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the Life Saving Crew, by
Robert Shaler**

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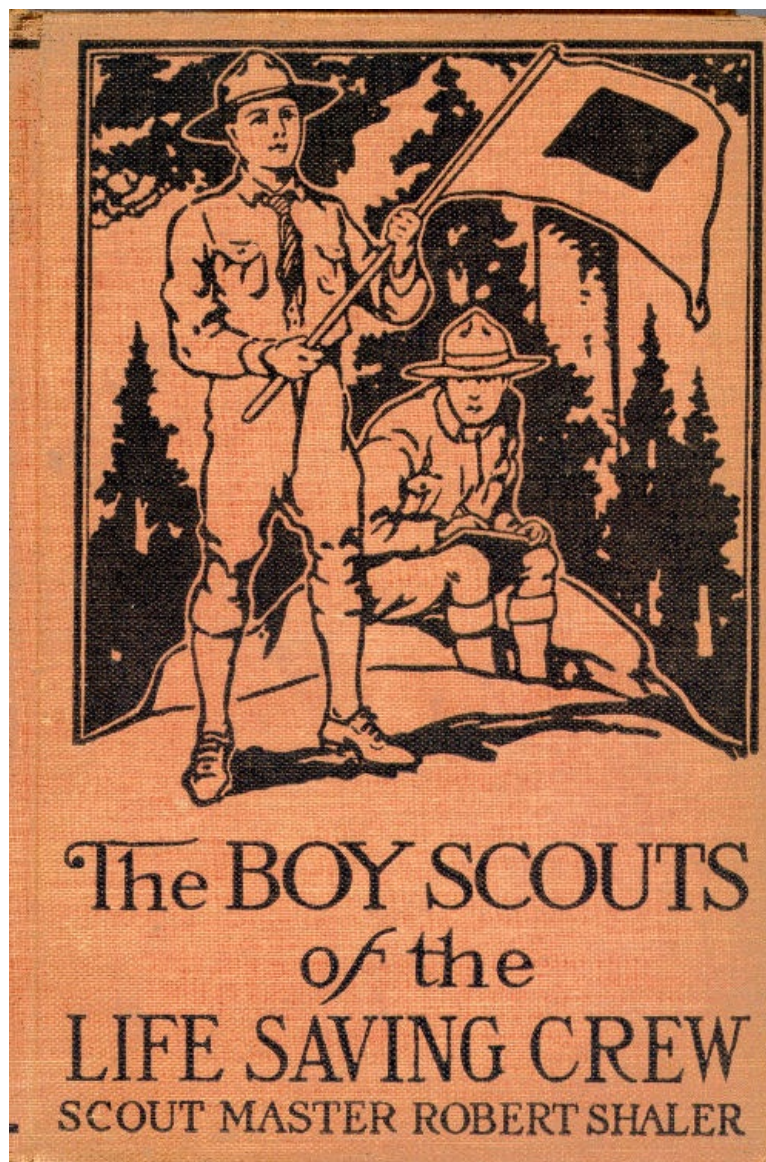
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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THE BOY SCOUTS OF THE LIFE SAVING CREW ***



THE BOY SCOUTS

OF THE LIFE SAVING CREW

BY
SCOUT MASTER ROBERT SHALER

AUTHOR OF "BOY SCOUTS OF THE SIGNAL CORPS," "BOY SCOUTS OF PIONEER CAMP," "BOY SCOUTS OF THE GEOLOGICAL SURVEY," "BOY SCOUTS ON PICKET DUTY," "BOY SCOUTS OF THE FLYING SQUADRON," "BOY SCOUTS AND THE PRIZE PENNANT," "BOY SCOUTS OF THE NAVAL RESERVE," "BOY SCOUTS IN THE SADDLE," "BOY SCOUTS FOR CITY IMPROVEMENT," ETC., ETC.

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The Boy Scouts of the Life Saving Crew.

CHAPTER I. OUT ON THE TRESTLE.

"We're almost there now," said Alec Sands as he steered the big touring car around a curve in the road and out upon a long stretch of hard, smooth, well-oiled clay. "Unless I'm mistaken, that white church spire over there beyond the fringe of palm trees marks the end of our journey. I really didn't know it was going to be such a long run, or I'd have told Bronson to send some lunch with us."

"Wish you had!" Chester Brownell exclaimed, leaning back in his seat in the tonneau. "I'm almost starved!"

"I reckon we can make up for it to-night," added Billy Worth, who sat in front beside Alec. "This Santario is quite a place, isn't it, Alec?"

"I think so," answered young Sands. "From what I've heard, I guess it's a sizable town now, though only a few years ago it was a mere village inhabited by fishermen. Someone discovered that the soil two miles inland from the village was suited for raising oranges, so he bought up several acres and planted an orange grove. Since then others have followed the leader, and now the village has grown so large that the oldest inhabitant can hardly recognize it."

The three young tourists who were speeding along at a good thirty miles an hour, were all members of a troop of Boy Scouts whose summer headquarters were located at Pioneer Lake, "up North." Alec Sands, the captain of the Otter patrol, and Billy Worth, a member of the Wolf patrol, had been prominent in many of the contests held at Pioneer Camp. Chester Brownell of the Otters was less well known to the boys of the troop, but Alec had come to know him at Hilltop School and had found in him a promising athlete.

At this time the boys were far away from the scene of their earlier adventures, being on a visit at the winter residence of Alec's parents—Palmdune, a splendid mansion near a picturesque old town on the Florida seacoast.

It was early spring and the weather had not yet begun to be oppressively warm. Indeed, the nights were still cold with frequent threats of

frost,—that dread enemy of the budding orange groves. Alternating with days and nights of mild stillness were intervals of semi-storm, of rough winds that swept the low-lying shore and menaced coastwise shipping with the danger of being blown landward upon the numerous sandbars and keys.

Like other towns and villages in that part of the country, Santario had thrived all winter on the influx of wealthy Northerners who were accustomed to spend “the worst months of the year” there. And now these pleasant resorts were just beginning to slide back into their usual grooves of inactivity, and to have the quiet, unruffled appearance which was most familiar though not most welcome to their oldest inhabitants. Claynor, the nearest railway station to Santario, was the town where the three boys had spent that day. The place was rich with interesting historical associations, and they had enjoyed visiting it. Its little museum contained many relics not only of the earliest Spanish colonists but also of the later wars with the Seminole Indians under their great chief Osceola. At present the boys were returning, late in the afternoon, to Palmdune, where Alec hoped to have another guest for the Easter vacation.

8

His expected guest, who had not yet arrived, was Hugh Hardin, formerly leader of the Wolf patrol at Pioneer Camp. After some hesitation on Hugh’s part, owing to the fact that he and Alec had not always been on the best of terms in the past, Hugh had persuaded himself that to decline Alec’s invitation without sufficient reason would be both ungracious and unfriendly, and so he had accepted it in the same spirit with which it was given. As a matter of fact, Hugh had done so gladly, for he had a genuine liking and respect for his rival, Alec Sands, and he had usually been the first to regret and to make amends for their previous unpleasantness. On his journey down South, Hugh was even now eagerly looking forward to the visit, while at the same time his three friends, bowling along the highway in the big touring car, were discussing his arrival.

9

“If we take the car out again to-morrow to drive over to Claynor to meet Hugh, we’ll take some grub with us,—you can bet on that!” said Alec. “I thought there was some kind of an inn at Claynor, but we found only that clam-and-oyster parlor!”

10

“Gee, what a joint!” exclaimed Billy in an aggrieved tone. “Bucking broncos wouldn’t have dragged me into it!”

“Me, neither,” Chester added with ungrammatical emphasis.

“I had a letter from camp to-day—from Buck Winter,” he continued. “We left so early I didn’t have time to show it to you fellows before we started. Buck says Tom Sherwood has been elected temporary leader of our patrol, Alec. Hope he’ll be as good a one as you were, old scout.”

“Thanks!” responded Alec, laughing. “How much do you want for handing me that one, Chet? Can you change five cents?”

"At this moment," replied Chester, "I couldn't change a—Hello! look at that!"

As he uttered the words, he leaned forward, pointing over Billy's shoulder. Alec, after one quick glance, threw out the clutch and jammed on the emergency brake with such suddenness that Chester, caught unprepared, tumbled back upon the seat. Before he had recovered from this jolt, he saw Alec and Billy jump out of the auto and run swiftly through the tall grass toward a railway track close to the road. Leaping from the car he followed them at full speed.

11

The track at this point made a long curve preparatory to crossing a narrow trestle over an inlet of the ocean, scarcely a hundred yards distant from the spot where they had left the car. Not quite halfway across the trestle, a girl, carrying a basket, was advancing, hurrying over the ties, and behind her trotted a big shaggy dog. The three lads had sprinted forward over a sandy embankment toward the track because they heard, in the distance behind the girl, the sudden shrill whistle of a locomotive and the rumble of an approaching train.

The girl also heard it, glanced back over her shoulder, and with a shriek of terror, flung the basket aside and fled onward as fast as she could run.

12

As the young Scouts dashed to the rescue, the ominous rumbling grew louder and louder; the rails began to hum; then, with another warning blast of the whistle, the freight train appeared around the bend and thundered toward the long bridge.

Billy was the first to reach the end of the trestle toward which the girl was coming rapidly. Running forward, leaping from one tie to another, he realized how precarious was the footing, how easily one misstep might hurl anyone into the depths below. Between the ties underfoot he caught glimpses of the flashing green water swirling around the upright piles as the tide flowed in, and, looking up, he could see the strained, desperate expression on the girl's white face.

"Don't lose your nerve!" he called to her. "You'll get across all right." He was not so confident as he appeared to be, but he knew instinctively that she needed encouragement. "Come on, come on; but take care!" he shouted. "We're going to flag that train."

13

Alec was close at his heels. Stripping off his coat and waving it frantically, he overtook Billy just as young Worth, bounding forward, almost collided with the girl and caught her outstretched hands in his own. Some little distance behind them, Chester stood at the end of the trestle, gazing with horror-stricken eyes at his friends and wondering what was the best thing he could do at this crisis.

"Oh!" he groaned despairingly. "They'll never stop it! They'll all be killed!"

Without waiting to see what progress Billy and the girl were making as they turned and ran, Alec bounded forward for several yards, and stood in the middle of the track until the train was almost upon him. Then, with quick decision,

14

he leaped to one side and flung himself down on the ground.

The train passed him amid a whirl of dust and sand and small stones, and in another minute it was out upon the bridge. Car after car thundered past, with a deafening rumble of wheels. There was a sudden shriek and a jar of the brakes being applied, but before the engine had come to a standstill it had almost crossed the trestle.

Alec sprang to his feet before the train stopped. He looked wildly around and back to the place where he had last seen Billy and the girl. They had disappeared!

"What has happened?" he wondered, in a stupor of dread. "Did the train hit them, or did they jump off the trestle into the water? I must go back and find out! Oh, there's Chester at the other end of the bridge. He's waving his arms and shouting."

15

Alec wheeled and ran back swiftly down the track and out on the trestle. The train blocked his way, but he climbed up a small iron ladder at the rear of the last car, ran along the roofs of the cars, and dropped to the ground just behind the tender, on the left side of the track. There, stretched out flat on one of the ties, he peered over, and his eyes met those of Billy Worth, full of the strain of waiting, upturned to his face.

With one arm around the girl, whose arms clung about his neck, and the other flung over one of the trestle rods under the track, Billy hung there straight downward over the water fully twenty feet below. Alec saw that Billy's grip was weakening and that there was no time to lose.

Swiftly he twined his legs around the tie and lowered his body as far as he could. Then he stretched out his arms; but it was not enough; he could not reach the girl.

16

17

CHAPTER II. THE RESCUE.

"Can you lift her up a little, Billy?" he asked in a low voice.

"I'm afraid to," Billy whispered brokenly. "If I move, I'll—I'll lose my—grip."

"Drop, then! Drop into the water, both of you!"

"Don't dare—she can't swim—current's too swift. Guess I'll have to, though, or else——" He felt the girl's arms loosen. "Hang on to me!" he said sternly.

"No, no!" cried the girl. "Let me go! I'll try—try to swim. And you can drop after me and—and—pull me out! Let me go!"

"Wait!" shouted Alec. "Can you hold on a minute longer, Billy? There's someone coming!"

Then came the sound of someone running over the ties, and Alec gave a little gasp of relief.

18

"Is that you, Chet?" he asked, without looking up or turning his head.

"Engineer," answered a gruff but tremulous voice. "Here, let me help you."

"Take hold of my feet, then," Alec replied. "Lower me down another six inches so that I can reach them. Quick, now!"

The man obeyed promptly. While he was speaking, Alec had slackened his hold with his legs, and the engineer lost not a minute in catching his ankles in a firm grip. The next moment Alec held the girl in his arms, and he managed, by a great effort, to pass her to Chester, who had just run up to help.

"Now, catch hold again," he said to the engineer as he leaned over the edge once more. "Get a good grip this time; Billy's no lightweight."

"Hi! what are you going to do?" yelled Chester, dropping down beside him. "Alec, let me take a turn! I can pull Billy up if—"

19

"Never mind me; I can climb up alone," called Billy in a faint voice from under the track. And he swung sidewise until he could brace his feet against a cross-pile.

Slowly, with aching muscles, he drew his body upward; inch by inch he climbed, grasping the projecting ends of the ties. The strain on his tired arms was tremendous, his shoulders felt numb, his hands clutched wildly—slipped—and with a gasp, he lost his hold, and fell down, down, into the flowing tide.

A tremendous splash sent a shower of spray up into the faces of his friends. Blinking, they saw him sink, saw the clear green water close over his head, and after waiting breathlessly for several minutes, saw him bob up to the surface and strike out for the nearest point of land. They knew he could swim like a seal, but they feared that, weakened by the strain he had just undergone, he might fail to make any headway against the current. As it was, they saw that he would be swept beyond the point toward which he was struggling into a broader space of open water that looked very dark and deep.

20

Chester was just about to fling off his coat and shoes on an impulse to dive to the assistance of his friend, when he was checked by an outcry from the girl. Plucky and alert, she had quickly recovered her presence of mind, and now she ran along past the engine to the end of the bridge, calling:

"Carlo! Here, Carlo! Come here, boy!"

A deep-throated bark greeted her, and her companion and protector, the big dog, dashed to meet her, wagging his tail and showing every sign of canine joy at seeing her again. But without pausing to respond to his enthusiasm, she sped along the shore of the inlet until she came opposite where Billy was now floating with the tide, wisely resting before he continued his exertions.

21

Pointing toward him, the girl urged Carlo into the water. "Get him, Carlo, good boy! Go on! Go on! Get him!"

And the faithful animal seemed to understand at once what was required; at any rate, he plunged boldly into the water and paddled out straight as an arrow toward Billy.

Giving a cheer, Alec and Chester, followed by the trainman, ran over to the spot where the girl was standing. Meanwhile, Carlo had come abreast of the swimmer, who, seeing him, had turned over and was resuming his strokes. Billy was too tired to disdain the noble dog's assistance, so he put out one hand and grasped Carlo's collar. Using his other arm and his legs, he helped the big dog to tow him back to the embankment.

It was slow work, and the tidal current was merciless, but at last they reached shallower water where Billy could touch bottom. Releasing the dog, he waded to the shore and threw himself on the coarse grass.

22

"Billy, old scout, you're a hero!" exclaimed Alec, bending over his breathless comrade.

"You bet he is, boys!" agreed the engineer. "Anything pluckier or cooler than the way he dropped over the side of the trestle, with the girl hanging onto him for dear life,—when they thought they wouldn't be able to get ahead of the train,—I never saw in all my born days! And I've seen a good many nifty stunts, too,—including your hand-me-up rescue of the girl," he added turning to Alec, whose face, pale with anxiety, flushed crimson at these words of praise.

"Are you all right, Billy Wolf?" queried Chester, alarmed at Billy's silence.

"Yes, I'll be—all right—in a few—minutes," panted Billy, raising his head. As he did so, his gaze met that of the girl, and he saw that her dark blue eyes were filled with tears. "Oh, there you are!" he observed, smiling. "Not hurt, are you?"

23

"Not at all, thanks to you!" she answered, a little sob in her voice. "I—I tried to thank your friend, a few minutes ago, but I haven't thanked you for saving—"

"Oh, that's all right!" interposed Billy. "We're only too glad that we happened to come along in time. Aren't we, Alec?"

"Of course we are!" assented the other rescuer warmly. He patted Carlo's fine head. "He's a great old dog, isn't he? Whew! Stop shaking water all over us, Carlo! Can't you see Billy is wet enough already?"

"Down, Carlo!" commanded the young girl.

Carlo bounded away, barking joyously.

Billy stood up, dripping wet and shivering slightly, in spite of the warm afternoon sunlight. His hair was matted with sticky salt water, his clothes were soiled with mud and sand, but he laughed as he shook himself. Chester and Alec began to pat and thump him vigorously to quicken circulation.

24

"Take a few sprints up and down the bank," advised Chester. "You're chilled, Billy; your teeth are chattering."

"Nonsense!" laughed Billy. "I'm all right."

As if to prove this assertion, he began a wrestling match with Carlo, who had come frisking up to him. But this sport was interrupted by the departure of the engineer.

"Well, I must be getting up steam again," said the man. "Good-by, all!"

After shaking hands all around, he walked rapidly back to his engine, and soon the big freight was on its way again, the various trainmen waving their hands in farewell.

"I must be on my way, too," the girl said, breaking an awkward little pause which followed the last echo of the vanishing train. "I was going over to Santario, to see my father. He is the keeper of the Life Saving Station at Red Key," she explained. "His name is Anderson,—Peter Anderson. Mine is Ruth."

25

"We're Boy Scouts," replied Alec, feeling that some introduction was due. "This chap is William Worth,—we call him Billy, for short,—this is Chester Brownell, and I'm Alec Sands. We are on our way to Santario, too; we left our machine over yonder. If you like, we'll be glad to give you a ride. Will you come? It's getting late, the sun's going down, and you'll never walk all the way to Santario before dusk. Better come with us."

His suggestion was offered in frank kindness and Ruth Anderson was quick to appreciate it.

"It's very good of you to invite me," she said. "Thank you very much! I'd love a ride. You see, I've never been in an automobile. I've been in a lifeboat, though; but that's not exciting,—unless there's a storm!"

26

"That's something we've never done—gone out in a lifeboat," Chester remarked. "I visited a station on the coast of Maine two summers ago, but I didn't see the crew at work."

"I've never even seen a Life Saving Station," said Billy.

"I have it—a great idea!" exclaimed Alec. "Some day, soon after Hugh gets here, we'll motor down to Red Key and——"

Ruth interrupted him with a silvery laugh. "Oh, that will be fine!" she cried gaily. "Dad will be so glad to see you-all and to thank you for all you've done for me to-day. And I'm sure you'll like the crew over at Red Key; they're the nicest, kindest, bravest fellows in the world! And they'll like you, too; I know they will!"

27

CHAPTER III. COMING EVENTS.

Ruth's spirits, considering the shock and excitement which she had experienced scarcely an hour ago, seemed to have risen wonderfully. And somehow her light-hearted gaiety was soon felt by the three courageous young Scouts who

had shared her danger. As they all walked over to the waiting auto, chattering and laughing, even Billy forgot his sorry plight, though he was still "soaked and sticky," as he said jocosely. Alec went to find his coat which he had cast aside, and, returning with it presently, he made Billy remove his wet one and put on the dry garment as well as the dust-robe which lay folded upon the seat in the tonneau.

"I'll look like an Indian with a blanket," said Billy, laughing.

28

"Never mind; please put it around you tight—like this," urged Ruth, and forthwith she wrapped it shawl-wise around Billy, who immediately ceased to demur.

She was about to spring into the car, when she paused, one foot on the running board, and looked questioningly at Alec.

"Oh, I almost forgot poor Carlo!" she exclaimed, struck by a sudden misgiving. "What *can* we do with him? He can't run all the way and keep up with us, can he?"

"Not much!" was Alec's emphatic reply. "He's going to ride with us. There's plenty of room in the car."

"But he's dripping wet!"

"No matter. In he goes! Nothing's too good for old Carlo! Now you and Billy jump in and take the rear seat, and make him sit on the floor."

They obeyed without more ado, though some persuasion was required to make Carlo get into the car and lie down at their feet. He showed a decided preference for jumping up on the seat between Ruth and Billy, and once there, for shaking himself vigorously. Billy good-humoredly protested that he was wet enough, and at last Carlo took the hint to subside.

29

Chester cranked the machine, sprang in beside Alec, and they were off, bowling over the long smooth road at a rate that defied the rural speed limits.

Alec was an excellent chauffeur, and he handled his big car with skill and assurance. There was very little traffic on the road at this time of day, so he had to look out only for an occasional mule-drawn market wagon driven by a negro in ragged blue "jeans," or now and then a swarthy, smiling pedestrian who waved his hat and called out some jolly greeting, as they flashed by. Ruth was delighted with the ride. When they had gone two or three miles beyond a small settlement near the coast, she asked Alec to drive slower so that she might point out to him some fine fishing grounds between the low-lying keys.

30

"Dad said there is always good fishing out yonder," she told him, "and he ought to know, because he's very familiar with the shore all the way from Red Key to Santario. You see, he used to be one of the regular beach patrol before he was made captain of the Life Saving Station."

"Is that so?" responded Billy, with interest. "I reckon he could tell us some great yarns about his experiences."

"Yes, indeed. I'll ask him to," promised Ruth,

"when you-all come over to Red Key and see the station some day."

"We'll do that as soon as Hugh comes," Alec said, pleased with the suggestion.

"D'you think we could manage to put in a day or two fishing?" ventured Chester, whose enthusiasm for all kinds of water sports was unbounded.

31

"Yes, I guess so," answered Alec.

"Are you boys all Scouts?" Ruth asked after a few minutes, during which she had listened attentively to reminiscences of their fishing and canoeing trips at Pioneer Camp. And on being assured that they were, she continued: "My brother is, too; he belongs to Florida Troop No. —I forget the troop number, but anyway it's the Bear patrol. They had a camp near Okechobee last summer."

"Where are they now?"

"They're going to meet at Claynor for a week or two, and then go on an exploration of the Everglades," said Ruth. "Perhaps my brother and you-all will get acquainted one of these days; and that would be fine!"

"What's your brother's name?" asked Chester.

32

"Marcus," answered the girl; "but everybody calls him Mark."

"We'd be glad to know him, of course," said Alec, politely; and Billy promptly added, "Sure thing, we would."

Talking thus, they arrived at a place called Five Corners from the fact that it was the meeting point of five roads, or rather, the point where two other roads cut into the main highway. Ruth then suggested that they should set her down, for by taking one of the roads, she could reach Red Key within an hour, while they could continue their journey to Santario. But Alec would not consent to this suggestion, and he turned the car down the road leading to the little village that clustered around the life saving station.

Arrived there, Ruth introduced the boys to her father, who thanked them warmly for their bravery and invited them to visit the station early in the following week.

33

"The weather is still sort o' uncertain at this time o' year, and we may have storms almost any day," said Peter Anderson. "Usually they don't amount to much along this coast, but you never can tell. Anyway, come over when you can."

"We will, thanks," Alec replied; and after a cordial farewell, the boys drove away. An hour later they were at Palmdune, where their story had a sympathetic hearing and they were treated to a bountiful supper before they went to bed. Billy retired somewhat earlier than the others, yielding to Mrs. Sands' advice. He really was more tired than the rest, and, furthermore, he wanted to write a letter home.

When Alec and Chester went up to the former's room, which they occupied together,—Billy was

34

to share the adjoining room with Hugh, later,— they were not at all sleepy, and they continued their animated discussion of plans for the next week. Even after he put out the light and jumped into bed, Alec continued talking, until a soft snore from the other side of the room showed him that Chester had already fallen asleep. He soon followed the example, but his mind was not idle, for he dreamed that he had gone to sea in a big schooner, and was sailing over the blue ocean.

In his dream, the captain of the schooner was talking to him and telling him what a fine sailor he had become. Presently he invited Alec to breakfast with him and handed the young mariner a plate of hot buttered toast and the fin of a shark fried in oil. When Alec had eaten this, the captain told him to go up on deck and see what the weather was, for the sea had begun to be rough and the ship to pitch and roll in the trough of the waves. Alec did so, and to his astonishment he found the foamy seas tossing and roaring and the officers shouting orders to the men to take in sail.

Presently there came a terrific crash, the masts went by the board, the waves dashed over the ship, and Alec found himself tumbling among huge breakers, until, almost in an instant, he was thrown upon a beach where he lay helpless, unable to crawl out of the way of the angry waters. Every moment they threatened to carry him seaward again. In vain he tried to work his way up the sand dunes with his arms and legs. Presently down he came—to find himself sprawling on the floor!

35

“What’s the matter?” exclaimed Chester, awakened by the noise. He sat up in his bed, looking around in sleepy bewilderment. “What made all that row?”

“I fell out of bed!” answered Alec dolefully. “I dreamed I was shipwrecked.”

“I’m glad you’re not,” chuckled Chester. “Get into bed again,—and for pity’s sake dream of something else.”

36

Feeling decidedly foolish, Alec, without a word, meekly did as his friend advised.

37

CHAPTER IV.

PLANS AND PROJECTS.

The next morning was dull and foggy with a suspicion of a wet drizzle in the air. Nevertheless, the boys were up early, filled with eager anticipation of the good times in store. Had not Mr. Sands promised to announce that very day the plans he had made for their recreation?

Up at Pioneer Camp in the northern woods they were accustomed to enjoy a plunge in the lake before breakfast. So now, instead of dressing, they donned bathing suits, crept noiselessly downstairs and out on the lawn, and raced to the beach, which was only a short distance from the

border of Mr. Sands' estate. Arriving there, they found it deserted, although footprints in the sand showed them that a surfman from the Life Saving Station, two miles further up the shore, had patrolled the beach during the night.

Overhead, huge, white, jagged clouds moved slowly across the sky. Their close ranks were broken now and then by shafts of sunlight that pierced through the fog and struck steely-blue gleams from the undulating waves. A few white-caps dotted the ocean, and the heavy swells rolled ponderously toward the shore, breaking into cavernous surf that sounded like far-distant thunder. To Billy Worth, inland born and bred, the ocean seemed a source of endless wonder; to Alec and Chester, it had become a friendly element, and they proved their familiarity with it by wading boldly in and diving straight through the green breakers.

38

"Come on, Billy!" yelled Chester, bobbing up on the crest of a wave. "The water's fi—"

No sooner were the words sputtered forth than Chester was lifted bodily, rolled over and over, and flung with a thump upon the beach, almost at Billy's feet. A wave had broken unexpectedly and had tossed him around as though he were a bit of driftwood. He staggered up, his eyes and mouth full of briny sand, and rubbed one shoulder gingerly.

39

"Where am I?" he inquired. "I must have turned a dozen complete somersaults! Gee! My shoulder's out of joint—at least, it feels so! Why don't you go in, Billy?"

"I'm going," replied Billy, doubling up with laughter. "Look at Alec out there! He's got tangled up with a bunch of seaweed, his arms and legs are covered with the slimy stuff! Seems to me, it's more fun watching you fellows; but here goes, anyway!"

He bounded forward and dived through the green arch of a comber with a skill and daring that rivaled the best feats of his companions. Chester followed him as soon as he could get the sand out of his eyes. For only a short while the three swimmers disported themselves in the waves, for they were sensible enough to go ashore before the exhilaration of the exercise had even begun to wear off.

40

As they returned to the house, they noticed one of the Revenue Marine Bureau cutters cruising along the shore not far out; and Alec explained that the cutters made regular trips up and down the coast during winter and early spring, to warn or assist imperiled vessels.

"I didn't know they came as far south as this," said Chester.

"Oh, yes; but not so often as they do along our northern coasts," Alec rejoined.

After breakfast, Mr. Sands called the three boys out on the broad veranda, and they all ensconced themselves in comfortable wicker chairs.

"Well, what have you got to say for yourself, Dad?" inquired Alec. "What's the good word?"

41

His father looked at him and laughed.

"I suppose you mean you're waiting to know what I intend to do with three lively lads who are making themselves too numerous to mention? Am I right?"

"Yes, since you put it that way. If you want to get rid of us, how are you going to do it?"

"Oh, there are plenty of ways. For instance, I might hustle you back to school before this quite unnecessary vacation is over," said Mr. Sands, who was fond of teasing and joking.

"Not much! Not if we know it!" protested Alec, glancing at Billy and Chester, whose faces were twisted into broad grins. "Besides, Hugh is coming to-day, and it wouldn't be decent of you, Dad, to punish us all like that. What have we done, anyway? We've been good and——"

Here Chester gave way to laughter.

"You see!" cried Alec's father. "That was too much for Chester! He knows some secret which I'll have to worm out of him before I'll commit myself to any program."

"No, sir, not guilty!" declared Chester.

"On the level?"

"On the level," solemnly echoed Chester.

"All right, then. What would you all say to a trip down the coast?"

"A hunting and fishing trip?" Alec asked eagerly.

"Yes, if you want to try any fishing. You can't hunt; it's not the season, you know."

"We wouldn't want to, even if we could," his son replied on second thoughts. "But the fishing would be great sport! That's a bully idea of yours, Dad! I'm keen for the trip!"

"How about you two?" Mr. Sands turned to the others. "Does the plan strike your fancy?"

"It surely does!" was Billy's prompt reply.

"Simply great!" added Chester.

"Good. Do you think Hugh will like it?"

"I'm sure he will," Billy said. "Hugh's the boy for any sort of outing and adventure, sir, and this one will be just the thing."

"The ayes have it, then," said Mr. Sands. "Well, my plan is this: I've found out that I can charter the small sloop *Arrow*, Lemuel Vinton, owner and master,—you remember him, Alec?—and engage his services as captain. For crew, he'll have you four boys and a certain young man from my New York office whom I'm sending over to Havana on business. His name is Roy Norton; he's a good sailor, and one of the most sensible and likable young men I've ever had the good fortune to know. I'll expect you boys to stand by him as your leader on this trip, just as you would if he were George Rawson or your scout master, Denmead."

"Is he a scout?" asked Alec.

"I believe so; anyway, he knows a lot about scoutcraft, and he's deeply interested in it. He was delighted when I suggested his going on this trip."

"Aren't you going too, Dad?"

"Sorry, I can't. I'm obliged to go out to Chicago next week. Business. But Norton'll manage you chaps better than I could; he knows the ropes. He'll go as far as Key West with you. You'll leave him there and come back in the sloop, under strict sailing orders from Captain Vinton. Mind you, I want each one of you to give me his word to render prompt and willing obedience to any instructions you may receive, either from Norton or from the captain."

"We promise," replied the three Scouts. To himself Alec added: "Hope this man Norton isn't going to boss us around like four kids! George Rawson and Chief Denmead never do that. They never have to; a few words are enough! Wonder what Norton'll be like?"

Mr. Sands rose from his chair.

"What train is Hugh coming on?" he asked, consulting his watch.

"Why, Dad! You know there's only one a day now arriving at Claynor. It's due at eleven-eighteen."

"Well, you'd better be on the jump toward the garage, if you're going to drive the car over to meet that train. You've only a little more than an hour."

"We'll get there in time, all right," said Alec. "I wouldn't miss meeting Hugh—not for a lot! Come on, fellows."

About an hour later the touring car drew up at the platform of the station at Claynor, and its three occupants alighted to seek shelter from the clouds of dust that a stiff breeze was blowing from the roads. With the exception of the station agent and a few negro porters asleep on a long bench, not a soul was in sight near the little terminal. Across a small plaza, where a few dusty palm trees swayed dejectedly in the wind, could be seen a row of quaint shops, an old Spanish church, and a moving-picture theater; beyond this was a vista of the main street of the town, with people coming and going, to and fro, in a leisurely manner.

Presently, long after schedule time, the train rolled up and came to a standstill. Almost the first passenger to alight was a tall, slender, yet well-developed young fellow, who rushed forward at sight of his three comrades and seized their hands.

"Hugh, old scout, we thought you'd never get here!" exclaimed Alec.

"Your beastly old train's late," added Billy.

"I know it is—worse luck! Don't blame me! It wasn't my fault. I couldn't get here sooner or I would, you may be sure."

"Well, we're mighty glad to see you," said Chester.

"Come on, Hugh! We've got a lot of news to tell

you on the way home!" exclaimed Alec.

"I'm all ears," replied Hugh, laughing.

CHAPTER V. A VISIT OF INSPECTION.

Red Key, on which the Life Saving Station stood, was virtually an island, half sand, half coral reef. It was about one-quarter of a mile in length, very irregular in its general formation, and commanded an extensive sweep of shore,—being one of a group of Keys which are so small that they rarely appear on ordinary maps. Yet it was a fairly important post, one which required the presence of a regular crew on duty at certain seasons of the year.

In addition to the building which housed two surfboats, a big chest full of signal flags, another of rockets, a Lyle gun,—used for shooting coils of rope out to a floundering ship,—and a heavy cart on which the gun could be mounted like a piece of artillery when it was necessary to drag it to another part of the shore,—in addition to this building, there was a small cabin occupied by Peter Anderson, his wife, their son Mark, and their young daughter Ruth, who, however, spent most of the time with her aunt at Santario. The men of the crew were quartered in the loft of the main building, above the beach apparatus, and they took their meals at Anderson's cabin.

From this loft a steep and narrow staircase led up into a little tower which served as a lookout, and, in case of emergency, as a lighthouse. A big lamp, seldom lighted, hung on chains fastened to the roof of the tower.

All these details the boys learned on their first visit at the station, two days after Hugh's arrival. Anderson himself took them over the boathouse and explained everything to them, much to their satisfaction. Hugh was impressed with the practical efficiency of such equipment, as well as with the orderly readiness for instant service which marked both the apparatus and the men in charge. Chester admired the boats which were built for contending with the roughest surf, yet capable of being easily managed by the brawny men who wielded the heavy oars. Alec and Billy, glancing at the surf guns or carronades and then at the rows of life-preservers hung upon the walls, expressed a wish that they might some time have a chance to go out in those boats to the rescue of a ship in distress, or, at least, to see the crew in action, even if they should not be permitted to join in the work.

"So you'd like to, eh?" said Anderson, chuckling grimly. "Well, I'll remember you said so. You may have a chance one of these days,—if there's not too much danger. Anyway, since you know all about signaling, you might be able to work the flags and communicate with a vessel in distress. Here's a chart showing the complete flag signal code. Just run your eye over that."

They did so, and their interest in his

explanations made them indifferent to the passing of time. All the while the tide was rising steadily and, before they realized it, they found themselves cut off from the mainland by several feet of rough water which covered the connecting sandbar.

"Here's a nice fix we're in!" exclaimed Alec. "What can we do now? Swim ashore?"

"It's not much of a distance," observed Chester, measuring it with level gaze. "But the water's pretty rough, and there's a strong set toward the ocean. Better not risk it, I say."

It was quite unusual for Chester to be so cautious. His companions looked at him in surprise.

"I second Chester's motion," remarked Billy, who had had quite enough strenuous swimming for the present.

52

"You certainly are not going to try any fool stunt like that, boys!" declared Anderson. "I know what a current there is through that inlet, and you couldn't hire me to let you try to swim it! Why, out there,"—he pointed to the nearest extremity of the island,—“is what is called a sea puss, a place where cross currents meet and form a whirlpool at mid-tide. It would swallow you up before you could guess what had happened to you! No, sirree! Here you'll stay until low tide again. Do your folks know you came over here to-day?"

"Oh, yes; I told them," Alec answered.

"All right, then; they won't be worried. If you hadn't told them, I'd get out a boat and take you over, but——"

"We'd hate to give you that trouble," said Hugh. "Besides, we're not a bit sorry to stay here in this interesting place; that is, if you don't mind. We're not in the way?"

53

"Not a bit of it! The boys'll be glad of your company. Sorry that Mark and Ruth are away, though. You'll be marooned here twelve hours. That means all night, as it's four o'clock now. Well, never mind. I guess we can put you up for the night, if you're not too particular, and the missus can rustle enough grub for us all."

"Thanks, ever so much," said Alec and Billy, almost in one breath, and Hugh added: "It's mighty good of you, Captain Anderson." He was much pleased with the hospitable captain's "us all." It seemed to include all four boys in a fellowship with the crew of life-savers, for whom the young scouts had begun to feel a genuine liking and respect.

"I guess you boys can find enough to do to amuse yourselves till supper time," the keeper continued. "If you want to, you can go out with the beach patrols."

54

"Are they going over to the mainland?"

"No, not this afternoon. I guess it won't be necessary," said Anderson, gazing up into the leaden sky. "It's pretty windy, to be sure; but unless this wind shifts to the northeast, all they'll need to do, until dark, will be to cross from one key to another, and so on down for

quite a long way.”

“How will they cross?”

“We keep a dory at each end of Red Key, and there’s a small pontoon bridge connecting that point out yonder with the Key just beyond it. Beyond this end of Red Key”—he turned around and pointed in a new direction—“the Keys are so near together you can wade from one to another, if you wear oilskins and if the tide isn’t full. Run along now, and tell Downs and Baley that you’d like to make the beat with them.”

With a joyous whoop, showing that the captain’s suggestion had met with instant favor, the four scouts dashed away to find the men.

55

Jim Downs and Fred Baley—Surfman Four and Six, respectively—were more than willing to “tote the youngsters” with them, as Jim said. They would not start out until sunset, so there was an interval of impatient waiting. To while away the time, Surfman Three, a genial young Irishman named Larry Flynn, proposed a series of track games between the crew and their visitors. Larry prided himself on his speed in the quarter-mile, and his mates—all but Baley and Downs, who had to hold themselves fresh for their coming duties—were prompt to respond to the call of play.

In the good-natured competition that followed, Alec captured the hundred-yard dash; Hugh and Larry actually tied in the quarter-mile; while Surfman Five, a tall, lanky, muscular fellow named Culver, won the broad-jump, in which all took part. Billy easily carried off a hurdle race,—the improvised hurdles were chairs with boards laid upon their backs,—and Chester distinguished himself in the high-jump, his chief rivals being Culver and Hugh. When it came to the weights, the boys had very little chance against the larger and brawnier men, and Frank Bowers, Surfman One, threw the hammer several feet farther than anyone. He was as skilful with his left hand as with his right.

56

“Frank is our best all-round athlete,” said Surfman Two, addressing the captain.

“You’re a fairly husky one, yourself, Ed,” returned Anderson, slapping him on the back. “It isn’t everyone can pull stroke oar in a lifeboat as steady and strong as you.”

The games over, all repaired to the loft, where Mrs. Anderson helped them arrange “a couple o’ shake-downs” for the visitors. Bowers then took his station in the lookout, Hugh and Chester remaining with him to hear his interesting accounts of bygone wrecks and rescues, while Alec and Billy studied maps and charts downstairs. They were full of enthusiasm for the proposed sailing trip down the coast, and they wanted to become familiar with the shore line, the bays, inlets, keys, etc.

57

About six o’clock the jangling of a metal gong, which hung outside Mrs. Anderson’s kitchen, summoned the crew to supper. True to the scout principle of being helpful and useful whenever they could, the four boys insisted on helping Mrs. Anderson and her aged colored cook serve the wholesome meal, though she would fain have treated them as guests.

"It's great fun!" they declared. "We're having the time of our lives!"

After supper they returned to the boathouse.

With the setting of the sun there was a lull in the wind, but when Baley and Downs started out, at seven o'clock, on their four hours' tour of duty, it had risen again and was blowing with renewed force—but still not from the northeast. Alec and Chester, the two Otters, accompanied Baley; while the Wolves, Hugh and Billy, went with Downs. Thus they set forth in the long twilight, laughing and talking, thrilled with this new adventure, unaware of the danger and disaster that loomed large in the immediate future.

58

59

CHAPTER VI. THE BEACH PATROLS.

"Wind's blowing some," observed Baley, raising his voice so that he could be heard above the angry snarl of the surf.

"Hope nothing hits the bar to-night," Downs answered.

Then the surfmen trudged off in opposite directions, following the line of the wave-beaten strand, each carrying on his back a recording clock in a leather case, several candle-like Coston lights, and a wooden handle.

With oilskins buttoned tightly and hip-boots drawn up, Jim Downs and his youthful comrades fought the stiff breeze on their watch. Darkness was slow in coming, so they were not yet in imminent peril from shifting sands, driftwood, or tidal waves. Their mission was a serious one, requiring alertness and keen observation. Soon a sense of solemn responsibility subdued even the high spirits of the boys, finally checking the flow of their eager conversation altogether.

60

"Isn't that a ship 'way out there?" Hugh asked at length, gazing at something which seemed to be the dark bulk of a vessel in a sea of foam.

"Guess it's only a cloud," answered Downs, and Billy agreed with this opinion.

Hugh said nothing in contradiction, but he was by no means convinced that the slowly moving form was not that of a schooner. Indeed, he believed he saw the faint lines of spars and rigging.

After a few minutes Downs, to make sure, looked again at the distant object. Then, taking a Coston signal from his pocket and fitting it to the handle, he struck the end on the sole of his boot. Like a match it caught fire and flared out through the mist, a dull red light. He stood still, holding the torch above his head, waiting for some answering signal from the vessel,—if it were one, after all.

61

No signal was shown in response. Either the ship was still too far out to catch sight of the warning beacon, or none of her crew was on deck at the moment. The glowing torch

sputtered and went out, and with a shrug of his broad shoulders, Downs trudged on down the beach.

"Come on, kids, we'll set off another light farther on," he said. "If that's really a ship, give her a few minutes to watch for signals."

In awed suspense, Hugh and Billy followed him to the end of Red Key. Chained to a post driven in the sand, they found a stout dory with two pairs of oars.

"Pile in," said Downs, "and sit tight. Hardin, you take one pair of oars, I'll take t'other, and we'll be over on the next key in a jiffy."

The crossing was soon made. Billy tied the boat to another post, while Downs again lighted a signal. They were still near enough the station to notify the lookout there of a possible ship in distress, and in a few minutes they caught the gleam of the big lamp in the tower, shining out through the vapor blown from the crests of the waves.

Still no sign from the object of their concern.

"Look!" cried Hugh. "It can't be a cloud; it hasn't changed its shape, and——"

"And it seems to be comin' nearer," added Downs, interrupting him quickly. "You're right, son; it's a sailing vessel. She's being blown landward, but with good luck, she'll slip past the bar out there, and maybe she'll make for the lee o' Turtle Island. Watch and see. Come on,—but we won't hike over the pontoon to-night. I'll go alone."

Through long vigils in all kinds of weather, the patrol learns every foot of his beat thoroughly, and he is able to tell with reasonable accuracy how and where a storm-tossed vessel will be driven, or where a stranded one lies. Downs was no exception to this rule, yet there were times when, experienced surfman as he was, he felt uncertain whether a ship was likely to be forced over on the mainland beach, or whether she would run aground on the outer bar at the end of the keys. The latter situation was the more to be dreaded, for the bar was far beyond the reach of a line shot from shore.

Deciding to continue his beat, Downs left the two scouts seated together on a mound of sand and driftwood, and made his way alone across the swaying, tossing pontoon.

"I'll be back in about twenty minutes," he said, and he was as good as his word.

At the end of his beat he stopped to take a watchkey attached to a post, and, inserting it in the clock he carried, to record the time of his visit at that spot. By this means is kept an actual record of the movements of the patrol at all times.

Returning to the place where he had left the boys, he found them sitting in awed silence.

"No signs from the ship yet?" he shouted.

So quietly had he approached, and so thunderous was the booming of the surf, Billy and Hugh were startled at the sound of Downs's

voice. Even had they not been staring out to sea, waiting in suspense for the ship's signal, they would not have seen him come up, so thick was the mist.

Billy gasped and jumped up. "What—what are we going to do now?" he asked.

"Want to go back to the station?"

"No, no!" exclaimed Hugh, springing to his feet. "We're out here with you. We'll stick by you."

"But I'm out here for four hours' duty. You don't want to stick it out that long, son?"

"Yes, we do—if you don't mind," replied Billy.

"Is there anything you'd rather have us do?" asked Hugh, beginning to understand a kindly hint in Jim Downs's words. "We'd like to be of real service, if we can."

"Sure you can! Seeing as the weather's so thick, suppose you lads race back to the station and report what we've seen. Then, if the cap'n sends Larry out to join me, you can come back with him. See?"

"All right," they responded.

Again they climbed into the dory and rowed back to Red Key. Jim waited to light another torch, and the boys sped up to the boathouse, where they informed the keeper, who already knew of the ship, of what they had seen.

* * * * *

Meanwhile Baley, with Alec and Chester, had walked the opposite beat. From the first, however, they felt sure that the distant object against the murky horizon was a vessel. With lighted Coston signal in hand, Baley pursued his difficult way along the shore, buffeted by the wind and drenched with flying spray. He explained to the boys how the outer line of sandbars, which in summer breaks the blue ocean into sunny ripples and flashing white caps, has power to churn the spring tides into fury and to grip with a mighty hold the keel of any vessel that is unlucky enough to be driven on it.

As they trudged doggedly on, the wind whipped through the beach grasses on the dunes and spitefully swirled handfuls of cutting sand into their faces. Fortunately, the night was not cold, else they might have fared worse. As it was, the two scouts rather enjoyed the novel experience. They felt that they were, for the time being, a part of Uncle Sam's coast guard,—members of a crew of brave men whose vigilance and strength and presence of mind save hundreds of lives and valuable property every year.

They told Baley how they had learned to become efficient signalers, and he heartily approved of that branch of their training. Knowing a lot about the Boy Scout organization,—for his son was then a tenderfoot in a Florida troop,—he was not surprised at the amount of general "prepared-ness" which Alec and Chester modestly displayed.

"You never can tell, my lads, just when and where and how you'll need to use what you've learned," he said pleasantly. "For instance: Suppose we had to signal that ship out there to-morrow morning, or even to-night, if she gets into trouble? Could you do it?"

"Reckon we could, Mr. Baley," replied Chester quietly.

"If we have a chance, you'll see," was Alec's even more confident answer. The vague possibility implied in Baley's question gave him an adventurous thrill.

68

When these three reached the end of their beat and turned back toward the starting point, they were surprised to meet Culver. He had been sent out to keep watch with Baley, for Keeper Anderson thought it best to have four men on patrol that night. Larry Flynn had been sent to reinforce Downs.

When the first watch was over, four other surfmen took the places of those on duty; but the boys were quite ready to seek the "shakedown" prepared for them. The long night hours passed, and daylight crept slowly and feebly across a cloudy sky and over a turbulent sea.

69

CHAPTER VII. THE STRANDED SCHOONER.

"It's lucky we went across to the mainland last week for a fresh supply o' provisions," remarked Larry Flynn at breakfast that morning. "I'm as hungry as a tinker's goat, and them lads can stow away enough fodder for a whole regiment of—"

His jocularly was interrupted by a laugh from the men, and then by a strange and sinister sound. Beneath the howl of the wind could be heard a dull booming, so foreign to anything the gale brought to their ears that even Captain Anderson sprang from his seat at table and ran to the window in alarm.

It was useless. The fog was so thick he could not see further than twenty feet. The gray light of day had dispelled the darkness, but the vapor rolling in from the ocean obscured even the crests of the surf. Culver and Ed Strong joined him at the window, and all three remained silent and motionless.

70

"Never dreamed she'd run aground this morning," Bowers muttered, rising from his chair. "Everybody thought she'd slip past the bar."

"There was only a slim chance, after all," said Downs.

"Has the ship struck?" asked Hugh, tense with excitement.

Keeper Anderson nodded.

"Seems so," he replied gravely. "Get to work, boys!"

All hurried out of the cabin.

Then came that which they feared to hear: another dull report brought on the wings of the wind and fog. All doubt now vanished from the minds of the crew.

"Saints help 'em!" Larry exclaimed fervently, when they entered the boathouse. He began to pace the floor impatiently as he worked like a hound in leash.

71

"Help who, sir?" asked Chester, following him.

"The poor divils who are firin' that 'ere gun, knowin' there's some one near who can lind 'em a helpin' hand."

"Do you mean that there's a wreck?" Alec queried in a tone so low that none save Captain Anderson heard him.

"Ay, son," he answered. "The craft, whatever she may be, has run aground on the bar."

"How can you tell without seeing her, sir?" Billy inquired, wishing that he knew enough to lend a hand with the boat.

"In the first place, she must be there because the wind brings us the sound of her signal gun; she might be only half as far away on the other side, and we couldn't hear it so loud."

"It seems to me that any half-sober skipper would have been more careful!" declared Culver reproachfully, pulling on his oilskins. "He would have clawed off shore at sunset last night, if he knew his way."

72

"What do you count on doing now?" asked Hugh, always ready for action.

"We're going to launch the boats!" roared Anderson, and even before the words were uttered every man, equipped for the venture, sprang to his appointed task.

The crew ran the ever-ready surf boat through the double doors of its house and down an inclined plane to the beach. Resting in a carriage provided with a pair of broad-tired wheels, the staunch craft was hauled by Powers and Flynn and the four boys through the clinging sand and into the very teeth of the wind to the point nearest the vessel.

"Can we go out with you?" yelled Hugh excitedly.

The surf rolled in with a deafening roar that seemed to shake the ground, drowning the sound of his voice. No one paid the slightest attention to the eager lads; the men were too busy and too deeply concerned with the grave task ahead of them to heed, even had they heard Hugh's request. It was but natural and right; and Hugh was surprised only at his daring to ask such permission. Nevertheless, he was keen to share the danger; he longed to be one of the rescuers.

73

Each breaker curved high above the heads of the men, and, receding, the undertow sucked at their feet and tried to drag them down. In such surf it seemed impossible to launch a boat; yet with scarcely a word of command, every man,

knowing from long practice his position and duties, took his station beside the boat and, shoving it directly into the surf, launched it, after a severe tussle. Climbing aboard, each man took his place. The captain, grasping a long steering oar in his hands, stood at the stern.

It was then that Anderson, glancing at the crew who were pulling steadily, saw that Alec and Hugh, carried away by their eager excitement, had leaped into the boat with the others and were adding their strength to that of two oarsmen.

74

A dark frown furrowed his brow, for he could not approve of this intrusion; the next moment, however, he gave a short, grim laugh.

"They'll have to take their chance with the rest of us," he said to himself. "And, unless the worst happens, nobody'll ever know about their doing this. Confound the plucky young chumps, they ought to have stayed on shore; but they're as venturesome as my Mark!"

With a sweep of his oar, he kept the boat's head to the seas, skilfully avoiding the most dangerous crests. To do this required strength, coolness, and judgment; but Anderson possessed all three qualities to a remarkable degree. Instinctively, the two boys had placed themselves so that the weight in the boat was evenly balanced, and this fact the steersman was quick to notice.

75

At last the first watery rampart was crossed. Then, adapting their stroke to heavier swells, the six stalwart rowers propelled their twenty-five-foot, unsinkable boat at good speed, although it seemed dreadfully slow to them, no doubt. Hugh thought of the crew of the stranded vessel, which was now plainly visible, now hidden behind a veil of fog with every gust of wind. Were they helpless and hopeless, he wondered, or were they taking heart at the assurance that help was coming?

All of a sudden, Anderson noticed that the two boys had not donned cork jackets, such as the men had buckled on.

"Here, you crazy scamps!" he shouted. "Put on those lifebelts!" And he pointed to some that were fastened to the inside of the boat.

76

They obeyed him at once, awed by his furious tone. Perhaps they had done wrong, after all, in coming out in the lifeboat! They began to repent of their rashness; though they felt no fear; it was an opportunity, an adventure such as might never again come into their lives. At any rate, it was too late for repentance! There they were, rowing like mad with all their strength and enthusiasm! If only Captain Anderson would not be too angry with them afterward when it was over!

Over! The adventure had only begun! How would it end?

Once, indeed, a thought of his parents flashed into Alec's mind. He could imagine his father's wrath if this perilous escapade should become known! But Hugh would never tell, and as for himself—here a wave dashed up over the thwart, drenching him in a fountain of foam.

And now, when they were actually nearing the vessel, an unforeseen mischance occurred. Before the surfboat could reach her, she lurched over the bar on a mightier wave, veered halfway around, and drove directly toward Turtle Island. The crew in the boat could do nothing, and the few men aboard the schooner were helpless. With straining eyes, the lifesavers saw the vessel drift rapidly past them; they even heard shouts and frantic yells from the deck, and, in return, they shouted encouragement.

Climbing up into the rigging, the sailors, eight in number, waited for their craft to strike the beach. The surfmen, turning their boat, put for shore again to get the apparatus needed for the new situation.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE RESCUE.

To load the surfboat with the crew of the luckless vessel, when there was none too much room for the oarsmen, and then to encounter the heavy surf, would have shown great lack of judgment on the part of the rescuers. It was a method to be pursued only in case of dire need. To reach the ship after it had become stranded on the key shore or near it was a much safer and surer method of saving life for all concerned.

Rowing hard against the now outflowing tide, yet helped by the wind, the lifesavers approached the beach. With a rush their boat rolled in on a giant wave and, no sooner had the keel grated on the sand, than the crew, including the two scouts, were out knee-deep in the undertow dragging the boat up high and dry. No one could deny that the boys showed remarkable quickness in action and an alert understanding of what had to be done.

“Get the beach wagon!” commanded Anderson.

Billy and Chester, who had hurried to the spot where the surfboat landed, greeted their scout comrades with a whoop of joy, envy and relief. No time was lost. A minute later the entire crew, some pulling, some steering, dragged out the beach wagon: a light framework supported by two broad-tired wheels, and carrying a sand-anchor, which was like a huge cross, in addition to other apparatus.

Over hummocks of sand, across pools of water, in the face of wind and waves, they ran, dragging the beach wagon along the key to the place where the driven schooner had run aground. It lay some distance out, and was now lurching groggily from side to side. Then, bringing the wagon to the nearest point opposite the stranded hulk, the crew unloaded their appliances.

“Hey there, lads!” shouted Anderson, “dig a hole in the sand!”

Flynn tossed some shovels to the boys, and at once they set to work with a will.

While this was being done, two men placed a small bronze cannon in position and another got out boxes containing small rope criss-crossed on wooden pins set upright in the bottom. These pins merely held the rope wound in coils until it was ready to be used, when board and pegs were removed.

Captain Anderson carried the free end of this line, which was attached to a ring in the end of a cylindrical projectile, over one shoulder; over the other was slung a box of ammunition. In a few minutes, aided by Baley and Culver, he sighted the gun, aiming for the outstretched yardarms of the schooner. Long practice under various difficulties and in all sorts of weather had taught him just how to aim. As he pulled the lanyard, the gun spat fire into the mist, and the long projectile sailed off on its mission, its attached line whirring out of the box, coil after coil. Baley and Culver peered out over the breakers to see if the keeper's aim had been true.

At last the line stopped uncoiling, and Anderson knew that the shot had landed somewhere. Minutes of suspense passed. Nothing happened. The rope spanned the tossing waves, but no answering tugs conveyed messages from the sailors to the waiting surfmen.

"What ails 'em?" muttered Larry Flynn impatiently "Are they all dead or drunk or have we—?"

"Shut up, Larry!" came the command. "Ah, there she goes now!"

Hugh and Chester sprang forward.

"The line's moving!" cried Chester.

"Quit hoppin' around like a sand-flea!" Larry admonished him severely. "Don't make so much noise! They can't hear ye, boy."

Indeed, as Chester had declared, the line began to slip through Anderson's fingers and move seaward. Those on shore knew that it had been found and that its use was understood; that is, that this line carried out by the projectile served merely to drag out a heavier rope, on which was run a sort of trolley carrying a breeches-buoy.

And now the eight mariners, securing the line, made the end of the strong rope fast to the mast well above the reach of the waves, and the surfmen wound their end firmly around the deeply buried sand-anchor. Wading out a little way, Bowers placed an inverted V-shaped crotch under the rope, holding it above water on that end. When this had been done, as much of the slack was taken up as possible, and the vessel was connected with the beach by a kind of suspension bridge.

Willing arms then hauled out the buoy along that suspended line.

Presently they saw a sailor climb into the stout canvas breeches of the buoy, and felt the tug on the whip-line that told them the rescue had begun. All together, with a will, they pulled on the line. Carrying its human burden, the buoy rolled along the hawser, swinging in the wind, now and then dipping the man in the crests of

the waves.

"As long as the old tub holds together and the masts stay upright, they're safe," muttered Anderson, watching the first passenger on this aerial railway.

"Do you think the waves will pound her to pieces?" asked Alec, who stood beside the keeper.

"Don't know. Depends on how solid she's built. By the slab-sided! I can make out her name now for the first time. Sun's getting stronger. It's the *Mary Jane*,—I know her cap'n. Look out there, Frank! He's coming! Catch him—easy now—that's the way!"

84

The sailor, brought up with a thud against the V-shaped support of the rope bridge, scrambled out of the buoy and slid down on the sand. Without stopping to gasp out his thanks, he helped the surfmen send the buoy swiftly back to the vessel, where another man climbed into it.

Forward, then, and back again they hauled the buoy, working like madmen to complete their work.

"She'll bust to pieces in ten minutes, 'pon my word!" declared the fourth sailor to come ashore. "The sea's running high, and the infernal old hulk'll never weather the poundin' she's getting!"

"Make haste, then!" roared Anderson, and his crew redoubled their efforts.

Two more sailors swung to safety ashore. None too soon, for the sixth man had hardly been dragged to the beach when the schooner's mast, unable to stand the buffeting of the waves any longer, snapped at the middle and toppled over into the sea, dragging with it a tangled mass of rigging. Two sailors were left on the deck of the *Mary Jane*.

85

But not for long. A mighty wave struck the vessel's side. They were washed off the sloping deck, and soon were floundering in deep water, clinging to the broken mast that was being hauled toward shore. At last they gained the land, and their rescuers were overwhelmed with thanks.

Such breathless exclamations of gratitude, such handshakes and hearty greetings! The four boys stood aside, listening to the story of the shipwreck, listening in a daze of wonderment, in a silent thrill of pride because they had shared in this memorable morning's work. Captain Anderson, even, was kind enough to praise them for their work; and, in turn, they thanked him for having allowed them to do whatever they could to assist the regular crew.

86

In the midst of this rejoicing there was a loud crash, and the abandoned *Mary Jane's* timbers yielded to the force of the waves. Broken and bruised and buffeted, she keeled over on the sandy reef, and the sullen ocean surged over her again and again, pounding her mercilessly.

87

CHAPTER IX.

HOME AGAIN—AND AWAY.

Though the crew of the vessel was saved, the surfmen's work was not yet over. The breeches-buoy had to be disentangled from the broken mast, spars and ropes, and the other apparatus had to be packed on the beach wagon and returned to the station. All this occupied some time. The hands of both sailors and lifesavers were sore and slippery with brine, the ropes were badly snarled, and the wind and waves tore viciously at the tackle. The task was completed at last, however, and then all made their way to a small shanty or refuge adjoining the boathouse. Here the shipwrecked men were provided with dry clothing and with food which they devoured ravenously.

"My stars! that grub looks good to little Willie!" declared one of the sailors, hastily climbing into dry flannels and a suit of overalls. "Thank'ee, cap'n; I'll take corned beef an' brown bread an'—an' a swig o' the hot coffee that ye have handy. Here's to ye all, sir, with many thanks and a blessin' on ye!"

88

All joined in the toast, and then made an onslaught on the plain but bountiful repast set before them.

One man, the captain of the ill-fated schooner, dejectedly explained between huge mouthfuls that they had been making for Santario, to get provisions for a voyage to Key West. The schooner's rudder had broken on a reef, and they had drifted for thirty-four hours without food, each man filling "the aching void" with nothing more substantial than water.

While the process of refreshment was going on, two patrols outside were continuing their beat, watching for portions of the ship's cargo of bales of cotton to be washed ashore. Without regard to the hardships already undergone, these men, taking turns, remained on duty all that stormy day.

89

Late in the afternoon the wind died down, and at ebb tide the crew of the *Mary Jane* and the four scouts took leave of their brave friends.

"We'll never forget this experience as long as we live," Hugh said as he grasped Keeper Anderson's hand. "It's meant a lot to us and has taught us more than we could ever learn from books."

"Well, well, guess that's true, son," replied Anderson. "Perhaps I ought not to have let you boys—but we won't say anything more about that, since there's no harm done."

"Hope we weren't too much in the way, sir," said Billy and Chester, and Alec added his word to the general chorus. Then, with a parting invitation from the surfmen to come again, they departed.

90

It was a long time before the boys were to pay another visit to the Red Key Life Saving Station, and when they did so, it was to be under very different conditions. They saw it next at

midsummer when the great ocean was calm, when gentle breezes filled the sails of vessels passing along the horizon, and when the sun shone benignly over land and sea.

Meanwhile, soon after their arrival at Palmdune, and in the midst of preparations for their cruise on the *Arrow*, they wrote a joint letter to Keeper Anderson and his crew thanking him again for his kindness to them. To this letter Mr. Sands added a pair of field-glasses for each of the crew,—even better than those they already possessed,—and a huge packing-case full of books and magazines.

Roy Norton arrived on the day following the boys' return. He had read newspaper accounts of the unusual storm along the coast, and he was much interested in hearing all about the adventures of the youthful lifesavers.

91

From the first, the boys liked Norton; in many ways he reminded them of George Rawson, their assistant scout master at Pioneer Camp. Unlike Rawson, however, who was tall and lean and sinewy, Norton was a young man of medium height, rather thick-set and muscular, yet agile and quick in action. He, too, possessed an apparently inexhaustible fund of energy and good humor.

Captain Lemuel Vinton, who met them one morning on the main fishing dock at Santario, proved to be a stout, grizzled, salt water veteran of fifty years or more. He greeted them with gruff cordiality and escorted them aboard the *Arrow*, where he assigned them their sleeping quarters.

With him, as their future guide through the Everglades, was Wastanugee, a Seminole Indian who answered to the more convenient nick-name of Dave. He was much given to living among the whites, and, while it was clear that he liked civilized ways and also hard dollars, or "chalks," as the Indians term them, it soon became evident,—toward the end of the first day's cruise,—that he disliked and dreaded "the big salt," as he called the ocean.

92

"Uh! Bad medicine!" he grunted. "Bad weather. Dave better stay home. Go home, anyhow, when get Big Cypress Harbor. Incah!"

Having baited the boys' hooks, he settled himself resignedly within the folds of his blanket, stretched out his trousered legs and moccasined feet, and yawned loudly.

"Best kind of fishing weather, this," said Alec. "Tarpon are bound to bite now, aren't they, Captain?"

Captain Vinton shook his head slowly.

"You can't never tell 'bout tarpon," he answered. "Sometimes they will, then ag'in they won't. Mostly they'll do as they durn please, which is likely to be jest w'at you don't want 'em to do. One thing, though: we're goin' to have wuss weather afore we have better, mark my words."

93

Hearing this, Dave grunted dolefully.

Vinton's remarks about the tarpon seemed to be verified, for the boys had such poor luck in

getting bites that presently they made their lines fast by wedging the poles under the thwarts and turned their attention to a faint blur of smoke rising far out against the brilliant blue horizon.

"Wonder if Cap'n Bego really did git out?" said Vinton, as if communing with himself.

But Norton overhead the query. "Who's Captain Bego?" he inquired casually.

"Oh, he's a greaser who's been havin' some trouble with a United States revenue cutter from Havana. Cutter's the *Eagle*. If Uncle Sam gits after Bego ag'in, there'll be one set o' rascils turned back, I reckon."

"You mean——"

"Filibusters," was the startling answer.

94

95

CHAPTER X. THE SILVER KING.

Within half an hour the mysterious trail of smoke along the keys was obliterated, although it was not far in advance of the *Arrow's* course. Even before the boys had ceased to wonder what it really was, it seemed to vanish from sight as if blown away by a puff of wind, leaving them nothing but their useless speculation.

Presently they became aware of a new motion of the staunch little *Arrow*. It rode easily upon long, slow, oily swells, rising and sinking at a rate that soon caused the unhappy Seminole to stagger into the little cuddy of a cabin, with a look on his leathery face which prophesied that one Indian was about to be utterly and unrestrainedly seasick!

"Poor Dave!" said Norton, as the victim's figure slouched dejectedly into a secluded corner. "I can sympathize with him, though I'm lucky enough not to know how he feels!"

"How about you, Billy, you land-lubber?" inquired Alec. "You're beginning to look a trifle pale around the gills!"

"Shut up!" retorted Billy good-naturedly.

"Nice thing to tell a fellow, I must say!" remarked Chester with a grin.

"It's enough to make anyone feel seasick, to be told he looks so!" Hugh added laughing. "Give a dog a bad name, and he'll bite—just to save his reputa——"

"Something else is biting!" yelled Billy, and he sprang forward eagerly.

There was a rattling noise behind them. The captain, abandoning the wheel for a moment, reached forth and grabbed a tarpon rod that was sliding overboard. He thrust it into Alec's hand.

"Hang on to it," he gruffly directed. "You've got somethin' big, lad. Mebbe, though, it's only a shark."

96

97

"Only a shark!" echoed Alec in surprise. "Why, I thought sharks were enormous!"

"There's all kinds o' sharks, big an' little."

"I've heard of land sharks," murmured Norton, "and seen 'em, too; but I've never met with a sea shark. At least, I've never been on speaking terms with one."

"This one pulls like a whale!" Alec declared, playing the long line, one hand on the reel.

Seeing that his own pole was all right, Billy remained close beside Alec, ready to lend a hand if Alec needed assistance. For a while none was needed, but by and by it began to appear that the fish was tiring the fisherman, instead of just the reverse. Alec's wrists and forearms positively ached with the strain of managing the prize, and he allowed Billy to help him. All stood around, tense with interest, watching the contest. Even Dave, hearing their gleeful shouts and exclamations, forgot his misery and came forth from the cuddy to add his grunts and mumbled directions. However, he was unable to remain long on deck. With a portentous groan, he fled again to contend with his woes.

98

As the sloop plunged onward, they played the fish nearly an hour, taking turns so that all might share in the sport. Twice, by a skilful handling of the reel, Hugh barely kept the line from snapping. At last they drew the game in far enough to see a gleam of silver flash through the dark green water. A big tarpon leaped out of the bosom of a wave, glittered one moment in the sunlight, and then darted back into its native element.

"Gee! Did you see him?"

"Did I! Well, you bet I did!"

"Must be a fifty pounder!"

"All of that. No wonder he pulls so hard!"

99

"Keep your hand on the reel, Chester. He'll snap the line if we're not careful," advised Norton. "Easy now! He's tired, but there is a lot of fight in him yet."

"Ginger! I should say so! Look at that!"

Again the big fish leaped.

"Where's Dave with the gaff?" demanded Captain Vinton. "Dave, you lazy, good-fer-nothin' sea-cook, come up here. Bring that gaff."

Another frantic leap of the tarpon, not so high this time, brought a shout from Alec.

"Oh, you Dave! Hurry up!"

But the Indian just then was dead to this world. Not even a groan gave assurance that he was still alive and miserable. Silence hung over the deck of the *Arrow*, silence broken only by the excited gasps of her fishing crew.

Convinced that Dave would not or could not respond to the call, Vinton lashed the tiller, and reached into a locker from which he brought out the gaff. He prepared to use it as soon as the tarpon came within reach.

100

But there was more strength than he supposed in the tiring yet gamey sea-fighter. Out spun the line from the humming reel; to and fro darted the silver prize, until more than a dozen yards lay between him and the *Arrow's* gunwale.

"Reel in, reel in!" cried Norton. "Don't give him a chance to jerk away."

"Slow up a little!" the captain added quickly, leaning as far out over the rail as his portly proportions would allow. He was almost as eager as any of the boys. He had forgotten his dignity as master of the *Arrow*, and was lost in the excitement of capturing a fifty pounder.

"Slow now. That's better—ah! He nearly got away then!"

Just about this time Hugh heard a sudden rasp of line spinning from his rod, which lay on the opposite side of the deck, wedged under another thwart.

"Hello! that pole will go overboard unless I do something," he cried, and sprang forward to seize it as it slid toward the taffrail. He managed to catch it at the instant that the butt was about to slip oceanward. "Oh, come here!" he called out. "Another tarpon hooked!"

Thrusting the rod into Alec's hands once more, Billy crossed over to join Hugh.

"Ready there now?" he heard Captain Vinton ask in a loud tone. And then came Chester's eager, "A little nearer, Alec, a little nearer. There!"

Vinton made a lunge with the gaff.

"Durn him! He dodged it!" exclaimed the captain in great vexation.

"Try it again," urged Norton cheerily. "Better luck next time."

Meanwhile, on their side of the sloop, Hugh and Billy were having their hands full. One was trying to gain command of the reel, and the other was keeping a firm hold on the pole. So absorbed were they in this feat, they were oblivious to a sudden veer of the wind and an increased rolling of the *Arrow*. Hugh's reel was buzzing furiously. With staring eyes he watched the line cut through the water, and every minute he and Billy expected to see a tarpon just as big as the first one leap from a wave.

They heard a shout, followed by a splash and the spasmodic flapping of a big fish landed on the deck, and they knew that the first tarpon had been caught. But they scarcely turned their heads to look. Their whole attention was given to this one.

Suddenly the captain, becoming aware of the wind flurry, sprang to the wheel.

"Look out, boys!" he cried hoarsely. "She's going to jibe! Watch out, you two there!"

Startled, Billy glanced around and instantly realized the new peril; but Hugh, absorbed with holding the fish and saving his line, saw nothing. At Billy's warning, however, he ducked his head just in time to escape a sweeping blow from the big boom which swung over the starboard beam,

requiring Vinton to take a new tack. Still holding his line, desperately hoping that it would not break, Hugh began to reel in his prize swiftly and skilfully. Ordinarily he would not have tried this, but with the shifting of the vessel's course he felt there was no time to spare. Besides, his tarpon seemed to have been more securely hooked than the first one, and Billy now knew just what to do. After about ten minutes of struggle, they succeeded in pulling up on deck a fish that was only a few inches smaller than the other, and their exploit was greeted with a cheer.

"Stow the shoutin', lads!" ordered Captain Vinton. "Here! Take the sheet. That easter is a hummer, I reckon. Be ready to lower the peaks, Norton, if I give the word."

104

Hugh, Alec, and Chester sprang for the main sheet, loosening it promptly. Billy stood ready to help Norton. The captain pushed the tiller away from the "nor'-easter," and surveyed with "a weather eye" the rolling expanse of waters now darkened by frequent "flaws."

"We're right in the wake of a squall," he stated calmly. "Keep cool, every mother's son o' you-all. Where's that copper-hide rascal, Dave? In the cuddy, eh? Well, this'll either kill him or cure him!"

105

CHAPTER XI. DOWN THE COAST.

For the next few minutes the *Arrow* ran so much risk of having the sails blown off or the mast broken, that all rejoicing over the capture of the two big tarpon was banished by the imminence of the danger. Flaw after flaw darkened the water, flattening the long swells; but at length the squall passed, and once out of a broad inlet, the sloop headed straight down the coast under a good breeze.

"What for so much hurry?" grumbled Dave, emerging from the cabin, and looking around quizzically. "Huh! Plenty time."

"Oh, we're in no hurry, Dave," answered Hugh with a laugh. "This is just sailing for sport. You'll like it after a while when you get more used to it. Go and sit up fore, to windward."

106

Dave meekly obeyed.

"A whiff of this salt air will do him good," said Norton to the captain, who, ignoring Dave entirely, vouchsafed no reply.

He appeared to be pondering some contingency of which his crew were unaware. He spat profusely, cast his eyes aloft at the topsails that had not been lowered despite the squall, then looked measuringly at his sloop.

"Wind's slackening," he observed.

Hitherto heading southward, the *Arrow* now began to edge toward the long line of keys. By this time the wind had gradually dwindled

almost to a breath, and the sun hung far down the Western sky, glowing like a disc of molten copper.

"Bad weather comin'," croaked Dave, noting these signs. "One day, two day off, p'raps."

This gloomy prophecy was received in silence. No one thought it safe or worth while to deny the assertion.

107

Presently they came abreast of a fringe of larger keys fronting an important harbor. Beyond the broad inlet that led in toward the bay and mainland, a stretch of smooth, clean, white sand, bordered by clumps of waving cabbage palms, indicated to Captain Vinton that he was near one of his old camping places.

"I'm goin' to stop over thar for supper," he called to the boys. "We might better spend the night on shore, for there'll be wind ag'in and rough water later on."

So the *Arrow* made in shoreward. The four boys reefed her jib and her topsail and stood ready to reef the main sheet. When everything had been attended to on board the sloop and the anchor had been cast, all piled into a big dory trailing astern.

"Pull for the shore, boys, pull for the shore!" sang Norton in a rollicking voice. And they did. Soon they were preparing supper on the beach.

108

"There's squalls breedin' out yonder," remarked the captain after supper while lighting his corncob pipe. "After dark I'd ruther have these keys atween 'em and us. But perhaps they'll blow over. Yon can't never tell for sure, at this time o' year."

Unpromising as the weather seemed, the evening passed without anything happening to cause discomfort. The storm clouds drifted past, giving way to a host of brilliant stars that took possession of the heavens, and to a steady westerly breeze that bid fair to continue all night. The captain and the Seminole guide, wrapping themselves in blankets which had been brought ashore in the dory, dozed beside the driftwood fire. The four boys and Roy Norton, however, enjoyed a swim in the lagoon before they sought their own blankets and "turned in" for a good night's rest. Their bunks were snug hollows scooped out of the sand, warm and dry, a few feet away from the glowing embers.

At sunrise the breeze freshened a little, but the weather was balmy. The first rays of the rising sun woke the voyagers, and the boys would have been sorry had they missed seeing the gorgeous semi-tropical dawn burst upon the world. The sky was one vast, rosy glow, and the ocean glittered with opalescent hues. Low islands, overgrown with close, green, stunted vegetation, were on every side. They stretched like golden bars across the lagoons, showing the broad sound on one side and on the other the dark blue of the Gulf Stream, far out where the Florida Straits widened toward the distant Bahamas.

109

When the sun was an hour high, they breakfasted on fruit, fish, toast, and coffee. That simple repast over, they gathered up their

110

belongings and prepared to return to the sloop. Quite unexpectedly, an idea crept into Dave's sluggish mind:

"Good moon last night, much white beach, turtle come out and lay eggs," he remarked slowly. "P'raps we find eggs. Might try."

He rose and strolled lazily along the beach, accompanied by the four young scouts.

"Maybe bear will walk beach after eggs," he added presently. "Young master run back, get rifle."

"Wait for me, then," said Alec, and he ran back to the camping place. Returning in a few minutes, he handed the rifle to Dave. "If we meet a bear, you can shoot him," he said. "I don't want to, even if I could."

Dave gave a low chuckle. "Oh, guess we won't find bear till night," he said. "We just go look for signs now."

Signs proved to be fairly plentiful; so it was decided, to the unseaworthy Indian's great satisfaction, to remain there that day, hunt at night and set sail early on the morrow. The day passed pleasantly, though uneventfully, and, after supper, Captain Vinton went aboard the *Arrow*. Dave sat up while the others took "forty winks" before being roused for the night hunt. At the rising of the moon, they all set forth in single file, and crossed the little island by an old trail through the chaparral to the ocean side. There they found a firm, wide, sandy strip of shore on which a low surf was murmuring its continuous song. The moon sailed higher and higher, the night was delightfully warm and calm, and there was an excellent prospect of finding game.

Telling Norton, Chester and Hugh to hide in the scrubby growth that fringed a sand dune, Dave took Alec and Billy along the beach for about fifty yards. In the full moonlight they could see quite plainly the curious wobbly trail, rough and broad, of a large turtle, leading to and from the water. Dave followed it for a few paces, then stopped abruptly and began to prod the sand with a stick which he had picked up for that purpose.

"Got 'em! Got eggs!" he announced presently. "Big nest heap full."

"All right," said Alec. "Now we'd better go back to where the others are, and wait for the hungry old—"

"By and by moon go down," interposed the guide, with an unusual degree of interest. "Then bear may come out for walk,—get his supper, huh? Come."

They went back to the place of ambush, and waited quietly. How long they waited not one of them could tell exactly. It seemed hours. At last their patience was rewarded. A clumsy black form emerged from the thick vegetation on the dunes, stood motionless for several minutes sniffing the air, and then ambled slowly and cautiously toward the water, pausing now and then to nose the warm sand.

"It's a bear, and he smells our tracks," whispered Hugh.

"Will he find the nest?" Billy asked, nudging Dave with his elbow.

113

"Sure, he find it all right," was the whispered reply of the Indian. "When turtle make nest, lay eggs, scent is stronger than what we leave. Watch him. You can—huh, look!"

The small black bear had stopped near the turtle's nest, and now it uttered a soft grunting squeal of delight. It half raised itself on its hind quarters, looking around warily to make sure it would not have to share the feast with any other of its tribe. Then, quite suddenly, it dropped down on all fours, and lunging forward, began to scoop up the eggs with its paws, smacking its lips greedily.

Dave raised the rifle, took deliberate aim, and — Just then Hugh pushed the weapon aside with a quick movement of his arm.

"Don't shoot, don't shoot it!" gasped the lad, excitedly. "See,—over there in that clump of bushes!"

With a muttered exclamation, Dave glanced in the direction that Hugh was pointing. The others did likewise. They then beheld a sight which was far more interesting and more worth while than that of a harmless animal lying dead upon the sand, victim of Dave's marksmanship.

114

Two little black cubs, scarcely larger than terriers, but much rounder, chubbier and more furry, trotted out from the shadow of the dune and waddled toward their feasting mother. As fast as their short legs would carry them, they ran to her side and fell to gobbling up the remaining eggs. When the nest had been emptied, Ursula and her cubs romped together on the moonlit beach, and, finally, walked away, unharmed.

Well pleased with the amusing scene they had witnessed, the hunters returned to their camp site, went to sleep presently, and on the morrow rejoined Captain Vinton on the sloop.

115

CHAPTER XII. AT THE LIGHTHOUSE.

On the whole, the boys were enthusiastic about their cruise at the end of the first week. After camping again for a day or two on Palm Island, they sailed idly among innumerable smaller islands, enjoying the fine weather, bathing, fishing, taking photographs, learning how to manage the sloop, and making observations of other ships that passed.

"The Captain says that by running to starboard more we can strike the lee of Elbow Key Light to-morrow," Norton said, as he and the boys were turning into their bunks at nine o'clock one night. "You know that's where the sponging fleet work at this time, so, in case of storm, they can shelter under the lighthouse key. How would you

like to spend to-morrow night among the spongers, then make camp at Cypress Key afterward?"

All were agreeable save Dave, who grunted his disapproval.

116

"What for fool 'way time 'mong sponges? No good. We going to try for sponge? No? Well, why fool time that way? Holawanga! Too much time, no good!"

But they gave him not the slightest heed, and discussed the new plan with enthusiasm.

The next day was marred by a heavy thunderstorm, but in spite of it they made good progress down the coast. As the afternoon waned and the line of keys dwindled behind, the *Arrow* headed toward a group of islets where the United States has erected a lighthouse.

The keepers there were isolated from home and friends most of the time, but a straggly fleet of sponging craft from Nassau, Key West, and elsewhere flocked there in time of bad weather.

117

As night came on, the breeze freshened considerably. Across the surging water the light flashed like a great star. Once the *Arrow* sighted a dark bulk, black and impenetrable as the night then closing down, yet with rows of lights and with smoking funnels that now and then seemed to glow with internal fires. On it passed, heading straight for Elbow Key, but it gave no heed to the wallowing little sloop.

"By Jove, that's a battleship!" exclaimed Norton. "In war paint, too!"

"Je-ru-sa-lem!" Hugh added excitedly. "Wish we were nearer her! Wonder which one she is?"

"We ain't so interested in that, jest now," said Captain Vinton gruffly. "What we want to do is to git under a lee shore soon's possible; there's a reg-lar young gale comin' on."

Through a haze that slowly thickened as the wind increased, they saw several sloops and schooners, most of them larger than the *Arrow*, riding at short cables; while a few others were driving under reefed sails from the sponging grounds farther out, to take similar positions of safety.

118

"Stand by to shorten sail," ordered Vinton, and the boys and Norton worked busily. Dave gave his attention to a big coil of rope which he evidently intended to throw—where?

Surely not against the rocky wall toward which they were gliding recklessly!

Alec looked anxiously at the captain, but he did not speak. If Dave did not know what he was about this was no time to question. Like his comrades, the boy resigned himself to obeying orders. These came thick and fast for a few minutes. Hugh and Chester, having lowered and lashed the jib, stood beside Norton—waiting. To Billy it seemed that the *Arrow* would momentarily strike that reef of rocks.

Suddenly the captain ported the helm three points.

119

"Haul in the booms! Lower tops'!" he shouted.

Mechanically, in a sort of daze, they obeyed. The next minute they saw a perpendicular crevice in the face of the rock wall about twenty feet high. This fissure widened until a sheer cleft nearly thirty feet wide yawned directly in the path of the *Arrow*. Then they understood what the captain was driving at. Here was an ideal shelter from the coming storm.

"Lower away all!"

Almost before they realized the fact, the *Arrow* had glided into the crevice and was floating on a small sheet of smooth water, all sails lowered. Tugging at the anchor, Billy stood ready, waiting only the word.

"Drop anchor!" sang out Vinton, his deep voice echoing weirdly in that strange retreat.

120

"How much cable, Captain?"

"Fifty feet. Dave, toss the line over to that little dock."

This was quickly done, the rope being caught by a man who had come on the run as soon as he had seen the *Arrow* slip into this protected cove. Tying it fast to a pile, he rose and bawled through his cupped hands:

"That you, Lem?"

"Ay, ay, Johnny," responded Vinton. "I didn't fergit this stunt, you see."

"That's right. The *Arrow's* the only sloop small enough to get in. Comin' ashore?"

"Yep; by an' by."

Presently they all climbed down a rope ladder into the *Arrow's* dory, which swung alongside, and went up to the lighthouse. All but Dave, who, strange to say, considering his dislike of being on the water, preferred to spend the night in the cuddy.

Outside the cove the wind howled with a fury that nearly swamped some of the anchored craft. Indeed, it flung spray and foam over their rigging, and made them tug desperately at their cables. Now they rose swaying on the crests of the waves, now they sank into the deep troughs as if they were bent on going to the bottom. Yet in the little rock-bound cove the lighthouse boats and the *Arrow* were secure and safe.

121

In the house, after supper, the voyagers sat and talked with their host. The lighthouse keeper's name was John Bowling, and he was a brother-in-law of Captain Anderson of the Red Key Life Saving Station. So, naturally, he was interested in hearing about the rescue of Ruth, the boys' recent sojourn at Red Key, and the wreck of the *Mary Jane*.

"I used to know the cap'n of that schooner," he said, "but it's three years since I saw him last. We don't see many folks or have many visitors here, except the spongers and now and then the crew of some passing craft. So strangers with news to tell are certainly welcome."

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"Don't you find it pretty lonely?" inquired Alec.

"Well, there's always enough to do to keep us busy, and most of us have our families here. Sometimes we take trips over to Key West for supplies, and twice a year the steamer belonging to Uncle Sam's lighthouse department brings us the regulation stores of oil, coal, etc., that are furnished to all the stations from Maine to Texas. But life here isn't very——"

"Hello, down there!" called an assistant keeper from the lantern and, running to the foot of the stairs, Chester answered the hail.

"Tell Cap'n Bowling there's a small craft, probably a sponger, comin' in from the east'ard. As nigh as I can make out there's two men on board, waving lanterns. But they don't seem to have her in hand very well."

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"A sponger from the east'ard," repeated Bowling, having heard his assistant's report. "There's like to have been trouble out there, lad, for the most venturesome sponge-fisher who ever lived wouldn't be abroad in this blow unless something had gone wrong. Tell Bill to keep his eye on them."

Chester repeated the instructions, and a grin overspread his face as he heard Bill mutter irritably:

"Keep an eye on 'em! I'd like to know what else he thinks I'd do? Anyone'd have sense enough for that."

"What's he saying?" asked Bowling sharply.

"Just talking to himself, I guess," replied Chester.

"That's a bad habit Bill has got," the keeper said, laughing. "He chews over a lot of words that don't mean anything, though they kind o' rile a man. Go up and see what's eating him, sonny."

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Young Brownell obeyed promptly, although he felt quite confident that he would not learn anything more than Bill had already reported.

"There's trouble o' some kind out yonder," the assistant declared and handed Chester a pair of night-glasses. "Thank fortune, we don't have to sit still and see them poor fellows drift past us while we're suckin' our thumbs!"

"Do you think——"

"I'm tryin' to figger out how we're going to lend a hand if that there sponger strikes a sunken ledge or a coral reef, as I reckon she will."

"You couldn't even stand on the rocks while the sea is running as it is now!" said Chester.

"I ain't so certain 'bout that, though I'll admit that a man couldn't keep his footin' there and 'tend to much else. 'Sides, the tide's risin' now. It's within an hour o' high water."

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When Chester descended the stairs in some anxiety and reëntered the keeper's room, Bowling asked sharply: "What's Bill doing—besides his duty? Depend on him for that!"

"Trying to decide how we can help those in the sponger, if she strikes a ledge, sir."

"Oh, so that's what's troubling him! Let's hope his fears won't be justified! Bill Wayne may be mulish and irritable at times, but whenever any danger or hardship comes up, his heart swells out till it's too big for his body."

CHAPTER XIII.

SAVED FROM THE STORM.

In spite of Keeper Bowling's light words, inwardly he shared his assistant's anxiety and keen sense of responsibility. His calm, easy manner was assumed chiefly that his other men and his guests might not dread the worst, before the belated sponger had made further progress toward the haven.

However, everyone felt anxious. The men were dividing their watches as usual in order to keep the light in prime order throughout the night. At last word came that the sponger had struck on the nearby shoals. Instantly all was hustle and prompt action in the lighthouse. All but one of the men, followed by Roy Norton and the four scouts, lanterns in hand, hurried down to the scene of the wreck.

"They must have been too close to the light and miscalculated their distance," said Bowling, throwing a coil of rope over his shoulder. "In the darkness it's quite possible to do that. Even experienced seamen have made that mistake."

"Men," he added, a moment later, "I'm going back to the house and rig a block to a bar across the east window of the tower. By overhauling all the spare line in the storeroom, I'll get enough to make a tackle that will reach from that window well down into the water."

"Yes, but what then?" Hugh asked breathlessly. "What will that do, sir?"

"With the loose end—well padded so it won't cut—belayed under the arms, there'll be a good chance for some one to go out into the surf and carry the line to those poor devils out there. And then I—"

"Oh, Captain!" cried Hugh eagerly. "Let me go! I'm light, I can swim, and I'm not a bit afraid of the rough water. Say, Mr. Bowling, let me go!"

"You, my boy! Not much! You must be crazy!"

The other men protested against Hugh taking such a risk.

"Lad, you don't know what it would be to swim out there in these rough shoals! It takes a heavier chap than you to do the stunt," said one man gravely.

"Why, you'd be battered around like a cork by these waves," said another. "Any moment you might be dashed on a hidden reef and—"

"Oh, I'm sure I could do it!" declared Hugh.

"No, no, lad!" interposed Bowling decidedly. "It's out of the question, though we all like your

courage.”

Without waiting to hear more, he and Bill Wayne ran back to the lighthouse. Hastening to the storeroom and opening its window, they shoved a timber through, pulling it across the aperture. They attached to this a large quantity of rope and a pulley block. Bowling then knotted the rope around Bill's body, after which Wayne clambered up on the sill. Bowling hauled the line taut as it ran through the block, and, when the assistant swung off, he lowered Bill slowly to the rocks below.

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Standing near, Hugh could see Wayne as he went boldly into the surf. The lad's heart bounded with the thrill of the exploit which he had vainly sought to undertake. Again and again he saw Bill carried off his feet by the force of the waves beating on the line of rocky ledges, bowled over, tossed to and fro; again and again he saw him stagger up, pulled backward and upward by the line fastened to the timber and manipulated by Bowling's strong arms. And, finally, to his horror, he saw Wayne fall under a big roller, and he waited vainly in breathless suspense for him to rise.

It was then that Hugh acted with impetuous courage. Plunging into the surf before anyone could restrain him, he dived and swam and fought his way to the place where he had seen Bill knocked down. He was just in time to seize the floating line, which had become caught around a submerged point of rock, and yank the other swimmer up until he had regained a foothold. Together they staggered back, Wayne gasping his thanks and praise. He was just about to make another attempt to strike out to the sponger, when he was arrested by a loud outcry.

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The other members of the rescuing party had ventured further along the ledge of coral limestone, carrying with them their lanterns and ropes. At their feet the surf broke sullenly, foaming on the rock, making it slippery. It was dangerous work, yet they were filled with the high resolve to aid those unknown, helpless fellow beings in even greater peril out there in the darkness. They shouted, waved lanterns and finally saw a light waved in answer—before it was extinguished by a tremendous wave. While they were waving, three half-drowned spongers were flung, still swimming, into shallow water; and Norton, Chester and two men sprang in and dragged them out on the ledge.

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It was the shout that greeted this act of heroism which caused Bill Wayne and Hugh to desist from their brave efforts.

Without loss of time, the unfortunate men were hurriedly carried to the lighthouse, where first-aid measures were immediately applied.

Anxiously the boys watched the efforts of the gruff keeper and his assistants, and eagerly they saw the signs of life returning gradually to the half-drowned spongers. As soon as the men were able to take it, the captain gave each of them a cup of steaming coffee. And by the time this hot stimulant had done its work, they were ready to sit up and recount their adventures.

They had, it seemed, passed one available harbor late that afternoon, believing that they

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could reach their destination before the storm overtook them. But the wind had caught them, the rudder had snapped off short, and they had drifted upon the shoals in spite of their best efforts to avoid them.

They had watched despairingly the futile efforts of the men who had tried to rescue them, and had finally determined to cast themselves into the sea and trust to their swimming powers and the intruding waves to carry them within reach of safety.

When the thrilling tale was ended, the boys drew deep sighs, realizing only then that they had quite forgotten to breathe in their intense interest.

CHAPTER XIV. CAPTAIN BOWLING'S STORY.

"Were you ever shipwrecked, Captain Bowling?" asked Chester, rather abruptly breaking the pause which followed the sponger's story.

"Bless you, lad, I've seen more wrecks than you could count, I might say."

"Yes, but I mean, were you ever in one? Did you ever have an experience like——"

"Like the one our friends here have just been through?"

Chester nodded. The others, guessing that he was trying to "draw out" the lighthouse-keeper into a recital of bygone adventures, drew closer around the table or sat in attitudes of quiet expectancy. Bill Wayne handed over to the grateful spongers a pouch of tobacco, pipes and matches, then filled his own pipe.

"Fire away, Cap'n," he said, smiling. "You're in for a third degree!"

Captain Bowling laughed. Evidently he was by no means averse to telling stories of his earlier life as a sailor.

"I was shipwrecked, years ago, a blamed sight worse than you were to-night," he said, turning to one of the spongers.

"Yes, sir, twice as bad," continued the captain. "Say, Lem, quit your snoring!"

"Go on, don't mind me!" was the reply.

"Well, boys," the keeper began willingly, "I'll tell you about one wreck. When I was a young fellow, 'bout twenty, I belonged to an old-fashioned brig, *Nancy*, commanded by one of the toughest nuts I ever had the luck to know. His name was Lowes, and he was a regular slave-driver,—but a good seaman, though. Give the devil his due, say I! We were fishing and cruising around the Bahamas, under a lively breeze, and one night—I never knew how it happened—we got blown 'way off our course.

"As the night came on, the breeze increased to a

reg'lar Atlantic gale," Bowling continued, puffing at his pipe. "Rain fell in sheets and torrents, the thunder was loud enough to crack your ears, and flashes of lightning nearly gave us all blind-staggers. Sometimes it all was bright as daylight, then dark as a pocket, pitchy dark. Suddenly the lookout gave a yell: 'Breakers ahead!'

"'Put the helm a-lee!' shouted the watch.

"But before the order could be obeyed, we felt a shock that lifted her bow clear out of water, it seemed, and we knew she'd struck a reef. My stars! how the sea did swat poor *Nancy*, banging her down on those rocks! I tell you, boys, there was a wild scramble for the boats!

"Old Lowes, he was shouting curses and orders, trying to keep up some show of discipline. The for'ard mast fell over the side nearer the reef, just as the bo's'n and nine other hands got one boat launched.

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"I happened to be in it. As soon as we got clear of the rocks we lay on our oars, waiting to pick up any men that jumped overboard. We urged them on, but they were all busy with the last two boats. They got one of them launched, and then they pulled away toward a rock some little distance from us. It was a big rock, kind of flat, but they never reached it.

"We rowed out to that rock and then a loud crash told us the brig had gone to pieces. We heard sounds like thunder, as the timbers and planks were dashed upon the reef,—then a yell, a frantic shout.

"'By God, we're going back there, no matter what happens,' said one of our crowd. 'We can't let our mates drown like rats!'

"So we landed most of our load and rowed back, as quickly and carefully as we could. We picked up eight of the crew, the first trip, and Cap'n Lowes and two officers, on the second. It was dangerous work, but twenty of us, in all, were saved, out of twenty-seven souls. When day dawned we saw the sea covered with fragments of the wreck.

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"We were about twelve miles from the nearest island; we hadn't a bite of food, and many of us had very little clothing on.

"We huddled on the rock, and all that day, the next night, and the next day, we waited for some ship to pass by and discover us. None came. The men nearly died from exhaustion, hunger, and thirst; some drank sea water, lost their minds, and threw themselves off the rock; others got unconscious and had to be tied down to the rock, in order not to be washed away by the seas. We tied them with whatever rags of clothing we could use for the purpose.

"Another night went by. In the morning, several of our number were missing, and others lay dead on the rock. Lowes was among the missing; he had gone raving mad. And finally, when we had lost all hope, I sighted a schooner standing directly down for us. Imagine our joy!

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"Well, boys, to make a long story short, a boat from the schooner picked us up and we were

taken aboard. They gave us water and food, a small portion at a time. They gave us clothes, for most of us hadn't a stitch on our backs; and they treated us mighty white.

"No one who hasn't been through such an experience can appreciate how horrible it is," concluded Bowling. "But you lads have been life-savers to-night, and you must have had enough of adventures and hardships! How about comfortable bunks and a sound sleep?"

As they rolled themselves warmly in blankets a little later and settled down for a good night's sleep, they appreciated that for the second time that spring they had had the great privilege not only of seeing, but of sharing the heroic work of life-saving crews.

As earnest Boy Scouts, these experiences meant to them a better understanding of the motto, "Be Prepared," and filled them with a determination to acquire greater skill in all land and water accomplishments.

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The next day being calm and sunny, the *Arrow* was hauled out and made ready to continue the cruise to Key West. Arrived there, Roy Norton bade his younger comrades a warm farewell and left them standing on the foredeck, waving their caps and cheering for him as he departed on his mission.

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CHAPTER XV. INTO THE EVERGLADES.

When Norton returned to Key West, five days later, he found the boys still there, their number increased by a new arrival, who was none other than Mark Anderson, Captain Bowling's nephew. Mark had "turned up" quite unexpectedly to visit his uncle, having come on a sailing vessel manned by the crew whom his father and the other surfmen of the Red Key Station had rescued from the *Mary Jane*. As Hugh expressed it, it was "a reunion of old friends," and everyone had been surprised and glad to meet again.

As Mark had soon made friends with the scouts of the northern patrol, they invited him to join them on a brief trip through the Everglades. This he was only too glad to do, for he had never seen the southwestern part of the Glades, and he was an enthusiastic young explorer. He was frankly delighted at the prospect. Moreover, having been through other sections of that mysterious region, he was somewhat familiar with the methods which the Indians adopt in traveling. Much to Dave's surprise, Mark showed considerable knowledge of Seminole customs and characteristics; in fact, he quite won Dave's heart, though Dave would have been the last person in the world to give any outward signs of regard.

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"That boy heap good," was his only comment to Captain Vinton, after Mark and his new friends had spent an afternoon on board the *Arrow*, helping to stow away provisions in the cabin and

to make everything ship-shape for the return cruise and the by-trip to the Everglades.

"How have you learned so much about the Indians, Mark?" inquired Alec, that same evening, when all had taken leave of their hospitable friends at Key West,—friends of Mr. Sands,—and had gone aboard.

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"Oh, I picked it up from a man named Ed Daylor, who's a great pal of Dad's," answered Mark. "Last summer he took me on a hunting trip to Lake Okeechobee. He's been among the Indians for many years, hunting and fishing, and he's a regular big swamp woodsman. He can follow a trail through the swamps and never once lose his bearings. And he's a corker at poling."

"What's that?"

"Poling? Why, you have to use a pole instead of a paddle, in traveling through the Glades. Don't you, Dave?"

"Sure. Seminole no good with paddle," admitted the guide. "Heap good with pole."

"Even on salt water a Seminole usually poles or sails round the coast," put in Captain Vinton. "You're likely to see one of Dave's tribe cruisin' along shore 'most any time in a cypress-log canoe,—makin' fair progress, too. By the way, I've got two good poles on board now. Thought I'd better take 'em along, as good ones are hard to find even along the coast. Go an' fetch one, Dave, my hearty."

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The guide went aft to find the canoe poles, which were fastened to the rail. While he was busy untying them, Vinton, who seemed to be in a talkative mood, continued to enlighten the boys.

"They're hard to find, 'cause they've got to be straight saplings," said he. "In the Glades a paddle ain't much use, an' if you break your pole and haven't another with you, you're in a bad fix."

"See," he added, as Dave returned with a pole, "here she is, an' a good straight, strong one, too."

The pole which he handed around for the boys' inspection was about eight feet long, slender and supple, tapering at the upper end. About one inch from the larger end a triangular inverted bracket was nailed.

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"It looks like the stilts we used to hobble around on," said Billy, balancing the pole.

"It surely does," agreed the captain. "That part of the pole that's beyond the bracket keeps it from slippin' on rocks, and its flattened end, besides the bracket, or foot, stops it from sinkin' very far into mud. You'll get the hang o' it after you've seen Dave polin'. That will be in another day or two."

The "day or two" proved short enough, for the beginning of the homeward cruise was pleasant, favored by perfect weather. At nightfall of the second day, the *Arrow* cast anchor off the mouth of a broad, shallow river. For two days they had been sailing through a labyrinth of small islands, and now they found themselves beached on a

little cove at the river's mouth. Here a clearing had been made in the luxuriant growth and a settlement had been established, consisting of four cabins and several tents.

Dave knew the place well; in fact, he had advised them to start inland from here, for he had friends who were willing to lend the amateur explorers two very serviceable log canoes. They had purchased other supplies, including a tent and rubber sleeping-bags, mosquito netting, leather leggings and heavy shoes, at Key West. Also medicines, in case of need.

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"Well, here we are on the edge of the Everglades!" said Norton the next morning, when all the provisions and suitable clothing had been properly packed away in the two cypress dug-outs. "And now for an inland voyage to the Seminole country!"

Before them lay a sea of apparently pathless grass, through which the river crawled slowly until it seemed to be lost among huge lily-pads. Cutting through the saw-grass in all directions, spreading out like the lines in a human hand, were many shallow water-courses.

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"Which one shall we take, Dave?" asked Norton.

"Take dat one first," replied the guide, pointing. "By-a-by we come to camp. Dave know."

Taking the pole, he got into the larger of the two canoes, and Alec, Chester, and Mark took their places in front of him, as it had been arranged by drawing lots. In the other canoe, which was managed by a young Indian named Jim, the other two boys and Norton stowed themselves. At the last moment Captain Vinton had decided to remain at the settlement and await their return, for a short trip in the Everglades had no charms for him. This was perhaps just as well, for it evened the crews of the canoes, and gave a place to young Jim, who was a better guide than the worthy captain.

Both Dave and Jim knew the direction of the Seminole camp, and though they headed off into the wrong water-course once during the morning, they did not go far afield. The streams were wonderfully clear, except in places where the guides had to pole through enormous patches of water plants and grasses. For six miles they pushed into the Glades, and about noon they reached a small inland island on which was a rude landing made of wreckage from the coast.

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Dave explained that his tribesmen often transport planks and timbers very long distances, lashed to their canoes on the outside. At this landing they found numerous poles standing in the mud where former owners had left them at random. The boys borrowed some of these poles, for they were eager to learn the art of swamp navigation from their friendly guides.

They all landed, and soon they were enjoying a fine lunch of fish, fruit, tea and hardtack. Later, strolling along the shore of the islet, Jim shot an alligator, which he deftly skinned with his sheath-knife. Then he hung the skin upon poles to stretch and dry.

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"Me leave um here 'till come back," he said.

"Why, Jim, aren't you afraid somebody will steal it?" asked Billy in surprise.

Jim frowned and shook his head. Dave glanced sharply at the young scout, as if he were vexed at Billy's question.

"Nobody steal," he said quietly. "Only Injuns around here—miles, miles." He waved his arms in a comprehensive sweep of the horizon. "Seminole always honest," he added.

"That's the truth, all right," said Mark. "A Seminole is as honest as the daylight."

Whereupon the question was dropped, although Billy could not refrain from whispering in an aside to Mark. "Did you say as the daylight, or *in* the daylight, sonny?" And Mark grinned a response.

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After lunch, with Dave's canoe leading the way, they continued their inland voyage, marveling at the strange country through which they passed. Sometimes, plunging the pole through several feet of mud that underlay the clear water of the streams on which the canoes glided, Dave and Jim struck the hard rock bottom of limestone. The oceans of saw-grass, the occasional groves of palm, wild fig, mangoe, and rubber trees, the clumps of cypress, all were rooted in a bed of mud of various depths.

Pushing on slowly, they came at last to a good place for a camp that night. It was a small circular island, on the top of which was the framework of an Indian's lean-to shelter. Covering this with grass, rubber blankets, and netting, they soon had a comfortable "shanty," fairly well protected from mosquitoes and snakes; and there they spent the night.

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CHAPTER XVI. THE FRIENDLY SEMINOLES.

About noon of the next day they arrived at the Seminole town which was their destination.

As they approached the village, which was located on a broad triangle of land slightly higher than the surrounding expanses, they noticed a little wharf along one side, and close to this wharf a number of canoes of different sizes. Standing in one of these canoes, a large one, was an Indian, who was working hard with a curious piece of mechanism. It was a sheet of tin roofing about three feet square, into which holes had been driven, with the rough side up like a nutmeg grater. Across this sheet, back and forth, the Indian was violently rubbing the roots of the coonti plant.

"What on earth is he making?" asked Billy.

"Starch," replied Mark promptly. "The Indians eat coonti starch like pudding, and it tastes mighty good, when you're hungry. I've been told that it's very nourishing and healthful, but I've never eaten much of it."

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Having landed, the party stood watching the starch-maker, while the two guides made the canoes fast to the wharf. Then Dave and Jim led the way in search of friends in the village.

A few braves were standing around, gazing at the young strangers, or now and then exchanging a few mumbled words of greeting with Jim and Dave, whom they addressed by their true Seminole names. All the other men of the little village were absent, perhaps out fishing or hunting.

Not a woman or a child was in sight; they had run away to hide behind trees or within their palmetto huts. It was only when they were assured that the visitors were of the most friendly nature that they came out, eying the strangers curiously and distrustfully. One small boy whom Jim called to him was disposed to be friendly with Billy, who bought of him a bow and arrows. Norton had brought several boxes of colored beads, and he scattered handfuls of these among the children, who scrambled and scampered away for them in every direction with joyous cries.

After a while the hunters began to return in canoes, singly or in twos or threes. Beyond greeting the two guides briefly, they paid very little attention to the strangers, but continued their occupations serenely undisturbed.

On a platform close to the water's edge, two Indians were skinning some freshly killed otters. In a hut nearby, an old man, a silversmith, was making earrings and crescents of hammered silver. Further on, an Indian boy was hollowing out a log for a canoe; and three squaws were drawing water from a spring on the island, using big gourds to carry it.

Old canoe trails led from this island in all directions through the salt marshes, and the boys would have greatly enjoyed following a few of them, had time permitted. But the hours were flying, and soon the scouts would have to return to the settlement where Captain Vinton and the *Arrow* awaited them.

Accordingly they left the main part of the Seminole camp, and retracing their steps to the crude little wharf, embarked once more in their canoes. The friendly Seminoles gathered in a body on the wharf, to see them off; and soon the two canoes were headed down stream, following very nearly the same course over which they had come.

By dint of hard and rapid poling, the guides managed to reach the lean-to island before nightfall. Aided by the slow currents of the water trails, travel down stream was more rapid than it had been; nevertheless, it was a thoroughly tired and sleepy company of explorers who rolled into their sleeping-bags in the shelter of the lean-to that night.

Next morning, however, all were early astir, for Dave had suggested an alligator hunt. After breakfast they started off in the canoes, resolving to run up any small creeks they might find in search of these reptiles.

It was still very early. A light mist was rising from the countless acres of saw-grass, and the

sun was shining through a veil of fleecy clouds. Slowly, almost noiselessly, the canoes glided along the water-courses, while their eager occupants hardly dared to speak, lest breaking the vast silence should alarm the hidden game.

The canoes were moving slowly around a point of land, when Dave, raising his hand, whispered:

“See big one—over there.”

At a distance the object which he pointed out appeared to be the trunk of a fallen tree, half in water, half on the mud bank of the stream. It was motionless, and they stared at it without recognizing its shape and color. Expecting to see the glossy black back of an alligator, they observed that this creature was of an ashen gray, the color of an old sun-dried stump.

“Where? What is it?” whispered Chester.

“S-sh!” came the low, sibilant warning from Dave. “Heap big ‘gator,—*aal-pa-tah*. You not want to wake him, scare him.”

“Huh!” grunted Jim. “No ‘gator.”

“What? That old log is a—”

“Crocodile!”

Even as he spoke, Jim lowered his pole and took a paddle, with which he guided the dug-out forward without noise or splash. Dave followed his example. Together, almost side by side, the canoes with their breathless crews approached the crocodile. But unfortunately, as the hideous creature was to leeward of the canoes, there was no way for them to get the wind of it; and this fact accounted for a sudden startled movement of the beast. It turned its head, opened its huge jaws with a curious loud hiss, and then, straightening itself halfway on its short legs, began to slide backward into the water.

However, at the very instant that it began to move,—and it moved with astonishing rapidity, for so ungainly a brute,—a sharp sound broke the silence. Jim’s rifle spoke, and the report rang out startlingly.

With a gentle slide, the huge reptile had disappeared into the water. Anxiously they waited for him to rise to the surface again and show whether he had been fatally wounded. Jim could not tell whether or not his shot had taken effect.

But he was not kept long in doubt. After a few minutes, the water was violently churned by the dying struggles of the crocodile, and the canoes, tossing up and down on the wavelets, were nearly upset more than once. Perilous moments for the hunters! Had either of the canoes, or both, “turned turtle,” the vicious and frantic reptile might have avenged its own death!

Instead, it presently lay inert and lifeless in the shallower part of the stream, whence Jim, springing out of the canoe, dragged the heavy body ashore and began at once to skin it, assisted by Dave.

There were many miles still to be traveled, and so Norton decided not to spend any more time in

that locality, but to return to the river station by nightfall, if possible.

"Cap'n Vinton will think we're lost, strayed, or stolen, never coming back to civilization," he said laughingly.

"I almost wish we were!" said Hugh with a sigh. "I love the wilds. I'd like to spend a whole year down here among the Glades, if I could. Wouldn't you, Bill?"

"You bet!—if there was some reason, some purpose in our doing it," Billy answered. "I'd get tired of just loafing, though."

"So would I."

"I know you would."

"Well, *I* wouldn't!" declared Alec, smiling. "Hunting, fishing, exploring, taking photos—that would be enough for me."

"I guess you'd change your mind, Alec, before long," said Norton. "At any rate, we must return to civilization now. I dare say your parents will be anxious for a telegram from us within a day or two, assuring them that we're all well. Remember, it's many days since you last wrote about your adventures, and they'll want to know that we're not shipwrecked, lost at sea, or adrift in the Glades."

"Oh, they'll soon have all the news."

"Besides, we've a long cruise up the coast, back to Santario, still ahead of us," continued Roy Norton. "And Mark is looking forward to seeing his family and friends at Red Key."

There was a brief silence. The Seminole guides had resumed their poling, keeping the canoes almost abreast. A light breeze, warm and pungent with the tang of the marshes and the scent of scrubby pines, passed over the ocean of grass.

Chester broke the silence. "It's been a great trip," he said with quiet enthusiasm. "We've all enjoyed it immensely. I wish those fellows at Red Key could have come along with us; they'd have liked the run."

"I guess they have plenty of adventures," Billy added. "I'll never forget our experiences at Red Key and later at the lighthouse."

Hugh agreed with this statement. Somehow, he felt that the slight part he and his comrades had played in sharing the labors of those brave surfmen and guardians of the coast would linger in his memory longer than any other experience of their visit. It meant to them all much more than their brief sojourn at the Seminole village, with the stalwart braves returning from the chase, the squaws busying themselves with household cares, the romping children, the air of contented aloofness that pervaded the scene.

"Yes, it's been a great trip." He echoed Chet's words with sincerity.

"It's not over yet, thank fortune!" said Chester.

"It has hardly begun!" Alec rejoined briskly.

And, as later events showed, he was a true prophet; for the boys were destined to add many further adventures to their list of exploits before they returned to Santario and to Alec's home.

These adventures will be related in "The Boy Scouts on Picket Duty."

THE END.

Transcriber's Notes

- Copyright notice provided as in the original—this e-text is public domain in the country of publication.
- Silently corrected palpable typos; left non-standard spellings and dialect unchanged.
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