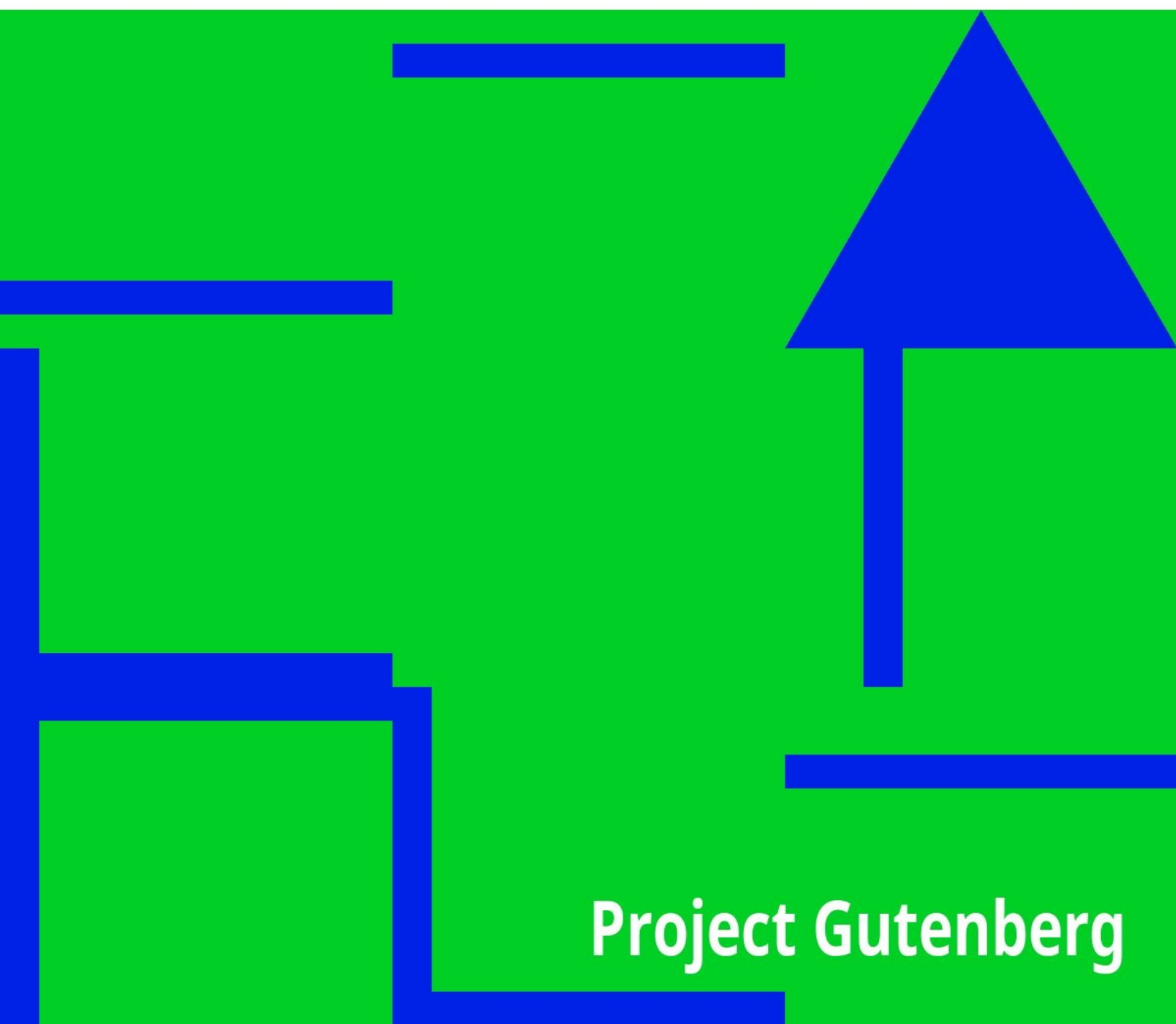


Real Gold

A Story of Adventure

George Manville Fenn



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George Manville Fenn

"Real Gold"

Chapter One.

A Chat in a Boat.

"Bother the old fish!"

"Yes; they won't bite."

"It's no good, Perry; they are having their siesta. Let's get in the shade and have one too."

"What! in the middle of the day—go to sleep? No, thank you. I'm not a foreigner."

"More am I; but you come and live out here for a bit, and you'll be ready enough to do as the Romans—I mean the Spaniards—do."

"Not I, Cyril, and I don't believe fish do go to sleep."

"What? Why, I've seen them lie in shoals here, perfectly still; basking in the hot sunshine, fast asleep."

"With their eyes shut?"

"Gammon! Fish can't shut their eyes."

"Then they can't go to sleep.—My! it is hot. I shan't fish any more."

Two boys sitting in a boat half a mile from the shore, and sheltered by a ridge of rocks from the tremendous swell of the vast Pacific Ocean, which to north and south curled over in great glistening billows upon the sand—in the former instance, to scoop it out, carry it back, and then throw it up farther away; in the latter, to strike upon sheer rocks and fly up in silver spray with a low deep sound as of muttered thunder. Away to the west

there was the great plain of smooth damasked silver, lost at last in a faint haze, and all so bright that the eyes ached and were dazzled by its sheen. To the east, the bright-looking port of San Geronimo, with a few ships, and half-a-dozen long, black, red-funnelled screw-steamers at anchor; beyond them wharves and warehouses, and again beyond these the houses of the little town, with a few scattered white villas rising high on terrace and shelf of the steep cliffs. The place looked bright and attractive seen from the distance, but dry and barren. Nothing green rested and refreshed the eye. No trees, no verdant slope of lawn or field; nothing but sand in front, glittering rock behind. Everything suggested its being a region where no rain fell.

But, all the same, it had its beauty. More, its grandeur, for apparently close at hand, though miles away in the clear distance, rose the great Sierra—the mighty range of mountains, next to the Himalayas the highest in the world—and seeming to rise suddenly like a gigantic wall right up into the deep blue sky, cloudless, and dazzling with the ice and snow.

The two boys, both of them, though fair by nature, tanned now of a warm reddish brown, were of about the same age, and nearly the same physique; and as now they twisted the stout lines they had been holding round the thole pins of the boat, which softly rose and fell with a pleasant lulling motion, the first who had spoken unfastened the neck-button of his shirt.

“Hullo! Going to bathe?”

“Bathe! No, thankye. I should wake up the sharks: they’d bite then.”

“Ugh!”

“Yes, you may shudder. They grow fine about here. Why, before I’d made a dozen strokes, you’d hear me squeak, and see me go down and never come up again.”

“How horrid! You don’t mean it, though, do you?”

“Yes, it’s true enough. I’m going to have a nap.”

As the boy spoke, he lay back in the stern of the boat, and placed his

broad Panama hat over his face.

"I say, Perry, old chap!" he continued, with his voice sounding whistly through the closely-woven hat.

"What?"

"If you smell me burning, wake me up."

"All right," said the lad addressed as Perry; and resting his elbows on his knees, he sat gazing up at the huge towering mountain nearest at hand for a few minutes, then:

"Cil!"

"Hullo!" drowsily.

"Don't go to sleep, old chap; I want to talk to you."

"I can't go to sleep if you talk. What is it?"

"I say, how rum it seems for it to be boiling hot down here, and all that ice and snow to be up there. Look."

"Yes," said Cyril, "'tis its nature to. I don't want to look. Seen it before."

"But how far is it up to where the snow is—a thousand feet?"

"What?" cried Cyril, starting up into a sitting position, with his hat falling off.

"I said how far is it up to where the snow is?"

"I know you did," cried the boy, laughing, "and you said, was it a thousand feet?"

"Yes, and it was stupid of me. It must be twice as high."

"Perry Campion, you are a greenhorn. I say: no offence meant; but my dear, fresh, innocent, young friend, that snow is three miles high."

“Well, I know that, of course. It must be much more to where it is.”

“Sixty or seventy,” said Cyril, whose drowsiness had departed, and who was now all life and eagerness. “The air’s so clear here that it’s horribly deceiving. But I didn’t mean that: I meant that the snow’s quite three miles straight up perpendicular in the air.”

“Nonsense!”

“But I tell you it is. If you were to rise straight up in a balloon from here, you’d have to go up three miles to get on a level with the snow.”

Perry Campion looked fixedly at his companion, but there was no flinching.

“I’m not gammoning you,” said Cyril earnestly. “Things are so much bigger out here than they look.”

“Then how big—how high is that mountain?” said Perry.

“Nearly four miles.”

“But it seems to be impossible.”

“It isn’t, though,” said Cyril. “That one’s over twenty thousand feet high, and father has seen much bigger ones up to the north. I say, squire, you’ve got some climbing to do. You won’t hop over those hills very easily.”

“No,” said Perry thoughtfully. “It will be a climb.”

“I say: whereabouts are you going?”

“I don’t know. Right up in the mountains somewhere.”

“But what are you going for?”

“I don’t know that either. To travel, I suppose.”

“Oh, but the colonel must be going for something,” cried Cyril. “I believe I know.”

“Do you? What?”

“Well, you don’t want me to tell you. I suppose the colonel has told you not to tell anybody.”

“No,” said Perry quickly. “He has not told me. Why do you think he’s going?”

“Prospecting. To search out a good place for a mine.”

Perry looked at him eagerly.

“The Andes are full of places where there might be mines. There’s gold, and silver, and quicksilver, and precious stones. Lots of treasures never been found yet.”

“Yes, I’ve heard that there are plenty of minerals,” said Perry thoughtfully.

“And besides,” said Cyril, grinning, “there’s all the gold and silver that belonged to the Incas. The Indians buried it, and they have handed down the secret of the different places to their children.”

“Who have dug it up and spent it,” said Perry.

“No. They’re too religious. They dare not. They keep the secret of the places till the Incas come again to claim their country, and then it will all be dug up, golden wheels, and suns, and flowers, and cups, and things that the Spaniards never found. That’s it; your father’s going after the treasures. But if he is, you’d better look out.”

“Why?”

“Because if the Indians thought you were after that, they’d kill you in no time.”

Perry looked at him searchingly.

“Oh, I mean it,” said Cyril. “Father has often talked about it, and he says that the Indians consider it a religious duty to protect the hiding-places of these treasures. There was a man took a party with him up into the

mountains on purpose to search for them.”

“Well? Did he find anything?”

“Don’t know. Nobody ever did know.”

“How was that?”

“He never came back. Nor any of his people.”

“Why? What became of them?”

“I tell you they went up into the mountains and never came back. The Indians know what became of them.”

“But was no search made for them—no examination made of the Indians?” cried Perry, looking aghast.

“Search! Where? Indians! What Indians?” said Cyril sharply. “You forget how big the place is, and what great forests and wilds there are over the other side.”

“But it sounds so horrible for a party like that to disappear, and no more to be heard of them,” said Perry.

“Yes, but the Indians are savages, and, as father said, they think they are doing their duty against people who have no right in the country, so your father will have to look out. I wish I were going with you, all the same.”

“You’re safer in San Geronimo, if it’s as bad as you say,” cried Perry.

“Oh, it’s bad enough, but I shouldn’t mind.”

There was silence for a few minutes, during which time both lads sat gazing dreamily up at the vast range of mountains before them, with its glittering peaks, dark cavernous valleys, and mysterious shades, towards where the high tablelands lay which had been the seat and home of the barbaric civilisation of the Incas, before ruin and destruction came in the train of the Spanish adventurers who swept the land in search for El Dorado, the City of Gold.

Perry Campion was the first to break the silence.

“How long have you been out here, Cyril?—Cil, I say, I shall call you Cil.”

“All right, I don’t mind, only it won’t be for long. You go next week, don’t you?”

“Yes, I suppose so,” said Perry, glancing again at the mountains.

“Wish I were going with you. What did you say?—how long have I been out here? Nearly four years. Father sent me over to England to be educated when I was six, and I was at a big school at Worksop till I was twelve, and then he sent for me to come out here again.”

“Weren’t you glad?”

“Of course. It was very jolly at school; but school isn’t home, is it?”

“Of course not.”

“Father said I could go on reading with him, and it would brush up his classics, which had grown rusty since he turned merchant.”

“Wasn’t he always a merchant, then?”

“My father?” cried Cyril. “No, he was a captain in the army, and had to give up on account of his health. The doctors said he was dying. That was twelve years ago; but he doesn’t look like dying now, does he?”

“No, he looks wonderfully strong and well.”

“Yes. This place suited him and mother because it was so dry.”

“And then he took to being a merchant?”

“Yes; and ships off drugs, and minerals, and guano, and bark.”

“What! for tanning?”

“Tanning! Ha! ha! No, no; Peruvian bark, that they make quinine of. Physic for fevers.”

“Oh! I see.”

“It’s very jolly, and he makes plenty of money; but I do get so tired sometimes. I should like to go to sea, or to travel, or something. I hate being always either at studies or keeping accounts. I wish I were going along with you.”

“To be killed by the Indians,” said Perry drily.

“I should like to catch ’em at it,” cried Cyril. “But I’d risk it. What an adventure, to go with your father to hunt out the places where the Indians buried the Incas’ gold!”

“My father did not say he was going in search of that,” said Perry.

“No; he’s too close. But that’s it, safe enough; you see if it isn’t. Only think of it—right up in the grand valleys, where it’s almost dark at mid-day, and you walk along shelves over the torrents where there isn’t room for two mules to pass, and there are storms that are quite awful sometimes. I say, I’d give anything to go.”

“I wish you were going, Cil.”

“You do?” cried the boy excitedly. “I say: do you mean that?”

“Of course I do,” said Perry, looking amused at his companion’s eagerness. “We’ve got on right enough together since we have been staying at your house.”

“Got on? I should think we have,” cried Cyril. “Why, it has been no end of a treat to me for you to be at our place. I can’t get on very well with the half-Spanish chaps about here. They’re gentlemen, of course, with tremendously grand descents from Don this and Don that; but they’re not English boys, and you can’t make English boys of them.”

“Of course not.”

“Ah, you may laugh,” continued Cyril, “but would you believe it? I tried to get up a cricket club, and took no end of pains to show them the game, and they all laughed at it, and said I must be half mad. That’s being

Spanish, that is! It's no wonder their country's left all behind."

"Then the cricket was a failure?" said Perry.

"Failure? It ended in a fight, and I went home and burned the stumps, bats, and balls."

"What a pity!" cried Perry.

"That's what father said, and it did seem too bad, after he'd had the tackle brought out from England on purpose. I was sorry afterwards; but I was so jolly wild then, I couldn't help it."

"How came there to be a fight?" said Perry after a pause, during which he watched the frank, handsome face of his companion, who was looking at the great peak again.

"Oh, it was all about nothing. These Spanish chaps are so cocky and bumptious, and ready to take everything as being meant as an insult. Little stupid things, too, which an English boy wouldn't notice. I was bowling one evening, and young Marini was batting. Of course he'd got his bat and his wits, and he ought to have taken care of himself. I never thought of hitting him, but I sent in a shooter that would have taken off the bail on his side, and instead of blocking it, he stepped right before the wicket."

"What for?" said Perry.

"Ah, that's more than I know," said Cyril; "and the next moment he caught it right in the centre of his—er—middle."

"Ha! ha!" laughed Perry merrily.

"It knocked all the wind out of him for a minute, and then, as soon as he could speak, he was furious, and said I did it on purpose—in Spanish—and I said it was an accident that all people were liable to in cricket, and that they ought to be able to defend themselves. Then he said he was able to defend himself."

"That meant fighting," cried Perry, growing more interested.

“Of course it did, but I wasn’t going to notice it, for the mater said I was to be very careful not to get into any quarrel with the Spanish fellows, because they are none too friendly about my father being here. They’re jealous because he’s a foreigner, when all the time there isn’t a more splendid fellow living than my father,” cried the boy warmly. “You don’t half know him yet.”

“Well, what happened then?” said Perry, as he noted the warm glow in the boy’s cheeks and the flash of his eyes.

“Oh, Mariniarz appealed to three or four of the others, and they sided with him, and said that they saw me take a long breath and gather myself up and take a deadly aim at his chest, and then hurl the ball with all my might, as if I meant to kill him.”

“What rubbish!” cried Perry.

“Wasn’t it? You couldn’t teach chaps like that to play cricket, could you?”

“Of course not. They didn’t want to learn.”

“That was it; and they egged Mariniarz on till he called me an English beast, and that upset me and made my tongue loose.”

“Well?”

“He said he knew from the first I had a spite against him, and had been trying to knock him over with the ball; and, feeling what a lie it was, I grew pepper, and told him it wasn’t the first time an English ball had knocked over a Spaniard, for I got thinking about our old chaps playing bowls when the news came about the Armada.”

“Yes?” cried Perry, for Cyril had stopped.

“Well, then, he turned more yellow than usual, and he gave me a backhanded smack across the face.”

“And what did you do?” cried Perry hotly, for the boy once more stopped.

“Oh, I went mad for a bit.”

“You—went mad?”

“I suppose so. My mother said I must have been mad, so I expect I was.”

“But you don’t tell me,” cried Perry impatiently. “What did you do?”

“I don’t know.”

“Yes, you do: tell me.”

“I can’t recollect, and I never could. I only know I turned very hot and saw sparks, and that there was a regular banging about, and sometimes I was up and sometimes I was down; and then all at once I was standing there, with Mariniarz lying on the ground crying, and with his nose bleeding. Another chap was sitting holding his handkerchief to one eye, and two more were being held up by some of the players, who were giving one of them some water to drink, while the other was showing them a tooth which he held in his fingers.”

“Then you’d whacked four of them?” cried Perry excitedly.

“I don’t know,” said Cyril, with his face screwed up. “I suppose I had been knocking them about a bit, and they wouldn’t fight any more. They all said I was an English savage, and that I ought to be sent out of the place; and then I began to get a bit cooler, and felt sorry I had knocked them all about so much.”

“I don’t see why you should,” cried Perry.

“But I did. It made such an upset. There was no end of a bother. My mother cried about it when I went home, and said I should never look myself again; and when my father came home and saw me with bits of sticking plaster all over my face and knuckles, he was in a regular passion, for he had been hearing about it in the town, and had words with the other boys’ fathers. Then he made me tell him all about it from the beginning, sitting back, looking as fierce and stern as could be, till I had done; and I finished off by saying, ‘What would you have done if you had been me?’

“‘Just the same as you did, Cil, my boy,’ he cried, shaking hands; and

then my mother looked astonished, and he sat back in his chair and laughed till he cried. 'Why, mother,' he said, 'they tell us that the English stock is falling off. Not very much, eh? One English to four Spanish.'

"'But it's so terrible,' my mother said. 'Yes,' said my father, 'fighting is very disgraceful. No more of it, Cil, my lad; but I've made a mistake: I ought to have made a soldier of you, after all.' I say, though, Perry, I do wish I were going with you, all the same."

"I tell you what," cried Perry; "I'll ask my father to ask yours to let you go with us."

"You will?" cried Cyril, making a rush.

"Mind! we shall have the boat over."

It was a narrow escape, but by sitting down they made the boat right itself.

"Yes, I'll ask him to. I say, though, it isn't so dangerous as you say, is it?"

"They say it is, particularly if you are going to hunt for the gold the Indians have buried."

"But I don't know that we are. Would you go, even if it is so dangerous."

"Of course I would," cried Cyril excitedly. "I do so want a change. Ahoy! Hurray! Dinner!"

"Eh? Where?" cried Perry.

"Look. Father's hoisting the flag."

He pointed in the direction of one of the white villas up on the high cliff slope, where a union jack was being run up a tall signal staff by a figure in white, clearly seen in the bright sunshine, while another figure was evidently using a telescope.

"There's my father watching us," said Perry, shading his eyes.

“Lend a hand here and help to haul up this stone,” cried Cyril, and together the boys hauled up the heavy block which served for an anchor.

Five minutes after, they were rowing steadily for the wharf—Incas’ treasure, perils from Indians, fights with Spanish boys, and heights of snow peaks forgotten in the one important of all questions to a hungry youth—*Dinner*.

Chapter Two.

A Failure.

Dinner was over at Captain Norton’s. Mrs Norton had left the dining-room, after begging her son and his visitor not to go out in the broiling heat. The boy had promised that he would not, and after he had sat listening to Colonel Campion’s—a keen grey-haired man, thin, wiry in the extreme, and giving promise of being extremely active—talk to his father about the preparations for his trip up into the mountains, Cyril gave Perry a kick under the table, and rose.

Taking the sharp jar upon his shin to mean telegraphy and the sign, “Come on,” Perry rose as well, and the two boys, forgetful of all advice, went and sat in the dry garden, where every shrub and plant seemed to be crying out for water, and looked as if it were being prepared for a *hortus siccus* beloved of botanists, and where the sun came down almost hot enough to fry.

Here the boys had a long discussion about the promise Perry had made in the boat; after which they waited for an opportunity.

Meanwhile, as the two gentlemen sat chatting over their cigarettes, Captain Norton, a frank, genial, soldierly-looking man, said:

“So you mean to take all the risks?”

“Risks!” said the colonel, turning his keen eyes upon the speaker, as he let the smoke from his cigarette curl up toward the ceiling. “You an old soldier, and ask that?”

“Yes,” said Captain Norton. “I have been here a long time now, and know something of the country.”

“Are the risks so very great, then?”

“To an ordinary traveller—no: to a man going with some special object or search—yes.”

“I did not say that I was going on a special search,” said Colonel Campion quickly.

“No, but everything points to it; and as you came to me with letters of introduction from an old friend and brother-officer, I receive you as my friend, and treat you as I would a brother.”

“And as the man whom you treat as a brother, I am very reticent, eh?”

“Very,” said Cyril Norton’s father; “and if I try to know why you are going upon so perilous a journey, it is not from curiosity, but because I am eager to save you from running into danger.”

Colonel Campion held out his hand, which was taken, and the two men sat for a few moments gazing in each other’s eyes.

“If I spoke out, Norton, you would immediately do everything you could to prevent me from going, instead of helping me; so I am silent, for I have made up my mind to go, and no persuasion would stop me.”

“Then you are going on an insane quest of the treasures of gold said to have been buried by the Incas’ followers to preserve them from the Spaniards.”

“Am I?” said the colonel quietly.

“I take it for granted that you are; so now, listen. It will be a very dangerous search. That the gold exists, I do not doubt; and I feel pretty sure that the Indians have had it handed down from father to son. Where this gold is hidden in the mountains is a sacred trust, which they in their superstitious natures dare not betray. It means death to any one who discovers one of these hoards.”

"If found out," said the colonel, smoking, with his eyes half shut.

"He would certainly be found out," said the captain, "and if you persist in going, you must run the risk; but I beg of you not to take that boy Perry with you, to expose him to these dangers."

"What am I to do with him, then?"

"Leave him with us. He will be happy enough with my boy Cyril; and my wife and I will take every care of him."

"Thank you, Norton," cried the colonel warmly; "I am most grateful. But you are wrong: he would not be happy if he stayed here and I went alone; I believe he would prefer running all risks with me. How odd!" added the colonel, smiling; "here he is, to speak for himself."

For at that moment the door was softly opened, and Perry stood there, looking startled.

"Come in, boy, come in," cried the colonel.

"I—I beg; our pardon; I thought Captain Norton had gone."

"No, and we were just talking about you."

"About me, father?"

"Yes; Captain Norton thinks it would be too risky and arduous a journey for you up into the mountains, and he says you are to stay here and make yourself happy with Cyril till I come back."

The lad looked delighted.

"Oh father!" he cried. Then, quick as thought, his manner changed.

"It is very good of Captain Norton," he said gravely, "but I could not stop here and let you go alone."

"Don't be hasty, Perry, lad," said the captain kindly. "There, I'm going down to the wharf; you and your father chat it over, and we'll talk about it

when I return.”

He left the room, passing out through the veranda.

“Well,” said the colonel, looking away at the window, “I think he’s right, and you had better stay, Perry.”

“I don’t think you do, father,” replied the boy. “Besides, you promised to take me.”

“Um! Yes, I did, my lad; but circumstances have altered since then. They say it’s dangerous up there among the Indians.”

“Then you had better not go, father,” said Perry quickly.

“I have undertaken to go, and I am going,” said the colonel firmly. “I gave my word.”

“And you can’t break it, father?”

“No, my boy, not honourably.”

Perry laughed softly.

“Hullo! What does that mean, sir?” cried the colonel. “Glad I am going into danger?”

“Of course not, father,” said Perry. “I was only laughing because you promised to take me, and you can’t break your word.”

The colonel leaned back and laughed.

“And I’ve come with a petition, father,” said Perry.

“Petition?”

“Yes; you said that it would be nice for me to be with Cyril Norton.”

“Yes, I rather like the lad. He’s a rackety, wild young dog, but there’s a good deal of the gentleman about him. But what do you mean! You said you did not want to stay here.”

“Yes, father, but he wants to stay with us.”

“Stay with us? We’re not going to stay here.”

“I mean, go with us. He is wild to go. Take him with us, father. I should like it so much.”

“Why, Perry, my boy, you’re mad,” said the colonel. “If the journey is so risky that Captain Norton wishes me to leave you here, do you think it likely that he will let his son go?”

“Perhaps he would with you, father. He trusts you.”

“Not to that extent.”

“Try him, father. It would be so nice to have Cil with us.”

“Nice for you, sir—double responsibility for me.”

“You wouldn’t mind that, father, and we would help you so.”

“Yes, nice lot of help I should get from you.”

“You don’t know, father; but, I say, you will ask him?”

“Ask him yourself, sir,” said the colonel firmly; “here he is.”

For at that moment steps were heard in the veranda, and Captain Norton appeared.

“Don’t let me disturb you,” he said; “I came back for some bills of lading. —Well, Perry, you’re going to stop and keep Cil company, eh? I’ll have the big boat out and newly rigged for you boys. You can fish, and sail, and—”

“But I’m not going to stay, sir,” said Perry quietly.

“Not going to stay! I’m very sorry. But you must think better of it. Sleep on it, my lad. That journey in the mountains will be too arduous for a lad like you.”

“Oh no, sir. I’m light and strong, and—”

“Yes? And what? You are afraid of outstaying your welcome? Nonsense, boy; you’ll be conferring a favour upon us. I shall be glad for Cil to have your company. He likes you.”

Perry exchanged glances with his father, who nodded, and his eyes seemed to say, “Now’s your time.”

“Yes, sir, and I like Cil. We get on together, and—and he wants to go with us!”

Perry uttered the last words hurriedly, and then wished that he had not said them, for the captain looked at him quite fiercely.

“What!” he exclaimed.

“Cil said he would give anything to go with us, sir, and I promised to ask my father if he would take him.”

“Well,” said Captain Norton sternly, “and have you asked him?”

“Yes, sir.”

“What does he say?”

“He says no,” said the colonel firmly. “There is no doubt, I suppose, that I am going to run some risks, and I begin to feel now that I am hardly warranted in exposing my own son to these dangers. I should certainly not be right in exposing the son of a friend to them, even if that friend consented, which he would not. Am I right, Norton?”

“Quite right,” said the gentleman addressed.

“Then we need say no more about it,” cried the colonel. “Pray, my boy, help us by dissuading your new friend from thinking about so mad a project. We must not make Captain and Mrs Norton regret their kindness to us.”

“No, father. I understand,” said Perry.

“Then there is an end of the matter,” said the colonel.

“Not quite,” said their host, smiling, “I am still hoping that you will stay with us, Perry.”

“No, sir,” said the boy, very firmly now, “I am going with my father. I wish, though, you would let Cil come too.”

“Impossible, my lad,” said the captain.

“Then now let’s change the subject,” said the colonel. “I do not start yet for a week, and plenty of things may occur to alter all our opinions and determinations.”

“They will not alter mine,” said the captain firmly. “If you both alter yours, I shall be very glad. There, I must go now.”

Captain Norton gave Perry a friendly nod, and left them once more.

“There, Perry, you hear?”

“Yes, father, but he may alter his mind.”

“Don’t expect it, my lad; Captain Norton is firm as a rock in all he decides upon.”

“So is Cyril, father.”

“Not quite,” said the colonel, smiling; “the stuff is soft yet, and will have to yield. There, go and tell him you have failed.”

“Yes, father,” said Perry sadly.

“And you mean to go with me?”

“Of course, father.”

“Very well,” said the colonel, and Perry left the room.



Chapter Three.

Preparing to Start.

“Well, did you ask him?” cried Cyril eagerly, as Perry went out into the parched garden, the boy pouncing out upon him from behind a patch of dry-looking shrubs.

“Yes, I asked him, and then your father came in.”

“Yes,” said Cyril eagerly, “I saw him, and kept in hiding, because I thought it best to leave it for you to do. Well, what did your father say?”

“He as good as said no.”

“Yes, at first,” cried Cyril. “I knew he would. But he came round.”

“And then your father came in.”

“Yes?”

“And my father made me ask him what he had to say about it.”

“Yes? Do go on, old chap. You are so slow.”

“The captain was quite angry, and wouldn’t listen to the idea for a moment.”

“That was because he had made his plans for you to stay with me. But he came round, didn’t he?”

“No,” said Perry sadly. “He was firm as a rock, and they are both dead against it. I should have liked for you to come, Cil.”

There was a dead silence; and as Perry looked at his companion, he saw that his brow was full of deep lines, and that the boy’s face looked hard and set, the eyes fixed, and the lips tightened together into quite a hard crease.

Perry looked at him for a few moments, feeling pained to see the way in

which the lad took his disappointment.

"I'm so sorry, Cil," he said at last.

Cyril did not seem to have heard him, and after a pause Perry spoke again.

"Perhaps your father will give way before we go."

"What?"

Perry started, the word sounded so sharp and harsh.

"I say perhaps he'll give way before we go."

"No, he won't. He never does. Father says a thing, and means it."

"It's very disappointing," said Perry, "but it's of no use to fret."

Cyril laughed bitterly.

"You're going," he said sharply. "It can't disappoint you."

"Yes, it can. I am disappointed. I don't care about going so much now without you."

"Then stop here with me," cried Cyril sharply.

"I can't," was the reply. "You wouldn't give up going if you were me. Don't let's think any more about it now, but go and do something."

Cyril made no reply, but walked straight away out of the garden and then down towards the harbour, while Perry watched him for a few minutes sadly, and then followed slowly, missed sight of him, and after quite a long search found him sitting on the edge of his wharf, where the sun beat down most fiercely, and staring straight out to sea. "Cil!" said Perry, after going close up, but without exciting the slightest notice of his presence.

There was no reply.

“Cil—don’t be sulky with me.”

“Not sulky,” came with quite a snap.

“Well, angry then. It isn’t my fault. I wish you could come.”

“Didn’t say it was your fault.”

“Then why do you take it like that?”

Cyril turned upon him quite fiercely.

“What’s the good of talking?” he cried. “You can’t understand. You go sailing about with your father and seeing things everywhere. I never go even into the forest. It’s horrible always shut up here with book-keeping and classics. I wish sometimes I was only one of the Indians, like that one yonder.”

Perry felt disposed to say, which one? for there was a second Indian close by; but wishing to brighten his companion, and turn the current of his thoughts, he merely said:

“Well, I shouldn’t wish to be a she Indian.”

“Those are not shes—they’re both men,” said Cyril sharply.

Perry looked at the pair incredulously, for they certainly had a most feminine aspect, being broad of figure and face, plump-cheeked, and with thick long hair cut square across the forehead and allowed to hang down behind. Their eyes were dreamy-looking and oblique, their faces perfectly devoid of hair, and to add to their womanish look, they wore a loose kind of cotton garment, which hung down from their shoulders nearly to their ankles.

“I say, what are they doing?” said Perry, as he stared at the pair.

“Taking snuff. That’s their way. They carry some in a little bag, and when they want to take any, they put the powder in that little siphon-like pipe, and hold it to their nose, and another one blows it up. That one sitting down’s the guide father is getting for you.—Here, hi!”

The Indians looked round, nodded, finished the snuff-taking business, and then came deliberately toward the boys.

“They’re Antis,” said Cyril, as Perry watched the two sleepy-looking Indians curiously, and noted that they were both about his own height.

The men came close up, and stood there smiling, waiting to be spoken to; and as Perry had hoped, their presence took Cyril out of himself for the time.

“Been to see my father?” said Cyril in a mongrel kind of Spanish.

One of the Indians nodded.

“And his father too?”

The man replied that he was going now. So Cyril interpreted the few words.

“That’s the worst of them; and it’s so hard to make them understand exactly what you mean. He didn’t know what I meant, and had not been—What say?” For the Indian had muttered something which he repeated.

“Wants to know if I’m going too,” said Cyril bitterly; and he shook his head at the Indian, when both smiled and looked pleased.

Cyril gave his teeth a grind. “You beggars,” he cried in English, “looking glad because I’m disappointed.—And I’ve given that first chap many a good tuck out, and lots of tobacco dust for snuff, and paid him no end of times for birds he has shot with his blowpipe, besides buying butterflies and eggs he has brought down out of the mountains. All right, though; I’ll serve them out.—I say,” cried the boy, and a complete change came over him, “can you speak Spanish?”

“I? No, not a word.”

“That’s a pity. You’ll have to learn a few words, so as to be able to talk to these chaps. But you’ll soon pick them up—some Indian, some Spanish, and some half-and-half. Wait a moment; I want to talk to this chap about—about your going.”

He began to speak to the man in a low voice, and then grew more and more eager, while the Indian began by smiling and looking amused, but, directly after, shook his head, and seemed to be refusing something which Cyril was asking. Then Perry saw the lad put his hand in his pocket and give the Indian a good two-bladed pocket-knife, whose keenness he demonstrated to the great interest of the Indian, who tried it on one of the heavy posts by the wharf, and then transferred it to his pocket with a smile of satisfaction, nodding his head now to everything Cyril said.

Their conversation lasted for some time, and Perry began to grow impatient after he had satisfied his scrutiny of the two Indians' appearance, and wondered why they should disfigure themselves by painting horizontal lines from their noses across their cheeks.

"There," cried Cyril, speaking rather excitedly, "it's all right now. He says he'll take great care of you, and wait upon you as if you were his father, and always find the best places for sleeping, and mind you don't tumble down into any of the great gaps. But, I say, Perry, old chap, you do wish I was going, don't you?"

"Of course I do."

"Ah, well, I suppose I must give in and make the best of it, mustn't I?"

"I'm afraid so."

"And you can't write to me and tell me how you are getting on. There are no post-offices up there."

"No, I suppose not."

"You suppose not!" cried Cyril, laughing, and looking as if his bitter fit had quite passed away.

"Why, you're going where you'll hardly see a soul, unless you meet a party coming down from the mines, or bringing bales of bark. There, I'm not going to look grumpy any more, but I did feel savage for a bit."

"That's right. Let's make the best of it while we're together, and do some more fishing, or have a mule ride or two."

"No," said Cyril decisively, "that's all over now. Father told me this morning that I should have to work and help you make all your preparations, for there would be no end to do. Come along. They're going up to see your father now."

The two Indians were both moving off, and the boys followed to the house, where they were witnesses to the meeting, Captain Norton having followed shortly, and acting as interpreter between the parties.

"It is rather awkward," he said, "but I daresay you will soon pick up enough of their jargon to make them understand."

"Oh yes," said the colonel. "I could gather the man's meaning from the Spanish words he used."

"Then you will soon manage. Of course, if you had been a Spaniard, it would have been easy enough."

"I shall not worry about that part of the business," said the colonel, "so long as the man is willing, and will do his best. But we shall want two others to attend to the mules."

"He understands that. He is going to bring another trustworthy fellow. He proposed doing so himself."

"And they can manage the mules?"

"Oh yes, you may trust them. This man, Diego, as we call him, has been in the habit of coming down from the mountains for years to trade and sell. I consider that I was very lucky in getting him for you. When will you start, shall I tell him?"

"On the sixth day from now."

"That is soon, is it not?"

"No; that ought to be time enough to get our mule-packs ready, and a sufficiency of stores. I have everything else."

"Don't hurry," said Captain Norton. "You are very welcome here, and I

shall regret your going.”

“I know that,” said the colonel warmly, “but I am eager to begin, and shall be restless till I start.”

The captain nodded, and said a few words to the Indians, who replied, and then took their departure, it being fully understood that they would be there, ready, on the sixth morning.

“Ha!” exclaimed the colonel, “that is satisfactory.—Now then, Perry, my boy, call up John Manning to unpack the luggage, and we’ll make our selection of what we mean to take. Captain Norton will keep in store for us all that we decide to leave, and he will help us with his experience in making our selection.—And you will help too, Cyril, will you not?”

“Of course, sir.”

“Thanks. Sorry I can’t take you, my lad, but your father is right.”

Those next five days passed almost like magic. Six highly-bred mules were selected by Captain Norton’s help, and furnished with packages and hide ropes, besides more for riding purposes.

“But we shan’t be able to manage so many, sir,” said John Manning, a lithe, dry-looking man of about forty, who had been the colonel’s servant when he was in the army, and had stayed with him ever since, to Perry’s great disgust; for the lad declared that he was the most disagreeable fellow under the sun, since he was always grumbling.

It was quite true, for he found fault with everything to the two boys; though silent, as if he were still in the ranks, in the presence of the colonel. But he quite won Cyril’s heart in one of his grumbles, and always after, during their preparations, the boy declared that he was capital fun, and that he liked him.

“There, young gentlemen,” said John, “that’s as much toggery as I can get in the colonel’s soft portmanteau, and you’ll have to make shift, Master Perry, if you want any more flannels and things.”

“Oh, there’ll be enough, John,” said Perry. “A fellow don’t want collars and

cuffs up in the mountains.”

“But there ain’t enough, sir. The man must ha’ been a hijot as made that portmanter. If it had been six inches longer, it would have held ever so much more.”

“Why, of course it would,” said Cyril contemptuously.

“It ain’t my business,” continued the man; “I’m only a servant. But what ought to ha’ been done was to have had Mr Cyril here with us, and filled a portmanter up with his things. Then they’d ha’ balanced quite easy on the mule’s back.”

“Yes, that’s what ought to have been done,” said Cyril excitedly.

“I wish you’d hold your tongue, John,” cried Perry angrily.

“All right, sir. Cut it out, if you like. We’re in savage lands, and there’s no magistrates to stop it, for all I know. But there, sir, that’s all I can do as I see.”

“How are you getting on?” cried the colonel, joining them. “All packed now?”

“Yes, sir,” said John Manning, drawing himself up stiffly.

“Did you oil the rifles and pistols?”

“Oh yes, sir; I went all over the armoury. Everything’s in perfect order.”

“And the cartridges?”

“Some in every package, sir; so that you can always get a few.”

“That’s right.”

By this time the captain had had an abundance of the most portable and useful provisions packed, simplicity having been especially studied; and on the evening of that fifth day, it was felt that nothing more could be done.

“I can think of nothing else to help you, Champion,” said Captain Norton.

“No, you have done wonders for me. There’s only one thing I wish.”

“What is it?”

“That you were coming too.”

“Colonel Champion!” cried Mrs Norton, as the boys exchanged glances.

“I beg your pardon, madam,” said the colonel. “I will not be so selfish. No, I do not wish that.—Come, boys, make the most of your last hours together. Shall you be up to see us off in the morning, Cyril?”

“Of course,” said the boy with a sigh.

“To be sure,” said the captain; “and we’ll ride a few miles with you—eh, Cil?”

“No, thank you father, I’d rather not,” said the lad dolefully. “I’ll bid them good-bye here.—Coming out, Perry?”

“Yes,” said the latter.

“Don’t be long, my lad,” said the colonel. “I want you to get to bed in good time. You must be up by four.”

“Breakfast will be ready by then,” said Mrs Norton.

“All right, father,” said Perry, and the two lads went out into the soft moonlight, to be accosted directly by John Manning.

“I was looking for you, Master Perry, sir,” he said. “I’ve been a-making of my will, and want you to see me sign it, and witness it.”

“You want to sign your will?” cried Perry, laughing.

“Yes, sir; this here’s going to be my last journey, I’m afraid, for one o’ them mules has marked me down. He means to kick me over the first pressy pass we comes to.”

“Don’t let him,” cried Cyril. “If he’s going to, shove him over instead.”

John Manning stared.

“Thankye, sir, I will. Now, do you know, I never thought o’ that.”

“Come along, Cil,” said Perry, laying his hand upon his companion’s shoulder, and they strolled along to where they could look over the sparkling lights of the town, away across the glittering ocean, with its broad path of silver, and then back up to the huge mountain, whose icy top flashed in the brilliant moonbeams, while every here and there the deep ravines marked the sides with an intense black.

They neither of them spoke, both feeling too sad at heart, but stood there, rapt in thought about the coming morrow, till they were interrupted by the coming of John Manning.

“Colonel says it’s lights out, young gentlemen,” he said respectfully. “There’s allers something wrong in this world.—You ought to ha’ been with us, Master Cyril, sir, in this forlorn-hope job. But, I suppose, we must make the best of it.”

“Yes,” said Cyril bitterly. “I suppose we must.”

A quarter of an hour later the lads were in their bedrooms, listening to the hum of the mosquitoes, and feeling weary, but restless in the heat. Cyril felt as if he could not sleep for thinking of the coming day, but all the same, he went off soundly in spite of his depressing thoughts, and woke up with a start, to find that his father was standing by his bedside.

“Half-past three, my lad,” he cried. “Up with you, and act like a man. Show our visitors that you can be unselfish, and let’s start them happily upon their expedition.”

Cyril tried to say, “Yes, father,” cheerfully, but not a word would come.

“Sulky?” said Captain Norton rather sternly. “I’m sorry that you turn like that. I’ll talk to you this evening, Cyril, my boy.”

The boy drew his breath hard, but he said no word, only began hurriedly

to dress, as his father left the room.

Chapter Four.

Three Shadows.

“Hallo, sir,” cried Captain Norton, as they stood outside in the enclosure where the mules were being loaded, “where’s the a other man?”

The Indian guide looked a little troubled, but spoke out quickly in his half-Indian, half-Spanish jargon.

“He will come. He will meet us soon in the mountains.”

“Is that to be depended upon?” said the colonel harshly; for the absence of one man of his force jarred upon his military precision.

“Yes. I have always found the Antis trustworthy.”

“But we shall be a man short for the mule-driving.”

“No,” said Cyril quickly. “They want no driving. All you have to do is to start the leading mule, and the others will follow right enough.”

“One more thing,” said the colonel, who had had many a weary march across the hot dusty plains of India. “Ought we not to take water?”

“No; the Indians will take you from spring to spring. They know all the streams and falls in the mountains.”

The mules were laden after a good deal of squealing and kicking, and, during the process, John Manning shook his head, and confided to Perry that the big leading mule with the bells had squinted round and shaken one hind-leg at him.

“He means me, Master Perry, sir. I ought to have got that will done.”

“Nonsense! it’s all right,” cried the boy; and soon after, an affectionate farewell was taken of the Nortons, it being decided, at the last moment,

that the captain should not accompany them. Then the little mule train started in the darkness up the bridle road leading straight away for the mountains, Cyril sending a cooee-like call after them as they reached the first turn of the zigzag road, and, ten minutes after, they were slowly rising above the town, which still lay in the darkness below.

The guide went first quite out of sight with the leading baggage mule, the others following; then the colonel walked next, beside his mule, with John Manning behind him; lastly, followed Perry with his mule, and the second Indian came last of all.

The road was fairly wide at first, giving room for three mules to have walked abreast, but their habit was to keep in single file, and, in spite of all efforts on Perry's part, his animal followed the example of others, and walked close to the edge.

As the day broke, John Manning noticed the trouble his young master was taking, and he shook his head.

"'Tain't no good, sir; I've been a-trying as hard as a man can try to get the crittur to walk like a Christian, and he won't. One of 'em 'll go over the edge directly, and kill hisself, and serve him right."

But the mule team plodded on, in their slow patient way, higher and higher, while from time to time the travellers stopped to gaze back away over the town, at the glittering, far-spreading sea, till all at once, after surmounting the last zigzag up the side of the mountain, the leading mule turned a sharp corner and disappeared from Perry's view, the others following, just as if they had entered a door in the side of the mountain. But, upon leaching the spot, Perry found that they had entered a chasm in the slope—a huge rift, not twenty feet wide, and made quite dim by the distance to where it opened upon the sky; while below, it rapidly ran together, and closed some forty feet beneath the ledge along which the path ran, and with a swift gurgling stream hurrying downward to the shore.

It was Perry's first sight of a mountain stream whose waters came direct from the melting snow of the heights above, where winter always reigned, but he could see little but an occasional flash as the mules plodded on

close to the edge of the path, which, as it rose, grew narrower and more rugged. And, as they still ascended, and the walls on either side of the gorge shut out the light, the boy shuddered, and wondered whether the way would become more dangerous, for, if so, he felt that he dared not mount and ride where a false step on the part of the mule would send him down headlong from the shelf-like track, twenty—forty—why, it must be a hundred feet down to the stream!

“Two, I should say, boy,” said the colonel, for Perry had involuntarily spoken aloud. “Don’t take any notice of the depth; you’ll soon get used to it. Look at the mules, how they keep to the very edge.”

“Yes, it’s horrible, father. The guides ought to train them to keep close to the wall.”

“The mules know best, boy. They are used to carry loads which spread out on either side, and they avoid the wall because it is as dangerous. They might catch their burden against it, and be jerked off.”

“I don’t think I shall ever get used to such paths as this.”

The colonel laughed.

“Not in half a day,” he said. “In a short space of time you will run along them as fearlessly as if you were on an English road.”

“But are there many like this?”

“Pooh, this is nothing, Perry. You are going up into a land of wonders, where everything is so vast and grand that you will have no time to feel nervous.”

“But what are we going for?” asked Perry.

The colonel turned and looked his son full in the eye. Then, smiling:

“Wait,” he said. “You will know in good time.”

Perry felt abashed, and wished that he had not asked, mentally determining not to question his father again, while, as he recalled his

conversations with Cyril, he began to feel that his new friend's ideas must be right. Directly after, he felt sure that they were, for John Manning edged up to him, where the path was a little wider, and said in a whisper:

"Master won't tell you, then, Master Perry?"

"Won't tell me what?" said Perry rather shortly.

"What we're going after. Strikes me as we're going treasure-hunting, and we shall get into one of them wonderful valleys you read of in the '*Rabian Nights*, where the precious stones lies about so thick, you can scoop 'em up."

"Oh, nonsense!"

"Do you know what the next country is to this?"

"Well, I suppose, if you went far enough over the mountains, you'd come to Brazil."

"Zackley, sir; and what comes from Brazil?"

"Nuts," said Perry, laughing. "Hard-shelled, oily nuts, that are horribly nasty to eat."

"Yes, sir, and di'monds. So don't you say it ain't likely that we may come to a valley of precious stones, because it strikes me that's what it means."

Onward and upward, along paths partly natural, partly cut in the sides of the gorge where the stream ran, and about mid-day Perry began to realise how high the mountains were, for, upon reaching an opening where he could look up and down, he saw that they had been climbing up and up for about seven hours, and were able to look down at a wonderful panorama of mountain-side and valley; but upon looking upward, the great snowy peak appeared to be as far away as when they started.

Just then the guide spoke to the leading mule, his voice echoing back from across the gorge, for they had reached a slope where the sun shone, and there were patches of grass and green shrub which promised

pasture for the animals. They all stopped at once, waited patiently to be relieved of their burdens; and then, when the packs were neatly arranged in a circle, the patient beasts threw themselves down, had a good roll, tossing their legs high in the air, so as to balance themselves for a few moments upon their spines, and then rose again, to begin nibbling at such herbage as they could find.

John Manning busied himself at once and started a fire, while, taking a tin, the second Indian went down the steep slope to the bottom of the gorge, and toiled up again with his load of clear icily-cold water, into which, when it boiled, a small handful of tea was thrown, the tin removed from the fire, and the provisions the colonel's servant had taken from a basket were served out.

The Indians took what was given to them, and sat down by themselves, while the others partook of their portions with great gusto.

Then, upon looking round, Perry found that the Indians were fast asleep, and asked his father whether he ought not to go and wake them up.

"No, boy; they'll take their mid-day nap and wake up soon."

And so it proved, for at the end of a couple of hours, the two men suddenly sprang up, caught the leading mule and led him back to the path, the others following and standing patiently to be laden.

Then onward again till dark, when the guides halted at a spot like the last, the fire was lit, the evening meal prepared, and, well tired out, Perry lay down to pass the first night in the awful solitude to which they had climbed, and gazed up at the brilliant stars seen between large walls of rock. He wondered what Cyril was doing; felt that it would be impossible to sleep cushioned on that hard rock, and fell asleep directly, as a matter of course.

The night was cold up there beneath the glittering stars, but when Perry woke up, warmly rolled in his blanket, there was a sight before him that was as new to him as it was grand.

Right away, apparently at the head of a long narrow valley, and high up toward the heavens, there was a huge peak that might have been the

mass of glittering rock from which broke away the diamonds, emeralds, sapphires, rubies, opals, and amethysts, which went to form the valleys of precious stones of which John Manning had spoken. For it was all dark below, but up there one of the gigantic Andean peaks was bathed in the full blaze of the rising sun.

The boy lay gazing up, enraptured, thinking of the delight of climbing up into such a world of glory, and then rolling himself out of his blanket, he leaped up, with the stiffness and uneasiness of the past night quite gone, for the colonel's voice reached him:

"Now, my lad, jump up; breakfast."

At the same moment he heard the crackling sound of burning wood, and in a nook of the great wall of rock, where otherwise it would have been quite dark, the glow of a bright fire shone upon the intent, hard face of John Manning, who was baking a bread cake upon a disc of iron, while the two plump, effeminate-looking Indians watched him complacently.

Just below, the mules were cropping the green herbage, and from below them came the rush, roar, and splash of falling water.

"That's right," cried the colonel, holding out his hand. "Slept well? Find your bedroom draughty?"

"I don't know, father," said Perry. "I was looking at the stars one minute, and the next I was staring at that glorious peak."

"Glorious indeed, my boy. Hah! There's nothing like a tramp in the mountains, and a night's rest in the beautiful, crisp, fresh air. Come along down to the dressing-room."

"Where?" said Perry, staring.

"Down yonder for a wash," said the colonel merrily; and, leading the way, they descended the precipitous slope to where the stream ran thundering by, reaching first a place where it was not above a couple of yards across.

"Why, I thought it would be bigger than this," said Perry, "from the noise it

makes.”

“Bigger than you think, my lad,” said the colonel. “There is an enormous amount of water going by here. I daresay that crack is a hundred feet deep. Look at the speed at which it runs.”

“Yes, it seems to run fast.”

“Seems!” cried the colonel. “Here, give me your hand. Don’t be afraid. Stop a moment; roll up your sleeve above your elbow. That’s it. Set your feet fast, and trust to me.”

The boy obeyed, and after making sure of his own footing, the colonel let his son sink down sidewise till he was nearly horizontal, and could plunge his arm right into the stream above the elbow.

It was a strange sensation for the boy to be sinking lower and lower, gazing in the gloom at that rushing, glassy water, which, as it darted along, carried with it another stream—one of air, which blew his hair about and felt icily-cold, but nothing to compare with the water into which he plunged his arm.

The shock was electric. It was as if he received a blow from a mass of ice which numbed him, and gave his limb a sudden snatch and drag to draw it from the socket.

Perry gave a gasp, and pulled his arm out of the torrent.

“Ugh!” he ejaculated. “It’s freezing.”

“Yes; would you like a plunge in?”

“What! there, father? It would sweep me away.”

“Yes, if you were a thousand times as strong, my lad. The force is tremendous. Come along here.”

He led the way upwards to where there was a fall of some few feet, and at the side a shallow pool of the water, wonderfully round, and forming a basin, giving them ample room for their ablutions; after which, fresh and

glowing, they climbed up past the mules to where the breakfast was waiting, the hot coffee, bread, and frizzled charqui, or dried beef, being partaken of with an appetite Perry had never felt before.

Then the remains were packed up, the squealing mules loaded, and they started once more; now rising a thousand feet, now descending, but always following the stream deeper and deeper into the mountains, till the grandeur and weird sternness of the gorge's defiles through which they passed grew monotonous, so that at the end of two days Perry began to long for some change and the open sunshine, away from the tremendous precipices which closed them in, and, in spite of the elasticity of the air, had sometimes a strangely depressing effect.

John Manning felt it, evidently, and sought every opportunity of keeping Perry by his side, so as to have a good grumble about the colonel.

"I don't know what he could be thinking about, Master Perry, to come to such a place as this. It's the world's end, I say. We shan't have a bit o' shoe to our foot when we've gone a bit farther."

"Why don't you ride more, then?" said Perry. "You've got a mule on purpose."

"What!" said John Manning, turning sharply round, "ride that mule? No, thankye, sir. I've seen him kick. I'm not going to give him a chance to send me over his head down into one of them cracks. I believe some of them go right through the world. Look at this one now. I can't see no bottom to it—can you?"

He pointed down into the deep chasm along one of whose sides the rough path led.

"No, not from here," said Perry, glancing down, and wondering at the absence of giddiness.

"Nor from anywhere else, sir," grumbled the man. "Why, if any one told me that if you dropped down there, you'd come out somewhere by Simla, I should believe him, for I know they go right through."

"Nonsense!" said Perry, laughing. "There, father's beckoning to me."

It was evening once more, and they were coming again to an opening among the lower mountains, where they would halt for the night. In fact, half an hour later the leading Indian checked his mule in a bowl-shaped hollow, where there was a dense little wood of goodly-sized trees, and a thread-like fall of water came curving down into a mossy basin, while the whole place was brightened by the reflection from the mountains, made dazzling now by the setting sun.

The preparations were made for the evening meal with quite military precision; the arms were placed near the fire, and, as if in imitation, the two Indians placed together their long stave-like blowpipes and bows and arrows, before helping to unload the mules, and then sitting down patiently to administer snuff to each other, and wait to be asked to join the meal.

"It's very awkward, Perry, my lad," said the colonel suddenly. "We ought to have had a guide who could understand us more easily."

"It *is* awkward, father," said Perry.

"Come and help me now, and between us we may make the man comprehend."

Perry followed to where the Indians were squatting down in their loose cotton smock-frock-like garments, and at a sign the leader rose.

"The other man—where is the other man?" said the colonel in Spanish; but the Indian gazed at him vacantly, till in a fit of inspiration Perry repeated his father's words as nearly as he could, and then began to count, laughing as he said in Spanish, "One—two"—and gave an inquiring tone to the word "three," as if asking for it.

The man smiled and pointed to the ground as he answered, and then closed his eyes and let his head fall over upon one hand.

"What does he mean by that, father?" said Perry.

"I can't tell, my boy, unless he wants to show us that the other man is coming while we sleep."

They tried again, but could get no farther. The Indian grew excited at last and voluble, making gestures too, pointing forward and then at the ground, ending by pointing at them in turn, throwing himself down and pretending to sleep.

“I give it up,” said the colonel, turning away towards the fire; “but we must try to learn their language as fast as we can, or we shall never get through our journey.”

A good meal near the fire, whose glow was comfortable enough up at the height they now were, and then father and son strolled a little way about their camp, the wood proving very attractive; but the darkness soon closed in, and they began to return toward the fire, which glowed brightly and cast the shadows of the Indians against the rock-wall as they sat prolonging their meal.

“What is John Manning doing eating with them?” said the colonel suddenly. “I told him he was to keep those men in their places. They are my paid servants while—”

“He’s over yonder,” said Perry, interrupting his father, “stacking guns together, I think.”

“Nonsense!” said the colonel; “there he is, sitting with the Indians, eating.”

“He can’t be, father; I can see him over there.”

“But look, boy, there are three shadows against the cliff.”

“One—two—yes, there are three shadows,” said Perry dubiously; “but it is something to do with the fire.”

“Absurd, my lad; there are three shadows cast by three men sitting there.”

“I know,” cried Perry excitedly; “that is what the Indian meant—that the third fellow would be here to-night to sleep, or while we slept.”

“To be sure,” cried the colonel, in a tone full of satisfaction. “I’m glad of it, not but what we could have got on without him, for the mules go well

enough, but because it proves the guide to be trusty and a man of his word.”



Chapter Five.

Perry is Startled.

The guide came to the colonel smiling as soon as he saw him seated, and pointed to; the other side of the fire, as he spoke words which evidently announced the coming of the promised assistant.

The colonel replied in Spanish, and the Indian went back to his companions. Soon after, the smell from John Manning's pipe rose on the cool night-air, and Perry sat talking to his father in a questioning mood.

"When are we going over the top of one of the snow-mountains, father?" he said.

"I have no intention of going over the top of either of the mountains," replied the colonel. "We have nothing to gain but hard labour up there. We want to get through the first ridge, and on to the rich tablelands, or among the beautiful valleys."

Perry said "Oh!" in a tone of voice which suggested "Do we? I did not know." Then aloud: "How high up are we now?"

"About eight thousand feet, I should say; perhaps a little more, for it is rather cold. There, let's get to sleep; I want to start early and be well on our way soon after sunrise."

The colonel had his desire, for, long before the lower part of the ridge was quite light, the mules were all loaded, and the party made their start, with Diego the Indian leading, the new arrival second, and the other man right in the rear as before.

Perry had one glance at the new-comer, and made out that he was a more stunted fellow than the others. In other respects he seemed to be similar in aspect, but wore a good deal of radiating paint upon his cheeks, from which it was drawn along in lines right up to his brows, and downward toward the jaws. He wore the same loose, many-folded gown, reaching just to his knees, and carried a bow, arrows, and a long

blowpipe, but he was wanting in his friends' plumpness and breadth of shoulder.

"Looking at the new mule-driver, Perry?" said the colonel. "Yes? Seems to be quite a stripling. But so long as he does his work well enough, it does not matter."

He did do his work and well, as it proved, trudging along by the mules, helping to unload and load again, managing those under his charge admirably, and proving to be most industrious in fetching water. But he was timid and distant to a degree, shrinking away when either of the English party approached him, and on one occasion showing so evident an intention to hurry away into the mountains, that the colonel checked his son when next he saw him making for the Indian lad.

"Let him be," said the colonel; "he's wild as a hawk, and he doesn't look particularly clean."

"No," said Perry, laughing, "he is a grub. Those fellows don't wash, I suppose, for fear of spoiling their paint."

They ceased then to take much notice of their fresh follower all through that day and the next; and the Indian trudged on beside the luggage mules, with his shoulders up and his head bent, as if he were carefully watching where he should next place his feet, speaking to nobody but Diego, when the guide left the leading mule for a few minutes to stop and look right along the line, inspecting the loads as the mules passed him, smiling at the colonel and Perry, and exchanging rather a fierce look with John Manning; for, somehow, these two did not seem to be the best of friends. Then he would let his companion who guarded the rear come right up, walk beside him, talking for a few minutes, and then start forward again at a trot, passing them once more till he had reached the leading mule.

There was little change that day, always a constant succession of precipitous walls to right and left, their way being along a narrow shelf, with the stream they followed thundering beneath them, sometimes a hundred feet beneath, at others perhaps a thousand, and quite invisible, but making itself evident by the echoing roar of the rushing waters.

They passed nobody, neither did they see a single animal to tempt them to use rifle or gun that hung by its sling across their backs, till late in the afternoon, when, just as they turned the corner of a great buttress of rock, a huge bird suddenly swept by, gazing wonderingly at them. By one consent, father and son paused to watch the ease with which the great-winged creature glided along the gorge, half-way between the top and the stream below, turned suddenly and came back, as if to renew their acquaintance, and then curved round again, sweeping along for a short distance, and again wheeling round, not in a series of circles, but ellipses, each turn sending it almost without effort higher and higher, till it had reached a sufficient elevation, when it passed out of sight over the wall on their left.

“Eagle?” said Perry.

“Vulture,” replied the colonel. “There you have seen one of the biggest birds that fly. Didn’t you notice its naked head?”

“Yes; and it had quite a comb over the top, and a ruff round its neck. I thought it was an eagle from its great hooked beak.”

“The featherless head is a general mark of the vultures,” said the colonel. “I wish I had had a shot at it; but I don’t know: I don’t want to be burdened with bird-skins, especially of such a size as that.”

“What a monster to skin!” said Perry thoughtfully. “Why, its wings must have been six or seven feet from point to point.”

“Double the length—say fourteen or fifteen, my boy,” replied the colonel. “It must have been that. Old travellers used to make them out to be twenty-five or thirty feet from wing-tip to wing-tip; but they do reach the size I say. Hallo! what are we stopping for?”

“Why, there’s a bridge,” cried Perry; “and the path goes along on the other side of the gorge.”

“And what a bridge,” muttered the colonel.

He might well exclaim, for it was formed in the narrowest part of the gloomy gorge, and though not more than five-and-thirty feet in length, it

looked perilous in the extreme, being formed merely of a couple of thick ropes of twisted fibre, secured at either side round masses of rock, and with a roadway made by rough pieces of wood laid across and firmly bound to the ropes.

“A suspension bridge with a vengeance,” continued the colonel. “We shall never get the mules to cross that.”

And he had perfect warrant for his words. For some forty yards below, the water foamed along in a perfect torrent, falling heavily from a shelf above, and sending up quite a thick mist, which magnified the surrounding objects and added to the gloom of the place.

Perry felt appalled, but the halt was of short duration, for after turning to them and shouting something which was almost inaudible in the roar of the torrent, the Indian stepped on to the bridge, and walked coolly across, half hidden by the mist; while the mule which played the part of leader bent its head, sniffed at the stout boards which formed the flooring, stepped on and walked carefully across, with the bridge swaying heavily beneath its weight.

“Not so bad as it looked, my lad,” said the colonel, as the next mule followed without hesitation. Then, after a pause, their new Indian crossed, followed with the mule by which he had walked, and then the rest, including those from which the travellers had dismounted, for no one thought of venturing to ride across the chasm.

“Our turns now, Perry,” said the colonel. “How do you feel?”

“Don’t like it,” said Perry huskily.

“Summon up your nerve, my lad; forget that there is any torrent beneath you, and walk boldly across. Here, I’ll go first.”

“No, no, please don’t,” cried Perry, setting his teeth. “I’ll go.”

“Go on, then,” said the colonel.

The boy descended from the few yards of loose stony way to where the wet rough-hewn boards began, drew a deep breath, and stepped on to

the bridge, conscious that the guide was looking back, and that the new Indian was at the other end, watching him earnestly, with his lips slightly parted and his teeth bared.

To Perry it was a sign that their attendant felt the danger of the place, and was watching to see him fall. And if he did, he felt nothing could save him, for he would be swept away in an instant down that narrow chasm full of rushing water, where it was impossible for any one to climb down and stretch out a helping hand.

One step, two steps, three steps, all descending, for the middle of the bridge hung far lower than the ends, and Perry could feel it vibrato beneath him, and his nervous dread increased. And yet it was so short a distance to where the Indians were waiting, as he stepped cautiously on till he was well past the middle, when all at once the sky above him seemed to be darkened over his head, there was a peculiar, whistling, rushing sound, and looking up sharply, Perry saw that the huge bird which had passed out of sight had wheeled round and was flying so close above him, that it seemed as if its object were to strike at him with its powerful talons.

As a matter of fact, the bird swept by five-and-twenty feet above his head, but it was near enough to destroy the lad's balance as he started and bent down to avoid the fancied blow. The colonel uttered a loud cry of warning, and Perry made an effort to recover himself, but this stagger caused the bridge to sway, and in another moment or two he would have been over into the torrent had not the bridge vibrated more heavily as a guttural voice whispered to him:

"Quick! *mano*—hand!"

It was accompanied by a sharp drag as his own was seized, and, recovering his balance, he half ran—was half pulled—up the slope into safety on the other side.

Perry felt giddy and dazed as the Indian loosed his hold and hurried away among the mules, while before he had half recovered himself, his father had crossed and was at his side.

"Perry, my lad, you sent my heart into my mouth."

“Yes,” faltered the boy. “It was very horrid. That bird.”

“It was startling, my lad, but you ought to be able to walk boldly across a place like that.”

“Ahoy! colonel!” came from the other side, as John Manning hailed them.

“What is it?” shouted back the colonel.

“Hadn’t I better go back, sir?”

“Back? No. Come over!”

John Manning took off his hat and scratched his head, looking down at the hanging bridge and then up at his master.

Just then there was a shout from Diego and some words in the Indian tongue, which resulted in the other Indian offering his hand to the colonel’s servant, who resented it directly.

“No,” he growled; “I’ll do it alone. One must be safer by one’s self;” and stretching out his arms like a tight-rope dancer, he came down cautiously, stepped on to the bridge and slowly walked across, the Indian following at a trot, as if astonished at any body finding so good a pathway difficult.

“I hope there ain’t many more o’ them spring playthings, sir,” said John Manning gruffly. “I thought Master Perry was gone.”

“Nonsense!” said the colonel shortly. “That great bird startled him. Forward again; the men are going on.—Perry, my boy, you must give that Indian lad a knife, or something as a present: he saved your life.”

“Yes, father,” said the boy, looking dazed and strange. “I—I’m better now.”

“Yes, of course you are. Pish! we mustn’t dwell upon every slip we have. There, think no more about it,” he continued, as he noticed the boy’s blank, pale face. “Go on, and mount your mule.”

“I think I would rather walk,” said Perry.

“Walk, then,” said the colonel shortly, and he went on and mounted his mule.

“Quick! *mano*—hand!” buzzed in Perry’s ear, and at the same time he seemed to hear the booming roar of the torrent beneath his feet, and the rush of the huge bird’s wings just above his head—“Quick! *mano*—hand!”

“I say, Master Perry, sir, don’t look that how,” said John Manning in a low voice; “you’re as white as taller candle. You’re all right now.”

“Yes,” said Perry, trying hard to recover his natural balance. “I’m all right now.”

“You’ve made the colonel look as black as thunder, and it wasn’t our fault. They’ve no business to have such bridges in a Christian country. But it was enough to scare any one, my lad. I thought that there bird meant to have you.”

“That was fancy,” said Perry hastily. “I ought to have known better.”

“No, it wasn’t fancy, my lad. I think he’d have had you, only seeing us all about made him give you up. But it’s all right.”

“All right?”

“Yes, sir, we’re on the c’rect track.”

“Of course we are,” said Perry, as they marched on once more behind the mules, followed by the Indian.

“You dunno what I mean, sir,” said John Manning testily. “I meant on the track for one o’ them di’mond valleys. Know what that bird was?”

“Yes; a condor.”

“Con grandmother, sir. It was a roc, one o’ them birds as carried Sindbad out o’ the valley. This was only a chicken, I should say; but it was a roc, all the same.”

“What nonsense!” said Perry. “That was all fancy tale and romance.”

“Not it, sir. I might have thought so once, but I don't now. Let me ask you this, sir,” said Manning: “suppose there was no way out or no way into the valleys we've come along, could you climb up the sides?”

“No, of course not.”

“And if you'd heard tell of birds with wings thirty foot across before you'd seen 'em, would you have believed in them?”

“No, and I don't now.”

“What! after one of 'em come down to attack you, and we scared it away.”

“That was only about half the size.”

“Oh, come, Master Perry, sir, don't get a haggling about trifles; there ain't much difference between fifteen foot and thirty. You mark my words, sir, the colonel's been studying up his *'Rabian Nights*, and he's on the right track now for one of them valleys, and we shall go back to San-what's-its-name with these ugly-looking donkey mules loaded up with all kinds of precious stones. You're a lucky one, Master Perry, sir, and your fortune's about made.”

“Think so?” said Perry, for the sake of speaking, for he was very thoughtful.

“Yes, sir, I just do; and as for me, I hope it's going to be my luck to get just a few nubbly bits for myself, so as I can buy myself a cottage and a bit o' garden, and keep a pig, so as to live retired. You'll come and see me, Master Perry, then, won't you?”

“Of course,” said the boy, and then, making a trivial excuse to get away, he hurried along the line of slow-going mules to see that his father was right in front before their guide, who walked by the first mule; then there were three more plodding along, just far enough behind each other to be safe from any playful kick. By the head of the third mule their new Indian driver was walking with his bow over his shoulder, a handful of long arrows tucked under his arm, and his head bent down watching his footsteps.

Perry kept behind at some distance, watching the Indian's every gesture, till he saw his father returning, for the track had become wider, and the boy watched intently; for he saw the colonel bend down from his mule and tap the Indian on the shoulders as he said a few words in Spanish. But what they were Perry was too far off to hear, the mules too making a good deal of clattering on the rocky track, which noise was echoed all around in a wonderful way.

"It must have been my fancy, but I could have been sure he said something to me in English," muttered Perry. "I was so excited, I suppose."

Chapter Six.

A Night Alarm.

"Did you give the Indian lad the knife?" said the colonel as they came abreast.

"No, father."

"Go and do it at once, and mind how you give it; the fellow's as wild as a hawk. I thought he was going to spring over the precipice as soon as I touched him."

Perry took out the pocket-knife he had with him, and stepped forward; but a word from his father checked him.

"I don't want to make too much fuss over this, Perry, my lad," he said, "but you displayed a great want of nerve. You did not act like a healthy, sturdy, English boy, and but for that Indian's quick decision, you would have lost your life."

"Yes, father, I'm afraid so."

"Then, for goodness' sake, my lad, try to shake off this girlish cowardice, or you'll make me regret bringing you."

"I'll try, father," said the boy, his face flushing hotly.

"That's right. I'm sure Captain Norton's son would have cut a better figure."

Perry's face grew hotter, and he felt a bitter feeling of annoyance at being compared so unfavourably with the lad who had been his companion.

The feeling was only momentary, though, and he went on and overtook the Indian, with the knife in his hand.

He was going to give it without a word, but the idea that, perhaps, after all, the half-savage being might understand a few words of English, flashed into his mind, and he said:

"This is not worth much, but I hope you'll keep it in memory of my gratitude for your bravery to-day."

To his disgust, the Indian paid not the slightest attention, but trudged on barefooted beside the mule, as if perfectly unconscious of any one beside him, and Perry's nerves being all on the jar, he felt irritated at giving, un-noticed, a pretty speech.

"Here, catch hold," he said. "This is for you."

He thrust the knife into the Indian's grimy hand as he spoke, and then walked on to where Diego received him with a smile of welcome, and began talking directly in his mongrel tongue, perfectly content if the boy seemed to understand a word here and there, when he pointed to cavernous-looking holes in the cliff face opposite to him, to some brighter and greener spot in the gorge, or to some distant fall which glittered in the sunshine which came obliquely down into the narrow vale.

All at once there was a beating of wings, and one of the huge condors, startled from the eyrie it occupied high up above their heads, suddenly threw itself off, and began to fly round, rising higher and higher, while the Indian rapidly fitted one of the long feathered arrows be carried to the string of his bow, waited till the great bird was gliding by, and then loosed the shaft. The arrow struck the condor in the wing, and made the huge bird give itself an angry jerk, as if it were disposed to turn upon its

aggressor; but as Perry watched, the bird gave a few rapid beats with its pinions, shooting upwards rapidly, and though it was some distance away, the air was so clear that Perry distinctly saw the long feathered arrow shaken out of the condor's white wing, and fall slowly down into the depths of the gorge, while the great bird literally shot up for some distance, and then glided over a shoulder of the mountain they were flanking, and disappeared.

The Indian looked at Perry and shook his head, as he muttered some words which were easily interpreted.

"Lost my arrow, and did not get my bird."

"And a good thing too," said Perry. "It would have been of no use, and only wanton destruction."

The man nodded and smiled as if Perry's words were full of sympathy for his loss. But they fell upon other ears as well, for the colonel was close behind.

"Rather misdirected sympathy, I'm afraid, Perry, my lad," he said. "The bird would have been no use to us, but I dare say its death would have saved the lives of a good many young vicunas and llamas."

Perry stared for a moment or two, and then: "Oh yes, I know. Do they live up in these mountains?"

"Yes, you'll see plenty by-and-by."

"Sort of goats, aren't they, father?"

"Well, my boy, they partake more of the nature of a camel or sheep, as you'll say whenever you see the long-necked, flat-backed creatures. But it's getting time for camping. The mules are growing sluggish, and sniffing about for food."

"I hope we shan't camp here," said Perry with a shiver.

"Not an attractive place, but I daresay Diego has some spot marked out in his eye, for he has evidently been along here a good many times

before.”

Ten minutes later, as the snowy peaks which came into view began to grow of a bright orange in the western sunshine, one of the mules in front uttered a whinnying squeal, and the rest pricked up their ears and increased their pace.

“Steady there! Wo-ho!” shouted John Manning. “Hadn’t we better sound a halt, sir, or some of ’em ’ll be over the side of the path.”

“I think we may trust them; they smell grass or something ahead, and know it is their halting-place.”

“But look at that brown ’un, sir; he’s walking right out from under his load.”

A few hitches, though, and a tightening of the hide ropes, kept the loosened pack in its place; and soon after, to Perry’s great delight, the gorge opened out into a bright green valley, where, a snug, well-sheltered nook being selected, the mules were once more unloaded, and a fire lit. Then, thanks to John Manning’s campaigning cleverness, before the light on the mountain tops quite died out, they were seated at a comfortable meal, with a good fire crackling and burning between them and the Indians, wood for once in a way being fairly plentiful, there being a little forest of dense scrubby trees low down by the stream which coursed through the bottom of the valley.

“Not quite such a savage-looking place, Master Perry,” said John Manning, when the colonel had taken his gun and gone for a final look round before they retired to their blankets on the hard ground.

“Savage! Why, it’s beautiful,” cried Perry, who had been watching the colours die out on one snowy peak.

“Yes, sir, I suppose it is,” said the man, shaking his head; “but we didn’t take all the trouble to see things look beautiful. We can do that at home. What I’m thinking is that the place don’t look healthy.”

“Not healthy? Up here in the mountains?”

"Tchah! I don't mean that way, sir; I mean healthy for your pocket. This looks like a place where you might have a farm and gardens, and keep sheep. You'd never come here to search for di'monds, and sapphires, and things."

"N-no," assented Perry.

"O' course not. We want good wild broken stone muddle over rocky places, where you have to let yourselves down with ropes."

"Or ride down on rocs' backs, eh, John?"

"Yes, sir, that's your sort. We've passed several good wholesome-looking places that I should have liked to have hunted over; but of course the colonel knows best, and he is leading us somewhere for us to have a regular good haul. Tired, sir?"

"Yes, pretty well, but one feels as if one could go on walking a long way up in these mountains."

"Well, sir, we've got every chance, and I'd just as soon walk as get across one of these mules, with your legs swinging, and the thin, wiry-boned crittur wriggling about under you. I always feel as if my one was groaning to himself, and looking out for a good place where he could thrust his hind-legs up and send me flying over his head into the air, where he could watch me turn somersaults till I got to the bottom."

"Oh, they're quiet enough," said Perry.

"Oh, are they, sir? Don't you tell me. My one never misses a chance of rubbing my leg up against a corner, and when he has done there, he goes to the other extreme and walks right along the edge, so that my other leg is hanging over the side; and if I look down, I get giddy, and expect that every moment over we shall both go."

"I tell you, they don't mean anything," cried Perry.

"Then why does my one, as soon as he knows he has frightened me, begin to show his teeth, and laugh and wriggle his ears about, as if he were enjoying himself right down to the roots. I don't believe these mules

are any good, Master Perry, that I don't, and as aforesaid, I always feel as if I'd rather walk."

Further conversation was put an end to by the return of the colonel, and soon after, leaving the Indians crouching near the fire, which they seemed reluctant to leave, the English party sought the corner which had been selected for their sleeping-place, rolled themselves in their blankets, and with valises for pillows, and their stores piled up for a shelter from the wind, they were not long in dropping off to sleep.

Perry's was sound enough at first, but after a time he began to dream and go through the troubles connected with crossing the swinging bridge again. He found himself half-way across, and then he could go no farther in spite of all his efforts, till, just as the condor was about to take advantage of his helplessness, and descend to fix its talons in the sides of his head and pick out his eyes, the Indian made a snatch at him, and dragged him across for him to awake with a start.

It was all so real that his brow was wet with perspiration, but he settled what was the cause, and changed his position peevishly.

"That comes of eating charqui late at night, and then lying on one's back," he muttered, and dropped off to sleep again directly.

But only to begin dreaming again of the condor, which was floating overhead, spreading its wings quite thirty feet now; and there was the scene of the day repeated with exaggerations. For the Indian guide bent an immense bow, and sent an arrow as big as a spear whizzing through the air, to strike the huge bird, which swooped down close by, and looked at him reproachfully, as it said in a whisper: "I only came to bring back your knife."

Perry lay bound in the fetters of sleep, but all the same, his ears seemed to be open to outer impressions, for the words were repeated close to him, and he started up on to his elbow.

"Who's there? who spoke?" said a low firm voice close to him. "That you, Perry?"

"Yes, father," replied the boy, as he heard the ominous *click-click* of the

double gun that lay by the colonel's side.

"What were you doing?"

"Nothing, father. I just woke up and fancied I heard some one speak."

"There was a whisper, and some one brushed against me just before. Did you move from your place?"

"No, father," said Perry, feeling startled now.

"Manning!"

"Sir!"

"Have you been moving?"

"No, sir; fast asleep till you woke me, talking."

"Then some one has been visiting us," whispered the colonel. "Hah! what's that?"

"Something rustling along yonder, sir."

Bang! bang! Both barrels were discharged with a noise which seemed to have awakened all the sleeping echoes of the mountains around their camp.

Then, as the colonel hastily reloaded his piece, Perry and John Manning sprang up, each seizing his gun, and waited.

"I missed him; but, whoever it is, he won't come prowling about again. Follow me quickly. Stoop."

Bending down, they hurried across the few yards which intervened between them and the smouldering ashes of the fire, which, fanned now and then by the breeze sweeping along the valley, gave forth a faint phosphorescent-looking light, by which they could just make out the figures of the three Indians standing with their bows and arrows ready, as if about to shoot.

“Which of you came over to us?” said the colonel in Spanish; but there was no reply, and the speaker stamped his foot in anger. “What folly,” he cried, “not to be able to communicate with one’s guide!”

“Could it have been some one from the valley lower down?” whispered Perry, who then felt a curious startled sensation, for he recalled perfectly the words he had heard while asleep, or nearly so: “I only came to bring back your knife.”

“Then it must have been the little Indian, and he could speak English after all.”

Accusatory words rose to Perry’s lips, but he did not speak them. A strange reluctance came over him, and he shrank from getting the poor fellow into trouble, knowing, as he did, that his father would be very severe on the intruder upon their little camp. For it was a fact that the little Indian had crept up to where they slept and spoken to him. The excitement had prevented him from noticing it before, but he held in his hand the proof of the visit, tightly, nervously clutched: the knife was in his left hand, just as it had been thrust there while he slept.

“Attend here,” said the colonel. Then very sternly: “You cannot understand my words, perhaps, but you know what I mean by my actions. One of you came for some dishonest purpose to where we lay sleeping, and I wonder I did not hit whoever it was as he ran.—Give me your hand, sir,” he cried; and he seized and held Diego’s right hand for a few moments.

Then dropping it, he held out his hand to the other Indian, who eagerly placed his in the colonel’s palm.

“An outside enemy, I’m afraid,” muttered the colonel; “they are both perfectly calm.—Now you, sir,” he continued, turning to the last comer, who hesitated for a moment, and then held out his hand.

This was all in the dim starlight, the figures of the men being made plainer from time to time by the faint glow from the fire; but their faces were quite in the shade as the colonel took the last comer’s hand and grasped it tightly, while Perry’s heart began to beat, for he felt that the discovery was coming; and hence he was not surprised at the colonel’s

fierce and decided action.

"Your pulse galloping," he cried angrily, as he dragged the dimly-seen figure forward. "Perry, Manning, cover those two men, and if they make a gesture to draw their bows, fire at once.—Now, you scoundrel, it was you, and you had come to steal."

"No, he had not, father; he came to give me back my knife."

"What!" cried the colonel angrily.

"It's a fact; he put it in my hand while I slept; and here it is."

"Then—"

"It's quite true, sir, and no good to keep it up any longer."

"Cil!" cried Perry in astonishment.

"Yes. Don't be very angry with me, Colonel Campion. I felt obliged to come; I couldn't stop away."

"Why, you treacherous young rascal," cried the colonel, shaking him violently.

"Don't, sir, please; you hurt!" cried Cyril half angrily.

"How dare you mutiny against your father's commands, and come after us like—?"

"I dunno," said Cyril mournfully. "I felt obliged; I wanted to be with Perry there."

"But to come masquerading like this, sir! How dare you?"

"I dunno, I tell you," said the boy petulantly. "It isn't so very nice to come over the stones without shoes or stockings, and only in this thing. It's as cold as cold, besides being painted and dirtied up as I am. My feet are as sore as sore."

"And serve you right, you young dog. What will your father say?"

"I don't know what he'd have said if you'd shot me," grumbled Cyril.

The colonel coughed.

"You precious nearly did, you know," continued Cyril querulously. "I heard the shots go crashing in among the bushes as I ran."

"Then you shouldn't have come prowling about the camp in the middle of the night," cried the colonel. "Of course, sir, I took you for some wild beast or marauding Indian."

"Well," said Cyril, "now you know, sir, and I suppose I can go back and try to sleep."

"Go back? Yes, sir, first thing—to your father," cried the colonel fiercely. "I suppose he does not know you have come?"

"No, sir."

"Of course not. A pretty disgraceful escapade, upon my word, sir! I only wish I were back in my regiment, and you were one of my subalterns. I'd punish you pretty severely for this, I promise you."

"Would you, sir?" said Cyril drearily. "I thought I was getting punished enough. I'm sorry I disturbed you, sir; I only wanted to get close up, and touch Perry's hand."

"Bah!" cried the colonel. "Why did you want to touch Perry's hand?"

"Because I was so lonely and miserable, lying there with my feet sore. I couldn't sleep, sir. The stones have cut them, and I was afraid to wash them, for fear you should see how white my legs were."

The colonel coughed.

"Here; stop a moment, sir," he said, in rather a different tone. "You see, I might have shot you."

"Yes, sir," said Cyril dolefully. "And it did seem hard to be shot at, because I felt glad the poor fellow didn't go off the bridge."

The colonel coughed again.

“Hum, ha, yes,” he said, a little huskily. “It was a very narrow escape, of course, and you behaved very well. You—er—yes, of course, you quite saved his life. But I shall say no more about that now.—Here, Manning, get Mr Cyril Norton a couple of blankets.—And you’ll come and lie down by us, sir; and mind this: no more evasions, no attempts to escape.”

“I shan’t try to escape in the dark,” said Cyril drearily. “Where should I escape to, sir?”

“Ah! of course. Where to, indeed! So recollect you are a prisoner, till I place you back safely in your father’s hands.—Stop! Halt! What are you doing, Perry?”

“Only shaking hands with him, father,” said the lad.

“Then don’t shake hands with him, sir. Shake hands with gentlemen, and not with lads who disgrace themselves by disobeying their father’s orders, and satisfying their own selfishness by causing others intense anxiety.”

Perry drew in a long, deep breath, which did not go down into his lungs properly, but seemed to catch here and there.

“One moment,” said the colonel; “can you make that man Diego understand?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Then tell him and his companion to go to sleep again.”

Cyril said a few words to the guide, and the two Indians dropped down at once, close to the warm ashes.

“I suppose, then, he knew all about your escapade, sir, eh?” cried the colonel. “Of course, he must have got you the Indian clothes and paint.”

“It was all my fault, sir; don’t blame him,” said Cyril humbly. “I’m very sorry I did it now. It seemed—”

“Seemed? Well, what did it seem, eh? There, hold your tongue now, and go and lie down by Perry. Recollect you are in an old soldier’s camp, and I forbid all talking now. Stop!—er—are you hungry?”

“No, sir; I can’t eat,” said Cyril bitterly.

“Humph! There, go and lie down, both of you, and get to sleep.—Once more, no talking, Perry; not till to-morrow morning.—Good-night, both of you.”

By this time John Manning had taken two soft blankets out of one of the packs, and handed them to the prisoner with a very unmilitary whisper.

“My!” he said, “what a game, Mr Cyril.”

But neither of the boys smiled. They lay down in Perry’s old place, and Cyril uttered a sigh of content, and then a stifled sob, as he felt Perry’s hand seeking for his to hold it tightly.

“Good-night,” he whispered, as Perry bent over him, and then there was another whisper.

“Can father send you back, Cil?” and the answer came:

“It’s too late now. No.”

Just then the colonel lay down again in his old place, and another rustling told that John Manning was curling up in his.

“Good-night, Perry, my boy,” said the colonel.

“Good-night, father,” replied Perry, and then to himself, “Oh, I hope he’ll say good-night to poor old Cil.”

He had his wish.

“Good-night, Cyril,” came rather huskily.

“Good-night, sir,” said the boy, in a voice he could hardly keep steady.

And then came:

“Thank God I did not hit you when I fired, my lad.”

Then there was nothing heard but the whispering of the wind below them among the trees.

Chapter Seven.

The Slippery Way.

“Awake, Cil?” whispered Perry, just as daylight was making its way down into the depths of the valley, and a faint glow became visible on one of the snow peaks.

“Yes,” was whispered back, “these two hours.”

“Couldn’t you sleep?”

“No; not for thinking. It’s all very well for you, but I’ve got to hear what your father says this morning.”

This was unanswerable, and Perry remained silent for a few minutes, wondering what he had better say next.

Then the inspiration came.

“Look here, Cil,” he said; “you won’t get on any the better for having a painted and dirty face. I’ll get a bit of soap, and we’ll go down and have a good wash.”

“What’s the good?” said Cyril. “Dirty painted face goes best with things like this.”

“Yes, but you’re not going like this,” said Perry. “You must put on decent clothes.”

“Haven’t got any,” said Cyril sourly.

“No, but I have—two spare suits, and you shall have one.”

Cyril gave a start.

“I say, Per,” he whispered excitedly, “do you mean that?”

“Of course I do. My things will fit you, and you can have a regular rig-out.”

“Oh!” ejaculated Cyril. “Come on then, quick.”

They stole out of their corner to the baggage pile, where Perry pointed to the portmanteau containing his kit, signing to Cyril to take one end and help him to bear it a dozen yards away to where a huge mass of rock had fallen from above.

“Here we are,” cried Perry, dragging out one of the suits that had been made expressly for the journey. “They’ll fit you, I know.”

“Fit!” cried Cyril excitedly; “of course they will. Once get myself decent, I shan’t so much mind what the colonel says—I mean, I can bear it better. I did feel such a poor miserable wretch when he was talking to me in the night. It all seemed so easy just to dress like one of the Indians; but as soon as I was in that long shirt thing, with my bare legs and feet, I felt as if I’d suddenly turned into a savage, and daren’t look any one in the face.”

“And I don’t wonder at it,” growled a deep voice. “Here, what game’s this, young gents?”

The boys looked up to see that John Manning was peering over the rock, and they were so startled for a few moments that neither spoke.

“Going off again, and you with him, Master Perry? Well, you don’t do that while I’m here.”

“Don’t be so stupid, John,” cried Perry, recovering himself. “Can’t you see what we’re doing?”

“Yes, that’s what I can see, making of yourselves a little kit apiece, ready to desert, both of you.”

“Rubbish!” cried Perry.—“That’s all, isn’t it, Cyril?”

“Boots!” said Cyril dolefully; “but I don’t know how I am going to get them on.”

“Oh, a good bathing will do that. Here you are.—Now, John Manning, fasten this up again, and take it back.”

“Honour, Master Perry?”

“Honour what?”

“You’re not going to desert?”

“You go and light a good fire and get breakfast ready; we’re going down to have a bathe.”

“Oh, that’s it, is it?” said the old soldier, chuckling. “Well, a bath would improve Master Cyril. Shall I bring you down a tin of hot water, gentlemen.”

“You be off, and hold your tongue. I don’t want my father to know until we get back.”

“All right, gentlemen,” said John Manning, grinning; “but I say, Master Cyril, there’ll be court-martial on you arter breakfast.”

“Come along, and don’t mind him,” whispered Perry, and they hurried down to the side of the torrent, where they had to spend some time before a suitable place was found where they could bathe without being washed away, for the water ran with tremendous force. But at length a safe spot was hit upon, where the stream eddied round and round; and here Perry’s tin of soap was brought into play with plenty of vigour, there being no temptation to prolong their stay in water which had come freshly down from the snow, and which turned their skins of a bluish scarlet by the time they were dressed.

“Shall I pitch this smock-frock thing into the stream?” said Perry, with a look of satisfaction at his companion.

“Throw it away? No. Perhaps your father will order me to keep it to wear, and make me give back your clothes.”

"I know my father better than that," cried Perry warmly.

"But see how he went on at me last night, and how he'll go on at me again to-day. I wish I hadn't done it."

"I'm glad you are come, Cil," said Perry; "but it does seem a pity. Whatever made you do it?"

"I hardly know," said the boy sadly. "I was so down in the dumps because I couldn't come with you, and I did so long, for it seemed as if you were going to have all the fun, and I was to be left drudging away at home, where it was going to be as dull as dull without you. And then I got talking to Diego, and when he heard that I was not coming too, he said he should give it up. He wasn't coming with three strangers, he said, for how did he know how people with plenty of guns and powder and shot would behave to him."

"He said that?" cried Perry.

"Yes, and a lot more about it, and he wanted me to ask father again to let me come."

"And did you?"

"No; where would have been the use? When father says a thing, he means it. Then Diego turned quite sulky, and I thought he was going to give up altogether. That was two days before you were going to start, and I begged him not to throw you over, and he said he wouldn't if I came too; and when I told him my father wouldn't let me, he said why not come without leave? And after a great deal of talking, in which he always had the best of me, because I wanted to do as he proposed, at last I said I would, and he got me the Indian dress and the bow and arrows."

"And when did you start?"

"That same night, after they'd gone to bed at home. I'd got the things all ready, and I soon dressed and locked up the clothes I took off in a drawer they weren't likely to look into, so that they might keep on expecting to see me back, thinking I'd gone out next morning early, and that would give me a start of all that night and all next day."

“What a thing to do!” said Perry.

“Yes; wasn’t it? Didn’t seem so bad in the hurry and worry of getting off I didn’t think about anything but hurrying on after you, and then I got very tired and hot, and that kept me too from thinking about anything but catching up to you.”

“But how did you know the way?” said Perry.

“Oh, that was easy enough. Diego told me which road he should take, and I’d been along there before as far as the place where he said he would wait for me.”

“Yes, he said when you would come.”

“And when at last I was getting nearer to you, I began to lose heart altogether, and I’d eaten all the food I brought with me; and I’d had so little sleep, because I was obliged to overtake you before you started. If I had not—”

He stopped short, and Perry stared at him.

“Go on,” he said at last. “If you hadn’t what?”

“If I hadn’t caught up to you, it would have been all over.”

“Nonsense! Why? You’d have gone back.”

“No. I’d been one whole day without anything to eat, and I couldn’t have got back, tired as I was, in less than four days. I should have lain down and died.”

“But you’d have met somebody,” said Perry.

“Up here? No. There’s a caravan of llamas comes down about twice a year, and now and then a traveller comes along, but very seldom. How many people did you meet?”

“Not one.”

"No, and you were not likely to. I knew this, and it made me keep on walking to overtake you, for it was my only chance."

"But did you think about what a risky thing you were going to do before you started?"

"No," said Cyril sadly; "all that came after, and there was no going back."

"But what a way your father and mother must be in. What will they think?"

"Oh, don't, don't, don't!" groaned Cyril. "Think I haven't gone over it all, times enough? I never thought how much there was in it, or what trouble it would make till it was too late. Do you think I'd have come to be near you for a minute last night, if I'd known that the colonel was going to shoot at me?"

"Of course not."

"And that's the way with lots of things: one don't think about them till it's too late. Hush, here he comes."

For while the boys were busy talking, they had climbed up the side of the valley, and come close up to the fire before they were aware of it.

"Humph!" ejaculated the colonel sternly. "So you've given up being a savage then, young fellow, eh?"

"Yes, sir," said Cyril humbly.

"You'll join us at breakfast, then, eh?"

"I don't feel as if I could eat anything, thank you, sir."

"No, I shouldn't think you did; I don't think I should have much of an appetite if I had behaved to my father and mother as you have behaved to yours. But there, you are my friend's son, and I must be hospitable, I suppose. Come and have breakfast, and then the sooner you are off back, the better."

Perry stared at his father so hard that the colonel noticed it.

“Well, boy,” he said, “what is it?”

“I was thinking about what you said, father.”

“About his going back? Well, what about it?”

“How is he to go all the way back by himself?”

“The same way as he came, sir, of course.”

“He couldn’t do it, father. His feet are sore, and he’d have to carry all the provisions he’d want on the way.”

“Provisions! To carry? Why, he hasn’t got any.—Have you, sir?” Cyril shook his head. “Then how do you expect to get back?”

“I don’t know,” said the boy sadly. “No!” thundered the colonel. “Of course you don’t know. Nice sort of a young scoundrel you’ve proved yourself. Scoundrel? No: lunatic. You can’t go on with us, because, out of respect for your father, I won’t have you; and you can’t go back alone, because you have no stores. What do you mean to do—lie down and die?”

“Perhaps I’d better,” said Cyril bitterly; “there seems to be nothing else I can do.”

“Well, don’t lie down and die anywhere near where I’m camping, sir, because it would be very unpleasant, and spoil my journey. What time do you start back, now you can go decently?”

“Now, sir,” said Cyril, and he turned sharply and took a step to go, but the colonel caught him by the shoulder.

“Come and have your breakfast first, sir. If you can behave badly to your father and mother, I cannot, by ill-treating their son. No nonsense: come and sit down, and I’m very glad to see that you are beginning to realise what a mad trick it is of which you have been guilty.—Ready, Manning?”

“Yes, sir,” came back from the fire, and a minute later they were all seated in silence, partaking of the hot coffee and fried bacon made ready for them by Manning, who gave Cyril a bit of a grin as he saw the change

in his appearance.

The colonel ate heartily, but Perry's appetite was very poor; and Cyril could hardly master a morsel, in spite of the colonel's manner becoming less harsh.

"Come, boy," he said, "eat. You've a long journey back, and you'd better make much of the provisions, now you have a chance. I'll send your father a line in pencil for you to bear, and to exonerate me from causing him so much uneasiness. By the way, how many days do you think it will take you to get back?"

Cyril tried to answer indignantly, but the words seemed to stick in his throat; and Perry's face grew red at what he considered to be his father's harsh treatment of the lad whom he looked upon as his friend. There was a painful silence, then, for some minutes, during which the colonel went on with his breakfast, and Perry sat with his eyes dropped, unable to get any farther.

All at once, Cyril spoke out in a half-suffocated voice, as he looked up indignantly at the colonel. "Isn't it too hard upon me, sir," he cried, "to keep on punishing me like this? You know I cannot go back, or I should have gone long ago."

"I want to punish you, sir, because I want to make you feel what a mad thing you have done, and how bitterly cruel you have been to a father who trusted in your honour as a gentleman, and a mother whose affection for you was without bounds."

"But, don't I know all that?" cried Cyril, springing up and speaking passionately now. "Hasn't it been torturing me for days past; and wouldn't I have gone back if I could, and owned how wrong I had been?"

"Only you had found that, when once you had foolishly put your foot on the slippery decline, you could not get back to the starting-point, and have gone on gliding down ever since," said the colonel, speaking quietly. "Yes, my lad, I believe you have been bitterly sorry for your foolish escapade since you started, and you have been severely punished. There, I will say no more about it."

“And you will help me to get back, sir?”

“If an opportunity occurs. As soon as we meet an Indian who can be trusted, you can take two of the mules, and a sufficiency of provisions to last till you get back. I am a man short now, or one of these should return with you at once. I am sorry for your people, but I cannot turn back now, and I’m sure your father would not ask it of me.”

“Thank you, sir,” said Cyril humbly.

“There,” cried the colonel, “I have done my duty by you, boy. You have had your punishment, and you have taken it bravely. I have no more to say, especially as you are not yet out of the wood, but have your father to meet.”

“Yes, sir, I have my father to meet,” said Cyril.

“Then, now eat your breakfast, and let’s get on again. Take off that miserable face, for I shall not refer to the trouble again.”

He held out his hand. Something very like a sob escaped from Cyril’s lips, as the boy made a quick snatch at his hand, and held it in his for a moment or two.

Then the breakfast went on in silence, and Perry’s appetite suddenly returned; while Cyril did not do so very badly after all.



Chapter Eight.

Signs of Suspicion.

Half an hour later, the little caravan was in motion, and, for the first time the preparations were delightfully easy. Eager to be of some service, and to try to make up for what he had done, Cyril began to help to load the mules, and above all, helped the colonel.

For the latter was trying hard to make the guide understand that he would like to pass through the patch of forest below them, before they ascended the mountain path visible away to their left; and the man stared at him in the most blank way possible, and then kept on pointing to a couple of great fagots which lay tightly bound upon one of the mules' backs.

"It's all right, sir; let me speak to him," cried Cyril eagerly. "He thinks you keep on telling him you want wood for the next fire we make, and he says he has got plenty." Then, turning to the guide, he rapidly said a few words in the rough dialect of Indian and Spanish, with the result that the man gave the colonel a sharp look, and then nodded his head, and went off with the leading mule.

Perry gave his father an eager look, and the colonel, who was smiling with satisfaction at the ease with which a difficulty had been smoothed away, frowned.

"Oh yes, it's very nice," he said; "but I cannot afford to have an intelligent interpreter on such terms as these, Master Perry. There, get on; I said I would not refer to the trouble any more.—Hi! Cyril, my lad, you'd better ride that black mule."

"Ride—the mule, sir?" said the boy hesitatingly.

"Yes; your feet are cut and sore. Rest till they are better."

"Hurrah!" whispered Perry. "Jump up, old chap. Here, I'll give you a leg. I shall ride, too, to-day."

The next minute, both boys were mounted, and following the last mule with the second Indian.

That patch of scrubby forest looked to be close at hand, but it took them nearly an hour to reach it, everything being on so grand a scale among the mountains; but at last they began to thread their way through, with the colonel eagerly examining the different trees, the Indians noting his actions curiously, but always hanging their heads again if they thought that they were observed.

The colonel kept up his examination, but did not seem very well satisfied; and soon after, the bushy trees with their shining green leaves were left behind, and they journeyed on through what had looked at a distance like fields of buttercups, but which proved to be a large tract covered with golden calceolaria, whose rounded turban-like flowers glistened in the sun. This looked the more beautiful from the abundance of grass, at which the mules sniffed carelessly, for they had passed the night eating.

Then before starting upward, there was the rapid stream to cross at a spot where the rocks had fallen in a perfect chaos from the mountain-side, completely filling up the chasm along which the water ran; and here they could hear it rushing, gurgling, and trickling down a hundred channels far below, in and out amongst the rugged masses of rock which dammed it back.

The mules made no difficulty about going over here, merely lowering their muzzles, and sniffing at the cracks and holes as they felt about with their forefeet, and climbed more than walked across to the solid rock and the bare, very faintly marked, stony track, which led up and up to a narrow gap in the mountains, evidently a pass.

Steeper and steeper grew the way, now zigzagging along a stiff slope, now making a bold dash at the mountain-side, over loose stones which went rolling down, setting others in motion till regular avalanches rolled down into the valley hundreds of feet beneath.

"Have you ever been here before, Cil?" said Perry, who now rode close behind his friend.

"No. Never any farther than the place where I overtook you."

“Isn’t this very dangerous?” continued Perry, as the mules climbed up, sending the loose stones rattling down to their right.

“Eh? Dangerous? I don’t know. I was wondering what they are thinking at home. Yes, I suppose it is dangerous.”

“Then hadn’t we better get down and walk?”

“What for? We couldn’t walk up so well as the mules. They’ve got four legs to our two. They’re a deal more clever and sure-footed than we should be.”

Perry kept his seat, fully expecting to have the mule make a slip, and then for them to go rolling down hundreds of feet into the valley; but in due time the gap-like opening was reached, and through this place, with the walls on either side so steep that they looked as if they had been cut, they passed into a narrow valley, or rather chasm, looking as if the mountains had been split down to their roots by some earthquake; and a chill of horror ran through Perry, as he checked his mule where the rest were panting and recovering their breath.

“Not a very cheerful-looking place, boys,” said the colonel, as he surveyed the great chasm, running apparently for miles through the mountains, zigzagging, returning upon itself, and always dark and profound in its lower part; so deep, in fact, that from where they stood it might have gone right down to the centre of the earth, while upward the sides rose, wall-like, toward three huge peaks, which looked dazzlingly white.

All at once Perry started, and it seemed as if an electric shock had passed through the mules. For there was a tremendous booming roar some distance away, followed by peal after peal, as if of thunder running for miles amongst the mountains, and not dying away till quite a couple of minutes had elapsed.

“Thunder,” whispered Perry.

“No, I think not,” said Cyril below his breath.—“What was that, Diego?” he said in the man’s tongue.

The answer was laconic, and accompanied by a smile.

“He says some of the snow fell over yonder, out of sight.”

Crash!

There was another roar, followed by its echoes.

“Look! look!” cried Cyril excitedly. “There, just below that place where the sun shines on the ice.”

“Yes, I see it,” said Perry; “a waterfall.” And he shaded his eyes to gaze at the glittering appearance of a cascade pouring over a shelf of ice into the depths below.

“Waterfall!” said the colonel, smiling. “There is no water up there to fall. It is a cataract of pieces of ice and solidified snow, thousands of tons of it broken away through the weight and the mass being loosened by the heat of the sun.”

“Gone!” cried Cyril.

“To appear again, lower down,” said the colonel, and they watched the glittering curve of dazzling ice as it reappeared and made another leap, and again another and another, lower down, till it finally disappeared by falling into some chasm behind a fold of the mountain. But the roar of the ice was continued like distant thunder, telling how enormous the fall must have been, though dwarfed by the distance into a size that appeared trifling.

Then the boys sat gazing at the black gulf before them, with its huge walls, which were nearly perpendicular in places.

“I say, of course, we’re not going along that way?” said Perry nervously.

“I don’t know,” replied Cyril; “the tracks generally do go along the worst-looking places.”

“But how can they have been so stupid as to pick those?” said Perry petulantly.

“They don’t pick them,” replied Cyril. “Only they are obliged to go along any places there are. Yes, we shall have to go along yonder.”

“Impossible.”

“How would you go, then?” said Cyril. “We’re not flies; we can’t climb up those walls; and you couldn’t go over the mountains if you wished, because of the ice and snow. You must go in and out round them where the valleys are open, and this is open enough. There is no other way.”

“But, I say, shan’t you be—er—just a little afraid to go down there?”

“No,” said Cyril quietly. “I don’t feel afraid a bit. There’s only one thing I feel afraid of now.”

“What’s that? Falling off one of the precipices?”

“No,” said Cyril sadly. “Meeting my father.”

Perry was silent, and his friend turned to Diego, who was going from mule to mule, examining the knots in the hide ropes by which the baggage was secured to the pack-saddles.

“Which way does the road go now?” he asked.

The man pointed straight along the black chasm running from below them away into the distance.

“Along there?” whispered Perry, as he comprehended the gesture.

“Yes, I thought so,” said Cyril coolly. “There can be no other way.”

“But what else did he say?” asked Perry breathlessly.

“He said, did your father want to go on any more.”

“What’s that?” cried the colonel.

Cyril repeated the man’s remark.

“Tell him of course, till I wish him to stop.”

Cyril delivered the message, and the man spoke again, gesticulating and pointing along the deep valley.

“He says, sir, that there is no place farther on where you will get a bigger valley, and that there are plenty of snow-mountains farther back.”

The colonel made a gesture full of impatience.

“What does he mean, Cyril? Doesn’t he want to go any farther?”

“I think that’s it, sir. I’ll ask him what he means.”

Cyril turned to the guide again, and there was a short, eager conversation, carried on for a minute or so.

“He says, sir, that the way along the track is very dangerous. It goes along that side, to the left, and the path is very narrow. If any one slipped, he would fall right to the bottom.”

“It must be the regular way across the mountains, where mules are accustomed to go, and he undertook to guide me; so tell him I go on.”

Cyril conveyed the colonel’s words to the man, who looked annoyed, and glanced suspiciously at the colonel as he said a few words, to which the boy replied angrily.

“What’s that? what’s that?” cried the colonel.

Cyril hesitated.

“Speak out, sir; what is it? Why don’t you speak?”

“He said he wanted to know where you wanted to go, and what for?” said Cyril, watching the colonel rather anxiously.

“Tell him as far as I please, and where I please,” said the colonel sternly. “Now then, at once; and tell him I should advise him not to ask me any more questions. Forward!”

Cyril interpreted the words, and the Indian looked sharply at his

employer, to see in his eyes the glances of a man accustomed to command, and without a word he took the rein of the leading mule, and went away to the left, seeming to Perry as if he were passing over the edge of a precipice, so suddenly the descent began, a dozen yards away.

But, as is often the case among the mountains, that which had looked so terrible at a little distance, lost its dangerous aspect when boldly approached, for, following closely upon the luggage mules, Perry reached the edge of that which he had supposed to be a precipice, and found that it was only a slope, going downward; but it was quite steep enough to require great care in crossing it, and the mules showed their comprehension of the fact that it must not be attacked lightly, by the way in which they walked, slowly and carefully, making sure of every step they took, till they were well across the green slope, and on to solid rock once more.

And now it was plain that the man had not exaggerated, for their path lay along what is known to geologists as a fault in the rock of which the side of the valley was composed—that is to say, the upper part of the huge mass appeared to have slipped sidewise, leaving four or five feet of the lower part of the valley wall like a shelf, and along this the mules began to walk cautiously, taking the greatest care that their loads did not touch the side of the rock, and consequently walking as close to the edge as possible.

The man had not exaggerated in the least. The shelf-like paths they had previously traversed were in places perilous enough, but here the bottom of the chasm-like valley was quite hidden from the travellers, and imagination added largely to the depth whenever either of the boys stole a glance downward.

No one spoke, but they rode on in single line, feeling appalled by the awful nature of the place, hour after hour, for the path wound and zigzagged, and seemed without end. At every slip of a mule's hoof, at every kick against a loose stone, Cyril felt his pulses leap, and Perry turned cold with apprehension; while, whenever Cyril turned to look round at his friend, each saw in the other's face a hard set look, and a strange, almost despairing stare in his eyes.

They were conscious of there being a rushing torrent somewhere far below, but it was down in the region of gloom, and they went on for hours without once catching even a gleam of the water, which at times sent up a dull thunderous roar, at others died away into a faint murmuring vibration, as if it were making for itself a subterranean channel through the bottom of the chasm. But little attention was paid to that, each of the travellers keeping his eyes fixed upon the narrow path in front, and rarely glancing up at the rocky wall on their left, or down into the profound gulf upon their right.

It was well on in the afternoon when, in turning an angle where the path shot off suddenly to their left, they came upon a wide opening lit up by the sun; but, saving that it was light, it was more repellent to the eye than the path along which they had come. For it was one wild chaos of tumbled-together rocks, looking as if, by some convulsion of nature, the whole of that portion of the valley side had been shattered and tumbled down from the shoulder of a huge mountain, destroying the pathway, and leaving in its place a broad stretch of masses of rocks, from pieces hundreds of tons in weight, to fragments not larger than a man's head.

Progress across this appeared impossible, but the guide went on for a few minutes and then stopped; for rugged as the place was, it possessed the quality of being level enough to enable them to make a halt for refreshments, without being on a narrow shelf where there was not room for a mule to be turned.

Hideous as the place was, every face brightened, for the strain of feeling in great peril was for the time removed, and even the mules showed their satisfaction by whinnying to each other, and giving themselves a shake, as they began to sniff about and browse upon the dry vegetation which grew amongst the fallen stones.

"Hah!" ejaculated the colonel, as he got off his mule, and looked round and above at the pure blue sky. "One feels as if one could breathe and move now."

"Yes," said Perry, with a shudder; "it was horrible."

"Nonsense, boy," cried the colonel. "It was not a place one would select

for a nice walk, but I should not have liked to miss such a journey. People at home do not know there are such wildly-grand places in the world—eh, Cyril?”

“No, sir,” replied the latter eagerly, for a pleasant word or two from the colonel was like a gleam of sunshine in his breast; “but it was dangerous. I should not have liked to get off my mule on that shelf.”

“Not on the precipice side, certainly,” said the colonel.

“Why, there wasn’t any room on the other,” cried Perry; “and if one had turned giddy, one would have gone down, down—ugh!”

“Yes, the place did look deep,” said the colonel, “but no one did turn giddy, and the mules went along as steadily as if they had been on a turnpike road.—Well, Manning, what’s the matter?”

“I was thinking about our having to go back along that there path, sir.”

“Well, I daresay we shall,” replied the colonel, “but you don’t mind.”

“Not mind, sir?” cried the old soldier gloomily.

“Not you, my man. I grant it is a little dangerous, but not so bad as walking along a shelf in the Nagari pass, with a Belooch behind every stone, taking aim at one with his long matchlock.”

John Manning grinned, took off his hat, and scratched his head.

“You did not complain about the danger then,” continued the colonel.

“No, sir, I didn’t, did I!” said the man, wrinkling up his face a little more; “and I ain’t going to grumble about this neither. I’ll go wherever you lead, colonel, like a soldier should.”

“Yes; I knew that when I chose you to come with us, Manning,” said the colonel quietly. “Well, what about dinner? We had better have it upon that flat-topped stone.”

“I shan’t be five minutes, sir; but I was hesitating about that stone. It’s just

in the hot sunshine, and if there are any snakes about here, that seems a likely place.”

“Any snakes about here, Diego?” asked Cyril, and the man shook his head, and replied that it was too cold.

A few minutes later they were enjoying a hearty meal, and the mules were revelling in their freedom from their loads, while the two Indians sat munching their sun-dried strips of meat, and talking together in a low voice.

“All these stones and rocks tumbled down from above, I suppose, sir?” said Cyril, after a prolonged look upward at the peak which rose high above them, with its smooth sides glittering with snow, and a thin, white, gauzy cloud just hiding the extreme point.

“Yes, my lad,” said the colonel, shading his eyes, and looking up. “The snow hides the old scar, but I should say that during some eruption the whole side of the crater fell outward, and crumbled down to here, as you say.”

“Crater?” cried Cyril.

“Yes; don’t you see that it is a volcano?”

“I did not, sir. Then those clouds up there are smoke?”

“More likely steam.”

“Steam? Those clouds?” cried Perry, gazing up. “And is this a burning mountain?”

“Yes. You will be able to say you have been on the side of a volcano,” said the colonel quietly. “Look at all this broken stone about; how glistening a great deal is, as if it had been molten. That piece, too, looks like scoria.”

“Then hadn’t we better go on at once?” cried Perry, getting up from the stone on which he was seated.

“What for? Are you afraid of an eruption?” said the colonel, with a shade of contempt in his voice.—“Feel that stone where he was sitting, Cyril; perhaps it is warm.”

“Yes, it was quite warm when I sat down upon it,” said Perry hastily. “All the stones about here are nearly hot.”

“Of course they are, sir,” cried his father. “Have they not been baking in this hot sunshine? There, sit down and finish your dinner. Mountains don’t break out into eruption without giving some warning.”

“But this must have been quite lately, sir,” said Cyril, to turn the colonel’s fire.

“Geologically lately, my lad,” he said, picking up and examining a stone, “but not in our time, nor our grandfathers’. In all probability these stones came crumbling down some hundreds of years ago.”

“Then you think there is no fear of another eruption, father?”

“If I did think there was, do you think I should be sitting here so calmly?” replied the colonel.

Perry had nothing to say to this, and he soon after became interested in a conversation which took place between Cyril and the guide, waiting impatiently until it was at an end.

“What does he say?” asked Perry, as Cyril turned away.

“That as soon as we’ve passed this rough place there’s another path, like the one we’ve come by, and he wants to know if your father means to risk it.”

Perry felt a shrinking sensation, but he said nothing, knowing how determined his father was when he had set his mind upon a thing.

“I told him we were going, of course. But, I say, Perry,” whispered Cyril, “how far does he mean to go?”

Perry shook his head.

“Is it any use to ask him where he means to stop?” whispered Cyril.

“No; not a bit.”

“Hallo! Look here!” cried Cyril, and Perry snatched up his piece from where it lay.

“Look out, father!” he cried, as one by one, with solemn, slow stride, some half-dozen peculiar-looking, flat-backed, long-necked animals came into sight round an angle of the valley at the far side of the chaos of stones amongst which they had made their halt.

“Put down that gun. Don’t be stupid,” cried Cyril. “Can’t you see they are llamas?”

“What if they are? I suppose they are good to eat.”

“I shouldn’t like to try one,” cried Cyril, laughing.

The colonel had now caught sight of the animals, which kept on coming round the corner in regular file, with their long necks held up stiffly.

“Quite a caravan,” the colonel said. “Ask Diego what they are carrying.”

“I know, without asking, sir,” said Cyril eagerly. “They’re bringing down Quinquina—kina, as they call it. You know, sir—bark.”

“Hah!” ejaculated the colonel eagerly, and he took out the little double glass he carried to examine the train of animals, which had evidently come from the track that they were to pursue after their halt.

“You’re wrong, I think, my lad,” said the colonel, after a long examination through his glass. “They have all got bales of something on their backs, and, judging from the outside, I think they are skins or hides.”

“Yes, sir, that’s right,” cried Cyril, “but it is bark inside. They make the bark up into bales, and cover them with hides before binding them up. I know; I’ve seen them before.”

The colonel continued his inspection, and Cyril hurriedly questioned the

guide before speaking to the former again.

“He says they are taking the kina down to the port, and that they will halt here to rest.”

“Then we’ll stay a little longer and see them,” said the colonel, closing his glass after seeing several armed men turn the corner and begin to climb beside the llamas over the rugged stones.

Chapter Nine.

Cyril Scents Danger.

As the men in charge of the llamas came in sight of the colonel and his party, they waited for more and more to join them, and it soon became plain that they expected or meditated an attack; but a peaceful message sent on by the colonel gave them confidence, and the swarthy men, for the most part armed, came on, followed now by their charge, till the great opening in the rock-wall was filled by the drove of rough, woolly-looking animals; there being over five hundred in the caravan, and each bearing about a hundredweight of the precious fever-averting bark.

Diego and Cyril’s powers were soon brought into requisition for interpreting; the strangers willingly stating where they were going, but proving themselves as eager to know the colonel’s business as he showed himself about the bark bales, before the mules were once more loaded, and the English party started again, so as to get to the end of the valley before dark.

The coming of the caravan had given the boys encouragement, for, as Cyril argued to Perry, the track could not be so very bad if that drove of animals bearing loads could come along it in safety.

“I don’t know about that,” replied Perry. “I had a good look at them. Short-legged, broad things like these, with soft spongy feet like camels, seem made for walking up here among the rocks; while the mules, with their long legs and hard hoofs, look as if they might slip and go over at any time.”

This was just after they had started, and found, as soon as they had cleared the rocky chaos, that the shelf path was so wide that the lads were able to ride abreast; and as the colonel had gone right in front with the guide, the boys began talking about the men with the llamas.

“Any one would think your father wanted to go into the kina trade,” said Cyril, who was rapidly recovering his spirits. “Did you notice how the Indian frowned when Diego kept on talking to him, and I asked all those questions for your father?”

“I thought he seemed impatient and tired, and as if he wanted to sit down and rest.”

“Oh, it wasn’t that,” said Cyril quietly; “it’s because they want to keep all about the bark trees very secret, so that no one else shall be able to grow it and supply it for sale. You heard my father say how the people who went in search of the trees never came back again. Father feels sure that they were murdered.”

“No; that was the people who went after the treasures.”

“Oh, was it? I forget. Perhaps it was both,” said Cyril. “My head got in such a muddle over my coming after you, that things are mixed. I suppose it was because Colonel Campion asked so much about the kina.”

“Father takes a great interest in everything; that’s why he travels and has come here,” said Perry. “Look, there goes a condor.”

“Well, let him go,” said Cyril. “He isn’t good to eat, and you’ve got plenty of provisions to last till you get to some village on the other side of the mountains. But, I say, it does seem strange that you people should come here of all places in the world.”

“I don’t see it,” replied Perry. “It’s a very wonderful place to come to, but I wish it wasn’t quite so dangerous. I keep feeling afraid of turning giddy.”

“Yes, it’s a wonderful place to come to, and I had no idea that the valleys were so awful and deep; but I should enjoy it if it wasn’t for thinking of them at home. I hope they believe I’ve come after you. Wish I’d left a line

to say where I had gone.”

“It’s too late to wish that now,” said Perry.

“Yes, but one can’t help wishing it all the same. I wish I knew why your father has come up here.”

At that moment there was a warning shout from forward, and another from John Manning in the rear, for the boys had been so wrapped in their thoughts that they had not noticed how rapidly the path was narrowing. They had, however, another hint, and that was from Cyril’s mule, which, from long training on similar paths, knew exactly what to do, and went on ahead, while Perry’s stopped short on the narrowing shelf which followed all the windings and angles of the rocky wall, and had become so strait that Perry shrank from watching the laden mules, whose loads every now and then brushed against the stones, and one completely caught against a rough projection, making the intelligent animal that bore it stop and ease away a little, leaning more and more over the precipice till Perry’s hands turned cold and wet, and he held his breath. Just, though, as he was about to close his eyes, so as not to see the poor brute plunge headlong down to where it would certainly be dashed to pieces, the load escaped from the awkward corner, and the mule trudged on just as before, while Perry heard a deeply-drawn sigh just behind him.

“I thought he’d have gone, Master Perry,” said John Manning. “Mules ain’t got no nerves, that’s for certain, and if ever you hear any one say in the future as a donkey’s a stupid animal, you tell him he don’t know what he’s talking about.”

“That mule’s sensible enough, at all events,” said Perry, without venturing to turn his head, lest he should have to look down into the gulf.

“Sensible, sir? Why, he acted just as a human being would. I call it wonderful. I say, Master Perry, though.”

“Yes? But I wish you wouldn’t talk to me so, while we are going along a place like this.”

“Don’t say so, Master Perry, because I want to talk. It keeps one from feeling a bit skeary, because this is a place, sir, really.”

“Well, what do you want to say? Speak loud, for I can’t turn round to listen.”

“But if I speak loud, the colonel will hear me, sir, and I want to talk about him.”

“Well, go on then; what is it?”

“Can’t you tell me, sir, where we’re going to, and what we’re going for?”

“We’re going over the mountains, John.”

“Well, sir, I know that; but what are we going for?”

“To find the valley of diamonds, and throw down lumps of meat for the rocs to fetch out.”

“No, no, sir, that won’t do,” said John Manning, shaking his head. “As you said to me the other day, that’s only a story out of the *’Rabian Nights*, and not real truth, though these places might just as well be something of the kind, from the looks of them. But, I say, sir, you do know where we’re going, and what for, don’t you?”

“No, I have not the slightest idea. Ask my father yourself.”

“What, sir! Me ask the colonel about the plan of his campaign? Why, I should as soon have thought of asking the Dook o’ Wellington.”

“We shall know in good time, I daresay,” said Perry; and then a slip on the part of one of the mules ahead made them turn cold once more.

But the clever animal recovered itself on the instant, and for hours they kept on along this path, till the boys despaired of reaching its end, and began to calculate on the possibility of having to encamp on a place like that for the night.

But it is a long lane that has no turning, and just when there was a sensible deepening of the gloom, and the peeps they had of the sky overhead were of a golden amber, they turned an angle and became aware of an increase in the murmuring sound of water, which thenceforth

grew louder and louder, till it was evident that they were approaching some extensive fall.

An hour later they were in full sight of where it came thundering down hundreds of feet, spouting forth from a gap, and plunging down on to a huge buttress of rock, which shot it off again far into the air, distributing it so that it went on down into the valley like a misty rain, and without a sound arising from below.

The fall was magnificent, for, as they approached, the upper part was turned to gold by the setting sun, and to add to the beauty of the scene, there was a patch of forest on either side, and the narrow shelf was broadening out to where it ran into a side valley, all golden green and darkened shadow. For they had reached the end of the terrific gorge, and there were scores of places just in front ready for the formation of ideal camps, without the risk of an incautious step sending its unhappy author thousands of feet down into the depths below.

In another half-hour they were in a place which, by comparison with the sterile defile of darkness and depression, seemed to the lads beautiful in the extreme; and after a hearty meal, while the colonel was looking round the camp, as he called it, and having a farewell glance for the night at the mules, which were thoroughly enjoying the abundance of grass, Cyril sat looking very thoughtful and depressed.

"He's thinking of home and his people," said Perry to himself, and then, on the impulse of the moment:

"I say," he cried, "why didn't my father send you back along with the llama train? I never thought of that before."

"Are you in such a hurry to get rid of me?" said Cyril bitterly.

"No, of course not; but as he said he should send you home by the first, I thought it strange that he had not done so."

"Because they were not going to San Geronimo," said Cyril quietly. "They would turn off to the north, just where I first joined you, and I suppose he thought, after what I had suffered, it would be too cruel to send me to find a great deal of my way back with people like that."

They relapsed into silence for a time, during which period John Manning cleared away and washed up as methodically as if he were at home, while the two Indians sat by the fire munching away at the supply of biscuit given to them.

“What are you thinking about, Perry?” said Cyril at last.

“The stars. How big and bright they are up here. What were you thinking about?”

“Diego, our guide.”

“What about him?—that he ought to be fonder of water, even if it is icily-cold?”

“No,” said Cyril seriously. “I want to know why he has turned so quiet and serious, and why he seems to be always watching your father in such a peculiar way.”

“Father was sharp with him, and ordered him to go on, when he seemed to want to go back.”

“Yes, and I suppose he did not quite like it; but that isn’t all.”

“What is all, then?” said Perry.

“Ah, that’s what I want to find out. He puzzles me. He’s thinking about something, and I shouldn’t wonder if he has taken it into his head that your father has come up here to look for the Incas’ treasures.”

“Pooh! Why should he think that?” returned Perry.

“Because these Indian chaps are horribly suspicious as well as superstitious. They would think it a horrible sin to touch the gold if there is any; and if it is found, they would be ready to defend it.”

“What with? Bows and arrows?” cried Perry, laughing.

“Yes, and blowpipes.”

“Why don’t you introduce pop-guns as well?”

“Because they are toys,” said Cyril seriously, “and blowpipes are not. Don’t you know the tiny darts they send out are poisoned, and that one will kill anything it hits?”

“Is that true?” said Perry, whose eyes dilated at the idea.

“Quite true. I saw a man kill several birds with the darts. They died almost directly they were struck, and I have been told by father that he has seen small animals die in a few minutes after being scratched.”

“But do you think—Oh, what nonsense! You have got your head crammed with that idea about the gold.”

“Perhaps so,” said Cyril thoughtfully, “and maybe I’m wrong. But I don’t like to see old Diego turn so gruff and distant, and it seemed strange for him to go and talk for a long time with the Indians in charge of the llamas. I saw them look very strangely and suspiciously at your father afterwards.”

“Those Indians? Why, what could it be to them? Ah, the Peruvian Indians are said to be joined together to protect everything belonging to the old days when they were a great nation, and keep it for the time when the Incas come back to rule over them again.”

“Say, Master Perry,” said John Manning in a low voice, “your eyes are younger than mine. Just cast ’em along the rock path we come to-day.”

“Yes, what for?”

“Are you looking straight along, sir?”

“Yes.”

“Well, what do you see?”

“Nothing at all.”

“Try again, sir.”

Both Perry and Cyril looked along the path, tracing it faintly in the coming night for some distance along, beyond where the great fall came thundering down.

"I can't see anything," said Perry.

"Nor I," said Cyril. "Yes, I can. There's something that looks like shadows moving."

"Steady, sir; don't seem as if you were noticing it, but notice it all the same. It struck me as strange ten minutes ago, but I thought it was fancy. But you see it, sir, and it must be right. Now then, sir, what do you make that to be?"

"Indians," said Cyril promptly.

"That's right, sir—what I thought; and they're watching us, and after no good."

"What! Do you think they are hanging round the camp to try to steal?"

"Don't know, sir," said John Manning gruffly. "I hope that's the worst."

Chapter Ten.

John Manning Thinks.

John Manning's curious remark sent a thrill through Cyril, and, trying hard not to appear as if watching, he strained his eyes in the direction indicated, but the gloom had increased, and neither he nor Perry could make out anything more.

"What do you mean by 'you hope that's the worst?'" said Perry.

"Well, sir, I hardly know how to tell you."

"Speak out," said Cyril rather huskily. "If you think there's danger, tell us, so that we can tell the colonel, and put him on his guard."

“Well, young gents, I did give him a hint once, but he nearly jumped down my throat,” said John Manning.

“What!” cried the boys in a breath.

“Well, sir, that’s what you clever folk call methy-physical. I told him I didn’t think the Indians was to be trusted, and that I fancied they were keeping an eye upon everything he did, and he insulted me, sir.”

“Nonsense, John,” said Perry. “My father wouldn’t insult you.”

“O’ course you stick up for your dad, Master Perry, as is quite right natural, and your duty to. But I put it to you, Master Cyril: he’s a soldier, and I’m a soldier, and if one soldier calls another a stoopid old woman, with no more pluck than a quill pen, isn’t that an insult?”

“But Colonel Campion did not mean it, I’m sure,” said Cyril impatiently. “Now then, don’t waste time. What is it you think?”

“Well, sir, I think our Indians said something to those Indians who were with the llamas, and three or four turned back and followed after us.”

“Are you sure?” said Cyril anxiously.

“Well, sir, I’m sure I saw some of them dodging us and following. I wasn’t very sure at first, for I thought p’raps the colonel was right, and I was a bit of an old woman growing scared at shadows; but I feel pretty sure now.”

“But why should they follow us?” asked Cyril tentatively. “You have some idea in your head.”

“Well, sir, I have; and whether it’s right or wrong I can’t say, but it seems to me as these people are all in league together, and they don’t want anybody to come up in the mountains. They want to know what we’re about.”

“But don’t you fancy that, because it is what you have been thinking, John,” said Perry. “You have been wonderfully anxious to know where we were going, and what for.”

“That’s a true word, sir,” replied the man, “but I think they want to know too. It seems to me they’re afraid we want to take something out of their country.”

“Nonsense,” said Perry.

“Nonsense!” said Cyril sharply. “He’s right, Perry. It’s just what I told you, and—”

“Now, quick, Mr Cyril!” whispered John. “Turn towards me, as if you were going to speak, and look toward the path we came by.”

Cyril responded quickly, and saw by the light of the fire, which had just then blazed up brightly, a dark face peering at them over a great piece of rock. He even saw the flash of the fire in the watcher’s eyes, and then, as he pretended to hand something to Manning, his look was averted for a moment, and when he glanced again in the same direction, the face was gone.

Cyril responded quickly, and saw a dark face peering at them over a great piece of rock.

“Now, Master Cyril, what do you say?” whispered John Manning.

“I say it may only be curiosity,” replied Cyril, “but certainly we are being watched, and the colonel ought to know directly.”

“Hah!” ejaculated the old soldier, with a sigh of satisfaction, “this puts one in mind of old times up in the hill-country, with the niggers waiting to go at you with matchlock or knife. I didn’t think I was ever going to have the luck to see a bit of fighting again.”

Perry started, and Cyril’s face looked in the firelight as if it was flushed.

“Where’s the colonel?” he said quickly. “Be steady, Perry, old chap. There’s nothing to be frightened about. Don’t look as if anything was the matter. Come and find your father, and let’s go and speak to Diego and the other man.”

“But I can’t speak to them,” said Perry excitedly.

“Never mind, I will. Come along.”

“And suppose they shoot at us,” whispered Perry, “with an arrow or blowpipe?”

“They’d better!” said Cyril grimly. “But they won’t do that. Come on.”

He walked on toward the fire, behind which the two Indians were crouched, apparently enjoying the warmth and the charqui they were munching; but they gazed furtively up at the two boys as they came up, and one of them started slightly as Cyril made a sudden stoop, but became impassive directly when the boy picked up two or three half-burned brands and threw them into the middle of the fire before holding his hands out to the flame.

“The waterfall makes it feel cold up here, and damp,” he said to the guide in his patois, and the man smiled as he spoke, and then pointed up a defile away above them as he replied.

“What does he say?” asked Perry.

“That the wind comes down that narrow rift from the snow, and it is that which makes it cold. I only half understand him.”

He turned laughingly to the guide, and said a few words to that effect, and the man laughed and nodded as he replied.

“Oh, what a big fib!” said Cyril merrily. “He says I speak his tongue beautifully.—Oh, there’s the colonel looking round at the mules. They’re having a beautiful feed here. Plenty of grass for the mules,” he said to the Indian, and the man nodded again, and said it was good.

The colonel said something very similar, as the boys strolled carelessly up, at a time when Perry felt as if he must run to his father, shouting: “Look out! Danger!”

“We must stay here two or three days, boys,” the colonel said. “The mules will revel in this grass and fresh water, and make up for their fasting lately.”

"I think not, sir," said Cyril, speaking carelessly, and making believe to pat one of the mules, which turned sharply round and showed him its heels.

"What do you mean, sir?"

Cyril told him quickly; and as he spoke, the colonel's hand twitched, and went involuntarily to his side, as if he were seeking a sword.

"Humph!" he ejaculated. Then quietly, and looking at the mules: "That's right, lads; don't make a sign. I daresay John Manning is right. He has eyes like a hawk, and he is true as steel. Well, I'm not surprised. I half expected it, though not quite so soon."

"What shall we do then, father?" said Perry anxiously. "Go back?"

"Englishmen don't go back, Perry," said his father gravely. "They would not have colonised the whole world if they did. No, boy, we are going on, and I don't think there is anything to fear. These people are all joined together to watch every stranger who comes into their country, in dread lest they should be in search of the Incas' treasures, and they would be ready to fight in defence."

"And kill us, father," said Perry, with his lips paling in the firelight.

"If we let them, boy. But we are well-armed, John Manning and I, and know how to use our weapons if it should come to a struggle, which I doubt."

"Then you have come in search of something, sir! I knew it," cried Cyril.

"Yes, I have come in search of something, boy, and I mean to find it and take it away out of the country in spite of all their watchfulness and care. Now, then, what do you say to that? Are you afraid, and do you want to get back?"

"I don't know, sir," said Cyril quietly. "Yes, I do. I can't help feeling a bit frightened like. I don't want to, but I do."

"And you wish to go back? For I warn you I am going on in spite of all obstacles."

"No, I don't," said Cyril quietly. "I shall go with you. I'm not going to leave Perry in the lurch."

"There's a coward for you, Perry, my boy," said the colonel, laughing. "You must be a very good sort of a fellow to have made a friend like that; one who risks his father's anger to come with you, and who is now ready to run more risks for your sake."

"I'm afraid it isn't that, sir," said Cyril frankly. "I wanted to come because I thought it was going to be a great treat."

"There, say no more now. Listen to me. I shall take it for granted that we have spies in the camp, and that, consequent upon their communication to the men of the llama caravan, some of that party are following us. Of course the poor fellows consider that they are performing a religious duty, so I shall not charge them with their action. They will go on watching us till they find I have done something which calls for immediate action. Till then we are safe."

"Then you will not do anything, sir?" said Cyril, looking quite aghast.

"Oh yes, I shall be upon my guard. From now there will be watch set every night in camp, and we shall sleep with our arms charged and ready for action at a moment's notice."

"Yes," said Cyril, with a sigh of satisfaction.

"You can handle a gun, Cyril?"

"Yes, sir, after a fashion. I have often been up in the hills with my father, shooting."

"That will do," said the colonel. "Now let's go and have a look at the falls before setting watch and going to our blankets. Tell the men to keep up a pretty good fire, Cyril."

He led the way to where the Indians were seated as he spoke, and nodded to them smilingly as Cyril gave his orders; and then, as the men quickly obeyed them, the colonel led the way to the edge of a cliff! From here they could see the large body of water come gliding down in a curve

from far away up in the darkness, to gleam in the firelight as it passed them, and then dive down into the deeper darkness below.

“An awful-looking place, boys, in the darkness,” said the colonel quietly. “There now, we’ll seek our blankets—at least you shall, for I shall take the first watch; John Manning will take the second.”

“Shall I sit up with you, father?” said Perry.

“No, my lad, we must husband our resources. Your turn will come to-morrow night. Remember what I said about the guns. Make no show, but have your ammunition ready for use at a moment’s notice. The Indians will see that, you may depend upon it, and act accordingly.”

Half an hour later the two boys were lying inside a little shelter formed of the mules’ packs and a wall-like mass of rock, listening to the roar of the falls, and watching the figure of the colonel standing gazing out into the night, as he rested his chin upon the barrel of his piece.

“I shan’t go to sleep to-night,” said Perry in a whisper.

“Oh yes, you will. I shall,” replied Cyril.

Just then John Manning came close up, with his gun in his hand.

“Good-night, gentlemen,” he said. “Colonel says I’m to come and lie in the shelter here. Don’t kick in the night, please, because I’m going to be at your feet. I had a messmate once out in India, who, when we were in barracks, used to sleep like a lamb, but so sure as we were on the march and had to share a tent, which meant he slept in his boots, you might just as well have gone to sleep with a pack of commissariat mules, for the way in which he’d let go with his heels was a wonder. Good-night, gentlemen, good-night.”

Chapter Eleven.

The Peril Thickens.

There must have been something wonderfully lulling in the roar of that fall, and a feeling of great confidence in the fact that the colonel would keep watch over them half the night, and John Manning, stern, tried, old soldier that he was, for the second half; for, though the boys lay there, fully convinced that they would not be able to sleep, and had visions of knife-armed Indians creeping toward them through the darkness, they soon dropped off, and rested uninterruptedly for eight hours, when they sprang up at a touch from John Manning.

"If you gentlemen will relieve guard," he said quietly, "I'll see about breakfast."

Soon after, as if nothing whatever had happened, they all sat down to a hearty meal, and that over, once more started upon their journey through the mountains; the Indians seeming more willing, and at the suggestion that the mules should rest for a day or two in that luxuriant pasturage, eagerly assuring the colonel, through Cyril, that for days to come they would find plenty, and that the road would be easier.

On hearing this, the colonel decided to go on, and soon found that the guide's words were correct; for, during the next six days, they traversed smiling valleys, with grass and trees in abundance. Snowcapped hills rose high above them; but where they journeyed, they were in a beautiful temperate climate, with rich soil and abundance of flowers.

This part of their journey was delightful; for the way along the passes was easy, and the colonel, who was a dead shot, several times over added to their larder with his gun.

But they went on in no false security; for several times over they passed Indians, and were made fully aware of the fact that every mile they took was carefully watched, and that the leader of the expedition inspected no mountain shelf, cave, or patch of dwarf forest, without his acts being duly noted, though in no observant way.

Diego proved to be a perfect guide; and, making no objections now, he led them steadily on in a way which would have disarmed suspicion with some people; but the colonel was quietly on the alert, and went on examining plant, flower, and tree, at one time with all the patient care of a

botanist; and at another time, when they were climbing some rugged shelf in a ravine, letting no mineral escape his observation.

And all the while the little party, though they made no sign, were perfectly well aware that they were being watched.

“Strikes me that when we’ve got it, they won’t let us take a simple lump of gold out of the place, Master Cyril.”

“No,” said the boy drily.

“But I mean some of the precious stones, Master Perry. I shall have them.”

“How?”

“Swaller ’em, sir, if I can manage it without being seen. Why, do you know I went down by that bit o’ stream, last night, to bathe my feet, and before I got there, I stopped short and sneezed, and before I had time to say, ‘Bless me!’ there was an Indian’s head popped up over a bush, and another from behind a stone, to see what was the matter.”

“Yes; I’ve noticed something of the kind,” said Cyril thoughtfully. “But I shouldn’t advise you to swallow any stones you find.”

“Why, sir?”

“Because they won’t agree with you.”

“They agree with chickens,” said Manning, grinning, “and make their hard food digest, so I don’t see why they shouldn’t agree with me, sir. But, I say, Master Perry, let it out now; I’m sure you’d feel a deal happier if you told us what the colonel’s hunting for.”

“I shall not tell you, because I don’t know. My father knows best about what he’s doing, I daresay. We thought, the other day, that we were in great danger; but you saw how quietly he took it, and how it all came to nothing.”

“Perhaps the time has not come yet,” said Cyril rather seriously; “don’t

let's talk too soon."

No more was said then; but a few days later, the others thought of how prophetic the boy's words had proved.

But it was not until another fortnight had passed, and a day had arrived when, after journeying through a deep defile of a similar character to that which they had threaded upon the day when they met the llama caravan, they reached a point upon the slope of a huge mountain, from which they looked down over a glorious picture of hill and dale, verdant forest and wide-reaching plain, with, in two places, thin serpentine threads of water glistening in the sun.

"At last," said the colonel gravely. "It has been a long journey, boys, but we have reached the point I sought."

Cyril looked at him inquiringly; and Perry, who felt that he was expected to speak, said: "Yes; it's very grand. How different to being in amongst the mountains!"

"Yes, boy; we can breathe out here. Did you notice the water in the last two streams we passed?"

"Yes; very beautiful with the overhanging trees, father."

"Yes; but the way they ran?"

"No," said Perry.

"Look yonder, then," said the colonel, pointing to a little rivulet which leaped out from between two masses of rock. "Where is that going?"

"Into another stream, I suppose," said Perry, "and that will run into another, and so on, till they all together form a big river, and run into the ocean."

"Yes; but what ocean, my boy? Don't you see that we have crossed the watershed? Till the last day or two, all the streams we passed have been going constantly west into the Pacific. Now we have passed through the mountains, and found the eastern slope, where all run down to make the

vast rivers which flow into the Atlantic.”

“I should not have known,” said Perry.

“Nor I,” said Cyril; “but its much fresher out here.”

“Yes, we have left the dry region behind, to get into the land of rains and many waters. We saw no such forests as those which are spread before us even at this height.”

“Is this high, sir?” asked Cyril.

“Yes, my lad, about nine thousand feet.”

“And shall we go back the same way?” asked Perry.

“Possibly, my lad, but more probably not. It depends upon the way the Indians treat us.”

“But we can never find our way back any other way,” cried Cyril. “Don’t think about it. We should be lost up here in these mountains.”

“No, because we have a guide with us, my boy, and if I can help it, he will not leave us till he has seen us safely back.”

Cyril said nothing, but the thought occurred to him:

“Suppose we wake some fine morning, and the guides are gone.”

They camped that night on the slope of the hill, and till it was growing dark, the colonel busied himself with his glass, carefully, as it seemed to the boys, inspecting the forest in every direction, and ending by closing the telescope with a satisfied smile, which was not lost upon Cyril.

“He has found it,” he said to Perry, as soon as they were alone.

“Found what?”

“What he has come after.”

Perry looked at him wonderingly.

“You have found out?” he said.

“No, I wish I had; but didn’t you see how pleased he seemed when he came back to supper, and said that we should camp here for a few days?”

“Yes, I noticed that.”

“Well, doesn’t it mean that we have got to the spot at last that he was in search of?”

Perry shook his head.

“Well, you see if we don’t find out something to-morrow.”

Perry had almost forgotten his companion’s words at breakfast-time the next morning, but they came to his memory as soon as they had done, for the colonel said:

“Now, boys, we’ll make a little expedition along the edge of the forest here this morning. Cyril, tell the men to mind the mules don’t stray too far, and keep up the fire.”

John Manning looked sharply at the colonel, as much as to say: “Then you mean me to come also, sir?”

“Yes, I want you to carry spare ammunition and the game-bag. I hope we shall have some sport along here,” said the colonel, who had caught the old soldier’s inquiring gaze.

Half an hour later, they were tramping along the mountain-slope, through open woods that were quite park-like, and gave them glimpses of the far-spreading region below, all vested in a delicate bluish mist, while where they journeyed all was brilliant sunshine. There was a delicious feeling of spring in the air, for though the sun was hot, the air was crisp and cool, making the task of walking easy, and giving the travellers a feeling of elasticity, wanting when passing through the gloomy gorges of the huge mountain-chain.

The colonel led off as if he were quite accustomed to the place, though

there was no sign of a track, and before they had gone far, Perry whispered a hope that they would not lose their way.

“No fear,” said Cyril. “We are keeping the mountains on our left, and we must keep them on our right as we go back. We have only to keep along till we strike the stream, and follow it up or down till we reach our fire. I daresay we shall see it long before we are near, by the smoke.”

They had gone quite a couple of miles without seeing any trace of game, the woods being wonderfully silent. The colonel was on in front, and the two boys about twenty yards behind, each bearing a gun, when Perry suddenly paused.

“Where’s John Manning?” he said. “I thought he was close up.”

They waited, and then whistled several times, but there was no response, and then Cyril ran back to where the land was more open, but still there was no sign; and he was about to run forward again, and signal to the colonel to stop, when the missing man suddenly appeared with his piece at the trail, running hard, but keeping himself bent down, to avoid being seen.

“What’s the matter?” said Cyril, as the old soldier came up. “Seen a deer?”

“No, sir; I only had a suspicion.”

“What of?”

“Struck me that Master Diego would come after us to see which way we went.”

“Well?”

“Yes, I hung back to watch, and he’s half a mile behind, tracking us by our footmarks, with his head down, or else he’d have seen me.”

“Come on, and tell the colonel.”

They hurried forward, and joined Perry, waiting for them anxiously.

“At last,” he said excitedly. “Did you see?”

“See what?”

“Those Indians.”

“No. Where?” said Cyril.

“On both sides, among the trees. They are watching us. What ought we to do?”

“Rearguard closes up on the main body,” said John Manning quickly. “Single file, and at the double. Now, sir, you head the advance. March.”

Cyril sprang forward to overtake the colonel, looking down as he trotted forward in search of trampled-down grass and broken twigs; but from the first he saw nothing, neither could he hear a sound, and after some minutes’ progress, he pulled up short, and breathing hard.

“We had better spread out now,” he said, “or we shall overlook him.”

“Didn’t you see which way he went?” said John Manning.

“Out this way somewhere,” said Perry. “He can’t be far away.”

“Enemy closing in,” said the old soldier in a low voice. “Forward, my lads. We must find him now.”

Those last words sent a chill through Cyril, who sprang forward again, and then nearly uttered a shout; for, about fifty yards in front, he caught sight of the colonel standing half hidden by the thick growth at the edge of a clearing, where some dozen or so of men were busy apparently cutting wood. Beyond them were two rough huts thatched with boughs, and piled up in little stacks were fagots of the wood which the men had cut down.

They were so busy over their task, that they had not noticed the presence of the colonel, neither did they hear the approaching footsteps as they worked on. But the colonel did, and turned and hurried back to meet the boys, holding up his hand to command silence. His eyes were flashing

with satisfaction as they came up, and he had a branch of one of the trees about them in his hand.

“We thought we had lost you,” said Perry excitedly. “What’s that?”

“The magic tree I have come all these thousands of miles to seek, boy, and now—”

“Will you cast your eye this way, sir?” said John Manning, in a hoarse low voice of warning. “Indians all around. Do it mean mischief, or are they only friends?”

He gave his head a backward wag as he spoke, and as Cyril looked excitedly in the indicated direction, he saw that which made him thrust his hand into his pouch to count the cartridges; for if the coming Indians meant offence, they as travellers were in mortal peril of losing their lives.



Chapter Twelve.

At Bay.

To have attempted to escape, the colonel said, would be madness, for it would have suggested fear of the approaching Indians, and made them think at once that the visit to their secluded haunts meant no good to them; so throwing his piece into the hollow of his left arm, and bidding the others do as he did, Colonel Campion took a few steps forward to meet the Indians, and held out his hand.

This had the effect of making them halt a few yards from them, and keeping their faces fixed upon the English party, they talked rapidly among themselves.

At that moment Cyril caught sight of Diego hanging back among the men in the rear.

"There's our guide, sir," he said hurriedly. "Shall I call him?"

"He there?" said the colonel sharply. "Yes, call him. No: go through them, and fetch him, boy."

Cyril hesitated for a moment or two, and his heart beat high; but the order had been given in true military style, and it had its influence. The boy felt that he would be backed up by the colonel in all he did, and throwing his gun over his right shoulder, he stepped boldly forward, finding that the white was master even here; for the Indians, taken by surprise at his firmness, parted at once to let him pass, and then Cyril's pulses beat a little more rapidly, for the men closed up again, shutting him off from his friends.

The boy felt this, but he knew that he must not show fear, and without a moment's hesitation, he walked on up to where Diego stood half hidden behind a couple of the Indians, and clapping his hand upon the man's shoulder, "Come," he said, "the colonel wants you."

The guide shrank at Cyril's touch, and looked at his fellows for support,

but no one stirred, and uttering a low sigh, the man allowed himself to be marched away to where the colonel stood, the Indians giving way on either side, and then closing up again in silence, and without the slightest show of menace.

For to them it was as if a superior being had calmly passed among them and fetched one, each man feeling relieved that he was not the one selected, and that, had he been, he would have felt compelled to go.

“Well done, British boy,” said the colonel to Cyril, as he stopped before him with the guide, who looked of a curious dusky colour now; his eyes showing the whites around the iris, and his lips seeming parched as he moistened them hastily with his tongue from time to time.

“Now then,” continued the colonel sharply, as if he were addressing a delegate from a mutinous company of his old regiment, “why have you brought all these men after me, sir?—Interpret quickly, Cyril.”

This was done, and the man’s voice trembled as he answered.

“He says they made him come, sir,” said Cyril.

“Which is a lie,” cried John Manning; “for he has been dodging us all the time.”

“Silence there. ’Tention!” cried the colonel harshly, and the old soldier drew himself up smartly, lowered and then shouldered arms, just as if he had been on parade.

It was a trifle, but it had its effect upon the Indians, giving them a great idea of the importance of the colonel, who stood there, erect and stern, issuing his orders; and in their eyes he was a great white chief, if not a king.

“Now,” he said sharply, “let that boy ask him what these people want.”

Cyril interpreted and obtained his answer, the peril of their position sharpening the boy’s faculties, and making him snatch at words of which he was in doubt.

“They have come,” said Cyril, “to see why you are here. They say you have no right to come amongst the kina gatherers, and that you must go back to the coast at once.”

“Indeed!” said the colonel haughtily. “We shall see about that. Tell them, boy, that I am the English chief of a great white queen; that I have come into this country to examine it and its products, and that I will shoot dead with this piece the first man who dares to interfere with me and mine.”

“Hear, hear!” growled John Manning.

“Silence in the ranks,” cried the colonel sharply; while, gaining confidence, Cyril’s voice partook somewhat of his leader’s imperious command, as he repeated the words as loudly as he could, so that all might hear.

There was a low fierce murmur from the little crowd, which was now augmented by the bark peelers, who closed the English party up from the rear.

“What do they say?” cried the colonel, taking a step forward, and cocking his piece at the same moment.

“That they will make us prisoners, sir,” said Cyril.

“Who dared say that?” roared the colonel, and taking another step forward, he looked fiercely round, with the result that to a man the Indians bent their heads before him, and not one dared look him in the face.

“Hah!” he ejaculated, “that is better. Now tell them I wish to see the kina gathered and prepared.”

Cyril gave the interpretation of his words, and Diego and an old Indian came humbly forward and laid down their bows and arrows at his feet.

The colonel took a step and planted his foot upon the weapons. Then drawing back, he pointed down.

“Pick them up!” he said sternly in English, and repeated the words in Spanish, when a low murmur of satisfaction arose, and the men stooped,

lifted their weapons, and then making deprecating signs, they led the way into the clearing where the cinchona trees had been cut down, and the people had been busy collecting and drying the bark.

The colonel went on first, and Cyril and John Manning next, followed by Perry and Diego.

"It does one good, Master Cyril," whispered John Manning, "it does one good again, my lad. That's the sort of man the colonel is. Fit for a king, every inch of him. There ain't many men as would have faced a body of savage Indians with their bows and arrows like that. He's the right sort of stuff, ain't he? and yet they let him leave the army and go on half-pay."

"Yes, but do you think there will be any treachery?" replied Cyril.

"No, sir, I don't, so long as we show 'em we mean to keep the upper hand of 'em. They daren't. They know the colonel meant what he said, and felt that every word he said was true, and that a big chief had come among 'em."

"Yes, I could see that," said Cyril.

"My word, he was like a lion among a lot o' them big, long-necked sheep, sir; and you did your part of it splendidly."

"I did?" said Cyril, looking at the man in wonder.

"Yes, you, sir. I only wish our Master Perry would speak up as bold."

"Why, John Manning," said Cyril, half laughing, "if you only knew how I felt."

"I do, sir."

"Not you, or you would not talk like that."

"I tell you I do, sir. You felt just as I did first time I went into action, and heard the bullets go whizzing by like bees in the air, and saw some of them sting the poor fellows, who kept on dropping here and there, many of 'em never to get up again. I thought I was in a terrible fright, and that I

was such a miserable coward I ought to be drummed out of the regiment; but it couldn't have been fright, only not being used to it; and I couldn't have been a coward, because I was in the front rank all the time, close alongside of your father; and when we'd charged and driven the enemy flying, the colonel clapped me on the shoulder and said he'd never seen a braver bit of work in his life, and of course he ought to know."

"I did feel horribly frightened, though," said Cyril.

"Thought you did, sir, that was all. You couldn't have done it better."

"I don't know," said the boy, smiling. "Suppose the Indians had found me out?"

"Found you out, sir? Bah! If it comes to the worst, they'll find out you can fight as well as talk. Now, just look here, sir; didn't you ever have a set to at school, when you were at home in England?"

"Yes, two or three."

"And didn't you feel shimmery-whimmery before you began?"

"Yes."

"And as soon as you were hurt, forgot all that, and went in and whipped."

"Well, yes, I suppose so."

"Of course you did, sir. That's human nature, that is. But, I say, Mr Cyril, sir, what does it all mean? Why has the colonel come out here? He can't have come just to see people cut down a few trees and peel off the bark."

"I begin to think he has."

"But I could have taken him down in Surrey, sir, and showed him into woods where they were doing all that to the oak trees, without coming out here, or running any risks of getting an arrow sent through you, just as if you was a chicken got ready to roast."

"I don't quite understand it yet," said Cyril; "but don't talk any more now."

Look, look! what is he going to do?"

Chapter Thirteen.

In Treasure Land.

They were by this time close up in front of the huts of the bark gatherers, when all at once one of the huge condors came swooping along overhead, looking gigantic up against the sky. And then it was as if a sudden idea had struck the colonel, who raised his piece, took aim, lowered it, and hesitated; for the huge bird was at a great distance, and the people looked at him wonderingly. The next moment his rifle was at his shoulder again, there was the flash and puff of white smoke, the sharp crack, and the rumbling echoing roar in the mountains, as the condor was seen to swerve and then dart straight upward.

"Missed!" muttered John Manning, "but he felt the bullet."

"Hit!" cried Cyril excitedly, for all at once the bird's wings closed, and it fell over and over and then dropped like a stone, crashing in among the trees about a hundred yards away.

The Indians had looked on at first incredulously, and several of them exchanged glances as the condor shot upward as if to escape unharmed; but the moment it turned over and began to fall, they set up a loud shout and rushed off to pick up the fallen bird, the whole crowd making for the dense patch of forest, and then walking back steadily, bearing the bird in triumph.

"Rather a risky thing to do, boys," said the colonel, reloading as he spoke. "If I had missed, I should have done harm to the position we have made in these people's estimation. But I felt that I could hit the bird, and now they will believe that I may prove a terrible enemy in anger."

"Do it? Of course he could," whispered John Manning. "I've known him take a rifle from one of our men lots of times, and pick off one of the Beloochees who was doing no end of mischief in our ranks up in the mountains."

By this time the Indians were back, looking full of excitement, and ready almost to worship the white chief who had come amongst them, with such power of life and death in his hands—powers beside which their bows and arrows and poison-dealing blowpipes seemed to them to be pitiful in the extreme. They laid the body of the great bird, which was stone-dead, at his feet, and then looked at him wonderingly, as if to say, “What next?”

That shot had the effect which the colonel had intended to produce, for to a man the Indians felt the terrible power their white visitor held in his hand, and each felt that he might be the object of his vengeance if any attack was made.

But Colonel Campion felt that the effect was only likely to be temporary, and that he must gain the object for which he had made his perilous journey as quickly as possible, and begin to return before the impression had worn off.

Bidding Cyril then tell their guide that he should camp there for a few days, he sent the two men back for the mules, giving orders that they should take a couple of the Indians who had followed them to help.

His manner carried the day, and the party of four departed.

“I suppose it’s all right, Master Cyril,” whispered John Manning; “but I should have thought we’d ha’ done better by fortifying our own camp, and not running our heads right into the lion’s mouth; but the colonel knows best, and we’ve only got to obey orders.”

Certainly that seemed to be the safest course to pursue—a bold one; so in this spirit, and as if the colonel felt that there was nothing whatever to be feared from the people, the mules and packages were brought up. A snugly-sheltered spot was selected, close to a spring which came gushing from the rock, and a fresh camp made; the party going and coming among the cinchona gatherers as if they were invited visitors; while the Indians themselves looked puzzled, and watched every action from a distance.

That night, beside the fire, surrounded by the dense growth of the life-preserving trees he had sought, the colonel became more

communicative.

"You boys have, I daresay, canvassed why I undertook this expedition," he said, "and, I suppose, took it for granted that I came in search of the gold supposed to be hidden by the Peruvians, to save it from the rapacity of the Spaniards."

"Yes, sir; that's what I thought," said Cyril.

"Or else to find one of the di'mond walleys," growled John Manning.

"This is not the right direction for them, my man," said the colonel, smiling. "You have to seek for them between the leaves of books. No, boys; I came to seek something of far greater value to my fellow-creatures than a buried store of yellow metal, which may or may not exist. It is possible that a number of the sacred vessels from some of the old temples may have been hidden by the priests, who, at their death, handed down the secret to their successors; but I think it is far more likely to be a fable. Still, the Indians believe in it, and if they knew that a discovery had been made, they would destroy the lives of the finders, sooner than that the gold should be taken out of the country."

"Then you have not come to find the gold, sir?" said Cyril; while Perry lay there upon his chest, resting his chin upon his hands, and elbows on the earth, gazing up in his father's face.

"No, boy; I have come, and I am running some risks, I know, to drag out into the light of day the wondrous medicine which has saved the lives of hundreds of thousands, and made it possible for men to exist in the fever-haunted countries spread around the globe."

"You mean quinine," said Cyril. "Father always keeps a bottle in his desk."

"Yes, I mean quinine, the beautiful crystals obtained from the bark of these trees, boy; the medicine kept so jealously guarded here, the only place where it is produced, high up on the eastern slope of these mountains. I have come to seek it, and have found it far more easily than I expected: we are sitting and lying here right in the middle of one of the cinchona groves."

“But we can’t take away much, father, even if they will let us,” said Perry.

“Wrong, boy. I hope that we shall be able to bear away, unseen, enough to stock the world, and to make the drug, which is a blessing to humanity, plentiful, instead of civilised Europe having to depend upon the supply from here—from this carefully-guarded place.”

“You mean to take away some young trees,” said Cyril excitedly.

“I should like to do so, but that is a doubtful way, my boy. The young trees would be awkward to carry, and transplanting trees often means killing them. We must try something better than that, though. I shall see what I can do in making one bundle, with the roots carefully bound up in damp moss.”

“Yes, we might do that,” assented Cyril, “but we didn’t bring a spade.”

“Let us find some tiny trees, and we’ll do without a spade,” said the colonel quietly. “But I am in this position, boys. I know very little about the trees we see around us. That they are the right ones there can be no doubt, for the Indians are camped here, cutting them down, and peeling off and drying the bark. There are several kinds which produce inferior kinds of quinine; but these laurel-like evergreen trees produce the true, the best Peruvian bark; and it is to take away the means of propagating these trees in suitable hot mountainous colonies of our own, that we are here. Now, how is it to be done?”

“Indians won’t let it be done, sir,” said Manning. “Here, I know lots o’ places up Simla way where it would grow fine. Up there, north o’ Calcutta, sir.”

“Yes; there are spots there where it might be grown, or in the mountains of Ceylon,” said the colonel; “but we have to get it there.”

“I know,” said Cyril. “Let’s get heaps of seed. Why, we might till our pockets that way.”

“Yes; that is my great hope, boys; so, whenever you see seed-pods or berries nearly ripe, secure them. But we are surrounded by difficulties. We may be here at the wrong time of year, though I calculated that as

well as I could; and now that we are here, I have been terribly disappointed, for so far, instead of seeing seed, I have noted nothing but the blossoms. It is as if we are too early, though I hope these are only a second crop of flowers, and that we may find seed after all."

"But these sweet-smelling flowers, something like small lilac, are not the blossoms of the trees, are they?" said Perry.

"Yes, those are they," said the colonel. "Now my secret is out, and you know what we have to do.—Well, Manning, what is it?"

"My old father had a garden, sir, and he used to grow little shrubs by cutting up roots in little bits, which were often dry as a bone when he put them in, but they used to grow."

"Yes," said the colonel. "Quite right; and now we are here, in spite of all opposition, we must take away with us seeds, cuttings of twigs, and roots, and if possible, and we can find them, a number of the tiny seedlings which spring up beneath the old trees from the scattered seed. There, that is our work, and all must help.—Do you hear, Manning?"

"Oh yes, sir, I hear, and if you show me exactly what you want, I'll do my best; but, begging your pardon, sir, ain't it taking a deal o' trouble for very small gains?"

"No, my man, the reward will be incalculable."

"All right, sir, you know best. I'll do what you tell me, and when we've got what we want, I'll fight for it. That's more in my way. But, begging your pardon once more, wouldn't it be better for you to go to the head-man, and say, through Master Cyril here: 'Look here, young fellow, we've come a long journey to get some seed and young plants of this stuff; can't you make a sort of trade of it, and sell us a few pen'orth civilly.'"

The colonel laughed.

"No. They will not let us take a seed out of the country if they can prevent it. I will tell you all the worst at once. They will make a bold effort to master the dread with which I have succeeded in inspiring them, and fight desperately to stop us when we get our little store."

“Then, begging your pardon again, colonel, wouldn’t it ha’ been better to have come with a couple of companies of foot, and marched up with fixed bayonets, and told him that you didn’t mean to stand any nonsense, but were going to take as much seed as you liked?”

“Invited the rulers of the country to send a little army after us?”

“Yes, of course, sir; but they’ve got no soldiers out here as could face British Grenadiers.”

The colonel was ready to listen to every opinion that night, and he replied quietly:

“I thought it all out before I started, and this was the only way—to come up into the mountains as simple travellers, reach the hot slopes and valley regions where the cinchona grows, and then trust to our good fortune to get a good supply of the seed. But, even now, from our start from San Geronimo we have been watched. You have noticed it too, boys. Even the guide we took has arrayed himself against us from the first, and, while seeming to obey my orders, has taken care to communicate with every one we passed that he was suspicious of my motives. Every mile we have come through the mountain-range has been noted, and will be noted, till we get back.”

“Why not go back, then, some other way, sir?”

“Because we cannot cross the mountains where we please. The road we followed is one which, no doubt, dates from the days when the Incas ruled, and there are others here and there at intervals, but they will be of no use to us. Somehow or other, we must go back by the way we came, and I hope to take at least one mule-load with us to get safely to England. There, that is enough for to-night. Now for a good rest and we shall see what to-morrow brings forth. Cyril and Perry, you will be on sentry till as near midnight as you can guess, and then rouse me. I’m going now to take a look round at the mules, and then I shall lie down.”

He rose and walked away to where the mules were cropping the grass, which grew abundantly in the open places, and as soon as he was out of hearing, John Manning began to growl.

"All right, young gentlemen," he said, "I'm ready for anything; but, of all the wild scarum-harum games I was ever in, this is about the wildest. Come up here to steal stuff! for that's what it is, and you can't call it anything else. I've know'd people steal every mortal thing nearly, from a horse down to a pocket-knife. I've been where the niggers tickled you when you was asleep and made you roll over, so that they could steal the blanket you lay upon. I've seen the crows in Indy steal the food out of the dogs' mouths; but this beats everything."

"Why?" said Perry shortly.

"Why, sir? Because physic's a thing as everybody's willing enough to give to someone else; I didn't think it was a thing as anybody would ever dream o' stealing. As you may say, it's a thing as couldn't be stole."

"Father knows what he is about," said Perry shortly.

"Course he does, sir. Nobody denies that. We've got to begin taking physic with a vengeance. All right: I'm ready. And I was thinking all the time as we should bring back those four-legged jackasses loaded with gold and precious stones. All right, gentlemen. As I said before, I'm ready; and it's a good beginning for me, for I shall get a long night's rest; so here goes."

He rolled himself in his blanket, then lay down with his feet near the fire, and began to breathe the heavy breath of a sleeper the next minute.

"Well, Cil," said Perry, "what do you think of it?"

"Don't know," said Cyril. "Yes, I do. They're wonderfully watchful over the bark, and as soon as they know what we are after, they'll stop us."

"Then we must not let them see what we are after, my lad," said the colonel, who had returned unseen. "We must collect plants and flowers of all kinds, and load a couple of the mules. That will help to disarm suspicion.—Pieces loaded?"

"Yes, sir."

"That's right. We must keep military watch now regularly; but there will be

nothing to fear to-night."

Chapter Fourteen.

The Night-Watch.

Those were very encouraging words, and they seemed to tingle in the boys' ears as the colonel followed his servant's example, rolled a blanket about his shoulders, and lay down with his head resting on one of the mules' loads; but the impression soon died away, leaving the lads close together, with their guns resting on the grass, listening in the deep silence of the starlit night, and for some time without speaking a word.

"Come a little farther away," whispered Perry at last. "I want to talk."

They moved a few yards away from the sleepers, and stopped beneath a great spreading tree at about equal distance from the colonel and the fire, which glowed faintly, but gave sufficient light for them to see Diego and the other Indian squatted down, making tents of their long garments, and with their chins bent down upon their breasts; but whether asleep, or waking and watchful, it was impossible to say.

"Well?" said Perry at last, after they had been straining their ears to catch different sounds, now the trickling murmur of falling water, now some strange cry from far away in the woods, or the whisper of a breeze which came down from the mountains to pass away among the trees.

"Well?" said Cyril.

"Isn't it awfully quiet?"

"Yes."

"Look over there, just to the left of the fire. Isn't that some one watching us?"

"Tree trunk," said Cyril laconically.

There was a pause, and then Perry whispered again.

“I say, I don’t want to be cowardly, but there’s some one coming slowly through the trees. I caught a glimpse of his back. He’s stooping down—there, between those two big trunks, where it’s open. Don’t you see—stooping?”

“Yes, I see, and nibbling the grass as he comes. One of the mules.”

Perry shaded his eyes—needlessly, for there was no glare to shut out—and he soon convinced himself that his companion was right.

But he felt annoyed, and said testily:

“I wish you wouldn’t be so ready to contradict everything I say.”

Cyril laughed softly.

“Why, you didn’t want it to be an enemy, did you?”

Perry made no reply, and they stood for some time together in silence, listening to the *crop, crop* sound made by the mules, and the whispering sighs of the wind, which came down sharp and chill from the mountains. At last Cyril spoke again.

“Let’s walk round the camp.”

“You can’t for the trees.”

“Oh yes, we can. It’s cold standing here. We’ll work in and out of the trees, and make a regular path round. It will be better than standing still.”

“Very well,” said Perry shortly. “Go on first.”

Cyril shouldered his piece and stepped off cautiously for a couple of dozen yards, and then struck off to the left, meaning to make the fire act as a centre round which they could walk, keeping guard and themselves warm; but before he had gone many steps he stopped short.

“Look here,” he whispered, “you are a soldier’s son, and ought to teach

me what to do in keeping guard.”

“There’s nothing to teach,” said Perry. “All you’ve got to do is to keep a sharp lookout.”

“Yes, there is. If we keep together like this, we leave a lot of the camp exposed. What we ought to do is for one to go one way, and one the other; then meet, cross, and go on again. It would be far better.”

“But then we should be alone so long. We had better keep together.”

“Very well,” said Cyril shortly; but he owned to himself that he felt better satisfied, for it was lonely, depressing work there in the darkness.

Cyril stepped forward again, going slowly and carefully through the thick growth, making as little noise as possible, and trying to keep as nearly as possible to the same distance from the fire—no easy task, by the way—but he had not gone far before he stopped short and started aside, bringing his gun down to the present. For, all at once, from out of the darkness, some one seemed to strike at him, the blow cutting through the twigs and leaves by which he was surrounded with a loud whistling noise, while the stroke was so near, that he felt the air move close to his face.

“Fire—fire!” whispered Perry excitedly.

“What at? I can’t see any one,” replied Cyril, as he stood with his finger on the trigger.

He felt his heart beat with a heavy throb, and his hands grew moist, as he tried hard to pierce the darkness, and fix his eyes upon the enemy who had made so cowardly a blow at him; but the thick branches shut out every ray of light, and the silence was now painful in the extreme. The position was the more startling from the fact that neither could tell from which side the next blow would come.

But still that blow did not fall, and it seemed to Cyril, as he stood there holding his breath, that the Indian who had struck at him so treacherously was waiting until he moved, so as to make sure before striking again. At last the painful tension came to an end, for suddenly, from just in front, there was a heavy sigh, and *crop, crop, crop*, followed by a burst of

laughter from the boy.

"Oh, I say, Perry," he cried, "what a game! Fancy being scared like that by a mule."

"Then it was one of the mules?"

"Of course; we frightened the poor thing, and it kicked out at us. Come along."

He bore off a little to one side, and they passed the browsing animal, and, though describing rather an irregular circle, made their way round the fire, getting back pretty exactly to the place from which they started.

This was repeated several times, and then, for a change, Cyril proposed that they should strike off a little, straight away from the camp.

Perry was willing, and they put their plan in operation, for no special reason other than that of seeing the ground was clear in different directions, and to relieve the monotony of the watch.

"You lead now," said Cyril, in a low voice, so as not to disturb the others, who, in thorough confidence that a good watch would be kept, and that there was no fear of any danger, were sound asleep.

Perry led on, finding the way more open a short distance from the camp, but he had not led thirty yards when he stopped short.

"Hallo! another mule?" said Cyril.

"Indian!" said Perry huskily; and, as Cyril pressed forward to his companion's side, there, hard to define, but plain at last, stood one of the Indians, who raised his arm and pointed back, uttering two or three words in a guttural tone.

"What does he say?"

"That we must go back to the fire. Perhaps we had better," said Cyril. "I don't like his being there, though. Look here," he said quickly; "let's make haste back, and go right out the other way."

“What for?” said Perry, following his companion.

“I’ll tell you directly.”

Five minutes later they were checked just on the other side by another Indian who started up right in their path.

“Come and warn my father,” said Perry excitedly. “They’re going to attack us.”

“No; I think not,” replied Cyril decisively. “They’re sentries. Come and try another way.”

He led off again, after they had returned to the fire, finding that they were not followed, and that all was still; and again they were stopped by an Indian starting up and ordering them back.

“That’s it,” said Cyril quietly; “they’ve surrounded us with sentries.”

“To attack us?”

“No; to see that we don’t escape; and while we were walking round and round, they were within a few yards of us, listening to all our movements.”

“But they couldn’t have been there then, or they would have started up as they did just now.”

“No; we weren’t doing anything they minded; but as soon as we tried to go straight away, they stopped us. Let’s try once more.”

He led off quickly again, with the same result; and then Perry turned back to where his father lay asleep.

“What are you going to do?” whispered Cyril.

“Wake up my father, of course. We are attacked.”

“Don’t do that,” said Cyril decisively. “We are not attacked, or they would have seized us at once. I’m sure they are only guarding us, to make sure that we don’t try to escape. It’s of no use to wake him till the proper time.”

Perry hesitated.

“But we are in danger.”

“No; I don’t think we are. They are watching us, but they don’t mean to attack us, or they would do so. You’ll see now. We’ve come among them, and they’ll keep us under their eye, and perhaps will not let us go again. Look here: let’s go and speak to Diego.”

Perry was easily led, and yielding to his companion’s decisive manner, he followed to the fire and then round to the other side, where the Indian guide and his companion were squatted down with their chins resting upon their chests.

They made no sign as the boys came silently up, and appeared to be fast asleep; but Cyril knew better, for he saw in the dim glow shed by the fire, a slight tightening of the man’s hand upon his bow.

“They’re asleep,” whispered Perry. “Better come to my father.”

“Asleep with one eye open, and on the watch,” said Cyril quietly, and he bent down and whispered a few words.

They were electric in their effect, for both men raised their heads, and their eyes glittered in the faint light from the fire.

“Didn’t take much waking,” said Cyril, with a little laugh. Then turning to Diego, he said, in the man’s half-Spanish jargon:

“Why are the Indians on the watch all round here?”

The man looked at the speaker intently.

“Are the Indians watching all round?” he said quietly.

“You know they are. Why is it? To keep us from going away?”

The man looked at him intently, and then nodded his head.

“And suppose we try to go away, what then? Would they fight?”

“Yes,” said the guide gravely.

“And try to kill us?”

“Yes, they would kill you.”

“Try to, you mean.”

“No,” said the man gravely. “Kill you. You are few, they are many.”

“Stop a moment,” said Cyril, as the man turned his head aside wearily.

“Will they try to kill us if we stay?”

“No.”

Cyril tried to get more information from the man, but he shook his head, and made a pretence of being so lazy and unable to comprehend the boy’s words, that Cyril gave up in disgust, and turned impatiently away.

“It’s of no good to-night,” he said. “We heard all that he is likely to know. Let’s walk round again.”

“But they may strike at us in the dark.”

“No, they will not do that. I’m not afraid. Let’s go through with our watching, till we think it’s midnight, and then wake up the colonel.”

“We’d better call him now.”

“No; if we did, it would only be giving a false alarm, when we know that there is no danger. Come along.”

The weaker mind yielded to the stronger, and the march round was begun again, one which required no little courage, knowing, as the boys did, that there must be quite a dozen Indians within striking distance, and every rustle they heard, made probably by one of the grazing mules, might be caused by an enemy creeping forward to strike a blow.

At last, when they felt that it must be getting toward midnight, Cyril proposed that they should go back close to where the colonel lay asleep,

and they had not been standing near him ten minutes, hesitating to call him for fear he should be awakened too soon, when he suddenly made a hasty movement, opened his eyes, looked round, and sprang to his feet.

“Midnight, boys,” he said, “is it not?”

“We don’t know, father, and did not like to call you too soon.”

“Yes, it must be about midnight,” he said decisively, “or I should not have woke up. Well, is all right?”

“No, father,” whispered Perry.

“Oh yes; there’s nothing to mind,” said Cyril hastily. “We only found that there are a lot of Indians round about the camp.”

“You saw them?”

“Yes, sir. So soon as we moved a little way, a man rose up and stopped us.”

“On one side?” said the colonel.

“All round, sir.”

“On guard, then, in case we wished to escape. We’re prisoners, my lad, for the present. However, they will not venture to hurt us, unless we give them good reason, by loading up the mules to take away something they consider ought to be kept here, and that we shall not be ready to do for some days to come.”

“That’s what I wanted Perry to feel sir,” said Cyril, “but he would have it that they were going to attack us to-night.”

“There is no fear of that, my boy,” said the colonel firmly. “There, lie down, and sleep till breakfast-time; there is nothing to fear.”

“But are you going to watch alone, sir?”

“Yes, quite alone, my lad,” said the colonel, smiling. “There, take my

place; I'm rested now, and you have nothing to mind. Don't meet perils half-way; it's bad enough when they come. Till they do, it is our duty to be patient and watch. Afterwards we must fight—if it is necessary. Now—to bed."

The boys obeyed, and the colonel commenced his solitary watch.

Chapter Fifteen.

Collecting the Gold.

"Ever see 'em ketch eels at home, Master Cyril?" said John Manning one morning.

"We used to set night lines in the lake at school," said Cyril. "We threw the bait out ever so far, and tied the other end to a brick sunk in the water."

"Oh yes: but I don't mean that way, where every twopenny eel spoils four pen'orth o' good line and hooks. I mean with an eel-trap, one of those made of osiers, so that it's very easy to get in, but very hard to get out."

"Yes; I saw some of those once," cried Perry, "up by a weir. But why? There are no eels here."

John Manning chuckled, and shook all over, as if he enjoyed what he was saying.

"Not many, sir, but quite enough. We're the eels, and we've wriggled ourselves right into a trap, and there's no getting out again."

"It doesn't seem as if there were," said Cyril thoughtfully; "but we're getting what the colonel wanted, and I don't think the Indians have noticed it yet."

"Tain't for want of looking, sir," said the old soldier. "I go for a bit of a walk in one direction, and begin picking something, and feel a tickling about the back. 'Some one's eyes on me,' I says to myself, and I go a bit

farther, and feel the same tickling in front. Then one side, then t'other, and it's always eyes watching."

"Yes," said Perry. "We've been a week here, and I get so sick of it: I never move without there being some one after me; and the worst of it is, you don't see him coming, but find him watching you from behind a rock, or out of a bush."

"Yes," said Cyril, "it isn't nice. They crawl about like snakes, and almost as quietly."

"Don't matter," said John Manning, with another chuckle. "We can be as cunning as they. How have you young gents got on since the colonel give his orders?"

"Pretty well," said Cyril. "Of course it's of no use to try and get roots or cuttings, they look too sharp after us; but I've found some seed, and he has got more than I have."

"How much have you got, both of you together?" asked the old soldier, with his eyes twinkling.

"Nearly a handful, I should say," replied Cyril.

"A handful, sir! Why, what's that? I've got quite half a gallon."

"You have?" cried Perry. "Father will be so pleased."

"Course he will, sir," said John Manning, with a self-satisfied smile. "'Get every seed you can,' he says, 'and they'll hardly notice you.'"

"'Right, sir,' I says, and I set to work quietly, going a bit here, and a bit there, in among the trees, making believe I was making for them cocoa-nut leaves as the Indians chew; and whenever I caught one of the Injuns watching me, I picked a leaf, and began to chew it, and nodded at him, and said *bono, bono*. You should have seen how he grinned and showed his teeth at me, Master Cyril, and I could see he was thinking what a fool this Englishman was. But I wasn't quite so stupid as he thought, eh?"

"But that's not cocoa-nut leaf," said Cyril, "but the leaf of the coca."

“Well, sir, that’s what I say. I know it isn’t the nuts but the leaves they chew.”

“But the coca leaf’s a different thing.”

“Course it is, sir; one’s a leaf and t’other’s a nut.”

“But, don’t you see, cocoa-nut leaf and coca leaf are different things?”

“No, sir; but it don’t matter. They think I’m hunting for them leaves to chew, and they laugh at me, and all the time I’m getting a good heap of the seeds the colonel wants. ’Tain’t the first time he’s sent me to forage.”

“But where are the seeds?” said Cyril.

“All right, sir,” said John Manning, with a look full of cunning. “Never you put all your eggs in one basket, sir.”

“Of course not; but I hope you’ve put them in a dry place. Seeds are no use if they’re not kept dry.”

“They’re all right, sir. I’ve got some in each of my pockets, and some along with my cartridges in my satchel, and some inside the lining of my coat, and a lot more round my waist.”

“Round your waist?” cried Cyril. “You can’t wear seeds round your waist.”

John Manning chuckled once more.

“Can, if you put ’em in an old stocking first, sir,” he said. “But look here, young gents, as I’m so much more lucky than you are, and know better where to go for ’em, you’d better take part o’ mine, and leave me free to fill up again.”

“Yes, that will be best,” assented Perry. “I can take a lot in my pockets.”

“Any one looking, sir?”

“Very likely; but I shall take no notice. They won’t know what we’re changing from one pocket to the other, so let them watch.”

“All right, sir; then here goes,” said the old soldier, thrusting a hand deep down into his trousers pocket, and drawing out a quantity of seed. “Here you are, sir; and I’d make believe to eat a bit in case any one is watching.”

But as they were seated out of the sun, in the shade of the rough hut that had originally been put up for drying the kina bark, they were pretty well hidden from watchers, and able to carry on the transfer in comparative secrecy.

“But this isn’t seed of the cinchona tree,” cried Cyril excitedly.

“What!” said the old soldier sharply, and as if startled. Then altering his tone to one of easy confidence, with a dash of the supercilious. “Don’t you talk about what you can’t understand, sir. These here are what the colonel showed me, and told me to pick for him.”

“They’re not the same as my father told me to pick,” cried Perry.

“Well, seeing as you’re young gents, and I’m only a sarvant,” grumbled the man, “it ain’t for me to contradict, and I won’t; but I will say them’s the seeds the colonel told me to pick, and there they are, and you’d better put ’em away.”

“I’m not going to put these in my pocket,” said Cyril, “for I know they’re wrong.”

“And I certainly shan’t put them in mine,” said Perry.

“Look here, young gents, ain’t this a bit mutinous?” said John Manning. “Colonel’s orders were that we should collect them seeds, and if you’d got the best lot, I should have helped you; but as you haven’t got the best lot, and I have, ain’t it your duty to help me?”

“Yes; and so we should, if you hadn’t made a blunder.”

“But I ain’t, young gents; these here are right.”

“No,” said Perry. “These are right,” and he took a few seeds from his pocket.

“And these,” said Cyril, following his companion’s example.

“Not they,” cried John Manning warmly. “They ain’t a bit like mine.”

“No, not a bit,” said Cyril triumphantly.

“No, nor his ain’t like yours, Master Perry.”

The boys stared, for this was a new phase of the question, and they eagerly inspected the treasures.

“I’m sure I’m right,” said Perry confidently.

“And I’m sure I’m right,” cried Cyril.

John Manning put his arms round his knees, as he sat on the ground, and rocked himself to and fro, chuckling softly.

At that point the colonel came up, and looked round wonderingly.

“You’re just in time, father,” cried Perry. “Look at this seed John Manning has collected.—Show him, John.”

The old soldier triumphantly pulled out a handful, and held it under the colonel’s nose.

“What’s that?” said his master.

“The seed you told me to forage for, sir.”

“Absurd! There: throw it away.”

“Throw it away, sir?”

“Of course. It is not what I told you. There, take and throw it away, where the Indians see you do it, and they will pay less attention next time they see you collecting.”

John Manning said nothing then, but went out of the slight hut frowning, came back, and the colonel turned to the boys.

“Well,” he said, “what have you got?”

They both eagerly showed a little of the seed, and the colonel uttered an ejaculation full of impatience.

“No, no,” he said; “pray be careful. That is not the same as you got for me the day before yesterday.”

“Not mine?” cried Perry.

“No, sir; nor yours either, Cyril. They are both cinchona, but of the inferior, comparatively useless kinds.”

John Manning chuckled.

“But the seeds are so much alike, sir,” said Cyril.

“Yes, but the broken capsules with them are not, boy. The good splits down one way, the inferior the other. There, I suppose I must give you all another lesson. Come and have a walk at once.”

He led the way out, all taking their guns, in the hope of getting a little fresh provision, as well as to throw off the attention of the Indians, who smiled at them pleasantly enough, as they looked up from their tasks of cutting and peeling the bark from the trunks and branches, most of the men with their jaws working, as they chewed away at the coca leaf, which every one seemed to carry in a little pouch attached to the waist.

No one seemed to pay further heed to them, but they were soon conscious that they were being watched, for an Indian was visible, when they went past the spot where their two guides were watching the browsing mules; and then, as they plunged into the forest, from time to time there was an indication that they were being well guarded, and that any attempt at evasion would result in an alarm being spread at once.

Once well out among the trees, the colonel began picking leaf and flower indiscriminately, to take off the watcher’s attention; but he contrived, at the same time, to rivet the boys’ attention upon the flower and seed of the most valuable of the cinchona trees, indicating the colour of the blossom, and the peculiarities of the seed-vessels, till even John Manning declared

himself perfect.

“Seeds only,” said the colonel. “I give up all thought of trying to take plants. We must depend upon the seeds alone, and we ought to get a good collection before we have done.”

“And then, father?” asked Perry.

“Then we go back as fast as we can, if—”

“If what?” asked Perry.

“The Indians will let us depart.”

“That’s it, sir,” put in John Manning. “What I was saying to the young gentleman this morning. They don’t mean to let us go. We’ve regularly walked into a trap.”

There was silence for a few moments, the colonel frowning, as if resenting the interference of his servant, but directly after he said quietly:

“I’m afraid you are right, John Manning, but we must set our wits against theirs. In another week we shall have quite sufficient of the treasured seed to satisfy me—that is, if you three are more careful—then we must start back, before our stores begin to fail.”

“What about the guides, sir?” said Cyril. “They will not help us.”

“No,” said the colonel. “Not the Indian guides, but I have a little English guide here, upon which we shall have to depend. There must be other passes through the mountains, and we know that our course is due west. We shall have to trust to this.”

He held out a little pocket-compass as he spoke, and then, after they had added somewhat to the store of seed already collected, both boys this time making the proper selection of tree from which to gather the reproductive seeds, they walked slowly back toward the camp.

But not alone: the Indians who had followed them outward, returning slowly behind them, carefully keeping far in the background, and trying to

conceal the fact that they were on the watch; but it was only too plain to all that it would require a great deal of ingenuity to escape notice and get a fair start when the time came for making their escape.

Chapter Sixteen.

Preparing for Flight.

"I say, Cil, I don't quite know what to make of it," said Perry, a few days later. "These people are as civil and amiable as can be; they surely won't try to stop us when we want to go?"

"You wait and see," was the reply. "They will. I know them better than you do."

"But they don't think we have got anything to take away."

"Perhaps not; but they will think that as soon as we are out of their sight we shall be searching for and taking something away that they want to preserve, and if we do get away unseen, they will be after us directly."

"Well, we shall soon see," said Perry rather gloomily, as he sat gazing down into a deep valley running due south, in whose depths a bright gleam here and there told of the presence of water.

"Yes, we shall soon know now. Your father and John Manning have been carefully examining the mules, and going over the stores and packages."

"Have they? I didn't know."

"I did, and then they came out here and sat for some time over their guns."

"On the lookout for birds?"

"On the lookout to see if this way would do for us to escape."

Perry whistled.

“Did they tell you so?”

“No; but I put that and that together.”

“Put why go this way? This does not lead over the mountains.”

“Because the Indians will not think we should choose this route.”

“But we couldn’t get over the mountains from down there.”

“We must,” said Cyril quietly.

“But,” said Perry, “we can’t get the mules and their loads away without Diego knowing.”

“Must again,” replied Cyril. “We can’t escape without a supply of food, and we must have the mules to carry it, for we may be weeks wandering about in the gorges of the mountains. So it’s must, must, must, my lad. We’ve got it to do, and we’re going to do it.”

“I say.”

“Well—what?”

“Do you think it will come to a fight?”

“Not if your father can help it; but if it does, we shall have to do some shooting.”

Perry drew his breath hard.

“Don’t stare down the valley any more,” said Cyril, after a pause.

“Why? It’s very beautiful.”

“Because you’re watched. We’re watched always, sleeping or waking.”

“Then we shall never be able to get away,” said Perry despondently.

“Must, my lad. Why, we’re not going to let a pack of half-savage Indians prove too clever for us. What are you thinking about? There, let’s get

back at once, or they'll be thinking we mean something by sitting here."

Perry rose and followed his companion, who made several halts in the forest before they reached the shelter-hut, to find the colonel and John Manning away; but they returned soon after, each carrying a couple of good-sized birds, which gave a colour to their morning's walk.

This game John Manning bore off to prepare by the fire which Diego and his companion kept going night and day; and as soon as he had gone, the colonel seated himself, and looked curiously from one boy to the other.

"Well Cyril," he said sharply, "ready to go home and meet your father?"

"Yes, sir," replied the boy promptly. "I want to get it over."

"And you, Perry, ready to go back to where you can sleep in a decent bed again?"

"Yes, father," replied Perry; but there was a dubious tone to his words.

"That's right. Listen, then, both of you. I trust to you to make no sign whatever, but to go on precisely the same as usual, so as to keep the Indians in ignorance of our intentions."

"Then you are going to make a start, sir?" said Cyril eagerly.

"All being well, very soon, my lad."

"But the mules, sir?"

"Ah, we shall see about that," said the colonel. "I have now got together quite as much of the seed as I dared to hope for, and it would be foolish to delay longer. These Indian labourers are only working for somebody of importance, and if whoever he may be comes and finds us here, our position may be made very unpleasant, so I have decided for us to start at dark, to-morrow evening."

This announcement caused a peculiar fluttering in the breasts of both lads, for they felt that they would not be able to get away without a

struggle, since that they were detained here until some one in authority arrived, seemed certain; and they well understood how necessary it was for them to get away if possible.

The rest of the day passed like a feverish dream to Cyril, whose thoughts were of a very mingled nature. On the one hand, there was the risk to be run in making their escape, and the long perilous journey before them; on the other hand, there was home at San Geronimo, and his father's stern face rose before him, full of reproach for his conduct; and now, more than ever, he asked himself how he could have been so mad and so cruel to those who loved him, as to leave in the way he had.

Too late for repentance then, as he knew, and he had to face the inevitable, and take the punishment he deserved as patiently as he could.

Toward dark the boys found themselves alone with John Manning, who whispered: "Been over the arms and ammunition, gentlemen, and they're in splendid order. Bit touched with rust, but that won't interfere with their shooting."

"Don't talk about it," said Perry petulantly.

"Can't help it, sir. We're off to-morrow night, and some of us may have to cover the retreat. You can't do that sort o' work without tools."

"Look here," said Cyril eagerly. "How about the mules?"

"I don't know, sir," replied the old soldier. "That's the puzzle of it. But the colonel knows what he means to do, of course. I've been with him before, when he was going to make an advance."

"But this is a retreat," said Cyril sharply.

"What, sir? Retreat? British soldiers don't retreat. Of course they have to make an advance the other way on sometimes. You can't always be going in one direction; but they don't retreat. It'll be all right, though, sir. You'll see: for following orders, I've got all the packs ready to stow on the saddles at a moment's notice, and we shan't leave nothing behind."

They had a hint soon after of there being a plan all ready, for the colonel

came and hunted Cyril out to act as interpreter, and walked down with him to where Diego and his companion were seated, while the mules were browsing here and there, some fifty yards away.

“Now, interpret as well as you can,” said the colonel. “Tell him that I am very angry about the state of the mules, which look half-starved. The feed about here is disgraceful, and all the time there is a splendid supply on the other side of the clearing, beyond where the Indians are cutting and stacking the bark.”

Cyril's voice shook a little from anxiety as he began his interpretation, but it soon grew stronger, and he gave the colonel's wishes with so much energy that the guide looked terribly disturbed as he replied.

“What does he say?” cried the colonel angrily.

“That the head-man of the kina gatherers gave orders that they were to be pastured here.”

“Then tell him to go to the head-man, and say I order them to be moved at once over to the other side of the huts, ready for me when I wish to go on.”

Diego started off at once, and returned soon after with the head-man and about a dozen of the Indians, to whom the colonel's wishes were repeated; and then came quite a deprecating reply that it was impossible, for the woodcutters were going in that direction the very next day, and the mules would be disturbed again.

“Tell him my mules are of more consequence than his bark gatherers,” said the colonel, “and that I insist upon the mules being moved.”

There was a laboured interpretation, a short buzz of conversation, and then a reply came through Diego that the head-man would obey the white chief's orders, and remove the mules to better pasture; but it could not be there, in the place he wished.

“Tell him anywhere, so long as the poor beasts are properly fed.”

The colonel stalked away, with his rifle in the hollow of his arm, the

Indians giving place obsequiously; but he turned back to Cyril. "Tell John Manning to stop and see where they are driven, and then come and report to me.—You two follow."

Cyril gave the colonel's orders, and then went after him to the hut, where they sat waiting for nearly an hour before Manning arrived.

"Well, where are the mules?"

"They've driven 'em out of the bit of forest, sir, and down on the other side toward the slope of that big valley."

"Hah!" ejaculated the colonel; and then, after a pause, "The very spot."

"But you said the other side," said Cyril; "at the back of their huts."

"Where I knew they would not have them," said the colonel. "It looked to them, in their childish cunning, like an attempt on my part to get the animals down toward the point from which we came; and, of course, they would not do that. I hardly expected such good fortune, boys; but the mules are in the very place I wish. Now we have to devise a means of getting those mules loaded unseen, and then starting off down the valley as soon after dark to-morrow night as possible."

A long conversation followed as to those best means, and the colonel heard each one's proposal impatiently.

Perry said it was impossible, and that they must all take as much provision as they could carry, and leave the mules behind.

John Manning said there was only one way of doing it, and that was for him to take the stock off one of the guns, and as soon as it was dusk creep round the camp, and catch every one of the sentries by surprise, and then club him, and bind his hands and feet.

"I could stun 'em, sir, and then they couldn't give no alarm."

"You mean, murder the poor wretches," said the colonel quietly.

"No, no, sir; not so bad as that," grumbled the man. "These Injuns have

got heads as thick as rams. More likely to spoil the gun."

"Now you, Cyril," said the colonel quietly.

"I can't propose anything, sir," said Cyril frankly. "It seems to me that we might pass one or two of the Indians, but the others would see or hear the mules."

"And you can propose nothing else?"

Cyril shook his head, and the colonel got up and went out of the hut, to go and walk up and down where the Indians were busy, giving first one a friendly nod, and then another, evidently to their great satisfaction.

The party in the hut watched him for a few moments, and then John Manning said:

"There aren't no better way, gentlemen, than mine. I don't want to kill none of 'em, so long as they don't try to kill me, or any of you. If they do, why, of course, it makes me feel nasty, and as if I could do anything to stop 'em."

"It's too horrid and butcher like," said Cyril firmly.

"Yes," assented Perry.

"Very well, then, gentlemen, suppose you propose a better way. It's of no use to go an' say, 'Please we're tired of staying here, and want to go,' because that only would be waste of breath."

"Yes," said Perry sadly. "We shall never get away till they give us leave."

"Hear that, Mr Cyril, sir; that's my young master, and the son of a stout soldier as never turned his back on an enemy in his life. Don't say you're going to give up like that, sir."

"No," said Cyril, setting his teeth. "I'm not going to give up, and he is not going to give up either. We'll get away somehow, though we can't see the way just now."

“That we will, sir,” cried John Manning excitedly. “Bri’sh wits again’ Injun wits. Bah! who says we can’t beat them? It’s all right, gentlemen. I know the colonel, and have known him since he was a slip of an ensign, and I was not much more than a raw Johnny of a boy fresh from the awkward squad. I say I know the colonel, and he’s only been leading us on. Wait till to-morrow night. He’s got some dodge or another ready to fire off, and this time two days we shall be on our way back, and the Injuns’ll be howling like mad, because they can’t make out which way we’ve gone.”



Chapter Seventeen.

Perry's Horror.

"How do you feel, Cil?" said Perry, in the middle of that same night.

"Horrible. Can't sleep. I am hot and itchy, and all of a fidget about things."

"Father said we were to take things coolly, when he said good-night."

"Didn't say how, did he?" whispered Cyril. "I shall be so glad when we begin doing something. Anything's better than this waiting to begin. I say —"

"Yes."

"Isn't it near morning?"

"No, it ain't," said a gruff voice in an ill-used tone. "How's a man to get a good sleep before he relieves the colonel, if you two young gents keep on twisting about and talking?"

"All right, we'll be quiet now."

"Ay, do, my lads. Get a good sleep, and have a nap or two to-morrow, for we shall be travelling all night."

There was silence for the rest of the time in the little camp, broken only by a weary sigh or two, for no sleep came to the restless lads; and the next morning found them red-eyed and feverish in spite of the bathe they had in the intensely cold water of the neighbouring mountain rill.

And all that day they were on the strain, and constantly on the watch for the colonel, hoping that he would become communicative. But he was very quiet, and spent the greater part of the day either sleeping or pretending, and lounging about watching the Indians busy cutting down trees, or peeling the boughs and twigs.

John Manning, too, looked wonderfully lazy, and avoided the boys, who

at last began to look at each other in despair.

"I can't make it out," said Perry at last. "We are not going to-night, or father would have said something—don't you think so?"

"Don't know."

"But you don't think we can be going?"

"I think we are," replied Cyril, "and they are doing all this to throw the Indians off their guard."

Dinner-time came, for which meal John Manning had prepared a very satisfactory dish from some charqui flavoured with fruit and vegetables, and the boys anxiously waited again for some communication from the colonel. But he was still reticent, and after the meal was over, Diego and his companion were summoned and left to clear the tin bowl which did duty as a dish, a duty they always carried out to perfection, never leaving it so long as there was a scrap to finish.

Then came the long, hot, weary afternoon, which the two boys started to pass under the boughs of a sturdy tree, both feeling their irritability increase as they listened to the crackling and breaking of wood near at hand, and the murmur of voices from the Indians, who kept on busily with their work.

There was a humming noise in the air, as the insects darted here and there in the hot afternoon sunshine; and from where the two lads lay, they could see the mountains slope down rapidly into the long deep valley, filled now with a soft golden haze, while the air was delicious with the aromatic perfume shed by the trees around.

Cyril felt hot, feverish, and weary still, but at the same time, as he lay there, it seemed as if that valley at his feet was very beautiful with the sun lighting it up from end to end, and that it would be a pity to start that night, before he had had a good restful sleep, and then—directly after it seemed to him—he felt vexed with Perry for worrying and shaking him. The next moment he started up to find that the valley below looked dark, and the sun was on the other side of the mountains, while the colonel was standing over him, smiling.

"That's better, boys," he said. "I'm glad that you have both had a good rest. You will be all the fresher for your walk."

"Then you are going to-night, sir?"

"Hush! Yes; of course.—Perry."

"Yes, father."

"Don't go away, either of you, and you must not look excited. Come and have supper—it is ready—and then wait about by the hut while the guides have theirs. You will take no notice of anything, but loiter about outside while John Manning and I act. But be ready to help, if I call upon you."

"We'll do all you wish, sir," said Cyril excitedly.

"Then do it calmly," said the colonel. "Mind this, the Indians must not have a suggestion that shall make them suspicious. To them everything must seem as if we were patiently submitting to our rather easy captivity. Come."

The colonel led the way back to the fire, close to which their meal was spread by John Manning, and as the boys drew nearer, they saw that Diego and his companion were hanging about as if wondering why they had not been summoned sooner to partake of the meal.

"Yes, we're late," said the colonel aloud, and setting the example, he took his place and began to eat as calmly as if nothing important was on the way.

"Come, boys," he said quietly, "make a good meal, and don't look anxious; there are some of the Indians coming up. Recollect what I said."

Cyril tried to act his part, and said something in a laughing way to Perry, but it fell very flat. Still, there was nothing in the scene to attract attention, and though they were all aware that work for the day had long ceased near the huts, and the Indians who were not partaking of their simple meal, were strolling about, and many of them keenly watching the white party, no head was turned. At last the colonel asked if all were done, and

then rose and signed to Diego and the other man to come and take their places.

This they did eagerly, and from where Cyril stood now in the semi-darkness, he could see the men's faces by the light of the fire, and that they were eating hungrily.

"Did you look to the mules?" said the colonel in a low voice.

"Yes, sir, all ready."

"That's right. Now, boys, the Indians have strolled back, and I don't think they have set any watch yet. Keep on walking to and fro as you do sometimes, with your arms on each other's shoulders. Keep between the fire and the Indians' clearing, and take no notice of anything you see. We shall not leave you behind."

Cyril's heart beat violently, and he heard Perry utter a low sigh as he threw his arm over his companion's shoulder and they began walking to and fro about twenty yards from their fire, while the low hum of many voices came from the clearing where the Indians were talking together before settling themselves for the night.

Meanwhile Diego and his companion were eating away as if they had suffered a three days' fast, and showed no sign of leaving off, till all at once, just as the boys turned, they became aware of the fact that the colonel had gone from the spot where they had seen him last, and that he and John Manning had suddenly appeared in front of the guides, where they were eating. By the light of the fire they saw that guns were presented at the men's heads, with the effect of making them throw out their arms to seize their weapons, but before they could effect anything for their defence, they were thrust backward, and Cyril at the same moment saw by the firelight Diego lying upon his back, with the colonel's foot upon his chest, and the other man in a similar position, held down by John Manning.

"Keep on walking," Cyril said aloud to Perry, for the latter had stopped, panting and startled, and Cyril felt him quiver as he half-forced him along.

"What are they going to do? Kill them?" whispered Perry.

"They're going to master them," replied Cyril. "Don't speak like that. Recollect our orders. It is to save them from being seen."

The boys kept on their walk, watching the proceedings by the fire as much as they could, but in less than five minutes there was nothing to see, for both the guides were bound with a hide rope from the mules' packages; and urged onward by threats from the colonel's and John Manning's pieces, they had passed out of sight among the bushes in an enforced stooping position, a faint crackling telling of the direction in which they had gone, while a louder crackling and snapping told, with the accompanying blaze, that something had been thrown upon the fire.

"The bows and arrows," whispered Perry, and they kept up their monotonous tramp to and fro.

"What are they doing now?" said Perry suddenly, and then he started, for Cyril burst out into a merry laugh, and gave him a sharp slap on the back, so suddenly, and with such force, that Perry stumbled forward, and nearly fell.

"Are you mad?" cried the boy furiously.

"Not quite," said Cyril merrily. "Here, give us your hand, old chap: I'll haul up. That's your sort. Ahoy! There you are again."

He said all this boisterously, and then in a low whisper:

"Keep it up. Hit me, or do something. Two Indians have come up close to watch."

Perry trembled violently, but he tried to follow out his companion's plan, and turning upon him, engaged in a mock struggle, each making believe to throw the other for a minute or two, and then laughingly resuming their walk to and fro.

Those laughs were very hysterical, though, and Perry's next words came with gasps as he said:

"See the Indians now?"

“No; they’re either gone back or they’re hiding.”

“Which? Let’s go and see.”

“We can’t,” replied Cyril. “Our orders are to walk up and down here, as if nothing were wrong. Can’t you see it will make them believe we are going on as usual?”

“Yes,” said Perry huskily; “but I wish my father would come now.”

“So do I.”

“Those two may have got the better of them.”

“Not they,” said Cyril stoutly. “It would take three Indians to get rid of your John Manning. Your father will take care they do nothing. Don’t take any notice. Hear that?”

“Yes, some one going away through the bushes. Those two hadn’t gone, and they were hiding.”

“Yes.”

“But are they both gone now?”

“I only heard one,” said Cyril, beginning to whistle a merry tune, but before he had got through the first strain, there was another faint rustling among the trees.

“There goes the other,” said Cyril quietly, and then he broke into a loud yawn. “Heigh—he—ha—hum,” he said. “How dark it has grown.”

“Listen,” whispered Perry.

“I heard it,” said Cyril. “One of the mules squeaking.”

“No, it was a horrible cry. Some one has been killed.”

“There goes another then,” said Cyril, as a peculiar sound came from the forest.

"Yes, they are killing the guides."

"I tell you, it was the squeaking of the mules. I know the sound well enough."

"I'm sure you're wrong," protested Perry.

"And I'm sure *you* are. If it was the cry of some one being killed, wouldn't there be a rush of the Indians, to see what was the matter?"

"If they heard it."

"And they would. Trust them for that. The mules are excited and calling to one another. I believe they are being loaded."

"Oh, how can you take it all so coolly?" groaned Perry. "My heart beats as if it would break, and I feel a curious choking sensation at the throat, and all the time you take it as if there was nothing the matter."

"Do I? You don't know," said Cyril. "I believe I'm worse than you are; but never mind, try to laugh."

"Laugh," said Perry piteously. "I feel as if I could sit down and cry."

"Leave that to the girls, lad. We've got something else to do. Don't stop. We must keep on, so as to keep the Indians from thinking there's anything wrong. There, cheer up. Can you sing any thing?"

"Sing!" cried Perry, in a voice full of reproach.

"Very well, then, I must whistle softly."

He commenced a tune, and got through a few bars. Then he ceased as suddenly as he had begun, and began talking.

"I say it was very plucky of your father, wasn't it? The boldness of the plan has made it do. The Indians could not even think we should make such an attempt."

For a full hour the boys kept up that painful tramp up and down, Perry

growing more and more silent, and Cyril bursting out from time to time with a little peal of forced laughter. Twice over, they were conscious of the presence of the watchful Indians creeping furtively among the trees; but the actions of the boys allayed their suspicions, and they went back as softly as they came.

“Was it never to end?” the lads asked themselves, and though neither made any allusion to their thoughts, they were tortured by fancies of what might have happened, till at last Perry was certain that, instead of the colonel and John Manning killing the two guides, these two men had turned upon them and stabbed them to the heart.

At last the boy could bear this thought no longer. He fought hard to keep it to himself, but it would have vent finally, and as they turned to continue their weary tramp, he suddenly caught Cyril fiercely by the arm.

“They won’t come back to us,” he whispered. “They cannot. Diego and the other man turned upon them, killed them, and those were their cries we heard. They’re both dead, Cil—they’re both dead.”

“And your father has come to tell us he has been killed,” said Cyril, with a forced laugh, which was more like a hoarse cry of agony. “At last,” he groaned: “I don’t think I could have borne it any longer.”

“What do you mean?” said Perry.

“There—by the fire. Here they come.”

Perry looked sharply round in the direction pointed out by his companion, and then the pulses of both seemed to stand still, for they heard the approach of Indians from the direction of the clearing. Almost at the same moment, they could plainly see by the faint light of the fire, not the colonel and John Manning coming to fetch them at last, but the figures of the guides bending down, and then beginning to approach, in the soft furtive manner of a couple of wild beasts about to make their fatal spring.

Chapter Eighteen.

Adventures of a Night.

“He was right,” muttered Cyril, as the blood rushed to his head and made him feel giddy; “and now they mean to have us, but—”

He stopped short, and his teeth made a grating sound as he seized Perry by the shoulder. “Can you fight?” he whispered. “I—I don’t half know,” groaned Perry. “I’ll try.”

“That’s right. We must,” the boy continued. “They shall find we’re English after all.”

“What are you going to do?” said Perry, holding on by his companion’s arm.

“Get our guns. They’re close by the fire there. What are those two doing?”

“I don’t know,” was the reply, and Perry gazed hard at the two guides, who were stooping about the fire. “Yes, I do; they’re putting on more wood.”

“Then, as soon as they come toward us, we must run round and try to get our guns.”

They stood in the darkness watching for some moments, while the guides still busied themselves about the fire, wandering here and there, as if busy about something; though, after seeing the flames rise, on the first portion of wood being added, their object appeared vague.

All at once the rustling toward the clearing recommenced, and the boys looked sharply in that direction, fully expecting that the first attack would come from there; but the sound grew fainter, and they knew that the Indians must be going back, apparently satisfied with their scrutiny. This meant the danger lessened for the moment by one half; and Cyril now gripped his companion’s shoulder more tightly.

“Now, then,” he said, “let’s get round by the trees to the other side.”

“Too late,” said Perry; “they are coming here.”

Cyril glanced toward the fire, but no one was visible. In the brief moments during which their backs were turned, the guides had disappeared, and all was silent; not a sound suggested the spot from which the enemy would advance.

"We must chance it," whispered Cyril. "Quick; come along this way. Quiet."

They started away to their right, so as to get round to the back of the fire; but as fate had it, they went right into the arms of those whom they were seeking to avoid. Not forty steps had been taken cautiously through the dark shadows beneath the trees, before Perry uttered a cry as the two guides sprang up in their path.

"This way, Cil; run," he whispered.

"Hush! Silence!" came in a familiar voice. "Don't you know us, boys?"

Both Cyril and Perry were speechless, so great was the emotion caused by the surprise, and they stared at the dimly-seen, bare-headed figures wearing the Indians' long, loose garments.

"Now, quick," said the colonel, stripping off the Indian frock, "off with yours, too, Manning."

The man obeyed with all a well-drilled soldier's celerity and silence, and, stooping down, the colonel was about to thrust the cotton garments in amongst the undergrowth, when Cyril, who had now recovered himself, whispered a few words to the colonel.

"Good! Capital!" he said. "Only quick, and we'll wait here."

Cyril snatched at the two frocks, and, stooping down, laid them, well stretched out, at a short distance from the fire, where, in the dim light, they gave a rough idea of covering a couple of Indians stretched out in sleep.

It was only the work of a minute, and then Cyril was back to where Perry stood excited and nervous, for the feeling was strong upon him that, after all, his father and Manning had slain the two guides.

“Where are the mules?” said Cyril to the colonel.

“Silence! Follow. Stoop till we are well beyond the fire.”

“But our guns, sir?” said Cyril.

“I said silence, boy!” replied the colonel, and they went off in single file for about a couple of hundred yards in and out among the trees, till the colonel stopped short, and the boys made out that they were standing by the mules, which were waiting, all ready laden, and with hanging heads, ready to proceed on their journey. Then, without another word, the colonel took the rein of the old leader, started off, and steadily and quietly the others followed, the unladen last, while John Manning and the two boys followed for some time.

“Here, take your fireworks, my lads,” whispered John Manning at last. “Pouches are fastened to ’em, and well filled with ammunition. I’ll help you to put ’em on as we go.”

All this in a whisper, and then Perry said: “You thought of our wanting them, then?”

“Rum sort of soldier if I hadn’t, my lad,” growled the man. “Steady. Keep on walking. Under your right arm, my lad. That’s it.—Now you, Mr Cyril.”

“Mine’s on all right,” was the reply; and then it was always onward and downward, in and out among the trees, with all around so dark beneath branches, that, but for the steady, slow pace of the mules, which never hesitated for a moment, the journey would have been next to impossible. And all the time, as the rustling, soft, trampling noise made by the animals’ hoofs went on, very few words were spoken, for every ear was attent and strained to catch the first announcement of the pursuit having begun.

The two boys felt no inclination to converse, but tramped on silent enough, while, when anything was said, John Manning was the speaker. He would begin by enjoining silence in the ranks, and the minute after, find he had something he must say.

“Don’t think they’ve took the alarm yet, gentlemen,” he said, after a long

time. "That dodge o' yourn with the Injuns' frocks was splendid. When they do come, take your word from me, as I command the rearguard; and fire low, for we must give them a volley."

Perry shrank from their old servant involuntarily, for it seemed to him horrible that John Manning should speak in so cheery a tone from time to time, when, only a short time back, he had imbrued his hand in the blood of their two guides. But at last he felt constrained to speak, the words coming forth unbidden.

"Those two guides," he said huskily.

"Ay, poor chaps, it seemed hard, sir," replied the old soldier; "but it was us or them, and, of course, it had to be them. We was obliged to do it, or else how was I to get the mules loaded?"

"But it seems so horrible," said Cyril.

"Oh, I don't know, sir. Sort o' tit for tat. They wouldn't ha' been very particular about us, and it was, as you may say, in self-defence. But, I say, Mr Cyril, don't you think I got all those packs down to the mules pretty quick, and the beasts laden?"

"Wonderfully quickly," said Cyril.

"It was, sir, though I say it as shouldn't say it. I did get warm over the job. Thought I should have had no end o' trouble with 'em, but they took it as quietly as lambs; and as soon as they found out what was going on, the pack-mules all hung together and waited their turns, while the saddle mules seemed to be looking on."

"Of course that was after the—after Diego and the other man—"

"Of course, sir. There'd ha' been no mule packing if we'd left those two chaps to lift up their lovely voices, and shout to their friends for help. That would not have done, eh, Mr Cyril?"

"No; I suppose not, if we were to escape."

"And that's what we had to do, sir; for, as the colonel said to me more

than once, 'We're not safe, John Manning, for sooner or later they'll find out why I have come, and then I would not answer for our lives.' But we're off now in spite of 'em, and well provisioned too. My word, I did get a warming over those mules; but the colonel's wonderful handy at the loading, and helped me well. You see, he superintended a lot out in India, when we had mules and camels to carry our baggage. And we did it all fine. Listen."

They paused, but the faint pattering of the mules' hoofs was the only sound; and they followed on again, John Manning keeping silence for a time, and then bursting out with a chuckle.

"I told you so yes'day, young gentlemen. The colonel 'll have some dodge to get us off, and there you are! He led, and it was grand the way in which he had worked it out. He didn't tell me till to-night, and when he had done, I laughed out. 'Think it will do, John Manning?' he said. 'Do, sir?' I says. 'Of course it'll do;' and it's done. Don't suppose those two liked it much, poor fellows, but they had to put up with it."

"Oh, John Manning," cried Perry excitedly, unable to bear it any longer, "how can you treat it so lightly? If you had tied and bound the poor wretches, it would have been different, but to drag them away and kill them in cold blood! It is horrible."

"Well I *am* blessed!" exclaimed the old soldier, in a tone and with an emphasis that showed how he was startled.

"And I'll never believe that my father meant it to be so."

John Manning gave Cyril a dig with his elbow, and he winked one eye, but the act was invisible in the darkness.

"Why, it was him as 'vented the plan, sir. I only helped carry it out."

"Oh!" ejaculated Perry.

"Hadn't we got to escape, sir?"

"But in such a way!"

“Why, it was a splendid way, Master Perry. But I say I am ashamed of you to go private court-martialing your own father in that way, and find such fault with him for helping you to get off!”

“I’m not going to judge him,” said Perry. “I only say it was horrible.”

“Well, yes, sir, it was, and is,” said the old soldier, giving Cyril another dig. “Can’t say as I should like to lie all night on my back with my hands tied behind me to a big pole, and my ankles and knees served the same, just as if I was going to be roasted for a cannibal’s dinner, and to make it worse, an old worsted stocking rammed into my mouth, and a cloth tied over it and behind my neck, to make sure I didn’t get it out.”

“What!” cried Perry.

“I said a stocking rammed into my month, sir, so as I shouldn’t holler, only breathe. It is hard on a man, but what was you to do?”

“Then you didn’t kill them,” cried Perry joyfully.

“Kill ’em,” said John Manning, in a tone full of disgust. “Did you ever know a British soldier, as was a soldier, go killing folk in that way, sir, when they’d been made prisoners? Master Perry, sir, I’m ashamed o’ you for thinking such a thing o’ your father, as is as fine an officer as ever stepped.”

“Not so much ashamed of me as I am of myself,” said Perry huskily. “Then Diego and the other man are all right?”

“They don’t think so,” said the old soldier with a chuckle. “They’re precious uncomfortable by this time, for I rammed the stockings pretty far, and I tied them knots with those new hide ropes as tight as they’d draw.”

“Quiet there, quiet,” said the colonel sternly, for he had stopped and let the mules pass him. “No more talking for the present. Can you hear anything?”

“No, sir, not a sound,” said John Manning. But even as he spoke there was a faint cry borne on the night wind from high up the valley, and situated as they were, that sound could only have one meaning—pursuit.

Chapter Nineteen.

The Dark Way.

“They’ve missed us,” said Cyril excitedly. “Shall I run to the leader, sir, and hurry him on?”

“No, my lad,” said the colonel, “we shall do nothing by hurrying. Our retreat must be carried out slowly. We can get on no faster than the mules will walk. Keep on as we are.”

He left them after listening for a few minutes, and hurried forward to reach his place again by the leading mule, for the sagacious beast had gone steadily on, followed by the others, acting as if it knew its duty as well as a human being—that duty being to follow the easiest course offered by the valley, which ran parallel with one of the outer ranges of foot-hills, there being no track whatever to act as guide.

“Sounds quite reviving,” said John Manning in a whisper. “We’ve had so much dull do-nothing times, that it quite freshens one up.”

“How long will it be before they overtake us?” said Perry anxiously.

“How long have we been coming here, sir?” replied the old soldier.

“I don’t know—an hour, I suppose.”

“Yes, sir, an hour. Well, if they knew the way we came and followed on, it would take them hours more than it has taken us.”

“Why?” said Cyril sharply.

“Why, sir? because,” said John Manning, with one of his dry chuckles, “they’ll have to come along very slowly, searching among the trees as they come, for fear of overrunning the scent; for as it’s dark, they’ve got nothing to guide ’em, and I hope they won’t find much when it’s light, for the sun will soon dry up the dew which shows the marks made by brushing it off. We’re all right till they hit the track we’ve come, and that

won't be till some time to-morrow, if they hit it then."

"Oh, they'll know the way we've come," said Perry, who was breathing hard from excitement.

"They must be very clever then, sir," said John Manning drily. "I should say they'll think we've made for the way we came."

"Speak lower," said Cyril. "Why?"

"Because, says they, these white fellows haven't got any guides now, and they only know one road, so they're sure to take it."

"Yes, that sounds likely," said Perry sharply; "but how was it we could hear them shouting?"

"I know that," said Cyril. "The air is so clear right up here in the mountains, and the wind is this way. It's like seeing. You know how close the peaks seem when they're twenty miles away."

"Yes, sir, and sounds run along a hollow like this wonderfully. Why, I remember in one of the passes up in India, we in the rearguard could hear the men talking right away in the front as easily as if we were close to them."

"But look here," said Cyril. "Diego or the other fellow must have seen which way we came."

"They must have been very sharp then, sir, for I took care to tie a little biscuit bag over each of their heads, only I left holes for their noses to come out and breathe. Don't you fret, young gentlemen; we've got the start, and I don't believe the fight 'll begin 'fore to-morrow evening, if it do then."

"You know, then, that it will come to a fight," said Perry.

"Well, say a skirmish, sir. We in the rearguard 'll have to be divided into three companies, and keep on retiring one after the other, and taking up fresh ground to protect the baggage-train. It's all right, gentlemen, and it'll be quite a new experience for you both. You'll like it as soon as the

excitement begins.”

“Excitement?” cried Perry. “Suppose one of us is shot.”

“Ah, we don’t think of that, sir, in the army,” said John Manning. “We think of the enemy getting that. But, if one of us is so unlucky, why, then, he’ll be clapped on a mule’s back and go on with the baggage-train.”

The two boys stopped then to listen, but all was silent save the faint rustling made by the mules in front as they went steadily onward in their leader’s track. The night was dark, but the stars glittered brilliantly overhead in a broad strip which showed how deep down the valley had grown, and how wall-like the sides rose in their blackness.

“I say,” whispered Perry, stopping short. “Doesn’t it make you feel shivery?”

“No,” said Cyril. “Shuddery. We seem to be going on, down and down, as if this were a slope leading right underground. I shall be glad when the daylight comes, so that we can see where we are going.—Hear any one coming?”

“No, but let’s go on, or we may be left behind.”

“Well, we are left behind now.”

“But suppose we missed the others. It would be horrible.”

“No fear,” said Cyril; “the valley’s getting narrower and narrower, and if we keep on, we’re sure to overtake the mules.”

Cyril was right, for in a few minutes they heard the faint patter of the hoofs again, and were glad to keep close in the rear, for instinctively the patient beasts picked out the easiest way. And now from being a smooth, grassy, park-like, open valley, the route they followed began to contract into a gorge, from whose wall-like sides masses of stone had been tumbled down in the course of ages, till the bottom was growing more difficult to traverse every mile they passed; while, for aught they knew in the darkness, they might be skirting precipice and pitfall of the most dangerous kind, depending, as they were, entirely upon the mules.

They had suggestions of there being unknown depths around, for to their left there was the gurgling, rushing sound of water, apparently deep down beneath the fallen stones, sometimes louder, sometimes dying away into a murmur; till all at once, as they turned a corner into sudden, complete darkness—for the long band of starry light overhead was now shut out—they were startled by a deep echoing, booming roar, and a chilling damp air smote them in the face as it came down, evidently from some gorge to their right, which joined the one along which they had travelled.

It needed no explanation. Light failed, but they knew as well as if they were in broad sunshine that they were face to face with a huge cascade which came gliding down from far on high into some terrific chasm far below, while the change from the calm silence of the valley they had traversed to the deafening sound which rose from below, was confusing and strange to such a degree, that they came to a stand.

It was not that the noise was so great, as that it seemed, paradoxical as it may sound, so huge and soft, and to pervade all space, to the exclusion of everything else. As Cyril said afterwards, it was a noise that did not pierce and ring in your ears, but stopped them up and smothered all speech; while the darkness was so deep, that no one felt the slightest desire to take a step forward.

Perry was the first to make any move, for all at once he felt for Cyril, placed his lips close to his ear, and said excitedly:

“My father: can you hear him?”

“No,” replied his companion, after a pause. “I can only hear the water.”

“Then he must have fallen in.—Here, John Manning. Where is the lantern?”

“Tied to the first mule’s pack, sir.”

“Oh!” exclaimed Perry excitedly, and then he shouted “Father!” as loudly as he could, but the cry seemed to be driven back in his face.

“I’ll light a match, sir,” cried Manning, and after a few moments there was a flash, the gleam of a light, and the shape of the old soldier’s hands, with

the tiny flame gleaming ruddily between his fingers; but, save that the boys saw the familiar rugged features of the man's face for a few moments, they saw nothing more, and the darkness grew painful as the match went out.

John Manning struck another light, got the splint well in a blaze, and tossed it from him; but there was nothing to be seen but mist. The boys now shouted together, but without result, and a chilling sensation of dread came over them as they grasped each other's wet cold hand, not daring to stir, and with the horrible feeling increasing upon them that some terrible tragedy must have happened to their leader.

Just when the sensation of horror was at its height, John Manning's voice was heard.

"What had we best do, gentlemen—go forward or go back?"

"We ought to go forward," said Cyril.

"Yes, that's what I feel, sir," shouted the man; "but next step may be down into the pit."

"We must go on," said Perry excitedly; "my father wants help. He's in danger, I'm sure, or he would have made some sign."

As he spoke, he snatched his hand from Cyril's grasp, and took a step or two forward into the black darkness.

"Perry!" shouted Cyril, in a voice which sounded like a faint whisper, as he felt himself seized by the shoulder, John Manning's great hand closing upon it like a vice, and holding it firmly.

"Where's Master Perry?"

No answer escaped Cyril's lips for a minute. He felt suffocated, and it was not until John Manning had shaken him violently and repeated his question twice, that he panted out the single word, "Gone."

"Can you see where—has he fallen in?" was panted in his ear.

“No; he stepped from me to help the colonel, and then he was gone.”

John Manning groaned, and Cyril felt the strong man’s hand trembling, and the vibration thrilled through the boy’s frame until every nerve quivered with the horrible dread which assailed him.

All at once he felt the lips at his ear again.

“Let’s shout together, sir,” was whispered, and they tried hard to make their voices heard, calling together with all their strength, but they did not seem to be able to pierce the roar which pressed, as it were, upon them; and though they repeated the cry at intervals and listened for a reply, none came.

“It’s no good, Mr Cyril, sir,” groaned John Manning. “I’m ready, sir, to do anything to try and save my poor colonel and Master Perry; what can I do? It’s like chucking away my life and yours, sir, to stir a step.”

“Yes, and I’d help you,” said Cyril despairingly; “but we dare not move in this terrible darkness.”

“Shall we try to go back, sir?”

“No,” shouted Cyril firmly. “We must not do that.”

“What then, sir? What can we do?”

“Wait for daylight,” Cyril shouted back in the man’s ear. Then softly to himself: “And pray.”

Chapter Twenty.

Waiting for Daylight.

As John Manning afterwards said, those were hours to make a man’s hair turn grey, and to Cyril every minute seemed to be indefinitely prolonged, as he stood till he felt his knees begin to give way beneath him, and finally sank cautiously down upon them—John Manning

imitating his movement—till they both rested upon wet, slippery rock.

There they crouched with strained ears, waiting for the light which seemed as if it would never come, while the noise was crushing them back, as it were, upon themselves, and dulling their brains till all was to Cyril like some terrible dream. There were moments when he felt as if his senses were leaving him, and the sensation was almost welcome, for the agony at last grew greater than he could bear.

He had reached this pitch as he crouched there with his arm drawn tightly through John Manning's, when he felt the man's grasp upon him loosened, and the next moment he felt a thrust.

He knew directly what it meant. Following the movement, he became conscious of some pale, bluish-looking smoke on his left, and as this grew clearer, he realised that it was not smoke, but a thick mist between him and the coming light of day; but for a few minutes there was nothing more.

Then by slow degrees this dim, grey appearance grew and expanded, till the boy made out that the mist rose out of the depths before them, and at last that he and John Manning were crouching upon a ledge of rock on one side of a great gulf, down into which the waters thundered from their right, while overhead the wall of rock rose up nearly straight, the light of day being shut out by the dense mist which rose from below.

This light increased rapidly now in pale gleams from the left, and a faint, soft diffusion from above, showing that they were where a vast rift in the mountain joined at right angles the valley they had descended, while the rocky sides were so close that they nearly met overhead. But some time elapsed before they could make out more, the steamy mist obscuring everything, and preventing them from seeing anything of Perry or the colonel.

They had both risen to their feet, and clasping hands, began, as soon as it was possible to see a step or two, to try to penetrate farther in; but before they had gone half-a-dozen steps, John Manning, who looked misty and unsubstantial to Cyril, stopped short and pointed downward in front of him to where the rock looked slippery as glass.

“He went down there, sir,” he shouted, and loosening his grasp, threw himself down upon his chest, and wormed himself forward, so as to get his head over the gulf and look down.

Cyril watched the man in agony, fully expecting to see him glide forward out of sight; but in a few minutes he worked himself back, rose, and placed his lips to the boy’s ear again.

“Can’t see. All one thick cloud of spray.”

Cyril gave a great start, for at that moment, from out of the misty gloom, the colonel strode forward to meet them.

“Thank goodness,” he shouted. “I was very nervous about—Where’s Perry?”

Cyril and John Manning, whose faces had lit up with pleasure, now gave him a despairing look, which made him seize Cyril by both arms.

“My boy!” he gasped. “Where’s my boy?”

There was no reply. There was none needed, for the colonel read in their faces what was wrong. He had seen them, too, trying to look down into the misty gulf below, and there was a horrible look of despair in his countenance as he pointed mutely down into the terrible-looking gloom.

Then going right to the edge, he tried to look over, but drew back a little and stretched out his hand to John Manning, hooking his fingers the while.

The old soldier stepped forward. Long discipline and training had made him ready to grasp his master’s wishes, and planting his right foot against a projecting piece of the rock, he hooked his fingers in the colonel’s, and then hung slightly back, giving a little and a little more, till the latter was able to lean right out and gaze down.

It was by this time far lighter, and the mist was here and there transparent, as it came eddying up more and more like the clouds of smoke from a fire, but there was no piercing even the lightest parts; and giving this up in despair, Colonel Campion rose up, made a sign to them

to stand firm, and then stepped rapidly in the direction from which they had seen him come.

One minute they saw his figure growing fainter along by the side of the rock-wall, the next he had disappeared in the gloom and mist.

“Let’s follow,” said Cyril, with his lips to John Manning’s ear.

The man shook his head.

“Soldier never leaves his post without orders,” he replied. “Better stay, sir.”

Cyril hesitated, but stayed; now watching the spot where the colonel had disappeared, now letting his eyes wander round the place, which, as the growing light of day penetrated it more and more, was still awful enough, with its whirling mist, gloom, and deafening roar of invisible water falling behind the pearly veil, but far from being as terrible as when it was all shrouded in deep obscurity.

For the light came down softly from high above their heads, showing that though the rocky walls nearly approached, there was a firmly-defined band that would probably be bright and golden when the sun rose, but John Manning’s words were justified as he suddenly leaned forward and said:

“What a place, sir! It’s a wonder there ain’t four of us gone for good.”

Just then the colonel reappeared with half-a-dozen of the raw hide ropes used about the mules for lassoes, tethering, and binding on their loads.

These he threw down, and John Manning followed his example as he began to knot them together.

“Bear me?” shouted the colonel to the old soldier.

“Two of you, sir,” said the latter; “but you lower, I’ll go.”

The colonel shook his head angrily—the task of speaking was too much in his state of anguish—and he went on trying the knots he made, while

Cyril picked up one end and examined a couple of the knots before making a strong loop, and passing it over his head and shoulders.

His action passed un-noticed for a few moments, for he had drawn back; but when the last rope was joined to the others, the colonel turned and grasped the boy's intention.

"God bless you, my lad," he cried, "but I cannot let you go."

Cyril hardly heard a word in the midst of that deep-toned, booming thunder, but he grasped their import, and stood firm.

"Yes," he shouted. "I'm light. Lower me down."

A curious sensation attacked him as he spoke, and he knew that he was turning pale, but he faced in the direction of the gulf, and tried hard to pull himself together.

"Perry would have gone down after me," he said to himself, "and it isn't so very dangerous after all."

But all the while he knew that it was, and also that it was a task calling for nerve, determination, and strength, all three of which he seemed to be wanting in when face to face with the dense, wreathing mist of that terrible gulf.

"I don't care. I'm afraid, horribly afraid," he muttered between his teeth. "But I'll go. I'd go if it was twice as dangerous, if it's only to let father know I'm not all bad."

Meanwhile, a short discussion, painfully hard, went on between the colonel and John Manning, the former hesitating, the latter insisting.

"He's light, and can do it better than you. Perhaps we couldn't pull you up, nor you me."

Then the colonel held out his hand to Cyril, who grasped it eagerly, but in an instant the colonel's face began to work, and he drew the lad to his breast, held him there for a brief moment, and then released him.

"I'm not afraid now," shouted Cyril, and he stepped at once to the edge, and, as the line was tightened, went down on his face, passed his legs over, and, grasping the line with both hands, glided down; seeing the faces of the two men who held the rope disappear, then the shelf; and the next minute, as he was lowered, he saw nothing but the light mist which closed him in, and struck dank and chilly to his face and hands.

He had expected to swing to and fro in the air, and had prepared himself to grasp at the rock, and try to prevent himself from turning round and round; but to his surprise he found that he was on a sharp incline, down which he was sliding easily, for the rock was covered with a slippery mossy growth, over which his hands glided whenever he tried to check his course; for, in spite of his determination, the desire to do this mastered him. Anything to stop himself from going down into that awful place at some terrible depth below, where the water was churning round and round, and tossing up this mist of spray. To go down into that must mean instant death; and after all, what good was he going to do? Poor Perry had slipped, gone over the edge, and then not fallen headlong, but glided down at a terrible rate, with no power to arrest his course; and, if he were not down there below, he must have been swept out by the stream, and be far away down the river by then.

These thoughts came quickly as he slipped gently down, keeping his face toward the roaring water and churning mist, but seeing nothing; for the darkness now, as he was lowered more, began to increase.

Down, down, down! Was there no end to the rope? How long it seemed before it was checked. Still Cyril tried hard to make out something of the whereabouts of his friend. But no; if he turned to the right, toward where there was the hissing noise of the falling water, all was black, as black as it was below in the fearful hollow into which it plunged, to send up that deafening, reverberating thunder. At last to the left there, where he knew the chasm must open into the valley by which they came, he could see a faint suggestion of light, such light as one sees when looking towards a candle with the eyes tightly closed, and when trying to peer through the veined lids.

Then, to his horror, he was being lowered again, for he had believed that the end of the hide rope was reached.

It seemed a great depth down before there was another check, though probably it was not more than a dozen or twenty feet; and once more, as he tried to grasp the slimy rock behind him, he peered about vainly, knowing that if poor Perry had once begun to glide down that horrible slope, he must have gone right on down to the bottom.

Then there was a heavier strain upon his chest, and to his intense relief, now that he felt how vain his effort had been, he turned his face toward the rocks, and tried to help by climbing, as he was being drawn up.

Vain effort. Hands and feet glided over the slippery moss, and he soon subsided, and waited in increasing agony, while he was steadily hauled up. For, in descending, his senses were hard at work, and he was momentarily hoping to rest upon some shelf where he might come upon Perry. But now he had nothing to do but think of himself and his risks, and, in spite of the effort to be brave, he could not keep his mind from dwelling upon the knots of the several ropes, and wondering whether those John Manning tied were as firm as the colonel's, and whether the rope itself might not have been frayed by passing over the rocks, and give way just before he reached the shelf.

At last, with head burning, hands and feet like ice, and clothes drenched with the spray, he felt himself seized by John Manning's strong fingers and lifted into safety.

It had now become light enough for him to see well around; the mist on high was turning roseate and warm by reflection, for the sun was rising; and the colonel turned from him with a look of agony, and stood with his back to them, while John Manning unloosed the rope.

"Nobody could come out of such a place as that, my lad," he said, "alive."

Chapter Twenty One.

The Pursuit.

"I'll go down again, sir," said Cyril, when the colonel had turned back, and he had tried to make him understand the nature of the place, as far as he

had been able to make out.

But the colonel shook his head.

“We must go back, and try to reach the stream where it flows out, my boy,” he said. “We can do no good here.—Come, Manning, and fetch the mules.”

John Manning stared, and seemed as if he could not understand.

“The mules, sir—go back and find the stream? What about the Indians, if they are coming on?” The colonel had forgotten their pursuers. “The mules,” he said then; and he led the way on into the mist, Cyril following him wonderingly along the continuation of the rocky shelf for about a hundred yards, and glancing back from time to time to see that John Manning was close behind, untying the knots of the hide ropes as he came.

Every step took them nearer to the great waterfall, and in the dim light Cyril now made out that the path was wider; but all at once it seemed to end in front of a gleaming sheet of water reaching from the thick mist below right up to where the rock-walls appeared to give place to the spray-clouded sky. And there, just before them, all huddled together, stood the mules, ready to turn toward them as they approached.

“They brought me as far as this last night,” said the colonel, “and then stopped. No wonder, poor brutes, they would go no farther; and I was lost in the darkness, and dared not turn back. I stood with them till daybreak, hoping you all were safe, and then—”

Cyril uttered a wild cry of joy, one which made itself heard by all, for a bare-headed misty figure, whose presence they had not been aware of as it followed them, suddenly caught the colonel’s arm, placed its lips to his ear, and cried:

“Quick, father—the Indians; they’re coming down the valley fast.”

In the face of such news as Perry bore, there was no time to ask questions about his escape, but as the colonel grasped the boy’s arm, trembling the while with excitement, his heart throbbing with joy, he cried:

“How far away?”

“Not half a mile. I could see them coming down the valley.”

“This way,” said the colonel promptly, and he supplemented his words with gestures, as, still holding his son’s arm tightly, he led them on through the mist of fine spray inward toward where the mules were standing together. And now as they approached the fall, a great deal of the horror caused by the darkness and noise passed away, for the mist grew opalescent from the sunshine far above, and though progress looked terribly perilous, they could see the extent of their danger, and there was no mystery of hidden peril, no constant dread of unknown chasms waiting to engulf them at their next stride.

For they knew now that they were in one of Nature’s wildest and grandest rifts, where a goodly-sized river, after tearing its way along the profound depths of a narrow gorge, had reached a spot where by some earthquake convulsion this gorge had suddenly, as it were, broken in two. One part had dropped several hundred feet, forming a profound chasm into which the water from above leaped in one great glistening wave, smooth as so much gleaming glass, to be broken up into spray as it reached the jagged rocks below, and there eddy and foam in what was undoubtedly a huge basin, from which the mist arose, while the broken water swept on down into the valley to join the little stream by whose side they had come.

The leading mule threw up its head as the colonel approached, and its parted teeth and drawn-back lips suggested that it was whinnying a welcome or a demand for food. But the great fall before them, and the knowledge that at any time the Indians might appear from out of the dense mist and commence their attack, gave the colonel eyes for only one thing, and that a way out of what seemed to be a perfect *cul de sac*.

The deafening roar, of course, prevented all consultation, and the mist added to the confusion; but these had their advantages for the fugitives, veiling their actions from their pursuers, and preventing any sound made by the mules from being heard.

And as Cyril watched their leader’s actions, and then caught an

encouraging look from John Manning, who gave his head a jerk in the colonel's direction, as if to say: "It's all right, he'll find his way out," the boy felt in better spirits. The terrors of the night were gone; they were all there safe, and there was the possibility of the Indians feeling as much in awe of the terrible chasm as they had themselves, and hence shrinking from making their way through the mist, and giving them the credit of going on down the valley by the greater stream which issued from beneath the falls.

Cyril's thoughts were many, and in the reaction from the terrible despair from which he had suffered, he was ready to accept anything short of the marvellous; and consequently he was in nowise surprised on seeing their leader go right on into the darkness, peering here and there, and the leading mule follow him and Perry, the rest getting in motion directly, and going on into the mist till the last had disappeared.

Just then John Manning, who had turned to look back, wiping the moisture from his face, clapped Cyril on the shoulder, and placed his lips close to the boy's ear.

"Can't see 'em coming. This'll scare 'em from following. They'll think nobody but mad folk would ever come along here. I say, he's found a way behind the fall."

But John Manning was wrong.

They followed the direction taken by the last mule, together stepping cautiously onward through the mist, for the rugged shelf they were on was dripping with moisture, and felt slippery beneath their feet, while to their left there was the huge body of water always gliding down into the spray which eddied up to meet it. Then, to their intense astonishment, they stepped right out of the dense, clinging mist, which hid everything, into a clear atmosphere. It was quite in twilight that they stood, but the falling water brought with it a cool current of air; and as they both stopped for a moment to gaze and wonder, there to their left was the great fall rushing down clear of the rock behind, and leaving plenty of room for any one to pass through to the other side, beneath the water, had the shelf been continued there; but it passed round to their right, as if Nature had made a natural staircase, zigzagging up the side of the gorge; and there,

some distance above them, were the colonel and Perry, mounting slowly after the leading mule, which showed no hesitation about proceeding now that it was day.

John Manning nodded, and they followed up and up the giddy path, now leaving the fall some distance behind, now approaching it again, but always near enough to be terribly impressed by the vast curve of gleaming black water, which, as they rose higher, could be plainly seen plunging down into what appeared to them as a dark grey cloud.

From time to time the colonel looked back and waved his hand, stopping at last at a spot where the natural track curved suddenly round a sharp point of rock. The mules followed one by one, their heads right down, and their feet carefully planted at every step, till the last had gone round; and then in turn Cyril and John Manning climbed up, and before passing the sharp rock, stopped to gaze down into the vast rift up whose side they had mounted so far.

From this point the whole of the wild zigzag was visible right to where the grey veil of mist shut off the level shelf where they had passed the night, and John Manning's lips had just parted to utter some words about the horrible nature of the place, when Cyril started back and jerked his garment, to make him follow suit.

The old soldier was keenly alive to danger, and dropping upon his knees, he joined Cyril in cautiously looking over the edge of the rocks they had just ascended, softly bringing the muzzle of his piece to bear upon what he saw.

For, as he gazed down, there in the gloom, not two hundred yards away as an arrow would fly, but at a distance which it had taken them nearly half an hour to climb by the gradual ascent, was the figure of an Indian standing out just clear of the mist, and peering cautiously about, as if searching every rock and crevice around.

The next minute another had joined him, coming out of the mist cautiously, and with the tentative motion of one who was on strange ground.

Then came another and another, with their figures looking huge and

grotesque as they stood in the mist, and then suddenly shrinking into the stature as of dwarfs, as soon as they were clear.

One by one they came on, till there were at least thirty collected together, and all gazing about cautiously, as if in dread.

As Cyril knew from his own experience, they could only converse with difficulty, so that he was not surprised to see that one of them, who appeared to be the leader, was gesticulating and pointing here and there, and finally upward toward where the two fugitives were watching every act.

But, as the boy watched the Indians keenly, it was very evident that they were far from confident, and he soon decided that they were as much panic-stricken by the horror of the place as he and his friends had been overnight. At last, though after a great deal of pointing upward and hesitation, it seemed as if they were all reluctantly about to continue the pursuit, for their leader took a few steps forward and waved them on.

But they did not stir, save to crowd together a little more and press toward the wall of rock, away from the fall.

"They don't like it," whispered John Manning, for it was becoming possible, where they lay, to make a few words audible without shouting. "Strikes me they're so scared, that if we were to send one of these big pieces of rock rolling down, they'd beat a retreat."

"Look, look!" whispered Cyril.

"I am," said John Manning, for all at once a couple more of the Indians suddenly appeared from out of the mist, in whom they recognised Diego and his fellow-guide, the former holding something in his hand which he was showing to all in turn with a great deal of gesticulation, accompanied by eager pointings down into the depths below the fall, and back through the mist.

"What's he got there?" whispered John Manning. "Something to eat? He wants them to go back."

"I know," said Cyril so loudly that his companion caught his arm. "It's

Perry's cap."

"What!" cried the old soldier. "I know how it is. They've found it somewhere down the stream, where it had been washed, and he's saying that we must all have tumbled in there and been swept away."

This appeared to be a very likely interpretation, for, with a great display of eagerness, the men hurried back through the mist till all were gone.

"Let's make haste on and overtake them," said Cyril eagerly. "I want to ask Perry where he left his cap."

"And he'll tell you, sir, that he didn't leave it anywhere, but had it took away by the water."

"Are they in sight?" said the colonel, bending down over them. "You were quite right. This is an excellent place to keep them back. Yes," he continued, on hearing the surmises of the two watchers, "that must be it, and they have gone back to follow the stream."

He led the way again, and they followed to where Perry was anxiously looking back, as the mules steadily went on higher and higher up the gloomy gorge, where the great stream was hurrying and foaming along toward where it would make its plunge; while the thunderous roar of the fall was rapidly dying away, shut out, as it now was, by curve after curve of the valley.

The place was black and forbidding enough, but as they got on another mile or two, their journey was brightened by the glow upon the ridges and slopes on high where the sun reached, and the grassy sides of the lower mountains looked delightful after their long experience of black, dripping stone.

Many a look back was given as they went on higher and higher, every step taking them more into the mighty range, and fortunately due west; and, weary as they all were, intense was the longing to hurry their steps. But that last was impossible. They were dependent upon the mules for their supply of food, and the cautious animals only had one pace, and this regulated their masters'.

At last, when utterly exhausted, a halt was called just at a sharp turn in the gorge, where water could be reached, and the rocks sheltered them and the mules from pursuers; while they gave them the opportunity of scanning the narrow way for nearly a mile, so that if a watch was kept, it was impossible for them to be taken by surprise.

There was some stunted herbage too, here, upon which, as soon as they had drunk, the mules began to browse. But no load was removed, arms were ready for an attack, and the only mule that was lightened was the one that bore the provisions.

And now Perry was questioned more closely about his escape, and Cyril heard it from his lips for the first time.



Chapter Twenty Two.

Perry's Peril.

"There isn't much to tell," said the boy with a shiver.

"Never mind; tell me: I want to know. What's the matter—cold?"

"No, I'm warm enough now," said Perry, "for my clothes have got dry; but it makes me shiver as soon as I think about it, and I feel as if I always shall. It's a thing I shall dream about of a night, and wake up feeling the water strangling me."

Cyril looked at him in wonder, and the boy tried to smile, but it was a very pitiful attempt, and he went on hurriedly.

"You know how horrible all that was when I felt sure that my father had gone down somewhere, and something forced me to go and try to find him. And then, as I went on through the mist, I only took three or four steps before my feet gave way, and I was sliding at a terrible rate down, down to where the water was thundering and roaring."

"Was it very deep?" said Cyril, for his companion paused.

"I don't know; I seemed to be sliding along very fast, and then I was fighting for breath, and being dashed here and there, and I suppose I was carried along by the water almost as swiftly as I slid down that dreadful slope. Then, after fighting for my breath, all was confusion and darkness, and I can't remember any more till I found myself lying among some rocks. The water was rushing and foaming over my legs, and every now and then rushing up over my chest, and making me feel so in fear of being drowned that I climbed a little, and then a little more, till I was out of the water, but afraid to move in the darkness in case I should fall in again."

"Where were you?" said Cyril.

"I didn't know then, but lay aching with the cold, and listening to the

rushing water; while it was so dark, that I felt sure that I must have been washed into some great hole underground, where I should lie till I was dead."

"We felt all kinds of horrors about you," said Cyril, "but you seem to have suffered more than we did."

"I don't know," said Perry plaintively. "It was very bad, though, and if I hadn't fallen at last into a sort of stupor, I've thought since that I should have gone mad."

"Stupor!" said Cyril, smiling. "You mean you went to sleep."

Perry looked at him so reproachfully that Cyril felt the blood flush into his cheeks, and the colour deepened as his companion said: "How could a fellow go to sleep when he believes his father has been killed, and he has himself just escaped from a horrible death?"

"Don't take any notice of what I said," cried Cyril hurriedly; "I did not mean it."

"I know you did not. I suppose it was from being so exhausted. I felt as if I had been stunned, and could neither think nor stir, and then this curious feeling came over me, and everything passed away. It was not sleep."

"No, no; don't say that again," cried Cyril apologetically. "How long were you like that?"

"I don't know, only that it was still dark when I came to, and sat wondering where I was, and whether I should ever see the light again, so miserable and desolate you cannot think."

"Yes, I can," said Cyril warmly; "I felt bad, too, when I thought you were drowned, and went down to try to find you."

"What!" cried Perry excitedly. "You went down to try to find me?"

"Oh yes," said Cyril coolly. "Didn't you know? They put a rope round me and let me down."

“Cil!”

“Well, don’t make a fuss about it,” said Cyril, laughing. “They had hold of the rope.”

“But the place was so awful. Didn’t you feel frightened?”

“Horribly, of course, and it was ever so much worse when I’d got to the end of the rope, and felt that you must be gone. But never mind that. Go on. You were saying how miserable you were.”

“Yes,” said Perry thoughtfully, “till all at once I caught sight of something high up, just as if it was a point of light coming through a crack in the roof of the cavern into which I had been washed.”

“And was it?”

“No,” said the boy, with his eyes brightening, “it was the first light of morning shining miles up on the ice of one of the great peaks, and as I watched it, I saw it get brighter and then begin to glow as if it were a precious stone. The light gradually stole down lower and lower, till it seemed to come right into my heart; and from that moment I began to grow strong and hopeful, and something seemed to tell me that I should see you all again.”

“Hah!” ejaculated Cyril, as he watched his friend’s countenance; “I wish something of that kind had come to me when I was feeling worst.”

“You weren’t alone,” said Perry, smiling. “Well, as soon as I found that I was just at the edge of a rushing torrent, I knew that if I followed it up, I should come to the mouth of the gorge where you must be, and I began to climb along the side, getting warmer every minute; and I felt more hopeful too, for I began to think how clever my father was, and that he would have been able to save himself, or have been saved, just as I was.”

“And then you soon found the mouth of the gorge where the water came out?”

“Yes, and the place where we turned in last night, instead of going right

on down the main valley. It was quite a climb up to the path, but I dragged myself up; and just then I happened to turn my eyes along the way we came just as I was warmest, and then I turned cold again."

"Because you saw the Indians?"

Perry nodded, and the boys sat in silence for a few minutes, looking up at the sunlit sky, which appeared like a broad jagged path running along high above their heads.

"What are you thinking about?" said Perry suddenly, as he noted the thoughtful, deeply-lined brow of his companion.

"Eh? Oh, nothing much," replied Cyril. "Only that when I knew you were coming up into the mountains, I felt so jealous of you, and I fancied that you were coming to see all kinds of wonders and make great discoveries, and that it would be one grand holiday, day after day, and instead of that—I say, we haven't had so very much fun yet, have we?"

"Plenty of adventures," replied Perry thoughtfully.

"Yes, plenty of adventures."

"It's been so hard upon you, though, from the first. You were so upset when you joined us."

"And serve me right," cried Cyril angrily. "I'd no business to do it; I believe they think at home that I'm dead. Nothing's too bad to happen to me."

"Then you're sorry you came?"

"Yes; horribly. I don't mind all we've gone through, because it has seemed to stir me up so, and made me feel as if I'd got more stuff in me; and it ought to, for sometimes I've felt, since we came, that I behaved like a miserable, thoughtless coward."

"No one could call you a coward," said Perry firmly.

"Oh yes, they could—a miserable, selfish coward."

"I should just like to hear any one call you one," said Perry viciously, and with a hard, fierce look in his countenance.

"Then you soon shall," said Cyril. "I call myself one a dozen times a day. There, I'm a coward."

"But I meant some one else."

"You wait long enough, and you'll hear my father call me one."

"You're not."

"Yes, I am, and I shall deserve all he says—that is, if we ever get back to San Geronimo."

"Don't talk like that," said Perry. "What's to prevent us?"

"Indians," said Cyril mournfully.

"But we've left them behind."

"For a bit. They'll hunt us out again somewhere. They've got all the advantage of us. I daresay there are thirty or forty of them hunting us, and what one doesn't know of the country, another does; and as they spread out, they'll warn every Indian they meet, so as to run us down, for they're sure to feel now that we're after the buried treasures, and they'll give us credit for having found them."

"Why?"

"Because we have escaped. Every pass will be guarded, and every valley searched, so that they are sure to come across us at last.—Look, they're going to start. Come along." And picking up their guns, the boys joined the colonel and John Manning, who were tightening up the ropes round two of the loads.

"Better trust the leader, Manning," said the colonel.

"Yes, sir. He seems as good as a guide; and if you set his head straight, he'll take us somewhere; and where he goes, the others'll follow. Rum

thing, too, sir.”

“Oh, I don’t know,” said the colonel; “these animals have passed their lives in the mountains.”

“Of course, sir, but I didn’t mean that. I meant it was a rum thing for them to follow their leader in this way, for they all hate him like poison, and kick at him whenever they have a chance; and as for the way he kicks at them, I wonder sometimes he doesn’t get his heels stuck in their ribs, so that he can’t get out no more. ‘Tis their natur’ to, eh, Master Cyril, sir?— Ah, would yer!”

This to one of the mules, whose heels must have itched, for it was softly turning itself round as if seeking somewhere to administer a good round kick.

Then all was ready for a start; but first the colonel mounted the side among the rocks, to search the valley with his glass.

He was soon satisfied that the Indians were nowhere within sight, and taking advantage of the high position he occupied, he turned the glass in the other direction, to scan the way they were about to go.

All there was utterly silent and desolate. There were the rocks everywhere, hardly relieved by a patch of green, and he was about to descend and start the mules, when he caught sight of Cyril hurrying back toward him, and signing to him to stay where he was.

“What is it?” he cried, as he saw the boy’s anxious face.

“Look up to your left, sir, just above where that big rock sticks out just as if it must fall.”

“Yes, I see,” said the colonel; “with another just above.”

“That’s it, sir. Look just between those two blocks.”

“Yes, I have the place.”

“Well, sir, there are two Indians there watching us.”

"No, my lad, there are no Indians there. Take the glass and look for yourself."

Cyril snatched the glass, directed it to the steep, precipitous side of the gorge, and then uttered an ejaculation full of annoyance.

"They're gone, sir, but I'm sure there were two men there."

"Then if so, they must be close to the same spot now. I hope you are wrong, but of course you may be right. Let's go on, and if they are there, we shall be sure to catch sight of them, for they must go forward or backward."

"Would you go on?" said Cyril dubiously.

"At any cost, boy. We cannot go back to that awful chasm to pass another night. There, back with you, but keep your eyes on the position in which you saw the men."

Cyril was silenced, and half ready to suppose that in his anxiety he had deceived himself; and in a few minutes he was back with the colonel, beside Perry and the mules, but without seeing anything in the direction he had pointed out.

"Ready?"

"Yes, sir, but my eyes are not quite so good as they were, sir, and I fancied I saw some one creeping along the side of the rock, up yonder to the right."

"Left, John Manning," cried Cyril, "and I saw it too."

"You saw something on your left, sir? Then I am right, and my eyes are true. There's Injuns watching us, sir, and if we don't look out, we shall have arrows sticking in our skins."

Chapter Twenty Three.

At the Bivouac.

The boys were heartily glad when, just before nightfall—night, which fell much sooner, shut in there in the deep valleys of the Andes—the colonel snatched at a suggestion made by John Manning.

“Water, sir, coming out of that slit in the rock, plenty o’ breastwork, and a bit of green stuff for the mules.”

“Yes, we’ll halt here. We are not likely to find a better place,” said the colonel.

So instead of tramping on for another hour, a halt was called early, the packages formed into a shelter in front of the “slit” in the rock, as John Manning called it, a place which suggested its being a way into a good-sized cavern, and then a fire was lit, and they prepared their meal.

For no more had been seen of the Indians, and though the colonel had a shrewd suspicion that they might still be in chase of them, those which had been seen in the valley were, he concluded, only wanderers, whom they had startled while on some hunting expedition, and whom they would probably see no more.

The fire was only used to heat the water for their coffee, and as soon as this was made, carefully extinguished by John Manning, so as not to attract attention if any one was still about; and then they sat, glad of the rest, eating biscuit and charqui, and sipping coffee from the tin.

Over the meal, John Manning made a report respecting what he called the commissariat department.

“Stores getting low, sir,” he said.

“Yes, I must supplement them with one of the guns,” said the colonel. “I have been so much taken up with getting the cinchona seed, that I have hardly thought of anything else.”

Very little was said then for some time, the weariness mentally felt by all making them ill disposed for conversation; but just before dark the colonel carefully inspected their surroundings, and with John Manning’s help, made a few arrangements for their defence.

“I don’t think they would dare to attack us if they found where we are,” said the colonel; “but we must be prepared.”

“Is it worth all this trouble and risk, father?” said Perry, who was, in addition to being weary and low-spirited, stiff, and a good deal bruised.

“What! to get the seed, boy?”

Perry nodded.

“Lie down and rest, and wait till the knowledge comes to you, boy. There, I’ll speak out and ask you a question. Do you think it is good for humanity at large for one of the greatest blessings discovered by them, for the prevention and cure of a terrible ill, to be solely under the control of one petty, narrow-minded government, who dole it out to the world just as they please, and at what price they like? Why, such a blessing as quinine ought to be easily accessible all the world round, and if I can succeed in getting our precious little store safely to England, it will be the beginning of a very great work. Worth the trouble? Why, the tenth part of what I have obtained of full ripe seed, of what is undoubtedly the finest white-flowered kind, would be worth a hundred times the labour and risk we have gone through—worth even giving up life, my lad, so that others might benefit by what I have done.”

“But suppose, when we get it to England, it won’t grow,” said Perry.

“Why, you doleful young croaker!” cried the colonel merrily, “I don’t expect it to grow in England. Tropic plants do not flourish in our little, cool, damp isle. There are plenty of places, though, where it would grow, if we get it safely home.”

“Getting it wet isn’t good for it, is it?” said Perry sleepily.

“You are thinking of what you have in your pockets,” said the colonel. “That will not have hurt, for it would dry again pretty soon.—You have yours safe, Cyril?”

“Yes, sir, there’s about three pounds in my pockets.”

“I have as much, and John Manning a little more, while I have a small

packet in each of the mules' loads."

"So as to make sure of saving some of it?" said Cyril eagerly.

"Yes, that is the idea, my lad," said the colonel. "Now, boys, Manning and I will take it in turns to watch. There, get a good rest, and don't think that I should have gone through all this labour, risk, and excitement unless I had felt that I was doing something well worthy of the trouble; so make up your minds to get it safely to San Geronimo."

He left them, as usual, to see where the mules were grazing, and Cyril sat gazing down before him.

"What's the matter?" said Perry.

"I was thinking that it's all very well for you people to get back home, only it isn't so pleasant for me."

"Father will speak to Captain Norton for you," said Perry.

"No: I don't want him to. I shall speak myself. I wouldn't have my father see me sneak in behind yours in that cowardly way. Oh dear, I wish it was over!"

"Mules feeding well and all quiet, boys," said the colonel; "and to all appearance there isn't a soul near us for miles.—By the way, Manning, did you go into the cave?"

"No, sir. Did you tell me? Seemed too damp to use for sleeping."

"No, I did not tell you; but get the lantern and let's look inside. We don't want to be disturbed by some animal coming out in the night."

Manning took the battered lantern, and led the way to where the spring came gushing out of what at a distance looked like a long, narrow, sloping crack, but which proved to be, on closer acquaintance, large enough for a man to walk in upright by stepping from stone to stone, round about which the water came gurgling and bubbling out.

It was about a dozen yards from where their fire had been lit, amongst

the stones fallen at different times from the heights above; and as they approached, a low musical rippling greeted their ear in a pleasant murmur, suggesting that the spring must come for some distance through a low, natural passage, whose stony walls caused the echoings of silvery splashings, which now grew louder and more strange.

“Yes, too damp-looking for a resting-place,” said the colonel; “and it does not look like the lair of any dangerous beast, but we may as well examine it, and we ought to have done so before. Why, boys, it would make quite a fortress if we had to defend ourselves. Plenty of water-supply, and ample room to drive in the mules.”

John Manning had gone inside at once, and as soon as he was a short distance from the narrow entrance, he struck a light and applied it to the candle within the lantern, holding it above his head, and then cautiously picking his steps along from stone to stone in the bed of the stream.

Whish, whirr, came a peculiar sound, and, as if moved by one impulse, the two boys rushed out, startled, to stand looking back, wondering why the colonel had not followed.

“What was that?” cried Cyril.

“I don’t know. Something rushed by my head,” said Perry excitedly, as he looked vainly round in the dim light, and then back at the faintly lit-up entrance to the cave, where the lantern, now invisible behind a curve, shone upon the moist stone wall.

“Come along back,” cried Cyril; “what cowards they will think us. It must have been birds. Ah! yes; look, dozens of them,” he cried, pointing to where what seemed to be faint shadows kept gliding out and shooting upward over the face of the rock, to disappear at once in the evening gloom.

“Think they are birds?” said Perry, in an awe-stricken voice.

“Birds or bats,” said Cyril. “How stupid to be startled like that! Come along.”

He sturdily led the way back, ashamed of the sudden access of fear

which had come upon him; though entering so strangely weird-looking a place by the feeble light of a lantern, and when unnerved by long toil and the dangers they had lately passed through, it was not surprising, and stronger folk might easily have been scared.

He had hardly got well inside again before his face was brushed by a soft wing, and he felt ready to run back once more, but this time he mastered the dread, and felt that Perry's hand was laid upon his arm just as the colonel's voice, which sounded hollow, echoing, and strange, said softly: "Goes in, perhaps, for miles.—Look, boys."

The voice sounded close to his ear; but to his surprise he found that the lantern was quite a hundred yards in, and the light glimmering from the surface of the tiny stream, while there was plenty of room on either side for them to walk.

"Where are you, boys?" said the colonel, more loudly.

"Here, sir; coming," cried Cyril, who grasped the fact, now, that their sudden rush out had not been noticed.

"It's all safe so far; no crevices or chasms," said the colonel; and as the two lads approached, "Did you see the birds? They are flying about overhead in flocks. Hark at the rush of their wings!"

As he ceased speaking, and his voice was no longer reverberating and whispering about overhead, a peculiar fluttering, whirring sound, as of many wheels in rapid motion, struck upon the boys' ears, a sound which added strangely to the mysterious air of the place. It was evident, too, that the roof was now far above their heads, giving room for the strange dwellers in darkness to wheel and swoop about, often so close that the wind raised by their pinions beat upon the explorers' cheeks.

"Lucky I'd got the lantern door shut," said John Manning, in a strange whisper, "or they'd have blown it out a dozen times over.—Shall I go any farther, sir?"

"No; it is of no use. But what a hiding-place! There's room, Manning, for quite a brigade.—What's that?"

A sharp crash fell upon their ears, as of a stone dislodged somewhere high up in the distance; and this was evidently the case, for they heard it rattle down, loosening others, and sending a reverberating echo along the cavern, which told of its vastness being greater than they had before imagined.

“One of the birds loosened a stone, sir,” said John Manning. “Look out: here they come.”

For, evidently alarmed by the falling stones, there was now the rush as of a mighty wind, and the little party could feel that a great flock of birds was passing overhead toward the entrance, hurriedly making their escape out into the open air.

“Let’s follow their example,” said the colonel; “we are only wasting time. But this would make a capital retreat if we were attacked; and we could defend it against hundreds.”

“Till we were starved, or burned out,” grumbled John Manning.

“It would take a forest on fire to burn us out of this, sir,” said the colonel. “What! make difficulties? We have plenty to encounter without. Now then, forward with the light.”

John Manning faced round, and led on at once, while, as he held up the lantern, the dark mass of birds in a regular train could be seen passing on toward the entrance, which was reached directly after, both boys uttering a sigh of relief on finding themselves once more in the outer darkness, where they could breathe freely, and feel as if a great danger had been escaped.

Chapter Twenty Four.

The Cave’s Mouth.

As soon as they were outside, Cyril looked round for the birds, expecting to see them swooping about in all directions, but there was nothing visible between him and the stars; and with the peculiar nervous feeling

which he had felt in the cavern assailing him again, he turned to the colonel, who laughed.

“Well,” he said, “did you think it was something of what the Scotch call ‘no canny,’ my lad?”

Cyril felt more uncomfortable still.

“Do you think they really were birds?” he said.

“Of course; the South American cave-bird. A regular nocturnal creature.”

“What! a sort of owl, sir?”

“No. Perry here has seen their relatives at home.”

“I? No, father,” said the boy wonderingly.

“Nonsense. What about the nightjars you have seen hawking round the oak trees in Surrey, after sunset?”

“Oh yes, I remember them,” cried Perry.

“Well, these are, I fancy, birds of a similar kind, but instead of frequenting trees, they live in flocks in these dark caverns, and go out of a night to feed. Our light startled them just as they were about to take flight. This must be one of their great breeding-places.—But no more chatter. Sleep, and get a good night’s rest.”

Easier said than done. The boys lay down in company with John Manning, but it was long enough before either Cyril or Perry could drop off! They would close their eyes, but only by an effort, for they were always ready to start open again at some sound high up on one or the other side of the narrow winding valley. It was cold too, in spite of the blankets, and when Cyril did at last slumber, he felt that he could hardly have been asleep an hour, as he started up into wakefulness again.

Something was wrong he was sure, and he stretched out his hand to touch John Manning, who awoke instantly and sat up.

“All right,” he said, in a low voice.

“No, no, don’t move,” whispered Cyril, grasping his arm. “I fancied I heard something.”

“Eh? Fancied? Perhaps it was fancy, sir. I’ll ask the colonel.”

“Listen first.”

They knelt there in the darkness, attent for some minutes.

“Don’t hear anything, sir. I’ll go and speak to the colonel. What did you fancy?”

“I—I don’t know,” faltered Cyril. “It must have been while I was asleep. Yes,” he whispered excitedly, “that was it.”

“The mules!” said the old soldier. “What are they doing here in camp?”

For there came plainly now the soft pattering of hoofs on the stony ground, and directly after a tall figure loomed up out of the darkness.

“Want me, sir?” said John Manning, in a quick whisper.

“As you are awake, yes. There is something stirring close at hand, whether wild beast or Indian I can’t say. Keep watch, and cover us while I get the mules into that cave.”

John Manning’s double gun was already in his hand, and he stood fast while the colonel went by with the leading mule, the others following. Then directly after the soft pattering ceased, and the watchers knew that the patient animals had been led right into the cave.

“Hear anything, Master Cyril?” whispered John Manning.

“No.”

“And one can’t see down in this dark gash,” grumbled the man. “We humans are worse off than any of the animals. We can’t see so well, nor hear so well, nor smell so well, nor run, nor fly. Lucky for us, we’ve got

gumption enough to make telescopes and steam-engines and ships, or I don't know what we should do."

"Who's that?" said the colonel, returning. "Cyril?"

"Yes, sir."

"Go and stand at the mouth of the cave, and mind that the mules don't come out."

Cyril obeyed, and took up his position on a stone in the gurgling stream, to stand listening to the soft patter of the mules within, and to the faint whispers which came time after time from where he had left the colonel and John Manning.

He had been at his position for some few minutes, turning from time to time in the darkness to cast a furtive look back into the entrance of the cavern, hardly able to restrain a shudder, as he thought of its unknown depths and the strange sound they had heard of the stone falling, and he could not help wishing that Perry was with him for company's sake.

For there was a terrible feeling of lonesomeness there in the darkness, especially at a time like that, when he had just been roused from an uneasy sleep by something unexplained at which the colonel had taken alarm.

"He said either Indian or wild beast," mused the boy. "What wild beast could there be?" There were, he knew, the wild varieties of the llamas, guanacoës, and the like, but they were timid, sheep-like creatures; and there were, he knew, pumas, the South American lions, as they were called, and perhaps jaguars—both these latter cat-like, nocturnal creatures; but they were animals of the forests, and not of these sterile, rocky valleys. Still, there might be other dangerous beasts in plenty, and his eyes wandered here and there, and he held his gun ready, though in that deep gloom he felt that he would be quite at the mercy of anything which attacked.

He had just reached this point, when his thoughts took a fresh direction—suppose some savage creature should be in the cave, and suddenly spring upon him from behind.

He turned cold with horror, and tried to call for help, but his mouth and throat were dry from the nervous trepidation he suffered; for he had suddenly been touched just below the shoulders, something big having given him a rude thrust. This was followed by another, which nearly sent him down into the water from the stone.

But he recovered himself, turned sharply, and struck out with his right hand—a quick angry blow, while he felt as angry with himself for his absurd cowardice, the second thrust having awakened him to the fact that he had received a heavy push from the head of one of the mules, which had come silently close up, and was desirous of getting out again into the open air.

Cyril's blow drove the animal hastily back, and as he stood listening, he heard the effect of his sharp action, for there was a good deal of pattering about when the mule turned sharply to its companions, driving them farther in. Then there was silence once more.

“How easy it is to let one's self be frightened,” thought Cyril. “I wish I were braver, and more like a man.”

Then he wondered why the colonel and John Manning did not come to him, and whether they were searching about for the cause of alarm. All was very still now, and it was some time since he had heard a whisper.

“Very likely I shall hear a shot fired,” he thought, and making up his mind not to be startled if he did, for that it would be a good sign and a proof that the cause of their night alarm had either been killed or frightened away, he stood gazing out into the darkness in all directions, and then smiled and complimented himself on his firmness.

“Not going to be scared at that,” he muttered, for there had been a sudden clattering of hoofs among the stones inside the cavern—just such a sound as would be made if one of the mules had kicked out at its companions, and made them start.

All was silent again for a minute, and then there was a faint splash.

“One of them gone down to drink,” said Cyril to himself, and he turned now and looked inward along the narrow opening, and could see faintly

one of the stars reflected in the black water, now twinkling, now burning brightly. Then it disappeared, as if a cloud had passed across the heavens, though that could not be, for another star gleamed closer to him, but that was blotted out too.

“One of the mules coming out,” he said, starting and raising his hand, when there was a sudden bound made by something which had been crawling slowly out of the cave’s mouth; and as the boy struck at it wildly, his fist touched something warm and soft, and the object, whatever it was, made a stone or two rattle where it alighted, and then was gone.

Cyril raised his gun, but he did not draw trigger, for it was folly to fire quite at random, and he was leaning forward, peering into the darkness, when a faint click made him turn again toward the mouth of the cave, just in time to be driven backward and lose his feet as another of the creatures leaped out and dashed away into the darkness.

Two, and they were not mules, though evidently four-footed creatures. But what could they be? he asked himself, as he recovered his feet and stood with presented piece, his heart throbbing, and his finger on the trigger, ready to fire at the next movement from the cave. They could not be pumas, for the touch he had of the first one’s body was not furry; neither could they be large monkeys, for they would not have smooth bodies, and besides, these creatures were too large.

He was still in doubt, when there was a sound behind him, and as he turned sharply, a husky whisper:

“Don’t fire, my lad. What was that?”

“Did you hear it, Manning?”

“Yes, and had a glint of some one running by me.”

“Some one?”

“Yes. Indian, I think; did you see him?”

Cyril told him of what he had seen, and was just finishing, when there was a faint whisper and a movement of a stone or two as some one

hurried up.

“Manning—Cyril—”

“Yes, sir.”—“Yes, sir.”

“Look out. Some one passed me just now. Who’s this—Perry?”

“Yes, father,” came in excited tones from out of the darkness. “Was it you who fell over me?”

“No: when? where?”

“Just now. Then it must have been Cyril. He went down heavily, but jumped up and ran away.”

“Indians, sir,” said John Manning, in a low angry growl. “They passed the line of sentries, and must have been trying to spot the camp.”

“Absurd.”

“Fact, sir. Ask Mr Cyril here.”

“Yes, sir; two Indians—I thought they were wild beasts—came crawling out of the cave and jumped by me.”

“You saw them?”

“Oh no, sir: it was so dark; but I hit at one of them and felt him.”

“Came out of the cavern?”

“Yes, sir.”

“But are you sure?”

“Quite, sir; I heard them frighten the mules, which began trampling, and then one of the men sprang out.”

“Shall I light the lantern, sir, and go in and see if there’s any more?” growled John Manning.

"No, my man; in all probability there were only the two, and perhaps they were not enemies to be feared. Possibly we have scared them more than they scared us."

Cyril mentally demurred to that, but said nothing, and the colonel went on:

"I'm afraid our night's rest has gone," he said, "for it is impossible to lie down with the knowledge that Indians who may be enemies are about.— Did you see anything as you made your round, John Manning?"

"No, sir; but I heard something twice. It may have been only an animal, but something moved a few little stones up to the left. When I went cautiously up, whatever it was had gone. Did you see or hear anything, sir?"

"I thought I heard a whisper a short distance away, but I could not be sure. I am sure, though, that some one glided by me, and Perry here had the best of evidence that one of the Indians fell over him."

"Unless it was Cyril; he did lie down to sleep by me, father."

"I've been on guard here by the cave's mouth for ever so long," said Cyril sharply, as if resenting the fact that his companion should have been sleeping while he watched.

"Then it was an Indian," said the boy sharply.

"We have the mules safe, Manning," said the colonel, "and now we must make sure of the baggage. Stand together, boys, facing two ways, while Manning and I get the packs into the cave."

"But there may be more Indians in there, sir," said Cyril.

"If there are, we must drive them out. That must be our fort for the present."

At that moment there was a faint whistle from a distance, and it was answered from somewhere high up on the mountain-side.



Chapter Twenty Five.

Between Two Stools.

No time was lost. The two boys were posted at the cavern entrance, one to try to check any advance from the valley, the other to guard against the escape of the mules, and stay by his presence any Indian who might still be in hiding.

This latter was Cyril's duty, and this time he set his teeth and stepped right within the opening, encouraged by the fact that he had the colonel and John Manning constantly coming and going with the mule-packs, till only two were left to bring in.

"I can hear people coming nearer," whispered Perry just then, and the colonel threw his load down at his son's feet.

"You lads carry that in," he said.—"Manning, quick, we must get those other packs. They're coming on."

John Manning, who was walking back from the cave, hastened his pace, and the two men hurried through the darkness to where the last two packages lay.

"You keep watch," said Cyril. "I'm the stronger, and will get the pack inside."

Perry said nothing, but felt glad and yet sorry, for he dreaded to re-enter the cave alone, and at the same time was ashamed to relegate the task to his companion.

But there was no time for hesitation. Something serious was evidently going on by the spot where the packages had been stacked, for there were shouts and cries, and Cyril stooped to lift the pack, meaning to hurry into the cave and then return to pick up the gun he left with Perry, and stand ready to support their companions, in case he could do any good.

The package was heavy, but he hoisted it on to one shoulder, and was

about to bear it into the cave, when he was driven backward, and fell heavily, to be trampled under foot by a couple of men who charged out, plainly showing that there were others inside.

It was almost momentary work. The men were there and then gone in the darkness, and, sore and angry, Cyril struggled to his feet.

"Why didn't you fire?" he cried.

"What at? I might have hit you, or perhaps my father," protested Perry.

"Trampling on a fellow like that," grumbled Cyril, rehoisting his load.

"Yes; they had each got a pack."

"What! our packs?" cried Cyril excitedly.

"Yes; I could just make that out," said Perry.

"Oh!" ejaculated Cyril, stepping close in, and throwing down his load so as to regain his gun, "what will the colonel say?"

Not what the boy expected, for just then he came panting up with John Manning, carrying a pack between them; while the rattling of the loose stones told that they were being pursued.

"Quick, both of you," cried the colonel, "fire in the direction of the noise."

Cyril's gun spoke out with both barrels rapidly, one after the other, the flashes cutting through the darkness, and the reports being followed a few seconds later by quite a volley of echoes, which ran reverberating along the gorge, to die away slowly in the distance; but before they had ceased, the little party was well inside the very doubtful shelter they had chosen, and John Manning posted at the entrance with his loaded piece.

"Why didn't you fire?" whispered Cyril.

"I did."

"That you didn't. I did twice."

"I mean," said Perry, "I pulled the trigger, but the thing wouldn't go off.— Oh!"

"What's the matter?" said Cyril eagerly, as he reloaded his piece.

"Don't say anything," whispered Perry. "I forgot to cock it."

"A narrow escape, Manning," said the colonel just then.

"Tidy, sir," replied the old soldier; "but I don't like losing that pack. Shall I make a charge and fetch it in?"

"Madness, man," said the colonel. "Let it go. We've got all the others safe."

"No, father," cried Perry excitedly; "two Indians rushed out of this place while you were gone, and each man had one of the packs."

"What!" cried the colonel in a despairing tone; "three of my precious packages of seed—gone?"

No one spoke; but from out of the darkness came the peculiar sound of one grinding his teeth, and a pang of misery and disappointment shot through Cyril as the colonel said bitterly:

"Two of you with guns, and you could not check those brutes."

"No, sir," growled John Manning; "how could they without bay'nets? 'tain't to be done."

"It was all so sudden, father," put in Perry, his words saving John Manning from a stern reproof. "Cyril was knocked down, and there was not time to fire."

"And if there had been," whispered Cyril maliciously, "your gun would not have gone off."

"Beg pardon, sir," said John Manning, "I daresay we can get back the seed in the morning: they'll keep the good things, and throw what they think is rubbish away."

“No,” said the colonel, speaking sternly, “the three bags in those packages are gone. It is the main object of these men to keep the seed from being taken out of the country. Where is the lantern, Manning?”

“Somewhere along with the packages, sir. I think we brought it in with the second lot.”

“You keep guard, while we search the cave. A sharp lookout, mind.—Perry, come with me.—You stay with Manning, Cyril, till I return.”

“Sharp lookout, sir!” growled the old soldier. “Who’s to keep a sharp lookout in the dark, and how’s a man to guard the inside and outside together?—Say, Master Cyril, we’re in a pretty tidy hole here, and it’ll take all we know to get out of it again.”

“Oh, we shall manage,” said Cyril sharply; “but three packs gone. That’s terrible!”

“’Tis, sir, and they’d all got in what’s of more consequence to us now than seed—a whole bag each of rice and meal, without counting delicacies in the shape o’ pepper and mustard.”

Just then there was the crackling of a match, followed by a faint glow, and the lantern shed its light around, gleaming from the running water, and showing dimly the mules standing in a group with their heads together. Then as Cyril stood waiting and watchful, he saw the lantern go on and on as if the colonel were zigzagging about to and fro, now approaching the little stream, now going right away. Sometimes the light passed beyond intervening rocks, and disappeared for a minute, then came into sight again; but there was no sign of other occupant in the great cave, whose extent was evidently vast.

“Don’t see no more o’ they bat birds buzzing about,” said Manning suddenly. “I hope they’ll come back.”

“Why?” said Cyril.

“Foodling,” growled the old soldier. “We may have to stand a siege, and it ain’t bad to know you’ve got plenty of meat and water on the spot.”

“What’s that noise?” whispered Cyril.

“Some on ’em crawling about on the stones outside yonder. I heered ’em, and if they don’t keep off—I don’t want to shoot no one, had enough of it when I was out in Indy, sir; but duty’s duty, and if they won’t leave us alone, they must be taught how. See anything o’ the lantern now?”

“No; it has gone out of sight some time.”

“Humph! I hope they won’t go too far and lose themselves, sir, because they can’t be spared. I knowed of a man losing himself in a stone quarry once under ground, but they found him afterwards.”

“Half-starved?” said Cyril eagerly.

“Quite, sir. It was a year after he went down. I don’t like work under ground. It’s only fit for rats or worms. See the light now?”

“No: what’s that?”

“Something moving inside, sir.”

“The mules?”

“No, sir; their hoofs are not so soft as that. Sounds to me as if some of ’em was going to make a rush, and we haven’t a bay’net to bless ourselves with. You fire, sir, at once before they come on.”

Cyril did not hesitate, but without shouldering his piece, he drew trigger with the result that they heard, mingled with the reverberations of the report, a faint pattering noise as of retreating feet.

“Well done, sir. Reload quickly. They were going to rush us, and that’s taught ’em we were on the kwy wyve as the Frenchies call it.”

“Keep a sharp lookout your way,” said Cyril as he hurriedly reloaded, his fingers trembling from his excitement.

“That’s what I’m doing, sir, with my ears. I’ve been on sentry before with different kind of Indians on the lookout to bring you down with bullets. I

shall hear 'em, I dessay."

"But look here, John Manning, we've stopped those men from coming, and driven them back on the colonel."

"Yes, sir, and all the worse for them, for he's sure to hear them and be on the lookout. Strikes me that the cave swarms with Indians, and that our first job ought to be to clear the place. But look out, and don't be in too great a hurry to shoot now, sir, because your shot 'll bring our friends back to us. Perhaps it came in quite right, for they may have lost their way."

Then some minutes passed, and a noise was heard which made Cyril lower his gun again, but a voice warned him that he must not fire.

"Where are you?" cried the colonel.

"Here, sir."

"Thank goodness. We had an accident, fell over a stone, and put out the light. This place is tremendous, and we should have hardly found our way out of it, had it not been for your shot. Did you mean it as a recall?"

Cyril explained, and the colonel came to the conclusion that it was useless to explore farther, for there was room for a hundred of the enemy to hide and elude them, so vast was the number of huge blocks lying about, masses which had fallen from the roof during some convulsion of nature.

"We must wait for daylight," he said at last. "It is impossible to make any plans till then."

But all the same the colonel arranged his little force so that it might tell to the best advantage; he and Perry securing themselves behind a block of stone to guard from an attack within, while Cyril had to join John Manning in guarding the entrance from an attack from outside, where they had the satisfaction soon after of seeing one of the mountain peaks appear, pale and ghastly looking, over the other side of the gorge, while all below was intensely black.

Once they heard a peculiar cry which might have come from Indians or some wild creature, quadruped or night-bird; but otherwise all was still in the gorge, as they strained their eyes in their endeavours to pierce the darkness in search of danger.

At last weariness began to tell upon Cyril, and his head nodded gently, then went down so suddenly that he started up, angry, and in dread lest Manning should have been aware of his lapse. For it was horrible at a time like that, when perhaps the lives of all depended upon his watchfulness.

"It was too dark, and he did not notice it," thought Cyril, with a glow of satisfaction pervading his breast.

"Yes, it's hard work, as I well know, sir," said Manning quietly. "When I was a soldier first, I used to think it killing work to keep on sentry when one would have given anything to have a good sleep."

"You noticed it, then," said Cyril.

"Noticed it, my lad? why, of course. Seeing how dark it is, you might have had a doze and me not known anything but there you were, very quiet; but when you says to me, as plain as a young man can speak, 'I'm tired out, and my eyes won't keep open any longer,' why, of course, I know you're off."

"But did I say that?"

"Not exactly, sir, but you said 'gug,' and I heered your teeth chop together when your chin went down upon your chest."

"Oh!" ejaculated Cyril bitterly, "and I did try so hard."

"Course you did, sir, but human nature's the nat'ralist thing there is, and it will have its own way. I'd say have a snooze, but orders were that you was to watch, and watch you must."

"Yes," said Cyril firmly, "and I will keep awake now."

He kept his word for fully ten minutes, and then his efforts were vain. If

the peril had been ten times greater, he would have dropped off all the same; but he had not slept a minute before there was the sharp report of a gun which came bellowing out of the cave's mouth, and the boy started up once more as if it were he who had been shot; while from close at hand there was a rush of feet, and John Manning fired at once into the darkness, with the result that there was another rush from Cyril's right.

Chapter Twenty Six.

In the Gorge.

"Well," cried the colonel, as the echoing died away, "are they coming on?"

"They were, sir, without us knowing it," said Cyril. "Your shot frightened them, and then Manning fired and startled some more."

"The mules warned me," said the colonel, "as they did you, but a shot sent the rascals back.—Hah! the light coming at last."

For the mountain peaks were beginning to glow, and the clouds which hung round the highest showed tints that were quite crimson, while the light was now slowly stealing down into the deep gorge, bringing with it relief from the terrible anxiety of the night.

Then, as it grew brighter, it became evident that the Indians had drawn off for a time, not a sign being visible of their presence anywhere in the deep valley, while inside the cavern all was so still that it was almost impossible to believe that any danger could be lurking there.

But the danger was ever present, and it was not until John Manning had been posted well inside the cavern, ready to fire in the event of any fresh advance, that preparations were made for a very necessary meal; after which it became requisite to hold a council of war, when it was decided that to stay where they were would be madness, and that nothing remained for them but to show a bold front and push on at once.

Perry looked so dubious that his father smiled.

“Don’t you see, my boy, how dependent we are upon the mules? Well, the mules must be turned out to graze, and we shall be as safe journeying on as posting ourselves to guard them. Besides, if we stop here, the Indians will conclude that we are afraid to go on, and this will give them courage; whereas, if we advance boldly, they will give us the credit of being braver than we are.”

“And if we shut ourselves up in that cave, how long will the provisions hold, sir, if I may make so bold?” said John Manning.

“Quite right,” said the colonel nodding. “Don’t you know, Perry, that a wise man once said that an army does not gallop along, but crawls upon its stomach?”

“Crawls?” said Perry.

“You don’t understand, boy. He meant that an army can only move as fast as provisions can be supplied to it. That is our case. If we take the risk of shutting ourselves up here—a dreary, depressing plan, by the way—we can only hold out till our provisions come to an end. Better far make a bold dash onward toward the other side of the mountains. Every step we take will be toward civilisation and safety, while every step the Indians take in pursuit will be toward land where they know that they will be at a disadvantage. There, I do not see why I should explain all this to you, but I want you to have confidence in me. And you too, sir.”

“Oh, I have, father,” cried Perry.

“And I’m sure I have, sir,” said Cyril warmly, “only I can’t help feeling that we shall be safer in the cavern than out there in the narrow valley, where these people can shoot us down when they like.”

“Of course you feel that, my lad,” said the colonel, “but I am under the impression that they will hesitate about shooting at us. I fancy that they will strain every nerve to master us and capture all our stores, in the full belief that we are taking out of the country valuables that their traditions and the teachings of their rulers bind them to defend. If they had liked, I feel convinced that some one of us, perhaps two, would be wounded and helpless by now.—What do you say, John Manning?”

“Well, sir, I’m ’bout divided in my opinions. One time I think they must be such bad shots, they’re afraid to show it, and another I get thinking that they’ve got an idea of your being an indefatigable sort of a gentleman.”

“Well, I am, John Manning,” replied the colonel smiling; “and you know it too.”

“Course I do, sir, but that isn’t what I mean, sir: ’tain’t indefatigable; it’s a word that means something to do with armour, and the more you shoot at any one, the more you won’t hurt him.”

“Invulnerable,” said Cyril.

“That’s it, sir,” cried the old soldier, slapping his leg. “Lor’, what a fine thing it is to have been brought up a scholar.”

“You are right, Manning. I impressed them, I suppose, by my shooting, and they have evidently some idea of that kind in their ignorance. We’ll take advantage of it and start at once.—Very tired, boys?”

They were silent.

“Shall we start now, or try to get some rest, and then start at night?”

“Let’s start now, sir,” said Cyril firmly. “The darkness makes cowards of us—I mean, makes one of me, for I’m always fancying dangers all around.”

“Are you ready, Perry?”

“Yes, father. Let’s go at once.”

“We will,” said the colonel, “for I’m afraid that we should make very poor progress after dark. In with you then, and let’s load up the mules; they must take a mouthful of grass wherever there is any as we go.”

The very thought of getting on chased away a great deal of the weariness, and the little party were soon hard at work in the semi-darkness, just inside the cave, fastening on the packs. Then all mounted the riding mules, and without a moment’s hesitation rode out, the colonel with the leading mule turning up the gorge, which ran pretty nearly due

west and rising higher at every step, while John Manning and the two lads formed the rearguard.

“Ten times better than being shut up there in the dark, my lads,” said the old soldier, sitting up erect in his saddle, with the butt of his piece resting upon his thigh. “It’s like being in the cavalry.—See any of ’em, Master Cyril, sir?”

“No, not a soul in sight. Have they gone right away?”

John Manning chuckled.

“Just far enough to keep a sharp eye on us, sir. They’re hiding somewhere behind the stones.”

But for the space of an hour, as they rode on in the shade of the early morning, there was no sign of an enemy either to front or rear, and inspired by the crisp mountain air, the boys felt their spirits rise, and were ready to banter John Manning about what they looked upon as his mistake.

“Depend upon it,” said Perry, “they drew right back to go and camp for the day, and rest, before coming to attack us again.”

“They were soon rested then, sir,” said the old soldier drily, “for there’s two of ’em up yonder behind those pieces of rock.”

“Where? Nonsense. Birds: condors, perhaps, on a shelf.”

“Perhaps so, sir,” said John Manning; “but they’re birds that can make signals, and your father sees them too.” For just then the colonel drew his mule aside, and let the rest pass on, while he waited for the rearguard to come up.

“Be on the alert,” he said as they came up; “the Indians are high above us on the mountain-side, and they are making signs to others right up the gorge. Close up.”

Then going nearer to his old servant, he whispered:

“Keep a sharp eye up to right and left, and if they open the ball, jump down, and don’t hesitate about taking good aim at the first who tries to stop us.”

“Right, sir. But how do you think they will open the ball, sir? Arrows?”

“No: as our old friends in the North-west did, John Manning. Ah, look, they have begun.”

“Yes, sir; I expected it,” cried John Manning, as the mules all stopped short, their leader having suddenly swerved aside to avoid a little avalanche of stones and masses of rocks which came tearing down from far on high, right across their course.

It began by the dislodging of one great mass, which was forced over from a rocky shelf, and before this had rolled half-way, it had started hundreds more, the attempt being so well contrived that the pieces of rock, which came leaping and bounding down with a clashing sound like thunder, would certainly have crushed one or more of the mules, but for their quick appreciation of the danger.

Two sharp replies to this attack were given from the loaded pieces, and the Indians disappeared; but when, after a great deal of coaxing, the mules were got into motion once more, the colonel urging the leader round beyond where the stones had fallen, the boys uttered a warning cry, for another mass of rock was started from high up on the other side, and with such good effect that the rush of stones it started caught the tiny caravan half-way, and to the misery and despair of all, one of the best mules lay with its pack half buried, and the poor creature’s head crushed almost flat.

This time the boys fired up at a single man perched fully twelve hundred feet above the narrow bottom of the gorge, and he dropped out of sight, while the colonel and John Manning leaped down again, and rapidly removed the stones which impeded them in their efforts to loosen the pack-ropes and remove the load to another mule.

This was a hindrance of a good half-hour, and the colonel looked very stern as he gave the order to advance again, when they gained about a mile, the gorge opening a little. Then the huge towering walls contracted

once more, and a black-looking prospect opened before them, for there, so narrow that there was barely room for the mules to go singly, was their way, through a black-looking rift, above which the mountains on either side rose in shelves admirably adapted for the enemy's defence, and promising so ill for the little party, that the colonel hesitated for a minute while he used his glass. Then, as all was still, no sign of an enemy visible, he gave the order to advance, in the hope that the place was too precipitous for the Indians to occupy.

Vain hope! Ten minutes later the mule he rode lay quivering on the ground; the colonel having the narrowest of narrow escapes from a terrible death.

"Forward!" he said firmly, but as he spoke, another avalanche and another came thundering down, and seeing the madness of attempting to proceed, he gave the word to retreat.

It was needless, for the mules had already sprung round, and were hurrying back at a rate that was faster than anything they had yet shown.

There was no yell of triumph from on high, and no sign of enemy on either hand as they rode back, face to face with the fact that exit from the gorge in that direction was impossible, and that unless they could find some side ravine leading in the direction they wished to pursue, there was nothing for it but to retrace their steps right to the cinchona cutters' camp, and from thence make their way home by the road they came.

"It does seem so strange," said Perry, as they rode back; "they don't pursue us, but let us ride quietly on. Are they satisfied with the mischief they have done?"

Cyril made no answer, for he was watching the colonel, where he rode by himself, grave and stern, impressed as he was by the feeling that all his efforts would be brought to nought, if he could not devise some means of reaching San Geronimo. At that moment it looked hopeless, and as if he would be thwarted at every step, for though the enemy were invisible, he had had bitter experience of the fact that their knowledge of the mountain paths placed them at a tremendous advantage, and he felt that in all probability they were even then where they could watch every movement,

and had perhaps got well ahead, ready to stop them by another attack upon the mules.

It was past mid-day now, and the hope of getting well onward toward safety was completely crushed; the sun was now shining fiercely down into the gorge, heating the rocks so, that the reflection was almost worse than the scorching rays from above. The mules were panting and thirsty, and the exertions of the day, coming upon such a broken night, were telling terribly upon all, so that reluctantly, and as their only resource, the colonel allowed the old leading mule to make straight for the stream which came gurgling out of the cave they had left that morning. Here, to the surprise of all, the intelligent beast, instead of stooping to drink at once, stepped carefully among the stones right into the cool shade within, the rest following, and five minutes later Perry and Cyril were seated inside upon one of the packs.

“And all that day’s work thrown away,” said Cyril sadly.

“And two mules dead,” whispered Perry, so that his father should not hear.

“But we saved their loads,” replied Cyril.

“What for?” said Perry, in the same low voice. “It’s of no use: we shall never get away alive.”



Chapter Twenty Seven.

Ready for the Worst.

Nature must be satisfied at whatever cost, and, as soon as possible, the provisions were unpacked, while a fire, which had been lit with the scraps of wood collected as they returned, burned brightly, the smoke drawing farther into the cavern, and being rapidly dispersed. Then, as soon as the kettle, suspended by an iron rod over the flames, began to boil, a very small handful of tea was thrown in, and the tin lifted off and laid aside.

Only some very wooden cake bread, and some very dry tough beef, with a strong flavour of being imperfectly sun-cured; but how delicious it was when washed down by the warm, unsweetened, milkless tea!

They sat on the stones a little way inside the entrance, where the cool dampness of the cave was relieved by the soft, warm, sunny air which floated in from the gorge; and a sharp lookout was kept for the Indians, but not a sign betrayed their presence. A short exploration of the interior, too, was made, but there was not a sound to be heard, save an impatient stamp or two from the mules; and, concluding that the enemy had all left the place, the colonel returned to where he had left the boys on guard, but only to find them both fast asleep, and John Manning walking up and down slowly by the stream, with his gun over his shoulder.

"Don't wake 'em, sir," said the man appealingly: "they tried very hard to hold up, but it warn't to be done; and if I hadn't got up and taken to marching here on sentry-go, I should have been fast asleep too."

"Poor fellows," said the colonel sadly, "it was too much to expect after what they have gone through. There, lie down for a couple of hours, and then I'll wake you to relieve me."

"Begging your pardon, sir, if you'd take first turn," began the old soldier, but he was cut short directly by a sharp gesture, and, without a word, he lay down with his piece in his hand, and was asleep directly. The colonel took his place, and then began to walk slowly to and fro, now right out where the sinking sun glistened upon the surface of the stream, now

back inward, with the walk growing darker, till it was quite black.

And as he marched to and fro, the colonel reflected upon the hopelessness of their position. As he approached the open sunshine, he felt lighter-hearted; but as he turned and walked inward toward the cold and darkness, his spirits sank once more, and he saw no way out of their difficulties save the giving up of that for which he had come all those many thousand miles. Then he stopped short, for Cyril had suddenly sprung to his feet, looking horribly guilty and ashamed.

"I am so sorry, sir," he faltered. "I did not mean to go to sleep."

"You could not help it, my lad," said the colonel, laying his hand upon the boy's shoulder. "You had reached the limit of human endurance. But, Cyril, my lad, you are being sharply punished for your mad escapade."

"Yes, sir," said the boy sadly, "and I suppose I deserve it. I should mind all this much less if we had arranged with my father that I should come."

"Well done, young philosopher," said the colonel, as he kept his hand on the lad's shoulder, and marched him to and fro. "Come, as you can think so well, give me your advice. You know why I have come—to obtain this seed to place in the hands of those who will cultivate it, and make the world independent of the one source of supply."

"Yes, sir," said Cyril wonderingly.

"And you see the position to which I am reduced."

"Yes, sir. Will the Indians kill us?"

"Not without paying dearly for it," said the colonel sternly. Then changing his manner: "No, my lad. These people are only half-savage, and look upon what they are doing as a duty. I do not think they will kill us if they can get possession of all our baggage. They might keep us in captivity until means are taken to free us; but I don't know—I hardly feel that our lives are safe."

"Not very, sir," said Cyril grimly, "if they rolled big stones. It might have been us instead of the mules this morning."

“Yes, we have had some narrow escapes; but what shall I do now—give up and own that I am beaten?”

“And let them have the kina seed, sir? No, that I wouldn’t; I’d fight for it first,” cried Cyril excitedly.

“Do you know what you are talking about?” said the colonel excitedly.

“Yes, sir,” cried Cyril, “I was very much down a while ago; but I’ve had something to eat now, and a sleep and—What! give up to a pack of savages, and let them rob you of all we have worked so hard to get? That I wouldn’t while there was a charge of powder left.”

“Humph!” ejaculated the colonel, looking at the boy searchingly.

“That’s what my father would say if he were here. I wish he were.”

“To thrash you for leaving home in that cowardly way?”

“No, sir,” said Cyril quietly. “My father never thrashed me, and he never would. He always said it was degrading a boy to beat him, and that he was a poor parent who could not rule his children without blows. He told me he thought he could hurt me a good deal more by his words, and so he always could.”

“Perhaps so, sir,” said the colonel sternly; “but see what a mistake he has made, and what a miserable young dog you have turned out.”

Cyril was silent for a few moments.

“I hope I’m not all bad, sir,” he said. “I’m sure I’ve bitterly repented what I have done.”

“And been severely punished, too, my lad,” said the colonel kindly. “Your father is quite right, and when I tell him how you have behaved—as, please God, I hope I shall—if he is the man I believe him to be, he will shake hands with you as I do now, and say, ‘Let’s forget the past!’”

“Colonel Champion!” cried Cyril, snatching at the hand extended to him.

He could say no more, for something seemed to rise in his throat and choke him, while the colonel rested his arm affectionately upon his shoulder once more, and walked him up and down toward the light and back again.

“So you’d fight for it and stand out, eh?” said the colonel at last.

“Yes, sir, that I would,” cried Cyril excitedly, “and I’m sure Perry will say the same.”

The colonel was silent for a few moments, gazing straight before him into the darkness, and he asked himself whether he would be justified in running all these risks. He shook his head, and they turned and marched down again toward the light, where the rippling stream looked rosy in the evening, and the rocks on the other side of the gorge were all aglow. And there was so much in the brightness and hope and prospect of success that the feelings of dread, the shrinking from a terrible ordeal, and all hesitation fled away.

“Yes,” he said firmly as he stopped short; “a civilian might hesitate and give up, but I cannot, my lad. I determined to carry out this task, believing that by it I should vastly benefit suffering humanity at large, and Heaven helping me, I will achieve my aims.”

“And you will fight it out, sir?” cried Cyril.

“I will, my boy, to the bitter end. I made the Indians fear me, and if they attack us now, they shall fear me more, for I have our lives to save as well. Now, go and lie down.”

“No, sir, I don’t feel sleepy; let me watch with you.”

“You are a soldier for the time being, my lad, and if we are to succeed, discipline must be observed. In an hour’s time I rouse up John Manning to relieve me, and toward morning, when you are rested and refreshed, you shall be called to take your watch.”

Cyril lay down without a word, meaning to think out all that had been said, and feeling happier than he had since he left home. But he did not think, for in a few seconds after he had stretched his weary limbs upon

the rocky floor, all the corners and points of his bed became soft as eider-down, and he dropped into a deep dreamless sleep, leaving the colonel seated on a rock, leaning forward with his gun between his legs, and his form looking black against the soft glowing light at the entrance of the cave.

Chapter Twenty Eight.

Nature is Mistress.

"I haven't slept long," thought Cyril as he woke with a start to see the colonel seated as he had left him when sleep came. He did not appear to have moved, and all was perfectly still. One thing, however, puzzled him, and that was the light. It was soft and warm and glowing then; now it was clear and bright.

All at once he saw something come into sight from the side and stand looking in. It was the old leading mule, and it stood there munching away at a tuft of green stuff which it held in its teeth, and then dropped, and stooped its head to take a long drink of water.

"Have the Indians gone?" thought Cyril, "and has the colonel let the mules out to feed?"

He sat up for a moment or two, and then lay down again.

"I may as well sleep till I am called," he thought, and he lay listening to the heavy breathing of John Manning and Perry, whom he could see lying in precisely the same position as when he lay down a few minutes before.

But was it a few minutes before? Cyril asked himself as he saw the mule lift its head with the water dripping from its lips, and then pick up the tuft of green twigs, and go on munching again. It could not have been longer, for the colonel had not been relieved yet; but the light was so strange. Last time he looked, the opposite side of the gorge was glowing with the sunset rays; now it was in shadow, and the sun was shining just inside the mouth of the cave, and making the water flash like molten silver.

The mule stared in toward him, and Cyril made a bull, as a sudden thought flashed through his mind.

“Why, it’s to-morrow morning!” he mentally exclaimed as he started up, “and I’ve been asleep all this time.”

He went to where the colonel sat, and though the stones rattled a little beneath his feet, the watcher did not stir, but sat as if gazing straight out past the mule, when Cyril said reproachfully:

“You shouldn’t have let me sleep so long, sir.”

But there was no answer, and at that moment there was a dull sound, a whinnying sigh, as the mule gave a violent start, throwing out its legs in all directions, and scattering the stones before gathering itself together, and making a tremendous leap to go galloping away, not so quickly, though, but that Cyril saw it had a long arrow sticking in its back.

“What’s that? Who? You, Cyril?” cried the colonel, springing to his feet. “What! Have I been to sleep?”

“I don’t know, sir; I only just woke up.”

“Why, it’s morning,” cried the colonel angrily. “What was that noise?”

“The old mule. Some one shot an arrow, and stuck it in her back.”

“But how came it there? I—I—Ah! and I blamed you, boy, for falling asleep at your post.”

“Anything the matter, sir?” said John Manning, coming forward, followed hastily by Berry.

“Matter, man; yes. I have kept watch by sleeping all night.”

“Well, sir, I don’t wonder,” said the man. “I have too, for you didn’t call me to go on duty.”

“Oh, shame!” exclaimed the colonel. “And at a time like this!”

"I don't see no shame in it, sir," growled John Manning bluntly. "You wanted sleep like the rest of us, and you couldn't fight against it. You ain't an iron man, sir."

"Silence, sir!" cried the colonel angrily, and he hurried right out of the cave, closely followed by the boys, in time to see the mule disappear low down the gorge, galloping madly among the stones.

"Another—our most valuable pack mule gone," cried the colonel, in a voice full of the anger and annoyance he felt. "The poor brute must have strayed out to graze."

"Yes, sir; I saw it eating when I awoke, and then directly after the arrow struck it."

"Then the Indians must be close at hand. Come back and help to secure the rest of the mules, or they may be straying out after their leader."

Cyril looked in the colonel's face, and then pointed down the valley at something moving, plainly seen now in the clear morning atmosphere.

"Yes; I see it. One moment till I focus the glass."

The colonel held his little double glass to his eye, and then let his hand fall to his side in dismay on learning that the mischief was worse than he had anticipated, for there was another mule on the far slope; and just then John Manning came up with Perry from an expedition within the cave.

"Yes: what is it?" cried the colonel sharply.

"Sorry to have to report it, sir," said Manning, in a low deep growl, "but the mules have strayed out in the night."

"All?" said the colonel hoarsely. "Is there not one left?"

"No, sir; as far as I can make out, not one."

The colonel's brows knit, and he stood motionless for a few moments. Then without a word he walked right in to where it was quite dark.

“Light the lantern,” he said sharply, and in a few moments a match gleamed out, and the candle was soon after shedding its rays in all directions. But hardly had John Manning given a glance round, than he uttered a sharp ejaculation.

“What is it?” cried the colonel. “Can you see the rest of the mules?”

“No, sir.”

“Well, what is it?” cried the colonel impatiently.

“Don’t you see, father?” cried Perry excitedly; “the Indians must have crept in while we slept. They have carried everything away.”

“What?” raged out the colonel as he looked wildly round where his servant was holding up the lantern, and then he uttered a groan.

For it was too true. Every pack had gone, and with them the possibility of holding out against the cunning enemy who had been in their midst.

The same thoughts came to each of the boys—thoughts of all they had heard before setting out, of those who ventured into the mountains in search of the Incas’ treasures never being heard of more, and a curious chilling feeling of despair came over them.

Would they ever see home again?

But the colonel was not the man to give way to despair. The position was terrible—right out there amid the gigantic mountains, with the only roads through them those naturally formed by the torrents in the wild deep gorges, shut in by precipices of the most stupendous nature, with no other guide than their compass, and surrounded by enemies who might at any moment make an attack; while, so far from being able to make a prolonged defence now, the Indians had robbed them of the means.

This was the position as it struck them all at first, but the colonel gave it a different aspect directly.

“Council of war,” he said cheerily, as he led the way out into the sunshine, and sat down upon a block of stone. “Come, Perry lad, a soldier’s son

must not look like that as soon as he is face to face with difficulties. John Manning will tell you that he and I have been in worse straits than this up in the hill-country.—Eh, Manning?”

“Of course, sir. This is nothing. Such a fine morning, too. Why, if the snow lay twenty foot deep, as we’ve seen it, and we didn’t know whether we had any fingers or toes, we might begin to holler.”

“Of course,” said the colonel. “So let’s see what is to be done.”

The two boys exchanged glances, but said nothing.

“Now, then,” cried the colonel, “let’s look the worst straight in the face, and then we will calculate our advantages. First of all, the enemy.”

“None in sight, sir,” said John Manning.

“No; they have gone. They have achieved their aim in getting possession of our baggage.”

“Don’t you think they’ll attack us, sir?” said Cyril.

“No, certainly not. They have been here, and found us asleep. Had they wished to slay us, there we were at their mercy, and not a hair of our heads has been touched. Next trouble.”

“Walked off with all the wittle, sir,” growled John Manning.

“Yes, that’s bad; but we have plenty of water, and shall not fail in our journeyings for that. Bad thing to be journeying through a wild country with not a drop of water, eh, Manning? We have done that.”

“Don’t talk about it, sir. And the sun all the time drying the very marrow out of your bones.”

“Yes, those were terrible times, my man. We shall not suffer that way, and as to food, we have our guns. What about ammunition?”

“All got plenty, sir,” growled John Manning. “I’ve seen every morning that our pouches were full.”

“That’s right, then. With a little hunting, we must find some game in these valleys, scarce as it has been. Then there is the coca leaf, whose virtues we must try, failing anything better. Oh, come, we are not so very badly off.”

“Then you will try at once to make for one of the tracks through the mountains, sir?” said Cyril.

“And live by hunting, father?” cried Perry.

“And give up, after trying so long, and being so near success, my boy?” said the colonel. “Come, come: Britons would not have made their name known all over the world if they had gone on like that.”

“Look here,” cried Cyril excitedly; and then he stopped and looked doubtingly at the colonel.

“Well, I’m waiting, my lad. Every suggestion has its value at a time like this. Speak out.”

“I’m afraid you’ll think the idea too wild, sir.”

“I will say so if it is, my boy. Let’s have it.”

“I thought this, sir,” said Cyril hesitatingly: “we’re well-armed; the Indians are afraid of you, and they are most likely retreating back to their camp with our mules and baggage, along with the seed we worked so hard to get.”

He stopped again, and looked from one to the other, very red in the face all the time.

“Well, go on,” said the colonel encouragingly.

“Why not show them we’re not a bit afraid, and go on in pursuit of them at once? I don’t believe they’d fight, and if they did—well, we should have to do the same.”

“Hooray!” shouted John Manning, throwing up his cap, catching it again, and then drawing himself up stiffly as he glanced at the colonel: “Beg

pardon, sir."

The colonel merely nodded, but said to himself: "I wish Percy had spoken like that." Then turning to Cyril: "You said, why not go in pursuit?"

"Yes, sir," said Cyril, throwing off his hesitation, and speaking now with his eyes sparkling, and cheeks flushed with excitement. "Why not?"

"Exactly, my boy, why not?" said the colonel. "We were caught unawares, and I have blamed myself, an old soldier, severely for the greatest lapse of which an officer can be guilty—eh, John Manning?—sleeping on duty in face of the enemy."

"Awful bad, sir, in time of war."

"Yes, but there are bounds to human nature's endurance, John Manning; and though I would not own it to myself, I was utterly exhausted."

"All was, sir."

"Then now we must make up for it.—Cyril, my lad, you have proposed exactly what I intended to do. Fortunately, we made a good meal last night. To-day we must feast again when we have retaken the baggage.—All ready? Fall in."

The boys followed the colonel's example, and leaped to their feet.

"Light marching order," said the colonel, "so we ought to get along fast. That mule we saw, Cyril, shows that the others have been taken down the valley toward the great fall. There is no choice of road here, so I take it that the Indians are making their way straight back to their camp. Now, one word more. See that your weapons are ready for immediate use; no talking, but keep all your energies devoted to making observations in every direction. No rift or ravine likely to hide the enemy must be passed, if it is one possible for mules to climb. Now, forward."

Then with a feeling of exhilaration that the boys could hardly comprehend, the little party started off with the colonel leading, and John Manning with his gun over his shoulder marching last, with a look in his face that suggested his feeling that he was guarding the rear of a column

of advance once again.

Chapter Twenty Nine.

A Military Movement.

At the first spot which gave him an opportunity to examine the gorge, the colonel mounted to a narrow shelf and made good use of his glass, descending at last to say: "They have got a good start of us, but there is something about a quarter of a mile on that I can't make out. Forward cautiously."

Five minutes later the colonel halted again and sent Perry to the left, close up under that side of the gorge; Cyril to the right, with orders to advance in a line with him, and be ready to fire if there were any need.

It was quite a military movement, and the boys' hearts beat heavily at what seemed like the first initiation in real warfare; but before they had gone far Cyril uttered a shout, and pointed forward to something now hidden from the colonel by a cluster of rocks in the lowest part of the ravine, close to where the river ran with a deep-toned roar far below.

A minute later they were alongside the object, which proved to be the leader, lying as near as it could get to the deep gash in which the water was foaming. The poor wounded beast had in its struggles broken the long arrow nearly level with its skin, and in its agony of thirst it had been trying to reach the water, but fallen upon its side.

As Cyril came close up, the mule raised its head and uttered a piteous whinnying noise, looking up in the face of one who had many a time broken off some green spray of juicy growth to feed it as it trudged along with its load; but its eyes were already glazing, and it was the poor creature's last effort, for the head fell back heavily: there was a curious quivering of the legs, which struck out once as if their owner were galloping, and then all was still.

"Poor brute," said the colonel. "We cannot bury it, for there is no soil here, even if we had tools. Forward, my lads."

He led on, and the boys followed, feeling low-spirited; but they soon had something else to think about, for just as they were approaching one of the narrowest parts of the gorge, Perry stopped short.

“Where’s John Manning?” he said.

Cyril followed suit, but no sign of the old soldier met his eyes, and they communicated with the colonel, who looked very anxious and much disturbed.

“We must return,” he said. “Why, boys, you ought to have kept in touch with him. Double.”

They all started back, but before they had gone a hundred yards the colonel cried “Halt;” for there in the distance was the missing man coming on at a rate which meant that he would soon overtake them.

“Did you see what he has been doing?” said Cyril, as they were once more on the march.

“Been stopping to get something,” said Perry, “but I could not see what. Could you?”

“Ugh! Yes,” said Cyril, with a shudder of disgust. “He doesn’t want for us to be starved, but who’s going to eat mule?”

The tramp was long and tedious, but being no longer controlled by the pace of the baggage animals, the little party made far better progress than when they were making their way up the valley; yet the distance they had come was far greater than they had anticipated, and for long enough there was no sign of the Indians having passed that way. But they kept on, the colonel feeling convinced that they had passed no side ravine up which the mules could have been driven; while, having these animals at their command, the colonel felt certain that the Indians would not carry the loads.

At last, during the hottest part of the afternoon, a halt was called, and they made for a huge rock which overhung on one side, offering a tempting shade from the burning sun; but before they reached it Cyril uttered an eager cry.

“Look! look!” he said excitedly, and he pointed to where there were marks about a patch of herbage where the mules had been cropping the coarse stuff, as well as browsing upon some tufts of bushes, whose green twigs were bitten and broken off, and here and there leaves which had been dropped were still so fresh that it was evident that they could not long have been left.

This discovery, and a faint trace or two of the Indians having been with the mules, had a better effect upon the party than hours of rest. For they knew now that the treasured packs, containing not only the necessities upon which they depended for life, but the carefully-collected seed, were only a short distance ahead, and that if they pushed on with energy they ought to overtake them.

The rest depended upon the strong arms of the two men.

They went on then at once, but no fresh sign encouraged them, and at last the closing in of the ravine and the piled-up mountain in front warned them that they were approaching the gloomy chasm into which the river plunged. In fact, half an hour after, the deep booming roar of the fall began to be audible, as if coming from somewhere high up on the mountain-side.

“If it’s coming to a fight,” said Perry, “I hope it will not be in that deep cavernous place near the fall. I feel as if I hardly dare go down to it after what happened.”

“Nonsense; you’ll feel plucky enough when it comes to the point. Come along.”

“Steady, young gentleman. Halt,” growled John Manning. “You should keep your eyes open for what’s going on in front. Look at the colonel.”

They gazed forward, and saw that the last-named gentleman was signing to them to stop and follow his example of crouching down; and directly after they saw him creeping on toward the spot, from which so short a time before they had seen the Indians come out from behind the veil of mist, and amidst the roar of the falls point upward, making signs to each other, and then disappear.

It was now so gloomy, that it was hard to make out their leader's movements, for the light only reached them from the narrow opening high overhead, and where the little river raced onward toward the fall it was rapidly growing black; but in a few minutes the colonel signed to them to come on, and at a word from John Manning they advanced quickly, stooping in obedience to a sign from the colonel's hand, and reached him at last where he crouched behind a stone.

He did not speak, but pointed, and first John Manning, then Perry, and lastly Cyril peered cautiously over the stone, the latter being only in time to see that they were quite right in their surmises, for there below was a party of about thirty well-armed Indians, slowly making their way down the last of the many zigzags of the path toward where the mist rose like a dark veil, the wind which blew down the gorge keeping it, as it rose from the great gulf, from spreading in their direction, but beating it back into a dense cloud, to float slowly out into the valley beyond.

There they were walking very cautiously, some ten in front, and next, to Cyril's great joy, the remainder of their train of pack-mules, well loaded with the treasures taken from the cave. The rest of the party followed about a dozen yards behind.

Cyril remained watching till the head of the little column readied the veil of mist, went on, and was completely blotted out the next minute, one by one, the Indians being visible in the gloom, and then gone.

Next it was the turn of the animals, and as Cyril watched, it was very curious to note how a mule would be visible for a time, then its head and shoulders would disappear, and lastly it would be entirely swallowed up. The remainder of the Indians followed, one by one, till the last man, who seemed to be their chief, was alone, and he turned back to gaze upward, narrowly scrutinising the zigzag path by which his party had descended for a few minutes before he followed the rest. Then the gloomy place was utterly deserted, and momentarily growing blacker, so that the way down could not be seen.

There was no fear now of their words being heard above the booming roar which came up out of the chasm, and the colonel explained his intentions.

"I am going to call upon you all to show your nerve," he said, "for we must go down, and pass along by the fall through the darkness and mist."

"But is it safe, father?" said Perry anxiously.

"Safe or no, my lad, it is a chance I cannot let slip," replied his father. "You saw their leader looking back, Cyril? He was evidently satisfied that there was no pursuit, and he and his people will conclude that once they get through the mist they will be safe, and no doubt camp just on the other side for the night.—Manning, we must steal through the mist, creep up, and surprise them. Two or three of our little volleys will, I believe, put them to flight if we come upon them suddenly, and then we must return this way, and show our teeth fiercely if they pursue."

"Right, sir; I'm ready," said John Manning. "You lead, and we'll follow."

"Let's rest, then, till it is quite dark. I believe I can lead you right through to the other side without much risk, for after our experience we know the worst. Besides, where they can go, we can go. There, wait a bit, boys, and we shall have our own again, and the wherewithal to make a good meal. No, no," the colonel added as John Manning raised his head. "Only in case of utter starvation, my man. We can hold out a little longer, and I hope we shall not have to come to eating mule. Now, lie down, all of you, and rest. In a couple of hours' time I shall start."

Chapter Thirty.

Trapped.

Hungry and faint, it was a dreary time passed during that halt; but in spite of all, it was restful, though the stones were hard, and there were moments when Cyril felt as if he could go off fast asleep, and dream of banquets, as hungry people are said to do.

But there was no sleeping, and, as nearly as could be guessed, at the end of two hours the colonel rose, and gave the word "Forward."

Then began the journey down the long zigzag, every turn bringing them

nearer to the spot where the river took its great plunge into the gulf. The roar grew deeper and louder, though still smothered by the dense mist, and as they drew nearer, there was the damp odour of water, breathed in the smallest of vesicles, as it was churned and then whirled upward to battle with the breeze descending the gorge.

The last turn of the descending path at last, and then the colonel stopped, for they were face to face with the great black veil of mist.

“Now,” he said, with his lips close to each one’s ear in turn, “you first, Perry, take a grip of the stock of my gun, and pass your own backward as I do mine for Cyril to take hold. Then Cyril will do the same for John Manning to grasp, and we shall be linked together and well in touch. I shall lead, of course. Courage, boys, and no hesitation. We shall soon be through. Now, forward.”

In half-a-dozen steps the darkness, which had been relieved by the faint gleaming of the stars peering down into the gorge, became intense, for they were once more in the mist, and guided only by the gentle drag upon the guns, as without hesitation the colonel led on, keeping close to the wall upon his left.

The noise of the water thundering down was more confusing than ever, the mist more stifling; but the boys gathered confidence as they went on, and Perry was too much occupied in following his father’s steps, to think much about the horrible slip into the gulf below; while Cyril, as he stepped on manfully, kept trying to recall how far the way was through, and calculated that they must be fully half-way.

He had just arrived at this conclusion, when he turned angrily to resent what he looked upon as absurd behaviour on the part of John Manning, who suddenly grasped him tightly, pinning his arms down to his sides, and flinging him up against the rock-wall as far as possible from the edge of the gulf.

“How stupid!” he cried aloud, though not a word was heard. “I’m all right. Now you’ve broken the chain.”

He had arrived at this point, when he felt a rope passed rapidly round him, binding his arms to his sides. Then he was thrown upon his back,

and in spite of his struggles, his legs were treated in the same way, after which a cloth was bound over his face, so tightly as to be almost suffocating. Lastly, he felt himself lifted head and heels, and borne forward, dizzy, confused, and wondering what had happened to his companions, and finally bound to conclude that they must have been treated precisely in the same way. He felt that this must be so, and that the Indian cunning had been too much for the colonel's strategy, a party having remained in waiting in full knowledge that they were pursued, and ready to pounce upon them, just in a spot where an attack would be least expected and surest of success.

All at once, as the boy was borne along, feeling satisfied that it was useless to struggle and folly to exert himself and shout, it occurred to him that his bearers were going closer to the edge of the gulf, for the roar of the water seemed to be more deafening. There could only be one reason for this, he argued—it was his turn to be thrown in, and the others must be gone.

The horrible thought made him begin to struggle with all his might, but at the first writhe a strong additional arm was passed over his body, gripping him tightly to its owner's side, and in this fashion he became helpless, and was carried forward, to grow calmer, for he awoke to the fact that his life was certainly for the present safe.

Then a curious feeling of faintness came over him, the heat of the cloth over his mouth was suffocating, bright specks of light danced before his eyes, there was a singing in his ears, and then everything seemed to be at an end, till the stars were looking down at him from far on high, and above the low distant booming of the fall he could hear the pleasant silvery gurgle of water, and the heavy breathing of sleepers close at hand.

By degrees the boy's head grew clearer, but at the expense of his body, for as the power of thinking brightened, his limbs grew heavier, numb, and helpless, and the effort he made to turn over upon one side proved to be in vain. He felt that the cloth which bound his lips was gone, but there was no inclination to cry for help, and he lay perfectly still, wondering whether his companions were near, and then utterly exhausted, all passed away again, but this time he slept.

It must have been near morning once more, when Cyril awoke with a feeling of something warm touching his ear, and a voice whispered:

“Careful, my lad. I’ve cut you free, and I’m going to cut the colonel and Master Perry clear. Now try and rub your legs gently. We must make a dash for it, as soon as you’re ready. Don’t speak.”

The lips were removed from his ear, and there was a faint rustling, that was all.

He tried to obey the orders he had received, but for some minutes there was scarcely any sense of feeling in his hand, or in the part he touched, but he worked on, feeling hopeful now. John Manning was fighting for their freedom, and the others must be close at hand, but he felt that if they were as helpless as he, they would not be of much use in an attempt to escape from their captors.

And as Cyril went on softly rubbing circulation into his numbed and swollen legs once more, a faint point of light high up in the clouds, where an ice peak was catching the first rays of the coming morn, shone out like a hopeful sign to tell him that all was not yet lost.

For quite half an hour he kept up the gentle friction, bringing back circulation, but with it intense pain. Then his heart bounded, and he forgot his agony, for John Manning crept close to him again.

“Been rubbing?” he whispered.

“Yes.”

“Can you fight?”

“I’ll try.”

“All right then, boy; the others are ready, and I think the Indians are asleep. We must make a dash for it now, before they make up their minds to put us out of our misery, for I am afraid it’s that they mean.”

“What do we do first?” whispered Cyril, who felt the power rapidly coming back into his legs.

“Wait till the colonel joins us with Master Perry. They’re coming as soon as they feel it safe, and then we dash back for the falls, and retreat up the gorge. When we jump up, keep together and run. Hit out, lad, at anybody who tries to stop you. They’re only cowards after all, but the colonel’s coming. Now get up softly. Ready?”

“Yes.”

At that moment there was a fierce yell, and Cyril was dashed back upon the ground, three Indians flinging themselves upon him; there was a dull blow, a groan, and John Manning cried aloud:

“They’ve done for me, lad; run for it, if you can get free. Tell the colonel I did my duty to the last.”

Almost at the same moment Cyril, as he fiercely struggled, heard a shrill cry of agony from Perry, a shout from the colonel, and the reports of half-a-dozen guns fired in rapid succession.

Then all was blank, for a heavy blow on the side of the head made the lad insensible to what was passing around.

Chapter Thirty One.

Father and Son.

When Cyril opened his eyes and began to look about, his head was aching violently, and a swimming sensation made everything near him look misty and indistinct. But he was conscious that the sun was shining brightly all around, and that he was lying in the shade cast by a tree, whose foliage was so familiar that he closed his eyes again to think and wonder whether he was dreaming.

For that was unmistakably a cinchona tree, one of those he had thought about so much of late.

He opened his eyes again, and looked round to see that there were several mules about grazing on the rich grass, and there was a peculiar

odour in the air which he knew to be caused by burning wood.

A low buzz of conversation was going on, too, somewhere close behind him, and he tried to look round, but the movement gave him so much pain that he let his head sink down, uttering a weary sigh, which was evidently heard, for there was a rustling sound behind him, and some one came and bent down and took his hand, at the same time laying another upon his forehead and gazing into his eyes.

For some moments nothing was said; Cyril, with his heart beating heavily, gazing up into the eyes that looked down into his, while he wondered more than ever what it all meant.

“Don’t you know me, my boy?” was said at last, and a half-hysterical cry escaped the lad’s lips as he clung to the hand which grasped his.

“Yes, father! But—but what does it all mean?”

“That you must lie still and rest for a bit. You have had a nasty blow on the head, but you will soon be better.”

“But—where are we?—where is Perry, and where is the colonel? I can’t think, but I don’t understand why you are here.”

“You can ask yourself that last question by-and-by, my lad.”

Cyril shrank a little, for those words were more potent than any reproach, and Captain Norton went on:

“You were asking about your friends. They are all here, but have been hurt more or less. We only came up just in time.”

“You came up—just in time? Oh, I remember now. We were fighting and trying to escape, and somebody fired. Was it you, father?”

“Yes, my lad, my friends and I. If we had not arrived as we did, I’m afraid that there would have been a tragedy here in this valley, for the Indians were roused, and I believe that you would none of you have lived to see another day.”

“And the Indians: where are they now?”

“Far away, my lad. They will not face firearms.”

“But you came, father—after me?”

“Of course, as soon as I grasped the fact that you had followed Colonel Campion. At first I would not think it possible that my son could treat us at home as you had; but when, from a man who had come over the mountains with a llama train, I learned that he had seen you, I did what I felt it to be my duty to do for your mother’s sake.”

Cyril’s hands went up to his face for a few moments, and then they were gently pressed aside.

“This is no time for blaming you, Cyril,” said the captain gently; “you are injured. Get well, my boy. But you asked me how I came here. As soon as I knew that you were with Colonel Campion, I got the help of two or three friends, and our servants, and we obtained mules and came on in search of you. I did so, for, in addition to my duty to you, I repented letting a brother-officer come upon what I felt more and more was an exceedingly risky expedition. It has proved so, has it not?”

“I’m afraid so, father,” sighed Cyril. “Would the Indians have killed us?”

“It seems so. You were utterly outnumbered, and from what I can gather, I suppose they believe you were hunting for and had found some of the old treasures buried here in the mountains.”

“Oh no,” cried Cyril; “they were quite wrong.”

And he explained the object of the colonel’s mission.

“They would not believe that, my boy, though they would have been just as ready to stop anything of the kind. I found, on tracing you to their camp, that you had come down in this direction, and the man who acted as our guide gathered that there was some trouble on the way, and thus made me hurry on after you. I should have come up with your party sooner, only three times over we were tricked into following another track, our guide proving perfectly untrustworthy directly after he had been in

communication with the people at the back camp. However, I came up with you in time, just as a fierce fight was going on, and your party were being worsted. A few shots drove the Indians off, and for the present we are safe."

"And the mules and their loads?"

"There are our mules," said the captain quietly.

"No, no; I mean ours," cried Cyril.

"I have seen no others. There are none here."

"But they've taken the kinia seed that the colonel came to collect. We must go and attack them at once."

"We must get from here on to the regular track through the mountains as soon as we can, my boy," said the captain sternly. "We do not know whether we may not ourselves be attacked by a strong body of the Indians. I cannot do as I like, for I must study my friends; but if I could, I would not run any risk in the face of such odds: so if Colonel Campion can by any possibility sit a mule, we shall begin our retreat at once. What? Can you stand?"

"Yes, father. Only a little giddy; and I want to see the colonel and John Manning."

For Cyril had raised himself to his feet, and his father led him at once to where his companions lay close by, where their rescuers had formed their temporary camp, and were now making a hearty meal.

Perry was lying back with his head bandaged, John Manning was suffering from a severe knife wound, and the colonel lay looking very hollow of cheek, for he also in the fight had received a bad knife thrust, and to Cyril it seemed that it would be impossible for the party to begin their retreat for some days to come.

But as soon as he awoke, the colonel declared himself able to sit a mule, and John Manning insisted upon the hurt he had received being merely a scratch; so, as the case was urgent, a start was made that same

afternoon, and a few miles made before they were overtaken by night, and encamped, setting a careful watch in case of attack.

But none came, the lesson given by Captain Norton quelling all present desire for a closer acquaintance with the firearms; and soon after daybreak they were once more in motion, the leader retracing the way taken by his friends in their attempted escape till they were close up to the cinchona camp, which they found deserted.

A long halt was necessary here on account of the injured party, but two days later they were on their way again, after a long consultation between Colonel Campion and their friends.

“Did you hear what was said?” asked Perry, as he and Cyril rode side by side wherever the track would allow.

“Yes, everything; your father wanted to stay here for a bit and make an expedition or two in search of the Indians, so as to try and recover the baggage and mules.”

“Of course,” said Perry. “It’s horrible to go back like this, regularly beaten. But they wouldn’t?”

“No: my father said he was willing, but the rest would not. They said they had come to help to save all our lives, and bring me back, but they were not going to risk their own any more to satisfy—”

“Well, satisfy what?” said Perry, for his companion checked himself.

“Like to know?”

“Of course.”

“Satisfy your father’s mad-brained ideas.”

“Mad-brained indeed!” cried Perry indignantly. “And didn’t father say they must go?”

“No,” replied Cyril, laughing, “because he had no authority, and he was perfectly helpless. You see he couldn’t go himself.”

"I only wish he was strong enough," cried Perry. "He would soon show some of them."

"Hasn't he shown them enough? My father's right."

"What, in giving up?" cried Perry indignantly.

"No, in behaving like a good soldier, and drawing off his forces when he is beaten. Father told him that it was folly to go on now in his helpless state. That, injured as he was, he would kill himself and you and your man too, for you had neither mules, provisions, nor weapons, and that the only thing to do was to go back."

"And what did my father say?" cried Perry hotly.

"Nothing. He only held out his hand without speaking, and they stood for half a minute."

"But it's horrid to be beaten and go back like this, robbed of all our belongings, and just too when we had succeeded so well. The cowards! All that party against us. I feel as if I couldn't go back to San Geronimo."

"So do I," said Cyril dolefully.

"You? What have you got to mind?"

"What have I got to mind? All that my father will say when we get back, though I don't worry about that so much."

"What, then?"

"I've got to meet my mother."

"Well, but she won't say anything unkind to you."

"No," said Cyril sadly, "not a word; but she'll look at me as I often seem to see her looking at me now, and asking me how I could behave so cruelly to her. It half killed her, father says, for my boat was missing for a fortnight. One of the fishermen had taken it away, and she thought I had gone out in her, and was drowned."

Perry was silent, and soon after the boys had to separate, and ride in single file about the middle of the little line, Captain Norton and two of his friends forming the rearguard, in case of attack.

But though the return journey was very slow, on account of the weakness of the injured part of the little caravan, and there was every opportunity for the Indians to fall upon them had they been so disposed, they went on, day after day, unmolested, and their nights were undisturbed.

Those long narrow shelves of rock at the sides of the defiles seemed as if they would never end, but the clear crisp mountain air was wonderful in its curative effects; and while Perry was quite well again, and Cyril had about forgotten his injury, Colonel Campion and John Manning, though both thin of face, and generally a good deal pulled down, were strong enough to walk down—at the close of the last day's journey—the long slope which led to Captain Norton's house on its platform high above the sea.

"Where's Cyril?" said Perry suddenly to Captain Norton. "I haven't seen him these two hours."

Captain Norton stopped at the edge of the narrow path, and pointed down to the dry-looking garden at the back of his house, where the tall, tapering flagstaff stood up, with the British colours fluttering in the sea-breeze.

Perry shaded his eyes, and through the clear evening air he could distinctly see his companion standing by a lady, and looking up at the little mule train filing down the slope.

"Why, he has run on home!"

"Yes," said the captain. "I sent him on to meet his mother alone. Perry, my lad, for the sake of all who hold you dear, never be guilty of such a selfish, thoughtless act as his."

"I'll try not," replied the boy thoughtfully; and then in an animated way: "But, I say, Captain Norton, if it had not been for his thoughtless act, where would we three have been now?"

The captain smiled and looked at the colonel, who had heard all that had been said.

“That’s a question I would rather not try to answer, my lad. There, no more: I’ve promised Cyril to bury the past.”

Weak as he still was from his injuries, and smarting from the bitter disappointment of his failure, Colonel Campion seized the first opportunity which occurred of getting a passage up to Panama, the two boys parting with many promises of keeping up a correspondence, which were none too faithfully fulfilled. Perry wrote from Panama, and again from Barbadoes on the way home. Then three years elapsed before Cyril had a letter, though Captain Norton had heard again and again from his friend the colonel.

Here is a portion of the letter Cyril received:

“I don’t suppose they will do it, but I think they ought to make my father F.L.S. and F.R.S. and F.G.S., and all the rest of it, besides knighting him. For only think, in spite of all the disappointment of losing the packages of seed we so carefully made up, the little lots we had in our pockets, including those you gave me at San Geronimo out of yours—I mean that day on board the packet, when you said, ‘You may as well take these, for they’re no use to me—’ I say, all these were distributed and set, and with the exception of one lot, pretty well all grew, and they have made small plantations in Java, Ceylon, India, and one or two other places, so that in the course of time there’ll be quinine in plenty in hot places all over the world. Which lot do you think it was failed? You, in your modesty, will say your own. Not it, but mine; and I’ll tell you how it was—through my fall down into that horrid place. The seed was of course soaked, and it went off mouldy, I suppose. At all events, none of it grew.”

“Hah!” exclaimed Captain Norton as he heard the letter read. “It was a daring thing to do—a brave soldier’s deed. How many poor wretches in the future who struggle back from some deadly fever will ever hear of or bless his name? Hardly one.”

“But we shall have the satisfaction, father, of knowing that we helped to save them all the same.”

“Right, boy,” cried the captain, bringing his hand heavily down upon his son’s shoulder. “You did your share, and it would be a poor world indeed if we did all our good actions for the sake of the reward.”

“But mine was not a good action, father,” said Cyril gravely.

“Ah, well,” said his father, “it is a matter of the past. I made you a promise then, and we will not argue that.”

The End.



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