

ADVENTURE BOUND

Capt. W. E. JOHNS



*** A Distributed Proofreaders Canada eBook ***

This eBook is made available at no cost and with very few restrictions. These restrictions apply only if (1) you make a change in the eBook (other than alteration for different display devices), or (2) you are making commercial use of the eBook. If either of these conditions applies, please contact a <https://www.fadedpage.com> administrator before proceeding. Thousands more FREE eBooks are available at <https://www.fadedpage.com>.

This work is in the Canadian public domain, but may be under copyright in some countries. If you live outside Canada, check your country's copyright laws. IF THE BOOK IS UNDER COPYRIGHT IN YOUR COUNTRY, DO NOT DOWNLOAD OR REDISTRIBUTE THIS FILE.

Title: Adventure Bound

Date of first publication: 1955

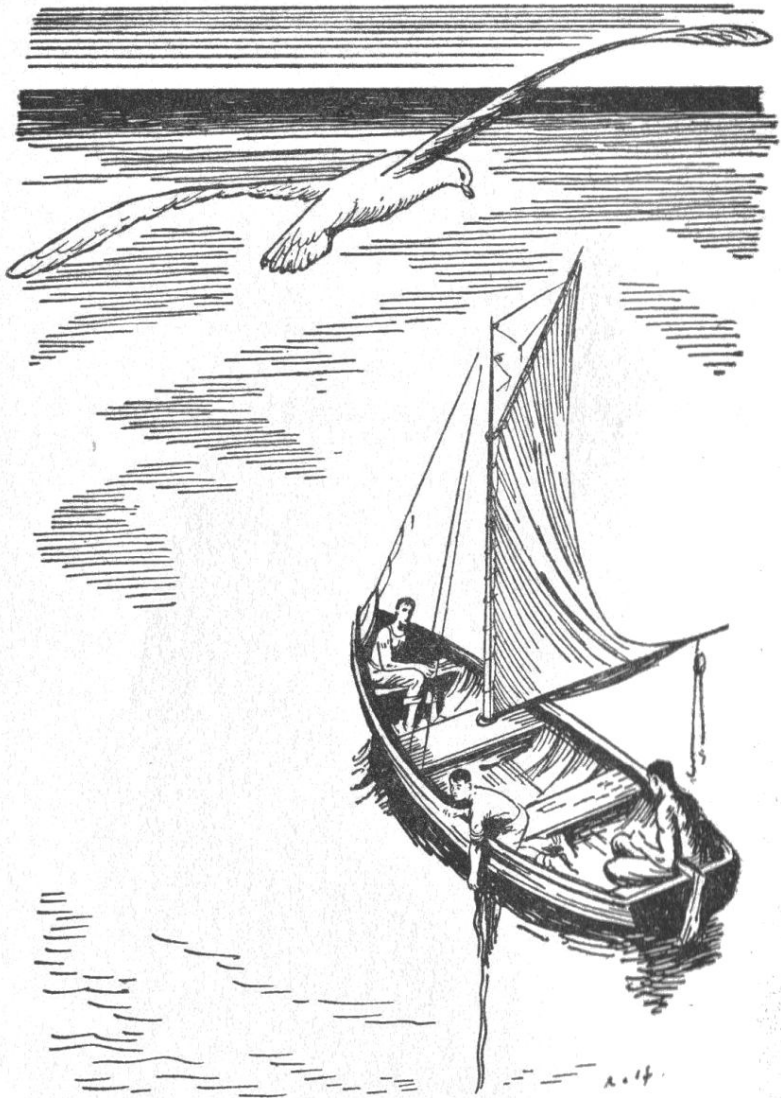
Author: Capt. W. E. (William Earl) Johns (1893-1968)

Date first posted: Aug. 28, 2021

Date last updated: Aug. 28, 2021

Faded Page eBook #20210865

This eBook was produced by: Al Haines, akaitharam, Cindy Beyer & the online Distributed Proofreaders Canada team at <https://www.pgdpCanada.net>



The ship's lifeboat floated motionless

ADVENTURE BOUND

by
CAPTAIN W. E. JOHNS

Illustrated by Douglas Relf

THOMAS NELSON AND SONS LTD
LONDON EDINBURGH PARIS MELBOURNE
TORONTO AND NEW YORK

THOMAS NELSON AND SONS LTD

Parkside Works Edinburgh 9
36 Park Street London W1
312 Flinders Street Melbourne C1
218 Grand Parade Centre Cape Town

THOMAS NELSON AND SONS (CANADA) LTD
91-93 Wellington Street West Toronto 1

THOMAS NELSON AND SONS
19 East 47th Street New York 17

SOCIÉTÉ FRANÇAISE D'ÉDITIONS NELSON
25 rue Henri Barbusse Paris V^e

First published 1955

CONTENTS

[1 Three Men in a Boat](#)

[2 The ‘Pampero’](#)

[3 On the March](#)

[4 Too Much Adventure](#)

[5 Down the River](#)

[6 ‘Where it is, there it is!’](#)

[7 Two Sorts of Luck](#)

[8 Touch and Go](#)

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

The ship's lifeboat floated motionless

The *pampero* hit the boat

Digger said they were British

A soldier sprang up in front

. . . bullets were soon flicking feathers on the water

The woman was there crying in a shrill voice

They passed the place where Tommy was sitting

They were on their way up the river

'It's here'

The four Germans were messing about

In a few minutes they were alongside

ADVENTURE BOUND

CHAPTER 1

THREE MEN IN A BOAT

THE ship's lifeboat floated motionless on a sea that shimmered with all the hues of mother-of-pearl under a dome of palest turquoise. Around it and above, as far as the eye could probe the misty dawn, only one thing moved: a snow-white albatross that swung low on rigid wings, the undersides reflecting faintly the colours of the water as the great bird skimmed with effortless ease the placid surface of the ocean.

There were three men in the boat—or, to be strictly correct—two men and a boy. None was properly dressed. All were heavy-eyed, with a powdering of salt encrusting hair and eye-brows. It would have been difficult to find a more ill-assorted trio.

One, the oldest, sat in the stern, an arm resting on the tiller, as, chin in hand, he gazed steadily into the pitiless distances. Judged by features alone he was an ugly man, but, as sometimes happens, this was more than counterbalanced by an expression of amiability and content. He was about forty years of age, broad and heavily built. He was naked to the waist, and when he moved the muscles of his massive torso rippled under a skin that was heavily tattooed in a wonderful variety of designs—dragons, anchors, palm-trees, lovers-knots and names. The word 'mother' was entwined in a laurel wreath, and 'Pompey,' on a life-belt, occupied the centre of his chest.

The second member of the party, in order of seniority, sat in the bows. He was a lean, long-limbed, sun-tanned fellow of early middle age. His eyes, now brooding over the waste of water, were so brightly blue as to be particularly noticeable. His hair was flaxen. Clean-shaven, what little flesh he carried on his face was moulded to prominent bones, and this, with a firm-lipped mouth, gave him, except when he smiled, a somewhat hard appearance. He was scantily dressed in a vest, and a pair of grey flannel trousers held up by a many-pocketed belt.

The third occupant of the boat was a boy who, half reclining on his seat and fidgeting constantly, dangled his fingers in the water as if to admire the limpid drops that fell from them. He looked about fifteen, but would not have passed as a first-class specimen of that age. He was thin; his face was pale and inclined to be pinched; but his eyes were clear and his expression

alert. He wore a khaki shirt and shorts, much stained, and a pair of gym shoes that had seen better days.

The lean man, who from time to time had glanced at him with slight disapproval, broke the silence. 'You'll lose your hand in a minute, kid, if you go on playing that game. I can see two shadows—and there's only one bird.'

The boy withdrew his hand with alacrity. 'What's the other shadow?' 'Shark.'

The boy stood up to look.

'Sit down before you fall in,' ordered the lean man curtly.

'All right,' said the boy in a hurt voice. 'Don't be grumpy. I've never seen a shark. This is my first adventure.'

'Make the most of it,' invited the lean man grimly. 'If we don't soon get a breeze it's likely to be your last.'

The tattooed man shifted the piece of tobacco that he was chewing from one side of his mouth to the other and spat reflectively into the sea. 'Don't worry, son,' he said cheerfully, speaking with a curious accent. 'If your time's come it's come, and there ain't nothin' you can do about it. If it ain't come, it ain't. I've been in worse spots than this. It could have been wusser. We've got a boat. We might have been swimmin'.' He threw a meaning glance at a triangular fin that was keeping the boat company.

'What did we hit—a mine?' queried the boy.

'Guess so. A ship don't blow her guts out for no reason, not even an old sea-cow like the *Midas*.'

'Was there time to send out an S O S do you think? If so, planes might be out looking for us.'

'Not a hope, son. She went down too fast. Never had a ship sink under me faster. If the forr'd hatch hadn't been open I'd still be in her.'

'This boat is the one that stuck when they tried to lower her. That's when the oars dropped out. Afterwards she fell in, or *I* wouldn't be here.'

'That's what I mean. Our time hadn't come.'

'Whatever happens now I've had an adventure, and a jolly good one,' stated the boy, almost with enthusiasm.

'What's good about it?' growled the lean man.

'Everything. I got what I was looking for.'

'Adventure, eh?'

‘Yes.’

‘Is that why you were going to Trinidad?’

‘Is that where we were going?’

‘Didn’t you know?’

‘No. I didn’t ask. It was all the same to me. I hoped we were going to a foreign country, the wilder the better.’

The big man began to laugh loudly, but broke off abruptly. ‘How come you on board if you didn’t know what port we was bound for?’

‘I was a stowaway.’

‘In that case I ought to throw you overboard.’

‘Not while the shark’s there.’ The boy looked startled.

‘Seeing as how we may need you to help bale if we ship a sea I’ll let you stay aboard,’ decided the big man confidentially.

The lean man stepped into the conversation. ‘Suppose we quit fooling and get down to hard facts. With strict rationing we’ve food and water for a week. If we don’t get a breeze in that time we shall still be where we are now.’

‘Couldn’t we be drifting somewhere,’ suggested the boy hopefully.

‘We could, but we’d have to drift a long way before we got anywhere.’ The lean man looked at the big man. ‘What’s your idea of our position?’

‘I figure we’re close on four hundred miles from the nearest land, which’d be the top end of South America. The *Midas* was thirteen days out. Reckoning we made a hundred miles before that south-west wind died on us makes us about where I said. Don’t worry. We’ll get a breeze. We’re in the trades and they come from the east. Failing that we oughta pick up that fast current that runs north up the coast of South America. And now, seeing as how we’re likely to be shipmates for a bit, what about getting to know each other. What’s your name, son?’

‘Tommy. Tommy Tucker. It’s Jack, really, but I’ve always been called Tommy after the Tommy Tucker who sang for his supper.’

‘We’ll all be a’singing for some supper presently.’ The big man chuckled at his own joke. ‘Go on, Tommy; tell us about yourself.’

‘I’m sixteen and I come from Wapping,’ continued Tommy. ‘Dad and Mum were killed by a bomb in the war. When I left school I tried for the Air Force to see the world, but they said my physical standard wasn’t up to it, so I got a job delivering vegetables for a greengrocer. There didn’t seem to be

much hope of finding any adventures in cabbages and cucumbers so I stowed away on the *Midas*.'

'What made you choose the *Midas*?'

'She looked such a dirty old tramp that I felt sure she went to funny places.'

The big man guffawed. 'She's sure gone to a funny place this time.'

'When I got hungry I gave myself up. The mate gave me a clout and put me into the galley to wash dishes. That's what I was doing when we blew up. I've still got a shilling and my scout's knife.'

'A bob, a knife and a bit o' string, and you're okay anywhere,' asserted the big man.

'That's all, except I hope I don't die till I've found a treasure or a gold mine.'

'Tough guy, eh?'

'What about you?' questioned Tommy. 'What's your name?'

'It's writ on me chest. I had it writ big so when my turn came to be washed up they'd know it was me.'

'But is Pompey your real name?'

'If I ever had another I've forgot it. Nobody'd know me by it so it wouldn't be no use, would it? From Frisco to Tokyo, Boston to Bombay, I'm Pompey the stoker, the man who keeps the screws a'turning. Shovelled me way round the world, as you might say. If I had a shilling for every ton of coal I've shifted I'd be a millionaire.'

'Are you British?'

'Well, I wouldn't say that exactly, although that's what's in me Blue Book, and if it suits the owners it suits me. According to my ma I gave my first bleat on a Chilean cargo boat. My father was engineer. Scotch, as my ma told me. She was Spanish. Her father ran a hotel in Valparaiso. They got married, and she sailed with him till a hurricane threw us on the beach near Santa Cruz. That was the last she saw of him. He must have gone down with the ship. She carried me, a kid, to Frisco. Later on she married the skipper of a whaler, and sailed with him. I haven't seen her since.'

'You didn't go with them?'

'Not me. I hated him as much as he hated me. Sail with a guy who'd cuff a kid every chance he had? Not likely. After that I drifted around on all sorts of ships, mostly flying the Red Duster,^[1] till one day, after being torpedoed and picked up by a destroyer, I found myself in Pompey. Next time I sailed

and they asked me last port I said Pompey. But one of us must have made a mistake because when I got me Blue Book I found they'd put Pompey in the place where my name should have been. I've been Pompey ever since.'

[\[1\]](#) The Red Ensign of the merchant service

'Where on earth is Pompey?'

The big man looked shocked. 'You never heard of Pompey? But then, at school I suppose they'd call it Portsmouth.'

'You must have had some wonderful adventures!'

'Oh, I just take life as it comes—if that's what you call adventures.' Pompey looked at the man in the bows. 'What about you, mister? I reckon you paid your passage.'

'I did.'

'And what would you be doing on an old tub like the *Midas*?'

'It happened to be the cheapest way of getting to where I wanted to go.'

'Tell us the rest,' requested Pompey.

'What does it matter?'

'Come on now, play the game,' demanded Tommy.

The lean man smiled. 'I suppose we might as well talk about something. Name, Driscoll—Jim Driscoll; better known on my job as Digger because I'm Australian. Age thirty-five. Went to any school that happened to be handy. My father was a mining engineer, always on the move. Mother died when I was a kid so he dragged me around until he was killed in an accident, when I pushed out on my own to look for my bread, and, with luck, a little butter.'

'Did you have adventures?'

'If an adventure is something that happens to knock you flat just when you think you're on your feet, the answer is yes. A couple of days ago I was bouncing on air. Now, with the reward of eighteen months sweated labour at the bottom of the Atlantic, I'm back where I started. That's how it goes.'

'Did you ever find any gold?'

'None to speak of, although I've done a lot of looking. You soon learn there's no future in that—unless you happen to be the one in ten thousand who strikes lucky. If the gold bug is biting you, my advice is, forget it. It's a

gamble in which the hunter stakes everything—his comfort, his health and his life—on a million to one chance. Most of those who try it eventually come down to the things that aren't so hard to find. There's a market for almost everything these days.'

'What sort of things?'

Digger shook his head. 'I see I've started something. Civilisation clamours for more and more raw materials—metals, chemicals, timber, dyes, medicinal plants, aromatic gums for perfumes, skins, flowers and even bugs and beetles. Of course, the modern prospector has to know about these things—be able to recognise what he sees. My last job was to collect orchids for a millionaire in England. He paid me well. Where's the money? Gone to Davy Jones.'

'That was tough.'

'It's nothing new. I once spent a year walking about on the bottom of the Timor Sea looking for pearls. Had the luck to find an untouched oyster bed and got a hatful. On my way to port a willy-willy blew my schooner on a reef and I lost pearls, ship and everything else. You might call that an adventure, but if it ever happens to you, my lad, you'll find another name for it.'

'Did you ever find any diamonds?'

'No, but I once struck a vein of peridotite. That's a kind of rock in which diamonds are sometimes born. Those you find in gravel have had the rock worn away. The crystals are harder than the rock. I was just going to start work when along came a police patrol and arrested me for poaching diamonds in territory that had been closed for prospecting by Government orders. I didn't know. So instead of diamonds I got a month in gaol.'

'That was rotten luck.'

'You learn to take the rough with the smooth.'

'What was your best find?'

Digger thought for a moment. 'About a bushel of ginseng.'

'What's that?'

'The root of a plant. You spot it by a ferny leaf and a little red flower. In China it's worth its weight in gold. The Chinese believe it'll cure any disease and ensure long life. I was humping the stuff to the coast when I went down with malaria. While I was sick wild hogs ate the lot. That isn't adventure. It's heartbreak. Still, you go on. The motto of the prospector is, "where it is, there it is."'

‘Did you lose every time?’

‘No. If I had I wouldn’t be here. I’ve made money out of ipecacuanha, sarsaparilla, vanilla, babbasa, guarana, uricuri and ivory nuts.’ Digger laughed at the expression on Tommy’s face. ‘Those are the things the modern explorer looks for,’ he added.

‘But what the dickens are they?’

Digger sighed. ‘Ipecacuanha—the medicine your mother may have given you when you were a toddler—is the root of a Brazilian violet. You get sarsaparilla from the flower you call smilax. Vanilla, the flavouring they put in ice-cream, is the seed pod of an orchid. The other things yield wax which is in big demand in Europe. They use ivory nuts to make buttons. I once took a concession on an area of grass in Burma and sold it for a thousand pounds. It was a pampas grass that makes fine paper. I happened to know that. On my last trip I got some good samples of cinnabar, bauxite and balata gum.’

‘What on earth are they?’

‘Cinnabar is mercury ore. Bauxite is the chief source of aluminium. Balata is a sort of hard rubber used in engineering for coating canvas driving belts. If the samples turn out as good as I hope I shall buy a concession from the Government concerned and sell it to a company that exploits these things. Now stop asking questions.’

‘You know,’ said Tommy earnestly, ‘if they’d teach us these things at school, instead of algebra, for instance, there’d be some sense in it. Chaps would know what to look for while they were waiting for adventures to turn up.’

‘You’re telling me,’ put in Pompey. ‘Coming round the Horn one time we fished out of the sea a great lump of fat. At least, that’s what the skipper thought it was. He made us grease the mast with it. Do you know what it was? Ambergris, worth about five quid an ounce. And we slung it about like it was soft soap. The Old Man drank himself to death when someone told him what he’d done. That’s what comes of not knowing the ropes.’

‘What’s ambergris?’ asked Tommy.

‘I was waiting for you to say that. They say it’s a disease on a whale’s lungs. The whale coughs it up and they put it in scent, so I’m told. And if you’re going to say what’s this and what’s that every time anyone speaks I may have to change my mind and put you overboard after all.’

There was silence for a few minutes. Then Pompey let out a yell and pointed to a ripple that was spreading across the surface of the sea. ‘Here

comes the wind,' he shouted.

CHAPTER 2

THE 'PAMPERO'

FOR two days the boat ran before those winds which, for their steadiness and reliability, are perhaps the most famous in nautical history; the 'Trades' that wafted Columbus, and thousands of ships after him, to the New World.

For the first twelve hours the wind was light; the sea sparkled, and there was nothing more suspicious about the sky than a prospect of rain. Tommy, who was content with this state of affairs, asked more questions, and learned more about his companions. He also learned to like them.

'There are some things you'll never get to know in a classroom, laddie, and my job is one of them,' Digger told him. 'You have to go places. And what good has it done me, anyway? Fifteen years of slogging through country most people have the sense to avoid and all I possess is my jungle pack.'

'Where is it?' asked Tommy, looking surprised.

'It's this belt I'm wearing—and you wouldn't guess what's in it. I was shipwrecked once on one of those desert islands books rave about. That was the time I lost my schooner. It taught me a lesson. I'd have swapped all the pearls that ever came out of the sea for a box of matches and a fish-hook. I swore that if I was lucky enough to be taken off I'd see that it never happened to me again. From that day to this I've never travelled without my belt. At sea I've slept in it, which is why I still have it. I've never needed it—but I may. Experience can be a hard master—but you don't forget the lessons it teaches you.'

Tommy had assumed, naturally, that all they had to do was to make a landfall, but he was disillusioned by Pompey, who informed him that it was one thing to sight land but another matter to set foot on it. Many a lifeboat, declared the sailor, had been lost with all hands trying to get ashore through heavy surf after surviving a thousand miles of open water. The fact that there were no oars in the boat was not likely to make getting ashore any easier.

On the second day the wind freshened and blew up a short choppy sea, that not only caused Tommy some alarm but gave him his first pangs of seasickness. He no longer asked questions. Praying that they might soon see land he watched Pompey shorten sail. To the south the sky now presented an uncanny appearance, and Pompey looked at it so often that it was evident he

did not like it. However, he said nothing. The foaming crests of the waves that now surrounded them began to break into the boat, and Tommy, scared and miserable, helped to bale.

‘Still enjoying your adventure?’ Digger asked him slyly.

Tommy didn’t answer. It was dawning on him that adventures might, after all, be more enjoyable in an armchair than in reality. Once, when a big sea broke aboard and threw the boat on its beam ends, he thought it was the finish; but by some miracle Pompey managed to keep them right side up although knee-deep in water. He baled furiously.

Towards evening, with surprising suddenness, the wind abated, and the sea fell to a long oily swell. The sky, no longer blue, turned to an ominous sickly yellow, casting an evil light on the heaving ocean. Tommy mustered the courage to ask Pompey how far he thought they were from land.

Pompey said he thought they were close; too close; he would have preferred more sea-room. There was, he opined, a *pampero* on the way.

Tommy didn’t know what a *pampero* was, and, as it was obviously something unpleasant, he refrained from asking to be enlightened. Just how unpleasant a *pampero* could be he was soon to learn. He noticed the albatross had disappeared.

Presently, far away over the port bow, a purple smudge appeared. ‘Here she comes,’ announced Pompey calmly. A moment later Digger sang out that he could see land. Tommy was overjoyed, but Pompey received the information without enthusiasm. He said he daren’t try to turn. ‘When she hits us, mates,’ he advised, apparently referring to the *pampero*, ‘keep your heads down and hang on.’

The purple smudge rose swiftly until it covered half the sky. It was now dim twilight. Digger said he thought he could see a light on the shore. Tommy wished heartily that he was with it.

Ten minutes later the *pampero* hit the boat. It arrived with a roar, tearing the surface off the sea and throwing a great deal of it into the boat, which heeled over under the shock. The sail disappeared in a blur of spray. Tommy, unprepared for an onslaught so violent, gasped and clung to his seat. The boat rolled sickeningly, and his stomach rolled with it.



The *pampero* hit the boat

The wind had begun blowing in tremendous gusts, piling up seas into which the boat plunged, shipping water. Tommy, baling madly as the boat dropped into a trough, was sure it could not recover in time to top the next curling crest. Yet in some amazing way it did. Weary with the strain of holding on and baling, half blinded by the salt in the stinging spray, to Tommy the ordeal became a nightmare.

How long these conditions persisted he did not know. Time had ceased to have meaning. He baled mechanically. Yet with it all there was born in him a strange jubilation. He was battling with nature in her most ferocious mood. There was something inspiring about it. He wanted to shout. Instead, he was horribly sick.

Darkness hid the raging water, darkness utter and complete. There was no moon. Not a star showed in the heavens. The wind moaned. The sea snarled. The boat rocked, helpless, at its mercy.

Some time during the night the wind fell. But not the sea. Still it snarled. Still the boat rose and fell at its whim.

The end was as sudden as it was unexpected, for not a light showed anywhere. The boat seemed to stop abruptly, as if brakes had been applied to check its motion. It rose like a lift, and came down with a crash. A mountain of water poured over it and in an instant Tommy was struggling for his life. Unseen hands seemed to be dragging him down—down—down. Little specks of light began to dance before his eyes and he knew that he was drowning. He had to breathe or die. He opened his mouth. Air poured into his lungs. But the respite was brief. Again he was dragged down. His struggles became feeble and he knew his strength was failing. So this, he thought dimly, was the end of his adventures. He hoped it would soon be over.

Then his movement seemed to change. Instead of being dragged down he was being thrust forward. It was as though he were on an enormous toboggan. It crashed with a roar like thunder, hurling him on to something solid; but before he could clutch it he was being dragged back at terrifying speed. Again he was flung forward. He felt stones in his hands, and he dug his fingers into them to stop the ghastly slide. The whole world seemed to be sliding, and he with it.

Suddenly, to his amazement and relief, he found he could breathe. Sucking in air in great gasps he tried to stand; but he was still on a sliding world, and in spite of his efforts to cling to it he was torn away. His endeavours to regain it became frenzied when from somewhere near there came a mighty roar, as if an avalanche was overtaking him. Something struck him with the speed of an express train and swept him into a world that was torn by lightning and noises beyond imagination; a world that ended in a void into which he fell, leaving behind the uproar.

He seemed to be falling for a long time. The sensation was not unpleasant but he wished it would end. He could see the bottom now, a misty plain where all was silent. He threw out his hands to break his fall. As

he struck it, it exploded in a sheet of scarlet flame that faded quickly to crimson, to purple, and finally, to black.

He returned to the world he knew without being immediately aware of it. He did no more than open his eyes and gaze unseeingly at a dawn sky; a canopy of egg-shell blue feathered with pink; but for a little while it conveyed no message to his brain. Then, slowly at first, but presently with a rush, memory returned, and he sat up, not without difficulty, for he was stiff and sore from the pounding he had received from the giant combers that had flung him on a shelving shingle beach. He removed from his neck a ribbon of slimy kelp, and as he did so he became aware that he was the centre of attraction for an army of crabs, such crabs as he had never seen before, creatures with waving antennae and ridiculous stilt-like legs. Now that he had moved they were retiring, clicking their disappointment. He picked up a stone and threw it to hasten their departure.

This exertion served a useful purpose, for it caused him to evacuate a prodigious amount of sea water. The spasm passed and he felt more normal, able to think reasonably clearly. His first thought was, naturally, wonderment that he was still alive. He realised, of course, what had happened. Next he thought of Pompey and Digger, hoping they had been as lucky. He could see no sign of them. He got unsteadily to his feet and looked around.

To one side was the sea, the waves still spreading lace curtains on a beach that stretched away on either hand in a sweeping crescent. Debris along the high-water mark told him what had happened to the boat. Behind, and not far away, the wall of a forest rose sheer for a hundred feet, dark, mysterious, menacing. Dimly in its twilit depth the liana-festooned boles of giant trees faded into a tangle of foliage. At one spot, in contrast with the sombre background, a spray of scarlet flowers sprang like a flame from a low-hanging branch. It looked as if his wish had been fulfilled, and he had landed in a wild country. It was rather wonderful, but a little bit frightening. The forest looked the sort that would conceal wild beasts and savages.

Still trembling from shock he moved a little farther away from it and sat on a heap of seaweed. He felt sick, weak and thirsty—very thirsty indeed. The inside of his mouth was rough with dryness, and his lips were stiff with salt.

The snapping of a twig in the forest brought him to his feet, heart thumping with apprehension. Pompey appeared, carrying what appeared to

be one half of an enormous orange. This turned out to be part of the shell of a strange fruit. It was nearly full of muddy water.

‘Have a drink,’ invited Pompey.

Tommy drank the water gratefully. It tasted foul, but he was in no state to be particular. ‘Do you know what happened to Digger,’ he asked.

‘He’s all right,’ was the reassuring answer. ‘Trying to find something to eat. We found you, pulled you up clear of the water and then looked round for some water with less salt in it. How are you feeling?’

‘Not so bad.’

‘That’s swell.’ Pompey grinned. ‘How’s the adventure going?’

‘Fine. After all, we’re still alive, that’s the main thing. Do you know where we are?’

‘America, I guess.’

‘Not on an island?’

‘If it is it’s a big ’un. No, I reckon we’re on the mainland.’

‘What part? America is a big place.’

‘Sure is. Your guess is as good as mine. Mebbe if we walk along the beach we’ll come to some place. Then we can ask where we are. Here comes Digger.’

Digger appeared, carrying a small bunch of green bananas. ‘This is the best I can do,’ he announced. ‘Lucky to find these. Got them in a patch by an abandoned hut a bit along. Indian shack, I think.’

‘Is there no fruit in the forest?’ asked Tommy in a surprised and disappointed voice.

‘Could be, but we’re not likely to get it. The birds and monkeys get what’s growing, and any that falls is grabbed by the ants. Forget what you’ve read in your story books. The easiest place to starve to death is in a tropical forest, which is mostly sweat, thorns, rotten leaves and mosquitoes. If we want to eat we’d better start walking.’

They set off along the beach.

They had not gone far when a large brilliantly coloured butterfly whirled past them. Digger jerked a thumb at it. ‘Collectors in London and New York will pay ten pounds for that sort.’

Pompey frowned. ‘Aw shucks! Why worry about money?’

‘Don’t you?’

‘Me? No. I don’t worry about nothin’. What’s the use. Living at all is a risky racket, but I shan’t go before my time and nor will you. When our time comes we shall go, and nothin’ won’t stop us, so what’s the use o’ worrying. There might be a bunch of Indians round the corner waiting to stick us full o’ spears. So what? Right now we’re alive, and that’s enough to go on with.’ Pompey’s tone of voice changed suddenly. ‘Say, what’s all this?’

From round the bend in front of them had appeared a long straggling column of men, not fewer than a hundred. The leaders were mounted. The rest marched. Some limped, or walked with difficulty. Dressed in a variety of garments, some colourful, all carried weapons. A wagon brought up the rear.

‘Now we shall know where we are!’ exclaimed Tommy.

‘Sure,’ murmured Pompey dubiously. ‘Sure we shall know where we are. Mebbe we shall wish we didn’t.’

‘What do you mean?’ asked Tommy. ‘I call this a perfect end to my adventure.’

‘If you was to ask me, Tommy lad, I’d say your adventure’s just about to start,’ said Pompey soberly. ‘If ever I saw a crew of *hombres* I didn’t like the look of, it’s right here. Don’t forget this ain’t the first time I was in South America.’

‘That goes for me too,’ put in Digger. ‘I can smell trouble from here.’

The motley mob advanced. Some horsemen galloped forward.

CHAPTER 3

ON THE MARCH

It was some minutes before Tommy could get an inkling of what was happening. He could only stand silent and bewildered in the centre of what seemed to be a furious argument. One or two things were clear, however. The first was, Pompey and Digger had been correct in their judgment of the situation. Trouble, serious trouble, was uncomfortably evident. The second was, the marching men were troops, soldiers of some sort, or bandits. A number of wounded suggested that there had been an engagement, and this party was the remnant of the side that had been defeated. This was in fact the case, as he was soon to learn.

For a time the altercation raged, words flying in threats and expostulations. There were moments when blows seemed imminent. Pompey, vehement, pointing at the sea, was obviously explaining who and what they were. Digger backed him up, but with little effect. So much could be followed by the fierce gesticulations, but to Tommy the actual words conveyed nothing. It came as a surprise to him that both Pompey and Digger could speak the language used. Then he recalled that Pompey's mother had been Spanish, and supposed that to be the tongue he now employed with a fair degree of fluency.

At last Pompey threw up his arms in resignation or despair and turned to Digger. 'It's no use,' he muttered savagely in English. 'It's either do what they say or have our throats cut. That won't get us no place.'

Digger agreed. 'We'd better go with them,' he decided.

Rifles were put in their hands, cartridges in their pockets, and the march was resumed.

'Would you mind telling me what all that was about?' asked Tommy, as they trudged along with the rest.

Pompey answered: 'It seems like we've got tangled up in a revolution. I'd say this lot have had a smack in the eye and are now collecting men to have another go. No use arguing with 'em. Mebbe we'll get a chance to skip presently.'

'But we're British,' protested Tommy. 'If they killed us there'd be a row.'

‘And what good would that do you if you was under the ground pushing up the daisies?’

‘We shall have to slip away before we get mixed up in a battle,’ said Digger. ‘I was caught up in one of these local rows once before. We shall have to be careful how we go; if they catch us bolting they’ll shoot us on the spot. If the other side wins we shall be shot for fighting against them.’

‘That’s a cheerful look-out, I must say,’ observed Tommy bitterly.

‘I hope this lot have got some grub with ’em, that’s all,’ said Pompey. ‘Don’t scoff it all. Keep a bit by for a get-away.’

Tommy strode on in a daze, wondering if this could really be happening.

After marching for some miles without pause a river was reached. It was forded. On the far bank was a village, with a mixed population of whites, mulattoes and Indians. The people ran out cheering, carrying food.

‘We seem to be on the popular side, anyway,’ remarked Tommy.

‘Don’t you believe it,’ dissented Digger sarcastically. ‘It would have been the same had the other side come along. People bring out their grub because if they didn’t it would not only be taken but the place burnt down. They’re trying to put the best face on a bad job. This will probably ruin them.’

To say that the food was distributed would be to give a false impression. It was a case of snatch and grab, every man for himself. Pompey, who was not backward in moving forward, may have got more than his share, but he divided it generously and they all had a reasonable meal. In less than half an hour a bugle sounded and the march was resumed.

‘I reckon the enemy must be close behind us or we wouldn’t be pushing on so fast,’ opined Pompey. ‘In this part of the world people usually have forty winks after dinner; but not today; and that can only mean one thing. Some of the wounded are dead on their feet, but they keep going because they know what’ll happen if the other side catches up with ’em.’

The march was continued until dusk. Only the fear of death kept Tommy on his feet, for he was near the limit of his endurance. Pompey carried his rifle. To make matters worse the last part of the march crept up a narrow track that was not only steep but sticky with mud. It ended on a plateau dotted with outcrops of rock and growths of cacti. Here the army halted.

Some pigs that had been taken from the village were now slaughtered and the meat issued. Maize meal was doled out from the wagon, each man getting his share. Tommy, who had sunk down from sheer exhaustion, would

not have bothered with it; but Pompey insisted that he went for his ration, pointing out that his life might depend upon it.

Camp fires sprang up on all sides. So strange and wild was the scene that Tommy was now sure he was dreaming, or in a delirium.

Pompey nudged him. 'How's your adventure going, Tommy?' he chaffed, impaling some strips of meat on a stick and holding them in a fire he had lighted.

Tommy smiled wanly. 'It's going a bit too fast for me to keep up with it.' He yawned. 'I'm so tired I can't think.'

'Aw shucks! Don't say that. A bit of meat and a night's sleep'll make a new man of yer. Sorry we ain't got no apple sauce.'

A coarse but satisfying meal was just concluded when a young man, tousle-headed and unshaven, came and squatted beside them. 'I saw them pick you up,' he said in English. 'You're British or Americans, ain't you?'

Digger said they were British.

'I'm glad to have somebody to talk to at last,' rejoined the newcomer.

'Who are you?' inquired Digger.



Digger said they were British

‘Joe Batson’s the name. Batty they called me in the Army, and batty I must have been to come to this loonybin. They picked me up a week ago. Crumbs! What a time I’ve had! And all I was doing was having a quiet drink at a *cantina* in their cockeyed town.’

‘What country’s this?’ asked Pompey.

‘Rioguiana.’

‘What’s going on?’

‘Revolution. Bloke named Don Enrique Avenida tried to bump off the president and grab the country, but somebody blew the gaff and the plot went off at half cock. Now he’s on the run. He’s the good-looking fellow on the grey horse. Seems a decent sort of chap. Plenty of guts. In the thick of it all the time. The rest are mostly a lot of drips. Ran like rabbits at the first bang. We got a pasting. This bunch is all that’s left of about five hundred. Another five hundred didn’t turn up at all. Lot o’ skunks.’

‘You talk like you was on the side of this Don Whatsisname,’ observed Pompey.

‘Not me. I’ve no axe to grind. But it made me mad to see these rats walk out on their leader when things got hot. Went against the grain somehow. Well, it’s all over bar the hangings and shootings and Don Enrique knows it. The troops must have seen me so I’m for the high jump if we’re caught. That’s why I’m heading for the border with the rest.’

‘What border?’

‘Some say Brazil, some say Venezuela. It’s all the same to me. I never was much good at geography.’

‘How come you to be in this part of the world?’ asked Pompey.

Batty Batson smiled sheepishly. ‘It sounds a joke, but I came here looking for a half a ton of gold. I must have been nuts.’

Tommy, who had nearly fallen asleep, sat up at the word gold. ‘Gold!’ he ejaculated. ‘Do you really know where there’s some gold?’

‘Yes. And there’s not much doubt about it being there. It’s a long story.’

‘Go ahead,’ invited Digger. ‘There’s always time to listen to a tale about a half a ton of gold even if it’s all lies.’

‘There’s no lie about this lot,’ declared Batty. ‘It *was* there, even if it isn’t there now.’

‘Where?’

‘I’ll come to that in a minute. Do you remember a German light cruiser named the *Ronstadt* being caught and sunk off the coast of South America by our lads in the war?’

‘Perfectly well.’

‘There was more to it than that, although I reckon few people know about it. This was how the story came my way. I don’t mind you knowing because if I get scuppered in the next scrap—but we’ll talk about that in a minute. When I was called up for National Service I was sent to Germany—army of occupation, you know. My lot were in Hamburg. I was billeted on

an old German lady named Frau Lowenhardt. Nice old lady. Lived alone. Husband and only son were both killed in the war, she told me. Some things were still short in Germany so I used to take her anything I could scrounge. Maybe that's why she took a fancy to me. She got like she was my own mother. Then one day I was posted to Korea. The night before I was due to leave she called me into her room. She had something to tell me, she said. This is what it was.' Batty took the short end of a cigarette from his cap, lit it with a glowing stick, and continued:

'It seems her son was a sailor. He was on the *Ronstadt* when she was sunk. At the time her job was to fetch a load of gold that had been pinched from somewhere earlier in the war. The ship that had actually pinched the gold dumped it. Where and why I don't know. It doesn't matter. The point is, the *Ronstadt* got it, and was on her way home when she got word that our lads were after her; whereupon she bolted into a Rioguanan river called the Olarayo. The skipper, seeing he was trapped, and reckoning he'd be lucky to get home, hid the gold again. The British Government didn't know anything about the gold, of course, and the skipper of the *Ronstadt* was going to see we didn't get it whatever happened. As I say, he took it ashore and buried it again. It's in bars, by the way. Afterwards he made a dash for home, but he was out o' luck. Our chaps caught him and down he went. There were only a few survivors, and the old girl's son, Karl, was one of them. Now according to Karl there was only one other fellow amongst those who were saved who knew where the gold had been hidden—a petty officer named Dostler. What happened to him I don't know. Karl didn't know. This, you understand, is what Karl told his mother when he got back to Germany, before he went back to sea and got drowned. Before he went, though, he made a map of the place where the gold was hidden and gave it to his mother to take care of. Maybe he had an idea of getting the gold himself one day—but I don't know about that. Anyway, he didn't get a chance. Well, the old girl said she didn't want the map. It was no use to her, so as I'd been kind to her she gave it to me, thinking it might do me a bit of good.'

'Have you still got it?' asked Digger.

'You bet your life I have,' asserted Batty. 'As soon as my time was up I decided to have a go at it. I'd got my gratuity. My idea in the first place was to see if the stuff was still there, bearing in mind that this bloke Dostler might have got there first. It was no use deciding what to do about it if it wasn't there.'

'Why didn't you report this to the Government?' inquired Digger.

‘What Government? The Rioguianans? Ha! They’d have seen it wasn’t there. And if I’d told the British Government all they could have done was approach the Rioguianans, so it would have come to the same thing. No, I wanted to get my hands on a bit of the stuff myself—naturally.’

‘What happened?’ asked Tommy eagerly.

‘Well, I had to wait some time for a permit to land in Rioguiana, but I got here all right. Landed at Los Ricas, the capital, a bit down the coast. Found a little place where I could stay, parked my pack and went out to get my bearings. I was sitting at a *cantina*—one of those places where you sit on the path—having a cup of coffee when, blow me down! if bullets didn’t start whizzing. Then, before you could say Jack Robinson, up comes a bunch of toughs. They make signs I’ve got to fight—or else. So I fought. Actually, I couldn’t do anything else, because by this time the other side was shooting at me and I had to defend myself or I’d had it. After they’d seen me shooting at ’em my only chance was to stick to this lot! Several people got roped in like I did, but until you came along I was the only Britisher in the party.’

‘What do you reckon to do now?’ asked Pompey.

‘Hang on till we get to the border and then skip.’

‘What about the gold?’

Batty looked dubious. ‘I don’t know. If I come back and they cop me I’m for the high jump.’

‘How did you intend to get to this place where the gold was hidden?’ asked Digger curiously.

‘Walk, of course.’

‘Walk! By yourself?’

‘Why not? I’ve marched hundreds of miles in my time—in full marching order.’

‘What about grub?’

‘I had my old army pack with enough iron rations in it to last me for two or three weeks, and a little money to buy stuff on the way, so I wasn’t worried on that score. The trouble is, I’ve lost my pack, and unfortunately my passport was in it. I left it in my lodging, and after what’s happened I wouldn’t dare to go back for it.’

‘When you talk about half a ton of gold, do you mean that literally?’

Batty smiled apologetically. ‘Well, not exactly. I was sort of keeping it in round figures. Actually, Karl told his mother there were thirty ingots of five

kilograms each. I worked that out to be roughly three hundred and thirty odd pounds as we should weigh it. Say, three hundredweights.'

Digger did some quick mental arithmetic. 'Worth around fifty thousand pounds at today's prices.' He grinned. 'You were going to have a nice job shifting that lot single-handed.'

'After humping sandbags up and down trenches that didn't frighten me. But I'm dashed if I know what I'm going to do about it now.'

'You'd better stick to us,' declared Pompey. 'We're all in the same boat.'

'But these people wouldn't dare to touch us,' protested Tommy. 'If they did the British Government would have something to say about it.'

'In these parts they shoot first and talk afterwards,' observed Pompey cynically.

'We'd better see about some sleep,' advised Digger. 'We look like having another stiff day tomorrow.' He looked at Tommy. 'How's your adventure going, kid?'

'Fine,' answered Tommy, without conviction. 'But I wish it wouldn't go quite so fast.'

All around, the camp-fires were burning low. The early noise and bustle, and the mutter of conversation, had died to a strange uneasy silence.

Using his shoes for a pillow Tommy stretched himself out on the hard earth, and within a minute was sound asleep.

CHAPTER 4

TOO MUCH ADVENTURE

TOMMY opened his eyes the next morning to a world of noise and confusion that was all the more bewildering because the plateau was shrouded in a clammy grey mist that made it impossible to see beyond a few yards. The time, he judged, was not long after daybreak. Pompey, Digger and Batty were on their feet, attitudes tense, staring into the murk. Figures loomed up, running, panting, distraught, to vanish again in the fog. A medley of noises indicated panic.

‘What’s going on?’ asked Tommy anxiously.

Pompey answered. ‘Sounds to me like the Government troops have caught up with us.’

Hardly had the words left his lips than some shots were fired. A bugle pealed. Voices yelled. A ragged volley crashed, to be followed by sinister whistlings in the air.

‘Let’s get out of this,’ pleaded Tommy urgently.

‘Sure—but how?’ answered Pompey. ‘Which way do we go? Running into the enemy won’t help us any.’

A man, waving a drawn sword, rushed past, yelling.

‘He says fight or die,’ translated Digger. ‘What he really meant was fight *and* die.’

‘What’s Don Avenida up to?’ muttered Batty. ‘Why doesn’t he get his mob together instead of letting ’em run wild?’

‘How can he give orders with everyone bawling his head off?’ inquired Pompey in a voice heavy with disgust.

There was now a steady crackle of musketry. Bullets whined as they glanced off the rocks or slashed through fleshy cactus leaves.

‘If we stand here one of us is going to stop something in a minute,’ said Digger calmly. ‘Let’s try to find out which way the attack is coming from.’

‘Sounds like they’re all round us,’ observed Pompey, biting the end off his coil of tobacco.

They all moved forward slowly, across the *pampa*. A man lay in a grotesque position across their path. He was dead. Tommy shrank away, his

mouth suddenly dry, at his first sight of a man killed in action. On all sides, now, was the dreadful clamour of battle. Tommy knew that had he been alone he would have fled, panic-stricken. Only the casual behaviour of the others prevented him from obeying the impulse. He was terrified, and he was afraid his face would reveal it.

‘You wanted adventure, kid, and by gosh, you’re getting it,’ observed Pompey grimly. ‘Don’t waste your time ducking. You don’t hear the smacker that gets you.’

‘Tough luck, running into a madhouse like this,’ said Digger sympathetically.

‘Enough to scare the daylights out of anybody,’ declared Batty. ‘This not being able to see a blooming thing. . . .’

A large dark shadow loomed in front of them. It turned out to be about twenty men who had formed a square and were shooting blindly into the fog. Don Avenida, his horse dead at his feet, was there, sword in one hand and revolver in the other.

‘Where’s the rest of his men?’ wondered Tommy.

‘Bunked, I’ll bet,’ answered Pompey.

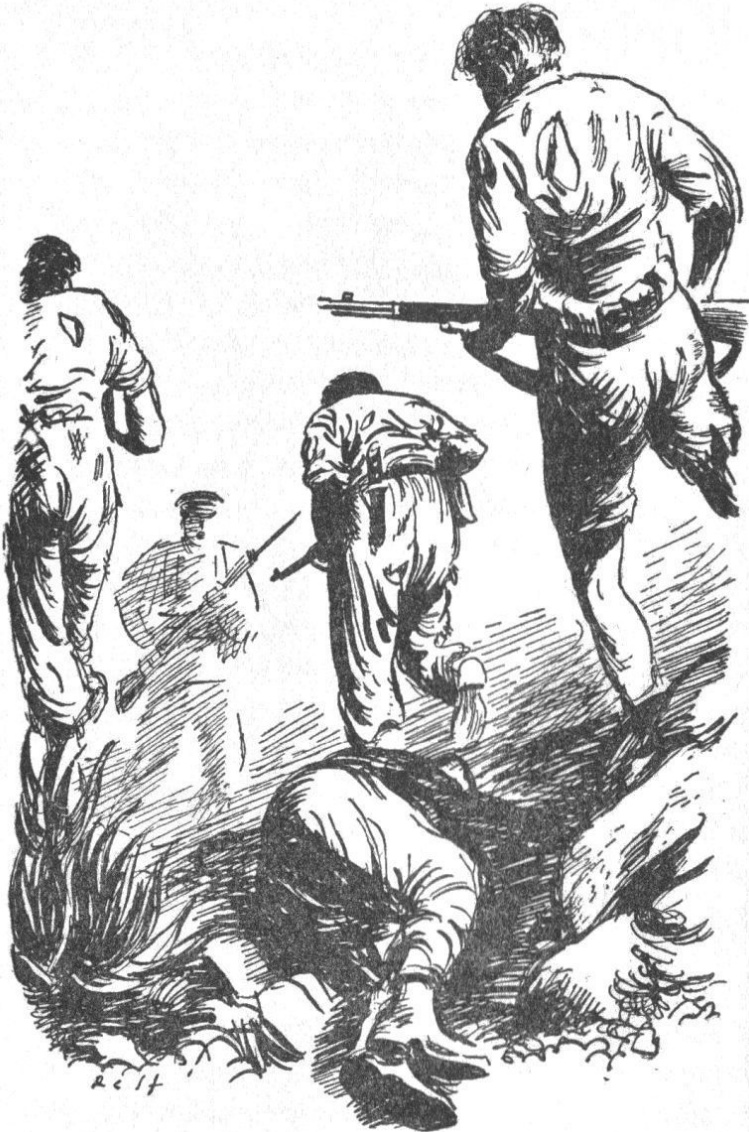
‘Lot o’ rats,’ snarled Batty. ‘That’s what they did last time.’

They joined the leader of the lost cause. He saw them, and threw them a smile of gratitude, although he must have known that he was doomed. Soldiers could sometimes be seen vaguely, like phantoms, in the mist. Shots poured in, and Don Avenida’s supporters fell, one after another. The fog began to lift. Rocks and cactus spurted flame. Then Don Avenida went down, and that was the end. With the fall of their leader the last surviving members of his party broke and fled.

‘That’s the pay-off,’ said Pompey tersely. ‘It’s now or never. Come on.’ With that he dashed off, away from the direction of the main attack. A soldier sprang up in front and lunged at him with a bayonet. Pompey shot him.

All this Tommy saw as if he were a detached spectator. The whole thing was less real than if he had been watching a screen play. His movements had become mechanical. His brain seemed numb. Indeed, he was no longer even conscious of his limbs. Only the instinct of self-preservation remained, and under its impulse his one purpose was to get away as quickly as possible from a situation into which he had been thrown by circumstances beyond his control.

The mist had now become a drizzle, but he was scarcely conscious of it. Thorns tore at his legs. He hardly felt them. It was not so much that he actually feared death. He just wanted to escape from one of those nightmares that seem endless, in which one rushes on without getting anywhere. Always in front were rocks and cactuses, and then more rocks and cactuses.



A soldier sprang up in front

Then, at last, the ground began to slope downwards. A few trees appeared, becoming thicker as the ground continued to fall away. Keeping together they hastened on, Pompey and Digger, their rifles held ready for instant use, leading the way. Where they were going Tommy didn't know. He suspected that none of them knew. It didn't matter. The thing was to get away from a battle which, judging by screams and yells behind them, had become a massacre. Panting, slipping, sliding, clutching at trees for support, he blundered on. Once he jumped over a snake as it glided across his path. It was the first wild snake he had ever seen, and although he loathed the reptiles, at the time the incident passed almost unnoticed. He remembered it later with a shudder. Digger told him it was a bushmaster, one of the most deadly snakes in the world. He was thankful he didn't know it at the time.

Slowly, the gruesome din of war faded away behind them. Pompey paused for a moment to say they would have to push on, for now would begin the business of rounding up any surviving rebels. So they went on, to what seemed to Tommy for hours. The ground had continued to fall and they were now in real forest. The heat was suffocating, and Tommy remembered what Digger had said about sweat, thorns and rotting leaves. They moved through a dark-green twilight, under a roof of leaves that dripped water in a steady stream. But there was none to drink, and he needed a drink badly. The only part of him that was dry was his mouth. He told Digger so, whereupon Digger took hold of a liana as thick as his leg, and saying, 'Hold your hands,' slashed it with his knife. Clean cool water gushed out, and Tommy drank it gratefully.

'Never try doing that yourself,' warned Digger. 'There's another liana very much like that one, but it's poison. Contains strychnine.'

They went on.

The journey seemed interminable, but like all journeys it came to an end, and this was first revealed by a bright light ahead.

They staggered towards it, and there above them was the sky. Before them rolled a broad river.

Now, thought Tommy thankfully, they would have to stop. And so they did; but not for long. Distant calls and whistles made it evident that they were being pursued; and as they must have left a track plain enough for a child to follow they could only push on or be overtaken. They were all in a dreadful state, streaked with mud and hair plastered on their faces. By good fortune they had struck the river at a bend, with the result that a beach had been cast up, although this, when they set off along it, turned out to be mud into which they sank nearly to the knees. The river itself was the colour of

mud. An inquiry from Tommy ascertained that no-one knew where they were, or the name of the river, although Batty had made a careful study of a map of the country before starting on his quest. But then, he had been on the march for a week.

Rounding the bend they saw a house—or rather, a shed—in a little clearing. It was a dreary dismal place, and appeared to have been abandoned. Digger said it was, or had been, the home of a rubber collector. Just beyond it the beach lost itself in a hideous tangle of mangrove roots, and to Tommy's consternation it looked as if they would have to take to the jungle again. It need hardly be said that his mental picture of a tropical forest had by this time been rudely shattered. However, their luck was in, for lying on the bank, half hidden by rushes, they found a canoe. At its best it must have been a primitive affair, consisting simply of a hollowed-out tree trunk; but now it was in the final stages of dilapidation. Still, it appeared to be watertight, as they ascertained by tipping the rain water out of it. Digger found two old paddles lying at the back of the hut; they were in the same worm-eaten state as the boat, but they had to suffice. It could only be hoped that they would last to the far side of the river. It took their combined strength to get the heavy watersoaked craft on the water. Pompey and Digger operated the paddles, taking a course diagonally downstream to lessen the strain on them.

They were only just in time. The river was about two hundred yards wide, and they were not more than half way across when several soldiers appeared on the bank they had just left, reaching the water where they themselves had emerged from the forest. The Government troops had obviously followed their tracks, and it was natural that they should continue to do so, for the marks in the mud were as plain as if they had been made by half a dozen buffaloes. For this reason the canoe was not seen immediately, and by the time a shout announced its discovery it was some way down the river, as well as nearly across. Nevertheless, it was not out of danger, and bullets were soon flicking feathers on the water. Two or three anxious minutes followed before the canoe was driven under some overhanging branches out of sight of the enemy. There it rested. After a while, following a debate, the soldiers moved off downstream and disappeared in the jungle.



... bullets were soon flicking feathers on the water

Pompey urged the clumsy craft forward to the bank, where they all got out. Tommy sank down regardless of the slushy state of the ground and mopped his face with a filthy rag that had once been a handkerchief.

‘Let’s hope there isn’t another canoe anywhere near on the other bank,’ he said fervently. ‘I’m about all in.’

‘What! Packing up in the middle of your first adventure!’ chided Pompey. ‘You can’t do that.’

‘I’m sorry about Don Avenida,’ remarked Batty. ‘He seemed a decent sort of chap.’

‘Aw shucks! I shan’t lose any sleep over him,’ declared Pompey. ‘People who start trouble can’t grumble if it trips them up. If there’s anybody to be sorry for it’s the poor saps who backed up his gamble for the president’s chair.’

‘They ran like a lot of rabbits,’ muttered Batty.

‘They knew what was coming to ’em if they got caught. Their trouble was they lost their heads. We got away because we kept together and watched which way we went.’

‘And here we are,’ said Batty.

‘Yes, and where’s that?’ inquired Digger practically. ‘Do you know where we are, because I don’t? We’d better see about finding out. I’ve had some experience of this sort of country so I can tell you we’re a long way from being out of the wood. And I mean that literally as well as figuratively, as you can see for yourselves. We’ve got to eat before the mosquitoes eat us, and unless we can find a village that’s going to be difficult. If we can find a village we might also get an idea of where we are.’

Batty now broke the news that he had a map, as well as the sketch showing where the gold was buried; but when he produced it hope turned to disappointment, for it turned out to be merely a page torn from an atlas, showing the whole of South America, of which Rioguiana is but an infinitesimal part. On a scale so small the map was useless for any practical purpose other than showing the position of the country. Moreover, being wet, the paper had stuck in its folds like pulp, for which reason it had to be handled with the greatest care if it was not to fall to pieces.

‘You know, Batty, you’d have done better to wait for the dry season instead of coming in on the edge of the wet, when everything is waterlogged and bedraggled,’ remarked Digger, trying to unstick the map. ‘Let’s try to work it out this way,’ he went on, pointing with a muddy finger. ‘Here’s Los Ricas. That’s where you say you started from. How long were you on the march?’

‘Five days.’

‘Doing how many miles a day?’

‘It’s hard to say. You see, we started over mountains, and then had some forest to get through in order to reach the coast. After that we must have done about fifty miles. But I can tell you this. When we halted last night we

weren't far from the frontier. I can't understand why we didn't stick to the coast.'

'I can guess the answer to that,' said Digger. 'Had we carried on along the coast we should have struck this river at the mouth, with no way of crossing. With the river in front and the government troops behind we should have been trapped; wherefore Don Avenida turned inland to strike the river higher up, where it may be possible to cross. If we weren't far from the frontier this river may form the boundary. If it is the boundary then it must be the Olarayo, into which the *Ronstadt* bolted—and hid the gold.'

'Wait a minute,' requested Batty. 'It isn't as easy as that. Like most of these big rivers the Olarayo has about six mouths—what they call a delta. Karl makes a note of that on his chart. What I'm trying to say is, even if this is the Olarayo we're on now, it isn't necessarily the particular mouth into which the *Ronstadt* bolted. As far as the gold is concerned it doesn't really matter, because the stuff was hidden above the point where all the different rivers join.'

'Never mind the gold. What about some grub,' put in Pompey impatiently. 'We couldn't do anything with the gold even if we found it. A couple bars'd sink this crazy canoe. Let's get out of this mess we're in.'

Digger agreed. 'We couldn't make any headway upstream in this dugout. The only way we can go is down. And we'd better keep near the bank in case it sinks, because there are some nasty beasts in all these rivers. We shall just have to keep going till we come to a village, unless we have the luck to strike a rubber collector's hut. Not that he'd be likely to help us with grub. It takes these chaps all their time to feed themselves. We'll keep on this side because of the troops on the other bank. Some of them may have crossed over, of course. In a delta there is seldom a clearly defined frontier. There are usually islands that are a sort of no-man's-land. It boils down to this. We can't stay here. There's no question of walking through the forest. We can't go upstream so we must go down, and the sooner we're on our way the better, because if we don't get somewhere before dark we're going to have an uncomfortable night. A week of this without mosquito nets and we shall be rotten with malaria.'

'Couldn't we shoot something to eat?' suggested Tommy tentatively. 'We've still got our rifles.'

'Certainly, if we have the luck to see anything to shoot at other than alligators, and there will probably be plenty of those,' answered Digger. 'Come on.'

The dugout was pushed clear of the trees and started on its journey down the river of doubt.

CHAPTER 5

DOWN THE RIVER

As the canoe proceeded cautiously down the broad stream Tommy had an opportunity to think calmly for the first time since the *Midas's* lifeboat had been cast ashore on Rioguiana; and his dominant sensation was one of disappointment. He felt he had been cheated, misled by the glowing accounts he had read of the tropics. How right Digger had been when he had talked of discomfort, ill-health and death being the portion of the explorer.

That his wish to meet with an adventure had been fulfilled he would not have denied; but this was not the sort of adventure he had visualised, or would have chosen. This one had been forced upon him. But then, he brooded disconsolately, perhaps that was what an adventure really was—something forced upon one, willy-nilly. And without unpleasantness there could be no adventure. In a word, the dreams he had cherished had let him down badly.

He would not have minded being dirty, wet and hungry, had there been compensations; had the scenery lived up to its reputation for sunshine, colour and variety. This horrible sameness was depressing. Where was the sun? The blue sky? The luscious fruit, the gorgeous flowers and the wild animals? Certainly they were not here—or if they were they were not to be seen, so they might as well not have existed. Instead, all was drab monotony, dark and cheerless. And to cap all, the miserable land was beset with strife, murder, sudden death and ferocious insects. There were plenty of insects, and they all seemed to be as hungry as he was.

The dugout, cumbersome and waterlogged, drifted on a turgid yellow stream under an overcast sky from which rain sometimes fell in torrents. On each side the sombre green wall of the forest rose straight from the water, sullen, and in some indefinable way, menacing. The only variation was at the bends, where a beach of mud and debris had been cast on the wide curve. At every turn of the river Tommy looked ahead eagerly for something different. But it was always the same. More water; more forest. Sometimes the canoe overtook dead trees, and islands of floating weeds. On one of these lay a snake. Aside from this reptile, an occasional parrot flapping across the river, or an alligator on a mudbank, were the only creatures he saw to confirm that he was in the wild country of his dreams. The day wore

on. They saw no soldiers, which was at least a mercy for which to be thankful.

It was dusk when, in a clearing on their side of the river, they came upon a fairly well-built hut, with a palm-thatched shed close by. To call the building a house would be to flatter it. Two almost naked children were chasing some little brown pigs in the mire, watched by a mangy dog. The barking of this animal brought an unhealthy-looking woman to the door. She had a baby in her arms. Pompey called something to her, as if to assure her of their peaceful intentions, as they dragged the canoe clear of the water. Then, in an indescribable scene of squalor, Pompey and Digger engaged her in a conversation which Tommy, of course, was unable to follow. This took place on a sort of platform built outside the hut. It had a roof but no walls. The floor was made of palm-frond spines. It was littered with empty tins and garbage. In places it had broken through into muddy holes in which the pigs had wallowed. Flies were everywhere. The smell was awful.

At the end of the conversation Pompey translated for the benefit of those who had not understood. The woman was the wife of a rubber collector who was away on his rounds. Soldiers had been there looking for four *gringos* who were on their way down the river. The river was not the Olarayo but a tributary. A jungle track would take them to the village of Sanquitos, on the near bank of the Olarayo, about five miles distant. The woman had no food to spare. The soldiers had taken her chickens. But she could let them have some fruit, and some *farofa*, which Digger said was a national dish, a sort of porridge made of manioc root. They could spend the night in the shed where the rubber was stored. There were some old hammocks there.

That was all. The woman watched them listlessly as they discussed the matter. Not that there was much to discuss. In the circumstances they were glad to accept any sort of food and shelter for the night. They would make for Sanquitos first thing in the morning. There would, they realised, be some danger in this; but it would be less dangerous than continuing in the dugout. In any case, they were still in no position to choose. The present hand-to-mouth existence could not be maintained indefinitely. Just what they would do when they got to Sanquitos would depend on what they found there. The only member of the party who had any Rioguianan money was Batty, and he hadn't much. Digger had five English pound notes, and an American twenty-dollar gold piece, in his 'emergency' belt; but it was thought there might be some difficulty, and danger, in trying to change these into local currency. Apart from that, their only marketable possessions were the rifles they still carried. But as none of them had a permit to carry firearms the disposal of these weapons would be attended by some risk.

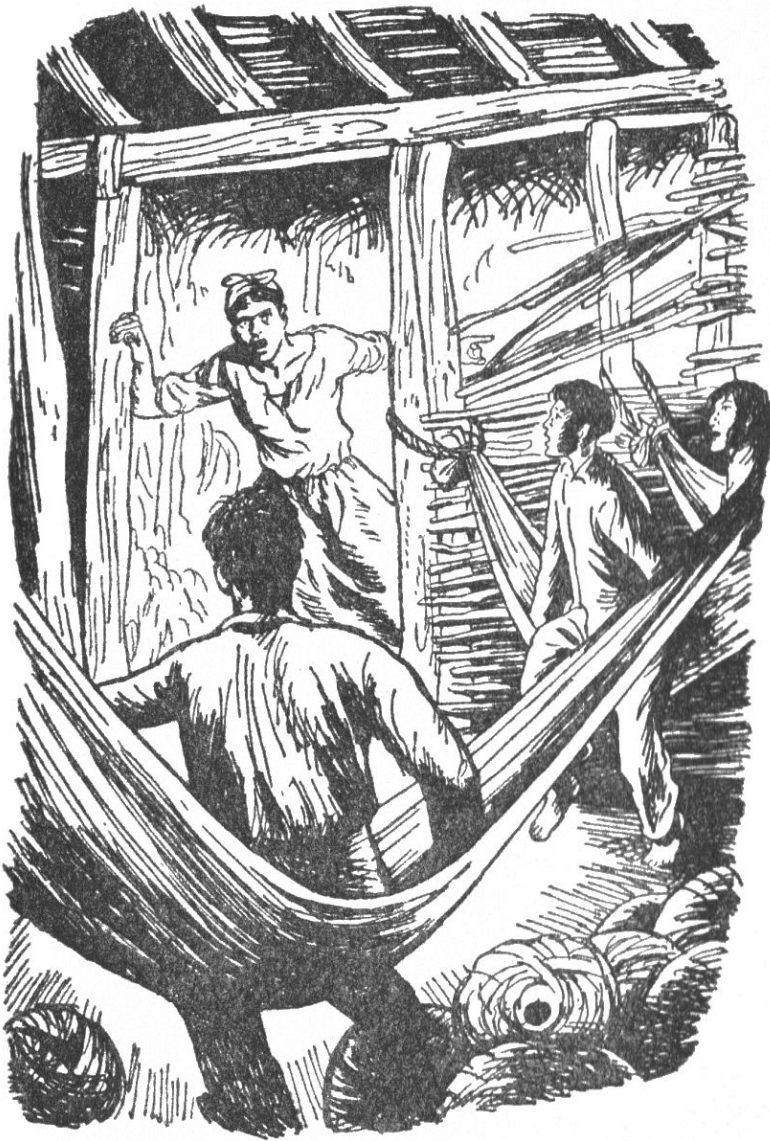
As by this time it was nearly dark, they went into the hut to make preparations for the night. Digger lit a small fire clear of the balls of crude rubber, both to enable them to see what they were doing and to discourage the mosquitoes that were now rising in swarms. The woman brought them some mediocre oranges, and a bowl of *farofa* which they ate, using broken pieces of gourd for spoons. To Tommy the stuff tasted like a mixture of sawdust and chalk. Moreover, it gummed up his mouth, so that he had some difficulty in getting it down; but it did at least satisfy his appetite, and he felt better for it. Worn out, he climbed into his hammock and was instantly asleep.

The next thing he knew the woman was there, in the sullen red glow of daybreak, wringing her hands, making frantic signals and crying something in a shrill voice.

Pompey was out of his hammock in a flash, 'Come on,' he rapped out urgently. 'Soldiers are coming up the river in a gunboat. The dame wants us out of the way in case they call here.'

Whether or not the soldiers called they never knew, for no further invitation was necessary to send them running down the track which the woman pointed out to them, and that was the last they saw of her. Tommy was upset that they should leave her without recompense, or even thanks, but the circumstances were such that the slightest delay might have cost them all their lives—not excluding their benefactress, who might have been shot for harbouring rebels.

After covering about a mile of heavy going at top speed they stopped to listen, but hearing no sounds of pursuit they steadied the pace; for which Tommy was thankful, for under the great trees the atmosphere was like a turkish bath. His clothing stuck to his body.



The woman was there crying in a shrill voice

The first indication that they were approaching Sanquitos was provided by an area where trees had been felled recently, for red sap still dripped from the cut surfaces. Digger said he thought Sanquitos must be a lumber town. The trees, he told them, were redwoods, the *pau brazil* that had given Brazil its name. The trees lay in all directions, and they had either to climb over the slippery trunks or work their way round them. When sounds not far ahead warned them that they had nearly reached their immediate destination

Digger said it was time they made a plan of action. They sat on a branch to discuss it.

At the end it was resolved that Digger, leaving his rifle behind, should go ahead, alone, and spy out the land. The first and most important thing was to ascertain if soldiers were there, or had been there to warn the population to be on the look-out for four Europeans. Should the coast be clear he would look for a lodging where they could have a clean up, eat some food and decide what they should do next. Taking some of Batty's money he departed on his mission.

He was away for some time, but his news, when he returned, was good. There were no soldiers in what he described as a small township, engaged in the timber industry, on the right bank of the Olarayo. There were shops and a hotel of sorts. Wood-burning steamers, plying up and down the river, called for fuel and cargo. One was there now. No doubt they would be able to book a passage on it to the coast. Posing as an American reporter, he had changed his twenty-dollar gold piece and taken one room only at the hotel, for himself. He thought it better that the others should do the same, as odd men would be less likely to attract attention than a party of four—particularly as it was known, in the capital at any rate, that four Europeans had been involved in the rebellion. Finally, he had bought a long-sleeved shirt for Pompey, whose tattooed skin, he averred, could hardly fail to identify him as one of the wanted men should descriptions be published. Once in the town they would try discreetly to raise money on the rifles. In such an outpost it should not be difficult to find a buyer.

All this worked out as planned, and with only one slight hitch. They entered the town one at a time. When Tommy's turn came he saw Pompey talking to an official of some sort. Later Pompey told them it was the local policeman, who had asked him if he had seen anything of a party of four *gringos* who were travelling together. Pompey had, of course, said no. Thus was the wisdom of Digger's plan proved, and they took heed of the warning.

To Tommy, Sanquitos was a horrible little town, dirty and untidy, ramshackle without being picturesque. It consisted of nothing more than two rows of one-storied wooden dwellings on either side of an earth road, slippery with mud and littered with rubbish. One end wandered away into the forest; the other end finished at a rough wharf where the river traffic berthed. There were one or two general stores, and a dilapidated structure with bedrooms scattered haphazard round a courtyard, that was known as the hotel.

Apparently the arrival of strangers, mostly recruits for the lumber camps, was nothing unusual. No questions were asked, and by evening they were installed in their rooms, having had a bath and a meal, looking reasonably respectable in the cheap cotton clothes that were worn by the local people—white, black, brown and every intermediate shade. More than half the population was Indian.

Assembled in Digger's room, the question that now arose was what to do next. On their way down the river and through the forest it had been the general assumption that they would get out of the country as quickly as possible; but now they were feeling better, and no immediate danger threatened, it was inevitable that the subject of the gold should be reintroduced. Batty was still determined to go after it, and even Pompey agreed that it would be a pity, now they were so close to the cache, to go away without so much as ascertaining if the gold was still there.

The big problem, of course, was money, for they would need a boat, digging tools, and, since they would go upstream, food for at least two or three weeks. Should they find the gold, the question would arise, what could they do with it? For more reasons than one it was obviously impracticable to attempt to transport all the gold down the river in a canoe—never mind get out of the country with it. Then there was the matter of the ownership of the gold. To whom did it belong? Batty admitted frankly that he didn't know. That aspect of the case hadn't struck him. He had assumed, somewhat casually, that whoever it had belonged to originally must have long ago regarded it as lost. Surely it was now a matter of 'findings keepings.'

The others were not so sure of this, but Pompey, always practical, squashed the argument by stating that the time to count these particular chickens was after they were hatched. Should they find the gold they could move it to a new cache, and *then* decide what to do about it. The common sense of this was so apparent that no-one disputed it, so they returned to ways and means of reaching the place where the gold was alleged to have been hidden. Without money they were obviously helpless, so Digger said he would see how much he could raise on the rifles, or at any rate, on three of them, for if they were going up the river they ought to keep one.

With this object he went off again, and after a lengthy absence returned with more encouraging news. He had sold three of the rifles, and most of the cartridges, to a second-hand dealer. He hadn't got much of a price, but as the deal was under the counter, so to speak, that was only to be expected. But he had enough, he thought, for their purpose. From the same dealer he had bought an old, but river-worthy canoe, with a tarpaulin cover which could if

necessary be used as a tent. He had also bought, as part of the deal, a pick and a spade, so all they needed now was food. Not so much would be required as they had originally estimated, for he had arranged for a tow, with the skipper of the steamer then taking on firewood at the wharf, for as far as they needed to go. There would be no difficulty in travelling downstream. It was the upstream journey which, under the power of paddles alone, would take time, and consequently a big supply of food.

Pompey smacked his thigh. ‘Nothing like having a man in the crew who knows his way around,’ he said admiringly.

‘I don’t know,’ answered Digger dubiously. ‘I’ve started on some crazy jaunts in my time, but this is, I think, the craziest.’

‘What time does the steamer cast off?’ asked Pompey.

‘Ten o’clock tomorrow morning, when another steamer, from another arm of the estuary, is due in. That should give us comfortable time to get food aboard, settle up here and get ready for off.’

Tommy grinned. ‘This is beginning to sound more like the sort of adventure I was looking for,’ he declared.

‘I hope you’ll still be thinking so in a week’s time,’ returned Digger soberly. ‘Things have been going well. I’ve learnt from experience to watch out for a snag when things look too rosy.’

The snag, although they did not know it, was even then on its way up the river.

CHAPTER 6

‘WHERE IT IS, THERE IT IS!’

MORNING came again under a leaden sky, but an occasional fleeting glimpse of blue foreshadowed the approach of better weather, although there were still frequent and heavy showers.

Tommy made a reconnaissance with Digger to make sure all was well. At the wharf, the steamer that was to tow them up the river was still unloading bags of manioc, which, Digger said, was the staple food of the country, and, incidentally, the root from which tapioca is made. Behind it floated the canoe. There were also some other queer-looking craft, looking like rafts made of logs tied together, or pinned together with skewers, the forward end being brought to a point. Sometimes two or three of these rafts were lashed together. Each raft carried a rough superstructure of canes in the form of a shelter—it could hardly be called a hut.

Digger said these were *balsas*. When two or three were fastened together the result was called a *callapo*. These craft were built and used by Indians known as *balseros*, and their purpose was to bring their produce down the river—balsa logs, rubber and the *chicle*—another rubber-like latex—that formed the base of chewing gum. Balsa wood, being as light as cork after it had been cut for some time, floated on the top of the water, not in it. The trees grew nearly everywhere in tropical America, always near water. Tommy recalled that it was on account of its lightness that *balsa* wood was used for making models, particularly model aeroplanes.

‘Why didn’t we have a *balsa*,’ inquired Tommy. ‘There seems to be more room on one than in a canoe.’

Digger smiled sadly. ‘As you see, the method of propulsion is by pole, and going upstream it takes a bit of handling. In fact, in deep water, to get a *balsa* upstream at all is a dickens of a job, not to say hard work. Usually three *balseros* are required to work the raft. Two pull on a tow rope while the other man steers. You may have noticed that at every bend of the river there’s a beach on one bank. Very well. Two men, towing the raft, walk up the beach for as far as they can get. Then they pole to the other bank and haul up the next beach on that side. So they go on up the river, criss-crossing all the time. Of course, coming down is comparatively easy.’

‘That doesn’t sound like fun to me,’ said Tommy seriously.

‘It isn’t,’ agreed Digger. ‘I’d better go and see about the grub.’

Tommy and Batty kept watch on the canoe while Digger and Pompey fetched the stores. No-one took any notice of them.

At ten o’clock the tow rope was made fast and everything was ready—everything, that is, except the steamer, which seemed to be in no hurry to move off. Tommy fretted at the delay, but it made no difference. In a way, this unpunctuality did them a service. Certainly it provided them with some information that was to affect their movements.

What happened was this. While they were waiting, Tommy, tired of squatting in a cramped position in the canoe, got out and sat on the wharf. He was still there, for the steamer showed no signs of departure, when up the river came a small but powerful-looking steam yacht of some fifty or sixty tons. As it neared the wharf, clearly with the intention of tying up, Tommy watched the deck closely. Naturally he thought it might be a Government craft with soldiers on board. This, however, was apparently not the case, for four civilians in smart duck suits came ashore, leaving the craft in charge of a coloured man—presumably the river pilot. The men were, without doubt, Europeans. As, talking, they passed the place where Tommy was sitting, he caught one word of their conversation clearly, possibly because that word struck a chord on his memory. The word was Dostler. This, he recalled with a shock, was the name of the second member of the crew of the ill-fated *Ronstadt* who knew where the gold was buried. That could only mean one thing. In his haste to get back into the canoe to tell the others what he had heard he nearly upset it.

‘They’re Germans all right,’ muttered Batty, his eyes on the retreating figures. ‘We needn’t wonder what they’re doing here.’

‘There is this about it,’ said Digger. ‘If Dostler is in that party, and they’re on their way up the river, it means that the gold is still where it was buried.’

‘It won’t be there much longer if they get to it first,’ put in Batty bitterly. ‘And here we sit doing nothing.’

At this juncture, to the great relief of everyone in the canoe, the captain of the steamer went on board, and a hoot of the siren promised an early departure.



They passed the place where Tommy was sitting

‘As Dostler, knowing about the gold, is still alive, I wonder why he waited for so long before coming after it,’ said Tommy. ‘I mean, it’s extraordinary that he should arrive at the same time as ourselves.’

‘It isn’t funny at all,’ asserted Batty. ‘Come to think of it, if he intended coming after the gold it was pretty certain to be a close thing between us. Rioguiana clamped down on visas. They didn’t want foreigners in the country. Maybe they knew a revolution was blowing up. As I told you, I was hanging about the London Legation for weeks before I could get my

passport stamped and no doubt it was the same on the Continent. As soon as I got my permit I started, and I reckon Dostler did the same. It seems he's got some money, or has pals with some, so he was able to buy that boat. Even so, if it hadn't been for that revolution cracking off I should have been here days ago.'

'If he gets the gold he'll be able to cart it away in that smart craft of his,' put in Pompey thoughtfully.

'He isn't going to get it,' averred Tommy confidently. 'Whoever the gold belongs to, it isn't his, anyway,' he added.

By this time the steamer was moving away from the wharf. The tow rope became taut, and they were on their way up the river.

The journey was anything but a comfortable one. Every time the steamer altered course to avoid a mudbank, a *balsa*, or one of the floating grass islands, the canoe rocked dangerously in the wake. When the furnace was fed with wood logs, and this happened often, the canoe was sprinkled with showers of sparks. Apart from these irritations, in their cramped quarters it was hardly possible to move without a risk of capsizing. Still, no-one complained. Tommy had resigned himself to a fact that was fast becoming evident: one couldn't have an adventure without danger and discomfort. That was his experience so far, anyhow.

The voyage was not without interest. A watery sun may have been responsible, but birds and butterflies of brilliant colours often flew across the river. As before, the forest flanked the river on both sides. Sometimes mangrove roots stood in regular rows, like tangled fences. From every forest tree dangled the lianas of which he had so often read. But apart from alligators basking on the mudbanks no four-footed animals were seen. There was a strange fish that sometimes appeared on the surface near the canoe, to race at astonishing speed with its front half out of the water, like a miniature speed-boat. Digger informed them that these fish had four eyes, two turned upwards to watch the surface for food, and two turned down to watch for enemies below. It was, Tommy agreed, a very convenient arrangement. He noticed that here, as before, every time the river made a sharp bend a beach had been formed on the wide arc. It was on such a beach, said Batty, that the *Ronstadt* had buried its gold.



They were on their way up the river

The most satisfactory part of the undertaking was the speed at which they were travelling; for it was obvious that had it not been for Digger's brilliant idea of getting the steamer to tow them, there would have been small chance of racing Dostler to the cache. The enterprise had clearly become a race—although fortunately the other competitors were unaware of it. Nor would the race end when the cache was reached. The gold would

have to be moved before Dostler and his friends arrived, or there would certainly be trouble when the two parties came into collision.

It was about four o'clock when the river took a sharp turn to the north. This was above the last point where the river split, and, indeed, according to Batty's chart, the wide beach formed by the river's northward sweep—which was there before their eyes—was the place where the *Ronstadt* had buried the gold, not daring to risk running aground by going farther up the treacherous river.

The tow rope was cast off. The steamer went on to disappear round the bend, leaving the canoe floating like a log on the dark water—and Tommy's pulses beating faster now that the cache was actually in sight. Success seemed assured, and as Pompey dug his paddle in the water Tommy experienced the first symptoms of that strange disease—gold fever. His hands, he discovered, were trembling. This was all the more strange because he didn't particularly want the gold for its own sake. He remembered what Digger had said about the lure and the thrill of finding the precious metal. It was, after all, only a metal. Yet no amount of iron or lead would have produced in him that queer feeling of excitement.

Pompey took the canoe to the upriver end of the beach before running it ashore under the liana-festooned branches of the first trees. 'Better have her where she can't be seen,' he remarked. 'Other people besides us are on the river, and if they see a craft here they might wonder what goes on. Them soldiers might still be poking round, for instance.'

Digger went further. 'We had better post a watcher while we're working,' he said, as they stepped ashore and dragged the canoe high and dry. 'On the beach we shall be in the open for all the world to see, so at the first sign of a boat coming up or down the river we'd better take cover till it's gone. That may be a nuisance, but it would be better than starting rumours in Sanquitos, or anywhere else.'

'Particularly if one about people digging here got to Dostler's ears,' stated Pompey.

'We shan't do much digging today; it'll be dark by the time we've made camp and marked the position of the gold,' returned Digger. 'First thing is to get ourselves snug for the night, far enough back from the river to have a fire that can't be seen. We shall need a fire, or be torn to pieces by mosquitoes.'

A suitable site was soon found behind a giant tree at the back of the beach and some fifty yards from it. So thick was the tangle that they had to cut a track to it; but on the other hand there was no risk of a fire being seen

from the river. The stores and the tarpaulin were now carried up from the canoe, and in a short time all was ready for the night. An overdue meal was taken in haste, for it seemed that everyone was now affected by the gold fever. There was, of course, every reason why they should hurry, for Dostler's yacht was obviously fast, and might be expected at any time.

Digger refreshed his memory by a last scrutiny of the chart, although by this time they had all seen it and knew the key by heart. It was simple. Standing at one end of the beach a line was to be taken on the point of a distant hill. From the other end of the beach a sight was to be taken on the V formed by two more hills. At the point where the two lines crossed the gold was buried. Had Karl, the German sailor who had helped to bury the gold, been there, he would of course have remembered the exact spot, provided nothing had changed. In the same way, Dostler, when he arrived, would be able to walk straight to the place without reference to a chart.

Within five minutes the hills marked had been located, without difficulty and without doubt. Only by a most extraordinary coincidence could there be another bend in the river where precisely the same physical features occurred.

The excitement mounted as with a stick the two lines were scratched on the muddy sediment of which most of the beach was formed. There were, of course, obstacles, dead trees and the like, but these did not interfere seriously with the demarcation.

At the point where the lines crossed Digger drove his stick into the ground. 'This is where it should be,' he declared, in a tone that was not quite his normal speaking voice, revealing that even he, hardened prospector though he might be, was not immune from the general infection.

Unfortunately by this time the sun was below the horizon, and darkness was falling with the tropical speed to which Tommy had by this time become accustomed. Moreover, to their chagrin, heavy raindrops, from a sky that had suddenly become overcast, foretold one of those downpours of which he had also had some experience. In such conditions it was obviously impossible to proceed, and a dash was made for the camp.

'If the sky clears we'll see what we can do by moonlight,' shouted Digger above the drumming of rain, as they huddled under their waterproof cover.

Tommy thought the storm would never end. It may have lasted for two hours; then it stopped with the same suddenness as it had started, although the leafy canopy continued to drip water for some time afterwards. It was now dark, so dark that it was literally impossible to see a hand in front of the

face. Movement in the forest was out of the question. Fireflies appeared, and mosquitoes rose in clouds. With everything soaking wet it was not easy to start a fire, but by some industrious whittling of sticks with their knives they managed to collect enough dry chips to get one going. The smoke made them cough, and brought tears to their eyes, but even this was to be preferred to the attacks of the voracious insects. A can of coffee was made, and this they drank with relish, in positions that were far from comfortable. No-one commented on this, for the talk now was all of the gold.

At last Digger said: 'If the sky's cleared the moon should be up by now. Let's go and have a look.'

Had there been a moon they would not have seen it from under the dense roof of leaves. While they had been talking Digger had woven a torch of twigs, and this, after he had got it well alight by putting it in the fire, enabled them to get to the beach; and there, riding high amid fleecy clouds, was the moon, nearly full.

'Wait a minute!' Pompey stopped suddenly in a listening attitude. 'Hark at the river. She's growling. That storm must have put her up. We'd better go and see if the canoe's all right. I made her fast, but we should look a pack of fools if she broke away and we found ourselves marooned.'

They soon ascertained that the canoe was still as they had left it, although the rising water had crept closer to it. Digger said the water would fall just as fast as it had risen, now the storm had passed; but to be on the safe side they pulled the canoe a little higher and tied on an extra rope. This done they went to the spot where the stick still stood erect in the mud. Now they were in the open no torch was necessary. The light was somewhat misty and therefore dim, but it was sufficient for their purpose except when the moon was behind a cloud.

Pompey, who had brought the spade, began to dig. The others watched, for the pick was not required. Quickly the hole grew larger as Pompey, his muscles developed by years of shovelling coal, tossed aside the muddy soil. 'Must be getting close,' he muttered after a time. 'Gimme that stick.'

Using the stick as a probe he let out a grunt of satisfaction as it struck something hard. 'Here we are,' he cried, flinging the stick aside, and seizing the spade sent the earth flying. Having scraped the object bare he stooped and felt it. Slowly he straightened his back, and it was in a very different tone of voice that he said: 'It's a dead tree.'

Disappointment was expressed in a short period of silence.

‘If there’s a tree there the gold can’t be there,’ observed Digger pensively. ‘This can’t be the place. The gold was buried at a depth of three feet. It couldn’t be under the tree, which must have been there for a long time—years, maybe.’

‘I’ll tell you something else,’ said Pompey. ‘We could easy be in the wrong place, because where the lines cross each other depends on the height of the river. I mean to say, if we’d taken our sights at the height the river is now, instead of where it was when we arrived, we shouldn’t be here. We should be some place else, nearer the forest or farther away from it—I dunno which.’

‘You’re right,’ confirmed Digger. ‘This is what comes from being in too big a hurry. But we can’t be blamed for that. It was Dostler turning up that caused the rush. Before we do anything else we shall have to fill in this hole and level it off. We can’t leave it as it is. If Dostler turns up in the morning and sees someone else has been digging it won’t make things any easier for us.’

‘And what if *he* starts digging?’ demanded Pompey. ‘What do we do—just stand and watch him lift the boodle?’

‘It’s no use jumping fences till you come to ’em,’ Digger pointed out. ‘We’ll deal with that problem should it arise.’

Pompey did not pursue the argument but started heaving the dirt back into the hole. He had just finished smoothing the surface with the back of the spade when a great mass of cloud, which had been slowly approaching the moon, reached it, and once more the scene was plunged into utter darkness. Raindrops began to spatter on the mud.

‘That’s done it,’ murmured Pompey in a resigned voice. ‘We can’t do anything in this. Might as well go back to the tent and keep dry, and come back in the morning when we can see what we’re a’doing of.’

Reluctantly the others agreed.

‘What a nuisance,’ said Tommy sadly.

‘I never knew a gold hunt yet without a nuisance or two,’ answered Digger philosophically.

CHAPTER 7

TWO SORTS OF LUCK

THE next morning, after a night of such discomfort that no-one got much sleep, the camp was astir—and glad to be astir—early. A satisfying breakfast was made of coffee and jammy biscuits, over which Digger said he had been thinking about the error of their first attempt to locate the bullion.

‘We don’t know when the *Ronstadt* was here, and if we did it would only give us the probable height of the river at that time,’ said he. ‘We still wouldn’t have a dependable figure. Even if the chart gave us the actual distance from the edge of the water we should be up against the same problem, because, as we know, the height of the water varies. But we needn’t worry about that. If we take two readings, one from the estimated low water mark, which we can judge by the limit of the reeds, and the other from the high-water mark, which is plain enough to see, and then draw a line between the two points, that line should pass over the gold. The only thing about that is it means digging a trench, which will take time, and time is everything now because it’s a safe bet that Dostler and Co. will arrive some time today.’

‘I’ve been thinking about that,’ announced Pompey. ‘Dostler’s got a problem too, and that’s how to get here without running aground. These rivers, with mudbanks here, there and everywhere, are mighty tricky.’

‘Dostler had a pilot on board. An Indian, I think. I saw him,’ put in Tommy.

‘Sure. I saw him too,’ answered Pompey. ‘Picked him up at the mouth of the river, no doubt. But is Dostler going to bring that pilot up here, which would mean letting him see what they’re after? Not likely; not unless he wants the whole river to know about it. I’ll bet he puts that pilot off at Sanquitos, and gropes his way up here as best he can. That’ll take time—I mean, if he has to take soundings. That craft of his will draw every inch of four foot, and as there’s plenty of mud at less than that, if he tries moving in a hurry he’ll stick.’

‘The *Ronstadt* came up here,’ reminded Batty.

‘So what? A ship o’ that class would have charts, and even if the skipper didn’t trust ’em there was nothing to stop him picking up a pilot. Having got here he’d see to it that the pilot didn’t see what he was a’doing of. If the

bloke did see what was going on he'd still be aboard when the *Ronstadt* went down. Would the skipper let him go to blab the news about what he'd seen? Not on your life, mates. That's why I say Dostler may be a little while getting here. You watch it.'

'I hope you're right,' said Digger. 'Let's get busy.'

The party groped its way to the beach, to find the stars just paling in the sky. There was still not sufficient light for the distant landmarks to be observed, so, much to their chagrin, they had to wait.

They had this consolation. The dawn was clear and fine, although heavy cloud on the horizon suggested that the good weather was not likely to persist all day. But an hour or two of sunshine would be better than none at all. The wild life seemed to realise this and made the most of the present genial conditions. Macaws and green parrots winged up and down the river, squawking harshly. Pigeons and parakeets flew from tree to tree. Palm-fronds, stirred by a slight breeze, rustled softly, giving life to the scene. A foraging party of lemurs appeared, but seeing the intruders coughed danger signals. A distant shrill whistle, Digger said, was the cry of a tapir. All this, it need hardly be said, was more in accord with Tommy's mental picture of a tropical forest.

They went to work, but no sooner had they marked out the new line than a *balsa*, manned by three Indians, appeared, forcing them to take cover. However, the raft was travelling downstream and was soon out of sight, whereupon the digging started in a burst of feverish activity. Tommy watched down the river, Batty upstream, while Pompey used the spade and Digger probed with a pointed cane.

There was another, longer, delay while a *balsa* went past, travelling upstream in the manner Digger had described. From the cover of the trees they watched the clumsy craft being towed by the crew, who, in passing, walked along the edge of their own beach. These irritating delays, being inevitable, were accepted without comment. The moment the *balsa* was round the corner the work was resumed. The sun, not yet overtaken by the clouds, began its daily tour of the sky, and they were soon perspiring in its fierce heat. Pompey threw his shirt aside. Mud and sweat made strange patterns on his decorated torso.

It was nearly eleven o'clock, with everyone in a fever of impatience and anxiety on account of Dostler's probable arrival at any moment, when Digger, who was behind Pompey probing the trench he had dug, let out a shout. 'There's something here!'

'Another tree,' opined Pompey. 'I'm down three feet.'

‘Gold’s heavy stuff. It may have sunk a bit in the mud.’

Pompey turned back to the place indicated. He drove in his spade. It struck something with a thud. He stooped. For a few seconds he groped in the mud. Then, with a yell of ‘It’s here,’ he held aloft an object that looked like a black brick. He threw it on the ground and wiped away the clinging dirt. Digger dropped on his knees and carved a groove with his knife. The groove gleamed softly yellow. In a moment they were doing a war dance round it.

Prudence, however, soon restored them to normal. ‘Okay. Quit fooling,’ ordered Pompey. ‘As I haul the stuff out you others handle it into the trees.’



‘It’s here’

For the next half-hour they all worked like madmen, panting to and fro between the cache and the forest. Then, with a flash of lightning and a roll of thunder, came the rain. It rained as if all the taps of heaven had been turned on at once; but still they toiled, slipping, sliding and gasping under their loads, rivulets of water running down their bodies. Visibility was reduced to a few yards, so there was no longer any need to keep watch, for the river could not be seen.

At last Pompey yelled, ‘That’s the lot,’ and began throwing the earth back in the hole he had made, until, finding it almost impossible to handle the churned-up slime, and seeing that the rain was doing the work anyway, he joined the others, who were stacking the bars for easy transportation.

A discussion arose as to where to put them—whether to carry them to the camp or find a temporary hiding-place nearer. For the gold was still where it had been dumped, just inside the fringe of the forest. Naturally, the first concern had been to get it off the beach and out of sight before another *balsa* came along.

They were still talking when the rain stopped, or abated to a drizzle, with the same suddenness that it had begun; and there, not a hundred and fifty yards away, still moving slowly towards the beach, was the German yacht.

‘By gosh! We were only just in time,’ muttered Pompey.

Tommy, peering through the drizzle, could see four men on deck. ‘I think you were right,’ he told Pompey. ‘I can’t see a pilot.’

‘And now what?’ asked Batty.

‘We’ll get a bit farther back into the trees and watch what happens,’ answered Digger. ‘There’s nothing else we can do.’

Squatting as far back in the forest as would permit a view of the beach they saw the vessel drop its anchor. A dinghy was lowered to the water. The four men got in and came ashore. One strode ahead of the others.

‘That’ll be Dostler,’ observed Pompey. ‘He knows just where the stuff was buried.’

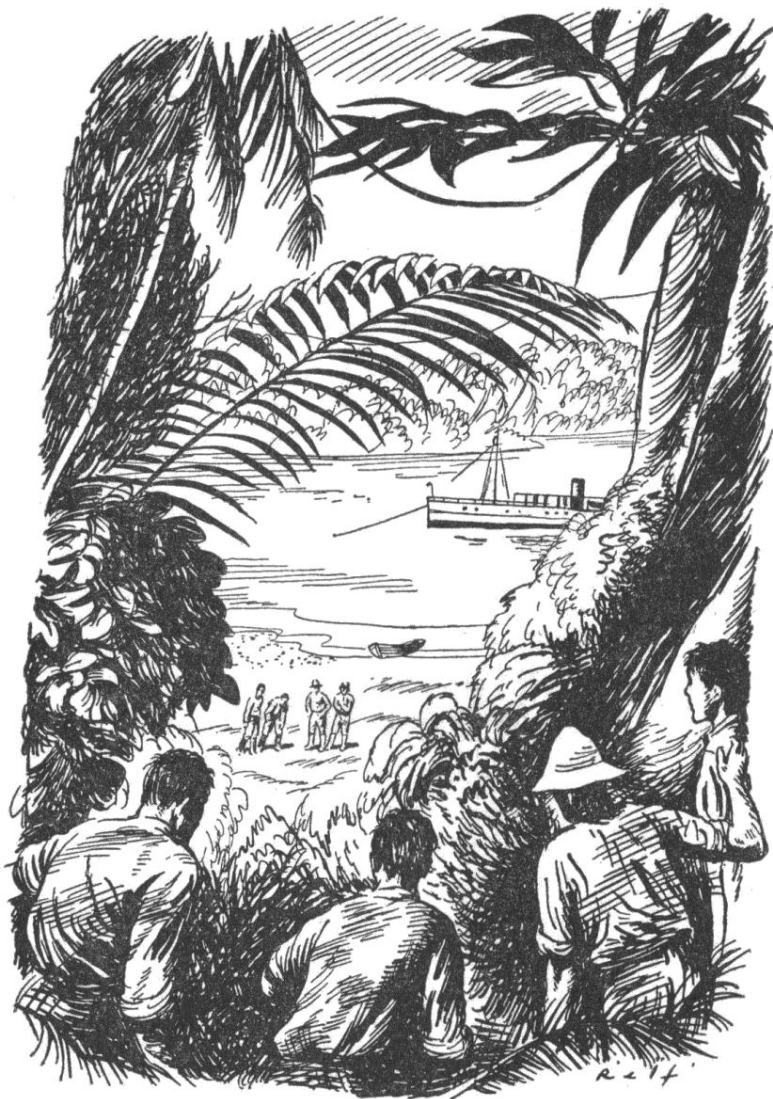
‘And it won’t take him long to see it’s been lifted,’ said Digger.

Of this there was no doubt, for while much of the excavated earth had been thrown, or washed by the rain, back into the trench, the ground was far from level. But, while it was evident that there had been digging on the site, there was little indication of when this had occurred, for the heavy rain had smoothed out the uneven surfaces which otherwise would have been there. So it seemed that the storm, which they had called hard names, had in fact done them a good turn.

Dostler, of course, realised instantly what had happened, and his disappointment was so pathetic to watch that Tommy found it in his heart to be sorry for him. He could appreciate how he would have felt had the situation been reversed. Dostler’s companions, who may have put up the money for the trip, and provided the yacht, reacted quite differently. They stormed, they grumbled, and standing together appeared to be accusing Dostler of misleading them; which struck Tommy as being both foolish and

unkind, for Dostler was not likely to have made the journey without reason to suppose the gold was still there. And when all was said and done, Tommy and his friends had nothing against Dostler. He was not an enemy. He had as much right to be there as the British party. He had not tried to harm them. What he would have done had the circumstances been different, or what he would do if he now discovered them, was a matter of surmise. Anyway, as Pompey remarked in a low voice, the predicament in which the Germans found themselves was nothing to do with them. Digger agreed. It was the luck of the game, he asserted.

That the game was not yet played out was demonstrated in a manner that was not only unexpected but dramatic.



The four Germans were messing about

The four Germans were messing about—literally—in the mud, for what purpose was not apparent unless it was that they couldn't bear to tear themselves away from the place, when round the lower bend of the river came a grey-painted craft which, according to Pompey, could only be a Government gunboat, or armed launch. His statement was supported by the presence on deck of a number of men in uniforms. Leaning against the rail on both sides they appeared to be watching the banks. That the yacht had been seen, and was of interest to them, was made clear by a burst of activity

that followed some excited pointing and arm waving. The Germans saw the vessel, of course, but after a casual glance at it took no further notice.

‘I smell trouble,’ said Pompey. ‘If these Germans haven’t got proper papers they’re gonna wish they’d stayed at home.’

‘Even if their papers are in order, unless they’ve got some cash to oil the palm of the chap in charge of the gunboat, they’re likely to have a thin time,’ asserted Digger cynically. ‘I’ve had some experience of officialdom in South America. At the best they may keep these fellows hanging about for weeks, while they make inquiries—as they put it. You’re always exposed to that risk in this part of the world if the officials think you have any money. You can’t really blame them. They’re badly paid, and they make up the deficiency as best they can.’

‘You’re telling me,’ murmured Batty. ‘Cost me five quid to get ashore. Proper racket.’

‘I suspect those chaps haven’t realised it,’ returned Digger, nodding towards the Germans, who, seeing the gunboat coming over, were walking towards their dinghy. ‘If they kick—and being Germans they may—they’ll make it all the worse for themselves.’

‘Now I’ll tell you something,’ interposed Tommy. ‘Those soldiers weren’t up here for a picnic. I’d say they were looking for four Europeans on the beach—if you see what I mean.’

Pompey struck his thigh. ‘By the Great Horn Spoon, kid, you’ve said a mouthful,’ he declared.

By this time the gunboat had put some men ashore and an altercation had started.

‘This fair beats the band,’ said Pompey. ‘You see what a mess the Germans are in. Even if they’re not accused of taking a hand in the revolution the troops are bound to ask ’em what they’re doing here. What are they a’going to say? Tell ’em they were looking for a pile o’ gold? Not likely. That *would* land ’em in clink. They take a poor view in these parts of treasure hunting without a permit. That’s right, Digger, ain’t it?’

Digger agreed.

The officer in charge now made his decision known. The four Germans were taken to the gunboat. Three men from the gunboat went aboard the yacht, and in a few minutes both vessels were on their way down the river.

‘Well, I call that pretty tough,’ commiserated Tommy.

‘Nothing like as tough as if it had been us on that bloomin’ gunboat,’ Pompey pointed out with some warmth.

‘Not only did they just miss the gold but it looks as if they’re going to land in gaol.’

‘So what?’ exclaimed Pompey. ‘There’s plenty of time yet for us to end up in the same place.’

‘And if we don’t want that to happen we’d better do something, instead of standing here nattering,’ remarked Digger. ‘The question is, what are we going to do with this heap of metal now we’ve got it?’

‘You tell me,’ requested Batty helplessly.

‘You were going to bury it in a fresh place and then make arrangements to come and fetch it.’

‘That was my idea,’ admitted Batty. ‘But looking at the thing at home, and looking at it here—staring me in the face as you might say— isn’t quite the same.’

‘Let’s haul the stuff farther back into the timber, have something to eat, and think about it,’ concluded Digger.

CHAPTER 8

TOUCH AND GO

Two hours later they had still not reached a decision about the disposal of the gold bars, which had been moved a little farther back into the forest and hidden under leaves and dead sticks. They were now actually sitting on the heap while every possibility was discussed.

To Tommy, this was the most fantastic situation that had arisen so far in a chain of adventures that were, to say the least, astonishing. Here they had the gold and didn't know what to do with it! He had imagined, from what he had read of treasure hunting, that the great difficulty was to find the hoard. Once that was achieved the business was as good as finished. In a book that would no doubt be the case, he pondered moodily. In actual fact, he perceived, it was not so. The big problem was still before them. The trouble was, gold bars were not things that could be stowed in the pockets. They were heavy and cumbersome. One or two, with their own weight, would be enough to sink the canoe, which was already low enough in the water for safety.

'Well, we'd better make up our minds soon,' contended Digger. 'If those Germans find themselves in a real awkward spot they may have to tell the truth to save their skins. Should that happen you can imagine what this beach would look like inside twelve hours. The word gold is sheer dynamite. If we're going to get out it's now or never.'

'It won't be now,' observed Tommy sombrely. 'There's one of those *balsas*, a big one, just coming round the corner. Against this current it'll be an hour going past, even with three Indians on the tow rope.' His tone of voice rose a shade as he continued: 'You know, that's what we want.'

'What do we want?' inquired Pompey.

'A *balsa*. With one of those rafts we could load up the gold and float down the river.'

Pompey looked interested. 'I believe you've got something there, kid.'

Said Digger: 'The trouble about that is, white men don't use *balsas*, although one may take a ride on one occasionally.'

'If you knew some trick of darkening our skins we could pass for Indians,' argued Tommy, warming up to his scheme. 'We wouldn't have to

land anywhere until we were well out of the danger area, the other side of Sanquitos. We're all right for grub. As for clothes, the Indians wear the same sort of rags as we've got on—in a better state than ours too, after our blundering about in the mud and rain. Nobody would take any notice of four Indians on a raft. It would be less risky than trying to get past Sanquitos in a canoe.'

'Where are you going to get a *balsa*?'

'Buy that one coming up the river. Those chaps must be sick of towing. They can make another when they get home.'

'How are they going to get home if we take their *balsa*?'

'We'll throw in the canoe in part exchange. They'd get home a jolly sight faster than on that clumsy raft.'

Pompey grinned. 'The kid knows all the answers.'

'It's certainly the only feasible idea to date if we're to get the gold down the river as well as ourselves,' conceded Digger. 'Frankly, I wasn't looking forward to trying to get down the river in the canoe now that gunboat's on the job. I've a feeling that four white men are going to be conspicuous. I was contemplating turning our skins brown anyway.'

'Can you do it?' asked Tommy, excitement creeping into his voice.

'Easily. In my belt I've an ounce or more of permanganate of potash crystals; part of my snake-bite equipment; never move without it since I saw a man die from snake-bite. A strong solution of that will make us as dark as we need to be.'

'The only thing, then, is to find out if those *balseros* will part with their raft,' asserted Batty. 'I'm all for it. Let's get out, I say, and if we can take the gold with us so much the better.'

'Put the rifle and cartridges in the deal,' suggested Pompey. 'That should help, and we shan't want 'em.'

'Wait here,' ordered Digger, and getting up, taking the rifle, he strode across the beach to intercept the *balsa*.

The others watched anxiously, although the transaction was concluded much more easily than they expected. They knew Digger had been successful when he handed over the rifle and emptied the cartridges from his pocket. Leaving the raft on the beach the men went with him to the place where the canoe had been hidden, and in a few minutes they could be seen paddling away.

Digger returned smiling.

‘Great work,’ complimented Pompey.

‘It was easy,’ answered Digger. ‘They were only concerned with getting home, and as they come from the headwaters of the river, where there are plenty of *balsa* trees, they jumped at the offer. But come on. Let’s get our skins dyed before it rains again and makes the job difficult. I’ll do Pompey first and he can start loading up. We’ve got to work fast. If that gunboat comes back in the middle of things it’s going to be awkward. While I’m doing Pompey you others can make a start. Get the grub aboard first in case we have to move off in a hurry. We shall need food—and we can’t eat gold.’

With a definite object now in view everyone went to work with a will, but it was the best part of two hours before they were ready to move. Luckily the rain kept off, which gave their new skins a chance to dry; and even Digger had to admit, as he poled the *balsa* out into the stream, that as far as appearance went, even at close quarters there was very little difference between them and what they pretended to be. Everyone was glad to be clear of the beach which, while it had not treated them badly, might well become a dangerous mooring.

How well advised they had been not to linger there was proved during the afternoon, when they met the gunboat and the yacht coming up the river together at a purposeful speed. To Tommy’s consternation the gunboat turned towards them. Cupping his hands round his mouth the man on the bridge shouted something, and Tommy held his breath while Pompey replied.

The vessel went on without slackening speed.

‘What was that about?’ asked Tommy.

‘Wanted to know if we’d seen four *gringos* in a canoe.’

‘What did you tell him?’

Pompey chuckled. ‘Told him the truth, of course. Said we saw ’em just after daybreak, away up the river.’

‘He’ll learn the truth when he overtakes the Indians in the canoe.’

‘He’s some way to go before he does that,’ said Pompey confidently. ‘I’d rather see his stern than his bows.’

Tommy wondered what would have happened had they been in the canoe. He also wondered what the captain of the gunboat would have done had he known that under their tarpaulin there was a neat stack of gold ingots. He decided that it was better not to think about it.

‘We ought to pass Sanquitos in the dark,’ asserted Digger. ‘That should suit us fine.’

What was going to happen afterwards had not yet been decided, Digger repeating his principle of one thing at a time.

The *balsa* drifted on at the same speed as the current, somewhat low in the water under its heavy load. An occasional canoe or *balsa* was seen, but apart from these there was no traffic on the river. The light began to fail. The sun dipped behind the wall of trees. Then suddenly it was dark, with a million stars gleaming in an indigo-blue sky. Fireflies waltzed along the river bank.

The moon crept over the tree-tops, glowing red at first, huge, magnificent. Slowly as it climbed it turned to silver, to flash on the ripples made by the *balsa*’s passage through the water. On both sides loomed the forest, black and mysterious. From it at intervals would come strange cries, chirpings and whistlings; and sometimes a wonderful elusive perfume.

The raft drifted on, for the most part through a silence that was profound. Later, a straggling cluster of lights showed the position of Sanquitos; but still the *balsa* glided on and Tommy breathed a sigh of relief as the lights vanished astern.

Digger lighted a small fire to boil water for coffee and they had a meal. ‘We’re doing fine,’ said he. ‘We shall soon have to start thinking about what we’re going to do when we get to the estuary—or before that, if we’re not to drift out to sea.’

‘Yer know, mates, I’ve been thinking about this ’ere river,’ said Pompey pensively. ‘Years ago, when I was on the old *Dolphin*, one o’ the Green Funnel Line what works the South American Atlantic ports, we used to call at a cockeyed little place at the mouth of a river much like this one. I forget its name, and I don’t think I ever knew the name of the river. It meant nothing to me. But I’d know the place again if I saw it, because back o’ the town there’s a big rock on a hill on which someone has stuck a statue of one of the local big-wigs. Painted red, I remember. There’s a long pier, falling to bits, where we used to pick up rubber and timber. Jock Anderson ran the *Dolphin* in my time. If this ain’t the river it can’t be far away. It was in this part of the world.’

‘What if this is the river?’ asked Digger.

‘I was thinking o’ getting home. The Green Funnels might still call here. That’d suit me. We’d be okay under the old Red Duster. We’d be taking a chance to sail under any other flag with *this* cargo.’

‘What are we going to use for money to buy a passage?’ inquired Digger a trifle sarcastically.

‘This stuff we’ve got under our hatches, of course. Gold’s gold anywhere, and if there’s a master on the Seven Seas who’d turn up his nose at it, then I’ve never met him.’

‘Was the name of this port you’re talking about La Garta?’ interposed Batty.

‘That’s it!’ exclaimed Pompey. ‘Now how would you know that?’

‘Because that’s where I wanted to get off when I came out, but they wouldn’t let me. Said I had to report at the capital before I could go ashore anywhere else; show my papers and go through customs, and all that sort of rot. La Garta would have suited me better because it’s at the mouth of the Olarayo.’

‘That’s dandy,’ rejoined Pompey. ‘All we have to do is find a snug little cove where we can lie low till the old Green Funnel blows in. Leave the rest to me. There’s bound to be someone aboard as knows this picture on me chest.’

Silence fell. The *balsa* drifted on, Digger using the pole to keep it near the bank ready to take cover should an emergency arise. Tommy fell asleep with a block of gold under his head for a pillow. His last thought was, in the matter of adventure he had no cause for complaint; for come what may, not many people could boast that they had slept on a bed of solid gold.

When he was awakened by the others talking, day was just breaking, and he was astonished by the width of the river. Digger and Pompey, using overhanging branches, were dragging the *balsa* into a thick growth of rushes backed by a narrow sandy beach.

Seeing him awake, Pompey grinned and said: ‘We’re there. La Garta is about a mile lower down. The same old pier’s still there, and lying alongside is a craft which, if it ain’t the *Dolphin*, is her twin sister.’

Tommy thrilled at the news. ‘That’s wonderful,’ he cried, starting up.

‘Pompey’s going down alone to have a word with the Old Man,’ Digger told him. ‘We’ll wait here.’

After a quick meal from their fast-diminishing provisions Pompey set off, and after that all the others could do was wait, watching the river traffic, of which, naturally, there was more here than higher up.

Pompey was away for about two hours, and when he returned, carrying a heavy bundle of sailcloth and rope, one glance at his grinning face was

enough to reveal that his mission had been successful.

‘It ain’t the *Dolphin*,’ he announced, dropping his bundle and sitting on it. ‘It’s a new sister ship, the *Dorado*. And who do you think I found on the bridge? Old Jock Anderson himself. Was he surprised to see me? You should have seen his face when I told him what we’d got and how we were fixed.’

‘You told him about the gold?’ interposed Digger.

‘Had to. You can’t fool an old salt like Jock.’

‘Will he take us?’

‘Sure he’ll take us. He’s due away on the tide just before sundown, bound for London; but to save us lugging the stuff down to him he’s coming up here to fetch it. Says it’s better we shouldn’t be seen in the town. And he don’t want the crew to see this cargo of ours in case they start talking; so we’ve got to sew it up and rope it, so as the winches can pick it up quick and easy. The port authorities might wonder what he’s a’doing of up here. I’ve brought some canvas in case the tarpaulin wasn’t enough. Here’s needles and rope.’

‘He won’t be able to get close in, in a ship of that size,’ averred Digger.

‘ ’Course he won’t. He’s been on the mud in these ’ere rivers too often to take any chances of that. He’s coming as near as he can get, just below, and we’re to float down to him. He’ll throw us a line to bring us alongside. He’s having a boat standing by in case there’s any difficulty.’

‘When can we expect him?’

‘As soon as he’s finished loading rubber. He ain’t got much more to pick up.’

‘What are we paying him for this?’

‘I told him he could have a slab of gold, out of which he could pay the owners what he thought fit.’

‘Fair enough.’

‘Let’s get busy. We ain’t got too much time,’ concluded Pompey.

With what haste the ingots were sewn into canvas covers and roped up can be more easily imagined than described. With everyone working like a slave the work went forward quickly, and by the time the deep-sea tramp could be seen feeling its way cautiously up the river, with a man in the bows taking soundings, everything was ready.

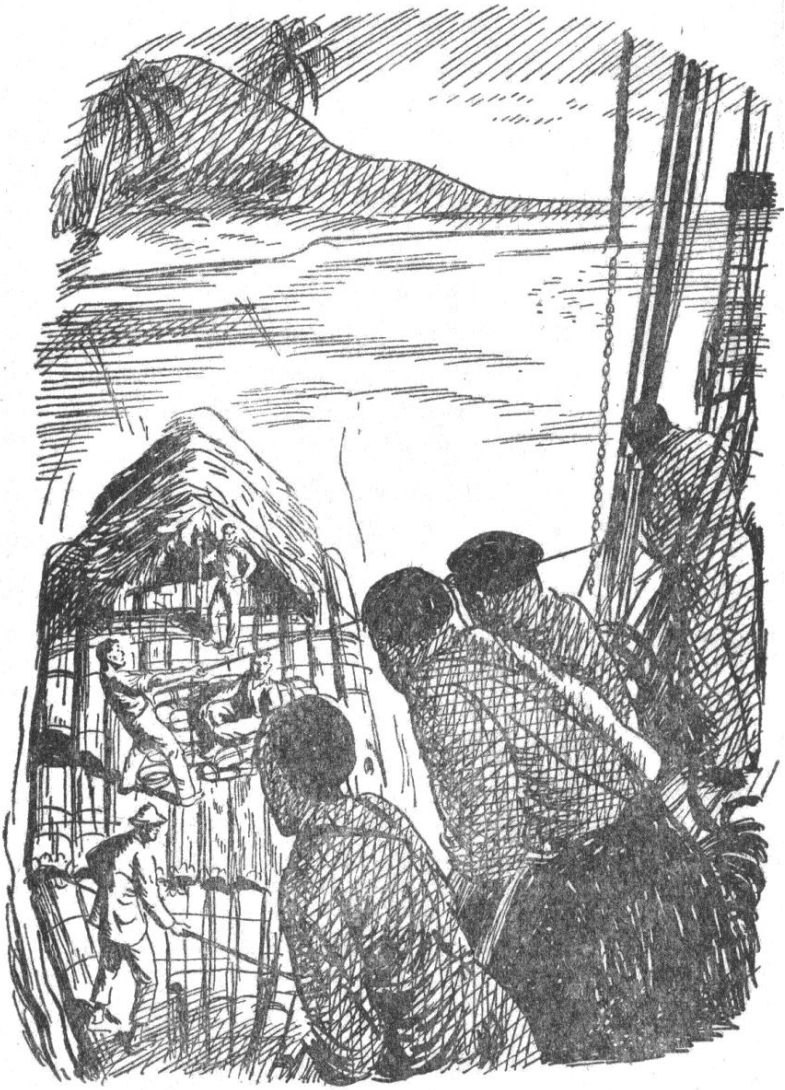
‘We’ll push out so as he can see us,’ said Pompey. ‘That’ll make it easier for everybody. Anything to save time.’

The fact was, with success now in sight, fears of a last-minute hitch had everyone in a state of mounting anxiety and excitement.

The *balsa* was poled clear of the trees, and on reaching the stream began to drift down towards the steamer, which changed course slightly to meet it. But once Pompey was out of the depth of his pole the raft could no longer be controlled, and for a few minutes there was confusion when it looked as if they might pass too far from the ship for a line to reach them. However, seeing what was likely to happen the captain edged inshore a little, so that the line, when it was thrown, just reached them. Pompey seized it and hung on, with the result that in a few minutes they were alongside, with a row of curious faces staring down at them.

The rest was mere routine. The steam winches hissed; chains rattled, and one by one the heavy parcels were swung inboard, where they disappeared from sight. The crew of the *balsa* were then hauled up and the raft allowed to drift away. Bells clanged, and the *Dorado's* screws churned the muddy water as it turned downstream.

‘We’ve done it,’ yelled Tommy delightedly.



In a few minutes they were alongside

Pompey did not answer. He was staring up the river. There was no need to ask what he was staring at. Round the bend, perhaps half a mile distant, came the gunboat, a high bow-wave indicating the speed at which it was travelling.

‘Will it catch us?’ asked Tommy tensely.

‘Easy,’ answered Pompey heavily, and dashed up to the bridge.

The others followed.

The skipper had his spy-glass to his eye. ‘They’re signalling us to stop,’ he announced.

‘Going to?’ asked Pompey tersely.

Jock Anderson smiled. ‘Not me. I’m not taking orders from that bunch of scallywags.’

By the time the *Dorado* had made the full turn to get her bows pointing to the sea, the gunboat had nearly halved the gap between them.

‘Will they shoot at us if we don’t stop, do you think?’ Tommy asked.

The captain’s eyes glinted. ‘They’ll think twice before they fire on *that*, my boy,’ he replied grimly, nodding at the Red Ensign his ship was flying. ‘Maybe we can teach ’em a trick or two—aye, in their own back yard.’ So saying he spun the wheel and the *Dorado* heeled a little as it altered course.

The gunboat saw the move and acted instantly, turning across the arc of the circle to cut off the *Dorado*, so that it looked as if Jock Anderson had lost ground instead of gaining it. Tommy, horrified, could only stare, wondering at the purpose of this apparently fatal manoeuvre.

He hadn’t long to wait for it to be revealed. Pompey let out a bellow of triumph as the gunboat appeared to heave itself out of the water, stop, and take on a heavy list. Its siren hooted uselessly.

Said Jock, his face wreathed in smiles, ‘Aye, she’s found it. Ye ken yon heap o’ mud, Pompey? I mind the day fine I put the old *Dolphin* on it and had to wait for a spate to lift me off. Like to have cost me my ticket.’

‘As I said before, nothing like knowing yer way around,’ observed Pompey.

Leaving the luckless gunboat on the mudbank where its haste and careless seamanship had put it, the *Dorado* ploughed on towards the open sea.

By nightfall the coast of Rioguiana was a purple smudge on the skyline.

.

That, really, was the end of the adventure which Tommy had set off to seek, and had found. It finished where it began, for the *Dorado* made its run home without incident and in due course arrived at what has sometimes been called the ‘Hub of the Empire’—the Port of London.

The gold was, of course, declared on arrival, and an inquiry followed; but as nothing was known of it, and no claim was made by anyone purporting to be the owner, the treasure remained automatically the property

of the finders. They were not allowed to keep the actual metal—not that they wanted it—which went to the Bank of England, where a credit representing its value was lodged in their names.

In spite of protests Batty insisted that they should share and share alike. The others thought that Batty, who had produced the chart, should have a larger share, for without him they would have known nothing of the gold. But Batty argued that without their help he would not have got the gold. That they had been lucky to get it was not to be doubted, but even so, the prize had not been won without danger and discomfort boldly faced. Worthwhile prizes seldom are.

At a celebration supper, as they discussed their wealth, Digger remarked: ‘As I once told you, the trouble about striking it rich is, you’ve lost your incentive to go a’hunting.’

To which Tommy replied: ‘Don’t you believe it. I can now start on a new adventure—and this time pay my passage.’

‘Just what I was thinking,’ said Batty.

‘I could go to sea myself for once without having to shovel my way around,’ put in Pompey thoughtfully.

Digger agreed there might be something in the idea.

Printed in Great Britain by
Thomas Nelson and Sons Ltd, Edinburgh

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Misspelled words and printer errors have been corrected. Where multiple spellings occur, majority use has been employed.

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

[The end of *Adventure Bound* by Capt. W. E. (William Earl) Johns]