



Journey to the River Sea

Chapter Thirteen

The twins, in their flesh-pink party frocks and satin shoes, had run out into the street. They panted across the square, turned down a side road, and as they ran they quarrelled.

‘We can’t go and see those men without Mummy,’ said Gwendolyn.

‘Yes we can. I know where the Pension Maria is; it’s quite near.’

‘But it’s down by the docks. There are awful men there. I’m not going without Mummy,’ said Gwendolyn obstinately.

‘All right then, we’ll get her. But don’t blame me if she tries to get half the reward.’

'She won't. We wouldn't let her. It's for us and no one else.'

A man came out of his house and stood by his garden gate.

'You see, he wants us for the White Slave Traffic,' said Gwendolyn, and tried to run faster.

The man, who had come out to walk his dog, crossed the road but the twins did not stop till they reached the club where their mother was playing bridge.

'Right, that's it,' said Mr Trapwood. He shut the lid of his suitcase. 'In another couple of hours we can go on board.'

He looked longingly at the lighted ship, ready for her start at dawn. She looked so clean, so nice, so British...

Mr Low came to stand beside him. 'Decent bunks, decent food, people speaking English. You can't believe it.'

But in spite of the relief of being on the way home, the crows were broken men. Mr Low was still feverish, Mr Trapwood's insect bites had spread in an infected mass over his face and neck, and neither of them could keep down their food.

It wasn't being ill, though, that worried them the most. It was failure. They would go back with an empty berth in their cabin and a sad story to tell Sir Aubrey.

'He'll probably hire some other detectives and send them out. He won't give up so easily.'

'It's The Blood,' said Mr Trapwood gloomily. 'The aristos are like that when it's The Blood they're dealing with.'

Down below the pension bell pealed loudly. Then the maid came up and knocked on the door.

'There's three ladies to see you,' she said.

And before the crows could ask any more, the door was thrown open and Beatrice and Gwendolyn, followed by their mother, came excitedly into the room.

'We know where he is! We know where the Taverner boy is hiding!'

'We know for sure!'

The crows, who had been lying weakly on the bed, sat up. Their eyes glinted. They were changed men.

'Where? Where?'

Beatrice said, 'If we tell you, are we sure to get the reward? As soon as you've found him?'

'Of course.'

'All of it?'

'Yes, yes...'

'He's here in the museum. The Natural History Museum, just down the road.'

Mr Low was hitching up his braces, fetching a coil of rope. Mr Trapwood was strapping his pistol underneath his jacket. They were not surprised; they had suspected Glastonberry all along.

'We want to see you catch him.'

'No!' Mrs Carter spoke sharply to her girls. 'There may be a struggle. Or violence.'

'That's true enough.' The crows were buttoning up their jackets. 'You just go back home; we'll see you get the money.'

'The address is Carter, Tapherini, Rio Negro. I'll write it down for you,' said Mrs Carter.

'But send it to Miss Beatrice and Miss Gwendolyn,' said Beatrice. 'Send it to us.'

'It'll go to the police station; you can fetch it from there,' said Mr Trapwood, patting the bulge inside his jacket. 'How do you know he's in the museum?'

'Maia told us. We made her. We twisted her arm till she did. We knew she had a secret.'

The crows nodded. The dark girl with the pigtail. There'd been something fishy about her from the start.

'Now, ladies, if you just go home, everything will be taken care of, and I assure you that your reward is safe.'

The museum, of course, was locked, but it was not difficult to find Professor Glastonberry's house. It was a modest bungalow in a quiet street lined with palm trees. The crows rang the bell; then thumped on the door, then rang again.

After a long time it was opened and an old woman peered through a crack.

'We want Professor Glastonberry. At once. Fetch him.'

'Nada,' she said. 'Nothing. No here.'

'Yes, he is. You're lying.'

The crows pushed her aside. The professor's house had a small study, a sitting room and a bedroom with an empty bed.

'Where is he? Tell us at once!' They shook her roughly by the arm. 'Where?'

'Is in Obidos. Fetch bichos for museum.'

'Well, find his keys then.'

'No keys.'

'Don't lie to us.'

The crows were losing their tempers.

'No lies,' she said. 'Professor has keys on himself.'

'We're wasting our time,' said Trapwood. 'Come on; we'll go to the police. They'll force open the door.'

At the police station there was only the glimmer of a light in one window. The crows thumped on the door, shouted, banged on the glass. At last a very young man, his uniform unbuttoned, came out yawning.

'You must open up the museum at once,' shouted Mr Trapwood. 'The Taverner boy is hiding there.'

'Eh?'

'The museum. You must open it quickly,' squeaked Mr Low.

The policeman shook his head. 'Colonel da Silva no here.'

He yawned again and tried to go back into his office, but the crows pushed him aside.

'Show us where your tools are. For entering a building.'

'What is tools?' asked the befuddled young man.

But the crows were already rampaging through the building, opening doors, peering in cupboards...

'Here — these'll do. A chisel, a crowbar... and this metal rod. We can use it as a battering ram.'

'Right.'

Ignoring the young policeman, who was shouting and waving his arms, the crows ran out into the street.

The outer door of the Museum of Natural History was massive, but the crows were no longer the ill and feeble men they had been an hour ago. They were men of steel now they were so close to success.

They chiselled and they prised, they cursed and they sweated, and presently the hinges broke and they were through.

'Find the lights,' ordered Trapwood.

Mr Low bumped into an anaconda, stumbled over a case of coatis, and found the switch.

The whole world of the rainforest appeared before them; coiled snakes, crouching monkeys, huge caymans with bared teeth. It all looked very different at night.

'He might be anywhere.'

They began to search.

'Come out, Taverner, we know you're there!'

'Your time's up, boy. We won't hurt you.'

'You'll be all right with us.'

They went on shouting and searching — behind a case of capybaras, under a bench holding an aquarium of piranha fish, on the top of a cupboard of pelts...

Nothing.

They went into the second room, and the third. Then up the stairs to grope among the throwing spears and necklaces of teeth...

Still nothing.

Downstairs again, into the professor's office and his lab. Nothing except an eerie skeleton on a metal stand.

'Get the girl. The pigtailed girl. We'll force her to tell us.'

'All right.'

Mr Low made for the door.

The yellow eyes of a snarling jaguar stared at Mr Trapwood. He didn't much like the idea of being in the museum alone.

'No, wait. I'll come with you. We may have to bring her by force.'

Miss Minton was behaving oddly. She had taken no steps to follow the twins and had prevented Sergei from doing so. Instead she was watching Maia, who was pretending to enjoy the party and not making a good job of it. Maia's colour was high, she was obviously upset, but Miss Minton did not go to her; she just watched.

She had been watching now for several days.

The children were not dancing any longer. They were falling on the food. Maia did her best to eat, she had never seen such exotic dishes, but she could hardly swallow anything. What was happening in the museum? Sergei had interrupted the twins before she could tell them about the trapdoor under the sloth. Poor Sergei who had only wanted to help and protect her, and who now looked at her, angry and bewildered, not enjoying his own party as he should.

What was happening? Had they found Clovis yet?

In the entrance hall there was a disturbance. One of the maids was arguing with two grim-faced, black-clad men, who now pushed her aside.

'We want the pigtailed girl who lives with the Carters.'

'Maia, she's called.'

They opened the door to various rooms, while the servants tried to stop them. Then the door of the dining room...

The only pigtailed girl was a very small blonde sitting on the lap of her governess so that she could reach the table. Maia sat bent over her plate. She had arranged her loose hair so as to partly hide her face, but it didn't help her. The crows knew her at once. 'That's her — over there. You, girl, you're to come with us.'

'No.'

Maia had risen and was holding onto the side of the table.

'If you don't, we'll have to use force.'

Sergei got to his feet, prepared to do battle. Then a bony hand descended on Maia's shoulder.

'I think you had better go with these gentlemen and tell them what they want to know,' said Miss Minton. She turned to the crows. 'I shall, of course, accompany her.'

'No, Minty, please! I can manage by myself!'

'You must let me be the best judge of that. Come along, Maia.'

By the time they got to the museum, Maia did not have to act her panic. There was no chance to explain anything to her governess; if Miss Minton told the crows that Clovis was not Finn Taverner, all her work would be undone. If only there was a moment to explain before the trapdoor was opened.

But there wasn't.

'Right. Now. Where's the boy?'

Maia was acting again. 'Don't make me tell you, please. He's my friend. And he begged me not to let you take him back.'

Miss Minton said nothing. She looked grimmer than Maia had ever seen her. There was no help to be expected there.

'Look, we've got no time to waste. And we've got a gun.' Mr Trapwood patted his chest.

'Shoot me then,' said Maia. 'You can shoot me before I'll betray—'

'That's enough, Maia. You're being hysterical. Tell these gentlemen what they want to know and then we shall go home.'

'I don't want Finn to—'

'Finn. Is that his name?' said Trapwood. 'Yes, that sounds right. The letter was signed F. Taverner. Come on then.'

'He's in the cellar.' Maia's voice was very quiet. She turned her head away.

'Where's that? How do you get down there?'

'There's a trapdoor. It's under the giant sloth. The skeleton. In the lab.'

The crows barged ahead, holding Maia by the arm, and Miss Minton followed. Still no chance to warn her governess.

They reached the sloth. 'There, look. You can see the handle,' said Mr Low.

Mr Trapwood pushed him aside and caught the edge of the stand with his arm.

The sloth crashed to the ground.

Miss Minton and Maia cried out, seeing the jumbled bones.

'There it is! Come on. Heave!'

Mr Trapwood heaved. The door creaked slowly upwards... And out of the dark hole there sprang, not a cowering, frightened boy, but a furious, thrashing figure. A boy with black hair and a headband who charged at the two men, shouting and jabbering in an Indian dialect. The crows tried to grab his arm — and missed. The Indian boy ran past Mr Low, but was tripped up by Mr Trapwood and stumbled, cursing in his strange babble; screaming like a trapped animal.

Maia gave a moan of despair and stood there, her hand over her mouth. What was Finn doing here? What had gone so terribly wrong? And where was Clovis?

The crows wrestled with Finn. Two to one; a gun against bare fists. But as they fought the boy, trying to pinion him, they were aghast.

So this was the heir to Westwood — a savage, babbling away in an unearthly tongue! No wonder he had been afraid to take up his rightful place in England! He probably lived in a tree.

Maia's eyes never left Finn. He was still hoping to escape, she could see that. If he could get out into the street, he might have a chance but not here. He fought like a demon; once he managed to free himself, but Mr Low caught his leg while Mr Trapwood hit him on the side of the head with the butt of his pistol.

'Now, now, boy, we're not here to hurt you.'

But the wild boy didn't understand. He went on struggling and fighting and shouting in his ghastly tongue. They'd have to tie him up to get him on the boat. And what would Sir Aubrey say? If ever there was a hollow victory, this was it.

Miss Minton, all this time, had been standing stock-still, looking at the Indian boy with a strange expression on her face. Now she walked carefully to the edge of the open trapdoor and looked down the flight of steps leading into the darkness.

Miss Minton waited. She was staring intently at the back of the cellar and the pile of packing cases.

Then she said loudly and clearly, 'Come out, Finn Taverner. Come out and be a man.'

Among the packing cases something stirred. A glimmer of light fell on fair hair. A boy straightened himself and stood up.

Miss Minton continued to stare down into the murk.

'You heard me, Finn,' she said — and the crows turned, amazed. 'The mantle of the Taverners has fallen on your shoulders. It is time you faced your destiny.'

Clovis looked up and saw the upright figure of Miss Minton, standing above him. She had always made him feel brave — and now he forgot that an hour before he had been overcome with terror and begged Finn not to give him up to the crows.

Clovis straightened himself. He squared his shoulders. He tossed back his curls. Then slowly, with immense dignity, he climbed the cellar steps.

'Unhand my servant, please,' he ordered the crows. 'As you see, I am Finn Taverner.'

The crows let go of the Indian. They stared at the golden-haired youth who had appeared at the top of the cellar steps. The boy's breeding showed in every movement; he was an undoubted and true aristocrat. Here before them was The Blood which Sir Aubrey longed for, and they were filled with joy.

The boy now addressed his servant. 'You have served me well, Kumari,' he said — and every word was crystal clear; the words of a perfect English gentleman, speaking slowly to a foreigner. 'Now I give you your freedom. And with it, this token of my thanks.'

And out of the pocket of his tunic he took a watch on a long chain which he handed to the Indian.

'But, sir,' said Mr Trapwood, who had seen the glint of silver. 'Should you—'

'I am a Taverner,' said Clovis. 'And no one shall say that I am not grateful to those who have served me. And now, gentlemen, I am ready. I take it you have reserved a first-class cabin for me?'

'Well,' began Mr Low.

Mr Trapwood kicked his shin. 'It shall be arranged, sir,' he said. 'Everything will be taken care of.'

'Good. I should like to go on board immediately.'

'Yes, sir, of course. If you'll just come with us.'

Clovis bowed to Miss Minton, then to Maia. His eyes were dry and his dignity was matchless. Then he followed the crows out of the museum.