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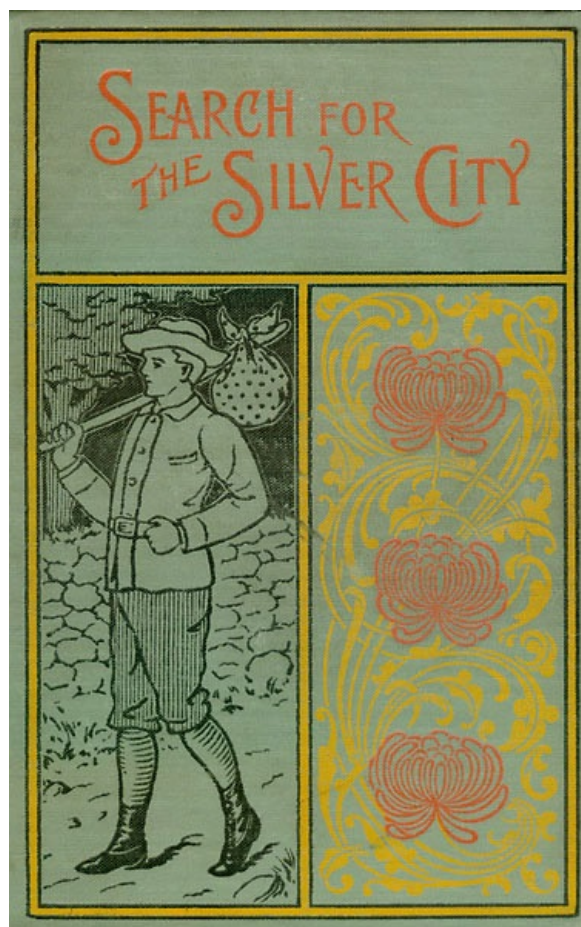
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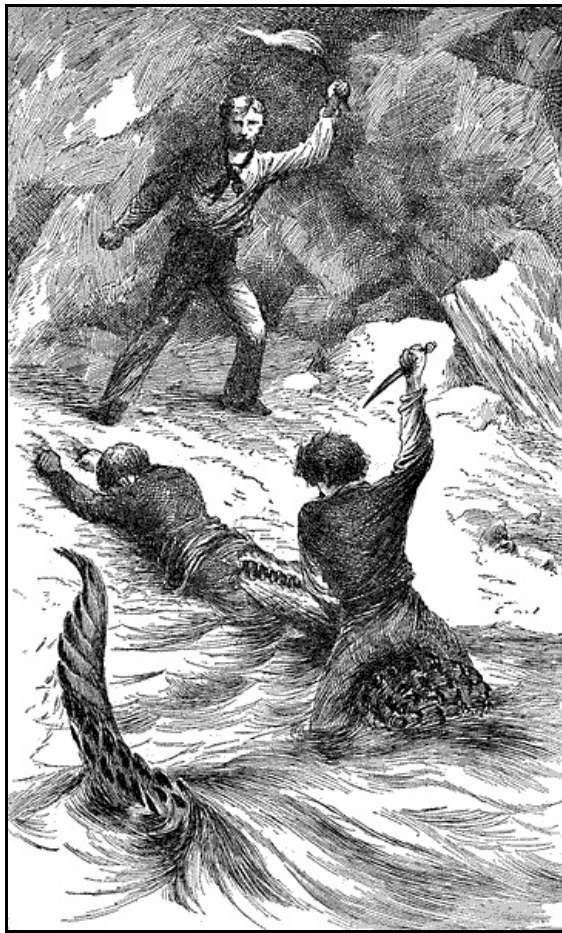
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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THE SEARCH FOR THE SILVER CITY: A TALE OF ADVENTURE IN YUCATAN ***





Instead of releasing his hold on Neal
the reptile held firm, etc. See page [193](#).

THE SEARCH FOR THE SILVER CITY.

A TALE OF ADVENTURE IN YUCATAN.

By **JAMES OTIS.**

Author of "The Castaways," "A Runaway Brig," "The Treasure Finders," etc., etc.

ILLUSTRATED.



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INTRODUCTION.

In Mr. E. G. Squier's preface to the translation of the Chevalier Arthur Morelet's "Travels in

Central America" the following paragraph can be found:

"Whoever glances at the map of Central America will observe a vast region, lying between Chiapas, Tabasco, Yucatan, and the republic of Guatemala, and comprising a considerable part of each of those states, which, if not entirely a blank, is only conjecturally filled up with mountains, lakes and rivers. It is almost as unknown as the interior of Africa itself. We only know that it is traversed by nameless ranges of mountains, among which the great river Usumasinta gathers its waters from a thousand tributaries, before pouring them, in a mighty flood, into the Lagoon of Terminos, and the Gulf of Mexico. We know that it has vast plains alternating with forests and savannas; deep valleys where tropical nature takes her most luxuriant forms, and high plateaus dark with pines, or covered with the delicate tracery of arborescent ferns. We know that it conceals broad and beautiful lakes, peopled with fishes of new varieties, and studded with islands which supports the crumbling yet still imposing remains of aboriginal architecture and superstition. And we know, also, that the remnants of the ancient Itzæes, Lacandones, Choles, and Manches, those indomitable Indian families who successfully resisted the force of the Spanish arms, still find a shelter in its fastnesses, where they maintain their independence, and preserve and practice the rites and habits of their ancestors as they existed before the discovery. Within its depths, far off on some unknown tributary of the Usumasinta, the popular tradition of Guatemala and Chiapas places that great aboriginal city, with its white walls shining like silver in the sun, which the *curé* of Quiche affirmed to Mr. Stephens he had seen, with his own eyes, from the tops of the mountains of Quesaltenango."

In Stephens' "Yucatan," Vol II, page 195, are the following lines:

"He (meaning the padre of Quiche, with whom Mr. Stephens was conversing), was then young, and with much labor climbed to the naked summit of the Sierra, from which, at a height of ten or twelve thousand feet, he looked over an immense plain—and saw at a great distance a large city spread over a great space, and with turrets white and glittering in the sun. The traditional account of the Indians of Chajul is, that no white man has ever reached this city, that the inhabitants speak the Maya language, are aware that a race of strangers has conquered the whole country around, and murder any white man who attempts to enter their territory. They have no coin or other circulating medium; no horses, cattle, mules, or other domestic animals except fowls, and the cocks they keep under ground to prevent their crowing being heard. One look at that city would be worth ten years of an every-day life. If he (the padre) is right, a place is left where Indians and an Indian city exist as Cortez and Alvarado found them; there are living men who can solve the mystery that hangs over the ruined cities of America; who perhaps can go to Copan and read the inscriptions on its monuments. No subject more exciting and attractive presents itself to my mind, and the deep impression will never be effaced."

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THE SEARCH FOR THE SILVER CITY.

CHAPTER I.

THE SEA DREAM.

Three years ago last August, it is unnecessary to specify the exact date, Teddy Wright was not only a very lonely fellow, but considered himself abused by circumstances.

During the previous season he had studied very hard at the military school on the Hudson which he often referred to slightly as "the barracks," and as a reward for the flattering reports sent home by his teachers, had been promised a long vacation in the Adirondacks with a schoolmate who lived in the northern portion of New York state.

Teddy's parents and sisters intended spending the summer at some one of the fashionable watering places; but with three long months of "roughing it" where game could be found in abundance, he had no desire to accompany them.

"Life in the woods knocks staying at a big hotel on the sea-shore, where a fellow is obliged to be dressed up all the time," he said when one of his sisters expressed surprise at his choice. "We shall regularly camp out, and father has given me a doubled-barreled breech-loader, to say nothing of his own rod and collection of flies. Jack and I will have the jolliest kind of a time while you're moonin' on the hot sands trying to think it is fun."

Teddy went to Jack's home, and, to his sorrow and dismay, found that young gentleman so ill that there was no hope of his being allowed to take the long-contemplated trip.

He remained there, however, until perfectly certain of this unpleasant fact, and then returned home to the house which had been left in charge of one servant, and, as he expressed it, "just to spite himself," refused to join the remainder of the family.

Of course this was a most foolish proceeding; but Teddy was in that frame of mind where a boy of seventeen is prone to foolish deeds, and there he stayed in a frame of mind very nearly approaching the sulks, until he received a letter from Neal Emery, another schoolmate, whose father lived in Bridgeport.

Mr. Emery owned a large factory in that city, and Neal had intended to spend his vacation at home where he could enjoy the use of a small sloop-rigged yacht his mother had presented him with the year previous.

The letter contained a very pressing invitation for Teddy to visit Bridgeport, since his trip to the Adirondacks had been postponed, and concluded with the startling announcement:

"Father has just bought the Sea Dream, a beautiful steam yacht of an hundred feet in length, and I don't know how many tons. He proposes to cruise around three or four weeks while mother is at Bar Harbor, and is perfectly willing I should invite you to join us. We will have a jolly time, and if nothing prevents I want you to come at once. We are to start Wednesday morning."

The letter had been received Monday afternoon, therefore Teddy had but little time for preparation.

He first sent a long telegram to his father, repeating the substance of what Neal had written, and asked permission to enroll himself on the Sea Dream's passenger list.

Not until late in the evening did he receive a favorable reply; but his traps, including the gun and fishing tackle, were packed, and on the first train Tuesday morning he started, all traces of ill-humor having vanished, for a cruise on a steam yacht promised quite as great pleasure as had the stay in the woods, with not so much certainty of hard work. Neal met him at the depot, and after going to the former's home only long enough to leave the baggage, the two set out to view the yacht which, in all the bravery of glistening paint and polished metal, lay at anchor in the harbor.

Although not an expert in matters pertaining to marine architecture, Teddy could appreciate the beauty of the little craft while she swung lazily to and fro at her cable as if husbanding strength against the time when speed and endurance would be required.

Neal signaled from the pier, two of the crew came ashore in the captain's boat, and the boys went on board where, during the remainder of the day, they were busy examining and admiring the jaunty little craft.

Leading from the main saloon were two state-rooms on either side, and in one of these Neal had already stored such of his belongings as he intended to take on the cruise.

"This is our room, and now that we are here I wonder why we were so foolish as to carry your baggage up to the house. If it was with us we would remain on board, for it is very much more pleasant than in the hot town."

"There is nothing to prevent our bringing it down," Teddy replied with a laugh. "I had certainly rather stay here to-night."

"Come on, and then we shall feel more at home when the cruise begins."

The boys were rowed ashore, and the sailors instructed to remain at the pier until their return.

Then a short visit was made to Mr. Emery's office, where Neal explained what they proposed to do, and having received permission to occupy the quarters slightly in advance of sailing time, Teddy's baggage was soon in the small apartment which to both the boys looked so enchanting.

"I wish we were to be gone three years," Teddy said as he threw himself on a locker and gazed around.

If he could have known just at that moment how long the cruise would really last it is very certain he would not have expressed such a desire.

"Next year father says he will start early in the season, take mother with us, and not come back until it is time for me to go to school."

"And you must get an invitation for me," Teddy replied, his eyes glistening with pleasure at simply contemplating such an excursion.

"There won't be any difficulty about it. He has already promised that if nothing happens he will speak to your father."

"And in the meanwhile we've got before us the jolly fact that we're to stay on board a month."

"Yes; but there's no good reason why we should remain below where it is so warm. Come on deck for awhile, and then we'll have a look at the engine-room."

The engineer, Jake Foster, was under the awning aft, and Neal introduced his friend, saying as he did so:

"Teddy has never been yachting before, not even in a sailing craft."

Jake, a stout, jolly looking fellow hardly more than twenty-five years of age, gazed at the visitor curiously a moment, and then said with a hearty laugh:

"He'll have a chance to find out what an acquaintance with the ocean means, for I understand that Mr. Emery is going to run well over to the Bahamas before he comes back."

"Father has business there which it would be necessary to attend to not later than next fall, so intends to make it a portion of the pleasure trip."

"Are we likely to have much rough weather?" Teddy asked, realizing for the first time that it was more than possible he might be called upon to pay Neptune a tribute.

"Not at this time of the year; but its more'n probable the Sea Dream will kick up her heels enough to show something of what is meant by a life on the ocean wave before she pokes her nose into this port again."

Then the engineer was summoned from below, and the boys remained aft recalling to mind all they had studied relative to the Bahama banks.

The stores were on board; everything was in readiness for the start as soon as the owner should arrive, and when the steward summoned them to supper it seemed as if the voyage had really begun.

CHAPTER II.

UNDER WEIGH.

It was a long while before the boys could close their eyes in slumber on this first night aboard the Sea Dream, owing to the novelty of the surroundings. It seemed as if Teddy would never cease admiring the snug quarters with the guns and fishing rods hung where they could be seen to the best advantage, and Neal had very much to say regarding the plans he proposed to carry into execution during the cruise.

Despite such enchanting topics of conversation they were not able to remain awake all night, and when finally the journey into dreamland was made, neither returned to a full realization of the situation until quite late in the morning.

Teddy was the first to open his eyes, and in a very few seconds the throbbing of the screw, as well as the invigorating draught of cool air which came through the open port-hole, told him that the voyage had really begun.

"Neal, Neal," he cried, shaking his friend vigorously. "Wake up; I think we are at sea."

Neal was on his feet in an instant, and after one glance through the tiny window he replied with a laugh:

"There's no question about our being under way; but we sha'n't see the sea to-day."

"Why, we are on it now."

"If you have forgotten your geography as soon as this you'll be obliged to do some mighty hard studying when we get back to school. The Sea Dream must go through the sound before we reach the ocean, and most likely we shall make harbor at Martha's Vineyard to-night."

"Of course I knew about the sound; I had forgotten, that's all," and Teddy looked just a trifle ashamed at having displayed so much ignorance.

Never had the boys made their toilets more quickly. Both were eager to be on deck in order to extract the greatest possible amount of pleasure out of this first day of the cruise, and when they finally emerged from the companion-way an exclamation of surprise and delight burst from Teddy's lips.

The yacht was steaming at nearly full speed over waters as placid as a pond, and here and there were craft of all kinds darting back and forth like active fish.

"I tell you there's nothing in the way of sport to beat sailing," Teddy said enthusiastically.

"There are times when it isn't quite as nice as this. When it storms, and the yacht dances around so that it is impossible to come on deck you will think camping in the Adirondacks is much better."

"I thought vessels always went into a harbor at such times."

"If you are at sea it is necessary to take whatever comes in the way of weather, but there is no reason why we should speak of such things now. Let's have a look at Jake and his engine before breakfast."

During this first day of the cruise the boys were very busy. Considerable time was spent eating three decidedly hearty meals, and what with inspecting every portion of the steamer and watching the passing vessels, they managed without much trouble to find something in the way of amusement until the Sea Dream arrived off Cottage City, where Mr. Emery proposed to stop a day or two.

The wind had come up quite strong toward night, and when the little craft swung to her anchors some distance from the shore Teddy was feeling decidedly disagreeable.

There was not sea enough to trouble the greenest fresh-water sailor that ever "caught a crab;" but to poor Teddy, who had never been on the water save when crossing from New York to Brooklyn or Jersey City, it seemed as if the Sea Dream was very like a hideous nightmare.

She danced lightly on the long swell as if courtesying to the craft in her immediate vicinity, and each graceful movement caused Neal's guest to fancy his stomach was turning somersaults.

"You are not going below now?" the former said as Teddy staggered toward the companion-way.

"I am if it is possible to get there," was the impatient reply.

"But we shall have a chance to see the town. Father is going ashore presently."

"In one of those little boats?" and Teddy pointed to the davits where four polished tenders hung glistening in the sun like some articles of adornment.

"Of course. How else could he get there?"

"That doesn't make any difference to me. This boat is bouncing around enough for a fellow to wish he'd never heard of such a thing as a yacht, and in one of those egg-shells I'm certain it must be terrible."

"But it isn't. Try not to think of being sick, and come on shore with me."

"How can I help not thinking about it when I feel as if I was dying?"

Then, as if unable to prolong the conversation, Teddy ran below, while his friend followed more leisurely.

Neal could offer no inducements sufficiently strong to tempt his companion out of the berth, and there he remained until next morning when, in half a gale of wind, Mr. Emery decided to take a party of friends to Nantucket.

Only this was needed to give Teddy a severe attack of seasickness during which, when he spoke at all, it was to repeat over and over again his intention of going home as soon as the Sea Dream arrived at Cottage City.

Probably he would have carried this threat into execution if the excursion had not been prolonged; but it was four days before the yacht returned to Martha's Vineyard, and by that time he had, as Jake expressed it, "found his sea legs."

Now no matter how much the little craft tumbled around he remained undisturbed, and the sight of food was no longer disagreeable, but very pleasing to him.

Therefore it was that when the Sea Dream left Cottage City for the Bahamas, the delightful portion of the cruise, so far as Teddy was concerned, had but just begun.

Inasmuch as there was no especial reason why they should arrive at any certain time, and the owner wished to remain at sea as long as possible while making the voyage, the yacht was run at half speed, thus not only saving considerable coal; but unnecessary wear and tear of the machinery.

That it could be very warm on the water had never entered the minds of the boys; but as they journeyed southward the heat became intense. During two days it was almost a perfect calm, the only air stirring being that caused by the motion of the steamer, and the cabin seemed like an oven. There the thermometer stood at 84 degrees, while in the galley it was twenty degrees higher, and in the engine-room it frequently rose to 130 degrees.

Neal and Teddy could do little more than lie under the awning aft, working hard but unsuccessfully to keep cool by the aid of fans and such iced drinks as the steward prepared.

The novelty of yachting had passed away in a measure, and they were already counting the days which must elapse before the Sea Dream would be in a less torrid climate.

Jake had assured them that when the yacht came to an anchor and the fires were drawn it would be much cooler on board, therefore both the boys were delighted when Bridge Point at the entrance to the N. E. Providence Channel was sighted.

There was a light breeze blowing off the banks, and the yacht was running slowly as she passed within a quarter of a mile of the low lying land, when suddenly a most disagreeable odor from the shore caused Neal to say impatiently:

"If such perfumes as that are common to the Bahamas I had rather endure the heat than stay a very long while, no matter how cool it may be when we cease steaming."

"What is it?" and Teddy covered his nose with his handkerchief.

"I don't know; but I wish Jake would put her ahead faster, for it is absolutely sickening."

His desire for more speed was not gratified. To the surprise of both the boys the engine-room gong sounded for the machinery to be stopped, and as the headway was checked Mr. Walters, the sailing master, came from the wheel-house to where Mr. Emery was sitting.

The boys could not hear the short conversation which followed; but their surprise increased as the order was given to lower away one of the port boats.

"What are we stopping here for?" Neal inquired of his father.

"Doesn't the odor give you any idea?" Mr. Emery asked with a smile.

"None except that the sooner we get away the more comfortable I shall feel."

"When I tell you that we are likely to find as the cause of your discomfort something nearly as precious as gold, it may be a trifle more bearable."

Both Neal and Teddy looked perplexed, and the latter said laughingly:

"It is strong enough to be worth a good deal; but do you really mean what you say, sir?"

"Every word. Mr. Walters thinks he can find ambergris which has been washed up on the rocks, and that is quoted at ten dollars per ounce. Now you boys have been at school long enough to know exactly why it is so valuable."

"I have heard of it as being the base of the finest perfumes," Neal said slowly; "but that must surely be a mistake if it smells anything like this," and he did violence to his stomach by inhaling a long breath of the disagreeably laden air.

"It is true, nevertheless. Ambergris is believed to be the product of a sort of ulcer or cancer which has formed in the bowels of a whale. After a certain length of time, or because a cure has been wrought by change of feeding place, the mass is dislodged. It floats, and is often found far out to sea; but more particularly among the cays in the Turks islands. It is the foundation of nearly every perfume, and in ancient times was used for spicing wine."

During this conversation the boat had been lowered, and, with Mr. Walters as steersman, was being pulled toward the land. Now Neal and Teddy were sorry they had not accompanied the sailing master; but it was too late for regrets, and the odor did not seem to be nearly as

disagreeable since they knew from what it proceeded.

"Never mind how much the stuff is worth," Teddy said, as he and Neal leaned over the rail in company with Jake, who had come on deck to ascertain why the yacht had been brought to a standstill, "it isn't a nice thing to smell of, and I shall remember this afternoon whenever I see perfume."

"It isn't always the most agreeable things which are of the most service," Jake replied with an air of wisdom; and then as a loud shout was heard from the shore, the boat having reached the land some time since, he added, "It's ambergris for a fact, or they wouldn't be makin' such a fuss."

Five minutes later the little craft was seen approaching the yacht, and each instant the odor became stronger until both the boys were forced to cover their organs of smell.

In the bow of the boat was a black mass looking not unlike coke, and weighing, as was afterward ascertained, forty ounces.

"I thought I couldn't be mistaken, although I never run across anything of the kind but once before," Mr. Walters said triumphantly, as he handed the precious substance up to one of the sailors, who took it very unwillingly.

"We shall be driven out of the yacht if you try to carry it home," Mr. Emery replied, moving aft as far as possible.

"It won't trouble us many hours. We will sell or ship it at Nassau, and I reckon all hands can manage to live until we arrive there."

The valuable substance was wrapped carefully in several thicknesses of canvas, and placed in the hold where it is not probable any odor from it could have been perceptible on deck, although both the boys were quite positive the yacht was thoroughly permeated.

After this short delay the Sea Dream continued on her course at a higher rate of speed, for now that she was so near land the heat seemed unbearable, and when night came Neal and Teddy stretched themselves out in the hammocks which had been slung under the after awning, wishing, not for a glimpse of Nassau; but that they were off the New England coast instead of being so near the tropics.

Then, despite the profuse perspiration, both fell asleep, not to waken until the rattling of the cable through the hawse-holes told that they were in the harbor.

CHAPTER III.

NASSAU.

A semi-tropical port in midsummer is by no means a pleasant place however diversified and picturesque the scenery may be, and when the boys awakened from their restless slumber the lassitude which beset them told how great an effect the climate could exert.

Even Mr. Emery was disinclined to any severe exertion; but his business must be transacted, and, after a breakfast eaten on deck, he ordered the boat to be made ready.

"If possible I shall leave to-night," Neal and Teddy heard him say to the sailing master, "therefore it will be well to get your ambergris on shore before noon."

Neither of the boys cared to see the town at the expense of walking around under the blazing sun, and when Mr. Emery was being rowed toward the dock-yard they joined Jake who, in the coolest spot under the awning, was watching the fishermen near by.

The water was clear as crystal, and of a bright greenish tinge which admitted of their seeing very distinctly the tiny fish of silver and golden hues as they darted to and fro; the violet and blue medusæ, and the cream-colored jelly-fish as big as a watermelon. There were angel fish of a bright blue tinge; yellow snappers; black and white sergeant majors; pilot fish; puff fish which could inflate their bodies until they were round as a ball, or flatten themselves to the shape of a griddle cake.

The cow fish attracted the boys' attention more particularly, for it had two horns, and its head was shaped exactly like a cow, and when one passed with a "calf" as Teddy called it, swimming by her side, both agreed that it was well worth suffering so much from the heat to see such a sight.

Fish of all colors and sizes swam around the yacht as if examining her hull, and the effect of such brilliant hues displayed through the crystal-like water was actually startling because of the gorgeousness.

Before they were weary of admiring this aquatic panorama Jake called their attention to a fisherman who, in a small canoe, was pursuing his vocation in a very odd manner.

In his boat he had a hideous looking sucking fish, around the tail of which was tied a long cord with a wooden float at one end. While the boys were watching him he dropped the monster

overboard, and in an instant it darted at a medium-sized Jew fish, attaching itself to the latter by means of the sucking valve on the top of its head. Having done this he remained motionless, his victim seeming to be literally paralyzed, and there was nothing for the boatman to do but pull in on the float, disengage his animated fishhook by a dextrous pressure on the sucker after both had been drawn aboard, and send the repulsive looking servant out again.

Although the Jew fish must have weighed at least a hundred pounds, he was landed without difficulty, and Jake gravely assured his companions that a sucking fish could "pull up the whole bottom of the ocean providin' the rope on his tail was strong enough to stand the strain."

Then the engineer told a story which did not bear quite so hard on the imagination since it was absolutely true, and began by saying as he pointed toward the little fortification known as Montague fort:

"That place has been the headquarters of at least a dozen pirates, the worst of which was called Black Beard, a bloodthirsty villain who sunk two vessels right where we are anchored this blessed minute. The feller's real name was John Teach, an' that big banyan tree over there is where he used to hold what he allowed was court martials.

"He was drunk about three-quarters of the time, an' allers had a great spree when there were any prisoners on hand. He an' his men would get the poor wretches to the tree, go through all the ceremony of a reg'lar trial, an' allers end by stringin' every blessed one of 'em up in such a way as to prevent 'em from dyin' quick, when a fire'd be built underneath, so's to roast the whole lot.

"They do say he buried all the treasure among the roots of the banyan, an' many's the one who has dug for it; but so far as I ever heard, not a single piece has been found. While he lived this wasn't a very pleasant harbor for them as cared about a livin' to make."

"What became of him finally?" Teddy asked.

"An English man-of-war got hold of him after awhile, an' he was strung on the yardarm to dry. If I'd been in command of the vessel he should have found out how it felt to be roasted. Say, don't you boys want to go over to Potter's cay?"

"What is to be seen there?"

"The sponge yards, an' it's a great sight if you never visited one."

"It is too hot," Neal replied with a very decided shake of the head.

Jake did not urge the matter, for just at that moment the second port boat was lowered, and Mr. Walters made ready to go ashore with his precious bundle of aromatic ambergris.

Idly the boys watched the perspiring party, pressing handkerchiefs to their faces meanwhile, since, despite the wrappings of canvas, the valuable mass gave most decided proof of its being in the vicinity, and when the boat started for the shore Neal and Teddy clambered into the hammocks, for even leaning over the rail was an exertion in the sultry atmosphere.

During the middle of the day both the boys slept, for a siesta is as necessary as food in hot climates, and when the light breeze of evening crept over the waters Mr. Emery came aboard with the welcome intelligence that his business had been concluded.

"We will get under way again before midnight," he said as he stepped over the rail, and was received by Mr. Walters. "Now that a breeze has set in it should be cool enough to permit of the men's working without fear of prostration."

"It would use me up to walk fore and aft twice," Neal said in an undertone to Teddy; "but it isn't for us to complain of the heat if we can get out of this furnace."

Jake was nowhere to be seen. It was as if after his invitation to go on shore had been declined he betook himself to some other portion of the yacht, where he could perspire without allowing the others to see his suffering, and the boys swung to and fro until the hour came when the singing of steam told that preparations for departure were being made.

There could be no doubt but that Nassau would be a pleasant place in which to spend the winter months; but it was by no means desirable during the summer, and when the Sea Dream left the little harbor where the water was hardly more than sufficient to float her, both Neal and Teddy gave vent to a sigh of relief.

"We are to run south until it is possible to give the banks a clear berth, and then stand straight up the coast for home," the former said as the yacht glided almost noiselessly over the phosphorescent lighted waters down the eastern side of the shoals. "If a good head of steam is kept on we should be in a colder latitude very soon."

"We can't get there any too soon to please me," Teddy replied, as he waved the palm-leaf fan languidly. "I believe it would be a positive comfort to have my nose frost-bitten."

"It isn't possible you will have such comfort as that for some time to come; but we may be able to make your teeth chatter in a few days," Neal replied laughingly, and then as the breeze caused by the movement of the yacht over the water fanned his face, he added sleepily, "Good night; I don't believe I shall open my eyes until after sunrise to-morrow."

As a matter of fact this prediction was not verified; before evening a wind had come out of the sea which caused the yacht to bow before it like a reed in a storm, and the hammocks that, a few hours previous, had seemed so rest-inviting, were swinging at a rate that threatened to throw their occupants to the deck.

"I fancy it is time we went below," Neal said, as he awakened his friend by a series of vigorous shakes. "If we stay here half an hour longer it will be doubtful whether we're on board or in the water."

The Sea Dream's lee rail was already so near the surface that the green waves curled over it now and then, and before the boys could reach the cabin they were thoroughly drenched.

It was the greatest possible relief to crawl into the bunk and pull up the bed-clothes to defend themselves against the cold wind which came through the port-hole, and so delicious was this sense of being chilly that they failed to realize the cause of the sudden change in the weather, until they heard the sailing master in the cabin reply to Mr. Emery's question:

"You are getting your first taste of what is known as a norther; but there isn't the slightest danger if we can crawl away from the land, and we shall have no trouble in doing that so long as there is a full head of steam on."

"What does he mean by a norther?" Teddy asked of Neal, who had shown, by rising on his elbow, that he was awake.

"A wind coming from the north, more frequently met in the Gulf of Mexico, when the temperature falls very suddenly, as was the case this evening, and a furious gale is often the result."

"So long as it holds cold I don't see that we have any cause to complain," was the sleepy rejoinder; but before the night came to a close he had good reason for changing his mind on the subject.

It was about midnight, as near as the boys could judge without looking at a watch, when the yacht was flung on her beam ends with a sudden force which threw both out of the berth, and before the port-hole could be fastened, flooded the state-room with water.

Teddy might well be excused for the shrill cry of alarm which escaped from his lips, for at that moment even an experienced sailor would have fancied the little craft had struck upon a reef, more particularly since it was known they were in a dangerous locality.

"We are sinking!" he cried frantically as he tried in vain to open the door, and Neal was of the same opinion.

After what seemed to be a very long while although in reality it could have been but a few seconds, the Sea Dream slowly righted, and then it was possible for the boys to gain the cabin.

Here they were met by Mr. Emery, who had just succeeded in leaving his own room, and before any conversation could be indulged in the steamer began pitching and rolling about in a manner that showed she was not on the reef even if the first shock had been the result of striking one.

It was only by holding with all their strength to the immovable articles of furniture that they avoided being flung from one end of the cabin to the other, as the yacht plunged and tossed, throwing violently to and fro everything which had not been securely fastened.

The cabin lamp was burning dimly, and the faint light only served to reveal more clearly the general confusion.

Once amid the tumult the boys heard Mr. Emery shout:

"Don't be frightened; if there was any immediate danger Mr. Walters would warn us."

"He may not be able to come where we are," Teddy thought; but he refrained from giving words to such a dismal foreboding, and in silent fear waited for—he knew not what.

CHAPTER IV.

A NEW DANGER.

To the frightened boys in the cabin it was as if the night would never come to an end, and during every one of those fearful moments they believed the yacht was on the point of taking the final plunge.

At four o'clock in the morning the steamer's movements became more regular; but not less in violence, and, shortly after, the sailing master came below.

"We are laying-to," he said to Mr. Emery. "There is a nasty sea on, and I didn't care to take the chances of fighting against it."

"How does she stand it?"

"Like a darling. I was afraid of straining her at first; but when she took the butt end of the storm in such a pleasant fashion there was no longer any reason to fret about her."

"It didn't seem like such a very pleasant fashion to us," Teddy said to Neal, who had succeeded in gaining a chair near his friend.

"It appeared to me as if she kicked pretty hard about it," Neal replied, and then Mr. Emery asked:

"What are the weather indications?"

"There is no reason to hope for anything better until the wind blows itself out, and according to my way of thinking that won't be within the next twenty-four hours. Why don't you people lie down?"

"Because it has been a matter of impossibility to remain in the berths."

"You can do so now without much difficulty. Come, boys, let me help you to turn in."

The calm, matter-of-fact way in which Mr. Walters acted caused the boys to feel more comfortable in mind, and they made no protest when he assisted them to the state-room where there was yet water enough to show what had happened.

"Why didn't you call one of the stewards to mop this up?" the sailing master asked as he lighted the swinging lamp.

"We haven't seen one since the gale begun," Neal replied with a laugh. "I fancy they were as much frightened as Teddy and I."

"It won't take long to turn them out," and Mr. Walters started forward in a manner which boded no good for the skulkers.

Neal and Teddy found little difficulty in retaining a recumbent position, although the yacht was tossing up and down like a mad thing. She no longer gave those sudden lurches which threatened to carry away even the short spars, and for the first time since the deluge from the port-hole, they began to feel really comfortable in mind.

The steward came in very shortly after Mr. Walters left, and from the expression on his face it was evident he had been rated severely for neglect of duty.

"It didn't make any difference to us whether the water was washed up or not," Neal said in a friendly tone. "The sailing master saw it and asked why we hadn't called you."

"He don't allow that a man has any right to sleep," the steward replied sulkily. "If he'd been up since five o'clock, he'd want to turn in before midnight instead of foolin' around the cabin till it was time to begin another day's work."

"Is it possible that you have been sleeping?" Neal asked in surprise.

"Why not?"

"I don't see how you could even lie down while the yacht was tumbling about in such a furious manner."

"That was none of my business. I didn't ship before the mast, consequently it ain't any duty of mine to go prowlin' 'round if the wind happened to blow a little."

"If you call this a 'little' I wouldn't like to be on board when you thought it was a regular gale," Teddy said with a laugh.

"I've seen the wind blow so hard that a fellow had to lash his hair down to keep it from bein' carried away when he went on deck; but that didn't stop my wantin' to get a watch below."

With this remark the steward, having finished his work, left the room, and the boys were alone once more.

Although they had believed it would be impossible to sleep during a gale such as the yacht was now laboring under, the eyes of both were soon closed in slumber, not to be opened until late in the morning.

So far as could be told by the motion, there was no diminution in the strength of the wind, and they experienced great difficulty in making their toilets.

When this task had finally been accomplished, however, Neal said as he opened the door after some trouble, owing to the erratic movements of the yacht:

"I'm going on deck. It can't be much worse there, and it wouldn't be a bad idea to see what the ocean looks like in a gale."

"I'll go too: but don't let's venture out of the companion-way, for the waves must be making a clean sweep over the decks."

When the boys entered the cabin no one was to be seen save the surly steward who visited them the night previous, and in reply to Neal's question he said:

"Your father left word that he wasn't to be called. It wouldn't be much use for him to turn out,

because we can't set the table in such a rumpus."

"What are we to do for breakfast?"

"The same as Mr. Walters did, get a cup of coffee and a hard-tack; that'll go way ahead of nothin' if you're very hungry."

"We can go into the galley when we want a bite," Neal replied, and then he led the way up the narrow stairs where, through the half-opened hatch, it was possible to get a view of the raging waters.

Perhaps it would have been better, so far as their peace of mind was concerned, not to have ventured out, for the scene was anything rather than reassuring.

Standing there and looking forward the boys could see a huge wall of water dead ahead bearing down upon the yacht as if to swamp her, and at the moment when it appeared as if the final stroke had come she would lurch to leeward, presenting her side to the wave, rising on the succeeding one and shivering on its crest as if shaking the spray from her shrouds, after which came the downward plunge that caused the boys to hold their breath in fear.

The sky, the swiftly flying clouds, and the waves were of a grayish hue looking ominous and threatening and the little craft appeared to be but a plaything for the angry elements. That she could out-ride the gale seemed almost impossible, and Teddy said with a shudder as he descended the stairs:

"Don't let's stay where we can see it. I wish I hadn't looked, for, bad as matters seem to be down here, it is as nothing compared to being on deck."

Neal was of the same opinion, and the two passed through the cabin to the engine-room where Jake was keeping vigilant watch over the machinery.

"Why, I thought we were hove to," Neal exclaimed in surprise as the engineer assisted him and Teddy to a seat by his side.

"So we are; but it is necessary to keep the screw turning, otherwise it might not be possible to hold her in the proper position."

"How long have you been on duty?"

"Since I saw you last."

"Haven't you had any sleep?"

"I can bottle up enough when the gale abates; but just now it stands a man in hand to have his weather eye open pretty wide, for a bit of carelessness would work considerable mischief. I'm going to have breakfast, an' if you boys care to join me we'll make it three-handed. You're not likely to fare any better in the cabin than here to-day."

The boys accepted the invitation, and with some cold meat and hard-tack placed on the locker where it could not slide off, and mugs of steaming coffee in their hands, all made a remarkably jolly meal under the unfavorable circumstances.

During the remainder of the day Neal and Teddy stayed below, not caring for another view of the angry sea, and when night came the gale had so far abated that the yacht was sent ahead once more; but owing to the force and direction of the wind it was deemed best to continue on a southerly course even at the expense of reaching the Caribbean Sea, rather than take the chances of putting about.

All this Jake explained when the boys visited him just previous to retiring, and he added in conclusion:

"It seems pretty tough to go yet further south; but Mr. Walters is a cautious sailin' master, an' when he makes up his mind to a thing you can count on its bein' mighty nigh right."

"Will it be possible to get home as soon as father intended if we go so far out of the way?" Neal asked.

"If he don't do any cruisin' after he gets up north I reckon it could be done; but there's no sense in figgerin' on that till we're off Hatteras."

Now that the yacht had proved her seaworthiness by riding safely through the storm the boys would have been willing to go almost anywhere in her, and the idea that they might have no cruising in a more agreeable climate caused a decided feeling of disappointment; but, as Jake had said, there was no reason to worry about that while they were so far from home, and as if by common consent the subject was not broached again.

On the following morning when they went on deck the sun was shining down upon the yet angry looking waves; but one of the sailors assured them that "the gale had blowed itself out."

"It stands to reason there'd be a heavy sea runnin'; but its settlin' down fast, an' by to-morrow there won't be swell enough for comfort."

In this he was correct. Twenty-four hours later the awnings were up, and all hands were panting

under the blazing heat of a tropical sun.

This sudden change prostrated the boys, and during the next two days they fanned themselves, drank iced drinks, and sought in vain for some spot where a breath of cool air could be found.

It was the fourth day after the norther. While waiting for dinner to be brought on deck (the meals had been served under the awnings since the storm, for the cabin was too hot to permit even of their eating there), Teddy lay near the after starboard boat lazily wondering why that thin curl of blue smoke should come from the planking directly over the kitchen, instead of through the pipe as it always had before.

Owing to the fact that there was no unusual disturbance he never fancied for a moment anything could be wrong, and remained gazing at it in silence so long that Neal asked curiously:

"What do you see that is so very interesting?"

"I was wondering what had happened to the galley pipe."

"How do you know that it isn't all right?"

"I suppose it is; but it looks queer to see that smoke coming up as if from the deck."

Neal looked in the direction indicated by Teddy's outstretched finger, and seeing the blue curl, which had now grown considerably thicker, sprang to his feet very quickly.

Without speaking to his friend he ran forward, Teddy still ignorant there was any danger, and in the shortest possible space of time Mr. Walters came from the wheel-house in response to Neal's emphatic request.

To Teddy it seemed as if but an instant elapsed before the deck was a scene of confusion, and as all hands were called for duty he heard one of the sailors cry in a tone of alarm:

"Tumble up, boys, the yacht is on fire!"

CHAPTER V.

FIGHTING THE FLAMES.

It was some moments after the fire was discovered before anything could be done toward checking the flames, for the very good reason that the exact location remained a mystery until a visit had been paid to the hold.

The cook said the galley felt unusually warm; but he paid no particular attention to the fact, thinking the weather had grown hotter, and, save for the smoke, there were no signs of fire to be seen anywhere until Mr. Walters called upon one of the men to raise the hatch which led into the eyes of the yacht directly beneath the kitchen.

Instantly this was done a broad sheet of flame burst forth, and had the stout covering not been replaced immediately, the little craft would have soon been consumed.

Working with all speed, for even the seconds were precious now, the hatch was battened down, and a hole large enough to admit of the nozzle of the hose, bored just abaft the hatch-way.

While this was being done a portion of the crew had been getting into working order the hose used for washing down the decks, and when all was ready the real task of extinguishing the flames began.

A steady stream of water was forced into the hold as rapidly as the men could work the pumps, and the lower deck examined carefully for the slightest aperture which might admit air.

How the fire had started no one knew, nor was any time spent in trying to ascertain, for every person had been detailed to some duty.

Neal and Teddy were given the lightest task, which was simply to watch the hose at the place where it entered the deck, to make sure the water flowed through freely, and the nozzle did not slip out.

Ten minutes after the alarm had been raised all hands were working methodically, thanks to the discipline maintained by Mr. Walters, and it became a question simply of whether the flames could be stifled or drowned.

"Do you think they can save the yacht?" Teddy asked after a short time of silence, and Neal, who had not seen the broad sheet of flame which leaped from the hatch-way replied confidently:

"Of course. If the hold is filled with water she surely can't burn."

"Are there boats enough to carry us all in case the fire does get the best of us?"

"Certainly; but it won't come to anything quite as bad as that."

Before Teddy could ask another question one of the stewards shouted down the forward companion-way:

"Mr. Emery says that his son is to come on deck. There is no need of two there."

Neal obeyed the summons thinking he was to assist at the pumps; but in this he was speedily undeceived.

"Take such things as you are likely to need most from your state-room, and stow them in one of the boats aft," his father said when he reported for further duty. "Although I don't think we shall be obliged to abandon the yacht, it is well to be prepared for any emergency."

This was no time to ask questions, and Neal obeyed at once, observing as he entered the cabin that the stewards were collecting food and such other things as might be needed in case they were forced to depend upon the frail crafts.

This work rather than the evidences of fire in the hold, frightened Neal. Until this moment he had not believed there was any possibility the steamer could be destroyed while there were so many to assist in saving her; but now there was no question as to the fact of their being in great danger.

"Unless father and Mr. Walters were convinced that the fire had got considerable headway, the boats would not be provisioned so soon," he said to himself.

His portion of the work could be performed quickly. He and Teddy had brought all their belongings, with the exception of the fowling pieces and the fishing rods, aboard in two satchels, and these he packed with the utmost expedition. Then, with both weapons, he went on deck, stowed all the goods in the after port boat, and returned to his father's state-room to see if anything could be done there.

From the disorder it was apparent that the stewards had been in this apartment before him; but a fine rifle yet hung on the bulk-head, and in the open locker was quite a large amount of ammunition.

"There's no reason why these cartridges shouldn't be taken if we are obliged to leave the yacht," he said to himself as he gathered them into convenient shape for carrying. "In case we land on a desolate island they would be mighty useful."

When he went on deck with his second burden the stewards were putting small kegs of water into each boat, and after stowing the ammunition by the side of the first articles brought, he looked over the little craft to ascertain what his father had thought best to save.

He could find nothing there; but on searching the starboard gig he discovered a small quantity of wearing apparel.

"I wonder if that is the craft he intends to go in, or have the clothes simply been thrown anywhere."

At that moment Mr. Emery came out of the pilot-house followed by Mr. Walters, and Neal ran forward to ask which boat his father intended to use in case the abandonment became necessary.

"It makes no particular difference," Mr. Emery replied in answer to Neal's question. "We can easily arrange the details later. Go into the engine-room and tell Jake to drive her at full speed, and to report if the water we are pumping in is likely to rise as high as the furnaces."

Promising himself that he would re-stow the goods on the gig, putting his father's with those belonging to himself and Teddy, as soon as this message had been delivered, he descended the companion-way after glancing rapidly around the horizon.

There was no land to be seen on either hand, and he understood at once why the order to keep the yacht going at full speed had been given.

The small boats were by no means staunch enough to be depended on for a long cruise unless the present dead calm should continue until they could reach land, and every effort was to be made to gain some of the islands in the vicinity.

When Neal entered the engine-room he believed for an instant that Jake had not heard of the terrible danger which threatened. Work there was going on as usual, except, perhaps, that the engineer and his assistants were watching the machinery a trifle more carefully than seemed really necessary; but when he repeated the message Jake's face grew just a shade paler.

"Say to your father that we have got on every pound of steam that can be raised, and it will be necessary to slow down presently because the bearings are growing warm. The water is already above the fire-room floors, and if the pump is worked an hour longer the fires will be drowned."

"But you must keep her going, Jake. It would be terrible to take to the boats when there was no land in sight."

"I'm bound to do my best; but a man can go only so far. Do you know where we are?"

"No."

"What is being done on deck?"

"The sailors are pumping, and the stewards are provisioning the boats."

"Getting ready to abandon the little craft, are they?"

"Father said that was being done in order that we might be prepared for any emergency."

"And he's got a pretty clear idea that the flames can't be kept under, or else there wouldn't be a thought of such a thing. How's the weather?"

"A dead calm, as it was this morning."

Jake remained silent a few moments as if revolving some plan in his mind, and then he said abruptly:

"Neal, if we do have to put off you and Teddy must try to go in the same boat with me."

"Unless father makes different arrangements."

"Of course, of course; but if nothin' is said we'll stick together. Go back an' say that the Sea Dream shall do her best until the water gets above the fire-boxes, an' then my part of the work has been done."

Neal left the engine-room feeling that there was very little chance of reaching any port in the yacht, and since there was no reason why he should hurry on deck, he went around by the way of the galley where Teddy was stationed.

"How are things going on here?" he asked, forcing himself to speak in a cheerful tone. "Can you get any idea of the fire?"

"Put your hand on the deck," Teddy replied gravely, his face of a livid white although big drops of perspiration were streaming down his cheeks.

Neal obeyed, and immediately drew his hand back with a cry of mingled pain and fear.

The planks were already so hot that it seemed as if the flesh must be burned.

"Has father been here within a few moments?"

"He has just left."

"Did he say anything?"

"Nothing except that I was to come on deck when it was so hot I couldn't stand it any longer. Neal," and now Teddy spoke very earnestly, "you laughed when I referred to the possibility that the yacht might be destroyed; but I know your father thinks she cannot be saved."

"I believe now that he does; but I didn't when I left you. Everything is ready for us to abandon her when nothing more can be done."

"Are we to go in the small boats?" asked Teddy, excitedly.

"It is the only chance we've got; but don't look so frightened," he added, as Teddy's face grew yet paler. "It is calm, there's absolutely no sea at all running, and we shall be as safe as on board the yacht."

"It will be horrible," Teddy whispered as if to himself, and Neal added:

"I'll tell father what Jake said, and then come straight back to stay with you."

"Don't be away long. It seems as if I had been deserted, when there is no one here."

Neal could not trust himself to speak. Ascending the companion-way rapidly he approached his father who was conversing with Mr. Walters near the bow, as if that position had been chosen to prevent the crew from hearing what was said.

After repeating the engineer's message he asked:

"Can I go back where Teddy is? I think it frightens him to stay there alone."

"I can't say that I wonder very much; it is a very trying situation for a boy, especially one who has never been to sea before. Ask Jake if he will send a man to relieve him and then you may both come on deck."

To deliver this message and return after one of the firemen took Teddy's place at the nozzle, did not occupy five minutes, and the frightened boy gave vent to a long sigh of relief when he was in the open air once more.

Except for the heat the weather was perfect. The Sea Dream, showing no sign of the monster which was gnawing at her vitals, save by the clouds of smoke that ascended from the bow, dashed on like the thing of beauty she was; but when her flight should be checked there would remain nothing but the tiny boats to bear those on board to a place of safety.

THE LAST RESORT.

Mr. Emery and the sailing master had decided that the yacht should be kept at full speed, headed for the nearest land, until the water which was being pumped into the hold drowned the fires in the furnaces, when recourse must necessarily be had to the boats.

There could no longer be any question but that the entire forward portion of the hold was a mass of flames which it would not be possible to hold in check very much longer.

By this time all on board understood that the yacht was to be abandoned, and, with the exception of those in the engine-room and at the pumps, every one gazed as if fascinated at the clouds of smoke arising from near the bow. Already were tiny curls coming from between the deck planks, and Teddy heard Mr. Walters say in a low tone to Neal's father:

"I am afraid the flames will burst through before the furnaces are flooded. It is too late to cut another hole in the deck, and by an hour at the latest we must take to the boats."

"Have the crew been told off?"

"I will attend to that now."

Then the sailing master announced to each man the boat to which he was assigned, and during the next hour hardly a word was spoken. Teddy and Neal conversed now and then in whispers, as if not daring to make a noise, and the sailors worked in grim silence.

Nothing save the clank of the pumps and the throbbing of the screw could be heard.

When the hour had passed it was no longer possible to force water into the hold. The heat was so great that the hose burned as fast as it could be pushed through the aperture, and long tongues of flame were appearing around the edges of the hatch.

All hands, including the boys, were formed in line, and water sent below in buckets for twenty minutes more, when the word was given to slacken speed.

The lower deck had burst through, and there was no more than time for Jake and his assistants to clamber up the ladders before the flames had complete possession of the yacht from the bow to the engine-room companion-way.

There was no time to be lost in lowering the boats, and the men were forced to leap in regardless of the previous assignment, for once the fire burst the bonds which had confined it so long it swept aft with almost incredible rapidity.

Teddy and Neal, bewildered by the flames which actually burned their flesh as they stood by the rail while the sailors let go the falls, had only thought of reaching the craft in which their property was stowed, and Jake followed; but as the little tenders were allowed to drop astern beyond reach of the intense heat the boys discovered that Mr. Emery was not with them.

He had charge of one boat; Mr. Walters commanded another; Jake was held responsible for the safety of the third, and the last was handled by the mate.

"Shall we come with you, father?" Teddy shouted.

"I don't think it will be advisable to make any change now, and you are as safe in one boat as another."

"I'll answer for them," Jake cried cheerily, and the sailing master added:

"Jake can handle a small boat better than any one here, therefore you need not fear an accident will result through carelessness."

"How am I to steer?" the engineer asked.

"Due west. The boats must remain together, and in each one is a lantern to be hung up during the night to lessen the chances of being separated. Two men in every craft are to be kept at the oars all the time, and, in order to make the work light, they should be relieved hourly. The indications are that the weather will hold clear; it is only a couple of hundred miles to the Cuban coast, and we are not likely to be cooped up in these cockle shells very long."

As he ceased speaking Mr. Walters gave the word for the oarsmen to begin the work which it was supposed would be continued without intermission until all were in a place of safety, and the boats were pulled about a mile from the burning steamer, when, as if by common consent, they were brought to a standstill to watch the destruction of the Sea Dream.

The jaunty little craft was moving through the water slowly, enveloped in flames from bow to stern, and the boys gazed at her with a feeling of sadness which did not arise solely from the fact of their present peril. It seemed to them as if she could understand that those who should have saved her had fled when her need of assistance was greatest, and she was creeping slowly away to die alone.

"The poor thing can't swim much longer," Jake said, as if speaking to himself. "The boiler will explode——"

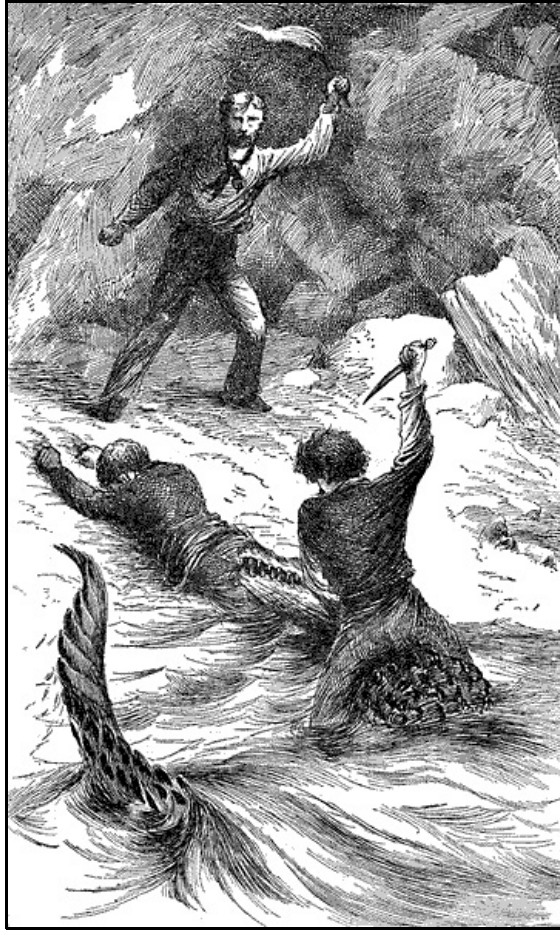
Even as he spoke a black cloud of smoke shot up from amidships, followed by a shower of fiery

fragments, some of which struck in the immediate vicinity of the boats, and then the glare of the conflagration suddenly vanished as the Sea Dream sank beneath the waves.

It would have been strange indeed if each member of the little party had not experienced a feeling of sorrow and desolation at this moment.

The yacht which, a few hours previous, had appeared so staunch, was no longer afloat, and their only hope of reaching land was in the tiny boats which could hardly be expected to live in an ordinary sailing breeze.

The tears were very near Teddy's and Neal's eyelids, and Jake's voice was quite the reverse of steady as he gave the word for the men to resume work at the oars.



Instead of releasing his hold on Neal the reptile held firm, etc. See page [193](#).

Night was close at hand. The sun had already set, and the short-lived twilight cast a sinister grayish hue over the waters. Mr. Walters' boat had the lantern raised at the bow on the end of an oar where it swung gently to and fro, and in a few moments all the others could be distinguished by the same signal.

During such time as they had been waiting to witness the end of the Sea Dream the little crafts had drifted farther apart, until the one in charge of Neal's father was nearly half a mile away, and the sailing master could be heard shouting for them to be brought nearer together.

"We shall probably have a breeze to-night," he cried when Jake's boat approached within easy hailing distance, "and if it should come you must rig up something to serve as a sail, for your only chance of keeping afloat will be to run before it. You have a compass, and remember that land is to be found to the westward."

"Ay, ay," the engineer replied, as he looked around in vain for some sign of the wind, and then he added in a low tone to the boys:

"I allow Mr. Walters is off in his reckonin' this time, for there isn't a breath of air stirring now."

"We may get it later," Neal said apprehensively, and Jake muttered to himself; but yet so loud that Teddy could hear him:

"It'll be tough on us if it comes out of the wrong quarter."

In ten minutes from the time the word had been given to bring the boats into closer order the mantle of night had fully fallen, and the location of the other crafts could only be told by the tiny, swaying lights, or the hum of voices.

Jake's boat was loaded less deeply than the remainder of the little fleet. In addition to himself and the two boys, there were but three sailors on board, and the stock of provisions was correspondingly small. As a natural consequence she rode higher out of the water, and although

built on the same model as the others, the engineer insisted she was by far the fastest sailing craft.

An hour had not elapsed before it was possible to test her quality in this respect.

The breeze which Mr. Walters predicted came up from the east, and as its first influence was felt Jake shouted in a tone of relief:

"We're in luck this time, lads. Here's what will shove us along in the right direction, an' we can count on striking land without too much work. Lash a couple of coats to the oars, an' set them up close by the forward thwart; you'll find a chance there to make 'em fast."

This apology for a sail was soon gotten in place, and, small as was the surface presented to the wind, the little boat surged ahead, rippling the water musically under her bow.

Jake held the rudder lines, the boys sitting either side of him on the bottom of the boat where they could stretch out at full length in case they felt inclined to sleep, and after they had listened to the swish of the sea under the stern for some time Neal asked as he raised his head to look over the side:

"Where are the others?"

"Considerable distance astern. I knew this one could show them her heels."

"But the orders were that we must not separate," Neal exclaimed in alarm.

"That is true; but how can we help ourselves just now? We can't shorten sail, because there would be nothing left, and we're bound to run ahead of the waves, small as they are, or be swamped."

"But suppose we never see them again?"

"Don't worry about that; we're all headin' in the same direction, an' have only got to wait till they overtake us after land is sighted."

Although Jake spoke in a positive tone Teddy and Neal were far from feeling comfortable in mind; but, as he had said, nothing different could be done, and each tried to hide his fears from the other.

The weight of the wind increased as the night advanced, and by the words of caution which the sailors uttered from time to time, the boys knew that those who should best understand such matters were anxious regarding the outcome of this night run.

Now and then a small quantity of water would dash over the side; but it was quickly bailed out, and, as one of the men said, "did more good than harm, for it gave them something to do."

Notwithstanding the gravity of the situation, Neal and Teddy fell asleep before midnight, therefore they were unconscious of the fight which their companions were making for life. It was necessary the frail craft should be kept dead before the wind; otherwise she would have been swamped by the following waves, which were now running dangerously high, and the skill of the helmsman was all that prevented her from destruction.

Not for a single moment during the hours of darkness was it safe to relax the vigilance, and the constant strain on one's nerves was more fatiguing than the real labor.

Just as the day was breaking Neal awoke, and then he aroused Teddy by asking Jake:

"Can you see the other boats?"

"Not yet; but some of them may be in sight at sunrise. It isn't possible their lights would show up more than a mile off."

"Isn't the sea running very high?" Teddy asked timidly as he attempted to stand erect; but Jake grasped him by the shoulder as he said quickly:

"It isn't safe to move around very much. Lie quiet until the wind dies away a bit; we've got more'n we want, and the boat must be kept trimmed mighty carefully or there'll be trouble."

It was only necessary for the boys to watch their companions in order to learn the dangers which beset them, and, clasping each other's hands, they waited in anxious suspense for the rising of the sun to learn if the remainder of the party was near.

CHAPTER VII.

ON SHORE.

When the first rays of the sun appeared above the horizon the sailors searched with their eyes in every direction; but neither land nor a craft could be seen.

"I knew we were bound to run away from the rest of the party," Jake said, keeping his face turned

toward the bow, for the slightest carelessness might be fatal to all. "If this wind dies out we can lay still till they come up, as they're sure to do before long."

"But suppose the other boats have been swamped?" Neal suggested, with a choking sob as he realized that he might never see his father again.

"We won't suppose anything of the kind," Jake replied sharply. "There are plenty in the crowd who can handle the boats better than this one was handled, and if we rode out the night in safety why shouldn't they have done the same?"

"The only chance of our not seein' 'em," one of the sailors said thoughtfully, "is, that sailin' slower, they may now be near land that we passed in the night without knowin' it. There should 'a been a lot of keys within fifty miles of where we abandoned the Sea Dream."

"That's very true, matey," and now Jake spoke in his customary cheerful tone, "an' we'll soon be makin' some place where there'll be a chance of stretchin' our legs. Overhaul the grub, one of you, an' let's have a bite; I feel like a man what's been on a thirty hour watch."

"So you have, for that matter. Even if you ain't a sailor man I'd like to see him as could handle a little craft any better. With me at the helm she'd have gone to the bottom before midnight."

"I won't kick 'cause you praise me," Jake replied with a laugh; "but don't lay it on too thick for fear I might get proud."

"I was only tellin' the truth, an' jest what all of us think. When the breeze freshened I made up my mind that the voyage was about ended; but here we are yet, an' here we're likely to be a spell longer unless we strike another norther."

While the man was speaking he had passed aft two cans of preserved meat, some hard bread, and a small jar of pickles, after opening the tins with his sheath knife, and every one on board made a hearty meal, the boys in particular feeling decidedly cheerful when the repast had been eaten.

"The wind is fallin' off a bit, an' I reckon it'll come dead calm by noon," Jake said, after refusing to allow one of the seamen to relieve him. "We'll all soon have a chance to bottle up sleep."

"How long do you think it ought to be before we sight the land?" Neal asked.

"That's jest what I can't say, lad; but 'cordin' to my way of thinkin' we was a good bit below the coast of Cuba when the little yacht went down. That norther blew us a good way off our course, an' it's possible Mr. Walters might have made a mistake in determinin' the position, although it ain't exactly the proper thing for an engineer to set up agin a first-class sailin' master."

"It won't take long to find out if this breeze holds, an' that's some comfort," one of the sailors replied, and then the three men drew lots to see which two should take a watch "below."

During the forenoon there was but little change in the condition of affairs. The wind decreased until it was nothing more than a good sailing breeze; but the expected calm did not come.

The boat reeled off the knots in fine style, despite the poor apology for a sail, and the boys were allowed to change their position, which they did by sitting on the after thwart.

About twelve o'clock Jake stretched himself out on the bottom for a nap, awakening one of the sleepers that the man at the helm might have assistance in case he should require it, and the boys alternately dozed or searched the horizon in vain for some signs of the other boats.

Those who were hungry ate whenever it pleased them to do so, and there was no lack of either food or water. Teddy would have talked with his friend regarding the prospects of reaching home within a reasonable length of time; but Neal was so anxious about his father that he could speak of nothing else.

Toward the close of the day the wind freshened again, and, in obedience to his previous orders, Jake was awakened, the man at the helm saying in an apologetic tone:

"I can hold on here a good bit longer; but you wanted to know if there was any change, an' there is. It looks to me as if we should have more of a breeze than we had last night."

"No signs of land yet?"

"No sir; but the Cuban coast, if that's what we're headin' for, is so low that we wouldn't be likely to raise it till we got close on."

Jake ate supper before taking his seat at the helm, and then the boys were advised to lie down as on the preceding night.

"You'll be comfortable there, and won't stand so much of a chance of gettin' wet."

It was evident that Jake wanted to have them out of the way, and both obeyed at once, Teddy saying as he stretched himself out on the hard boards:

"It seems as if my bones were coming through the skin, and I'm sore all over."

"Things are not nearly as bad as they might be, so we musn't complain," Neal replied philosophically; but at the same time it seemed as if he could not remain in that position another night.

Even in face of the danger to which they would be exposed, the occupants of the boat welcomed the increase in the weight of the wind since it was reasonable to suppose that each mile traversed carried them just so much nearer the land, and, with the exception of Neal and Teddy, all were in good spirits when the darkness of night covered the ocean.

Owing to the absence of exercise the boys did not sleep well, and when the unconsciousness of slumber did come upon them for a few moments at a time, it brought in its train dreams so distressing that wakefulness with the full knowledge of the dangers which encompassed them, was preferable.

It seemed as if twenty hours instead of ten had passed when one of the men in the bow cried joyfully:

"If I don't see the loom of land now it's because I never saw such a sight before."

"Where away?" Jake asked, straining his eyes in the vain effort to discern anything amid the gloom.

"Dead ahead as we are running. It must be somethin' more'n a cay, or it wouldn't show up so big."

The gray light of approaching dawn was lifting the mantle of night when the man spoke, and, ten minutes later, all saw with reasonable distinctness the dark cloud which could be nothing less than land.

Now the roar of surf was heard, and Jake said in a troubled tone:

"I don't see how we are to make it after all, unless we plump her straight on, an' that's likely to be a dangerous experiment."

"Why not take in the sail, and work the oars; then you can pick a landing place?"

"All right, let go the halyards; but instead of furling the canvas you can stow it under one of the thwarts."

This order was given and obeyed cheerily, for all were in the best of spirits now that the end of the wearisome journey seemed to be so near at hand and in a very short time the boat was moving slowly toward the shore, rising and falling gently on the heavy swell.

Each moment it was possible to see more distinctly the coast, and when they were thirty yards from a shore strewn with jagged blocks of coral, Jake shouted:

"Hold on, boys, it would be worse than folly to attempt to run in there while the sea is so high."

"Can't you find a better place?" one of the men asked.

"It appears to be the same all along for a mile or so in either direction."

"There's more danger of bein' swamped while runnin' up or down the coast, than in makin' a try for it here. Let her go in on the swell, an' when the water shoals we can jump over to lighten her so she'll strike well up on the shore where there'll be no trouble in savin' everything."

"I don't like the idea," Jake replied. "We can't tell what a fellow might meet with, an' to be swung agin one of them rocks would be hard lines."

The sailors were determined to make the attempt regardless of his warnings, and after a few moments he refused to argue longer.

"You ought to know better than I," he said, "an' its no more'n right you should have your own way without any fuss; but the boys an' I will stay here till she strikes. That is a better plan than goin' over the side when you know nothing about the shore, and besides, I can't see the advantage of lightenin' her."

"So she'll strike higher up on the beach, of course, otherwise she'd be stove before you could say Jack Robinson."

"Do as you please, an' so will I. Shall I steer her in now?"

The sailors kicked off their boots, and began pulling vigorously at the oars while Jake said in a low tone to the boys:

"Be ready to jump the minute she strikes; but not before. Look out for the rocks, and take care the swell don't drag you back."

The heavy waves were rolling up on the shore with a roar that rendered conversation difficult, and as he glanced ahead at the foaming waters in which it did not seem possible the little craft could live for a single moment, Teddy pressed Neal's hand as if to say good-by.

Neal gave him one quick, hopeful glance; pointed shoreward to intimate that they must watch every motion of the boat in order to be prepared when the most favorable time arrived, and, following Jake's example both arose from the thwart, standing in a stooping posture in order to steady themselves by the rail.

Carried on the crest of an enormous wave the tiny craft hangs as if poised in mid-air for an

instant, and as the vast body of water is dashed forward the three sailors leap into the boiling, swirling foam.

Teddy fancied he heard a muffled cry of agony; but just at that moment he could think only of saving his own life, and there was no time to so much as glance around.

The boat was shot suddenly forward with the water dashing above the stern and sides, and Jake shouted:

"Over with you now!"

At the same instant that the boat struck the boys leaped, and during several fearful seconds it was doubtful whether they could hold their own against the treacherous under-tow.

By clinging to the sides of the craft, and straining every muscle, the attempt was successful, and as the wave receded the little tender lay across a sharp piece of coral, almost a total wreck.

"Take hold and shove her further up!" Jake shouted. "Work now as you never did before, or we shall lose all our stores!"

During the next half minute the three struggled to the utmost of their power, and then the fragments of the boat and the goods which had been brought from the Sea Dream were high upon the beach beyond reach of the next wave, which swept in with a yet louder roar as if enraged at having been deprived of its prey.

Not until this had been done was it possible to look around for the sailors, and Teddy cried as he gazed seaward without seeing any living creature:

"Where are they?"

Jake watched the boiling waters several seconds before he replied mournfully:

"It was as I feared. They either struck some of these jagged rocks as they leaped from the boat or the under-tow was so strong that it dragged them down."

"Do you mean that all three have been drowned?" Neal cried.

"If they were alive we should see them by this time," and Jake ran along the shore hoping they might have succeeded in scrambling out at some other point.

Teddy and Neal followed him, and when five minutes passed there could be no further doubt.

"If they had waited until the boat struck, as we did, there would have been little trouble to get ashore; but now we shall never see them again."

The boys could hardly realize that three strong men had been taken from this world so quickly, and when finally the fact stood out boldly without the slightest possibility of mistake, a feeling of deepest depression took possession of all.

Teddy threw himself face downward on the sand and gave way to grief, while Neal and Jake stood by his side in silence, for this dreadful catastrophe seemed to be a warning of their own fate.

CHAPTER VIII.

SUSPENSE.

How long they remained on the shore in an apathy of despair not one of that party ever knew.

Jake was the first to arouse himself, and, understanding that work is the best remedy for mental troubles, he said, with a great effort to speak cheerily:

"See here, lads, this will never do if we want to get out of the scrape. We've got to stay here till the other boats come along, and it is necessary to make some preparations for living. The goods must be stowed where they won't be destroyed, an' there's plenty to keep us busy for the rest of this day."

"When do you think the other boats should arrive?" Neal asked.

Jake realized fully how slight were the chances that either of the crafts would come to that exact spot, even if they were all afloat; but he had no idea of adding to his companions' grief, therefore he replied:

"It may be forty-eight hours. You see some or all of them might have put out a sea anchor when it blew so hard, for they carried heavier loads than we did, and while layin' still we hummed right along, consequently its difficult tellin' when to expect 'em."

"Of course they are bound to land here?"

Jake hesitated only for an instant before he decided that under the circumstances a lie was absolutely necessary, and then replied positively:

"Of course. Where else would they come?"

"I was afraid there might have been some little difference in the steering."

"We all were obliged to keep dead before the wind, therefore ought to come out pretty nigh alike."

This reply appeared to satisfy Neal, and he set about cheering Teddy, who finally arose to his feet and signified his willingness to do whatever Jake should propose as necessary.

The engineer made many suggestions which he would not have thought of had he been alone, or in the company of those who did not need such a tonic.

All the goods were first carried from the beach to the edge of the thick forest a hundred yards away, and over the collection was constructed a shelter to protect it from the dew. The fragments of the boat were carefully gathered up and deposited in the same place.

Then a quantity of such pieces of dead branches and decaying wood as could be found near at hand was stacked close by the beach, to serve as a signal in case a vessel or the boats should heave in sight.

When this had been done it was noon, and Jake set about preparing as elaborate a meal as their store of provisions would permit, saying as he summoned them to the repast:

"Now boys, I want you to fill yourselves up so's to be ready for hard work in case anything is to be done when the others get here. Afterwards we'll take a snooze, which is the proper thing to do at the middle of the day in a hot climate, and then there must be some exploring, for we want to find out if we are really on the island of Cuba."

The boys' hunger was very much greater than their grief, and without further urging they did full justice to the meal, Teddy saying as he helped himself to the third slice of preserved meat:

"It wouldn't be a bad idea for us to hunt a little while for something in the shape of a vegetable, or we shall soon run short of provisions."

"It's the very plan I was thinking of. In these woods we should be able to find many things that would help out on the bill of fare; but in case that can't be done, you boys must turn hunters. It's mighty lucky you have your guns and plenty of ammunition."

This last suggestion pleased the boys wonderfully and if Jake had not insisted very strongly that they sleep during the hottest portion of the day, both would have started into the forest without delay.

After lying down in the shade slumber came to their eyelids quickly, and when he was convinced they were across the border of dreamland, Jake arose softly, saying to himself as he stole up the shore:

"This goes ahead of any scrape I ever had the bad luck to fall into, an' I'd give all I've got to know exactly where we are, for I'm certain it ain't Cuba. If two days pass without our sightin' a sail I must fix up some story to make the boys eager to tramp across the country. That'll be better than stayin' here where, 'cordin' to my idea, there's mighty small chance of our finding anybody who can help us."

He walked along the shore fully two miles; but there was no diversity of scene. The coast strewn thickly with coral rocks, and backed by a dense forest, was all that could be seen either above or below the place where they landed.

Then Jake forced his way through the tangled undergrowth, experiencing no slight difficulty in so doing, and the vegetation confirmed his belief that the little craft had been carried by the wind to some land further south than was at first supposed.

On the water not a sail was in sight, and when Jake returned to the place where the rude shelter had been put up he was in even a more despondent mood than Teddy and Neal had been.

"I s'pose we must wait here a couple of days to satisfy the boys the other boats won't come, an' then it's a case of strikin' across the country with good chance of wanderin' around until fever or wild animals puts an end to it."

His companions were yet asleep, and he lay down beside them in order to prevent any suspicion that he had been spying out the land.

Under other circumstances the monotonous roar of the surf would have lulled him to rest; but now his anxiety was so great that, despite all efforts, his eyes would persist in staying open very wide, and he spent the remainder of the siesta trying in vain to decide what was best to do.

Not until late in the afternoon did the boys awaken, and then Neal said as he sprang to his feet:

"It won't do for us all to sleep again at the same time. If the boats came in sight since we've been lying here it is very probable father has missed us, for more than likely they would try for a better place to land further up or down the coast."

"You needn't worry about that, lad. I've kept honest watch, and not so much as the wing of a sea gull has appeared above the horizon."

Teddy, remembering what Jake had said about hunting, began to clean the guns, for both had been thoroughly wetted during the landing, and Neal walked slowly along as he looked out over the water intently.

Before going very far he saw the engineer's footprints on the sand, and shouted excitedly:

"Some one has been here! Perhaps father arrived before we did."

"There's no such good luck," Jake replied. "While you fellows were snoozing I went a long bit in that direction."

"Then it's only a waste of time for me to go over the same ground," and Neal retraced his steps, adding when he gained Teddy's side, "I'll do my share of that work."

"You spoke too late, for I have finished. Now let's see what can be done in the way of hunting; a roasted bird will be a big improvement over salt meat, and I count on finding plenty of game."

"All right, provided Jake is willing to stay here alone."

"What is to prevent me from joining the party?"

"Someone must remain in case the boats heave in sight," Neal replied in a positive tone, and the engineer said carelessly:

"I didn't think of that; but it'll be all right, I'll keep my eyes peeled," and he added to himself, "I wish he wasn't so certain about the others coming, an' then the disappointment wouldn't be quite so great."

Jake cautioned the boys against going very far from the beach because of the danger of getting lost in the forest, and as they disappeared among the underbrush he threw himself upon the ground, unable longer to fight against the despair which was rapidly overpowering him.

He understood perfectly well how great would be the danger in attempting to make their way through the wooded portion of the country at this season of the year, when fever germs lurked in every spot where stagnant water was to be found, and knew at the same time how extremely difficult it might be to find a place offering any more advantages than did the narrow strip of sand on which they had been thrown.

"It wouldn't be quite as bad if I knew where we are," he said to himself. "It can't be possible that we're on the coast of South America; but if that should prove to be the case we'd make a pretty mess of it by trying to cross."

Then came the thought that perhaps it would be better to travel up the coast, and as to the advisability of this he studied a long while without being able to arrive at any satisfactory conclusion.

Two hours were spent in this profitless speculation, and then the boys returned, bringing with them two large hoccas, birds looking not unlike wild turkeys.

"We shan't starve while such game as this is to be found," Neal cried triumphantly. "I believe we might have shot a dozen by staying longer; but there was no sense in doing so just for the sake of killing. It will be a hard job to eat all this meat before it spoils."

"How far in did you go?" Jake asked, rising to his feet quickly and trying to banish from his face the look of dejection, lest his companions should suspect how desperate he believed the situation to be.

"Not more than half a mile," Teddy replied.

"What is the general appearance of the country?"

"The undergrowth is very dense in places, and above here, a little to the right, we came upon what seems to be a swamp. It was there we found these birds, and something else which is not quite so promising."

As he spoke Teddy pulled up his shirt sleeve, and pointed to several black specks on his skin.

"They are ticks, or garrapatas, as the Spaniards call them," Jake replied, as he opened his pocket knife. "The sooner you get rid of them the better, for they will make what is likely to be a bad sore unless a cordial invitation to leave is extended."

"Are you going to cut them out?" Teddy asked in alarm.

"Not exactly; but you won't get rid of the pests without considerable pain, for they have the faculty of crawling under the skin mighty fast."

Jake set about the work in a methodical manner, causing Teddy to cry aloud very often as the insects were pulled or dug from the flesh.

Then Neal was called upon to undergo the same operation, and not until nearly an hour had passed were the hunters free from the painful pests.

It was now nearly sunset, and all hands set about preparing the hoccas for roasting, by first plucking the fowls, removing the intestines, and sticking them on a sharpened stake in front of

the fire.

It was not an entirely satisfactory method of cooking, for while one portion was done brown, another would be hardly warmed through; but, as Teddy said, "it went a long way ahead of nothing," and all three worked industriously, turning the game or piling on the fuel until, about an hour after sunset, the task was completed.

By this time the castaways were decidedly hungry, and the half-cooked fowls tasted better than had the most elaborate meals on board the Sea Dream.

CHAPTER IX.

ACROSS THE COUNTRY.

When, supper having been eaten, preparations were made for the night, Neal insisted that one of the party should remain on guard during the hours of darkness, in order to watch for the boats, and Jake had no slight trouble in convincing him that it was not absolutely necessary.

"We couldn't see their lights half a mile away if they have any hoisted, which isn't likely, for the oil must be scarce by this time," the engineer said, "and, in case we did sight them, what good would it do? We should induce them to land here, and we know how dangerous that is even in the daytime. I had rather let them pass without knowing where we are, than to be the innocent cause of a second disaster."

After considerable discussion Neal was made to understand that no good could come of posting sentinels, and the little party lay down on the bed of leaves; but, owing to the suspense concerning the fate of the others, neither slept very soundly.

It was hardly light enough to see surrounding objects when Jake began to prepare breakfast, and as soon as the sun rose Neal and Teddy paced to and fro on the beach gazing seaward; but without seeing that for which they sought.

For the first time Neal began to despair concerning his father, and returning to the camp he said in a voice choked by sobs:

"I don't believe we shall ever see either of them again. The wind has held steady since we landed, and they should have been here a long while ago. Our boat couldn't have sailed so much faster than theirs that we should arrive twenty-four hours in advance."

"Now put out of your mind the idea that we are not to see all hands some time," Jake replied quite sharply. "I'm willing to admit that they may not strike here, for I might as well own up to the truth, and say the chances are against two boats coming so far and hitting the same spot on the coast. That doesn't prove, however, that there has been any further disaster."

"Then you do believe that they won't come here?"

"Yes."

"Why haven't you proposed to make some change?"

"I didn't want to say anything until we were certain the boats wouldn't heave in sight. I shouldn't advise making a move yet awhile; but since you've broached the subject we may as well talk plainly."

"Do you think we are likely to be taken off by a vessel?"

"The fact that none have passed within our line of vision certainly shows that such a chance is slim. I have come to the conclusion that we are not on the island of Cuba, and it stands us in hand to try for some town or sea-port. We might stay here a month, and then have a craft heave in sight when the surf run so high as to prevent a boat landing."

"What do you want to do?"

"Strike straight through the woods. There must be people living here somewhere, and the sooner we find them the sooner we'll get home."

"Why not follow along the beach?"

"Because, if this is an island, as it surely must be, we could get across quicker than around, and, besides, with all these coral rocks the beach is not the best sort of a road for traveling, loaded down as we shall be."

Neal was silent for a moment, and Teddy took advantage of the opportunity to ask:

"When do you think we ought to make a move?"

"My idea is that we should stay here to-day (our supply of water won't last much longer), and start early to-morrow morning. That would be time enough to prove whether the boats are coming, and give us a chance to get the traps into proper shape for carrying."

"You know best what should be done," Neal said, speaking slowly, "and I am ready to do as you propose."

"Now that is what I call sensible talk," Jake replied, in a tone of satisfaction. "By buckling right down to work, and putting out of our minds all unpleasant thoughts, for it don't do any good to moon over what can't be changed, we shall soon get out of this scrape."

Neal remained silent. To leave the coast seemed like deserting his father, and although he knew Jake's plan should be carried out, it made him sad to think of going where it would be no longer possible to see the ocean.

Teddy, however, experienced a sense of relief as soon as it was decided to enter the forest in search of human beings. To him the place was anything rather than agreeable, for he could never rid himself of the feeling that the drowned sailors would soon be washed ashore, and during the hours of darkness all kinds of queer fancies came into his mind with every unusual sound.

He was eager to discuss with Jake the details of the proposed journey, and, Neal listening to the conversation but taking no part in it, the matter was arranged to the satisfaction of the engineer and Teddy.

The ammunition and such provisions as had been brought ashore, was divided into three portions, one being very much heavier than the others, and each tied in such shape as would be most convenient for carrying.

So much of the game as would not be needed for immediate consumption was wrapped in leaves for the travelers to take with them; but that which caused Jake the most anxiety was the fact that the supply of water would be exhausted before they started.

"It can't be helped," he said ruefully, "and we may be mighty thirsty before finding any; but the case would be worse if we staid here, so there is no reason why we need worry very much. In that swamp you spoke of we shall surely find what thirsty men can drink on a pinch, and I'm positive we'll get along all right."

As if eager to convince himself that there was no great danger to be apprehended from the journey through the forest, he continued to talk about his plans until both the boys were perfectly familiar with all he hoped to gain by the attempt; but of his fears not a word was spoken.

At night all retired early in order to be fresh for the morrow's work, and when the first faint flush of another day appeared in the eastern sky Jake aroused his companions.

"Turn out, boys," he shouted cheerily. "We must make the most of these cool hours, for it will be necessary to halt at noon, and we want to get through the forest as quickly as possible."

While speaking he was fastening the heaviest package on his back, and after a hurried toilet in the sea Neal and Teddy took up their loads.

It was still quite dark under the towering trees when the journey was begun; but each moment the gloom grew less, until, when the sun rose it was possible to see the way with but little difficulty.

To travel very rapidly was out of the question. In certain places the underbrush was so dense that considerable exertion became necessary in order to force a passage, and despite all efforts not more than two miles an hour could be made.

At the swamp plenty of cool, clear water was found, and with this Jake filled the two bottles, all they had in which to carry a supply of the precious liquid.

At noon a long halt was made, and when the sun began to decline the weary march was resumed.

By no means the least of the travelers' suffering was caused by thorns, and to one who has never had any experience of this sort, a description of the various spines and needles which project from the strange plants in these vast forests would seem exaggerated.

They are of all sizes and shapes, and in many places actually prevent a man from making his way through the foliage even though he be armed with a machete. Oftentimes it is absolutely necessary to make a long detour in order to avoid the painful obstructions, and before half of this day's journey was finished all three of the castaways bore bloody evidence of what these natural bristles can do.

The siesta was decidedly abridged, for Jake realized the importance of concluding the tramp as quickly as possible, and the afternoon was but little more than half ended when, to the intense surprise of all, they suddenly arrived at a clearing in the very midst of the forest.

After wandering among the luxuriant vegetation the travelers were almost startled at seeing an avenue of banana trees which had evidently been planted by the hand of man, and, following it up, the little party were yet more surprised at seeing a white man swinging idly in a hammock.

Jake advanced as if unable to believe the evidences of his own senses, and said hesitatingly:

"We had no intention of intruding, sir; but followed the line of banana trees without the slightest idea of finding a gentleman's home."

"Don't apologize," the stranger replied in good English, and springing to his feet as if in alarm. "It

is true that I am not in the habit of receiving callers in this out-of-the-way place; but those of my own race are none the less welcome. Will you walk into the house?"

The boys peered through the foliage where, after some difficulty, they saw a small cabin, hardly large enough to be called a dwelling, and Jake replied quickly:

"We would prefer to remain here. Having walked since sunrise, you can fancy that any place in which to rest our legs without fear of coming in contact with a scorpion or a snake is grateful."

"I can't promise that you won't be troubled by such visitors; but you are welcome to do as you choose."

Jake threw himself on the ground, asking as he did so:

"Can you tell me how near we are to a sea-port? We have just landed from a pleasure yacht which was destroyed by fire, and haven't any idea where we are."

"You are now in Yucatan, and probably know perfectly well how near to the coast, for——"

"In Yucatan?" Jake repeated in surprise.

"Exactly, and not so very far from the famed Silver City of the Chan Santa Cruz Indians."

"That last information doesn't seem to be very important so far as we are concerned; but it does surprise me to know we are in this section of the country, for our captain was quite positive we should strike the coast of Cuba."

"Tell me how such a mistake was made."

"That is exactly what I don't know myself; but it won't take long to explain why we are here."

Then Jake told the story of the cruise in the Sea Dream, of the unaccountable conflagration, and the fatal landing on the coast, concluding by saying:

"As a matter of course we are most anxious to reach some place from which we can find a steamer or sailing vessel going to the United States. Probably you can give us the proper information, and by that means get rid of unexpected and, perhaps, unwelcome visitors."

"But I do not wish to get rid of you," the stranger replied quickly. "On the contrary I am more than delighted because you were forced to come here, since you can render me a very great service."

"I fail to understand how," Jake replied in perplexity.

"You shall soon know, and I fancy you will be decidedly surprised when I give you all the details. First, however, allow me to prepare supper, and then it will be singular if I do not tell such a story as will cause greater astonishment than you ever experienced before."

With these strange words the young man—he did not appear to be more than thirty years old—leaped out of the hammock, and disappeared among the shrubbery which so nearly concealed the building.

CHAPTER X.

A STRANGE STORY.

The meal, which was partaken of heartily by the weary travelers, consisted of eggs and fruit, with plenty of freshly cooked tortillas, and as Teddy remarked in a low tone when it was absolutely impossible for him to eat any more, "it went way ahead of turkeys roasted on a stick."

After his guests had finished this very satisfactory repast, the stranger proposed that all adjourn to the banana avenue where he slung another hammock that both the boys might lie down, gave Jake a cigar of home manufacture, lighted one himself, and, lying upon the ground in an attitude of absolute repose, said laughingly:

"Now if you wish to hear the story I promised to tell there is nothing to prevent."

"I would certainly like to know how it happens that you are living alone in this forest," Jake replied.

"Then I will begin in regular story-book style, for when it is ended I intend to make a proposition. My name is Byron Cummings, and the last home I had previous to the building of this shanty, was in Baltimore, Maryland. Two years ago—it may have been longer, for one does not keep a very strict record of time in this country—I visited Merida on a pleasure trip, and while there heard the story of the Silver City."

"Is that the name of a town, or do you mean that the precious metal is so plentiful there?" Teddy interrupted.

"I refer to a city built by the Chan Santa Cruz Indians which has received this name because the

ornamentation of the houses is of silver, and so profuse as to give it the appearance, at a distance, of being a collection of silver buildings. Don't laugh until you hear the whole story," he added, as a smile of incredulity passed over Jake's face.

"Any one in Merida, and, in fact the English histories, will tell you that this wonderful city is in the vast tract of marshy land situated between here and Merida, known as the Black Swamp. It is a fact that no white man has ever seen it, since the only approach is across the swamp on the south side, and the way so closely guarded that a person must have special sources of information in order to get through the labyrinth of narrow water courses on the banks of which are sentinels ready to salute the visitor with a shower of poisoned arrows.

"It cannot be reached from the east because of the rocks, a few samples of which you probably saw on the sea coast. As you doubtless know, the Indians hereabout have never been conquered by the whites, and the interior is as much an unknown land as it was at the time of the conquest.

"Certain of the Chan Santa Cruz Indians visit Merida at certain seasons of the year, where they sell, or rather, exchange for goods, gold dust and massive golden ornaments, valuing the yellow treasure so lightly, and bringing such quantities that there can be no doubt they have access to an enormous deposit. Silver they use as we do iron, and I myself have seen one of these visitors wearing thick beaten bands of it as a protection to his legs, probably because of the thorns."

"If they come into the towns I should think some venturesome fellow would follow, to learn the secret of the city in the swamp," Jake suggested, and it could plainly be seen that he was growing decidedly interested.

"That has often been tried; but, so far as I can learn, no one ever succeeded. Twice I tracked three villainous looking old fellows to the very edge of the marsh, and both times they disappeared so silently and completely as to make it seem as if the earth had opened and swallowed them. Then, learning of the many who had failed in the same attempt, I formed a plan which must give me the victory, although it has required much time."

"What is it?" Jake asked breathlessly.

"I resolved to learn the language, and to that end came here with an Indian who knows the habits and customs of these people, he having dealt with them for many years, and, what is more, has been within sight of the famous city. From him I have gained all the information necessary to enable me to penetrate the swamp, and now flatter myself that I can speak the dialect of the Chan Santa Cruz tribe as perfectly as a native."

"Have you remained here two years doing nothing else but studying how to reach the village?" Neal asked.

"Very little beside that. We built the hut, planted these trees for a lounging place, and now raise chickens and fruit enough to provide us with food."

"Where is the man you speak of?"

"He went to Merida three days ago; but will return by the day after to-morrow if no accident has befallen him."

"When are you going to make the attempt to get through the swamp?"

"Very soon if you accept my proposition."

"What have we to do with it?" Jake asked in surprise.

"I will explain. Old Poyor and myself are not strong enough numerically to make the attempt alone, for in case the secret of our identity should be discovered, nothing could save our lives. With you three as an addition to the party, and two armed with good weapons, I would not be afraid to travel straight through the city. As a matter of fact the only real danger is in approaching the place; but I have studied over that portion of the business so long that I do not fear a failure if you can be prevailed upon to join us."

"That is out of the question," Neal replied decidedly, speaking quickly, as if afraid Jake might agree to the scheme. "You know we must get back to our own country as soon as possible, for if father is alive he will suffer great anxiety concerning us."

"You are right to make haste; but what if I tell you that by going with me no time will be lost?"

"How can that be possible?"

"Because if you were in Merida to-day you could not reach Progresso in time to take the steamer which left for the United States this morning. If you remain here two weeks more, there will then be ample opportunity to get passage on the next vessel which starts. I have a time table, and you can see by it that I am telling the truth."

As he ceased speaking Cummings arose, walked leisurely to the house, and returned with the article in question, which he handed to Neal.

It was only necessary to glance at it in order to learn that his statement was a fact, and when Teddy was also convinced, the host continued:

"According to the plan I have formed we should be back in less than ten days from the time we

begin the journey, and if you agree to the scheme it should make us all wealthy."

"But you said the old Indian would not return for three days," Jake interrupted.

"Very true; but we shall not wait for him to come here. That which he will bring is exactly what we want as an outfit, and we can meet him at the only entrance to the swamp where, for more than three months, I have had a boat hidden in readiness for the attempt."

Then Cummings gave a more detailed account of the wonderful city as he had heard it in Merida and from Poyor, and so well did he tell the story that in a short time his guests were in the highest state of excitement.

"Now the question is whether you will join me?" he said in conclusion. "Having studied the matter so long I feel warranted in saying that it is not an unusually dangerous venture, and, if we are successful, the amount of wealth we can carry away must be enormous."

"It wouldn't take me long to decide," Jake replied promptly; "but seeing that I am in Mr. Emery's employ I couldn't go contrary to his son's orders. As a matter of fact I'm not bound in any way; but it seems to be the only square thing to do."

"And what is your idea?" Cummings asked as he looked toward Teddy.

"Since we can't start for home immediately, I don't see why we shouldn't spend the time in what will be the jolliest kind of an adventure whether there is any gold to be gained or not."

The young man then turned to Neal questioningly, and the latter said hesitatingly:

"It isn't fair for Jake to make me decide. He should know better than I whether we ought to go with you. If it was possible for us to leave the country at once there could be no question, for we must return to the United States at the earliest opportunity."

"And since that cannot be done you have no objections to joining us in the visit to the Silver City?"

"I don't know. You would not go until to-morrow, so we have a chance to discuss the matter among ourselves."

"Very true. I've some work to attend to, and while I am away you will be able to talk privately."

Then Cummings arose, went toward the house and when he disappeared from view Neal said to Jake:

"Now tell me just what you think of going with him; I mean, what you think father would say if we could consult him, not what we would like to do."

"Well, if you put it in that way," and now Jake spoke as if weighing every word, "I can't see why we shouldn't have a little fun, seein's how we're bound to stay here longer than he allows is enough to go to this Silver City an' back. It would be a mean kind of a man who'd object to our havin' enjoyment after all that's happened."

"Then you believe father would approve of our going with Mr. Cummings?"

Jake was not exactly prepared to say "yes," and at the same time he did not wish to reply in the negative after his acquiescence in all the host had advanced as reasons why they should accompany him, and after a long pause Neal added:

"Of course I want to go, for it can't be possible that there is very much danger, and I make this proposition: We must sail on the next steamer, and if Mr. Cummings is willing we should desert him, no matter what may be the condition of affairs when it is time for us to start for the coast, then we are warranted in accepting the proposition."

"That is what I call putting the matter in the proper light," Jake replied with considerable emphasis. "On this basis no one can possibly find any fault, and we may as well tell him that we have decided to go."

"First explain that we must leave Yucatan on the next steamer which starts from Progresso."

"I'll do it, and if he is so certain that we shall be out of the Silver City in that time there can be no reason for any fault-finding."

"I think Neal has arranged the business as it should be," Teddy said approvingly, and from that moment the castaways believed they were committed to the scheme.

Half an hour later, when Cummings returned to learn the result of the interview, Jake explained upon what grounds the decision had been arrived at, and he expressed himself as perfectly satisfied with the arrangement.

"If we can't get into the city during the coming week there is no use trying," he said, "and I will undertake to see you on board the next steamer which sails. Now it only remains to decide upon the details, and at sunrise to-morrow we will begin what I have been preparing for, during the past two years."

Since the details consisted only in agreeing upon what amount of luggage should be taken with them, but little time was spent in discussion, and as the boys retired on this night it was with the

knowledge that when the sun rose again they would start for the Silver City which every traveler in Yucatan admitted had an existence.

CHAPTER XI.

THE JOURNEY.

The boys and Jake had no preparations to make for the journey. The goods they had brought from the coast was their only property, and could readily be carried as during the tramp to this point.

On the contrary, Cummings found many things which it was necessary should be done before departure. Whether successful in the attempt to reach the marvelous city or not, he could hardly hope to return to the hut where all his preparations had been made, and there was much to be done.

After ascertaining that his guests were willing to accompany him he made arrangements for their comfort during the night, and then, excusing himself on the plea of work, was seen no more until the time for departure had come.

Of the three castaways Neal was the only one who had any misgivings regarding the proposed detour. It seemed to him as if he was in some way abandoning his father by embarking in this enterprise, although how anything more could be done to aid those who had taken refuge in the boats was beyond his comprehension.

This much was clear in his mind, however: He had agreed to aid in the attempt, and when Cummings awakened the little party he arose quickly, firmly resolved to do everything in his power to reach the city which, as yet, he was not thoroughly convinced existed.

It was still dark when the final preparations for the journey were begun, and Cummings' impatience was so great that the sun had but just shown himself above the horizon when the morning meal had been eaten, and their host was urging them to make haste.

"We must be at the rendezvous not later than this afternoon in order to avoid the chance of passing Poyor on the way," he said impatiently, "therefore the sooner we start the better."

"We are ready," Jake replied, and, after setting the fowls loose, Cummings led the way through the underbrush, finding a path where the others would not have believed any existed.

As if to prevent the boys from losing their interest in the search for the Silver City, their guide continued to add to the story he had already told, and during the long march but little else was talked about.

Jake who was as excited as a man well could be, for he had no doubt but that they could find large quantities of treasure where there would be no difficulties in the matter of carrying it away, plied Cummings with questions whenever the conversation lagged, and Neal had but little opportunity to speculate upon the fate of his father.

Not until late in the night, when to Neal and Teddy it seemed as if they could go no further, did the party halt, and during the last hour of the march the utmost silence was maintained.

"It is absolutely necessary to avoid detection in case any of the Indians may be in the vicinity," Cummings had said, "and we must move as stealthily as if we knew positively they were waiting for us."

From that time no one spoke. The guide crept on at a slow pace, his every movement copied by the remainder of the party, and on arriving at the rendezvous he motioned the others to lie down, whispering as they gathered around him:

"We are near the canoe, and it only remains to watch for Poyor, who should be here by morning. I'll stand guard while the others sleep."

There was no thought of putting up anything in the shape of a shelter, and the boys stretched themselves on the ground in the midst of a thick clump of vegetation, Teddy whispering to Neal:

"If it is necessary to take such precautions as these before we are near the city, we may expect pretty rough times before arriving at the place."

"That's a fact, and I begin to wish we hadn't started. There is no positive assurance we shall get through in time to take the next steamer for home, and even Cummings himself can't say whether any of us will ever come back."

"Do you want to give up the job now?"

"I'd be ashamed to do that, for it would look as if we were afraid; but I'm sorry we agreed to the plan;" and Teddy replied heartily:

"So am I."

Jake had nothing to say; but whether his silence was caused by a desire to obey Cummings'

instructions to avoid making a noise, or by misgivings as to the wisdom of the venture, neither of the boys could guess.

Despite the anxiety of the younger members of the party they soon fell asleep, owing to excessive fatigue, and did not arouse to consciousness until Jake whispered as he shook them vigorously:

"It's time to start. The Indian has come, an' ain't half as bad a lookin' man as I counted on seeing."

The boys sprang to their feet, finding themselves face to face with a tall, half naked figure which, in the dim light, looked more like a statue of bronze than a human being. He stood scrutinizing them keenly for fully a minute, and then, as if satisfied with their appearance, turned away to walk swiftly along the edge of the swamp until lost to view in the darkness.

"Poyor has just arrived," Cummings said by way of explanation; "and according to his belief it is well for us to start at once."

"Where has he gone?" Teddy asked.

"After the canoe; it is but a short distance from here."

"Don't you dare to cook breakfast?"

"Certainly not; the light of a fire would be worse, for us, than the report of a gun. Until we arrive at the Silver City it will be a case of eating cold food, and perhaps we may be obliged to wait even longer than that before having anything very elaborate in the way of a meal."

"If we are only certain of coming back again where it is possible to do as we please, I won't grumble about what we are obliged to eat," Neal said, with a nervous laugh.

"Don't borrow trouble," Cummings replied quickly; but both the boys noticed that he no longer spoke in the same confident tone as before the journey was begun. "We shall surely get through without difficulty."

The conversation was interrupted by the approach of Poyor, who came down the water-way in the canoe more like a ghost than a creature of flesh and blood, and Jake, whose head had been turned in the other direction, could not suppress a slight exclamation of surprise as the Indian suddenly appeared by his side.

The canoe which had been brought thus silently was simply the trunk of a tree hollowed out, and about fifteen feet in length. It yet rested lightly on the water when the entire party and all the traps were on board, and the boys noticed with no slight degree of astonishment, that one stroke of the paddle was sufficient to send it sharply in either direction.

"Now you have a chance to finish your nap," Cummings whispered as, kneeling aft, he began to assist Poyor in propelling the craft.

"Don't you want us to help?" Teddy asked.

"No, there will be nothing you can do until we enter the Silver City."

Tired though the boys were it was literally impossible to close their eyes in slumber now, and they remained very wide awake watching the coming of a new day.

When the sun had risen they could get some slight idea of the country through which they were passing; but of what might be a few yards beyond no one could say.

The shores of this particular water-way through the swamp were flat, covered with reeds and long grass, with here and there dense tangles of trees and vines, and the channel was so narrow that only at rare intervals could the paddles be used. The Indian and the white man pushed the boat from one bend to another, oftentimes finding it difficult to pass the sharp curves, and the boys confidently expected this labor would be continued during the entire day, therefore their surprise was great when, about an hour after sunrise, the little craft was forced under a clump of overhanging foliage as if the journey was at an end.

"What is the matter?" Neal asked in a whisper, and Cummings replied in the same cautious tone:

"Nothing. It would be in the highest degree dangerous to travel very far now that it is light."

"How long are we to stay here?"

"Until the darkness comes again."

"Wouldn't it be safe to go on the bank where we can stretch our legs?"

"We must not leave the boat. It will be only for a few hours, and then we shall have plenty of exercise paddling."

Immediately the canoe had been made fast under the mass of vines and shrubbery Poyor stretched himself out in the bow as if the task of remaining perfectly quiet during an entire day was a very agreeable one, and Cummings followed his example.

Jake, who had been sitting amidships, moved toward his friends, and the three spent an hour talking of what was now termed by all "a foolish venture."

There was nothing left for it, however, but to continue on since they were in the swamp, and after a time Neal said petulantly:

"Well make the best of it, and if an opportunity should occur to go to Merida there must be no hesitation, whatever Cummings may say."

As if this resolution gave them renewed courage, the boys lay down in the most comfortable position possible, after eating a light lunch, and until nightfall no sound save that caused by heavy breathing could have been heard from the boat.

Then, when darkness came again, Poyor, who had remained almost without motion during the entire time of the halt, aroused himself, ate half a dozen bananas, and took up the paddle.

The precautions against being discovered by those who might be on the watch were now redoubled. Before rounding a bend the Indian waited in a listening attitude to assure himself no one was moving in the immediate vicinity, and when it became necessary to work the canoe along by aid of the foliage the utmost care was exercised to prevent the branches from rustling.

As the hours wore on and no attack was made Cummings appeared to be highly elated, and Jake's gloomy forebodings were dispelled in the thought of the treasure which they might be able to bring away.

Once, about midnight, when they halted a moment for Poyor to reconnoiter, Neal whispered to the leader:

"How many nights of this kind of traveling is necessary before we reach the city?"

"When we next halt it will be to leave the boat and continue the journey on foot. It was the possible difficulties, not the distance, which rendered the undertaking formidable."

The Indian returned, stepped into the canoe without speaking, and took up the paddle as if to say there was nothing to prevent them from going ahead.

From this time until faint streaks of light caused by the approach of the sun could be seen in the sky there was no lengthy interruption to the advance, and then as the boat was pulled out of the channel into a sort of basin or break of the bank which led among the more dense portions of the forests, Cummings said to Neal:

"In two hours you shall have a full view of the Silver City, and then there can be no doubt as to the truth of what I have told you."

CHAPTER XII.

THE SILVER CITY.

To Neal and Teddy the thought that they were so near the wonderful place described by Cummings overshadowed everything else, and the probable danger was but a secondary consideration.

Jake was in a perfect fever of excitement, and so great was his desire to see the city from which he fully expected to bring away enormous amounts of gold that more than once did the leader caution him in an impatient tone to remain quiet.

Impassive, apparently unmoved by the fact that the plan which he and his white companion had spent so many months in perfecting was about to be proven successful, or a failure that might result in the death of all concerned, the Indian stood silent and motionless at the foot of a gigantic cypress tree; but Teddy observed that he was on the alert for the slightest unusual sound.

Cummings dealt out some food; but none of the party ate it. Hunger had been banished by suspense, anxiety and anticipation.

Gradually the gloom was dispelled, and it became possible to see the varied forms of life everywhere around.

The party had halted upon a slight elevation, where they had a limited view of that portion of the forest which appeared to be distinct from the region of marsh. As the sun arose, and a singularly dazzling light, different from anything the boys had ever seen before was reflected on the tops of the trees, it seemed as if every branch was laden with birds of the most gorgeous plumage flitting here and there like movable jewels against a background of green enamel.

Hundreds of monkeys filled the air with an almost incessant chattering which drowned all other sounds, and snakes of every color and size writhed and wriggled in different directions to greet the grateful heat of the sun.

It was a picture most beautiful, and at the same time, because of the serpents, terrifying.

Cummings began to make his way up the trunk of the cypress, aided by Poyor; but when Jake would have followed, the Indian motioned for him to remain with the boys.



The Indian stood silent and motionless at the foot of the gigantic Cypress tree, etc. See page [113](#).

One glance appeared to be sufficient for the leader of the party, and as he descended he whispered to Neal:

"We have made no mistake. The city can be seen plainly. You and your companions may gratify your curiosity, for we shall remain here until Poyor comes back."

Then turning to the Indian, Cummings whispered a few words, and the former glided through the underbrush, being lost to view almost immediately.

By assisting each other the three castaways were soon where such a marvelous sight was presented that exclamations of surprise and admiration burst from their lips; but, fortunately, the chattering of the monkeys would have prevented the outcries from being heard had a party of Chan Santa Cruz Indians been at the foot of the tree.

Far to the eastward was a long range of low, rocky mountains, and at the north and south spurs or cliffs, all enclosing a beautiful valley in the center of which was a city of dazzlingly white buildings.

To look at this collection of houses and temples very long at a time was almost impossible because of the peculiar glare which the boys had mistaken for the sun's rays.

It was caused by the reflection of the god of day on an edifice in the center of the city, the dome-like roof of which was covered with a burnished metal substance having the appearance of silver.

The adjoining buildings, composed of white stone having a softness as of alabaster, threw this peculiar light in every direction, causing the city to stand out amid the green foliage like a huge incandescent mass.

Each house stood in a square by itself, and, judging from the area of the city one might have estimated the population at about fifteen thousand. The streets were laid out with the utmost precision, and composed of what appeared to be fine white sand, while at every intersection were monuments of grotesque figures or animals.

At regular intervals were enormous white columns capped with the glistening metal, the same as displayed on the dome of the principal building and on many of the houses.

After taking in this wonderful picture as a whole the boys gazed at the most prominent objects in turn, the central edifice occupying the greater share of attention.

That this was a place of worship seemed reasonable to suppose because of the crowds of people entering or departing from the opening formed by lofty pillars of shimmering metal, and also because of the tiny threads of smoke which arose from several apertures in the roof as if from altar fires. To confirm the beholders in this belief the faint sound of sweet music arose in the air,

and instantly the throngs in the streets prostrated themselves in adoration of some one of the statues.

The citizens were dressed in flowing garments of white, and all seemed intent on worship which was prolonged until after the spectators left the tree.

One singular fact was noted by Teddy, and he called Neal's attention to it.

Neither on the surrounding hills nor in the city could a single animal of any kind be seen. It was as if even the birds from the forest so shaped their course as to avoid flying over the dazzling wonderful city which was shut out from the rest of the world by the swamp wherein fever lurked in its most horrible form.

How long the boys and Jake gazed at this marvelous picture neither of them could ever say. They took no heed of the passage of time, and when Cummings called softly that it would be well to come down in order to gain a little rest before Poyor returned, Teddy noticed with surprise that the sun was high in the heavens.

"Well, do you believe now that the Silver City really has an existence?" the leader asked when the three stood by his side.

"After that anything seems possible," Neal replied with a sigh as if weary of gazing at so much magnificence.

"Save some adjectives expressive of admiration until we are in the city, when I fancy you will see very much that is more curious."

"The people don't appear to be so terribly ferocious," Teddy said, "and yet you think they would kill us all if our presence was discovered."

"I am positive of it. In a white man they see only one of that race which has worked them so much injury, making ruins of many cities, and oppressing the rightful owners of the country."

"If that is the case how are we to get in there?" Neal asked.

"Poyor has a plan which I think will be successful; wait until he returns, and if the conditions are favorable to the attempt you shall soon know."

"But suppose he stays away until a party of Indians take it into their heads to come in this direction?"

"There is little danger of our being discovered unless it has been suspected we have crossed the swamp, which is hardly probable. Very few of the inhabitants ever venture out, and there is no reason why they should come to this exact spot. Lie down now, Poyor will be with us by nightfall."

It was a simple matter to follow the first portion of this advice; but decidedly difficult to close their eyes in slumber after what had been seen.

Teddy and Neal, who threw themselves on the ground side by side, could not keep their thoughts from the wonderful city, and when both Jake and Cummings were apparently wrapped in slumber the former whispered:

"Do you think now that we were foolish to come?"

"No, because it isn't so far in the swamp but that we can get out in a short time if anything happens, and a glimpse of that city would repay a fellow for considerable trouble."

"But suppose the Indians get hold of us?"

"That is something I reckon Cummings can take care of. If he has made such elaborate preparations for entering, when it is so near where he was living we can be pretty certain there will be no very grave mistake."

"Even if we succeed in reaching the city I can't understand how it will be possible to carry away much gold."

"Nor I; but yet you know a small package is valuable, and five persons could lug a great deal."

"Do you fancy he brought us simply to carry the treasure for him?"

"He said we would all share alike, so our services wouldn't be of much advantage to him, more particularly since he and the Indian could bring away a heavier load than all three of us."

In this manner, speculating upon the benefits which might accrue to them rather than regarding the great danger to which the entire party was exposed, the boys passed the time until late in the afternoon, and then Poyor approached so softly that he stood in their midst before any one had heard even a rustling among the leaves.

On seeing the man Cummings sprang up eagerly, asked a question in the Indian dialect, and the reply was given at great length, Poyor using more gestures than the boys had ever fancied were at his command.

That his report was in the highest degree interesting to Cummings there could be no doubt, for the latter listened intently, interrupting him only to ask some question, and not until nearly half

an hour had passed was any explanation made to the others.

Then Cummings said with a slight show of triumph:

"Poyor has just come from the city, and there is no suspicion that we have passed the line of sentinels."

"If he did that what is to prevent us from doing the same?" Jake asked as the leader paused for an instant.

"Nothing except our skins are white, and he can readily pass himself off for a Chan Santa Cruz. He speaks the language, resembles them in features, and could make his way around the town with but little trouble; but on that point no great amount of time need be spent. Here is the plan which I wish to carry into effect: Poyor has found a vacant building on the outskirts of the place which he has bargained for, representing himself as one of the sentinels recently released from duty on the eastern side. In that character no person will be likely to wonder why he is without acquaintances, for the watchmen often remain away from the city one or two years, entering only when it is necessary to procure provisions."

"Is he to go on alone?" Jake asked.

"Certainly not. At a late hour to-night we will accompany him, and all our hopes of success depend upon gaining this building without being discovered."

"How long are we to stay there?"

"A week if necessary."

"A week!" Teddy and Neal cried in concert.

"Yes, and I hope we shall be able to remain concealed in the house during that time, otherwise it may go hard with us."

"But what do you expect to do shut up in a building, for of course we must keep out of sight?" and Jake's face expressed the utmost surprise and apprehension.

"That is exactly what you shall learn when we arrive there. Since I have proven that the Silver City really has an existence, the least that can be done is to aid in carrying out my programme without too much discussion."

"You won't have any reason to complain because I don't obey orders," Jake replied quickly.

"Then I will soon show you what we expect to do providing our plans work without a hitch during the next ten hours. Let's get these traps into a more convenient shape for carrying, in order that we may be ready for the last stage of our journey when Poyor gives the word."

CHAPTER XIII.

IN THE CITY.

The boys and Jake were decidedly perplexed and not a little worried in regard to the outline of work as given by Cummings. They failed to understand how it could be to their advantage to go into the city if it should be necessary to remain hidden all the time, or in what way they would derive any benefit from the visit.

Although the leader of the party knew from the expression of their faces that they were dissatisfied with the general outlook, he did not volunteer any information, thinking, perhaps, that it was unnecessary to do so since they were where it was impossible to withdraw from the enterprise.

Neither Teddy nor Neal believed the party would be exposed to any extraordinary danger. The only idea in their minds was as to whether it would be possible for them to get out of the swamp in time to take the next steamer which left Progresso for the United States, and both believed it would be a great misfortune to miss the first opportunity of reaching home.

"We can stand it for one week," Neal said in a whisper: "but what I am afraid of is that it won't be possible to leave the city at the end of that time," and Teddy replied in the same cautious tones:

"It is for us to see that such a contingency does not arise. Jake will do as we say, and if Cummings refuses to leave at a date sufficiently early for us to reach Progresso, we must force him to act as has been promised."

"What shall we do in case he refuses?"

"We are three out of a party of five, and should be able to arrange matters to our own liking."

Neal was perfectly contented with such a view of the case, and he felt well satisfied that nothing could prevent them from doing as they wished; but unfortunately, he failed to take into consideration the very important fact that while it might be a simple matter to enter the city, they

could not be certain of leaving it at will.

"We can do as we please by standing firm to our determination of going away in time to take passage on the steamer," he said; "therefore we'll see the adventure through to that point, and if Cummings fails in his purpose of bringing away a large amount of gold we will have had such an experience as can be talked about when we get home."

As for Jake, a glimpse of the glistening walls of the city had literally intoxicated him, and his one and only desire was to reach that point where he could satisfy himself by the sense of touch as well as sight.

As the time drew near for the final move in the bold scheme Cummings became greatly agitated. It was as if all the blood had left his face, and his eyes were open wide and staring as he gazed into vacancy.

"Are you sick?" Teddy asked in alarm.

The young man shook his head.

"I suppose I'm acting like a fool; but can't prevent my nerves from getting the best of me just at this time. After laboring two years for one thing, and then being so near a successful completion of the work, is enough to make any fellow excited."

Teddy was on the point of saying he fancied that fear of the ultimate result might have some share in this alleged nervous attack; but, fortunately, he checked himself in time, and turned to watch Poyor who was hiding the boat beneath an ingeniously constructed screen of leaves.

Night came slowly; the twittering of the birds and the chattering of the monkeys was hushed. Among the dense underbrush the darkness was intense, yet the Indian remained motionless in a listening attitude.

Amid profound silence the moments passed until to the boys it seemed as if it must have been midnight when Cummings whispered:

"It is time. Poyor shall lead the way, and I will bring up the rear."

Walking in single file, and keeping firm hold of each other's garments lest they should be separated, the little party began the last stage of the journey.

The Indian went forward as if familiar with all the surroundings, and when half an hour had passed he halted only long enough to point ahead where, through the foliage, could be seen the city, its buildings gleaming ghostly white in the starlight.

The decisive moment had arrived.

If they should be seen by a single person the alarm would be given, for the clothing as well as the skin of all the party, save Poyor, would proclaim the fact that these newcomers belonged to the hated race, and the end could not be long delayed.

Assuring himself that there was no one in sight, Poyor quickened his pace, leading the way toward a small building on the outskirts of the town, and ten minutes later, the strangers were inside the dwelling; but although successful in the undertaking, were virtually prisoners.

The house was very small as compared with the majority of those seen by the boys when they gazed from a distance, and had evidently been unoccupied a long while.

The one room which comprised the entire lower floor was destitute of anything in the way of furniture, and the sides, ceiling and floor were formed of the same soft-looking white stone which appeared to be the only building material in the city.

Poyor did not give his companions much time in which to inspect this portion of the building. With an impatient gesture to the boys who were gazing around them in evident disappointment, he led the way up a narrow flight of stairs to a sort of attic hardly more than six feet high, and with only two narrow slits in the wall to serve as windows.

Here five hammocks had been slung, and on one of them the Indian threw himself without a word of rejoicing or comment upon the ease and safety with which they had entered the city.

"Now what is to be done?" Neal asked as Cummings started toward the stairway.

"I wish to bar the lower door, for it would be exceedingly inconvenient if we should have callers."

"It strikes me that there will be very little chance to get gold if we are to stay shut up here."

"That's just what has been puzzlin' me ever since I saw the place," Jake added. "We're not even in the city, only on the edge, and so far as seein' what's goin' on is concerned, the big tree in the swamp would have been a better place."

"You may find that we are too near the heart of the town," Cummings replied with a grimace. "Tomorrow, after Poyor has looked around some, we will decide on a plan. You had better go to sleep while there is a chance, for no one can say when we may be obliged to beat a hasty retreat."

The boys followed this advice for the simple reason that there was nothing else to be done. Teddy had looked through the narrow slit in the wall; but without being able to see anything of interest,

and in this city which may have been, and probably was standing when Columbus discovered America, the three who had been literally thrown upon the coast of Yucatan lay down to sleep.

Owing to the strangeness of their surroundings, and the knowledge of the danger which threatened, no one gave himself up to very profound slumber.

The silence was so perfect as to be almost oppressive, until half an hour before sunrise, when a low strain of sweetest music arose on the air, gradually swelling in volume, and finally ending in a wild burst which caused Poyor to spring to his feet.

"What is the matter?" Teddy asked, and Cummings replied carelessly:

"Nothing in particular. That music is the summons to prayer, and now is the time when the Indian can go through the streets with less danger of being discovered."

In another instant Jake and the boys were at the apertures which served as windows; but some time elapsed before they could see anything owing to the gloom. Then, as day dissipated the darkness, they distinguished throngs of white robed figures hurrying from every quarter toward some common point, which was probably the temple with its dome of silver.

It was an odd sight to see so many people moving rapidly, but without noise, while neither cart nor animal of any kind accompanied them. Here and there were men carrying burdens on their backs by aid of a strap passed around the forehead, and many women and children literally loaded down with flowers.

"I don't see any great show of gold or silver," Teddy said, after gazing at the scene some time in silence. "No one appears to wear anything like jewelry."

"That may be because such metal is too common here," Jake replied. "What bothers me is to make out why Cummings and the Indian are so afraid of being discovered. These people don't look as if they'd kill a fly unless he made a noise, an' that's what they seem to be scared of."

"Don't make a mistake," Cummings whispered, as he overheard the last portion of the conversation. "If it was known that a white man had succeeded in entering the city our lives would be taken within the next hour."

"You may believe all that; but I'll hold to it that they're the most peaceable lot I ever saw, until somethin' comes up to prove the contrary," and Jake went toward the street door with Poyor, regardless of whether he was seen by the passers-by or not until the Indian said sharply:

"Go back; I do not wish to die."

"If you're frightened of course I'll get out of the way," Jake replied half angrily; "but before we leave this town I'll show you how much reason there is for being afraid."

"And in ten minutes from that time you will cease to live," Poyor replied gravely, as he left the building, closing the door carefully behind him.

"It will be well to remember what he has said," Cummings added sharply as he approached the engineer to bar the door. "These people are peaceable until the time comes when religion and all the traditions of their race tell that a long remembered wrong should be avenged, and then no class can be more implacable. I would not show my face outside of this door for as much gold as can be found in Yucatan."

This remark silenced Jake, but he was by no means convinced of its truthfulness, as could be told by his whispered remark to Neal:

"They know we will have a chance to lug off a pile of money, an' to prevent us from wantin' too much, try to prove that we must stay out of sight so's they can get the cream of the bargain."

"Don't do anything foolish," Teddy replied earnestly. "Cummings would not have asked us to come with him unless there had been good reason for wanting assistance, and it is not possible he has made any mistake regarding the nature of the people."

Jake had nothing more to say; but it could readily be seen that he believed his own ideas on the subject were correct, and at this moment something occurred which demanded his entire attention.

Poyor had but just left the building, and a crowd was gathering in front of the door, causing Cummings to say with every sign of fear:

"We shall soon have a chance of learning what these people will do in event of finding a white man in the city, for it looks as if we were discovered."

CHAPTER XIV.

THE FESTIVAL.

It can well be imagined with what anxiety the party in the building looked through the narrow

apertures at the crowd below.

Even Jake began to fancy he had made a mistake in regard to their peaceful dispositions, and Teddy noticed that he examined very carefully all the weapons.

Those on the outside were armed chiefly with bows and arrows; but a few carried a sort of spear with a tip which looked not unlike glass, and Neal whispered to Cummings:

"If they have got nothing but arrows we ought to be able to hold a large number in check with our guns."

"Don't make the mistake of despising their weapons, for every one is covered with a poison so deadly that a single scratch would be more dangerous than a wound from a bullet."

"Do you think they have learned that we are here?"

"I can't explain in any other way the motive for the gathering; but none of them appear to be paying very much attention to the building."

As a matter of fact, although there were four to five hundred directly in front of the house, hardly one of them glanced toward the openings through which the little party were gazing; but the majority appeared to be having a most sociable time.

As the moments passed without any evidence that an attack was to be made the voluntary prisoners began to grow more comfortable in mind, and again Jake proposed that such people were neither able nor inclined to inflict much injury upon any one.

Suddenly there was a great commotion among the crowd; the men shouted and waved their weapons, danced about in the most grotesque fashion and from afar off could be heard the sound of music.

Five minutes later the cause of this sudden change of demeanor became apparent.

Down the street from the direction of the forest came several hundred women decorated with the most beautiful flowers, and carrying huge bouquets or wreaths. They trooped along without any attempt at marching in regular order: but on arriving in front of the men they halted suddenly in response to sharp strokes on a gong or tongueless bell which one of them held high in the air.

The men were now on one side of the street and the women on the other, and in this order they stood when twenty persons of both sexes, carrying on a broad flower-covered platform a repulsive looking figure apparently composed of gold, marched between the ranks and halted.

Instantly every one sank down with bowed head as if in adoration, and the invisible music, accompanied by the peals of sweet-toned bells, filled the air with melody.

"We were frightened too soon," Cummings said with a sigh of relief. "It is a festival of some sort, and this happens to be the place where it is to be welcomed to the city. It would be most unfortunate if Poyor should take it into his head to come back just at this time."

"He could see the crowd before getting very near and would know enough to stay at a distance," Neal replied. "I'd like to know what that statue represents."

The golden figure was certainly very odd. Its body was in shape not unlike a panther's; but the tail was short, and stuck straight in the air. The head might have been formed to represent a monkey, although the ears were very long, and the whole was covered with carving to represent scales.

"How much do you suppose it weighs?" Teddy asked of Jake, and the latter, who had also been trying to compute its value, replied:

"Not an ounce less than a hundred pounds. What a prize that would be if we could carry it away!"

"There are many of the same kind in the city." Cummings added, "and we should be able to get off with some before a week is ended."

"Then that is the plan you have formed?" Neal said interrogatively.

"Exactly. Poyor is to examine all the statues near by, and decide upon such as we can pull down some night, after which it will only be a question of reaching our boat. I have no fear of being able to get through the swamp providing we have a start of five or six hours."

While this conversation was being carried on the people outside remained in the same devout attitude; but just as Cummings ceased speaking there was a change in the affairs.

The music grew louder, and the bells were rung more rapidly, and the devotees sprang to their feet with shouts and songs, the women throwing flowers on the platform until the hideous god was nearly hidden from view.

When the tongueless bell was struck three times the crowd gathered around the image bearers, and all started toward what the white men believed was the temple, chanting in perfect harmony with the music.

The worshipers were soon lost to view; but their voices could be heard for ten or fifteen minutes, after which clouds of smoke, probably caused by burning incense, arose from the silver-domed

building.

"If Poyor is wise he will come now," Cummings said, as he looked anxiously out. "The people are so intent upon the worship, or installation of a new god, whichever it may be, that he can get into the house without being seen."

But there were no signs of the Indian. Strain their eyes as they might he did not appear.

The sounds of music died away. The smoke ceased to arise from the temple, and the people began to walk the streets intent upon their business or pleasure.

"It is strange he is so imprudent," Cummings muttered half to himself. "Now the only safe way is to wait until night, if indeed he is yet at liberty."

"Do you think anything has happened to him?" Neal asked.

"Of course I can't even guess; but it is very strange he has waited so long."

More than that Cummings would not say: but both the boys could plainly see he was very anxious, and all grew greatly distressed in mind as the hours wore on.

Noon came, and once more the streets were nearly deserted, for the inhabitants of the city were indulging in a siesta.

Now Cummings stationed himself at the window, peering out eagerly; but all in vain.

Slowly the moments passed. The boys tried to eat; but the terrible suspense had spoiled all appetite for food, more especially since it was not particularly inviting, and after swallowing a few crumbs Teddy said:

"It's no use, I can't even force it down. Why did we come here, knowing at least a portion of the danger?"

"Cause we were fools," Jake replied philosophically; "but that is no reason why we shouldn't have as near to a square meal as is possible," and he began to devour another tortilla.

"We won't despair yet," Cummings said, as he left his post at the window and joined the little group in the further corner of the room, "Poyor is cautious in the extreme, and may believe it isn't safe to enter the house in the daytime under any circumstances."

"Did he say when he would come back?"

"No; it was understood he should return at the first favorable opportunity."

"Could you find the way to the boat if we never saw him again?" Teddy asked.

"Yes, although we might have some trouble in doing so."

Then another long interval of silence came upon the little party, during which each one listened intently for the slightest sound which might betoken a visitor.

Finally Jake fell asleep, and so loud was his snoring that it seemed as if he must be heard from the street, therefore the boys pinched him when there was too great a volume of sound, and at the same time wished they could enjoy the same happy unconsciousness of the situation.

Cummings alternately paced to and fro, and stood by the narrow aperture overlooking the street, until nightfall, when the citizens walked up and down singing or chatting.

It was as if every one was perfectly happy, and this condition of affairs caused Cummings to feel less despondent.

"Look," he said to Neal and Teddy, "if Poyor had been discovered the people would show some signs of excitement. We have no reason to fear yet awhile."

The argument was certainly a good one, and the boys' courage revived wonderfully. They made a reasonably hearty supper of tortillas, and when the promenaders began to disappear, thus telling that the hour for retiring was near at hand, Cummings went downstairs and unbolted the door.

Now every second appeared like a minute, and when it seemed as if the night must be well nigh spent a slight sound was heard from below.

Jake would have rushed to the stair-case to welcome the Indian; but Cummings restrained him. It was not certain who the visitor might be, and with bated breath all listened until a low voice said:

"It is Poyor."

The remark was commonplace in the extreme; but no combination of words sounded more sweetly to the boys, and they rushed forward to clasp the Indian by the hand.

In the dim light it was not possible to see him very clearly; but from the imperfect view all understood that something serious had happened. He was panting as if just having concluded a long race, and the flowing white garments he had put on before leaving in order to resemble the inhabitants of the city, were torn and stained with mud.

Cummings spoke to him in the Indian dialect, and he replied gravely, the first words causing the

white man to utter an exclamation of dismay.

"What is the matter? What has happened?" Teddy asked; but Cummings made no reply until Poyor had spoken at considerable length, and then he said:

"The worst possible misfortune has befallen us. Our boat has been discovered and brought into the city. It is believed we are hiding in the swamp, and a number of men are searching there for us."

"Why didn't he come straight back to tell us?" Jake asked angrily. "If these people are so fierce as you pretend, it is time we were making our escape."

"To have approached this place in the daytime would have been in the highest degree dangerous, and, besides, he had a good deal of work to do."

"Such as what?"

"It was necessary we should know exactly the strength and whereabouts of the searching party. That he has discovered."

"And how much good will it do us while we are shut up in here?"

"Do not cast reproaches in the time of trouble," Cummings replied gravely. "We must work together to extricate ourselves from the danger into which I have persuaded you to come."

Jake was silenced, and Poyor continued to tell his story, but still speaking in his own language.

The boys fancied he was proposing some plan which did not meet with Cummings' approbation, for the latter spoke vehemently at times.

While this was going on Teddy whispered to Neal:

"It begins to look as if the sailors who were drowned in the surf were more fortunate than the rest of us. They died quickly, and we shall probably find out what it means to be tortured."

"Don't speak of such horrible things, Teddy. We are not captured yet, and there is no sense in looking trouble in the face."

"It can't be helped sometimes. I've had enough of adventures, and if we do live to escape from this place all the gold in the world wouldn't tempt me to get into another such scrape."

CHAPTER XV.

A RETREAT.

Cummings and Poyor talked together fully half an hour before the former volunteered any further information to his white companions, and then he said:

"It would be useless for me to disguise the truth in any particular, for it is important all should know the absolute facts of the situation. In laying my plans for this expedition the only contingency for which I did not prepare, was exactly what has happened. I never believed there were so many sentinels in the swamp that the boat would be discovered, and when we came through without seeing a single one, I felt perfectly safe on that score."

"Isn't it possible the Indians will think it is a craft belonging to some of their own people?" Neal asked.

"There is no hope of that. She is entirely different in build, and you must remember that we left a number of things on board. Those who found her came directly to the city, and orders have been given by the chief men that the swamp be searched thoroughly. There is no longer any possibility that we could go through without being discovered."

"Then we've got no chance of escaping," Jake cried passionately, and Cummings replied calmly:

"Who says we haven't? the coast line, where no one would think of looking for an enemy, is still open, and what prevents us from trying to make our way in that direction?"

"Then you have given up all hope of carrying away any treasure?"

"Under the circumstances I shall be well pleased if we succeed in getting away alive. We are now in a position where nothing save escape must be thought of, and I am the one who has placed you three in such a dangerous situation. Shut your eyes to the fact that so much treasure might be gained, and bend all your energies to leaving this section of the country. As compared with life gold amounts to very little."

"Then we are to say that the attempt has been a failure," Jake added in a tone of reproach.

"Yes, and I take upon myself all the blame. You have spent but little time on the enterprise, while to it I have devoted not less than two years, therefore you can get some idea of the extent of my disappointment as compared with yours."

"We recognize that fully," Neal replied, "and understand that you believed the expedition would be successful; but since it has proven to be a failure let us decide upon the proper course to be pursued rather than spend our time reproaching each other."

"You are talking like a sensible fellow," Cummings said approvingly. "Here is the situation in a nut-shell, and Poyor understands English sufficiently to follow us in all we say. To go back by the way we came is now impossible, and yet we must leave the city before a house to house search is made, as I am convinced will be the case when it is shown that there are no strangers in the swamp. The only open course is toward the east, over the mountains, and the journey can be accomplished if we hang together. I am willing to acknowledge that I have led you on an unsuccessful search, although that may be of little satisfaction, and now my only aim is to release you from the dangers which beset us all."

"We understand that perfectly," Teddy said quickly, "therefore there is no reason why the matter should be discussed. We took the same chances that you and Poyor did, consequently our interests are identical. Show us how to get out of here, and the Chan Santa Cruz Indians may keep all their gold and silver so far as I am concerned."

"But how are we to be paid for the time spent?" Jake asked fretfully.

"By saving your own life, which is now in great danger," Neal replied. "Give up all idea of making yourself rich by the venture, and think only of how we can best get away."

"That is something for Cummings to fix," Jake replied in a sulky tone. "I came here for gold, and if that can't be had let those who put up the job help us out of the scrape."

"I have already taken upon myself all the blame of the failure, and admitted that it came about through an oversight of mine," Cummings said sternly. "Now if you will listen to my plan I believe we can get out of here alive, which is the one important thing just at this time when everything has gone against us."

"What do you propose to do?" Neal asked, with a glance at Jake which should have silenced him.

"Strike for the sea-shore. Poyor believes it is yet possible to leave the city on the eastern side without danger of meeting the sentinels, the majority of whom have been withdrawn to aid in searching the swamp, and by moving quickly we can at least be out of this hornets' nest before sunrise."

"You are the best judge; we will follow your directions," Teddy said, speaking more calmly than one would have fancied was possible in view of all the danger. "Tell us what you think is best and we will agree to it, for now Neal and I have but one desire, which is to leave the Silver City in the shortest possible space of time. We can be of but little assistance in case of a regular fight, and according to my way of thinking, your greatest mistake has been in accepting such useless companions."

"I am perfectly satisfied that so far as you are concerned I have not made any error. With twenty well-armed men I should not try to maintain my position, for to hold out against an attack would be impossible, and the only question now is whether we can escape. Having been here once I will come again, and at some time in the future you shall hear that I succeeded in bringing away treasure from this same wonderful city."

Then Cummings held a short conversation with Poyor, and when it was concluded turned toward Neal and Teddy, as if disdainingly to submit any plans to Jake, and said:

"My first idea was to make an effort to return by the same way we came; but the Indian has persuaded me to the contrary. Are you willing to do as we think best?"

"You are as eager to save your own lives as we are ours," Neal replied, "and since you are familiar with this country it would be foolish for us to offer any advice. Do whatever in the opinion of both is best, and we will obey orders."

"Our scheme necessitates an immediate move, for, as yet, no attempt has been made to learn if there are any strangers in the city."

"Then you propose to go without making any effort to carry away gold?" Jake asked.

"Exactly. The journey has been a failure, through my carelessness as I said before, and to load ourselves down with treasure when a long march is before us, would be the height of folly."

Jake remained silent, and Neal said:

"Don't waste any more time talking. Let us start at once."

Cummings spoke with Poyor, and the latter replied with the air of one who considers himself vanquished, after which the former said:

"We may need all this food. Make it up into bundles, and we will start at once. The journey before us is a long and a dangerous one: but, as I believe, it is the only way of escape left open."

The boys set about making the small amount of baggage into five parcels while Cummings and the Indian were still discussing some point, and when the conversation was concluded the former said:

"We will start for the sea coast. There is no immediate hurry, for there is yet at least six hours before the inhabitants will be stirring."

"There must be sentinels on the east as well as the west side," Teddy suggested.

"True; but if the information brought by Poyor be correct, there will not be as strict a watch kept. The Indian believes we should try to force a passage through the swamp, fighting in case of a necessity; but I prefer that course where the least danger is to be met, even though the distance be greater."

Neither Neal nor Teddy cared to discuss the matter: they knew that Cummings was the best judge in such a case, and were well content to follow his leadership; but Jake did not trust him so implicitly.

"Before we leave here I want to know your plans," he said. "My life as well as yours and the others, is in danger, and it is no more than right that I have at least a faint idea of what is to be done."

"You are quite right," Cummings replied mildly. "It is my purpose to travel toward the east as far as the sea-shore, and from there make our way to my hut. So far as I can see it is the only practicable course."

"What does the Indian say?"

"He thinks we can go through the swamp even if we have no boat: but, in my opinion, the danger of contracting the fever is too great."

Jake had the appearance of a man who is about to make some protest, and Neal whispered to him:

"In such a case as this it is our duty to accept Cummings' view of the matter. Do not delay now when we all know that every moment is precious."

"Have it your own way, I won't say another word," the engineer replied impatiently; "but I think we have followed this man blindly as long as we should."

Neal paid no attention to the latter portion of this remark, but said as he turned toward the leader:

"It is all right; we are ready."

"Then follow me, and remember that our lives may pay the forfeit if a single incautious word is spoken."

Thus speaking he took up one of the packages, looked once more to the cartridges in his gun, and started down the stairs, the boys and Jake following, while Poyor brought up the rear.

At the outer door he hesitated an instant, much as if to persuade himself that it was absolutely necessary to flee from this city to enter which he had spent so many days in making preparations, and then, throwing it open, he led the way into the deserted streets.

"Our safest plan is to go straight across, rather than try to circle around the outskirts where we may meet with sentinels," he said, motioning for Poyor to lead the way. "At present no one suspects that we are here, consequently the guard will not be particularly on the alert."

"Do as you think best," Neal replied, and then, falling back by the side of Teddy, he whispered:

"If it hadn't been for me you wouldn't have gotten into this scrape; in case anything happens try not to believe it was my fault."

"There is no possible chance that you can be to blame," Teddy replied warmly. "Any one would have accepted the invitation to go yachting, and this last part of the cruise is only the result of an accident with which you had nothing to do."

Jake did not open his mouth; he acted as if Cummings had done him a personal injury in proposing such a trip, and the fact that they were obliged to leave without making any effort to carry away the vast amount of treasure which he knew to be in the city unguarded, aroused his anger in a most unreasonable degree.

Poyor took the lead and conducted the party directly past the enormous temple with its ornamentation of silver which shone in the pale rays of the moon until the entire structure appeared to be a solid mass of the precious metal, and the marvelous sight was too much for Jake, who, coming to a sudden halt, said doggedly:

"It may be all right for you boys with rich fathers to turn your backs on so much wealth; but I'm goin' to have some part of this treasure, or give the Indians a fair chance to kill me."

CHAPTER XVI.

DISCOVERED.

Cummings was bringing up the rear during this march across the city, and when Jake halted he naturally thought it was in obedience to some signal made by Poyor, therefore he remained silent until hearing Neal say imploringly:

"Go on, Jake. Don't stop now when we have a chance of getting away in safety, for what is gold in comparison with life?"

"Have you halted with any idea that it may be possible to carry anything off with us?" Cummings asked, speaking in a whisper, and Jake replied in the same cautious tone:

"That's the size of it. You brought us here with the promise that we could make ourselves rich, and when the first little thing goes wrong you run. Now I will do as I please."

"It is nothing less than suicide. We have before us a journey so long and difficult that however small a burden you may have to carry, it will seem all too heavy."

By this time Poyor turned back to learn the cause of the halt, and when it was explained he said gravely:

"Each instant we stand here brings death so much nearer. Even at this moment watchful eyes may be upon us, and once we are discovered flight will be almost impossible."

The little party stood directly in front of what was evidently the main entrance to the temple. It was formed of twenty slender shafts of white stone which in the moonlight looked translucent, and each column upheld a grotesque figure composed of what appeared to be silver.

"I am goin' to have one of them images, no matter what happens," Jake said doggedly. "I don't care how much of a tramp there is before us, and the more the thing weighs the better I'll be pleased, for it's the first chance I ever had to make myself rich."

"But think of us," Teddy whispered. "We all run the risk of being killed because of what you propose to do."

"There's no need of your waitin' here. Go on, an' I'll take care of myself. I ain't such a chump as not to be able to find my way out."

"It must be as he says. We can wait no longer," Poyor said peremptorily. "Better one should die than all," and, seizing Neal by the shoulder, he literally dragged him away.

Cummings did the same by Teddy, and as the boys were thus forced from the place they saw Jake trying to make his way up one of the smooth shafts.

"It is cruel to leave him when you know he will be killed," Neal said as he struggled in vain to release himself from the Indian's grasp.

"He knows the danger, and will not come. We must care for ourselves. Now remain quiet; there has been too much noise and too long a delay."

Poyor was walking at a pace so rapid that the boys were forced to run; but before they reached the next intersecting street a loud crash was heard from the direction of the temple, and Cummings whispered:

"He has toppled over one of the columns, and discovery is now certain. He has insured our destruction as well as his own."

The words had hardly been uttered when shouts were heard from different portions of the city, and, as if he had sprung from the ground, a man appeared directly in their path.

A second's delay would have been fatal. Poyor, releasing his hold of Neal, dashed forward with the agility of a cat, and springing upon the stranger bore him to the ground.

There was a short, sharp struggle which lasted while one might possibly have counted ten, and then the man lay motionless while Poyor, grasping Neal by the arm once more, darted on down the street.

Now it seemed as if the entire city had been aroused. On every hand could be heard shouts as if of command and cries of surprise and anger. The sound of footsteps in the rear told that the pursuit had already begun, and it was a race for life with the odds fearfully against the fugitives.

"You must run now as you never did before," Cummings said sharply to Teddy. "There can be no thought of fatigue until we reach some shelter where it will be possible to make a stand."

"I can hold out as long as Neal; but neither of us are a match for Poyor."

"He could run all day."

Two moments later, when they were nearing a broad street which Cummings fancied led to the woods on the eastern side of the city, Poyor slackened his pace to say:

"There is one close behind who must be stopped. Will you do it, or shall I?"

"Help Teddy along, while I try it."

As the Indian took Teddy by the arm, thus having a boy on either side of him, Cummings unslung the rifle which had been strapped over his shoulder, and, wheeling suddenly, raised it at a man

who was not more than forty yards in the rear.

"Don't shoot! It's me!" a familiar voice cried, and as Cummings turned to resume the flight he muttered to himself:

"It's a pity they haven't caught you. But for your folly we could have passed through the city unobserved."

Jake no longer believed the Chan Santa Cruz Indians to be such a peaceable race. When, as Cummings had suspected, the shaft he was trying to climb toppled over, he was able to escape injury by leaping to one side, and immediately made an effort to detach the statue which was cemented firmly to the stone.

It seemed to him that he had but just begun the task when two men rushed from the interior of the temple. Fortunately for him they were unarmed or his term of life would have expired at that moment; but as it was one of them seized a fragment of the stone as he turned to run, and threw it with such accuracy of aim that Jake's cheek was cut from the eye to the chin as smoothly as if done with a razor.

With the blood streaming down his face Jake ran for dear life in the direction taken by the remainder of the party, and now fully realizing the danger he had brought upon them.

"I deserve to be killed," he said to himself, "and if that Poyor don't try to even up things with me for this night's job it'll be because he's a better Indian than I ever gave him credit for."

When the remainder of the party reached the end of the broad street with the welcome shelter of the forest not more than half a mile away, Jake was ten or twelve yards in the rear, and three times that distance behind him were a dozen men who appeared to be gaining each instant.

Again Poyor spoke to Cummings, and again the latter stopped suddenly and wheeled about: but this time there was no warning shout to prevent the rifle from being discharged.

There was a loud report, a cry of pain from one of the pursuers, and all halted for an instant to aid their wounded companion.

When Cummings turned to continue the flight Jake was by his side, saying as they ran:

"If it comes to close quarters I'll drop behind, and make as long a fight as I can, which will give the rest a chance to gain on the crowd."

"They would surely kill you. There could be no hope in a hand to hand struggle."

"I know that, and it will be no more than I deserve. If I hadn't been such a fool you would have got through without turning a hair."

This confession and the proposition to sacrifice himself had the effect of dissipating Cummings' anger, and he said decidedly:

"We will stick together and take even chances. No matter what has been done one shall not be sacrificed to save the rest unless I, who brought you here, am that one."

To carry on any extended conversation and at the same time continue the pace was out of the question, and during the next five minutes not a word was spoken.

Now there were two dozen pursuers, and the boys had become so nearly exhausted that Teddy felt positive that he could not keep on his feet long enough to reach the forest.

Poyor, seeing that both the boys had nearly run their race, shouted in his own language a few words to Cummings, clasped his panting companions by the waist, and, although thus burdened, soon drew away from both the white men.

Nearer and nearer come the pursuers.

Once more Cummings halts, discharges his rifle, and then presses forward.

Poyor gains the shelter while the others are a hundred yards away, and allowing the boys to drop to the ground, he unslings Neal's gun, stands at the very edge of the cover where he fires two shots just in time to save the remainder of the party.

"We must not stop here," he says as Cummings comes to a halt by his side. "Help the boys, and leave me here long enough to hold them in check until you have put considerable distance between the crowd and yourselves."

Cummings waited only until he had given the Indian his own rifle and some cartridges, for it was a more effective weapon than Neal's, and then he and Jake did as directed.

Traveling in as nearly a straight line as possible they marched rapidly, while behind them could be heard shot after shot, telling that Poyor was doing his duty.

"If he can keep that up long enough we shall give them the slip after all," Jake said, speaking with difficulty as he gasped for breath.

"There are others to be met. Between here and the coast is a line of sentinels who may be more vigilant than those in the swamp."

Now that the pace was slower, and because of the assistance rendered, Neal and Teddy were able to make their way unaided, and the former said as he pushed Cummings from him:

"I am all right now. You have as much as you can do to take care of yourself, and it is not fair to half carry me as you and Poyor have been doing."

"It hasn't been such a very hard job; but I'm perfectly willing to give it up if you are feeling better."

"We are both in fair condition," Teddy replied, and being relieved of the burdens the men were able to travel more rapidly.

During the next ten minutes not a word was spoken, and then Cummings said as he halted:

"We'll take a little rest, for I am nearly blown."

All threw themselves on the ground where they lay panting until, recovering somewhat, Jake asked:

"How is Poyor to find us in this thicket? He can't follow a trail in the darkness."

"He will succeed in doing so as— Say, are you wounded?"

"One of those fellows cut my cheek open with a rock; but beyond the pain I don't reckon there's been any great damage done."

"You are fortunate that it was not inflicted by an arrow or spear. Let me try to bandage it, for the loss of blood will tell upon you if we continue this gait very long."

With strips torn from Jake's shirt the wound was bound up in an awkward fashion, and Cummings said as he finished the work:

"When Poyor comes he will gather a certain leaf which has healing properties, and in a short time all the pain will go away; but I fancy you'll carry that scar to your grave."

CHAPTER XVII.

A HALT.

Jake professed to have but little care how long the scar might remain on his face providing the wound healed, and they succeeded in escaping from the Chan Santa Cruz Indians.

"Nothing that can happen to us during the journey to Merida would be half as bad as to fall into their hands," he said with a shudder, "and what surprises me most is that I should have thought they were peaceably inclined."

"But that is exactly what they are until it comes to dealing with a white man," Cummings replied. "You must remember all that the people—the natives I mean—have suffered since America was discovered. The barbarous treatment they received from the Spaniards is told from father to son, and it is a portion of their religious training to work all the injury possible to the whites. Read of what the invaders did to satisfy their thirst for gold, and then you can no longer wonder why these people, the only ones who have kept their city free from the conqueror, are so implacable. Remember that Yucatan was once covered with populous cities, the ruins of which show even at this late date how magnificent they were, how splendid beyond comparison with the one we have seen, and you ask yourselves why these Indians do not rise and massacre all of the hated color that can be found."

"But you also came hoping to take away their treasure," Neal said, smiling at Cummings' vehemence.

"That is true, therefore I have no word of blame when they attempt to kill me; but, as a matter of course, I try to save my life even though I am to them nothing more than a common robber. In my own eyes, however, the case seems different. To procure such goods as I most desired, would probably be, by the aid of Poyor, to solve that which scholars have studied for so long in vain—the origin of the Aztecs and Toltecs, for I believe the Chan Santa Cruz belong to the latter race, and keep fresh all their histories and traditions."

"And now that you have failed it would be better to go home with us," Teddy said.

"This attempt has failed; but I shall try again and again until I succeed, providing we get out of this scrape alive, which is by no means certain, for we have a long and perilous journey before us."

"Which we are not likely to make unless Poyor comes back," Neal added grimly. "It surely seems as if he should be here by this time. I haven't heard the report of his rifle for a long while."

"Most likely we are too far away for the sound to reach us. We will wait half an hour longer, and then I will go back to see if anything has happened."

Cummings had hardly ceased speaking before the Indian appeared in their midst, having come so softly that no one heard him until he stood before them.

"It is not a good watch you keep," he said to Cummings, speaking in English.

"We cannot guard against such an approach as yours. Where are the enemy?"

"I left them at the edge of the forest. Knowing how we are armed they do not dare to follow very close; but when the sun rises a hundred will be at our heels."

"Shall we go on now, or will you rest awhile?"

"I am ready. We have no time to lose."

Cummings rose to his feet, the others following his example, and the Indian started forward without delay.

"How far are we from the sea-shore?" Cummings asked as the march began.

"More miles than we shall travel for many days. By sunrise every sentinel will know we are here, and it will be impossible to break through their lines."

"Then how are we to get home?" Teddy asked in alarm.

"He probably hopes to find some place where we can stay in hiding for awhile. In this section of the country there are many large caverns in which streams of water are invariably found, thus causing the belief that a subterranean river flows from the valley to the sea. If we stop at one of them until it is decided we have succeeded in escaping, you will not be able to take the steamer as intended."

"But we may have to stay two or three weeks."

"Better that than to be captured," Cummings replied, and then he relapsed into silence.

During the next two hours the little party pressed steadily forward, making their way with difficulty through the tangled foliage, and then Neal was forced to ask for another halt.

"I must rest awhile," he said. "My feet are sore, and it seems impossible to take another step."

Poyor halted, was about to seat himself, and then, as if suddenly remembering something, he said:

"Wait here. I will soon be back."

The white members of the party were too tired even to talk. Throwing themselves upon the ground they enjoyed the luxury of rest, and, convinced there was no danger to be apprehended from the enemy until daylight, Neal and Teddy gave themselves up to the embrace of slumber.

An hour passed before the apparently tireless Poyor returned, and he awakened the sleepers by saying:

"I have found that for which I sought. Come with me, and repose until labor will seem a pleasure."

"What is it? A cave?" Neal asked sleepily.

"More than that. An underground house where we can live in safety, unless the retreat should be discovered."

It was a great exertion to get into traveling trim; but all hands did it after a time, and Poyor led the way, although he had probably been there but once before, as if following a familiar path.

After about half an hour's rapid walking the Indian halted at an opening in the hillside hardly more than large enough for one to go through on his hands and knees, and motioned for the others to enter.

Cummings led the way, and while he was doing so Teddy asked Poyor:

"Have you been here often before?"

"This is the first time."

"How could you see a small hole like that while it is so dark?"

"On the line of these caves the earth is always damp. When we halted last I could feel that we were on the underground water course, and it was only necessary to follow it up. Here we shall find both food and drink."

"I don't understand where the food comes in unless we are to live on bats," Neal said laughingly, as he in turn entered the aperture.

By the time Teddy was inside Cummings had lighted a branch of what is mistakenly called fat wood, and, using this for a torch, it was possible to have a reasonably good view of the temporary home.

The boys found themselves standing in an enormous chamber, from which led several galleries or

smaller rooms, lined with the same soft white stone seen in the buildings of the Silver City, and at the further end was a narrow stream rising apparently from the solid rock, crossing the cavern to the opposite side where it disappeared.

To describe the beauty of this marble chamber fashioned by nature would be impossible. Neal and Teddy had but just begun to realize its magnificence when they were startled by the whirring of wings and a clucking noise such as is made by a barn-yard fowl, and an instant later Poyor had knocked over with a piece of rock what looked very much like a chicken.

"It is a toh," Cummings said, as he took the prize from the Indian. "At the city from which we came so unceremoniously these birds are kept as hens, and their eggs are most delicious."

"But how did this one happen to be in here, I wonder?" Teddy muttered.

"The species are found nowhere else but in the caverns. Probably there are several hundred here."

Before the torch had burned out the boys had time to examine the odd chicken. It was about as large as a bantam, had soft, silky plumage, and a tail composed of two feathers which were nothing more than stems up to the very tips, where were tassel-like appendages.

"Now if the enemy does not track us here we can live pretty comfortably for a few days; but I hope we shan't be obliged to stay any longer. Poyor will destroy our trail as soon as it is light, and if they should come I fancy we can tire them out, for one man can hold this place against a hundred."

"I am going to drink my fill of that water," Jake said, as he groped his way toward the rear of the chamber. "It seems as if I hadn't had all I needed since we started on this trip."

"Be careful," Cummings shouted quickly. "Don't venture near the stream until I get another torch."

"Why not?"

"Because in some of these caverns alligators are found, and it is never safe to drink from the running water without first making sure that there are no saurian guards about."

Cummings went to the entrance for more wood, and when he returned the Indian was with him.

"This will cure the wound on your face," the latter said to Jake as he held out a branch covered with small, glossy green leaves. "Take off the cloth that I may see it."

While Jake obeyed, Cummings was kindling a fresh torch, and as the light fell upon the engineer's cheek both the boys uttered exclamations of surprise.

It was certainly a terrible looking wound, the dried blood causing it to appear even larger than it really was; but Poyor set about dressing it with the utmost indifference, perhaps because he thought Jake deserved it for having been so stubborn and criminally foolish.

The Indian chewed the leaves to a pulp, and then spread them thickly on the wound, after which Cummings replaced the cloth, and Jake declared that the pain had subsided instantly.

"I must remember the name of that plant if it can be found in a dried state at home," he said, "and there are many times when such a poultice would come in mighty handy."

"He has only bound on leaves from a shrub called guaco; but you needn't try to remember the name, for they are efficacious only while green. Now that the surgeon's duties have been performed we will get some water, and then set about cooking breakfast. Poyor, bring in plenty of wood, and then try to find another toh."

At the swiftly running stream nothing resembling an alligator was seen, and the white members of the party enjoyed to the utmost copious draughts of the ice-cold liquid.

Meanwhile the Indian was rapidly obeying Cummings' orders. He built a fire near the water, and by the light which the white stones reflected in every direction, had but little difficulty in knocking over three more of what Teddy persisted in calling "chickens."

Leaving the cave again he soon returned with a lot of clay which he pasted over the tohs without removing the feathers or intestines, and thus prepared one would have supposed they were nothing more than so many balls of mud.

These he put into the fire, piled the wood over and around them, and then sat down to wait for the fruits of his labor.

The boys fell asleep before the fowls were cooked: but after a little more than an hour Cummings awakened them to get their share of the feast.

The now thoroughly baked clay was broken open, and it was found that the feathers and skin of the birds had adhered to the covering, leaving the white flesh temptingly exposed.

Among the small amount of stores there was salt sufficient for several days' consumption, therefore they were not without seasoning for the meat, and Jake, Neal and Teddy were quite positive they had never eaten anything half so delicious as this odd chicken baked in a most

singular manner.

CHAPTER XVIII.

CAVE LIFE.

When the meal was ended it was nearly daylight and Cummings said as he stretched himself out close by the entrance:

"It is necessary that the strictest kind of a watch should be kept every moment of the time from now on. I'll take the first trick, Jake shall be awakened next, and Poyor, who has done the most work, comes last."

"But what are Teddy and I to do?" Neal asked in surprise. "We are as well able to stand guard as any one else."

"I allowed that it would be at least twenty-four hours before you were in condition for anything," Cummings replied with a laugh.

"That is where you made a big mistake," Teddy added. "We insist on doing our full share."

"Very well, if Poyor is asleep when Jake goes off duty one of you shall be called."

It was arranged that they should sleep near the entrance where the sentinel could awaken them if necessary, without making a noise, and after the weapons were examined once more to make certain they were in good working order, all save Cummings made a business of going to sleep.

The Indian did not give any one an opportunity of awakening him. At the expiration of an hour, just as Cummings was thinking it time to call Jake, he arose and peered cautiously out through the opening.

"Why did you get up so soon?" Cummings asked. "You need rest, and there is nothing to prevent your sleeping until noon if you feel so disposed."

"There is much work to be done," he replied gravely. "When the sun rises I must examine the trail to make sure it is not too plain."

"It will be another hour before daylight."

"By sitting here I shall be ready to go as soon as it is light."

"I do not think you are giving me the true reason," and Cummings ignited a match that he might see the Indian's face.

"You must not do that," he said quickly, as he clasped his hand over the tiny flame. "It is unwise so near the entrance."

"You believe then that we are in considerable danger?"

"We shall be until we are outside the Chan Santa Cruz country."

"That is not all you can say. I wish to know exactly your opinion of the situation."

"You shall know; but it is not well to explain to the others. Our enemies will find us I think, and we may be forced to fight to the end, for they will not give up the chase until after many days."

"Do you think it would be unsafe to push on again now we have had rest and food?"

"By this time the sentinels know what happened last night, and the forest is full of enemies. A poisoned arrow can be sent in the daytime, while he who shoots it remains concealed. Before noon we would all be dead."

Cummings was silent for a moment, and then he asked in a low tone:

"How far do you think we are from the sea-shore?"

"The distance is not great; but the way so difficult that the journey could not be ended in less than five days."

"Then it seems that we are in a tight place whatever course is pursued."

"We can fight longer here than where the trees conceal our foes," was the grave reply, and then Poyor crept through the opening into the gloomy forest where wild animals and wilder human beings lurked to destroy.

After this conversation Cummings was in no mood for sleep, and he refrained from awakening Jake.

Seated where he could hear the slightest sound from the outside, he reflected upon all the dangers of the situation, and reproached himself for having led the boys and the engineer into such peril.

"I would have been culpable if no one but Poyor had accompanied me," he said to himself, "and now I am directly responsible for the lives of those who but for me, would at this moment be safe in Merida."

There was nothing to be gained by scolding one's self, and he strove with very poor success to put such thoughts from his mind until the sun rose, partially lighting up the gloomy recesses of the forest, and sending tiny rays of light through the narrow aperture.

The three sleepers breathed regularly and noisily; but the sentinel disturbed them not.

The minutes passed slowly until two hours had elapsed, and then a slight rustling of leaves near the entrance caused Cummings to seize the rifle more firmly and peer out.

It was Poyor returning, and he appeared weary like one who has run a long race.

"Have you seen anything?" Cummings asked anxiously.

"There were four Indians about a mile south from here. They came from the city last night, and are searching. It was possible to hear them talk. The sentinels near the coast have been doubled in number, and there is little hope we could pass them."

"It is barely possible they may not find this cave; the entrance is small, and almost hidden by the brushes."

"Yet I found it in the night."

"True," Cummings replied gloomily, and as he said nothing more Poyor went to the stream to quench his thirst.

While passing by Jake he accidentally brushed the latter's arm with his foot, and the engineer was on his feet in an instant, staring around stupidly as if believing the enemy was upon him.

"Why didn't you call me to stand my watch?" he asked in a loud tone, and Poyor, darting back to his side whispered:

"It is not safe to make any noise. Do not so much as speak aloud."

By this time the boys were aroused, and when the Indian had cautioned them in turn all three went to where Cummings was seated.

"Are we going to move, or have you concluded to stay here?" Neal asked.

"We shall be obliged to make this our headquarters for a few days. Poyor has seen people from the city in the immediate vicinity, consequently it is advisable to keep under cover."

"Do you think we will be able to leave in a week?" Teddy asked anxiously, and Cummings replied evasively:

"I hope so."

To Jake, who did not feel so eager to reach home by the next steamer that left Progresso, the prospect of remaining in the cave several days was agreeable rather than otherwise, and he asked:

"Are we to cook any breakfast this morning?"

"No, because the smoke might be seen. To-night there will be no such danger, and the light can be screened from view, therefore it is a case of getting along with a cold bite until then. Sleep as much as possible in order that you may be ready to do your share of the watching, and remember that perfect silence is absolutely necessary."

Then Cummings intimated that the conversation should cease, by turning his attention to what might be happening outside, and the three went toward the opposite end of the cavern where the Indian had thrown himself down for a nap.

Here, after discussing what little they knew regarding the situation, they ate a few totopostes, a thin, dry tortilla which will remain sweet many days, and then gave themselves up to slumber once more.

To sleep when one does not feel the necessity of such rest is, however, not an easy matter to be arranged, and after two or three short naps the boys found it impossible to woo the drowsy god.

They walked around the cavern, arousing flocks of tohs; but, owing to the dim light, finding nothing worthy of attention, and then they went to the entrance where Cummings refused to hold any conversation with them because of the possibility that some of the enemy might be lurking outside, where it was possible to hear the sound of their voices.

In this restless manner the day was spent, and when night came again Poyor ventured out once more.

By this time Cummings felt the necessity of gaining a little rest, and he proposed that Neal and Teddy take their turn at standing watch.

"It will not be so tedious if you remain here together," he said, "and we will give Jake a job later in the night."

It was really a relief to the boys to have something to occupy their time, and as they took his place at the entrance he lay down near at hand where they could awaken him without difficulty in case it should become necessary.

To repeat all the unimportant incidents of the night would be tedious. When Poyor returned from his first trip outside he built a fire near the stream, shielded the flame by a screen of boughs that the light might not be reflected from the entrance, and then, with the air of one who is accustomed to such work, set about catching "chickens" enough to make a hearty meal.

Dishing these up in clay he roasted them as before, and Cummings was awakened to share in the appetizing meal.

Then the Indian went out again, while Jake was standing watch, and an hour later (it was then about two o'clock in the morning), he returned, and roused Cummings, saying in his native tongue as he did so:

"Five miles from here is a smaller cave. The sentinels have just finished searching it. They will be here in the morning. I have thought we might slip past them, by exercising great caution, and it would be just so much nearer the coast."

"Do you believe it should be done?" Cummings asked, as he sprang to his feet.

"It can do no harm, providing we are not discovered during the march through the forest, and we may possibly be able to throw them off the scent."

"Then we will start at once. Under such desperate circumstances nothing should be neglected which might be of benefit. How much food have we got on hand?"

"All that will be needed. It is not difficult to procure provisions in this forest."

It surely seemed as if they might better their condition very materially by making this change, and, in view of all things, it was the proper manœuvre since by remaining there was no doubt the party would be discovered, when a regular siege must necessarily be the result.

There was yet a considerable amount of the roasted tohs on hand. This was wrapped in leaves with the remainder of the provisions, and all the luggage made up in three packages, for it had been decided that the boys should not be called upon to carry any burden.

"It may be that we shall be obliged to move quickly," Poyor said, "and it is best they have nothing but their guns."

When everything was in readiness for the start the Indian went outside once more to reconnoiter, and on his return the final preparations were made.

He, Cummings and Jake fastened the bundles to their backs; Neal and Teddy were cautioned to take plenty of cartridges from the general store, and then, Poyor leading the way, they emerged from the cave.

CHAPTER XIX.

A CHANGE OF BASE.

Although the boys did not know the full extent of the danger, they could understand something of the anxiety felt by both Cummings and Poyor when the shelter of the cave had been left behind.

The latter moved with the utmost caution, taking half a dozen steps and then stopping to listen; halting whenever the foliage rustled more than he fancied was usual and otherwise acting as if believing the enemy had completely surrounded them.

Under such circumstances the advance was necessarily slow, and at least an hour was consumed in traveling less than a mile.

Teddy was on the point of protesting against such excessive precaution when the sound of voices caused all the party to crouch low among the bushes, hiding themselves in the foliage just as four Chan Santa Cruz Indians came to a halt not more than twenty feet away.

It was not difficult to distinguish the form of each one even amid the gloom, and from their manœuvres Teddy and Neal were confident that they had halted for the remainder of the night.

It would have been impossible to hold any conversation, however guarded, without the certainty of being heard while these men were so near, and the fugitives remained motionless, hardly daring to breathe, until it seemed as if some change of position must be made regardless of the consequences.

Each one with the possible exception of Poyor, was so cramped as to be in great pain: but all knew that the slightest unusual noise among the foliage would have attracted attention.

Of course Cummings' party was more than a match for the Indians; but in addition to his

disinclination to begin a fight, was the chance that there might be others in the immediate vicinity who would join in the battle, thus reducing the odds which appeared to be in favor of the white men.

It was in the highest degree important, also, that they remain hidden, for once the Indians got a glimpse of the party it would be a simple matter to track them to the next hiding place.

There was another and a very weighty reason why both Cummings and Poyor wished to avoid an encounter in the forest, even though their weapons were much superior to those carried by the Chan Santa Cruz so far as rapid work was concerned. Unless struck in some vital part, the chances are in favor of recovery from a bullet wound; but let the skin be punctured ever so slightly by arrows poisoned with the venom of the snake known as the nahuyaca and death is certain to follow.

With all this in mind it is little wonder that the fugitives suffered considerable pain before making any attempt to change positions, and that they would be forced to remain exactly where the halt had been made, until morning, seemed positive.

Poyor was well content to stay there as long as the men carried on a conversation, for he was thus enabled to get some valuable information concerning their proposed movements, and not a word escaped him.

Three hours elapsed before the pursuers gave any sign of leaving the place, and then a peculiar sound as of a night bird calling to its mate, caused them to start to their feet.

It was evidently a signal from another party of pursuers, for these men answered it by a similar cry, and it was repeated several times by those in the distance.

A moment later the Indians had started, and as they disappeared Neal whispered to Teddy:

"I never realized before how much comfort there is in the ability to move whenever a fellow feels so disposed."

"If I'd been obliged to keep still ten minutes longer I believe my legs would have dropped off," Teddy replied with a sigh of relief.

There was no time to say anything more; Poyor had begun the advance, and the little party moved slowly and silently through the gloomy forest until the Indian halted in front of an opening slightly larger than the one leading to the cave they had just left.

Jake did not wait to be told that the journey had come to an end; but at once crawled through, followed by Cummings with the materials for making a torch, and in a few moments the boys were also inside.

Poyor did not accompany them; he wanted to assure himself that they had not been discovered, and proposed to stand guard among the trees until this had been accomplished.

The cavern was not more than half as large as the one first visited; but was formed of the same peculiar stone. Here also was a stream across one corner, the bottom of which sloped gently up to the shore of fine white sand, and, so far as could be ascertained, it did not afford a home for disagreeable monsters in the shape of alligators.

There was plenty of evidence near the entrance to show that in addition to searching the cave the Indians had made a long halt. Fragments of totopostes were scattered around, and a small pile of fine shavings told where one of them had repaired an arrow.

The only objection which could be found in this new refuge was that it had not been taken possession of by tohs. Cummings searched everywhere in vain for the "chickens," and the troubled look on his face spoke plainly of his disappointment in failing to find a supply of food close at hand.

"If we should be discovered and besieged it will be a case of short rations," he said as the little party returned to the opening to wait for Poyor.

"Don't you suppose there are fish in the stream?" Teddy asked.

"I never heard that there were; but even if it was stocked with them we should be none the better off since there are neither hooks nor lines here."

"Neal and I have got plenty of both, so what's to hinder our finding out? A fresh fish wouldn't taste badly."

"Very well. I'll stay here on guard, and——"

He was interrupted by the arrival of Poyor, who had crept through the short passage without making sufficient sound to be heard by those who were supposed to be watching, and, speaking in English, he said to Cummings:

"I do not think there is any one near here, and now I wish to go further on to learn where the next line of sentinels is posted. We may be able to change our quarters again, and if every move takes us nearer the coast we shall be gaining just so much every time. You must keep a better watch, however, for if I can surprise you, so can others."

"I will take it upon myself to see that no one else is able to do the same thing," Cummings replied with a laugh. "When you are outside in the vicinity I always feel secure; for the best Chan Santa Cruz that ever lived couldn't pass without your knowledge. Did you hear anything of importance while we were hiding so near that party?"

"From what they said it is positive fully a hundred men have been sent from the city to search for us, and with the sentinels there must be double that number between here and the coast."

"It would seem as if with so many they ought to run us to the ground finally," Cummings said musingly. "Where were those fellows going?"

"They had been following the wet track examining the caves, and began near the range of hills which forms the east boundary of their country. One of the party believed we had doubled back in order to cross the swamp, and if we can remain hidden it may not be long before all the searchers will be sent in that direction."

"Did they make any talk about what would be done with us in case they run us down?" Jake asked.

"All are to be taken to the city alive, if possible, and it is not hard to say what would be our fate there."

"What do they do with their captives?" Jake continued, as if this not very cheerful subject fascinated him.

"A white man would be sacrificed in the temple before the gods, and the death stroke would not be delivered until much torture had been inflicted."

"Don't talk of such horrible things," Teddy interrupted nervously. "It can do us no good to learn all the terrible particulars. I want to keep my mind on the one idea of escape."

"That is where you are right," Cummings replied approvingly. "We shall be worth any number of dead men for some time to come, and won't discuss even the possibility of capture. When are you going to start, Poyor?"

"When I have bound more guaco leaves on this man's wound," was the answer, and now the boys noticed that he had brought a fresh supply of the wonderful shrub.

After preparing it as before the bandage was removed, and by the light of a splinter of fat wood which Cummings fired with a match, it could be seen that the edges of the gash had already united.

"To-morrow there will be no reason for keeping it tied up."

"That is to say, the wound will be healed, and you'll have a souvenir of the Silver City which can never be lost," Cummings added.

"I won't complain, for I came out of the scrape much better than I deserved," the engineer replied with a laugh.

Poyor was now ready to go on the scout, and he delayed only long enough to say:

"There must be no talking while I am away, for one who speaks cannot listen, and if the enemy should come here again his approach will be like that of a serpent."

"You shan't have any cause to complain," Cummings replied, and an instant later the Indian had left the cave.

Teddy now thought the time had come when he should settle the question of whether there were any fish in the stream, and after gaining Cummings' permission to make the attempt he and Neal brought out the lines and flies which had been saved from the wreck of the Sea Dream.

"We shall need bait," he whispered. "If there were a million fish there they couldn't see a fly in the dark, and, besides, if this river runs underground entirely not one of them knows anything about insects."

"A piece of roasted toh will be the very best we could have," and Neal soon brought out some of the toughest portions of the remnants left from the last meal.

Cummings would not listen to their proposition that a fire be lighted, therefore it was necessary to work in the dark, and they experienced considerable difficulty in beginning the task.

Then, while Jake sat near by deeply interested in the experiment, the boys moved their lines to and fro, forced to wade quite a distance into the water, and ten minutes passed before there was any sign that their efforts would be rewarded by success.

"I've got a bite," Teddy whispered excitedly. "By the way he pulled it must have been a big fel—Hello, he's taken hook and all!"

"Tie on another quick while I try to catch him," and Neal ventured further into the water, throwing the line as far as possible toward the other side.

The thought came into Jake's mind that, while no alligators had been seen when they first entered it was by no means certain one or more would not follow down the course of the stream,

and he was on the point of warning Neal not to venture too far from the edge of the shore, when there was a mighty splash, a cry of fear and pain from the fisherman, and the engineer shouted regardless of the fact that the enemy might be close at hand:

"Help! An alligator has got Neal!"

CHAPTER XX.

A DESPERATE STRUGGLE.

There was no necessity for the outcry. The splashing of the water told Cummings what had happened even before Jake had time to shout, and he started forward at full speed, carrying with him the materials for torches.

When Jake and Teddy were in a condition to understand anything, for the sudden attack had bewildered them to a certain extent, Neal was lying face downward upon the sand, and being slowly dragged backward.

The alligator had evidently snapped at his leg, and, missing his aim, had caught the boy's trousers rather than the flesh. Instead of releasing his hold for a better grip, he was trying to drag Neal into deeper water, and once there the struggle would have been quickly ended.

Neal had dug his hands into the sand, straining every muscle to prevent being pulled into the stream; but despite all efforts the monster was rapidly getting the best of him.

Cummings lost no time after arriving on the scene of action. The boys' cries had guided him to the exact spot, and he waited only long enough to kindle a blaze before joining in the fight.

"Teddy, go back to the entrance, get one of the guns, and be sure that no one comes through, for we are likely to make so much noise here that if any of the enemy are in the vicinity we shall be discovered. Jake, you are to hold the torch, and take good care that it burns brightly."

Cummings was armed with nothing but his hunting knife and by this time the alligator had dragged fully half of Neal's body into the water. There seemed to be but little hope that the boy could be rescued before serious injury had been inflicted.

Pulling off his coat and belt Cummings leaped boldly on the back of the saurian monster, burying the blade of his knife in the alligator's eye at the same time, and then ensued a most terrific struggle.

Instead of releasing his hold on Neal the reptile held firm, and put forth every effort to sink in the deeper water to dislodge the more formidable antagonist who was striking beneath the surface with his weapon in the hope of hitting some vulnerable spot.

Jake stood on the bank holding the torch high above his head to prevent it from being extinguished by the showers which were sent up by the lashing of the monster's tail, and powerless to aid in the fight for life.

Slowly but surely Neal was being pulled from the shore. With only the sand to clutch he could retard, not check the saurian's movements, and work as he might, it seemed impossible for Cummings to strike a fatal blow.

"Drop your torch and seize the boy by the arms," the latter shouted as he saw that the battle was going against him. "At this rate I shall soon be where it will be out of the question to prolong the struggle."

Jake did as he was commanded, and in the darkness the remainder of the terrible fight was waged.

The engineer pulled until to Neal it seemed as if his arms would be torn from their sockets, and the alligator retained his hold as he struggled to throw off Cummings.

The noise of the combat sounded almost deafening to Teddy, who was doing his best to listen for any unusual disturbance among the foliage outside, and he felt confident that if the enemy was anywhere in the vicinity the secret of their hiding place would soon be discovered.

The struggle lasted only five minutes; but Neal would have said an hour had passed since he was first seized, and then Cummings won the victory by slipping from the alligator's back regardless of the rapidly moving tail, and stabbing him under the fore leg.

Even then it appeared as if the victory was to be purchased at a great cost, for, in order to avoid being killed by the monster's dying struggles, Cummings was forced to release his hold, and the current carried him rapidly toward the channel formed by the waters through the rock.

"Light the torch!" he shouted, putting forth all his strength in order to breast the tide. "I'm in the middle of the stream, and likely to be carried through the wall."

Jake had pulled Neal high up out of the water the instant the alligator's hold was released, and at this appeal he dropped him suddenly, groping around for the bundle of wood so hurriedly cast

aside.

It was several seconds before he could find it, and then much valuable time was lost in trying to ignite the fuel made damp by the spray which had been thrown up. It seemed to him that never had he been so clumsy, and the anxiety to move quickly only served to retard his efforts.

Finally, after what to Teddy appeared to be a very long while, the fat wood was ignited, and then it could be seen that Cummings was in a most dangerous position. He was not more than six feet from the aperture through which the water raced with redoubled force because the opening was several inches lower than the surface, and swam as if nearly exhausted.

Jake was the only one who could render any assistance just at this moment, and he proved to be equal to the occasion.

Seizing one of the guns he waded into the water to his waist, and succeeded in extending the weapon sufficiently for Cummings to grasp the end of the barrel.

"Hold on for grim death; I've got to drop the torch!" he shouted, suiting the action to the words, and Teddy could see no more because the light was suddenly extinguished.

Now the sentinel forgot that the enemy might creep upon them and running forward he cried:

"Don't give in, Jake; I'll help you."

Before he could reach the stream the work was accomplished. Jake pulled Cummings on the bank by the side of Neal, and proceeded to relight the torch, a difficult matter since the matches in his pocket had been spoiled by the action of the water.

In this last work Teddy was able to render some assistance, and the flame had but just sprung up from the wood when Cummings said hurriedly:

"Extinguish that light. If we haven't advertised our whereabouts to the Indians already there is no reason for taking foolish risks. We'll attend to matters here, Teddy, and you get back to the entrance."

This command was obeyed at once, and the sentinel heard only a faint sound from the direction of the stream until his companions rejoined him, none the worse for the battle except in the respect of being decidedly wet.

"Have you heard anything suspicious?" Cummings asked anxiously.

"Not the slightest noise. If there had been any Indians in the vicinity they would surely have made an attempt to enter when all hands was raising such an uproar."

Cummings crept through the short tunnel and investigated in the immediate vicinity of the opening before he could believe they had been so fortunate, and when he returned Jake said:

"I thought you wouldn't find anything. If those imps had had the slightest inkling of where we are it wouldn't have been necessary to wait so long as this before the fact was made known."

"It was better to be sure. Poyor was so careful to caution us about a noise that I was afraid he knew some of them were lurking near by. It is all right, however, and we can congratulate ourselves on a fortunate escape from more than one danger."

The weather was so warm that no one felt any serious effects from the involuntary bath. A portion of the wet clothing was taken off and hung on the guns set in the sand as stakes, to dry, and since their fears regarding the proximity of the Indians had been partially set at rest by Cummings' survey, there was a general disposition to talk of something foreign to the struggle through which they had just passed.

"You have said very much about the poisoned arrows which the Chan Santa Cruz Indians use," Neal began, "and I would like to know how they manage to render them so deadly."

"It is by no means a difficult matter, and as Poyor's people use very nearly the same method of increasing the death-dealing power of their weapons, I can describe the process exactly," Cummings replied, speaking in a whisper, regardless of the Indian's remark that "he who talks cannot listen." "You have heard me say many times that the nahuyaca is the most venomous of serpents, and instead of being content with a single bite, as is the case with snakes in general, he strikes many times with almost incredible rapidity. When the Indians wish to prepare the poison for their arrows or spears they first get the liver of a tapir, or some other animal as large, and then hunt for the species of serpent I have spoken of. Once found he is pinned to the ground with a forked stick in such a manner that he can use his head freely; but yet be unable to escape, and the liver, fastened to a long pole, is held where he can strike at it.

"When the snake refuses longer to bite he is killed, and the liver placed where it will decompose without any of the moisture being lost. You can imagine what a mixture it is when thus prepared, and in it the weapons are dipped.

"It is said that the venom retains its deadly properties for many weeks, and, in fact, I know of a native who came very near losing his life by being scratched with an old arrow that must have been poisoned nearly a year previous."

"I should think they might make a mistake when shooting game, and use a doctored arrow rather

than one of the ordinary kind," Teddy said.

"That could only result from sheer carelessness. The point of a poisoned weapon is covered with a reddish brown substance which cannot be mistaken, and, for greater security, the feathers used for the tip are invariably green. A Central American Indian never takes a green shafted arrow, nor a spear on which is painted a band of the same color, when he goes out to procure food."

"Then if we happen to meet these fellows who are hunting for us, we are likely to come out second best even though they have only bows with which to shoot," Jake suggested grimly, and, evading a direct answer, Cummings replied:

"We will hope that we shan't get near enough to let any such thing as that trouble us."

Then the conversation gradually ceased. Neal and Teddy, after learning that Cummings intended to remain on watch until Poyor returned, lay down together, where for at least the hundredth time they discussed the chances of reaching home within a reasonable number of days, and, hopeful though both tried to appear, neither could bring himself to set any definite day for the end of the dangerous journey which might never be finished.

"There is so much certain," Neal said decidedly after a short pause, "once we get out of this section of the country we'll go to the nearest sea-port and wait there for a steamer or a vessel, without ever setting our feet outside the town. There'll be no more delays if we get clear of this scrape."

"You can count me in on that, and now I'm going to sleep. It seems as if a week had passed since we started from the last cavern."

Jake had already taken advantage of the opportunity to indulge in slumber, and soon Cummings was the only one on the alert; anxiety kept his eyes very wide open, for he believed Poyor should have returned some time before.

CHAPTER XXI.

A LONG HALT.

When the morning dawned Poyor was still absent and Cummings' anxiety had become intense.

It hardly seemed possible the Indian would go very far from the cave of his own free will, and that he had been captured by the enemy appeared more than probable.

Neither Jake nor the boys awakened until after the sun had risen, and, as a matter of course, the first inquiry of each was concerning the man upon whom all depended so entirely.

Before Cummings could give words to the fears which had haunted him during the night the entrance to the cave was darkened, and Teddy cried joyfully:

"Here he is, and I hope we are to make another move pretty soon, for after last night's adventure this isn't the most pleasant place I ever saw in which to spend any length of time."

It could easily be seen from the Indian's general appearance that he brought no bad news, and without waiting to be questioned he went toward the stream to quench his thirst.

A sharp cry from both the boys caused him to halt very suddenly, and when Cummings told the story of the adventure with the alligator he said:

"You should not have made such an attempt except when a fire was burning, and even then to wade into the water was wrong. I will get what can be used for both drinking and fishing."

Again he left the cave, returning ten minutes later with what looked like a slender bamboo, save that there were no joints in it. Through the middle of the pole, running the entire length, was a small hole hardly larger than is to be found in a reed, and with this while standing five or six feet from the stream he drank at leisure, keeping his eyes fixed upon the surface of the water to guard against an attack.

Having thus quenched his thirst he returned to where Cummings was on guard and told the story of his wanderings.

He had followed straight along the line of moisture, finding cave after cave but none of them as well adapted to their purpose as was this one, and had seen none of the enemy until five or six miles had been traversed, when a strong cordon of sentinels was discovered.

The men were stationed not more than twenty feet apart, and, as nearly as he could judge, had been ordered to remain and prevent the fugitives from leaving the country by way of the coast. From what he already knew concerning the people, he understood the number of men on duty at this particular point had been largely increased, therefore the natural inference was that there were two distinct bodies engaged in trying to capture the white men. One whose duty it was to guard the boarder so thoroughly that it would be impossible to escape, while the other scoured the forest and swamp.

"We must stay here several days," he said in conclusion. "After a time the men will grow careless, and then we may be able to make our way through the lines; but now it is impossible."

Until this moment Neal and Teddy had hoped there might yet be a chance for them to reach Progresso in time to take passage on the steamer as first agreed upon; but now they were in despair. Poyor spoke so positively that there could be no doubt the journey to the coast would be a long one, in case they ever succeeded in making it, and the thoughts of the loved ones at home who were probably mourning them as dead caused them to be more gloomy than on the night of the flight, when it did not seem possible any of the party would escape alive.

Cummings, who had no care as to when he reached the coast, and Jake, to whom time was no particular object, received the news calmly. A week more or less made but little difference to them, and after a short pause Cummings said:

"If you will stay on guard, Jake, I'll find out if it is possible to catch any fish. The food supply is an important matter which should be settled at once, for we must not depend upon what can be gotten in the forest, since no one can say how soon we may be besieged."

Poyor lay down to sleep as if perfectly indifferent to the experiment, and the boys followed Cummings. To watch him fish was better than remaining quiet thinking over their troubles.

The reflection of the sun from the outside had so far dispelled the gloom that it was possible to distinguish surrounding objects with reasonable distinctness, and Cummings stood by the bank of the stream as he tied one end of Teddy's line to the pole Poyor had used for drinking purposes, while, with the last remaining fragments of roasted toh, began the work.

In the most perfect silence the boys watched him for ten minutes, and Teddy said:

"I guess you'll have to give it up as a bad job. There's nothing but alligators in the stream, and what they most want is another chance to get hold of Neal's trousers."

"It was lucky for me that they didn't get hold of my ankle as well. I don't understand how I escaped so easily, for——"

"Here's the first one," Cummings said triumphantly, as he swung on shore a fish weighing about three pounds. "If we find many such there won't be any danger of suffering from hunger."

The boys seized the flapping evidence of Cummings' skill as an angler, and hurried to the entrance in order to examine it more closely.

In shape it was similar to a brook trout; but instead of being spotted had black scales as large as one's thumb nail, and not until it had been scrutinized carefully was anything seen to betoken the presence of organs of sight. Then Jake pointed out two slight depressions near the end of the upper jaw, which were protected and nearly covered by a cartilaginous substance extending entirely across the head something after the fashion of a hood.

"I don't wonder he had to try a long while before catching this fellow," Teddy said with a laugh. "A fish that has such poor apologies for eyes can't be expected to see bait very quickly."

"It isn't likely they can see anything, and if these small specks are eyes they've probably only been put on as ornaments."

At this point Jake, regardless of the fact that he should have been listening intently at the aperture, began what was evidently about to be a long dissertation on the subject of a fish being able to smell while in the water, and to prevent him from neglecting his duties as sentinel, the boys went back to the stream, arriving there just as Cummings landed a second prize.

At the end of an hour four fish, aggregating in weight not less than ten pounds, were on the bank, and it was decided that no more should be caught.

"We've got food enough to last us during twenty-four hours," Cummings said, "and it would be a waste of time to fish any longer."

"When are we to cook them?" Teddy asked.

"That is a job which must be left for Poyor. He can do it better than either of us, and, since there are none of the enemy in the immediate vicinity, I fancy we may count on having these for the next meal."

Then Cummings took his turn at sleeping, after impressing on the minds of the boys and Jake that a strict watch should be kept by all regardless of the news brought by the Indian, and during the two hours which followed before there was any change in the condition of affairs, little else was done save to discuss the situation.

They talked of the loved ones at home; of the probable whereabouts of those who had left the burning yacht in their company, and of the chances that they would soon reach the coast, until Jake changed the subject by saying abruptly:

"We'll soon be blind if the Indian don't find a hidin' place where the sunlight penetrates once in awhile. I begin to feel a good deal like a bat already, an' have a big mind to slip out for a walk."

"Don't so much as think of it," Teddy cried in alarm. "It isn't certain that the enemy are not close by, and the risk is too great."

"I can't see it in that light," Jake replied in his old obstinate manner. "Perhaps Poyor has had more experience in these woods than I have; but I'll bet considerable that I can get around as well as he does."

"Do you remember what happened the last time you believed Cummings and Poyor were mistaken or ignorant?" Neal asked meaningly.

"What has that got to do with my going where I can use my eyes a bit?"

"Very much, considering the fact that Cummings thinks it is dangerous even for him to venture out. You are safe so long as the Indians do not get a glimpse of you, and it would be endangering the lives of all hands if you tried such a foolish experiment that can be of no especial benefit in case it is made successfully."

Jake did not reply; but from his manner Neal believed he intended to leave the cave at the first favorable opportunity, and resolved to keep a close watch upon him.

Nothing more was said on the subject because at this moment Poyor arose, and going to the stream for a drink of water, saw the fish on the bank.

"Hungry?" he asked, coming toward the entrance.

"I wouldn't object to something warm," Teddy replied with a laugh; "but I suppose it isn't safe to build a fire till after dark."

"We can have one now," the Indian said, as he began to crawl through the passage.

"There," Jake said triumphantly, as Poyor disappeared, "you can see how much danger there would be in our taking a stroll. Yesterday he wouldn't let a fellow whisper, and now we're to cook as if such a tribe as the Chan Santa Cruz had never existed."

"That doesn't make the slightest difference so far as we are concerned. He could go in safety where you'd be certain to get into trouble."

Again the engineer was silenced but not convinced and Neal's fears that some dangerously foolish move might be made by him, were increased.

When Poyor returned he brought with him a small quantity of wood, more mud, and a bundle of green leaves.

At the further end of the cave he built a fire; encased the fish as he previously had the "chickens," piled the embers over them, and then, in the canteen brought by Cummings, he steeped the leaves.

Breakfast or dinner, whichever it might be called was ready in half an hour, and when Poyor set the repast before them, where all could be on the alert while eating, Teddy exclaimed:

"Those leaves must have been from a tea plant; it seems quite like being on the yacht again to smell that."

"You'll be disappointed when you taste of the beverage," Cummings, who had just been awakened by the Indian, said, as he approached his companions. "He has made an infusion of pimientillo leaves, a drink of which the natives of Yucatan are very fond."

Teddy was pleased rather than otherwise with the flavor, which was as of tea mixed with cloves, and drank so much that Poyor was forced to brew another canteen full in order to satisfy his own desires.

The fish were pronounced delicious, and although Cummings thought he had caught considerably more than could be consumed in one meal, there was very little left when the hunger of all had been appeased.

It was now nearly noon, when every native of the country believes a siesta is necessary, however important business he may have on hand, and Poyor stretched himself once more out on the sand, Cummings advising the boys and Jake to do the same thing.

"I slept so long that I couldn't close my eyes now if I tried, so you had better take advantage of the opportunity."

CHAPTER XXII.

JAKE'S VENTURE.

The boys followed Cummings' advice; but owing to the fact that they had taken no exercise the slumber was neither prolonged nor refreshing.

When they awakened Poyor and Jake were yet asleep, and they went softly to where Cummings was keeping most vigilant watch.

"Had enough of it?" he asked with a smile.

"Yes: we are not feeling so comfortable in mind that we can sleep at will, and just now a little goes a great way," Neal replied.

"Don't make the mistake of dwelling upon your troubles. By putting them from your mind you are in better condition to meet what may come, and besides, fretting never did mend matters."

"I'll admit that the advice is good; but it is not every one who can follow it."

"Why not? Have you tried by looking for something else with which to occupy your attention?"

"Shut up here as we are it would be pretty hard work to think of anything except our own situation."

"I'm not so certain of that. Suppose we try by speaking of the country on whose shores you were cast by the waves?"

"It was formerly an independent republic; but now forms one of the Mexican states," Teddy replied promptly.

"I'll admit that to be true; but it is a small fund of information for a schoolboy to have regarding a country which was probably the most powerful on the hemisphere hundreds of years before Columbus crossed the ocean. Here have been found the ruins of forty-four large cities; the remains of enormous artificial lakes, paved roads, and, in fact, all the evidences of a high state of civilization which existed before Europe could boast of the slightest form of government."

"You may be certain that I shall study about it with more interest in case we are so fortunate as to be able to go to school again," Teddy replied. "Tell us about the people who lived here when it was so great."

"I wish I could," Cummings said with a sigh. "If it had been possible for us to have taken from the Silver City any records, or sculptured figures, or plates of a historical nature, I might have succeeded in solving that which the student can speak of only as a mystery. Before the Conquest it was known as Maya—that is to say, the territory now called Yucatan, and the Chan Santa Cruz yet speak the Maya language. It is only certain that for many centuries there was here an important feudal monarchy, which doubtless arose after the Toltec overthrow of the very ancient kingdom of Xibalba."

"Cortez was the first white man to come into this country," Neal said half questioningly.

"Not by any manner of means. In the year 1502 Ferdinand Columbus, driven by adverse currents out of his southerly course, sighted a group of islands off Honduras, and captured a huge canoe, which is described as having been as wide as a galley and eighty feet long, formed of the trunk of a single tree. In the middle was an awning of palm leaves, not unlike those of Venetian gondolas, under which were the women, children and goods. The canoe was propelled by twenty-five Indians who wore cotton coverlets and tunics without sleeves, dyed various colors and curiously worked. The women wrapped themselves in large mantles of similar material.

"The men wore long swords, with channels each side of the blade, edged with sharp flints that cut the body as well as steel. They had copper hatchets for chopping wood, belts of the same material, and crucibles in which to melt it. For provisions they carried roots and grain, a sort of wine made from maize, and great quantities of almonds. This is a fragment of the history of Yucatan, simply a suggestion of what can be found by study, and some day when you have nothing to do, ask Poyor to tell you of his people's traditions."

Cummings had succeeded in interesting the boys despite Neal's assertion that it would be impossible to think of anything but their own condition, and Teddy asked, hoping to hear more about the country:

"How large is Yucatan?"

"I question if even the officials know. It is set down as containing 76,560 square kilometres, with 302,315 inhabitants; but the last figures can be only guess-work, since regarding the unconquerable tribes of the interior, such as we are now trying to escape from, all is conjecture."

This concluded the conversation so far as Cummings was concerned, for Poyor had awakened and joined the party, and there was very much to be discussed with him relative to what move should be made, when a sufficient time had elapsed.

In order that the boys might understand all which was said, the two men spoke only in English, and when the consultation was brought to a close the former had a very clear idea of the condition of affairs.

"It is safe to venture out in search of food," Poyor said, when Cummings intimated by his silence that there was no further topic which he wished to discuss, "and I will go for a short time."

"Why not take one of the boys with you?" the leader of the expedition asked. "It is dull work for them here, and a little exercise will be beneficial."

"Not yet," the Indian replied quickly. "Too broad a trail would surely attract the attention of the enemy, and we must not run such a risk."

"Very well, we will do a little fishing in order to have something hearty for supper in case you are

not successful."

Then the Indian went cautiously out through the narrow passage, and he had but just disappeared when Jake awakened.

"What's goin' on?" he asked with a yawn. "Has Poyor left us again?"

"He thought it might be possible to get some game near by, and proposes to make the attempt," Cummings replied carelessly. "Now that you are awake stand watch awhile, for the boys and I are going to catch a few more fish."

Jake seated himself by the entrance, and Cummings led the way to the stream, never fancying for a single moment that the sentinel might desert his post.

The second effort to draw food from the water was more successful than the first. Cummings had hardly dropped the line before the bait was seized, and he landed a fairly good sized fish, after which he proposed that Teddy should try his hand at the work.

"I don't want to monopolize all the fun," he said laughingly, "therefore you boys had better take turns until we get enough for supper. To-night we'll ask Poyor to cut another pole, and then both can enjoy the sport at the same time."

The fish were smaller than those previously taken and half an hour elapsed before there were enough on the shore to make up what Cummings believed was sufficient for a hearty meal.

Then the three walked slowly toward the entrance to relieve Jake; but, to the surprise of all, he was not there.

"It is my fault," Neal cried while Cummings was looking around in the belief that the sentinel had gone to another portion of the cave and would soon be back. "I knew from what was said this forenoon that he had an idea of venturing out, and made up my mind to watch him closely; but the history lesson and the fishing caused me to forget it entirely."

"Do you mean that he has had an idea of leaving us?" Cummings asked in astonishment.

"No; he simply proposed to take a walk. He thinks it is as safe for him as for Poyor."

"But I, who surely understand the woods better than he, would not dare to attempt it."

"You know what he has done."

"If he does not lose his own life ours may be sacrificed," Cummings said passionately. "The Indian can go through the undergrowth without leaving any sign of his passage: but for Jake to do so is simply to set up a guide-board by which the enemy can find us."

"I should have told you at once," Neal said in self reproach.

"You are not to be blamed in the slightest; but if I could get my hands on him at this moment he would regret most sincerely ever having such a thought in his head."

"What will be the result?" Teddy asked in distress.

"If he succeeds in finding his way back, which I doubt very much, we will be forced to make a change regardless of the consequences, and if he is captured it becomes a case of our putting the greatest possible distance between this cave and ourselves," Cummings replied bitterly.

"I might go out and try to find him," Neal suggested, and his companion put an end to any such idea by saying impatiently:

"Your efforts to aid him would only result in making our own position just so much the worse. We must wait until Poyor comes back, and learn what he has to say in regard to the affair."

"But it seems cruel to let him run into danger without saying a word."

"It is not half as bad as it is for him to jeopardize all our lives. He did the same thing once before, and the consequence was that instead of making back tracks to my shanty, as could easily have been done, we are forced to skulk around two or three weeks with no certainty of escaping even at the end of that time."

Both Neal and Teddy understood that it would be useless to say anything more in Jake's favor, and as a matter of fact, they felt quite as bitter toward him as did Cummings, for it was not difficult to see what might be the result of his foolish excursion.

In silence the little party waited until the Indian returned bringing the carcass of a tapir, a small quantity of alligator pears, and two so-called cabbages cut from palm trees.

"It is not difficult to get all the food that may be needed provided we can keep the fact of our being here a secret," he said in a tone which showed how greatly he was pleased by his success.

"And that we shall not be able to do many hours longer except by some piece of rare good luck," Cummings said bitterly. "Jake went out a long while ago, and is now, I presume, roaming around in order to give the enemy an opportunity of looking at him."

"Went out?" the Indian repeated in surprise. "Do you mean that he has left the cave?"

"That is exactly the size of it."

"Why did he do such a foolish thing?"

"Because he was too much of a baby or an idiot to stay in hiding until the danger had passed. He claimed that exercise was necessary."

"He will get all he needs," Poyor said half to himself, as he allowed the supply of provisions to fall unheeded from his hands. "We also must leave this place."

"Do you mean that we should go at once?" Cummings asked as if he had been expecting such a remark.

"When the night has come we will start, and with but little hope of breaking through the line of sentinels."

"Are we not to wait for Jake?" Neal interrupted.

"If he does not return before we are ready there will be little chance of ever seeing him again," was the grim reply as Poyor paced to and fro, evidently so disturbed that it was impossible for him to remain in one position.

CHAPTER XXIII.

A HURRIED DEPARTURE.

Neal and Teddy were in a state of the most painful suspense from the moment Poyor returned until the time for their departure arrived.

The one hope was that Jake would succeed in finding his way back, for the thought that he might be captured was terrible, and they sat near the entrance listening intently to every sound.

"You're bound to be disappointed if you count on hearing him," Cummings said bitterly.

"But there is a chance that the Indians are some distance from here," Teddy replied. "Poyor didn't find any until he reached the line of sentinels."

"I am not saying that he is necessarily captured yet; but it would be little short of a miracle if he found his way back after going any distance from this cave. I wouldn't dare to make the attempt."

"But are we to go away without trying to find the poor fellow?" Neal asked in a tone of distress.

"It would be useless to search, and we are now in too much danger to waste any time," Cummings said sternly. "Our one chance of escape was to give the enemy the idea that we had succeeded in getting out of the country, and he has destroyed it. Now this portion of the forest will be filled with Indians, and in twenty-four hours from the moment he or his trail is seen, we shall be discovered. We cannot aid him, and I doubt whether I would be willing to do so if it was possible, for a man of average common sense who will act as he has done deserves punishment."

The boys made no reply. Each instant their companion's anger against Jake increased, and it was not well to rouse him by further conversation.

Near the bank of the stream Poyor had built a fire and was cooking a portion of the tapir and the fish, for in the hurried flight which was soon to be begun there might not be an opportunity to prepare food.

The Indian had unpacked the bundles in order to discard everything not absolutely necessary, and was tying each compactly when the boys approached.

"Why are you making only three packages?" Neal asked. "Teddy and I want to do our full share of the work, and it isn't right for you and Cummings to lug everything."

"You will be forced to do more than an equal share because that which Jake carried must now be divided between us," Poyor replied grimly. "The fourth load is to be made up of the provisions."

"Are you going straight for the coast, and try to force your way through the line of sentinels?"

"That cannot be done. We must now ascend the mountain range on the north of the forest."

"But by so doing the journey will be made much longer, won't it?"

"Very much."

"Then why not try to fight through?"

"Because it is impossible. Not one of us would live to see the ocean."

There was not much comfort to be derived from such a conversation, and again the boys went to the entrance where Cummings was examining carefully all the weapons.

"You must carry plenty of cartridges where they can be gotten at quickly," he said, as they came

up. "It is impossible to say what may happen, and no precaution should be neglected. The guns are in good order, and with them we may succeed in holding the enemy at such a distance that their arrows cannot be used."

"We have filled our pockets," Neal replied, and throwing himself upon the ground, he watched Cummings and Poyor at their work.

Ten minutes later the Indian came to the entrance and said as he began to crawl through the narrow passage:

"I will make one effort to find him who has caused us so much trouble."

"Don't spend any time on such a fool," Cummings cried fiercely. "He knew the danger, and if he chooses to run into it, jeopardizing our lives at the same moment, nothing too bad can happen to him."

"He may be near at hand. I will make a search," Poyor replied as he rose to his feet on the outside, and Neal whispered to Teddy:

"If Jake can be found matters won't seem quite so hard, for it will be terrible to think of him wandering around until captured, and we running away from him."

Teddy nodded his head; but did not dare trust himself to speak. He had been thinking of home until the tears were so very near his eyelids that he feared they would overflow.

During the next half hour not a word was spoken by either of the little party, and then Poyor returned alone.

There was no necessity of questioning him, and Neal covered his face with his hands to hide the distress he knew must be pictured there, for there was no longer any hope the engineer would accompany them on their rapid and most dangerous flight. By this time the meat was cooked, and the Indian brought a generous supply to the entrance; but no one had any particular desire for food.

"You must take some," Cummings said, when Neal and Teddy turned away. "We may not have an opportunity to eat again for many hours, and it is necessary to be prepared for a long tramp."

The boys managed to swallow a small quantity after considerable effort, when the final preparations were made, and by the time they were completed the sun had set.

Night had not fully settled down when Poyor gave the signal for the start, and one by one the fugitives crept from the cave, pushing their bundles before them, since the passage was not sufficiently large to admit of their walking upright.

"Strap the pack on firmly," Cummings said in a whisper, when they were in the open air. "We may be obliged to run, in which case there must be no chance of losing our baggage. You boys follow Poyor, and I will bring up the rear."

The Indian was waiting for them to get into proper marching order, and instantly this had been done he started at a rapid pace.

As they left the cave it seemed to Neal and Teddy that Jake had really been abandoned, and, regardless of what he had done, they felt that it was cruel to hurry away so soon.

"It could have done no harm to wait until morning," Neal said in a whisper, when they halted a short distance from the starting point while Poyor went ahead to reconnoiter.

"And by that time we might have found ourselves besieged. It would have been a delay of twenty-four hours, for all our traveling must be done in the night," Cummings replied. "We have taken the only course he left open to us, and we won't discuss the matter any more."

The march was resumed after a short delay, and not until two hours had passed did the Indian so much as slacken his pace.

They had arrived where the forest is less dense; but the undergrowth more tangled, and Poyor signified by gestures that the boys would be allowed a short time of rest.

Teddy was about to ask if he could take off the pack, for the cords were cutting into his flesh in a painful manner; but the Indian checked him with a quick motion of the hand.

The party were now near where it was supposed a line of sentinels was stationed, and, holding his finger to his lips, Cummings gave them to understand that the utmost silence must be preserved.

Again Poyor went forward alone, and the tired boys sat with their backs against a tree thinking only of Jake and his possible fate.

The silence was so profound as to be almost alarming. Here and there amid the foliage could be seen countless fire-flies; but not even the rustling of the leaves broke the stillness, and it did not require any very great stretch of the imagination to fancy that the enemy were lurking close at hand awaiting an opportunity to spring upon them.

Once a rat-like tuza ran past within a few inches of Teddy's feet, and as the boy leaped up in

affright, fancying the vengeful Indians had discovered him, it was with difficulty he repressed a cry of alarm.

With so many horrible things to think of it was a decided relief when Poyor came gliding noiselessly back to announce that the journey could be continued, and once more the little party picked their way over fallen and decaying timber, or through thickets where thorns tore both clothing and flesh.

After a time they reached ascending ground, showing that they were on the foot hills of the range, and the advance became more laborious, until, shortly before sunrise, Neal declared that he could go no farther.

"We must stop," he whispered to Poyor. "I have held out as long as possible, and could not keep on half a mile more if the enemy were in close pursuit."

The Indian nodded his head to signify that the halt should be made, and a few moments later he turned aside into a small ravine or cut on the side of the hill.

Here he threw down his burden, and the boys followed the example, paying no attention to the advantages or disadvantages of the spot as a refuge during the day which was so near at hand.

Lying at full length on the ground, heeding not that deadly reptiles might be close at hand, Neal and Teddy fell asleep almost immediately, and Poyor proposed that Cummings should also seek repose.

"I will watch," he said, "and when the sun rises we can decide whether it is safe to stay here."

Although the white man was weary he would not admit that the Indian could bear more fatigue, and insisted on keeping awake until it was learned if they should be warranted in remaining.

In perfect silence the two stood guard over the sleeping boys, and when the morning came the important question was soon settled.

The place of refuge to which chance had brought them was admirable both for purposes of defense and for hiding. It was a deep, narrow cut extending thirty feet into what appeared to be a mass of sandstone, and at the entrance was not more than ten feet wide, while over the top the foliage grew so luxuriantly as to completely conceal them from the view of any one who might be above.

In front the trees were small, and it was possible to see forty or fifty yards down the side of the hill, therefore the enemy could not approach unobserved save from the top.

"It is good," Poyor said approvingly. "We can remain here until night."

"But why have we not met the sentinels which you believe to be so numerous?"

"They are further on. At the end of the next march we shall be in their midst."

"And then comes the most difficult portion of our journey. But we won't search for trouble," Cummings added after a short pause. "Let us have breakfast, and then one shall stand guard while the others sleep."

Poyor unpacked the provisions, awakened Neal and Teddy, and with a view before them which, under other circumstances, would have called forth expressions of the most lively admiration, the little party made a hearty meal.

CHAPTER XXIV.

JAKE.

It was only natural that on awakening Neal and Teddy should first think of the engineer and his possible fate; but the other two members of the party were so incensed against him that neither cared to speak on the subject.

They asked concerning their location, and were told all that Cummings and Poyor knew, and when the very satisfactory meal was brought to a close the former said as if inviting a discussion:

"We have sufficient food to last us three days if there is no game picked up on the way; but our supply of water threatens to run short very soon unless we can manage to refill the canteens. Are we likely to find a stream among these hills, Poyor?"

"When we descend into the valley there will be no lack of plenty to drink; but on beginning the ascent of the mountains we must be careful not to use too much."

"How long shall we probably be on the range providing every thing works smoothly?"

"Three days—perhaps four."

"But we can only carry water enough for two days at the best."

"Then each one must take but half as much as he needs."

"Of course that would settle the matter; but it is going to be pretty tough to travel in heat without all we want to drink."

"Better that than to fall into the hands of the Chan Santa Cruz," Poyor replied gravely.

"I am willing to admit it; but at the same time I believe we can hit upon some plan of carrying all that may be needed."

"We may find the water pitchers in the forest, and by means of them replenish the supply."

"That is figuring upon a possibility, and we are by no means certain of getting what we want."

"There is plenty of time to think the matter over, for, unless we are discovered, it will be necessary to stay here until night. Will you sleep now?"

"You need rest more than I," Cummings replied. "Lie down while I stand guard."

The Indian did not hesitate; it made very little difference who remained on watch providing the utmost vigilance was maintained, and he stretched himself on the ground at the farther end of the ravine where he could be sheltered from the rays of the sun.

The boys seated themselves by Cummings' side where the best view of the surrounding country could be had; but the latter was in no mood for further conversation, and the three remained silent for an hour or more, when Teddy asked:

"How long before you intend to call Poyor?"

"There is plenty of time," Cummings replied carelessly. "We have all day before us, and when I am tired he shall take his turn."

"Why can't we do something? If you lie down now it will be gaining just so much more sleep, and surely both of us can keep watch as well as either you or he."

"That is a good idea, and I'll take advantage of the offer. Call me if you see the slightest thing suspicious, or hear any sound not made by the birds. I don't fancy we shall be troubled; but at the same time no one knows what may happen."

"We'll take good care; you shall be told if anything larger than a rat comes in view," Teddy replied, "so don't lose time that might be spent in sleep."

Cummings followed this advice at once, and in a few moments his heavy breathing told that he had crossed over into slumberland.

During the next hour nothing was seen or heard by the sentinels, who sat just within the shadow cast by the rock gazing intently down the hill, and then Teddy whispered excitedly as he pointed to a clump of bushes near where the trees were thickest:

"Look in that direction. Can't you see the foliage is moving to and fro more than should be the case on a calm day like this?"

Neal followed with his eyes Teddy's finger, and after a close scrutiny said:

"I see what you mean: but there is probably some animal among the bushes. At all events we shan't be a great while finding out, and it isn't well to call Cummings until we are positive something is wrong."

During five minutes the boys watched intently, and then there could be no question but that the leader should be awakened. They had seen a man, or at least a portion of one, as the foliage was parted gently to admit of his looking out, and Neal said as he raised his gun:

"Call Cummings. I won't fire until he gives the word unless that fellow comes too near."

Believing that they were about to be attacked, Teddy shook the leader of the party vigorously as he whispered:

"They've found out where we are, and one is just getting ready to make a rush."

This information was well calculated to arouse Poyor as well as the white man, and they ran with all speed toward the entrance to the ravine where Neal was making ready to shoot.

"He has shown himself twice since Teddy went to call you," the boy said, "and I know exactly where to fire if you believe it ought to be done."

"Do you think he knows we are here?" Cummings asked, and Neal replied:

"He has been looking out from among the bushes as if suspicious that there was something wrong in this quarter; but I don't fancy he has seen us."

"Then do not fire. It is of the greatest importance that we should remain concealed, and to discharge a weapon now would only be to bring down a crowd upon us. Get back to the farther end of the ravine while Poyor and I find out what is going on."

The boys did as they were bidden, taking their station where it was possible to see all the men

were doing, and after ten minutes both were surprised by hearing Cummings say in a tone of relief:

"It is only that idiot, and he evidently mistakes us for enemies. The best thing we can do is to let him stay where he is, for then he can't get us into another scrape."

"It's Jake!" Teddy cried. "I thought that arm didn't look like an Indian's!"

"It will be worse than wicked if Cummings don't let him know who we are. Of course he's hunting for us, and we *must* call to him."

As Neal spoke he stepped forward, and was about to cry out when Cummings prevented him.

"Let the fool alone," the latter said. "If he joins us we shall never be able to pass the sentinels."

"You can't mean to let him wander off by himself."

"Better that than give him another chance to bring the enemy down upon us."

"But I won't allow it," Neal cried angrily. "It is true he has been worse than foolish twice——"

"And the third time he'll succeed in bringing all hands up with a sharp turn. We are where very little is needed to put us in the power of the enemy, and we cannot afford to take such chances as he appears to delight in."

"Then Teddy and I will leave you, and run all the risk with him, which is nothing more than fair, considering the fact that he is one of our party."

From the look on Cummings' face it was evident he intended to make an angry reply; but before he could speak Poyor said:

"The boys are right. It is not good to desert a friend, no matter what he has done."

"Very well," Cummings said impatiently. "Call him in, and during the remainder of this journey, if we live to finish it, I will see that he does not have a chance to work any more mischief."

Neal did not delay. Stepping out from the ravine he shouted:

"Jake! Jake, come in here!"

Although the engineer was so far away the cry of mingled surprise and joy which burst from his lips could be heard distinctly, and in the shortest possible space of time he was in the ravine shaking the boys' hands vigorously.

"What are you up to here?" he asked. "Looking for me?"

"Indeed we were doing nothing of the kind," Cummings said angrily. "After you so kindly did all you could to tell the Indians where we had located it was necessary to make a quick move, and if I had had my way you would never have known how near we were."

"I don't suppose it will do any good to say that I am sorry?" Jake suggested meekly.

"Not a bit, for this is the second time you have done all the mischief possible. By this last performance it has been necessary to take a course nearly three times as long as the one we intended to travel, and no one can say what you won't do before we are out of the scrape."

"I pledge my word to obey orders. The experience I have had during the past twenty-four hours has taught me that I can't afford to take any more chances while we are in this heathenish country."

"It is a grave question whether we shall be able to get clear, and now that you have come we must make another change, running all the risks of traveling in the daytime, for the enemy can follow up on your trail as readily as if you had set sign-boards all the way."

Jake understood that it would do no good to make any reply while Cummings was in such a rage, and he very wisely retreated to the further end of the ravine where he whispered to Teddy:

"Can't you give me a bite to eat? I'm just about starved."

"Haven't you had anything since leaving the cave?"

"Not a mouthful, and only one drink of water."

"Where have you been?"

"Walkin' all the time. When I went away it was only with the intention of travelin' a short distance. It didn't seem as if I had gone a quarter of a mile before I turned to go back, an' I've been tryin' to get there ever since."

"Didn't you sleep any last night?"

"Not a wink. I wanted to; but some kind of a big animal came prowlin' around the tree I'd chosen as my sleepin' apartment, and after that I couldn't so much as shut my eyes without takin' the chances of fallin' off the branch."

"Did you meet any one?"

"No."

"But how came you over here so far?"

"It seems as if I'd had time to go across the whole country since I saw you last. Say, give me some water and a mouthful of anything that's eatable, an' then I'll get a little sleep before tacklin' Cummings again. I suppose its a case of goin' way down on my marrow bones before he'll forget what I've done."

"I fancy you are right in that respect," Teddy said gravely, as he overhauled the stores to procure the food, "and he can't be blamed, for you have put us in a very bad position without even the poor excuse of having tried to benefit the party."

"From this out I won't so much as yip," Jake replied earnestly, as he made a vigorous attack on the roast tapir. "Getting lost in such a forest as this is enough to make a fellow's hair turn white."

"If it will prevent you from playing the fool any more I shall be satisfied," Cummings, who had come up unperceived, said emphatically.

CHAPTER XXV.

ON THE RANGE.

Although it was nearly noon, the time when the natives of Yucatan believe a siesta is absolutely necessary, Cummings insisted that the flight should be continued without further delay.

"It would not be surprising if the Chan Santa Cruz sentinels had seen that idiotic Jake, and followed him in order to learn where we were hiding," he said when Neal asked why they had left the ravine during the hottest portion of the day. "If the Indians should besiege us here, it would only be a few hours before surrender must be made, because of lack of water, therefore we can render our position no worse, and may succeed in bettering it by going now."

Poyor evidently looked at the matter in the same light, for he made no protest; but began at once to prepare for the tramp.

Jake, after eating a hearty meal, had stretched out at the further end of the hiding place, and was just giving himself up to the luxury of slumber when Teddy aroused him by saying:

"Come, what are you lying here for? We are ready to start, and there's a good deal of satisfaction in knowing that this time you'll have to carry your share of the load."

"But I've got to have a nap first. Just think how long it's been since I've had a chance to close my eyes."

"You'll have to wait awhile. Both Cummings and Poyor believe it is absolutely necessary for us to make a quick move, and if you're not ready they will go away alone."

Jake began to protest; but Teddy cut him short by saying:

"It won't do any good to kick. They are angry because we were forced to leave the cave, and won't spend much time coaxing."

"Hurry along," Cummings shouted impatiently. "We must be well up on the range before sunset."

These words spoken in an imperative tone caused Jake to spring to his feet very nimbly, and as he neared the entrance Poyor pushed one of the packages toward him as he said:

"We carried all last night, and it would be only right to give you a double load."

"I'd have to take it if you did," Jake replied; but as if to prevent any different distribution of the burdens, he tied this one on quickly, saying when it was fastened firmly to his back, "Now I'm ready to tramp as long as you do; but it would have suited me better if I'd had time for a nap."

"It will serve you right if you don't get a chance to sleep for a week," Cummings replied sharply. "Go on, Poyor leads the way as before, and see to it that you keep close at his heels."

The fugitives soon learned that however difficult it might be to travel through the tangled underbrush of the forest, it was as nothing compared to clambering over the ledges of green or white rock which formed the base of the range.

Here there was nothing to shield them from the fervent rays of the sun, and so intense was the heat that it seemed as if they were walking over the top of a furnace.

The only relief from the excessive warmth was when they came upon a deep fissure in the rocks where was a pool of water, with the most gorgeous flowers around the margin. Everywhere else the soil was sandy, covered in places with pebbles and burning gravel. In front of them were the mountains, bare and sterile, on which the least experienced of the party knew no drop of water could be found.

As a matter of course both Cummings and Poyor kept strict watch over the surrounding country

lest the enemy should be creeping upon them unawares; but when, late in the afternoon, a short halt was called, nothing suspicious had been seen.

"I don't understand how you could have wandered around twenty-four hours without being discovered by some of the sentinels," Cummings said to Jake, when they were reclining on the side of the mountain in the shadow cast by an overhanging rock, where a full view of the valley beneath could be had.

"Perhaps they have given over lookin' for us," the engineer suggested.

"There's no chance of that. Every square foot of the country will be searched, and sooner or later they'll come across our trail."

"How long will it take us to get over the range?" Neal asked.

"It is impossible to say: but we must keep moving nearly all the time, for the small amount of water we have with us now is the last that'll be seen until we are on the other side."

"I feel as if I could drink the entire supply, and then want more," Teddy said, the knowledge that they were cut off from all means of adding to the store making him thirsty.

"I reckon every one in the party feels much the same way," Cummings replied grimly. "If it was possible to find a stream now and then the journey across the range would not be such a dangerous one."

With the exception of the suggestion he made when they first halted, Jake did not join in the conversation. His eyes had closed in slumber almost instantly after lying down, and during half an hour he was allowed to sleep uninterruptedly.

Then Poyor awakened him, and the weary march was resumed, the advance becoming more difficult each moment as they climbed higher up on the range.

About two hours before nightfall the sun was hidden from view by dense masses of dark clouds, and the boys hailed with joy this relief from the burning heat.

"If we could only have it like this all the time!" Neal exclaimed.

"Better the sun than the clouds," Cummings said in a tone of anxiety, and Poyor increased his pace, no longer searching with his eyes for the enemy; but casting quick glances from side to side as if hunting for some particular object.

A south wind came up, and the boys were trudging along right merrily, despite their fatigue, when it was as if a solid sheet of water descended upon them.

There had been no warning drops to give notice of the coming storm; but the rain literally fell in torrents, drenching the fugitives at the first downpour.

It was now impossible to see twenty feet in either direction. The driving rain and the white clouds which completely enveloped the mountain shut out everything from view.

The enemy might have crept close upon them without being aware of the fact.

There was no place in which to shelter themselves, and the boys had a thorough illustration of what a tropical rain-storm may be during the time Poyor was hunting for such a place as would serve to shield them from the flood.

Not until half an hour had passed did they make a halt, and then the Indian led them under an overhanging ledge, in front of which was a sheer descent of eighty feet or more to the valley beneath.

"Here we can wait until the worst of the gale has blown over," he said, as he threw down his burden and prepared to enjoy a long rest. "It is not likely we shall be able to move to-night, and there is no fear the enemy will come upon us while the storm rages."

"We shall at least be where the canteens can be filled," Cummings replied in a tone of content, "and by gaining a fresh supply of water the journey will be robbed of half its dangers, consequently a wetting is of but little consequence."

To have seen the mountain at this moment one would hardly have thought that the party could have suffered from thirst. Every crevice of the rocks was now a stream, and by reaching out in a dozen different directions a quantity of the precious liquid could be obtained.

The only thing to cause alarm was the fact that this storm was but the beginning of the summer season, during which rain might be expected each day, and thus the danger of fever while crossing the low lands would be greatly increased.

"The sentinels will certainly keep under cover during such weather as this," Cummings said in a tone of satisfaction, "and we may be able to get over the range without a hand to hand fight, as I had anticipated."

Under such climatic conditions the meat would not keep sweet many hours, and Poyor set the entire stock before his companions, saying as he did so:

"What cannot be eaten must be thrown away, therefore he is fortunate who can now swallow

enough to prevent the pangs of hunger from being felt during the next forty-eight hours."

"But we certainly won't be forced to stay here that length of time," Neal replied. "It can't rain all the day and night."

"It is safe to count on a long storm," Cummings added. "This is the beginning of the bad season, and there will be a certain amount of water fall each day."

"Did you take the fact into consideration when you made ready to visit the Silver City?" Neal asked.

"Of course, and if there had been nothing to prevent the carrying out of my plans we would have been clear of the swamp by this time, or so near the edge that but a few hours traveling must have taken us through."

It was worse than useless to talk of what might have been, and the little party settled down to make themselves as comfortable as possible under the circumstances.

Overhead the rock sheltered them from the rain; but now that every crevice had been turned into a stream it was difficult to protect one's self from the innumerable tiny crevices through which the water was pouring, and each member of the party lay down in turn only to find himself literally flooded out before it was possible to gain any rest.

The night had come, and the air, so warm a few hours previous, was uncomfortably cold.

Jake proposed that a fire be built, providing he could find a sufficient quantity of dry wood; but both Cummings and Poyor decided against it in a very emphatic manner.

"Although we have been traveling for the past six or eight hours where any one in the valley might see us, we are not so insane as to build a beacon here that our pursuers may be guided to this halting place."

Cummings spoke in a petulant tone, and fearing that he might add something regarding the fact that if Jake had behaved himself all would now be in the cave, Teddy hastened to say:

"If we can't build a fire why not spend the time walking, for it will be impossible to sleep with this rain beating down upon us?"

"It would take a better man than Poyor to lead the way in the darkness and storm. Here we must stay, at least until morning, and then unless the rain has ceased falling, it will be a case of going hungry awhile."

Finding that there was to be no change in the condition of affairs, Jake had crawled into the further end of the shelter where, with the water dripping down upon him he was trying his best to sleep, and Neal curled up beside him.

Poyor, regardless of the weather, remained just outside the rock as if on guard, while Cummings, a few paces behind him, sat upon a fragment of stone listening intently, and Teddy wisely concluded to find a resting place somewhere, for he was so weary that repose seemed absolutely necessary, more especially since there could be no doubt but that the journey would be continued immediately the storm cleared away.

Selecting a spot where some portion of his body could be kept dry, he lay down, and, regardless of all discomforts was soon oblivious to everything around him.

CHAPTER XXVI.

THE PURSUIT.

During this night of discomforts the boys and Jake succeeded in gaining more rest than one would have thought possible under the circumstances.

The temperature had fallen so much that, in comparison with the heat of the day, it was positively cold; but by lying close together and covering themselves with half a dozen enormous leaves from a vine which encircled the rock, they managed to pass the long hours without positive pain.

Whenever Neal, who awakened very often, opened his eyes he saw Cummings and Poyor standing near at hand like statues, and the natural supposition was that they did not seek repose even to the slight extent of sitting down.

Once he called to the white man, proposing to do his share of the watching; but the offer was positively declined.

"I could not rest even if I should lie down," he replied in a whisper. "There are too many chances that the Chan Santa Cruz Indians may creep upon us under cover of this mist, and both Poyor and myself are needed. Sleep if you can, so that we may be prepared for a hard tramp to-morrow."

As it proved, however, these excessive precautions were useless. The rain continued to fall

steadily and in great volume until daybreak, and then all hands prepared for another tramp, for each one was so completely drenched that a little water more or less could not make much difference.

The breakfast was by no means a hearty one. The moisture had spoiled the roast tapir, and even the remaining totopostes were so damp as to be decidedly unpleasant to the sight as well as the taste.

Jake shut his eyes and ate a small quantity: but neither Neal nor Teddy could force the food down, and, in view of the fact that there was little likelihood of finding any game on the summit of the mountain, it seemed reasonably certain they would be forced to fast a long while.

The burdens, soaked with water, had increased in weight very materially, and again Poyor overhauled them in order to throw away yet more of the load.

All the fishing tackle, two extra suits of clothes belonging to the boys, the spoiled provisions and, in fact, nearly everything except the ammunition and weapons, was left behind when the ascent of the mountain was continued.

It was not yet time for the sun to rise; but the gray light of coming day served to show the way, and Poyor strode on in advance at a pace which would have soon winded the boys had Cummings not ordered him to proceed more slowly.

"We must keep on without a halt until noon," he said, "and it would be bad policy to use a portion of the party up before the journey has fairly begun."

Even at the best pace possible the progress was by no means rapid, owing to the obstructions in the path. Here it was necessary to make a long detour that an overhanging ledge might be avoided, and there they were literally forced to scramble among boulders of every size at imminent risk of breaking limbs or being precipitated to the valley below.

Before half an hour had passed the rain ceased falling as rapidly as it had begun, and as the sun appeared the clouds at the foot of the mountain were dispersed.

Poyor halted and turned to look toward the valley.

Almost at the same instant a loud shout was heard and Cummings uttered an exclamation of dismay, as a party of at least a hundred Indians burst into view about a mile below.

"They halted rather than run the risk of passing us during the storm," he said half to himself. "Inasmuch as the slowest of that crowd can travel two yards to our one we are likely to be overhauled in a very short time."

"It is the end," Poyor said gravely. "There is little chance of escape, and none of running from them."

"Do you propose that we shall stand and fight?" Cummings asked.

"There is nothing else to be done."

"But we have no show against them."

"As much as to run."

"Here in the open they can soon surround us."

"We will be able to throw up a line of these rocks before they get here, and because it is in the open we can hold them back a few hours."

There was plenty of material near at hand with which to make a shelter sufficient to protect them from the poisoned arrows, and after a few seconds' hesitation Cummings saw that Poyor's plan was the only one which could be carried into execution.

"Set to work lively, boys," he shouted, as he began to throw up the smaller boulders in a circle. "Everything depends on our getting a fort ready before they come within shooting distance."

There was no necessity of urging the boys or Jake to labor industriously. They could see the enemy and hear their yells of triumph at having tracked the game so successfully, therefore not a second was wasted.

It seemed as if Poyor had the strength of a dozen men in his arms. He lifted huge boulders which the remainder of the party together could hardly have moved from their resting place; flung the smaller ones around as if they were nothing more than pebbles, and when the circle had been raised four feet high, set about digging away the sand from the center in order to increase the depth.

The preparations were not yet completed when the foremost of the pursuers came in view from beneath a ledge about forty yards away, and he said to Cummings:

"Three guns are enough to hold them back while Jake and I finish the work here. Do not hesitate to shoot, for they will stop at nothing when the time comes that we can hold out no longer."

"Teddy, you sit there," Cummings said, as he pointed to an aperture in the wall which had been left as a loop-hole. "Neal, you're stationed next to him, and I'll hold this place. Now work lively,

and pick off every one of those yelling villains that comes within range."

He discharged both barrels of his weapon in rapid succession as he ceased speaking, and the two leaders disappeared immediately; but whether they had been hit by the leaden messengers, or only frightened, no one could say.

Teddy raised his gun as a third man pressed forward, and, as he afterward confessed, closed his eyes while pulling the trigger, for to fire deliberately at a human being was something inexpressibly terrible.

Even if he did not hit the mark the bullet must have gone so near the man as to frighten him, for when Neal discharged his weapon at a fourth Indian the entire party beat a retreat, disappearing behind the ledge.

"They can't send an arrow from that distance with any accuracy of aim," Cummings said in a tone of satisfaction, "therefore we may count on keeping them back until night, at all events."

"And then what?" Teddy asked with a shudder.

"That is something we won't talk about yet awhile," was the grave reply. "We've got at least twelve hours before us, providing they don't catch us napping, and at such a time as this it is a much longer lease of life than I expected."

Teddy and Neal looked at each other in silence. The situation must indeed be desperate if Cummings could count on remaining at liberty only one day, and then—

In fancy Teddy could see them led back to the Silver City as prisoners. He almost heard the strains of music while they were marched into the temple amid the slender, silver-tipped columns, with the throng of people following to witness the torture and final stroke which should relieve them from suffering.

"What is the matter?" Neal whispered. "You have turned as white as a ghost."

"I was thinking of what will happen when those murderers get us in their power."

"Don't do anything of the kind; it is too terrible. I will die here fighting rather than be taken prisoner."

"And is that all the hope we have left?"

"To be killed here? Perhaps not; but it is far preferable to the torture Poyor and Cummings say is sure to be our portion in case of capture."

Neal's face was also pale; but there was a certain look of determination about it which told he had made up his mind for the worst, and would struggle manfully to the end.

Jake on the contrary, was nearly paralyzed with fear. He understood now if never before all the trouble he had brought upon his companions, first by making their presence in the city known, and, lastly, by betraying the whereabouts of the party when he ventured out of the cave. That the Indians would not be turned from their purpose he realized fully, and there could be no mistaking the desperate condition in which he had placed all hands.

He was supposed to be aiding Poyor; but, as a matter of fact he could do little more than look out over the fortifications, fearing each moment that the enemy would make a sudden dash.

The particular thought in the minds of all was as to what might be done in the way of replenishing the larder, for now the siege had really begun the question of how food could be procured was a serious matter, more especially since no one had eaten what would be worthy the name of breakfast.

Neither Cummings nor Poyor feared a direct assault. In their opinion it was only a question of holding the enemy in check, and to this alone did they pay any attention.

Cummings watched over the line of rocks, and at the slightest show of a living target discharged his weapon; but, so far as could be ascertained, without inflicting any injury upon those who were ready to deal out death at the first opportunity.

"It is only a question of holding back until the night comes, when they can ascend the mountain, and, being above us, be able to shoot us down without exposing themselves," Teddy said as he sat by the aperture watching for a sight of the enemy.

"We will wait until sunset before we give up entirely," Neal replied, in a tone that showed he had lost all hope. "Then, unless Poyor can devise some plan for escape, we shall have to stand a hand to hand fight which can result in but one way."

"You admit that we can't escape?" Teddy replied interrogatively. "Five against a hundred won't be able to stand very long."

"We can at least hold our own a few hours, and when the end comes we will be found fighting."

This was poor consolation for a fellow who hoped his friend might see some better way out of the difficulty, and Teddy settled back to watch for an opportunity to discharge his weapon with effect; but feeling that it was vain labor so far as the ultimate result was concerned.

During the forenoon, while every crevice in the rocks was running with water, Poyor filled the canteens, and when this work was done he insisted that Jake should continue to aid him in lowering the level behind the line of rocks; but the engineer was, to use his own words, "completely played out," and the necessary work was neglected until he could gain a certain amount of rest, which, under the circumstances, every other member of the party was willing to forego for a time.

CHAPTER XXVII.

AT BAY.

When the Indian had scraped the sand away to the solid rock, thereby deepening the enclosure at least twelve inches, he ceased work, and, seating himself by Cummings' side, prepared to do his share of the watching.

By this time the assailants had become convinced that it was useless to expose themselves to the murderous fire which could not be returned with any possibility of injuring the white men, and they remained under cover.

"I believe we might sneak away from them," Neal said, after looking fifteen or twenty minutes at the ledge beneath which the enemy had taken refuge, without seeing so much as a man's head. "They think we will shoot them down, and might keep under cover while we were escaping."

"Then you believe they do not know what we are about?" Cummings asked grimly.

"How can it be possible if no one comes out to reconnoiter?"

"Look down the valley."

Following with their eyes the direction of Cummings' outstretched finger the boys saw a party of Indians far down the mountain side out of range, traveling rapidly in the opposite direction.

"They are running away!" Teddy cried gleefully. "Our guns were too much for them."

"Do you believe there are as many in that crowd as we saw coming up the mountain?"

Teddy gazed again, and this time the look of joy and relief faded from his face.

"No," he replied slowly, "only about half as many."

"And the remainder are under the ledge ready to come out at the first good opportunity."

"But what are those fellows doing?"

"Going out of range where every movement we make can be seen without risk of being shot at, and when the night comes they will circle around us."

That this supposition was correct could be seen a few moments later when the party halted in full view, and disposed of themselves in such places as the bushes afforded any shade from the sun's hot rays.

"They are taking things mighty easy," Neal said after a long pause, during which he watched the enemy intently.

"What is to prevent?" Cummings replied. "Time is of no especial object to them providing we can be captured finally, and just now we are situated very much like rats in a trap."

"I wonder what would be the result if one of us should show himself?" Teddy said musingly.

"You shall soon see. Poyor, walk a short distance up the mountain, and let the boys learn how well we are watched."

The Indian did as he was requested, and had hardly left the fortification when those in the valley made a series of signals to the men above, and instantly Cummings had another opportunity to empty his weapon at a living target as several men sprang out from beneath the ledge.

"Now you have some slight idea of what the result would be if we should attempt to run away," he said while re-loading the gun.

"But what is to be gained by staying here if you are certain we shall be surrounded? Wouldn't it be better to have the fight out when it is possible to see what we are doing?"

"Yes, decidedly; but I prefer to wait longer. While there's life there's hope, and before sunset something may happen to give us the advantage."

Poyor came back leisurely, and as he re-entered the circle of rocks those in the valley settled down contentedly once more.

During this conversation Jake had been sleeping soundly; but now the sun shone full upon him, and the heat was so great that he was forced to change his position, saying as he did so:

"In a couple of hours more we shall be roasted to a turn."

"That isn't the worst that may befall us," Cummings replied, evidently pleased at an opportunity to increase the engineer's fears.

"But it seems as if we might make a try for some game. I'm very nearly starved."

"You are at liberty to do as you please, because it is not possible to work us any further injury. According to your belief the Chan Santa Cruz Indians are such peaceable fellows that they might allow you to hunt in the valley awhile."

"What's the use of roughing into me now? I know I've made a fool of myself twice; but I'm in the same hole with the rest."

"That doesn't make our situation any the more bearable, and when we think how it was brought about it is only natural to feel sore. Even now you insist on taking rest when the others are working."

"But I traveled steadily for twenty-four hours, and haven't had half as much sleep as the remainder of the party."

"What about last night?"

Jake made no reply. He considered himself abused because Cummings persisted in talking about what had been done, when he believed the matter should be dropped after the fault was acknowledged.

Another hour passed. The sun was directly overhead, and the heat seemed excessive. There was no longer any shadow cast by the rocks, and the sand was so hot as to be painful to the touch.

"There is no reason why you boys should remain on guard," Cummings finally said. "The Indians will not make a move before afternoon, and it is equally certain we shall not get a chance to shoot at those under the ledge."

"We may as well sit here, for no fellow could sleep in this oven," Teddy replied; but Poyor showed what might be done, by lying down near the front wall and closing his eyes.

At the end of two hours there was no further change in the condition of affairs. Poyor continued to sleep, the boys and Cummings remained on guard, and Jake sat leaning his head against the rocks while the perspiration ran down his face in tiny streams.

Then, as on the previous evening, the clouds began to gather, and Cummings said in a tone of satisfaction as he gazed toward the sky:

"There's evidently no danger that we shall suffer from thirst, for another storm is coming up, and while it lasts we may see some chance of giving those fellows the slip."

"But you didn't dare to travel last night when it was raining," Teddy said.

"Very true; but that was at a time when we were not positive the enemy were so near. Now they are close at our heels we shall be warranted in running many risks which, twenty-four hours ago, would have been most imprudent."

In a very short time the sun was hidden from view; a cooling wind blew across the mountain, and every member of the sad visaged party experienced a wonderful sense of relief.

Poyor arose to his feet like one refreshed, and Jake bestirred himself sufficiently to propose that he relieve Neal or Teddy a short while.

"You can sleep now that the sun doesn't shine," he said, "and I promise to keep strict watch."

After some hesitation Teddy accepted the offer while he paced to and fro to rest his cramped and aching limbs, and Poyor consulted with Cummings relative to an attempt at flight when the storm should come.

His idea was that they could not be any worse off by making one effort to reach the summit of the range, even if the desired result was not attained, and after considerable discussion the white man agreed to the plan.

"It is barely possible that we may get on all right, and the situation is so desperate that almost any change must be for the better," he said. "We will wait half an hour or so, and then start if the enemy have made no move meanwhile."

The threatened storm was not long delayed.

In less than an hour it was upon them in all its fury, and Cummings said sharply as he pressed nearer the front of the fortification:

"Now we need all the eyes in the party. Keep a sharp watch, and fire at the first moving thing you see."

On this occasion thunder and lightning accompanied the wind and rain, and by the glare of the flashes it was possible to see as if at noon-day.

Never before had the boys witnessed such a terrible tempest. The entire heavens seemed ablaze

at times, and the peals which echoed and re-echoed from one point to another appeared to shake the mountain.

The wind was so powerful that even Poyor could not stand against it, and Cummings said in a tone of deepest disappointment:

"Unless we choose to venture into the valley again flight is out of the question. We must stay here and take what the Indians care to give us when the storm clears away."

He had hardly ceased speaking when a flash of lightning nearly blinded them; the earth shook most decidedly before the thunder peal came, and then it was as if all nature was in convulsion.

The rocks forming the fortification were precipitated down the mountain; the little party were hurled violently forward, and then intense darkness and the most profound silence ensued.

Teddy reached out his hand to touch Neal; but the latter was not near him.

"Neal! Neal!" he shouted again and again, and several moments elapsed before he heard, as if far away, an answering cry.

"Where are you, Teddy?"

"Here, on the side of the hill. Come this way."

"I can't. I'm nearly buried in the sand."

From the direction of the voice Teddy knew his friend had been thrown quite a distance down the hill, and he cried:

"Keep on shouting so I can find you."

"Don't move! Wait for another flash of lightning!"

It was Cummings who had spoken, and an instant later Jake was heard begging for help.



The little party were hurled violently forward, and then intense darkness ensued. See page [268](#).

"All the rocks of the fort must be on top of me. Will somebody help pull them away."

The rain was yet falling in torrents: but the electrical disturbance had ceased entirely.

That something terrible had occurred all knew; but what it was no one could say.

When Jake implored some one to aid him the second time, Poyor cried:

"Let each remain motionless. I will find the engineer. The earth has opened here, and I am on the brink of a chasm."

This order was obeyed, and the boys knew by the sound of the Indian's voice that he was making his way toward Jake.

At the end of ten minutes he shouted:

"There has been no harm done here. We will come to you."

The boys spoke from time to time to guide him, regardless of the fact that they might also be calling the enemy, and after what seemed to be a very long while the party were re-united at the spot where Neal was, as he had said, nearly buried in the sand.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

THE CATASTROPHE.

To extricate Neal from his disagreeable position was a long, but not a difficult operation.

It appeared as if the earth Poyor had dug up from the middle of the fortification was all heaped above him in such a manner that he could do nothing in his own behalf, and it was only necessary to dig this away.

"What could have happened to upset things so thoroughly?" he asked, staggering to his feet, and being obliged to sit down very suddenly lest the wind should blow him down.

"As near as I can guess there has been a land slide," Cummings replied. "I believe it began at the ledge under which the Indians were hidden, and how far it extends no one can so much as guess until it is possible to get a view of the country."

"Are you not afraid of an attack?" Teddy asked.

"Not while this storm is raging. Stand up for a moment, and then you can see whether those fellows would make much headway trying to reach us."

The wind was blowing furiously, and the rain falling in great volume. Now and then the little party cowering close together for mutual protection, would be struck by a perfect shower of pebbles and wet sand with such force that, had they been in a standing position, all would have been overthrown, and it really required considerable exertion to remain in one spot.

The ammunition, or rather, the greater portion of it, had been left near the front wall of the fort, and the chances were that it was destroyed by the water or scattered beyond finding.

Teddy was the first to think of this misfortune, and he said in a tone of despair:

"There's little hope now that we can hold the enemy in check even for an hour, in case they should make an attack, for I don't believe we have twenty cartridges left."

"And but two guns, for I lost mine when I was blown down the side of the mountain," Neal added.

"Don't make the mistake of searching for trouble," Cummings interrupted. "It is sufficient to know that we are alive and uninjured. The Indians will not bother us for some time."

Not until considerably past midnight did the rain cease falling; but the wind storm still continued, and Poyor said, speaking for the first time since the party were united:

"It will not be possible to leave here until sunrise. Those who can sleep should try to do so, for we may have a hard day's work before us to-morrow."

"I should as soon think of sleeping during a battle," Teddy replied with a shudder. "The suspense is worse than actual danger."

"What can you be afraid of just now?" Jake asked.

"At this particular moment, nothing; but I feel positive that when the sun rises we shall find ourselves surrounded by the Indians."

This was not a pleasant subject of conversation, and it was dropped as if by mutual consent.

The wind seemed icy cold, and the fugitives nestled closer together for protection against the blast, counting the slowly passing moments until heralds of the coming dawn appeared in the sky.

Before it was sufficiently light to distinguish surrounding objects the wind lulled, and, standing erect each looked anxiously down the side of the mountain, waiting impatiently for the rising of the sun.

As the misty clouds which veiled the top of the range drifted away, an exclamation of astonishment burst from the lips of all.

Where, a few hours previous, had been a band of men eager to capture or slay the white strangers, was now only a yawning chasm.

Beginning at the ledge of rocks it appeared as if a giant hand had rent the side of the mountain apart, throwing the huge mass of earth into the valley, uprooting or crushing trees, and making desolate for many hundred yards what had been a perfect garden of trees, flowers and shrubs.

"Why, there must have been an earthquake!" Jake exclaimed when the first burst of astonishment passed away.

"Hardly as bad as that," Cummings replied. "I fancy the lightning struck the ledge, and then a regular land slide followed."

"Do you suppose the Indians are buried under that pile of earth and rocks?"

"Unless they understood what damage might be done by such storms they must be, and it stands us in hand to get away from this spot before others can arrive."

"It is terrible to think of so many being killed," Teddy said mournfully, and Jake asked sharply:

"Are you sorry we've got a chance for escape?"

"Certainly not; but no matter who they were, one can't help feeling shocked at such a catastrophe."

"It is not well for us to stay here," Poyor said before any reply could be made. "While looking at what we believe to be the grave of the Chan Santa Cruz army, they may be climbing the mountain to cut us off."

"You are right, Poyor. Boys, look around for the ammunition and Neal's gun, and whether we find anything or not we must be on our journey in five minutes."

Cummings led in the search, which resulted in nothing, for even the boulders which formed the fort were hidden from view by the sand and gravel, and then Poyor advanced on the way upward once more.

Although it seemed certain the enemy had been destroyed the Indian did not neglect any precaution. He traveled further in advance than usual and from time to time cast searching glances toward the valley where, in all probability, so many lay dead.

Now every member of the party were suffering for food. It was thirty-six hours since they had satisfied their hunger, and during the greater portion of this time a large amount of labor had been performed.

"I believe I could eat an iguana, and that's the most disagreeable looking reptile I've ever seen," Teddy whispered to Neal, and the latter replied gravely:

"It doesn't seem right to complain about being hungry after escaping from such a terrible situation; but at the same time I'm willing to confess that almost anything would taste mighty good just now."

The travelers were nearing the summit of the mountain where not so much as a blade of grass could be seen, and there was nothing for it but to endure hunger, as they were forced to, the heat, which, as the day advanced, seemed almost insupportable.

It was about noon when the little party stood on the highest point of land, and, looking over a long stretch of valley and plain covered with verdure of the deepest green, saw the blue waters of the Caribbean sea, the crests of the waves sparkling in the sunlight like jewels set in sapphire-colored enamel.

Never had the ocean seemed so beautiful and friendly as now, after the long, dangerous tramp, and the boys forgot all privations and discomforts as they gazed at the broad expanse of water.

"If the Sea Dream was afloat and anchored off there how quickly we could get home," Teddy cried.

"Even allowing that nothing happens to prevent our traveling ten hours a day, it will be a week before you can stand on the shore of the sea," Cummings replied, glancing backward as if regretting that he was about to descend the range which would separate him from the wonders and wealth of the Silver City.

"At least, we have nothing more to fear from the Indians, and there is now good reason to believe we shall get home at some time, which is more than either of us could have said truthfully last night."

"We can't have that satisfaction," and Cummings turned to resume the march. "The Chan Santa Cruz frequently go to the coast, and there are plenty living near by who may try to make matters disagreeable for us. But we must not stand here speculating; it is necessary to gain the forest below before finding anything for supper, and I'm free to confess that either fish or meat will be very acceptable."

The thought of food caused all to forget their fatigue, and the descent was begun, the progress being as easy and rapid as it had previously been slow and difficult.

The afternoon was not more than half spent when they reached the fringe of bushes marking the forest line, and an hour later the little party were shielded from the rays of the sun by the wide

spreading branches of enormous trees.

Now the advance was more of a hunting excursion than the ending of a day's journey, and each member of the band searched among the foliage for something eatable.

Poyor was the one who finally succeeded in replenishing the larder, and he did it in a right royal manner.

While Neal and Teddy were looking for a bird which the latter declared he had caught a glimpse of among the leaves, the Indian started off at full speed, returning in a short time with two armadilloes.

"Good for you!" Cummings shouted joyfully. "We'll have a first-class supper now, with plenty to spare for breakfast. How did you manage to get both?"

"An Indian is a better hunter than the white man," Poyor said with a smile as he set about building a fire.

"Do you intend to eat those horrid looking things?" Teddy asked in surprise.

"Indeed I do, and after you get a taste of the old fellow's flesh, roasted in his own shell, you'll say it goes ahead of everything except a morsel of fat from the back of Mr. Armadillo."

A small spring bubbled out of the ground beneath a huge logwood tree, giving rise to what would probably be a large stream by the time it reached the coast, and here it was proposed to spend the night.

To protect themselves from possible visits from wild beasts Cummings set about collecting fuel for camp-fires, and in this work the others assisted while the Indian played the part of cook.

While his game was being roasted Poyor searched the forest in the immediate vicinity, and succeeded in finding a quantity of yellowish green fruit which Cummings explained to his companions were mangoes.

"I thought it was necessary to cultivate mangoes," Teddy said in surprise.

"Not here, although it was originally introduced from India; but it took so kindly to the soil that one finds the fruit even in the heart of the primitive forest. Except for the odor of turpentine, I think it the most pleasing of all that nature has bestowed."

Just at that moment the boys were more interested in what Poyor was doing than regarding the fruits of Yucatan, and instantly he pulled the first armadillo from the fire they were ready to be served.

During ten minutes after receiving his share of the meat on a broad leaf, every member of the party ate ravenously, and then Jake said with a sigh of content, as he helped himself to another generous portion:

"I declare it is almost worth while going without grub in order to know how good it tastes."

"I'd rather eat less at a time, and have my meals more regularly," Teddy said with a laugh, as he made an attack upon a pile of mangoes.

Then Cummings began to discuss with Poyor the best course to pursue while journeying to the coast, and the others listened in silence, for upon the decision arrived at might depend all their chances of ever reaching home again.

CHAPTER XXIX.

A FIERCE CONFLICT.

That Poyor believed the more serious danger was over, the boys understood from the fact that camp-fires were to be kept burning during the night, something which would never have been allowed had he feared an attack from the Chan Santa Cruz.

Then again, the Indian no longer refused to converse lest the duty of the sentinel should be neglected; but talked readily and at considerable length with Cummings regarding the course to be pursued.

He also indulged in the luxury of a smoke, something he had not done since leaving the white man's hut, and, taking their cue from him, the remainder of the party gave themselves up to absolute repose both of body and mind, therefore because of these reasons if for no other, this particular halting place was afterward remembered as the most pleasant they knew during the long, fruitless journey.

When Cummings and Poyor finally decided upon the line of march for the following day, the twilight was rapidly deepening into the gloom of night, and the latter lighted the fires, thus making a circle of flame completely around the party.

"Is it really necessary to have such a blaze, or are you indulging in it simply because it has been so long since we dared allow our whereabouts to be known?" Teddy asked, as he sat with his chin on his knees gazing at the burning wood.

"We are guarding against brute enemies. It is said that jaguars are plenty in this section, and there can be no question but snakes abound. These embers, which require only labor to keep alive, will do very much toward saving our small stock of ammunition."

Jake did not appear disposed to join in any conversation since dinner. He had thrown himself on the ground near the foot of a gigantic tree, and, from the expression on his face, Neal fancied he was regretting that they had not succeeded in bringing away any treasure from the Silver City.

"What are you thinking of?" he asked.

"Only figgerin' out what a 'royal excursion this would 'a been if I'd got that image I tried so hard for."

"If you had succeeded in carrying it outside the city we should not be here now," Cummings said gravely. "With that lump of silver added to our load I fancy we would be prisoners at this moment if they allowed us to live so long."

"I reckoned you'd take the disappointment harder, after spendin' so much time gettin' ready for the trip."

"Of what use would it be for me to complain? In view of all that has happened we have been remarkably fortunate in getting away alive, and consequently there is very much to be thankful for."

"Do you think that if I'd obeyed orders right up to the handle anything more could have been done?"

"Not in the matter of carrying away treasure, for all hope fled the moment our boat was discovered. You simply caused us additional hardships, and have put an end to my visiting the place again for many months."

"What?" Teddy cried in surprise. "Are you still thinking of entering the city again?"

"I am, most certainly. It shall be my life work to discover the history of these people, and tell to the world the meaning of the inscriptions on the monuments of Copan. This failure has simply been a misfortune, not anything which will prevent my continuing the labor."

"Do you count on asking others to go with you?"

"No," Cummings replied, with a meaning glance toward Jake. "If I ever succeed the honor will be divided among Poyor and myself alone."

Then, as on the day when he first broached the subject, he reviewed all that is known to the white race concerning the buried cities of Central America and of the descendants of that mighty race of people whose once high state of civilization cannot be questioned. When he concluded Jake indulged in but one remark before composing himself for slumber:

"It don't make any difference to me whether the inscriptions can ever be read or not; but a fellow feels sore to think that he had a chance of scoopin' in enough to set himself up in great shape, an' was prevented when the precious metal was under his very fingers."

"Have you any particular reason for going to Progresso?" Neal asked after a pause.

"I have most decidedly. Since getting you in a scrape which nearly cost your lives, it is only right I should see you homeward bound."

"Couldn't we find our way alone?"

"That would be impossible even for me. Poyor is the only guide, and when he has done his work you sail on the steamer, while he and I return to the little hut, there to wait for another opportunity of getting inside the Silver City."

After this Cummings appeared disinclined to talk any more, and the boys lay down near Jake for the slumber which both needed so badly.

Although their eyelids were heavy with sleep, it was not possible to lose consciousness immediately. Now their safety was in a measure assured, the thoughts of Cummings' great disappointment, and the lost opportunity of making themselves famous, came to mind more forcibly than ever before, causing both to remain awake after all save Poyor were breathing heavily.

"This won't do," Teddy said half to himself. "The mysteries of the Silver City are not to be solved by us, and the sooner we go to sleep the better condition we shall be in for to-morrow's tramp."

Before Neal could reply the Indian stole softly toward them and whispered:

"If you would see the father of serpents, sit up and look toward the spring; but make no noise."

The boys did as they were directed and could distinguish by the glare of the camp-fires the largest snake either had ever seen.

It was a boa, moving lazily toward the water course as if conscious that its own wonderful strength was sufficient to enable it to cope successfully with all enemies.

Before it was possible to form any estimate as to the serpent's size another stranger appeared on the scene, causing Poyor to raise his gun ready to shoot.

This visitor was a jaguar, who had evidently come out for a drink, and the unusual light prevented him from seeing the boa. He moved warily forward, ready to meet an attack, and probably trying to make up his mind whether or not this was a favorable opportunity to get a particularly good supper, when the boa darted upon him.

Taken by surprise from the rear, the snake had one complete turn around the animal's body before there was any show of resistance, and then ensued a most thrilling conflict.

The boys could see that the boa's tail was fastened firmly around a tree, thus giving him a purchase such as the jaguar would have difficulty in overcoming.

Using both claws and teeth the animal defended himself bravely for ten minutes, and then it could be seen that the rapidly tightening folds of the serpent were hampering his movements. He no longer struggled so desperately; but uttered shrill cries of alarm which were responded to from a distance.

"His mate is coming," Poyor whispered. "Now we shall see a royal battle."

It was as he had said. A few moments later another jaguar appeared, and the boys could understand that the boa was making haste to crush the first victim before meeting the second enemy.

It was possible to see the muscles of the serpents' tail stand out as the pressure was increased, and then could be plainly heard the breaking bones while the victim uttered wild screams of agony.

The female jaguar had but just come into view when her mate was killed, and she darted at the serpent with a yell of rage which was answered by an angry hiss.

Whether the boa was taken at a disadvantage in the beginning of the fight, or had become so weary with its previous exertions as to render it incapable of putting forth all its powers could not be told; but certain it is that the second battle was short.

The beast caught it by the neck at the third attempt, and the lashing of the monster's tail told that he was beaten.

"He killed one jaguar easily; but this last beast will soon finish him," Teddy whispered, and almost before the words had been uttered the battle was virtually at an end.

Having relinquished its hold of the tree, and unable to encircle the animal's body with its deadly folds, the boa's strength was useless, and from that time on only the snarling of the jaguar and the threshing of the serpent could be heard until the fight came to an end.

"What are you going to do?" Neal asked as Poyor raised his weapon when the silence told that the conflict had been decided in favor of the weaker party.

"Kill the beast. There are too many of her kind already, and I shall be doing a favor to those who come after us by reducing the number."

"Don't shoot; she has proved her right to live, if the theory of the survival of the fittest be correct, and after such a battle it would be cowardly to kill her."

"If, on the morrow, you should find yourself suddenly seized by her, there would not be so much pity in your heart," Poyor replied, and before Neal could make any reply the animal had vanished in the thicket.

"There is no longer any question of what should be done," the Indian said regretfully, after a pause, as he lowered his weapon. "There is a fine skin for those who care to save it."

"It can lay there for all I care," Teddy replied with a laugh. "Fur in this kind of weather isn't pleasant even to think of. Perhaps in the morning Cummings will fancy it worth his while to carry the hide away."

"The ants will have devoured it before the sun rises, and since it has no value for you it is well to go to sleep. One of the white men can call you when it is time to stand your share of the watch."

"Is guard to be kept all night?"

"It would be unsafe for all to sleep. If the jaguars had not met the serpent what would have been the result to those whose eyes were closed in slumber?"

"There is no necessity of saying anything more," Neal replied with a laugh. "We will be ready when our turn comes."

Then, as soon as they could compose themselves sufficiently, the boys surrendered to the demand of slumber, and Cummings must have stood their watch himself, since they were not awakened until another day had come.

Breakfast was already cooked. On a number of gigantic leaves the Indian had spread such food as he could procure: Mangoes without stint; a roasted bird shaped not unlike a goose, and several small, white cones which tasted like radishes.

Except for such articles as bread or vegetables, it was a meal which would have tempted an epicure and to it all hands did full justice.

When their hunger had been satisfied, Cummings said as he shouldered one of the two remaining guns and took up a greater portion of the cartridges:

"It is time we were moving. We can travel reasonably slow, in order that no one may become exhausted; but not an hour must be lost. The way before us is long, even after we reach the sea-shore, and each day wasted is just so much delay in reaching our destination."

"Now that we are really homeward bound you will have no reason to complain because our powers of endurance are too slight," Neal replied, as he took up the remaining weapon, and the march was immediately begun.

CHAPTER XXX.

A WELCOME CHANGE.

While they were on the mountain where no shade could be found the boys thought that it would be a wonderful relief to gain the shelter of the forest; but after traveling an hour they realized that the heat was nearly as great in one place as another.

Among the trees the rays of the sun did not beat directly down upon them; but to balance this every breath of wind was shut out, and the atmosphere seemed stifling.

The perspiration rolled from their faces in streams, and so great was the humidity that it seemed as if it would be a positive relief to be in the sunlight.

"I reckon you've got a better opinion of mountain travel by this time," Cummings said laughingly, as Neal involuntarily halted. "In such a climate the shade of the trees is a positive discomfort."

"We can stand it," Teddy replied bravely. "Every step takes us just so much nearer the coast, and one glimpse of the sea will repay us for all our exertions."

It seemed as if even Poyor was affected by the heat. He no longer strode forward at such a rapid pace; but lagged from time to time as badly as either member of the party.

Cummings urged first one and then another on until about eleven o'clock in the forenoon, and then he said, coming to a full stop by the side of the stream they had been following:

"We can now afford to indulge in a siesta, and shall probably travel all the better for frequent halts. Later in the day one of us will do a little hunting, and the march need not come to an end until it is no longer light enough for us to see the way."

To this very welcome proposition no one had any objections to offer, and in the shortest possible space of time only the sentinel, which on this occasion proved to be Teddy, was left awake.

It was dull work sitting there listening to the droning of the insects; but no member of the party could have kept watch more conscientiously than did he, and when it seemed impossible to hold his eyes open any longer he paced to and fro to prevent them from closing.

With the exception of the usual noises of the forest, it was as if all nature slumbered, and he had just begun to think that standing watch was a useless precaution when an unusual rustling among the foliage caused him to start in surprise.

His first thought was that the Chan Santa Cruz had followed them over the range; but an instant later this was shown to be a mistake, as four copper-colored men, bearing no resemblance to the inhabitants of the Silver City, however, passed through the forest a short distance away without apparently being aware of the proximity of the white party.

To arouse Poyor was but the work of an instant, for it was only necessary to touch him gently on the shoulder when he sprang to his feet.

"There are some men over there," Teddy whispered as he pointed in the direction taken by the strangers.

The Indian started through the underbrush as noiselessly as a serpent, and as he disappeared the boy awakened Cummings.

"Were they armed?" the latter asked, after the short story had been told.

"I didn't notice. My only idea was to arouse you and Poyor, and there wasn't much time for an examination."

"It can't be that they have followed us over the range," Cummings said, half to himself, as he

seized his weapon and made sure it was loaded. "It won't do any harm to be prepared, therefore you had best get the others on their feet; we may have to trust to our legs."

It was not an easy matter to awaken the remainder of the party without causing an outcry; but by first covering the mouth of each with his hand Teddy finally succeeded, and then stood on the alert with them as Cummings made his way in the direction taken by Poyor to assist in the investigation.

One, two, three minutes of suspense followed, and then came a cry which set all their fears at rest. It was the salutation of friends, and an instant later Cummings shouted:

"Do not fear; we have found acquaintances."

"It is time something of the kind was discovered," Jake said in a tone of relief. "I was beginning to think we should never meet one again."

"They looked like Indians," Teddy said doubtfully, and Neal added:

"I fancy we can take Cummings' word for it. Here they are, and it will soon be possible to know why they were so foolish as to come into this part of the country where wild beasts are not the least of the dangers to be encountered."

The strangers appeared, escorted by Poyor and the white man, and the latter said as they came into the opening selected as a halting place:

"These are acquaintances of ours from Merida, who have visited this section of the country in search of bird skins, which find a ready sale among your people. They have a canoe, and report that a dozen miles below here the stream widens until it can be navigated by reasonably large crafts."

"Since we haven't so much as the smallest kind of a boat I can't see how that information will be of any use to us," Neal replied laughingly.

"It won't take long for me to explain. I propose to hire them to carry us to the sea-shore, and thus save just so much labor of traveling on foot."

"Is their canoe large enough?"

"It will carry a dozen."

"Then our troubles are indeed over," Teddy cried joyously; but Cummings dampened his ardor somewhat when he added:

"There will then remain the journey around the coast, and with such a load it would not be safe to put to sea in their craft. But let us enjoy the blessings which come to us," he added, on observing how quickly his companions' countenances fell. "Half a loaf is decidedly better than no bread at all, and when a tramp of six days can be set aside we have good cause to feel pleased."

The strangers had not waited to be welcomed by the other members of the party. Without stopping to be invited they began preparations for cooking on rather an extensive scale, using the contents of their well filled game bags, and the savory odor which soon arose brought Jake to a full realization of the good fortune that had come to them.

"With those fellows to hunt the game it will be a regular feast from here to the coast," he said approvingly, "and I think this is the first piece of good luck we've had since leaving the Sea Dream."

The newcomers could not speak the English language, consequently all the conversation on the part of the fugitives was carried on by Cummings and Poyor; but these two interpreted such portions as they thought might be of interest to the boys.

From the middle of what is known as the "dry season" until the period of almost incessant rains is well advanced, these hunters spend their time on one or another of the streams leading from the coast, and they consider themselves well paid when a year's work nets each an hundred dollars.

"That is really a large amount of money to them," Cummings explained when Neal suggested that hunting was not a very profitable employment. "One quarter of the sum will serve to purchase the absolute necessities of life in a country where fruit can be had for the labor of gathering, and in ten years they can well afford to retire from business, or become landed proprietors by leasing logwood cuttings, sub-letting the land to those who will pay fifteen cents a hundred pounds for all that can be gathered."

The strangers were quite as satisfactory cooks as Poyor, and when the dinner had been spread on the leaves each member of Cummings' party was ready to do it full justice.

After the meal a short time was spent by the men in smoking, and at about four o'clock in the afternoon the journey was resumed.

Feeling secure because of numbers, and the reports made by the newcomers that there was no one in the immediate vicinity the boys were allowed to follow their own inclinations as to the line of march, and each strayed here or there as he pleased until the coming of night forced them to keep together because of the danger to be apprehended from wild animals.

It was late in the evening when they arrived at the hunters' camp; but Cummings did not propose to remain there even for one night.

He insisted that they could travel by water as well during the hours of darkness, while it would be no more labor for one to guide the canoe, allowing her to drift with the current, than to stand watch.

The strangers used every argument to induce him to defer the beginning of the journey until morning; but he was determined, and after some controversy the men made the canoe ready.

Neal, Teddy and Jake were stationed amidships, where thanks to the generous size of the craft, they could stretch out at full length whenever the fancy seized them. Poyor was seated in the bow, Cummings on the stern thwart, and the owners of the boat where they could use the paddles to advantage.

Of this first night's journeying the boys knew very little. The stream was narrow, and lined on either bank with trees so that at times even the heavens were obscured by foliage, therefore they could perceive nothing save the dark wall on either side.

From the movements of the helmsman it was possible to understand when the canoe was rounding a bend, or being pulled from the bank; but that was all, and, weary of watching without being able to see anything, the boys soon gave themselves up to slumber.

When they awakened the little craft was moored to the bank at a point where the stream formed a basin; a fire was burning brightly, and over it Poyor bent in a suggestive attitude.

"Well, this is the kind of traveling that suits me," Teddy cried, springing to his feet and arousing his companions. "While we were sleeping the boat drifted steadily on, and, at this rate, when we arrive at the coast all hands ought to be in good condition for a long tramp."

"Where's Cummings?" Neal asked, as he in turn arose from the bottom of the canoe.

"Gone for game," the Indian replied.

"Oh, we're not to have breakfast until it is shot," he added laughingly.

"It makes no difference what they find, for there are twenty fat fish roasting in the coals, and you may eat at any time."

"Is there a chance of meeting with an alligator or a crocodile in this stream?"

"Not here."

"Then I'm going to have a bath," and Neal began to undress, Teddy and Jake quickly following his example.

During half an hour they had most glorious sport swimming, and then the return of the hunters literally laden down with game warned them that it was time to prepare for the morning meal.

CHAPTER XXXI.

THE SEA.

After breakfast the voyage was resumed.

The owners of the canoe urged that the party remain in camp until the following day, in order as they said, that all hands might be the better fitted for the journey; but Cummings decided against such delay in a very emphatic manner.

"It is of the greatest importance to these boys that we reach the coast at the earliest possible moment," he said, "and there is no good reason for halting any longer than is necessary for the purpose of cooking. With such a large crew each one can get all the rest he needs, and yet not be obliged to do a great amount of labor."

Very unwillingly the Indians took their seats in the boat, and during the day the boys saw very much to interest them.

Among the trees were monkeys in regular droves, and the more mischievous appeared to think it great sport to follow the craft and pelt the occupants with fruit.

Next to these long tailed brutes, black squirrels were the most numerous, and had the party been on a hunting excursion it would have been possible to load the canoe to the water's edge with this species of game.

Now and then a sleek jaguar showed himself. Again a drove of peccaries peered out from among the underbrush, and more than once Cummings was forced to exert all his authority to prevent the Indians from stopping to bag an incautious tapir which had come to the stream for water.

The animals seen on this day's journey were few, however, as compared with the birds.

There were times when it seemed as if the channel was literally blocked with them, and as the boat advanced they dived under the surface or flew with harsh, discordant cries past the travelers' heads.

There were tanales with hard, crooked beaks, white heron, the spoon-bill with pink plumage, long necked flamingoes with flaming wings, cranes on their stilt-like legs, and teal and ducks in greatest variety.

Only once did Cummings allow any shooting to be done, and then it was to bring down a jacana that the boys might see the long spur, sharp as steel, which nature has placed under the wing, thus rendering him a formidable antagonist even to the boa.

For the noon-day meal there was plenty of provisions left from breakfast, and while the canoe was being borne along by the current at the rate of three or four miles per hour, the little party regaled themselves with meat or fruit as fancy dictated.

When the sun was within an hour of sinking behind the trees the word to halt was given, and that they had covered a long distance since morning could be told from the alligators and the turtles which were so numerous as to often render navigation dangerous.

"You will indulge in no more baths this side of Progresso," Cummings said, as the boys leaped ashore just as the long snout of an alligator appeared at the very edge of the water, its owner waiting in the hope that by falling overboard some of the boatmen would provide him with a supper. "The presence of these fellows shows that we are nearing the coast, and if they will give us half a chance you shall know the taste of fresh water turtle, which is much finer than that of their cousins from the sea."

It would have been a very agile alligator who could have stopped Poyor in his search for a toothsome morsel, and in a short time two, known as hicoteas, were roasting in the midst of a roaring fire.

"While a fellow is traveling in this manner he can't complain of the bill of fare," Jake said, in a tone of most perfect content, as he helped himself to another portion of the turtle. "With a different kind of food at each meal, and all of the primest quality, we ought to grow fat."

"More especially since you are not obliged to exert yourself in the slightest," Teddy added with a laugh.

"There's a good deal in that also, though I never refuse to do my share of the work."

"Except when you feel very tired."

"Well a man must take care of himself, and there are times when it becomes absolutely necessary to rest. Say, if we had some of those silver images here it wouldn't be a very hard job to carry them, eh?"

"Now don't get back to that subject," Neal said impatiently. "If you are so eager to have two or three stop here with Cummings, and make one of the party when he tries the venture again."

Jake did not appear inclined to trust his precious body in such a dangerous place again, and, the command to go on board the canoe having been given, the conversation was brought to an abrupt close.

All night the little craft drifted with the current, more than once striking with considerable force the back of a sleeping alligator, and neither the boys nor Jake were called upon to stand watch.

Neal offered to do his share of the work; but Cummings would not listen to the proposition.

"With six men on board the time of duty for each one is short, and we have an opportunity to get more sleep than is really needed. Besides, you are not sufficiently acquainted with such sailing to be a very valuable assistant at the helm."

When the boys awakened on the second morning the character of their surroundings had changed entirely. Instead of being on a narrow, swiftly-running stream, they were in a broad lagoon with innumerable water-ways leading in every direction, and it had become necessary to use the paddles.

"Where are we?" Neal asked in surprise.

"Within less than a day's journey from the sea," Cummings replied. "The stream led into this lagoon, and if these Indians know the true course, as they claim to do, we shall start direct for Progresso in the morning, in good condition for a long tramp."

A short stop was made at a spot where a few trees broke the monotony of the scene, and here a second meal of turtle was prepared, Cummings saying as the boys began the repast:

"Our water supply is now limited, for that by which we are surrounded is brackish if not absolutely salt. I intend to take the greater portion of what the men have on board, when we start up the coast, and every drop will be needed before the journey is finally ended."

"When did they take it on board?" Teddy asked in surprise, as he learned by examination that all the gourds had been filled.

"While you were asleep."

"We can't carry one of these big things."

"By tying a rope of vines around the necks of two I guarantee to get along without much trouble, for they will grow lighter every hour."

"Will the journey be a hard one?"

"You mean up the coast? Yes, it will, and what is bound to make it particularly bad is the glare of the sun as reflected from the water."

"It can't be any worse than climbing the range, knowing the Indians were close behind," Teddy said with evident satisfaction.

"You are right, my boy, and we shall have the pleasure of knowing that each step taken is one the less, without any fear of being obliged to double back in order to escape enemies."

During nearly the entire day the boys strained their eyes trying to get a glimpse of the sea; but not until late in the afternoon was this possible.

Then, as the canoe rounded a point, the vast expanse of water lay spread out before them, and was greeted with three rousing cheers.

"It begins to look now as if there was some chance of our getting home," Teddy cried excitedly. "We are at least where a vessel can be signaled in case anything should prevent us from walking and——"

"Don't flatter yourself that we shall see many sailing crafts within hailing distance," Cummings interrupted. "At this point the water is so shallow that only the smallest boats venture inshore."

"Never mind, we can see the ocean while tramping along, and know that somewhere on it is the steamer which will carry us home."

When the voyage was resumed all hands worked at the paddles, for it was quite important, according to Cummings' belief, that they should get out of the lagoon before sunset, and the canoe sped on, dashing the spray in the air with her bow as if rejoicing that the journey was so nearly ended.

There were yet two hours of daylight remaining when the party reached the mouth of the narrow channel they had been threading, and to the left was the coast, piled high with rocks.

Only through the inlet leading to the lagoon could a landing be effected from a vessel, and it was at this point that the hunters had been set ashore by the craft on which they had come from Progresso.

There was yet a small supply of provisions on the canoe, and these the Indians willingly shared with their passengers. The water gourds were divided between the two parties, and, having been paid a good price for their labor, by Cummings, the four men departed, not wishing to spend the night where fever lurked.

"We don't particularly need rest," Cummings said, when the fugitives from the Silver City were alone again; "but it would be foolish to begin the last portion of our journey so late at night. We'll carry our belongings up the shore a bit, and then camp."

The crooked necks of the water gourds afforded a good handle by which to carry them, and, each taking a portion of their sadly depleted outfit, the little party followed the leader about a hundred yards from the place at which they had landed, to where the huge rocks gave promise of a partial shelter.

Now the time had come when both food and water must be husbanded with care, and instead of setting out the entire amount for each to thoroughly satisfy himself, Cummings divided so much as he thought would be sufficient for the meal, giving every one an equal share.

"It is to be short rations for awhile," he said cheerfully. "That will be better than to fill ourselves up now, and suffer afterward."

No one could take any exception to this very reasonable precaution, and the meal was eaten in the merriest possible fashion.

Then there was nothing to do but wait until morning, when the march was to be resumed, and Neal and Teddy occupied their time speculating as to what the loved ones at home were doing just at that particular moment.

It was not a remarkably pleasant thing to do, considering how great a distance separated them, and when they grew weary of thus making themselves mentally uncomfortable, Teddy asked:

"How long do you suppose it will take us to reach Progresso?"

"I hope to be there in about a week."

"And you feel positive there is no chance of hailing a vessel?"

"Just a chance: nothing more. The possibilities are so slight that it wouldn't pay to spend any time

waiting for a craft to heave in sight."

"What would you do if one should come along to-morrow morning?"

"Try to attract the attention of those on board, of course; but there'll be no such good fortune as that, so the best thing we can do is to lie down now, for we have a hard day's work before us."

CHAPTER XXXII.

A HAPPY SURPRISE.

The monotonous roar of the surf should have lulled the boys to sleep very shortly after they lay down on the sand where a number of boulders formed a partial shelter; but instead of doing so it appeared to have the opposite effect.

For a long while after Cummings and Jake were wrapped in slumber they talked of the journey which lay before them, and speculated with heavy hearts as to the fate of those who had left the burning yacht in their company.

This was a topic of conversation seldom brought up since the day they first saw the Silver City, because their peril had been so great as to overshadow everything else. Now, however, when it seemed as if they were very near home, the fear that but one boat of the four had lived to reach the land came to both with painful intensity, and fully half the night was spent in trying to persuade themselves that it was well with the remainder of the Sea Dream's crew.

When they did finally sink into slumber Poyor was sitting bolt upright with his back against a huge block of coral-like rock, looking out over the water, and in the morning when Neal opened his eyes the Indian was in the same position.

"Have you seen a vessel?" the boy asked.

"There is one," was the calm reply, and Neal sprang to his feet in the greatest excitement to see a small, schooner-rigged craft with all sail set moving slowly through the water on a parallel line with the coast, about three miles away.

In another instant he had awakened the remainder of the party by shouting vigorously, as if believing it possible that those on board could hear his voice.

"What's the matter?" Cummings asked: but before the question could be answered he also saw the craft.

"It looks as if she was bound in our direction, and we had better try to attract attention; but you'll never do it by shouting, my boy."

"What shall we do?"

"Build a fire, of course," Jake replied. "They have got plenty of time to send a boat ashore, for it is nearly calm, and in another hour there won't be so much as a breath of wind."

Before he had ceased speaking Neal and Teddy were running back toward the line of trees for wood, and in a short time a cloud of smoke was ascending from the shore at the very edge of the water.

While the others continued to bring fuel Poyor sprinkled the flames with a bough wet in the sea in order to prevent them from burning too freely, and there was no interruption in the work until a flag was raised on the schooner's main-mast to signify that the signal would be answered.

"We're in great luck," Cummings said, as he seated himself on one of the boulders, for it was no longer necessary to keep the fire burning. "No matter where she is bound I don't fancy we shall have much trouble in persuading them to put into Progresso, and the tramp up the shore which all have been dreading can be avoided."

As a matter of course the entire party were in the best of spirits, and to Neal and Teddy the little craft had a particularly friendly look.

The schooner had been headed for the shore when the smoke first began to ascend; but the wind was so light that she hardly moved through the water, and, after a few moments, the watchers could see that a boat was being lowered.

"That dashes some of my hopes," Cummings said with a laugh.

"What do you mean?" Neal asked.

"I thought there might be just a chance that she hailed from Progresso, and we should have no trouble in persuading them to do as we wished."

"Why do you think that isn't the case?"

"Because you couldn't find a crew of natives who would willingly row so far; the majority would wait for a breeze a week before voluntarily performing so much labor."

The boys watched the boat as she approached slowly, and when she neared the shore both they and Jake started in surprise, scrutinized her more intently, and then looking at each other as if in fear.

"What is the matter?" Cummings asked, and Neal replied slowly:

"The man who is steering resembles Mr. Walters, the sailing master of the Sea Dream, that is all."

"It *is* him!" Teddy cried excitedly. "I am certain of it now; but how did he get here in that schooner?"

As a matter of course the question could not be answered by his companions, and all waited with the liveliest signs of impatience until the gentleman was within hailing distance, and then Neal shouted:

"Is that really you, Mr. Walters?"

"To the best of my knowledge it is," was the laughing reply. "Are you all well?"

"In first-class condition. Where is father?"

"On board the schooner. I will give the signal to let him know the crew of the yacht have all been saved."

As he spoke he discharged a revolver, and the waving of the flag told that the good news was understood.

"Not all, Mr. Walters, the three sailors in our boat were drowned while trying to land on this coast."

"It is too late now to rectify the mistake. I hoped when I saw so many that there had been no disaster."

By this time the little craft had been rowed around the point of the lagoon where it was possible to effect a landing without danger of being swamped, and the sailing master leaped ashore to welcome by hearty handshakes those whom he had feared were dead.

Cummings and Poyor were introduced, and then Neal asked:

"Where did you get the schooner?"

"Chartered her to hunt for you; but Mr. Emery shall tell the story. Will you come aboard now?"

"You are to go with us," Neal said, turning quickly toward Cummings.

"I hardly know what to do. It would probably be wisest for Poyor and I to begin the homeward march since there is no longer any necessity of going to Progresso."

"But you must see my father. Time is not so precious just now but that you can afford to spend another day in our company."

"It shall be as you say," Cummings replied laughingly. "I hesitated only because the sooner our long tramp comes to an end the more comfortable I shall feel in mind."

Jake and Teddy had already clambered into the boat; the others followed, and the little craft, loaded down nearly to the water's edge, was rowed out toward the schooner.

It is not necessary to make any attempt at trying to describe the reception the castaways met with from the remainder of the yacht's crew, nor the manner in which Poyor and Cummings were welcomed.

After the heartiest greetings had been exchanged Mr. Emery and the sailing master asked for an account of the landing and subsequent wanderings, and it is safe to say that they were treated to a wilder story than they had ever dreamed of hearing.

Mr. Walters was at first disposed to look upon it as a "yarn;" but the souvenir which Jake carried on his face was evidence that could not be doubted, and Cummings soon convinced the skeptical sailing master that the Chan Santa Cruz really had an existence.

"That is an adventure I would like to have," he finally said in a tone of enthusiasm. "I can't understand why it shouldn't be possible to hit upon some hiding place within half a mile of the city, and on a stormy night, for instance, lug away precious metal enough to make ourselves rich."

"That and more can be done if one has patience and discretion."

"Now we're where there's little doubt about gettin' home you may rap at me as often as you please," Jake said with a hearty laugh. "I admit having acted like a fool; but so long as nothing serious came of it, except the cut on my own cheek, it isn't a hanging matter."

"I haven't a relative in this world," Mr. Walters continued, "and now the Sea Dream has gone down would be obliged to look around for a job, therefore if you'll accept me as a comrade I'll stay here instead of going back to the states."

"Do you really mean to enter upon such a wild venture?" Mr. Emery asked in surprise.

"Most certainly. What is to prevent?"

"Nothing that I know of; but it seems little less than suicide to go there after the Indians have been so thoroughly aroused."

"We shall not make the attempt for several months, perhaps a year," Cummings added.

"Where would you propose to stop? Here?"

"How far do you intend to go in this schooner?"

"To the nearest port where we can find a steamer bound for the United States."

"That is Progresso, and if you have no objections Poyor and I will accompany you there. We need some supplies from Merida, and if Mr. Walters is of the same mind when we arrive I shall be more than pleased to have him go with us."

"The vessel is at your disposal. We will land you at any point, and I yet have sufficient money with me to pay Walters' wages and make him a slight advance if he needs it."

"Very little will be required if he joins Poyor and myself. The cost of living in this country is small, for nature provides bountifully."

The captain of the schooner, a full-blooded negro, was told to head his craft for Progresso as soon as the wind should spring up again, and then Mr. Emery asked many questions concerning the city the boys had seen, while their answers only made the sailing master more eager to remain with Cummings.

"This is hardly fair," Neal finally said. "All the time we have been telling you of our adventures, and not one word have we heard regarding your movements. I would like to know where the three boats we out-sailed went to on the night after leaving the yacht, and where this schooner was found?"

"It is not a long story," Mr. Emery replied. "When you disappeared in the darkness we continued on the same course, and succeeded in keeping the three boats well together. At sunrise your craft was not in sight. We held on all that day and the next, finally arriving at Cozumel where we stayed three days in the hope you would appear. Then this schooner touched at the island, and I chartered her to search for you. We have been cruising up and down the coast ever since, for it seemed positive your boat reached the land in this immediate vicinity."

"How long would you have stayed here?"

"Not many days more, for we had begun to believe you were picked up by a vessel. Knowing Jake could handle a small craft better, perhaps than any other member of the crew, and also that she was the most seaworthy of the four tenders, it did not seem reasonable she had foundered while the others went through in safety."

"Then we came out just in time."

"Yes, for I had no idea you could be so far up this way, and we should have left the locality as soon as the wind would permit."

Jake wanted to ask the sailing master how it happened that he had made such a mistake in his reckoning; but it was a delicate question, and he thought it best to wait until Mr. Walters had left them, when Neal's father could probably give the desired explanation.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

HOMeward BOUND.

One can readily fancy what a feeling of perfect content had come over the boys after finding themselves once more with nearly all the crew of the Sea Dream.

There was no longer anything to cause anxiety; the vengeful Indians had been left far behind, and the fear of an attack was among the things of the past.

"I used to think it would be mighty nice to go into some such place as we have just left," Neal said to Teddy, while the two were sitting under the awning aft, some distance from their companions; "but now we know what the reality is like, I've had enough."

"I suppose our story would sound pretty fair if it was put into a book; but whoever wrote it couldn't be all the time telling about how hungry and tired we were, how the mosquitoes and flies nearly ate us up, how thoroughly we were frightened the greater portion of the time, nor how disagreeable it is to be where there's precious little chance for a fellow to keep clean."

"That is why adventures seem so nice when you read about them, for all the trifling things which serve to make a person uncomfortable in both body and mind are omitted."

"Yes," Teddy said very emphatically, "one day would be enough for any fellow I know, and the idea of going where there is likely to be plenty of chance for adventure will never again have any fascination for me."

In this strain the boys talked until dinner was served on deck, which was not a particularly well cooked meal, after which the conversation became general.

The re-united party spoke chiefly of Mr. Walters' determination to remain with Cummings, and while listening to it Jake forgot all else save the wonderful sights he had seen in the famous city.

"I have a good mind to stay with you," he finally said. "The idea that I have been where silver could be had for the labor of carrying it away, and didn't get any, makes me angry with myself. Now that Mr. Walters has concluded to try his hand at it I believe I'll do the same thing."

Poyor looked up quickly, shook his head very decidedly, and Cummings said emphatically:

"Then it will be necessary for you to go alone; I've been there once with you, and it was only by the rarest good fortune that we succeeded in coming away alive, therefore I'm not disposed to try the same dangerous experiment again."

"I suppose you think I would make a fool of myself once more?"

"I am positive of it. When your opinion chanced to be at variance with ours you would go straight on without giving the slightest heed to the consequences. It is best for you to stay with the boys."

Jake had nothing more to say; but later in the day he told Neal and Teddy privately that he believed he would venture into the swamp alone.

"I could do it as well as Poyor can. They want to make out that it is a very dangerous venture."

"You thought the same on the night when that beautiful scar was presented, and also when you wandered away from the cave, unable to find your way back," Neal replied with a laugh.

Then Jake had a desperate fit of the sulks from which he did not recover until the schooner was standing up the coast under the influence of the strong night breeze.

The voyage to Progresso from this time on occupied but a few hours. The clumsy looking vessel proved to be a good sailor, and on the following afternoon she had dropped anchor in the harbor, twenty-four hours before the next steamer was advertised to leave.

There was yet plenty of chance to bid good-by to those who intended to remain behind, and the last moments were spent together rather than visit the quaint town, for no one could say whether they would meet again.

Jake made no further preparation to join the treasure seekers, and Neal felt positive that if they had allowed him to make one of the party his courage would have failed him at the last minute.

Not until a late hour in the night was there any attempt to break up the gathering. Each felt a certain repugnance to so doing, and if Mr. Emery had not finally insisted on retiring all might have remained under the awning until morning.

"It is good-by as well as good-night," Cummings said as he arose. "We do not care to stay here very long for fear some of the Chan Santa Cruz may recognize us, and by daybreak I propose to be on our way to Merida, from which point we shall return to the hut where we first saw the castaways."

"We can at least count on hearing from you," Mr. Emery said. "The boys will be eager to learn how your venture succeeded."

"It is not convenient to post a letter where a journey of fifty miles on foot is necessary to reach a mailing place; but you shall hear from us at the first favorable opportunity."

With Jake, Cummings and Poyor spent but little time; neither had any especial love for him after all that had happened; but with the boys the Indian was almost affectionate.

"If the gods will listen to Poyor's prayer your lives shall be free from clouds," he said gravely, and laying his hands on their heads he went through a certain ceremony as if blessing them, after which he did not speak again.

If good wishes were of any avail both Walters and Cummings should have succeeded in their attempt to carry away treasure from the Silver City; but whether they have yet been able to do so neither Neal nor Teddy know, for not a word has been heard from them since that parting in the harbor at Progresso.

The trip home was as uneventful as is usually the case when one travels on a steam vessel, and at about the time when the Sea Dream should have arrived the castaways landed in New York before the news of the yacht's destruction had been learned.

As a consequence neither Teddy's parents nor Neal's mother had been anxious concerning them, and the home coming was a very tame affair, as compared with what both had been through.

Even at this late day the boys are speculating as to whether the white men and the Indian ever succeeded in their desires, and both believe the news will soon come that Cummings has been

able to read the inscriptions on the monuments at Copan by the aid of his researches in the Silver City.

THE END.

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THE SEARCH FOR THE SILVER CITY: A TALE OF ADVENTURE IN YUCATAN ***

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