

CHAPTER XIV

TRIUMPHANT

THE *Emmie's* course lay due south for the matter of a mile before she could turn the lower end of the island. Consequently she had a fair wind for that distance, and there was wind enough to satisfy even the boys. With their booms well out and clipping the foam from the frothing waves with every roll, the pursued and the pursuer swooped forward through the night.

The turtlers knew well that the boys could play them no tricks here. There was only one course for both and that was straight ahead. Reefs and keys and shoals hemmed in the narrow lane of water on both sides, and the least trifling with the tiller would result disastrously.

The storm was playing into the hands of the turtlers. Their sail was not reefed down as close as the *Emmie's*. The wind fairly hurled their heavier craft through the broken surface of the

water. By the incessant play of the lightning which crackled in a net of blinding lines across the sky they could see the *Emmie* clearly, and gauge with accuracy every yard they gained.

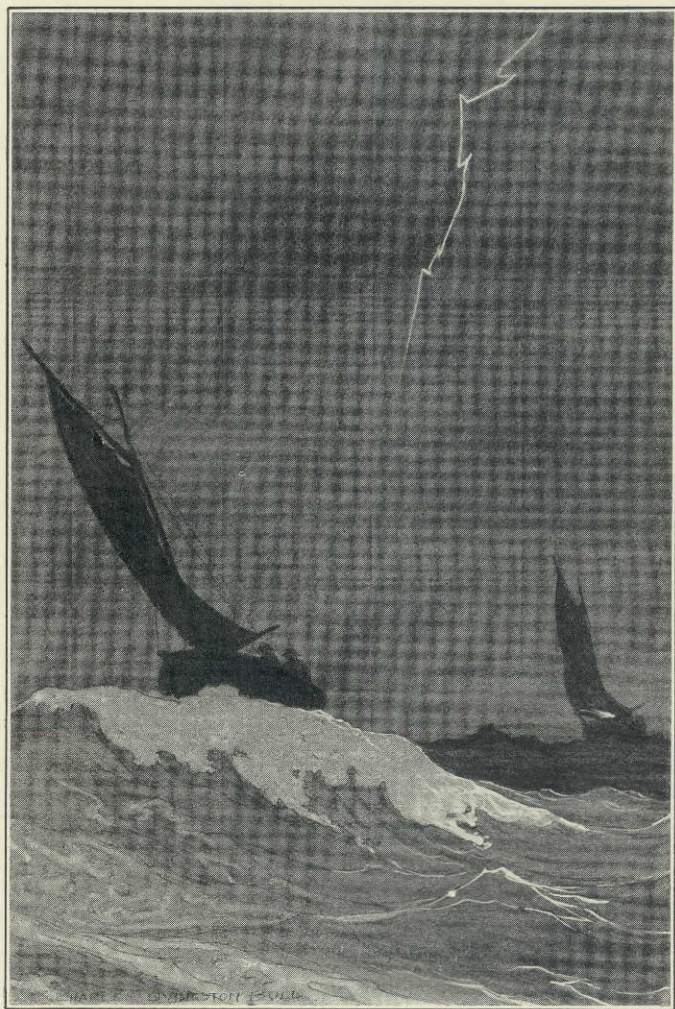
"Do you think we can make it?" shouted Jim through the wind. He was crouching in the cockpit with the loose end of the mainsheet in his hands. It took Bob's superior strength and coolness to handle the tiller in such weather.

"I reckon we can if the wind don't blow any harder," said Bob. "I wish it would rain."

"It might as well be daylight, with this lightning," acquiesced Jim. "We're not far from the end of the island, though."

Much as he wished the blurring rain would come the lightning was useful in one respect. By its glare Bob could see the island spring out of the blackness as clear as print on a page, and these sudden glimpses enabled him to get his bearings. In every interval of dark his heart seemed to crawl up his throat at the thought that the next plunge might crack the *Emmie's* bottom on some shoal. With the eager seas behind her she could not live long if once she struck.

He did not share Jim's eagerness to reach the



WAGNER'S ILLUSTRATION

“THE NEXT PLUNGE MIGHT WRECK THEM.”

end of the island. Though the turtlers had gained upon them the *Emmie* was far from being overtaken, and Bob believed that as the wind lessened she could more than hold her own on a straight course. Once they had rounded the lower end of the island they would have to beat a wearisome way home, and here skill and luck and a knowledge of the ticklish region would count heavily. The turtlers, who lived on their boat the year round, were almost as cunning and skilful in the water as wild fowl.

The end of the island drew near. Bob clenched his teeth and braced himself for what was coming. Now he was glad of the three reefs in the *Emmie's* sail. Stiff as she was she could not have faced such a wind with all her canvas.

“Ready!” cried Bob. “Now, in with her!”

He bore upon the tiller and the *Emmie* swooped in a great curve, the seas swashing over her high weather rail. With all his strength Jim hauled upon the mainsheet. It was as much as he could do to get the boom in, but presently Bob cried out for him to make fast.

This was a short leg and a swift one. The turtlers almost came to grief as they changed

their course, and for a moment the big sail threw their craft over at a perilous angle. But she righted without mishap, and by the next flash Bob could see her crew perched on her weather rail, holding her down to it with their weight.

Though they gained here the hardest part of all was to come. Fortunately there was room to spare, and the *Emmie* could make quite a run of it before coming about. She tore across the seas like a mad thing, her lee rail under, and sheets of cold spray drenching the boys to the skin.

“Let go the sheet!” cried Bob, and obeying her tiller the *Emmie* swung up into the wind, echoing like a drum under the blows of the waves. For one horrid moment she hung there wallowing, but as the mainsheet snapped taut and the gale caught her sail again, she headed bravely into the smother.

The turtlers came about the next instant and made as if to cut the *Emmie* off. But their heavier craft did not respond with sufficient quickness, and her large spread of canvas hampered her. Still, when she began to forge forward she had cut a third off the *Emmie's* lead.

Bob dreaded the repetition of these tactics in the narrowing waters ahead. In the long throat of the lagoon the turtlers, absolutely reckless as they were, might succeed in running them down.

Close to the lagoon's throat on the east was a wide shoal, an under-water continuation of the outer bar. Ordinarily there was enough water on it to let the *Emmie* slide across, but very little more. Under the drive of a norther the water was always lower there than usual, but nevertheless Bob determined on the desperate expedient of crossing this dangerous place.

If they struck, the water was not deep enough to drown them and they might be able to escape to the bar in the tender. If they succeeded in passing over there would be heavy seas to face until they could reach an opening in the bar two miles north, but Bob was not afraid of the seas. The question was, could they reach the bar before the turtlers, if the *Emmie* struck. And then another possibility dawned upon him.

The turtlers could not be so familiar with the water round the lagoon as they were with those farther south. It was quite possible that they did not know of the existence of the shoal, and

it was highly improbable that their sloop could pass over it.

“Jim!” cried Bob. “I’m going to cross Broken Point shoal on the next tack.”

“We can’t do it!” gasped Jim. “We’ll strike as sure as guns!”

Bob set his jaw firmly.

“I think we can get over,” he said. “Ready now! About she comes!”

The *Emmie* pounded furiously in the black waters, and heeled as the wind struck her till it seemed as if she meant to go on her beam’s end.

“Shall I loosen the sheet?” roared Jim, clinging to the rail with one hooked arm, the water rushing over his feet, which were braced against the lee wall of the cockpit.

“No,” cried Bob. “She’ll straighten out in a minute. And she won’t draw so much water, sailing on her ear.”

Jim comprehended and smiled grimly. As the sky burned in a furious darting of electricity they saw the turtlers’ boat swooping behind them like some monstrous storm bird. How the craft had gained upon them so, they could not tell. There

she was, and it was nip and tuck now for Broken Point shoal.

With his eyes fixed unwaveringly ahead to catch every glimpse of the point, Bob steered the *Emmie* for the best there was in him.

"We're almost there, Jim," he cried at last. "Bring up the stuff into the cockpit. If we strike we must have it ready to put in the tender."

It took strength and grit to crawl along the lowered side of the little cabin and remove the heavy burlap bag from its nook forward, but in spite of slips and tumbles Jim presently appeared with their treasure.

"Now for it!" cried Bob. "Haul the sheet in a bit more."

"She'll turn over!" said Jim, alarmed.

"No she won't," said Bob. "We're close up in the lee of the point. But just take a turn round the cleat and be ready to let go like a shot."

The *Emmie* went down with a sickening give as Jim yanked her boom inboard. Down she went till her little cockpit was half filled with water. If the wind had increased by a breath she would have gone over, but in a moment she was under the lee of the point and in calmer waters. That

danger was passed. If she did not strike all would be well.

Jim looked back over his shoulder, striving to pierce the darkness. He could distinguish nothing, not even the hissing heads of the waves racing alongside. But he knew that the flashes had revealed their course, and that the turtlers were close behind unless they had suddenly abandoned the chase through fear of the shoal.

A long streak of lightning flared and the pursuing craft stood out clearly on the weirdly lighted water. The flash had hardly vanished when three huge, dazzling rents seemed to tear the sky apart. It was as light as day for a moment, and Jim, gazing astern, saw the turtlers' boat pause suddenly in her downward swoop. Over went her mast, cracked short off at the deck, and her sail beat upon the water like the broken wing of a goose. Darkness engulfed her the next instant, and peals of thunder rattled a mocking requiem.

Awed by the catastrophe Jim forgot to feel triumphant.

"They've struck, Bob!" he cried. "I saw the mast go clean overboard."

“What!” said Bob. “Hurrah! Ease her off now. We’re as safe as if we were at home in bed.”

“They’re not in any real danger, I reckon,” said Jim, letting the mainsheet out.

“Not a bit. The water isn’t over three feet deep here if it’s that, and they’re only a short way from the point. They can row there in three minutes — or walk if they choose. Trust a turtler to take care of himself. But they won’t get their old boat off Broken Point shoal in a hurry.”

“Think it’s safe to ease her off?” asked Jim. “I didn’t take my bearings that last flash.”

“She’s begun to deepen,” said Bob. “We’ll strike plenty of water in a minute. There, feel that!”

The *Emmie* plunged violently and tossed the spray over her bows, but in a moment she steadied to the longer swing of the waves. The motion was a relief after the short pitching on the shoal, and though the wind now bore upon them with more force it was easier to meet it in this deeper water. Nor was there any need now of sacrificing safety to speed. Worn out as the boys

were from their strenuous day and night their spirits rose exultantly.

"It'll be morning when we get there," said Bob.

"Yes," said Jim. "It seems almost like a dream, Bob." He drew the bag to him and spreading it open, feasted his eyes on the heap of tarnished coins. How much blood and violence those dull disks had seen since they left the mints of Spain. Their reappearance after decades of oblivion had found the world as lustful for their possession as of old. They had roused all that was selfish and cruel in man, and the thought of their history sobered the spirits of the boys. A great responsibility went with the possession of them. There was good and evil in them. So far their power had been largely used for evil, and it seemed to Bob and Jim that it was for them to wipe out the stain upon Morgan's gold.

As they passed through the cut in the bar into the lagoon the sun was just rising behind the black pines on the mainland. The wind still blew with force, but the clouds were breaking and in the west was a patch of clear soft blue below which the sun rose glorious. Its light shot over

the black pines and touched the white houses of Ordville. Bob saw the little bungalow among its azaleas, and the thought that he was bringing some relief into the lives of the sleeping inmates swelled his heart and flushed his tired face. And back in the pines was a sick girl. He was bringing aid to her too. In truth Bob realized then that in peace of spirit the doer of good has his reward.

