

CHAPTER III

The Old Historian

Arising at dawn we stood and looked, amazed at the richest land mass on earth.

"These are the largest, tallest oaks, bays and palms I ever saw," said Charlie.

"There is a fern big enough to hold up a boy," Dave marvelled. "I know I never saw the like in my life. How do you account for this, Bill?"

"This soil is largely composed of Peruvian guano and pebble phosphate, and, therefore, it is many times richer than the famous bottoms on the river Nile," I explained.

The next moment we heard wild turkeys gobbling, peacocks screaming, wild chickens cackl-

ing and crowing, and parrots, guineas and monkeys chattering. The woods and water were alive with busy birds of many species, and all ecstatic with joy.

"Bill, how do you account for the presence of these monkeys, parrots and poultry on this island?" Dave inquired.

"The counterfeiterers," I answered, "must have brought them or their ancestors here."

Turning, we saw sweet, but wild orange trees covered with golden fruit, and on these we feasted.

A little further back we saw a stocky palm tree forked like a fig bush, loaded down with cocoanuts the shape of a capsule and the size of a quart cup.

We went to it and cut a hole in the tough rind of one of the capsules and drank the cocoanut milk, which was sweeter and richer than the milk of a pampered Jersey.

"I am disgusted at the cocoanut milk I drank at Fort Myers," Charlie smiled.

Then I cut open a riper looking capsule, and while the milk was gone, the rind was covered with a yellow substance like cheese or butter. Indeed and in truth it was a vegetable butter, wholesome, sweet and good. Then we had a real feast of milk, butter and hard-tack.

This done we locked the boat to a fern tree and started up the sandy beach to look for signs of the Coat Man and outlaws.

"Now, boys, I believe we are in the land and home of the counterfeiter—a desperate and dangerous gang. So be careful, look and listen," I urged.

Continuing up the winding beach for about a mile we came to an old shaggy cypress, ten feet in diameter at our noses, but the old patriarch was all dead except one limb. The dead limbs were dangling and falling and the bark was sliding off. The old sentinel looked naked, sad and forsaken.

Walking up and putting my hands on the venerable old tree I saw a letter cut into a piece of

the clinging bark. Excitedly I removed the moss and read in Spanish

"PIZARO GOMEZ OF SPAIN
1583"

"What on earth can that mean, Bill?" Dave exclaimed.

"I have never seen," said Charlie, "anything like that before."

"Whose name is that?" Dave asked anxiously.

"It is," I explained, "the name of a Spanish youth who, while cruising in Tampa Bay in 1582, went ashore to hunt but never returned. Not one word has ever been heard of the boy from that day to this."

"Why, this name was cut a short time after Columbus discovered America," Dave declared. "What do you think of it, Bill?"

This question staggered me and I could advance no theory to explain it.

"It is a mystery how that youth got into this hidden island, but he must have been here," I said, "and cut his name, for the Indians could

not have done so, being ignorant of Spanish language."

"Is it possible, Mr. Argo, that this tree could have been standing here in 1583?" asked Charlie.

"Yes, they grow," I answered, "to be five to nine hundred years old."

"Well, what do you think of it, Bill?" asked Dave.

"It is a mystery and this is all I now can say. However, I do believe this matter is in some way connected with the Coat Man and will prove so if that mystery is ever solved. Really I feel as if we are walking on strange ground."

Removing the moss from the bark a little higher up I found more letters and they read:

"PIZARO GOMEZ OF SPAIN
1684"

"Great stars! Bill, this name was cut apparently by the same engraver and was done one hundred and four years later. Think of it!" Dave exclaimed.

"I think, and know it is a profound mystery, that is all I can say."

For a moment we all stood in speechless silence.

"It may be that this island has been the home and rendezvous of European counterfeiter for ages," Charlie said, "and some of these outlaws may have found the lost boy and brought him to this island where he lived and cut his name."

"Well, if he cut his own names he was about one hundred and twenty years old when he cut the last one," said Dave.

"This is barely possible, but I think it probable that he made a mistake in cutting the date," I said, "but I hope and trust that we shall discover new facts that will explain all things."