

## CHAPTER VIII

### THE ILL WIND

THE men had been confined in camp for two days and a half. It would have been useless to venture out, even if the boats could have stood up under such weather, for fish take to deep water during these three days' winds. So they lay there on the beaten-down wire grass in the lee of the bunk-house, swapping yarns and listening to the everlasting crackle-crackle of the cabbage-palms, and the plaints of the wind-blown cranes that tried to tack out to the purplish flats of the lagoon.

It was dull sport. The men knew each other too well for amusement, and it was quite natural they should try to extract entertainment from Jim, the greenhorn.

With the exception of Sandy Goulden, they were not really malicious. If Sandy took any pleasure in his cross-grained life, it was when he

was making someone uncomfortable. He began to "pick on" Jim the first day, tentatively, with an eye on Bob, whose long, clean limbs and broad shoulders suggested unpleasant possibilities.

Bob sat in the lee of the bunk-house, apparently absorbed in plaiting a fish basket. He had brought Jim into a rough school, and he knew his friend must stand his initiation if he ever hoped to amount to anything. So, although his gray eyes flashed now and then, and the spade-cut over his nose grew deeper, he did not interfere.

On the afternoon of the third day the wind let up a little. It was too late for the fishermen, however. They were out of grub, and the norther had blown the water off the flats, and swept it away down the channel to the southward. The camp had never seen it so low. They made up their minds that if they were to anchor within half a mile of the wharf, they would have to start for home before sunrise the next morning. The thought of running back with empty boats made them sore.

"I reckon I know what's the trouble with this yere trip," announced Sandy, suddenly. "We've got a Jonah along, and his name is Jim."

He rose to his feet and strode slowly up to where Jim sat. Jim had made up his mind to stand anything rather than involve Bob in a quarrel, but it seemed to him that he could not bear much more. His nerves were twitching like the float-line of a net when it is full of crazy fish.

“And his name,” repeated Sandy, unctuously, “is Jim.”

He reached down a hairy hand, clutched the boy by the bosom of his coat, and lifted him to a position limply upright. For a moment he looked into the eyes of his victim, and the dumb patience he read there made his own glow with a sudden rage.

“You miserable little yellow pup!” he snarled. “Why don’t you yap?”

With a single swirl of his powerful arms he swung Jim from his feet, and threw him headlong to the ground ten feet away. Fortunately for the boy, he landed on his shoulders in a heap of dead palm leaves, where he lay white and shaken.

Bob put down his basket deliberately and walked up to Sandy.

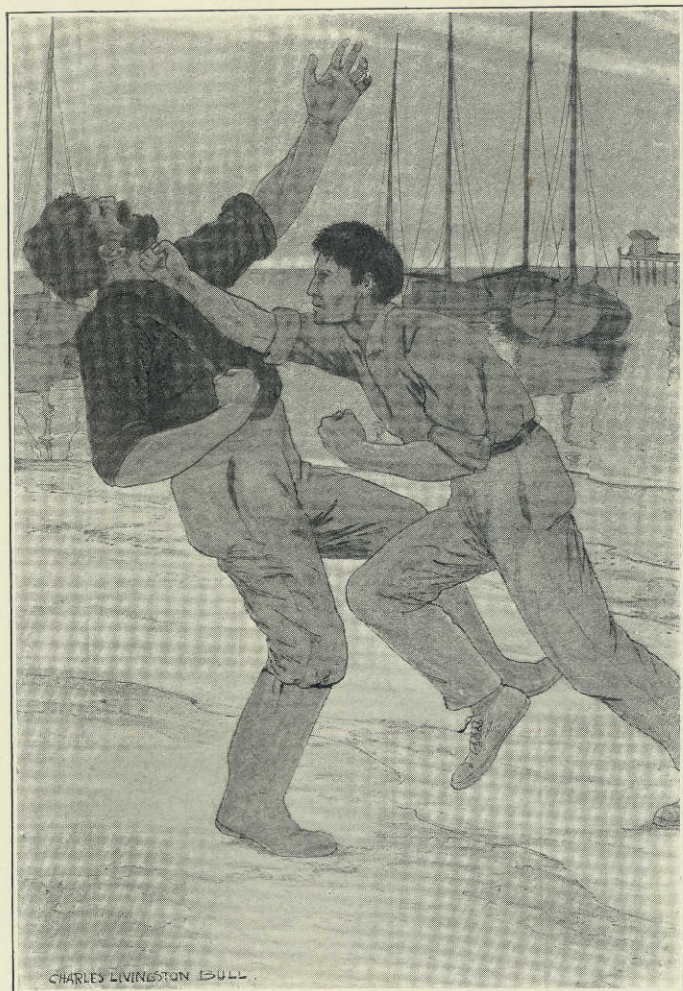
"You'd better try me," he said, quietly, his gray eyes steady, his voice softly persuasive. "I reckon Jim's plumb tired playing."

Sandy paused and put down the foot with which he had been about to favor Jim. Then with an oath he struck at Bob.

The hulking bully was far heavier than his slim opponent, but somehow his slashing blows failed to score. Bob, cool and agile, ducked and gave ground, and when the right moment came he drove in his hard fist as critically as a woodman strikes a line with his ax. His muscles were not so big as Sandy's, but they were more limber and unweakened by dissipation, and every ounce of his weight went behind his blows. He knew instinctively when and where to hit and he was as fearless as a bull terrier.

When Sandy went down for the third time there was no more fair fight left in him. As he got up stiffly, fumbling at his hip pocket, two of the nearest men jumped at him and wrested away the knife he had half-drawn.

"This is where she stops," said Red Simonson, scornfully. "Any more of this kind of play, and you'll have the gang to fight."



“ EVERY OUNCE OF HIS WEIGHT WAS BEHIND HIS BLOWS.”



He flung the knife into the scrub as he spoke. Sandy shot a furtive look round him out of swollen eyes. There was not a glimmer of sympathy in any face; even his partner, Little Joe, wore a dubious, half-pleased grin.

“You wait, you —” Passion checked further utterance, and with his wild black hair streaming about his bruised face, he turned his back on the group and strode down to the jetty.

Jim put a timid hand on Bob’s arm.

“I’m right sorry, Bob,” he gulped. “Maybe I am a Jonah, like Sandy says. There’s this norther and — and this fuss with Sandy. He’s a mighty mean man. I feel he’ll do something to even up on you.”

“You hush up,” replied the other, smiling. “Everything that’s happened was just naturally bound to happen. Don’t you go to setting yourself up on wheels. You ain’t of that importance.”

But Jim was not to be so easily diverted.

“I’d like to bring you good luck,” he said, wistfully. “I ought to, sure, taking me in the way you did.”

The camp retired very soon after supper. Sandy was the last man to enter the shanty. The

lantern had been blown out and the rest of the men were half-asleep when he slouched sulkily in and threw himself down on his bunk, which was close to the door.

Sometime in the small hours of the night he awoke, sore and unrefreshed. The shack was filled with unmelodious sounds of slumber. Lifting his head, Sandy identified the various bunks, one by one, with his ears. Satisfied finally that all the occupants were asleep, he threw aside his quilt and stepped softly to the door.

Like a shadow he moved down the bank toward the jetty. The string of boats lay with their sterns shoreward, their rigging cobwebbed against the thin starlight. Sandy's trained eyes quickly distinguished the one he wanted, and sitting down, he drew off his shoes and stockings.

The *Emmie E.* was filled with nets from the tiny deck forward to the raised platform under her tiller, a condition of affairs that Sandy noted with satisfaction. She was an old boat, and though recently cleaned a few barnacles remained on her bottom. He scratched his fingers on the sharp cones more than once as he swept his hand below her water-line. He had to wet his arm to



the shoulder before he struck a promising seam. Then he went to work patiently to loosen the caked paint and oakum with his fish-knife.

It was a childish piece of revenge, but Sandy was no Machiavellian plotter. In reality, he showed some skill in the execution of his plan. He did not want the *Emmie* to sink at her moorings. It would be more artistic and less suspicious to have her spring a leak after she was well under way, when the strain of her drawing sail would spread the seams with which he had tampered.

When he had finished his pleasing occupation it was almost time for the camp to be astir, but he had the undeserved good fortune to gain the shanty and creep into his bunk before Red, sometimes called "Clocky" Simonson for his ability to keep track of time, awake or sleeping, gave a final regretful snort, and awoke.

Jim stretched himself on the yielding pile of nets, with his face toward the stars, while Bob controlled the tiller from his seat in the stern. There was enough wind to make the run exhilarating. An agreeable sense of unmeasured speed was present, which the light of day, disclosing the familiar landmarks on the shore, would have

destroyed. The water gushed by the bow with a crisp singing, and ran away in writhing lines of phosphorescent light in their wake. Overhead guttural-voiced, unseen herons were passing.

Jim was in an apathetic state, half sleepy, half-melancholy; but Bob, none too cheerful himself, began to glance down at the water with a puzzled interest. He peered at the ghostly rim of the shore, hauled in and then slackened the main-sheet, and fidgeted with the centreboard.

"I reckon she must be rolling up the bottom 'long with her!" he exclaimed at last. "She's sure sailing like a sponge this morning."

Jim nodded absent-mindedly, watching the roseate smear in the east pulsate and grow against its curtain of cloud. Already it was sending out level films of light to which the surface of the water responded with a steely twinkle.

"Ain't she rather low?" he asked suddenly. Bob looked up from a perplexed consideration of the *Emmie E.*, and uttered an exclamation of surprise.

"Why, the water's blown clean to the south-ard!" he said. "I never saw it like this before."

After a moment of staring, with a look ahead

to assure himself that the channel still existed, he returned to his study of the *Emmie*. Jim was now conscious that something ailed her. The springiness was gone from her lift, and when she fell away in a trough she sank soggily with none of that sensitive vibration that shows the life of a stanch craft. Suddenly Bob whistled. He had been poking among the nets with his foot.

"She's drinking like an oyster at flood-tide," he said.

He cast a quick look about him.

The dawn was radiant now, filling the atmosphere with soft color. On the east the sedge was yellowing, mile on mile of vacant marsh, while in the west the Florida coast drew its straight line of hard green.

"We'll run her into Mallard Bend — if we can get her there," he said.

"Think there's any danger?" asked Jim.

"Not after we quit the channel."

Bob pushed the tiller over and hauled in on the main-sheet. The *Emmie* responded listlessly, and Jim saw the water swash back over the platform on which Bob's feet rested.

He dug his fingers tensely into the pile of nets,

staring over the side with uneasy speculation. Presently he saw the opaque water lighten as the glimmer of yellow sand struck up through it.

"I reckon we're out of the frying-pan," said Bob. "But it looks like we couldn't run her in. Ain't there a bar across the Bend?"

Flats and ill-smelling patches of mud that he had never seen before gleamed copper-colored under the rising sun. Quantities of dead and dying fish lay stranded on the mud, their white bellies prodigiously swollen. Ospreys and buzzards were feeding amicably on the profusion.

Jim stood up and gazed, with his hand on the mast. A grayish streak was drawn across the entrance to the cove.

"There ain't more than a couple of inches on her," he reported.

The *Emmie* struck bottom almost as he spoke. She hung a moment and then slid on a few yards farther, trailing a muddy wake. At last she came to a full stop, and Bob let the main-sheet go with a run.

With his arms heaped with nets Jim walked disconsolately ashore. As he stepped on the little bar a tearing sound went up from the Bend,

like the roar of a distant flock of scaup ducks lifting. A huge, dark patch appeared on the surface, and drifted rapidly toward the farther end, as if a squall of wind had struck the water. It sank as suddenly as it had arisen. Instinctively Jim felt that he had made a discovery.

“O Bob!” he exploded. “Fish! The Bend’s alive with ’em!”

Bob came up leisurely. “Gudgeons,” he said; but he picked up a conch-shell and started along the strip of mud that bordered the reedy bank. Something wavering, almost imperceptible in the water checked him. He cast the heavy shell toward it.

Instantly thousands of silvery bodies darkened the water in an aimless rush, and several gleaming shapes leaped wildly into the air and disappeared again with a splash.

“Mullets!” he exclaimed, and in a dozen wide, splashing leaps he was back on the bar. “Yes, I reckon you *are* some kind of a Jonah, Jim.”

He seized an end of one of the nets and plunged with it into the water on the inner side of the bar. Jim, quick to catch his idea, sprang to aid him.

It was plain how the thing had happened. The Bend was a deepish blind pocket of water running back into the marsh four hundred yards. Some time during the gale a band of greedy porpoises had struck the huge school and driven it into this haven. The larger fish had not dared to cross the shoal entrance, and the frightened mullets had lingered until the falling water had cut off their return.

"There!" exclaimed Bob, straightening his back. "We've got 'em bottled, and we can catch 'em whenever it suits us. Fifteen thousand pounds, if an ounce. What'll the mother think now?"

Jim laughed excitedly. Fifteen thousand pounds, and the price of fish sky-high!

"Let's fix the *Emmie* and take a load back," he suggested eagerly, with visions of a triumphal home-coming.

A few strips from an odd square of canvas and some rope ravelings made the old boat fairly tight. Bob's forehead puckered as he worked, and he made a shrewd guess as to the origin of those leaks; but he kept his own counsel.

They launched the light tender in the Bend

and swept down upon the mullets with the gill-net. It was an experience to be remembered.

The place was actually alive with fish darting furiously on every side, their dark dorsal fins cutting the water with a sound as of ripping cloth. Many leaped the barrier of nets and fell squirming on the bar. Some actually landed in the boat in their blind fright. The net ballooned and tugged at its ropes as it swelled with quivering life. The salt drops flew in showers. It was tremendously exciting.

It was hard work, too, although the rising water made each trip easier. At last the *Emmie* was flush to her gunwales with the silvery dark-eyed fish, and Bob spread her brown sail to the wind.

The stars were out when they dropped anchor in the channel off the gray, spidery wharf, but the evening was warm and a full quota of fishermen sat lounging on the benches against the fish-house. Jocular voices hailed them as they rowed in.

“Thought the *Emmie E.* could sail some!”

“How’s walking, Bob?”

“Stopped to fish, likely?”

The sally provoked a laugh, but lean, saturnine Brown, the dealer, uttered a snort.

"You-all make me tired," he said. "There ain't a man among you smart enough to capture a minner, and a fish-famine on."

"I don't know about that," drawled Bob, looping the painter round a pile. "If you'll send some of your men out to the *Emmie* you'll find a few."

"What's that!" exclaimed the dealer. "You ain't got any fish, have you?"

"All she can hold," said Bob. "And it's only an instalment. Can you use a matter of fifteen thousand pounds?"

"Can I use — Say, don't you know there's a fish-famine North?" and Brown, effectually aroused from the sulks, bawled sharp orders to his henchmen.

Bob's gaze wandered to the stricken line of loungers. In their various expressions of astonishment and chagrin he was tasting the sweets of triumph when suddenly he missed a familiar face.

"Where's Sandy?" he inquired, casually.



Red Simonson cleared his throat.

“Sandy? Well, I ain’t particular fond of Sandy, but I’m due to admit it’s tough to take a licking and come home broke, and find your kid down with the diphthery all in one day. But say, tell me where you found the fish?”

Bob’s little self-gratulatory smile died out. “That story’ll keep till to-morrow,” he said, “Jim and me’s too ravenous to talk.”

As the two picked their way cautiously over the rudely laid flooring of the wharf, Bob tucked an arm under Jim’s.

“We’re going to make a nice thing out of this,” he said. “It’s been a lucky trip for us — luckier than it has been for Sandy, for instance. That kid of his lit on a bad time to take the diphthery, Jim.”

“Yes,” said Jim, soberly. He knew what sickness meant when it took every dollar in the house to meet doctor’s bills.

“I was thinking we could afford to give Mrs. Goulden a little something,” continued Bob, carelessly. “But of course that’s just as you say. He picked on you considerable at camp.”

“Oh, I don’t mind — now,” said Jim with the same pretence of indifference. “His kid’s sick. Let’s do it.”

Bob laughed and squeezed Jim’s arm. “And now that’s settled I don’t mind telling you we might consider it like taking out a sort of marine insurance policy,” he said.

“Yes, I suppose so,” grinned Jim. “But it was lucky for us the clumsy old fool tried to scuttle her. You needn’t think I didn’t catch on, Bob.”

Just then Jeppson came up behind them and clapped Bob on the shoulder.

“You ran into a nice piece of luck, didn’t you?” he remarked. “How much do you reckon to make?”

“Oh, I don’t know,” said Bob. “At a rough guess we’ve got ten to fifteen thousand pounds tied up in Mallard Bend.”

Jeppson whistled. “Well, well,” he ejaculated. “I didn’t know it was anything like that. I reckon you’ll feel too biggerty now to listen to my small proposition.”

“Why no sir,” said Bob, smiling. “Jim and I don’t think we’re going to be lucky like this all the time.”

“Well, it’s only this,” said Jeppson, his voice assuming its natural tone of importance. “I liked the way you handled Sandy yesterday, and I said to myself then, ‘there’s a young fellow that’ll make a good deputy for you if you happen to want one.’ Sometimes there’s trouble when you try to round up a gang of plumers and an extra pair of hands comes in useful. I just thought I’d speak to you and get your idea. It ain’t every young fellow I’d ask, you know that.”

Jeppson had recently been appointed game-warden, an honor that was not allowed to languish in his hands. He was a burly man, as strong as an ox, and thoroughly conscientious, but self-complacent to an extraordinary degree.

That Jeppson should make such a request of him was indeed a compliment. Bob was pleased as well as surprised. To be deputy game-warden even for a few days was to do public service, and the phrase had a big sound in his young ears. But in view of the work he and Jim were engaged in, the thing did not seem feasible.

Jeppson, however, overcame his objections. He explained that Bob need not bind himself

in any way. He should act only if it was convenient for him, and he was to understand that deputies received pay for their services. Under such circumstances Bob could not refuse, and the warden left them with a satisfied good-night.

The big catch in Mallard Bend netted the boys a round sum, but the season as a whole was so poor that without that they would have made little more than their expenses. Storms were frequent and fish shy and scarce. More than once Bob wondered if Jeppson had forgotten the talk on the pier. The hard work and the inadequate returns left him dissatisfied and restless, and he was ready to anchor the *Emmie E.* and seek new adventure. But months passed before Jeppson had any need of his services.

At last one day the warden sent for him.

"How is it? Too busy for a little trip?" he asked.

"No," said Bob. "I'm ready to go on a big one if you want me to."

Jeppson had received word that a gang of plume hunters were raiding the rookeries on a certain cluster of islands.

"We can take my boat and run down there

in a day," he said. "There's no telling how long we'll have to stay. Those fellows are crafty. Maybe it'll take a week to locate 'em. You can cook, can't you?"

Bob assured him that he could.

"Well then," said Jeppson. "Be ready to start at sunrise tomorrow. We'll run down to Flamingo Islands and make that our headquarters. There's a queer sort of a stick there called Braithe. He's lived there some years all by himself. Perhaps he can give us a clue."