

## CHAPTER XII

### THE RIVAL SEEKERS

“WHAT shall we do?” asked Jim anxiously. Bob considered a minute.

“Well,” he said, “we came here to look for that treasure. That’s our job. We must find it, and be so careful about it that these fellows won’t suspect we’re working under their noses. I’m glad now we left the *Emmie* on the other side. They’ll never find her there, I’m sure, and that gives us an advantage we may need.”

“Then the only thing to do is to go ahead — and keep out of trouble if we can,” said Jim.

“That’s it. I’m not going to worry till I know just what there is to worry about. These fellows may be peaceable, though I doubt it. We’ll sure give them a wide berth. I reckon we’d better go back and get some sleep now, so we can get an early start in the morning.”

The boys were up before the sun the next day,

and after a hasty breakfast they set out for the hill. Bob carried old Bess and a pickaxe, while Jim took the shovel and his gun. Thus burdened it was not an easy matter to thread the heavy thickets in the dark, but the fact that they had been over the ground before was of much service to them. They made good time in spite of their awkward implements and reached the drier slope of the hill before sunrise.

Jim was so well fagged that he wanted to rest on the spot, but Bob was anxious to reach the summit. Up they toiled, panting and soaked in perspiration. It was choking hot under the trees; but as they topped the rise a cool wind from the east blew refreshingly upon them. They threw themselves down on the bare grass too tired to speak, their faces upturned to the paling sky.

It seemed only a minute when dawn came with a sudden flaming of red in the east, and they could hear the herons below them croak gutturally as they left the rookeries. Bob sat up and grasped his gun.

"Let's get at it," he said. "We can hide the shovel and pickaxe here till we need them. We'd better keep together at first."

They stood up and studied their surroundings. The top of the hill was as bare as a board. Its western slope they had agreed to leave unexplored at present. On the east the wood was much more open; little groups of trees were scattered about, and in the clear places a few fern tufts grew, but there were many spaces bare of everything except grass.

Starting down the right side of the slope the boys moved slowly along, studying the tree clumps. When they reached the belt of wood that covered the low bottom lands they made a wide turn and ascended the hill till they reached the crest again. Then they descended as before. Thus they zig-zagged up and down the slope, avoiding the open stretches as much as possible. Not a tree escaped their notice, but "Morgan's grove," as they now called the four palms of the scroll, did not materialize. There were single palms in plenty, and groups of anywhere from six to a score. A group of four palms only there was not, however.

Noon was at hand and hot and somewhat discouraged they sat down in the shade of a small pine to eat the lunch they had brought with them.

They were on the lower edge of the slope facing the heavy wood that separated them from the beach. The lagoon in which the turtles had anchored lay a quarter of a mile off to the south, and as the boys were well screened by a thicket of ferns they disposed themselves to rest and eat in comfort.

They were half through their lunch when a little blue heron came flapping and squawking out of the woods and passed directly over them. While he was still in sight another appeared, and under him a blue cloud of birds lifted with loud cries.

"Something's frightened them," exclaimed Bob. "Get down in these ferns, Jim, and keep a sharp lookout."

Peering through the green fronds they saw a man step out of the wood and glance cautiously up the hillside. He was hatless and the sun shone directly in his face, illuminating his ragged tow hair and causing his broad tanned nose to gleam like polished oak. It was the man who had lit the lanterns the night before. There was no mistaking him.

After a few moments spent in scrutinizing the

hill he gave a clear, birdlike whistle. This he presently repeated, and then drawing a pipe from his pocket he began to cram its bowl with tobacco. But before he finished his three companions emerged from the wood behind him, and one of them, creeping stealthily up, knocked the pipe from his hand, crying out with a hoarse laugh :

“ A nice scout you are, Mack! If your eyes ain't any better than your ears we'll have to look for the kids ourselves.”

The tow-headed man seemed about to make an angry rejoinder, but thought better of it and picked up his pipe.

“ I've looked around enough to see that they ain't here,” he said gruffly. “ Find any signs of 'em? ”

“ Nary a sign,” said one of the others, a tall man with a white handkerchief round his neck. “ If I hadn't heard 'em myself I'd say this was a waste of time, but what we heard was plain enough, wasn't it, Joe? ”

Joe was the man who had performed the playful feat with the pipe. He was bull-necked and long-armed, and of the four his countenance was decidedly the most vicious. Bob wondered that

he had not noticed his hang-dog face on Brown's pier.

"Plain!" snorted Joe. "You'd have said so if you'd been where we was, Mack. Camel Cay was the place they named, and no mistake, and we saw 'em sail for here yesterday. Only this place is so full of holes and pockets you could hide a fleet of boats here."

"What seems funny to me," said the fourth man, who had hitherto listened in silence, "is that hearing so much about the gold and Morgan and Camel Cay, you heard so little about where the stuff was buried. That's what seems funny to me."

He thrust his thumbs in his belt as he finished, and favored his companions with a stare that did not betray much amusement.

"That's so, Eben," said Mack. "They cuss other people's ears and eyes, and don't half use they own, so far's I can see. Why was it you didn't hear the important parts, Rafe?"

He looked at the tall man with the handkerchief round his neck, but the fellow, who had a certain jauntiness about him, shrugged his shoulders lightly.

"Didn't I tell you they had that writ down on a piece of paper?" he said. "They were looking at it with their heads close together. I could see that through a crack in the boards, but I didn't know what was on it because they didn't read it out loud. Perhaps if they'd known I was there they'd have obliged me by doing so."

"Well," said Eben harshly, "we've got to get hold of those kids, that's plain. And standing here talking like parrots won't do it. Spread out now, boys, and we'll beat the side of this hill."

The plan seemed congenial to all of them. Without another word they separated and advanced toward the hill in a line, the tall man on the extreme left, Mack and Joe in the middle, and Eben on the right. With fast-beating hearts the boys saw that the latter was headed directly for the patch of ferns in which they lay. In a few minutes he must inevitably run upon them, but to retreat seemed almost as dangerous as to remain where they were. The ferns, unfortunately, were an isolated group, shaded by half a dozen pines. On every side the ground was more or less open.

"I think we'd better run for it," whispered

Bob. "We're bound to be seen sooner or later, and the bigger start we have the better. If we can make those trees over on the left we'll have good cover."

Jim was shaking with excitement, but his pluck was undiminished.

"Come on," he said. "I'm ready. At any rate we've got guns and they haven't."

They crept to the edge of the thicket.

"Keep right round the hill," advised Bob, "and head for the *Emmie*. If we have to separate we'll meet there. Now!"

The bull-necked Eben was close to the opposite edge of the thicket as the boys dashed out. For a moment he was too startled to utter a sound, but when he did find his voice he raised it in a bellow that reverberated against the hill, and brought his companions up on a run. They saw their quarry darting across the open and grew as noisy as a pack of hounds.

"They won't have much wind left if they keep that up," said Bob, glancing back.

The turtlers were strung out behind them in a ragged line, with Eben well in the lead. He was running fast, but not with the long, steady stride



that tells in a stern chase. He had hoped to run the boys down in one fierce rush, and now he was coming on head down and arms thrashing, expending more energy than he should have. Bob decided that there was nothing to fear from him, but Rafe, the long-legged man, looked dangerous. He had already passed Mack and Joe, and was rapidly overhauling Eben.

“Put on a little more speed if you can, Jim,” cried Bob. “We’ll drop them all right in the woods.”

“Sure,” panted Jim. “Come on.”

The ground over which they were running was too open to afford them any cover, though there were a number of trees scattered about. A quarter of a mile ahead were visible the first spurs of the heavy western woods, creeping round the northern end of the hill. If they could gain these Bob felt sure that they could escape from the turtlers, but the spurs looked a long way off and the ground was growing rougher with every stride.

The turtlers, who were neither as young nor sound of wind as the pursued, soon showed the effects of the hot chase. Joe and Eben had

dropped so far back that they were practically out of the race. Mack was plowing sturdily along, but there was no spring to his stride. Rafe alone had not lost an inch. If anything he had gained upon the boys, and his long legs were swinging easily and his face was set in a sneering smile. It was evident that he knew how to run, and had considerable energy in reserve. It was Rafe whom they had most to fear.

Bob was not greatly alarmed concerning himself, but the way Jim was panting began to frighten him. In spite of his confidence Jim was not holding the pace. His face was commencing to look drawn, and his open lips were rigid. Now and then he stumbled.

"Only a little way farther," cried Bob encouragingly. "We'll be safe when we strike the woods."

He was far from feeling as brave as his words, however. He glanced back and a thrill of alarm shot through him. Rafe was much nearer than before. The sneer on his lips was more pronounced, and it was plain he had noticed Jim's condition. In fact he seemed to think victory was within reach, for he suddenly dropped his

methodical stride and plunged forward in a fierce spurt.

Before Bob could make up his mind how to meet this charge, the thing was over. The tall man's foot encountered a protruding root and he crashed forward on his face with sickening violence. The quickness with which he rose testified to his grit, but one step was all he could take. He uttered an oath and, stooping, clapped his hands to his wrenched ankle.

"We're all right now, Jim," cried Bob exultantly. "No need to break your heart over it."

Then something startlingly unexpected happened. Rafe whipped a pistol from his hip pocket and fired point-blank at the boys. Fortunately his hand was unsteady from the effects of his run and the hard fall, but even then the bullet whirred unpleasantly near Bob's head, and a thunder-clap from a clear sky could not have startled Jim more.

At the sharp report he stumbled and almost fell. If Bob had not heard the bullet whistle by he would have believed that Jim was wounded. He had him by the arm in a minute, sustaining him and urging him forward. It was more neces-

sary now than ever that they should reach the woods.

Seeing their leader resort to extreme measures the rest of the turtlers followed suit. Every one of the rascals had a revolver, and a fusilade of shots rang out while bullets hummed round the boys like great bees. Now they were glad indeed of the thickets of tall ferns. Plunging into the nearest they ran with heads lowered, the green fronds waving about their shoulders.

They were close to the first tongue of wood now. Its black aisles, choked with scrub, seemed the most attractive spot on earth to them. With a final burst of speed they reached the shade flung forward by the outermost branches. The moist coolness of the wood closed round them, and still they ran on, staggering, slipping, drunk with weariness.

At last Jim could go no further. He dropped his gun and sank at the foot of a tree, gasping for breath. Bob was not much better off, but he stood listening for some moments, ready to keep on if necessary. He heard no sound, however, except the rapid thumping of his heart. For the moment they were safe, and the clumsy turtlers

could not approach them through the scrub without giving some warning.

"I reckon it's the wisest thing we can do — to rest awhile," he said, and sat down by Jim's side.

"Do you think those fellows meant to kill us?" asked Jim.

"It looked like it," said Bob. "They're the lowest of white trash, and vicious and ignorant enough to do anything. Who would know it if they did, off on this out-of-the-way place? We've got to be mighty careful now, Jim. We don't want to be cornered, but if we are I reckon we must do some firing ourselves."

"I reckon so," said Jim, thoughtfully, "but I hope we won't have to. Do you think we ought to stay here any longer?"

"No," said Bob. "We'd better work round to the western side. We'll be safer there."

He rose and stretched himself.

"That's a strange palm," he said, looking at the one against which Jim was leaning. "See those queer swellings! And one side of it's been blazed deep. They all look about a thousand years old. I never saw such big ones."

"Hullo!" he added sharply. "There are four of them! Jim, four palms!"

Jim leaped to his feet.

"One, two, three," he counted aloud. Then with a hushed voice: "Four!"

"And no more!" cried Bob. "See, they stand like the corners of a square. And they've been standing for years and years. All this trash in the middle has grown up since."

Excitedly he began to walk round the square, examining the trees.

"It's just as I thought," he said presently. "They've been blazed. Do you know what that means, Jim?"

"It means that this is Morgan's grove," said Jim, solemnly.

The boys looked at each other, almost in awe. The spirit of the dead buccaneer seemed to hover over the spot. The croak of a passing heron made both of them jump, and glance nervously round. But as the bird passed all was still again in the damp, sunless woods. Somehow this absolute stillness had never seemed so uncanny before.

They drew together, speaking in whispers, as

if unseen listeners might be crouching in the thicket round them.

“Four hundred yards to the northeast,” said Bob.

He produced his little pocket compass, and held it in his palm, but his hand shook so that the needle danced like a live thing.

“Pshaw!” he said. “I’m as nervous as a minnow.”

He pressed the side of his hand against one of the trees, and the little blue-black needle slowly steadied into place, its thin point toward the north.

“Fix the line to this tree,” he said. “Hurry, Jim! It would never do to let those fellows find us now.”

Jim pulled a big tarpon reel from his pocket. There were six hundred yards of tough silk fishing-line wound on its axle, and every ten feet was marked by a ring of red ink. Its loose end was fastened to a stout tack, which Jim drove into the north side of the palm with the butt of his gun. Then, with Bob in advance, compass in hand, they slowly and silently started through the wood. The low click of the big reel as the

line ran out sounded to them as loud as the blows of a trip-hammer.

They had not gone many yards when they perceived that the spur of wood was very narrow. The trees and scrub grew scarcer, and the sunlight came pouring down in broad shafts. Very soon they saw a strip of bare, grassy ground ahead, and beyond that the beach, its white sands shining like silver against the intense blue of the water.

"Three hundred and fifty feet," announced Jim in hushed tones. "Only fifty feet more, Bob."

Excited as they were the boys now walked as softly and slowly as if they expected the ground to yawn under their feet. Each step was taken more reluctantly than the last, while their eyes roamed swiftly round, searching for something that would suggest a natural terminus of the line, but compelled to follow the slim, pointing needle. And when Jim cried out: "Four hundred feet!" it found them standing in a little open spot between the scattered trees. The sandy soil about them was flat and thinly covered by coarse grass. No stump or stake protruded from the level surface.



They looked at each other blankly for a moment. Both were conscious now that they had been expecting to reach some definite guide-post or mark which would assure them that they were on the right course.

"Well," said Bob, swallowing his disappointment. "We must mark this spot if Morgan didn't."

He broke the stems from three or four fallen palm leaves and thrust them into the soil at Jim's feet. On the upright stakes he impaled the great, tough leaves, and the whole made a landmark that could not well be overlooked.

"I don't see any live-oak," said Jim, who had been staring toward the north during these operations. "I don't see anything but palms and a couple of button-woods. An old live-oak would show his head if there was any round here."

"It ought to show," agreed Bob, and swept his eyes slowly over the thin woods before them. "But I'll be shot if it does."

"We must be on the right trail so far," said Jim. "There couldn't be two groves like that, and the four trees were all blazed too."

Bob nodded emphatically.

"That was Morgan's grove all right," he asserted. "I feel sure of it. And we've come northeast four hundred yards by the compass. That live-oak is somewhere and we must find it."

"But suppose the turtlers follow us up," said Jim. "I don't fancy playing target again."

"We've got to take some risk in this," said Bob. "And I don't think they'll bother us just now. They know we can outrun them, especially since their best man wrenched his leg. They'll try to ambush us, I think, and we must keep our eyes open. What do you say? Shall we give it up or take the risk?"

Jim scratched his nose with a wry smile.

"I'm not a quitter, old chap," he said. "I'll hunt for that stuff till my shoes are worn out, but I wish the turtlers were in Kansas just the same."

"So do I," said Bob. "You take the compass, and old Bess and I'll look out for 'em. If it comes down to shooting I reckon she'll have a word to say this time. With BBs she can bite as well as bark."

The very thinness of the woods at this point was in their favor, for though it might reveal

them to spying eyes, it provided no cover through which the turtlers could stalk them. In this stretch it was an easy matter, too, to mark the various trees, and there was no live-oak among them. There was still the heavier growth ahead, and towards this they directed their steps.

Half an hour's search along the course indicated by the compass brought no satisfactory results and they were a long distance from their starting point. In fact further progress toward the north would be of no value as the land beyond dropped sharply toward the shore, and no tree growing on the slope could be seen from the mark Bob had constructed. They concluded, therefore, to work back again, extending their search through the woods on either side of the line on which they had come.

This time they separated, though keeping within hail of each other. Half way back Jim raised a joyful shout, that was broken off abruptly. When Bob ran up, he was standing with his arm dramatically pointing at the object that had roused his enthusiasm.

It was a live-oak in truth, and as dead and wormy as a piece of aged driftwood. A ruck

of fallen branches lay round its massive trunk. What had once been the giant of the island was now a broken, leafless thing, whose thick stubs were lower than the surrounding tree-tops. In Morgan's day the great oak must have been a conspicuous landmark. That it was the tree they sought the boys had no doubt. So far as they had seen it was the only one of its kind on the island.

"It's off the course, as we made it," said Bob. "But that's not strange. Now the thing to do, it seems to me, is to lay a course straight south from here. It will intersect our line from the four palms to our marker somewhere. That ought to give us the truest point we can get."

"I'll point her south," said Jim, compass in hand. "There, she's on the mark. Straight now as the crow flies."

They had no detours to make or thickets to force. It was easy to follow the course, and soon they were back again in the park-like open where their marker lay. This was not so far out of the way as they had supposed. They struck the fish-line a few yards beyond it, and drove a stake to mark the point of intersection.

“This is as near as we can come to it,” said Bob. “It’s pretty rough measuring, but it may be near enough. Now for the one hundred yards east.”

But an unforeseen difficulty arose immediately. They were on the extreme eastern edge of the point of wood. A few steps would carry them into the treeless, grassy strip above the beach, to which it was plain the last measurement must take them. The treasure, then, was buried in the sand of the beach, where it would be folly to dig for it in broad daylight. Such a proceeding would inevitably bring the turtlers down upon them, and the rascals would have all the advantage of the ground.

There was nothing for it but to hide in one of the nearby thickets until the sun set. First they climbed the hill after the pickaxe and shovel. There was no sign of the turtlers either on land or sea, and a strong uneasiness began to take possession of the boys at this mysterious disappearance of the enemy. It seemed to forebode a plot of some consequence, and on their return trip down the slope they crept from shadow to shadow, their guns held in a position of readiness.

Nothing happened, and entering the thicket they had chosen they settled down to await the setting of the sun. Fortunately for their patience it was not far off. Presently the nighthawks appeared, sweeping above the tree-tops with their strange twanging cries. The light faded in the west and bats began to scurry about. Cranes and herons and egrets came flocking back to the rookeries, and as darkness fell a profound silence enclosed the island.

Like wild rabbits the boys crawled out of the thicket and looked cautiously round in the pale starlight. While Jim held his hat over the compass Bob studied it by the light of a match, and when their direction was clear they stole out across the open almost on hands and knees. Luckily there was no air stirring. Jim kept the matches burning so that the compass was never in darkness, and by and by they felt sand grind under their feet and knew they were on the beach. Bob had tied a hundred yards of line to the stake and this now came taut in his hand. They had reached the end of the course. If their rough reckoning was right Morgan's gold lay under them.

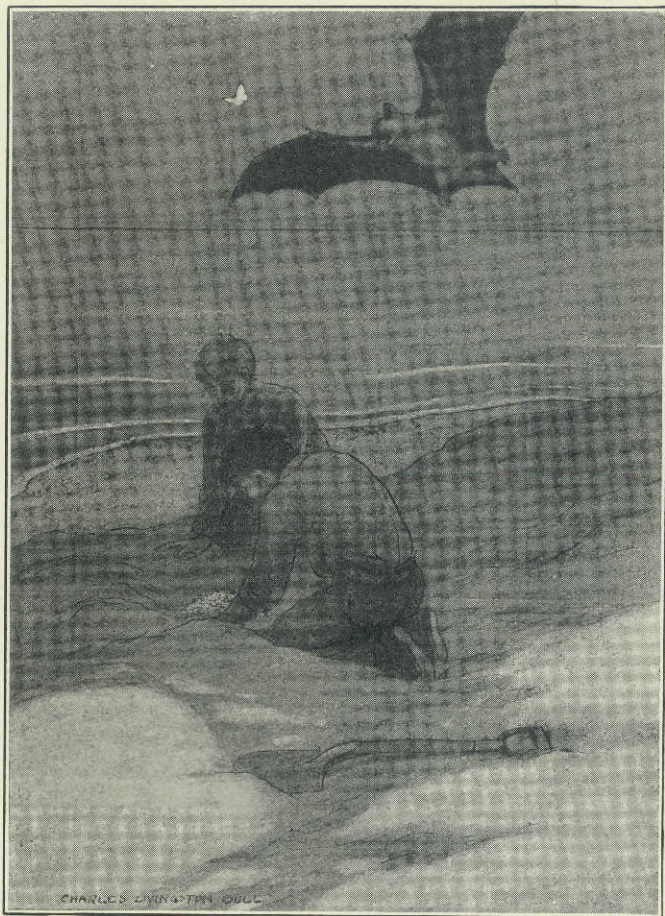
They marked the spot with their hats weighted with sand, and returned for the implements. They were too excited to speak. With pick and shovel they fell to work, digging as if their lives depended on it. The light sand flew and sweat ran down their faces. The turtles were completely forgotten.

The place was well above the usual high water mark, and lay close to a steepish bank. As the moon rose and poured its light upon the beach Bob noted this bank with growing interest. Its face was abrupt and ragged, and large lumps that had fallen from it lay on the beach.

“Jim,” cried Bob, suddenly. “Some big storm has hit this end of the island, and the water has eaten off the top of the beach. Before that it was several feet higher where we are standing. Don’t you see, Jim!”

“Yes, I see,” said Jim, leaning on the pick. “What of it?”

“Why, this,” said Bob excitedly. “It’s saved us a heap of digging down. It’s shovelled away at least four feet for us, and if it hasn’t swept the treasure away entirely, the stuff can’t be far below the surface. Instead of digging a deep



“FELL ON HIS KNEES AND DUG WITH BARE HANDS.”





hole at this one spot we can dig a shallow one that will cover ten times the space. See!"

"Sure," said Jim, and stepped out of the hole they had been excavating. "We'll leave this well and spread ourselves."

Using the hole as the centre of a circle they carried their operations over a wide area. Suddenly Bob, who was digging close under the bank, uttered a sharp ejaculation.

"I've struck something," he said.

"Something?" exclaimed Jim, in a voice that quivered. "What does it feel like? Don't stand there dumb as a clam. What does it feel like?"

"Wood," said Bob. "It may be a bit of drift but it sounds — it sounds sort of hollow."

Jim ran up, the pick raised high over his head, and brought it down with all his force at the spot where Bob's shovel was embedded. There was an audible dull sound of breaking wood, and Jim fell on his knees, scratching the sand away with his bare hands. Bob, more calm, pushed him aside.

"Let me use the shovel," he said. "I'll have it out, whatever it is, in no time."

It was hardly two feet below the surface, a

rectangular box with the pick fast in its lid, across which stretched three iron bands, one broken in halves, the others so eaten with rust that a blow with the shovel shattered them. The wood was in a condition nearly as bad. The splintered lid was soon forced open. On their knees they wrenched it off and flung it on the beach. Then they bent forward, almost sick with excitement.

The moonlight fell full on the contents of the box. Tarnished as the stuff was there was no mistaking it. Its shape and the clink of it as they thrust their hands in spelled the magic words. The box was full of silver and gold.