

The Boy Scouts on Picket Duty

Robert Shaler

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THE BOY SCOUTS ON PICKET DUTY

by Scout Master Robert Shaler

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CHAPTER I

THE MYSTERIOUS STEAMER

In the wake of an easterly squall the sloop Arrow, Lemuel Vinton master and owner, was making her way along the low coast, southward, from Snipe Point, one of the islands in Florida Bay about twelve miles northeast of Key West.

With every sail closehauled and drawing until the bolt ropes creaked under the strain, the Arrow laid a fairly straight course toward Key West. She bore a startling message, the nature of which her captain had considered of sufficient importance for him to prolong a cruise he had undertaken and to hasten back to the port whence he had sailed, twenty-four hours previously, to inform the authorities.

The sloop had not sped far from the Point, and the receding shore line had scarcely grown dimly blue on the horizon under a peculiar yellow-gray sunrise, when Captain Vinton's crew began to make their appearance on deck. The crew consisted of five Boy Scouts, an older companion who was in charge of them, and a Seminole Indian guide, called Dave, who had been hired to conduct the boys on a brief exploration of the Everglades. Four of the boys belonged to a troop of scouts who had their summer headquarters at Pioneer Camp, far away among the New England hills. They had, however, formed a resolution to spend the present summer not at Pioneer Camp, where most of their younger comrades would be, but in seeing some new sections of their native land. To this end, three of them---Hugh Hardin, his chum Billy Worth, and Chester Brownell---had gladly accepted an invitation from the fourth, Alec Sands, to spend a month at Palmdune, the Florida residence of Alec's father, who had sent them on this cruise. With them Mr. Sands had sent his secretary, a young man named Roy Norton, who had left them temporarily at Key West while he attended to business in Havana. When he had returned from Havana, he had found a new member of the party---Mark Anderson, the son of the captain of Red Key Life-Saving Station.

The Arrow had been anchored off Snipe Point during the previous night, where Captain Vinton had gained the information which made him decide to return to Key West. This knowledge, which he had already imparted to the boys, was to the effect that throughout the night before, while he and Dave alternately watched, he had seen a gray steamer or perhaps a gunboat cruising among the islands off the Point, occasionally coming close enough to the beach to be made out distinctly, but showing no lights and making no signals.

Immediately his suspicions had been aroused by this mysterious action. His impression was that the vessel belonged to a country which was then hostile to the United States. In that case she was either grappling for the cable between Key West and the mainland terminus at Punta Rossa, which lay close inshore at Snipe Point, or was trying to make connection with some other vessel carrying supplies or ammunition from some West Indian port, perhaps intending

to run the blockade.

Why she should attempt to tamper with the cable, he could not understand, knowing the superior efficiency of the wireless system; but he thought she might be one of the elusive filibustering vessels reported to have been seen in the Gulf of Mexico several days before this.

Stories about these mysterious vessels had caused official orders to be sent to Tampa and to Galveston, Texas, concerning the departure of several transports with American troops. And Captain Vinton himself had almost encountered a notorious filibuster named Juan Bego, one night during the earlier part of this pleasure cruise; that is, he had sighted a vessel which he felt sure was the Esperanza of Captain Bego, in waters which were supposed to be debarred to the enemy. All this had tended to make him more alert and wary than ever, even suspicious; and he had resolved to lose no time in reporting his most recent discovery.

"You boys might as well heave them old tarpon poles overboard now," he said seriously, as he shifted the helm. "That there craft I seen las' night ain't Yankee built, I'll swear; and if she should take a notion to foller us, we want to be light and shipshape, without no signs o' lubberliness that the squall may have brought to the surface. How's everything in the cabin, Dave? Tight and neat?"

The Seminole grunted, nodding his head in affirmation. Apparently he was too disturbed in mind to reply verbally; besides, like most of his kind, he was a poor sailor, and he did not enjoy the speed at which the Arrow was now sailing. It upset his mental balance as well as his bodily equilibrium.

Obeying the captain's instructions, the boys tossed overboard their heavy poles, saving only the lines and reels.

"When we get back to Key West, what's the first thing to do, Captain?" inquired Alec.

"Report seeing that steamer to the naval authorities," was Vinton's prompt answer.

"I didn't know there were any-----"

"There's likely to be some there now, waiting for orders."

"And will they search for the strange vessel?"

"You bet they will! We ain't goin' to let no sneakin' furrin tub show us her heels,---are we, lads?"

"Not if we can help it!" exclaimed Hugh. "I guess one of Uncle Sam's revenue cutters will give chase to that steamer, or gunboat, or whatever she may be."

"Not if she's a gunboat, I reckon!" quoth Vinton with a chuckle. "Cripes! that vessel was certainly a clipper for goin'! Her cap'n was wise enough to keep to wind'ard, for he seemed to know where the rough water begins to rise and how to make the most o' them keys. Never mind; off Nor'west Cape he'll have to come out like a seaman

and take his duckin'! H'ist that there jib, Billy, and make Dave move his carcass where it'll do some good."

But Dave did not want to bestir himself from his position on the weather gunwale, where he crouched dejectedly, letting the stiff breeze dry his spray-soaked garments. He groaned, protested, grunted, and finally swore volubly as Alec prodded him, while Billy hoisted the flying jib.

"What for so much hurry?" he grumbled. "Get to Key West by afternoon, anyhow. Dave want plenty sleep."

"You slept like a top for six hours last night!" declared Alec.

"No-o; Dave watch, saw steamer,---no more sleep, no forty winks."

"Oh, come!" laughed Billy. "I heard you snoring, Dave; you woke me up! I thought it was thunder!"

"Nothing less than thunder or a cannon firecracker would wake you up, Billy,---as a general rule," said Hugh, flinging one arm over his chum's shoulders and giving him a vigorous hug.

"Look yonder, boys!" shouted Captain Vinton at the helm. He pointed aft, and the four lads sprang to their feet and hurried toward him, alert and eager for a new surprise.

Some distance behind them, toward the mainland, a thin trail of smoke which had not been seen for two or three hours was now visible inside the keys. Could there be any reason for the reappearance of that smoky blur against the sky? Was it made by the mysterious steamer? If so, was she following the Arrow?

"By the shades o' shad, I orter know that boat!" exclaimed Vinton in puzzled chagrin. "See? She's coaled up, goin' for all she's worth. Alec, git out my glass from the cabin, take a look, and see if there's many men aboard."

Alec ran to do the captain's bidding. Descending into the cabin, he took from a locker an old-style marine telescope with which he hurriedly returned to the deck. After some focusing he managed to catch a glimpse of the steamcraft, just before she partially disappeared from sight behind one of the sandy reefs that fence off the sound.

"The crew of the steamer seem to be quite excited," Alec said, as he trained the telescope upon them. "I can see sailors running across her deck, and two of them have just hoisted an American flag. Some others are waving signals and---"

"What?" shouted the captain. "American flag, did you say?"

"Yes. What do you think of that?"

"Reckon she wants to speak us."

"Why?" asked Chester.

"Looks like this is the first time she's seen us," said Vinton, taking

the marine glass from Alec. "But it can't be the same craft we sighted back yonder, last night. Anyhow, if they're wavin' signal flags,---and they are, sure enough!---they must want to speak the _Arrow_. That's plain. I'm goin' to ease in more and see who's aboard. Look! the dinged old boat is comin' out from behind the bar now."

Pondering some contingency which he did not explain to the boys, Vinton shifted the helm; and his sloop, hitherto heading in a southwesterly direction, now began to edge closer to the line of keys. Had Vinton not known his course so thoroughly from long experience in sailing these channels, inlets, and lagoons, it would have been dangerous; but he dexterously eluded the various reefs and oyster bars and brought the _Arrow_ safely into smoother water. Meanwhile, the boys noticed that the wind, which had blown so strongly, was beginning to slacken, thus allowing the steamer to gain on the _Arrow_ quite perceptibly. They saw then that she was a small steamer, like a steam yacht, and light gray in color,---perhaps one of the United States revenue cutters.

Captain Vinton was astonished. He had already begun to have serious doubts that this could be the same mysterious vessel he had seen cruising about the islands the night before. All at once, unexpectedly, his doubts were resolved into a certainty that it was not the same, for even while he was wondering, a strange thing happened:

A long, low, gray shape, something like a built-for-speed tug-boat with a short funnel, darted into view from between two keys, and, crossing the wake of the revenue cutter, glided swiftly along the very course the _Arrow_ had taken, heading back toward Snipe Point. Before the sloop and the steamer had come within hailing distance of each other, the strange craft, not depending on the dying easterly wind, was well along the course, sending back---toward a trail of darker smoke.

CHAPTER II

A CONTRABAND CARGO

"Well, what d'you know about that?" queried Billy, easily relapsing into slang when the first few minutes' surprise had worn off.

"Dunno much about it," Captain Vinton answered in a somewhat gruff tone, "but it looks to me mighty like a filibuster's craft, or p'rhaps a smuggler's."

At the word "filibuster," the boys---figuratively speaking---pricked up their ears.

"What on earth can they be trying to smuggle?" was Hugh's eager question, to which the captain replied promptly:

"Arms,---leastways, cartridges or gunpowder. They ain't tryin' to smuggle 'em _into_ Fluridy, but _out_ of it," he explained. "Some gang of raskils is buyin' small quantities of war goods up state---or

else from Cuby---totin' 'em down the coast an' through th' Everglades, and gettin' 'em aboard some steamboat like that one, and so away where they'll do the most harm. Get me?"

"Yes," replied Alec, "but I never would have thought such tricks were possible in these days."

"Boy, you can't never tell what's just possible or what ain't, in these days," gravely asserted Captain Vinton. "All sorts o' things is like to happen, and sometimes it's durned hard to know just what's goin' on. But if that's any filibustin' outfit, they'd better make tracks out o' these waters as fast as they can lay beam to wind'ard."

So saying, he shifted the helm again and bore away at an angle that would enable them to come close to the revenue cutter, now scarcely a quarter of a mile astern. Lighter and lighter came the wind, slower glided the Arrow over the long heavy swells, nearer and nearer came the cutter, going at a steady, rapid rate. Soon the two vessels were within hailing distance, and a megaphone call came across the water, clear and distinct:

"Sloop, ahoy! Can you understand?"

"Aye, aye!" called Vinton.

The five boys gathered around him, eager to hear the interchange of calls. Even Dave rose and shambled over to the little group at the tiller. On the other vessel they could now see a number of men in blue uniforms and one in a civilian's suit of gray tweeds.

"Who've you got aboard?" came the next question from the captain of the Petrel.

Vinton briefly stated his passenger list and explained the purpose of their cruise.

"Bound for Key West now?" shouted the Petrel's captain, whom Vinton, studying him through the marine glass, recognized as James Kelsey. "Trying to dodge that craft that just passed us, or trying to catch her?"

"We were goin' to report as how we seen her las' night off Snipe Point," bawled Vinton, speaking through a megaphone which Dave had handed to him. "Thought you fellows were at Key West."

"We were until this morning," came the answer. "We've been chasing that boat. She's the Esperanza, a smuggler. Have you seen her throwing anything overboard, or picking up stuff---like boxes or small kegs?"

Then a light of understanding broke upon Vinton's mind. So that was what the smuggler had been doing all night! Not grappling for the cable, but stealthily picking up a contraband cargo of munitions of war, small stores such as could be cast adrift along the coast in some prearranged method and gathered in by those who had been instructed to recognize the floating objects! What were they? Water-tight kegs of dynamite, submerged, but buoyed up by thrice their weight of corks? Boxes of rifle bullets? Or merely harmless glass bottles containing, perhaps, written descriptions of the country

to be invaded, photographs of fortifications, details of naval or military equipment?

The answer was not long forthcoming.

"Ain't seen her pick up anything," shouted Vinton, "but reckon that's her lay. What's she after?"

"Dynamite."

"By thunder!" ejaculated the captain in a low tone of awe.

"Yes, that's just what they'll do, if they can," Billy commented with one of his irrepressible grins. "They'll buy thunder. You've said it, Cap! But what'll they use it for?"

Vinton paid not the slightest heed to Billy's poor pun. Instead, while Alec gave Billy a dig in the ribs, the captain put the same question to Kelsey.

"Oh, you know they've started another one of those dinky revolutions in Panama, two generals fighting for the presidency," explained Kelsey. He no longer was obliged to shout curtailed messages through his megaphone, but spoke through it in a tone only a few degrees louder than ordinarily; for the sloop and the steamer were now almost alongside. "Well, the U.S. and Cuba want to stay entirely out of the little war game; but one side of the revolution, the Visteros, are sore at Uncle Sam and trying to make him take a hand. They've got agents in all the Gulf states, in Cuba and Hayti, and they're trying to stir up trouble."

What kind o trouble?

"Any old kind. They're not particular as to the brand. It's war stores they want, and discontented loafers for soldiers of fortune. And the Visteros are stealing dynamite to threaten the Canal."

"Bosh!" roared Vinton in a loud guffaw. "They couldn't do it! Let 'em try!"

"Yes,---let 'em! But meanwhile, we're out to put the kibosh on this smuggling. By the way, Vinton, now that you've made your report, you can turn around again when you've got the wind, and go back up along the coast. No need to go to Key West now."

"Hum-mp!" grunted Dave. "Waste time, get sick---all for nuthin'!"

"Shut up, you greasy Seminole!" muttered Vinton, and he turned away scornfully. "All right, we will," he called to the _Petrel_. "What you goin' to do?"

"First find out if that craft hid anything over there behind that key where she was lying, and then follow her."

More confabbing of an unimportant and general nature followed between Vinton and Kelsey and the man in tweeds, who was evidently the special correspondent of some newspaper. At the end of the conference, Kelsey called out:

"Well, I guess we'll mosey on, Lem. Goodby and good luck to you. If you meet any smugglers in the upper 'glades or along the coast, send word to Tampa; they'll rush a cutter with some of the Gulf police to the spot. Keep a sharp eye on strange-looking craft, will you?"

"Aye, aye!" responded the _Arrow's_ captain, little knowing into what adventures this pursuit of smugglers would lead him and his crew.

In a few minutes the _Petrel_ had swung about and was heading in the direction from which the _Esperanza_ had appeared. The _Arrow_ was left becalmed and drifting on the heavy swells of the Gulf; but her crew, excited by the prospect of encountering freebooters of the main, forgot to be seasick, even if they had been so inclined, and fell to preparing their noonday meal.

Vinton tilted his cap over his left eye and surveyed the trim _Arrow_ with frank satisfaction, at the conclusion of their repast.

"All shipshape, boys? Good! Reckon I'll let one of you steer awhile, and hit my bunk for an hour or two. There'll be wind out'n the sou'east, later on; and then I'll take charge again. All you've got to do now is to turn her around, with her nose pointin' yonder,"---he waved a hand toward the distant Sanibel Islands that stretch along the coast south of Charlotte Harbor,---"and take 'vantage of every puff of wind that you can use for tackin'. Understand?"

They signified their readiness to manage the sloop, once she had gone well beyond any reefs or bars, and they drew lots to see who should be first to take the captain's place while he rested. The draw, fell to Chester and he took charge of the helm. Alec came next, then Billy took his turn, and finally Hugh. While one steered, the others kept a look-out for the erratic _Esperanza_, thinking it might again appear from some unexpected quarter. Mark and Roy Norton lounged in the bow and lazily swapped fishing stories, not at all averse to leaving the work to the rest.

With the departure of the _Petrel_ on her return to the waters near Snipe Point, and with a barely-perceptible rise of wind, the sloop _Arrow_ laid a zigzag course toward the Ten Thousand Islands and came abreast of them about five o'clock. Beyond a broad inlet that led into the bay, a white sand beach, sparsely overgrown with crabgrass and waving palmettos, indicated to Dave that they were near one of his old camping places. He called Captain Vinton's attention to it, hinting that it would be a good place to spend the night.

"Why not aboard the sloop?" queried Vinton, though he knew perfectly well that Dave would seek any excuse to stretch his unseaworthy limbs on _terra firma_ in preference to tossing on the bosom of old ocean.

"Bad weather comin',---windy to-night," said the Seminole prophet, pointing to a bank of jagged slaty-gray clouds that was rising in the west over the gulf.

"Reckon you're right, Dave. If that brings half the wind its looks promise, I'd ruther have these keys between it and us---eh? There's another squall brewin' out yonder. Come on, let's go ashore, lads."

Making in shoreward, the _Arrow_ presently cast anchor off a shallow

cove "inside" the nearest bar. All five boys got into the sloop's dory, and after landing the others on the beach, Hugh rowed back to the sloop to bring the captain, Norton and the guide ashore. When they landed, they discovered Billy and Alec, Chester and Mark engaged in examining a big battered tin box, locked, with its cover sealed up with black sealing wax, which they had found half buried in the sand.

"What is it? What have you got there?" Hugh asked quickly, running forward.

"It looks like part of Captain Kidd's buried treasure!" said Billy, whose eyes were sparkling with anticipation.

"Nothing of the sort!" declared matter-of-fact Chester. "It's probably a lot of old maps and charts."

"Let's open it and see," was Alec's advice.

But the captain interposed.

"Let it alone, boys," he said. "It's marked with a small initial 'B.' That may stand for Bego or---bait."

CHAPTER III

ON A LONE SCOUT

The captain's oracular advice mystified the boys until, seated by their evening camp fire of driftwood, he explained to them that the mysterious box might be filled with articles such as Juan Bego and his men were both hiding and collecting.

"I dunno as he's been as far up the coast as this," Vinton added, "but 'twouldn't be hard for a sly old sea-dog like him to creep along these keys at night time 'most any distance."

"Are we far from the Everglades?" asked Billy, cautiously stirring the fire; for, in spite of the spring warmth, there was a decided chill in the air so close to the ocean.

"Well, the 'Glades are a good stiff hike from here," replied the captain. "Eh, Dave; how about it?"

The guide made no answer. Wearied with doing nothing all day, save lying around on the deck of the Arrow a prey to seasickness, he had fallen asleep. Above the splash of the surf and the rustle of the wind in the palmettos, his snores could be heard distinctly, making night hideous. Alec was on the point of waking him with a nudge in the ribs, when Hugh restrained him.

"Let him sleep, Alec," he whispered. "Poor old Injun, he's comfortable at last!"

"So am I," added Chester, stretching himself out on the warm sand.

"This is better than those stuffy little bunks in the cabin, isn't it?"

The next minute he regretted those words, for Captain Vinton looked at him with an aggrieved expression, as if peeved to hear any disparagement of the Arrow. The good captain was inordinately proud of his sloop, which he preferred to all other craft; indeed, had he been offered the command of one of the gigantic Atlantic liners, it is likely that he would have declined the honor.

Presently Vinton rose and, beginning to stroll up and down the beach, looked all around him and up at the sky in the scrutinizing way which seafaring men have when they retire for the night or turn out in the morning, to ascertain what sort of weather they may expect.

Overhead, he saw large masses of clouds scudding across the starry heavens, driven by the wind which bid fair to continue all night and all the next day. Off on the lagoon loomed the dark hulk and slender mast of the sloop, rising and falling on the choppy waves, her bow light gleaming across the water like a watchful eye. At his feet lay the dory, drawn up on the sand and moored by a line fastened to a palmetto, well out of reach of the rising tide.

Behind him sparkled the ruddy camp fire with the recumbent figures of the five scouts, Norton and the Indian grouped around it, and nearby lay the neat little pile of provisions and utensils covered with a tarpaulin. What matter if rain should chance to fall during the night? They had brought light blankets and rubber ponchos from the sloop, so they would be well protected.

Everything was safe and in order; he was satisfied and at peace with all mankind,---even with the smugglers who had roused his righteous wrath,---and his youthful companions were happy, enjoying the cruise and their adventures.

So unpromising did the weather beyond the keys look, and so congenial seemed the lagoon and this sheltered islet, the captain came to the conclusion that it would not be amiss if they should linger there a day or two longer than they had planned. After all, Alec's father had set no time limit for the cruise and the boys were in no hurry to return to Santario.

Thinking thus, he rejoined his crew around the fire and heard them discussing a plan to take the dory and row out on the lagoon in the morning, if it were not too rough, in the hope of catching some fresh fish for breakfast. He assented to this plan, for he himself intended to go aboard the Arrow the first thing on the morrow to look her over and see how she had weathered the night. Wrapping himself in a blanket and bidding the boys follow his example, he lay down beside the embers and was soon asleep.

Hugh and Billy, lovers of surf-bathing, would fain have taken a dip into the breakers before going to sleep; but Alec sensibly counseled them against this.

"Wait till daylight If you shed your clothes now and go in, the mosquitoes will eat you alive before you're dry again," he warned them. "Besides, it's dangerous to go in around these shores in the darkness. You might stumble into a hole or a sea-puss and be carried out to sea before you knew what had happened. And

Dave told me there are sharks that-----"

"Oh, forget it!" laughed Billy. "We have no intention of furnishing supper to a shark. Anyway, real, live, man-eating sharks are as scarce as hens' teeth---almost."

Nevertheless, being overruled by Hugh, who saw the wisdom of Alec's advice, he promptly abandoned the desire for a plunge; and, as he soon learned, they did well to seek the protection of their smoke smudge, for the mosquitoes were truly formidable. Even under the canopy of smoke, these noxious insects darted viciously to bite and torment the campers. Time and time again, the boys were awakened from sleep by the attacks of these buzzing pests; but at last they grew more accustomed to such onslaughts, and pulling nets closely around their limbs and faces, they sank into deeper slumber.

* * * * *

"The evening red, the morning gray
Sets the traveler on his way.
The evening gray, the morning red
Brings showers down upon his head."

Hugh whispered these words softly to himself when he awoke in the dim twilight hour just before dawn. It was still too dark for him to distinguish objects clearly, and for a moment he felt that queer sensation of being lost, of not knowing just where he was---that feeling which sometimes comes to one even in the most familiar surroundings. At once, however, it left him, and the little rhyme crept into his mind instead.

"Wonder why I waked up so suddenly?" was his silent query as he lay there blinking up at the sky, watching the few visible stars grow pale and paler. "Thought I heard some noise like distant thunder, very far away, and then it changed into the sound of muffled oars, or the tchug-chug-tchug of a motor boat. Then a voice said softly, 'It's a fine morn---' Oh, pshaw! Must have been dreaming. Is anybody else awake?"

He sat up and peered through the dusk. No, his companions were still asleep, prone on the sand. The breeze had lessened and the nocturnal insects had begun to take flight into the shadowy undergrowth, retreating before the advance of day. Across the dark stretch of water between this island and the mainland a flock of waterfowl flew noiselessly and vanished over the dunes. The surf broke with monotonous, soothing rhythm, stirring the silence with little waves of sound.

"It must have been the surf I heard," Hugh thought, still trying to decide what had roused him from sleep.

Quietly rising, so as not to disturb his friends, he stole down to the beach and stood gazing at the sloop, which now rode calmly at anchor, her bow light still shining.

"And yet it did sound like a motor boat," he said aloud.

The sound of his own voice, breaking the stillness, almost startled him. With a short, low laugh at his habit of talking aloud when

alone, he turned his back on camp and walked on for some little distance up the beach, until he rounded a curve of the shore and saw before him a narrow channel separating the island on which he stood from another, slightly larger. Clumps of young palms grew on that other island, taller and greener than those around the camping place. Hugh had been told that a palmetto bud cut out of a young, fresh, green palm would be fine with a piece of fat pork in making a stew; so he felt tempted to swim across the estuary and gather a choice bud.

The fact is, this desire was chiefly an excuse for a bit of exploration. Hugh loved to prowl around in unfamiliar places even if he were alone, though he naturally preferred to share a quest of discoveries with some comrade. So now, shedding his coat, outer shirt, and shoes, but retaining his other garments for protection against mosquitoes, he dived into the inlet and swam across it easily.

Continuing his tramp, he presently found himself on the slope of a sandy mound which formed the northeastern extremity of the small island. From the top of this he could obtain a good view of the surrounding islands and the mainland. He sat down to rest on the mound and to enjoy the outlook.

By this time the eastern sky was beginning to show a pale rosy glow, and soon the first rays of the rising sun turned the edges of clouds into flame. Across this glowing expanse the mainland stretched as far as the eye could see, a dark, low-lying, emerald-hued mass, varied and mysterious.

As Hugh gazed, the sun rose into view, flooding earth and sky and sea with glorious light. The boy drew a deep breath of wonder and turned to look around him on all sides. As he did so, his eyes rested on something which changed his breath of admiration into a gasp of astonishment.

At the base of the mound on which he sat, partly hidden by clumps of stunted cypress and palms, was a small hut built of bamboo and thatched with palm leaves. It was built in the form of a lean-to against the slope of a sand dune near the shore, and at first glance it seemed to be part of the island itself. Indeed, it was so well concealed that Hugh might never have noticed it at all, save for the fact that he caught sight of a canoe with three men in it approaching the hut, from behind still another island.

Some instinct warned him not to let himself be seen, and he slid down from the top of the mound and lay flat, watching the canoe. He felt like a scout in the enemy's territory, or a sentry on duty, stationed there to observe the actions of unknown foes.

To his surprise, the canoe came to land directly in front of the hut, and the three men sprang out into the shallow water and drew it up on the beach. From the bottom of the canoe they lifted a long object rolled in canvas. Suspending this from their shoulders, they disappeared into the hut.

CHAPTER IV

THE HUT ON THE BEACH

Hugh was agog with curiosity. He felt that he must find out who were those three stealthy strangers and what they were doing there.

"Perhaps they're smugglers," was his first thought. "If they are, I'd be doing a real service to Uncle Sam if I could report their whereabouts to the _Petrel_ when she comes back this way. Gee! it's worth the risk! Here goes!"

Without stopping to think much more about it, Hugh began to creep forward on hands and knees down the mound and quite close to the bamboo lean-to. Though usually unwilling to play the part of an eavesdropper, he felt justified in his present impulsive venture by the actions of the three men, for they seemed to be engaged in some underhand work which would not stand the light of day. So hiding himself behind a cypress stump, Hugh listened eagerly, straining his ears to catch every word.

The men spoke in low voices so he could not hear everything, but he heard enough to convince him that they were indeed smugglers. They were arranging to convey a cargo of dynamite from a point near the mouth of the little stream Sandgate on the peninsula (Florida) over to this retreat on the island. This was to be done on the first night when there was no moon and the wind was blowing off shore.

"There's a guy named Durgan lives over yonder in a little clearing 'bout a hundred yards up from the mouth of the creek," said one of the men. "Lives there all year 'round alone, fishin' an' raisin' turtles fer market. Queer ol' cuss, kind-a looney,---but he's friendly to us and willin' to oblige us by showin' a light in his cabin winder when the coast is clear."

"You theenk dat will be next-----"

The rest of that question was lost to Hugh, because the man who had first spoken muttered a warning of silence, then added something in a still lower tone. In vain Hugh tried to catch the words. Then the man whose accent indicated that he was either a Creole or a Haytian spoke again.

"Eet is not alway so easy to tell when dere will be no moon," he said. "And der wind, eet blow effery way---in one day."

"Never mind,---just wait," came the answer. "One o' these nights, perhaps to-morrow, we'll-----"

Again the sentence was lost. Hugh frowned impatiently. However, as they went on talking he heard some more of their designs---in particular, the fact that the dynamite was to be used for blowing up a railroad bridge.

Thinking that he had heard enough by this time and knowing that if they discovered him he would be captured as a spy, Hugh began to wonder how and when he should leave his hiding place and crawl back to camp with the least risk of being observed. At any moment the men might emerge from the hut or others of their gang might join

them. Yet he did so want to learn where they had come from, and whether their vessel was lying at anchor somewhere among these many islands! So he lay there, flat on the sand, scarcely daring to breathe lest he should be heard, heartily wishing the men would give some more definite hint of their purposes, and devoutly hoping that none of his friends, missing him from camp, would come in search of him with shouts and calls!

"That would be fierce!" he whispered inaudibly. "That would give me away and scare off these jail birds mighty quick!"

Suddenly the distant tchug-tchug of a gasoline motor boat came to his ears. Raising himself on his elbows, he peered over the stump, out across the glittering blue water, and saw a good-sized dory, manned by a solitary individual who wore light oilskins, coming swiftly toward the hut on the beach.

"That must be the motor boat that passed our camp last night," thought Hugh. "I feel sure now, surer than ever, that I heard it go by in the darkness. But it's coming over from the mainland now. Wonder who's that man at the tiller?"

Down he sank again and waited.

Presently the motor-dory drew up alongside the strip of beach in front of the bamboo hut and came to a standstill. The man in oilskins called out:

"Hey! You-all in thar!"

Instantly one of the three rascals came forth from the hut.

"Hello, Durgan!" he called, not at all loudly, through his cupped hands. "What's the news?"

"Beat it!" was Durgan's warning answer. "Thar's a campin' party on th' island below here---I seen 'em 'bout ten minutes ago---old Cap'n Lem Vinton, an Injun, an' four or five boys."

"Lem Vinton, eh? All right, Joe, we're going. Can you tow us around Spider Key?"

"Nope. I'm goin' home now," Joe Durgan replied tersely, with the abruptness of one who has done an irksome duty and would avoid further responsibility for the present.

Suiting actions to words, he quickened his engine and made off toward the Florida shore.

His boat had scarcely become a speck on the water, when Hugh began to crawl back to the other side of the mound. Joe Durgan, who was evidently not nearly so "looney" as represented, had warned the smugglers of the presence of the Arrow near their retreat, and Hugh realized that no time should be lost if Vinton were to spread sail and go in pursuit of them or of the Petrel.

"Now's the time for me to beat it, too," he resolved. "While they're talking they won't hear me or see me, and I can hurry back to the place where I left my coat and shoes."

When he had gone some little distance without being discovered, he fancied he was safe and rose to his feet, intending to run as fast as his legs could carry him---which was no snail's pace, indeed! Scarcely had he begun to move forward, however, when he heard a shout, followed by the sound of hurried footsteps.

Being fleet of foot and having no desire to be caught and treated as a spy, he set off running at full speed. The ground was quite rough and he had to turn aside to avoid bushes and hollows, yet he had no difficulty in keeping ahead of his pursuers. The very impediments in his way served to retard pursuit, and he did not despair of escaping. He had to cross over a ridge, at the top of which he was exposed to view. He had just reached it, when he heard some one shout:

"Stop! Come down,---or I'll fire!"

"Fire away!" thought Hugh, knowing how unlikely it was that any one would be so desperate as to shoot at him. "You can't stop me with that foolish bluff!"

Ignoring the threat, he rushed down the little hill, hoping soon to find some spot where he could turn off to one side or the other, hide in shelter, and thus evade the rascals. He was surprised to find that he had gone so far in his wanderings, that the smugglers' island was so much larger than it had seemed. For a moment he felt a vague fear that he had lost his bearings and was running in the wrong direction.

To ascertain how near his pursuers were, he threw a glance over his shoulder. This proved fatal to his hopes, for his foot caught in a tangle of crab-grass and down he came headlong. Over and over he rolled; and then for some seconds he lay still, a little dazed by his fall, unable to move. The next minute he found himself in the grasp of two men.

"Hullo, youngster! What made you try to git away from us?" asked one of them in an angry tone. He was a short, thick-set, burly man, with black eyes that seemed to glitter like a serpent's. His huge hands fastened upon Hugh's arm in a grip of steel.

Hugh replied truthfully but not very wisely: "I'm on my way to camp, and I want to get there as soon as possible."

"Camp, eh? Who are you?"

"I don't see what that has to do with my being in a hurry to get there."

"Maybe not, but we want to know where you was hidin' before you hit the trail," said the other man, a dark-visaged fellow with a sinister cast in one eye. "Come on now! Spit it out!"

"I was just exploring this island for fun," replied Hugh. "I was hunting for---"

"You were hiding!" vehemently declared the black-eyed man. "Whereabouts?"

"On the ground, of course; there are no trees to climb around here."

"None o' yer guff!" The swarthy captor dealt Hugh a hard thwack on the side of his head. "What's yer business here, anyhow? Where's yer camp?"

No answer.

"By gad, I'll make ye open up!" cried the cross-eyed knave, losing his temper. He was about to strike Hugh again, when the other man, still holding the lad in a steel-trap grip, pushed him aside with one foot.

"Hold off, Harry," he commanded gruffly. "I know where his camp is. He's one of Lem Vinton's crew. That's the Arrow over yonder, but he ain't going back to it yet awhile."

"Let me go!" shouted Hugh, struggling to free himself from the grasp of those sinewy hands. "Let me go, I say! What---what do you want with me? I tell you---help! Hel-----"

The frantic shout was checked by another blow from the angry ruffian's fist, and Hugh measured his length upon the sand.

"Shut up, will ye?" snarled the man, thrusting a bunch of sharp-edged grass into Hugh's mouth. "Look here, Branks," he added, "we can't let this kid blow the gaff on us to Lem Vinton. Why, the cap'n wouldn't wait ten minutes before he'd sail out to find that blamed cutter ag'in; and then we'd have him and the Petrel on our trail."

"Harry, you're right---dead right. The boy has got to come with us, until-----"

"Sure! Here, lend a hand. Tie his arms."

With their leather belts they bound the lad's hands securely, despite his struggles. Once, by a manful effort, he managed to break away and run forward a few yards. But they were after him instantly, before he could get the gag out of his mouth. In the tussle that followed, he kicked and writhed so vigorously that the cross-eyed captor howled with pain. Then, beside himself with rage, he felled Hugh by a blow on the head.

Myriads of stars reeled in the sunlight before Hugh's eyes, then the light of day changed to pitch darkness, and Hugh sank down on the sand---a limp heap, unconscious.

CHAPTER V

KIDNAPPED BY SMUGGLERS

When Hugh regained his senses, about half an hour later, he found himself lying on the bottom of a canoe, bound and gagged, staring up at the sky. The sun beat down upon him, full in his face, causing

him to close his eyes until he could just see through the lashes,---a trick he had learned in many games played in the woodlands. In the present instance it served him well, for the three men who were paddling the canoe swiftly toward the mainland believed that he had not yet recovered fully from the punishing they had given him; so, after their first glance, they paid little attention to the captive.

Though the threatened storm which Captain Vinton and Dave had looked for on the previous evening had given way to a mild and sunny day, the breeze was still brisk and the sea was choppy. The canoe bobbed up and down on the short waves, and Hugh was rolled from one side to the other or bounced roughly with every motion of the light craft. He felt sick and sore, his head ached miserably, and though he had had no breakfast, the very thought of food was repugnant to him.

On the island, he mused, his friends would have discovered his discarded garments by this time, and would be calling and hallooing to him---in vain. What would they think of his prolonged absence? That he had been drowned, or attacked by sharks, or lost in a quicksand?---what on earth would they imagine had happened to him? And Billy? Poor Billy, he would be quite frantic over the strange disappearance of his chum! The actual state of affairs would be about the last guess to enter their minds.

Well, it could not be helped now. He would have to bide his time and await developments, trusting that his friends would not delay their coming to the rescue. Meanwhile, where were these three villains taking him against his will?

After dodging from one island or key to another, slipping along the shady shores, the canoe suddenly struck out across the wider stretch of water, beyond which lay the mainland. Presently it thrust its nose into the soft bank of a stream, or, rather, a sluggish water-course which made a clear channel in an ocean of waving saw-grass. The men shipped their paddles, stepped out, and lifted Hugh to his feet; then they dragged him ashore.

He was able now to look about him, to see where they had landed.

A desolate spot it was, being merely an indentation in the swampy coast, a deep cove formed by two projecting arms of land which boasted of no vegetation except the tall grass and a group of stunted palmettos. Into this cove flowed a stream, and at a little distance from the mouth of the stream stood three log cabins, thatched with bundles of grass. They were all that remained of a little camp of fishermen and beach-combers, which had once shown promise of becoming a village before it had been finally abandoned to the wilderness.

From the stove-pipe chimney of one of these cabins, the largest, a thin spiral of blue smoke rose and drifted away on the breeze. This was the only sign of human occupancy. The other two dilapidated buildings might readily be imagined to shelter only spiders and snakes. Toward this habitation the smugglers now led their young captive, having first removed the gag from his mouth.

"Now you can shout an' yell all you've a mind to," said Branks, his black eyes twinkling with grim mirth. "Raise the roof, if you want;

there won't be anybody for miles around to hear you."

Hugh made no reply, though his quick temper was at the boiling point. He did not believe a word of the taunt; indeed, on the way over from the island, listening to the men's talk, he had formed the opinion that they were trying to "bluff" him, trying to impress him with the idea that he was helpless and far away from his friends.

The chief thing which puzzled him was:

Why had not the Arrow given chase to the canoe if his friends had caught sight of it, as they must have done? It seemed very unlikely that no one of his party had seen the canoe stealing out across the water. Hugh did not know that Vinton, as soon as the canoe had been sighted, had given orders to go aboard the sloop at once, and that the Arrow had promptly gone in pursuit, but such was the case. Only, by some accident, the sloop had struck shoal water and was now stuck fast on a sandbar, waiting for the tide to lift her afloat.

Meanwhile, approaching the hut, Branks strode forward, paused, and gave a weird, low whistle. He was answered by a similar one, and then the cabin door was opened by a man dressed in a brown flannel hunting-shirt, corduroy trousers, and hip boots rolled down to the knees. He stood shading his eyes with both hands, as if blinded by the sunlight on emerging from the windowless cabin.

"That you, Harry?" he inquired.

"No, it's me---Branks," replied the other man. "Confound your eyesight, Joe! can't you tell an honest poor cuss from a crook?"

He laughed at this merry sally, and Joe Durgan responded with a snort.

"Who you-all got thar?" was his next question, as the others came up. "A kid, eh? What you-all doin' with him?" He blinked at Hugh, much as a sleepy owl blinks at a hunter who has discovered its nest. Then a thought crossed his mind: "O-ho! you're one o' the crowd campin' o'er yonder!"

"Right you are, Mr. Durgan!" declared Hugh with calm politeness. "But why I've been captured and brought here, I don't quite see. I wasn't doing any harm that I know of just prowling around the islands for the fun of it,---nothing more."

"Whar your frien's?"

"Don't know, I'm sure. They'll be over here looking for me in a short while, I guess."

"They will, eh? Don't say so? Well, come in and make yourself to home."

There was something so sinister in this invitation and in the leer which accompanied it, that Hugh felt a qualm of misgiving. He hung back, uncertain what to say next, until cross-eyed Harry gave him a push that sent him staggering through the doorway. The four men then entered the cabin after him, closing the door cautiously.

Inside the hut they were in comparative darkness, the only light

coming in between the chinks in the log walls. An opening which had once served as a window was now boarded across, for some unknown reason. The only furniture in the dwelling consisted of a fine old mahogany table---sadly out of place---three cheap wooden chairs, a cupboard against one wall, and a rude bunk beside it covered with deer-skins. From the cupboard Durgan brought forth a tallow candle set upright on a broken saucer. Lighting this, he placed it on the table.

"Sit o'er thar," he said to Hugh, pointing to the bunk.

Hugh obeyed in silence; and the men then gathered around the table, speaking in tones so low that he could scarcely distinguish the words.

"A strange scene!" he thought, surveying the dingy interior. "Outside, broad daylight; in here, four scoundrels in candle-council, planning deeds of darkness; and I, trussed up like a calf, watching them because there doesn't seem to be anything else I can do. At least, not just now."

He lay down on the bunk, heaving a sigh of weariness.

Hearing the sigh, Joe Durgan glanced up. "If you'll behave like a good lad an' not try to run away," he said, grinning, "I'll untie your hands, and you kin be more comfortable-like. What say?"

"Thanks!" said Hugh; and when Durgan, assuming the word to be a promise of good behavior, unbound the prisoner, Hugh lay down again and feigned sleep. In his heart he was grateful to Durgan for the kindness, but he was no less resolved to take every opportunity for escaping that might arise.

The men continued to speak in low voices, but he heard enough of their discussion to convince him once more that they were arranging to meet at a spot where some sort of a cargo was to be run, the first night when there would be no moon and an off-shore wind. As far as he could learn from the snatches of talk which reached his ears, the spot was to be close to this deserted settlement; before them was a little sandy bay where boats could come ashore, even should there be a heavy sea running outside.

It was further decided that Joe Durgan would show a light in a window of one of the smaller cabins if the coast was clear.

In order to draw off the revenue cutter men from the spot, they proposed also to set afire two small hay ricks which stood near. By so doing, they hoped that the crew of the _Petrel_ would try to extinguish the flames, so as to prevent the fire spreading inland to an extensive grove of valuable cypress trees. As this was sure to be no easy work, the smugglers calculated to run the cargo and carry the goods into the cellar of the cabin.

"Didn't know this hang-out had a cellar," said Branks. "Why don't we-----"

"Shut up!" interrupted the cross-eyed man, holding up a grimy finger which he pointed at Hugh. "Did you say cigar, Branks?" he added craftily in a louder tone, so that Hugh might hear.

"No, I said cel-----"

"I won't sell one, but I'll give you one," again interposed the other.
"Here, take it!" And he added under his breath with an ugly oath,
"You double-dyed fool!"

Hugh lay still, breathing deeply and heartily wishing the men would go away. He began to fear they would spend the day there in hiding. Presently, however, they rose from the table and went out, closing and locking the door behind them. He was a prisoner! He sprang up and rushed over to the door.

"Let me out!" he cried, beating on it with clenched fists. "You crooks'll have to pay for this when you're caught!"

A loud laugh was the only answer.

CHAPTER VI

THE PLIGHT OF THE "_ARROW_"

Hours later, when the _Arrow_ was finally clear of the bar, she veered around and made down the coast, passing the little bay where the canoe had landed. So occupied with the distressing problem of Hugh's disappearance had her crew been,---for not one of the party could believe him drowned,---and so busy in trying to keep the sloop from being pounded to pieces by the waves while stranded, that no one aboard had noticed the canoe on its return trip across the strait.

When sailing order had been restored and Captain Vinton had ceased to rage and swear at the mischance, his one idea was to return to the waters where he knew the _Petrel_ was cruising. Strange to say, he was the only one who guessed that Hugh had fallen into the hands of "coast-prowlers" as he called them,---with adjectives too lurid to mention!---and was, being held captive lest he betray their plans. With this idea in mind, he was determined to bring the revenue cutter to Hugh's rescue; he knew the _Petrel_ could cope with the situation.

By an unlooked-for stroke of fortune, he had not gone very far down the coast before he sighted the cutter, and soon he brought the _Arrow_ within hailing distance. He communicated the news to the officers on board, and a sort of council of war took place immediately. Together, they were not long in forming a plan of reprisal.

It was decided that they should proceed forthwith to a small fortress a few miles southward, where a squad of regulars was stationed. The place was called Fort Leigh, but it scarcely deserved the name, being in reality only a temporary camp located on the site of an old fortification which had been a military headquarters during the Seminole wars. Its nearness to the vicinity in which, according to the _Petrel's_ reliable information, the smugglers were operating was the reason why all decided to go there for assistance.

Lieutenant Driscoll was in command at the fort and he could be counted

on to bring the smugglers to terms.

"Why, it's the most high-handed piece of knavery I've heard of for many a long day!" he exclaimed when the information was brought to him by Vinton and the others. "Those scoundrels must have their nerve, all right, to kidnap a young fellow merely because they didn't want him to tell tales!"

"It's an outrage!" agreed Norton emphatically. "But we've got to get busy right away, Lieutenant. What are we going to do about it?"

"You're right. We must lose no time," replied Driscoll directly. "We'll set out this very hour and invade the haunts of gang. They're not many miles from here, I'm told, hiding in the Everglades. Come with me; I'll have my men ready in half an hour.

"You boys'll go along, of course," he added. "If we have to pitch camp for a night or two, while we're hunting them, we'll need you for signalers or scouts, or for picket duty."

"Picket duty?" echoed Chester.

"Yes, both in camp and along the line of march. I presume you all are willing to serve?"

"Yes, sir; we certainly are!" came the eager chorus. Then, abashed at their lack of military formality, the speakers saluted in more soldierly fashion and stood at attention, awaiting orders.

These were soon given, and after a hurried preparation the whole party---with the exception of three privates who remained at the fort---sallied forth against "Bego's gang." It was decided not to go on board the Petrel for the few miles' trip back along the coast, but to use the Arrow, instead; for the latter would not be so easily recognized by the smugglers.

"No doubt they'll have pickets posted at different points near Durgan's settlement, if, as we suspect, they have a rendezvous there," said Lieutenant Driscoll. "But we'll camp tonight on Palmetto Key, cross over to the shore the first thing to-morrow morning-----"

"Before daylight?"

"Of course; and then we'll land on 'em, hot-and-heavy. I count on their trying to ship a cargo to-morrow night, when there'll be no moon."

"I understand," said Norton. "Will you permit me to make a suggestion, Lieutenant Driscoll?"

"By all means, my dear sir. What is it?"

"Well, the fact that you mentioned their pickets gave me an idea that it would be well if you sent some of us,---say these scouts and myself, for instance,---over to the mainland to-night to act as pickets for you fellows encamped on Palmetto Key."

"An excellent idea! But how do you propose to communicate with us,

in case there should be anything doing to-night?"

"By means of bonfires on the shore, or by wig-wagging with torches."

"I thought you would say that!" exclaimed the lieutenant heartily.

"You mean---you don't approve of that part of the plan?"

Lieutenant Driscoll laughed.

"Oh, not at all! That is, I meant only that I was pleased to discover a civilian who knows anything about signaling."

Amused at the lieutenant's patronizing comment, Norton merely smiled in his good-natured way, though he would fain have answered more sharply. Alec and Billy glanced at him and then at each other, and Alec whispered:

"I guess the lieutenant doesn't know that Boy Scouts are expected to be pretty efficient signalers, does he, Bill?"

To which Billy responded with a snort:

"What he doesn't know would fill a book!"

Fortunately these remarks were not heard by anyone but Dave, for the lieutenant and Norton were arranging a system of signals to be used in case of necessity. Meanwhile, with Vinton at the helm, and the men of Driscoll's company crowded on the deck of the sloop talking with the other scouts, the trim little Arrow was making good speed over the blue water. Billy and Alec walked restlessly up and down the deck, their minds busy with thoughts of Hugh, for whom they felt no little anxiety.

"Wonder what he's doing now?" said Alec.

"I'd give anything to know for sure that he's alive and safe!" was Billy's rueful rejoinder. "I've heard all sorts of stories about what rough-necks like those smugglers do to any one that butts in on their game!"

"You don't believe they'd kill him?"

"No-o, hardly that. But they might----"

"The worst of it is," interrupted Alec, "we don't even know that he's alive. He might have been drowned or-----"

"I won't believe that, Alec! I can't believe it!"

"But you said just now-----"

"I don't know what I said or what I meant!"

"Calm down, Billy, old scout! You're all upset."

"Who wouldn't be, I'd like to know?"

"I don't blame you," said Alec in genuine sympathy. "We all are, you

know; but we've got to keep our heads, and we mustn't despair."

"Yes, you're right, Alec."

There was a brief silence, while the two friends stood by the rail watching the low-lying shore slip past them as the Arrow flew onward. Then Billy spoke again, and his voice was steadier.

"We're going to find Hugh and get him out of danger," he said quietly, "so let's get ready to do our level best."

"I'm with you, Bill! That's the stuff. That's the way to feel! Why, it helps a lot not to lose hope at the start! Come on, let's find out what we're going to do first."

Mark Anderson came over to them just then, tugging at his cap to keep it from being blown away.

"We're almost at Palmetto Key now," he said. "Whew! I'll be glad when we're off this boat on dry land,---and doing something! This cruising-around-while-you-wait gets my nerve! I've had about enough of the salt water, anyway. When we get Hugh back, me for the choo-choo cars home to Santario!"

It was a natural impatience, and some of the boys shared it for the time being. They might change their minds later, they agreed, but at present most of them were of Dave's opinion of the cruise---"Heap much trouble, not much fun." However, the prospect of excitement and a possible encounter with smugglers on the outskirts of the Everglades, cheered them considerably.

Gliding through the channels between islands and keys, and keeping out of sight of watchers on the mainland as far as possible, the Arrow finally cast anchor off Palmetto Key nearly opposite Durgan's cove, and the boat made two trips ashore with Norton and the boys. Dave went with them, of course, for he was thoroughly familiar with that section of the coast. Each was armed with a revolver and a belt of cartridges, but orders were given that there should be no shooting except in self-defense or as a last desperate resort to make "the gang" deliver up their prisoner.

They landed on a little grass-covered peninsula about a hundred yards from the cove, and immediately began to look around them for good station points to observe the movements of "the enemy." The ground in that locality was somewhat higher than the surrounding expanses, and therefore less swampy; but there were numerous little zigzag ditches or watercourses in which the tide rose until it overflowed the banks.

"We'd better not linger here," said Norton.

"When the tide comes in, this little point of land will be under water."

"No, no," said Dave, shaking his head. "Safe here---see!" He pointed to the dry grass blades on which were no traces of brine. "You stay here. Me and Billy go get canoe."

"Canoe? Where can you get one?"

Again Dave pointed, this time to a group of three ramshackle cabins

just visible through the bushes. In one of those cabins Hugh was even then a prisoner. Had Dave or Billy known this, they would not have hesitated to swim to the place, if need be to say nothing of the difficulty of going there and "borrowing" a canoe, in which they all could approach the smugglers' headquarters.

Dave explained that the cabins on the cove were called "Durgan's settlement," and that the place bore a bad reputation. He added that to his certain knowledge the revenue men had intended for some time past to raid the place, and that they had waited only for more proof that the smugglers foregathered there.

Having assured the others that he and Billy would soon return with some kind of a canoe or boat, Dave set forth, accompanied by Hugh's chum. The others, separating, took up their positions where they were concealed by the long grass, but where they had a good view of the islands and straits, the cove, and the three cabins.

They were now pickets on duty.

CHAPTER VII

A GATHERING OF THE CLAN

"If there are any of the gang around here, where on earth are they?"

The question came in a whisper from Billy, as he and the Seminole pursued their way cautiously along the edge of a watercourse, in the direction of the cabins. Bending forward, sometimes crawling on hands and knees, they advanced---an inch at every step, it seemed to impatient Billy.

"Do you think they're hiding near here?" he asked, and Dave shook his turbaned head.

"Gone 'way," was his answer. "Boat come back to-night, mebbe so."

"Boat? What boat?"

"_Esperanza_."

"Oh! Then you think they'll try to leave this part of the coast soon?"

"Dunno. Wait. We see, we tell _Petrel_."

There was nothing else to do, so Billy curbed his eagerness to learn the present whereabouts of the smugglers and crawled forward in silence. Once he drew back with a gasp of horror as a large moccasin snake darted across his path; but seeing the loathsome creature glide away to a safe distance, he went on, following the guide. Nevertheless, a chill ran down his spine when he thought how narrowly he had escaped stumbling full tilt upon the reptile, which, unlike the rattlesnake, never gives warning of its presence.

When they had traversed the stretch of marsh between the peninsula

and the cove, alternately walking on soft springy ground above a bed of coralline limestone and wading knee-deep along the watercourse, they emerged upon the left bank of the cove. The two smaller cabins were not more than twenty paces distant, and between them was a plank bridge rudely built in the form of a trestle. Dave and Billy approached this bridge.

Suddenly they stopped short and crouched in the high grass. Plainly to their ears came the shrill barking of a dog.

Dave expressed his feelings in one round oath, which, being uttered in his native dialect, sounded to Billy "Like gargling the throat."

It needed no expletives to inform Billy that the dog's appearance on the scene of action was certain to cause trouble.

"Ketch um dog, choke um!" said Dave, looking about him to see if the barking had brought anyone to the place.

"Where is the cur?" Billy asked.

"Don't see um," replied the Seminole. He straightened up until his head was above the top of the grass. "A-ah!" he exclaimed in a guttural tone. "Man in sailboat yonder."

Impulsively Billy scrambled to a kneeling position, and his gaze followed Dave's. The two spies then beheld the figure of a man seated in the stern of a dug-out canoe that carried a mast and sail and was coming around the bend of a stream.

"If he sees us-----" began Billy.

"S-s-sh!" Dave interrupted warningly. "Wait, see where he go."

"Is the dog barking at us or at him? What d'you think, Dave?"

"At us," was the answer. "Man come, let dog loose,---we better go back! Incah!"

"No," said Billy firmly. "Dog or no dog, I'm not going back till I've found out where they've hidden Hugh!"

If Billy had only known that Hugh was locked in that further cabin! If Hugh had only been able to communicate with his friends on picket duty! How much trouble would have been avoided,---yet what an adventure they would have missed!

Dave now explained to Billy that his purpose had been to purloin the sailing canoe, so that the smugglers on shore would be dependent on a boat from the Esperanza to take them and their goods away. This would enable the crew of the Petrel to intercept the smugglers as soon as they landed. But now, with the appearance of this man in the canoe, Dave's plan seemed about to be thwarted.

* * * * *

Meanwhile, what of the others who remained on the peninsula?

More than an hour passed before any one saw a suspicious figure on

the landscape. Then Alec, whose post was farthest removed from the landing place, suddenly caught sight of two men walking along the shore. They were carrying the same battered tin box which he and Billy had found half buried in the sand, many hours ago. Evidently the box was heavy, for they appeared to stagger with its weight.

Alec raised his voice in the weird, low call of the otter. As his patrol was named after that animal, he knew that Chester, also of the Otter patrol, would recognize the signal. In this case it meant "Danger. Look around you."

From a distance, hidden behind a clump of palmettos, Chet responded with the same call twice, in quick succession.

But the men carrying the box heard the calls. They knew it was still too early in the afternoon for otters to be hunting so noisily, and they were surprised, startled, suspicious. To Alec's dismay, they dropped the box, stood still, and stared all around them. Alec lay flat on the ground, trusting that his khaki suit and brown flannel shirt would help him to escape observation. At the same time he dread lest one of the other pickets would be seen too soon.

The two men, after gazing out to sea as if expecting to sight a vessel on the horizon, picked up the box and came on again. Every step brought them nearer Alec, who of course had been told to allow all strangers to pass unchallenged---until to-morrow.

"Hark!" said one of the men, listening. "That's Rover barking!"

"He barks at nothing!" declared the other. "Eet is a fool dawg, zat Rover! I know heem, yes."

"You haven't as much sense as that 'fool dawg,' Max!" retorted the first speaker, who was none other than the swarthy ruffian, Harry Mole. "Somethin's going on over there at the settlement or the dog wouldn't bark. Come on, hurry; Branks may need us."

So saying, he and his companion passed by, and Alec, who had heard every word, breathed a sigh of relief. He wished the two men were not going in the same direction Dave and Billy had taken; but he felt sure that the latter could give a good account of themselves if discovered in hiding.

"But that would upset the whole scheme," he reflected. "Perhaps I'd better sneak around, ahead of those two rascals, and warn Dave and Billy to lie low? Or shall I---no, I've been stationed here, and it's up to me to stick to this post."

As he watched the two men stumbling on over the uneven ground, he wondered with a little thrill of apprehension whether they would run across any of the other pickets, or even meet Billy and Dave returning from their quest.

However, no such undesired event came to pass, and the two smugglers finally disappeared behind a row of trees covered with vines.

After that, the watchful young pickets waited in silence, with only a low-spoken word now and then as they paced back and forth under cover to emphasize the stillness. An hour passed,---another hour,---the sun

began its slow descent into the broad bosom of the ocean. Long before this, the _Arrow_ had slipped away a little farther up along the coast, so that she would be out of sight behind one of the numerous islands in case the _Esperanza_ drew near Durgan's cove.

Once the dog's barking sounded louder, and nearer, but after a minute or two it ceased, and silence reigned over all.

"What's become of Dave and Billy?" wondered Chester.

The same question was troubling the minds of Roy Norton and Mark Anderson, in their respective station-points; but there seemed to be no answer to it at present.

Twilight crept upon them apace, then deepened into the shadows of night. As they had arranged, they left their posts and assembled at the place chosen for their landing. After hours of more-or-less solitary watching, it seemed good to be together in council, to eat their simple supper, and to compare notes.

In the midst of their evening meal, the faint purring of a motorboat's engine reached their ears, and after a few minutes a boat with two figures in it was seen approaching them, gliding almost noiselessly along one of the waterways. The occupants of the boat were Billy Worth and Dave. Reaching the place, they stopped the engine, ran the boat's nose into the soft bank, and sprang ashore.

"Where---how----did you get it?" asked Norton in surprise.

"The boat? Oh, we just borrowed it from Joe Durgan and his friends!" Billy declared. "We saw the boat tied to a little trestle over there at the deserted settlement, and when we saw Durgan and two other men go into one of the cabins, we sneaked up quickly and took the boat from them without asking permission and got away with it!"

"Didn't they see you, or hear the engine?"

"No," answered Billy.

"That's strange! Are you sure?"

"There were no windows in the cabin, that we could see," explained Billy, "and when they got inside, they made a lot of noise."

"Gee! won't they be wild when they find their boat gone!" said Mark.

"They may think it slipped its moorings and drifted away on the tide. At least, that's what Dave says."

The Seminole grinned. "Anyhow, they look for boat soon," he said. "Something doin' tonight, you bet!"

Alec had risen and was standing erect, his face turned toward the ocean.

"What are you staring at?" queried Chester. "See any stars?"

"There's just one," replied young Sands, pointing southwest. "Mighty low down---there! Now it's out."

"No, it isn't. I see it!"

"So do I!" exclaimed Billy and Norton.

"There it is again!"

"What a queer star!"

"Perhaps it's a lighthouse. Captain Vinton said that there is one somewhere near this locality."

The sky was cloudy; there was no moon. Overhead, a few large stars glittered brilliantly, but the seeming star at which they were gazing was unlike any of those celestial lights. It steadily grew larger, yellower. Finally two lower gleams appeared, and then all three vanished, as if they had been snuffed out.

"What is it?" asked Norton, turning to Dave.

But the Seminole guide apparently did not hear the question. He was staring in the direction of the three cabins, whence arose in the murky darkness a shower of sparks, then one---two----three shooting green stars.

"Look!" he exclaimed hoarsely.

"By Jove! a Roman candle!" ejaculated Norton. "It's a signal!"

"No star out to sea," Dave said. "No star, but um boat."

"Boat? You mean-----"

"_Esperanza_! She come here to-night."

CHAPTER VIII

THE BLAZING BEACON

Had it been daylight, the boy scouts on picket duty would have seen the same long, low, gray craft something like a built-for-speed tug boat, which had surprised Captain Vinton when it first appeared among the Keys, now coming to anchor outside Durgan's Cove, in the darkness.

As it was, however, they could see nothing after the _Esperanza's_ lights went out; but, waiting impatiently, they presently heard the dip of oars, the faint rattle and squeaking of row-locks, and then a low whistle which seemed to come out of the quiet that brooded over the ocean.

"It's a boat from the _Esperanza_!" muttered Norton. "One of us had better steal back to the camp, and see what our friends are doing. Dave, you-----"

"Oh, let me go!" interposed Alec. "I can run the motor boat over to our camp and bring the soldiers here in about twenty minutes---or

less."

"My dear boy, those fellows out there who are coming ashore would be sure to hear a motor boat," declared Norton. "Even with a muffler on, the sound would reach them."

"But it's the only boat we have, .sir," said Mark, "and, when all's said, that's why Billy and Dave took it---to bring the men over sooner than they could tramp across these flats."

"You're right, Mark; but-----"

Again he was interrupted by one of his eager young friends---Chester, this time.

"Perhaps Dave could pole the motor boat over," he suggested.

"Could you, Dave? It's not a large boat by any means."

"Uh-huh, sure!" assented the guide. "But slow work---lose heap time."

"No matter. Anyway, we've got to give those fellows time to land and to get to the cabins before we surround them. Go ahead, Dave; and Alec, you go with him to run the boat back. I guess you know more about a gasoline engine than any of us. Hurry now---and good luck!"

The intrepid young scout needed no urging. Before Dave had found a suitable pole, Alec had taken his place at the stern and was pointing her in the direction of the peninsula on which Lieutenant Driscoll and his men were waiting.

In a few minutes Dave was pushing the light but substantial launch along the waterway, and almost immediately it disappeared from sight, swallowed up in the darkness.

It returned in about half an hour, crowded to the gunwales, carrying the dozen men. In the meantime, a rather startling incident had occurred.

Dave and Alec had been gone only ten minutes or so, when the assembled pickets observed a bright light burst forth from the surrounding gloom and rapidly increase until it assumed the proportions of a large bonfire.

The outlaws were carrying out the first part of their plan, which was to attract the revenue men away from the vicinity of the cabins while they effected a loading of their munitions or other contraband goods upon the _Esperanza's_ boat. They counted on the probability that the revenue men would hasten to put out the fire on the coast---which was quite a little distance from the cabins---and would be unaware of other operations at the same time.

But in this scheme they reckoned without their pursuers; for the crew of the _Petrel_---even now hurrying to the scene of action---had received information of this very ruse, and had decided to ignore it and to make directly for Durgan's Cove.

Not knowing that the _Arrow_ was lying near, or that the dozen men

from the fort, with the scout pickets, were already on the scene, those energetic seamen of the _Petrel_ were bending every effort to reach the smugglers' headquarters on time.

Captain Bego, of the _Esperanza_, however, knew that the _Petrel_ was on his trail, and he was all the more anxious to make "a getaway with the goods."

The bonfire, instead of dying down at last, seemed to rise higher and higher, casting a lurid glow over the marshes and streams, and even upon the dark waters of the ocean. Made of driftwood, bundles of dried saw-grass and withered cypress boughs---industriously piled on by Max, the half-breed, who had been sent there for that very purpose---it blazed merrily, and a shower of sparks swirled around it, veering toward the cabins. To all appearances, the three cabins seemed doomed to take fire; in which case nothing could save them or their contents.

The soldiers from the fort and Dave had disappeared into the darkness of the deeper shadows.

Eager to see the fire and to find out what was going on in that vicinity, Billy, Alec, and Roy Norton crept forth from their hiding place and approached the glowing beacon.

For the most part, they followed the bank of a creek or inlet which, like all its fellows, wound and zig-zagged through the springy turf of the marsh. This particular waterway reflected the glow of the bonfire more brightly than the others, from which fact they deduced that it would be the most direct path.

On getting nearer, the hum of human voices showed them that a number of men had assembled, some of whom were engaged in throwing water over the blaze, others in patrolling the beach. Evidently the bonfire was burning too high and casting too much light to suit their purposes.

"Who are they?" queried Alec in a whisper.

"I don't know," answered Norton as quietly.

"Look!" Billy exclaimed softly. "There are three mulattoes in that bunch over by the dune. And see that tall, skinny, dark man with the oilskin coat over his left arm? That must be Captain Bego."

"He certainly looks like Vinton's descriptions," Norton observed.

"And he's giving orders as if he-----"

"Hark! What's that noise?"

Breathlessly they waited and listened.

After another full minute they again heard the sound---a low rumbling, like distant thunder.

"Geel! it sounds dangerous," said Billy.

"I wish we knew what it was."

"I can make a pretty good guess," Norton added, still whispering.
"It's a-----"

In the middle of his sentence he was interrupted by a shout from one of the mulattos.

"Boat! Boat comin'!" cried the man, running toward the others, who by this time had almost extinguished the bonfire. His announcement was distinctly heard by the three hidden scouts.

"Wonder if he has seen our captured launch or a boat out at sea?" said Alec.

"Boys, he means---the _Petrel_!"

"Oh!" the other two exclaimed dubiously.

"How do you know?" demanded Billy. "How can you tell?"

"It's just a guess on my part," Norton admitted readily; "but before we came ashore today, Vinton told me that he wouldn't be at all surprised if the _Petrel_ came cruising back this way by evening; and so, when that fellow came running up with the news, my first thought was that the _Petrel_ was not far off."

"But where are the soldiers all this while?" asked Alec. "Why haven't they followed us here?"

"They may have gone to the cabins, instead," replied Norton.

"Perhaps Dave has guided them to the bonfire by another way, and they're just waiting to make an attack when that fire-raising gang start toward the cabins."

"I guess you're right, Billy. Come on, let's get nearer."

With one accord, the three moved forward.

CHAPTER IX

DEEDS OF DARKNESS

As yet, neither the soldiers nor the revenue men had appeared on the scene. In spite of his shrewd guess, Norton began to believe that the smugglers, having come to the conclusion that their bonfire was not necessary, after all---because they fondly imagined the _Petrel_ was far away down the coast---would waste no more time trying to attract the cutter to that spot, but would proceed boldly, under cover of darkness, to run their goods from the cabins to the _Esperanza_.

Such seemed to be Bego's decision, also; for as Roy, Billy, and Alec drew nearer, they heard the swarthy leader directing most of his men to "shoulder arms and march over to Durgan's headquarters."

Presently the group near the bonfire was diminished by the departure of eight or nine men, who picked their way gingerly over the uneven ground, muttering directions to one another as they went. Billy could hardly restrain his impulse to follow them.

At one time they passed so close to the ambushed pickets that the latter could distinguish the words "after midnight" and "set the boy loose."

"They're talking about Hugh," said Billy to himself, and his heart beat fast with excitement. The words gave him assurance that his chum was alive, which was some comfort.

"I think I'll just have to follow them," he mused a few moments later; and telling Norton and Alec that he would be back very soon, he slipped away, trailing Bego's men, before Norton could prevent him from going.

It would have been better for Billy had he remained in hiding; but he was eager to know how Durgan and his confederates would manage to run their cargo on board the Esperanza, having no motor boat to use; and he was even more eager to find out what had become of Hugh.

Without stopping longer, therefore, in the neighborhood of the bonfire, he hurried away toward the spot at which he had heard the men propose to run the cargo.

He must have crept onward for ten minutes or so, when he heard a pistol fired.

The shot was followed by two or three others in quick succession.

This made him more than ever eager to find out what was happening. He doubled his speed. Fortunately, by mere chance, he had stumbled upon the very stretch of ground which he and Dave had traversed earlier in the day; the trail was fairly good, and he knew just how to proceed.

All this while he had not seen a single person, and he had not been seen by any of the smugglers.

After a few minutes he heard more shots sounding much nearer, then shouts and hoarse yells, mingled with the sharp staccato of pistols and rifles. He felt sure that by this time the soldiers under Lieutenant Driscoll had come up and were having a lively fight with the outlaws, the latter trying to defend their property, and the former to confiscate it.

At any moment he expected to find that the men whom he was following were returning to the beach to join their comrades; but evidently they had received strict orders to go straight to the cabins, for they went on, and he followed them. Now he availed himself of all the knowledge of stalking and trailing which he had gained in scoutcraft games at Pioneer Camp.

Which party, the soldiers or the smugglers, would succeed in their object seemed doubtful. The darkness was intense, and though Billy pictured the whole scene, as yet he could not see anything except an occasional spurt of flame as a revolver or rifle spat viciously.

Even the forms of the men he was following had disappeared from view. This did not discourage him, for he was used to following a trail in the dark.

Still he stumbled onward, forgetting that bullets flying about were no respecters of persons.

At last he reached the top of a low mound whence he could see dimly a number of dark figures scurrying hither and thither. From their actions and from the babel of shouts, commands, oaths and shooting that came from the little clearing around the huts, he judged that they were engaged in a determined struggle.

That the soldiers were having the best of it, he had no doubt. It appeared to him that they had captured not only part of the intended cargo but also some of Bego's men; while others, bolder villains, seemed to be trying to rescue their comrades.

In his rejoicing over this turn of affairs, he gave a yell of triumph---and just at that moment a bullet whizzed over his shoulder, almost searing his neck! The yell quavered on his lips, and he dropped down on his knees, which were trembling and knocking together.

"Whew! that came pretty close to yours truly!" said Billy, speaking aloud as if he expected some one to hear him. "That's what might be called being 'under fire,' and I don't like the sensation---not by a long shot!"

Even in moments of danger or of distress, Billy managed to see the funny side of circumstances. He grinned now at his little joke, but all the while he was intently scanning the scene before him and wondering if he would be drawn into taking part in it. Also, he was anxious to know where his friends were at that moment. Would they join in the fray?

Suddenly his eager gaze was shifted to a new quarter. He stared, wide-eyed and breathless.

Out of the night, running like mad along the shore and across the acres of sand and clay and mud, came a body of men armed with rifles. They were making directly toward the scene of conflict as fast as they could find their difficult way.

"Who are they? Where have they come from?" Billy wondered.

And then, like a flash, he understood. "Oh!" he gasped. "Oh, I know, I know now! They're the men from the _Petrel_! Marines, I guess---if that's what you call 'em."

It was true; the new arrivals were the Revenue Service men, and as it chanced, they had come just in the nick of time. For Joe Durgan, Branks, Harry Mole, Max, the villainous half-breed, and others at the huts, were being reinforced by Bego's followers who had hurried up from the bonfire; and they were beating back the soldiers, whom they now outnumbered.

Suddenly Billy heard another yell, a wild, eerie, shrill call, and Dave, leading Norton and the Boy Scouts, sprang from their boat which had crept up to the farther side of the clearing, and dashed

forward to meet the crew of the _Petrel_.

Recognizing them even in the darkness---which now began to be relieved by stray gleams of moonlight struggling out of the clouds---the revenue men turned to the left under Dave's guidance, and took a short-cut, coming up in the rear of the battle.

Alone on the little mound, Billy realized that he was separated from his reunited scout friends and their allies by a small mob of desperately fighting men. He was cut off from the rest by reason of Dave's having steered the boat along a watercourse of which he, Billy, knew nothing; in fact, he had lost his bearings and knew not in which direction the improvised camp lay.

However, the conflict before him absorbed his thoughts and left him no time to worry about his own predicament. He was still wondering how the revenue men had happened to arrive at a critical time.

The explanation was as follows:

Unknown to Billy or to any of his friends, the _Petrel_ had steamed full speed to Palmetto Key; and Captain Vinton, sighting the cutter from the deck of the concealed _Arrow_, had signaled to her captain, telling him just where to land his men. This accounted for their unexpected arrival, which soon turned the tide of battle in their favor.

Creeping forward, Billy saw the smugglers fleeing in all directions, after setting fire to the two smaller cabins. As they ran, they exchanged shots with the soldiers and the revenue men; but, owing to the gloom, these shots failed to take much effect, beyond slightly wounding their captors. Fired on in turn, they ran toward the beach, past their smouldering bonfire, near which their boat was drawn up on the sands waiting to take them back to the _Esperanza_.

The light of the blazing huts now illumined the scene, and in the glow, Norton caught sight of Billy running toward them. He hailed the lad with a shout:

"Hi! Hurry up, Billy! Where have you been all this time?"

"Watching the fight!" shouted Billy, whose voice sounded doleful. "Wishing I could butt into it earlier! Come on, come on! We're chasing 'em!"

"Hold on!" Norton exclaimed loudly. "We've had about enough of this. Here we'll stay, my boy, and let our better-armed friends capture the gang. When they get to their boat it will be a case of 'first come, first served' to get away. Most of them'll be caught and captured. Meanwhile, it's up to us to find Hugh. He must be in that largest shanty there, unless-----"

"Come on!" yelled Billy, seeing his brother scouts already commencing the search.

He dashed over to the remaining shanty and flung himself against the door.

"Hugh, Hugh!" he called. "Are you in there?"

No answer---only the roaring and crackling of the flames as they devoured the old walls and crumbling roof of the nearby abandoned dwellings.

"Hugh!" shouted Alec and Chester, banging on the door, while Mark ran around the cabin, looking in vain for a window or other means of entrance.

The door gave way and the three scouts rushed in, followed by Norton.

Dave stood in the doorway, his lanky form with the red glare of the fire behind it casting a grotesque shadow on the interior wall of the cabin. He remained there on guard, lest any of the smugglers should return.

Alec struck a match. Its sputtering flame lighted the single room, dispelling the shadows for a brief moment. Anxiously they all peered around the dingy shanty.

"Hugh, where are you?" said Billy in a hoarse whisper. "Are you here? Can't you speak?"

Still no answer.

Then Alec's match went out.

"Have you another match?" asked Norton.

Like Billy's, his voice was husky. A vague dread seemed to seize him, weighing down upon him like a tangible thing.

"Yes," said Alec. "Here's one more---the last."

Again he struck a light and a hasty search was made. Every moment was precious.

In vain. The cabin was empty.

CHAPTER X

THE END OF THE RAID

At the beginning of the fight, Hugh awakened from a troubled sleep into which he had fallen, wearied with fruitless efforts to break the lock of the door. One thought was ever in his mind, even in his dream: to escape. For this purpose he had clawed away a wide chink in the log walls, he had even dug under the threshold---without avail.

Nevertheless, he was glad to be active and thankful that he had been unbound before his captors went away, leaving him a prisoner in the shanty until they were ready to release him. Joe Durgan had even been considerate enough to leave a half loaf of bread and a glass of beer on the table; but Hugh declined these delicacies.

All during the fight he crouched by the locked door, listening in alternate hope and dread of the outcome, now and then raising his voice amid the din and confusion outside. It was perhaps not strange that none of his friends heard him, for his shouts only mingled with those of the smugglers and were lost in the general clamor.

But they were heard by one man, who, though not exactly a friend, was yet an amiable enemy.

In the midst of the conflict, when the Revenue Service men had arrived to turn the tide of fortune, the door was quickly opened and shut, and a man stood in the room, panting hard.

Hugh sprang to his feet, ready for any new emergency.

"What are you-all doin' thar, youngster?" said a voice in the darkness, a deep voice which Hugh recognized as Durgan's.

"Trying to get out, of course," he replied defiantly, every nerve in his young body tingling with excitement. "What did you expect me to do, Durgan?"

"Eh? Oh, nothin'. Thought you might ha' gone to sleep like a good little boy."

The man's harsh laugh sounded hollow and unpleasant. Hugh shuddered.

"I was asleep," he said, "but when----"

"Real unkind o' your friends to wake you up, eh?" interrupted Durgan. His hand stole behind him. With a quick turn he opened the door, and admitted some one. "Come in, Harry," he said. "The kid's here, all right. What did I tell you?"

"That so?" growled Harry Mole. "Well, we know who he is now. Somebody tipped off the officers about the run we was goin' to make to-night; and since it wasn't this kid, it must-a been one of his bunch. Shall we heave him into the stream, Joe, or leave him here?"

"Not on your life!" Durgan replied promptly. "He's caught on to too much about us while he's been here, and he can tell those ginks a lot that we don't want 'em to know. So's long as we kin get out o' here alive, we'd better take him along."

"He spoiled our plans to-night. He deserves to be knocked on the head an' thrown out to the 'gators!"

"Spoilt our plans, you bet! But he'll get his, by-and-by. Come, take him and hustle away. Cripes! hear them bullets smashin' into the wall!"

"Remember, kid," said Mole, "if you shout or let out a word, we'll stick a knife between yer slats."

From the fierce way in which Mole uttered this threat, Hugh did not doubt he would do as he said. However, he did not yield without a silent struggle, though he was soon overpowered by the two burly

ruffians. Each taking him by an arm, they led him outside and dragged him over a stretch of bumpy ground, stumbling along in the semi-darkness.

Scarcely five minutes after they left the hut and the two burning shanties behind them, Hugh's friends burst into the empty cabin---too late to rescue him.

But these young, well-trained scouts lost no time in searching the place. Separating into pairs---Norton and Mark, Alec and Chester, with Billy and Dave in advance, following Durgan's and Mole's trail---they formed a line of communication between the cabin and the site of the bonfire, hoping that by thus keeping a picket line they might catch sight of Hugh or his captors beating a hasty retreat toward the shore.

Meanwhile, Durgan and Mole with Hugh between them walked very fast indeed. Had they not supported Hugh, he should have fallen several times; for, young and strong as he was, he was almost worn out with the rough treatment he had undergone. Every minute he thought they would stop, and, making an end of their senseless threats, release him and run. But they evidently had no intention of doing so.

Hugh tried to ascertain in what direction they were leading him, but he soon gave this up as useless. He was on the verge of despair, when suddenly out of the gloom came a startlingly familiar call---the call of the Wolf patrol.

"_Wow-ow-ooo-oooo-hoo-Hugh!_"

It sounded not far away, on his left, and the lad's heart bounded with joy. He knew that that call could come from none other than Billy Worth, and Billy must therefore be near at hand, ready to lead his comrades to Hugh's rescue.

For one wild moment he was tempted to answer the call---then discretion prevailed, and he kept silence.

Naturally, the two men also were startled at the sound. Mole gave Hugh a prod in the shoulder with the point of a knife and Durgan swore volubly.

"None o' that thar, Harry!" he warned. "Don't hurt the kid. If you do, we'll-----"

"Aw, shut up!" retorted the other, and they hurried on.

By great effort Hugh said nothing, asked no questions, did not even answer the wolf-call. Instinct told him it would be better to do as his captors had ordered, and now he pretended to feel resigned to his fate---knowing that help was forthcoming.

As they went on, sounds of a lively scuffle reached his ears, and he could also hear the dull booming of surf, by which he knew that he could be at no great distance from the shore. Behind him, evidently following, again sounded the wolf-call, giving him courage and renewed hope.

Durgan turned to him angrily.

"What made you jump when you heard that thar howl?" he demanded.

"Nothing. Where---where are we going?" Hugh ventured to ask, at length, forgetting that he was not to utter a word of protest. "I'm dog-tired, and my knee aches---a sprain, I guess."

"You lie!" retorted Mole fiercely, and he struck Hugh across the mouth.

"You'll soon have time enough to rest yourself, youngster," added Durgan in a kinder tone. "You're in luck that things ain't no worse for you."

But Hugh scarcely heard; at any rate, he paid no heed. Boiling with rage at the insult, he gave one shout: "Billy! This way, scouts!" and struggling desperately, he managed to slip from his captors' grasp.

In another minute he had whirled around and was running as fast as he could put foot to the ground.

To his surprise, Mole and Durgan did not chase him. When he paused for an instant to rub his bruised knee and to look around, he dimly saw them in the distance running to a spot where a crowd of men were pushing and struggling to get into a boat.

Presently he discerned a larger body of men hastening to the place, and in the dim light of the moon he saw that they were soldiers and seamen.

While he stood lost in wonderment, Uncertain where to go, he heard footsteps and familiar voices near. He gave the call of his old patrol, and Billy answered it immediately.

The next minute, Billy rushed into view, and the two chums were reunited in a vigorous bear-hug of sheer, silent rejoicing. They found words at last.

"Billy, old scout, I was beginning to think I might never see you again!"

"You were? Why, Hugh, I'd have looked for you from here to Yucatan and back again, twenty times over, by sea and land, before I'd give up!" cried Billy, forgetting in his enthusiasm how near he had come to the verge of despair.

"I'm dying to know whatever happened to you," he added. "But here come the rest of the bunch; so you'll have to tell all of us your story."

"It's soon told," said Hugh; and after joyful greetings had been exchanged, he told them all that had happened to him since his unlucky morning stroll to the hut on the far-away beach.

In their turn, they related the events of their search for him, and described the fight around the cabin in which he had so lately been a prisoner.

"And there's the end of the fight now," said Norton, pointing to the group of combatants and to a boat manned by five oarsmen who were putting out to sea. "Look! There they go!---all of them who managed to escape No! By Jove, the boat's coming back to shore! I suppose Uncle Sam's men threatened to shoot the rascals if they didn't come back."

"Serves 'em right!" said Chester.

"Let's go over there and watch proceedings," urged Alec.

"I second the motion!" Hugh declared, eager to see the latest developments.

So without further discussion, they hurried over to the place, and were in time to witness the capture of Bego and his gang.

* * * * *

By morning, a sullen company of prisoners was put aboard the _Petrel_ and conveyed southward to Key West for trial.

The interval between their capture and the departure of the revenue cutter was spent in putting out the fire near Durgan's cove, all that remained of the three adjoining shanties being a heap of charred logs and wind-swept ashes. Durgan's motor boat was fastened by means of a long cable to the aft rail of the _Arrow_, which was commissioned to tow it to a wharf at Charlotte Harbor, where it would be delivered to a brother of the smuggler. This brother, a thoroughly honest fisherman, was well known to Captain Vinton.

Bego's ship, the _Esperanza_, remained at anchor off the cove. Arrangements were made for its safe delivery at Charlotte Harbor, as soon as a suitable crew could be sent to convey it to that haven.

Hoping that his presence might not be required at the trial, though fully resigned to the probability of having to attend it, Hugh wrote out and signed a full statement of his experiences with the outlaws.

This paper was also signed by Norton, Captain Vinton, and Lieutenant Driscoll, as testifying their belief in its veracity. The captain of the _Petrel_ undertook to deliver it to the proper authorities, and it was eventually accepted in lieu of Hugh's personal testimony.

Having attended to these matters, the crew of the _Arrow_ went aboard about noon. The day was perfect for the return voyage, a fair breeze blew against her weather-stained sails, and the ocean was as blue as sapphire.

The entire party was glad to be on the sloop's clean decks once more; even Dave seemed happy and relieved when Durgan's Cove and its outlying shores faded into a velvety green blur along the horizon. So they left the scene of their adventures, and glided swiftly away "on the home stretch," as Chester called it, under cloudless skies.

CHAPTER XI

ABOARD THE "_ARROW_"

It was not until the second day of the voyage back toward Santarion that Hugh felt quite himself again. The nervous strain of his experiences as a captive would have been enough to exhaust him, and in addition he had suffered real buffeting and hardship at the hands of his captors.

Dave stretched a hammock for him on deck at the captain's orders, and there Hugh spent nearly the entire first day of the homeward trip.

The other boys and Norton diverted his few waking hours with stories and riddles and simple games, and Captain Vinton, himself, contributed more than one tale from his store of recollections.

"Tell you what, boys," the old captain said as he concluded one of his yarns, "we fellows these days meet with a few excitin' experiences now and then, but to get some idea of what lively times on the water may be, go back to John Paul Jones and his day, or even to the sea fights of '62."

"Have you read much of the history of those days, captain?" inquired Roy Norton interestedly, while the boys leaned forward to hear the reply.

"Son," said Captain Vinton in answer, turning to Alec Sands, his blue eyes alight with a keen expression, "Son, go to my cabin and bring me an old, worn book from the shelf there: 'Famous American Naval Commanders,' it is called."

Until Alec's return, the captain looked out over the water with far-seeing eyes, and the others, watching him, wondered what stirring scenes his imagination was picturing to him just then.

He glanced up as Alec handed him the volume of naval history and grasped it with the firm gentleness of a true book lover. He turned it over thoughtfully, straightened its sagging covers, opened and closed it several times, and finally spoke:

"That's the answer to yer question, Norton," he said. "And that's only one of about a dozen histories I've got on my old shelf. When times is dull or I'm waitin' fer a party who've gone into the Everglades, or when the _Arrow_ is lyin' off shore in a dead calm, then I start in at the first page of the book that happens ter be on the end of the shelf, and I live over the old days of the privateers, when it meant somethin' to sail the seas."

"Who is your _biggest_ hero?" asked Mark as the captain paused.

The old man smiled humorously before he answered.

"Wal', my biggest hero," he said, "is the littlest hero on record as a sea-fighter, I guess. Like Napoleon Bonaparte, his bigness was not in his body but in his mind. And that's Paul Jones of the _Bonhomme Richard_."

As the captain pronounced the name of his hero, he struck his worn

book a resounding slap, and his jaws clicked in emphasis of his statement.

"Can't you tell us something about him?" asked Chester, fascinated by the old captain's earnestness.

"That's the ticket---I mean, please do," endorsed Billy heartily.

"No, I can't do that," was the deliberate reply, as the captain rose to relieve Dave at the tiller, "but you can all borry the book and read the historian's account of the battle between the _Serapis_ and the _Bonhomme Richard_. I git so excited when I read that, I hey ter go put my head in a pail o' water to cool it off! Fact! You know that's whar the cap'n of the _Serapis_ calls out: 'Hev ye struck?' And John Paul Jones shouts back: 'Struck! I am just beginnin' ter fight!'"

As Captain Vinton straightened his rounded shoulders and delivered this emphatic quotation, he shook his fist at an imaginary enemy and then brought it down hard on the railing. Then he grinned sheepishly.

"You see how 'tis," he said, laughing at himself as he moved away. "Guess I'll hev ter stop talkin' or go fer that pail o' water!"

The boys, left to themselves, discussed the theme that the captain's words had suggested, and were rather ashamed to see how vague their knowledge of the famous battle was. So, at Alec's suggestion, Norton agreed to read the account of the fight as given in the captain's book; and grouped about Hugh's hammock, the boys listened eagerly.

"That makes our experiences on picket duty seem tame in comparison," said Alec, commenting on the story when Norton had closed the book.

"We were not all on the firing line," replied the young man, smiling. "I'll venture to say that Hugh did not find his share at all tame."

Hugh smiled and nodded ruefully as his mind flew back to his dangerous situation as a captive of the desperate filibusters, and he felt that he could understand a little of what it meant to be in the thick of the fight.

"Me, too," exclaimed Billy, shuddering at a sudden recollection. "I haven't told you fellows that I came near having my ear shot off, that time the other night when I was separated from the rest of you for a while. Excuse me from anything nearer real battle fire than that!"

Just at that moment, a soft, regular thump-thump-thump from the deck behind Hugh's hammock made all the boys turn quickly.

There stood Dave, skillfully flinging gayly colored hoops over a post at some distance from him.

"Oh, ho! A game of ring-toss, is it?" cried Chester, rising eagerly. "Say, boys, let's form rival teams and have a tournament."

"Good!" echoed Billy. "The Pickets versus the Pirates!"

"That sounds exciting!" called Hugh, sitting up in the hammock. "Count me in on that, boys. Guess I can get up long enough to take my turn now and then."

"Let Dave and Mr. Norton choose sides," suggested Alec, "Dave for the Pirates and Mr. Norton for the Pickets."

"Hurrah!" cried Mark. "On with the game!"

In less time than it takes to tell it, Dave, grinning broadly at his prominence, and Norton, entering into the contest with his usual spirit of enthusiasm, had chosen sides and a list was hastily written and posted on the cabin wall as follows:

Pirates vs Pickets

Dave	Norton
------	--------

Hugh	Billy
------	-------

Chester	Alec
---------	------

Mark	Captain Vinton
------	----------------

"Oh, but I can't play!" protested the captain. "I've got my hands full with the _Arrow_!"

"We'll take turns and spell you at the helm," returned Norton. "All hands on board are enlisted in this fight."

Pleased at his insistence, the old captain yielded the wheel whenever it came his turn to toss, and he proved to be an adept at the game, to everybody's delight.

Norton and Dave had agreed that the contest should consist of five complete rounds, giving just twenty opportunities to each side. Only the total successful tosses would determine the winning score, but the best individual records would decide who should be the team captains in subsequent games.

The fun of the thing entered into every one of the contestants, yet not one of them failed to put his best efforts into the game.

"Now we'll see some accurate shooting," called Billy as Hugh took the rings for his fourth turn.

"No fair trying to rattle me," returned Hugh, laughing good-naturedly. "I'm still the interesting invalid."

"Hush!" whispered the irrepressible Billy quite audibly. "Don't say a word, boys! It might shake his nerve, you know, and he might suffer a relapse!"

"You teaser!" commented Hugh, beginning his play.

One after another, Hugh steadily tossed the rings over the post.

"Pshaw! You can't disturb him," ejaculated Alec. "He is as calm

as the sea is just now."

"Five!" counted Chester softly. "Six! You put every one over this time, Hugh. Billy's jollying just inspired you!"

"And now it is his turn," said Hugh, returning to his hammock. "Now we shall see something!"

Billy flushed a little, grinned, set his teeth, poised his body firmly, and then swung into the position of the famous "disk thrower."

Thump! The first ring struck the deck a good foot beyond the post, rebounded, and rolled rapidly toward the railing.

Roy Norton stopped it with his foot and called, "Steady, Billy! Take your time."

Thump! The second ring, tossed more cautiously, dropped at least six inches in front of the goal.

Thump! Thump! Thump! Three more landed in quick succession, draping themselves gracefully against the standard that upheld the post.

"One more, Billy. Make this one count," coached his captain urgently.

By this time, Billy's face was scarlet and his hand shaking. He took a long breath, fixed his eye on the top of the slender post, and tossed the ring desperately. It fell well to the right of the goal and rolled up against Dave's feet.

Dave quickly stooped to pick it up, trying to hide the wide smile that parted his lips.

Billy's scout friends made no attempt to be so polite. Pickets and Pirates alike, they burst into a roar of laughter.

Captain Vinton, his weather-beaten face wrinkled into a dozen humorous lines, called out:

"Billy, words is sometimes like a boomerang---they fly back and ketch ye, ef ye don't watch out!"

And so the contest progressed; now luck favored the Pirates, and again Captain Vinton's skill brought up the uncertain score of the Pickets.

At the end of the final round, however, Dave's team had a clean balance of ten counts over the combined records of the Pickets, the winners showing a total of ninety-five successful throws out of a possible one hundred and twenty.

Captain Vinton had the best individual score, securing twenty-six out of a possible thirty points, while Hugh, thanks perhaps to Billy's inspiring comments, stood next with a record of twenty-four.

The sun was setting redly over an almost calm sea as the games were finished. Dave, beaming at the success of his team, vanished without urging and soon the welcome odors of supper cooking were wafted to the eager nostrils of the hungry boys.

That evening they all gathered around the old captain as he sat at the helm and guided the lazily-moving craft, begging him for another tale from his own reminiscences or from his favorite history.

"Wal', boys," agreed the captain at length, "I'll tell you about one sea fight that I almost witnessed myself. Fact is, I was a little too young to be thar, but my father was mighty nigh bein' in the thick of it, and I've heard him tell the tale a hundred times ef I hev once.

"It was in March, '62," the captain resumed after a little pause. "The North was consid'rably stirred up over rumors of how the Confederates hed raised the _Merrimac_ and made out of her a terrible ironclad vessel, warranted to resist all ord'nary attacks. Then these rumors were followed by news of the destruction of two sailin' frigates, the _Cumberland_ and the _Congress_.

"The Union forces were pretty uneasy when they heard what hed happened off Hampton Roads, but they were all pinnin' their faith to a little new ironclad just built on Long Island and already speedin' south ter meet the _Merrimac_. My old dad, servin' on the _Roanoke_, was lucky enough to see both them craft:---the big, clumsy _Merrimac_, all covered with railroad iron and smeared with grease, and the nifty little _Monitor_, that they said looked like 'a cheese box on a raft'!

"Wal', 'course you boys hev all read about what happened when the little fellow steamed out ter meet the big fellow, the day after the frigates were destroyed.

"Fer four hours, Dad said, the two ironclads jest pestered each other with hot fire, but the shot and shell slid off them like water from a duck's back. The little _Monitor_ darted around the big _Merrimac_ like a bee buzzin' round a boy that had plagued it.

"Thar wa'n't no great harm done---except that Lieutenant Worden, who was in command of the Monitor, got hurt by the bits of a shell that drove into his face---but the little ironclad hed proved two things. Fust, that she could hold her own; and next that the day of wooden vessels in naval warfare was over.

"As you boys know, warships now-a-days are all ironclad. Folks hey called 'em 'indestructible,' but I guess thar ain't no sech word allowable any more. Between the new explosives and the airships---wal', they say we ain't heard the last word yet, by a long shot!"

The old captain rose as he spoke, shaking his head thoughtfully and gazing out over the sea and into the sky.

"Wal', boys, off to yer bunks now! We'll hev a fairly calm night, but thar'll be wet decks to-morrow!"

CHAPTER XII

A SURPRISING ADVENTURE

The captain's prophecy was literally fulfilled, and the boys had no opportunity for fairweather games the next day. Instead, clad in oilskins, they lounged about the wet decks, watching the captain's skillful handling of the boat, ringing the big fog bell when the atmosphere grew thick, and clinging to the railing when the sloop pitched and tossed restlessly on the heaving sea.

Dave retired as usual in rough weather into sullen silence, coming on deck most reluctantly only when his services were demanded by the captain.

Late in the day, the storm increased to a gale of some little violence, and the captain decided to make for the nearest harbor. He had hoped to reach the home haven that night, but his policy was to meet disappointment rather than to run risks.

"Mebbe I hev a surprise up my sleeve fer you boys," Captain Lem said, his eyes twinkling as he saw their long faces on hearing the news of delay. "Wouldn't mind addin' a little excitement ter the end of the trip, would ye?"

"We're aching for it," returned Billy promptly. "This has been an awfully long day, you know, captain."

"Wal', ef I've got my bearin's all right, we'll spend the evenin' in a right cheerful place. That's all I kin say now, but you boys go collect your belongin's, so's we kin land fer the night ef my calc'lations hold good."

Just as the early darkness of the rainy night shut down over the rolling sea, the boys discovered a gleaming light, high and steady, not far off toward the Florida coast.

"Jimmy!" cried Billy excitedly. "Bet the captain is going to take us to a lighthouse for the night!"

"Can't be your uncle's light, Mark, where we saw the spongers on the way down," commented Chester thoughtfully. "We're too near home for that."

"I have an _idea_---" began Hugh slowly.

"And so have I!" interrupted Alec, glancing at Mark.

At that moment, Roy Norton began to ring the fog bell under the captain's directions.

"Ding! Ding! Ding, ding, ding!" resounded the heavy iron tongue.

There was a pause, and then the signal was repeated. A longer silence followed and again the slow, clear signal was twice repeated.

By this time, the captain had guided his dauntless little vessel into slightly quieter waters, although she still pitched and tossed in a way that would have alarmed a "landlubber."

Then came a new sound, louder than the noise of the pounding waves, deeper than the clang of the iron bell.

"Boom! Boom! Boom, boom, boom!" An answering signal had broken the silence where the steady light shone.

Mark started, as though recognizing the sound.

"Why, that-----" he began bewilderedly, "that is the signal gun at Red Key! Captain, are you signaling to my father?"

"Jest so," Captain Vinton replied. "Keeper Anderson knows my knock on his door!"

"How shall we land?" asked Chester excitedly, as he saw Dave making ready to drop anchor.

At that moment a rocket went streaking up toward heaven and a second later a slender rope fell writhing across the deck, where Roy stood swinging a torch.

"Hurray!" called Hugh, seizing the rope just as Norton, at the captain's orders, also grasped it. "Hurray! It's the breeches buoy!"

It will be recalled by those who followed the adventures of "The Boy Scouts of the Life Saving Crew," that Hugh and Billy, Chester and Alec had been at the Red Key Station on the night of a thrilling rescue. They had accompanied and in a slight way assisted the life-savers on their patrols, at the launching of the life boat, and in the final use of the breeches buoy.

It was most exciting to return to the scene of their memorable experience in this unexpected fashion.

The boys hauled willingly on the rope and soon it was taut, the odd conveyance swinging by the deck railing.

"You go first, Mark. While yer father knows my knock and realizes that I didn't give my danger signal, still he may be a mite anxious to see you, knowin' you was comin' home with me on the _Arrow_."

Obedying the captain's directions and grasping his waterproof bundle of clothes, Mark thrust his legs into the breeches buoy, the signal was given, and the trip through the waves began.

Soon the strange vehicle was back again, and this time Chester, buttoning his oilskins about him closely, was ordered ashore.

In a brief time Hugh, and then Billy, Alec, and Norton had followed the others.

Meanwhile, Captain Vinton, with Dave's help, had made everything shipshape on board the _Arrow_. Then, sending Dave shoreward in the breeches buoy, the captain himself, true to tradition, waited to be the last to leave his ship.

Although they had not encountered a moment of real danger, the boys had been given an experience of actual rescue. When Captain Vinton joined them on shore, they greeted him enthusiastically and then stood back to watch his meeting with Keeper Anderson.

The latter grasped the captain's hand in a hearty grip.

"Good for you, Lem, you old sea-dog!" cried the keeper. "You didn't scare us any and it was great fun for my boy and his friends. Mark has gone in to see his mother---she'll be some surprised---and to tell her to fix up some hot coffee and things for you 'survivors.'"

"Haw! haw! haw!" laughed the old captain. "This was the easiest shipwreck I ever managed to survive! He! he! he!"

In great good nature the two men walked toward the keeper's house, while the boys followed, eagerly renewing their acquaintance with the stalwart men of the life-saving crew.

Roy Norton was an interested observer, and when he, too, had met Mrs. Anderson and Ruth, and heard the story of their first exciting encounter, he no longer wondered at the boys' enthusiasm.

That night the crowd slept, as four of them had before, in hastily arranged shakedown; and when morning dawned, they looked out upon a sea so blue and sparkling they could scarcely realize that it was the gray, angry, heaving expanse of the night before.

The Arrow dipped and rose jauntily on the sapphire water, giving no sign that she, too, had spent a restless night pulling and tugging at her deeply embedded anchor.

After an early breakfast, the four boys said their farewells to Mark and Ruth and their parents, and, with the captain and Norton, went out to the Arrow in boats manned by members of the life-saving crew.

Not many hours later, they reached Alec's home in Santario, and there they found Mr. Sands, waiting a little anxiously for their safe return. He had learned from the morning papers that the previous night's storm had been severe at sea, and he had not known how or where the Arrow might have weathered the gale.

When he had been told of the "rescue" off Red Key Life Saving Station, he exclaimed impatiently, "Why in the name of sense, didn't you telephone me from Red Key? Here I have spent many hours in needless anxiety."

The boys looked at one another in silence.

"It simply never occurred to us that we were back within communicating distance," replied Alec at last. "We haven't seen or heard a telephone since we left home."

"And really, Mr. Sands," said Roy Norton quickly, "when you hear what strange, unusual experiences the boys have had, you will not wonder at their forgetting the convenience of a little, every-day matter like the telephone. For myself, I offer no excuse. I should have been more thoughtful. But I, too, have dropped the customs and responsibilities of home life about as thoroughly as have the boys, I am afraid."

"That is all right, Norton," said Mr. Sands. "I spoke hastily, for my nerves were a little frazzled."

"Now, boys, make yourselves comfortable and clean, and then come out on the veranda and tell me the tale of the exciting trip."

It was an eager quartette of boys who responded to this invitation; and when they finally started to relate their experiences, Mr. Sands found it necessary to hear them in turn in order to get any clear idea of connecting events.

At length, however, he had followed them on their trip south, in imagination; had seen the panting tarpon on the deck of the Arrow; had taken the winding waterways into the Everglades; had encountered the revenue cutter and the filibuster; had watched through a night of adventure with the scouts on picket duty; and had finally swung safely through the dashing waves to the Life Saving Station.

"Well, boys, I little thought when I put you aboard Captain Lem's sloop for a little cruise south that you would see so much variety and excitement. But if you are not sorry, I am not. You are all home again, safe and sound, and none the worse for your experiences. Take it easy, now, for the rest of your stay here and have the best time you can."

This advice the boys were not at all reluctant to follow. For a day or two they lounged about the broad piazzas in hammocks and easy chairs, reading books from Mr. Sands' well stocked library or from Alec's own bookshelf.

On the second evening of this quiet home life, however, Billy's uneasy spirit led him to say:

"Fellow scouts, I move you, sirs, that we take to the road. My hiking muscles are aching for use. We have sailed and paddled and motored. Now I propose, sirs, that we tramp."

"Second the motion!" echoed Chester.

"What do you think of the idea, Alec?" asked Hugh, turning to their young host. "Will your father think we are ungrateful guests if we go off for a day or two so soon after the cruise?"

"We'll plan a trip," replied Alec readily, "and submit the scheme to him to-night. If he has no objections, we will telephone Mark and ask him to join us, and perhaps Norton can go along, too."

Alec's suggestion was carried out, and Mr. Sands not only approved the plan but added interest to it by producing some excellent road maps and proposing a tour of adventure.

"Suppose," said he, "instead of traveling as one company, you divide your forces, three of you taking one route and three another to your night's camping place. Here is a good spot to camp," indicating it on the map, "and I will send the machine there with the essential supplies so that you can 'hike' without being heavily burdened. How does that strike you?"

"As being far better than our first plan," applauded Billy.

The other boys agreed enthusiastically, and the details were promptly

arranged.

Early the next morning, as the arching sky and gray waters began to take on a rosy glow from the approaching sunrise, the automobile shot out of the driveway between the palms and down the shell road in the direction of Red Key, carrying Alec and Chester to meet Mark Anderson.

The whir of the motor drowned the twitterings of the awakening birds, but could not dull the fresh odor of the jasmine, nor the beauty of the flowering vines and dew-wet hedges.

Even Chester was stirred by the "newness" of the whole world.

"Cripes, Alec, as Captain Vinton would say, this morning air and the view are worth crawling out at an unearthly hour to enjoy!" he exclaimed. "That ocean looks about a million miles wide, too; you can't even tell where the sky begins."

"There is Mark!" was Chester's next comment as the machine swung around a curve that had hidden an intersecting road.

"Morning, Mark," called Alec in greeting as the two boys jumped out of the car to join the waiting lad. "Now we're off!"

He turned to the chauffeur, assuring himself that the man understood the directions for reaching their camp with supplies late that afternoon, and then fell into step with the other scouts for their all-day hike. Beneath their feet the broken shells of the road crackled, overhead the towering palms waved, near the roadside the stiff grass bent noisily in the breeze, and around them momentarily day grew clearer and brighter.

As the morning advanced and the boys strode on nearing the pine woods, robins and bluebirds, shrikes and chewinks greeted them; and as they stopped for luncheon near a broad, open trail in the barren woodland a buzzard sailed above the tree-tops and peered at them curiously.

In the meantime Norton, Hugh and Billy had started promptly twenty minutes after the departure of the machine. Billy was in high spirits and declared that he scented adventure in the air. For an hour, however, nothing occurred to disturb the peaceful sway of Nature, and Billy was about to abandon his attitude of expectation.

Suddenly the stillness was broken by the uneven rattle of rapidly moving wheels over the shell road. Then the clatter of pounding hoofs further shattered the silence.

"It comes!" shouted Billy dramatically. Around a bend in the road came a galloping white horse, old and lean, dragging at its heels a reeling hurdy-gurdy cart.

Billy sprang for the horse's head. Almost at his touch the old creature stopped submissively.

"The poor old nag is all in," said Billy sympathetically, patting her quivering neck.

Meanwhile Hugh and Roy Norton had righted the music cart, and Hugh impulsively seized the handle of the machine and turned it to test

its condition.

"Hi---yi---yi!"

A dark-skinned foreigner came into sight, running toward them down the road.

He frowned at them darkly and dashed up to the old horse, swinging a short whip threateningly. Before the lash could fall on the still trembling beast, however, Hugh and Billy had sprung simultaneously upon the man.

"None of that!" cried Hugh, wresting the whip from the man's grasp.

The infuriated foreigner turned upon him with an avalanche of rapid words, struggling to break away from his captors.

At that Norton stepped into view before him. With a few gestures, a few faltering Italian and French words, and with great calmness and good nature, he managed to tell the man that his wagon was safe, and that the boys were willing to let him go if he would not beat the poor, tired, old horse.

Norton's manner, more than anything else, impressed the angry man. His scowls gave way to a pleasant expression and he nodded smilingly. The boys stepped back and the hurdy-gurdy driver busied himself at once, testing the harness and wheels and even patting the thin old nag.

Then he climbed upon his seat and gathered up the reins. Hugh picked up the fallen whip and handed it to him. The dark foreigner smiled suddenly and, reaching over, put the whip into its socket. Then, clucking to his horse, he moved slowly down the road.

"Well, what do you think of that?" cried Billy, puzzled at the sudden capitulation.

"That?" returned Norton. "That is a bit of southern Europe---tempest and sunshine, rage and child-like faith combined."

"Like a small boy, he needed to be managed," said Hugh, "and you knew how to do it."

With a new respect for Roy Norton, the two scouts joined him again on their inland hike. But they did not forget the incident, nor did they fail to relate it that evening to the other three boys, whom they found already established at camp around a blazing fire.

The next morning the returning parties exchanged routes for the homeward trip, but nothing more exciting was encountered than glimpses of orange groves, of pine barrens, of cypress swamps, and of numberless birds.

But their "hiking muscles" had been well exercised and they felt nearer to the heart of Florida because of their long tramp.

There were a number of letters waiting for the boys, some from their home people and others from the scouts who were enjoying the "Geological Survey" at Pioneer Camp. These the boys shared, eagerly

discussing the news and wondering what plans would be made for the fall and winter.

Some of the things that actually did happen the following fall are related in "The Boy Scouts of the Flying Squadron."

THE END

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