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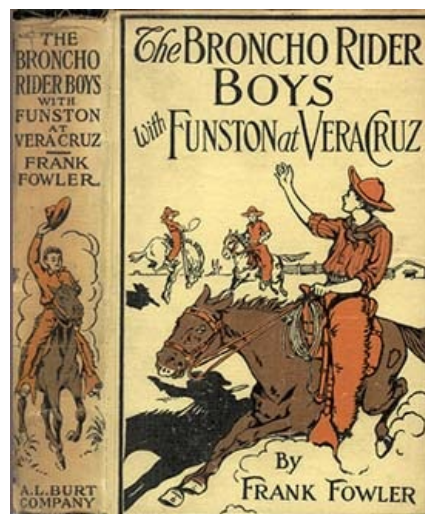
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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THE BRONCHO RIDER BOYS WITH FUNSTON AT VERA CRUZ ***



**"THIS IS NO PLACE FOR ME,"
COMMENTED BILLIE AS HE
KEPT HIMSELF WELL
HIDDEN BEHIND A GIANT
CACTUS.**

***The Broncho Rider Boys with
Funston at Vera Cruz. Page***

The Broncho Rider Boys With Funston at Vera Cruz

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OR

Upholding the Honor of the Stars and Stripes

By FRANK FOWLER

AUTHOR OF

"The Broncho Rider Boys with the Texas Rangers," "The Broncho Rider Boys at Keystone Ranch," "The Broncho Rider Boys Down in Arizona," "The Broncho Rider Boys Along the Border," "The Broncho Rider Boys on the Wyoming Trail."



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THE BRONCHO RIDER BOYS WITH FUNSTON AT VERA CRUZ

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THE BRONCHO RIDER BOYS WITH

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FUNSTON AT VERA CRUZ.

CHAPTER I.

A DARING ADVENTURE.

"Let me look, Billie," and Donald reached out his hand for the field glass through which Broncho Billie was gazing down from the summit of Real del Monte upon the plain of Quesco, through which the Pachuca river winds its way. "Maybe I can make out who they are."

Billie handed over the glass without a word and stood expectant, while Donald scrutinized closely a body of horsemen—twenty or more in number—which had halted beside the railroad that connects the little city of Pachuca with the City of Mexico.

"They are not soldiers, that's certain," was Donald's comment after he had inspected the riders carefully for a couple of minutes.

"That's what I thought," from Billie. "They look like a bunch of *vaqueros* to me; but what would a crowd of fifty cowpunchers be doing in a country where the only cattle are goats?"

"That's right!" laughed Donald, greatly amused at Billie's odd expression, "but still that is what they appear to be. Perhaps they are expecting a drove of cattle up on the train."

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"More likely they are expecting a load of bullion going down to the City of Mexico," remarked the third of the party. "What do you think, Pedro?" turning to the fourth of the boys who composed the quartette.

"I am afraid you are right, Adrian," replied Pedro, with an accent which denoted that of the four he was the only one who was not of an English-speaking race.

"You don't think they would hold up a train in broad daylight, and that not more than five miles from town, do you?" queried Billie.

"If they are what I suspect," declared Pedro, "I think they would hold it up at the station, if there were only a few more of them."

"And what do you think they are?"

"I think they are Zapatistas."

"What are they?" asked Donald.

"Followers of the bandit leader, Emilio Zapata."

"Which side does he belong to?" asked Adrian. "Huerta or Carranza?"

"Neither. He is simply a bandit, and his followers prey upon any whom they find unprotected."

"And do you really think they are going to hold up and rob the train from Pachuca?"

"*Sin duda!*" meaning without doubt.

"Then we must prevent them," declared Donald emphatically.

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"What business is it of ours?" asked Billie. "If one bunch of Mexicans wants to rob another bunch, especially if the second bunch are Huertistas, I don't know that it is for us to interfere. I'm not looking for trouble."

"You're not afraid, are you? If——"

"Say, Don," interrupted Billie, "what's the use of always asking such foolish questions? If I remember rightly, the last time you asked me that question was up on the Rio Grande a year ago, about the time that I was swimming rivers and breaking into prisons with the Texas Rangers to get you and Ad out of trouble. Now why——"

Donald held up both hands.

"That's enough, Billie," he laughed. "I'll take it all back. Of course you're not afraid. But I insist we must prevent this hold-up."

"And again I ask, why?"

"Because there may be women and children on the train and——"

"That's enough," exclaimed Billie. "You needn't go on with the rest. But what's the plan? We're a good ten miles from those chaps—unless we had an airship."

"And then how far do you think it is?" queried Adrian.

"Well," replied Billie slowly, as he squinted up one eye, "I should say they are about four miles away as the crow flies. But we are not crows. By the Real road, it is at least ten miles."

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"There must be a short cut somewhere," insisted Donald.

"There is," explained Pedro. "Just around the next turn in the road there is a goat path that leads down to the river. If you are not afraid of getting wet——"

"There you go," laughed Billie. "Afraid of getting wet! Just let's settle it once for all that we are not afraid of anything that it is right for us to do."

Pedro laughed good-naturedly.

"Well, then, since we are not afraid of getting wet, we can follow the river for about two miles by fording it several times, and emerge on the plain a mile this side of the clump of trees which hides those fellows from the highway."

"And then what?" from Billie.

"That is as far as I've gone."

"Then you'll have to do better. Just as soon as we emerge from behind those trees, we'll be a fair target. Four against twenty is 'most too much on an open plain."

For several minutes no one spoke. It was Adrian who broke the silence.

"I think I see a way, not only to save the train, but possibly to capture the bandits."

The boys looked up in surprise.

"Do you notice how the railroad curves in toward the hills just after it crosses the river bridge?" he continued, pointing out the place he meant.

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"Sure, we see it," from Billie.

"Well, when we leave the river, instead of riding toward that bunch of trees, we'll ride the other way. That will bring us to the railroad track near the curve. Then we'll ride up the track. If we do not reach the station before the train leaves, we can flag it. There is sure to be at least half a dozen guards aboard. We will make ten. Most of the men aboard will have revolvers. The result will be that instead of the bandits taking the train by surprise, we will take them by surprise, and ——"

"And the army that takes the other by surprise wins," finished Billie, taking off his sombrero and bowing to Adrian in mock gravity. Then to Pedro, "Let the scout lead the way and the army will fall in behind, with the general at the head."

A laugh followed Billie's words, and putting spurs to their horses, the four lads dashed down the mountain road upon their self-appointed mission, which was by no means the first daring adventure in which they had engaged; for the stories of the doings of the three American lads in the quartette have furnished interesting reading for thousands of American boys.

It is because of their numerous adventures and their skill as horsemen that the trio has become known as the Broncho Rider Boys. Their names are Donald Mackay, Adrian Sherwood and William Stonewall Jackson Winkle, better known as "Broncho Billie." This latter name was given him some two years before when he went to visit his cousin Donald at the latter's home on the Keystone Ranch in Wyoming. It was not given him because he was such an expert rider, but because he could fall from his broncho pony easier than any boy in that section. Rotund in appearance, he was as jolly as he was fat, and his chief failing was his appetite. No matter what the hour, no one ever mentioned eats that Billie was not hungry.

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When he first came West he was supposed to be in poor health. It speedily developed that such was not the case. He was simply hungry. Months in the open air had enabled him to eat without fear and he was now about the most robust specimen of boy that any one ever saw.

Donald, the oldest of the trio, was one of those level-headed chaps who had a knack of doing the right thing at the right time. His judgment had been proven good in many a tight place and under many thrilling conditions. As a result, he was generally looked up to as a leader by the others, although it must be admitted that Adrian was also a lad of sense and plenty of nerve.

Adrian was the owner of a large Wyoming ranch, and one of the books which has proved most interesting to American boys is known as The Broncho Rider Boys on the Wyoming Trail, a story of how Adrian saved his property from being taken away from him by a dishonest uncle.

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About a year previous to the time this story opens, these three boys had been on a trip along the Rio Grande, when they fell in with Capt. June Peak and a company of Texas Rangers, who had been detailed to keep watch of the actions of a band of cattle smugglers. Sent across the river into Mexican territory on a secret mission, the Broncho Rider Boys had the good fortune to rescue Pedro Sanchez, the fourth member of the quartette, from the hands of a band of ruffians. Pedro turned out to be the son of Gen. Sanchez of the Mexican army, who was visiting an uncle in northern Mexico. After a series of thrilling adventures, which are told in full in The Broncho Rider Boys with the Texas Rangers, Donald, Adrian and Billie returned to their homes, promising to visit Pedro in the City of Mexico whenever the time was ripe.

During the time that the boys were scouting in Mexico they had learned to speak Spanish quite well, and this knowledge had been so improved during their visit with Pedro that they now spoke the language well, an accomplishment which proved of much value to them later on.

About a month prior to the day upon which this story opens, the three Americans had met by appointment at New York City and had come to Vera Cruz by boat and thence to the City of Mexico, where they found everything in a greatly disturbed condition because of the revolution which had been started some months previous by Gen. Carranza.

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It might be well right here to state briefly the history of the previous few months in Mexico, so that all may understand how it happened that none of the four boys had a very high opinion of Gen. Huerta, at that time dictator of Mexico.

For nearly 35 years, up to 1911, Mexico had a peaceful existence under a republican form of government. During the last 32 years of that time Porfirio Diaz was president. Just prior to 1912 a revolution was begun against what had come to be called the Diaz government, and Diaz was compelled to flee from Mexico. The revolution was headed by Francisco Madero, who was then made president.

In February of 1913 a revolution was started against President Madero by Felix Diaz, nephew of Porfirio Diaz, and the City of Mexico was attacked. At that time Gen. Huerta was in command of Madero's forces in the City of Mexico. He proved a traitor to Madero, went over to Diaz, arrested Madero and confined him in prison. Two days later, April 22, 1913, President Madero was shot by order of Huerta, who then declared himself dictator. At the same time he asked that the other nations of the earth recognize him as the head of the Mexican government, a thing which the government of the United States refused to do.

March 26, 1913, another revolution was started, this time against Gen. Huerta by Gen. Carranza, governor of the state of Chihuahua. This revolution had been in progress more than a year when this story opens.

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Pedro's father, Gen. Sanchez, had been a friend of President Madero. When Madero was shot, Gen. Sanchez fled to Pachuca where he had a large hacienda and also owned vast interests in the silver mines at Real del Monte, some six miles up the mountains. Later, however, he was promised protection by Gen. Huerta, who was anxious to have the friendship of such a prominent man, and returned to the City of Mexico. It was some time after this, about March 1, 1914—when matters had quieted down in the City of Mexico—that the three American boys went to visit Pedro.

A few days previous to the one on which we find the four boys headed for the railroad to foil the would-be train robbers, they had come to Pachuca, which is located some sixty miles from the City of Mexico, on horses furnished them by Gen. Sanchez, to see the mines and the beautiful mountains overlooking the plains of Quesco. Every day they took long rides in various directions, in spite of the unsettled condition of the country—a condition which compelled them always to go armed with their trusty Marlins and Colts—and that is how they happened to be on the Real road at such an opportune time.

With these explanations, it is no wonder that the boys were keen for the adventure upon which they were now embarked.

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A sharp ride of fifteen minutes brought them to the river and into it the horses plunged. At places it was only knee deep and at other places where they were obliged to cross it was necessary for the horses to swim; but this was only fun for the Broncho Rider Boys.

Half an hour after sighting the bandits, the boys halted on the railroad track, well secreted from their quarry by the curve before mentioned.

"And none too soon," declared Donald as the sharp whistle of the engine was heard perhaps half a mile away.

"How shall we flag her?" asked Pedro.

"With that red bandana handkerchief on Billie's neck," replied Donald as he reached over and snatched the neckwear from its place.

Springing from his horse, he ran up the track waving the red signal as he ran.

A sharp blast from the whistle a couple of minutes later gave proof that the danger signal had been seen, and the grinding of the brakes told that the train was coming to a stop. Even before this was an accomplished fact the conductor swung himself from the front car and came running down the track to see what was the matter, while the guards covered the boys with their carbines.

"What do you mean by stopping the train?" he demanded angrily.

Donald explained in as few words as possible.

The conductor signalled the guards to him and told them what Donald had said.

"What had we better do?" asked the conductor.

"We had better go back to Pachuca for help," replied the guards.

"And let the Zapatistas escape!" exclaimed Billie hotly. "What do you want to do that for?"

"We have only six guards," the conductor explained, "and——"

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"And that, with us, makes ten," interrupted Billie.

The conductor regarded the boy with surprise.

"Do you mean you will join us to help capture the bandits?"

"What do you think we're here for?" asked Billie.

"Yes," chimed in Adrian. "What do you suppose we stopped the train for?"

"But even ten are no match for twenty or more," declared the guard.

"Of course they are," said Donald, "if the twenty are taken by surprise."

"Which they will not be if we don't act pretty quick," insisted Billie. "Come on! Let's go after them," and he climbed up onto the car.

"That's what I say," said Pedro, following Billie's example.

Without more words the others followed and the conductor gave the signal to go ahead.

"How about the horses?" asked Donald, turning to Pedro.

"They'll be all right; but if we capture the Zapatistas we'll have horses enough any way."

"And if we don't," remarked Billie grimly, "there'll be some riderless horses any way."

"Let us hope that they will not be the ones we have left behind," said Donald gravely.

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CHAPTER II.

A STRANGE MIX-UP.

While the train was gathering headway the conductor and the guards rounded up all the men they could find on the train who were armed. There were more than a dozen, so that in point of numbers, the force on the train nearly equalled the Zapatistas. These were so stationed at the windows that they could give the would-be robbers a warm reception.

"We must use some strategy," declared Adrian, "or we will simply succeed in killing a few and scaring away the others. That will not be a very brilliant deed."

"No," from Donald, "but it will save the bullion. What's your plan?"

"Well, I was thinking it would be a good plan to separate the train."

"How?"

"You can see it is all down grade from here to where the bandits are waiting for us."

"Yes."

"As soon as we get to running a good speed, Billie and I will go into the express car with the three guards. You and Pedro stay here with the other guards and the passengers. As we near the bandits, uncouple the train, put on the brakes and stop the coaches. We will rush by with the engine and express car, firing as we go——"

"Which will be all right," interrupted Billie, "if they don't ditch the engine."

Adrian's face fell.

"I hadn't thought of that."

"Well, you'd better."

After a moment Adrian's face brightened.

"They might better ditch the engine and express car than the whole train," he declared.

"Right you are," from Donald. "If you and Billie are game enough to try it, I say it is the proper thing. If they ditch the engine, we will be back a ways and can run down to your assistance. If they don't ditch you, we will have them between two fires."

"Just what I thought," replied Adrian. "How about it, Billie?"

"I'm game. My head may be a little thick, but I can see just as far through a two-inch plank as the next one."

"All right, then. Come on," and Adrian led the way into the car ahead, while Donald and Pedro stood by to uncouple as soon as they passed the clump of trees before alluded to.

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Almost at the same instant several sharp blasts from the whistle gave the danger signal, and Donald threw over the coupling lever and put on the brake. The coaches slowed quickly down, but the engine and express car dashed in between the horsemen stationed on either side of the

track.

Prepared for what they knew was coming, the engineer and fireman had thrown themselves down on the floor of the cab, while Adrian, Billie and the three guards poured a volley into the robbers as they passed and several horses lost their mounts.

This fire was followed by a fusillade from the horsemen and a minute later the engine, striking an unspiked rail, rolled completely over into the ditch, wrenching itself clear from the express car, which, after bumping over the ties for several seconds, suddenly ceased its antics and glided smoothly along.

As by a miracle it had run completely over the space from which the rail had been loosed and landed upon the good track, down which it now sped.

So unexpected was the change from ties to track that Adrian and Billie were unable for a few moments to understand what had happened. Then Billie rushed to the door and seized the hand brake.

"Grab hold and help stop this car," he yelled to Adrian, "or there is no knowing where we'll land."

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Adrian hastened to obey, but the wrench that had been given the car when the engine broke loose had put the brake out of commission and the car sped on.

The three Mexican guards now appeared on the platform and gazed wildly up the track where they could see the fight going on between the bandits and their companions.

"What shall we do, Señor?" asked one of them.

"Search me," from Billie. "How long is this grade?"

"It is down hill all the way to Pitahaya."

"How far is that?"

"Ten kilometers from Pachuca."

"That must be about three miles farther," said Adrian.

"Correct," from Billie, "but unless it's a mighty steep up-grade the other side of Pita-what's-its-name, we're going so fast we'll not stop till we've run away past it."

"Well, what of it? We can coast back, can't we?"

The car gave a lurch to one side that almost threw the boys off the platform.

"We're certainly going some," called Adrian. "Hang on!"

And hang on they did until they dashed past the little station of Pitahaya and after several minutes began to slow down.

"This is a little better," Adrian finally remarked as the car showed some sign of coming to a stop.

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"Yes, indeed," from Billie. "I suppose we'll come to a dead stop soon. Do you think she'll start back on her own hook, or shall we have to start her?"

"We'll soon see," and see they did, for a couple of minutes later the car came to a stop.

For some minutes the five occupants of the car waited to see if it would start back down the grade. When it did not they got off to decide what could be done.

"It's a mighty steep hill," Billie ventured. "Looks as though the five of us ought to start it. Let's try."

The five put their shoulders against the car and pushed with all their might, but it refused to budge.

"If we only had a crowbar," said Adrian, "we could start it in a jiffy. Suppose some of you look in the car. There might be one there."

The three Mexicans jumped to obey.

Directly they appeared in the doorway with a large claw-bar in their hands.

"Will this do?" asked one.

"Sure! Throw it off," said Billie, "and I'll soon start the old caboose."

Picking up the bar, Billie inserted the claw under one of the wheels while Adrian stood with his hand on the car rail ready to spring aboard.

At the first attempt the claw slipped and nothing happened, but at the second attempt the wheels yielded a little.

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"This time she'll go," Billie called. "All aboard!"

Adrian sprang onto the car as Billie bore down upon the bar and the wheels began to revolve.

"Never mind the bar," cried Adrian as he saw that Billie was raising the implement to throw it onto the platform. "Jump aboard!"

Billie started to obey, but the advice came too late. As he dropped the bar it struck one end of a tie, flopped over and hit him on the shin.

"Wow!" he yelled, grabbing his ankle with both hands.

"Never mind your leg," shouted Adrian. "Jump on or you'll be left."

Billie tried to obey, but the car was now under headway and although he sprinted his best, he was soon left behind.

Adrian started to jump off the car, but seeing his intention Billie called to him not to do it.

"I'll get there some time," he called. "Just tell them I'm coming," and he stood in the middle of the track looking ruefully after the rapidly disappearing car.

After some moments he picked up the claw-bar and threw it spitefully into the ditch beside the track, as much as to say, "Lay there! You're the cause of all the trouble." Then he started slowly after the car.

In the meantime Adrian was flying as fast back toward Pachuca as he had been flying away from it only a few minutes before. It could not have been more than ten minutes altogether since the wreck of the engine and Adrian figured that if the grade were steep enough the car might gain momentum enough to carry it back to the scene of the trouble; but he had little hope that it would.

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When he shot through Pitahaya on his return trip, however, he saw that the car was going at a terrific rate of speed.

"What do you think?" he asked one of the Mexicans. "Do you think we'll get all the way back?"

"Cierto," was the reply. "When they first built this road they used to have mules haul the car to the top of this hill and then turn it loose and it would run almost to Pachuca. That was before it had any engines."

Adrian looked at the man and winked one eye very slowly.

"Señor, it is true," spoke up another. "I was a guard at the time."

Adrian could scarcely believe the statement, but he afterward learned that the men spoke the truth.

"Well, then," he said, "we had better look to our arms, for we may need them. There is no knowing how this affair has turned out."

The advice was well taken, for as they drew near the scene of the wreck, they saw that they were badly needed. More than a dozen horsemen were in sight at some distance from the wreck and with their long-range rifles were doing their best to pick off any one who showed his head.

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"Our party must be out of ammunition," suggested Adrian, "or they would give a better account of themselves."

"Our carbines would not carry that far," explained one of the guards.

"Our Marlins will," replied Adrian, and as he spoke there were two simultaneous flashes from two of the car windows and two of the bandits fell, one shot from his horse and the other with his horse shot under him.

For a moment the other horsemen hesitated as to the course they should pursue and then, putting spurs to their horses, they dashed toward the train, just as the express car, having reached the end of the track, bumped onto the ties and came to a stop.

"Now!" cried Adrian as the riders drew near, firing as they came, and four shots rang out.

The volley from so unexpected a quarter took the horsemen completely by surprise, and they pulled up with a jerk. The action proved their undoing, for as they stood thus for a moment, they gave those in the train the opportunity they desired and the volley that followed turned four more riderless horses upon the plain.

It was more than flesh and blood could stand, and the seven or eight remaining horsemen turned and fled, followed by at least three whistling bullets from as many Marlins.

The fight was over and the bullion had been saved, but what of Broncho Billie, who had been left at the top of the hill four miles away?

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That was the first question asked by Donald when he greeted Adrian two minutes later.

"Oh, he's all right," was the laughing reply. "He's just taking a little walk for his health."

But when Billie failed to put in an appearance an hour later, the boys mounted their horses and started up the track to meet him, leading Billie's mount between them.

CHAPTER III.

BILLIE LOSES HIS NERVE.

Broncho Billie was not a rapid walker. In fact, if there was any one thing in which Billie was not a success, it was walking. He could ride a horse all day, but when it came to depending upon his own legs as a means of locomotion, he was a dead failure.

Therefore he walked slowly along, counting the ties as he went.

"They certainly do lay 'em thick," he mused after some minutes. "Three hundred and one, three hundred and two, three hundred and three, three hundred and four, three hun——"

He stopped short and looked behind him.

"I sure thought I heard some one," he muttered. "It must have been a bird."

He turned and started forward.

"Let's see, where was I? Oh, yes, three hundred and five, three hundred and six, three hundred and——"

Again he stopped, but did not turn around. Instead he stooped down as though to pick up a stone, which enabled him to look backward between his knees.

He caught a movement in the grass at the edge of the right of way.

"I thought so," he muttered. "Now to find out who it is, and what he wants."

He picked up a small stone and threw it at a tall cactus which grew near the track some distance ahead.

"Good shot," he said aloud as the stone hit the stalk. "I wonder if I could do it again."

He stooped down and picked up another stone, taking a good look backward from his stooping position. There was not a movement to indicate the presence of a living thing.

"This is getting on my nerves," the boy mused as he picked up several small stones and again walked forward. "I don't mind being followed by a white man, but I'm a whole lot leary of these greasers. They're bad enough when they're friendly."

Then aloud, as he threw a couple of stones: "I'll never get anywhere if I don't make better time than this. I'll just sprint a few."

Suiting the action to the word, he started on a run.

Almost immediately he was aware of a soft pat-pat in his rear. He had heard a similar sound in the wilds of Wyoming and he recognized it at once.

It was the footfall of a four-legged animal.

"So!" he ejaculated. "I wonder what it is. If there were wolves down here I would say it was a wolf, but I don't believe there are." Then a minute later, "Well, whatever it is, I'm going to find out."

He whipped out his automatic and turned suddenly.

As before, not a single living thing was in sight, only in the grass a movement as before.

Without a moment's aim, he fired a single shot at the spot. It was an act born of fear and Billie knew it, but for the life of him he could not have done otherwise, so nervous had he become.

The report was followed by a cry of pain and an instant later there came running directly toward him out of the tall grass a figure so weird that Billie stood as one paralysed.

The figure was that of a man not more than two feet high, with long arms and a head of diminutive size. While it stood upright at times, at others it came forward on all fours. To Billie it seemed a cross between a man and a monkey.

Gathering his wits in an instant, Billie would have fired again—in fact, raised his revolver to do so, when the strange creature fell to its knees and raised its hands in supplication.

"By George!" exclaimed the lad as he stood with lowered weapon. "What kind of a thing is this? I wonder if it can talk?"

Then as he took a step toward it: "I'm not going to hurt you. Come here."

The creature arose to its feet and came slowly toward him. As it did so Billie noticed that blood was running from a wound in its scalp.

"Poor thing," he said. "That must have been where the bullet hit him. It was a close shave."

"Can you talk?" he finally asked.

The strange creature turned its head to one side and eyed him closely, but no sound came from

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its lips.

"It must be an ape of some sort," mused the boy; "but how did it become so tame?"

He slowly returned his automatic to its holster, thinking in the meantime how he could dress the creature's wound; but no sooner had his hand left his weapon than the ape sprang at him with the utmost fury. It landed on his shoulder, wound its legs about his neck, and with its long arms made a wild grab for the revolver.

Then began a strange and terrible struggle for the possession of the weapon. Even as he fought the beast, Billie realized that in some manner the ape had learned to fear firearms, but whether it had ever learned to use them he could not venture a guess. He felt certain if he could draw the weapon and point it at the ape, it would at once cringe in fear. What might happen if the ape should get possession of it, he could only imagine. [Pg 26]

For a youth of eighteen, there were few whom Billie met that were his match physically, but this diminutive man-animal held him as in a vise. Billie exerted every ounce of his strength to free himself from the terrible hold, while the ape fought even more fiercely to retain its grip and to gain possession of the weapon.

It was a weird and fearful struggle waged there in the stillness of the tropical woodland—a stillness broken only by the occasional wild scream of the ape, or the hoarse breathing of the boy as he fought to free himself from that horrible grasp.

The struggle must have lasted for two or three minutes—to Billie it seemed hours—when by a sudden wrench the lad managed to free his left arm sufficiently to get the beast by the throat. For an instant it loosed its hold on his right arm and that act decided the battle.

Finding his right arm free, Billie seized his revolver and without drawing it from the holster pulled the trigger.

At the sound of the shot, the ape uttered a plaintive cry, relaxed its hold upon the lad and fell upon its knees on the ground with its hands raised in supplication as previously. [Pg 27]

"I ought to shoot you," declared the lad between his gasps for breath as he drew the weapon from its holster and pointed it at the animal, "but I won't. I'll take you with me and maybe I can sell you for enough to pay me for the scare you've given me. Now, march!"

He pointed with his finger down the track, but the beast would not stir.

"Don't you intend to do what I tell you?"

The animal perked up his head and kept his eye upon the revolver.

"Well," exclaimed Billie as he drew a long breath, "this is the limit. I can't make you mind and I won't hurt you. I guess the only thing I can do is to go and leave you."

Suiting the action to the word, Billie turned and started down the track, his revolver still in his hand.

He had not gone more than a dozen steps, before he heard the soft pat-pat behind him, and on looking back could see nothing but the waving grass to indicate the whereabouts of his erstwhile assailant.

"So I am to be followed, am I? Well, all right." Then, as an afterthought: "I wonder how I can catch him when I want him. I wonder if this will do," and he raised his weapon and pointed it toward the moving grass.

With the same plaintive cry which Billie had come to recognize as one of fear, the animal ran toward him and sank to his knees. [Pg 28]

Billie smiled.

"It's all right, old chap. As long as I know how to handle you, why you can follow me right back to the train."

Again he started down the track at a brisk walk, it having just occurred to him that there might be something doing at the other end of his journey.

Twenty minutes later he reached the station at Pitahaya where he had expected to find Adrian and the three Mexicans awaiting him, but, as we know, they had gone on to the scene of the wreck. Not realizing just what had happened, but always on the alert for the unexpected, Billie, therefore, began an inspection of the station.

It did not take him long to discover that Pitahaya was little more than a siding with a one-room building, which was used as a freight house and a waiting room. It did not even boast of a station master.

"There must be some reason for having a building here," he mused. "There must be some sort of a settlement around somewhere. But what's that to me? I might as well be jogging along towards Pachuca."

Then he bethought him of the ape, which he had no mind to lose after his exciting experience.

But the animal was nowhere to be seen.

"I wonder if I could raise him with a shot," soliloquized Billie.

He raised his weapon, which he still carried in his hand, and fired aimlessly, while he turned his eyes in various directions, but there was nothing to be seen. [Pg 29]

"Oh, well," he thought, "what's the difference? He'd just be a nuisance anyway. I might as well be trudging along."

He jumped off the station platform and proceeded down the track, filling the magazine to his automatic as he went. Then having finished the task, he returned it to his holster and once more began counting the ties.

"One, two, three, four, five, six——"

Bing! And a stone whistled by his head.

Billie turned, and as he did so a second stone from the same source struck him on the temple, and he fell to the ground.

A second later the ape sprang from a palm beside the station and ran toward him, stopping every few feet to see if the lad would rise.

When within a few feet of the prostrate lad the animal made a leap and landed upon his body. In another instant it had gained possession of Billie's weapon, which it examined curiously for a moment, ere it sprang away and stationed itself some two rods distant, where it sat watching with the weapon aimed directly at him.

For perhaps five minutes the two retained their relative positions and then Billie began to regain consciousness. Several times he moved uneasily and then he suddenly sat up and looked around. [Pg 30]

"I wonder what happened," he finally thought, and then he became conscious of a pain in his head.

He raised his hand to the aching spot and his fingers encountered a big lump.

The truth came upon him like a flash. He dropped his hand to his holster, and sprang to his feet.

As he did so he caught sight of the ape and found himself looking into the business end of his own weapon.

With a yell he dropped to the ground as though the expected had happened.

But when no shot followed, he began to regain his wits and lay still trying to figure out once more just how much the ape might know about the use of the weapon.

He remembered the old saying that a gun was a dangerous weapon without lock, stock or barrel, because a man killed his wife with the ramrod; and so he figured that an animal which had intelligence enough to throw a stone and knock him senseless, might have sense enough to fire a revolver.

"If I only knew something about his history," soliloquized Billie, "I might be able to guess how much he knew. But he is a perfect stranger to me. I don't even know his name."

After several minutes and nothing had happened, Billie decided to make some effort to get away.

"I might as well be shot as to be prisoner to an ape," he thought, and so he arose to a sitting posture and surveyed the scene. [Pg 31]

There sat the ape as before, with the automatic pointed at Billie, but with a puzzled look upon its face. When the lad finally arose, the ape appeared still more puzzled and at length, turning the weapon away from Billie, looked into the muzzle.

"That settles it," exclaimed Billie. "He doesn't know how to fire it. I'll go and take it away from him."

He started toward the animal, which at once pointed the revolver in Billie's direction. There came a sharp report and a bullet whizzed by the boy's head.

"Worse and more of it," exclaimed Billie. "He doesn't know how to use the thing, but he's liable to shoot me as long as I stay in range. I'll just make myself scarce."

Stooping down, he picked up a good-sized stone and hurled it at the ape and then, without waiting to see the result of his throw, jumped into the jungle which lined both sides of the track, determined to make a detour and if possible lose his unpleasant companion.

He had not run far before he realized that the ape was following, but this he did not mind. There were plenty of trees between them, and he felt sure he would soon be able to reach some sort of a habitation, when he suddenly found himself on the edge of a deep basin into which he plunged before he was able to gain his equilibrium. [Pg 32]

CHAPTER IV.

THE ROSARIO VIEJO.

To be suddenly pitched head-foremost down a rocky declivity into a mass of prickly pear bushes and other tropical brambles is by no means pleasant; and as a result Billie was not in the best of humor when he picked himself up and looked to the top of the 60-foot embankment down which he had slid.

"It's a wonder they wouldn't hang out a red light when they dig a hole like this," he declared angrily, "and not let a fellow most break his neck, to say nothing of scratching his eyes out! This is worse than a subway cave-in."

He pulled himself together and surveyed his surroundings.

The basin looked very much like an old quarry—so old that the shrubbery on the sides had grown into good-sized trees, and the whole place was covered with herbage of one sort or another. In one corner of the excavation, which must have covered some two acres, there was the ruin of an adobe house, while near the center was a stone structure made of four stone pillars about twenty feet apart and roofed over with two huge stone slabs, set so as to form a gable roof. Except for its size, it had the appearance of the old-fashioned well houses, which were once so common in New England.

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"It's a tough-looking place, whatever it is," was Billie's comment. "I wish the fellows were here."

And then for the first time in more than half an hour Billie bethought him of his companions. His strange experience with the ape had driven all other thoughts out of his mind.

"By George!" he exclaimed aloud, "I wonder how the fight with the bandits came out?"

Almost as in answer to his words, there appeared upon the edge of the excavation into which he had fallen, but upon the opposite side from that on which he had taken his slide, ten horsemen, three of whom carried across the pommel of their saddles the bodies of three men. They halted and surveyed the basin critically. Then, single file, they slowly descended into the quarry.

Billie recognized them the minute he laid eyes upon them. They were the remnant of the bandit band, and the bodies carried across the pommels of the saddles were three of their wounded companions.

"This is no place for me," commented Billie as he kept himself well hidden behind a giant cactus. "It reminds me of Ali Baba and the forty thieves. I hope I have better luck than Ali Baba."

As though to carry out the trend of Billie's thoughts, the horsemen halted near the ruin of the adobe house before mentioned and two of their number dismounted and entered. A minute later the rest of the band rode into the ruins and disappeared, followed by the riderless horses of the two dismounted men.

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Billie rubbed his eyes.

"I wonder if I'm getting dippy," he muttered. "Maybe that crack on the side of my head has made me see things."

He sat down to think.

"If I only had some kind of a gun," he mused, "I wouldn't feel so everlasting helpless. Confound that ape! If I ever see him again I'll break his neck."

Then, after a moment's thought: "I don't believe the beast would give up the chase. He's likely to show up at any minute. Something has to be done."

The boy scanned the edge of the embankment, if perchance he might see anything of his persecutor. There was nothing in sight and he decided to go on a tour of inspection. As quietly as possible he stole along the side of the excavation toward the spot where the ruin stood, when once more he had that sense of being watched.

Turning his head quickly, he saw the ape about twenty paces to one side aiming the revolver at him.

Then Billie lost his temper.

"This thing has got to stop," he exclaimed. "I'll be doggoned if I'm going to stand for it any longer."

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He ran quickly toward the ape, and fell on his knees as he had seen the ape do, and raised his hands in supplication.

The animal quirked its head and fairly beamed with pleasure as it slowly advanced and stood beside him.

But its simian smile was quickly turned to surprise, for like a flash Billie snatched the weapon from its hand and aimed it at the animal's head.

"Now," he said, "you come with me."

The animal made no move.

"We'll see whether you will come or not," said Billie, and stooping down he broke off a good-sized sprout from a live oak. "Now, march!" and he raised the whip.

It was the one thing needed. The beast had evidently felt the touch of a whip before, for it raised its arm and danced about as though going through some circus maneuver.

"The first mystery is solved," laughed Billie. "Now for the second one. Come on, Ab," unconsciously naming his companion after the hero of Stanley Waterloo's famous story.

The ape seemed to know what was wanted and the two proceeded slowly and silently toward the ruin.

"I've been in a whole lot of queer scrapes," mused Billie as he crept along, "but this is surely the queerest—tramping around with an ape to solve the disappearance of ten cutthroats. I hope I wake up pretty soon."

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But it was no dream, as Billie was soon to discover.

Arriving at the ruined building, Billie crawled along by the wall until he came directly under what had once been a window. Then, after listening a long time and hearing no sound, he ventured to raise his head and peep in.

The old ruin was as empty as though there were not a living person within fifty miles.

"Great Scott!" gasped the boy. "What do you think of that! Now I know I'm dreaming!"

He turned to the ape, waving his whip.

"Here you, Ab," he said, "go in there and see what you can find."

He pointed to the window and the animal sprang lightly in and a minute later perched itself on one of the decaying rafters.

"If there were any one around, they would certainly see Ab," reasoned Billie, "and would make some noise about it. I guess it's safe to go in."

He crawled around to the door and entered. There were the tracks of the horses, but the horses had disappeared as completely as though they had been swallowed up.

Billie called softly to Ab, who did not see fit to obey until he waved his whip. Then the animal sprang lightly to the ground. Billie showed him the tracks.

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"Where do you suppose they went?" he asked.

Ab blinked his eyes and, for the first time since Billie had become acquainted with him, made a noise in his throat, much like the voice of a child.

Billie smiled in spite of himself.

"I'm glad you've decided to become sociable," he said, "What do you make of this? You look as though you could think."

Ab blinked his eyes stupidly and then suddenly became alert as though listening.

"What is it?" asked Billie, impressed by the ape's attitude.

For a reply Ab sprang through the window and made straight for the structure in the middle of the quarry. In another instant he was on the roof.

Billie followed as fast as he could and as he stepped beneath the roof started back in the utmost amazement, for up through what looked like a huge well there came the distinct sound of human voices.

For several seconds he stood as one in a spell and then he started forward to peer into the well, but on a second thought did not.

"I couldn't see anything if I did," he thought, "but any one looking up could see me. I'll do better by listening."

The words came to him almost as distinctly as though he were in the same room with the speakers, and there was no longer any doubt that the voices were those of the Zapatistas who had attempted to rob the train.

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From their conversation Billie learned the outcome of the fight, and he was greatly amused at the attempt of the bandits to figure out who had betrayed them. Each one had a different theory, but all agreed that there must have been a traitor in the band. It was all the lad could do to prevent himself from calling out to them, just to see what effect his words would have.

After discovering from the conversation that the bandits felt themselves perfectly secure where they were and that they were likely to stay there for some time, he finally decided to get back to the railroad and thence to Pachuca and give the alarm.

Acting upon the decision, he made his way across the basin to where he had slid down the embankment and slowly and laboriously climbed to the top, followed by Ab.

Retracing his steps, he soon reached the railroad and looking down the track toward Pachuca gave a shout of delight as he saw his three chums approaching, leading a fourth horse between them.

"Just in time," he said, as they drew near enough to exchange greetings.

"Just in time for what?" queried the others as one.

"To capture the bandits that you let escape."

"How do you know that we let any escape?" asked Adrian.

"I'm a mind reader."

The other three looked incredulous.

"Oh, it's a fact," declared Billie. "I can tell you all about the fight just as well as though I had been there," and he proceeded to prove his words.

"Some one told you," said Adrian.

"Sure," laughed Billie, thoroughly enjoying the perplexity of his companions. "My friend Ab. Come here, old man, and be introduced," and Billie waved his whip, which he still carried.

With a little cry the ape sprang to his side, an act which only added to the amazement of the others.

"Allow me," said Billie with mock gravity, "to introduce my friend Mr. Ab from No-man's-land. Ab, these are the rest of the Broncho Rider Boys. How would you like to join the company?"

Ab scratched his ear and looked wise.

"Oh, come," interrupted Donald. "Tell us what's up and what we must do to capture the rest of this band of cutthroats."

Thinking that he had carried the joke far enough, and realizing also that he might be wasting valuable time, Billie related his adventure, describing the place he had discovered.

"It is the Rosario viejo," said Pedro, as soon as Billie had finished his story.

"What's that?" asked Billie.

"An abandoned mine. It is called the old Rosario to distinguish it from the new Rosario, which is now one of the most valuable mines in this region. The station at Pitahaya was built especially to serve it."

"I see," said Billie. "Where is the new mine?"

"Down there," and Pedro pointed to a trail leading in the opposite direction. "It is just about as far from the station on that side of the railroad as the old Rosario is on this."

"Don't you think we had better summon some assistance from the mine workers?" asked Adrian.

"They may be in cahoots with the bandits," laughed Donald. "I have lost my confidence in about every one in this bandit-ridden land."

"I don't blame you," said Pedro, "and I hope the day will soon come when all this trouble will be over."

"Then you agree with me that we should tackle the bandits alone, do you?" asked Donald.

"It is the only safe way."

"All right, then," exclaimed Billie. "Let's be off. If we use a little strategy, I'm sure we shall succeed."

He turned to mount the horse, which a minute before had been standing a few feet away, but it was gone.

"Where's my horse?" he cried.

The others turned in surprise.

"It certainly was here a minute ago," declared Adrian.

"Then it can't be very far away," insisted Donald.

"It's so far I can't see it," replied Billie.

"There it goes!" shouted Pedro, who had jumped his mount across the track as soon as he heard Billie's cry.

The others looked in the direction indicated, and sure enough, there went the horse about a quarter of a mile away on a dead run and on its back was Billie's late acquaintance, Ab.

"By George," exclaimed Billie angrily as he snatched a rifle from Donald's holster, "I've had enough of that ape. I'll put a stop to his foolishness," and he leveled the rifle.

But ere he could press the trigger, there was a report from another quarter and the horse and its rider hit the dust.

CHAPTER V.

WHEN THE OLD WAS NEW.

A cry of astonishment went up from the quartette and then they stood silent to see what would be the next move.

They did not have long to wait, for presently a tall, gaunt figure strode out of the brambles some yards from the fallen horse and uttered a hoarse shout, upon which Ab sprang from the spot where he had fallen and ran toward the newcomer, giving vent to shrill cries as he ran.

"That must be his master," muttered Billie. "I'm glad I didn't shoot the little beggar."

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"I'm more interested in the master than in the monkey," said Donald. "He is evidently not a Mexican. Who and what do you suppose he is?"

"An animal trainer from a circus," replied Adrian.

"There are no circuses in this part of the world," commented Billie.

"If he only had a hand organ instead of a gun, I could place him," laughed Donald. "What do you make out of him, Pedro?"

"It's a *saltimbanco*."

"What is that?"

"A man who goes about making people laugh."

"Oh!" from Adrian. "You mean a mountebank?"

"I think so."

"And this chap," ventured Billie, "isn't satisfied with making a monkey of himself, but carries a real one with him."

Pedro laughed. "That seems to be it."

"I'm sorry he killed the horse," said Donald. "We need him."

"Perhaps he didn't," suggested Adrian. "Suppose we ride over and see."

Suiting the action to the word, the boys rode out into the open, much to the newcomer's surprise and consternation.

"Señors," he exclaimed, as he came running toward them, "I am sorry I had to hurt your horse; but I couldn't lose my brother."

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"Your what?" asked Billie.

"My brother. My little brother. Could I, Ambrosio?" and he patted the ape on the cheek.

"What do you call him?" asked Donald.

"I call him Ambrosio because he is so sweet."

"Bah!" exclaimed Billie. "I called him Ab, but he ought to be named Diabolo. But how about the horse?"

"I am afraid I have rendered him quite useless for the present, Señor. I may have broken his leg."

An examination of the fallen animal revealed the fact that while the leg was not splintered, it was so badly injured that the animal was quite useless.

"Have you far to go, Señors?" queried the mountebank.

"Only as far as the Rosario viejo for the present," answered Adrian. "After that——"

"After that," interrupted Billie, "we may not want to go anywhere."

The mountebank looked at Billie questioningly.

"That's what I mean," reiterated Billie. "We are going there to capture a band of cutthroats, but we may have a fight."

The man made a grimace, which was intended for a smile.

"I understand. Can I be of any service?"

Donald eyed him suspiciously.

"What do you think?" he asked.

"You may have noticed how I stopped the runaway," he remarked.

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"Very neatly."

"Sure," from Billie. "It was a short stop."

"I perceive that you are an American. I am also a fan."

"What!" from the three Americans.

"True. I am even worse. I formerly shot the pill in one of the bush leagues. I aspired to a place in the box of one of the major league clubs, but instead I joined the Madero revolution. I had all the sport I wanted and finding my brother in this forsaken land, I joined him as a public entertainer. Shall we give you a sample of our performance?"

"Not now," from Donald. "Let's go and round up this bunch of revolutionists first."

"But why?" queried the mountebank. "To-morrow they may be the government."

The boys looked at each other with an expression that said as plainly as words: "True! We never thought of that."

"Now, I have a better plan," continued the mountebank. "Let's go and entertain the revolutionists. Let's be neutral."

"I'm afraid we are already belligerents," laughed Adrian. "We have had one brush with them."

The mountebank heaved a sigh.

"Of course, if you have declared war, we shall have to fight to a finish, unless," with a grin, "we can intrench."

"It is they who are intrenched," explained Billie. "They are at the bottom of the old mine, although I don't know how they got there."

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"So," laughed the mountebank. "Suppose we go and find out."

Arrived at the shaft house, for that is what the gable-roofed building was, the boys and their new-found friend approached and listened to the sound of voices which still arose to the top of the shaft.

Evidently considering themselves free and safe, the bandits were preparing their evening meal, for it was now well on toward sunset. They were singing and joking as though they had not just lost half or two-thirds their number.

From a few remarks made now and then, it appeared that they proposed on the following day to recruit the band up to its former strength.

"That is the thing we must prevent," declared Donald.

"A very easy thing," said the mountebank, "if we had enough provisions to remain here for twenty-four hours, or more."

"How so?" asked Billie.

"Why, they will doubtless send out two or three to do the recruiting. We can capture them as they leave the ruins."

Billie glanced at the man from under his broad-rimmed sombrero as he asked: "How did you know they came out through the ruins?"

The mountebank smiled.

"Now, don't go to mistrusting me, young fellow, for I'm on the level. But I've been in this place before, and I know that the only way to where your friends down there are camping is through the ruins."

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"Have you ever been down there?"

"Yes. They are only about sixty feet below the ground, in a chamber which was originally a gallery in the mine. The shaft over which this house is built is over two hundred feet deep."

"I'd like to explore it," remarked Adrian.

"Do you think you have the nerve?" and the stranger bent upon him a penetrating gaze.

Billie laughed softly.

"Say, stranger," he finally said. "I guess you never heard of the Broncho Rider Boys. We've got the nerve to do anything that any other human being dare do."

"Then we'll get rid of these bandits in short notice," declared the mountebank emphatically. "You are just the chaps I have been looking for."

He leaned over the mouth of the shaft and gave a shrill whistle.

In an instant all was silent below.

Half a minute later he repeated the whistle thrice.

There was a clatter below of arms and accoutrements.

"Over behind those big cactus with you, quick," was the next command. "If you insist on fighting these men later, you can. Now let's get rid of them." [Pg 47]

For just a moment the boys hesitated, but there was something in the man's manner that seemed to force obedience and they obeyed.

They were not a moment too soon, for they had no more than secreted themselves than the back wall of the ruin flew open and the men rode out. Of those who had been at the mouth of the shaft only a few moments before, only the mountebank with his ape was in sight.

"What is it?" asked one of the band, riding up to him.

"Guard the track at the summit. Let no train pass, even if you have to tear up the track."

"By whose order?"

The mountebank made a mysterious sign with his left hand.

"*Bueno!*" from the horseman. "Close up the doors and care for the wounded," and putting spurs to his horse, he led the bandits from the basin.

As soon as they were out of sight, the mountebank summoned the boys to the shaft house by a wave of his hand.

"Now," he said, "you'll have a chance to test your nerve, and we must work rapidly to get where we wish to go before dark."

He took from a crude knapsack which he wore upon his shoulders a coil of cord about half the size of a lead pencil, but evidently of much strength. Then seizing the ape, he fastened one end of the cord to the belt about the animal's body, and despite its unwillingness to be thus treated began to lower it into the shaft. [Pg 48]

Totally unable to account for his actions, the boys stood speechless, watching the operations.

After some minutes, the cord slackened.

"He's reached the bottom," was the information vouchsafed. Then a moment later: "Help me to pull him up, one of you."

Billie hastened to lend a hand and in a short time the head of the ape appeared above the edge of the shaft. In his hand he held one end of a good-sized rope, which the mountebank took and tied around one of the stone pillars which supported the roof.

"Now, then," he said, "we are ready to descend into the old mine. Which one of you will go first?"

The boys looked at each other, but there was no reply until Donald asked:

"Why should we go down at all?"

"Why," was the somewhat quizzical reply, "to show your nerve."

"Unless there is some good reason other than that, there are plenty of ways to show our nerve without lowering ourselves to the bottom of an old mine."

"There is a good reason," was the reply.

"Then tell us. If it is good, there can be no objection."

"The object of this descent," said the stranger calmly, "is to see if we cannot solve the mystery of the abandonment of the mine." [Pg 49]

"Have you ever been down?" asked Billie.

"Often."

"There is no foul gas at the bottom?"

"Not now, as you may see by the condition of Ambrosio, who has been clear to the bottom."

"Then I am willing to be the first to descend; but first I must know more about you than I do."

"What difference does that make? You will have three friends here with me. They are all armed and I can see they know how to use their weapons. I cannot possibly harm you. I will be the third to descend. I assure you that the descent and the ascent are comparatively easy for athletic young chaps, as the sides of the shaft are very uneven. By the aid of this rope you can come up almost as easily as you would climb a ladder. The adventure is well worth your while."

"And you won't tell us who you are?"

"I have already told you. I am an American soldier of fortune. My name, if that means anything to you, is Francis Strong, and I have assumed this character of a mountebank solely for the purpose of going about the country without being molested. What I hope to do, is of no interest to any one but myself."

It was a straightforward statement and the boys saw no reason to doubt its truthfulness.

"All right, then," exclaimed Billie. "Here goes!"

He grasped the rope and lowered himself over the side. It was as Strong had said and in a very few minutes he found himself at the bottom. He could see nothing except the dim light at the mouth of the shaft. [Pg 50]

Giving the rope a vigorous shake, as had been agreed upon, he saw another figure begin to descend, and in a short time Pedro stood beside him. Strong was next to descend, then came Ambrosio, and after him Adrian and Donald in the order named—Donald having determined to be the last, that he might be sure that everything was safe above ground.

"I should have given you this," was Strong's first remark upon alighting at Billie's side, and he drew from his pocket an electric torch. "But it slipped my mind."

"We all have them in our trunk in the City of Mexico," replied Billie, "but I doubt if either of us has one with him."

"This is sufficient, for I shall light some torches I have prepared as soon as we are ready for our work."

When Donald had descended, Strong led the way through a lateral about thirty or forty feet, at the end of which another vertical shaft had been sunk. Around the mouth of this Strong had set a number of torches, which he now proceeded to light. By their glare it was possible to see part way down the hole.

"The thing I hope to find," explained Strong, "is at the bottom of that hole, if it exists at all." [Pg 51]

"What is that?" asked Billie.

"I think I can best answer your question," was the reply, "by reading you a translation of a paper which is said to have been found in the shaft above, where the bandits have made their rendezvous. How it came into my possession, matters not. I believe there are now enough of us here to prove or disprove its truthfulness, unless some one has been here before us."

Seating himself on a jutting boulder, Strong took from his pocket a paper, which he read as follows under the flickering torchlight:

"Being about to leave this world, I desire to obtain forgiveness for the great and only crime of my life, hence this confession.

"There were five of us. Names do not matter. They were my fellow workmen. We had been entrusted with the output of the Rosario for the year and had promised to guard it with our lives. We heard the soldiers of Maximilian coming. We were not enough to withstand them. We determined to hide the treasure in the western shaft. We carried it to the edge and threw it in. My four companions went down to cover it over with dirt, which I brought from the other shaft and gave them, shovel by shovel. A mad idea seized me. If they were dead, no one but I would know the hiding place of the treasure. I would kill them; but how? I glanced about. Great pieces of rock were on every hand. Without stopping to consider the foulness of the deed I rolled a huge piece to the mouth of the shaft and pushed it in. There was a cry of terror and I heard a voice call out to know what had happened. I said a piece of rock had broken loose and asked what damage it had done. Only one replied. The others had been stricken down. Madly I pushed over another rock and then another and still another. Then there was silence and I fled. The soldiers found me unconscious at the bottom of the shaft. Ere I became conscious, Maximilian was no more. When I returned hither, the mine had been abandoned. Here I have lived for years alone with my misery. Now I die. May God forgive me.

JOSÉ RODRIGUEZ.

CHAPTER VI.

A FEARFUL EXPERIENCE.

"Well?" queried Donald when Strong had finished reading the paper, "what are we going to do about it?"

"We are going to find out, if we can, whether José Rodríguez told the truth, and if he did, whether any one else has tried to prove it."

"What do you think of it, Pedro?" asked Billie, indicating the opening at their feet.

"Exactly."

"Have you ever been down in it?" asked Adrian of Strong.

"No! I did not feel equal to the task and I was afraid to ask help of any of these cutthroats."

"What do you think of it, Pedro?" asked Billie, turning to the Mexican lad, who had made no comment whatever.

"It's an old tale," was the reply, "this story of the Rosario viejo. I have heard it many times and I presume this shaft has been explored by every prospector in this section. In my opinion it is a huge hoax."

At Pedro's words, Strong's face became ashen.

"Are you telling the truth?" he asked hoarsely.

"Indeed I am. My father knows of several who have searched the place and nothing has ever been found."

Strong drew a long breath and passed his hand over his face.

"I have believed it true," he finally said, "ever since I first came into possession of this paper. There is something about it that rings true and I have counted upon finding sufficient wealth to enable me to achieve a long cherished plan. If what you say," turning to Pedro, "is true, my chance of attaining my ambition is very slim."

"I'm sorry, sir, but if I had known for certain what your object was in coming down here I might have saved you the trouble. Isn't there any other way you might obtain the money you wish?"

"If there is, I don't know it."

"Pedro may be right," spoke up Billie suddenly, "but I am in favor of making an inspection of our own, now that we are here. What do you say, Don?"

"I'm with you." Then to Strong: "How are we to get to the bottom?"

Strong reached over and from behind a nearby boulder produced another bundle of rope.

"I had intended making a rope ladder," he said.

"All right, then," from Donald, "a rope ladder it shall be."

The boys set to work and in the course of an hour had made a rope ladder more than fifty feet in length. Lowering it into the shaft, it seemed to reach to the bottom and Billie started to go down, but Strong prevented him.

"I shall go first," he said. "If there is any danger from poisonous gas, or from reptiles, I shall take the risk. You boys have parents and homes. I have no one. If I should suffer any mishap, do not attempt to rescue me. It would not be worth while."

"Nothing will happen," declared Adrian. "I have a hunch and my hunches are usually right."

The rope having been properly fastened and warded off the side by an ingenious arrangement of several large rocks, Strong began his descent. In his left hand he carried a flaming torch and Donald leaned over the edge, looking down, with rifle sighted, to fire upon any reptile which might be brought to light by the torch's ruddy glare.

Step by step Strong went down, stopping every now and then to hold his torch below him, if perchance it might come into contact with fire damp or any other noxious gas.

He had descended at least three-fourths of the way, when, as he swung his torch below, he uttered a cry that was almost a shriek and the torch fell from his hand.

At the same instant Donald gave vent to a loud exclamation and his rifle cracked.

"Hold on," he cried as he arose from the ground, "as you value your life, don't lose your hold."

"What is it?" asked the others in one voice.

"Snakes! Dozens of them," replied Donald. "Climb up, Strong, as fast as you can."

"All right," came a feeble reply, followed almost immediately by a louder call of "Help!"

"Hold fast," called Donald. "I'm coming."

But before he could turn to step down the ladder, a chattering figure sprang past him and shot down the rope.

It was the ape. He had heard his master's call and had gone to his assistance.

A moment later came a joyful cry that told as plainly as words that Ambrosio had reached his

master in time.

"Are you all right now?" called Donald.

"Yes. I'll be up in a minute. Good old boy," the last remark evidently addressed to the ape.

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When Strong's head appeared above the edge of the shaft a couple of minutes later he was as pale as a ghost and when he at length came into the full light of the torches, it was seen that his hair was as white as snow. The fright had completely changed its color.

"Let's get out of here," he gasped as soon as he was helped to his feet. "I wouldn't go down into that place again for all the gold and silver in the world."

"It was pretty rough for sure," admitted Donald. "I just caught a glimpse as the torch fell among them, but it was so quickly extinguished by the wriggling mass I only shot once for fear of hitting you."

"It was the darkness that frightened me," Strong explained feebly. "If I hadn't let go my torch to hold on with both hands, I don't think I would have minded so much. But the darkness hid what was below and it just seemed as though they were right after me. I'd have been a goner sure if it hadn't been for good old Ambrosio," and he laid his hand affectionately on the ape's head.

"Do you think you'll be able to climb out of the mine?" asked Billie as they reached the main shaft.

"Yes, with Ambrosio's aid; but I'm going out first. I don't think I have nerve enough left right now to be the last out."

The exit from the mine was much slower than the descent had been, but in the course of an hour they were all once more out under the stars.

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"What about the bandits?" queried Billie.

"Take my advice," said Strong, "and let them alone. This is none of your quarrel. If the Mexicans want to fight among themselves, let them. It's a family quarrel and you will only make matters worse by interfering. The time may come when these very men may prove your best friends."

"That's the advice I gave when we first discovered them to-day. I wish now we had all followed it."

"If we are not going to do anything," declared Adrian, "the quicker we get out of here the better."

"I consider that more good advice," laughed Billie, "especially as I am just reminded that I haven't had a bite to eat since noon. But I have no horse."

"That's easily remedied," replied Strong.

He went into the old ruin and in a few minutes returned with a very good animal, all saddled and bridled.

"It will not be missed," he said. "Now ride for your lives. Take the trail to the left and don't let moonlight catch you within five miles of here."

"Aren't you coming with us?" asked Donald.

"No! I am better off here."

"How will you account for your white hair?"

"I'll tell them it is a charm. They'll believe it and it will make me that much more valuable. Now go!"

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Without wasting more words the boys put spurs to their horses and were soon out of the basin and on their way to Pachuca.

"It seems like a year since we came down here," remarked Adrian to Billie as they galloped along.

"It sure does," was the reply as Billie rubbed his stomach suggestively. "I'll never go out again as long as I'm in this revolutionary republic without a haversack full of grub."

"Who said grub?" called back Donald.

"What a question," laughed Adrian. "Who is it that's always hungry? It's all he thinks about."

"Oh, it is, eh?" from Billie. "Well, I'm thinking about something else now. There's the moon coming up over the valley and we're not three miles from the old Rosario. We'd better keep our eyes peeled and see that our shooting irons are in shape. We may have to fight our way home even yet."

As though to verify the prediction there appeared at the moment the figure of a solitary horseman silhouetted against the rising moon.

"You're a prophet of evil all right," said Adrian. "Now what?"

"Just keep on riding."

"But that chap is right in our way."

"Then ride him down. He'll be worse scared than we are."

The advice seemed good and the boys spurred forward.

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"If you think he means us any harm," Donald remarked, "I might take a shot at him."

"I don't believe he does."

Again Billie proved a good prophet as the rider rode directly toward them, waving his hat in his hand.

"It's Tony," exclaimed Pedro as the rider approached a little nearer.

Tony was one of Gen. Sanchez' servants.

"Why, so it is," laughed Donald. "I suppose he is out looking for us."

Which was exactly the case. The news of the fight had reached Pachuca along with the part the boys had played in saving the bullion, and Pedro's father had heard it along with the others.

Later, word had been brought that one of the boys was missing and the others had gone to look for him. When none of them returned after all these hours, Gen. Sanchez had organized a searching party, of which Tony proved to be the advance guard.

A few minutes later, several horsemen dashed up and the boys were given a rousing reception.

"The *Jefe politico* is waiting to greet you," Tony told the boys.

The jefe politico is the mayor.

Billie smiled broadly and once more rubbed his stomach.

"This begins to look encouraging," he remarked to Pedro. "I think I can taste the good things already."

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Half an hour later the boys reached the city and were given a cheer as they passed through the main street and up to Gen. Sanchez' home, which was located half a block from the plaza. And in another ten minutes Billie was facing the mayor over a plate of steaming soup, while a mozo stood at his back waiting to serve the leg of a twenty-five pound turkey. Raising his eyes from the table, he caught sight of what was coming and gave Donald, who sat next to him, a dig in the ribs with his elbow.

"How's this for a prophet of evil?" he asked.

Donald took a look at the great bird which was rapidly falling into pieces under Gen. Sanchez' skillful hand, and remarked with a wink:

"Great!"

CHAPTER VII.

THE INSULT TO THE FLAG.

A week later, or, to be more exact, on April 10, 1914, the Broncho Rider Boys and their friend Pedro were back in the City of Mexico. During the two weeks they had been at Pachuca, many changes had taken place and on the morning in question they had just finished their coffee in the breakfast room when Guadalupe, Pedro's sister, brought in the morning paper.

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"What's the news?" asked Adrian.

Guadalupe glanced at the paper and hid it behind her back without making any reply.

"Why, Sister!" exclaimed Pedro with all the dignity of his sixteen years. "How can you be so rude?"

"She's only joking," laughed Billie, who was always found on Guadalupe's side when any argument took place. "Come, tell us! What is it?"

Guadalupe shook her head.

"Oh, I can't," she replied in a pained voice.

"Why not?" from Billie.

"It says we are going to have war with the United States and I don't believe it."

"Of course you don't," replied Billie. "Neither does any one else."

"Let me see," said Pedro sternly.

Slowly the girl handed her brother the paper.

He opened it and read.

"A party of American marines was arrested in Tampico yesterday for landing on Mexican soil with arms in their hands. They were marched through the streets under a heavy guard and lodged in jail. After a parley with the American Admiral, Mayo, the commandant of the city finally released them upon the assurance of the Admiral that it should not occur again."

"Well, if it was only a mistake, that doesn't mean war," laughed Billie, but Donald's face took on a more serious look.

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"That isn't all," said Pedro.

"Well," from Billie, "let's have the rest of it."

"The American Admiral has now declared that the men did not land on Mexican soil with arms in their hands, but that they were in their boat at the pier when arrested. He claims that they were taken from under the American flag——"

"What?" almost shouted Billie, springing to his feet. "Taken from under the American flag? Well, I'll bet that will mean war—unless," he added after a brief pause, "Gen. Huerta apologizes."

"Why should he apologize?" asked Pedro.

"For insulting the American flag."

"That's what the American Admiral says," interrupted Guadalupe, "and he threatens to fire on the city."

"And I'll bet he'll do it," said Adrian.

"If he does we'll sink his ships," said Pedro.

"What with?" asked Billie sarcastically. "Why, Admiral Mayo could blow Tampico out of the water."

"If he does, the Mexicans will march on Washington," from Pedro.

"What?" from Donald. "March on Washington? Why, Huerta can't hardly keep Carranza out of the City of Mexico."

"But if your admiral fires on Tampico, Carranza will help Gen. Huerta," declared Pedro.

"Do you really think so?" asked Adrian.

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"I know it. We may have our little family troubles down here in Mexico, but if the United States should interfere, we'd all turn in and fight her."

Billie was about to reply when Gen. Sanchez entered the room.

"I see you have been reading the news," he said calmly.

"And discussing it too," said Donald.

"Which we had better not at present," replied the General. "You boys are our guests and as long as you are, you are our friends; but I am afraid there is serious trouble coming and I think it will be much better if you make arrangements at once to return to the United States. As you know, I am not a favorite with the present administration and I might not be able to protect you."

"We can ask the protection of the American Ambassador," said Donald.

Gen. Sanchez smiled kindly.

"The American Ambassador may be asked to leave."

The boys looked serious.

"Do you really think it is as bad as that?" asked Adrian.

"I fear so. Later dispatches from Tampico state that the American Admiral has demanded a salute of twenty-one guns to the American flag. I know Gen. Huerta well enough to know that he will never order the salute."

"Then what will happen?" asked Donald.

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"No one can say. I understand that the American government has placed the matter in the hands of Admiral Fletcher, the ranking officer, who is in charge of the Atlantic fleet off Vera Cruz."

"Do you think we should go at once?" queried Billie.

"Yes, I think it would be better. I will make such arrangements as I can for your transportation to Vera Cruz. In the meantime you had better go and register yourselves at the United States Embassy. I am never sure of Gen. Huerta."

Without further discussion the boys prepared to take Gen. Sanchez' advice, and, donning their hats, started for the embassy, leaving Pedro much chagrined and Guadalupe in tears.

"I can't see why there has to be war!" she declared. "Why can't men behave themselves?"

"What do girls know about war?" asked Pedro.

"They know it's terrible and takes their fathers and brothers, that's what they know, and they wish they didn't have to know that."

Pedro made no reply, but went to his room, where he selected from among his most cherished belongings a gift for each of his guests—three beautiful opals—and laid them upon their respective suit cases.

When the Broncho Rider Boys arrived at the embassy they found a large crowd of Americans already assembled. Word had been circulated that it would be wise for all of them to leave Mexico and those who could were going, while many men whose business detained them in Mexico were sending their families. All had come to the embassy for information and to register. [Pg 65]

As a result it was late in the afternoon before the boys returned to Gen. Sanchez' residence. But late as they were, the general had not yet come in. They went to their room and when they saw the gifts which Pedro had laid on each valise, they could not keep back the tears.

"Well, there's one thing," declared Billie as he drew the back of his hand across his eyes, "we don't have to fight Pedro, no matter what comes. I'm going to hunt him up and tell him so."

And he did.

It was some hours later when Gen. Sanchez returned and announced that it would be impossible for the boys to get transportation to Vera Cruz for two or three days, as the track had been torn up in the neighborhood of Cordoba, but that he had been promised that they would be given safe conduct as soon as the track was repaired.

It was three days later, therefore, before the boys were able to leave, during which time they remained in the house at Gen. Sanchez' request to avoid any unpleasantness, which might make trouble for him.

On the morning of the 13th the boys bade good-bye to their host and his family and were driven in an automobile to the station. Already there were more than enough persons to fill four trains, and the guards were permitting only those to board the cars who had passes signed by the Mexican provost marshal. [Pg 66]

Thanks to Gen. Sanchez, our boys had been provided with such passes, but they were not allowed to take their rifles or revolvers aboard the train. They had no more than found seats and made themselves comfortable than the conductor shouted "Vamanos," and the train pulled slowly out of the shed.

"Well," remarked Donald as they rolled slowly along, "this is a pretty tough ending to a friendly visit. I think I've seen about all I want of Mexico for some time to come."

"What do you suppose will happen?" asked Billie. "Do you think we'll really go to war with Mexico unless Gen. Huerta orders the salute?"

"I don't know," was Donald's cautious reply. "I hope not."

"And I hope we do!" exclaimed a somewhat florid gentleman who sat in the seat ahead and who had overheard the conversation. "I'd just like an opportunity to come down here with an army and wipe the whole nation off the earth."

Donald made no reply, but Adrian asked sympathetically: "Have they treated you badly, sir?"

"Have they treated me badly? Well, I should say so. They wouldn't let me out of my hotel for two days and now they have refused to carry my trunk and made me leave it with the express company. I guess they don't know who I am." [Pg 67]

"I'm sure they do not, sir."

"Well, I'll show them who I am as soon as I get to Vera Cruz and can see Admiral Fletcher. He'll know how to protect Americans!"

"I'm sure he will, sir."

"And when the first marine lands, I want to be right there with a rifle to help drive the Mexicans off the earth."

"It would be wise not to say too much," whispered Adrian. "I see that officer in the end of the car has his eye on you. He may speak English."

"I don't care who hears me," said the florid man angrily. "I mean it."

At the same moment a guard who had approached from the other end of the car laid his hand upon the angry man's shoulder.

"If the Señor is not satisfied," he said, "we shall be pleased to send him back to the City of Mexico."

"Oh, no-no-no," was the stammering reply. "I am very well satisfied. All I want is to get out of the

country."

"Let us hope there will be no trouble about that," was the polite response, and the florid man lapsed into silence.

Ordinarily it is a pleasant day's journey from the City of Mexico to the seaport city of Vera Cruz; or if one prefers he may make a night ride of it in times of peace. The train which left the City of Mexico that April morning made no such time. After a tiresome all-day ride with numerous aggravating stops, when darkness fell they were still on the plateau of Mexico, some miles west of Orizaba, running slowly for fear some stray bunch of Carranzistas or Zapatistas might have torn up a length or two of track.

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It was possibly an hour later that the engine gave a furious jerk, followed by a bump and another jerk, and then the train came to a dead stop.

In a minute everybody was on his feet asking everybody else what had happened. As no one knew, there was a general movement for the doors, as it was too dark to see much from the windows.

"Sit down, everybody," ordered the guard. "There is no danger, but we have stopped on a high trestle."

The passengers obeyed, realizing the danger of leaving the coaches. There was a general round of conversation, and then as the train did not start, people settled back in their seats and tried to sleep.

Some minutes later Billie gave Adrian a nudge with his elbow.

"Are you asleep?" he asked.

"No. Why?"

"I've just been looking out of the window. We're not on a trestle."

"No? Well, what of it?"

"Only that the guard was lying. What did he do it for?"

"I don't know. Because he was a Mexican, I guess. Go on to sleep."

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"That isn't the answer, although it's pretty good. They have some scheme. I wouldn't be surprised if they were going to keep us prisoners somewhere around here."

"Nonsense. Go on to sleep."

But Billie was not satisfied. He leaned over and tried to talk to Donald, but he was fast asleep.

"I think I'll go on a little scouting expedition," he muttered. "I need some exercise."

He arose, stretched himself and walked slowly toward the door, which stood wide open.

"I wonder where the guard is?" he thought. "It's mighty funny he'd go and leave the coach like this."

He stepped on to the coach ahead. The same condition existed.

Billie's curiosity got the best of him and he jumped out onto the ground. It was pitch dark, but he had not advanced more than twenty steps before he discovered groups of men seated upon the grass. A second glance convinced him they were armed.

He drew back and stood beside the coach, where he thought fast.

"There's one of two things," he soliloquized. "We are either prisoners or else we are being guarded against an expected attack. Whichever it is, this is no time for the Broncho Rider Boys to be asleep. I'll go and tell the others."

He started to climb onto the car, but a guard appeared on the platform and ordered him away at the point of his bayonet.

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"I'm a passenger," explained Billie.

"Go away!" was the reply, emphasized by a quick advance of the bayonet.

Seeing that it was no time to argue, Billie slid back into the darkness.

CHAPTER VIII.

TREACHERY FOILED.

Broncho Billie had been in too many unpleasant places to be at all worried over his predicament, but he was much concerned about the condition of the train and its passengers, practically all of

whom were Americans and a large majority of whom were women and children.

"It would be fierce," he mused, "to have them held here, or in a detention camp as prisoners; and it would be worse if we should be attacked by an overwhelming force of revolutionists. I've just got to know the truth."

He glanced up at the coach with its dimly lighted windows.

"I wish I could talk to old Don. He most always knows what to do. But how can I get at him?"

He sneaked out to where he could see the coach platform. The guard was still there, as well as the guard on the other car. [Pg 71]

"Worse and more of it," he exclaimed.

Then he examined the car, trying to determine at which window he had been seated. Several were open, and he determined to try and speak to some one.

"Our seats are not far from here," he thought as he stopped under the second one. "I'll try this."

He picked up a stone about as big as an egg and tossed it into the window. A howl from a child followed the act and Billie ducked under the car. He could hear the mother pacifying it, but evidently she, too, had been asleep and had not discovered the stone.

"I think I know just which child it is," said Billie with a grin, "and this next open window must be ours."

He picked up another stone and tossed it in to his second choice, this time with better results.

Donald had just aroused from a nap, and, missing Billie, was looking for him. Not seeing him in the car, he was about to look out of the window when the stone hit him on the chin.

"Ouch!" he exclaimed as he started back.

Billie heard the exclamation and gave the familiar whistle.

Donald was on the alert in an instant. Looking up and down the car to be sure he was not being watched, he stuck his head out of the window.

"What is it?" he asked. [Pg 72]

"Trouble," was Billie's laconic reply. "Come out."

"How can I? The guard is at the door."

"Jump out of the window."

"They might see me."

Billie thought fast.

"Let Ad stand between you and the door."

"Great," from Donald.

He aroused Adrian and told him the situation.

"You stay in the train," he said, "and we'll keep you posted as to what is going on outside. If there is any real danger we will give the alarm."

He picked up his overcoat and pretended to be fixing a pillow. Adrian did the same. Then, while the guard's back was turned, he dropped out of the window.

Billie was beside him when he rose to his feet.

"This way, Don," he whispered. "Let's get out into the dark and hold a council of war."

They glided out into darkness, but where they could keep their eyes on the engine.

"Now tell me about it," said Don.

Billie told him what he had discovered.

"It does look strange," Donald admitted. "Have you any plan?"

"I haven't an idea above an oyster," was the characteristic reply.

Donald scratched his ear reflectively.

"How would it do," he finally asked, "to sneak over by the soldiers and see if we can't pick up some scrap of conversation that may give us a clue as to what is going on?" [Pg 73]

"Fine. We must keep together, though. We might never find each other in the dark if we should become separated."

Silently they crawled toward the spot where Billie had seen the soldiers. When they did not hear any sign of them after several minutes' crawling they stopped to listen.

"There surely was a squad here a few minutes ago," declared Billie. "They must have moved."

They remained silently thoughtful for several minutes, but all was as silent as a graveyard.

"That's mighty funny," said Billie. "I know I was not mistaken. Let's go back by the train."

They turned for that purpose and could see a group of figures at the platform of each coach.

"That's the answer," exclaimed Billie. "They have surrounded the train. Now let's see what will happen."

They had not long to wait as an officer shortly boarded each car and a minute later there was a commotion among the passengers.

Drawing a little nearer, the boys could hear the officer in the car nearest them explaining that the passengers would be obliged to alight and change trains.

"The track has been torn up ahead of us," he said, "and we shall have to walk nearly a mile to where the train is that came up from Vera Cruz."

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This had been quite the customary thing in Mexico for some months and the passengers prepared to obey.

"I don't believe it is true," said Billie to Donald.

"We can soon find out," declared Donald. "Let's walk down the track a piece. We can easily keep ahead of the crowd."

Avoiding the glare of the locomotive's headlight, the boys hurried down the track and when far enough away from the train to feel secure, they took the middle of the track.

"This is far enough ahead," said Donald, "to keep out of sight and the track is all right so far. I don't believe it is torn up at all."

"Then what is up?"

"That is what I've been trying to decide for nearly an hour," replied Billie. "It looks as though they intended to make all the Americans prisoners."

"But what for?"

"Why, for hostages, to be sure. Don't you remember how Cæsar took a lot of the Helvetians for hostages?"

"By George!" from Donald. "I believe you are right. Do you suppose it is Huerta's orders?"

"I expect so. He hates Americans."

While the boys had been talking the passengers had been taken from the train and were now coming toward them.

"Let's keep just far enough ahead to see what will happen," said Donald. "We must get in touch with Adrian somehow."

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They started ahead, but it speedily developed that the others were not following. Instead they had been halted a short distance from the locomotive, back from the track, and surrounded by soldiers.

"There seems to be a hitch somewhere," Don finally remarked. "They don't seem to know just what they do want to do."

"Come on back and find out," said Billie. "It's up to us to do something."

Cautiously they crept back to where they could hear the conversation among the passengers and the questions they asked the guard. Some were laughing and more were expressing indignation. A few of the women were crying, but above all they could hear the voice of the florid-faced man telling what he would do as soon as he could get into touch with Admiral Fletcher.

"Which won't be very soon, unless I'm mistaken," laughed Donald.

Presently some one began to whistle a popular air, but in such a way that the boys recognized the well-known whistle of Adrian.

"Do you hear that?" asked Billie. "Ad wants to know what we are doing."

"He'll have to wait for the present," said Don, "but there go a couple of officers back to the train. Let's follow them."

The boys darted into the shadow of the coaches and crept back only a few steps behind what proved to be the captain in charge of the company and his second lieutenant.

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"If I only had my automatic, I'd soon settle this whole matter," declared Billie.

"You wouldn't hurt anybody, would you?"

"I'd capture the officer and make him take us to Vera Cruz."

"Of course," from Donald. "Why didn't I think of it before? Let's do it."

"But we have no weapons."

"Then we must get some."

"How?"

"Keep your eyes open. There must be some way."

The officers kept on their way until they reached the first Pullman, where they stopped for a minute.

"Are the orders in here?" asked the captain.

"No; the conductor has them. He wouldn't stop the train without I gave them to him."

"Carramba! Why didn't you tell me so before? Go and take them from him and bring them here at once."

"Bueno, Capitan! Will you wait here?"

"Yes, I'll go inside. Hurry."

The lieutenant turned and hurried back. The boys only saved themselves from being detected by throwing themselves flat on the ground.

For a moment the captain remained looking after his companion and then turned and entered the car.

"We must have that order," said Donald.

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"We must!" echoed Billie.

"Then we'll get it," they exclaimed as one.

So alike were the thoughts that passed through their minds that they did not even feel obliged to speak the plan aloud.

"Which one of us will stop him?" asked Donald.

"You'd better. I'm heavier and I can handle him easier."

They walked back some ten feet, where Donald stopped, while Billie went about ten feet farther and drew off into the darkness.

A couple of minutes later they heard the lieutenant coming. He passed Billie without seeing him.

Then Donald advanced and met him as by chance.

"Who comes there?" asked the lieutenant in a sharp tone, drawing his revolver.

"Why, hello, lieutenant," said Donald as he came close to him. "What's happened?"

The lieutenant eyed him suspiciously.

"Where did you come from?" he asked.

"From the rear sleeper. I woke up and found myself all alone."

"Humph!" grunted the lieutenant. "You must have been overlooked. Come with me."

He started to replace his revolver in its holster when a slight noise behind him caused him to turn his head. As he did so, Billie's fist caught him under the chin and he fell in a heap without making a sound.

"Good work!" muttered Donald as he picked up the revolver which the lieutenant had let fall. "Now to business."

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CHAPTER IX.

DONALD'S STRATEGY.

Lifting the unconscious man in their arms, they bore him into the darkness away from the train, where he was soon deprived of his coat, hat, and weapons. Then he was gagged and securely tied with his own sabretasche.

Donald, being nearest the lieutenant's size, donned his uniform, buckled on his sword, and with the order in his hand hastily entered the car, closely followed by Billie, with the ready revolver in his hand.

The captain had thrown aside his hat and was smoking a cigarette in one of the easy seats as the boys entered. He gave them only a hasty glance as he blew a cloud of smoke into the air, and the

next minute he was covered by Billie's weapon.

"Up with your hands!" was the stern order.

The captain hesitated, but a sharp prick from Donald's sword sent the hands into the air.

In another minute the captain was disarmed.

"Now," said Donald sternly, "we'll see what all this trouble is about."

He opened the telegram he held in his hand and read:

"American Admiral has given an ultimatum. Hold train and passengers until further orders.

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Maas."

"Who is Maas?" asked Donald sternly.

The captain shrugged his shoulders, but said nothing.

"You'll answer in just one minute, or you'll never have a chance to answer another question," said Donald, as he stood with drawn sword, while Billie covered the captain with his revolver.

"Would you murder an unarmed man?" asked the captain.

"I wouldn't consider it murder. Answer."

The look in Donald's eyes was not to be mistaken.

"Gen. Maas is in command of Vera Cruz," the captain said.

"Good. I think I see it all. If it is decided not to accede to the ultimatum, it is proposed to hold the train load as hostages."

The captain smiled.

"Now listen!" and Donald spoke very slowly so that every word might find lodgment. "You have one chance for your life. Can you guess what it is?"

The captain shook his head.

"To do just exactly as I bid. Just one little attempt to do differently, and you are a dead man."

The captain scowled, but made no reply.

"Put on your hat and come with me. Order the passengers back on to the train and give your engineer instructions to cover just as much of the distance between here and Vera Cruz by daylight as he knows how!"

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The captain shrugged his shoulders as he arose from his seat.

"I see you think it will be easy to escape. Just put any such idea out of your mind. There is no possible chance."

Donald turned to Billie.

"This is what must be done. We shall walk directly back to where the passengers are. The captain will give his order without any hesitation. Otherwise I shall shoot him through my pocket. You will keep right behind us. If I fire, you fire also. One of us will be sure to kill him."

Donald led the way from the car and Billie brought up the rear.

Through the dark they marched, each with a hand on the captain, so they might feel his slightest tremor.

Arriving at the engine the captain summoned the sergeant.

"Order the passengers to board the train," was the brief command.

The sergeant hastened to obey.

"Bueno!" said Donald, as the passengers rushed back.

Then under his breath to Billie: "Call Adrian."

Billie did so.

"Where are you?" Adrian called back.

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"Down near the engine."

A moment later Adrian appeared coming through the crowd of hurrying passengers.

"Where's Don?" he asked as soon as he caught sight of Billie.

"Not far. Stay here. We may need you."

Adrian's face showed some surprise, but he said nothing.

"Now, captain," said Don quietly, "your orders to the engineer," and under cover of the darkness he pushed the point of his revolver into the captain's side, while Billie touched him significantly in the back.

The captain gave the order as he had been instructed.

"Now for the conductor," ordered Donald.

The order was given, but the conductor refused to obey.

"I must have a written order," he said.

"Why?" asked Donald, in his rôle of lieutenant.

"To countermand the order of Gen. Maas."

"Captain," was Donald's quiet hint, "don't you think it would be well to place the conductor under arrest?" and again he poked his revolver into the captain's side.

The order for the conductor's arrest was quickly given.

"Now, then, vamose," called Adrian. Then to the engineer, "I will act as conductor."

The guards and extra soldiers who had been detailed for this special service, sprang aboard; the engineer pulled open the throttle and the train began to move. [Pg 82]

"Aren't you going, too?" asked Adrian.

"Yes," whispered Billie to Donald, "hurry aboard with your prisoner."

The captain was evidently of the same mind, for he started to board the already moving train.

"No you don't," exclaimed Donald, pulling him back. "You're going to stay here with us!"

"Do you mean it, Don?" asked Billie in surprise.

"Sure! What do you think he'd do to us as soon as it was light?"

By this time the train was under headway; a second later the last coach passed them and in another minute the tail lights were disappearing in the darkness.

"It looks to me," remarked Adrian with a long breath, "as though we were in the consommé."

"Perhaps," was Donald's laconic reply, "but those women and children will be safe in Vera Cruz under the guns of Admiral Fletcher's fleet by daylight, or I'm greatly mistaken."

"And what are we going to do with our friend the captain?" queried Billie.

"He'll have to accept our hospitality under the stars until morning and then we'll see."

In telling about his experiences later Billie said it was the longest and the shortest night he ever knew. It seemed a long time for daylight, but it seemed a short time for the train which was bearing his countrymen to safety. [Pg 83]

When day finally began to break, the first thing that became visible was the snow-tipped peak of Mt. Orizaba, against which the sun threw his brilliant rays long before he could be seen above the horizon. It was a beautiful sight and the boys voiced their admiration with many exclamations of delight. Then they turned their attention to the more serious thoughts for the day.

The first thing they did was to release the lieutenant from his unpleasant predicament and restore to him his uniform.

"We should like to return you your arms also," said Donald, "but your government took ours from us and I think we shall have to keep yours in their place."

Neither of the officers made any reply, but their dark looks boded no good for the boys.

"You might just as well look pleasant," laughed Billie. "All is fair in love and war."

"We'll make you sing a different song when we get you in Vera Cruz," said the captain.

"And when do you think that will be, Captain?" queried Adrian.

"As soon as the next train comes along."

"Oh, that's it, is it?" said Donald. "That being the case, I guess we will not wait for another train. By the way, how far is it to Vera Cruz?"

"About a hundred kilometers." [Pg 84]

"That's about eighty-four miles, isn't it, Ad?"

"Just about."

"And it's down hill pretty much all the way, isn't it?"

"I should say so by looking down the valley."

"A right nice little walk, Captain. Let's be going. We ought to make it easily in four days."

At this cordial invitation the captain lost his temper.

"Carramba!" he exclaimed. "Am I a boy to be made sport of? I will not go. If you wish me to go you will have to carry me," and he deliberately laid himself down on the ground.

In spite of themselves the boys were obliged to laugh.

"We carried the lieutenant last night, but we don't desire your company badly enough to carry you," laughed Billie. "If you don't want to go, I for one vote to leave you. We have to forage for something to eat and the fewer there are, the easier it will be. And speaking of eats, it seems to me I smell something cooking right now."

At Billie's words the others sniffed up their noses.

"It's a fact as sure as you're born," declared Donald.

"And I'm going to find out where the odor comes from," said Billie. "There must be a house around here somewhere."

Again he sniffed the air and smiled jubilantly.

"The wind's in the east," he laughed. "It must be somewhere in this direction. Come on, Captain." [Pg 85]

The captain refused to move, but Billie led the way, followed by the two boys. They had not gone many rods when through an opening in the trees they beheld a good-sized adobe house. Pushing hastily toward it, they soon reached a cleared space, and there, gathered about a bunch of some forty or fifty horses, were a dozen men, while through the open door of the house many more were to be seen seated at a table—eating.

"Come on!" exclaimed Billie. "I'm going to have something to eat; I don't care who they are."

"We might as well make the best of it," declared Donald. "We are discovered any way and the best thing we can do is to put on a bold front."

Without further words the three boys walked boldly toward the house.

CHAPTER X.

A TIMELY RESCUE.

The minute the boys' presence became known, there was a commotion in the house and in the clearing surrounding it. Those in the yard sprang toward their guns and those in the house jumped from the table.

"Don't move," called out Billie. "We are friends." [Pg 86]

But the men were not sure and at once surrounded the boys.

They appeared to be soldiers, but their uniforms were of a great variety and many hues. Only the officer in command had anything the appearance of a real soldier.

"Who are you?" he demanded as he came forward.

"Friends! Americanos!" replied Donald.

"Yes; and hungry ones," added Billie with a gesture that brought a smile to the officer's face.

"Where did you come from?" was the next inquiry.

Donald explained that they had been left by a train that had stopped nearby. He did not think it necessary to enlighten the officer as to the circumstances.

"If you don't believe us," broke in Billie, "you can ask the officers we left back there by the track."

Donald made a gesture of impatience, which Billie failed to understand, but which the officer was quick to interpret.

"Officers? Of which army?" he quickly asked.

"Gen. Huerta's."

"Carramba!" exclaimed the officer in command. "Go quick, corporal, and bring them to me."

Then to Billie: "If you are telling me the truth you have done me a great favor."

The boys looked surprised. [Pg 87]

"How is that?" asked Donald.

"Do you not know that we are of the army of Gen. Carranza?" was the interrogative reply.

"Why, no!" exclaimed the boys in unison.

"It is true," said the officer. "I am Captain Lopez. Now tell me, who are you?"

Briefly Donald told of their acquaintance with Gen. Sanchez and of their adventures of the night before, at which the captain laughed heartily.

"You are smart boys," he declared.

"And hungry ones," again added Billie.

"You must be. Here, Juan," calling a soldier to him. "Take these *muchachos* to the house and feed them. I'll have a look at these rebels."

"Rebels," said Adrian to Donald under his breath as they walked toward the house. "Now what do you think of that?"

"That's his viewpoint," replied Don. "He thinks of the men who overthrew President Madero as rebels."

By this time they were near enough the house for Billie to smell the aroma of the coffee and he quickened his pace.

"I'll talk politics after I've sampled the breakfast," he declared. "If the breakfast is good, I'll join the band."

It was nearly half an hour later that the boys stood before the captain. With a good breakfast under their belts they felt fit for anything that might offer.

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"I'm afraid you boys are in a bad fix," said Captain Lopez. "I suppose you want to get to Vera Cruz and on to some ship that will take you to the United States; but I don't know how you are going to make it."

"Why, can't we get another train somewhere down the line?" asked Adrian.

"There may not be any more trains for some time."

"How's that?"

"We are here to stop them."

"Does that mean you are going out to tear up the track?"

"Not right here, but a little nearer Vera Cruz. There is a much larger body of troops about five miles below."

Billie uttered a prolonged whistle.

"That does look bad, sure enough," he declared. Then, after a pause: "What's the matter with walking?"

"It's a long ways and the mountains are full of our men."

"Can't you give us a safe passage? You say we have done you a favor by turning these two officers over to you," suggested Donald, indicating with a nod of his head the captain and lieutenant of the train guard who were now held prisoners.

"I'll do the best I can," was the reply, "but you will have to remain with me to-day. We are on scout duty and shall not return to the main body until to-night."

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"That'll suit me all right," laughed Billie, "and if you don't mind I think I'll go into the house somewhere and take a nap."

"Bueno," laughed the captain. "You might as well all take a nap. If we have occasion to leave the neighborhood we will call you."

Ten minutes later the three were fast asleep on a pile of Mexican blankets in the best room in the house.

Three hours later they were awakened by a fusillade of shots.

They sprang to their feet and looked around. For just a moment they could not remember where they were. Then they recalled their situation and became on the alert.

"Trouble outside," was Don's laconic statement.

He and Billie drew the revolvers they had captured the night before.

"Put 'em up," advised Adrian. "We're not here to fight."

"We might have to," from Billie.

"Not at all. If one side wins, we are safe. If the other side wins, we are prisoners and the

attackers will be our rescuers."

"Great head, Ad," was Billie's comment. "But I'd like to know what is going on," as another fusillade was heard.

"Better stay where we are till the shooting stops," said Don.

It was good advice and the boys waited as quietly as they could.

A few minutes later there was a volley and a shout, followed by the sound of rushing feet. Then there was quiet as the shots were heard receding.

When none of their friends returned after a few minutes, the boys ventured to the door. There was no one in sight.

"I wonder where they have all gone?" ventured Billie.

"I expect that our friends have run away and some of Huerta's soldiers are chasing them."

"If they do, they will run into an ambush," said Adrian.

Which is exactly what happened.

"That won't do us any good," said Don. "Now that we are alone, I vote that we get back to the railroad track. We won't get lost if we follow that and a train may come along."

The advice seemed good and they started to go.

"Hold on," exclaimed Billie. "Let's see if we can't find some grub to take with us."

"Great head!" laughed Adrian.

"Great stomach, you mean," from Donald. "It never lets him forget."

The boys plundered through the house. The owners must have been scared away, for nothing had been disturbed. In the kitchen they found a big plate of *tortillas*, half a baked kid, and some wheat bread. This they appropriated.

"We might as well have a blanket apiece," said Donald. "It is only another case of a fair exchange. The Mexicans have our suit cases."

Each took a blanket and Adrian was so fortunate after searching all over the house as to find a shotgun and a belt full of loaded shells that went with it.

"If those shells were loaded with buckshot you'd be all right," said Billie. "They're the——"

His speech was interrupted by a cry that fairly made their blood run cold.

"What's that?" and the three stopped as though they had been paralysed.

Again came the cry, and with a single bound the boys were out in the open, each with his weapon ready for instant use.

They could see no one, but there was the sound of something crashing through the brush which hid the railroad from the house.

"Sounded like a wild cat," declared Donald.

"Or a coyote," said Billie.

"I'm sure it was a human voice," remarked Adrian. "Do you remember the Zuñis?" referring to another adventure told in the story of the "Broncho Rider Boys Along the Border."

Even as he spoke there emerged from the brush the figure of a woman carrying in her arms a small child. Winged by fear, she was bounding along like an antelope.

A moment later, and not two rods behind her, came forth a figure which the boys instantly recognized as a mountain lion.

How the woman had succeeded in escaping it even for a moment was a mystery.

In a second the three weapons spoke. The report was followed by a scream from the beast and a cry from the woman, both of whom fell lifeless to the earth—the beast dead and the woman in a swoon.

"Take care of the woman, you two," said Adrian. "I'll examine the beast."

No one stopped to question the order.

Billie picked up the child which the woman had let fall, while Donald stooped down and felt the woman's pulse. Then he darted into the house and was back in a minute with a bucket half filled with water. With it he bathed the woman's temples and poured a little down her throat.

In a couple of minutes she revived and looked around.

"Mi niña!" she gasped.

"She's asking for her child," said Donald.

Billie carried the little one over and stood it beside her.

With a glad cry she snatched it in her arms and burst into tears.

"She's all right," laughed Donald. "Now let's have a look at that animal."

They walked over to where Adrian was watching the inanimate carcass.

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"Where did we hit him?" asked Billie.

"I can see three places and one is big enough to throw a baseball through it."

"That's from the shotgun," said Donald. "It's what did the business. Must have been buckshot and we were so close it didn't have a chance to scatter."

"I'd sure like that hide," said Adrian.

"We'll be in luck if we save our own," remarked Billie. "Unless we can do something for the woman, we'd better be jogging along."

By this time the woman had risen to her feet and the boys could see that she was not a peon as they had supposed, but of the better class.

"Where could she have come from?" queried Donald under his breath.

"Suppose you ask her," laughed Adrian.

Donald did so. At first she was too dazed to answer, but after Donald spoke a few words quietly and in his very best Spanish, she was able to answer his questions.

"Is this your house?" he asked.

"No, Señor; my house is down the mountain."

"What are you doing here alone?"

She gave him a startled glance and then hugged the child closer to her breast.

"You need not fear us," were the reassuring words.

"The soldiers came," she said slowly. "They had already killed the others. They would have killed me."

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"The soldiers?"

"Yes. They were looking for my husband. They said he was hidden in the house; but he was not. He is with Gen. Carranza."

"When was this?"

"Yesterday. I have been in the mountains all night. There was a fight a few minutes ago and I saw them pass. Then I came here, when the awful beast sprang out," and again she drew the child to her.

"Are you hungry?"

"Si, señor!"

It was the child that answered.

In an instant Billie's hand was in his pack and he held out the *tortillas*, which both mother and child took and ate ravenously.

After their hunger had been appeased, they questioned the woman further, telling her they were going to Vera Cruz.

"If you will come with me down the mountain, you can hide in my house," she said.

"We don't want to hide," laughed Billie. "We want to get to Vera Cruz. However, we'll see you home, if you don't mind."

Without more words the woman led the way, Billie insisting upon carrying the little girl.

After a walk of more than two hours, the woman stopped in a little clearing from which a view of the mountainside for miles could be gained.

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"There is my house," she said, pointing to the roof of a really noble mansion constructed of stone. "But what is that flag I see on top of it?"

The boys took one good look at it and then they let out a wild yell.

"Hurrah!" they cried. "It's the Stars and Stripes."

"I don't know what it means away out here," said Donald, "but wherever it is it means something. Come on!" and he dashed down the mountainside, followed by the others.

CHAPTER XI.

FRIENDS IN DISTRESS.

Half an hour later the boys stopped beside a ruined wall in which was a still more ruined gate.

It was the home of Gen. Luiz Blanco, whose wife and child it was that the boys had saved from the mountain lion.

Above the house, on a lofty turret, waved the American flag—a fact which caused the boys to enter the gate and approach the house without hesitation.

But when they reached the great front door leading into the patio, they found it shut and barred.

Here they knocked loudly.

For some minutes there was no reply, despite repeated knocks, but finally a voice called out in English:

"Who's there?"

"American boys in trouble."

"What?" was the surprised reply. "Say it again, till I see if it is true."

"It's true all right, all right," said Billie. "If you don't believe it we'll sing the 'Star Spangled Banner,' or 'Hail Columbia'."

They could hear some one removing the bars and a moment later the gate swung open, and a huge, bewhiskered man in ragged garments and a Winchester rifle in his hand stood before them.

"Come in quick," he commanded, "and let's get this gate barred. There is no knowing when that band of robbers will be back."

"Robbers?" queried Billie, as he set the little girl on the ground and extended his hand to the man. "What robbers?"

"They call themselves soldiers," and the man seized Billie's hand and gave it a mighty grip, which made even Broncho Billie wince, "but what do we care for them? With four Americans we can defy a hundred of them." Then, as Donald and Adrian finished barring the gate: "It's certainly good for sore eyes to see such faces," and he grasped each boy in turn.

"Well, we're mighty glad to see you," replied Donald. "We expected to find the place deserted."

"How did you know anything about the place?"

"This lady told us it is her home."

"What?" from the man. "Do you mean to tell me this is the Señora Blanco?"

"Even so, Señor," replied the lady. "No one would recognize me in these rags and grief. Oh, Señor, had it not been for these brave Americans I should have been devoured by a lion."

"You don't tell me. But I'd know they were the real thing. Their faces show it. But come, let's go into the house. You'll excuse me, Señora, for taking possession of your castle."

"It is yours, Señor. Do with it as you will. But will you not do me the favor of your name?"

"I beg your pardon, Señora. I had forgotten. I am Ebenezer Black, who owns the ranch across the valley. My daughter and I were out on a hunt for some lost cattle when we were waylaid by this so-called company of soldiers. I drove them off but my daughter was wounded and I made for this place. Finding no one at home, I took possession."

"I am so glad, Señor. And where is your daughter now?"

"Sitting in a big armchair, nursing a wounded arm."

"Oh, let us hasten," cried the señora. "I may be of some assistance."

They hurried into the house and into the great library, now all in disorder and strewn with bits of cigars and cigarettes. In one of the big leather chairs sat a girl of some sixteen or seventeen, with her left arm in a sling, but in her right hand she held a glistening revolver. She was very slight, but dressed in a riding costume of unique design, and with a wealth of soft brown hair hanging just to her collar. With just a touch of pallor due to the wound, the boys thought her the most beautiful girl they had ever seen, not excepting Pedro's sister Guadalupe.

That the girl was surprised at the addition to the party goes without saying. She looked first at her father, then at the newcomers and then back to her father, as much as to ask: "Who are they?"

"This," said Mr. Black as the señora came forward, "is the lady of the house and her daughter. These are American boys, as you can see, although you haven't had a chance to know many

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American boys. I don't know their names, but names don't count. I'll vouch for them."

"We are very highly complimented," laughed Donald, "but I shall be pleased to introduce us. I am Donald Mackay. Now that you know me, I will introduce my friends, Adrian Sherwood, ranch owner and good fellow, and William Stonewall Jackson Winkle, better known as 'Broncho Billie.' We are known as the Broncho Rider Boys."

"Oh, Father," exclaimed the girl, "I've read about them. I have a book some one sent me from the United States telling about their adventures at the Keystone ranch."

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"You don't say so," from her father. "I didn't know they were such celebrities. Such being the case, young gentlemen, allow me to introduce my daughter, Josephine, commonly called Josie. Now then, how did you all come here?"

As briefly as possible Adrian related their adventures since they left the City of Mexico the previous morning; told about the information contained in the telegram from Gen. Maas, and wound up by saying: "We may be at war with Mexico right now for all we know."

"Well, now what do you think of that?" exclaimed Mr. Black. "I just knew I had a reason when I hoisted that flag. It's one Josie always carries in her saddle bags. It makes her feel safer, she says."

"And I hope she is safer," exclaimed Billie, "with it waving over her to-day, than she would be without it."

"At any rate she has more protection than she had a few hours ago," ventured the señora. "I shall never forget how I was protected."

"I'd feel a whole lot better," said Donald, "if I had some other weapon. A Colt does very well in a tight place; but I certainly miss my Marlin."

"We formerly had quite a supply of arms," was the explanation offered by the señora, "but when Gen. Blanco went to join Gen. Carranza he armed all his men and it took about everything we had. However, there are a few weapons left—unless," she added as an afterthought, "the Huerta soldiers have discovered their hiding place."

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She led the way to the cellar and pointed to a spot at one side.

"If you will brush away the dirt that covers the floor about there," she said, "you will find a large slab. This can be raised, and underneath there should still be several good rifles."

Donald and Billie, who had accompanied her, while Adrian remained up stairs with the others, quickly followed her instructions. The edges of the slab were exposed to view and after some effort the opening was revealed. In it were four rifles and an old-fashioned cannon. The rifles were not of the latest make, but two were magazine rifles and were a decided improvement over revolvers in case it came to defending the house.

"I suppose that old cannon might be mounted on the roof somehow and made effective," said Donald after he and Billie had inspected the other arms. Then to the señora: "Is there any ammunition?"

"There was powder in that wine cask," she replied, "but I don't know whether there is any left. The balls for the cannon are on the roof."

The boys examined the cask and found it contained quite a quantity of powder. Then they all returned to the library and made their report.

"Not a very heavy armament to withstand a siege, is it?" was Mr. Black's comment. "Half a dozen rifles with about a hundred cartridges, an old cannon that might explode any minute, and four revolvers. It won't do."

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"What else can we do?" asked Billie.

"Why, now that there are four of us, we'll cross the valley to my house. It is just as well located to withstand a siege as this and it is thoroughly armed and provisioned."

"Suppose we have to fight?"

"Then we'll fight."

"But you forget your daughter and the señora and her child."

"I didn't forget Josie," was the reply, "and, wounded as she is, she can take care of herself; but I don't know about the others. They would be a handicap. Have you anything better to offer?"

Billie scratched his head.

"Not for the moment."

"Well, I have," exclaimed Adrian.

"I thought it was about time Ad woke up," laughed Donald. "Let's have it."

"Captain Lopez told us that there was a large body of Carranza's troops down the railroad a short distance. If he meant by a short distance six or eight miles they can not be more than a couple of

miles from where we now are. I feel sure that the skirmish we passed through has proved disastrous to the Huerta forces and I am willing to go out and find Captain Lopez and bring relief."

"And I'll go with you," said Billie.

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"I can do just as well alone. If I am not captured by the other side I shall make it easily, and," he added, "I am sure I shall not be captured, for I can lick any squad of peons that I'm likely to meet."

"You are a brave boy," said Josie, a bit of praise which brought the color to Adrian's cheeks and was an added incentive for bravery.

"But why shouldn't I go?" insisted Billie.

"You may be needed here. This house is a marked place and if a small band of the Huerta forces has escaped, this will be one of the places where they will rally."

"Your friend is right," agreed Mr. Black. "I admire the pluck of all of you, but his plan is best. The sooner he goes the better and we will make the house as impregnable as we can. Let us hope he is successful."

"You can bet on me," was Adrian's reply as he shouldered his rifle, looked to the fastening of his belt, and descended to the gate, where Mr. Black let him out.

After Adrian had gone the others inspected the house and its approaches for the purpose of determining where they might mount the cannon. They finally decided upon a spot in an angle of the roof, where a chimney offered some protection and from which it commanded the main approach to the house.

"I'm not sure we will be able to get the cannon up there," laughed Billie as they passed through the library on their way to the cellar, "but we'll do the best we can."

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"Don't worry," was Josie's reply. "You don't know how strong Dad is."

The boys thought they could guess, but when they saw Mr. Black pick up the cannon as though it had been a log of cord wood and carry it upstairs they concluded that Josie was right.

"When I was a young man," was Mr. Black's only comment, "I was considered the strongest man in our county. I reckon if it came to a pinch I'd be a pretty hard man to handle even yet."

The boys had no doubt of it.

By the time the cannon was mounted and loaded the sun was nearing the top of the mountains behind them and a few minutes later it sank from sight.

"It won't be long now until we shall have to depend upon our ears instead of our eyes for our protection," said Donald. "Where is the best place to watch?"

"I'll tell you what I think," said Billie. "Let one watch from the roof and the other down by the gate. The one on the roof can hear noises from a distance. The one by the gate can hear any one who may be sneaking around."

"I'll watch on the roof," said the señora. "I know the chirp of every bird that belongs here. I shall know in a minute if anything happens that is unusual."

"And I'll watch by the gate," declared Donald.

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"Only till midnight," said Billie, "when I'll relieve you."

"And I'll relieve the señora," said Josie.

"Where do I come in?" queried Mr. Black.

"You are the general, Dad. You can be everywhere."

Sentry duty is always nerve-racking business. If you have ever been obliged to sit alone in the dark and watch with your ears, you will understand this and you will understand how Donald felt sitting alone by the barred gate in the dark, 3,000 miles from home and in the midst of a war-stricken country.

Even the north star looked unfamiliar, so close was it to the northern horizon. Once in a while he fancied he could hear the señora weeping, but for at least three hours this was all he heard.

Then he heard a distinct "S-s-s-s," which was the signal agreed upon between him and the señora if she heard anything unusual.

In an instant he was on the alert. Yes, he was sure he heard footsteps near the gate, without. Then there were some minutes of silence, then the hiss of a fuse and a moment later an explosion which blew the gate from its hinges.

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CHAPTER XII.

A NIGHT ATTACK.

Realizing in an instant that the hiss of the fuse, like the rattle of the snake, betokened danger, Donald drew hastily back into the patio in time to be out of reach of the explosion which splintered the gate and tore it from its hinges.

Then, with finger on trigger, he awaited the coming of the foe.

It was a tense moment and the boy's heart beat fast. He had been in many trying situations, but never in one where the safety of so many others seemed to depend upon him.

He heard the sound of oncoming feet and intuitively threw himself upon the ground behind a little stone paling which surrounded a dismantled fountain.

The act undoubtedly saved his life, for an instant later there was a scattering volley and he could hear the bullets hit against the stone wall of the house behind him.

In an instant he pressed the trigger and a yell which followed gave evidence that the bullet found a mark.

He fired again, but evidently without effect, and a minute later a light at one side of the patio told him that the enemy, or a part of them at least, were inside the gate.

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As the light flared up Donald fired again, but again without avail; but a moment later the cannon on the roof spoke.

"So," he thought, "Billie and Mr. Black are at last awake."

At the report of the cannon the light went out and there was the rush of scurrying feet, followed by a shout.

The shout indicated that those within the patio had withdrawn to the other side of the gate.

Feeling sure that the patio was now free of the enemy for a time at least, Donald retreated in the dark to the house and was soon inside. At the first landing he encountered Josie, sitting on a step with a ready revolver. He was able to see her by the dim light of an oil lamp which hung from the ceiling.

"Where are the others?" he asked.

"On the roof. They are trying to locate the enemy."

Donald ascended to the roof.

"I have a plan," he said, "which will enable us to get in another shot. Load with shrapnel and I will see if I can't make some sort of a light outside the gate. Be ready on the instant."

He ran downstairs and again crept out into the dark patio. He had noticed in the afternoon that there were several bundles of straw in the stable.

Taking one of these under his arm, he approached the angle in the wall near the outer gate. He lighted a match and as the flame caught the straw he flung the bundle over the wall, at the same time darting inside the stable.

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He had hardly found a safe position when the cannon spoke again and evidently with telling effect.

But before those inside the walls had time to think, the enemy rushed in, determined to capture the place.

In the dark they rushed to the house, but once under the gallery which extended all around the inside of the patio, they produced a light which enabled them to find the doors.

The light also enabled Donald to see those at the door and he fired from the stable.

For a moment the fire in the rear disconcerted the enemy and several fled, but others took possession of the doorway and forced their way in.

The first one who entered fell by a bullet from Josie's revolver; but realizing her weakness she jumped and fled to the floor above, where she met her father coming down.

"They have gained possession of the house," Mr. Black told Billie as he and the señora also descended from the roof. "We must now guard the stairway. We should be able to hold it indefinitely."

This prediction seemed correct, as the first four or five men who attempted to reach the second story never got more than their heads above the floor.

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After several trials of this sort, they withdrew and held a council of war. The result was that a few minutes later a voice called out from below:

"If you will surrender, your lives will be spared."

In reply Mr. Black shouted: "If you do not withdraw and leave us in peace you will meet a fearful punishment."

His reply was greeted with jeers.

"I wonder how many of them there are?" queried Billie.

"Quite a bunch from the sound." Then, a moment later, "They seem to be going out."

"Maybe they think we will come down," said Josie.

"But we must not," exclaimed the señora. "They would kill us. Surely our friend must bring us aid soon."

"Let us hope so," was Mr. Black's reply.

And hope was the best they could do.

There was no further attack, although they could hear the sound of voices in the patio below.

After a long period of quiet Mr. Black ventured the assertion that they were waiting for daylight, and his surmise proved correct.

No attempt was made to force an entrance until the first faint light of day began to appear. Then there was renewed activity below and a few minutes later the sound of a single shot.

"I wonder what that was," exclaimed Billie.

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No one could answer, but had Billie been where he could see, he would have known that it was Donald who fired.

As the light came, Donald, peering through a crack in the stable, had seen a man climbing up the side of the house toward the roof. Without a moment's hesitation he fired and the man dropped, shot through the right hand.

But the shot was Donald's undoing. The flash of his gun was detected and half a dozen men rushed his hiding place and took him prisoner.

He was at once taken before the captain of the band and questioned as to the number of defenders and as to the whereabouts of Gen. Blanco.

To all the questions Donald gave an evasive answer.

"If you will tell me where Gen. Blanco is," said the captain, "I will give you your freedom."

"That's easy," was Donald's reply. "He is with Gen. Carranza."

"I don't believe it."

"Well, I can't help that, nor does what you believe make any difference. It is the truth and what you may believe has nothing whatever to do with it."

The captain scowled.

"Who is it then, that is defending the house?"

"Americans. You had better let us go, or it will be the worse for you. We had a safe conduct from Gen. Huerta, but we were betrayed."

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"If I had my way," said the captain, "I'd shoot every American in the whole of Mexico."

"I don't see why," from Donald. "We have nothing against you."

"Take him away," ordered the captain, "and see that he does not escape. Now let us capture the others."

There was a rush for the house as Donald was led back to the stable.

Billie and Mr. Black heard them coming.

"Go to the roof," commanded Mr. Black, speaking to the two females, "and keep yourselves and the little girl out of sight. We will hold them back here as long as we can and then we will also come to the roof."

The command had hardly been obeyed than the Mexicans began to crowd up the stairs. They were met with shot after shot, but at last all the weapons were empty.

"Run for the roof," said Mr. Black as he arose to his feet and with his heavy boot kicked a head which was just coming up the stairs.

Billie obeyed and a minute later the fugitives had gathered upon the last place of safety left.

"If we only had some ammunition," moaned Billie. "Can't we do something?"

Then, as in answer to his own query, he picked up a twelve-pound cannon ball that lay on the roof and, raising it above his head with both hands, hurled it through the opening upon those below.

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This unexpected attack caused the besiegers to draw back, but only for a moment. Then they came on again. In his desperation, Mr. Black, with almost superhuman strength, picked up the cannon itself, just as Billie had picked up the ball, and hurled it down the stairs.

Half a dozen men fell beneath its weight, while the others, frightened at such an exhibition of strength, fell back in dismay.

A shout from the captain urged them forward, but ere they could gather their courage for another rush there came the sound of a volley in the patio below and a minute later Adrian rushed up the stairs, followed by Captain Lopez and a squad of his soldiers.

Taken in the rear and entirely by surprise, the Huerta forces threw down their arms and cried for mercy, and in less than five minutes after the arrival of Captain Lopez and his men, the entire force, or as many as remained, were prisoners.

CHAPTER XIII.

A NARROW ESCAPE.

Two days later the three boys sat on the verandah of Mr. Black's commodious house awaiting the call to breakfast. Under escort of Captain Lopez' men they had crossed the valley between Mr. Black's and Gen. Blanco's the day after the night attack and had spent the time since in getting a much needed rest.

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"It's less than four days since we left the City of Mexico," remarked Donald, "but it seems like a month. I wonder how matters stand at Vera Cruz?"

"From that telegram from Gen. Maas, that we took from the lieutenant, Admiral Fletcher may have taken the city," said Billie.

"I hope not," from Adrian.

"Why?" asked both the others.

"Cause I'd like to be there when it happens."

"Yes, so would I," echoed Billie.

"If he has taken it," ventured Donald, "we may have difficulty getting through the Mexican lines."

"Well, the best thing we can do," asserted Adrian, "is to get somewhere and find out what is going on just as soon as we can."

The call to breakfast interrupted their conversation, but as soon as they were seated at the table, they broached the matter to Mr. Black.

"I expect you are right," he said, "but I'd like to have you stay with me a while. It's mighty lonesome here for Josie and me."

"If we are at war with the Mexicans," remarked Billie, "this will be an unhealthy place for an American, I imagine. I should think you would want to take your daughter away from here."

"Oh, Josie and I are not afraid, are we, Josie?"

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"No indeed, Dad. We are a match for a regiment of Mexicans when we are on our own ground."

But in spite of the assertion made by Mr. Black he admitted to the boys after breakfast when Josie was not present that he wished his daughter was safe in Vera Cruz.

"Why don't you go with us?" asked Adrian. "We should be pleased to act as an escort."

"Yes," echoed Billie. "We'll see you through."

"I'll tell you what I had thought of doing," said Mr. Black. "It's only a good day's ride a-horseback to Moreno. We have many friends there with whom I could leave her. If you boys would act as an escort that far you would be no farther from Vera Cruz than you are now and I believe you would have a better chance in reaching the port over the Tierra Blanca division than on the main line."

"Whether we would or not," replied Adrian, "we should be glad to act as your escort."

"There is another thing in favor of that route," continued Mr. Black. "The farther we keep from the main line of railroad, the less likely we are to fall in with the Huerta forces. The southern territory as far as Santa Lucrecia is practically in the hands of Carranza."

"From what you say," was Donald's comment, "it is greatly to our advantage to do as you wish. Let's consider the matter settled and start at once."

"It's too late in the day to start now," was Mr. Black's reply. "We shall wait until to-morrow morning and be on our way by daylight. I don't want to be riding through the mountains after dark. There are wild animals that are worse than the soldiers."

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"As the Señora Blanco can testify," laughed Billie. "Every time I think of what a close shave she had, it gives me a chill."

That afternoon Mr. Black brought out half a dozen horses for the inspection of his guests.

"A day's ride on a strange horse isn't always an easy task," he explained, "and I thought you might amuse yourself trying these. You can each pick out the one that suits him best."

It was a task which suited the boys better than any they had undertaken in days, and as they had not only Mr. Black, but Josie and the General's wife for spectators, they were more than pleased to show their dexterity after true cowboy fashion.

The remainder of the afternoon was therefore spent in riding, throwing the lariat and in shooting, much to the gratification of Mr. Black, who declared he had never seen a better exhibition of its kind.

As a result of their experience, the boys picked out three medium-sized horses, which Mr. Black emphatically stated showed their good judgment of horse flesh, as completely as their riding had proved their horsemanship.

They were all in the saddle early the following morning, Josie's wound having healed sufficiently to permit her to ride without danger.

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Early morning in the tropics is the pleasantest time of the day, and although the road from Mr. Black's hacienda to Moreno would take them from an altitude of over four thousand feet down to about two thousand feet above sea level, they would be sufficiently up in the mountains to make riding fairly comfortable.

The route chosen took the little party first to the headquarters of the Carranza force operating in that section. They were warmly greeted by General Dorantes, the commanding officer, who furnished them with a guard of four men and passes through the lines, "if," he added as he bade them good luck, "you should find it necessary to pass our lines. If my reports are correct, we are in possession of all the territory to the south."

For hours the cavalcade rode on without incident, stopping only long enough to partake of a mid-day meal at the hacienda of Don Alvaro Flores, a friend of Mr. Black's. Late in the afternoon, however, when about six miles from their destination, there came to their ears the sound of heavy firing—of field pieces mingled with the occasional roll of a machine gun.

They stopped and listened intently.

"Which direction do you make the firing to be?" asked Mr. Black of the corporal in command of the escort.

"In the direction of Tierra Blanca, sir. It sounds as though our forces might have been attacked."

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"How will that affect our journey?"

"Hard to tell, sir. If we win, as we shall, the enemy may fall back toward Santa Lucrecia, or they may retreat toward Moreno. If you will take my advice, you will halt here until the action is over."

The advice seemed most excellent and the cavalcade came to a halt and the riders dismounted to give themselves a much-needed rest.

The firing lasted something like twenty minutes, then suddenly ceased, with the exception of an occasional "Boom!"

"It sounds as though we had beaten them off," said the corporal.

"Is there any way that we can tell in which direction they have retreated?"

"Only by a reconnoiter."

"Which is our long suit," declared Billie. "You just stay here with the guard, Mr. Black, and we three will soon have a report."

Looking to their arms, with which they had been well supplied by their host before leaving the hacienda, the boys rode forward toward an elevation something like a mile distant. From this they hoped to get a view of the country.

There was a fairly level road and they dashed along at a good rate despite their long ride. The horses were as hard as iron and the boys did not know the meaning of the word tired.

Reaching the top of the hill, they found a space, from which they could see clear across the valley through which ran the railroad from Santa Lucrecia to Vera Cruz. To the right, some miles away, they could see a good-sized little city which their common sense told them must be Tierra Blanca. To the left, but nearer, was the smaller town of Moreno, for which they were headed.

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Between the two towns, and coming directly toward them, was a band of galloping horsemen, probably one hundred or more in number.

"Great Scott!" was Billie's ejaculation as he caught sight of the horsemen, "they're coming right at us."

"I believe you are right," from Donald. "They seem to be on this very road."

"What would you take them to be?" was Billie's next question.

"Give it up," replied Donald.

"I'll bet I can make a good guess," said Adrian. "They are a flying column of Huerta cavalry, sent out to test the Carranza lines. They have paid their respects to Tierra Blanca and now they are headed for Cordoba."

"They'll never get there," said Billie. "They'll run into General Dorante's men."

"But if it's a surprise, they'll cut their way through."

"It's up to us to see that it is not a surprise!" cried Donald. "Come on!" and he turned and dashed back the road they had come. [Pg 118]

In less than five minutes they were where they had left their companions. In another two minutes they had told their story and in another minute the corporal and his men were on their way back toward General Dorante's headquarters.

"It's only a question of whose horses are the best," said Mr. Black. "And now let us to cover."

Leaving the highway, the Americans turned sharply to the left and dashed for the shelter of a piece of woodland something like a half a mile away. Pell-mell they went over rocks and shrubs, regardless of themselves or their horses, and succeeded in reaching the friendly cover just about three minutes before the cavalry came into sight over the hill.

"We're all right now," said Mr. Black, "if the troopers will stick to the road, but if they should take it into their heads to scatter, we might have trouble."

With eager eyes the boys watched the oncoming horsemen, prepared to flee for their lives if they should be discovered, as they realized how useless would be any resistance.

Nearer and nearer they came until the leaders were at the very spot they had just left, and then with a rush they passed by, turning neither to the right nor to the left.

Every one in the party heaved a deep sigh of relief. [Pg 119]

"It's a wonder some of them didn't stop," said Billie.

"Oh, I don't know," laughed Adrian. "Look yonder," and he pointed to the brow of the hill, where another, but much smaller body of horsemen had appeared. "They evidently didn't intend to have their mission interfered with by fighting a rear-guard skirmish."

"I think the best thing we can do," said Mr. Black, "is to surrender ourselves to the pursuers. They are evidently Carranzistas and our passes will protect us."

Breaking off a piece of bamboo, Mr. Black tied a handkerchief to it and raising it above his head the little party rode out of the woods. They were sighted at once and a party of horsemen dashed toward them, and surrounded them.

It was as they had expected and Gen. Dorantes' passes were immediately recognized by the officer in command. He was much pleased at the information given him concerning the corporal and thanked the boys in the name of Gen. Carranza for their good offices. He furthermore detached an escort of a dozen men to see that they reached Moreno in safety and commended them to the care of the jefe politico, with the verbal instruction that the boys be allowed to proceed on their way to Vera Cruz at their will.

CHAPTER XIV.

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APRIL TWENTY-ONE.

"Boys," said Mr. Black the following morning as they were preparing to pay a visit to the jefe politico, "I want you to do me a favor."

The boys looked at him in surprise.

"Well, what is it?" asked Donald, when Mr. Black did not immediately continue.

"I want you to accept, as a mark of my appreciation of your bravery and good services, the horses upon which you are mounted and the accoutrements."

The look of surprise on the faces of the boys deepened.

"I am sure, sir," replied Donald, speaking for the others, "we should be pleased to accept them if we were expecting to remain in the country. We hope, however, to leave Vera Cruz in a very few days."

"Boys," and Mr. Black's face was most serious, "there is no knowing when you will reach Vera

Cruz; much less leave it."

"What do you mean?" from Billie.

"I had a long talk with my friend, Don Ramon, last night after you were in bed and he tells me that the railroad between here and Vera Cruz is in the hands of Gen. Maas, the other side of Guayabo, and there is almost no chance of your being allowed to pass through the lines."

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"Why not?" from Adrian.

"Well, you see, since we have heard anything, relations between the two countries have become more and more strained and the United States has practically declared a blockade on Vera Cruz. The entire Atlantic fleet is assembled outside and there is liable to be a clash at any time."

"Then we'll accept the horses, Mr. Black," spoke up Donald, "and we'll ride to Vera Cruz. It can't be more than fifty miles."

"Forty-six by rail," said Mr. Black. "I kind of thought you might like to try and make it, is why I want to give you the horses," and the speaker smiled knowingly.

"The sooner we start the better, I expect," said Adrian.

"Yes; after you pay your respects to the mayor."

The foregoing conversation explains how it happened that on the morning of April 21, 1914, the Broncho Rider Boys looked down from a little hill, the top of which was covered by tropical foliage, upon the harbor of Vera Cruz, with the American fleet in the offing.

By a circuitous route and by two nights of riding, hiding in the day, the boys had reached this spot about an hour after sunrise.

"Whew!" was Billie's exclamation as he looked out across the harbor at the men-of-war flying the American flag. "There's a bunch of them, isn't there?"

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"Sure is," from Adrian, "and they look peaceable, too."

"You never can tell by the looks of a toad how far it will jump," laughed Donald. "But peaceable or warlike, I'd like mighty well to be on board one of them."

"Here, too," from Billie. "I wonder how we're going to make it."

"How would it do for one of us to try and get into town and find the American consul?" queried Adrian.

"Fine," from Donald, "if he succeeded; but bad if he did not."

"Then what had we better do?"

"Give it up. Suppose we wait here a while and something may turn up."

"I'd like to know what can turn up?" asked Billie.

"I don't know; but I was thinking that one of the ships might happen to send a boat ashore for something. If we saw it coming, we could ride quickly into town."

Adrian laughed. "I reckon it would be just as hard to get through the Mexican lines then as now. No! I'm going out to reconnoiter."

It was an hour later when he returned.

"I've found a way," he said as he threw himself on the ground and fanned himself vigorously with his hat. "It's down by the water works. There are several Americans down there."

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"Good," said Billie. "Let's go. I'm getting mighty hungry."

"Now don't be in a rush," cautioned Adrian. "There's a picket between here and there. We'll have to ride easy. You put the saddles on the horses. I'm pretty well tired. I want to tell you it's hot."

Billie was busy with the horses when Don suddenly pointed out toward the American men-of-war.

"Look!" he exclaimed. "There's something doing."

And sure enough there was.

Out from behind two of the largest vessels there suddenly darted a number of launches loaded with blue-jackets and marines.

In another instant they had headed for the shore, while out behind them trailed the American flag.

The boys sprang to their feet and watched the approaching boats with the utmost interest.

"There must be a thousand of them!" exclaimed Billie.

"More than that," said Donald, as his eyes ran over the oncoming boats. "There's nearer fifteen hundred."

"And look there," cried Adrian. "See those two smaller ships moving in toward shore."

"What do you suppose they are going to do?" asked Billie, all in a tremor of excitement.

"Looks to me," replied Donald, "like they were going to capture the town."

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"Why, that's war!" from Adrian.

"Well, isn't that what we've been expecting? I wish I knew what it all means."

As some of the readers may not know what was the cause of the action it may be explained that a German steamship had arrived the night before loaded with arms for Huerta's army. Admiral Fletcher had no right to seize the German ship, so he determined to seize the port of Vera Cruz. Then if the arms were landed they would be in the hands of the Americans.

"Well," declared Adrian, "whatever else it means, it means business."

"Do you suppose the Mexicans will try to prevent the landing?" asked Billie.

"We'll know in a minute, for they are most ashore," said Donald.

Donald was right and in another minute a shot rang out followed by a rattle of musketry.

"Flash! Flash! Bang! Bang!" spoke the howitzers in the foremost of the launches.

Boom! Boom! Boom! came the sound of three guns from the ship nearest the city, which proved to be the *Prairie*.

The crash of the six-inch shells as they struck in the city could be heard above the rattle of the rifle fire which had now become continuous.

"It's a sure enough battle," cried Billie. "Come on! Let's go down!" and he flung himself onto his horse.

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"What would you do?" cried Donald, seizing Billie's horse by the bridle. "You'd be killed by the fire from our own guns. This is the best place we could be in while the firing is going on. As soon as our men have driven the Mexicans out of town, then we can go in."

"But I want to take a hand in the fun," said Billie.

"It's no fun, as you'll find after it's all over. No knowing how many of our boys are being lost, to say nothing of the Mexicans."

"Look!" cried Adrian, who had not taken his eyes from the scene in the harbor. "There are a couple of other ships going into action."

Billie turned at sound of Adrian's words. Sure enough, there came flashes from more guns, as the *Chester* and *San Francisco* moved up into striking distance, although at that time the boys did not know the vessels' names.

"What show will the Mexicans have against those guns!" exclaimed Donald. "They'll be driven out of town in short order."

Once more Donald was right and after some minutes of firing, the boys realized that the rifle fire was becoming less.

"If they retreat, which way do you suppose they will go?" queried Adrian.

"I was just thinking about that," was Donald's reply. "What do you think, Billie?"

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"I should think along the main line of railroad."

"And I imagine they'll retreat in every direction," said Adrian.

"In which case," advised Donald, "we'd better be prepared to make a dash through."

"Look here," from Billie. "Can't you see that the shots are all aimed at one particular place? I'm sure if we come around by the south, we can get in behind our men some way. It's a good deal better chance than to stay here to be shot down by the retreating Mexicans."

The others were forced to admit the wisdom of Billie's advice and they proceeded to follow it.

Mounting their horses, they rapidly retraced their steps for a couple of hundred yards and then headed for the harbor.

They had not gone more than half a mile when they caught a glimpse of foot soldiers forming in line on what appeared to be a parade ground.

"This is no place for us," exclaimed Donald. "Back to the woods."

"I'm afraid it's too late," from Adrian.

"I hate to run for it," was Billie's comment, "but it's the best we can do. I have no mind to fall into Mexican hands right now."

He put spurs to his horse and dashed through a little clump of trees which grew by the way, closely followed by the other two.

They seemed to have done just the right thing and were congratulating themselves upon their lucky escape, when they heard horses coming from the other way.

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Billie drew his horse up with a sudden turn.

"It looks as though we'd have to fight for it, boys! If we do let's give a good account of ourselves."

They drew their Winchesters for instant use.

The sound of hoofbeats drew nearer and then there burst into sight from around a turn in the road a sight which caused the boys nearly to fall from their horses with laughter.

Riding on a mule and followed by several peons on burros was the florid-faced gentleman whom they had met on the train the day they left the City of Mexico. He was bare-headed and his coat tails streamed out in the breeze. He had no saddle and was clinging onto the mule by grasping him around the neck.

"Help! Help!" he cried as he caught sight of the boys. "I surrender. I surrender."

Seeing the boys' horses directly in his path, the mule came to a sudden stop, with both feet stuck out before him. The result was that the florid-faced gentleman, who wished to head a company of marines to drive the Mexicans off the earth, shot forward over the mule's head and landed in a cactus bush.

Now a cactus is not a pleasant thing to sit upon, even when the greatest care is used; but to be shot into it as from a catapult is more than any one can bear.

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With a yell that might have been heard half a mile, had it not been for the noise of the guns, the man scrambled to his feet and darted away down the hill, while the peons stopped at the unexpected sight of the boys.

"Americanos!" they cried, and, tumbling off their burros, fell on their knees in abject terror, as though expecting that their end had come.

CHAPTER XV.

THE INSULT AVENGED.

Perceiving that the advantage was on their side, the boys did not hesitate to profit by it.

"Do as we bid," ordered Donald sternly, "and your lives will be saved. Disobey and we will not answer for the consequences."

The kneeling peons uttered never a word, but raised their eyes with a look of surprise.

"Get up," was the next command.

The peons obeyed.

"Now conduct us to the water front by a route where there are no Mexican soldiers."

"Do you think you can trust them?" asked Billie.

"At any sign of treachery, our first shot will be for them." Then to the peons: "Now march."

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Without a word the peons, five in number, started back over the route by which they had come but a minute before.

"Where did the other American come from?" asked Billie of the peon nearest him as they rode along.

"Quien sabe, señor," was the hesitating response. "We saw him riding by and we followed him."

"That's the way with loud talkers," remarked Adrian. "When the test comes they usually weaken."

The firing, which had somewhat subsided for a few minutes, suddenly began again with renewed vigor, especially on the part of the ships.

"Our boys are getting ready for another advance," said Billie, and his manner became greatly excited. "Let's get there in time to take part."

"I'm willing," declared Adrian. "Come on!"

The two boys dug their spurs into their horses and dashed forward, upsetting a couple of the peons in their flight.

"Hold on!" called out Donald. "You'll get into trouble."

Billie and Adrian paid no attention to his cry, whereupon he also put spurs to his horse, leaving the peons gaping with astonishment in the middle of the road.

And now the boys came into sight of the water front where the fighting was going on. It was at

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the instant that the order had been given to clear the space around the custom house, and the boys saw the marines advance on the double quick.

The Mexicans gave way, but volley after volley was poured down upon the advancing Americans from the roofs of houses and from nearby church towers.

There were several shots in rapid succession from the *Chester*, which had drawn in more closely, every one of which struck a tower where a large force of Mexicans had gathered.

The tower toppled and fell, carrying many with it.

"Hurrah!" cried Billie. "Give it to them!" and, firing his rifle as he went, he rode right down into the main street.

"He'll be killed by our own men!" cried Donald.

But he was not. Instead he dashed into the open space in front of the custom house, just as the marines swept by, his hat off and his rifle cracking as fast as he could fire.

Seeing that the danger from the marines was past, Donald and Adrian fell in behind Billie, just as an officer came around the corner at the head of another company.

Espying the boys, he halted his command.

"What are you doing here?" he demanded.

"We just came to town," replied Billie, "and we're trying to help avenge the insult to the flag."

"Good!" was the emphatic reply. "Fall in behind us. You may be of service."

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The boys obeyed and followed the company as it swept up the street. Presently they came to a barricade, behind which the marines had taken a stand. The boys expected the command to halt, but instead they passed the barricade and pushed onward toward the outskirts of the city.

All the time there was a continuous fire upon them by men secreted on the roofs of houses.

"I'd clean out those snipers if I were in command," said Donald to his companions.

The words were hardly out of his mouth ere another company of marines made its appearance and the men dashed into the houses on either side of the street.

"Somebody has the same idea, Don," was Billie's comment as they rode along.

Two blocks farther came the order to halt and entrench. A minute later the officer called the boys toward him.

"Would you rather lend us your horses, or act as orderlies?" he asked.

"If it's all the same to you," was the reply, "we'll serve as orderlies."

"Very well. Will you," turning to Adrian, "go back to the custom house and tell Captain Rush that we have reached our position. You," to Billie, "ride with all speed to the landing and say that the enemy has retreated toward the water works. They should not be allowed to stop long enough to do any damage."

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The two boys were off like the wind to carry the orders.

"Anything for me?" asked Donald.

"Not for the present. Better dismount and get behind something."

Two minutes later Adrian pulled up in front of the Custom House and delivered his message, while Billie kept on to the water's edge.

"Do you know where the water works are?" asked the officer to whom Billie gave his order.

"Yes, sir!"

"Then lead us to it."

Without a word Billie obeyed and the Jackies followed on the run.

The information was evidently received none too soon, for they encountered quite a force of Mexicans, guarding the works.

A volley from the bluejackets was returned by a scattering fire and the Mexicans turned and fled.

But the volley had been sufficient to lose Billie his mount, as his horse came to his knees with a bullet in his shoulder.

Without waiting to see the cause of Billie's fall any more than to ask if he was hit, the Jackies pushed on toward the water works, leaving Billie to look out for himself as best he could until the work in hand was completed.

"This is sure enough tough luck," was Billie's comment as he helped the horse to his feet and examined the wound. "It will lay him up for a week."

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He took the horse by the bridle and led him slowly back toward the Custom House, where he reported to an officer and hunted up Adrian.

"What had we better do now?" he asked. "I'd like to find a place to tend to my horse."

"The fighting seems about over," was Adrian's reply, "and I reckon the horse will be given attention by some one."

"Oh, I don't want to make any trouble, Ad! If nobody objects, suppose we go hunt a stable."

They were about to leave when a sergeant stopped them.

"You're to follow me to the Captain," he said. "Here," to a marine who stood by, "take charge of these horses and see that the lame one is cared for."

"I wonder if they will take our horses away from us?" muttered Adrian as they followed the sergeant.

"Give it up. I wonder what he wants of us?"

It did not take them long to find out.

"Are you the boys that brought the messages from Lieutenant Blunt?" asked Captain Rush.

"Yes, sir."

"Will you undertake another mission?"

"With pleasure," replied Adrian.

"Same here, sir," from Billie, "but my horse has been wounded."

"That's bad. However, I guess we can find another."

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"Sure, sir. I can borrow Don's."

"Who is Don?"

"He's the other one of us, sir. He is still out with Lieutenant Blunt."

"Well," said the Captain, "either two of you will do. What I want is to find out to just what point the Mexican army is falling back. Do you think you can find out?"

"Sure."

"Very well. My compliments to Lieutenant Blunt and give him this order. He will pass two of you through the lines. The other can remain with him. Sergeant, their horses."

Five minutes later, both astride Adrian's horse and leading the other, they appeared at the outpost and delivered the order.

"Which two shall it be?" laughed the lieutenant as he looked the boys over.

"I guess it will have to be Adrian and Don," replied Billie ruefully. "I've had glory enough for one day. The insult to the flag has been avenged and the Stars and Stripes are floating over Vera Cruz."

"I think it's only fair that Don, as you call him, should share in the adventure," said the lieutenant, "and the sooner you go the better. It is almost sundown now."

Then as Donald and Adrian started on their mission:

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"Success to you and report here when you return."

"Is there any place near here where I can care for my horse?" asked Billie as soon as the others had passed out of sight.

"Why, yes. There are stables in almost any of these houses. Here, try this one," and the lieutenant indicated the one before which they were standing.

Billie knocked on the big door, but there was no reply.

"Knock louder," laughed the lieutenant. "Use your boot."

Billie used his foot and with such vigor that the gate flew open.

When no one appeared to answer his summons, he stuck his head inside the patio and called lustily.

"Must be deserted," he finally remarked. "Such being the case, lieutenant, I reckon I might as well take possession."

"Sure. Go ahead. If every one has gone, I may join you later."

Billie led his horse within and looked around. It was a large house and the patio was the most elaborate Billie had ever seen. He had thought that Pedro's home in Mexico City was fine, but this was much finer.

"They must be swells," was the lad's comment. "I reckon they became frightened and have run away with General Maas."

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He started to lead the horse to the stable and then stopped.

"I might as well shut this big gate," he thought. "I'll leave the little gate open so the lieutenant can come in."

He pushed the big gate together and dropped the bolt in its place.

"Now to do something for the horse," and he turned to the animal which stood patiently by.

Then he stopped and stood in mute astonishment at what his eyes beheld.

In the center of the patio, with rifle in hand, aimed squarely at his head, stood a figure he had last seen on the banks of the Rio Grande more than a year before—the figure of a man whom he had known only as Santiago.

The recognition was mutual, but instead of the friendliness which had always before marked the attitude of the strange man, there was now upon his face a look of the most bitter hatred.

CHAPTER XVI.

SHADOWING AN ARMY.

When Donald and Adrian left the city they rode slowly along for some distance without any sign of the retreating Mexicans, except the occasional sight of some camp utensil which had been thrown aside as too heavy to carry. Occasionally they met peons or women, who looked at them curiously, but all of whom were more than willing to tell of the army that had so recently passed.

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"How many men do you suppose General Maas has?" queried Adrian.

"The lieutenant said it was supposed he had about seven thousand. It may be more, and it may be less."

"Well, they're certainly light-footed," laughed Adrian. "Don't you think we ought to get closer?"

"If we can without being seen."

They put spurs to their horses and for a mile or more galloped along at a fair speed.

Then from a little eminence they saw the rear guard of the retreating army.

"This is near enough," cautioned Donald.

They halted and watched the marching men.

"How far would you say we are from town, Don?"

"At least seven or eight miles."

"Do you know what towns are in this direction?"

"Not the slightest idea. That's the next thing we must find out."

The enemy having by this time passed out of sight, they again spurred forward, but holding their distance.

Darkness had now fallen and the boys were obliged to pick their way more carefully.

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For half an hour they rode silently and then Donald spoke:

"They certainly will not march all night. They must have some place in mind."

"So I think," from Adrian. "But there seems no sign of a halt."

Ten minutes later, however, they caught sight of a fire light.

"That looks like it might be a camp," suggested Adrian.

They rode cautiously forward.

"It surely is," affirmed Donald a couple of minutes later. "We'd better dismount and do a little reconnoitering on foot."

The suggestion was immediately put into effect.

Leaving their horses tethered beneath a giant palm, which would serve as a landmark, the boys crept stealthily forward. In a few minutes they were near enough to see figures about the fire.

"They are evidently getting ready to pass the night," said Donald.

"Yes," from Adrian, "and there is another fire off yonder," and he pointed to the right.

"They are getting ready to post their pickets," explained Donald.

"Then we'd better get busy, Don. There must be some way of finding out where the army is going to stop."

As with one accord they drew still nearer the camp, they could smell the coffee and their appetites began to assert themselves.

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"Wish I had some," whispered Adrian.

"You'll get to be as bad as Billie first thing you know," was the retort. "But, hush! There comes some one."

They lay flat on the ground and listened.

Whoever it might be was coming directly toward them.

Not a move did the boys make, hoping that they might not be discovered, but ready to act if they were.

When within ten feet of them the footsteps halted and they heard a voice say:

"This will be far enough. You are the end man on the line."

"Bueno, caporal!"

"Keep a close watch," cautioned the corporal. "You never know what these Americans may do."

"Si, Señor. How far are we from Vera Cruz?"

"About four leagues" (twelve miles). "General Maas will make a stand at Tejeria, about a league further on."

Then as he moved away. "Remember now, no sleeping. This is a real war."

"Bueno, mi caporal. I understand."

The corporal departed and the sentry, shouldering his rifle, began pacing his station.

A minute later Donald gave Adrian a dig with his elbow as a signal, and they slowly crawled away.

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"That's the information we are after," whispered Donald when they were out of earshot. "Now to get back to Vera Cruz as quickly as possible."

They rose to their feet and ran swiftly but silently toward the palm tree, where their horses were tethered.

Suddenly Adrian stopped and grabbed Donald by the arm.

"What is it, Ad?" asked Donald.

"Can't you see! There is some one there with the horses."

They both peered through the darkness and Donald quickly perceived that Adrian was right.

Then as by one impulse they drew a few steps nearer.

In the dim starlight they were able to make out the figures of several men.

"Do you think they are soldiers?" whispered Don.

Adrian shook his head.

"Camp followers. Thieves," he whispered.

Donald nodded his head in acquiescence.

The boys lay down upon the ground and put their heads together.

"It wouldn't be any trick at all," whispered Donald, "if it were not for the pickets. But any noise will bring down upon us a couple of hundred men. Maybe more. We have simply got to dispose of that outfit without noise. But how?"

"Bad job," was Adrian's only reply.

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"If the horses were only our Wyoming cow ponies, they'd come at our call."

"But they're not," replied Adrian.

For several minutes neither spoke, but lay silently watching the movements of the men about the horses.

"How many can you make out, Ad?"

"Five."

"I don't see but four."

Adrian pointed to the left, about ten or twelve feet, to one who stood alone.

"What's he doing there?"

"Give it up." Then a moment later: "I have it!"

"Well, what is it?"

"He's watching for us to return. That's what they're all waiting for. They think we'll be a great catch."

"That's just it," from Donald. "Let's fool them!"

"Well, first, let's capture the one yonder. We'll show them a Wyoming Indian trick."

Slowly and silently the boys wiggled their way to where the lone robber stood. Then as silently as a ghost Donald arose, while Adrian bent on his knees.

There was a swift movement and Donald's arm was around the Mexican's neck, shutting off his wind, while Adrian pulled his feet from beneath him. In another minute he was bound by his own sash and gagged with a handful of grass.

"That's one!" exclaimed Donald, as he sat upon his prisoner's chest. "Now, how about the others?"

"Not so easy, Don."

"But it has to be done," declared Donald. "Scratch your head."

Adrian did so, but to no avail.

Time was passing and they did not know how long ere something would turn up, when Donald gave Adrian a kick.

"Look! They're getting uneasy."

This was undoubtedly true, as the men were moving about and one of them even had the temerity to light a cigarette.

Then of a sudden Adrian spoke.

"I've got it!" he exclaimed under his breath. "Help drag this chap farther away."

They picked him up bodily and carried him fifteen or twenty feet.

"Now, listen," said Adrian, "both of you. You, Don, sneak as near the horses as you dare. I'll give you just five minutes by my watch. Then I am going to give this man one chance for his life. I am going to take the gag from his mouth and let him give one call for help. If he makes another sound, it will be his last."

"Then what?"

"Those fellows have waited so long that they are tired. They will all rush to where they expect to find him. Then you will rush in and cut the tethers. By the time they find this man I will be with you. Sabe?"

"Good!" from Donald. "I'm off."

In exactly five minutes by his watch Adrian gave the prisoner a rough shake.

"You know what I said?"

The man nodded his head.

"Well, I am now going to take out your gag. If you make more than one cry, or utter more than one word, your own knife will finish you."

He held the knife before the man's eyes. Then with the knife in one hand, Adrian pulled the wad of grass from between the prisoner's teeth.

No sooner had the man drawn one long breath than he let out a yell that might have been heard half a mile and which he was about to repeat with variations, when with a swift movement, Adrian forced the grass back into his mouth and the yell died in a dismal gurgle.

"I ought to use the knife," said Adrian, "but I guess this will do."

With a bound he sprang to his feet and dashed to where Donald was already performing his part of the work.

The plan had worked exactly as Adrian had figured, and in another moment the boys were astride the horses and away toward Vera Cruz.

But one thing they had not taken into consideration. That single yell of their erstwhile prisoner had aroused the Mexican pickets and from half a dozen directions came the sound of rifle shots and then the sound of a bugle calling to arms.

Even while Adrian was running toward the horses, the excitement had begun, and as the boys

started on their homeward ride, a volley from the encamped forces sent the bullets whistling by their ears.

"This is no place for us!" cried Donald. "Don't be afraid to use the spur. It is our only chance."

And now as they rode furiously forward, came the sound of firing on their left and some distance ahead.

"What does it mean?" called out Adrian as they rode neck and neck through the darkness.

"Search me, Ad; but our only chance is in our horses," and Donald again plied the spur.

Outlined against the sky at the top of a small knoll, they could see a small body of horsemen.

"Keep away to the right," said Donald. "Keep in the valley and in the shadow," and he drew off the beaten highway, with Adrian close behind.

On the soft earth their horses' hoofs made no sound and in a couple of minutes more they descended into a little valley and the noise of the alarm passed out of hearing.

"It was a mighty close shave," declared Adrian a few minutes later, when they pulled their horses down to a walk to allow them to catch their breath.

"Sure was," from Donald, "but we got the information we went after."

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Half an hour later they were challenged by the American pickets, which had been thrown even further forward than where the boys had passed through the lines. They stated their mission and were at once sent under guard to the officer of the day.

"Oh, it's you!" was the lieutenant's salutation as he saw who it was. "Did you get what you went after?"

"Yes, sir," from Donald. "The enemy has halted at Tejeria, fifteen miles away."

"Well done. I'll send an orderly to carry the report to headquarters. You boys are entitled to a rest."

"Where's Billie?" asked Adrian, looking around after the orderly had departed.

"Who?"

"Billie. Our chum."

"Oh, yes," replied the lieutenant. "He's disappeared."

"Disappeared?"

"Yes. He went into this house here," pointing to the building before which he had stationed himself, "and when I went in later to see how he was coming on with his wounded horse, I found the horse standing in the middle of the patio, but your chum had disappeared."

"And then what?" queried Donald.

"Nothing. I made up my mind he had gone after something to put on his horse and I haven't thought much about him since."

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"Then it's up to us to find him. Can we go inside?"

"Sure," laughed the lieutenant. "Go as far as you like, only keep inside the lines."

Without more words the boys entered the patio.

CHAPTER XVII.

BILLIE GETS A SURPRISE.

When Billie found himself looking into the muzzle of a rifle in the hands of Santiago, his first impulse was to call out; but the expression on Santiago's face caused him to remain silent.

While the strange man owed his life to the lad, as is related in the story of the "Broncho Rider Boys with the Texas Rangers," there was that in the man's face which told that he was under a severe mental strain, and Billie did not think it wise to presume upon his former friendship.

Therefore, he remained quiet, waiting for Santiago to speak.

If he recognized Billie, he gave no intimation of the fact; but in a harsh voice commanded: "Up with your hands!"

Billie obeyed.

"Turn to the left and march. In there," he continued a moment later as Billie approached an open door in the rear of the patio.

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Into the house Billie went—into a large room, but dimly lighted. Santiago followed, closing the door behind him with a kick.

"Why shouldn't I shoot you down like a dog?" asked Santiago as soon as the door was closed.

"I can't see any reason," was the reply, "except that it might cause you a lot of trouble when it was found out. I imagine that Admiral Fletcher is going to be pretty severe upon snipers and others who shoot Americans."

"Bah!" exclaimed Santiago angrily. "I spit upon Americans! Bah!"

"That's all right," Billie agreed, "if it's the way you feel about it."

"Just because you Americans have driven away a few soldiers with the guns of your great fleet, you don't think you can conquer Mexico, do you?"

"I hadn't thought much about it."

"Then it's time you did, as you may never have another chance."

"Well, then," explained Billie, "I'll tell you how it looks to me. You might a great deal better be governed by the United States than by a man like Huerta."

"Huerta! Huerta!" fairly screamed Santiago. "He is not the governor of Mexico."

"No," from Billie. "He calls himself the provisional president. In reality he is a dictator."

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"He is a murderer!" shouted the thoroughly excited man.

"Then what are you worrying about? All that the Americans want is to get rid of Huerta. They don't want Mexico. Didn't you know that, Santiago?"

"What? Who calls me Santiago? I am Ixtazhl, Prince of the Aztecs and guardian of the treasures of Montezuma. Who calls me Santiago?"

In his excitement he rested the stock of his rifle upon the floor and bent upon Billie a gaze so fierce as greatly to disconcert him for the moment.

But Billie was not a lad to be easily unnerved and after a moment he replied calmly:

"I call you by the only name I know. It was the one you used on the Rio Grande when you sent me on a mission to Pancho Villa."

"Villa! Villa!" repeated Santiago, as though trying to recall something that had passed from his memory. "Villa! Where have I heard that name before?"

"On the Rio Grande is all I can tell you. Do you remember Don Rafael?"

At mention of the name the expression on Santiago's face changed again, this time to one of fiercest rage.

"Don Rafael!" he cried. "Don Rafael! Now I know you! You are Don Rafael. That is why I should kill you!"

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"Great Scott, no, I am not Don Rafael!" shouted Billie as Santiago again raised his rifle and the lad perceived that he had to do with a crazy man. "I'm the boy that saved your life when Don Rafael tried to kill you. Don't you remember?"

Again Santiago lowered his weapon, and again there came upon his face that puzzled expression.

"Tell me, Santiago—I mean Prince Iztazil, or whatever you call it, what are you doing here?"

Santiago eyed him suspiciously, but finally laid his rifle across a table in the center of the room and approached nearer the lad.

"Listen!" he said in a whisper. "I am the guardian of the treasure of Montezuma. It is to be used to free Mexico from the Spaniard. He must be driven out. The land belongs to the Aztec."

"But where is the Aztec?" queried Billie. "I know him not."

"I am he. The peons are my people. The Spaniard—bah! He owns the houses and he owns the lands; but he must be driven out."

"Isn't that what Villa says?"

"Villa? Villa?" again repeated Santiago, and again he lapsed into silence.

For some minutes he remained motionless ere he stepped back, picked up his rifle and started for a door leading to a stairway.

"Come!" he commanded. "I will show you."

"Hadn't we better take care of the horse first?" asked Billie, not at all anxious to be wandering around with an armed lunatic. "He may die."

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"What is a horse when the future of Mexico is at stake, my son? Come with me and you shall hear a strange tale."

"I have heard one already," was Billie's mental comment, but realizing by the term son which Santiago had applied to him that he was in no immediate danger and trusting to his wits to finally overcome the strange man should it become necessary, he followed.

At the head of the stairs was another door, which Santiago opened and entered. It was a sort of ante-room, much like the entrance into a lodge room. Around the walls was a motley collection of firearms, swords, spears and smaller weapons.

Stopping in front of one of the racks, Santiago placed his rifle in it, and then from another took a couple of small swords, one of which he handed to Billie.

"This is a bug house sure enough," muttered the boy as he took the sword and examined it curiously. "I wonder what next?"

He had not long to wait, for opening a closet, Santiago took therefrom two beautifully embroidered robes, one of which he threw over his own shoulders and the other of which he put on Billie.

"It doesn't hardly match my hat," laughed Billie.

Without a word, Santiago removed Billie's sombrero and hung it on a peg in the closet, which he closed. [Pg 151]

Then he opened another door and led Billie into a large, brilliantly lighted room, hung with the richest tapestries.

"Looks like we had strayed into some Turkish bath house," thought Billie, "but I might as well see the thing through."

"Sit here beside me, my son," Santiago finally said. "You shall become my heir. I will introduce you to the court."

Santiago clapped his hands, as though bidding a servant to attend; but there was no response.

He turned his head from one side to the other as though in amazement and again clapped his hands, this time with vigor.

After a moment's delay, there was a movement behind one of the draperies and presently the curtain was drawn back and a man's face appeared.

"Come hither," commanded Santiago.

The man obeyed.

"Where are the others?" demanded Santiago.

"Oh, señor," cried the man, "the others have hidden themselves in the cellar!"

"Slaves! Cowards!" exclaimed Santiago. "What do they fear?"

"The great guns, señor. We might all be killed."

"You will certainly be killed if you do not mind what I say," was the reply as Santiago drew his sword. "Now summon the court that I may introduce my son." [Pg 152]

The man bowed and left the room, and in a few minutes returned accompanied by two more men and several women, all arrayed in fantastic costumes.

All bowed as they entered, and Santiago waved his hand.

"This is my son and heir," he said. "Come and kiss his hand."

They all came forward and kissed Billie's hand, which he held out in order to facilitate the job.

"Now," said Santiago, "we——"

"Now," interrupted Billie, "if it is all the same to you, Prince, we'll have supper. I haven't had a mouthful to eat since daylight. I'm 'most starved to death."

"It is well," agreed Santiago. "It is well that my heir should not die of hunger. Let the table be placed."

The order seemed to meet with general approval, and in the course of half an hour there was spread what would have proved a feast at any time, but which was beyond description to a hungry boy; and the way he waded into the food was a caution.

During all this time Santiago had uttered never a word, nor would he eat but the smallest portion of food—a taste of every dish which he set before his guest.

"My son tells the truth," Santiago finally remarked as Billie pushed back his chair with the single word "Bastante," meaning enough. [Pg 153]

"I always try to," was the smiling rejoinder, for Billie was now in the very best humor. Eating was his strong point and he had gone the limit.

"Clear away the feast and then reassemble," was Santiago's next order.

This order was carried into effect, and the servants also must have enjoyed a square meal, for it was more than an hour ere they again assembled, during which time Billie sank back in his chair and slumbered peacefully.

He was finally awakened by a hand laid upon his arm.

"Awake, my son," were the words he heard. "It is now time that I reveal to you the secret of my life. It is now time that I should tell you the secret of the treasure of Montezuma."

"That's right, Prince," said Billie sleepily. "Let her go."

Santiago regarded him interrogatively.

"What said my son?"

"Oh, yes, Prince. I forgot you only understood good English. Let her go, means proceed with the secret."

"Let her go. Let her go," Santiago repeated a couple of times. "Yes," he continued, "I had forgotten about her."

He clapped his hands and the same servant who had first appeared approached his chair.

Santiago gave an order in a language which Billie did not understand, but which he imagined was Indian, and the servant withdrew, only to reappear a few minutes later with a young woman who greatly resembled Santiago and who was also arrayed in a gorgeous costume. [Pg 154]

She had evidently not expected to meet a stranger, for she drew back upon seeing Billie and the color rushed to her face.

"Come hither, daughter," was Santiago's command.

The young woman obeyed.

"Lucia," said Santiago, "this is the honorable young man whom I have chosen for my heir. Henceforth consider him your betrothed. The marriage shall take place one new moon from today."

"Oh, Father," cried the girl, her face becoming even more scarlet than before, "I cannot——"

"No!" interrupted Billie, springing to his feet, "neither can I. You ought to be ashamed of yourself, Santiago——"

"What!" cried Santiago, springing to his feet and again drawing his sword. "Who calls me Santiago? I am Prince Ixtazhl of the great Aztec nation and guardian of the treasure of Montezuma!"

He raised his sword and would have stricken Billie down ere the boy could have prevented had not the young woman thrown herself between them and seized his arm.

At the same instant the door from the ante-room opened and Donald and Adrian entered. [Pg 155]

CHAPTER XVIII.

A MISSION FOR FUNSTON.

"Santiago!" exclaimed Donald.

"By all that's great!" from Adrian.

"Help!" cried Lucia. "He will do something desperate!"

Donald and Adrian sprang forward, but their assistance was not needed. Billie had by this time gathered his wits and in a twinkling the mad-man was disarmed.

"Shall we bind him?" asked Adrian as they came forward.

"No, indeed," replied Billie as the now helpless man sank down upon the chair. "He isn't dangerous."

"What's it all about?" queried Donald.

"Oh, nothing much! He simply wanted to make me his heir and marry me to his daughter."

Donald and Adrian cast an admiring gaze upon Lucia, who was now kneeling at her father's side.

"Well," said Adrian in an aside, "I don't see why you should object to that."

"Who said I objected?" demanded Billie. "It is the young woman who objects."

"But whoever supposed he had a daughter?" said Donald. [Pg 156]

"Not I," from Billie. "But this is certainly a queer mess."

Then to Lucia: "How long has he been in this way, Señorita?"

"Only a few days. Since this trouble with the Americanos."

"But how could that affect him?"

"It is a long story, señor. For years he has been trying to overthrow the government. When Madero was made president, he was happy. Then came that awful tragedy, by which Madero was killed. Since that time he has not been himself. But when it became evident that the United States would interfere he became as you have seen him to-day."

"When I told him that all the United States wanted was to get rid of Huerta, he was much pleased," explained Billie. "That was when he proposed to make me his heir."

Lucia's cheeks grew red, as she asked: "And did you accept his proposal?"

"I neither accepted nor rejected. I just followed him in to see what would happen next."

"But would you accept?" insisted Lucia.

"That depends," replied Billie, with a touch of color in his own face. "But what had we better do now? You and I will discuss the other question later."

"The best thing we can do," interposed Donald, "is to report to Lieutenant Blunt. Isn't there some place, Señorita, where your father can be placed for safe-keeping?"

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"He will be perfectly safe here with me, señors, if the servants are allowed to remain."

"They certainly will be," declared Billie. "I will personally vouch for that. We have done Captain Rush a good turn to-day and I know he will be glad to do that much for us. And besides, the Americans will harm no one."

Lucia gave Billie a grateful look as she replied:

"Ah, señor, I shall trust it all to you. I can see that you are a friend of my father and I know you are telling the truth."

"You bet you can trust me," was Billie's emphatic reply. "Come on, fellows, let's go look after my horse."

In the door Billie turned:

"I'll leave my robe in the cupboard, Señorita; and, if you don't mind, I'll ask Lieutenant Blunt to make himself at home in the patio."

"The house is yours, señor. Do as you think best."

"By George!" exclaimed Adrian as they descended the stairs to the patio, "this is getting serious."

"What?" queried Donald.

"Why this affair of Billie and the young lady we have just left."

"Nonsense!" from Billie. "It isn't half as serious as what I saw at Moreno."

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"No!" laughed Donald. "I saw that myself; but Josie is an American. Hey, Ad?"

"I don't think it's very nice to be making remarks about young ladies in their absence," retorted Adrian, bristling up.

"Oh, come now, Adrian!" laughed Billie. "You started it. But what do you make out of Santiago?"

"He's evidently a rich old chap with a bug. That's all."

"Well," commented Billie, with a nod of his head, "strange things do happen when you travel. Who'd have thought we'd ever see the old chap again, and at a time like this?" and he went back to where Adrian and Donald had stabled the horses, to see if there was anything he could do for the wounded animal.

When Lieutenant Blunt was made acquainted with the conditions prevailing in the house, he immediately took possession of the lower floor and from that time on until the arrival of General Funston with the Fifth Brigade, it was made one of the official residences.

The week following the occupation of Vera Cruz by the American forces was a busy one for our boys. Because of their intimate knowledge with the Spanish language, they were continually in demand. There was never a verbal message from the American Admiral to some Mexican official but what they were called upon, and they very soon made friends of every Jackie and marine in the city.

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Ten days later the boys stood upon the wharf awaiting the arrival of the first boatload of General Funston's regulars from the big transports which had anchored in the harbor the night before. Because of the shallowness of the water, everything in Vera Cruz harbor has to be brought ashore in small boats, known as lighters. As the boys watched the first of these to approach there was something in the face and bearing of the officer in command which attracted their attention.

"By George!" exclaimed Donald, "I seem to know that face. Don't you, Billie?"

"Does look kind o' familiar. Where have we seen him?"

"I'll tell you!" cried Adrian. "It's the lieutenant who was in charge of the patrol on the Rio Grande."

"Lieutenant Grant!" exclaimed Billie. "Sure as you're born. Well this is luck!"

"Luck? What do you mean?"

"Why, maybe he'll be able to tell me whatever became of those drafts for ten thousand pounds that I took from old Don Pablo."

His companions laughed.

"Still thinking about that, are you?" said Donald. "Why of course you'll never hear of them again. The bank is simply in that much."

"Maybe so," admitted Billie, "but I'll get something official."

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And he did.

It was several days later, though, after the regulars had taken possession of the city and the navy forces had withdrawn to their ships. The boys were sitting in Lieutenant Grant's quarters, to whom they had offered their services as soon after his landing as they were able, and were laughing over their adventures on the border.

"It was certainly a close call you boys had," the lieutenant was saying. "I'm not sure but our neutrality was mighty near a breaking point. What do you think, Billie?"

"Possibly so; Americans will be Americans. But say, Lieutenant, whatever was done about those drafts I took from Don Pablo? I've never been called upon to tell my story, nor have they ever come back to me."

"That's because you were out of the United States," replied Lieutenant Grant. "It was less than a month ago that I was asked if I knew your whereabouts. Uncle Sam has decided that he has no claim to the drafts and they were returned to me. I have them in my army chest. If they are any good to you, I shall be pleased to hand them over."

"I guess they are not much use to any one," sighed Billie mournfully. "My father says no bank would cash them without Don Pablo's signature, and no one can get that."

"I'm glad you take it so philosophically," laughed the lieutenant. "I hope you'll have better luck next time."

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The boys arose to leave.

"Which way?" asked the lieutenant.

"No place in particular. We thought we'd go home."

"You mean to the United States?"

"Not to-night," laughed Adrian. "Just to the house where we are living. It belongs to old Santiago."

"Who is he?"

Briefly the boys narrated what they knew about him on the Rio Grande, how they had met him here, and why they were staying at his house.

"Has he no other name?"

"Why, yes, I suppose so," replied Billie. "We always call him Prince to his face, and his daughter as the Princess Lucia. Of course, it is all make-believe, but it is one way of keeping him quiet."

He called to one of Santiago's servants, whom Lucia had lent them to look after their horses.

"Oh, Chomo!" he said. "Do you know what Santiago's surname is?"

"Si, señor. It is Ojeda."

"What?" cried all the boys at once. "Ojeda? Why, that was old Don Pablo's name."

The boys stood and eyed each other in speechless wonder. The same thought was in all their minds.

"Do you think it is possible?" asked Billie at last.

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"Do I think what is possible?" asked Lieutenant Grant.

"Why, that Santiago could have given those drafts to the stranger so as not to be known in the matter."

"Possibly. He seems a man of mystery."

"Well," declared Billie, "I am going to find out."

"How, I should like to know," asked Donald. "He's too crazy to remember anything, even if he wanted to tell you."

"You forget Lucia," said Billie.

"Oh, no, I haven't," laughed Donald, "and I have no doubt she would tell you all about it if she knew; but I do not believe she does. Santiago is too deep to have entrusted his secrets to a girl not yet out of her teens."

"You never can tell," remarked the lieutenant. "Men with a hobby do strange things. You'd better ride along with me to headquarters. I'd like to introduce you to General Funston. He's a man after your own hearts. You know how he went out and captured Aguinaldo when he was in the Philippines."

"I've read about it," replied Adrian. "It was a bold deed."

"Sure was," said Donald. "We'll be mighty glad to meet him."

It may also be said that General Funston was glad to meet the Broncho Rider Boys, especially after Lieutenant Grant told him in a few words of the good work they had done on the border and on the day that Vera Cruz was taken.

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"And when do you expect to return to the United States?" asked the general.

"Just as soon as we can obtain passage," replied Donald.

"I think we can arrange that for you in a few days," replied the general. "In the meantime come in occasionally."

The boys thanked him and started to leave, when the telephone in the general's quarters rang. He looked for some one to answer, but no one being at hand, he picked up the 'phone himself.

"What's that?" he asked after a brief moment. "The water works. You think they are attempting to cut you off. All right, I'll rush help."

He set down the 'phone and turned to Lieutenant Grant.

"The enemy has gathered in force about the water works," he said sharply. "They evidently intend cutting off the water supply. Tell Colonel Bright to send them reinforcements at once. Do you boys know the way there?"

"Yes, sir," from all three.

"Then show the men the nearest way! Now go! The safety of the city may depend upon you!"

CHAPTER XIX.

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AN UNUSUAL RIDING PARTY.

Flinging themselves into the saddle, the boys rode rapidly after Lieutenant Grant and were at Colonel Bright's quarters by the time the bugle had called to boots and saddle. In another minute, at the head of a squadron of cavalry, they dashed over the road they had come to know so well.

What happened during the next twenty minutes is history.

Guided by the boys, the reinforcements arrived opportunely to stop the advance of a large body of Mexicans who would have destroyed the water works and have left the inhabitants and the American troops entirely without water.

A few minutes later two batteries with rapid-fire guns put in an appearance, and in less time than it takes to tell it, the Mexicans turned and fled.

It was not General Funston's mission in Vera Cruz to overrun any more Mexican territory, so the Mexicans were allowed to retreat without pursuit; but the lines were strengthened so that from that time on there was never any danger from Huerta's forces, although there were numerous alarms and plenty of scout duty.

During the few minutes of fighting, the boys were in the midst of it and all came through it without a scratch. But it was exciting work and when it was over they were publicly thanked by Colonel Bright for their good work.

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"Well," laughed Billie as the three rode slowly back to their home, "that's glory enough for one day. I don't care to be a soldier."

"Nor I!" agreed Donald. "I prefer a quiet life on the ranch."

"Which we are in a fair way to see in a few weeks," commented Adrian. "I have no doubt that

General Funston will do as he agreed and find us passage."

"I for one shall be glad to return to the States," said Donald.

"So shall I after I have found out about Santiago's connection with that ten thousand pounds."

"That's right," was the laughing rejoinder. "Stick to it, Billie, and who knows what may happen?"

"Do you know," remarked Adrian slowly, "I'm beginning to be considerably worried for the Americans scattered throughout Mexico."

"Why should you be?" from Donald.

"I remember Pedro's words that, if the United States did anything, Carranza would unite with Huerta."

"I don't believe he would."

"Maybe not. But the Zapata brothers will think this a good time to make the Americans trouble. I was thinking of Mr. Black and Josie." [Pg 166]

"I'll bet you were," laughed Billie. "I wouldn't be surprised if they were thinking about you. Hey, Don?"

"Well, they might do worse," said Donald. "There are worse fellows than Adrian."

"That's right," retorted Adrian good-humoredly. "I can stand it. But, just the same, I wish I knew they were safe."

"Well, what's the matter with our paying them a visit?" queried Billie.

"Nix," from Donald. "We'll stay inside the lines. I've had enough of this bush fighting."

They approached Santiago's residence, where they had decided to remain until they sailed, when they perceived a peon on a pony standing by the gate. As they drew near they recognized him as one of the peons who had served as Mr. Black's mozo.

"Why, hello, José!" exclaimed Donald. "What brings you here?"

The mozo drew a letter from beneath his poncho and handed it to Donald.

"For me?" asked Donald. "I thought it must be for Adrian. I didn't think the——"

"It is from the jefe," interrupted the mozo.

"Oh, it's from Mr. Black!" with an accent on the Mr. "That's different."

Donald opened the letter and read it hastily.

"Well, by George!" he exclaimed, "what do you think of that?" [Pg 167]

"I can tell you better when I know what that is," replied Billie.

"Why, Mr. Black is becoming alarmed over the activities of the Carranza forces and wants us to ask General Funston if he won't send out enough cavalry to escort him and his daughter to Vera Cruz in safety."

"Of course we'll ask him!" exclaimed Adrian. "Let's do it at once."

"Now wait a minute," said Donald. "Let's see about it."

"What is there to see?"

"There's a good deal to see. You remember our experiences on the Rio Grande?"

"But this is different! We are at war with Mexico now."

"No, we are not. We have simply seized one port as a reprisal. To send a cavalry force out into the country might bring on more trouble."

"Well, I don't care!" exclaimed Adrian hotly. "I'll go and ask him alone if you are afraid to go with me. I'm not going to leave Jos—I mean Mr. Black and his daughter out there at the mercies of these greasers. You hear me!"

"Oh, we'll go with you, all right!" said Billie. "But don't be surprised if you don't get what you ask."

Accordingly the trio started for General Funston's headquarters. After some delay they were admitted to his presence and Donald showed him Mr. Black's letter. [Pg 168]

The general perused it carefully and then remained silently thoughtful for some moments.

"I wish I could do what our countryman asks," he finally said, "but I do not see how I can. To send a force out nearly fifty miles, even for such a service, would be overstepping the purpose for which I am here. I——"

"But you wouldn't leave them out there to be mistreated and perhaps killed, would you?"

interrupted Adrian.

The general smiled.

"Such is not my intention; but we must plan some other way. We must use a little strategy."

"That's right!" exclaimed Billie, "and I'll bet the man who went out and rounded up Aguinaldo will know how to do it!"

Again the general smiled broadly, evidently well pleased at the implied compliment.

"I'll do the best I can," he said quietly, "but I am not very familiar with the lay of the land. You boys have had some experience. Perhaps you can suggest something."

Adrian said nothing, and Donald scratched his head. It was Billie who spoke.

"I was just wondering, General," he said, "if some of the men wouldn't like to take a little horseback ride and see something of the country."

"Well, now, perhaps they might," assented the general.

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"We could show them some mighty fine scenery, sir."

"By the moonlight, I suppose?"

"Yes, sir. By the moonlight and early sunrise."

"And about how many would you like to take on this picnic?"

"Well," replied Billie, squinting up one eye, "I was thinking that Adrian and I might take out about ten to-night. Then about the same time to-morrow night Don could take another ten. We would probably meet somewhere in the mountains and watch the sun rise."

"A very nice plan," said the general, "and one of which I approve. You may ask Lieutenant Grant to make enquiries among the men in his company and see if there are any who would like to be given two or three days' leave for such a purpose."

"Thank you, sir!" and Billie touched his hat in true military style.

"And you might say to the lieutenant," was General Funston's parting words, "that I should be glad to hear later how the men enjoyed their ride. I think, now that the boys are down here, they should be given a chance to see the country."

"Billie, you have the making of a great general," was Donald's comment as they left the general's quarters. "How did you think of it?"

"I remembered my experience when I wanted men to help me get you and Ad out of trouble in Presidio. Lieutenant Grant will know all about it."

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And so he did. In less than half an hour ten regulars, some of them but very little older than Billie and Adrian, were ready for the ride which Billie had proposed and which in his mind would be as far as Moreno.

"You are sure ten will be enough?" asked Lieutenant Grant.

"Sure! Twelve Americans are enough to lick fifty Mexicans if it comes to that; and besides we shall have Mr. Black and Josie. He's as good as four."

"And don't forget the reinforcements, if they are needed," laughed Donald. "We will be right on the spot where we saw the sun rise the first morning after we left Moreno."

"It looks all right," was Lieutenant Grant's comment, "but it is always well to have a big enough force. Success to you!"

"You'll make all the necessary explanations to the crowd you bring out, Don," was Billie's parting words. "Adrian and I will explain the nature of the trip to our fellows as we ride along."

This they did, and gave the soldier boys a little history of their own troubles in reaching Vera Cruz.

"No explanations are necessary," remarked a young chap by the name of Brooks, a corporal. "We saw you out at the water works and we know you are made of the right stuff. You lead! We'll follow, won't we, boys?"

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"You bet!" replied the others in one voice.

CHAPTER XX.

ADRIAN FOILS A TRAITOR.

It was nine o'clock of the second night that Adrian and Billie, accompanied by Mr. Black's mozo,

José, and the ten troopers, reached the outskirts of Moreno.

They had made good headway the first night, had slept in the hills during the day and had come this far without molestation.

"If everything goes to the end as it has this far," remarked Corporal Brooks to Billie as they neared the little town, "it will be nothing but a pleasant outing, sure enough."

Arriving at the edge of the town, the boys sent José forward to see how the land lay and to bring them word.

"Do you think you can trust him?" asked the corporal.

"We'll have to," replied Adrian. "I believe he is loyal, and Mr. Black seems to have complete confidence in him."

"Let's hope so, anyway," said Billie. "It seems to be the best we can do to get word to Mr. Black of our presence."

"Hurry back, José," urged Adrian as the mozo departed.

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"Si, señor," was the brief reply. "You may depend on me."

"It ought not to take him more than half an hour," explained Billie. "It isn't more than a mile."

But a half hour passed and then another and still no José.

"Something must have happened to him," said Adrian.

"That's the charitable way to look at it," laughed the corporal. "It's more likely, however, that he's making arrangements to have something happen to us."

"I hardly think so," was Billie's comment, "but, if he is, we'll fool him."

"How?"

"We'll move."

"But he may come back."

"We'll leave one man here on guard. The rest of us will go around to the other side of town."

"Good!" from the corporal. "You are a strategist."

The plan was at once carried into effect.

"Now then," said Billie, "I'm going in to town myself."

"Not much," declared Adrian. "I'm going."

"I'd offer to go myself," laughed the corporal, "but I don't know the place."

"We'll toss for it," said Billie.

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"All right," and Adrian produced a coin. "Heads I win. Tails you lose."

"No funny business," said Billie. "Choose heads if you want."

Adrian flipped the coin. It came down heads up.

"All right," agreed Billie. "Now for some set of signals."

"Our old Broncho Rider whistle if I need help," said Adrian. "If everything is O. K., I'll give the whip-poor-will."

Adrian slid from his horse.

"What are you doing?" asked Billie.

"I'm going afoot. I didn't spend my boyhood among the Indians for nothing. Good-bye!" and a moment later he disappeared in the fading moonlight.

"Whatever the conditions," said Billie, "we'll soon know," as he settled back in his saddle.

Running swiftly along, Adrian made straight for the barracks in which he knew would be found whatever soldiers might be in the city.

"If I find everything quiet at the barracks," was his thought, "I can go straight to where Mr. Black is stopping without fear. If I find there is any disturbance, I'll be more careful."

Ten minutes of running brought him to the barracks. All was as quiet as the hour demanded. He stood under the shadow of the back wall long enough to hear the sentry's call and then he turned in the direction of the house where the two Americans were stopping.

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It was only a few blocks away and he reached it without incident.

"Kind o' funny," he mused, "that I haven't seen or heard a soul on the street. I wonder what's become of José?"

He stopped a minute to ponder.

"Things are going almost too smooth. I'll just stop a bit."

He stole past the house and a moment later threw himself into the gutter, where he lay as one dead.

The wisdom of his action soon became apparent.

He hadn't been lying there two minutes until a solitary figure passed him and stopped in front of the house, evidently listening to hear what might be going on inside.

A moment later he was joined by another figure. Adrian could just make them out in the darkness.

"Have they come?" was the whispered question.

"I can't tell," was the whispered reply.

Adrian heard both the question and the answer distinctly.

"It's José," he said to himself. "He knew that it was the plan for Billie and I both to come to the house. The traitor! I have a notion to shoot him in his tracks."

Only the fear of creating a disturbance kept the lad from carrying out his notion.

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"Why don't you knock and tell the Gringo you are here?" was the next question.

"They might be in there."

"Well, what of that? You can tell them you were stopped by the guard and have just been released. That'll seem reasonable."

José stepped to the door and knocked.

There was no response and he knocked again.

"Who is there?" asked a voice.

"José. I just come from Vera Cruz. Let me in."

There was a movement within and presently the door opened and José entered, closing the door behind him.

Adrian slowly arose to a kneeling posture.

"I wonder what the other will do now?" he wondered.

He did not have long to wait, for the other knocked on the pavement with his gun and presently several more figures appeared. Adrian had just time to throw himself to the ground and escape detection.

The men in front of the house exchanged whispered confidences and then all but one started to leave.

"If any one attempts to leave the house," was the command, "fire! If any one attempts to enter, allow them to do so and then give the customary call."

"Bueno!" was the response, and all but the one withdrew.

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A minute later Adrian again arose to a crouching posture and as the sentry cautiously approached the door, he crept up behind him. An instant more and he was upon the man and had him by the throat.

The man was a wiry Mexican and evidently in training, for he squirmed and kicked vigorously; but Adrian's grip was too firm upon him and in a couple of minutes he sank down limp upon the ground.

The noise of the scuffle must have been heard inside, for the door cautiously opened and a head peered out.

Without a question Adrian sprang within, dragging the lifeless form of the sentry with him.

"Quick, bar the gate!" he commanded.

The command was obeyed.

"Now where is Mr. Black?" he asked.

"Upstairs talking with José."

"All right. Bind this man while I go up. Don't let him escape or he is liable to cut your throat."

"*No temer V, señor*" was the response, meaning "Have no fear."

Adrian ran lightly up the stairs, revolver in hand. He heard voices talking and had no doubt that José was narrating some trumped-up story.

"Yes, señor," he heard the mozo say, "they are expecting you. It is necessary that you go at once."

Adrian flung open the door and covered José with his revolver.

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"Put up your hands," he commanded. Then to Mr. Black, to whom José was talking: "Take his weapons away from him, Mr. Black."

Realizing at once that something was wrong, Mr. Black obeyed.

"Now tie him."

This was also quickly done, Mr. Black asking at the same time what had happened.

"I can't tell you exactly, Mr. Black, but this man has betrayed us and we are now watched by a squad of soldiers."

Mr. Black's face turned as black as his name.

"Is that true?" he demanded, seizing José by the shoulder with such a powerful grip that the man cried out with pain.

"Oh, señor," he cried, "don't kill me! I will tell you all."

"See that you do," was the command. "One lie and I will wring your neck as I would a chicken. You know me."

"I'll tell the truth. I told the captain at the barracks. He is going to capture all the Americanos and hold them for ransom and I am to have half."

"That is evidently the truth," declared Adrian, and he proceeded to tell Mr. Black what was being done to get him and his daughter to Vera Cruz, and how José had played them false.

For a moment it looked as though Mr. Black might wreak his vengeance on José, but after a minute he thought better of it.

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"You ought to die this minute," he declared, "but I'll wait till I have more time." Then to Adrian: "What had we better do now?"

Before Adrian could reply the clear note of a bugle rang out upon the night air.

CHAPTER XXI.

ADRIAN HAS AN ACCIDENT.

"What do you suppose that means?" asked Adrian.

Mr. Black made no reply and a moment later the bugle call was repeated.

"It sounds to me," said Mr. Black, "as though some fresh troops were coming in."

"That's bad," was Adrian's comment.

"Perhaps not, my lad, if we act quickly."

"How so?"

"The new arrivals may take up the attention of the gang of bandits outside and we may get away ere they return."

"Good," was Adrian's comment. "Where is Miss Josie?"

"Waiting in the next room with the family of my host."

Mr. Black stepped to the door and called to those within. In a few words he explained the situation and in less than three minutes he and the girl were mounted and ready to ride.

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"Where is your horse?" he asked Adrian.

"I left it with the boys at the cocoanut grove."

"But we can't go and leave you here."

"Of course not. I shall run alongside of your horse, holding to its mane, Indian fashion. Now then, are we ready?"

"All ready!"

The great gate was opened noiselessly and, bidding a subdued good-bye to the family, the three passed out into the night.

"I should have throttled José ere I left," declared Mr. Black as they passed down the street.

"I wish we were as safe as he is," laughed Adrian.

For three blocks they wended their way as silently as possible and just as they came out into the open there came another bugle call.

"That's for us," said Adrian. "There is no mistaking that command. Now to run for it."

The two riders put spurs to their horses and Adrian bounded along at their side, running as lightly as an antelope. They were rapidly nearing the spot where the Americans were in waiting, when Adrian stepped into a hole and pitched forward onto his face.

"Don't stop for me!" he called. "I'll be there as quick as you are!"

He picked himself up and started to run, but his ankle gave him such a pain that he almost fainted. [Pg 180]

"Great Scott!" he exclaimed, "I've sprained my ankle."

He sat down and rubbed the maimed member for a couple of minutes and then attempted to hobble on. It was more than he could bear and he sat down again.

"By George," he groaned, "this is tough! I'll have to call for help."

He gave the well-known whistle, but there was no response.

He gave it again; but still no answer.

"Worse and more of it," he muttered. "Something has happened to Billie."

What it might be Adrian could not imagine, but he was sure that his chum was not at the appointed spot, as he was near enough to have heard the whistle and would surely have answered.

"Well, I can't stay here. The greasers will be coming pretty soon. I must get along some way."

He got up and walked a few steps and again sat down. There was no sound of a pursuit and the hoofbeats of Mr. Black's horses had ceased.

"They have reached the grove," Adrian muttered. "I must get there some way."

Once more he arose to his feet and took several steps and then sank down in a faint, so great was the pain.

When he came to himself he was lying upon a matting of some kind and to his ears came the faint sound of a guitar, followed a few moments later by sounds of girlish laughter. [Pg 181]

He sat up and looked around, but could see nothing, except a ray of light coming in through a little crack between a couple of blankets that formed a curtain in a doorway.

"Where in the name of common sense am I?" he muttered.

He attempted to get to his feet, but the pain in his ankle brought him quickly to himself.

"Now I remember!" he exclaimed. "I fell and sprained my ankle. But how did I get here?"

He started to call, but at that moment the music ceased and a minute later he heard voices saying good night. Then a door was closed and immediately the curtains were thrown open and a peon woman stood in the door.

"Oh!" she exclaimed, upon seeing Adrian sitting up and looking at her. "Then you are not dead?"

"I should say not. Did you think I was?"

"I was afraid so."

"Why?"

"Because your death might be laid at my door."

"Evidently she hasn't discovered I am an American," thought Adrian. "Well, I'll not tell her until I have to."

The woman turned around and called to some one in the other room and another figure appeared in the door—that of a girl some fifteen years of age. [Pg 182]

"Look, Peppita," and the elder woman pointed at Adrian.

The girl gave a little scream.

"*Madre mia!*" she exclaimed. "Who is it?"

"I know not, my child. I found him unconscious at our back door and dragged him inside."

"I beg your pardon," said Adrian. "I didn't know I was near any house."

"It is a very poor one, señor. I and my daughter are all alone since my poor Leocadio was killed."

"Who killed him?" asked Adrian, becoming interested.

"The Huertistas. He was a soldier under Gen. Dorantes."

"Is that so?" exclaimed Adrian. "I know Gen. Dorantes well. He is a fine man. But you will soon be avenged, for Huerta's days are short."

The woman's eyes snapped.

"*Es verdad?*" meaning, "Is it true?"

"It certainly is. Since the Americans have taken Vera Cruz, Gen. Huerta will have to go. It is only a question of a few days."

"*Bienissimo!* The Americans are brave men! My Leocadio was fond of the Americans."

"I am glad of that, señora, for I am an American."

The woman and girl both started back as in fear and then came forward again.

"How did you come here, señor?"

"I fell from a horse and sprained my ankle. I tried to walk and must have fainted."

"Have you friends in Moreno?"

"I did have, but they have gone and I want to get to Vera Cruz."

"Vera Cruz is a long way, señor. I never expect to go that far from home—me and my little Peppa."

Adrian smiled.

"I expect it does look like a long ways to you, señora; but it is not far. Do you think I can stay here with you until my ankle is well enough to walk? I have a little money. I will pay you something."

"Oh, Mother!" exclaimed the girl, who now spoke for the first time. "You will let him stay, won't you?"

"The wife of Leocadio would not turn a lame dog out, much less a lame boy."

"*Mil gracias, señora!*" exclaimed Adrian, with much gratitude. "Yes, more than a thousand thanks. You will never regret it."

"The wife of Leocadio is not learned," was the reply, "but she knows an honest youth when she sees one. Come, Peppita, let the young man go to sleep. We will make our bed out here."

She drew the curtains together and Adrian was left alone to his own reflections.

"By George!" he exclaimed under his breath, "if I ever get out of this measly country, I'll be glad. I wonder what has become of Billie? Of course he'll look for me, and old Don, too; but it looks as though it might be weeks before I could walk. Well, I don't care. If Mr. Black and Josie got away, that's glory enough for one day."

He settled himself down and tried to go to sleep, but his leg hurt him so that he could not. In fact, the pain was so great that every once in a while he groaned.

After a few of these groans the woman appeared in the door with an earthen vessel filled with hot water.

"If the señor will bind this on his ankle, it will do it much good," she said.

"I'll do anything to get rid of this pain," said Adrian.

He took the jar and, dipping his handkerchief in it, bathed his ankle freely and finally bound the cloth around the swollen part.

"There," he muttered as he at last succeeded in finding a comfortable position, "now I think I can get a little sleep."

How long thereafter it was before he came to himself he did not know, but when he opened his eyes the first streak of daylight was creeping in through a little window.

A minute later there was the rattle of musketry, followed by a hearty American cheer. He raised up to look out of the window, when the side of the room came in with a crash.

CHAPTER XXII.

A RESCUE AND A SURPRISE.

It would be hard to describe Adrian's surprise at the unexpected event which closed the preceding chapter. His first thought was that a cannon ball had struck the house, but a second thought convinced him that such was not the case. Before he had time to think further he heard a big voice call out:

"Here he is!"

A moment later Mr. Black burst in through the opening in the wall and, picking Adrian up in his arms as though he had been a baby, started on a run with him for the nearest horse.

"There you are!" he exclaimed as he set the boy on the horse. "Now to run for it!"

Adrian needed no second bidding, but digging his heels into the horse's side he dashed away toward the cocconut grove, his flight being protected by the Americans with Billie at their head.

A couple of minutes after, the entire band had rallied in the shelter of the trees, where they stopped to plan for the next move.

"How did you ever find me?" asked Adrian as he and Billie peered out toward the town.

"Mr. Black knew about where he lost you and we tracked you by your trail. Whoever dragged you into the house, left a trail as wide as your body."

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"It was a woman," explained Adrian, "and she was hiding me. But where were you when I whistled for help?"

"That's a long story," was the reply, "which I will tell you when we have time; but briefly we were on the other side of the town, where we left the man on guard. It appears that our friend José was a first-class traitor."

"As I discovered," said Adrian.

"Yes," continued Billie, "he sent a bunch of soldiers to capture us. The sentry heard them coming and gave the alarm. We went to his aid and succeeded in rescuing him, but that is what got us into this trouble."

"And now what?"

"Now we have to get away just as soon as we can."

"Right," said Mr. Black. "There is no enemy in sight at this moment and the best thing we can do is to run for it. If we can cross the valley safely, we shall have little trouble."

"I'd like to stay and give them a few shots," said the corporal, "but it would probably be unwise."

"I'll tell you what, Brooks," suggested Billie, "suppose you and I remain behind until we see the others well across the valley. If there is any pursuit, we can hold them back for a few minutes. They will not know how many we are and it will give the others a chance to escort Mr. Black and his daughter to a place of safety. You know that is what we really came for."

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"Fine!" was the corporal's reply.

Mr. Black and Adrian protested, but they were overruled.

"It's a good idea," said the oldest of the troopers, "and now to run for it."

It was fully five minutes after the others had left that Billie and Brooks saw the Mexican infantry, some fifty in number, emerge from the town and come slowly toward them.

Looking across the valley, they could perceive that the little band under the direction of Mr. Black was nearing the protection of the forest that covered the next hillside.

"Two minutes more and they will be safe," said Billie.

"Then we'll give them the two minutes," replied the corporal. "Cut loose at the bunch as soon as it is near enough."

A moment later two rifles spoke out and then they turned loose their automatics, to give the impression of a much larger force.

Two men fell and a minute later two more, as the boys' Winchesters again spoke.

"Now for the horses!" cried Billie as the Mexicans threw themselves upon the ground.

They sprang to their horses and dashed away down the valley.

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They were not discovered until they had cleared the shelter of the trees and then a volley was fired after them. The bullets sang all around them, but they escaped unhurt, and before another volley they were out of range.

"It's a good thing for us that they have no cavalry," said Brooks as they sped along.

"Sure is," was the response, "and I hope they don't succeed in getting word ahead of us."

"We'll fix that," said Brooks. "We cross the railroad just at the foot of the hill and I'll climb up and cut the telegraph wires."

"They may have sent word already."

"Hardly. They may have tried to, but it's dollars to doughnuts that there was nobody at Joachin or Rio Blanco to receive it. The nearest night operator, I imagine, is at Piedras Negras."

"They may send a force from there to head us off," suggested Billie.

"That's so; but I'm not sure whether Piedras Negras is held by the Carranza or the Huerta forces."

"It's a terrible mix-up, isn't it?" laughed Billie. "But I guess either side would be glad to get us."

They had reached the tracks by this time and a couple of minutes later Brooks was up a pole and with the aid of his bayonet broke the wires.

"If it isn't too late, that'll hold 'em for a while," he remarked as he descended from the pole and mounted his horse. [Pg 189]

When they joined the main company, Billie told Mr. Black what they had done and repeated to him what Brooks had said.

"I think he is right," said Mr. Black, "and my advice is that we should give Piedras Negras a wide berth."

"We can't get too far away from the railroad," explained Billie, "or we shall miss Don and his company. They are coming out for just such an emergency."

They rode rapidly forward for a couple of hours and then, turning sharply off the highway, took to the woods which now grew dense all along the mountain sides.

About ten o'clock they stopped for breakfast and then all took a nap until the sun drew near the western horizon.

"We should reach our rendezvous with Don about dark," explained Billie, "and that would get us into Vera Cruz about daylight."

As they approached the appointed spot, Billie and Adrian, ever on the alert, noticed almost as one that the place had a changed appearance and mentioned it to the others.

"What do you mean?" asked the corporal.

"I can't exactly explain," was Adrian's reply, "but my prairie training always warns me to go slow when I sense danger." [Pg 190]

"A mighty good idea," muttered one of the troopers, an old campaigner who had seen service with Funston in the Philippines. "These are slippery chaps."

"If I could walk," was Adrian's comment, "I'd soon find out what is wrong; but you can't scout on horseback."

The cavalcade came to a halt and the men examined their weapons to be sure they were in order.

"What do you think we'd better do, Ad?" queried Billie.

"I don't know. How far are we from the rendezvous?"

"Not more than half a mile."

"If it were not for the possibility of making matters worse," suggested Adrian, "I'd fire a few shots; but of course what we want is to get into Vera Cruz without a fight. What do you think, Mr. Black?"

"This is new business to me, boys," was the reply. "I'll have to leave it to you."

"What's the matter with my going on a scout?" asked Billie.

"Nothing the matter with your going," laughed Adrian, "but there might be with your coming back. No, I shall have to go, ankle or no ankle."

He slid from his horse, and almost before any one realized what he was doing he had slipped away on his hands and knees. [Pg 191]

"He is certainly a brave boy," was Josie's remark, "and I hate to think of his taking all this risk on my account."

"Not so much risk for him as for us, I'm thinking," muttered the old trooper. "They are looking for mounted men—if they're looking at all—and not for crawling boys."

The old trooper was right, and ten minutes later Adrian returned to say that there was a small body of horsemen at the next turn of the road.

"Did you see anything of Don?" queried Billie.

"Not a sign."

"That's mighty funny. Where do you suppose he can be?"

"He may be hiding back in the woods, just as we are."

"Well," said the corporal, "now that we know where the greasers are, what's the matter of going forward?"

"No matter at all," replied Adrian. "We can easily bear away to the left and give them the shake,

but I don't know what to do about the others."

"The others will have to look out for themselves," replied Brooks. "They are able to do it."

The words had hardly left his lips ere there came the sound of a single shot away to the left.

"There they are!" cried Billie. "Come on!"

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The little cavalcade started forward, but ere they had gone a dozen rods they could hear the sound of approaching horsemen, crashing through the woods to their right.

"The Mexicans!" said Adrian.

"To cover, every man!" cried the corporal.

A minute later every horse lay flat on the ground with his rider concealed behind him.

CHAPTER XXIII.

A DINNER AND ITS RESULT.

With a shout the Mexicans broke into the clearing which the Americans had just left. They were a motley crowd, not much like the cavalry that forms such a great part of Uncle Sam's army.

"It seems a shame to hurt them," muttered the corporal. "They look as though they would run if you said boo!"

Seeing no one, the Mexicans, some twenty or twenty-five in number, came to a halt and their leaders held a council of war.

The Americans, a couple of rods back in the woods, partly concealed by the trees and partly by the deepening twilight, watched them silently.

After a couple of minutes' confab, the captain of the band gave an order which the boys could not hear and a couple of Mexicans dismounted and began carefully to examine the ground. They were looking for the prints of horses' hoofs.

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"*Aqui'sta!*" exclaimed one of the men on foot, pointing to the ground.

The captain drew near and leaned over from his horse to see more clearly.

He was evidently satisfied, for he straightened up and gave another command and the two horsemen sprang to their saddles.

Another command and every man's sabre flashed in the air.

Raising his own sabre aloft, the captain was about to give another command, when there was the sound of a single shot from the rear and the captain's sabre went flying from his hand, struck by a rifle ball.

"*Carramba!*" he cried. "*Emboscado!*" meaning "an ambush," and putting spurs to his horse he turned and fled in the direction from which he had come, followed by the entire band, while the Americans fired a volley into the air.

"They'll never stop running," laughed the corporal, "until they reach home—wherever that is."

"And in the meantime we'll get out of here," said Mr. Black.

The men sprang to their feet and to their horses. At the same moment there came from the woods to the left the well-known whistle of the Broncho Rider Boys.

"It's Don!" cried Billie, as he gave the answering call, and an instant later Donald came into view through the trees, closely followed by half a score of Uncle Sam's troopers.

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"Just too late," said Adrian.

"Too late for what?" queried Donald.

"To see a masterly retreat," and in a few words he told Donald what had occurred.

"Well," was the rejoinder, "I am glad no blood was shed. But who fired the shot from the rear?"

"I," came a voice, and out of the shadows appeared a figure which had a most familiar appearance. "If you don't recognize me," he continued, "you may recognize Ambrosio."

"By George!" exclaimed Billie, "if it isn't our old friend Strong. Where on earth did you come from?"

"I suppose I might ask you the same thing," was the laughing reply. "Briefly, I am on my way to Vera Cruz. I heard there was a band of American brigands out in the mountains and I thought I might fall in with them."

"So that's what they call us, is it?" said Billie. "I never expected to be called a brigand."

"Strange things happen to men who travel," declared Strong facetiously; "but you'd better be going. There are some good troops in this section and they are on the lookout."

"Good advice," muttered the old trooper. "This ain't no pleasure excursion."

"Sorry we haven't a horse for you," said Adrian to Strong, "but I guess you are used to walking."

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"A good deal more so than riding. But, if one of you don't mind giving Ambrosio a lift, it will help some."

Several expressed their willingness to take the ape on behind, but he would go to no one but Billie.

"All right, old man," laughed the boy; "but no funny business," and he broke off a twig and shook it at Ambrosio. "You see this."

Now that the two companies had united, they broke away from the railroad and made a bee line toward Vera Cruz, arriving in sight of the city at daybreak.

"Here's where we part company with the troopers," explained Donald. "We six and Ambrosio will ride into town together and the boys will come in as they wish. There must be no suggestion of a military expedition."

"I see," said Mr. Black, "and I want to thank you all for your kindness to my daughter and to me. That is about all I can do now. Perhaps some day I can do more."

"That's enough," muttered the old trooper, "unless you can get us all sent back home. I can't see any use of keeping us here."

"That's all right, old man," laughed the corporal. "You know you would not go home if you could."

"Better not give me a chance," was the grumbling reply, as the trooper bit off a big piece of tobacco and tucked it away in his cheek.

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Reveille was just sounding when the boys, accompanied by their three friends and Ambrosio, perched upon Billie's horse, drew up in front of Lieut. Grant's quarters. They had been recognized and passed through the lines, and as the men caught sight of them they were given a hearty cheer.

"You seem to have made friends," laughed the lieutenant as he greeted them, "and there is every reason why you should. The general will be glad to see you and hear your report. I have no doubt you have a good story to tell, and he likes a good story."

When the boys reached home they found the gate still locked, although it was now considerably past the time when the household was astir. Their knock was answered by the *portero*, who, in response to a question by Billie, said that Santiago was seriously ill and had been for thirty-six hours.

"What is the matter?" asked Donald.

"Fever."

"I am not surprised," declared Adrian. "The strange thoughts he has been thinking so many days were bound to result in something serious."

"Perhaps it is not convenient for us to remain here," said Mr. Black. "We can, I am sure, find some other place."

But at this moment Lucia appeared at the head of the stairs. When made acquainted with Mr. Black's words she would not hear of his taking Josie to any other house and gave orders for making her perfectly at home. The only one who did not remain was Strong.

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"I'll come back this evening," he said. "I have a strange story to tell you boys and I may need your help in locating a man I am most anxious to find."

But he did not come back that evening, and when he did come the next night the boys were not there, having been invited to dine with Gen. Funston. Had things not happened thus, a part of this story could never have been written, for it was while dining with the general that the boys were given a duty to perform, which was the most arduous of all their adventures in the land of the Montezumas.

And this was the manner of it.

They were just finishing dinner and Billie was congratulating himself that he had had his fill of good American cooking, when an aide announced that a Mexican gentleman, Don Esteban Mendoza, craved an immediate audience with Gen. Funston.

"I am sure you young gentlemen will excuse me a few minutes," said the general, "as Don Esteban is one of the prominent bankers of the city and I know his business must be of importance."

The boys were glad to accept the proffered excuse and the general withdrew, leaving them in the

company of several members of his staff, to whom they briefly related their recent adventure. When they told of the "ambush" there was much amusement.

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In the midst of their conversation the general returned accompanied by Don Esteban.

"These are the young gentlemen to whom I referred," explained the general, introducing the boys. "They are typical Americans and, being civilians and speaking Spanish fluently, will be just the ones to help you in your trouble."

Then to the boys: "Don Esteban has a very delicate mission for which he asks the assistance of Americans. He wished me to detail three young officers for the work, but this I do not feel I can do, as it is strictly a private mission. If you feel that you can undertake it, he will be glad to explain it to you."

"Anything that you recommend, General, we shall be glad to undertake," replied Donald, acting as spokesman for the trio.

"Then I shall turn you over to Don Esteban, and as his business is pressing, I will excuse you if you wish to accompany him home."

"A thousand thanks, General," said Don Esteban effusively. Then to the boys: "My automobile is at the door. If you will take seats in it, we shall be speedily at my house. You will pardon me if I speak nothing but Spanish, as I know very little English, although"—with an expressive glance at Gen. Funston—"I hope to know it better."

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Following Don Esteban, they were soon speeding through the streets and five minutes later entered a handsome patio.

"This is my house," said Don Esteban. "Be pleased to consider it your own. Now, if you will follow me to the library, I will explain the mission I wish you to undertake."

The boys followed without a word, but as they passed up the stairs Billie muttered under his breath:

"Did you notice, boys, that this house backs right up against Santiago's?"

CHAPTER XXIV.

DON ESTEBAN'S STRANGE LOSS.

"Before I explain to you the mission I wish you to undertake," said Don Esteban, "I must narrate briefly a story that has been handed down from the days of Montezuma. It is to the effect that when the Spanish conqueror, Cortez, was about to capture the City of Mexico, most of the treasure of the Aztecs was sunk in the lake, which at that time covered a portion of the Mexican plateau.

"A part of this treasure is said to have been recovered, but the mine from which the gold of Montezuma was taken has never been discovered, although search has been made for upward of five hundred years. Some have supposed that the mine was adjacent to the City of Mexico and that it was flooded at the time the treasure was sunk in the lake. Others have thought it was located in the state of Michoacan, while still others have believed it located in the vicinity of Mt. Orizaba.

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"My reason for telling you this is that some years ago a strange appearing man came to our bank and made a large deposit of money, all in gold. He did not deposit it all at once, but brought it in a few thousand dollars at a time until it amounted to more than a million dollars. Then he disappeared and we have never seen him since."

"And has he never called for any of the money?" asked Billie.

"Not in person, although he has drawn upon it at frequent intervals. The name under which it was deposited is James Moon."

"An American?" asked Donald.

"I could not say whether he was an American or an Englishman. We took him for the latter. But now I am coming to the real part of the story.

"In addition to the money which he deposited, he also left with us a small brass-bound box, in which he said there were valuable papers. He gave orders that it should be delivered to no one but himself in person, or until the expiration of ten years. The ten years will be up in a few days and this afternoon I bethought me of the box. But when I went into the vault in which it has been kept for so many years, the place upon an upper shelf, where it has always stood, was vacant. The box was gone!"

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"Gone?" exclaimed all the boys in unison. "Do you mean stolen?"

"So it would appear."

"How could it have been done?" asked Adrian.

"I cannot say; but the strange thing about the whole matter is that in place of the box, there lay upon the shelf an envelope—yellow with age, upon which was written in ink that had scarcely faded the words: 'Montezuma's Mine.'"

"Well, what do you think of that?" queried Billie, looking at the others in amazement.

"I don't think," laughed Adrian. "It's up to you to do the thinking."

"Is there no clue whatever?" asked Donald.

"Not that could be really called a clue. The only suspicious thing that has happened to-day at all, was that a mountebank came into our bank——"

"A mountebank!" from all.

"Yes."

"Did he have an ape with him?"

"No! He was quite alone. He did not come in to make merry, but to get a bill changed. While he was there he was observed to scrutinize the place very closely."

"But he did not go into your vault?"

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"No! He took his change and went peaceably out."

"Then, why should you suspect him?" insisted Donald, casting a knowing glance at the other boys.

"Because, an hour later, he came in again and said that one of the bills we gave him as change was a counterfeit."

"Was it?"

"No, it was not, although it was an old issue. The teller who waited upon him had no recollection of ever having seen the bill before, but rather than have a scene, we gave him another bill for it."

"How large a bill was it?" asked Adrian.

"Only a peso"—that is a dollar—"and it seemed hardly worth talking about; but you'd have thought it was a hundred."

"Perhaps it seemed a large amount to him," ventured Billie.

"Perhaps," admitted Don Esteban. "But be that as it may, I should like to see the man again, and especially would I like to know where he got that old dollar."

"Why?"

"Because it may have come out of that box."

"Well, yes," said Donald, with a shake of his head, "it might have; but how could the mountebank have gotten the box?"

"That is the mystery," was Don Esteban's reply.

"And how do you wish us to help you?" asked Adrian.

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"Why," explained the banker, "I asked Gen. Funston to find the mountebank for me. He said you boys would do better than any one else."

"But why us? Why not a Mexican policeman?"

"Because the mountebank was an American. He may even have been a soldier and have hidden himself among your men."

"Oh, he was an American, was he?" laughed Donald. "Then I believe we can put our finger on him with ease. But the man we have in mind always carried with him an ape."

"Then it may not be the same," replied Don Esteban, "for this one had no ape with him either time."

"It certainly does look like a mystery," was Adrian's comment. "Where is the vault from which the box was taken?"

"On the other side of the patio."

"May we examine it?"

"Certainly. I'll show it to you now."

Don Esteban led the way downstairs and across the patio. Opening the rear door of the bank, he escorted them within and closed the door.

Passing behind the counter, he opened the iron door of the vault, disclosing within a good-sized

chamber, in the rear of which was set the great steel safe, locked with a time lock.

"There," explained Don Esteban, pointing to an upper shelf, "is where the box stood."

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"Oh, it was not a large box, then!" said Adrian.

"Oh, no! Not more than eight or nine inches cube."

The boy examined the vault carefully by the light of a gas jet.

"There seems no way that any one could have entered except by the door," said Donald.

"None whatever!"

"You are sure there is no opening in the ceiling?"

"Absolutely."

Don Esteban led the boys out and locked the door of the vault.

"Well," declared Donald as they came out into the patio after finishing their inspection, not only of the vault but of the rest of the office, "I guess we had better go home and study over the matter a little. I should not be surprised if we could put our hands upon the mountebank with very little trouble; but I feel sure he had nothing to do with the disappearance of the box."

"I wish I could feel that way," said Adrian after they were out of hearing of Don Esteban. "I have never quite trusted Strong. There is something strange about him."

"Yes, he is a bit queer; but how on earth could he have stolen the box if he did not even go behind the counter?"

"He couldn't; but still I mistrust him."

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"I wonder where Ambrosio was all this time?" mused Billie.

"Tied up at home, most likely. An American among Americans would hardly feel like traveling around with a hand organ and a monkey," was Don's emphatic reply.

Upon arriving at Santiago's residence they were told that Strong had been there earlier in the evening and seemed much disappointed at not finding them at home.

"Did he leave any word?" asked Billie of the portero.

"None, señor; but Donna Lucia would like to see you in the library."

"What is the matter? Is Santiago worse?"

"No, señor. He is sleeping quietly. I could not say what she wants, but she seemed considerably disturbed."

"Better go up alone, Billie," said Donald. "If we are needed, you can call us. We'll wait here in the patio for a few minutes before we turn in."

Billie ran up the stairs and tapped at the library door. He was immediately admitted by Lucia and the door was closed behind him.

"It is getting to be a good deal of a family affair," laughed Adrian.

"Yes," replied Donald, with a grin. "I wonder where Josie and Mr. Black are?"

Adrian colored.

"I don't know why you should have thought of them!"

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"Oh," replied Donald nonchalantly, "speaking of family affairs naturally reminded me that you ___"

"Oh, Don!" came Billie's voice, breaking in upon the conversation.

"Yes. What is it?"

"Come up here, the both of you! Quick!"

The boys ran up the stairs two steps at a time.

"In here," and Billie held the library door open. "I've something I want to show you."

He led the way to the table, and there, under the glow of the lamp, stood a brass-bound box about eight or nine inches cube.

CHAPTER XXV.

DONALD IS KIDNAPED.

"Great Scott!" was the spontaneous exclamation of both the newcomers. "Where did it come from?"

"You tell," replied Billie. "Lucia says it was not here an hour ago. Neither has any one been in the room so far as she knows."

"Has she been here all the time?" asked Adrian.

"No, she was with Josie in her room for a time; but the door into the patio was locked."

"Some one might have come in through the window."

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"A fat chance, isn't there!" laughed Billie, pointing to the only window in the room which was protected with long and heavy iron bars, set so closely together that a child would have had trouble in squeezing through—much less a man.

"Does look a little difficult," replied Adrian.

"Worse than difficult. Impossible," was Donald's comment.

"Did you hear any noise?" asked Billie of Lucia.

"None whatever."

"And you have never seen the box before?"

Lucia wrinkled her brows and thought deeply.

"Do you know," she finally said, "I have a sort of a dim recollection that, away back in my childhood somewhere, I have seen it or one just like it."

"Away back in your childhood," laughed Donald, "couldn't have been so very far, Señorita."

Lucia made a little grimace.

"I'm nearly seventeen," she said.

"Botheration!" said Billie. "We are not here to discuss ages, but to find out how this box came here. I have no doubt that Lucia has seen many similar boxes in her time."

"Well," asked Donald, somewhat nettled, "what do you propose to do?"

"In the first place, I want to search the house."

"That's a good idea," declared Adrian. "Donna Lucia, will you lead the way?"

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"Certainly. Right this way; but don't go into father's room. I know there is no one in there. One of the servants has been with him every minute of the time."

Headed by Lucia, the boys explored the house from top to bottom, but not a sign of any one could they find. So far as they could determine, the box must have come in of its own self.

"I'll tell you one thing we can and must do," said Billie, after they had returned to the library. "We must keep a watch in this room to-night. Whoever put the box here may return."

"Right!" from Don. "You do have occasional lucid intervals, Billie."

Billie grinned, but made no reply.

"I think we may all stay here for a few hours," suggested Lucia. "Father is so much better that I think we may have a little music. I will play some accompaniments on the guitar and Josie can sing."

"That will seem a good deal like being back in the States," declared Adrian. "With the Stars and Stripes flying over my head, a brigade of American troops on guard and an American girl singing, I can almost forget I am on Mexican soil."

"How about the accompanist?" queried Billie.

"Oh!" laughed Adrian, "we're quite willing to adopt her. Hey, Donald?"

"Don't ask me, Ad. Ask Billie."

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"I am sure we could do no better," was Billie's gallant reply.

Lucia's suggestion was carried out and for a couple of hours there was a merry little party under Santiago's hospitable roof. Even the mysterious box was forgotten and the young people were giving themselves up to a jolly good time, when suddenly there came a scream which caused every one to turn their eyes toward the room in which the sick man was supposed to be lying.

But there in the doorway he stood, his long night robe reaching nearly to the floor and his thin black hair standing almost on end.

"Father!" cried Lucia, rushing toward him "What is it?"

He waved her off, but made no reply, while with his long bony finger he pointed at the brass-bound box.

"Where did it come from?" he asked in a shrill, querulous tone. "Who brought back my secret casket?"

"Yours?" came from every one in the room.

"Yes! Mine! Mine!!" he almost screamed.

"He's raving!" cried Josie. "Can't some one do something for him?"

"No," he replied, and his voice became more calm, "I am not raving. I know whereof I speak. Quick! Let me look within it to see that all is safe."

"It is locked, Father," said Lucia, coming to his side, "and we have no key."

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"I can unlock it," he cried. "I can unlock it. Give it to me. Give it to me."

He staggered forward and seized the box in his hands. For several seconds he fumbled with it, turning it first upon one side and then upon another, and at last raised the lid. He thrust in his hand and then stopped as one stupefied.

"Empty! Empty!" he gasped in an almost audible whisper. "The plan of Montezuma's mine is gone! Gone!!"

A moment he stood and gazed around upon the faces of those in the room and then collapsed upon the floor.

Quickly the boys picked him up and carried him to his bed and the attending physician was summoned.

Billie picked up the box and examined it curiously.

"I wonder how he opened it?" he mused. "There must be some sort of a spring somewhere."

He felt the box all over, but could find nothing. Then he closed it and set it upon the table. A moment later Donald picked it up and tried to open it, but it was locked fast.

"Nothing but mysteries," he said. "I'm getting tired of them. But before anything else happens, I'm going around and notify Don Esteban that the box is here."

"I'll go with you," said Adrian.

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"No, you'd better stay here. I'll take a mozo with me."

He ran hastily down the stairs and a minute later the boys heard the gate close behind him.

"I guess this is the quickest way," thought Donald as he gained the sidewalk. "I'll not bother with a mozo. With American soldiers on guard and my automatic in my pocket, I have nothing to fear."

A couple of minutes later he was ringing the bell at Don Esteban's house. He was hastily admitted and at once conducted to that gentleman's presence, where he narrated hastily what had occurred at the other house.

"Who is this old man?" Don Esteban asked of Donald.

Donald explained as best he could.

"Which is mighty little," he declared when he had finished. "He is the greatest mystery we have ever encountered. There is no doubt that he is an Indian, but he speaks English like an Englishman."

"I must go and see him at once," declared Don Esteban, rising.

"I don't think you can, sir, to-night. I don't think the physician would permit it."

"Well, then, the first thing in the morning. I thank you, young sir. Won't you have a glass of wine before you go?"

"No, I think not," replied Donald. "I've never acquired that Mexican habit yet. Good night, sir."

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He left the house feeling greatly relieved that he had reported the finding of the box and walked slowly along whistling merrily. As he turned off the street upon which Don Esteban lived he heard soft footsteps behind him and turned hastily.

But he was too late.

Before he could see who it was, or ere he could cry out, a cloak was thrown over his head and he was picked up and carried away bodily.

Donald was not the boy to give in without a struggle, but kick and squirm as he might, he could not free himself. Presently those who were carrying him stopped and laid him on the sidewalk. Then he heard a knock and a gate opened. Then he was lifted up again and, almost before he knew it, he was thrust into a little room—a closet it seemed—and the door closed upon him.

It was a hot night and the little place was stifling.

"I'll smother if I don't get out of this," he muttered.

Slowly he unwrapped the cloak from about his head and at last freed himself completely from its folds; but he secured little relief from the heat.

The room could not have been more than six feet square and it did not take Donald long to run his hand clear around the wall.

There was only one door, that through which he had been thrust, and it was locked. He pounded upon it, but to no avail. Then he sat down to think.

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"There is certainly no use to sweat myself to death," he told himself. "I'd better be as quiet as I can. There is air enough coming under the door so I won't suffocate, so I might just as well wait and see what will turn up."

He ran his hand all over his automatic and found it in good shape. Then he leaned back against the wall opposite the door and waited. Ten minutes later the door was suddenly yanked open, another figure was bundled into the closet and the door slammed shut, almost before Donald could think.

CHAPTER XXVI.

A PLOT AGAINST FUNSTON.

A muttered imprecation was the only intimation that the figure which had been so unceremoniously bundled into the closet was alive.

"Who are you?" asked Donald in Spanish.

"Let me out of this," was the unsatisfactory response in English.

"Oh!" from Donald. "You are an American. Well, keep still and I'll help you to get rid of the blanket."

He grabbed hold of the covering and the newcomer was soon uncovered.

"Now, then, who are you?" asked Donald again.

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"I'll show you who I am if I get hold of you," was the uncivil answer, and an arm shot out.

"Now look here," said Donald, "if you don't stop that I'll let daylight through you. We are in a bad box and the only thing to do is to make the best of it."

"We?" exclaimed the newcomer. "Why do you say we?"

"Because I am a prisoner the same as you are. Now, who are you?"

"I'm Lieutenant Grimes of the general's staff. Who are you?"

"I am Donald Mackay, on a special mission for Gen. Funston."

"How did they get you?"

"Kidnaped me on the street. How did they get you?"

"Same way. I had just left the general's quarters."

"I can see that some one might want to capture you, lieutenant, but I cannot see what they want of me."

"How long have you been here?" asked the lieutenant.

"About half an hour. By the way, are you armed?"

"No; they took away my weapons. How about you?"

"I have my automatic. I'd have used it when you came in, only you were dumped in so suddenly."

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"What do you suppose the game is?"

"I don't know; but we'll find out. I've been in tighter places than this—but no hotter," after a pause.

"Have you tried to get out?"

"Yes; but it was too hot work. The door seemed pretty strong."

"Perhaps the two of us might force it," suggested Grimes. "I'm a pretty husky chap."

"We might try," replied Donald. "The place is so narrow we can get a good brace."

They put their feet against the opposite wall and pushed against the door.

"We'll never make it that way," said the lieutenant. "We'll have to throw ourselves at it."

"Not much room for that, Lieutenant, but you give the word and we'll have a try."

Getting their bearings as well as they could in the dark, they drew themselves back and then literally threw themselves at the door. It gave way with a snap and both fell to their feet on the outside.

Quick as a flash they were on their feet, Donald with his weapon ready for instant action.

But there was no one in sight.

"That's mighty funny!" exclaimed the lieutenant. "Lock two strong men up in a place like that and not guard it."

"It's a mighty good thing for us they didn't," laughed Donald. "I wonder where we are?"

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He glanced about the room which was dimly lighted by a couple of lamps, fastened to the wall by brackets. It was well—yes, elegantly furnished. At one side of the room was the closet out of which they had just emerged, while at the opposite side were three doors. On a third side were two windows and the fourth side was a plain wall.

"Not a bad-looking place," observed the lieutenant.

"Not at all," echoed Donald, "and there seem plenty of means of exit."

"Sure, my boy; and if it's all the same to you, we'll go. The sooner I get back the quicker I'll be able to start something in this direction. Come on!"

They crossed over to the doors and tried the first one. It was locked. They tried the second and it opened into another closet.

"Three times and out," laughed Donald as he took hold of the knob of the last door.

It yielded to his touch and he opened it gently. Then he quickly and quietly closed it.

"What's up?" asked the lieutenant.

Donald put his fingers to his lips.

"How many?" queried Lieut. Grimes.

"Three," was the whispered response. "Let's hear what they have to say."

He opened the door a crack, through which they could see three men seated at a table. One wore the uniform of a Mexican officer, the other was dressed in Mexican costume, while the third was unquestionably an American, although they could only see his back.

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"I have carried out my part of the agreement," the American was saying, "and now I want my money."

"How do we know you have?" asked the officer.

"Haven't I put Gen. Funston into your hands?"

"We are not sure it is Funston," said the other.

"Then bring him out and look at him. You know the general when you see him, don't you?"

"I think so, although I've never seen him but once."

"Well, that is he, all right," declared the American.

Donald turned and looked at his companion. Then he chuckled.

The lieutenant said nothing, but stroked his whiskers which he wore in exact imitation of his chief.

"Lucky for the general," he whispered, and Donald nodded his head that he understood.

The two Mexicans exchanged a few words under their breath which Donald could not hear and then the officer took from his breast pocket a large wallet, from which he counted out ten bank notes. They were yellow backs and Donald was not at all surprised when the officer said:

"Here are ten one-thousand-dollar bills in American money. We believe you are telling us the truth, as your words are corroborated by the men who brought him here. But if you are playing us false, we shall know how to reach you."

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The American shrugged his shoulders as he took the bills, rolled them up nonchalantly and placed them in his trousers pocket.

"You can find me at the Hidalgo Hotel whenever you want me," he said, "and now I must be going."

He arose from his seat, and as he did so, Donald caught sight of his face. It was the mountebank, Strong, but in his stylish clothing Don had failed to recognize him.

"Great Scott!" he muttered to himself, "the plot thickens!"

"What's that?" queried the lieutenant, who caught the muttered exclamation.

"Nothing much," replied Donald as the three men walked toward a door in the farther end of the room and he was enabled to speak without being heard, "only that is the man I'm looking for. Let's get out of the window and see if we can't head him off."

He closed the door and turned the key which he had quietly taken from the other side.

The windows were open and they looked out. They were on the side of the house overlooking a good-sized lawn.

"That's the reason they are not barred," explained Donald. "Had they been front windows, we might as well have been in jail. You go first and I'll cover the retreat."

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Lieut. Grimes sprang into the window and lowered himself to the ground, just as a hand turned the knob.

"Good-bye!" muttered Donald. "Sorry I can't wait to receive you," and he followed the lieutenant.

On the ground they could hear the men trying to open the door and as they sped across the lawn toward a high brick wall, the door gave way with a crash and they could hear surprised voices.

"They have discovered our wreckage!" cried Donald. "Over the wall you go!"

"You first this time," said the lieutenant.

"No, you first. I can boost you up, but I couldn't pull you. You can pull me."

The argument was good and the lieutenant acted upon it.

A minute later he was on top of the wall.

"Great Cæsar!" he exclaimed. "There's nothing under me but water."

"Never mind that," was the response. "Haul me up."

The lieutenant leaned down and gave the lad a hand.

"Here we are," he said a minute later. "We can't jump in, for there is no knowing where we are."

"Sure," from Donald. "Let's run along the wall."

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This they did for about a hundred yards and then the wall ended abruptly against what appeared to be an abutment.

"We must act quickly," declared Donald. "They think you are Funston and won't hurt you. Keep up the deception. I'm going to swim for it. I'll have help here just as quick as I can. So long," and, throwing off his coat, he jumped into the water some twenty feet below.

CHAPTER XXVII.

THE ADMIRAL TO THE RESCUE.

When Donald struck the water he allowed himself to go clear to the bottom, as he wanted to find out just about how deep it was.

It was, as he had expected, about the depth of the water in the harbor and he made up his mind that he could not be far from some of the wharves that constitute the water front.

When he came to the surface, he struck out away from the wall, and by the light of the moon was soon able to see the vessels in the offing. He could also see that he was well north of the principal docks.

"I guess I'll land at the first place that offers," he thought, "and find my way to headquarters from there."

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He struck out lustily, but had not been swimming more than a couple of minutes, when he heard the sharp exhaust of a gasoline launch.

Realizing that it must be an American craft, he shouted at the top of his voice.

At first there was no response, but as the boat came nearer and he shouted even more loudly, a friendly hail came over the waters.

"Where are you?" came the voice as the boat came to a stop.

"Here, to your port side," he replied.

The launch was started again slowly and Donald was soon able to make himself visible.

"Who are you?" was the first question pumped at him by the officer in command.

"Special messenger for Gen. Funston," was the response.

"Where is your uniform?"

"I'm not a soldier. I am a civilian."

"A likely story," snapped the officer, who chanced to be an ensign.

"I can't help how likely it is," snapped Donald in return. "It's true, and I want to be put ashore as quickly as possible. I have an important message and the safety of one of his staff is involved. There is also a plot on foot to capture the general himself."

"Nonsense! And besides, I can't put you ashore. I am carrying a message to Admiral Fletcher." [Pg 222]

"But my business is important," insisted Donald.

"So is mine," declared the ensign.

He ordered his launch full speed ahead in the direction of the flagship.

"It's pretty tough," commented Donald, "but I'll prove I am right when I get to the ship."

"I hope so," was the reply. "I haven't anything against you and you may be telling the truth, but I can't take any chances."

Fifteen minutes later they drew up beside the flagship.

"Up you go," said the ensign, motioning Donald up the ladder. "I'll present you to the officer of the deck," which he quickly did.

"Here's a man I picked up in the water, sir, who says he has a message for Gen. Funston, but I had no time to put him ashore."

"Looks more like a boy than a man," replied the officer. Then to Donald: "What's this about you having a message for Gen. Funston?"

Donald repeated what he had told the ensign.

"What's that?" asked another officer, coming forward out of the shadow of the after turret.

The first officer saluted.

"Tell the Admiral your story, my lad," he said.

Again Donald repeated his story, this time going more into detail.

"Come with me," ordered the Admiral, and he led the way to the wireless operator. [Pg 223]

"Get into communication with Gen. Funston at once," was the admiral's order.

"Here he is, sir," was the report a couple of minutes later.

"Ask him if he has three American boys on a special mission."

The answer came back promptly that he had.

"Ask him if Lieut. Grimes is missing."

Again came back the answer that he was.

"Tell the general that we have one of the lads on the *Arkansas*, and that he has had a strange adventure. Tell him I will send the lad ashore immediately."

"Thank you, sir," said Donald. "I knew some one would know what to do."

"You're a brave lad," was the Admiral's comment, "and I shall be glad to hear the end of the adventure. You and your companions must come out and dine with us as soon as your mission is ended."

Donald thanked him for his kindness and hastened to the launch which was to take him back.

Twenty minutes later he stood before Gen. Funston.

"You seem to have been in the water," was the general's first words.

"Yes, sir," laughed Donald. "I jumped from a wall north of town, leaving Lieut. Grimes on top of it." [Pg 224]

"What! Lieut. Grimes on top of a wall? How did he get there?"

"He was kidnapped, sir! It was a case of mistaken identity!"

"Mistaken identity! I don't understand!"

"They took him for you, sir, because his beard is trimmed like yours."

The general smiled grimly.

"Think I shall have all my staff officers do the same," he commented. Then more seriously: "Can

you lead us to the house?"

"I'm not sure about the house; but I can take you to the stone wall from which I jumped. That ought to guide us to the house."

"Right," said the general.

He called another member of his staff and gave a few brief orders.

In another ten minutes two launches loaded with regulars and armed with a rapid-fire gun in each, steamed swiftly up the harbor.

"There's the wall!" exclaimed Donald a few minutes later, "and there's where I jumped," pointing to a spot near the abutment.

The officer in command headed the boats for the shore.

"It is not only a question of freeing Lieut. Grimes," said the officer, "but we also want to capture the conspirators. This is a much more serious matter than Gen. Funston is willing to admit."

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"Then if you will take my suggestion, sir," said Donald modestly, "I would let a few soldiers go over the wall as well as entering the front of the house."

The officer looked up twenty feet. The wall was absolutely perpendicular and as smooth as the side of a house.

"I'm afraid none of my men can scale it," he said.

"Can't we throw a grapnel over it, sir?"

"We might; but it would be a very slight hold."

"If you can make it hold at all," laughed Donald, "I'm willing to make the effort. At best I can only fall back into the water."

"True," declared the officer. "We'll try it."

A grapnel was tied to a long line, such as is used in tying the launch to the shore, and after several vain attempts the grapnel caught in the top of the wall.

Donald sprang forward and tested it with his weight and it held. Then, without another word, he braced his feet against the wall and in almost less time than it takes to write it, he was at the top.

"Do you see any one?" asked the officer from below.

"No, sir; but there is the sound of pacing footsteps on the walk that runs along the side of the house."

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"Good! Now make fast the grapnel and we will see if there are a dozen men here who can climb to the top."

The dozen were quickly found and they were soon at the top of the wall. The officer finally decided to add to their armament one of the rapid-firers.

"If there is any resistance," he said, "we'll knock the side of the house in."

"What shall I do?" asked Donald.

"You'd better come back into the boat. You can help us to enter the house in front."

Donald slid down the rope and the expedition quickly made a landing. Silently, so as not to alarm those within the house, the men took their way to the front of the mansion, which was at once recognized as one of the finest in Vera Cruz.

"Do you know who lives here?" asked the officer.

"No, sir," replied Donald.

"I was told it was the residence of one of Huerta's generals," said a soldier. "It was pointed out to me the first day we landed."

"Good!" from the officer. "I shall now have no compunction about entering the place."

With Donald and a couple of soldiers, the officer approached the door and gave a vigorous knock.

There was no response and he knocked again.

"Who is there?" finally came a voice, evidently a mozo.

"An American officer. Open the door in the name of the law."

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There was a still further delay and then another voice asked: "How do we know it is an officer?"

"Open and find out, before I force the door."

There was a still further delay.

"It's a good thing we guarded the rear," said Donald. "They are evidently trying to gain time to

spirit Lieut. Grimes away, thinking it is Gen. Funston."

"True," said the officer. "We'll wait no longer. Corporal, force the door!"

The corporal placed a small stick of dynamite under the door and fixed a fuse.

"Step back a little," he said.

All obeyed, when at the instant the door was thrown open and a hand, in which was an automatic revolver, was thrust out, directly in the face of the officer.

But quick as was the action, Donald was not taken off his guard.

With a single swift blow he struck the weapon into the air.

At the same instant a fusillade from the rear of the house gave evidence that the men stationed upon the wall had done their work.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

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BILLIE MAKES A DISCOVERY.

Having released Lieut. Grimes and taken the plotters into custody, the next task was to locate Strong, the mountebank, and to solve the mystery of the box.

Outside the one exclamation which Donald had uttered when he recognized Strong as the third of the plotters, he had not betrayed his secret to any one, and when Lieut. Grimes told his story to Gen. Funston and described the American, Donald vouchsafed no information which might help to apprehend him.

"The plotter told the Mexicans that he could be found at the Hidalgo Hotel whenever he was wanted," explained Lieut. Grimes. "While he may have lied about it, I think we should send a force and try to locate him."

The advice was acted upon and a corporal and four soldiers sent to the hotel, but to no purpose. No such man was known there.

"What was the use of my saying anything about it?" asked Donald of the other two boys when he returned to Santiago's house and narrated to them the story of his evening's adventure. "I was sure he was not there and I have no idea where he is; but we'll find him and the ten thousand dollars given him by the Mexicans for his treachery."

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"That's right, Don," was Billie's comment. "If you can get that money and I can get my ten thousand pounds, this trip won't be so bad."

"In the meantime," said Adrian, "I propose that some of us go to bed. It's nearly two o'clock and there is mighty little chance that any one will try to steal the box again."

"I think you are right," said Billie. "We might as well all go. The doctor is still with Santiago and will stay until he is better. It isn't at all likely that any one will try to come into this room while he is here."

Billie voiced the unanimous opinion, and a few minutes later the young people had all sought their beds, leaving instructions with the physician and the servants that they were to be called if any change for the worse occurred in Santiago's condition.

It was probably two hours later, just about daylight, that the entire household was awakened by a terrible shriek and one of the maids rushed out into the patio.

The boys came to their feet with a bound and hurried from their room on the ground floor, while the others appeared at the head of the stairs.

"What is it?" asked Donald as soon as he could quiet the shrieking maid. "What are you yelling about?"

"Oh, señor!" she cried. "I have seen the devil."

"Nonsense," laughed the boy. "You had a nightmare."

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"No, señor. It was the devil. He had horns and a tail and he had the little box under his arm. I saw him!"

"The box!" cried Billie. "Quick, Lucia, look and see if the box is gone!"

The girl rushed back into the library and she, too, gave a shriek.

"It's gone!" she cried. "It's gone!"

The boys sprang up the stairs three at a time and into the library. Lucia was right. The box was gone.

"It must be the old boy, sure enough," said Billie, "or at least one of his imps." Then to the maid: "How did he get in?"

"I don't know, señor. I only saw him go out. He went right through the door without opening it."

"Nonsense!" from Donald. "His Satanic majesty might go through a solid door, but the box wouldn't. There is some other explanation."

"But who could it be?" queried Lucia in great fear.

"Some one who knows the house," declared Adrian emphatically. "He may have put on some masquerade costume just to frighten these superstitious servants in case he was discovered."

"I believe Ad is right," agreed Donald. "What do you think, Billie?"

"Maybe, Don; but I have a theory of my own. If I am right, I can work it better if I tell no one."

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At this moment the physician entered the room.

"How is Santiago?" asked Donald.

"Better! He has gone to sleep, and if he is not disturbed, I expect him to be greatly improved when he awakens. I should not be surprised if this were the turning point in his illness."

"Then we had all better go down on to the first floor and leave him alone with his nurses."

"I'd give a good deal to know where Strong is," remarked Donald as they were drinking their coffee an hour later.

"So would I," declared Billie. "I believe, if we can find him, we can solve this entire mystery."

"As soon as we finish our coffee," suggested Donald, "let's get busy and find him. He can't be far."

"That's right," said Adrian. "We'll round him up in short order. Hey, Billie?"

"We ought to; but I'll tell you what. You fellows go out and see if you can get a line on him, and I'll hang round the house to see that the devil doesn't come and steal the rest of the house."

"Especially Lucia," laughed Donald.

"That's all right," was the good-natured reply; "but I have an idea that the devil and Strong may have something in common."

"You don't think it was Strong who came and took the box, do you?" queried Adrian.

"I don't know just what I do think, Ad; but I'm going to do a little detective work and I want to give the impression that we are all out. When you fellows go out, don't say anything that would cause any one in hiding to think we are not all going out together. Do you sabe?"

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"Sure. I hope you'll get a clue if we do not."

When the others had gone, Billie sat quietly in his room for a long time. He could easily have gone to sleep, as he had had only a couple of hours' rest, but he made up his mind that he would not be caught napping again if anything should happen.

But nothing happened.

The minutes passed into hours and it was rapidly nearing noon when Billie made up his mind that it was a bad job.

"We had our chance at daylight," he muttered, "and now we will not get another. Whoever is after the box, has it and is not going to take any further chance of being caught."

He went out into the patio and looked up at the sun. It was almost in the zenith and the air was stifling.

"Any one would be a fool to go out at this time of day," he mused. "I wonder where the fellows are?"

He stepped back under the shade of the arcade that extended clear around the patio and threw himself onto a stone seat.

"Queer old place," he thought, "and a queer old seat."

He laid his hand on one of the carved arms and mechanically toyed with an eagle's head that formed one of the decorations. To his surprise the head turned in his hand.

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"I hope I haven't broken it," he said as he examined it more closely.

It was clearly made to revolve and so he turned it clear around, when of a sudden the arm of the seat fell apart and the bottom collapsed, disclosing to Billie's astonished eyes a pair of stairs.

Almost thrown to the pavement by the giving way of the seat, Billie picked himself up and looked about to see if he were observed.

There was no one in sight and he stooped down and examined the stairs carefully. Then he straightened up and rubbed his chin as a sudden gleam of intelligence passed through his brain.

"So," he muttered, "this is why Santiago dwells in a house that is directly back of the banker's. That was his box and he is the strange man who made the million-dollar deposit in Don Esteban's bank."

Then he stopped and pondered.

"But who stole the box? Not Santiago, for he has not left his room for days. If it was Strong, he must have entered the bank from some direction other than this. I don't understand, but I'm going to make some further investigation."

He reentered his room, buckled on his automatic and took from his suit case—which, by the way, he had located at the railway station along with that of his companions after the occupation of the city by the marines—his electric torch. Then he went out and descended the stairs, which he discovered were twenty-four in number.

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Reaching the bottom he found himself upon a landing some six or eight feet square, from the opposite side of which another flight of stairs ascended.

"I reckon I better see where they lead to," was his comment as he slowly began their ascent.

After going up eighteen stairs his head touched the floor above. He counted the remaining steps by the light of his torch and found that there were six more. This would make the floor over his head on an exact level with the floor of Santiago's house.

"It's just as I expected," he muttered. "If I can get through this floor, I shall find myself in Don Esteban's residence—somewhere. But just where? That's the question."

He pushed upon the stone above his head, but it refused to move. Then he held up his torch and examined the ceiling carefully. Whatever the method by which the stones could be moved, it was carefully concealed.

Much chagrined, Billie at length decided to retrace his steps and await the coming of his companions. He reached the landing and crossed over to the steps by which he had descended.

Glancing up, he uttered an exclamation of surprise, for there at the opening and peering down the stairs was Ambrosio, the ape.

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With a cry of recognition the simian started to descend the stairs, but at a noise from above he hesitated and then sprang back and out of sight.

An instant later the opening was closed and Billie was left in the darkness, except for the light of his torch.

CHAPTER XXIX.

THE MYSTERY DEEPENS.

While Billie was making his discoveries Donald and Adrian had also been busy.

When they left the house, at Donald's suggestion, they went first to the bank and told Don Esteban about the disappearance of the box and what the maid had seen. He was much disappointed until it was explained to him that they also had another clue.

"We shall spend our time in the slums," said Donald, "while our chum keeps watch at the house. We feel sure that between us we shall solve the mystery."

"I hope so," was Don Esteban's response. "Do you think I might be able to see this man Santiago?"

"I'm afraid not, sir! The doctor wants him to sleep as long as he can. We will let you know later in the day."

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Leaving Don Esteban, the boys started for the plaza, intending to play the part of sightseers and visit every place in which a mountebank might reasonably expect to go. They felt certain that Strong would keep away from the more aristocratic places.

Keeping their eyes open and ever on the alert, they wandered about the streets and into many public places, but up to eleven o'clock had made no discovery. Then they entered a cantina for breakfast, purposely choosing one that was little frequented by Americans.

Seating themselves at a table in one corner where they could see without being seen, the boys ordered a hearty breakfast and then turned their attention to the others in the place.

At the table nearest them were three men of ordinary appearance, busy with their meal. Beyond them was an American soldier, who seemed to have dropped in out of curiosity. He was paying very little attention to his meal, but was eyeing a young woman who was seated behind the cash counter.

On the other side of the room, and partially hidden from our boys by the cash counter, was

another man, smoking, and evidently waiting for some one. He kept his eye on the door and every once in a while glanced nervously at his watch.

"Not much going on in here," said Donald in English.

"No; but we are a little early. There may be more in before we finish our breakfast."

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It was a true prediction, for within the next five minutes as many more persons entered and disposed themselves around the various tables. Then the boys' breakfast was served and for a few minutes they were more absorbed in the food than in the guests.

As Donald raised his eyes for a moment, however, he caught sight of a man talking to the one sitting back of the cash counter. They were evidently arguing about something in an undertone and a minute later the newcomer took a seat with his back to the boys.

"Look!" was Donald's smothered exclamation, "over there by the cashier. Isn't that our man?"

Adrian raised his eyes and gazed hard at the back of the man's head.

"I could tell better if he would remove his hat. It does look like him, but he has disguised himself some way."

"Sure," laughed Donald. "That's part of his trade; but I'm dead sure it is Strong."

"What had we better do?"

"I don't know. He'll recognize us the minute he sees us. If he is keeping away from us, he will leave. If he is not, he may come over and speak to us. There is no reason why he should not, so far as he knows."

"How would it do to make ourselves visible?"

"I hardly know." Then after a pause: "I'll tell you what. As soon as we finish we'll go out, as though we did not see him, but we will be sure to make enough commotion to attract his attention. Then we'll station ourselves where we can see him as he comes out."

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"That's all right, Don; but suppose he doesn't come out?"

Donald scratched his head.

"Oh!" he exclaimed, "I knew I had a thought back of that. When he sees us, if he is not trying to avoid us, he will speak to us. If he does not speak to us, we will know there is something wrong and take immediate steps to have him arrested."

"But he may escape."

"How can he?"

"I suppose he could go out through the kitchen if he had to," was the ready reply.

"Yes, I suppose he could. We must do better than that."

"I'll tell you," said Adrian. "I'll go over and speak to that soldier in English. If it is Strong, he will hear me and will involuntarily make some move. If he wants to make himself known, he will. If he does not do so, we will simply sit here till he goes out and then shadow him."

"That sounds good. Go over and say 'Howdy' to the soldier."

Adrian arose from his seat and stepped over to the soldier.

"Hello, partner!" was his somewhat noisy greeting. "Won't you come over to our table?"

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"Why, sure, neighbor! I was just thinking that I was getting mighty lonesome."

He arose from his chair and took a seat beside Donald, who had been observing Strong closely. There could be no doubt that he had been attracted by Adrian's voice, but he gave no intimation that he knew the boys.

"Glad to see you," said Donald, without taking his eyes from his man. "Won't you have another cup of coffee?"

"Bet your life, neighbor!" Then as he lighted a fresh cigarette: "Smoke?"

"Never learned!" laughed Donald. "Seems mighty funny down here, doesn't it?"

"Sure does; but you're just as well off without it. Live here?"

"No," replied Adrian; "we were on our way home and got stuck!"

"What's the matter?" asked the soldier, with much concern. "Out of coin?"

"We haven't much; but Gen. Funston has promised to find us passage home in a few days. Our friend saw him early this morning," this latter remark expressly for Strong's ears.

"If he told you he'd do it, he will," said the soldier. "You can bet on him every time."

It was very evident from Strong's actions that he was taking in every word of the conversation,

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which was in English and in an unusually loud voice. He pretended to eat, then leaned over and said something to his companion, and a minute later arose from the table and hastily quitted the place.

But the boys were not to be fooled. They sprang from the table and hastily followed, Donald throwing a greenback to the cashier which more than doubly paid the bill.

Their sudden action did not escape the soldier, who, attributing it to another cause, also hastily quitted the cantina.

As the boys emerged into the street, they saw Strong hastening away in the direction of the custom house.

"Going to lose himself in the crowd," said Donald. "Don't let him get out of your sight."

"What's the matter?" asked the soldier, running to catch up with the boys. "Ugly greasers?"

"No," replied Donald, "we're shadowing a man who is wanted by Gen. Funston. That's him," pointing; "keep your eye on him."

"I thought you chaps had something on," laughed the soldier. "You can bet on me!"

Now that they approached nearer the center of the business portion of the city, there were more people on the street; but they were so near their quarry that they easily kept him in sight. Only once had he glanced back, but that was enough to convince him that he was followed.

"He's headed for somewhere," said Adrian. "He doesn't expect to get away from us simply by walking." [Pg 241]

"Right," agreed Donald. "There he goes into the post office."

"Yes," from Adrian, "and it has two doors. You stop at the first one and I'll run to the other."

He started on a run and the soldier followed suit.

The sight of a man running and a soldier following, quickly attracted attention and pedestrians began to stop and see what the matter might be. In less than a minute a crowd had collected, among them several soldiers, who quickly brought Adrian to a halt.

"What's the matter?" asked one. Then as the soldier came up: "What are you chasing him for?"

"I'm not chasing him," laughed the seeming pursuer. "He and I are after another chap."

The delay occasioned by this interference was not great, but it was sufficient to allow Strong to escape, had it not been for Donald. He had seen the crowd gathering and, realizing what would happen, ran around the other way, just in time to see Strong disappearing around the corner of the street on which the bank was located.

Madly he dashed down the street and turned the corner in time to see Strong enter the big gate leading into the patio of Don Esteban's residence.

Putting on more steam, a couple of minutes later Donald also dashed into the patio; but Strong was nowhere to be seen. [Pg 242]

"He must be in the bank," muttered the boy, and he quickly entered the door.

But Strong had disappeared as completely as though the earth had opened and swallowed him up.

CHAPTER XXX.

THE MYSTERY SOLVED.

When the opening at the head of the stairs had closed upon Billie and he realized that he was shut in a subterranean passage, for a minute his heart sank within him.

He had tried to find an opening at the top of the opposite stairs and had failed, and he did not know that he would have any better success in trying to find a way to open the place through which he had descended.

"Nobody on earth knows that I am down here," he thought, "and with Santiago sick and maybe dying, no one on earth probably knows that there is such a passage."

But Billie was not the lad to sit down and cry. He had been in tight places before and he had an abiding faith in his own ability to do things. Therefore, he called up his courage and slowly mounted the stairs leading to Santiago's patio.

At the top of the stairs he found himself confronted by exactly the same condition as he had found on the opposite side. [Pg 243]

"But there is this difference," muttered Billie. "I know that there must be some sort of a crack

where that slab fell back."

He held the electric bull's-eye close to the stone and scrutinized every spot.

Not a single crack could he spy.

Then he took out his big jack-knife and prodded with it clear across the width of the stairway.

There was nothing but solid stone.

"Looks kind o' desperate," he told himself, "but I have simply got to find an opening."

Again he prodded the place over without result.

"It's no use," he finally said to himself. "If I am to get out of here, help will have to come from somewhere outside. But how can it?"

He sat down on the stairs and thought deeply.

"If it is as I think," he mused, "these stairs have been used recently. The very fact that Ambrosio is prowling around here is proof that Strong must have been here at some time. But where is Strong?"

He slid down several steps and threw the light of his torch across to the opposite stairs.

"Bang!" went something that sounded like a falling stone.

Billie sprang to his feet.

"Click! Bang!" and down the opposite stairway streamed a ray of light.

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Billie shut off his electric torch and waited.

Then on the steps there appeared a foot, then another, until a whole human body was in sight. Then "click, snap!" and the light disappeared.

"By George!" exclaimed Billie under his breath, "there's a man on the stairs right opposite to me. Who on earth can it be?"

His first inclination was to turn on the light, but on second thought he decided not to.

"I'll let him set the copy," thought Billie. "It's a mighty good thing to be able to spring the surprise."

He drew his automatic and stood ready for any emergency.

It was still as a tomb.

He could hear his own heart beat and he could also hear the heavy breathing of the other man.

"Sounds like he had been running and was just catching his breath," was Billie's mental comment.

After some minutes the man's breathing became more quiet and Billie heard him slowly descending the stairs.

"This won't do," thought Billie. "He probably has some kind of a light, and if he gets on the landing and I'm up here, I'll be like a man up a tree."

The lad sat down and slowly slid toward the bottom.

Being only a few steps from the landing, Billie was down first. He crowded to the right and listened.

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The other was now nearly on the landing. Now he was on the landing, hugging the wall on the side opposite Billie. Now they passed each other, or rather the man passed Billie, for Billie stood perfectly still.

It seemed as though he must hear Billie's breathing, but if he heard anything he must have thought it his own echo, never dreaming that he was not alone in the passage.

Now Billie could hear him ascending the stairs leading to Santiago's house, and his hope rose high.

"He must know how to open the floor," thought Billie. "I'll be right there when he does."

Silently as a cat Billie crept up the stairs behind his unknown companion.

Near the top the man stopped and a minute later he flashed an electric light against the stone overhead. Another minute and he heaved with the top of his head and the slab slid back.

"And now," exclaimed Billie in a deep voice, "put your hands over your head!"

Whether from fear or from the unparalleled surprise caused by hearing a human voice at such a time and in such a place, instead of obeying Billie's command, Strong's hands—for Strong it was—fell limp at his side and his electric torch fell to the stones beneath his feet.

"All right," continued Billy, "if that's the way you feel about it; but just remember that a single false move and I'll cut this automatic loose among your ribs. Now climb out a step at a time."

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With face as white as marble at the shock he had just sustained, Strong obeyed implicitly and Billie was soon standing on the stone patio, looking Strong in the face.

"You're a good one, you are," he said sarcastically. "I should think you'd be ashamed to call yourself an American."

"What do you mean?" asked Strong in a trembling voice.

"Why, first of all, stealing from the bank, and then selling your own countrymen to the Mexicans."

"Who have I sold?"

"Do you mean to say that you didn't sell Gen. Funston to the greasers for ten thousand dollars?"

"Of course I do!" in a somewhat stronger voice.

"Perhaps you'll deny that you are Strong, the mountebank. You don't think for one minute that I don't know you in spite of your make-up, do you?"

"No, I'll admit that I'm the mountebank. As for my name that is of small importance in a country like this. But I did not sell Gen. Funston, as you put it. I knew the man I pointed out was not Funston and I knew that as soon as the Mexicans found it out they would let him go. Some one might have told them rightly. As it was I spoiled their game and I got the money. Do you think it any crime to do that?"

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"That's a matter I am not in a position to discuss," was Billie's answer. "But how about robbing the bank?"

"I had as much right to the box as any one."

"You'll have to prove that to some one besides me; all I can do is to turn you over to the authorities."

"Never!" cried Strong. "I'll die before I'll rot in a Mexican jail!"

He uttered a peculiar noise and before Billie could imagine what it meant, he felt himself seized from behind by a pair of hairy hands.

He had been in that clutch once before and recognized in an instant that he was in the grip of the ape.

He gave one loud cry for help and then turned loose with his automatic.

The tumult which followed is beyond description. Billie's shout was as nothing compared to the cry of the ape as one of the bullets struck him in the leg and another pierced his foot. Loosing his hold upon the lad, he grabbed for the weapon, but Billie managed to evade him and would undoubtedly have slain the animal had not Strong sprung to his assistance, with the result that in another minute Billie was disarmed.

Ill would the lad have fared then, at the hands of his two assailants, had not the noise attracted to the scene several soldiers, while an instant later came a loud shout as Donald and Adrian dashed into the patio.

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On the other side of the square they had heard Billie's shout, followed by the automatic, and had rushed to his aid.

In another minute both Strong and his hairy friend were overcome and securely bound.

"Where did you find him?" asked Donald, pointing to Strong.

"Down there," was Billie's reply, as he pointed toward the still open underground passage way.

"How did he get there?"

"I suppose he entered from a similar entrance in Don Esteban's patio. I have had an idea all the time that there was some reason for the position of these two houses."

"But it doesn't lead into the bank. How could he steal the box out of the vault?"

"There is the real thief!" exclaimed Billie, pointing to the ape. "He sneaked in while Strong kept the bank employés engaged. By some mistake in his understanding he put the envelope back in the bank the next day instead of putting back the box. It was he who crawled through the bars into Santiago's library. He was also the devil who scared the maid almost into fits."

"Well! Well!" exclaimed a voice from the gateway. "I never could have believed it."

The voice was that of Don Esteban, who had entered while Billie was speaking.

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"I have come to see this strange man, Santiago Ojeda," he explained. "What says the doctor?"

"Here comes the doctor now," announced Adrian as the physician made his appearance in the gateway. "He can speak for himself."

CHAPTER XXXI.

THE TREASURE OF MONTEZUMA.

The shadows of evening had fallen and a cool breeze was blowing in off the Gulf of Mexico when a group of persons, among whom were the Broncho Rider Boys, gathered around the bedside of the sick man.

It was as the physician had predicted, and when Santiago had awakened after his long sleep, he had regained his senses, although he was very weak. But as the day declined and the heat lessened he had become stronger, and now at his own request, Lucia and her friends drew around to listen to his tale.

At one side of the bed stood Lucia, the three boys and Don Esteban. At the other stood Mr. Black, Josie and the physician, while at the foot of the bed was Strong, with Ambrosio in his arms, and a couple of soldiers who had the mountebank in custody.

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"As my daughter knows," began Santiago in a feeble voice, "I am a direct descendant of the great Montezuma. My ancestor was the guardian of the treasure which had been accumulated by the Aztec kings for years. After the overthrow of my race by the Spanish conquerors, there was given to my first great ancestor the keeping of the secret of the source of the gold which had made the city of Anahuac such a rich prize.

"This secret has been handed down through all these generations, the one object being to use this knowledge in freeing Mexico from the Spanish yoke. This secret I, as the last of my race, possess."

The aged man paused, his strength being hardly able to the task he had set himself.

"It is much as I suspected," whispered Don Esteban to Donald, while Lucia bent over and smoothed the brow of the sick man.

"A few years ago," Santiago finally continued, "I began to see an opportunity for the people to assert their rights. In our good Señor Madero I saw the one who should lead the common people out of their bondage. I went to him and offered him all the wealth at my command. He accepted the trust and we began our work. It was at that time that I placed the money with Don Esteban. Also the box, containing the secret of the mine, of which only I and Madero knew.

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"You all know what has happened since that time. Madero won, but he was betrayed. His betrayer now seeks to rule the republic, but he can never do it. He must be overthrown."

The aged man became greatly excited and the physician cautioned him to be careful. In a few minutes he became more peaceful and continued:

"I have always been a great friend of the Americans. I admired their integrity and their government. I spent many years of my youth in the United States. I have known many of their great men. I was sure they would be pleased with Madero, and they were. But after he was betrayed, then I began to fear them, as I was told that the usurper, Huerta, had been helped by them."

"Who told you that?" asked Billie, almost without thinking.

"That man there," and Santiago pointed with his long bony finger at the mountebank, Strong. "That man, Francisco Rodriguez, who claims to be an American, but who is a traitor to his country. He fed me with lies, as I now know, and he wormed out of me the secret of Montezuma's Mine."

Again the aged man's excitement nearly overcame him, but again he rallied with an almost superhuman effort.

"It was because of his lies that I made him my trusted agent; but he betrayed me as he has others. It was to him I gave the ten thousand pounds which the young señor took away from my servant, Pablo Ojeda—who is not an Ojeda, but whom I have allowed to use that name. I desire that the money become the property of the young señor," and he feebly extended his hand toward Billie, "who has always been such a good friend to me and mine. The secret of the mine is to be found in the box which I left with Don Esteban. I am getting to be an old man, and if you will now bring in the box, I will turn it over to my daughter Lucia, who is my only descendant."

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Don Esteban made no move to comply with the request, but looked at the boys in such a perplexed manner that the sick man was quick to take notice.

"What is it?" he asked, rising on his elbow and looking at Don Esteban with burning gaze. "What is it? Has anything happened to the box?"

"Yes," faltered the banker, "it has been stolen."

"Stolen!" almost shrieked Santiago. "Stolen! Then there stands the thief!" and he pointed to Strong, who stood with blanched face.

"We know that," said Billie, "but the box has been stolen again and no one knows where it has gone."

"You are wrong," muttered Strong. "It has not been stolen. It is in the bank where it always was."

"Impossible!" cried Don Esteban. "How could it be back in the vault?"

"Ask Ambrosio," replied Strong, with a wan smile. "He can tell."

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"Of course he cannot tell," almost shouted Don Esteban.

"Then we shall never know; but I am sure the box is there."

"Send for it! Send for it!" cried Santiago. "Send for it at once that I may turn over to my daughter the secret of the mine."

"That you will never be able to do," said Strong. "It has been destroyed."

"Destroyed!" burst from almost every lip. "Destroyed? How?"

Strong shook his head.

"I can't tell. Again you'll have to ask Ambrosio. It is he who destroyed it."

"By George!" exclaimed Billie, "I knew I ought to have killed that monk the first time I had any dealings with him. I'm sorry now that I didn't."

"At any rate," declared Don Esteban, "I shall send for the box."

He turned to Santiago, who had fallen back upon his pillow, and over whom the physician was bending and feeling his pulse.

"I shall send for it at once," he repeated.

Slowly the physician raised his head and loosed his hold upon the sick man's wrist.

"It is too late," he said. "He will not need it. He is dead."

On board a returning army transport bound for New York stood the Broncho Rider Boys casting their last glance shoreward as the sun was setting behind the mountains that form the background of the city of Vera Cruz. Over the city still waved the Stars and Stripes, and as the darkness fell and the tip of Mt. Orizaba gradually faded from sight, Billie turned to the others and in a voice tinged with sadness remarked:

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"There's only one thing about the whole country that I admire."

"What's, that?" asked Adrian. "Lucia?"

"No; it's the wholesome respect the Mexicans show for Brigadier-General Funston."

"Yes, and if he is let alone, he'll make them respect the American flag," echoed Donald.

"Long may it wave!" was Adrian's sententious comment.

But it did not wave long over Vera Cruz, for the following November, Huerta having been obliged to leave the country in the meantime and Gen. Carranza having established himself for the time being in the City of Mexico, the American forces were withdrawn and the Carranza forces took possession of Vera Cruz. Some months later Carranza was recognized by the United States, and at this writing is establishing his government, which promises to be a continuation of the one established by Madero.

Thus it will be seen that Santiago's work for his country was productive of good, as are all efforts to bring liberty to the people and to free them from the rule of a few.

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Before sailing for home, the boys had the satisfaction of knowing that the man known as Strong had been properly punished, and that, in accordance with Santiago's dying wish, the ten thousand pounds which he had practically given to Billie months before on the Rio Grande, were placed to the lad's credit in the banking house of Don Esteban.

The fate of Ambrosio, the ape which caused so much trouble, was left in the hands of the keeper of the prison to which Strong was sentenced. It is to be hoped that his behavior will improve.

THE END.

TRANSCRIBER'S NOTES

Front matter: Added table of contents.

Page 48: Removed extra quotation mark.

Page 60: Changed "moso" to "mozo."

Page 62: Changed typo "gaurd" to "guard."

Page 87: Changed typo "variey" to "variety."

Pages 123, 132: Left words "blue-jackets" and "bluejackets" as printed.

Page 140: Added closing quotation mark.

Page 197: Added missing period.

Pages 206, 214, 224: Left words "kipnaped" and "kipnapped" as printed.

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THE BRONCHO RIDER BOYS WITH FUNSTON
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