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Title: The Broncho Rider Boys with the Texas Rangers

Author: Frank Fowler

Release date: April 30, 2012 [EBook #39577]

Language: English

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The Broncho Rider Boys With The Texas Rangers **Frank Fowler**

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PULLING HIMSELF TOGETHER AND GRASPING HIS MARLIN FIRMLY, ADRIAN STEPPED CAUTIOUSLY TOWARD THE BROKEN DOOR.

THE BRONCHO RIDER BOYS WITH THE TEXAS RANGERS

or

The Capture of the Smugglers On the Rio Grande

By Frank Fowler

Author Of

"The Broncho Rider Boys At Keystone Ranch."

"The Broncho Rider Boys In Arizona."

"The Broncho Rider Boys Along The Border."

"The Broncho Rider Boys On The Wyoming Trail."

A. L. BURT COMPANY

NEW YORK.

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CHAPTER I.—A MULE HUNT IN THE CHAPARRAL.

"Crack!" went Broncho Billie's revolver and the silver dollar which had been tossed into the air as a target went spinning into the yellow waters of the Rio Grande as a result of Billie's unerring aim.

"Not a bad shot, Ad," remarked Billie with a laugh as he ejected the shell from the cylinder and shoved a fresh cartridge into the empty chamber of the revolver. "I don't miss 'em very often now, and this time the river is a dollar in."

"Yes," replied Adrian, a bit crestfallen, "and I'm a dollar out."

"Didn't think I'd hit it, eh?" and Billie's round face broadened till it looked like a full moon.

"Well, I didn't know but you might, but I hadn't stopped to think what would happen to the dollar if you did. The river didn't look so near."

Billie chuckled to himself good-naturedly as he returned his six-shooter to its holster, while Adrian continued:

"I'll make a better guess at distances before I try it again. I can't afford to be losing dollars like that."

"Oh, that's all right, Ad!" and Billie shoved his hand down into his pocket. "Here's one to take its place."

Adrian shook his head and made no move to take the proffered coin.

"Go on, take it!" insisted Billie. "I don't want to make you lose your last dollar."

"That's all right about my last dollar," replied Adrian. "I guess I know where to get another, and the lesson is worth a peso."

"Well, if you go broke because of it, don't be afraid to tell me," was Billie's joking reply; "but what can be keeping Donald, I wonder. It's high time we were getting back over the river," and Billie cast his eye toward the mountains some miles in the distance to see how close to their tops the sun was getting.

"He'll surely be here in a few minutes," said Adrian. "He knows how long it will take us to get to town as well as we do."

And while the boys are awaiting the arrival of their companion, it might be well to explain to any reader who has not had the pleasure of reading the preceding volumes of the Broncho Rider Boys series something about the trio of young Americans whose names have been mentioned.

Adrian Sherwood, who had so recklessly risked his silver dollar as a target for his companion to shoot at, was the owner of a ranch in Wyoming, which he had but recently inherited and come into possession of through a series of most exciting adventures as told in a preceding volume of this series, entitled "The Broncho Rider Boys on the Wyoming Trail." He was a youth of much wisdom and judgment for one of his years and a close chum of Billie, who had been christened William Stonewall Jackson Winkle.

Because of the exciting adventures through which Adrian, Billie and Donald had passed and because they had practically lived in the saddle for the past year and a half, they had become known to the cowboys and rough riders of three states as "The Broncho Rider Boys." Born in the south, but having spent most of his boyhood in New York State, Billie had come west nearly two years previous to find health and to rid himself of the superfluous weight which some good-natured doctor had said was the cause of his trouble. Months in the saddle had made very little difference in his weight and if there were a more healthy chap in the country than he, such a one would be hard to find.

When Billie first came west, he was a veritable tenderfoot. He was always creating fun for those with whom he was thrown and was invariably in some sort of trouble. The number of times he had been thrown from the back of his broncho could hardly be enumerated, and more in fun than because he was a daring rider, he had been rechristened Broncho Billie by his cowboy friends.

But Billie had developed rapidly. Of the three there was not one who could ride or shoot better than he. His only weak spot was in throwing the lariat. He never seemed to get just the proper hang and his attempts to use the rope almost invariably resulted in disaster to himself or his friends. As is usually the case with fat people, Billie fairly bubbled over with good humor, being a fine example of Tony Lumpkin's famous advice to "laugh and grow fat."

Donald Mackay, Billie's cousin, whom he had come west to visit, was the son of the owner of a

big ranch, known as Keystone Ranch. He was one of those steady, reliable boys whom we have all met and who can always be depended upon in any emergency to do the right thing, although at times he may be slower than some others in the manner in which he works. Taken all in all they were a well-balanced trio, as their actions under many trying conditions and in many hazardous adventures had justly proved. They had thwarted an unscrupulous syndicate from robbing Donald's father of valuable property. They had protected an inoffensive tribe of Indians against the designs of a band of sharpers, and they had straightened out affairs at Adrian's ranch in a manner which would have been a credit to much older heads.

After their adventures in Wyoming, as told in a preceding volume, they had started to return to Arizona by a two months' ride through Colorado and New Mexico; but, when they reached Albuquerque, they had received a letter from Billie's father, saying that he was going on a vacation trip to El Paso, Texas, and asking if it were possible for Billie to meet him there.

"Of course I can," exclaimed Billie aloud, as he read the letter.

"Of course you can what?" queried Donald.

"Meet father in El Paso," was the reply.

"What, and leave us to go home all alone?" said Adrian.

"There's two of you, isn't there?" retorted Billie, forgetting his grammar entirely.

"Of course there are two of us; but that's hardly a company, while, as everybody knows, three make a crowd," and Adrian laughed almost sadly. "Who'd take care of Jupiter?"

Now Jupiter was the broncho which Billie's uncle had given him when he first came West, and a terrible time Billie had had in breaking him. He hadn't thought about him.

"You could lead him, couldn't you?" asked Billie.

"We're driving two pack mules now. How would you expect us to take care of Jupiter?"

Billie shook his head slowly. "I don't know," he said.

"I'll tell you what," suddenly exclaimed Donald, "we'll all go to El Paso. We'll ride there. It isn't so many days out of our way, and we'll see something of the country. We might even get a look at President Madero, of Mexico."

Donald's suggestion met with immediate approval by the others, and so, instead of going southwest from Albuquerque, they headed south. Because of the lay of the land, they had traveled farther south than was really necessary, but had figured it out that it would be better riding in the valley of the Rio Grande than to climb over the range of mountains that forms the watershed of the Pecos River. Striking the Rio Grande near Langtry, they had slowly ridden up stream toward El Paso, first on one side of the river and then on the other, until this afternoon found them approaching the mouth of the Concho river, which empties into the Rio Grande from the Mexican side.

Two hours previous they had halted in the chaparral for a bite to eat and a short *siesta*. While they were lounging about, Donald had announced his intention of going to a little hamlet, the adobe houses of which could be seen a couple of miles away, to see if he could not buy a *riata*, as a rope for leading horses is called.

"Why not wait until we reach Presidio?" queried Adrian. "We should reach there by dark."

"We may not, and we need it to tether the pack mules. The one on Bray is worn out, and first thing we know he'll wander away and we'll waste a whole day looking for him."

"Well, hurry up, then," said Billie. "We don't want to be waiting around here all the afternoon."

Without more words Donald had mounted Wireless, for so his mount was named, and ridden away in the direction of the houses, while Billie and Adrian had strolled up the bank of the river, killing time. It was during this stroll that Billie had offered to show his skill with a six-shooter by hitting a silver dollar thrown into the air.

They had hardly been out of sight of the halting place during their stroll, but, upon their return, instead of finding Donald, they found old Bray, one of the pack mules, missing, just as Donald had predicted.

"He cannot have gone far," declared Adrian. "He hasn't had time."

"That's certain," was Billie's reassuring comment, and, feeling sure that a few minutes' search of the chaparral would reveal the missing animal, they started out hastily, on foot, not deeming it necessary even to mount their steeds.

For the next ten minutes they tramped through the chaparral, calling to each other as they went, but no sign of the mule could be found. Then they returned to the camp and mounted their

horses, but, although this enabled them to see over the tops of the mesquite bushes that spread out for miles up and down the river, they could see nothing of the missing animal.

"There comes Don," Billie at last sung out, as he caught sight of the returning horseman. "Maybe he can give us some advice."

But Donald had no advice to give, except to scatter and search.

"I hate to say 'I told you so,'" laughed Donald, "because it was really my fault that I didn't get a new *riata* before. I reckon now we might as well decide to stop here all right, for I can see we have our afternoon's work cut out."

Half an hour's riding having revealed no sign of Bray, the boys again met at the camp.

"Haven't you seen anything at all?" called out Adrian, as the boys came within hailing distance of each other.

"Yes," replied Billie, "I saw a *hacienda* about three miles up the river. I knew Don spoke a little Mexican, so I came back to tell him, and ask if you didn't think it would be a good thing to apply to the owner for help. Maybe some of the peons have run across Bray and driven him home."

"Good idea," said Adrian. "You fellows go up to the *hacienda* and I'll stay here and look after the other mule and the camp. I'm glad Bray didn't have his pack on, or we'd stand a chance of going hungry tonight."

"Don't mention such a thing," laughed Billie. "The very thought of it fills me with despair."

CHAPTER II.—A WILD CHASE AND ITS RESULT.

The *hacienda* which Billie had discovered in his search for the lost pack mule was located about a mile from the Rio Grande on the Mexican side of the river, and appeared to be part of an estate of considerable size. The house itself was a good-sized dwelling, built in true Mexican style, with a great wall surrounding it, and the yard, or *patio*, as it is called, inside the walls. It was of dazzling whiteness, and, situated upon a little knoll that rose almost abruptly out of the otherwise level plain, made quite a pretentious appearance.

"Looks as though it might belong to people of quality," remarked Donald, as the boys approached it, after a sharp gallop of twenty minutes.

"Yes, or a fort of some kind, with that high wall all around it."

"The wall, as you call it, is part of the house," explained Donald. "However, it serves the purpose of a fortification. Father told me they got into the habit of building their houses in this way during the days when revolutions were of almost daily occurrence."

"A habit from which they haven't yet recovered," laughed Billie.

Riding up to the great front door, or gate, which they found closed, they knocked loudly. A sharp-eyed Mexican lad answered the summons and ushered them into the *patio*, where they sat quietly upon their horses until the owner appeared. He was a little, weazened old man—Don Pablo Ojeda, by name, as the boys afterward learned—but he received them with a great show of friendliness.

"Welcome, strangers," he said, by way of greeting. "What can I do for you today?"

"We are travelers," replied Donald, "and one of our pack mules strayed away. Being unable to find it, we thought perhaps some of your servants might have come across it, and, not knowing to whom it belonged, have driven it to this place."

"Quite possible," replied the old man. "I will summon them and inquire."

This he did. In response to his summons, half a dozen peons put in an appearance, but all denied any knowledge of the mule.

"He has probably gone down the river in the direction from which you came," said Don Pablo, after the servants had gone back to their work. "That would be the most natural thing."

"Quite likely," was Donald's reply. "We will look for him in that direction. We are much obliged to you for your trouble."

"*No hay de que*," meaning, there is no occasion for thanks, was the Mexican's answer, and, without more ado, the boys took their departure.

"The old hypocrite," exclaimed Donald, as soon as the boys were out of earshot. "I actually believe he found the mule himself, and knows where he is at this very minute."

"I thought that myself," commented Billie, "although I could understand very little of what was being said. But he was altogether too gracious."

"What most aroused my suspicions," said Donald, "was a side remark I heard him whisper to that big dark peon. I didn't get the whole of it, but it was something about removing the livestock to another pasture. But he can't fool me, if ever I get sight of old Bray, for he had the Keystone brand."

The boys walked their horses slowly along, talking the matter over, undecided what to do next; but, as they at last emerged from behind a long row of cactus, which formed a hedge around one side of the *hacienda*, Billie uttered a sudden exclamation.

"Look!" he almost shouted, and pointed away to the left, where, about a mile distant, could be seen a couple of men on horseback, driving before them a dozen or more horses and mules. "I believe that big mule a little to the side is old Bray."

"I'm sure of it," replied Donald. "It's a long ways too far to see the brand, but he's got a peculiar stride that I recognize as soon as I set eyes on him."

"What had we better do?" queried Billie. "We're perfect strangers here, you know."

"I don't care if we are," was the emphatic response. "No thieving hypocrite can get away with my mule as long as my name is Donald Mackay. Follow me," and, putting spurs to Wireless, he dashed off in the direction of the drove, closely followed by Billie.

From the direction in which the men were driving the animals it was very evident they were headed for the mountains, some seven or eight miles away, and it was plain to the boys that, if they ever expected to get old Bray, they would have to overtake the drove before it reached the foothills. A small stream flowed across the plain and emptied into the Concho some miles farther west, and it was necessary for the men with the drove to cross this stream before they could make a direct line for the place they wished.

The boys were unfamiliar with the lay of the land, but they made up their mind that they could cross the stream higher up and thus get between the men and the mountains. They did not know that the only ford was the one toward which the men were driving the horses, and accordingly, instead of following the direct trail, they struck off diagonally across the plain.

The men saw the boys as soon as they appeared upon the scene, and immediately put the drove on a full run for the ford.

While the stream toward which both the pursued and the pursuers were heading was not a large one, it was quite a torrent because of the heavy rains of the past two or three days—the rainy season having already begun. The natives were well aware of this, and thought it impossible for anyone to cross it except at the ford in question. Being fully a mile in advance, they had no fear of being overtaken, as they felt certain that when the boys reached the river they would have to turn down stream for more than half a mile before they could cross. This would give the thieves another good mile the advantage.

Wireless and Jupiter seemed to know what was expected of them, and fairly flew over the ground. The natives were also well mounted, and the chase would have been a fruitless one, had conditions been as they supposed. But they did not know the kind of boys they had to deal with, nor the mettle of the horses they rode.

After ten minutes of hard riding, it became evident that the boys were gaining, and as the thieves and their booty plunged into the ford, the boys were rapidly approaching the river at the place they had picked out to cross.

Then for the first time the pursuers saw why it was that the thieves had chosen a crossing so far downstream.

For just a moment they drew rein, seeing which the natives gave a shout of derision as they, too, slackened their pace and rode more leisurely toward the mountains.

But again the thieves had reckoned without their host, for, in another minute the boys put spurs to their horses and dashed toward the stream, even higher up than they had first aimed. Billie had discovered a narrow place, and had made a suggestion to Donald, which they determined to carry out.

At the spot which Billie had discovered the stream was about thirty feet from bank to bank. Billie's suggestion was that they make the horses jump it.

It was a dangerous suggestion, because the very narrowness of the stream made the current at this point exceedingly swift. How deep it was neither of the boys had the slightest idea; they did know, however, that it was necessarily the deepest spot on the whole plain. But this did not deter them. They had made up their minds to head off the thieves, and such a small thing as a thirty-foot leap over a raging torrent of water was not to be considered.

So surprised were the men whom they were pursuing, that for the time they forgot their herd and riveted their attention upon the boys, not for a moment expecting them to try to cross when once they approached near enough to the stream to know the actual condition.

But, never flagging, almost neck and neck, Wireless and Jupiter dashed toward the narrow spot.

As they drew nearer, both boys saw that the stream was wider than they had thought, and swerved just a moment from their course.

Again the natives uttered a shout of derision, expecting to see them pull up; but on they came.

"Can we make it?" shouted Billie.

"Sure," replied Donald, who was better acquainted with the latent ability of his horse than his eastern-bred cousin. "Give Jupiter his head and just a touch of the spur, and over we go!"

They were right on the brink, and suiting the action to the word, they gave their horses their heads for the leap.

Into the air they rose like a couple of soaring birds, and for one brief moment were flying over the rushing water. The shout of derision died on the lips of the now thoroughly frightened natives, as both the thoroughbred beauties landed fairly on the opposite bank and sped on their way, as though they had but jumped a ditch.

By their daring feat the boys had so gained upon the thieves that they were now not more than a quarter of a mile behind and gaining rapidly. Seeing that they could not escape with their booty, the thieves turned suddenly to the left, deserting their herd, and rode as fast as their horses could carry them directly toward the chaparral that skirted the Rio Grande.

At this the boys would have drawn rein, seeing that old Bray was now within their grasp, but their attention was attracted by a shout from the opposite side of the stream which they had just crossed.

Turning their heads to see whence came the noise, they beheld a body of a dozen or more horsemen headed toward the ford at full speed.

"Don't let them escape! Don't let them escape!" shouted the leader of the band, and, without stopping to think why they should obey such an order, but feeling that there was good reason for it, the boys again took up the chase.

As they espied the horsemen on the opposite bank, and realizing that there was but one way to escape, the thieves turned in their saddles and simultaneously fired a shot at their boy pursuers.

The balls whistled by the boys' heads, but did not stop their furious gallop. Again the thieves fired, and again the balls whistled harmlessly by their heads.

But they had no chance to fire again, for the lads were right upon them. Suddenly Donald's hand shot forward, and his lariat sung out with lightning speed. True to its aim, it fell over the shoulders of the nearest Mexican. Wireless stopped as though he had been suddenly rooted to the spot; the Mexican's horse dashed on riderless, and his master lay senseless upon the ground.

At the same moment Billie's revolver cracked and the horse of the other fleeing Mexican pitched headlong to the earth, carrying his rider with him. Before he could recover himself, Billie had pulled up beside him, and, leaping to the ground, quickly bound him with his own lariat.

The boys had hardly regained their breath, when a loud cheer announced the arrival of the other horsemen.

"Good for you, young fellows," exclaimed the leader of the band, as he, too, sprang from his saddle. "You've made an important capture. We've been trying to get evidence against these cutthroats for weeks. I surely owe you one."

"That's good," laughed Billie. "It's mighty nice to have something coming. But who are you?"

"Oh, me," was the good-natured rejoinder. "I'm Captain June Peak, of the Texas Rangers, and these are part of my company."

CHAPTER III.—A DANGEROUS MISSION.

Of course both Donald and Billie had heard of the Texas Rangers, that daring body of the Texas militia which has done so much in maintaining law and order along the Mexican frontier, as well as in the lawless communities farther interior. This, however, was their first introduction to the rangers, and they gazed at the riders with considerable astonishment, their appearance not being such as would give a stranger a very good opinion of their law-abiding character.

"Texas Rangers," finally exclaimed Donald, in a tone that indicated some doubt. "Then what are

you doing this side of the Rio Grande?"

"Well, I declare," responded Captain Peak, looking around at his men with a twinkle in his eye, "we must have crossed the river without seeing it. We'd better get back just as fast as we can."

"That's right, Cap.," replied one of the men, "but you wouldn't think of leaving these poor fellows lying on the ground, would you?"

"Sure not. Just pick them up, some of you, and we'll get right back to our own side of the river."

The words were no sooner spoken than several of the men sprang to the ground. The two Mexicans were quickly thrown across the backs of a couple of horses, and the rangers prepared to return.

The boys had heard the words of the captain, and watched the proceedings without a word, realizing by the captain's manner that the affair was more serious than he let on. As the men again resumed their saddles, and the captain was about to mount, Donald thought it high time to ask further questions; but he hadn't decided just what to say before Captain Peak asked:

"How did you boys happen to be chasing these greasers?"

"They were stealing our mule—that big one there," replied Donald, pointing to old Bray. "You can see he has the Keystone brand, the same as our horses," and he indicated the marks upon Jupiter and Wireless.

"Then you'd better cut him out and come along with us," said Captain Peak. "This won't be a very healthy place for you much longer."

"No?" And the boys looked at the captain inquiringly.

"No; there's going to be trouble along the border, and it may break out any minute. That's why these horse-thieves are so bold; and that's why we are on this side the river, where we really have no business. But these fellows have become such a nuisance that when we saw them leaving the *casa* a little while ago we couldn't resist the chance of getting them. We shall turn them over to the Mexican authorities at the first opportunity, and I hope you boys will be on hand to give your testimony against them."

"If they are really horse-thieves," replied Donald, "we shall be glad to help bring them to justice; but we are only travelers, and don't wish to be delayed on our journey any longer than necessary. We have a companion and another mule back there in the chaparral."

"All right," replied Captain Peak, "we'll ride back that way and see that no one disturbs you. Then we'll all get into town as soon as possible. It's only six or seven miles."

Acting upon Captain Peak's advice, the boys cut old Bray out from the rest of the drove, and in company with the rangers, galloped back toward the place where they had left Adrian. It is hard to say which was the greater, his pleasure at seeing his companions with old Bray in their possession, or his surprise at the numerous company that was with them.

As they rode leisurely toward Presidio, after crossing to the American shore, Donald explained to Captain Peak how they happened to be so far from home. He was much interested in their story, and when they reached town introduced them to the officials, both civil and military. The captured horse-thieves were locked up in jail and the boys went home with Captain Peak, who invited them to spend the night with him at the hotel.

"I tell you," exclaimed Billie, as they sat on the porch that evening after supper, "a woman's cooking surely does taste good! Why, just think, we haven't had a bite for most a month that we didn't cook ourselves."

The following morning the boys were awakened by a big commotion outside, and, looking down the street toward the jail, saw that it was surrounded by a great crowd. They hastily dressed themselves and rushed out of the hotel. Almost the first man they met was Captain Peak.

"What's the matter?" asked Billie.

"There has been an attempt to rescue the prisoners, but it did not succeed."

"Who did it?" queried Adrian.

"We are not exactly sure, as the rescuers mounted their horses as soon as they were discovered, and managed to get away. Some of the rangers are after them, however, and I hope will get a trace of them."

"They must have been pretty bold to come into a town as big as this," said Donald.

"So they are; but, as I told you yesterday, there is likely to be a lot of trouble the other side of the river, and the authorities are having their hands full looking after possible revolutionists. As a result lesser culprits go free."

"That must make a lot of trouble on this side," suggested Adrian.

"It does, for, in addition to watching for horse and cattle thieves, we have to keep our eyes open for gun runners."

"What do you mean?" asked Billie. "What are gun runners?"

"Would-be revolutionists, who smuggle quantities of arms into Mexico without the knowledge of the Mexican officials."

"I didn't know it was our business to stop that. I thought anybody could buy arms to sell in Mexico?" said Adrian.

"So they can; but these arms would not be for sale. They would be for arming bands of men to overturn the government. We are under no obligation to stop it, but, as we want law and order along the border, we always try to help the Mexican authorities," explained Captain Peak.

"But there come my men now," he continued, as several horsemen turned into the main street.

The boys crowded around with others to hear the result of the chase, which the men reported to have been fruitless.

"If we could only have chased them over the river we could have captured them," declared the sergeant in charge, "but, after the little raid yesterday, we thought we'd better not try it."

Seeing that there was likely to be no more excitement, the crowd dispersed and the boys went into the hotel for breakfast; but when they came out they found Captain Peak waiting for them.

"How would you boys like to do a little scout duty for me over the river?" he asked.

"Scout duty?" repeated Donald. "I don't think I understand."

"Draw up some chairs," replied the captain, "and I'll explain."

The boys did as directed, and the captain continued:

"I've been interested a whole lot in the adventures you boys have had, and I can see you are a smart bunch. You said you were willing to stay and help convict the cattle thieves, but we can't arrange to turn them over to the Mexican officials and have their trial before tomorrow, no matter how fast we act. The Mexican always wants to wait till tomorrow."

"Now, as long as you will be here a day or two, anyway, I thought maybe you would like to take a little excursion across the Rio Grande, and see how people live on that side. If you kept your eyes open, you might see something that would be useful to me."

"In what way?" queried Adrian.

Captain Peak drew his chair a bit nearer and looked all around to be sure no one was listening.

"It is like this," he continued. "President Madero has discovered that there is a real plot on foot to start another revolution and overthrow his government. Arms for the revolutionists would have to come from this side of the river. As a revolution is unlawful, carrying arms across the Rio Grande to help a revolution is unlawful, and he has asked Uncle Sam and the State of Texas to prevent any guns or ammunition from going into Mexico which do not go through the Mexican custom house."

"It looks to me," broke in Billie, "as though that was the business of the Mexican government."

"So it is," replied Captain Peak, "but as long as Mexico is a friendly nation it is also our business to prevent filibustering—and that is what gun running amounts to."

"There is also another reason for helping to prevent this sort of smuggling. We frequently have to ask the Mexican government to aid us in running down outlaws who escape into that country. If we don't help them, they won't help us. So you can see, if we can learn anything about this revolutionary movement, it will be a good thing. You boys, because you are strangers and travelers, are just the ones to help. What do you say?"

For several moments the boys said nothing, but finally Donald replied that if the captain would give them a few minutes to talk the matter over between themselves, they would be able to let him know.

"All right," was the reply, "I've an appointment with the mayor, which will give you all the time you need," and he left the hotel to keep his appointment.

"Well," remarked Billie, as the captain disappeared around the corner, "what do you think of that?"

"I don't think anything of it," replied Donald. "I've no liking for that kind of work."

"Why not?" queried Adrian.

"I don't know. I just haven't, that's all."

"You'd like to prevent war, wouldn't you?"

"Sure," was Donald's emphatic rejoinder; "but I can't see how this trip can prevent war."

"I don't know as it would," said Adrian, "but, if we could do anything which would keep a lot of dissatisfied peons from getting guns and going out and killing people, it seems to me we would be doing a good deed."

"That's just the way it seems to me," declared Billie. "The average Mexican who wants to start a revolution looks to me a good deal like the fellows who stole our mule."

"Not necessarily," replied Adrian. "Sometimes revolutions are started by men to overthrow a bad government. But my mother has always taught me there was a better way to right a wrong than to go to war over it. That's why I am in favor of doing all we can to help those who want to prevent trouble."

"Of course if you put it that way," said Donald, "I've no objection to the excursion, as the captain calls it."

When Captain Peak returned, they unanimously announced their readiness for the trip, and, half an hour later, fully instructed as to what was expected of them, they were across the Rio Grande, engaged upon what proved to be the most important adventure of their career.

CHAPTER IV.—A FRIEND IN NEED.

"This is certainly a funny excursion," laughed Billie, after the boys had ridden along in silence for some minutes. "It's like looking for a needle in a haystack."

"How so?" queried Donald.

"Well, isn't it? This big country is the haystack, and the bunch of gun runners is the needle. I see mighty little chance of finding them."

"Oh, I don't know," replied Donald. "We never started out to find anything yet that we didn't locate it—even old Bray," he added as an afterthought.

"That's right," chimed in Adrian. "There is nothing like having your luck with you."

"Huh," grunted Billie, "I'm not sure but the greatest luck we could have would be not to find anything."

Adrian looked at the speaker in surprise.

"It's the first time I ever knew you to show the white feather," he said.

"Who's showing the white feather?" demanded Billie, with much spirit. "I'm just as anxious as anyone to put a stop to lawlessness; but you wouldn't call any man a coward, would you, because he wouldn't deliberately stick his head in a hornet's nest?" And he gave his horse a vicious dig with his spurs.

"Oh, don't get mad about it," said Adrian. "I didn't mean to hurt your feelings."

"Well, then, don't be accusing me of showing the white feather. There's a whole lot of difference, in my mind, between being a coward and using a little common sense."

"He has the best of you there, Ad.," remarked Donald; "when it comes to doing things, Billie will be on the job."

Donald's words were like oil on the troubled waters, and after a few minutes Billie continued in a voice entirely free from any irritation:

"The thing I can't understand is this: If somebody has so much information as to what is to be done, why don't they have some little knowledge of those who propose to do it? The whole thing looks fishy to me."

"I believe you're right," assented Adrian, after turning the matter over in his mind for several minutes. "There is something kind of mysterious about it."

"I don't see it," declared Donald, "but, even if there is, all we have to do is to keep our eyes and ears open. We have the law on our side."

"Looks like mighty little law to me," replied Billie, who, for some reason or other insisted upon looking on the dark side. "But, to change the subject, what do you call that?" and he pointed

away to the south, where a cloud of dust was to be seen.

"Looks as though it might be a herd of cattle," said Donald, after a moment's inspection. "Although," he added, after further observation, "it would be a mighty small one."

"They certainly make a lot of dust," was Adrian's comment, followed in a moment with: "Look! Look! It's a race! It's a race!"

A race it certainly was, in which something less than half a dozen horsemen were engaged, and the boys drew rein to watch it.

At the first glance it did not appear to be very exciting, as one of the riders was so far in advance that there seemed very little chance for any of the others. But, as the boys watched the flying horsemen, it slowly dawned upon Donald that there was something wrong.

"By George!" he suddenly exclaimed, "I don't believe it's a race at all. It looks to me as though there were three trying to catch one, and I don't think it's for any good purpose."

"I believe you're right, Don; and, look," exclaimed Adrian, "they're headed this way!"

That the boys were right was fully evidenced as the flying horsemen approached. The pursuers seemed to be men, while the fugitive was a lad of about the same age as our travelers.

All at once the boy espied the Broncho Rider Boys, and, digging his spurs into his horse, turned abruptly and rode directly toward them.

"*Socorre mi! Socorre mi!*" he called, as he came within hailing distance.

"What does he say?" asked Billie.

"He's crying for help," replied Donald. "What had we better do?"

"Help him, of course," replied Billie.

"And get ourselves into a lot of trouble for our pains," declared Donald.

"Who cares! Three to one is more than I can stand," and Billie yanked his Marlin from its sheath at his saddle girth.

Seeing that Billie intended to interfere, even if he had to go it alone, Don and Adrian followed his example, and, spurring their horses forward, interposed between the boy and his pursuers.

"What's all the trouble?" asked Donald in Spanish, as soon as the pursuing horsemen had come to a halt.

"He is running away from home," replied one who seemed to be the leader, "and his uncle sent us to bring him back."

"It isn't so," declared the lad, who had stopped his flight and had come up behind the boys. "Do not believe him, *señores!*"

Adrian turned at the sound of the lad's voice. "Which are we to believe?" he asked.

"Believe me," exclaimed the lad imploringly. "If you let them take me, I do not know what they will do with me."

"Why are they chasing you?" asked Don.

"I don't know, unless it is because they do not like my father."

"Who is your father?"

"General Sanchez, of President Madero's staff."

"Who are these?" and Don pointed to the waiting horsemen.

"I don't know who that man is," replied the lad, pointing to the leader, "but the others are peons on my uncle's *hacienda.*"

"Is this true?" asked Don, turning to the pursuers, while Billie and Adrian tenderly fondled their rifles.

"Partly," replied the leader. "But you heard him say he did not know who I am. Well, I am one of his uncle's closest friends. I learned this morning that Pedro," and he pointed at the boy, "was getting into bad company, and so came out to look for him. I found him in bad company and told him he must come home with me. He refused and rode away. I then started after him. If I were not his uncle's friend, do you think I would have his uncle's peons with me?"

"It hardly seems so," replied Donald; "but, if you are such a good friend of his uncle, it's a wonder

he does not know you. How about that, Pedro," and he again turned to the boy.

"It's all a lie," was the emphatic reply. "I was out watching the men at work at the foot of the mountains this morning, when this man rode up. He told me to come with him. Never having seen him, I refused, whereupon he threatened to flog me. I jumped on my horse and rode away. A few minutes later he came after me, making all sorts of threats. Then he summoned the peons and chased me. They seem to do everything he tells them, but I do not know why."

"It sure is a queer mix-up," said Donald to his companions, in English, "and I don't know what to do."

"I'll tell you what," exclaimed Billie, after the matter had been fully explained to him, "let's all ride back to his uncle's, wherever that is, and see what he says."

"Why, sure," said Donald. "Billie, you'll make a judge some day. We'll go at once."

When the proposed plan was explained to the Mexicans, both sides to the controversy quickly acquiesced, and, turning their horses about, the combined parties started toward the mountains, Pedro leading the way.

The road ran along the bank of the Concho for a couple of miles, and then turned abruptly toward the foothills. It was a beautiful valley, and the Broncho Rider Boys were much interested in the scenery. They passed several small groups of adobe houses, which Pedro explained were on his uncle's estate, which seemed very large.

"There is the house," Pedro at length explained, pointing to a fine appearing place on the top of a small hill. "It's only a couple of miles farther."

So interested had the boys become in what Pedro was telling them that they had paid very little attention to the rest of the company, until, as they rounded a turn in the now rocky road, Adrian discovered that the man who had made all the trouble had disappeared. Adrian quickly turned and rode back a few rods to where he could get an unobstructed view of the road behind, and there was Mr. Mexican riding away as fast as his horse could carry him.

"What shall we do?" queried Adrian, as soon as he had called the others back.

"Nothing, I should say," was Donald's advice. "It looks like the question of who was right and who wrong had settled itself. I say good riddance. What do you say, Pedro?"

"I say let him go. I don't want him; but I should like to know who he is." Then to the peons: "Do you know who he is?"

The peons looked stupidly at each other, but made no reply.

"Why don't you answer?" asked Donald sharply. "Who is that man?"

"*Quien sabe!*" was the exasperating answer, as the men shrugged their shoulders in a manner which reminded Billie so much of a vaudeville act that he burst into a hearty laugh.

"*Quien sabe!*" he repeated. "Well, I know enough Spanish to understand that they don't know. But why don't they know?"

"It's too deep for me," replied Adrian. "The whole affair is too mysterious for anyone but a Sherlock Holmes to ferret out; but there is certainly no need of our going any farther in this direction, and I move that we start back."

"You won't have any trouble in getting home now, will you?" he asked, turning to Pedro.

"Oh, no; and are you going back to the Rio Brava?"

"To the what?" asked Donald.

"The Rio Brava."

"He means the Rio Grande," explained Adrian. "The Mexicans call it the Rio Brava, and that is the way it is on their maps. I saw one of their geographies once."

"Then we're going back to the Rio Brava," laughed Billie, "and I hope we get there before it begins to rain."

Whereupon, bidding good-by to Pedro, who was most profound in his thanks, they started on their return ride.

They had not been riding more than half an hour before the clouds, which had been getting blacker and blacker, became so angry-looking that they determined to seek shelter, and turned their horses' heads toward one of the little cluster of houses they had passed earlier in the day.

CHAPTER V.—A NIGHT IN A MEXICAN KITCHEN.

By the time the boys reached the little cluster of adobe buildings, the rain was descending in torrents, and, in spite of the tropical surroundings, the air was much too cold to be comfortable. As they approached the first house on the outskirts of the hamlet, the door opened and a blanketed peon, preceded by half a dozen dogs of all kinds and conditions, made his appearance. Rushing at the horses, the dogs made the neighborhood hideous with their barking, but they made no attempt to do more.

"What do you want?" called out the man, speaking in Spanish.

"Call off your dogs," replied Donald, "so we can talk with you."

The man did as requested, and the animals grouped themselves around him in the doorway.

"We want a place to get in out of the rain and something to eat," Donald continued, as soon as the barking had ceased.

"There is no place here," replied the peon.

"What is this building?" and Donald pointed at a small hut at one side, which was covered with a thatched roof.

"It's the kitchen."

"What does he say?" asked Billie, who hadn't been able to gain the faintest idea of the conversation.

"He says that's the kitchen," replied Adrian.

"Huh!" grunted Billie, "looks more like a pigpen."

"What's the matter with our going in there until it stops raining?" continued Donald, pressing his inquiries.

"You can go in there, if you want to, but there is nothing for you to eat."

"No eggs?"

"No."

"No tortillas?"

"No."

"No frijollas?"

"No."

"We will pay you well," added Donald.

The peon's manner underwent a remarkable change.

"Perhaps the *señora* has a few tortillas," he said. "I'll go and see."

He turned and quickly entered the house, returning in a minute to say that there were both tortillas—corn cakes—and beans, and inviting the boys to alight.

"There is no room in my *casa*," he said, "but, if the young *señores* will be satisfied to go into the kitchen, I will make a fire and the *señora* will get them something to eat."

The boys needed no second bidding, and, quickly dismounting, they threw their bridle-reins over some cactus growing about, and went inside.

"I'd rather eat out of doors," declared Billie, after looking the place over.

"So would I," said Adrian, "if it were not for the rain."

"Oh, I don't know," ventured Donald philosophically, "I've seen worse places than this. Do you remember the Zunis?"

"It was always dry there," declared Billie.

"Yes, and there were always plenty of snakes," laughed Adrian, who never had forgotten Billie's aversion to reptiles since his visit to the snake dancers.

Their conversation was interrupted by the appearance of the peon's wife, who proceeded to make a fire in the Mexican range, as the boys called the few bricks set up on edge. From a little earthen dish she produced a few thin corn cakes, which she toasted over the fire. When they

were properly done, she put them on a dish and poured over them a couple of spoonfuls of black beans. These she offered to the boys to eat.

Billie looked at it askance.

"I thought I was glad to eat a woman's cooking at Presidio last night," he said. "If this is a sample of Mexican women's cooking, I'd rather get my own meals."

However, they were all hungry, and the beans and tortillas soon disappeared.

"How much are you going to pay him for this, Don?" queried Adrian. "You said you would pay him well."

"I don't know. Do you think fifty cents is enough?"

"Try him and see."

Donald took a silver half dollar from his pocket and held it out toward the man, who had been watching the boys in silence. He looked stupidly at it, but made no move to take it.

"Don't you want it?" asked Donald.

"No, *señor*; it is too much."

"How much do you want?"

"A real is plenty."

A real is worth in American money about seven cents.

"Oh, take it," urged Donald in Spanish, "although I think a real is all it's worth," he added in English, which the peon could not understand.

Thus urged the man took the coin and bowed low with many expressions of thanks. The coin also seemed to have loosened his tongue, and he urged the boys to make themselves perfectly at home.

"My poor house is yours," he declared, "as long as you will honor it with your presence. I will go and give your horses some straw."

Suiting the action to the word, he hastily left the hut, and, looking through the door, the boys saw him leading the animals to a little corral a short distance from the kitchen.

The rain continued to descend almost in sheets.

"This must be the way it rained in the days of Noah," Billie suggested.

"Yes," replied Adrian, "and it looks as though it might continue for forty days. I've never seen anything like it."

"What had we better do?" asked Billie, thinking about the ride back to Presidio.

"What can we do?" echoed Donald. "We never could find our way back to the Rio Grande in this rain, and, if we did, we would find it so full of water we couldn't get across. The only thing we can do is to stay right here till it stops raining."

And stay they did.

The afternoon passed and darkness fell. The peon brought in a candle stuck into a most unique candlestick, which must have been the property of some ancient Don. The boys wondered where he got it, but did not think it wise to inquire. They knew too little Spanish to engage in anything like a general conversation with the man, but they did manage to get enough out of him to discover that he was much dissatisfied. Why, they could not make out.

Along about nine o'clock, the peon and his wife betook themselves off to the other hut, which served as their main house, and the boys, piling their saddles in the doorway, to keep out any stray dog that might be prowling about, rolled themselves up in their blankets, stretched themselves out on the floor, and were soon asleep.

How long he had slept, Billie could not tell, when he was awakened by a most unusual noise. The rain was still falling, although not in such torrents. At first Billie thought that the noise was caused by the rain on the thatched roof; but he soon became convinced that such was not the case. Finally he reached over and shook the sleeper nearest to him. It happened to be Adrian.

"What's the matter?" queried that young gentleman, sitting up and peering into the darkness.

"I don't know," whispered Billie, "but it sounds as though some one were trying to get in."

"Where?"

"That's what I can't make out."

Adrian pulled his saddle-bag toward him and took out his electric torch. Slowly he pointed it in every direction, but he could see nothing unusual, although the strange noise continued.

"Funny, isn't it?" he said, and then he arose to his feet.

As he did so, Billie glanced up at the speaker, and what he saw caused a broad grin to overspread his rotund countenance.

"Look!" he exclaimed, and pointed toward the roof.

Adrian did as he was told, and burst into a hearty laugh, which aroused Donald.

"What is it?" he exclaimed, also springing to his feet.

"Goats," laughed Billy. "They're climbing all over the roof."

And sure enough they were, for what Billie had seen was the hoof of one of them sticking through the roof.

"They'll all be coming through, first thing you know," said Billie.

"I'm not so much afraid of that as that they will make holes for the rain to come through," declared Adrian. "We must scare them off. Shoo!"

But he might as well have cried shoo at the moon.

"Wait a minute," exclaimed Billie, "I'll fix them."

He crawled over to the other side of the kitchen, where a great dry cactus stem was leaned up against the side of the wall. It was as thick as a man's leg, about six or eight feet long, and almost as light as cork. Waiting until he was satisfied by the sound that a goat was directly over his head, he gave a great thrust with the cactus log.

His aim was a good one. With a loud bleat, that was almost a wail, the goat went tumbling off the roof, and in a minute the boys heard it pattering away as fast as it could scamper. Twice during the night was the feat repeated, the only inconvenience it caused being that the boys did not sleep as soundly as they otherwise would.

After the last interruption Billie did not return to sleep, but lay awake thinking about the strange experiences of the past two days. As a result he saw daylight slowly breaking, and finding himself so wide awake, he determined to go and tend to the horses.

Removing the saddles from the doorway, he went out. The rain had ceased and there was every indication of a fine day. After taking a critical survey of the landscape, he went to the corral and examined the horses, to see that they were all right, after which he led them to a pool some distance away to water.

The whole proceeding consumed some fifteen or twenty minutes, so that, by the time he was ready to return to the hut, the sun was just rising above the horizon.

Giving the horses an armful of straw, which he found under a little shed, he started back to awaken his companions, when, to his surprise, he found himself confronted by the whole pack of wolfish dogs, who not only refused to let him advance, but threatened to attack him.

He uttered a loud "Halloo," but no one seemed to hear him.

"Get out of my way," he shouted, but his words only seemed to make the animals more furious.

Again he uttered a loud "Halloo," and again no one replied.

By this time the dogs had become more courageous, and it began to look like a very serious situation, so that Billie, in order to defend himself, drew his six-shooter, determined to use it on the first of the dogs who should make up his mind to attack him.

Once more, however, he called aloud, and in response to the shout Donald appeared at the door, just as Billie was taking aim at a big gaunt hound which seemed determined to spring upon him.

"Don't do it," called Donald. "Don't shoot unless you want to get us into all sorts of trouble."

"Why not?" asked Billie. "I'm not going to be made dog meat."

"You'll be made worse than that if you kill one of the peon's dogs."

Just what might have been the outcome of the situation is hard to tell, had not a voice of authority suddenly rang out from the direction of the house:

*"Vaya te, perros! Vaya te!"*¹

The dogs ceased their angry barking, and slunk hastily away, while Billie, looking in the direction from which the voice proceeded, saw Pedro riding around the kitchen.

CHAPTER VI.—ADRIAN MAKES A CAPTURE.

"By George!" exclaimed Billie, as he advanced to meet Pedro, "you surely did come right in the nick of time. I thought I'd have to become dog-meat, just to keep the others out of trouble, and I was going to do it."

"I don't think that would have been necessary," declared Donald, as he came out from the kitchen, followed by Adrian. "But I'm glad you got out of the trouble without killing the peon's dog. I know how much the peons think of their dogs—more than their wives."

"I'm very sorry," said Pedro, "that you should have had so much trouble, and that I did not take you home with me yesterday. My uncle says I was very rude not to have brought you home to breakfast."

"Breakfast!" exclaimed Billie. "How could you have taken us home to breakfast? It was after eleven o'clock when we met you."

Donald laughed.

"You don't understand," he said; "in Mexico they call the meal that we name breakfast simply coffee, as that is all they have to break their morning fast. From eleven to half-past twelve they have what they call *almuerzo*, or breakfast. Along about five o'clock they have *cena*, or supper, and dinner comes anywhere from seven to ten o'clock. This they call *comida*."

Billie's round face expanded into a broad smile.

"Four meals a day!" he finally exclaimed. "Fine! I think I'd like to live in Mexico."

"I'm sure we'd like to have you," laughed Pedro, "and now that I have found you again, you must come with me and have coffee. Then my uncle will send someone with you to show you the short way back to the Rio Brava."

The Broncho Rider Boys looked at each other knowingly as Adrian explained that they were not at all anxious to find a short road back, as they wished to see as much of the country as possible.

"That's fine," was Pedro's exultant exclamation, "for, if you are in no hurry, you can stay with us several days, and I can take you up the Concho. I surely want to do something to show you how much I appreciate what you did for me yesterday. My uncle thinks I was in great danger."

"How so?" asked Donald.

"Get onto your horses, and I'll tell you as you ride along," replied Pedro. "Here, Fillipe!" he called, "come and saddle the horses."

Not only Fillipe, but several other peons, who had made their appearance while the boys were talking, hastened to obey Pedro's command, and in a very few minutes the four boys were jogging along toward the Hacienda del Rio, for so the estate of Pedro's uncle was called.

"Now for the story," laughed Billie, "and I wish you would tell it in English so I can understand."

"If you won't laugh at my English," said Pedro, "I'll try."

"What, do you speak English?" asked Adrian.

"A little. My sister, Guadalupe, speaks it well, as does my uncle; but they call me the lazy one, because I have never tried very hard. I'm sorry now I didn't try harder."

"Well, try now," insisted Billie. "We have so many foreigners in the United States and so many speak poor English that we can understand most anything."

Pedro laughed heartily.

"I hope I can do as well as some; so, to begin with, I must tell you something about my home. We live on a large *hacienda*, in the State of Michoa-can, and our house is built only a little ways from the shore of a small lake, Tiasca by name. On the other side of this lake are mountains, very much like these across the Concho," and he pointed across the river to the west.

"On the shore of the lake, nearest the mountains, is a little village of fisher-folk, but they are a bad lot. They are lazy and dishonest. They steal at every opportunity. Hardly a week passes that some of them do not cross the lake and steal chickens, pigs, goats, and even cattle. We call them pirates, because they come over in little boats. They have always been bad, but since they became Zapatists they are worse than ever."

"What do you mean by Zapatists?" asked Adrian.

"Followers of the robber, Zapata. You must have heard about him."

"Now that you explain, I believe I have. So these men are followers of Zapata?"

"Yes; and before the days of President Madero they were a part of what was known as the Las Cruces robbers.

"Well, ever since my father was a young officer he has always had trouble with these pirates."

"Do they ever try to break into your house?" queried Billie.

"They did once, and that is part of the story. It happened when Guadalupe was a baby and I was only a little more. My father was away at the time with almost all the rurales in the district, and the robbers must have known that there were only a few peons left to guard the house.

"Three of them came to the gate and demanded that my mother give them five hundred dollars. She refused, and they threatened to come and get it. Mother was not much afraid, as our house is very strongly built of stone; but still she took every precaution to see that they could not break in; but that night about twenty-five of them surrounded the house and sat down to a regular siege."

"Couldn't you shoot them from the windows?" asked Billie.

"I suppose we could, but mother didn't wish to do that. So she just kept everything shut tight, expecting every hour that my father would return.

"After they had been there three days, one of our peons, Jose Gonzales, who had been away to Morelia on an errand, came home. He said that, as he came up the shore of the lake, he heard a group of the pirates saying that they were getting afraid to stay longer, and that they were going back across the lake. Sure enough, they did, and my mother was so relieved, especially to have Jose home, for he was considered above the ordinary run of peons, that she ceased her watchfulness and turned the care of the place over to Jose.

"Along about midnight my sister was taken sick, and my mother was obliged to get up to take care of her. As she came out into the rotunda and cast her eyes across the *patio* toward the great front gate, she saw a sight which frightened her nearly to death. Jose was standing in the half-open gate, talking to men whom my mother knew must be the pirates. She realized at once that he was a traitor, and, drawing quickly back into her room, she barred the door as best she could, and waited to see what would happen.

"She didn't have long to wait, as the robbers soon attempted to get in; but for a long time the bar held. Then Jose brought a great hammer and the door finally yielded."

"The villain!" exclaimed Billie, whose fighting blood was stirred by the recital of such treachery.

"It is even worse than you think," continued Pedro, "for, as the pirates rushed in, Jose called out, as he pointed to my father's strong box: 'There is the silver. You can have that, but the *señora* is mine.'

"At this he seized my mother, and started to carry her out of the door; but, as he turned, he saw a sight which caused him to lose his hold and draw his knife, for there in the door stood my father, his drawn saber in his hand and death in his eye. He took a step forward and aimed a blow at Jose, but as he struck, my mother, overcome with joy, seized him around the knees and spoiled his aim. Instead of cleaving Jose's skull, he struck a glancing blow and cut off his left ear. We found the ear later."

"Good for your father!" exclaimed all the boys. "But then what happened?" and they drew their horses down to a walk, so interested had they become in the story.

"Well, for a moment the robbers were surprised by the attack, but when they saw my father was alone, they all turned upon him and he would undoubtedly have been killed, but that his men, who had by this time overpowered the robbers in the *patio*, came to his aid. The bandits were soon secured, but in the fight and darkness, Jose escaped. We afterwards learned that he had been an accomplice of the bandits for years and had planned this attack for the sole purpose of stealing my mother. His aim was to become a gentleman and live in the City of Mexico, and for a while he did. Later my father learned of his whereabouts and his arrest was ordered, but again he managed to escape.

"During the Madero revolution he tried to win the good graces of President Madero, but his record was too bad and President Madero ordered him out of the city. Since that time he has threatened vengeance on the President and all his friends. It is even said he is trying to start a new revolution. He is none too good, I can tell you."

"But what has all this to do with your great danger?" asked Adrian.

"Why, my uncle thinks Jose is the man from whom you rescued me yesterday."

"What!" exclaimed all the boys in chorus. "That man!"

"That's what my uncle thinks. He has been reported in this vicinity. He has changed his name to Rafael Solis and I heard one of the peons yesterday address him as Don Rafael."

"I didn't notice that he had lost an ear," said Donald.

"No," said Billie, "but you noticed that he wore his hair unusually long, didn't you? I expect he does that to hide the missing ear."

"That's it exactly!" exclaimed Donald. "I knew there was something strange about his appearance, but for the life of me I couldn't tell what it was."

"Well, that's it," replied Billie, "and if I ever get my eye on you again, Mr. Don Rafael, I'll know you."

"You mustn't say Mr. Don Rafael," explained Pedro. "Don means Mr. If you want to, you can call him Don Rafael; but as for me I shall think of him always as Jose the traitor."

"But here we are at my uncle's house and he will be more than glad to see you."

As the little cavalcade drew up in front of the great white house, a peon opened the big gate and the quartette rode into the patio. Other servants quickly took their horses and led them to the stable, while Pedro escorted the boys up a broad flight of stairs to the second floor, on which were located the parlors, library and dining room. It was a beautiful home and our boys felt just a little bit awkward on coming into such a sumptuous house dressed in their travel-stained riding garments. But if they had any sense of being out of place, they were quickly put at their ease by a kindly faced gentleman of middle age, who advanced to the head of the stairs and greeted them pleasantly.

"These are the brave Americans who gave me such unexpected assistance yesterday," said Pedro by way of introduction.

"I guessed as much," replied his uncle.

"And this is my uncle, Don Antonio Sanchez," said Pedro to the boys, "he is just as glad to see you and to have you here as I am. And uncle," he continued without stopping to catch his breath, "they are going to stay with me several days, aren't you?" to the boys.

"I don't think we promised, did we?" replied Donald, "but we will stay today, anyway. We shall be pleased to see something of the Concho valley."

Don Antonio lead the way to the dining room, where the boys were introduced to Pedro's aunt and to his sister, Guadalupe.

If the boys had been embarrassed upon meeting Don Antonio, they were more so upon meeting Guadalupe, who was something different from any girl they had ever met. When she was introduced to Billie and called him Don Guillermo, he turned as red as a turkey gobbler and wished he was somewhere else; but, after a few minutes, he forgot his embarrassment in his morning meal—for when it came to eating, there was nothing could interfere with the business of the moment.

Don Antonio and his wife were much pleased with the boys and asked Donald and Adrian many questions about the big ranches from which they came. Both were able to give him all the information he wanted and he insisted that after breakfast all should ride over his *hacienda* and see the American improvements he had put upon it.

A member of Don Antonio's household who attracted much attention from the boys was a great Newfoundland dog, by the name of Tanto. He was Guadalupe's special property, and at first eyed the boys with a good deal of suspicion. But, when he discovered that they were friends of the family, he became quite as friendly as any of the others.

"He seems very fond of you," said Billie to Guadalupe, in an attempt to make himself agreeable to the beautiful *señorita*.

"Yes, indeed," she replied. "I raised him from a puppy. Are you fond of dogs, Don Guillermo?"

"Oh, yes," interrupted Adrian, who overheard the remark, "Don Guillermo is very fond of dogs. If you could have seen him playing with them, about daylight this morning, you would have thought so," at which remark all the boys laughed heartily, and Billie had to explain his adventure.

"Well, I think it was too bad that you should be caught in such a place; but Tanto will never do a thing like that. Will you, Tanto?" and she patted the dog's head.

"Come on," called Pedro from the *patio*, "if we're going to look over the *hacienda*, let's get started before it gets any warmer."

Accompanied by Don Antonio, the boys rode from place to place over the great farm, along the

eastern border of which the Concho river wound its way, while on the other side the mountains rose abruptly to several hundred feet. At the southern extremity the river approached almost to the foot of the mountains, making a narrow neck of land. Still farther south the river broadened out into quite a lake, upon which were a number of small boats.

As the boys turned to retrace their path, Adrian lingered a moment to watch the flight of a flock of water-fowl, and, as he did so, his attention was attracted to the movements of a boat, which had put out from the mountain-side, and which had started the flight of the water-fowl. It contained three men, and, as it slipped silently out of the shadows of the overhanging trees, there was something about the appearance of the man at the stern which seemed most familiar, although he had his blanket thrown over his shoulder in such a manner as to conceal his face.

At first Adrian started to call his companions, but upon second thought he decided to do a little reconnoitering on his own hook. He accordingly dismounted from his horse, and walked slowly around the trees which obscured his view. At his left was a little point of land, extending out into the water, and he slowly and cautiously made his way thither. From this point of vantage he obtained a good view of the river for quite a distance, and could see the boat without being seen.

It was very evident that the boat had come out of a little inlet about a hundred yards from the point upon which Adrian was standing, which appeared to be the mouth of a small brook. On the other side of the point, around which the boat was slowly being rowed, was a steep rock, at least three times the length of an ordinary skiff, beyond which it was impossible for Adrian to see. The boat headed directly for the rock, and a moment later disappeared behind it; but that one look was sufficient to convince Adrian that the man who had attracted his attention was the same who had tried to steal Pedro.

"I wonder what he is doing around here, anyway?" soliloquized Adrian. "No good, I'm sure. The best thing I can do is to hurry after the rest of them and tell them what I have seen. They'll be wondering where I am."

Hastily he scrambled up the bank to where he had left his horse, when, just as he raised his head above the edge, he felt a hand grasp his right foot, and he was pulled violently downward. For just a minute he clung to the shrubbery about him, and then, gaining his wits, he suddenly relaxed his hold and, turning half way round, push himself backward.

It was an old trick he had learned at school, and the result was that he came down on top, instead of underneath, the man who had grasped his ankle.

In another moment he was engaged in a rough-and-tumble fight, which proved of short duration, for Adrian was much more than a match for his assailant. Almost as soon as it takes to tell it, Adrian was sitting on top of a white-shirted peon, whose only weapon was a great stone, with which he had doubtless intended to intimidate, rather than hit, the boy.

"Well," exclaimed Adrian, as soon as he had gained his breath sufficiently to speak, "what do you mean by dragging me down like this?"

At the sound of Adrian's voice the peon turned his head and looked up at his captor in the greatest surprise.

"Pardon me," he whined. "It was a mistake. I thought you were someone else."

"Who did you think I was?"

"*El niño de Sanchez*"—meaning the Sanchez boy—whined the peon.

"Oh, you did, eh?" exclaimed Adrian. "Well, you come with me and let Don Antonio question you. I think he is looking for you."

CHAPTER VII.—IN THE HANDS OF THE ENEMY.

Adrian did not have to lead his captive far, for, when he reached the place where his horse was waiting for him, he saw the others returning. They had become concerned at his delay, and had come back to look for him.

"What's the matter?" called Donald, as soon as he was within speaking distance.

"I've had a fight," was the response, "and this is the result," pushing the peon forward.

"Fight!" exclaimed Billie. "What were you fighting about?"

"Oh, nothing. This man tried to capture me, and I turned the tables, that's all."

"Explain," said Don Antonio, looking first at Adrian and then at the peon.

"This man mistook me for Pedro, he says, and tried to drag me into the river, or somewhere."

Don Antonio turned upon the peon fiercely.

"Is this true?" he demanded sternly.

"Forgive me, *señor*," whined the peon, "I was ordered to do it."

"Ordered!" thundered Don Antonio. "By whom?"

"Don Rafael."

"*Asi!*" exclaimed Don Antonio, and his face grew even more stern. "So it is that scoundrel who put you up to this? Where is he?"

The peon remained silent.

"Where is he, I say?" repeated Don Antonio.

"I can't tell."

"Why not?"

"He would kill me, *señor*."

"Have no fear. If you will tell me why you tried to take Pedro and where we can catch Don Rafael, as you call him, I will give you ample protection."

Thus encouraged, the peon said that Don Rafael was hiding in the mountains a short distance from the river. He said that he had gathered about him a band of more than fifty men, and that he had told them they were to be part of a new army to overthrow President Madero and make Porfirio Diaz again president. In order to protect themselves, he told them they must make a captive of General Sanchez's son, Pedro.

"I see," exclaimed Don Antonio. "They want to hold Pedro as a hostage, in case any of them get into the hands of the law. Isn't that it?"

"*Si, señor*," said the peon, nodding his head emphatically. If this proved to be true then Donald's guess had been along correct lines. This little fact seemed like a good omen to begin with. Now, if it turned out that this further prediction regarding the limited number of the rustlers also came to pass, and they could only catch them off their guard before dawn arrived, it would not be strange if they turned the trick, daring as their plans might appear.

"Now, first of all we've got to muffle our ponies' heads so they can't betray us by neighing," announced Donald.

"A good idea, I say," Adrian went on to remark, approvingly. "I've known the best trained cayuse going to let out a neigh when it scented some of its own kind near by. That's a thing they just can't help, seems like. So, the sooner we get their muzzles tied up the better."

"You'll have to show me how," said Billie; "because that's where my education's been sorter neglected, so to speak. But I want to know, just stick a pin in that, please."

He soon learned just how this could be accomplished by the aid of their blankets. The horses objected to such treatment, but had to submit in the end. And when the job had been completed they were so muzzled that they could not have whinnied, no matter how hard they tried.

Mounting them again the three boys moved cautiously ahead. It was their purpose to cover a cer-
[Transcriber's note: missing line(s) of text at this place in original printed text.] can get away. The rurales can take care of the fifty others later on."

"That is good advice," declared Don Antonio. "Let us hasten back and send a messenger to Presidio del Norte, and then we can return and watch for Don Rafael."

"I don't see any use of all of us returning to the house," declared Billie. "I'll stay here and watch the river."

"And I'll stay with you," declared Adrian.

"Suppose we fix it this way," said Don Antonio: "Pedro and one of you return to the house and send the messenger, and I and two others will stay and watch the river, as Don Guillermo says."

"If Don Guillermo's willing," replied Adrian, with a laugh at Billie's Mexican name.

"Sure I'm willing," said Billie, "and tell the rurales to hurry up or we'll capture the whole bunch."

The matter having been thus decided, Pedro and Donald returned to the house, taking the captured peon with them, while the other three hitched their horses and proceeded to the little point of land from which Adrian made his observation.

The morning was now far spent, and the sun was rapidly approaching the meridian; but for once

Billie seemed to have forgotten that it was dinnertime. In fact, so interested was he in the adventure, that he seemed utterly oblivious of the sun itself, which beat down fiercely upon the trio, and made the shade almost a necessity. So interested was he, in fact, that he ventured to the very edge of the point, and peered eagerly in the direction of the great rock.

"I could almost swim around there," he said to himself. "I've a great notion to do it."

For a minute he stood undecided.

"If it wasn't for my Marlin I would," he mused. "As it is, I guess I'd better go around."

He walked back toward the place where he had left the others, all the time looking for a place where he could get around behind the big rock.

"What are you looking after?" queried Adrian, as Billie passed the spot where he sat with his eyes glued on the river.

"I want to see what is the other side of that rock."

"What good'll that do? We can see way up the river from here."

"I don't know," was Billie's response, "but I've got a hunch to take a look."

"Well, go ahead. Don Antonio and I will stay here. If you see anything, call."

Slowly Billie forced his way through the fringe of bushes that lined the bank, and, little by little, climbed to the top of the big rock, from which he could gain just as good a view of the mountainous country at the side as he could of the river. What he saw caused him to drop hastily to the ground and crawl a step or two backward, for directly in front of him, not a hundred yards away, was a score or more men grouped around Don Rafael, who was addressing them earnestly.

Waiting to see whether or not he had been observed, and judging from the fact that there was no commotion from below that he had not, Billie cautiously peered through the foliage.

The spot upon which the men were gathered was right at the mouth of the little stream before mentioned. A boat, evidently the one in which Adrian had seen Don Rafael and his two companions, was tied to the bank.

So far as Billie could see, only three or four of the men were armed. They seemed a peaceable lot.

"I wonder what he is telling them?" mused Billie in a partly audible voice—a habit of talking with himself of which he seemed totally unconscious. "I wish I could get near enough to hear."

Cautiously he crept nearer the edge of the rock, in the meantime straining every nerve to catch a word. Once he did catch the sound of Don Rafael's voice, but he could not understand.

"The trouble is," explained Billie to himself, "he is talking Spanish, and I'm not familiar enough with the lingo to distinguish the sounds. I wish he would talk English."

Again he advanced his position a couple of feet.

The voice was more distinct, and, as Don Rafael became somewhat excited, Billie caught the words, "*carbina*" and "*macheté*," which he knew referred to arms.

"By George!" suddenly exclaimed Billie, in a voice loud enough for anyone near him to have heard, "I'll bet they're talking about running guns into the country. I'll bet we've stumbled onto the very thing we came out to find. I must hurry back and tell Ad."

Unmindful of the men below, he jumped up from his recumbent position and started to leave the rock the way he had come. In his haste, he did not notice that the spot upon which he had been reclining was covered with moss, and, as he took his first step forward, his foot slipped; he grasped frantically at the surrounding bushes, to save himself, failed in his attempt, and the next moment pitched head first off the rock.

Vainly he tried to break his fall by catching at the shrubbery. His efforts only resulted in his turning almost a complete somersault and landing head first upon the sand, in the very midst of the men upon whom he had been spying.

As he fell, he gave one cry for help, and then, as his head came into contact with the hard ground, all around him became dark, and he knew no more.

The cry for help reached his companions in the midst of an animated discussion about Mexico and its needs, and they sprang to their feet on the instant. For just a moment they waited to hear the cry repeated, but, when it was not, Adrian threw a shell into his repeater, and started in the direction of the cry, closely followed by Don Antonio, whose greater age made him somewhat slower in his movements.

From the time the cry was heard until Adrian reached the summit of the rock, could not have

been more than three minutes, but in that time the men and Billie had completely disappeared, the only thing remaining to give any idea of what had happened being Billie's hat, which had fallen from his head in his fall, and the sound of oarlocks, which seemed to come from up the little creek.

CHAPTER VIII.—IN THE SMUGGLER'S CAVE.

The soft purling of water was the first sound which greeted Billie's ear when he was again able to collect his thoughts. He was lying upon his back and looking up into darkness. He tried to move, but was unable to do so, and so closed his eyes and tried to think what had happened.

As his mind became clearer, he remembered his fall; and, as he became more and more normal, and could move his hands about, he realized that he was lying in the bottom of a boat and that the purling of the water was caused by the rapid movement of the boat through the water.

"I wonder what makes it so dark?" he thought. "It was dinnertime the last I remember, and I don't feel as though I had been asleep very long."

All at once the noise of the water ceased, and a moment later he heard the boat grate upon the sand. A man sprang over him and beached the boat, and Billie could feel it being pulled up onto the shore. Then a light appeared, and in another minute a man with a lighted torch in his hand came and peered into the boat.

"*Buenos noches*," Billie exclaimed, after the man had been gazing silently into his face for several seconds. "*Que hora es?*"

He thought it must be quite right to say "good evening" because it was dark, but he asked the time to make sure.

The man made no reply, but turned and walked hastily away.

"That's funny," said Billie. "I think I'll follow him."

He attempted to arise, but a strange feeling in his head and in the pit of his stomach caused him to forego the attempt.

"I must be hungry," he thought. "That's what I get for going without my dinner. But I've been hungry before and never felt this way."

Somehow or other he didn't seem able to figure it out, and so he closed his eyes and lay perfectly quiet, with a sense of going to sleep.

The next time he opened his eyes, the whole scene had changed. He was lying on some sort of a coarse bed and by the light that came in through a small grated window in the ceiling, he could see that he was in a good-sized room, the walls of which appeared to be solid stone.

There were several pieces of furniture in the room, consisting of chairs, a table and a chest of drawers. On the walls were a couple of old-fashioned gun-racks, but no guns. The general impression it gave was not pleasant, and reminded him of some of the old Scotch prisons he had read about in the works of Sir Walter Scott.

"I wonder where I am," was the first thought that came to his mind. "I'm out of the boat, that's certain, but how did I get here?"

Again he attempted to arise, and this time found that he was stronger and able to sit up.

He made a careful inspection of the room, and discovered that there was only one door, directly facing the bed, and no windows save the one in the ceiling. Then he happened to think of his revolver, and felt for it. It was gone, but his holster and belt, filled with cartridges, still remained about his waist.

"I'm in a jolly nice fix," he muttered to himself, and, for want of anything better to do, he lay back on the bed and closed his eyes, still wondering what had happened.

A few minutes later he heard the door open, footsteps approach his bed, and a hand was laid upon his head.

Billie looked up through half-closed eyelids, and was surprised to see bending over him a strange-looking individual, who reminded him strongly of the Zuni medicine man, only that his face was more refined.

"What do you think of him, Santiago?" asked a voice in English, whose owner Billie could not see, but which sounded somewhat familiar.

"I do not think he is badly hurt. I think he will be all right soon."

"Bueno! Then I will leave him in your care; but see to it that he does not escape. Our safety may depend upon keeping him prisoner."

"That's nice, pleasant information," thought Billie as he heard the speaker withdraw. "To be kept a prisoner, am I? Well, we'll see about it."

He uttered a faint groan and threw his hands over his head as though in pain.

"I'll not get well as fast as they expect," was his mental resolve. "I'll make them think I'm too sick to get away until the right time comes."

Again Billie felt a hand upon his head and again he observed the man beside him with half closed eyes.

When the man spoke again his voice was as soft as a woman's.

"Where do you feel badly?" he asked.

Then for the first time it occurred to Billie to wonder how he happened to be addressed in English.

"It must be a friend," he thought. So he replied in a voice that sounded most strange to him: "In my head. It seems too big for the rest of me."

"No wonder," said his companion—whether nurse or jailer, Billie was trying to determine. "You struck right on top of it when you fell off the rock."

It was the first time that Billie had thought of the rock; but at the word, the happenings of all that had gone before came back to him.

"Now I remember," he thought. "I must have fallen right in the middle of that bunch and they have brought me here—wherever this is. That must have been Don Rafael who was in here; but why are they all talking English?"

It was a bigger problem than he felt like answering, so he just lay quiet as he felt a cooling lotion applied to his head and a pleasant but very pungent odor filled the room.

"I think I'll go to sleep if you don't mind," he finally said and he closed his eyes.

It did not seem to Billie that he had slept more than fifteen minutes when he again opened his eyes, but as he learned afterwards he must have slept nearly twenty-four hours. The strange man still stood beside him, holding in his hand a dish of steaming soup, while at the foot of the bed stood Don Rafael.

For just a moment Billie did not recognize either of them, but was brought to himself by hearing Don Rafael say:

"I am very sorry you met with such a serious accident. I suppose you must have been hunting and lost your foothold. I have sent word to your friends and am sure they will come for you as soon as you are able to be moved."

He spoke with such an air of truthfulness, that if Billie had not been absolutely certain that he was a bad man, he would have believed him. However, he said nothing, and after a minute Don Rafael continued:

"You must not think I have any animosity against you for what you did in helping Pedro to escape me. That is a matter of Mexican politics of which you young Americans know nothing. The Americans are all my friends. Now you must eat your dinner. I will come and see you again."

The word dinner sounded pretty good to Billie and so he felt justified in saying "thank you," and sitting up in his bed took the soup from Santiago's hand as Don Rafael left the room.

"You are much better," said Santiago, as Billie ate his soup as only a hungry boy can.

"Yes, I think so; but I don't feel exactly right yet."

"You will in a little while. Do you want some more?" as Billie emptied the dish and handed it back.

"I usually eat something besides soup," declared Billie. "Have you anything else?"

"Oh, yes," and Santiago took from a tray which he had placed on the table a dish of black beans.

"Frijolles!" exclaimed Billie. "They look pretty good. I'm sure I can eat them," and eat them he did.

"Are you Don Rafael's mozo?" he asked as he finally finished his meal.

"Santiago is no man's servant," was the soft but dignified reply. "Santiago belongs to Mexico."

"I wonder what he means by that?" thought Billie, but he didn't think it wise to ask, so he simply said: "Oh!" But after a few minutes he ventured to ask:

"How do you come to speak English?"

"So that everyone who hears me will not understand. Don Rafael is the only one here who understands English. It is a foreign tongue."

Again Billie replied "Oh!" to himself. He thought: "Funny, isn't it, that English is a foreign language. I never thought of it before."

"Do you wish to get up?" Santiago finally asked.

"After a little. If you don't mind, I think I'll lie here a while longer."

"Very well. I'll be back soon."

For a long time Billie lay with wide-open eyes, looking at the ceiling.

"I wonder why I don't feel like getting up?" he asked himself. "I guess I must have had a hard bump. I wonder where Donald and Adrian are, and if they really do know what has become of me. Of course they'll come and get me after a while; but where do you suppose I am? It must be some sort of a cave, I guess."

He looked at the grated window in the ceiling, through which came the sunlight as the leaves which almost covered it on the outside were blown backward and forward by the breeze.

"I wonder where that opening leads to," he thought. "If I could only get through that, I'd be all right; but I reckon that's impossible."

Still he kept on looking and wishing he were on the other side of the grating.

All at once something shut off the light.

"Hello!" exclaimed Billie. "I wonder what's happened?"

In another second the obstacle was removed and the sun shone in again, only to be shut out a minute later.

"By George!" exclaimed Billie, sitting up in bed, "there's something looking in at the window. I believe it's a dog."

He got out of bed, and stood directly under the opening, looking upward.

"It is a dog," he declared. "I wonder whose?" Then all of a sudden: "It might be Pedro's. Suppose it is! Tanto! Tanto!" he called.

The animal gave a low whine, as of recognition.

"By George, I'm right!" declared Billie, becoming much excited. "There must be somebody with him. They must be looking for me. Tanto! Tanto!" he again called.

At this the dog gave a sharp bark and immediately disappeared.

For a long time Billie watched the opening for him to reappear, but he did not come back, and Billie finally went and lay down; but not for an instant did he take his eyes from the little window in the ceiling. He could tell by the way the glints of light moved about that fully an hour had passed, when again the opening was darkened and a face appeared at the grating.

"Don Guillermo! Don Guillermo!" a voice softly called, and then Billie recognized that his caller was Pedro's sister, Guadalupe.

CHAPTER IX.—GUADALUPE IN DANGER.

In order to explain Guadalupe's presence at the grated window in the top of Billie's prison-house, it is necessary to recount the happenings at the Hacienda del Rio and vicinity since the hour that Billie plunged from the top of the rock into the midst of Don Rafael's band.

It was shortly after noon when Billie's accident happened, and Donald and Pedro were on their way to send for the rurales. As we have seen, Adrian and Don Antonio ran to Billie's assistance, but were too late to discover his whereabouts. They did, however, find his hat, and, in searching more closely, also discovered the print of many feet on the sand along the bank of the creek.

Upon making this discovery, Adrian led the way up the creek for several hundred yards, and finally arrived at a place where the creek seemed to flow right out from under the side of the mountain.

This solved the mystery. There was undoubtedly a cave under the mountain, which was entered by means of the stream. Adrian was for getting one of the small boats he had seen on the banks of the Concho, and going immediately to Billie's rescue, but Don Antonio advised that nothing be done until the rurales arrived and there was a sufficient force to arrest Don Rafael and his band.

Adrian finally agreed to the plan, and, after a careful survey of the location, he and Don Antonio returned to the house.

When Donald heard what had happened he was even more insistent than Adrian had been that they should proceed at once to examine the cave. If they found it was in possession of Don Rafael and his band, Donald was in favor of forcing their way in, no matter what the opposition.

"I am sure that would be very unwise," declared Don Antonio. "Our messenger is already on his way to Presidio del Norte to summon the rurales. They will certainly be here by daylight tomorrow morning. Then we can go in force and will be sure to succeed. If only four of us go, we will probably be overpowered by numbers and your friend may suffer. Let us have patience."

"Well," replied Donald slowly, "I'll agree to wait until morning; but, if the rurales are not here by that time, I shall go after Billie, if I have to go alone."

"You won't have to go alone," said Adrian. "You know that."

"Indeed you won't," chimed in Pedro. "I remember what you did for me."

The night passed slowly to our boys, and they were up the following morning at sunrise. Coffee was served soon after, and still the rurales had not arrived.

A few minutes later the messenger sent to summon them returned to say that, owing to a report that a quantity of arms were to be run across the river lower down the Rio Grande, most of the rurales had been sent thither, and would not return till morning. This meant they could not possibly reach the Hacienda del Rio before noon.

"That settles it," declared Donald. "I'm going to find Billie."

"And I, too," said Adrian. "I'll bet the place the rurales have gone is at the same place we lost old Bray."

"Where was that?" asked Don Antonio.

"At the *hacienda* of old Pablo Ojeda," replied Adrian, and he told of their experience.

"I have heard of him often," said Don Antonio. "He has always been suspected of smuggling across the border—not only cattle, but liquor, ammunition, and all dutiable goods."

"I should think the rurales would lock him up," said Pedro.

"They have, several times, but he has always managed to escape punishment. He has some sort of political influence, which has helped him escape."

"Well, I don't care what they do with the old chap," said Donald. "I'm off to find Billie."

"I shall stay and guide the rurales," said Don Antonio. "You boys go and do all the scouting you wish; but take my advice and do nothing rash until I come with the rurales."

Promising him they would be careful, the little party of three set out, and Don Antonio went to his study to do some writing. Guadalupe, who had stood silently by, listening to the conversation, followed the boys to the great gate, and waved them a good-by, after which she returned to her room and tried to busy herself in her daily tasks. But somehow she could not become interested in her work, and, a little later, calling Tanto, she wandered out into the fields, finally straying to the bank of the river.

For a time she sat on the bank, watching the flowing water, and thinking about the three boys, who had so unexpectedly come into her life. She was much interested in them and their adventures, and her thought went out especially to Billie, whose captivity seemed most hard.

"And he is in all this trouble just because he helped Pedro to escape Don Rafael," she thought to herself, not knowing that the boys had a mission of their own. "I wish I could do something to help him."

After a while she arose and walked slowly up the river, toward the spot where Billie disappeared.

"I mustn't be walking in this direction," she suddenly thought, "I might get into trouble."

Espying a cow-path, which seemed to lead away from the river, she turned to the left, thinking that she would come out into the open field after a little. Instead, she found herself going deeper into the woods, and after a few minutes again sat down to rest, before retracing her footsteps.

She called Tanto, but he did not seem inclined to lie down. Instead, after the manner of dogs,

went off on an exploring expedition of his own.

Guadalupe must have fallen asleep, for she was awakened by Tanto licking her face.

"Go away," she exclaimed, springing to her feet, and then she noted that it was afternoon.

"I must have slept a couple of hours," she thought. Then, as she started back by the way she had come: "Come, Tanto, we must be going."

But Tanto refused to go, and when she turned to call him, he indicated by every means he could that he wanted her to go in the opposite direction.

"What is it?" she asked.

Tanto barked loudly, and again started off in the opposite direction, stopping every few feet and looking back to see if she were following.

"Do you want me to go that way?" she asked, taking a few steps toward him.

The dog barked joyfully and gave every evidence of pleasure.

"Well, go on, then," she finally said. "You may know the way home better than I."

Off went Tanto on a gentle trot and Guadalupe followed as best she could.

Tanto led the way up a little hill and down the other side to a ravine of some depth. It didn't look very inviting, and Guadalupe stopped.

"I'm sure this isn't the way home," she exclaimed. "Come on back, Tanto."

But the dog refused to obey, and continued his antics.

"Well," thought the girl, "I might as well see what he has found," and she again followed him until he came to a spot where the path terminated abruptly in front of a steep bank which was covered with vines and underbrush.

Up this bank Tanto scrambled, and, with nose to the ground, emitted several sharp barks.

"What is it?" asked Guadalupe, as she, too, climbed to the top of the bank, noticing as she did so that she could see the river through the trees fully half a mile away.

Again the dog barked and put his nose to the ground, while, with his feet, he began to scratch among the leaves.

Looking down to see what he was trying to get, Guadalupe saw the grating, and, a moment later, she was down upon her knees beside the dog.

The grating was partly covered with leaves, so that at first the girl could not make out what it was. Brushing these aside, the opening was revealed, and a moment later she had her eyes down as close as she could get, and was peering into the darkness.

As her eyes became accustomed to the darkness, she discovered that she was looking into a large room, and gradually she could make out the various pieces of furniture. Then she discovered there was someone on the bed, and having no doubt as to who it was, she called:

"Don Guillermo! Don Guillermo!"

This was the sound which had attracted Billie's attention.

"Is that you, Don Guillermo?" she asked.

"Yes," came the whispered reply.

"Are you hurt?" she next asked.

"Not much."

"Are you a prisoner?"

"Yes; but I'm not going to be long."

Guadalupe could see that he was getting upon his feet, and partly arose to shift her position, when Tanto sprang back with a deep growl. The next instant she felt herself seized from behind, and, when she would have screamed, a hand was placed firmly over her mouth.

Guadalupe was a girl of spirit. Through her veins flowed the blood of fighting ancestors, and, when she felt herself so suddenly seized upon, she had no mind to give up her freedom without a struggle.

Wrenching herself free, she gave one scream. Before she could repeat it, she heard Tanto utter a fierce growl, and the next minute felt her captor fall.

Turning quickly to discover what had happened, she saw that Tanto had grasped her assailant by the throat, and that man and dog were engaged in a fierce fight upon the ground at her feet.

Even while she looked the man ceased to struggle and lay still.

Calling to the dog, Guadalupe started to leave the spot, but was prevented by the appearance of two more men. They both started back with surprise, at sight of the girl and dog, and the lifeless figure at their feet.

Turning from the prostrate form, Tanto drew back, facing the newcomers.

"*Caramba!*" exclaimed one. "Shoot the brute. I've left my pistol in the cave."

"And I, too," said the other. "I have nothing but my knife."

"Well, then, use your knife. I'll take care of the girl," and he advanced upon Guadalupe.

But Tanto's blood was up. Everyone but Guadalupe was an enemy. As he stood by the girl's side, with lips drawn back and every hair erect, he was a foe to be considered. The taste of blood had made him wild. Before the speaker had taken five steps, the dog was at his throat. The force of the attack carried both dog and man to the ground, where for some seconds they fought desperately. But the unarmed peon was no match for the great beast. In a few minutes the conflict was over, and a second figure lay stretched upon the earth, while Guadalupe—unnerved by the sight—covered her face with her hands.

She was brought back to herself by a soft voice saying: "Call off your dog, *señorita*, and I will help you to get away from here."

Guadalupe raised her eyes in surprise.

"You need have no fear," the speaker continued. "I am not making war on women. Call off your dog, or I shall be obliged to kill him," and Santiago, for it was he, drew a revolver from his breast.

Seeing that the man was armed, when he had declared to his companion that he was not, Guadalupe perceived that he must be friendly, and so called to the dog.

At first Tanto was not inclined to mind, but, after a second command, he left his last victim and placed himself at Guadalupe's side.

"You can see I could kill your dog," explained Santiago. "I could have killed him before. But I have no love for these," and he gave the two bodies a contemptuous kick. "Keep your dog at your side and follow me before someone else comes."

Even as Santiago spoke, they heard voices, and other men came crashing through the bushes some distance away.

"This way," said Santiago, and he started in an opposite direction.

But they had no more than reached level ground than they heard voices on the other side.

"It is impossible for us to get away without being seen," said Santiago. "Can you send the dog home?"

"Yes."

"Then do so, and trust to me."

Bending over Tanto, the girl said in a firm, low voice: "Go home, Tanto! Go home and bring my father!"

The dog looked at her earnestly for a moment and then at Santiago.

"Go!" again said Guadalupe, and she reached out and took Santiago's hand. "No one is going to harm me."

The dog gave a low whine, as though he perfectly understood, and bounded away through the underbrush. As he disappeared, Santiago fired his revolver into the air and advanced toward the approaching footsteps. A moment later a dozen of the smugglers appeared.

"What's the meaning of this shooting?" asked the leader.

"Go to the top of yonder mound and see for yourself," was Santiago's reply.

Several of the men hastened to follow the instructions. They scrambled up the mound, where they recoiled in fright at the sight of their comrades.

"How did it happen?" asked the leader, as he returned to where Santiago and Guadalupe were standing.

"Ask the girl," replied Santiago. "All I know is that I came up from the room below to bring an order to Louis and Leocadio, who are on guard at this place. I found them both as you see them. The girl and her dog were running away as fast as they could. I fired a shot at the dog, but missed him. I captured the girl, and am going to hold her for a ransom."

The leader looked at him incredulously. Then to Guadalupe he said:

"How could a dog kill two men?"

Guadalupe looked at Santiago, but made no reply.

"Tell him," said Santiago. "Tell Fillipe how it happened."

"I don't know," declared Guadalupe. "One man seized me and Tanto sprang upon him. A few minutes later the other came."

"Who is the girl?" asked Fillipe.

"She belongs at the Hacienda del Rio," replied Santiago.

"*Asi!*" exclaimed Fillipe. "This is good news. Don Rafael will be glad to get her. Come along!"

He seized Guadalupe by the arm and started to lead her away, but Santiago interfered.

"Hands off!" he said. "She belongs to me. I'll take her to Don Rafael, and, if there is any ransom, I shall have it."

Although Santiago's words were spoken in a low, soft tone, Fillipe obeyed, and the entire party left the place and proceeded by a circuitous route to the rear of the little chain of foothills which bordered the river. After a walk of some five or ten minutes they approached a clump of bushes in front of which a Mexican was standing guard. He stepped aside, and the men entered the bushes, which Guadalupe soon discovered concealed a door in the hillside. At a knock from Fillipe the door was opened, disclosing a passageway through which the men and their captive proceeded, closing the door behind them.

They had no sooner disappeared than two figures emerged stealthily from behind a jutting rock and threw themselves upon the guard, whom they quickly overcame and bound.

The two figures were Donald and Adrian.

CHAPTER XI.—A COUNCIL OF WAR.

Having secured the guard and bound him firmly to a tree, the boys approached the door through which Guadalupe had just been led captive.

"I never suspected it," said Adrian.

"Nor I," said Donald, "I thought sure it would be Billie. Where do you suppose they caught her?"

"I can't imagine. You don't suppose they have attacked the house, do you?"

"Hardly."

"Where do you suppose this door leads to?"

"There must be some sort of a cave back in these hills," and Donald left the door and began exploring the immediate neighborhood.

"By George!" he finally exclaimed, "I believe I've got it. You see these hills form a little ridge leading to the creek. Somewhere in here there is a cave which opens onto the creek, and these cutthroats have made some kind of an underground passage to the cave."

Donald's guess was a good one. The only thing wrong about it was the fact that the underground passage was not made by the men at present using it, but by others many years before—how long, no one knows.

"I believe you are right," said Adrian, "and, if you are, what is the matter with following this ridge until we find the other entrance?"

"That's just what I was going to suggest," was Donald's reply. "Come on!"

Suiting the action to the word, he ascended the hill, followed by Adrian.

Arrived at the top, the boys could see that they were some little distance from the creek and that the ridge upon which they stood was not continuous but broken and irregular. There were also two paths.

"Which of these paths had we better follow, Don?" asked Adrian.

Donald bent down and examined both carefully.

"I believe," he finally said, "that this one on the left has been the most used. Suppose we take this?"

They did so, and after a few minutes approached the place where the bodies of the two smugglers were lying.

"What's this?" exclaimed Donald, starting back as the two figures caught his eye.

Adrian made no reply, but stood staring in surprise at the unexpected sight. It was not a pleasant spectacle, and both the boys involuntarily turned away from the place.

Donald was the first to regain his composure. "Come," he said, "this is no time for squeamishness. Something serious has occurred, and we have been in too many serious scrapes to falter now! Let's see what has happened."

They approached closer and examined the bodies.

"They have been killed by some wild beast," declared Adrian. "They look just like sheep that have been killed by wolves."

"Yes," replied Donald, "or by dogs."

"Why do you say dogs, Don?"

"I just have an idea; that's all."

Adrian wrinkled his brow. Then a smile of intelligence passed over his face.

"I see," he exclaimed. "I have the same idea—Tanto!"

"Exactly," replied Don. "But they have captured Guadalupe in spite of the dog."

"By George, Don, you've hit it exactly! But where is the dog now? He must have escaped, or we should see his body here."

"True," replied Don. "But why should he run away? You'd think a dog which could do such a thing would stick to his mistress no matter what happened."

"Sure you would. There's a mystery here we must unravel. Where do you suppose Tanto is?"

As though in response to the question, there was a sharp bark from the thicket, and the next moment Tanto sprang up onto the mound and attacked one of the lifeless bodies.

Both the boys turned at the unexpected arrival, only to confront Don Antonio and an officer of the rurales, who clambered up beside the boys.

"What is the meaning of all this?" demanded the officer, gazing first at the boys and then at the dog and his victims.

"You know as much about it as we," replied Adrian; "but anyone can guess what has happened," and he proceeded to tell the officer about seeing Guadalupe taken into captivity by the smugglers and the finding of the bodies, while Don Antonio called Tanto away and ordered the peons who had followed him to cover the bodies with branches until they could be properly cared for.

"Well," exclaimed the captain, for so the officer proved to be, "we have evidently run to earth a desperate band; but I am not sure whether they are simply smugglers or revolutionists."

"The presence of Don Rafael leads me to believe they are the latter," said Don Antonio.

"We shall very soon find out," declared the captain. "My men will be here shortly, and we will force the door to the cave and run them out and capture them."

"How?" queried Donald.

"Very simply! I will station a part of my men in front of the cave. Then I will force the rear door! If they try to escape by boat, they will be either captured or shot. If they turn and show fight, we will be in sufficient force to overpower them."

"And, while you are doing this, what do you think will happen to our friend and to Don Antonio's

niece?"

"Yes," echoed Don Antonio, "we must remember Guadalupe! We can do nothing until she is rescued!"

The captain removed his sombrero and scratched his head.

"I hadn't thought of that," he finally said.

"That is where Don Rafael is the smartest," said Adrian. "That is why he was trying to capture Pedro."

"What would you suggest?" asked Don Antonio, who had come to have a wholesome respect for the opinions of the American boys.

"I haven't figured it out yet," replied Adrian. "Have you thought of anything, Don?"

"Yes; I have thought of a number of things, but none that seems to meet the requirements."

"How would it do to try and get into communication with Don Rafael?" suggested Adrian.

"Not a bad idea at all," replied Donald; "but—hello! what's the dog found?" he suddenly asked, as Tanto, with nose to the ground, began to wag his tail and utter a joyous whine.

The exclamation at once called the attention of the four to the little grated window, through which Guadalupe was looking when seized by the bandits, and Donald threw himself down beside the dog and peered into the space below.

"What do you see?" asked Adrian.

"Three figures," whispered Donald, "but I can't make out who they are. I wish we could pull out these iron bars!"

He seized the grating and pulled with all his might, but the bars refused to yield.

"If we only had a crowbar!" he exclaimed.

"Beat them down," came a voice from below.

Donald started back in surprise for just a moment, then put his face close to the bars and whispered back:

"What did you say?"

"Beat the bars down! They are only held in their place by a frame which must be rotten."

Donald repeated the instructions to the others.

"We haven't anything to beat them in with," replied Adrian. "Who is it talking—Billie?"

"I don't know who it is," replied Donald. "Sounds like a woman's voice. Can't somebody find a big stone?"

"Plenty," said Don Antonio. "Here, *hombres*," to the peons, "bring one of those big stones yonder."

The men hastened to obey, and, with the stone for a sledge hammer, Donald quickly knocked out the iron bars, which fell noisily to the floor below.

The opening thus made enabled him to get his head in sufficiently to have seen the interior of the room, had it not been that he shut off his own light; but it was not necessary for him to see what was going on, for this time Billie was out of bed and talking to him.

"Is that you, Ad?" he asked.

"No, it's Don. How are you, Billie? All right?"

"All except a little weakness in my legs and a bit of dizziness in my head."

"Who is with you?"

"Guadalupe and Santiago."

"Santiago who?"

"I don't know his other name, but he's all right. He's looking out for us."

"Are you a prisoner?"

"Sure. What do you suppose I'm doing here—taking a vacation?"

Donald could not help laughing at Billie's characteristic reply, in spite of the seriousness of the situation, as he turned from the window to repeat his conversation to his companions.

"What had we better do?" he finally asked.

"Is your friend armed?" asked the captain.

Donald put the question to Billie and received a negative reply.

"Suppose you hand him your rifle and then find out just how things are in the room below."

"Here, Billie," called Don, "you take my Marlin and defend yourself to the last. How are things fixed down there?"

"Santiago can tell you better than I," was the response. Whereupon Santiago explained to Donald the exact condition in the cave.

It appears that when the men who had captured Guadalupe took her before Don Rafael, he was filled with joy, and ordered that she should be kept with the greatest care.

"She will prove another and most valuable hostage," he declared, and at once ordered her locked up in the same cell with Billie, which was the only place of its kind in the cave. When Santiago objected, he ordered him locked up also.

"And here we are," explained Santiago. "There is but one door into the cell, and that very narrow, so now that we have two weapons, for I still have my revolver, we can prevent anyone from coming in. The only way they could get us out is to starve us out, which, of course, is impossible now that you are here."

The information was received with great thankfulness by the rescuing party. In his attempt to make the escape of his prisoners impossible Don Rafael had put them in the one spot where, under the changed conditions, they were comparatively, if not perfectly, safe.

Very briefly Don whispered the proposed plan of attack to those within the cave, closing with an injunction to Billie to be on the alert and to make every shot count if the smugglers should attempt to force the entrance.

"And here's something to keep up your courage," he added, throwing into the cell the luncheon which had been given him when he left the Hacienda del Rio that morning. "You see, I remembered your failing."

While this conversation had been going on, the rurales to the number of half a hundred, guided by Pedro, had arrived, and arrangements were at once perfected for an attack upon the smugglers' stronghold.

CHAPTER XII.—THE BATTLE AT THE CAVE.

Mustering his band, the captain of the rurales quickly formed his plan of attack. Ten of the company were to seize the two boats at the mouth of the creek and take their positions at the side of the big rock, whose slippery top had proved so disastrous to Billie. Ten others were to secrete themselves on the bank of the stream opposite the water entrance to the cave. The balance of the band were to force the door whose outer guard had been overpowered and bound by Donald and Adrian.

Having thus disposed his forces, the captain started with his division of thirty toward the door, with the understanding that he would not attempt to force an entrance until a shot from the river should advise him that the water forces were in position.

"What will you have us do?" asked Donald.

"Keep out of the way, so that you will not be shot," laughed the captain. "That's the proper thing for boys."

"We're not that kind of boys," declared Adrian.

"Oh, well then," answered the captain, "you just skirmish around on the outside to pick up any who might succeed in getting away! I don't think you'll have a great deal to do, for my men intend to bag the entire band."

The plan suited the boys first rate and they proceeded immediately to take advantage of the instructions.

"I'll have to station myself somewhere in short range," declared Donald. "Having loaned Billie my Marlin, I have nothing but my six-shooter."

"I reckon that'll be sufficient. It looks to me as though the whole thing would be at short range

and of short duration. I hope so. We're not down here looking for trouble."

"That's surely the truth," laughed Donald, "but somehow or other, we seem to have a faculty of getting mixed up in all sorts of things."

"That's because you are always trying to help some one out of trouble," declared Pedro. "If it had not been for me, you would never have been mixed up in this at all."

"It does look that way, doesn't it?" laughed Adrian. "But appearances are sometimes deceitful, eh Don?" and he gave Donald a knowing look.

"They sure are; but let's be hunting a place where we may be of service."

"I'll tell you what," exclaimed Adrian after they had stood undecided for several minutes, trying to decide upon a position of vantage, "let's station ourselves on that little knoll just above the door. Then if any should get by those guarding the river entrance I could pick them up with my rifle; while if any should be able to dash past the captain's party, you can stop them with your Colt."

"How about me?" asked Pedro.

"You can either stay with us, or follow Don Antonio."

"I think I'll stay with you. As you say, you seem to have a faculty for getting mixed up in things and this is one of the things I want a hand in."

The boys had hardly reached the place they had selected, when a shot from the river front told that the flanking party had taken its position and a minute later the boys could hear the blows that were being rained upon the door to force it from its place.

"It isn't quite as easy a job as the captain thought," said Donald after the battering had continued for several minutes.

"I should say not!" declared Adrian. "He never will get in that way. Why doesn't he blow it open?"

"Maybe he doesn't know how!"

"Then we'd better go and show him! He's wasting time."

The words were hardly out of his mouth when the air was rent by a terrific explosion and great pieces of rock and a cloud of dust and dirt were thrown high into the air, almost burying the Broncho Rider Boys and their companion in the débris.

The smugglers had fired a mine which had been arranged for just such an attack.

As soon as the boys could gain their feet and free themselves from the pile of dirt which had been thrown up, they turned their attention to the rurales to see what might have been the damage done. Fortunately it was slight. Two men had been killed and three wounded, but not seriously. The worst feature of the explosion was that the rear entrance to the cave had been so blocked with the falling rock, that an entrance was impossible without much digging and clearing away of the rubbish.

However, if the rurales could not get in, neither could the smugglers get out, except by the river entrance. That they had no desire to do so was soon evident, for before the main force, accompanied by the boys, could reach the river front, the smugglers—or as many as could be loaded into three skiffs—emerged from the cave on the river side.

That they had not expected to meet any resistance in that quarter was evident from the fact that they were not at all prepared to fight, nor did they take any precaution to defend themselves until greeted by a volley from the rurales stationed on the opposite side of the creek.

But no sooner had they received the first volley, than they turned sharply up stream and a minute later replied with a well directed fire.

Immediately thereafter the ten men who had been posted behind the big rock clambered up to the top and from this position of vantage poured a volley into the boats. Almost at the same moment the captain led the main force around from the other side, thus taking the boats between two fires.

Seeing their hopeless position and realizing that they were greatly outnumbered, the smugglers threw down their arms and surrendered. The boats were quickly drawn ashore and the captured smugglers landed and placed under a guard.

"There must be at least as many more," said Donald to the captain, when he had counted the prisoners and found there were only twenty-four. "During our scouting we have seen fully forty."

"Is that true?" the captain asked one of the prisoners.

"*Quien sabe*" was the unsatisfactory reply.

"You don't know, eh?" said the captain.

"No, *señor capitán*."

"Perhaps I can help you," said the captain. Then turning to one of his men: "Here, corporal, stand this man up against that rock, and if he doesn't answer by the time I count ten, shoot him."

Without a word the corporal obeyed and told off six men as a firing squad. The smuggler's hands were tied behind him and he was placed with his back to the rock, while the rurales with carbines leveled stood ready to fire.

"Look, you," said the captain as he took his position a little to one side. "At the word ten the men will fire and I shall not count very slowly either. Ready. One, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight—"

"There are forty-five besides the captain and Santiago," broke forth the smuggler.

"Nine, ten, fire," finished the captain, and at the word the carbines cracked and the smuggler pitched forward and lay motionless!

An exclamation of horror burst from both the American boys.

"Captain!" cried Donald. "It's murder."

"How could you after he had spoken!" exclaimed Adrian.

The captain shrugged his shoulders and lighted a cigarette.

"It had to be done sooner or later. It might as well be now as later."

"But you broke your word!"

"Not at all. I told him if he did not speak I would shoot. I did not tell him I would not shoot if he did. You Americans are too tender-hearted."

"I shall report the case to your superior officer," declared Donald.

Again the captain shrugged his shoulders.

"I shall report it myself," he said. "The man simply tried to escape and we shot him. It is the *ley de fuga*."²

"Can such things be?" queried Adrian.

"You can see that they are," answered Don Antonio, who had come up in time to hear the conversation. "In dealing with men of this class, when revolution is plotted on every hand, things are done in Mexico which would not be done could a stable government be established."

"Before we are through with this band, you may wish that more of them could be thus disposed of," declared the captain. "Remember that you have a companion in there who has not yet been rescued."

The boys started as though they had been stung. In the excitement of the tragedy they had just witnessed Billie had passed entirely from their thoughts.

"We're a nice pair of chums, ain't we?" exclaimed Adrian. "No knowing what is going on inside that cave. Let's get busy."

Without waiting to see what the others might be going to do, Adrian started on a run for the window in the cave.

"If I can't do anything more," he thought, "I can at least tell Billie to keep up his courage! I wish I was in there with him."

As he climbed up the mound, he noted that a little volume of smoke was coming out of the window, which now served as a chimney for the cell in which Billie was confined.

"Powder smoke!" he exclaimed as he drew near enough to get a whiff. "It must be from the explosion."

He bent over the hole and tried to look into the cell, but could see nothing.

"Billie!" he called; but there was no response.

Again he called, this time more loudly, but still there was no answer, and Adrian's heart fairly stood still with apprehension.

"I wonder what can be the matter?" he gasped. "By George, I wish I was in there!"

He had hardly uttered the words, when the place on which he was standing seemed to give way beneath his feet and he felt himself slowly falling.

It was not a long nor a hard fall, and, as he felt himself once more on a solid foundation, and looked up toward the sky, he saw he had not fallen more than twenty or twenty-five feet. What had really happened was that the roof of the cell, cracked by the explosion, had caved in with Adrian's weight, and he was in the very place he was wishing he was, although the condition of the cell had materially changed since Donald had looked down into it less than twenty minutes before.

Before the explosion, the cell had been a room some thirty feet square and twenty or more feet high. Now it was half filled with dirt and pieces of rock, the door which had guarded its entrance had been crushed, and through the opening Adrian caught a glimpse of the front entrance to the cave and the water beyond.

But there was no sign of Billie or the smugglers.

Pulling himself together and grasping his Marlin firmly, so as to be ready for any emergency, Adrian stepped cautiously toward the broken door. Hiding himself as well as he could behind the shattered casemate, he peered out into the cave.

The room was empty and at first there appeared no way in which the smugglers could have left except by the river, seeing which Adrian breathed easier.

"They must have gone out like the others," he thought, "and have been captured by the rurales."

Having arrived at this decision, he walked boldly out toward the river entrance.

But he had not advanced ten paces into the main cave before a noose fell silently over his shoulders, and he felt himself jerked violently backward.

The very act, however, caused him to tighten his grip upon his rifle, and the weapon was discharged, the report vibrating with an echo that made it seem almost a cannonade. At the same time his head came into contact with the hard floor with such force that it completely stunned him.

In the moment of consciousness between the report of the rifle and the time his head struck the floor, he saw a figure leap forward out of the darkness, and as he lost consciousness the sound of his own rifle seemed to be taken up and echoed back by an innumerable number.

And that was just exactly what happened.

The figure that had leaped forward was Donald, and the volley came from the carbines of a score of rurales, who had followed him into the cave, and fired pointblank at the smugglers over Adrian's prostrate form. The lariat in the hands of one of the smugglers had pulled Adrian to the earth, just in time to save him from the fire of the rurales.

For the next few minutes the battle in the cave raged with the utmost fierceness. The smugglers had taken their stand in an alcove, hewn into one side of the cave, a little above the floor level. A projecting shelf afforded them a slight shelter, and from this partially fortified position, they made a desperate fight. In fact, they were doing great damage among the rurales, and it had begun to look as though they might succeed in driving them to shelter, when a rattle of shots from their rear completely disconcerted them, and they threw down their guns and called out that they surrendered.

The next instant there emerged, seemingly out of the solid rock, three figures with blackened faces and tattered garments, who advanced toward the rurales. They were Billie, Santiago and Guadalupe.

"Don't shoot!" cried Billie, as the rurales, thinking them some new foe, raised their carbines. "We are friends!"

"Billie!" shouted Donald, dropping his revolver and grasping his stout comrade in both arms. "What has happened to you?"

"We were in the explosion."

"You look like you had been in a coal mine. Are you hurt?"

"Not a scratch—none of us!"

"Then look after Ad, while I help dispose of these cutthroats."

"Ad!" exclaimed Billie. "Is he hurt?"

"I don't know. There he is. Find out and do something for him as soon as possible."

Billie hastened to do Donald's bidding, but Santiago was before him. He raised the boy's head onto his knee, and from a small flask forced a few drops of liquid down his throat. A moment later Adrian opened his eyes, gave one look at the two blackened faces before him, and uttered a yell that brought everyone to "attention" as though a bomb had exploded.

"What is it?" asked Donald, jumping to Adrian's side.

"That's what I want to know! What is it?" pointing his finger at Billie.

Donald burst into a loud laugh. He had been under the most intense excitement for hours, and, as the ludicrousness of the situation struck him, he could not have kept from laughing had a howitzer been pointed at his head. His overwrought feelings simply relaxed, and he fairly screamed with laughter.

Realizing the humor of the situation, Billie speedily joined in, and the combined laughter of the two was so infectious that, without at all understanding what it was about, the rurales and smugglers also began to laugh. It is probable that no battle ever fought had such a remarkable ending.

For Adrian, it was the best thing that could have happened, for it brought him to himself, and he discovered at once who the three black-faced individuals were; but it was a bad thing for the rurales. While they were indulging in their most enjoyable recreation, Don Rafael quietly withdrew into the darkness and disappeared into the opening through which Billie and Santiago had made their entrance.

CHAPTER XIII.—A MYSTERIOUS DISAPPEARANCE.

It was a couple of hours later and the Broncho Rider Boys had just seen the rurales ride away toward Presidio del Norte with their prisoners. The two hours had been spent in a vain endeavor to find Don Rafael, whose sudden disappearance and escape had taken away much of the success of the expedition. The boys had just made another examination of the cave, and were now grouped together on the water's edge, undecided what should be their next step.

"It is certainly the most mysterious affair I ever had anything to do with," declared Donald, "and we have solved some pretty big mysteries."

"Right you are," said Adrian. "I thought the mystery of the Zuni medicine man was the biggest mystery we should ever have to unravel, but this beats it."

"What was that?" asked Pedro, who was one of the company.

"It's most too long a story to tell now," replied Adrian, "but it was told in print a few months ago by a friend of ours, Mr. Frank Fowler, who wrote it into a book under the title of 'The Broncho Rider Boys Along the Border.' I'll send you a copy when we get back to the States. It was a mystery, all right, but we ferreted it out, hey, Don?"

"We sure did, and we must ferret this one out, too."

"The most mysterious part to me," said Billie, who up to this time had stood apart thinking, "is not the disappearance of Don Rafael, but the disappearance of Santiago. There is something unusual about him that I must know."

"The captain didn't seem to care much about his disappearance," said Adrian.

"I know he didn't, but he simply took him for another of the smugglers, while he believes that Don Rafael is the head of a new revolutionary movement. I am sure that this is not so."

"What?" asked Don. "Don't you think Don Rafael is stirring up a revolution?"

"I meant I didn't think as the captain does about Santiago," explained Billie.

"Oh! Well, what do you think about him?"

"I hardly know; but I don't believe he is a peon. I believe he is an educated man and is here in disguise for some purpose."

"What makes you think that?" asked Pedro. "He seemed like a peon to me."

"That's because you did not get well acquainted with him. I did; for, when you are in as tight a place as we were right after the explosion, it doesn't take long to get acquainted."

"What did he do?" queried Adrian.

"That would be hard to tell. It would be easier to tell what he did not do; but the thing that first attracted me was the way in which he cared for Guadalupe."

"Speaking of Guadalupe," exclaimed Adrian, "I'd forgotten all about her! What became of her?"

"Don Antonio took her home long ago," replied Donald. Then to Billie: "Then what did Santiago do?"

"He just took charge of the both of us as though he owned us. He didn't even appear nervous. You would have thought that he was in the habit of being blown up. A peon wouldn't have done that! He would have thought only of himself."

"That's so," declared Pedro; "I've seen them do it."

"Well, Santiago didn't. As soon as he had gained his feet after the explosion knocked him down, he picked Guadalupe up in his arms, and, calling out to me to follow him, he dashed out into the cave. The place was full of men, but they were for the most part busy getting into the boats. They evidently thought that the only attack they had to fear was from the rear and were all hurrying to get out.

"Without stopping to speak to anyone, he turned toward the rear of the cave, stood still for a moment, as though looking for something on the wall, and then gave a sudden push with his hand. As though by magic the opening appeared through which you saw the three of us come and by which Don Rafael escaped."

"Then why can't we find the place?" interrupted Adrian.

Billie shook his head slowly.

"That's part of the mystery," he finally said.

"Yes, and a big part," declared Donald. "If we could locate that door, we could find Don Rafael. Don't you think so, Billie?"

"I'm sure of it."

"Then let's find it!"

"I'll show it to you," said a soft voice, which came to them out of the semi-darkness.

At the sound of the voice the boys turned hastily and grasped their weapons.

"Don't be afraid," continued the voice. "No one is going to hurt you," and out of the darkness stepped Santiago.

"I just said you were the greatest mystery," exclaimed Billie, as soon as he saw who the newcomer was, "and now I know it."

"Not a mystery," declared Santiago, "but a patriot."

"Which is even a greater curiosity in Mexico," declared Donald.

"I am afraid you are right," was the sad reply; "but there are still a few, and some day we will free Mexico from the rule of those who seek nothing but their own advancement."

"To which class does Don Rafael belong?" asked Adrian.

Santiago's usually mild face grew stern.

"To the wrong one, I fear. That is what I am trying to find out. I have been told he was a patriot. What I have seen today leads me to believe the opposite."

Pedro had listened eagerly to what Santiago had been saying, but without speaking a word. Now he could contain himself no longer.

"He is a dog!" he exclaimed, "a would-be murderer and a thief. He knows not honor! He bites the hand that fed him, and he would now help to assassinate our good president, Francisco Madero!"

Santiago's eyes flashed. "Have a care," he said. "How do you know all this?"

"My father is a trusted friend of President Madero. He knows that the president has at heart the good of all the people, not the rich alone. Don Rafael, as you call him, was a trusted servant of my father. He betrayed his trust, and has become the vilest of the vile. I can give you the proof!"

For several minutes Santiago remained silent, thinking deeply. When he spoke it was with determination.

"You say you can give me proof," he said. "You shall have the opportunity. Come!"

He quickly led the way to the place in the wall of the cave where the boys felt sure the secret door was hidden. With one foot he gave a sliding push to a triangular stone in the floor, and a moment later the secret opening was disclosed.

"No wonder," exclaimed Billie, "that we couldn't locate the door. We never thought that the key might be hidden in the floor. We only searched in the wall! What simpletons!"

Santiago smiled whimsically, but made no reply, as he led the way through the door.

"We will not need to close it now," he explained, "as there is no one here whom we need fear."

He took from a niche in the rock a small lantern, which he was about to light, when Donald drew from his pocket his electric searchlight.

"Take this," he said, handing it to Santiago. "It is much better."

Santiago took it in his hand and regarded it curiously.

"It is a strange instrument," he said. "Is it safe to use it?"

"Why not?" queried Donald in mild surprise.

"It looks like magic. It might bring ill luck."

"Oh, no," laughed Don. "Everyone uses them where we came from."

Santiago hesitated for a moment, and then said slowly: "It may be right for those who understand. For those who do not it is ill luck. Take it back. I dare not use it."

Slowly Donald returned the searchlight to his pocket, while Santiago fumbled with the lantern which he was trying to light.

As the blue flame of the match cast a flickering light about the place, suddenly from out the darkness there sprang a figure with uplifted hand, and hurled itself upon Santiago. There was a muttered oath, a blow, and the figure darted through the still open door, and disappeared in the outer cave, while Santiago sank down upon the floor, murmuring to himself:

"The magic light! The magic light! The ill luck has come!"

"It's Don Rafael! It's Don Rafael!" shouted Pedro. "Don't let him escape!"

He sprang after the fleeing figure, closely followed by Billie and Adrian, while Donald bent over the prostrate Santiago, examining his wound by the light of his electric.

A moment later there was a shot from without, but, while Donald still bent over Santiago, trying to stop the flow of blood from a wound in his shoulder, the others came back.

"Did you get him?" he asked.

"I didn't even wing him," was Billie's crestfallen reply. "He must bear a charmed life. But I'll get him yet, if I have to stay in Mexico all summer!"

Santiago raised his eyes, and a fierce smile played upon his lips, as he fixed his gaze upon Billie.

"Do you mean it, *señor*?" he asked.

"You bet I do!"

"Promise me!"

"Sure, if that will do you any good!" replied Billie lightly.

"Look out!" exclaimed Adrian. "That may mean more than you think!"

"I don't care what it means," declared Billie; "I've given my word, and I'll stick to it!"

Santiago reached out and took him feebly by the hand. "You will never regret it," he said. "When you have made your promise good, come back to me for your reward."

And then the strange man swooned in Donald's arms.

CHAPTER XIV.—PANCHO VILLA.

Several days have elapsed, days filled with anxiety over the fate of Santiago, and once more the boys find themselves in the saddle, headed for the Rio Grande.

"It sure does seem good to feel your pony between your knees," exclaimed Donald, after they had galloped along a couple of miles at a lively rate, the horses themselves setting the pace after their days of rest.

"That it does," replied Billie, "especially when your mind is at ease. I shouldn't be enjoying myself

at all, were I not sure that Santiago was on the road to recovery. That certainly was a nasty cut. I hope this trail will lead us to where we want to go."

"I can see no reason why it should not," declared Adrian. "It is as plain as the nose on your face."

"And that's pretty plain in your case," laughed Donald, for it was a well-known fact that Adrian's nose was his most prominent feature.

"I wish I could see it that way," insisted Billie. "It looks to me as though this were a good deal of a wild goose chase."

"I don't see how you figure it," retorted Adrian, and he put his hand into his inside pocket and took therefrom a piece of paper. "Here is the address as plain as can be: 'Rafael Solis, Presidio del Norte, care Señor Pancho Villa.' What more do you want?"

"I want to know who Pancho Villa is, and where he lives! There is nothing sure we can locate such a man."

"Santiago says he is well known."

"Yes, for a peon," said Billie, determined not to be satisfied.

"Santiago says he is more than a peon. He says he is a great man."

"That may be so—in the eyes of Santiago; and still he may amount to very little in a place as big as Presidio del Norte."

"To hear Santiago talk about him," interjected Donald, "you'd think he was a great general."

"That's because he was the head of a little band of what Santiago calls patriots during the Madero revolution," replied Billie.

"Well, that ought to be enough to identify him," declared Adrian exultantly. "I'll bet we can find him."

Billie was not satisfied, but as the road at this point was through a ford of the river, conversation for the time was interrupted; and, when the boys again came abreast, the conversation took another turn. What has been said, however, is sufficient to show the mission upon which the boys were bent.

By dint of hard riding the boys reached the Rio Grande before dark, and immediately crossed to the American side and hunted up Captain Peak.

"Well, well!" he exclaimed, as he caught sight of them. "I was afraid you had run into some kind of trouble, you were gone so long!"

"Some kind of trouble!" laughed Donald. "Several kinds of trouble would come nearer hitting it."

"You don't say so!" and the captain opened his eyes wide.

"Indeed we do," said Billie.

"Then I'm even more glad to see you," chuckled Captain Peak. "Suppose you come into the hotel and tell me about it."

Giving their horses to the *mozo*, the boys accepted the captain's invitation; but, after a few words, which indicated that the story was to be a long one, he insisted that its recital be postponed until they had eaten their supper. The suggestion was promptly seconded by Billie, who declared emphatically that the story could wait, but that the supper could not.

If it were not that Captain Peak might be kept waiting too long, it would be interesting to tell you what and how much Billie ate at that meal. He has since declared it was the greatest he ever ate—which is a most remarkable statement, and easily classes it as "some supper."

But the longest meal eventually comes to an end, and then the boys sat down with Captain Peak and gave him a detailed account of their happenings from the time they left him a week before up to their return.

"I was sure I was making no mistake when I sent you out," he declared, when the story was finished. "You evidently stumbled right into the very band I have been looking for. Of course I have heard something of the capture from across the river, the captain of the rurales having given out the information. Naturally he took all the credit, and no mention was made of you boys, which," continued Captain Peak, after a minute's reflection, "is a good thing, seeing that the adventure is only just begun."

"Only just begun!" exclaimed Billie. "I was in hopes we were near the end."

"So far as your part is concerned, that may be true; but it looks to me like the beginning of another serious revolution. Evidently this Don Rafael is acting for someone else—whom, I cannot

tell, but I imagine for Felix Diaz—who naturally would like to take revenge upon Madero for driving his uncle, Porfirio Diaz, out of Mexico.

"If he expects any help from Villa, however, I am afraid he is going to be greatly mistaken. I know Villa well, and, peon though he is, he is a brainy man, and an ardent Maderist. I don't believe they will ever get him to join a movement against the president."

"That's what Santiago says; but Don Rafael is a smooth talker, and he may make such promises that Villa will listen to him," explained Adrian.

"Of course it is none of my business," continued Captain Peak, "as long as they stay on their own side of the river; but the trouble is, they are always coming over here to do their plotting, and to get arms enough to start things going. That's why I am glad of this information, and I shall do all I can to help the present government."

"My interest in the matter is all on account of my promise to Santiago," said Billie. "If we can find this Don Rafael, we shall at once notify the proper authorities, and I think the rurales will not lose him again."

"I'll do all I can," said Captain Peak, "but I must act within my jurisdiction."

"How can we find this Pancho Villa?" queried Adrian.

"Just go over to Presidio del Norte and ask the first peon you see," was the captain's reply. "They all know him."

Billie sprang from his chair. "Come on!" he exclaimed, "let's waste no time. We may find him in time to put him on his guard."

"I wouldn't go tonight, if I were you," cautioned the captain.

"Why not?" asked Billie.

"Well, I don't think it is hardly safe."

"You don't think we are afraid, do you?"

"It isn't a question of fear. It is rather a question of a fight, and I know you don't want to get into a fight."

Billie scratched his head.

"I don't know as I should exactly say we wanted to get into a fight; but we wouldn't mind if something should happen that would give us a chance to take a fall out of our friend, Don Rafael."

Captain Peak laughed.

"I see!" he said. "All you want is a chance, and you're not so particular who furnishes it. But, take my advice, and don't get into trouble tonight. Things are too unsettled, and I don't want to be obliged to make a raid into Mexico to rescue you. I have even had to answer quite a few questions about the trouble we had the other day over by Don Pablo's."

"All right," laughed Billie. "We won't get into any trouble. We will just see this wonderful peon, and put a flea in his ear, and then we'll come back."

"Just as you say," was the captain's answer. "I'm sure you are able to take care of yourself."

Bidding the captain good-night, the boys called for their horses and slowly rode across the river.

Presidio del Norte is not a large town, but as it is on the line of the Orient railroad—which at this particular time was in process of construction—it was quite a lively place for a Mexican pueblo. It is built around the inevitable plaza, the stores all facing thereon, and, when the stores and the little booths in the plaza are all lighted, becomes quite an attractive spot.

Drawing up at one of the booths, the boys accosted an intelligent-looking peon, and stated their errand. He looked at them a bit suspiciously, but finally agreed to help them find the object of their search.

"Follow me," he said, and, turning away from the brightly lighted plaza, led them down a dark and narrow street. "Pancho is a poor man, *señores*, and does not live in a very nice place."

"He didn't need to tell us that," laughed Adrian. "We still are able to see."

"No," said Donald to the guide, "you do not need to apologize. We understand that Pancho is an honest man, which is more to his credit than to live in a fine house."

The Mexican led them about four or five squares and stopped before a miserable little adobe house.

"*Aquí'sta!*" he exclaimed, and knocked loudly on the half-open door.

"*Quien es?*" came a voice from within, meaning, "Who is it?"

"Americanos to see Pancho," replied the guide.

"*Bueno!*" came the voice, and a moment later a large, fine-looking man appeared in the doorway.

"I am Pancho Villa," he said pleasantly. "What can I do for you?" and this was the Broncho Rider Boys' introduction to the man who afterward became the foremost general of Mexico.

CHAPTER XV.—A SHOT IN THE DARK.

"What can I do for you?" again asked Villa, as the boys did not at once reply, not knowing exactly what to say, nor how to say it in the presence of a third person.

"We have a message for you from a fellow patriot," Adrian finally replied. "Perhaps it would be better if we entered your house."

"My casa is a very humble one," replied Villa, "but, if you will deign to honor it with your presence, you are quite welcome, *señores*."

The boys alighted and threw their bridle-reins over a post at the side of the gate.

"Stay here and watch the gentlemen's horses, Secundino," said Villa to the guide, who was about to leave. "If you see anyone lurking about, call."

"*Bueno*" was the reply and the guide threw himself down beside the horses.

The boys entered the house, followed by Villa. As their guide had said, it was a poor house, but it was comfortable and clean. Its only furniture consisted of a few chairs, a table, a bed, and some rugs on the floor. A single candle furnished the light.

"Now, *señores*," said Villa, after they had all been seated, "we can talk without being interrupted. What is your message, and from whom?"

"Our message," replied Adrian, who seemed to have made himself the spokesman, "is a warning. It is from one who calls himself only Santiago."

"Santiago!" exclaimed Pancho. "Santiago! And how did he come to make strangers—Americans—the bearer of a message to Pancho Villa?"

"It is a long story," replied Adrian, "but if you will listen we shall be glad to explain."

"No story is too long, if it is the truth," said Villa.

"Which this is," declared Adrian earnestly, and for the second time that evening the events of the past few days were rehearsed.

"And you mean to tell me that Rafael Solis attempted to kidnap the son of General Sanchez?"

"That is exactly what he did," declared Billie, who had scarcely been able to keep quiet while Adrian was talking. "And he would have succeeded, too, if we had not been there to help him escape."

"But that isn't the worst, to my way of thinking," exclaimed Donald. "The worst thing was his assault upon Santiago!"

"He explained that to me by saying that Santiago was playing into the hands of the *hacendados*," declared Villa, meaning by the "*hacendados*" the rich landowners, who for years have been grinding the peons under their heel.

"Explained to you!" exclaimed Billie. "Then you have seen him?"

"He left me not an hour ago."

"It is none of our business," said Donald, "but as we are interested in Santiago, we should be glad to know what he wanted."

"Just what you might expect—to help him overthrow President Madero, who, he says, is just as bad as was Diaz."

"Do you think he is?" asked Billie, who had become much interested in Mexican affairs during the past few days.

"*Quien sabe!*" was Villa's non-committal reply. "We hope not, but Mexico has suffered much from those who should have been her friends."

"Well, whatever President Madero may be," said Adrian emphatically, "Don Rafael is a scoundrel and murderer at heart."

For several minutes Villa made no reply, then with a shake of his head: "Time will tell!"

A few minutes later, when the boys were leaving the house, he said: "You may tell Santiago that he can depend upon me to do the right thing. I am working for Mexico—not for Pancho Villa."

"We are sure you are," was Adrian's reply, and the others echoed his words.

Tossing a peso to the peon who had been guarding their horses, the boys mounted and slowly rode back the way they had come. They had almost reached the plaza when there was a pistol shot in their rear, followed by a cry of pain.

Without stopping to consider what their action might lead to, the boys with one accord wheeled about and dashed back down the street. The street was as deserted as when they passed up it a moment before. When they reached Villa's house they drew rein and called loudly, but there was no response.

"That's mighty strange," said Donald, after they had called a couple of times with like result. "What do you suppose has happened?"

"Can't imagine," replied Billie. "Maybe he doesn't hear us. I'll knock."

He dismounted and gave the door, which was still ajar, a vigorous thump, but no one replied. Then suddenly, while they were wondering what they had better do, there was a sound of voices at the head of the street, and a moment later a crowd of people, headed by several policemen, came hastily down to where they were standing.

"There they are! There they are!" cried out a voice. "They are the men who were with him!" And the speaker pointed at the three boys.

"What's the matter?" asked Adrian, as the policemen stopped at his side.

"This man says you have been plotting with Pancho Villa to start a new revolution."

"Nonsense!" exclaimed Adrian. "You know that Villa is a friend of President Madero."

"Yes, everybody knows that," said the other policeman.

"How about that?" the first policeman asked, turning to their accuser.

"That's what I said," declared the man. "I said they were trying to get Pancho to join a revolution against the president."

The boys by this time had a chance to take a good look at the man, and recognized him as the one who had guided them to Villa's house. Whereupon Donald exclaimed, with considerable warmth: "That's a lie, and you know it." Then to the policemen: "You don't have to take our word; ask Pancho."

"Of course," replied the policeman, and he approached Villa's door and knocked loudly.

But, as in the case of the boys, there was no reply.

"Where has he gone?" asked the policeman, turning to Adrian.

"I don't know. He was here just a few minutes ago; but when we came back to see who was shot, he was gone."

"What's that?" asked the policeman. "Did you say somebody was shot?"

"We thought so. We were riding up the street when we heard a shot, followed by a cry. We came back to find out about it. That's how we happen to be here now."

"What did you find?"

"Nothing!" replied Adrian.

The policeman eyed the boys fiercely.

"Don't try to make fools of us," said one.

"No," declared the other, "we are not to be played with by any young Gringos. We don't believe any such story."

"I can't help it whether you believe or not," retorted Adrian angrily. "It is the truth!"

"We shall see," declared the first policeman. "You come with us to the *cuartel*. The *jeffe politico* will have to look into this."

"Now we are in for it," said Billie, under his breath. "The next time I hear a Mexican shoot another I'll ride the other way."

"Where do you suppose Villa can have gone to?" asked Donald of the other two, as they rode along behind the policeman, followed by a shouting, hooting mob.

"Give it up," replied Adrian. "It couldn't have been he that was shot."

"Who knows?" said Billie suddenly. "No one entered the house. He may be lying in there dead."

"That's so!" exclaimed Adrian, "I'll suggest it to the policeman."

"Not as you value your life," interrupted Donald. "If by any chance they should find him dead, they'd accuse us of killing him."

All this had been said in English, of which the policemen did not understand a word. In fact, had it been said in Spanish, it is doubtful if the policemen could have heard, on account of the hooting and the cries of "Down with the Americanos! Death to the Gringos!"

"If they ever get us locked up," said Donald, a moment later, "it's going hard with us. We've simply got to get away!"

"All right!" replied Billie. "You lead the way."

"Wait till the right moment and keep your eye on me. When I shout, both of you join in and we'll try and stampede this herd."

Slowly they rode along the narrow street and finally emerged on to the plaza. Here the street was much wider, and the crowd became less dense, although no smaller numerically.

As they passed one of the *cantinas*, a gang of half-drunken railroad laborers of various nationalities came out, singing and shouting. Among them were several Americans, seeing which Donald gave a wild yell, crying at the top of his voice:

"Hurrah for Uncle Sam!"

Billie and Adrian joined in the cry, at the same time putting spurs to their horses, which sprang forward, upsetting the policemen and creating a tumult which quickly became a riot, as the Americans in the crowd took up the cry and shouted lustily for Uncle Sam.

In the confusion which followed shots rang out from every side, most of them fired into the air, and there was a general scurrying to shelter by the natives, who had learned to get out of the way when a crowd of track hands and cowboys began to shoot up the town. Taking advantage of this, the boys dashed out of the light of the plaza, and were soon well on their way to the river; and it was none too soon, for, attracted by the commotion, a band of rurales was ordered out to arrest every foreigner found on the street.

"It was some excitement while it lasted," remarked Billie, as they gained the American side. "I think I'll stay out of Mexico for a while."

"What!" exclaimed Donald, "with Don Rafael still at large?"

"Yes," said Adrian, "how about your promise?"

"By George!" exclaimed Billie. "The excitement had driven it entirely out of my mind—and besides, I must learn what has become of Villa."

CHAPTER XVI.—A VALUABLE DISCOVERY.

It was late the next morning when the boys awoke and began calling to each other.

"What's the first thing on the program?" asked Adrian, as he put the last touch upon his toilet.

"The first thing," declared Billie emphatically, "is breakfast. I hope they have hot cakes and sorghum molasses."

"Not a very fashionable dish," laughed Donald.

"Hang the fashion," replied Billie. "What I want is something that tastes good. How about you, Ad?"

"That's me, too. But I think I prefer ham and eggs, sunny side up."

"What are you fellows trying to do?" asked Donald, "increase my appetite?"

"No need of that," laughed Billie. "I've never seen you when you couldn't do justice to whatever is set before you; but hurry up."

Five minutes later they were seated before a breakfast table that seemed to have been fixed for their special benefit, for not only did the bill of fare contain ham and eggs, but hot cakes and syrup as well.

For several minutes they were too busy to talk, but finally Donald pushed back his chair with the remark that so long as he could get a breakfast like that, he didn't care how long he stayed on the border.

"Nor I either," echoed Billie. "But what had we better do to get into touch with matters across the river?"

"I should certainly advise seeing Capt. Peak," said Adrian.

"Of course; but what then?"

"Depends upon his answer."

"Well," said Billie, "I have a duty to perform and the sooner I set about it the better. Come on!"

He led the way out of the hotel and down to Capt. Peak's headquarters. They found the captain mounting his horse.

"I was just coming to see what had become of you," he said. "I didn't know but you had left the country."

"No reason why we should, is there?" laughed Donald.

"None at all; but I wouldn't be found on the other side of the river too soon, if I were you. You must have stirred up a hornet's nest last night."

"I don't know what you mean by a hornet's nest," replied Billie, "but we did have quite an exciting time."

"Of course you found Villa," said the captain.

"Found him and lost him," replied Adrian, and he proceeded to narrate their adventure.

"And you have no idea who fired the shot?"

"Not the slightest."

"I'm sure Villa was not the victim," continued Capt. Peak, "or we should have heard of it by this time. They would have been over here looking for the murderer."

"Which might have made a lot of trouble for us," said Donald.

"Exactly! But if you boys want something to help pass away the time for a couple of hours, get your horses and we'll ride down the river and see if we can hear anything."

The boys gladly accepted the invitation and a few minutes later were riding leisurely along the bank of the Rio Grande on what the captain called a tour of inspection.

"Sort of scout duty," laughed Adrian.

"Exactly; only we're not likely to discover anything at this hour of the day."

It seems, however, that it is the unexpected that happens, and they had not ridden more than two or three miles from town before they made a discovery which brought them to a sudden halt and caused the utmost astonishment.

Not twenty feet from the river bank, entirely free from any attempt at concealment, lay at least a dozen cases of rifles and a rapid-fire Maxim.

"Well!" exclaimed Capt. Peak, as he surveyed the arms from the back of his horse, "What do you think of that?"

"The thinking doesn't seem to be up to us," laughed Billie. "The question is, what do you think?"

For some minutes Capt. Peak made no reply, the while his eye noted the surroundings. Then he dismounted and examined the ground carefully, while the boys watched him with interest.

"I'll tell you what I think," he finally exclaimed, as he came slowly back to his horse. "There has been a pretty good-sized gun-running expedition—so large, in fact, that these few arms have been entirely overlooked."

"They must have been pretty bold to attempt such a thing so near Presidio del Norte."

"Yes," replied Capt. Peak, "and the very boldness of it is what helped them to succeed. This is the last place I should have looked for a crossing. I must send out and get these guns."

"Don't you think they will be missed later?" asked Adrian.

"No doubt; but the owners will have discovered the loss too late."

"I was just thinking it might be a good thing to leave them here unmolested and set a watch over them."

"What good would that do? They will not make a second attempt at the same place."

"It occurs to me," said Adrian with becoming modesty, "that it would be a good thing to ride on just as though we had found nothing. As soon as we get around that piece of chaparral, let me come back and hide myself. I believe somebody will be around trying to locate the missing weapons. As I understand it, that rapid-fire gun is a valuable piece."

"There is no doubt of that," admitted the captain.

"If the one who comes hunting it finds it has not been molested, he will think it has not been discovered and he will take some steps to carry it away. When he does so, I can give the alarm and we can pounce down upon him."

"Your idea isn't at all unreasonable," said the Captain, "and I'm perfectly willing to see what we can do."

Accordingly the little cavalcade rode along for more than half a mile. It then halted in the edge of the chaparral, where Adrian dismounted and slowly made his way back through the mesquite bushes which covered the plain.

It was hot lying there in the broiling sun, but Adrian did not mind. This was his idea, and somehow he felt sure that it would meet with success; but for a long time it did not seem so. Finally, however, as Adrian began to think the Captain might better take charge of the arms, he noted a strange figure on the opposite bank of the Rio Grande. He was a little man, and, as nearly as Adrian could make out, old.

"He doesn't look like a gun runner," thought Adrian; "but you never can tell."

At first the little man did not appear to be looking across the river at all; but as Adrian watched, he saw that the man on the other shore carried a pair of field glasses.

"That means that I must lie mighty low," muttered Adrian to himself, and he hugged the ground tight, behind the mesquite bush.

The man at length leveled his glasses and peered long and earnestly—not only at the rapid-fire gun, which showed most prominently—but at all the bushes up and down the river for some distance.

"He certainly knows what he is looking after," thought Adrian, "but I don't believe he will come over in the day time."

For the time being at any rate, Adrian was right; for after some minutes spent in observation, the man returned his glasses to their case and walked rapidly away.

Slowly Adrian withdrew from his position, backing out on hands and knees until he was hidden from the other bank. Then, rising, he hastened to where he had left his friends.

"Well," was Billie's greeting as soon as Adrian came in sight. "I hope you discovered something to pay us for going without our dinner."

"If catching a gang of gun runners is enough, I think I did."

"What's that?" inquired Capt. Peak. "You think you have a line on them?"

"You can judge for yourself," replied Adrian, and he related what he had seen.

"Don Pablo Ojeda!" exclaimed Capt. Peak as soon as Adrian had described the appearance of the man on the opposite shore. "If we can only catch him red-handed, it will be a great capture!"

"You don't mean he's the old chap who tried to steal our mule, do you?"

"He surely is," declared Donald. "The description fits him perfectly."

"And it's very plain, now," continued the captain, "why they selected this spot. It is only half a mile up stream from the trail that leads from Don Pablo's to the river—just far enough for a boat to float down of its own accord. All it would take would be one man to steer. Once the guns were put on board, the others could ride down the river, swim their horses across and thus avoid any trouble in case the boat were discovered."

"I'm glad if my information is of any use," said Adrian.

"It unquestionably is. Now then," and the captain mounted his horse, "to make arrangements to

capture all who come to this side of the river.”

“Hadn’t we ought to notify the Mexican authorities?” queried Donald.

“If we were sure the information wouldn’t leak out,” was Capt. Peak’s reply; “but there is too much revolution in the air right now to know whom to trust.

“No,” after a pause, “we’ll play this game alone,” and turning his horse to the north, he started by a circuitous route for town, closely followed by the boys.

“I’m glad we’re this side the river,” said Billie as they rode along. “I seem to have more faith in the Rangers than in the Rurales.”

CHAPTER XVII.—A MEETING OF REVOLUTIONISTS.

Midway between the Hacienda del Rio and the *hacienda* of Don Pablo Ojeda, near the source of the little mountain stream across which the Broncho Rider Boys chased the horse thieves in recovering old Bray, there stands an old mill. When built, or by whom, not even the oldest inhabitant of that region can remember. It is made of rock quarried out of the mountain side; and although the water wheel has long since gone to decay and the millstones have fallen into their beds, the walls of the building remain intact.

To be sure there is no roof on the building, but the heavy oak rafters, cut from trees on the mountain side, are reasonably strong, and, covered with a wealth of tropical foliage, form sufficient covering for one who is accustomed to the outdoor life of these regions.

Into this ancient structure, on the afternoon of the same day on which Capt. Peak and his young comrades discovered the rifles of the gun-runners, four men might have been seen to enter. Three of them were strangers. The fourth was the missing Don Rafael.

That they had no fear that they would be seen, was evidenced by the open manner in which the strangers dismounted from their horses and threw their bridle reins to their accompanying servants.

Of the three one had a decidedly military bearing while the others bore evidence of being well-to-do landowners.

“You surely have a veritable fortress here, Don Rafael,” declared the military man after a brief glance around. “With a little work in the way of outer trenches, it might be made well nigh impregnable to any but those armed with modern siege guns.”

“So I have thought, General,” replied Don Rafael deferentially.

“Where have you hidden the arms?”

“This way, General,” and Don Rafael led the way to the rear of the ruins and pointed out a strongly constructed door, which apparently opened into a vault. “They are well cared for.”

“How many have you?” asked one of the others.

“In the neighborhood of ten thousand small arms and ten machine guns. Another shipment was brought over the river last night and will be carted up here tonight.”

“Good!” exclaimed the general. “But now to the purpose of our visit. You asked us to meet you to hear the plans of General Orosco regarding the overthrow of the Madero government. What are they?”

“Sh-sh-h! Not so loud,” exclaimed Don Rafael, as he cast furtive glances out toward the servants and the horses. “Your mozos might overhear!”

“Small chance of that,” said the general, “and if they did they would want to join the movement.”

“Briefly,” said Don Rafael, “the plan is this: To start the movement in the northern states with the revolt of the Chihuahua garrison. General Orosco stands ready at a moment’s notice to come north and assume command; but you will have to start the movement in your state. I will start it here.”

“How about Villa? Will he join us?”

“I am sure he will; but if he will not, I will see that he does not interfere.”

“How many men can you muster?” asked the general.

“I shall have two thousand. I should have been able to do better, had it not been that my plans were interfered with by three young Gringos who are touring this state on horseback! I ran into them at a most inopportune time, and as I did not wish to get into trouble with the United States

authorities, I could not punish them as I otherwise would."

"That's bad," said the general.

"Yes, it is; but if they come across my path again, I shall make short work of them."

"Well," said the general after a few more questions and answers, "I think we know enough. I shall expect to see you at Presidio del Norte in a few days. I trust you will succeed in your mission with Villa."

Then, as he emerged from the old mill and once more stood and looked at the old structure: "This surely is a wonderful spot! We must see that it is properly fortified."

The visitors approached their horses and were about to mount, when a peon on foot was seen approaching from downstream. That he was the bearer of a message of some sort was evident from his actions, and the horsemen remained unmounted, awaiting his coming.

"It's one of the men who were with us on last night's expedition," explained Don Rafael as the man approached near enough to be recognized. "I wonder what he wants."

They were not kept long in suspense, for the messenger, seeing that they were waiting, hastened his footsteps and soon reached them.

"What is it, hombre?" asked Don Rafael.

"A serious mistake was made last night."

"How so?"

"A lot of rifles and a machine gun were left on the American side of the river."

"What!" exclaimed Don Rafael "A machine gun?"

"Si, Señor!"

"What's to be done?"

"That's what Don Pablo wants to know. He told me to say that he has discovered that the guns are right where they were left and so far have not been seen. One of the men has been posted on this side of the river to watch that no one molests them. Don Pablo thinks if they are not discovered during the day, we can easily bring them over right after dark, so that they can come up here with the others!"

"I don't see anything else to do," said Don Rafael.

"Then you will send the men to help?" asked the man.

"Is that what Don Pablo wants?"

"Si, Señor!"

"Very well. Tell him I will have a dozen men on hand as soon as it is dark. I may come myself to see that he makes no more blunders."

"That's the only safe way," said the general.

The messenger made no reply, but with a muttered "*Hasta luego*,"³ took his departure as fast as he had come and the three strangers soon followed his example.

Left alone, Don Rafael watched them as they slowly wound their way down the mountain path, and when they finally passed from view, turned and entered the mill. Quickly he ascended the dilapidated stone stairs to the second story, where, in a small room partitioned off from the rest of the mill, he had made him a habitation, and threw himself upon his crude bed.

"Pancho Villa!" he exclaimed with a mocking laugh. "Pancho Villa, indeed! It will be a long time before anyone sees Pancho Villa!"

CHAPTER XVIII.—SPRINGING THE TRAP.

Feeling assured that the trap was well baited with the forgotten guns, Capt. Peak determined to omit no detail which would insure the complete capture of the gun-runners when the trap was sprung.

He accordingly mustered his men early in the afternoon, and, accompanied by the boys, who were most anxious to take a hand in the capture, openly left town in exactly the opposite direction from the place where the guns had been discovered. By this plan he hoped to allay any

suspicion which might be aroused and communicated to the smugglers by their spies, with whom he had no doubt the city was filled.

Riding up stream for several miles, until the city was entirely lost sight of, the Rangers made a wide detour back into the country, arriving in the vicinity of the trap just as the sun had set.

As soon as it was sufficiently dark for the men to come out into the open without being seen from the Mexican shore, they were so disposed that they could surround the gun-runners on three sides, while a fourth detachment was posted up stream, but sufficiently near the bank of the river to cut off a retreat in that direction.

"It would please me greatly," said Capt. Peak, in giving the last instruction, "if we could also capture the boat in which the guns are to be carried over the river. Not only would it be good evidence, but it would help to prevent similar expeditions in the immediate future."

This remark offered a suggestion to Donald, and when the others had been stationed, he announced his plan to Capt. Peak.

"I'm sure," he said, "that we three boys can capture that boat better than anyone else, because we are all good swimmers."

"What has that to do with it?" asked the Captain. "The boat will have to come to shore to get the guns."

"I know that," replied Donald; "but suppose they even succeeded in getting the guns down to the river bank, what good would it do if they found the boat gone?"

"I see," laughed the Captain. "Well, go ahead; but we shall not wait for the Greasers to get the guns down to the shore before we nab them."

Having obtained permission to act, Donald at once called Adrian and Billie and unfolded to them his plan. It was very simple, namely, to secrete themselves on the shore, or even in the water if necessary. Then, as soon as the boat had landed the men, to swim up behind it and draw it back into the river.

"Suppose they make it fast to the bank," suggested Adrian.

"I had thought of that," replied Donald, "and that is why I think it better to hide on shore."

"How would it do for one of us to remain on shore," suggested Billie, "and the others to station themselves out in the river where the water is breast high? Then, if they fastened the boat to the shore, the one on land could, in the dark, easily slip up and cut the ropes."

"Not a bad idea," replied Donald. "Suppose you stay on shore and Ad and I will do the water act."

"Yes," said Adrian, "and if you are discovered you can easily pass yourself off as a Mexican. If you are questioned all you have to say is 'quien sabe' and stick to it, and they'll know you are a peon."

"Suits me," declared Billie, and he drew his hunting knife from his belt. "One stroke of this will cut any ordinary rope."

This plan having been decided upon, Donald and Adrian threw off their superfluous clothing and waded out into the stream, while Billie secreted himself behind a little pile of brush, left on the shore by the last high water.

They had hardly taken their positions, when the faint sound of oars came to their ears and a couple of minutes later a good-sized batteau came into sight through the darkness. It was rowed by six men while a half dozen more were seated at the bow and in the stern.

The batteau had no sooner touched the shore than those in the bow sprang out and pulled the boat partially onto the gravelly beach. The others followed more slowly, but after a minute or more all were landed. Not a word was spoken for some minutes, and several of the men spread themselves out into a scouting party. One of them passed so close to the place where Billie was concealed that he could have touched him with his hand; but it never seemed to occur to the Mexicans that anyone might be hidden on the beach.

Those who were not on the lookout, pushed the boat back into the water and turned it so they could pull out immediately it had received its load. Then for the first time a spoken order was given in a low voice—a voice which sounded strangely familiar to Billie, although he could not think where he had heard it.

"All ready!" it said, "and hurry up! Juan and I will be sufficient to guard the boat!"

"So ho!" exclaimed Billie to himself! "It appears we are to have two to deal with," and as he saw the figures steal away in the darkness he slipped silently nearer to the boat to see how the guard was placed.

A glance was sufficient to show him that one man sat in the boat with oars in his hands, while the

speaker stood on the shore. He had not yet decided what to do, when he noticed that the boat was silently and slowly drawing away from land. The shore guard must have noticed it at the same time, for he said in a sharp whisper to the oarsman:

"You're drifting out! Hold your boat to the shore!"

The oarsman gave a couple of strokes with his oars, but without any apparent result! The boat continued to draw away.

"The current must be very swift!" he muttered.

"Or else you are very weak," declared the man on shore, and he leaned over to grasp the boat, which was still within reach.

This was Billie's opportunity and he was quick to seize it. He had realized from the beginning that it was not the current, but Adrian and Donald who were pulling the boat into the stream, and so, as the man on shore leaned over to grasp the boat, Billie sprang forward and gave him a violent shove, which landed him face down in the bottom of the batteau, and sent the craft well out into the stream.

Then, without a moment's hesitation, Billie sprang in after him, calling out to the other two boys to scramble aboard without delay.

Almost before the words were out of his mouth, there was a crack of rifles and the shouts of the Rangers mingled with the cries of the gun-runners, who had been caught in the trap.

But quick as Billie had been, the man whom he had pushed into the boat was quicker. He was on his feet in an instant and grappling with the lad, while at the sound of the shots he called to the oarsman:

"Pull for the other shore! Pull for your life!"

Although Billie was large and strong for his age he was no match for his assailant, who was not only possessed of much strength, but was as agile as a cat. Almost in less time than it takes to tell it, he had thrown the boy to the bottom of the boat. Quickly he picked up an oar, as though to deal him a blow, when his attention was diverted by the severe rocking of the boat.

Turning to see the cause, he espied Donald and Adrian piling in over the gunwale.

Raising aloft the oar which he had intended for Billie, he aimed a vicious blow at the head nearest him, but as the blow was about to descend, Billie caught him by one leg and he dropped the oar to save himself from falling into the water.

By this time the oarsman had discovered the condition of affairs and had come to his companion's rescue. Rising in his place he struck with his oar the boy nearest him. It happened to be Donald, and the oar came down on his shoulder with a sounding whack. It was only by the greatest good luck that it did not hit him on the head. As it was it caused him to utter a cry of pain and release his hold on the boat.

It was a critical moment.

Adrian had just succeeded in pulling himself into the boat, but had not yet gained his footing; Donald was apparently helpless in the water, and Billie was struggling with the leader of the gun-runners, while the oarsman, with oar in hand, seemed to command the situation.

But before the man with the oar could gather himself for another blow Adrian, from his crouching position, sprang upon him. His head struck the Mexican squarely in the pit of the stomach, and with a loud "Ah!" as the wind was knocked out of him he toppled over into the water. The next instant Adrian reached over and seized Donald by the hair and pulled him up to the boat, where he was able to grasp the gunwale with his uninjured arm.

The blow which struck Donald, and his cry, had a most unfortunate result upon Billie. For just a moment he was undecided whether to throw his antagonist into the river, or to release his hold and help Donald. In that moment his opponent saw his opportunity and took advantage of it.

With his doubled knee he struck Billie in the face and as the lad fell over into the boat, he plunged into the river and struck out for the Mexican shore.

"Don't let him get away," cried Billie, as soon as he could gather himself to speak. "It's the leader of the gang!"

"All right," said Adrian. "Help me pull Donald in and we'll row after him."

In almost no time Donald was helped into the boat and Billie and Adrian seized the oars and started in pursuit of the fleeing Mexican. They were not expert oarsmen, but they did their best and the boat made good headway. But row as hard as they could, they were unable to discover a trace of the fugitive, and it soon became evident that he had escaped in the darkness. Neither did they see anything of the man whom Adrian had knocked overboard.

"We haven't made a very creditable record," declared Adrian as they finally ceased rowing and tried to make out where they were. "I hope Capt. Peak did better."

Considerably crestfallen, the boys turned the boat and rowed for the American shore, where they shortly arrived.

"Well," said Capt. Peak as they beached the batteau and sprang ashore, "I see you have the boat. Did you get anything else?"

"Nothing but a sore shoulder," replied Donald ruefully.

"It's all my fault," declared Billie. "I ought to have shot the leader instead of trying to capture him."

"The leader!" exclaimed Capt. Peak. "Was it the leader you were fighting with?"

"Sure!" was Billie's emphatic reply. "And he's a good one, too!"

"You ought to know," laughed the Captain. "It was your old friend, Don Rafael."

"What!" cried Billie, as he regarded Capt. Peak with a look of blank despair. "Don Rafael! You don't mean it!"

"That's what the men say, and I have no doubt they know."

"And to think that I had my hands on him and didn't recognize him!" said Billie, almost in tears with disappointment. "That's twice I've let him escape. I'll bet I don't do it a third time!"

CHAPTER XIX.—WITH THE REGULAR ARMY.

Despite the escape of Don Rafael, the expedition had been a great success. All the other gun-runners, with the possible exception of the one whom Adrian knocked into the river, had either been captured or shot, the arms had been secured for evidence, and the boat, which had been so well used, had been captured.

"It's all very well for the Rangers," said Billie to Donald as they were climbing into bed that night, "but it hasn't helped me a bit. I am no nearer keeping my promise to Santiago than I was yesterday morning. In fact, I am further away, for Don Rafael will be more cautious than ever."

"Well, I wouldn't worry about it," replied Donald good-naturedly. "Go to bed and sleep over it. You may dream it out. Because we've done our best today is no sign we cannot do better tomorrow. We profit by experience, my father says. Our very failures make us try that much harder."

"That's a fact," declared Adrian. "I've proved that myself."

"It doesn't seem as though I could try much harder," said Billie, with a vigorous shake of his head; "but as Donald says, the best thing to do now is to sleep over it," and he tumbled into bed and was soon sleeping as soundly as though he had not just been through an ordeal which would have been a memorable one even for one much more experienced than Broncho Billie.

The events of the morrow proved that sleeping over the matter was the very best thing that could have been done, because it was the last real good night's sleep the boys had for some time. While they were eating their breakfast the next morning, Capt. Peak came in and told them that a revolution against President Madero had already broken out and that General Felix Diaz was attacking Vera Cruz.

"So you see," he added, "our predictions were pretty nearly correct."

"What effect will it have upon your work?" asked Donald.

"I expect it will increase it greatly. We shall have to be more active than ever to prevent gun-runners, smugglers—for gun-running is nothing less than smuggling—from getting arms across the border."

"You seem to have done about all you can since we have known you," laughed Adrian. "I don't see how you can do much more."

"Well, in the first place," explained Capt. Peak, "I expect we shall be attached to some regiment of regular army cavalry, or at least we shall be under the direct orders of some United States officer, instead of working as state troops as we do in times of quiet. This will undoubtedly be the first step. After that, we can only guess as to what duty may be assigned us."

The Captain's prediction proved quite correct and before night it was announced that Captain Peak's company had been assigned to duty with the regulars under command of Col. Bliss.

During the day many rumors were afloat as to happenings across the river, but it was not until that night that the revolution developed in Presidio del Norte. Then firing was heard, and from the American side it could be seen that a skirmish of some sort was in progress.

It was while these events were shaping themselves that the Broncho Rider Boys held a council of war over their own future.

"We ought to be in El Paso now," said Donald, in reviewing the situation. "We are already past due and Billie's father will be greatly worried at our non-appearance; but I don't know how we can help it."

"Can't we telegraph him?" asked Billie.

"There is nothing but a military line from here to Langtry," replied Donald.

"Well, I'm sure Capt. Peak can get a message through for us," insisted Billie. "I feel more like staying here now than ever. I am sure I shall be able to get a line on Don Rafael, and if I can't capture him I may be able to help some one else do so."

"I feel a good deal like Billie," declared Adrian, "and I vote to notify Billie's father, if possible, and stay right here for a few days longer anyway."

"Two is a majority," said Donald, "so let's go and see what we can do."

They found Capt. Peak in conversation with a member of Col. Bliss' staff and made known their wants.

"These are the young men of whom I have just been speaking," said Capt. Peak to the officer. "Boys, I want to introduce you to Lieut. Grant of the regular army!"

The boys acknowledged the introduction.

"And so you want to get a message to El Paso," said the Lieutenant.

"If we can," replied Billie. "I am afraid my father will be getting worried."

"Of course you know the line is for purely military purposes?"

"Yes sir," was Billie's prompt reply, "and this message is a military necessity."

"Yes?" queried the Lieutenant. "How so?"

"Because it has to be sent to prevent Capt. Peak from losing our services."

Both the Lieutenant and Capt. Peak laughed heartily at Billie's witty reply, while the Lieutenant said forcibly:

"And that he cannot afford to do right now. We have already counted upon your assistance in a little scouting expedition."

"Then the message can be sent?"

"Undoubtedly. Also, we will undertake to get you a reply."

"That is most kind of you," said Billie, "and for my part I am ready to volunteer for duty this minute."

"How about your companions?" asked the Lieutenant.

"We are like Dumas's three guardsmen," said Adrian. "'One for all and all for one.'"

"Then we'll consider the matter settled," said the Lieutenant. "Report here at seven o'clock this evening for instructions."

"Well," remarked Donald as the trio rode away, "I never expected to become a military scout."

"Nor I," declared Billie, "but neither did I ever expect to be christened Broncho Billie. I'll sure have some tales to tell when I get back east."

"Yes," laughed Adrian. "First thing you know you'll become a regular Buffalo Bill, and be running a Wild West show!"

"I shouldn't be at all surprised. In these days of rapid-fire methods, why not a circus?" asked Billie.

And the other two replied: "Why not?"

When the boys reported for duty to Lieut. Grant at seven o'clock they found that conditions across the river had developed rapidly. The revolutionists had taken possession of Presidio del Norte and the skirmish referred to in the last chapter was in full swing.

"I hadn't expected such rapid developments," said the Lieutenant after a word of greeting. "This breaking out of open hostilities has made the mission upon which I wish to send you much more dangerous than I had thought. If, under the circumstances, you do not feel like undertaking it, I will detail someone else."

"Has the telegram gone to my father?" asked Billie.

"Yes."

"Then I feel bound to perform the duty you desire."

"You need not," said the Lieutenant.

"Whether I need, or not, I do. When I'm paid for doing a job I expect to do it. Of course," he added, "we'd do whatever you want us to anyway; but the telegram is personal with me."

"I admire your spirit," said the Lieutenant earnestly, "and I am now more than ever convinced that you are the very ones to perform the service."

The Lieutenant opened a drawer in his desk and took therefrom a large map, which he spread out upon a table. It was drawn so as to show, not only the boundaries of the different counties and districts, the watercourses and highways, but was also shaded so as to show the topography of the country on both sides the Rio Grande.

"Now look," he said to the boys, placing the point of his pencil on the map, "and listen carefully. Here is where you found the guns the other day. Here is the beach where you captured the boat. Back here, half a mile, you strike the trail leading to the little town of Alamito. There you come upon the line which has been surveyed by the Orient road and which strikes the Southern Pacific at Alpine. The reason why this spot has been selected for gun-running is that arms can be unloaded at Alpine and brought down here over these trails. Do you understand?"

The boys nodded their heads.

"Perfectly," they exclaimed.

"Col. Bliss has been informed that a decoy expedition is to be started from Alamito within a day or two, possibly tomorrow night, for the purpose of drawing our soldiers into a conflict with a band of Mexican revolutionists, in the hope that we will follow them across the river into Mexican territory. This would create an international dispute, which the revolutionists hope would cause the United States to take a hand in the Mexican troubles.

"The information desired, is to know, not the exact time of the proposed decoy expedition, for the conspirators will see that this information comes to us, but the exact size of the force, the route to be followed and the names of the men who are planning the expedition. The latter is the most important. Once their identity is known, it will be easy to do the rest, even to stopping the expedition before it starts."

"Have you any suggestion as to how to go about this?" asked Donald.

"Yes; that is one of the things I was going to explain. My idea is for you to join the expedition."

"Will they take us?" queried Adrian.

"It is for you to see that they do."

"We don't look like Mexicans," ventured Billie.

"The conspirators are not all Mexicans," said the Lieutenant. "In fact, it is thought that the whole thing is planned by Americans who own property in Mexico and want this government to intervene. Cowboys are the very chaps needed, and you can fill all the requirements. I should say the best place to join the expedition is in Presidio del Norte. If you can cross the river while the fighting is going on you stand a good chance of meeting the very men you are looking for."

"It's about the biggest job we ever tackled," said Donald aside to Adrian.

"Oh, I don't know," replied Adrian. "That bunch of smugglers was no small proposition."

"You are not afraid to undertake it, are you?" asked the Lieutenant.

"Afraid!" exclaimed Billie. "Why, Lieutenant, we're scared half to death most of the time; but that doesn't keep us from going ahead and doing whatever needs to be done. The only real fear in this matter is that we may not be smart enough to work the thing out."

"Then I know of no one who is," laughed the Lieutenant.

"We'll do our best," said Donald.

"I am sure of that," declared Lieut. Grant, "so now off with you! Do not delay your report a minute longer than necessary. Everything depends upon having information in advance."

The Lieutenant turned again to his desk and filled out a blank.

"Here is a pass through the patrol," he said as he handed Donald the paper. "Also an order to allow you to use the barge you captured. A couple of my men will row you over and bring the barge back. You can swim your horses behind. Once on the other side, you will have to look out for yourselves."

Leaving the Lieutenant, the boys mounted their horses and rode rapidly out of town to the spot where the boat lay. A short distance from the shore they were stopped by the patrol and presented the pass. The corporal of the guard was called, to whom they also gave the order for the use of the batteau and men to row them over. Both the pass and the order were promptly honored and in less than half an hour after leaving the Lieutenant they were on the Mexican shore.

While the spot upon which they landed was some distance from the firing line between the Federal troops and the revolutionists, they soon found that they were in the direct line of fire and quickly proceeded to change their position.

"I don't mind taking some chances in a fight for Uncle Sam," said Adrian, "but I object to being made a mark for a lot of greasers, who are fighting among themselves."

"Right," assented Billie, "but it looks as though this were Uncle Sam's service, so we'll have to take some chances. Suppose we get to the top of that knoll and see if there is still enough light to determine what is happening."

For want of better advice the boys accepted Billie's suggestion, and rode toward the little rise of ground. When they had approached the top, they dismounted, threw their bridle reins over a mesquite bush and cautiously made their way to the summit on foot.

While it was after sunset, it was well that the boys took this precaution. As they lifted their heads above the brow of the little hill they discovered, a short distance away, a force of Federals so posted as to command the knoll, evidently fearing that it might conceal some of the attacking revolutionists.

Quickly the boys dropped out of sight, and remounting their horses rode rapidly farther up stream. Then, using the little ridge as a screen, they made their way around to where they could approach the Federal line from the left.

Having then determined their position by a hasty reconnoiter, they advanced openly as though ignorant of all the trouble.

Their presence was quickly discovered and a detachment of cavalry charged down upon them, whereupon Donald waved his white handkerchief as a flag of truce, and the three halted until the horsemen came up.

"*Quien viva?*" shouted the leader as he came within hailing distance, which, being translated, means, "Who lives?" and is the common challenge either on the field or in camp.

"Mexico!" replied Donald, acting as spokesman.

"*Que gente?*" demanded the officer, meaning literally, "What people?" although the challenge is used very much as our soldiers call, "Who goes there?"

"Friends!" replied Donald. "We are Americans and wish to go to Presidio del Norte."

"Impossible!" declared the officer, who bore the rank of lieutenant. "No one can pass the lines."

"Will you take us to the commanding officer?" was Donald's next question.

"Without doubt," replied the officer with a broad smile. "We are bound to do that, whether you wish or not."

"Suits us," was the reply; and at the word of command the little detachment started for headquarters, wherever that might be, the cavalymen keeping the boys well surrounded.

It was a short ride, the commanding officer having made his headquarters in an adobe hut just behind a knoll similar to the one on the side of the valley where the boys had obtained their first view of the battle. They were quickly ushered into his presence and their joy and surprise may well be imagined when they recognized, in one of his aides, the captain of the rurales who had captured the smugglers at the cave.

The recognition was mutual and an exclamation of surprise burst from the lips of the captain.

"Caramba!" he exclaimed. "Where do you come from?"

The boys looked at each other in some confusion, not knowing just what to say. But once more Billie was equal to the occasion and he replied with his most innocent smile, "We were captured!"

"So I see," laughed the captain. "But what were you doing?"

"We wanted to see the battle," replied Billie. "We never had seen one and we wanted to know what it was like."

The captain smiled grimly and was about to say something more, when the general demanded sternly:

"Who are these boys, Captain?"

"They are the boys who aided in capturing Don Rafael's gang," was the prompt reply.

"What! The boys who rescued my son from that cutthroat!"

"The same, General!"

If the boys had been surprised at recognizing the captain, they were much more surprised at what followed.

Springing from his chair, the general seized first one boy by the hands and then another and wound up by throwing his arms about all three, much to their discomfort as well as their embarrassment.

"My brave lads!" he exclaimed. "How can I ever thank you for what you did for my son? He has told me all about you! I can never repay you."

"We're not looking for any payment," stammered Adrian. "All we want is to get into Presidio del Norte."

General Sanchez drew back and regarded them in surprise.

"Presidio del Norte!" he exclaimed. "What can you possibly want there?"

For a moment the boys made no reply, but eyed each other in a questioning manner. Each knew what the other was thinking, but neither was sure just what to say. At last Billie spoke.

"Tell him, Donald," he said. "It's the very best thing to do."

"Right!" was Donald's reply. Then to the general: "Can we have five minutes with you in private?"

"Five!" exclaimed General Sanchez. "Ten times five if you wish!"

"Five will be plenty," said Donald.

The general issued an order and the room was quickly cleared.

"Now, then," said he, "you may talk to me like I was your own father! That is the way I feel toward you."

CHAPTER XXI.—JOINING THE REVOLUTIONISTS.

Fifteen minutes later, just as the last rays of daylight were fading away, three horsemen were seen to dash out of the Federal lines and head straight for the intrenchments which the revolutionists had hastily thrown up around Presidio del Norte.

A minute later a band of at least a dozen cavalymen followed in hot pursuit.

But that one minute had been sufficient to give the three horsemen enough of a lead to make it a stern chase, which everyone knows is a long chase; and although the cavalry were plainly well mounted, the three horsemen gradually ran away from them.

When this became evident, the pursuers opened fire upon the trio, but their shots failed to reach their mark. In a couple of minutes more, the cavalymen were obliged to draw rein to prevent them from coming within range of the revolutionists' rifles, while the fleeing horsemen rode directly into the trenches and later into the town.

The three horsemen were the Broncho Rider Boys and the chase was a ruse determined upon by the boys and General Sanchez when they told him their mission, for of course General Sanchez was as anxious to thwart the revolutionist plot as was Lieut. Grant.

So well was the ruse carried out, however, that it completely deceived the revolutionists; and as the boys came inside the revolutionary lines, they were cheered loudly.

They approached the first officer they met and asked the way to the commander of the city. He was not only glad to direct them, but even offered to accompany them—an offer which they were glad to accept.

“That was a narrow escape,” he said as they rode along.

“It was that,” replied Donald; “but it was either escape or be stood up before a firing squad, and we took the chance. If that’s the way the Madero government treats people, it’s no wonder you all revolted.”

“That’s right,” declared Billie. “I’d like to have a chance to take a shot at them.”

“You shall have it,” declared the officer. “I will tell the general and he will be glad to enlist you.”

“*Bueno!*” replied Billie, although joining the revolutionists was a thing he had not before considered. A gun-running expedition didn’t seem so bad; but to be put out on the firing line was a good deal too much like war.

They soon reached the barracks, and for the second time that evening the boys were ushered into the presence of a commanding general.

Without giving them a chance to speak, the officer who had conducted them thither introduced them by saying:

“General, here are three Americans who have just broken through the enemy’s line and want to join our army.”

“Is it possible?” queried the general, a dapper little man, who looked about as much like the boys’ idea of a revolutionist as a horse looks like a goat.

The officer assured him that it was more than possible; that it was a fact.

“They must be smart young men to escape General Sanchez,” was the general’s next remark.

“They are,” declared the officer, who seemed to be considerably nettled at the general’s manner. It was a daring ride, he had seen it and he wanted the credit of bringing in three such valuable recruits. “I’d be glad to have them in my battalion,” he added.

“*Asi!*” said the general as he slowly nodded his head. He was clearly suspicious and still the revolution was so new and the need of men so great that he couldn’t afford to be too particular. “So you would like them in your company, Don Carlos?”

“*Cierto!*” was the officer’s emphatic reply.

“Very well; take them along. But remember, you have sharp work ahead, and want only men on whom you can depend. These American cowboys are a hard lot, especially when they are drinking.”

“I know men when I see them,” replied Don Carlos, with an air of self-importance. “I wasn’t born yesterday.”

“*Bueno!*” and the general waved his hand. “Take them away. I’m busy now; but come back in an hour and I’ll give you your instructions.”

“Come,” commanded the officer called Don Carlos, and the boys followed him from the room, not having spoken a word.

“I hope we’re going to see some active service,” said Adrian to Donald in an undertone, which was intended for the ears of the officer, although it was supposed not to be.

“I’ll bet we will,” replied Donald in the same manner. “The major here is all right.”

Don Carlos squared his shoulders and threw out his chest, the remark having greatly pleased his vanity. And right here it may be said that Don Carlos was as brave and dashing a revolutionist as there was in the army, his only weakness being his egotism. Because of this his judgment was bad, and courage without wisdom is quite apt to get one into trouble.

“Well,” muttered Billie, who had quickly caught on to the game, “I’d like to know where I’m going before I join any company. The major may be all right, but unless he gets a chance, what can he do?”

“We’ll have plenty of chance,” interrupted the major.

“Yes, I know,” grumbled Billie, “to stand in a trench and shoot at nothing. What I want is something with a dash!”

“We’ll have that, too,” declared Don Carlos. “What would you say to a raid across the river and a fight with the patrol?”

"Fine! That's the kind of a job for me!"

"How about your comrades?"

"We're with you!" exclaimed both Adrian and Donald in one breath. "Anything for excitement!"

"You're young men after my own heart!" declared Don Carlos, who was a right young man himself.

"Where are we going now?" asked Billie, seeing that they were riding back toward the firing line.

"My men are mostly in the trenches," replied Don Carlos, "but the dozen or more I have selected for this raid are in a little cantina just around the corner."

He gave his horse the spur and a moment later pulled up at the most inviting of the numerous cantinas which encircled the plaza.

"Here we are!" he exclaimed, as he leaped from his horse. "Come in and I'll introduce you to the rest of the troop."

As the boys alighted they recognized the place as the one that had played such a conspicuous part in their recent visit to Villa, but they felt sure that no one would recognize them; and even if anyone did, the revolution had completely changed conditions since that time. The only fear they had was that they would not be able to play the part they had assumed.

"Take your time," was Donald's advice, "and keep your wits about you."

"You don't suppose they'll want us to drink, do you?" asked Billie.

"I hardly think so," answered Donald. "My observation is that the average Mexican is not a drinker of anything stronger than *agua frescas*"—meaning by this, drinks like limeade, piña and other soft drinks.

"Oh, well," laughed Billie, "I could stand a good lemonade right now. Let's hurry up!"

Donald's prediction was quite right, and when the boys entered they found a number of the troop just about to indulge in a *grosella*, a very palatable beverage made from currants and tasting much like the now famous grape juice. A couple of tough-looking Americans were the only ones who were drinking anything intoxicating.

"These are our new recruits," cried Don Carlos, so that all could hear. "Here's their health!"

"*Salud!*" meaning, "your health," was the boisterous response, and in a very few minutes the boys found themselves on terms of soldierly good fellowship with the whole band, not excepting the Americans, who were the most boisterous of all.

"I don't like these fellows' looks at all," declared Adrian to Billie, the first time he got a chance to speak to him privately. "They look like a couple of outlaws."

"I expect they are," laughed Billie. "Perhaps they take us for the same."

"By George, I believe they do!" was Adrian's answer. "Now what do you think of that?"

"What do I think of what?" queried Donald, who had heard the remark.

Adrian repeated the conversation.

"Well," declared Donald, "I don't know but we are, in the eyes of anyone who don't know the facts."

"What!" exclaimed Billie. "Haven't I a right to fight for the revolutionists if I want to?"

"Sure you have; but if you are caught at it, your own government would not interfere in your behalf. If you expect the United States to protect you, you must be neutral in other peoples' battles!"

"Of course," explained Adrian, "our present position is not that."

"Oh, no!" replied Donald. "We are on a mission for our own government."

Their conversation was interrupted by the major, who, calling all the men aside, explained to them briefly that they were to go on a dangerous mission across the river into the United States.

"If it succeeds," he said, "it will not only insure the success of our cause, but will mean a goodly sum of money to each one of us."

"How is that?" asked one of the Mexicans.

"Because the work we have to do is in the interest of a large railroad syndicate, which is most

anxious to have the United States intervene in the troubles in Mexico!"

"We want no intervention by the United States," declared several of the men fiercely. "Rather Francisco Madero than the American pigs!"

"You don't understand," explained one of the Americans, to whom our boys had taken such a dislike. "The Americans only want to be guaranteed——"

"We know," replied one Mexican. "We are willing to fight, but not for the Americans."

"*Bueno!*" exclaimed several.

For a few minutes it looked as though there might be a small revolution among the revolutionists, but Don Carlos was equal to the occasion and announced that no one had to go who did not want to.

"Neither will they get any of the money," he added. "Now then, all who do not wish to go may return to the trenches."

No one made a move, although there was considerable muttering.

"Now that this matter is settled," said Don Carlos, "I will go and get my final instructions. I'll be back soon."

"We seem to be getting pretty close to the facts," said Donald as Don Carlos left. "If we can only get some names we shall have all the information we need."

"We shall get those after we get a little better acquainted," said Adrian, and he proceeded to make friends with the members of the band as best he could.

Perceiving that this was the proper thing to do, Donald and Billie also began to get better acquainted and were making good progress when Don Carlos returned, accompanied by two companions, which brought the number up to twenty.

"Attention!" he called as soon as he entered the cantina.

The order was obeyed, although not in a very soldierly manner.

"The expedition is to leave for the American side in twos and threes," he explained, "and we are to meet at Alamita at eight o'clock tomorrow night. If any are captured, they are to allow themselves to be imprisoned without protest. No matter what happens, keep your orders secret. You understand?"

"*Bueno!*" was the unanimous reply.

"Then go!" ordered Don Carlos, and he stepped aside to allow the men to pass out.

"Stop!" exclaimed a voice from the rear of the cantina. "One thing you have forgotten!"

The boys, along with the others, turned at the sound of the voice and there in a rear door stood Don Rafael.

"Great Scott!" exclaimed Billie. "This is no place for me!" and he made a bolt for the door, followed by Adrian and Donald.

"Stop them," cried Don Rafael, who recognized them at the same instant they recognized him. "They are spies!"

CHAPTER XXII.—BESIEGED BY REVOLUTIONISTS.

At the cry of spies all was confusion, and the revolutionists, with loud imprecations, sprang forward to seize the accused.

But quick as were the Mexicans, the Broncho Rider Boys were quicker! Evading the outstretched hands which would hold them, the boys dashed for the door, striking right and left at all who came within reach.

"Look out for the knives and use your fists," cried Donald, as he planted a well directed blow on the point of Don Carlos' chin, which laid that enthusiastic revolutionist low.

Billie and Adrian followed suit, and the two nearest them went down under their attack.

Another bound and they had reached the door.

"Shoot them," cried Don Rafael. "They are friends of Gen. Sanchez!"

He drew his revolver and would have fired, had not the man nearest him knocked his revolver

from his hand.

"You'll hit our own men," he said. "Who are you anyway?"

"I'll show you who I am," replied Don Rafael, beside himself with rage. "Take that!" and he aimed a blow at the man, which not only knocked the man down, but caused Don Rafael to nurse his fist with pain.

And now the boys are in the street and the whole band is after them, shouting and firing their revolvers indiscriminately.

Ordinarily such an affair would have created great excitement, but with firing in progress all about the city, it only attracted a few old men and boys, who joined in the pursuit.

"Get off the plaza," cried Adrian. "Get into the dark!"

"Can't we get our horses?" gasped Billie.

"No!" replied Donald as they ran. "Never mind the horses! Look for some place where we can hide."

They darted down the first street which seemed to offer a refuge, with the whole band in hot pursuit.

"They're gaining on us," said Billie. "Let's turn another corner!"

This they did and still another, but were unable to shake off their pursuers, who seemed to increase in numbers.

"In here!" at last cried Donald, as he noticed the door of a house standing partly open. "In here and shut the door!"

Suiting the action to the word, he darted in. The others followed, slamming the door behind them.

It was not a moment too soon, for the next instant the crowd came around the corner and passed down the street, thinking the boys still ahead.

It was pitch dark in the room into which they had stumbled, but Donald produced his electric light and they took a hasty survey of their surroundings.

"Here's a candle," he said. "We'd better light it and save our electricity."

This they did, and as the dim light gave them a better view of the entire place they were all struck with its familiar appearance.

"It seems to me as though I had been in here before some time," said Billie.

"Me too," declared Adrian, and he looked about more carefully.

"I've got it!" exclaimed Billie. "It's Villa's house!"

"By George, you're right," said Adrian. "I wonder where he is?"

"It don't look as though anyone had been here since we were," said Billie.

"Maybe there hasn't," replied Donald. "This surely is a queer mess we have fallen into."

The noise of a great commotion in the street and the sound of pounding on doors came to them through the grated window.

"The mob is returning!" said Adrian.

"What do you suppose the pounding is?" queried Billie.

"I should say they were breaking into the houses along the street," said Donald.

"That is just what they are doing," asserted Adrian. "Looking for us, no doubt."

"We'd better barricade the door," exclaimed Donald, and he grabbed the bed and pushed it against the door, while Billie pushed up the table.

"Not much to barricade with," remarked Adrian and he piled up the chairs.

The work had hardly been completed when there was a knocking on the door.

The boys made no response.

"Open!" cried a voice, "in the name of the law, open the door!"

Still the boys made no reply; but they made ready to use their weapons if necessity demanded.

Then came blows upon the door, evidently from an ax, and in a moment the lock was shattered.

"It's time to give them warning," said Donald. "Fire through the first opening they make."

The very next blow made the opening desired and three shots rang out. They were followed by screams from the street and the hammering ceased.

"They've found out that there is some one here, anyway," said Billie. "I wonder what they'll do next?"

A volley from without was his answer, but the shots were all high and no damage was done. The boys did not wait for a second volley, but jumped around to each side of the door, out of range.

Evidently believing that the shots had taken effect, the besiegers renewed their attack; but at the first blow the boys reached around and delivered their fire.

There was no answering shout to tell that the shots had taken effect, but the hammering ceased and a second later there was another volley.

"They are simply wasting their ammunition," said Donald. "As long as we stay away from in front of the door they cannot possibly hit us."

"They might batter the house down though," said Adrian. "I wonder if there isn't some way of escaping by the rear."

"Suppose you go and look," said Donald.

"I'll go," exclaimed Billie. "My experience in the smugglers' cave has made me expert." He dropped down on the floor and made his way on all fours to the back of the room.

There seemed to be but one entrance to the room and that was from the street. The entrance into the patio, which might have been expected, being lacking.

"I wonder why that is," thought Billie. "All the Mexican houses I have ever seen opened into a patio."

The patio is the little court around which Mexican houses are almost invariably built.

"Give me your electric light," he at length said to Donald. "I am sure there must be an opening somewhere."

Donald did as requested and Billie on all fours went carefully round the room, looking for a possible door.

"Here's the place," he finally exclaimed, "but the door has been walled up." Then a moment later: "Hello, what's this? A trap door."

Quickly he brushed away the sand with which the floor had been covered, as is the Mexican custom, and the outlines of a door were plainly visible; but there seemed no way of raising it. Several times he passed his hand over the door, if perchance he could find a knob or a secret bolt, but in vain!

"I'll have to pry it open with my hunting knife," he finally exclaimed and began digging away with all his might.

"Are you sure it's a door?" asked Donald, crawling over to where Billie was at work.

"Sure! Can't you see?"

"It surely is," said Donald. "Here, let me hold the light, while you get a good purchase with the knife."

Billie handed over the electric light and gave the knife a vicious dig into the crack between the door and the surrounding floor. At the same time the besiegers struck the street door a terrific blow with the end of a steel rail which had been brought up from the railroad camp.

Just exactly what happened, Billie was at first unable to realize. All he knew was that the trap door, upon which he was leaning with one hand, had given way beneath him, and he was falling head first down a flight of stairs.

Picking himself up as soon as he struck bottom, which was not more than six feet, he started to ascend the stairs, but at the second step his head came into contact with the floor.

The trap door had flown back into its place.

CHAPTER XXIII.—BILLIE SOLVES A MYSTERY.

"Ouch!" exclaimed Billie, as his head came into contact with the door. "I wonder what——" and then he stopped and listened.

Overhead he could hear the sound of stamping feet and the sound of shots. After a couple of minutes there was silence, which was more ominous than the sound of fighting.

For a moment Billie's heart fairly stopped beating with fear for what might have happened to his companions. Had they been killed or simply overpowered? What was he to do?

Even while these thoughts flashed through his mind the silence was broken by voices, and above all the others he could hear that of Don Rafael, which he had now come to recognize.

"Bring them out into the light where I can get a good look at them," he ordered. "The gringo curs! We'll have a nice little shooting party at daylight that will make them an example for others who want to spy upon Mexican patriots!"

"Patriots!" thought Billie. "If they are patriots, I'm sorry for Mexico."

"Where is the other one?" he heard Don Rafael ask a minute later.

"These are the only two," was the reply.

"Where is your comrade?" he heard Don Rafael ask, and Billie's heart gave a great leap for joy as Donald's voice replied:

"Don't you wish you knew?"

"Answer," commanded Don Rafael.

To which Billie heard Adrian say: "You'll find out soon enough where he is!"

"*Caramba!*" almost shouted Don Rafael. "If you don't answer at once I'll shoot you now instead of waiting till daylight."

"Do," replied Adrian, "and it will make it just that much worse for you!"

Evidently Don Rafael must have been somewhat impressed by what Adrian said, for he did not shoot. Instead he commanded to bring more lights and search the place.

But there was nothing to be seen but the empty room, the scuffle having obliterated all signs of the trap door.

"Whose house is this?" Don Rafael at length asked.

"Pancho Villa's," replied one of the men.

"Villa's!" cried Don Rafael. "Villa's! May the saints protect us! Let us go at once!"

A minute later Billie heard the retreating footsteps overhead and a couple of minutes later all was again still.

"I wonder what there is about Villa to scare Don Rafael in that way," he thought. "The last I knew, he was trying to get Villa to join the revolution."

It was too big a problem for Billie, and so instead of bothering about it he began to figure how he was going to get out.

"If the door could open to let me in," he said aloud to himself, "it can open to let me out."

"You are right!" replied a voice in Spanish from somewhere out of the darkness.

To say that Billie was not startled by the voice would be rather a strong statement, for brave as he was, such a happening tended to send several creepy chills up his back. He had retained his hold upon his knife as he fell, and his clasp upon it tightened considerably as he asked with all the courage he could command:

"Who are you and how do you know?"

"I know because I fixed it to open. I will leave you to guess who I am."

In an instant it flashed into Billie's mind who it was that was speaking to him, and he replied with a good deal more assurance:

"There is but one person who could have made and used it! You are Pancho Villa."

"*Bueno!*" was the reply.

"Well then," asked Billie, "will you kindly show me how to get out?"

"Yes, if you will tell no one I am here."

"It's a bargain," said Billie.

A moment later there was a sound of a match being lighted and the cellar was illumined by a faint gleam of light, which grew larger as the light was applied to the wick of a candle. By this light Billie saw he was in a cellar the same size as the room above and that his companion was lying on a bed in one corner of the cellar.

"What's the matter?" asked Billie. "Are you sick?"

"I have been wounded," was the reply.

"When?"

"The night you boys visited me."

"By whom?"

"I am not sure, but I think it was Don Rafael Solis."

"That must have been the shot we heard as we were leaving that night!"

"Yes!"

"How are you now?"

"I was going to leave here tomorrow. I am afraid there is going to be an uprising against President Madero very soon."

"What!" asked Billie. "Didn't you know it had already broken out? Why, they are fighting all around here right now."

Villa sprang to his feet, entirely forgetful of the wound in his side.

"Do you mean to tell me," he said, "that a revolution has already begun?"

"Exactly!"

"Who started it?"

"Gen. Felix Diaz, they say. Up here, the garrison has joined the revolution. Gen. Sanchez was on his way to take command when the revolution broke out. He failed to reach here in time. He is now attacking the city with a thousand infantry and five hundred cavalry."

"Who is in command of the revolutionists?"

"I do not know for sure; but one of the chief actors is called Don Carlos, while Don Rafael seems to have a lot to say."

For several minutes Villa stood silent, turning the matter over in his mind and seemingly undecided as to the course he should pursue. Then he suddenly straightened himself and looked Billie squarely in the eye.

"The revolution is wrong," he said. "President Madero is the friend of the peon. I shall stick to him no matter what happens. Come, it is time I was acting."

He took a step up the stairs and by the light of the candle drew back a bolt and opened the trap door. Then he stood aside for Billie to pass.

Arriving in the room above they stopped and surveyed the wreck. The rail, with which the door had been battered in, was where it had fallen and confusion reigned.

"Where are you going?" asked Billie after a moment.

"To join Gen. Sanchez. Why?"

"Because something has got to be done between now and daylight to save my companions!"

"*Bueno!*" exclaimed Villa. "They shall be saved!"

"How?"

"I will explain later! No friend of Santiago shall suffer for trying to do me a kindness. And, besides," he added after a moment, "I owe Don Rafael one for this."

He placed his hand on his wound and a look of fierce determination passed over his face.

"How did it happen?" asked Billie, no longer able to restrain his curiosity.

"He tried to assassinate me and would have succeeded had I not had the trap door to hide me. I think my sudden disappearance must have frightened him. That is why he was frightened again tonight when he found he was in my home. He must think that the place is guarded by an evil spirit."

"It seems more like a good spirit to me," declared Billie, "but let us hasten to Gen. Sanchez! I cannot rest easy till my companions have been rescued."

CHAPTER XXIV.—LOST IN THE CHAPARRAL.

An hour later Billie and Pancho Villa stood before Gen. Sanchez. It was then ten o'clock and the sun would arise shortly before five. Neither Billie nor Villa had any doubt that Don Rafael would carry out his threat to execute the two young Americans. It was in keeping with his previous actions and with the so-called laws of the revolution.

They had encountered some difficulty in getting through the city lines, but Villa was equal to the occasion and they reached the Federal pickets in safety. Here they gave their names and were quickly escorted to Gen. Sanchez's headquarters.

The general had lain down to take a few minutes' sleep, but had left word to be awakened if anything was heard from the boys.

Briefly Billie told his story.

"What can be done to save my friends?" he asked.

Gen. Sanchez looked grave.

"It is a hard problem," he replied. "We have been trying all day to force our way into the city, but have not yet succeeded, as you know. It seems hardly possible that we should be able to carry the lines between now and dawn."

"Still there is a way," said Villa.

The general regarded him with considerable surprise.

"How?" he asked.

"By the bed of the river."

"What do you mean?"

"The river," explained Pancho, "runs right beside the walls of the barracks. The water on this side is not so deep but that it is possible for men to march right up to the walls of the barracks, if they know the channel. I know it. If I had a hundred men who were not afraid I could carry the barracks.

"But," he continued, "in order to lead this force to the barracks unobserved, it would be necessary for you first to attack the city from the opposite side. While the fighting is going on fiercely over there and the revolutionists are striving to prevent you from entering the city on the east, I will lead this hundred men into the barracks. As soon as we have rescued the Americans we will attack the revolutionists in the rear! You know what the result will be?"

"Undoubtedly!"

"Then you agree?"

"Yes; but I hardly know how to withdraw a hundred men from any one place on our attacking line. Our force is small as it is."

"I wish some of the rangers were over here," exclaimed Billie. "They'd help, I know."

"Yes," replied Gen. Sanchez, "but that is impossible. If any American soldiers were to help us it would be almost as bad at this particular time as though they helped the other side. We shall have to do the best we can. I will promise you fifty, and a hundred if possible. Return at 3:30 o'clock and I will give the order."

"I need a hundred men," declared Villa as he and Billie left the general's presence, "and I don't see how I can do with less."

"I'll tell you!" suddenly exclaimed Billie. "Maybe the rangers cannot come as rangers to help rescue Donald and Adrian, but they can come as friends of mine and I believe they will. I have at least five hours to get across the river and bring them back. I am going to try. It is the only way. I wonder if we can find a horse!"

"Cierito!" replied Villa. "We'll take the first good one we see!"

This they did, and ten minutes later Billie was again headed for the American shore.

Billie had been over the ground between Presidio and Presidio del Norte so many times that he thought he knew it perfectly, and as a result, although the night was dark, he put spurs to his mount and was quickly beyond the Federal outposts.

But the horse Billie was riding was not Jupiter. He was undoubtedly a good horse, as the speed at which he went fully testified. But it is one thing to have a horse that understands English and another to have one that understands only Mexican, as Billie soon discovered.

The horse which Billie had mounted at Pancho's suggestion was Mexican clear through. He had never been across the Rio Grande, nor had he the slightest knowledge of the ground over which he was running. He had come from the south only twenty-four hours before, and, despite all that Billie could do, he insisted in bearing away from the river. Time and again Billie forced him back into the right direction, as he thought, but after half an hour's hard riding, which should have brought him to the spot where the boys had landed from the boat, there was no river in sight.

"By George!" exclaimed Billie aloud, as he finally drew rein and peered into the darkness, "I wonder where that river has gone to. It ought to be around here somewhere!"

He turned his horse sharply to the left and for several minutes rode slowly along, looking all about his narrow horizon.

"Don't you know where you are?" he asked of the horse; but not understanding English, there was no answering movement of the animal's ears and no sense of that companionship which a horseman should feel from his mount.

"If I'd had Jupiter under me I wouldn't be in this fix!" thought Billie, and for a brief moment he was almost overcome with a sense of loneliness.

But there was no time to waste. The lives of his companions depended upon his success, and he hastily pulled himself together and spurred forward.

For another five minutes he galloped along, when all at once his horse went down upon his knees and only the saddle kept Billie from going over his head.

Quickly gathering himself, he tried his best with the reins to lift the animal to his feet; but his efforts were in vain and he was obliged to dismount.

One look at the ground beneath his feet was sufficient. He had ridden into the midst of a prairie dog village and his horse had fallen into one of the holes.

After some minutes, Billie succeeded in getting the animal on his feet; but when he mounted and started to ride, he found that the broncho was so lame he could scarcely move.

While the accident was unfortunate in one way, it was a good thing in another. It served as a landmark to tell Billie where he was—for the very first day the boys had arrived on the Rio Grande they had noticed it and Billie was sure that it was the only dog village for miles.

"I must be about two miles from Don Pablo's," he mused. "That makes me fully six miles from the city and with this lame pony I don't know how long it will take me to get there! I wish I could get hold of one of old Don Pablo's mules."

He gave the broncho a slap with the reata, not having the heart to use his spurs. The animal tried to go a bit faster, but the effort was a failure.

"I can walk faster than this," was the lad's next thought and without a moment's hesitation he threw himself from the horse and started in the direction of the river on a run.

"If I can only find that river," he muttered as he sped along. "I'll stick close to it until I reach town. It can't be so very far away!"

Billie was a good runner and he had learned in his months of experience on the plains how to run so as not to tire himself. It was vastly different from running along a beaten path, or even along a regular trail. The ground was covered with sand hummocks, and every once in a while he would run into a patch of sand so deep that it was impossible to do more than walk.

After some minutes Billie struck a belt of chaparral.

"Well!" he gasped, "this is encouraging, anyway. I am getting nearer the river."

Through the brush he ran and finally, to his great delight, he emerged into a beaten path.

"Now I'm all right," he thought. "This will lead me right down to the shore."

Encouraged by the thought, he put on more steam and spurted ahead; but when, after five

minutes' running, he failed to come to the water, he stopped and looked around.

"I must be going in the wrong direction," he exclaimed, and turning, began to retrace his tracks.

For nearly ten minutes he kept on his course and then again stopped, pretty well tired out.

"This is something fierce!" he said aloud. "I'm in as bad a fix as that chap you read about in mythology, who was lost in a labyrinth. I used to think that was a pretty fishy story, but here I find myself in the same fix. I wish the stars would come out!"

But the stars failed to appear and Billie stood perplexed.

As he stood thus undecided, his ears caught the sound of a strange little cough and a smile spread itself over his face.

"The prairie dogs are barking at the pinto," he laughed. "Well, anyway, I know where I am as far as they are concerned. I must have gone pretty nearly in a circle. That wouldn't be strange for me, but why should this path go in a circle?"

He took off his sombrero and wiped the sweat from his forehead.

"It's mighty funny," he continued, still thinking of the path.

Then an explanation came to him.

"It isn't a circle!" he exclaimed. "It's a loop and I would have gone straight across it if I had kept on the way I was going when I first struck it. There must be a bend in the river down here somewhere."

Billie's surmise was quite correct. It was a bend in the river, and in a few minutes more, pushing straight through the chaparral, he came in sight of the water.

"Well!" declared the lad as he drew a deep breath, "I'm certainly glad to see you! And now to get to the other side."

He sprang down the bank in three long strides and peered out toward the American shore. It seemed a long way and the water was running at a good speed.

"What a fool I was not to stick to the broncho," he muttered. "If he couldn't walk, he could swim. If I was sure he was still there I'd go back and get him; but that's altogether unlikely. No sir, I've just got to swim it alone and the sooner the better."

He threw off his jacket and began to unbuckle his cartridge belt.

"If I could only find a log of some kind, it wouldn't be so bad; but I don't see any."

He took a few steps along the shore, peering into the darkness, as he rolled his belt about his six-shooter and deposited them in his hat.

Then he turned again to the water, and, throwing off his boots—which together with his jacket he tossed up on the bank, as if perchance he might come back for them on the morrow—he waded in.

He had reached deep water, and was just about to strike out for the opposite shore, when his ear caught the sound of oar-locks. He paused in the act of launching himself into the current, and listened attentively. There was no mistaking the sound, and he waited anxiously to see what would appear.

He had not long to wait, for a couple of minutes later a batteau, very much like the one the rangers had captured the night before, came into sight, rowing slowly upstream. It contained three persons, two at the oars and the third standing in the bow of the boat, looking forward.

Billie sank himself into the water until nothing could be seen below his eyes. There was only one chance in fifty that he would escape detection, but he was in luck, and, as soon as the boat passed him, he struck out for it with all his speed.

Good swimmer though he was, he would never have been able to catch the boat had the men been rowing with any speed; but they were evidently looking for something, and were going so slowly that it was no trick at all to swim up behind and seize the stern with both hands.

For several minutes after he had secured a hold he made no move, being content to let the boat tow him along; but, after a few minutes, he began silently to use his feet and legs and to turn the boat's head toward the American shore.

At first the oarsmen did not notice what was happening. Then the one on the American side of the boat exclaimed:

"*Caramba, hombre!* Don't pull so hard! Can't you see you are pulling us out of our course?"

"Yes," echoed the man in the bow, "don't get too near the American shore tonight. We may be watched."

"I'm not pulling hard," replied the other oarsman. "It's Emilio who is weak. If he would pull harder, there'd be no trouble!"

Hearing the controversy, Billie sank lower into the water, and let the boat hold its course. Then, after a couple of minutes, he again diverted the little craft, being more careful, however, to do it gradually.

Several times he performed the feat, until the boat was past the middle of the stream.

"I guess I'm near enough now," he thought to himself, "so I won't have any trouble," and was about to release his hold and let the boat go on her way, when the man at the bow called out sharply:

"Where are you going? Do you want the gringo patrol to get you?"

The words were spoken in a much louder tone, evidently, than had been intended, and must have been heard from the American shore, for immediately thereafter there came a challenge in English:

"Boat ahoy! Who goes there?"

There was no answer from the boat, only an answering tug from the oarsman, who pulled lustily to turn his boat from shore, while Billie, using himself as a rudder, strove his best to keep the boat in an opposite direction. The result was that the boat kept straight ahead.

"Who goes there?" again came the challenge. "Answer, or I'll fire!" A threat which was carried out a moment later when no reply was forthcoming.

The patrol must have caught a glimpse of the boat, for the bullet whistled through the air close to it.

"*Caramba!*" shouted the man in the bow. "Why don't you pull?"

"We are pulling!" exclaimed the oarsmen, "but the evil one must have the boat in his grasp, Don Pablo! We can't turn it!"

"Don Pablo!" exclaimed Billie to himself, "so that's who it is!" And he struggled harder than ever to turn the boat toward the shore, while the patrol, evidently reinforced by two or three comrades, poured a sharp fusillade in the direction of the sound of the voices.

"The evil one, verdad!" exclaimed Don Pablo. "The evil one must have hold of you, Emilio. Pull!"

But, instead of pulling, Emilio dropped his oar and pitched forward into the boat, pierced by a rifle ball from the shore patrol, which now seemed to have the range of the boat.

CHAPTER XXV.—THE FIGHT IN MIDSTREAM.

As the bullets whizzed overhead and all about the boat, and as Billie saw the oarsman pitch forward, he had two thoughts in his mind—one to keep from being hit by the bullets, and the other to capture Don Pablo, whom he considered as the real leader of the gun runners.

It took some quick thinking to know what to do, but Billie was learning how to do that very thing.

Seizing the oar which had fallen from Emilio's hand, he dragged it out of the rowlocks, at the same time calling out with all his might:

"Cease firing!"

The command, given in excellent English, had its effect upon the soldiers on the shore. The firing ceased, and a voice called out:

"Who are you?"

"I'm a messenger from Americans who are in danger in Presidio del Norte," replied Billie; "but there are Mexicans in the boat. You have hit one of them, and I've captured the boat!"

"Then bring the boat ashore," called the patrol.

"I can't!"

"Why not?"

"They won't let me!"

"I thought you said you had captured the boat!"

"So I have," replied Billie, "but I haven't captured the Mexicans!"

"No," shouted Don Pablo, who was now slowly making his way toward the stern of the boat, "nor will you. Your hour has come!"

"Don't be so sure!" called the voice from the shore, and a shot rang out, which came so close that Billie could hear it sing above his head. Don Pablo ducked into the bottom of the boat, as though to dodge a bullet which was already yards away.

"Did I hit him?" called the patrol.

"No, but you came pretty close," replied Billie. "But you hadn't better try it again. You might hit me. I'm in the water."

"What, swimming?"

"Yes! I've got hold of the stern of the boat; but I've got to let go," he added hastily, as he saw Don Pablo again rise to his feet.

"What for?"

"They'll get me!"

"If we fire high enough can't we keep 'em down till you can push the boat to shore?" asked the patrol.

"You might try it!"

And they did, with the result that Don Pablo again ducked to the bottom of the *batteau*, while Billie worked with all his might to push the boat toward shore.

It is one thing to swing a boat under headway, and another to push a boat of the size of the *batteau* even obliquely against a current. Thus it was that, while Billie had been talking, the boat had slowly drifted downstream and the patrol had been obliged to run along the bank.

"I'm afraid I can't do it!" Billie finally shouted. "I guess I'll have to give up!"

"Don't," called back the soldiers. "Hang on and we'll come out after you. One of the boys has gone for a boat."

"All right," called Billie. "Hurry up!"

"If they don't," muttered the lad, "I'll have to give up."

Then he thought of his mission, which had momentarily been driven from his mind by the excitement.

"I can't give up," he thought. "I must get into the boat."

Holding on to the gunwale with one hand, he reached up and took his six-shooter from under his hat, letting both the hat and cartridge belt fall into the river. Then, as the shots continued to fly over the boat, he slowly pulled himself aboard, at the same time calling out to those on shore:

"Cease firing! I've boarded her!"

Having boarded the *batteau*, the next thing for Billie was to make himself master of the craft, an act which he at once recognized was somewhat difficult, seeing it was two to one, and at least one of the two was probably just as well or better armed than he.

However, there was no backing out, nor had our hero any idea of such a thing. He knew if he would succeed in the mission which he had undertaken there must be no such word as fail. Therefore, the first weapon at hand was strategy, and strategy Billie at once employed by putting himself in a position where the oarsman served as a shield for any bullet Don Pablo might see fit to fire at him.

This was comparatively easy, as Don Pablo, in his endeavor to get at Billie, had left the bow of the boat and gone astern, while Billie had executed a flank movement by swimming around and boarding the craft from the bow. This put the oarsman between him and Don Pablo, with his face toward the latter.

At the sound of the lad's voice, the oarsman arose and turned his head to see what had happened.

"'Bout face!" exclaimed Billie, covering the man with his Colt. "If you move I'll fire!"

The oarsman turned his face quickly, only to find himself looking into the muzzle of Don Pablo's revolver, that nimble old gentleman having arisen from the bottom of the boat as soon as the firing on shore had ceased, with the intention of taking a shot at Billie before he could put

himself on the offensive.

Finding himself thus between two fires, the oarsman let out a yell that would have done credit to a bunch of football players.

"Don't shoot!" he cried. "For the love of the saints, don't shoot, Don Pablo! You will hit me instead of the gringo!"

"Sit down!" commanded Don Pablo.

"Don't you dare," countermanded Billie, "unless you want a bullet in your back!"

"I'll shoot you if you don't," said Don Pablo.

"I'll shoot you if you do," declared Billie.

"Mercy! Mercy! *Señores!*" cried the oarsman. "I have done nothing for which I should be shot."

"You are protecting the gringo!" said Don Pablo.

"You are protecting Don Pablo!" repeated Billie, who, now that he had shaken the water out of his eyes and had secured a firm footing, could fully appreciate the strange condition of affairs.

If Don Pablo should carry out his threat to shoot the man, he would leave himself at Billie's mercy. Should Billie shoot first, and his bullet fail to reach Don Pablo, he would be at the mercy of the Mexican.

But Billie seemed to have the best of the situation, for all he wished to do was to hold Don Pablo at bay until the boat from the American shore should come to his rescue. As a result he was satisfied to let matters remain as they were. Especially did he feel that he had the better of the situation when he heard the sound of oar-locks from out the darkness.

"You won't have to stand long," he said to the oarsman, "I hear them coming after us. As soon as they arrive you can sit down."

"They shall never get us!" exclaimed Don Pablo. "I'll die first!" and he pulled the trigger of his revolver.

Had the old man fired without speaking, there is no knowing what damage he might have done; but, from his words, Billie guessed exactly what he proposed to do, and ere Don Pablo could pull the trigger, he rocked the boat. As might have been expected, the shot flew wild, as Don Pablo sought to maintain his balance.

"Now I've got you," said Billie. "Surrender or I'll fire."

Almost at the same instant the form of another *batteau* loomed up in the darkness, and a voice exclaimed in Spanish:

"Look out! There's a boat ahead!"

The cry was followed by a wild attempt of those in the oncoming boat to check its progress; but the effort was in vain and the two boats came together with such force as to cause Billie to lose his balance. He made a vain attempt to regain his equilibrium, but without avail, and so, in order to make the best of a bad situation, he plunged, rather than fell, into the river.

CHAPTER XXVI.—BILLIE OVERHEARS A SECRET.

It might have been expected that, as Billie plunged into the water, his chief thought would have been regarding his safety. But such is the vagary of the human mind, that safety was the least of his thoughts. The question he asked himself as he dove from the boat was:

"Now, who do you suppose they are, and where did they come from?"

In order to answer the question it is necessary to make a word of explanation.

As stated before, the *batteau* to which Billie was clinging had gradually drifted downstream, even while he was shouting his story to the patrol. After Billie climbed into the boat, and ceased his effort to direct its course, it drifted even more rapidly than before. The result was that, when struck by the other boat, it had drifted back nearly to the bend in the river where Billie first took to the water.

When Billie arose to the surface, after his dive, he looked about to see what had become of the boats. There they were, not twenty feet away, side by side! One might have thought they had met on purpose, rather than by chance, so friendly was their appearance.

And this was exactly the case, although that purpose came very near being thwarted by Billie's

activity.

"Well," thought Billie, as he shook the water from his eyes, "seeing that I am here, I might as well find out what is going on."

Slowly he approached the boats, and now that he was bareheaded, he could not be distinguished from the water.

"He must be somewhere around," he heard one voice declare.

"Unless he has been drowned," suggested another.

"No such good fortune," said a third, which Billie recognized as belonging to Don Pablo.

"Do you know who he was?" asked another voice, this in English.

"He said he was a messenger," replied Don Pablo, also in English. "He said something about going for help for some Americans who are in danger."

"There are plenty of them in danger, for that matter," replied the voice, "but they are not likely to get any help from him, whoever he was. If he didn't drown, he has probably made for the shore. I don't see any use of our worrying about him any longer."

"He may be clinging to the boats, as he did before," said Don Pablo.

"We can soon find out," was the answer. "You look all around my boat, and I'll look around yours."

The oarsmen slowly swung both boats, so that those in one could obtain a view of the other. There was no Billie in sight, and each speaker so reported. But, in spite of the report, Billie was right there, just the same.

Any boy who can tread water knows how easy it is to stand still, and, with little or no effort, allow a boat to which he might have attached himself to turn, without turning with it. That is just what Billie did. He practically went clear around the boat without moving. The boat did the moving instead.

Having satisfied themselves that they were alone in the middle of the river, the occupants of the boats drew them close together, and began an animated conversation in English, so that the oarsmen could not understand.

"What was all that shooting going on upstream?" asked the newcomer.

"It was the patrol. The American drew their fire," was Don Pablo's response. "They pretty nearly finished Emilio."

"No great loss," muttered the other.

"Not to you," replied Don Pablo bitterly. "You foreigners seem to think that a Mexican more or less is a small matter."

"Oh, come now, Don Pablo," replied his companion, in a changed tone of voice, "don't get a wrong impression. There is a whole lot of difference between Mexicans. You know as well as I do that a peon more or less makes little difference, even to you. Men like you are the real support and strength of Mexico."

"Whether they are or not makes little difference. But now to the matter we came here to discuss: How much will you give me if I bring about an invasion of American territory by our people?"

"Who do you mean by our people?"

"I mean the Mexicans."

"There are two kinds of Mexicans since this morning," was the reply.

"How so?"

"There are now Maderists and revolutionists," said the newcomer. "I wouldn't give you five cents to bring about an invasion by the revolutionists."

"Why not?"

"Because they are not the government."

"Not yet!" said Don Pablo.

"When they become the government it will be time to discuss them," was the curt reply.

"Then what do you want?" asked Don Pablo.

"This is what I want," said the other. "I want you to bring about some action that will cause the United States to intervene in Mexican affairs."

"For what purpose?"

"So that our property in Chihuahua will be protected. There will never be a real government in Mexico until the United States makes it. If your revolution—"

"Sh-h-h!" exclaimed Don Pablo. "These peons might understand."

"What do you care? It is your revolution, isn't it?"

"No! No! It is the people who have arisen."

"All right. Have it your own way; but whose ever revolution it is, if it succeeds in bringing about intervention by the United States, the purpose will be accomplished and you will be well paid. If this revolution fails to bring about the result, then we must keep having revolutions till we do succeed. Do you understand?"

"Perfectly."

"We will furnish the money. You do the rest."

"We!" thought Billie to himself, as he followed the conversation. "I wonder who we are?"

Then again, after a moment's thought: "Great Scott! This must be the party whom Lieut. Grant wanted us to locate. Don Pablo and Don Rafael are only tools. This man is the real power. How am I going to land him?"

While he was still turning the matter over in his mind, he heard the stranger say:

"Here are drafts on the Bank of England for ten thousand pounds. See that the money is used to the best advantage if you ever expect any more. You'll hear from me when I want to see you again."

Then to his oarsmen: "All right! Let's go home!"

Slowly the boats drew apart. For just a moment Billie was undecided which one to follow. Evidently the visitor was the very man he had started out to find, and yet, what would happen if he followed him? Would anyone believe his story without some other evidence—evidence which he did not have? But Don Pablo had the evidence—the drafts on the Bank of England. Those were what he needed and those he must have.

Without a moment's hesitation he turned and grasped the stern of Don Pablo's boat, which was slowly moving away under the power of only one oar.

CHAPTER XXVII.—HUSTLING FOR EVIDENCE.

After what seemed an age to Billie, although the time actually consumed could not have been more than fifteen minutes, the boat reached the shore at a spot with which he was most familiar. It was the end of the trail leading from the river to Don Pablo's *hacienda*.

As soon as the boat touched the beach, Don Pablo sprang ashore and pulled it up onto the land and made it fast to a post. The oarsman followed more slowly, while Billie remained in the water until both men started up the trail.

Then he came ashore and silently followed after. He was barefooted and bareheaded. He was wet through and had no weapon; still he was undaunted.

He kept as close to the two men as he dared, fearing he might lose sight of them in the dark. He had no idea of what time it was, but figured that he must have been away from General Sanchez' headquarters at least three hours. This gave him only three hours to finish his mission and return. His heart sank, as he thought what might happen in case he should fail, and a great sob welled up in his throat, as the faces of his chums came to his thoughts.

"I can't fail!" he declared to himself. "I have just got to win."

The men ahead of him walked rapidly, and in a comparatively short time reached the *hacienda*. Billie remembered it well—every spot he had noticed upon his first visit to the *hacienda* had impressed itself upon his memory.

Reaching the big gate, Don Pablo knocked lustily and the gate was quickly opened.

Here was Billie's first real difficulty. How was he to enter? Once the gate was shut, he knew it might take him hours to find a way in. Something had to be done and done at once.

Picking up a good-sized stone, Billie let it drive with all his might at the boy who stood in the gateway holding the light. It was a good shot and struck the boy on the shin. With a cry of pain he dropped the lamp and grabbed the injured member.

"*Caramba*, what is that?" exclaimed Don Pablo, as he drew his revolver. "Are we attacked by thieves, or is the spirit of evil in the air?"

"It is neither," replied the boy who had been hit. "It must be Juanito who threw the stone. He is jealous because I have a better place than he."

"What is Juanito doing outside the *hacienda* at this time of night?" demanded Don Pablo. "Go bring him in, and do you, Luis," turning to the oarsman, "give him a good beating. Then take three men and go and bring the body of Emilio to the *hacienda*."

As soon as he had thrown the stone Billie had glided quickly to the adobe wall which surrounded the *hacienda*, and, as the boy and Luis went in search of the supposed Juanito, and Don Pablo passed within the gate, Billie darted in behind him and hid himself behind one of the bushes which he remembered seeing in one corner of the *patio*.

Stopping only for a moment to take a drink from a jar, which stood at the foot of the stairs, Don Pablo ascended to the second floor. A moment later, seeing that the way was clear, Billie followed, just in time to see Don Pablo enter one of the rooms which opened out onto the great corridor, for it must be said that the *casa* of Don Pablo was a large and handsome one.

Having located the room, Billie sat down in the dark to wait.

He did not have to wait long, for in a few minutes Luis and the boy returned, much chagrined over their inability to locate little John.

"What's that?" asked Don Pablo, coming to the door in his shirt-sleeves, "can't you find him?"

"No, *señor*," was the reply. "It is too dark."

"Well, let him go until morning. Then give him a good beating."

"Who is that you are going to whip?" called a woman's voice from somewhere down below.

"Juanito. He threw a stone and made us a lot of trouble."

"Why, he couldn't," replied the woman. "He is here with me and hasn't been out tonight."

"What," queried Don Pablo, "hasn't been out tonight? Then there is something wrong! Quick, Luis, call some of the men and make a thorough search."

The servant hastened to obey, while Don Pablo went back into his room. Through the open door Billie saw him take an envelope from the pocket of the coat which he had thrown over a chair and place it in the drawer of a great secretary. Then, seizing his hat, he ran quickly downstairs, closing the door behind him.

"I thought I would stir things up," mused Billie, as he crept silently toward the room which Don Pablo had just vacated. "Now, if I can get that envelope and get out of here while the men are hunting for me, I'll be all right!"

Reaching the door, he waited until the voices below told him that the men had gone out. Then he softly pushed open the door and entered.

It was a larger room than he had thought from the glimpse he had from without, but it lay just as he expected. Quickly he opened the drawer of the secretary and took therefrom the envelope. By the light of the oil lamp that hung from the ceiling he saw that it bore the name of a New York bank and he had no doubt it contained the evidence he sought.

He closed the drawer, and as he turned to leave the room caught sight of Don Pablo's cartridge belt and revolver hanging on the back of a chair.

"I might need something like this," he thought, and without a single qualm of conscience he buckled the belt around him, drew out the revolver, and loaded the empty chamber which Don Pablo had fired while in the boat.

With the revolver in his hand he was about to leave the room, when a soft voice—a voice which he never could forget—said quietly:

"Don't you think, *señor*, that you are making yourself almost too much at home?"

At the sound of the voice, Billie turned as though shot.

"Santiago!" he exclaimed. "Where did you come from?"

If Billie had been surprised by the sound of the voice, Santiago was even more surprised when he recognized the visitor.

"Don Guillermo!" he cried. "Is it really you? I did not recognize you in that attire!"

"You mean in this lack of attire," replied Billie quizzically, as he regarded his bare feet and drabbed condition.

"But why are you here?" asked Santiago.

In just as few words as possible Billie explained.

"And you have seen Pancho Villa?" queried Santiago.

"Yes, and things are just as I tell you. Don Rafael and Don Pablo are both enemies of Mexico. They are both working for their own advancement. You know that a war with the United States is the last thing honest Mexicans desire."

"Undoubtedly. And you think the possession of these drafts will aid you in preventing it?"

"Unquestionably," was Billie's emphatic reply.

"Then go! I shall make no attempt to detain you, although I am powerless right now to aid you. This shall be a part of the reward I promised you. When you can come to me and tell me that Don Rafael is no more, you shall have the rest. Now go, before the men return. They are a wild lot. and now that the revolution has broken out, there is no controlling them."

Billie started for the stairs; but, before he reached them, he could hear the men coming in, grumbling at their ill luck and in finding no one.

"Wait," said Santiago. "I will go down and attract their attention, so that you may come down. Be careful."

Suiting the action to the word, Santiago ran quickly down the stairs, as though just awakened.

"What is all the trouble?" he asked. "Have the Maderists attacked us?"

"Maderists," laughed one. "*Caramba*, no! Don Pablo has been frightened by a shadow."

"By his guilty conscience, more likely," muttered another. "The idea of getting honest men up at this time of night to hunt goblins."

"Look out! There he comes!" whispered another. "If he hears you, you will think of something besides goblins!"

While this conversation had been going on, Billie had managed to slip down stairs, and again took his place behind the bush in the *patio*. Then, as the men went back to the servants' quarters, he edged around near the gate, watching an opportunity to slip through.

While he stood there waiting, he heard a clock strike midnight.

"It is not as late as I thought," he said to himself. "There is still time if I am not detained."

He glanced around and no one was in sight but Santiago. Outside all was dark, and he decided now was his chance.

Grasping the revolver tightly in his hand, he darted for the gateway, and bumped squarely into Don Pablo, who entered at the same moment.

For a moment the collision stopped Billie and sent Don Pablo reeling against the wall. Billie was much the heavier, but the old man was a bunch of sinews. Both gathered themselves for a spring as Don Pablo gave a cry that sounded like a wild beast and could be heard all over the *hacienda*.

"Gringo dog!" he exclaimed. "Now I have you!" and he made a dash at the boy.

Billie raised the revolver in his hand as though to fire, and then changed his mind.

"He must be unarmed," he thought, "and I don't want to kill him."

He shoved his arm out sharply and the barrel of the revolver struck Don Pablo full in the face, knocking him to the ground.

With a yell which he had learned from the Wyoming cowboys, Billie sprang over the prostrate form and dashed away in the darkness.

CHAPTER XXVIII.—A QUESTION OF NEUTRALITY.

So sudden had been Billie's assault and escape that it was several minutes before those in and about the *hacienda* could understand what had occurred. But when they did at last comprehend,

they started after him with a wild cry of revenge.

This time, however, Billie knew his ground and whither he was going. Straight as an arrow he ran, in spite of the darkness, and, several minutes before the pursuing Mexicans had reached the river, he had unfastened the boat and launched it into the stream. With the aid of one oar, which he used as a paddle, he was slowly disappearing in the gloom when he heard the pursuers upon the bank. Several shots were fired at him, but all went wild. In a few minutes he was within hailing distance of the American shore.

Thinking it wise under the circumstances, he called aloud as he approached land, and after two or three shouts received an answer from the patrol.

Guiding the boat by the sound of the voices, he was soon ashore, where he was surrounded by the United States soldiers.

"Who are you?" demanded the corporal of the guard.

Billie explained.

"Why didn't you come in sooner?"

Again Billie explained.

"It doesn't sound exactly right," was the corporal's reply. "We shall have to take you to headquarters."

"That's exactly what I want," declared Billie, "and the sooner the better. If I don't get help quick my friends will be executed."

"What's that?" asked the corporal, with added interest.

Briefly Billie explained.

"You'll never get any help from the lieutenant," he was told.

"I'm not expecting it," was Billie's response. "But I'll bet the rangers will help me!"

The corporal shook his head. "It would be a breach of neutrality," he declared. "The President wouldn't stand for it, even if the commanding officer did. It would cost him his commission; maybe something worse."

"We'll see," was Billie's only reply. "Now will you rush me to headquarters?"

"You bet I will," replied the corporal, emphatically, and in almost no time Billie was galloping toward Presidio in charge of a couple of troopers.

Lieutenant Grant had turned in when the galloping horsemen drew rein in front of his headquarters, half an hour later, but he quickly turned out again when the troopers made known their errand.

"Well, well," he exclaimed, as he caught sight of Billie. "There must be something serious to have caused you to make a report at this time of night!"

"There is," was Billie's forcible reply. "The lives of my two companions depend upon my getting assistance to rescue them from the revolutionists!"

"Tell me about it," said the lieutenant, and Billie did so in the shortest manner possible.

"What do you expect me to do?" asked the lieutenant, when he had finished.

"I don't know. I was in hopes you could suggest something!"

"I'm afraid that even a suggestion from an officer of the United States might be looked upon as a breach of neutrality," was the reply.

"Then how would it do if you should go to bed and go to sleep?" asked Billie. "Of course you could not violate your order of neutrality if you were asleep."

"That's true."

"And then, again," explained Billie, "there is a dangerous man abroad tonight, who needs watching."

"How's that?"

"I saw an English-speaking foreigner give a Mexican ten thousand pounds tonight to aid the revolution."

"What!" almost shouted the lieutenant. "Ten thousand pounds?"

“Exactly.”

“How do you know he gave him that amount?”

Billie ran his hand inside his shirt and pulled forth the big envelope he had taken from Don Pablo’s secretary.

“I couldn’t swear to it yet,” he said; “because I have not looked inside this envelope; but, if I am not mistaken there is that sum in drafts on the Bank of England in this envelope.”

With trembling fingers he tore open the wrapper, and there, just as he had expected, were the drafts—ten, each for a thousand pounds!

“And who was the man?” asked Lieutenant Grant.

“I don’t know, but I had hoped that the name on the drafts might tell.”

The lieutenant examined them carefully. Then he shook his head. “No,” he said, “there is nothing to show by whom they were drawn. They are simply bank checks of one of the largest banks in New York on the Bank of England, with whom they doubtless have a large account. They are made payable to Pablo Ojeda, and, so far as the checks go to show, might have been purchased by Don Pablo himself. However, in the expert hands of the United States Secret Service, we may be able to find out whose money this really is.”

At this information Billie’s face fell.

“I thought I was doing a big thing,” he muttered. “Now I see I might better have followed the man.”

“You have done a big thing,” said the lieutenant; “and, to show my appreciation of what you have done, I am going to send all the pickets for half a mile down the river to hunt the man. If any of your friends should slip across the river at that point, I shall not know it. And now, I’d advise you to hunt up Captain Peak and go to bed—that is, unless you and he should decide to do a little more scout duty before daylight.”

Billie was not slow to take the hint, and started for the hotel. He had not gone twenty paces when the two troopers who had ridden in with him overtook him.

“Just tell Captain Peak,” said one of them, “that there’ll be ten of us waiting for you down below the custom house. We’ll be in our shirt-sleeves, as it wouldn’t do to be found dead in our uniforms if anything should happen.”

Billie’s heart gave a great bound. “I see,” he said. “You won’t have to wait long.”

Five minutes later he was in Captain Peak’s room telling his story. In another ten minutes the two of them emerged from the hotel and walked swiftly down the street. In still another ten minutes, men who looked like cowboys, but each carrying a Winchester, might have been seen going toward the river below the custom house. Half an hour later the streets again took on a deserted appearance, save for the two or three policemen who suddenly emerged from unknown quarters and resumed their beats.

CHAPTER XXIX.—IN THE DARKNESS BEFORE DAWN.

Promptly at the appointed hour—the darkest hour in the whole twenty-four, the hour before dawn—Pancho Villa appeared at the door of General Sanchez’s headquarters. Almost simultaneously General Sanchez appeared in the doorway.

“Is everything in readiness?” he inquired, as he recognized Villa.

“Everything but the men, general.”

“They are also ready,” was the response. “I regret that there are only fifty; but they are well officered, and will do whatever they are told. They are the pick of my force.”

Villa saluted, but made no reply.

“Don’t you think them sufficient?”

“No, general; but I hope for reinforcements!”

“I am afraid you will not receive them. But where is the American youth?”

“He has gone across the river, general.”

“Across the river? You don’t mean he has deserted his comrades?”

“No, general. He has gone for reinforcements!”

"Oh! I see," and General Sanchez shrugged his shoulders.

"But I am afraid they will not come," continued Villa. "The pickets on both sides of the river are very alert tonight."

"Do you know where the Americans expect to cross?"

"I can only guess, general."

"Perhaps you will guess aloud."

"I should guess they might cross below the ferry."

"Very well."

He turned to an orderly who stood ready to ride at a moment's notice: "Go tell Captain Rodriguez that if a band of refugees should seek to land from the American shore they are to be allowed to pass unquestioned." Then to Villa: "Is that all?"

"Yes, general."

"Very well, go! You will find your force down by the water's edge. The assault upon the revolutionists' lines will begin in half an hour!"

But, in the meantime, what of Donald and Adrian?

When the revolutionists headed by Don Rafael had broken into the house and the boys were taken prisoners, they had been as greatly surprised at the disappearance of Billie as had the others; but it did not take Donald long to figure out what had happened. Of course he did not know that Billie was hearing all that was going on, but he felt sure that he was safe.

At the first opportunity he had explained to Adrian his solution of the mystery, and both had confidence that in some way Billie would bring about their escape, although they could not see how.

Because of this confidence they kept a bold front, but it must be admitted that they thought their last hour had come when Don Rafael had declared that he would have them shot immediately. When he gave orders to suddenly leave the place, they were much mystified, not knowing that a guilty conscience had filled him with a great fear.

After leaving the place where they were captured, the boys were first escorted to the *cuartel* by a shouting, howling mob. Here they were examined by a petty officer. After that they were conducted into the presence of the commanding general and again examined with a view to finding out what their mission really was. Finally, they were turned over to a corporal, and after several hours were locked up in a room in the barracks to await further action.

"Well!" exclaimed Adrian, as soon as they were left alone. "This seems the most serious situation in which we have ever found ourselves!"

"Possibly so," replied Donald; "but we know that Billie is at work to get us out."

"We certainly do," affirmed Adrian; "just as he knew we were at work to rescue him when he was captured by the smugglers; but it is going to be a great deal harder to get to us, with a battle line all around us. For my part, the situation seems hopeless."

"'While there is life there is hope,' says the old proverb," declared Donald, "and we are very much alive."

"Yes, and able to put up a fight if we had a chance; but what chance is there, when we have been deprived of our arms, and will be taken from this room by a file of soldiers? No, old man"—and there was a visible tremor in Adrian's voice—"I'm afraid our time has come."

He bowed his face in his hands, and for some minutes both the boys were silent. Then Adrian straightened up, and, looking Donald squarely in the face, said:

"If it comes to the worst, I am not afraid to die. It will be in the service of our country and a man can die but once."

"That's the way to talk," said Donald. "No matter what happens, we must be brave. If we die, it will be like Americans!"

He put out his hand, which was warmly clasped by Adrian.

"It shall be as you say," he declared. "But I shall not give up hope till the very last minute."

They were still standing with hands clasped, when they heard the key grate in the lock. They turned quickly at the sound, and, although it was still an hour until day, and, in spite of their determination to be brave, for a moment their cheeks paled.

But their time was not yet.

Instead of the file of soldiers which they feared they might see, their visitor proved to be Don Rafael.

"So!" he exclaimed, as he noticed the pallor upon their faces, "you are not so brave as you would have me think!" and he laughed scornfully.

The boys made no reply and he continued:

"You thought you would trap me, did you? You thought I wouldn't recognize you as the ones who upset my plans at the cave? You are too young, my friends, to catch an old fox like me!"

"We may be," said Donald, "but, if anything happens to us, there are those who will make you pay dearly."

"Bah!" and Don Rafael snapped his fingers. "That for your friends! I have been in too many affairs to be bluffed by a couple of striplings."

"Just as you please," replied Donald, "but what I say is true. Why, at this minute they are on their way here!"

As he spoke, there was the boom of a cannon from the outskirts of the city, followed almost immediately by the crash of rifles.

"Perhaps you think those are your friends," laughed Don Rafael. "If so they will meet with a warm reception."

"They'll be here before daybreak," said Adrian.

"You think so?" exclaimed Don Rafael, and he regarded the boys with a crafty expression. "Well, perhaps you are right, and so, to avoid any danger of your escape, we will not wait until daylight for your execution."

He stepped to the door of the guard room and called:

"Don Carlos!"

A moment later that young gentleman appeared.

"Send me a sergeant and a file of soldiers," ordered Don Rafael. "I have decided not to wait until daylight. The execution will take place at once in the *patio*."

"It has come!" said Donald aside to Adrian. "Be brave!"

Silently they once more clasped hands, and awaited the coming of the soldiers, while Don Rafael eyed them savagely.

"I'll teach you," he exclaimed, "to interfere with my plans. It will serve as a lesson to other Americans!"

Then, as the tramp of feet was heard on the stone pavement without: "Here they come! Now, then, get ready," and he stepped aside, so as not to obstruct the doorway.

The boys threw back their shoulders, and looked the man squarely in the face. His eyes fell before their honest gaze, and he turned his head with a muttered oath.

At the same moment there was a crash of rifles, which seemed at the very door, and the sergeant, who had just appeared in the doorway, fell with a groan.

"*Caramba!* What is it?" yelled Don Rafael.

He dashed across the room toward the door, as a hearty American "Hurrah!" followed by a regular cowboy yell was heard without.

At the sound Don Rafael turned as white as his dusky color would permit. He drew his revolver from his holster, and backed slowly into the room, with his eye fastened upon the doorway.

So sudden had been the change in affairs, that for a moment the two Broncho Rider Boys stood stupefied; but, as Don Rafael slowly retreated, their wits returned.

"Grab him!" shouted Donald.

At the cry Don Rafael turned quickly upon the boys, revolver in hand.

"So," he exclaimed, "this is your work, too! Well, it is your last!"

Slowly he raised his weapon as though to enjoy the full measure of his revenge. Then, as his finger pressed the trigger, there was another crash of rifles. Both boys threw themselves flat

upon the floor, and the bullet from Don Rafael's revolver buried itself in the adobe wall.

Before he could take a second aim, a tall figure in peon's garb sprang into the room.

It was Pancho Villa.

One glance told the story. Without a moment's warning his revolver cracked, and Don Rafael pitched forward to the floor, dead.

The next instant a dozen Americans, headed by Billie, rushed into the room.

CHAPTER XXX.—AU REVOIR, BUT NOT GOOD-BY.

It was not until two hours after daylight that the complete result of Villa's strategy was apparent. At that hour the battle was over and the Federals took possession of the city. For a minor battle it had been a severe one, and the victory was well won.

From the balcony of the city hall the Broncho Rider Boys watched the victorious army, with General Sanchez at its head, march into the town. As the column passed the place where the boys stood, the general caught sight of them as he glanced from right to left, and gave them a salute with his sword, which was followed by every member of his staff. The boys returned the salute, and a few minutes later were given a chorus of "Vivas," as the troop of Villa passed the balcony.

The Americans who had taken part in the rescue of the boys had returned to the American side before it was light.

"I reckon we had better return, too," said Donald, as the boys were talking the matter over a few minutes later.

"Yes," replied Adrian, "I suppose we should go and make our report to Lieutenant Grant."

"I can't see that there is much to report," declared Donald.

"Why," exclaimed Billie, with a hearty laugh, "that the gun-running expedition has been abandoned for want of runners."

"Don't you think he has heard about it before this?" asked Adrian.

"Possibly," and Billie chuckled to himself; "but that doesn't relieve us from making our report. Besides (decidedly), I'm hungry, and there is nothing this side of the river fit to eat!"

"I thought there was some reason for the anxiety," laughed Donald, "but at that, I think we should go and report."

They made their way hastily to General Sanchez's headquarters, where they were cordially received, although General Sanchez was so busy with the work of taking over the city that he could spare them but a moment. He thanked them, however, in the presence of all the officers for what they had done, and gave them an escort to the river.

"When these troublesome times are over," he said, as the boys were leaving, "you must all come and pay Pedro a visit in the City of Mexico. We shall be most glad to see you."

The boys thanked him for his invitation, and rode away.

It was not until they had enjoyed a good breakfast that they put in their appearance at Lieutenant Grant's quarters. Here again they were cordially received, although, as they had expected, a report of what had happened on the other side of the river had already been made. Here, also, Billie found a telegram from his father, telling him that he could wait no longer in El Paso, and saying that he would write him about coming back East in the near future.

"It looks as though my days as a Broncho Rider Boy were about over," said Billie, with a sigh; "but whenever you fellows are ready to go and visit Pedro in the City of Mexico, let me know, and I'll surely be with you."

And in passing it may be well to say that some two months later, when affairs became so bad in Mexico under General Huerta that the United States government was obliged to send a force of sailors and soldiers to take possession of Vera Cruz, our Broncho Rider Boys found themselves—because of General Sanchez's invitation—right in the midst of this trouble. This furnishes another story of the Broncho Rider Boys, which will be known as *The Broncho Rider Boys With Funston At Vera Cruz, Or Scout Duty Afloat and Ashore.*

"You must leave me your permanent address," declared Lieutenant Grant. "I may have occasion to write you almost any time."

"For what?" asked Billie.

"Why, in reference to the ten thousand pounds. If we succeed in tracing the purchaser of these drafts, your testimony will be necessary to punish those who may be responsible for creating this trouble along the Rio Grande."

"What is he talking about, Ad?" queried Donald.

"I'm sure I don't know. I haven't heard anything about ten thousand pounds. What is it, Billie?"

In answer to which question, Billie related again, both for the benefit of his chums and of Lieutenant Grant and Captain Peak, the story of his experiences in the river and at Don Pablo's *hacienda*.

"Suppose no owner is found for the drafts?" asked Captain Peak. "Then what?"

"I reckon the bank will be that much ahead, unless," the lieutenant added, with a laugh, "our friend Billie should wish to return them to Don Pablo."

"Hardly," replied Billie. Then, as an afterthought: "Santiago said they were to be a part of my reward."

"Who is Santiago?" queried Lieutenant Grant.

"A mystery," was the laughing rejoinder.

And a mystery he must remain for the present, although in the story of the Broncho Rider Boys with Funston, the mystery is cleared away, and the ownership of the ten thousand pounds is settled in a manner that shows what strange things may happen when a nation is at war.

"There is just one more question which I should like to ask," said Lieutenant Grant to Billie, as the boys were about to leave. "Of course there were no Americans in the force that captured Presidio del Norte?"

"Certainly not," replied Billie. "I am reliably informed that every American, except we three, left the city some hours before it was captured. Isn't that right, Captain Peak?" And Billie turned to the captain of the rangers.

"Such is the report that was made to me," declared the captain, "and I have no reason to doubt it!"

"Then that will be all," laughed the lieutenant; "and I wish you a pleasant journey home. When do you start?"

"Just as soon," replied Billie, "as we can get old Bray loaded with enough provisions to carry us through."

And with a hearty handshake all around, the boys started to make preparations for continuing their journey, carrying with them the best wishes of all the Texas Rangers.

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