



## Chapter Eight

Clovis had come up the river in an old tramp steamer which carried anything from cattle to timber.

He had paid the last of his money to the captain, who had allowed him to crouch on deck between a crate of bleating nanny goats and a leaking sack of maize. But he wouldn't put Clovis off at the Carters' landing stage.

'Bad place,' he said.

And he made Clovis get out onto an old jetty higher up and walk back along the bank, so that by the time he reached the bungalow he was scratched and tired and very hot.

But now as he made his way up the gravel path to the house, his spirits rose. It was so neat and tidy and quiet. No chickens to give you fleas, no barking dogs running the length of their chains.

Dusk had fallen and two of the windows were lit up. Clovis walked quietly towards them and looked in.

He saw a most comforting sight. The Carters were having supper, sitting around a large table spread with a clean white cloth. He could see Mrs Carter — a kind-looking plump woman in a blue dress with frilly sleeves, serving something onto pudding plates. A pink blancmange; Clovis could see it shaking a little on the dish and his mouth watered. Shape his foster mother had called it. She made it with strawberries and cornflour and milk fresh from the cow. Opposite Mrs Carter was her husband, a thin man in gold rimmed spectacles — and facing him the twins.

They looked just the way Maia had described them on the boat: pretty and dressed in white, with ribbons in their hair. And beside them, Maia... The twins were pretty, but Maia was special with her serious face and kind eyes; he could see her pigtail looped over her shoulder. Just looking at it made him feel safe, as if he could hold on to it and be all right.

Miss Minton didn't seem to be there. Perhaps it was her day off and she had gone to visit friends.

He stood and looked a little longer, unseen by the people in the room. It was a good name for this house: Tapherini — A Place of Rest. Then he went round to the side of the house and knocked on the door.

It took only a few moments to shatter Clovis' dream. First came the violent shrilling of an alarm bell. Then a maid with a sullen face led him to the dining room and opened the door — and the twins looked up, stared at him — and exploded. It wasn't laughter that came from them, not really. It was that awful giggling; that high-pitched, merciless titter that had spread across the footlights in the theatre and set the other children off. Clovis recognized it at once. So it was the twins' laughter which had hounded him!

'Oh!' gasped Beatrice. 'It's Little Lord Fauntleroy,' and then both girls said, 'Will I have to stop being your little boy?' in a deep and growly voice and repeated it, their voices getting lower and lower... and in between they choked and spluttered and patted each other on the back, and started taunting him again.

Clovis stood perfectly still by the door. He looked at Maia to see if she too was going to join in, but she looked horrified and now she jumped up and came to stand beside him.

'Don't!' she said passionately to the twins. 'Please don't; can't you see—'

Mrs Carter now took charge. 'All right, girls,' she said to her daughters, 'that will do', and to Maia, 'Sit down, please. We have not finished our meal.'

But it took some time for the twins to quieten down. They still growled and gulped, and then Beatrice said, 'Look at Maia, protecting her boyfriend!'

'Enough,' said Mr Carter, dabbing his mouth with his napkin. It was the first word he had spoken at table, and was to be the last, but the twins now managed to control themselves.

'Now,' said Mrs Carter, staring at Clovis, 'might I ask what brings you here?'

Clovis looked at the soft, rounded face. Close to, it did not look kind and motherly as it had done through the window. He felt that under the puffy cheeks one would find stone.

'I wondered if I could stay with you for a few days. We have to leave the hotel — all of us, and I thought...' His words died away.

Maia now turned to Mrs Carter and stretched out her hands to her as if she was begging for her life. 'Oh please, please, Mrs Carter, couldn't he stay? He could have my room and I'd go and sleep with Miss Minton. I'm sure Mr Murray will help him to—'

'Stay?' Mrs Carter interrupted in a horrified voice.

'Stay with us?' said Beatrice. 'We don't have actors to stay, do we, Gwendolyn?'

Both twins shook their heads slowly, left to right and right to left. They reminded Maia of the women knitting by the guillotine during the French Revolution, while heads rolled into baskets.

'Heaven knows what he might have picked up in the Paradiso,' said Mrs Carter. And to Clovis, 'What are those bites on your leg? Fleas or bedbugs?'

Clovis flushed. There were bedbugs at the Paradiso; he minded it just as much as Mrs Carter. But it was true that he no longer looked like a boy wonder on the stage. It had been impossible to get hot water at the hotel. His long hair was unwashed; his clothes were too small for him, and stained.

'We can't just turn him out,' said Maia desperately.

'I hope you don't think we can take in every verminous stray that comes to the door. The boy must go back. Beatrice, go and fetch Miss Minton.'

'I'll go,' said Maia quickly.

'No. I asked Beatrice.'

But Gwendolyn, who wouldn't even go to the bathroom by herself, had slipped out after her sister.

Maia had not sat down again; she stood beside Clovis as though she could come between him and his misery. In its bowl in the centre of the table, the pink 'shape', which had looked so good through the window, had sunk into a watery mush.

Miss Minton appeared in the doorway.

'Good evening, Clovis,' she said.

Clovis took a step towards her. 'Good evening, Miss Minton.' She looked just as she had looked on the boat, sharp-faced and strong. He'd liked her from the start; she was fierce but she was straight, and for a moment he was sure she would be able to help him.

'Please take the boy out and order Furo to take him back to Manaus at once,' ordered Mrs Carter.

'Oh, not tonight,' begged Maia. 'Surely—'

'Tonight. I hope you are satisfied, making us use the boat and wasting fuel on a runaway boy.'

Miss Minton gave Maia a quelling look. 'That will do, Maia. Come along, Clovis. I'm really ashamed of you, putting the Carters to so much trouble.'

Clovis shook off her arm, and gave up hope.

'I'll come by myself,' he said.

If Miss Minton too was his enemy, there was nothing to be done.

The two Englishmen had returned from upriver in a very nasty temper. They had spent two days on a boat with piglets and chickens and an old woman who was seasick even though the river hardly moved in the still heat. There were no bunks, only hammocks strung on deck, and Mr Trapwood fell out of his in the middle of the night onto an Inspector of Schools from Rio who was not pleased.

Even worse had befallen Mr Low who had decided to have a swim when the boat stopped to take on more wood, and came out of the water to find a dozen blood-sucking leeches feasting on his behind.

And when they got to the Ombuda there was no sign of Bernard Taverner's son.

The interpreter whom Colonel da Silva had sent with them was very helpful. He went ahead to the chief of the Ombuda and greeted him in his own language and said that Mr Low and Mr Trapwood were important people who had come from Great Britain to search for a missing boy. But what he also said in a low voice, was that these two gentlemen were being a great trouble to the Colonel, who begged the chief and his friends to tell them some story about a lost boy which would keep them quiet and make them go away again.

The Ombuda chief and his friends were only too pleased to do this. They did not like Mr Low and Mr Trapwood, who had not brought any of the presents one usually brings when visiting a tribe — fishhooks, and knives and cooking pots — and they loved making up stories.

So they told them about an English boy, fair-haired and beautiful as the sun, who had been here, but had wandered away again.

'Where to?' asked the crows eagerly. 'Where did he go?'

'In the direction of the Sacred Mountain,' said the chief, pointing to the north.

'No, no, in the direction of the Mambuto forest,' said his second in command, pointing in the opposite direction.

'Forgive me, father,' said the chief's young son, 'but the boy went to the river.' And he pointed somewhere different again.

'Ask them when this was,' said Mr Trapwood excitedly.

So the Indians and the interpreter talked among themselves and then they went to a hut on the edge of the clearing and fetched out an old woman.

The old woman wasn't just old; she was ancient, with arms and legs like sticks and not a tooth in her head, but when the chief explained what he wanted, she grinned happily and said yes, yes, she remembered the boy very well.

'His eyes were as blue as the blossom of the jacaranda tree, and his hair glistened like the belly of the golden toad that squats on the lily leaves of the Mamari river,' said the old woman, who was having a good time. 'His skin was as white as the moon in the season of—'

'Yes, but when? When?' interrupted the crows rudely. 'When was he here?'

The old woman sat down on a tree stump and began to count. She used her fingers and her toes and then some pebbles on the ground, and the chief and his friends helped her.

Then she winked at the interpreter and said it had been fifty years ago.

'What!' shouted Mr Trapwood. 'Fifty years!'

She nodded and said, yes she was sure because it was when she was a very small girl and still had all her milk teeth in her head, and the Indians nodded also and said yes, she had often told them of the lost boy who came when she was no higher than the tail of a swamp deer — and they led her back into the hut, patting her on the back while she giggled with glee.

So the crows had to give up, but they could not leave because the boat back to Manaus was not due for another two days and they had a very uncomfortable time staying with the Ombuda, who drummed a lot and seemed to live mostly on nuts. That the tribe were sharing their food and shelter very generously did not of course occur to the crows, who had been brought up to think of the Indians as savages.

By the time they returned to Manaus, the Englishmen were not in very good shape.

'I've had enough of this,' said Mr Trapwood as they sat in their room in the Pension Maria overlooking the docks.

'So have I,' croaked Mr Low. 'This business has got to be settled. The Bishop goes back in ten days' time and the Taverner boy is going to be on it.'

'If he exists,' said Mr Trapwood gloomily.

'Of course he exists. You saw the letter.'

'Well why doesn't he come forward, or anyone else?'

'Do you think we ought to put up the reward? The old chap said we were to use our judgement.'

'I suppose we might as well. After all, it's not us that's paying it. What we need now is a thorough house-to-house search of the buildings outside the city. If Taverner was a naturalist, he probably wouldn't live in the middle of town. And they may not have seen the notices out there.'

'I'm sure that chap at the museum knows something,' said Mr Low moodily. 'The one who said that Taverner didn't have a son.'

Then the little Brazilian maid brought in their supper which was the same as lunch and the same as breakfast — brown beans stewed with pigs' trotters. Mr Low dug about in it gloomily looking for bits of gristle and Mr Trapwood found a dead ant on his plate. It seemed to be a perfectly clean ant, but he gagged and pushed his plate away.

'This place is closer to hell on earth than anywhere I've been,' he said.

On the morning after Clovis had been turned away from the house, the hairdresser came out from Manaus to do Mrs Carter's hair. At first he was silent and surly, but when he found that Mrs Carter meant to pay him at last, he cheered up and gave them all the news. The actors had all been thrown out of the Paradiso and had got hold of a lorry and were trying to get out of Brazil through Venezuela where the British Consul was supposed to be good-natured and inclined to turn a blind eye.

'But everyone thinks they'll be stopped at the border,' said Monsieur Claude.

'Poor Clovis,' said Maia when she heard this.

The twins shrugged. 'He's only an actor,' said Beatrice. 'A vagabond. They're used to wandering about.'

'Clovis isn't,' said Maia, but she said no more about him. Since Clovis had been taken away by Miss Minton she had been quiet and subdued, scarcely speaking to anyone.

But the piece of news that interested the Carters most was that the reward for the discovery of Taverner's son had been doubled.

'It's forty thousand milreis now,' said the hairdresser, crimping Mrs Carter's curls. 'They've put up notices everywhere.'

'Imagine the dresses one could buy with that,' said Beatrice.

'And the hats,' said Gwendolyn.

'And the shoes.'

'And the chocolates. Boxes and boxes of chocolates.'

'You could buy something a great deal more useful than that,' said Mr Carter. The full set of glass eyes from Queen Victoria's piano tuner for example; he had seen it in the catalogue. Or he could pay off that shark Gonzales from whom he'd borrowed money and who was always pestering him.

'There's a new kind of wallpaper which stops insects from landing on it for twenty years,' said Mrs Carter wistfully. 'I read about it at the dentist.'

For a moment all the Carters stood with narrowed eyes, thinking of what they would do with so much money.

And on the following day, the crows arrived at the bungalow.

They had chartered a boat belonging to a wealthy merchant, and landed at the Carter's jetty while the children were doing their lessons.

Mr Carter was out bullying his workers somewhere, but when he saw the boat he came in quickly. Mrs Carter brought Mr Low and Mr Trapwood into the dining room where Miss Minton was giving the twins dictation.

'Fetch Maia,' she ordered the governess. 'These gentlemen want to question everybody.'

The crows sat down twitching their black trousers up at the knee so as to keep the creases in. They liked the Carters' dining room: the smell of Lysol, the shrouded windows. A decent British household at last. Maia was brought in. She recognized them at once, and the twins saw that she had turned pale.

Mr Trapwood did not waste any time. 'Some of you know already what I am going to say. We have come from England to find a missing boy — the son of Bernard Taverner. It is now very important that he is

found and brought back before the Bishop sails. The reward for news of him has been doubled. Now I want you to think very, very carefully whether you have any idea of where such a boy might be hiding.'

Maia looked up. 'Why is he hiding? Why doesn't he come forward? Why doesn't he want to go back to England?'

The crows frowned. 'Whether he wants to go back or not has nothing to do with it. The boy must go back, and at once. It is a matter of life and death.'

'If we tell you something useful, will we get the reward?' asked Beatrice.

'Certainly.'

The twins looked at each other. 'We think Maia is hiding him,' said Beatrice. 'I had toothache last night and I woke up and I saw her sneak out to that end hut where the rubber workers used to live. The one that was empty.'

'We don't know for certain but that's what we think,' said Gwendolyn.

'She goes outside sometimes when she's supposed to be in bed.'

'No. Honestly. That's nothing to do with—' Maia had jumped up from her chair. 'I don't know anything about the boy you're looking for.'

'All the same, I think I might ask these young ladies to take us to the hut they describe. Have I your permission, Mrs Carter?'

'Certainly. But if Maia has been deceiving us she will be most seriously punished.'

Miss Minton had come to stand beside Maia. 'If Maia has really been hiding someone she will certainly be punished. But I find this hard to believe.'

'It isn't Bernard Taverner's son. Honestly—'

But it was too late. The crows had risen, and now everybody moved out of the bungalow, down the side path and towards the huts of the Indians. Furo and Tapi and old Lila were standing outside their door, looking on in silence.

Miss Minton had taken Maia by the arm, as if she expected her to run away. Her nutcracker face was closed and angry.

Mrs Carter moved past the huts as if she were walking through an open drain, and the twins held their noses as they passed the pot-bellied pig.

'Please,' began Maia, and stopped as Miss Minton's steely fingers dug painfully into her arm.

'Be quiet, Maia,' she said.

The hut was locked, but that didn't help them. Mrs Carter shouted to Tapi to bring the key, and Tapi disappeared into her hut. She was away a long time but eventually, sulkily, she brought the key.

'Empty,' she said to the crows. 'Not inside. Nada. All gone away.'

'We shall soon see,' said Mrs Carter and took the key.

Maia bit her lip and stared at the ground.

The lock was stiff. 'Give it to me,' said Mr Carter, taking the key from his wife. He fumbled for a while, then managed to turn it. The door swung open.

There was a loud screech, a flutter of black wings — and a trapped bird flew out, sending Mrs Carter reeling backwards.

Then silence. On the floor of the hut was an old blanket, a candlestick with a spent candle, and nothing else.

The hut was empty.

Nobody in the Carters' bungalow slept well that night.

The twins lay in bed thinking about the money that had escaped them.

'I was going to get that blue silk cloak in Fleurette's window,' sighed Beatrice.

'It wouldn't suit you. The neck's too low.'

They began to argue, but then remembered that neither of them could buy the cloak.

'All the same, I think Maia knows something. Did you see how worried she looked when they were opening the hut?'

'She's just the sort of person who would be on the side of a runaway. Look how she tried to shelter Clovis.'

'But the Taverner boy isn't just a runaway. He's a criminal. He must be or they wouldn't be so keen to catch him.'

'Well I'm going to watch Maia. I don't trust her at all.'

In their bedroom down the corridor, Mr and Mrs Carter too were thinking of all that could be done with the reward for the capture of Taverner's son.

'We could go back to England for a visit. I'm sure Lady Parsons would be pleased to have us to stay.'

Mr Carter did not answer. For one thing he never spoke to his wife if he could help it, and for another the last thing he wanted was to go back to England. He had left his job in the bank there in a hurry. Quite a big hurry. If he had stayed even a few days longer the police would have come for him because he had borrowed money that did not belong to him. And out here he was getting behind-hand again with certain payments. The forty thousand milreis would have helped to clear his debts. They wouldn't have cleared them, but they would have helped.

Mrs Carter was frowning, thinking of Maia. 'I don't really trust that girl — and the governess favours her.'

'Well, if you send her away we're done for,' said Mr Carter. 'I owe that rogue Gonzales three batches of rubber and I haven't got one.'

'How can that be?'

'You wouldn't understand,' said Mr Carter wearily.

He sighed and reached for the lamp, but Mrs Carter got up once more and took her flit gun from under the bed. She was almost sure that she had heard something buzzing by the window.

Maia had put on her dressing gown and crept down the corridor to Miss Minton's room. She had brought her hairbrush, but the hundred strokes were just an excuse. She was perfectly capable of brushing her own hair.

'But where can he have gone, Minty? The actors aren't here any more and he doesn't know anyone else in Manaus. I'm so worried about him.'

‘He won’t come to any harm,’ said Miss Minton, brushing steadily. ‘He’s quite a sensible boy really.’

But Maia could not see it like that.

When Miss Minton had taken Clovis to the empty hut, it was with the idea of keeping him safe until she could make other arrangements for him. She was sure now that Mr Carter had never sent the cable to Mr Murray and she had hoped to ask Sergei’s family to take Clovis in for a while. The Keminskys were well known for their hospitality, and in the end surely the British Consul would do something for the boy? But the Keminskys had gone to visit one of their farms in the north, and they had been forced to hide Clovis for a second night.

And now the boy had vanished.

The next day was a Sunday. On one Sunday in the month an English vicar came out to conduct a service in the next village upriver from the Carters’ house. Mrs Carter liked church. The twins in their pretty dresses were always admired, she heard other English voices... In England they had sometimes been allowed to join Lady Parsons in her pew. She had expected Maia to accompany them, but the girl looked peaked and wretched and had been sick in the night.

Mrs Carter did not like people being sick. ‘I hope it’s not infectious,’ she said to Miss Minton, who shook her head. She knew exactly why Maia had been sick. She was worried about Clovis. She had been sick after she came across an Indian being flogged on Mr Carter’s orders.

‘I think she needs a quiet morning by herself,’ said Miss Minton, and was told that it was her duty to accompany the twins.

‘We don’t want people saying we can’t afford a governess,’ said Mrs Carter to her husband.

So the family disappeared upriver in the launch. Maia noticed that it was not Furo who was steering the boat, but it was not till Furo came himself and beckoned to her that she allowed herself to hope.

‘Come,’ he said, as he had done the first time and Maia got up quickly and followed him. Her sickness had gone. She felt hopeful and excited. If this was a summons from Finn, perhaps he would know what to do.

This time she was not asked to put on a blindfold and at this sign of trust her spirits rose still further. When they came to the green wall, she could make out the opening, now that she knew it was there. It wasn’t much more than a change in the colour of the green as the rushes took over from the undergrowth. She closed her eyes to protect them against the branches, and then they were through and she was in the lagoon again.

Even before she saw Finn, she felt as though she was coming home.

The dog wagged his tail; properly this time; nothing too gushing — he was not that kind of dog — but he remembered her.

She jumped out onto the jetty. Finn’s hair was coal-black, as it had been the first time she saw him, and he wore his headband; he was in his Indian guise again. But he looked relaxed and untroubled, and when she thought of the crows she found herself shivering.

‘They’ve been at the Carters,’ she said. ‘The crows.’

‘I know.’

Of course, he would know. He knew everything.

‘And you’ve lost your little actor friend,’ he said, grinning.

Furo had paddled back to the entrance and Maia followed Finn into the hut. He had a bowl of fruit on the table — avocados, prickly pears, nuts, a melon. Her mouth watered but she turned her head away, angry with Finn for speaking so carelessly of Clovis.

‘Yes, I’m so worried about him. He came and the twins jeered at him and Mrs Carter said he had to go back. But the actors had gone so we hid him in the store hut.’

‘We?’

‘Well, Miss Minton really, but I was so upset that she told me what she’d done. I thought I’d get Mr Murray to pay his fare but he hasn’t. Then the crows came and they made us open the door — they thought it was you we were hiding — and he’d gone. Vanished.’

‘He’ll be all right,’ said Finn.

His casual tone annoyed Maia. ‘That’s what Miss Minton says, but why will he be all right? He’s got nowhere to sleep and no money.’

Thinking about Clovis and how she had let him down had brought tears to her eyes, and she brushed them away angrily. Clovis was her responsibility, not Finn’s. Finn had troubles enough of his own.

But Finn had seen her distress. ‘Come and see the Arabella,’ he said. ‘I’ve cleaned the funnel. Walk carefully; there’s some wet paint.’

She followed him onto the little launch.

‘Have a look under the awning,’ said Finn. ‘But don’t make a noise.’

She moved quietly forward. What strange animal had Finn brought aboard and tamed?

Someone lay sprawled out on the deck. He lay on his back, his limbs were thrown out loosely; he was so still that he might have been dead.

But he wasn’t. He was deeply asleep. So asleep that even when Maia bent over him he did not stir.

‘He’ll sleep for a bit,’ said Finn. ‘I gave him something. He’s a nice boy but you’re right; he does cry a lot.’

‘You mean you’ve drugged him?’ Maia was shocked.

‘It’s only mashohara leaves,’ said Finn. ‘Old Lila used to give them to me in a drink. It’s quite harmless.’

But Maia was not altogether pleased. ‘You seem to know a lot about herbs and medicines — and dyes,’ she added, looking at Finn’s hair.

‘The Indians taught my father, and he taught me. It’s how we lived partly, finding new medicines.’

They went back and sat on the jetty, and he explained what he had done. ‘Furo told me that the crows were on their way, and he told me about Clovis being in the hut. He thought you’d get into awful trouble from the Carters. So I fetched him away in the night.’

The dog lay quietly between them; two swallowtail butterflies chased each other over the lotus leaves.

‘Actually,’ Finn went on, ‘I’ve got an idea — I told you. I’ll explain when I’ve woken Clovis.’ He looked up at the sun. ‘He’ll be awake in half an hour. Better make some tea and serve it nicely. Clovis likes things properly done. Teacups with saucers and no bugs on the bread and butter.’

Finn was right. Clovis woke up in exactly half an hour looking refreshed and well. He too liked the hut.

‘I wouldn’t mind living in a place like this,’ he said, helping himself to a biscuit.

'Well that's a good thing,' said Finn. 'Because you're going to. For a few days. Till just before the Bishop sails.'

Clovis looked up; his eyes full of bewilderment.

'I'll explain,' said Finn. 'I thought, you see, that you could take my place. The crows don't know what you look like — and they don't know what I look like. If Maia will do what I ask her, I think it could be done. Then you'll get safely to England and I'll get away.'

Maia stared at him.

'But you can't! You can't send Clovis back to a prison!'

Finn was bent over the dog, steadily scratching the space between his ears.

'I think it's time I told you about Westwood,' he said.