to protect it from the dews of night and chance rains and a few days would see it thoroughly cured and capable of keeping sweet and good so long as it was kept dry.

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With some hazy idea that they might be of some future use, the captain cleaned and washed out the two, great, trough-like, upper shells of the turtles.

"Dat looks like a lump of wreckage out dar by de reef, Massa Cap," Chris observed as he straightened up from his task of spreading out the meat. "Pears like de tide is settin' hit in dis way."

"It is a bit of wreckage or a clump of seaweed," the captain agreed after a brief survey. "It's drifting in all right, but it's going to miss the island by a good hundred yards."

The two suspended work while they watched the drifting object slowly near their island.

"It looks like a hatch with something like a stack atop of it," he observed to the captain as the object drew close.

"Hit's a man or 'ooman atop ob hit," cried Chris, whose eyes were keener than the old sailor's. "He's layin' plum still, jes' like he was dead."

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Closer approach of the object convinced the captain that the little negro was correct. There was beyond doubt a motionless body lying on the low floating hatch. It was evident too that the hatch with its burden would pass the island at a distance of at least one hundred and fifty yards. To venture out and attempt to tow it in was to assume a terrible risk. The water between it and the island was raging and tossing over dozens of dangerous hidden rocks. Only the strongest swimmer would have the slightest chance of success, and, even should he succeed, it might be to find that he had risked his life to rescue a corpse. But the ocean breeds in its followers a brotherhood that leads them to deeds of quiet heroism. They never know when they may be in need of a rescuing hand and it is seldom that one turns aside from the rendering of service, no matter how dangerous it may be to himself.

When the hatch with its burden was nearly abreast of the island Chris began to strip off his clothes, but the Captain stopped him.

"You're still too weak to attempt it, lad," he declared. "You couldn't make it thar an' back, I reckon I can fight it out all right. I've mighty nigh got back all my strength."

Hastily stripping off the pants and shirt in which he was clothed, the old sailor slipped off into the water and struck out for the wreckage with long steady strokes, warily avoiding the foaming spots which marked the positions of the larger rocks. The swim was not difficult for so experienced a swimmer. The struggle would come when he attempted to return with his burden. In a few minutes, he reached the wreckage and, resting his hand upon the hatch gazed down at the burden it bore. He saw a man, apparently about forty years of age, attired in rough seaman's garb, his face bronzed and seamed from long years of exposure to wind and weather. The stranger was lying flat on his back on the hatch, his legs dangling over the end. A rope passed around his body and under the wood work prevented the larger seas from washing him off his frail support. He was unconscious and the captain reached over and placed his ear close to his chest. He could detect a faint beating of the heart. It was slow and feeble but still it was beating,—the man was alive.

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Once satisfied of this fact, the old sailor quickly shifted to the end of the hatch, and, resting one hand upon it, and striking out with the other hand and both feet, strove to force it back to the island. He had not accomplished half the distance with his burden when he saw that he could not hope to succeed. The tide was slowly but surely sweeping him in past the island direct for the mainland. Still, he battled desperately on, swimming with all his strength. Suddenly the little raft seemed to move forward with increased speed.

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"Take it easy, Massa Cap," sounded Chris' voice close to his elbow. "We can make it togedder all right." The plucky little negro had been quick to see the danger and equally quick to come to the rescue.

Between the two, after half an hour of heartbreaking battling with the current, they managed

to shove the raft ashore, where they sank exhausted and panting upon the sand.

As soon as they were able to move, they unlash the unconscious sailor from the hatch, and, carrying him up, laid him upon the captain's couch. The man seemed nearly dead, and for hours the two, wet, exhausted castaways worked over him, struggling to coax the spark of life into a flame. At last they were rewarded by seeing a tinge of color creep into the bronzed face. At length the sailor sighed and opened his eyes.

"Water," he gasped, faintly.

"Golly! I should reckon he's had 'bout enough water," Chris exclaimed.

"Get some for him quick," Captain Westfield commanded. "The salt brine he has swallowed has parched his throat and stomach."

The sailor took only one mouthful of the proffered water, then spat it out with his face twitching.

"Salt, salt," he murmured.

A horrible fear seized the captain. He snatched the shell from Chris' hand and took a swallow of the water. His fear was confirmed, it was salt. The Gulf had risen close enough to their little well to percolate through the sand into it and render it as salt as itself. [195]

The little negro divined the situation from the captain's face. "Golly! dat's bad," he cried. "Doin' widout water is a heap wurser den doin' widout food."

"Water, give me water," pleaded the rescued man. "My throat's parched, parched."

"You shall have some water as soon as we can get it," Captain Westfield assured him. There was something vaguely familiar to the old sailor in the man's queerly accented speech. It was more puzzling as he had no recollection of ever having seen the man before.

Considering his low condition the sailor recovered his full senses and a measure of his strength with astonishing rapidity. It was plain that he had not been deprived of either food or water for any great length of time. He was soon able to sit up and take notice of his surroundings. A curious look stole over his bronzed face as his gaze took in the two castaways.

"How did I get hyah?" he demanded.

Captain Westfield related the story of the rescue briefly.

The sailor's rough features worked with emotion. "I remember part," he cried. "Our vessel struck on Needle Rocks in the darkness an' went down like a stone. I had just time to throw myself on the hatch an' pass a rope around my waist. The crew," he shuddered—"must have all been dashed to pieces against the rocks. God knows how I escaped. An' yo' risked yo'r lives to save mine, yo' an' that boy. Mon, how could yo' forgive me enough to do such a deed?" [196]

"Forgive you?" echoed the captain, puzzled. "I had nothin' to forgive."

"I am Rufus Sanders, the Key West sponger who refused yo'r appeals for help an' left yo' to yo'r fate," cried the man, excitedly.

"I did not know that, but it would have made no difference," said the captain, gently. "You were a helpless, shipwrecked man." He checked the flood of thanks on the sponger captain's lips. "You have nothing to thank us for," he declared. "We have only saved you from one fate to suffer a worse with us. We are hopelessly imprisoned on this island, an' we have no water. All we can do is endure, pray an' hope."

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## CHAPTER XXVI. WITH THE BOYS.

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CONSIDERING the misfortunes which had befallen them, the two chums were in surprisingly good spirits, as they picked their way through the marsh, headed South. It was a relief to be free from the dread and apprehension under which they had labored for so many days.

"I feel almost as though we were on a picnic, instead of being shipwrecked sailors who have been robbed of their ship, and have lost all except the clothes on their backs," Charley declared.

"Everything is going to turn out all right after all," agreed Walter, hopefully. "Chris is going to get over his wound all right. He and the captain will have no trouble in getting plenty of food and water. We had ought to reach Judson by dark, and we'll get a boat or wagon and return for them at once. We can easily get from Judson to Tarpon, and there we can get the United States Commissioner to take up our case, and the minute the 'Beauty' enters port she will be seized and held for us. At the worst it will only mean the loss of our diving boat and a little patient waiting. And think of the store of gold which will be ours for a little work." [198]

But his chum was not quite so optimistic. "I do not think that we had better build too great

hopes on recovering either our ship or the gold," he observed. "That Manuel is a clever rascal. I fear he will rise to the occasion. He may think that we are wrecked in the storm but I am convinced he will take no chances. He will plan and scheme to the last to secure the ship and money and save his own neck from the halter. He may be caught at last but he will not sail boldly into any port. He's too wary for that."

His words did not dampen Walter's high spirits. "There is a revenue cutter at Tarpon," reminded his chum. "As soon as we get to Judson, we will telegraph to the Commissioner. He will not wait for the 'Beauty' to touch a port if we can put our case strong enough. He will start the cutter out in search of her at once."

"I hope you are right. If we are going to make Judson before dark, however, we are going to have to travel faster than we are going now. It's slow going amongst this mud and rock. Let us make our way inshore and see if it's any better traveling there."

But as they approached close to the mainland they saw that there was no hopes of easier traveling in that direction. The dense hammock jungle extended down to the edge of the marsh. To make one's way through it would be far slower than to continue over the marsh. They, accordingly, retraced their steps to the water's edge. It was slightly easier traveling close to the water. The waves had beat down the marsh grass along the edge leaving a kind of beach of rock and mud. It was hard and dangerous walking but safer than over the marsh itself, where the rank growth hid the treacherous bog holes. [199]

The boys often paused in their march to examine the masses of stuff that had been cast up by the waves. The squall of the night before had robbed the bottom of great masses of seaweed and had taken heavy toll of the life in the water. Every few minutes the lads would pass great clumps of seaweed tangled together in beautiful rainbows of bright scarlets, yellows, crimsons and purples. Curiously enough, the storm had dealt very harshly with the finny tribe. Likely many of the fish had been caught in shoal water and their lives beaten out against the cruel rocks. They dotted the shore and the chums frequently halted to admire one's curious shape or coloring.

"I wonder what kind this one is?" said Walter, pointing to a long slim fish of a beautiful brilliant green.

"That is a parrot fish," his chum enlightened him. "I think they are one of the most beautiful fishes that swim. They are of all colors, some are violet, some of golden, some scarlet, and in fact, they are found of every shade and hue. They get their names from their many brilliant colors, I guess." [200]

"What a wonderful mysterious thing the sea is," Walter commented. "I never realized before how much of strange life it contains."

"What we see along the beach this morning is only a very small sample of its population," his chum replied. "Sometimes, I think that all life must have come first from the sea. There is hardly an animal on land which has not a grotesque likeness in some creature of the sea. Take that fish there with the peculiarly shaped head and horns. Its resemblance to a cow is so striking that it has been named the cow fish. There is another little fish with a head just like a horse. It is called the sea horse. Then there is the toad fish, the frog fish, the snake fish, and hundreds of others closely resembling the animals after which they are named. But here," he concluded, "is, in my opinion, the most wonderful fish I have ever heard of. I have seen many of them but one always has a puzzling fascination to me."

He had stopped before a flat round-shaped fish which lay stranded in the edge of the water. It was still alive and struggling feebly to get back into deeper water. It was of a light-tan color and was covered with spots of darker hue. On its upper surface was a soft, spongy-looking, circular spot. It was not a pretty looking object and Walter viewed it with disgust. [201]

"I don't see anything fascinating about it," he commented.

"Just put your finger on that soft spongy place," Charley directed, "that's where it's wonderful secret is concealed. It is not poisonous," he added as his chum hesitated.

Walter bent down and pressed his finger against the spongy mass. The next instant he leaped back with a cry of alarm, shaking his arm madly. "Jerusalem!" he exclaimed. "What is it?"

"Got a shock did you?" laughed his chum. "That's an electrical fish. Their mystery to me lies in where they get the electricity with which they are charged. Even a small one like that contains enough to give a powerful shock."

The morning had been advancing rapidly as they walked and talked and the sun was shining down hot on their bare heads. Charley, justifying Chris' confidence in him, was quick to recognize the danger from its torrid rays.

He cast a look up at the sun. "It is nearly noon," he declared. "We must get something to cover our heads with and then find something to eat. I am getting as hungry as a wolf."

There was nothing along the rocky, muddy beach that would do for hats and the two bent their steps in towards the mainland. There, they broke off small leafy branches and thrust the stems down the backs of their shirts so that the leaves would tower above, and shade their heads. These made only a poor substitute for hats, but shed off the fiercest rays of the sun. [202]

Close to where they broke off the boughs was a small running stream and the boys drank thankfully of its cold sweet water.

"We have no time to waste in cooking and I fear our bill-o-fare for dinner will be rather scanty," Charley said. "Let's look around here and see if we cannot find fruit of some kind."

There were palmetto berries in plenty all along the high bank but the lads had no desire to partake of them except in a case of necessity. Seeing nothing promising along the edge of the jungle, they scrambled up the bank and made their way slowly and cautiously into the hammock, keeping a wary eye out for snakes. They found fruit of several kinds in abundance, but most of it Charley rejected as being poisonous, or not fit to eat. They gathered two kinds which he declared were both palatable and nourishing. One was a golden-red fruit about the size of a pear. It contained a large nut to which the meat clung closely. One bite into it and the boys' hands and faces were smeared with sticky juice. "I would recognize that smeary juice and strong turpentine flavor, anywhere," laughed Walter, "these are mangoes, the fruit, they say, you have got to get into a bath-tub to eat if you want to keep clean."

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The second fruit was about the size of a large plum and snow white in color with a blotch of red on the sides. Its meat was sweet, milky and slightly puckering.

"They are cocoa-plums," Charley explained. "They are considered quite nutritious but I would be afraid to eat a great many of them at a time on account of their puckerishness. We can eat all we want to of the mangoes however, they will not hurt us."

As soon as their repast was finished the boys filled their pockets with mangoes and cocoa-plums and hastened back to the shore.

They plodded steadily along while the afternoon wore away, but their progress over the rocks and mud was slow and they realized that they would not be able to reach Judson before darkness rendered further traveling dangerous.

They were passing a matted clump of seaweed on the shore when Charley, stopping with a cry of delight, fished out from its midst a round piece of wood about four feet in length, from which trailed a long, light line badly frayed in places by the rock.

"Do you recognize this?" he shouted.

"No," replied his chum in wonder at his excitement.

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"It's the buoy that marked the place where the gold ship lay. The Greeks will have a job to locate the gold now. That storm must have chafed the rope in two against a ledge of coral. Hurrah, hurrah."

"I don't see but that is as bad news for us as for the Greeks," Walter said, dubiously.

"It is, in a way," his chum replied. "Of course it will make it harder for us to find the exact spot where the treasure lays, but the Greeks will be delayed by it and that will give us a chance to get there with the revenue cutter and catch them before they get all the gold removed and get away."

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## CHAPTER XXVII. THE JOURNEY.

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It still lacked about an hour to sundown when Charley called a halt. "We cannot possibly make Judson before night, and it would be sheer foolishness to try to travel over these rocks after it gets dark," he declared. "We would be sure to get some bad falls and very likely break an arm or leg. The best thing we can do is to find a good place to camp while it is still light and make ourselves as snug as possible for the night."

Walter, who was beginning to feel tired out from the long day's tramp, was quick to agree with his proposal and the two lads headed in for the mainland, for neither felt any desire to spend the night on the wet, muddy marsh.

Good fortune seemed to guide their footsteps for they struck the mainland just where a little stream of clear water bubbled forth amongst a clump of towering cedars.

"The very place for our camp," Charley exclaimed. "You see what you can fix up in the way of a shelter, Walt, while I look around and see what I can find for our supper."

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Walter was fast becoming an adept at the science of woodcraft and he went about his task with certainty and dispatch. First, he broke off armsful of small boughs which he spread in two piles upon the ground close to the trunks of two big cedar trees. These were to serve as their couches and over them he proceeded to erect a rough lean-to to protect them from the wind and dew. There were plenty of dead boughs all around, and, selecting two of the longest and straightest, he leaned them against the trunk of the two trees about six feet from the ground, embedding their other ends firmly in the ground. Across these, he laid other limbs a couple of feet apart and upon them piled palmetto leaves and boughs to form a roof. Before the open front of the rude

structure, he built a roaring fire of dead cedar limbs. Close beside it he piled up a huge heap of wood with which to keep the fire replenished throughout the night. This completed his labors, and stretching himself upon his springy, fragrant couch before the crackling fire, he waited hungrily for his chum's return. He was becoming alarmed over his long absence when there came a crackling of boughs and Charley strode into the circle of firelight, bearing in one hand a snow-white heart, or bud, of a cabbage palmetto and in the other, a chunk of fresh meat several pounds in weight.

"What have you got there?" he inquired, eagerly.

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Charley grinned, "I'm too hungry to stop and tell you now. Sharpen up a couple of sticks and we'll broil some steaks, then, I'll give you three guesses as to what it is, and bet that you don't guess right."

Walter hastily cut two long green palmetto stems and sharpened them to points at the ends. By the time he had them ready, Charley had cut a couple of generous-sized steaks from the hunk of meat. The balance of it he wrapped up in a couple of green palmetto leaves and buried in the coals. While the steaks impaled upon the sticks were sizzling appetizingly before the fire, he wrapped up the palmetto heart in green leaves and buried it beside the roasting meat.

So hungry was Walter that he cut bits from his steak before it was fairly done and devoured them with eager appetite.

"Like it?" inquired his chum with a twinkle in his eye.

"Fine, it only needs a little salt to make it perfect," Walter declared. "I can't quite place it though. It tastes like a cross between pork and beefsteak. What is it anyway?"

"Guess."

"Pork?"

"Nit."

"Coon?"

"Nit."

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"Opossum?"

"Nit."

"I give it up then. What kind of animal is it?"

"I found it on the bank of a little creek not far from here," said Charley, dreamily. "It was sound asleep and it did not look very pretty or innocent even in its slumber, but beggars can't be choosers, so I got me a good heavy club and crept up on it softly. When it woke up I was near enough to give it a good rap over the head. It gave me a couple of good licks in the shins with its tail, however, before I got it killed."

Walter rose in his indignation, "Why didn't you tell me at the start that it was alligator meat," he demanded, "I would not have eaten a mouthful of it."

"And you'd gone hungry to bed," said his chum with a chuckle. "You'd have let your prejudice cheat you out of a good meal. It tastes all right, don't it."

"Yes," Walter admitted, ruefully, "and, now that I've eaten some of it, I might as well keep right on eating."

"Wise lad," Charley approved. "Let me tell you there are lots worse things than alligator steaks when one is hungry."

The steaks disposed of, the boys attacked the roasted meat and palmetto cabbage with such vigorous appetites that there was but little left when their hunger was at last appeased.

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"Pretty slim show for breakfast," said Charley, ruefully, as he eyed the scanty remains. "Let's see if we can't fix up some way to catch something during the night."

The plan which they finally decided upon to accomplish this was very simple. With their sharp knives, they whittled out several sets of figure-four setters, and, dragging several small logs just outside the circle of firelight, they placed a figure-four setter under an end of each and baited the triggers with bits of meat left from their supper. An animal nosing around after the bait would be sure to spring the setter and cause the log to descend upon it.

"We will surely get a coon or opossum before morning," Charley declared. "Animals have lots of curiosity and some of them are sure to be attracted by the light of our camp-fire. The smell of the cooked meat will attract them also."

This last task completed, the boys stretched themselves on their soft couches before the cheery fire whose rays danced and flickered amongst the leafy greenness of their shelter. It was a cozy, cheery little camp and the two lads lay long awake, talking hopefully with the cheery optimism that waits upon a hearty supper and healthy vigorous youth. When at last they fell asleep, it was with confident hope of a successful morrow.

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It seemed to Walter that he had barely fallen asleep when he was struggling in that nightmare state which lies halfway between slumber and entire wakefulness. He struggled pantingly for breath, but every breath he drew seemed to stifle him. Oppressed with black horror, he fought his way back to consciousness. But wakefulness brought small relief. The air was heavy with a stench that nauseated and sickened him.

Charley, crouched beside the fire, was holding his nose with one hand, his face expressing unutterable disgust.

"What in the world is the matter?" Walter demanded.

"One of our traps worked," announced his chum, grimly. "It's only a little skunk, but my, what a big smell."

"I should say so," Walter agreed. "We can't stay here. We'll have to move camp."

"I second the motion to adjourn," said his chum, solemnly.

No time was lost in debating the question and the lads quickly took their departure from their cozy camp. They made their way cautiously along the edge of the hammock until the raucous odor was left behind, then they halted and built another fire.

"The measly little varmint," said Walter, wrathfully, as they crouched beside the blaze. "He's gone and cheated us out of a good night's sleep." [211]

"Oh, it isn't as bad as all that," said his chum, cheerfully. "It's nearly morning now. See, there's the morning star in the East. Besides," he added, whimsically, "That poor little fellow isn't to blame. He didn't ask us to set a trap for him. I bet he regrets the accident as much as we do." Then throwing back his head he sang in his clear tenor voice, "Driven From Home."

As the humor of the incident dawned upon Walter, he burst into laughter in which he was joined by his fun-loving chum.

It was too near morning to consider selecting another shelter so the two sat beside the fire until day broke, then they made their way back to the camp to examine their traps. All were sprung, but, outside of the skunk, the only victims were an opossum and a coon which they bore back to their new fire. The opossum they broiled and ate for breakfast while the coon they roasted to carry along with them for dinner.

Sunrise found them once more on the march headed South.

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## CHAPTER XXVIII.

### JUDSON. [A]

By noon the two lads estimated that they must have come at least twenty miles from where they had left the captain and Chris, and, if the old sailor had been right in his reckoning, they could not be far from their objective point, the town of Judson. They began now to keep a sharp watch ahead and ere long were rewarded by the sight of a low black line projecting out from the marsh ahead. A closer approach resolved the low black line into a long, shaky, decrepit wharf, its piling rotting from age and neglect and its timbers and planking fast falling into decay. On the mainland back of the marsh a few rude cabins, each at least a half a mile distant from its nearest neighbor, rose from the middles of wide neglected fields. One lone, aged sloop rode at anchor near the wharf. The little port and the hamlet itself seemed to wear an air of deadly decay, sadness and gloom. [213]

"Not a very cheerful or prosperous-looking place," Charley observed as they clambered up on the wharf and made their way ashore over its shaky timbers.

"No," his chum agreed, "but I am thankful to reach it, poor as it is. My feet are getting sore from tramping over these rocks, I can tell you."

At the shore end of the dock the two paused long enough to take a more careful survey of the place.

"I declare it looks as though it was deserted or all the inhabitants dead," Walter said nervously, "See how the roads are all grown up with weeds as though they were never used. There is no sign of anyone about either."

"Just notice those cabins," his chum exclaimed, "They look just like the pictures I have seen of houses the first settlers used to build during the Indian times. They are built of great logs and have loopholes like the forts of those days. What a queer place!"

"Well, there's smoke coming from the chimney of that nearest cabin, and there seems to be someone working out in the field by it," said Walter with a sigh of relief. "I was beginning to think it was an abandoned village."

The two bent their steps towards the cabin indicated. It was set in a square clearing of about twenty acres, that was surrounded by a strip of pine woods which separated it from its nearest [214]



neighbor. As they drew nearer, they could see a man at work near the cabin. He was ploughing up the ground with a rude plow hitched to a yoke of oxen.

As the boys stepped out of the road into the clearing, they were greeted by savage barks, and a pack of dogs lolling around the cabin woke into sudden life and came tearing towards them.

The man at the plough let go the handles and sprang into the cabin. The next minute a rifle barrel protruded from one of the loopholes, "Halt right where you-all is," called a voice from behind the rifle.

"Call off your dogs," shouted Charley, as he and Walter, snatching up a couple of sticks, endeavored to keep the growling, snapping curs at bay.

"Who are you-alls an' what do you want?" demanded the holder of the rifle.

"We were shipwrecked twenty-five miles up the coast. We want supplies and help to bring in two companions, one of whom is badly hurt," answered Charley.

"Come closer an' let me have a good look at you-all," commanded the cabin's occupant, "Here yu Bet, yu Tige, yu Jim, be still thar," he called to the snarling pack which slunk growling away at his harsh commands.

The boys drew near the cabin in obedience to his order. A brief survey of them seemed to convince its owner that they were not what he feared. The cabin door was flung open, and, rifle in hand, he appeared in the doorway. [215]

"Come in you-alls an' have a cheer," he invited. "I'll jis' unhitch them oxen an' then, while I'm rustling up a bit of supper, you-alls can give me your story."

The tired, hungry boys accepted his invitation with alacrity, and, while he was busy unharnessing the yoke of steers, they seated themselves in a couple of rude home-made chairs, and gazed curiously about them.

The cabin was about twenty feet square. Its rough log walls were whitewashed, and its pine-slab floor spotlessly clean. At one end was a big old-fashioned fireplace from the rafters above which hung home-cured hams, slabs of bacon, and strings of sausages. A barrel in a corner was heaped high with huge, sweet, sugary yams. Several boxes beside it were heaped with onions, cabbages, carrots, pumpkins, and other vegetables. In another corner stood a barrel of home-ground corn meal and a big hogshead of water. Taken all in all, the little cabin's interior was a sight to fill the two hungry lads with satisfied anticipation. They had hardly completed their survey of it when their strange host entered latching and bolting the heavy door behind him. [216]

He was a man about forty years of age, strongly built, but sallow with the sallowness of the native Floridian. His face was kindly in expression but stamped on its every line was a look of uneasiness and apprehension. It was not an expression of fear but rather the look of a brave man who was simply on his guard every moment against expected dangers.

"I sho' have got to ask you-all to excuse me fur the way I dun greeted you," he apologized, "but, you see, strangers are mighty scarce around hyar an' one has to be plum' careful. I'se powerful glad to see a new face though—it's been mighty nigh two years since I had talk with a stranger. I reckon, you-alls must be some hungry. I'll rustle up a little supper while you-all gives me your tale."

With a deftness that indicated long batching experience, he cut great slices of ham and placed them to broil over the coals, mixed a pone of corn bread and put it to bake in a Dutch oven, and buried a dozen big yams to roast among the embers. While he was thus engaged, Charley related the story of their voyage and shipwreck omitting only any mention of the gold. His story was frequently interrupted by his host's exclamations, "I swan, an' dew tell." When the lad had finished, the stranger beamed upon him with evident pleasure. "I swan, hit's jis' like a novel I read once," he declared, "hit was writ by a fellow called Russell, Clark Russell, if I don't disremember his name. I don't reckon his story was true though. I 'lows he just made it up outer his head—but the vittals is ready now, you-alls jis' back up to the table thar an' helps yourselves." [217]

The hungry boys needed no second invitation but fell to work on the tender juicy ham and sugary yams with hearty appetites while their host as he ate, watched them with evident pleasure at their enjoyment. When all had finished, he put away the dishes, filled his corn-cob pipe, and leaned back in his chair against the wall.

"You-alls can't go back to whar yu left the captain an' the little nigger to-night, noways," he observed.

"No," Charley agreed, "but we would like to start back early in the morning if we can get a wagon or a boat."

"Thar ain't no fitten road for a wagon leading up the coast," observed their host. "I owns that little sloop anchored down thar by the dock. I reckon, you-alls could make out with her. I don't reckon them Wrights would stop you-alls from going if they understood jis' how things stood. I don't 'low they would be so pesky pisen mean as all that. I'd like to go with you-alls an' see that ole captain an' that little nigger, I sho' would."

"We would like to have you go with us," said Walter, eagerly. "Why can't you?" [218]

"Cause I don't ever expect to leave this hyar cabin alive," said his host, calmly.

The boys stared at him in uneasy astonishment.

"No, I ain't crazy," said the man quietly. "Hush, jis' lis'en' a bit."

A long prolonged growl came from one of the dogs outside. The man arose and taking up his rifle stepped over to the loophole beckoning to the lads to follow. The moon lit up the little clearing almost as light as day. The dogs were moving around outside, sniffing and uttering low growls.

The boys could see nothing unusual in the clearing but they felt a sense of danger in the very air. Their host's eyes, more accustomed to the surroundings than their own, evidently detected something ominous in one of the shadows thrown out from the belt of pines. He thrust the barrel of his rifle out through the loophole and the next instant its sharp crack rent the stillness of the night. The lurking shadow vanished amongst the pines with a whoop of defiance.

Their host pulled in his rifle, "A plum' miss," he said, disgustedly, "Wall, the war is on for fair now. Better outen that light an' draw your cheers up by the fire an' I'll tell you'alls about hit."

#### FOOTNOTE:

[A] This account of Judson is the description of a little West Florida town as it actually has been, and is to-day. Nineteen of its scanty population have died by a fierce war. The author has only changed the first letter of the town's real name.

## CHAPTER XXIX. THE FEUD.

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"THAR ain't no call to keep watch at the loopholes," said their host as the alarmed lads' glances kept wandering towards the dark openings. "The dogs will tell we-alls if anyone tries to come near the cabin." He leaned back in his chair in silence for a few minutes gazing into the heart of the fire whose flickering rays lit up his bronzed, thoughtful, kindly face.

"Hit all began years ago when I warn't but a little bit of a shaver," he began, quietly. "Judson was a right-prosperous, happy, contented, little place, then. Thar was mighty nigh a hundred people living in the town, an' in the woods nigh about hyar. Each family had hit's own little cabin an' farm an' raised all hit's own living of meat, corn, taters, an' sugar cane, an' each family had hit's patch of cotton with which they bought what things they needed that they didn't raise themselves. We had a right tidy little schoolhouse. I went to hit two terms when I was a little shaver," he said with evident pride, "an' I learned how to read an' write pretty well—the reading's been a heap of company to me during the years since then. Each family had a plenty to eat an' wear, an' thar warn't none that you could call real poor people like I hearn tell you-alls have in the North. We used to have dances and barbecues, an' picnics an' a right sociable time. The town was started by two families, the Turners an' the Wrights—I'm a Turner,—an' all the people about was kin to one or the other family, which made everybody friendly and sociable with each other. Hit was jis' a little Eden on earth, this place, 'till the serpent came twisting an' crawlin' in. The devil must have sho' had a hand in making some of the men folks believe that the Good Lord intended the honest corn they raised for anything but food for man an' beast. Yes, I reckon, hit sho' must have been ole Satan that made a few of the Turners an' Wrights get together an' start a little whiskey still over thar in the woods yonder. The womin folks was again hit from the start, as, bless their hearts, they've always been again the cursed stuff. Hit was Christmas week that the still was started goin', an' Christmas Eve the ones running hit gave a big barbecue at the still to celebrate it. Most everyone went, as they always did to doin's in the neighborhood. Even my daddy an' two brothers, Ben an' Abe, went to see the fun as they called hit, but mammy she was a good, religious woman, she staid at home an' kept me with her. She would have liked to keep the other boys with her too, but they had grown out of her control as boys sometimes do." His bronzed face grew sadly thoughtful, as he continued, "I recollect, I cried because I couldn't go too, but mother sang to me an' tole me stories—mother was a powerful hand at telling the kind of stories boys like an' I soon quit cryin' an' went to sleep quiet an' happy with mother singing to me. Hit was the last time I ever heard mammy sing. I reckon hit was 'bout midnight when a noise woke me up. The door had been flung open—hit was never locked in them days—an' father an' Abe came rushin' in. Father's face was white as a sheet an' I'll never forget the look on mammy's face. Hit seemed as if she knowed without a word from daddy what had happened. Thar was a curious tremble in her voice as she asked, 'Whar's Ben?' At the sound of her voice father broke down an' sobbed like a child. 'He's dead,' he cried. 'They've killed my boy Ben. Those Wrights have killed my boy Ben.'"

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The man paused as the recollection of that terrible scene crowded his mind, while the two lads looked at each other with sympathetic horror.

"No one seemed to know just how the trouble started," went on their host, quietly. "All hands had taken a little too much liquor, there had been a few hot words, a blow, an' Ben had keeled

over with a knife in his side. Then the fightin' started between the kin of both families, an' daddy an' Abe had run home to git their guns. Sore at heart as mammy was, she begged 'em not to shed no more blood but to leave it to the cotes, for mammy, as I have said, was a religious woman. But both Wrights and Turners came first from the mountains of Kentucky whar man don't go to law again' man but settles his quarrels with his rifle, An' so the blood-feud began. Thar was more than Ben killed that night,—Wright's as well as Turners. When all had sobered up from the liquor thar came a kind of lull or truce, but war always bruk out again when either families got to drinkin'. They got Abe the followin' year, but not 'fore he had shot a couple of Wrights. Hit was three years afore they got father. Mother, she pined away an' died soon after they got him. I think she was kinder glad to go, such things are wearin' on a woman. An' so the killin's been goin' on ever since by spells when the liquor gets to flowin'. I am the only Turner alive, now, though thar's a few of my kin still scattered around hyar. I've been shot at a powerful lot of times, but, I reckon, I've been lucky. Then too, they ain't none of them hunted me so powerful hard, for I ain't took no part in any of the killin's. I've shot a couple of times to scare them away but not to kill. My own kin 'lows that I'm poor-spirited, but somehow or other, I can't forget the look on mammy's face the night Ben was killed. I don't want to be the cause of puttin' no such look on any woman's face. I've knowed all these years though that my time must come sooner or later. I heard to-day that the Wrights have got in a lot of liquor from Tarpon Springs an' they are sayin' that the last Turner has got to be wiped out of Judson. So, I got me in a store of water an' grub an' fixed to lay low for awhile. I may be able to hold out until their liquor is gone an' the danger is past, but I reckon hit doan' make so powerful much of difference. They air plum' sho' to get me sooner or later. Wall, that's the story, young fellows, hit's been a right smart relief to have someone sympathetic to tell hit to. Don't you worry none though. As soon as comes mornin' I'll hist a flag of truce an' arrange to have you fellows let out peaceful. You can take my boat an' go after your captain an' that little nigger, but I sho' advise you not to stop hyar on youah way back. Keep right on to Tarpon Springs. Some of my kin folks kin bring the sloop back from thar."

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"You are very good," Charley exclaimed. "But tell me why you have never left this awful place. There are hundreds of places where you could have made as good a living and been free from dread and worry."

"Mammy's grave is out thar among them pines," said the man, simply, "an' daddy's, an' Ben's, an' Abe's, then, atter all, this place is home, no other place could be that."

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"I see," said Charley, much abashed.

"I am proud to have met you, Mr. Turner," declared Walter, warmly. "I think you are a noble man."

"No? I sho' reckon you is mistaken," said the man in surprise. "Me noble? I reckon not. My own kin 'lows I'm mighty poor-spirited 'cause I won't take no hand in the killin'."

"I don't care a cent what your kin says," began Walter, hotly, but he was interrupted by the crack of a rifle, the whistle of a bullet, and the howl of a dog outside.

His host winced as if the bullet had struck his own body. "They've killed Bet," he cried. "Bet, what I raised from a little bit of puppy. They hadn't ought to go an' shoot a poor defenceless, dumb animal, hit ain't right. My God, be they goin' to kill all my poor faithful dawgs," he cried, as another shot rang out followed by another pitiless howl.

Rifle shot followed rifle shot while the man stood trembling with eyes flashing as he listened to the whining of the animals outside. At last, heedless of the bullets pattering against the logs, he flung the door wide open and called to the hounds. They came crowding in, a whining, mangy, ill-looking pack, but disreputable as they were, they had been the man's only friends through his lonely years and the two lads respected him for his act.

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As soon as he had bolted the door again, he rummaged in a corner and brought out three rifles. He handed one to each of the boys. "I reckon, we'll have to watch at the loopholes now the dawgs air inside," he said quietly. "You-alls can take the ones at the ends, I'll tend to the sides. Be right careful 'bout standin' in front of 'em, a bullet might pass through. An' don't shoot to kill if you can help it."

"An' his kin people call that man poor-spirited," whispered Walter in wonder to his chum as they took up their positions.

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## CHAPTER XXX. BESIEGED.

THE boys had little opportunity for conversation in their new rôle as guards, being separated from each other by the length of the cabin. Strange as was the position in which they found themselves, they felt but little fear. The massive logs of which the cabin was constructed bid defiance to the entry of a bullet, and neither of them could believe that the affair would amount to more than a few shots being fired at the building while the attacking party was under the influence of the liquor they had drank. They believed that with the coming of day the feudalists would disband and retire to their homes, while they would be free to return to the rescue of their

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friends on the island. Nevertheless, they were not going to take any chances in the duties as sentinels. They stood well to one side of their loopholes and peeped out at the little clearing plainly visible in the bright moonlight.

"I reckon they can't see to shot through the loopholes, but you-alls want to keep youah bodies out of line with them," cautioned Mr. Turner. "Hit mought be that a stray bullet would pass through one of them. An' don't either of you young fellows fire 'less you jes' have to. You doan't want to get mixed up in this hyar quarrel. If yu' jis' naturally have to shoot, aim low an' give it to 'em in the laigs."

"There seems to be several of them gathering together at the edge of the woods," called Charley anxiously. "Here they come straight for the house!"

His host darted to his side. "They've got a long pole an' air aiming to batter down the door," he announced. "Keep back, boys, an' let me do the talking an' shootin', if thar's got to be any."

But the boys crowded close to his side, eager to view the coming attack.

There were about a dozen men in the approaching party and they advanced at a rapid trot, bearing between them a huge pine log. [227]

"Halt whar you air," commanded Turner when they had approached to within sixty feet of the house. "If you-alls come any closer meanin' trouble, someone is goin' to get hurt."

There were enough of timid spirits in the party to cause a halt in the advance.

"We're goin' to get youah hide this time, Bill Turner," shouted the foremost of the gang, a big, heavily-whiskered man. "Hit's a disgrace on us Wrights to have one of youah name livin' still in this settlement. You're goin' to be done for this time."

"Now, I ain't done nothin' to you-alls in all these years," said Turner quietly and argumentatively. "You ain't got no cause to come 'round hectoring me."

"More shame for you," shouted the big man. "We're goin' to do you, first, 'cause you're a Turner, second, 'cause you've been too poor-spirited all these years to put up a man's fight."

"Pears lak hit needs a powerful lot of yu to do fo' one, lone, mean-spirited critter," said Turner, mildly.

The big man stamped his foot with rage. "Hit don't take none but me," he roared. "Yu come out hyar an' we'll have it out, man to man."

"I ain't a-doubting you're courage, Jim Wright," returned the other, slowly, "but I ain't aimin' to hurt no man 'less I have to. Besides, if I did get the best of yu, all the rest of youah gang would come down on me. Jes' keep away from my cabin, that's all I've got to say." [228]

"Come on, boys," roared the leader. "He's too mean-spirited to hurt a fly. He can't shoot all of us, anyway."

There was some hesitation, but his fellows, evidently, believed that the man inside would not fire. Under the urging of their leader they picked up the log and started on a run for the door.

But they quickly discovered their mistake. From the loophole shot out quick jets of flame as the man inside worked the lever of his Winchester. The log dropped unheeded to the ground as its bearers broke for the cover of the woods. Some were not able to run but limped away groaning with pain. After the fleeing ones strode the big leader, cursing them for cowards and imploring them to return to the assault.

"I don't reckon I've hurt any one of them very much," Turner remarked, as he slipped more shells into his rifle. "I jes' aimed for their laigs."

"Thank God, it has all ended without loss of life," Charley said earnestly, but his host shook his head.

"Hit ain't ended, hit's jes' begun, Jim Wright ain't one to be scart out by a little lead. He don't know what fear is. If he can't get none of 'em to come back with him, he'll come back alone. I wish you young fellows were safe outer hyar, but it won't do for you to try to leave now. Crazy drunk, like them fellows is, hit wouldn't be safe for you. Maybe by morning they'll be sobered up enough to listen to reason." [229]

In spite of his words, the boys were hopeful that the night would pass off without further trouble, but they were soon undeceived. Half an hour had not passed when the big leader emerged from the woods followed by a half a dozen of his fellow feudalists.

His followers halted by the fallen log but he advanced boldly direct for the loophole.

"Keep away, for Gawd's sake, keep away, Jim," Turner implored. "I don't want to have to shoot you."

"Hit's you or me this time!" shouted the other, "The sun don't rise on no living Turner in this town."

"Keep back," warned Turner, thrusting his rifle through the loophole, but even in his desperate

situation, the boys, crowded close beside him, and could see that he aimed only at the legs of the advancing man.

Ruffian though he was, the other was not without brute courage. He never paused in his advance. "Shoot," he shouted as he whipped out a pistol, "Shoot, that's what I want yu to do."

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The two reports came almost together, but the pistol shot was a fraction of a second ahead of the other. Like a fire-swept weed Turner crumpled to the floor, his rifle exploding as he fell.

The big man clapped one hand to his side and fell to the ground.

With the report of his rifle, his followers had grabbed up the log and rushed for the door, but Charley had been quick to see the danger. Snatching up the rifle from the fallen man, he fired at the moving legs as fast as he could work the lever. The whistling lead was more than the assaulters could stand. Three dropped their hold on the log and limped hurriedly for cover while their fellows, deprived of their aid, could no longer sustain the heavy timber, which sank again to the ground while they hastened after their wounded companions.

The boys watched them in silence until they entered the woods then Charley set down the rifle.

"I don't think they will be back right away again," he said. "Anyway, we have got to risk a light. Perhaps Mr. Turner is not dead."

With hands that trembled with excitement Walter struck a match and lit the lamp, then, the two boys lifted the prostrate man and laid him upon the bed. "Keep watch at the loophole while I see if anything can be done for him," Charley commanded.

The man's shirt was matted with blood and the lad did not attempt to take it off, but cut it away with his sheath knife, exposing the white chest in the center of which gapped a horrible hole. "He's badly wounded," he announced after a careful examination of the wound. "There's two holes, one in his chest and one in his side. I believe the bullet struck a rib and glanced, coming out at his side. If so, he will pull through if I can only stop the blood flowing. I'll have to keep this lamp lit for awhile even it is risky. I'll be as quick as I can."

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There was little in the rude cabin with which to do in such a case, but the resourceful lad made the best of the situation, working with feverish speed so as to be able to extinguish the lamp as soon as possible. First, he washed out the wash basin thoroughly and filling it with clean water from the barrel added to the water a generous handful of salt. With this he washed the ugly-looking wound, then tearing into pieces a fresh sheet he found lying on a shelf, he made a little wad of rags with which, after soaking them in salt water, he plugged up the gaping hole. Over this he bound wet strips of the sheet to hold it securely in place. He was rewarded for his labor by seeing that the flow of blood was quickly checked and soon ceased entirely. As soon as he made certain of this, he extinguished the light and crept to his chum's side.

"I think he will pull out all right," he announced. "He is unconscious yet, and when he does come to he'll be very weak from loss of blood. Have you seen any more of those fellows?"

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"They're still in the woods around the clearing. Listen and you'll hear their voices every now and then."

"Has the man who was shot moved any?"

"No, he lays just as he fell. I guess he's dead."

"It's a horrible affair," said Charley with a shudder. "I'll never forget this night. It has put us in a bad fix. We can't leave here now, and I don't like the way the wind is coming up. If there's a heavy storm, the captain and Chris will be in danger, it wouldn't take a very heavy sea to cover that marsh. Just listen how it's blowing."

Walter seemed not to hear what his chum was saying. He stood staring out at the still figure stretched on the ground. "He hasn't moved, but maybe he isn't dead," he said at last. "Perhaps, he is bleeding to death and a little attention might save his life."

"You're right," Charley exclaimed. "We must bring him in."

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## CHAPTER XXXI. THE ENEMIES.

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It was a risky thing to attempt. To venture outside would be to expose themselves in the bright moonlight to the bullets of the feudalists, but the two plucky lads never hesitated. The body lay not a dozen steps from the cabin and it would not do to let his fellows approach that close to the little fort. Either they must save him themselves, if he was not already dead, or leave him to die alone in the night.

"We must be quick about it," Charley declared. "As soon as I unlatch the door, we must run out, grab him by the shoulders, and drag him in—he's too heavy to lift."

In this bold move fortune seemed to favor the lads. They got their heavy burden to the door

before a shot was fired and, then, the bullets whistled harmlessly above their heads.

"We were lucky that time," Charley panted as he barred the door again. "Now keep a sharp lookout. I'll have to light that lamp again."

"This fellow is not so very badly hurt," he announced, as soon as he had examined his new patient. "The bullet has gone right through the fleshy part of his shoulder. He will come out of it all right if the wound is kept clean." In a few minutes he had washed and dressed the wound as he had the other man's, then, putting out the light once more, he rejoined his companion at the loophole. "Anything stirring?" he inquired. [234]

"No, I don't even hear their voices now. Perhaps they will not bother us again to-night," Walter replied, hopefully.

"I am not worrying about them as much as I am this wind," said his chum gloomily. "We are safe enough here so long as the grub and water holds out, but, God knows how it is faring with Chris and the captain."

The gale was now howling and whistling around the little cabin with a force to justify Charley's gloomy apprehension. The boys had to speak loudly to make themselves heard above its uproar. They soon abandoned all attempts at conversation and waited wearily and silently for another assault from the feudalists and for the coming of day.

Either the ruffians had at last become over-powered by the liquor they had drunk or else they had decided to wait the coming of day, for they did not again show themselves in the clearing. Day, however, came at last, after what seemed to the exhausted lads an age of waiting.

As soon as it became light enough to see, Charley removed the bandages from their stricken host and redressed his wound more carefully. "His pulse is getting stronger and there is some color in his face," he remarked to his chum. "I believe, I could bring him to, but I guess it's best to let him lie unconscious as long as he can. He will suffer enough when he does regain consciousness." [235]

As soon as he finished with Turner, Charley turned to his other patient who was beginning to move uneasily and show signs of returning consciousness. While he was yet bathing his wound the man opened his eyes.

"Gosh! how my shoulder hurts," he growled. "Be mighty careful how you touch it, young fellow, or I'll skin you alive."

Charley set aside the basin of water and rising to his feet looked down on the fellow with a face full of scorn.

"You great, big, drunken, cowardly murderer," he exclaimed. "It's a pity that bullet didn't kill you. You are not fit to live on God's green earth. You're shot when trying, with a crowd of your fellows, to kill a lone, inoffensive man. Your friends don't think enough of you to come back and get your carcass. We bring you in and care for you and instead of thanks, your first words are a growl and a threat. You are a cowardly, disgraceful cur,—that's what you are."

Astonished rage filled the man's face. "No man ever said words like that to Jim Wright and lived," he gasped. He attempted to rise but was too weak to gain his feet, and sank back with a groan. [236]

"Oh, I guess you won't do any killing for a little while," sneered Charley, whose anger was at white heat. "I've no doubt people have been afraid to tell you the truth before, but you are going to hear it for once in your life. I've no doubt with your strength and disposition you've bullied everything until they are afraid to do anything but flatter you, but, now you are going to take a dose of your own medicine." Then, seating himself just out of reach of the man's powerful arms, he proceeded to tell him what he thought of him in words that stung with contempt and scorn. Then, as his anger subsided, he repeated the story Turner had told him, contrasting Turner's quiet, patient, peaceful heroism with the other's blood-thirstiness and violence, with all the power of the earnestness he felt.

At first the man kept interrupting him with curses and abuse, but as he went calmly on ignoring the interruptions the fellow lay quiet, his face turned to the wall.

Once Charley stopped, thinking he might have fainted he lay so still, but he spoke up gruffly.

"Did I kill him?"

"No, but it's not your fault that you didn't," the lad replied, curtly, and went on with his arraignment. "I don't care a hang what you and your cowardly fellows think," he concluded, "all decent people would say that that poor fellow lying there is a brave hero while you are the mean-spirited, cowardly one. And, now, if you'll lie quiet and keep your mouth shut, I'll dress that wound. I hate to pollute my hands by touching you, but it's got to be done." [237]

The man lay quiet while the lad washed and bound up his wound. Charley could see that his features were working convulsively, but whether from rage or pain he could not determine.

As soon as his task was completed, Charley relieved his chum at the loophole and Walter set about making coffee and cooking some breakfast. They were both sadly in need of food and felt much better after they had eaten. As soon as they had finished, Charley made his chum lie down

to take a nap, promising to call him, and lie down himself in a couple of hours.

While Walter was asleep Turner came out of the deep swoon which had followed his wound. He was weak and in terrible pain but in full possession of his senses. It was evident that he was greatly bewildered at the sight of his enemy lying helpless on the floor, and Charley explained the situation to him in a few words.

"I sho' am glad I didn't kill him," said the sick man, thankfully. "I jes' shot at his laigs, the gun must have gone off when I fell. I am sho' sorry I hurt you so bad, Jim, I didn't aim for to do hit." [238]

But Wright kept his face turned to the wall and answered not a word.

As the morning advanced Charley was much puzzled by the constant sound of hammering coming from the woods near the clearing. It was evident their enemies were preparing another surprise but he could not guess at its nature.

All the morning long the hammering continued, then shortly before noon there emerged from the woods an object which caused him at first, to stare in bewildered surprise, and, then, as it drew nearer the cabin to send him to shaking Walter, whom he had let sleep on.

"Wake up! Wake up!" he cried. "We have got to fight for our lives. Those fellows have built a heavy breastwork on the front of a wagon and are shoving it ahead of them up to the cabin."

"Young fellows! help me up and help me to that loophole," gruffly commanded the wounded man on the floor. "Don't hesitate," he cried as the lad was about to refuse the surprising command, "them fellows have got a couple of sticks of dynamite in that cart an' if they get near enough to throw it thar won't be enough left of this cabin to make a good toothpick. We was aiming to use it last night if we couldn't get Turner no other way."

Between them the two startled lads got the big fellow on his feet and supported him to the loophole where he leaned against the logs, his face twitching with the pain of his effort. [239]

It was just in time, for the wagon with its burden of death was scarce a hundred feet away when he shouted: "Stop where yer are, boys. Thar ain't no call to throw any of that stuff."

"Is that you, Cap?" called one of the men. "Why, we 'lowed yer was dead."

"An' I might have been for all of yu fellows, leaving me to die on the ground like a poisoned dog."

He paused while a chorus of excuses came from the men behind the breastwork.

"Well, I ain't dead, but it ain't no thanks to yu fellows," he went on slowly and painfully. "Now, yu fellows jes' roll that wagon back whar hit came from an' go home and behave yerselves. Yu fellows know me an' know I'll do what I say. Hit's jes' come to me, an' hit's come in a powerful rough way, that I've been powerful mean, pisen an' onery. My eyes am sho' opened at last, an' I'm powerful ashamed of how I've been carryin' on. But hit's all over now. From now on Bill Turner is my friend, an' the man that lifts a finger again' him lifts it again' me, an' me an' my close kin will make this place too hot to hold him. That's all I've got to say. Now, go home."

Murmurs of astonishment arose from the men behind the wagon as they slowly but obediently backed the wagon towards the woods. Over the face of the wounded man on the bed stole a look of joy unspeakable. [240]

The bewildered but delighted boys helped Wright back to his place on the floor.

"I want to shake hands with you, Mr. Wright," said Charley, earnestly. "I am afraid I talked pretty rough to you."

"I needed hit," said the other as he took the proffered hand. "Hit's a pity, young fellow, that thar ain't more like yu down in this neck of thar woods."

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## CHAPTER XXXII. THE CASTAWAYS AGAIN.

LEAVING the boys safe from the danger that had threatened them, let us return to the castaways whom we left confronted by that menace, the most grewsome of all to shipwrecked sailors, the lack of water.

The sponger captain needed no explanation but the captain's simple words to realize the terrible tortures and awful death that awaited them all if help in some shape did not soon come to their rescue. His bronzed face grew white beneath it's coat of tan. [241]

"I am frightfully thirsty, already," he exclaimed, "Is there no way we can reach the mainland. Thar's water in plenty thar."

"If we were birds or fish, we might get thar, I reckon," replied Captain Westfield, "but, being as we are only human beings, I calculate it ain't no way possible."

The Conch eyed the raging water that stretched between the little island and the shore.

"A strong swimmer might make it," he observed, musingly. "I've swum farther many a time but it was when I was in a sight better shape than I am now."

"Yes, I reckon a right powerful swimmer might make it," assented the captain, "but this little fellow and I are not equal to it, we'd never reach the land."

"I believe I could do it even now," said the sponger calculatingly, "but I won't desert yo' two Yo' saved my life an' I'd be worse than a Greek to leave yo' here."

"If you can do it, go ahead, man," said the old sailor. "You can't do us any good by staying. Better save your own life," but the Conch shook his head sadly.

"My life ain't worth much, now," he said sadly. "My little ship's gone, all my brave comrades drowned, an' everything I had in the world lost. I've not much to live for now." [242]

"Bosh, man," said the old sailor, "I reckon, thar's always something for a man to live for as long as the Good Lord let him live. If thar wasn't the Lord wouldn't let him live."

But the Conch was not to be comforted, the full extent of his loss was beginning to make itself felt as he regained his strength and the full possession of his senses after his terrible ordeal. He soon moved a little apart from the two castaways, and, seating himself on the sand buried his face in his hands. The two watchers could see the tears trickling between his fingers and they turned away greatly moved at that most impressive of sights, the grief of a strong man, ashamed of displaying his tears. When they looked again he was on his knees and his bowed head showed that he was praying. When he rejoined them, his manner was filled with the calm and quietness of one who has found peace for his afflictions.

"I see there is no wood here with which to build a raft," he observed. "Things look pretty bad, but they say the darkest hour is just before the dawn. We must take courage. Yo'r young friends may return with help at any hour."

The captain shook his head sadly. "Something has happened to them or they would have been back long ago. They cannot return now until the storm is over." [243]

"It cannot last much longer," declared the Conch, confidently. "It is losing force now, I believe it will blow out by morning."

"Maybe, but it will take a long time for the sea to go down so a boat can live in it, and, in the meantime we have no water."

"We must not give way to despair," said the Conch, who seemed like another man after his devotions. "Let's dig another well right in the midst of the island, perhaps we can get water fit to drink."

With but little hope the three fell to work and by noon had dug a hole to water, but they had only their labor for their pains, the water was salt, bitter, and undrinkable. Indeed their labor was worse than fruitless for their exertions had greatly increased their thirst.

Chris kindled a fire and roasted some of the turtle meat and eggs, but the castaways only partook of a few mouthfuls, as eating seemed but to increase their thirst.

The Conch had lost his hat when wrecked and Chris, observing his bare head, set about braiding him another hat from the green palmetto leaves.

The Sponger watched him with interest. "Do yo' think yo' could make a water-tight mat of that stuff?" he enquired, eagerly.

"Golly! I reckon, dis nigger could," declared the little darkey. "I'se done made baskets ob hit dat would hold water like a bucket." [244]

"How long would it take yo' to make a mat four feet square?"

The little negro considered, "I guess I could do hit in a day."

"Then drop that hat business and get to work on hit. Work like yo' never did before. There's a chance, jes' a chance, that it will be the saving of us. Captain, there is work for us to do. Get the entrails out of one of those turtle shells. Clean them out good, pack them full of sand, and stretch them out in the sun to dry. I've got a plan in mind. It may fail, but it's worth trying. Be careful not to break the skins."

It was evident from the man's manner that he was intensely in earnest and the old sailor lost no time in asking idle questions but went quickly to work at the task assigned him. In a short time he had cleaned and washed out the turtle entrails and filling them with dry sand stretched them out to dry in the hot sun. When thus prepared they formed a kind of small hose some thirty feet in length.

While he was thus engaged, the Conch dragged the empty shell down to the water and cleaned and washed it out thoroughly. Leaving it near the water's edge, he collected and piled close beside it, a heap of dry wood. Then he returned to where Chris was working and fell to helping him by stripping and preparing the palmetto buds for the little darkey's nimble fingers. [245]



Just before sundown he carefully removed the sand from the dried entrails and was in possession of a long, tough waterproof hose without hole or break in it.

Night brought no cessation of the strange labor. A fire was kindled beside the little darkey and he plaited on by its light while the captain and the Conch kept him supplied with palmetto strips.

About midnight Chris held up his work with a weary sigh; "Hit's done," he announced.

"Now for the test," cried the Conch, trembling with excitement.

Taking the strong, flexible, green mat he hurried down to the turtle shell which he had filled half full of sea water. Placing the mat over the top of the shell, he bound it firmly in place with wisps of palmetto leaves. Then, cutting a small hole in the center of the mat, he inserted in it one end of the strange hose, packing wet sand around it to make it air-tight. He next coiled down the hose in the edge of the sea and placed the other end of it in the empty turtle shell. Then, heaping wood around the mat-covered shell, he started a fire.

The Captain and Chris at last understood his plan. With his rude contrivance, he was going to try to distill fresh water from salt after the manner they do on big steamships with costly and complicated apparatus. The steam from the heated water was supposed to escape from the shell through the hose. In passing through it it would become chilled when the hose was coiled down in the cold sea water and, condensing into water again, reach the other shell fresh and free from salt. [246]

In theory the plan was perfect, but would the rude contrivance do the work?

The three thirsty watchers fairly held their breath as they kept the fire roaring around the shell and awaited results. At last tiny wisps of steam began to trickle through the closely-woven mat. Tiny drops of moisture were dropping from the end of the hose. These grew larger and larger until at last a tiny stream of water trickled forth.

They danced and shouted for joy. "It works! It works!" they cried.

But thirsty though they were they had to possess their souls in patience and wait for the process worked very slowly. All night they staid by the shells keeping the fire going. Just at day-break the Conch gave the command to put out the fire. In the other shell was several gallons of clear, pure water. As soon as it had cooled sufficiently they dipped it up with shells and drank greedily. It was slightly bitter and tasteless but never did drink taste better to parched throats. With the satisfying of their thirst, came hunger and they all made a hearty meal off the roasted meat and eggs left from dinner. Just as the sun arose they lay down to sleep completely exhausted but with thankfulness to God in their hearts. Their greatest danger was past. They had water and food in abundance, and the storm was slowly but surely subsiding. [247]

They slept through the long day, awakening only when the shades of night began to fall. Then after satisfying their hunger and thirst, they lay down and slept until morning came.

They opened their eyes upon a clear, still day. The storm had gone and the sea was growing calm. Far to the South there showed on the blue water a tiny patch of white,—a sail.

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## CHAPTER XXXIII. THE RESCUE.

THE castaways watched the distant sail with mingled feelings of joy and suspense. Was it the boys, or was it merely a strange craft beating up the coast? Would it pass near the island or would it go by too far out for them to make their presence known? These were the questions they debated as they strained their eyes on the distant patch of white.

One thing soon became evident to the eager watchers, the sail was steadily growing larger. Although the storm had passed and the sea subsided there was still a brisk breeze blowing and each passing hour brought the stranger craft visibly nearer. No thought of breakfast entered the castaways' minds, all their attention was fixed on the approaching sail. [248]

At last it became evident that the vessel was a small sloop, that it was headed directly for the island and that it was rolling and pitching frightfully in the still heavy seas.

On it came, plunging and tossing like a frightened steed and sending showers of spray from its cut water. At last it was close enough to discover two figures on its decks, one at the wheel, the other forward, tending the jib sheet.

"Hit's Massa Charley and Massa Walter," shouted the sharp-eyed Chris. "Praise de Lawd, Praise de Lawd," and his over-joyed companions shouted a fervent "Amen."

The sloop came steadily on, passing the island and rounding up under its lee as near as its young captain dared to approach. Anchor was dropped, sails lowered, and launching a small boat it carried on deck, its crew of two came sculling for the shore.

And what a demonstration of joy there was when it grounded on the sands and the chums so [249]

long separated and so long beset with perils were once more reunited. Such hand-wringings and congratulations, and eager questions and chorused answers. All happy. All excited. All talking at once, and no one making himself thoroughly understood in the general clamor.

But Charley soon interrupted the talk-feast. "We will be here all day at this rate," he said, laughing. "We had better get on board and get under way. That sloop is pretty old and cranky for these waters and we'd better get back as soon as we can for fear another squall will come up. We can tell our stories on the way."

The suggestion was wise and as none cared to linger long on the dreary little island which had been the scene of so much anxiety and suffering, there was no delay in carrying it out. All climbed into the little boat and were carried out to the sloop. Her sails were hoisted, her anchor weighed, and her bowsprit headed South for Tarpon. Down in the sloop's cabin the castaways found a hot meal of ham, eggs, potatoes and coffee waiting for them, which Walter had prepared as a pleasant surprise. In their excitement they had forgotten they were hungry, but they remembered it now and fell upon the tasty food with appetites that only left bare dishes when satisfied, at last. The boys had brought a pile of clothing with them, and after a wash-down in cool sea water, the castaways threw away their soiled, tattered garments, and, fed, washed, and freshly clothed, felt like new men. [250]

The Captain's eyes danced with joy when Walter presented him with a pipe and tobacco he had brought with him.

Later all gathered around the wheel and stories and experiences were exchanged, but the reader is already familiar with the most of them.

"Even after the trouble was all over we couldn't get away at once," Charley said, concluding his tale. "I can tell you we were worried to have to lay around and wait for the storm to pass, knowing that you and Chris must be in danger on the island. The people were awfully good to us after the feud was ended. They could not do enough for us. They even wanted to give us money, but of course we couldn't take that. As soon as the wind went down we borrowed this boat of Mr. Turner and started out. We are to leave her at Tarpon and he will get her from there."

"Well, all's well that ends well, I reckon," said the captain, puffing in supreme content. "We are safe an' well now an' while we ain't got much money, we will have the 'Beauty' as soon as she comes into port, an' she's jes' the same as two thousand dollars in the bank."

"And we will have another try for that gold when we get her," Charley declared. "I figure that those fellows had to cast loose during the storm and scud before it. They could not ride it out at anchor. Now that the buoy's gone, it will take them a long time to locate the gold again. We, knowing the latitude and longitude can get back to the spot before they can find it and get all the gold removed, if we can get a revenue cutter at Tarpon, as I think we can." [251]

The Captain's face was filled with dismay. "I've clean forgot the figures, boys," he exclaimed. "I put it down in the log all ship-shape, the latitude and longitude, but I've clean forgot what it was. I ain't got no memory for figures."

It was a heavy blow for the golden-hopes of the two boys and a silence of disappointment followed the old sailor's announcement.

"It's no use crying over spilt milk," said Charley, at last, cheerfully. "We have still got the schooner, and, with the money we get from her, we can make a good start at something else."

"You have still good cause for rejoicing," observed the sponger captain. "You will still have your vessel, but I have lost my all."

The two chums were not the boys to give way to repining and they were soon again as bright and cheerful spirits as if their brightest hopes had been realized.

It was midnight when the little sloop at last crept into the harbor of Tarpon. It was useless to go ashore at such an hour so the little party made everything snug aboard and turned in on deck for a few hours' sleep. [252]

They were up early next morning, and, after a hasty breakfast, hurried ashore to notify the Commissioner of their arrival and get him to take steps for the seizure of the "Beauty" as soon as she reached port.

Mr. Driver was standing out in front of his store as they came up the street. Amazement and incredulity filled his face when he sighted them.

"You!" he cried, "Why, I thought you were all at the bottom of the Gulf."

"No, we are slightly disfigured but still in the ring," laughed Charley as he shook hands. "Our schooner has not come in yet, has she?"

Mr. Driver stared at him for a second. "There's a mystery here," he declared. "Come on into the store, and let's hear your story."

Seated in the store's little back room, Charley recounted their adventures while Mr. Driver listened attentively. When he had concluded, Mr. Driver remained silent for a moment.

"I hate to be the teller of bad news," he said, at last, "but you must learn it, and it had better

come from a friend. Your schooner is lost with all hands on board."

"Lost!" cried all together.

"Yes, she went down at anchor during the storm. The Greek sponger 'Zenephone' was passing when she went under. Not a man was saved. Every one on the 'Zenephone' wondered why she did not scud before it instead of hanging to her anchor. I understand now. They did not want to leave the neighborhood of the gold."

[253]

It was a heavy blow. At one sweep they were robbed of their all. The little band of chums sat paralyzed with grief, looking helplessly at each other. Mr. Driver arose quietly and closed the door softly behind him, leaving them alone with their grief.

For a few moments no one spoke. "It's hard, but it must be met," sighed Walter at last. "What are we going to do? We have nothing left now, not even the clothes we wear."

"God knows," answered Charley, hopelessly, at a loss for once. "I suppose we will have to hunt work at something or other."

"And likely be scattered and separated for the first time in years," exclaimed the captain.

"That's the worst of it," agreed Walter, sadly. "I don't mind working but I hate for us all to have to drift apart."

"Me too," wailed Chris. "Golly! I don't want to be with no one but you-alls."

"I don't believe the 'Beauty' is lost," Charley declared. "I believe this is just another of Manuel's tricks. He is as sharp a rascal as ever lived. I'll bet she is safe and sound somewhere and that Manuel just bought the Greeks on the 'Zenephone' to tell that story."

[254]

"Maybe," admitted the captain, doubtfully. "The story rings true, though. It would have been likely for them to hang to their anchor by the gold."

"And it would be just the kind of details Manuel would think of, knowing we would be more likely to believe the story if we escaped alive. He is an artist at rascality."

"Even if you're right, I reckon it won't help us much," said the old sailor. "The story's tied our hands all right. The Commissioner won't do anything just on our suspicions, an' we ain't got any money to do anything ourselves."

"I feel that Charley is right," Walter declared, "but we've got only one chance to prove it. Get to work, get some money and hire a Greek detective to look into the matter for us. The first question is, what can we do to earn money?"

They were engaged in a fruitless discussion on this point when Mr. Driver entered. He heard their discussion with sympathetic interest.

"There is no work around here," he declared. "The Greeks work cheaper than an American can. It's hard for an American to earn a bare living here. I understand from what you say that you do not want to be separated. I might find work for one of you, but I couldn't for all. There is only one suggestion I can make in such a case."

"Please give it to us," Walter requested.

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## CHAPTER XXXIV. CONCLUSION.

[255]

"WELL," said Mr. Driver, "there is a large fish-house at Clearwater, twenty miles below here. You probably could get a job fishing for it. You could all work together then. It is hard, dirty work but there is pretty good money in it if a man works hard."

The chums exchanged glances.

"I believe we will try it," Charley said. "Of course we will have to talk it over before we decide, but there does not seem to be anything else we can do."

"Very well," said Mr. Driver, "I'll give you a letter to the fish boss, I know him personally. And you'll need a little money to pay your fares there. You can return it when you get to earning."

The chums thanked the kind-hearted storekeeper for his advice and assistance and adjourned to the sidewalk where they discussed the matter earnestly. It did not take them long to decide to follow Mr. Driver's suggestion. They bid good-bye to the sponger captain, who decided to remain in Tarpon and try to get service on one of Mr. Williams' schooners, and, accepting the loan of ten dollars, which Mr. Driver pressed upon them, they boarded the first train going South and soon landed in the little town of Clearwater. And there, we must leave them for the present.

[256]

THE END.

### Transcriber's Notes:

Obvious punctuation errors repaired. The original text had no table of contents. One was created to aid the reader. Chapter I is untitled.

Page 3, "tatoood" changed to "tattooed" (tattooed arms and rolling)

Page 10, two lines were transposed. The original read:

shouted, as the smiling Greek shrugged his shoulder with the money by to-morrow night I'll close up ders. "You know what I say. If you don't come this place and have you prosecuted for obtaining

Page 14, "hundreth" changed "hundredth" (a hundredth part of)

Page 43, "alloted" changed to "allotted" (allotted to their boat)

Page 62, "along" changed to "alone" (worse than being alone)

Page 74, repeated word "see" removed from text Original read: (I don't see see what his object)

Page 78, "Manual" changed to "Manuel" (Manuel approached Captain)

Page 85, "blow" changed to "below" (been below for only)

Page 89, "exclamation" changed to "exclamation" (an exclamation of surprise)

Page 93, "captian" changed to "captain" (the captain declared)

Page 100, "gapping" changed to "gaping" (gaping hole in her)

Page 101, "was" changed to "were" (There were no)

Page 102, "that" changed to "than" (time than it has)

Page 105, "aim" changed to "air" (working the air pump)

Page 109, "baton" changed to "beaten" (Greeks had been badly beaten)

Page 128, "average" changed to "average" (better than average marksmen)

Page 164, "squaking" changed "squawking" (marsh hens, the squawking)

Page 190, "minues" changed to "minutes" (in a few minutes he)

Page 203, "taveling" changed to "traveling" (further traveling dangerous)

Page 231, repeated word "is" removed from text. Original read: (awhile even it is is risky)

Page 231, "gapping" changed to "gaping" (up the gaping hole)

\*\*\* END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THE BOY CHUMS IN THE GULF OF MEXICO

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