## CHAPTER

# Thirteen

IT WAS IN LATE MAY that I believe Timothy decided we might stay there forever. We had not seen a schooner sail or heard an airplane since setting foot on the island.

I know it was late May because each day he dropped a small pebble into an old can that he'd found on the beach. It was our only way to tell how many days we'd been there. Every so often, I'd count them, beginning with April 9. We now had forty-eight pebbles in the can.

On this day, Timothy said thoughtfully, "Phill-eep, 'as it evah come into your own self that I might be poorly again some marnin'?" I knew he was thinking about malar and the fever.

I said it had.

He said, "Well, you mus' den know how to provite your own self wid feesh."

For more than a week, I knew he had been laboring over nails to turn them into fish hooks. He always speared the fish or langosta with a sharp stick, but I could not see, of course, to do that. I knew he was making the hooks for me.

He said, with a secret tone in his voice, "I 'ave foun' an outrageous good 'ole on d'reef in a safe place."

We went down the hill and started out along the reef shelf. By now, my feet were tough and I hardly felt the jagged edges of the coral. But I knew that lurking in the tide pools were the treacherous sea urchins. Stepping on them invited a sharp spine in your foot, and Timothy had already warned me that, "dey veree poison, dey b'gibbin' you terrible pain."

Every two feet, Timothy had driven a piece of driftwood deep into the coral crevices so that I could feel them as I went along. Neither of us knew what to do about the sea urchins but Timothy said he'd think mightily about them. He had taken a large rock to smash them all along the path over the reef top. But in time they would come back.



We went out about fifty feet along the reef, and then he said, "Now, we feesh."

He described the hole to me. It was about twenty feet in diameter and six to eight feet deep. The bottom was sandy, but mostly free of coral so that my hooks would not snag. He said there was a "mos'" natural opening to the sea, so that the fish could swim in and out of this coral-walled pool.

He took my hand to have me feel all around the edges of the hole. The coral had been smoothed over by centuries of sea wash. Timothy said that the sand in the sea water acted like a grindstone on the sharp edges of the coral. It was not completely smooth but there were no jagged edges sticking out.

"Now, reach downg 'ere," Timothy said, "an' tug off d'mussel."

I put my hand into the warm water, kneeling down over the ledge, and felt a mussel. But in ripping it loose, I lost my balance and only Timothy's hand prevented me from falling in. If you are blind, the sensation of falling can be terrifying. My memory of the fall off the raft was still very clear.

Timothy said, "Easy dere, Phill-eep. Jus' sit a moment an' relax."

His voice was soothing. "If evah you do fall, jus' stay in d'hole awhile, feel which way d'wattah washes, den follow it to d'ledge, grab hol', an' pull your own self out."

Timothy guided my hands in opening the tough

mussel shell and digging the slippery meat out to bait the hook. "'Tis an outrageous sharp knife, so be veree careful o' your fingers."

Then he told me to feel the hook and slip the mussel bait over the barb. I'd fished many times with my father and this was easy.

Rusty bolts served as sinkers. Timothy had found several pieces of wood with bolts in them; had burned them, then raked the bolts out of the ashes. He'd unraveled a life line from the raft to make single strands for the fishing line.

I dropped the hook and sinker overboard. In a moment, there was a sharp tug. I jerked, flipping the fish back over my shoulder so it would land on the reef. Timothy cheered and told me to feel along the line to the wriggling fish, then take the hook out.

Squirming and jumping in my hand, it was small but fat. I grinned over toward Timothy. When I had fished before, it was fun. Now, I felt I had done something very special. I was learning to do things all over again, by touch and feel.

I said to Timothy, "Dis is outrageous, hombuggin' good feesh 'ole."

He laughed with pleasure.

Every day after that I did all the fishing. Timothy, of course, continued to get langosta. He had to dive for them, but I caught all the fish. After the third morning, he let me go out alone on the reef. I'd feel my way along his driftwood stobs,



find the hole, pry a mussel loose, and then fish.

I was alone on the reef but somehow I always felt he was sitting on the beach nearby. I could sense his presence, yet he was always at the hut when I got back there.

We often talked about the cay and what was on it. Timothy had not thought much about it. He took it for granted that the cay was always there, but I told him about geography, and how maybe a volcano could have caused the Devil's Mouth. He'd listen in fascination, almost speechless.

We talked about how the little coral animals might have been building the foundations of the cay for thousands of years. I said, "Then sand began to gather on it, and after more years, it was finally an island."

It was as if a new world had opened up for Timothy. He kept using that same expression, "Dat be true?"

I found out that he'd never thought about how the sea grape, or the vines, or the coconuts came to our cay. I told him what I knew.

Seeds had drifted in from the sea, or birds had brought them. After a rain, they'd taken root.

"D'lizzard?" he asked sternly.

"I'd bet a bird, flying from another island, holding a mother lizard in its beak, dropped it here. Then the baby lizards were born. Or maybe a mother lizard washed ashore on driftwood during a storm."

Timothy was very impressed, and I felt good that I'd been able to tell him something.

We found a lot to talk about.

I think it was the fifth afternoon of this week that I blurted out to Timothy, "I'll climb the palm now."

"Eh, Phill-eep," he said, and I could almost see the grin on his face and the light in his eyes as he looked skyward. Greedily, I'm sure.

He said, "Dere is one coconut tree ovah dere dat 'as a sway in 'is back like an ol' horse. Dat is d'one to clim'."

I was trembling a little as he led me to the tree, telling me I should go up just a short way; climb it like a monkey. If I could do it, I was to come back down, put the knife between my teeth, and go up again.

The trunk of this palm tree must have been about two feet in diameter because I could easily put my hands around to the back. I grasped it, hunched by body, placed my bare feet on the rough trunk, and began to climb. Timothy was probably holding his breath.

I went up about ten feet and froze. I could not move up or down. My legs and arms were rigid.

Timothy, standing below to catch me if I fell, called up softly, "Phill-eep, 'tis no shame to ease your own self back downg to d'san'."

Slowly I began to back down along the trunk.



The bark was rough against my hands and feet, but what I felt most was Timothy's disappointment. I couldn't have been more than a few feet off the ground when I took a deep breath and said to myself, If you fall, you'll fall in sand.

Then I started climbing again.

Timothy called up, "You 'ave forgot d'knife."

I knew that if I stopped now, I'd never climb it. I didn't answer him but kept my hands and feet moving steadily. Then I heard him shout, "You b'gettin' to d'top." Palm fronds brushed my head. I grasped the base of one to pull myself up. Timothy let out a roar of joy.

Then he told me how to reach the coconuts. It took a long time to pull, tug, and twist two of them loose. But they finally fell. I stayed in the palm another few minutes to rest, then slid down. I had won.

As my feet touched the ground, Timothy hugged me, yelling, "D'palm harass us no more."

We drank every drop of the coconut milk, and feasted on the fresh meat.

Squatting near me, his teeth crunching the coconut, Timothy said, "You see, Phill-eep, you do not need d'eye now. You 'ave done widout d'eye what I couldn't do wid my whole body."

It was almost as if I'd graduated from the survival course that Timothy had been putting me through since we had landed on the cay.

It rained that night, a very soft rain. Not even

enough to drip through the palm frond roof. Timothy breathed softly beside me. I had now been with him every moment of the day and night for two months, but I had not seen him. I remembered that ugly welted face. But now, in my memory, it did not seem ugly at all. It seemed only kind and strong.

I asked, "Timothy, are you still black?"

His laughter filled the hut.

# CHAPTER

# Fourteen

ONE VERY HOT MORNING in July, we were down on north beach where Timothy had found a patch of calico scallops not too far offshore. It was the hottest day we'd ever had on the cay. So hot that each breath felt like fire. And for once, the trade wind was not blowing. Nothing on the cay seemed to be moving.

North beach was a very strange beach anyway. The sand on it felt coarser to my feet. Everything about it felt different, but that didn't really make

sense since it was only about a mile from south beach.

Timothy explained, "D'nawth is alles d'bleak beach on any islan'," but he couldn't say why.

He had just brought some calico scallops ashore when we heard the rifle shot. He came quickly to my side, saying, "Dat b'trouble."

Trouble? I thought it meant someone had found the cay. That wasn't trouble. Excited, I asked, "Who's shooting?"

"D'sea," he said.

I laughed at him, "The sea can't shoot a rifle."

"A crack like d'rifle," he said, worry in his voice. "It can make d'shot all right, all right. It b'tell us a veree bad starm is comin', Phill-eep. A tempis'."

I couldn't quite believe that. However, there had been, distinctly, a crack like a rifle or pistol shot.

He said anxiously, "D'waves do it. Somewhar far off, out beyond d'Grenadines, or in dat pesky bight off Honduras, a hurrican' is spawnin', young bahss. I feel it. What we heeard was a wave passin' dis lil' hombug point."

I heard him sniffing the air as if he could smell the hurricane coming. Without the wind, there was a breathless silence around our cay. The sea, he told me, was smooth as green jelly. But already, the water was getting cloudy. There were no birds in sight. The sky, he said, had a yellowish cast to it.

"Come along, we 'ave much to do. D'calico scallop can wait dey own self till after d'tempis'."



We went up to our hill.

Now I knew why he had chosen the highest point of land on the cay for our hut. Even so, I thought, the waves might tumble over it.

The first thing Timothy did was to lash our water keg high on a palm trunk. Next he took the remaining rope that we had and tied it securely around the same sturdy tree. "In case d'tempis' reach dis high, lock your arms ovah d'rope an' hang on, Phill-eep."

I realized then why he had used our rope sparingly; why he had made my guideline down to east beach from vines instead of rope. Everyday, I learned of something new that Timothy had done so we could survive.

During the afternoon, he told me this was a freak storm, because most did not come until September or October. August, sometimes. Seldom in July. "But dis year, d'sea be angry wid all d'death upon it. D'wahr."

The storms bred, Timothy said, in the eastern North Atlantic, south of the Cape Verde Islands, in the fall, but sometimes, when they were freaks, and early, they bred much closer, in a triangle way off the northeast tip of South America. Once in a great while, in June or July, they sometimes made up not far from Providencia and San Andrés. Near us. The June ones were only pesky, but the July ones were dangerous.

"Dis be a western starm, I b'guessin'. Dey outrageous strong when dey come," he said.

Even Stew Cat was nervous. He was around my legs whenever I moved. I asked Timothy what we should do to protect him. He laughed. "Stew Cat b'go up d'palm on d'lee side iffen it b'gettin' too terrible. Don' worry 'bout Stew Cat."

Yet I could not help worrying. The thought of losing either of them was unbearable. If something bad happened on the cay, I wanted it to happen to all of us.

Nothing changed during the afternoon, although it seemed to get even hotter. Timothy spent a lot of time down at the raft, stripping off everything usable and carrying it back up the hill. He said we might never see it again, or else it might wash up the hill so that it would be impossible to launch.

Timothy was not purposely trying to frighten me about the violence of the storm; he was just being honest. He had good reason to be frightened himself.

"In '28, I be on d'*Hettie Redd* sout' o' Antigua when d'tempis' hit. D'wind was outrageous, an' d'ol' schooner break up like chips fallin' 'fore d'ax. I wash ashore from d'sea, so wild no mahn believe it. No odder mahn from d'*Hettie Redd* live 'ceptin' me."

I knew that wild sea from long ago was much on Timothy's mind all afternoon.

We had a huge meal late in the day, much bigger than usual, because Timothy said we might not be



able to eat for several days. We had fish and coconut meat, and we each drank several cups of coconut milk. Timothy said that the fish might not return to the reef for at least a week. He'd noticed that they'd already gone to deep water.

After we ate, Timothy carefully cleaned his knife and put it into the tin box, which he lashed high on the same tree that held our water keg.

"We ready, Phill-eep," he said.