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Author: G. Harvey Ralphson

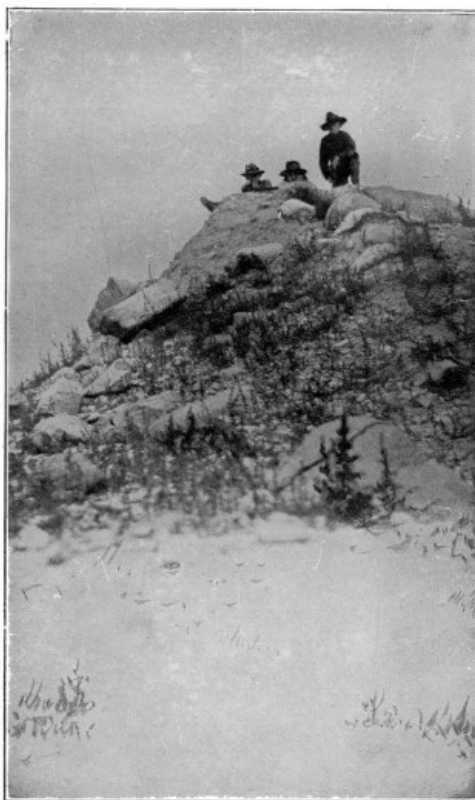
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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK BOY SCOUTS IN THE CANAL ZONE; OR, THE PLOT AGAINST UNCLE SAM ***



FRONTISPIECE. Boy Scouts in the Canal Zone;
or The Plot Against Uncle Sam.

Boy Scouts in the Canal Zone

Or

The Plot Against Uncle Sam

By

Scout Master, G. Harvey Ralphson



Author of
"Boy Scouts in Mexico; or On Guard with Uncle Sam."
"Boy Scouts in the Philippines; or The Key to the Treaty Box."
"Boy Scouts in the Northwest; or Fighting Forest Fires."

Embellished with full page and other illustrations.

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Boy Scouts in the Canal Zone
OR
The Plot Against Uncle Sam

CHAPTER I

THE PLOT AGAINST THE GATUN DAM.

"Five Black Bears, two Wolves, and a Panther. That would be a choice collection of wild animals to take to the Canal Zone."

The remark was greeted with shouts of laughter, and then the boys in the handsome clubroom of the Black Bear Patrol, in the city of New York, settled down to a serious discussion of the topic of the evening. There were seven present, Ned Nestor and Jimmie McGraw, of the Wolf Patrol; George Tolford, Harry Stevens, Glen Howard, and Jack Bosworth, of the famous Black Bear Patrol; and Peter Fenton, of the Panther Patrol. They ranged in age from thirteen to seventeen, Jimmie being the youngest and Ned Nestor the oldest of the group.

They were all enthusiastic Boy Scouts, and their clubrooms were well supplied with boxing gloves, foils, and footballs, as well as weapons and articles necessary on camping expeditions. The clubroom in which the boys were assembled on this gusty night in early April was situated in the upper part of the fine residence of Jack's father, on Fifth avenue. The Black Bear Patrol was composed almost entirely of the sons of very wealthy parents, and the boys were off to the woods and waters whenever opportunity offered.

In company with Lieutenant Gordon, of the United States Secret Service, and Frank Shaw, a member of the Black Bear Patrol, whose arrival was momentarily expected, the boys present had, on the previous day, returned from a series of unusual and exciting experiences in Mexico, and now they were discussing a proposed plan for an excursion to the Canal Zone. Of course they could make the trip if they desired, but what they wanted was to go in the company of Lieutenant Gordon, sent there on a secret mission by the Secretary of War.

"Aw, come on, Ned, an' be a good feller," Jimmie McGraw urged, as Nestor expressed a doubt as to the advisability of taking the boys on the Canal Zone trip, to which he had been invited by the lieutenant, both as assistant and companion. "Let us go! We'll talk the lieutenant into letting us go along if you'll say a good word for us."

During the trip to Mexico to which reference has been made, Ned Nestor had succeeded in averting serious complications between the government of that rebellious republic and the government of the United States. Through his efforts a threatened raid across the Rio Grande from the Mexican side had been checked on the very border, and the secret service men associated with him did not hesitate to declare that his tact and activity had done much to prevent a war between the two countries.

Before leaving the scene of their operations in Mexico, Lieutenant Gordon had been ordered to New York on important official business. Only an inkling of what that official business was contained in his letter of instructions. Only the bare fact that complications in the Canal Zone were placing the Panama Canal in danger was conveyed to him. Later, after his arrival in New York, he had learned that the government suspected plots to destroy the great Gatun dam by the use of explosives.

Only a hint of the threatened danger had been conveyed to the War department, but that was enough to set on foot the investigation of which Lieutenant Gordon was to be the head. One of the lieutenant's first acts after receiving his instructions was to secure the services of Ned Nestor, being guided in this by the wonderful success of the boy's efforts in Mexico.

Thus it chanced that on this night every boy who had had the good fortune to share in the Mexican adventures was importuning Nestor to use his influence with the lieutenant in order that they might all be taken into the party. They had already gained the consent of their parents, Nestor, individually, was willing, and it only remained to convince Lieutenant Gordon that they could be of use to him and the government on the Canal Zone.

"If you don't loosen up and take us with you," Harry Stevens declared, with a grin in the direction of his companions, "we'll give you a chase to the equator. You know how you found Jimmie in George's bed? Well, if you don't take us along with you, you'll find us all in your bed before you get to Panama."

"It seems a pity to unload such a mess of wild animals on the people of the Zone," laughed Nestor, "but we'll leave it all to Lieutenant Gordon. Lavish your honeyed words and smiles on him!"

"What's it all about, anyway?" demanded Jimmie. "It's something concerning the big canal, I know, for I heard you two talking of explosives at the Gatun dam."

"We all heard that," cried Jack Bosworth. "You can't keep secrets from us. What is it all about? Is some one trying to blow up the big dam?"

Nestor looked into the faces of the boys with serious eyes. He had not suspected that they knew anything definite regarding the secret mission, and was annoyed to think that he in part might be to blame for the leak which had been discovered.

"Is that what you're going for?" asked Harry Stevens. "Are you going to mix with governmental affairs again? Because we've got to go if you are. Honest, now, we won't say a word if you tell us."

"Do you all promise that?" asked Nestor.

"Sure we do," came in chorus.

"Well, then," Nestor went on, "we don't know much about the matter, except that there are hostile influences at work down there, directed against the canal. We do not know the proposed point of attack, but presume that the big dam is in the greatest danger. We do not even know where to look for the plotters, or whether they are Americans or of foreign birth. The motive for the contemplated destruction of the great waterway is not even surmised. In fact, for all we know, this may be a scare, but the thing is serious enough to call for rigid investigation, so down there we go."

"Sure you can't get along without us!" cried Jimmie. "If you want to know who is at the bottom of it all, just ask me. It's the railroads. I've heard men say the canal would have been finished years ago only for the determined opposition of the transcontinental lines."

"Much you know about it!" cried Harry Stevens. "If anybody should ask you where to look for the trouble, put your finger on the map of Japan. The little brown men are digging under the Gatun dam if any one is."

"It does not seem possible that either the Japanese government or the railroad interests would descend to such despicable work," Nestor said. "I won't believe it of either of them until I have absolute proof."

"It would be going some to blow up the Gatun dam," Peter Fenton cut in. "Why, when finished, that dam will be more than a hundred feet high, and will cover one hundred and sixty-four square miles with water. Its purpose is to huddle the highland streams into a lake which will become a part of the canal. This lake will cover plantations, small farms, villages, and even the present right of way of the Panama railroad."

"If they succeed in blowing up the Gatun dam," Jack said, "there will be no Canal Completion Exposition in San Francisco in four years. That would be a shame, for we were all going."

"Think of all that land being put down in the bed of a lake!" Harry Stevens exclaimed. "We ought to have taken a tip when the canal was first talked about and bought up that property. Uncle Sam would have bought it of us at a fancy price. Just think of a sure-thing speculation like that."

Peter Fenton, known as the Encyclopedia, sat back in his chair and laughed until his face was as red as the painted snout of the black bear which looked down from a shield on the wall. The boys shook him up until he regained the power of speech.

"If you boys had been one year old when the Panama Canal was first mentioned," he managed to say, choking back his laughter, "you would now stand at the venerable age of four hundred and sixteen years."

"I guess you get your history in the dream book," Jimmie cried.

"Nixy dream book," declared Peter, with the dignity which comes of much knowledge. "The Spaniards who lived in the Province of New Granada, on the Isthmus of Darien, as it was then called, planned a ship canal across the neck in the year 1518, and there has been talk of the big ditch ever since."

"Then it takes a long time to get at the job," suggested Jimmie. "The trench could have been scooped out with a teaspoon in less than four hundred years."

"Wait until you get down there! You'll see what impression your teaspoon would make. I've been reading up since I've returned to New York, and know something about the size of the job. The canal will cost millions more than Congress figured on, and the job is going ahead without graft, at that."

"Still," Harry Stevens interrupted, "it would have been a wise move to have annexed a lot of that land."

"If your speculation had developed when the first talk of the canal was heard," Peter went on, "you would have had to do business with King Ferdinand, of Spain. He would have put the soil on the bargain counter for you one day and shot you up the next. That wouldn't have been so cheerful."

"Nice party to do business with," laughed Harry.

"He was next to his king job, all right," Peter continued. "He was there with the gunpowder when any subject stood to put anything over on him. He caused Columbus to be returned to Spain in chains, and permitted one of his officials to shoot up the first white man who ever looked out on the Pacific from the divide of the Isthmus. He carried things by a large majority, did Ferdinand."

"It was his queen who put her jewels in soak to buy a ship for Columbus," commented Jack Bosworth. "I read about it when I was laid up with my broken arm. You remember the time the horse climbed into my motor car?"

"The police say you never stopped running until you bumped against one of the White Mountains," laughed Harry. "Who was this white man who first climbed the divide?" he asked; "as I'm going down there, I want to know. I may set up a monument to his memory."

"Don't be too sure about going," warned Glen Howard. "Lieutenant Gordon may kick on the whole bunch of us."

"Then we'll all go down in my motor boat," replied Harry. "You can't keep me out of the Canal Zone when there's things doing."

"The man's name was Balboa," said Peter, in answer to the question, as he smiled at this tardy recognition of the services of the explorer. "He went broke at St. Domingo, one day in the year 1510, and hired a fellow to head him up in a wine cask and put the cask on board a ship bound for Darien. He made the trip, all right, and landed broke, but in three years he was captain of the precinct, as they say in Manhattan, and on his way to the Pacific. He looked out on the big ocean for the first time on the 26th of September, 1513. Some say it was the 25th. I don't know which is right."

The door of the clubroom now opened and Lieutenant Gordon entered. He was a man of not more than thirty, with a stern though not forbidding face and an alert military figure. His brown eyes lighted up with sudden humor as he dodged the clamorous boys, and dropped into a chair.

"What about it?" asked Jimmie, who seemed to be a favorite with the officer. "Do we go with you, or do we trail along in the motor boat?"

"The man higher up," began the lieutenant, "says you may go with me if you will try to—"

There was no necessity for the lieutenant going on with the sentence. He had warned the boys so many times as to their conduct on the Isthmus, if permitted to go with the secret service men, that they now knew in advance what he was going to say, and they repeated his former admonitions with shouts of laughter.

"All right," said the lieutenant, trying to look dignified, "if you won't listen you can't go."

"Go on an' talk your chin off," shouted Jimmie. "We'll listen to every word until our arms drop to the floor."

"Never mind that now," laughed the officer. "I'm too busy at present to speak the advice you'll all forget before I'm out of the room. Where is Frank Shaw? I came here to see him."

"He was coming down to-night," George Tolford replied, "but it is so late now that he may not be here. Anything special?"

"Why, yes," was the reply. "I want to know what he has been saying to his father about the difficulty in the Canal Zone."

"Why, he doesn't know anything to tell," said Nestor, "not even as much as the boys here now know, for I have talked the situation over with them but not with him."

"What do they know regarding the situation?" asked the lieutenant, apprehensively.

"Nothing except that the Panama canal is threatened by some unknown influence."

"Well," said the lieutenant, thoughtfully, "some one has been leaking, and it seems as if our first move in the game must be made right here in New York."

"It wasn't Frank that leaked," Jimmie asserted, in defense of his friend. "He wouldn't do such a thing, and he couldn't tell what he didn't know, anyway," with which logical conclusion the boy turned his back to the group.

"There is something wrong somewhere," Lieutenant Gordon said. "Wait until I tell you what took place this afternoon and you will agree with me."

CHAPTER II.

THEFT OF THE EMERALD NECKLACE.

"Early this afternoon," the lieutenant went on as the boys gathered about him, "I was interviewed by a reporter for the *Daily Planet*."

"Frank's father owns that newspaper," Jimmie suggested.

"Yes," said the officer, "and that is why I thought Frank might know something of the origin of the inquiry. The reporter was not slow in getting at the point he was in my rooms to discuss. Almost the first question he asked me was this: 'Is it true that the government has ordered you to the Canal Zone to investigate an alleged plot to blow up the Gatun dam?' Coming from a reporter, as it did, the question knocked me all in a heap."

Ned Nestor leaned forward with a new interest showing in his face.

"I should think so," he said. "What did you tell him?"

"I tried to bluff him out at first, but soon learned that he knew more about the Zone situation than I did. He didn't get much information from me, but I learned from him that the *Daily Planet* is wise to the whole situation, as the boys say. Now, the question is this: 'Where did the editor secure his information?' I asked him in so many words, but he only laughed at me."

"The place to go for that information," Nestor suggested, "is to the editor himself. Mr. Shaw would, of course, know all about it."

"That is exactly what I thought," said the lieutenant, "so I lost no time in getting to the editorial rooms. Mr. Shaw was there, and treated me very courteously, but the only satisfaction I could get from him was the information that he knew something of what was going on, and was doing his best to secure enough facts regarding the matter for a news story."

"I may be able to get more than that out of him," George ventured.

"I doubt it," the lieutenant said, "for he is afraid some rival newspaper will get an inkling of the matter and beat him out on the sensation he is preparing. It seems that his men have discovered documentary evidence of some sort, papers which might be of great value in the hands of the government."

21

"Wouldn't he give you a hint as to the contents of the papers?" asked Ned.

"No; he wouldn't even give me an idea as to the parties he suspects. I think he might have done that, in the interest of good government. Well, of course his information is his own, but he might have trusted me not to betray his confidence to his rivals. I must confess that I don't like his attitude in the matter."

"The papers may contain nothing the government could use," Ned observed, "although their value to the newspaper may be great."

"I would like to get a look at them, all the same," said Gordon.

"I wish he would call off his reporters," Ned went on. "If they go about the city asking the questions they asked of you, the plotters will soon know that they are being watched, and that will make their capture more difficult."

"That is the idea," exclaimed the lieutenant. "Perhaps we can get him to let the case alone for a few days."

"That is doubtful," Ned said, "but there is one ray of light in the situation. If the plotters find out that the editor of the *Daily Planet* has documentary evidence against them, they may try to steal the papers, and so disclose their identity."

22

"I would steal them myself if I got a chance," laughed Gordon. "The government needs every pointer it can get."

"Better let the others try first," advised Nestor, with a smile. "It really does begin to look as if the first move in this Panama game might be made right here in New York."

"I'd like to know where Shaw got the pointer," Gordon said, in a moment. "I thought at first that Frank might have let out something in asking permission to go to the Zone."

"He doesn't know a thing about it," Jimmie put in, warm in the defense of his friend. "How could he drop a hint, then?"

"There was something said about the situation in Panama before we left the Sierra del Fierro mountains in Mexico," said Nestor, "but I can't for the life of me tell just what it was."

"It was nothing definite," said Harry Stevens, "for I had forgotten all about it. There was some talk about our going to the Canal Zone, but nothing was decided on, and the plot against the government wasn't mentioned. At least that is my best recollection of the talk there."

23

"There was something more than that said," the lieutenant observed, "but that is unimportant now. The thing to do, if we can, is to stop this investigation by the *Daily Planet*. The reporters will let the cat out of the bag and the interests back of the plot will either act immediately, before we can check them, or delay the matter until everything in connection with it is forgotten."

"If the papers collected by the *Daily Planet* people give any inkling of the motive which is leading the plotters on," Nestor said, "we really ought to get hold of them."

"I believe you are as bad as the lieutenant, and would steal them yourself if you got a chance," grinned Jimmie.

"I would at least try to get a look at them," was the reply.

"Look here, fellows!" George Tolford cried, excitedly, "I think I know where Mr. Shaw got his pointer. It is this way: Mr. Shaw is interested in Zone property, and owns a large block of stock in an emerald mine. He spent most of the past winter on the Isthmus, and there is where he unearthed the story. You take it from me that this is right."

24

"That view of the case makes it all the more imperative that we learn the contents of the papers Mr. Shaw has," said the lieutenant, rising and pacing the room excitedly. "If he got his information on the Isthmus, it is more than likely that it points out not only the motive but also the interest which is planning the outrage. I must send some high official to talk with Mr. Shaw. He is interested in an emerald mine, you say?" he asked.

"Sure he is," replied George Tolford. "Frank told me all about it not long ago, at the time he showed me an emerald necklace his father gave him."

"An emerald necklace," repeated Jimmie. "What you gettin' at? Boys don't wear necklaces."

"This emerald necklace," George went on, "is as old as the hills. Frank says the stones were taken out of a mine in a valley in the interior of Colombia four hundred years ago. There are

twenty-five stones, each weighing over six carats. Taken separately, the stones are worth a thousand each, and together their price is fabulous. Frank says the necklace formerly belonged to some secret order of natives, and that \$100,000 has been offered for it because of the perfectly matched stones, and because of its wonderful history. It is a peach, I can tell you that, and Frank will never go broke as long as he sticks to it."

25

"I didn't know that there were any emeralds down that way," Glen Howard said. "We will bring a couple of carloads back with us."

"Emeralds down that way!" repeated Peter Fenton. "Why, the best emeralds in the world are found in South America. The very best are found in veins traversing clay-slate, hornblende slate, and granite, in a little valley not far from Bogota, the capital of the United States of Colombia. Inferior stones are found imbedded in mica slate in Europe. You see I've been reading up on South America."

"It looks that way," laughed Lieutenant Gordon. "I must get a look at Frank's emerald necklace before I leave New York."

"We may find one like it in the ruins of Spanish Panama," said Peter.

"Guess there ain't many ruins around Panama," declared Jimmie. "Not many ruins anywhere Uncle Sam's soldiers are."

"Just the same," persisted Peter, "the Panama built by the Spaniards in the year 1518 is now in ruins, unless it has been restored since the Americans took possession of the Canal Zone. It lies six miles to the northeast of the present city of that name."

26

"I wish Frank would drop in to-night," the lieutenant said, after a pause. "I have an idea that he might suggest something of value just now, some way in which his father may be reached. We are leaving for the Zone on Thursday morning, so have only one more day in the city, consequently there is no time to lose."

The boys fairly shrieked their appreciation of the information that they were to depart for the Isthmus so soon, and gathered about Lieutenant Gordon with extended hands.

"But you must understand this," the lieutenant said, returning the greetings heartily, "you are not supposed to be in my company at all. I may need to talk with some of you, but if I do it will be in a casual manner, just as one tourist might address another. I am traveling alone, understand. I shall stop at the Tivoli, at Ancon, a short distance from Panama, and you will have a cottage in the jungle, near Gatun."

"And we are to ramble about wherever we like?" asked Harry.

"Wherever you like," was the reply, "only you must not look me up unless in case of serious trouble. I'll communicate with you when necessary."

27

The boys all agreed to the conditions readily enough; they would have consented to almost any arrangement in order to be taken on the trip. After the details were disposed of, Ned called the lieutenant aside and asked him a most surprising question:

"Are you really thinking of trying to steal those papers?"

"I've a great mind to make the attempt," was the smiling reply. "We need them in our business, and, besides, the government has plenty of men here who may as well be working on this case as any other."

"This is on the theory that the papers may reveal to you the nature of the plot and the names of the plotters?"

"That is the idea, exactly. I have no doubt now that Mr. Shaw secured his pointers while on the Isthmus, and the papers doubtless contain information which it might take us months to procure. Yes, I think I shall set men at work on the case to-morrow. Besides getting the papers, we will rob Shaw of his sensation. A publication of the situation just now would be a calamity."

28

"I think," Nestor said, modestly, "that I see a way to accomplish the ends you seek without resorting to larceny. Will you promise me that you will do nothing further in the matter of the documents until I have talked with you again on the subject?"

"But it is imperative that we act quickly," protested the lieutenant.

"I understand that," Nestor replied, "but, all the same, I think I see a way to gain our ends by keeping out of the way at present. Will you promise?"

"Oh, yes! Have your own way about it. I can set the men at work just before we leave New York, and the information contained in the papers can be sent to me by code. Have your own way, my boy."

"Thank you," Nestor said, and the two returned to the main room. The 'phone in a closet near the door was ringing sharply, and Harry Stevens entered the closet and shut the door. In a moment exclamations of dismay and surprise were heard issuing from the other side of the closed door, and then Harry bounced back into the room, his face white, his eyes shining with excitement.

"What is it?" asked half a dozen voices.

29

"Lieutenant Gordon and Ned are wanted at Shaw's house at once," the boy said. "Go on the run, boys, for there is something stirring there. Mr. Shaw has been chloroformed, the servants knocked about like tenpins, and Frank's emerald necklace has been stolen. We'll wait here for

news.”

“And so,” the lieutenant said, looking Nestor in the eyes, “you were waiting for the interests back of this thing to show their hand by trying to get the papers.”

“Yes,” replied Nestor, “I had an idea the interests would try to do a little stealing on their own hook.”

“But if they have secured the papers—”

The lieutenant hesitated, and Nestor went on:

“If they have secured the papers, they know no more now than they did before. They are not out after information concerning their own plots. They are trying to reduce the outside supply of knowledge about their movements.”

“There was nothing said about papers being stolen, was there?” asked the lieutenant. “Perhaps the necklace really was the point of attack.”

Nestor turned to George Tolford.

“Do you know where Frank kept his necklace?” he asked.

“Sure I do,” was the quick reply. “He kept it in a hinky-dinky little safe up in his room. I told him he was foolish to take such a risk with it.”

“Did he keep the safe locked?”

“Locked! Not half the time. He would rush in there, open it up, and then run all over the house, leaving the door swinging.”

Nestor and the lieutenant now left the room, after asking the boys to wait there for a short time. Once out on the street, the lieutenant remarked:

“If the necklace was kept in Frank’s room, why did the thief take the pains to chloroform Mr. Shaw, who must have been in his own room?”

Nestor shrugged his shoulders for reply. That was a point he had already considered. Again the lieutenant asked a question:

“If the papers had been taken, wouldn’t that have been mentioned the very first thing? Wouldn’t Mr. Shaw think first of recovering them?”

“I don’t know,” replied Nestor. “The thing for us to do now is to find out who it was that entered the Shaw house to-night, and what was taken besides the necklace.”

30

CHAPTER III.

HOW THE TRICK WAS TURNED.

31

Leaving the boys in the luxurious clubroom of the Black Bear Patrol, and promising to keep them posted as to the situation by 'phone, Lieutenant Gordon and Ned Nestor hastened in the direction of the Shaw residence, only three blocks away. A surprise awaited them at the Shaw door.

When they mounted the marble steps to the front portal they were astonished to see Jimmie McGraw standing in the shadow of a column, waiting for them with a grin on his face. He pushed the electric button for admittance as soon as they reached his side.

“What are you doing here?” demanded the lieutenant, trying hard to appear angry with the boy.

“Why, I just come over to tell Frank—”

“Never mind that now,” said the lieutenant, interrupting. “If this is the way you obey orders you can’t go to the Canal Zone with me.”

“Well, you see,” Jimmie began, in a contrite tone, “I thought of something, after you left, that I wanted to say to Frank, and I knew he’d have asked for me if he’d ‘a’ thought of it, so I just run over.”

32

“What was it you wanted to say to Frank?” asked the lieutenant, with a smile in Ned’s direction. The persistence of the boy pleased him, to say the least.

Just then the door was opened, saving Jimmie the exertion of manufacturing a smooth tale to tell the lieutenant, and the three entered the great hall of the fine residence, where they found Frank awaiting them.

“I was afraid you’d both left the clubroom and couldn’t be found,” he cried, as he took his friends by the hand. “Come right up to my room, and I’ll show you just how the thieves got the emerald necklace.”

“Perhaps we ought to see your father first,” Lieutenant Gordon suggested, thinking of

something much more important, to him at least, than the bauble.

"Father is with Doctor Benson just now," was the reply.

"Was he seriously injured?" asked Nestor, anxiously.

"Not a bit of it," was the reply. "They just sneaked up behind him and stuffed a big handkerchief soaked with chloroform into his face. The drug knocked him out for a short time, but he is all right now. He told me to show you my room as soon as you came, and then to take you to him."

33

"Who else is in the house?" asked Nestor.

"No one but Doctor Benson and the servants," was the reply.

"Then the police have not been called?"

"No, indeed. I asked father to wait until you two came. I don't take much stock in the cheap plain clothes men they send about on robbery cases. But come on up to my room, and I'll show you what a sucker I am."

"If I had said that," Jimmie put in, "you'd 'a' handed me one."

"So Jimmie is on the case too," laughed Frank. "Well, son, there's money in it for the man who restores my emerald necklace, which I'm sure to get back, in the end. Why, that necklace has been stolen about a thousand times, and has always been restored to the rightful owner. Once it was found in the heart of Africa, in the kinky hair of a native. There's blood on it, too, for men have been killed trying to steal it, and trying to prevent its being stolen. It's the most valuable necklace in the world."

34

The boy mounted the staircase as he spoke, leading the others to his room, which was at the front of the house on the second floor, directly over the apartment used by his father as a library, or study. The suite occupied by the boy was elegantly furnished, the only thing which marred the tasty arrangement of the place being a steel safe which stood between the two front windows of the sitting room.

"There," said Frank, closing the door of the room behind the little party, "they got the necklace out of that safe."

"How did they open it?" asked the lieutenant, and Jimmie laughed.

"Frank never closed a door in his life," the boy said.

"Was the safe open?" asked Lieutenant Gordon.

"Yes," was the reply, "it was open. I had just been there to get some money when I heard a scrap going on in the corridor and rushed out, leaving the door open, like a sucker. The necklace was taken while I was gone."

"Anything else taken?" asked Ned.

"Not a thing. Oh, I guess the thief got a couple of dollars there was in the cash drawer, but nothing else was disturbed."

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"How long was he in the room?" asked the lieutenant.

"Oh, perhaps fifteen minutes. What I mean is that it must have been about that length of time before I came back here. You see, when I got out into the hall, Pedro, that's one of Dad's pet servants, was scrapping with two pirate-looking fellows at the head of the stairs. One of them had him by the throat when I came up."

"And they both got away?" asked the lieutenant.

"Yes, they both got away. They turned and ran down stairs when I came up and bolted out of the front door, just as if some one stood there holding it open for them."

"Was the night-lock on?"

"Certainly; it always is at night."

"Couldn't anybody open it from the inside, whether familiar with the house or not?" asked Ned.

"No; for the night-bolt is controlled by an electric button, which you have to push before it can be moved from the inside, so no one not familiar with the house could have opened it."

Nestor glanced at the lieutenant with a question in his eyes, and the officer nodded. There was little doubt in the mind of either that the crime had been planned by some one thoroughly conversant with the premises. It was at least certain that exit had been made easy for the thieves.

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"You spent this fifteen minutes, after the flight of the thieves by way of the front door, in your father's room, I take it?" asked Ned.

"Yes; when the thieves ducked out of the front door I found a maid fainting in the corridor running along back of the parlor to Dad's room, the place where he does his work while in the house. She flopped over when I spoke to her and pointed to Dad's room. There I found him lying on the couch, drugged with chloroform."

"They placed him on the couch, did they?"

"Oh, no, sir, the thieves didn't take that trouble. Pedro was there before I entered the room, and it was he that did that. He had 'phoned for the doctor, too, before I got into the room."

"He was chasing the thieves?" asked Ned.

"Why, yes. He was just ahead of me at the front door."

"Then how did he get back and do so much before you reached the study?"

"I opened the front door and looked out for a couple of minutes," was the reply. "I was rattled, of course, and don't know how long I stood there, but I remember seeing two men running down the street. If I had known then that they had my emerald necklace, I'd have chased them and roared until the police came up and stopped them."

"Then you came right in?"

"Yes; right to the corridor where I found the maid lying on the floor."

"And you remained with your father until the doctor came, and then went back to your room? It was then that you discovered the loss of the emerald necklace?"

"Yes, I missed it when I came back."

"You saw only two intruders?" asked Ned.

"There were only two."

"And these two ran down the staircase just ahead of you?"

"Yes; they went down in about one leap."

"Now, was the necklace in the safe when you went to it?"

"I am certain that it was."

"You saw it there?"

"I saw the case in which it was enclosed."

"And the case was gone when you returned?"

"Yes; oh, the necklace was taken from the safe during my absence, all right."

"Yet the two men were ahead of you, and went out of the street door before you reached the lower landing?"

Frank's face showed that the idea presented by Nestor was new to him. He had never considered that feature of the case. In fact, he had been so excited that he had not thought logically of the circumstances surrounding the theft.

"Well," he said, "I reckon I need a hired man to do my thinking for me. Why didn't that idea get into my thick head before?"

"Are you still certain that the necklace was in the safe when you left the room?" asked Ned, with a smile.

"Yes; I am dead sure of that. Why," he added, "there must have been a man that I did not see. Wonder why he didn't give me a clip on the head."

"Someone will come here an' steal you, some day," grinned Jimmie.

"I don't doubt it," replied Frank. "Now, where do you think the other man was?" he asked, turning to Ned.

Ned arose and went into the sleeping room, from which opened a bathroom and a large closet. There was a door opening into the sleeping room from the corridor, the apartment being of the same length, east and west, as the sitting room. The closet opened from the sleeping room, and also from the bathroom.

"What do you find here?" asked Frank, following him into the closet and through into the bathroom.

"The third man might have been hiding in here," Ned replied. "When were you in this bathroom last?" he added, looking carefully about the place.

"Not since early in the afternoon."

"The suite was unoccupied all the afternoon?"

"Yes; I am rarely here in the afternoon."

"What time did you come up here after dinner?"

"It was probably eight o'clock, for Dad was telling a rather interesting story at table, and we sat a long time. Mother is away on a visit to the Pacific coast."

"And your father went to his room then?"

"Yes; he said he had some work to do."

"His room, also, was unoccupied all the afternoon?"

"Yes; it must have been."

"Who is usually about the lower part of the house during the afternoon?"

"No one when mother is away."

"Do you know whether anything was taken from your father's room?"

"Why, I haven't heard that feature of the case discussed. We can soon find out by asking him."

"Gee!" cried Jimmie. "What would they want to go an' dope him for if there wasn't something in his room they wanted?"

"That is a very pertinent question," Lieutenant Gordon remarked. "It certainly seems that the thieves came here for something besides the emerald necklace."

"Meaning the papers?" asked Ned, with a laugh.

"Meaning the papers, of course," was the reply. "I am still of the opinion that the theft of the necklace was only incidental."

"It begins to look that way to me," observed Frank. "As Jimmie says, what would they attack father for unless they wanted to search his room?"

"You know about the papers?" asked the lieutenant.

"Yes, indeed. They constituted the subject of the interesting story Dad was telling me at table to-night."

"Did he tell you what they contained?" asked Ned.

"He did not. He told me only what they dealt with."

"He believes there is a plot against the completion of the Panama canal?"

"Oh, yes; he is quite certain of it."

"Did he mention the parties he suspected?"

"He refused to do so. I can't understand why he should refuse. Can you?"

"I think I can appreciate his position," replied Ned.

"Great Scott!" cried Frank. "Do you think the agents of the men we are to grapple with in the Canal Zone have been in this house to-night? If so, it looks like they were looking us up, instead of our being after them."

"Where is this man Pedro?" asked Ned, not answering the question.

"He was in the study when I left, a few moments ago."

"Then we will go down there. I want to ask him a few questions."

At the foot of the staircase, they heard the telephone ringing, and Frank went into the closet. When he came out again he seemed excited and unnerved.

"I guess there's something more than the necklace at stake to-night," he said, "for Dad's rooms in the newspaper building have been ransacked. I guess we won't have to go down to Gatun to lock horns with the men who are in this plot against Uncle Sam. If the Gatun dam was in New York, they might have blown it up to-night, for all that has been done to thwart them."

"Well, we've just got to work on the case," grinned Jimmie.

CHAPTER IV.

THE MAN IN THE CLOSET.

"If you take my advice," Ned said to Frank, as they reached the study door, "you won't say anything to your father about the trouble at the office until we have talked with him concerning the raid on the house. He might rush off to the newspaper building immediately, without answering our questions about the visit to his room."

"That is just what he would do," Frank replied.

When the boys entered the study, closely followed by Lieutenant Gordon and Jimmie, they found three men in the room. One was Mr. Shaw, lying on a couch at the front of the apartment. One was Dr. Benson, who sat in an easy chair at his side. The third was Pedro, the servant mentioned by Frank as one of his father's favored attendants. He stood by the couch as the boys stepped into the room, his bold black eyes studying their faces impertinently as they entered.

The man was not far from forty, tall, slender, dusky of face—plainly in intellectual capacity and breeding far above the menial position he occupied in the house. Standing in repose, his figure was erect and well balanced, like that of a man trained to military service.

But even as he stood subserviently by the couch of his employer, his slender hands at his sides, there seemed to be something of the alertness of a wild beast in his physical attitude of suppression. Somehow, he gave Ned the impression of one about to spring forth upon an enemy.

After the presentations were made, it was with the greatest difficulty that Lieutenant Gordon restrained himself from at once taking up the topic he had discussed with Mr. Shaw so unsatisfactorily that afternoon—the subject of the plot against the Gatun dam. What did the editor know? What did he suspect concerning the raid on his home? Did he believe that the

plotters had opened their defense right there in the city of New York?

However, he curbed his hasty impulse, knowing that the information he sought was not to be obtained in that way. Mr. Shaw was looking upon the matter entirely from the standpoint of an enterprising journalist, and would be cautious about giving out his own discoveries and impressions.

"Are you still suffering from the effects of the chloroform?" asked the lieutenant, anxiously.

"I'm still a little weak," was the reply, "and still a little tippy at the stomach, but Benson tells me that I shall be well again in an hour."

"You were of course attacked without warning," the lieutenant continued, half hoping that the editor would enter into a full and frank discussion of the event.

"Entirely so," was the reply. "I was sitting at my desk when the door was opened and some one entered. I thought it was Pedro, for I had just rung for him, and did not look around. Then I was seized from behind and a handkerchief soaked with chloroform thrust into my face."

"You did not see your assailant?" asked Ned.

"Now for the cross-examination," laughed the editor. "I have heard something of Mr. Nestor's work in the secret service," he added, "and shall be glad to answer any of his questions. Go ahead, my boy. No, to answer your first question, I did not see my assailant, and do not know whether there were two or only one."

"Did you notice the time?" asked Ned, modestly.

"Yes, it was nine o'clock. The next I knew, Pedro was lifting me onto the couch, and a maid was lifting her voice to high heaven out in the corridor. That, I have since learned, was at ten o'clock, so, you see, the ruffians had an hour to work in."

"They must have mussed the room up quite a lot in that time," said the lieutenant, hoping to bring the editor to the point in which he was interested.

Mr. Shaw made no reply, but turned to Ned with a smile.

"Go ahead, Ned," Frank cried. "We all want to know what ideas are brooding in that clever brain of yours."

"I would like to ask," Ned began, modestly, "if you can assign a reason for the attack upon you."

"Why, they came into the house after the emerald necklace," was the reply. "They looked here for it first. That is all."

"But it appears that they knew the necklace to be in Frank's safe," urged Ned. "At least it did not take them long to find it there after the safe was unlocked and he was brought from his room."

"Oh, well, they probably looked here first," insisted the editor. "The manner in which they rummaged the place while I was unconscious shows that they searched for it here. The necklace was the thing sought, of course."

"Did they take anything from the room?" asked Ned, and Lieutenant Gordon leaned forward, anxiously awaiting the answer.

"Not a thing," was the quiet reply. "At least, I have missed nothing."

"Perhaps the thing they sought was not found," suggested Gordon, no longer able to keep the plot subject out of the conversation.

"I know what you mean, Lieutenant," the other replied, "and I may as well tell you now that the papers to which you refer are not in the house—were not here and never have been here. They are perfectly safe, and we will drop them from the case, if you please."

"I am naturally anxious about them," said Gordon, "in the interest of the government, of course, for I believe they hold the key to a mystery I am asked to solve."

"You may be mistaken as to the contents of the papers," laughed Mr. Shaw. "Well," he added, "we will eliminate them from the matter in hand. What next, Mr. Nestor? I have great hope of your success in unraveling this mystery of the necklace."

"With your permission," Ned replied, "and in your presence, I would like to ask your man a few questions."

Pedro turned a pair of venomous eyes toward the speaker for just an instant. Then he stood respectfully looking at his master again. Ned saw the movement, the quick hostility of the glance, and felt surer of his ground than before.

"He will, I am sure, be happy to answer any questions you may ask," said Mr. Shaw.

Pedro nodded, half defiantly, as though he felt humiliated by being placed at the service, even a verbal one, of a boy, and Ned asked:

"When you saw the men at the head of the staircase, what did you say to them?"

The answer came in perfect English, yet there was a something in the voice which told as plainly as words could have done that English was not the native tongue of the speaker.

"I ordered them from the house," he said.

"And then they attacked you?"

"The mark of a hand is on my throat, sir."

"How many men were there?"

"Two, sir, and they both piled on top of me."

"There was no one else in the corridor?"

"No one."

"They were armed, I presume?"

"I saw no weapons in their hands."

"They might have killed you?"

"Only for the arrival of Master Shaw they might have done so."

"Can you describe these men?" asked Ned.

"I don't think I can, sir. I was too busy to notice their faces or their clothes during the short time I was with them."

"Can you say whether one of them was tall and slender, with very black hair, turning gray in places?" asked Ned, fixing his eyes on those of the servant.

Pedro looked back at his questioner for an instant, and then his gaze fell to the floor.

"I can't say," he replied, slowly, while the others, amazed at the character of the question, turned to Ned for explanation.

"If the description I have given is recognized by you as that of one of the men you met in the corridor," Ned went on, "can you tell me whether his clothing was wet or dry?"

There was dead silence in the room. There had been nothing thus far in the case leading up to this description, and those present looked at Ned with wonder in their faces. To say the least, the questions seemed irrelevant.

Pedro stood for a moment touching his dry lips with the tip of his tongue, his fingers clasping and unclasping, then his shoulders straightened into firmer lines and he faced his questioner with a smile of complacency.

"I don't know what you mean," he said.

"Perhaps I should have said damp clothing," Ned replied. "The man I have in mind—the man who might have been one of your assailants—entered the house just after the rainstorm, which came on close after six o'clock. His clothing was soaking wet when he came in, but would not remain so for four hours."

Pedro grasped the back of a chair which stood near him and looked out of the window to the lighted street in front of the house. While he stood silent Mr. Shaw arose to a sitting position on the couch and asked:

"Why the description, Mr. Nestor? Why the positive statement about the time at least one of the men entered the house?"

Every eye in the room was now fixed on Nestor's face. Even Lieutenant Gordon seemed inclined to think that some huge joke was being pulled off.

"The man who came in at six," Ned replied, "came in out of the rain, and left marks showing the height and breadth of his shoulders on a wall against which he leaned. These marks show a man tall and slender. He entered the house dripping with water, moving about like a street sprinkler and leaving signs of his presence in the places he visited. He seems to be a person of rather refined tastes, inclined to be neat in personal appearance, for he went to Frank's bathroom to clean up. There he used the washbowl and the toilet articles, leaving black hair turning gray in the comb."

"This is uncanny," shouted Frank. "You couldn't have observed all this during the minute you were in the bathroom," he added.

Mr. Shaw considered the question gravely, his eyes fixed on those of the boy.

"He sprinkled the closet floor, did he?" he asked, presently.

"Yes, sir; and stood back against the closet wall, and used Frank's comb and brush."

"Did he come to this room, also?"

"Yes, sir; the little round spots on the delicate covering of this little table were made by dripping water. You see, sir, he was in here before the water dripped off his clothes in the closet, probably soon after he entered the house."

"But how did he get into the house? How did he get into this locked room?"

"I should say that he was assisted by some one belonging in the house," was the quiet reply. "After he left this room he mounted the staircase and hid in Frank's closet, evidently waiting for you to return home, or for Frank to come. Perhaps he hoped that one of you might bring home the thing, or the things, he had been unable to find in your rooms."

"The papers concerning the Gatun plot, for instance," said the lieutenant.

The editor glanced at the officer with a slight frown on his brow, but made no reply to the remark. It was plain that he was unwilling to take up that phase of the case.

"It is a wonder the fellow didn't jimmy Frank's safe and get the emerald necklace, without waiting so long for the safe to be opened," he said, in a moment.

Thus insisting on his previously expressed opinion that the sole purpose of the thieves had been to secure the emerald necklace, further disclaiming any belief that the alleged plot against the government had figured in the matter at all, the editor smiled provokingly at the officer.

Nestor looked from the lieutenant to the newspaper owner and smiled quietly.

"I wish I knew," he said, "whether the papers we hear so much about really reveal the details of an alleged plot against the government."

Mr. Shaw did not reply.

"If they do not," continued the boy, "do they connect some man, or some group of men, with a plot which may be forming?"

The editor glanced approvingly at Ned, as if rather pleased with his cleverness, but did not speak.

"I have known newspaper men," Ned went on, "to make mistakes in such matters. However, I have no doubt that you have good reasons for the course you are taking," he continued, "and therefore I have no fault to find with you."

"You're a fine fellow, Mr. Nestor," the editor exclaimed. "Some day, when you see the matter in the right light, I'll tell you all about it. I can't do so now, for no end of trouble might come from it."

"Very well," replied Ned. "There is one more question I want to ask you. Will you answer it?"

"If I can consistently do so, yes."

"If the men who searched this house to-night were after the necklace, and that alone, why should they extend their operations to your offices in the newspaper building?"

"Did they do that?" asked the editor calmly. "Then I shall have to go down there and look things over. Will you kindly accompany me?"

But the search at the offices was barren of clues.

CHAPTER V.

AT THE GREAT GATUN DAM.

"Over there is the oldest country on this side of the world," said Peter Fenton, pointing over the rail of the vessel and across the smooth waters of the Caribbean sea. "We are now on the famous Spanish Main," he continued, "where adventurers from the Windward Islands laid in wait for the galleons of Spain. Just ahead, rising out of the sea, is the Isthmus of Panama. Down there to the left is the continent of South America, where there were cathedrals and palaces when Manhattan Island was still populated by native Indians."

The minds of the Boy Scouts were filled with splendid dreams as they followed with their eyes the directions indicated by the pointing hand. It was all a fairyland to them. Peter talked for some time on the causes which had brought the scum of the seven seas to the Isthmus, and then Ned Nestor interrupted the talk by inviting them all to the stateroom he occupied in common with Frank Shaw.

When all were seated on chairs and bunks Ned opened the door and looked out on the passage which ran along in front of the apartment. When he turned back into the room there was a humorous twinkle in his eyes.

"His Nobbs is in sight," he said.

"The same party?" asked Frank.

"The same dusky gentleman who has followed us since the night of the theft of the emerald necklace," Ned replied.

"He ought to receive a Carnegie medal for always being on the spot," Frank said.

"We ought to turn the hose on him," Jimmie corrected.

"We should feel lost without him," laughed George Tolford. "When I first saw him in the newspaper building, while you were investigating the chaos of papers in Mr. Shaw's rooms," he went on, "I had a hunch that we shouldn't be able to lose him."

"Well, we haven't been able to lose him," Peter Fenton said. "He reminds me, the way he floats about, of the ghost of some pirate who sailed about the Spanish Main four hundred years ago in a long, low, rakish craft adorned with a black flag."

"I saw him in the newspaper building that night," Jimmie said, "an' he looked glad because we

got no clues there.”

“Why didn’t Ned have him arrested in New York?” asked Jack Bosworth.

“What for?” demanded Jimmie.

“For making a nuisance of himself. Then he couldn’t have followed us on board the ship. Also, he might have been able to get a little sleep nights.”

“I reckon we have kept him going,” Frank observed, with a laugh.

Ever since the night of the robbery the man called “His Nobbs” for want of a better name had kept Ned Nestor in sight most of the time. He had followed him home after the profitless visit to the newspaper office on the night of the theft, had chased about after him while the details of the trip to Panama were arranged the next day, and had turned up on the ship after she was under way.

The fellow did not seem to be overly anxious to keep his watchfulness a secret. He acted like any first cabin passenger on the ship. But, somehow, he managed to keep Ned in view most of the time. Now and then he was caught watching the door of Ned’s stateroom. He never spoke to the boy, and never even looked at him when the two passed one another.

Taking advantage of this preference for Ned’s company, the boys had put up all sorts of jobs on the fellow, and some of their pranks had kept him watching Ned’s odd moves all night. It was a new and strange experience to Ned, this being spied upon so openly, and he was at a loss to account for the mental processes which inspired the strange surveillance.

“Well,” said Ned presently, “let him watch outside if he wants to. We came in here to talk about something else. I have just been talking with Lieutenant Gordon, and he says we are to go into camp in the jungle not far from the Gatun dam. He will stop at the Tivoli, at Ancon, adjoining Panama. When we have anything to communicate to him, one of us can go down to Panama after supplies and leave word at an office where one of the lieutenant’s associates in the case will always be in waiting. We are not to know the lieutenant if we meet him in our soup.”

“We’ll be eaten alive out there in the jungle,” protested Jimmie.

“Besides, it would be more natural for us to go to Gatun for our supplies,” Peter Fenton said.

“There are reasons why he wants us to remain in the jungle near Gatun for a time,” Ned replied, and the boys separated, Jimmie strolling off in the wake of “His Nobbs,” “just to see if he couldn’t make him cough up something,” as he expressed it.

The mystery of the theft of the emerald necklace was still unsolved, the man whose picture Ned carried in his brain had not been found, Pedro had been among the missing ever since he had walked out of the Shaw residence on the morning after the robbery. When the boys landed at Colon the next morning the case upon which they were engaged was still new ground before them.

Frank Shaw continued to take the loss of his emeralds very seriously, and at no time during the trip to Colon had he failed to keep an eye out for Pedro, whom he suspected of having admitted the thief to the house.

“His name isn’t Pedro at all,” he said, as the train sped out of the network of tracks behind Colon, “but Pedrarias. That was the name of the robber who succeeded Balboa as governor of New Granada, the pirate who stood Balboa up against a wall and shot him. Pedro, as I call him for short, declares that he is a direct descendant of that old stiff. He says the Spanish blood in his veins is pure. Great Scott! if I had such a pirate for an ancestor, I’d keep mighty still about it.”

Peter Fenton was in his element now. As the train moved away from Colon he pointed out various points of interest, and supplied such information about them as he had gleaned from the maps and books he had consulted. The ruins of the old French workings were soon in sight, the locality where millions had been squandered in graft. And there was Mount Hope Cemetery, where thousands who had perished from fever had been buried.

“The doctors have cleaned out the fever now,” he said, “by cleaning out the mosquitoes—the poison kind with the long name,” he added. “The Canal Zone is about as healthy now as the city of New York.”

Then came thickets where the trees were tied together with vines and creepers, all in gorgeous bloom. The great trees lifting their heads out of the jungle reminded the boys of the electric towers of New York, the twists of vines resembling the mighty cables which convey light, heat and power to the inhabitants of Manhattan.

As if in rivalry of the wealth of blossoms, bright-plumaged birds darted about like butterflies of unnatural growth. Now and then they saw evil looking lizards, some of them a yard in length, scuttling off through the marshes or looking down from high limbs. There was a swampy atmosphere over all the landscape.

Then, as the Boy Scouts looked, thinking of the glory of a camp in the thicket—of a retired nook on some dry knoll—the jungle disappeared as if by magic, and the train was winding up grassy hills. Beyond, higher up, the scattered houses of a city of fair size came into view.

“That’s Gatun,” cried Fenton. “I’ve read half a dozen descriptions of it lately. Great town, that.”

“The houses look like boxes from here,” Jimmie observed.

"Of course," Peter replied, "they are all two-story houses, square, with double balconies all screened in. Might be Philadelphia, eh?"

There were smooth roads in front of the houses, and there were yards where flowers were growing, and where neatly dressed children were playing. Jimmie turned from the homelike scene to Frank.

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"I thought there would be something new down here," he complained. "This is just like a town up the Hudson."

"Jimmie expected to find people living in tents made out of animal skins," laughed George. "He thinks the natives eat folks alive."

"You wait until you get out of the country," Frank said, "before you talk of cottages up the Hudson. There will be something stirring before we get off the Isthmus."

"I hope so," Jimmie replied. "There surely will be if we camp back there in the jungle, among the snakes and lizards."

"Why not camp on the hills back there?" asked Jack.

"We may soon camp anywhere we like," said Ned. "The Zone government understands that we are a lot of kids out after specimens."

"Specimens of what?" asked Jimmie.

"Tall, slender men with black hair turning gray," replied Frank.

"Quit your kiddin'," grinned Jimmie.

The boys left the train at a modern depot, passed through the train-shed, crossed a level sward, and looked down into a mighty chasm.

"Great Scott!" cried Frank. "Is that the bottom of the world?"

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He pointed below as he spoke.

"There seems to be a thin crust of rock between the bottom and the other side of the world," laughed George. "See! There are tunnels and pits down there. The men are still digging. Look like ants, don't they?"

It was a wonderful sight, and the Boy Scouts gazed long at the scene of activity before turning away toward the Gatun dam itself. This, Peter Fenton explained, was one of the big cuts of the canal, and ran from the marshy valley above down through the rocky ridge which held the rains in check and made a swamp of the upland.

Along the margins of the excavation ran shining steel rails upon which were mounted tapering structures of steel, from which cables crossed the gorge, carrying great buckets of concrete for the work below. Heavy walls were growing out of the depths.

"The ships will come up out of the sea through this cut," Peter explained.

"Then they'll climb the hill," scorned Jimmie.

"They will stop down there," said Peter, "and the lock gates will be closed, and the water will lift them to the level of the lake."

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"I don't see no lake," observed the skeptical Jimmie.

"The lake will lie where the low land is, over there," replied Peter, pointing. "The Gatun dam will block the water and make a lake 85 feet above sea level, covering one hundred and sixty-four square miles of earth."

"So the most of the canal will be lake?" asked the boy.

"Quite a lot of it," was the reply.

"And if any one should blow up the dam, after it gets on its job, the ships would have to climb a ladder if they got over to Panama," he exclaimed.

"Something like that," Peter said.

"Where is the Gatun dam?" asked Jack.

"It is going up over there," Peter replied, pointing out a low, broad ridge which appeared to link two hills together. "That is what will make the inland sea, and that is the lump of earth we came here to look after."

"It is a busy place night and day," Ned said. "See the electric towers and wires? Work never stops."

"Something like His Nobbs," grinned Jimmie. "I wonder if he has had any sleep since he struck our trail?"

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"I haven't seen him since we left the train," Jack said. "Perhaps he has delivered us over to the Panama division of the Anti-Canal Benevolent Society. In that case, we shall see no more of him."

After a time the boys strolled over to a neat little hotel on the principal street of the town, and there saw Lieutenant Gordon, who strolled up to Ned, just as any two Americans meeting there might have affiliated.

"Your camp in the jungle is ready for you," the officer said, as the two walked about the lobby of

the hotel. "You will find a movable cottage there, all furnished, and a good cook. Until further orders you are all to remain there."

"Pretty quick work," said Ned.

"The orders for the cottage camp were sent over by wire before we left New York," the lieutenant replied. "You are at liberty to roam about the works at will, only you ought to leave some one at the cottage always."

"As I understand it, we are boys looking for adventure?" asked Ned.

"Exactly."

"And an emerald necklace," added the boy with a laugh.

"I have a notion that if you find Pedro you will find the necklace, unless you find him too late—after he has disposed of it."

"That may be," Ned replied, doubtingly, "but we are not likely to run across Pedro over here. Neither shall we see His Nobbs. They have played their roles, and we shall have new ones to contend with now."

That night the boys took possession of the cottage in the jungle, dancing and prancing about it like wild Indians. It all seemed to them to be too good to be true. Here they were, at last, on the Canal Zone, and, in a way, in the secret service of the government. It was late when they retired, and no guard was set.

This Ned regretted, after the others were asleep, and so lay awake a long time, watching. Then, about midnight, he saw some one looking in at the porch door.

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CHAPTER VI.

A BOMB AND A RUINED TEMPLE.

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Ned lay perfectly still and the door was closed again, with the figure still on the outside. There were no lights inside the cottage, and it was a fairly clear night, so the boy could see the man standing on the porch, the wire screen in the door robbing his figure of sharp outline.

The intruder appeared to be listening for some sound within. Now and then he bent his head forward toward the door, and once, when Jimmie snorted out in his sleep, he darted a hand toward his hip, as if reaching for a weapon.

"His Nobbs, or his substitute, has arrived," thought Ned.

After a moment the man left the porch, closing the outer door carefully behind him. Ned was out of bed in an instant, following on after him. When he gained the porch, the intruder was turning the corner of the house.

Fearful of being seen, Ned crouched in a dark corner of the porch and waited. He could hear the fellow moving about, but could not see him, as he kept away from the front of the cottage.

68

The situation did not change for five minutes. The unwelcome visitor was still moving about outside and Ned was waiting for some decisive move to be made. The cottage did not rest on the knoll itself, but was set up on blocks a foot or more in height, and before long the boy heard sounds which indicated that the man he was watching was creeping in under the floor.

Waiting only long enough to make sure of this, Ned left the porch and hid himself in the jungle, which, on the south, came to within a few feet of the wall. The fellow was indeed under the house, as the boy knew by the sounds he made. It was perfectly dark under there, so his movements could not be observed.

In five minutes more the fellow backed out and arose to his feet. Then Ned saw that he held something in his right hand which looked like a fuse. It seemed that it was the man's benevolent idea to deprive the jungle of the society of the boys by blowing up their cottage.

Ned's first impulse was to shoot the fellow where he stood. He had no doubt that the fellow had put enough explosive under the floor to kill every person in it. That would be murder, and the boy's impulse was to deal out to the ruffian the fate of a murderer.

69

But he did not fire, for the intruder had not yet lighted the fuse. He stood for a moment with the end in his hand and then moved toward that part of the jungle where Ned was concealed. The boy moved cautiously aside, but even then, as the man crouched down in the vines, he could have touched him with a hand by crawling a yard to the front.

Deliberately the fellow lighted a match and applied it to the fuse. The end of the cord brightened for an instant and then became black again.

"It is wet."

The words were whispered in English.

He struck another match, listened an instant to make sure that the noise of the lighting had not attracted attention inside the cottage, and applied it to the fuse. The fuse burned swiftly, and the boy heard the incendiary go crashing through the tangle of vines and creepers, heading toward the south.

Ned cut the fuse above the crawling coal and stood for a moment listening to the man struggling with the undergrowth. Then he hastened into the cottage and laid a hand on Frank Shaw's shoulder.

"Get up," he whispered. "The fireworks have begun."

Frank sat up in his bunk and rubbed his eyes sleepily.

"What is it?" he asked. "Have you found the necklace?"

"Dress, quick."

"Wonder you wouldn't let a fellow sleep," grumbled Frank.

While the boys were dressing there came a snicker from Jimmie's bed.

"Don't start anythin' you can't stop," they heard the boy whisper.

"Want a midnight ramble among the snakes?" asked Ned, drawing on a pair of rubber boots which came up to his thighs.

"You bet I do," was the reply.

"Then get up and dress, and put on your high boots, for there are crawling things in the jungle."

Leaving the boys dressing, Ned hastened outside and listened. The man who had attempted the destruction of the cottage was still moving through the thicket. It seemed to Ned that an army could have made no more noise than he made. In a moment he was joined by Frank and Jimmie.

In as few words as possible Ned explained the situation to his amazed chums.

"What you goin' to do?" Jimmie asked.

"I want to follow that fellow to his principal," was the reply. "I want to know who set him at such cowardly work."

"It won't be difficult to follow him," Frank said. "He makes a noise like a circus parade."

"One of you must stay here and watch the cottage," Ned said, then. "When the explosion does not come, he may circle back here to see what has happened. The other may go with me."

Both boys insisted on accompanying Ned, but it was finally decided that it would be better policy to leave Frank at the cottage.

"You'll have to make haste," Frank said, regretfully, "for the sounds he is making are becoming fainter. What are you going to do with that fuse?" he added, as Ned drew on the line and hauled about half a foot of gas pipe from under the house.

"It will do no harm to take it with me," Ned replied. "It is not very heavy to carry, and it may be of use."

"I hope you'll blow that chap up with it," exclaimed Jimmie.

"Be careful that you don't blow yourself up with it," warned Frank.

"There are no cigarette smokers in the party, and so there is no danger," was the reply.

"I'll be here listening when the explosion comes," grinned Frank.

The sounds out in the jungle were now growing fainter. The man was either finding the way easier or he was getting some distance away.

"Come on," Jimmie urged. "He'll get away from us."

"If you make as much noise as he does," Frank said, "he'll stop and shoot you before you get anywhere near him."

It was no part of Ned's intention, however, to follow the intruder through the jungle. He was now waiting to make sure of the general direction the fellow was taking. He listened some moments longer, until the sounds grew very faint indeed, and then took the path which led from the cottage to a fairly well-made road ending five miles away at one of the streets of Gatun.

"You're gettin' the wrong steer," Jimmie said, as they moved along. "You'll have to go around the world if you catch him by going this way."

"The fellow is making for the hills," explained Ned, "and we may be able to catch him as he comes out of the jungle."

The boys made good speed along the cleared lane until they came to a rolling, grassy hill, one of many leading up to the summit. Then they turned off to the east, still keeping their pace but taking precautions against being seen, as the night was clearer now than before, and a moon looked down from the sky.

Finally Ned paused in a little valley on a gentle slope.

It was one of the wonderful nights rarely experienced save under the equator, or very close to the middle girdle of the globe. The luxuriant growths of the jungle seemed to be breathing in long, steady pulsations, so uniform was the lifting and falling of the night breeze.

Now and then the call of a night bird or the cry of a wild animal in the thickets came through the heavy air. From the distance came the clamor of the greatest work the world has ever undertaken. The thud and creaking of machinery mingled with the primitive noises of the forest. And far away over the cut flared the white light of the great electric globes which lighted the workers on their tasks.

74

As the boys looked forth from their depression in the side of the slope, two men came around the rise of the hill and stood at the edge of the jungle, not more than half a dozen yards away. Almost at the same instant it became apparent that some one was floundering about in the thicket immediately in front of them.

A low whistle cut the air, and then the creepers parted and a man's head and shoulders appeared. Ned and Jimmie crouched lower in their dent in the grassy hill.

The man emerged from the thicket and stood with the others, tearing clinging vines and leaves from his clothing as he did so.

"What is wrong?" a voice asked. "There has been no explosion."

"The fuse was wet," was the reply.

"Then why didn't you go back and fix it?" demanded the first speaker. "The sooner the job is done the better."

"I heard some one stirring in the jungle," was the reply.

"A nice man to be given such a task," roared another voice. "You must go back."

75

"You've landed the plotters, all right," whispered Jimmie. "I'll bet there's plenty more bombs like the one you have, waiting to be tucked under the Gatun dam. Gee! I'd like to take a shot at them gazabos."

Still standing in the moonlight, only a short distance from the listening boys, the three men argued in low tones for a moment. It was clear that the man who had placed the bomb was refusing to obey the orders given by the others.

"I'm not in love with the job, anyway," the fellow snarled, "and you may do it yourselves if you want it done to-night."

The others did not appear to relish the murderous job they were urging the speaker to undertake, and in a few moments the party moved around the base of the hill and then struck for the higher ground by way of a gully which cut between two elevations.

When the boys, mounting the breast of the hill and crouching at the summit, saw the men again, two were making for the cloud of light which lay over the workings while the other was following the crest of the hill toward the east.

Presently the two swung down into a valley, and then twin lights like those of a great touring car showed over a rise.

76

"What do you think of that?" asked Jimmie. "There must be a good road there."

The car came on a few yards after the lamp showed, and the two men clambered aboard. In five minutes the motor car was speeding toward Gatun.

"Two for the city and one for the tall timber," Jimmie snickered, as the car moved out of view. "There's the solitary individual watching them from the summit."

As the boy spoke the man who had laid the bomb so unsuccessfully faced away to the east and disappeared down the slope. It was not difficult to keep track of him, although the necessity for concealment was imperative, and the fellow proceeded at a swift pace for an hour.

At the end of that time he was in a lonely section of country, where rounded knolls were surrounded by the dense growth of the jungle. In spite of the wildness of the spot, however, Ned saw that civilization had at some distant time made its mark there. Here and there low, broken walls of brick lifted from the grass, and the vegetation was not quite so luxuriant. In numerous places, as they advanced, the boys saw that the ground had once been leveled off as if to make way for a building, the ruins of which were still to be seen.

77

"One of the ruined cities of the Isthmus," Jimmie whispered. "If Peter could see this he would know all about it."

"It wasn't a very large city," laughed Ned.

"There's the ruins of a temple over there," insisted the boy. "There's a wall standing yet. And there's the man we want going into it."

As the boy spoke the man they were following disappeared behind the wall. Before he could be restrained Jimmie wiggled forward to the foot of the ruin. Nestor saw him peering around the end of the line of brick and hastened forward.

The man they had followed was nowhere in sight when Ned turned the angle, and Jimmie lay on the ground in the shadows, kicking up his heels.

"He went down through the earth," the boy giggled, regardless of the danger of the situation. "He went right down through the ground. Say, but he's a corker, to get out of sight like that."

Ned caught the lad by the arm, to silence him, and listened. A steady click-click came from the ground beneath their feet. The sounds came continuously, almost with the regularity of the ticking of a clock.

78

"Where was he when he disappeared?" asked Ned.

"Over there in the corner," was the reply. "He walked up to the wall and stepped out of sight. What's that queer smell?" he added, sniffing the air.

"There must be a fire down there in the vaults of the old temple," replied Ned. "They must have a fire, for the smoke is coming out of a crevice at the top of that wall, and they are working on metal."

"Yes," said Jimmie, "an' I'll bet they're makin' more bombs—bombs for the dam."

CHAPTER VII.

WORKING ON NED'S THEORY.

At daybreak Frank Shaw stood in the screened porch facing west, watching and waiting for the return of Nestor and Jimmie. It had been a long night for him, but he had kept his vigil alone, knowing that his chums needed all the rest they could get.

Many times between midnight and morning the noises of the tropical forest had taken on the semblance of human voices, and then he had crept out from the screens to listen intently for some indication of the approach of his friends. But they had not come, and now he was anxious to set out in search of them.

While he stood there with his brain filled with forebodings of evil, he heard a step in the cottage, and then Jack Bosworth stood by his side, bright and exuberant of spirit after his long sleep. He stood silent for a moment, looking out into the wonderful jungle and then turned to Frank.

"Great country," he exclaimed, sweeping a hand toward the gorgeous thickets.

"A dangerous country," Frank said.

"And a country for an appetite," cried Jack. "I'll get the boys up and we'll have breakfast. Why," he added, turning back to the porch after glancing over the row of bunks, "where's Ned?"

"He went away at midnight," was the reply, "and hasn't returned. I'm afraid something serious has happened to him."

"And you have been watching for him all night?" asked Jack. "Why didn't you waken me? I reckon I'm entitled to a fair share of what's going on here, be it good or bad."

Frank told the story of the night briefly and Jack listened with a frown on his brow. His fingers clenched at mention of the bomb which had been placed under the floor of the cottage.

"We're spotted, of course," he said, when Frank concluded the story. "If we had only tipped His Nobbs off the ship on the way over."

"I suggested that to Ned," Frank answered, "but he only laughed at me. He declared the fellow to be the missing link between himself and the principals in the Gatun dam plot."

"What's the answer?" demanded Jack, with a puzzled air.

"Why, it is his theory that half of the criminals of the world would escape punishment if they could only learn to lie quiet until they were looked up."

"I see. His notion was that the plotters, guided by His Nobbs, would visit us with hostile intentions, and that they might leave a trail back to their own camp."

"That is about it."

"Well, they seem to have looked us up all right."

The other boys now came tumbling out of the cottage, shouting their greetings to Frank and Jack and the golden morning, and clamoring for breakfast. Five minutes later, when the events of the night had been explained, their healthy appetites had vanished. Even when the cook began preparations for the morning meal, filling the air with tantalizing odors of cooking food, they sat in serious consultation with no thought of breakfast in their minds.

"What ought we to do?" asked Jack.

"Go and look him up," suggested George Tolford.

"He may have become lost in the jungle," Peter Fenton remarked. "Suppose we go out into the jungle and fire our guns?"

"I'm afraid it is worse than that," Glen Howard remarked. "We ought to let Lieutenant Gordon know about it."

"I am afraid Ned wouldn't like that," Frank said.

While the boys discussed ways and means a dusky youth of perhaps twenty was seen approaching the cottage on a run. His dress was half American and half native, but his face was

wholly Spanish. He paused when he discovered the boys on the porch and held out his hands, as if to show that his mission was a peaceful one. Frank motioned to him to approach and opened the screened porch door for him to enter.

"Good-morning, gentlemen," he said, in excellent English. "I am from Lieutenant Gordon."

"Then I think you're the fellow we are looking for," Jack said.

"He wants you to join him up at the Culebra cut," the youngster continued. "The two who left the cottage last night are there waiting for you."

"Glory be!" shouted Jack. "We were just wondering what had become of them."

"They wandered out to Gatun and came upon the lieutenant," said the messenger.

"In the night?" asked Peter, suspiciously.

"A little while before daybreak," was the ready reply.

"We'll go and get ready for the journey," Frank said, but at the door he beckoned to Jack and they walked away together.

"What do you think of him?" asked Frank.

"Why, he seems to be all right," was the reply. "At any rate he knows about the boys going away in the night and not coming back."

"The man they followed away would know that, too," Frank said.

Jack looked his friend in the face for a moment and scratched his head.

"Say," he asked, "do you think this is a stall?"

"I don't like the looks of the fellow," was the reply. "Besides, what would the boys be doing up at the Culebra cut?"

"If you think it is crooked we won't go," Jack observed.

"Another thing," Frank went on, "we were to have nothing to do with Lieutenant Gordon while on the Isthmus. We were to roam about at our own sweet will and pick up what information we could. So it doesn't seem likely that he would send for us all to meet him at the Culebra cut. Does it, now?"

"No, it doesn't look reasonable," Jack admitted.

"You know what we were saying about Ned's theory?" Frank asked, in a moment.

"You mean our talk about criminals pointing the way to their own destruction by unwise activity in defensive methods? Of course I remember it. If what we suspect is true, though, Ned rather overplayed it in this case, and got caught."

"We don't know yet whether he got caught or not. We only know that he is unaccountably missing. Well, what if we accept Ned's theory here and go with this messenger? If he is on the square he'll take us to Ned. If he is crooked he'll take us to people who know why Ned did not return to the cottage."

"It may be easier to get taken to the people you speak of than to get away from them," Jack said, dubiously.

"I'm game to try it, anyway," Frank continued, "but I think we ought to leave one behind at the cottage, for Ned may return, possibly, though I doubt it. Anyway, it will do no harm to leave some one here."

"Suppose," suggested Jack, "we don't leave any one at the cottage, but instruct one of the boys to remain here when we go with this fellow and then follow on immediately, sort of keep track of where we are taken?"

"That's a fine idea," Frank replied. "I'll go with the messenger and take the boys with me. You remain here and see where we go—that is, you remain here when we leave and then trail on after us, like a Sherlock Holmes."

"I would rather go with you," Jack replied, "but I'll do the sleuth act if you prefer to have me. You'll need a rescuer, all right," he added, "for Lieutenant Gordon never sent that chap after us. Never in the world."

The cook soon called the boys to breakfast, but there was not much eaten, greatly to the disgust of the cook. When they left the table the messenger asked if they were ready to go.

"All ready," cried Frank, but Jack threw himself into a chair and took up a magazine, watching the face of the messenger over the pages as he did so.

"You are to give up the cottage," the messenger said, with a frown of disapproval. "No one is to be left here."

"It will be all right for me to remain here until the others come," Jack said, with a smile. "I don't feel like a walk this morning."

"There is a motor car just over the hill."

"No inducement," laughed Jack. "I'm going to remain here."

The messenger said no more, though it was plain that the arrangement did not please him. In a few moments the boys were off, the messenger leading the way and keeping up a running fire of

conversation.

"What do you think of that?" asked Jack of the cook, as the party disappeared in the thicket.

"I don't like it," was the reply. "I overheard what Frank told you about the disappearance of Ned and Jimmie, and was anticipating something of the kind."

"Why didn't you say something?"

"It was not for me to interfere," was the reply.

The cook, known as Tommy, was looked over critically by Jack.

"I believe you're all to the good," he said. "You wouldn't be here if you wasn't. Now, what do you say to exchanging clothes with me?"

"I have no objections, only I don't exactly see—"

"We're just about the same size," Jack went on. "Same black hair and black eyes, same ugly smooth face—glad you have no whiskers. You're tanned up a little, but I can put some stain on my face. There you are. The cook goes to Gatun and Culebra and Jack Bosworth remains at the cottage. They won't think of molesting the cook."

"I would rather go with you."

"But some one ought to remain here," urged Jack.

Tommy thought over the proposition for a moment and smiled.

"All right," he said. "I'll remain here, as long as necessary," he added.

The exchange of clothing was quickly made and Jack managed to darken his face with a stain made of crushed leaves which Tommy gathered for him.

"Now, you'll stay right here, won't you?" Jack asked, as he passed out of the doorway. "Ned and Jimmie may return, you know."

"Yes, I'll stay right here," the cook said with a grin.

But as Jack entered the thicket he added:

"Until you get out of sight. Then it is me for the Tivoli and Lieutenant Gordon. It looks to me as if these babes in the woods had bitten off more than they can chew."

Whether his supposition was right or wrong, the cottage was closed in five minutes, and Tommy, wearing Jack's clothing, was racing through the path Ned had taken the night before, on his way to Lieutenant Gordon.

His journey on foot, however, was destined to be a short one, for at the turn of the path he came upon a man loitering in the open space just ahead.

"Wait a second," the man exclaimed.

Tommy was not inclined to check his pace, but a revolver in the hands of the fellow induced him to do so.

"You are Jack Bosworth?"

Tommy hesitated. For an instant he thought of declaring his identity and so getting away to the Tivoli and Lieutenant Gordon. The man in his path settled the problem for him.

"No use to deny it," he said. "You are to come with me."

"Where?" asked Tommy.

"If you have any weapons give them to me," the other said, gruffly, paying no attention to the question.

"All right," Tommy said, handing out a revolver. "It is a heavy thing to carry, anyway. Where are you going to take me?"

"Straight ahead," cried the captor, with a frown. "Straight ahead. I'll tell you when to turn and when to stop."

"You seem to have an accommodating disposition," laughed Tommy. "Why didn't you stop the cook, who went out a little while ago? Perhaps he would have been glad of your company."

"We are not interested in the cook," came the answer, and Tommy smiled as he thought that at least one point of the ruse had met with success.

"That cook will be fired for leaving the cottage," grinned Tommy, making the deception as complete as possible.

In the meantime the motor car containing the five boys and the messenger was speeding on its way toward Gatun and the Culebra cut. When Jack came out on the road the machine was disappearing from sight, but he managed to keep track of it from the hilltops for a considerable distance.

The messenger was full of talk, his evident intention being to keep the boys interested. In spite of the attention paid them, however, Frank and Harry Stevens managed to hold a conversation on the back seat.

"This is carrying out Ned's theory with a vengeance," Harry remarked. "If we get dumped into the big cut we'll charge it up to him."

"The play opens with plenty of action in the first scene," grinned Frank.

"The adventure would look better to me if I knew what had become of Ned and Jimmie," Harry said, despondently.

"If we keep up the appearance of being pleased with the ride," Frank said, "we may be able to learn something of their whereabouts. It is mystery to me how the plotters got hold of Ned, if they did get hold of him."

"You recall the talk in New York as to whether the men who entered Mr. Shaw's study were in quest of the plot papers or the emerald necklace?" asked Harry.

"Yes; and I've been studying over that problem ever since."

"Well, I've been wondering, ever since we started out on this rather risky trip with the messenger, whether the people Ned encountered last night, and the people we are likely to meet to-day, are the people of the plot papers or the people of the emerald necklace. What do you think about it?"

"I fail to see why the necklace thieves should bother. They've got the trinket they wanted, haven't they? It is the canal blowers we are facing now."

"You know Ned's theory," whispered Harry. "Well, if the necklace thieves have brought the bauble back to the Isthmus, they think we're hot after them, and so may strike at us before we can get our guard up. See?"

"No, I don't see," replied Frank. "I'd like to believe they brought the necklace over here, though. Then I might stand a chance to get it back. You'll find that it is the men who are plotting against the big dam that we are mixing with."

The motor car ran through Gatun without stopping, and finally drew up at a rambling old structure which seemed to have been deserted ever since the days of Balboa. The messenger explained that they were to wait there for the lieutenant, and all entered the ancient ruin, the boys looking carefully about as they stepped through the doorway.

The room which first received them was long and narrow, with walls showing both age and neglect. They were met at the door by a tall gentleman of military bearing and a dwarf whose mischievous black eyes stared fixedly into their faces.

"The lieutenant is late," the military man explained. "If one of you is Frank Shaw, however, a portion of the business of the day may be taken up before his arrival."

Frank admitted his identity, and was invited into a smaller room opening from the apartment in which the others waited.

CHAPTER VIII.

EXPLOSIVES FOR THE GATUN DAM.

Ned and Jimmie listened for some moments to the steady click-click of metal which came, or appeared to come, from the ground directly underneath their feet, and then Ned arose and crept forward.

"Where you goin'?" whispered Jimmie.

"Down there."

Ned pointed to the dark corner.

"You'd better come away," warned the boy.

"We are here to investigate," Ned replied, almost impatiently.

"Then investigate with a bomb, or with a cannon," advised Jimmie.

"No time for that," came the reply. "The conditions which exist now may not exist in an hour's time. It is now or never."

Moving forward, Ned saw a faint finger of light cutting the shadows in the corner Jimmie had pointed out. Jimmie saw it at the same instant.

"I'll bet they've got a blacksmith shop down there," he said.

There was no opening in the great stone slabs of the floor through which a man might make his way—only the crevice through which the ray of light came. Ned turned his attention to the wall to the south.

Behind a luxuriant growth of vines he saw another glimmer of light, and in a moment stood looking down a narrow stairway, at the distant end of which were numerous lines of red flame. Jimmie, looking over Ned's shoulder, uttered a muffled exclamation.

"Looks like a door made out of red-hot bars," he said.

"It is a board door," Ned whispered back, "with wide cracks between the planks. There is an intense red fire in the room beyond."

Ned placed a foot on the top step of the stairway and slowly and cautiously rested the weight of his body upon it, to make certain that no trap for the protection of the place had been set there. The stone step was solid and bore his weight firmly.

At the bottom of the stairway the boys stopped and looked about. Straight ahead was the cracked door, to the south was a solid wall, to the north, under the stone pavement they had crossed to gain the corner, was a dark room, the door to which stood open. The room was close and hot.

"How are your matches, Jimmie?" whispered Ned.

"Got a pocketful," was the reply. "Want a light?"

"Not yet. We would better feel our way into the room. Keep close to me and keep your gun handy."

The room was small, something like a vestibule to a larger one which ran along parallel with the one from which the light came. It was very dark there, and more than once the boys stumbled over obstructions on the floor, which seemed to be of brick or stone. Once Ned heard Jimmie laughing softly as he rolled on the floor.

"I'm thinkin' what the movin' picture men are missin'," the boy said, as he moved forward on his hands and knees.

"This would look rather amusing—on a white canvas on the Bowery," Ned said.

After reaching a wall, the stones of which felt damp and oozy to the touch, Ned ventured to light a match. The underground room was long and narrow, with rock walls in which there was no opening except the one by way of which the boys had entered.

Ned, by the flaring light of the match, brushed away the mould which flourished in that unwholesome place and seated himself on the stone floor, his back against the wall. Jimmie, seeking physical companionship, nestled close to him.

"Gee," the little fellow remarked, with a snicker, "you thinkin' of takin' up a homestead here?"

"I'm going to remain in this room until the workers in the other chamber go away," was the reply. "I've taken a notion to look into that apartment."

"And if they don't go away?"

"I'll wait until they do. It is probable that they do all their work at night."

"Then you won't have to wait long," the boy replied. "It was growing light in the east when we came down here."

Jimmie dropped off into a restless sleep after a time, and Ned sat there waiting and listening, just as Frank, a short time later, waited and listened on the porch of the cottage in the jungle. When the boy awoke it was with a start of anxiety.

"The boys will think we're dead," he exclaimed.

"I hope they won't try to follow us," Ned whispered.

"If they do," the other said, "they'll find signs in twigs and stones all the way along. The stone heaps point the way to this place, and give the warning at the place where the stairs begin."

Reference was here made to Boy Scout methods used in the forest. For instance, a stone with a smaller one on top says:

"This is the trail."

Place a stone to the right of this and the meaning is:

"Turn to the right."

One to the left means:

"Turn to the left."

A smaller stone on top of the other two, with none at the side, means: "Be careful."

"I hope they will keep away," Ned went on. "It is a miracle, almost, that we got in here without being discovered."

"What you think you'll find in there?" asked Jimmie.

"Something concerning the plot," was the reply.

It seemed a long time before the work in the chamber ceased, and Ned had plenty of time in which to review the strange case he was interested in. The transition from gay New York to that weird apartment seemed almost like a whiff of fancy. Then he recalled the painstaking surveillance of the fellow called "His Nobbs" on the way down, and smiled at the thought that the plans he had made at first sight of the spy had worked out remarkably well.

He had submitted gracefully to the surveillance, knowing that in time the man who was following him would track him to his camp on the Isthmus. That was the very point. He would not know where to look for the plotters, but they would know where to look for him. He

depended on them to send a man to work him mischief, and reckoned on being able to follow that man back to his principals.

This they had done. The men who had employed the spy on the ship had acted quickly and had sent a bomb-thrower. Ned shuddered as he thought of the risk he had taken that night in going to bed without leaving a guard. He had overlooked a point in the game there, for he had not apprehended such prompt action on the part of the men he had pitted himself against.

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However, the plan had miscarried because of his waking at the critical moment, and here he was, at the door of the men who had sent the man about their murderous work. But were these the principals? When he thought of the two who had hastened off toward Gatun in a motor car he did not believe that they were.

"I shall have to look in other places besides subterranean chambers for the men in charge," he thought. "These fellows are merely tools."

Presently the sharp click-click of metal came no more through the heavy air of the room, and Ned, awaking Jimmie, who had fallen asleep again, moved into the small room from which the doorway gave a view of the stairs. He could see from this room that the sun was shining brightly outside.

Ned had scarcely stationed himself in the heavy shadows back of the doorway when four men came down the passage and passed him. He had no doubt that they were the workmen going out for the day. Such work as they did must needs be done in the night.

Two of the men were tall and slim, with Spanish-looking faces, and two were short and stout, with a heavy droop to their shoulders and broad faces almost entirely covered with whiskers.

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"The original anarchists," whispered Jimmie, as the two short men passed.

After the disappearance of the workmen all was still in the underground rooms. The door to the work-chamber had been left open, and Ned knew that one of two things was the solution to this.

Either there were other men in the room, or there were watchers on the outside. He ventured out in the passage at the foot of the stairs and looked up. A roughly-dressed man stood half in view, his back to the watcher. When Ned turned back he saw Jimmie disappearing into the work-room. He called softly to him, but the boy passed on through the doorway and was lost to sight.

Annoyed at the unnecessary risk taken by the boy, Ned stepped back into the room he had just left and waited half expecting to hear a call for assistance. He knew that he could be of more assistance there than in the open doorway to the room which the boy had entered. There he would at least have the first shot if Jimmie was pursued and made for the stairs.

101

While he waited almost holding his breath, he grasped the bomb he had brought with him from the cottage. If Jimmie should be killed in there, the bomb should avenge his death. The ruins of the temple and the work-shop of the plotters should all ascend heavenward in one grand explosion. After a time, however, his fears were set at rest by the appearance of the boy, who came up to the doorway with a grin on his face.

"Nothin' stirrin' in there now," he said. "Come on."

It seemed plain now that those interested in the work which was going on underground were depending on outside watchers to protect them. The fire in a rude forge which stood at the distant end of the chamber was dying out when the boys reached it, and the place was only dimly lighted.

On one side of the room was a pile of gas-pipe, cut in six-inch lengths. In a corner, far away from the fire, and half buried in the earth—a great paving stone having been removed to make way for the excavation—were tin vessels tightly covered. After his experiences of the night, Ned did not have to inspect the contents of these tins. He knew very well that they contained high explosives.

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"There's stuff enough here to blow up the continent of South America," Jimmie said, pointing at the gas-pipe lengths and the tin vessels.

"And they are getting the material in shape to do the work," Ned added.

"Yep," Jimmie answered. "We've caught 'em with their workin' clothes on. We've got to the bottom of the plot."

"You go too fast, son," Ned replied. "We haven't got a single clue to the men higher up. It is probable that we have discovered the plant of the men who are planning to destroy Uncle Sam's big job, but the work we have undertaken has only begun."

"Why, catch these men," said Jimmie, "an' you've got 'em."

"Got these men, yes, but the chances are that even they do not know the men who are at the head of the conspiracy."

"Some one is puttin' money into it, anyway," the boy suggested.

"Yes, and we don't even know the interests which are doing it," said Ned.

103

Ned now busied himself about the chamber, having closed the door so that the light of his matches would not show. There was, of course, danger that the watcher might descend the stairs and discover the closed door, but there was also the chance that he might attribute the changed situation to accident.

Presently Ned came upon a battered old writing desk standing on the head of a large barrel. The slanting top was locked down, but the boy soon had it open. Its contents consisted of two rolls of drawing paper.

Ned took them out, stirred the fire to a sudden glow, and bent over the figures and lines on the sheets. His face grew thoughtful as he looked.

"What is it?" Jimmie asked.

Ned held out the rolls.

"This one," he said, "is a drawing of the Gatun dam, and this other is a crude sketch of the basement of the *Daily Planet* building in New York."

"Gee!" cried the boy. "Are they goin' to blow that up, too?"

"They appear to be thinking of it," was the reply. "And there on the margin of the sheets, of each of the sheets, is a date line—Saturday, April 15th. This is the 13th."

"Is that the date set for the explosion?" asked the boy, with wide-open eyes.

"I don't know," was the reply, "but it seems to me that we ought to get out of here and communicate with Lieutenant Gordon, and also with Mr. Shaw, in New York. The date marked here may be the one set for action."

They started at once for the door, Ned taking the sheets with him and hoping to pass the guard without being seen. As they moved forward, however, they heard voices, and then a square of light told them that the door which they had left closed had been opened, and that three men were entering.

"If they turn on the light now," Jimmie whispered in Ned's ear, "there'll be somethin' doin' here."

The newcomers did not light the flaring torches with which the room was usually illuminated, but, closing the door, sat down near the forge.

"I think," Ned whispered, drawing Jimmie toward the door, "that the fate of the Gatun dam and the *Daily Planet* building depends on our getting out of here. Move carefully."

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CHAPTER IX.

A FASTING STUNT IS SUGGESTED.

105

While Ned and Jimmie were wondering how they were to escape from the subterranean chamber, Frank Shaw sat in the private room in the old house on the road to the Culebra cut, facing the gentleman of military carriage and wondering what would be the next move in the complicated game.

"How long have you known Lieutenant Gordon?" the man asked. "I beg your pardon," he said, without giving the boy opportunity to answer the question, "but I have not yet told you who I am, and you can hardly be expected to answer questions asked by an unknown person, especially when so much is at stake. I am Colonel Sharrow, of the United States army, detailed on Canal Zone duty."

The man's manners were frank and engaging, his personal appearance that of an officer in the service, yet Frank did not trust him. He did not believe that Lieutenant Gordon had sent for the boys. He did not make answer to the question asked concerning the lieutenant, and it was asked again, in this way:

"Have you known Lieutenant Gordon long?"

"A very short time," was the reply.

"You were with him in Mexico?"

"I met him in Mexico. I did not go there with him, nor did I travel in his company, except on the way out."

"Do you think he is entirely loyal to the government?" was the next question.

"I think he is," was the short reply.

"I am glad to hear you say that," Colonel Sharrow continued. "I should be sorry to change the good opinion I have formed of Lieutenant Gordon."

"It seems to me," Frank said, indignantly, "that you are inviting an adverse opinion concerning him."

"Not at all," was the pleasant reply. "It was my purpose, in making the remark I did, to test your loyalty to my very good friend."

106

There was a short silence in the room, during which Frank could hear his friends moving about excitedly in the adjoining apartment. If they were conversing, they were doing so in whispers, as no words could be heard.

"Lieutenant Gordon," the Colonel said, "is very much devoted to the service, and is especially interested in the investigation upon which he is now engaged. By the way, he seems to have a very able assistant in the person of Ned Nestor."

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"Ned can help some," Frank replied, delighted at this appreciation of his chum.

Colonel Sharrow did not seem to be a bad fellow, after all.

"I suppose Ned will be here with the lieutenant?" Frank asked, then.

The Colonel hesitated, smiling more pleasantly than ever.

"To tell you the truth," he said, "the messenger did not tell you the exact truth. Ned is not with the lieutenant."

"Then this is a trap," exclaimed Frank, rising to his feet.

The Colonel laughed heartily.

"You are an impetuous young fellow," he said.

"You will be telling me next," the boy said, "that we are not to meet the lieutenant here."

"You are not to meet him here," was the calm reply.

Frank moved toward the door.

"Then I'll be going," he said.

"In a moment," said the Colonel, stepping forward. "Wait until you hear what I say, and then you may pursue whatever course seems good to you. You were in deadly danger, out there in the cottage, and we thought best to get you away. We knew, too, that you were too loyal to leave the place in defiance of orders, and so we used this ruse to bring you here, to the protection of your friends. If Nestor had been at the cottage we might have explained the situation to him. What time did he leave?"

108

"Don't you know what time he left, and why he went?" demanded Frank, all his former suspicions returning.

"We only know that he was not there at daybreak," was the reply, "and so we brought you away. Why did he leave so suddenly?"

Frank looked the Colonel in the eyes unflinchingly, determined to have the truth out of him, and asked:

"And so you don't know where he is now?"

The Colonel did not reply, and Frank knew that there was no necessity for continuing the conversation. He was satisfied that the Colonel was one of the plotters, perhaps the leader, that Ned's departure from the cottage had not been detected by the man he had followed into the jungle, and that his friend, at least up to daybreak, had not fallen into the hands of the enemy.

109

He saw in an instant how the case stood. The plotters, spying about the cottage at daybreak, had noted the absence of Ned. Fearful that he had departed on some errand which might seriously affect their own interests, they had resolved to bring the others away and learn from them, if possible, where Ned had gone.

As the reader has doubtless suspected, this was the exact truth. The plotters, at the time the boys were taken from the cottage, did not know where Ned was. He had not been seen following the would-be murderer, nor had any information from the bomb-boom disclosed his presence there.

Colonel Sharrow had regarded the "pumping" of the boy as certain of success, and was not a little surprised when he failed to go into the details of the incident which had taken Ned and Jimmie away from the cottage. It had seemed certain to him that the boy would hasten into an excited account of the peril of the situation. He did not know how the bomb had been discovered, or how it had been taken from under the floor of the cottage, but he knew that it had been done.

He had depended upon Frank to tell him all about it, and to explain where Ned had gone and why he had left the cottage in the night. He was greatly worried over the disappearance of the boy, for he did not know what had been discovered regarding the attempted destruction of the cottage and the consequent murder of the boys. He did not know what steps Ned might be taking to discover the author of the attempted outrage of the previous night. Besides, he was curious to know just how the destruction of the cottage had been averted.

110

"We do not know where Ned is," the Colonel said, in reply to Frank's question. "We thought you might assist us in finding him."

"How?" was the sharp demand.

"By telling us what took place at the cottage last night, and where Ned went when he left—also what time he left the cottage."

"I thought so," Frank said, when the case had thus plainly been stated. "I had an idea you wanted to know what steps are being taken to bring you and your bomb-thrower to justice. Well,

I refuse to tell you anything about it.”

The Colonel was not yet ready to appear under his true colors. He had one more issue to discuss with the boy, and hoped to meet with better success than he had in the other matter. 111

“You don’t seem to understand the situation, or to trust me,” he said. “You do not appreciate the peril your friend may be in. If you did, you would tell us all you know about the incident. Now, there is another thing I wish to discuss with you. You are the son of the owner of the *Daily Planet*?”

Frank nodded.

“Have you communicated with your father recently?”

“Not since our arrival on the Isthmus.”

“Then you have not heard from him since your arrival here?”

“I have not.”

“And consequently do not know of the peril he is in?”

Frank started and turned pale. He knew that this information, like that concerning Ned and the lieutenant, might be false, but he was anxious just the same.

“What peril is he in?” he asked, and the other smiled to think he had struck fire at last.

“Well, it seems that he is accumulating proof against the men who are said to be planning to destroy the big canal, over yonder, and is getting on the wrong track. The men he is about to accuse of complicity in the plot are justly indignant, and are preparing to dynamite his building in case any copy concerning them is sent to the composing room. 112

“You seem to be conversant with the affairs of these men,” Frank suggested, with a frown. “Are you one of the men who sneaked into our home and chloroformed father and stole my necklace?”

“I heard something about that,” the Colonel said, “and wondered at it. However, we are not discussing past incidents. What I desire you to do is to communicate with your father, in the cipher you sometimes use in your correspondence, and inform him of what I have just told you. Say to him that he is mistaken in the men, and that his building will be destroyed if he attempts to publish the alleged facts he has on hand.”

“I think,” Frank said, “that I can trust his good judgment. He can take care of himself.”

“Then you refuse to send the message?”

“I certainly do.”

“You seem to be a fat, healthy sort of a boy,” laughed the other, changing the subject, apparently, with a suddenness which astonished the boy. 113

“I have no cause to complain,” Frank said.

“How long do you think you can live without food?” was the next question.

Frank saw the meaning of the fellow in his angry eyes and dropped back into his chair. The boys in the next room were now talking excitedly, and some of the exclamations could be heard.

“If you don’t open the door we’ll break it down.”

That was Harry Stevens. The reply was too faint to be heard.

“What are you doing to Frank, anyway?”

That was Harry Stevens’ voice again. The question was immediately followed by a bang on the door.

“Keep back,” a voice said. “This gun is loaded.”

The situation was a serious one, and Frank blamed himself for getting into such a trap. If he had remained at the cottage, he thought, there would have been no immediate danger to his friends.

“Perhaps, after a week’s fast, you might have strength enough left to write such a communication to your father as I suggest?” 114

The manner was unbearable, the tone insulting, and Frank could hardly restrain himself from attacking the fellow.

“In a week,” he said, his eyes flashing, “you and your associates will be in some federal prison.”

“You talk bravely,” said the other, “and I observe that you are glancing about in search of some way out of this, to you, disagreeable situation. Spare your pains! Even if you could vanquish me and my associate in the next room, you could not leave the house. It is guarded by a dozen picked men.”

“Is that as true as the other things you have said?” asked the boy.

The Colonel laughed until his face turned red and his sides shook.

“You are a bright boy,” he said. “It is quite a pleasure to do business with you. A very capable boy.”

He went to the door of the room and looked out.

“Where are the men?” he asked.

The dwarf, who had been sitting on a rude table near the door, swinging his short legs in the air, looked up with a slight frown.

"I haven't got 'em," he said.

"Well, see if you can find them."

The dwarf, called Jumbo by those who knew him, got off the table and pointed to a window.

"Use your eyes," he said.

Three men stood there looking in. In the road in front stood the automobile in which the party had reached the house. On a hilltop perhaps sixty rods away a little spurt of dust indicated the approach of another motor car.

The Colonel beckoned to the men to enter. As they stepped inside three more men entered from a rear door. They were all dusky, hungry-looking fellows, with snaky black hair and shrinking black eyes. They were dressed in tattered clothes, and carried revolvers in plain view.

"Quite an army," Frank said.

"This old house," the Colonel began, a sneer on his thin lips, "is larger than you may think. At the top of a wing which stretches back toward the jungle there is a room where Spanish prisoners were once confined. With your permission I'll escort you boys there, advising you, in the meantime, to think the situation over carefully."

The puff of dust on the distant hilltop grew more pronounced, and the chug-chug of a swiftly moving motor reached the ears of those in the ancient structure.

CHAPTER X.

A DELEGATION OF BOY SCOUTS.

The three men who entered the subterranean chamber where Ned and Jimmie were hidden did not go to work at the forge, neither did they illuminate the place with such poor means as were at hand. Instead, they settled down in sullen silence by the dying fire in the forge. What little talk there was could not be understood by the lads for the reason that it was conducted in Spanish.

Ned was waiting in the hope that they would soon take their departure, but they seemed to be in no hurry to do so. Finally it was disclosed, in a few words of broken English, that they were waiting for some persons of importance to appear.

"If they don't get a move on pretty soon," Jimmie whispered, "we'll have to make a break of some kind. If we don't get out directly there won't be any newspaper building in the Shaw family, and Uncle Sam won't have any more Gatun dam than a robin."

"We must wait until the last moment," Ned replied. "The guards out there would shoot us down before we could reach the head of the stairs. We can't rush them from below."

It was a long and anxious wait there in the underground room, especially as so much depended on the boys getting out. They had no idea what had happened to the boys left at the cottage, or what was taking place in New York. The only thing in their favor was that the workmen did not light the torches which lay about. Such an act would have led to their discovery and precipitated a struggle at once.

"See if you can't reach one of them bombs," Jimmie giggled, nudging Ned in the ribs. "I want to eat it."

"I have about reached that stage myself," Ned replied. "I never was so empty in my life. We'll have to do something before long."

"Suppose I start an' run?" suggested Jimmie.

"You'll get a breakfast of lead if you do," Ned replied. "Sit still."

Again the boys sat back in their corner to wait, huddled together for the sake of companionship, and wondering what had become of their chums at the cottage.

"They ought to be here by this time," Jimmie complained, in a whisper. "I left plenty of instructions regarding the route."

The little fellow did not, of course, know that the boys were at that moment in the ancient house near the Culebra cut, nor that an automobile was speeding over a hill to the north of the old structure—watched by his friends with anxious interest.

"Something may have happened to them," Ned said. "It seems to me that this case is set on automatic springs. The slightest move on our part brings out a bang from the other side. Our opponents are industrious chaps, and that's no fabrication. They keep going every minute of the time."

"And they've won every trick so far," grumbled Jimmie.

"Yes, but the game is not out yet," Ned replied, hopefully.

"I should think these gazabos would get tired of waitin' an' go away," Jimmie said, after another long silence.

"They are taking turns sleeping," Ned replied. "I heard one of them snoring a few minutes ago."

Jimmie settled back again, rubbing his stomach dolefully, and the place seemed to grow darker before his eyes. When he awoke again Ned was pulling at his arm, and there was a great shouting and pounding at the door.

"Wake up and get your gun out," Ned said. "There's going to be something started here in a minute."

"What is it?" demanded the boy, sleepily.

"The others have come," Ned replied, "and there'll be lights in here directly."

"I'm so wasted away with hunger," Jimmie said, "that they'll have to shoot pretty straight to hit me."

One of the men by the forge now began stirring the embers preparatory to lighting a torch, and the others made for the door.

It looked as if there would be open battle in a moment, but in that moment a shot came from the outside, followed by a faint cheer.

The three men who had waited in the chamber drew together, close to the sullen light of the forge, the torches unlighted in their hands. They seemed to be whispering together, and the boys saw them turn their faces toward a corner not far from the forge.

Two more shots came from outside, and then a voice cried, in English:

"Open the door, you chumps."

"That's Jack Bosworth," cried Jimmie, bounding toward the entrance.

Ned followed the boy's movement for an instant, and then faced back toward the forge, where the three workmen had stood. The last one was just disappearing through an opening in the wall, and, with a bound the boy was after him. A heavy plank door snapped shut in his face.

Then the front door was thrust open, and Frank, and Jack, and Harry, and Glen, and Peter dashed through, shouting at the top of their voices. Jack even lifted up his chin and howled "In the prison cell I sit."

"Prison nothin'," Jimmie exclaimed, indignantly. "We was just goin' out to find you fellers."

"That's what the guard at the door said," cried Jack. "He told us that you were expected out any minute."

The lads danced about like mad creatures for a moment, and then settled down to meet the situation in which they found themselves.

"Where are the guards?" asked Ned.

"If they are still going at the pace they set out in," laughed Frank, "they must be pretty near up to San Francisco by this time. I never saw such running in my life."

"Why didn't you capture them?" asked Jimmie.

"For the same reason you did not capture the men who were inside," laughed Frank.

"But we did capture 'em," insisted Jimmie. "We've got 'em locked up in a chamber that opens from that corner."

"Is that true?" asked Frank.

"Yes," replied Ned. "It is true that they went into a chamber over there, but the door is locked on the other side."

"We'll soon remedy that," Jack observed, and in a short time the boys were pounding away at the plank door with a heavy sledge which had evidently been used in cutting up the gas-pipe.

When the door was down a narrow passage was revealed. This, followed by the boys, led to an opening at the bottom of the knoll on which the temple had been built. The men who had operated the bomb factory had escaped, every one of them, and Ned turned away in disgust at the luck which seemed to pursue him.

"Every man of them got away," he grumbled.

"What you kicking about?" demanded Jack, pulling away at the pile of pipe which was evidently the makings of a supply of bombs. "You captured their artillery."

"They can make more," Ned replied.

"And the maps he found," Jimmie cried. "Maps showing how to blow up a Gatun dam and a New York newspaper office. All marked out. Just like lessons on blowing things up from a correspondence school."

Frank was all attention immediately. He had heard something like that before that day, and asked a score of questions in a breath.

When the story of the drawings was told the boys gathered about Ned while he pointed out the lines drawn in what purported to be a sketch of the basement of the *Daily Planet* building. Frank declared that the dots made in the drawing were located exactly at steel and concrete foundation points. The plan of destruction had evidently been prepared by some one familiar with the structure.

"It strikes me," Frank said, after a moment's inspection of the drawings, "that we'd better get out of here and reach a cable office. One of the plotters was kind enough to tell me what they were about to do, and this looks like they mean to keep their word, for once in their lives, at least."

"We'd better be getting out of this, anyway," Jack put in, "for those chaps are sure to come back and bring a gang with them. Suppose we go back to the cottage and see what has been doing there?"

"I thought you came from the cottage here," Ned said.

"No," was the reply. "We left the road leading from Gatun at the point where you two left it last night."

"I'll bet you saw my signs in twigs," Jimmie said.

"We sure did," was the reply, "and we found your signs in stone out there on the stone pavement, and Jack bunted one of the guards in the head with the third rock."

"But I don't understand this," Ned said. "Where have you boys been this morning?"

"This morning," declared Frank. "It is most night now."

"I'll tell you," grinned Jack, "they went and got taken prisoners by a martinet of a fellow and a dwarf, and I had to go and get them out. Say! But you wait a second, and I'll produce my modest assistant."

He stepped to the edge of the jungle and whistled shrilly, and the next moment a slender boy of perhaps fifteen stood by his side, gazing at the group, now on the pavement of what had at one time been the court of the temple, with something of fear in his dark eyes. He was dressed in clothes which were much too large for him, and his manner indicated that he was not at ease in the company of the well-dressed Boy Scouts.

"This is Gastong," Jack explained. "He's capable of doing a running stunt that would make an express train look like it was hitched to the scenery. Gastong," he added, turning the boy around so that he faced the others, "this is the company of bold, bad men you've enlisted in. What patrol did you say you belonged to?"

"The Owl, Philadelphia," was the reply.

"Gee," cried Jimmie. "Looks to me like he was a piece of the Isthmus."

"This," explained Jack, with the voice and manner of one standing on a box before a tent and touting for a curiosity, "is Gastong, the boy tramp of the Isthmus. If he had a place to sleep he would run away from it before night. If he went to bed with a dime in his pocket he'd dream it was there and get up and spend it. If he was set to digging in a mine he'd chop his way through and come out on the other side and run away. If he was—"

Frank clapped a hand over the speaker's mouth and marched him away.

"We've got no time for stump speeches," he said. "The gazabos we drove off when we arrived will come back with reinforcements, and—and there you are."

"I'm dying to know what has been happening," Ned said, with a laugh. "It looks to me as if you boys had been in something of a mess yourselves."

"Time enough for that when we get back to the cottage," Jack said. "Come on, Gastong, and we'll lead the bunch to the festive board. I hope the cook will be there. Say, but why don't you fellows compliment me on me fine appearance in this menial rig?"

"You haven't given us time to say a word," laughed Jimmie. "You look like the cook, indeed, you do; and you make me hungry."

"That is another story for the cottage," Jack said, and the boys hastened off toward the camp which had proved such a source of danger to them.

When they came in sight of the place they were astonished at seeing Lieutenant Gordon and the cook sitting side by side on the screened porch. The cook was still dressed in Jack's clothes, and the lieutenant, who had evidently just arrived, was speaking rapidly, as if laboring under great excitement.

CHAPTER XI.

JACK AND HIS FRIEND GASTONG.

Lieutenant Gordon sprang to his feet when he saw the boys emerging from the jungle, and stood waiting, his hand on the porch door, while they entered.

"You've given me a good scare," he said.

"There's been a scare comin' to everybody to-day," grinned Jimmie, "even to the dagoes in the bomb chamber."

"The bomb chamber," repeated the lieutenant. "What have you youngsters been up to? Where did you find a bomb room?"

"Back here in the cellar of a ruined temple," Jimmie started to explain, but the lieutenant stopped him.

"Suppose we begin at the beginning," he suggested.

"That is the beginning," Ned replied, "the beginning of the story after we left the cottage in the night."

Then Ned related the story of the finding of the ruined temple and what had taken place there.

"But how did you boys get to the temple?" asked the lieutenant, then. "The last I heard of you one of the plotters had you in tow, and Jack was running off after you in the cook's clothing. Where did you boys connect with each other?"

"Hold on!" Jack broke in. "Where did the cook connect with you? I presume he is the boy that brought you here?"

"Sure," said the cook. "I had no intention of remaining here. I knew about what would happen to you boys, and so started on a run for a 'phone, the idea being to reach the lieutenant. I was mistaken for Jack, and held up by a man who must have been left to spy about the cottage, but I got a chance to hand him one and got to a 'phone. Since then the lieutenant has melted a thousand miles of wire making inquiries for you."

"I'm glad we all got out before the lieutenant got to us," Jimmie cut in. "I guess this bunch of Boy Scouts don't need any United States army to pry us out of our troubles. We almost got here first," he added, with a provoking grin.

"When you get done congratulating yourselves," laughed the lieutenant, "perhaps you will tell me how you boys got to the ruined temple."

"I cannot tell a lie," cried Jack, "I did it. While I was chasing myself along through the dust kicked up by the choo-choo car the boys rolled away in, I came upon a youth who held me up in the middle of the road and asked how I'd like to continue my run against time in an airship. He was a cheeky looking chap, and I felt like giving him a poke in the breather, when he grinned and gave me the Boy Scout high sign."

"You never found a Boy Scout out here in the jungle?" exclaimed Gordon.

"You bet I did," Jack continued. "If you don't believe it, go back there to the cookerie. He's filling up on the beans I was expecting to get myself. Call him my dear Gastong, and he'll come."

"Cripes!" cried Jimmie, and he was away in a second, attacking the great dish of pork and beans which stood on the table in the cookroom.

"Gastong," continued Jack, looking longingly into the cook room, "was born on the Isthmus, and knows all about conditions here, but he's too aristocratic to mix with the inhabitants for any great length of time. He's got the highfaluting blood all right, but he is shy of the skads, so he protects his dignity and pride of race by bumming his way over the world, like an English milord with a ruined castle and an overdraft at the bank. He learned to talk United States in New York, and got to be a Boy Scout in Philadelphia."

"Details of pedigree and biography later," said Ned. "Did he have an airship?"

"He had the next best thing to it," Jack replied. "He had a motor car which he was running for some gazabo over in Gatun. He was out for his health when he saw the boys shooting by in a car with a man he knew to be a crook, and was about to follow on and see what was doing when he saw me speeding up the right of way, looking as if I was obliged to catch the machine ahead."

"He left his car around the corner of the hill and met me on foot, with about a dozen Boy Scout signs on tap and a score of badges of honor hidden away in his ragged clothes. He told me what he thought of the man who was running the car ahead, and I told him how he would be patrol leader on the Golden Streets just because he was a Boy Scout and was there at that time, so we got into his machine and followed the crook in the lead."

"What about the tramps?" laughed Frank.

"When we saw the boys go into that old house, we knew there was something crooked going on, and Gastong said to me that if I wouldn't give him away he would put me wise to a bunch of hoboes that were camping out in the jungle, too lazy to work, and just about ripe for a scrap. So we rounded up the hoboes and made a break for the old house."

"That's all," cried Frank.

"And got there just in time to see Frank and his friends going to the floor with a lot of has-been wrestlers the man in charge of the house had precipitated on them," Jack went on.

"Where are the people who were in the house?" asked Ned.

"Up in the air," cried Frank. "Say, they got out so fast that they melted a path all down the hill to the motor car. We ought to have fixed that so it wouldn't run."

"Where are the hoboos?" asked the lieutenant.

"Gone back to camp, wearied out with their exertions," laughed Jack. "They came to the Isthmus to work on the canal, but found the climate didn't agree with them, so they are taking the rest cure. I was a find for them, all right. They've got money enough to live on for a month, and I've got to wire Dad for more soap."

"It is a pleasure to bump into a nice, bright little boy like you," grinned Jimmie, standing in the doorway with a great slice of bread in his hand. "Here you had an army big enough to surround that old ruin, an' yet you went an' let the fellers get away. An' we've been blowed up, an' locked up, an' chased in motor cars, an' gone without our eatin's, an' nothin' doin'. Up to date we're about as useless on the Isthmus as an elephant's ear on an apple pie—big enough to be in the way, but not good enough to become part of the diversion."

There was now a call from the cook, and there was no further talk of the situation for the next half hour. The lieutenant was fully as active at the table as the others, and the newcomer, Gastong, as Jack persisted in calling him, seemed to forget that he had invaded the kitchen half an hour before and paid his respects to a pan of baked beans. After the meal a council was called on the porch.

"You all understand," Lieutenant Gordon said, "that you cannot remain here without being constantly on guard?"

"Of course," Frank said.

"And you know that the men who have been seen in connection with this plot will now disappear from the game and new men take their places?"

"That is the worst feature of the case," Ned said, thoughtfully. "My theory worked first rate up to a certain point. I was put in communication with some of the underlings in the plot, just as I planned I should be, but they all got away. The men who are at the head of this conspiracy will not permit the fellows who have appeared in one of the roles to appear again. We haven't gained a thing."

"Except a more definite knowledge of the purposes of the plotters," suggested the lieutenant. "We know now that it is the Gatun dam that is threatened, and that the newspaper building in New York will soon become a mass of ruins unless some action is taken at once."

"Also we know where they made their bombs," said Jack.

"But we don't know where they will make them in future," said Frank.

"Well, what about staying here?" asked the lieutenant.

"We are doubtless as safe here as anywhere," Jack suggested.

"Of course I want to stay here," the irrepressible Jimmie put in. "I haven't got on speakin' terms with the scenery yet."

"There may be another bomb under the house this minute," Frank said, starting up from his chair. "The place has been alone all day."

The boys swarmed out of the porch like a colony of bees looking for a new home, and while some crawled under the floor of the cottage, others penetrated the jungle for some distance in every direction. There were no suspicious objects under the floor, and the jungle seemed to present a peaceful attitude.

"What about having the old temple and the deserted house watched for a time?" asked Jack, as all returned to the porch.

"What do you think of that, Ned?" asked the lieutenant.

"If they are watched at all," was the reply, "it is my idea that the work should be done very secretly, and no arrests made there."

"Say," Glen Howard remarked, "there was a dwarf in the house named Jumbo. He didn't seem to like the gang he was training with, and I thought we might be able to get him to keep an eye out for us."

"I'll go and see him," Jimmie said.

"Yes, go walking right up to the front door and knock, and say you would like to sell the lady of the house a carpet sweeper, and you'll get a piece of lead in your anatomy," Jack said.

"All right," Jimmie grinned, "when I go to call on Jumbo I'll get an airship an' drop down out of the blue into the chimney. Say, you fellers make me tired. Do you really want to get this Jumbo person into the game?"

"It might not be a bad idea," Ned replied.

"All right, then," grinned Jimmie, "I'll have me private secretary look him up."

"You might have him look up my emerald necklace, while he is about it," laughed Frank. "I can't afford to lose that."

"As I have before remarked," said the lieutenant, "find Pedro and you'll find the necklace."

"Unless he's soaked it," Frank put in.

About dark Lieutenant Gordon arose to go back to Ancon and Jimmie and Peter Fenton moved down the little path with him.

"Here," the lieutenant said. "You boys mustn't be seen with me. You are not supposed to be connected with the secret service in any way."

"No, I suppose not," chuckled Jimmie. "I suppose they come here an' put bombs under our cottage, an' lug us off to deserted houses, an' all that, thinkin' we're down here in search of a new kind of butterfly. If anybody should ask you, the plotters know just as much about our arrangement as we do."

Ned, who had been following along behind the others, broke into a laugh.

"The boy has the situation sized up correctly," he said.

"Then come along," growled the lieutenant. "Where are you going?"

"We're going to have a look at the Culebra cut," was the reply. "You said we might ramble about the Isthmus all we wanted to."

"But why go with me, and at night?" asked the officer.

"We want to see the work going on under electricity," Peter replied.

"Let them go," advised Ned. "If they can't take care of themselves it is time we found it out."

The fact was that the boys had learned from the cook that the lieutenant had come to the vicinity of the cottage in an automobile, and they thought this a fine chance to secure a ride to the famous excavation. There was at least another member of the party who seemed to think just as they did, for when the machine purred out into the rough road leading from the path to Gatun the slight figure of Gastong vaulted into the back seat with the boys and motioned to them to remain quiet.

"What's up?" whispered Jimmie.

"Perhaps he wouldn't let me go," suggested the other.

"You've ducked an' dodged so long that you're afraid of everybody," returned Jimmie. "I guess any of our friends can go where we can."

Gastong, however, had not given the true reason for wishing to keep his presence in the car a secret from the lieutenant. The boy had been so considerately treated by the Boy Scouts that he was infatuated with them, and wished to serve them in some important way.

Not having any steady occupation or place of residence, the boy had been driven about alike by the native authorities and the army officers until he was, as Jimmie declared, afraid of any one having authority. He had been treated as an equal by the boys, and was determined to serve them. He had heard the talk of enlisting the dwarf, Jumbo, in the cause represented by the secret service men, and was now resolved to return to the deserted house and look the little fellow up.

Therefore, when the machine drew near to the house which the lads had visited that day under such unfavorable circumstances he dropped out and was soon lost in the shadows of the jungle.

"What do you think of that?" Jimmie demanded.

"I think he can do a better job there than either of us could," was the reply.

"Well, when we come back from the cut," Jimmie said, "I'm goin' to drop off here an' see how the chump is gettin' along."

Looking back, they saw a light flare up in the house, and then die out!

CHAPTER XII.

LOST IN THE JUNGLE AT NIGHT.

"Just look at it!"

The lieutenant, after many warnings against getting in the way, and against getting lost in the jungle, had just left Peter and Jimmie, and the boys stood at the verge of the great Culebra cut, taking in the wonder and the force of the marvelous scene.

Night and day, under the great white lights, the work went forward, cutting a way for the commerce of the world. Night and day the human ants bored into the earth. Continuously the blasting and scraping, the puffing and the roaring, went on. Always the great steam shovels were biting into the soil and the rock.

"That doesn't look like the deep blue sea down there, does it?" Peter went on, "yet the largest vessels in the world will be sailing over here in four years, sailing through this cut, and over a forest beyond the rise there. It looks big, doesn't it? And it sounds big, too."

From where the boys stood there seemed to be a hopeless confusion of men and machines, but they knew that back of all the hurry, and bustle, and noise, was a great machine, a wonderful system, born in a human brain and reaching its lines out to the smallest detail.

"When you sit on a fire-escape balcony, or in a park," Jimmie said, his mind going back to the New York lounging places he knew best, "and read about how many tons of earth have been removed during the week, you don't sense it, do you? You've got to come down here and catch Uncle Sam at his job."

While the boys talked of the marvelous thing before them a stranger of quiet mien stood watching them from an elevation a few yards away. He was a man of middle age, with brilliant black eyes, long, like those of an Oriental, and a figure almost boyish in its proportions. He was neatly dressed in a dark suit of some soft, expensive material, his linen was spotless, and a diamond of great value and brilliancy glimmered in his pure white tie.

He stood watching the boys for a moment listening to their talk, and then approached them, softly, deferentially, yet with an air of frankness.

"It is a wonderful sight," he said, as he came to the edge of the cut where the lads stood. "In all the world's life there has never been anything like it."

The boys turned and looked the man over modestly, yet with sharp eyes. It is not to be wondered at, after their experiences there, that they were suspicious of all strangers. They both at first rather liked the looks of the man.

"It is worth coming a long way to see," Peter observed.

"Yes," was the reply, "it is wonderful, even to those who are small cogs in the great machine, and so it must seem almost supernatural in its showing of strength to those who look upon it for the first time."

"You belong on the works?" asked Jimmie, gazing at the man with a sort of awe, as one might look at a man of mighty deeds.

"Yes, I have my part in the work," was the reply, "though it is only a modest part. I am in the office of the engineer, and frequently come out at night to note the progress of the big cut."

"It must make a man feel a mile high, to be part of a thing like this," Jimmie said, sweeping a hand over the scene. "It makes little old New York look like thirty cents," he added, with a laugh.

"The work," the stranger said, in a pleasant tone, which gave no indication of foreign birth "has progressed beyond the expectations of the most enthusiastic advocate of the canal. When we came here we found about seven miles of waterway bored into the side of the Isthmus, reaching, well, about up to the rising slope of Gatun. Beyond this there were scratches in the soil for about forty miles. There was a notch nicked in the hills of Culebra—just a nick bearing no resemblance to what you see before you at this time."

"That was over there where the hills rise up like men watching the lights and listening to the noise?" asked Jimmie, his imagination thoroughly stirred by the scene.

"Yes, over there. It would have taken the Frenchmen a century to dig down to the level where those shovels are working, where those tracks lie. I'm afraid it took the men they brought here most of the time to bury the dead. But, after all, they never got in touch with the really big thing."

"I guess that was the Chagres river," Peter said; "I've read something about that, about the trouble it makes."

"Yes, that was the river," the stranger went on, by this time pretty deep in the confidence and admiration of the boys. "They found the Chagres having everything its own way on the uplands, over to the north, there. It ambled along like a perfect lady in spots, then it twisted its water into whirling ropes which pulled at the banks and toppled cliffs into the current."

"Freshets?" asked Jimmie.

"Exactly. When the engineers came they found something worth while. They found a dismal, soggy-looking ditch which could do things in a single night. They found crumbling and shaling cliffs which showed the bite of the waters. Time and again they had to do their work all over again. Then they decided to take the Chagres by the neck and choke it into subjection."

"I'd like to see some one choke a river," Jimmie laughed. "You try to choke a river and you'll find that the harder you clutch it the more trouble it will make you."

"But they not only choked the Chagres," the stranger said, with a captivating smile which went far toward giving him the complete confidence of the boys, "they put it in chains. If you look on a detail map of the Isthmus, you will see a white band stretching from Limon Bay to La Boca, just below the hill of Ancon. That is the line of the canal. Then, across this white band, you will see a crooked line, a turning and twisting line. That is the river, which seems to change its mind about general direction every few minutes. The engineers found this river in the habit of getting up in the night and tearing their work in pieces."

"Why didn't they cut a straight channel for it?" asked Jimmie.

"That was tried, but finally the engineers decided to stop trying to make the river behave itself, as a river, and turned their attention to squelching it. They are going to turn it into a lake—the Lake of Gatun."

"I've heard something about that," Jimmie said. "Go on and tell us more about it."

The stranger smiled pleasantly, but there was a sudden quickening of the flame in his brilliant eyes which the boys did not notice.

"The upland portion of the Isthmus, the plateau, as it would be called in Mexico, is fairly level from Gatun to the Culebra hills. It might, in fact, be called a shallow basin, with hills shutting it in. Now do you see what the Gatun dam is for?"

"Sure. To flood that basin and turn the Chagres into a lake," cried Jimmie.

"That is just what will be done. The Panama canal will be a lake most of the way. The locks will float the vessels up to the lake and down to the canal again. The hills, and forests, and farms of the basin will be under water."

"And the mines," Jimmie said, thinking of the talk he had had with Peter concerning the emerald mines. "The lake will flood them, too."

"There are no mines there any more," the stranger said, lightly, but there was a quality in his voice which almost asked a question instead of making a statement of fact.

"I've been wondering if there wasn't mines down there," Jimmie added, in a moment.

"What kind of mines?" asked the stranger.

Jimmie was about to say "Emerald mines," but Peter's anxious face warned him to check the words on his lips.

"Oh, I've heard of all kinds of mines about there," he said, instead.

"The mines are farther south," said the stranger. "Are you boys with a party?" he added, in a moment. "If not, I would like to have you spend the night as my guests."

"We've got a camp back here," Peter said, "and the others will be expecting us."

"I see," said the other. "You are the boys who are here in search of specimens. I recall something Lieutenant Gordon said about you. But you are a long way from the cottage in the jungle near Gatun."

"When did you see Lieutenant Gordon last?" asked Peter, suspiciously.

"I met him something over half an hour ago," was the reply, "on his way back to the Tivoli at Ancon. You came here in his machine?"

"Yes," was the reply.

"Well, I'm going to Gatun to-night, and you may ride with me."

The stranger turned away, as if to get his motor car, and Peter nudged Jimmie in the ribs with his elbow.

"Now we've done it," he whispered.

"Done what?"

"Got a man after us."

"Do you think he is one of the men we came here to look up?" asked Jimmie. "I've been thinking he looks like a Jap. Perhaps he's one of the men at the bottom of that bomb business. Well, we don't have to go with him."

"I'd like to see where he would take us," Peter whispered.

"Not for your uncle," Jimmie replied. "It is me for the jungle. This thing is gettin' worse 'n' a Bowery drama. The villain comes on in every scene here. Say! Suppose we take a run into the woods before he gets back?"

"I'm not in love with the jungle at night," Peter said. "Besides, I'd like to know what this Jap has in mind."

The chug-chug of the stranger's motor was now heard, and, without waiting for further discussion, the boys ducked away into the jungle, which crowded close on the cut at this point.

They heard the car stop at the point where they had been standing, and heard a low exclamation of impatience, indicative of disappointment, from the lips of the driver, and then crept farther into the tangle of vines.

Finally Peter stopped and faced toward Gatun.

"We'd better be working toward home," he said. "This thicket is no place for a civilized human being at night."

Although there was a moon, and the sky showed great constellations with which the boys were unfamiliar, the jungle was dark and creepy. Keeping the lights from the workings on their left, the boys pushed their way through the undergrowth for some distance without resting, and then paused in a little glade and listened.

"Gee," cried Jimmie, after standing at attention for a moment, "there's some one following us. We'd better dig in a little deeper."

"It may be a wild animal," said Peter, who, while ready to face whatsoever peril might come in the company of the man they were running away from, was in mortal terror of the jungle.

"There are no man-eaters here," Jimmie replied, unwinding a snake-like creeper from his neck

and pushing on.

"I can feel snakes crawling up my legs now," complained Peter, with a shiver.

The noise in the rear came on about as fast as they could move, and at last Jimmie sat down on a fallen tree.

"He can hear us," he said. "We might as well be hiding with a brass band."

"Then we'll keep quiet until he passes," Peter trembled out. "I'm afraid to go plunging through here in the dark, anyway."

Making as little noise as possible, the boys crept into a particularly dense thicket and crouched down. Almost as soon as they were at rest the noise behind ceased. In five minutes it began again, but the sounds grew fainter and fainter and finally died out.

"He was followin' us all right," Jimmie said. "Now we'll dig in a little deeper, so as not to come out anywhere near him, and then go back to camp."

They walked, or crept, rather, until they were tired out and then looked about.

There were giant ceiba trees, with trunks as smooth as if they had been polished by human hands, tremendous cotton-trees, their branches bowed down with air plants, palms, to which clung clusters of wild nuts, thick, bulbous trees, taller trees with buttressed roots, as if Nature knew the strain that was to be placed upon them and braced them up accordingly, trees with bark like mirrors, and trees with six-inch spike growing from the bark.

And through this thicket of trees ran creepers resembling pythons, smaller vines which tore at the boughs of the trees, and a mass of running things on the ground which caught the foot and seemed to crawl up toward the throat. By daylight it would have been weird and beautiful. At night it was uncanny and fearsome.

"We ought to be in sight of the lights by this time," Peter said, after they had crept on and rested again and again.

"Yes," said Jimmie, "but we ain't. We're lost in the jungle, if you want to know."

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CHAPTER XIII.

BOY SCOUTS TO THE RESCUE.

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Ned Nestor and Frank Shaw sat on the porch, that night, for a long time after the other boys were asleep. It had been decided that Frank should stand guard until midnight, but Ned was far too anxious to attempt to sleep. The absence of Jimmie and Peter worried him, and he sat waiting for some sign of their approach until very late.

"Frank," he said, after a long silence, "there has been some talk in this case about your father having an interest in an emerald mine down here. Have you any idea where that mine is?"

"Not the slightest," was the reply. "All I know about it is that it is a paying proposition, and that foreigners are in the game with him."

"You do not even know whether the mine is situated in the Province of Panama?"

"I rather think it is."

"I have heard talk," Ned went on, "about mines on the line of the canal. It may be that this one is."

"I think it is not far from Colon," was the reply.

"Do you know who these foreigners are?"

"Japanese, I think."

Ned was silent for a time, as if studying some proposition over in his mind. The boys in the cottage were stirring in their sleep, and a shrill-voiced bird in the jungle was calling to its mate.

"What are you trying to get at?" Frank asked.

"Has it ever occurred to you," Ned replied, "that your father acted rather strangely on the night he was attacked in his house—the night your emerald necklace was stolen and the office building searched?"

"I have never thought of his attitude as remarkable," replied Frank, "but, come to think the matter over from this distance, it does seem that he did act queerly when asked to reveal the nature of the information he had received. Lieutenant Gordon was angry with him."

"Yes; the lieutenant believed that the papers would help him a lot if he could get hold of them. He still thinks so."

"I understand that he still, in his mind, accuses father of disloyalty to his country," said Frank.

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"It seems to me," Ned continued, "that one of two propositions is true. Either the papers would be useless in revealing the plot, or they deal with a situation which your father believes himself capable of handling alone."

"I wonder what he will think when he gets the cable Lieutenant Gordon took up to Panama for me?" asked Frank.

"What did you say in the message?"

"I told him to keep an army of men in the basement of the newspaper building—to look out for bombs all over the structure."

"I am glad you were able to warn him," Ned said, "but I can't help believing that he knew something of the peril he was in before we left New York. He was altogether too quiet that night when his house and his office were searched. He appeared to me to be planning a revenge both effective and secret."

"And he never made a row about Pedro leaving him," Frank said. "Why, he used to think Pedro was the whole works."

"You say the fellow's name is not Pedro at all, but Pedrarias?" asked Ned.

"Yes, that is what father says. I gave him the name of Pedro for short. He is an offshoot of the Spanish family that ruled the Isthmus after Balboa was shot. He claims pure Castilian blood, and all that. How he ever consented to become a servant is more than I can make out."

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"Has it never occurred to you," asked Ned, "that he might have had an object, besides that of salary, in acting the part of a menial?"

"I have thought, since the night of the robbery, that he might have scented the necklace from afar off and come there to get it."

"Your father found him on the Isthmus?"

"Yes; on his latest trip."

"He consulted with him, in a way, concerning conditions here?"

"Yes, I think he did. Pedro is a very intelligent man, and proud as the Son of the Morning. He gave me his pedigree about the first day of his service in the house."

"Perhaps your father sought his advice regarding the emerald business."

"Yes, I think he did, now and then."

"And Pedro was always ready to advise?"

"Oh, of course."

"And your father grew to put some confidence in his talk?"

"I presume so, for they talked together a good deal. But I don't see what you are getting at."

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"Do you know whether the two discussed the location and opening up of new mines?"

"Oh, yes. Father is always after new mines."

"Where is he looking for them?"

"On the Isthmus and all through the republic of Colombia, I think."

"And especially on the Isthmus?"

"I believe so."

"And Pedro was active in looking up possible workings?"

"Yes; he used to show father maps and plans, at night, in the study, and they used to pore over them for hours at a time. But what does that amount to? Father took him to New York, I have no doubt, because he thought he would be useful in that way. The fellow knows every inch of the Isthmus and South America. Now, let me ask you a question. Do you think he stole my emerald necklace?"

"No, frankly, I do not," replied Ned.

"But you have a notion that he let the others into the house?"

"Well, he might have done so."

"He showed guilt when he ran away."

"Of course. The fact is that if he did let the thieves into the house he did not do so especially to give them a chance to steal the necklace. At least that is the way I look at it. And, again, if he did admit them, he permitted them to do a bungling job."

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"You mean that they didn't get what they wanted?"

"Exactly."

"The papers concerning the plot?"

"Probably."

"Well, how could they get them if they weren't in the house?"

"He should have located them before he turned his confederates loose."

"Then you really think Pedro was at the bottom of all that?"

"I have not said so," was the reply. "There is no knowing whether he was or not."

"I wish you wouldn't be so secretive," Frank said. "You have a straight out and out theory of that night's work, and you won't tell me what it is."

"I never form theories," was the reply.

"What would Pedro want of the papers?" Frank demanded. "Was he in the plot to blow up the dam, or was he just paid to get them?"

"I can tell you more about that in a few days. It is midnight, and I will relieve you. Go to bed."

"I shall sleep sounder after I hear from father," the boy said, passing into the cottage. "He may be having troubles of his own in New York," he added, pausing at the door for a last word.

Ned sat for a long time on the screened porch with the splendor of the tropical night about him. The jungle came nearly to the walls of the house on all sides, save in front, where a little clearing had been made, and the noises, the creature and vine talk of the thickets, came to his ears like low music.

He listened constantly for the footsteps of the absent boys, but for a long time there was no break in the lilt of the forest. Then—it must have been two o'clock—he heard the quick beat of running feet, and directly Gastong, as Jack had fancifully named his new acquaintance, came spurting into the cleared space.

He stopped running when he reached the middle of the cutaway spot and, seeing Ned on the porch, beckoned to him.

Ned was off the porch in an instant, standing by the exhausted boy, who was now on the ground, supporting his swaying figure with one hand clutching the long grass.

"What is it," asked Ned.

"Have you heard anything of the boys, the two who went away in the car?" asked the other. "Have they come back?"

"No," replied Ned, filled with a sickening sense of helplessness, "they have not returned. Come inside the screen and speak low, so as not to wake the others."

Gastong rose slowly to his feet and walked stumblingly to the porch. Once inside he dropped into a chair.

"I have run a long distance," he said, by way of apology for his weakened condition. "I'm all in."

"What is it about the boys?" Ned demanded, clutching the other by the arm.

"I stopped at the old house," began Gastong, but Ned cut him short.

"About the boys," he said, shaking him fiercely. "What about the boys?"

"They are either in the hands of your enemies or lost in the jungle."

The words were spoken shrinkingly, as if the news conveyed might be of his own making.

"Where did you leave them?"

"I stopped at the old house," began the other again, "and remained there only a few minutes. Then I went on toward the Culebra cut and came upon a friend who told me what had taken place."

"Well! Well! Well!"

"The boys stopped at the cut, this side of the high point, and were there accosted by Gostel. Oh, you don't know Gostel?"

"No, no," was the impatient reply. "Who the dickens is Gostel?"

"He is a spy, a Jap who has been hanging about the Isthmus ever since the beginning of the work."

Ned was thinking fast. This might mean something tangible. He had never heard of Gostel before.

"Well, what of Gostel?" he asked.

"He talked with the boys for a time and invited them to become his guests for the night. He referred them to Lieutenant Gordon. I got it from my friend who heard all their talk."

"And they went away with him?"

Ned's voice was harsh and high, and the boys in the cottage were heard moving about, as if awakened by his voice.

"No, they didn't go away with him. They became suspicious of him, and when he went for his car they ran away into the jungle. A mad thing to do. A crazy thing for boys to do, for strangers. There is death in the jungle."

"And why didn't you go in after them?" asked Ned.

"What could I do alone?" asked the other, with a little shiver of apprehension.

"If you know the country—"

Gastong interrupted with a gesture of impatience.

"Knowing the country couldn't help me, not with Gostel and his men trailing into the jungle after the boys."

There was a new fear creeping into Ned's heart, and he was beginning to realize that there are perils more to be dreaded than the perils of the jungles.

"How many went in?" asked Ned, in a moment.

"Oh, half a dozen—I don't know. Some one must go for help. Gostel will kill the boys. I should think that after the experiences of the afternoon—"

"I am ready to go this minute," Ned said.

"Oh, but you must have torches, and guns, and stand ready to fight against wild beasts as well as against men. There are jaguars in there, and boas—serpents ten yards in length. Natives have been killed by jaguars within the month."

"Jaguars rarely come as far north as this," Ned said, "and your serpents are not dangerous," but the other insisted that there were both jaguars and boas in the jungle.

"This man Gostel may have gone to the rescue of the boys," suggested Ned.

Gastong laughed weakly.

"You don't know him," he said. "I tell you he is a spy, a Japanese spy, watching every inch of the canal as it is excavated. He is in the pay of hostile interests, and will work you all a mischief. He knew before you arrived that you were coming."

"How do you know that?" demanded Ned.

Gastong's replies to the question were not satisfactory, and so Ned gave over questioning him. The sleeping boys were aroused and in ten minutes, just as a faint tint of day came into the east, they were away to the jungle—taking the way to Gatun at first, as the thicket they sought was far to the southeast of that city.

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CHAPTER XIV.

THE KILL IN THE JUNGLE.

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It was growing darker every minute in the jungle, for there were now fleecy clouds in the sky, and the moon was not always in sight. Following Jimmie's statement that they were lost, the boys stood stock still in a dense thicket and tried once more to get their bearings.

"We've got something figured out wrong," Peter said.

"I don't see how we have," Jimmie insisted. "See here! That is the moon up there? What?"

"Looks like it."

"Then it's got lost," Jimmie continued. "Ever stand behind the scenes in a theatre and hold a moon up on a stick?"

"Never did."

"Well, I did, on the Bowery, once, and I got so interested in what was goin' on in front that the moon set in the east. That's what's the matter with this moon. Some—"

"There ain't no supe holding up this moon on a stick."

"Then they've moved the Panama canal," insisted Jimmie. "If they hadn't, we would have come to the cut a long time ago. That moon is supposed to be in the south. It ought to be."

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"Perhaps a little west of south."

"Well, we crossed over the ditch down here, didn't we, and struck into the jungle from the west side of the Culebra cut?"

"Of course we did."

"Then if we keep the moon in the south, on our right, we'll come back to the cut?"

"Sure. Anyway, we ought to."

"Well, Old Top, we've been walkin' for the last two hours with the moon on our right, and we haven't got anywhere, have we? You don't see no lights ahead of us, do you?"

There were no signs of the big cut. The great lights which blazed over the workings were not to be seen. The noises of the digging, the dynamiting, the pounding of the steam shovels, the nervous tooting of the dirt trains, might have been a thousand miles away.

"You've got to show me," Peter said, after studying over the matter for a moment. "That moon isn't on no stick on a Bowery stage. It is there in the south, where it belongs, and if we continue

to keep it on our right we'll come to the canal in time. We are farther away than we thought for."

They struggled on through the jungle for another half hour, and then stopped while Jimmie looked reproachfully at the moon.

"I'd like to know what kind of a country this is, anyway," he grumbled. "I never saw the moon get off on a tear before."

"Except when you had it on the end of a stick," said Peter, with a noise which was intended for a laugh, but which sounded more like a sigh of disgust.

"Well, we've got to stay here until morning," Jimmie said, presently, "and I'm so hungry that I could eat a boa constrictor right now."

"Quit!" cried Peter. "Don't talk about snakes, or you'll bring them down on us."

"That was coarse, wasn't it?" observed Jimmie. "Well, I'll withdraw the remark."

"If we stay here until morning," Peter said, dubiously, "how do we know the sun won't rise in the west?"

"All right," Jimmie replied. "Guy me if you want to, but you'll find this is no joke before we get through with it."

"I know that now," Peter replied. "I never was so tired in my life, and I'd give a ten-dollar note for a drink of cold water."

The boys sat down on dry tree knuckles, buttressed roots rising three feet from the soil, and discussed the situation gravely. After a short time Peter got up with a start and began prancing about the little free space where they were.

"I've got it!" he cried. "We're both chumps."

"They usually act that way when they're dyin' of hunger an' thirst," Jimmie said, dolefully. "Keep quiet, an' you'll feel better in a short time."

"But I know which way to go now," Peter insisted.

"Oh, yes, I know. You're goin' to tell which is north by the moss on the trees. Or you're goin' to tell which way is northeast by the way the breeze lays the bushes. Or you're goin' to make a compass out of the dial of your watch. I've read all about it. But we're stuck, just the same, not knowin' the constellations."

"Stuck—nothing," cried Peter. "Look here. Which way does the Panama canal run?"

"North and south, across the Isthmus, of course."

"There's where you're wrong! From Gatun to Panama the line of the cut is more east and west than north and south. Now revise your opinion of the moon. At this time of night she would be in the southwest."

"That would make a little difference," admitted Jimmie.

"Well, there you are. Take a line running southeast and a couple of chumps going almost southeast by keeping a southwest object to the right, where will they land? That's mixed, but I guess you know what it means. Where would a couple of chumps find the southeast line?"

"About next week at two o'clock," cried Jimmie. "Come on. We'll start right now, an' get out of the jungle before daylight."

In a few moments after taking a fresh start the boys came to a place where a small body of water made a clearing in the forest. The little lake, or swamp, for it was little more than a well-filled marsh, was of course walled about by trees and climbing vines, but there was a lane to the southwest which permitted the light of the moon to fall upon the water.

The surface of the pool was well covered with floating plants, and now and then, as the boys looked through the undergrowth, a squirming thing ducked under and out of sight. There was something beautiful about the spot, and yet it was uncanny, too.

"I wish that was all right for a drink," Jimmie observed.

"It is all right for a drink—if you're tired of living," Peter said. "Say," he added, pointing, "what do you think of that for a creeper, over there? I'm sure I saw it climbing down off that tree."

Jimmie took one look and started away, drawing Peter with him.

"It's a python!" he exclaimed. "Come on."

"There are no pythons in this country," Peter replied, pulling back and looking out over the water again.

"It is a boa, then," Jimmie cried. "Come away. It is getting out of the tree!"

The boys did not move for a moment. They seemed to be fascinated by what they saw. It was a serpent at least ten yards in length—a serpent showing many bright colors, a thick, elongated head, a body at least ten inches in diameter, and a blunt tail. As it moved down the column of the tree it launched its head out level in the air as if anticipating a feast of Boy Scout. The shining head, the small, vicious eyes, drew nearer to the faces of the watchers, and it seemed as if the serpent was about to leap across the pool.

Directly, however, the reptile threw its head and the upper part of its body over a limb on a tree

nearer to the boys and drew its whole squirming body across.

"It is coming over here, all right," whispered Peter. "Can you hit it? A bullet landed in that flat head might help some."

"Of course I can hit it."

Jimmie would not have admitted fright, but his voice was a trifle shaky. It is no light thing for a boy reared on the pavements of New York to face a serpent in the midst of a tropical forest at night.

"You shoot, then," Peter said. "I'll hold my fire until we see what happens."

Jimmie drew his revolver and waited for a moment, as the head of the snake was now in the shadow of the tree. When it came out again, still creeping nearer to the boys, swaying, reaching out for another tree which would have brought it within striking distance, the boy took careful aim and fired.

There was a puff of smoke, the smell of burning powder, a great switching in the branches of the tree. Peter seized Jimmie by the arm and drew him back.

"If you didn't hit him he'll jump," the boy said.

When the smoke which had discolored the heavy air drifted away, they saw the serpent still hanging from the limb, pushing his head out this way and that and flashing a scarlet tongue at its enemies.

"You hit him, all right," Peter said. "Try again."

After the third shot the body of the serpent hung down from the tree with only a stir of life. It was evident that at least one of the bullets had found the brain.

"It will hang there until it decays," Peter said. "That tail will never let go. Come on away. It makes me sick."

"There's always two where there's one," Jimmie said, "and we must move cautiously, for there would be no release from the coils of a snake like that."

"I thought I heard something moving in there a moment ago," Peter said, pointing away from the pool. "I'll go in and see."

"Don't you stir," advised Jimmie. "There's some one in there. I heard voices. We have been followed all this long way, and the shooting must have located us."

This was a very natural conclusion, and the boys crept behind the bole of a tree and waited for what seemed to them a long time. Then footsteps were heard, soft, stealthy steps, like those of a man walking in padded stockings. The great leaves of a huge plant with red blossoms moved, and a pair of fierce eyes looked out.

"That's a panther," whispered Jimmie.

"A South American jaguar," Peter corrected. "They eat men when they get desperately hungry."

The great cat moved out from behind the plant and stood in the shaft of moonlight. It was a graceful beast, an alert, handsome creature of the woods, but did not look in that way to the boys just then.

In size it was nearly the equal of the full grown tiger. The head was large, the body thick yet supple, the limbs robust. In color it was of a rich yellow, with black rings, in which stood black dots, marking the sides.

The beast is known as the South American tiger, and is by far the most powerful and dangerous of tropic beasts of prey. It is swift enough to capture horses on the open pampas and strong enough to drag them away after the kill. In some of the countries south of the Isthmus the jaguar is a menace to the inhabitants, and settlements have been deserted because of them. It is rarely that one is found as far north as the Isthmus.

While the boys watched the cat slipped out one soft paw after the other and looked about, as if awakened from sleep. Then it moved toward the tree behind which the boys were partly concealed.

"Now for it," whispered Peter. "If we miss it is all off with one of us."

"He may not come here," Jimmie said, hopefully. "He was probably brought here by the smell of blood. Say! Don't you hear something back of us? This cat's mate may be there."

And the cat's mate was there. Not looking in their direction, but sitting up like a house cat, watching the swaying body of the serpent. Her nose was pushed out a trifle, as if scenting supper in the dangling horror.

"The mate is here, all right," Peter said, in a whisper. "We're between the two of them. What is the first one doing?"

"Coming on," whispered Jimmie, "and I've got only three shots in my gun."

"That's all you will have time to use if you miss the first one," Peter said.

"That's right," Jimmie returned.

"And we'll have to shoot together," Peter went on.

"Is your hand steady?" asked Jimmie.

"As a rock," was the reply. "Good-bye to little old New York if it wasn't. Funny notion that a jaguar should be trying to eat a Wolf and a Black Bear."

"And a baby Wolf, too," added Jimmie. "My beast is coming on, bound to investigate this tree. When he gets so close that he can spring I'll give the word, and we'll shoot together."

The cat approached slowly. At first it did not seem to catch the scent of prey in the neighborhood of the tree. It came on with cautious steps, crouching low, as if ready to leap.

Then the female caught sight and scent of the boys and uttered a low cry of warning which the male appeared to understand, for in a second its ears were laid down on its neck and the belly touched the ground.

"When you shoot keep the lead going," advised Jimmy. "Now!"

Again, in that splendid tropical scene, there was a puff of smoke, one, two, three, four. Again the odor of burned powder attacked the nostrils and clouded the heavy air. Again there was a great floundering in the thicket.

The boys stood waiting for the snarling impact, but none came.

CHAPTER XV.

SIGNAL FIRES IN THE JUNGLE.

"I guess we got 'em," Jimmie cried, as the smoke drifted away.

"I got mine."

Peter spoke proudly, just as if there had been no fear of the result a moment before.

"Mine's lying down to rest," Jimmie went on. "I'm goin' up to feel his pulse."

"If he gets a swipe at you, you'll wish you hadn't been so curious about his old pulse," Peter observed.

But Jimmie did not at once go toward the wounded beast. The great cat lifted its head, gave a cry that echoed and re-echoed through the forest, and sprang for the tree. The boy's revolver spoke again, and the long hours of practice with the weapon in the shooting galleries of New York told. The beast dropped to the ground with a bullet in the brain, sent in exactly between the eyes.

The female lifted her head at the cry and tried to regain her feet, but was not strong enough to do so. With a turn of her pretty head in the direction of her mate, she fell back dead.

"It's almost a shame," Peter said.

"You wouldn't be so sorry for the cats if they had got a claw into you," Jimmie observed. "Just one claw in the flesh and it would have been all off."

Peter turned away from the dead animals.

"Come on," he said, "it seems like a slaughter house here."

"Wait," Jimmie cried. "I want to swing the cats up so they won't be devoured by their friends of the jungle. I want the skins for rugs. Guess they will look pretty poor in our patrol room. What?"

"I'll come back with you in the daylight," Peter said, "if you'll come away now."

Leaving the glade where they had encountered such dangers, the boys moved toward the canal line, keeping the moon, now well toward the horizon, at their back.

"If we had done this before," Jimmie said, as they forced their way through clusters of clinging vines, "we would be at home in bed now."

"But we wouldn't have had the jaguar rugs coming to us," answered Peter. "Glad I didn't think of it before."

Presently they came to the top of a little hill in the jungle and looked out over the country ahead. There were no canal lights in the distance. Afar off they could see a faint streak of dawn.

"I don't believe we're going right, after all," Jimmie said.

"We must keep a little more to the left," Peter replied. "The line of the canal runs almost southeast here, and we are going east. We'll strike it quicker if we turn to the north."

"This ain't much like the Great White Way at daylight," commented Jimmie, as a great creeper settled about his neck, having been pulled from a tree by his companion.

"I don't see what we're doing in here in the night, anyway," Peter observed. "We didn't come down here to get big game, but to prevent enemies of the government getting gay and blowing up the Gatun dam. Whew! They might have blowed it up while we've been shooting snakes and cats. Guess there's one of the explosions now."

A rumbling came toward them from the east. It was such a rumbling as one hears when great masses of fireworks are set off at once. Such a rumbling as one hears in war, when the rifles are speaking along a line of infantry and cannons are roaring out above their patter. The ground shook, and birds, frightened, fled from tree boughs with strange cries.

"Something has gone up," Jimmie said. "I wish we could see over the tops of that next line of trees."

"Sounds like the crack of doom," Peter observed. "I wish we could get out of the tall timber and see what's going on."

"There's a white light," Jimmie cried, excitedly. "That must be the workings."

"That's a cloud, just touched with dawn," Peter replied. "There's no sight of the canal yet. If we could only get out to the cut we'd soon be home."

"Home?" repeated Jimmie, in disgust, "we're more'n fifty miles from camp, the way the roads run. If we can get a train at Culebra, we may be able to get home by dark. You must remember that we rode a long way with the lieutenant. Culebra is almost to the Pacific. The locks are there, or near there."

"We can get a train, I guess," Peter said, sleepily. "I wonder if any of the boys are sitting up for us?"

"You bet they're out hunting for the two of us," Jimmie said. "It takes one half of our party to keep the other half from getting killed," he added.

There were still no signs of the canal line. The jungle was as dense as ever, and seemed more desolate and uncanny than ever under the growing light of day. As the sun arose and looked down into the green pools vapors arose, vapors unpleasant to the nostrils and bewildering to the sight.

Presently the boys came to a little knoll from which they could look a long way into the jungle stretching around them. Below were slimy thickets, tangles of creepers and vines which seemed to be sentient, but no signs of the work of man. It was now eight o'clock in the morning, and the boys were worn out and hungry.

"If they're out lookin' for us," Jimmie said, "I'll give 'em somethin' to follow. Watch me."

"But they won't be anywhere around here," Peter said, as Jimmie began gathering dry twigs and branches from the ground.

"They'll begin where Lieutenant Gordon left us," insisted the boy. "Now you see if I don't wake some Boy Scout up. Here, you carry this bunch of wood over to that other knoll."

"All right," Peter said. "Perhaps another jaguar will see the signal and give us a call."

In a short time the boys had gathered two great piles of dry leaves and branches lying some fifty feet apart. Then a quantity of green boughs were gathered and placed on top of the dry fuel. When matches were touched to the piles a dense smoke ascended far above the tops of the trees. There were two straight columns of it lifting into the sky above the jungle.

"There!" cried Jimmie wiping the sweat from his face, for the morning was hot and the work had been arduous, "if there is a Boy Scout within ten thousand miles he'll know what those two columns of smoke mean."

"Of course," said Peter. "If he's ever been out camping."

In the Indian signs adopted by the Boy Scouts of America one column of smoke means:

"The camp is here."

Two mean:

"Help! I am lost."

Three mean:

"We have good news."

Four mean:

"Come to council."

When the dry wood burned away the boys piled on more, keeping green leaves on top all the time, to make the smudge. After the fires had burned for half an hour a signal came from the thicket—a long, shrill whistle to attract attention, and then a few bars of "The Star Spangled Banner."

"That's a Boy Scout, all right," Jimmie exclaimed, "but it ain't none of our bunch. They wouldn't wait to whistle. They'd jump right in an' tell us where to head in at. You bet they would."

In a moment a human hand, a slender, boyish hand, appeared above a great squatty plant at the foot of the knoll. The thumb and first finger were extended opened out, the three remaining fingers closed over the palm of the hand.

"Whoop!" yelled Jimmie. "The sign of the Silver Wolf."

"Come on up," cried Peter. "The appetite is fine."

Then a boyish figure arose from the shelter of the plant and moved up the hill to where the boys stood. He was apparently about fifteen years of age, was dressed as a lad of his age might

appear on Broadway, and presented a fresh, cheerful face, now wrinkled into smiles, to the boys waiting with extended hands.

"I saw you signal," he said.

"Where are you from?" asked Jimmie, shaking the extended hand warmly. "We're from the Black Bear and Wolf Patrols, New York, and we don't know any more about getting along in the woods than a Houston street mucker."

"I'm from the Black Bear Patrol of Chicago," the other replied, "and my name is Anthony Chester, Tony for short. What you doing in the Devil's Hole?"

"Is this the Devil's Hole?" asked Jimmie.

"That is what they call it."

"The Devil seems to be having a good time of it," Peter said. "He's had us on the hip all night."

"We were in camp, father and I, about half way to the cut," Tony said, "and heard your shots a spell ago. What did you kill?"

Briefly the boys told the story of the night, and then Peter asked:

"Why didn't you answer the shots?"

"We were stalking jaguars," was the reply, "and did not want to lose our game. The woods are full of them, for some reason, this spring."

"Did you get them?"

"No; I guess the ones you got were the ones we were after."

"Then I'm glad we got them, for we'll divide the skins with you."

"Then, a little while ago, I saw your smoke signal and read it to Dad, and he told me to come out and bring you to camp for breakfast."

"What?"

"Breakfast?"

"Is it far?"

"Is it cooked?"

The boys fairly danced about their new acquaintance as they asked questions and rubbed their stomachs significantly.

"All cooked and all ready, plenty of it," was the reply.

"Where is the camp?" asked Peter, then.

"Oh, just a short distance from the Culebra cut," was the reply. "Dad came out here some weeks ago with me and one servant, and we're living in a tent all fixed up with screens and things. The jaguars aroused us early this morning, so we got up to shoot them."

"Is your father workin' for the Canal people?" asked Jimmie.

"Oh, no," was the reply. "He takes a great interest in the Culebra cut, and spends a good deal of time out there, but he is not working for the government. He's just loafing, and I'm having the time of my life."

"Does he go out there nights?" asked Jimmie.

"No; Saneé, the servant, is away nights, and Dad stays with me."

"Never mind all that now," Peter put in. "Let us go and see what they've got to eat. I could devour one of the cats we killed."

Young Chester led the way toward the camp he had spoken of, the boys following, nearly exhausted from the exertions of the night. It had been arranged that they should return for the skins of the two jaguars they had slain.

As they straggled along through the jungle, Jimmie's thoughts were busy over a problem which had come to his mind during the talk with the lad who had rescued them. Why was Mr. Chester, of Chicago, encamped in the jungle, at the edge, almost, of the Culebra cut, apparently without other motive than curiosity?

Why did he spend most of his time during daylight watching the work on the cut, and why was his servant invariably away from the camp at night? Were the men watching the work there for some sinister purpose of their own? Or was it merely a general interest in the big job that brought them there?

The man who had accosted them the previous evening had been watching the job, too. Were these men spies, or were they in the service of the government and watching for spies? It seemed odd to the boy that every adventure into which he stumbled had to do with the main object of the trip to the Canal Zone. Or, at least all the others had, and this meeting in the jungle might follow in the train of the others.

He was wondering, too, about the explosion they had heard early in the morning. At the time of his leaving the cottage with Lieutenant Gordon nothing had been decided on concerning the store of explosives which had been discovered in the underground chamber at the ruined temple. He did not believe that Ned would leave the deadly material there, to be used at will by

the conspirators, so he was wondering now if the stuff had not been set off by his friends.

After a hard walk of a mile or more the three came out to a little clearing in the jungle and saw a tent with screened openings. Standing in front of the tent, his face turned toward the approaching boys, was a man Jimmie had last seen in the Shaw residence in New York City.

CHAPTER XVI.

A MIGHTY JAR IN THE JUNGLE.

It was half-past two in the morning when Ned Nestor and his companions left the cottage in the jungle. A few fleecy clouds were now drifting over the sky, but, on the whole, the night was fairly clear. It was some distance to Gatun, where Ned hoped to secure a railroad motor for the Culebra trip, so the boys moved along at a swift pace.

However, the party was not destined to reach Gatun as speedily as was anticipated. When the boys came to the spot from which Ned and Jimmie had struck off into the jungle, or into the edge of it, rather, in pursuit of the man who had placed the bomb, Jack called Ned's attention to two skulking figures moving up the swell of the hill which the two boys had climbed the night before.

"There are some of your friends—the bomb-makers," Jack said.

"Yes," Ned replied, "they have been in advance of us for some distance."

"Watching the cottage, I presume," Jack suggested.

"More likely watching to see if we remained at home or went abroad planning mischief for them," Ned replied.

"Then they're next to us," Jimmie broke in. "I'd like to follow 'em up to the old temple an' blow 'em up."

"I have an idea that something of the sort may happen before morning," Ned said. "I had the idea that the fellows would remain away from the bomb-room for a few days, believing that we were watching it, but it seems that they are back again. We mustn't permit them to take the stuff away."

"Goin' to blow it up to-night?" demanded Jimmie, eagerly. "Gee, but that will make a blow-up for your whiskers. Say! I'd like to sell tickets of admission for this performance. That would be poor, wouldn't it?"

"It may not be necessary to blow it up," Ned observed. "If Lieutenant Gordon sent a couple of secret service men back there, as arranged, the fellows have not got into their bomb-chamber. If the secret service men did not arrive, it is likely that the plotters are moving the explosives away. We'll go and see, anyway."

"I'll run on ahead and see what's doin'," Jimmie exclaimed, darting away.

Ned caught him by the collar and drew him back, whereat the boy appeared to be very angry.

"You little dunce," Ned said, "you'll get a bullet into your anatomy if you don't be more careful. Now, you boys go on down the road toward Gatun," he added, turning to the others, "and make all the noise you want to. I'll go up to the old temple and see what is going on there. One of you would better go with me—not close up with me, but within seeing distance."

"That's me," cried Jimmie. "I'll stay near enough to see what becomes of you, and go back and tell the boys if they're needed."

This arrangement was finally decided on, and Ned and Jimmie dropped into the jungle while the others proceeded on the way to Gatun, making plenty of noise as they walked. As they disappeared the two men who had been seen just before made their appearance at a point half way up the hill.

They stood crouching in the moonlight for a moment, pointing and chattering words which reached the ears of the watchers only faintly, and then turned toward the old temple. They walked with less caution now, and it was plain to the watchers that they believed that all the boys had gone on to Gatun.

When Ned and Jimmie came within sight of the old temple half a dozen shadowy forms were seen moving about on the uneven pavements which had at one time formed the floor of a court. When the two Ned was following approached they advanced to meet them.

A conversation lasting perhaps five minutes followed the meeting, and then, leaving one man on guard, the others passed through the doorway under the vines and disappeared from view. The man who had remained outside was evidently the leader of the party, for the others had listened when he talked and had obeyed his orders, as indicated to Ned by gestures.

This man stood at the doorway behind the vines for a moment after the others had gone below

and then seated himself on a crumbling wall not far away.

"Why don't you geezle him?" whispered Jimmie, who was not staying back very far, much to Ned's amusement.

"I was thinking of that," Ned replied. "I shall have to circle around so as to get in on him from behind."

"You wait a second," whispered the boy, "and I'll make him turn around so as to face the other way."

Before Ned could offer any objections or restrain the boy's hand, Jimmie launched a stone into the thicket on the other side. The watcher sprang to his feet instantly, moved away a few paces, and turned back.

"He's goin' to call the others," Jimmie whispered.

The fellow approached the doorway as Jimmie spoke, which was exactly what Ned did not want. If the man would remain outside, alone, it might be possible to capture him with little risk. If he called his companions, there would be no hope of taking him prisoner.

Ned motioned to Jimmie and the lad threw another stone into the thicket, and again the watcher moved in that direction. This time he advanced to the edge of the thicket and bent over to peer under the overhanging branches of a tree.

Before he could regain an upright position, or give a cry of warning because of the quick steps he heard behind him, Ned was grappling with him, his fingers closing about the muscular throat. It was a desperate, although a silent, struggle for a minute, and Ned might have been disappointed in the result if Jimmie had not bounced in on the two and terminated the battle by sitting down on the head of the man Ned had already thrown to the ground. As an additional precaution against any noise calculated to alarm the others, Jimmie held his gun close to the captive's nose.

"Nothin' stirrin' here," he panted. "You lie still."

"What does this mean?"

The words were English and the voice was certainly that of a man from one of the Eastern states of the North American republic.

Ned drew a noose around the prisoner's wrists and tied his rather delicate hands together firmly behind his back. Then he searched him for weapons. A revolver was found in a hip pocket, also a package of papers in a breast pocket. The fellow cursed and swore like a pirate when the papers were taken.

"This is highway robbery," he finally calmed down enough to say. "I am an official of the Zone, and you shall suffer for this."

"Gee," said Jimmie, with a chuckle, "you must have a contract to lift the canal an' the Gatun dam into the blue sky."

The prisoner snarled at the lad a moment and turned to Ned.

"Why are you doing this?" he asked.

"What are your men doing down there?" Ned asked, ignoring the question.

"They are removing explosives, explosives to be used in the work at Gatun."

"Why is it stored here?"

"For safety."

"Were your men storing this bomb," taking the clumsy exhibit from his pocket, "under my cottage for safety?" Ned demanded.

"I don't know anything about that," was the reply. "Return my papers."

Instead of returning them, Ned took the packet from his pocket and made a quick examination so far as the light would permit, of the half dozen letters it held.

The captive writhed about and cursed fluently until Jimmie touched his forehead with the muzzle of his gun and warned him against "starting anything he couldn't finish," as the boy expressed it.

"Now," Ned said to Jimmie, restoring the letters to his pocket, "you march this pirate off toward the cottage while I scare the others out of the bomb-room and blow it up."

"Blow it up before they get out," urged the boy.

"I am no executioner," Ned replied. "They doubtless deserve to be put to death, but I'm not the one to do it."

"Wait," said the captive, as Jimmie motioned him away. "If you will give me a chance to tell my side of the story those letters reveal, I may be able to establish my innocence. I can make it worth your while to listen to me," he added, significantly.

"Cripes, I smell money," laughed Jimmie.

"Go on with the boy," Ned replied. "If you want to talk with me you may do so later."

"What are you going to do with me?"

"Turn you over to the Zone government."

The captive would have argued until his friends came out and sized up the situation, and Ned knew it, so he motioned Jimmie to march the fellow away and set about the work he had in hand. He took out the bomb he had brought with him and estimated the length of time the fuse would burn. It was, as has been said, a very long fuse, and the boy was satisfied that he could escape from the danger zone after firing it.

Then, seeing that Jimmie was out of view with his prisoner, he brought out his gun and fired two shots into the air. The result showed that he had planned with judgment, for the men working below came bounding out of the doorway behind the vines and vanished in the jungle, going in a direction opposite to that taken by Jimmie. 191

The rapidity with which the workers in the bomb-room disappeared astonished Ned until he reflected that he might unconsciously have given a signal agreed upon between the men and the guard. At any rate, he finally concluded, the men were not there to fight in defense of the place if spied upon, but to seek cover at once, as is the habit of those caught in the commission of crime.

He had expected to drive them away by firing from the jungle, but had not anticipated a victory as easily won as this. When the workers had disappeared Ned made his way to the underground room. There he found torches burning, and a fire in the forge. The place was littered with gas-pipe cut into small lengths, and the covers had been removed from the tins of explosives.

It was clear that the bomb-makers had been at work there, and the boy wondered at their nerve. He could account for their returning to their employment there so soon after the place had been visited by hostile interests only on the ground that they believed the secret service men and the boys were being held at bay by others of the conspirators. 192

Wondering whether the boys who had gone on toward Gatun were safe, he lighted the fuse of the bomb and hastened up the stairs and out into the jungle. A few yards from the broken wall of the temple he met Jimmie, red of face and laboring under great excitement. He turned the boy back with a significant gesture toward the temple, and the two worked their way through the thickets for some moments without finding time or breath for explanations.

When at last they stopped for breath they found themselves about at the point where they had parted from their chums. As they came into the cleared space a flash lighted up the sky, flames went flickering, seemingly, from horizon to horizon, and lifted to the zenith. Then came the awful thunder of the explosion. The ground shook so that Jimmie went tumbling on his face. After the first mighty explosion others came in quick succession.

"That's the little ones," Jimmie cried, rolling over in the knee-deep grass to clutch at Ned's knee. "Talk about your fourth of July."

As he spoke a slab of stone weighing at least twenty pounds came through the air with a vicious whizz and struck a tree close to where the boy lay. 193

"If we don't get out of here we'll get our blocks knocked off," Jimmie said.

"The shower is over," Ned replied. "What were you running back for? If you had not met me, if I had gone out another way, you might have been right there when the explosion took place."

"Then I'd 'a' been sailin' around the moon by now," the boy grinned.

"Where is the captive?" demanded Ned.

"He went up in the air," replied Jimmie. "I had me eagle eyes on him one second, and the next second he was gone. He didn't shout, or shoot, or run, or do a consarned thing. He just leaked out. Where do you think he went?"

"I think," Ned replied, "that you were looking back to see the explosion and he dodged into a thicket."

"Well," admitted Jimmie, "I did look back."

Ned, rather disgusted at the carelessness of the boy, walked on in silence until the two came to the smooth slopes which led up to Gatun. There they found the boys, waiting for them, eager for the story of the explosion, and wondering at their long delay.

CHAPTER XVII.

THE WATCHER IN THE THICKET.

Between Tabernilla and Gamboa, a distance of about fifteen miles, the restless Chagres river, in its old days of freedom, crossed the canal line no less than fifteen times. At Gamboa the river finds a break in the rough hills and winds off to the northeast, past Las Cruces and off into more hills and jungles. 194

Where the river turns the canal enters the nine-mile cut through the Cordilleras, which form the backbone of the continent. Here at the Culebra cut, the greatest amount of excavation for the waterway is being done. This cut ends at Pedro Miguel locks, which will ease the ships down into the Pacific ocean.

Where the river turns to the northeast, at Gamboa, a wild and hilly country forms both banks. The hillsides as well as the plateaux are overgrown with dense vegetation. As in all tropical lands, the fight for survival is fierce and merciless. Trees are destroyed by great creepers, great creepers are destroyed by smaller growths, and every form of life, vegetable as well as animal, has its enemy. Every living thing springs up from the dead body of another.

195

Sheltered and half concealed from view in this wild country between Gamboa and Las Cruces, on the day the Boy Scouts set out in their search for Jimmie and Peter, there stood a house of stone which seemed as old as the volcanic formation upon which it stood. It was said that the structure had been there, even then looking old and dismantled, when the French began their operations on the Isthmus.

This house faced the valley of the Chagres river, having its back against a hill, which was one of the steps leading up to the top of the Cordilleras. There was a great front entrance way, and many windows, but the latter seemed closed. Few signs of life were seen about the place at five o'clock that afternoon.

From a front room in the second story the sounds of voices came, and now and then a door opened and closed and a footstep was heard on the stairway. However, those who walked about the place seemed either going or coming, for the house gained no added population because of the men who climbed the slope at the front and, ignoring the main entrance, passed on to the second floor by a secret staircase in the wall, entrance to which seemed easy for them to find.

At the hour named three acquaintances of the reader occupied the front room on the second floor of the stone house. They were Col. Van Ellis, the military man Frank Shaw had talked with in the old house near the Culebra cut, Harvey Chester, the father of the boy Jimmie and Peter had encountered in the jungle, and Gostel, the man who had approached the two boys the night before on the lip of the great excavation.

196

In a rear apartment, a sort of lumber-room, devoted now to wornout and broken furniture and odds and ends of house furnishing goods, was still another acquaintance—Ned Nestor. The patrol leader had met the two lost boys at Culebra, in the company of Harvey Chester and his son, Tony, and had spent enough time with the party to learn that Pedro, the ex-servant of the Shaw home, had been seen at the Chester camp, and that he had fled at the approach of Jimmie and his chum.

The story of Gostel's watching the cut at night, probably assisted by Pedro, and Harvey Chester standing guard, or seeming to do so, by day, had interested Ned greatly. The presence on the Isthmus of Pedro gave an extra kink to the problem. The attempt to capture the two boys, as previously told by Gastong, on the previous night, and the unmistakable anxiety of Chester to remain in their company, had led Ned to believe that at last he was getting to some of the people "high up" in the conspiracy against the canal. Surely a man of the education and evident wealth of Harvey Chester was not loitering along the Culebra cut just for the excitement there was in it. It was plain that he was there for a purpose, and the arrival of a man Jimmie declared to be Gostel had convinced Ned that the heads of the plot were not far away.

197

Gostel had greeted the boys heartily, expressing relief at the knowledge that they had escaped in safety from the jungle, and Chester had urged them all to accept of his continued hospitality. Nothing had been said of Gostel's pursuit of the two boys, and Ned had reached the conclusion that Gostel did not know that his movements had been observed.

Anxious to see what Gostel really was up to, Ned had instructed the boys to remain at a hotel at Culebra or visit the Chester camp, just as they saw fit, and had followed Gostel back to Gamboa and out to the stone house, where he had managed to hide himself in the room above described without his presence on the premises being suspected. One thing, however, Ned did not know, and that was that Jimmie McGraw, full of life and curious to know what was going on, had trained on after him and was now watching the house from a thicket on the hillside.

198

Ned had heard a good deal of talk since hiding himself in the rear room, much of which was of no account. Men who had delivered notes and messages had come and gone. Col. Van Ellis seemed to be doing a general business there. Some of the men who came appeared to be canal workmen, and these left what seemed to be reports of some kind.

From a break in the wall Ned could hear all that was said and see a great deal of what went on in the front room. At five o'clock a tall, dark, slender man whose black hair was turning gray in places entered the front room by way of the secret stairway in the side wall. He handed some papers to Col. Van Ellis and seated himself without being asked to do so.

"What, as a whole, are the indications?" Van Ellis asked.

"Excellent," was the short reply.

"And the latest prospect?" asked Chester.

"In the valley, near Bohio."

"What have you found there?"

"Clay-slate, hornblende, emeralds."

199

"In large quantities?" asked Chester, anxiously.

"There is a fortune underground there," was the reply. "Green argillaceous rock means something."

There was silence for some moments, during which Van Ellis pored over some drawings on his desk, Chester walked the floor excitedly, Gestel regarded the others with a sinister smile on his face, and Itto, the recent arrival, sat watching all the others as a cat watches a mouse.

"And this territory will be under the Lake of Gatun?" Chester asked, presently.

"Yes, very deep under the Lake of Gatun," was Itto's reply.

Again Van Ellis bent over the drawings, tracing on one with the point of a pencil.

"There are millions here," he said. "We have only to stretch forth our hands and take them."

"The wealth of a world," Itto observed.

The men talked together in Spanish for a long time, and Ned tried hard to make something of the discussion, but failed. He was convinced, however, that Chester was being urged and argued with by the others and was not consenting to what they were proposing to him.

200

In half an hour a man who looked fully as Oriental in size, manner and dress as Itto stepped inside the door and beckoned to that gentleman. Asking permission to retire for a few moments, Itto passed out of the door with the newcomer. Instead of going on down the secret staircase, however, the two opened a door at the end of the little hall upon which the front room gave, and appeared in the apartment where Ned was hiding.

The boy, however, was not in view from the place where they stood, and they had no reason to suspect his presence there, so he remained quiet and listened with all his ears to the low-voiced conversation carried on between the two.

"And these are the latest?" Itto asked, referring to papers in his hand.

"Yes, they are the last."

"And the showing—"

The newcomer shrugged his shoulders.

"You see for yourself," he said.

"Well," Itto said, directly, "it does not matter, does it?"

"Not in the least."

"If the information does not leak out," Itto went on, "there will be no change in our plans. We cannot afford to wait."

201

"For our country's sake there must be no delay."

Ned was slowly piecing this talk with the one which he had heard from the front room, and the significance of it all was sending little shivers down his back. He thought he understood at last.

As the two men left the room Ned heard a paper rustle on the floor, and at once made search for it. It was a drawing, similar to the one discovered in the bomb-room at the old temple, and was a complete sketch of the Gatun dam, the spillway, the locks—everything was shown, with character of fills and suggestions regarding the foundations. Here and there on the drawing were little red spots.

The significance of the red marks brought a date to Ned's mind. The drawings found in the bomb-room had borne a date, Saturday, April 15. If what he surmised was correct, he had only a little more than twenty-four hours in which to work. In the period of time thus given him he might, without doubt, succeed in averting the destruction of the big dam. But that was not the point.

His business there was not only to protect the Gatun dam but also to get to the core of the conspiracy and bring the plotters to punishment. The men who were plotting on the Isthmus were also plotting in New York. An inkling of the true state of affairs came to him, and he saw that in order to accomplish what he had set out to do his reach must be long enough to stretch across the Atlantic and there grapple with the subordinates in the treacherous plot.

202

Itto returned to the front room when the newcomer left and again the talk and the arguments went on, sometimes in Spanish, sometimes in English. Mr. Chester seemed to be asking for more time. Presently the date Ned had found on the two drawings was mentioned.

"The time set was Saturday—to-morrow," Itto said, grimly.

"That was decided upon a long time ago," Van Ellis said.

"Before the New York complications arose," Chester argued. "We did not know at that time what complications might result from the defection of one of our number. It is injudicious to go on now."

"The date referred to was also set for action in New York," Itto said.

"Yes, but the thing is inadvisable now, for Shaw has been warned."

203

It was plain to Ned that he would have to get away from the old stone house and decide upon some effective means of meeting this emergency. He had work to do in New York as well as in Gatun. The drawing found in the bomb-chamber had told him that. Now this new information

emphasized the demand for instant action.

There was no doubt in his mind that it was the purpose of the plotters to blow up the great dam on the next day, probably after nightfall. As has been said, he could thwart the plans of the traitors by communicating with the secret service men under Lieutenant Gordon, but that course would not be apt to bring about all the desired results. He wanted to arrest every man connected with the plot. Not only that; he wanted proof to convict every one of them.

There seemed to the boy only one way in which he could attain the results sought for. He must catch the plotters "with the goods on," as the police say. He must catch them with explosives in their hands under the shadow of the dam! Ned knew that Harvey, Van Ellis, Gostel, and Itto were deep in the treacherous game, but he did not know how many others were taking part in it. He suspected that men high up in finance were back of the plot, and wanted to get the whole group.

204

He thought he knew why Harvey, Van Ellis and some of the others were in the plot. He was quite certain that he did. But he was not so certain of the motives of Itto, the Japanese. They might never be revealed unless the game was checked at the right moment.

There was an air of insincerity about the Japanese which Ned did not like. It seemed to the boy that he was leading the others on—or trying to lead them on—in a sinister way. The impression was in the lad's mind from the moment of his meeting Gostel that the two men, Itto and Gostel, were in the plot for some purpose of their own, a purpose which was not the accumulation of money, and which did not match the motives of the others.

About six o'clock Chester arose to his feet.

"I must go back to camp," he said.

"But there is a meeting to-night," Van Ellis urged.

"An important one," Gostel put in.

"And a midnight visit to the dam," Itto said.

"I have a previous engagement at the camp," Harvey insisted. "We have guests from New York, my son and myself."

205

"The secret service lads," exclaimed Gostel, scornfully. "Leave them to me to-night, and you can then keep your engagement with us."

"I have my doubts about their being connected with the secret service," Chester replied.

"We are positive," Gostel said. "They were followed from New York. We know the plotting that has been going on between Gordon and Nestor."

Much more concerning the boys was said, but Ned was too anxious to get away to pay full attention to it. Another burden was now on his mind. He must see that the boys were warned and came to no harm.

He had left them with the understanding that they might remain at the Culebra hotel or return with Tony Chester to the cottage where they had been taken when brought out of the jungle. If they had returned to the camp, they might already be in great danger.

Chester insisted on taking his departure, and the others accompanied him to the foot of the stairs in the wall, arguing with him every foot of the way. Ned stood at the door of the rear room when they returned, and while they were getting settled in the front apartment he slipped out and moved cautiously down the steps.

206

When he gained the grounds outside he dodged into a thicket not ten feet away from the exit and waited to make sure that no one was moving about on the outside. He was anxious to get away from the place without his presence there being known. A struggle, even if he succeeded in getting away, would put the plotters on their guard.

In a few moments he realized that the grounds were not so devoid of human life as he had believed. He heard voices on the side toward the hill, and a rustling in the thicket told him that some one was stealthily moving there.

Knowing that it would be dark in a short time, Ned remained crouched low in the bushes, hoping to escape detection in that way, but footsteps came closer and closer to his hiding place, and he sprang up just in time to see a lithe figure hurtling toward him, the figure of a tall, slender man with an Oriental cast of countenance.

Glad that there was only one, Ned braced himself for the attack, which, however, did not come. When within a yard of its object, the lithe figure turned, staggered forward, uttered a low cry of anger and surprise, and lay swathed in a cluster of vines which had tripped and now held him to the ground.

207

Realizing that the man who had attacked him, or attempted to, must not escape or be permitted to utter a cry of warning, Ned sprang forward and caught him by the throat. The fallen man squirmed about in the thicket for a moment and then feebly motioned for Ned to remove the pressure from his neck.

Then the patrol leader saw that the fellow had been lassoed, caught about the neck by a running noose in a slender rope. This accounted for his antics when first observed by the boy. Puzzled beyond measure, Ned loosened the noose so the captive would not die from lack of air.

The man sat up in the tangle of bushes, pressing his hands to his neck and rocking to and fro with pain. It was plain that the rope which had caught him had been drawn by a merciless hand. But whose hand was it? Ned was greatly interested in that question.

"I have released the rope so as to give you a little longer lease of life," Ned said to the prisoner, "but if you try to call out for help, or to escape, you'll be killed. Do you understand?"

208

Ned shifted the noose to the man's wrists, which were fastened behind his back, and relieved him of a revolver and a wicked-looking knife. Then he asked:

"Were you watching me?"

"Yes," was the short reply, in good English.

"You knew that I was in the house?"

"Yes. I saw you go in."

"Do the others know that I was in there?" asked Ned, then, anxiously.

If the others knew, then all his plans must be revised.

"No," came the reply. "I had had no opportunity of telling them."

"You were placed on guard here by the man called Gostel?"

"Yes."

"Well, who was it that pulled you down? There is something strange about that."

"I saw no one," replied the other, feeling of his throat again.

"Were others watching here with you?"

The prisoner shook his head.

"Then who did it?" demanded Ned. "That rope never dropped down from the clouds and brought you up so cleverly. Why, man, you would have had a knife into me in a second only for the rope."

"I hoped to," was the calm reply.

209

Then Ned heard a giggle in the thicket, and in a moment the vines parted and Jimmie looked out, a shrewd smile on his freckled face.

"Why didn't you follow the line to the end?" he asked, with a chuckle. "Then you would have come to the life saver."

"I was so rattled for a moment that I did not think of that," was the reply. "How did you come to be here?"

"I followed you," replied the boy.

"And you have been lying out there in the thicket all the time I have been in the house?"

"Why, yes, of course."

"Well, you did a good job," Ned said, taking the boy by the hand. "The cowboy stunt you have been practicing so long came into good use at last."

It was now getting quite dark, and lights showed in the house. From where the boys stood they could not see the lighted front windows, but only the reflections on the slope in front of the structure.

"I knew it would prove handy in time," grinned Jimmie. "I caught this gazabo on the fly, eh?"

"I can't understand how you managed it, in this thicket," Ned said.

210

"There's a clear space there where he leaped at you," Jimmie said. "I saw him rising to spring and dropped it over his head, like a bag over a blind pig. What you goin' to do with him, now you've got him?"

Ned turned to the prisoner with a smile on his face.

"What would you suggest?" he asked.

"Gee! You've got your nerve," Jimmie exclaimed. "Leave it to him an' you'll fill his pocket with yellow ones an' turn him loose to carve you up."

"If you release me," the captive replied, evidently taking the question in good faith, "I'll leave the country."

"Is that on the square?" demanded Jimmie, with a grin at Ned.

"There is a condition, however," the man added, "and that is that you make it appear that I was killed in defending the house."

"What's the answer?" asked Jimmie, while Ned stood by wondering if he had not struck a lead of good luck at last.

"I'm sick of the game," the prisoner replied. "I'm not in it for money, anyway, and the other motive is no longer of avail to me."

"If you'll tell me everything you know concerning this plot against the Gatun dam," Ned said, "I'll release you after the case is ended."

"Not a word," replied the other, closing his lips tightly, as if to shut back words seeking utterance.

"Then we'll have to find a little coop to put you in," Jimmie said. "I wish we had you back at Culebra."

While the temporary disposition of the prisoner was being discussed, and while Ned was questioning him as to the immediate movements of the plotters and receiving no satisfactory replies, the lights in the house were extinguished and the men who had occupied the front room were heard descending the stairs. In a moment some one called out:

"Gaga."

"Is that your name?" demanded Ned of the prisoner.

"Yes."

"Then answer him."

Gaga did not respond at once, and the keen point of a knife came in contact with his throat.

"Answer him."

The call came again, farther away now.

"What shall I say?" asked the captive.

"Answer him as you would have answered if nothing had happened to you here," was the reply.

The prisoner uttered a long, low cry, and the boys waited with suspended breath. Even at the peril of his life the fellow might warn the others. Ned knew how loyal the people of his nation are.

But the reply was not a warning, or a call for help. The man who had called out the prisoner's name answered now with an "All right. Remain about here." Then the men moved away in a body, taking the road to Gamboa.

"Are they coming back to-night?" asked Ned.

"I can tell you nothing," was the reply.

When the men who had left the house had disappeared from sight Ned bade the captive rise that he might be searched closely for weapons.

"Say," Jimmie cried. "There's your tall, slender man with black hair turning gray in places. Ever in New York, Mister?" he added.

The prisoner made no reply.

"You are enough like Itto to be his brother," Ned said. "Perhaps you won't mind telling me which one of you stole Frank Shaw's necklace?"

The prisoner turned his back indignantly. He was indeed a fair copy of the man called Itto, and his shoulders, narrow and high, might have made the damp stains Ned had found on the wall of the closet in the Shaw house in New York.

The stone house was now, seemingly, without an occupant and the thickets about were silent save for the noises of the night. A faint clamor came from the canal, where workmen were hewing away at the ribs of the Cordilleras, now the slight jar of an explosion, now the grinding of a steam shovel, now the nervous shrieking of the trains pushing back and forth.

The electric lights over the cut drew lines of silver light on the tall trees and the foliage of the hills farther away, but here there was only a faint suggestion of illumination.

"Now you've got him," Jimmie said, presently, "what you goin' to do with him? We can't get him to Culebra or Gatun without bumpin' into some fresh guy who would want to take him away from us."

"I'm afraid you're right about that," Ned said. "We can't afford to have him get away and inform his companions that something of their plot is known."

"What would they do?"

"Make new plans, and we should have to begin all over again. As the case rests now we stand a good chance of catching every one of the conspirators."

"And the chap that stole the emerald necklace?"

"Even the necklace may drift to the surface in the eruption which is sure to take place in the near future," smiled Ned. "Now about Gaga," he continued. "Suppose you look around and see if you can't find a room in the old house which would not be used to-night, even if the plotters

should come."

Jimmie hustled away and soon returned with the information that there was a room in the rear of the house, on the first floor, which would answer for a prison very well.

"But there ain't no door to it," he added, "an' the glass is all out of the window. Looks like it had been deserted for a hundred years."

"Perhaps we can rig up a door," suggested Ned.

"What's the use?" asked Jimmie. "I'm goin' to stay right here with the captive until the secret service men come an' take him away."

"But they will not come until the case is ended," urged Ned. "The knowledge that Gaga is a prisoner—arrested by a spy who overheard what was said in the house—"

"I wouldn't call myself a spy," Jimmie said, indignantly.

"There is no dishonor in serving as a spy in a good cause," Ned replied. "As I was saying, the mere knowledge of his arrest would disarrange our plans as much as his escape would. We would better make him secure here and leave him to his own thoughts, it seems to me."

"I would like to have him remain," said Gaga, much to the amazement of the boys.

"He can't resist my winnin' ways," cried Jimmie. "All right. I'll stay if you will send out about a ton of grub."

"Perhaps the boys will object to bringing it."

"Jack, or Frank, or any one of them," Jimmie exclaimed. "No trouble about that. Perhaps it will take two to bring enough."

The prisoner's bonds were loosened so that he would not feel them drawing into the flesh, but still he was left securely tied up. The room was not unpleasant, with the starlight shining in through the dismantled doorway and the broken window, and Jimmie planned to have a good rest there during his watch.

The boy had been on his feet all the previous night, wandering about the jungle, and had taken only a short rest at the Chester camp. The prisoner was so secured that it did not seem possible for him to get away, even if left there alone, so the lad rolled a dilapidated old easy chair up to the window and lay back at his ease.

For a long time neither spoke, and then the prisoner asked:

"When will I be taken to prison?"

"Search me!" Jimmie replied.

"I take it," the captive continued, "that the whole plot is discovered?"

"Bet your life!" Jimmie answered, drowsily.

"Then the United States government will have to put up a couple of extra prisons," was the comment of the prisoner.

"What you doin' it for?" demanded the boy.

The prisoner did not see fit to reply to this leading question, and Jimmie put another, equally pertinent:

"Who let you into the Shaw house that night?"

"Why do you think I was in the Shaw house?" asked the other. "Where is the Shaw house?"

"You know where it is, all right," Jimmie said. "Who was it that let you in? That is what I want to know. An' who opened the door for you to go out?"

There was no reply, and Jimmie piled on another question:

"Why did Pedro run away from Shaw's and why did he run away from Chester's camp when he saw me coming from the jungle?"

The prisoner gave a quick start, and something like a groan came from his lips.

"Is Pedrarias, the man you call Pedro, here on the Isthmus?" he asked.

"Sure he is. Didn't he report to you after he got here?"

"Living at the Chester camp, you say?"

"He was there this morning, but ran away when he recognized me. I was at the Shaw house in New York on the night of the robbery."

The prisoner checked a Spanish oath and struggled to rise to his feet, but fell back into his chair because of his bonds.

"There is bad blood between this man and myself," he said, then. "If he saw me with Chester to-day he will present himself here to-night. If he comes and finds me a prisoner, bound and at his mercy—if he comes here to-night, and finds us in this room, and you are unable to deal with him, will you cut my bonds?"

"And permit you to run away together and give me the laugh?" said Jimmie. "You're a modest kind of a fellow after all, and with nerve to spare."

"If you do this," Gaga replied, "I promise to return to you and submit to be bound again, if I

come out of the conflict alive."

"Do you think Pedro would murder an unarmed man, and a bound one, at that?"

"Yes, the hatred he has for me is so great that he would take any advantage of me."

Jimmie was getting the notion that there was something tragic in the air, and was even considering the proposition seriously when there was a movement at the open doorway.

"If he comes here," Gaga went on, "you must either kill him yourself or let me. He will spare neither of us."

The boy was listening for a repetition of the sound at the doorway, when a form lifted from the crumbling threshold and stood peering in. Gaga gave a cry of terror and the intruder drew back for an instant.

The boy knew that the man whose figure he had seen outlined against the star-sprinkled sky was the man he had seen standing by the couch of the owner of the *Daily Planet* on the night of the robbery, the man he had seen later in the Chester camp in the jungle.

"For the love of Heaven!" the prisoner whispered.

The entreaty struck home to the heart of the boy. He had always prided himself on his love of fair play. He knew that he could not successfully defend the doorless, windowless room until the arrival of his friends, or the return of the plotters. Pedro could hide in the thicket and rain bullets upon himself and the prisoner until both were killed.

He could not make his own escape and leave the prisoner bound and at the mercy of his enemy, nor could he shoot the intruder in cold blood when he appeared in the doorway again. He was only a boy, and his inherent love of a square deal conquered.

While the movements at the door continued, he slipped over to Gaga, ran his knife through the cords which bound him, pointed to the weapons which had been taken from him, and crouched down in a corner of the room, his heart beating like a trip-hammer.

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CHAPTER XIX.

A GUARDIAN NEEDING GUARDING.

220

Little realizing the danger in which Jimmie had been left, Ned made what speed he could to Gamboa and there looked about for some means of reaching Culebra without delay. It seemed important that he should reach the other members of his party as soon as possible and send one of the boys back to keep watch with Jimmie.

Besides, it was his intention to communicate with Lieutenant Gordon immediately. He did not expect the lieutenant to call out a squad of secret service men and place the big dam under guard. That, he reasoned, would defeat his plans for rounding up the plotters. However, it was his duty to report progress to the officer and consult with him concerning future movements.

At Gamboa he found a telephone and called the Tivoli at Ancon, but, to his disgust, Lieutenant Gordon could not be found. He tried the offices of several engineers and canal officials with no better result. At last, exhibiting a secret service badge which had been given him by the lieutenant, he mounted an engine about to leave for Culebra and was soon in that beautiful city.

The boys were at the hotel where he had left them, having declined the repeated offers of hospitality by Mr. Chester, and Tony was with them. A session was at once held in a private room, and Jack Bosworth and Harry Stevens jumped at the chance to load themselves with provisions and travel back to the stone house east of Gamboa. They were given the needed directions and sent away with a note to an officer of the railroad, who, it may be as well to state here, landed them at Gamboa in quick time and without asking any questions.

After the boys had taken their departure Frank Shaw called Ned aside.

"There's something doing here to-night," he said. "Mr. Chester came out of the parlor as red as a lobster, about six o'clock, and I guess he had a fight with a couple of Japs, Gostel and another chap I've never seen before. They parted courteously, but I could see that Tony's father was angry clear through. After he had gone back to his camp, or started for it, the Japs got a little crowd of gabbers about them and set off down the road toward Colon. They seemed mighty pleased over something, and I guess they're going to start something to-night."

"And the other man, this Col. Van Ellis. Did he come here with Chester?"

"Oh, yes; he was here, but I took good care that he did not see me. I think he went away with Chester. They were both very angry."

"Angry at the Japanese?"

"Yes; anyway, they disagreed over something. But while the two white men were angry, the Japs seemed pleased. I'll tell you what I think, Ned. The Japs are up to something the others do not

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like."

Ned was beginning to see a great light. Once before, since seeing Gostel, he had studied out the problem of the sincerity of the man, and had reached the conclusion that he was using Chester—perhaps others—for some sinister purpose of his own. Now he thought he saw the plot in its true light. However, he did not communicate his thoughts to the others. Had Gordon been at hand he would have confided the story to him. But Gordon was not at the Tivoli at Ancon and no one seemed to know where he was, so he was obliged to go ahead and exercise his own best judgment.

"What's doing to-night?" Glen Howard asked, when Ned and Frank returned to the room where the other boys were seated. 223

"We're going to Gatun," was the reply. "We're going on a special engine, and we're to leave the tracks in the outskirts and get down to the dam."

"Why, this is not the night," Frank said, surprised.

"The date on the drawings was that of to-morrow, Saturday," said Glen. "This is Friday. Of course you know what you are doing, but I wouldn't take any chances on flushing the game."

"What is it all about?" demanded Tony Chester. "There seems to be something in the air to-night. Father went away in a grouch and told me to remain with you boys, and Gastong is wandering about the city in a half-distracted manner. If you go to Gatun may I go with you?"

Ned pondered a moment before replying. There was in his mind the thought that this boy might work a miracle for his father. He saw one chance for saving Chester from the results of his connection with the plotters, and resolved to take it, risky to his plans though it was.

"No," he said, in a moment, "you are to go to your camp with a note for your father. After you deliver the note, you are to come back here and remain until you hear from me. If your father comes with you, so much the better." 224

"Will he tell me what is in the note—why he comes back to the city?"

"I don't think so," was the reply. "If he does come, tell him to remain close to a 'phone, here, for I may want to talk with him."

"I can't understand what all this mystery is about," Tony exclaimed.

"When did you see Gastong last?" asked Ned.

"Oh, about half an hour ago. He was in the hotel then, flying around like a hen minus her head. He asked for you, and said he'd be in the buffet when you came."

Ned lost no time in getting to the buffet, where he found Gastong, sitting in conversation with a trampish-looking fellow who seemed to be somewhat under the influence of liquor. He beckoned to Ned when he entered the room and made room for him on the leather rest at his side.

"This is Tommy, the cook," he said, when Ned was seated. "Your cook."

"You ought to join the force," laughed Ned. "I never would have known you."

"Lieutenant Gordon told me to keep watch of you boys," laughed Tommy, "but I reckon you're doing pretty well for yourselves." 225

"You are a secret service man?" asked Ned, satisfied now that Gordon had indeed thought it necessary to keep them all under surveillance.

"Of course," replied Tommy. "I'm not much of a cook. I guess you found that out up at the camp."

"It was thoughtful of the lieutenant," Ned said, "but, as you say, we seem to be getting on very well. Do you happen to know where Gordon is at the present moment?"

"He was to meet me here," was the reply, "but has not shown up."

"It is dollars to apples," said Gastong, "that the Japs have cornered him. He told me, on the night you went after the bomb-man, that some one was sleuthing him."

"I didn't know that you knew him," Ned said, wondering if every person he had come upon since arriving on the Isthmus was in the secret service.

"Well," said Gastong, "Lieutenant Gordon was on the squad here, you know, before he went to Mexico, and I used to meet him now and then."

"And he told you, on the first night of our arrival at camp, that we might need looking after?" 226

"Well, he told me that it would do no harm to let him know if I saw a mob of New York boys wandering about the works," laughed Gastong.

"So that is how you happened to be patrolling the Culebra cut in a motor car on the day the boys ran into Col. Van Ellis at the old house?"

"Well," said Gastong, "Tommy, here, kept me posted in a way, and I thought I might be useful out that direction."

"It was clever of the lieutenant," laughed Ned. "Suppose you now turn your attention to him? He may need the help of the Boy Scouts to get out of a hole himself."

"I reckon you could help him, all right," Gastong replied, confidently, but still with a look of anxiety on his face. "He has a heap of confidence in you, Mr. Nestor, but he thought best to take

every precaution for your welfare. That is the reason why he surrounded you, as far as possible, with secret service people."

Ned was more than amused at the statement, for all the discoveries that had been made had resulted from the activities of the boys and himself. In fact, the only help Gordon's chain of secret service men had given his party was the thwarting of the plans of Van Ellis at the old house.

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This had been important, in a sense, as the boys would otherwise have been held prisoners there and so would not have been able to come to the rescue of Ned and Jimmie at the old temple. Still, Jack Bosworth had been in that incident, and it was a question in the mind of the patrol leader if the result would have been the same without him. However, he gave the lieutenant full credit for his cautious way of going at the matter.

"The Japs, as you call them," he said to Gastong and Tommy, "have gone on toward Colon. I'm going on after them, but it may be well for you to remain here on the chance of meeting the lieutenant. He may have plans of his own for to-night."

"I am sure he has," said Tommy. "He has been active all day, with half a dozen men going and coming under his orders. He missed you this afternoon."

"I had a date to view the scenery up the Chagres river," laughed Ned.

The patrol leader went back to the room where he had left Frank, George, Glen, and Peter. Tony had left for his father's camp and George Tolford had gone with him.

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"I would give considerable to know what Chester and the Japs, as they are called, quarreled about to-night," he said, but of course the boys could give him no information on the subject.

As a matter of fact, Ned thought he knew, but the thing was so incomprehensible to him that he doubted, for a time, his own reasoning. It was now nine o'clock, and it seemed to him that the time for action had come. Whether he was right in his deductions or not, he could not afford to ignore the plans he had made for the night. He did not like the idea of accepting responsibility for the important move he was determined to make, but Lieutenant Gordon was not to be found, and there was nothing for him to do but to go ahead.

"Now, boys," he said to his chums, "we are going into a game to-night that may lead to bloodshed. Again, it may prove a farce. I have only my own judgment to go on, but the matter is so serious that I'm going to take a risk. I should prefer to have Lieutenant Gordon with us, but that seems to be impossible. Get your guns ready, and I'll arrange for a railroad motor car to take us to Gatun."

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"I just believe Lieutenant Gordon is in trouble," Peter said. "He was in the hotel this afternoon, just before they carried the sick man out, but has not been seen since."

Ned sprang to his feet, all excitement.

"When did they carry a sick man out?" he asked.

"Oh, it must have been about five o'clock," was the reply. "He was plumb sick, too, for they carried him out in a wheel-chair, with a sheet over his face."

"Who carried him out?"

"Why, the men from the hospital who were sent for."

"What floor?" demanded Ned, a thought he did not care to put into words coming to his mind.

"Third floor," replied Peter. "I stood out there, looking around, when the chair was brought down on the freight elevator."

Greatly to the amazement of the boys Ned darted away. In a minute he stood before the clerk's desk.

"Will you have a boy show me to Lieutenant Gordon's room?" he asked.

"Certainly," was the reply, "but you won't find him in. There have been repeated inquiries, for him this afternoon."

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"Has any one been to his room?" asked Ned.

"Yes, but it is locked and the key is not here. I was up on that floor about five o'clock, when the hospital people took a man out of the room next to his, and his door was locked then."

Ned stood for a moment in deep thought, hesitating, wondering if the clerk was a man to be trusted in a great emergency.

"You look to me like a dependable man," he finally said to the clerk, "anyway, I've got to take you into my confidence. Will you take duplicate keys to the lieutenant's room and the room next to it and come with me?"

"Of course, if it is anything important," replied the clerk, "but you'll have to give some good reason before I can admit you to either room."

"Step in here," Ned said, motioning toward a little check room at the end of the counter. "You saw the sick man carried out?" he asked, as the clerk wonderingly stepped into the designated room.

"Yes, I saw him taken out. He was a stranger—took the room about noon through a friend. I did not see him at all, that is, until he was carried out, and then I did not see his face."

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"You are sure it was not Lieutenant Gordon who was carried out?" asked Ned.

"Why, why, he wasn't sick. He said nothing to me of being ill."

"But he has enemies on the Isthmus," Ned went on, "and is now at work on a very delicate and dangerous job for the government. Suppose—"

The clerk waited to hear no more. He seized the keys asked for and bounded toward the elevator, taking Ned with him. When they entered the lieutenant's room they found it in great disorder. There were many signs of a desperate struggle. On the floor was a three-cornered slip of paper which had evidently, judging from the quality and thickness, been torn from a drawing roll. The scrap showed only two irregular lines, but Ned recognized them.

Lieutenant Gordon had taken into his possession the crude map of the Gatun dam which Ned had discovered in the old temple bomb-room. The next room, the one from which the alleged sick man had been taken, was also in disorder, and the door which connected the two apartments had been forced open. There was a strong odor of chloroform in both rooms.

The clerk did not need to be told what had taken place. His face turned white as chalk and his voice trembled as he asked:

"What is to be done? Think of the lieutenant being carried off from this hotel in the daytime. It will ruin us."

"First," Ned replied, "you must make up your mind to keep what has been done a profound secret. You may tell the proprietor if you see fit to do so, but no one else must know."

"But the secret service men must be told."

"Not now," Ned replied. "I have an idea that I can restore the lieutenant to his friends without any row being made over the matter."

"But how? I don't understand."

"At least," Ned urged, "wait until two o'clock to-morrow morning. I am going out now on an expedition which may reveal many things, if I succeed. If I fail, why, then you must notify the secret service men and look for me in some of the pools about Gatun."

The clerk finally consented to this arrangement, and in ten minutes Ned and his chums were speeding toward Gatun on a railroad motor car.

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CHAPTER XX.

THE SPOIL OF THE LOCKS.

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At eleven o'clock that night the workmen employed at the locks, the spillway, and the barrier of the Gatun dam found that their lights were not working satisfactorily and sent word back to the electric department that something was amiss.

The electric department sent word back to the men in the excavations that the lights were all right so far as they were concerned, that they were doing their full duty efficiently, and that the men with the shovels, the dynamite and the dump cars might go chase themselves.

This expression of fact and permission did not make it any lighter at the workings, but the men kept on, in the intermittent showers of illumination, and grumbled while they excavated and piled in the concrete. At last, just before midnight, the incandescence did not come back to the globes, and the men gathered in groups to discuss the matter and express heated opinions of the efficiency of the men in charge of the lighting plant.

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The workmen moved about here and there in the shadows and clambered like ants over the great bulk of the dam. No one looked to see that the men assembled in the workings all belonged there. At midnight four men who did not belong there entered the excavation which leads from the bottom of the lower lock to the sea-level channel into Limon Bay, which is a child of the Caribbean Sea.

These four men moved about as if accustomed to the situation, only now and then they halted and whispered together. Other men, workmen, were doing that, however, and so these four passed on up to the foot of the spillway without attracting attention.

Here they separated, one to the west, one to the east, where the locks are, and one to a position half way between the spillway and the west side of the locks. The fourth man remained near the foot of the spillway.

Due primarily to its size, Gatun dam has received, perhaps, more attention in the United States than is its due. There is nothing especially difficult or complicated about this dam, and many dams have been successfully built in this country to withstand much larger pressures and greater heads of water than the Gatun dam without being given one-quarter of the attention.

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Gatun dam fills the opening between the hills at Gatun through which the Chagres river flows to

the Caribbean Sea. It consists, if it may be regarded in the light of a finished production, of a water-tight center or core composed of sand and clay mixed in proper proportion and deposited hydraulically; that is by being pumped in.

On each side a wall of rock confines this core. The bulk of the dam rests on impermeable material of sufficient supporting power. The locks and spillway are considered a part of the dam.

The locks are built in an excavation at the east end of the dam, in rock, and will lift vessels from the Atlantic level to the level of the Lake of Gatun. The spillway is a concrete-lined opening cut through a hill of rock near the center of the dam. When supplied with suitable gates, it will regulate the level of the lake.

The dam proper is about 9,000 feet long over all, measured on its crest, including locks and spill way, but for only five hundred feet of this great distance will it be subjected to great pressure. During this space there is, or will be, a weight of about eighty-five feet depth against the barrier. For only about half its length will the head of water on the dam be over fifty feet.

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It will be seen from the above description that the point of attack on the dam would naturally be where the pressure is greatest, also at the locks, which would make a mighty channel for the flood of water, and which would be difficult to repair. The spillway, too, if enlarged by explosives, would make a nasty hole to build up.

Now another point which Ned had considered when he looked over the crude drawings he had discovered. Hard rock underlies the dam near the surface of the ground except for about one-fifth of its entire length. Here the rock dips down to a minimum depth below sea-level of from 195 feet in the depression east of the spillway to 255 feet in that west of the spillway. Here, of course, would be another point of attack by one designing permanent mischief.

These depressions or valleys have been slowly filled during past ages. Measured from sea-level down, the first 80 feet consists of sand and clay; the next 100 feet or so is stiff blue clay, while the last 20 to 60 feet is a conglomerate, composed of sand, shells and stone. It will be readily seen that great damage might be done by a raging torrent boring into the sand and clay of the first strata.

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Now, the outer walls of rock are 1,200 feet apart, the interval being filled with spoil from the canal and lock excavations. The south "toe," as it is called, has a height of 60 feet, while the north or down-stream "toe" is 30 feet high. Spoil from the excavations will be dumped outside the "toes" until the dam is 2,000 feet in width at the bottom. The top of the dam is, or will be, 30 feet above water level and have a width of 100 feet. The channel of the spillway is 300 feet wide.

Ned had figured it out that one attacking the dam would naturally seek to enlarge the locks and the spillway and also to burrow in under the bulk of the dam where the sand and clay had been washed in below sea-level by countless years of flood and storm. The locks and spillway, enlarged, would require years of active work for repair; the sand and clay, if subjected to high explosives, would cause the crest of the dam to drop in on the north side and so enfeeble the entire structure, requiring the gigantic work of constructing new foundations.

Therefore, when Ned saw the four men moving toward the spillway, saw them part and seek the vulnerable points which have been described above, he knew that the time he had been waiting for had come. The treacherous rascals were there to do their wicked work that night—to carry out plans long formed and well considered—and they were opposed only by the inexperienced patrol leader from New York and his three chums, Frank Shaw, Glen Howard, and Peter Fenton. It will be remembered that Jimmie McGraw, Jack Bosworth, and Harry Stevens were at the old stone house on the road to Las Cruces from Gamboa, and that George Tolford had accompanied Tony to the Chester camp.

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On reaching Gatun the boys had slipped out of the lights of the station and descended immediately to the bottom of the cut. They were at once accosted by a foreman, but the explanation Ned gave seemed more than sufficient, for Dan Welch, the man in charge of a group of workers on the locks, at once summoned his assistant to the job and remained with the boys.

"I have heard about you, Ned Nestor," Welch said; "in fact, about half the men in the workings at Gatun have heard of you."

"I don't understand how," replied the puzzled boy.

"Well, through that bomb business at the cottage. You see, it leaked out. When the attempt to blow up the place was reported, the men naturally asked what the dickens the scamps wanted to blow up a crowd of sightseers for, and then it came out that you came here with Lieutenant Gordon, and that's about all."

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It was at this time that the lights suspended operation. Welch glanced about the busy scene for an instant and sat down on a box which contained tools.

"No use," he said. "The electric men work as they please. We'll wait here and lose our record. Did you say where Lieutenant Gordon is to-night?"

"I did not, because I wasn't asked," was the reply, "and because I don't know where he is."

"He's a good fellow, Gordon," Welch exclaimed. "I'd go far and fast to do him a favor. I hope he's coming out of this game all right."

Then Ned sat down on the tool-box and told Welch the story of the abduction of the lieutenant, and also the story of what was going on there that night, as he understood it. To say that Welch

was profoundly excited does not half express the foreman's state of mind as he listened.

"My God!" he cried, when Ned paused. "To think of the wickedness of the thing. To destroy the work of years. To delay the completion of the canal for a decade. What can we do? In this darkness, the spoilers can work their will."

"I think I know who they are," Ned said. "We must find them."

"It is too bad that the lights should fail us just at this time," the foreman said.

"I have an idea that the plotters arranged for that," Ned said, then.

"But how?" demanded Welch. "The plants are well guarded. You know, of course, that we are all on the lookout for something of the kind? We thought we had provided against any sudden surprise. Where are we to look for them?"

Then Ned pointed out the probable points of attack, and Welch sprang to his feet in a fuming passion.

"The spillway and the locks," he cried. "And the point where the soft earth extends under the dam! Come!"

"Bring four of your men who can be trusted," Ned advised, not leaving the box.

"Yes, and what then?"

"Send a man to the light station and have tracers sent out, but instruct him not to have the lights turned on until you give the signal."

"I understand," the foreman said. "We'll catch them with the goods!"

Four men, workmen, were strolling along the danger points within five minutes, and another moved toward the electric switches which governed that part of the illumination. Ned and Welch remained near the spillway. The three boys, after whispered instructions from Ned, moved along the line passing word from man to man.

It was a long and heart-breaking half hour, seemingly double that time, that followed. The man from the switches came back and whispered to Welch, and at that moment a shrill bird-call sounded in the darkness. This, in turn, was followed by the report of a revolver, and then the light leaped into the globes, making the place, the entire length of the canal dam, the spillway and the locks, as bright as day.

There came a half-hearted explosion from the direction of the locks, followed by more shots. Then everything was in confusion, and groups of men gathered in four spots along the line. There were more shots and then the three boys rushed, panting, to the position Ned and the foreman had taken.

"They've got them!" Frank cried. "They've got every man of them—four Japs with lighted fuses in their hands!"

"There must be more than four!" Welch cried.

"I think not," Ned replied. "This is hardly a job for many men to work on! The four dare not take others into their confidence. Come! Suppose we gather them in?"

"How do you boys know they've got them all?" demanded Welch. "The four men must be some distance apart."

"Not too far for a revolver to carry a signal!" smiled Ned. "You probably noticed four groups of shots? Well, the boys who have been acting as messengers from man to man gave directions as to the number of shots for each group!"

"I see!" said Welch. "You don't need any whiskers, boy, to do the brain work of a man. Here comes the first batch!"

Itto and Gostel were the first ones brought in. Itto was wounded fatally and Gostel was bleeding from a wound in the side. The other men were not injured. They stood in a little group for a moment, and then Itto dropped to the ground.

The reports of the men who had been sent out to the danger points showed that each one of the four had been caught lighting a fuse, the bombs having been set.

"We were forced to work before we were ready," Gostel said, defiantly. "Our government discovered what was going on, and we would have been arrested to-morrow. So we were obliged to take the risk to-night. We were working for the glory of the Emperor, but he forbade it!"

"I did not believe the government of Japan would descend to any such despicable work," Ned said. "You fellows are cranks! You would have worked great harm to your Emperor if you had succeeded. By the way," he added, "what did you do with Lieutenant Gordon?"

Gostel glared at his questioner, but Itto beckoned Ned to his side.

"The old stone house on the road to Las Cruces!" he whispered.

"Where is that?" asked Welch, who had bent over the wounded man and heard the words.

"I know," replied Ned. "One act of this tragedy has already been pulled off there. Have your men take these cranks to Gatun and get a railroad motor. We must get to Gamboa without loss of time. It is only a short distance from there to the place he speaks of. If they took Lieutenant Gordon there a prisoner, they are likely to have had a warm reception, for three of my chums

are there!"

But it was not necessary for them to go to the old stone house. At Gamboa they found Lieutenant Gordon and the three boys. Jimmie excitedly related the sensational occurrences at the house.

"Jack and Harry came up," he concluded, "just as the two men, Pedro and Gaga, were going together with knives. I was scared into a trance! The boys covered them with guns an' we trussed 'em both. You never saw people more surprised in your life. Then two men brought in Lieutenant Gordon, all nicely tied up, and went away, or started to go away. Well, they wasn't prepared for an attack from the bushes, and we have four prisoners in a cell of a jail at Gamboa, right over there!"

In an hour the boys were all back at Culebra, with Lieutenant Gordon looking angry enough to eat sinkers, as Jimmie said. The officer though pleased at the general results, did not like to admit that he had been captured by the enemy and rescued by the Boy Scouts, the little fellows he was guarding!

CHAPTER XXI.

THE TANGLE STRAIGHTENED OUT.

It was nearly daylight when the tired party entered the lobby of the hotel at Culebra. The eight men who had been captured were all under strong guard, the bombs had been taken from the dam, and the danger was over.

"Now," Lieutenant Gordon said, "we'll go after the men higher up."

He started back as he uttered the words, for Mr. Shaw, Harvey Chester, Col. Van Ellis, George Tolford, and Tony Chester came hastening toward him.

"There are three of the men higher up!" the lieutenant shouted. "I arrest you, gentlemen, for treason!"

The three men drew back in surprise and Mr. Shaw stepped forward.

"What does it mean?" he asked. "I sailed from New York the day after the boys left, but reached Culebra only to-night. When I came here I found Mr. Chester and Mr. Van Ellis waiting for news from Ned Nestor. What does it mean?"

"It means!" shouted Gordon, "that your dupes are all under arrest, through the efforts of Nestor, and that the Gatun dam is no longer in danger. It also means that you three men are under arrest! I suspected, that night in your house in New York, Shaw, that you were trying to lead me to a false trail."

Mr. Shaw glanced indifferently at the officer and motioned to a distinguished looking gentleman who had been observing the scene from a distance.

"This," he said, "is Colonel Hill, your chief, Gordon. He came on from New York with me. Let him speak."

"But the others are prisoners," insisted Gordon.

"I have an idea," Mr. Shaw said, "that Nestor knows more about the complications of this case than any one else. Suppose we let him sum it up?"

"I am sure he can do it!" growled Gordon.

Although it was now broad daylight, and all were tired and in need of sleep, the party went to a private parlor and Ned began the story of the case, first having a short talk with Jimmie, who had listened to a confession from Gaga.

"The plot against the Gatun dam," he said, "did not originate with the business men who were looking for emeralds along the line of the cut. When I first sized up the case it seemed to me that the men interested in emeralds, including Mr. Shaw, were willing to delay the completion of the canal in order that they might have time to develop mines believed to be fabulously rich in emeralds."

"That is the way it looked to me," the lieutenant said.

"I began work along that line," continued Ned, "for the news that Mr. Shaw was interested in emerald mines, and his refusal to reveal the contents of the papers he had secured, led me to the opinion that he had been approached by his partners with a proposition to destroy the Gatun dam, that he had their proposals in writing, and that he had refused to become a party to such an outrage."

"Then why didn't he tell us who the men were?" demanded Gordon.

"Because," was the reply, "he did not think his partners, Mr. Harvey Chester and Col. Van Ellis,

would go to the extremity proposed. He thought they would change their minds when the enormity of the crime was set before them. In fact, he suspected from the first that they were being urged on by others having private ends to gain by the destruction of the dam. Besides, he thought himself capable of handling the situation alone. Is that true, Mr. Shaw?"

"All true," was the reply, "but I don't see how you found out what was in my mind," he added, with a laugh.

"It was all very clear to me, in time," was the reply. "Unless I am very much mistaken, you, Mr. Shaw, fearful that the enemies of the canal scheme might act too quickly, gave the information to the government which led to Lieutenant Gordon being put on the case. Is that right?"

"Yes," was the reply, "that is right, but how—"

"All in good time," Ned went on. "Now, the fact that you had warned the officers of the government became known to your associates in the emerald business. That is, it became known to the men who were drawing the associates into this crime. It was then necessary for them to get the papers they had given to you, the maps and plans of the best points of attack. The papers mentioned names, and would have convicted every one of them of treason."

"Where did you get a glimpse of the papers?" asked Mr. Shaw.

"I have never seen them," was the reply, "but what took place shows what they contained. When you left the Isthmus, Pedro, real name Pedrarias, was induced by some of the conspirators to go with you as your servant. His real duty in your house was to steal the papers before you turned them over to the government."

"I had no intention of doing that," the editor said.

"But the conspirators did not know that," Ned went on. "Now, while Pedro went into your employ for the purpose of stealing the papers he also went for a purpose of his own. It was his longing to possess the emerald necklace—which had long been in his family—that induced him to become a servant, though the large sum of money the conspirators paid him was a consideration, he being very poor.

"You all know what happened. Pedro did not succeed in getting either the papers or the necklace. He remained in the house until the others became anxious and sent three men on to New York to accomplish what Pedro did not seem capable of doing. One of these men was Gaga and one was Itto."

"Working under instructions from his confederates, Pedro let Gaga into the house about six o'clock one rainy night. He remained inside so long without reporting to those outside that they demanded admittance, and Pedro was obliged to let them in. This must have been about nine o'clock. When Itto and the other man entered, they went at their work roughly. They assaulted Mr. Shaw and searched his rooms which had already been searched by Gaga. Then they went upstairs to search Frank's room, and Pedro tried to turn them back.

"He did not trust them, being afraid they would secure the necklace. By the way, the chances are that he did not know that Gaga was still in the house. Well, when Pedro opposed their passage and Frank ran out, the two fled, finding the night-bolt off at the street door. Then Gaga got the necklace and got out of the house during the excitement.

"It may be well to say here that Pedro did not leave the house to further conspire with the canal plotters. When he found that Gaga had indeed stolen the necklace he went after him. He did not care where the others went, or whether they secured the papers or not. It was the second man, the one with Itto, who followed us on board the boat and was named His Nobbs by the boys."

"Pedro went back to Mr. Chester, who had been prominent in locating him in the Shaw house, and waited for a chance at Gaga. By this time both Mr. Chester and Col. Van Ellis had decided to turn the plotters over to the government and take their chances on arrest, for of course the arrested men would accuse them of being at the head of the conspiracy."

"Col. Van Ellis was going to lock us up and see how long we could go without food!" Frank exclaimed. "That doesn't look much like the work of a contrite heart!"

"You would not have been starved," Van Ellis replied, with a smile. "At that time our friends, the Japs, were watching our every movement, and Mr. Chester and myself agreed to let them play their game a little longer in order that they might be caught and punished."

"What about the mysterious Jap men you are talking about?" demanded Jack Bosworth. "I am anxious to know how they tangled these three business men up in the game."

"Is it true," Ned asked of Mr. Shaw, "that Gostel and Itto first proposed delaying the work on the canal?"

"Yes; they first suggested it."

"They told you of emerald mines under there?"

"Certainly."

"But they never took you to see the mines?"

"No; we took their word for it."

"Well, they lied to you. There are no emerald deposits under the line of the canal. Their purpose was to get you involved in a scheme to blow up the dam, believing that you, by your influence, would be able to ward off suspicion after the job had been accomplished."

"But why?"

"Because they are cranks. They believed they would be doing their Emperor a great favor by destroying the canal. They were insane on the subject. They believed that Japan could never become mistress of the Pacific with the canal in operation and the fleets of the world passing through it.

"Well, they carried on the plotting, made their bombs, and fought us boys, as you all know. Their plans were progressing satisfactorily, for they did not know that Mr. Shaw, Mr. Chester, and Col. Van Ellis would have stopped them at the risk of their own lives, had they been able to do so, until the Japanese government got wind of what was on. 253

"Then these cranks were warned by the Japanese officials to stop. Instead of doing so they abducted Lieutenant Gordon and advanced the date of the crime one night. The abduction was cleverly planned and executed, but Mr. Chester learned of it, and there was a row about it. But there was no suspicion on the part of Mr. Chester that the job was set for last night, I take it. Is that true?" he asked, turning to Mr. Chester.

"Yes, I was completely deceived, and only that you boys were on guard the dam would have been blown up!"

"I overheard their plans in the stone house," Ned continued. "Mr. Chester and Col. Van Ellis went there to call the whole thing off, but Gostel and Itto lied to them. I heard Gaga admit to Itto that there were no emeralds under the canal line. I found there another map of the dam, with marks where the bombs were to be placed. Then, when I got back to Culebra and found that Lieutenant Gordon had been abducted, I knew that the job was set for that night." 254

"I was sorry you went without me," Mr. Chester said.

"I wanted you here when the end came," Ned replied, "and so sent for you. I wanted you where you could not be accused of complicity in the crime, for I knew that you were innocent. Your only fault was in listening to the men at all."

"Yes, we should have listened to Mr. Shaw instead of the Japs," Mr. Chester admitted, "but it has come out all right. The peril is over. Now, what about the necklace?"

"Gaga carried it with him, lugged it about on his person," Ned said, "and Jimmie secured it after his arrest at the stone house. Pedro would not have been captured if he had not followed Gaga there with the intention of murdering him and securing the necklace. Yes, the bauble is in Frank's possession again!"

"And that closes the case," laughed Mr. Shaw, "and you boys may as well go back to New York with me. The reward for your work, Mr. Nestor, will be large, and you may as well take a rest. We will leave the prisoners in the hands of the law." 255

"Wait a moment!" said Col. Hill. "We are in need of a herd of Boy Scouts, just like this one, up in the Philippines. Will you go, boys?"

THE END

The lads were anxious to go, of course, and the story of their adventures there will be told in the next book of the series, entitled:

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*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK BOY SCOUTS IN THE CANAL ZONE; OR,
THE PLOT AGAINST UNCLE SAM ***

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