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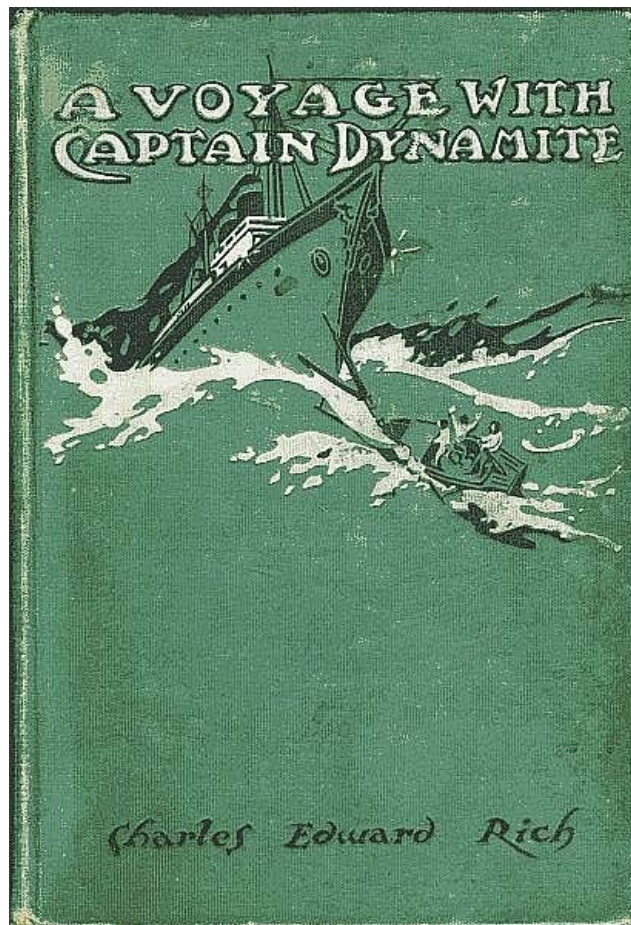
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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK A VOYAGE WITH CAPTAIN DYNAMITE ***





Suddenly he half rose in the tossing boat and shouted
to the rowers (Page 13)

A VOYAGE WITH CAPTAIN DYNAMITE

BY

CHARLES EDWARD RICH



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A VOYAGE WITH CAPTAIN DYNAMITE

CHAPTER I

CAUGHT IN A GALE

"Let go the jib halliards, Mason. Lay out there, Bert, and get in that slack sail. It's blowing a bit. Gee, see that bank of wind coming up."

The little pleasure boat careened and took aboard a few barrels of water as she faced a sudden puff of wind that almost put her on her beam ends. But she was a game little craft, and came back from the onslaught of the elements with a sturdiness that indicated strong timbers, and a build that was meant to cope with the sudden squalls that come out of a clear sky off the coast of Martha's Vineyard during the early autumn days.

"She's good for anything that you will get around these parts, and she is the fastest boat of her length in these waters."

This recommendation by Tom, the veteran skipper of the summer fleet, had been sufficient to complete the sale of the sloop to three enthusiastic boys. And the boat had made good her reputation and served her purpose well. During the two months that the boys had owned her, there had been few days when she had not been in commission, either cruising for blue fish, or skimming along the shores of the island in a pleasant, summer way, lazily passing the days away for the youngsters, who lolled contentedly on her deck.

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Since we shall follow the crew of the yacht through many adventures, let us make their acquaintance at once. At the helm stood Harry Hamilton, a boy of sixteen, strong of build and an athlete of renown within the circles of his school. Honest and straightforward in all his dealings, and with a cheery disposition, he commanded the respect and admiration of his fellows, and because of his natural characteristics, was usually looked upon as the leader in their sports. With his parents he was spending his vacation at their summer home at Cottage City.

With him were two schoolmates, Geoffrey Mason and Bertram Wilson, who were staying with him. Bertram was about Harry's age. Geoffrey, nicknamed "Midget" Mason, or the "Midget," was a year younger than his chums, and although small for his age, was strong and wiry. Light hearted and fun loving, he was always the life of any gathering of boys. He was one of Harry Hamilton's staunchest friends and admirers. For weeks the boys had enjoyed the sailing, bathing, fishing, golf, and other sports, but their particular diversion was sailing. Under the instruction of old Tom, the boys were soon able to handle alone the little boat that they had bought by clubbing together their resources.

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"Don't worry, mother, she's as safe as a scow," Harry would say, as he saw the expression of anxiety spread over his mother's face when he announced that they were off for a day's cruising.

On this day they had started early in the morning for a blue-fishing cruise, and all had gone well until the homeward voyage. The cockpit was full of big fish and the boys took much pleasure in anticipating their reception when they made fast to the pier. The little sloop was skimming along under full sail, when just off Edgartown a stiff puff of wind struck them.

Harry jammed the helm hard down and the boat responded gamely, coming quickly up into the wind. It was then that he called sharply to Mason to let go the jib halliards. The sail was so light and the wind slapped it from side to side with such angry vehemence that it would not run down on the stay. Harry dropped the helm, and holding it down with the pressure of his leg, seized the down haul and brought the jib, flapping and pounding, down to the bowsprit.

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"Get out there and furl that jib, Bert," he shouted. "We'll have to reef down the mainsail soon."

Bert climbed cautiously out of the cockpit and made his way along the slippery deck until he reached the bowsprit. Clinging to the mainmast, he steadied himself while he surveyed the thrashing sail, whose folds of canvas hung over and trailed in the water until, caught every now and then by the wind, it bellied out like a balloon. A wave bigger than the rest completely submerged the bowsprit as the boat plunged into the trough of the sea.

To furl the jib it was necessary to climb out on the lower stay, which acted as a foot rope, and it required the agility of a cat to hang on and drag the water-soaked, wind-thrashed sail onto the bowsprit and make it fast with canvas stops. For a moment Bert hesitated, but Harry waved to him eagerly to go on. Bert nodded in assent and began to climb gingerly out onto the stay. Harry held the boat up into the wind to aid his companion in getting in the wet and flapping sail.

They plunged into wave after wave, carrying Bert almost completely under, as a bather goes under a comber in the surf. But he hung onto the light spar with one hand while he dragged in the sail with the other. When his task was completed and he climbed inboard again, Bert was as wet as if he had been overboard.

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Then came the task of reefing the mainsail, which the boys accomplished successfully, though not without a hard struggle, for the wind increased in violence every moment. Holding the boat, which now carried only a few square yards of canvas, well up into the wind, they pounded along with the gunwale under the rushing water. She rode a little easier and the boys settled down for a breathing spell.

"There is nothing to be done now but to let her run," said Harry, as he gripped the helm hard to meet a sudden plunge into a head sea.

"But we are heading straight out to sea," said Bert, with a tone of worry in his voice.

"Can't be helped. This wind has not reached its limit yet, and I would not dare to try to take her in before it. It might take the mast out of her."

"It's getting dark, too," said Mason, nervously.

"That can't be helped either."

"Can't you ease her off for the Massachusetts shore?"

"I tell you, Bert, there is nothing to be done with safety but to keep her right up into the eye of the wind."

"But this blow may last for a day or two."

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"Now look here, Bert, you and I have been caught in one or two hard blows and we have pulled out all right together. If you think you know more about handling this boat than I do, I will turn the helm over to you and you can have your own way."

"Skipper," said Bert, with a return of his natural good humor, "I seek neither the honor nor the responsibility. Keep the helm and sail her on to whatever port this blooming gale may be heading us for. It looks to me as if we would make the coast of Ireland for our first stop."

"She is not making as much headway as she appears to be. I have got her jammed way up into the wind."

The sky was constantly growing darker and the wind seemed each moment to increase in fury. To add to the discomfort of the situation, it began to rain. The wind howled and shrieked and lashed the surface of the water into a white foam, lifting at times the crests from the waves and hurling the fine spray into the faces of the boys.

Darkness was falling rapidly, and away off in the distance behind them the lights of Cottage City flashed out as the cottagers began to light the lamps.

Harry sat silently at the helm, with his eyes fixed on the sail, now and then changing their course a little as the gusty wind veered a point or two.

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On they plunged into the teeth of the ever increasing gale. Soon complete darkness shut in around them and it was impossible to see beyond the bow of the boat, that at times rose high on the crest of a rushing wave and then swooped down to meet the next with a crash that sent a shiver through her timbers. But she was a sturdy little craft, and shaking herself like an animal, she would rise lightly to the top of the next wave, ready to fight it out to the end.

Mason and Bert perched grimly on the windward rail of the cockpit. Neither had spoken for a long time.

"Take a turn at the pump, Bert," said Harry, "I think she is taking water."

Bert started towards the pump, slipped on the fish that filled the cockpit and pitched head-foremost into the lee scuppers.

"Throw half a dozen of those fish into the cuddy and chuck the rest overboard," said Harry, who, notwithstanding their serious situation, could not refrain from laughing at Bert's frantic efforts to regain his feet among the slippery cargo. "We may need some of them for food before we get out of this, but the others are in the way."

Mason climbed down from his perch with care and helped to throw the fish overboard.

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"Pretty dangerous situation, skipper," said the imperturbable youngster, "when we have to sacrifice the cargo. However, over they go."

The little cabin, or cuddy, of the boat was so low that it was with difficulty that one could crawl into it. On either side the boys had fitted up small bunks that served for lounging during calm weather, and in the middle of this space, on the centreboard box, they had arranged a table on which stood a small oil stove. Here they frequently cooked their luncheons when cruising.

After the fish were disposed of, Bert manned the pump, and for five minutes was busy getting the water out of the hold.

"This blow has opened up some of her seams," said Harry, as Bert began to puff. "We shall have to work to keep the water out of her, boys."

"What about eating?" asked Mason, whose stomach never quailed, even in the face of danger.

"We'll go without eating for the present, young man, and you may think yourself very lucky if you get out of this even with an empty stomach."

"O, fudge, I can sneak down into the cuddy and fix up a nice mess of baked beans that will make your mouth water. There are three cans left. Besides, if we are going to drown, what's the use of drowning on empty stomachs?"

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"Don't you even put your head in that cuddy, Midget," said Harry, sharply. "If anything should happen to this boat you would be drowned like a rat in a trap, in there."

"Pish, pish and tush, tush, what's the use of having a skipper if he is going to upset his craft? Bert, it is high time the crew mutinied. What—"

At this moment a big wave struck the bow of the boat and swept her from stem to stern, filling Mason's open mouth with salt water.

"Skipper," he sputtered, as soon as he could speak, "I confidently believe you did that on purpose."

"This is not a time for your nonsense, Mason," said Harry, somewhat sternly.

As he spoke, a fiercer gust of wind, veering a point or two, caught the sloop amidships, and before Harry could let go the sheet or bring her closer up, she heeled over to the blast until the water poured in a torrent into the cockpit. Harry jammed down the helm and let go the mainsheet and she righted herself, trembled under the strain and plunged ahead once more into the seas.

It was mere chance that both Bert and Mason were not swept into the sea by the sudden careening of the boat. As it was, they were thrown into the cockpit, and when they climbed back in the darkness to their places on the weather rail, the Midget wore a much more serious expression on his naturally comical face.

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"You are right, Hal," he said, solemnly, "I guess it's no joke after all."

The rain was now coming down in vicious torrents that beat in the boys' faces, almost blinding them.

Suddenly in the blackness ahead there flashed a bright, green light like the eye of some monster of the deep. It appeared to be about as high above them as the mast head of the sloop. They each saw it at the same time, and each knew, with a thrill of horror, what it meant.

"Hold fast," shouted Harry, in tones that could just be heard above the howling of the gale, and at the same time he put the helm hard down. "She's almost on us."

It was too late. There was a crash and the sound of splintering timbers.

The big steamer cut the little craft in two as cleanly as with a knife.

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CHAPTER II

CARRIED AWAY TO SEA

As the big, black hull of the steamer crashed into the sail boat, a loud shout went up from her

deck. The note of fright in it penetrated even through the shrieks of the gale.

"Boat under our starboard bow, sir—we've run her down."

The warning shout and the cry that announced the disaster were punctuated only by a breath. Then followed a babel of orders and the quick clanging of signal bells in the engine room. The sudden churning of the screws in the angry waters told that the steamer's engines were reversed.

A man rushed out of the cabin and took a commanding place on the steamer's bridge.

"Where did she go down?" he shouted in the ear of the mate, who clung to the rail and peered back into the darkness.

"About a hundred feet aft, sir," the man answered, pointing into the blackness that enveloped the steamer.

"Lower the port lifeboat," shouted the newcomer on the scene to the men who were collected on the forward deck.

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He darted back toward the cabin as he spoke and the sound of creaking ropes told that his orders were being rapidly carried out.

"The boat will never live in this sea," shouted the mate.

The man turned at the cabin door with a scowl.

"You heard my orders," he said, sharply. "There are lives to be saved and it is not a question whether the boat will live. We will make her live. Call for volunteers if the men have any scruples about trusting themselves with me, but get the boat into the water at once. Every minute counts."

He was gone but a second and emerged from the cabin in a heavy suit of oilskins. He sprang nimbly down the companionway to the deck.

"Who goes with me in the boat?" he shouted to the assembled crew.

"I, sir, and I," cried the men in chorus, all anxious to be in the boat with their commander.

"You, and you, and you," he shouted, as he designated six men with a quick movement of his forefinger. The men tumbled over the side into the boat that was tossing like a cockle shell in the waves that threatened to dash her to pieces against the big steamer. The captain slipped over the side and took his place in the stern. It was a difficult task to get the boat safely off, but it was finally accomplished by skill and strength; and as she rode away from the side on the top of a nasty roller she was greeted with a cheer from the disappointed men who had been left behind and who longed to be with their commander in his perilous undertaking.

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As they rowed away from the steamer there was no sign in the darkness of the little boat they had run down, but the man at the tiller steered as determinedly as if he knew for just what point in the blackness he was headed. With his head bent slightly forward and his big body swaying with the rock and pitch of the lifeboat he kept his eyes fixed straight ahead.

Suddenly he half rose in the tossing boat and shouted to the rowers, who were bending their backs to the oars that every now and then would sink deep into a towering wave and the next instant swing viciously through the air as the boat rolled up on the crest of a big billow.

"Steady all," he called in a deep growl. "Now hold her."

The men dug their oars into the tumbling sea in an effort to bring the boat to a standstill, but the waves caught her and hurried her on. The sailors caught a fleeting glimpse in the darkness of the bottom of an upturned boat to which three boys were clinging. The man at the tiller swung the boat's head around as they swept by and, caught broadside on by a big wave, she rolled for a moment as if she was about to capsize. But the trained sailors held stoutly to the leeward oars, and the boat righted herself and rose like a cork on the wave and settled down so close to the wrecked yacht that the man in the stern leaned over and tossed the end of a rope beyond the heads of the boys.

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"Catch it and make fast to something," he cried, as the rope fell. "We cannot get any closer to you without smashing this boat. Jump!"

When Harry came to the surface after the collision he found that he was not hurt and, shaking his head like a dog, he prepared to make a fight for his life against the sea. His first thought was of his companions, but it was impossible to tell what their fate had been. It took all his strength to battle with the waves and keep himself afloat. Now and then, as he was carried helplessly to the crest of a big billow, he tried to peer into the darkness that surrounded him. He could see nothing but empty blackness. It was impossible to swim, had he known in which direction to head. All he could do was to husband his strength to keep on the surface and to breast and rise with each wave that passed under him.

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He knew it would be useless to shout, for his voice was weak from his exertions and could not be heard above the howling of the wind and the lash of the sea. He could faintly hear the commotion

on the steamer and see the lights from her portholes when she rode a high wave. But he had no hope that any boat that might be lowered could reach him in that sea.

Once he thought he heard faint cries for help near him, and as he sank into the trough of a sea, a black mass swept by him. He groped wildly to reach it and his hand touched a dangling rope. He seized it with the frenzy of a drowning man and the next instant had pulled himself alongside of what proved to be the wreck of the yacht. He dragged himself up and threw his arms over the keel and for the first time since he had been swept under the surface of the water drew a long breath. The touch of something solid in that angry sea put new life into him and he shouted feebly for very joy.

An answering cry, weak as his own, came from the other side of the wreck and he saw two heads just above the line of the keel. Bert and Mason had also been fortunate enough to reach the upturned half of the boat, and for a time at least all were saved from the maw of the sea.

Just then the lifeboat reached them and the rope cast by the captain's strong hand fell over their heads. Harry caught it and managed to make it fast to a ring bolt. Then without hesitation the boys one by one dropped off into the water and half swimming and half dragging themselves by the rope, made their way from the wreck to the lifeboat into which they were pulled by strong hands. As soon as they were dragged aboard, the boys sank to the bottom of the boat exhausted.

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"How many of you were there?" asked the captain, as the last of the three boys was pulled into the boat.

"Only three," answered Harry, weakly.

"All right, then," said the captain, with a tone of relief in his voice, "You are all accounted for. Pull men."

By the time they reached the steamer the boys had revived and were able to scramble up the rope-ladder that was lowered over the side. The captain was the last to go aboard. As he reached the deck he looked at the bedraggled youngsters with a good-natured smile.

"Better come below and get on some dry clothes," he said, as he nodded his head to the mate on the bridge.

The bells in the engine-room jingled and the big steamer began to forge ahead again into the storm as if nothing had happened to delay her voyage. The drenched boys gladly followed the captain into his cabin. He was a man of enormous build, big-boned and muscular. His head was covered with a mass of curling blond hair and his face was clean-shaven. As he threw off his oilskins and tossed them into a corner of the cabin the boys saw to their astonishment that he wore a fashionable suit of summer flannels and a handsome negligée shirt. His trousers, which were turned up at the bottom in the latest mode, were suspended by a fancy leather belt and his feet were encased in low tan shoes. He looked like the owner of a yacht off on a summer pleasure cruise, but to the eye of the veriest land lubber it would be at once apparent that the steamer which he commanded was not a yacht. He was about thirty years old and carried his size and weight with an ease that showed the training of an athlete.

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After he had thrown aside his oilskins, he began to rummage through a big chest and finally threw out a lot of old togs for the inspection of his involuntary guests.

"Good deal like a Baxter Street fit, I guess," he said, laughing. There was just a touch of brogue in his voice. "Never mind. Chuck off the wet ones. These will have to do until we can get the others dried in the engine-room. Roll up the trousers and sleeves and look out that I don't tread on the tails of your coats."

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The boys were glad to get out of their wet and chilled clothing and needed no second invitation. They were a funny looking trio when they had rigged themselves out in the captain's duds. The sleeves of the Midget's coat hung to the ground and his trousers' legs doubled up twice before he could walk. Harry was the tallest of the three and yet the captain's clothes hung on him like a sack on a pole.

"Now I'll bet you are hungry," said the captain as he surveyed the boys with a twinkle of amusement in his eyes. "What do you say to a cup of hot coffee and bite of biscuit? This ship is no hotel, as you will find before you get through with her. Nothing better in the cabin than in the fo'c'sel. But we have plenty of the sort we have and as often as we want it."

He stepped to the door of the cabin as he spoke and called to a man on deck:

"Send the cook aft."

"Aye, aye, sir," came an answering shout through the howling of the wind. Presently another man appeared in the doorway and stood respectfully awaiting orders.

"Cook, have these clothes taken to the engine-room to dry and then bring us a pot of coffee and some biscuits. And serve coffee to the men on watch—it is a nasty night."

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"Aye, aye, sir," answered the man cheerily. It was plain the men were glad to serve their captain.

In a short time the boys were sitting around the small table in the cabin eagerly discussing the coffee and hardtack as if it had been the most delicious repast.

A remark made by the captain had stuck in Harry's mind, and he took the first opportunity to put the question that was bothering him.

"Where are you going to land us, captain?"

The big man leaned back in his chair and laughed long and loud. The boys looked at him in surprise. It was not an agreeable laugh although there was no ill-humor in it.

"What in thunder does he see to laugh at?" whispered Bert to Harry in a disgusted tone.

"Wait, we shall find out in good time."

"We should like to be put ashore at Cottage City, if you please," continued Harry, ignoring the captain's merriment, "but if that is too much out of your way, Nantucket will do and we can take the boat home in the morning."

Again the captain went off into a paroxysm of laughter. The peals of loud guffaws grated on the ears of the anxious boys.

"He can't be a bad man at heart," whispered Mason to Harry, "or he wouldn't have taken so much trouble and run so much risk to pick us up after his steamer ran us down." [Pg 20]

"No, I don't understand it. I feel as if I were being kidnapped," said Bert.

Presently the captain's fit of humor passed and his face became serious again.

"Boys," he said, "I shall have to ask you to take things as they are and ask no questions. You are my guests. Do not worry."

"But, captain, we must get home," said Mason petulantly.

The man smiled at the speaker.

"I hope we will all get home sometime," he said, quietly.

"You speak as if there were some doubt about it," said Harry quickly.

"There is," answered the captain, slowly.

The boys looked at one another in dismay. What did it mean? Harry was the first to recover his composure.

"You surely intend to land somewhere," he said, half questioningly.

"Sure—if we are lucky."

"You mean that this storm is so bad that there is danger we may not weather it?"

Again the captain laughed his big laugh.

"We'll weather this all right. It's only a capful of wind for the old *Mariella*. She has ridden out many a storm that would make this one look like thirty cents." [Pg 21]

"Then if there is no danger from the weather, we demand that you land us at the nearest port."

Harry drew himself up and looked very important as he spoke. The captain only smiled indulgently.

"You might as well learn at the start, young gentlemen," he said quietly, "that there is no such word as *demand* recognized by Captain Dynamite."

"Sounds like a pirate name," whispered the irrepressible Midget, loud enough to be heard by the captain.

"I am something of a pirate," said the big man as if in reply. "Now I will be quite frank with you. I shall not make any port except that of my destination and that will be, if we have luck, in about six days from to-night. I am sorry that you will have to remain with me against your wishes, but you will admit that I am not responsible for your coming aboard. In fact, if you will pardon the allusion to the little accident back there, you are very lucky to be where you are and not tucked away in Davy Jones' locker. I shall consider you my guests and you may have the free run of the ship, but it will be impossible for you to leave it until we reach port. Make the best of the situation, boys. It has been forced on us both." [Pg 22]

Harry jumped up impulsively, and held out his hand to the big man across the table.

"Do not think we are ungrateful, sir. We know that we owe our lives to you and that you risked yours to save us from drowning. But you forget that we have folks ashore who will think we are drowned if we cannot get some word to them."

The big skipper jumped to his feet, grasped Harry's outstretched hand and shook it warmly.

"My boy," he said, "it is unfortunate and I regret it as much as you, but it cannot be helped. If we pull through this voyage all right, you will be able to get a message to your folks in the course of two weeks. Now, it is pretty well into the night and I must go on deck for the last watch, so you had better turn in."

As he spoke, the captain opened a door that led off the cabin and disclosed a room as large as an ordinary stateroom with two berths on each side.

"Here are four bunks. Turn in and sleep well. By the way, begin to feel any little qualms at the stomach yet?"

The steamer, while like a house in comparison with the small boat in which they had been tossed about, was still rolling and heaving in the heavy seas with which she was battling. But the boys were all good sailors and none of them felt anything like an attack of seasickness.

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Harry, whose anxiety for the worry and pain which his absence would cause those on shore, could not get off his mind the subject, and in a persistent way returned to it like a terrier to a bone.

"Well, captain," he said, "admitting that for some reason which you do not care to tell us, it is impossible for you to land until the end of your voyage; will it not be possible to hail some passing vessel and send a message back that we are safe and sound?"

The captain's face darkened, and a look such as the boys had not seen there before, spread over his countenance. Instinctively they fell back from him in his anger.

"I have told you that the situation cannot be remedied. Let us not discuss the matter further. You are my guests. Do not force me to make you my prisoners."

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CHAPTER III

"SHE'S LIKE A WARSHIP BELOW."

As the captain left the cabin the boys looked at one another without speaking, for some minutes.

"What do you make out of him?" asked Bert, who was the first to break the silence.

"Sure enough pirate" said the Midget, confidently. "Gee, did you see his face?"

"Yes, he evidently has a very bad temper and it will be well for us not to cross him too far," said Harry, thoughtfully; "but I don't propose to stay on this ship any longer than is necessary, whatever her mission, and I shall keep my eyes open for a chance to get ashore, or to signal some passing vessel."

"Well, we cannot do anything in the escape line to-night, so we might as well take his advice and turn in," said Bert, with a yawn.

An inspection of the stateroom showed a very comfortable room fitted with two narrow bunks on each side. They were neatly made up, and the linen was fine and clean. Thoroughly worn out, the boys prepared for bed and for the time cast their troubles aside.

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As they were about to jump into their bunks, a slight grating noise was heard. They all stopped and waited in silence. There was no further sound. It seemed to have come from the cabin beyond. After a second's thought, Harry stepped quickly out of the stateroom and to the door that led to the deck.

"We are no longer guests," he said, quietly, as he turned back into the stateroom and jumped into his bunk with resignation.

"What do you mean?" asked Bert, in a whisper.

"I mean that we are prisoners," answered Harry. "The door of the cabin is locked on the outside. That is the noise we heard. However, we can do nothing to-night, and as I am very tired and sleepy I am going to turn in."

"Say, Hal," said Mason, in an awed tone, "what are we up against?"

"Search me," replied Harry, in a sleepy voice. "We may be able to learn something in the morning. Let's go to sleep now. We may need all our wits by and by."

Notwithstanding the mystery of their situation the boys were soon fast asleep, and when they awoke, the sun was streaming through the port holes of the cabin. The steamer seemed to be moving along on an even keel. Apparently they had ridden out the storm of the night before. Harry was the first to spring from his bunk. He hastened to the cabin, his first impulse being to try the door and see if they were still prisoners. He started with surprise when he reached the outer room. At the table in the centre sat the captain working at some maps and papers. He looked up pleasantly as Harry entered.

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"Good morning," he said cheerily, "did you sleep well after your ducking?"

"Perhaps we should have slept better if we had not been locked in," answered Harry, a little surprised at his own temerity.

The man laughed good-humoredly.

"Oh, that should not have disturbed you," he said. "You see we did not seem to understand each other very well last night when I left you. I think we shall do better to-day. Now what do you say to some breakfast? You have slept pretty late. It is twelve o'clock. There are your clothes. You all better tumble out and get dressed. I am hungry myself and just about to turn in. I have been on deck all night. The storm has passed, and we are making very good time on our voyage, you will be glad to hear, no doubt."

All the temper of the night before had disappeared, and the captain was again the big, bluff, good-natured man that had first impressed the boys. There was nothing to do but to follow his advice and watch for developments, and Harry, putting aside any thought of further prying into the affairs of the mysterious ship and her strange skipper for the present, returned to the stateroom and began to dress. The captain went to the door of the cabin and called. Again the same man answered with a respectful salute.

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"Tell the cook to serve breakfast."

"Aye, aye, sir."

These words seemed to be the extent of the man's vocabulary. The boys soon learned that it was the only spoken formula of the ship's crew unless in reply to questions, which were rarely asked. The captain's words were commands. He ruled the entire ship's company with a power as absolute as that of a monarch. But the yoke did not seem to gall. The men's obedience was the sort that is given to one loved and honored.

By the time the boys had gotten into their clothes, which had been carefully dried and pressed, they found that breakfast had been spread in the cabin. It was as tempting as a meal at home. The hard tack of the night before had been replaced by an omelet, hot biscuits, fried potatoes, and a steaming pot of coffee, which from previous experience the boys knew to be good. The savory odor of the food appealed strongly to their appetites, and for the moment they forgot everything except that they were very hungry and that there were good things to eat at hand. The captain took his place smilingly at the head of the table, and the Midget whispered to Harry:

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"He's not such a bad sort, after all. I wonder what kind of a pirate he is, anyway."

"Sit down, boys, and buckle to. Hard tack does not stay long by you, but I told you last night I only eat what I give my men so that I could offer you nothing better then. I hope you will enjoy your breakfast. I have a very good cook. Used to sub at the Waldorf but got into a little trouble on shore and is trying the sea. Stuck his mate under the rib with a carving knife and is taking a voyage with me for the benefit of his health."

"Aren't you afraid he might do the same to you some time if he lost his temper?" asked Mason, looking at the captain with his eyes as big as saucers. He did not like the idea of sailing with a desperado of that sort.

"Oh, no," answered the big man, carelessly; "I should stick first, you know, and then it was in self defense that the blow was struck. Let me give you some of this omelet. You will find it as good as any you could get at home."

The boys looked at the strange man in wonder. They could not make out his character. But they ate their breakfast with a relish just the same, and the captain entertained them with tales of the sea that made them alternately laugh at his drollery or wonder at his daring. Not that he ever brought himself into the stories, but the boys knew that he was the hero of the adventures which he related, because they felt that he would have acted in just the way his heroes did. There was a strange air about the man that attracted them to him. They felt that he would be a firm friend and an unrelenting enemy. They liked to be with him, liked to hear him talk, liked to see him smile, but they all felt that they should dread to incur his anger.

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He was rough and unpolished, but he dressed like a dandy. He had evidently changed his clothing since coming off watch, for he wore at breakfast another flannel suit and low, patent leather shoes. His trousers were carefully creased and turned up. He resembled more, in appearance, a prosperous broker than the captain of a steamer whose mysterious character made him seem all the more out of place aboard. When they had finished breakfast he took a gold cigarette case from his pocket, and offered it to the boys.

"Smoke?" he asked, carelessly.

The boys declined with thanks. The captain stretched himself and yawned as he rose from the table.

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"Now, young gentlemen," he said, "I am going to turn in. Make yourselves at home. I take it that I have your word that you will not concern yourselves with that which does not concern you."

"That depends upon how you construe the remark," said Harry, promptly. "I should prefer to remain a prisoner in this cabin than not to use my senses to my own advantage. For one, captain, I shall not promise except that I will not do anything that might be considered prying into your affairs. We feel sufficiently under obligations to you to prevent us from taking advantage of your hospitality. It might be proper for me to tell you, though, that I shall make every effort to get off your ship. Not that I object to your company, but because we all feel that we owe it to the folks at home."

The captain laughed. He did not seem at all annoyed at Harry's frank statement.

"Begorra, I like you for your honesty. Go on deck and get the air. You will find that I have not much to fear in the way of losing your company just at present. Believe me, though, youngsters"—here he became serious again—"if I could do so—with—what shall I say—with safety, I should be only too glad to put you ashore and to relieve the anxiety of those who are waiting for you. But in this matter I must be the judge, for there are more persons involved and more interests at stake in the voyage of the *Mariella* than you can conceive. But I will put no restrictions on you. Go on deck and amuse yourselves as well as you can and make the best of the situation. Before we part company you will understand my position better. Wait, I will introduce you to the mate."

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He stepped to the cabin door and called:

"Suarez."

"Aye, aye, sir," came the prompt response, and a small man appeared in the doorway.

"Suarez," said the captain, "these are the young gentlemen we picked out of the sea last night. They are rather unwilling voyagers, for which they cannot be blamed. Take them on deck and let them have the run of the ship."

The mate looked up quickly at the captain in a questioning manner, as if he would like to protest, if he dared. The captain smiled.

"The run of the ship, Suarez," he repeated, as if in answer to the unspoken protest.

Again the mate saluted, and turned gravely to the deck, followed by the boys. He was a small, swarthy man, in great contrast to the captain. He looked like a Spaniard. His hair was black and he wore a mustache and goatee, and his small, black eyes were as alert as a cat's and seemed to take in everything at once in all parts of the ship. His expression was one of keen shrewdness, but there was a look of care and anxiety that softened it. His actions and manner were those of a man who does not wish to attract attention. As they reached the deck he turned to the boys, and bowing, said with a slight foreign accent:

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"Good morning, young gentlemen. I hope you rested well after your unfortunate experience. The captain says you are to have the run of the ship. Make yourselves at home, and if there is anything that I can do to add to your pleasure, pray call upon me without reserve."

His voice was soft, and he spoke with a great politeness of manner.

"He's too smooth," whispered Mason. "He will bear watching."

The mate did not seem inclined to further conversation. He bowed again, waved his hand as if to indicate that the ship was theirs, and turned and walked to the bridge.

The boys looked around them. There was nothing to be seen but an expanse of water. There was not a sign of land or a vessel. The storm of the night before had subsided, except that the waves were still running high under a brightly shining sun. Harry put his hand to his eyes to shade them, and scanned the horizon in every direction, but there was not even a speck to be seen.

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"The captain was right when he said there was not much danger of losing our company," he said, as he finished his observation.

"Unless we jump over and swim for it."

"What would we swim for?"

"I am very well satisfied to keep the planks under my feet and wait for something to turn up."

"Me, too," piped the Midget. "Let's make a round of the ship."

The steamer was comparatively small. In the darkness of the night and the storm, and viewed from the little sloop, she had looked like an ocean liner as she suddenly came upon them. Everything about her was spick and span. The decks were as clean as holy stone and water could make them, and all the brasswork shone brightly in the sun. The decks seemed strangely deserted. Suarez, the mate, paced the bridge stolidly. On the forward deck two men were on lookout. In the pilot-house a sailor stood at the wheel, while behind him stood a man whose eyes roamed constantly from the compass to the horizon.

The boys walked to the gunwale and looked over at the broad expanse of sea. For some time no one spoke. Each was thinking of the worry and anxiety that those at home were suffering.

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"Say, Hal," said Bert, finally, "what do you make out of this craft? Of course it is out of the question to think of a pirate in these days, but there is certainly some mystery about this steamer and her captain."

"Did you notice he said that if he could do so with safety he would put us ashore? What does that word 'safety' mean? There is no danger from the elements, he admits. What other danger threatens him if he goes ashore? There is some mystery here and as we have become a part of it it is up to us to find out what it is."

"Yes, but how?"

"By keeping our eyes and ears open is all I can suggest now."

"Let's go forward and take a look around."

The boys strolled along the deck that narrowed into a passage about three feet wide as they reached the forward house, which apparently contained the petty officers' rooms. In the centre was the door that opened into the engine-room. Only the upper works of the big engines were visible. The boys stopped. A man, evidently the engineer, or one of his assistants, sat on a leather-covered seat facing the levers and indicators. He looked up for a moment from the paper he was reading, and nodded to the boys with a smile, and then returned to his reading without a word.

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"Fine morning, sir, after the storm," said Bert.

The man nodded again without raising his eyes from his paper.

"Cheery lot of conversationalists," said Bert, in disgust, as they moved on.

At the forward end of the house was the galley. As they reached this a black, woolly head popped out of the open half-door. The negro grinned widely and quickly drew back his head.

"Good morning, Sambo," said the persistent Bert.

The negro bobbed his head, and grinned still more broadly, but did not speak a word.

"All lost their tongues," said Bert.

Just forward of the deck house a small hatch stood open. It led to a narrow iron ladder that ran almost perpendicularly down into the dark depths below. The boys peered into the blackness without being able to distinguish anything.

"I am going down," said Harry, after a moment's pause.

He stepped over the edge and placing his foot on the first rung of the ladder, began to descend with great caution. The others watched him anxiously until he disappeared in the darkness. They waited at the hatch for a long time before he reappeared. When he did he climbed out with a serious face and drew his companions away to the other side of the steamer's deck.

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His expression indicated that he had discovered something of more than ordinary interest.

"What is it?" whispered Bert, when they were out of range of the galley and engine-room.

Harry leaned toward his companions impressively as he answered in an awed tone:

"Say, fellows, she's a regular warship down below."

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CHAPTER IV

A LESSON IN PATRIOTISM

The boys huddled together at an obscure part of the deck and Harry described to them what he had seen below decks.

"There are two eight pounders and two rapid fire guns with their noses poked against port holes that can be opened at a moment's notice. And besides these, there is an arsenal of small arms like rifles, pistols, swords, and cutlasses. Everything seems to be in apple pie order and all ready for use. If we were living in the days of the old pirate ships, I should say that we were likely to fly the black flag at any moment."

"What do you make of it, Hal?" asked Bert.

"I tell you I cannot make anything of it. It is beyond me. The only thing we can do is to keep our weather eyes open and watch for developments. It is certainly a ship of mystery and the captain does not apparently propose to enlighten us as to her character. But he seems to be an honest man, and I think we are perfectly safe in leaving all to him, and I believe that sometime we shall know what we are up against. In the meantime, however, as I warned him, I shall make every effort to get off the ship, or to notify some passing craft that we are on board safe and sound, so that word may be carried to those on shore. They must believe that we are drowned by this time, particularly if they have picked up the wreck of the yacht."

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"Let's go aft and take a look over the cabin while the captain is asleep. All's fair in love and war, you know, and we are certainly entitled to find out all we can about our surroundings, particularly in view of Hal's investigations below."

The boys strolled leisurely aft, taking care not to arouse the suspicions of any one about the decks. They entered the cabin. All was still. The sun shone brightly through the port holes and lay in a wide beam on the big map that the captain had been studying when the boys turned out of bed.

"Let's have a look at this," said Bert, quickly approaching the table as he spoke. "It may tell us something of our destination."

The boys gathered eagerly around.

The map was a hydrographic chart of the Caribbean Sea. Cuba and Porto Rico appeared on a large scale. The boys studied it in silence and finally Mason shook his head in despair.

"That does not tell much," he said. "We may be going to Cuba or Porto Rico, but if we are, why all this secrecy and those firearms?" [Pg 39]

"They may fit in together more closely than you think," said Harry, who had been studying the map thoughtfully.

"What do you mean?" asked Bert.

"I do not mean anything yet. Let us wait. Speculation and guessing will not solve this mystery."

"Look here," said the Midget, who had been browsing around the cabin. He had lifted one of the cushions from a settee and disclosed beneath a locker which contained a number of flags of different colors and shapes.

"What are those?" asked the boys in chorus.

"They are signal flags. Now let's find the code and then we can signal some passing ship."

"Here's the code," announced Harry, who, as soon as Mason had spoken had gone to a little book shelf on the wall of the cabin. "But how are we to get the flags up without attracting attention?"

"Easy. We will make up our signal and then take the flags necessary to show it and conceal them where we can get them at any moment. Then when we sight a vessel we can bend them onto the halliards and have them aloft before anyone can interfere. It would be a minute or two before they could haul them down, even if they discovered them at once, and in that time it is likely that the other ship would have read them. Anyway, it is worth trying." [Pg 40]

"I think you are right," said Harry. "Nothing venture, nothing have. Let's make the signal."

He took the code book from the shelf and opened it on the table.

"In the first place, it is necessary to know what you want to say before you pick out your flags. Now what shall the message be?"

"Say we have been kidnapped by a pirate ship and want assistance," suggested the Midget, wisely.

"Nonsense," replied Bert, "we don't want to say anything about the ship. We have nothing against her, nor her captain. Didn't they save our lives? All that we want is to be taken off and if that is not possible to have word sent home that we are all right, and then we can see the thing out comfortably. In fact, I for one, would much prefer staying aboard if it were possible to get word ashore. We do not know what interesting adventures may be in store for us aboard this strange craft."

"Well, anyway, let's frame a message."

"It's got to be short, for we cannot use any more flags than is absolutely necessary, as we may be discovered before we can get them up. How's this: 'Report Hamilton, Mason, and Wilson picked up from wrecked yacht off Cottage City by steamer *Mariella*. All well.'" [Pg 41]

"Fine," said Mason. "Hal, your massive intellect astonishes me more and more each day."

After some discussion, the boys selected the proper flags and laid them to one side. The problem of getting them aloft then presented itself.

"There must be halliards already bent for the use of signals," said Harry. "I will go out on deck and have a quiet look for them."

He returned shortly from his inspection.

"Everything is ready for instant use," he reported, "but we must have the flags bent onto a separate piece of rope so that all we shall have to do is to fasten the rope to the halliards and send the flags aloft. And then we must also stow the flags somewhere where we can get at them easily as soon as we see another vessel."

"Leave that to me, captain," said Mason, saluting with a grin. "Right under my bunk is a place. All you fellows watch where I put them, so that if I am not with you when the ship comes along you can do the trick. No telling when a man of my fiery temper may be put in irons on a ship like this."

The boys carefully stowed away the flags after they had bent them in their proper order to a spare piece of rope which Mason picked up on deck. They now felt that they had done as much as lay within their power to relieve the anxiety of the folks at home, and all that remained was to keep a sharp lookout for a passing ship. They arranged watches so that one of them should be on deck during all of the daylight hours, and all hands were to keep their eyes open through the port holes and from such other points of vantage as they could take at all times when it was light [Pg 42]

enough to see a passing ship.

This satisfactorily off their minds, the boys took more interest in a survey of their prison ship, for so they had begun to look upon her, although each one of them had made up his mind that he would like to see the adventure out.

That night before dinner they met the captain again in the cabin. The maps were still lying on the table.

"Do you see this big island here, boys?" he asked. "It looks big on the map, but it is a very small spot on the face of the earth, and yet its people have suffered more misery, injustice, and oppression than the world will ever know."

"Discontented people always quarrelling with their government are usually unhappy. They bring most of their misery on themselves."

Harry spoke carelessly. He was not much interested in the wrongs of Cuba. He was surprised to see the captain's eyes flash again with that fierce fire that had marked them when he first defied him. [Pg 43]

"Discontented, is it," almost shouted the captain. "And do you know why, boy?"

"I am sure I do not, Captain Dynamite, except that it is apparently born in them."

"Yes, that's the way most of the world, ignorant of poor Cuba's trials, looks at the matter. Statesmen have investigated and reported back to the halls of Congress and Cuba and her wrongs have been laid away in the dusty archives."

"Look," he said, pointing again at the map, and involuntarily the boys gathered closer around him and peered at the parchment. "That land, as God made it, was the fairest that the eye ever looked upon."

Captain Dynamite paused for a moment and seemed to grow more calm. He seated himself with his elbows on the table behind him and deftly rolled a cigarette with one hand. The boys, interested now because of his intense feeling, waited for him to continue.

"Youngsters," he said finally, "let me give you a little piece of history of these 'discontented' folks and perhaps you will regard their condition with different eyes and hearts. Your text-books at school have undoubtedly told you that Spanish rule in Cuba began in 1511, when Diego Valesquez subjugated the peaceful natives, and the Spanish methods of conquest made a record that lives to this day. [Pg 44]

"See this island here," said the captain, pointing to Hayti. "At that time almost uninhabited, its wild shores and hidden inlets served as places of concealment for buccaneers. These pirates of the Spanish Main not alone indulged in the adventurous pastime of smuggling, but they attacked and plundered Spanish trading ships and even made forceful expeditions upon land, ravaging cities and towns. They were encouraged in their depredations by other nations unfriendly to Spain. Henry Morgan, one of these buccaneers, who was commissioned as a privateer, was knighted by England in 1671 because of his prowess as a legalized pirate.

"In 1762, Havana was besieged by the English and the Seven Years War began. The British were successful and under English rule the ports of Cuba were opened to free trade and an era of progress was inaugurated. But it was short lived, and in 1763 Cuba fell again into the hands of Spain, England trading the island for Florida. The two first governors under the new Spanish régime were liberal, just, and progressive. They were Luis de Las Casas, appointed in 1790, and the Count of Santa Clara, who succeeded him in 1796. [Pg 45]

"It was about 1810 that the general discontent of the colonist with the tyrannical home government resulted in the formation of political societies whose purpose was to plan insurrections in the hope of wresting the island from Spanish rule, as did Buenos Ayres, Venezuela, and Peru. There was no open revolt for ten years, when the revolutionary leaders proclaimed a governing law, and after two years of turmoil the king yielded to their demands. But as Spain's promises were made only to be broken, other insurrections soon sprang up among the colonists. One of the most important revolutionary movements of those days was led by Narciso Lopez, a Venezuelan. This was in 1848. He was unsuccessful, but escaped with many of his followers to New York, where he found many sympathizers and practical aid. The United States government frustrated his attempt in 1849 to return to Cuba with a small invading force. A year later he reached the island with six hundred men, but was forced to take to his ship again, and with a Spanish gunboat close astern, made Key West and disbanded the expedition.

"By this time the Lopez revolution had gained much fame and many sympathizers in the United States who, while they were not inspired with the patriotic sentiment that stirred him, were strong admirers of his courage and determination. With a small band of four hundred and fifty men, and with Colonel Crittenden, of Kentucky, a West Pointer who won his title in the Mexican War, as second in command, Lopez started for Cuba from New Orleans the next year. On landing, Crittenden and one hundred and fifty men remained near the shore to guard the supplies, while Lopez, with the rest of the little invading army, marched inland. Both parties were discovered by the Spaniards, surrounded, and after a desperate resistance, completely wiped out." [Pg 46]

"Do you mean that Lopez and Crittenden were both killed?" asked Bert, who had listened to the

captain's recital with intense interest.

"Lopez and Crittenden and every man jack of the expedition," replied the captain, solemnly.

"Who was the next to try it?" asked Harry, whose eyes shone with excitement.

"Up to this time the grievances that inspired the Cuban colonists to revolt were mostly of a political character, based upon that bone of contention that inspired your own revolution against the British—taxation without representation. The little island to-day pays to Spain every year over \$20,000,000 in revenue. In 1868, a lawyer named Cespedes declared independence of Spanish rule on a little plantation at Yara. He had back of him only one hundred and twenty-eight men, but in a few weeks after his declaration ten thousand men gathered under his leadership. A republican form of government was established, with Cespedes at its head. General Quesada commanded the poorly equipped but determined and patriotic army. Until 1878 the insurgents held the field with about fifty thousand men. They constantly met and vanquished the Spanish forces under the Count of Valmaseda, but the resources of the Spaniards were greater, and finally the Cubans were disintegrated, but still maintained a guerilla warfare, constantly harassing and defeating the Spanish forces sent against them. But neither side made any progress toward the end and at the end of the year both were ready for a compromise, which resulted in the treaty of El Zanjon. At this time the Spaniards were commanded by General Campos, and the insurgents by Gen. Maximo Gomez—that grand old warrior who still holds the field for Cuba against the forces of Spain—I kiss his hand."

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Captain Dynamite, as he mentioned the name of Gomez, rose to his feet, bowed solemnly and reverentially, and lifted to his lips an imaginary hand.

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"Fighting, still fighting for Cuba," he whispered as he resumed his seat. After a moment's pause he shook himself as if awakening from a dream and continued his narrative.

"That treaty promised Cuba representation in the Spanish Cortes, or congress, but while it was kept in the letter it was broken in spirit. The government obtained control of the polls and the deputies, or representatives elected were always government tools or sympathizers. So poor Cuba, after her long struggle, was no better off than before, and in 1894 José Marti, at the head of a new insurrection, set sail from New York with three ships, men, and munitions of war. But the United States authorities stopped them. Marti then joined Gomez in Cuba and was killed in a skirmish. He was succeeded in command by General Gomez, who still fights on with a hungry, ill-clad handful of men against the best of Spain's army. One hundred and forty-five thousand men have been sent against him but he still fights; he still lives to fight, although he is over seventy-five years old.

"I have told you of the dogged determination, the splendid patriotism of the men who are fighting to lift the yoke of Spain from poor Cuba. Surely there must be something more than mere political wrongs to inspire such a spirit. You have heard of Weyler—'Butcher Weyler' they call him, and he is proud of the title. Frightened by the courage and resistance of the insurgent army, Spain looked about for a man capable of crushing the indomitable spirit of the rebels. In Weyler she thought she had found the man. He arrived in Havana in 1896. Among his first acts looking to the pacification of Cuba was his order of concentration. You have heard perhaps of the wretched 'reconcentrados?' They are the product of Weyler's order. Under this policy nearly a million peaceful Cubans, farmers and dwellers in the country, have been driven from their homes into nearby cities and their deserted houses burned to the ground. These people are mostly women and children and old men—non-combatants. In this way Weyler sought to stop the aid that was being given to the insurgents in the field. From the 'pacificos,' as they are known the rebels could at any time secure food, clothing, and shelter.

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"Concentrated in the towns, without food or money to buy it, and many without clothing, these reconcentrados quickly became the victims of famine and disease. A part of Weyler's order of concentration provided for the gifts of ground to cultivate, and the Spaniard's answer to the charge of inhumanity is a shrug of the shoulders and the reply that the reconcentrados starve because they are too lazy to work. 'We give them the land,' he says, 'and they will not till it.' True, they gave them land, but no seed to sow and no tools to reap and they have no money to buy them. Everything they owned is in the heap of ashes that marks the spot where the little thatched cottage once stood. Thousands and thousands of human beings are herded together like cattle, with no means to feed themselves, and, unlike cattle, with no one to feed them.

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"Why, I have seen—I have been told by those who have seen it—of little children with the skin drawn like parchment over their bodies. And boys, when you think that among these poor victim's of Spain's pacification policy are the wives and children, sisters and sweethearts of the struggling insurgents in the field, is it any wonder that the spirit of independence will not down in the Pearl of the Antilles?"

That the captain was a man of feeling and education there could be no further doubt in the minds of the captive boys. That he should have taken the trouble to thus enlighten them on the subject of Cuba's wrongs was a compliment to their understanding which was not lost.

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CHAPTER V

SENDING THE MESSAGE

The captain no longer interfered in any way with the actions of his young guests. They were entirely free to do as they pleased on the ship, and apparently were under no surveillance. As they came on deck on the fourth morning at sea, the day was beautifully bright and clear. The sky was taking on that peculiar blue that is seen only in the lower latitudes. The atmosphere seemed to have thinned, and the horizon to have moved away a mile or two. The sea was as smooth as glass and the steamer was ploughing her way along at the rate of fifteen knots (miles) an hour. As usual, the decks were deserted, with the exception of the man at the wheel and the two lookouts who were always on post, day and night, no matter how clear the day, or how unnecessary the double watch might seem.

It was the custom of the boys in the morning to distribute themselves around the deck so that they could take in all the points of the compass, and for a time each would study the horizon with careful scrutiny, in the hope of sighting some vessel to which they might signal. Everything had been carefully arranged so that as soon as a ship of any sort was seen, word was to be passed quietly from one to another without attracting the attention of anyone on deck, and then each knew his duty.

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Hamilton was the custodian of the flags. On him rested the responsibility of displaying the signal so that the passing ship might read the message.

The boys had studied the compass and the maps that were each day displayed in the captain's cabin, and they knew that they were headed south. Although that gave them little or no clew to their ultimate destination, they felt some comfort in the knowledge that the shore of America lay to the starboard, and away off somewhere beyond the dreary horizon was the country they all loved, and where their anxious friends and families were awaiting some word from them.

Bert's post was a little forward of the beam on the starboard side. As he took his place this morning, his heart was heavy. He was thoroughly tired of the monotony of the voyage, and the mystery that enveloped the ship was beginning to wear upon him. For days now they had sailed without seeing anything but a dreary expanse of water on every side, unbroken by anything that was human. Porpoises played around the bows of the steamer, and gulls shrieked as they swooped above her. Now and then a fish leaped out of the water as the steamer ploughed through the waves.

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Bert leaned on the rail with his chin resting in his hands and his eyes fixed upon the blank before him. Suddenly he raised his head, and an expression of surprise crept into his face. He turned and looked stealthily around him. Harry was slowly walking up and down the main deck just aft of the fo'c'sle where the lookouts were stolidly pacing.

Bert again turned his eyes toward the horizon. What appeared like a thread in comparison with the vastness of space around them wavered above a small black speck. Bert watched it with eager eyes. At this moment Harry stopped in his walk as he approached the starboard side, and placing his arms on the rail looked out over the sea in the direction of the black thread. Then the boys turned to one another and a questioning glance passed between them. Little by little they moved in toward one another until they met.

Harry looked carefully around him before he whispered:

"Bert, I think it is a steamer."

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"I'm sure of it, Hal. Have you got the signals ready?"

"I can get them in a minute, but she is too far away yet."

"You know passing vessels always study one another with a glass."

"But I do not believe she could make out our signals even with a glass, yet."

At this moment one of the men on lookout turned and looked up at the second mate, who silently paced the bridge.

"Steamer off the starboard bow, sir," he said, quietly.

"Keep closer watch. I've seen her," replied the mate, gruffly.

"Aye, aye, sir," came the usual response, without a change in tone.

Involuntarily the boys turned their eyes aft to the captain's cabin. As they did so the door opened gently and the natty, flannel-garbed figure of the commander moved out onto the deck and to the bridge. He carried a glass in his hand, which he raised to his eyes after he had spoken a few words to the mate.

"I thought so," said Bert, dolefully. "You can't lose him."

"Never mind," said Harry, "if she comes near enough I will get the signals up before he can stop me, and we will have to take chances on their being read before he can get them down."

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"But aren't you afraid of what he may do?" asked Bert, in some fear.

"What can he do?"

"He seems to be capable of doing a whole lot that might be unpleasant. For instance, he might put you in irons and chuck you down in the hold."

"I do not think he would dare do that. But anyway, I am going to take the chance. We owe it to the folks at home."

"You are right there, Hal. I'm with you whatever comes of it."

"Oh, he's not a cannibal, or a pirate. He might be pretty mad and perhaps use us a bit rough at first, but I think he would laugh at it afterward, when he recovered his temper."

"Gee, but think of all the unpleasant things that might happen before he decided that it was time to laugh."

Harry smiled at the mournful face of his chum, and turned again to look at the speck in the distance. Seemingly, it had grown larger. The captain, who had finished his scrutiny, looked down at them and smiled and waved his hand.

"Sleep well, lads?" he called to them pleasantly.

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They nodded sheepishly in reply.

"I can't help liking him," replied Bert.

"There is something big and honest about him like a Newfoundland dog," answered Harry. "I feel sort of mean about trying to trick him. He would be a good friend and a mighty bad enemy."

The captain took another look at the approaching vessel, spoke in a confidential tone to the mate, and again disappeared into his cabin.

"She's coming on," said Harry, with satisfaction. "Unless she changes her course, I will send up the signals in five minutes." He looked at his watch as he spoke. "Pshaw, I'm always forgetting that the salt water has somewhat interfered with the internal arrangements of this affair," he continued, laughing.

By this time the strange steamer was pretty well hull up and the boys could distinguish her masts and funnel as well as see what appeared to be flags fluttering in the breeze.

"In order that we shall not cause any suspicion, Bert," said Harry, presently, "you go and get the Midget and stroll forward. I do not need your help any more than to distract attention from me as much as possible."

Bert turned, and walking around the deck, joined Mason who, while he had heard the call of the lookout man and knew that there was a steamer in sight, had not deserted his post, although he was keen with anxiety when Bert reached him.

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"Where is she?" he asked, eagerly.

"She's off the starboard bow, but don't ask fool questions. Move up forward so that Hal can get a chance to have the flags up."

Although burning with a desire to watch the proceedings, the boys kept their faces steadfastly turned to the bow as Harry began in an unconcerned manner to work his way aft. He slowly climbed the companionway that led to the upper deck, and carelessly approached the mast to which the signal halliards were attached.

He stood there for a moment as if watching the oncoming steamer, but his eyes were scanning the decks and the bridge on which the second mate slowly paced to and fro. Then he turned his back to the mast and as he stood with his hands clasped behind him, he cast off the halliards from the cleat to which they were fastened. He was almost concealed from view by the big mast.

When he had loosened the ropes, he turned quickly, and taking the end of another rope from under his coat tied the two together. After one final peep around the mast he threw his coat open boldly, made several quick turns and unwound from his body the rope to which the signal flags were attached. Then with a strong pull he began to send them aloft rapidly.

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As the colors sped upward and broke into the wind, his heart almost stopped beating from excitement.

Now they were half way up to the masthead and no one had seen them. The second mate still paced the bridge with his back to him. He glanced at the captain's cabin. No one appeared from there.

"I shall get them up," he whispered to himself through his tightly shut teeth, "but will they be read?"

Now they were chock with the pulley block and he made the ends of the halliards fast to the cleat and stood back to view his work. It seemed scarcely possible that they should not be seen and read by the passing steamer which was now so close that he could almost make out her colors with the naked eye.

With a feeling of triumph he looked aloft at the flags that, aided by a friendly breeze and the motion of the steamer, were fluttering out straight from the masthead. As he dropped his eyes

from aloft he started back with a slight cry of fear and surprise.

The head of Suarez, the mate, appeared above an after companionway, his eyes flashing with anger. He rushed at the boy like an enraged animal, but Harry, determined to protect his signal as long as possible, stepped to the mast and took a capstan bar from its place at the base and stood defiantly awaiting the onslaught of the mate, who rushed upon him regardless of his threatening attitude. Before Harry knew what had happened the bar flew out of his hands, and he lay sprawling on the deck from a blow from the open hand of the mate.

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Suarez paid no further attention to him, but seizing the halliards hauled down the signal. The scuffling of feet and the fall of the heavy capstan bar caused the second mate to turn quickly, and at the same moment the captain's door opened and he stepped out on the deck. His face flushed with anger as he saw the signal-flags, and then he turned quickly to the other vessel.

As he did so, Harry, whose eyes followed his, saw what he believed to be an answering signal, creep up the mast of the passing steamer. Suarez saw it, too, for he turned to Harry with an ugly look in his eyes.

"The mischief is done, you young devil," he said.

"I hope so," answered Harry, quietly rubbing the arm on which he had fallen. "Your hand is heavy, Suarez."

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"I am sorry if I hurt you, Master Hamilton," said the man, somewhat more calmly, "but you are guilty of insubordination and you have broken your word to the captain."

"You are mistaken, Suarez," said a deep voice behind them, and they both looked quickly around to find Captain Dynamite beside them, his glass raised to his eyes as he scanned the passing steamer. "Master Hamilton made me no promise; in fact, he warned me that he would take the first opportunity that presented itself to get ashore, or to communicate with a passing ship. He has been too sharp for us, that is all."

"Message received all right, captain?" asked Harry, eagerly.

Dynamite smiled at the boy's assurance.

"Yes, received and acknowledged," he answered; and then turning to Suarez he continued, in a low tone:

"I do not think it has done any harm. She does not apparently wish to learn anything further of us."

"Captain Dynamite," said Harry, warmly, "there is a big load off my mind, and now we will stick to you through thick and thin. We owe our lives to you, and we are not ungrateful. Whether you wish to take us into your confidence or not, I do not believe, whatever may be the mystery of your voyage, that there is anything dishonorable about it, and you can count on us as part and parcel of your crew. We have succeeded in getting word to our friends at home as I told you I would try to do; now we are yours to command."

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The captain looked down into Harry's earnest face, his own quite serious and solemn.

"You are a fine lot of lads," he said, "and if I was on a pleasure cruise I would not ask for better companions, but look you, this voyage of mystery, as you call it, is a very serious piece of business and I wish you were all safe ashore and well out of it."

"But we don't want to be out of it, captain," asserted Harry, stubbornly. Bert and Mason had now joined the group on the after deck.

"No, captain," piped the Midget, "we are in it so far and we want to stick. You can't chuck us overboard very well, and as long as we have got to be a part of your expedition, I think you better muster us in as a part of the crew."

"Well, youngsters, as much as I regret it, you may have to cast your fortunes in with ours after all, but until that necessity arises we will go along as we are, I your host and you my unwilling guests."

"No, not unwilling now, cap," replied Mason. "So long as the folks know we are safe and sound I think I had rather be aboard this queer craft with you than any place I can think of just now. What do you say, Bert?"

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"Right, as usual."

"Well, boys, while I have perfect confidence in your integrity and all necessity for further secrecy is about past, still I think for your own good, in view of possible happenings, it is best that I and my mission remain a mystery to you."

The captain turned toward his cabin as he spoke, as if to terminate the conversation.

"Perhaps it is not such a mystery after all, captain," said Harry, quietly. "We must be pretty near the coast of Cuba."

The man turned quickly, a glint of that fierce light in his eyes, and then he burst into a hearty laugh.

"Pretty sharp youngsters, eh, Suarez?" he said. "We may be able to make some use of them yet. I think they better dine with us to-night."

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CHAPTER VI

VIVA, CUBA LIBRE!

Although used to the eccentricities of costume in which the captain indulged, Harry was not prepared for the formal gentleman who greeted them as they entered the cabin that night.

Captain Dynamite was in full evening dress, and Harry could not help thinking how well he looked with his big, athletic form draped in conventional attire. But he had not looked for such dress on shipboard, or at least on a ship of the mysterious character of the *Mariella*.

"Welcome to our little dinner party," said the captain, solemnly, as he shook each boy by the hand and pointed to seats on the big divan. "This is the first time that strangers have graced our board on this occasion. I hope it portends a successful ending to our voyage."

"We certainly hope so too, captain. We should be very sorry to feel that our presence on your steamer might cause trouble to you."

"O, one never knows what the morrow may bring. This is our farewell night. To-morrow we enter the zone of danger. But to-night we will be merry. Is not that an excellent idea?"

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"The idea is all right, captain, but where is the danger?"

"Ah, that you may know to-morrow."

"All right, cap," said Mason, carelessly throwing one leg over the other and thrusting his thumbs into the armholes of his vest, "we'll stick to you."

"I believe you will, boys, but it will be my care to keep you free from harm if possible. That is one reason why I have made so much of a mystery to you of the voyage of the *Mariella*. Whatever may befall us you will have had no part in the purpose of this voyage, and remember, above all things, that you are American citizens. There are American consuls in every port and Uncle Sam will take care of his own, perhaps not with the alacrity that we sometimes could wish for, but in due course of time. So shout loudly for Uncle Sam if you need him and if he does not hear you, don't forget that John Bull speaks your language."

The boys were puzzled by the captain's speech, but they knew him well enough to realize that it would be useless to question him. At this point the mate entered the cabin. His appearance was so odd that Bert had to hide his face behind his handkerchief to laugh. His expression was as solemn as the captain's. He wore a pair of blue pilot cloth trousers, a vest with brass buttons and an old-fashioned swallow-tailed coat. The trousers, which were badly creased and puckered from long service inside the tops of his sea boots, were now pulled down outside, but the wide tops of the boots showed in a ring at the knee.

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The captain greeted him in the same dignified way that he had received the boys, and he gravely took a seat on the divan beside them. The next to put in an appearance was the engineer, who wore his service uniform. The second mate was the last to arrive. He was dressed in blue flannel vest and trousers and a Tuxedo coat. Notwithstanding his own almost faultless attire, the captain did not seem to notice the negligé of his men. He greeted each warmly and in the same sober manner. When they had all assembled, he rang a bell and the steward promptly responded.

"You may serve dinner," he said. "There are seven at table to-night."

"A fair prospect for a good run to-morrow, captain," said Suarez, rubbing his hands with the air of one who looked forward with pleasure to a coming event.

"Sure one never knows what the daylight will show," answered the captain, with a touch of his brogue. "We may find ourselves in the very devil of a hornets' nest when the sun shows over the horizon. But Suarez, me boy, we have pulled together out of many a bad hole, haven't we, old man, and we are ready for another, eh?"

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"The captain knows he can count on me when there is any fighting to be done in the good cause."

"Fighting, eh," whispered Bert to Harry. "What do you suppose these queer guys are talking about?"

"I think I begin to have a small notion."

"What do you divine, most noble chief?"

"I do not think it would be wise to say until I am surer of my facts."

"And do your suspicions point to some dreadful mystery of the deep?" whispered Mason, with mock fear, while his mischievous eyes sparkled with fun.

"Something perhaps a little more serious than we have been mixed up in before, if I am right."

"Really."

"As serious as powder and bullets can be."

"Powder and bullets," repeated Bert in some alarm. "What do you mean, Hal?"

"I tell you I cannot speak until I am surer of my ground. You know I made an expedition into the hold to-day while the hatches were open."

"Yes, but you did not tell us that anything that you saw there was at all suspicious."

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"I do not know that it is, but I can tell you this: instead of carrying a general cargo of merchandise for trading purposes, as we are supposed to do, we are loaded to the gunwales with guns and ammunition."

"Well, guns and ammunition are perfectly legitimate articles of merchandise."

"That all depends upon where and for what purpose they are shipped."

"What do you mean?"

"If two nations are at war and a nation supposed to be friendly to each should send arms and ammunition to one or the other, it would be a violation of international law, and would be looked upon as an act of war on the part of the friendly nation."

"But suppose the nation had nothing to do with it and that the cargo was shipped by individuals who were in sympathy with the cause of one or the other?"

"The friendly nation is supposed to see to it that no such cargo is shipped from its shores, and the vessel undertaking such a task ranks as a pirate and is called a filibuster."

"But there are no two nations now at war, so that theory cannot hold good."

"There are no two nations at war, but there is a nation that has had on its hands for many years a warfare within its own borders as Captain Dynamite told us very entertainingly to-day."

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"O, Cuba?"

"Yes, Cuba."

"And do you think that Captain Dynamite is one of those buccaneers that he told us about?"

"Let us wait and see."

"Say, but that would be fine, wouldn't it, Hal?"

"You might not think it so fine if a Spanish warship should open fire on us."

"But we will not mix up in their quarrel."

"No, but a Spanish gunboat would mix it up with us very quickly if she saw us first."

"What right would she have to interfere with a ship flying the American flag?"

"If we could not give a proper account of ourselves in her waters she would stand on very little ceremony."

"And do you think we are likely to get mixed up in any real fighting with real powder and bullets?" asked Bert, in some dismay.

"I don't know. Look out, the captain is watching us."

"Gee," whispered Mason, "I wish I was back in Cottage City."

Captain Dynamite, who had been talking with his officers while the boys discussed their situation in whispers, now looked over at them curiously. Harry did not care at present to have to explain his suspicions. At this moment, fortunately, the steward entered with the soup and created a diversion. Captain Dynamite rose, and waving his arm toward the table, said:

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"Gentlemen, dinner is served. Let us be seated."

The captain took his place at the head of the table, and his men grouped themselves around him while the boys found seats near the bottom and facing all. It was certainly a curious gathering for a dinner table: the four bronzed, earnest-faced men at one end of the table and the three fresh-faced, wondering youngsters at the other. For a moment there was a deep silence, and Bert leaned over to Harry and whispered:

"Say, Hal, I feel as if something ought to explode, or the captain ought to break out the black flag. This atmosphere is getting too tense for me."

"Sh, keep quiet," said Mason, "don't you see old Dynamite is going to say something? Perhaps he may let us into his secret. He seems to be feeling pretty good natured."

"Gentlemen," said the captain, rising at his seat, "fill your glasses."

As he spoke, he passed a black bottle that stood at his right hand to the mate, who filled his glass and passed the bottle on to the engineer.

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"There is lemonade in that pitcher at your hand, youngsters," said the captain. "Fill your glasses."

The boys did as directed and the captain raised his glass of grog high in air. His men rose silently from their seats and did likewise.

"Here's to the good cause and confusion to its enemies," he said, in a deep voice.

"Good luck to the cause," shouted the men as they dashed off their liquor and sat solemnly down again.

For half an hour scarcely a word was spoken, as they all did full justice to the cook's excellent dinner. When they were through, the steward removed the cloth and the captain brought out a box of cigars which he passed around, this time not overlooking the boys, but they each refused, with thanks. The steward replaced the black bottle and it made another circuit of the table. After a short silence, during which the men puffed vigorously on their cigars, the captain said quietly:

"Men, to-morrow we begin to get busy. You all know what dangers we are facing and you have all been through them before. I know you will acquit yourselves well if it comes to a tight rub, for your hearts are all with the cause. That we may all know to what end to bend our individual endeavors, and in case anything should happen to any of us, I will now read to you the orders under which we are sailing. Always remember our compact. We have our numbers. If number one falls, number two takes command, and to him you give your true allegiance, always with your minds free from personal ambitions and petty jealousies, working only as human machines for the good of the cause."

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The men turned and looked nervously in the direction of the boys. The captain noticed their suspicious glances.

"Do not fear," he said, addressing particularly the furtive-eyed Suarez, "I will answer for them. They are my guests."

There was in the captain's tone just a touch of defiance, as if he challenged opposition to his views.

"Now listen, and mark well the directions in the order. It is in Spanish, but I will read it to you in English, as I believe none among you, save Suarez and myself, understand Spanish."

The captain produced from a large wallet a paper which he read slowly, dwelling long upon those passages containing detailed instructions:>

HEADQUARTERS OF THE INDEPENDENT GOVERNMENT AT CUBITAS.

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TO CAPTAIN DYNAMITE,
Boston, Massachusetts, U. S. A.

GREETING:

When, with the assistance of a power higher than mortal endeavor, you shall have safely brought your expedition within the lines of the enemy's ships, proceed with all possible dispatch to that point on the coast mutually agreed upon by us at our last meeting. There, should a kind and just Providence so will it, you will find your landing covered by five hundred men under Captain Morgan, who is your friend. From him you will receive any necessary further instructions. May our just cause shield you from harm and bring you safely through your dangerous mission to the arms of your friends who kiss your hand.

(Signed) BETANCOURT.

GOMEZ.

"You know those names, my friends," said Dynamite, after reading the order. "In their name and in ours, out of the fullness of our hearts, I give you our toast—Viva Cuba Libre!"

The men sprang to their feet and raising their glasses while their eyes shone with the fever of excitement, shouted:

"Viva, viva, Cuba libre!"

"I thought so," said Harry, as the sound died away.

"What does that lingo mean?" asked Bert.

"It means 'hurrah for free Cuba,'" answered Harry.

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CHAPTER VII

IN THE DANGER ZONE

Harry was awakened the next morning by the clanking of heavy chains, rumbling of iron trucks, banging of doors, creaking of cordage, and the hoarse shouts of men. Above the unusual din the voice of the captain rose deep and resonant. Harry sat up in his bunk in wonderment. The usually quiet and methodical ship seemed to have in an instant been transformed into what to the ear might easily resemble an iron foundry. The noise also aroused Bert and Mason.

"What's our friend the buccaneer up to now?" queried Mason, rubbing his sleepy eyes.

"The sooner we get on deck, the quicker we shall find out," answered Harry, jumping from his bunk and beginning to dress hurriedly.

"Sounds to me suspiciously like a pirate chief and his blood-thirsty crew preparing to board an unsuspecting ship," said the irrepressible Midget, as he poked his head into his shirt. "Shouldn't be a bit surprised when we get on deck to find a lot of evil-faced men armed to the teeth—you know pirates are always evil-faced. By the way, did you ever know how the expression 'armed to the teeth' originated? Well, you see, after a pirate has stuck his belt full of pistols and cutlasses, and has both hands full of guns, he just chucks a dirk in his mouth and then, of course, he is armed to the teeth. Singular how you fellows are always drawing on my fund of general information. One dollar, please."

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"Stop your nonsense, Midget," said Harry. "Remember what Captain Dynamite said last night. We are in the zone of danger to-day."

The noise had now somewhat subsided, and by the time the boys were dressed the usual quiet pervaded the ship.

Harry stepped from their stateroom into the main cabin and was surprised to see the captain sitting quietly at the table with his back turned to him. His elbows were resting on the table and his face was in his hands. He was looking intently at some object in front of him. He did not move as Harry approached, and the boy could see that he was gazing at a portrait.

"Good morning, sir," said Harry, stopping at a respectful distance. "Have we struck the danger zone, yet?"

"Danger—danger?"

The captain almost shrieked the words as he leaped to his feet, and clasping the portrait to his breast as if to protect it, turned fiercely on the boy.

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"O, it's you," he said quickly, on recognizing Harry. Then he passed his hand over his eyes as if returning from a trance.

"I was with her when you spoke," he said softly, "and then the thought of danger drives me mad. See——"

The captain held out the photograph for the boy's inspection. It was the picture of a beautiful young woman of Spanish type, with dark hair and eyes.

"This time I take her home as my bride. She has promised it. I have left her too long at the mercy of Weyler's bloodhounds. But Gomez will see that no harm comes to my Juanita. He has promised. The general has promised, and soon—very soon, I shall take her away—away from this danger zone."

The big man seemed dreaming again as his eyes rested with an expression as soft as a woman's on the fair face of the girl. Then with that characteristic shake of his huge body he placed the portrait carefully in an inner pocket, next his heart, and turned again to Harry with his dare-devil laugh on his lips.

"Ha, ha! Danger zone? Oh, sure, we are in it. But we are ready for 'em, my boy. All's in shipshape for friend or foe. We've set a smiling face to the fore, my lad, but a broad laugh would uncover some moighty sharp teeth." At this moment the mate hurriedly entered the cabin and saluted.

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"What is it, Suarez?" asked the captain, quickly.

"Smoke off the starboard bow, sir."

"Can you make her out?"

"Not yet, sir."

"Call me when you can."

The mate saluted again and retired. The captain turned away from Harry unceremoniously, and Bert and Mason having joined him, the boys went on deck. There was no change apparent that would have accounted for the strange noises that had awakened them, except that the hatches were now fastened down with heavy iron bars and the little forward hatch where Harry had made his first tour of inspection was guarded by two men, who stood with folded arms on either side. There were now two men on lookout aft as well as forward. They paced slowly to and fro, their eyes fixed astern. Amidships, on both the starboard and port sides, a man walked backward and forward over a space of about fifteen feet, always closely scanning the sea on either side. Off the starboard bow could be seen a thin thread of smoke that rose almost perpendicularly in the still air.

The boys had never before seen so many men on deck at the same time. Not a word was spoken as the lookouts fore and aft passed and repassed each other. On the bridge both mates were on duty. [Pg 77]

"Say, where do you suppose all these dummies sprang from, anyway?" asked Mason, as he surveyed the scene in astonishment. "I wonder if there are any more where they came from?"

"Let's go down and interview our friend Sambo," said Harry. "He has been growing communicative lately. Yesterday he deigned to say 'Yas, sah.' Maybe we can coax something more out of him."

When they reached the galley, to the boys' great surprise, the negro poked his head out over the half door and grinning broadly, said:

"Mornin', sahs."

"Why, Sambo," said Bert, in astonishment, "where did you find your tongue?"

"Always pick it up again in danger zone, sah."

"There goes that danger zone again," said Mason, in disgust. "I don't believe there is any danger between here and the equator, Sambo."

"Name not Sambo, sah. George Washington Jenks, New York, U. S. A., at yo' service, gents."

Finding the negro in such an unusual mood the boys grouped themselves about the door intending to draw the man out if possible, and learn what they could that might serve to confirm their suspicions as to the purpose of their cruise. As Harry stepped up to the door and brought the man's entire body into view, he noticed with amazement that he wore a cartridge belt and pistol holster from which the butt of a revolver peeped. [Pg 78]

"Why, George, what are you carrying a pistol for this morning. Afraid the crew will mutiny?"

"Always carry gun in danger zone, sah," replied the negro, grinning still more.

"The whole ship has gone crazy over the danger zone," said Bert.

"Yas, sah," said George Washington. "May have mix-up bime-by," and he jerked his thumb over his starboard shoulder.

"Mix-up with the captain?"

"Humph. George Wash'n Jenks not such a blame fool's that. Mix-up with steamer coming up to starboard. May be, may be not. Not such a mucher at guessing."

"Is that why you are carrying a pistol; because a steamer is coming up?"

"Always carry gun in danger zone, sah," and again the negro grinned tantalizingly.

"George Washington Jenks, New York, U. S. A., I have a nice, green one dollar bill saved from a watery grave," said Harry, "and if you will tell us what the danger zone is, you can have it." [Pg 79]

As Harry spoke he pulled a bill out of his pocket and displayed it temptingly before the negro. George Washington Jenks looked at it covetously out of the corner of his eye. Then he shook his head proudly.

"Better go ask Cap'n Dynamite. Might be he need the money. George Wash Jenks don't."

"I guess you are true blue, Wash," laughed Harry, as he put the money back in his pocket.

"You pretty good guesser, sah. Not such a mucher myself."

The boys, convinced that they could gain no information from the negro, and realizing the uselessness of attempting to question any others of the crew, strolled aft again. It seemed to Harry that the thread of smoke had grown a little thicker. The captain opened his door and stepped out on deck, glass in hand. He signalled to Suarez, who came aft at his bidding.

"Can you make her out yet, Suarez?"

"Not yet, captain, but she is headed to cross our bow and should be hull up in a few minutes."

For five minutes both men stood with their glasses trained on the smoke. Finally Suarez dropped his to his side with the air of a man who has learned what he wished to know. [Pg 80]

"Yes?" said the captain, interrogatively.

"It's the little one we dodged last time."

"The *Belair*. So I thought. Change the course two points to starboard. We will go astern unless she gets curious and I suppose she will. Yes, see, she is heading up for us. Hold your course; it would be folly to change it now. If we can't bluff it through, why we can—well, do the next best thing, Suarez, eh—call her hand."

Dynamite threw back his head and laughed heartily.

"Everything is in readiness for the call, sir," said the mate, gravely.

"Very well, Suarez; tell Battersea to notify the men below to stand by."

The boys looked at one another in mute wonder. Then there were other men below, and for what? Harry's mind reverted to that forward compartment so well stocked with munitions of war.

"Bert," he whispered, "I guess they were right about that danger zone, and although I'm not 'such a mucher' at guessing, as our friend Jenks of New York, says, maybe we'll have that mix-up."

For nearly an hour the quiet routine aboard the *Mariella* continued. The captain slowly paced the after deck, now and then scanning the oncoming stranger through his glasses. There was an air of suppressed excitement in the silence. By this time the other steamer was clearly discernible with the naked eye, and the boys could see that she was a small gunboat flying a foreign flag, which they guessed to be Spanish. She had two large guns mounted forward, and a number of rapid fire guns aft and amidships.

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She was a tiny craft for a fighter and apparently had once been a pleasure yacht; but she looked saucy and dangerous as she came on toward them. As Harry looked along the quiet decks of the staid and sober *Mariella* he could not help comparing her to a big dignified Newfoundland dog with a snapping terrier perking boldly up to her.

They could now distinguish the forms of men on the gunboat's decks.

"Come over here to the starboard rail, boys," said the captain, suddenly turning to them. "You may help to carry out more successfully the little farce we are about to attempt. Show yourselves as much as possible and act as if you were curiously interested in our friend, the gunboat, as no doubt you are."

At this moment a black-bearded little man, who had been strutting pompously on the bridge of the gunboat, raised a megaphone to his lips and a volley of foreign words, perfectly unintelligible to the boys, was shot out into the atmosphere.

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In a moment the captain sent back a reply to what had evidently been a demand for a description of his ship.

"The *Mariella*, Boston for San Juan, Porto Rico; general merchandise and three passengers returning from school."

"That's us," whispered Mason. "Look important now. This is as good as playing charades. Can you guess the word, Hal?"

For a few minutes those on the deck of the gunboat seemed to be discussing the reply. The little man on the bridge gesticulated violently as he apparently argued with a subordinate officer. Finally he put his marine glasses to his eyes again and for fully a minute Harry felt that he was studying them and Captain Dynamite, who stood facing him, his big form looming up to its full height, while a smile played around the corner of his mouth.

Suddenly the little man danced up and down like a jumping jack, shot his arms in the air and waved them wildly. Then he seized the megaphone and aimed it at the captain's head. This time the boys could understand the words that he poured out, for he spoke in broken English.

"Ah, ah," he shouted, "I know you now, you el Capitaine Dynamite, el filibust, el buccaneer, el pirate. Surrend—surrend in Queen's name."

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The little man's words had an electrical effect on the captain. The smile faded away and his mouth became a set, straight line. In a moment he was all action.

"Go ahead full speed, Suarez," he shouted. "All hands to quarters."

In a moment his orders were transmitted from mouth to mouth and as quickly the quiet decks became transformed. Men in a seemingly endless stream rushed up through the forward hatch from below and scattered about the decks with soldier-like regularity, each taking, without the least confusion, a station to which he had apparently been assigned. Every man was armed with sword, pistol, and rifle, and almost before the boys had recovered from the first gasp of astonishment, the bulwarks were lined with rows of fully armed, determined looking men, who stood silently at their posts awaiting further orders.

George Washington Jenks stepped out of his galley, his black, shining face as usual on a broad grin. He looked aft at the boys, pointed to the gunboat and chuckled.

"George Wash Jenks is not such a bad guesser after all," said Harry. "Mix-up has arrived all right."

"Say, but Hal, do you think there is going to be any real fighting?" asked Bert. All of the boys were intensely excited and nervous from their unusual surroundings.

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"It looks a heap like it."

"And here we are right in the middle of it without as much as a hat pin to do business with," moaned Mason.

The captain, who had darted into his cabin a moment before, now emerged with a cartridge belt buckled around his flannel coat and two army pistols at his sides. He carried three other pistols in his hands.

"Here, boys," he said, as he approached them and handed one to each; "these are for protection only. Do you know how to use them?"

"Only give us something to shoot at and we will show you," piped the Midget.

"Well, if you have to shoot, there are your marks," was the reply, as he pointed to the gunboat.

In the meantime equal activity had been displayed on the Spaniard. Her decks swarmed with men, and over the still water was borne a jargon of unintelligible orders.

Suddenly there came a sharp command from the little man on the bridge. Dynamite understood it and raised his hand as if to warn the boys back. There was a puff of smoke at the gunboat's bow and then a loud report.

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A solid shot whistled across the bows of the *Mariella* and ricocheted over the water into the distance.

"Crowd on all steam, Suarez," shouted the captain, shaking his fist at the gunboat. "We will first try the wise man's course and run away, but if we cannot shake off that little terrier, we'll have to show our teeth."

Then turning to the Spaniard again he put his megaphone to his lips and shouted to the little commander, who still capered and gesticulated on the bridge:

"Yes, I *am* el Capitaine Dynamite. Come on and take me if you can. Viva, Cuba Libre."

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CHAPTER VIII

A BRUSH WITH THE GUNBOAT

The *Mariella* swung slowly around until she presented only her stern and the width of her hull as a mark for her enemy, and then under a full head of steam she started to show her heels to the Spaniard. But clouds of heavy, black smoke began to roll upward from the gunboat's funnel, showing that she, too, was crowding on steam for the chase.

The puff of smoke, the bark of the gun, the shot skipping over the water across their bows, much as a child scales a flat stone across a mill pond, opened the boys' eyes to the seriousness of the situation. They fingered their revolvers nervously and watched the black bow of the Spaniard anxiously, expecting to see another white burst of smoke.

But the little commander evidently believed he could rely on the speed of his vessel to overtake the *Mariella*, for after the warning shot, he did not fire again, and with throbbing engines the steamers settled down to a trial of speed.

"If we could only imagine that as a starting gun this would make a first-rate yacht race," said Bert, after they had been running for some minutes.

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"Yes, and for a richer stake than ever a yacht raced for before," replied the captain, who had overheard the remark. Harry thought of the portrait of the beautiful girl that lay next the man's heart, and wondered if he meant her, but when he remembered the ringing defiance in his voice as he shouted back to the Spaniard, "Viva, Cuba Libre," he was inclined to believe that the man's spirit of patriotism rose superior to his love just now.

By this time the veil of mystery that had hung over the ship and her purpose had been pretty well lifted by the sequence of events, and the boys were convinced that they were a part of some secret mission against Spain in the interests of Cuba.

Harry had little time for speculation as to the motives that inspired the captain, for another puff of white smoke appeared at the gunboat's bow and a shot whistled by close to the starboard rail. The *Mariella* had been slowly drawing away from her pursuer, and the Spanish commander evidently feared his prey would escape.

Suarez, on the bridge, turned anxiously aft as if expecting instructions, but Captain Dynamite only set his lips into that firm, straight line and raised his glasses to watch the enemy's movements.

Another puff of smoke, a sharp report, and a shot struck the water one hundred yards astern, but in direct line with the *Mariella*.

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"They've got the direction, but not the range," muttered the captain. "Hard a-starboard, Suarez, for half a minute, and then take your course again. We'll give that gunner another guess."

The *Mariella* swung to starboard just enough to take her out of the direct course of her pursuer.

"Now, try it again, Mister Sharpshooter," sung out the captain, although the Spaniard was by this time far out of range of his voice. "It will take you some time to pick up your target once more."

The Spaniard sent two other shots after them in quick succession, but they fell harmlessly to port. The quick swinging of the *Mariella* out of her course had disconcerted the gunners.

"Don't you think you youngsters better go below?" said the captain, joining the boys, while he calmly rolled a cigarette. "I haven't much respect for their marksmanship, but you never can tell where a stray shot may fall."

By this time the sensation of nervousness and anxiety that had followed the first shot had passed, and the boys were as eager to see the affair to an end as if they had been spectators at a play. They did not yet seem to feel themselves a part of the drama that might so easily be turned into a tragedy.

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"If we are not in the way I should much prefer to remain here," said Harry, "and if we are going to be shot I had rather have it done on deck than in a stuffy cabin."

"Very well, I guess you are safe enough. Anyway, we shall be out of range in about fifteen minutes. Ah, she's going to try it again."

Another shot fell only a few feet astern.

Captain Dynamite placed his glasses on the roof of the deck house, tossed his cigarette over the side, and removing his coat, folded it carefully and placed it beside the glasses.

"You are getting a little too close, Mister Goodshot," he said, rolling back his cuffs. "I guess a dose of your own medicine is about due." Turning to the bridge, he called:

"Keep her steady, Suarez."

"Aye, aye, sir," responded the mate. There was a note of glee in his voice and he rubbed his hands together with an air of great satisfaction, as he watched his commander's preparations. He seemed to know what they portended, although the boys could see no purpose in them.

The captain now stepped quickly to the after rail, and placing his finger underneath it, seemed to be pressing upon something. A square section of the deck began to slide silently and mysteriously away, leaving a black hole up through which there rose slowly a rapid fire gun. There was a sharp click of snapping bolts as the new section of deck came into place.

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"Now there will be something doing," whispered Bert.

Quickly taking his place on the saddle of the gun the captain trained it with the hand of an expert. It seemed but a second from the time he ran his eye along the sights before the discharge came. Without waiting to see the result of his shot, he turned the muzzle a little to the right, sighted it again quickly and fired.

The boys watched breathlessly, straining their eyes to see the result, but without avail. Captain Dynamite rose, wiped his hands with a silk handkerchief and walked to the deck house for his glasses.

"They are both out of commission, bedad," he said, after a minute's inspection. "Scoot for the inlet, Suarez, me boy."

"Aye, aye, sir," replied the mate, gleefully. "Don't you think you better give them one more for good measure, sir?"

"Enough's a-plenty, Suarez. We'll have her hull down before eight bells. Would you like to see what a little gun like that can do?"

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He turned to Harry as he spoke and handed him the marine glasses. They were a powerful pair and as Harry regulated them to his vision he seemed to be almost on board the Spanish gunboat. All was confusion on her decks. The "both" referred to by the captain as being out of commission, were the port and starboard guns, with which she had been potting at the *Mariella*. Captain Dynamite's shots had each scored a bull's-eye.

In the turmoil, Harry could see that someone had been injured and was being borne away by his companions. He lowered the glasses and held them out to the captain.

"You have laid up a man for repairs, I think, sir," he said.

The captain waved the glasses back with something like a shudder.

"I am sorry," he said, quietly. "The poor chap was only doing his duty. I aimed at metal and not human bodies. I hope he is not much hurt."

He turned to the rail again, touched the spring, and the gun slowly sank out of sight, the section of the deck that concealed it slipping into place again with a click. Putting on his coat he entered the cabin, leaving the boys in possession of the glasses. For some time they were greatly interested in watching, turn by turn, the proceedings on the deck of the gunboat, but finally the *Mariella* made such good use of her heels that even with the glasses, they could make out nothing but the outlines of the Spaniard.

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When they turned again to the deck of their own steamer, they were surprised to see that it had once more resumed its usual appearance. The armed men had disappeared, the second mate paced the bridge, and only the lookouts occupied the decks. It was now twelve o'clock, and eight bells sounded clearly on the still, tropical air. The boys recollected for the first time that they had had no breakfast, just as Captain Dynamite stuck his head out of the cabin door.

"Come on, lads," he called, cheerily; "sure we've let the Spanish terrier cheat our stomachs."

The exciting events of the morning had not impaired the boys' appetites, and they promptly responded to the call. When they went on deck again only a speck on the horizon marked the pursuing gunboat.

"Few of their old tubs can measure paces with the old *Mariella*," said the captain, with satisfaction, as he swept the sea with his glasses.

"She looked as if she had once been a pleasure yacht," said Harry.

"So she was, my boy. The Spaniards bought her from a New York millionaire, but she was an old model then, and they have top-hampered her with armor and guns until they have knocked what little speed she had out of her. We'll not even see a whiff of their smoke in half an hour."

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"Will she continue so hopeless a chase?"

"O, sure she will. She hopes to trap us down the coast. See, there are the shores of Cuba."

The boys turned quickly as he pointed over their starboard bow and saw a low dark line in the distance.

"Hurrah," shouted Bert.

"Hurrah for what?" asked the captain, smiling at the enthusiastic boy who swung his cap as he shouted.

"Why, just hurrah," answered Bert, sheepishly. "I began to think all land had disappeared from the face of the ocean."

"Then you don't like the water?"

"Heretofore I always considered myself dead stuck on it, but hereafter terra firma for mine. Something that you can dig your heels into and where disagreeable Spaniards don't send bullets whistling around your ears. How soon will we make Havana, captain?"

One of Dynamite's roaring laughs greeted this question of Bert's.

"Me boy," he said, as soon as he caught his breath, "if we should sail into Havana harbor every mother's son of us would be shot by sunrise to-morrow."

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"But you are going to land somewhere?" questioned Harry.

"Sure there's a fine bit of a place down the coast that we'll take a peep into before the moon's high to-night—barrin' any more Spanish terriers. Sure they're thick on this coast. A pack of snarling mongrels, and all snapping at the heels of Captain Dynamite. It's a proud man I should be with a head on me that's worth five thousand dollars to the man who can take it to Weyler."

"Do you mean that the Spaniards have put a price of five thousand dollars on your head?" asked Harry in amazement, as he backed away from the man instinctively.

"That was before my last voyage," chuckled the captain. "I would not be surprised if they had boosted the quotation a point or two since then. Gomez will know the latest market price."

The boys looked at him with awe. Here was a man who, though sailing into the enemy's waters, boldly laughed at the thought that there was a price on his head.

"He's the finest buccaneer I ever met outside of story books," whispered Mason, as if meeting buccaneers was an every day occurrence with him.

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"Suarez," called the captain, "lay off and on until eight bells, then call me. I'm going to take a nap. We can't make the inlet until sundown."

Slowly Cuba rose out of the sea as the *Mariella* ploughed her way toward her shores. The long dark line began to take shape against the azure sky and to form itself into hills and valleys. The dark mass turned to a deep shade of brown and then to green as the brilliant verdure of the island caught the rays of the sun. When they were near enough to distinguish the contour of the coast line, the steamer's course was changed and for a time she stood out to sea again.

"What are we doing that for?" enquired Bert, anxiously.

"Didn't you hear the captain tell Suarez to stand off and on until eight bells? We are probably going to make a landing somewhere here, but it is not yet time."

At this moment eight bells struck and without waiting to be called, Captain Dynamite opened the door of the cabin and stepped out on deck. Once again he had changed his costume and was now attired in white duck and wore a white yachting cap. As a breeze blew his coat aside, the boys could see that he still wore the cartridge belt and pistols. He scanned the shore for a moment and then turning to the mate, who still stood on the bridge, he said:

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"Well done, Suarez. At sundown I will take her in."

The coast at this point seemed covered with a thick, tropical growth of palms and high, rank weeds, interlaced thickly with vines that reached to the water's edge. Back a few hundred feet the land rose abruptly, forming the foothills of the mountainous inland. The boys looked closely

for some inlet or bay into which the *Mariella* might steam, but there seemed to be no break in the thick foliage so far as the eye could reach. In the silhouette formed by the rising hills two palms, taller than the others, stood out against the sky like lone sentinels guarding the shore against invading buccaneers.

At dinner, the captain was in a particularly agreeable mood.

"Well, my young pirates, how are you enjoying your cruise?" he asked jokingly. "It's pretty nearly at an end and all danger for you is about past. In an hour or so we shall be safely within the sheltering arms of Cuba, and I think it is about time I introduced myself to you. I am plain Michael O'Connor, sometimes known as Dynamite Mike, but more generally styled Captain Dynamite—at your service. I am neither a buccaneer, pirate, nor privateer, but an humble Cuban sympathizer who takes his life in his hand now and then to bring arms and ammunition to the men who are fighting for the good cause of Cuba libre. I do this, first, because I love Cuba; second, because it is a very lucrative profession; third, because I like danger."

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"But, Captain Dynamite, why should an Irishman love Cuba?" asked Harry.

"Sure, I'm only half Irish. My mother was a Cuban and I was born on the island on my father's little sugar plantation. The Spaniards shut him up as an insurgent. He died in jail—tortured to death I shall always believe—and my mother died of a broken heart in the arms of my childhood sweetheart, Juanita. I was not there. I left the island when only a youngster, to shift for myself in the States. I took to the sea and I shall always be thankful that I did, for it has enabled me in some measure to avenge the death of my father. But now to your own affairs, my boys. After we have safely disposed of our cargo, I shall be free to make a straight run for the States, and as I shall have others aboard for whose safety I shall be responsible, I think probably you had better stick to the old *Mariella*. I did think of getting you onto the railroad to Havana, but your lack of passports might cause you trouble."

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"We'll stick by the *Mariella*, captain," said Harry. "What do you say, fellows?"

"Sure, the *Mariella* for us."

"All right, that's settled. I think it's about time to run to cover."

As they stepped out on deck the tropical twilight was fading and the steamer was now close within the dark shadow of the shore. Captain Dynamite went forward to the bridge.

"Turn in, Suarez. It has been a long day for you. I will take her now."

The mate saluted and left the bridge. The captain entered the wheelhouse and the man relinquished the spokes and stood silently to one side. The captain swung the wheel over quickly, with a sure, firm hand, and the bow of the *Mariella* came around until she was headed directly for the wooded shore. Harry saw him raise his eyes and look once at the sentinel palms.

Then the engine-room bell clanged loudly and the *Mariella* shot at full speed, head on for the shore.

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CHAPTER IX

THE MIDNIGHT MESSAGE

Harry clutched the rail involuntarily. It seemed as if at any moment they would strike the shore with a crash, and yet he could not but believe that the captain knew what he was doing. He stood quietly at the wheel, scarcely moving it after he had once taken his course, but his eyes were fixed intently ahead.

Nearer and nearer they rushed to the shore. Now they were almost upon it. Harry steadied himself, and cast one quick glance at the captain. Now the bow cut the thick foliage like a knife, but there was no shock, and the *Mariella*, with trees and vines scraping her sides and rising almost to her funnel-top, shot into a broad lagoon that lay completely hidden by the dense foliage at the entrance.

As they passed in, Harry looked back. The passage through which they had entered was scarcely wider than the steamer, and formed on either side by two points of rock. It needed a bold and skillful hand to bring them safely through that naturally-masked channel. The foliage dropped partly back again but there still remained a gaping hole to show where the steamer had pushed her way through.

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Again the bells in the engine-room clanged, the screw churned the water violently; there was a roar and rattle of the anchor chains, and within twice her own length the *Mariella* came to a standstill and her dangerous voyage was safely terminated.

"Washington," called the captain, leaning out of the wheelhouse; "shut the door."

"Aye, aye, sah," responded the negro, as he emerged from the galley. "George Wash Jenks knows his duty."

Two of the men lowered a boat and jumped in. The negro followed with a long boat hook. They rowed back to the entrance of the inlet, and Jenks with his hook, deftly pulled the vines and creeping plants across it again. In five minutes none could have told that the luxurious growth had been disturbed.

The tropical night now began to settle rapidly over the still lagoon. The business of making the steamer snug at her anchorage, which is usually attended by the creaking of cordage, the clanking of chains, and the discordant shouts of sailors and commanders, was carried on almost in silence. The orders of the captain and mate were given in tones scarcely louder than used in ordinary conversation, but the men responded with alacrity. Within half an hour the *Mariella*, her throbbing engines stilled, lay silently at anchor and not a sound broke the stillness of the night. The shore of the main coast piled up in a black mass, without shape or color, in front of them, while the protecting arm that shielded them from the ocean loomed high above the steamer's funnel, showing in silhouette against the star-lighted sky in fantastically waving lines of palm leaves.

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Tired out with the exciting and unusual events of the day, the boys, after gazing for a time at the strange, silent scene around them, retired to their bunks, and were soon fast asleep.

Captain Dynamite lay dreamily back in a steamer chair on the quarter deck, lazily puffing a cigarette, but his eyes were intently fixed on the black shore. The steamer was in total darkness. Not a lamp was lighted except a small red lantern, like a signal light, that hung over the side facing the shore.

The captain lighted a match and looked at his watch.

"Five minutes to midnight," he murmured. "They are late. Can anything have gone wrong? Ah, there's the signal now."

A small red light flashed out of the darkness of the shore. Three times it showed, and then disappeared. A dark figure that had been standing by the light on the *Mariella* swung it three times from side to side.

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Captain Dynamite rose from his chair, stretched his great body lazily and walked to the rail. As he did so, he threw open his coat and eased up one of the pistols in its holster. His hand remained resting on the butt.

A small boat with two rowers, and a man in the stern, shot out from the black shadow of the shore onto the star-lighted surface of the lagoon. They rowed without the splash of an oar straight to the *Mariella*.

"Who goes there?" called Dynamite in a whisper, as the boat shot under the steamer's quarter.

"*Independencia*," came the prompt reply, and in a second the dark form amidships tossed over a rope ladder. In a moment more the man in the stern of the small boat had scrambled over the rail of the *Mariella* and strode rapidly aft. He sprang lightly up the steps to the quarter-deck, and seizing the hand of Captain Dynamite, who met him at the companionway, shook it vigorously.

"Captain Morgan, sure it's glad I am to see ye again."

"God bless you, O'Connor. Another of your dare-devil expeditions safely ended. We didn't look for you for two nights yet."

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"Fair weather and only one little brush with a small gunboat. Altogether, quite an uneventful trip. And how goes the cause of independence, Captain?"

"We still hold our own, O'Connor, despite the butcher's boasts. We left them two hundred dead and wounded at our last three meetings, while our loss was only five killed and ten wounded."

"Bravo, Morgan, we'll wear them out yet. Let them pour their troops into Cuba by the thousand. Disease, our insidious ally and insurgent bullets will take care of all they can send."

"Aye, but the bullets are getting scarce, O'Connor."

"Ah, but there are enough here to do for ten thousand Spaniards," cried Dynamite, stamping excitedly on the deck, "and there will always be enough to go around so long as O'Connor lives, and the planks of the *Mariella* hold together."

The woolly head and grinning countenance of George Washington Jenks showed above the top step of the companionway.

"And what of Gomez, Morgan?"

"Gomez is now with President Betancourt at Cubitas, waiting for a report of your expedition."

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"He shall have it within forty-eight hours. Are your men ready for the landing?"

"The lagoon is guarded inland and shore. There is not a Spaniard within twenty miles."

"Then we will begin at once. What are you doing on the quarter-deck, you black rogue?"

The captain had just discovered Jenks as he stood respectfully at the head of the companionway, apparently awaiting orders.

"Sut'nly, the Cap'n call?"

"No, I didn't call, blockhead. Get below."

"Ah, ain't such a mucher as a guesser, but sut'nly I guess the cap'n stamp him foot."

"You're right, Washington. I did stamp, but I didn't want you. However, as long as you are here bring out a chair for Captain Morgan and that box of cigars on my cabin table."

"Well, Washington, you are back in Cuba with a whole skin again," said Morgan, cordially extending his hand to the negro.

"Cap'n Morgan, suah," said Jenks, carefully rubbing his hand on his trousers before accepting the captain's. "Ah'm right glad to see you again, sah. O yes, sah, George Wash Jenks' skin am whole, sah. Cap'n Dynamite, he see to that, sah. Nevah leave Cap'n Dynamite, sah."

"That's right, Washington, stick to the captain and he'll pull you through, and Cuba needs a few more honest hearts like yours." [Pg 105]

"Ah serve Cap'n Dynamite, sah. He serve Cuba."

With great dignity the negro turned away and entered the cabin.

"An honest fellow, O'Connor, and seems devoted to you."

"Yes, I think Washington would follow me to the ends of the earth; but what are the orders, captain? We must be up and doing. I should not like to lie here long enough for the Spaniards to discover our landing-place."

"Ah, there I am as ignorant as you. Here are sealed instructions from Gomez."

Captain Morgan handed a packet to O'Connor, who broke the seal eagerly. When he had read what the message contained the hand that held it dropped nervelessly by his side. He gasped as if for breath, and pulled nervously at the collar of his shirt like a man choking. Morgan, who noticed his singular actions started toward him.

"What's the matter, O'Connor?" he asked, anxiously. "Are you ill?"

For a moment the captain did not answer, and then he said, faintly:

"Wait. I must think." [Pg 106]

Morgan, wondering, but respecting his mood, stepped back. Captain Dynamite folded his arms and his head sank low on his chest. For fully five minutes he sat thus, and then suddenly leaped to his feet, clenched his hands, straightened up to his full height, and stamped his foot, loudly on the deck. The negro appeared with the steamer chair. He stopped in terror at the wild appearance of Captain Dynamite, and believing that he was the cause of his anger, stammered and stuttered in an effort to speak.

"Ah, sut'nly, came as fast as ah could, sah. George Wash Jenks no loafing nigger, sah."

"Call Suarez," said Dynamite, in a low voice, ignoring the negro's attempted apologies.

"Misser Suarez turned in, sah."

"Call Suarez," roared the captain, taking a threatening step in the direction of Jenks.

"Yas, sah," answered Jenks, his eyes big with wonder. "Needn't be so uppish. Ah shall sut'nly call Misser Suarez." Jenks backed away to the companionway in an effort to keep his face to the angry skipper and miscalculating his distance rolled backward down the stairs.

"You clumsy idiot," bellowed Dynamite, stepping to the top of the stairs and peering down into the darkness, out of which came a whisper:

"Yas, sah. Ah shall sut'nly call Misser Suarez." [Pg 107]

Dynamite stepped back, and without speaking to Morgan, who watched him anxiously, paced the quarter-deck with nervous strides. Suarez appeared in his pajamas, rubbing his eyes. The captain stopped as he saluted, and looked from one to the other of the men. Finally he said, holding out the message to Suarez:

"Suarez—Morgan—here are the instructions regarding the removal of the cargo. They are simple. There is also news—bad news—but that concerns only me. Take this paper, Suarez, and with Captain Morgan's assistance carry out the orders to the letter. You are in command."

Then he turned to Washington, who had followed Suarez to the quarter-deck.

"Bring me my night coat, Washington, and my rifle. Suarez, have the gig lowered. I am going ashore."

"Alone, captain?"

"Alone."

"And may I ask the captain where at this hour of the night?"

"To Gomez."

"Take a file of my men, O'Connor. The country between here and Cubitas is full of Spaniards."

"Thank you, Morgan. I have good, true men of my own who know the country as well as I do myself, but they would only hamper me. I must make speed—speed, do you hear? Suarez, why do you stand there like a wooden Indian? Get my gig into the water." [Pg 108]

"If you are bent upon going, O'Connor, and I know how useless it is to try to swerve you, why not take my boat. It is manned and lying at the ladder."

"That is better, Morgan. I will send it back to you. Come on, you lazy rascal, with that coat."

He seized his coat and rifle, and ran down the stairway to the companionway, and along the deck to the point where Morgan's boat lazily floated on the black water.

"Take your orders from Captain Dynamite," called Morgan to his men as O'Connor slid down into the boat. The negro who had followed close at his heels peered over the side and whispered pleadingly:

"Cap'n Dynamite, sah, you'se not going without George Wash Jenks?"

"To the shore, lads, and pull for your lives," said O'Connor. The boat shot away from the steamer's side and was soon lost in the dark shadow of the shore.

Washington shook his head deprecatingly, and returned to the quarter-deck, where he gravely saluted the mate. [Pg 109]

"Your servant, sah," he said. "Cap'n Dynamite he say you in command."

"Bring a lantern, Washington, quick," said Suarez. Then turning to Morgan, he continued:

"What do you suppose the bad news can be that has so affected the chief and which he says concerns only him?"

"Gomez's message will tell. Quick, boy, with that lantern."

As Jenks stepped into the cabin, Harry, fully dressed, came out of his stateroom. The unusual noise on deck and the loud commands of the captain had awakened him.

"What's up, Wash?" he asked.

"Plenty. Cap'n Dynamite get bad news in message, and bang—he scoot for shore."

"Captain gone ashore, to-night?"

"Suah, enough."

"What's the bad news, Wash?"

"Nobody knows yet. George Wash Jenks get cap'n's lantern and then we find out."

He took the lantern from the hook, and with Harry behind him returned to the deck. Morgan took the light and held it so that Suarez could read the message.

"Ah, here it is" said the mate, after he had scanned the instructions. He read aloud: [Pg 110]

"My heart is full of grief for you. Notwithstanding the heavy guard maintained around the house the Spaniards succeeded last night in seizing Juanita and have taken her to prison. She is charged with aiding the rebels. Come to me at once that we may plan together to effect her escape or rescue."

"Spaniards got Missee Juanita?" shouted Washington, who had listened eagerly while Suarez read. "I guess I go to cap'n."

The negro made a flying leap for the rail and in another instant would have dived into the sea toward the shore. Morgan was too quick, though, and seizing him by the collar dragged him back to the deck.

"Never was such a mucher at guessing," murmured the negro.

"What do you say to putting the boy ashore and letting him join O'Connor?" asked Morgan. "He knows the country and might be of much assistance to that stubborn man in his dangerous journey."

"Please, Missee Suarez, sah, lemme go after Cap'n Dynamite. He and Missee Juanita need George Wash Jenks."

The negro dropped on his knees as he pleaded with the mate.

"And we will go with you, Washington." [Pg 111]

It was Harry who spoke, and the men turned to him in astonishment.

"You do not know the danger, my boy," said Suarez, quietly.

"We'll chance it. We owe Captain Dynamite a big debt. If there is a chance to help him in his

trouble it is our duty to do so."

"It is a question whether you would help or hinder him."

Suarez was undecided. While he bore the boys no malice he had always chafed at their presence on the ship. No interest in them as individuals would have caused him to oppose their wishes. His thoughts, hopes, desires, and ambitions were all Cuba's. The fate of the three boys whose lives meant nothing to the cause, was nothing to him. Deep down in his heart he would be glad to rid the ship of them. But he feared the wrath of his chief. He walked the deck in silence for a few minutes and then, as if speaking to himself he said:

"If any one should take one of the boats and make the shore during the night, their escape might not be discovered until daylight."

As he finished speaking, George Washington Jenks beckoned to Harry, and together they made their way silently down to the main deck.

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CHAPTER X

INTO THE ENEMY'S COUNTRY

Harry called Bert and Mason and explained the situation to them. Both were eager to accompany the expedition on shore. Washington was busy forward when the boys joined him. He had gathered and piled up under the rail a supply of guns and ammunition sufficient to arm a company of men. He had made good use of the few minutes the boys had occupied in dressing, for a small boat already lay alongside the steamer. Harry surmised that the men, who were all exceedingly fond of their commander, had assisted Washington in order that he might set out to give what aid he could to Captain Dynamite. There was scarcely a man among them but had made several voyages with him, and they well knew the danger that attended a journey through that part of the island, and the fate that awaited their chief if he should fall into the hands of the Spaniards. The mate was still in close conference with Captain Morgan, and either intentionally, or because of his preoccupation, paid no attention to the preparations of the little expedition.

"What are you going to do with all those guns?" asked Harry, as he surveyed the pile.

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"May be some big shooting," replied Washington, nodding his head, wisely. "More guns, more shooting."

"But how are we to carry that arsenal? If I am not mistaken travelling hereabouts is not the easiest thing in the world, and we shall want as little to hamper as possible."

"I guess young gemman right," said Washington, looking regretfully at the heap of guns.

"Let us each take a gun and a pistol——"

"And machete—machete," interrupted the negro, his eyes bulging, while he swung his arm as if wielding one of the short Cuban swords.

"All right, Washington, machete if you choose. They may do to cut our way through the underbrush."

"Cut way through Spaniard," said Washington, still waving his arm excitedly.

"You can do all that kind of cutting, George Wash Jenks. Perhaps you would prefer a razor."

"No, machete."

"All right; machete it is, and I hope you will find something to use it on and work off some of that cutting energy."

They then each selected from the supply of arms a rifle, pistol, and all the ammunition they could comfortably carry. They lowered them into the small boat and were about to climb in when Harry stopped them.

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"What about food, Washington?" he asked. "We'd better tote some along, I think."

With his usual energy, Harry had naturally taken command of the expedition.

"How much of a tramp is it to where Captain Dynamite is going?"

"Captain Dynamite go to Gomez—Gomez at Cubitas."

"That does not mean anything to us. How far is it from here to Cubitas and how long will it take us to reach it?"

"'Bout two days."

"All right. Now Washington, you get some ship biscuit, dried beef, and coffee from your stock in the galley and we will each carry our own rations. I guess we can get through on that grub for two days."

"And ah guess a leetle lasses for coffee, Misser Harry," pleaded the negro.

"How under the sun are you going to carry molasses, Washington? I guess you will have to take your coffee black and without sweetening."

"Never was such a musser at guessing," murmured Washington, as he turned into the galley. He soon reappeared with the rations, four oilskin jackets, and a coffee pot. They divided the food and each bundled up his supply in an oil skin and tied the package on his back. They were now ready to begin their journey, and one by one they silently slipped over the side and dropped into the boat below.

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"Washington, you take the tiller," said Harry. "You know the way."

"Yas, sah."

"Do you know where to make a landing in the dark?"

"George Wash Jenks knows every inch of the coast hereabouts with him eyes shut."

"All right then. You get up in the bow, Midget, and keep a lookout ahead. Bert and I will row. It's not more than three hundred feet to the shore."

The boys bent to the oars and the little boat shot across the narrow streak of starlit water into the shadow of the rugged shore.

"Stop!" whispered Mason quickly, when they were within a few feet of the beach. The boys backed water and brought the boat up within her own length.

"What is it?" asked Harry, anxiously.

"There's a man on shore with a gun aimed plumb at us," replied Davis, pointing into the darkness ahead.

"Him one of Misser Morgan's men," said Washington. "Him all right, ah guess, maybe."

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The boys started to row again when a loud command from shore made them rest on their oars with great dispatch.

"Halt, or I'll fire."

The words came out of the darkness in deep, determined tones. The boys could dimly distinguish the form of a man standing on a little bluff above them, with his rifle aimed with disturbing accuracy directly at their boat.

"We are friends from the *Mariella*," called Harry, "and are on our way to join Captain Dynamite."

"Captain Dynamite passed through the lines half an hour ago. He said he was travelling alone."

"Yes, that's right," answered Harry. "He thinks he is, but we want to help him. Let us come ashore and I will explain to you."

"Halt, or I fire," again came the command.

"Don't you think we better go back, Hal?" whispered Mason, who had crouched down in the bow out of the way of a stray bullet. "I don't care much for this real gun business. It's too exciting for my constitution."

"Don't you understand," persisted Harry, "that we are friends of Captain Dynamite and the cause?"

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"Friends of the cause will give the countersign," said the voice in the same even tone.

"Washington, you ought to know the countersign," whispered Harry to the negro, who had listened to the conversation with open mouth. He shook his head as if he did not comprehend.

"You know—the word that tells people that you are a friend of Cuba."

"O, dats de password—suah." Washington grinned with joy.

"Well, the password then; what is it?"

"Ah guess it is 'Independencia.'"

"I hope you have guessed right this time."

"Not such a mucher," murmured Washington, deprecatingly.

"Independencia," repeated Harry, loud enough for the man on shore to hear.

"Advance friends," said the sentinel, quickly lowering his gun.

The party landed without further opposition and found instead of one man, whose form they had been able to distinguish from the boat, ten or a dozen more a few feet back from the shore, squatting around a small fire, the light of which was masked by a thick growth of underbrush. They were all dark-skinned men with heavy growths of black beard. They looked up without displaying any particular interest as the boys landed, but the sentinel who had challenged them

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came forward and held out his hand in greeting. He was undoubtedly an American.

"Glad to see any one who speaks English," he said, as Harry approached and took his offered hand. "What are you boys doing here?"

"That's a long story," replied Harry, smiling. "Briefly, though, Captain Dynamite ran down our sail boat while we were sailing off Martha's Vineyard, picked us out of the water and brought us along whether we would or no."

"And where are you going now?"

"To join Captain Dynamite. He may need our assistance."

The man smiled.

"I am afraid you will be more likely to need his if you persist in your purpose," he said.

"That, of course, is a matter of opinion," replied Harry, drawing himself up indignantly. "And to return the compliment may I ask what you are doing in Cuba?"

"Certainly," laughed the man. "I came with Morgan. We are soldiers of fortune."

"Then you are not a patriot?"

"Not exactly. I believe in the cause and I also believe that we will eventually win."

"And then you expect your reward?"

"That's what we are fighting here for."

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"Sort of playing with fortune," chimed in Mason.

"Not exactly—sort of throwing dice with fate."

"Well, come on, fellows," said Harry. "We are losing time and letting the captain get more of a lead on us."

"So you are determined to go on?"

"I see no reason yet to turn back," replied Harry.

"But you do not know the country and its dangers."

"We have a good guide," said Harry, pointing to Washington.

The man leaned forward and peered in the darkness at the negro.

"Why, it's George Wash Jenks," he said in surprise. "Captain Dynamite's man. How are you, Wash?"

"Ah guess ah's all right, sah."

"Still guessing I see, Wash."

"Not such a mucher, sah," the negro grinned broadly.

"Well boys, you are right about your guide. You can't go wrong around here while Wash is with you. Good luck to you. You will have to travel fast to catch up to Dynamite though. He was making express time and would not even stop to shake hands. All I could get out of him was: 'Gomez—I must get to Gomez.' Nothing wrong, is there?"

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"No, nothing—nothing that concerns the cause. Good-bye. Come on, Washington."

Harry turned and started into the brush.

"Not that way, Misser Harry," called Washington. "We keep by the shore a piece yet. Never get no further than six feet in there, ah guess."

He turned along the narrow beach below an overhanging bluff. For half an hour they hugged the shore.

"Did the captain come this way do you think, Washington?" asked Harry.

"Don't guess this time, Misser Harry. No other way to come."

So far the going had been comparatively easy. They had to now and then clamber over jagged points of rocks that made out into the sea, and in the darkness they several times stumbled and fell, but no one was much hurt. Most of the way, however, had been along the sandy beach. Now Washington stopped and seemed to be looking for something. He peered out into the darkness over the sea and then shook his head. Then he stepped back toward the water and looked up at the skyline of the quickly rising inland country.

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"Lost the trail?" enquired Harry, after he had watched the negro's movements for some time in silence.

"Not lost 'em, Misser Harry. Tryin' to find 'em. Big tree on leetle island. Can't see 'em." He pointed out over the sea where he had been gazing. Then he turned and pointed inland. "Big tree

there. Can see him all right."

The boys looked up to where he pointed over the land and saw a large palm rising high above its fellows and clearly marked against the sky. It resembled the two big trees that had guided Captain Dynamite in making the entrance to the hidden lagoon. Evidently Washington was searching for some spot that was to be discovered by bringing the big tree on shore and the now invisible one on the island into line.

"George Wash Jenks, he find 'em. Don't worry 'bout dat," he said, as he walked about five feet to the right and then faced about and approached the bluff, which at this point was twenty feet high and thickly grown with brush and low entangling plants. He fumbled around among the vines and then turning to the boys called: "All right now."

As Harry came up he pointed at the bluff and then pulling aside the underbrush began to slowly work his way inward. The boys followed him. The branches scratched their faces and the ground vines clung to their feet. They were entering a narrow cleft in the hill which was filled with rank vegetation.

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"Keep a pushin'," said Washington. "Not so bad when we get in leettle more."

They struggled on for about one hundred feet when the brush became less thick and finally they reached a narrow lane that had been hewed and trampled through the high growth. Their progress now became easier and with Washington in the lead they pushed ahead rapidly. They had made their way about half a mile inland when out of the brush came a voice that brought them to a standstill with a start.

"Alto! Quien Va?"

"Dat another Misser Morgan's men," whispered Washington.

"Independencia," said Harry, when he had recovered his breath, for the challenge coming unexpectedly from one concealed by the darkness and the bushes was somewhat startling. There was a low reply in Spanish and they proceeded without molestation.

About every half a mile a mysterious voice challenged them, but the countersign secured for them uninterrupted progress. Through the waning night they pushed on, until the light in the sky told them that day was breaking. Then Washington stopped. He had scarcely spoken since they took the trail.

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"Missers," he said, as they halted, "better have breakfast now."

"Can we light a fire here safely?"

"Yes, now; not bime bye."

They unslung their improvised knapsacks and gathering some dry brush soon had a small fire burning. Washington made the coffee, procuring water from a stream that ran through the brush. The boys, thoroughly tired out, threw themselves down for a brief rest. They munched their crackers and dried beef with relish and drank coffee in turn from a tin cup that Washington had had the foresight to provide.

"This seems very much like camping up at school," said Mason.

"Yes, only I would prefer to have the boys in the bushes than a lot of Spaniards and Cubans with real bullets in their guns," replied Bert.

"You always do look at the unromantic side of things, Bert. We haven't seen a Spaniard yet."

"Good and plenty when we get in the open," said Washington.

"How do you know this country so well, Washington?" asked Harry.

"Born here, Misser Harry. I'se Cuban nigger."

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"I thought you said you were 'George Wash Jenks, New York, U. S. A.?'"

"I suah are now, sah. I was only a picaninny when I ranned away with Massa Cap'n Dynamite."

"So you ran away with your young master, eh?"

"Yas, sah, dat's it."

"And you've been with him ever since?"

"Him couldn't lose me, sah." George grinned.

"And who is Miss Juanita?"

"Misse Juanita live on next plantation. She and Massa Capt'n Dynamite goin' to get married bime bye. He tell her so when he ranned away."

"Well Washington, it's sun up now and we better be moving if we expect to catch up with Massa Captain Dynamite."

"We not catch Cap'n until we get to Cubitas."

"Why not?"

"Cap'n travel through this country faster'n any mule, and he not stop 'til he get there."

"Not stop to sleep?"

"No sleep, no eat. Missee Juanita in danger. I know the Massa Cap'n."

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CHAPTER XI

CAPTURED BY SPANIARDS

The party, after breaking their fast, packed up their rations and started on again. The tangled forest of low growth through which they struggled began to thin out, and they found themselves in an almost open country at the foot of a range of mountains. Before they left the shelter of the bushes, Washington motioned the boys back, and dropping on his stomach, wriggled to the edge of the woods, where he made a long survey of the country. Seemingly satisfied, he beckoned to the others to come on, and they all cautiously crept out into the open country.

"Must keep eyes peeled now for Spaniards," said Washington. "Plenty of 'em 'tween here'n Cubitas."

"Which way now, Washington?" asked Harry.

The negro pointed straight ahead.

"Over that mountain?" queried Mason, in dismay.

"Suah—and then another—but that's Cubitas."

They toiled on while the hot sun began to mount high in the sky. The perspiration dripped from their faces as they walked. The mountain was thickly wooded to its very base and they made as rapid progress as possible in the wake of the doggedly plodding negro in the effort to gain the shade and the security of the trees.

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"Half hour more and we find good place for siesta. Can't go on 'til sun goes down," said Washington, who had noticed the boys' fatigue.

When they reached the foot of the mountain the negro struck off into the thick woods, and after a long climb they came out into a small glade, through which trickled a tiny stream. The boys drank greedily of the cool water, and Washington gathered boughs and leaves and soon rigged up a temporary shelter under the trees. Throwing themselves down beneath this, with their coats for pillows, all hands dropped off into a deep sleep.

When Harry awoke it was late afternoon. Bert was sitting up rubbing his eyes. Washington and Mason still slept on.

"I'm getting very tired of this sort of thing, Hal," whispered Bert, "I am afraid I was not cut out for a strenuous life. Do you think there are any Spaniards loafing around in this neighborhood?"

"Let's take a look while the others finish their nap," suggested Harry.

The boys picked up their rifles and cautiously entered the woods, moving from tree to tree and dodging around rocks and boulders in true Indian fashion. The excitement of thus picking their way through the woods caused them to forget that they were proceeding in anything but a direct line, and when they at last bethought themselves, neither could tell in which direction the camp lay behind them.

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They dared not shout, and they looked at each other in dismay.

"We are a brilliant pair," said Bert in disgust. "Now what are we to do? Have you any idea how far we have come, or in what direction?"

"I think I have a general notion. Let's work back anyway."

They faced about and began to make their way as rapidly as possible in the direction from which they believed they had come. Both were pretty well frightened for they realized the danger of becoming separated from their guide in that wild country, aside from the possibility of falling into the hands of Spaniards. In their nervous scare they hurried recklessly on, tripping now and then over trailing vines and plunging head on into thickets. Still they did not come upon the glade from which they had so unwisely strayed.

At last, convinced that they were not proceeding in the right direction, they stopped and tried again to figure out the position of the camp. It was useless. They were now hopelessly lost. Harry looked up at the sun anxiously. It was getting low.

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"It looks as if you and I were in another scrape, Bert," he said, trying to smile.

"We might wander for days without getting out of this labyrinth."

"It's not so bad as that. We can get into the open all right by simply following the mountain down. But I do not know what good that would do us, for we could never find the pass through which we came."

"No, and then there are the Spaniards."

"Well, I suppose the Spaniards are a pretty serious proposition to Washington, who is their natural enemy, but I do not think they would do us much harm. We're American citizens, you know."

"They are not looking for American citizens out here, and we should have a hard time explaining. We couldn't say we came on the *Mariella*."

"No, that would hardly do. Still, we have not done anything to injure Spain, and we were certainly unwilling passengers on the *Mariella*. I do not see how they can do anything very disagreeable."

"Judging from what Captain Dynamite says, they are inclined to consider every one except a Spaniard as an enemy and a Cuban sympathizer." [Pg 129]

"Well, we've got to take some sort of a chance, so we might as well shout."

"All right, both together."

They sent up a "holloa" that rang through the trees.

"Mason—Washington," they shouted. "Answer. We have lost you."

Away in the distance they heard a faint answering call. In their efforts to retrace their steps they had wandered still further from their companions. They could not distinguish the words of the reply, but the sound gave them the direction, and with glad hearts they set off.

Suddenly they heard a crackling in the bushes behind them.

"Quien Vio?" called a voice. Their hearts sank within them. Turning quickly, they looked into the muzzles of four rifles.

"Gee, it's the Spaniards at last," whispered Bert. "Still I don't know but I had rather see them than no one. It was getting mighty lonesome."

"They may be more of Morgan's men," said Harry.

"By jove, that's so. Let's try the countersign on them." [Pg 130]

"Don't," commanded Harry, quickly, catching his arm. "Suppose they were not. The word would convict us at once."

"You're right."

Had Washington been with them he would have recognized the Spanish challenge.

In the meantime the men had advanced, keeping the boys covered with their guns as if they were a pair of desperadoes who might attack them at any moment. They wore old and dirty uniforms, but it was plain that they had once been of regulation color and pattern.

"They are Spaniards fast enough," whispered Harry, as the men approached. "Cubans have no regular uniform." Then to the men he said:

"Good afternoon, gentlemen. We are glad to see you. We are lost out here on your mountain. They are your mountains, I believe. We're Americans, you know."

"Ah, Americanos," said one of the men. "Surrend."

"Yes, Americanos if you prefer it so, but what do you want us to surrender?"

"Surrend," repeated the man, laying his hand roughly on Harry's rifle.

"O, the guns? Certainly. They are of no use to us, apparently."

Harry and Bert believing it to be the best policy to be tractable, held out their guns with amiable smiles. They were snatched rudely from them. When the rifles were safely in the hands of the soldiers, a little fat man whom they had not seen before stepped out of the bushes, where he had evidently intended to remain until the prisoners were disarmed. He was an officer, judging from his side arms, and with great pomposity he now advanced, puffing and blowing, toward the boys. He said something in Spanish to one of the men, who replied: "Americanos." [Pg 131]

"Who you are doing here?" he demanded of Harry.

"O, sir," said Harry, "it is an agreeable surprise to find a gentleman who speaks our language so fluently," and he advanced with hand extended. The little man jumped back as if he feared the boy was about to strike and dodged behind his men, jabbering rapidly in Spanish. Evidently in response to some command, the four men rushed upon the boys and pinioned their hands behind their backs, tying them with gun straps.

"Look here," said Harry, indignantly. "I don't know who you are, but this is an outrage on two American citizens—do you understand?" He walked boldly up to the fat officer as he spoke and

notwithstanding the boy's hands were now tied, the man backed away from him in fright.

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"You will have to answer for this to the United States—do you understand that?" continued Harry.

"Poof to United States," said the little man, snapping his fingers. He then gave another order in Spanish, and two of the men took up a position in front of the boys and two behind. The men in front began to march and those behind prodded the prisoners in the back with their guns, to indicate that they were to go on. There was nothing for the boys to do but submit, and slowly they began the descent of the mountain, the valorous commander keeping well to the rear.

"These are your gentle Spaniards who wouldn't do a thing to you," said Bert, as they marched unwillingly along between their guards.

"O, this pompous little fat man is some subordinate officer who is puffed up with his own importance. We will be all right when we get to headquarters and can see the commanding officer."

"I'm not so sure of that. They do not seem to be bubbling over with kindly respect for the United States."

"Wait till we see the consul. You know O'Connor told us to call for our consul if we got into trouble."

"They may not let us see him."

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"Then we'll—what will we do then, Bert?"

"Then it will be a case of measuring our wits against these fellows', and trying to make our escape. We may be able to get word to Captain Dynamite. Anyway Mason and Washington will probably discover that we have been captured and will go on to the captain."

"Yes, but he has troubles of his own now to attend to."

"Still I do not think he is the man to desert us entirely. He might get his friend Gomez to do something for us."

"Well, a great deal depends on whether we have fallen into the hands of a small or large detachment of Spaniards. If it is only a skirmishing party, Gomez or Morgan might rescue us."

"Let us hope it is a small outfit. I don't like the spirit these chaps show, nor the contempt in which their fat commander seems to hold the United States."

They were now getting near the foot of the mountain. Suddenly Harry clutched Bert's arm.

"What is it?" asked Bert, startled by Harry's movement.

"Don't look to right or left. I just saw the Midget's white face peeking out at us as we passed that last clump of bushes. It's all right now. They know we are prisoners and you can trust Mason for getting a move on." The boys tramped along with lighter hearts now that they were confident that their companion knew of their predicament.

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"I hope they will not get pinched too," said Bert.

"Don't always look on the dark side of things, old chap," said Harry, a little testily. "Cheer up."

They were now in the open country again and made more rapid progress. The Spaniards moved along without any attempt at caution now. They well knew the Cuban methods of warfare, and did not fear an attack in the open. Opposed always by much superior numbers, the insurgents had learned that the only way to successfully cope with their enemy was to keep under cover and prosecute a guerilla warfare.

As they climbed the top of a small hill the boys were surprised to see in front of them the outlying buildings of what seemed to be a town or city of some size and importance. When they approached nearer they found that these buildings were but poor huts or cabins, and formed a sort of irregular, narrow street that led into the town, which was situated about a mile beyond. As they entered the street the character of these shed-like habitations flashed upon the boys. They were the homes of the "reconcentrados" of whom O'Connor had told them. The boys shuddered as they passed them and for a time scarcely dared to look to one side or the other for fear that they might see some horrible sight, so forcibly had O'Connor's description impressed them. Most of the huts were without doors and the interiors were open to a passing view. So hopeless were the miserable inmates that they did not even care to hide their suffering from the heartless eyes of the curious. The men laughed and joked as they passed on and Harry could not but feel that their jests were pointed by the misery of the reconcentrados.

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Finally a horrible curiosity turned their heads and they saw in front of one of the huts a group of four persons. They were a man, a woman, a child of perhaps fourteen, and a babe in its mother's arms. The man lay stretched at full length on his back at the roadside. His eyes, which were open, were turned upward to the sky. The woman sat with her back to the mud wall of the hut. Her eyes were fixed on the man at her feet. The child stood in the doorway looking with expressionless eyes out into space. The few rags that covered them only served to emphasize the emaciation of their bodies and limbs. It needed no trained eye to tell that they were starving. As the party passed, not one of the four changed position or once turned their eyes. In their mute

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suffering they seemed unconscious of their surroundings.

One of the guards looked and laughed brutally.

Harry tugged at his bonds. In his fierce indignation he would have struck down the man.

Finally they passed out of this street of misery and entered the town. The boys had forgotten their own troubles in the contemplation of the suffering of the unhappy creatures behind them. The guards who had been slouching along at a swinging gait now straightened up and assumed a more soldierly air. At a word of command from their fat commander they halted before a building which was more imposing in appearance than its neighbors, and looked to be a public edifice of some sort. They marched, with their prisoners still between them, up the few steps that led to a wide doorway and into a large room on the right, where an officer was reclining in a lounging chair, lazily puffing a cigarette. It was now growing dark outside and the room was dimly lighted by a lamp that stood on the flat desk in front of the only occupant.

The man straightened himself up as the squad entered, and the little commander saluted with great deference.

"I told you so," said Harry, who noticed the air of deep respect that now marked their captor. [Pg 137]
"The little fat man is only an understrapper. Now we shall have a hearing."

While the little officer reported to his superior, the latter looked the boys over with some apparent curiosity. He asked a few questions and then uttering something that sounded like a judicial decision, he sank back in his chair again and lighted another cigarette.

The guard faced about, prodded the boys in the back again with their guns to indicate that they were to move on, and the procession filed out into the street again. For a moment the boys could scarcely realize that they were to have no hearing, and then Harry turned to the fat man indignantly.

"Are we not to be permitted to tell our story?" he demanded. "Where are you taking us? I demand a hearing as an American citizen in the presence of the American consul."

The little man, who evidently understood much of what he said, chuckled, and the men, taking their cue from their commander, jabbed the boys once more in the back.

"It's no use, Hal," said Bert. "We might as well wait and see what they intend to do with us."

They passed from one narrow street to another until they again halted in front of a building [Pg 138]
whose narrow windows were closely barred.

"Looks uncomfortably like a jail," said Harry, as he surveyed the white front of the gloomy structure. A door on the level with the street opened, the guns prodded the boys in the back again, and they entered through the low portal into a dark corridor. The door closed behind them and they found they were alone with a black-bearded man who carried a bunch of large keys that jangled unpleasantly.

He motioned silently for the boys to follow him, and as they had no choice in the matter, they did so. At the end of the corridor the man opened a door and pointed in. The boys entered and the door swung to behind them silently.

It was almost dark, but through the barred window of the room just enough twilight crept to show the boys that they were in a room that contained only a wooden table, two chairs, and two low wooden beds.

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CHAPTER XII

ON TO GOMEZ

When Mason and Washington awoke and discovered that their companions were missing, the negro became greatly excited.

"You stay here, Misser Midget," he said. "I go see if I can find 'em. They get lost in these woods, or caught by Spaniards. Don't you move 'til George Wash Jenks come back or you get lost too."

Washington took his rifle and disappeared among the trees, while Mason anxiously paced the small glade. The time passed slowly and the boy's nerves were strung to their highest tension. He started at the smallest rustle of the leaves in the trees around him, and began to imagine all sorts of disagreeable possibilities. What if Washington should be unable to find his way back or should fall into the hands of the Spaniards? And what if the Spaniards should discover him before Washington returned. His excited mind began to reflect pictures of a lone boy starving to death in the woods. And then the picture would change and he would be struggling against an overwhelming number of Spaniards, who would seize and bind him and rush him off to suffer the horrors of the inquisition. [Pg 140]

Suddenly in the distance he heard the boys' shout. It sent the blood tingling through his veins. At least he was not quite alone in the woods while his companions were within hailing distance. He

sent up a glad cry in response. Again came the shout and again he replied, and then with his heart more at ease, he sat down on a rock and waited for them to appear.

There was a slight crackling in the bushes behind him. He turned quickly. Washington burst into the clearing, his eyes bulging with excitement.

"Quick, Misser Midget," he said, seizing the boy's arm and dragging him off into the thicket.

"Spaniards got Misser Harry and Misser Bert and comin' this way."

Crouching low in the bushes, they saw the prisoners marched by and were helpless to aid them. Once Washington gripped his gun and made a movement to dash out of cover, but his better sense prevailed.

"No use," he whispered. "Spaniards too many and must be more close by."

When the party was well down the mountain, Washington pushed aside the bushes and straightened up. Turning to Mason, who was pale from excitement, he said: "Now we make tracks for Massa Cap'n Dynamite. They take Missers where they take Missee Juanita. Massa cap'n he come back with one—two—three hundred men and he and Cap'n Morgan they make 'em sorry."

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As there seemed to be nothing else to do but to seek reinforcements, Mason, with a heavy heart picked up his bundle and his rifle, and followed Washington through the woods. Their progress was slow, as the negro proceeded now with more caution. Darkness soon came upon them and made their advance still more difficult. The route that Washington was following often necessitated a climb up the almost perpendicular face of a rock as the mountain became more precipitous. Mason's hands bled from contact with the rough rocks, and he panted for breath. Still Washington pushed on, and when morning broke they found themselves at the top of the mountain.

"Take short rest," said Washington, unslinging his pack and sitting down with his back to a boulder. "Eat a bite and Wash make some coffee. Heap easier goin' down mountain."

"But you said there was still another mountain to climb, Washington," said Mason, wearily.

"Yas, sah, but Cubitas and Massa Cap'n Dynamite on top that one. May meet 'em comin' down with one—two—three hundred men."

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"I hope we meet them at the foot, Washington. I do not long for another climb like this one."

"Pretty tough one, suah 'nough, sah."

The descent was of course much easier than the climb, but nevertheless they found many obstacles in their way, and as caution dictated that they should keep well aside from any open trail, their progress down the mountain was scarcely more rapid than their climb had been. But they had the advantage of daylight and passed over the rough places with fewer bruises and cuts. They made one more short stop at about noon, and then pushed on again although the sun was now excessively hot, even as it filtered through the thick foliage. It was late afternoon when they reached the bottom of the mountain and entered the valley between the two ranges of hills. This valley was about a mile wide and through it flowed a narrow stream. The shores were wooded, but the rest of the country was an open plain. They waded the little river, and as they were about to clamber out on the other side, the familiar challenge rang out:

"Alto!"

"That General Gomez man. Say password," said Washington.

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"Independencia," said Mason, with a slight quaver in his voice.

These unexpected challenges from invisible sentinels were somewhat wearing on the nerves. They passed on without interference.

"Where was that man stationed, Washington?" asked Mason.

"Up top of head in big tree," chuckled the negro. "Good place to pop over Spaniard if he comes along. Not get by the next one so easy."

Washington was right. When they reached the foot of the mountain they were again challenged, and although Mason promptly gave the countersign, they were at once surrounded by a dozen armed men, who talked rapidly in Spanish. Washington, who spoke the language imperfectly, explained that they were the bearers of an important message for Captain Dynamite, and after many conferences aside and further questioning, two men were told off to accompany them, and they were allowed to proceed practically as prisoners.

"All right now," said Washington, with a broad grin. "Got a suah 'nough body guard."

A wide, well-used trail made the ascent of this mountain comparatively easy. When they reached the top, Mason was surprised to find a small settlement in the middle of which was a large, low, wooden building, all four sides of which were patrolled by sentinels. Toward this building their guard headed. They entered through a wide doorway and found themselves in a large, square room, with three other occupants. It was now quite dark, so that for a moment Mason did not recognize Captain Dynamite as one of the men. The three were in earnest converse at a long

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table, and for some time did not notice the new comers, who paused on the threshold.

"That Massa Cap'n Dynamite, General Gomez, and President Betancourt," said Washington, pointing to the notable group.

Mason looked with interest at the old general who stood at the head of the table. He was easily distinguished because of his military bearing and accoutrements, for the grizzled warrior had one little weakness—a love of display. He was a much smaller man than Mason expected to see, but there was that in his rugged, tanned face and firm chin that at once commanded respect and attention. He bore his seventy odd years lightly and his slight form was as straight as a ramrod. His uniform, unlike those of his faithful followers, was immaculately spotless. His carbine, on which he rested, was gold mounted; the sabre at his side was elegantly chased and decorated, and the silver on his pistol handles glittered in the waning light. As he turned his eyes on the group in the doorway, his heavy iron-grey eyebrows contracted into a scowl and he spoke quickly to O'Connor. The latter turned and started from his chair angrily. [Pg 145]

"What are you doing here?" he demanded.

"If you please, Massa Cap'n, ah——"

"Let me explain, Wash," said Mason, advancing a step when he felt the hand of one of the guards fall heavily on his shoulder. "I think, captain," he continued, pointing to the man, "that we can get along now without the protection of these gentlemen."

O'Connor waved his hand and the two men saluted and filed out.

Mason advanced boldly to the table and facing O'Connor, said:

"Captain Dynamite, you should not blame Washington. It is his love for you and Miss Juanita that brings him here."

"I suppose you are right, boy," said the captain, still scowling, "but I am in great trouble and I do not like to have my plans interfered with. But what brings you here?"

"Well, we heard that you were in trouble, and as Washington was going to join you, we thought we would come along, too, and be of what assistance we could." [Pg 146]

The scowl faded from the man's face. He turned to General Gomez and spoke to him in Spanish. When he had finished, the old warrior looked the Midget over from head to foot and the stern lines of his face broke into a genial smile, gentle and reassuring. O'Connor stepped forward, and taking Mason's hand, shook it warmly.

"I thank you, my boy, for your good intentions. You must have made excellent time over a rough and dangerous road, for you are here close at my heels. And your journey has left its marks, I see," he said, as he noticed Mason's cut and bruised face and hands, and his torn clothing. "But where are your friends?"

"The Spaniards have got 'em," said Mason, laconically.

O'Connor looked first at the boy as if he thought it a joke, and then at Washington, in whose troubled face he read confirmation.

"Yas, Massa Cap'n; Spaniards got 'em, suah 'nough," said Washington, nodding his head vigorously in the affirmative.

"When, where, how did it happen?" asked O'Connor, rapidly.

"It was on the far side of the fust mountain, after we pass the fust clearing. Boys left the camp and before George Wash Jenks could find 'em 'long came Spaniards and snapped 'em up." [Pg 147]

"Why did you let them leave the camp, you rascal? You know this country too well for that."

"Went while George Wash Jenks was asleep," answered the negro sheepishly.

"Well, where did they take them?"

"Leettle town 'bout mile down clearing, ah 'spect."

"Humph! You don't know, then?"

"George Wash Jenks think it best to come to Massa Cap'n and not go snoopin' after Spaniard in the open. Got cotched too."

"Yes, I guess you are right. Now, what is to be done? I wonder if the boys will know enough to keep their tongues still about the *Mariella*?" The captain looked questioningly at Mason as he spoke.

"You needn't fear, sir, that they will say or do anything likely to get you into trouble," said the boy, promptly.

O'Connor smiled at the boy's defence of his comrades.

"I was not thinking of myself, my boy; but if it were known that they were in any way connected with the expedition of the *Mariella* it might go hard with them."

"I think they will understand that, sir."

"Now, the next question is how to aid them. I think my own mission lies in their direction. But you need freshening up a bit, and I'll wager you are hungry. I will send a man with you to my quarters. You will find soap and water there and a tin basin. The accommodations are a little primitive and not quite up to the *Mariella's*, but you can get some of the dirt out of those cuts. We will sup here when you are ready. Washington, you know the way to the mess-room. Go and fill up that empty stomach of yours and then return to me. You go back to Captain Morgan in an hour."

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"O, Massa Cap'n, not goin' to send George Wash Jenks back?"

"You will be best serving me, Washington. You will bear a dispatch of the utmost importance. It must be in Captain Morgan's hands within thirty-six hours in order that he may co-operate with us. I know of no other man who knows the road well enough to cover it in that time. You will also act as an escort to Miss Juanita's mother and her attendants."

Proud of the distinction and eager to serve his master, as he insisted upon calling O'Connor, the negro straightened up.

"Message shall be there, sah. Missee Juanita's mother shall have escort, too."

O'Connor called an orderly and sent him with Mason to his quarters. After washing and tidying up his tattered clothing as well as he could, the boy returned to the military headquarters, where the three men were again in earnest conference. O'Connor motioned to a big wooden settee at one end of the room. Mason stretched out on this and, utterly worn out, his eyes closed and in five minutes he had dropped off into a heavy slumber.

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For half an hour longer the men continued their conference, and then, having come to some unanimous conclusion, they rose from the table. O'Connor, seeing the sleeping boy, stepped over to the settee and removing his coat, rolled it up and placed it gently under his head. Then, with a military salute to President Betancourt, he and General Gomez passed out of the building.

Mason was suddenly awakened by the shouts of men and the jangling of guns and sabres. He sat up quickly and rubbed his eyes, looking around the room in a bewildered manner. At first the train of recent events would not form themselves properly in his mind. He could not for a moment recall the room in which he found himself, or how he got there. The moonlight was streaming in at the low open windows and fell upon the long table at which again sat the three men, while an orderly stood silently behind the chair of the general. They were apparently eating, and hunger gnawing at the boy's stomach dulled any sense of delicacy and he rose and walked directly to the table.

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"I think you said we would sup here, Captain," he said.

O'Connor turned and motioned to the orderly to bring a chair.

"I certainly did, my boy, but seeing you asleep I thought I would not disturb you at present. Sit down, and while you eat tell me all you know of the capture of the boys and the movements of their captors."

Mason told the details of the boys' capture and O'Connor repeated it in Spanish to Gomez and Betancourt. In the meantime outside of the building all was confusion, and through the open door and windows the boy could see that armed men were rapidly gathering in response to the loud commands of leaders. As fast as one squad or company formed, it moved off and down the mountain trail by which Mason and Washington had approached the plateau. Another squad began forming at once. There seemed to be a constant stream of men pouring down the mountain side.

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CHAPTER XIII

HARRY REFUSES TO BETRAY CAPTAIN DYNAMITE

Harry and Bert had hardly time to inspect the bare room in which they were imprisoned, when the door opened again and two men entered. They removed the straps from the boys' wrists and retired without a word. A key grated in the lock after the door had closed. Harry walked over quickly and tried to open it. There was no handle or lock on the inside and it would not yield to pressure.

"Well," said Harry, after a short silence, dropping onto one of the beds.

"Well," repeated Bert in the same half-questioning tone.

"We are prisoners hard and fast. What do you think they mean to do with us?"

"Send us on to Havana, maybe, for the inspection of Weyler. But in the meantime what are we going to do? I don't believe in letting them have it all their own way, do you?"

"No, not when I can get my breath, but their methods are so rapid and one-sided that they make

me dizzy."

"The first thing to consider is some plan of escape."

"And if we escaped we wouldn't be any better off than we were in the woods. We wouldn't know where to go. However, it would be wise to make a more careful inspection of our prison house for possible future use." [Pg 152]

Acting on this suggestion the boys made a survey of the room. It was a square apartment, with walls of grey stone. The floor was composed of smooth stone slabs. The ceiling was heavily timbered. There were two barred openings in one of the walls just above their heads. They pushed over the table, and climbing up on it, looked out. In the moonlight, they could see that the outlook was on what was apparently the jail yard, a large space enclosed by a high wall. Nothing interposed between them and the free air outside but two iron bars. They shook these with all their strength, but they were sunk firmly in the stone frame and would not budge.

"I don't think they need feel uneasy, for fear we will escape," said Harry, after they had finished their inspection.

"Nothing left but to knock down the turnkey. Must always call 'em turnkeys in a stone jail like this."

There was a sound of a key in the lock and the door swung open again. The man with the clanking keys entered, followed by two others, who promptly slipped a pair of handcuffs on the wrists of the boys, and taking each boy by the arm they led them out of the jail and back to the building into which they had first been ushered at the muzzles of the guns. [Pg 153]

The same dignitary who had ordered their incarceration still sat at his desk, although in a more dignified attitude. At his right, sat a man who seemed to be a clerk. On the left, stood the fat officer and the four soldiers. An elderly man with grey side-whiskers stood near the desk talking with the presiding personage. When the boys entered he approached them and held out his hand.

"I am Consul Wyman. I understand you are Americans and in some sort of trouble."

Both boys grasped his hand warmly. It was a great relief to find one who spoke their tongue and who could make their situation clear to their captors. And the thought that he represented officially the Government of the United States, restored much of their waning confidence in themselves.

"Mr. Wyman," said Harry, "we certainly are glad to meet you. We are Americans and we are in trouble with these Spanish gentlemen. We do not know why yet. We did not know it was a crime, or against the laws to travel in Cuba or we should have selected some other country for our explorations." [Pg 154]

"The trouble is that your presence in this part of the island strikes the authorities as suspicious. You have apparently passed through none of the regular ports of entry, for a careful watch is kept on all strangers here now, and travelling through a country so infested as this is with Cuban bandits——"

"Bandits?" interrupted Harry, looking Mr. Wyman straight in the eye. Captain Dynamite's teachings had taken very deep root in the heart of the American boys.

"Well," said Mr. Wyman, "they call themselves insurgents, but they are not recognized belligerents you know." Here Mr. Wyman lowered his voice almost to a whisper: "And you know we have to be very diplomatic in dealing with these Spanish gentlemen, they are so sensitive."

"Mr. Wyman," asked Harry, "are you an American or a Spaniard?"

"Oh, an American—an American always," replied the consul, proudly.

"Then it seems to me, sir, that you should not let the Spaniards select your words for you," said Harry, with some indignation.

"Ah, diplomacy, my son, diplomacy," said the consul, drawing himself up with comical dignity. "You do not understand the need for diplomacy. Why, I was selected by our President for this delicate mission, because of my large experience in matters diplomatic. But let us return to your own affairs. I see the general is getting nervous. This is the Bureau of Justice and I shall see that you have an impartial hearing." [Pg 155]

"Bureau of Justice," sniffed Bert. "Humph, a pretty one-sided old bureau. I should say it had lost a castor or two."

"Ah, you misjudge General Serano," said Mr. Wyman. "He is an exceedingly fair-minded gentleman."

The consul stepped before the desk of the general and beckoned to the boys to follow him. He spoke in Spanish for a few minutes, and then turned to the boys again.

"The general will examine only one. He thinks that will be sufficient."

"Very well," said Harry, stepping up to the desk. "I will go the general one round."

"My young sir," said Mr. Wyman, with some concern, "let me advise you to treat the court with

due deference. This gentleman will act as interpreter, as I understand you do not speak or understand the language."

A man with a heavy black mustache waxed to needle points, and who seemed to wear a perpetual smile, took a position beside Harry, and the examination began.

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"What is your name?"

"Harry Hamilton."

"Your age?"

"Fifteen."

"Your nationality?"

"American," answered Harry, "but look here, Mr. Interpreter, I wish you would ask the general what right he has to ask me these questions; why I was interfered with by his soldiers; why I was prodded in the back by their guns; why I was thrust into your old prison; why I am handcuffed, and why I am here; and just tell him firmly, Mr. Interpreter, that I do not propose to answer any more of his questions until he answers a few of mine."

The clerk, who was transcribing the testimony looked up in amazement as the interpreter began to literally and faithfully translate Harry's words. Mr. Wyman looked worried and leaned forward, and said:

"Treat the court with due deference, my young sir, or even my diplomacy may not be powerful enough to save you from the wrath of the general."

"I think I must have a few rights here, Mr. Wyman. I certainly have a right to know with what crime I am charged before I am examined."

"Yes, yes, that is quite true, quite true," replied the consul, advancing to the desk and speaking to the general.

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"You are charged with being suspicious characters," said the interpreter, repeating the words of the presiding officer.

"Oh, thank you," said Harry, politely. "You can now tell the judge he may proceed."

The interpreter wisely refrained from repeating Harry's words.

"What are you doing in Cuba?"

"Travelling."

"How many were there in your party?"

"Now, that's such a foolish question, general; that little fat officer there knows there were only two of us. In fact, here we are; you can see for yourself."

"How did you reach Cuba?"

"By steamer."

"Where did you land?"

"On the coast."

"General Serano says your answers are not satisfactory," said the interpreter.

"Surely he wants me to tell him the truth," said Harry, affecting surprise.

"Yes, but he wants all the truth."

"I have answered his questions truthfully and directly. If he wants further information and doesn't know how to ask for it, he cannot expect the prisoner to supply the questions."

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"At what point or place on the coast of Cuba did you land?"

"I do not know."

"Does your companion know?"

"He is as densely ignorant on that point as I am."

"What was the name of the steamer?"

"I refuse to answer."

The little fat officer poked one of his soldiers in the ribs in a very unmilitary fashion, and the general looked at the consul with an expression that said, "I told you so." The consul himself looked at Harry in honest amazement.

"Do you refuse to answer on the ground that you might incriminate yourself?"

"No, on the ground that I might incriminate someone else," answered Harry, promptly.

"Who is that someone else?"

"Now, general, that is another one of those foolish questions. If I could answer one I could answer the other."

"Then you refuse again?"

"I do."

"Will you tell the court why you came to Cuba?"

"Because I had to. I assure you we are not travelling for our health, and would have been very glad to have been back in the United States long before we met your little fat officer on the mountain." [Pg 159]

"Then why did you come?"

"To be perfectly frank, general, we were out yachting off Martha's Vineyard—I don't suppose you know where that is—when a steamer ran us down during a storm, picked us up, and brought us along to Cuba—that's all."

"And you still persist in refusing to give the name of the steamer?"

"Yes, sir, but with due respect to the court," Harry smiled pleasantly at the consul. He looked upon the examination as a mere farce, and did not now regard their position as at all serious. Although he did not consider the consul a particularly forceful representative of the United States, he felt confident that the Spanish general would not dare to ignore his demands. Could he have foreseen the occurrences of the next few days he would not have felt so easy in his mind. The general turned again and addressed the boy.

"According to your testimony," repeated the interpreter, "your presence here on the island is entirely accidental, therefore it is difficult to reconcile this testimony with your refusal to answer the simple questions of the court. In this I wish to say that your consul and representative here concurs with me. I now warn you that you must answer the questions that I am about to ask you or take the consequences that your refusal will entail. Personally, I believe that you could, if you would, clear yourself and your companion of all suspicion, and if your explanation of your presence on board this mysterious steamer is true, and I believe it is, your refusal to answer the questions will only further complicate the case against you." [Pg 160]

"The general is quite right, my boy," said the consul earnestly. "You can see that he means to give you every opportunity to clear yourself."

"Very well, sir. Suppose you have another try," said Harry, turning to General Serano. "I assure you that I will answer any question that I honorably can."

"Very well: I repeat, what is the name of the steamer that brought you to Cuba?"

"I cannot answer," replied Harry, promptly.

"Remember, I have warned you. At what place on the coast did you land?"

"I have told you, general, that I do not know."

"How far from here in miles?"

"I couldn't even guess that, general."

"How long had you been away from the steamer when my men found you?"

"I cannot answer."

"Do you mean that you are unable to answer, or that you refuse?"

"I refuse."

"Where were you going?"

"To tell the plain truth we were very well lost when your friend there overtook us."

"But you had an objective point that you were trying to reach. What was that?"

"I cannot answer."

"Very well; you may step aside."

After a few words from General Serano, the interpreter turned to Bert, and said:

"Step forward, please. The general wishes to ask you a few questions also."

"All right," answered Bert, stepping promptly to the front.

"You have heard the questions that have been asked your companion?"

"Yes, sir."

"And you have heard those that he refused to answer?"

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"Yes, sir."

"Will you answer them?"

"No, sir."

The answer was apparently not unexpected. The general and the consul began an earnest conversation in Spanish. The latter seemed to protest against the decision of General Serano who, however, was set and determined. Finally, Mr. Wyman turned to the boys. [Pg 162]

"I am very sorry," he said, "that for some reason which I cannot conceive you will not satisfactorily answer the questions of the court. I have endeavored to have you paroled in my custody, but the general will not permit it."

"Do you mean that we are to be sent back to jail?" asked Harry, in surprise.

"That is the general's intention. It is not too late for you to answer his questions, though, and I am sure that if you do, you will be promptly released."

"And has the United States Consul no power or authority?"

"He has the power to see that you have a fair and impartial hearing. You have had that, and must blame only yourselves for the position in which you now find yourselves. I shall not desert you, and if you care to make a confidant of me, perhaps I can suggest some way to extricate you from this tangle."

"We will take a little time to think the matter over, Mr. Wyman, thank you. It is not alone ourselves who are involved, or would be involved, if we attempted now to clear ourselves."

General Serano now indicated that he wished to speak to the prisoners, and the consul fell back. [Pg 163]

"Young men," repeated the interpreter, "the conditions in Cuba are such, and particularly in this province, that the utmost vigilance is necessary on the part of the authorities. Your explanation of the suspicious circumstances under which you are detained is entirely unsatisfactory to me. You are found alone in a country infested by men who are in revolt against the Government, travelling with seeming security; you admit having landed on the coast from a steamer whose name you refuse to tell; you are apparently headed for the center of the insurgent uprising. You will not tell where you are going or from whence you come. It is my duty to hold you, and you are therefore remanded to jail pending a further investigation. Perhaps in a few hours, or say to-morrow, you may be willing to answer my questions, in which case you may so inform your consul, and he will take such steps as are necessary to reopen the hearing. I am sorry that you will not be guided by the more mature mind of Mr. Wyman in a matter that may be more serious in its consequences than you imagine."

The general waved his hand, and the fat officer, with a malignant smile of triumph marshalled his men and approached Harry and Bert with the muzzles of their guns once more extended toward them. A sharp word from General Serano caused them to lower their guns and assume a less dictatorial manner toward the prisoners. [Pg 164]

Once more the boys were conducted to the gloomy white jail and the doors of their prison room closed upon them.

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CHAPTER XIV

THE SECRET PASSAGE

Two men entered the room shortly after the door had closed on the boys, and removed the handcuffs. They passed out in the same silent manner, and the prisoners were left alone again. There was no light in the room, but the moonbeams entered through the barred windows, and cast two streaks of light across the floor that was sufficient to enable the boys to see almost as well as by daylight. They each sat down dejectedly upon a bed and for a long time neither uttered a word. Harry was trying to think out the true meaning of their position, which began to assume a more serious phase to him. There was no element of play in it, now.

He reviewed his recent examination by General Serano, and wished he had not assumed quite so nonchalant an air, although he felt that he could not have answered the questions which would perhaps involve the safety of Captain Dynamite. They were unquestionably in a disagreeable situation. He realized that if he were to tell the entire truth they would be immediately released, but the truth would at once set the Spaniards on the heels of O'Connor, and Harry could not forget the personal risk the man had taken to save their lives after he had run them down, nor the kindness with which they, as unbidden guests on his ship, had been treated. To betray his confidence would be a dastardly act, for, even if he could have doubted the words of O'Connor, the actions of the commander of the gunboat were sufficient to indicate that it would go hard with the intrepid skipper of the *Mariella* if he should fall into the hands of the Spaniards. [Pg 166]

Mason and Washington were still to be counted on. He felt sure that they would continue on their way to O'Connor and that he would make some move to effect their rescue. There was one strong

objection to waiting for O'Connor. Whatever plan he might adopt for their relief must necessarily be attended by violence, for in no other way could he approach their captors, except it be by strategy, and there seemed to be no chance of escape in that way.

He feared for O'Connor's sake to take the consul into their confidence, except as a last resort. While he had the utmost respect for the man's integrity he feared the influence of General Serano. At all events there was nothing that could be done to-night. He turned to Bert who was sitting in an equally dejected frame of mind on the edge of his bed with his head in his hands.

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"Let's turn in, Bert, old man. Things may be brighter in the morning."

"I don't see much hope. Do you think Captain Dynamite would care if we told that Spanish gentleman the whole truth as to how we came here?"

"No, I don't," replied Harry, indignantly. "If O'Connor could advise us I know the man well enough to believe that the first thing he would tell us to do would be to make a clean breast of everything. But I would hate to say what I should think of myself, or of you, if either of us did such a thing. Why man, you know as well as I do that it would set the Spaniards after him like a pack of hounds on the trail. And you know there is a price on his head and a big one, too. Don't let any more such bubbles get into your think tank or you and I will have to part company."

"You are right, Hal," said Bert, sheepishly. "I didn't think of the danger to him."

"Well, then, let's go to bed."

The boys threw off only their outer clothing and lay down on the hard husk mattresses and were soon fast asleep notwithstanding the uncertainty and danger of their predicament.

The place was in almost total darkness when Harry awakened suddenly and sat bolt upright in bed. He listened for a moment intently, as if for the repetition of the sound that had awakened him.

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"What was it, I wonder. Something must have wakened me."

He sat motionless for a long time, but not a sound broke the stillness of the night.

"I know I heard something," he said to himself as he dropped back on the bed again. He could not sleep, however, for the sense that he had been awakened by a strange sound, and the mental effort that he had made to catch a repetition of it, had completely aroused him. He lay on his back looking up into the darkness when he heard a sound like a smothered sigh.

"Bert," he whispered, as he sprang up and sat on the edge of his bed, "was that you?"

"What's that? What's the matter, old man?" asked Bert, aroused from his sleep.

"Was that you?"

"Was what me—what's the matter with you, Hal?"

"Have you been awake?"

"No, not until you called me."

"Then you didn't sigh?"

"Not unless it was in my sleep."

"This wasn't a sleepy sigh."

"Say, Hal, what is the matter with you? You make me feel creepy."

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"I heard a sigh."

Bert groped his way over to Harry's bed and sat down beside him.

"Say, old man, you're not asleep, are you?"

"No; Listen! There it is again."

The boys drew closer together and put out their hands until they touched one another. The sound they heard seemed to come from nowhere in particular.

"What do you think it is, Hal?"

"I don't know. Wait until we hear it again."

By this time their eyes had become accustomed to the darkness of the room, and aided by the star-lighted sky, they could see into every corner. There was no one in the room. Somewhat reassured they waited. The next time the sound was an unmistakable sob, and it seemed to be wafted through the barred windows on the still night air.

"I know what it is," said Harry, eagerly jumping from the bed and pulling the table under the window. "It's some one in the cell next to ours. Let's try to talk to him."

"He's probably a Spaniard or a Cuban, and will not be able to understand you."

"I'm going to try, anyway. Misery loves company, you know."

Harry mounted the table and put his face between the bars.

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"Hist," he said.

A low moaning cry answered him.

"Bert, it's a woman," said Harry, turning in amazement to his companion, who now mounted the table beside him.

"How do you know?"

"Couldn't you hear? It was a woman's voice."

"Hist," said Harry, again, as loudly as he dared. "Who are you? Can we help you in any way?"

He hardly expected a reply for he felt, as did Bert, that they would not find any other English-speaking prisoners confined there. His surprise was great therefore, when a low voice, with just a suspicion of soft Spanish accent, asked:

"Who are you?"

"We are two American boys who would like to assist you if we can."

"Are you prisoners also?"

"We are."

"Then I fear you can be of little assistance to me, but I thank you very much for your interest. What have they shut you up for; are you friends of the insurgents?"

"We have one very good friend among them, but until we met him we did not know an insurgent from a Spanish regular. May I ask what offense you have committed against the laws of this fussy country?"

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"I am a Cuban," said the soft voice, with a little gasping sob.

"Is that a crime?"

"Yes; to be a true Cuban."

"O, I see. You are what they call a sympathizer."

"Yes."

"How long have you been here?"

"I have lost count of the days and nights. I think a week."

"Have they ill-treated you?"

"Not yet, but they threaten to if I do not give them the information they seek, to-morrow."

"What do they want to know that you can tell them?"

"Much, very much, about the insurgent arms."

"And you will tell them to-morrow?"

"Not to-morrow—not ever."

The voice was low and full of tears, but there was a ring of determination that told of a strong heart despite her woman's weakness.

"Hooray," whispered Bert. "Good for you."

"And have you no friends who can aid you?"

"Yes, one, but he may even now be dead or dying in a Spanish dungeon. It is for him I weep, not for myself. There is a price upon his head."

"What," said the boys in a breath.

"Is he Captain Dynamite of the *Mariella*?" asked Harry, excitedly.

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"He is sometimes called so. His name is Michael O'Connor. What do you know of him?"

The woman's voice trembled with excitement.

"Hoop la," whispered Harry, hardly able to refrain from shouting. "Captain Dynamite is not in any dungeon cell, Miss Juanita, and if I am not mistaken he is already devising some plan with Gomez to effect your rescue."

"Who are you," whispered the girl in amazement, "who know O'Connor and my name so well?"

"I told you, Miss Juanita, that we had one friend among the Cubans; that is Captain Dynamite. We made the last trip with him on the *Mariella*, though not willingly. We'll tell you that story some other time when you are well out of this."

"He was well?" nervously whispered the girl.

"Yes, until he got the dispatch from Gomez telling him that you had been captured. Then he was off to Cubitas like a shot in the middle of the night. We were trying to join him when they nabbed us."

"But they have not learned from you where he is?"

"Miss Juanita, you wrong us. We do not betray our friends."

"Oh, and it is because you will not betray him that you are here. I kiss your hands."

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"Permit us to kiss yours—figuratively—Miss Juanita," said Harry, gallantly, while Bert gulped down a lump in his throat when he thought of his suggestion to tell the Spanish general the truth.

"But I wouldn't have done it, Hal, old man," he said, involuntarily.

"Wouldn't have done what?"

"Not when it came right down to bed rock."

"What are you talking about, Bert?"

"Oh, nothing. I was just thinking."

"Well, don't think so loud unless you are going to take me into your confidence. Any chance of getting out of that dungeon cell of yours, Miss Juanita?"

"None."

At this moment they heard the sound of regular footsteps outside.

"Sh," whispered the voice. "It is the guard. Go away from the window."

The boys jumped down from the table, and as they did so, Bert stumbled and fell heavily against the wall. When he recovered his balance they heard a strange grinding sound like a heavy door creaking on rusty hinges. The boys listened in wonder.

"Gee, but this is a creepy old place," said Bert, as the noise continued. "Now, what do you suppose that is?"

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"It sounds as if it came from the wall there. Let's investigate."

They moved nervously over to the stone wall that separated their prison room from that of Miss Juanita. The noise seemed nearer and more distinct, but they could see nothing that might cause it. Still the strange sound continued. In the semi-darkness they watched in wonderment the blank face of the wall from which the sound seemed to proceed. Suddenly Harry seized Bert by the arm.

"Look!" he whispered in a tense voice. He pointed to a large stone in about the centre of the wall. "Doesn't it move?"

The stone to which Harry referred was larger than any other, being three feet square, and placed about waist-high from the floor. Bert watched intently. It seemed to him that he could see a slight trembling movement and then an almost imperceptible jump as the hand of an electric clock advances with a jerk. The face of the stone, too, seemed to be out of line with the others.

They advanced closer, and Harry passed his hand cautiously under the stone. Unquestionably it had moved, either by accident or design. The upper edge projected into the room beyond the line of the wall at least an inch and the lower edge receded in the same way. As Harry's hand rested on the stone he felt it tremble and jump and the upper edge advanced another quarter of an inch into the room.

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"That stone is revolving on a horizontal axis," said Harry, confidently, after his inspection. "Now the question is: How and why?"

"It seems uncomfortably like the times of the inquisition," said Bert, shuddering.

"Oh, pshaw, don't you see that wall separates us from the cell of Miss Juanita, and the Spaniards would have nothing to do with opening this passage?"

"Do you think she is doing it, then?"

"No, for had she known of the stone she would have mentioned it when I asked her if there was any chance of escape from her prison. It has come about through an accident, I feel sure, but how? Of course there must be some secret spring that works it, but where is it and how and by whom has it been operated?"

"Hal, I believe I did it," whispered Bert, excitedly.

"What on earth do you mean?"

"You know when I jumped down from the table I fell against the wall. It was immediately after that we heard the creaking."

"Thunder, you are right. You must have touched the spring."

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"I think so. Let's look for it."

The boys carefully examined the wall near the place where Bert had stumbled, and to the left of the revolving stone they found a small, diamond-shaped stone that to the casual observer would appear to have been set in the wall to fill in the broken corner of one of the larger stones. Upon close inspection they found that it was set loosely in the wall without mortar. They dared not touch it for fear it might stop the invisible machinery that it had evidently set in motion.

Slowly the stone continued its unsteady revolution, until at the end of about five minutes the creaking stopped, there was a clicking sound as if a cog had settled into place, and all movement ceased. The big slab, which was six inches thick, had now obtained a horizontal position, leaving an opening above and below into the next room, or cell. The axis upon which the stone revolved was a little above the centre, so that the lower opening was nearly eighteen inches high.

The boys peered through into the darkness of the next cell.

"Miss Juanita," called Harry, softly. "May we come in? Perhaps this scheme of opening walls may continue through to the outside world."

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CHAPTER XV

THE EXECUTION AT DAWN

"Who is there?" came a frightened voice from the farthest corner of the room.

"It's the American boys who were talking with you at the window," answered Harry, reassuringly. "We are friends. Do not fear."

"Oh," came in a gasp of relief. "I thought they were about to inflict some new horror upon me. What have you done?"

"We do not quite know ourselves. In some way we touched a secret spring that rolled over this stone and formed a passage between these two cells. It is just possible that there may be another one. May we come in and look?"

"Yes, yes, come in. Oh, perhaps it is true—perhaps we shall be able to escape from this horrible place."

"Do not hope for too much. It was only a chance thought of mine. However, we better see."

The boys climbed through the opening without difficulty and found themselves in a room exactly similar to the one they had left, except that it was furnished a little more comfortably for a woman.

The moon had set, but they were now so used to the darkness that with the little starlight that penetrated through the barred windows they were able to see quite well. They went at once to the wall directly opposite and began an eager search for a diamond-shaped stone. There was none, nor was there any big slab-like stone resembling the revolving one in the wall through which they had just passed. They tried the other two walls, but also without avail. It was evident that only these two cells were connected.

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"Well, Miss Juanita," said Harry, when they had assured themselves that there was no other opening, "we have only succeeded in widening our prisons. There is no other means of exit but the doors. I am very sorry to have raised your expectations."

The girl, who had followed them eagerly from place to place as they examined the walls, held out her hands in protest at Harry's words.

"Oh, let me thank you for the ray of happiness you have brought me," she said, quickly.

"I can't think that we have in any way lightened your burden, except that you may count on us to do anything in our power to help you, but I fear that is very little."

"Ah, but you brought me news of him and—and the knowledge of the near presence of friends is cheering."

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"Yes, Miss Juanita, and I think you can bank on hearing more news from him in the very near future."

"I hope so for—for all our sakes."

"Now that we are literally up against a stone wall, I think we better climb back into our own cell before the guard takes it into his head to look around. Cheer up, Miss Juanita, Captain Dynamite will be on the march before long, I'll warrant you. Good night."

"Good-night, my friends."

"Now I wonder how the old stone works backwards?" said Harry, when they had returned to their own room.

"Press the button and the stone will do the rest," said Bert, with a grim attempt at humor. He pressed the diamond-shaped stone as he spoke, but there was no answering creak, nor did the slab move.

"It is not likely that the same spring does double duty. We will have to hunt up the other," said Harry. "Now, by all the laws of symmetry there should be another similar stone on the other side of the slab—and here it is."

He pushed on this as he spoke, and at once the grinding sound began again and the stone slowly settled back into place.

"Well, our discovery of the Don's secret inquisitorial passage does not appear to have done us much good," said Bert, as they stretched themselves out on their beds again. [Pg 180]

"I'm not so sure of that," replied Harry, thoughtfully. "I think I see a way by which at least one of us three can benefit by it."

"How?"

"Wait until I get it all thought out. In the meantime I am going to get a little more sleep."

They did not return to their own cell any too soon, for they had no more than turned over for their second nap when a light flashed in their eyes and they sat up to find their silent jailor had opened the door noiselessly and was inspecting the room with the aid of a large lantern. He nodded his head in a satisfied way and passed out again.

"Say, Hal, old man, this sort of thing is getting on my nerves," said Bert, when the man had gone.

"I wouldn't mind a few streaks of daylight myself, Bert."

Tired as they were, the boys' nerves were so worked upon that they were unable to go to sleep again and tossed on their cots until the gray dawn began to show through the windows. They lay in a sort of lethargy watching the sky grow brighter and brighter until they were aroused to action by the loud voices of men and the clanking of guns in the jail yard below. [Pg 181]

"Holloa, I wonder what's up now," said Harry, jumping up and climbing on the table to peer out.

The yard was still full of dark shadows and the forms of men were not fully distinguishable, but Harry could make out a group of armed soldiers standing at ease, chatting and smoking cigarettes near one of the gray walls. An officer, apart from his men, strutted pompously up and down the yard.

"I guess they must be going to drill," said Bert, who had climbed up beside Harry.

"Pretty early for drill."

"Time doesn't seem to cut any figure in this country. I've been doing something night and day ever since we struck the place. I should like to get home to a quiet life again."

Another officer entered the yard and approached the man who paced to and fro. He handed him a paper which the other read, nodded as if in assent, and turning to the men gave an order in a sharp voice. The soldiers fell into a file of threes and at another word of command marched quickly into the jail, the officer following them, leisurely rolling a cigarette.

In another moment the boys heard the tramp of feet at the lower end of the corridor outside of their cell. [Pg 182]

"Are they coming for us, do you think, Hal?" asked Bert, in a tremulous voice.

The footsteps came nearer and nearer. Now they were just outside the door and the boys involuntarily caught their breath. They passed on without stopping and they heard them die away down the passage. Again there was silence and then a sound as if a heavy iron door had been closed with a bang. This was followed again by the regular tramp of the soldiers' feet as they returned along the corridor. They passed the door of the boys' cell and again the sound died away.

Harry turned again to the window. The soldiers filed rapidly into the yard, but this time there was another in their ranks. A man in his shirt sleeves with his hands bound behind his back marched with head erect between the two middle ranks. He was a tall, muscular man, broad of shoulder and lithe of limb. His face was pale, but the expression was calm and determined. His step was firm and the soldiers at his back found no need to urge him on. They marched straight to the wall of the yard that faced the jail, and at a command from the officer, the soldiers parted, leaving the man standing with his back to the wall and facing his captors.

As the soldiers fell back they formed ranks of six on either side of the prisoner, the butts of their rifles resting on the ground. Down this narrow human alley the commander strode until he stood face to face with the man against the wall. He spoke to him in Spanish and the prisoner replied briefly, at the same time lifting his head proudly and looking his questioner firmly in the eye. Although the boys could understand nothing that was said, it was easy to tell that the officer had made some offer which the other proudly rejected. The boys looked on with a feeling that they were about to witness a tragedy, but some strange fascination prevented them from turning away. [Pg 183]

The commander turned to the jail and lifted his hand as a signal. A friar in long solemn robes walked slowly down between the ranks of soldiers, his eyes fixed on the ground. As he reached the prisoner, he stopped in front of him and raised his head. In his thin, worn face there was an expression of gentle sorrow. He spoke a few words and raised a cross before the face of the other, who leaned eagerly forward and kissed it. The friar bowed his head and fell back a few paces. In a low voice he repeated what was apparently a prayer, and then once more holding the cross for a moment before the eyes of the doomed man, he turned and walked slowly back to the jail, his lips still moving in prayer.

A man stepped out of the ranks and tied a silk handkerchief over the eyes of the prisoner. The boys, watching breathlessly through the bars of the window, were pale with the horror of the scene. They now understood the tragedy that was about to be enacted, but they could not shake off the desire to look.

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The soldier moved back into the ranks, there was another sharp command and the lines wheeled and marched in a single rank of twelve back to the jail wall. They were now directly under the boys and out of their line of vision. All they could see was the man with the bound hands and bandaged eyes standing calmly facing them.

There was another quick command, followed instantly by a rattle of arms.

The boys cast off the spell that had held them, and with a cry of horror jumped down from the table and throwing themselves on the beds placed their hands over their ears.

Another command in a low tone, and the discharge of twelve guns as one ended it.

"I hope she did not see," said Harry, raising his white face.

He had scarcely uttered the words, when the wild shriek of a woman rang out on the morning air.

A loud, coarse laugh from the jail yard followed the pitiful cry and Harry clenched his hand in futile anger.

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CHAPTER XVI

THE ESCAPE

It was sometime before the boys recovered from the unpleasant effects of the scene they had witnessed in the jail yard.

"I wonder who he was?" said Bert, after a long silence.

"Probably an insurgent. But whoever he was, he was a brave man."

The door of their cell quietly opened at this moment and a man brought food and set it on the table. The boys, who had not eaten anything for many hours, disposed of the porridge and some mysterious sort of meat stew with relish. They had scarcely finished their meal when the cell door opened again and the gentleman with the genial smile, who had acted as interpreter, appeared.

"Good morning," he said, cheerily. "Did you sleep well?"

"Very well, thank you," replied Harry, wondering what the purpose of the man's visit might be.

"Thought I would drop in and see if there was any message you would like to send to the general or to Consul Wyman."

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"You mean that you were sent to see if we were ready to talk yet, don't you?"

"Just a different way of putting it."

"Well, you may tell General What-You-May-Call-Him that we have nothing more to say than we said yesterday; and you may also inform him that our situation is known to our friends by this time, and that he will be held to a strict accounting by Uncle Sam for this outrage upon two American citizens."

"You have communicated with your friends—how?"

The genial smile on the man's face faded into a look of surprise and anxiety. He glanced quickly around the room to see if there was any means by which they could have communicated with the outside world.

"That is another one of those questions that we claim the privilege of refusing to answer."

"I will deliver your message, but I warn you that it will not be well for you to arouse the anger of General Serano. He fears no one."

"It is entirely up to the general whether he gets angry or not. I really do not see any necessity for it."

"Will you send any message to Consul Wyman?"

"No—yes, come to think of it, I should like to speak to Mr. Wyman. Will you ask him if it will be too much trouble for him to see us here?" [Pg 187]

"General Serano will be pleased to furnish you with an escort to the consul's. The air will do you good this morning."

"When I go to the American consul I shall go without an escort, as you call it—guard I think would be more like it."

The man shrugged his shoulders.

"I will send your message to the consul," he said.

"What do you want of the consul, Hal?" asked Bert, when the man had gone.

"He is a part of my secret-passage plot, but I do not know whether he will be game or not."

Mr. Wyman did not keep them waiting long. He bustled in behind the turnkey and greeted them heartily.

"Good morning, boys," he said. "I understand you want to see me. I hope you have changed your minds and will now sensibly answer the general's questions and set yourselves at liberty."

"No, Mr. Wyman, we will never do that—at least not until we know that the one we might injure by so doing is quite safe. We did think, however, sir, that we would like to take you into our confidence." [Pg 188]

"The best thing you can do, boys. I may be able to help you out of your trouble; at least, I can act with more intelligence in your interests."

"Yes, sir, so we thought," answered Harry meekly, glancing at Bert, who sat open mouthed, utterly in ignorance of Harry's plans. "Do you think there is any chance of our being disturbed?" he continued, looking at the door.

"None whatever. The man with the key will not open the door until I rap three times."

"Very well, sir, if you will take that chair I shall be quite comfortable here on the bed."

The consul drew his chair up close to Harry and sat down. Bert also seated himself on the bed. Beginning with the wreck of their sail boat, Harry then told Mr. Wyman in sequence the events that had led up to their present incarceration in a Spanish jail in Cuba.

"Now, sir," he said, as he concluded, "you can understand why we cannot tell anything that will in any way bring harm to Captain Dynamite."

"Yes, yes," said the consul, who had been deeply interested in the boy's story. "A marvelous man, and there are many more like him in the service of Cuba. I believe they will win. I—I hope they will win."

Mr. Wyman lowered his voice and looked around the room as if to see whether there was anyone to overhear him. Harry looked at him in surprise. [Pg 189]

"I thought you were a Spanish sympathizer, Mr. Wyman," he said.

"Diplomacy, my boy, only diplomacy."

"I am very glad to hear you say so, sir; you may fall in with my plan quicker."

"What plan?" asked the consul, suspiciously.

"I will tell you presently, but I have not finished my story yet. You see that wall?" Harry pointed to the wall between their cell and the one occupied by Miss Juanita. The consul nodded. "Behind that wall is a young woman—a Cuban sympathizer—who is awaiting torture, perhaps death, at the hands of her captors, because she will not betray the cause. And that young woman is Miss Juanita, the sweetheart of Captain Dynamite."

"How do you know this, boys?" asked Mr. Wyman, springing to his feet in excitement.

"Do you see that big slab in the wall?"

"Yes."

"That closes a secret passage between this room and hers. Last night we accidentally touched the spring that rolls back the stone, and we talked to her. If you can depend upon our not being disturbed, I will open it now and you can see for yourself." [Pg 190]

"I will answer for the man with the key. He now and then gets a little present from me. I find it convenient to be in touch with all hands. Diplomacy, my boy, diplomacy."

Harry stepped to the wall and pressed the diamond-shaped stone. The groaning and creaking of the rusty mechanism of the revolving stone began and in five minutes the passage was open. Harry peered through and started back with a cry.

The young woman lay face downward on the stone floor of her cell.

"Miss Juanita," called Harry, softly. "What is the matter? Get up. It is your friends again."

She did not stir.

"She may be dead," said Harry, in fear, as he climbed through the passage. He knelt down beside her and turned her limp body over so that he could see her face. "No, she still breathes."

"Perhaps she has fainted," said Mr. Wyman from the other side of the passage. "Take some water from that pitcher there and bathe her face."

Harry did as directed and soon a faint sigh escaped from her pallid lips, and in a moment more she opened her eyes and looked up, dazed and frightened.

"Do not be afraid, Miss Juanita," said Harry, nervously. "It is the American boys again. What has happened?"

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"I think I fainted," she said, weakly. "Oh, it's all so terrible."

Painfully she dragged herself to her feet and sank into a chair that Harry placed for her.

"What is so terrible?" he asked.

"First the shooting in the jail yard this morning. Did you see it?" Harry nodded his head. "I cried out. I tried not to, but the horror was too great. They laughed. They had wrung from me the first sign of womanly weakness. Then they came to me and repeated their demands for information. But I was strong again and they left me with curses. To-morrow I shall stand where he did in the jail yard. I must have fainted when they left me. But do not mind. It is soon over. Tell him when you see him that I died bravely for—for him and the cause."

The woman buried her face in her hands and sobbed softly.

"Do you mean, Miss," asked Mr. Wyman anxiously, through the opening, "that they told you that to-morrow—that to-morrow——" He could not finish the sentence, but she understood him and nodded her head.

"Yes—to-morrow—at dawn."

Harry stooped down and whispered:

"Do not fear, Miss Juanita, it will not be at dawn to-morrow, nor any other day. But much will depend upon yourself, so dry your eyes, Miss, and be ready to do your part when the time comes."

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The woman looked up at him wonderingly.

"Have you heard from him?" she asked.

"Not yet, but you will if you will only arouse yourself a bit and be ready to do as I tell you when I come back."

Harry turned from her quickly and hastily climbing through the passage, touched the spring that closed it.

"Now, Mr. Wyman," he said, as the stone rolled into place. "You have seen and heard."

"What an outrage—what a horrible outrage," murmured the consul, gazing blankly ahead of him.

"Will you listen to my plan now, Mr. Wyman?" said Harry.

"Yes, yes," replied the consul, eagerly. "What is it?"

Harry drew him down on the bed beside him and in a whisper that even Bert could not hear, unfolded the scheme that had come suddenly into his head in nebulous shape when they had discovered the secret passage.

"But think of the sacrifice," said the consul in an uncertain tone when Harry had concluded.

"Never mind that, sir—that is for me to consider, and I have done so. I am willing to take the chance."

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"But if you come to my house I shall be at once connected with the escape and that would bring my office into disrepute. I do not care for myself, but the United States must not be brought into the case."

"But if I never reach your house you cannot in any way be responsible. Listen—all you have to do is to tell General What's-His-Name that I have promised you to tell the whole truth in regard to our landing, but that I insist that I shall be paroled and permitted to visit you alone and without guard. Bert will remain as hostage, so that there can be no suspicion."

"Say, Hal," said Bert, nervously, "you are not going to leave me here alone?"

"Not for long, old man. What do you say, Mr. Wyman? Think how you would feel if these men carried out their threat, and they are quite capable of it."

"I'll do my best, my boy. Your risk is the greater, but it is a noble act."

Mr. Wyman rose and shook Harry's hand vigorously. He rapped three times on the door and as the jailer opened it he turned again and said: "You will hear from me shortly, when I have laid your case before General Serano."

"Say, Hal," said Bert, as soon as the door closed, "what is this plan of yours, and why am I kept in the dark like an outsider?"

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"Because I want to take all the responsibility and do not want to have you mixed up in it if it should fail."

"But I am willing to take equal chances with you, old man. It isn't fair."

"Oh, yes, it is. You will understand later."

Bert moped for a time in resentment, but as Harry refused to be affected by his mood, he soon cheered up and determined to watch for developments that might enlighten him as to the plot that Harry and the consul were hatching. But nothing developed. A guard brought in their dinner and it was nearly nightfall before their door opened again and the smiling interpreter entered.

"So you have thought better of it, after all, young gentlemen?" he said.

"I do not know whether it is better or worse, but we have thought differently, if that's what you mean," answered Harry.

"I mean that you have decided to tell the general what he wants to know."

"No, I have decided to tell Consul Wyman."

"Yes, but he will tell the general."

"That will be his concern."

"Very well. Here is a pass from General Serano through the guards. When you are ready to go, rap three times on the door and it will be opened. Only one of you is to leave this place; the pass is for only one. Should both of you attempt to use it you would be at once arrested. I simply warn you."

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"Thank you. We have no intention of trying to escape. We enjoy your hospitality too much and the longer we board with you the longer the score you will have to settle with Uncle Sam."

Harry took the pass from the man, who then left the cell.

"Now to work, Bert," said Harry, eagerly, as the door closed. "Listen! When it is dark I am going through the passage. You must close it at once, so that in case any one should come in it will not be discovered."

"But suppose the jailor should come in; how can I account for your absence?"

"You cannot understand him nor he you, and he would probably rush off to make a report of my escape. Before his return I will be back. But that will not be very likely to happen. When I have been in the other cell ten minutes, open the passage again, and when I come through do not speak, no matter what you may see or hear. Then close the passage at once. Do you understand?"

"Yes."

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"And after I have left this room see to it that the door is safely closed again, and then once more open the passage."

"What for?"

"Never mind that now. Do you know what you are to do?"

"Yes; close and open the passage twice and say nothing."

"That's it."

They did not have to wait long for darkness. Night was now falling rapidly. They sat in silence as the dark shadows began to fill the room. Harry was in a serious, thoughtful mood and talked but little. Finally, when the room became so dark that they could not see one another's faces, he rose.

"It is time now, Bert," he whispered. "Remember your part."

He stepped to the wall and groping around until he found the spring, pressed it and the stone began to revolve. When the passage was fully open, he peered through into the darkness of the other cell, and whispered:

"Miss Juanita, do not be afraid; it is the American boys. Are you there?"

"Yes," came a soft answer.

Harry climbed through the passage and Bert promptly touched the spring that closed it. The heavy stone moved slowly back into place and Bert was alone.

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He had no watch, so he counted the seconds. The ten minutes seemed an hour to him. At last they passed and he opened the passage again. For some reason he expected to see Harry and the young woman climb through, but only the form of the boy appeared in the gloom. He waited a

moment to be sure that the girl did not follow, and then closed the passage. As the stone settled into place, the form moved quickly to the door and rapped three times. Almost instantly it swung open and the jailor with his lantern stood without. As the boy's form glided silently out past the stolid turnkey, Bert started back and with difficulty suppressed a cry of amazement. For a moment the light of the lantern had fallen on the face of the form in the doorway.

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CHAPTER XVII

"YOU WILL BE SHOT AS SPIES"

When Bert had somewhat recovered from his surprise, he rushed to the wall and pressed the spring to open the passage. A form in girl's clothes climbed quickly through, but it was the voice of Harry that whispered:

"Hustle, Bert, and close the passage. No telling when they may discover that the bird has flown. I must get under cover with these duds on."

He jumped into bed and drew the sheet up close around his neck.

"I'm quite ill, you know; sudden attack of malaria. Can't receive any callers."

"Has Miss Juanita gone to see the consul?" asked Bert.

"Not unless the consul has taken a trip to the mountains."

"What do you mean—why don't you let me in on your plot now that you seem to have carried it out successfully?"

"Can't be sure of success just yet, but I think it will work."

"And when do we get out?"

"I don't know; maybe we are in it tighter than ever. Sure to be if they find that we or rather I had anything to do with her escape, and I guess they must sooner or later."

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"Where has she gone?"

"I hope by this time she is pretty well out of the town, headed for the open between here and the mountains. In the darkness she is all right and the deception will not be discovered. She makes a very good boy and as she is about the same height as I am my clothes fit her first rate. The pass will carry her through the lines all right and as she knows the country like a book, I hope she may make the mountains and the road to Cubitas before daylight. If she does she is safe, and I have a strong conviction that she will meet Captain Dynamite on the march before midday to-morrow. And gee, what a meeting that will be—I should like to be there and see the expression on big O'Connor's face when he sees her."

"Then your plan did not have anything to do with our release from this place?"

"Nope—only Miss Juanita's. She was in danger; we are not."

"We may be after this."

"Yes, but I think we can depend upon O'Connor. Mason and Washington should have reached him by this time."

"What can he do to help us?"

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"I don't know, Bert, but I think he is the sort of man who will find something to do."

"What are you going to do for clothes?"

"That's another problem that will have to work itself out. Meanwhile I shall have to stick to Miss Juanita's dress. Didn't you think it fitted well? I shall have to have it let out around the waist a little, I think. I guess they don't serve any supper in this hotel, and as I got very little sleep last night, I think I will take a snooze while we wait for something to happen."

Harry was soon fast asleep, but Bert, though also very tired, was more anxious as to the outcome of their affairs and sat for a long time on the edge of his bed, thinking. The moon rose in a clear sky and cast two bright beams through the barred windows and across the prison floor. Bert's reverie was disturbed by the sound of hurrying feet in the corridor and the clamor of loud voices approaching their cell.

"I guess something's going to happen," said Bert, nervously to himself. "Perhaps I better be asleep, too." He rolled over onto the bed and appeared to be deep in slumber when the door was thrown open roughly and three men entered the room. They were General Serano, who was scowling darkly; Consul Wyman and the ever-smiling interpreter.

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"I wonder why he always mixes up in everything," thought Bert as he peeked at their visitors out of the corner of his eye.

Serano stopped just beyond the threshold and in surprise pointed to the two occupied beds. Then he said something in Spanish to Mr. Wyman, who replied calmly:

"I told you that neither of them had been at my house. You see for yourself that they are both here. There must be some mistake."

"But there can be no mistake about one of them having left this place within two hours," said the interpreter. "The jailer let him out."

"Then he must have let him in again, for there they both are soundly sleeping."

"But the jailor says that he did not, and it was the boy's long absence that caused the general to send me to your house to see if he was there. You have not seen him; some one unquestionably left the prison; no one has returned and yet they are both here—what does it mean?"

Mr. Wyman shrugged his shoulders and turned to the general.

"The boys indicated to me that they were ready to give the information that you desired. I made arrangements as you know, to have one of them come to my house and there tell his story. Neither of them came. Perhaps they changed their minds."

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"Let us question them."

The interpreter stepped to Bert's bedside and as he did so the boy sat up and rubbed his eyes as if just awakened.

"Good evening, gentlemen. Good evening, Mr. Wyman. What can we do for you? Is it morning yet?"

"Did either of you leave the prison to-night?" asked the interpreter quickly, without preliminary. Bert, who was entirely ignorant of what course Harry intended to pursue, dared not answer, fearing that he might undo some of his companion's plans.

"Why, I've been asleep for some time and my friend has a bad attack of malaria," he answered yawning. "I see that is moonlight and not daybreak. Can't you call around in the morning on your way to breakfast? We'd ask you to take a bite with us, but I do not think you would like the bill of fare."

"Will you or not answer a plain question? The general waits."

"Tell the general not to let me detain him. Ask him to drop in in the morning, too, when he has more time."

The man turned to Serano and shook his head.

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"They are impossible, sir."

Bert saw an amused smile creep around the corners of the consul's mouth.

"Let us try the other."

As he spoke the general touched Harry on the shoulder. The boy drew the sheet closer around his neck, and murmured:

"Please go 'way."

"We only want to know if you left the prison to-night to see Mr. Wyman. He is here with us."

"No, I haven't been out of your old prison since you put us here."

"But you intended to go."

"Yes, but I changed my mind. I'm very apt to do that. I'm sorry if it put you out any, but I do not see why you couldn't wait until morning for my apologies."

"But the jailor says he let one of you out to-night and that no one returned."

"Your jailor is very silly. If he let one of us out and didn't let him back how could we both be here now? I don't want to cast any reflections on General What's-His-Name's intellect, but I should think he might figure that out for himself. Come around in the morning and we will talk it over. But I should advise you to look around for another jailor. This one's imagination is too strong."

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"Then if you did not leave the jail and you have changed your mind, you have no use for that pass that General Serano sent you," said the interpreter, with his genial smile. Bert looked at Harry in dismay. How was he to get out of this snarl?

"No, that's quite true. Bert, will you get the pass for the general out of the pocket of my coat on the chair there?"

"Your coat is not here, Hal," said Bert in apparent surprise as he stepped to the chair.

"Not there? What nonsense. Tell the general that I shall hold his jailor responsible for my clothes. How under the sun am I to go about in my underclothes. It is not the value of the suit at all. It is pretty well used up now, but it's the principle of the thing."

As Harry talked he thrashed about under the bed-clothing as if in anger.

"And then there was nothing of importance in the pockets—no papers that could be of any possible value to any one. It is an outrage—tell General What-You-May-Call-Him that I consider it an outrage on a helpless prisoner to have his clothing sneaked away in the middle of the night, either for the profit of the jailor or the possible information of his captors. Mr. Wyman, is there nothing that can be done in this matter?"

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General Serano spoke a few words to the interpreter, who promptly repeated them with evident glee.

"The general says you are to get out of bed."

"It's all up now," thought Bert, and his face turned a shade paler.

"The general is inconsiderate; however, since he insists I will take the chances of another chill."

As Harry spoke he drew his legs up from under the sheet and stood down on the floor clad only in his underclothing. He had somehow managed to slip out of the girl's dress while he protested against the disappearance of his clothing. Bert drew a breath of relief; but the respite was brief. General Serano, either thoughtlessly or by design, threw back the sheet from Harry's bed as soon as he touched the floor and disclosed the dress from which he had with difficulty extricated himself.

"Whose is this?" demanded the general, pouncing on the garment and holding it out for inspection.

"Whose is this?" repeated the interpreter like a parrot.

"How should I know," answered Harry.

"Probably belongs to one of your former tenants."

"It's a woman's dress."

"Yes, it looks like it. Better look up your register and see who had this room last."

At this moment there was a sound of hurrying footsteps in the corridor accompanied by a volley of Spanish expletives uttered in a frightened voice.

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"I wonder what's going to happen now," whispered Harry to Bert. "These people are so full of life it makes me tired to watch them."

The turnkey burst into the room with hands uplifted and eyes bulging. He spoke a few panting words to General Serano who seized him by the neck in anger.

"She is gone, fool? How can she be gone unless you let her out?"

Then, as if struck by a sudden thought, he dropped his hold on the man and turning to Mr. Wyman, held out Juanita's dress excitedly.

"See, she is gone."

"Who is gone?" asked the consul, calmly.

"She—she in the next cell. This dress is here; the boy's clothes are gone and some one left this room to-night."

"You mean to infer that the boys contrived the escape of the woman in the next cell?" asked Mr. Wyman.

"Yes, yes, what other inference is there?"

"But can you explain how they could have communicated with her, how they could have exchanged clothes and how she could have left this cell?"

"No, no, I cannot explain that, but here is the evidence—here and there;" and he pointed excitedly to the wall of the next cell.

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"The irascible old general seems to be wise on the passage," said Harry, under his breath.

"How can that be evidence if you cannot explain it, general?" asked the consul, gravely.

"No, he's not on, after all," whispered Bert.

"They shall explain," said the general, sternly pointing to the boys.

"We're in it again," said Bert. "I wish he wouldn't do that. It makes me nervous."

The general seemed to be working himself into a fury. He raised his voice as he delivered what was apparently an ultimatum to the consul.

"No, no, not that," cried Mr. Wyman, in frightened protest.

Without a word in reply General Serano turned on his heel and strode out of the room.

"What did the angry gentleman say, Mr. Wyman?" asked Harry.

"He said that if you did not explain the disappearance of Miss Juanita within forty-eight hours you

would be taken out into the jail yard and shot as spies."

"Ah, Miss Juanita, eh. Then they know her," said the genial interpreter as he slunk from the room. "I must tell General Serano."

Before the eyes of the boys there rose with vivid distinctness the picture of the jail yard at dawn.

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CHAPTER XVIII

CAPTAIN DYNAMITE FINDS JUANITA

While these events had been transpiring in the Spanish town, Captain Dynamite had not been idle. As the last man of the little Cuban army filed down the mountain-side, he rose from his chair, and tightening his belt stretched his big body as was his custom when any action was imminent.

"Well, my lad, I must be off. There is no time to spare if we hope to be of use. You will remain at Cubitas and when it is all over I will send Washington and a squad to pick you up."

"Oh, no you won't, Cap. When it's all over I shall be right where you are."

O'Connor could not repress a laugh. Mason bristled with indignation at the thought of being left behind.

"There may be a good bit of fighting, my lad," said O'Connor.

"Well, I'm not spoiling for a scrap, but I can't stay behind when I may be of some use to the fellows. Better let me go along with you, Cap, for I shall be close on your trail if you don't."

"Suppose I have you locked up for safe keeping?"

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"Now you wouldn't do that, Cap, would you? You can't expect a fellow to sit still and chew his thumbs in safety while his chums are in danger. You wouldn't do it, would you?"

"All right, youngster, come along. I don't blame you for wanting to have a hand in it. And you may be of some use after all."

"I hope you will give me a try, Cap," said the Midget, straightening up his small form boldly.

"Do you think you can stand the tramp? You haven't had much sleep and you may not get any more for twenty-four hours."

"That little nap I got on the bench was as good as a night's rest. Besides, this country is so strenuous one doesn't need much sleep anyway. I think if I lived here long I should give up sleeping as a useless accomplishment."

They started on down the mountain and before daybreak had overtaken the men camped on the bank of the narrow stream where they were preparing breakfast. O'Connor and Mason joined Gomez and his staff. They ate a light meal and were ready for the march again. The men all seemed to know O'Connor and the officers saluted him respectfully as he passed among them. After a conference with the general the latter called one of the officers to him, and said:

"Captain Dynamite is in command. You will take your orders from him. With your company he will take the lead in the advance."

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The man saluted and then turned to O'Connor for instructions.

"Report to me when you are ready to move."

"I am ready now, sir."

"Very well, detach your company and cross the ford. We will keep about half a mile in advance of the main body until I give you other instructions. Deploy your men in twos and advance as rapidly as you can. You know the rendezvous and understand the necessity for caution. That is all."

The man saluted and in five minutes his men were fording the stream with O'Connor and Mason close in their rear. Across the open valley they made rapid progress, the men marching in regular order, but when they reached the wooded country at the foot of the next mountain the officer in command gave an order in Spanish and the men deployed in twos and disappeared like shadows into the brush. In a moment not a man was to be seen, and as O'Connor and Mason entered the woods there was not even a sound to be heard that would indicate that fifty men were making their way through the thick bushes ahead of them.

The route O'Connor followed was not so precipitous as that taken by Washington and they reached the summit of the mountain by noon. Still O'Connor pushed on, stopping only to drink from a mountain stream and to dash the cool water over his head and face, an example that Mason quickly followed. They had scarcely spoken since leaving the ford, O'Connor saving breath for the work in hand. Once or twice he had turned to the Midget who toiled manfully on at his side and asked him if he felt tired. Satisfied with the boy's ready answer that he was "all right,"

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he would plod on again.

They had made their way about a mile down the mountain side when an officer stepped out of the bushes in front of them and saluted O'Connor.

"Well, what is it?" asked the captain in Spanish.

"A scout has brought in a prisoner."

"Who is he?"

"A boy. He is apparently faint from exhaustion."

"A boy?" said O'Connor, wonderingly. "I wonder if they can have escaped?" He repeated the man's words to Mason who despite his own fatigue, leaped and capered wildly.

"It's Hal Hamilton, I'll bet," he said joyfully. "They must have escaped. Trust Hal to fool the Dons."

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"He knows the countersign and your name, sir, and he keeps repeating them in a dazed way. That's why the captain thought you might want to see him."

"I guess it's one of the boys all right, but I wonder where the other is. If I know them as I think I do one would not leave without the other. Where is he?" he asked turning again to the man.

"About a mile below, sir. We found him lying in a little clearing."

"All right, I will go to him."

"Ask him how he was dressed," said Mason as they hastened on.

The man described the boy's suit as well as he could.

"That's Hal, sure," said Mason when the reply had been translated to him. "Bert can't be far away."

"Did he have light hair?"

The man shook his head.

"Black," he answered.

"Pshaw, he's made a mistake. It must be Hal."

As they entered the clearing the prisoner sat with his back against a tree. His head was turned almost away from them, but Mason recognized the clothing and rushed forward with a glad cry.

"Cheer up, Hal, old man," he shouted as he bounded across the clearing and dropped on his knees at the boy's side. He was on his feet in a moment, his face scared and white.

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"It's not Hal, Cap," he whispered as O'Connor approached at a more dignified pace. "But he's got Hal's clothes on."

"What mystery is this?" said the big man as he strode around so that he could see the face of the prisoner. The next moment he turned as white as marble, but his eyes gleamed with joy as he sank down and took the almost inanimate form in his arms.

"Juanita," he gasped. "Thank God, you are safe. Quick boy, some water."

"Thunder, it's a girl," said Mason as he stooped and looked into the face that was now resting on Captain Dynamite's shoulder. He brought some water in his cap and O'Connor bathed the girl's head and chafed her hands until she began to show some signs of returning vitality. She raised her head and looked around in a dazed manner. Then her eyes fell on O'Connor.

"Michael," she whispered, and her head sank again on his shoulder with a sigh of relief.

The men knew well the story of O'Connor's love and they silently withdrew from the glade leaving only Mason and an orderly with the strangely reunited couple. Finally Juanita was strong enough to sit up and leaning back against the tree again, she smiled into O'Connor's anxious eyes.

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"I could go no further, Michael," she whispered, "but I thought you would find me here."

"How did you escape, Juanita?" asked O'Connor, softly.

"Ah, yes, the brave American boys saved me. Oh, I fear they will suffer much for it. I tried not to go for they are suspected already of being Cuban spies and this will make it worse for them; but the one they call Hal would listen to no reason, no argument. They had a friend in the American consul, he said, who would look out for them and I—I was already doomed."

"Doomed," repeated O'Connor, starting forward, his eyes snapping.

"Yes, it was to have been this morning at dawn."

O'Connor choked back something suspiciously like a sob and for a few minutes neither spoke. The man was thinking with a chill at his heart how near to death she had been. Then he beckoned to Mason.

"Come here, youngster, and hear what your brave comrades have been doing. This is the young woman we set out from the *Mariella* to save. Your friends have done that nobly for us; now we must return the compliment with proper interest."

The Midget bowed gravely and sat down on the ground beside O'Connor.

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"They are resourceful youngsters, Juanita, as I have reason to know, but how under the sun did they manage it? I see you are wearing the suit of one of them."

"Their cell was next to mine. Night before last they heard me crying at my window. They could not see me but they spoke and asked me what they could do to help me. There was nothing to be done, so we talked and they tried to cheer me up and in some way they learned who I was and they—they told me you were safe and then I didn't mind so much. Then the guard came and we had to go away from the windows. As one of them jumped down from the table on which they had been standing, he touched the spring of an old secret passage between the cells. The next day, I don't know how, they got a pass from General Serano to visit the American consul. The pass was good anywhere within the lines. That night, just after dark, they touched the secret spring and rolled back the rock between the cells and one of them insisted that I should put on his suit and take the pass and escape. As I have told you he would listen to no form of argument and in the darkness of the cell I put on his clothes and he took my dress. I felt so strangely that I was sure the deceit must be discovered at once, but no one questioned me from the time I left the prison until I passed safely through the lines."

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"Hooray for Hal Hamilton," shouted Mason, enthusiastically. He had listened breathlessly to the girl's story of her escape and the part his chums had played in it.

"But your escape must have been discovered in the morning if not before. What were the boys to do then? How was Hamilton to account for the absence of his clothes?"

"They would not explain that or anything."

"And why are they suspected of being Cuban spies?"

"Because they will not explain their presence on the island for fear of endangering you."

O'Connor leaped to his feet excitedly.

"May Providence guard them until I get there. Juanita, our paths diverge here again for a little time. My duty lies where those boys are imprisoned. You will go on with an escort to the *Mariella*. She lies safely in the old place and your mother awaits you there."

"Oh, Michael, how can I thank you?"

O'Connor called the orderly.

"Tell Captain Fernandez to send me a guard of ten men, all of whom know the route to the lagoon, and tell him that one of them must speak English." Then turning to Mason he said: "I am going to ask a favor of you. I cannot take Miss Juanita on with me, nor can I leave her here. Will you take command of the guard and escort her safely to the *Mariella*?"

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"Cap, I had hoped to get closer into the mix-up, but I see you are embarrassed by the presence of this young lady and I assure you, Miss and you, sir, that as a gentleman I am pleased to serve you both."

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CHAPTER XIX

DRAWING THE NET CLOSER

"I hold, sir, that there has been no connection shown between the escape of the woman prisoner and the presence of this dress in the cell of these boys, and I therefore ask that the charge against them be dismissed."

It was Consul Wyman who spoke, addressing General Serano who again sat in judgment on Harry and Bert in the Hall of Justice. It was two days after the discovery of the escape of Miss Juanita and following the dire threat of the general to have the boys shot as spies if they did not make a full and complete confession. There had been little sleep for them after the night visit to their cell, and the next day no one had visited them save the jailor with food. The following morning, however, after their breakfast had been served, they had been summarily hauled before the still fuming commander, heavy-eyed and pale, Harry wearing an old Spanish uniform which the jailor had given to him.

Again they had been subjected to a severe cross-examination, and again they had firmly refused to answer any question that in any way endangered the safety of Captain Dynamite.

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Mr. Wyman, who fully appreciated the serious position in which the boys were placed, also showed the effects of loss of sleep. He was an able man and beneath his little exterior conceit about his powers of diplomacy, there beat an honest and fearless heart. He had come to the conclusion that the existence of the secret passage was unknown to the present authorities, and

without this knowledge no case could be made out, legally, against the boys. He also knew that the legal rights of prisoners were not always considered by General Serano, and for this reason he had determined, as a last resort, to fall back on his official prerogatives and demand the release of the boys in the name of the United States, or, failing in this, a hearing before a higher authority in Havana.

"Admitting that your contention in regard to the presence of the dress of the escaped prisoner in the room of the accused to be well taken, how can you account for the fact that the pass which was given to them in order that they might communicate with you was used by another?"

General Serano smiled grimly as he put this question to the consul. Mr. Wyman staggered. He had forgotten the pass. For a moment he did not reply, and then, pulling himself together, he said:

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"We do not admit that fact, sir."

"Very well. Let the captain of the guard step forward."

A man with a sword clanking at his side stepped up and saluted.

"What was your duty night before last?" asked the general.

"I was in command of the picket line three miles outside of the city," replied the man.

"Did any one pass through the lines from the city while you were in command?"

"Yes, sir."

"Who?"

"A boy."

"A boy—are you sure of that?"

"A person wearing boy's clothes, sir."

"Very well; why did you let the person wearing boy's clothes pass through your lines?"

"He—the person wearing boy's clothes showed a pass from you, sir."

"At what hour was this?" continued General Serano, looking triumphantly at the consul, who bit his lip and thought hard.

"About two hours after sundown."

"That will do. Now, Mr. Wyman, can you explain this for the benefit of the prisoners?"

"All this does not prove that the pass presented by a boy to this officer was the same pass that was given to the prisoners." [Pg 221]

"I issued but one pass that day."

"There is nothing to show that that was the one."

"Captain of the guard, what date did the pass bear?"

"It was of even date."

"Now, Mr. Wyman."

The consul hesitated a moment and then stepped closer to the desk of General Serano. Lifting his arm impressively, and looking the general steadily in the eye, he said:

"I still hold, sir, that there is not a scintilla of legal evidence against the prisoners. We might admit for the sake of argument, that the dress found in their room was that of the escaped woman prisoner; we might also admit, that the pass used by the boy in passing through the lines last night was the one issued by you to the prisoners, but what evidence is there to show that the one using the pass obtained it from these prisoners, or that it was the escaped prisoner?"

"The evidence is absolutely circumstantial."

"That is just it. It is purely circumstantial; there is no direct evidence connecting these boys in any way with the escape of the woman."

"Let me inform you, Mr. Wyman," said General Serano, scowling savagely, "that I shall assume that the person who passed through the lines last night was the prisoner and further," here he leaned toward the consul, "I shall assume that the clothes she wore was the boy's missing suit." [Pg 222]

"Very well, then," said Mr. Wyman, calmly, "let us admit that the person was the woman, and the clothes she wore were the boy's, do not all the known facts point to a plot conceived and executed by those outside rather than inside a prison cell? Those inside had absolutely no means of communication; those outside had easy access to both cells. Unless some method can be shown by which these prisoners could have communicated with the prisoner in the next cell there can be no legal construction of the present evidence that will connect either of the boys with the escape of the woman. You know the strength of your locks and the thickness of your jail walls. How could these two boys here have contrived to release this woman through stone and iron? By

way of the barred windows, ten feet apart? Even if the exchange of clothing could have been accomplished by this means, which I contend is impossible, who liberated her, General Serano? There was only one means of escape and that was through the door of her cell. If these boys, themselves, confined by locks, walls, and bars, could have unlocked the door of her prison-house, then they are possessed of supernatural powers that should enable them to walk out of your jail themselves. No, General Serano, unless you can establish the fact of physical communication between these prisoners and the escaped woman they can in no way be held responsible for her disappearance, and I ask that the unfounded charge against them be dismissed."

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Mr. Wyman bowed to the general and stepped back. He had made a good fight and fired his last shot in the boys' behalf. General Serano, impressed by the wisdom of his argument, was silent for a time, as if thinking. Then he leaned forward to the consul and said in a low tone:

"There is one thing more, Mr. Wyman. After the discovery of the escape of the woman prisoner her name was not spoken in your presence nor in the presence of the other prisoners, and yet when I had left the cell you referred to her by her given name. Will you tell me how this was?"

Mr. Wyman's face flushed, and he drew himself up defiantly, as he replied:

"It is immaterial to this case how I came by that knowledge."

"It is material so far as it influences my decision."

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Mr. Wyman bowed without speaking. Nothing could be gained by dwelling upon this unfortunate occurrence. At this point an aged and decrepit man was led into the room by two soldiers. He was so weak that he had to be supported on either side. General Serano looked up and scowled at him as an intruder, and turned to an aide for an explanation, when the smiling interpreter glided to his side and whispered in his ear. He started back in eager surprise, and then cast another glance of triumph at the consul as he said:

"Bring him forward."

All eyes were now turned on the tottering old man as he was slowly led to a chair which was placed in front of General Serano's desk.

"You have some information in regard to this case which you wish to impart to me?" asked the general.

"What case?"

The old man's dim eyes turned in the direction of the speaker like those of one who is almost blind. He seemed dazed and frightened.

"Well, never mind the case. Were you ever the warden of the jail here?"

"Oh, yes sir, but that was many, many years ago."

"Yes, I know," said the general, coaxingly, "but what do you know about the jail?"

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"Nothing much now, sir, not for many, many years."

"No, no, what do you know that no other man now living knows?"

"Much, sir, much, for they have all gone on before."

"Do you know any secret of the jail?"

"Secret? Oh, yes, a secret. No man knows but me, no man knows."

The old man shook his head stupidly, and rubbed his gnarled hands.

"What is the secret?" General Serano leaned forward to catch the answer.

"I have forgotten."

"No, no, you knew it ten minutes ago—think."

"No man knows—they've all gone before," muttered the old man.

Mr. Wyman uttered a sigh of relief. The old jailer evidently knew of the existence of the secret passage, but his mind was so far gone that the consul was hopeful that General Serano's examination might fail.

"Do you know of any secret passage?" asked the general in an insinuating tone.

"Passage—who said passage," said the old man bristling up and looking around the room with unseeing eyes. "There is no passage; it's a lie. No one knows—no one knows but the old jailer."

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The interpreter stepped up to the old man and whispered something in his ear. The wrinkled face cracked into a hideous grin that showed his almost toothless gums.

"Money," he chortled, "yes, give me money—gold." He reached out his gnarled hands and grasped at the air. The interpreter at a sign from General Serano, placed a peseta in one of his outstretched palms. He felt it for a moment, and then held it close to his nearly sightless eyes.

"No, no, you can't fool the old jailer," he whined. "That's silver. Gold, give me gold. The secret's

worth it. 'Sh. You can go at night. Just touch the spring and slowly—slowly the stone will roll back. And then the rack. Ha, ha, the rack—that makes 'em talk."

Mr. Wyman shuddered when he thought of the scenes of horror the old jailer might have witnessed.

"Here is gold; will you show us the passage, now?"

"Yes, come."

The man started to his feet, and the interpreter, taking the place of one of the soldiers, guided his steps toward the door. General Serano rose from his seat and followed.

"Mr. Wyman, will you accompany us? The old man's mysterious secret passage may interest you." [Pg 227]

"The old man is imbecile. His evidence is valueless."

"But his secret passage cannot be imbecile too."

"He is dreaming."

"Let us see. Bring the prisoners." He motioned to an officer, who detailed two men to accompany the boys. Harry and Bert were ignorant of what had been going on, all having spoken in Spanish, and as they followed the old man to the jail, Mr. Wyman explained to them briefly what had taken place. Harry's first thought was of the girl.

"Then Miss Juanita has gotten away safely," he said with satisfaction.

"Yes," replied Mr. Wyman, "I think there is no doubt she is all right, but think of the price."

"We haven't paid it yet, Mr. Wyman."

When they reached the jail the old man was led directly into the boys' cell. He was weary from his exertion, and sank into a chair and his head fell on his breast. In a moment he was fast asleep. The interpreter, who seemed to be general factotum to Serano, shook him roughly by the shoulder.

"Come, come, you have your gold, now show us the passage." [Pg 228]

The man roused himself and looked stupidly around the room. By chance his eyes rested upon the big slab in the wall, but he could not see it. Still he raised his bony finger either by intuition or luck, and pointed directly at it.

"It is there," he said, and his head dropped again.

Mr. Wyman shuddered. The scene was a gruesome one, and the possibility that the man might disclose the passage was so imminent that his nerves were at their greatest tension. All hope of clearing the boys of the charge of being Cuban spies it seemed would be lost if the old man's mind should clear sufficiently for him to indicate the secret spring.

"Yes, yes, it is there, old man, but where is the spring?"

Again he raised his head and looked blankly at the wall, and then once more his head drooped.

"I cannot remember," he murmured. Mr. Wyman drew a long breath. It was at least another respite. There was a sound of clanking chains in the jail corridor. The old man trembled and raised his head feebly.

"What's that?" he whispered. "Chains?"

Again the sound was heard.

"Yes, yes, they're coming. Quick, we'll chain him down—chain him hand and foot. Quick—open the passage." [Pg 229]

He struggled to his feet and tottered to the wall. For a moment he groped in blindness, while the boys held their breath and then, with a low chuckle he placed his finger unerringly on the little diamond-shaped stone. The creaking and grinding noise began, and the stone slowly revolved before the astonished eyes of General Serano. When the passage was fully open the general stepped to the wall and inspected it curiously. Then he turned to Mr. Wyman and said:

"The case against the accused is complete. You may inform them that the sentence imposed will be carried out unless they make a full confession before sundown to-night."

"And I, General Serano, knowing that they are innocent of any connection with the cause of the insurgents, warn you in the name of their Government that you will commit an outrage for which you must pay dearly. I shall communicate with General Weyler at once."

Serano shrugged his shoulders.

"General Weyler has the utmost confidence in my judgment."

"Will you suspend sentence until I can communicate with my Government?"

"No. Your Government has nothing to do with the matter. All that can be settled afterward." [Pg 230]

"One last request, General Serano—give me forty-eight hours to communicate with General Weyler."

"Oh, as it will be the same in the end, you may have the forty-eight hours."

He turned to the jailer, who had watched the opening of the wall in wonder. "Take the prisoners to another cell where they cannot find a secret passage."

As the boys were being led from the cell they passed the interpreter, who smiled genially at them. Harry could scarcely refrain from showing him how much he despised him.

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CHAPTER XX

CAPTAIN DYNAMITE TO THE RESCUE

Consul Wyman sat in his study in deep thought. His heart was heavy and in his mind plan after plan to save the boys from their threatened fate was formed, only to be abandoned as not feasible. His wife sat with him aiding now and then by a suggestion. She, too, was deeply interested in the fate of the American boys, of whose adventures and self-sacrifice her husband had told her.

"Everything falls to the ground, Annie," he said finally. "There is only one hope and that is an appeal to the government."

"But you know the red tape and delay that means, John," said his wife.

"We have forty-eight hours from dawn to-morrow."

"Far too short a time to reach Washington through Spanish sources, I fear."

"I believe you are right."

"And you cannot stir Serano?"

"He is adamant."

"Then I can see nothing but an appeal to Weyler."

"There is scarcely time for that."

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"There can be no delay."

"But the courier. I know of no one whom I can trust and who would act in the boys' interests. It is a diplomatic mission. There must be neither pleading nor threatening."

"Then you must go, John."

"That is what I have been thinking, my dear. I am glad you see it in the same way."

"When will you start?"

"Within an hour. If you will leave me now, I will prepare a brief to present to General Weyler."

Mrs. Wyman left the room and the consul drew his chair closer to his desk where a student lamp burned. The room was large, opening by a casement window upon a garden filled with luxuriantly growing plants and shrubs. The night was warm and the window stood open, admitting the heavy perfume of flowers. The lamp, which was the only light in the room, cast a bright circle on the desk. All the rest of the apartment was in deep shadow.

Mr. Wyman had been writing about half an hour when he turned to the window behind him as if he had heard an unusual sound. Then he returned to his writing. Again he swung around in his chair and listened. Then he rose and walked quickly to the window.

"Annie, is that you?" he called.

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There was no reply.

"I am sure I heard a sound in the garden," he said to himself.

"Probably you are right, consul, although I tried to make as little noise as possible."

Mr. Wyman started back involuntarily. The words which were spoken in a whisper, seemed to come from a clump of bushes at the right of the window. Mr. Wyman peered into the darkness but could see no one.

"Who are you?" he asked loudly, "who comes stealing into my garden under the cover of darkness?"

"Are you alone?" was the only reply.

"And of what concern is that to you?"

"Sure, and if you were me you would concern yourself a good bit about it."

"Well, I am alone; now who are you and what is your business here at this time of night?"

For answer a dark form crept stealthily out from the shadow of the bush, leaped lightly in the window, and as quickly drew the hanging curtain across it, shutting out all view from the outside. Although the night was warm, the man wore a coat with the broad collar turned up so as to conceal his face, and a broad sombrero slouched down over his eyes. He kept close within the shadows in the corner of the room.

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"Pardon me, Mr. Wyman, for entering your house in this unceremonious manner, but there was no other way that offered just at present. My mission is of the utmost importance, but it would not be well for either of us if I were discovered here. Can we depend upon being undisturbed?"

"How do you know that I wish to be undisturbed? You seem to know me, but refuse to disclose your identity. I cannot consent to this one-sided interview. Who are you?"

"If I tell you that I am a friend of the American boys, is that enough?"

"Quite. You need have no fear; we shall be undisturbed here."

The man, reassured, stepped forward and threw off his coat and hat. Mr. Wyman looked him over curiously for a moment and then pointed to a chair.

"Be seated, Captain Dynamite," he said, quietly.

O'Connor started back in some dismay.

"You know me?" he said. "How?"

"The boys described you to me very accurately. You have a pair of very staunch friends in those youngsters, sir."

"Yes, yes, I know," said O'Connor, eagerly. "Tell me of them—they are safe?"

"They are alive and well, but they are not safe."

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"What do you mean?"

"In the first place tell me if Miss Juanita reached you in safety?"

"Yes, thank God, and she has told me much of what the boys have risked for her and me. That is why I am here."

"Yes, and there is not another man with a price upon his head who would place it in the lion's mouth as you are doing. Why did you come here alone? You can do no good single handed."

O'Connor leaned forward and whispered:

"But I am not alone. There are twelve picked men with me."

"Where are they?"

"Pardon me the liberty, but they are out there in your garden."

"How did you get here?"

"By methods known only to Indians and Cubans."

"Humph," said Mr. Wyman, somewhat annoyed, "I may not get clear of this affair without getting shot myself. But what can twelve men do?"

"Twelve such men as those can do much. But tell me, please, so that I may act with proper dispatch, just what the situation is in regard to the boys."

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The men drew their chairs closer together and in a low tone Mr. Wyman began to tell in sequence the events that had transpired since he had been involved in the affair.

"So," said O'Connor, when Mr. Wyman had finished, "then I am not much too soon. Now, let us consider what is the best way to proceed. I shall probably have to ask you for a trifle of aid."

"But I must be off to Weyler. I have not a minute to waste if I wish to reach him in time."

"In time for what?" asked O'Connor, in surprise.

"In time to secure a reprieve."

"Nonsense, man."

"May I ask what is nonsense, Captain Dynamite?" said Mr. Wyman, whose dignity was injured.

"In the first place, it is nonsense to expect any aid from Weyler, who always staunchly supports his lieutenants, whether right or wrong, and in the second place, we do not want a reprieve. We've got to get them clean away from here before they will be safe—clean off the blooming island. I'll take them back to the old *Mariella*—that's the safest place for them. I wish to goodness they had never left her."

"But how, my good sir—how under the sun are you going to get them to the *Mariella* when they are locked up in a Spanish jail?" [Pg 237]

"No jail is impregnable."

"But you cannot storm it in the face of a garrison of men with a handful of twelve."

"There are more than fifty times twelve almost within gunshot, but I still think the twelve will be sufficient for my purpose."

"Do you mean that the city is threatened by insurgents?" Mr. Wyman looked worried. "I must get my wife away, sir."

"Don't worry, consul. If it comes to that the American flag is sacred to the insurgents; but if there is any fighting it will be on the picket line only, I fancy."

"But what is your plan?"

"To take the boys out of that jail first."

"How?"

"Is it strongly guarded?"

"Inside and out. It is a military prison."

"How many men?"

"Four outside and four within, in charge of an officer."

"Oh, that's easy."

"But the first sound of a conflict would arouse the garrison, which is directly in the rear of the prison."

"There will be no sound of conflict after we get to work, Mr. Wyman." [Pg 238]

"How can I aid you?"

"By securing permission to visit the boys in their cell. Can you do it?"

"I am not sure. General Serano's mood is not the best in the world just now. The boys have tantalized him beyond measure. He cannot seem to beat them, and aside from his official pride, his personal dignity has suffered. My position as defender of the youngsters has gained for me his ill-will. But I will try. What am I to do?"

"Simply leave the jail at a time that I shall fix. We will do the rest. You will not be involved in any way, except that you may be seemingly handled a little roughly, but that will only be done to divert suspicion from yourself. Do not resist."

"There will not be too much violence, I hope?"

"No more than is needed, sir. I do not like violence myself. There may be a broken head or two, but they are soon mended. It is now nine o'clock. What time does the watch change?"

"At midnight."

"Very well. Now, if you will permit me, I will call one of my men."

"Make what use you please of me and my house. I wish to aid you in any way I can."

O'Connor stepped to the window and drew aside the curtain. As he did so, a dark form darted into the shadow of a bush. O'Connor saw it and paused. [Pg 239]

"There is someone in your garden beside my men," he whispered to the consul.

"Impossible. The servants have gone to bed."

"Someone was listening at this window."

"Whom can it be?"

"Someone who suspects you. Can you think whom it would be?"

"No." The consul shook his head nervously.

"Very well, we'll see."

O'Connor turned and darted out of the window. In a moment he returned holding General Serano's official spy by the scruff of the neck. The interpreter's genial smile had given place to a look of terror and he trembled with fear. O'Connor swung him around so that he faced the consul.

"Do you know him?" he asked.

"Yes," answered Mr. Wyman, as he looked the man over with an expression of disgust, "he is General Serano's man Friday." Then to the man he said sternly: "What are you doing here, in my garden, at this time of night?"

"Preoccupation, Mr. Wyman, preoccupation of the mind. I must have strayed in by mistake. I hope you will pardon me."

"Well, we will think that over, my man," interrupted O'Connor. "How long had you been listening at the window?" [Pg 240]

"Listening! O, sir, far be it from me to listen at the window of our esteemed consul."

"You weren't very far from it just now."

"I had just discovered my error, sir, and was about to retrace my steps——"

"Having heard all that you wished," O'Connor broke in.

"I hope the gentleman is jesting. I should be grieved indeed if he held so evil an opinion of me."

"Please consider yourself grieved. Now, Mr. Wyman, I should like to still further impose on your hospitality. This gentleman, I believe, is very anxious to serve me—is that not true, Mr. Friday?"

"Oh, quite true, sir; it shall be my pleasure; but the name, sir, is not Friday—it is Villamonte."

"Mr. Wyman, can I trouble you for a short piece of rope?"

The consul left the room and returned with a piece of clothes-line about three feet long which he handed to O'Connor.

"Now Mr. Monte, I shall have to ask you to extend your hands behind you."

"Surely your excellency will not bind me?"

"My excellency sure will. Stick 'em out and be quick about it." [Pg 241]

"I protest. General Serano shall hear of this outrage."

"I am quite confident of that, but I am not ready to lose your company yet, Monte."

O'Connor turned the man around much as he might have done a child, and bound his hands behind him. Then he led him to a chair into which he thrust him and lashed his hands tightly to the back, Villamonte jabbering vehemently in Spanish the while.

"Now, Mr. Wyman," said O'Connor, when he finished, "this gentleman's providential preoccupation of mind will relieve you from the necessity of visiting General Serano. I think he will be very glad to carry out any instructions I may give him." As O'Connor spoke, he carelessly removed a pistol from his belt, and as he examined it he held the muzzle so that it covered the trembling Villamonte, who cowered back in the chair.

"Won't you, Mr. Monte?"

"Whatever his excellency wishes shall be my pleasure," stammered the interpreter.

"Good; now we understand each other, Monte." [Pg 242]

CHAPTER XXI

GENERAL SERANO MEETS CAPTAIN DYNAMITE

The new cell in which the boys had been placed when the escape of Miss Juanita was discovered, looked out through its barred windows onto the main street of the little straggling town. In the distance, although the house was concealed from view by intervening buildings, they could see the American flag floating over the consulate. This outlook had afforded them some occupation during the day, and even when night fell they stood together gazing silently out into the deserted street, lighted only by the brilliant moon. They began now to feel that their position was critical, and Bert, who more easily yielded to the depressing effects of circumstances, bemoaned his fate and all the series of events that had led up to their present unenviable plight. He was inclined to blame Harry for the initial step.

"If you only hadn't taken it into your Quixotic head to try to aid Captain Dynamite, who is able to take care of himself, we might now be safe on the *Mariella*," he growled, "instead of waiting patiently for some one to take us out and shoot us." [Pg 243]

"Why, Bert, old man, we've got two more days before we step out and play targets. Many things may happen in that time."

"Nothing to help us out of this scrape that I can see."

"Mr. Wyman will surely do all that lies in his power to aid us."

"Yes, but you know yourself that since Serano suspects his connection with the escape of Miss Juanita his power has been very much curtailed."

"Well, there's Captain Dynamite yet to be counted on."

"Humph, where is he and what could he do if he were here?"

"I don't know, Bert, but you can't make me believe that he would abandon us completely to our fate. It's not like him, I tell you."

"If all the hope we have is centred in Dynamite or Wyman I think it is time we began to think of doing something for ourselves."

"Sure," answered Harry in surprise, "but what under the sun can we do, Bert?"

"We might——" Bert hesitated and glanced nervously at his companion; "we might effect some compromise with Serano."

"How?" asked Harry, coldly.

"We might agree to tell him what he wants to know about how we got to the island when we can be assured that it will injure no one." [Pg 244]

"There are two reasons why that plan would be useless. In the first place how are we going to tell when Captain Dynamite is safe, and in the second place the affair has gone so far now that I do not think Serano would be satisfied with simply that information. He is pretty well convinced that in some way we are connected with the Cuban cause."

"Oh, gee, I wish I had never gone sailing."

"That's going back a long way to make a connection between cause and effect, Bert," said Harry, who could not help smiling at his companion's hopeless view of the situation.

They were silent again for a time. Not a sound broke the stillness of the night save the regular steps of the sentinel below them. Some light clouds scurried across the moon, shutting off for a time the flood of silver light and throwing a gray shadow over the street.

"Look," said Harry, suddenly. "Didn't you see a man creeping along there?"

"Where?" asked Bert, eagerly.

"In the deep shadow close in by the wall of that house."

"I can see no one," said Bert, after straining his eyes in an effort to penetrate the darkness.

"Watch," whispered Harry. "I know I saw some one creeping along as if he did not want to be seen." [Pg 245]

"Even if you did, what does it signify?"

"Captain Dynamite would come that way," answered Harry, confidently.

Suddenly the clouds swept on and again the street was flooded with a radiance that made the shadows cast by the walls of the houses as black as the darkest night in contrast.

"Then did you see?" asked Harry, excitedly.

Bert nodded quickly in the affirmative.

As the moon flashed out they had both seen a man dart closer into the protection of the deep shadow of the wall.

"There's another," whispered Bert, pointing out through the bars in his eagerness, to a point about ten feet beyond where the first man had appeared. "What if the guard should see them too?"

"The sentinels are on the same level and cannot see as well as we can up here. I wonder who they are. See, there is another."

"Who can they be?"

"I'll bet you a dinner when we get home that Captain Dynamite is in town."

"O, Hal, do you think we will ever get home?"

"I'm beginning to feel very sure of it. See, there are other men in the distance and all are coming toward the jail." [Pg 246]

The prison stood in a narrow plaza or square facing the main street. Toward the dark shadow of a building that formed a corner of the square the indistinct forms of the men seemed to be making their way. The boys counted nearly a dozen, closely hugging the walls of the low houses, slip one by one into the wider shadow of the corner building. Still the regular steps of the guard below told that the mysterious gathering had not been discovered.

Presently four men emerged boldly from the shadow, and arm in arm, and with unsteady gait approached the prison. In hiccoughing tones they sang a Spanish drinking song. In the bright glare of the moonlight the boys could see that they wore the uniform of Spain.

"Pshaw," said Harry, in a disgusted tone. "They are only a lot of drunken Spanish soldiers after all, making their way back to the barracks."

Harry was keenly disappointed. He had been confident that the strange movements of the men indicated that some action was on foot which he imagined Captain Dynamite was directing.

"But where are the others?" whispered Bert. "There are more in the shadow."

"Probably waiting a chance to slip into the barracks without attracting too much attention from their officers."

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The four men reeled on. The regular pacing of the sentinel ceased and he hailed the approaching quartet in a jocular way. They answered with thick tongues and coarse laughter. Presently they passed out of view of the boys, having come close within the shadow of the wall below them.

Then suddenly there was a muffled sound as of one trying to cry out with a heavy pressure on his throat, the hard breathing of men desperately struggling, and then silence.

The boys looked at one another in wonderment. What could it mean? Possibly a drunken squabble between the men and the guard. Now the slow pacing of the sentinel was resumed. Apparently the difficulty had been adjusted.

"I think we might as well get to bed," said Harry, after they had waited for ten minutes without any further developments. "There is nothing doing to-night, I guess."

As he spoke, the cry of a night bird sounded on the still air, but, strangely enough, it seemed to come from directly below their window, instead of from the air above. Almost immediately an answering call was heard in the distance, and then all was still again.

"I am not so sure, after all, that those men were Spaniards," said Harry, as he turned eagerly to the window again.

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"Why?"

"Did you hear those signals?"

"I heard a bird."

"I don't think it was a bird."

"Listen; if they were birds we shall hear them again."

The boys listened patiently for several minutes, but the sound was not repeated.

"I believe they were signals, and—look—look! Isn't that Captain Dynamite himself coming out of the shadow further up the street?"

"It certainly looks like him," gasped Bert, "but who is that with him and how does he dare to walk openly in the streets?"

"It's the Spanish interpreter," whispered Harry, after a minute's inspection; "and—and Captain Dynamite, sure. Hooray."

"Don't hooray yet," said Bert, wagging his head disconsolately. "Remember there are more Spaniards in the shadow there."

"Yes, if they are Spaniards."

"And see how closely the interpreter walks. Can Captain Dynamite be a prisoner?"

"Not of that little man," sniffed Harry. "Look at the size of him beside O'Connor."

The two men whom the boys had seen in the distance were indeed O'Connor and Villamonte. They came on through the bright moonlight apparently as unconcerned as if there were not a price on the head of one. And they walked as close together as bosom friends, but a pistol in the coat pocket of Captain Dynamite pressed closely against the side of his companion.

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"Now you are sure you know your part, Monte?" said O'Connor, as they neared the prison.

"Sure, your excellency."

"And you know what it means to play any tricks, do you?" As he spoke O'Connor emphasized his remark by jabbing the muzzle of the pistol into Villamonte's ribs.

"Surely your excellency can trust me," quaked the interpreter.

"Yes, under the circumstances. You also want to recollect that I understand Spanish, so you cannot fool me in that way— and my finger is always on the trigger. At the first word or sign of warning off it goes. Now take that scared expression off and look pleasant; we are nearly there."

At the door of the prison they were met by a Spanish officer, who received Villamonte with great deference and looked wonderingly at O'Connor, who wore his cloak and sombrero so that little of his face was visible.

"Now you've got your cue," said O'Connor, in English, in a low tone, at the same time pressing the pistol harder into Villamonte's side.

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"We come from General Serano," said the interpreter reluctantly. "He wishes the American boys removed secretly to the government house, as he anticipates a plot to release them."

The officer bowed and Villamonte and O'Connor passed into the jail.

"Do you wish your escort to enter also?" asked the officer.

Villamonte turned in surprise and saw eight men close upon their heels, but as he quickly noted that they all wore Spanish uniforms, he smiled triumphantly.

"Yes," said O'Connor, in English, and again the pressure against his side brought Villamonte to his senses.

"Yes," he repeated to the officer, and the men filed silently in and the door was closed behind them.

"Now," said O'Connor, turning to the officer in command, and for the first time speaking in Spanish, "if you will kindly conduct us to the cell of the American prisoners we shall be obliged to you, and if we wish to please General Serano, haste is essential."

The officer preceded them down the corridor, which was lighted dimly, and then ascended a winding stone staircase to the floor above. He opened the door of a cell and stood aside for them to enter. [Pg 251]

As Harry saw O'Connor's big form in the doorway he rushed forward with a glad cry:

"I knew it, Bert, it's Captain Dynamite. I told you he would come."

"Hush," said O'Connor, as he took the youngsters in his arms, much as one would two children and gave them a bear-like hug, "not so loud. We can take no chances, for we are not out of the woods yet."

"It's the terrible Captain Dynamite," cried the officer in dismay. Then he turned and fled down the stairs. Villamonte, relieved from the pressure on his ribs, slunk towards the door. O'Connor saw him and laughed.

"Run along, Monte, if you wish. I don't need you any more."

"But he will give the alarm," said Harry, in a frightened tone.

"No, I think not; but gather up your things, if you have any, for we must lose no time in getting out of here."

"We've got nothing but what we stand in, Cap," said Harry, laughing, "and this old Spanish uniform does not fit me very well, at that. Maybe Miss Juanita is through with my clothes by this time." [Pg 252]

"God bless you, youngster, they served her well."

"She is all right?"

"Right as a trivet and safe aboard the old *Mariella* by this time, thanks to you."

As they reached the lower corridor one of the men saluted and said:

"We put them in there, sir," pointing to a room opening off the corridor, which was used by the officer in command of the watch. O'Connor looked in and burst into one of his hearty laughs.

"Come here, youngsters, and take a last look at the valiant jailers," he said. The boys stepped forward and looked into the room. The four soldiers, gagged and bound hand and foot, were sitting with their backs against the wall, and facing them, and also bound in the same ignominious manner, were the commander and Villamonte.

Harry could not refrain from gloating a little over his fallen enemy.

"How about the glory of Spain, Mr. Interpreter?" he enquired. Villamonte scowled but did not reply.

"Come now, boys, we must be moving. This place is pretty hot for me," said O'Connor.

At this moment some one knocked loudly on the door of the prison and a deep voice called in Spanish: [Pg 253]

"Open, captain of the guard; it is I."

"Who is I?" asked O'Connor.

"Open at once. I am General Serano."

The boys caught the name and it struck terror to their souls. O'Connor smiled.

"Is General Serano alone?" he enquired.

"Yes; why do you keep me here. Open, I say."

O'Connor motioned to the boys to step behind the men, who were grouped a few feet in the rear of the corridor awaiting instructions. Then he threw open the prison door and stood back for General Serano to enter.

CHAPTER XXII

THE ESCAPE—VILLAMONTE AGAIN BEATEN.

As General Serano stepped over the threshold of the jail, O'Connor slipped the heavy bolts and turned the big key in the lock; then he placed the key in his pocket.

"Who are you, and where is the captain of the guard?" asked Serano, starting back in surprise when he saw O'Connor.

"The captain is engaged at present," said O'Connor, bowing and smiling impudently; "what can I do for your excellency?"

"Take me at once to the American prisoners. I have decided to revoke the two days' reprieve. Their sentence shall be executed in the morning unless they choose to bend their stubborn spirits and tell me for whom they are acting. They are not alone in this thing. Even now their friends may be gathering and threatening our outposts."

"That is quite true, your excellency; it certainly is wise to take every precaution. Your visit was very well timed, as a few minutes later you might have found the prisoners out. They were just starting for a little airing. The prison is very close, don't you think?"

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Serano looked puzzled, and O'Connor said, in English:

"Step forward, boys, and say 'How-de' to his excellency."

Harry and Bert came from behind the men, and stopping in front of the general, saluted him gravely.

"What does this mean?" demanded Serano, looking from the boys to O'Connor, as a suspicion that all was not right flashed into his mind. "Where is the captain of the guard? I insist that he shall report to me at once. And who are you, sir, who usurps the authority of the commandant here?"

"I am Captain Dynamite, at your service, your excellency," said O'Connor, making an elaborate bow and doffing his sombrero so that his features were revealed to the now thoroughly frightened general.

Serano leaped back and for a moment seemed dazed. Then his eyes fell on the eight soldiers standing back of the boys. His waning courage returned, and drawing himself up, he pointed his finger at O'Connor as he addressed the men.

"There is a price on that man's head. Seize him and see to it that he does not escape."

Not a man stirred. O'Connor, who had rolled a cigarette, turned to Serano.

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"May I trouble you for a light, general. There is no reason why we should not talk this thing over calmly."

"Dogs," continued the general, stamping his foot, "why do you not obey me? Seize that man. He is a desperate outlaw."

Some of the men jeered and others took a threatening step or two in the direction of the general, who jumped back into a corner of the corridor.

"What plot is this?" he gasped.

"Those are my men, general," said O'Connor calmly. "I should advise you not to be so violent. They do not like your language, you see. May I trouble you for that light?"

Serano drew out his match box and held it at arms length, lest O'Connor come too near him.

"Have no fear, sir," said O'Connor, who saw his perturbation, "No harm will come to you if you are wise enough to follow my instructions. You see, you are helpless. We hold the jail and no one will discover the plot until the watch is changed at midnight. Your guards are bound and gagged, and enjoying a siesta with your spy, Villamonte, in there." "Villamonte, too," exclaimed Serano, in surprise.

"Yes; he was kind enough to secure for me the entree to your jail, a favor any one in town would have been eager to grant, I doubt not, but Monte was the first to present himself. Perhaps you would like to see him. You will find him in there with the others."

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General Serano walked to the door of the officers' room and looked in. He started back with an expression of anger.

"This is an outrage on her majesty's soldiers for which you shall pay dearly, sir."

"Let's not talk about pay between gentlemen, General Serano. I think you will admit that if it came to a settlement I have rather the best of it just now, and if I were so inclined, I could remove one of Cuba's most implacable enemies with one stroke of a machete. But I am not here for that purpose. There are others who will undoubtedly attend to that later. Now, all that I

require of you is that you sit down at that table and write me a pass that will take me and my friends through your lines."

"Never, sir. I will call the outside guard," and the general made a leap for the door.

"The night is warm, general. Don't over-exert yourself. The door is locked and the key is in my pocket, and besides, if I should let you out you would only fall into the hands of more of my men. Your outside guard is also bound and gagged, and reclining against the wall of the jail in the shadow. The sentinels you saw on patrol when you approached the jail are my men. You see, there is no escape."

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"But the uniforms—they are Spain's."

"Yes, they belonged to unfortunate men who fell fighting for your cause. We Cubans have quite a stock of them on hand. I think you said you would write that pass."

"No, sir, never," roared the general, with a rattling Spanish oath.

"Very well, then I am sure you will pardon a few liberties."

O'Connor turned to the waiting men and said: "Remove the general's uniform."

"What is the meaning of this new outrage?" gasped Serano, backing into his corner again as O'Connor's men started to execute his order.

"Your uniform will serve as a passport if you refuse to write the pass," said O'Connor laughing.

"I'll write the pass," said the general quickly, and O'Connor motioned back his men. "My uniform shall never be so disgraced."

"Suit yourself, general—uniform or pass—it's all the same to me. There is pen and ink."

Serano sat down and with ill grace wrote something on a piece of paper which he handed to O'Connor. The latter read it and handed it back, with a shake of his head.

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"You will have to try again, general," he said. "Now write as I dictate."

"Never, sir."

"Your nevers come trippingly on the tongue, general. Boys, the general's uniform, please."

"No, no, I'll write it."

"Very well, but please to remember that I have no time for elocutionary exercises. One more never and off comes that uniform. I'll give you just three minutes to write this: 'Pass Captain O'Connor and his party through all Spanish lines and outposts.' That's right; now sign it."

Reluctantly Serano affixed his signature.

"Thank you," said O'Connor, with mock respect, as he took the paper. "Now there is just one more little favor that I feel sure you will be pleased to grant me, and that is to step upstairs with my men and see how you like the room the American boys have just vacated. You will find it quite comfortable. Our accommodations are a little overtaxed just now. Don't forget to leave your key at the office when you go out, and don't blow out the gas. Now boys, show the new guest to his room."

O'Connor laughed until he was forced to hold his sides as his men, delighted with their task, roughly hustled the astonished and fuming officer along the corridor and up the steps. They heard an iron door slam and the men returned and saluted with grinning faces.

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"Always find it a good thing to let your men have a little enjoyment mixed in with their work. Come on now, let's say good-bye to Monte and go. It only lacks an hour of midnight and when the watch changes it will not be long before our little game is discovered."

As he spoke, O'Connor walked to the door of the officer's room and looked in, followed by the boys.

"Good-bye, Mr. Interpreter," said Harry, "what are the quotations on glory to-night?"

Villamonte wagged the ends of his waxed mustache in an effort to speak. O'Connor laughed and turning to the door, unlocked it, and slipping back the bolts, gave a low whistle, like the one the boys had heard from their cell window. In a moment the answer came.

"Come on," said O'Connor, "the coast is clear."

They passed silently out into the night. The eight men joined their comrades and the next moment, one by one, they darted across the streak of moonlight and disappeared in the deep shadow of the building at the corner of the square. O'Connor stopped and looked around to see if they had been observed, but the streets were deserted.

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"Aren't you afraid that General Serano will yell through the window and give an alarm?" asked Harry, looking up to the bars of the cell they had so recently occupied.

"My men never leave a prisoner so that he can yell," said O'Connor, chuckling. "We have about an hour's start, and if we make the best of that we should be well out of the woods before the escape

is discovered."

O'Connor walked rapidly and they soon reached the outskirts of the little straggling town without meeting anyone to question them. Now and then Harry saw dark forms ahead gliding along in the shadows of the low buildings or darting swiftly across patches of moonlight, and he knew O'Connor's men were within call. O'Connor, himself, walked openly, with a boy on each side of him. In half an hour they had left the last of the huts of the reconcentrados behind them and struck boldly out into the open country, the twelve men, at a command from O'Connor, falling into marching order behind him.

In the dim distance lay their haven of safety: the dark, wooded foothills of the mountain that towered in black, ragged outlines before them, and the low-lying jungle at its base, within whose shelter O'Connor knew nearly a thousand determined men lay, only waiting word from him that his mission had failed, to move like a whirlwind on the unsuspecting outposts entrenched between them and the town. [Pg 262]

"We must be getting close to their lines," said O'Connor, looking at his watch. Then he turned quickly and put his hand to his ear in a listening attitude. At first the boys could not distinguish the sound that his quick ear had caught, and then indistinctly a faint, hollow clatter came over the plain from behind them. They strained their eyes but could see nothing that might cause it.

"It's a horse—galloping hard," said O'Connor, and his mouth set into that straight line that the boys knew so well. "Lie down."

O'Connor set the example and dropped on his stomach, with his ear to the ground. After a moment he raised his head slightly, and said:

"I think there is only one, but it will be safer to get under cover. Crawl to those bushes and lie low."

They all wriggled along the ground until they were partially concealed from view by one of the clumps of low trees and shrubs that dotted the plain.

"Do you think they have discovered our escape?" asked Bert.

"Can't tell yet," answered O'Connor, who was standing up behind a tree, trying to catch a glimpse of the rider whose approach was heralded by the vigorous pounding of his horse's hoofs. "I am satisfied that there is but one horse and it hardly seems likely that one man would set out in pursuit of a dozen, nor can I think it is a courier riding so hard at this time of night." [Pg 263]

The clatter of hoofs now became distinct, and away in the distance they could see a speck that grew larger each minute, until it took the form of a horse and rider. The course he was taking would bring him within an eighth of a mile of the party. As he came nearer O'Connor strained his eyes to make out the rider. The moon was getting low, but there was still light enough on the plain to make it possible to distinguish faces at some distance.

On came the horse, and the watchers could see that his rider was urging him with voice and spur. Nearer and nearer they came until the foam flecks shone white in the moonlight.

"By thunder," said O'Connor, suddenly; "it's the old villain, Monte. How did he get out?"

"Who is it?" asked Harry, eagerly.

"Villamonte, the interpreter."

"Then the escape has been discovered."

"Undoubtedly."

"But what is he doing out here alone?"

There was a moment's silence while O'Connor watched the panting horse come tearing on. Now he was almost abreast of the clump of trees, and even the boys, with their untrained eyes, could make out their persistent enemy, Villamonte. [Pg 264]

"He's riding for the outpost to revoke this pass," said O'Connor, slowly tapping the pocket that contained the paper. "They think that is the best means of trapping us."

"It's all up with us then, if he gets there first," said Bert, "and we have no horses to stop him."

"No, but we have something just as good," said O'Connor, turning quickly to the man behind him; "let me have your Mauser, Pedro."

He took the rifle and stepped out into the open. Dropping on his knee, he raised the weapon to his shoulder and seemingly without aiming at the flying mark, fired. The boys shrank back involuntarily. Bloodshed, no matter how necessary, was revolting. Still, they could not help watching to see the result of O'Connor's shot. The horse pitched forward and rolled over on his side, pinning his rider beneath him.

"Shoot the horse if he is not already dead, and bring in the man," said O'Connor, coolly handing the rifle back. Two men started on a dog trot for the fallen horse and rider.

"Is—is he dead?" asked Harry, hesitatingly.

"The horse or the man?"

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"The man."

"No, there is nothing the matter with Monte more than a broken arm perhaps. I shot at the horse. I am sorry—I would almost rather have shot the man. But it had to be done."

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CHAPTER XXIII

BACK TO THE MARIELLA

Perspiration dripped from the drooping ends of Villamonte's waxed mustache as the men brought the discomfited interpreter before O'Connor. He had suffered nothing worse than a few bruises, but he was covered with dust and dirt and his expression was a strange mixture of fear and amazement. He could not seem to comprehend what had happened.

"We couldn't lose you, could we, Monte?" said O'Connor laughing. "I am sorry to have had to deprive you of your horse, but you were riding faster than the speed limit. Now I think the safest thing to do with you is to take you right along with us. You seem to like our company. Pedro, bind the gentleman's hands behind him and slip a gag into his mouth. We cannot take any more chances with you, Mr. Interpreter."

Villamonte, who knew that it would be useless to protest, contented himself with scowling at O'Connor and the boys. Then they took up the march again and met with no further obstacle until they were challenged by the outposts at the trenches. General Serano's pass took them into the presence of the officer in command, who looked the party over with some surprise.

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"You are escorting a prisoner, Captain O'Connor, I see," he said. "General Serano does not mention him in his pass."

"I did not know that General Serano had to explain his affairs to his subordinates, sir."

"It is a little unusual."

"I should advise you to ask no questions in this matter. It is a mission in which the general is deeply interested. These two young men have been for some days his guests, awaiting an opportunity to get to the coast. This prisoner is a man of so desperate a character that it is not deemed safe to even grant him ordinary privileges. I dare not remove the gag from his mouth even while safe within the lines, lest some secret signal he might utter bring a horde of insurgents about our ears. There is a price on his head. General Serano does not mention him in the pass, captain, because of this. In the strictest confidence I will mention a name to you that will explain the need for extraordinary caution."

O'Connor lowered his voice almost to a whisper as he leaned confidentially toward the officer and said:

"Captain Dynamite is in this party."

"Ah! He is the terrible Captain Dynamite?" gasped the commander, taking a few steps backward and pointing at Villamonte. O'Connor put his finger to his lips and said:

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"Sh! Remember I have not said so."

"I understand, Captain O'Connor. I am honored by your confidence. Pass on with your prisoner with what speed you may."

The party made their way rapidly through the lines and within an hour, with O'Connor as guide, they had reached the shelter of the thick brush that separated them from the lagoon where the *Mariella* lay.

"Now, boys," said O'Connor, as he slackened his pace, "you are as safe as if you were under your own roof trees. There are a thousand men at our command lying within these woods and stretched from the coast to the mountain yonder. All of Spain's army could not fight its way through that line."

"Why have we not been challenged by the sentries?" asked Harry. "The Spaniards might creep among them as we have done."

"O, no, we are expected and our approach has been watched and covered by ready guns for some time. There are men now within ten feet of us. See?"

O'Connor uttered that peculiar bird cry, which was answered at once from the bushes near at hand, and the next moment, as silently as an Indian, a man stepped out in front of them and saluted O'Connor.

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"Where is the general?" asked the captain.

"At his headquarters in the clearing. He wished to be notified of the safe arrival of your party."

"We will go to him at once. Take this prisoner and keep him securely bound, but you can remove the gag now. My dear Monte, you will kindly accompany this gentleman. And now, my men," he continued to his twelve companions, who still grouped themselves about him, "you have done your part well. I thank each of you for your fidelity. You can join your separate companies and present my thanks to your commanders."

The men, as they passed O'Connor, shook his hand warmly. There was something about the man that made everyone with whom he came in contact glad to serve him.

"Now, come on, boys; we will go to the general and thank him for his aid."

"What general is it?" asked Bert.

"General Gomez, bless him," answered O'Connor, doffing his sombrero to an imaginary presence.

"Then we shall see General Gomez," said Harry, eagerly.

"That ye will, and a fine bit of a fighter ye'll see, too."

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With O'Connor in the lead they pushed their way through the dense brush until they came out into an open space that had been cleared by axe and machete, but that it was no new rendezvous was evident from the directness with which O'Connor approached it through the pathless underbrush. It was about forty feet square and in the middle there had been erected a rough shelter, or hut, without walls, the thatched roof being supported by four poles. Under this, in a reclining camp chair, sat the grizzled old warrior, with several of his staff officers. He rose as they entered the clearing and advanced toward O'Connor with his hand extended in greeting.

For some time they talked earnestly together, O'Connor making a report of his expedition into the town and the rescue of the prisoners. Now and then the old general would turn his weather-beaten face toward the boys, and in the flickering light of the camp fire they could see the expression of cold severity melt away into a smile as soft and gentle as a woman's. Presently, the conference ended, he stepped over to Harry and Bert, shook each by the hand, and then retired to the hut again, and at once began to issue orders to his staff. One by one they saluted and left him.

"Are they going to attack the town?" asked Harry.

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"No, my boy, not now. Had we not appeared the attack would have been made within an hour. As it is, the general will return to Cubitas to continue his campaign as originally planned, and Captain Morgan, who moved up here to co-operate with the general, will return and cover the removal of our cargo. All that remains now is to take the old *Mariella* safely out of these waters and then we can say, 'All's well that ends well!' In the meantime, as I am a bit anxious myself to get away, we will press on and make the lagoon by dawn. Then you boys will have a chance to put in a little sleep, for, as our friend Washington would say, I'm not such a mucher at guessing, but I'll warrant you are running a little short of rest since your arrival on these lively shores."

The boys were indeed completely fagged out. The reaction following the nervous strain and the excitement of the past few days was beginning to set in, and Harry felt that if he could once more climb into his bunk on the *Mariella* he could sleep for twenty-four hours. Still, they pulled themselves together and struck out again into the bush close in the wake of O'Connor, who seemed to be made of iron.

As they reached the shores of the lagoon the sky was just brightening with the gray dawn. The outlines of the *Mariella* were dimly discernable. Bert and Harry, now completely exhausted, threw themselves at full length on the beach. O'Connor put his fingers to his lips and again that strange bird cry floated out on the still air over the dark lagoon. There was no answer, but in a moment the sound of creaking ropes could be heard, and then there was the splash of a boat in the water, followed presently by the regular sound of oars. O'Connor lighted a match and held it for a second above his head as a signal to the rowers.

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A boat's keel grated on the sand and Suarez leaped out and seized O'Connor's hand in both of his.

"Glad to see you back safe, sir," he said, earnestly. "Miss Juanita and her mother are safe on board and I see you have the two young gentlemen with you, so we are all accounted for again."

"Good, Suarez, and how about the cargo?"

"Nearly all on shore. We shall be ready for sea again by midnight if Morgan returns to take charge of the removal on shore."

"Morgan and his men will be here within a few hours. Keep the cargo moving; I shall not feel at rest until I get well out to sea again."

Suarez turned toward the boat and the boys heard him mutter:

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"Petticoats always do knock the pluck out of a man."

As they rowed alongside of the *Mariella*, day had dawned and the boys could distinguish Miss Juanita, Mason, and Washington leaning over the rail. Little Mason swung his cap and shouted in his joy.

At this point Washington seized him and dragged him back, at the same time placing his finger

on his own lips to indicate that he should be quiet.

"O, bother," grunted Mason, "who's afraid now the cap's back?"

Miss Juanita greeted them warmly as they came over the side. She took a hand of each boy and kissed it with a pretty little courtesy. Washington was so jubilant that he could not refrain from a few steps of a double shuffle on the deck.

"Ah guessed Massa Cap'n Dynamite'd bring 'em all back all right, all right, an' ah ain't such a mucher at guessin' either," he said, with a wide grin.

The boys, quite abashed by Miss Juanita's demonstrative thanks, stammered a few words in reply and turned to greet their eager companion.

"Say, fels, tell me all about it," said the Midget, dragging them off to the forward part of the deck.

"First got to go to the galley with George Wash Jenks and get some coffee and bite to eat. Ah bet you suah hungry, Misser Harry an' Misser Bert." [Pg 274]

"We suah are, Washington. What have you got to eat in there?"

"Ah guess ah got some suah 'nough fresh doughnuts."

"Oh, doughnuts for ours," cried the boys in chorus.

"Also for mine, Wash," said Mason solemnly. "I may not be a hero, but I've got just as good an appetite for fresh doughnuts as if I had rescued the maiden all forlorn. How about that, Wash?"

"Suah, Misser Mason, you get doughnuts too."

"Very well, then, lead on."

They followed the grinning and happy negro into the galley, while O'Connor and Miss Juanita joined her mother on the after deck. For half an hour they were busy tucking away Washington's doughnuts and coffee, while Mason waited patiently for the story of their adventures. Full stomachs and a sense of safety after a period of excitement and danger, however, brought about a lethargy that only rest and sleep could dispel, and with heavy eyes and weary legs they dragged themselves aft to their stateroom, and crawling into their bunks, fully dressed as they were, fell into a heavy sleep despite the disgusted protests of Mason, who was finally obliged to leave them to their dreamless slumber.

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CHAPTER XXIV

THE ESCAPE FROM THE LAGOON

When the boys awoke it was dark again. They had slept through the day without a break. Mason, who had been hovering around restlessly all day, poked his head into the stateroom just as Harry was rubbing his eyes.

"O, say, you chaps, have you returned to life again? Do you know you have been pounding your ears for thirteen hours?"

"Where are we, Midget?" asked Harry, yawning.

"Still in the blooming lagoon."

"Oh, yes, I remember now." Harry sighed comfortably and turned over.

"Oh, say, you fellows; turn out. You have had sleep enough and I am as lonely as a cow in a strange pasture. You've had all the fun; now the least you can do is to get up and tell me about it."

"Fun, eh?" said Bert, who had been awakened by the conversation. "I wish you had had my part of the enjoyment. More quiet amusement will do for me."

"I am as hungry as a bear," said Harry, jumping out of bed. "If you won't let us sleep we must eat. Have you had supper yet?" [Pg 276]

"No; Cap said he was going to wait until you waked up."

"All right; if you'll get a bucket of water we'll be ready in short order. I've got to wash up. I'm as dirty as a digger Indian."

When Harry turned out he found his own suit, carefully mended and pressed, laid out over a chair. He gladly discarded his badly fitting Spanish uniform, and after a good wash, donned his own clothing again and made quite a presentable appearance as he walked out on deck, where he found O'Connor and Miss Juanita and her mother lounging lazily in steamer chairs.

O'Connor jumped up and warmly welcomed the boys, and Miss Juanita insisted upon presenting them to her mother as "the brave American lads who had saved her from the vengeance of

General Serano."

"And now, youngsters," said O'Connor, as soon as they had blushingly acknowledged the warmly expressed gratitude of Miss Juanita's mother, "I know you are hungry and dinner waits. My Waldorf chef has done himself proud in honor of the occasion and George Wash Jenks, his assistant, has begged to be allowed to serve us. Let's get busy." He rose as he spoke and the boys saw that he had dressed himself with scrupulous care again, in a suit of light flannel, yachting cap, and immaculately white canvas shoes.

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It was a merry party that gathered around the cabin table, which, with its elaborate setting of crystal and silver, would have been a credit to any domestic establishment. Washington, in a white coat and apron, his face wide ajar with a happy grin, served them skillfully. After dessert had been cleared away and O'Connor had secured permission from the ladies to smoke his cigarette, Mason, who had been for many hours impatiently waiting to hear the story of his comrades' adventures, saw his opportunity, and rising and bowing to the company with his funny, grave expression, said:

"Ladies and gentlemen, and our distinguished host: Little as I am accustomed to public speaking, I wish right here to say that I consider that I have been very shabbily treated. Fickle fortune robbed me of an opportunity to become a hero, and it looks as if I would now be denied even the poor gratification of enjoying the thrilling adventures of my brave comrades by word of mouth. I know I'm little and perhaps my suit would not have fitted Miss Juanita as well as my friend Hamilton's, but it was not because of my size that unkind fate singled him out for the hero part and left me not so much as an understudy. It was pure hard luck, and now I demand, as the slighted party, that the story of the rescue from the Spanish prison be told in the minutest detail for the benefit of the assembled company by those who acted the principal parts. Captain Dynamite, I leave it to you if it is not due to a disappointed, would-be hero?"

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O'Connor laughed heartily at the boy, who kept a serious and sober face during his harangue.

"Your position is well taken, Master Mason," he said. "I propose that Master Hamilton begin the story at the point where he and his companion fell into the hands of the Spaniards."

After some urging Harry told in an easy narrative style the story of his and Bert's adventures, to which Mason listened breathlessly, while Washington, who had been permitted to stand behind O'Connor's chair, alternately grinned and stared in amazement. The story of the misfortune of Villamonte seemed to amuse him greatly, and as Harry described his expression as he lay bound and gagged in the prison, the negro slapped his leg in glee, and for a moment forgetting himself, cried out.

"Ah guess Misser Tree Card Monte not bother Massa Cap'n Dynamite no more. He, he, ha, ha."

They all joined with Washington in his mirth, and in the midst of their hilarity the cabin door opened and Suarez, with a reproachful expression, looked in at O'Connor and waited for the noise to subside.

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"Captain Morgan's sentinels on the point report a light off shore, sir," he said, as soon as he could make himself heard.

"What sort of a light, Suarez?" asked O'Connor, without showing any excitement.

"Probably a vessel's light, sir."

"Very well. Call me if it seems to be making in shore."

Suarez cast another glance at O'Connor that seemed to say, "Petticoats are out of place on filibusters," but he wisely refrained from expressing any such opinions aloud.

Harry continued his narrative and O'Connor appeared to listen with as great an interest as if he were not familiar with the details already. Harry noticed, however, that every now and then he cast a glance at the door as if he expected Suarez to return. He had reached that point in his story where they discover Villamonte riding madly after them on the plain and Washington's eyes were bulging with excitement, when the door again opened and Suarez stepped in and saluted.

"I think you had better come on deck, sir," he said, quietly.

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"All right, Suarez," said O'Connor, jumping up quickly. "Go on with your story, my boy, I will join you again shortly. Keep up the interest; you've got your audience in the proper mood now." With a light laugh, intended to allay any anxiety Suarez's words might have caused his guests, O'Connor left the cabin.

Harry realized that some danger threatened them, but catching a significant look in the eyes of the captain as he left the room, fell in with his purpose readily and continued his story as if nothing had happened.

"What is it, Suarez?" asked O'Connor, as soon as they were alone on deck.

"She's headed in shore and directly for the inlet, sir."

"Can you make her out yet?"

"I have not been ashore, sir, but Morgan's men say they can only see her lights."

"Lower a boat and let me take your glasses. I do not want to alarm the ladies by returning to the cabin for mine."

"Women are a bit of a nuisance at such times, sir," said Suarez, who could no longer refrain from expressing his views, however mildly.

"No, you are wrong there, Suarez," said O'Connor, who understood the mate's aversion to everyone and everything that was not working directly for the good of the cause. "They are only an incentive to extra caution, which you must admit is an admirable thing for me." Suarez shook his head doubtfully as he went forward to get the boat in the water and O'Connor laughed at his officer's croquet. [Pg 281]

A boat was quickly lowered and manned, and O'Connor was rowed to the point of land that separated the lagoon from the ocean. He made his way to a group of men who, in the shelter of some palm trees, were watching the red and green lights of an approaching vessel.

"Can you make her out?" asked O'Connor, eagerly.

"No, sir. We have no glasses. Perhaps you can tell what she is."

O'Connor took a long look at the lights, which were yet mere specks.

"I can't make her out yet," he said, as he lowered his glasses, "but whoever she is she must know the coast hereabouts pretty well to head in so close."

He sat down with his back to one of the trees and his face to the sea and rolled a cigarette. He smoked calmly for ten minutes and then put his glasses to his eyes again.

"She's a gunboat," he said finally. "Let me know in fifteen minutes if she still holds her course." [Pg 282]

He turned back to his boat and was rowed rapidly back to the *Mariella*. Suarez met him at the gangway.

"Did you make her out, sir?" he asked eagerly.

"Yes, she's a gunboat—I think our old friend the *Belair*, and if it be she there is no significance in her presence here. She has probably been cruising up and down the coast since we left her trying to solve the mystery of our sudden disappearance. But in any event you better prepare for the worst; but quietly, Suarez, quietly. We do not want to alarm the ladies unnecessarily."

"Bother the ladies," grumbled Suarez to himself, as he went forward to carry out the captain's orders. O'Connor leaned on the rail facing the black point of land that hid them from view. Presently a boat put out from the shore and as she came under the *Mariella's* quarter, O'Connor whispered:

"Well?"

"Only the red light shows now, sir," answered a man in the small boat.

"She has changed her course, then. Good. Keep a sharp lookout and let me know at once if she changes again."

"It seems to be steady, sir. I think she has come to anchor."

"Whew," whistled O'Connor; "that's bad." [Pg 283]

The little boat put back to shore and O'Connor stood leaning over the rail in deep thought. Meanwhile dark shapes moved quickly, but silently, across the deck as the men took their quarters. The mate aroused O'Connor from his reverie.

"All is ready, sir," he said.

"Very good, Suarez. I think I know what her game is now. She's beating the coast for just such hidden spots as this lagoon. Get word at once to the men on the point to watch carefully for the approach of a launch or small boat. There is to be no demonstration unless they find the inlet. In that case let them see that no one gets out again. And Suarez, the machete—no guns. There must be no noise to tell the *Belair* what has happened."

O'Connor rejoined the party in the cabin with a smile on his lips that belied the weight of anxiety on his mind.

"Now ladies," he said cheerily, "if Harry has finished his tale of adventure we will bid you good night, as I have to make ready for sea. You will occupy my cabin, as I have no doubt the boys will be quite willing to bunk with me in a spare stateroom forward."

The boys bade the ladies good night and retired to the deck with the captain. [Pg 284]

"What's up, Cap?" asked Harry, as soon as the door closed behind them.

"Can't fool you, eh?" laughed O'Connor.

"I knew something had gone wrong, sir, as soon as you left the cabin."

"Well, I suppose I might just as well tell you boys, for you will find out sooner or later, but I do not want a word of it to reach the ladies; you understand?"

"We'll be as silent as clams at high water," said Mason, "but I should like to have it thoroughly understood that I am next in line for any hero parts."

"There is a Spanish gunboat—the same one we had the little mix-up with coming down, I think—lying just off the inlet. I believe that her commander suspects that we have hidden away in some such place as this and he is beating the shore with small boats in the hope of locating us."

"But what chance would a small boat have if she did discover us?"

"If the boat crew discovered us and got away the gunboat could shell us out or sink us in the lagoon."

"Another cheery outlook," groaned Bert. "I thought we were safe on the *Mariella* and it seems that it is only a choice between Spanish guns ashore and Spanish shells at sea."

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"Oh, it's not quite so bad as that, Master Wilson," said O'Connor laughing, but with an anxious look in the direction of the cabin. "If they do not discover our hiding-place we shall sneak out all right under cover of darkness, and if they do discover it, we shall have to fight for it; but in either event we shall get out." O'Connor's mouth tightened into that straight line that indicated his desperate moods. He stepped over to the rail and fixed his eyes on the black shore of the lagoon. It was his usual abrupt method of closing a conversation, and the boys who were now familiar with his peculiarities, did not attempt to question him further.

The tide was running into the inlet and the *Mariella* had swung around on her anchor chains until she was pointed directly for the hidden opening to the sea. The boys left O'Connor to his thoughts and strolled forward. The sky was partially overcast and the moon, which had just risen, was almost obscured by heavy, slowly moving clouds. Now and then, however, it broke through a rift, flooding the lagoon with its silvery light and throwing the black sides of the *Mariella* into bold relief. Not a breath of air stirred leaf or twig.

"We are ready for action," whispered Harry, as they passed the silent forms of the men standing quietly at their stations. "They won't catch Captain Dynamite napping, any way."

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Near the fo'c'sle deck they found Washington at his post, a Mauser in his hand and machete and pistols in his belt.

"Hullo, Wash," said Mason, "are we going to have another mix-up?"

The negro grinned and bobbed his head rapidly at the same time placing his finger on his lips.

"What's the matter? Lost your tongue again?"

"Sh. George Wash Jenks can't talk on fightin' duty."

"That's right, Wash; obey orders," said Harry, as they passed on.

The dark forms of the waiting men, the dead silence that hung over the steamer, and the tense air of anxiety and doubt that pervaded all began to have a disquieting effect upon the boys who, at first, full of confidence in the courage and experience of O'Connor, had regarded their situation as only remotely dangerous. For a long time they stood looking off at the screen of trees and vines that separated them from the sea, where the gunboat lay in wait for its prey.

A black cloud that had obscured the face of the moon slowly passed over it, and again the shores of the lagoon stood out in detail, almost as if the sun shone upon them. Harry placed a hand quickly on Bert's shoulder and pointed ahead of them. There was a commotion in the leafy screen as if something was forcing its way through. The next moment the bow of a boat crept slowly out until its full length was visible within the lagoon. Another cloud began to draw a fleecy fringe across the moon, but before its darker center passed over the shining disc, the boys could see many black moving spots on the surface of the water, rapidly approaching the boat from behind.

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"We must tell the captain," said Harry, turning quickly, only to find O'Connor with folded arms standing silently behind them, watching the scene with contracted brow. He did not appear to notice the presence of the boys.

"Now, quick," he hissed between his teeth, as if coaching someone in the distance, and at the same time the boys saw the black spots rise from the water, as many arms shot up and seized the gunwale of the boat. Then a veil of darkness shut out the dramatic scene as the cloud shut out the light of the moon.

There was a sound of splashing water, a low cry or two and then silence again. O'Connor turned away and joined the mate, who had watched the brief spectacle from the bridge.

"It was well done, Suarez," said O'Connor.

"Aye, aye, sir; it was a neat job. Trust Morgan's men for that." The splash of oars alongside interrupted them and the sentries' boat appeared again. O'Connor leaned over the bridge.

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"Boat and four men captured at the inlet, sir," called a voice from out of the darkness.

"Good; anyone hurt?"

"Not a soul, sir. We were two to one and they threw up their hands when we climbed over the stern of their boat. What shall we do with the prisoners?"

"Turn them over to Captain Morgan; and now, Suarez, when can we go to sea?"

"Whenever you please, sir. The cargo is all ashore."

"Get up steam at once."

"Are you going to take her out to-night, sir, in the face of the *Belair*?"

"If I don't take her out to-night we shall have to run the gauntlet in a hail of solid shot. It will not be long before they will suspect that something has happened to that boat. By daybreak the *Belair* will move in. Our only chance is to get out under cover of darkness. She is well within range now, but we can get clear of the inlet with a bit of speed on before she discovers us, and if we've got to fight I prefer the open sea."

"Very well, sir. Shall I heave the anchors?" asked Suarez.

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"You can't heave the anchors until you get up steam, man."

"I told you we were ready for sea, sir," said Suarez, in a reproachful tone. "The *Mariella* is always at your command."

Fifteen minutes later O'Connor stood in the pilot house with his hand on the wheel. He looked back for a moment at the two sentinel palms and then he rang the bell for full speed ahead.

The engines throbbed, the screws churned the still water of the lagoon into a white froth and the *Mariella*, with rapidly increasing speed, poked her nose into the green foliage that barred her passage to the sea. Branches and vines scraped along her sides for a moment and then, released from their impeding embrace, she forged ahead with a tremble and start into the open sea. The red portlight of the waiting gunboat gleamed in the darkness a few points off her port bow. O'Connor swung her head around until the light was off the *Mariella's* quarter. Then he turned the wheel over to the steersman who stood beside him.

"Keep her steady, now," he said, as he left the pilot house and returned to the bridge, where Suarez stood with his glasses trained on the red light.

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"No sign of movement, yet, sir," he said.

"You have no lights burning?"

"Not a light aboard, sir, except in the binnacle."

"All depends upon the moon then. She'll hardly make us out against the shore. If the moon stays in for fifteen minutes we shall be out of range of her guns and we can outfoot her in a stern chase."

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CHAPTER XXV

HOME AGAIN

Mrs. Hamilton sat on the broad veranda of her cottage looking wistfully out to sea. She was pale and languid from the weight of many anxious days and sleepless nights. Before her lay the treacherous ocean, now calm and peaceful, rippling laughingly in the summer sunshine. The white sails of tiny pleasure craft skimmed lightly over its placid surface, and in striking contrast to her unhappy mood, nature and the world seemed to show their cheeriest faces. The laughing voices of merry youngsters, the twitter of the sparrows in the trees, the soft notes of a girl's happy song wafted to her from a passing yacht, all grated harshly on her overwrought nerves. Day in and day out, in sunshine and storm, since Harry's disappearance, she had sat in a sheltered corner of the veranda and—waited.

Mr. Hamilton stepped out of the cottage, and drawing a chair beside her, took her hand gently in his and caressed it silently.

"There is no word yet?" she said, finally, without taking her eyes from the dancing water.

"None."

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"And you have been unable to learn anything of the steamer,—the *Mariella*?"

"All that my agents can find out is that she is apparently a tramp, and that she cleared from Boston for southern ports with a cargo of general merchandise."

"And she has not been reported since?"

"No."

"There can be little hope then?"

"We must not despair yet."

"There could have been no mistake in the name of the steamer that picked them up?"

"I hardly think so. I saw the captain of the steamer that reported them and he is positive that he could have made no mistake in reading the signal."

"Then she should have arrived at some port long ago."

"Yes; but these tramp steamers are sometimes very slow and it is not unusual for them to be many days overdue and turn up all right. I think, Mary, it is best that you should go home. This anxiety is killing you and the surroundings here keep you constantly overwrought. I have every point covered from which a report of the steamer might be received, and then, who knows, if Harry should land in the South, he might go West at once."

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Mrs. Hamilton shook her head and pointed out over the sea.

"No, Edward, that is the way he went and I shall wait for him here."

A boy on a bicycle rode up to the house.

"Telegram for Mr. Hamilton," he called, as he jumped from his wheel.

"Quick, Edward, it may be news from Harry," said Mrs. Hamilton, rising eagerly as her husband took the yellow envelope from the boy and broke the seal hastily.

"The *Mariella* is bound in," he almost shouted, as he passed the paper to his wife. She took it in her trembling hands and read:

EDWARD HAMILTON,
Cliff Cottage,
Cottage City, Mass.

Tramp steamer *Mariella* just reported passing in. Bound for Boston.

WILLIAM COFFIN, Nantucket.

Mrs. Hamilton sank back into her chair, an expression of eager hope lighting up her wan face.

"Do you suppose that Harry is on board, Edward? Can it be that he is coming home at last?"

"I hope so, Mary, but I cannot understand it. Where has the steamer been and why has she not been reported out?"

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"Can this be a mistake?" asked the woman plaintively, holding out the telegram.

"No, I think not."

"Then let us go to Boston at once and meet him."

"That would be unwise. By the time we could reach there, Harry—if he is aboard—might be on his way here. It is best to wait, Mary, and hope for the best. In the meantime, I will wire to my agent in Boston to meet the steamer."

With a sigh of resignation, Mrs. Hamilton resumed her weary vigil. Suddenly she started up with a new idea.

"Edward," she said, "if she is coming in she will pass out there."

"Yes, but too far out for you to see her, Mary."

"Never mind; bring me the glasses. It will help to pass the weary hours of waiting."

Mr. Hamilton brought her a pair of marine glasses, and rearranging the cushions behind her head with a tender hand, he left her eagerly scanning the horizon for some sign of a passing steamer.

When he returned from the telegraph office she called to him eagerly:

"Look, Edward, just off the point. There is a steamer."

"Yes, probably a collier."

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"But she seems to be headed this way."

"They go up the sound to New York."

"But might she not be the—the——"

"No, Mary; she would have to head out around Cape Cod to make Boston."

"I know, I know, but perhaps she may land him here."

"That would take her out of her course and mean the loss of time. Her captain would not do that."

For fifteen minutes more, Mrs. Hamilton watched the steamer in silence and then she turned again to her husband, and said:

"She is not going up the sound, Edward; she is headed in here." Mr. Hamilton took the glasses and scanned the steamer.

"She does seem to be headed this way."

"It is the *Mariella*, Edward."

Mrs. Hamilton spoke in a low tone of deep conviction. Her husband looked at her anxiously.

"You are trying to make coincidences fit your wishes, Mary," he said. "Do not build up false hopes; the disappointment will be too much for your worn nerves."

"I shall not be disappointed, Edward; see, she is headed straight in now."

"It is strange," said Mr. Hamilton, beginning himself to take an interest in the steamer, which was now certainly headed almost for the cottage. [Pg 296]

"Quick, Edward, the glasses; I can see people on her decks."

Mrs. Hamilton rose from her chair as she spoke and almost snatched the glasses from her husband's hands in her eagerness. For a long time she stood like a statue with the glasses trained on the steamer, and then suddenly she took a white shawl from her shoulders and waved it wildly above her head.

"It is Harry," she cried, sobbing with excitement, as she thrust the glasses into her husband's hands. "See, they have seen us, too, and Harry is waving his hat."

Her overwrought nerves could not stand the excess of joy and she sank into her husband's arms.

Mr. Hamilton carried her into a big room that overlooked the water and placed her gently on a lounge. When she recovered consciousness and opened her eyes, she looked up into the face of her son, who bent anxiously over her.

"Harry," she whispered, her happiness sending the warm blood back into her face again.

"Mother," he cried, seizing her in his strong young arms.

When she was stronger they led her out to her seat on the veranda where she had kept her weary vigil, and she warmly greeted Bert and the Midget, who had just returned from the telegraph office, where they had sent word at once to their homes telling of their safe arrival in America. O'Connor who had come ashore at Harry's earnest solicitation, stood in the background talking with Mr. Hamilton, to whom he had briefly outlined the adventures of the three boys since they had been his guests on the *Mariella*. [Pg 297]

Harry took the big man by the hand and led him over to his mother.

"Mother," he said, proudly, "I want you to know my friend, Captain Dynamite."

"Captain Dynamite?" repeated Mrs. Hamilton, in wonder.

"Captain O'Connor, I mean; they call him Dynamite because when you touch him off there's sure to be something doing. He saved our lives twice—once from the sea, and once from the Spaniards."

"The Spaniards—my son, what are you talking about?"

"That's a long story, mother. I will tell you that to-night."

After much persuasion, O'Connor was induced to remain overnight on condition that all hands would dine on the *Mariella*. He went back to the steamer and sent a large boat ashore for his guests and no happier party could have been found that night than those who gathered around the table in the cabin of the old *Mariella*. Miss Juanita made Mrs. Hamilton's heart glow with the pride of a mother as she told of Harry's sacrifice to save her, and after dinner, as they all gathered on the after deck under the starlit sky, Mr. and Mrs. Hamilton listened with breathless interest as the various actors told the story of their adventures during the voyage with Captain Dynamite. [Pg 298]

It was long after midnight when all the farewells had been said and the boat that was to put the departing guests ashore left the side of the *Mariella*. As the sailors pushed off, O'Connor and Juanita stood at the rail, his big hand resting gently on hers.

"Say, Cap," shouted the Midget, as they moved away, "count us in when you cut that wedding cake."

[THE END.]

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK A VOYAGE WITH CAPTAIN DYNAMITE ***

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