

CHAPTER XI

TO CAMEL CAY

HALF-WAY back on his return to Ordville, Bob met Jeppson, and inducing him to leave the wagons and walk beyond the range of the drivers' ears, he told him what had taken place. Without waiting for any comment, and indeed astonishment seemed to deprive the warden of the use of his tongue, Bob humbly requested leave to tender his resignation.

Jeppson, still somewhat shaky from his attack of malaria, mopped his forehead, blew his nose, and loosened the collar round his thick throat. Having cleared himself for action, he looked Bob sternly in the eye.

"If you'd arrested that fellow King," he boomed, "I'd have taken your resignation hand over fist, Bob Leach. Law be swizzled! You did a good thing by the law when you refused to do your duty, and a better thing by human

nature. That cracker won't trap any more turkeys, or shoot out of season either, I reckon, and if he'd been fined or jailed, like as not he'd be at it again, harder'n ever, soon's he got clear. You send your man back and we'll go home."

"Of course," the warden resumed when Bob was seated by his side and the team turned toward Ordville, "of course, the sick kid makes all the difference. It seems to me, speaking unofficially, it was a case that called for discretion, and discretion pretty often means mercy. I reckon I'm allowed some latitude in this business, and I say you did about right; but it's just as well to keep it between us two. Let some folks know you're human and they think you'll swallow any old story. Now what's this stuff about a bottle?"

Bob produced the glass jar from his pocket and removed the little scroll of parchment. Jeppson studied the inscription with a sceptical smile, and smacked it with his open hand.

"Don't think it's worth much?" asked Bob.

"Not the thing it's written on," said the warden.

"I never heard of Beef Is. myself," commented Bob, disparagingly.

“ Well, as to that, there’s a Beef Is. all right, or there was. That’s a kind of old-time name for it, and I reckon it’s true enough that there was cattle on it once which the pirates used to kill and barbecue. The island’s down on the charts now as Camel Cay, owing to the hump on it. But as for any gold being buried there, I’ll eat all you or anybody else ’ll find.”

With a contemptuous laugh Jeppson popped the scroll into the bottle and handed it back to Bob.

“ Better heave it into the scrub,” he advised. “ It’ll unsettle your mind to no purpose.”

But Bob put it into his pocket instead. Now that he knew there was a Beef Island the thing assumed a different aspect. A longing began to grow in him to visit the place and see whether or not there was a clump of four palms there.

“ I reckon I’ll keep it just for fun,” he said. “ Of course somebody may have done it for a joke; but it seems like they would have made it plainer. Seems like they would have signed it with a whole name too, and not just an M. Folks would hardly bite at such blind bait as that.”

Jeppson mused a moment.

“Well, maybe it was clear enough when it was written. M. now, could stand for Morgan, couldn't it? Everybody knew him in those days, and the story of the booty he took and buried. Why, that rascal got barrels of gold and silver, I reckon. It is strange, what became of it. But I don't want to hunt for it myself. Might as well look for the ships he sunk out at sea, I think.”

This was undoubtedly sound common sense, but by recalling the name of the famous pirate Jeppson closed Bob's ears to everything but the insistent small voice within him. Morgan! Why hadn't he thought of him at once? — the boldest, wildest rogue of all that predatory band. Barrels of gold and silver certainly had fallen into those bloody, greedy hands, and, as Jeppson said, what had become of them? Buried some of them must have been, and why not on the lonely, outlying Camel Cay. Pirates had gathered there. They had given the cay its early name. Morgan, as well as the rest, must have shared in its fierce hunts and fiercer feasts, and what more natural than to bury his surplus there before taking to the perils of the sea again?

Jeppson would have seen only folly in such imaginings, so Bob kept them to himself for the present. Jim would rise to them he knew, and Jim should share the treasure, if treasure there proved to be.

The trip seemed endless. At last they emerged from the woods into the glare of Ordville, and dismounting from the wagon, Bob set out in search of Jim. He was not at home nor at his father's hardware store. No one knew where he was till Bob met Rufus sauntering down the dusty road with a string of cat-fish. Rufus "'lowed" the missing one was busy at Brown's pier; "An' I 'spect he's got dat ole wharf jus' bending wid cats," he added.

"I might have known he was there," said Bob, smiling, and started for the pier, taking the short cut along the shore of the lagoon.

The narrow strip of muddy sand was alive with black-breasted plover, willet and tattlers, but though they ran and wheeled before him within easy range, Bob felt no inclination to return to the bungalow for his gun. In fact he hardly heard their pipings, or observed their graceful evolutions on the wing, in which each flock veered

and twisted as one bird. The mystery of the glass jar had taken firm hold of him. In imagination he was already on Camel Cay, digging for Morgan's gold.

At the anchorage by Brown's pier were several bateaux. All but one had their sails furled, and Bob, familiar with the cut of every local boat, saw that this one was a stranger. She was a large craft with a narrow jib and a filthy mainsail. A couple of men were lolling in her cockpit, but Bob could not distinguish their features. He gave them only a brief glance, and waved his hand at Jim who was sitting on the end of the pier, patiently bobbing his cat-fish line.

"I reckon he'll lose interest in cats when he sees what I've got," thought Bob. "Jim's enough of a sportsman to jump at a game like this."

Jim, indeed, jumped in more senses than one as Bob told his story. He let his line fall into the water, and leaping to his feet, joined Bob in the little shed when the latter produced the jar with a flourish. Side by side on the bench they bent over the yellowed bit of parchment. Jim's tongue was in his cheek as his gaze devoured the writing, and his bare toes worked on the

planking. There was nothing sceptical about Jim. He was positive that their fortunes were made. He wished to hear the story all over again, for in his first state of rapturous wonder his mind had not been able to linger delightfully on the various details.

So Bob began his recital again, the parchment spread on his knee. He was interrupted by many questions from Jim, and at last brought it down to the talk between himself and Jeppson, when the warden had supplied the name of the writer of the pamphlet.

"It was Morgan, all right!" exclaimed Jim positively. "The stuff's there if we can find it, and we'll start to-morrow, in the *Emmie E.*"

A doubt suddenly clutched Bob.

"Perhaps it's been found already," he said, "It's years since Morgan put it there. Morgan, himself, Jim, may have gone back for it."

Jim's enthusiasm was not to be dampened by any such supposition.

"I don't believe it," he declared stoutly. "What would the bottle be kept for, then? You can bet that those old niggers knew more than what's written here."

"It's strange they should have believed in it and never looked for it," said Bob.

"Maybe they did," replied Jim. "A nigger's stupid that way. Maybe they couldn't read and only knew what was on the paper by hearsay. And whoever told 'em mixed it up more than likely, so the niggers never did know the right place to look."

It was impossible not to feel cheered by Jim's stout confidence.

"It's reasonable," mused Bob. "Like as not it was just as you say. At any rate we'll start to-morrow in the *Emmie E.*"

"Hurrah!" cried Jim, tossing up his hat.

It struck the roof and came down behind him, falling through the gap between the bench and the rear wall. Jim turned and thrust his hand down to recover it. As he did so a sudden shaft of sunlight streamed through a broad crack as if a shutter had been opened. Jim clapped his eye to the crack and instantly his round face sobered.

"Sh!" he whispered, turning toward Bob. "There's a couple of fellows out there."

If there were eavesdroppers it was rather late

to think of caution. The cat was out of the bag now. But Bob was not inclined to take the thing seriously.

“Come on,” he said. “Let’s be going.” As Jim rose he added in a lower voice: “Take a look at them as we go out.”

The men — there were two of them — were total strangers to Bob. They stood close to the thin wall of the shed, smoking their pipes in a matter-of-fact way, though both of them stared pretty hard at the boys.

“They’re from that boat,” said Jim, as they passed out of hearing. He pointed to the craft Bob had previously noted. “Hard looking gang, I call ’em. Brown said they were turtlers from some place to the south’ard. Do you reckon they heard us?”

“No, I reckon not,” replied Bob. “A word or so, maybe, but I’m not worrying.”

The end of Brown’s pier was a common lounging spot for fishermen, and it was natural enough that the turtlers should walk out there for a glance up and down the lagoon. They had not looked “hard” to Bob, and he thought no more of the incident at the moment. He walked back

with Jim, arranging the details of the trip, which in all probability would extend over several days. To be on the safe side they decided to take enough bacon, hardtack and coffee to last them a week. Fish and fowl could be counted on to add to the bill of fare whenever wanted. A pickaxe and shovel apiece were absolutely necessary, and a blanket to sleep in. With their guns, these would constitute the bulk of their baggage.

"To-morrow at eight, then," said Bob, when their plans had been completed. "I shan't sleep a wink. Jim, suppose we-all really find something!"

"Something!" cried Jim. "We'll find gold, Bob! That's the kind of something it'll be."

His round face shone with earnestness.

"I hope those fellows didn't hear," he added. "A gang like that would do anything for money."

"Pooh!" laughed Bob. "Get the money first, Jim."

"*When* we get it," said Jim, "we'll hold on to it, I reckon. I'll meet you at eight with my kit."

Neither of the boys slept well that night. As soon as daylight came Bob, tired of inaction,

dressed and gathered together his part of the equipment. Though it was not yet six o'clock he hastened toward Brown's pier, thinking to have the boat in readiness by the time Jim appeared.

Jim, however, had been even more restless. He was waiting at the wharf, and the *Emmie's* spread sail and the neatness of her rigging testified as to his impatience. His own kit was stowed aboard, and as soon as Bob's was put away, they hauled up the anchor and pointed the *Emmie E.'s* nose down the lagoon.

"We're off, Bob," cried Jim exultantly. Hardly a word had been exchanged during the hurried embarkation. Now Jim's spirits bubbled over. "This is a great day," he said. "It'll be a bigger one, though, when we come back."

"We'll see," smiled Bob. "We've got a fair wind anyway, and that's a good omen. The *Emmie's* a good boat before the wind."

The breeze was not strong but it was steady. There was little motion on the lagoon. The *Emmie* drew away from the fleet of fishing boats rapidly, and began to drop the cluster of white houses behind her. As she passed the southern

limit of the town Bob glanced back with a little thrill. How would he return? Ashamed of a fool's errand, or with pockets full of Spanish gold? At least, no one was in the secret, not even his family or Jim's, and their failure, if they did fail, would not be common property. Jeppson, of course, knew of the parchment, but in all probability would never think of it again.

Just to make sure that their departure had not been noted, Bob looked back again. The gaff of one of the boats was jerkily ascending her mast. All the other craft lay bare and motionless, their noses cocked into the wind. The sail crawled up and swung out, revealing two long streaks of mildew from gaff to boom.

"Hm!" exclaimed Bob. "Those turtlers are getting under way."

Jim frowned.

"I don't like it," he said uneasily. "They heard us, Bob, you can be sure of that. You take my word for it, they'll follow us."

"Let 'em," said Bob. "If they try to stick to us all day we'll know what to expect. We'll give them a run for it, anyway."

He drew in on the mainsheet and the *Emmie E.*

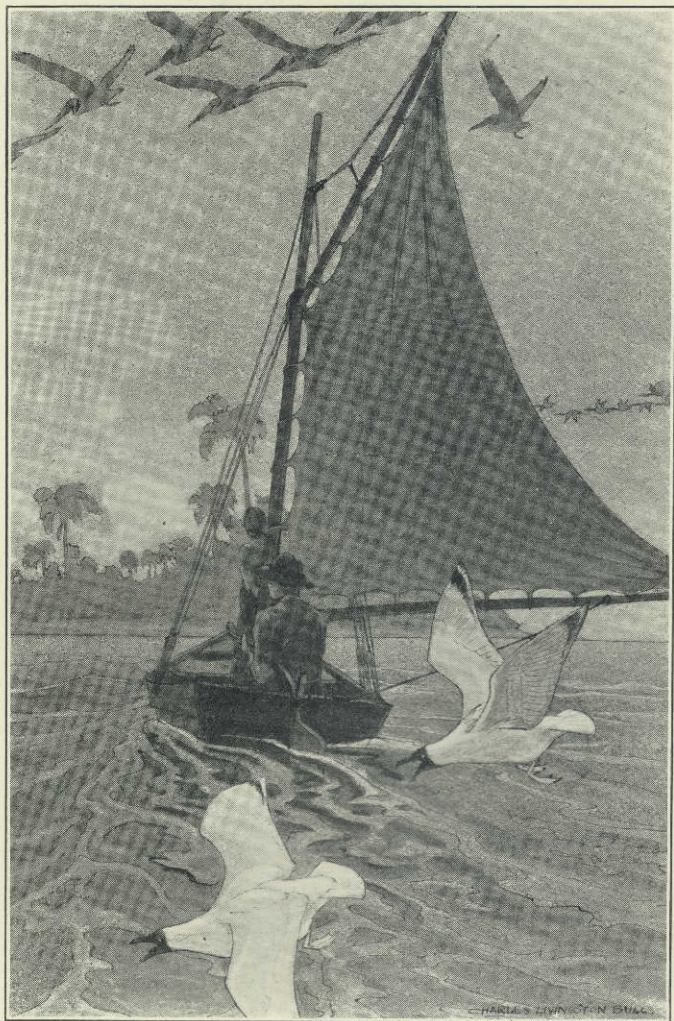
swooped forward with more life. The dark green of the shore slipped by with reassuring quickness; Ordville dropped out of sight behind, and by and by the sail of the turtler's boat was lost in the pearly haze that hung over the water. The craft had not left her anchorage so far as the boys could see.

"Maybe they were only drying the sail," said Bob. "The dew was thick as cream last night."

"What do they care about dew," retorted Jim scornfully. "Look at her; all barnacles and mildew! When they hoist sail they're going to get out. If they heard us talk they won't be in any great hurry. They know where we're going and that's enough for them."

"I don't think they'd follow us if they did hear," said Bob. "It would seem like a wild-goose chase to them."

For six miles it was a straight reach down the lagoon; then the *Emmie E.* was brought about and headed on an eastward course, out among the reefs and mangrove covered islets that lay like green velvet against the rich purple of the water. Not a sail but their own was in sight. Flocks of gulls and terns, blindingly white in the sun,



“ FLOCKS OF GULLS AND TERNS CIRCLED AROUND THEM.”

circled lazily round them. Long lines of ibises and herons rose from the island rookeries and drifted away like strings of gray and blue smoke. The beautiful and placid scene seemed to receive them with gentle confidence; but nature was not quite as trusting as she looked. Under the sparkling waters she hid sharp-backed reefs and great shoals that lay as so many defences round the islets where her wild children nested.

Fortunately the air was light or the *Emmie E.* would soon have found herself hard aground with miles of mud and water between her and Camel Cay. She touched often, but by quick work and an occasional use of the long sweeps the boys kept her slowly forging ahead, and the strangely humped island lay at last close abeam.

It had a thin white beach and for the rest seemed all wooded. From where the boat lay no tree stood out above its neighbors. Branch locked with branch in an impenetrable union, and the leafy tops formed a uniform coverlet of green.

"How are we going to find the four palms among all those trees," said Jim thoughtfully. "I reckon we've got work ahead of us."

“We can tell better when we land,” said Bob, but he, too, was disturbed by the uncompromising aspect of the island. “In the first place we must find some good place to hide the boat in case those turtlers do follow us. A little caution won’t do any harm.”

To this Jim readily agreed, and the *Emmie E.* slowly skirted the island while the boys scrutinized the shore for a favorable spot to anchor. A number of little coves and lagoons indented the cay, some narrow and deep, others mere scallops in the beach, and presently they passed the mouth of one that instantly appealed to them.

The *Emmie E.* was put about and headed for the opening. It was so narrow that the boat had to be steered with the nicest care to avoid striking the limbs that stretched out over the dark water. Dense ranks of pine and palm and button-wood stood on either bank, their branches heavy with orchids and other parasitic plants. Cactuses and broad ferns grew thick as grass among the tree trunks. It was dim and hushed and cool on the strange little stream, which wound about through the wood and seemed to penetrate to the heart of the island.

The entrance had disappeared; lost behind the rank foliage in which they were buried. The *Emmie's* sail hung motionless in the windless place, and dropping it, the boys forced the boat ahead with the sweeps. It was warm work and they soon had enough of it. Satisfied that they were thoroughly screened they tossed the anchor over. It seemed to fall into the black water with a chuckle, and the noise of the rope rasping the *Emmie's* bow was uncannily loud in the deathly silence of the spot. But the boys' spirits were too high to yield to the gloom of the island.

"It isn't too late to have a look over the place before dark," said Bob. "What do you say?"

"Do you think I could sit here as if it was a doorstep!" exclaimed Jim. "Of course we'll take a look around. Bring the bottle along and I'll carry my gun. We might pick up something good for supper."

It was only a few yards to either bank, and jumping into the tender they drove it ashore with a couple of strokes of the oars. Then tying her painter to a mangrove root and hiding the oars in a thicket, they began to force their way through the ferns and palmetto scrub toward the centre

of the island. Of the two humps or hills that rose there the one to the north was considerably the higher and would undoubtedly afford them a better view. Accordingly the boys directed their course toward it, without stopping to examine the woods by the way, for the sun was low and they wished to get back to the *Emmie E.* before dark.

It was not long before they realized that this would be impossible. The distance to the hump was greater than they had estimated, and the going much harder. The ferns and scrub were dense and tall, and several times they were obliged to cross swampy stretches where muck and water lay knee deep, and the sprawling knees of the mangroves tripped them at every step. Venomous moccasins hissed at them from the clumps of grass rising above the water, and the fear of a close encounter with one of the hideous reptiles made them proceed with the greatest caution.

At last the wet, lower portion of the island was passed, and the ground began to rise before them. The soil rapidly grew dryer and firmer and the undergrowth sparser. The trees stood

much farther apart and wide patches of sky could be seen between their tops. As they mounted the last sharp rise they saw that the summit itself was almost bare, an oval of coarse grass about two hundred feet long, and that the eastern slope was not half so heavily wooded as the side by which they had come. A narrow strip just back of the beach, however, was thick with trees, and as they looked down a great concourse of birds suddenly rose from them and streamed off to the south with clanging cries.

"It's almost sundown," said Bob. "We can't get back before dark and I don't fancy walking among those moccasins at night. I vote we go down this side of the hill and walk round by the beach. It's a little longer but it's open going."

"I'd rather walk twice the distance than go back through those swamps in the dark," agreed Jim. "I wish we had time to do a bit of hunting for those palms."

That was plainly out of the question, however. The lower rim of the sun had touched the sea in the west and already the quick, semi-tropical dusk was gathering round them. It was important that they should gain the beach before the

sun set, for there would be no twilight as in the north, and night would be upon them at once.

Without further delay the boys began to descend the eastern slope. It was a comparatively easy task for the ground was clear and firm, and its slant helped them to keep a rapid pace.

"I reckon this was where the cattle used to browse in the old times," remarked Bob, thoughtfully. "There's good feed here, and none on the other side. It makes me think that this is where we want to look for our marks."

Jim stopped short and looked round in a sudden excitement.

"You've struck it, Bob," he exclaimed, almost solemnly. "You never made a better guess than that in your life. The cattle must have fed here, and the buccaneers would have camped as near 'em as possible. This is the side toward the sea, too, and that's another reason why they would have chosen it. It's my opinion we needn't consider the other side of the island at all."

"We'll bring the *Emmie* round to-morrow and tuck her into one of the coves," said Bob. "I think I'm right. At any rate we can't do better than work over this side first."

Filled with enthusiasm they crossed the space between them and the strip of woods back of the beach in quick time. The sun was more than half down. As they entered the thick growth of trees they lost what little light the sky still held, and it was almost necessary to feel their way along. Instinctively Jim allowed Bob, who carried the gun, to lead, but he kept close upon his heels. So close that when Bob suddenly paused the two boys collided forcibly.

"What is it?" asked Jim in a tense whisper.

"There's water ahead," said Bob. "A sort of a lagoon, I reckon, like the one where we left the *Emmie*."

Jim breathed a sigh of obvious relief.

"Oh! is that all. Don't scare a fellow for nothing."

"We'll have to work round the edge of it," said Bob, and went forward again, feeling his way among the arched mangrove roots.

Jim stumbled along behind, his head cocked to catch the warning hiss of any moccasin that might lie in their path. His spirits rose as they neared the beach, and he began to hum *Dixie*;

but before he had finished the second verse a hand was clapped across his mouth.

“S-sh!” said Bob. “Keep still.”

“What is it? More water?” mumbled Jim against the hand.

“Look out there!” said Bob.

His voice was low and imperative. Jim's eyes followed Bob's outstretched arm and saw through the trees the pale, metallic sheen of the little lagoon on which a vague black blot rested. As he gazed this took on a familiarity of outline, and shadow separated itself from substance. It was a boat. Who manned it, and what was it doing at this lonely cay which had no attractions for anyone except an occasional band of plume-hunters? And the nesting season was over and neither snowy heron nor egret now wore the ornamental feathers so ruthlessly sought.

As if to answer Jim's outspoken question a match suddenly spurted on board the boat. Some one touched a loose roll of paper to it, and a broad yellow flame sprang up and shed such a radiance into the dark that Bob and Jim shrank behind a tree. The man with the blazing paper leisurely lighted the wicks of a couple of lan-

terns, quite unconscious of the revelation he was making. The boat was so near the bank that every detail of her was distinct, and the features and dress of two of the four men were clearly revealed. Then the fellow with the paper tossed it overboard, and in the dim glow of the lanterns the figures sank to formless shapes. But the boys had seen enough.

"It's the turtlers!" breathed Jim. "They've followed us."

"They must have overheard us after all," said Bob gravely. "I can't imagine any other reason for their coming here. I'm afraid we're going to have some trouble."