Chapter XIII

TOM’S mind was made up now. He was gloomy and desperate. He was a forsaken, friendless boy, he said; nobody loved him; when they found out what they had driven him to, perhaps they would be sorry; he had tried to do right and get along, but they would not let him; since nothing would do them but to be rid of him, let it be so; and let them blame HIM for the consequences — why shouldn’t they? What right had the friendless to complain? Yes, they had forced him to it at last: he would lead a life of crime. There was no choice.

By this time he was far down Meadow Lane, and the bell for school to ‘take up’ tinkled faintly upon his ear. He sobbed, now, to think he should never, never hear that old familiar sound any more — it was very hard, but it was forced on him; since he was driven out into the cold world, he must submit — but he forgave them. Then the sobs came thick and fast.

Just at this point he met his soul’s sworn comrade, Joe Harper — hard-eyed, and with evidently a great and dismal purpose in his heart. Plainly here were ‘two souls with but a single thought.’ Tom, wiping his eyes with his sleeve, began to blubber out something about a resolution to escape from hard usage and lack of sympathy at home by roaming abroad into the great world never to return; and ended by
hoping that Joe would not forget him.

But it transpired that this was a request which Joe had just been going to make of Tom, and had come to hunt him up for that purpose. His mother had whipped him for drinking some cream which he had never tasted and knew nothing about; it was plain that she was tired of him and wished him to go; if she felt that way, there was nothing for him to do but succumb; he hoped she would be happy, and never regret having driven her poor boy out into the unfeeling world to suffer and die.

As the two boys walked sorrowing along, they made a new compact to stand by each other and be brothers and never separate till death relieved them of their troubles. Then they began to lay their plans. Joe was for being a hermit, and living on crusts in a remote cave, and dying, some time, of cold and want and grief; but after listening to Tom, he conceded that there were some conspicuous advantages about a life of crime, and so he consented to be a pirate.

Three miles below St. Petersburg, at a point where the Mississippi River was a trifle over a mile wide, there was a long, narrow, wooded island, with a shallow bar at the head of it, and this offered well as a rendezvous. It was not inhabited; it lay far over toward the further shore, abreast a dense and almost wholly unpeopled forest. So Jackson’s Island was chosen. Who were to be the subjects of theirpiracies was a matter that did not occur to them. Then they hunted up Huckleberry Finn, and he joined them promptly, for all careers were one to him; he was indifferent. They presently separated to meet at a lonely spot on the river-bank
two miles above the village at the favorite hour — which was midnight. There was a small log raft there which they meant to capture. Each would bring hooks and lines, and such provision as he could steal in the most dark and mysterious way — as became outlaws. And before the afternoon was done, they had all managed to enjoy the sweet glory of spreading the fact that pretty soon the town would ‘hear something.’ All who got this vague hint were cautioned to ‘be mum and wait.’

About midnight Tom arrived with a boiled ham and a few trifles, and stopped in a dense undergrowth on a small bluff overlooking the meeting-place. It was starlight, and very still. The mighty river lay like an ocean at rest. Tom listened a moment, but no sound disturbed the quiet. Then he gave a low, distinct whistle. It was answered from under the bluff. Tom whistled twice more; these signals were answered in the same way. Then a guarded voice said:

‘Who goes there?’

‘Tom Sawyer, the Black Avenger of the Spanish Main. Name your names.’

‘Huck Finn the Red-Handed, and Joe Harper the Terror of the Seas.’ Tom had furnished these titles, from his favorite literature.

‘Tis well. Give the countersign.’

Two hoarse whispers delivered the same awful word simultaneously to the brooding night:

‘BLOOD!’

Then Tom tumbled his ham over the bluff and let himself down after it, tearing both skin and clothes to some extent
in the effort. There was an easy, comfortable path along the shore under the bluff, but it lacked the advantages of difficulty and danger so valued by a pirate.

The Terror of the Seas had brought a side of bacon, and had about worn himself out with getting it there. Finn the Red-Handed had stolen a skillet and a quantity of half-cured leaf tobacco, and had also brought a few corn-cobs to make pipes with. But none of the pirates smoked or ‘chewed’ but himself. The Black Avenger of the Spanish Main said it would never do to start without some fire. That was a wise thought; matches were hardly known there in that day. They saw a fire smouldering upon a great raft a hundred yards above, and they went stealthily thither and helped themselves to a chunk. They made an imposing adventure of it, saying, ‘Hist!’ every now and then, and suddenly halting with finger on lip; moving with hands on imaginary dagger-hilts; and giving orders in dismal whispers that if ‘the foe’ stirred, to ‘let him have it to the hilt,’ because ‘dead men tell no tales.’ They knew well enough that the raftsmen were all down at the village laying in stores or having a spree, but still that was no excuse for their conducting this thing in an unpiratical way.

They shoved off, presently, Tom in command, Huck at the after oar and Joe at the forward. Tom stood amidships, gloomy-browed, and with folded arms, and gave his orders in a low, stern whisper:

‘Luff, and bring her to the wind!’
‘Aye-aye, sir!’
‘Steady, steady-y-y-y!’
‘Steady it is, sir!’
‘Let her go off a point!’
‘Point it is, sir!’

As the boys steadily and monotonously drove the raft toward mid-stream it was no doubt understood that these orders were given only for ‘style,’ and were not intended to mean anything in particular.

‘What sail’s she carrying?’
‘Courses, tops’ls, and flying-jib, sir.’
‘Send the r’yals up! Lay out aloft, there, half a dozen of ye — foretopmaststuns’l! Lively, now!’
‘Aye-aye, sir!’
‘Shake out that maintogalans’l! Sheets and braces! NOW my hearties!’
‘Aye-aye, sir!’
‘Hellum-a-lee — hard a port! Stand by to meet her when she comes! Port, port! NOW, men! With a will! Stead-y-y-y!’

‘Steady it is, sir!’

The raft drew beyond the middle of the river; the boys pointed her head right, and then lay on their oars. The river was not high, so there was not more than a two or three mile current. Hardly a word was said during the next three-quarters of an hour. Now the raft was passing before the distant town. Two or three glimmering lights showed where it lay, peacefully sleeping, beyond the vague vast sweep of star-gemmed water, unconscious of the tremendous event that was happening. The Black Avenger stood still with folded arms, ‘looking his last’ upon the scene of his former
joys and his later sufferings, and wishing ‘she’ could see him now, abroad on the wild sea, facing peril and death with dauntless heart, going to his doom with a grim smile on his lips. It was but a small strain on his imagination to remove Jackson’s Island beyond eyeshot of the village, and so he ‘looked his last’ with a broken and satisfied heart. The other pirates were looking their last, too; and they all looked so long that they came near letting the current drift them out of the range of the island. But they discovered the danger in time, and made shift to avert it. About two o’clock in the morning the raft grounded on the bar two hundred yards above the head of the island, and they waded back and forth until they had landed their freight. Part of the little raft’s belongings consisted of an old sail, and this they spread over a nook in the bushes for a tent to shelter their provisions; but they themselves would sleep in the open air in good weather, as became outlaws.

They built a fire against the side of a great log twenty or thirty steps within the sombre depths of the forest, and then cooked some bacon in the frying-pan for supper, and used up half of the corn ‘pone’ stock they had brought. It seemed glorious sport to be feasting in that wild, free way in the virgin forest of an unexplored and uninhabited island, far from the haunts of men, and they said they never would return to civilization. The climbing fire lit up their faces and threw its ruddy glare upon the pillared tree-trunks of their forest temple, and upon the varnished foliage and festooning vines.

When the last crisp slice of bacon was gone, and the last
allowance of corn pone devoured, the boys stretched themselves out on the grass, filled with contentment. They could have found a cooler place, but they would not deny themselves such a romantic feature as the roasting camp-fire.

‘AIN’T it gay?’ said Joe.

‘It’s NUTS!’ said Tom. ‘What would the boys say if they could see us?’

‘Say? Well, they’d just die to be here — hey, Hucky!’

‘I reckon so,’ said Huckleberry; ‘anyways, I’m suited. I don’t want nothing better’n this. I don’t ever get enough to eat, gen’ally — and here they can’t come and pick at a feller and bullyrag him so.’

‘It’s just the life for me,’ said Tom. ‘You don’t have to get up, mornings, and you don’t have to go to school, and wash, and all that blame foolishness. You see a pirate don’t have to do ANYTHING, Joe, when he’s ashore, but a hermit HE has to be praying considerable, and then he don’t have any fun, anyway, all by himself that way.’

‘Oh yes, that’s so,’ said Joe, ‘but I hadn’t thought much about it, you know. I’d a good deal rather be a pirate, now that I’ve tried it.’

‘You see,’ said Tom, ‘people don’t go much on hermits, nowadays, like they used to in old times, but a pirate’s always respected. And a hermit’s got to sleep on the hardest place he can find, and put sackcloth and ashes on his head, and stand out in the rain, and —’

‘What does he put sackcloth and ashes on his head for?’ inquired Huck.