

6. The Buccaneers

Once more the blacks formed a circle around our adventurer, who coolly drew his tube and said to the chief:

"Tell your people I'm going to walk away through those trees, and if any one dares to interfere with me I'll paralyze him."

The chief understood enough English to catch his meaning, and repeated the message to his men. Having seen the terrible effect of the electric tube they wisely fell back and allowed the boy to pass.

He marched through their lines with a fine air of dignity, although he was fearful lest some of the blacks should stick a spear into him or bump his head with a war-club. But they were awed by the wonders they had seen and were still inclined to believe him a god, so he was not molested.

When he found himself outside the village he made for the high plateau in the center of the island, where he could be safe from the cannibals while he collected his thoughts. But when he reached the place he found the sides so steep he could not climb them, so he adjusted the indicator to the word "up" and found it had still had enough power to support his body while he clambered up the rocks to the level, grass-covered space at the top.

Then, reclining upon his back, he gave himself up to thoughts of how he might escape from his unpleasant predicament.

"Here I am, on a cannibal island, hundreds of miles from civilization, with no way to get back," he reflected. "The family will look for me every day, and finally decide I've broken my neck. The Demon will call upon me when the week is up and won't find me at home; so I'll miss the next three gifts. I don't mind that so much, for they might bring me into worst scrapes than this. But how am I to get away from this beastly island? I'll be eaten, after all, if I don't look out!"

These and similar thoughts occupied him for some time, yet in spite of much planning and thinking he could find no practical means of escape.

At the end of an hour he looked over the edge of the plateau and found it surrounded by a ring of the black cannibals, who had calmly seated themselves to watch his movements.

"Perhaps they intend to starve me into surrender," he thought; "but they won't succeed so long as my tablets hold out. And if, in time, they should starve me, I'll be too thin and tough to make good eating; so I'll get the best of them, anyhow."

Then he again lay down and began to examine his electrical traveling machine. He did not dare take it apart, fearing he might not be able to get it together again, for he knew nothing at all about its construction. But he discovered two little dents on the edge, one on each side, which had evidently been caused by the pressure of the rope.

"If I could get those dents out," he thought, "the machine might work."

He first tried to pry out the edges with his pocket knife, but the attempt resulted in failure. Then, as the sides seemed a little bulged outward by the dents, he placed the machine between two flat stones and pressed them together until the little instrument was nearly round again. The dents remained, to be sure, but he hoped he had removed the pressure upon the works.

There was just one way to discover how well he had succeeded, so he fastened the machine to his wrist and turned the indicator to the word "up."

Slowly he ascended, this time to a height of nearly twenty feet. Then his progress became slower and finally ceased altogether.

"That's a little better," he thought. "Now let's see if it will go sidewise."

He put the indicator to "north-west,"--the direction of home--and very slowly the machine obeyed and carried him away from the plateau and across the island.

The natives saw him go, and springing to their feet began uttering excited shouts and throwing their spears at him. But he was already so high and so far away that they failed to reach him, and the boy continued his journey unharmed.

Once the branches of a tall tree caught him and nearly tipped him over; but he managed to escape others by drawing up his feet. At last he was free of the island and traveling over the ocean again. He was not at all sorry to bid good-by to the cannibal island, but he was worried about the

machine, which clearly was not in good working order. The vast ocean was beneath him, and he moved no faster than an ordinary walk.

"At this rate I'll get home some time next year," he grumbled. "However, I suppose I ought to be glad the machine works at all." And he really was glad.

All the afternoon and all the long summer night he moved slowly over the water. It was annoying to go at "a reg'lar jog-trot," as Rob called it, after his former swift flight; but there was no help for it.

Just as dawn was breaking he saw in the distance a small vessel, sailing in the direction he was following, yet scarcely moving for lack of wind. He soon caught up with it, but saw no one on deck, and the craft had a dingy and uncared-for appearance that was not reassuring. But after hovering over it for some time Rob decided to board the ship and rest for a while. He alighted near the bow, where the deck was highest, and was about to explore the place when a man came out of the low cabin and espied him.

This person had a most villainous countenance, and was dark-skinned, black-bearded and dressed in an outlandish, piratical costume. On seeing the boy he gave a loud shout and was immediately joined by four companions, each as disagreeable in appearance as the first.

Rob knew there would be trouble the moment he looked at this evil crew, and when they drew their daggers and pistols and began fiercely shouting in an unknown tongue, the boy sighed and took the electric tube from his coat pocket.

The buccaneers did not notice the movement, but rushed upon him so quickly that he had to press the button at a lively rate. The tube made no noise at all, so it was a strange and remarkable sight to see the pirates suddenly drop to the deck and lie motionless. Indeed, one was so nearly upon him when the electric current struck him that his head, in falling, bumped into Rob's stomach and sent him reeling against the side of the vessel.

He quickly recovered himself, and seeing his enemies were rendered harmless, the boy entered the cabin and examined it curiously. It was dirty and ill-smelling enough, but the corners and spare berths were

heaped with merchandise of all kinds which had been taken from those so unlucky as to have met these cruel and desperate men.

After a short inspection of the place he returned to the deck and again seated himself in the bow.

The crippled condition of his traveling machine was now his chief trouble, and although a good breeze had sprung up to fill the sails and the little bark was making fair headway, Rob knew he could never expect to reach home unless he could discover a better mode of conveyance than this.

He unstrapped the machine from his wrist to examine it better, and while holding it carelessly in his hand it slipped and fell with a bang to the deck, striking upon its round edge and rolling quickly past the cabin and out of sight. With a cry of alarm he ran after it, and after much search found it lying against the bulwark near the edge of a scupper hole, where the least jar of the ship would have sent it to the bottom of the ocean. Rob hastily seized his treasure and upon examining it found the fall had bulged the rim so that the old dents scarcely showed at all. But its original shape was more distorted than ever, and Rob feared he had utterly ruined its delicate mechanism. Should this prove to be true, he might now consider himself a prisoner of this piratical band, the members of which, although temporarily disabled, would soon regain consciousness.

He sat in the bow, sadly thinking of his misfortunes, until he noticed that one of the men began to stir. The effect of the electric shock conveyed by the tube was beginning to wear away, and now the buccaneer sat up, rubbed his head in a bewildered fashion and looked around him. When he saw Rob he gave a shout of rage and drew his knife, but one motion of the electric tube made him cringe and slip away to the cabin, where he remained out of danger.

And now the other four sat up, groaning and muttering in their outlandish speech; But they had no notion of facing Rob's tube a second time, so one by one they joined their leader in the cabin, leaving the boy undisturbed.

By this time the ship had begun to pitch and toss in an uncomfortable fashion, and Rob noticed that the breeze had increased to a gale. There being no one to look after the sails, the vessel was in grave danger of

capsizing or breaking her masts. The waves were now running high, too, and Rob began to be worried.

Presently the captain of the pirates stuck his head out of the cabin door, jabbered some unintelligible words and pointed to the sails. The boy nodded, for he understood they wanted to attend to the rigging. So the crew trooped forth, rather fearfully, and began to reef the sails and put the ship into condition to weather the storm.

Rob paid no further attention to them. He looked at his traveling machine rather doubtfully and wondered if he dared risk its power to carry him through the air. Whether he remained in the ship or trusted to the machine, he stood a good chance of dropping into the sea at any moment. So, while he hesitated, he attached the machine to his wrist and leaned over the bulwarks to watch the progress of the storm. He might stay in the ship until it foundered, he thought, and then take his chances with the machine. He decided to wait until a climax arrived.

The climax came the next moment, for while he leaned over the bulwarks the buccaneers stole up behind him and suddenly seized him in their grasp. While two of them held his arms the others searched his pockets, taking from him the electric tube and the silver box containing his tablets. These they carried to the cabin and threw upon the heap of other valuables they had stolen. They did not notice his traveling machine, however, but seeing him now unarmed they began jeering and laughing at him, while the brutal captain relieved his anger by giving the prisoner several malicious kicks.

Rob bore his misfortune meekly, although he was almost ready to cry with grief and disappointment. But when one of the pirates, to inflict further punishment on the boy, came towards him with a heavy strap, he resolved not to await the blow.

Turning the indicator to the word "up" he found, to his joy and relief, that it would yet obey the influence of the power of repulsion. Seeing him rise into the air the fellow made a grab for his foot and held it firmly, while his companions ran to help him. Weight seemed to make no difference in the machine; it lifted the pirate as well as Rob; it lifted another who clung to the first man's leg, and another who clung to him. The other two also caught hold, hoping their united strength would pull him down, and the next minute Rob was soaring through the air with the entire string of five buccaneers dangling from his left leg.

At first the villains were too astounded to speak, but as they realized that they were being carried through the air and away from their ship they broke into loud shouts of dismay, and finally the one who grasped Rob's leg lost his hold and the five plunged downward and splashed into the sea.

Finding the machine disposed to work accurately, Rob left the buccaneers to swim to the ship in the best way they could, while he dropped down to the deck again and recovered from the cabin his box of tablets and the electric tube. The fellows were just scrambling on board when he again escaped, shooting into the air with considerable speed.

Indeed, the instrument now worked better than at any time since he had reached the cannibal island, and the boy was greatly delighted.

The wind at first sent him spinning away to the south, but he continued to rise until he was above the air currents, and the storm raged far beneath him. Then he set the indicator to the northwest and breathlessly waited to see if it would obey. Hurrah! away he sped at a fair rate of speed, while all his anxiety changed to a feeling of sweet contentment.

His success had greatly surprised him, but he concluded that the jar caused by dropping the instrument had relieved the pressure upon the works, and so helped rather than harmed the free action of the electric currents.

While he moved through the air with an easy, gliding motion he watched with much interest the storm raging below. Above his head the sun was peacefully shining and the contrast was strange and impressive. After an hour or so the storm abated, or else he passed away from it, for the deep blue of the ocean again greeted his eyes. He dropped downward until he was about a hundred feet above the water, when he continued his northwesterly course.

But now he regretted having interfered for a moment with the action of the machine, for his progress, instead of being swift as a bird's flight, became slow and jerky, nor was he sure that the damaged machine might not break down altogether at any moment. Yet so far his progress was in the right direction, and he resolved to experiment no further with the instrument, but to let it go as it would, so long as it supported him above the water. However irregular the motion might be, it was sure, if

continued, to bring him to land in time, and that was all he cared about just then.

When night fell his slumber was broken and uneasy, for he wakened more than once with a start of fear that the machine had broken and he was falling into the sea. Sometimes he was carried along at a swift pace, and again the machine scarcely worked at all; so his anxiety was excusable.

The following day was one of continued uneasiness for the boy, who began to be harrassed by doubts as to whether, after all, he was moving in the right direction. The machine had failed at one time in this respect and it might again. He had lost all confidence in its accuracy.

In spite of these perplexities Rob passed the second night of his uneven flight in profound slumber, being exhausted by the strain and excitement he had undergone. When he awoke at daybreak, he saw, to his profound delight, that he was approaching land.

The rising sun found him passing over a big city, which he knew to be Boston.

He did not stop. The machine was so little to be depended upon that he dared make no halt. But he was obliged to alter the direction from northwest to west, and the result of this slight change was so great a reduction in speed that it was mid-day before he saw beneath him the familiar village in which he lived.

Carefully marking the location of his father's house, he came to a stop directly over it, and a few moments later he managed to land upon the exact spot in the back yard whence he had taken his first successful flight.