

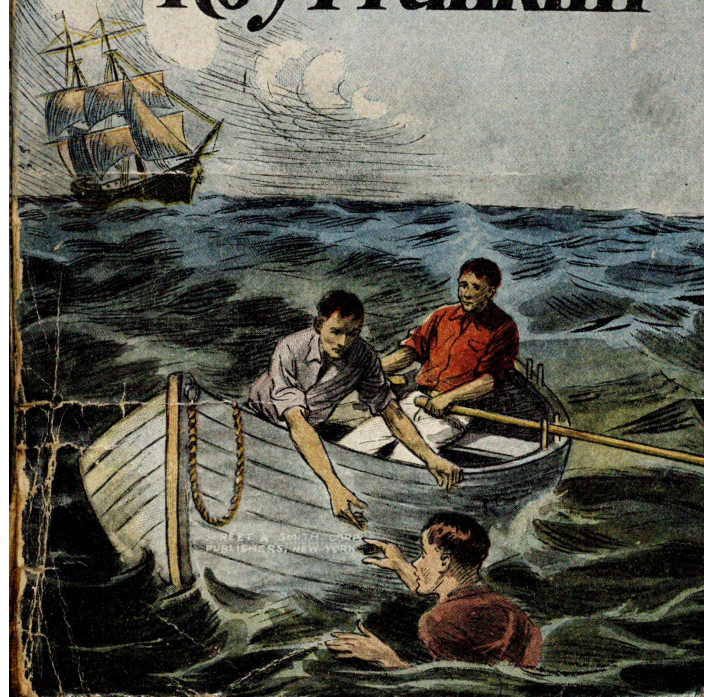
Bound to get there

ALGER SERIES No. 199

Bound to Get There

By

Roy Franklin



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Bound To Get There

OR

A Boy Who Could Not Be Downed

By

ROY FRANKLIN

Author of "His Own Master," "Always on Deck,"
"Out For a Fortune," etc.



BOUND TO GET THERE.

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CHAPTER I.

THREE DISCONTENTED BOYS.

“I won’t stand it!”

“What will you do, Nick?”

“I’ll run away. If I work for my money I ought to have it. Mr. Steele can get a new boy. I won’t work any longer and get nothing for it.”

The scene was a yard at the rear of a barn that belonged to a comfortable-looking house in Parkdale. Nick Collins, just turned his sixteenth year, was the first speaker, and his companion was Frank Alden, about the same age. Day had just died beyond the high, blue hills, and evening sounds were in the air.

Until two months before the story opens Nick had lived with his grandfather, his only known relative. The old man died, leaving the lad an orphan; at least, people told him so. His mother had passed away when he was very young, and his father, a sailor, had gone to sea and never returned.

Nick was left penniless, and at the death of his grandfather was obliged to earn a living as best he could. He was a bright boy in many respects. At mechanics and navigation, his grandfather’s hobbies, he had become quite proficient, but neither of these sciences offered him any opportunity in the dull, inland town of Parkdale.

So Nick took the only work he could get, that of lighting the lamps of the little town. In this employment he was the assistant of Jerry Steele, the official lamplighter—a man who had treated him none too well.

“Well, Nick,” said Frank Alden, “you’re better off than my brother Will and I are. Six dollars a week——”

“I don’t get six dollars a week.”

“They say you do.”

“All the same, I don’t. That’s my wages, but I don’t get it.”

“Who does, then?”

“Jerry Steele.”

“Doesn’t he give you your board and clothes?”

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“He promised to; but you ought to see the board! As for the clothes, look at them. These are my best—Sunday and week day alike. Oh, I don’t want to talk about it. It isn’t worth wasting breath over. I’ve made up my mind. Mr. Jerry Steele and I will part. That’s the end of it.”

There was a resolute look in Nick’s eye, and his friend knew that he meant to keep his word. Just then there came from the barn sounds that were familiar to the ears of one of the boys—Frank Alden.

“Oh, Nick!” he whispered. “Something has happened.”

“I guess you’re right, Frank.”

The familiar sounds were the wailing, pleading cries of a boy in distress, and the harsh, coarse accents of an angry man.

“Ye hain’t had enough of it yit!”

“Oh, yes, I have.”

“No, ye hain’t. I’ll teach ye to worrit the life out o’ me. Take that, an’ that, an’ that! Ha, the switch’s broke. Well, I’ll git a new one.”

“Oh, please don’t,” the victim of the man wailed. “I don’t deserve a licking.”

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“Ye don’t, eh?”

“No. It wasn’t me that let the duck into the parlor.”

“Tell that to the marines. Mebbe ye didn’t steal my silk hat?”

“No, I didn’t.”

“Ye didn’t, eh? Then who was it?”

For a moment there was silence. Evidently the boy would not tell. “Out with it!” cried the man. “Do ye hear?”

Still silence.

“Then take the consequences, ye stubborn little mule!” exclaimed the other. “I’ll beat it out o’ ye, or my name ain’t Ahab Towns!”

The two boys outside the barn looked at one another significantly, and then at the building whence the talk and wails had come. Their glance spoke indignation and resentment.

“He’s getting it bad, Frank,” said Nick.

“Yes, and it isn’t his fault. I’m not going to stand it.

“I’m with you, Frank,” the other said firmly. “What had we better do?”

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“Wait! He’s coming.”

The boys found a convenient clump of lilacs to shelter them as they saw the dim outlines of a man’s burly form at the barn door.

“It’s Ahab Towns, and he’s going to hunt another switch,” whispered Frank. “Come along. Now’s our chance.”

“What’s your plan?”

“Sh! Come and see.”

Frank’s voice was resolute. He led the way toward the barn, entered it quietly, and Nick followed.

“Will, Will! Are you there?” called out Frank in the darkness.

“Yes, yes!” came the quick, eager response. “Oh, help me out of this. Look out! He’s coming back.”

“We’ll help you, Will.”

“Yes,” added Nick. “That’s what we’re here for.”

“Now, Will,” said Frank, “you get out of the window as quick as you can; and you, too, Nick, and wait for me outside. Never mind what I intend to do. Skip!”

Frank and Nick scampered to the other end of the barn, taking Frank at his word, and not turning back to see what he was about. They only noticed, as they were getting out of the window, that Frank was busying himself about something at the door. In the dim light that showed from the outside they could not tell what he was doing.

A minute more, however, and Frank also sprang through the window. Then the boys waited, all together, until Ahab Towns should return. Presently they saw him, armed with a fresh switch, rush for the barn. He was shaking with rage, and determined to whip the stubbornness, as he called it, out of his stepson.

In the semi-darkness and amid his haste, however, he never noticed a rope stretched across the open door, perfectly taut. There was a wild sprawl forward, a quivering shock, and Ahab Towns measured his length on the floor, and made the air hideous with his cries of pain and anger.

“We’ve paid him off, anyway,” muttered Frank grimly. “Now, boys, let us leave here.”

“Yes, and he’ll pay us off when we come home again,” replied Will, in alarm.

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“You leave that to me,” was Frank’s assuring response. “Ahab Towns has whipped me for the last time. If you haven’t the grit to say the same, why, stand it, that’s all!”

“What do you mean, Frank?” asked Will.

“Come over to the common, where we will have a fair run if Towns follows us, and I’ll tell you.”

The three boys moved on silently after this. A bright, intelligent trio they were, although the episode of the hour somewhat clouded their youthful, handsome faces.

The expression of the features of each indicated their peculiar individual characteristics.

Frank looked resolute, reckless, defiant. Will's countenance expressed a haunting fear and anxiety. Their history was a brief but strange one. Frank and Will were brothers and Ahab Towns was their stepfather.

About five years previous their mother, who was a widow, had married again. Two years later she had died, and Ahab Towns, already a disagreeable, fault-finding stepfather, became a cruel, heartless guardian and taskmaster.

He seemed thoroughly to hate the boys, and on every occasion that presented the slightest excuse for an exercise of his mean authority, he beat them unmercifully.

Schooling, clothes, and even proper food were denied them, and the loveless life the boys were thus compelled to lead almost broke their spirits.

Matters had been going from bad to worse until Frank had formed a secret resolve at some near time to cast aside the galling yoke that bound him and his brother to an unhappy fate. He had been delighted at heart, therefore, when he heard Nick Collins complaining of his hard lot, and declaring that he, too, intended to run away and strike out for himself.

The three boys reached the village common and found a grassy spot, where they seated themselves.

They found the playground deserted, for it happened to be that hour when supper claimed boys' and girls' attention for a time.

Will kept glancing back apprehensively in the direction of home, as if fearful of pursuit from his stepfather.

Frank translated the significance of his anxious looks with a scornful glance.

"Don't be afraid, Will!" he said. "I meant what I told you."

"What?"

"Ahab Towns won't whip me again."

"Nor me?"

"Not if you're wise."

"What do you mean?"

"I'll tell you later. When the boys come we'll play with them. When they go home you and Nick be sure to wait and see me."

"Look here, Will," said Nick, "what was the trouble to-night, anyway?"

"Nothing that I was to blame for."

"I believe that."

"You know Jack Benson?"

"Yes, and everybody knows him as the meanest, roughest boy in town."

"You know the gang of loafers he goes with?"

"You bet I do."

"Well, a few days ago, you remember, we had some trouble with him and his friends—those fellows from the river?"

"Yes, and I guess they'll remember it, too," said Frank. "We gave them a good whipping."

"And you remember what Jack said?"

"Yes—that he'd get even with us."

"Well, he did."

"How's that?"

"Ahab Towns"—the boys never called their ill-natured stepfather otherwise—"caught Jack stealing apples a week ago, and licked him for it."

"That's the best thing Ahab ever did," remarked Frank, with a grin.

“Maybe it was, but the double licking made Jack hot to get even with all of us. To-day, when we were in the garden, Jack came along. He was ready to do anything to spite us. He drove the duck into the parlor and shut it in, and there Towns found it when he brought in a friend an hour or so afterward.”

“I see. And Towns blamed you for it?”

“He whipped me for it,” replied Will, with a long face.

“I should say he did, the way you hollered. Well, go on.”

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“Then Jack saw Towns’ high silk hat on the ledge of the sitting-room window. He broke a dozen eggs into it. When Towns put it on you can imagine how he raved and tore. I told him that I saw Jack around and that I knew he did it. No use. I had to take the blame and the punishment for it.”

Just at that moment there was an interruption to the talk of the three boys. The advance courier of the players of the evening had arrived with a joyous shout, and within five minutes several others had joined him. In half an hour a score of light-hearted boys were engaged in harmless, enjoyable games on the village green.

Amid the excitement of the hour, Frank, Nick, and Will forgot all about their troubles and plans, and joined heartily in the fun. Hi-spy, pump-pump, pull-away, and other spirited games finally palled on their spirits, and mischief began its subtle promptings.

“Who wants some real fun?” called out the voice of one of the larger boys.

A ready response came in a dozen voices.

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“You know where old Captain Eccles lives?”

“Yes, yes!”

Captain Eccles was a retired sailor who lived alone near the river. His hermitlike life had long been a theme of discussion and mystery to Parkdale boys.

“Well, let us make him a quiet visit.”

“Huh! A nice welcome he’d give us.”

“Oh! I don’t mean a friendly call. We’ll put a “tick-tack” on the window and get him out after us with that old broken blunderbuss of his.”

There were some dissenting voices, but the majority prevailed, and the throng were soon on their way toward the river. Eager for the “real fun,” they could hardly keep silent as they neared the dilapidated cabin where Captain Eccles had lived so many years. It was merged in complete darkness, and the boys got in the shadow of some bushes. One of them had produced the bent pin, stone, and string that comprises that fascinating mischief maker so dear to boys’ hearts.

“Who’ll put it on the window?” was asked.

Will Alden, a ready victim in all cases, assumed the duty. The pin was attached, he returned to the bushes.

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Tap, tap! amid the stillness of the place, and then a cry of disappointment.

“The pin has fallen out. It will have to be put in place again, boys,” spoke the leader of the group.

“I’ll fix it,” whispered Nick.

Nick Collins approached the cabin window cautiously. The stealthy application of the pin to the window was only the work of a moment, but it was disturbed rudely.

“Run, Nick!”

“The captain!”

The warning came from the group in the bushes and startled Nick. It came too late, however, for just as he began to run, a man’s form darted from the door of the house.

“Ha! You young rascal! I’ve caught you!” said some one in a gruff voice.

And then appeared Captain Eccles. He dragged his struggling captive to the open door of the cabin, thrust him in roughly, followed himself, and locked the door after them.

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Those in the bushes had started to run at the first sign of danger in the appearance of the captain. They paused finally, dismayed and frightened. Frank Alden, less timorous than the others, had remained behind, and checked their flight by a sudden call.

“Don’t be cowards!” he cried. “See here, are you going to desert a comrade?”

There was no reply.

“Let us pelt the house with stones,” suggested Will.

“No—that’s no use. I wonder what the captain will do with Nick?”

But wondering and impatient waiting were all that resulted from a brief consultation. One by one the boys decided that they were expected at home, and abandoned Nick Collins to his fate. All except Frank and Will. They remained behind. The former looked sullen and angry as the last of their companions disappeared toward the village.

“Nice fellows, they are!” he growled.

“What can they do to help Nick, anyway?” asked Will.

“They might wait, at least.”

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“Oh! the captain won’t hurt him. See here, Frank, it’s time we were home.”

“Where?”

“Home.”

“Is it?”

“Yes, and Towns will whip us as it is.”

“He won’t whip me!” declared Frank. “I’m not going home, Will. I’m going to wait here for Nick.”

“It may be all night.”

“I don’t care. I shouldn’t go home, anyway. Will, that is what I meant to tell you. I’m through with hard work and hard knocks from Ahab Towns. I shall never go home again. I’m going to try life on my own hook—I am going to run away!”

JACK BENSON'S REVENGE.

Frank Alden's face was resolute and set as he announced his bold intention to rebel against the tyranny of a cruel stepfather. His brother Will's face was fairly white with fear and surprise.

"Run away!" gasped the latter.

"Exactly."

"You don't mean it?"

"I do."

"But——"

"Don't be afraid, Will. You are more scared at the idea than you will be at the reality," said Frank. "Stop and think for a moment. Can we stand the life at the house any more?"

"N—no."

"Then now is the time to end it. We owe our stepfather nothing. He hates us, and will probably be glad to get rid of us. I've been thinking of this for a long time, and seriously, too, and I'm going to leave Parkdale. If you go with me, well and good. If not, I'll go alone."

Will looked bewildered.

"Where shall we go to?" he asked.

"To the city. Nick is going there. He will join us. I've got a package in the grove back of the house hidden in the big oak tree. I made it up to-day. It contains all we have, and a dollar I have saved besides. We'll go and get it and come back here and wait for Nick, and then start out together."

"Will Nick go?"

"Certainly he will."

"We may starve or get arrested——" began the timid Will.

"No, we won't. Come along, if you are with me."

"Yes, I'm with you," replied Will faintly. His manner certainly was not very enthusiastic.

The two boys left the spot with a last look at Captain Eccles' cabin. It was dark and still, as before. As they walked toward the common a strange thing occurred at the place where they had just been talking so earnestly.

Plainly revealed in the moonlight, from behind a fallen log, a human face, and then a boy's form came into view.

He was a low-browed, bold-eyed youth, and his eyes twinkled with some secret satisfaction as he looked after the retreating boys.

"That's how it is, eh!" he chuckled. "I heard all they said. Going to run away. Well, smarties, I'll get even with you more than ever now, or my name ain't Jack Benson!"

Only for a moment did the sneaking fellow remain where he was.

"I'll hurry to the house," he said to himself, "and tell old Towns all about it."

He started on a run as he spoke, but halted abruptly a few feet farther on.

"Better still!" muttered Jack gleefully, as a new idea struck him. "They've hidden some clothes and money in the oak tree in the grove. I can get there afore they do. I'll get the package, pocket the money, and carry the clothes to Towns."

A rapid detour made him master of the situation over his unsuspecting enemies, who went on more slowly and cautiously.

Jack had no difficulty in finding the oak tree. As he drew out a package from its hollow, he hastened to a copse some distance away, coolly ransacked the bundle, secured a dollar tied in a handkerchief, and then sat silently awaiting developments.

In a few moments a form came toward the tree. It was that of Frank Alden. Jack saw him go through all the pantomime of search, surprise, disappointment, and dismay. Then he retreated, and the chuckling, malignant watcher could observe him and Will at the edge of the thicket engaged in anxious talk.

“They may think that Towns found the bundle and may start away,” thought Jack. “Now is my time to act. They licked me once too often, but I’m even with them.”

He abandoned the scattered clothing, and started at once for the house. Just inside the gate he paused, and fell to thinking. It occurred to his malicious mind that he owed Ahab Towns a grudge as well as his stepsons. He was still smarting under the punishment the man had given him for stealing the apples. The more he thought of this beating the more spiteful he felt against Towns.

“If I tell on the boys,” Jack reflected, “I’ll be helping that mean old bear. I won’t do it. I know what I’ll do. I’ll kill two birds with one stone. I’ll wipe out old scores to-night, and settle with Towns for that whipping. And I’ll do both at the same time.”

Whatever Jack’s crafty plan might be, it required some time to put into execution. He went to where the moonlight fell full upon a flat-topped board fence. Then he ransacked his pockets.

A greasy pack of cards, some cigar stumps, and other articles about as valuable, were transferred from one pocket to another. Finally he produced a lead pencil and a not overclean strip of paper.

Placing the paper flat against the fence, Jack proceeded with no small difficulty to outline what bore some resemblance to a placard. He twisted his fingers first this way, then that, in his efforts to write. The spelling of the words did not bother him much. He just spelled them any old way. When at last he had finished, he looked upon his work with pride.

It read:

To ower stepfother and Jerry Steele—surs. you aboused us, and we tak ower revenj on you both, you will see in the barn.

NICK COLLINS,
FRANK ALDEN,
WILL ALDEN.

This fine piece of literary work Jack stood and admired for some time. He decided that he had done a smart thing in putting Jerry Steele’s name on the notice as well as addressing it to the other boys’ stepfather, for this would tell Nick’s unfair taskmaster that his victim was one of the conspirators—at least, one of those whom he wished to make out as conspirators. When Jack had filled himself with admiration for his miserable attempt at writing and spelling, he stole toward the house, mounted the front steps, and paused at the door.

With a pin he fastened the written paper on a panel of the door, then sneaked away to the garden, scudding through the shrubbery with a quicker pace when he saw somebody passing by on the walk outside. [Pg 26]

A moment he halted when he reached the barn; then he darted inside. For not more than two minutes he remained there, but when he came out his face was pale and his manner that of a badly frightened boy. He broke into a brisk run and never lessened his speed until he was well on the other side of the common.

Meantime Frank and Will Alden had gone through several experiences that were none too happy. The visit to the oak tree had proved a severe disappointment to Frank. In vain he felt for the package he had placed there. It was gone. He tried to account for its disappearance, but without success. After searching again, to no purpose, he decided to return with Will to the vicinity of Captain Eccles’ cabin.

“Who could have taken it?” murmured Will, completely mystified.

“I cannot imagine.”

“Have you any suspicion?”

“Yes.”

“Who do you suspect?”

“Well, maybe Towns took it.”

“Perhaps. Look! Who is that?”

A form had passed hurriedly across a level stretch of ground beyond them. It was the figure of a boy.

“It’s Jack Benson!” exclaimed Will.

“And coming from the direction of the house, too.”

“So he is.”

“Wonder what he is in such a hurry about?”

They followed the fleeting figure, but Jack was out of sight before they could overtake him. To Frank the incident kindled suspicion in a new direction. He and Will went on until they came to the neighborhood of the Eccles cabin. There they halted and looked around in search of Nick Collins. But he was nowhere in sight. They sat down patiently to wait for him. Frank was serious and thoughtful, and Will plagued with fears and uncertainties. Thus it happened that neither paid attention to a deepening glow in the sky over a point from which they had come not long before, until of a sudden the illumination became strikingly bright. A flash seemed to shoot athwart the hilltop.

“Frank! Did you see that?”

“What?”

“It’s a fire!”

“That glow? By jiminy, it does look like one.”

“And in the direction of home.”

They sprang to their feet and gazed intently at the lurid glare. A moment or two and they heard the discordant, confused shouts of many persons in the distance. These sounds came nearer and nearer, and the boys set off at a run for the crest of the hill. They had hardly reached it when they heard some one just beyond them, shouting:

“Fire, fire!”

A man running toward the village was crying the word at the top of his voice.

Another man, coming from the village, asked him excitedly:

“What’s burning?”

“Towns’ barn,” replied the other breathlessly.

“Are you going for the fire engine?”

“Yes. We must get it out quick or the house will go.”

The man ran on, but the other called after him:

“How did it catch?”

“Set afire.”

“Tramps?”

“No,” came the reply as the man ceased running and turned around, more eager to repeat some gossip he had heard than to call out the engine. “His own boys did it. They fired the barn because he whipped them. They ran away this evening, and left a note saying they set the fire out of revenge.”

A STORY OF THE PAST.

Nick Collins was never so dismayed and startled in his life as when he found himself rudely seized by the arm outside of the cabin of Captain Eccles, detected in the act of mischief which had for its result the annoyance of its strange inmate.

When his captor had pushed him through the open door, locked it, and regained a grasp of his arm, he led him into a lighted room.

A strange room it was, almost as strange as the grizzly, weather-beaten captain himself. It resembled the cabin of a ship, and its walls were covered with models of various kinds of sea craft, curiosities from the ocean, and nautical instruments of antique design.

Captain Eccles thrust Nick into a chair, eyed him with apparent fierceness, and then in a gruff and terrible voice ejaculated:

“So you’re the bold privateer who comes annoying a quiet sea dog in winter quarters, eh?” [Pg 31]

Nick did not know what to say, but he managed to stammer the truth:

“I—I—it was only a bit of harmless fun, sir.”

“Fun, eh? Disturbing the old craft that’s laid up for repair after thirty years of service. Who are you, anyway?”

“A boy from the village.”

“Are they all like you?”

“Well, perhaps I’m as bad as any of ’em.”

To Nick’s immense relief, the captain laughed outright at this candid confession, and the boy began to think that the gruff old mariner rather enjoyed his capture as a relief to the monotony of his hermitlike existence.

“What’s your name?”

“Nick Collins.”

Captain Eccles started, stared hard at the lad, and seemed deeply interested.

“Say that again,” he said.

“Nick Collins.”

“Son of Captain David Collins, mariner, of the good ship *Star of Hope*, lost with all on board off the coast of South America ten years ago?” [Pg 32]

It was Nick’s turn to look amazed as the captain reeled off the sentence like a man thoroughly conversant with the subject under discussion.

“Did you know my father, sir?”

“Did I know him, lad? I knew him as the bravest, truest friend I ever had. Did you never hear of me?”

“Only from what my grandfather told me. He’s dead, you know, sir.”

“Dead? Well, well! I scarcely know that the sun rises and sets, shut up in this dreary hold here. Go on, lad—tell me all about yourself.”

It was a strange situation strangely arrived at. Nick found himself suddenly the entertainer of an interested host. In simple language, he related the details of the uneventful life he had led at Parkdale. There was a long pause when he had concluded his recital. The captain seemed to be lost in mournful reflection, and he uttered a deep sigh as at last he aroused himself and gazed earnestly at Nick.

“It makes me sad to have old times revived,” he said. “So you are the son of Captain Dave. I knew you lived here, and I went to see your grandfather once for acquaintance sake, but he was gruff and unsociable. Did he

never talk about your father?"

"Very rarely, sir."

"Never spoke of the strange voyage he took and the treasure and the shipwreck?"

Nick looked startled.

"I always supposed that my father died in a general wreck at sea," he murmured.

"Humph! Not much of a teaching for a brave captain's boy. No, Nick, there was a strange story about the *Star of Hope*. It was a ship owned by Admiral Semmes. Never heard of him, either, I suppose?"

Nick nodded negatively, and a contemptuous look came over the captain's face.

"Never told you of it, and you a captain's son! Never been on the sea, I suppose?"

"I never saw it, even."

"And I was afore the mast at twelve!" remarked Eccles proudly. "Well, I'm going to tell you about your father."

"I wish you would, sir."

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"Ten years ago there lived in Boston an old naval officer called Admiral Semmes. He was a great sailor and had circumnavigated the globe a dozen times, and had known many strange adventures. Your father and he were great friends, and I knew him quite well, for I was mate in the merchant service when David Collins was captain. Now this Admiral Semmes was not a rich man, but one day he and your father managed to raise a sum amounting to eight thousand dollars. Do you know what for?"

"No, sir."

"To buy a ship."

"The *Star of Hope*?"

"Exactly."

"That was the ship that my father was lost in?"

"That was the ship of which he owned half and Admiral Semmes the other half," replied Captain Eccles. "They could not pay for all of it, so they mortgaged it to secure eight thousand dollars to pay the balance. That money they obtained from James Vail, a broker, of New York City."

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"Did the ship go on a regular cruise?"

"No. That was the strangest part of it. The voyage was purely one of speculation. Your father, it seems, had secured from a dying sailor the secret of the hiding place of a vast amount of sunken treasure near an island in the Pacific. It was the wreck of a Spanish galleon containing nearly a quarter of a million dollars in bullion and coin, and sunk by pirates. So convinced was your father that the story was true and that he could find the treasure, that he brought Admiral Semmes to the same belief. To search for that treasure the *Star of Hope* was equipped and provisioned. I tried to get a release from the merchant service to go with him, but could not. I bade your father good-by at the dock at Boston. I never saw him again."

There was a pause, during which Captain Eccles betrayed deep and silent emotion. Then he continued:

"Four months later a China steamer brought news to San Francisco of the finding at sea of a raft containing a dying man—a sailor of the *Star of Hope*. He lived long enough to tell that a terrible storm had overtaken the *Star of Hope* in mid-ocean. The longboats and raft were put out. The captain alone refused to desert the wrecked ship, which floated away and was never seen again. He, the sailor, was the one survivor, apparently, for from that day to this not one word of the *Star of Hope* has ever been received."

"And the secret of the treasure died with my father?"

"No. Strangest of all romances, when the ship on its fatal voyage touched at Valparaiso he wrote two letters."

"Two?"

"Yes. One to me and one to Admiral Semmes. He wrote that he was tortured with a vague premonition that disaster would follow his venture; that should the ship be lost a valuable secret would die with him. He wrote out the location of the treasure on a sheet of paper and cut it in two."

“What was that for?”

“To interest me in the affair if he died, for in that contingency he left me his share of the treasure. It was divided with his father and yourself. These parts of one letter he mailed at Valparaiso, destined one for me and the other for Admiral Semmes.”

“And you received them?”

“I received my half. The letter to Admiral Semmes miscarried, or was never sent, for it never came. The half sent me was utterly unintelligible without the remainder. Many and many an hour did the admiral and myself try to decipher the mutilated fragment. It conveyed no coherent meaning. Then the admiral began to advertise for news of the ship, for the letter. It was of no avail.

“I gave it up as a hopeless task long ago, and came here to live, telling the admiral that if ever a clue should be discovered, I would lead the expedition for the treasure. But the years have gone on, and I never heard from the admiral until a few weeks ago, when he wrote me that he believed he had secured a trace of the missing half of the letter your father wrote.”

“And since then, sir.”

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“He has not written me. I long since abandoned all hopes of the ship or the treasure. That is the story. A strange one, is it not, Nick?”

“It is indeed, sir.”

Its recital had made Nick sad and serious, and he forgot place and circumstances as he gave way to reflection.

“If you go to the city to seek your fortune,” said Captain Eccles after a pause, “find Admiral Semmes and tell him who you are. For the sake of your father he will befriend you, although I imagine that his wealth and influence have sadly deteriorated in his almost fanatic search for the lost ship and the treasure paper.”

“I will remember, sir,” said Nick.

“And if you remain here come and see me again, and come often, but don’t rouse me with your tricks,” laughed the captain.

He named the address of Admiral Semmes in New York City as they parted at the door of the cabin.

Nick Collins fairly gasped as he found himself alone and looked around him.

All that had transpired within the last hour seemed like some vague dream.

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A mystic hand appeared to have drawn him beyond the threshold of the past, and then after a fleeting glimpse of its dark secrets to have thrust him beyond its portals again.

He was confused, bewildered. He wandered on a few paces and sat down on a rock to recover himself.

Why did the story of Captain Eccles so impress him? Why did it seem that fate had sent its revelation upon this eventful night? What caused the dim thought that his father might still be alive; that in some way the treasure-trove of the Pacific was to be mingled with his own young life?

Quick, animated conversation aroused Nick Collins from his reverie. Some men were passing leisurely by from the direction of the common, and paused to glance back at a fading glare in the northern sky.

“The fire’s pretty nigh out,” remarked one of them.

“Yes,” said the other. “No fear of it spreading now.”

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“It’s quite a heavy loss.”

“Towns can stand it. The widow Alden brought him two other farms.”

Nick Collins started and listened intently. A fire, and at Ahab Towns’! What did it mean?

“He was lucky to escape with his life,” resumed the last speaker. “His sister and her family were in the house, and the barn had caught the house before they were awakened. They say Towns was wild over his loss, and ran back to save some papers, and if his sister hadn’t thrown a cloth over his head and dragged him out he would have been overcome by the smoke and have perished.”

“He’s hot after those who fired the place.”

“Yes? Rather ungrateful children.”

“They ain’t his children, you know, and he wasn’t much of a stepfather to them. It will go hard with Frank and Will if they are caught.”

Nick Collins’ heart seemed to stand still. Frank and Will charged with setting fire to Ahab Towns’ home! It could not be possible!

“There were three of them in it,” he says.

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“Yes, that Collins boy probably put them up to it. Anyway, the three names were signed to the paper that Towns found pinned to his front door. That Nick Collins always was a roving, restless boy. Now they’ve all three cut out, probably for the city.”

The men passed on. Nick Collins stood like one stunned. He knew that there must be some mistake, but what did the reference to the signed paper mean?

It would be folly to venture in the vicinity of the Towns homestead and attempt to vindicate himself. In his heart, at that moment, Nick believed Towns himself had fired the place, and for some crafty, mysterious reason cast the blame upon his stepchildren and himself.

Nick lingered where he was for over an hour. Many people were returning from the fire, and talk about the incendiary plot seemed to be upon every tongue.

A word here and there imparted much information to Nick. He knew that suspicion of crime rested against the Alden boys and himself, and that Frank and Will had disappeared. He was mystified as to the motive for the fire. What could Ahab Towns hope to gain by convicting them of the crime? The more Nick thought about it the deeper seemed the mystery that underlay the affair.

The glow had all gone from the sky now. People returning to the village passed the common now and then. At length two boys came along. One of them Nick instantly recognized. It was Jack Benson. His companion was a tough-looking lad whom Nick did not know, but who was apparently one of his associates at the low, river settlement beyond the village.

Jack’s face looked triumphant, excited, and full of malice. Nick told himself that there must be some reason for this. His wits, naturally sharp, had been set on keenest edge by the events of the last few hours. Something in the appearance of Jack Benson aroused a vague concern and suspicion in his mind.

He decided that one of those boys, at least, would bear watching, and that boy was Jack Benson. As they passed on Nick skirted the grove, came as close to them as he could without being seen, and tried to catch what they were saying.

“Quite a blaze down there, wasn’t it?” remarked Jack’s companion.

“Yes. It serves old Towns right.”

“How’s that?” asked the other.

“Oh, he’s a mean old snoozer. I hope they’ll get Collins and the others.”

“Why?”

“Because I’d like to see them sent away for a long term.”

“You must have it in for them, Jack.”

“Surest thing you know.”

That was all Nick heard. But it was quite enough to set him thinking in a new line, and Jack Benson became a decided object of suspicion.

“Frank and Will have certainly left the village,” mused Nick. “I wish I could find them.” He set out in search of his friends.

Realizing that the utmost caution was necessary, that they would seek to arrest him for the fire in the Towns house, he avoided the public streets as much as possible, and made his way toward the outer edge of the village. Once he had a narrow escape from walking right into the arms of the constable. This happened as both were turning the corner going in opposite directions. But the man, who was smoking and thinking probably about the fire, and the work it would give him to do in finding the incendiary, passed on without so much as a look at Nick Collins’ face.

“It is dangerous for me to stay here,” he told himself. “Why should I? If I am arrested, Towns will be sure to make out a bad case against me. Frank and I often talked of going to the city, and how we would walk there on the railroad track. This looks like a good time to go. Maybe Frank and Will have started already.”

Thus it came about that Nick, almost unconsciously, became a fugitive. A minute or two after deciding to go to the city he had started down the rickety little railroad line that ran from Parkdale to the county seat. He kept on and on, his determination to quit Parkdale growing stronger as he proceeded.

Whether he met Frank and Will or not, he would continue as far as the city. No more of humdrum, sleepy Parkdale for him. He had passed many a bitter day there, chafing under the injustice inflicted upon him by Jerry Steele, and he had no regret at leaving it. As he walked along he fell to reflecting on Captain Eccles’ strange story, and thought of the things he had read about life in the great city. It was nearly midnight when Nick stopped at a small station and sat down on a bench outside to rest.

No one was in the station, and the village near by was wrapped in silence and darkness. He fell asleep. The sun was shining in his face when, with a start, he awoke. Some one was shaking him vigorously. Nick sprang to his feet at the sound of a familiar voice shouting in his ear:

“Wake up, Nick Collins. Wake up!”

The man shaking him was the town marshal of Parkdale. Nick guessed instantly that he was there to arrest him for his supposed share in the fire at Ahab Towns’ home.

ON TO THE CITY.

Nick was somewhat dismayed, but he took the situation pluckily, and did not act at all like a guilty boy.

"It's about the fire at the Towns house, I suppose?" he said, stretching himself and yawning.

"That's what it is," replied the marshal, with twinkling eyes.

"I didn't have anything to do with that," Nick asserted stoutly.

"You didn't, eh?" the other rejoined, trying to look severe.

"No, I didn't; and if you've followed me all the way from Parkdale for that, you've been wasting time."

To the boy's surprise, the marshal burst out laughing.

"Why, Nick, who accused you?" he said.

"But——"

"I guess nobody has accused you but yourself, and I don't say it's a guilty conscience at work. You heard the stories flying around last night; you got frightened, and you beat it while your shoes were good. Isn't that so, my lad?"

Nick looked confused, but very much relieved.

"That's about the size of it," he said.

"Now that you know, I don't want you, Nick," the marshal went on, "I'll tell you who I do want."

"Who is it?"

"The guilty one."

"Do you mean Frank or Will? If you do——"

"Frank and Will," the marshal interrupted, "are wanted by Ahab Towns, but that's none of my business. If they want to run away, it doesn't concern me. No, Nick, the chap that set fire to the barn is the only one I want just now."

"I see; and you don't know who he is?"

"Did I say so?"

"Then you do know?"

"I'm pretty sure."

"Who do you think it is?"

"Jack Benson," the marshal answered.

"I thought so!" cried Nick.

"Have you seen him?"

"No, sir."

"Have you any idea where he would be likely to hide?"

"I haven't, marshal."

Nick told how he had seen Jack the night before, and the marshal related how they had learned of his guilt in the matter of the fire. After the first excitement had abated somewhat, it was proved that the clumsy writing and horrible spelling on the placard that the audacious but foolish Jack had attached to Towns' front door was not the work of such intelligent boys and good scholars as Nick, Frank, or Will.

Besides, on the reverse side was found some scrawling memoranda made by Jack Benson, and in this way the paper was traced to him. And to fix the guilt more securely on the revengeful Benson, a passer-by had seen

him in the yard of the Towns home a little while before the fire. And next, by way of a crowning bit of stupidity, Jack had boasted of his crime among his chums, and then, learning that he had been found out, he had fled from the village as fast as his legs could carry him.

The marshal had started to try and find him, and had a horse and buggy near the station, where he had discovered Nick fast asleep.

"I have an idea that he crossed the country to Allentown, where some relatives of his live," said the marshal. "Anyway, I shall go there and look for him. Going to the city, Nick?"

"Yes, sir."

"Waiting for a train?"

"Oh, no. I was only resting here."

"You haven't got the Alden boys hidden anywhere about here, have you, Nick?" asked the marshal, winking.

"No, sir. I have no idea even where they are."

"Well, tell them to put as much space as possible between themselves and Ahab Towns if you see them. He is furious at everything, and wants them back to vent his spite on if nothing else. And say, Nick, I think I can give you a lift on your way. Here."

The marshal wrote a few words on a card and handed it to Nick.

"I have a relative who runs the engine on the wood train, due here in a short time. Hand him that card and make yourself generally useful and he'll give you a ride, I guess."

Nick considered himself very fortunate at meeting the marshal, frightened as he was at first. It was a great relief to know that suspicion had been removed from himself and the Alden boys so far as the fire at Parkdale was concerned, and he longed to find Frank and Will and join them in the new life that now looked so bright with the shadows of past anxiety removed.

At about eight o'clock a rusty locomotive steamed up to the station and began to take in water. Nick handed the card to the engineer. It resulted in an invitation to Nick to take a seat in the locomotive.

This he did. The train ran from down the river to the county seat, and had about ten cars loaded with cordwood. The route was desolate, the rails uneven, and the rolling stock old and dilapidated, yet Nick enjoyed the journey, and for over two hours did little else but view the changing landscape.

At every curve or crossroad the engineer told him to pull the whistle and ring the bell, and so promptly and intelligently did Nick obey these orders that he finally trusted him entirely to keep the lookout from the window of the locomotive.

It was well that Nick did not tire of the task and that he was vigilant in his duty, else a serious and probably fatal accident might have occurred.

At a curve in the road Nick suddenly aroused the engineer by giving the quick signal of warning and shouting excitedly:

"Stop the locomotive!"

"What's the matter?"

"Some one is motioning us ahead!"

"Boys!" remarked the engineer carelessly as he glanced out of the window of the cab and saw that two boys were signaling the train frantically.

"No, no. They mean something! The rails seem broken beyond them."

The engineer sprang to the lever quickly and reversed it. None too quickly, for when the puffing, panting monster of steam came to a halt it was only a very few feet from the evidences of what might have caused a terrible accident.

Two rails were torn up and several wooden ties crossed the roadway, forming a formidable obstacle to progress.

Two boys, who had so opportunely signaled the train, had stepped aside, and for them Nick looked eagerly.

"It's lucky you saw the youngsters!" said the engineer as he viewed the broken rails.

"The boys who warned us saved us," responded Nick. "I should not have discovered the break until we were fairly upon it but for them."

"Where are they?"

"Here they come."

The boys approached the engine.

Suddenly, with a cry of delight and surprise, Nick sprang from the cab.

"Frank—Will!" he ejaculated.

"Why, it's Nick Collins!"

The meeting was a most happy one, and the trio forgot their surroundings momentarily amid the excitement of joyous reunion.

The train hands had gathered about the front of the engine and were discussing the broken roadway. They decided that a broken axle on the night train had dragged over the ties and dislocated them. Then they set to work to repair the damage.

Nick overwhelmed Frank and Will with questions as to their being there.

"We got frightened when we heard that we were accused of burning the barn at home," explained Frank.

"And left the village at once?"

"Yes. About an hour ago we reached here and saw that an accident would occur if we did not do something to give warning."

Both boys were overjoyed when Nick told them of the discovery of the real incendiary in Jack Benson.

"I suspected him," cried Frank excitedly. "It was he who stole our bundle, too. He must have heard us talking about it. Well, I'm glad we aren't leaving home under a cloud."

"Are you still determined to go?" asked Nick.

"Yes," responded Frank firmly.

"And you, Will?"

"I go where Frank does."

"Then we will all go together. Come, boys, we won't starve so long as we can work, and we won't get into trouble if we keep honest and behave ourselves."

"Are you going to the city, Nick?" asked Frank.

"Yes."

"On this train?"

"As far as it goes in that direction."

"Where is that?"

"To the county seat."

"I wish we could ride with you."

"Do you suppose I would let you walk and me stay here?"

"You can all go!" cried the engineer, surprising the trio in the midst of their talk, which he had, in part, overheard. "We owe you young fellows a big debt of gratitude for warning us."

Frank and Will looked pleased at the hearty compliment, and when the broken rails had been repaired they were given comfortable seats in the tender of the engine.

They reached the county seat, the terminus of the road, about noon. Here a pleasant surprise awaited them.

The engineer insisted on their accompanying him to a restaurant, and such a meal as he ordered for his hungry young friends they had never partaken of before.

“Well,” he said when they had finished the repast, “I suppose you are going to the city?”

“Yes,” replied Nick.

“It’s fifty miles yet, you know.”

“We can walk it in two days.”

“Or steal a ride now and then,” put in Will.

“Sort of economical, ain’t you?” laughed the engineer, who was deftly leading the boys on to learn the state of their pockets.

“We have to be,” said Nick.

“No money?”

“A few cents, that’s all.”

“Well, just walk with me as far as the railroad offices till I hand in my report and I’ll direct you the best way to go.”

The engineer was bound that the brave signalers of the train at the broken rails should not go unrewarded if he could help it. When they reached the company’s offices he told them to sit down in the outer room, and was gone for some time.

When he returned a clerical-looking gentleman accompanied him.

“So these are the boys, eh?” said this individual, beaming benignantly on the youthful trio.

“Yes, sir.”

“Saved the train and want to go to the city?”

The engineer nodded assent.

The gentleman, who was an official of the road, shook hands with each of the boys. Then he went into the inner office again and returned shortly. He bore an envelope in his hand and handed it to Nick.

“That will help you on your way,” he said, “and if ever you come here again, remember, we don’t forget your services, and you shall travel free over our line.”

The boys were voluble in their thanks as the official waved them a pleasant adieu.

“What’s in the envelope?” asked Will curiously, as they again reached the street.

“Open it and see,” smiled the engineer.

Nick did so.

The inclosure consisted of two pieces of paper.

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One was a pass over the railroad to the city for the three of them.

The other was a crisp, new five-dollar bill. You may be sure that there were exclamations of delight by the happy boys at this unexpected help toward reaching their proposed destination.

THE CRAZY ADMIRAL.

The young adventurers were fortunate in securing a train for the city almost immediately after leaving the engineer.

Amid the excitement and pleasure of their recent experience life looked pretty bright, and their enthusiasm lasted all the way to the city.

The money seemed a fortune to them, and they discussed various ways and means to make it last until they could obtain work.

For that, Nick had insisted, must be their first thought, and even amid the enjoyable bustle of the train, the novelty of swift travel, and the rosy promise of the future he found time for serious reflection.

It was dusk when the train rolled into the station at New York—the giant, teeming metropolis that had been the subject of their fond dreams for weeks, and which none of them had ever visited before.

At first the stir and din of the streets confused them. The crowds of hurrying, rushing people in the [Pg 59], the shouting drivers outside, the roar from the pavements, the dazzling electric lights, and all the kaleidoscopic variety of street life bewildered and almost frightened them.

It was a world of wonders to the country-bred boys. It was some time before they ventured to leave the vicinity of the station. At last, however, they plucked up courage and set forth.

“Where are we going to?” asked Will, who clung, half frightened, to Nick’s arm.

“To look and see what we had better do for a place to sleep,” was the careless-spoken reply.

Nick did not feel careless, however. Far from it. A great sense of loneliness and depression dampened for the moment every hope he had entertained of being able to fight his way in this great, noisy sea of life.

As they left the railroad terminus, however, the glare and turmoil decreased. They found quieter streets, and they began to feel less strange.

“We may as well walk around for an hour or two,” suggested Nick.

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“Yes—why not?” said Frank readily. “When we get tired we can find some place to sleep.”

“There’s another thing, too,” said Nick.

“What’s that?”

“Captain Eccles gave me an address. I’d like to find it.”

“All right.”

Nick referred to the directions the captain had given him concerning the city residence of Admiral Semmes. He had jotted it down, but he remembered the street without looking at the written memorandum.

He made an inquiry of a man they passed, and the latter told him that the street he named was about two miles south and west.

More than once in their efforts to find it the boys went astray. They were delighted at last to come to a street corner which bore the name of the thoroughfare they sought.

It was a quiet, retired street, and Nick quickly got the hang of its ascending scale of numbers and the odd and even sides of the street. They passed along until they reached the number that Captain Eccles had given them.

“That’s the house,” said Will eagerly.

He had kept close track of the numbers, and now he pointed to a house that set far back from the street—one of the few dwellings on Manhattan Island that still have a long courtyard in front.

“It looks dark and unoccupied,” said Frank.

“And seems to have been so some time,” remarked Nick.

The front fence was broken and the gate lay at one side on the ground. The walk was in disorder. As the boys approached the veranda, a glance showed it to be in bad condition, with the steps frail and rickety.

"The windows are broken and the door is open," said Nick, in surprise. "What a strange house!"

He felt disappointed as he peered at its dark interior. Plainly the house was untenanted. Either Captain Eccles had given him the wrong address, or Admiral Semmes had moved away.

They ventured to enter the dismantled structure. Evidences of destruction and wanton mischief were revealed on every side. Doors had been torn from their hinges, blinds broken, and the windows appeared to have been the target for every mischievous lad's sling in the neighborhood.

"This must be the place," said Nick, "but Admiral Semmes has moved away. There's a man passing. I'll ask him."

Nick hurried down the steps and spoke to the man.

"Please excuse me, sir," he said, "but do you live near here?"

"Yes—over there," and the stranger indicated a house opposite.

"Do you know anything about this house?" asked Nick.

The man smiled oddly.

"Oh, yes, everybody knows about it."

"Who lives here, sir?" asked Nick eagerly.

"No one now."

"I mean—you see—who did live here last?" the boy stammered.

"The crazy admiral."

Nick started. This answer conveyed to the quick-witted lad a feeling of distrust of Captain Eccles' strange story. Perhaps all he had told Nick was a romance, come to him mostly from the distracted mind of a deluded person.

"The crazy admiral?" repeated Nick.

"Yes. That's what they called him."

"Do you mean Admiral Semmes?"

"I believe his name was Semmes. He was a curious old man, who came here some years ago and shut himself up in that house, and never spoke to his neighbors."

"Why did people call him crazy?" asked Nick.

"Oh, he acted so strange. He would lock and bar every window days, and wander around the garden nights armed with a gun, as if guarding some treasure. No one ever entered the house but sailors."

"Sailors, sir?" repeated Nick.

"Yes. When a ship from around the Horn came into New York harbor you would see the admiral at the docks. He'd invite a whole ship's crew here, and give them a great feed and lots of drink for days at a stretch. Then they would go away, and he would be more solemn and strange for weeks, when he would repeat the operation."

"Why did he do that?"

"People said that years ago a ship he owned mysteriously disappeared in the Pacific Ocean, and he had a hope by questioning sailors from there to get a clue to it."

Nick grew more hopeful. There was no insanity in this. Rather, it verified Captain Eccles' story, and indicated the systematic perseverance of a determined man resolute to pursue a shadow till it gave some semblance of reality to the hope of his life, to learn the fate of the *Star of Hope* and the mystery of the hidden treasure of the far, unknown ocean isle.

The revelations of the man were fascinating to Nick. He listened eagerly as the former continued:

“Then the admiral would advertise for some letter he had lost. Altogether he acted very strange, very strange!”

“And when did he leave here, sir?”

“Only a few weeks ago.”

“Do you know where he went?”

“No. One day he rushed to a real-estate man near here. ‘The object of my life is attained!’ he shouted. [Pg 65] We discovered the lost letter. Sell my house at once—this day, this very hour, at any sacrifice. I must have money to perfect my cherished schemes!’ The notary found a customer who gave \$5,000 for the property—less than half its value. That night the crazy admiral disappeared. We have never seen him since. The boys have had free range of the building since and have nearly ruined it, but the man who bought it is going to build stores here. You seem interested, lad. Do you know the admiral?”

“I wish to see him, sir. He knew my father,” replied Nick.

They talked a little more, then the man passed on.

Nick walked slowly back to the veranda and sat down on the steps, lost in reflection. There was no fiction in Captain Eccles’ story, no madness in Admiral Semmes’ strange movements. He believed firmly that the latter had found the missing letter. How he longed to see him! How the mysticism and romance of all the events centring around the lost ship, the *Star of Hope*, thrilled and fascinated him! [Pg 66]

He must try and find Admiral Semmes—he must write to Captain Eccles and tell him of his discoveries and state his own whereabouts.

What more natural than that the admiral should seek out the captain? And if he did, and an expedition was sent out to search again for the hidden treasure, how he, Nick Collins, would delight in joining it!

Frank and Will stood watching him curiously and did not disturb his meditations. He had told them all about his interview with Captain Eccles, and they discerned that his talk with the man in front of the house had disturbed him somewhat. Finally Nick broke his reverie and told them what he had learned.

“It’s getting late, boys,” he said at the conclusion of his interesting recital. “We must find a place to sleep.”

“Where shall we go?” asked Will.

“We can find a cheap lodging place somewhere.”

“I saw none near here,” said Frank. “Look here, Nick!”

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“Well?”

“The weather is fine and no one will disturb us if we stay here.”

“That’s so!” replied Nick.

“Then let us stay here to-night.”

“I’m willing if you are.”

“We are,” said Frank and Will together.

They placed a couple of broken doors on a slant, spread their coats over them, and were soon in the land of dreams.

SEEKING WORK.

“Work and the admiral!”

These words comprised the motto that kept ringing through Nick Collins’ mind as, early the next morning, he left the deserted house.

They had awakened bright and refreshed from their sleep, and Nick had gone to a neighboring store and bought some things for breakfast, of which all partook heartily. As they ate they made their plans.

“We know where this place is,” said Nick, “and we can meet here to-night, even if we do not stay here—eh, boys?”

“Yes—just the thing!”

“We will all go out and look around. To-night we will return here, meet, and report our success.”

Nick divided the money he had among them, and the trio started forth.

As they came to a business portion of the city they separated. Nick took one street and Frank and Will went down another together.

The first hour was not a very encouraging one to Nick. He kept a sharp outlook for signs bearing the coveted legend, “Boy Wanted,” but no such welcome call to work appeared.

He had gradually passed from the neighborhood of hotels and dry-goods stores to the wholesale district, and thence into the Wall Street section, where bankers, brokers, and financial men generally had their establishments.

He had paused, somewhat wearied and undecided, against a railing of iron outside a building aglare with polished metalwork, and marble, and plate glass, when he saw an open automobile move up to the curb.

The sole occupant and driver of the machine was an elderly, haughty-looking man, who got out leisurely and ascended the white marble steps with an air of proprietorship.

Nick glanced at the gilded inscription over the arched doorway.

A strange, intense look came over his face as he read the same:

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JAMES VAIL,
BROKER.

Marine Loans and Insurance a Specialty.

Somehow the name held his attention. It sounded familiar. Where had he heard it before?

“James Vail—James Vail! Oh! I remember now. Captain Eccles spoke of him. That was the name of the broker who loaned my father and Admiral Semmes the eight thousand dollars on their ship, the *Star of Hope*.”

The discovery was an exciting one to Nick, for it seemed another accidental link in the chain of circumstances attending the mystery of the hidden treasure of the Pacific, in quest of which his father had lost his ship and his life.

Why might not this man, James Vail, know something of the whereabouts of Admiral Semmes? Why might not the admiral, at last securing the long-lost letter, go direct to Vail to report his success and secure his coöperation in finding the treasure?

The impulse to enter the place at once and seek and question James Vail was checked as Nick contrasted his own attire with that of the well-dressed people who were passing in and out of the building.

Perhaps the man who had got out of the automobile was James Vail, and Nick glanced at the car again.

Then he started, and his amazed glance rested upon the vehicle and its vicinage intently curious.

A strange pantomime was going on near it—for it was a pantomime. A ragpicker, with quick, glittering eyes, was traversing the outer edge of the curb and was every moment drawing nearer to the carriage.

He carried a huge bag over his shoulders filled with paper and rags, and as he moved along, to all appearances his eyes were fixed on the ground, as if he were looking for stray pieces of paper.

What fixed Nick's attention, however, was the fact that the man, while he pretended to be absorbed in his gutter quest, in reality had eyes only for the building into which the man from the automobile had just disappeared.

His glance was eager, sly, piercing, and, as he made feints to pick up pieces of paper, he kept nearing the rear of the motor car, stealthily, slowly, surely.

On a front seat at that moment Nick saw a brass-bound portfolio or reticule, and he was convinced that the ragman saw it, too. The latter directed a last watchful glance at the building. No one seemed to be noticing him. Of a sudden he darted to the car. Quick as a flash his deft, bony hand reached toward the seat. With a rapidity that was swift and effective as sleight of hand he grasped the portfolio, popped it into the bag, and started to cross the street.

The boldness and suddenness of the act, for a second or two, left Nick somewhat dazed; but no longer. Another instant and he was down the steps in a bound.

He came upon the ragpicker before he had reached the middle of the street, and laid hold of the bag.

"Stop! stop!" he cried.

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The man tugged at the sack, and then turned a fierce, angry face on Nick.

"Letta alone! Go away! I licka you! Letta go, letta go!" he shouted, reaching his free hand around to strike Nick.

"No. You stole something out of that automobile. Put it back or I will call a policeman!"

"Ah! you boy, I killa you!"

The fierce, revengeful face of the ragpicker was aflame with passion as he tried to wrest the bag from Nick's grasp.

The latter held on, however, and was whirled round and round, always opposite the man.

Suddenly the latter dropped the bag. Like a flash Nick went down, the bag on top of him.

The man caught his throat in an iron grip.

"Help! help! This man is a thief!"

Although nearly choked, Nick clung to the bag. A crowd began to gather. The man who owned the automobile came running out. Several persons in the crowd were ready to help the boy, but the ragpicker made this unnecessary. Directing a vicious kick at young Collins, he fled around a corner.

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Nick struggled to his feet, pale and gasping. A policeman bustled up and seized his arm.

"Here, what's the trouble?" he demanded.

"Arrest that man!" Nick answered, pointing in the direction the ragman had gone.

"What man?"

"The man that owns this bag."

"Ain't this your bag?" asked the policeman suspiciously.

"No."

"What are you doing with it, then?"

"He tried to steal—oh, from your automobile, sir."

Nick had seen the owner of the machine among the bystanders.

"My car?" repeated the man, casting a glance at his automobile.

"Yes, sir."

“What do you mean?”

“That man reached into it and stole—this!”

As he spoke Nick opened the bag and produced the portfolio. The owner of it turned pale.

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“Good gracious!” he ejaculated. “How careless of me to leave it there. Did you stop the man?”

“Yes, sir,” answered Nick quietly.

“A hundred thousand dollars in negotiable securities, and nearly stolen!” murmured the other. “Here, boy!”

He drew some coins from his pocket, looked at them a moment, as if in hesitation, then said:

“Come into the office, boy. I want to see you.”

Nick followed him. The crowd gazed at the young hero of the occasion admiringly.

“Plucky boy! He deserves a hundred for that act,” was the remark of one onlooker.

“Who is it?”

“Vail, the broker. The boy saved him a hundred thousand dollars.”

“No danger of a big reward there! He’s too close-fisted!”

“And needs all his money to pay his honest debts if rumor has it right!”

These and similar comments fell upon Nick’s ears as he mounted the steps of the building, but the broker was too far ahead to hear them.

Mr. Vail ushered Nick into a large countingroom and thence into his private office.

A crafty-faced, smirking man, evidently a manager or confidential clerk, stood at a railed inclosure and looked up inquiringly.

“Trouble outside, Mr. Vail?” he asked.

“I should say so! Loucks, look here!”

“Your portfolio?”

“Yes. I carelessly left it in the automobile and some one stole it.”

“How did you get it back?”

“This boy recovered it.”

“Much in it?”

“All the Speedwell bonds.”

“Well, well! And this boy saved it?” Loucks regarded Nick with a snaky, smirking glance that, while it seemed to express admiration, impressed Nick very unpleasantly.

“We must reward the boy, Loucks.”

“If you please, sir——”

“We must give him a substantial reward.”

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“Let the boy speak, Mr. Vail. What was it, lad?”

“I want no reward, sir.”

Mr. Vail, halfway to his desk, stopped short.

“No reward!” he exclaimed.

“Eminently unselfish and proper!” nodded Loucks, smiling. “Quite right, my lad! Only a duty, eh?”

“Yes, sir, but I would like work.”

Mr. Vail looked relieved at an escape from paying money in reward for Nick’s services. He regarded the boy searchingly for a moment.

“Do you live in the city?” he asked.

“I just came here last night.”

“He looks honest, Loucks. Is there a vacancy?”

“I can make one, sir.”

“Do so. This boy will work cheap.”

“Write your name on that,” said Loucks, handing a pen and paper to Nick.

Nick did so.

“Call at eight o’clock to-morrow morning. Position as messenger. Wages, five dollars a week. If honest and reliable, six dollars after next January. Good day. Boy of sense and honesty! No reward! Excellent! Good day!”

Then, with the same smirking smile, he bowed Nick from the desk, out of the office into the countingroom, and, with a last nod and smile, into the street.

THE YELLOW PACKAGE.

The last few days of Nick Collins' life had been full of surprises, but this last one was too bewildering to realize readily. He had really expected no reward for what he had done for Mr. Vail, but the impatience and indifference of the broker contrasted painfully with the honest, hearty kindness of the railroad engineer.

"I've got a situation, anyhow," reflected Nick as he walked slowly from the place. "It isn't much of a salary, but I will try to make myself useful and worth more in time. This man knew my father and Admiral Semmes. I wonder if he will recognize my name when he sees it, and if he could tell me anything about the admiral?"

The remainder of the day was uneventful to Nick; monotonous, too, for he was eager to begin work and to see Frank and Will, and learn if they had found employment.

Outside of the rushing, excited life of business and the evidences of wealth about him, Nick found but little in the city that was pleasant. For whole blocks he would pass amid squalid houses where poverty and misfortune seemed in their most hideous aspect. The sight of these wretched homes, swarms of ill-clad children, and the absence of trees and flowers, depressed his spirits. A memory of country life, of its serene joys and peacefulness, forced a striking contrast. While the city might be attractive to the seeker after fortune, he told himself, the blessed haunts of nature made life at its leisure purer, and brighter, and nearer to heaven.

He found no difficulty in returning to the former home of Admiral Semmes, and he was compelled to wait for Frank and Will nearly two hours.

The latter was tired, discouraged, and dissatisfied. He had found no work, had wandered to the wharves, been nearly drowned, and voted the city a bore.

Frank had been more fortunate. Finding no regular situation open, he had sold copies of a weekly paper, and by perseverance and hard work had actually made a dollar by his day's labor.

Both the boys were amazed and interested at Nick's story.

"You are always having lucky adventures," said Will.

"Not very lucky. Only five dollars a week," replied Nick.

"But it's a steady place."

"You will find one if you persevere, or I may find one for you," said Nick encouragingly. "We've all done the best we could, boys, and we have reason to be very thankful. Well, boys, what's the program for to-night?"

"Stay here," said Will promptly.

"Yes. It's going to rain, and it's comfortable and economical here," assented Frank.

"Very well, boys," replied Nick, and preparations for supper were soon under way.

It began to rain soon afterward, and they made a bench of some boards and sat on the covered veranda and looked out on the street and talked. Will fell asleep while Nick and Frank were still talking, and soon after the latter lapsed into silence.

Nick was aroused from a fit of reflection abruptly.

"Nick!"

It was Frank's voice, and raised scarcely above a whisper.

Nick regarded his companion inquiringly.

"What is it, Frank?"

"Sh! not so loud."

"Why?"

"We may be heard."

“Who by?”

“A man outside there.”

“What of it?”

“He seems to be watching the house.”

“Nonsense.”

“Maybe it’s some one who might arrest us for staying here?”

“I guess not. He’s only taking a walk.”

“In the rain?”

“That’s so. It does look singular.”

“It’s the third time he has passed the house in the last half hour.”

“Are you sure?”

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“Yes—I’ve been watching him. Now, you wait and he’ll come in sight again.”

“He must walk around the block, then?”

“It looks so, and it looks suspicious, Nick.”

The boys watched the street from their shadowed covert, and sure enough, at the end of a few minutes the same man appeared.

He would walk slowly a few steps, pause, glance at the house across the street, walk on, halt again, and then, reaching the lamp-post near by, take a yellow-covered package from his pocket and hold it conspicuously before him.

Then he would glance searchingly around again and resume his walk, passing out of sight down the block.

“What can it mean?” asked Nick.

“He seems to be expecting some one.”

“Yes.”

“To come for the package?”

“I don’t know.”

“Let’s watch again.”

“All right.”

The result was the same. The man reappeared, went through the same strange movements, and disappeared as before.

Once, twice, three times, four times.

The man came and went, came and went. Always the same searching glances, always the yellow package.

Just as he disappeared the last time, Nick started to his feet excitedly.

“What is it, Nick?” asked Frank.

“The man!”

“He’s gone.”

“Yes, but the package.”

“What of it?”

“He dropped it.”

“I didn’t see him.”

“I did.”

“Where?”

“You can’t see it from here, but I saw it fall.”

“Then it’s on the sidewalk?”

“Just at the edge of the fence. He went to put it back in his pocket, and it slipped and fell to the walk.”

“Go and get it.”

“And give it to him—yes.”

“Shall I go with you?”

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“No. There is no use of both of us getting wet.”

Nick ran down the veranda steps and out to the sidewalk.

Traversing its length, just at the end of the lot he paused and looked around him.

Lying at the edge of the sidewalk in a little puddle of water was a yellow-covered parcel.

Nick picked it up and examined it. It bore no marks or writing, and he saw that the paper was oiled and impervious to moisture, as the water dripped freely from it as he held it up.

It was raining hard, and Nick stepped under the spreading tree near the lamp-post.

What could the package contain? But that was not his affair. His business was to return it to the man who had lost it.

He gazed down the street in the direction that the man had gone.

No one was in sight—the stranger had disappeared.

“He has gone around the block,” decided Nick. “He will be sure to return. I won’t run after him. When he comes this way again I will return it to him.”

He waited. Five—ten—fifteen minutes—half an hour passed, and still the stranger did not return.

“Had I better go in search of him?” Nick asked himself.

He had thrust the package inside his coat and glanced once more searchingly up and down the street.

“Ah, there he comes!”

Yes, some one was coming; but as the man neared Nick, the latter saw at a glance that it was not the owner of the yellow package.

The newcomer, however, was certainly as much an object of curiosity as the other. He was almost hidden in a waterproof coat and his movements were stealthy and suspicious.

Like the other, he scanned the vicinity anxiously.

As he neared Nick the latter could just see a pair of unnaturally bright eyes and the end of a long, snow-white beard.

The man started and shrank back as he caught sight of Nick for the first time.

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Their eyes met.

And then transpired for the startled Nick Collins an event as strange and perplexing as ever fell to the lot of boy or man.

A DEEP MYSTERY.

Whoever the man was, he stared very hard at Nick, and seemed about to address him.

He had come up directly near the lamp-post, and a dash of rain and the wind took back the cloak that enveloped his form as he did so.

Then, in an effort to restore its clinging folds, the face was revealed, and Nick Collins had a full view of it.

It was particularly pale—a white, anxious face, careworn and sad, but eager and excited just now, in keeping with the wild, staring expression of the restless eyes, which shone like two stars of fire.

That face Nick never forgot, and he was destined to see it very soon again under the strangest of circumstances.

Somehow he associated the newcomer with his mysterious predecessor. Almost involuntarily, as if he believed the former to have been sent by the other, Nick took the yellow package from his coat.

As the light fell upon it, and its conspicuous glare of color struck the eyes of the man, he startled Nick by uttering a wild cry, resembling that of some beast of prey.

In a bound he was at Nick's side.

"The yellow package!" he cried, in shrill, eager tones.

"Yes. The man——"

"Give it to me! At last! Here!"

He had torn the parcel from Nick's hand. Fairly gloating over it, he drew a similar package from his cloak, only that it was larger and more compact, and thrust it into the bewildered boy's grasp.

Then with a hunted look about him, as if fearing that some one might be lurking in the shadows to rob him of what he appeared to prize as a great treasure, the man darted off, ran down the thoroughfare, and disappeared around the next corner, leaving the astounded Nick Collins standing beneath the lamp-post, staring vaguely, mutely at the package so deftly substituted for the one he had previously held.

What did it mean? What was the significance of these strange doings? Who were the two men who appeared and disappeared so singularly?

What was their connection one with the other? What was the mystery of the two packages? Nick turned the new package over and over in his hand; he tried vainly to reason out some motive for the action of the men who had come and gone.

Frank called to him from the veranda.

"Nick!"

Collins looked up and down the street, and reluctantly entered the garden and approached the veranda.

"I thought you were going to stay away all night," said Frank.

"I thought so myself," was the other's preoccupied answer.

"Aren't you wet through?"

Nick had not noticed, but believed he was. Frank, who had observed all that had occurred, was keen for information.

"Nick!" he cried sharply.

"Well?"

"What does all of it mean? Rouse up! You seem to be going to sleep."

Nick roused himself.

“Tell me what it all means!” persisted Frank.

“You saw me on the sidewalk?”

“Yes.”

“Well, you know as much as I do.”

“But the man?”

“There were two men.”

“Yes, I know, and the last one?”

Nick related what he had said.

“And he gave you another package?” said Frank.

“Yes.”

“Is that it?”

“Yes.”

Frank looked at the package curiously.

“What do you suppose is in it, Nick?”

“I don’t know.”

“Aren’t you going to open it?”

“It isn’t mine.”

“The man gave it to you.”

“By mistake.”

“Why do you think so?”

“Because it certainly was not intended for me.”

“Whether or not, it is yours now. Open it. That may give us a clue to the owner.”

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“Maybe we had better.”

“Of course we had,” cried the curious Frank.

“Come inside.”

Frank had bought a candle that evening. He lighted it, and took it into a room where the blinds had been carefully closed, so that no light might warn outsiders of their presence there. The boys sat down on the floor, with the candle beside them.

Nick glanced at the outside of the package. It was covered with a piece of manila paper and tied carelessly with a string.

He untied this. The first covering was removed. A second one appeared; it was of thin tissue paper. This was removed.

“Oh, Nick!”

No wonder that Frank gasped out the words and recoiled in wonder. Nick Collins sat speechless, and the contents of the package fell from his nerveless fingers.

Bank notes—fives, tens, twenties!

There was nothing in the package but money.

FIVE THOUSAND DOLLARS.

Never in their life had the boys seen so much money at one time.

They could scarcely believe the evidence of their eyes.

But it was certainly money—genuine wealth—heaps of it, and, for all the outside world might know, it was theirs.

Nick Collins sat staring at it blankly, as if dazed. Frank looked frightened.

“Nick, it’s money!”

“Of course it is, Frank.”

“What shall we do with it?”

Nick began to pick up the scattered bills. As he piled them one upon another he counted them.

He restored them to their original package, tied them up with trembling fingers, and said:

“Frank, it’s strange!”

“Nick, I should say so.”

“Do you know how much there is in that package?”

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“About one million dollars.”

“Not quite as much as that,” said Nick, smiling.

“Half a million?”

“No, five thousand dollars.”

“And we’ve got it?”

Nick looked around cautiously.

“Yes, Frank, and we want to be careful that no one sees us with it.”

“They’ll rob us of it, you mean?”

“Yes, or think that we have stolen it.”

“Well, of all strange things!”

“It’s strange, all right; but I begin to see the light.”

“You do?”

“Yes.”

“What is it?”

“It’s only an idea I have.”

“It may be the right one.”

“Possibly.”

“Tell me about it, Nick.”

“Well, the first man that passed by here had the yellow package.”

“Yes.”

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“He seemed to hold it so that any one expecting to meet him would see it.”

“It looked so.”

“He finally got tired of waiting.”

“Why?”

“Probably he thought that the person he expected wouldn’t come to-night.”

“On account of the rain?”

“I shouldn’t wonder,” said Nick.

“Then what happened?”

“He went away.”

“Losing the package as he went?”

“Without knowing it—yes.”

“What about the second man?”

“He appeared a few minutes later.”

“Yes, Nick.”

“He looked around as if expecting to find some one here.”

“I noticed that.”

“He discovered me.”

“Yes; and then?”

“Well, I was not the person he expected to see, probably, but he eyed me closely. The minute that he saw the package he seemed to be satisfied that he had found out what he had come for. It was not me or any one else he was after, but a package.”

“What did he do next?”

“Just picked up the package and scooted.”

“Leaving the money in its place?”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“Well, I think that the yellow package probably contained valuable papers or something of that sort, found or stolen by the first man. The other was anxious to recover them and pay for them, and he came ready to do so. He supposed that I must be authorized to receive the money, as I had the yellow package, and would not listen to any explanations, but thrust the money upon me.”

“Nick, I believe you are right,” cried Frank.

“Anyway, here is the money. It isn’t ours. It is a large amount, and it will be sought for.”

“What shall we do with it?”

“Keep it for a while. One of the men may return here to-night or to-morrow night. It is our duty to watch for him.”

“And if he does not?”

“Then I will take the money to some bank or public officer and have him advertise for the owner by explaining how it came into our possession.”

This plan was adopted. Nick stowed the money safely away in an inner pocket of his coat, and then they went out again on the veranda.

It was agreed that they would say nothing to Will of the money that night, and they did not disturb him from his slumbers.

Nick and Frank took turns at remaining awake, but the alternate watch until daylight resulted in no return of either of the men of the mysterious packages.

From his last doze Nick awoke as much mystified about the money as ever.

He had dreamed of murder, fire, and thieves. The possession of the money was a burden of care and responsibility to him.

“Five thousand dollars! Why, that is the price the notary paid Admiral Semmes for this house,” he heard the dozing Frank murmur half consciously.

But he noted the coincidence carelessly.

Clever boys sometimes fail to appreciate the importance of trifles.

AT THE OFFICE.

Long before eight o'clock that morning Nick Collins was at the office of James Vail, the broker.

He had bought a collar and tie, a handkerchief, and a neat, cheap hat, and looked quite presentable as he left the boys at the old house.

The money affair had unsettled Frank, but Nick resolutely insisted that it was an outside issue that could have but one result—its restoration to its rightful owner, and he advised the boys to follow out the program of the day previous regarding a quest of work.

The Vail offices were in charge of the janitor when Nick arrived, and the latter, not knowing him, refused to admit him.

Mr. Loucks was there soon after Nick arrived, however, and greeted him with his usual smirk of calmness.

"Ah! early, my boy! That's right. Come in—come in, and I'll tell you what you have to do."

He made Nick sit down when they reached the private office.

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"Well, ready for work, eh?" he asked briskly.

"Yes, sir."

"And willing? That's right. Let's see, Nick is your name?"

"Yes, sir—Nick Collins."

"Yes—yes," and Loucks regarded Nick keenly. "Your parents living?"

"They are both dead, sir."

"Father a farmer, I suppose?"

As Loucks said this his crafty eyes belied the sincerity of the question.

"No, sir—a sailor."

"Ah, yes—a sailor. Merchant service?"

"I believe so, sir. He died when I was quite young, and I don't remember much about him."

This information seemed to please Loucks, for he changed the subject at once and began to inform Nick of his duties as messenger.

"See how snug and cozy we make you," he said, as he led Nick to a closet between the countingroom and the private office. "You see, it's a sort of sentry box. When you're not busy you can look out of the window. You see two ground-glass slides here. Do you know what they are for?"

"No, sir."

"Tap! That is the bell for the countingroom, and you open the slide on that side, thus," and Loucks briskly manipulated the sash. "Then the caller nods for you to come to him, or calls his orders to you. Same way on other side, only tap! tap! is our signal."

"Yours and Mr. Vail's, sir?"

"Yes, ours. We are the same as partners," remarked Loucks, with an effort at conscious dignity and pride; "that is—hem!—I am a kind of confidential partner, but of course I tell you this in confidence."

"Yes, sir."

The clerks began to arrive soon afterward, and later still Mr. Vail himself appeared.

He took no notice of Nick until he called him to take a letter to a bank near by, and his face wore a preoccupied look whenever Nick glanced at him.

Nick was kept quite busy during the morning, running errands and helping carry the enormous ledgers and other blank books for the clerks to and from the vault.

In the afternoon, however, he was comparatively idle. After two o'clock he sat in the closet to which he had been apportioned, and had no orders until the clerks began to leave for the day.

Then Loucks came to him.

"Stay till five o'clock, Nick," he said. "I may want to send you on a special errand."

"Very well, sir."

Nick soon tired of watching the court from the closet. Whoever had preceded him in the office as messenger evidently had experienced the same weariness, for the windows on both sides had been scraped bare of the white paint in patches, and Nick could see perfectly both into the countingroom and Mr. Vail's private office.

More than that, as the hubbub of daily toil in the first-named apartment subsided, he found that sounds from the office occupied by the broker and Loucks were perfectly audible in his little waiting room.

A small, broken piece of glass in one corner of the sash, evidently pried out by his curious predecessor, paid off his effect.

As Nick sat there he could both see and hear all that transpired in the private office.

He did not suppose that the dry details of business would interest him, but almost unconsciously he found himself listening to the monotonous humdrum tones of Loucks' voice.

The latter seemed to be reading to his employer a statement of the business of the office. As he concluded, Mr. Vail made a startling remark.

"Well, Loucks," he said, "that's the balance—that's the outlook, is it?"

"Yes, Mr. Vail."

"Then it's ruin!"

Nick started in surprise.

"Ruin it is at those figures, sir."

"Is there no way out of it?"

"There is."

"What?"

Nick, glancing through the window, saw the snaky Loucks move nearer to Vail.

"You must leave all to me, sir."

"What do you mean, Loucks?"

"I mean crash, ruin, protested notes, bankruptcy! The business has been running at a loss for a year. If we can tide over another year, I know one or two schemes that we can set in motion, work, terminate, and go out of business rich men."

"You do?"

"Yes."

"What are they?"

"Rather risky, but sure."

"Well?"

"The Speedwell estate."

"What about it?"

"Negotiate the securities lying in the vault, and secure a temporary loan to tide over present difficulties."

If ever there was a tempter's face shown, it was Loucks' just then. The broker turned pale.

"No! no!" he cried. "Are you mad, Loucks? That would be fraud."

Loucks smiled calmly.

“And what, then, sir, may I ask?”

“Arrest—disgrace.”

“If found out—yes; but trust me that no one can ever find us out. No, sir. Use the securities, borrow a sum adequate to tide us over, and rely on me to bring things about all right.”

James Vail seemed to be in mental misery at the words of Loucks.

“How can you do that?” he asked.

“Never mind how, but I can give you one hint. You know the *Vista*?”

“Our old ship in the West Indies trade?”

“Exactly, sir.”

“What of it?”

“She’s past her best, you know.”

“Yes.”

“Cost thirty thousand dollars and worth ten thousand dollars.”

“Well?”

“Insure her for her full cost. Suppose she should burn some night?”

The broker was startled; so was Nick at the crime involved in Loucks’ suggestion. Plainly Loucks was a scoundrel—his employer a weak, wavering man.

At that moment there came an interruption.

Tap! tap!

“Some one is at the office door, Loucks,” said Vail.

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Loucks glided to the door and opened it.

The janitor stood there, a man behind him.

“Some one to see Mr. Vail, sir,” he said.

“It is past business hours——” began Loucks.

“I must see him!” declared the visitor, pushing his way past the janitor.

“Mr. Vail is engaged, I tell you,” said Loucks.

“He will see me.”

“What is your business, sir?”

“That I can tell to him only.”

“And your name?”

“Admiral Semmes.”

To this rapid talk Nick had listened intently. As that name was spoken he could not repress a start of wonder, doubt, and joy. He had not yet seen the face of the newcomer. Loucks also looked startled.

Vail, at the desk, arose quickly to his feet.

“Show him in—show the admiral in,” he said quickly.

The stranger strode across the floor with rapid, nervous tread.

“Mr. Vail, do you remember me?” he asked, extending his hand to the broker.

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“Perfectly. Close the door, Loucks.”

Nick Collins recoiled, with a faint cry.

He had caught a fine glimpse of the face of the man who announced himself as Admiral Semmes.

He might well be amazed, for the visitor was no other than the man who, the night before, had so mysteriously given him the package containing the five thousand dollars!

EVIL PLOTTERS.

Nick recognized the admiral readily, as much by his quick movements and bent form as from a memory of his snow-white beard and keen, penetrating eyes as revealed in the street-light glow the previous night.

He was attired in a threadbare suit, and resembled some veteran of war service, an air of dignity being apparent even beneath his nervous manner.

Nick was glad that the admiral had come to light at last, doubly glad now that he had not questioned Vail as to his probable whereabouts.

In view of the developments of the hour Nick felt that he could scarcely venture to trust James Vail with the money—the \$5,000.

He would wait until the admiral had left the office, when he would follow him, return the money, and hope for an explanation of what the strange proceedings of the past might signify.

Vaguely Nick began to comprehend a plot about the money in which the story of Captain Eccles was involved. He believed that once he could see the admiral alone much that was now obscure would be made plain to him.

Vail had grasped the admiral's hand and motioned him to a seat.

"It is many years since we met," said the admiral. "Mr. Vail, I should like to see you alone."

The admiral glanced at Loucks as he spoke.

Vail made the latter a quick signal, and he retired within a railed inclosure and pretended to busy himself at a desk, although Nick noticed that his crafty eyes watched the visitor intently.

"Mr. Loucks is my confidential associate in business," explained Vail, "and you can freely give me your confidence before him."

"Very well, Mr. Vail."

"What is it, admiral?"

"You say you remember me?"

"Perfectly."

"You remember loaning me and a friend eight thousand dollars ten years ago?"

"Yes, I recall it distinctly."

"That friend was Captain Collins."

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"Of the merchant service."

"And the ship——"

"The *Star of Hope*."

"You have a good memory, I see," said the admiral.

"I ought to have in that affair."

"Why so?"

"My loan was secured by insurance on the *Star of Hope*."

"Well?"

"And the companies for a time refused to pay it, claiming that there was no evidence that the ship was ever lost."

"Well, I guess it was, and my poor friend, Captain Collins, drowned. But that is all passed, Mr. Vail, and my visit here is on more recent and vital issues. I come to you as our business friend of the past to place at your

disposal a great fortune.”

The admiral’s tone grew slightly more earnest and excited as he spoke these words.

“What!” ejaculated Vail, starting eagerly.

“A fortune, I say. After many years’ waiting it is mine.”

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The effect of this statement was to bring into Vail’s face an expression of all the latent avarice of his nature. Loucks had also been deeply impressed by the words, for he leaned forward at his desk, a hungry look in his sinister face.

“That fortune,” cried the admiral, with flashing eyes, “is there!”

He had drawn an object from his pocket and brought it down with a resounding slam on the desk at which the broker sat.

Nick Collins had a new surprise at the sight of the parcel in Admiral Semmes’ hand. It was the yellow package—the one he had found the night before in front of the dismantled house, and had exchanged to the admiral for the bundle of bank notes.

“Does that contain the money—the fortune?” asked Vail eagerly.

“No, Mr. Vail, but it is the key to the fortune.”

“The key?”

“Yes—the clue to a treasure estimated to be worth over a quarter of a million of dollars.”

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The broker looked somewhat disappointed, still he evinced an unmistakable interest in the package.

“Do you remember what the *Star of Hope* was fitted out for?” asked the admiral.

“Yes. For a South American cruise.”

“After treasure.”

“I heard something of that. The ostensible voyage was for coffee from Brazil.”

“That was to hide our secret and prevent others pursuing our line of quest. Listen.”

To absorbed listeners, in graphic, eloquent words, Admiral Semmes repeated the story of the sunken treasure already narrated to Nick Collins by Captain Eccles at Parkdale.

As he proceeded, the zest of a man deeply in earnest, and in love with fixed convictions, made him greatly excited. He told of the two letters, or, rather, of the one cut in two at Valparaiso by Captain Collins on his outward-bound voyage.

“That letter revealed the hiding place of the sunken treasure,” said the admiral. “Half of the letter arrived in safety and was received by Captain Eccles. That he gave to me. The other half was never mailed, or miscarried, it seems, for although we waited for nearly a year it did not arrive. Eccles, after the news of the wreck of the *Star of Hope*, abandoned the secret and the treasure as irretrievably lost.”

“And you?” asked Vail.

“I never lost faith in a hope that some day the dream of my life would be realized, and I would recover the lost clue. To that end I devoted health, money, patience, time. I visited every ship from Pacific waters that came to New York. I made friends with the crews. I fêted them: I questioned them. It was of no avail. No one had seen a trace of the wrecked *Star of Hope*.

“Then I began to advertise for the lost half of Captain Collins’ letter. I even advertised in the Spanish-American papers and tried to trace the letter from Valparaiso. About six weeks ago I received a strange letter from the South. A man signing himself Don Felisterra, and claiming to be a Brazilian, wrote me that he could produce the paper I wanted. He wanted a price for it—five thousand dollars. Would I give it? I telegraphed him four decisive words in reply.”

“What were they?” queried the interested Vail.

“Simply these: ‘Come to New York.’”

“Did he do so?”

“Yes. Four days since I received a second letter from him. For some reason Felisterra was very cautious and suspicious. He evidently feared that he would not get the money—he seemed to fear deception or trouble, or else he was a criminal who wished to evade being seen publicly. At any rate, he told me to meet him near my former residence.”

“Your former residence?”

“Yes—I sold it for the five thousand dollars to buy the paper. I was to meet him or a messenger he would send after dark on a certain night—last night. He would have a yellow package in his hand containing the document in question. I was to exchange the money for it, ask no questions, and make no attempt to follow Felisterra or have him followed.”

“A strange arrangement!” murmured Vail.

“Yes, but I agreed to it.”

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“And went to the place indicated?”

“Promptly.”

“With the money?”

“Certainly.”

“Ready to give it possibly to a swindler who would palm off a worthless piece of paper upon you for the money?”

“I risked that, and I would have risked double if I had had it and it was necessary.”

“Was the man there?”

“No, but his messenger was—a boy.”

“You obtained the yellow package?”

“Yes, and exchanged the money for it and went home. Oh, the profound happiness of the moment when I opened this precious yellow package and perused its contents!”

“It contained what you expected?”

“The other half of the letter, written by Captain Collins in Valparaiso, Chili, ten years ago—yes. It matched the half I had unmistakably. It indicates the course at sea to the island, to the treasure itself, so that any sailor could find it. Think of it, Mr. Vail—a quarter of a million of dollars! It is mine, all mine, except the share that goes to Eccles and to any family Collins may have left.”

There was no mistaking the fact that Vail was deeply impressed with the admiral’s story. He believed it to be true, believed in the treasure—and envied this man his possession of the key to its secret.

“Oh! I almost forgot to tell you the outcome of Felisterra’s schemes,” said the admiral. “A strange fatality happened to him.”

“How was that?”

“I don’t know.”

“Have you any theory?”

The admiral paused before answering, as if in thought. At length he said:

“I had a theory.”

“What is it?”

“Well, I figured out that he robbed or killed some man in South America and found the letter, which probably had been picked up somewhere.”

“Why do you think this?” asked Vail.

“I don’t say that I do think so now; but I did, and it was because Felisterra was so cautious.”

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“Why don’t you think so now?”

“Because I know better.”

“Well?”

“Early this morning,” the admiral went on, “a man came to the hotel where I have been living recently—a policeman.”

“To see you?”

“Yes.”

“What about?”

“About Felisterra. It seems that the man must have had enemies who were pursuing him. Probably he received the money from the messenger he sent to meet me, and started on his way home.”

“I don’t quite follow you, admiral,” said Vail. “Has anything happened to Felisterra?”

“I should say something had happened to him,” was the old mariner’s reply.

“What was it?”

“He was found late last night only two blocks away from my old home, a dagger in his breast.”

“Dead?”

“Yes, indeed.”

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“How did you hear of it?”

“The police found my name in a memorandum book on the body, and came to me for information. I suppose they thought I might know something about the murder even if I didn’t have a hand in it.”

“Could you give them any clue?”

“No. The assassin is unknown, and probably never will be found.”

“Has anything been learned as to this Felisterra’s past?” asked the broker.

“Yes,” the admiral answered. “From the memorandum book I learned that he had been an outlaw in the Andes, and had a terrible enemy in the person of another outlaw, who had sworn to kill him. Probably this man followed him from place to place, came up with him at last in this city, and made good his threat.”

“Did you learn anything else?”

“Yes. The memorandum showed also that in a robbery of the mail—committed probably by some band of South American desperadoes—my letter had been found and preserved for its strangeness.”

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“How came Felisterra to visit this country—this city?”

“It was the result of a chance reading, on his part, of a newspaper advertisement. Poor fellow! They’ve taken his body away for burial. His money is gone, but the secret of the treasure I have pierced at last.”

“And what do you intend to do with it?” asked Vail, his eyes glinting with interest.

“Make use of it,” the admiral answered promptly.

“You will go in search of the treasure?”

“Certainly.”

“Alone?”

“Certainly not. I’m getting along in years, Mr. Vail, but I’m not a fool.”

“I didn’t think you were, admiral. Well, what do you propose?”

“First of all, sir, let me tell you that I am a pauper. This paper cost me the last dollar I had in the world, but I do not care for that. I must have a ship, capital, coöperation in this great undertaking.”

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“How do you expect to get these things?”

“Oh,” replied the admiral, with a wave of his hand, “any capitalist would finance a surely paying enterprise like this.”

“I understand, admiral. You have come to me——”

“To place in your hands a fortune,” broke in the confident old sailor. “You loaned me money before. Loan it to me now. Advance enough to man a ship and provision it, and I will give you——”

“How much?” asked Vail eagerly.

“One-eighth of the treasure recovered.”

The broker was disappointed, but concealed his feelings. After pretending to think a moment, he said:

“I might lend you a hand, admiral.”

“You might!” repeated the older man. “Will you—yes or no?”

“Yes—if your story is true.”

“My story true!” cried Semmes excitedly. “Look for yourself! I’m not afraid to let you read the description, for it is too complicated to be committed to memory. Besides, I know you to be an honorable man.”

He opened the package as he spoke, and produced two halves of a yellow, timeworn letter, pasted on a single sheet of paper. At sight of it Vail’s face took on a pallid hue, and a crafty look came into his eyes.

“Loucks,” he said, extending the hand that held the letter over the railing of the desk compartment, “just cast your eye over that. See if there is anything in it that would warrant us making an investigation of the admiral’s scheme.”

So calm and businesslike were the broker’s manner and tone that Semmes suspected no unfair play. Nevertheless, he kept his eyes on the precious paper until Vail, for a moment, distracted his attention from Loucks, who sat at a desk and spread the letter before him. When he turned again to watch the confidential associate of Vail the latter made a quick sign to Loucks, which the admiral did not see. That sign meant plainly, “Copy it—quick!”

“I believe that the venture is a good one, admiral,” said Vail, resuming his seat.

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“It is sure, and bound to be highly profitable.”

“And one-eighth is all you will give to me if I capitalize the expedition?”

“Absolutely all. The amount at issue is so large that——Hold on, there!”

Admiral Semmes sprang excitedly to his feet.

“What’s the matter?” asked Vail.

“My paper! See what he’s doing!”

“Mr. Loucks is only examining it, as I requested him to do. You don’t think we’re going to buy a pig in a poke?”

“He’s doing more than look at it!” exclaimed the old seaman. “He’s copying it. That’s what he’s doing.”

“Well, if we go in with you, haven’t we a right——”

“No copies, I say,” broke in Semmes. “I won’t have it!”

He reached over the railing and tried to seize the paper, but Loucks moved away.

“Here, you!” the admiral cried. “Give me my paper.”

Loucks only grinned.

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Then Vail showed his true colors. He laid hold of Semmes and held him back from the railing.

“You’ll get your paper, admiral,” he said, “when we have made a copy of it.”

“But you’ve no right to copy it!”

“What! Not when we are going to join you in the enterprise?”

“You may not join me.”

“We want a copy, anyway.”

“What right——”

“Oh, I’ve got plenty of right on my side,” sneered Vail, “if that’s what’s worrying you.”

“Right on your side!” fumed the admiral. “What is it, I should like to know?”

“There is an unpaid claim of interest on the *Star of Hope* mortgage,” Vail answered exultantly. “You’ll not have the courage to deny that.”

This reply bewildered the admiral for a moment. He stared vaguely at the crafty man before him, then, with a cry of rage, made another rush for the railing.

“You scoundrel!” he roared. “I see that I’ve fallen into the hands of a thief.”

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Vail stepped before the admiral to keep him back. The men clinched. There was a brief struggle. The old admiral was thrown to the floor. In the fall his head struck an iron post of the railing. An ugly wound was the result, and Nick, from his boxlike inclosure, saw the blood flow as Semmes lay white and motionless on the floor.

A BRAVE BOY'S RESOLVE.

Nick Collins' first impulse was to rush from his place of concealment and call the police. But he did not do so, probably because a desire to see what Vail and Loucks would do held him to his point of observation.

Evidently Vail had not intended to inflict bodily injury on the admiral, and the serious result of his interference with the old man filled him with fear for the consequences.

For a minute or two he stood looking down at the prostrate, motionless figure on the floor, and then he turned to Loucks. The latter had ceased his work of copying the letter, and was leaning on the rail beside his employer.

"Loucks," said Vail gravely, "this is bad work."

Loucks came from behind the rail, bent down, and examined the face of the admiral.

"What do you think of it?" asked the broker.

Loucks, intent on his examination, did not answer.

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"Is he—dangerously hurt?" faltered Vail.

"No, I think not," was the other's answer. "But he breathes strangely."

"What does that mean?"

"Can't say exactly, but I don't like it."

"What shall we do?"

"Leave it to me," said Loucks reassuringly.

"But what—what is—to be done?" asked Vail anxiously.

"Oh, don't get frightened," Loucks muttered. "We're not responsible for accidents. Our main care should be for the paper."

"That's so. Give the paper to me."

Loucks handed the bit of writing to Vail, then started to leave the room.

"Where are you going?" asked his employer, in surprise.

"For a doctor."

"Is it as bad as that?"

"Best to be on the safe side. If he should die on our hands it might be awkward for us. Here, Nick!"

Loucks had entered the outer office, and approached the door of the messenger's closet.

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Nick Collins fully realized that fate, in leading him to a knowledge of the dark plots of these evil men, had made him seemingly the guardian of an imperiled man's interests. He therefore feigned sleep and closed his eyes as Loucks opened the closet door.

"Here, Nick, wake up! wake up!"

Nick started to his feet.

"An errand, sir?" he asked, in as calm a tone as he could command.

"Yes—run for a doctor."

"Where, sir?"

"The nearest doctor is in the Hills Building, around the corner. A client has fallen in the office, and needs medical care."

Nick sped away with a pounding, anxious heart. He could only think of obeying orders just now.

When he returned in five minutes a professional-looking man accompanied him.

Nick followed him into the private office and watched his ministrations to the injured admiral with an anxious face.

The admiral had recovered motion but not consciousness. He moved restively and moaned incoherent words and sentences.

The physician looked puzzled, and his face grew graver and graver as the minutes passed by.

"The hurt is a trivial one," he said, "a mere scalp wound, yet its effect alarms me. Who is the gentleman, sir?"

"A chance visitor who came here to borrow money," said Loucks. "He fell as he was leaving the office."

"Did he seem rational when he came here?"

"Scarcely," replied Vail. "He seemed to be entertaining some delusion regarding an immense amount of money."

"Ah! that explains it. I would advise you to get him to his friends."

"We do not know them."

"Then to some hospital. He needs watching and care more than medicine. The fall evidently has precipitated a long-threatened mental trouble. I may be mistaken, gentlemen, but all the indications tend to the distressing conclusion that when the patient recovers consciousness he will be hopelessly insane."

Nick Collins heard this with a sinking heart. A sense of responsibility for the safety of the old friend of his father had grown upon the lad in the last few minutes. Admiral Semmes was friendless now, at the mercy of unscrupulous and powerful plotters. Who would protect his interests? Who would wrest the stolen secret of the treasure of the Western deep from the clutches of these cruel, heartless schemers?

"Heaven help me to be a friend to this lonely old man in his misery and misfortune!" was the wish that Nick breathed.

EVENTS OF A DAY.

“What the dickens is the matter, Nick?”

It was Frank Alden who asked the question, and its anxious tone was caused by Nick’s long, woebegone face. He had just appeared at the old house, which was still the home of the three adventurers.

Nick told his story, and if ever there were three startled and interested listeners to a recital they were certainly Frank and Will Alden. Nick took them through all the exciting events at the broker’s office.

“And what became of the admiral?” Frank asked, when Nick had finished his narrative of the events of which the reader is cognizant.

“They took him to a hospital.”

“Where?”

“I could not learn.”

“Why, Nick!” exclaimed the other boys, in a tone of rebuke.

“I couldn’t help it,” Nick explained. “They got me out of the office—sent me on an errand, and [when] I returned the admiral was gone—taken away in an ambulance, I heard. The office was locked up, and there was nothing for me to do but come home.”

“That’s too bad,” said Frank. “But I don’t see that you are to blame.”

“Of course you are not, Nick,” chimed in Will.

“Boys,” said Nick, “I’m terribly cut up about it. It seems as if the old man’s misfortune is my own.”

“It is, isn’t it?”

“In a way, yes; for my father was part owner in the treasure.”

“I know what I’d do!” cried Will.

“What?” asked Nick eagerly.

“I’d—I’d have those men arrested.”

“Who?”

“Vail and Loucks.”

Nick smiled at Will’s greenness.

“What would you have them arrested for, Will?” he asked.

“For stealing the paper.”

“I couldn’t prove that.”

“Then have them arrested for knocking down the admiral.”

“They would deny it all and get me into trouble,” replied the keen but cautious Nick.

“One thing is certain,” said Will. “I wouldn’t work another day for such villains.”

“I don’t think that would be a good plan, either,” returned Nick.

“What! You don’t mean to say you’re going to stay in their office after all that has happened?”

“I certainly am,” replied Nick calmly.

“But they are the wickedest kind of men.”

“I know it, Will, and it’s just on that account I’m going to remain in their employ.”

“I understand what you mean, Nick!” cried Frank.

“Do you?”

“Yes. You’re going to stay there and keep an eye on them.”

“You’ve hit it. Don’t you see now, Frank?” said Nick. “Unless some one watches them, and beats them in their scheme, they will succeed.”

“Then you’re going to watch them?”

“Yes; and I’m going to beat them, too,” Nick answered confidently. “Look here. This is their game, as I figure it out: They mean to rob the admiral by sending for the treasure or going to it themselves. They don’t suspect how much I heard and know. Don’t question me any more, boys. I want to think.”

So the boys let him alone. Not only did Nick think, but he acted, as well, that very evening. He went out and bought a pen, ink, and some paper, and by the light of the candle wrote a long letter to Captain Eccles, at Parkdale.

He related all that had occurred since his arrival in the city, for he knew that it would prove of the utmost interest and importance to the captain. He mailed the letter that night. It asked Captain Eccles’ advice, and suggested that he come to New York, find his friend, the admiral, take charge of the \$5,000 belonging to him, which Nick had, and help Nick to regain possession of the stolen letter. He wrote out a careful description of the place where the boys were making their home, so that the captain might find it easily.

When his letter was in the mail box Nick set his mind at work to devise some means of getting hold of the stolen writing. He realized that this would prove a very difficult task, for he had shrewd as well as unscrupulous men to deal with. He decided that his stay in the broker’s office would be very brief, once he had gained possession of the all-important letter.

Frank and Will had been offered work in a printing establishment, so the boys all left their temporary home early the next morning.

Nick arrived at the broker’s office on time. After Mr. Loucks got there the lad went into the private room of the head of the concern to tidy up the desks. Although he kept a watchful eye, he saw no traces of the tragedy of the night before, and caught no sign of the letter stolen from Admiral Semmes.

Evidently Loucks had not the faintest suspicion that Nick knew anything at all of the important events attending the visit of the old sailor, for he scarcely noticed the boy that morning, and treated him carelessly. [Pg 134]

Nick, on his part, was on the alert. He had resolved to hear the first words exchanged by Vail and his confidential man when they should meet. And luck was with him, for when the two came face to face for the first time since the admiral was taken to the hospital, Nick happened to be in his little messenger’s closet, where he could hear as well as see.

The broker’s countenance was pale and wore a worried look, and Nick guessed that he had passed a sleepless night.

“What news, Loucks?” he asked eagerly.

“About—our man?”

“The admiral—yes.”

“All charming and serene,” Loucks answered, with a crafty wink and a chuckle.

Nick noted that he was more familiar than ever in his manner toward his employer. He said neither “Sir” nor “Mr. Vail.” Evidently the comradeship of crime had broken down the last barrier of respect between these two.

“What do you mean?” Vail demanded, in a low tone.

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“Haven’t we got everything our own way?”

“Explain.”

“Why, you have the paper.”

“Yes—the treasure clue.”

“The hospital has the man. The situation looks pretty good to me.”

“Did you go to the hospital this morning?” Vail asked, after pondering the other’s words a moment.

“Yes.”

“How is he?”

“Nothing to be feared from that quarter.”

“Why?”

“The man is a raving maniac.”

Vail, not yet wholly hardened to guilt, quailed a little at this.

“Well,” he said presently, as if to still the voice of conscience, “we didn’t make him a maniac.”

“Of course not,” chimed in Loucks, with a grin. “It was an accident.”

“And as Semmes owes us some back interest——”

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“Very far back, and very misty, Vail,” put in the other, whistling lowly.

The broker frowned at the other’s familiarity, but did not rebuke him with words.

“Well, it’s a pity to have all that treasure lying idle,” he went on.

“Right you are.”

“Especially at this time.”

“When we need the money.”

“Exactly. No one knows about it but us.”

It was Nick’s turn to smile, and he did so, taking in every word they uttered, although, in his closet, he seemed to be paying attention to nothing in particular.

“One thing is certain,” Loucks said. “The admiral will never be able to claim anything in this life.”

“But suppose, by an unlucky chance, he should?” said Vail anxiously.

“That chance is so long as not to be worth thinking about,” returned the broker’s associate. “But if he should claim it, isn’t one-eighth of it ours?”

“I suppose so,” replied Vail absently.

“No one even knows that the admiral is at the hospital. He seems to have no friends or relatives. His partner is dead.”

“Captain Collins?”

“Yes.”

“But his son lives. Funny he stumbled across us, eh, Vail? Little he suspects, though. Well, go on.”

“So I have decided to act.”

“At once?”

“Yes.”

“How? Go for the treasure?”

“Exactly.”

“Not yourself?”

“Yes, myself. Why not?”

“But the office business here?”

“You must take care of that.”

“We need money.”

“Raise it by a loan for a year on the Speedwell estate.”

“We can do that.”

“Long before it is due I will have returned with the treasure.”

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"If you don't get wrecked."

"Oh, I don't worry about that."

"But you've got to find the treasure," remarked Loucks.

"I can't fail."

"Are the directions explicit?"

"Very."

"Where is the letter?"

"I put it in my private box in the vault."

"We divide on the result, don't we?" asked Loucks greedily.

"Dollar for dollar."

"Good. That is fair, and I am with you to the end. Now, what is the program?"

"To raise money, first."

"I'll attend to that."

"To get the business here in running shape for a year."

"Money will do it."

"To buy or charter a ship."

"That's easy."

"Secure a crew."

"Yes."

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"And start for the treasure island."

A visitor on business here interrupted the colloquy, and that was all Nick heard spoken by the plotters that day that bore on the subject so prominent in his mind.

Later, however, he overheard a brief conversation that startled him. Loucks, opening a letter that had come in the mail, uttered an ejaculation of dissatisfaction.

"Bad eggs from a broken basket!" he cried savagely.

"What's the matter, Loucks?" asked Vail.

"A young scapegrace relative of mine in trouble, and he is being sent to me to reform."

"Who is he?"

"His name is Jack Benson."

Nick Collins started.

"He's been getting in serious trouble. Ah, I have it. He might be useful on a ship, and a cruise at sea might steady him down somewhat. Could he not go with you?"

"Well, we'll see about it," replied Vail carelessly.

All that day the broker was busy figuring and writing, and seemed to be anxious to complete all the office work so as to get time to attend to preparations for the voyage for the treasure.

Nick did his work that day in a mechanical sort of a way. He had yet to accomplish the task he had set for himself—the wresting of the admiral's letter from the hands of his enemies.

Nick's heart failed him when, at about three o'clock that afternoon something happened to indicate that Captain Eccles, even if he came to the city at once, would arrive too late to prevent the success of the plotters' schemes.

The secret of the treasure was henceforth a divided secret, for when Vail left the office for the day Loucks went stealthily to the vault and returned soon after with a folded paper. It had a yellow covering—it was the halved letter of Admiral Semmes.

Evidently Loucks was guilty of double-dealing, and unknown to Vail had a key to his private box. Nick saw him proceed to copy the paper, letter for letter. The wily Loucks apparently intended to make sure that his individual rights should be protected.

He returned the letter to the vault and folded the copy and placed it in his pocket with a sinister smile of satisfaction.

Then he came to Nick, his hat and gloves in hand.

"I'm going home for the day, Nick," he said.

"Yes, sir."

"And the bookkeeper may remain some time. You wait until he goes and see that the vault is securely locked, and notify the janitor to close up."

"I will, sir."

Loucks departed. Nick glanced into the countingroom. There was but one person there, the bookkeeper poring over his ledgers.

A wild impulse thrilled Nick to a desperate movement. The vault door was ajar as Loucks had left it. Within that vault was the broker's private box which contained the clue to the treasure.

Could he but obtain that, and place it and the money in Captain Eccles' hands, what better outfit for a voyage in quest of the treasure could they ask?

Even if Vail and Loucks, relying on the copy to pursue the same course, should be rivals in the quest, what chance for success had they against a skilled mariner like Captain Eccles?

It would only be a question of speed and activity. The temptation was too great to be resisted. The paper in the vault belonged to Admiral Semmes. His friend and partner was Captain Eccles. Nick determined to secure it.

Once that resolve was made he was reckless of consequences. He stole cautiously toward the vault.

The bookkeeper seemed about to close his books, but he did not glance toward Nick, and the latter kept on his way.

He was all atremble with suspense, fear and uncertainty. The venture was a bold one. A new employee of the place and comparatively unknown, if discovered in the vault his presence there would be regarded as having a criminal purpose.

He reached the iron door and pushed it quickly, gently back. He crossed the threshold and then the stone floor.

Around, on all sides, were wooden shelves, and boxes, and rows of pigeonholes. Account books, tin boxes, small safes, and bundles of papers were arranged in bewildering confusion.

He had seen the tin box which Vail sometimes brought to his desk from the vault, but there were several like it, and he could not in the dim light of the place distinguish the one he sought.

Besides, even if he succeeded in finding it, he knew that it would be locked and time and patience would be required to get access to its contents.

He felt discouraged and disappointed. He had half a mind to abandon his hastily formed project as impossible, and even started to leave the vault.

Then he recoiled in terror.

Hasty footsteps were coming toward the vault.

"The bookkeeper," murmured Nick, in affright. "I shall be discovered."

He could not hope to escape through the open door without being seen.

He glanced wildly about him. The bookkeeper had probably come after a book and would soon return to his desk.

If he could hide safely during his brief visit Nick felt assured that he could later escape unperceived.

There was a kind of cabinet at one end of the vault that was partly empty. It contained only a few rolls of paper—plans, maps, and the like. To this refuge Nick sprang quickly, hid himself within its narrow confines, and drew close the door.

The bookkeeper entered the vault with an armful of books and threw them on a shelf. Then he started to leave the place. Nick uttered a sigh of relief, but in the next instant a gasp of dismay and alarm.

As the bookkeeper left the vault he closed the ponderous outer door securely, making the boy a prisoner.

A NIGHT OF SUSPENSE.

Nick sprang from his covert the moment that the door closed. He realized in a flash that the bookkeeper had made his final visit to the vault, had put his books away for the night, secured the receptacle for the valuable papers of the broker's office, and was probably now about to leave the place, all unconscious of the boy he had shut in a living tomb.

No ray of light penetrated the vault now. Its air was close. What if it had no outlet for ventilation? Would he be shut in to a slow and horrible death by suffocation?

The thought was terrible to Nick.

He sprang to the ponderous iron door and beat upon it. He shouted and screamed for help. Only the dull and hollow echoes of his own voice ringing through the confined, metal-bound vault replied.

Finally exhausted, he sank to the marble floor in despair. No sound from the outside reached him, and perhaps his own cries would have been inaudible even if any one was just outside the vault door. The bookkeeper probably had gone away now, and the office was locked and abandoned for the night. No one probably would visit it until the janitor came for his early morning rounds.

Nick strove bravely to be calm, and to reason to some definite purpose. He remembered that there was an electric light in the vault, and he began to feel around for the button by which to switch it on. He found it at last, and quickly the darkness was dispelled. The light illuminated the place brightly, and gave the captive new courage.

Next he looked around to see if there was not some means of ventilation, and he leaped with joy to find a small iron grating in a corner, which covered a flue that communicated with the outer air somehow, or, at least, with the large rooms that composed the broker's offices.

With light and an assurance of air, Nick felt that he was in no immediate danger. It was only a matter of patience now. Twelve hours or more to morning! How should he pass the time? He tried to be cheerful, and drive away the haunting dread of discovery in the morning.

"There will be some way of escape," he told himself. "When they open the vault in the morning I will say that I was accidentally shut in here, which is the truth. I certainly did not get shut in from choice."

One thing was certain. He had plenty of time to form whatever plan he should adopt when the moment came to account for his presence in the vault. He thought of everything, but finished by deciding that there was only one thing for him to do when the door of the vault should be thrown open. That was to get out of the office as quickly as he could, and never come back again. He realized that the execution of this plan would be beset by difficulties, but it was the best he could hit upon, so he dismissed the subject from his mind, and turned his attention to what had brought him into his present predicament.

"The paper!"

The clue to the treasure was now as good as in his possession. He had only to look around a bit and find it. It must be in the broker's box of private papers. More than once he had seen Loucks carry that box into the vault.

"I came here to get it. I need time to do so, and time—well," he mused, with a grim smile, "I've got nothing but time on my hands."

He began a close examination of the shelves, and at last brought his search down to the tin boxes only. There were several almost alike. At last he came across one bearing the initials "J. V."

"This is it!" he exclaimed.

The lid was fastened by a small padlock. Nick placed the box on a shelf at a convenient height and examined the lock. He set to work trying to manipulate the lock so as to force it open. But it was rather a complicated affair, and baffled all his effort. While he was working at it the hook of the padlock snapped in two.

“Now I’ve done it!” murmured Nick. “If I’m caught here they’ll blame me for the broken lock. The paper will be missed, and it will go hard with me. This settles it. There’s nothing left for me but to make a break for it as soon as the door is opened.”

Then he lifted the lid of the box anxiously. Hooray! It was there. The all-important yellow package was in his hand. He opened it, and read the letter that his father had written so many years before.

He shut the box and put it back on the shelf from which he had taken it. Then he studied the timeworn document that had caused poor Admiral Semmes years and years of anxiety. What struck Nick was the clearness of the directions it contained. The writing was simplicity itself once the separate halves had been placed together. It was a plain direction as to the location of the treasure.

Nick read it again and again, learned it by heart, repeated it aloud, and at last put the paper in his pocket.

“What will Frank and Will think of my staying away all night?” he mused. “Well, no use worrying about that. Ten hours more to wait. I’ve done enough thinking and reading. What’s the matter with my having a sleep! It looks good to me.”

So he lay on the floor of the vault, and was soon in the land of dreams. When he awoke it seemed to him that it must be near morning. He waited an hour. It seemed an age. At last there came a sound that made him start. Somebody was at the door of the vault.

Nick turned out the light.

He did not think of concealing himself in the cabinet, as he had planned—and later attempting to escape—but he moved up close to the door with a sudden impulse.

The heavy bolts shot back. The door was opened gingerly, a little way. The room without was flooded with sunshine. Nick made out a form outlined against the light—the form of a man. He was holding the door, about to swing it wide.

The man was Loucks.

He was speaking to some clerk near the vault. Nick heard the clerk answer:

“No, the boy has not been here this morning.”

“They have missed me!” murmured Nick.

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“Is your private box all you want, Mr. Vail?” called out Loucks toward the private office.

There seemed to be an affirmative response.

Then Loucks opened the door wide and entered the vault.

Every nerve was on edge as Nick shrank close to the corner nearest the door.

Loucks passed by him and reached for the tin box on the shelf.

Nick started to spring from the vault, but he was not quick enough. Loucks turned suddenly and grabbed him.

“Hello! What does this mean?” he exclaimed.

One hand holding the box, Loucks dragged the boy out into the light of the countingroom.

The clerks had heard Loucks’ startled cry, and stared wonderingly at Nick. Loucks looked blankly at his prisoner.

“Nick! Nick Collins!” he ejaculated.

“Yes, sir,” murmured Nick faintly.

“You were in that vault all night?”

“I was locked in accidentally, sir.”

A dark, distrustful look came into Loucks’ face. He fairly dragged Nick into the private office, showed him disapprovingly at the staring clerks, opened and closed the door, and pushed Nick to a chair.

“What is this?” cried Mr. Vail, who was seated at his desk.

“It’s the errand boy.”

“Ah, and late, too! That’s bad.”

“He is, on the contrary, very early,” said Loucks, in a peculiar tone.

“What!”

“He has been here since daylight, since midnight—in fact, all night, shut up in the vault, accidentally, he says.”

“Incredible, Loucks!”

The broker had started violently as his eye fell on the tin box.

“Loucks, look at that!”

“The box!”

“Yes. The lock is broken. Boy, what do you know of this?” demanded the broker sternly.

Nick did not answer. Vail opened the box.

“Gone!” he cried.

“What is gone?” asked Loucks.

“The yellow package.”

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“Then the boy has it. Vail, we have been deceived. I feared the coincidence of his being a son of Captain Collins. No, you don’t!”

Loucks uttered the words as Nick, in sheer desperation, made a break for the door. Loucks seized him and dragged him back before the desk.

Just then there was an interruption. The office door opened. A clerk from the countingroom appeared.

“A gentleman to see you, Mr. Vail.”

“I am busy. Let him wait a minute or two.”

“Now, then,” said Loucks, scowling down at the pale and agitated Nick, and neither he nor the broker noticing that the clerk had not entirely closed the door, and that the visitor he had announced lingered impatiently at its threshold—“where’s that paper?”

Nick was silent.

“You took it.”

“Search him!” ordered Vail angrily.

“He’s in some plot to rob us,” cried Loucks. “Here it is!”

Sure enough, there it was. All Nick Collins’ bravery and patience had been of no avail. The yellow package was produced triumphantly by Loucks from an inner pocket of the boy’s coat and thrown upon the desk.

Loucks resumed his search and brought forth a second package.

“This is mine—not yours!” declared Nick. “Give it back to me!”

The second package was the five thousand dollars that belonged to Admiral Semmes.

“Ha! money!” exclaimed Vail. “Why, this boy is a systematic thief!”

“Three—four—why, Vail, there’s fully five thousand dollars in this package!”

“But it isn’t ours!”

“Not ours?”

“No.”

“Why not?”

“I didn’t leave a dollar in the vault last night.”

“No, it is not yours. Give it to me!” cried Nick.

But Loucks held him in a strong grasp.

“Boy,” he said fiercely, “how came you in that vault?”

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Nick was desperate now.

“To prevent your wicked plans to rob Admiral Semmes,” he replied audaciously.

“He knows all!” cried Vail, in dismay.

“Where did you get that money?”

“It belongs to Admiral Semmes. Let me go. Give me that money or I will go to the police and expose you.”

“You will, eh?” sneered Loucks, giving him a vicious jerk. “The truth, boy! Who sent you here? What is your scheme? The truth, or we will send you to prison.”

“No, you won’t!”

A new voice had spoken. Vail and Loucks started. The man at the door, a witness to all that had transpired, had entered the room silently, cautiously. Now he revealed himself, and at sight of him Nick Collins uttered a cry of joy.

To the dismayed plotters the newcomer was only a bronzed, rough-looking sailor. To Nick he was his strange acquaintance of Parkdale—Captain Eccles!

He bore in his hand a heavy cane. His homely face fairly bristled with indignation as he strode boldly to the desk.

With one swift swoop he seized the two packages lying there.

The broker sprang to his feet. Loucks made a movement to tear the money and paper from his grasp.

Whack! The heavy cane came down on Loucks’ pate with a sounding blow.

“Stand back!” roared the captain. “I am not to be trifled with!”

“You murderous scoundrel! I’ll call the police!” cried Loucks.

The whirling cudgel again drove him back.

“Who are you?” gasped Vail, in amazement.

“This boy’s friend, you thieving lubbers, who are trying to rob him. Here, Nick, lad, take these parcels and run for it. I’ll cover your retreat. To the house where you wrote me to come. Go—no questions. I’ll deal with these pirates alone.”

And then, as Nick darted to the office door and out of the room, the captain guarded its threshold, cane in hand, and said, in a mocking tone:

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“In two minutes hoist your anchors if you like, my coveys. Until then it’s an embargo or a broken head. Avast, there! both of ye. Don’t try to run the blockade or I’ll into you, as sure as my name is Captain Eccles!”

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CHAPTER XV.

NEW PLOTS.

At the name of the bold captain, Vail paled and Loucks looked alarmed, for they both recognized it as that of the man whom Admiral Semmes had mentioned as the partial legatee of the secret letter written by Nick's father.

"Now, then, arrest me!" cried the captain, when he was satisfied that Nick was many blocks away. He flung himself into a chair and gazed contemptuously at the broker and his accomplice.

But neither of them spoke. There was a difference between dealing with a helpless, friendless boy and a big, powerful, self-possessed man.

"You're downed, and confess it, eh?" said Eccles scornfully. "Well, you're wise. That boy is a jewel, and has defeated your plots, but it happens that I came just in time. That money you dare not touch. As to the paper, if it's yours, prove it. I claim that you stole it. If I find that you have injured my friend, Admiral Semmes, I'll have you locked up before night."

There was no reply yet. The plotters saw the uselessness of argument with their visitor.

"I'm going to leave here," said Eccles, rising. "If you need me it won't be hard to find me. You won't want me, you thieving lubbers! You're lucky to get off clear, as it is. Now, you try to trick me or follow me and it will be the worse for you."

Captain Eccles darted a last menacing glance at Vail and Loucks and strode from the room.

As the door slammed after him the eyes of the plotters met.

One furious, desperate ejaculation alone left the lips of Vail, the broker.

It was——

"Ruined!"

"Yes, the boy and his friend have beaten us!"

"Follow him!"

"That man?"

"Yes."

Loucks rubbed his bruised head ruefully and shrugged his shoulders.

"Not I," he said.

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"We must know where he goes—we must defeat his plans."

"I'll try it."

Loucks caught up his hat and hurried from the room.

On the steps outside the building he paused.

Just across the road stood Captain Eccles. He saw Loucks, waved his cane warningly, and strode on.

Loucks turned to go back to the office, but at sight of a boy that stood between him and the door he halted and uttered an exclamation of surprise.

"Uncle!"

The boy who spoke the word was ragged and an unpleasant grin was on his face.

Loucks only stared at him.

"Uncle!" repeated the boy. "Don't you know me?"

"Know you!" said the man, in a tone of disgust. "I should say I did. Jack Benson."

"Yes, uncle. Ain't you glad to see me?"

"What the dickens are you doing in New York?" demanded Loucks, with a frown.

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"The folks sent me here."

"Sent you *here*! In Heaven's name, what for?"

"To see you. They said you'd find something for me to do."

"Who said so?"

"The folks, uncle."

"Confound the folks! They've sent you here to sponge on me. You look half starved."

"I am," Jack said quickly. "But say, uncle, what is that man doing here?"

"What man?"

"The one that shook the club at you."

Loucks started, and an eager look came into his eyes.

"Do you know that man, Jack?" he asked.

"Sure I do."

"Who is he?"

"Captain Eccles."

"Yes. He told us that. But where's he from?"

"Parkdale."

"Do you know Nick Collins, too?"

"You bet I do."

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"Why do you say it that way?" asked Loucks.

"I had a row with him in Parkdale, and I got into trouble through getting even with him."

Loucks' crafty face worked with excitement.

"Look here, Jack," he said. "I guess I can find something for you to do. In fact, I have a job for you right now."

"I want something to eat first," put in Benson.

"Oh, you'll get all you want to eat. Do you see this?"

Loucks held up a ten-dollar gold piece that he had taken from his pocket.

Jack's eyes glittered.

"Do I see it?" he said. "I should say so! What about it?"

"It's yours if you do what I tell you."

"I'll do it," declared Jack, not caring what the task might be. "I think I could eat up about half of it in ten minutes."

"Well, do what I tell you and you can have all you want to eat."

"All right."

"I want you to follow that man."

He pointed across the street, where Captain Eccles, his back to them now, stood looking in a shop window. [Pg 164]

"Follow Captain Eccles?"

"Yes, and find out where he is staying."

"I'll do it."

“Here’s the money. Now, don’t stop to eat. There’ll be plenty of time for that when you’ve found out what I want to know.”

Jack started to go.

“Wait a second,” said Loucks. “He’s standing there yet. Now, this man probably will meet Nick Collins.”

“Why do you think so?”

“Never mind. Just listen to me. If he should meet Nick, be sure you don’t let either of them see you. Bring me word here as soon as you have learned where they are living.”

“I’ll do it.”

“And, Jack—if you succeed I’ll make it twenty dollars. Quick! He’s going!”

Jack was off like a shot. He hit up a very good pace for a boy who was running on an empty stomach, and with a ten-dollar gold piece in his pocket. Fortunately for Loucks’ plan, however, Captain Eccles, after he turned a corner, entered a restaurant, and Jack followed him; so the boy, while keeping an eye on the captain, was able to satisfy the cravings of his stomach. It is no sure thing that Jack would not have abandoned the chase had this opportunity to eat not presented itself. As it was, he swallowed some food, followed the captain out of the restaurant, unseen by the latter, and kept him in sight for some time.

Meanwhile Loucks, a smile of satisfaction on his evil face, had gone back to the broker’s office. There he found Vail at his desk wearing a very long face.

“Cheer up, Vail,” said Loucks. “All is not lost yet.”

“What do you mean?”

Loucks told of his meeting with his nephew, and how he had sent him to shadow Captain Eccles.

“I don’t see how that is going to help us,” said Vail despondently.

“Don’t you?”

“I certainly do not.”

“Suppose we locate the captain?”

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“Well?”

“And the boy?”

“What of it?”

“Suppose by that means we recover the paper and the money?”

“But we won’t.”

“Don’t be so sure of that. But even if we don’t recover them there is still a chance in our favor.”

“I should like to know what it is.”

“Oh, you would? Evidently you haven’t much faith in my judgment. Look here, Vail; suppose you stop thinking I’m a fool.”

“What are you driving at?” growled the broker.

“Just this,” answered the other triumphantly. “I made a duplicate key to your private box not long ago.”

Vail only frowned at this evidence of his associate’s duplicity and craft.

“You don’t seem to like that little precaution I took,” remarked Loucks.

“Precaution! Rascality, I call it,” Vail said.

“No,” returned Loucks quietly, “it was only a very wise move on my part, for which you have to thank me.”

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“Explain yourself.”

“Well, last night I went to your box.”

“Indeed!”

“Yes; and I took out that blessed yellow package.”

"Pity you didn't keep it out. Then the boy wouldn't have got it."

"Oh, I did better than keeping out."

"Come, come," said Vail impatiently. "Stop talking in riddles. What did you do?"

"I made a copy of the paper. There!"

Vail's eyes lighted up with pleasure.

"You made a copy of it?" he said eagerly.

"That's what I did."

"Then—you—know—the location of the treasure?"

"Just as well as they do."

"And it's only a question of who gets to the island where it is first?"

"Precisely."

"Good for you, Loucks! Splendid work!"

"I thought you'd say so."

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"Then we needn't worry about the captain and the boy. Let them go."

"Oh, no. I'm going to keep them in sight, just the same. I think I'll be able to put them out of the way, so far as giving us any trouble goes. Meantime, you'd better go ahead with the arrangements to search for the treasure."

"That's a good idea. I'll take up the matter to-day."

"Now you're talking."

"I know of a ship, the *Diamond*, a fast sailer, that can be chartered at once."

"Take her."

"I will. And the money?"

"I will have it by night."

Two hours afterward, Loucks, sitting alone in the office, received a welcome visitor. He did not recognize him at first, but at closer view saw that it was his precious nephew.

"Jack!" he exclaimed.

"It's me, uncle."

"By Jingo! I didn't know you."

"No? Well, I'm disguised," said Jack, grinning.

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"I should say you were!"

Jack's disguise was not very elaborate or skillful. It consisted merely of a handkerchief tied over his face so as almost to conceal it.

"I've got a terrible toothache," the young scamp said, with a wink.

"I see. What did you put that thing on for?"

"Wasn't I doing detective work?" asked Jack smartly. "This disguise helped me to watch those people you sent me after."

"Without being recognized."

"Bet your life, uncle."

Jack was feeling good. He had just put away a large "feed" of corned beef and cabbage.

"Did you follow them?"

"Eccles—yes."

“Where did he go?”

“To an old house near the river.”

“Was Nick Collins there?”

“Yes, and two other boys.”

“Who are they?”

“Frank and Will Alden.”

“You know them?”

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“Oh, yes! They are from Parkdale.”

“Well?”

“The house is not occupied, except by them. I managed to sneak upstairs and listen to what they said.”

“They didn’t see you?”

“Trust me for that. I’m a natural-born detective!” said Jack proudly.

“Well, what did they say?”

“They seemed to have some paper about a treasure.”

“Yes, yes!” cried Loucks eagerly.

“They talked about it for a long time. Then they decided to go after it.”

“What, at once?”

“Yes, to-day. They said that others might be on the same track.”

“I understand,” commented Loucks impatiently.

“And hurry was the thing.”

“I see.”

“So the captain said they would go to Pan—Pan——”

“Panama?”

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“That’s it—Panama—first.”

Loucks looked puzzled, but asked:

“And then?”

“He said that he had seen a friend, a ship captain, who sails for there to-morrow.”

“Did he speak this captain’s name?”

“Yes. Captain Dare.”

“Say that again!” cried Loucks sharply.

“Captain Dare.”

“You are sure?”

“Surest thing you know.”

“Did he name the ship?”

“Yes.”

“What was it?”

“The *Vista*.”

An ejaculation of delight came from Loucks.

“The *Vista*!” he cried. “Our ship. Jack, can I trust you?”

“You bet.”

“Here is a hundred dollars.”

In blank amazement Jack Benson stared at the bills Loucks placed in his hand. He had never seen so much money in his life.

“Mine?” he gasped.

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“All yours, and double it if you obey.”

“I will.”

“Then come back here in an hour. Don’t let the captain or Nick Collins see you.”

“Not on your life.”

The minute Jack left the room Loucks gave way to the most extraordinary antics of joy. He paced the floor, laughed, chuckled, danced, and rubbed his hands in glee.

“Success!” he cried. “They sail on our leaky old scow, the *Vista*. Ha, ha, ha! We’ll insure the ship for seventy or eighty thousand dollars right away, send Jack on board with instructions, and burn her to the water’s edge in mid-ocean—Eccles, Collins, secret, and all. By jingo! My ragged nephew, is a trump! He’ll do the trick!”

AFLOAT ON THE OCEAN.

“Is everything ready, Nick?”

It was Captain Eccles who spoke. In the room were many evidences that preparations for departure had been under way.

“Yes,” the boy answered; “I guess we’ve got everything packed.”

“Good.”

It was two days after Nick’s escape from the vault and the clutches of Loucks and the broker. Nick, Captain Eccles, Frank, and Will were now occupants of an apartment in a boarding house not far from the North River.

The captain’s sudden appearance in Vail’s office had come about in this way: After receiving Nick’s letter at Parkdale, he had got into action at once. He took the first train to the city, and, arrived there, went straight to the former home of Admiral Semmes. There he found Frank and Will. The boys were much alarmed because Nick had not been there the night before, and when they had told the captain, he, too, became anxious. So he went off without delay to the office of Vail, with the startling result known.

From the restaurant where Jack Benson had followed him, he made his way to the dismantled old house, and, as he expected, found Nick there, anxiously waiting for him.

Then the friends held a council of war. It was decided, first of all, that before undertaking to block the schemes of Vail and Loucks they must find a comfortable place to live. This the captain looked after. He insisted that the boys accompany him to a boarding house over by the river—a comfortable enough place patronized mostly by seafaring folk. He knew the woman who kept it, and she placed a roomy apartment at the disposal of the little party.

Then Captain Eccles went out in search of his friend, the skipper of the *Vista*, to arrange for carrying out a plan he had formed. Eccles, of course, had no idea that the *Vista* was a ship over which Vail had any control. But such was the case. The vessel had come into the part ownership of the broker as the result of a financial transaction, and it had been leased now and then to firms in the carrying trade between this country and the West Indies.

Eccles saw his friend, the captain, talked over matters with him, and came away satisfied, although he didn’t like the looks of the ship any too well. Arrived at the boarding house, he took Nick aside and made known his plan.

“I have decided to act at once,” he said.

“How, sir?”

“By starting for the treasure island just as quickly as we can get away.”

“That sounds good to me,” said Nick; “but how about Admiral Semmes?”

“I have visited him,” the other replied.

“At the hospital?”

“Yes. I managed after a good deal of trouble to find the place.”

“How is he?” asked Nick eagerly.

“Well,” the captain answered, shaking his head gravely, “the admiral is certainly raving crazy now; but the attendants said that it was a kind of temporary fever.”

“Then there is hope for him?”

“Yes. The hospital people thought he would be all right in a few weeks.”

“Bully!” cried Nick.

"I made every precaution for his comfort," Eccles went on, "and I left a letter for him telling him that his friends were busy blocking the schemes of his enemies, and were on the sure track of the treasure."

"By gracious, I hope you are right, captain!" exclaimed Nick.

"I think I am. Anyway, that letter the admiral will get when he is himself again. It will be a comfort to him until we return."

"What about Vail and Loucks?"

"We will cook their bacon when we get back and the admiral is well again."

"What will you do?"

"With your help, Nick, I'll see that the law deals with them. No use to do it now. It would only mean delay for our big undertaking. Vail and Loucks, you may be sure, would fight prosecution to the last ditch."

"They have a copy of the treasure clue, captain."

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"What of that?"

"They may sail for the island first."

"Let them!" cried Eccles. "We'll outwit them, my boy. Don't bother your head about those fellows."

"But so much depends upon our getting ahead of them, captain."

"I know it, Nick. And if we attend closely to business we'll do it. I am determined to protect the admiral's interests. I am going to sail in search of the treasure."

"Won't it take a lot of money?"

"Yes, and we have it. The five thousand dollars is really the admiral's money, but if he were able to decide the matter, I am sure he would say, Use it to find the treasure. I shall do that very thing, Nick, for I am certain it is his wish."

"I've no doubt you are right, captain."

"It is a sure thing. I had a talk with an old friend to-day—captain of a West Indian merchantman called the *Vista*. His ship touches at the Isthmus of Panama on its southern course. She sails to-morrow morning. Will you go?"

"Will I go?" exclaimed Nick. "Captain, you know that I'd give anything to go to sea."

"How about your friends?"

"Frank and Will?"

"Yes. I don't know just what to do about them."

"Oh, they'll go, too; never fear."

"That's just it. I know they'll want to go, and you want to have them. But it's a serious thing carrying them away from home and, possibly, into all kinds of hardship."

"But they haven't any home, and they say they'll go to sea, anyway."

After thinking a moment, the captain said:

"Well, let them come."

Thus it fell out that Nick and the captain put in a busy day buying the things they needed for their expedition and packing them up.

"I made a very lucky discovery yesterday," said Eccles. "It gives us a great start over Vail if he, too, goes after the treasure."

"What's that?"

"We shan't go round the Horn at all."

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"Why not?"

"The *Vista* will drop us at the Isthmus."

“Yes; you told me that. And from the Isthmus how do we go?”

“Overland to the Pacific coast. There we can find a steamer or a sailing vessel to make the voyage south.”

“And after that?”

“At Buenaventura or some Peruvian port we shall find a ship in the coast trade called the *Regent*.”

“Then what?” asked Nick, his eyes glowing at the prospect of all this voyaging.

“Then, Nick, for the island and the treasure.”

“Hooray! You know the captain of the *Regent*?”

“Oh, yes—an old friend. His name is Dartmoor. He’d do almost anything for me. I see by the papers that he makes trips along the coast only, so that we can soon get hold of him.”

“How long will it all take?”

“Well, let me see. If we meet with no accidents, we ought to be well on the track of the treasure before the wall rounds the Horn.”

You may be sure that it was a trio of very happy boys who the next day went aboard the *Vista*, and at noon they found themselves watching the skyscrapers and shipping of New York fade from view as the vessel moved out of the harbor.

Captain Dare, skipper of the *Vista*, had greeted the boys in a friendly manner, and they soon felt at home aboard the ship.

Nick found the *Vista* to be a strange sort of craft. She was half steamer, half sailing vessel. The patched-up, built-over boat did not look very trim or staunch. Once on free water, however, she made very good speed; and, as she forged ahead, seemed to lose much of her clumsiness.

For hours the boys were delighted watching the working of the ship. They were interested in everything that was done by the crew. Just before daylight faded the sky became clouded, and the *Vista* passed out of sight of land.

It was about an hour after dusk, and only a faint moonlight relieved the darkness, when something fell overboard, and a boat was sent out to pick it up. The sailors on their return received a hasty call to supper, and neglected to hoist the boat again to the davits, and it floated astern.

Nick was alone on the aft deck, and, venturesome and bold, he thought he would enjoy the novelty of a ride in the yawl as it was drawn rapidly in the *Vista*’s wake.

It was but the effort of a moment for Nick to climb over the rail, grasp the rope, slide its length, and drop into the yawl. He clung to the side, but the motion of the small boat was far from a pleasant one, and he found that it wasn’t any fun at all. The rapid progress of the ship dragged the bow of the yawl fairly out of the water, and this made Nick’s head dizzy. He decided to get back on the ship.

But just as he came to this decision he was aware that the small boat was moving through the water more slowly; and the next instant he realized the terrible truth.

The rope that had held it had been cut or cast off, and the yawl was drifting, while the *Vista* steamed on, leaving the boy tossing in her wake!

“Help! Help! Man overboard!” Nick cried wildly.

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But there was no one near to hear him; at least, no one willing to give him a helping hand. There was some one standing at the rail and looking down at him, and, it seemed to Nick, in the dim light, that this some one had an evil grin on his face.

It was a boy. Just at the moment that distance effaced his features, and left them only a blur in the moonlight, Nick recognized him.

The boy at the rail was Jack Benson!

A TERROR AT SEA.

Two hours went by before any one noted Nick's absence from the deck of the *Vista*.

Captain Eccles had not seen him about the ship, but he supposed that he was with Frank and Will in the forecabin, and Frank and Will, not seeing him, took it for granted that he was in the cabin with Eccles planning the expedition for the treasure.

When, at last, Nick's friends met, and all declared they could not find him, a thorough search of the ship was begun, to no purpose, of course. The only theory Captain Eccles could form was connected with the missing yawl.

"He must have seen something drop overboard and started off in the yawl for it," he said to the skipper of the *Vista*.

"More likely he got sick of the sea and ran away in the yawl."

"No, he would not do that. Perhaps he went into the yawl out of curiosity, and it got afloat and he could not hail the ship. Captain, if we pass a port-bound ship, I'll go back in search of him."

"Nonsense!" growled Dare. "You could not find him any more than a needle in a haystack now. He's safe enough on calm water like this, and will be picked up by some steamer."

With this Eccles was forced to be content, but his fears were revived when, an hour later, it was learned that the rope attached to the yawl had been cut and not untied.

"There's some mystery about it," said Frank Alden to his brother Will that night.

Jack Benson could have told them what a simple thing it had been to dispose of Nick Collins.

Money had induced Jack to agree to the plots of his uncle, Loucks, and the morning the *Vista* sailed he was sent to its captain with a note from Loucks stating that he was to give him a free passage to Cuba.

Jack had kept out of the way all the first day for fear of being seen and recognized by Captain Eccles or the boys of the party, but at nightfall he had ventured on deck.

When he saw his enemy, Nick Collins, in the yawl, he decided that it was a fine chance to further the plans of his uncle, and at the same time get even with Nick. The result was that Collins was sent adrift.

Jack's success made him reckless, and the next morning he came boldly on deck. He recalled the fact that Loucks had given him a certain order to execute when the *Vista* passed the Gulf of Mexico. Until then he must be idle. Sooner or later he must be seen by Eccles or the boys, so he decided that he might as well go on deck and enjoy himself.

His idea of enjoyment was to go about the ship making a nuisance of himself. He climbed the rigging, tampered with the ropes and the compass, and what else he might have done no one knows; but one of the officers at last ordered him to leave things alone and go to his cabin.

"I'll go there when I get ready," Jack replied.

"What's that, you young scamp?" exclaimed the officer.

"Oh, mind your own business."

Hardly had the last word left Benson's lips when the angry officer had him in an iron grasp.

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"Let go of me!" cried Jack. "If you don't, I'll——"

He never finished the sentence. He received a blow from the man that made him see stars, and they were not the few that were shining in the heavens.

Just at that moment Frank and Will Alden came on-deck. The blow Jack had received did not knock him senseless, but it caused him to stagger and grasp a belaying pin for support. Jack set up a bellowing that could be heard for some distance. It brought Captain Dare hurrying to that part of the ship.

"What's all this about?" he demanded.

"An unruly passenger, sir," replied the officer, "and I had to take him in hand."

"I see. What has he done, Mr. Gallup?"

"Been meddling with things, sir, and when I ordered him to go below, he was insolent."

"He hit me!" cried Jack.

"Is that so, Mr. Gallup?"

"Yes, sir. I struck him because he told me to mind my own business. I thought it part of my business to make him understand that while he's on this ship he must behave himself."

"You did your duty," said Captain Dare. Then turning to Benson: "Go below, boy, and don't bother my men."

"I won't," returned Jack.

"What's that?"

"I won't go below till I get ready."

The captain regarded him a moment with flashing eyes. Then he said to the officer:

"Mr. Gallup, have the young mutineer put in irons. Perhaps that will bring him to his senses."

"You'd better not lock me up," said Jack. "If you do you'll get the worst of it."

The captain smiled.

"Get the worst of it, eh?" he said. "How's that?"

"My uncle, Mr. Loucks, owns some of this ship, and I'll have him discharge all of you."

Captain Dare and the officer burst into laughter. Just then a sailor appeared with a pair of handcuffs. At sight of them all the resistance fled from Jack, and he let go his hold on the belaying pin and scooted for the gangway. As fast as his legs could carry him he went to his cabin.

Frank and Will Alden had witnessed the whole affair.

"What do you think of that, Will?" said Frank. "Think of it. Jack Benson on this ship!"

"How did he ever get here?"

"Search me. Let's tell Captain Eccles."

They hunted up Eccles and told him about it. Thus it came about that Eccles went to Captain Dare and learned from him that the owner of the ship was Admiral Semmes' worst enemy—James Vail. Then the sturdy mariner began to scent a plot. He did not alarm Frank and Will by imparting to them his suspicions, but after that, you may be sure, he kept a close watch on the movements of Jack Benson.

This is how Eccles thought the matter out: "This boy has been put aboard by Loucks and Vail. He has begun his evil mission by sending Nick adrift. No doubt at all that it was he who cut the rope that held the yawl. Poor Nick! I wonder if we'll ever see him again. By jingo, if I catch that Jack Benson playing any dirty tricks, it will go hard with him."

But Jack gave no sign after that night of doing anything wrong. He seemed to have been thoroughly cowed by the threat to put him in irons and the apparent indifference of the skipper to the fact that Loucks, or, rather, his employer, James Vail, was owner of the ship. Jack was sullen and reticent, and seldom came on deck. With all his watching, Captain Eccles was thrown off his guard, for it did not look as if any trouble was to be feared from Benson now.

Thus matters stood until one dark night, when a storm seemed brewing. All the passengers had retired to rest. Frank and Will were in their berths, but not sleeping. They were talking over the mysterious disappearance of their chum, Nick, the loss of whom was a severe blow to them. They agreed with Captain Eccles that Jack Benson had something to do with Nick's disappearance, although, of course, they could not prove anything. In time the boys stopped talking, and fell asleep along with the rest of the passengers. The only persons awake were the officer on the bridge, the men in the engine and boiler rooms, a few sailors on deck, and others who had to be on hand to work the ship.

Jack Benson had pretended to retire, like all the other passengers, but he did not undress. He waited in his cabin until it was late enough for him to carry out the scheme he had planned.

When, at about midnight, he had opened his cabin door a little, looked up and down the passage that ran along by the staterooms, and had made sure that no one was moving about in that part of the ship, he stole out of his cabin and made his way toward the forward hold. Save for the throbbing of the engine, and the swish of the seas against the vessel's side, all was silence.

In his stockinged feet Benson crossed the main saloon, gained the companionway, ascended to the deck, glanced quickly about him, and made sure that no one was looking.

Then he darted along the deck, and down a gangway that led to a narrow passage, at the end of which was a bulkhead door. Producing a key he had stolen that day from the captain's cabin, he opened this door, and entered the hold.

Closing the door after him, he lighted a short candle, which he drew from a coat pocket. Its rays cast ghostly shadows about the place, but revealed the indistinct outlines of the great piles of merchandise that were part of the ship's cargo.

In a moment Jack decided what to do. He caught up a dry pine box that contained some light material—this he knew by the weight of it—and the box he placed beside a barrel of oil not far away. He did the same with one box of the same kind after another, until he had four or five of them ranged near the barrel of oil.

His next move showed that Jack had come well prepared for his fiendish work. From a pocket of his coat he took out a handful of excelsior, and then, reaching into the unbuttoned bosom of his shirt, he drew forth another handful of the same inflammable material. The production of this last lot of the finely cut strings of wood accounted for the wonderful chest development Jack had at the moment he slipped out of his cabin. Now he was himself again as to chest measurement.

He set the excelsior carefully about the boxes, and then, to make certain that his kindlings should not fail, he began hacking with his jack-knife at the boxes, and kept this up until he had added to the excelsior a lot of splinters and chips.

It was remarkable how coolly and with what apparent fearlessness he performed this evil task. Not for a single instant did he hesitate. He did not seem to realize his own peril in firing a ship that was so many miles from land. This might have been because Loucks had assured him that everybody lucky enough to be awake at the time the fire began could escape in the lifeboats.

At last Jack decided that all was in readiness for the match. He lighted one, and applied its flickering flame to the excelsior. Then he ran to the bulkhead door, opened, relocked it, and stole back to the gangway, up that to the deck, and then down the companionway, and along the stateroom passage to his own quarters. He had not encountered a soul.

He stood in the cabin, ears alert, waiting for the cry which he knew would come. He had not more than three minutes to wait.

"Fire! Fire! Fire!"

This, the most terrible cry that can be heard on shipboard, began to ring, and quickly was taken up on all sides.

A quiver of horror went through the *Vista* from stem to stern.

The gangways began to fill with partly dressed passengers, trembling, wringing their hands, shouting for help, weeping—laughing, some of them, in a delirium of fright—rushing for safety, or standing still, frozen with terror. Blinding smoke filled the ship, and presently the glare of flames could be seen.

In a moment the upper deck became a scene of hopeless confusion. Officers and crew were powerless to preserve even a semblance of order. One glance that Captain Dare gave the fire convinced him the ship was doomed. He knew it would be useless to fight those all-devouring flames. An attempt to do so would only be a waste of time and a futile risking of human life. Jack Benson had done his work successfully.

"Lower the boats!"

Above the tumult of frightened voices, this order of the captain, delivered in clear, ringing tones, could be heard. It was taken up by the officers, and the crew fell to work getting the boats ready to be lowered from the davits. Sailors stood by each boat keeping back the frenzied passengers until it should be time for them to

get in. Other sailors were sent through the ship to wake up any one who, by chance, had not been roused by the cries and general tumult.

Captain Eccles, Frank, and Will managed to keep their heads, and by example or word help others to do the same. They took a hand also in helping the women and children to get into the boats. When the word was given to board the lifeboats, Jack Benson tried to push by some women and children and get into the first one. Frank Alden caught him by the shoulders and pulled him back.

Jack ripped out an oath, and told Frank to mind his own business—a favorite expression of Jack's, it appears, and one that he accompanied now with a threat against Frank. It was the first time any words had passed between the boys since they had been on the *Vista*.

"All right," returned Frank to the threat; "you can do anything you like, but you don't get into a boat until your turn comes. Now, stand back!"

There was a look in Frank's eye that Benson did not like. So he went off to seek some other boat to which he might have a chance of pushing his way. He shook his fist at Frank as he moved away.

In the rush for the boats one of the passengers, a woman, fell overboard, and there was a delay in the efforts of a sailor to rescue her which held one of the lifeboats hovering near the ship for a long time. The seaman succeeded at last in reaching the boat with his exhausted burden, and both were lifted aboard by willing hands. Such scenes made the hour one of excitement, suspense, and terror. At last, however, every soul on board had been rescued. Even Jack Benson, after several ineffectual attempts to crowd past children, was allowed to get into a lifeboat.

"But if you don't stop playing the hog," said the officer in charge of it to him, "I'll throw you overboard."

The last boat to leave the ship contained Captain Dare, Eccles, Frank, Will, and several of the crew. [Pg 196]

Luckily the storm which seemed brewing did not descend with any fury. The boats, with loads of human freight, reached an island for which they were all headed, about twenty-four hours after the *Vista* was abandoned.

The cause of the fire was a mystery which bothered Captain Dare a good deal. He talked about it with Eccles as they rowed on. When they arrived at the island mentioned they found the other boats there, and not a single life had been lost by the burning of the *Vista*.

From the island everybody was transferred to the mainland, and from there to various points—according to the port to which they wished to go in order to continue their journey by water.

A week later Captain Eccles, Frank, and Will found a ship bound for the Isthmus of Panama by way of Colon and Aspinwall. On this they arranged for passage.

What had become of Jack Benson they did not know. Having finished the work for which he had been put aboard the *Vista* by Loucks and Vail, that young scamp had taken himself off with a group of passengers who took ship for Havana, and from there he intended to take passage back to New York. The conspirators had supplied him with plenty of money, which he had been careful to tuck away in a safe place on his person when he set fire to the ship.

Captain Eccles and his boy companions had saved little from the wreck except the clothes they wore. But Eccles had a good part of the cash that belonged to Admiral Semmes, and which was to be used in his interest; so they did not fear for the success of their treasure hunt. And, best of all, despite the hurry in which they had left the burning ship, Eccles had taken good care to bring with him the chart that Nick had recovered from the treacherous bankers.

As for poor Nick, there was no news of him at the port from which they set sail for the Isthmus. They made inquiry at every place where there was likely to be news of a ship having picked up a boy at sea, but all to no purpose. Needless to say, the disappearance of Nick had cast a gloom over the little party, but they decided to continue their quest for the treasure, and hope for the best. [Pg 198]

After a stormy passage in the Caribbean Sea, Eccles, Frank, and Will arrived at Colon. From there they went to Panama, where the gigantic work of digging the canal across the Isthmus was in full swing. Armies of workmen, many of them Americans, made a scene of activity in that southern clime which the boys from Parkdale regarded with open-eyed wonder.

Captain Eccles explained to them the great work which the United States Government had undertaken in opening a waterway between the Caribbean Sea and the Pacific.

“Will it be wide and deep enough for big ships to go through?” asked Frank.

“Yes, indeed,” the captain told him. “The very largest ships will be able to pass through. Vessels that now have to make the long voyage around the Horn will take a short cut when the canal is finished. It will save weeks and weeks of time in the passage from New York to the Pacific coast.”

From Colon they took a train across the Isthmus, and this for a part of the way followed the course of the canal, so that the digging operations were in full view from the car window. It was an experience which the boys thought they would always remember. It helped them to forget for a while their sadness over the loss of Nick Collins.

Arrived at the Pacific side of the Isthmus, they were fortunate in finding a ship bound south, and they reached Buenaventura in safety. Here Captain Eccles made inquiry for the ship *Regent*, commanded by his friend Dartmoor. Again they were in good luck. They learned that the *Regent* was due, on a return voyage from Peru, at Valencia, two hundred miles down the coast, in a week.

For Valencia the three took the first steamer that sailed.

“A little while, boys,” said the captain, elated over the prospect, “and we shall be on our way toward the treasure island.”

It was good news to Frank and Will, as well, but they could not help thinking how happy they would be if only Nick Collins were with them to enjoy the adventures that were soon to be theirs.

They reached Valencia, and found much to interest them in that quaint old place while they waited for the *Regent* to arrive. In two days she arrived. Eccles was waiting on the wharf when she came up. He was the first one on shore to hail her commander, Captain Dartmoor, his old friend. As soon as the gangplank was down he rushed aboard to clasp hands with the skipper.

Did Captain Dartmoor give him a warm welcome?

He fairly danced with delight at sight of his old shipmate.

“By jingo, Eck!” he exclaimed, “you don’t look a day older.”

“And you,” returned his friend—“why, Jack, you’re the same young fellow of fifteen years ago!”

For more than an hour the brotherly mariners were shut up in the skipper’s cabin while Eccles told his story. Dartmoor listened to it with wrapped attention and wonder.

“By jingo!” he exclaimed, “it takes me back to the days when we used to read yarns of the sea.”

“But this is going to be no yarn, captain.”

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“I sincerely hope not, Eck. I hope it will prove to be what you think—the biggest kind of a reality.”

“Don’t you believe it?” asked Eccles.

“Wait a minute,” the other answered evasively. “Give me time to think about it. Let me see that chart.”

Eccles produced the two halves of the letter written by Nick Collins’ father, and spread them before his friend. The latter studied the document for some minutes in silence. Then suddenly he exclaimed:

“Why, first point to reach, according to this, is Mountain Island.”

“Yes. What of it?”

“What of it? Man, I know the place.”

“Hurrah!” exclaimed Eccles. “You’ve been there?”

“Yes. It is little more than a barren reef twelve hundred miles due southwest.”

“Then the letter is right. That’s what it says.”

“That much is right, surely,” chimed in Dartmoor.

“From there we follow the course described in the letter. Now, what do you think of the project?”

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“I think very well of it,” drawled Dartmoor, which was a good deal for him to say, as his friend well knew.

“Then you believe in it?” cried Eccles eagerly.

“Yes, old shipmate, I do.”

“Hurrah!” again burst out Captain Eccles. “Just how much confidence have you in it?”

“A great deal.”

“Enough to come along and help me find it?”

“I have, Eccles,” replied the other earnestly.

“Shake on it.”

And the old-time friends and fellow mariners clasped hands.

“This is glorious!” said Eccles. “You’ll know where we can get a ship, how much we ought to pay, and all about it. It’s a long time, Jack, since I was in service, and I’ve sort of lost track of things.”

“What do you want of a ship?” asked Captain Dartmoor after a moment of silence.

“Can we get along without one?” returned the other, smiling.

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“You cannot, of course. But I guess one will be enough.”

“It sure will.”

“Well, isn’t my ship good enough?”

“Do you mean,” said the overjoyed Eccles—“do you mean that you’ll use the *Regent* for our expedition?”

“That’s exactly what I mean. Do you suppose I’d let you go in any other ship, Eck, as long as I have one at my command?”

Again the old friends’ hands met in a cordial grasp.

“Now, friendship is one thing and business another,” said Captain Eccles. “I have money. I will charter your ship outright or go in with you on shares.”

“Never mind that part of it. We’ll fix things up satisfactorily to both. I guess we won’t quarrel.”

“But I’d rather have it fixed. I want to do what is right by you and everybody connected with you in this matter.”

“All right. We’ll settle about the money later on. Come on deck.”

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It was plain that the project had awakened all the enthusiasm and love of adventure in Captain Dartmoor’s nature, of which there was plenty, although he was a cool and level-headed man.

“Mr. Griggs,” he called to his mate when they had reached the deck.

The mate touched his hat and drew near.

“What’s our cargo to be?”

“Wool.”

“Where for?”

“Buenaventura.”

“I want you to make arrangements to have some other ship carry it.”

The mate looked puzzled.

“I beg your pardon, sir,” he said. “Do you mean that we’re not to take it aboard?”

“Exactly.”

“But we are under contract to deliver it at Buenaventura.”

“Never mind. The reason for making the change is an important one. You will transfer the cargo and papers to the next ship that is bound for Buenaventura. Be sure that there shall be no slip-up, for I want the delivery to be made just as promptly as if the goods were carried in the *Regent*. This must be done in justice to the persons concerned.”

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"I'll do the best I can, sir," said the mate.

"See here, captain," put in Eccles. "I don't want you to take this risk for me. Suppose——"

"Suppose nothing," interrupted Dartmoor, his eyes sparkling. "There lies treasure island, doesn't it?"

He pointed southwest.

"Yes," Eccles answered.

"That's our destination, isn't it?"

"Of course, Jack, but——"

"But me no buts, shipmate," broke in the skipper of the *Regent*. "You are my life-long friend, aren't you?"

"Yes."

"You've said, 'Help me,' haven't you?"

"That's right."

"Well, when a friend like you says that, Jack Dartmoor is there! That's all there is to it. Yonder lies our treasure island. We transfer our cargo, we provision, and we sail just as quickly as we can." [Pg 206]

"When will that be?"

"To-night. This very hour," was Captain Dartmoor's resolute and hearty answer.

And so it fell out. At nightfall the stately *Regent*, with Eccles, Frank, and Will aboard, sailed into the hazy crimson of the western sky, a trailer on the ill-fated course of the *Star of Hope*, gone down in tropic waters ten years before with all the treasure it had on board.

OUTWARD BOUND.

What of Nick Collins?

At the first step in what fate had made the main purpose of his life—the successful carrying out of his father's project, and the securing of Admiral Semmes' rights—the lad had met with disaster.

The *Vista* glided from sight, while only the winds heard his cries for help. As darkness closed about him, he realized that all hope of rescue for many hours to come must be abandoned.

But he told himself that now was the time to be brave. He must keep up till daylight should make it possible for passing ships to see him, and possibly come to his rescue.

There was no oar in the boat, and no other means either of propelling or guiding the frail craft. Fortunately the sea was calm; danger of the yawl swamping was not very great.

The stars came out, and a light breeze rose, and altogether the night was a mild and beautiful one. As the hours wore on Nick had all he could do to keep awake, but he did so by a plucky effort, being encouraged to this now and then by sight of the lights of a passing ship. Impulsively he cried out for help, but the vessels were all too far away to hear his voice.

He was rejoiced at last by the first faint glow of dawn, and in time the welcome warmth of the sun's rays.

He busied himself scanning the horizon at every point in the hope of sighting a ship. But it must have been nearly noon before he discerned a distant sail. It seemed to be bearing directly down upon him, and his heart leaped with joy. He watched it breathlessly, with all the suspense of one whose life was at stake. He waved his hat, and his coat. He shouted himself hoarse, and then——

The ship passed on!

A mere speck on the vast expanse of water, he was invisible to those on the ship who, in all likelihood, would have been glad to come to his aid.

Twice a similar hope was kindled, only to be dashed. But ships came near, he told himself, and sooner or later he must be seen and rescued. With this hope he buoyed himself, and tried to forget his gnawing hunger and terrible thirst.

Finally, toward nightfall, when despair had begun to claim him, a fourth ship hove into view. How the poor boy waved his coat, and shouted with what was left to him of his voice!

This time his frantic signals were seen!

A yawl was launched, and soon he heard the welcome sound of the rowers.

An hour later Nick Collins was seated in the cabin of the brig *Pawtucket*, bound back for the port of New York. Before him was food and drink in plenty, and how he put it away! Nick had been hungry many a time before, but never in his life, it seemed to him now, had he really known hunger.

The captain of the *Pawtucket* was considerate enough not to bother Nick for his story until he had stowed away all the food he could hold.

In due time the brig sailed into port, and Nick went ashore, thankful for his escape, but with a heart not very happy at the thought that he was alone and friendless in the noisy, cruel vastness of New York.

But he had made up his mind what should be his first step. He would go to the hospital where Admiral Semmes was a patient, and see how it fared with his father's old friend. He remembered that Captain Eccles had said that the doctors there had predicted that the old sailor would be himself again in two weeks.

Fortunately Nick had a little money, so he was in no immediate anxiety about shelter for the night and the means of living until he could carry out a certain plan he had in mind.

He found his way to the hospital, a great building on the east side of the city.

"What can we do for you?" asked a pleasant-faced man at a desk in the office.

"I want to know something about Admiral Semmes," said Nick.

"Is he a friend of yours?"

"Yes, sir."

"Well, I don't know that we can tell you anything about him, except that he is a very fine old gentleman." [Pg 211]

"Is he better?"

"Better? I should say he was; so much so that he wouldn't listen to staying here any longer, although the doctors thought he'd better."

"Has he gone?" gasped Nick.

"Oh, yes—left two days ago."

"Where has he gone?"

"I couldn't tell you that. But wait a minute. Perhaps the people in the ward where he was may know."

He called up the ward by telephone, but, after making inquiry, told Nick that no one there knew where the admiral had gone. He had left no word at the hospital as to where he intended to go, except to say that he would sail for Panama as soon as he could get a ship.

Nick thanked the man and left the hospital.

Admiral Semmes going to Panama! This was, indeed, interesting news for the boy. It was exactly the thing that Nick also intended to do, by hook or by crook. Nick knew that Captain Eccles, and Frank, and Will would go on to Panama in pursuance of their purpose to hunt for the sunken treasure.

"The thing for me to do, first of all," Nick told himself, "is to find Admiral Semmes."

The clue the hospital clerk had given him seemed a valuable one. If the old sailor was looking for a ship to the Isthmus, the thing to do was to visit the offices of the steamship lines to Panama. And this Nick set about doing straightway. It had been his plan to look up a ship bound for the Isthmus, and seek an opportunity to work his passage to that point, in the belief that he might find Captain Eccles and the boys there, or, if they had been there and departed, find some trace of them, and follow on.

Nick visited one office after another that bulletined ships for Central and South American ports. But it was not until he had begun to despair of getting any clue to Admiral Semmes that he did come upon some encouraging news. This was in the office of a steamship line for New Orleans, the Isthmus, and Central America.

"Has Admiral Semmes been here?" Nick asked somewhat innocently, as if everybody must know. [Pg 212]

"Admiral Semmes?" repeated the man at the desk, smiling, but regarding the boy with twinkling, keen eyes. "I don't know anybody by that name, but I shouldn't be at all surprised if the person you seek is the elderly gentleman who was here not ten minutes ago."

Nick was all attention, you may be sure.

"What sort of a looking man is your friend?" the clerk inquired. "Tall and thin?"

"Yes, sir."

"Gray hair and beard?"

"Yes, sir. And he had on, the last time I saw him, a suit of gray clothes."

"So had this man. I guess you're on the right track, my lad."

"Where did he go?" asked Nick.

"Well, it just happens," the other answered, "that I'm able to tell you—at least, I'm able to tell you where he said he was going from here. He was looking for a ship that would sail soon for the Isthmus, and as none of ours will sail for ten days, I directed him to the Mexican-Costa Rica Line." [Pg 214]

"Where is that?"

"Just around the corner."

“Oh, thank you, sir; thank you!”

And Nick was off like a shot. His heart beat wildly as he came in sight of the sign of the steamship office indicated, and he sprang up the steps two at a time. And there, standing at a desk, talking to the booking clerk, was a gray-haired man. A glance told Nick it was the man he sought.

“Admiral Semmes!” he cried, in his delight.

The old mariner started and stared at the boy. Then, in a kindly tone, he said:

“Who are you, lad?”

“I am Nick Collins, sir. I am your friend. I—I—Captain Eccles—Panama—Loucks—Vail—the treasure!”

Nick was so excited that it all came out in a jumbled lot of words, but words, needless to say, that conveyed a clear enough meaning to the admiral.

He called Nick aside, and said to him:

“I see you know me.”

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“Yes, sir, and I know Captain Eccles; and I know, too, that you are looking for a ship to Panama.”

Semmes started anew.

“The dickens!” he exclaimed. “How did you know that?”

“They told me at the steamship office around the corner—the one you just left; and I heard it also at the hospital.”

“Well, well,” said the admiral, looking Nick over in amazement. “You’re a pretty bright boy. But what of it, if I *am* going to Panama?”

“I am going, too,” Nick answered simply.

“You?”

“Yes, sir; and we shall overtake Captain Eccles if we can only get a ship that sails at once.”

“We?” gasped Semmes.

“Yes, sir. I know all his plans.”

“All whose plans?” asked the other.

“Captain Eccles’.”

“What in the name of goodness are you driving at?”

“Didn’t you get the letter that Captain Eccles left for you at the hospital?”

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Then a smile came over the admiral’s face. Whatever suspicion of Nick that he had entertained was banished by the boy’s question about the letter. It proved that he must be in the confidence of Captain Eccles. He threw his arm around Nick, and exclaimed:

“Heaven bless you, lad! Tell me all about it.”

Nick related the events with which the reader is familiar so far as they concerned Eccles, Vail, Loucks, and the occurrence in the broker’s office that so greatly concerned the admiral himself.

The admiral listened like one in a dream.

“You are indeed a friend to me,” he said, grasping Nick’s hand. “My boy, you are a brave fellow, and worthy the father I loved as my best friend.”

Then he related his own experience. Two days before he had amazed the people at the hospital by suddenly coming to his reason. They gave him the letter left by the captain. Then, realizing that his secret was safe, that Vail had been baffled, he had set out to raise money to enable him to follow the captain. A friend had loaned him \$1,000.

“I said I realized that Vail was baffled,” the admiral went on. “That was my belief, Nick, when I first read the letter. But since I have been moving around, I am not so sure of that.”

“What do you mean, sir?”

"Well, I have learned something. It is that Vail has left suddenly on a mysterious cruise."

"In what direction, admiral?"

"As near as my informant could say, he is bound for the South Pacific Ocean."

"The treasure island is in that region," said Nick.

"Of course it is; and for the treasure island, you may be sure, the precious scoundrel has sailed. He's on the track of the treasure."

"But he won't succeed, sir."

"Not if Eccles beats him to it."

"When did Vail set out?"

"Yesterday, I am told."

"Then Captain Eccles will get there first!" cried Nick joyously. "See what a start he has."

"But we must be with Eccles when he gets there, Nick."

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"That's what I have hoped for, admiral. But even if we miss him, we can feel sure that he will come out all right."

"You have no more confidence in him than I have; yet I'm going to join him, if such a thing is a human possibility."

"I wish we could."

"But I have a new plan, Nick," the admiral said.

"What is that, sir?"

"I have given up the idea of sailing to Panama. I have decided that it would be less risky to take another course."

"What course?"

"Overland to California, or to Texas, and thence to the coast. Going that way we shall be almost certain to overtake the captain. Perhaps we shall pick him up at Buenaventura, perhaps at Valencia. We have the clue that must bring us to him sooner or later?"

"Captain Dartmoor, of the *Regent*!" exclaimed Nick.

"Right you are, my boy. What do you think of my plan?"

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"Splendid, admiral! Much better than to follow him to the Isthmus and run a chance of missing him there, and trailing on after him all the way, and perhaps missing him at last."

"That's just how I figure it out. All right, then, Nick, we start for the Golden Gate to-night."

And the midnight train bore them out of New York. In five days they reached the Pacific coast.

At San Francisco the admiral was lucky enough to find a ship that sailed the very day of their arrival, so that three hours after they set foot in that city they were watching its buildings fade away from the deck of a steamer bound for Buenaventura.

Despite this auspicious beginning of their journey by sea, trouble began to brew not many hours after they had got beyond sight of land.

The ship was caught in a severe storm and driven far out of her course. For several days they were at the mercy of the gale. At last the storm subsided, but the vessel was left in a condition so unmanageable that the outlook for finishing the voyage on her was not very hopeful.

Indeed, it seemed so bad to the practiced eyes of Admiral Semmes that he decided to go ashore at an island about which the ship had been drifting for several hours. This island lay off the coast of Mexico, and the admiral concluded that it would be better to land and take a chance of getting passage to the mainland on some vessel that might call there.

The captain agreed to their landing, and sent a sailor to row them ashore. And the venture turned out just as the admiral had anticipated. They did get passage, two days later, on a ship that took them to the mainland,

and the very next morning they boarded another ship bound for Buenaventura. At this place it did not take them long to get track of Captain Eccles, and Frank, and Will Alden.

"We've had a lot of delay, Nick," said the admiral, "but we'll catch them, after all."

"I hope so," was Nick's earnest response.

"It's a sure thing. They are only a few days ahead of us."

"Where have they gone?"

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"To Valencia."

"And Captain Dartmoor—have you heard anything of him?"

"Oh, yes."

"Is he at Valencia?"

"No, but he soon will be, I am told."

"When can we sail for Valencia?"

"In two days."

The two days they had to wait were anxious ones for the old mariner and his boy companion, and even after they had set sail this anxiety did not wear off. The voyage down the South American coast seemed a very long one. Nick, at the admiral's request, wrote out from memory the letter relating to the sunken treasure.

One beautiful morning they arrived at Valencia. The admiral bade Nick remain on the steamer, and hastened to the office of the principal shipping firm in the place. He returned in two hours, and Nick could see from his face that he was the bearer of bad news.

"They are not here," he guessed.

"No," said the admiral sadly. "They have gone."

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"Sailed?"

"Yes."

"On the *Regent*?"

"Yes. They met Captain Dartmoor, and went away at once."

"When?"

"Last night."

"What shall we do?"

"Do, lad?" exclaimed the admiral. "What else but follow them?"

The firm tone in which the admiral spoke made Nick's hope glow again.

"Come ashore," said his companion. "We have one chance yet, and it is a good one."

"What is that, sir?"

"To overtake them."

"Oh, sir, can we do it?"

"I think we can. At any rate, we can make a good try for it."

"And we will, sir," said Nick, catching the admiral's enthusiasm.

With the boy accompanying him, Semmes went back to the shipping office. The proprietor, a Spaniard, greeted them courteously.

"Ah, the admiral has returned!" he said.

"I have. Look here."

As he spoke, Semmes took from his pocket a big roll of bills.

"Do you see that?" he asked.

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“Yes, señor.”

“Would you like to have it?”

“I don’t think I should mind having it; but what does the admiral mean?”

“It is yours.”

“Mine?”

“Yours. But you’ll have to do something for it.”

“Ah, it is an American joke!” exclaimed the Spaniard, with a grin. “Well, what is the admiral’s pleasure?”

“Do you own that small brig in the harbor?” asked Semmes. He pointed to a pennant-decked ship at anchor, the foresails of which were just visible from the office windows.

“Yes, señor.”

“Is she a fast sailer?”

“None faster on the coast.”

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“Is she idle?”

“Yes; for a while.”

“How long?”

“Two days.”

“Good! Give me a good captain and crew, with orders to pursue the *Regent* for two days, and the money is yours.”

“Agreed.”

“You know which course the *Regent* took?”

“Northwest.”

“Overtake her, and when I have seen the captain I will double the money,” said Semmes. “Come, get busy, and give us an imitation of an American hustle.”

And it was a very good imitation indeed that the Spaniard gave of Yankee “git up and git.” And his enthusiasm was imparted to the crew when they were told of the brig’s mission.

YARNING BY THE WAY.

Within an hour they set sail. The skipper proved to be an active, intelligent man, and fell into the spirit of the undertaking. He crowded on all the sail his little ship could carry, and they scudded through the waves at a splendid pace. And this was kept up all day and through the night. There was a good stiff breeze all the time.

Captain Dartmoor and Admiral Eccles, like true old sailors, fell to spinning yarns, and you may be sure the boys were delighted listeners. Captain Dartmoor told this story:

“Not so many years ago I found myself with very little money, and, as far as I could see, not much chance of getting more in Vancouver, British Columbia. I had arrived there from Australia with the hopes of getting up to Klondike and making a fortune in no time. As it was almost impossible for me or any one else to get through to Dawson City in the winter time, I knocked about Vancouver doing whatever my hand found to do, from peeling potatoes in a hotel kitchen to painting the woodwork of a house.

“Just when I was breaking into my last few cents I met another Australian, who, with his wife, immediately offered me that boundless hospitality of the Australian all the world over, and in a few days I was as one of themselves. This gentleman’s name was Grindle, and he and his wife had more than once made the trip to Dawson City by way of White Horse. He was then contemplating another journey into the gold region when I met him, but, being a lazy sort of individual and careless of his belongings when on the tramp, his wife, who could not on this occasion accompany him, offered me fifty dollars to go and look after her husband.

“Of course, I jumped at the chance, and with a couple of other companions we left by boat in June, nineteen hundred, and, landing shortly after at White Horse, on the Yukon River, prepared for our long tramp of two hundred miles to a part of the country known as the Alsek, where, in the creeks, we hoped to stake out claims and return muchly enriched.

“I had always considered this part of the world as a cold and barren land, the home of snowdrifts and storm; but when we landed at White Horse I found it to be a land of beauty, of sunny days and clear skies, of foaming waters and green, dome-shaped hills, of high cliffs and granite peaks, snow-crowned for all time.

“The great river which we call the Yukon the Indians call the Yu-kon-ah—meaning mighty water; nor does it belie its name. It is over two thousand miles long and seventy-five miles wide at its mouth, and the large river steamers can navigate it for over one thousand eight hundred miles.

“The enchanting beauty of the wide-spreading Yukon Valley—its sunshine and wealth of vegetation, fruits, and flowers—came as a great surprise to me, and forced me to exclaim, ‘This cannot be the North!’ And it certainly was not that northland of which you may have read, described by the vivid imagination of those who have never seen it. No more glorious summers are to be found anywhere else on the earth’s surface, so far as I know—and I have visited many corners of this globe—and it is a hunter’s paradise.

“Here, in the late fall, you can hear the moose and caribou calling that it is time to get into their favorite meadows, where they winter; and hear in the white, soft evenings the goats and sheep trampling in droves, and seeming to confer as to the best location for their exodus; the grouse softly call in the thickets, and the ptarmigan, wild geese, and ducks gather in great flocks. There are also bears—black, grizzly, brown, and cinnamon—fat and sleepy; and in the sedges can be heard waterfowl discussing the annual excursion to the South. The streams are thick with trout, and one has only to cut a stick from the nearest tree, affix a line to it, with a couple of hooks baited with a bit of flannel, and at the first cast you will probably land a brace of beauties.

“This was the country, then, I found myself in when we started off from White Horse to tackle our little ‘stampede,’ as they call the tramp in the far Northwest. Each of us carried a pack weighing one hundred and twelve pounds, and we didn’t make very good progress the first day.

“Anyhow, when we came to the end of the day’s march, the first thing I did was to strip by the bank of a creek for a swim. I selected what I took to be a deep water hole about ten yards across; and without as much as dabbling a toe in it, to see what the temperature was like—as I said before, it was a fine day in June—I

plunged in, and I'm not quite sure that I have recovered from the shock yet! That creek was a glacial one, and the water liquid ice!

"Our second day's tramp was spent mostly in my trying to get my circulation up again, and my companions in joking me on my bathing propensities. Also, on this day, every old hand we passed on the trail warned us about a dry patch of country ahead of us on our next day's travel, and we were advised to start at daybreak if we wished to negotiate this terrible stretch of country successfully. Not only did we get verbal warnings, but scattered about on the trunks of pine trees we came across the legend, 'Beware of the dry patch!' [Pg 230]

"Well, the next morning we were on the move early, and I would just like to say here that Grindle and myself were each armed with a good old Australian 'billy' can. These we filled with water from a creek before we went, and, humping our packs, off we started to cross the dry patch. And what do you think this awful dry patch was? Why, just a little stretch of fine, dry, scrub country, only fourteen miles in extent! An Australian doesn't reckon anything under about fifty miles of waterless country a dry patch, but out on the Yukon they think great things of themselves to have 'crossed the dry patch.'

"After we'd tramped eight miles or so we called a halt, lit a fire, and soon had our two billies going. And the sensation they caused to the uninitiated American and European prospectors who passed our camps! They all wanted to know where we got the water from; and when we explained that we had carried it along with us in the billies they seemed quite flabbergasted at the idea.

"Needless to say, the dry patch held no terrors for us. As to the food we carried, it consisted of bacon, flour, and salt, with, of course, tea and sugar. Whether the awful cold of the eight-months winter freezes all the goodness out of the wood I do not know, but ashes never retain their heat in the northwest and damper is always cooked in ashes. We made flapjacks instead. These are made by mixing flour and water to the consistency of thin dough in a gold pan and pouring it into a frying pan, in which bacon fat still remains. The frying pan is then set in an oven built of boulders heated almost white hot by fire, and in no time one has a plentiful and excellently baked supply of flapjacks; or, if you want plain loaves, the frying pan is first cleaned of all fat.

"We came in for a mild sensation on the fourth day. I was walking some distance from my three companions, and, on reaching the top of a small knoll, I came slap on a pair of bear cubs, playing and gamboling about like a couple of kittens. Having no firearms with me—in fact, the only weapon among the four of us was a jack-knife—I skirted round them to see if the parents were anywhere in the vicinity; and not seeing them, and finding my companions were now on ahead of me, I let out a yell of 'Bears!' The way those three fellows hustled was a caution, as they thought the bears might be after the food they had in the packs on their backs.

"We carried extra rations of food, and 'cached' it each day for our needs on the return journey, in case we decided to return. By 'caching' I mean we suspended meat, or whatever we thought necessary, in the forked branches of trees, and the bears, of which there are a great many in that part of the world, naturally try and break open the caches to get a cheap feed.

"It's only natural, too, for a bear to try and do this; but there is a very strict, unwritten law that man may not break a cache except when in the last pangs of hunger, and then he must only take enough to keep himself alive. Any one found breaking a cache for the purpose of stealing would receive a short shrift in a summary and most unpleasant manner.

"The morning of our fifth day's stampede found us on the edge of what is known as the Champagne Landing, so named from the manner in which the water foams and bubbles over the river bed. It is a ford or crossing over a creek where the current swirls above a shifting bed at a frightful pace. Grindle explained that it was hopeless to try and wade through in bare feet, as the toes and feet sank into the treacherous sand, and, besides having to battle with the water, a man might almost get sucked down. We tackled it, accordingly, in top-boots, held one another's hands, and worked across upstream from one patch of firm sand, or poised ourselves on a jutting bit of rock until we could find a safe stepping place ahead.

"It only took us actually four minutes to cross the Champagne Landing, and it mayn't sound much to talk about; but it's one of the nastiest and most dangerous spots on the road to Alsek, and many have been the tragedies and hairbreadth escapes experienced in those foaming waters.

"Beyond the Landing, and when we had recovered from the buffeting we had received in the crossing, we struck into beautiful meadowlands, where flowers bloomed and mosses carpeted the earth. [Pg 234]

"A friend of mine, now in White Horse, has made a collection of these Alaskan mosses—principally found on the Yukon and Klondike—comprising one thousand three hundred species, some of them exceedingly

graceful; and unless you have seen them, you can hardly imagine the wonderful length and softness of the mosses in that region. For the greater part of the year they lie buried under the snow and ice, only to cover the earth with a mantle of vivid green when the snows have melted.

“After continuing our tramp till almost sundown, we struck a patch of wild strawberries and gooseberries, and we stayed right there. We slung off the packs, lay down, and just had, as the lower-school boys would say, ‘a real good blow-out.’ Unfortunately, those berries of both varieties were hardly ripe, but it made no difference; we ate, and ate, and ate till we could eat no more. Then we rolled over and tried to sleep. But we tried in vain, and the reason was not far to seek. I never saw men tied in such knots before outside a circus; and even in my own pain I could scarcely help laughing at the agonized expressions on my companions’ faces.

“Owing to one accident which occurred on the next day, I might have been compelled to enter Alsek even as Adam promenaded the Garden of Eden before his fall. It came about this way. All night it rained in torrents, and in the morning we built a huge fire under a giant fir tree. We erected a sort of drying house out of stripped boughs, and, stretching our sopping garments on this, we sauntered away to keep ourselves warm by moving about. On our return to the drying house, what was our consternation to discover that the fire had undermined it, and our clothes—at least my clothes, my companions were more fortunate—were burned. Of my one suit nothing remained but a metal trousers button and a buckle, both partly melted!

“The next hour or so had to be spent by all hands in fashioning me a pair of nether garments out of old flour sacks and a bit of spare canvas off one of the packs.

“Nothing more of interest happened till we reached the Alsek creeks, eight days after we had left White Horse, and then we at once set about staking our claims. Our first venture was on the side of a hill, and after a thorough trial we gave it up as hopeless. The only crop we might have raised out of it was boulders, and it didn’t give even a glimmer of gold.

“We pegged another claim on one of the creeks, and thought it looked very promising; it petered out, and didn’t show gold worth a cent.

“As our two claims had come to naught, we decided to return to White Horse. From information we received after having been only a day on the creeks, we found every yard of likely ground had been acquired; so, with a stay of but three days, we set out on our return journey, which occupied us two days less than the first one had done.

“On the final day we created a record, too, by doing the last forty-five miles into White Horse in one day, and on one meal. When we at last reached the city, I, for one, was too tired to eat; the very sight of food made me feel sick, so I turned in and slept for twelve solid hours; then I got up and showed them how a hungry Australian could eat!

“Meals cost a dollar a time then in White Horse; but I don’t fancy the restaurant keeper made much profit out of the first meal he served me with when I awoke.”

THE ADMIRAL'S YARN.

"I guess that's right, captain," was Admiral Eccles' quiet comment when Dartmoor had finished his yarn. "You always were able to do your share of eating, even on ordinary occasions."

There was silence for a while, then Nick, who knew that Admiral Eccles was a storehouse of good stories, ventured to say:

"Won't you tell us one, admiral?"

"Yes; give us a yarn," urged the other lads.

For a moment the old sailor did not answer, but at length, cocking an eye upward, he began:

"And so, lads, you would like to have a yarn from me. Well, I'll tell you the story of what I am a little too fond, it may be, of calling 'My Strange Christmas Day on an Iceberg.'

"Aye, strange enough I did think it at the time, too. As you must know, my boys, it was only my ^[Pg 239] first voyage, and I wasn't very much bigger than Master Nick here, then. Very likely, if the truth was all told, I was a bit awkward and wild, as lads are apt to be still, I fear. But, bless you, that voyage, or, rather, its ending, was enough to sober anybody. I've never forgotten it, and if the rest of my mates are still alive, I don't expect any one of them has, either.

"When I was sixteen years old the time came for me to leave school, and my parents—who were comparatively well to do—wished to put me into a wholesale grocery house, where I should have had a very good chance, indeed, of rising.

"I rebelled. My mind was set on going to sea. My bookcase was cram full of Marryat's novels, naval wars, maps, compasses, and a big treatise on navigation that I had picked up at a bookstall, and could no more comprehend than Joanna, the cook. I pleaded with all the hot, eloquent force of boyhood in favor of the ocean life of my fancy.

"My father called me a fool, and bade me at once make my mind up for business.

"'For into business you go, my lad,' he said.

"I wasn't quite so sure, for if neither argument, nor passion, nor tears were of any avail, there was ^[Pg 240] still an alternative, and I meant to take it.

"I did. I ran away to sea.

"When I came back from that first voyage, after an absence of nearly eight months, I was still in love with the briny, and still resolute in my determination to be a sailor.

"I had undergone not a little hardship of one kind or another, but it had not altered me. My relatives—with whom, despite my evil conduct, I had corresponded as often as circumstances would allow—placed, this time, no obstacles in the way of my ambition. On the contrary, they did their best to give me a good start on my second trip—a kindness which you must grant, my boys, I had not deserved at their hands.

"Thus it came about that I sailed again on board the *Vanthy*, a merchantman, bound for the cod fisheries of Newfoundland.

"As we neared the Newfoundland Banks, heavy fogs again and again overtook us, and the morning of the twenty-fourth of December found the *Vanthy* enveloped in one, if possible, denser and thicker than before. ^[Pg 241]

"The very masts, a few feet above our heads, became as though they were not, in the thick, yellowy vapor. And with the fog a strange, ominous stillness had crept over the deep. Once or twice since then I have noted that peculiar, inexplicable silence—like the hush before the storm—and always peril has been born of it.

"It was a stillness broken only by two sounds: the voices of captain and sailors issuing and answering orders, and the constant, regular wash, wash of the somber-colored waves against our vessel's sides.

“A great quantity of watching and working had fallen to my share during the small hours of the night that was past, and so I seized the first chance I could get to slip below and take a brief spell of rest.

“It was not to be.

“Hardly had I tossed myself into my hammock when a terrific shock dashed me out again with much violence upon the boards beneath.

“My experience was limited, and the first thing that struck my mind was that we had run on shore. [Pg 242]

“Hastily I scrambled to my feet and up on deck, to see there, looming weirdly up in the fog that, now the mischief was done, was beginning slowly to evaporate, the awe-inspiring form of a gigantic iceberg, a sight that would have appalled, nay, had appalled, stouter hearts than mine.

“Upon that iceberg it seemed we had struck with irretrievable damage to the *Vanthy*, stout and thoroughly seaworthy though the good ship was—no mere cockleshell or refurbished coffin ship, I can tell you.

“The captain’s voice broke through the tumult. Curiously calm it seemed to me, for I barely gave it a thought that at such a crisis a single moment’s indecision or want of self-control on the part of authority may mean the loss of many a valuable life, let alone a vessel’s cargo.

“‘Order, my men,’ he said. ‘This will never do. We have, as you know, been rammed by this iceberg. The ship has sprung leaks which no carpenter can repair. The collision has stove in our boats. Our only hope is to take refuge on the ice floe; the part nearest looks too steep, but I think it may be done farther round. What do you say? Shall we try? Luckily the sea is calm, or even that may be impossible,’ he added, in an undertone, and to himself alone; yet, standing as I did at the instant close to the speaker, I caught it, and in some small degree it served to reassure me.

“If Captain Beach did not despair, why need I?

“‘Aye, aye! Try, sir,’ gruffly responded the men.

“They were willing, and more than willing, eager, as the captain well knew, to embrace this chance of at least temporary safety.

“So we set to work as men only can work when life or death is the issue.

“Some, by plugs, did what was possible in the way of stopping the leaks. Some, in gangs, kept the pumps going; the remainder, under the carpenter’s directions, toiled at the making of the raft which was to carry us across.

“It was a great pity, the disaster to our boats, for if they had been spared us we might have got away to shore without difficulty.

“They were gone, however, and it was of no use crying over spilt milk; we worked instead. [Pg 244]

“A light skiff packed away below—a whim of the chief mate’s, it was said to be—was fished up and sent off with the one occupant it alone had room for, on a trip of discovery around the berg.

“The man returned with the welcome news that the captain’s surmise was right. On the opposite side, he said, there was both space for a landing—on ice—and accommodation within reach for us all. Once thereon, we might easily contrive to rig some sort of a shelter.

“Well, we were not long, I need scarcely say, when the raft was once made, in setting about our departure from the doomed *Vanthy*. And not a moment too soon, either, for that vessel was now settling lower and lower into the placid bosom of the ocean. We took across, as best we could, food, water, blankets, wraps, canvas, rope, and whatever of a portable nature we were likely to urgently require. If some of us looked out for what few valuables we had it’s not to be wondered at—they were not many.

“Then began the task of filing off the crew.

“We were obliged to divide our company into three sections to get them over in anything like safety, for both the raft and the space of time in which to use it were narrow—the latter much more narrow than anybody thought, and it was, doubtless, owing to this unfortunate miscalculation that the disaster which followed came.

“Two of the parties had been conveyed across in safety, myself in the second batch; the raft had been piloted back for the last time, and the men were seen climbing down the ship’s side onto it, when—as we watched from that corner of the floe from which we could get a distant side view—the battered *Vanthy* was seen to be

going down, dragging with her into the vortex our raft, and the poor fellows who were already on it. So we were compelled to witness, in dire agony of soul and utter impotence for aid, the sinking into a watery grave of those who for long months had been our companions and friends. It was an awful spectacle; one that even now, boys, almost overwhelms me. One man, and one only, of all those left behind for that fatal third trip managed to swim close enough to be picked up and rescued—thus far—by the skiff. [Pg 246]

“The one proved to be the captain.

“When I parted with him in port many days afterward, he seemed, I declare, fully ten years older than when we first sailed together; and not much wonder, eh, lads?

“The rest of that memorable day we occupied in making ourselves as comfortable as was possible in our cold quarters, sheltering as best we might under the overhanging brows of ice.

“Night came slowly on. The cold was simply intense.

“One by one the pale, glittering stars of the northern constellation broke in upon our loneliness, and the clear, calm moon drifted pitiless up into the sky.

“We needed no telling that if one of our number should fall asleep there, unnoticed, and hence unmolested by his comrades, it was more than probable that he would wake no more in the land of the living, rescue or no rescue.

“We talked, we told stories—grim ones they were—we even tried to sing; and thus the long, dreary hours of the night paced on.

“Morning dawned, gray and misty again—the blessed Christmas morn! Rations were served out in the usual order, and a sharp lookout was kept—I’ll warrant you, by all without exception—for some passing vessel that might be to us an angel of rescue. None came, nor sign of any, and that ‘strange,’ as I truly called it, Christmas day left us as it found us—cold, miserable, and tormented with a sleepiness we dared not indulge.

“Not many miles away—for we could not be far from land now—happy households were keeping the festive season in merry, orthodox fashion; we thus; doubting much whether there would ever again be any chance of our joining in the like.

“In what direction the iceberg was drifting, or if, indeed, it moved at all, was very hard to say.

“We waited, and well-nigh despaired.

“However, the next morning, as we were trying to gulp down the sorrowful meal that did duty for breakfast, a joyful shout rang from the man on the chief watch:

““A sail! a sail!”

“How those brief syllables nerved anew every heart in our little group. What wild pulsations of joy and reviving hope they kindled in our veins! With eager, straining eyes we gazed out over the boundless water waste to the distant southern horizon. There a large vessel was slowly looming into view. We stayed our breath in very dread, lest at any instant she should prove to be that horrible *Flying Dutchman*, a messenger of death, and not of life.

“But, no; she approached nearer and yet nearer.

“Would those on board note the tragedy that lay before them? That was for us now the all-important question.

“For some time the ship kept right on in her straight-ahead course, apparently bearing right down upon us. But at length we grew conscious of an alarming change of tactics. As might have been expected, the vessel’s course was being altered, with the intention of giving the floe in front as wide a berth as was practicable for her crew, it was just an ordinary measure of precaution, nothing more and nothing less; but to us it meant very probably sheer destruction, and that by one of the most awful of all lingering deaths. Ah, the agonized despair of that moment, lads, stamped, as it is, indelibly upon my memory!

“Hurriedly, one of our party—it chanced to be myself—climbed with numbed limbs, and hands, and feet, that soon became torn and bleeding against the rough, jagged edges of ice, to the highest attainable peak overhead, and hung out thereupon a signal of distress—a patched blue jacket stripped from one of the shivering wretches below. Anything to attract attention to our forlorn and desperate condition.

“Then, with parched lips but still lusty voices, we shouted together. Once; no answer. Again; and every instant now those on deck of this passing ship were becoming less and less likely to have their notice drawn

by any means to us. Again, and with redoubled force in the extremity of our woe, we shouted. And again no answer. Again and yet again we cried aloud with all the concentrated energy of our sailor lungs, and the fourth time several of our fellows fancied that a faint answering shout broke the harassing stillness that succeeded our efforts. Once more we halloed together, and launched the skiff as well.

“But this time there could not longer be any doubt of the joyful fact that we were heard. A half shifting of the vessel’s course, a louder, more distinct cheer, followed by the booming of a gun, proclaimed it; and very soon a boat was seen putting off from the ship’s side and coming toward us.

“It was, however, but too clear that their boat could not be safely brought near enough to the ice mass for us to have merely to step down into it as we had previously stepped up from our raft. We were, therefore, under the necessity of going to the ledge of ice nearest our deliverers, and from thence leaping into the sea and swimming to them.

“But what cared we for that?

“Life was in the deed, and one by one we accomplished it; those who could barely swim a yard—not so uncommon a thing among sailors as you might think—being very unceremoniously hauled into the boat by their comrades. Four of our wrecked crew, even then, were obliged to stay on their disagreeable refuge a bit longer, to prevent the risk of overcrowding. It was not a great while, though, and we were soon together again—a nice little bundle of castaways. Once privileged to find our tired feet again on wooden boards instead of cold, glittering ice, more than one or two of our poor fellows pretty nearly ‘knocked under,’ as the saying goes. What with the intense cold, the want of rest, the awful danger they had fronted, the alternate despair and rapture of the rescue, I don’t think that that is at all a matter for surprise.

“A short period of quietude, and the kindly attentions of the ship’s doctor and his medicine chest, soon, however, brought them around. As for myself, I was well again in much less time than any one would have imagined, considering my youth and the tender sort of bringing up I had had.

“The vessel that had effected so opportune a rescue was the *General Washington*—her destination New York, at which port she did not take long in arriving.

“Many and many a voyage I’ve taken since then, as you well know, my boys, to all parts of the globe almost, and not few are the ‘hairbreadth escapes’—as folks call them—through which I’ve been; but, somehow, whether because of my comparative inexperience at the time, I cannot say, not one has impressed me so much as My Strange Christmas Day on an Iceberg.”

After this yarn the boys turned in for the night, and had a good sound sleep.

At noon of the next day the watch aloft called out:

“Bear south by west!”

“Helm true! What is it?”

“A sail!”

The admiral paced the deck in a fever of excitement. Nick’s heart beat faster.

The man aloft kept his eye glued to the glass. A few minutes more and he called out again:

“Double-rigged—a schooner!”

A flutter went the rounds of the crew. The admiral uttered an exclamation of delight. Nick could not repress a hearty “Hooray!”

Fifteen minutes passed. The men on the deck could now see a dim speck on the horizon. All were excited, for success meant a prize award to all of them.

“Two pennants flying!” came the next report from the forearm.

“Can you make them out?” shouted the captain.

“Ay, sir.”

“What are they?”

“The red, white, and blue of America!”

A cheer interrupted him.

“And a heart and—it looks like a wreath!”

A wild yell of delight rent the air.

“The *Regent*!” cried Admiral Semmes and Nick Collins as they clasped hands in their outburst of joy.

ADRIFT.

“Once abeam of Mountain Island set sail due west. There are several clusters of rocks here that are down on the chart. These you will know as the Archipelago. Directly south thirty miles there is a barren stretch of island again. This is Mountain Island, also—but we shall call it, for the sake of clearness, Second Mountain Island. Reach that, then——”

“All is plain sailing!” cried Admiral Semmes, in delight. “Ah, Captain Eccles, I feel like a shipwrecked sailor nearing the shore of peace and rest at last.”

He was on board the *Regent* now, along with Nick Collins. There had been a happy reunion of all the friends. The Spanish brig had earned her money, for the pursuit of the *Regent* had been successful. Within an hour after it was a certainty that the schooner in the distance was the one they sought, the admiral and Nick were welcomed on board the Yankee craft.

Nick was received on the *Regent* like one come back from the dead.

Frank, Will, and Nick were the happiest boys on the Pacific or any other ocean. If ever three lads had stories of wonderful adventures to relate, it was that trio.

After a day or two of rest for the overtaxed admiral, he took part with Eccles and Captain Dartmoor in the daily study of the written clue to the sunken treasure.

“Mountain Island,” said Semmes when, on the second morning after the reunion, he was discussing the situation with Dartmoor and Eccles. “I knew it well when I was in active service. It used to serve as a mid-ocean watering station.”

“I have never seen it, but I’ve been near it, and I’ve noticed it on the chart,” said Captain Eccles.

“Well, then comes the Archipelago,” went on Semmes. “We can’t very well miss that.”

“No; it’s not likely.”

“Then Second Mountain Island.” Semmes put on his glasses and referred again to the letter. ““A barren stretch of island,” it says.”

“Thirty miles south,” put in Eccles from memory.

“I’ve never seen Second Mountain Island,” said Dartmoor; “but it’s easy of location. Once there, as the admiral says, it’s plain sailing. That is, the directions make it seem so, and yet——”

Dartmoor paused, and a serious look came into his face.

“What is it, Jack?” asked Eccles anxiously.

“The charts give a blank beyond it for many leagues.”

“Why is that?”

“It means that the waters there are not navigable.”

“Not navigable!” exclaimed the admiral. “Nonsense!”

“Oh, there’s water, and you can sail there; but it is a dangerous region.”

“In what way dangerous?”

“It may be full of breakers.”

“We can manage them.”

“It may be a region that is subject to sudden and severe storms.”

“We’ll get ready for them,” replied the admiral, dauntlessly.

“It may be ridden with pestilence.”

"You have a medicine chest aboard, captain, haven't you?"

"Yes."

"Well, we won't worry about the pestilence."

"But there may be other grave obstacles," contended Captain Dartmoor.

"Go on, my lad. Name them," said the doughty admiral.

"Well, what if we should encounter a grassy sea that clogs progress and makes the ship unmanageable?"

"We'll cut our way through the grass!" cried Semmes.

Dartmoor smiled. "You're determined to surmount all obstacles, I see, admiral," he said.

"Of course I am. I haven't fought my way through life for nothing. Now look here, Captain Dartmoor. It's all right to be careful; but you've only been making guesses about that section of the ocean that the chart leaves blank. Isn't it possible that nothing worse than unfavorable winds and currents make mariners shun the place?"

"It's quite possible, admiral," acquiesced Dartmoor. "At any rate, when we sail from Second Mountain Island we go south by west."

"Yes."

"About forty leagues."

"That's what the letter says."

"There are several islands in our course. And the one that we must find is very appropriately named. It is called Treasure Island."

"And the directions, I believe, say that it is easily distinguishable?"

"Yes; by a forest of palm trees on its western coast."

"That's a mark we can't miss."

"No; and once we reach the island the treasure is ours!"

"By jingo, we are indebted to the clear head of Nick Collins' father. What a lucid description of it all he has given! He has pointed out the location precisely."

And so, hopefully, buoyantly, the confident mariners discussed their plans.

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For the three boys life was a golden dream under those sunny skies. The crew of the *Regent* were devoted to their captain, and the entire ship's company was on the best of terms. They were a happy family.

The crew had been let into the secret of the voyage, and they took as much interest in attaining success for the undertaking as the persons chiefly concerned. Perhaps a promise of prize money had something to do with their enthusiasm.

Twice heavy storms drove the *Regent* out of her course, but she weathered the tempest bravely on both occasions, and in time regained her proper bearings.

One morning, just as the big, red sun came out of the eastern rim of the horizon, the *Regent* stood abeam of Second Mountain Island.

The news brought Admiral Semmes out of his berth two hours earlier than usual, and the boys, you may be sure, were up and on hand to join in the general rejoicing. Somewhere, within a hundred miles of them now, everybody believed, lay the much-hunted and wished-for sunken treasure.

The three principals in the expedition—Admiral Semmes, Captain Eccles, and Captain Dartmoor—held a council of navigation.

They agreed, after a good deal of discussion, that the best plan was to sail by day as much as possible, and anchor at night. Thus they could see exactly where they were going, progress slowly, and be sure to follow a definite course.

The first evening after leaving Second Mountain Island they came to a rounding reef that afforded a fine harborage.

“Safe in a calm, but bad in a storm,” said Captain Dartmoor.

“Right you are,” agreed the admiral.

“We’ll keep to the outer edge of those rocks there, and watch well, for a storm seems to be brewing.”

“I don’t think it will reach us to-night,” put in Captain Eccles, after giving the sky a weatherwise survey.

“I don’t, either, Eck, but we’d better be on the safe side.”

It was a night of such beauty as only the tropics afford. The stars were fair and serene, and a yellow moon gilded the scene with its radiance.

The ship at anchor, the sailors took their ease about the deck. Some of them sang or danced. One seasoned tar spun yarns of the tropics for three very keen boy listeners. He so excited Nick, Frank, and Will with descriptions of the beauties and wonders of coral reefs and palm-shaded islands that finally Nick said to Frank:

“That’s a coral reef yonder.”

“Yes, and those trees are palms.”

“How would you like to go to them?”

“I’d like it, you bet!”

“And you, Will?”

“I’d like to, of course, but what’s the use? They won’t let us go ashore.”

“Let us ask Captain Dartmoor,” suggested Will.

“No; I’ll ask Captain Eccles,” said Nick.

And he did so. But Eccles shook his head firmly when Nick, with the other boys at his side, presented their request.

“You’re safe here, Nick,” he said. “I lost you once, you know, and I don’t want to take a chance of repeating the experience.”

“But we’re not to be in danger, captain,” pleaded Nick.

“Not in danger?” repeated Eccles. “How do you happen to know that?”

“I mean that we shall only go just inside the reef.”

But Captain Eccles shook his head.

The boys looked sadly disappointed.

“Oh, let them go, captain,” said the admiral.

“Yes, I think you’d better,” put in Dartmoor. “There really isn’t any danger if they go inside the reef.”

“Well, all right,” Eccles consented. “But mind, boys, you’re not to be gone more than half an hour.”

The delighted lads were quickly in a boat and rowing toward the reef. As they rounded one end they found that it was not a continued ridge of rock, as it had seemed from a distance, but was broken here and there with outlets to the ocean.

They approached cautiously, found a place to moor their boat, and landed on the widest part of the reef. They were surprised to see that even on that scant soil there was vegetation, and of a sort that filled them with wonder. There were radiant flowers, some of them seeming almost to sparkle in the moonlight. Near the water’s edge they saw marvelous shells, which, for color, rivaled the splendid flowers. The boys felt as if they had suddenly been dropped into a section of fairyland.

The half hour granted them went by, grew into an hour, and then they remembered that they had a promise to keep.

“I’m sure we’ve been gone more than half an hour,” said Nick.

“So am I.”

“I’m sorry. We gave our word, you know, to Captain Eccles.”

“Well, let us row back just as fast as we can.”

“We’d better,” said Nick, “for more reasons than one. Do you feel this wind?”

“Yes,” answered Frank. “I thought it had grown stronger.”

They were still some distance from their boat.

“Hurry up, boys!” cried Nick, starting into a run.

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Frank and Will followed. But when they came in sight of the place where they had moored the yawl, an exclamation of dismay escaped Nick.

“Heavens! It’s gone!” he cried.

In the moonlit water, not very far yet from the edge of the reef, their boat was adrift. It was making for one of the outlets to the sea.

“After it, boys, quick!” cried Nick, as he took the lead in an effort to recover the boat.

All three of the boys sprang into the water, and waded toward the yawl. The heightened wind, which had swept the little craft from its insecure mooring, was now aided by the rising tide in carrying it toward the outlet.

But the boys made after it with good speed, and managed at last to come up with it. They laid hold of it by the gunwales, and tried to check its progress, but failed. It drew them along with it.

“Climb aboard!” shouted Nick.

They all did so. By the time they got at the oars the yawl had swung through the outlet and was in open water.

“Now, then, a steady pull for the *Regent*!” cried Frank.

But hardly had he spoken the words when the swift current tore an oar from his hands, and whirled it into the water far beyond his reach.

“An oar is gone!” he cried out.

“And we are drifting out to sea!” exclaimed Will, in terror.

In a flash Nick Collins realized the danger into which events had suddenly plunged them. One glance at the fast-receding reef told him how rapidly they were being swept to sea. A swift current fairly drove the yawl along. Dark clouds began to overcast the sky. The wind gave forth an ominous blast again and again.

With one oar Nick could do nothing. He looked into the pale faces of his companions.

“Boys,” he said, “we’re in for it. But keep cool. They may see us from the *Regent*, and send out a boat to get us.”

It was just a forlorn hope, as Nick knew, but he gave voice to it for the sake of keeping up his companions’ courage. On account of the intervening reef the yawl could not be seen from the deck of the *Regent*.

The land faded away. A roaring breeze stirred up the sea and rocked their little craft unmercifully. Will was striving bravely to keep from crying. Frank was silent. Nick scanned the water in the direction of the *Regent*, hoping against hope that their danger might have become known to those on board.

Farther and farther away from their friends they were carried. There was no moonlight now, and, with a sinking heart, Nick realized that even if a boat were sent after them they might not be seen.

“Lie in the bottom of the boat, both of you,” Nick said as the rocking grew worse. “There is nothing else we can do—nothing but keep the yawl as steady as possible. For the rest—we must trust to Providence.”

STRANGE ADVENTURES.

Save for the tropical tempest that descended, the experience passed through that night was not a new one to Nick Collins. He had known what it was to live through dreary hours of darkness longing for the dawn, and he had gone through that ordeal alone in an open boat, as the reader knows.

But for the other boys it was a new, and therefore all the more terrible, experience. How the little yawl escaped being overturned seemed to the three lads a miracle when they thought about it the next morning; but escape it did, and to that extent the castaways had to consider themselves lucky.

When the sun got high enough to illumine the ocean for miles around, they scanned the horizon with still a glimmering of hope. But there was no sail in sight, nor any sign of land.

"I suppose we have drifted far away from the reef," said Frank.

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"Very likely," Nick had to admit.

"We'll never see the ship again," groaned Will.

"That's not sure, by any means," returned Nick, in an effort to save his friends from despair. "But we've a great deal to be thankful for at that."

"What?" wailed Will.

"That we are alive this morning," replied Nick.

"But the storm isn't over," Will moaned.

"Oh, come, Will," urged Nick. "I know it's pretty hard on you, but don't give way. We might be worse off. The storm isn't over, yet the worst of it has passed."

"But we're nowhere near land."

"I'm not so sure of that," said Nick. "But whether we are near land or far from it, one thing we must do."

"You're right, Nick," put in Frank. "You mean we must keep our spirits up."

"Yes, that's *just* what I mean. Thousands of people have been in as bad a fix as this, and they have got out of it. So try to cheer up, Will."

"I'll try, Nick."

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"That's the way to talk. We may be found by the *Regent* in an hour. We may sight land any moment. Now, there's another thing that is certain."

"What's that, Nick?" asked Frank.

"We must be in the region of Treasure Island."

"What of it?"

"It means that we are in a part of the ocean where islands are numerous."

"And we may be able to reach one?"

"That's it. So, you see, it isn't so bad as it may look."

"Do you think the *Regent* will hunt for us?" asked Will.

"I do."

As Nick spoke he had been busy fishing out a piece of tarpaulin that had been crumpled up in a ball in the bow.

"Here, Frank," he said. "Catch hold of this."

"What for?"

“Spread out your two corners of it—so.” Nick did the same with the two corners that he held. “We’d better catch some of this rain. I don’t see any other way of getting a drink.”

Thus it was that they quenched their thirst. Then Nick carefully brought the ends together, making a sort of bag, and in this he preserved some of the rain water for future use.

It was as Nick had guessed. The worst of the storm was over. They drifted on until noon, the sea getting quieter as the wind died down. But it was not a calm that set in by any means. There was still a brisk breeze.

They were all feeling pretty hungry, you may be sure. They had not tasted food since supper the evening before, on the *Regent*. The chances for getting anything to eat were certainly very slim. They had no means of catching fish. At about three o’clock in the afternoon, Nick, who had been scanning the expanse of water in all directions, uttered a cry of excitement.

“What is it?” asked Frank. “A sail?”

“No.”

“Land?”

“No.”

“What, then?”

“Look!”

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Nick pointed into the distance, but high above the waves.

The others looked in the direction he indicated.

“Oh, only a bird!” said Frank, disappointed.

“*Only* a bird!” repeated Nick. “That means land.”

“How so?”

“Because, if I am not mistaken, it is a tree or swamp bird.”

“How can you tell that?”

“See how short its wings are.”

“That’s so.”

They were all country-bred boys, and knew something about the points of birds.

“And its short bill!” cried Nick. “You can see it plainer now.”

“Yes, yes. I guess you’re right, Nick. And— isn’t there something white on one foot?”

“Sure there is, Will! Good for you!”

They watched the bird as it flew in another direction, and passed out of sight.

For two or three hours there was no other incident to revive their hopes or break the monotony of their *perpetual* wait for something to turn up. Gloomily they realized that night would soon be upon them again, and, to make matters worse, it looked as if another storm were brewing.

Suddenly Frank cried out:

“Look! There’s another bird!”

Nick and Will cast their eyes upward.

“No, no,” said Frank. “In the water. Quick! Give me the oar!”

Nick passed him the oar, and with a rapid movement Frank drew to the boat a dark object that had been floating by. He leaned over and caught it up.

It was a dead bird.

“It’s a pigeon, isn’t it?” said Nick.

“I think so. And see! There’s something white on its foot!”

“By jiminy! You’re right.”

Attached to one of its legs was a substance of light color.

"It's a piece of bark!" exclaimed Nick when he had examined it. "It's tied on with the fiber of some plant."

"So it is."

"It must have been something like this the other bird had tied to it."

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"I think so."

"This means something, boys. The thing didn't get on this bird by accident."

"That's a sure thing, Nick."

"Some one must have tied it on. Why, look here, boys!"

They looked, and saw what had caught Nick's eye.

"Writing!" exclaimed Frank.

"That's what it is, as sure as we're alive. Now, let's see if we can make it out."

Nick set to work. Although upon the wood were traced unmistakably letters and words, the water had obliterated some of them. Over the remainder Nick bent and tried to make out something.

"What does it say?" asked Will impatiently.

"Wait a minute," said Nick, still studying the scrawl. At length he said: "Boys, it's a message."

"A message?"

"No doubt of it. Listen, and I'll read what I can of it: 'On—istan—over—en—years—a castaway. [Pg 234] found—send a ship—t—s—y—years—.' There's something else," Nick went on, "but I can just make it out. Wait a second. By gracious! I've got it: '*Star—f—ope.*' Hooray! That means *Star of Hope!*'"

The other boys bent over the writing eagerly.

"That's *Star of Hope*, all right," agreed Frank. "Now let's see if we can't put it all together so as to make some sense out of it."

And they did so, with the result that they had a message reading thus:

"On an island, over ten years a castaway. If this is found send a ship. *Star of Hope.*"

There was more of which they could make nothing—a blurred mass of color, where the pencil or ink employed in the writing had been washed out by the water.

"It's a puzzle, sure," said Frank.

"Of one thing I feel certain, though," Nick announced.

"What's that?"

"The person who wrote this knows something of the lost ship, the *Star of Hope.*"

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"It looks so."

"And this is my guess," Nick went on: "Some sailor wrote the thing, and a sailor that was on that ship, and he was cast away on some island not far from here."

"It seems likely."

"You see, the message speaks of 'ten years'. That's certain. There isn't room for more than one letter in the space between the word 'over' and 'en.' So it couldn't have been fourteen, fifteen, or any other 'teen. Do you see?"

"Yes," the others answered, in chorus.

"Well, it was ten years ago that the *Star of Hope* was reported lost at sea."

The singular occurrence gave the boys much to talk about, but their own position and its renewing perils claimed their immediate attention. With the approach of darkness the signs for a stormy night increased. By the time the sun had gone below the sea the wind was blowing strong and the waves running high. The boys had all they could do to cling to the sides of the yawl. They were hungry, weary, almost exhausted, and it is

not likely that they would have been able to weather the storm another night; something occurred to put them in the last extremity of danger.

It was at a moment when the lads had reached, it seemed to them, the utmost limit of their endurance. They were yielding to the despair of their situation when suddenly Nick called out, and with sufficient force to be heard by his companions above the swish of the waves, and despite the shrieking wind:

“A light! A light!”

He pointed straight ahead, where a somewhat feeble gleam appeared and disappeared, then showed again:

“What does it mean?” asked Frank feebly.

“We must be nearing land,” murmured Nick.

Oh, yes; they were nearing land.

Crash!

The yawl had struck a rock amid the breakers of an island beach!

The timbers of the small boat parted; the boys were flung into the sea. Nick caught a glimpse of Frank and Will struggling in the foam, and he made an effort to reach them, but the next moment they had vanished. Then he was forced to think of his own safety.

For a while he battled with the waves and rocks, and then, unable to continue the unequal fight, he surrendered to the inevitable.

When Nick, after several hours had gone by, regained consciousness, the waves had washed him ashore. He opened his eyes, and felt the cooling rain upon his face. He saw the light of day. The surf, pounding near by, sent its spray over him.

But he was not alone.

There was a human face near his own. It was not the face of Frank or Will.

It was that of an aged, careworn man. Its eyes were riveted upon his with an expression of great tenderness and anxiety.

The man supported Nick in his arms. And when the boy opened his eyes he heard the words:

“Saved! Thank Heaven!”

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“Who—who are you?” asked the wondering lad.

“Your father, Nick. The castaway of the *Star of Hope*!”

WRECKED AT THE DOOR OF HOPE.

What of the *Regent* and the little company of mariners who had set sail with such glowing hopes from the port of Valencia?

The storm that had driven the three boys away from the coral reef showed no mercy to the brig. She was torn from her moorings without a minute's warning.

Until that moment Captain Eccles and Admiral Semmes had waited, with ever-increasing fear, for the return of the yawl and the three boys. Captain Eccles reproached himself bitterly for having yielded to the wishes of the lads and the advice of the admiral and Dartmoor.

"Oh, why did I not stick to my own judgment," he raved, "and never let them go ashore?"

He forgot his own danger, and was on the point of putting out in a boat, with some sailors, to go to the aid of the young adventurers, when the tempest swept the *Regent* from her moorings.

And even then Captain Eccles implored Dartmoor to try to keep the ship near the reef and make an effort to rescue the boys. But this was impossible.

When a sailor said he had seen the yawl outside the reef Eccles knew that his youthful charges were adrift and at the mercy of the waves.

That night the *Regent*—like the small boat that held Nick, Frank, and Will—was the plaything of the tempest. Captain Dartmoor did not sleep, and it required every effort of the crew to keep the *Regent* from foundering. Next day when, during a lull in the storm, it was possible to make an examination of the ship, she was found to be in a very bad condition. She had sprung a leak, and some of the crew were told off to man the pumps. In this way they were able to keep her afloat.

Eccles and Semmes scanned the sea continuously in the hope of discerning some trace of the yawl, but the quest proved a fruitless one.

"I wonder if it is possible that the boys managed to get back inside the reef," said Captain Eccles, clutching at the only straw of hope.

Admiral Semmes shook his head.

"You don't think so, I see," Eccles said sadly.

"No, my dear friend; I fear the boys are lost."

On the second day, as the sun sank toward the horizon's edge, the storm resumed its old fury, and by the time darkness had set in it was even fiercer than the night before. But just before night fell the lookout had reported a low line of black on the weather quarter that looked like the beach of an island.

Darkness, however, prevented any definite progress in its direction, and efforts were given only to carrying the ship safely through the night. To this end, the first and most important service, the pumps were kept working, so that the hold might not fill with water.

Thus the *Regent* drifted on, hour after hour. It was not until midnight that anything happened to break the monotony of the dreary experience. Then a double alarm brought to the deck every man not at the pumps.

"Breakers ahead!" was the first alarm that came from the lookout stationed aloft.

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"Where away?"

"On the windward quarter."

Scarcely had his words died out when the watcher saw something to make him sound a second alarm:

"A light!"

There was no need to ask where, for coming out of the mist, a few points off their starboard bow, the schooner's folk saw the binnacle lamp of a big steamship.

A second or two and the great steel prow was crashing into the *Regent*.

Making a diagonal slash through the schooner from port to starboard, she carried away the sailing vessel's bowsprit and left her with a gap forward.

Then the destroyer, whirled on by the tempest, disappeared in the darkness.

It is impossible to realize how quickly this and subsequent events occurred. In ten minutes from the moment the *Regent* was struck she had sunk, and her crew were in the lifeboats beating against the waves, ^{Pen 283} seeking a landing on the shore which, the breakers told them, was not far away.

And they were successful in making a landing. But upon what a shore, and amid what surroundings!

The morning light told them the completeness of their disaster. They were on a desert island, without food, and all their belongings lost.

In the first gray of the morning a scene inexpressibly dreary met their eyes. The island, at the place where they had landed, was rock-bound, with a very narrow strip of beach, but for which their boats must have been dashed to pieces.

Beyond the island, at the south, stretched what seemed to be an interminable swamp.

There was no sign of the *Regent*. No wreckage from her had been driven ashore. The only reminders of the schooner on which they had set forth with such glowing hopes were the two lifeboats.

The storm had subsided.

Of the three leaders in the enterprise, Captain Eccles seemed most distressed by the disastrous turn of ^{Pen 284} events.

"By Heaven, mates!" he exclaimed. "It is the doom of all our hopes."

"We are alive, aren't we?" said Captain Dartmoor, in an effort to cheer him up.

"Yes; but our chance of getting the treasure—that is dead, Jack. And it seemed almost in our hands two days ago."

"It's hard luck, Eck," agreed Dartmoor; "but so long as there is life there is hope."

"It's fine of you to speak so, especially to me," returned Eccles gratefully.

"Why not to you as well as anybody else, Eck?"

"Have I not lured you into losing your ship?"

Dartmoor laughed.

"Why, Jack," he said, "when I came with you I took a chance. The sea has its risk—if it isn't one thing it's another."

"That's all right, and good of you; but——"

"Oh, come, old friend. We are in trouble. It's up to us to get busy, and find a way out of it. No time like the present, so let's begin at once."

Suiting the action to the word, he went over to where the crew were sitting and told them to man the boats. ^{Pen 285}

"Where are you going?" asked Admiral Semmes.

"To explore the island."

"A good idea. It all can't be like this."

"That's what I think."

Dartmoor and a group of the men got in one boat. Captain Eccles, Admiral Semmes, and the rest of the sailors entered the other. They set their course for a promontory that reached from the island's northern end.

Although the men were hungry and weary, they bent to the oars with a will, for their only chance of relief lay in going somewhere, doing something.

They rounded the high point, and were delighted at the prospect that unfolded to their view. Beyond the swamp, at this side, stretched an expanse of rich vegetation, its green showing bright in the sunlight, along with flowers of brilliant hue.

“Admiral, admiral! Look!” cried Captain Eccles, pointing toward the charming scene.

“Ah, yes; it is beautiful,” said the admiral.

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“But it is more than beautiful!” exclaimed Eccles, in excitement. “It is success!”

“Success! What do you mean?”

“This is our destination.”

The admiral looked at him, fearful that disaster had robbed poor Eccles of his reason.

“Our destination?” the admiral repeated.

“Yes. See the line of palms over there. That—that is Treasure Island.”

THREE BOY CRUSOES.

The fate that washed Nick Collins ashore alive was equally kind to Frank and Will Arden.

They clung to a broken timber of the yawl and were driven to land about a mile farther down the beach than the breakers had carried Nick. There, giving up their companion as drowned, they remained until morning.

Scarcely had the morning light begun to show the shapes of things when something happened which, for the moment at least, added to their terrors.

The place where Frank and Will passed the night was on the edge of a clump of trees. When Frank, with the coming of dawn, began to look about him, one of the first things he saw was a weird-looking creature coming out of the woods. He stared at them a while, and then moved toward them.

The boys' impulse was to run, and they would have yielded to it but for these words, called out in a hoarse voice:

"Don't be afraid! I won't harm you!"

This caused Frank and Will to turn again and look at what had seemed to them a wild man or some other strange creature. Now, reassured somewhat by the words they had heard, they stood their ground, and, as the being drew nearer, saw that he was a man.

"I don't wonder that I scared you, boys," he said. "Ten years alone on this island have made me look more like beast than man, I suppose. I have to guess at it," he said, with a grim smile, "for I haven't looked into a mirror in all that time."

In a few minutes he told them his story. He was Captain Collins, cast away ten years before, and ever since a prisoner on the island waiting vainly from day to day for a sail. Many had appeared on the horizon, but never near enough to see his signal of distress.

You may be sure that it was with amazement and a great joy in his heart that he learned who the boys were and heard their story, until they came to the part where they said they had parted from Nick and supposed him to be lost.

"Heaven grant that he, too, gained the shore!" exclaimed the father of Nick Collins. "Come, let us look along the beach. Maybe we shall find him."

As the reader knows, their search was rewarded. Hand in hand with his son, Captain Collins led the way to a rude cabin which the castaway had built for a home. He told the boys a wonderful story of his experience. He alone had remained on the sinking *Star of Hope* in that storm that sent her to the bottom ten years before.

He had managed to build a raft, and for days after the ship sank he floated about on an unknown sea. Then he landed on a desert island, and it proved to be the goal of his quest.

"The place where the treasure is hidden?" asked Frank.

"Yes."

"And it is here?"

"Yes. This is Treasure Island."

"And the treasure," put in Will. "Where is it?"

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"It is here, but not in this exact spot. It is on the other side of the island. I knew the spot from its description the moment I saw it. There I built a hut and kept a signal flying. For a year I watched in vain for a passing ship. Then I decided that I was on the wrong side of the island. I built a boat—it was lost in a storm recently—and came here. I saw that a ship had been here for I found an abandoned water barrel. Evidently it had been brought ashore by some ship's men, and for some reason never carried back to the vessel. So I moved my stores to this side of the island, and have lived here ever since."

"Father," said Nick, "how long have you been sending out messages tied to birds' legs?"

Captain Collins looked at him in wonder.

“You got one of them, then?” he asked.

Nick told him of the live bird they had seen with something white on a leg and then of the dead one they found in the water with the half-obliterated message.

“The hand of Fate is in this!” exclaimed the captain. “Those two messages you saw are only two of hundreds and hundreds that I have sent out. Trapping wild birds has been my chief occupation all these years. Those that I did not use for food I set free, first tying the messages on them.”

“And the treasure, father. You haven’t told us of that.”

Captain Collins’ face assumed a sad expression.

“Ah, my boy,” he said mournfully, “I found it.”

“And wasn’t there much?” asked Frank, misunderstanding the man’s manner.

“Much!” Captain Collins said, smiling grimly. “I thought it much at first—there must be a million dollars’ worth of it—but I have since learned how little it all is.”

The boys were puzzled.

“You did find it, then, father?”

“Yes, Nick, but what good to me were bars of silver and gold and bags of coins and jewels. They would not buy me a single mouthful of food. They could not bring back the friend I had lost to gain this fortune. It was as if I found so many shells on the beach.”

The boys were silent, seeing now what he meant, and impressed with his words.

“To occupy my mind,” Captain Collins went on, “I located the treasure and dug for it, and, in time, got it all, I guess. Some of it was in casks, some in boxes.”

“What did you do with it?”

“I moved it here.”

“In the hut?” asked Nick, he and the other boys glancing about the place.

“No; I put it in a cave.”

“And it is there now?”

“Yes; at least I suppose so.”

“Don’t you ever go to see?”

“Strange as it may seem to you, Nick, I do not. The reason is that I came to regard it as the cause of all my misery, and I hated that treasure as much as man can hate anything not endowed with life. So I never went near it. One day the waves drove ashore the remnant of a wreck—a sailor’s box. It contained a Bible. How my heart leaped with joy at sight of it! Willingly at that moment I would have given all my gold for it. It made life endurable. It taught me patience; it taught me that contentment of mind and uprightness are better than all the gold in the world. But enough of this, boys; some other time, perhaps, you’ll be interested in hearing more about me. Now, what of the plans of Captain Eccles and Admiral Semmes?”

Nick told him what he knew about it.

“They were on the right track,” said Captain Collins, “and if they weathered the storm are sure to find the island.”

“Is there any chance that they will come here?” asked Nick.

“If they keep on the course they laid out they must pass here.”

“Then let us make some kind of a signal.”

“That’s just what I was thinking of doing, Nick. We will make a new beacon light.”

“Where shall we put it?”

“Not on this side of the island, for they are not likely to look here.”

“Why?”

“Because the treasure is on the other side.”

“Then we’d better put our light over there.”

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“By all means.”

“How can we get there?”

“Not by land.”

“Why?”

“There is an impassable swamp between.”

“Then we must sail there. Have you got a boat?”

“No, Nick,” answered the captain, smiling; “but I’ve got you and the other boys to help me build one.”

The boys, of course, were delighted with the idea, and for two weeks they had a fine time taking part in the construction of the boat and exploring the island. The strange flowers, fruits, and birds, the sparkling sea, the shady forests, made the lads feel that they were in fairyland. They thought they would like to live on Treasure Island forever. The days passed like a dream. At the end of a fortnight the boat was finished. It was a rude device, to be sure, but staunch and fit for the service for which it was intended.

“To-morrow we set sail,” announced Captain Collins.

“And the treasure?” asked Frank. “Do we leave it here?”

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“Yes, for the present. We shall return, you know.”

But the next morning something happened to cause a decided change in their plans. Just as they reached the boat and were about to embark Nick started and pointed seaward.

“Look!” he cried.

A stately ship was in full sight.

THE TREASURE.

Every man in the boat thrilled with a new excitement when Captain Eccles announced that the land they had just left and were now approaching again was Treasure Island.

“Are you sure of it?” asked Admiral Semmes.

“As sure as one can be of anything.”

“I must say,” put in Dartmoor, “that it answers perfectly the description in the letter.”

There was no doubt about that, and amid visions of the great wealth they had come here to secure everybody forgot the disasters passed through and the discomforts of the present. Soon the boats were moored and a camp was started.

“We have found the island,” Captain Dartmoor said; “but we’ve a lot to do before we can locate the treasure and begin digging for it. Food and shelter are the first things to think of.”

All that day and the following one they devoted to building a rude house and getting a supply of such fruit and fish as they could. The third day it was decided to go in quest of the treasure.

“It will take some time even to locate it,” said Admiral Semmes.

And so it turned out, although the letter gave explicit directions. Every day they followed its instructions, returning to camp at night.

“To-morrow we visit that hill yonder,” said Semmes one evening. “That is the last point of location.”

“And the treasure?”

“According to the letter it lies between that hill and a narrow neck of land. It was a small cove once. There the Spanish galleon sank. The sand was carried by the sea into the cove, and partly filled it up.”

“But how did the treasure ever get out of the galleon, do you suppose?”

“Oh, some of the Spaniards must have tried to save it, and carried it ashore, to the water’s edge. We’ve been regarding it as sunken treasure all along. It really is buried treasure.”

“And we must dig to get it?”

“Exactly.”

Next morning all hands went to the hill. They had descended to the shore when Semmes picked up a ~~board~~^{plank} that stood in the sand. Some of the others stood near by while he read the name painted on it. The admiral’s face grew pale.

“Eccles!” he cried. “The name on it is *Diamond*.”

“Vail’s ship!” exclaimed Eccles. “Heavens! He has got here ahead of us!”

“Yes; the ship he sailed in from New York was called the *Diamond*. It is not likely there are two ships of that name.”

“No; it isn’t likely.”

“Then Vail has baffled us.”

“Possibly; but it is not certain. Let us press on, anyhow.”

They went on, and rounded the base of the hill, the others following Eccles and the admiral.

“This is the spot!” cried Eccles.

All looked eagerly at the ground where the captain pointed. What they saw was an excavation, whether recently made or not was not evident, the sand gave no hint on this point. It was on the edge of a small cove.

“What does it mean?” asked the admiral, in wonder. “Some one has been digging here?”

Eccles passed a hand across his eyes. "Too late!" he gasped.

"I'm afraid so," agreed Semmes more coolly. "Some one has been here."

"And the treasure is gone!"

"Vail has secured it!"

At this juncture fully twenty men dashed from the forest near by. They were armed, and advanced boldly until they surrounded the party from the *Regent*.

"Who are you?" demanded their leader of Captain Dartmoor.

Before the latter could answer another of the newcomers spoke up. Eccles and Semmes recognized him. He was James Vail.

"I've told you who these men are and what they are here for," the broker said to the leader of the band. The rascally Wall Street man's face wore a leer of triumph. "Seize these three." He pointed out Captain Dartmoor, Eccles, and Semmes.

"You scoundrel!" burst out Admiral Semmes. "It's not your fault that you did not murder me." [Pg 300]

He would have said more, but several ruffians obeyed Vail's order, and seized him, along with Dartmoor and Eccles, and stood them apart from the sailors.

"Now, you fellows clear out!" Vail cried to the seamen of the *Regent*. The sailors looked defiant, and stood their ground until the captain of the *Diamond* and his crew raised their revolvers; then there was nothing for them to do but go away.

The three captives were led some distance up the beach, then around a point of high rock, where the bay stretched before them, and they could see the *Diamond* at anchor.

"Now, then," said Vail, facing Admiral Semmes, "where is that treasure?"

Semmes answered him with a puzzled look.

"The treasure?" he said at length. "Why do you ask *me* for it, you dog?"

"Be careful what you say!" Vail threatened. "You're in my hands, remember, and if you don't keep a civil tongue in your head and answer my question truthfully it will go hard with you. Now, what have you ~~done~~ with that gold and the rest of the treasure?"

"What treasure are you talking about?"

"You know well enough. What you got from the cove down there."

"The treasure *we* got?"

"Yes. Come, out with it!"

"We didn't get any treasure," answered the admiral.

"You lie, confound you!" cried Vail furiously.

The captain of the *Diamond* drew him aside.

"I told you they would deny it," he said. "We'll have to put the screws on them and make them tell."

While they were talking in a low tone, and now and then casting ugly glances at their prisoners, Eccles and his companions comprehended the situation. Plainly the *Diamond* was the ship that had struck the *Regent* and sent her to the bottom. That explained why the larger vessel had not attempted to stand by and offer assistance to the *Regent's* company. Vail had arrived at the island after Eccles and his party, and found the treasure gone. There could be no doubt of this. Clearly Vail's anger was genuine. Evidently he was convinced that the admiral and the others had carried off the treasure and concealed it.

Vail put several questions to the prisoners, which they answered; thus he learned of the loss of the *Regent*, and all that they had done since their arrival on Treasure Island.

Still Vail was not satisfied. He believed that his rivals had secured the boxes and bags of wealth. Turning to the captain of the *Diamond*, whose name was Smith, he said:

“They’ve got it and hidden it, all right. We’ll keep hold of them and try that little game of torture you suggest. I think that will loosen their tongues.”

“I guess their story about the *Regent* is true,” said the other.

“Perhaps; but if they didn’t take the gold who else could have done so?”

“I’ll have to give that up, Vail.”

“Well, watch those sailors we let go. Be sure you keep them at a distance. They might try to rescue the old Semmes and the other two. We’ve got to hold on to them. It’s our only chance of getting a tip on where the treasure is.”

“All right, Vail.”

Several days passed. Then something occurred that turned the tide of events. The crew of the *Diamond* managed to get possession of some liquor stored in the hold and take it ashore. The result was that all hands except Vail and Smith got tipsy.

Those appointed to guard Eccles fell asleep, and the captain made his escape. As fast as he could he went to where the crew of the *Regent* were encamped, about a mile away. A plan was quickly formed to rescue Semmes and Dartmoor.

Owing to the drunken state of the *Diamond*’s guards, and the fact that Vail and Smith were off hunting for some clue to the supposed hiding place of the treasure, the admiral and his fellow prisoner were easily set free.

At nightfall the *Regent*’s party captured two of the *Diamond*’s boats, and in them stole silently to the side of the anchored ship. All was still. No one seemed to be awake. Evidently there had been a spree on board as well as ashore.

In a very few minutes Eccles and his party shook the sleepers awake, piled them all into a boat, and sent them ashore.

Then, just as dawn was breaking, they raised anchor and sailed away. When they had rounded the island and come in sight of the camp of Captain Collins and the three boys, the lookout reported signaling from the shore.

“It may be some of the *Diamond* gang,” suggested Semmes.

“No,” said Eccles, looking through a glass, “it’s a man and three boys. By Heaven! admiral, I believe they are the youngsters from Parkdale.”

A yawl was put off from the *Diamond*, and before an hour had passed Captain Collins’ friends welcomed him back to life, as did the boys they had given up for lost.

ALL ENDS WELL.

One beautiful September night the *Diamond* passed the Golden Gate and sailed into the harbor of San Francisco.

Below decks was a million in gold and silver, in the cabin a party of happy friends.

The voyage from Treasure Island had been without incident. Favorable winds, sunny skies, and calm waters had been with them all the way.

The day after their arrival in San Francisco the three captains and the admiral went to a prominent shipping agent. Captain Eccles acted as spokesman for the party.

"Are you agent for MacMillan & Lloyd, of New York?" he asked of the gentleman who presented himself.

"Yes, sir."

"Authorized to make sales and transfers for them?"

"Under instructions, yes."

"The firm own a ship named the *Diamond*?"

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"They do, sir."

"It is in port, here. We are ready to settle with the captain and crew, and buy the ship. What is the price?"

"How would you pay?" asked the agent.

"Cash, every cent."

The agent named a price, subject to the approval of the owners. For an hour telegrams flew back and forth across the continent. Before night Captain Eccles had turned some of the treasure into cash, and become owner of the *Diamond*. The next morning he went to a reliable sea captain he knew and offered him a large price to visit Treasure Island and carry Vail, Smith and the rest of the baffled treasure hunters back to New York. The offer was accepted, and in the latter city the disconsolate adventurers arrived in due time.

There was a surprise for Vail when he reached the door of his office in Wall Street. He found it closed and the place deserted. The Speedwell forgeries had been discovered, and Loucks, learning that the police were after him, had fled, taking all the available funds. His precious nephew, Jack Benson, who had managed to make his way back to New York after the wreck, went with Loucks, and neither was ever heard of again in New York. But Vail was caught, and, after a speedy trial, sent to Sing Sing prison for ten years.

Admiral Semmes, Captains Collins, Eccles, and Dartmoor found themselves well-to-do men when a division was made of the cash from the sale of the treasure. To Captain Dartmoor were given a new ship and a liberal allowance of cash, and every member of his crew received a generous reward.

Eccles and Collins engaged in the shipping business in New York, and Nick was made a junior partner. The other boys were not taken into the business until they had put in two more years at school, for they had not been as well advanced in their studies as Nick at the time they left Parkdale.

In time the two captains as well as Admiral Semmes passed away, but the sign over the door of the shipping office was not changed. And as "Collins & Eccles" the firm is known yet, but the head partner is Nick, and his associates are Frank and Will Alden. By introducing modern ideas and conducting affairs with the enterprise and enthusiasm of youth, they have built up a large and prosperous business.

THE END.