



CONTINUED FROM LAST SUNDAY

CHAPTER XVII.

SPYING OUT THE LAND

THE boys stood gazing at the unmistakable evidences that they had unwittingly returned to the key from which, but a little while previous, they believed they had escaped, as if it was impossible to credit their own senses. The rudely-constructed condenser seemed to suddenly have taken on a sinister appearance, and the gourds swayed back and forth in the wind with an ominous movement.

It was with an effort that Bok threw off the errible forebodings which beset him, and tried to be cheerful, as he said:

"Well, fellows, there's a bright as well as lark side to it all. We have come where we have a piece of bacon, an ax and a hatchet, and so we are better off than we thought. Then, again, it was from this place that we went out the gourd messengers, and they may et do good. We must try to keep away from Gomez, and perhaps in the end we shall be better off than if we had been wrecked on some other key. Let's do a little kirmishing to find out what the men are about."

Dudley was decidedly opposed to acting as spy. He had seen quite as much of Gomez and his friends as he thought necessary, and he feared recapture.

"Let's dig up the things we buried here, and go back where we can put up a camp." But we must know what they are doing," Bob insisted. "If you don't want to go with us, hide away among the bushes, and we'll soon be back."

Much as Dudley disliked being left alone, he thought it was preferable to venturing near the enemy, and he disappeared among the underbrush, as Bob and Percy started in what might be a dangerous mission.

Uncertain as to where the men were, and fearful lest they might be met in the most unexpected places, the boys moved slowly and cautiously, spending fully an hour in the advance, only to discover finally that their footsteps would hardly have been heard if they had taken no precautions.

It was evident, from what could be seen, that Gomez had ceased his efforts to find the treasure, for the time being, and was intent only on making arrangements to leave the island. With the exception of the wounded man, all were engaged in building a large raft, with a spar in the centre, to be used as a mast for the Jaquita's mainsail or jib.

The material was the trunks of small trees, formed in three layers, each placed at right angles with the other, and all lashed firmly together. They had broken up the raft made and partly sunk by the boys, and were using the timbers thus gained to strengthen their own at the ends.

"By waiting for a fair wind they can easily get to the mainland on such a craft as that, and we might do the same if we had one of those sails," Bob whispered to Percy.

But the mate only nodded his head in reply. He was quite willing the men should go, and would not look upon his imprisonment on the key as a hardship, if there were no such disagreeable neighbors.

"Let's go back," he said. "We can do nothing here."

Bob at once crept along in the direction from which they had just come, and in a short time they had made Dudley acquainted with all that had been learned.

"No matter how busy they are now," Dudley replied, apprehensively, "they may take it into their heads to come over this way. We shall be safer where you proposed building the camp, and the sooner we get there the better I shall feel."

There were several good reasons why they should make their way down the coast without loss of time, and as soon as the bacon, the ax and the hatchet had been dug up, the little party started, feeling decidedly worse in mind than when they set out, although they were considerably better off in worldly goods.

When they have arrived within about a quarter of a mile of the place where they proposed to make camp, they found on the beach a souvenir of the Jaquita in the shape of the small compass that had been kept in a wooden box in the cabin.

It was one of Dudley's old treasures, and had been brought on board when the boys first purchased the felucca, but had never been used because a large and better one was a portion of the vessel's outfit.

Dudley was the only member of the party who showed much joy at finding the useful article, but before the shipwrecked boys left Egg Key they came to appreciate how fortunate it was for them that it had been washed ashore.

When finally the cleared place was reached but little time was lost in selecting a location

for the camp. A clump of small trees standing close by the edge of the beach was used as uprights, and across them a roof of vines and leaves was quickly stretched, after which the weary castaways were ready to take the rest they needed.

"We can't build a fire until after sunset," Bob said, as they lay at full length beneath the green tent, "for those men would be sure to see the smoke in the daytime."

"I don't believe we shall run any risk, unless one of us goes up to Tampa for matches," Dudley answered gloomily, and his companions rose to a sitting posture immediately. It had not occurred to either of them that they were without the means of building a fire, and they stared at each other in blank dismay.

"We can make way with raw eggs and raw bacon if we can't eat raw turtles," Percy said, at length.

"We could start a blaze by using my watch crystal as a sun-glass, but that would have to be done in the daytime, and it's a little too dangerous. Let's have a nap now, for I feel as if I hadn't been asleep for a week, and we'll decide the question of cooking some other time."

It was not many moments before all three were wrapped in slumber, and when they awakened the sun had already set. They were very much refreshed by the rest, but so

called the food, with an evident effort. "I can eat these things roasted or fried, but I don't care for any more raw."

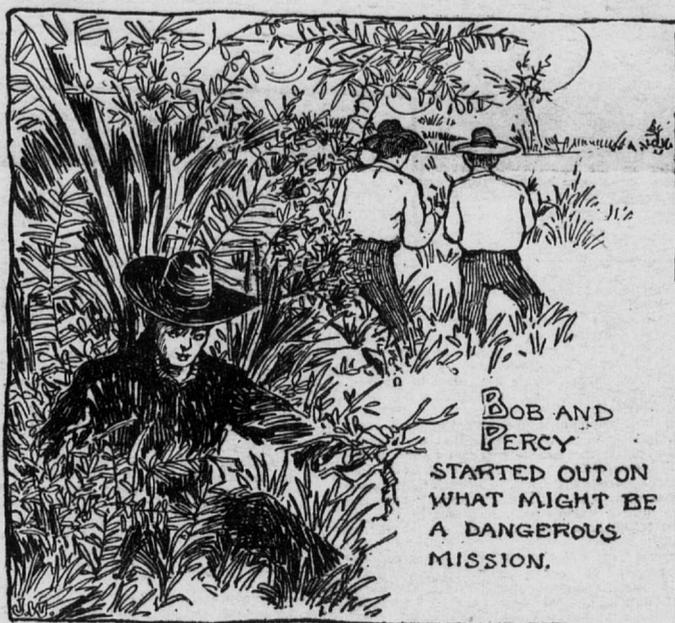
After the unsatisfactory meal was ended, the boys chatted, slept, or walked about the beach until it was time for the turtles to come on shore, and then they had plenty with which to occupy their attention. It seemed as if half of all the turtles in the vicinity of Egg Key had concluded to make their nests that night. Three or four could be seen on the beach each side of the boys at the same time, and for nearly an hour the excitement was great.

Five large ones, and ten times as many eggs as could be eaten, unless some means was devised to cook them, were the result of the night's work, and when the treasure seekers lay down under their roof of leaves, the turtle-camp had as many occupants as it could accommodate.

CHAPTER XVII.

THE PROBLEM SOLVED

THE first thought in the mind of each of the castaways next morning was how a palatable meal could be prepared. They felt as if it was almost an impossibility for them to subsist longer on raw eggs and bacon, and



BOB AND PERCY STARTED OUT ON WHAT MIGHT BE A DANGEROUS MISSION.

very hungry that each one managed to make a lunch from raw bacon.

When, late in the night, the moon rose, two turtles and a large supply of eggs were added to the larder, and the boys felt that they were comparatively rich—in the way of food. At daylight on the following morning a crawl was built for their two captives some distance in shore, and a trench was dug to supply it with water. As Bob remarked when they finished the work, "the place was beginning to look quite homelike, and even if they didn't succeed in finding the treasure it would be a good headquarters for them during future turtle seasons."

On this forenoon, for the first time since the wreck, Percy resumed work on the rope cipher, and he was obliged to confess, in answer to the persistent questioning of his friends, that he was no nearer the solution than when he first saw it.

"I don't know of any rule by which to work," he said, with a sigh. "In an ordinary cipher the repetition of characters, or the number of times each is used, will often give a clue, but here it is the same thing over and over, with nothing to help a fellow out." "Getting discouraged?" asked Bob, with a smile.

"Yes, I am, but not in the sense that I would think of giving up. I'll stumble on it some time, for when you come down to fact, it is nothing more nor less than a puzzle."

And Percy gave all his attention to the knotted rope once more, while the others settled down for a nap.

Supper, which was the third meal composed entirely of raw eggs, was less palatable than any, and the boys ate sparingly.

"We must have a fire tomorrow, even if we run some risk of being seen," Percy declared, finishing the second "young turtle," as Dudley

even Bob was willing to run the risk of building a fire.

"Let's get everything ready for cooking first," he said, when Percy broached the question of what they were to have for breakfast. "Kill one of the turtles and cut it up for broiling; bury the eggs in the sand underneath where the fire is to be built, and slice up the bacon. Then we will start the blaze, and all hands help cook, so that we shall not be obliged to keep it going very long."

The suggestion was carried into effect at once; the crystal of Bob's watch made a reasonably good sun-glass, and in less than an hour the work had been done, the fire extinguished, while the boys had such a breakfast as they had not eaten since the first appearance of Senor Gomez.

The captain laid out the work for the day by stating that he was going on a scouting expedition to the harbor, for the purpose of learning whether the smoke of their fire had been noticed by the enemy, and that during the time he was gone the cook should dig the eggs from the fireplace, in order to store them near the camp, while Percy was to be free to study the perplexing puzzle.

"Don't go away from the camp," he said, as he started out, carrying the hatchet as a weapon, "for if there is any danger that the men will come this way, we shall have to make a hurried move."

During the tramp he advanced with the greatest caution, fearful that the Spaniard had already suspected their presence on the key.

When the leaves were shaken by the light breeze he would stop until he had ascertained beyond a doubt that the movement was not caused by the enemy, and any un-

usual wash of the tide would be followed on his part by a rigid scrutiny of every bush or clump of palmetto.

Although he spent a great deal of time in making these investigations, he found, when he was where he could overlook the camp, that they had not been needless.

The raft was finished and moored by the shore, looking really like a seaworthy craft. The jib of the Jaquita had been rigged as a sort of staysail, and appearances indicated that the men were ready to leave the key and its treasure whenever it should suit their purpose so to do.

Launce was sitting within the shelter of the tent, nursing his wounded arm and smoking, while two of his companions were fashioning some small trees into oars.

Gomez was nowhere to be seen. He was not around the tent, and might be out searching for the hiding place of the pirate's treasure, or have gone to learn the cause of the smoke.

"If he noticed the fire he'll be almost certain to come upon Dudley and Percy un-awares," Bob said to himself, "and even if he is only out for a walk he may stumble on them. So the best thing I can do is to get back. How I wish we had waited one day more before trying to cook!"

He lost no time in vain repinings, however, but started off through the underbrush as rapidly as possible without making too much noise.

When the captain left the camp to reconnoitre, Dudley had busied himself with his work and paid but little attention to Percy, who had gone down to the very edge of the beach, where he amused himself with making diagrams in the wet sand.

Dudley wrapped the thoroughly-roasted eggs in leaves, forming them into packages of about a dozen, and bound them with vines to the bushes. The cooked bacon and turtle steaks were also covered with leaves and suspended from the branches of the trees, with the green substitute for twine.

He had nearly completed this task, which had occupied him for at least two hours, when a loud cry from Percy caused him to start at full speed for the beach, fearing some imminent danger menaced.

It was quite evident to him, as soon as he saw Percy, that the outcry had not been made through fear, for that youth was dancing about the beach, and giving way in every manner to the most extravagant demonstrations of joy.

"What has come over you?" Dudley asked, in surprise.

"Come here and see what I have found." Dudley went quickly toward the beach, thinking that some valuable article had been washed up from the sea, when Percy held out for his inspection an oblong piece of the under portion of a turtle shell, which had been rudely cut and letters scratched on it with the point of a knife.

In order that the reader may understand what Dudley looked at in perplexity, a reduced copy of it is given below.

"Can't you see what it is now?" Percy asked, impatiently.

"Indeed I can't," was the truthful reply, as Dudley gazed once more, but failed to discover anything interesting.

"Well, you must be stupid!" exclaimed Percy, who had no doubt but that the solving of the cipher occupied as prominent a place in the minds of his companions as in his own. "Don't you see that if I wind this cord around, fastening the loop on the top notch, that the first knot comes exactly under the letter H? The second just fits on the next turn under A, and so on until the cipher is read."

Then Percy again gave way to his joy in the most grotesque antics.

"But what does it say?" cried Dudley, as he clutched the whirling boy by the arm, forcing him, after quite a severe struggle, to stand still. "Tell me what it says!" "The first word is 'half,' the next 'south-east,' then 'palm,' and the last six knots are simply alternate letters to the key of the writing. We know now that the treasure is buried half a mile southeast by east from the head of the bay, and that the bearings are to be taken from the palm tree. It must be the one that stands just in front of Gomez's camp."

"How did you find it out?" asked Dudley, astonished at the patience and ingenuity exhibited by his friend in reading such a blind cipher.

"I assumed that the first word was 'half,' and I have been tracing on the sand a square of letters at such distance apart that the first four knots would come in the proper place to spell it. I didn't understand what was to be done with so much loose twine—that which is used in passing over the back of the diagram. Perhaps I never would have found it if I had had paper on which to work, but the lines couldn't be made accurately in the sand, so I hunted for something

CONTINUED ON FOLLOWING PAGE