

CHAPTER II.

THE AMATEUR PIRATE.

AFTER the boys recovered from the surprise into which Captain Sammy had plunged them they at once began to lay plans for the raising of the craft which had come into their possession so unexpectedly. The conversation soon assumed an argumentative tone, and it was nearly dark before they realized that they had spent the afternoon in almost useless talk, and yet had a walk of half a mile before they could get any supper.

For the twofold purpose of getting something to eat and to consult Mr. Evans on the best method of setting about the work they had so suddenly taken upon themselves, they started toward their boarding-house at full speed.

They were nearly home, when a small-sized boy with a very large-sized coat appeared from behind one of the buildings, making the most frantic signals to attract their attention. He presented such a comical appearance as he stood there, holding his large coat from actually flying out on the breeze, that the boys would have

stopped to listen to him, even though they had been in much more of a hurry than they were.

The stranger came toward them stealthily, as if he had an idea some one might try to prevent him, and when he was as near as he could get without actually touching them he said, in a most mysterious whisper,

“Come down to the beach in half an hour.”

He made no attempt to say anything more, but as soon as he had delivered his message, or command, he darted back behind the building again so quickly that hardly anything could be seen save the fluttering of one ragged and patched coat-tail as its owner turned the corner.

It was too mysterious a summons to be disregarded. The supper was eaten hastily, Mr. Evans given a very brief account of Captain Sammy's proposition, and then the boys started at full speed for the beach, their curiosity to know what was wanted of them driving nearly all thought of the yacht out of their mind for the time being.

Had the large-coated boy been a traitor to both State and friends he could not have acted in a more mysterious manner than while he was delivering his message; and Bobby could almost feel his hat lifted from his head by his hair as it tried to stand on end, when he realized that they were hastening at the height of their

speed to the rendezvous where all sorts of horrible trials might be awaiting them.

Only the thought that his cousins would think him a coward prevented him from refusing then and there to move another step seaward, and he moved along a few paces in the rear of the others, feeling as if he were hastening to some horrible doom.

Prompt as they had been in obeying the summons, they found the mysterious stranger at the appointed place before them. He was standing in the shade cast by some mangrove-trees, and as soon as the three boys came in sight he started toward them, much as if he fancied each individual inhabitant of the town was on the alert to prevent him from keeping his appointment. He stepped lightly and cautiously, as if he feared the very sound of his footsteps might betray him, and glanced behind him every few moments to make sure he had not been followed.

His excessive precaution in a quiet town like Tampa increased Bobby's fears to an alarming degree, and he was obliged to exercise the full power of his will to prevent himself from running away.

As when he had met them earlier in the evening, it was not until he was so near to them that a whisper could be heard that the new-comer spoke, and then he asked, as he glanced suspiciously around,

"Did anybody know you was comin' here?"

"No one but my father and mother," replied Dare, wondering what all these precautions could mean; and Bobby was now more positive than ever that a plan was on foot to rob them.

"What made you tell them?" asked the boy, in an angry tone. "Now, just as likely as not they'll tell the rest of the folks, an' they'll come down here an' nab us."

"They won't tell any one," replied Dare, hesitatingly; "but if they should, why would any one trouble us?"

"Hush!" exclaimed the boy, warningly, as he crept cautiously around on his tiptoes, looking suspiciously at each shadow, as if he thought an enemy might be lurking near. Then, having examined the vicinity thoroughly, he beckoned them to come down nearer the water, where he crouched behind a small clump of bushes.

Now, Bobby would not have been frightened by this one boy; but from the manner in which he had spoken it seemed almost certain that there were others somewhere near, who would spring upon them at a given signal.

"Don't go," he said, as Dare and Charley started to follow their mysterious acquaintance. "There may be a whole crowd round here somewhere who will try to rob us."

"Now, don't be foolish, Bob. No one would

try to rob us; and I want to know what this fellow has got to tell us."

Charley was quite as anxious as Dare was to solve this apparent mystery, and, very much against his will, Bobby was obliged to follow or be left behind alone.

"Get down here where nobody can see us," said the boy, as he crouched closer behind the bushes; "an' if you hear a lot of men comin', run jest as fast as you can."

"What for?" asked Charley, in surprise.

"What for?" repeated the boy. "Why, don't you know who I be?" and he spoke as if he felt greatly injured because they had not recognized him.

"I never saw you before," said Dare, looking at the boy more closely, thinking it just possible that he might have met him somewhere.

"I don't s'pose you ever did; but hain't you heard of me 'round Tampa yet? Didn't Cap'n Sammy tell you all about me?"

"No," replied the boys in one breath, and Bobby forgot his suspicious fears in his desire to know what distinguished person they had among them.

"Then cross your throats that you won't tell nobody you was here with me," said the boy, sternly.

Dare was about to take the required oath, when he remembered that his mother would

surely ask some questions about how they had spent the evening, and he said, quickly,

"We won't tell any one but mother, and she'll have to know all about it."

"Well! when I saw you fellers I thought you'd have more nerve than to run right to your mother with everything you know," said the boy, contemptuously.

Such sarcasm had very little effect on Dare. He was a boy who would never have thought for a moment of doing anything he could not tell his mother, and he had not the slightest desire to embark in any venture about which he could not talk freely with her. He considered her the truest friend and confidante a boy can ever have, and he said, quite sharply,

"I don't want you to tell me anything I can't tell my mother, and I'd have you know that it would take more of what you call 'nerve' for me not to run to her."

The boy was evidently abashed, and to cover his confusion he went through the form of scurrying around to see if any one was concealed near them. When he came back he said, in the lowest of whispers, which he tried to make sound as hoarse as possible, in order to give more effect,

"I'm Thomas Tucker!" Then he started back, as if he expected to hear an exclamation of surprise from his listeners.

But none was heard. The name sounded peaceful enough, and they could not understand why so much caution had been used in telling it.

"Don't you know who I am now?"

"I never knew of any one by that name," said Dare, and the others declared that they were equally ignorant.

"Well, I don't see what the matter is. You can't have been 'round this town much if you never heard of me, an' I thought sure Cap'n Sammy would have told you; but I s'pose he didn't want to scafe you at first;" and Master Tucker seemed to find a deal of consolation in the thought.

"Why, who are you?" asked Charley, impatient at the delay in learning who this evidently important though small and dirty person was.

"I'm a pirate!" and Master Tucker assumed a ferocious air as he gave this startling information; and then he added, confidentially, "That is, I shall be as soon as I get a crew an' a boat an' some pistols."

It was impossible for the boys to make any reply to this bold assertion; they were even at a loss to know what he meant.

"I'll tell you all about it," said the pirate Tommy, in the most friendly tone, and without the slightest tinge of blood-thirstiness about him. "I've turned a reg'lar pirate, an' I've got a black flag that I made out of a piece of mother's dress,

an' the folks in this town know all about it, 'cause I tried to get some of the fellers here to join me, an' they went an' told. Folks is awfully afraid of me, an' I don't s'pose Cap'n Sammy would go out in one of his boats after dark when I was 'round—not if he knew he could get six turtles for nothin'. That's why I had to be so careful when I asked you to come here to-night, 'cause if any of the folks thought I was shippin' a crew they'd be sure to come down here an' arrest us all."

Bobby looked around timidly, as if he expected to see at least a dozen officers of the law ready to pounce on him at once, and he bitterly regretted that he had thus put himself in the power of a regular pirate. Dare and Charley did not appear to be troubled in the least, and Bobby could not account for their unconcern, unless it was that the pirate was so small.

"But why did you tell us who you are?" asked Charley, not understanding why these disclosures had been made to them.

"That's the very thing," said Tommy Tucker, eagerly. "I want to get a crew—I've got one now, but he can't come out after dark, an' so he hain't much good—an' the very minute I saw you fellers I know'd you'd be jest the ones as would like to turn pirates."

It was not much of a compliment to their personal appearance; but Master Tucker did not

appear to think he had said anything out of the way, and he hastened to add,

"I heard that Captain Sammy had told you that you might have the *Pearl* if you could float her, an' I've had my eye on you since that, 'cause she'd make the best kind of a boat for a pirate, an' if you'll join me we shall have a boat an' a crew all at once. Of course I should be captain, but you fellers could be mates, an' Ikey Jones—that's the other feller—could be the crew. You see, the first thing that made me want to be a pirate was so I could serve Captain Sammy out. He thinks he's awful smart, he does, an' one day he took off his leg an' give me a whippin' 'cause I was tryin' to have a little fun with his turtles."

"Took off his leg!" repeated Bobby, forgetting the little captain's infirmity.

"His wooden one, you know; he can take it off awful quick when he wants to. Now, I jest want to catch him, an'—an'—well, I'll serve him out in some way. Now, say, will you join me?"

Aside from the wickedness of the business, neither of the boys had any desire to become pirates; for, even though it had not occurred to Tommy, they wisely concluded that it was not such a business as would flourish any length of time, more especially if Captain Sammy should come after them, with his leg in his hand.

"No, Tommy, we don't want to turn pirates,"

said Dare, thinking the matter too foolish and trifling to make much conversation about.

"You're reg'lar cowards, that's what's the matter with you!" shouted Master Tucker, angrily, as he retreated to what he considered would be a safe distance. "But you'll hear from me again, an' then you'll be sorry you didn't join me. Remember Thomas Tucker and his vengeance!"

Then the pirate with neither crew nor vessel disappeared in a stealthy way, as if the officers of the law were already on his track.

And the three boys did hear from Master Tucker again, although at the time they did not think there was a possibility that they should.