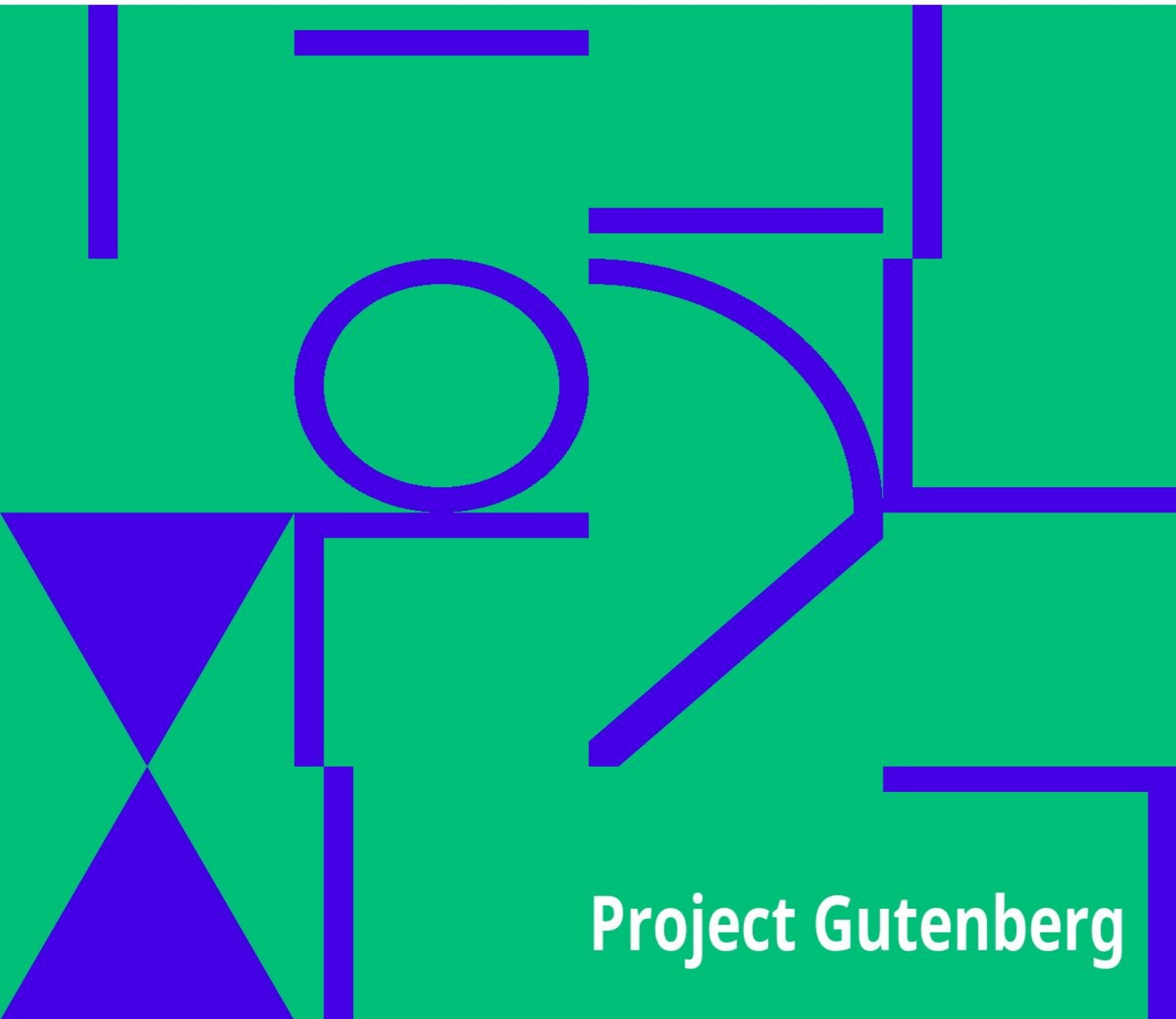


Bert Wilson at Panama

J. W. Duffield



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Bert Wilson at Panama

BY J.W. Duffield

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CHAPTER I

THE HOLD-UP

"Hands up! Quick!"

Now, in wild countries, such a command is never disobeyed, except by a fool or a would-be suicide. As Dick Trent was neither, his hands went up at once. And as he looked into the wicked muzzles of two bulldog revolvers, he inwardly cursed the carelessness that had led him so far afield, unarmed.

For that he had been careless there was not the shadow of a doubt. All that morning, as his train wound its way through Central Mexico, there had been unmistakable evidence on every side of the disturbed state of the nation. From the car windows he had seen a fertile country turned into a desert. The railroad line itself had been fairly well guarded by strong detachments of Federal forces; but outside the direct zone of travel there were abundant witnesses of strife and desolation. Smoke was rising from the remains of burned villages, the fields were bare of cattle driven off by marauding bands, harvests remained ungathered because the tillers of the soil had either fled for safety to the larger towns or been forced to take up arms with one of the contending factions. There were at least four important leaders, backed by considerable forces, who claimed to represent the people of Mexico, while countless bands of guerillas hung on the flanks of the regular armies. These last were murderers, pure and simple. It mattered nothing to them which side won. They robbed and slaughtered impartially, wherever booty or victims awaited them, and their ranks were recruited from the very scum of the earth.

Only that morning a brisk action had taken place at a small town on the line, and although the guerillas had been driven off they had managed to inflict considerable damage. A desperate attempt to destroy a bridge had been foiled, but one of the trestles had been so weakened that the heavy train did not dare to

cross until repairs were made. This caused a delay of an hour or two, and, in the meantime, most of the passengers left the train and strolled about, watching the progress of the work.

Among these had been Bert Wilson and Tom Henderson, Dick's inseparable friends and companions. A strong bond of friendship united the three and this had been cemented by many experiences shared in common. They were so thoroughly congenial, had "summered and wintered" each other so long that each almost knew what the others were thinking. Together they had faced dangers: together they had come to hand grips with death and narrowly escaped. Each knew that the others would back him to the limit and would die rather than desert him in an emergency. By dint of strength and natural capacity Bert was the leader, but the others followed close behind. All were tall and muscular, and as they stood beside the train they formed a striking trio—the choicest type of young American manhood.

They were on their way to Panama to witness the opening of the Panama Canal. That stupendous triumph of engineering skill had appealed to them strongly while in course of construction, and now that it was to be thrown open to the vessels of the world, their enthusiasm had reached fever heat. All of them had chosen their life work along engineering and scientific lines, and this of course added to the interest they felt simply as patriotic Americans. They had devoured with eagerness every scrap of news as the colossal work went on, but had scarcely dared to hope that they might see it in person. A lucky combination of circumstances had made it possible at the last moment to take the trip together; and from the time that trip became a certainty they thought and talked of little else than the great canal.

"How shall we go?" asked Tom, when they began to plan for the journey.

"Oh, by boat or train, I suppose," said Dick flippantly. "It's a little too far to walk."

"Yes, Socrates," retorted Tom, "I had imagined as much. But bring your soaring intellect down to earth and get busy with common things. Which shall it be?"

"I'd leave it to the toss of a coin," was the answer. "I don't care either way."

"I vote for the train," broke in Bert. "We've had a good deal of sea travel in our trip to the Olympic Games and that last voyage to China. Besides, I'd like to see

Mexico and Central America. It's the land of flowers and romance, of guitars and señoritas, of Cortes and the Aztecs——"

"Yes," interrupted Dick grimly, "and of bandits and beggars and greasers and guerillas. Perhaps you'll see a good deal more of Mexico than you want. Still, I'm game, and if Tom——"

"Count me in," said Tom promptly. "A spice of danger will make it all the more exciting. If the Chinese pirates didn't get us, I guess the Mexicans won't."

So Mexico it was, and up to the time they stopped at the broken bridge no personal danger had threatened, although it was evident that the country was a seething volcano. How near they were to that volcano's rim they little dreamed as they sauntered lazily down to the bridge and watched the men at work.

The damage proved greater than at first thought, and it was evident that some time must elapse before it could be thoroughly repaired. Bert and Tom climbed down the ravine a little way to get a better view of the trestle. Dick chatted a while with the engineer as he stood, oil can in hand, near the tender. Then the impulse seized him to walk a little way up the road that ran beside the track and get some of the kinks out of his six feet of bone and muscle.

It was a perfect day. The sun shone hotly, but there was a cooling breeze that tempered the heat and made it bearable. Great trees beside the road afforded a grateful shade and beneath them Dick walked on. Everything was so different from what he had been accustomed to that at each moment he saw something new. Strange, gaily-plumaged birds fluttered in the branches overhead. Slender feathery palms rose a hundred feet in the air. Here a scorpion ran through the chapparal; there a tarantula scurried away beneath the dusty leaves of a cactus plant. Up in the transparent blue a vulture soared, and made Dick think of the abundant feasts that were spread for these carrion birds all over Mexico. And just then as he rounded a curve in the road, his heart leaped into his throat and his hands went up in response to a quick, sharp word of command.

"Fool, fool," he groaned to himself. Then he rose to the emergency. He took a grip on himself. And his cool gray eyes gave no sign of his inward tumult as he looked steadily at his captor and returned gaze for gaze. And as he gazed, the conviction grew that his life was not worth a moment's purchase.

Before him, surrounded by his followers, stood a man of medium height, but

evidently possessed of great muscular strength. He wore a nondescript costume of buckskin, studded with silver buttons and surmounted by a serape that had once been red, but now was sadly faded by wind and weather. A murderous machete was thrust into a flaunting sash that served as a belt and a black sombrero overshadowed his face.

That face! Dick had never seen one so hideous except in nightmare. A sword cut had slashed the right cheek from the temple to the chin. The mouth from which several teeth were missing was like a gash. His eyes, narrowed beneath drooping lids, were glinting with ferocity. They were the eyes of a demon and the soul that looked through them was scarred and seamed by every evil passion. So the old pirates might have looked as they forced their victims to walk the plank. So an Apache Indian might have gloated over a captive at the stake. Dick's soul turned sick within him, but outwardly he was as cold as ice and hard as steel, as he stared unflinchingly into the cruel eyes before him.

Perhaps that level gaze saved his life. The bandit's hand was trembling on the trigger. One dead man more or less made no difference to him and he could rob as easily after shooting as before. Something told Dick that, had he weakened for a moment, a bullet would have found lodgment in his heart. He braced himself for the strange duel and as he looked, he saw the savage eyes change into a half-resentful admiration. It had been a case of touch and go, but Dick, by sheer nerve had won a brief reprieve. Without lowering the revolvers, the bandit called to one of the scoundrels, of whom twenty stood near by with carbines ready:

"Search him, Pedro," he commanded.

The fellow come forward quickly. Every movement showed the awe and fear in which the chief was held. He went through every pocket with a skill born of long experience. Dick's watch and money were taken from him, and, at a sign from the leader, his coat and shoes were also added to the loot.

"Now tie him and put him on one of the horses," said the captain, "and we'll be off. There may be some more of these accursed Americanos near by."

In a twinkling a lariat was dragged from the saddlehorn of the broncho, and Dick's arms were roughly tied behind his back. The rope cut cruelly into his flesh, but, with such an undaunted prisoner, they were determined to take no chances. Then he was lifted to the saddle and his feet tied beneath the horse. A

bandit leaped up behind him and grasped the reins with one hand, while he held Dick with the other. Not till he was thus securely trussed and unable to move hand or foot, did the chief lower the revolvers with which he had kept the prisoner covered. A sharp command, a quick vaulting into the saddles, and the guerilla band was off to its eyrie in the mountains.

Events had passed so rapidly that Dick's brain was in a whirl. It seemed as though he were in a frightful dream from which he must presently awake. Scarcely ten minutes had wrought this fearful change in his fortunes. A quarter of an hour ago he was free, serene, apparently master of himself and his fate. Now he was a captive, stripped of money and goods, tied hand and foot, in the power of a desperate scoundrel, while every step was carrying him further away from happiness and friends and life.

For he did not disguise to himself that death probably yawned for him at the journey's end. Whatever the whim that had saved his life so far, it was unlikely to continue. He tried to figure out why the revolver had not barked when it had him so surely at its mercy. It was absurd to think that this human tiger had been deterred by any scruple. He was of the type that revelled in blood, who like a wild beast lusted for the kill. Perhaps he had not wanted to leave the evidence of his crime so close to the victim's friends, whose fury might prompt to bloody revenge. The noise of the shooting might have brought them like hornets about his ears. Or did some idea of ransom, if it could be managed, appeal to his avarice? Or, possibly, he might be held as a hostage to be exchanged for some precious rascal now held by the enemy. In these last suppositions there were some glimmerings of hope and Dick drew from them such comfort as he might; but underneath them all was the grim probability that would not down that he was probably bound on his last journey.

His tortured thoughts turned back to Bert and Tom. He could see them now in his mind's eye, chatting and laughing on the edge of the ravine, while the men shored up the tottering trestle. Presently they would turn back and idly wonder what had become of Dick. A little longer and their wonder would change into a certain uneasiness. Still they would not permit themselves to think for a moment that anything could have happened to him. They would guess that he might be in the smoker or the buffet and would saunter leisurely through the various cars. Only then when they failed to find him would they become seriously alarmed. And he could see the look of fierce determination and deadly resolution that would leap to their eyes when they realized that he must have met with disaster.

For they would come after him. He had no doubt of that. Some time, some way, they would come upon him, dead or alive, unless their own lives were lost in the effort. He knew that they would stick to the trail like bloodhounds and never falter for an instant. They had faced too many perils together to quail at this supreme test when his life was at stake. Dear old Bert! Good old Tom! His heart warmed at the thought of them and a mist came over his eyes.

But what chance did they have of finding him? They were in a strange land where even the language was unknown to them, and where the natives looked with suspicion on everything American. The country through which they were passing was of the wildest kind, and the hard sunbaked trail left little trace. The woods were thick and at times his captors had to use their machetes to cut a way through the dense under growth. In places where streams were met, they walked their horses through the water to confuse the trail still further. They were evidently familiar with every foot of ground, and no doubt their camp had been located in some place where it would be practically impossible for pursuers to come upon them without abundant warning. The chances of success were so remote as to be well nigh hopeless. There was no use in deluding himself, and Dick pulled himself together and resolutely faced the probability of death.

He did not want to die. Every fibre in him flamed out in fierce revolt against the thought. Why, he had scarcely begun to live. He stood at the very threshold of life. Some lines he had read only a few days before, curiously enough came back to him:

*"'Tis life, of which our nerves are scant,
O life, not death, for which we pant,
More life and fuller that we want."*

Yes, that was it. He wanted life, wanted it eagerly, wanted it thirstily, wanted it desperately. Never before had it seemed so sweet. An hour earlier it had stretched before him, full of promise. The blood ran warm and riotous through every vein. He had everything to live for—health, strength, home and friends. And now the ending of all his dreams and hopes and plans was—what?

A shadow fell across him. He looked up. It was the vulture, circling lower now, as though its instinct told it of a coming feast. Dick shuddered. The air seemed suddenly to have grown deadly chill.

CHAPTER II

THE PURSUIT

Down at the ravine, stretched out at full length beneath the shade of a great tree, Bert and Tom were watching the progress of the work, as it slowly neared completion. There was more to do than was at first thought, but after making allowance for this, it seemed to drag on endlessly.

"Not much genius in that crowd, I imagine," said Bert.

"What do you mean?" asked Tom, looking up in surprise.

"Why," returned Bert, "I forget what philosopher it was—Carlyle, I think—who says in one of his books that 'genius is only an infinite capacity for hard work.' You don't see much of it straying around loose here, do you?"

"Well no," laughed Tom, "not so that you would notice it. I've just been looking at that fellow over there with a hammer. I'll bet I could take a nap in the time it takes him to drive a nail."

"They ought to have as foreman one of those husky, bull-necked fellows I've seen in some of the section gangs laying out a railroad in the Northwest," went on Bert. "Those fellows are 'steam engines in breeches.' There isn't much loafing or lying down on the job when they're around. When they speak, the men jump as though they were shot."

"Yes," answered Tom, "or perhaps a mate on a Mississippi steamboat would fill the bill. Those colored roustabouts certainly get a move on when they feel his gimlet eye boring through them."

"After all, I suppose the climate is a good deal to blame," mused Bert. "It's hard

to show much ginger when you feel as though you were working in a Turkish bath."

"Right you are," responded Tom. "We fellows born and bred in a cold climate don't realize how lucky we are. It's the fight with old mother nature that brings out all that's strong and tough in a man. I guess if the old Pilgrim Fathers had landed at Vera Cruz instead of on the 'stern and rock-bound coast' of New England they'd have become lotus eaters too."

"Well, that's what we're getting to be already," said Bert with a yawn, "and if I lie here much longer I'll strike my roots into the bank."

"Sure enough," assented Tom, "here we are talking about the laziness of these fellows, but I don't see that we're wearing any medals for energy."

"Energy," drawled Bert. "Where have I heard that word before. It sounds familiar, but I wouldn't recognize it if I saw it. I don't believe there is any such thing south of the Rio Grande."

"Come, wake up," retorted Tom. "Get out of your trance. I'll tell you what I'll do. Do you see that tree up there? I'll race you to it. That is, if you give me a handicap."

"Done," said Bert, who could never resist a challenge. "How much do you want?"

"How about a hundred feet? That oughtn't to be too much for a Marathon winner to give a dub like me."

"You don't want much, do you?" laughed Bert. "Your nerve hasn't suffered from the heat. But get your lead and I'll start from scratch."

Tom, quick as a cat, was not to be despised. On more than one occasion he had circled the bases in fifteen seconds. But he was no match for the fellow who at the Olympic games had won the Marathon race from the greatest runners of the world. For a little he seemed to hold his own, but when Bert once got into his stride—that space-devouring lope that fairly burned up the ground—it was "all over but the shouting." He collared Tom fifty feet from the tree and cantered in an easy winner.

Tom had "bellows to mend" and was perspiring profusely, but to Bert it had simply been an "exercise gallop" and he had never turned a hair.

"Well, you got me all right," admitted Tom disgustedly. "I've got no license to run with you under any conditions. But at any rate the run has waked me up. I've lost some of my wind, but I've got back my self-respect. But now let's go and hunt Dick up. I wonder where he is anyway."

"Probably stretched out on a couple of seats and taking a snooze," guessed Bert. "I'll bet he's lazier even than we are, and that's saying a good deal."

"Well, let's rout him out," said Tom. "Come along."

But when they reached their section of the car, Dick was nowhere to be seen.

"Taking a snack in the buffet, perhaps," suggested Bert. "There's something uncanny about that appetite of his. I'd hate to have him as a steady boarder."

But here their search was equally unavailing. The attendant at the buffet did not remember having seen any one of his description lately.

"Great Scott," ejaculated Tom. "Where is the old rascal anyway?"

Bert bent his brows in a puzzled frown. It certainly did seem a little queer.

"He must be close by somewhere," he said slowly. "He can't have vanished into the thin air. Perhaps the porters or the train men have seen something of him."

With a growing sense of uneasiness they went from car to car, but the mystery remained unsolved until they reached the engineer.

"Sure," replied that worthy, "I know who you mean. He was talking to me alongside the engine here."

"How long ago?" asked Bert, anxiously.

"O, it must be all of two hours," was the reply. "I remember it was just a little while after the train stopped. When he left me he started up that road," pointing to the path beside the track. "Said he was going to stretch his legs a little."

"Two hours ago!" exclaimed Bert.

"And not back yet!" cried Tom.

The boys looked at each other and in their eyes a great fear was dawning.

"O, I guess he's all right," said the engineer, "though he certainly was taking chances if he went very far. Things are rather risky around here just now, and it's good dope not to get too far away from the train unless you're pretty well 'heeled' and have got some friends along."

But his last words fell upon unheeding ears. With a bound, Bert was back in the car, closely followed by Tom. They rummaged hastily in their bags until they found their Colt revolvers—the good old .45s that had done them such good service in their fight with the pirates off the Chinese coast. Not a word was spoken. There was no time for talk and each knew what was passing in the mind of the other. Dick was gone—dear old Dick—and at this very moment was perhaps in deadly peril. There were only two things to be done. If he were alive, they would find him. If he were dead, they would avenge him.

That they were taking their own lives in their hands in the effort to aid their comrade did not even occur to them. It seemed the simplest thing in the world. It was not even a problem. Not for a moment did they weigh the cost. Were they hucksters to split hairs, to measure chances, when their comrade's life hung in the balance? As for the risks—well, let them come. They had faced death before and won out. Perhaps they would again. If not—there were worse things than death. At least they could die like men.

They thrust their weapons in their belt, threw a handful of cartridges in either pocket, leaped from the car and started on a run up the road.

As they ran, they gathered speed. The road fell away like a white ribbon behind them. The wind whistled in their ears. The canter they had already indulged in had put them in form and their anxiety gave wings to their feet. No time to spare themselves when every minute was precious—fraught with the chances of life or death. More than once they had run for glory—now perhaps they were running for a life. And at the thought they quickened their pace until they were fairly flying.

Their keen eyes scanned each side of the path for some sign of Dick's presence,

but not until they came to the turn in the road was their search rewarded. Then they stopped abruptly.

Something had happened here. There were no signs of a struggle, but the ground was torn up as though by the pawing of horses. The upturned earth was fresh at the edges and the prints of hoofs could be clearly seen. A bit of cloth fluttered on a tree and a broken strap lay on the ground. An ace of spades near by made it look as though a card game had been suddenly interrupted and this impression gathered force from the presence of an empty bottle that still smelled strongly of mescal, the villainous whisky of the Mexicans.

Like hounds on the scent the boys circled round the spot, trying to get the meaning of the signs. Their experience in camping had made them the keenest kind of woodmen and they could read the forest like an open book. Bert's sharp eyes caught sight of the bark of a sapling freshly gnawed. By its height from the ground he knew at once that this had been made by the teeth of a broncho. The mark of a strap a little lower down showed that the beast had been tethered there. All around the clearing he went, until he had satisfied himself that at least twenty horses had been standing there a little while before.

Tom in the meantime had been studying the hoofprints. One of them especially arrested his attention. He followed the trail some hundred feet and came running back to Bert.

"One of those horses has carried double," he panted. "See how much deeper and sharper his prints are than the others. And though he started off among the first he soon came back to the rear. The others with a lighter load got on faster."

Bert hastily confirmed this conclusion. There was no longer any room for doubt. They saw the whole scene now as clearly as though they had been on the spot when it happened. Dick had come unexpectedly and unarmed upon this band of guerillas. They had at least been twenty to one, and he had had not the ghost of a chance. They had carried him off into the mountains. For what purpose? God only knew.

But at least they had spared his life. There was still a chance. While there was life there was hope. And they would never leave the trail until that last spark of hope had gone out in utter darkness.

Now that they had fully settled in their own minds just what had happened, the

next thing in order was to plan the rescue. And this promised to be a tremendous task. The chances were all against them. They had no delusions on that score. The odds of twenty to two were enormous. Mere courage was not enough to settle the problem. With a heart of a lion they must have the cunning of a fox.

The boys sat down on the grassy bank and cudgeled their brains. The fierce excitement of the last few minutes had gone down, to be replaced by a steady flame of resolution. Bert's mental processes were quick as lightning. He could not only do, but plan. It was this instant perception and clear insight, as well as his pluck and muscle, that had made him a natural leader and won him the unquestioned position he held among his friends and comrades. Like a flash he reviewed in his mind the various plans that occurred to him, dismissing this, amending that, until out of the turmoil of his thoughts he had reached a definite conclusion.

He lifted his head from his hands and in short crisp sentences sketched out his purpose.

"Now, Tom," he said, "we've got to work harder and quicker than we ever did before. Here's the game. Make tracks for the train. It must be pretty nearly ready to move now. Go through Dick's bag and get his revolver. It may come in handy later on. Grab another big bunch of cartridges. Get the pocket compass out of my valise. Go into the buffet and cram your pockets full of bread and meat. We might shoot small game enough to keep us alive, but shooting makes a noise.

"Do these things first of all, and then hunt up Melton. You know whom I mean—that cattleman from Montana that we were talking to yesterday. He's a good fellow and a game sport. He told me he was going to Montillo on business connected with his ranch. That's the first station on the other side of the bridge. The train will be there in an hour. Tell Melton the fix we're in. He's chased outlaws himself and he'll understand. Ask him to go to the American Consul the minute he gets to Montillo and put it up to him that American citizens need help and need it quick. It's an important town and we'll probably have a consul there. If not, ask Melton to put the facts before the Mexican authorities. They don't love Americans very much, but they're a little afraid that the Washington people may mix in here, and they may not want to get in bad with them. Besides they hate the guerillas just about as much as we do. Anyway we'll have to take the chance."

"How about following the trail?" suggested Tom. "There are plenty of bloodhounds around. They use them to chase the peons and Yaquis. Shall I ask Melton to send some along if he can?"

"No," replied Bert. "I thought of that, but their baying might give us away. If they suspect pursuit, they might kill Dick and scatter before we could get to them. You and I are woodmen enough to follow a trail made by twenty horses. If there were only one they might get away with it, but not when there are so many. Now get a move on, old man. I'll wait for you here studying the signs, and we'll start as soon as you get back. If reinforcements catch up to us, all right. If we can get Dick without them so much the better. If not, they'll help us later on."

Without another word Tom leaped to his feet and was off down the road like the flight of an arrow.

CHAPTER III

A GALLANT COMRADE

As he flew on, he heard the shrill whistle of the engine and the ringing of its bell. The train was getting ready to move. Groups of workmen, tools in hand, were coming from the ravine, and the passengers, glad that the wearisome wait was over, were getting on the platform, ready to climb into the cars. He let out a link and reached the train just as the engineer was getting into his cab. Tom blurted out the facts of Dick's capture, and the conductor, coming up just then, willingly consented to hold the train a few minutes longer.

To carry out Bert's instructions was with Tom the work of a moment, and then, with pockets crammed to bursting, he sought out Melton, the cattleman.

That individual, a grizzled weather beaten veteran of the plains, listened with the liveliest sympathy and indignation. His eyes, beneath his shaggy brows fairly blazed as Tom panted out the story.

"The dogs! The whelps!" he cried, as he brought down his gnarled fist with a tremendous thump. "If I were only twenty years younger or a hundred pounds lighter, I'd come with you myself. But I'd only hold you back if I went on foot. But you'll see me yet," he went on savagely; "I'll fix up things at Montillo as you ask, and then I'll get a horse and come after you. I thought my fighting days were over, but I've still got one good fight under my belt. Go ahead, my boy. You're the real stuff and I wish I had a son like you. You make me proud of being an American. I'll do my best to be in at the death, and God help those greasers if I get them under my guns."

His warmth and eagerness proved that Bert had made no mistake in enlisting him as their ally at this time of deadly need. With a fervent word of thanks and a crushing hand grip, Tom leaped from the train and sped back to the comrade who

was impatiently awaiting him. A hurried report of his mission and they were off on the trail.

What was at the end of that trail? Dick, alive or dead? Rescue or defeat? A joyful reunion or graves for three? All they knew was that, whatever awaited them, it was not disgrace. And they grimly pulled their belts tighter and pressed forward.

As they climbed upward they came to an open space from which they had a wide view of the surrounding country. As they looked back to the south, they heard the faint whistle of the departing train and saw the thin veil of smoke that it left behind. Not until that moment did they realize how utterly alone they were. It was the snapping of the last link that bound them to civilization. With the swiftness of a kaleidoscope their whole life had changed. That morning, without the slightest idea of what fate had in store for them, they had been together, exchanging jest and banter; now one of their comrades was a captive in the power of desperate brigands and they were on their way to save him or die with him. It was a forlorn hope; but forlorn hopes have a way of winning out in this world, where grit is at a premium, and although they were sobered at the awful odds against them, they were not dismayed.

If they should be too late! This was the terrible fear that haunted them. Already the afternoon had advanced and their shadows were growing longer behind them. Bert consulted his watch. Night comes on suddenly in those latitudes and there were only a few hours of the precious daylight left. Whatever they did that day would have to be done before darkness set in. It was difficult enough to follow the trail by daylight, but at night it would be utterly impossible. Since they had not killed Dick at once the probability was that his life would be safe during the flight. But at night they would be resting, with nothing to do but drink and gamble and indulge in every vice of their depraved natures. What deviltry might come to the surface, what thirst for blood and death that could only be slaked in the torture of their captive! Nine-tenths of the world's crime is committed under cover of the night, and it is not without reason that Satan has been called the "Prince of Darkness."

Such thoughts as these gave an added quickness to their steps. The way led steadily uphill. The path was rough and they tripped often over the tangled undergrowth. Long creepers reached down like snakes to grasp them from the branches overhead. Once they narrowly escaped a treacherous bog that got a firm grip on Tom's feet, and from which Bert only pulled him out by the utmost

exertion of his strength. At times they lost the trail altogether, and fumed for nearly an hour before they took up the thread again. At the brook through which Dick's captors had walked their horses, they had almost begun to despair, when an exclamation of Tom's showed that he had found the spot where they had left the water. But through all these vexations, they stuck to the work with dogged tenacity. Then suddenly, almost without warning, night came down on them like a blanket. There was nothing of the long dusk and waning light common to northern climes. Five minutes earlier there was light enough for them to read by. Five minutes later and they could not see their hand before their face.

"Well, Tom, old scout," said Bert, "it's no go for to-day. We've got to go into camp."

"Yes," agreed Tom, bitterly, "we've done our best, but our best isn't good enough. Poor Dick——"

"Brace up, old fellow," replied Bert, feigning a cheerfulness he did not feel, "we'll get there yet. To-morrow's a new day. And remember that this same darkness is holding up the guerillas too. They've got to go into camp and they're not getting any further ahead of us. Likely enough they'll feel pretty secure now and they won't be stirring so early to-morrow, while we'll be afoot at the first streak of daylight. What we've got to do now is to figure out the best and safest way to spend the night."

Near the spot where they were when darkness had overtaken them, was a grassy knoll, at the edge of which uprose a giant rock. At the foot of this they drew together enough of branches and shrubs to make a rude bed, and prepared to settle down and spend as best they could the hours before the coming of the dawn. They did not dare to make a fire, lest some prying eyes might discover their location. They had nothing to cook anyway, but the fire would have served to keep up their spirits and the smoke would have kept off the mosquitoes that hovered over them in swarms. It would have helped also to drive the chill from their bones, brought on by the heavy mists that rose from the lush vegetation and set their teeth to chattering. They drew close together for the companionship, and munched their bread and meat in silence. They were feeling the reaction that follows sustained effort and great excitement, and their hearts were too sick and sore for speech.

Then suddenly while they brooded—as suddenly as the sun had set—the moon

arose and flooded the world with glory.

It put new life into the boys. They took heart of hope. Their mental barometer began to climb.

"I say, Bert," exclaimed Tom, eagerly voicing the thought that struck them both at once, "couldn't we follow the trail by moonlight?"

"I don't know," answered Bert, quite as excitedly. "Perhaps we can. Let's make a try at it."

They started to their feet and hurried to the spot where they had left the trail. Bathed in that soft luminous splendor, it certainly seemed as though they should have no difficulty in following it as easily as by day. But they soon found their mistake. It was an unreal light, a fairy light that fled from details and concealed rather than revealed them. It lay on the ground like a shimmering, silken mesh, but through its tremulous beauty they could not detect the signs they sought. They needed the merciless, penetrating light of day. Their hopes were dashed, but they had to yield to the inevitable. They were turning back dejectedly to their improvised camp, when Bert stopped short in his tracks.

"What was that?" he whispered, as he grasped Tom's arm.

"I don't hear anything," returned Tom.

"I did. Listen."

They stood like stones, scarcely venturing to breathe. Then Tom, too, caught the sound. It was the faint, far-off tramp of horses. Bert threw himself down with his ear to the ground. A moment later he jumped to his feet.

"Three horses at least," he said quickly. "Get in the shadow of the rock and have your gun ready."

They crouched down where it was blackest and strained their eyes along the road up which they had come. Nearer and nearer came the cautious tread, and their fingers fidgeted on the trigger. Then a faint blur appeared on the moonlit path. Another moment and it resolved itself into a burly figure riding a wiry broncho and leading two others. The moonlight fell full on his rugged face and the boys gave a simultaneous gasp.

"Melton!" they cried, as they rushed toward him.

At the first sound, the newcomer had grasped a carbine that lay across his saddle, and in a flash the boys were covered. Then, as he recognized them, he lowered the weapon and grinned delightedly. In another second he was on the ground and his hands were almost wrung off in frantic welcome.

"Guessed it right the first time," he chuckled. "Melton sure enough. You didn't think I was bluffing, did you, when I said I'd come? If I'd left you two young fellows to make this fight alone, I could never have looked a white man in the face again. We Americans have got to stick together in this God-forsaken country. It's a long time since I've ridden the range and taken pot-shots at the greasers, but I guess I haven't forgotten how. But now let me get these bronchos hobbled and then we'll have a gabfest."

With the deftness of an' old frontiersman, he staked out the horses where the grazing was good, and then the three sought the shelter of the rock. The boys were jubilant at this notable addition to their forces. His skill and courage and long experience made him invaluable. And their hearts warmed toward this comparative stranger who had made their quarrel his, because they were his countrymen and because he saw in them a spirit kindred to his own. Not one in a thousand would have left his business and risked his life with such a fine disregard of the odds against him. Up to this time they had had only a fighting chance; now they were beginning to feel that it might be a winning chance.

The old cattleman settled his huge bulk on the pile of boughs and drew his pipe from his pocket. Not until it was filled and lighted and drawing well, would he "unlimber his jaw," to use his own phrase, and tell of the day's experience.

"I figured it all out on the trail," he began, as he leaned back comfortably against the rock, "and the minute we got to Montillo, I made a bee line to the American Consul. A fellow in brass buttons at the door wanted my card and told me I would have to wait in the anteroom. But I'm a rough and ready sort of fellow—always believe in taking the bull by the horns and cutting out the red tape—and I pushed him out of the way and streaked right into the consul's private office. I guessed the old man was kind o' shocked by my manners—or my lack of them—but he's a good sort all right, and when I gave him straight talk and told him I wanted him to mix war medicine right away, pronto, he got busy on the jump. He sent out one of his men to get me three of the best horses that could be had

and then he scurried round with me to the big Mogul of the town—sort of mayor and chief of police rolled into one. I ain't much on the lingo, but I could see that the old boy was handing out a pretty stiff line of talk, and that the mayor was balky and backing up in the shafts. Not ugly, you know—anything but that. He was a slick proposition—that mayor. Smooth as oil and spreading on the salve a foot thick. Shrugging his shoulders and fairly wringing his hands. So sorry that anything had happened to these good Americanos whom he loved as though they were his brothers. He was desolated, broken-hearted—but what could he do? And every other word was manana—meaning tomorrow. That word is the curse of this country. Everything is manana—and then when to-morrow comes, it's manana again."

"Well, the old man stood this for a while, and then a sort of steely look came into his eyes that meant trouble and he sailed into him. Say, it did my heart good. Told him there wasn't going to be any manana in this. If there was, Mexico City would hear of it and Washington would hear of it, and before he knew it he'd be wishing he were dead. Those boys had to be helped mighty quick. He must call out his guards, get a troop of cavalry and send them off on the run. I backed up his play by looking fierce and rolling my eyes and resting my hand kind o' careless like on my hip pocket. I guess the mayor had visions of sudden death at the hands of a wild and woolly Westerner—one of those 'dear Americanos whom he loved as a brother—and he came down like Davy Crockett's coon. He started ringing all sorts of bells on his desk and sending this one here and the other one there, and promised by all the saints that he'd have them on the trail within an hour or two. To make it surer I asked the consul as a special favor to say that if they didn't come, I'd be back in a day or two—drop in kind o' casual as it were—to know the reason why."

He chuckled, as he refilled his pipe and went on:

"Of course, I couldn't wait around there on any such chance as that. We went straight back to the consul's office and these three horses were waiting for me. They ain't much to brag of and I've got some on my ranch that could lay all over them. But they're gritty little beasts and the best that could be got on such short notice. The consul lent me his rifle which seems to be a pretty good one, and I've got the pair of revolvers that I always carry with me.

"Then I struck the spurs pretty sharply into the broncho and lighted out. I knew there wasn't much daylight left and we certainly did some traveling. I wanted to

get up to you before dark if I could, but you had too big a start. I had no trouble in following the trail—I've tracked Sioux Indians before now, and these Mexicans are babies compared to them, when it comes to covering up—and when the dark came on I knew I wasn't very far behind. Then as the horses were still full of go, I just dropped the reins on their neck and let them meander along. So many horses have passed this way that I felt sure they would get the scent and keep on in the right direction. And as you see I wasn't very far out.

"Well," he ruminated, "I guess that's about all."

"All!" exclaimed Bert, warmly. "As if that wasn't enough. I never knew a finer or more generous thing. You've put us in your debt for life."

"Yes," broke in Tom, "for sheer pluck and goodness of heart——"

"Come, come," laughed Melton, "that's nothing at all. It's I who owe you a lot for the chance to get into such a lively scrap as this promises to be. I was getting rusty and beginning to feel that I was out of it. But now I feel as though twenty years had dropped away since this morning, and I'm just aching to hear the bark of a gun. It takes me back to the wild old days, when a man's life depended upon his quickness with the trigger. My blood is shooting through my veins once more, and, by thunder, I'm just as young at this moment as either of you fellows."

"Did you get any idea at Montillo who this guerilla chief might be?" asked Bert.

"Why, yes," replied Melton, slowly and almost reluctantly. "Of course they're only guessing, and they may not have the right dope. But while the consul was spelling with that mayor fellow, I caught every once in a while the word 'El Tigre.' That means 'the Tiger' in our language, and on our way back to the office he told me enough to show how well the name fits him. Some of the stories—but there," he broke off, checking himself abruptly, "it's getting late, and we've got to be stirring at the first streak of daylight. Now you fellows turn in and I'll sit here and figure things out a little."

Bert and Tom vigorously protested that they would take turns in watching, but he waved them off with a good humor that still had in it a touch of finality.

"Not a bit of it," he said. "More than once I've gone days and nights together without a wink of sleep, and felt none the worse for it. I'm a tough old knot, but

you young fellows have got to have your sleep. Besides, I've got a lot of things I want to think out before morning."

Under his kindly but forceful persistence, there was nothing else to be done without offending him, and he had done too much for them not to have his way in this. So, under protest, they stretched their weary bodies on the rude couch they had prepared. At first their minds were so full of anxious thoughts about Dick that it seemed as though they couldn't sleep. But old nature had her way with them and before long they were lost in the sleep of utter exhaustion.

"Mighty lucky I stopped that fool tongue of mine in time," mused Melton, as he looked at their tired faces, "or there would have been no sleep for them this night."

For it was a gruesome story that the consul had told him that afternoon. A fearful reckoning would be demanded of the "Tiger" at the day of judgment. A more villainous character could not be found in the length and breadth of Mexico. Awful tales were told of him and others more horrible *could* not be told. That he was a robber and murderer went without saying. Every bandit chief was that. Those were mere everyday incidents of the "profession." But the evil preeminence of the Tiger lay in his love of torture for its own sake. He reveled in blood and tears. He was a master of devilish ingenuity. The shrieks of the victims were his sweetest music. He was, morally, a cross between an Apache Indian and a Chinese executioner. There were whispers of babies roasted in ovens, of children tortured before the eyes of bound and helpless parents until the latter became raving maniacs, of eyes gouged out and noses cut off and faces carved until they were only a frightful caricature of humanity. His band was composed of scoundrels almost as hardened as himself and with them he held all the nearby country in terror. Rewards were out for his capture dead or alive, but he laughed at pursuers and so far had thwarted all the plans of the Government troops.

And this was the man into whose hands Dick had fallen. The boys had wondered why the bandit, if he meant to kill Dick at all had not done so at once. Melton shook with rage as he thought that perhaps he knew the reason. Perhaps at this very moment——

But such thoughts unmanned one, and, hoping that Providence would prove kinder than his fears, he resolutely turned his mind in other channels.

And there was plenty to think about. He had been engaged in many dare-devil adventures in his varied life, but, as he admitted to himself with a smile half grave, half whimsical, there were few that he remembered so desperate as this. He did not underrate the enemy. Like most Western men, he had a contempt for "greasers," but he knew that it was not safe to carry that contempt too far. An American, to be sure, might tackle two or three Mexicans and have a fair chance of coming out winner, but when the odds were greater than that his chances were poor. But in this case the odds would probably be ten to one or more. Then, too, these were men whose lives were forfeit to the law—double-dyed murderers who could look for nothing but a "short shrift and a long rope" if they were captured. They would fight with the fierceness of cornered rats. Moreover, they would be on the defensive and in a country where they knew every foot of ground and could seize every advantage. Altogether the outlook was grave, and it speaks volumes for the character of the man that his spirits rose with danger and he would have been bitterly disappointed if he were cheated of the promised fight.

Absorbed in his thoughts, the night passed quickly, and as the first ray of light shot across the eastern sky, he roused the boys from slumber.

"Time to get a move on," he announced cheerily. "A bite of grub and we'll be off. The horses can make better time in the cool of the morning, and if we have any luck we may strike those fellows before they've had time to get the sleep out of their eyes."

His energy found an echo in that of the boys, and in a few minutes their meagre breakfast had been despatched, the horses saddled and they had hit the trail.

The path wound steadily upward. It was too narrow for them to ride abreast, and Melton rode in advance, scanning the road with the eye of a hawk. Three hours passed, and just as they were nearing the top of the plateau, the leader suddenly stopped. With uplifted hand to enjoin silence, he turned into the dense forest at the side of the path and dismounted. Bert and Tom followed suit.

"I smell smoke," Melton whispered. "There's a campfire not far off."

And as a vagrant breeze strayed toward them, the boys, too, sniffed the unmistakable odor of smoke.

"Of course," went on Melton in a low tone, "it's no sure thing that this comes

from the camp of the fellows we're after. But all the chances lie that way. We'll tie our horses here and go ahead on foot. See that your guns are handy and don't step on any loose twigs."

A moment later and the bronchos were securely tied, and, silent as ghosts, they crept up the woodland path.

CHAPTER IV

THE CAPTURED SENTRY

They had wormed their way through the thick undergrowth for perhaps three hundred feet, when Melton, who was in the van, paused abruptly and gave a sign of caution. Then he beckoned the boys to come nearer.

"They've got a sentry posted here," he whispered, "I'd hoped they'd be too careless or too drunk to do it. Look over there a little to the right."

They peered through the bushes and saw, sitting on a tree stump, a Mexican, carrying a carbine, slung in the hollow of his arm. His back was toward them at the moment, but even while they gazed, he lazily rose and turned around, so that they caught a full view of his face. It was a rascally face that left no doubt in their minds that he was one of the bandit crew. A long knife was thrust in his belt, and he looked like an ugly customer to tackle in a fight. His small, piglike eyes looked listlessly about, and then, seeing no sign of danger, he reseated himself, and taking a flask from his pocket, applied it to his lips.

At a glance from Melton, they retreated as noiselessly as they had advanced, and not until they had gotten beyond earshot, did they stop for consultation as to their next move.

Bert and Tom felt their hearts beating high with excitement, but Melton was as cool and impassive as though he were seated on the veranda of his ranch.

While they waited for him to speak, he drew from its sheath a long double-edged bowie knife and fingered it thoughtfully.

"It's a long time since I've done it," he mused. "I wonder if I can do it now. I'll try it out first."

Rising, he went over to a tree about fifty feet away. At a height of six feet from the ground, he cut out a circle of bark, about the size of a saucer. The white patch stood out in strong contrast to the rest of the tree. Returning to the boys, who had looked on puzzled at his action, he planted himself solidly and took the bowie by the blade. A moment he stood thus, measuring the distance. Then he raised the weapon and hurled it at the bark. It whizzed through the air in a gleam of light, and struck two inches inside the circle, where it hung quivering. It was a marvelous bit of knife play, and Bert and Tom could hardly repress an exclamation.

"That's all I wanted to know," muttered Melton, as he came back, after pulling the knife from the tree and restoring it to its sheath. "It's a little trick that has saved my life once or twice before on the plains, and I wanted to make sure that I hadn't forgotten. I guess if I could hit that circle, I could do for the Mexican.

"For as you boys may imagine," he went on, "I wasn't doing this thing for pastime. We've got to get that sentinel out of the way. Of course, it would be an easy thing to wing him with a bullet. But that makes a noise and probably the camp is not far off. Our only chance lies in taking them by surprise. If they once get wind of our coming we'll have as much chance as a celluloid dog chasing an asbestos cat through Hades. I'd rather take this fellow alive if we could, for we might be able to get some valuable information from him. But I'm afraid he'd let out a yell or shoot off his gun before we could get to him. I guess we'll have to depend on this little persuader," he concluded, as he put his hand on the shaft of the knife.

Bert had been thinking rapidly.

"Couldn't we save that as a last resort?" he ventured. "I think that perhaps I might creep up on that fellow without his seeing me."

"But how?" asked Melton in surprise. "You'd have to be as quick as a coyote and as light as a cat to do it. What's your idea?"

"Why," replied Bert, "I figure that we might go back to the place where we first saw him. You can see from the listless way he looked around that he isn't really on the alert. Then too, he's drinking. If we find that he's facing our way, I'll make a circuit and get back of him. Then at the right second I'll make my dash. He probably won't hear me until I get close to him, and then he'll be so paralyzed,

what with the surprise and the drink, that I'll have my hands on his throat before he can make a sound. In the meantime, you keep him covered with your knife, and if he sees me too soon you can let fly."

Melton, a man used to quick decisions, spent only a moment weighing the pros and cons, looking keenly at Bert the while. What he saw seemed to satisfy him.

"It's a plucky stunt," he said, "but you're the lad to do it if any one can. I'd sure like to make that fellow talk before he goes over the great divide. Come along."

Noiselessly, they reached their former point of observation. The sentinel still sat there facing their way. The flask was in his hand and they could see from the way he tilted it that it was nearly empty. His carbine stood with its butt on the ground and the muzzle resting against the stump. Crouching low in the thicket, Melton drew his knife from its sheath, his eye gauging the distance. Bert, who had shed his coat and shoes, with a parting pat from Tom, made a wide circuit to the left, creeping along with his body close to the ground and scarcely daring to breathe. Once a twig cracked beneath his hand and his heart seemed to stop beating. But no sound came from the unsuspecting sentry, and after a moment's pause he went on. Soon he reached a point about a hundred feet in the rear of the Mexican, and behind the shelter of a huge tree rose slowly to his feet.

For forty feet the undergrowth was thick enough to conceal him. But then came the little clearing where for sixty feet no concealment was possible. He did not dare to tiptoe over it, because, if he were seen he could not get under way fast enough to reach his quarry. It must be a lightning dash. Once he had run a hundred yards—three hundred feet—in ten seconds flat. That would give him three seconds or less to cross the clearing. But a bullet could travel faster still. He drew a long breath and then, as lightly and swiftly as a panther, he leaped over the intervening space.

He had covered half the distance when the sentry heard him and sprang to his feet. For the fraction of a second he stood, petrified with surprise and fright. Then he reached for his carbine, but as though realizing that he could not level it in time, he abandoned that idea and snatched at his knife. And just then Bert launched himself on him like a thunderbolt.

Down they went fighting like wildcats. They rolled over and over. Bert's hands were on the rascal's throat and he could not utter a cry. But his knife was out and

upraised to strike, when Tom, who with Melton had rushed from the bushes the moment the clash had come, grasped the uplifted hand and wrenched it until the knife fell to the ground. Another instant, and the scoundrel, bound with his own belt and gagged with a portion of the serape torn from his shoulders, was sitting huddled up on the ground, with his back against the stump, while baffled rage and hate glowed from his wicked eyes.

"Good work, my boy, good work," said Melton, as he grasped Bert's hand warmly. "You tackled that fellow like a ton of brick. I never saw a prettier rough house than that was for a minute. Now get your breath back while I try to get this fellow to listen to reason. I know this breed of cattle pretty well and I have a hunch that it won't be long before we understand each other."

He drew out his bowie knife and felt its edge, while the prisoner looked on with a growing terror in his eyes.

Melton reached down and grabbing the fellow by the collar jerked him to his feet.

"Now, listen," he said, in the mongrel blending of English and Mexican that is understood on both sides of the border. "You're going to be a dead man in one minute if you don't tell me the truth. Sabe?"

Melton's eyes were like two lambent flames, and as the fellow looked into them, he wilted like a rag. He nodded his head eagerly as a sign that he would tell all he knew.

"I guessed as much," said Melton, grimly, as he turned to the boys. "These dogs would betray their own brother to save their miserable carcass. Untie that gag, and I'll turn him inside out until I get from him all he knows."

He placed the point of his bowie at the brigand's throat, and held it there while the boys removed the gag.

"One yip from you, and this knife goes in up to the hilt," said Melton. "Now tell me how far away your camp is from here."

"About a mile," replied the man, sullenly.

"What is the name of your captain?"

"El Tigre," was the answer, and the fellow shivered as he mentioned that redoubtable flame.

"How many men has he with him?" was the next question.

The bandit did not know exactly. There had been fifty or more, but a dozen or so had been sent on an expedition late last night. Maybe there were thirty or forty there now. He could not tell for sure.

The knife pricked sharply, and the fellow went down on his knees in an agony of terror, and swore by all his saints that he was telling all he knew. Why should he lie to the senor? The senor might kill him, but what he was saying was the truth.

"Get up," said Melton, disgustedly, for the cowardice of the cringing creature sickened him. "Now tell me what captives were in the camp and what your chief intends to do with them."

There were two captives there just now. One of them was a Chinaman, who had been taken in a raid on a hacienda, down in the valley. The other was an Americano, who had been surprised yesterday, when he came upon the band, just as they were getting ready to go away into the mountains. Three days ago there had been seven prisoners, but now—. The rascal made an expressive gesture that told only too clearly what had become of the miserable seven, and Melton had need of all his self-control not to end his prisoner's worthless life then and there, while Bert and Tom grew pale as they thought of Dick.

By an effort they restrained themselves, and the questioning went on. The bandit did not know what his chief intended to do. He rather thought that very morning the Chinaman would be put out of the way. But the young Americano, so cool, so brave—he did not know. El Tigre had seemed to be puzzled about him. The chief had been drinking hard and was very ugly. Yes, that was all he knew, and if the senor were to kill him, he swore on the head of his father that he had told nothing but the truth.

At a sign from Melton, the boys replaced the gag. They had drained him dry of information, and now they knew the work that was cut out for them. They dragged him into the thick underbrush and tied him to a tree. Then with a parting prick from the bowie, and a threat of instant death, if he sought to release himself before their return, they braced themselves for the task before them.

"It's up to us, my lads," said Melton, as he carefully examined his weapons to see that they were in prime condition, while Bert and Tom followed his example.

"The next half hour will probably tell the story. We're in for a lovely scrap, and we'll have that friend of yours with us when we come back, or we'll never come back at all."

A keen sense of elation thrilled Bert and Tom, as they fell in behind the old frontiersman, and followed him in Indian file up the path. The sickening suspense was over. The storm was about to break. Waiting was to be replaced by action. A few minutes more and they were to be battling for Dick's life and their own. The primeval man had broken through the veneer of civilization, and their nerves were tingling with longing for the fight.

For ten minutes they went on at a rapid pace. Then the sounds of the camp fell upon their ears, and they crept on with caution. They could hear oaths, interspersed with drunken laughter, and the stamping of horses. Abandoning the path, they vanished into, the thick undergrowth, and now on hands and knees drew near the clearing. Reaching its edge, they peered through the bushes, and saw a sight that froze the blood in their veins.

CHAPTER V

A FIENDISH TORTURE

It was long after dark on the day of Dick's capture, when the guerillas reached their camp. Familiar as they were with every inch of the way, they had gone on as rapidly after sunset as before, and only drew rein when they had reached the clearing. Dick was lifted from the broncho, and the bonds removed from his hands and feet. He suffered torments as the blood rushed back into his cramped members, but at least he was comparatively free to move about, and before long he had recovered from the physical effects of his long and exhausting ride.

His mind also had regained its serenity and poise. He was cool and calm to a degree that surprised even himself. The first shock was over. He had already tasted of the bitterness of death. In those long hours, he had fought the battle in his own heart and conquered. Now he was ready for whatever might befall. From this time on, no chance either of life or death could disturb him. He was prepared for either. But his keen eyes and trained senses were on the alert to take advantage of any slip on the part of his captors, and he was determined to sell his life dearly. If they took it, they should at least pay for it.

Pedro, who seemed to be the captain's righthand man, led the way to a ragged tent, of which there were perhaps a dozen in the clearing. Inside was a rude bed of boughs covered by an old saddle blanket. A wooden bench was the only other item of furniture, while a smoky pine torch, thrust into the cleft of a stump, gave a dismal light. Three of the bandits were stationed as a guard at the door of the tent, while two others were placed at the back. It was evident that the chief was taking no chances. They left his hands unbound, while he ate the meal of frijoles and tortillas that was presently brought to him, but when he had finished, his hands were again tied, though not so tightly as before, while his feet were secured to a stake, driven into the ground at the foot of the bed. Thus fastened, he could sit or lie on the bed, but could not move about. This done, they left him

for a while to his reflections.

Outside, the camp was given up to boisterous hilarity. The bandits had ridden hard and far that day, and they were enjoying the sense of rest and relaxation that comes after a day in the saddle. Their horses were picketed in rows on the edge of the clearing, while their masters sat around a huge fire and sought diversion after the manner of their kind. Games of cards and dice were in progress, and bottles of mescal passed from hand to hand. The growing drunkenness led rapidly to quarrels, and, in one of the groups, a stabbing affray was only averted by the coming of El Tigre on the scene. The noise ceased like magic and the knives were replaced in their sheaths, while the revelers tried to slink out of the sight of their dreaded master. He glared at the brawlers for a moment, but his mind was on something else just then, and, lifting the flap of Dick's tent, he stepped inside.

He had expected to find an anxious, excited, agonized prisoner. He stopped, nonplussed. Stretched out on his bed, Dick was sleeping as peacefully as a baby. Not a trace of fear or worry was visible on the strong, handsome face. It was a novel experience—this sort of disdainful defiance—to the monster whose name was a Synonym of terror over all that district.

"These cursed Americanos," he muttered. "Where do they get their courage? And those eyes—the first that ever looked into mine without falling. I swore to myself this morning that I'd pluck them out of his head. But I've thought of something better since," he mused, while a devilish grin spread over his face, "and I'll let him keep them until he sees what I'll have ready for him in the morning."

He was about to rouse the sleeper with a vicious kick, but thought better of it.

"No," he growled, "let him sleep. He'll be in better condition in the morning, and it will make his dying harder and longer." And with a last venomous look, he left the tent and its sleeping occupant, and went to his own quarters.

The camp wore a festal air the next morning. There was a general atmosphere of eager expectation. It was evident that something unusual was afoot. The fellow that brought in Dick's breakfast looked at him with a covert interest, as though he were to be an important actor in a drama for which the stage was being set. Had Dick known as much as Melton had learned of the hideous fame of his

captor, he might have divined sooner the nature of these preparations. He had slept soundly, and the freshness and brightness of the morning had given him new hopes. The food served him was very good and abundant, and he did not know why, just as he was finishing it, the thought came to him of the especially good breakfast served to condemned men on the morning of their execution. He brushed the thought away from him, and just then Pedro appeared at the door of the ten, accompanied by a half dozen of his mates.

He untied the prisoner's feet, and Dick arose and stretched himself.

"Come," growled Pedro, and they went out into the open space between the tents.

The fresh air fanned his forehead gratefully and he breathed it in in great draughts. On a morning like this, it was good just to be alive.

He cast a glance around, and saw at once that something out of the ordinary was about to take place. The entire population of the camp was on the scene. Instead of sprawling in haphazard fashion on the ground, the bandits were in an attitude of alert attention. The dreaded leader sat in the center of the clearing, his eyes alight with an unholy flame. He rose, as Dick approached, with a guard holding his arm on either side, and made him a sweeping bow of mock politeness.

"It is good of the senor to honor us with his presence, this morning," he said in fairly good English—in his early years he had been a cattle rustler in Arizona—"but I fear we can offer little for his amusement. In fact, we shall have to depend on the senor himself to entertain us. Is the senor, by any chance, a snake charmer?"

"Look here," said Dick, fiercely, "what's your game, anyway? You've got my money and watch and clothes. Now, what more do you want?"

"What more?" echoed El Tigre, softly. "Why, only a very little thing. I want your life."

The last words were fairly hissed. All the mock courtesy dropped away, and he stood revealed in his true character as a gloating fiend, his hideous features working with hate.

That face maddened Dick. With a sudden movement, he threw off the guard on

either side, took one leap forward, and his fist shot out like a catapult. It caught the sneering face square between the eyes, and the chief went down with a crash. In an instant, Dick's sinewy hands were on his throat and choking out his life.

But now the bandit crew, roused from their stupefaction, rushed forward, and overpowered him by sheer force of numbers. They dragged him from the prostrate form of the guerilla, and tied him to a tree close to the bushes, on the very edge of the clearing. The Tiger's face was bleeding from the smashing blow, when his followers raised him to his feet, and his rage was fearful to behold. He drew his knife and was about to rush on Dick, when the sight of two of his men, coming into the clearing with a bag between them, reminded him of his original purpose. By a mighty effort he restrained himself, but the ferocity of his face was appalling.

Dick, too, looked at the bag, as the men laid it on the ground. It was moving. Moving not sharply or briskly, as it might, had it held fowls or rabbits, but with a horrid, crawling, sinuous motion. A cold sweat broke out all over him. Now he knew what the Tiger had meant, when he asked him if he were by any chance a snake charmer.

A word from the chief, and two men came forward, holding forked sticks. A third slit the bag with his knife from top to bottom. From the gaping rent, two monster rattlesnakes rolled out. But before they could coil to strike, each was pinned to the ground by the forked stick, pressed down close behind the head. They writhed and twisted frantically, but to no purpose. Then another man bent down and drove his knife through the tail of each, just above the rattles. Through the wound he passed a thong of buckskin and looped it on the under side. Then, in each case, the other end of the thong was fastened securely to a stake, driven into the ground. When the work was done, a distance of ten yards separated the two stakes, and before each was a twisting reptile, wild with rage and pain. A man stood in front at a safe distance and held out a stick, teasingly. The snake flung itself to its full length, and the distance it could reach was carefully measured. Then, some inches beyond this furthest point, other stakes were drawn in rude outline of the form of a man. Near the buckskin thongs, men were stationed, with gourds full of water.

And now the stage was fully set for the tragedy. The audience was waiting. It was time for the actors to appear and the play begin.

El Tigre looked curiously at Dick. The latter's heart was beating tumultuously, but he met the scoundrel's gaze with calm defiance. He even smiled scornfully, as he stared at the battered lace, bleeding yet from his blow of a few minutes before. The significance of that smile lashed the bandit's soul into fury.

"I'll break him yet," he swore to himself. "He shall beg for mercy before he dies."

Then he said, aloud: "I was going to let the senor go first, but I have changed my mind. He is smiling now, and he shall have a longer time to enjoy himself."

He turned and spoke to some of his followers, and they went to a nearby tent, from which they emerged a moment later, bringing with them a Chinaman, whose yellow face was ghastly with fear. As the poor wretch looked around at the awful preparations, and realized that he was doomed, he threw himself down before the chief and tried to embrace his knees. El Tigre spurned him with his foot.

"Tie him down," he commanded, briefly.

They bore the unhappy man to the stakes, threw him down and bound him so tightly to them that he could not move. He was fastened in such a way that his face lay on one side, looking toward the snake a few feet away. The reptile coiled and sprang for the face, missing it by a few inches. Several times this was repeated. The horror of that wicked head and those dripping fangs darting towards one's face was insupportable, and shriek followed shriek from the tortured victim. Still, the snake could not actually reach him, and if the thong held—But now the man with the gourd poured a little water on the thong.

And the thong began to stretch.

The whole hideous deviltry of it struck Dick like a blow. Already he could see that the snake's head went a trifle nearer with every spring. And still the water kept dripping. In a few minutes more, the fangs would meet in the victim's face.

And it was his turn next. He, too, must face that grisly horror. Death in its most loathsome form was beckoning. His brain reeled, but, by a tremendous effort, he steeled himself to meet his fate. He would—

"Dick!"

What was that?

"Dick!"

Was that Bert's voice, or was he going insane? "Don't move, old man," came a whisper from behind the tree. "It's Bert. I've cut the rope that holds you until it hangs by a thread. The least movement will snap it. Let your hand hang down, and I'll slip you a revolver. Jump, when you get the word. We're going to rush the camp."

The reaction from despair to hope was so violent, that Dick could scarcely hold the weapon that was thrust into his hand. But as he felt the cold steel, his grip tightened on the stock, and he was himself again. Now at least he had a chance to fight for his life.

The snake was getting nearer to its victim's face. The last spring had all but grazed it. All eyes were fixed upon it, as it coiled again. Its waving head stood high above its folds, as it prepared to launch itself. And just then a bowie knife whizzed through the air and sliced its head from its body. The next instant, a rain of bullets swept the clearing, and Melton, Bert, and Tom burst from the woods, firing as they came.

CHAPTER VI

THE EXECUTION OF EL TIGRE

With a quick jerk, Dick snapped the rope that held him and rushed toward his comrades. He ranged himself alongside, and his revolver barked in unison with theirs.

The surprise had been complete. At the first shot, the bandits had leaped to their feet, and with wild yells scattered in every direction. Most of them had left their arms in their tents, and had nothing but their knives to defend them from attack. And these were wholly insufficient weapons, with which to meet the little band that flung themselves so recklessly upon them. For all they knew, they might be the vanguard of a force many times stronger, and they fled in wild confusion.

The guerilla chief was the only one who kept his head. He drew a revolver from his belt and returned shot for shot. He backed up slowly in the direction of his hut. With his eyes on the enemy in front, he had forgotten that the second snake was right behind him. He slipped on the slimy folds, and, the next instant, the enraged reptile struck at one of his hands as he attempted to rise. A burning pain shot through his index finger. He shook off the clinging snake, and, jumping upon it, stamped its head into pulp. Then he drew his knife and slashed his finger to the bone. The next instant he had reached his hut and slammed the door behind him.

The whole thing had happened in the twinkling of an eye. A dozen of the guerillas lay dead or wounded on the ground. The odds had been reduced with a vengeance, but they were still heavy. The attackers had played their trump card—that of the surprise. It had taken a trick, but the game was not yet over. No one knew this better than the old frontiersman. They had emptied their revolvers.

"Back to the woods," he shouted, "and reload."

Waiting only to recover his bowie and slash the bonds of the Chinaman, who lay there more dead than alive, he led the way. Soon they were under cover, and not till then did Dick throw his arms around Bert and Tom, in a hug that almost made their bones crack. Then he shook hands with Melton, with a fervor that made that hardy hero wince.

"I can never tell you," began Dick, and then he choked.

"You don't have to," returned Melton, gruffly, to conceal his own deep feeling, while Bert and Tom, in the grip of strong emotion, could only pat Dick's arms, without speaking; "It's nothing that any white man wouldn't do for another. Besides, we're not yet out of the woods. Those fellows will get their nerve back in a minute or two, and then look out for trouble. They've probably guessed by this time how few we are, and they'll be wild to get back at us. That leader of theirs is a beast all right, but he's no coward. The way he cut that poison out of his flesh shows that. Load your guns quick, and each get behind a big tree. Have your knives ready too, if it comes to close quarters."

"But you're wounded," cried Dick, as he saw a little trickle of blood from Melton's left shoulder.

"Only a scratch," laughed Melton; "the chief winged me there with his last shot. That's one I owe him and I always pay my debts. Just twist your handkerchief about it, and then we'll forget it."

It proved to be, as he said, only a graze, and they returned to their attitude of strained attention.

In the meantime, the Chinaman had come hobbling out to them, and in his hollow eyes there was a speechless gratitude that made them know that he was their slave for life. He was of no value as a reinforcement, and after having settled him in the shelter of a huge tree, they peered from behind their cover for some sign of the expected foe.

Five—ten—twenty minutes passed, and nothing happened. The waiting was more nerve racking than the actual combat. The only sound that broke the stillness was the groans of the wounded, as they crawled into and behind their tents. It would have been an easy thing to finish the work, but none of them could fire on a helpless man, even though a murderer and an outlaw. They had put them out of the running, and that was enough.

Then suddenly, just as they began to think that after all the bandits had decamped, came a volley of bullets that pattered among the leaves and thudded into the trees.

"I was sure of it," muttered Melton. "Keep close under cover," he commanded, "and make every shot tell."

Even as he spoke, his rifle cracked, and a crouching figure rose with a yell, and lurched heavily forward on his face.

"One less," he grunted, "but there's still a mighty lot of them left."

The shots that had been more or less scattered now grew into a fusillade. It was evident that the fighting was being intelligently directed, and that the bandits were regaining confidence. Melton and the boys shot coolly and carefully whenever they saw a head or an arm exposed, and the yells that followed the shot told that the bullet had found its mark. But there seemed no let up in the enemy's volleys, and what made Melton more uneasy than anything else was that the zone of fire was steadily widening. His long experience told him unerringly that the foe was trying to surround them. If his little band had to face four ways at once, it would go hard with them.

Suddenly he felt a touch on his arm. He looked up and saw the Chinaman. The latter pointed down the road.

"Men coming," he said. "Blig lots of men. Horses too."

Melton sprang to his feet. Sure enough, there were horsemen coming up the road. Was it a detachment of the guerilla band returning? Were they to be taken by fresh forces in the rear? He grabbed Bert by the shoulder.

"Here," he said, "face around with me. You other fellows stay as you are."

They crouched low with their eyes on the road. The tramp of hoofs became louder and the jingle of spurs and accoutrements fell upon their ears. Then their hearts leaped, as round the curve, riding hard, swept a squad of Mexican cavalry, fully a hundred in number, their brilliant uniforms glittering in the sunlight. With a wild hurrah and waving their hands, they rushed forward to meet them.

There was a hasty movement among the front ranks, as though to repel an

assault, but as they saw how few they were and realized the absence of hostile intentions, their carbines were lowered and the captain in command swung himself to the ground.

He was a young, well set up, soldierly looking man, and it took only a moment for him to grasp the situation, as it was rapidly sketched out by Melton. He had been educated in the Mexican military school and spoke English fluently.

"How large a force have you?" he asked.

"Here they are," replied Melton, with a wave of his hand.

"What!" the officer gasped in amazement. "You don't mean to say that with only four men, you attacked El Tigre and his band. It was suicide."

"Well," laughed Melton, "it hasn't come to that yet, but I'm not denying that things are getting too warm for comfort. The rascals would have had us surrounded in a little while, and I'm mighty glad you've come."

"You've done wonders," rejoined the captain, "but now you can rest on your arms, while I clear out this nest of hornets."

"Not a bit of it," replied Melton. "We're going to be in at the death."

"You stubborn Americanos," laughed the captain. "So be it then. You've certainly earned the right to have your way in this."

His dispositions were quickly taken. At the word of command, his troopers dismounted and tethered their horses. Then they deployed in a long line across the woods. A bugle blew the charge, and with a rousing cheer they rushed up the slope and across the clearing. A volley of bullets met them and several of them went down, but the rest kept on without a pause. Their carbines cracked without cessation, and one outlaw after the other fell, until not more than fifteen were left. These last were gathered in a corner of the camp, where under the leadership of El Tigre, who fought with a fury worthy of his name, they made their last despairing stand.

But their hour had come. The blood of their victims was at last to be avenged. One final charge, and the troops swept over them. The guerilla chief, seeing that

all was lost, lifted his revolver with the last bullet left, and put it to his head to blow out his brains. He had always boasted that he would never be taken alive. But just as his finger was on the trigger, Dick, who, with his friends, had been in the forefront of the fight, knocked his hand aside and bore him to the ground. In another second, he was tightly bound and the fight was over. With four of his band, the only survivors, he was put under guard, and left to await the pleasure of his captors.

Then at last, they drew breath. The work was done and well done. Dick was with them, safe and sound, and none the worse for his terrible experience. The band which had been the scourge of that distracted country had been practically wiped out, and the leader, who for so long had defied God and man, was a prisoner, awaiting his fate. What that fate would be no one could doubt, who knew how richly he merited death.

"I suppose," said Dick, as they sat a little apart from the others taking lunch with the captain of the troop, at his invitation, "that he'll be taken to Montillo for trial."

"Guess again," chuckled Melton, who knew something of the methods of the Mexican Government in dealing with guerillas.

"My orders were to take no prisoners," smiled the captain, and there was a meaning in his smile that boded ill for the remnant of the bandit crew.

"And, of course, I must obey my orders," he added drily. "The more readily," he went on, as his face grew dark, "because there is a private score that I have to settle with this scoundrel. The blood of my younger brother is on his hands. You can guess then, senors, whether I was glad, when I was trusted on this mission."

"Are they to be shot, then?" ventured Bert.

"All but the leader," answered the captain. "He must hang. And yet he shall not die by hanging."

Before they could ask an explanation, he rose and excused himself, as he had to give some orders to the soldiers, and they were left to ponder in vain for his meaning.

The next two hours were spent in clearing up the camp and burying the dead.

The bodies of the guerillas were thrown hastily into a narrow trench, but those of the soldiers received full military honors, the bugler playing taps, and a salvo of musketry being fired over the graves. In the meantime the boys had wandered over the camp, now shorn of the terror that had so long been connected with it. On the upper end, it terminated at the very brink of a precipice. All of Mexico seemed to be stretched out before them. The abyss fell sheer down for a thousand feet to the rocks below. They shuddered as they stood on the edge and looked through the empty space. On the brink stood a mighty oak tree, with one of its limbs overhanging the chasm.

A sudden recollection struck Melton.

"This must be the place the consul told me about, in one of his stories," he ejaculated. "He told me that one of the Tiger's favorite amusements was to bring a prisoner here and prod him with bayonets over the brink. I guess," he scowled, "we don't need to waste much sympathy on that fellow, no matter what the captain does to him."

And the boys, with a lively recollection of the snake and the buckskin thong, agreed with him.

But now the bugle blew and they hurried back to the clearing. The troop stood at attention. Routine work connected with the raid had been despatched, and the time had come for the military execution. Martial law is brief and stern, and, under his instructions, the captain had the power of life or death without appeal. His face was set and solemn, as befitted one on whom weighed so heavy a responsibility, but there was no relenting in his voice, as he bade a sergeant to bring out the prisoners.

The four came out, sullen and apathetic. He looked them over for a moment, and then gave a sign. A trench was hastily dug and the prisoners placed with their backs to it. Their eyes were bandaged. A firing squad of a dozen men advanced to within ten feet and leveled their rifles. A moment's pause, then a sharp word of command, and death leaped from the guns. When the smoke cleared away, four motionless forms lay in the trench, and justice had been done.

"Don't bury them yet," commanded the captain. "Bring out El Tigre."

There was a stir among the soldiers, as the dreaded chief, whose evil fame was known all over Mexico, was brought before the captain. He was harmless

enough now. All his power had been stripped away, and all that remained to him was his one redeeming quality of courage. He had heard the firing, and, as he came from the tent, he passed close by the bodies of his former followers. Doubtless the same fate awaited him, but he did not waver, and his hideous face expressed only the bitterest venom and malignity. If hate could kill, it would have blasted Dick, as for a moment the bandit caught sight of him, in passing. Then he faced his judge, who was also to be his executioner.

"Do you know me, El Tigre?" asked the Captain.

The outlaw glared at him.

"No," he snarled.

"Do you remember the boy you captured on that raid in the San Joaquin valley, three months ago?"

"What of him?"

"He was my brother."

The guerilla shot a swift glance at him.

"Carramba," he muttered. Then after an instant's silence. "Yes, I remember. He was great sport. He died hard. It was very amusing. Yes, he died hard."

If his object was to provoke instant death, he almost succeeded. The captain's eyes flamed and he snatched a revolver from his belt. But he saw the stratagem in time and by a great effort held himself in check. The flush faded from his face, to be succeeded by a deadly pallor.

"El Tigre," he said slowly, "the earth is weary of you and the devil is waiting for you. I shall not keep him waiting long. Take him up to the oak," he commanded, pointing to the great tree on the edge of the precipice.

The soldiers fell into line and the procession started.

When they halted under its branches, the hands and feet of the outlaw were securely tied. Then a soldier climbed into the tree, and far out on the branch that overhung the chasm. At a distance of twenty feet, he fastened a stout rope. Then

he crept back, and, making a noose in the other end, took his stand beside the prisoner and waited for orders.

The ghastly preparations were telling on the nerve of the guerilla, and he broke into a string of the wildest blasphemies. Without paying any attention to his ravings, the soldier at a signal, slipped the noose over his head. But instead of tightening it about the neck, as most of the lookers on, as well as the prisoner himself, expected, he adroitly drew it down to the waist, and thence up under the outlaw's arms. Then he pulled it tight. Four men took hold of El Tigre's arms and legs, bore him to the edge of the precipice, and pushed him off into space.

Like a giant pendulum, he swung out in a great arc, and then, returning, almost reached the brink. Gradually the arc grew shorter, until he swayed perpendicularly from the branch. Below, he could see the rocks at the foot of the cliff. The bones of many of his victims already reposed there. How long before he would join them? Was he to be left hanging there as a feast for the carrion birds? Wherever he looked was torture. Below, the rocks. Above, the vultures. In front, the enemies whom he hated with all the passion of his soul.

Ah! A firing squad was coming forward. They were going to shoot him then, after all. Good! Death would be welcome. He heard the roar of the guns, and still he was alive. Could they have missed him? Then another volley rang out. Still he lived. He could not understand. His glance went aloft. The rope was sagging. He could feel it give. A broken strand brushed against his face. And then he understood.

They were firing at the rope!

A panic terror seized him. He had reached the limit of human endurance. Again the shots, and a trembling that told him that the rope was hit. He tried to struggle upward. If he could only ease his weight. He stretched his bound hands aloft in a hopeless effort to climb up to the branch. He no longer dared to look below. Another volley and a sound of tearing. He drew in a long breath as though it would buoy him up. His feet felt about for something to rest on and relieve the strain. And still he could hear the crackling and feel the yielding and once more the guns rang out and the rope broke. With curses on his lips and delirium in his heart, he fell. Once he turned over in his awful flight. Then, a mere atom in that immensity of space, he shot like a plummet to the rocks below.

CHAPTER VII

OFF FOR PANAMA

It had been a day of tremendous strain from start to finish, and there was a general sigh of relief, as they gathered up their traps and prepared to leave the camp. Not since their fight with the pirates, had the boys had a closer "shave." It had been a case of touch and go, and they had barely escaped with their lives. But they had won out, after all, and, as Tom said, "a miss was as good as a mile." And their hearts warmed at the sense of comradeship, that had once again been tested to the limit and proved equal to the emergency. They had risked their lives for each other, and the "fortune that favors the brave" had not deserted them.

For Melton, their feeling was too deep for words. His was a heart of gold. Without the slightest personal end to be served, and prompted solely by his great, big, generous soul, he had come to their aid in the moment of deepest need, and fought shoulder to shoulder, in their effort to save their friend. Again and again they sought to voice their thanks, but the hardy old frontiersman would have none of it.

"Cut it out, boys," he laughed. "I didn't do a thing that you wouldn't have done for me, if you knew that an American was in trouble. Some day perhaps, you can pay me back, if you insist on considering it a debt. I only hope, if I ever do get in a scrape, I'll have some young fellows of your brand behind me."

As none of them could read the future, they did not know that there was a touch of prophecy in his words, and that the time was coming, when, in his own native Rockies, the boys would pay the debt with interest.

From the loot found in the hut of the bandit chief, Dick had recovered his watch and money and clothes, and declared that he felt like a human being again for the first time since he had been trapped by the guerilla band on the morning before.

They shuddered, as, on their way through the camp, they passed the bodies of the snakes, still tethered to the posts. They lay, quiet enough now, like the human fiend whose venom had been as dangerous as their own.

"The snakes and the Tiger," mused Bert. "They both lost out."

But now the cavalry were mounted and ready for the start. The horses of the guerillas had been released from their hobbles, and were led by ropes behind a number of the soldiers. One was assigned to Dick, while Melton and the boys mounted three, that they were to use temporarily, until they had recovered their own that had been left further down the trail.

As they were gathering up the reins, Bert felt a touch on his leg. He looked down and saw the Chinaman, who in the hurry of preparation had been overlooked.

"Great Scott!" he exclaimed. "The Chink! We forgot all about him."

The poor fellow's eyes were full of dread at the thought of being left alone in the wilderness.

"Of course we'll take you along, John," Bert continued, "though I don't know what on earth we'll do with you. But we'll settle that later on."

Dismounting, he gave the Chinaman a leg up on one of the led horses. The Oriental had never been on a horse in his life, and he made a comical figure, as he bobbed up and down. After threatening to fall off at any moment, he finally abandoned all effort to sit upright, and, leaning forward, threw his arms around the horse's neck and held on for his life.

"It's rather hard lines," laughed Dick. "But when he thinks of what he's getting away from, I guess he won't worry much about getting shaken up a little."

Soon they reached their own horses, and were proceeding to make the exchange, when they remembered the sentry who had been captured on that spot. They looked at each other with a little touch of perplexity.

"We can't leave him there to starve," said Tom. "On the other hand, if we remind the captain, he'll simply send one of his troopers to put a bullet in him."

"He's our captive," said Bert, "and I guess we'd better tend to this on our own

account. We didn't actually promise him his life, and no doubt he's deserved death many times over. We got some valuable information out of him, though, even if it was at the point of a bowie, and I think we ought to untie him and let him go."

As there was no dissent from this, they went to the tree where they had left the sentry. They found him nearly dead from terror. He had heard the sounds of the fight and the cheers of the soldiers, and knew pretty well how the struggle had ended. Now, as the boys approached, he tried to read their purpose in their eyes. He knew how he would have acted, had the case been reversed, and he did not dare to hope for mercy. But, to his astonishment, they took the gag from his mouth, untied his hands and told him he was free. He shook himself and then staggered away in the underbrush, trying to get out of sight before his deliverers should change their minds. They watched him till he vanished, and then retraced their steps to where Melton was waiting.

"You did right, boys," he said. "Although," he added, "a good many might think it was a case of misplaced sympathy. While I was waiting, I was reminded of the story of the little girl, looking at a picture of the early Christians attacked by lions in the arena. Her mother saw that she was crying, and was pleased to see that she was so tender-hearted. 'It is sad, isn't it?' she asked. 'Yes,' sobbed the child, 'look at this poor thin little lion, that hasn't any Christian.'"

The boys laughed, as they sprang into the saddle.

"Of course," concluded Melton, "it's rough on any lion to compare him to a fellow like this. Perhaps we'd better say a hyena, and let it go at that."

With hearts light as air, they cantered down the trail. Once more, life was smiling. They passed in quick succession the various land marks they had such good reason to remember. Here was the place where they had passed the night, and where Melton had come upon them, bringing cheer and hope. There was the stream, in which the outlaws had walked their horses. Most memorable of all was the curve in the road, where Dick had come upon the guerillas. Nothing in nature had changed since yesterday. But what a gulf lay between their tortured sensations of the day before and the joyous elation of the present!

It was long after dark, when they rode into Montillo—too late to see the consul and the mayor that night. They bade a cordial good night to the captain, and,

with a gay wave of the hand to the troopers, went to the leading hotel of the place. Here they found their baggage, which, thanks again to the thoughtfulness of Melton, had been taken from the train and sent there to await their coming—that coming which had been so doubtful a little while before. They saw to it that the Chinaman had food and drink and a place to sleep. Then a good supper, a hot bath, and they piled between sheets, to await the coming of the morrow.

It was long after sunrise the next morning, when they awoke. They had slept soundly, and, if any haunting recollection of their experience had taken form in a dream, there was no trace of anything but jubilation, as they dressed and breakfasted to an accompaniment of jest and laughter. Melton, who had risen earlier and was smoking on the veranda, rose and threw away his cigar, and after a hearty handshake, went with them to the office of the consul.

"Thank God, you're back," he cried fervently, as he shook hands with Melton. "And these, I suppose," he went on, as he turned toward the boys and greeted them warmly, "are the young rascals who have given me so many anxious moments lately. By Jove, I can't tell you how glad I am to know that you got out of that scrape all right. There aren't many who have fallen into the hands of El Tigre that ever came back to tell the story. Sit down now and tell me all about it."

He was a fine example of Uncle Sam's representatives abroad, keen, strong, determined, and the boys warmed toward him at once. He listened intently, while Melton told all that had happened, and his eyes lighted up, as he learned how they had rushed the camp.

"It was splendid," he exclaimed. "It's almost a miracle and I wonder that you pulled through alive."

"It was a narrow squeak," admitted Melton, "and, at that, I'm afraid we wouldn't have got away with it, if the troopers hadn't come up just when they did. The bandits had got over their surprise and were surrounding us. I tell you, that squad of soldiers looked mighty good to me."

"So I imagine," rejoined the consul. "And that reminds me that we ought to go round and see the mayor. You can thank your friend here," he went on, turning to the boys, "that the mayor got busy at all in this matter. It was that 'hand on the hip pocket' idea that did the trick. It scared him stiff. He thinks a good deal of that precious skin of his, and he didn't like the idea of having it shot full of holes."

I don't believe he ever hustled so much before in his life. No doubt by this time he has had a report of the affair from the captain of the squad, and he'll be strutting around like a turkey-cock."

The consul's prediction was confirmed, when, a few minutes later, they were ushered into the mayor's office. He was fairly bursting with self importance. He greeted them with ineffable politeness, strongly dashed with condescension.

He was delighted beyond measure to see his dear Americano friends again. But there—it was a foregone conclusion. Nothing could withstand his soldiers. He had already telegraphed to Mexico City, of the rescue, and of the complete destruction of the band of El Tigre. What no other mayor had been able to accomplish, *he* had done in one fell swoop. It would probably mean—ahem—a decoration, possibly—ahem—political promotion. He trusted that his good Americano friends would report the matter at Washington. It would show how sternly the Mexican government protected the lives of foreigners in its borders.

And so he went on, in a steady stream of self laudation, that so strongly stirred the risibles of the boys that they did not dare to look at each other, for fear that they would laugh outright. But they were, after all, deeply indebted to him, no matter what his motives, and they maintained their gravity and thanked him heartily for the aid he had rendered. Only after they had reached the street, did their features relax.

"Hates himself, doesn't he?" laughed Tom.

"He sure does," responded Bert. "He ought to be nothing less than president, if you should ask him."

"He's certainly throwing himself away to stay here as mayor," added Dick. "But, considering all that's happened, I don't mind if he does pat himself on the back. But here comes the man to whom we owe an awful lot, too. I like him clear down to the ground."

It was the young captain who approached, and they greeted him heartily. He also had reason for elation, both in having avenged his brother and in having accomplished a military feat that would surely add to his reputation. But he was modest, and stoutly disclaimed that the boys owed him anything. He had simply done his duty and it was all in the day's work.

"He's the right stuff," said Tom, as they separated, after mutual expressions of esteem. "He ought to be an American." Which from patriotic, if somewhat prejudiced Tom, was the highest praise.

And now, after warmest farewells had been taken of the consul, there was nothing to keep them in Montillo. Yes, there was one thing, as Dick suddenly remembered.

"The Chink," he said. "What about him?"

"Oh, give him a little money and let him stay here," suggested Tom. "He can easily get something to do."

The matter thus disposed of, they sauntered on, but as they neared the hotel, they saw the Celestial evidently waiting for them.

"Hello, John," said Bert, pleasantly.

"Hello, slelf," was the smiling answer. Then he went on calmly: "Me glo with you."

"What's that?" cried Bert, startled. "But we're going to Panama."

"Me glo too. Me glot flends, Panama."

"But have you got any money to take you there?"

"No. You glot money. Me play back," and he beamed on them blandly.

The boys looked helplessly at each other.

"How nice," murmured Tom.

"Well, of all the nerve," exclaimed Dick.

"Me glo with you," reiterated the Chinaman, kindly but firmly; and the benevolence of his smile was beautiful to see.

The bewilderment in Bert's face was too much for the others, and they burst into a roar of laughter.

"No use, Bert," said Dick, as soon as he could speak. "He's got the Indian sign on us, and we might as well give in."

"No," echoed Tom, "there's no getting away from that smile. If I had it, I could borrow money from the Bank of England."

"I throw up my hands," responded Bert. "He's adopted us, and that's all there is about it. We'll take him along as handy man, till he gets to his 'flends in Panama."

They put him to work at once, getting ready the baggage, and when this was completed, they sought out Melton to say good-bye. They wrung his hand until he laughingly protested that they wanted to cripple him.

"We'll never forget you, never," they declared with fervent sincerity.

"Same here," he replied with equal warmth, "and some day I hope to see you on my ranch. I'd like to show you what is meant by a Western welcome."

"Will we? You bet. Just watch us," came in chorus, and then they reluctantly tore themselves away from the great hearted specimen of Nature's noblemen, whose place in their hearts was secure for all time.

"Panama, after all," exulted Dick, as they stood on the station platform.

"Yes," chimed in Tom, "they couldn't cheat us out of it."

"The quickest route to the coast for us," added Bert, "and then the rest of the way by boat. I'm wild to set my feet once more beneath the Stars and Stripes."

CHAPTER VIII

THE GREAT CANAL

On a glorious afternoon, a few days later, the boys sat on the upper deck of the liner, as it drew near the city of Colon, on the Atlantic side of the Isthmus of Panama. With the quick rebound of youth, they had wholly recovered from the strain of the preceding days, and were looking forward with the keenest zest, to the opening of the great canal, now only two weeks distant. They gazed with interest at the Toro lighthouse, as the steamer left the gleaming waters of the Caribbean Sea, and threaded its way up the Bay of Limon to Cristobal, the port of Colon.

"And to think," Dick was saying, "that it's four hundred years almost to a day, since the isthmus was discovered, and in all that time they never cut it through. To cover that distance of forty-nine miles from the Atlantic to the Pacific, ships have sailed ten thousand, five hundred miles. It almost seems like a reflection on the intelligence of the world, doesn't it?"

"It surely does," asserted Bert, "and yet it wasn't altogether a matter of intelligence, but of ways and means. In every century since then, lots of people have seen the advantages of a canal, but they've been staggered, when they came to count the cost. It's easy enough to talk of cutting through mountains and building giant dams and changing the course of rivers. But it's a long jump from theory to performance, and they've all wilted until your Uncle Samuel took up the job. Even France, the most scientific nation in Europe, gave it up after she'd spent two hundred million dollars."

"It's a big feather in our cap," said Tom—"the very biggest thing that has happened in the way of engineering, since this old earth began. It's the eighth wonder of the world. The building of the pyramids was child's play, compared to the problems our people have had to meet. But we've met them—health

problems, labor problems, political problems, mechanical problems—met and solved them all. The American Eagle has certainly got a right to scream."

And their enthusiasm for the American Eagle grew with every hour that passed, after they drew up to the docks and went ashore. Everywhere there were evidences of thrift and progress and law and order, to be seen nowhere else in Central or South America. After the slovenly towns and cities of Mexico, it was refreshing to note the contrast. For five miles on either side of the canal—the Canal Zone—it was United States Territory. From being the abode of fever and pestilence, it had been transformed into one of the healthiest places in the world. Mosquitoes had been exterminated and the dreaded scourge of "Yellow Jack" wiped out completely. It was a cosmopolitan district, where all the nations of the world met together and all classes were to be found, from the highest to the lowest. But over this mixed and often turbulent population, the civil and military arms of the United States, ruled with such strength and wisdom, as to make it a model for the world's imitation. The city was bright, clean, animated, abounding in amusements and diversions; but lawlessness and disorder were unsparingly repressed. The boys were delighted at the novelty of what they saw and heard, and it was late when they went to their rooms, with an eager anticipation of all that awaited them on their trip across the isthmus.

For this trip from end to end of the canal was one of the most cherished features of their general plan. They wanted to study it at their leisure—the dams, the locks, the gates, the lakes, the feeders, the spillways, the attractions—the thousand and one things that made it the marvel of the twentieth century. And they vowed to themselves that what their eyes did not take in would not be worth seeing.

Colon, itself, held them for two more days, and during that time they lost one of their party. Wah Lee—for that they had discovered to be their Chinaman's name—had justified his statement that he had "flends in Panama." They had rather suspected that these alleged friends resembled the mythical Mrs. Harris, whose chief claim to fame was that "there wasn't no such person." They were agreeably surprised, therefore, when, before they had been twenty-four hours in the city, he told them that, through one of his "flends," he had found employment in the household of a wealthy Japanese residing in the suburbs. He would have gladly stayed with the boys, to whom he had become greatly attached. But although they were fond of him, and got a good deal of amusement from his quaint ways, they had really no need of him, and he was a clog on their freedom of

movement. They wanted to be footloose—to go where they pleased and when they pleased—and they were glad to learn that he was so well provided for.

"Me clome and slee you melly times," he assured them, benignantly.

"Sure thing, old boy," answered Tom. "We're always glad to see you."

"Me play you back," said Wab Lee.

"Pay back nothing," responded Bert. "You don't owe us anything. You've worked your passage, all right."

"Me play you back," he repeated, as calmly as though they had not protested, and pattered off, after including them all in his irresistible smile.

"And he will," affirmed Dick, despairingly. "We're just clay in the hands of the potter, when we come up against that old heathen. If he says he'll pay you back, paid back you'll be, as surely as my name is Dick Trent."

Which proved to be true enough, although the payment was made in different coin and in an other fashion than they dreamed of at the moment.

Two days later, bright and early they took the train on the little railroad that runs from Colon to Panama. Their first stop was to be at the Gatun Dam and Locks, the mightiest structure of its kind in the world.

As they came in sight of it, the boys gasped in amazement and admiration. What they had read about it in cold type, had utterly failed to give them an adequate idea of the reality. Here was a work that might have been hammered out by Thor. There were the mighty gates, weighing each, from three hundred to six hundred tons. The locks each had four gates, seven feet thick and from forty-seven to seventy-nine feet high. The gates were operated by electricity and open or shut in less than two minutes, and absolutely without noise.

In these locks were three chambers, lower, middle and upper. Each was a thousand feet Long, one hundred and ten feet wide and eighty-one feet deep. As the vessel enters the lower chamber, it finds there a depth of over forty feet. The gate is closed and the water pours in, lifting the vessel as it rises. In fifteen minutes, the water rises over twenty-eight feet. Now the ship has reached the middle chamber, and again the gates are closed and the process repeated. The

upper chamber is the last stage, and then the vessel reaches the artificial lake of Gatum. It has climbed eighty-five feet in about ninety minutes.

"Just like climbing a flight of stairs," exclaimed Dick.

"Precisely," said Bert. "Where a train climbs a mountain by a steady grade, the vessel leaps up to the top in three jumps."

"Think of trying to lift one of those enormous vessels with a derrick or a crane," murmured Tom; "and yet how gently and easily the water does it by pushing up from underneath."

"Look at the width of those concrete walls," pointed Bert. "Fifty-two feet thick!

"Well, twenty-five million dollars will do a lot, and I've read that it cost that much for these locks alone. And that's only a fraction of the entire work."

At every turn, they came across something that evoked their wonder and admiration. Most of the figures and statistics connected with the colossal work they were already familiar with, but the information thus gained was, in a certain sense, hazy and unreal. It was seen through the mirage of distance, and not until their eyes actually saw the work in course of construction, did the knowledge lying in their minds, take a sharp and clearly cut outline.

As they moved about the dam, they came in contact with many of the engineers connected with the work. These were picked men, Americans like themselves, and of the very highest class of skilled engineers. They were glad to meet the young fellows from the States—"God's country," as they named it to themselves, in moments of homesickness—and the intelligent interest of the boys, in marked contrast to many of the "fool questions" put to them by the general run of tourists, made them eager to impart to them all they wanted to know. They grew "chummy" at once, and by the time the boys had spent a half a day in their inspection, they knew more about it than they would have gained in a month of reading.

Among other things, they learned that the locks were the greatest reinforced concrete structure in the world. They had been built in sections, thirty-six feet long, and these had been joined together so as to make one gigantic rock, thirty-five hundred feet long and three hundred and eighty-four feet wide. This reached down fifty feet under tide, and towered one hundred and fifteen feet above the

level of the sea. The concrete necessary was brought in barges that if strung along in one tow would have stretched from Colon to the southern coast of the United States, a distance of fifteen hundred miles. Great masses of steel were first erected, and then the concrete was poured into these by giant mixers.

The wall at the west wing held back the waters of the Chagres River. This was allowed to spread out into a lake, covering nearly two hundred square miles, at a level of eighty-seven feet. From this the water was drawn to feed the locks, and even in the driest season would prove sufficient for that purpose.

Then there was the great spillway, in the hill that forms part of Gatun Dam. Here one hundred and forty thousand cubic feet of water can be discharged every second. The waters made a magnificent picture as they poured through the gates. As Dick remarked, it was "an abridged edition of Niagara Falls." At the east of the spillway, was the power plant, where the water, dropping seventy-five feet, developed enough electric power and light to operate the canal from end to end.

At Bohio, the southern end of Gatun Lake, they came to the place where the canal enters the foothills of the mountain range. Up to this point, there had been but little digging, but here the real work of excavation had begun. The earth and rock that had to be removed here was equal to that involved in cutting a ditch across the United States, ten feet deep and fifty-five feet wide. The dirt would load a train that reached four times around the earth.

"Only a little matter of a hundred thousand miles," exclaimed Tom. "Gee, these figures are enough to make your head ache. Everything is in thousands and hundreds of thousands and millions."

"Yes," said Bert, "it's simply inconceivable. We mention figures, but we can't really grasp what they mean. It seems like the work of giants, rather than men."

"Right you are," assented Dick. "Why, even the blast holes drilled for the dynamite, if put together, would stretch from New York to Philadelphia."

At the great Culebra Cut, where at one point the depth was over four hundred feet, the wonder grew. Twenty million pounds of dynamite had been used in this cut and the cost of the excavation was over eighty millions of dollars. Yet with such care and skill had this been managed that very few men had lost their lives; not as many as are killed in the erection of an ordinary office building in New York.

And here, at Culebra, the problem had been harder to solve than anywhere else. There had been enormous landslides, that made it necessary to do the work over and over again. Twenty-one million cubic yards of earth had fallen from the mountain side, in many cases covering the engines and shovels engaged in the work of excavation. One slide involved sixty-three acres. At another place, forty-seven acres moved entirely across the Canal at the rate of fourteen feet a day, and rose at one point to a height of thirty feet. Over twenty times, these avalanches came down the sides of the cut. It seemed as though Nature were angered at the attempts of man to change what she had ordained, and were determined to drive him to despair. But the attempts were renewed with dogged persistence, and now the course of the Canal had been fully protected, and baffled Nature could rage in vain. It was heart-breaking work, but when Uncle Sam puts his hand to the plough, he doesn't turn back. Science and pluck, working hand in hand with splendid audacity, had come out triumphant.

Part of the excavation had been made by hydraulic action. Where the ground was soft, tremendous streams of water played upon the banks, washing the dirt away. In other sections, there were enormous steam shovels, some of them weighing ninety-five tons, and scooping up the earth, a carload at a time.

"Nice little toys," remarked Dick, as he gazed into the maw of one of them.

"Right you are," responded Bert, "but they're toys that only giants can play with."

On the third day of their trip, they reached the Pedro Miguel Locks, forty miles from the Atlantic. In its general features, it was patterned after those at Gatun. Here, the vessel, which had been sailing along at a height of eighty-five feet above sea level after it left Gatun, would begin to drop toward the Pacific. It would descend thirty feet, then sail across an artificial lake for a mile and a half, until it reached the Miraflores Locks, the last place where it would be halted on its trip to the Western Ocean. Here there were two chambers, each lowering the ship twenty-seven and a half feet, making a drop of fifty-five feet in all. From there, for a distance of eight miles, it would pass through a channel, five hundred feet wide and forty-five deep, until at last it reached the sea.

And now the whole stupendous plan lay before them as clear as crystal. As in a panorama, they saw the vessel, as it left the Atlantic and prepared to climb the backbone of the continent. It would come up the Bay of Limon to the entrance of the Canal, and there the sailing craft would fold its wings, the liner would shut

off steam. On the wide expanse of Gatun Lake they would again proceed under their own power. Through the Canal proper they would be drawn by electric traction engines, running upon the walls. At Gatun, they would climb, by three successive steps, to a point eighty-five feet above sea level. Crossing Gatun Lake, they would pass through the Culebra Cut to the Pedro Miguel Locks. A downward jump of thirty feet here, another of fifty-five feet at the Miraflores Locks, a level sail for eight miles more, and they would emerge on the broad bosom of the Pacific. Then the sails would be broken out, the engines begin to throb, and away to the western coast or Manila, or Australia, or China and Japan. The dream of four hundred years would have become a glorious reality.

In ten hours, the largest steamship could ride in safety from ocean to ocean. The distance from New York to San Francisco by sea would be shortened by over nine thousand miles. Liverpool would be brought seven thousand miles nearer the Pacific Slope. From New York to Manila, five thousand miles were saved. The commercial supremacy of the sea would be taken from the maritime nations of Europe and put in the hands of the United States. That shining strip of water, fifty miles in length, would prove the "path of empire," and mark a peaceful revolution in the history of the world.

"And it's time that we came into our own again," declared Bert, as, their trip finished, they sat on the veranda of the hotel at Colon. "Eighty years ago, our flag was to be found on every sea. But we've been so busy with our internal development that we've let the control of the ocean pass into the hands of others, especially England. It's a burning shame that most of our commerce is carried in English ships. I hope that, now the Canal is ready for use, there'll be a big upbuilding of our merchant marine, and that it'll be no longer true that 'Britannia rules the waves.'"

"I think that the British already see the handwriting on the wall," remarked Dick. "Perhaps that explains their unwillingness to take part in the San Francisco Exposition. They've made a big fuss because we don't make our coastwise vessels pay any tolls for going through the Canal. But I think the real reason lies deeper than that."

"Germany and Russia are none too cordial, either, I notice," said Tom. "When you come to think of it, we haven't many friends in Europe, anyway."

"No," mused Bert. "About the only real friend that we have over there is France.

As a rule, she's been on pretty good terms with us, ever since she helped us in our Revolutionary War. We had a little scrap with her on the sea, once, and we had to warn her to get out of Mexico, when she tried to back up Maximilian there. But our republican form of government appeals to her, and, on the whole, she likes us.

"But Russia feels a little sore, because she thinks we sympathized with Japan in her recent war. And Germany has always kicked like a steer about our Monroe Doctrine. If she felt strong enough, she'd knock that doctrine into a cocked hat. She wants to expand, to establish colonies for her surplus population. She's especially keen on getting into Brazil. But wherever she turns, she finds the Monroe Doctrine blocking her way. She says it isn't fair: it isn't reasonable; it isn't based on international law."

"Well, isn't she right?" asked Tom. "It's always seemed rather nervy to me, for us to say that no other power shall acquire territory in North or South America. By what right do we say so?"

"By no right at all," admitted Bert. "We fall back on the law of self-preservation. We've simply figured out that we want to keep the ocean between us and the nations of Europe. Otherwise, we'd have to keep an enormous standing army. If they had territory near by, where they could drill and recruit and establish food and coal depots, so as to be ready to attack us suddenly, we'd be on edge all the time. As it is, we can go to sleep nights, without any fear of finding the enemy in our backyard the next morning when we look out of the window."

"Well," remarked a Californian, named Allison, whose acquaintance they had recently made, and who now drew his chair nearer and joined in the conversation; "we don't need to worry about Europe. The real enemy lies in another direction." And he pointed toward Asia.

"You mean Japan?" queried Bert.

"Exactly," was the answer.

"Aren't you California people a little daffy on the Japanese question?" chaffed Dick.

"Not a bit of it," replied Allison, with marked emphasis. "As sure as you're alive, there's going to be a tremendous fight between Japan and the United States. Just

when it's coming, I don't know. But that it is coming, I haven't the slightest shadow of a doubt. I'd stake my life upon it."

His deep earnestness impressed the boys in spite of themselves.

"But why?" asked Tom. "There doesn't seem any real reason for bad blood between us, as far as I can see."

"Then, too, we opened up Japan to modern civilization in 1859, and brought her into the family of nations," added Dick. "She's always professed the greatest friendship for us."

"'Professed,' yes," answered Allison, "but, for some time past, those professions have sounded hollow. There's the immigration problem. There's the Magdalena Bay concession. There's the California school question and the alien land bill. Have you read of the mass meetings at Tokio, and the passionate harangues against America? Wasn't that pretty near an ultimatum that the Viscount Chenda put before the Washington Government a little while ago? I tell you, gentlemen, that many a nation has been plunged into bloody war for reasons less than these."

"But, after all," objected Tom, "if anything of the kind threatens, we'll have time enough to see it coming, and get ready to meet it."

"Will we?" cried Allison. "Did the Russians have any warning, before the Japanese smashed their fleet at Port Arthur? Do you know that for two years past, her arsenals have been working night and day? With what object? When Japan is ready, she will strike as the lightning strikes. She may be ready now. Perhaps at this very moment, her fleet may be on the way to San Francisco."

In his excitement, he half rose from his chair, and his voice rang out like a clarion.

CHAPTER IX

THE TREACHEROUS BOG

Two days after their trip over the course of the Canal the three chums decided to spend a long day on an exploring expedition after their own heart. They resolved to go off early some fine morning on "their own hook" and see and do what pleased them best. Accordingly, they made all their plans, and, the night before the eventful day, laid in provisions for a "bang up" lunch for three.

They procured an old alarm clock and set it to go off at four o'clock in the morning. This done, they finished discussing every detail of the trip, and as soon as their excitement would let them, fell into a sound sleep.

It seemed to them that they had hardly laid their heads on the pillows when they were awakened by the strident whirring of the little sleep-killer, and sat up in bed yawning and rubbing their eyes.

"Good-night!" exclaimed Bert. "It isn't possible that it's really time to get up. It seems to me that I haven't been asleep more than ten minutes."

"Same here," yawned Dick. "I guess there must be something sleepy in this air. No wonder the natives are lazy, if they feel every morning the way I do now."

"Oh, what's the matter with you two lemons, anyway?" laughed Tom. "My private opinion, publicly expressed, is that you're both just plumb lazy. But there's nothing like that about me. Just see how lively I feel," and to prove his assertion he grasp ed a pillow in each hand and landed them with fatal aim on the respective heads of the other two.

"Gee," exclaimed Dick, as he and Bert rose in righteous wrath preliminary to smothering Tom under an avalanche of bedclothes, "it's a lucky thing you don't

feel any better than you do. In that case you'd probably be landing us with a couple of pieces of furniture."

"I'd like to do that, anyway," came Tom's muffled voice from beneath the pile of pillows and blankets. "For Heaven's sake, let me up and quit stepping on my head."

Thus adjured, Bert and Dick released their victim, and after what looked like a miniature earthquake among the pile of things on the floor Tom emerged, very red in the face.

"That's a swell way to start the day, isn't it?" he protested in an injured tone. "Two minutes more of that and I'd have smothered, sure. If you want to murder me, why don't you do it in a less painful manner?"

"Hush, my son," said Dick. "Who started it? Never start anything you can't finish, my boy."

With this piece of good advice Dick started dressing, and the others followed suit. After this they made up the lunch, eating a sandwich now and then by way of breakfast. There was nothing fancy in the way in which the sandwiches were thrown together, and the mothers of the three boys would no doubt have been horrified could they have seen it. However, "everything went," as Bert expressed it, and in a very short time they had their packing done and were ready to start.

They slipped as silently as possible through the corridors, and in less time than it takes to tell were in the outer air. It was still very early, and the hot sun was not yet high enough to dissipate the heavy mist that hung close over the ground. They knew this would not last long, however, so started out on their expedition at a round gait.

They had resolved beforehand to strike into the wild country bordering the path of the big ditch, and see it "at first hand," as Dick phrased it. Each had a rifle with him, and they expected to bag some small game if opportunity should offer, with which to supplement their lunch.

The country immediately bordering the Canal at this point was rather barren and rocky, but at no great distance a thick tropical jungle sprang up, and it was into this that the boys resolved to go. Accordingly they picked their way over the rough flat, perhaps two miles in width, which lay between them and the line of

green jungle.

The going was very rough, and it took them almost an hour to reach the trees. Everything has an end, however, and in due time they found themselves at the edge of the fringe of trees that stood out a little way from the main forest. These were soon passed, and the comrades entered the green gloom of the big tropic trees. Their trunks shot up thirty or forty feet before the branches sprang out, and were thinly encircled by clinging vines and plants.

The leaves in many places met overhead, and caused a perpetual twilight in the forest aisles. As the boys penetrated deeper and deeper toward the heart of the woods the underbrush and vines grew continually thicker, and in many places they found their progress stopped by some tangled growth and were forced to cut it away before they could proceed. It grew hotter and hotter, too, with a damp, clammy heat that at last became almost unbearable.

"Great Scott!" burst out Dick, at last, while they were cutting through a particularly tough growth of vines and creepers. "I think this is about the hardest work I ever did in my life. What you need to make a path in this blooming jungle is a carload of dynamite—not merely a few little toad-stickers like these we're using."

"Well, as we haven't the dynamite handy, I suppose we'll have to make the best of the 'toadstickers,'" laughed Bert, amused by his companion's rueful countenance. "You didn't expect to find a macadamized road running through this little strip of woodland, did you?"

"No, but I didn't expect to find vines made of cast iron, either," replied Dick.

"Never mind, old scout," said Bert, "this can't last long. We're certain to hit on a game trail sooner or later, and then we'll be in clover. And the harder we work now, the sooner we'll find it."

"Oh, well, here goes," responded Dick, and fell to with renewed vigor.

Before very long it turned out as Bert had predicted. After cutting through a particularly dense thicket, they had not gone far when they stumbled on a narrow but clearly defined trail that ran in a southeasterly direction.

"Eureka!" exclaimed Tom, as this welcome sight met their eyes, "it will be plain

sailing from now on, and we ought to be able to get somewhere."

"We don't know where we're going, but we're on the way," sang Bert. "Forward, march, fellows. Christopher Columbus had nothing on us as discoverers."

"Righto," agreed his companions, and they set forth along the narrow path at a brisk pace.

There were traces of game in plenty, but they were unable to catch a glimpse of anything that might give them a chance to exercise their marksmanship. Of course, the trees were full of monkeys and parrots, but they had no wish to kill merely for the sake of killing, and were resolved to shoot nothing that they could not use as food.

No game made its appearance, and the boys were looking around for a site on which they could pitch camp, when they were suddenly startled by a distant shout.

"Help, help!" came the cry, evidently at some distance from them. In spite of this, the three adventurers had no difficulty in recognizing the note of terror in it, and after one look at each other started off at a dead run in the direction of the cries. Running, tripping, stumbling, picking themselves up and racing on again harder than ever, it was not long before the shouts for help were appreciably nearer, and Bert, with what breath was left him, shouted back. Tom and Dick followed suit, and it became evident the person in distress, whoever it might be, had heard them, for his shouts ceased.

Suddenly Bert, who was a little in advance of the others, pulled himself up abruptly, and glanced down at the ground. "Easy there, fellows," he cautioned, between gasps for breath. "It looks as though we'd struck the edge of a bog, and now we'd better make haste slowly."

"You're right," exclaimed Dick, after they had taken a few cautious steps forward. "It keeps getting softer and softer, and I think we'd better look around for some path. We'll be bogged in another hundred feet."

"Well, we might as well let whoever it is we're going after know we're still on the job," said Tom, and forthwith he gave vent to a whoop that sent a cloud of wild birds soaring up from the reeds by which they were now surrounded.

His shout was answered by another from the unknown, and Tom yelled, "Don't give up, we'll get to you as soon as we can. What's the matter, are you stuck in the swamp?"

"Yes," called the other, "and I'm getting deeper every minute. Follow the edge of the swamp a few hundred yards toward the west, and you'll find the path that I wandered from. But hurry up, or I'm a goner."

"All right," sang out Bert, and the three hurriedly skirted the bog in the direction which its unfortunate victim had indicated. Sure enough, in a few minutes they reached a spot where the reeds thinned out considerably, and they could see the stranger. He was almost up to his shoulders in the soft, sticky mud, but when he caught sight of his would-be rescuers, he waved a hand to them feebly.

"Step lively, boys," he implored, "I'm almost done for. I won't be able to last long. The further I sink the faster, and this muck will soon be over my head."

The three comrades held a hurried consultation as to the best means they could employ to effect the man's release.

"Let's buckle our belts together," suggested Bert, hastily divesting himself of his. "Maybe we can pull him out that way."

This was no sooner said than done, and in a twinkling the three stout belts were fastened together. Then, following the captive's direction, they ventured gingerly out on the narrow path, composed of quaking tufts of soft earth that led into and presumably across the swamp. Soon they were within ten feet or so of the unfortunate, who proved to be a well built man of middle age. They threw him the end of the improvised rope, which he grasped desperately. Then they bent their united efforts to pulling him out of the clinging mire. Pull as they might, however, they were hardly able to move him, as they could get no purchase on the soft ground, and only began to sink in themselves. It was with difficulty that, after giving over this attempt as hopeless, they managed to scramble back to solid ground.

"Don't give up, boys," pleaded the unhappy man. "You're not going to let me die here, are you?"

"Don't worry about our deserting you," said Bert. "We're going to get you out of this, but we've got to figure out how. Can you think of anything?"

"You might run back to where the underbrush starts and bring back a lot of it," suggested he. "I might be able to support myself that way while you went for help."

"That's a good idea," exclaimed Bert, and in accordance with the suggestion they raced back to the jungle and soon returned, each bearing a large bundle of underbrush. This they threw into the swamp in such a way that the man could rest his arms on it. Then they waited expectantly to see if this would "turn the trick."

At first it seemed that the plan would prove successful, but before long it became apparent that the man was still sinking, although more slowly than before. The brush only served to defer his fate.

"Hang it all!" exclaimed Bert, as he realized this fact, "there's nothing we can do here alone. What we need is planks, and ropes, and tools. The only thing I can see is for us to hustle back to camp and get help."

"The sooner the better, I guess," agreed Dick, soberly, and accordingly they explained their intentions to the man in the bog.

"How far have you got to go?" inquired the latter, and when they told him he groaned.

"You'll never get back in time," he said, "but I guess it's the only thing left to do. Only, one of you please stay here with me. If I've got to die, I'd rather not die alone."

"Oh, quit that talk about dying," exclaimed Bert, although in his heart he had little hope. But the three comrades were resolved to employ every means, however desperate, for the stranger's release.

They held a brief consultation.

"You and Tom had better go, Dick," said Bert. "I'll stay here and do all I can to keep this poor fellow alive, but it's a long trip and I'm afraid there's not much chance for him."

So Tom and Dick set off at a brisk trot, and Bert began to talk with the unfortunate man with the idea of getting his mind as much as possible off his

predicament. It developed that he was an engineer connected with the Canal, who had gone for a day's hunting in the jungle. He had lost his way, and had been forced to make camp over night. Early the next morning he had set out, and when he had reached the swamp had attempted to cross it by way of a path that a native guide had pointed out to him as being a short cut, on a previous trip. He had taken two or three steps off the path before he realized it, and then, when he had attempted to return, had found himself held fast in the treacherous mire. All his efforts to escape had only resulted in his sinking deeper and deeper, and finally he had ceased struggling. Then he began to shout at intervals, in the faint hope of someone being within earshot, and, as we have seen, brought the three boys to his aid.

While the man had been talking, Bert's mind had been busy with a hundred plans for helping him, which, however, he was forced to abandon one after the other. It wrung his heart to see the poor wretch slowly sinking in the filthy mud, and to feel his own absolute inability to help him. By this time, the stranger was in the mire up to his chin, the underbrush which the boys had cut for him having gradually been pulled under.

Almost imperceptibly, but none the less surely, he sank, and Bert tore his hair and paced wildly up and down the bank, wrung by pity for the doomed man. At last the latter smiled weakly, and said, "Well, good-bye, my boy. You and your pals did your best, but I'm done for now. Hartley's my name, and tell the boys back at the camp that I died game, anyway. Tell them——"

But at this point Bert dashed madly away, pulling his sharp hunting knife from its sheath as he ran. He plunged into a thick clump of reeds on the edge of the swamp, and hastily cut an unusually long and tough one. He put it to his lips and blew through it, assuring himself that it was hollow. Then he rushed madly back to the place where the engineer was immersed. Nor was he a minute too soon.

The man had sunk until the mud was at his very lips, and in another few moments it would inevitably close over his mouth and nostrils. Bert dashed out on the quaking path, careless of his own danger, and in a few words explained his plan to the engineer. The latter's eyes lighted up with hope, and expressed the thanks he had no time to utter.

Bert got as near him as he could, and thrust one end of the reed into Hartley's mouth. His teeth and lips closed tightly about it.

"There you are." exclaimed Bert, exultantly. "Now you can breathe through that reed until help comes from camp, and then we'll get you out if we have to drain the swamp to do it. I'll stay right here till they come, and the reed will mark your position. Keep up hope and you'll be all right yet."

His eloquent eyes told Bert that he understood, and now there was nothing to do but sit down and wait for the expected help to arrive from camp. He knew that this would not be for some time yet, and his only hope was that the man in the swamp would not sink deeper than the length of the reed.

He sank very slowly now, but none the less surely, and gradually the mud covered his mouth—his nostrils—his eyes—and at length his head sank beneath the surface. The smooth mire closed over the place where he had been, and the slender reed was all that remained to connect him with the living, pulsing world about.

At the thought of the horrible death the engineer would now have suffered without the aid of that frail thing Bert shuddered, and thanked Heaven for the inspiration.

The seething tropic life went on without interruption, as Bert sat on the edge of the swamp with his eyes fastened on the reed. From the jungle back of him came the myriad cries of the wild things: the chatter of monkeys, the screams of the gaily colored parrots, and, once, the distant yell of a mountain lion.

The tropic sun beat down with ever-increasing intensity as it neared the zenith, and Bert felt an awful oppression stealing over him. After the first flush of triumph over cheating the bog, at least temporarily, of its victim, a rush of doubts and fears came over him. Could the engineer retain consciousness, immersed as he was in the vile, sticky mud? Would he not give up, and release his hold on the precious reed? These and a thousand other misgivings tortured Bert as he watched the reed and waited for the expected reinforcements. The minutes seemed hours, and when he looked at his watch he was astonished to find it was not yet noon.

At length his weary vigil was broken by a distant shout, which he recognized as Tom's. All his fears vanished at the prospect of immediate action, and he raised a great shout in return. In a few moments he could hear the noise occasioned by the passage of a considerable body of men, and soon the rescuing party hove in

sight. This consisted of several of the camp engineers and foremen, together with eight or ten husky laborers. Everybody, including Tom and Dick, carried shovels and ropes, and some of the laborers bore long, wide planks on their shoulders.

Dick and Tom rushed forward, followed by the others, but stopped short when they looked at the treacherous swamp and saw no sign of the engineer. Their faces paled, and Dick exclaimed, "Too late, are we? We did our best, but we've got here too late."

Grief was written on every face, but this was soon dispelled when Bert exclaimed, briskly, "Too late nothing. He's under the swamp, to be sure, but he's breathing through the reed you see sticking up there," and he pointed out to them this slender barrier between life and death.

"Well, I'll be hanged," muttered one of the rescuing party, "how in the world did he ever come to think of that, I wonder?"

"Never mind how I came to think of it!" exclaimed Bert, "the thing is now to get him out. I've been watching that reed, and I don't believe he's more than ten inches or a foot below the surface. I feared he'd be a good deal deeper by this time."

Accordingly the rescuing party fell to with feverish haste, and began constructing a sort of boxed-in raft about eight feet square. This would support several people on the shaky surface of the bog, and it would give them a place to work on while attempting to extract Hartley.

In the meantime, what had been the sensations of the unfortunate engineer? As the thick mud slowly closed over his head he held the reed tightly between his lips, and had little difficulty in breathing through it. The mud was warm, and strange to say, he had a feeling almost of comfort as he sank beneath it. Soon he felt an almost overpowering desire to sleep. He knew, however, that if he yielded to this he would lose his hold on the reed, and so fought off the perilous drowsiness.

Before very long he felt something hard under his feet, and was conscious that he was no longer sinking. At first he was at a loss to know what had stopped his downward progress, but at last decided he must have come to rest on a sunken stump. This theory was confirmed when he felt around, first with one foot and then with the other, and found that on all sides of him there was only soft mud.

But the stump beneath him renewed his hope.

Above ground the rescuing party was plying its saws and hammers to good effect, and in an incredibly short time had finished the rough raft. This done they spread the remaining planks along the so-called path leading into the swamp, and prepared to launch their "mud boat," as Tom styled it.

The rude affair was hoisted up on the brawny shoulders of the laborers, and they carried it into the swamp, treading very gingerly on the narrow, quaking pathway. They "launched" it at a spot as near as possible to the reed, and it was evident that it would give them an ample base from which to conduct their operations.

Stout ropes were then brought, and one of the engineers reached down into the soft mud directly under the spot where the reed disappeared. Quickly drawing his hand up, he exclaimed, "I touched him easily that time! Give me the rope, and I think I can reach down far enough to get it under his arms."

The rope was given him, and, reaching far over the side of the raft, he plunged his arms into the mud up to his shoulders. He manipulated the rope deftly, and soon jumped to his feet, waving his muddy arms.

"I've got it tied, all right," he exclaimed. "Now, men, we'll see if we can't pull the poor fellow out."

Three of the laborers took hold of the rope, and exerted all their strength on it. Slowly, very slowly, inch by inch, they pulled it up, until at last, amid a roar of cheers from them all, Hartley's head appeared above the surface of the swamp, the reed still held between his lips. The men leaned over and grasped his arms, and at last succeeded in pulling him into the boat.

He was a strange figure, and would hardly have been recognized as being a man. The thick mud clung to him, and made his features unrecognizable.

"Here," exclaimed Bert, "let's get the mud off him," and accordingly the contents of several water bottles was dashed over his face. At last he was able to open his eyes and to speak.

"There's no use my trying to thank you," he said, addressing the little group. "Nothing I can say can express my thankfulness to everybody here, and

especially these three lads, who have certainly done wonders for me."

"Oh, that's all right," said Bert, "maybe you'll have a chance to do something for us one day, and then we'll be quits."

"Well, that doesn't alter matters at present," replied Hartley, "and you and your friends certainly did everything that could be done. I had just about given up hope when you happened along."

"It's a lucky thing for you they did, Hartley," broke in one of the engineers, who had accompanied the rescuing party. "Why, when these two lads dashed into camp and told us of your fix, we gave you up for lost. That reed business was certainly a great stunt."

"No doubt about it," agreed another, and the three boys were deluged with a flood of like congratulations. Then the party started back. Hartley pluckily declared that he could walk, but they overruled him, and took turns in carrying him on a rude litter that they had hastily knocked together.

"That fellow certainly has got wonderful nerve," said Tom to Bert and Dick, and they heartily agreed with him.

CHAPTER X

A PERILOUS ADVENTURE

The party reached the camp without further adventure, and Mr. Hartley was put under the care of the camp physician. The latter pronounced him all right with the exception of the shock, and the only prescription he gave was "two or three days of thorough rest."

"Well, that's easy medicine to take," said Hartley, with a faint smile, when he heard this verdict, "but I hope you lads will come and visit me and help me kill time. I'm used to a pretty strenuous life, and time will hang awfully heavy on my hands if you don't. Besides, I want to have a chance to express my appreciation of your brave conduct better than I have been able to so far."

"Well, we'll come to see you, all right, with pleasure," said Bert, "only first we want to make one condition."

"And what is that?" inquired the engineer.

"Why, that you'll cut out saying anything about our 'brave conduct,'" said Bert. "We're naturally modest, you see," he added jokingly, "and anything like that bothers us."

"Well, all right. I suppose in that case I'll have to agree to your condition," assented the other, reluctantly, "but you can't keep me from thinking it, anyway."

"All right, then, that's agreed, and we'll let it go at that," said Bert, with a smile, "we'll be up to see you as soon as the doctor will let us, won't we, fellows?" turning to Dick and Tom.

Of course they were willing, so it was agreed that they should visit the engineer's

tent, the next day but one. This matter settled, the three comrades took a cordial leave of Mr. Hartley, and made their way back to their own quarters. Until now they had not realized how tired they were, but before they had gotten to their room they all felt as though they could scarcely keep awake.

They managed to defer their sleep long enough to eat a hearty supper, however, but then "made a dash for the hay," as Tom expressed it.

It did not take them long to get to sleep that night, and they were too tired even to discuss the exciting happenings of this eventful day.

With the characteristic recuperative power of youth, however, they were up bright and early the next day, and all three expressed themselves as feeling "as fit as a fiddle."

"But just the same," remarked Dick, "I feel like loafing around to-day and taking things easy. Let's go up to the stone crushing works and watch them. That's my idea of the most restful thing in the world—to watch somebody else working."

"It certainly is," agreed Bert, with a laugh, "but I'm afraid the 'somebody else' might not appreciate your philosophy."

"Oh, that's all right," said Dick. "Some time when I'm working, the other fellow is welcome to watch me, and then he'll be getting his rest."

"Huh," remarked Tom. "I'd hate to have to wait for my rest until you started laboring. I'm afraid I'd surely die from overwork before that happened."

"Oh, don't worry about your dying from overwork," retorted Dick, "that's my idea of the last thing in the world to be afraid of. What do you think, Bert?"

"Oh, I don't imagine any of us will get heart failure very soon from that cause," laughed Bert, "but here we are at the workings already, so let's proceed to take your 'rest cure,' Dick."

It seems hardly probable, however, that any invalid, suffering from "nerves" or some kindred disorder, would have selected this as an ideal place to recuperate. Everywhere the greatest activity was apparent, and the combined din of the different machines was a thing to be remembered. A steam shovel rattled and puffed, cement mixers crashed, and compressed air drills hammered

perseveringly at the living rock. Every once in a while, work would cease at some point, and the laborers would stand around expectantly.

Then there would come a muffled roar from some exploded blast, and a cloud of rocks, dirt, and smoke would shoot upwards. Then the men would fall to again with renewed energy, the giant steam shovel would be set to work, and a few more yards of rock would be carried away.

Thus the work proceeded without intermission, and the boys, although now somewhat used to the sights, looked on fascinated. There was something very wonderful and awe-inspiring about the whole process that held the boys spellbound.

"Just think of it," said Bert, after a long silence. "Imagine us standing maybe half a mile away from this canal and seeing some big ocean liner going through it. Why, it will look as though the ship were going over the solid ground."

"That's what it will, all right," replied Dick. "It's certainly the biggest thing ever."

"I should think it was," said Tom. "I can't think of anything else that even compares with it."

"No, neither can I," said Bert, thoughtfully. "That is, no practicable project. Of course wild schemes come up now and then to change the earth's course, or some other crazy idea like that. I remember reading of a plan like that somewhere. It seems its originator, whoever he was, planned to build a great ring of iron all around the earth at the equator, and then charge it with electricity. He figures that the immense magnetic attraction generated in that way would change the earth's course by acting on neighboring planets. I haven't much confidence in the plan, though," and, as Bert said this, he looked at Tom, slyly.

"Confidence!" exclaimed Tom, with a contemptuous snort. "Why, of all the fool schemes I ever heard of that's the limit. I shouldn't think you'd even——" but here he caught the twinkle in Bert's eye, and stopped abruptly.

"Ha, Ha!" roared Dick, "my, but you had Tom going that time, Bert, he thought you were in earnest about that."

"Well, why shouldn't I think he was in earnest?" growled Tom. "He's pretty near foolish enough even to believe in a demented idea like that. I wouldn't have been

surprised if he had."

"Well, never mind, old timer," said Bert, "I put one over on you that time, though, I guess. You'll have to admit it."

"Yes, I guess you did," said Tom, "but I'll get even for that sometime. Don't be surprised if you find a little rat poison in your soup some day. That's the only punishment I can think of that would fit the crime."

"Oh, that's all right," laughed Bert. "If it's like most rat poisons, all it will do is to make me fat and strong. I remember a friend of mine whose father was a farmer. He was telling me how his father scattered poison all around his barn in the hope of killing off a few of the pests, but he said that all the effect it seemed to have was to make them hungry, so that they ate more grain and feed than before. Maybe that's the way it will work with me, only the comparison isn't very flattering."

"It isn't, for a fact," said Dick, "but I hope in this case Tom isn't as blood thirsty as he sounds."

"Well, I might be persuaded to postpone the execution," admitted Tom, with a grin. "I'm always open to an offer, and a little matter of a five dollar bill or so would buy me off."

"All right, consider yourself paid," said Bert. "I'd rather owe it to you all my life than cheat you out of it."

"Much obliged, I'm sure," replied Tom, sarcastically. "As soon as I get the five spot I'll blow you both to a swell dinner."

"Good night," exclaimed Dick. "I hope I don't have to go hungry until that happens. I have a feeling that I'd lose considerable weight."

"You'll have a *long* wait, that's certain," replied Tom, and prepared to take to his heels.

The only indication Bert and Dick gave that they heard this atrocious pun was a couple of hollow groans and melancholy head shakes.

"Poor old Tom," mourned Dick at length, "poor old Tom. I've feared for some

time he was going off his head and now I know it. That's proof beyond question."

"Don't let it turn your hair gray," retorted Tom. "As long as I don't worry about my condition you don't need to. But I'll promise to be good and not do it again, anyway. That was a pretty rotten joke, I'll have to admit."

"That's all right," said Bert, "we forgive you. I'm glad to see that you realize what a crime it was."

After this they fell to discussing the events of the day before, and became so interested that they could hardly believe it was lunch time, when the whistles blew and the men threw down their tools and prepared to take a well earned rest for a brief hour. "Well," said Bert, glancing at his watch, "I guess it's about time we hit the trail toward the nearest eats emporium. Now that its called to my attention, I begin to realize that I'm hungry."

The others also discovered symptoms of a healthy appetite, so without further loss of time they hurried back to their 'base of supplies' as Tom put it.

"If we're as hungry as this without having done much all the morning, what would we be if we had been working since eight o'clock?" queried Dick, and the others were unable to give him a satisfactory answer.

"I guess they'd have to stop work, owing to a shortage in the food supply," said Bert, and his companions laughingly agreed with him.

They made a hearty lunch, and then returned to the scene of the excavations. There were a thousand interesting things to watch, and the afternoon passed very quickly. Their attention was specially attracted by one giant steam shovel that rattled and puffed like some untiring monster. The engineer guiding it directed its every motion with a touch of one of the levers close to his hand, and it seemed as though the machine were a living creature and he its brain. The great scoop would drop with a roar of chains passing through pulleys, and then, as the main engine began to puff, would rise slowly but with irresistible force.. Then a pair of auxiliary cylinders mounted on the beam of the shovel would begin to work, and the big scoop with its load of dirt and rocks would swing around and stop over one of the dirt cars. The engineer's assistant would pull a rope attached to the scoop, a catch would be released, and the bottom of the scoop would swing open, letting the load fall into the waiting car. This process would be

repeated again and again, and then, when the shovel had scooped up all the dirt around it, it would be moved forward a few feet, under its own power, to a new base of operations.

It seemed that its power was almost limitless, but at last there came a time when the boys thought it would meet an insurmountable obstacle. Close to where they sat, a big stump projected from the ground. Part of its gnarled and twisted roots was exposed, but a good deal of it was firmly imbedded in the earth. The steam shovel had worked its way along, until now it had reached a spot directly in front of this stump. The boys thought that some laborers would be sent to uproot it, so that the shovel could proceed, but there was no sign of this being done.

"Say!" exclaimed Dick. "I'll bet any money they mean to uproot that stump with the shovel, but I don't believe it can be done. Why, it would take a charge of dynamite to get that up."

"It certainly looks pretty solid," said Bert, "but they must know what they're doing. We won't have to wait long, though, to find out. Look! they're bringing the scoop up under it now!"

The three comrades watched intently as the big scoop dug in under the stump. As it came fairly up against the obstacle it slowed and almost stopped, and the boys caught their breaths. But the engineer opened the throttle a trifle more, and the stump moved! Slowly it gave way, one root after another snapping off with a loud report, and at last was lifted clear of the ground.

"Well, what do you know about that!" exclaimed Tom. "I thought the old steam shovel was up against it for fair, that time."

"So did I," said Bert, "but it fooled us good and proper."

"It's such things as that steam shovel that make the canal possible," said Dick, "just imagine the time it would take to dig that stuff out by the old method of shoveling. Why, it would take so long that we'd never live to see it finished."

"Yes, I guess you're right," said Bert, "and look at those compressed air drills working over there. Think how long it would take to bore out those holes by the old method of hammering a drill into the rock. There's no doubt, that, as you say, modern machinery is the only thing responsible for this work. It's a wonderful thing, any way you look at it."

It was indeed a subject admitting of much speculation, and the boys never tired of talking about it. In this way the afternoon passed very quickly, and when work was stopped they returned to their quarters.

On the way back, Bert said, "We might as well make arrangements now as later, fellows, for going to see Mr. Hartley. You know we promised to call on him tomorrow. What time shall we get there?"

"Oh, I should think right after lunch would be about the best time, don't you?" said Dick, and as there seemed to be no objection to this plan, they adopted it unanimously.

They arose early the next morning, and had ample time to take a long walk before breakfast. "Not that it's at all necessary," remarked Bert, "I don't very well see how any of us could have much better appetites than we have already."

"Yes, but if we didn't get all the exercise that we do, the appetites might not last very long," replied Bert.

They did not prolong their ramble long enough to interfere with breakfast, and got back to their quarters just in the nick of time.

"Another ten minutes," exclaimed Tom, "and we would have missed some of the eats. We certainly do have close escapes from disaster at times."

"It would certainly have been an awful calamity," grinned Bert, "but I think we must have some sixth sense that leads us back here in time for meals. I don't remember that we have ever been late to one yet."

"No, and we're not going to be, if I can help it," said Dick, and they all fell to in earnest.

Breakfast over, they selected a level spot not far from their quarters and had a "catch." Bert found his arm somewhat rusty, as he had not done any pitching to speak of for quite a while, but soon limbered up, and began "shooting them over" in his old time form. The morning passed quickly in the pursuit of this and other athletic exercises, and after a light luncheon the three comrades set out to visit Mr. Hartley in accordance with the plan they had formed the day before.

It was not a long walk to the engineer's tent, and they made short work of it.

Needless to say, Mr. Hartley was more than glad to see them, and expressed himself cordially.

"Sit down, sit down!" he said heartily, after he had shaken hands with them. "I've been looking forward to this visit with great pleasure. I'm used to a pretty active life, and I hate to be laid up even for a day. The doctor tells me I've got to have a complete rest for a few days, though, and I suppose he knows best."

"Well, the doctor isn't always right in these cases," said Bert, with a smile, "although he probably is in this. I remember a good joke I heard about that once."

"Go ahead and tell it to us," urged Mr. Hartley.

"Oh, it's about an Irishman, Mike we'll call him, who had been sick for a long time. At last the day came, when, to all appearances, he had finally given up the ghost, and the family physician was as called in more as a matter of form than anything else. He made the customary tests, and at last pronounced poor Mike dead. But just then Mike suddenly sat up in bed. 'You're a liar, docther!' he said. 'Oi'm not dead at all, at all.' But at this point his wife stepped up. 'There, there, Mike,' she said, soothingly, 'lie down again. The `doctor knows best.'"

There was a roar at this.

"Ha, ha!" laughed Mr. Hartley, "that's a pretty good one. That man must have held a large life insurance policy, I should say, judging by his wife's conduct."

"Very likely," grinned Bert. "But I can't vouch for that."

Mr. Hartley then related one or two of his pet stories, and soon they were all on the best of terms. After a while the conversation drifted around to local topics, and the boys were much interested in Mr. Hartley's description of places and happenings in the country bordering the "big ditch."

"Yes, there are more curious and unheard of places in this little strip of country than in any other place I know of, comparable to it in size," he said. "Why, if a quarter of the stories the natives tell are true, it is a veritable wonderland. And I think some of them are true. With my own eyes I have seen some of the things they talk about."

"Tell us of some of them, won't you?" requested Bert, and the engineer seemed nothing loath.

"There is one experience in particular that comes to my mind," he said, "that I have always meant to follow up at the first opportunity. It was while quite a party of us were out hunting, with three of the natives as guides. It was along toward the beginning of operations on the canal, and we were held up by a delay in delivering some of the machinery, so had plenty of time on our hands. Well, as I say, we started out bright and early one morning, led by the three guides, who had brought a strange story into camp. They told us of a ruined city they had discovered in the heart of the jungle. According to them, this old town covered miles of territory, and was presided over by some demon who claimed the lives of all who penetrated within its boundaries. And we were led to give some credence to their story by the fact that while they agreed to guide us to the city, they expressly stipulated that we should not require them to guide us further than its boundaries. They would stay outside, they said, and take the news of our death back to camp. They seemed to have no doubt that the demon would 'get us,' and you may be sure our curiosity was greatly excited.

"I and four others of the corps of construction engineers resolved to run this mysterious devil to the ground, and so, as soon as we could make the necessary arrangements, started out. We soon entered the jungle, and made steady progress. As far as we could judge we went almost due south. We traveled with hardly a stop other than long enough to eat, that first day, and only stopped when darkness made further progress impossible.

"We were up bright and early the next morning, and about noon caught our first glimpse of the ruined city. Way down a clearing in the jungle, we could see tall white pillars, many of them partly hidden by creeping vines.

"We all broke into a run, and in an hour or so were on the outskirts of the old city. And believe me, my lads, at one time that had been a city with a capital C! It had evidently been laid out in well ordered streets and squares, and everywhere houses were bordered by the remains of what had been great temples and buildings. Most of them were on the ground, mere heaps of ruins, but a few were still standing, at least in part, and we could get a faint idea of what the old city must have been in those far off days of its prime. At present, though, it seemed to be the abode only of wild things.

"We gazed in wonder at this sight for some time, and then held a pow-wow. We had a long discussion as to whether we should start exploring at once, or wait till the next morning.

"We finally decided on the latter plan, as, in spite of our blastings about wanting to shake hands with the presiding devil, we really had no great hankering to meet him after dark. Of course, we none of us believed in that 'devil' business, but still we had no doubt that some secret menace hung over the old city. The guides were positive on this point, and as they had been right so far, we were inclined to give their opinions some consideration."

Here Mr. Hartley paused as though to gather his thoughts, and the three boys, who had been listening intently to his narrative, drew a deep breath.

"My!" exclaimed Tom, "make out we wouldn't like to have been with you then."

"Yes, I daresay you would," said Mr. Hartley, with a smile, as he noted the eager longing in the eyes of his listeners. "I think it would have been an adventure after your own heart. But wait till you hear the rest, and you may be glad you were not along."

"I doubt it," said Bert, "but go on with the story, if you please, Mr. Hartley."

CHAPTER XI

THE DESERTED CITY

"Well," resumed Mr. Hartley, "we made camp, as that appeared to be the desire of the majority, and turned in, as soon as we had eaten supper. We were all dead tired after the long journey, and I guess none of us were troubled in our sleep by thoughts of the strange spirit of evil that ruled the city, according to the natives. It's a lucky thing, sometimes, that you can't see into the future. If we could have done so that night, our sleep might have been less sound.

"We were awakened by the guides, who had already prepared a good breakfast for us, and you may be sure we all ate heartily, both because it tasted good and because we wanted to start out on our exploration in good trim.

"The meal despatched, we entered the ruins by what had apparently at one time been a great gate, but which now was nothing but a twisted heap of stone. Evidently the city had been encircled by a wall, but this had crumbled away and was overgrown by the tropical vegetation.

"Of course, we had to leave the guides behind us, as they positively refused to pass the boundaries. This didn't cause us much worry, however, for we knew from experience that, when it came to trouble, they were of little use.

"The ruins lay before us apparently devoid of any human inhabitants. At first we didn't know which way to go, but finally decided to make straight for what looked to have been the center of the town. As well as we could make out, all the streets seemed to converge toward that point, which had no doubt been the public square.

"We followed this plan, but as we went along were often tempted to alter it. More than once we passed some building that seemed in better repair than the

others, and of course we wanted to explore it. But we thought it would be no use examining lesser ruins, when greater ones were at hand. For, as we got nearer the center of the town, we could see that the square was occupied by a building much more pretentious than any we had seen so far. From a distance it had looked merely like a jumbled mass of ruins, but when we at last stood before it we could see that such was far from being the case.

"To be sure, the building was in a ruinous condition, but, probably owing to its having originally been built in a more solid fashion even than its neighbors, it was in comparatively good preservation. Even the roof appeared intact in places, and we marveled as we gazed at it. Great columns rose tier after tier, interspersed with solid walls of granite, until they supported a roof at least eighty or a hundred feet from the ground. The facade was ornamented profusely with carvings of men and animals, some of them very well done, indeed.

"We realized that this building and its fellows must have been the production of some highly developed form of civilization, and many were the speculations as to who the ancient people could have been.

"But we soon got tired of looking at the outside, and were all seized with a desire to explore the wonderful place. Its main entrance was little obstructed, and there was nothing to prevent our going in. It was as black as pitch inside, although the sun was shining brightly, and we cast about for some means of lighting the interior. We secured some resinous fagots from a great tree that had sprung up near by, and found that they burned brightly and would serve our purpose perfectly.

"Each one of us armed himself with one of these, then, and took another along in reserve. In this fashion we invaded the ancient temple, for such we believed it to be, not without, it must be confessed, a rather chilly feeling in the neighborhood of the spine. At least, I felt that way, and I have no doubt the others did, too. However, we all carried revolvers, and felt confident that if the mysterious 'demon' attacked us, we would be able to give him a sharp argument.

"Nevertheless we kept closely together, and were inclined to believe firmly in the old adage that 'in numbers there is strength.' We had no difficulty in climbing over the fallen blocks encumbering the entrance, and soon found ourselves fairly on the inside. The place had a damp, earthy smell, and the air was very close and oppressive. It was black as pitch, too, and the light from our improvised torches

did little to dispel the gloom.

"However, it would never do to back out now, so we advanced cautiously, stumbling every once in a while over some fallen piece of masonry. Our footsteps rang and echoed under the great vault that we could hardly see, so lofty it was. It seemed almost sacrilege to disturb the silence of this building, that had probably not echoed to human footsteps for centuries.

"We kept on, nevertheless, until we were halted suddenly by an exclamation from one of the men in front.

"Look, look!" he exclaimed, pointing with a trembling finger. We followed its direction, and I distinctly felt my hair rise on my head.

For there, high up near the roof, two green eyes glared down at us with a baleful sparkle! They glinted and glowed, and a gasp went up from our little party.

"By all that's holy, what is it?" whispered Tom Bradhurst, my special friend.

"No one answered, but we all got a tight grip on our revolver butts. We gazed, fascinated, at those two lambent points of light, fully expecting to come to hand grips with the 'demon' then and there. As nothing happened, however, we plucked up courage enough to advance cautiously, and were soon near enough to make out the cause of our fright. The eyes were two great emeralds set in the head of a colossal idol carved out of a great block of solid granite! The image must have been at least thirty feet high, and the emeralds were each as large as a robin's egg.

"Great Scott!" ejaculated Bob Winters, another of our party, "that thing has scared me out of ten years of life, and I'm going to have my revenge. I'm going to climb up there and get those emeralds, if it takes a leg. Why, there'll be a fortune in them for all of us."

"We tried to dissuade him, for our nerves had been shaken, and we didn't want to monkey with the confounded things. Bob was always a dare-devil chap, though, and set on having his own way. So he went at it, climbing nimbly up the front of the image, until he was in a position to touch the great emeralds. Then he drew his hunting knife and commenced prying away at the stones to dislodge them.

"Suddenly he gave the most unearthly shriek it has ever been my lot to hear,

threw his hands up over his head, and started sliding down the steep front of the statue. While the shriek yet rang in our ears, a great section of what had appeared to be solid rock flooring at the base of the idol opened inward, and our comrade's body hurtled through the aperture and disappeared from our sight. His hunting knife rattled on the stones at our feet, and then all was silence.

"If we had been standing a yard nearer the base of the image the whole party would have been dropped through the hole."

At this point Mr. Hartley paused in his narrative, and passed his hand over his eyes. The boys saw that great beads of perspiration covered his forehead, but they had been so absorbed in the story that they had not noticed this before. They waited breathlessly for him to resume, which he did after a few seconds.

"Well," he continued, "for a few seconds we were stricken motionless by the suddenness and horror of the thing. Then we gathered ourselves together, and rushed to the edge of the gaping opening. We shouted and called, and at last were answered by a faint moan. Then we looked into each other's eyes, and knew that there was only one thing to do. We must go down into that black hole and do what we could to rescue our friend.

"But how were we to accomplish this? We had no ropes, and the feeble light of our torches when we thrust them into the black opening failed to reveal any bottom. For this reason we dared not risk a drop, with almost the certainty of not being able to get back again."

"It looked as though we were 'up against it,' but finally we made a makeshift rope by tearing up part of our clothing into strips and tying them together. This made a fairly serviceable rope, and, after tying knots in it at intervals to facilitate our descent, we lowered it into the opening. When we had let it out almost to the end it stopped swinging, so we knew it had touched bottom. I volunteered to go down first, and did so."

"It was ticklish business, and more than once I almost lost my hold. Finally, however, my feet touched a hard floor, and I let go."

"All right!" I shouted to those above. "Come on down."

"Coming, old man," replied 'Brad,' and the sound of his cheery voice was a great comfort to me. I knew he would soon be with me, and so gave my attention to

finding and helping Bob. I had not gone more than a few steps when I discovered him stretched out on the cold rock floor, either unconscious or dead. I soon found the former to be the case, to my great relief, and forced a few drops of whiskey from my flask between his teeth.

"By the time Bradhurst had reached my side I could see some signs of returning consciousness in Bob's face, and before long he struggled to a sitting posture."

"Wh—what happened, anyway?" he asked.

"That's what we'd like to know," said Brad. "What made you fall that way. What struck you?"

"Something darted out of that cursed thing's mouth and pierced my hand," replied Bob, as he began to regain his memory. "Look at that!" and he held his left hand out for us to see.

"It had been neatly punctured by some sharp instrument, which left a small wound not more than an eighth of an inch across. The hand was puffed and swollen, though, and the thought flashed across my mind that this scratch was probably not as trivial as it looked. I had little doubt that the instrument, whatever it was, had been poisoned, and as I stole a swift glance at Brad I could see that the same thought was in his mind.

"Bob never seemed to think of this possibility, though, and you may be sure we were careful not to give him an inkling of our anxiety. That would do no good, and our fears might be unfounded.

"While we were examining the hand, our companions had descended, and of course Bob had to repeat the cause of the accident to them.

"But how do you feel now, old man?" queried Brad, when he had finished.

"Oh, nothing extra," replied Bob. "I seem to feel rather dizzy, but I suppose that's the result of the fall. I'm lucky not to have broken my neck."

"Well, anyway, it's up to us to get out of this hoodooed place as soon as possible," I told them. "Come along. I'll go up first, then you fellows come, and we'll haul Bob out."

"Accordingly I started up our improvised rope hand over hand. I had not ascended more than five or six feet, however, when with a slight r-r-ip the rope parted above my head, and I fell back to the stones below. Fortunately I landed on my feet, and so escaped with nothing worse than a severe shaking up.

"But I had small reason to be thankful, nevertheless, for the desperate nature of our position was soon borne in upon me. How to get out—that was the question, and, when I put it up to my companions, they had no answer.

"The place in which we were now imprisoned seemed to be a sort of tunnel. It was not more than fifteen feet wide, but we had no means of telling how long it might be. To get out the way we had come was evidently out of the question, as the roof of the tunnel was at least twenty-five feet above our heads.

"Well, boys," said Bradhurst, at last, "the only thing we can do is to follow the course of this hole one way or the other, and try to find an outlet. And the sooner we start the better, as our torches aren't going to last much longer."

"Here was another horror added to our situation, which had seemed bad enough before. Without light, our chances of escape from the horrible place would be slight indeed, so we acted on our comrade's advice without delay.

"There was apparently little choice of direction. Our torches burned steadily, and so we knew there was no breeze coming from either direction that might point to an outlet. Our sense of locality was rather twisted by this time, but after a consultation we set out through the tunnel in what we believed to be the direction of our camp. Before we had gone far, Bob complained of wanting to sleep, and it was all we could do to keep him moving. I walked on one side of him, holding his arm, while Wryburn, another of the party, supported him on the other side. Brad walked in front, carefully scanning the walls of the tunnel for signs of an opening.

"After we had gone a considerable distance in this manner, we heard a faint roaring sound, that grew constantly louder as we pushed forward.

"It sounds like water," said Wryburn. "We must be coming to a subterranean river."

"We had little doubt that this theory was correct, and pressed forward with renewed hope. At any rate, we had the assurance that the tunnel would not end in

a blank wall, as we had feared, and so force us to retrace our footsteps.

"We were held back badly by Bob, though, who, by now, had become almost helpless. We were forced practically to carry him, and he seemed to have lost consciousness.

"All things have an end, however, and at last we stood on the bank of the underground river. It was two or three hundred feet wide, and raced along with a very powerful current. By this time you may be sure we were very thirsty, as well as hungry, and the cold water satisfied one craving if not the other. After we had drunk our fill we set to work dressing Bob's wounded hand as well as we could, which is not saying much. He seemed to be in a sort of coma, from which we were unable to arouse him."

"After we had made him as comfortable as possible we discussed plans of escape. I was of the opinion that our best course would be to follow the river in the hope of its emerging into the open at some point. There seemed to be no objection to this from my companions, so after a short rest we started out. First, we improvised a rude stretcher for Bob, and took turns carrying it."

"At the spot where we had first come upon it, the river was edged with a little strip of coarse gravel, but, as we progressed, this became narrower and narrower, and the river seemed to be running with even greater velocity than before. At last the strip of beach disappeared altogether, and we had no choice but to enter the water. We splashed along wearily, and hope burned lower and lower in our breasts. To add to our troubles, our stock of torches was almost exhausted, and we were forced to burn only one at a time, to make them last longer.

"The walls between which the stream now ran got closer and closer together, with the result that the water became deeper and rushed along with greater force. The sound of its roaring in the confined place was deafening, and communication with each other was out of the question.

"We had traveled perhaps three miles in this manner, when we suddenly noticed that the water seemed to be rising! Within a few minutes after we had observed this, it crept up to above our knees, and its roaring grew perceptibly louder. We looked desperately about us for some place of refuge, but there was none. The stream now ran in a cavern not more than eighty feet wide and ten feet high, and its smooth, water-worn walls stretched on into the darkness ahead without a

break.

"We looked at each other in dismay, as the water crept up, deeper and deeper. Pieces of wood and branches of trees were now floating on it, and Bradhurst said, 'Boys, there must be a heavy rain outside, and this stream is feeling its effects. If we don't get to some place where it widens out very soon, we might as well write each other's epitaphs. We've got to hurry like—listen! What was that?'"

"From the blackness in back of us came a sudden loud, menacing roar, growing in volume every second."

"Come on, boys, quick!" yelled Bradhurst, setting us the example by forging ahead faster than before. "There's a big wave coming that'll fill this place up to the roof, and the Lord help us if it overtakes us here."

"We stumbled along as fast as we could, but could make but slow progress, burdened as we were by the helpless form of our comrade. The water was almost to our waists, and the awful wave back of us approached with horrible rapidity. We were about ready to give up, when Bradhurst, who was a little in the lead, came ploughing back to us.

"Come along for your lives, boys," he shouted above the noise of the water. "This infernal hole widens out a little further on, and if—here, you fellows are tired out. Hustle along, and I'll carry Bob."

"We tried to stop him, but he paid no attention to us, and, stooping over, lifted the unconscious form of our companion on his broad back. Thus relieved, we put all our ebbing strength in one last mad dash, pulling Brad and his burden along with us. At last we reached a place where the cavern widened, and struggled up on a strip of sandy beach. But we were not out of the water's power yet, by any means. We knew that our only salvation lay in finding some refuge above the highest level the stream would be likely to reach, and so began a frantic hunt along the walls of the cavern.

"By the greatest good fortune, my eye caught sight of a rocky projection, quite a way up the side of the cave, and I yelled to my companions. They hurried over, and we climbed desperately up the rocky wall. I was the first to reach the platform, and I helped the others over its edge. Bradhurst waited until we were all up, and then hoisted Bob up over his head. I leaned over as far as I could, and

was just able to get a grip on the unconscious man. Assisted by the others, I pulled him up, and then in a twinkling we had Brad up, too.

"And not a second too soon, either. Even as we hauled our friend over the edge, a great foaming wall of water leaped out of the tunnel from which we had emerged not three minutes before, and boiled out over the floor of the cave in which we were. It washed against the walls, and we thought for a few seconds that it would even reach our place of refuge. It did lap up to within a foot of us, but then spread out more and subsided a little.

"We would have been as helpless as so many chips of wood if it had caught us while in the narrow tunnel, and we shuddered as we thought of our narrow escape.

"The ledge on which we found ourselves was amply supplied with driftwood, probably left there at the time of some former flood that had been even fiercer than this one. We made a fire, and waited for the water to subside with as much patience as we could muster. We knew that Bob would probably die unless we could get him to a doctor soon, and this made the waiting all the harder. At times he would rave in delirium, and at others lie so quiet that more than once we thought him dead.

"But the water did go down after what seemed to us an age, but was in all probability not more than a few hours. We resumed our journey down its channel, and by great good fortune came at last to the place where it emerged into the open air. The sun was shining brightly, and words are inadequate to describe our joy at seeing it once more. We took deep breaths of the warm tropical air, so grateful after the damp, confined atmosphere in which we had been so long, and thanked a kind Providence for our escape.

"We made our way back to our camp, and arrived just in the nick of time. Our guides had given us up as lost, and were much astonished at seeing us. After their first astonishment had worn off, they seemed to regard us with the greatest respect, which we were at a loss to account for at the time. We later found out that it was because we had been able to cheat the inexorable 'devil,' supposed to rule the old city, of his prey.

"We returned to camp by forced marches, and turned Bob over to the camp physician. He recovered at last, all but his hand, which never regained its power.

The natives said it was the 'demon's curse,' and possibly they were right.

"At the time nothing could have hired us to go back to the old ruins, but lately I've had a sneaking desire to go back and finish exploring that old temple. Perhaps I shall, some day, and likely as not the devil will get me, this time. Who knows?"

Mr. Hartley ended his strange narrative with a smile, half serious, half comical, and his listeners drew a long breath.

They voted it one of the most exciting tales they had ever heard, and besieged the engineer with questions as to the location of the ruined city. But Mr. Hartley only shook his head.

"No, no," he said, and, although he smiled, his tone was serious. "It would be just like you madcaps to undertake a journey there, and I don't want to be the cause of your death. If you don't mind, I'd rather not tell you."

Although disappointed, the boys did not press the matter, and after a little further discussion of the engineer's story, took their departure.

"Just the same," declared Bert, on their way home, "I'd like nothing better than for us three to tackle that 'devil.' I have an idea we could stand him on his head."

"I'd like to try it, anyway," declared Tom, and Dick declared himself as feeling the same way.

They talked about little else that evening, and if, after they were asleep, they were troubled by nightmares, the cause was not hard to determine.

CHAPTER XII

WAH LEE'S BOSS

The next few days were crowded with incident. The city was filling up with visitors, to be present at the ceremonies attending the opening of the Canal. Many of these were celebrities known all over the world. Soldiers, admirals, diplomats, men of affairs, brushed shoulders with thousands less famous, but quite as interested in the great event so soon to take place. The boys were constantly meeting someone whom they had known in the "States"; and, in the renewal of old friendships and the making of new ones, the time flew by as though on wings.

But, underneath all the hubbub and excitement, Bert was conscious of an uneasy premonition. He tried to analyze it, and, when unsuccessful in this, attempted to throw it off. Despite all his efforts, however, it persisted. Call it clairvoyance, call it telepathy, he felt aware of impending danger. Some "coming event" was casting "its shadow before."

Again and again the words of Allison recurred to him. Not that he believed in them. Although they had stirred him at the time with a sense of vague foreboding, he had dismissed them as the utterance of an enthusiast, who felt a deep antipathy toward the Japanese, and magnified the danger to be feared from them. Of course, it was absurd—that last remark of his that at that very moment a Japanese fleet might be on its way to attack the Pacific Slope. He laughed as he thought of it, but, somehow, the laugh did not ring true.

Wah Lee had kept his word, and frequently called to see his friends. But his serenity seemed to be disturbed. He appeared troubled and distraught. At times, he acted as though he were about to tell them something, but was himself in doubt as to the value of his information, and restrained himself. His all-embracing smile was conspicuous by its absence.

"What's bothering the old chap, I wonder," ruminated Tom.

"Search me," laughed Dick. "Something on his conscience, maybe. Perhaps he hasn't burned as many joss sticks before his particular idol as he feels he ought, and the failure worries him."

"I'm going to get right down to brass tacks, the next time he comes," said Bert, "and get it out of him."

But the wily Celestial baffled all efforts to "pump" him, and the matter passed from their minds.

Two days later, however, Wah Lee shuffled past Bert, as the latter was sauntering down the main street of Colon, and, apparently by accident, touched his arm in passing. Bert looked up, and, recognizing the Chinaman, started to speak to him. But the latter only gave him a swift glance from his almond eyes, and kept on, his face as stolid and inscrutable as that of a graven image. In that fleeting look, however, Bert's quick perception recognized that Wah Lee had some object in view, and wanted to talk with him. With a heightened pulse, but still retaining an indifferent air, he followed.

At the first turning, the Chinaman passed into a side street, Bert keeping a little way in the rear. The houses grew more infrequent and soon they came to the suburbs. Still on they went, until, at last, they were in the open country, and free from observation. Then, in a remote spot, where they could see for a long distance on every side, Wah Lee stood still, and Bert ranged alongside.

"Well, Wah Lee," he asked, curiously, "what's the game?"

In answer, the Chinaman drew from his pocket a crumpled sheet of paper, and handed it to Bert. He took it and smoothed it out. At first, it failed to convey any impression. The drawing was a rough one, and seemed to consist of a series of lines, punctured with dots. But gradually, as Bert gazed, his training in mechanics told him that it was a plan of some large structure. There were two rectangular outlines, that were perfectly similar, like two leaves of a table. No, they were gates. And then, like a flash, it came across him. They were the gates of the Gatun Locks! There was the wavy line, to indicate the water level, and, down below these, were the ominous dots. They seemed to be meant for holes, but his knowledge of the locks told him that they had no place in its structure. What did those holes mean?

A little shaken, he looked at Wah Lee for the key to the enigma.

"Where did you get this?" he asked.

"Found it," answered the Chinaman. "Man drop it. Man come to see my blossom. My blossom kill the canal," Wah Lee repeated.

For a moment, Bert's head swam, and a thousand bells seemed to ring in his ears. Then he steadied himself, and plied the Chinaman with eager questions that sought to pluck the heart out of the mystery. Wah Lee's knowledge of English was very limited, and it took a long time and infinite patience to get from him what he knew. Gradually, he pieced the bits together, until the whole thing became clear and coherent in his mind.

By the merest accident, Wah Lee had heard enough to know that the Japanese who employed him was engaged in a plot to destroy the Canal. How or when it was to be done, he did not know. It was doubtful if he could have grasped the details, even if he had heard them, so full they were of technical matters that conveyed to him no meaning. But he knew that the plot existed, and dimly understood that this would bring pain and suffering to Bert. As far as he himself was concerned, a dozen canals might be destroyed, without affecting him in the least. But he held the boys in strong affection for having saved his life, and he knew that he could pay his debt, at least in part, by letting them know what was brewing.

As regarded the paper, Wah Lee knew nothing, except that a white man, who spoke English, was a frequent visitor to his master, with whom he held long conferences. Only yesterday, on leaving the house after dark, he had accidentally dropped the plan, and Wah Lee, hovering near, had picked it up. A vague idea that it might be of value to Bert and prompted him to bring it to him.

This was the sum of the Chinaman's knowledge. He simply knew that his "blossom" was engaged in some kind of a plan to kill the Canal.

But Bert must know more than this—the nature of the plan, the people involved in it, the methods employed for it, the time set for its execution. Then, only, could the proper steps be taken to thwart it. How could this knowledge be obtained? Not by Wah Lee. He had accidentally stumbled upon it, and while this, of course, was an inestimable service, abler minds than his must unravel the details.

Whatever was to be done must be done quickly. Time was a factor of prime importance. Bert looked up at the sky. The sun was near its setting. Night would come on suddenly.

With the rapid resolution that was one of his chief characteristics, Bert made up his mind.

"Make tracks for home, Wah Lee," he said. "I'm coming with you."

The Chinaman made no demur and expressed no surprise. He led the way and Bert followed, racking his brain for the best thing to do. His plans took shape quickly. By the time they drew near the grounds, darkness had enveloped them like a blanket. He halted the Chinaman and talked to him in whispers.

He must get into the house, without being seen. Where did the talks with the white man take place? In the library. Very well. Was there any place where he, Bert, could be concealed and hear what went on?

But here the Oriental departed from his wonted calm. There was too much risk. Bert would be killed. His master had men in the house who obeyed him absolutely. If he merely lifted his finger, they would kill one man or twenty men.

But Bert was not to be deterred from his purpose. He had embarked on this venture, and, live or die, he would see it through to a finish. He cut short the protestations of the frightened Celestial and commanded him to show him the nearest way to the library.

There was no way, Wah Lee averred. The house swarmed with servants, and detection would be certain. Every window and every room in the mansion was ablaze with light. Unless he could make himself invisible, the attempt was hopeless.

Circling about the house, in the shadow of the shrubbery, Bert studied the location of the room that the Chinaman had pointed out as the library. It was on the second floor, and a broad veranda surrounded the house, about two feet beneath the window. Near by, a giant tree upreared its branches. With a parting word of caution, Bert shied up the tree with the agility of a cat. He ensconced himself firmly on a projecting branch, and peered through the heavy foliage.

The room into which he looked was a spacious one and furnished with all the

sumptuousness of Eastern luxury. Exquisite tapestries draped the walls, and priceless jades and porcelains bespoke the taste as well as the wealth of the owner. Quaint weapons and suits of armor, doubtless worn at some time by a shogun or samurai ancestor gave a touch of grimness to a beauty and delicacy of ornament that might otherwise have been excessive.

At a magnificent library table of ebony, inlaid with pearl, a man was seated with his head on his hand, in an attitude of profound thought. His left hand, playing with the ivory handle of a dagger that lay on the desk, betrayed a certain restlessness, as though he were waiting for someone. From time to time he raised his head, as if listening. At last he threw himself back in his chair with a gesture of impatience, and, with unseeing eyes, looked out of the window. And now, Bert, from his leafy covert, could study his face at leisure.

It was a typical Japanese face, with the high cheekbones and slanting eyes that marked his race. But nothing could hide the proofs of breeding and culture that were revealed in every feature. It was the face of a statesman, a scholar, a warrior, a prince. The habit of command was stamped upon it, and in his eyes glowed a spirit of resolution that almost reached fanaticism. Bert felt instinctively that here was a foeman worthy of any man's steel, a formidable enemy who would sweep away like chaff anything that stood between him and the accomplishment of his purpose.

Once or twice, Bert had seen him in Colon, a notable figure even in a town at that time filled with notables. No one seemed to know much about him. Three years ago, he had appeared in Panama and purchased a large landed estate. He had spent enormous sums in developing it, until it had become famous throughout the Isthmus for its extent and beauty. That the owner was fabulously wealthy could not be doubted. But beyond this, all was conjecture. He had no official position or diplomatic mission. No breath of suspicion had ever been attached to him of being in any sense hostile to American interests. His suavity, his courtesy, his unquestioned wealth and standing had won for him universal respect. And yet, if Bert's suspicions proved true, the accomplished Japanese gentleman into whose eyes he was looking, was the most dangerous foe that America had in the whole wide world.

A door opened and another Japanese entered the room. He was older than the man seated at the desk, and his face was creased with the deep lines of wisdom and long experience. He might have been, and probably was, one of the "elder

statesmen"—that august body, that, at home and abroad, guided the destinies of the nation. He saluted ceremoniously the owner of the house, and they were soon engaged in an animated conversation.

Then a man of a different type was ushered in by an obsequious servant. He was dressed in American fashion, but his face indicated a Spanish origin. He was a Cuban who had been educated as a civil engineer in one of the scientific schools of the United States. His features were alert and intelligent, but there was a certain shiftiness in his eyes, and something about him gave an indefinable air of dissipation. He had been employed for a time in harbor work at Vera Cruz, but had killed a man in a brawl and been forced to flee the country. On the Canal, there were eighty-seven distinct nationalities engaged in the work, and, in view of the great demand for labor, he had no difficulty in securing employment, the more easily as he was an expert in his profession. He had been assigned to the Gatun section of the work, with his quarters in the city of Colon.

The Japanese secret service, in its search for a suitable tool, had become possessed of the facts regarding the murder for which the man, Ofirio, by name, was wanted by the Mexican authorities. With infinite caution and by slow degrees, they had approached and sounded him. They appealed to his fears and his avarice. As regards the first, they could betray him to his pursuers. For the second, they promised him an amount of money greater than he could expect to earn in the course of his natural life, and a safe refuge in Japan. Under the stress of these two primal emotions, he had yielded, and, for a year past, had been in the power and the pay of Namoto, the Japanese, in whose library he was at that moment standing. He it was who had dropped the paper that Wah Lee had so fortunately retrieved and which had given Bert the first hint of the appalling disaster that threatened his country.

Bert noticed the subtle something in the air of Namoto—a mixture of power, disdain, and condescension—as he motioned the engineer to a seat. From a stray word or two that came to him, he noted that they were talking in English, which both understood, while neither could speak the native language of the other.

And now it became imperative that Bert should hear the conference that concerned him so tremendously. From where he was, he could see perfectly, but could hear nothing but an occasional disconnected word. He must leave his safe retreat, take his life in his hands and reach the veranda that ran beneath the open window.

Silently, he removed his shoes, and, tying them together by the laces, hung them over the branch. Then he crept out on the heavy bough that reached within three feet of the porch. Holding on by his hands, he let himself down, swung back and forth once or twice to get the proper momentum, and then letting himself go, landed as lightly as a lynx upon the veranda. A moment he swayed trying to keep his nearly lost balance, while he looked anxiously to see if the conspirators had heard. They showed no sign of disturbance, however, and, with a muttered prayer of thankfulness, Bert dropped on his hands and knees and crept beneath the sill. And there, safe for the instant, with every faculty strained to its utmost, he became a fourth, if unseen, member of the group.

CHAPTER XIII

MARKED FOR DESTRUCTION

Ofirio was speaking.

"I am sure that nothing has been overlooked," he was saying, evidently in answer to a question. "The charges of dynamite have been tamped into the holes, and there are enough of them, fired at the same moment, to wreck the eastern gate. In any event, it will so injure the delicate machinery that works them, that they cannot be moved. Portions of it, no doubt, will be blown into the Canal and block it so effectually that no ship can pass through. But, leaving that out of the question, if the gate cannot work, the Canal is put out of commission. It would be a matter of weeks, perhaps of months, to repair the damage."

"The longer the better, of course," said Namoto, "but we do not ask even that much of fate. Give us ten days of confusion and panic, with the Atlantic fleet on this side of the Canal and unable to get through to the Pacific, and our victory is sure."

"How about the tunnel?" asked Togi, the oldest of the three. "Are you sure there is no suspicion that it exists?"

"Not the slightest," answered Ofirio. "I came through it myself, last night, entering it at the masked exit near the locks, and leaving it by the secret opening in your cellar. Nothing has been disturbed, and the divers' helmets were in their accustomed place. If the Americans had any knowledge of it, their soldiers would already be in possession."

"Provided that we can keep the secret until the day of the grand opening," muttered Togi, uneasily. "You are sure," he went on, "that the connections are perfect?"

"The wires have been so strung that not one of the charges has been overlooked," asserted Ofirio, confidently. "There will be no interval between the explosions. When your finger presses that button, there will be a roar that will deafen the city and shake the whole Isthmus."

There was a brief pause, and Bert's heart beat so hard that it almost seemed as though it must be heard. The hideous plot had been revealed in all its blackness. His face was blanched as he thought of the possibilities, but he exulted in the fact that, at last, he had definite knowledge. He knew what was to be done—the destruction of the Canal Gate. He knew how it was to be done—by an electric current sent through the wires to the concealed explosives. He knew when it was to be done—on the opening day of the Canal.

In his mind's eye, he could see the progress of the plan that had been conceived and carried on with such infernal cunning. With the patience of moles, they had dug an underground tunnel, extending from Namoto's mansion to within a short distance of the locks. The mention of the divers' helmets gave him a clue to the way in which the holes had been made and the dynamite inserted. No doubt they had taken advantage of stormy nights, lowering themselves into the water at a distance from the locks and then slowly groping their way toward them. The wires had found a conduit in the tunnel, and ran directly to the library of Namoto. His index finger was indeed the finger of Fate, that expected to write a record of disaster to the United States. One pressure on a button would send the electric current surging through the wires, and the great Canal would, for a time at least, be put completely out of commission.

But, after all, this was not an end in itself. It was only the means to an end. It would be mere vandalism to cripple the Canal, simply for the sake of inflicting damage. Besides, the injury could be repaired, and, in a short time, all traces of it would have vanished. There must be an object for all this enormous toil and risk. What was it?

Namoto had spoken of the Atlantic fleet not being able to get through to the Pacific. "Ten days of panic and confusion." Why was it so imperative to prevent the warships on this side from joining their comrades on the other? Naturally, to keep the Pacific squadron weak and less able to resist attack. Then, an attack was planned. By whom? Who could attack us from the Pacific side but Japan? And when? Within ten days. And again Allison's words sounded in Bert's ears like the knell of doom: "Perhaps at this very moment a Japanese fleet is on its way to the

Pacific slope."

With a sinking of the heart, Bert reflected on the vast number of American warships now at Colon or hastening there. The government had planned to make a great demonstration of naval strength, in order to impress the nations of the world. For this purpose, many had been called home from European stations. Some of the most formidable dreadnoughts building at the navy yards had been rushed along in construction, so as to be manned and launched for the great review. Others, which naturally belonged to the Pacific squadron, but had been in the drydocks for repairs, would in the ordinary course of things, have been despatched before this around the Horn, to join their brethren in the Pacific. But since the opening of the Canal was so near at hand, it seemed unwise to steam ten thousand miles, when, in a little while, the same result could be attained by traveling fifty. Thus, from various causes, at least three-fourths of the American navy was on the Atlantic side. If it could be kept there, the Japanese could attack the remnant in the Pacific in overwhelming force. Then, with these captured or destroyed, the Japanese vessels could bombard San Francisco and Seattle, land their troops from the crowded transports, and gain control of the whole western coast of the United States. It was an imperial idea—boldly conceived, broadly planned, patiently developed, but—and Bert thanked God—not yet executed.

These thoughts had passed through his mind with lightning rapidity. But now, the plotters had resumed their talk. This time, it was Togi who spoke.

"I would that the time were set for to-night," he said. "The present is in our hands. The future is uncertain. Fortune is fickle. Fate has its whims, its bitter jests. All is ready. One pressure on that button, and before ten seconds have passed, the work is done. Is it wise to wait, Namoto?"

Bert scarcely dared to breathe, while he waited for the answer. It was long in coming. Namoto seemed wavering. Togi had spoken truly. The present moment was his. The future was on the "lap of the gods." Perhaps, in obedience to the mysterious laws of mind, the very presence, though unknown, of Bert, just outside the window, made him sense dimly some crouching danger. But the moment of indecision passed, and he answered, slowly:

"It cannot be, Togi. We must wait. We have waited nearly three years. Surely the gods of Japan will not desert us in the next two days. There are many reasons for waiting, but here are two:

"The shock must come at just the right moment. It will be tenfold more paralyzing, more panic-breeding. When bells are ringing, when crowds are cheering, when America is exulting, when the world is watching—at just that instant the blow must fall. The power of the unexpected is irresistible. The enemy's fall will be more crushing, and Japan will loom up, a sinister image of dread, that will fill the whole horizon.

"Then, too, with every hour that passes, our fleet is drawing nearer. From all quarters of the compass they are converging. Of course, they will not form a compact squadron, until the news is flashed to them that the Gate has been destroyed. Then they will unite for the last great rush upon the Coast."

"I should think," ventured Ofirio, "that so many Japanese warships in one part of the Pacific would be noted by merchant ships and reported to their governments. Do you not fear that suspicion may be aroused before you are ready?"

"Not so," answered Namoto. "Our Naval Department has shown the utmost care and caution. For a year past the vessels have been sent to various ports along the coast of Japan. In every harbor they have lurked, one here, another there, at Nakodate, Miyako, Nagasaki, Noshiro, Ohama, and others. Some have been reported in the naval bulletins as drydocked. Others have been sent, in ones and twos, on missions of courtesy or diplomacy to China, Australia, and other countries bordering on the Pacific. So adroitly and innocently has this been done, that not even a rumor is current in any foreign cabinet that anything is afoot, and even the masses of the Japanese themselves do not know what their government is doing. But all the commanders have had definite orders so to time their departure from the various ports as to meet at a given parallel within a day or two of the time set for the opening of the Canal. That parallel is between Hawaii and San Francisco, barely two days distant from the latter. Steam is up, the magazines filled, the guns shotted, the plan of campaign worked out to the last detail. Like hawks, they are hovering within easy reach of each other, ready for the signal. The moment I press this button, the wireless will flash the news across all the continents and all the seas. Then the captains who smashed the Russians at Port Arthur and in the Sea of Japan will turn their vessels' prows toward arrogant America, and within forty-eight hours our guns will be thundering at her western doors."

A dull glow crept into his sallow cheeks and his eyes blazed, as he saw in vision the victory of his beloved Nippon.

"But there," he said, as though repenting his outburst of enthusiasm, so foreign to his habitual reticence and self-control, "they will do their part. It only remains for us to do ours. I will not keep you longer to-night, Ofirio," he went on, by way of dismissal. "Report to me to-morrow at the same hour for final instructions."

He pressed a bell, and a servant, bending low, ushered the Cuban out into the night.

But Togi still lingered. The lines in his face had deepened. His long experience had taught him how often the cup is dashed from the lips as one makes ready to drink. The reaction and depression that come to one when, after tremendous toil and strain, his plans await fruition, held him in their grip. It is true, those plans seemed faultless. Nothing had failed in their calculations. The mechanism was working without a jar. But this very perfection was in itself ominous. Perhaps, even then, fate was preparing to spring upon them and lay their hopes in ruins. And again his eyes turned longingly toward the button, the lightest touch on which would shock the world to its center.

Namoto noticed the direction of his glance and smiled.

"Be not impatient, Togi," he said. "Soon now the hour will strike that marks the beginning of a glorious era for our loved Nippon."

"Glorious, yes," answered Togi. "Whether we win or lose, it will be glorious. Our soldiers will know how to fight and die for their country, as they have always done, and even if defeated they will not be dishonored."

"Dream not of defeat," protested Namoto. "Let not that word of evil omen pass your lips. To doubt may draw down on us the frown of the gods."

"But America is a great country, and her people, too, are brave. Besides, they are as the sands of the seashore for number."

"So was Russia great, and yet we beat her to her knees. We hurled back her armies and we crushed her fleets. So will we do to this haughty country, that sneers at us as an inferior race. America has had no real war for fifty years. She has no veterans left. We have hundreds of thousands who have had their baptism of fire on the field of battle. Can their raw volunteers face the seasoned warriors of Japan? Their regular troops are but a handful and are scattered all over the country. Before any real force can be brought against us, we will have subdued

all the country west of the Rocky Mountains. Then will come negotiations. As the price of peace, we will wrest from her Hawaii and the Philippines, and Japan will be the unquestioned mistress of the Pacific."

"But before this can be done," objected Togi, "will not the Canal be repaired, so that the rest of the American fleet can pass through and attack us?"

"No," replied Namoto. "Our first care will be to seize the Canal at the Pacific end and blockade it. The ships can only come out one by one, and they would be an easy prey to our vessels awaiting them in overwhelming force. We would be like cats waiting at the door of a mouse trap. If, on the other hand, they abandoned this and sailed around the Horn, it would be a matter of many weeks before they would reach us, and then they would be strained and weather tossed and uncoaled. Then, too, the Pacific squadron will have been destroyed, and we will have the advantage in ships and guns. If, on the way, they attacked Japan in retaliation, our fortifications, backed by our land forces, would hold them off." "They could land no troops and would have to content themselves with a harrying of the coast that would amount to nothing."

"Our plan is perfect," he went on; "everything has been provided for. But all depends on the blocking of the Canal. If, by any chance, it should fail, the campaign would be abandoned. Our navy is not yet large enough to match itself against the combined naval strength of America. We can only win by dividing the enemy, and beating his squadrons, one at a time. If the Atlantic fleet gets through to the Pacific, at the opening of the Canal, our labor of years will vanish into nothingness. The ships will return quietly to Japan by various routes, and the government will be ready to deny that any such plot ever existed. If you and I are charged with the plot, our country will calmly disown us and leave us to our fate.

"And we would gladly meet that fate for Nippon's sake, would we not, Togi? We would go to our death with banzais on our lips. It is sweet and glorious to die for one's country."

"We are prepared in any event," said Togi. "If we succeed, your yacht is waiting in the harbor ready to carry us home more swiftly than any can hope to follow. If we fail—" He made across his breast the sign of hari-kari—the Japanese form of suicide.

"If we fail," agreed Namoto, solemnly, "our home will be with the immortal gods."

He reached out his hand, and Togi grasped it firmly. For a moment they looked into each other's eyes. Then with a murmured word of farewell, the elder man turned and glided from the room.

Left alone, Namoto rose and strolled restlessly about. Then he approached the window, beneath which Bert lay hidden.

For a while he stood there motionless. Then he leaned out to catch the refreshing breeze. Bert tried to make himself as small as possible, and pressed close against the house. Namoto's eyes, glancing carelessly about, suddenly fell on the crouching figure.

Startled, he drew back, a cry shrilling from his lips. Like a flash, Bert straightened up, leaped through the open window, and the next instant his hands had closed about Namoto's throat. Down to the floor they went with a crash.

But the mischief had been done. The cry of Namoto had carried beyond the room. The door burst open and a horde of retainers rushed in. There was a stunning blow on the head, a shower of sparks streamed before his eyes, his grasp relaxed, and Bert felt himself sinking, sinking into a fathomless abyss.

CHAPTER XIV

SNATCHED FROM THE SEA

When he came back to consciousness, he found himself tightly bound and gagged. His head swam, and objects danced giddily before him.

Gradually he accustomed himself to the light and looked about him. A score of men stood leaning against the walls, while Namoto and Togi, seated at the desk, were conversing in low tones. They spoke in Japanese, but he had no doubt that they were deciding for him the issues of life and death. He had no delusions as to what probably awaited him. He had learned too much to be allowed to live.

But the conspirators seemed perplexed. To kill him, then and there, would be awkward. There is nothing in the world harder to dispose of than a dead body. Burial, burning, destruction by acids—all left traces. And this was not Japanese but American soil. There might be a hue and cry, a search, exposure, arrest. Still, he must vanish from the land of the living.

At last, Togi seemed to have an inspiration. He bent over eagerly and disclosed his idea. Namoto pondered and found it good. He beckoned to an officer in a naval uniform, and gave him his instructions.

At a signal, four men advanced, and, taking Bert by the legs and shoulders, carried him through a secret passage into the grounds. As silently as so many ghosts, they followed a road that led through the estate to the river's brink. There lay the swift sea-going yacht that Togi had mentioned. Bert was carried on board, the vessel slipped its moorings, and like a wraith passed down the Bay of Limon and out to sea.

It was with a sinking heart that Bert saw the lights of Colon grow more and more indistinct, until they looked to be little more than a nebulous haze rising above

the water. His first thought had been that the Japanese were taking him to Japan, for some reason of their own, and as they steamed on mile after mile this idea gained strength.

After his capture he had expected nothing better than instant death, and when he found that his captors had other plans he had a gleam of hope. Perhaps, after all, he could make his escape in some way, or get a message to the authorities. But when he was taken to the yacht hope died within him, and he almost wished he had been killed at the moment of capture. Knowing what he did, the possibility of his own life being spared brought him but little comfort. Once fairly at sea, and he felt that nothing could stop the awful catastrophe hanging over his country.

Filled with these melancholy reflections, he hardly noticed what was going on around him, and only looked up when two sturdy Japanese seamen approached him. They untied his bonds, removed the gag, and motioned him to follow them. Bert, seeing no sense in useless resistance, did as directed.

As he approached the port rail, he saw that a group of sailors gathered there were lowering some object over the side. As he reached the rail and looked down, he saw that it was a large, flat bottomed rowboat, with nothing in it except a wooden bailer shaped like an ordinary shovel.

This boat was quickly lowered until it touched the water, and then Bert saw what had previously escaped his notice—namely, that several holes, each about as large as a five-cent piece, had been bored in the bottom of the boat, and through these the water was rushing in a dozen little fountains.

Then he realized what were the intentions of his captors, and his heart, which at sight of the boat had begun to beat hopefully, seemed to turn to lead. This, then, was to be his end! With fiendish ingenuity, the Japs had prepared this death-trap for him, knowing that he would fight up to the last moment from the instinct of self preservation. The enemy of Japan should not die too easily. His agony must be prolonged. According to their calculations, the water would continue coming in faster than Bert could possibly bail it out, and eventually he would sink, and his perilous knowledge with him.

Well, at any rate, he resolved to make his enemies sorry that they had ever seen him. As the sailors came toward him with the evident intention of forcing him

into the boat, he grasped a camp chair that was standing near the rail, and swinging it in a mighty circle about his head, brought it crashing down on the head of the foremost seaman. The man dropped as though struck by lightning, and for a second his comrades hesitated, looking about them for weapons.

At a crisp command from an officer, who was standing a little to one side, they came on again with a rush. Bert felled the first of his antagonists with the stout chair, and then, as they were too close upon him for further use of this weapon, dropped it and resorted to his fists. He struck out right and left with all the strength of his powerful muscles, and for a few seconds actually held his swarming assailants at bay. Three men dropped before his hammer-like blows, before he was finally forced over the railing by sheer force of numbers and hurled into the rowboat.

As he struck it, the water spurted through the holes in the boat, and a shrill cackling laugh came from the row of slant-eyed faces peering down over the rail. The little craft was by now a quarter full of water, and as the Japanese yacht took on speed and swung away on its course Bert started bailing desperately. He realized that there was hardly one chance in a thousand of his being picked up before, in spite of all he could do, the little boat would fill with water and sink.

However, he resolved to keep afloat as long as he could on the bare chance of some vessel passing in his neighborhood. Accordingly he set to work with the wooden scoop, sending sheet after sheet over the side. He worked desperately, and at first almost thought that he was gaining on the incoming water. His exertions were excessive, and before long he was forced to bail more slowly. He kept watching a deep scratch in the side of the boat to see if the water was gaining. With a sinking heart he realized that it was. In spite of all he could do, it crept up and up until finally it was over the scratch and the boat was nearly half full. Luckily for him, the sea was unusually calm, or he must soon have been swamped.

At the thought of all that it would mean to his country if he drowned with his secret, Bert fell to with the scoop with furious energy, but was not able to hold his terrible pace long, and finally flung down the bailer in despair.

"Perhaps I can plug up the holes," he thought, and ripped off his coat. He tore great pieces from it and tried to stuff up the holes, but to no effect. Such crude plugs as he could make were inadequate to stay the inrush of water, and he

would hardly have time to insert one in one opening before that in another gave way.

So he was forced to give up this plan, and had recourse once more to the bailer. His only hope now was to keep afloat until he might be seen and picked up by a passing boat. He strained his eyes over the surrounding sea, but there was no sign of help in sight.

Slowly but surely the water crept up the sides of the boat until it was only a few inches from the gunwales. As the boat sank deeper, the water rushed in with ever-increasing force, and finally the conviction was forced in upon Bert that he had really come to the end of his resources. Of course, even after the boat sank, he could swim a little while, but after his fierce fight on the deck of the Japanese yacht and his terrific exertions afterward, he knew he would have little strength left.

Nevertheless he stripped off his outer clothing and resolved to do the best he could. Suddenly he was startled by a splashing, gurgling noise behind him, and, looking around, was surprised and puzzled to see what looked like the back of a huge whale floating within fifty feet of the stern of his little craft. In a second he understood, and a great wave of joy surged over him.

"It's a submarine," he thought, "and an American one at that," as he recognized the design.

Even as he looked, a hatch was thrown open in the deck of the submarine, and the head and shoulders of a man emerged from the aperture. Almost at the same instant Bert's rowboat gave a gentle lurch and disappeared beneath the surface. As he felt it sinking, Bert gave a great shout, and the man on the submarine whirled around in his direction, surprise written large on his countenance.

"By thunder!" he exclaimed, "what in the name of—" But here he dived below and in a few seconds reappeared with a life preserver attached to a long cord. This he cast toward Bert, who in the meantime had been swimming steadily toward the submarine. Bert grasped the preserver and was rapidly drawn on board by the first man who had appeared, and by two others who by now had joined him. Bert was soon safe on the sloping deck, and was besieged by a thousand questions.

The man who had first espied Bert was evidently an officer, and he soon quitted

the others and took the cross-examination in his own hands. It was some time before Bert was able to answer, and probably at no time in his strenuous career had he come nearer complete exhaustion.

Finally, however, his strength began to return, and he staggered to his feet.

"For Heaven's sake!" he exclaimed, "take me to the captain and let me give him a message I have for him. Never mind anything else just now—I can tell you all about that after we get started."

The officer saw that he was in deadly earnest, and although he was rather inclined to think this young fellow's experiences had unbalanced his mind, he led him below without further loss of time.

They descended a steep ladder, and presently entered the room in which were kept the machinery controls, gauges, and other apparatus relating to the operation of the submarine. There was a solidly built table in the center of this room, and at this, carefully examining a chart spread out in front of him, sat a sturdy, thick-set man of perhaps fifty years of age. As the officer entered, followed by Bert, the captain rose and waited for the officer's report.

He gave Bert only one glance, but it was such a keen, searching one, that our hero felt there was little in his appearance that the other had overlooked. Then the captain turned his eyes back to the officer, and returned the latter's salute.

"Well, Mr. Warren, what have you to report?" he asked.

"Why, sir," replied the officer, "I don't exactly know myself. When we ascended to the surface and I went up on deck, the first thing I saw was a foundering rowboat with this young man in it. A few seconds later it sank, and he swam toward the ship. I threw him a life preserver, and we hauled him aboard. He wouldn't answer any questions, though, and insisted on speaking with you personally, so I thought it best to bring him along."

"Very good," responded the captain, and turned slightly toward Bert.

"Now, young man," he said, "you wished to speak to me, and here I am. What is it you wanted to tell me?"

Thereupon Bert poured out the whole story of the Japanese plot as fast as he could speak, and the captain and his officer listened attentively, once in a while

asking a terse question. The commander's eyes were riveted on Bert during his whole speech, and when he had finished he sat a few moments immersed in deep thought.

Then he sprang to his feet and gave crisp orders to get the submarine under way. "See that the lad is clothed and well taken care of, Mr. Warren," he ordered, as his commands were being carried out. "He's evidently had some rather strenuous experiences, during the last few hours, and a little food and rest will do him a lot of good. We can wake him up when we need him."

Lieut. Warren saluted, and motioned to Bert to follow him. He led him through a long passage to the officers' dining room, and when a place was set for him at the table Bert fell to with a good appetite. The officers were naturally very much interested in his adventures, and he told them as much of his recent experiences as he thought fit, of course not mentioning details of the plot. Before very long they asked him his name, and when they learned that he was actually the man who had won the Marathon race at the last Olympic games, they would gladly have made him a present of the ship had they been able.

It was with the greatest difficulty that he finally broke away and made an attempt to get a little sleep. He was so excited that he found this impossible, however, and soon returned to the company of the officers. The electric motors driving the ship were humming at top speed, and the registering apparatus indicated a rate of fifteen knots an hour. This was good speed for a submarine, but Bert figured that, as the yacht on which he had been carried out was unusually swift, it must have traveled at least one hundred and fifty miles from the Colon harbor. At the rate of fifteen knots an hour, then, it would take them a little over ten hours to get back into the harbor, and he did not know how much longer to get up the canal to the mined gate of the lock. There was always the chance of accidents or delay, and he must reach the city before the morrow dawned.

CHAPTER XV

CUTTING THE WIRES

It seemed as though the time would never pass, and he tried to divert his mind by looking out of the glass windows or portholes, set in near the bow of the submarine. The boat was equipped with a powerful searchlight, which threw its brilliant rays far ahead, and lit up the ocean for a considerable distance all around. Even in his agitated state of mind, he found time to wonder at the dense and active life of the sea. Fishes, large and small and of every conceivable shape and coloring, swam close up to the porthole and seemed to be trying to look in. Some, attracted by the beams of light, followed the course of the submarine, never seeming to tire or fall back.

Every once in a while, some larger fish, engaged on a foraging expedition, would cross the path of light, and there would be a general scattering of the smaller fry, as they darted hither and thither in a frenzied search for safety. Some, indeed, the majority, were beautifully striped and spotted, and most of them Bert had never seen before. As he watched this teeming life, he grew more and more interested, and almost forgot his present surroundings. He was recalled to them by a light tap on the shoulder, and, turning around, he saw the officer, Lieutenant Warren, who had thrown him the life preserver.

"Quite an interesting study, isn't it, Mr. Wilson?" he asked, with a pleasant smile.

"I should say it was," exclaimed Bert, enthusiastically. "I never dreamed of being able to see a sight like this. It's almost worth having lived a lifetime just to have had this experience."

The other smiled at his earnestness.

"Yes," he said, "we all felt the same way you do, when we took our first few

trips. There used to be hot arguments as to whose turn it was at the port hole, and we had to arrange regular times between us. The novelty soon wore off, though, and now, as you see, there isn't much competition."

"Well, it's new to me, yet, and I certainly find it very interesting," replied Bert. "These fishes seem to be every color of the rainbow, and the way they keep darting in and out reminds me of a kaleidoscope on a large scale.

"It does, rather," the lieutenant assented, "and, believe me, we see lots of things besides fishes, too. Why, I've come across all kinds of wrecked ships, from rowboats to big four-mast-ers. In tropic waters, we've seen many a ship that I'm sure was an old Spanish galleon, and I'll wager there's many a fortune in gold and silver pieces that we've had to pass over in the performance of duty. There are uncounted riches lying at the bottom of this old ocean, my boy."

"I don't doubt it in the least," answered Bert, and then Mr. Warren went on to tell him various yarns of strange adventures he had undergone and marvelous things that he had seen. Bert listened, fascinated, for the officer was a man who had not only been all over the world, but knew how to tell a story. The time passed more quickly than he had dared to hope, and just before dawn, he was told that they were almost at the entrance of the Canal.

The little submarine flew into the great new waterway, and hesitated no more than the brave hearts guiding its course. Its powerful searchlight illuminated the Canal from side to side, and they were able to get an idea of the immensity of the completed enterprise. Mile after mile, the smooth concrete wall slipped away back of them, thick, ponderous, designed to last as long as civilization lasted, and perhaps longer. As Bert gazed, his heart thrilled with a great pride at what his country had accomplished, and this feeling was succeeded by a fierce hatred of those who were plotting to set the great work at naught.

But now, the submarine had almost reached the mined gate of the Lock, and its speed was gradually reduced three-fourths. It nosed cautiously along, until the searchlight revealed a vast structure directly ahead. Instantly the motors were reversed, and by the time the boat's speed had been checked, it was not more than thirty feet from the gate.

In the meantime one of the crew had been encased in a diver's suit and now made ready to leave. He was conducted into an air-tight room near the bottom of

the submarine, and, after the door had been securely fastened, water was admitted. When the room was full, the diver opened a door in the hull and stepped out of the boat, which had previously been lowered until it rested on the Canal bottom.

From the porthole in the submarine's bow he could be seen slowly making his way, following the luminous path made by the searchlight. In a short time he reached the gate of the lock, and began to follow its course toward the bank. He was soon out of the range of vision of those at the porthole, but, in a few minutes, returned; and it could be seen, by the way in which he still scanned the walls, that he had not yet found the wires leading to the explosives.

He had traversed perhaps half the distance from the center to the other bank, when he was seen to stop suddenly and carefully examine something near the lock.

"I'll bet he's found the wires," exclaimed Bert, excitedly.

"Very likely he has," replied Mr. Warren. "I was beginning to be afraid that the plotters had buried the wires so cunningly that it would be almost impossible to get at them."

But here, all doubts on the subject were set at rest, as they saw the sailor draw a pair of wire cutters from his belt and ply them on something near the wall. Immediately afterward he straightened up and waved his hand, as a signal that everything was all right.

"By Jove," cried the lieutenant, drawing a long breath, "I guess now we've spoiled those fellows' plans for good. But, believe me, that was rather ticklish work. I expected almost every minute to be wafted heavenward by a charge of dynamite. None of us would have had the slightest chance in the world, if that explosion had taken place."

"I rather think you're right," agreed Bert. "But why doesn't the man come back? He seems to be continuing his search along the Lock gate."

"Oh, that's because the captain gave him orders before he went out to examine the wall from end to end for traces of a second set of wires. But I guess that the Japs had such confidence in their handiwork that they had no doubt of the success of their one set. I must confess that I haven't much doubt regarding them,

either, if we hadn't happened along to spoil the whole show for them."

"Yes, the whole country owes Mr. Wilson a debt of gratitude it can never repay," broke in Captain Clendenin, who had come up and overheard the lieutenant's last remark. "It would have been a heavy blow, and one that would have required the expenditure of thousands of lives to recover from. The value of your services cannot be rated too highly, sir."

"I'm grateful for your high opinion of me, I'm sure," replied Bert, much confused by such high praise, "but it was as much by luck as anything else that I first got wind of the plan, and after that, of course, there was only one thing for me to do."

"That's all very well," responded the captain, "but nevertheless not many men I know would have done it, and I abide by my statement. It is no light thing for a young man to attempt, singlehanded, to thwart the plans of a great and powerful nation."

The diver had by this time completed a very thorough inspection of every inch of the gate, and in a short time returned to the submarine. He entered the water-filled room from which he had stepped forth, and, after he had closed the door in the vessel's hull, pulled a signal rope, and in a very few minutes the powerful pumps had emptied the room of water. Then the man was admitted to the body of the boat and relieved of his cumbersome suit.

This done, he immediately reported to the captain, and gave him a detailed account of what he had found.

"There were two sets of wires, sir," he said, "so that if one had not worked, the other would. I looked very carefully along the walls for other wires, but didn't find any."

The captain dismissed him, with a word of approbation, and then gave orders for the submarine to get under way. This was done, but Captain Clendenin had no intention of rising directly to the surface. The water chambers were pumped out very slowly, and, as the boat gradually rose, it was steered slowly back and forth across the face of the gates, and men were stationed at the portholes to look for any indication of other wires. They found none, but were able to see where the dynamite charges had been placed. Evidently the walls had been charged with enough of high explosives not only to derange the machinery but possibly to

blow it into fragments.

The men in the submarine shuddered as they thought of the awful catastrophe that would have occurred, and thanked the Providence that had enabled them to avert it. Bert became a veritable hero to all on board. Of course, by this time, the crew had gained a pretty good idea of how matters stood, and had as strong an admiration for him as had the officers. They were all picked men, chosen for their intelligence and bravery, and were therefore well fitted to appreciate these qualities when found in others. And Bert's exploit was after their own heart.

He had free run of the ship, and had learned the uses of most of the ingenious devices that were scattered everywhere about the boat. Accordingly, as he now stepped into the control room, he saw at a glance that they were nearing the surface of the water, being at this moment only twenty feet beneath it.

The gauge indicated less and less depth, and suddenly a burst of sunshine entering the porthole told Bert that they were at the surface. The hatchway was thrown open and he ascended to the deck. The pure, sweet air was very grateful after the somewhat confined atmosphere of the submarine, and Bert drew in great breaths of it. Pretty soon Lieutenant Warren joined him on the little platform and shared with him the beauty of the morning.

"It certainly gets pretty close in here at times," he remarked. "Once we got stuck on the bottom and had all sorts of a time getting off. Our reserve supply of air was used up and we all thought we'd suffocate, sure. But we managed to get loose from the wreck we were mixed up with, just in time, and I don't believe that I ever enjoyed the sight of the blue sky as I did then. It was a narrow squeak, and no mistake."

"I should say it was," answered Bert, and then, after a pause, he asked: "But where are we bound for, now, Lieutenant? What's the next move in the game?"

"Why, we'll get news of this plot to the Canal authorities and the War Department, as soon as possible, and then it will be up to them to act as they see fit. You've done your part and we've done ours, and they in their wisdom can decide the future policy of the nation."

"But what do you think that will be?" queried Bert. "They'll declare war, now, won't they?"

"That's a hard question to answer," mused the other, "but it's my private opinion that the whole matter will be hushed up. You may be sure that those engaged in this affair have covered their tracks very skillfully, and it would be practically impossible to prove that they were accredited agents of the Japanese Government. And in a case of that kind, the world requires more than mere suspicion, you know."

"Yes, I guess you're right," said Bert, thoughtfully. "Come to think of it, I'm the only one who overheard the plotters, and my evidence probably wouldn't be sufficient to prove a connection between them and the Japanese Government. I hadn't thought of that before."

"Well, I rather think that is the way it will work out," said the lieutenant. "However, you never can tell which way the cat will jump at Washington, and this may be the first move in a great war. We won't have many days to wait to find out, anyway."

The submarine made all haste to the nearest cable station at Colon, and from there ciphers in the navy code were sent to the authorities, narrating all the events connected with the plot.

Bert was put ashore, as soon as the submarine reached harbor, and parted from her officers with warm expressions of mutual esteem. The morning was well advanced, as he hurried toward his hotel. There was a hum of preparation apparent, the streets were crowded with throngs hastening to secure a point of vantage for the coming spectacle, and flags and bunting floated everywhere. And just then, as he turned a corner, Dick and Tom, with a wild yell pounced upon him. The anxiety and fear written on their haggard faces were replaced by a look of inexpressible delight. They grabbed his hands and pounded him on the back and otherwise acted as though suddenly deranged.

"You old rascal," shouted Tom. "Where on earth have you been?"

"Glory, hallelujah," cried Dick. "We've searched high and low and have nearly gone crazy."

Their queries rained on him without stint, but not till they had reached the hotel and he had bathed and dressed did he pour out the details of the astounding plot. The boys were thunderstruck at the peril, missed only by a hair's breadth, and their pride in Bert's achievement and joy at his return were beyond all words.

They were sitting on the upper veranda, as they talked, and the huge American flag that flew over the hotel, floated past them, just brushing them, as though in a caress.

"Old Glory," murmured Bert.

"The flag still waves," added Tom.

"Yes," exulted Dick, "and not at half-mast, either."

CHAPTER XVI

THE FOILING OF THE PLOT

It was noon, and Namoto sat in his library, waiting.

He was alone. All preparations had been made for instant flight. His household treasures, his heirlooms, his followers, with Togi in charge, had been sent to the yacht, that, with steam up, was lying at its moorings. The captain had reported the disposition of the prisoner, and had received his master's commendation. And now, after measureless toil and risk and scheming, Namoto prepared to taste the sweets of victory.

How near that victory was! The ceremonies were to begin at twelve. He saw in imagination the crowded wharves and banks, the shouting throngs, the stately ships, as, decked with flags, they moved slowly up the bay to the entrance of the Canal. As the first one entered the locks there was to be a salvo of artillery from all the vessels of the fleet. And then, his turn would come. A slight pressure on that button, and there would be a crash, a roar that would echo around the world. Japan would hear and rejoice; America would hear and tremble. To the one, it would be the signal of glorious triumph; to the other, the crack of doom.

There it was, now! Through the window came the boom of guns. He waited till the echoes died away.

Then, smiling, he forced the button down, and listened for the thunder of the explosion.

Silence!

Wonderingly, he pressed again.

And again, the silence of the grave!

Wildly, desperately, frantically, he pushed down with all his strength. Then, pale as ashes, he rose to his feet.

He had failed. How or why, he did not know. But, he had failed. He had gambled for great stakes and lost.

He could still escape. His yacht was waiting. He walked with a firm step over to the wall, and took down a dagger that had belonged to his ancestors.

And when Togi and the captain, alarmed at his non-appearance, burst into the room an hour later, they found him there. His home in Japan, his beloved Nippon, would never see him again. His soul had gone in search of that other home, promised by his creed to those who die for their country—the home of the immortal gods.

* * * * *

And all through that day and many days succeeding, the great Atlantic fleet climbed over the ridges of the continent and dropped into the Pacific. And out on that vast expanse, other ships, under another flag, melted away on the horizon, like the passing of an evil dream. The threat of invasion was over. In Tokio, they writhed in secret over the miscarriage of their plans, while in the inner circles of Washington there was unfeigned relief and rejoicing. And all America, unknowing of the peril so narrowly escaped, gloried over the successful opening to the world of the great Panama Canal.

For, as had been predicted, the matter was hushed up and buried in the official archives—that graveyard of so many tragedies, actual and impending. Those who knew were pledged to secrecy. Some day, perhaps, when the time was ripe, America would demand with interest the debt due from Japan. But while there could be no public recognition of Bert's services, he cherished as one of his choicest treasures a personal letter from the President thanking him for his splendid achievement in behalf of the nation.

And now they were on their way home, their hearts aglow with patriotism, after the stupendous proof of their country's genius and destiny, as shown in the great Canal.

Wah Lee, who had been under the close watch kept on all the household, after Bert was discovered, had escaped from the yacht, in the confusion following the death of Namoto, and sought refuge with the boys. His delight at finding Bert safe and sound was only second to that of Dick and Tom. At his earnest entreaties, they had agreed to take him to "Amelika" and look after his future fortunes. He was hobnobbing now with some of his yellow-skinned compatriots in the steerage, while the boys sat on the upper deck of the liner, as it drew away from Colon.

"It's a burning shame," Tom was saying, hotly. "You saved the country from disaster, and scarcely anyone knows it."

"Yes," asserted Dick, emphatically, "your name ought to be a household word all over the United States."

"Easy there, fellows," said Bert. "Anyone else could have done it. I simply had the chance and took it. It was sheer luck."

"No," cried Dick. "It was sheer pluck."

He had struck the keynote of his comrade's character. And, in Bert's later career, that quality of pluck persisted. In the field of sport it was soon to be as prominent as in the dashing adventure through which he had just come triumphant. How brilliantly it came to the fore in the exciting struggle that awaited him will be seen in "*Bert Wilson's Twin-cylinder Racer*."

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