

Davenport Spencer

The Rushton Boys at Treasure Cove: or, The Missing Chest of Gold



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CHAPTER I

THE COMING STORM

“Say, boys, it looks like a storm and a heavy one, too.”

The jest and laughter ceased at once, and three pairs of eyes looked in the direction pointed out by the speaker.

“See that big bank of cloud climbing up the sky?” continued Fred Rushton. “There’s more than a capful of wind in that, if I know anything about weather.”

“You’re right, Fred,” said Lester Lee, who was handling the tiller. “And we’re a long way off from home! It’s up to us to turn about and make a run for it.”

“Oh, I don’t think it will amount to anything,” said Teddy Rushton, Fred’s younger brother, who was never averse to taking a chance. “We’re having such a grand time that I hate to make a break for land unless we have to. Besides, I’ve never been out in a squall, and I’d like to have the experience.”

“You’d have more experience than you cared for with this blow that is coming,” returned the helmsman, and there was a growing anxiety in his tone. “I’m more familiar with this coast than you are, and I’d rather look at the storm from the shore than from the deck of this catboat. So, here’s for a quick scoot for home,” he concluded, as he brought the boat around and laid the course for the shore.

It was a staunch little sailboat of twenty-two feet in length, and the way she minded her helm, as well as the ease with which she rode the waves, spoke eloquently of her qualities.

On this afternoon, off the coast of Maine, she held a jolly party of four boys. Lester Lee, who owned the boat and managed the tiller, was the host, and his guests were Bill Garwood and Fred and Teddy Rushton, all of them fellow schoolmates of Lester’s at Rally Hall. It was vacation time, and the boys were gloating over the fact that they were going to have several weeks more than usual before school opened in the fall. The news had come in a letter that Fred had received that morning from Melvin Granger, one of his last year’s chums.

“Good for old Mel!” exulted Teddy. “He knew how good we’d feel about it, and he couldn’t get the news to us quickly enough.”

“That stroke of lightning knew its business when it struck the right wing of the building,” laughed Fred. “Mel says that several of the rooms were burned out, and it will be fully a month after the usual time before everything can be got in running order.”

“I’ll bet old Hardtack is raving, because he can’t get us under his thumb as soon as he expected,” grinned Bill, referring in this irreverent fashion to Dr. Hardach Rally, head of Rally Hall.

“It’s lucky the lightning didn’t hit the gymnasium, anyway,” commented Lester. “We’ll have some tough teams to tackle this coming year and we’ll need all the practice we can get. Ease her off a little, Fred,” he added, to the older Rushton boy, who was handling the sheet.

Fred did so, just in time to avoid the full force of a big wave that was coming on the port side. But enough of it came aboard to drench thoroughly Teddy and Bill, who were lounging at the foot of the mast.

“Wow!” yelled Teddy, as he scrambled to his feet. “That was a corker. I got a gallon down my back that time.”

“Gallon?” echoed Bill. “It seemed to me more like a hogshhead. I’m as wet as a drowned rat.”

“Don’t you care, fellows,” called out Lester. “We won’t any of us have a dry stitch on by the time we get to land.”

“You don’t suppose there’s any danger, do you?” asked Bill, who at his father’s ranch would have been perfectly at home on the back of a bucking broncho, but here on the sea felt out of his element.

“Oh, no,” replied Lester, carelessly. “That is,” he hastened to add, “there’s always more or less danger when one’s out in an open boat in a storm. But this *Ariel* of mine is a jim dandy, and I don’t think we’ll have any trouble. Even if she should go over, we could hang on to the bottom, and there are so many boats in these waters that we’d soon be picked up.”

Despite his careless air and confident words, it was evident from the way he scanned the sky and the tumbling waste of waters that he was secretly uneasy.

The sky had by this time become completely overcast, and although it was only mid afternoon, it was as dark as though twilight were coming on. The wind came in stronger gusts, and the waves broke ever more threateningly against the side of the boat. The land was blotted out, and only the tossing waters met the view in every direction.

“I ought to have turned around sooner,” Lester muttered to himself, “but I was so interested in the letter that Fred got from Mel I didn’t notice those storm clouds coming up.”

The conversation had ceased. Lester had all he could do to handle the tiller and shape his course, and Fred had to be on the alert in his management of the sheet, which strained and tugged under the force of the wind. It was a time for action rather than speech, and Bill and Teddy, who just then could do nothing but serve as ballast, looked on in silence as the *Ariel* tore through the waves.

Suddenly an object that appeared on the starboard side excited Teddy so much that a cry broke from his lips.

“Look at that big fish over there!” he exclaimed. “It’s a monster. What is it, a porpoise?”

“Porpoise nothing,” said Lester briefly, letting his eye wander a moment from the tiller. “That’s a shark.”

“A shark!” was the cry that broke at the same time from Teddy and Bill, neither of whom had even seen that “pirate of the sea,” and they felt a shivery thrill from the sudden discovery.

“Yes,” answered Lester, “and from the size of the fin, he must be a whopper. We seldom see them so large in these waters.”

“Is he a man-eater, do you think?” asked Bill in an awed whisper.

“That depends,” answered Lester. “If he’s a blue shark or a hammerhead, he probably is. They pulled one out about fifty miles from here last year, and when they cut him up, they found a man’s boot in his stomach. They’re good things to keep away from.”

“I should say they were,” agreed Bill. “I’d rather take my chance with a rattlesnake.”

Again they lapsed into silence, but their eyes never left that ominous fin that showed just above the water, cutting it like a knife.

There was a quick exclamation from Lester, and looking at him, they saw that he was peering at an object perhaps half a mile away. It was large and vague in the gathering darkness, but Bill’s keen eyes, accustomed to gaze over wide spaces in the West, made it out at once.

“It’s a motor boat!” he exclaimed. “And by jinks! it seems to be in trouble. See how it tosses about. It looks as if it would upset any minute.”

“Those motor boats are always unsafe,” remarked Lester, with the scorn that the master of a sailboat usually feels for any craft driven by machinery. “They’re getting out of order all the time, and a fellow takes his life in his hands every time he goes out in one. For my part give me a sailboat.”

“Can you see how many people are on board of her?” asked Fred anxiously.

“I see only one,” replied Bill, “and he seems to be tinkering with the engine. Wow! but she shipped a lot of water just then.”

“What are we going to do?” asked Teddy. “He may get upset, and if he doesn’t know how to swim, he’ll drown. And even if he were a good swimmer, he couldn’t make the shore in a storm like this.”

“Here’s the answer,” said Lester briefly, as he gave the tiller a twist and gave Fred directions to pull in the sheet. In a moment the boat had changed its course and was bearing down swiftly toward the disabled craft.

“I’m mighty anxious to get to shore,” Lester remarked, “but we’ve got to see what we can do for this fellow first.”

The storm was now full upon them, and the *Ariel* staggered as the waves beat against her sides. She ploughed along gallantly, however, under the skilful guidance of Lester, riding most of the waves, although now and then her nose would dive through a big one and enough water would come on board to keep Bill and Teddy busy bailing her out. All were thoroughly drenched, but no one thought of his discomfort, so intent were they all on reaching the motor boat, which by this time was absolutely out of control and tossing up and down like a chip in the surging tumult of waters.

The one occupant had given up as hopeless the attempt to fix the machinery. He had caught sight of the *Ariel* and was waving his hands wildly.

“He oughtn’t to be standing up,” muttered Lester. “He ought to crouch down and hold tight.”

They were now not more than a hundred feet away, when suddenly a groan went up from the boys.

A huge wave, cresting over the side, had caught the man on the motor boat full in the chest and hurled him into the sea!

CHAPTER II

DRAGGED FROM THE SEA

“He’s gone!” cried Teddy in horror.

“And with that shark around!” exclaimed Bill.

“There he is!” yelled Fred, as his straining eyes caught sight of a white face and a struggling figure at a little distance.

“Stand by with the boat hooks,” commanded Lester to Bill and Teddy, as he gave the *Ariel* a turn and bore down on the drowning man.

Those of our readers who have followed the adventures of the Rushton boys, as told in the previous volumes of this series, entitled “The Rushton Boys at Rally Hall” and “The Rushton Boys in the Saddle,” already feel well acquainted with them and the other occupants of the boat. Those who have not yet done so will need a word of introduction.

Fred and Teddy Rushton were the sons of Mansfield Rushton, a broker, living in Oldtown and doing business in an adjacent city, to which he commuted. He and his wife, Agnes, were devoted to their boys, and their home was a type of all that is best and wholesome in American life.

An occasional disturbing element in it was the frequent presence of the boys’ uncle, Aaron Rushton, who was a crusty bachelor with little liking for boys. He was constantly preaching the need of a firm hand in bringing up his nephews and scolding his brother for his laxity in that respect.

Fred, who was nearly sixteen, was a year older than Teddy. Both were alert and vigorous young Americans, bright in their studies and fond of athletic sports. Teddy was impulsive and given to playing practical jokes, and a large part of Fred’s time was taken up in getting his brother out of trouble.

One of Teddy’s jokes caused a runaway in which their Uncle Aaron nearly came to grief. He escaped personal injury, but lost his watch and some valuable papers, and he was so angry that at last the boys’ parents sent them to Rally Hall, a boarding school recommended by Mr. Aaron Rushton because its discipline was very strict.

The boys enjoyed themselves hugely at Rally Hall, for the year was crowded with fun and adventure. They had enemies as well as warm friends, and Fred had to thrash Andy Shanks, a bully who tried to put on him the theft of some examination papers.

When vacation time arrived, they arranged to go out to the Snake River Ranch in the West, to visit Bill Garwood, one of their chums at Rally Hall. They expected to have a glorious time and were not disappointed. For the first time, they saw rattlesnakes and bears that were not behind bars in a Zoological Garden. A tangled web of events was being wound around Mr. Garwood, Bill’s father, in the effort of plotters to get possession of his ranch where, unknown to him, a silver mine had been discovered. Teddy, by means of a moving-picture film taken by a company at the ranch, was enabled to run down a plot to steal Mr. Garwood’s cattle, and Fred had a chance to unmask a pretended ghost by which it was sought to frighten people away from the location of the mine.

Their grateful hosts wanted the boys to stay all summer, but they had to cut their visit short, as they had promised to spend a few weeks with Lester Lee at Bartanet Shoals on the coast of Maine. The lads had now been with Lester for about two weeks, and Bill, who had joined them on Lester’s earnest invitation, had come a few days later. They had had, so far, what Teddy called a “bang-up time” and the only thing that marred their pleasure was the fact that vacation was so nearly over. Hence their delight at the news in Melvin’s letter that, owing to an injury to one of the buildings, the fall term at Rally Hall would open about a month later than usual.

Lester had lived on the coast all his life and there was nothing about handling a sailboat that he did not know, but it taxed all his skill to rescue the man who had been thrown into the water.

Had the sea been smooth, it would have been an easy matter to wear about and pull him on board. But in this welter of wind and waves, it was all he could do to get the *Ariel* to obey her helm. Twice he swooped down near the struggling swimmer, but each time the waves beat the man back just far enough to be out of reach of the boathooks. Lester was coming round for another attempt when he was startled by a cry from Teddy:

“There he goes! He’s given up!”

The strength of the swimmer had failed. For another moment his arms moved aimlessly. Then he slowly sank from sight.

The boys looked at one another in horror.

Fred was the first to recover from his paralysis. He kicked off his shoes and thrust the rope of the sheet into Teddy’s hand.

“Hold this, Ted,” he commanded, “and do just what Lester tells you to do. You, Bill, hold on tight to this end of the line,” he added, picking up a coil at his feet, “and I’ll take the other. Leave plenty of slack till you see me come up.”

Almost before they knew what he intended to do, Fred dived overboard.

The sides of the *Ariel* were high and his dive carried the boy far down. Down, down he went, looking through the dim green waters for a white face and limp form. But his efforts were useless and he came up for air.

“There he is!” were the first words he heard, as he shook his head and looked around. “Over there to the right. Grab him, Fred, before he goes down again.”

Fred made a wild clutch at an object just beside him, and his fingers clutched an arm. He held on desperately, despite the waves that sought to tear him away.

“You’ve got him!” yelled Bill. “Hold tight now and I’ll pull you in.”

There was no movement in the limp form, which made it easier for his preserver. Holding tightly with one hand to the rope which had never left his grip, and grasping his unconscious burden with the other, Fred was drawn to the side of the *Ariel* by Bill’s muscular arms. But the strength of all three was necessary to lift the two of them on board, so Lester had to abandon the rudder, while Teddy left the sheet to help. They succeeded at last, after a vast amount of tugging and straining, and laid the stranger’s body on the deck, while Fred slumped down beside him trying to get back his breath.

“Why, it isn’t a man at all!” exclaimed Bill. “It’s a boy and I don’t believe he’s any older than we are.”

“Sure enough,” said Teddy. “I wonder who he is.”

“I’ve seen that fellow somewhere,” affirmed Lester, “but for the life of me I can’t tell where. But that can wait till another time. What we want to do now is to get to work. He can’t have swallowed much water in the little time he was under. Get him down on his back with his head low. Tear his shirt open at the throat. Work his arms slowly up and down. Here, Bill, you take one arm and Teddy the other. You’ll have to do it without much help from Fred and me, for we’ll have all we can do to get this boat to shore. The wind’s getting stronger every minute and we simply must reach land before dark.”

He resumed the tiller, while Fred again took the sheet, and they swung the boat around to its original course.

“I’d like to save the motor boat if we could,” remarked Lester, as they swung around. “It looks as though it had cost a heap of money. But just now it’s a question of life rather than money, and we’ll have to let it go.”

“It does seem a pity,” agreed Fred, as he glanced at the boat tossing about helplessly, now wallowing in the trough and again rising to the crest of a wave. “But perhaps it may keep afloat till the storm is over. We’ll cruise around and look for it to-morrow or next day.”

Bill and Teddy were working vigorously, applying all their knowledge of “first aid” to their unconscious passenger. For several minutes their work seemed to be without result, but at last they heaved sighs of relief as they saw a beating at the temples and a fluttering of the eyelids. A moment

later the stranger opened his eyes and looked vaguely around him. He tried to speak, but no words came.

“Don’t talk just now,” Teddy admonished him. “You’ve been in a tight pinch, but you’re all right. Just relax and go to sleep if you want to. We’re on the job and we’ll take care of you.”

The eyes closed again, and the boys, seeing that the danger was past, stopped their “pump-handle work,” as Teddy called it, and set about making the stranger’s position more comfortable. They made a rough bed for him with some blankets that they dragged from the tiny cabin and put a coat beneath his head for a pillow.

“The longer he stays asleep, the better it will be for him,” commented Bill.

“It’s lucky for him it isn’t his last sleep,” said Teddy. “It would have been that, if it hadn’t been for that brother of mine,” he added with a touch of pride.

“Fred surely is a plucky old scout and a quick thinker too,” agreed Bill. “He had his shoes off and was in the water before the rest of us fairly realized what had happened.”

“He can swim like a fish,” said Teddy, “and with that rope in his hand, I didn’t fear but we could get him on board again. But my heart was in my mouth when I thought of that shark.”

“It was taking a big risk,” declared Bill. “By the way, I don’t see anything more of that ugly fin. I guess he’s given us the go-by for to-day.”

But even as he spoke, there was a rush in the water alongside, and they caught a glimpse of a dark body at least sixteen feet in length, and saw a wicked eye gleaming up at them. It was only for a second and again the shark vanished. But his sudden appearance, at the very moment they were talking of him, made the boys shudder.

“He’s following us!” exclaimed Bill.

“That’s what,” said Teddy. “He knows we’re in a small boat and that the storm may capsize it. If it were a canoe or a rowboat, he’d probably try to upset it himself.”

“He couldn’t have been far off when Fred was in the water,” shivered Bill. “He may have been making for him at the very minute we hauled him out.”

“We got both out just in the nick of time, I guess,” assented Teddy soberly, and his heart was full of thankfulness as he gazed at his elder brother.

The latter just at present had his hands full. The storm had increased in fury and was now blowing half a gale. The sail threatened to split into ribbons, and the gunwale was constantly under water as the *Ariel* plunged along. Lester’s muscles were strained to the utmost to hold the rudder against the heavy waves that seemed bound to disable it.

His face was set and worried, as he glanced alternately at sea and sky. He seemed to be debating a question that bothered him. At last he reached a decision.

“It’s no use,” he said as he jammed over the tiller and changed the course of the *Ariel*. “We’ll never make Bartanet Shoals with the wind as it is now. We’d have to do too much tacking and beating up into the wind.”

“What will you do then?” inquired Fred anxiously.

“We’ll make for a cove I know of, where we can wait till the storm is over,” answered Lester. “And we’ll have to do some tall hustling to get there before night comes on. Here goes for a run before the wind.”

CHAPTER III

A WELCOME REFUGE

The change of course had not been effected without shipping a considerable amount of water as the boat hung for a moment in the wind. Bill and Teddy bailed desperately, and an instant later the *Ariel* was heading in a new direction. The wind now, instead of striking her sail at an angle, was following directly over the stern, and the little craft fairly flew. The power of the wind made her careen at a dangerous angle, and Bill and Teddy had to climb up on the further side to keep her from capsizing.

It was perilous sailing, but the bite of the salt spray on their cheeks and the swift pace at which they were moving filled the boys with wild exhilaration. They might have been four young Vikings out on a voyage of discovery, as they faced and dared the storm.

"See how she foots it through the water!" exclaimed Lester. "Isn't she a beauty?"

"You bet she is!" responded Teddy with enthusiasm. "I don't wonder that sailors get so fond of their boats that they'd rather go down with them than live without them."

"I can't say that I've got so far as that," laughed Lester. "But I'm sure I'd feel as bad about losing the *Ariel* as you boys would if you lost Star and Colonel."

"You'd feel mighty bad then," responded Teddy, as he thought of the horses that he and Fred had brought with them from the West.

At this moment, his attention was attracted by a movement on the part of the boy they had rescued. They had sheltered him as much they could, but they could not prevent an occasional dash of spray from striking his face and this had hastened his awakening. This time, his eyes were lighted with intelligence, and it was clear that he had largely recovered from the effect of his immersion.

Teddy bent over toward him.

"How are you feeling?" he asked with a friendly smile.

"Better," was the response in a faint voice. "I can't remember yet, though, just what happened to me."

"A big wave threw you overboard," broke in Bill. "We happened to be cruising near by, and we picked you up."

"I guess I must have hit my head against something when I went over," said the stranger. "I don't remember a thing that happened while I was in the water. Did I swim?"

"You seemed to be swimming a little," said Teddy, "but I guess it was more instinct than anything else. You went down before we got to you. But you'd better not talk any more just now. We'll be on shore before long I hope, and then we'll tell you all about it."

"There's the shore now," called out Bill in accents of relief, as he pointed to a long dark line ahead of them.

On the right it seemed to be sandy and level, but a little to the left there was a rocky elevation, against which the waves broke with a thunderous roar, sending back sheets of crested foam.

The boat kept on with unslackened speed and the boys grew somewhat uneasy as the tumbling breakers grew plainer to the sight. But that uneasiness became consternation, when Lester with a quick twist of the tiller headed the *Ariel* straight toward two immense rocks that seemed to stand out as sentinels on the coast.

"Lester!" shouted Bill in warning and then stopped. A look at the strained intent face of the helmsman told Bill that he knew exactly what he was doing.

They came nearer and nearer, and the faces of the boys blanched at the fearful turmoil of the breakers. Then Lester threw the tiller to port.

“Sit tight!” he yelled, and the next moment the *Ariel* dashed straight for a point midway between the two giant rocks.

There was an awful moment as she staggered through that seething turmoil of raging waters. But this was followed by an immense relief when they found themselves rocking on the waters of a sheltered cove, which, while rough, were like a mill pond compared to the sea outside.

Before them stretched a sandy beach, which bore no trace of human habitation except a tumbled down hut which stood fifty feet inland. A few scrub pines were scattered here and there, and some dejected looking bushes grew in a little patch of green that the sand had not yet swallowed up. It was not an attractive landscape, but to the boys, after escaping the perils of the sea, it seemed a bit of Paradise.

“Lower the sail, Fred,” directed Lester. “We’ll get out the sweeps and feel our way to a landing place.”

The sail came down with a run, and Fred rose and stretched himself after having been so long in a cramped position.

“Lester, you’re some sailor,” he said in hearty admiration. “You handled the *Ariel* to the queen’s taste. I take off my hat to you.”

“Same here,” echoed Teddy. “It certainly looked as if it were all up with us when you came shooting toward these rocks.”

“It was a dandy bit of work,” said Bill warmly. “It’s a lucky thing for this crowd that you were at the helm. If you hadn’t been, we might be food for the fishes by this time.”

“Oh, I don’t know,” returned Lester, flushing a little at the chorus of appreciation. “I just happened to know of this place, and I knew we had to get to shore before dark. So I took a chance on making it. But it’s nearly dark now, and we’ve got a lot to do, before we’re snug and tidy for the night.

“The first thing to do is to find a shallow place where you fellows can wade ashore. Then I’ll take the *Ariel* out a way and anchor her. As soon as that’s done, I’ll swim ashore and join you.”

They poled the boat in carefully with a pair of long sweeps until their soundings showed them that they were in less than three feet of water. Here Bill and the two Rushton boys jumped overboard, and while they held out their arms to him, Lester carefully let down the stranger. He could walk by this time, although he was still weak and shaky, and the boys helped him to the shore.

“Now you sit here for a while,” said Fred, when they had reached a point twenty feet or so up the beach, “while the rest of us hustle around and get something to eat. Do you feel hungry?”

“I’m beginning to,” smiled the other. “I guess I can punish my part of the supper pretty well.”

“Good!” said Fred heartily. “That reminds me. Say, Lester!” he called, as he waded back, “hand us over that string of bluefish. It’s lucky we caught them before the storm came up. Is there anything left from the lunch?”

“Not a thing,” answered Lester. “You wolves went through that lunch like a prairie fire. But I’ve got some slices of bacon in the locker, and here’s some salt and pepper. I guess we won’t go hungry.”

“Not from the looks of that string we won’t,” laughed Fred, as he received from Lester enough bluefish to feed a dozen men. “Now hand over the other things, and by the time you anchor and come ashore, we’ll be ready to fill you up.”

“That’s a big contract,” grinned Lester, “but I’m going to hold you to it.”

He poled the *Ariel* out a little way and dropped the anchor. Then he made everything shipshape about the little craft, slipped into the water, and swam ashore.

He found that his comrades had not been idle. Teddy had ransacked the hut and found an old frying pan and a bent up broiler, probably left there by the hunters that made this their rendezvous in the sniping season. Bill collected all the shrubs and twigs that he could find, and taking a match from an oilskin pouch started a fire. Fred was busy with his clasp knife, cleaning the fish, and when Lester reached them, he had half a dozen speckled beauties ready for the frying pan.

“Let’s use the busted broiler instead,” suggested Lester. “Bluefish are twice as good broiled as they are fried. We’ll use the frying pan for the bacon.”

“The fish would be better yet, if we had some oak twigs to broil them on, instead of the broiler,” said Bill, whose experience in camping out made him an expert adviser, “but there doesn’t seem to be any wood around here except pine. And the flavor of that spoils the fish.”

So they compromised on the dilapidated broiler, holding the fish over a fire of embers that they raked out from the main blaze. Bill busied himself with the bacon, and the appetizing odors that blended together made the hungry boys wild with anticipation.

At last the meal was ready, and they found it a feast fit for a king. They had no forks, but they used their knives as substitutes.

“Eating with your knife, Fred!” said Teddy, in mock horror. “What would mother say if she saw you?”

“I certainly am some sword swallower,” grinned Fred. “But we’re all in the same boat, and everything goes. I don’t suppose Robinson Crusoe and Friday were very particular about their table manners. And this is certainly a Robinson Crusoe stunt we’re doing.”

“Except that this isn’t an island,” laughed Lester.

“And there are no cannibals ready to make us into soup,” added Bill.

“And our boat hasn’t been wrecked,” exulted Teddy, looking out over the water, where the *Ariel* lay with the firelight reflected from her side.

CHAPTER IV

A STRANGE MISSION

It seemed to the boys as though they could never get enough, and Fred, as he saw one bluefish after another vanish, reminded the others that they would want something for breakfast the next morning. But at last even their ravenous appetites were satisfied, and they lay back on the sand, blissfully content.

"Easy camping," remarked Teddy lazily. "No dishes to wash, no beds to make, nothing to do till to-morrow."

"Do you think the storm will be over by that time, Lester?" asked Fred.

"I guess so," answered Lester, as he looked up at the sky where some stars showed through. "The clouds seem to be breaking away and the wind has died down a little. The surf doesn't sound so loud on the cliffs outside, either."

"I suppose your father will be worried when we don't get back to-night," remarked Bill.

"I'm afraid he will," assented Lester. "But I've had to stay away sometimes before when I've been caught in a squall, and he knows the *Ariel* is a pretty staunch boat. Still, he can't help feeling worried, and we'll make sail for home the first thing in the morning."

By this time, their clothes had dried in the warmth of the fire, and the comfort that this gave, together with the hearty meal they had eaten, put the youths in a state of supreme content. They were at peace with themselves and with all the world, and their satisfaction was all the greater by contrast with their peril of the afternoon.

The stranger had eaten heartily and joined freely in the conversation, but by tacit consent they had waited till the meal was over before they discussed his narrow escape. The Rally Hall boys had had time to take the unknown one's measure, and the general impression was favorable.

He was a clean-cut, well set up youth of about sixteen years. His form was lithe and muscular, his hair black, and his eyes frank and friendly. His speech showed education, and his manners were easy and correct.

If there was anything about him that marked him out as peculiar, it was a certain baffled expression that came and went in his eyes. He looked like one who was always seeking for something, but never finding it. His glance had taken in the cove and the surrounding shore, as though to impress it on his memory, with a view to using the knowledge later on.

Now as the boys lounged around the fire, he seemed to feel that the time had come to give some account of himself.

"I can't thank you fellows enough for having pulled me out of the water," he began.

"Here's the fellow to thank," interrupted Lester, clapping his hand on Fred's shoulder. "He went overboard after you."

"What?" was the surprised reply. "I thought you pulled me in from the deck. That was an awfully plucky thing for you to do," the stranger declared, as he grasped Fred's hand warmly, "and I'll never forget it. With that shark swimming around there, too!"

"Oh, that was nothing," disclaimed Fred. "I had tight hold of a rope, and it was no trick at all to hold on to you until the other fellows pulled us in."

"You took your life in your hand just the same," affirmed the other. "I hope that some day I'll be able to show you how much I appreciate it."

"What was the matter with your motor boat anyway?" asked Fred, who was always embarrassed by thanks and wanted to change the subject.

"The ignition was bad, and the water that I shipped made things worse. I was tinkering away at it and had almost got it to working right, when that big wave came aboard and carried me over

the side. I can just remember its hitting me, and after that everything was blank until I came to my senses on the deck of the boat.”

“I’ve seen that motor boat of yours cruising up and down the coast a good deal this last year or so,” remarked Lester. “You seem to be pretty fond of the water.”

The stranger shot a swift glance at the last speaker, as if he thought some hidden meaning might lurk behind the words.

“Yes,” he said, “I’m never happier than when I’m out on the open sea. Some of my ancestors must have been sailors I guess, and I have it in the blood. But that isn’t the only reason I’ve been cruising along this coast.”

“What is the reason then?” asked Teddy curiously. “That is,” he went on hastily, “if you care to tell us. We don’t want to pry into your affairs.”

The other seemed to debate with himself. It was as if a habit of secrecy were battling with a sudden desire for expression.

“I’ll tell you,” he burst out. “It’s a thing I’ve never told any one else. But you fellows have been so white to me, to say nothing of one of you having risked his life for mine, that I’m going to take a chance. Perhaps it will be a relief anyway. Brooding over it so long and not confiding in any one, I’ve been afraid some time I might go crazy over it.”

The boys were startled, but they gave no sign and the speaker went on:

“My name is Ross Montgomery. I’m looking for a chest of gold.”

The effect was electric. The thrilling phrase appealed to all that was most romantic in the listeners. Visions floated before their eyes of hidden treasures, of pirate hoards, of sunken galleons with their doubloons and “pieces of eight.” These things had seemed to belong to the misty past, to distant seas. Yet here in the prosaic twentieth century, in a civilized country, on a quiet beach along the coast of Maine, this boy of their own age was talking of a quest that might well stir the most sluggish blood.

“A chest of gold!” repeated Fred, as though he could not believe his ears.

“Where do you think it’s hidden?” questioned Teddy eagerly.

“How much money is in the chest?” asked Bill.

“Perhaps it isn’t money,” corrected Lester. “It may be gold dust, or it may be in bars. Have you any clue?” he asked, turning to Ross.

“What makes you think it’s on this coast?” put in Fred.

Ross raised his hand good-naturedly, as though to ward off the rain of questions.

“Easy there,” he smiled, “and I’ll tell you the whole thing from the beginning. Perhaps you’ll think I’m crazy. Perhaps you’ll say I have as good a chance of finding it as the fellow who looks for the pot of gold at the end of the rainbow. And you may be right. Anyway, I’ll give you what facts I know, and you can figure out for yourselves whether I have a chance or not.”

Ross waited a moment to collect his thoughts, and the other boys disposed themselves to listen. Their blood was bounding and their eyes shining. The situation was romantic in itself. The firelight played over their eager faces, the waters of the cove lay shimmering before them, while, at the outlet, the surf thundered against the rocks. The boys might have been castaways on some desert island in the tropics. The great world outside seemed very far away.

“My father was in business in Boston about fifteen years ago,” Ross began. “I was just a baby then, and, of course, I don’t know anything about those days except what I’ve been told since by my mother.

“Father was a good business man and he had built up a fairly large trade. We had a home in a suburb near Boston and all the money we needed. The business had been expanding, and father had put into it not only all his own ready money, but a lot that he had borrowed from his friends. Then hard times came. Of course he had to retrench in every way he could. He took in his sails and worked

hard to weather the storm. He'd have succeeded, too, but just as things were looking brighter, a big bank failure knocked him out completely."

There was a murmur of sympathy from the boys.

"As if that wasn't enough, he came down with brain fever," went on Ross. "I suppose it was brought on by worry and overwork. Anyway, when he got on his feet again, everything had gone to smash and he didn't have a cent left. Worse than that, he was in debt for a good many thousand dollars.

"Father was honest though," and there was a touch of pride in the boy's voice. "Everybody that knew him at all knew that. If his health had been good, he could have started in all over again, and even some of the men to whom he owed money would have lent him more to get him on his feet. But the doctor told him it would be simply suicide for him to go on under the circumstances, and that he'd have to go away somewhere and take a long rest.

"All of his property had gone to his creditors, but mother owned a small place up in Canada on the Gulf of St. Lawrence. She had inherited it from her father, and as it was free and clear, the whole family packed up and went out there.

"It was a complete change from the life we had lived before and my father's health began to mend right away. There was a good deal of valuable lumber on the place and as there was a good demand for this, he sold it at a profit. Then, too, he traded a good deal with the trappers who came out of the forests every spring with their skins and furs.

"Money began to pile up and father was feeling fine. It wasn't so much because *he* was getting the money, though of course that was a great thing, but he was fairly crazy to pay off every cent of the money he owed when he went into bankruptcy. He was a very proud man and couldn't bear to be in any one's debt. I've often heard him say to mother that the day he stood clear with the world again would be the happiest day of his life.

"He had kept a careful record of every cent he owed in a little memorandum book. Here it is now."

Ross reached into his pocket and drew out a small morocco-covered book that gleamed red in the light of the fire.

CHAPTER V

THE CHEST OF GOLD

Ross Montgomery turned over the pages rapidly, and the boys could see a number of accounts in a precise, methodical script.

“The first two or three years were the hardest,” the strange boy went on, “but after that the money came in fast. Father made a number of investments in lumber and in fishing interests, and everything he touched seemed to bring him luck. By the time I was six years old, he had got enough together to pay all his debts and make him independent for life.

“There was one funny thing about it, though. He had burned his fingers so badly in that big bank failure that he never would trust a bank again. Every dollar he got above what he needed to use in business, he stored away in an oak chest that he kept in a secret place at home. He had no use for paper money either. He’d take it, of course, when he couldn’t get anything else, but the first chance he got he’d change it for gold. Of course it was just a whim of his, but somehow it made him feel safer. Maybe it was a little mental twist left from his siege of brain fever. At any rate that’s the way he felt, and he kept piling up the gold in that old chest. All sorts of money, too, English, Canadian, French and American coins. I was small then and didn’t know much of the value of money, but I can remember once how the pieces shone when father gathered up a handful and let the coins fall in a shower back into the chest—”

“Gee!” interrupted Teddy, “just think of it. A rain of gold!”

“I’d like to be caught out in such a shower,” laughed Fred.

“And I wouldn’t want any umbrella to ward it off either,” added Bill.

“Cork up, you money grabbers, and let Ross go on with his story,” Lester laughingly advised.

“It brought bad luck to father, though,” said Ross soberly. “If it hadn’t been for that gold he might be alive to-day.”

It was the first intimation the boys had had that the lad’s father was dead, and they kept a respectful silence during the moment that followed while Ross seemed struggling with painful memories.

“A little over nine years ago,” the boy went on at last, “father concluded that he had enough on hand to settle with all his creditors, capital and interest, and still have enough left to make him independent for life. He planned to leave mother and me—I haven’t any brothers or sisters—at home, while he came down to Boston and settled the claims. Then he was going to pick out a home here and send for us to come to him. Although he had made the money in Canada, he had always felt homesick for his own country.

“Then the question came up,” continued Ross, “of how he was to get the money down here. Of course, the safer way would have been to take it to some Canadian bank and get a draft on Boston. But I’ve told you of the bitter feeling he had toward all banks, and he’d counted so long on turning over that identical gold to his creditors that he couldn’t give it up.

“We were a long distance from any large city, and the only way to travel by sea was to take some sailing vessel that stopped once in a while at a town near by. There was a good deal of smuggling going on just then between Canada and this country, and as there was a big profit in it, almost all the coastwise sailing vessels took a hand in it now and then. Sometimes it would be opium that had been landed on the Pacific coast and brought over to Quebec. Then, too, there were French laces and silks and wines.

“Of course it was illegal, but lots of people couldn’t see much harm in it. You know how it is with people that come over from Europe to New York. A vast number of them try to get things

in without paying duty and they think it's rather smart to get the best of Uncle Sam. Many who are honorable in every other way seem to lose that feeling when it comes to smuggling.

"Of course it's wrong, as everything is wrong that breaks the law, whether we think the law is just or not. But I'm just saying this to explain why father was willing to trust himself and his gold on board a smuggler."

The boys bent forward eagerly.

"For that's what he did," continued Ross. "There was a schooner, named the *Ranger*, that often stopped at the river town near where we lived. The captain was a man, Ramsay by name, whom father knew and trusted. His boat did a good deal of legitimate trading, but sandwiched in with that was quite a lot of smuggling off and on. Still, aside from that, Captain Ramsay had the reputation of being a strictly honest man, and he and father had been on friendly terms for years.

"When the time came, father went on board with all his baggage, including the chest of gold. Of course he did not take any one in the secret of what the chest contained. He figured on getting to Boston in a week or ten days.

"But the second day out, a tackle block fell from the foremast and laid Captain Ramsay dead on the deck. He was buried at sea and the first mate took command of the schooner. And it was right here that the trouble began.

"This first mate was a Portuguese, a good sailor, but aside from that I guess he was as big a villain as ever went unhung. There were five others in the crew, and they didn't seem to be much better than the mate. Captain Ramsay had been a rough captain and had been able to hold the men down, but as soon as he had gone things began to happen."

There was a pause for a moment while the boys held their breath waiting for the story to go on.

"And," resumed Ross, impressively, "I'd give my right hand to know just what those things were."

His hearers sat for a moment stunned and bewildered by this sudden ending.

"What!" gasped Teddy. "Do you mean that you don't know what happened?"

"No," was the reply. "I don't *know*. From what I've been able to learn I can make a pretty good guess. All I *know* is that my father was picked up a week later in an open boat, wounded and starving and delirious."

A gasp of wonder and pity ran around the little circle.

"From a letter found in his pocket they learned who he was, and after he had partially recovered they sent him home to us," Ross went on. "But from then to the day of his death, which took place a year later, he was insane."

"The scoundrels!" muttered Fred, clenching his fists in indignation.

"We tried to get at the facts by piecing together what he said when he was quieter than usual," Ross continued. "Again and again, he would speak of 'the lighthouse' and 'Bartanet Shoals.' Then he would imagine himself in a fight with the mate. Many times he spoke of 'burying the box.'"

"All these of course were slight things to go on, but by putting them all together and looking at them from every side, we figured out something like this:

"The mate probably had his suspicions aroused by the weight of the box that held the gold. Father must have come upon him when he was trying to open it, and there was a fight in which the rest of the crew joined. They were probably somewhere near Bartanet Shoals when this happened, and they put in at some quiet place along here to think over what they'd better do. They finally decided to bury the box and leave it there until the matter should have blown over and been forgotten. The men probably intended to put father out of the way, and, after the search for him had been given up, to come back and get the box. Father either tried to escape in the open boat, or the crew, not quite willing to kill him in cold blood, set him adrift, knowing that in his wounded condition it would probably amount to the same thing."

"Didn't the *Ranger* ever turn up?" asked Fred.

“Not at any of the home towns,” answered Ross. “But some months later it was found tied up to a wharf near Halifax. It was from the log they found on board that they learned of Captain Ramsay’s death. The crew were traced, and it was found that they had shipped on a brig that was bound for the Pacific. She went down in a storm off Cape Horn, and every soul on board was lost.”

“Then everybody who was actually concerned in the matter is probably dead,” mused Lester.

“Yes,” answered Ross, “we can’t look for any help from human witnesses. There’s a bare chance that some letter or document may turn up that will give us a clue. But that’s so unlikely that it’s hardly worth considering.”

“Then all you have to go on is the possibility that the box was buried somewhere on this coast not very far from Bartanet Shoals, and that if it was, it’s never been taken away?” asked Bill.

“That’s all,” admitted Ross, “except—”

He checked himself hastily.

CHAPTER VI

AARON RUSHTON, CREDITOR

If the other boys noticed the involuntary movement, they made no comment, and Ross went on:

“You fellows may think I’m foolish to go on hunting for the gold when I’ve got so little evidence to go on. It seems almost like hunting for a needle in a haystack. But there’s such a lot at stake that I can’t give it up.”

“I don’t think you’re foolish,” maintained Teddy stoutly. “It’s just what I’d do, if I were in your place.”

“So would I,” agreed Fred. “Of course you may never find it. But if you didn’t try for it, you’d feel restless and uneasy all the rest of your life.”

“It’s better to have tried and failed, than never to have tried at all,” declared Bill.

“You’re young enough yet to spare a year or two more at it anyway,” said Lester. “If nothing comes of it, you can settle down at something else.”

“Yes,” replied Ross, “it isn’t a matter of life and death anyway. Mother is still keeping the old place up in Canada and looking after the property that father left there. The income is small, but it is enough to keep us going, and if I finally have to give up looking for the gold, I can go back there and do pretty well. But it would take me a long time to get enough together to pay father’s debts, and perhaps I could never do it. That’s the real reason why I’m so anxious to find the chest. It isn’t so much for what it would give me, though of course I’d be glad to have it. But I know how father felt, and I feel that I owe it to his memory to carry out his wishes, if I possibly can.”

“Do the debts mount up to a very large amount?” Bill ventured to ask.

“Larger than I care to think of,” answered Ross. “I should say that it would take about twenty thousand dollars if they were settled now. And, of course, there’s the interest creeping up with every day that passes.”

“I guess the creditors would be so glad to get back the principal, that they wouldn’t worry much about the interest,” remarked Lester.

“I suppose they would,” answered Ross. “But they ought to get both, and I shall never feel that I’m clear with the world until they do.”

It was clear that the son had inherited to the full his father’s independence of spirit, and the boys’ liking for him deepened.

“Most of the debts are for small amounts,” Ross continued, again taking the little red memorandum book from his pocket, “that is, comparatively small. There’s one big one that is more than all the rest put together. The others are for a few hundred dollars each, though one or two of them run into the thousands.”

He turned over the pages.

“Father was very methodical and precise,” he went on, showing the pages. “You see, he has all the names arranged in alphabetical order. There’s Allen, three hundred and twenty-seven dollars; Carey, one hundred and ninety-two; Linson, eighty-five; Masters, six hundred and eighteen. And here we come to the big one, Rushton, twelve thousand four hundred and—”

“What was that?” broke in Teddy excitedly. “Why that’s my name and Fred’s.”

“Is that so?” asked Ross in surprise, for so far he had heard the boys speak to each other only by their first names, and there had been no formal introduction. “It isn’t such a common name, either. Perhaps it’s your father. What’s his first name?”

“Mansfield,” came simultaneously from both of the boys.

“Oh, then he isn’t the one,” said Ross, consulting his book. “This is—let me see,” as his finger sought the place, “Aaron—Aaron Rushton.”

“We have an Uncle Aaron, my father’s brother,” stated Fred.

“Can it possibly be Uncle Aaron?” asked Teddy, his pulses quickened by the possibility.

“I shouldn’t be a bit surprised,” rejoined Ross. “There can’t be so many Aaron Rushtons in this part of the country. This man lived, at that time in Medford, not far from Boston.”

“That’s just where Uncle Aaron used to live!” broke in Fred. “He has some property there yet, although lately he spends a good deal of the time with us in Oldtown.”

“Would you know his handwriting, if you saw it?” asked Ross, feeling in his pocket.

“Sure we would!” answered Fred. “We’ve seen it a hundred times.”

“Take a look at that then,” said Ross, taking a wrinkled sheet of paper from a collection wrapped in oiled silk and held together by a rubber band, “and see if it’s your uncle’s writing.”

Fred unfolded the paper with hands that trembled with excitement, while Teddy looked over his shoulder.

It was a brief note, dated fifteen years before, acknowledging the receipt of three hundred and sixty dollars, being the semi-annual interest on notes given by Mr. Montgomery. It had been written from Medford, and it bore the stiff precise signature of Aaron Rushton.

“That’s Uncle Aaron’s writing!” exclaimed Fred. “I can’t be mistaken.”

“It sure is,” echoed Teddy. “I’d know it among a thousand.”

“Well, what do you think of that?” chimed in Bill, as he and Lester crowded around to look.

It gave the boys a queer thrill to think of all that had been pressed into the years between the time that note was written and the present. It seemed like a link between the living and the dead. The man who had received it was in his grave, and the one who had sent it had long since given up all hope of hearing of the matter again. And now chance had brought together the son of one and the nephews of the other on this stormy night on the seacoast, and they sat tracing out the faded lines by the flickering light of the brush fire.

Fred sat back and drew a long breath.

“Do you remember what Dave Parloe said—that it was a small world after all?” he asked Bill. “I know now that he was right.”

“To think that it was you who saved my life this afternoon, and that it was your uncle who helped my father when he was in business trouble!” exclaimed Ross. “I feel that I owe you more than ever now. You see, Mr. Aaron Rushton lent part of the twelve thousand dollars to father when he started into business in Canada.”

“Just think of Uncle Aaron’s doing a thing like that!” exclaimed Teddy.

“You don’t owe me anything,” affirmed Fred, “and as for what you owe Uncle Aaron, he’s stopped worrying over that long ago.”

“But won’t he be surprised when we write and tell him all about this?” demanded Teddy.

“If we could only pitch in and help Ross find the gold, we’d square ourselves with Uncle Aaron for the rest of our lives,” remarked Fred.

“Why, has he anything against you now?” asked Ross, in surprise.

Teddy’s eyes twinkled as he looked at Fred.

“Oh, no,” he explained, “not especially. Down in his heart I think he’s rather fond of us. But he’s a bachelor, and he hasn’t much use for boys. I got in bad with him last year when I sent a baseball against the horse of a coach he was riding in and made the team run away. He jumped just as they got to a bridge and went head first into the river. Do you remember how he looked, Fred, when he came up dripping?”

“Will I ever forget it?” chuckled Fred, as the picture of his uncle, with his hair plastered over his face and the water streaming from his bony frame, came up before him.

“He was furious,” explained Teddy, “and he was worse yet when he found that he’d spoiled his watch and lost some valuable papers. We got those back for him, though, and that made things

better, though I don't think he approves of us yet. But if we could get this money for him, he'd sure give us a clean bill of health."

"Uncle Aaron likes money, all right," added Fred, "though I will say that when he does spend, he does it royally. He certainly fixed us up in style when he bought the tickets for us to go out to Bill's ranch. He's got a hair-trigger temper, but take him all in all, he's a good old chap."

"I think he must be, from what mother has told me," said Ross. "He might have seized what property we've got in payment of the debt, but when he learned that father had died and that mother had just enough to get along on, he did not trouble us. And that's one thing that makes me all the more eager to pay what father owed him."

"I tell you what we fellows ought to do!" exclaimed Fred. "We ought to spend the rest of our vacation here helping Ross look for the gold. There'll be lots of fun and excitement in it anyway, even if we never lay eyes on it."

"And think what it would mean if we did really find it," gloated Teddy. "Think what Uncle Aaron would say, and how proud father and mother would be if we had a hand in it."

"To say nothing of how Ross would feel, if we got back his father's money," added Bill.

"The idea looks good to me," declared Lester. "I have the *Ariel*, and if we can get the motor boat back for Ross, there won't be a spot on the coast within fifty miles that we can't explore. Between us, we may run across some clue, and even if we don't, we'll get lots of fun out of the hunt."

"Like the old darky with his lottery ticket," laughed Bill. "His boss reproved him for spending money on a mere chance. 'Oh, I dunno, boss,' the old fellow answered. 'T'ree dollars ain't much to spend fur a whole year's hopin'.'"

"It's mighty good of you fellows to help me out this way," said Ross gratefully, when the laugh had subsided. "Of course, if you do find it, there'll be a great big reward in it for you. I know that isn't what you are looking for, but you'll get it just the same."

"We'll leave that all to you," answered Lester. "We've got to find it first."

"Like the old English recipe for cooking rabbit that begins: 'First catch the hare,'" chuckled Fred.

The lads sat about the fire for another hour, too excited by all that had happened to think of sleep. Then Lester gave the signal.

"Come, boys," he said, "we'll have plenty of time to talk this over, but now we must get some rest. I want to get an early start in the morning, if the storm has blown over. It's me for the downy couch now and the early bird stunt in the morning."

The "downy couch" resolved itself into beds hollowed out in the sand with the boys' coats rolled up for pillows. But no king in his bed of state ever enjoyed a sounder sleep than that into which the tired boys fell at once, while the fire died down and the surf beat on the rocks outside.

CHAPTER VII

THE DRIFTING MOTOR BOAT

The sun had not yet risen the next morning, although the eastern sky was bright with signs of coming dawn, when Lester passed among his sleeping comrades with a shake on the shoulder for each.

"Come along, you sleepy heads," he cried, as they sat up and rubbed their eyes. "We must hustle now and get off. Lively's the word."

"You old tyrant," yawned Teddy. "I feel as though I'd just got to sleep."

"What's that I smell?" demanded Fred, as a savory whiff came to his nostrils. "Is it coffee, or does my nose deceive me?"

"Nary a deceive," grinned Lester. "I just remembered that we had some coffee in the locker, and I swam out and got it. And that isn't all. Just take a sniff of this," and he motioned to an old can that he had rummaged from the hut, and that hung by two forked sticks over the fire, giving off a most appetizing odor.

"Clams," pronounced Fred, as he bent over it. "Lester, you're a wonder. Where did you get them?"

"Found a bed of them up the cove a bit," answered Lester. "Oh, I'm some little hustler, if any one should ask you."

The boys needed no further urging, and after plunging their faces into the waters of the cove, they ranged themselves round the fire and sampled Lester's cooking. The clams were delicious as a beginning, and, topped off with the bacon and the rest of the bluefish, together with the fragrant coffee, furnished a meal that would have made a dyspeptic green with envy.

"Now, fellows," said Lester, when the last crumb and last drop had vanished, "the storm has gone down, although the water's still pretty rough. But we can start all right. I'll swim out to the *Ariel*, get up the anchor, and bring her in far enough so you can wade out to her and get aboard. Then we'll make a break for open water and take a look around for Ross' motor boat."

"I'm none too sure we'll find her," said Ross, dubiously. "She may have been swamped or dashed against the rocks."

"Oh, I don't know," remarked Fred. "It's a wonder what a boat will go through sometimes, and then she was so far out that I don't think she got near the rocks."

"Even if we don't find her, it won't be any proof that she went under," added Teddy. "Some other boat may have caught sight of her and taken her in tow."

"Not in such a blow as we had last night, I'm afraid," answered Ross. "Still, I'm not going to begin to grizzle now. There'll be plenty of time to do that if we don't find her."

In a few minutes they were all on board, and the *Ariel* made for the narrow passage between the sentinel rocks at the mouth of the cove.

"A little different from what it was when we came scooting in last night," remarked Teddy, as the sturdy little boat danced out on the waves that sparkled in the sunshine.

"Well, rather!" answered Lester, as he swung the *Ariel* round to her course. "I don't mind telling you fellows now that I felt mighty shaky yesterday afternoon. I've been out in many a stiff blow, but I've usually had warning and been able to make a dash for home. It takes pretty careful work to get a boat into that cove between those two big rocks even in ordinary weather; but it's a case of nip and tuck when one has to try it in a storm. My heart was in my mouth for a few minutes until we got safely through."

"You didn't show it," said Fred. "You went at it as coolly as any old salt who has done nothing else all his life but buck the seas."

“Well, anyway, we got through all right, and that’s all that counts,” returned Lester. “But after this I’m going to keep my eyes peeled for signs of trouble before the trouble comes.”

“It was our fault for talking too much,” remarked Teddy. “We were so stirred up by that letter from Mel that we couldn’t think of anything else.”

By this time Lester had the boat well out on the open sea, and every one kept a sharp lookout for any trace of Ross’ boat. In his heart no one of them really expected to see it again, but they all kept up an appearance of confidence, the Rally Hall boys doing so in order not to discourage their new-found friend.

He, on his part, was almost silent. This was due to some extent, no doubt, to the reaction from his severe ordeal of the day before, but it may have been caused somewhat by the feeling that he had gone too far in taking them fully into his confidence. His secret was no longer his, and while he was strongly drawn toward these wholesome young fellows who were of his own age, he could not help feeling a little uneasy. He felt sure that they would act toward him in perfect good faith, but some careless or indiscreet word dropped by any one of them might betray the secret to others who would not be as scrupulous.

“I wish we had brought a pair of glasses along,” remarked Lester. “There’s an extra pair at the lighthouse, and we might have had it as well as not.”

“Never mind,” said Teddy, “we’ve got Bill’s eyes to fall back on, and if they can see as far out over the water as they used to over the prairie, they’ll be almost as good as glasses.”

Over an hour elapsed without any trace of the derelict, and Lester began to feel uneasy in regard to his long absence from home.

“I hate to cut this short,” he said reluctantly, “but I know just how father is feeling after yesterday’s storm, and I feel it’s up to me to let him know we’re safe. As soon as we’ve done that, we can put right out again and spend the whole day looking for the boat.”

“You’re just right,” answered Ross heartily. “You fellows have done enough for me already and you ought to make a bee-line for home. The chances are all against our finding the motor boat anyway. It may have sunk long ago.”

Just as Lester was about to act on the suggestion, there was a cry from Bill:

“There’s something over there that may be what we’re after. I’ve been watching it for some minutes. It’s a boat of some kind, and it hasn’t any sails. It doesn’t seem to be going anywhere, but is just tossing up and down.”

The rest strained their eyes, but at first could see only a tiny dot. Lester steered straight toward the object and as a stiff breeze filled the sail he made rapid progress.

“That’s it!” shouted Ross jubilantly, as they came closer; “I’ve handled it too long to be mistaken.”

“Hurrah!” cried Teddy.

“Great!” exclaimed Fred. “It wasn’t a forlorn hope after all.”

“We’re some little searchers, all right,” exulted Bill.

They were soon within a hundred feet of the motor boat. It was a trim, smart-looking little craft, and the boys admired the long sloping lines that denoted speed. There was no sign of any damage to the boat, but the loggy way in which it moved showed that it had shipped a lot of water.

With a skilful twist of the tiller, Lester rounded to on the port side. Fred reached out and held the two boats together with the hook, while the others let the fenders over the side to keep the boats from scraping.

“Right as a trivet,” said Lester. “Here’s your boat, Ross, old man, and as far as I can see it’s just as good as ever.”

“I’ll never forget you fellows as long as I live!” exclaimed Ross gratefully, as he leaped to the deck of his own craft.

CHAPTER VIII

A SLENDER CHANCE

Ross was quickly followed by Bill and Teddy. Lester and Fred waited only until they had fastened the two boats securely together, then they followed the example of their mates.

"She isn't full of water or anything like that, is she?" remarked Teddy, as he saw the water sloshing from one side to the other as the boat rocked on the waves.

"Two feet at least," judged Bill.

"Not more than eighteen inches," was the verdict of Lester, who was accustomed to measure depths where water was concerned. "But that's enough and more than enough. She's a pretty good seaworthy boat, or she'd have shipped a good deal more."

"She must have ridden the waves like a cork," said Fred in admiration.

The motor boat was not quite as large as the *Ariel*, being perhaps two feet shorter, and also narrower in the beam. In the stern there was a gasoline engine of the newest type, bearing the name of a celebrated maker. Amidships, there was a tiny cabin that one had to stoop to enter. On one side of this were small lockers, one designed to hold tools and spare parts of the engine, the other serving as a pantry. On the other side was a low, broad seat extending the whole length of the cabin, and on this was a cushion which at night served as a mattress for the owner of the boat.

Everything about the little craft was trim and plain, the only ornament in sight being some brass work that surrounded the binnacle. It was clear that it had been built with an eye to usefulness rather than beauty.

"The first thing now, fellows," said Lester, after a quick glance around had satisfied his curiosity, "is to get the water over into the sea where it belongs. We'd better get off our shoes and socks and roll our trousers up high."

In a twinkling, the boys were ready for wading.

"I have a bailer here," said Ross, producing it from the locker.

"That's all right but it isn't enough," said Fred. "I'll get Lester's, and you fellows can rustle up something else that will do the trick."

The boys were rather restricted in their choice, but the articles they finally got together for the purpose served well enough. As Teddy put it, the collection was "neat but not gaudy." He had the frying pan, Bill handled the coffee pot, Lester used a huge sponge, while Fred and Ross did effective work with the bailers.

Before the onslaught of five sturdy pairs of arms, the water went down quickly and was soon so low that only the sponge could be used. Five minutes more, and the last drop had been squeezed over the side.

"There," said Lester, as he flung the sponge back into the *Ariel*. "She's empty now and the hot sun will soon dry out the planks. But I wouldn't advise you to sleep on those cushions to-night, unless you want to get rheumatism or pneumonia."

"I'm not going to," answered Ross. "As soon as I get the engine going, I'll beat it to Oakland, and I'll sleep between sheets to-night in a regular bed."

"It won't be a bad place, either, after last night on the sand," replied Teddy.

"Are you staying at Oakland right along, when you're not cruising around?" asked Lester.

"Yes, I've been there for the last two months. I have relatives there."

"If there's nothing special to call you there now, I'd be glad to have you come along with us to Bartanet Shoals," said Lester hospitably.

"That would be great!" exclaimed Fred. "Then we could talk more about the missing money. There'll be a hundred things come up that we'll want to ask you about."

“It’s very kind of you,” responded Ross warmly, “and I’d like nothing better. But just now I’m looking for my mother to come down from her home in Canada. She may be here any time now, and I want to be on hand when she comes. She’s going to stay for several weeks. But the very first chance I get, I’ll come over to the Shoals.”

“All right,” said Lester. “The latch string hangs outside the door, and we’ll be glad to see you.”

“How’s the engine?” asked Bill.

“Right as can be, as far as I can see,” was the answer. “I’ll have to dry it and polish it. There wasn’t anything serious the matter with it yesterday—just a little trouble with the ignition—and I was just getting it into shape, when that big wave came aboard and took me over.”

“We’ll stand by anyway for a few minutes to make sure,” said Lester, as he rose to return to the *Ariel*.

“Don’t wait another minute,” urged Ross earnestly. “You fellows have done enough for me already, and I know you’re just aching to get home to relieve your father’s mind.”

“We’ll cast off anyway,” was the reply. “It’ll take a little time to run up the sheet and get ready to sail, and by that time you’ll know better how things are.”

“What do you call your boat, Ross?” asked Teddy, as the rest of the boys rose to follow Lester.

“I’ve named her the *Sleuth*,” answered Ross.

“It’s a mighty suitable name, considering what you’re using her for,” laughed Teddy. “Let’s hope she’ll be sleuth enough to get on the trail of the smugglers.”

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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