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Wilmer M. Ely**

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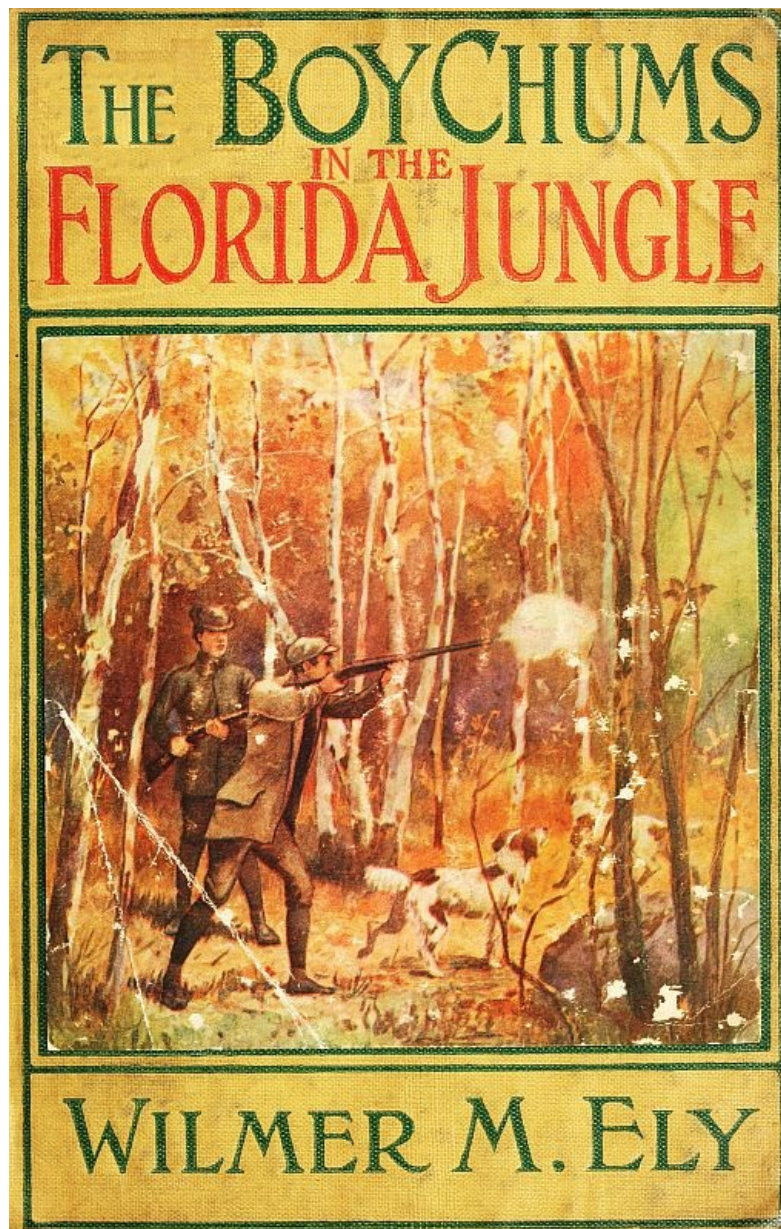
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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THE BOY CHUMS IN THE FLORIDA JUNGLE





**LIKE LIGHTNING THE HUGE BOOM
SWUNG AROUND, AND THE AVALANCHE
OF MUD DESCENDED AT THE PONY'S
FEET. [Page 128.](#)**

The Boy Chums in the Florida Jungle.

The Boy Chums In The Florida Jungle

OR

Charlie West and Walter Hazard With the
Seminole Indians

By WILMER M. ELY

AUTHOR OF

"The Boy Chums Cruising In Florida Waters"

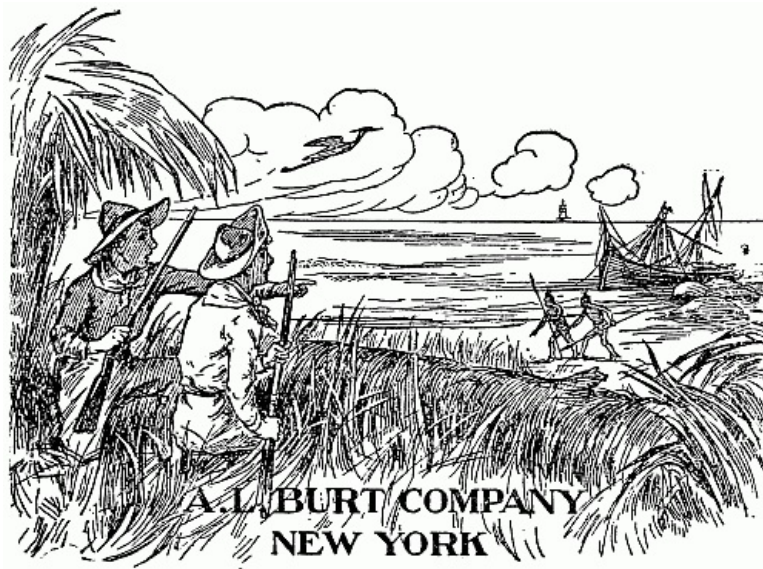
"The Boy Chums In The Gulf Of Mexico"

"The Boy Chums On Haunted Island"

"The Boy Chums On Indian River"

"The Boy Chums' Perilous Cruise"

"The Boy Chums In The Forest"



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THE BOY CHUMS IN THE FLORIDA JUNGLE

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JUNGLE

CHAPTER I. THE BOY CHUMS.

"GOLLY! I'm getting powerful tired ob dis. Fish what just clusterers 'round youah bait an' won't bite at hit nowadays is jest trifling and noaccount. I reckon dey's too ornery an' too finiky anyway to be fit to eat. Well, here goes again, though hit ain't no use. I'se dun spit on mah bait fifty times, an' rubbed hit twice with my rabbit's foot, but hit doan' do a bit of good. Dey jes' look at hit an' grin like white folks at a nigger's wedding." The little ebony negro who had spoken let drop his daintily baited hook into the water again with a gesture of disgust.

"Let me have a look at them, Chris," said another voice, and a white face joined the black, as the two peered over the edge of the bridge down into the crystal-clear depths of the water below.

The white boy straightened up after a brief glance into the azure waters. He was tall and sturdily built, with lines of self-reliance and determination upon his youthful face. His mouth widened into a grin of amusement, as he watched the little negro peering anxiously down at the circle of black-circle-eyed fish that crowded eagerly but warily around the baited hook. [4]

"You're fooling away your time, Chris," said the white lad. "Look here." He chopped up a few pieces of bait and flung them over beside the other's line. As they slowly sank there was turmoil and confusion amongst the finny observers below. With swirl and splash they darted up and seized upon the tiny fragments.

Chris wound up his line with a snort of disgust. "Dey are conjured, clean conjured," he declared; "going clean out ob their way to get bait when dar was plenty right afore 'em. Them's sure some fool fishes, Massa Charles."

"You're wrong," said the other boy lightly. "They are mangrove snappers, the foxiest fish that swims. Some one of them got hurt on a hook some time, and his misfortune has become history among the tribe. I guess that's what makes the black circles around their eyes. They just keep worrying so about getting hold of another tempting morsel with a hook attached that they don't eat half enough, and are fast worrying themselves into nervous prostration."

The little negro snorted, and continued to wind up his line, while his white companion paused to gaze with appreciation at the beautiful scene spread out to his view. At the shore end of the high railroad bridge upon which they stood was Jupiter, a tiny nest of white houses, almost lost among the glossy green palms and vivid blazing tropical flowers. Below them flowed the blue waters of the Laxahatchu River. To the west, the river broke into a dozen parts, each flowing swiftly between as many shoals and islands, and finally losing itself in the distance. To the east, it joined the sea, scarce a mile distant, the breakers meeting the river's waters in a tumbling mass of foam. A little below the bridge, on the opposite side of the river from Jupiter, three government buildings rose up from a high bluff—a wireless station, a weather bureau office, and a towering lighthouse, built long, long before the civil war. Beyond these, down close to the inlet, the lad's eyes focused upon a long point, jutting out into the river, upon which stood two small tents. From the inlet a rowboat, with two occupants, was approaching the point with the long easy strokes characteristic of experienced boatmen. [5]

The lad turned to his black companion. "Come on, let's go back to camp, Chris," he said. "The Captain and Walter are nearly there now."

"Better look to youah line. De slack's running out like mad, Massa Charles," chided the little darkey. "Golly! I don't know what you white chillens would do widout dis nigger. 'Pears like you white chillens can't even fish widout Chris along to tell you-alls when you got a bite." [6]

But Charley had already sprung for the coiled-up line, which was whizzing out at a rapid rate. Taking a turn around a post, he endeavored to stop the hook's victim in its mad career, but, as the long, heavy line tauted like a bar of iron, he realized that he stood a chance of losing both line and fish, and he paid out the balance of the line very slowly. It was not until the very end of the line was reached that the fish suddenly changed its tactics and, turning short, rushed for the bridge.

Charley yanked in the slack line swiftly and called to Chris to come to his assistance. Near the bridge the fish turned again and sped for the far-off inlet, both boys clinging to the line in a vain attempt to check the outward rush.

"Golly!" panted Chris, as the line dragged slowly and burningly through his grip. "Hit's lucky we ain't got this line tied to no post. Dat fish would sure pull de whole bridge ober."

"Rats!" laughed Charley, as he grabbed out his pocket handkerchief and hastily wrapped it around one hand to protect it from the burning line, "isn't the bridge bearing the whole strain as long as we are standing on it?"

"Course it ain't," maintained the little negro pantingly, "ain't my back beginning to ache, an' my arms get lame, an' mah hands burn like fire? Golly! You white chillens sho' don't use no logic or reason. Maybe you ain't holdin' back hard enough to feel hit, but I'se sho' getting de strain, not [7]

dis pesky ole bridge."

"Well, you will not have to bear it much longer," Charley grinned. "Don't you notice that the strain is getting weaker all the time? He's a monster, but he's evidently swallowed the hook clean down, and that's why he is giving up so fast. We'll have the best of him in a few minutes."

The lad's prophecy proved true, for, long before the end of the line was reached, the fish began circling in ever-narrowing circles until, at last, the two boys were able to tow it up slowly to the shore.

"Golly!" exclaimed Chris, as the fish's huge bulk came into view. "Dat's de biggest an' ugliest fish I ever catched. What is hit, anyway?"

Charley glanced down at the short, thick, black body and the huge, gasping, red mouth. "It's a Jew fish," he announced. "I guess it weighs about 800 pounds, but that's not so very much, when you consider that they sometimes grow to weigh over 1,800. Unlike most big fish, however, they are very good eating. Wind up the fish line, and then cut out some good big steaks. They will make dandy fish balls and chowder. While you're doing that, I'll run up to the village and tell everyone to come down and help themselves, then I'll bring the launch around from the dock and pick you up." [8]

Soon after his departure the villagers began to arrive in twos and threes, but not before Chris had cut out several fine steaks from the huge fish. By the time he wound up his line, washed the steaks carefully and strung them upon a piece of cocoanut fiber, Charley hove in sight in a little motor boat. He ran up as close as he dared to the shore and stopped his engine. "Hurry up and climb aboard," he called, "we want to get back to camp before dark."

Chris waded out, treading gingerly with bare feet over the oyster shells that strewed the bottom.

"Hurry up," laughed Charley, "your feet are too tough to be hurt by oyster shells."

The little darkey grinned as he clambered aboard. "Dat ain't de point," he protested. "I was reckoning dat some ob dem oysters might be alive, an' I sho' would have hated to crush de life out ob dem."

Charley threw over the wheel and started up the motor, and the little boat, whirling around, darted away for the distant point with its two snow-white tents. A few minutes' run brought them close to it, and Charley steered round into a cove, to avoid the tide wash, and ran the boat up on the shore. The anchor was taken out and imbedded in the sand. The motor was covered and everything made snug for the night. Then the two boys strolled forward with their burdens for the tents. [9]

Although it was not yet dark, a big fire of fragrant, spicy, mangrove wood blazed before the tent. A little ways from it on blocks of driftwood sat a boy of about Charley's own age, while close beside him sat an elderly man with a heavy beard. The boy was opening oysters, while the man was carefully breaking turtle eggs into a big pan beside him, taking care to let only the yolks fall into the pan and throwing away the uncookable whites.

"Hallo!" greeted Charley cheerfully. "What luck, Walt?"

"Too good," said the boy on the block listlessly. "Every turtle in the Atlantic must have tried to lay on the beach along here. Didn't even have the fun of looking for a nest. They were scattered around everywhere."

"And you, Captain?" asked Charley, with a grin at his chum's reply.

"Ran the skiff right up on a bed of oysters," the old sailor said briefly. "All I had to do was lean over the side and pick 'em up with my hand—big, nice, fat oysters, too."

Charley took a seat on a piece of driftwood, and silence fell upon the three. Only Chris, with the high spirits of his race, stamped down the fire into a bed of glowing coals, and prepared to make an omelette of the turtle eggs, a stew from the oysters, and a big pot of coffee, singing as he worked, [10]

"Ham meat hit am good to eat,
Bacon's berry fine,
But gib, oh, gib me what I long for,
Dat watermiln asmiling on de vine."

Charley broke the long silence that had fallen on the three. "We are getting to be three old grouches," he said calmly. "We have got the best of health. We have got \$5,000 cash in the bank. We have been truckers, wreckers, pearl hunters, plume hunters, spongers, and, lastly, net fishermen, and have gone through all kinds of hardships and perils, and yet, after we agreed to take a long vacation trip and rest up, here after only two weeks of it we are getting restless and dissatisfied. Am I right?"

"You are," declared Walter Hazard heartily. "I admit it. I'm sick of loafing. I want to get back to real work again."

"It's all right for a while, this lounging about from place to place, but I reckon I've about got my fill of it," Captain Westfield admitted. "I had a heap sight rather be working at something."

"I feel the same way," Charley agreed, "and I believe I've found the very thing for us, but it's big—the biggest thing the Boy Chums ever tackled. Come on. Chris has got supper ready. We will talk it over while we eat."

CHAPTER II. THE NEW VENTURE.

[11]

FOR A few minutes there was entire silence while the four devoted their whole attention to the delicious meal Chris had prepared, and, during this lull, the reader has time to observe and note more carefully this little band of old friends, whom he has doubtless met amid many adventures in the Boy Chum Series. They have changed but little since he met them last in "The Young Net Fishermen." Charley West, the strapping young fellow, who now sits on one side of the fire eagerly devouring piping hot omelette and rich oyster stew, is the same old Charley of yore, his face a trifle older and more alert, perhaps, from the dangers and hardships through which he has passed, but with the same old merry twinkle in his eyes. Walter Hazard, now grown almost as husky as his chum, sits next to him, and close beside Walt is gray-haired Captain Westfield, a sort of guardian father to them both, a master of the sea, but rather helpless on land. He, too, is little changed, while Chris, the little ebony darkey, wears the same broad, good-natured smile as ever. But we must stop and listen to the conversation now starting up, for upon it depends the future of our four friends.

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"Tell us what our next move is to be," Walter demanded.

"It rests with the rest of you as much as with me," Charley smiled. "All I am going to do is to make the suggestion."

"Go ahead," said the captain impatiently, "we're waiting to hear it."

"Well," said Charley, "West of Jupiter about forty miles lays the great lake Okeechobee. It's reported by explorers that there's a ten-mile belt clear around the lake of the richest land in the world. Between the lake and Jupiter there is only one little trading-post, called Indiantown. All the way leads through swamps, prairies, and pine barrens. There is a sort of road, but it is under water for about six months in the year."

"All that's interesting, but what has it got to do with us?" said Walter impatiently.

"I'm coming to that in a minute," said Charley placidly. "Last year the county commissioners passed a law for the building of a dirt road from Jupiter to the lake, and a man named Murphy made a bid of 17½ cents a yard for the dirt handled and he got the contract. He bought a steam shovel with a 1½-yard bucket. He went to work and has got about ten miles of the road completed. Now he wants to sell out his machine and contract. Says his wife in Connecticut is sick, and he's got to go back and stay with her. I saw him in Jupiter to-day, and he told me he would sell machine, tents, a team of mules, and the contract for one-third of what the machine alone cost him, \$3,000. I didn't promise him anything, but said we would ride out and look at it in the morning. It looks to me like a good chance to establish ourselves in a good steady business. There's about thirty miles of the road yet to build. And he says there are plenty more contracts to be had for the asking. The machine can dig one and one-half cubic yards of earth per minute, and, at 17½ cents per yard, that's some money, I'm thinking. Besides it works nights as well as days. Well, what do you think about it?"

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Walter looked rather disappointed. "That sounds all right," he admitted, "but there doesn't seem much chance of having any fun, adventure or excitement out of such a job."

"Adventure, excitement!" echoed Charley. "Why, I don't know where you'd be more likely to find both. Remember, we are going through an almost unknown country. Right through the Indians' hunting grounds, and through a country alive with snakes and game."

"Good," exclaimed Walter, with eyes shining. "I vote yes for the steam shovel."

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"I don't know about it," said the Captain doubtfully. "It ain't a good plan generally to go into a business that you don't know anything about."

"But we will soon learn," protested Charley vigorously. "If we buy, Murphy has agreed to stay on for a couple of weeks until we get on to the run of things."

"Well," consented the old sailor reluctantly. "It won't do any harm to look at the critter, though I guess I won't be able to tell as much about her as I would about a sea-going craft."

"Well, how about you, Chris?" Charley inquired.

The little negro grinned. "Golly, Massa Charley, I reckon I'm pretty well satisfied as I is. Don't reckon you-alls ebber seed a nigger but was willing to lay around in de sun all day an' do nothin' but eat an' fish, but if you-alls are goin' into any foolish projectin's, I reckon dis nigger will hab to go along to keep you outer trouble."

"Then it's settled," Charley declared with satisfaction. "We will get an early start in the morning and drive out and see just how things are going."

Thus settled, an early hour next morning found them on the way, drawn in a rickety wagon behind a lean mule with a wicked-looking eye. There was no danger of their losing their way for the machine-made road stretched out before them a smoothed mound of earth flanked on each side by deep ditches made by the removed dirt. At places the road was raised a full four feet above the surrounding land, while at other places it descended gradually to a mere two feet.

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Charley viewed it with satisfaction. "That's the kind of work I want to do," he said. "The kind of work that creates something, that helps people, gives them employment, and makes them happy. Take that road, for instance," he continued dreamily, "of course it is only a road, but it will open up the way to thousands of acres of rich land, and give thousands of people a chance to own a home and farm."

"Yes," agreed the Captain testily, who was hot and sweating under the blazing sun, "and it will drive away the Indians from their last hunting ground, and the people who will flock in will be Huns, Polacks and Japs, and most of them will die off with the malaria, and the rest, after they have raised their crops, will find it costs them more to get them to market than they are worth. Say, Chris, can't you spread more sail on that craft of yours? I allow that there ain't much breeze, but surely it can do more than a mile an hour."

Chris, who was driving the melancholy beast, obediently leaned forward and brought his tattered hat down on the mule's flank. "Get up, you Clarence; wake up, you mule," he shouted—and Clarence woke up. What had simply been before a saddened, downcast, plodding mule, became a marvel of upstanding ears, bared teeth and flying hoofs. Charley landed with a bump on the side of the road. Walter, close beside him, and the Captain not far away, while Chris, disdaining solid ground, lit far over in the ditch of stagnant water and mud. The cart, a battered wreck in front, with one thill gone, still remained, while Clarence, still enveloped in his harness and dragging the other thill behind him, with leaping bounds was headed back for home.

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Captain Westfield arose slowly and painfully, and felt gently of his trousers' seat. "I reckon Chris crowded on a wee bit too much sail," he said mildly.

Chris crawled out of the ditch, spitting out mud and water. "Golly, dat Clarence sho' can move some," he exclaimed admiringly, as he gazed after the vanishing mule. "Who would hab thought dat a little slap of the hat could liven him up so?"

"I don't think it was that, at all," laughed Walter, as he regained his feet. "I believe he took offense at being called Clarence, as any self-respecting mule would—probably his real name is Maud."

"You fellows can laugh, if you see anything funny in it," stated Charley reproachfully. "You wouldn't if you were me. You lit on the sand or water, but I landed broadside on a slab of rock. Well, there's no use trying to catch Clarence. He's singing 'Home, Sweet Home,' with four feet. I guess we are as near the camp as we are Jupiter, so we might as well go ahead."

[17]

So ahead they marched, looking more like a trio of hoboes than possible investors in a big enterprise. A walk of a few miles brought them in sight of a cluster of white tents, and they hastened their steps, knowing that their destination was not far ahead. They paused at the first tent, the largest of the cluster, and evidently the eating tent, for they could see through the open flap two long tables with rude seating benches running down the middle, and a heap of tin dishes on a table in one corner. Outside a big, powerful, sweating negro was kneading bread on a dirty-looking bench, upon which a protruding stove-pipe from the tent was sending down fine flakes of soot.

"Mister Murphy's dun fudder up the road apiece by the machine," he informed them in reply to their questions. "Be you gentlemen going to stay for dinner?"

They told him that they were not sure as yet, and hurried up the road, eager to be away from the odors of the camp.

"Golly," exclaimed Chris, "did you-alls notice de bench dat nigger was makin' bread on? I'll bet dar was a solid inch ob dirt on de top ob hit. Dat nigger's been scaling fish, chopping up meat, and making bread on dat same bench for de past six months widout washin' hit up once. Huh, if I was his boss I'd give him a licking for sho'."

[18]

A few minutes' walk brought them in sight of the big steam shovel, which was doing the work of two hundred men with wheelbarrows. It looked simple enough, a kind of short steel car, resting upon sections of railroad track. Upon the car was mounted, on a kind of ratchet work of iron, a swinging steel platform, from which projected out a long tapering steel boom, at the end of which dangled from wire ropes a huge steel bucket with wicked looking big teeth. Wire ropes an inch and a half thick led down the boom and wound, coil upon coil, around the big controlling drums on the platform below. Two gigantic cog-wheels controlled the lowering and raising of the huge boom in front. Just back of the big revolving drums and cog-wheels a second little platform arose from the first. It was iron-hooded overhead, but in front it was open, and behind the opening, with before him six huge brass levers, stood a man controlling the movements of this mighty worker. Even as the little party watched, the great shovel plunged down, straight down, burying its great teeth in the rooty ground. The drag rope pulled it in until it had gathered up a full load of earth. The boom lifted slightly, the platform swung around, and the bucket dropped its load. For five minutes Charley watched the operation repeated, with his watch in his hand. "Murphy hasn't lied about that," he said. "They are digging a bucket a minute, all right. Let's

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figure it out: One and one-half yards a minute, that's 26 cents a minute; multiplying that by 60 minutes in the hour, makes \$15.60 per hour, and 24 hours in the day, makes \$374.40 per day. That's going some, I guess."

"Whew," whistled Walter, "that's just like finding money."

CHAPTER III. INVESTIGATING.

[20]

THE working of the powerful machine had been observed from a distance. As the little party drew nearer, they could see more plainly the heaps of mud and wet dirt left in the wake of the steam shovel. Five gigantic negroes, with shovels and hoes, leveled off the piles, working slowly and languidly over the task, their legs wet to the knees and their bodies plastered with mud.

"Saws, all of them." Charley commented briefly, as they passed the sudden, slow-working group.

"Saws?" echoed Walter questioningly. "I never heard of that race before."

"They come from the Bahama Islands," Charley replied. "They all have to ship for this country by way of the port of Nassau. So they get their title from that port, but people on this side have shortened the title down to 'Saws.' They are the finest built and laziest race in existence, I believe. There, that's Mr. Murphy, right back of the machine. He hasn't seen us yet. Whew! Just listen to him."

Mr. Murphy, a short, florid-faced man, was standing with his back to them, cursing earnestly at two negroes, who guided the moving of the sections of track and cleared away all roots and brush from the machine's path. The negroes' faces were ashen with anger, but they worked on sullenly, probably because the butt of a heavy revolver protruded from the white man's pocket.

[21]

Mr. Murphy's face became wreathed in smiles, and he ceased his cursing to greet the little party cordially.

"You've just got to cuss at them Saws occasionally," he apologized, as he rubbed the sweat from his red face. "If you don't, you just simply can't get any work out of them. Well, I'm glad to see you. I expected you early and had given you up. Well, there's the machine, and you can see for yourself what kind of work it does. I've got my contract with the county commissioners back in my tent, but I'll show it to you when we go back to dinner, so that you'll see everything is O. K. Any questions you want to ask?"

"Sure," said Charley, with a smile. "We don't want to go into anything blindfolded. First, what are your monthly expenses?"

Murphy wrinkled his brow in thought. "Let's see," he said. "We work the engineers in shifts of 8 hours each. They get \$85.00 a month and board; that's \$255.00. Then there's two shifts for the firemen and ground men; that makes six men at \$36.00 a month—a total of \$216.00. Then, I have to carry two bridge builders at the same wage, which makes \$72.00 more. Then there's five graders, one cook, and one teamster, and a dynamiter to blow up the trees ahead of the machine; that's eight more, at \$36.00, or \$288.00. That brings my total payroll up to a little over \$800 a month. Then, there's the grub bill. It runs from \$250 to \$300 a month. Carbide for machine lights, feed for the mules, and other extras will likely bring the total expenses for a month up to \$1,200, but that's a trifle compared to what the machine is earning, and \$3,000 for the bunch is like giving it away. The machine alone cost \$12,000, and the tents, mules, wagons, and the motor truck would be cheap at another thousand dollars." He pulled a big watch out of his pocket and looked at the time. "Chuck's ready by now at the cook tent," he said. "Let's go and have a bite, and I'll run you into Jupiter in the truck afterward. We can talk business on the way."

[22]

In the cook tent they found one long table filled up with big, black, sweating negroes. At the other smaller one were seated the teamster—a white man—and the two sleepy-eyed engineers, off duty. The food was plenty, but coarse and cheap in quality. Hungry as they were, the boys partook of it meagerly, for they could not forget that dirty bench outside, and the inside was foul from the sweating negroes crowded into it. One thing they all noticed was the sullen silence that prevailed. Even the white men at their own table had nothing to say, except to ask occasionally for the passing of some dish they could not reach. The boys were glad when the meal was at last finished and they were able to get out again into the sweet, sun-purified air. Mr. Murphy remained behind for a few minutes, arguing loudly with the two engineers.

[23]

"I don't like the looks of this outfit very much," said Walter, as the four gathered together at the base of a pine tree. "The whole camp is filthy—tents, cooking, men, and everything else. And everyone appears so sullen and ugly, as though a little thing would start a fight going. Of course, the price is dirt cheap, but I don't like the looks of things."

"We can alter things in short order," Charley declared eagerly, for he was letting his eagerness to seize this new opportunity cloud his usually clear judgment. "Why, it won't take any time to change things around. We can stop the machine for a day, and turn all hands in on the job, make

them scrub the tents good with soap and water, and, after they are dry, pitch them all again in a different place. A change of cooks, and Sunday to rest up in, will take away a lot of that sullenness, I bet. I really believe that half of it is caused by Murphy cursing the men so much."

[24]

"Maybe you're right," Walter admitted. "Anyway, I would like to learn to run that steam shovel. I bet I could do it in a week."

"I don't ever want to have to climb aboard that critter," Captain Westfield observed; "but I reckon I could stay on the ground and keep the other fellows up to scratch. I ain't nowise anxious to go into the business, but I leave it up to you, Charley. I've never had much to do with shore business. Just do as you think best, boy."

"I leave it up to you, too, so far as I'm concerned," Walter agreed.

"I hopes you-all do buy it," Chris said, earnestly; "I sho' wants to do de cookin'; dat dirty nigger what's doing it now ain't fitting to do hit, no way."

"All right," Charley agreed, reluctantly. "If it's left up to me to do the deciding, I'll do it, though I had rather not take all the responsibility. Well, I'm going to buy——"

He had no time to continue what he was going to say, for at that moment Mr. Murphy stepped out of the tent and called to them. "Come around here to the next tent; that's where my motor truck is housed."

Walter examined the motor truck carefully. It was almost new, but it was evident that it had received rough treatment at the hands of inexperienced drivers, but its main parts were still good and unworn.

[25]

"Well, what have you decided to do?" asked Mr. Murphy, as they all clambered aboard the truck.

"We would like until to-morrow morning to talk it over," Charley said cautiously.

"Sorry, but the way it stands, I've got to close up at once," said Mr. Murphy briefly. "I've just got to get back home to my wife. I've got another man on my string, and if you fellows don't want the business I'll just run down to his place and see him to-night. I'm pretty sure he'll take it."

"All right, then; we'll take it," said Charley promptly. "Machine, truck, contract, and all equipment for \$3,000."

"Agreed," said Mr. Murphy, equally prompt. "I'll give you a regular bill of sale, covering everything, as soon as I get to Jupiter. We'll get there in time to find a notary, I guess."

There was no further chance for conversation, for, as soon as it was started up, the motor truck kept all hands busy trying to retain their seats. The dirt road was full of hollows, bumps and ruts that sent the truck's occupants bouncing and jarring from side to side, so that they were not at all sorry when Jupiter was at last reached. Once arrived, the notary was hunted up, and the transfer papers made out. "I'll stay with you two weeks and show you how to run the thing," said Mr. Murphy. "I ought to go at once, but I promised you I would stay, and I will. I suppose you will want to pack up and not go back until morning. So, I guess I'll take this check for \$3,000 down to Palm Beach, and get it cashed, and come back on the early morning train. There's a local train due for Palm Beach in about five minutes, so I'll say so long until morning."

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The boys were up at the first crack of day, packing up their few belongings, taking down their tents, and pulling out their little launch and concealing it back among the bushes. By sunrise they were at Jupiter, having rowed over in the skiff, which they hauled out and left, feeling confident that it would not be molested until they returned.

They found, upon inquiry at the little station, that the train would not arrive until nine o'clock.

"Want tickets?" inquired the station agent, who had answered their questions.

"No," said Charley. "We are waiting for Mr. Murphy. He's coming up on the train to take us out to camp. We have bought out his machine and contracts."

"Whew!" whistled the agent. "What did you pay him?"

"We got the whole outfit for \$3,000," said Charley proudly.

"Good Lord!" murmured the agent. "Cash or check?"

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"Check on the Bank of West Palm Beach," answered Charley less proudly.

The agent glanced at the clock. "Ten minutes of nine," he said musingly. "The bank opens at eight. You have got a chance—just a bare chance." He shoved over a pad of telegraph blanks. "Just wire the bank to stop payment on that check."

"Why?" asked Charley, bewildered.

"Because, it's a rotten proposition," declared the agent earnestly; "rotten all the way through. If you can stop payment on that check you'll save losing \$3,000, that's all."

Reluctantly Charley filled in a blank and shoved it over to the agent, who clicked it off rapidly on the key. When he had finished he came around from behind the partition. "It was none of my

CHAPTER IV. BUNCOED.

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"Do you mean to say that Mr. Murphy does not own the machine, the contract, and all the equipment?" Charley asked.

"Oh, I guess he owns the stuff out there, all right," said the agent. "The point is, that in a year's time he has only completed ten miles of the road, and, if you have read the contract over carefully, you will have noticed that it calls for the completion of the road in two years, or the contractor is liable to forfeit the machine itself. There remains thirty miles to do within a year. And that thirty miles is far harder to do than the ground Murphy has gone over. He has lost thousands of dollars upon the work he has done. I hardly blame him for trying to catch a sucker."

"But," Charley protested, "we saw the machine work. It digs over a cubic yard of earth a minute, and, at 17½ cents a yard, that ought to pay big money."

"It looks all right on paper," answered the agent wearily, "but it doesn't figure out that way in fact. You have got to allow for breakdowns, and a host of troubles you don't expect. The farther out you get the more troubles you are going to have. I cannot tell you all that may happen to you, for I do not know exactly, and, if I did, it would be against the rules of the telegraph company for me to repeat anything I have learned from messages that have come over the wire. That is a rule an agent is honor-bound to obey. But I may, however, give you a hint to be on your guard all the time. There are powerful people and influences at work to stop that road-building."

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"But why should anyone wish to stop it?" asked Charley, whose face began to wear an anxious expression.

"That I do not know," answered the agent. "All I know is that you will not be allowed to build that road in peace. How far its enemies will go to stop it, and what their motive is, I cannot say. But, if I were you, I'd be on the watchout for trouble right from the start."

"Cheerful news," commented Charley grimly.

"It isn't very joyful tidings, I admit," said the agent. "I would hate to tackle the job under such circumstances. The work itself is uncertain enough to keep any man worrying, without any trouble from outside. Now you have all the warning I am permitted to give you, and, if I may, I would like to ask you what are you going to do about it?"

"Do?" echoed Charley, throwing back his shoulders. "I coaxed my companions into this deal, and it's up to me, with their help, to pull out clear."

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"Go to it," said Captain Westfield, approvingly. "We have still got \$2,000, and we'll back you up to the last cent. If we go broke, it will not be the first time we've been that way."

"You've voiced my sentiments," agreed Walter, quickly.

"Dis nigger's sho' got to go wid you white chillens," Chris joined in. "Don't know what you'd do widout dis nigger to look out for you-alls."

The agent observed this demonstration of loyalty with increased interest. "If you all stick by each other like that, you will do better than Murphy has, at any rate," he observed. "I'll help you all I can, but I'm afraid that will not be very much, but, perhaps, I can drop a hint now and then that will be of help to you. Well, there goes my telegraph call. Guess it is an answer to your telegram to the bank."

In a few minutes he reappeared with the written message:

"Your message too late; check cashed a few minutes after eight."

"BANK OF WEST PALM BEACH."

"I gossiped a little with the agent at Palm Beach," he said. "Murphy left there on the southbound a few minutes ago. He bought a ticket to Havana. Sorry, boys, I did my best for you, but it was too late. Well, I hope you will have better luck than Murphy did. Drop in on me whenever you feel like it. I have got to get some waybills ready for the morning freight, now, so will have to get busy."

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The little party thanked him for his kindness and, strolling down to the dock, sat down to discuss the new turn of affairs.

"What a chump I am!" exclaimed Charley bitterly. "Here I've gone and dragged you fellows into a hopeless proposition, when common sense should have led me to investigate carefully. It was too good a bargain not to have some string fastened to it. One can't get something for nothing in this world."

"Maybe you were a mite hasty, lad," admitted the Captain; "but shucks, we all make our little

mistakes. Maybe we can do better than Murphy did with that big land turtle. It appeared to me that Murphy wasn't just the kind of a man to handle a lot of negroes, especially Saws. I could see there was a pile of dissatisfaction in that camp, and, when there's trouble in the fore-castle, the ship is never worked right."

"Golly, I don't blame them niggers for looking sullen and working no account when dey has to eat grub de way dat cook fixes it up. I reckon I could fix up some dishes dat would sho' make them open their eyes."

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"I believe there are several things that could be done to that machine which would make her work a lot better," Walter remarked thoughtfully. "I would like to work on the machine firing, if necessary, until I learned how to run her. That's the way we will fix it. Chris can be cook, I'll be engineer, the Captain overseer, and you, Charley, business manager."

Charley forced a grin. "I'm afraid my ability as business manager is at a discount now, but, if you fellows care to trust me again, I believe I will profit from the lesson I've just learned, and, with your help, will pull our hot chestnuts out of the fire. I believe it can be done. The first thing now is to get back to our white elephant. Do you suppose you can run that truck back to camp?"

"I believe so," said his chum doubtfully. "I used to run a car a little at home, but it was a different make."

"Well, go ahead, and see about it," Charley said. "The Captain and Chris will help you get our stuff aboard. I am going to make a round of the stores and see whether Murphy owes all of them. It is likely we will have to lay in supplies every week."

Charley found his surmise correct. Every merchant he met was clamorous to collect overdue bills on Mr. Murphy's camp. It was here that Charley's steady, if slow and interrupted, study of the law stood him in good stead. "You can't collect from us, and there's no use you're getting mad over it," he said coolly to each infuriated merchant. "You took a chance on Murphy, and got stung, the same as we have, and you've got to stand it the same as we have. If you get any of your money back it will have to be from Murphy. If we had been notified beforehand about your claims against Mr. Murphy, then we would have seen to it that the bills were settled before we paid over the purchase price. We have not benefited in the slightest by the things Mr. Murphy bought of you, and you cannot expect us to pay his debts."

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It was a frank, manly, straightforward statement, but the merchants received it with wrath, sore over the losses they had sustained, and treated the lad with many threats and charges of underhandedness, even going so far as to accuse him of being in collusion with Murphy in an attempt to defraud them. By the time the last merchant was visited the lad was convinced that he could expect no credit or sympathy in Jupiter. The knowledge did one good thing for him, however. It stirred up every bit of his fighting spirit, and, when he rejoined his friends at the truck, it was with the determination to make good on his unfortunate venture, if it were possible for a human being to do so.

Walter looked up at him with beaming face. "I can run it all right," he declared, "and it's in pretty good shape, too, though it's been frightfully misused."

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"Good," said his chum cheerfully, as he climbed aboard. "Run me down to the station first. I've got to send a telegram, and then we will go out to camp."

"I've come back to ask some more questions," he grinned to the friendly agent. "What's the name of a good wholesale grocery house in Jacksonville? I want one that does not deal much with the local merchants here."

"James K. Riley & Co. are the best I know of," said the agent promptly. "Their prices are very low, but they demand spot cash, so retail merchants do not trade with them much."

Charley wrote a few lines on a telegram blank and shoved it over to him. "Will you rush that through for me?" he asked.

The agent grinned as he read the telegram:

"JAMES K. RILEY,
Jacksonville, Fla.

Please send at once your price list of staple groceries.

WEST, HAZARD, WESTFIELD & Co."

"Merchants here didn't exactly fold you to their bosoms, when they learned that you were Murphy's successor?" he asked.

"Not so you could notice it," Charley admitted, with a smile. "One can't blame them much for being sore, but, of course, we have got to look out for ourselves."

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"Sure," assented the agent, "you're making a wise move at that, kid. It's a 250-mile haul from Jacksonville here, and the freights will be high, but, even so, you'll get your stuff 20 per cent, cheaper than the merchants here would charge you. The charge on this message will be a quarter."

Charley paid over the twenty-five cents and hurried out to the truck, where his companions

were impatiently awaiting him. As they whirled out on the dirt road leading to the camp he explained to them what he had been doing.

"You did just right," approved the Captain. "There can't be more than one captain to a ship, and I reckon you have got to be captain of this one until she sails into port or is wrecked on the rocks. You have got more business sense than the rest of us. I don't reckon because you made one slip that you are going to keep on making them. We will back you up with the last dollar we've got in the bank, won't we, lads?"

"Sure," said Walter heartily.

"Sho'," Chris agreed solemnly.

"Thanks," said Charley simply. "I'll do my best. Now, Walt, I wish you would show me how to run this truck. I've got a hunch that I'm going to have to use it a whole lot the next few months, and now's as good a time as any to learn."

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Fortunately the truck mechanism was very simple. And in half an hour Charley had so far mastered the principles of the different levers that he felt sure that he could run it if necessity demanded.

"There's one thing more to do before we reach camp," Charley said, when his lesson was finished. "We ought to unpack our pistols and have them handy in our pockets. I don't expect trouble, but it is just as well to be ready for it. I guess there are some pretty tough characters in that bunch. I noticed, big man as he is, Murphy had a couple of big pistols strapped on him when he was in camp."

The pistols were gotten out of the pack and carefully oiled and reloaded. They were late purchases and looked as small and harmless as toy pistols, but their appearance was deceiving. In reality they were automatics of the latest make, deadly accurate, and each, when loaded, carried 11 steel-jacketed bullets, that could be discharged in as many seconds. When slipped into a coat pocket they made only a slight bulge.

By the time they had all pocketed their weapons they came in full sight of the camp. Charley stood up and viewed it with a puzzled frown on his face.

"Something's gone wrong," he announced.

CHAPTER V. THE STRIKE.

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THE camp was soon plainly in view of all, and the reason for Charley's exclamation apparent. Although it was not nearly noon, groups of negroes were gathered around the various tents, and the big steam shovel lay far ahead, motionless and deserted, with no hint of smoke trailing from its smokestack. The only sign of activity about the camp was the sweaty cook, once more engaged in the seemingly endless process of molding bread on the dirty bench outside the tent.

Walter stopped the car, and Charley jumped out nimbly. None of his anxiety showed in his manner. He strode up to the negro.

"Do you make bread every day?" he inquired lightly.

"Sho', Cap," responded the big negro. "De niggers want hit fresh every day."

"Humph," commented the lad. "If I were you, I'd bake up enough at a time to last two or three days. Then you would have more time to keep things neat and clean, as they should be in a camp of this kind."

"Massa Murphy nebber found no fault wid my way ob doing things," objected the negro.

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"Well, we are not Mr. Murphy," Charley said curtly. "We have bought him out. We are the owners of this thing now, and we want our food clean. Remember that. Now, tell me, which are Mr. Murphy's and the engineers' tents?"

"Right ober dar 'mongst dat little clump of pines. De furst one is Mr. Murphy's."

Charley strolled over to the little tent and entered it. It was small and dirty, and the dirt floor was littered with whiskey bottles, all empty. Charley viewed them with a grim smile. "No wonder Murphy lost out," he murmured. "A man cannot put up a good fight and entertain John Barleycorn at the same time." There was a rude box desk in one corner of the tent, littered with letters and papers. Charley seated himself beside it and overhauled its contents quickly. This done, he walked out of the tent's squalor into the open air once more. He next drew back the flap of the first engineer's tent, and peeped inside, but the tent was deserted, as was also the second, save for disordered cots and black, greasy clothing, flung here and there. In the third tent, however, he found a young man, stretched out on a cot reading a magazine. Unlike the other tents, this was neat and cleanly, and the dirty working clothes of its occupants were hung up on a line stretching across the tent. "Hello," he greeted Charley boyishly. "Back again are you?"

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"Yes," agreed Charley, as he noted the other's self-reliant, boyish face. "I ought to have to apologize for not ringing your bell, or knocking at your front door, but I didn't see either."

"That's all right," laughed the youth, as he sat up on the end of his cot. "Take a seat on the other end. That's my seat of honor for my visitors."

"What's your name?" Charley inquired.

"C. P. McCarty," replied the youth, with a grin. "I'm ashamed to confess that the C. P. stands for Clarence Percy, but don't call me either, for I see red when I get good and mad."

"One of the engineers?"

"Oh, we get called that sometimes by courtesy. Really, we are what you might term runners. No one of us three is really a licensed engineer. Say, what might your name be?"

"Charley West, one of the new owners of this business."

McCarty threw back his head and chuckled. "Whew!" he whistled, "just to think I've been talking flippant to a new boss for the last ten minutes."

"Never mind that," Charley grinned. "What I want to know is what's the matter here? Why is the steam shovel not running? Where are the other two runners?"

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"Answer to question number one and two the same—general strike of all hands," replied McCarty briefly. "Yesterday was pay day. We have had no pay, any of us, for two months. Strike came when I went on watch. I tried to stop it, but it was no good. Can't say as I blame the niggers much. I'm kind of sore myself. It's bad enough living in a crowd like this, working in mud and water, living on bum, dirty grub, and, when you can't get your wages promptly, when you have a family to support, it's pretty tough. As for your third question, the other two runners have taken the dog and gone quail hunting."

"I see," said Charley absently. "How long have you been on the job?"

"Six months," said McCarty briefly. "I'm not an engineer, but I've worked around machinery ever since I can remember, and I've dug out more dirt on this job than the other two runners put together, if I do say it, and I could have done double if I had had a good crew back of me."

"I found Mr. Murphy's payroll in his tent," Charley observed. "I notice that, for the past two months, the men have been working only a little over half the time. How does that happen?"

"Accidents to the machine," said McCarty laconically. "I can't explain them, but they keep happening right along. Strange part of it is, they don't happen on my watch. Maybe that's just my good luck, but I have a feeling that there's something wrong somewhere. I don't know as there is anything wrong going on, but I've kinder got a hunch there is."

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"How about the other two engineers? Are they all right?" Charley asked.

"Now, I'm not going to snitch on my mates," said McCarty decidedly. "I may like them, or I may not, that has nothing to do with the matter."

"I think it has," said Charley coolly. "You owe a duty to your employers far above any ethical or fancied duty to your mates, as you call them. You are working for us, and we are the ones you look to for your pay. I'm going to give you a check for your wages due this afternoon. After to-day your salary will be \$100 a month, and you'll be chief engineer or runner on the job. There are conditions attached, of course. You are to give me fully reports on everything pertaining to your department; and, second, you will have to teach my chum, Walter, how to run the machine. You will have to look after the machine carefully, and, as soon as a part becomes worn in the least you must notify me, so I can have a new part ready as soon as the old one gives out. That's my proposition. Take it, or reject it, as you please."

McCarty reflected for a moment. "You're right," he said at last, "a man cannot serve two masters, and I have no reason to love either of the two engineers. They have bullied and slanged me as much as they dared ever since I've been on the job. It's hard to judge a dredge man, for they are the hardest class in the world. I guess it's the work and the men they work for that makes them so, and, when it comes down to real meanness and hardness, Bully Rooney and One-eye McGill stand at the lowest of the list. I know it sounds like a sneak, knocking his friends behind their backs, but I don't mean to be sneakish about it. You can tell them just what I've said. That I believe they have caused most of the hang-ups on this job—that but for them this job would have paid expenses, at any rate."

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Charley smiled. "I'm going to have a little talk with them," he admitted, "but I am not going to tell them anything you have said. I am grateful to you for what you have told me, and I believe we are going to make this thing pay. By the way, can you tell me of any good engineer that a man could depend upon to do the right thing?"

"There is Bob Bratton, of Miami," said McCarty, brightening, "he is as white as they make them; but," he added despairingly, "the best engineer in the world can do but little with a poor crew."

"I'm going to tend to that part of it," Charley said, with a smile. "You do your part, and I'll see that the crew does theirs. Well, go ahead and finish your story. There will be no work done on the

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machine to-day. Glad to have had this little chat with you. So-long. I'll make out your check this afternoon."

He stepped out of the tent into the clear sunshine again, strangely cheered by the fact that he had found at least one man in the gang upon whom he could depend.

At the cook tent he found Chris industriously scraping the dirt off the bench, and vigorously scolding the big negro, who was standing idly by, with a look of dismay on his ebony face.

"I'ze plum ashamed of you," Chris was saying. "I nebber thought dat a Bahama nigger could be so plum nasty and dirty. I'se sho' ashamed of my country when I see things like dis going on. Say, what island are you from, nigger?"

"Eluther," said the negro sullenly.

"Elutheria," echoed Chris, "right next to de Spanish Wells Island, whar you could hab learned all manner ob things from all dose white people what lives there. Nigger, I'se sho' ashamed ob you."

Charley grinned, as he turned to the Captain, who was facing the rest of the negroes, who had been drawn to the spot by the loud talking. They were a rough-looking lot of humanity, pitted by smallpox on their faces, and their bared arms and chests marked by old knife cuts and pistol wounds. But they were almost giants in size, broad-shouldered, and muscular-backed men with the narrow hips that mark the true athlete. [44]

Charley paused to choose his words before addressing them.

CHAPTER VI. LOYALTY.

 [45]

"WHERE do all you boys come from?^[A] I've been pretty well over the Bahama Islands, but I can't quite place you chaps," Charley said, smilingly. "What island are you from, anyway?"

"I reckon most of us men are from Andros and Abacco Islands. Thar's four or five from Little Abacco or Green Turtle Key."

"I have never been ashore at Andros or Abacco Island, but I know lots of fellows from Green Turtle Key. Will those of you from Green Turtle Key please step to one side?" Five grinning negroes separated themselves from the crowd.

"I understand that you boys have quit work and gone on a strike because your wages have not been paid. Well, inside of two hours I will have your checks made out, and you can go. We will not need you any longer.

"Hold on, you fellows from Green Turtle Key," he said, as they began to move away with the crowd. "I can't carry you all in at one trip. The truck can't do it on a dirt road. I want you fellows to stay over to-morrow, and I will take you in the next day, and I want you to work cleaning up this camp. Of course, we will pay you extra for the work, but it must be done well. Captain Westfield, here, will show you what we want done." [46]

The five negroes began to grumble, but the lad silenced them with a word. "If you are in such a hurry to go, you can walk in," he said. The negroes were not anxious to walk in, so they gave a grudging consent.

"Gee," whispered Walter, who had been listening closely. "How can we afford to pay them? They say there is two months' pay due them, and that will about eat up the balance of our funds."

"We have simply got to pay them," Charley grinned. "The labor alien law is strict, and they could tie up the machine with liens and render us helpless. Things are not quite as bad as they look. I've been looking over Murphy's papers, and I find that this month he had dug 10,000 yards so far. He could not collect the money on it until the county engineer comes out and measures it up, and that will not be until the end of the month, so we will get the \$1,750 coming in."

"But look what shape we are putting ourselves in," said Walter anxiously. "We can't work the machine without men." [47]

"Don't worry about that," said Charley cheerfully. "I'll tend to getting new and better men. What I would like you to do is to stick right close to McCarty and learn everything you can about the machine. He'll be glad enough to show you. I want you to master it, so that you will know how every part of it works, and can let me know, so that I can have a new part ready when the old one gives out."

"Good," Walter exclaimed. "I would rather fool around machinery than do any other work. Say, where's McCarty's tent? I want to have a talk with him."

"Wait until after dinner," Charley counseled. "He's enjoying himself now."

"But what am I going to do, Charles?" protested Captain Westfield. "I don't see where I come

in."

"I want you to be general overseer over the ground men, graders, and teamsters. You see, Captain, we want to push the work as fast as we can, and with as few accidents as possible. I am going to increase the men's wages, but they have got to earn their money. Take the graders we watched yesterday. Two good men could have done the work those five were doing. Now, if you will help me, we will get up our two tents a little farther up the road. To-morrow I wish that you would see that every tent is taken down and scrubbed with soap and water with a good dose of carbolic acid in it. When they are dry, have them pitched again, not far from that little bunch of spruce there. We will pitch our own tents among the spruces."

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McCarty and Walter came to their assistance, and in a short time the two tents were pitched in the thicket of glossy green and the dirt floors carpeted thickly with fragrant pine needles. This done, Charley brought over from Murphy's tent the box with its collection of papers. The payroll was already made out, so all the lad had to do was to make out the checks and, as soon as it was done, the negroes filed in, one by one, signed their names to the pay sheet, and received their checks. Some of them would have liked to have stayed and worked on, but the lad was sick of their dirtiness and laziness, and wanted no more of them.

Dinner followed close upon the completion of this task, and all gathered around the long tables upon which Chris had already impressed somewhat of cleanliness, and had cleaned up some of the rubbish which had littered the floor. The grinning negroes sat down to a dinner such as they hadn't eaten in many a day—plain and simple, but wholesome and well flavored and well cooked.

They had hardly begun to eat when the engineers entered, bearing a big bag of quail and followed by a panting pointer dog. They sat down quietly at the boys' table, and sullenly began to eat. Charley noted their faces with dissatisfaction. He knew, from what he had seen of the class, that dredge men are a hard, cruel, overbearing class, but these two shocked him in their sheer coarseness and brutality of expression, and from each emanated the strong odor of cheap whiskey. If not drunk, they were apparently on the verge of drunkenness.

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Charley waited until the last negro had filed out of the tent, then he turned to McCarty. "You might introduce me to your mates," he said, with mild sarcasm. "They are so highly trained, socially, that it seems that they will not speak without an introduction."

McCarty grinned with delight at his new boss.

"This," he said lightly, "is Bully Rooney; the one on the left is One-eyed McGill. Mr. Rooney, Mr. McGill, meet your new boss, Mr. West."

"If he's the new boss, he can just understand one thing," growled Rooney, "I'm not going to have any greenhorn fooling around the machine when I am working on it."

"Nor me, neither," growled his companion.

"You will not be troubled at all in that way," Charley assured them smilingly. "I'm going into town in the truck between two and three o'clock, and, if you can get your things packed up, I'll take you in. Your checks are ready, and I'll give them to you as soon as you sign the payroll. I do not want a man in our gang whom I cannot trust absolutely. And I will not have one that drinks. Drink leads to carelessness, and carelessness leads to accidents. I imagine that's why the machine has been broken down so much."

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A scowl of rage showed on Rooney's face. "That snip of a McCarty has been shooting off his mouth too much."

"Murphy's papers told me all I needed to know," said Charley quickly, but McCarty spoke up coolly and on his own behalf:

"And I've told him about the same thing, and ought to have told him more. I should have told him that the machine has been losing money ever since you two came on the job. That nearly all the dirt that has been thrown out has been thrown out on my shift. That not a week has passed without the machine suffering some breakdown that, in most cases, could have been avoided. Lastly, I could, and should have told him, that there will not be a cent of money made on this job until it's rid of you two skulking, booze-fighting man-killers."

Bully Rooney's face grew black with anger, and he launched himself like a clumsy bear at the slight McCarty. The youth, his Irish-blue eyes sparkling with anger, drew back his fists for a swinging blow at the other, but Charley promptly stepped in between the two with his little automatic in his hand.

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"Here, that's about enough of this," he exclaimed. "If there's any fighting to be done in this camp hereafter, we will do it—understand that. Now you two go to your tents and pack up what belongs to you, for I start for town at three prompt."

The two sullenly departed for their tents, muttering angrily as they went, and Charley turned to McCarty.

"I wish you would take Walter down to the machine with you this afternoon and show him all you can about its workings. I would also like you to make out a list of what new parts may be needed soon, and I will order them at once. If you know or can think of anything that will help to make the machine dig more dirt, I wish you would suggest it to me, and we will go over it

together. If it's feasible, we'll adopt it at once."

"I can suggest two or three things, right now," said McCarty, eagerly. "First, our pump is all on the bum. Its valve is all worn out. It needs repacking, and it needs a bigger intake pipe. We have to fill the boiler six times in twenty-four hours, and it takes an hour each time. If it had been tended to properly it would not take over fifteen minutes at a time to fill up the boiler; as it is, we lose a clear five hours' work a day on that one item alone. Then, there's the wood. It is always piled on the left side of the track, so that we always have to swing the machine around and wait for the ground men to load it on, and, of course, we do no work until they get through, which generally takes them 15 minutes, while, if it were placed on the other side, the machine could keep right on while the men were loading. There's another hour lost a day."

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"Six hours' waste out of twenty-four," Charley exclaimed. "Get the measurement of that valve and intake pipe at once, and I'll get them when I go in this time. As for the wood business, that belongs in your department," he said, turning to the teamster, a lanky, humorous-looking Missourian; "what have you got to say about it?"

FOOTNOTE:

[A] A form of address generally used in the South when white speaks to black.

CHAPTER VII.

[53]

CHARLEY HAS A NARROW ESCAPE.

"I AM not the boss of this outfit," said the Missourian, with a smile. "I do what I am told to do. Rooney and McGill ordered me to pile the wood on that side, so I've been doing it. I reckon Rooney and his partner figured it out that they would get a little more rest that way. Let's have a look at the mules, if you can spare the time."

"Sure," said Charley gladly. "I want to get in touch with every part of the business as soon as possible."

"I always build them a corral whenever we make a new camp," observed the Missourian, as he led the way to the pen where he kept the mules. "Hold on!" he shouted, as Charley stooped to pass under the bars. "If Pansy and Violet don't just happen to like your appearance, they are likely as not to kick the soul out of you."

Charley withdrew in haste. "My, but they are beauties for mules."

"Finest team I've handled," declared the teamster, with a grin. "I kinder like to have them a little savage with everyone. It keeps strangers from fooling with them. They have life and plenty of sense. I could not do my work with a poor team of mules. This work is terrible on animals."

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"And on men, too, I guess," Charley agreed. "I want to say that hereafter your wages will be \$2.00 per day as long as we satisfy each other. Now, how is your work? How much wood have you got ahead for the machine?"

"Not much," admitted the teamster ruefully; "perhaps enough for a day and night, if the machine runs like it usually does."

"That's not enough," Charley said decidedly. "There should be at least a week's wood ahead all the time. In case a mule gets sick, or goes lame, don't you see that the machine would have to lie up until we could get another team? It looks to me like this dredging business is like links in a chain. If any one man, from teamster up, fails to do his part in the work, why, the whole machine has got to go out of business until the defect can be made good."

"I'm doing my best," the teamster protested. "Most of my wood has to be cut and hauled over a mile to the machine, and the route I have to take to get to it is generally a winding one, for I have to pass around all ponds and bog holes. It takes careful driving to avoid bogging down your team and losing it."

"Well, then there is one weak link we have got to strengthen right away," said the lad cheerfully. "I will not be back from town until day after to-morrow, but, when I come, I will bring a good man to help you. He can do the wood chopping while you do the hauling; meanwhile, keep on with your work, so as to get ahead while the machine is idle to-day and to-morrow. Another thing I would mention is that I want to get things so systematized that it will not be necessary to do but little work on Sunday. I want that as a day of rest for all hands, so far as possible."

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The lanky Missourian reached out and grasped Charley's hand. "I'm right with you, lad, clean up to the hilt. You've got the right ideas. A body of men will do as much in six days as in seven, besides being more contented, healthy and cheerful."

"Well, I must get back to camp. I've got several things to see to before I start for town," Charley said.

"Hold on!" yelled the teamster, as the boy was turning away. "For God's sake don't move your feet!"

Startled, Charley looked down. In moving forward he had placed his right foot squarely upon the head of a huge snake, while his left foot was lying across the reptile's big body. It was only by summoning all his self-control that the lad kept from jerking impulsively ahead or to one side, a course which would surely have resulted in instant death. In fact, death was threatening as it was. The boy could hardly retain his position as the powerful reptile began to twist back and forth beneath his feet. Luckily, where he stood the ground was soft, and the parts of the snake upon which he stood were deeply imbedded in the soft sand, but, even with that in his favor, it was only a question of seconds before the repulsive reptile wriggled free. Charley drew his automatic and fired down at the huge, writhing, black body between his feet. The first shot penetrated the middle of the snake, and, firing slowly and carefully, Charley cut roughly through the middle of the snake's body. As its struggles grew less, the lad leaped far ahead and looked back. The snake was still struggling vigorously, but, with its body nearly severed, it could do nothing but swing its head viciously.

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"You did that pretty neat, lad," said the teamster cheerfully. "I was afraid you would try to jump. You've shore got pluck."

Charley grinned. "It was simply a bad case of being too scared to move. Well, let's climb on the wagon and get back to camp. Say," he continued, as the teamster whipped up the mules he had harnessed up while talking, "do you have many of those moccasins out here?"

"Not many right here," grinned the driver, "but on these strips of pine lands there is not supposed to be any. I suppose our crew kills from twenty to twenty-five a week. Sometimes we kill them all curled up nice and comfortable in our bunks. But, pshaw! that ain't nothing to the day it will be five or ten miles farther out. I drove out there once and it's a sure bet the wheels and mules' hoofs killed over a hundred going and coming."

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"Whew!" Charley whistled, "that's not very pleasant to hear, but, here we are at camp, and I've been too excited over this trip to ask your name."

"It's Jim Canody—'Languid Jim' they generally call me," grinned the teamster.

"You can go back to work, then, Jim," said Charley. "Do your best, and I'll have a good man to help you soon. Drive in by the cook tent and I'll jump off there."

"Well, Chris," he inquired, "how are you getting on?"

The little negro grinned. "Dis ain't going to be no cinch, Massa Charles," he said. "Cooking and cleaning up for twenty-five men is goin' to be a mighty big job for one small nigger. 'Sides, if you work a night crew hit means a whole lot more work putting up midnight lunches. Dat's a lot of extra work."

"I see you have got to have an assistant," Charley agreed.

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"Dat's so," acquiesced Chris, "but he's going to be mah helper, and I want to pick him out."

"Give me a description of the kind of help you want, and I'll try to get it," Charley grinned.

Chris reflected. "I'd like a nigger jes' 'bout my size," he said musingly. "'Cause he won't be noaccount 'less I can make him do as I tell him. I'd like him to be a yellar nigger, too. 'Cause a yellar negro is much more timid, and shows de dirt much quicker dan a coal-black nigger. Hit's a lot moah easy to keep him clean. Dis nigger don't want no noaccount nigger trifling around dat he can't lick."

Charley grinned. "I'll try to get you one like you wish. Now, I want you to make up a list of everything you need for the next sixty days."

"Golly! Massa Charles," exclaimed the little negro. "I can't do dat, nowadays. I might figure out what it would take to feed one man, but I can't calculate on twenty-five men for sixty days. Dat's too big figuring for one little nigger."

"Well, just figure on one man for thirty days," said Charley, amused, "and I'll figure on the other twenty-four men."

"Golly," exclaimed Chris, "youah sure got a head on you, Massa Charles. I don't see at all how's you going to figure dat out."

"Get out your list," said Charley, "and some time I'll tell you how to do it. Don't put down any fancy thing—only just what will make substantial hearty grub, like rice, pork, beans, coffee, salt, canned milk, sugar, flour, dried fruits, macaroni, and, I guess, canned meats, until we get out to the hunting ground. Hurry up, now, and get up that list. It's time I was going now."

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Leaving Chris to his strenuous labors of figuring out what one man could eat in thirty days, Charley gave a few instructions to the Captain about cleaning up the camp, and then sauntered over to the engineers' tent. With only a "Hello" he threw open the flap. Bully Rooney, half-dressed, rose up from his cot and jerked a rifle from its slings.

"Better put that down," Charley advised him. "Before you could get that thing into action I could riddle you with my automatic." Rooney reluctantly obeyed.

"Now, I didn't come in here for a row," the lad continued. "I came in to tell you that the car is ready for town. I'm going to leave in fifteen minutes. Better hustle and get your things together."

"I ain't going," said Rooney sullenly. "I've been working by the month, and I've got to have a month's notice or an extra month's pay."

"You are going. We will not have you on the ground—and that's pat," Charley declared. "If you and your partner stay on, we will see that you eat none of the company's grub. You can just stay here and starve, for all we care. Make up your mind quick—five minutes of that fifteen minutes have gone." [60]

"We'll go," growled Rooney, "but let me tell you, young fellow, we will sue you as soon as we strike town."

"That's good," said Charley, with cheerfulness. "We have got nothing to lose, because you've got no legal grounds for a suit; besides which, I don't believe either you or McGill dare to go to court. I really believe that neither of you dare face the showing up of the foul things you have done on this job. Now you both get a move on you. If you are not ready when starting time comes I'll leave you and bring out the sheriff to move you when I come back."

Before the time arrived to go, McGill and Rooney were stowing their hastily packed luggage in the car, and the negroes, with their few tattered belongings, were trying to find a place for themselves in the crowded truck. Then, with Charley at the wheel, the truck was headed around for Jupiter, and they were off.

CHAPTER VIII.

 [61]

WALTER TAKES HIS FIRST LESSON IN RUNNING AN ENGINE.

"I DON'T like the idea of Charley going in alone with that gang," Captain Westfield said uneasily. "It's a bad crowd he's got along with him, and they may make him trouble."

"I don't think they will," said Walter, as the two stood watching the truck out of sight. "They have all got their checks, and have got no reason for making trouble. I guess Charley can take care of himself. Did you see how fast he was driving the car—almost too fast? If those engineers are not just plain fools, they will not touch him, for, if he let go that steering wheel for a second or two, the car would turn turtle into the ditch and all hands be killed or hurt."

"Well," said the Captain, with relief, "if that's the case, I'll quit worrying and get out those Saws to get down the tents that are empty."

"And I'll go back to the machine," Walter said. "I want to learn all about it as soon as I can. McCarty seems to be a mighty fine fellow, and he is going to show me how to run it."

McCarty was waiting for him at the machine. "Now the first lesson is going to be a dirty one," he said. "We will have to crawl under the car, so you can see how each part works." [62]

Shedding their coats, the two wriggled under on the wet ground and, lying on their backs, McCarty pointed out the various cog-wheels that worked the car and the swinging table.

"Gosh!" exclaimed McCarty suddenly. "Look at that!"

Startled, Walter looked to where the other was pointing. In one of the deep, sharp niches, into which the long teeth of the ratching descended when the platform was in motion, was wedged a round, yellow stick, of some eight inches in length.

McCarty pulled out the strange object and looked at it musingly. He broke off a bit of it, and, crumbling it up in his hand, examined it closely. "That stuff must have been put in there just before I went on duty night before last," he said. "Gosh! It's lucky the nigger struck on me before I started up the machine."

"Why?" Walter asked. "What is that stuff, anyway?"

McCarty threw him the stick. "Catch it," he said; "that's dynamite of the strongest grade."

Walter held the stick gingerly, as though he was afraid it might go off at any minute.

"Don't be afraid of it," laughed McCarty. "It doesn't go off so very easy. It needs a sudden, hard jar, or a cap and fuse, to explode it. If I had swung that thirty-ton platform around on top of that stuff the machine would likely have been pretty badly smashed up, and maybe some of us killed." [63]

"Who could have put it there?" Walter asked.

"Hard to say. Someone who wanted to put the machine out of business, of course. To be frank, however, it all points to Rooney, who had the shift before mine. He blew the whistle for me when his shift was up, and I left from the camp at once. We passed each other about halfway, so no one else would have had much chance to put anything in there, between his departure from the machine and my arrival. However, it has done no harm, so there's no use worrying about it now, but we had better look good, and see if there's any more of it scattered around."

A close search, however, failed to reveal any more of the dangerous explosive, so the two boys crawled out from under the car and mounted the swinging steel platform, where McCarty showed the other which part of the cog-wheels they had seen below each lever controlled. There was a lever to move the car back and forth on its tracks like a steam engine, a lever to put on brakes, one to control the two-ton steel bucket, and another to raise and lower the long steel crane.

"Best way for you to learn to run it is to come on as fireman," he advised. "It's a hot, dirty job, and long hours, but you've got to learn the steam part first before you can become a good runner. You've got to know enough about a steam engine to tell if your fireman is doing his part right—to know whether he is carrying too much or too little steam, and whether he keeps water enough in the boiler all the time. A careless fireman can easily blow up a boiler and wreck his engine, so it pays to keep an eye on your fireman."

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"All right. I'll come on as a fireman," agreed Walter, cheerfully.

"That's right," approved McCarty. "It's the only proper way to learn. Here's another thing to think of: Suppose you went on to that machine to-morrow as a runner. You know now how it works, all about the levers, etc. But, take one example. The first thing you may have to do is to move back on another section of track. A section of track is only fifteen feet long, and the part of the car that rests on it covers twelve of the fifteen feet. The section next is butted up against the one the car is on, but is not fastened to it. Across the ends of the two sections the ground men place two six-foot pieces of iron rail, to catch the center wheels of the car. Now, everything is ready for moving, and the ground men signal, 'Go ahead.' You start ahead. Suddenly the ground men, who are watching cry, 'Hold, hold.' When you have heard that cry you know the car is not hitting that second section right. You have to stop that machine, and stop it, not in a second, but in a fraction of a second, or your machine will be off the track and buried in the sand; or, perhaps, even skidded into the ditch, and likely lost to you forever. Do you suppose a green man, with all that array of levers before him, could act quick enough to save his machine and crew? Why, running a steam locomotive is easy compared to running one of these things. Well, I guess we have gone over everything, and we might as well go back to camp. In the morning we will come out and fire up and take a few lessons in actual practice in firing and handling some of the simpler levers."

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"Good!" Walter exclaimed. "Say, what's that haze off there in the west? Isn't it smoke?"

"Indian fires," said McCarty. "They burn off parts of the prairies every six months so as to get fresh pasture for their stock. Appearances are deceptive out here. The air is so clear that one can see objects very far distant. Now, how far off would you say that fire is?"

"About ten miles off," Walter guessed.

"It's more than twice that far," declared the other. "It's a queer country we will be entering soon, and I'm thinking we'll see some queer things before we get through this job. But, here we are at the camp. My, that supper smells good."

[66]

They found the Captain driving the negroes at their task with all the authority an old shipmaster can display.

"Gee," exclaimed McCarty, "I never saw those niggers work like that before. Why, they've got all the empty tents down and one of them washed up. I wonder how he did it."

"Oh, the Captain can handle men, all right," said Walter proudly. "That has been his business all his life, handling tough crews of sailors."

The old skipper knocked off his men for the night and joined the two lads. "Well, I've got a good start for to-morrow," he said, with satisfaction. "We'll have everything finished up by to-morrow night. Say, those Saws ain't half-bad workers when you handle them right."

"Negroes are no good out on this kind of work. A nigger wants to be in or near a town," McCarty declared positively. "He wants to be where he can get out nights and 'rambles,' as he calls it. He don't like to stay long on a job, anyway. If he's not paid every Saturday night, he quits. If he is paid, he's pretty likely to quit, too, for he will have \$8 or \$9 in his pocket, and, as long as he has a dollar he does not believe in work. I remember hearing once this dialogue between a white man and a nigger:

"White Man—'Say, boy, do you want to earn a quarter?'"

[67]

"Negro—'No, sah, boss; I'se dun got a quarter.'"

Chris beating on a tin pan drew them all to the cook tent, where a good supper awaited them. The sun went out of sight while they were eating, and darkness followed immediately, as there is no twilight in Florida. Lanterns were lit, and, while the Captain and Walter lent the overworked little negro a hand in cleaning up, McCarty, who had moved his tent close to the Captain's, built up a big fire in front of the tents, and hunted up a few boxes for seats. Here the Captain and Walter soon joined him, while Chris wandered over to visit with his countrymen.

"I always like to sit by a camp fire evenings, when I am out on a job like this," McCarty said. "It seems to take away some of the loneliness, and makes things seem more cheerful. Just listen for a minute to the din, will you?"

There was no need to listen—the din could not be ignored. The croaking of millions of frogs,

the honk of sand-hill cranes, and the screeching of innumerable owls rose up from the darkness about them.

"Sounds like they were all saying their prayers at once and getting ready to go to sleep," said Walter, with a laugh.

"And that's just what they are doing," said McCarty. "Step outside of the circle of firelight with me, and take a look around." [68]

The three stepped out a few paces from the fire and gazed about them. It was pitch dark, but all around them glowed millions of tiny lights, fluttering here and there.

"Just fireflies," explained McCarty. "But watch. See that thin white mist rising from the ground?" As they watched, the white vapor rose higher, grew denser, and shrouded the land with a ghost-like shroud. The fireflies disappeared, the frogs ceased croaking, the owls' hooting died away, and all was still.

"Night has drawn its sheet over them, and they have gone to sleep," said McCarty whimsically.

"Hark!" exclaimed Walter. "What's that?"

"Hanged if I know," said McCarty, puzzled. "It's coming closer all the time, whatever it is."

CHAPTER IX.

BOB IS SENT HOME.

 [69]

It was strange sounds coming out of the mists that had drawn the lads' attention. They were not kept long in suspense as to the nature of the noises, for it soon became plain that they were human voices, one shrill and piercing, the other deep and guttural. Nearer they drew, until out of the white vapor loomed a huge, grotesque object, which gradually resolved itself into a big covered wagon, drawn by four gaunt oxen. In the front of the wagon sat an Indian woman, urging the weary beasts on with whip and shrill cries. Behind the wagon walked a huge, powerful Indian, closely followed by a mass of pigs, cattle and goats, which were urged on from the rear by a pack of mongrel dogs, of all sizes and colors. With much squealing of pigs, barking of dogs, and cries from the squaw, this strange equipage came to a stop in front of the camp.

The two boys advanced to the road to meet the visitors.

"Hello," Walter greeted them.

"Hello," returned the Indian. "No can get by big machine?" [70]

"No," said McCarty, "I'm afraid you can't. Machine right in road, deep ditches both sides, plenty mud. Back one mile is a road that circles around the machine. You understand?"

The Indian nodded comprehension. "No can find road at night. Me camp here."

"All right," Walter assented. "When you get unhitched, come over to camp fire and have something to eat."

The two boys rummaged around in the cook tent and got out a can of salmon, one of corned beef, and a box of crackers, which they carried out to the camp fire. The Indian was there awaiting them. "She unhitch oxen," he explained.

Walter grinned. "Indian man no work?" he inquired.

"No work," agreed the Seminole.

"Your squaw?" asked the interested lad.

"No, sister," and a gleam of interest shone on the Indian's impassive face. "You want squaw?" he demanded.

"No," said Walter hastily, while McCarty laughed.

"Sister strong, work good, cook good, too," recommended the Seminole seriously.

"Why don't you get a squaw yourself?" McCarty demanded.

"Sister got tongue sharp as knife point," admitted the Indian sadly. "She and squaw would fight and fight and fight with their tongues, and there would be no peace in the camp for its master." [71]

Her task performed, the Indian girl now approached the fire. She was pretty for an Indian. Like all Seminole girls, she wore a waist of bright colors, a skirt of calico of many hues, and beaded moccasins on her feet. She was frankly unembarrassed and smiled around at her hosts in evident friendliness.

Walter opened the cans and handed them and the crackers to the girl. "No meal cooked in big tent," he explained. "To-morrow morning have plenty hot grub."

The two ate silently and hungrily, and as soon as they had finished departed for their wagon with a brief "Good-by."

"They never even said thanks," McCarty commented.

"An Indian never expresses his gratitude in words," Walter explained, "but they never forget a favor done them. If we ever happen near that fellow's camp, he will bring in some present, such as venison or pork. Well, it is time we were turning in. The Captain has been asleep for hours."

Chris awoke all hands next morning at daylight by beating on a tin pan. He had breakfast all ready by the time they were washed and dressed. The Seminoles had already hitched up their oxen, and, seated by the cook tent, were patiently waiting for the promised meal. [72]

The boys invited them to seats at their own table, and were surprised to note that they seemed perfectly at ease, handling knife and fork.

The meal was quickly dispatched, and the Indians, with a brief "good-by," departed to pick up the road they had passed in the night, and the boys hastened out to the machine, while the Captain, with his negro helpers, resumed the work of cleaning up the camp.

Walter quickly picked up the knack of firing, and, after he had mastered its principles, McCarty, standing by his side, permitted him to handle the two levers that controlled the great steel bucket. Simple as it looked to be when he watched McCarty do it, Walter soon found that it required both quickness and coolness to handle only these two levers out of the many before him. He repeated the operation of raising, lowering, digging, and dumping several hundred times, gaining more quickness, sureness, and certainty with each operation.

"You're going to learn quickly," McCarty said. "I am sorry, but we can do no more to-day. If you'll look back at your water gauge you'll see that there are only a few inches of water left in your boiler. Filling it is too big a job for us to tackle alone, so you might as well rake out your fire, and we will go back to camp." [73]

"I say," he continued, as Walter threw open the furnace door and raked out the blazing billets of wood with an iron rake, "it's only nine o'clock. What do you say if we go off on a little hunt for the balance of the day? It's likely to be the last chance we will have in many months."

"I'll go you," Walter agreed. "That is, provided the Captain does not need any help."

They found the Captain with his task nearly completed. "No, you can't help me any," he said. "The niggers will have everything done by noon. Go on and have your fun, lads, but be careful, and be sure to get back by dark."

The boys sought their tents, and got out their guns and game bags. By the time they were ready Chris had a lunch wrapped up for them, and they struck out into the open woods, with Bob, the dog, gamboling in front of them.

"Why, you have brought your rifle along with you," Walter exclaimed, noting his comrade's gun.

"Yes; one shotgun is enough," said his friend; "and I am in hopes that we may run on to some big game. I've seen plenty of signs of deer lately."

"I'll be contented if I can get a good bag of quail."

"Oh, you'll get them, all right," said McCarty confidently. "The woods are full of them, and Bob is as good a bird dog as there is in the State of Florida. Look, he is at it already." [74]

As if to justify the compliment paid him, Bob had stopped in front of a little oak thicket, and stood with head thrust forward and tail sticking straight out. He waited patiently in this attitude for the lads to approach.

"Get your gun ready, and I'll scare them up for you," McCarty said. "If you are not used to shooting on the wing just aim at the flock and blaze away when they rise."

He picked up a heavy stick and threw it into the thicket. With a whirling of wings a big covey of quail rose up from its center.

Walter fired one barrel after the other into the middle of the flock.

"Good!" exclaimed McCarty. "You got a dozen at least. Watch where the balance light. Here, Bob, fetch 'em out."

The dog rushed forward, but stopped at the edge of the thicket.

"Fetch 'em out, Bob; fetch 'em out," encouraged the lad, but the dog turned back with drooping tail.

"There's something wrong in there," declared McCarty; "something the dog is afraid of."

"Well, I'm going in and get my quail," Walter said. "I'm not going to be cheated out of the first quail I ever killed."

"Hold on," said McCarty, "there's no telling what you may run up against. The thicket isn't over fifty feet across. Let's set fire to both sides of it, and one of us stand by each end. We ought to be [75]

able to kill whatever it is as it comes out."

"Good," Walter agreed. "I'll take my stand by this end, and you can take yours by the other."

In a few minutes the thicket was ablaze on both sides, while the two lads, with guns cocked, stood eagerly waiting the appearance of its occupant.

The thicket was all of small growth, and in a few minutes the fire had swept it clear to the ground, leaving only here and there a few smouldering stalks of thicket growth. The dead quail lay scattered around on the ground, unhurt except for a slight singeing of feathers.

"I guess Bob got a wrong hunch that time," Walter said, as he picked up his quail, of which there were thirteen.

"I'll bet on Bob every time," said McCarty. "There was something in here that he was afraid to tackle, and I'll bet if we look around long enough we'll find some trace of it."

"Look out!" said Walter. "There it is, right in front of you."

CHAPTER X. WALTER AND THE ENGINEER GO A-HUNTING.

[76]

A FEW feet in front of McCarty lay a little mound of soft dirt, thrown up by a gopher when digging its hole down deep into the earth. It was the stirring of this mound of sand that had called forth Walter's exclamation.

The boys watched, fascinated, as the sand trembled more violently, and a big, flat head, with lidless eyes, reared itself above the dirt. At sight of the repulsive-looking head, both boys fired, and the head dropped back, nearly severed from its body.

"Gracious!" exclaimed Walter, as they pried the rest of the body from the sand with their gun barrels. "Did you ever see one like it in your life?"

"I never saw such a monster before, and I don't believe anyone else ever did," agreed McCarty, as he gazed down at the beautiful, diamond-marked body of the huge rattlesnake, for such it was.

Walter measured the body with his gun barrel, while McCarty counted the rattles at the tip of the tail.

"It's eight feet two inches long," Walter announced. "No one will ever believe that we killed a rattle of that size."

"Well, here is one way to convince them," said McCarty, as, with his knife he severed the rattles from the body. "They can't doubt that it was a whopper. Here's twenty-four rattles and a button, which shows that it was twenty-four years old."

[77]

"My, but I would like to get that skin off," Walter said, longingly. "It's a beauty, but I'm afraid to skin it."

"Yes, it would be risky," agreed McCarty, who, like his companion, was well versed as a hunter. "It may have bitten itself when the fire was going over it. But come, let's move on. The sport is only just beginning. Did you notice where that covey of quail settled?"

"Yes," Walter said, "they went down in that bunch of spruce over there. Bob is nosing them up already."

The lads followed up the sniffing dog, and out of the rise Walter got seven more birds. "That makes twenty," he observed. "That's enough for supper, and there is no use killing more than we can use. I've got some buckshot cartridges. Let's try and find some bigger game. You've had no fun at all, so far. I've been having it all. Which is the best way to go?"

"I don't really know," said McCarty. "I have never hunted far from camp out here, but, I fancy, straight ahead is as good as any. I climbed way up on the machine's boom the other day and took a good look over the country. Say, it's the craziest looking country you ever saw. It's a regular Chinese puzzle of stretches of prairie, ponds, bits of flat woods, hummocks, and even little hills rising up suddenly from the prairie. It's a queer country, all right. Looks as though there might be any kind of game in it. Hang it, there goes that fool, dog again. Won't he ever learn a lesson?"

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Bob, barking madly, had dashed into a little thicket a few paces ahead.

"Hold on!" McCarty cried, as Walter started forward with cocked gun. "Bob, Bob," he yelled. "Come here; come here, you fool."

But the dog did not instantly obey. Instead, from the thicket came the sound of a fierce struggle.

"What can be in there?" Walter asked anxiously. "It sounds as though Bob was getting the worst of it."

"He is, and he isn't," grinned the other. "Just wait a minute and you will see what I mean."

Walter did not have long to wait. Soon a few short barks announced that Bob had triumphed, and a moment later the dog emerged from the bushes, but not before a villainous odor had reached the boys' nostrils. So strong and sickening it was, that the lads retreated in haste.

"Get out of here; go home," ordered McCarty angrily. "Go home, you fool."

Bob stopped and eyed him reproachfully; then, as if in obedience to an oft-repeated lesson, he turned around and trotted back to camp. [79]

McCarty chuckled as he gazed after him. "That's Bob's one failing," he said. "He will go out of his way to tackle a pole-cat. As soon as the scent of one battle wears off he goes out and seeks another. Seems like a regular mania with him. I sure hope he will not do as he did last time—when he went back to camp, sneaked into my tent and went to sleep on my cot. Whew! I had to burn my blankets and fumigate my tent before I could sleep in it again, but I guess I had better shut up. If we talk as we go along, we will never get near a deer."

Thus far the boys had been traveling through low, flat woods, scantily dotted with small pine trees and little thickets of spruces and oaks, but soon they began to enter an entirely different kind of country. Before them stretched a vast prairie, covered with grass and broken here and there by rising hummocks, densely wooded with pines, oaks and huge tropical trees. Every few hundred yards they saw grass ponds, or little sandy-bottomed lakes of crystal-clear water. Beside one of these little lakes the lads stopped to eat their lunch. It was full of fish of all sizes.

"I wish Chris was here," Walter observed. "He would have the time of his life yanking out those big fellows."

"Oh, he can get all the fishing he wants right close to camp," McCarty said. "I never saw such a country for fish in my life. Any hole that is deep enough to hold water is full of fish. Even the ditches the machine has left behind are full of little minnows already." [80]

The lunch finished and washed down by draughts of clear, cold water from the lake, the lads began searching around its sandy shore for deer signs. They found animal tracks in abundance, and were amazed at the number of different kinds—coons, wild-cats, foxes, deer, bears—all seemed to have made the little lake their drinking place, and, in one place, they came upon the padded footprint of a panther.

"My, I wish we could put in a week hunting around this little lake," said McCarty regretfully. "We could make a shelter not far away and take stands here at night. But, wishing don't accomplish much, so I guess we might as well be pushing on. Without a dog our only chance is to work up against the wind and keep our eyes open."

They had traveled about two miles in this manner when Walter suddenly stopped. "Look ahead, there," he exclaimed. "Can't you see something rising up a little above the grass?"

"By George, you beat me to it," McCarty acknowledged. "It's a deer's antlers. The deer must be lying down resting, or we would see its body from here. It's hands and knees for us now. We had better keep together and make as little noise as we can. A deer's hearing is keen." [81]

It was slow, hard work, crawling forward in this manner, but in the excitement the boys did not notice the strain it put on hands and knees. From time to time they would raise their heads cautiously and peer ahead, to see if the deer was still there. An hour and half of this slow traveling brought them to within a few hundred yards of the resting animal; then it suddenly arose, and sniffed the air suspiciously, with its head thrown back.

"Don't move," McCarty whispered. "It's beginning to scent danger."

The boys lay quiet for several minutes; then slowly raising their heads, took another peep. The deer still stood broadside to them, sniffing the air.

"It's no use trying to get any closer," Walter whispered softly. "It's ready to run at any minute. Better try a crack at it with your rifle. I'll get up on my knees and you can get a rest on my shoulder."

McCarty noiselessly obeyed, and, taking careful aim, fired.

"I got him," he shouted, as the deer sank to its knees, but, even as he spoke, the deer was up again and off like a flash. McCarty, taken unawares, had to stop to eject the worthless shell and throw in a new one, by which time the deer was far away, running in great bounds over the prairie. [82]

Walter could not refrain from laughing at the expression on the other's face. "Counted your chickens before they were hatched," he chuckled.

"Oh, I got him all right!" declared his companion confidently. "Look at the blood on the grass. He can't run far before he drops. See, he is beginning to falter now."

All the while they had been talking the boys had been hurrying after the deer, which, although a good mile away, was still in plain sight. Within five minutes after McCarty spoke, it suddenly disappeared.

"It's down," McCarty cried. "Let's hurry as fast as we can. It's getting late, and we are a good eight miles from camp."

When they reached the deer it was dead. The bullet had passed through the body close to the heart. McCarty produced a cord from his game bag, and, tying its front legs to its hind ones, slung the deer upon his back. "If you'll bring my gun, I'll manage the deer," he said. "It's a rule of the chase that each man shall bring in his own kill."

Walter slung the rifle over his shoulder. "I'll spell you when you get tired," he offered.

"I am not likely to get tired. The only thing I'm afraid of is that we are not going to be able to make camp before dark, and, for certain reasons, I hate to camp in this country overnight."

CHAPTER XI THE CONVICTS' CAMP.

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McCARTY took the lead, and, without hesitation, struck out due north.

"Why, you're going the wrong way," Walter exclaimed, "or at least it seems the wrong way to me. How do you know you're headed right?"

McCarty grinned. "I spent lots of my spare time hunting," he explained, "and most of it was done in a worse country than this, where one could get lost within a couple of hundred yards of camp. That kind of hunting develops a kind of direction instinct, as hunters call it, but which is really a habit of observation. Now I have taken note of every turn we have made to-day, and, although we are not going back the way we came, I'll guarantee that we'll come out within a hundred yards of camp. But I guess I had better stop bragging. I need all my wind to handle this deer."

It soon became evident that McCarty was right, and that they were not going to be able to make camp before dark. Indeed, they had covered not more than three miles of the distance when darkness descended upon them.

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"It's a little risky, but I guess we can push on until the white mist rises," said McCarty, as they halted for a moment to rest. "The moon is bright enough for us to pick our way now, but when the mist rises we will have to make camp for the night. I couldn't trust myself to find my way through the fog."

"I don't mind a night out," Walter said, "but I hate to have the Captain worrying about us."

"Same here," agreed McCarty. "But that cannot be helped now. Let's push on again, and get as far as we can."

"Well, let me take the deer for a while," Walter urged.

"Well, I don't mind if you do, for a few minutes," McCarty admitted. "I've carried many a one twice this distance, but that was in the day time. This trying to pick trail and carry too is sure getting my goat."

They had not proceeded far before McCarty stopped again. "If I am not badly fooled, there's a campfire right ahead of us," he said. "See that faint glow there in the darkness."

"Good," Walter said. "We can perhaps camp for the night with them, whoever they are."

"Maybe," agreed his companion doubtfully. "If they are Indians, it is all right, but I am suspicious of white men I meet in this country. We can keep on for a ways, then one of us had better go ahead and investigate before we walk in on them."

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"That's my part of the job," Walter exclaimed. "I'm a pretty fair scout, if I am not much of a woodsman."

"No," contested McCarty. "I'm better used to the kind of people we have in this part of the country than you are."

"Let's not quarrel about it," laughed Walter. "We can both go. Whoever they are, they are not likely to hear us above the din of the frogs and owls."

As the boys drew nearer to the campfire they became silent, lest the sound of their voices should make their presence known. When some two hundred yards from its glow, they left the deer behind and crept forward on hands and knees.

It was well that they had used such precautions, for the appearance of the group around the campfire was not reassuring. It consisted of three white men and one negro. The four were sprawled around the fire, over which a large turkey was hung to roast, and the firelight lit up four of as villainous looking faces as ever existed. The boys crept close enough to distinguish their features and hear the conversation that was going on.

The negro, whose face was scarred by several knife wounds, was speaking.

"I've done getting tired ob dis," he was saying. "I don't like dis hangin' around in de woods day after day adoin' nothin'. What for dat white man send us out in dese woods foah if he don't want us to do nothin'?"

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"Shut up," said one of his white companions curtly. "You've got no cause to kick. If he hadn't bribed the guard at the convict camp to let you escape, you would be working hard gathering turpentine yet."

"You ain't got no call to talk. I reckon you was in as bad a fix as me. Worser, 'cause de guard was just layin' foah a chance to put de whip on youah back."

"You two stop fussing," said the second white man in the group. "We are all escaped convicts, one no better than the other. A man helped us to escape, and sent us out here with a couple of months' grub and instructions to wait his orders. That suits me. I ain't anxious to go around any town until I get new clothes and my hair grows out, so I will not be spotted as an ex-convict. I'm willing to do what he says and wait for his orders."

"Same here," agreed the fourth man. "I don't know the boss' business, but I figure that he don't want to use violence to stop the building of that road unless he has to. He put Murphy out of business pretty quick by spending a little money with the engineers. Likely he's waiting to see if he can't work some such trick on the new concern before he tries any rough work."

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"Why don't he want the road built?" inquired one of his companions.

"Give it up. I reckon he's just an agent for some big corporation," said the other. "I ain't worrying my head about it. What I want is new clothes and some money, and I reckon we will get both if we do as the boss tells us to do."

The talk drifted round to other topics, and the two lads crept silently back to the deer, and, shouldering it, circled around the convicts' camp, being careful to give it a wide berth. It was not until they had placed a full half mile between themselves and the convicts that they ventured to speak aloud, and by that time the white mist had begun to rise, and McCarty stopped near a clump of small spruces.

"No use trying to go any farther," he said. "Let's make camp here in these spruces. We can cut some boughs and make a comfortable bed in a few minutes."

The spruce thicket really made a comfortable camping place. The dense growth of spruce shut out the dampness, and the ground beneath them was thickly carpeted with fragrant pine needles. In a few minutes the boys had cut enough small boughs to make a comfortable bed. They were too utterly weary to light a fire and cook any of their game. They still had part of their lunch left, and, as soon as it was eaten, they lay down on their couch with sighs of relief.

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"That was sure a tough-looking bunch back there," said McCarty, as he stretched out his weary limbs.

"And, judging from their conversation, they don't mean any good to us," Walter commented.

"It's queer, but I've felt all the time that some outside influence was holding back this road building, but it was only a hunch, and I could not be sure about it. Those fellows' talk to-night proves my hunch was right."

"The agent at Jupiter hinted that the Southern Dredging Co. might make us trouble," Walter remarked.

"The agent is mistaken," said McCarty, decidedly. "I worked for that company for years, and, while they will try to crush any company that gets in their way, they certainly would not take the trouble to go out of their way to crush a little concern like ours. No, there's some other reason for the trouble we've been having. Well, it's no use worrying. We had better go to sleep and get what rest we can. We will have to work to-morrow if your chum gets back with a new crew."

The two weary lads were soon sound asleep, and did not awaken until break of day. As it grew lighter, they were delighted to see the camp only three miles away. McCarty had made good his boast. He had come in a straight line from where they had killed the deer. In an hour's time they reached the camp, where Chris and the Captain were overjoyed to see them back.

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"If you hadn't shown up early this morning I would have been out hunting for you," the old sailor declared. "Chris and I didn't sleep much last night."

"I'm glad you didn't start out," said Walter, with a grin, "for then we would have had to turn around and hunted you up. Chris, cut off some venison steaks and fry them for us, please. We are as hungry as wolves."

As soon as breakfast was over the two lads went out to the machine and took the pump to pieces, so as to have it ready for putting in the new parts Charley was expected to bring back with him. This was all they could do until he arrived with a new crew, so they returned to the camp and lounged around, chatting with the Captain and Chris until they heard the truck coming in the distance, when they went out to the road to meet it. As it came in sight they could see that it was loaded with men.

"He's got them all right," Walter exclaimed with delight.

"Yes," agreed McCarty, "he's sure got a load of them. Gosh, I hope they are the right kind. If they are, we will soon get things running smooth and good."

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As the truck drew near, they could see two white men on the seat beside Charley, while the body of the car was filled with well-dressed men with black eyes and hair and rather dark complexions.

McCarty gave a whoop of delight.

"Bully for your chum!" he said. "He's got some of the best class of laborers that work in Florida."

CHAPTER XII.

CHARLEY GETS A NEW CREW.

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CHARLEY stopped the car in front of the camp and jumped nimbly out, followed by the two white men, whom he introduced to the two boys as "Bob Bratten and Will Kitchner, our new engineers." Both were well known to McCarty, and the three were soon busy recalling old times on other jobs where they had worked together. But Walter was chiefly interested in the new men who were climbing out of the car with their suit-cases in their hands.

"Gee, Charley," he whispered, "what kind of crew is this you have brought, a bunch of tourists?"

"They look like it, don't they?" Charley grinned. "But have you forgotten your manners? Can't you say good day to them, at least?"

"Good day, men," said Walter pleasantly, but his greeting was ignored, save by one of the strange men, who had a cast in his left eye and a humorous twist of the mouth. "Good day, *señor*," he said, with a grin. "These men no savey Americano. Me speak Americano plentee. Four years this country. Work plentee on dredges."

"This is Bossie," Charley said, with a smile. "He is going to be one of our firemen and also interpreter." He waved his hand toward the empty tents. "Tell the men to put their things in them and make themselves comfortable, Bossie," he said.

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"Spaniards!" exclaimed Walter. "Where in the world did you get hold of them?"

"Miami," said Charley happily. "I got the pick of four hundred of them that had just been laid off from work by the East Coast Railway Co. They have all had experience in this kind of work. There are several firemen among them, and that Bossie could even be trusted to run the machine, I believe. They are the best class of laborers that there is in Florida to-day. They are cleanly, hard-working, contented and ambitious. I've got two good engineers, too. But I must not stand here talking. I had to leave some Spaniards in Jupiter. I could not bring them all on one trip. I told them I'd be right back, so I will have to go. I'll be back with them before dinner."

"Shall we start up the machine?" Walter asked.

"No, wait until I get back. There are some things I want to talk over with all hands first. Here are those parts for the pump. Tell McCarty to have it fixed up this morning, so that we can start up this afternoon. I've got lots to talk over with you and the Captain, but that will have to wait. So long; I'll be back in a couple of hours."

Walter watched the truck out of sight with a grin. "He sure is doing some hustling," he said to himself.

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Before noon, Charley was back with the second load of Spaniards, and he also brought a yellow-skinned negro lad of about Chris' size and age. The Spaniards immediately made their way to the tents where their fellow countrymen had already unpacked and changed their fine clothes for overalls and jumpers.

Charley led the little negro to the cook tent, and lifted up the flap. "Here's your assistant, Chris," he said. "I hope he will give you satisfaction." He stepped quickly outside again, but stopped there, with a grin on his face, and beckoned to Walter to listen to the conversation that was going on inside.

"Hello, nigger," Chris was saying. "Where you come from?"

"Bimini," said the other negro meekly.

"Dat's where dey raise de laziest niggers in de world," Chris commented. "What's your name?"

"Sam Roberts," responded the cowed assistant.

"All right, you Sam. You get to work an' set dem tables, 'cause dinner's going to be ready mighty soon. After dinner I'll decide jus' what I wants you to do each day. Get to work dar widout no grumbling. I'se de boss in dis cook tent, an', if you don't do like I says, I'se goin' to gib you a worse lickin' dan youah mammy ebber gib you."

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When they were called to dinner later, it was to find the new assistant, shiny-faced from soap and water, serving hot venison steaks and mashed potatoes to both tables, while Chris watched him with a critical eye.

The two new engineers proved to be pleasant, healthy, vigorous, young men, and, before the dinner was over, those at the American table had got well acquainted with each other, while the Spaniards at the next table chattered noisily like a lot of magpies.

"I wish you would all come over to my tent," Charley requested, when the meal was over. "I want to say a few words to you before we start work."

When they had all collected in the little tent, the lad spoke out frankly. "This is rather an uncertain piece of work we are on, friends," he said; "and it largely depends upon you whether we can carry it through. We are pressed for time to complete it, and we have pretty nearly reached the end of our capital. Some unknown enemy is trying to stop or delay the work, for some reason I do not understand. If you will all do your best, I believe we will pull out all right, but it's going to be close work. Two things we must do: keep the machine running, and beware of all strangers. Allow no stranger to come near the machine. McCarty has been longest on this job, so when you are in doubt about anything you can consult him. Now you can fix the watches to suit yourselves and pick your crews."

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The question of shifts and crews was quickly settled between the engineers, Bob Bratton taking the first watch, from 12:00 o'clock until 8:00 o'clock at night. From 8:00 P. M. until 4:00 A. M. would be Will Kitchner's watch, while McCarty's trick would be from 4:00 A. M. until noon. This order, they agreed, should be changed each week, so that one man would not have to do all the night work. Each engineer understood some Spanish, and they soon picked out experienced firemen and ground men from among the Spaniards. As soon as all was settled, Bratton, with his crew, left for the machine, and the rest dispersed, to get things settled in their tents and to gain a little rest before it came their turn to go on duty.

As soon as our little party was alone, Walter related to the others the finding of the dynamite under the machine, and the presence of the four convicts in the near neighborhood.

"There's something big going on, but I can't imagine what it is," Charley said gravely.

"I reckon this road building is interfering with someone's plans, or they wouldn't be wanting to stop it," Captain Westfield observed.

"Sure," Walter agreed, "but who is this somebody, and what is his plan that we are interfering with?"

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"I expect we will get a clew to that before long," Charley said thoughtfully. "As soon as they see we are going to push things they will likely try to stop us. They got at Murphy through his engineers, apparently. But they can't get at us in that way. In fact, I don't see any way they can get at us, if we are careful and keep a sharp lookout. We've got good engineers, and a good crew, now, and I brought out two extra men, so as to have plenty of help in case of sickness or accident."

"How about those convicts?" Walter asked.

"I'm going in day after to-morrow for the supplies I ordered from Jacksonville, and I'll telegraph the sheriff about them," Charley said promptly. "I guess he will lose no time in recapturing them. In the meantime we will just have to watch out for them, that's all. I guess, Walt, you'd better give up the idea of firing—for a while, at any rate. I'll have to spend most of my time running around, and the Captain will be busy with the graders. It needs someone to keep a sharp lookout for any possible trouble or danger."

"All right," agreed Walter cheerfully. "I'll stay wherever you put me."

Further conversation was interrupted by one long whistle coming from the machine.

"He's got his boiler filled and is ready to start," Charley exclaimed. "Come on; we don't want to miss the start." His three chums were close at his heels, as he hurried out to the machine. Bratton saw them coming, and waited.

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"Thought you might like to break a bottle of wine over her before we started," he said, with a grin. He swung the powerful machine around and began to dig.

Our little party watched with admiration the ease and dexterity with which he handled the heavy, panting machine. Each time the big bucket dumped its load of mud in exactly the right spot, as though placed there by hand.

They lounged around the machine the greater part of the afternoon, watching with delight the steady progress being made. Except for brief stops, to take on wood and water, the bucket swung back and forth with the regularity of clockwork.

All the way back to camp Charley was silent. "Captain," he asked finally, "do you think you can handle that grading with three men?"

"I reckon so," said the old sailor. "Why?"

"If you can, I want to put the other two men on as night watchmen to guard the camp."

"Whew!" whistled Walter. "You must be looking for trouble."

"There's nothing like being prepared for it," Charley replied grimly.

CHAPTER XIII. LOOKING AHEAD.

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As soon as our little party got back to camp, Charley called together the Spaniards not yet assigned to duty, and had the Captain select the three men he wanted for graders. Although both Walter and Charley could speak and understand a little Spanish, the old sailor could not speak a word of it, and he was careful to pick out three men who understood a few words of English. Out of the remainder Charley selected two to go ahead of the machine, to clear its path of trees and to dynamite the larger stumps. Two men were assigned as bridge builders, for at every thousand feet a gap must be left in the road for the back water to pass through during the rainy season. A big, strapping fellow, over six feet tall, was named as assistant for the teamster, and the remaining two Spaniards were named as night guards. All but the night guards were to go to work next morning. To each one Charley explained that they must not permit any strangers to come near either camp or machine. If they saw any strangers, except Indians, they were to report it to him at once, or, if he was not in camp, they must report it to Walter.

"That ought to protect us pretty well," he remarked to his chums, after the Spaniards had dispersed, chattering over the jobs that had been assigned to them. "In the day time, the bridge builders will guard our rear, and the right-of-way men will be the same as scouts in front, while you will be watching all around generally. There will always be a crew on the machine, and the teamster and his helpers will be of some use as scouts in their work. That ought to prevent any chance of our being taken by surprise."

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"You talk as though you were preparing for war," Walter remarked.

"It does sound that way," his chum admitted. "I've got a hunch that we are going to see trouble as soon as those convicts get word to their boss that the machine is running again. Judging from what has been attempted already, our mysterious enemies will stop at nothing to accomplish their purpose."

"It's like fighting in the dark," Walter commented. "If we only knew just what we are up against, we would know better what to expect. This mystery business is something I don't fancy."

"It's up to us to solve it," said his chum; "and I'm going to have a try at the job to-morrow. It's comforting, anyway, to hear that machine working so steadily. That Bratton is sure doing some digging. Hear how regular that bucket is dumped. I wonder what those two long and two short whistles mean."

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"That's the signal to move track and back up," said Walter, proud of his newly acquired knowledge. "One short whistle means go ahead, three long ones are for the teamster; four long ones are the distress signal, and five long ones is the signal for everyone to come to the machine."

"The men must all be told what that last signal means," said Charley thoughtfully. "It may come handy some time."

As night drew near, the resting crews emerged, yawning, from their tents, and began to prepare for their night's work. Lanterns were filled and cleaned and working clothes donned. Chris, with his assistant's help, filled up a large basket with food, which, at sundown, was sent out to the workers on the machine.

Supper was eaten, and all the Americans gathered around the campfire and told stories and jokes in its genial glow. The Spaniards built another fire, in front of their own tents, and sang Spanish songs to the accompaniment of a couple of mandolins, while Chris and Sam, his new assistant, lounging in the cook tent, talked lovingly about their own country, the poverty-stricken Bahama Islands.

"This is a mighty different camp from what it was four days ago," remarked McCarty. "There was no music or laughing going on then. All you could hear was grumbling and cursing. Believe me, I like this new order better."

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When 8 o'clock came, Kitchner called his crew and left for the machine, from which soon came Bratton with his tired crew. "Digging's good," he said, in answer to McCarty's questions. "She's hitting a little rock, but it's soft and digs easy. I struck one dead head, but got it out without much trouble."

"What's a dead head?" Walter asked.

"Submerged stumps or trees," McCarty explained. "We often come upon them in our digging. They are generally big, hard as iron, and mean to get out. One does not see them until the bucket hits them, and then the machine is too close to use dynamite."

"Queer," the other commented.

"Yes," McCarty agreed. "There are forests buried below us, I suppose. The process of building up and tearing down goes on all the time. In the centuries to come, likely, these trees around us will be buried in turn, and another forest rise above them."

"The Lord moves in a mysterious way His wonders to perform," quoted the Captain reverently.

While this conversation was going on, Charley had slipped away from the little circle unnoticed, and stepped softly out into the darkness. He had not gone far before he was halted by an abrupt challenge and a leveled rifle. [102]

"It's the boss," he said, in answer to the challenge. "Where's Gomez?"

"Gomez is on the other side of the camp," answered the sentinel in Spanish. "Each of us make a half circle of camp, meet, and turn back again. No one can go or come unnoticed."

"*Esto bueno. Bueno nosche, hombre.*" (It is good. Good night, man.)

"*Bueno nosche, señor,*" replied the Spaniard politely, and Charley strolled back to the fire, satisfied that the night guards were doing their duty.

"Jim," he said, to the teamster, "I want to use one of the mules to-morrow. You've got enough wood hauled to last a couple of days. You can keep right on chopping while I'm gone. Take Juan out with you. He is to be your regular helper. Now, which mule had I better take?"

"Going to ride?" inquired the teamster.

"Yes."

"Waal," he said thoughtfully, "Violet will throw you the furthest, but Pansy might kick you while you're down."

"I'll take Violet," decided the lad, with a grin. "I object to being kicked when I'm down."

"I'm going to take a ride ahead to-morrow," he told his chum, when the rest had retired. "I am in hopes that I may hit on some clew to this mystery. At any rate I will look over the route we have to take, and see what we have got to encounter. I ought to have done that before we bought Murphy out. Well, here goes for bed. I am going to get an early start in the morning." [103]

His intentions were sincere, but he slept so soundly that he did not awaken until the general call for breakfast. While he was eating Chris put up a lunch for him, and, when he was through, Jim, the teamster, accompanied him out to the corral. "I'll put the bridle on Violet for you," he offered. "She sorter objects to strangers fooling around her mouth."

"All right," Charley agreed, but it was with some little secret dismay that he viewed the towering, powerful mule, as Jim bridled it, and, throwing a sack over its back, led it out of the corral.

It was too late to back out without chaffing, for the whole camp had paused on its way to work, to watch the proceedings.

"Lead it out on the grade and give me a hand up," he ordered, and Jim meekly obeyed. Charley placed his foot in the teamster's hand and swung himself lightly astride of the mule, while the teamster jumped hurriedly back.

"Get up," Charley said, as he gathered up the reins. Down went the mule's head, and up and down went its hind part, in a series of jolting, jarring bucks.

"Give it the whip," howled Walter in delight.

But Charley was too busy to heed advice. He grasped desperately at the mule's mane to save himself, but it was too short for a hand-hold, and over the mule's head he went, to land ten feet away in the soft sand with a thud that made his teeth ache. [104]

Slowly he picked himself up, and, rubbing the sand out of his eyes, looked back. The mule was nibbling placidly at a bit of grass, and behind it the whole camp was howling with laughter.

"I really think," remarked the teamster critically, "that you could do better with a saddle on."

"Saddle," exclaimed Charley wrathfully, "have you got a saddle?"

"Got a good one over in my tent. I 'lowed you preferred to ride bare back. Some do, you know."

Charley glared at him with suspicion, but the Missourian's pale-blue eyes met his with a look of entire innocence.

"I guess I could do better with a saddle," agreed the lad dryly. "Go and get it, if you please."

Even with the saddle on, it was all he could do to retain his seat as the mule bucked up and down. But the teamster at last gave it a whack with a stick over the hind quarters and started it off on a run. For one fleeting second Charley glanced back at the grinning faces behind, then he settled down in the saddle and strove to master the vicious brute.

CHAPTER XIV. SCOUTING.

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FORTUNATELY for Charley the newly-leveled road was still so unpacked and soft that the mule quickly tired, with its feet at every stride sinking to the fetlocks, and, before it reached the end of the grade, the lad had it under control. At the end of the grade lay the heaps of soft sand and mud the machine had lately thrown out. He must cross the ditch in order to get around the machine and do it before he reached the ant-like hills of dirt. He rose in his stirrups and surveyed the ditch ahead. It was about eight feet wide and several feet in depth, and in many places the bottom was nothing more than liquid mud. Picking out a place where the bottom showed white sand, the lad headed the mule for the ditch, and, as it hesitated for a moment on the edge, he brought his whip down smartly on its flank. With a snort of rage the mule leaped forward, clearing the ditch by a full two feet. It was a wonderful jump, and Charley settled back in the saddle with a sigh of relief. "You're sure some jumper, Violet," he said.

Skirting the edge of the ditch until he had passed the machine the lad regained the old road and rode slowly along, examining closely the route the machine would have to take. This was indicated by the surveyors' stakes, pieces of lath stuck into the ground every hundred feet. For the most part the stakes followed the line of the old road, departing from it only where the road turned and twisted, and Charley was able to follow them easily. The surveyor had done his work well. Every hundred feet had its stake, and on each stake was marked in blue pencil the number of the stake and the number of feet the new road should be graded to make it level. A full sense of the magnitude of the task they had undertaken came upon the lad, as he followed up the never-ending line of stakes. Here they led through a little hummock of dense growth, where it would be a fearful job to clear away the timber and dynamite the stumps. Beyond the hummock they crossed stretches of prairie or pine barrens, or skirted the treacherously soft edges of saw grass ponds, only to enter another hummock beyond. Charley gave a sigh of relief when the stakes joined the old road again. "There's sure some bad digging in those hummocks and around the edges of those ponds," he said to himself, "and how easy it will be for our enemies to tie up the machine for weeks, break us financially, and drive us off this job, if they just do one simple little thing that a child ought to think of. I guess it is because the thing is so simple that they have not thought of it."

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The reason for the stakes following the old road so steadily soon became apparent, for a little farther on it entered the thickest jungle the lad had ever seen. On both sides rose gigantic trees, matted together by great entwining creepers, and on each side of the road lay stagnant pools of water, covered with nauseous-smelling green slime. Not a sound of life came from the jungle's gloomy depths. The only living things seemed to be the huge, sluggish moccasins that slipped noiselessly from the road into the pools as the mule approached. Evidently the surveyor had decided that the old road was the only feasible route through the jungle.

Suddenly Charley ducked his head, as a whining, singing sound, passed over him. He had heard that whining message before, and knew it for what it was.

"A rifle bullet," he ejaculated, bewildered, as he reined in the mule and looked around. But no powder smoke met his searching gaze, and no report followed the bullet's whine.

Again it came, that menacing, whining sound, and from a tree close beside where he sat on the mule an inch-thick branch rattled to the ground, cut clean from the tree by the bullet.

Still Charley remained motionless, not knowing which way to go, backward or forward, but the next whining bullet decided the matter for him. It plowed a bit of skin from the mule's flank, and the startled animal, leaping forward, began to run. By the time the lad got it under control they were half a mile from where the shooting had taken place.

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"Whew! That was almost uncanny," the lad muttered to himself. "No smoke, no report, nothing but the whizzing of the bullets. It was not any native of these parts doing that firing, that's a cinch. The Indians and cowmen do not know that there are such things in existence as smokeless powder and Maxim silencers."

The weird jungle proved to be about two miles across, and Charley soon, with a feeling of relief, rode out into a pleasant, open country, dotted with small, clear-water lakes. He now began to come upon signs of life: cows grazing on the short, crisp grass; hogs rooting in the soft, muddy places. He grinned, as, turning a curve in the road, he came suddenly upon a group of Indian maidens, bathing in a little lake, and who, with shrill cries, bolted for the cover of a thicket when they spied him. Charley, with a grin on his face, kept his head turned the other way as he rode past. Not long after passing them he began to come upon patches of cultivated ground, and the thatched-roofed, open-walled dwellings of the Indians. At the first dwelling he dismounted and fastened the mule to a tree. The Indians from all the shelters crowded around him with eager greetings. He was delighted to find among the crowd many whom he had met before in the Everglades. These were apparently delighted to see him, and gravely made him acquainted with the rest of the tribe, which was composed of about one hundred braves, besides women and children. They insisted upon his having dinner with them. They fed and watched the mule, and altogether made him feel that he was among friends. For his part Charley was astonished at the evidences of prosperity this tribe exhibited. Their ponies, dress, and dwellings were far superior to any other tribes that he had ever met up with. But what astonished him most was the patches

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of cultivated ground. Never before had he seen such a wonderful growth of corn, yams, melons, and pumpkins.

After a dinner of stewed venison, yams, and melon, Charley began to ask the questions that had brought him out on his lonely ride. The Indians answered them readily. "Yes, they had seen white men—strangers. There had been several out as far as Indiantown. Sometimes they came two or three together. Sometimes one would come alone. They would camp for one sleep, then return to town and be seen no more. One there was who came often—a little man, with a beard like a spade. No, they did not know what the strangers' business was so far out from town. They carried guns, but seemed to kill no game." Mr. Bower, the man who kept the trading-post two miles farther out, might be able to tell him more about the strangers. [110]

So Charley mounted the mule again, and rode out to the trading-post. The road led direct to the little store hut, which was surrounded by a magnificent grove of oranges and grape fruit. Mr. Bowers, a fat, jovial-looking man, greeted him cordially, but could tell him nothing more about the strangers than he had already learned from the Indians. One fact he did learn, however, none of the visitors ever went beyond the trading-post. The lad then knew the clew for which he was looking must lie somewhere between the trading-post and the machine.

"We are meeting with some opposition in our road-building," Charley explained frankly, "and I did not know but what it might come through you cattle owners objecting to having your grazing lands thrown open to new settlers."

"Lord, no!" exclaimed Mr. Bowers, in frank surprise. "We have been trying to get that road out here for years. There's only half a dozen of us scattered between here and the big lake, and it has been hard work forcing the county commissioners to have the road built. Of course, we want the road. Our oranges rot on the trees now every season, because we are not able to haul them through the mud to the railroad. Our groves, with that road opened, would be worth more than our cattle. What if it does bring in new settlers? They will help to make our groves and lands still more valuable. If any one tries to hold up that road-building we will fix him if we can get our hands on him." [111]

It was well along in the afternoon when Charley bade the genial Mr. Bowers good-by and headed his mule back for camp. He alighted at the Indian camp for a moment, to examine the land, which seemed so wonderfully fertile. On the surface it appeared sandy and like other pine land, but a couple of feet below the surface he came upon a kind of soft, grayish rock. He dug out several pieces with his knife, dropped them in his game bag, and, remounting and waving a last farewell to the Seminoles, he proceeded on his homeward way.

It was with a feeling of dread that he rode back through the jungle, expecting every minute to feel the impact of a bullet. But he emerged safely on the other side without any message from the hidden enemies. Darkness fell soon after he left the jungle, but he merely let slack the reins and trusted to his animal's instinct to find the way home. Soon he spied the lights of the machine in the distance, and a half hour later he dismounted at the camp, aching and sore in every muscle of his body, and discouraged over his fruitless trip.

CHAPTER XV. THE FIRST BLOW.

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"THIS mystery business just seems to get thicker and thicker," Captain Westfield remarked, when Charley had finished relating his experience of the day. "Smokeless powder and Maxim silencers are no ways common out in these woods."

"It startled me for a minute," Charley admitted. "No smoke, no sound—just the whine of the bullets coming out of that frightful jungle got me for a while. I did not know which way to go, forward or back. I don't know whether they meant to kill me or not, but they pretty nearly scared me to death."

"Did you meet a little man with a spade-like beard?" Walter asked.

"No," said his chum. "Was there one here?"

"Yes. He was on horseback, and came from the direction of Jupiter. The bridge builders stopped him and sent in word to me. I went out and escorted him by the machine. He said his name was Jones, and that he had a young orange grove out near Indiantown."

"You did not let him go near the machine, did you?" Charley inquired anxiously. [113]

"I did not," said his chum emphatically. "He wanted to stop and chat with the engineers, but I told him we did not permit anyone around the machine but our own men, and he rode on."

"Funny," Charley observed. "I did not meet him. He must have turned off into the woods somewhere. I wish I had got a glimpse of him. I have an idea that he is the boss those convicts were talking about."

"He was a mild-mannered, kind of timid-looking, little man," Walter objected. "He did not look

as though he would hurt a fly."

"Mild-appearing men are sometimes the worst of all," Charley observed, as he stretched out on his cot. "Gee! but I am tired enough for a twenty-four hours' sleep."

But, tired as he was, the lad could not go to sleep. His active brain kept turning over every event that had occurred, in a vain search for a clue as to who their enemies were, and what was their purpose. That they would resort to desperate measures, if necessary, he had not the slightest doubt. The placing of the dynamite under the machine, the presence of the convicts, and the shots in the jungle, proved that. It must be a powerful motive that would induce men to go so far. For all his knowledge of the state and its people, the lad could not think of anything in this wild, remote country that would tempt men to risk the hangman's rope. [114]

Suddenly the lad raised himself on his arm again and listened. One of the sentinels had cried "Halt!" Then in quick succession came repeated cries of "Halt! Halt! Halt!" and then a shot.

Charley leaped from his cot, calling his companions, and, quickly lighting a lantern, found his rifle. But, before he could pull on his shoes, the flap of the tent was thrown open, and one of the sentinels, white-faced and trembling, rushed in.

"Me killie de man! Me killie de man!" he cried in broken English.

By this time both the Captain and Walter were awake, and the three gathered around the guard, somewhat pale themselves, for they were not the kind that value human life lightly.

"Go on, and tell us all about it," commanded Charley. "Talk Spanish."

The guard broke into a torrent of words. "He had seen the man approaching in the mist. Four times he had called to him to halt but the man kept coming on. Then he had fired and the man had dropped, and now he, Gomez, would be hung."

The chums had been pulling on their shoes and pants as they listened to the frightened Spaniard, and now seizing their automatics and giving the guard the lantern, they told him to lead the way to where the man lay. [115]

It was but a short way from the tents, that the Spaniard stopped and pointed ahead. "There he lies," he said. "I do not want to gaze on him. May the Blessed Virgin forgive me for his death."

The boys, peering into the mist, could dimly see a dark form lying on the ground ahead of them.

Charley snatched the lantern from the Spaniard's shaking hand and darted ahead. A few steps brought him to the motionless form. When the lantern's light fell upon it, he gave a howl of laughter, for, instead of lighting up the pale face of a dead man, as he had expected, its rays revealed the form of a small black bear.

At the sound of his laughter, Gomez timidly approached. His delight was unbounded when he found out that it was a bear and not a man he had killed. The four of them picked up the bear and carried it back to the cook tent.

"Where is Lavinia, Gomez?" Charley asked as they laid the bear down near the tent. "Why did he not come to your aid when you fired?"

The Spaniard shrugged his shoulders. "I have not seen him since I shot. He is afraid maybe. Maybe he climb up a tree."

But Charley did not join in the Spaniard's laugh; instead, he picked up the lantern. "Come on," he said shortly. "Let's see what has become of him."

Already the guards had tramped a beaten track around the camp and it was not difficult to find where Lavinia had made his half of the circle. Midway of it lay the Spaniard, face down on the ground. [116]

"Esto Morta (he is dead)!" cried Gomez.

"No," Charley said, as he felt of the man's wrist. "He has just fainted, I guess. Give me a hand and we will carry him into our tent. We don't want to rouse up the whole camp and get every one excited."

They bore the Spaniard into their own tent and laid him on Charley's cot. A sprinkling of cold water in his face, and a small drink of liquor quickly brought the man to his senses. "What's the matter with you?" Charley asked when the Spaniard had emerged from his stupor.

"I do not know, señor," replied the guard. "Everything go black all of a sudden. I know nothing more—head hurts more now bad."

Charley examined his head. "The skin is broken a little," he said. "I guess you must have hit it against something when you fell. How do you feel now? Feel able to get over to your tent and get to bed?"

"I go back on guard," the man said as he staggered to his feet. "I feel all right again pretty soon," but as he still appeared half dazed the lad insisted on his going to his tent. Gomez was sent back on guard and Charley took the sick man's place. Both the Captain and Walter offered to [117]

take the guard duty, but Charley refused.

"You both have to work to-morrow," he said, "while I will have most of the day to rest up in. I don't feel the least bit sleepy now," and in truth he did not. This new incident had given him fresh food for thought. It had needed only a glance at the wound on Lavinia's head to convince him that it had been made by a bullet. If he had had the slightest doubt, it would have been dispelled by the fact that they had found the Spaniard lying face down. Their hidden enemies were getting bold.

When daylight came the weary, troubled lad drank a cup of coffee Chris had ready for him and tumbled down on his cot for a few hours' sleep. He was up again before noon, and after a hasty lunch he drove the truck into Jupiter after the supplies he had ordered from Jacksonville. He found them waiting for him, and after loading them on the truck, he wrote out a telegram to the sheriff and handed it to the agent, who whistled as he read it over. "There's a big reward offered for those four men," he commented as he clicked off the message with his key. "They are all four of them desperate characters. I guess I'll wait for the sheriff's reply;" then Charley said: "If there's a reward in it, we might want our share. Money isn't any too plentiful with us yet. By the way," he continued, "do you know a little man with mild blue eyes and a spade-like beard that goes by the name of Jones?" [118]

"I don't know him, but I see him quite often," said the friendly agent. "He comes and goes here quite frequently, generally on night trains. He gets a lot of telegrams here. Most of them come from the state capital and New York. They are all code messages, that I can't make head or tail of. Everyone here in town knows him, but nobody knows his business, which is unusual in a little town like this. When he comes here he generally hires a horse and spends most of his time riding out in the woods. There, that's the reply to your message, I guess." He scribbled rapidly on a telegraph blank while the instrument clicked noisily. "That satisfactory?" he asked, as he tossed the sheet to Charley with a smile.

"Sure," Charley grinned, as he read:

"SHERIFF'S OFFICE,
Palm Beach Co.

"The four escaped convicts you described are desperate characters—\$500 reward offered for the capture of each. We'll divide reward. Too late to come to-day. Will come out by auto to-morrow morning and bring posse."

"SHERIFF."

It was almost dark when Charley got back to camp with his load, and he was thoroughly tired out, but he felt happier in spirits than he had in many days. [119]

"We've only got one more night of suspense to go through," he told his chums, over the campfire. "The sheriff will be out in the morning, with his posse, and that will dispose of the convicts, make us \$1,000 richer, and we will have peace for a while, I hope. Has that little man, Jones, come back yet, Walt?"

"Haven't seen anything of him," his chum replied. "The convicts are still camped in the same place. At any rate I can see the smoke of their campfire from the machine."

"Good!" Charley exclaimed. "You fellows can sit up and talk, as long as you want to—I'm going to bed. I'm dead tired."

CHAPTER XVI. FIGHTING THE FIRE.

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MIDNIGHT and the silence of sleep hung over the little camp, when suddenly there came the shriek of the whistle from the machine, four long blasts—the distress signal—and from their lines the guards came running in, crying, "Fire! Fire!"

Our little party, awakened by the din, stopped only to slip on their shoes, and when they emerged from the tent it was to find the Spaniards half-dressed, pouring out of their shelters. One glance was all that was needed to take in the situation. Not half a mile distant from the camp the prairie was a mass of flames. A strong wind was blowing from the north, and it was rapidly sweeping the flames down upon the little camp.

"My!" exclaimed Walter. "It looks as though we were goners, all right."

"Let's fight as long as we can, anyway," said Charley, who was rapidly making his plans. "Captain, get all the buckets out of the cook tent, and set half the men to wetting down the tents; the other half will come with me. Walt, come with me, also. Come on, men. Each of you bring along a big spruce limb with you." [121]

"We have got to fight fire with fire," he explained to Walter, as he headed for the path the guards had trod down in the grass. "Just outside the path is the best place to start a back fire.

The path will help to keep it from working back on the tents."

The two lads tore up big bunches of dry grass, and, lighting them, ran along the half-circle path, scattering fire as they went. The Spaniards were quick to catch the idea, and, stationing themselves at regular intervals along the path, with their green spruce boughs they beat out the flames that leaped the little path and threatened the tents. The prairie grass was knee high, and as dry as tinder, and, although the wind was against it, the back fire ate its way steadily back toward the leaping flames.

"We have done all we can," said Charley to his chum, as they stood watching anxiously the approach of the flames. "It's a toss-up whether we will win or not. If our camp goes, we are done for, that's all. We haven't got the money to refit again. My! that would be a wonderful sight to enjoy if our future wasn't hanging in the balance."

It was, indeed, a wonderful sight. The fire, now scarcely a quarter of a mile away, was sweeping steadily down upon them, a solid wall of flame ten feet high licking up the dry grass with a roaring cackle like a mighty wind in a forest, while toward it the back fire was slowly but steadily eating its way. The space between the two fires was as bright as day, and in it the lads could see scores of animals, running bewildered here and there, trapped between the two lines of flames: deer, coons, wild-cats and foxes ran back and forth in frantic terror. Within twenty feet of where the boys stood a lithe form cleared the flames of the back fire in a mighty leap, and rushed by the tents, heedless of the presence of human beings in its mad flight for safety.

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"A panther," commented Charley briefly, as the terror-stricken animal rushed by.

During all this time the other occupants of the camp had not been idle. Under the Captain's directions, his gang of Spaniards had formed a bucket line from the ditch to the tents, and they soon had the little dwellings dripping with water. The teamster had got his frightened mules out of the corral and led them to a place of safety on the grade, and the two engineers had run the truck out on the road beyond the line of flames. Their tasks done, all—Americans and Spaniards—worked to get their most valuable possessions to a place on the grade where they would be safe. They had but little time to work, however, for the intense heat soon drove them back to the road, where they gathered together and watched anxiously the meeting of the fires. They had not long to wait. With a roar, in which was mingled the cries of the tortured animals, the advancing wall of fire swept down on the thin line of back fire. Our little party held their breath and waited. If the wall of flame leaped the dozen or so feet the back fire had eaten away, their camp was gone. Five minutes and a transformation had taken place. Of the mighty conflagration nothing remained but the blacked, smoking dirt of the prairie. The back fire had vanquished its mighty rival. But the danger was not yet over. The wind had swept bits of blazing grass down among the tents, and tiny fires were springing up in a hundred different places. These the boys and their followers beat out with the green branches of the spruces. It was a full half hour before the last of them was extinguished, and they were able to stop and rest, and take account of the damage done. No one was seriously hurt, but all bore marks of the conflict, in the way of burned clothing, singed hair, and blisters, but all were too happy over the saving of the camp to pay much attention to these minor injuries.

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"Whew! that was a close shave," said Walter; "but all's well that ends well. By the way, I didn't see anything of McCarty and his crew. I should have thought he would have come in with his men and given us a hand."

"Perhaps he has had his hands full out there," suggested Captain Westfield. "Maybe that fire was just set so as to draw the men off the machine."

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"I never thought of that," said Charley, anxiously. "The fire drove everything else out of my head. Let's go out and see what's the matter. The machine isn't running."

As if in answer to their conversation, there came from the machine three long blasts of the whistle, a pause, then four long blasts.

"The signal for the wagon, and the distress signal," Walter cried.

The three lads went forward on the run, followed by half a dozen curious Spaniards. The Captain remained behind to keep an eye on the camp.

The boys were half way to the machine when the signals sounded again—three long blasts, followed by four long blasts.

Panting, they reached the machine, and clambered up on the steel platform, where the fireman and the two ground men were grouped around McCarty, who lay motionless, with his head in a little pool of blood.

Charley dropped to his knees beside the prostrate lad and felt for his pulse. "He is alive, all right," he exclaimed. "We'll have to get him to camp before we can do anything for him. Bossie, how did this happen?"

"Two men climb aboard while we standing still looking at fire," said the excited fireman. "McCarty no see them. I no see them. We busy watching fire, ground men busy watching fire, too. I no see them till there come a crack and McCarty falls. Man hit him over the head with a gun. Other man hit at me. I dodge. I got steam hose in my hand. I turn steam hose on two men. It burn them, plentee. They yell plentee. They drop guns. Run, plentee run."

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By the time he had finished his narrative, the wagon had arrived, and McCarty was gently lifted and placed in it, and the wagon headed back for camp.

"Please stay by the machine, Walt," Charley requested, as he took his seat in the wagon and pillowed McCarty's head in his lap. "I'll send one of the engineers to take McCarty's place as soon as I get to camp."

As soon as the wagon had gone Walter took one of the ground men's lanterns, and looked around for the guns Bossie claimed the strange assailants had dropped. He found both, half buried in the soft sand beside the car. They were Savage rifles, of the latest make, equipped with Maxim silencers. The lad ejected one of the cartridges, and prying out the bullet, examined the powder. It was high-grade smokeless. He gave one of the rifles to Bossie, much to the fireman's delight. "I think," said the Spaniard in his quaint English, "I think this be much more better than steam." The other rifle the lad gave to the ground man, with instructions to keep it always with him. He was showing them how to operate it, when Bob Bratton arrived to take McCarty's place. Bob grinned as he saw the Spaniards awkwardly handling their new weapons. "They are more likely to shoot themselves than one of the enemy," he commented, "but I guess it will make them feel safe to have a gun along with them."

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"How's McCarty?" Walter asked, anxiously.

"Oh, he's come too, all right," answered the other carelessly. "He got a pretty good crack over the head, but it didn't break the skull any. He'll be all right in a couple of days. Meanwhile," he added, with a sigh, "Will and I will have to work twelve-hour shifts."

"Are you not afraid to work nights, with all the queer things that are going on around us?" Walter asked curiously.

The other laughed frankly. "Thunder, no," he said. "Dredge men get used to danger. It's around them all the time. Why, kid, when we are working in the Everglades, it is often impossible to hire men to work in the rotten mud, and then we have to go to the jails and convict camps to get our labor. I've worked on jobs there that there were no free men on the payroll but the engineers. All the rest were men working out their fines, and every last one of them eager to crack the engineers over the head and get away. Bosh! This job is a cinch compared with some jobs we have all worked on."

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The sun was rising when Walter started back to camp. He had only gone a few steps when he stopped and waited. From the direction of Indiantown, a horseman was approaching the machine. The waiting lad recognized the pony and its rider. It was the little man whom he had escorted past the machine a couple of days before.

CHAPTER XVII. THE CONVICTS.

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WALTER stepped back of the machine, where he could not be seen, and watched the little man approach. He was curious to see if Mr. Jones would attempt to speak to the engineer after the warning he had given him.

Just before he reached the machine the little man turned off the road and rode along the other side of the ditch. When opposite the machine, he reined in his pony and hailed the engineer. Bratton stopped the machine for a second. "Go on," he shouted. "No strangers are allowed near this machine."

"I just want to talk to you for a minute," said the little man.

"Nothing doing," answered Bratton shortly. "I don't talk with strangers when I am on duty. Go on. Get out of the way." But the little man still persisted. Bratton swung the machine around, and winked at Walter, as the bucket gathered up its huge load of mud. Like lightning the huge boom swung around, and the avalanche of mud descended at the pony's feet. The frightened animal leaped forward, almost unseating its rider. Walter hurried forward to meet the little man, as he crossed the ditch to the graded road. "I thought I told you the other day that we allowed no one to bother our engineers, Mr. Jones," he said severely.

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"I beg your pardon. I had forgotten that," said the little man mildly. "Really, that engineer acted very rude. I merely wanted to ask him a simple little question."

"You can address your questions to me or one of my chums, hereafter," said Walter stiffly.

"I merely wanted to ask if he had chanced to see anything of my glasses. I dropped them along the road somewhere, and really I am quite helpless without them."

"I'll inquire at the camp if anything has been seen of them," said the lad briefly.

"I have ridden a long ways this morning," continued Mr. Jones, "and I am very hungry. I wonder if I could get a bite to eat at your camp."

Walter hesitated. He did not like to have the man stop at camp, but he disliked to refuse such a

simple request, when, after all, the man might be harmless and well-meaning.

"You may stay and have breakfast with us, if you wish," he said. "I guess it is ready now." He walked along silently by the pony's side while the little man chattered volubly.

"Why, you have had a fire," the little man said, as he surveyed the flame-swept prairie and smoke-blackened tents. "How lucky it didn't get your camp. I suppose that would have delayed you a lot in your work?" [130]

"Oh, I don't know about that," said Walter indifferently. "I fancy it would not have taken long to have got other tents and supplies."

The Spaniards and engineers were finishing their breakfast when the two entered the tent, but Charley and the Captain were not in sight. They came in and took their places at the table, however, while the little man and Walter were still eating.

"This is Mr. Jones," said Walter. "He lost a pair of glasses on the road, and wishes to know if we have seen anything of them."

"Please describe them to me, Mr. Jones," requested Charley, eyeing the little man closely.

"They were just ordinary nose-glasses, with gold rims. They were in a hard black leather case," said the little man promptly.

"I guess these are the ones," said Charley, producing the black leather case. "I found them."

"Where?" asked the little man, as he fitted the glasses on his nose.

"Right where the fire was started that nearly burnt us out last night," said Charley promptly. "The Captain and I just came from there. I think it's up to you, Mr. Jones, to explain how they got there."

"Dear me," said the little man quickly. "How queer! I suppose some Indian must have picked them up on the road and dropped them again when he started that fire. You know they are always burning off the prairie for their cattle. Quite a queer incident, isn't it?" [131]

"It is," agreed Charley dryly. "Perhaps you can explain——" But the lad did not finish his sentence, for from the road came the loud tooting of a horn, and all rushed for the tent opening, Walter exclaiming, "It's the sheriff." The sheriff it proved to be, and with him were a dozen active-looking men, each carrying a rifle.

"I've come for those convicts," the sheriff announced. "Can one of you show me where they are camped?"

"I can," Walter volunteered. "We will have to go on foot, but I guess we will catch them all right. They were up about all night, so they ought to sleep late this morning." He glanced around at Mr. Jones, to see how that person was taking the sheriff's arrival, but the little man was placidly picking his teeth with a bone toothpick and smiling pleasantly at the newcomer.

"All right, lead us to them," said the sheriff. "We want to get them back in the stockade before night, if we can."

Charley watched them out of sight, and then turned to the little man. "I wish you would tell me, Mr. Jones, what your game is," he said earnestly, "and why you are trying to stop this road-building." [132]

The little man looked at him with surprise on his face. "I really don't understand you," he protested mildly. "I must say this is a most extraordinary camp. Everyone seems so suspicious and rude. I have never encountered such treatment before."

"All right, Mr. Jones," said Charley, wearily. "Let's forget it. I must, however, request you to keep away from this camp hereafter."

"It is not likely I will come around here again, after the treatment I have received," said the little man stiffly, as he mounted his pony. "Good-day, sir," and he rode off, leaving the lad with the unpleasant feeling that he had perhaps wounded the feelings of an entirely innocent person. Slowly the lad turned away, and, going to his tent, flung himself face downward on his cot. In truth his nerves were strained almost to the breaking point by the tension and worry he had borne since the fateful day they had bought the machine. He felt himself responsible for the fortunes and even the lives of his friends and the men working for him, and the burden was a heavy one. But nature soon asserted itself, and the worried lad fell into a deep, dreamless sleep, from which he did not awaken until Chris aroused him for dinner. He found Walter at the table waiting for him. The sheriff's auto was gone. [133]

"Yes, we got the convicts, all right," Walter said, in answer to his questions. "They were sound asleep, just as I expected, and the sheriff's men had the handcuffs on them before they knew what was going on. The sheriff permitted me to question them, but I could not get a word out of them. They just shut up like clams. There is no doubt, though, that it was two of them that assaulted McCarty. Their faces and hands were badly scalded. While they were laying for a chance to get at him, Jones and the other two started that fire, I guess. Well, they gave us some hard work and worry, but all's well that ends well."

"We haven't come to the end yet," Charley said, gloomily. "We have only gained a few days of peace, I'm afraid."

Walter looked at his chum closely. It was so unlike Charley to give way to gloomy forebodings. "You want to get out and have a little fun," he said decidedly. "If you keep on brooding and worrying over this business, you are going to break down, and then what will become of the job? What you want to do is to get out and forget trouble for a couple of days and get the cobwebs out of your brain."

"I guess you are right," Charley admitted, "and I guess now is the time for both of us to take a little vacation. There is not much likelihood of trouble for several days. Let's get an early start in the morning, take our guns and some grub, and foot it out to Indiantown. Hire a couple of ponies from the Indians, and ride out to the great lake."

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"I'll go you," Walter cried eagerly, for he always welcomed anything that promised excitement or change. "It does seem a bit selfish, though, for us to go and leave the Captain and Chris behind."

"They would not care to make such a trip," declared his chum, "but we'll ask them, anyway."

"Go 'way, you white chillens," said Chris, when they approached him on the subject. "How you 'spect dis nigger's going to get away? Dat Sam can't cook none yet. 'Sides I don't want to go tramping 'round. I've done found a little pond back there a bit, whar de fish is so thick you have to push 'em away with a stick to keep them from all taking de bait at once."

They found the Captain, seated in the shade of a pine tree, smoking his pipe and watching the graders at work.

"No, lads, I don't care to go," he said, with a smile. "I reckon I'm a heap sight more comfortable here than I would be tramping around in the sun. I'm getting too old to get much pleasure out of such trips. You two go and enjoy yourselves. I'll stay and look out for things."

"We'll have to move camp in a few days," Charley remarked, as they paused on the grade for a few minutes to glance over the work that had been done since they had bought out Murphy. "The machine is getting too far from camp. It gives the men too long a walk, and wastes a lot of time. Well, I can't see but what everything is running smooth now," he concluded with satisfaction.

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And, in truth, the boys had reason to be satisfied with the way things were going. From ahead of the machine came the sound of axe and the sharp report of dynamite, as the right-of-way men cleared a path for the machine. The machine itself was swinging back and forth with the regularity of clockwork. Back of the machine followed the graders, leveling off the thrown-up dirt, while behind them came the bridge builders, constructing bridges over the gaps left by the machine. Everywhere was bustle.

CHAPTER XVIII. THE MEDICINE MAN.

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SUNRISE found the boys well on their way to Indiantown. By nine o'clock they were entering the jungle where Charley had been fired at on his previous trip. Before entering it, however, the lads stopped and cut two long slender poles with which to kill the moccasins basking on the road.

This time no rifle bullets halted their progress, but the snakes were there, and, by the time they had passed out of the jungle they had slaughtered over fifty of the loathsome creatures.

"Whew!" exclaimed Walter, as they broke out of the darkness of the jungle, "that's the most awful place I was ever in. It fairly reeks with rotteness and fever."

"Yes," Charley assented. "I dread putting the machine into it, but it's got to be done. I am going to set fire to it before the machine gets there; that may help some. Once we get through it, we are over the worst. There's Indiantown, about two miles from here. Now, I figure that the motive for the attacks on us lies somewhere between the machine and Indiantown, for the strange white men never go beyond the trading-post, but, for the life of me, I can see nothing in this country that would supply the motive, can you?"

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"No," Walter admitted. "The land seems fertile enough, but there is plenty of good cheap land along the coast, right close to the railroad, so no one would want to come way out here for land. There is not enough timber here to offer any temptation, and we know that Florida contains no iron, coal, or precious minerals. I can see no motive for any striving out here. I guess we are just dreaming when we talk of a powerful motive out here."

"It's no dream," said Charley decidedly, "unless that fire was a dream, those convicts a dream, that dynamite a dream, the assault on McCarty a dream, those rifle-bullets a dream, and the whole one disagreeable nightmare."

"Well, let's forget it all," urged Walter. "Remember, this is a pleasure trip, and we want to make the most of it."

This conversation brought the two lads to the first Indian dwelling, but they found it empty, as was the next and the next. Near the middle of the little settlement, however, they came upon the whole tribe, gathered around a large wigwam. Unlike the other buildings, this one was not only thatched on top, but was also inclosed on sides and ends with bark and palmetto leaves. In one end was a small opening, just large enough for a man to enter by lying flat on the ground and wriggling through.

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The two lads approached the silent group with their interest thoroughly aroused.

"What's the matter, Willie John?" Charley asked of an Indian he knew.

"Chief plenty sick," said the Indian sadly. "Indians go get paleface doctor, but paleface doctor say medicine no good, chief must die, but medicine man say he cure chief for two ponies. All right, we give two ponies. Medicine man come pretty soon to cure chief. No cure, no ponies. Understand?"

Charley nodded comprehensively. "Can we go in and see the chief?" he asked.

"I guess so," said the Indian indifferently. "It no matter, I guess. Chief be dead, maybe, before medicine man comes. He have to come all the way from Big Cypress."

Charley did not wait for other permission. Lying flat on his stomach, he wriggled into the wigwam, followed by his chum. Once inside the lads found themselves in pitch darkness, save that in a distant corner a feeble rushlight, set in an earthen saucer of oil, glowed faintly. For a moment, the lads were sorry that they had been so rash in entering, for the close air of the wigwam was heavy with the sickening smell of fever. A low moaning from one corner, however, drew them on.

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On a bed of boughs and skins near the rushlight lay what had been once a magnificent figure of a warrior. The rushlight was too dim to be of much use, so Walter lit match after match, while Charley bent over and examined the stricken man. The warrior was hardly more than a skeleton. The skin was drawn tightly over protruding cheek bones, and the black, beady eyes glowed with unearthly brightness in their deep sockets.

Charley felt of the Indian's cheek. It was almost hot enough to burn his hand. "We can do nothing for him," he said to his chum. "He is just skin and bones, and he cannot live long with such a fever. We had better get out of here. He may have something contagious. We were fools to come in here."

But, before the boys could reach the opening, the Indians outside began to wriggle in, each bearing a rushlight in its earthen saucer of oil. "Medicine man come," whispered Willie John, as he passed them. "Better sit down and keep still. Indians no like you go now. They get plenty angry if you go."

The boys' curiosity overcame their prudence. They were both anxious to witness the rites of the medicine man and they seated themselves among the Indians, who, after lighting their rushlights, set them together in the middle of the wigwam and sat down Turk fashion on either side of the wigwam and folded their arms across their breasts. It was a curious scene, with the dim glow of the rushlights falling on their impassive faces and black, beady eyes.

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For perhaps ten minutes the silence was unbroken save by the restless tossing and moaning of the sick man. Then, from outside the tent came a shrill, wailing sound, gradually getting nearer and nearer, until the skin that covered the entrance was pushed to one side and through the opening wriggled a figure that made the boys' flesh creep. Once inside the figure rose erect, and the lads could see in the rushlights' glow that it was an old Indian, naked save for a loin cloth. So old was he that his face was a mass of wrinkles, and he tottered as he walked. Around his withered neck was a string of alligators' teeth, and from his arms and waist and ankles hung strings of human bones. His withered body was painted a vivid red, slashed with streaks of bright yellow. In his right hand he carried a wand, from which hung dozens of rattlesnake rattles, which made a noise like the song of a locust whenever he moved his skinny arm. In his left hand was clutched a bag made of snake skin.

As this grewsome object passed by them the boys shrank back in dread, but the old savage did not notice them. He tottered on, and sank to the ground beside the sick man. Then followed a scene which the boys never forgot. Rolling on the ground beside the sick man the old Indian began to beat the air with his hands, uttering a low, wailing cry, that was taken up and repeated by the circle of Seminoles. Faster and faster the old man beat the air, flecks of foam gathered on his lips, and his withered face grew horribly contorted. With his talon-like hands he began clawing at the sick man, who was twisting and tossing on his couch, as though with convulsions. The medicine man paused for a moment in his wild exertions, and, taking from his snakeskin bag a packet of reddish powder, he scattered it over the burning rushlights. Immediately there rose a sweet, sickening, pungent vapor, that made the boys gasp for breath. They would have given a good deal to have got out in the fresh air, but they were afraid the Indians would resent any move on their part, and, besides, they were curious to see the end of this weird ceremony. They had not long to wait. The medicine man, with a sudden yell, snatched a knife from his loin cloth and plunged it into the sick man's arm. Into the long, shallow cut he had made he rubbed more of the reddish powder; then, with a long-drawn-out wail, he sank back to the ground and his limbs and body stiffened out as rigid as stone. Evidently this was the end of the incantations, for a couple of Indians advanced, and, picking up the stiff figure, bore it outside of the wigwam. The two lads

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started to follow, but Willie John put forth a detaining hand.

"Go look at chief first," he said, and they silently obeyed.

The change in the sick man was amazing. They could hardly believe their eyes. The haggard look of pain had disappeared from his face, his skin was moist and cool, his tossing had ceased, and he had fallen into a deep sleep.

"Pale face doctor no cure chief like medicine man," proudly said Willie John, and the wondering lads had to admit the truth of his assertion.

Outside the two lads found the Indians dashing water in the medicine man's face and trying to bring him out of his cataleptic state.

"He be all right, pretty soon," Willie John assured them. "Alway he get stiff like this when he wrestles with the evil spirits of sickness. Now I will go and get two ponies for you." He soon returned, leading two ponies already saddled and bridled. The boys mounted, and, with farewell waves of the hand, rode out of the camp and turned into the road leading to the great lake.

"What did you think of that business back there?" Walter asked, as soon as they were out of hearing of the little settlement.

"I give it up," Charley said frankly. "It's a mystery beyond me. Of course, I don't take much stock in all that wriggling, clawing, and wailing, but there must certainly be some wonderful curative agent in that powder. I agree with the doctor that the chief was dying when the medicine man came." [143]

"Well, it is not so very wonderful, after all, when one stops to consider the matter," said Walter reflectively. "The Seminoles are an old, old race, so old that nobody knows how old they are. For ages and ages they have lived in these great swamps, and it would be strange, indeed, if the more intelligent of them had not by this time found some remedy for the fevers of the country."

"It's interesting, anyway," Charley declared. "I'd give something to know what that powder was made of. It would be a blessing to the fever-stricken world."

CHAPTER XIX. THE OLD FORT.

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Nor long after leaving Indiantown the boys passed into a higher country, where the road wound in and out among great towering live oaks, under which the ground was thickly strewn with acorns. Multitudes of gray squirrels frisked among the branches and made the air noisy with their chattering.

"I'll bet this is a great game country," Charley remarked, as they stopped to water their ponies at the edge of a clear-running brook. "There ought to be bear and turkeys around where there are so many acorns. Listen! if I am not mistaken, those are turkeys drumming now." From a point a little to the left of the road came a hollow thumping sound, repeated at frequent intervals. "It's turkeys," said Charley, with conviction. "Come on, let's see if we can get a shot at them."

The two lads dismounted, and, tying their ponies to convenient trees, took their guns and picked their way softly toward the sound. A hundred feet brought them to where they could look out from the shelter of the oaks into a little glade or clearing a couple of acres in extent. What they saw caused them to pause and stare in admiration and amusement. In the center of the glade was a bunch of some twenty turkeys. The sun, shining down, lit up their plumage with a thousand colors, and made of them a picture well worth remembering, but it was the antics that they were going through that drew a smile from the two lads. [145]

The leader of the flock, a huge gobbler with ruffled feathers and drumming wings, was going through a sort of strutting, mincing dance, every motion of his being closely followed by each of the flock, moving with slow, stately dignity.

"Gee!" grinned Walter. "They are doing the 'turkey trot.' It costs five dollars to see that dance in New York."

"The ministers say it's immoral," said Charley laughingly, "so let's put a stop to it. Be sure to pick out one of the younger birds. We never could cook that gobbler tender. I'll bet he is ten years old."

The lads fired almost together, and two of the smaller turkeys sank to the ground, while the rest of the flock rose in flight, but only to settle again within easy gun-shot.

"No use killing any more," Walter said, as the two lads emerged from behind the oaks and picked up the dead birds.

"No," Charley agreed. "These will be all we can use. They would spoil before we got back to camp. But say, I am tickled to see game so plentiful. When we get the machine and camp out here, it will make a big difference in our grub bills." [146]

"Hold on a minute," said Walter, as his chum turned to retrace his steps to the road. "Doesn't it strike you as queer—this bare space in the heart of a great oak forest?"

"It is odd," admitted Charley. "I never thought of that until you mentioned it. Let's look around a bit."

The boys, up to now, had barely noticed the clearing, all their interest being centered on the turkeys. As they advanced into it they were surprised to note that it was not a freak of nature, but had been carefully cleared by hand. The indestructible live oak stumps still bore evidence of the axe. Wonderingly, the lads made their way forward.

"Those are not live oak trees at the other end of the clearing," declared Charley, who was looking around with eager eyes. "Let's see what they are."

A few minutes' walk brought them to the fringe of trees that had drawn the lads' attention. Here they paused, with an exclamation of astonishment.

"Gee!" Charley cried, "they are orange trees, and, from their size, they must be hundreds of years old."

"And there's another clearing beyond this one," cried Walter, who had entered the fringe of trees to pluck some of the golden fruit. "Come on, let's have a look at it. The oranges can wait until we come back."

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With all of boys' healthy love of mystery and discovery, the two lads pushed eagerly through the fringe of orange trees and found themselves in another but smaller clearing, in the center of which rose up high posts, forming four sides of a square enclosure.

"A stockade!" exclaimed Charley excitedly. "Let's see what's inside. It ought to be easy to break down one of those posts."

But their united efforts failed to crack any of the posts. They were all of live oak, which successfully resists the wear of centuries.

"It's no use tiring ourselves out for nothing," Charley said, after they had tried several of the posts without any success. "There must be an opening somewhere, and we have only to follow up the posts to find it." This they did, and, rounding the first corner of the stockade, came upon an opening in the wall, where had evidently once hung a strong gate. Pushing through the opening, they stood inside of the stockade, and, pausing, gazed around with a feeling of awe. The little enclosure was perhaps a half acre in extent. In the middle of it stood a small fort, cunningly constructed of big blocks of coquina rock. Around the little fort were grouped what had once been dwellings, but of which nothing now remained but their upright live-oak posts. A hole, in one side of the fort, which likely in some past age had been closed by a massive door, showed the enclosure to the fortress. Passing through the hole, the boys found themselves in a dim room, some forty feet square. The only light was the few rays that filtered through the loopholes, and the two lads had to pause to accustom their eyes to the dim twilight.

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"My, but look here!" cried Charley, as his vision cleared.

Walter backed nervously toward the door, as he, too, began to perceive the grewsome objects grouped around them. Directly in front of them stood a gigantic, man-like form. Gaping holes, where the eyes should have been, stared upon them, and one long arm pointed directly at them.

"Whew, that gave me a shock at first!" exclaimed Charley, with a nervous laugh of relief. "One does not expect to stumble upon dead men in armor in the wilds of Florida. Look! there's another and another and another," he continued, pointing to the other motionless figures sprawled in all sorts of attitudes about the room. At the foot of a cunningly constructed stone stairway, the suits of armor lay so close together that the boys could hardly pick their way between them.

"The defenders evidently made a brave stand here at the foot of the stairway," Charley observed. "Let's go up and see what's in the upper chamber."

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With but little relish for further investigation, Walter followed his chum as he climbed up the stone stairs.

The scene in the upper chamber was but a repetition of that below, only the floor was more thickly strewn with the suits of mail. Charley lifted the rust-encrusted visor of one, but let it drop hastily as his eyes encountered the grinning skeleton within.

"They were Spaniards who made this clearing and built this fort," he explained to his chum. "It may have been part of one of DeSoto's expeditions, or they may have been one of the treasure-hunting parties that were so numerous in the fifteenth century. Likely they became disgusted with tramping through swamps, and, when they came to this pleasant spot, they decided to stay for a time at least. So they, probably, made captives of many of the Indians, and put them to work, clearing, planting and building. But the Indians had their revenge in the end."

"You can stay here as long as you want to, but I am going to get out in the fresh air," said Walter, shuddering as he watched a hairy rat creep out from one of the suits of armor. "I will wait for you just outside the fort."

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"All right," Charley agreed. "I'll be out in a few minutes."

Left to himself, the lad searched around in the corners for a few minutes, trying to find something to carry away with him as a souvenir of their strange discovery, but, finding nothing, he soon gave up the hunt, and, gathering up his game bag and gun, he made his way back down the stairs and out of the fort, glad to be in the sunshine and fresh air once more.

Walter was not in sight, and, after calling him a couple of times, Charley decided that he had probably grown tired of waiting, and had returned to the orange trees to eat his fill, and for them the lad hastened. But his chum was not there, and, with a vague feeling of alarm, the lad hurried on to where they had left their ponies, but Walter was not there. Now thoroughly alarmed, the lad fired off his gun four times in rapid succession, then waited and listened, but there came no answering report.

After a moment's consideration, Charley turned around and hastened back to the ancient clearing. He made the round outside of the stockade, and then, entering the gate, searched the inside thoroughly, but no sign could he find of the missing one. Again he fired the distress signal of four shots, but there was no reply. [151]

The thoroughly frightened lad sat down on a block of stone, and strove to master his nervous fears and gather together his scattered wits. The whole thing was incomprehensible. Not fifteen minutes had elapsed since he had parted with Walter in the upper chamber of the fort, and now his chum was gone. He could not have gotten lost in the woods, for the way back to the ponies could be followed by a child, with its plain landmarks of orange trees and the other clearings. Besides, in that short length of time, Walter could not have got beyond the sound of the gun signal, to which he would certainly have replied.

CHAPTER XX. THE HIDDEN VOICE.

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FOR a few minutes Charley was almost a prey to vague, suspicious fears, which lie hidden deep in most of mankind. The suddenness of his chum's disappearance, the ages-old stockade, the ancient fort, with its grewsome occupants, all gave force to weird imaginings; but, with an effort, the practical lad shook off his gloomy thoughts with the simple logic that age is no more mysterious than youth, and that dead men are less to be feared than live ones. But, in spite of his sound reasoning, the worried lad could not imagine what had become of his chum. He was not in the stockade; he was not in either clearing; he was not among the orange trees; he was not back with the ponies, yet he had passed out of the fort not five minutes ahead of himself, but at this point in his reasoning Charley gave a start. He had found the flaw in his own logic. He had no proof that Walter had passed out of the fort. Affected as the lad had been by the grewsome sights, he might have fainted before reaching the open air and he might well have passed him by in the dim light without noticing him. [153]

Hastily gathering some dry sticks, Charley held them in one hand and fired the ends. As soon as his torch was blazing good, he entered the fort, and, holding it aloft, inspected the lower chamber. Near the middle of the chamber he found Walter's rifle lying on the stone floor, but a close search showed no other trace of the missing lad. Puzzled, he ascended to the upper chamber, but here he found everything as he had left it, and he descended again to the lower chamber, convinced that in it must lie the key to the mystery, for he was certain Walter would not have left the fort without taking his gun with him.

Walking around the stone chamber, Charley held his torch aloft and inspected the solid floor and walls, in the vain hope of discovering some clew to his chum's mysterious disappearance.

Suddenly he gave a frightened cry, and flung out his arms to save himself, for something had given way beneath his feet, and he felt himself sinking downward. Fortunately, his instinctive action had been so quick that his extended arms caught on the stone floor and saved him from sinking into the gaping black hole beneath him. Summoning up all his strength, the lad drew himself up out of the trap into which he had partly fallen, and, seizing the torch he had dropped, surveyed the spot. A large stone slab was slowly lifting back into place. In a flash, the lad grasped the situation. The slab had been so cunningly contrived as to appear part of the solid floor, but, when a person stepped on one end the slab would tilt down, sending the victim down to the depths below, and, when his weight was removed, the slab would tilt back into place again. [154]

Charley was quick to act. Sitting down on the floor, he placed his feet against the end of the slab and pressed downward. The end of the stone immediately tipped downward, exposing the dark hole beneath, and the lad shoved his rifle across the opening to prevent the slab from lifting back into place. From below him came a call that sent his heart bounding with joy: "Is that you, Charley?" it said.

"Yes. Are you hurt, Walt?" replied the delighted lad.

"Not much; some bruises, and a bump on my head, that's all. But, for goodness sake, hurry and get me out of here. The air is so foul it is making me feel faint. Get the ropes off the ponies, and fasten them together. I do not believe this hole is more than fifteen feet deep. But hurry, hurry!"

Charley was off like a shot and back in a few minutes with the halters from the two ponies.

Hastily knotting them together, he fastened one end to a projecting stone in the wall, and let the other end down to his chum, who, white-faced and shaken, crawled up it, hand over hand.

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Pausing only to secure their rifles and the ropes, the two lads hurried out into the open air.

"Gee!" said Walter, drawing long breaths of the sweet, pure air, "I thought I was a goner that time. I kept calling and calling after I fell, but when you did not answer I knew that you could not hear me. When I was sure that my voice did not penetrate outside of the hole I gave up hope, for I was positive that you would not find out the secret of that slab unless you stepped upon it, and, if you did that, there would be two of us buried alive, instead of one. Ugh!" he concluded, with a shudder, "I know now what fear is—genuine, blind, unreasoning fear."

The boys stopped at the orange trees only long enough to fill their game bags with the golden fruit, and hastened on to their ponies, fearful that, with no halters on, they might have turned back for Indiantown, but, much to their relief, they found the two animals browsing contentedly by the roadside. Each slung a turkey from one side of his saddle and a loaded game bag from the other, and, mounting, they rode on for their goal, the great lake. About four o'clock they rode out from a heavy growth of timber into full view of the broad, shining blue waters, and a few minutes later reined in their mounts on a high, grass-covered bank, shaded by big live oaks. Here they staked out their ponies to browse upon the sweet, tender grass, and, after a plunge in the cool waters of the lake, began their preparations for the night. Walter gathered great bunches of moss, and made soft beds at the base of a huge live-oak tree. Charley lit a big fire of live oak and pine, and, while it was burning down into a bed of glowing coals, he dressed and cut up the two turkeys, and soon had them frying and stewing in the pan and kettle they had brought with them. While Charley tended to the cooking, Walter gathered armfuls of dry wood and placed them in a circle around the oak, where he had made the beds. Before night fell everything was ready, and the boys sat down to a delicious meal of fried and stewed turkey and the eatables they had brought with them. They had eaten nothing since morning, and, when the meal was over, they were full enough and tired enough to be content to lie upon the grassy bank and simply gaze out at the glories of the sunset on the waters of the lake. When at last the light began to fail they watered their ponies and staked them in a fresh place, close to where they were going to sleep. This done, they started up the circle of fires around the tree and stretched out on their soft moss bed with a pleasant feeling of security, knowing that the slow-burning live-oak wood would keep the fires burning all night and protect them from all snakes and wild animals.

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"I have been wondering why that hole was made in that old fort," said Walter, as they lay on their backs gazing up at the stars. "It isn't deep enough for a well or a dungeon."

"Maybe it was a hiding place for their treasures," suggested Charley, idly.

"By Jove, I believe you've hit it," Walter exclaimed. "And that reminds me that I picked up something for a souvenir of my adventure before I climbed out. I couldn't see what it was, for the hole was dark and I had no matches. It was something hard, round and heavy. I have got it in my game bag now."

"Get it out and let's see what it is," said Charley, interested.

Walter rummaged in his game bag and brought out a round object, about a foot long and ten inches in circumference.

"Looks like a piece of petrified wood," he said, as he handed it over for his chum's inspection.

Charley took it, and, drawing near the fire, examined it closely. "Too heavy for petrified wood," he commented, as he took out his knife and scraped away at the green encrusted object. "By Jove! Look here," he exclaimed a moment later.

Walter bent over and looked at the place where his chum had been scraping. A reddish-brown color appeared where the green crust had been removed.

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"Is it gold?" he asked, excitedly.

"No," Charley replied. "It's copper. Let's scrape the balance of this verdigris off, and see if we can get an idea what it was intended for."

Laying the cylinder on the ground between them, both boys set to scraping away the green crust, and in a short time they had it all removed, leaving exposed the bright metal beneath it.

"Looks like there was a crack running around it near that end," Walter observed, as Charley held the cylinder down by the fire for closer examination.

"There is," agreed his chum, excitedly. "I believe the thing is hollow. That this end is nothing but a close fitting cap. Shall I see if I can knock it off?"

"Sure," agreed Walter, and Charley hammered against the end with his hunting knife. Suddenly the end gave way and out on the ground before the boys fell a shower of gold coins and jewelry.

Charley picked up one of the coins and held it to the light. "It's a Spanish doubloon," he announced breathlessly. "Let's count them and put them back in the cylinder. This is almost too good to be true."

The gold coins were gathered up from the ground and counted. There proved to be a thousand

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dollars' worth altogether. Besides the coins, there were some twenty gold rings set with gems, but these the boys were too inexperienced to tell the full value of. They, as well as the gold coins, were put back into the cylinder, and it was replaced in the game bag.

"I expect there are more where those came from," Walter remarked.

"I doubt it," said his chum, thoughtfully. "Even what we have found would have been considered a big amount in the days of those Spaniards. We can look when we go back to-morrow. Meanwhile, I am going to get me a good night's sleep. To-morrow is going to be another hard day."

CHAPTER XXI. CHARLEY GETS A TELEGRAM.

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THE tired-out boys slept soundly until awakened by the rays of the morning sun. Rising, they enjoyed a good swim in the cool waters of the lake, and then, stirring up the dying embers of the campfire, they warmed up and ate what remained of their feast of the night before. As soon as it was finished, they saddled up their ponies, and, with a parting look at the beautiful lake, headed back for camp.

They had not gone far before the sky became overcast, and soon there began to fall a fine, drizzling rain, that soaked their thin clothing and chilled their bodies. There was no shelter to get under, so they could only ride on and take it as it came. When they came to the place where they had stopped the day before Walter wanted to halt and look for more treasure, but Charley objected.

"Our matches are all wet, so that we cannot make a torch," he explained, "and we could not do much searching without a light. If there is any more treasure in that hole there is no danger of anyone finding it. We, ourselves, would never have found it but for an accident. We had better wait until we can come back with a proper outfit of ropes, candles, etc. To tell the truth, I want someone else along with us next time. If one of us should get hurt in any way it would be a bad fix for both so far away from camp. See how near I came to joining you in that hole yesterday? Two is not enough where there is danger of that kind. We will bring the Captain and Chris next time."

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Walter, still mindful of his experience in the black hole, was not overly anxious to repeat it, and they rode on in the drizzling rain. Before they reached the Indian camp the rain ceased and the sun came out again with a warmth grateful to their chilled bodies. On reining in at the camp, they were astonished to see the chief sitting out in the sun in front of his wigwam. He was thin as a skeleton, but appeared bright and cheerful. The Indian, Willie John, who had furnished them with the ponies, stopped them when they started to unsaddle.

"No, no," he said, "ride ponies on to big camp. Turn 'em loose. They come back all right."

The boys tried to pay him for the use of the animals, but he refused to take any money.

"Young pale-faces friends. No take money from friends," he said generously.

"Very well," Charley said, "but friends may give gifts to friends. Soon I go to town and get plenty of red and blue and yellow cloth and much beads. Two sleeps (nights) from now you come to big camp and get them. They will be a gift from the palefaces to their Seminole brother."

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"It is well," said the Seminole, gravely. "Two sleeps I come to big camp."

"There is something noble about the Seminoles," said Charley, as they rode on. "Now that fellow knows the value of money, and he knows he can get with it many things that he desires, but his code forbids him to take it from a friend."

"I like them," agreed Walter emphatically. "They are so different from our slovenly tribes of Western Indians. They are so clean, honest, generous, and truthful. I doubt if a white race put in this awful country would retain so many virtues."

"And they have never waged an unjust war," Charley added. "When they fought it was to save themselves from being crushed out of existence. But, when they did have to fight, they fought bravely. During the Seminole war, not so very many miles north of here, a party of Indians encountered a company of soldiers. The soldiers stood their ground until the last one was killed and the Seminoles victorious, but, after the battle was over, not a dead soldier was scalped according to savage custom. Not one was touched. Even their guns and equipment were left lying where they had fallen. It was a silent tribute the Seminoles paid to a brave enemy, and, to my mind, there was something fine in the act."

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This conversation had brought the lads to the jungle, and they fell silent as they rode through its gloomy depths.

It was after noon when they came in sight of the machine, which they were pleased to see was still working steadily, showing that nothing serious had occurred during their absence. When close to it, Charley reined in his pony and hailed the engineer.

"Hello!" he called. "How are they coming?"

Kitchner stopped the machine, and clambering down, walked up to him. "Not so bad," he said, in answer to the question. "But we've only got enough carbide to run the light to-night. Have to have some more before to-morrow night, or we will have to quit night work."

Charley frowned slightly. "That carbide light costs like fury," he said. "I brought out a big lot of it the last time I went to town. At the rate it has been used up, that light costs us about \$5.00 a night."

"It is expensive," agreed Kitchner, "and that is not the worst feature about it. It's dangerous to use on a job like this, where the men do not understand it. There is always some escaping gas from the tank, which is easily set afire by a spark from the engine or the careless lighting of a match close by. One of the firemen was burnt some last night. The gas caught fire from his lantern. An electric light would be far better, less dangerous, and save its own cost in the long run."

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"We'll get a dynamo and fix up an electric light, then," said Charley. "I'll go in to-night and order one. It will likely take several days to get it here, so I'll bring back enough carbide with me to run the light until it comes."

This settled, the boys rode on into camp, where Charley paused long enough to wash and change his clothes, then got out the truck and headed for town, where he arrived in time to catch the train for Palm Beach. He carried with him the gold and rings they had found in the old fort, for the boys had decided that it would be unwise to keep the treasure at camp, and that the sooner it was turned into money and safely deposited in the bank the better it would be. Once at the Beach, the lad sought out the leading jeweler in town, and showed him the rings and coins, and asked if he thought he could dispose of them for him.

The jeweler examined the rings with the greatest interest. "Some of these rings are very valuable," he declared. "Just how valuable, I would not like to say, offhand. If you care to intrust me with the disposal of them, I will get all the money I can out of them for you. The gold coins you will have no trouble about. Your bank will accept them at nearly their real value."

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Charley quickly accepted the jeweler's offer, and turned over the rings to him and received a receipt in return. At the bank he had no trouble with the gold coins, the cashier readily accepting them and crediting the value to his account.

His business transacted, the lad bought a paper, and, securing a room in a nearby hotel, stretched out on the bed to read and rest, for he was thoroughly tired out by the long day he had put in. He scanned the headlines with mild interest, but at last he came to a paragraph that he read and reread with growing excitement. The brief item ran as follows:

"Among the bills that will come up before the legislature when it meets next month is one to give to a wealthy New York company a grant of one thousand acres of land, just east of Indiantown, for the nominal sum of \$1 per acre. There is but little doubt that the bill will pass, for this land is so remote from transportation that it is considered of little or no value. The New York company, it is said, intends to develop the entire tract. They certainly seem very eager about it, for much money and influence is being used to secure the desired grant."

For a long time the lad lay back and considered this short notice, but could see nothing in it to account for the many attempts to stop the road building, for certainly a good road would be of vast value to the development company. At last he gave up puzzling over the matter, and turning out his light, prepared to go to sleep; but, he had no sooner stretched out, than there came a thumping at his door. "Wait a minute," he called to the knocker, as he turned on the light and slipped on his clothes. He opened the door, and in stepped a little, freckled-faced messenger boy.

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"Gee, Mister," he said, "I've had a peach of a job finding you. Been to every hotel and boarding-house in town. Got a telegram for you. Sign right here."

"Wait a minute," said Charley, as the youth turned to go. "There may be an answer to this."

Hastily tearing open the envelope, the lad read:

"Better get back as soon as you can. Bunch of New York toughs or gunmen just got off train. Met by wagons. Gone out direction of your camp. Saw Jones talking to some of them. Bad-looking characters."

There was no name signed to the message, but the lad knew it was from the friendly agent at Jupiter, and, turning it over, he wrote on the back.

"Can't get up until morning train. Many thanks."

He gave the message to the boy, together with a half dollar to pay him for his trouble, and, as soon as the boy had departed, he undressed and went again to bed, where he lay awake half the night, worrying over the agent's message.

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He was waiting at the sheriff's office next morning when that officer arrived, and to him he laid bare the whole story of their trials since he and his chums had bought the machine.

The sheriff listened with deepest interest, and when the lad concluded he said to him frankly: "I would like best in the world, lad, to help you, but you have no direct evidence against anyone,

and I can make no arrests without proof. I would advise you to see a good lawyer. Maybe he will be able to untangle this mess for you."

CHAPTER XXII. MOVING THE CAMP.

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MUCH downcast by his failure to secure the sheriff's aid, Charley made his way to the building where most of the lawyers of the county had their offices. Selecting one of the offices at random, for he knew none of the lawyers, even by reputation, he opened the door and entered. He found himself face to face with a bright, alert, keen-eyed young man, who greeted him pleasantly, and invited him to be seated. Briefly he stated his errand and retold the tale he had told the sheriff.

The young lawyer listened with deepest interest, and at the end of it exclaimed boyishly:

"By Jove, this is an interesting case. I wouldn't miss a chance to handle it for a hundred dollars. I was a detective before I was a lawyer, and the lure of mystery always appeals to me. There is certainly enough mystery in this case of yours to satisfy anyone. I will have to think it over carefully, and look up some features of it, before I can be of any help to you. I will be busy to-day, for I have a case coming up in Circuit Court, but to-morrow I will come out to your camp and look the ground over with you. I have a little auto of my own, and I will enjoy the trip out, even if nothing comes of it. I have always wanted to see that back country, and this will be a good chance to combine business with pleasure."

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Charley left the friendly lawyer's office feeling more cheerful in having enlisted his aid. He reached the station just in time to catch the train for Jupiter, where he alighted half an hour later. The agent was watching for him, and immediately drew him to one side.

"I am afraid you are in for a rough time out at camp," he said; "that was the wickedest-looking bunch of men I ever saw in my life. There were twenty of them altogether. They were expected, too, for there were wagons waiting for them a little ways from the station, and they drove off immediately."

"I cannot even stop to thank you properly," Charley said, earnestly. "We cannot thank you enough for what you have done for us, anyway."

"That's all right," said the agent heartily, "I am pleased to have been of any assistance to you. But I will not keep you, for I know you are anxious to see how things are at camp. So-long, and good luck to you."

A minute later Charley was in the truck and driving out on the dirt road at a dangerous rate of speed, for before him he could see the sharp cut of wagon tires in the soft earth.

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About three miles from camp the wagon tracks left the road, and, as far as the lad could see from the car, continued at a right angle to it. Somewhat relieved by this discovery, he reduced his speed and drove into camp at an easy gait.

Much to his delight, he found everything going on as usual, dinner cooking in the cook tent, the machine busily digging, and the graders leveling off close behind it. After a little chat with Chris, the lad retired to his tent, where he rested until his chums and the men came trooping in to dinner.

After dinner was eaten, Charley called a council of war of his chums, the two engineers off duty, and Bossie the fireman. He told them of all he had learned during his trip. "Of course I may be making a mountain out of a mole hill," he said, in conclusion. "Those men may be only a party of hunters out for a good time, but, from what we have already met with, it will be well to be on our guard until we are sure of the fact. We cannot tell in what way or when we will be made to suffer. I want every man—Spaniard as well as American—to be constantly on the watch for any signs of trouble. You, Bossie, explain to your countrymen just how things stand, so that none of them will be taken unawares. Now, have any of you any suggestions to offer?"

"I think we ought to move camp as soon as possible," said McCarty promptly. "It's a good two miles from here to the machine now, and the distance is growing greater every day. Of course, it does not make so much difference in the daytime, but, with an enemy around, it makes it risky for the men going back and forth at night."

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"You're right," Charley agreed. "We had better get an early start and move camp to-morrow morning to a place about a quarter of a mile ahead of the machine. I noticed a knoll of good, high sloping ground there. When you go out, McCarty, have one of the dynamiters set fire to the grass there, so that the ground will be bare for the pitching of our tents. We don't want to run any chance of being burnt out."

"I don't think we on the machine run so very much danger," observed Bratton; "not if we keep a good watch out. It is all steel, and, in case of attack, we can call the ground men aboard and keep the platform revolving fast. No one can then climb aboard, and the boiler and machinery will give pretty good protection, while we can use our guns from the platform to pretty good advantage."

"Good idea," approved McCarty. "I will adopt that plan and tell Kitchner about it when I go out."

"The dynamiters are a good mile and a half ahead of the machine," Captain Westfield observed. "I reckon it wouldn't be a bad idea to add them to the guard around the camp until the machine catches up with them a little." [172]

"Good suggestion," Charley approved. "We will do that."

"I have got an amendment to offer to the moving plan," Walter said. "I suggest that we move camp this afternoon. You have all apparently forgotten that to-morrow is Sunday, and all hands need a rest."

"You're right," Charley agreed promptly. "Call in all the men except the crew on the machine, and the bridge builders, Bossie. Get the other men in the tents to roll out and help. Tell the bridge builders to throw a bridge across the ditch, so that we can cross and get by the machine with the truck and wagon."

In a few minutes all was astir in the camp, men busy packing up, others pulling down and folding up tents, while still others piled them in the waiting truck and wagon. Within half an hour of giving the orders, Charley started with the first truckload, carrying with him half of the Spaniards to pitch the tents on the new camp-site. He found the knoll burnt clear of grass and the ground still smoking from the recent fire. Hastily unloading and directing the Spaniards where to set up the tents, the lad hurried back for another load.

Twenty men working with system can accomplish wonders, and long before dark the moving was finished and Chris was getting supper in the cook tent. [173]

"I don't like staking out the mules," said the teamster, as he joined the rest at supper, "but I can't build a corral for them until to-morrow. You see, they keep moving around nearly all night, and they get all tangled up in the ropes and wear the hide off their legs trying to get free."

"I don't believe they will hurt themselves much in one night," Charley assured him, "and to-morrow all hands can turn in and build a corral for them. How much wood have you got ahead?"

"Enough for a week," answered the teamster, brightening. "That Juan is a first-class worker, and I have been hauling steady. I've got it strung along the road for a mile ahead of the machine."

As soon as it began to get dark, Charley gave a gun to each of the two dynamiters, and gave them instructions to join their two countrymen as guards.

Everyone was tired, and all retired early to their tents. It was agreed that the machine should stop work at midnight, and that, when her crew came in, two of the camp guard would go out and keep watch on it the balance of the night.

Charley was roused up about midnight by the stop whistle of the machine, and a few minutes later he heard its crew entering the camp, and the chatter of the two guards, as they went out to take the crew's place. The lad rolled over with a sigh of content, and dropped off to sleep again, only to awaken again to the sharp crack of rifles. "Get up, you fellows," he shouted to his chums. "There's more trouble afoot." [174]

"Great Cæsar," exclaimed Walter, in disgust. "Can't we ever get a good night's sleep?"

"Don't look that way," said his chum grimly, as he pulled on his clothes.

Outside the tent the lads found the Captain and engineers just emerging from their shelters.

Along the road for a mile in front of the machine, huge bonfires were burning.

"They have fired the woodpiles!" Charley exclaimed. "Well, let 'em burn. There's more wood where that came from. Let's make for the machine; that's where the shooting came from."

A few minutes' walk brought them to the digger, where they found the Spanish guards excited but unhurt. They had fired the guns to let the camp know of the fire. They were so apparently nervous, however, that McCarty volunteered to stay with them the balance of the night.

"Well, it might be worse," said Charley, as the little party made their way back to camp. "They have just made more work for the teamster and woodchopper, that's all."

But, as they approached close to the camp, they were met by one of the guards. "*Señors*," cried the man, his voice trembling, "there is frightful groaning coming from the darkness behind our picket line." [175]

"Where?" demanded the teamster, who had joined the little party.

"Toward the North Star, not far from our picket line," answered the shaky sentinel.

"Go back to your post, *hombre*," Charley ordered. "We'll get the lanterns and come right out and see what it is."

The frightened sentinel obeyed, but he moved so slowly that the boys overtook him before he reached his post.

CHAPTER XXIII. EXCITING EVENTS.

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EVEN before they reached the guard line, the little party could plainly hear the groans that had so frightened the Spanish sentinel. The sounds came from a point some two hundred feet beyond the line. Between the spells of groaning would come noises like a struggle going on, a heavy fall, then more groans.

Suddenly the teamster with an oath broke into a run and the boys followed close at his heels. It was a pitiful scene that the lanterns revealed when they reached the spot. The teamster, with tears in his eyes, was swearing vigorously as he untangled the hitching ropes from the legs of the two mules whose sufferings were frightful to behold. Their bellies were swollen up to twice their natural size and their eyes were glassy with pain. Occasionally one would stagger to its feet, stand swaying for a few minutes, then fall heavily to the ground, where it would lay groaning in spasms of pain.

"What's the matter with them?" Charley demanded anxiously.

"The Lord only knows," said the teamster, "that swelling of the stomach looks as though they had been foundered, but that can't be. I only gave them their usual feed for the night—just what they always have."

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"Can we do anything for them?" inquired the lad.

Canady shook his head. "I am afraid they are too far gone," he said. "But I'll try. I've got all kinds of medicines in my tent. I'll run and get them."

He was back in a minute with a box full of pint bottles. Then followed hours of anxious labor, holding and dosing the sick animals, but it was all in vain. Before daylight one mule stiffened out in death and a half hour later the other one died.

It was a sorrowful little party that stood around the dead animals. To the little party of chums it meant the loss of \$500 and the tying up of the machine until a new team could be procured. To the teamster it meant the loss of two animals to which he had really grown attached.

"This was no accident," declared the Captain, as they stood around discussing the affair. "It comes right at the time the wood piles were fired. That ain't no coincident, I reckon."

"You're right," Charley agreed. "Their aim was to tie up the machine by cutting off our wood supply, and it looks as though they have succeeded. No doubt the mules were poisoned, but the thing that puzzles me is how the poison was administered. Mules are the most particular animals in the world about what they take into their mouths."

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"Let's have a look at the feed boxes," Walter suggested; "there ought to be some clues in them."

The teamster uttered an oath as he held his lantern over the feed boxes, for each was still partly filled with wheat. "That's what done it," he swore savagely. "All animals love the taste of wheat, but it is sure death to them if they eat any quantity of it. It swells so fast in their stomachs. Lord, I wish I had hold of the fellow who did this thing."

"Bring your lanterns," called Walter, who had stepped away a few paces from the crowd. "There's something lying here on the ground. I believe it's a man."

In a second his companions were by his side with their lanterns. As the lights flashed down on the prostrate object, an exclamation of horror burst out from the little party, for, lying on his back, his head in a pool of blood, lay a man, one side of his skull entirely crushed in.

"He's the one that fixed the mules," declared the teamster excitedly. "One of the mules killed him. Serves him right. I'm glad he got his."

"Shut up," said Charley shortly. "This is too horrible a thing to exult over. Come on, some of you, and give me a hand to carry him to my tent. We cannot leave him lying here."

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Silently the little party lifted the dead man and bore him into the lad's tent and laid him down on a cot. Charley got water and a cloth and washed away the blood on the dead man's face and head. The face was that of a young man but was seamed and aged by lines of dissipation. The lad, with repugnance for the task, searched the dead man's pockets, but found nothing but a loaded revolver and a box of small white pellets which he decided was dope of some kind.

His unpleasant task finished, the lad stepped out of the tent, followed by his chums, who had helped him with the dead man. The three stood silent for a minute drinking in deep breaths of the fresh early morning air.

"What are you going to do with him?" the Captain asked, jerking his head toward the tent where the dead man lay.

"Keep him until afternoon," Charley said wearily. "Some of his friends may come and claim the body. If not, we will give him as good a funeral as we can. It's a terrible piece of business. If all our money was not tied up in this job, I would vote to quit right now."

"Same here," agreed Captain Westfield. "I'm getting sick of the mud and water and all the troubles we are having, and this last business is about the last straw."

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"You fellows will feel better after a little nap, and a good breakfast," said Walter cheerfully. "I guess none of us is in love with this new venture of ours, but there is no good to be gained by getting in the dumps. We must keep cheerful and do the best we can. It is madness to talk about quitting now. It would likely take us years of hard work to save up the money we've got tied up in this business."

"You're right," Charley acknowledged. "We have got to fight it out. I guess I'll crawl in and catch a catnap before breakfast. A little sleep makes a whole lot of difference in a man's feelings."

Such indeed seemed to be the case, for, when a couple of hours later he joined the rest at the breakfast table, he was once more his old cheerful self. During the meal he outlined his plans to meet the new difficulty that opposed them.

"There's a lawyer coming out to see us to-day," he said, "and when he goes back I want you, Canady, to go back with him. I'll give you a check for \$500 and I want you to buy a good pair of mules and get them out here as soon as possible. I will try to get some of the Indians to haul wood while you are gone. I see there's a couple of piles of wood left near the machine that will do to fire up with to-morrow morning. After breakfast, Captain, take part of the men and have them bury the mules, and also dig a grave in that little bunch of spruces. It ought not to take more than an hour for the job, then all hands are to knock off and get a good day's rest. I think we all need it. I do not believe there is any need for a guard on the machine to-day, but we will have to put one on it to-night."

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Shortly after breakfast, Willie John, the Seminole, arrived as he had promised. Charley had not forgotten him when he was in town and the Indian's eyes sparkled over the bright colored cloth, beads, and mouth organ the lads presented him with. Before he left, Charley succeeded in hiring him and the two teams and wagons he had in Indiantown to haul wood for the machine until the teamster returned with the mules. The Seminole immediately took his departure, promising to be back with wagons and oxen before dark.

He had hardly gone, when Mr. Bruce, the lawyer, drove up in his auto. He was made welcome in the boys' tent and Charley briefly told what had occurred since he had seen him. The lawyer took a look at the dead man. "He has all the appearance of a tough," he said. "Rather an ignoble end for a gunman, to be kicked to death by a mule. I would advise you to bury him at once. It is not at all likely that his friends will call for him. To do so would be to give themselves away."

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The grave was already dug and, following the lawyer's advice, the body was at once laid to rest, the Captain saying a brief prayer over it before it was lowered into the grave.

The ceremony over, they all gathered in the shade of a big pine and discussed their troubles with Mr. Bruce.

"I confess," said the lawyer, "that I thought your young friend was exaggerating in the story he told me at Palm Beach, but I see now that the trouble is far more serious than I thought. I have not been idle since his visit to my office, and I have discovered one or two things that are extremely interesting, although I do not see as yet how they solve the mystery of your troubles. I have come out to-day to look over the ground and see if I cannot discover some connection between the facts I have learned and the trouble you are having. One peculiar thing I notice in all your accounts is that, with the exception of the placing of the dynamite under the machine, which may have been done by Rooney out of sheer personal cussedness, there has been no attempt made to destroy the machine."

"You are right, sir," Charley admitted, "but of course they have not had much chance to get at the machine."

"Another thing," continued the lawyer, "although you have been caused much anxiety, and worry and have suffered considerable loss, yet no one of you has been seriously hurt so far."

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"I follow your reasoning, sir," Charley said. "Your idea is that they do not wish to wreck the machine, but merely to stop its working, and that they do not want to kill, but merely to drive us off the job."

"Correct," said the lawyer; "but I am not going to say but what they will kill some of you if they can't stop the job any other way."

"You're comforting at any rate," said Walter, with a grin. "If we stop, we lose every dollar we have in the world. If we don't stop we are likely to be killed. Now which would you advise us to do?"

Mr. Bruce laughed. "I am not going to advise either at present," he said. "It's my duty as a lawyer to try to save you from both. Before I give any advice I want to look over the ground. Can I drive on out to Indiantown in my auto?"

"Sure," said Charley, "and we will go with you if you do not mind."

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CHARLEY and Walter climbed into the auto with Mr. Bruce, who immediately started up the machine and drove slowly out on the old road, noting his surroundings with interest.

"I have never been out in this country before," he said. "It seems wonderfully strange and interesting to me. So unlike anything I have ever seen in the North. I suppose that thick growth of trees ahead is the jungle you told me about."

The boys assured him that such was the case, and before entering the jungle he stopped the car and looked back at the machine. "At the rate your men are working, you will have the road completed up to the jungle in another week," he observed.

"Yes," Charley agreed, "that is, if we are not molested too much. I dread the work through the jungle, though."

"I should think you would dread it," agreed Mr. Bruce as the car slipped into the jungle's gloomy depths. "Gosh, I never saw such a sickly looking place and these awful snakes. I'll dream of them for weeks. Why, the place fairly reeks with fever and disease."

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"We are going to set fire to it before we put the machine into it," Walter said. "The fire will kill off a good many of the snakes, but it won't stop the danger from fever much."

Mr. Bruce drove on in silence until the car rolled into Indiantown, where he stopped it in front of one of the truck gardens with an exclamation of surprise. "My, I never saw stuff grow like that before," he said. "This land must be wonderfully fertile, although it does not look so very rich on top."

"There's a soft grayish rock a little below the surface," Charley explained. "I believe it produces that wonderful growth. I've got some samples of it in my game bag. You can have them if you want them. This land is wonderfully fertile, as you say," he continued, while Mr. Bruce examined the bits of rock, "but I don't believe, even with that in its favor, that it will be worth much until a railroad runs through here. It's too far from transportation."

"Yes," agreed Mr. Bruce absently. "It is too far away to be worth much for farming purposes."

The little party rode on as far as the trading-post, then Mr. Bruce declared he had seen enough, and turning the car around headed back for camp.

"It's queer how a really brilliant mind sometimes overlooks plain simple little things," he said as they slipped by the row of surveyor's stakes. "Now the man who is directing operations against you is a man of considerable intelligence, the ingenuity of his moves against you prove that. He has kept in concealment, and, in spite of all the annoyance he has caused you, you haven't got the slightest bit of evidence against him. Some of his tricks have been infernally clever, and yet he has overlooked one little thing that would have put you out of business in a short time."

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"Don't name it out loud," Charley begged. "I noticed it long ago, but I haven't even dared think of it for fear it might occur to him."

"I don't know but what you fellows are in the same class with him," said Mr. Bruce, with a smile. "This case reminds me of a story by Edgar Allan Poe about a long search for a hidden document. All sorts of out-of-the-way nooks and places were searched, and all the while the document lay in full view upon a mantel shelf."

"You mean that we have overlooked the solution of our troubles because it was in plain sight?" said Walter eagerly.

"Something like that," Mr. Bruce admitted. "I am not positive about it yet, but I expect to be within a few days. In the meantime, I'm going to refuse to answer any questions about it."

It was not yet noon when they got back to camp and Mr. Bruce retired at once to Charley's tent and began filling in the blank places on a lot of legal forms he had brought with him. "I want all you Americans to sign these without asking any questions," he said. "I know it's rather an unusual request, but this case is rather an unusual one, so you will have to do this blindfold if you want me to go on with your case. You will just have to trust to my honor, that's all."

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Without any hesitation, our little party affixed their signatures to the papers, the contents of which the lawyer kept carefully hidden. They reasoned that in their present position they had nothing to lose, if the lawyer proved dishonest, which they did not believe he would, for they were all favorably impressed with his appearance and brisk, business-like manner.

After they had signed, the teamster and engineers were called in and also asked to sign, which they willingly did, without question or comment.

"Now," said Mr. Bruce, when the signing was over, "I'll be going, for I've got to do some hustling the next few days if I am going to be of any use to you."

"Better wait for dinner," Charley urged, but Mr. Bruce shook his head. "I'll get a lunch in Jupiter," he said. "Every hour is important now. I wish you had come to me sooner; as it is, I have

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only a short time to do a whole lot of work in."

Charley followed him out to the auto. "I wish you would tell us what you have discovered and what you are going to do," he said.

"No, I'm not going to do that," said the lawyer decidedly, "not until I am sure that I am right. Do you think you can keep on working and stand those fellows off for a week longer?"

"I think so," Charley said simply.

"Good," approved Mr. Bruce, "I will be back within a week. I must warn you, however, that if my theories are correct the further you dig the more trouble you are likely to have. I expect the enemy will abandon all tricks and resort to attempts to kill before the week is out."

"That's a cheerful outlook," said Charley dryly.

Mr. Bruce hesitated before replying. "As a lawyer," he said, "I am against killing in any form, but as a mere man I would say that I would shoot to kill if the other fellow was doing the same."

"But killing is an awful thing," protested Charley. "It is never justified except in war."

"Then just consider that this is war," smiled the lawyer. "You will not have to stretch your imagination much. Good-by. I will be back in a week." The teamster climbed into the auto with him and in a few minutes the car was out of sight.

Charley slowly returned to the camp, where he told his chums what the lawyer had said. [189]

"I think I know about where those gunmen are camped," Walter said. "I can see the smoke of a campfire near where the convicts camped. If we have any more trouble with them, we could, perhaps, capture them in the daytime when they are sleeping and turn them over to the sheriff."

Charley shook his head. "That won't do," he said. "In the first place, even counting in the engineers, there would only be seven of us to do the job, for we could not count on the Spaniards. They lack the nerve for such work. Seven men could hardly handle twenty. In the second place, we have no evidence against any of them, except the one who killed the mules, and he is dead. If we turned them over to the sheriff he would have to turn them loose again."

"You're right about the Spaniards lacking nerve," Captain Westfield observed. "All these mysterious night attacks are frightening them. I am afraid we are going to have trouble holding them if this sort of thing continues."

"I've been fearing that very thing," Charley said thoughtfully. "They are a superstitious people and what they cannot understand frightens them. I can see only one thing more that we can do and that is for Walt and I to go on the night guard with them, and if there is any shooting we had better do as the lawyer says—shoot back." [190]

"I don't like the idea of bloodshed," said Captain Westfield.

"Nor I," said Charley grimly. "But if blood must be shed I would rather it would be theirs than ours."

"Same here," agreed Walter. "If we are going to keep watch to-night, Charley, we had better eat dinner and turn in for a nap."

It was nearly sundown when the boys emerged from their tents where they had been awakened from their sleep by a clamoring outside.

They found the din the herald of the arrival of Willie John with all his worldly goods, consisting of numerous dogs, pigs, cattle, two wagons, eight oxen, a squaw, his mother and his mother-in-law, a crowd of children, and a couple of wrinkled old Indians, likely his father and father-in-law.

Much to the chums' relief, Willie John decided to make camp further on close to the machine. After they had reached their camping place, Willie John left the squaws to the ignoble menial work of making camp, and with his son, a fine looking Indian lad, came over to discuss business with his pale-face employers.

"Me drive one wagon, four oxen," he said. "Boy drive one wagon, four oxen. How much?"

"Six dollars a day," said Charley promptly. "Six dollars and plenty of tobacco."

"It is well," said the Seminole. "Some tobacco now." [191]

Charley went to the supply and got a package, and the Indian, filling his pipe, sat down on a log and puffed away in silent content, his son sitting by his side silent and motionless except for the quick shifting of his black, beady eyes that took in every detail of the camp and its occupants.

"Fine boy you've got," observed Walter, who had been admiring the perfect form and proud carriage of the Indian lad.

There was a glint of fatherly pride in Willie John's eyes as he laid his hand caressingly on the lad's black head. "Him good boy," he said simply. "Him run faster, wrestle better, swim better than any other Indian boy. Him no drink wyomee (whiskey). Him no smoke. Him save all money. By and bye, he go to school, all the same as pale-face boy."

"That's good," Walter approved. "How old is he?"

"Twelve years," answered the Seminole. "We go back to camp now. Good-by."

"He certainly thinks a lot of that boy for an Indian," Walter remarked to his chum.

"Why not?" said Charley. "Don't you suppose Indians have feelings like other human beings?"

Both lads had occasion to remember this conversation in the near future.

CHAPTER XXV. SICKNESS IN THE CAMP.

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ACCORDING to agreement, as soon as night fell, Charley, taking two of the Spaniards with him, went out to stand guard on the machine for the night, while Walter and the other two took their posts on the guard line circling the camp. There is nothing so slow and tedious as doing guard duty, but the boys managed to hasten the flight of time by chatting with their Spanish companions and adding new words and phrases to their already fair knowledge of the language.

Much to their surprise nothing occurred to alarm the lads during the night. At daybreak Charley climbed up on the steel crane and took a good look over the country, but he could discover no trace of the enemy or any sign of campfire smoke.

With the break of day the fireman came out to get up steam, and Charley with his men returned to camp. "I can't see any trace of them or their campfire," he told his chum, "and I believe I've hit upon the reason why we were not molested last night."

"Let's have it," said Walter eagerly.

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"I believe they think they have put us out of business with the killing of the mules and the burning of our wood supply," Charley answered. "Of course they will soon discover their mistake and be at it again."

"Maybe they have gone back to town," his chum suggested hopefully, but Charley shook his head decidedly. "They would not go far," he declared positively. "They know it will not take us more than four or five days at the most to get another pair of mules and start up again. Well, let's be thankful for their giving us even one night's peace. I am going to get a bite to eat and turn in, and I advise you to do the same. If we wake up early enough we'll take the truck, run in to town and see if that electric light has come."

"All right," Walter agreed.

It was nearly sundown when the boys awoke, so the purposed trip was not made. As the machine was now working again, there was no need of a guard on it, so the boys agreed to divide up the camp watch. One standing guard with the Spaniards until midnight, and the other one from midnight until morning. "I'll take the first watch," Charley said, "then I can get a good nap and run into town in the morning."

Before going out to his post, Charley sauntered over to the Indian's camp and exchanged greetings with Willie John. "Did you see any pale-faces in the woods to-day?" he inquired.

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The Seminole shook his head. "No see strange pale-face," he said. "See campfire. Him one sleep old. Pale-faces gone."

"Well," said Charley, puzzled. "You must not go near any pale-face camp in woods. They very bad men. Maybe they shoot you or oxen. You understand?"

"Yes, me understand," said the Seminole. "No go near campfires any more."

"The gunmen have either moved camp or gone to town," the lad remarked to his chum when he returned to camp. "But we will keep watch just the same. It may be only a ruse to throw us off our guard."

The night passed away, however, without the slightest alarm, much to the lad's relief. Charley slept later than usual in the morning, and when he emerged from his tent he found the Captain waiting for him.

"One of the graders is sick," the old sailor informed him. "I wish you would take a look at him. He looks to me to be pretty badly off."

The lad found the sick man, one of their best workers, tossing restlessly on his cot, his face a brick red.

"What's the matter, Meticas?" he said cheerfully as he felt of the sick man's hot face.

"Plenty sick, señor," said the sufferer. "Plenty not all the time. No can work to-day. Work to-morrow, maybe."

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"Don't you worry about the work," said the lad kindly. "I go to town this morning, get doctor."

He will make you well pretty quick."

"Thanks, señor," said the man gratefully.

"It looks to me like a case of jungle fever," the lad said as he joined the Captain.

"It's working in that nasty mud all the time that has made him sick," the old sailor declared. "The hot sun burning down on that foul muck is enough to make an alligator sick. It don't bother me much, for I get off to one side and keep out of it. It's hardest on the ground men and the graders. They are in it all the time. They don't complain any, but I notice they are getting sores all over their legs from standing in it. It would not surprise me if more of them came down before long."

"I hope not," Charley said fervently. "We are in enough trouble as it is. I am going in and get a doctor for him this morning. You can take out one of the guards with you to take Meticas' place."

As soon as he had eaten breakfast, the lad took the truck and started for town. By noon he was back in camp again.

"Gosh, you made a quick trip," Walter commented.

"I didn't go to town," Charley said dejectedly. "Two miles from here is as far as I could get with the truck." [196]

"Why?" demanded his chum.

"Bridges blown up by dynamite from there on," said the other briefly. "I walked ahead two miles from where I left the truck and there was not a bridge but what was wholly or partly wrecked."

"Whew!" whistled Walter, "that will shut us off from getting more supplies."

"That's what it was intended to do," said his chum wearily, "but, I think, we can fool them on that point if we act quickly. Has Willie John come in for his dinner yet?"

"I think he is over at his camp now."

"Come on over with me," Charley said. "We have got to act quickly or we will find ourselves penned up out here without food."

They found Willie John and his family squatted around a big iron pot full of bear meat into which they kept dipping their hands and fishing after choice tid-bits.

"This afternoon you and boy go to Indiantown for us," Charley said. "You tell all of tribe we want to buy plenty yams, corn, pumpkins, pigs, and two cattle, then go out to trading-post and buy all the flour, sugar and coffee Mr. Bowers will sell. Have Indians bring all here to camp quick. Pretty soon bad pale-faces tear up bridge so we can no get grub. You understand?"

"Yes, me understand," said the Seminole. "Me go on foot. Indians got plenty of wagons to bring grub. Go much faster walk. Boy and squaw drive oxen and haul wood while I am gone." [197]

"Good," Charley approved. "You come over to camp before you go and I give you plenty of money to buy grub with."

"That will settle the food question for quite a while," the lad observed, as the two boys sauntered back to the tent.

"We don't really need anything from town for quite a while, except a doctor. I am going to see if I cannot do something for the sick man, but if he gets worse, we will have to get a couple of Indian ponies and go in for a doctor. By leaving the road and taking to the woods one can pick their way into town, but it would make a long, tiresome, dangerous journey, and we don't want to attempt it unless we absolutely have to."

Charley found the sick man about as he had left him, hot with fever and tossing restlessly. After viewing his condition carefully, the lad went back to his tent and got out the little medicine chest they usually carried with them.

"What are you going to give him?" Walter inquired.

"A big dose of calomel now, and as soon as the fever passes off I will give him two grain doses of quinine every two hours," said Charley promptly. "That's what the doctors always give for these swamp fevers. I am not much afraid of this kind of fever. It seldom kills and when properly treated it is easily cured. Of course it leaves one weak for a while, and not able to do much work. I wish, though, that I knew what to do to keep the mud from making sores on the men. I am more afraid of the sores than I am of the fever." [198]

"I don't know anything about medicine," said Walter thoughtfully, "but it is evident that the sores come from germs or poisons in the mud. Now if the men would put carbolic acid in the water when they bathe morning and night and then put on some carbolic salve, I believe it would check or kill that which makes the sores."

"I believe you're right," Charley agreed. "We will have them try it anyway. As soon as I can get to town I am going to get leggins for them all. That will keep the mud from coming in direct

contact with their skins. Well, we had better get what rest we can now. Those fellows have finished with the bridges and they will likely be back to make us more trouble to-night. I don't feel as though I had got enough sleep anyway."

The two lads wisely retired to their cots, where they gained a couple of hours of good hard slumber from which they were awakened by the arrival of Willie John returning from his errand. "Wagons come pretty soon, bring plenty grub," he informed them. [199]

Before dark the wagons began to arrive, loaded with yams, pumpkins, corn, and young pigs, besides all the flour, sugar and coffee Mr. Bowers had been able to spare from the trading-post.

The boys viewed the supply of food with satisfaction.

"There's enough to run us a couple of months," Charley declared, "and by that time we will either be doing well or else driven off the job." Before night fell the lad went in and took another look at the sick man. The fever had left him, so he gave him the first dose of two grains of quinine. "Repeat it every two hours until you go to bed," he told the Captain, who had come in from work. "I'll manage to slip in a couple of times after you retire and give it to him."

"There is another one coming down with it," the old sailor said gloomily. "Rama has been yawning and complaining of aching bones all day."

"Send him in here and to-morrow take out one of the guards in his place," said the lad promptly. "I am going to have the rest of the men move out of this tent into the others and turn this one into a hospital tent where the men can be quiet and undisturbed."

CHAPTER XXVI. A MIDNIGHT RAID.

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THE Spaniards sharing the sick man's tent willingly complied with Charley's request and moved their belongings to the other tents in which there was plenty of room for them. With Walter's assistance the lad cleaned the tent out thoroughly and tied back the flaps at both ends to permit the free circulation of air. Rama was made to go to bed on a second cot and given a dose of the same medicine given the other. This done, Charley called the balance of the graders and ground men together and gave them a large bottle of carbolic acid and a box of salve, instructing them how to use both. It was now getting dark, and after a hasty supper the boys with their two Spaniards repaired to the guard line. Before night, however, Walter had climbed a small tree and taken a survey of the country. Much to his disappointment, he had seen smoke rising from the convicts' old camping place, showing that the gunmen had returned to their old haunts.

"I wonder how they manage to find our camp so easy at night," the lad remarked, as he and his chum met on their rounds. "When McCarty and I were out hunting that time we could not see this camp from theirs, and after we camped in the thicket we could not see their camp, although we were not over half a mile away. The white mist blotted out everything." [201]

"That digging light way up on the machine's boom guides them," Charley answered. "The mist is densest close to the ground. The further up one goes the thinner it gets; consequently they can see that light even when they can't see our campfire."

"Simple enough, after all," Walter commented. "It's the simple things that puzzle one the most sometimes."

"Which reminds me of what Mr. Bruce hinted," Charley said, "that the solution of our mystery was in plain sight all the time, but hanged if I haven't puzzled over it till I made my head swim and can't make it out."

"Same here," Walter said. "I hope he is right and can make an end to this trouble, but I doubt it."

"Well, we will know in a few days. He promised to be out again within a week."

The lads turned back on their patrol and the conversation ceased.

The hours slipped slowly away while the four guards kept up their slow, weary, monotonous pacing back and forth. Three times Charley slipped in and administered doses of quinine. On the last trip he passed by the cook tent and, striking a match, glanced at the clock inside. [202]

"It's just midnight," he said as he rejoined his chum. "That seems to be the favorite time for their devilment. I suppose we can look for trouble any minute now." He had hardly finished when there came the sharp crack of rifles from about the machine. "Good," Charley exclaimed, "they haven't all got silent guns this time. Those reports will give our men an idea where to shoot."

"Hadn't we better go out there?" Walter asked.

"No, we may have our hands full here," his chum replied. "Besides, the engineer will whistle if he wants us. Gee, look at that!"

The swinging platform of the machine was turning around and around at great speed and from

it burst forth little jets of flame as the machine men answered the enemy's fire.

"Good boy, McCarty," Walter exclaimed. "I guess they will have a job hitting any of your men." He ducked as a bullet whizzed close by him.

"Watch out!" Charley cried, "they have got the camp surrounded, too."

"Shoot wherever you see a flash, then step to one side so they won't locate your position."

The Captain, Chris and the two engineers came running from the camp half dressed with their guns in their hands. By the time they reached the line, the rifles of both defenders and attackers were crackling merrily and the bullets were whining back and forth. For half an hour the firing continued on both sides, then the attacking party slowly withdrew, firing as they retired. The attempt on the machine had quickly been silenced, and McCarty was digging again as though nothing had happened. Lanterns were lit and the defenders took stock of the damage done. Captain Westfield had a scratch on the leg where a bullet had grazed, one of the Spaniards had lost a finger tip, and a cow staked out within the line had been killed. Whether the enemy had suffered from their fire they could not tell.

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"I doubt if they were hurt much," Charley observed. "I think they did most of their fighting from behind trees. We want to take a lesson from them on that. To-morrow we will have to fix up some kind of protection to get behind when the fun begins. I do not expect we will get off as lucky next time as we did this. I believe they were trying to scare us this time more than anything else."

Satisfied that the trouble was over for the night, the Captain and his companions returned to bed while the lads resumed their weary round of sentinel duty. Nothing more occurred to disturb them, and they were heartily glad when day at last came. As soon as it grew light enough to see well, the two lads went out and examined the place from which their enemies had fired. They found nothing, however, but a few drops of blood on the grass beside a tree. "Some one got barked a little here," Charley observed. "It wasn't anything serious, however, or there would be more blood around."

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The boys had just finished breakfast when one of the Spaniards came in from the machine.

"Boss, McCarty want you to come out to the machine," he said to Charley.

"I wonder what the trouble is now," said the boy wearily, as he arose and put on his hat. "Want to walk out with me, Walt?"

"Sure," his chum assented.

"What's the matter?" Charley asked of the white-faced Spaniard who accompanied them back.

The Spaniard hastily crossed himself. "God knows," he said with a shudder. "It's blood that we wash in and blood that we drink. May the Blessed Virgin forgive us."

As they were near the machine, the lads did not question him further, but hastened on to where McCarty was standing a little ways beyond the road.

"What's the matter?" Charley asked the engineer.

"You can see for yourself," was the reply. "Look at that little brook over there where we have been getting our water. Last night it was just ordinary sweet, pure, cold water, but just look at it now."

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The two lads stepped over to the tiny brook McCarty pointed out. It was only a few feet wide and three or four inches in depth, except where the machine men had dug a hole a couple of feet deep to make possible the dipping up of a few bucketfuls at a time. The boy's eyes opened wide with wonder and surprise, for the waters of the little rill were red like blood.

"Queer, isn't it?" said McCarty. "Hanged if I can account for it."

"I have seen brooks of that color where the water flowed over red bay tree roots," Walter volunteered.

"That color does not come from bay roots," objected the other. "You want to remember that it was all right and colorless yesterday. We got a fresh pail of water about two hours ago. Of course we did not notice the color then because it was dark, but one of the men went to get a drink a while ago and I thought he would throw a fit when he saw the color of the stuff he had been drinking. Bossie washed his face and hands in the brook a couple of hours ago and just look at him now." The lads glanced at the Spaniard, whose frightened face was a bright red. "They want to quit," McCarty continued in a low voice. "This, coming after all the other mystery, has scared them out of their wits. Unless you can hit upon some reasonable explanation of this thing and do it quick, I am afraid the whole gang will quit. They have been crossing themselves and muttering prayers to the Virgin for the last hour."

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A glance at the three frightened Spaniards convinced the two lads that McCarty was not exaggerating the seriousness of the situation.

"Keep them here until I come back," Charley told him softly. "Come on, Walt, I am going to follow that rill up to its source."

They had not far to go. A couple of hundred yards from the machine they found the rill's source among a clump of willows. Here a little spring bubbled up from the ground. Near its mouth, fastened tightly to a stake, was an object that caused the boy to utter exclamations of surprise and relief. It was a muslin bag capable of holding eight or ten pounds and it was stained a bright red. It had been cunningly placed in a narrow part of the rill and the dirt banked up on both sides so that all the water from the spring would have to pass through or over it.

"Don't touch it," Charley said. "Go bring the machine men here. I want to make this an object lesson to them."

While Walter was gone on this errand, the lad gathered up several pasteboard packages that lay scattered around on the ground. He noted with satisfaction that the directions on them were printed in Spanish as well as English. [207]

In a few minutes Walter was back with the wondering Spaniards. Relief began to replace the look of fright on their faces as Charley silently pointed out to them the red stained bag and, untying it from the stake, undid the string closing its mouth and shook out on the ground a mass of water-soaked red powder. He picked up three of the packages he had collected and gave one to each of the Spaniards. "Read," he said shortly. The Spaniards burst out laughing as they grasped the cause of the thing that had so frightened them.

"Our enemies want to stop us from building this road," Charley said in Spanish. "They are fools. They think by firing off their guns in the air at night, starting fires in the grass, and coloring water red with dyes, that they can frighten away the brave, noble sons of Spain. Surely they are fools."

"They are fools," agreed Bossie, now completely recovered from his fright. "They might frighten children, but Spaniards never. No other race is as brave and fearless as the sons of Spain."

CHAPTER XXVII.

BURNING OUT THE JUNGLE.

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WHEN the boys left the machine to return to camp the men were in the highest of spirits and the ground men were joking Bossie about his red face.

"I really believe that dye business is going to work out to our advantage," Charley remarked to his chum. "Those Spaniards will not be so likely to get frightened next time at a little thing they do not understand."

"I hope you're right," Walter said, "but, if these night attacks keep up much longer, I believe all the men will quit, and I shall not blame them if they do. One cannot expect men to work hard and then have targets made of them every night, all for \$2.00 a day."

"No," Charley agreed, "but we have got to hold them as long as we can. I am in hopes that Mr. Bruce will come to our rescue in some way. If he does not and this sort of thing continues, we are bound to go under sooner or later. We will simply be unable to keep men on the job."

"How do we stand now?" Walter asked.

"I haven't figured it out exactly," his chum replied, "but we are not much ahead of the game, for our expenses so far have been enormous. After this month's wages have been paid the men we will have but little left. Of course, we have got the part of the reward for the convicts coming and the money from the sale of the rings, but we have got neither of those yet and we cannot tell when we will get them. We are well equipped for three months ahead now, plenty of food, a new pair of mules on the way, and new parts for the machine. We will be under but little expense for several months to come. We are making good money on the digging, and if we could continue it in peace, we would have a good lump sum coming to us at the end of the job. But if this interference keeps up, the machine will be laid up and we will be broke—that's all." [209]

"But there's the money for what we have already done," suggested Walter hopefully.

"We will not get that until the middle of next month," his chum said gloomily. "If we are forced to quit the job before then we will get nothing. The county will keep it for failure to carry out our contract. We have just simply got to keep the machine working, that's all."

When the boys arrived at camp, Charley went at once to the hospital tent, where he found both sick men slightly improved. He left four quinine tablets with each, with directions to take one every two hours. To Chris he gave instructions to prepare some rich broth and dry toast for the invalids. This done, the two lads turned in and slept soundly until well along in the afternoon. [210]

They found the Captain had not been idle while they rested. With his graders he had thrown up mounds of dirt and roots every fifty feet circling the camp.

"Good!" approved Charley, as he viewed the old sailor's work. "When we get behind those we will be fairly safe from bullets. I wish those trees out there were out of the way. They give the enemy too much protection."

"There are only about a dozen of them big enough to give any protection," Walter observed. "Why not blow them up with dynamite?"

The suggestion was a good one and they immediately set about carrying it out. Assisted by the Captain with his graders, they dug holes under the trees' roots and placing several sticks of dynamite under each, thus exploded them with a fuse and cap. The powerful explosive blew the big trees clear out of the ground and in some cases many feet above ground before they fell.

"That's better," said Charley, with satisfaction when the job was completed.

"We can make still another improvement," Walter suggested. "Why not set fire to the roots? They are pitchy enough to burn good and the fires will show up any one trying to approach the camp." [211]

The idea was so feasible that the lads carried it out at once, and by the time night fell a bright glowing ring of fires surrounded the camp.

"I don't believe they will bother us to-night with all those fires going, but we'll keep watch just the same," Charley said. "We cannot be too careful."

The camp was not molested during the night, but about the middle of the night there came explosions at regular intervals from the direction of Indiantown.

Charley chuckled. "They are shutting the stable door after the horse is stolen," he remarked. "They are blowing up the bridges between here and Indiantown."

"I expected that would be their next move. That's why I was in such a hurry to get the provisions from the Indians."

"But the blowing up of the bridges ahead of us will stop the machine," Walter said.

"No, it will only delay us a little," his chum replied. "It's easily remedied. When the machine gets to a blown-up bridge it will simply face around and fill up the gap with mud and sand, and after it has passed over it will dig out the gap again and our bridgemen will put in a new bridge, which they would have to do anyway."

"I see," said Walter, greatly relieved. "Things are not always as bad as they seem."

But while the lads had reason to be thankful for a quiet night, they were not encouraged by the state of affairs in the camp next morning. Two more men, a ground man and a grader, were down with the fever. The condition of the other two sick men was greatly improved, but it was plainly evident that it would still be several days before they would be strong enough to go to work. [212]

The lads provided the new sick ones with medicine and made them as comfortable as they could before they themselves retired to rest.

"You'll have to get along with one man to-day, and let the other one go on the machine gang," Charley told the Captain. "To-morrow the guards will be rested up and you can have them to help you. Walt and I will keep watch alone hereafter."

"If this thing keeps up much longer it will not need the enemy to put us out of business," he remarked to his chum as they prepared for bed. "We can't spare another man off the job. If just one more man caves in we will only be able to run the machine half time, and that's a losing proposition. The worst of it is that we cannot get into town to get more men until Canady returns with the mules. I can't imagine what's keeping him. He ought to have been back yesterday."

"Well, let's not worry until the things actually happen," said Walter sleepily, as he stretched out on his cot. "It don't pay to cross a bridge until you get to it." [213]

"We have got to set fire to that jungle to-day," said Charley some hours later, as rested and refreshed, the lads ate their mid-afternoon meal. "The machine is within a thousand feet of it now. It will not do to wait until it gets closer, for the heat from that fire is going to be intense. We can't do better than to start it right now. The wind is blowing away from the machine, so the crew will not be troubled with the smoke."

The boys stopped at the first wood pile and split up a log of fat pine into long sticks for torches. Carrying these and a plentiful supply of matches, they made their way out to the edge of the jungle, which was not far from their new camp. Lighting their torches, one went north and the other south, scattering fire as they went. After they had started blazes for a couple of hundred yards either way, they returned to the road and watched the progress of the flames.

"Isn't there danger of its sweeping on into Indiantown?" asked Walter, as the flames began to mount skyward.

"No," replied his chum. "I made sure of that before I decided to set fire to it. There is a creek running along the other side of the jungle that will stop its progress. Just look at it. Did you ever see anything like it?"

The two boys stood and watched with awe the mighty conflagration they had started. The jungle was filled with dead and dying trees which flamed up like tinder at the fire's breath. Soon the flames were shooting up forty or fifty feet high and the roaring was like that of a mighty tempest. The heat quickly grew so intense that the boys were compelled to retreat slowly back to [214]

the machine. Even there the heat could be felt, although it was a thousand feet to the jungle and the wind was blowing the fire away from them.

The engineer stopped the machine for a few minutes to give all hands a chance to view the wonderful sight.

As the pillars of flame and smoke reared themselves skyward, the boys realized with astonishment that the jungle that had seemed so lifeless was really teeming with life. From both sides of the mighty blaze rose great flocks of blue and white cranes, egrets, whoopers, owls, parrots, great scarlet flamingoes, and dozens of strange birds the like of which the boys had never seen before. Nor was animal life lacking in either number or variety. Hundreds of hairy swamp rabbits, as big as a small dog, poured out from their doomed hiding places. Great big rats by the thousands swarmed by the machine. A couple of deer went by, covering the ground with great bounds. Wild cats, foxes, squirrels poured forth in great numbers. One huge, sprawling object emerged from the thicket and lumbered toward the machine, but before reaching it turned aside and sunk with a splash in a nearby lake. [215]

"Whew!" breathed the engineer, "that was the grandfather of all alligators. He must be all of twenty feet long."

As the fire spread to either side the flow of animal life was diverted in other directions and their rushing by the machine ceased.

"I believe that fire will kill every snake in the jungle," Charley declared with satisfaction.

"I doubt it. They will just keep under water until it is all over," his chum replied.

"That water is shoal and stagnant," Charley reminded him. "Burning branches and trees are dropping in it all the time. I'll bet it is actually boiling by now."

CHAPTER XXVIII. SHOOTING TO KILL.

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WHEN night came Charley and Walter had to go on the picket line alone, for the two remaining Spanish guards would have to join the grading gang in the morning. They adopted the plan the first two Spanish guards had used of each one making a half circle of the camp. For several hours they paced wearily back and forth, but as midnight drew near they became more watchful and alert, for this was the hour that their enemies generally chose to make their attacks.

All the camp was fast asleep and silence reigned unbroken, except for the exhaust of the machine and the occasional heavy fall of a fire-eaten tree in the jungle. But in their loneliness the boys were comforted by the knowledge that in their tents Captain, Chris, the engineers, and many of the Spaniards were sleeping, fully dressed with their guns by their sides, ready to run to the lads' assistance at the first alarm.

And soon it came, the sharp crack of rifles around both camp and machine. The two lads answered promptly, firing at the bright streaks of the blazing rifles in the darkness. [217]

"Keep down, keep down. Get behind the sand heaps," Charley shouted, as those in the tents came running to their assistance. "Keep down. They are shooting to kill this time."

A rain of bullets thudded against the sand heaps as the defenders dropped behind them and fired over the tops. The darkness was pierced with streaks of spurting fire as rifle spoke to rifle. It was evident that the enemy were shooting to kill, and the defenders did the same. Wherever a rifle flash lit up the darkness they aimed at the place and quickly fired. Occasional cries and oaths told them that some of their bullets were finding their mark. But they were not to go unhurt for their part. Charley, who had raised himself up to fire, felt the thud of a bullet and his left arm dropped helplessly by his side. In the excitement he felt no pain, but, letting go his rifle, he drew his automatic and blazed away with it. Walter, behind the next pile, had his straw hat shot off his head. Bob Bratton pitched forward on his face and lay still and motionless, while one of the Spaniards sank to the ground, his hand clapped to a wounded leg and cursed fluently. Once Walter glanced back at the machine. Its platform was revolving rapidly and the rifles of its crew were spitting viciously. But the enemy did not now have the protection of the trees, and they could not long face the hail of lead being poured upon them. Their firing suddenly ceased. [218] From where they had stood came piercing shrieks, and following the shrieks came frightened yells and the thud of running feet.

"Captain, take most of the men and go to the aid of the machine," Charley commanded. "The fighting is over here." The old sailor hurried away, followed by McCarty and most of the Spaniards.

From the darkness ahead of the two boys still came the awful shrieks.

"Chris, get a lantern, we must find out what's the matter out there," Charley said.

The little negro was back in a minute with the light and, taking it from him, Walter led the way hastily toward the shrieks which were growing fainter. He was closely followed by his chum and

Chris with their automatics in their hands. As the lantern lit up the scene of the shrieks, Walter shrank back with a cry of fear and horror. A hideous head with lidless gleaming eyes was reared many feet above the ground. Recovering himself with an effort, the lad raised his automatic and fired directly between the gleaming eyes. At the same minute Charley and Chris discharged their weapons and the hideous head fell to the ground.

Holding aloft the light, the three frightened boys advanced cautiously. Its rays shone down on a sickening sight. On the ground lay one of the gunmen crushed into a shapeless mass, while, still partly coiled around the man's body, a great boa constrictor writhed in its last death struggles.

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"Ugh!" shuddered Walter, "I did not know there was such an awful thing in Florida."

"Fire drove it out of the jungle, I guess," said Charley jerkily. "Let's get back to camp. Bratton has fallen and one of the Spaniards is badly hurt. We can do nothing here, it's all over."

They had carried Bratton in and laid him upon his cot and were helping the wounded Spaniard in, when Walter cried:

"Look at the machine! Look at the machine!"

The machine and the air about it was a mass of flames. Black figures were leaping from its platform.

"Rifle bullet hit gas tank," muttered Charley dreamily. "Explosion. Can't work nights. Keep her going daytimes, Walt. Enough men unhurt to do that. I'm tired, awfully tired. Think I'll go to sleep pretty soon," and the lad, weak from loss of blood, sank unconscious to the ground.

When Charley opened his eyes it was to find himself in his cot, his arm neatly bound in splints, the sun shining in the open tent flaps, and Walter sitting on a box by his side.

"How did I get here?" he asked in wonder. "The last I remember was the machine being in flames."

"You keeled over in a faint," Walter replied cheerfully. "Loss of blood, I guess."

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"Was there any one killed?" Charley demanded anxiously.

"We thought Bratton was for a while, but the bullet hit a rib and glanced out again, making only a flesh wound. He'll be all right again in a week. The three Spaniards on the machine got pretty badly burned, but not dangerously so. Luckily for them, the ditch was there. They jumped right off the machine into it. The engineer by some miracle escaped without a burn. Sicavia, the Spaniard that was wounded in the leg, will be around again in a few days. He has only got a flesh wound. I guess that's all, except we buried that dead gunman this morning."

"The machine, is it running?" Charley questioned eagerly.

"Yes, I got them to start her up again this morning. But we can't run her nights for we have neither lights nor a night crew."

"Go on," said Charley gravely. "I see that there's worse to follow."

"Well, if you will have it, I suppose you might as well learn it now as a little later," Walter said. "The fact is the whole gang of Spaniards are going to quit. I had hard work to get any of them to remain over to-day."

"I suppose this is the end," said Charley, with a wry smile. "Well, we have fought a good fight, and I, for one, am not going to give up yet."

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"There is such a thing as knowing when one is licked," his chum said sadly, "and I think about every one on the job has reached that point. I do not see how we can do anything more."

Charley lay quiet for a minute thinking, then he said quietly: "Will you get me about a pint of hot, strong coffee, Walt?"

"Sure," answered his chum quickly, glad to see Charley taking the ill news so quietly.

When he returned it was to find his chum sitting on the edge of his cot trying to dress, but making an awkward job of it with only one hand.

"You must not get up," he protested, but Charley only smiled and said lightly: "Nonsense, a broken arm is no excuse for lying in bed. Why, it don't even pain me much. The pain will come later when the bone begins to knit. Will you please get all the men together? I want to talk with them a bit."

When Walter had gone the lad finished dressing and drank the strong coffee, which put new strength in his body.

When he emerged from the tent it was to find that his chum had gathered together in a body outside all the men but those confined to the hospital tent. He had even brought in the men from the machine, which had been stopped for the purpose.

Charley wasted no time in idle words, but came directly to the point.

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"My chum tells me, men, that you all want to quit," he said in Spanish.

"Si, señor, si, señor (Yes sir, yes sir), came the eager answer from the crowd.

"You are your own masters," continued the lad. "Of course, you are free to quit whenever you want to and there will be no trouble about getting your money when you wish to go, although your month is not up yet." He paused for a moment and looked over the eager faces gathered before him, before he continued: "I would not attempt to keep you on this job against your will, but I will say that I think it is foolish of you to quit now. All the bridges between here and Jupiter have been destroyed, so I cannot take you in with the truck. To attempt to make your way in through the woods and carry your belongings with you would be folly, for the way would be long and winding and you would run the risk of getting lost. Besides, there are several of your companions who are sick and unable to travel. Surely you do not want to desert them. Now, what I wish to propose is this: You all know the teamster has gone in to get more mules. We expect him back any hour. When he comes if you are still minded to quit, we will hire an Indian guide and send you in by wagon. Until he comes, I would ask you to continue at work. Our lights on the machine are ruined so we can only work day times, and in the day time you are in no danger from our enemies. Those of you who do not work on the machine will throw up breastworks all around the camp so that we will be well protected at night."

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When he ceased the Spaniards drew to one side for consultation. In a few minutes Bossie came forward and said in his quaint broken English:

"We stay till by and bye, wagon come, then catchee town. We all likee Boss plenty. Likee grub, likee job, but no likee mud, no likee fever, no likee shooting all the time. We work till wagon come—no more."

"Good," said Charley, "you can go back to work now. It might be worse," he remarked to his chum. "The machine will be kept going day times anyway."

CHAPTER XXIX. THE SEMINOLE LAD.

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THE two lads next visited the hospital tent, where they found the fever patients much improved but the three machine men suffering greatly from their burns, while Bob Bratton and the wounded Spaniards were resting as comfortably as could be expected. The boys did all they could to make the sufferers comfortable, then sauntered out for a look at the burned jungle. Here they met with a scene of utter desolation. Many trees and stumps were still burning, but the larger part of the jungle had been swept clean. The shallow pools of water had been dried up by the intense heat, leaving exposed an expanse of black mud fissured by cracks. Of the former multitude of snakes that had infested the place they saw not one. Returning from the destroyed jungle, the lads searched over the scene of battle of the night before. They found blood on the ground in several places, indicating that all their bullets had not been wasted. Before entering the tent, Charley paused and took a last look around. Several Spaniards, under the Captain's direction, were throwing up a solid breastwork, close to and surrounding the camp. The machine was working steadily, and the slow moving ox carts were crawling back from the distant timber with their loads of wood. The Indian camp had been outside of the fighting zone the night before. With a sigh, the wounded lad entered his tent and throwing himself on his cot, gave way to his despair. Try as he might, he could see nothing but ruin for himself and companions. There was little hope of getting another crew for the machine. The departing Spaniards would carry the story of their disasters in with them, and it would be impossible to induce others to come out. A negro crew might be secured, but it would take time, and the lad knew the colored race well enough to know that they would not stick in the face of danger.

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The crew's wages would take almost the last dollar they had in the bank, and if the County insisted, as he feared it would, on their rebuilding the destroyed bridges, the reward for the convicts, the money they had found in the old fort, and what was due on the digging they had already done, would be swept away to the last cent. In no direction could he see any hope. In spite of all his efforts and careful planning, their mysterious enemy had triumphed, and he and his companions were ruined. He did not blame the Spaniards for quitting. The work was hard enough and dangerous enough to bear, without the added risk of being shot in the dark.

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At last, worn out by his gloomy reflections, the lad fell into a fitful slumber from which he was awakened by Walter, who was pale of face and excited.

"What's the matter?" Charley demanded as he sat up on the edge of the cot. "You look as though you had seen a ghost."

"I hate to tell you," faltered his chum, "but I knew you would have to hear about it, so I ran ahead to break the news to you myself."

"Out with it," Charley said. "I'm strong enough to bear anything now."

"You know the Indian lad that drives one of the wagon teams—the boy Willie John is so proud of—they just found him dead on his load of wood—shot through the heart."

"The fiends," said Charley, "to shoot a poor, innocent, harmless child. They shall pay for it. Pay

for it dearly." He threw aside the tent flap and strode out, Walter by his side babbling over the details of the tragedy.

"You ought to have seen Willie John's face when he found him," he said. "It was like a demon's for a minute, then it became like stone."

Charley made his way out to the Indian camp, where the Spaniards and the Americans were already gathered. The squaws were breaking up camp, while Willie John sat in one of the wagons holding the dead lad in his arms. [227]

"Willie John, Willie John," said Charley brokenly. "We never thought anything like this would happen. We never dreamed those fiends would fire on you or the lad."

"Me understand," said the Seminole without emotion. "You no to blame. Bad pale-faces in wood did it."

"We will see that they are punished for it, Willie John," Charley promised, with tears in his eyes. "We will do all in our power to bring them to justice."

"Me understand," said the Seminole, and added simply as he gazed down at the lad in his arms: "Him was good boy. Him no smoke, no drink wyomee. Him save every little bit of money he get so by and bye him go to school all the same as pale-face boy. Him was very good boy."

The boys watched the lumbering, slow moving wagons out of sight with unashamed tears in their eyes. Then Charley turned to the machine men. "Rake out your fire and make everything snug on the machine," he said quietly. "There will be no more work for there will be no more wood."

When the machine men, their task done, had gathered with the others at the camp, the lad addressed them again.

"You have all seen what has happened to-day," he said quietly. "A bright, innocent, harmless child murdered simply because he was working for us. We hardly deserve the name of human if we do nothing to avenge his death. It is getting too near night to do anything to-day, but I am going to call for volunteers to go with me to-morrow morning to either capture his murderers or wipe them out of existence. Who will go with me?" [228]

His chums and the two engineers stepped promptly to his side, and the Spaniards followed one by one.

"Good," said the lad, with a sad smile. "We will start at daylight."

There was no singing or laughter in the camp that night, for each man carried to his tent with him the reflection that the morrow might see him as dead as the Indian child they were going to avenge. There were plenty of men to act as guards for the night now that the machine was not working, so Charley retired early to his tent and soon fell asleep. At daybreak the guards awoke him and his companions as they had been ordered to do, and reported that the night had passed off without alarms. Chris soon had breakfast ready and over cups of strong steaming coffee their plans for the expedition were made.

When the sun arose ten Spaniards and seven Americans armed with guns and pistols filed out of the little camp and silently tramped away for where a distant smudge of smoke showed the location of the gunmen's campfire. Only enough more remained behind to guard the camp. [229]

The little party of avengers advanced with caution. They marched in a twisting line so as to always keep a hummock or a bunch of spruces between them and the distant camp smoke so that their approach would not be noticed. As they slowly drew nearer double caution was observed, but at last they came upon an open stretch of prairie which they must cross to reach the thicket in which the gunmen's camp was located.

"Here is where they take the alarm," commented Charley, as they emerged out upon the open prairie.

But the little party crossed the open stretch without any sign of life from the gunmen.

"They have either moved or are sound asleep," he said. "Get your guns ready. Don't fire unless I give the word. Follow me, and make as little noise as you can."

The little party filed into the thicket, the chums and engineers in the lead and the Spaniards following close behind. At the edge of the cleared camping place the little party halted in horrified amazement. They had come to avenge the killing of the Indian lad, but another avenger had come before them. Sprawled upon the ground in all manner of attitudes, lay eighteen men—all dead.

"Lord!" breathed McCarty softly. "Who could have done it?" [230]

"There is only one answer to that question," said Charley gravely. "Those whose right it was to do it, if the taking of human life is ever right. Look at those heads."

The others shuddered with horror as they gazed upon the reddened skulls from which the scalp locks had been skillfully removed. Aside from that nothing had been touched, guns still lay where they had fallen and tents and supplies were undisturbed.

"The Seminoles," exclaimed Walter, and his chum nodded assent.

Two men were sent back to the camp for shovels, and when they returned graves were dug in the sandy soil and the dead men laid to rest. A search of their clothing and belongings gave little clue to the strange men's identity, but from the quantity of tablets and powders found upon them, and their dissipated appearance, the boys decided that they were members of that deadly drug-crazed band of New York gunmen.

Their sickening task finished, the little party headed back for camp.

"I am glad, after all, that it is not by our hands that they fell," Charley said to his chums as they tramped along. "To take life, even in the heat of passion, is a terrible thing."

"Aye, aye, lad," said Captain Westfield reverently. "The Good Book truly says, 'Vengeance is mine, saith the Lord.'" [231]

The little party arrived back in camp by noon. Much to their surprise, they found Willie John back again with his wagons busily engaged in making camp.

"Me come back, haul more wood," explained the Seminole simply.

During dinner there was great chattering and whispering at the Spaniards' table, and after the meal was over Bossie, always their spokesman, approached Charley.

"Spanish *hombres* (men) no want to quit now," he said in his quaint English. "They likee boss, they likee grub, likee job. They no be shot at nights any more. They want to stay on job now. They think it much more better."

"All right, Bossie," replied the lad listlessly. "We can only work half time now until the mules come and I can go in and get the electric light."

"I will be glad when this job is over," he told Walter. "The violence, trouble, and bloodshed have destroyed all my interest in the work. The gunmen will bother us no more, but I am wondering already where the enemy will strike next. The gunmen were only tools."

"Cheer up," said his chum, with an attempt at cheerfulness. "The darkest hour is always just before the dawn."

CHAPTER XXX. VISITORS.

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ONE and all in the camp now began to look forward to the coming of Canady with the mules. The Spaniards because, until a new light was installed, they could only work half time and consequently could only earn half their usual wages. The rest of the party because they were getting really alarmed over the Missourian's long absence.

"He ought to have been back long before this," said Charley, the day after the tragic discovery of the dead gunmen. "If he does not show up by to-morrow morning, I am going to hire a pony from the Indians and start in and look for him. Something surely must have happened to him."

"If you do go in you are liable to miss him on the way," Walter objected. "He may come back by one route while you are going in by another. Better give him a little more time. Jim impressed me as being perfectly well able to look out for himself."

"You don't think he could have been tempted by the big amount of money he carried?" asked Captain Westfield, with some hesitation. "Five hundred dollars is a lot of money to a poor man." [233]

"But not to Jim," Charley said decidedly. "Jim is a true Southerner and a thief is almost a curiosity among Southern races. No, Jim would not touch a cent that did not belong to him. Something has happened to him, that's all."

"Well, if you go in to-morrow, I am going with you," Walter said decidedly.

"We will talk that over later," Charley said. "We have nothing to do to-day so we might as well amuse ourselves and try to forget for a time that, if we are not actually ruined, we are pretty close to it."

"That's a good idea," his chum agreed heartily. "What shall the program be?"

"I would like to explore the country to the side of the road a bit, say out where you and McCarty went when you killed the deer. I have not been out that way yet."

"Suppose we all go," Walter suggested. "All can get away except the man running the machine, and even a little change like that will do a fellow a pile of good."

"Good!" Charley approved. "We will all go that want to and make a day of it."

It developed that all the Americans were eager for something in the way of a change. Even the Captain was willing to take a day off and Chris insisted that his assistant Sam was now [234]

competent to prepare a meal for those left behind. Armed with guns and lunch baskets, and with Bob, the dog, frisking ahead, the merry little party set out determined to have a pleasant time.

Quail was plentiful and a great number were bagged before the little party reached the prairie regions with its sandy bottomed lakes. They stopped by one of the lakes and rested at noon. They had brought fishing tackle with them and enjoyed huge sport pulling in the big fish with which the lake was full. Several of these roasted over the coals made a welcome addition to the lunch they had brought with them.

The afternoon was spent killing more quail, fishing, following up a homing bee which led them straight to a big hollow tree filled with delicious honey, and digging in the mounds which dotted the prairie. These mounds were found to contain quantities of human bones, arrow and spear heads, stone hatchets, and vessels of earthen ware. They were evidently the relics of a race long since gone out of existence, a race that lived in the country long before the Seminole Indians.

Tired but happy, the little party got back to camp just after sundown. Here a surprise greeted them, for they found the sheriff, and half a dozen of his aids, awaiting their arrival. The sheriff's face was very grave and he answered their cordial greetings crisply.

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"Gentlemen," he said, "I have a warrant for the arrest of Charley West, Walter Hazard, Capt. Benjamin Westfield, Bob Bratton, Will Kitchner and C. P. McCarty (white), and Christopher Columbus (negro)."

The little party stared at each other in stupefied amazement.

"On what charge?" demanded Charley, recovering his breath.

"On the charge of being the principals and accessories before and after the fact in the murder of one Levi P. Morton, late of New York City, on the night of November 23d, 1913," read the sheriff droningly.

"That gunman!" gasped Walter. "Why no one murdered him, Mr. Sheriff. He was kicked to death by mules he attempted to poison."

"I shall have to warn you that anything you say can be used against you at your trial," said the sheriff sternly. "I have found the grave of the dead man near this camp."

"Rats!" sneered McCarty angrily. "No sane judge would hold us ten minutes on such a charge."

"Well," observed the sheriff coolly, "you will have a chance to test that. Even if I were convinced of your innocence, I would have to arrest you just the same. When a warrant is given me it is my sworn duty to serve it."

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"The sheriff is right," Charley said hopelessly. "We will have to go with him, and we might as well do it without argument. The judge will turn us loose as soon as he hears our story, but it will be too late then."

"Too late for what, lad?" asked Captain Westfield.

"Why, can't you see this warrant is a put-up job," Charley exclaimed impatiently. "Don't you understand it's the latest move of the enemy to get us out of the way while they disable the machine and destroy our camp?"

"By Jove, I believe you're right," exclaimed McCarty.

"Right, of course I'm right," said the lad fiercely. "What other reason could there be for such an absurd charge? You will see that no one will appear against us when we are brought up in court. Well, the game's up, boys. We have all put up a good fight, but this settles it. I would not give ten cents for what we will find here if we return after being set free. May we have time enough, Mr. Sheriff, to pay off our men and pack up our things?"

"You can have all night," replied the officer. "We will not go in until morning. It's a long journey, for, with the bridges gone, we will have to pick our way back through the woods."

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After our little party had finished a silent, gloomy supper, they retired to their tents to pack up their scattered belongings.

Charley called the workers to his tent one by one and gave each a check for a full month's wages. He made all of them promise to stay and guard camp and machine during their absence, but he really had but little hope that they would remain in camp long after all the Americans were gone.

Their packing done, the little party gathered around the campfire as gloomy and disheartened a little bunch of men as it would be possible to find. One of the larger of the tents had been given up to the sheriff and his posse, and to it the officer sent his tired men early, saying he would stand guard over the prisoners himself the first part of the night.

"Boys," he said, when the last one of his men had retired, "I hate to execute this warrant. I had to be stern to you before my men, for every one of them wants my job and would be glad to make any trouble they could for me at headquarters. Being as we are alone together now, I will say that I believe you fellows are as guiltless as a babe of the crime with which you are charged. I believe, as you say, that it's a frame-up, but I've got to take you all in to answer to it, unless——"

"Unless what?" asked Walter eagerly.

"Unless," said the sheriff suggestively, "you overpower me, tie me up, and make your escape to-night."

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Charley grasped the meaning in the officer's tones. "No, it would be of no use," he said. "It might make you trouble and we would be no better off, compelled to hide out in the woods, than we would be in jail."

"I guess you're right," the sheriff admitted. "It's too bad, it's too bad."

"We thank you for your kindness," Charley said gratefully. "We know what your duty demands and do not blame you in the slightest for this. You could not do otherwise."

"I'm glad you understand that," said the sheriff, brightening. "By the way, I had to arrest your teamster, too, day before yesterday, on the same charge." He grinned at the recollection. "He was just starting out for here with a new pair of mules when we nabbed him. Lord, he fought like a wild cat and swore like a pirate while we were taking him to the lock-up."

"So that's why Jim hasn't come back," said Charley, with a grim smile.

"That's the reason," assented the sheriff. "He hasn't had a hearing before the judge yet. My eldest boy is looking out for the mules for him. When I left, Lawyer Bruce was flying around trying to get Jim out. Swore he would have him set free before noon."

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"Did Mr. Bruce know you were coming out for us?" Charley inquired, with interest.

"I dropped him a hint," said the sheriff. "My, you ought to have heard him rave. He had Jim Canady's cussing beat a mile. He used longer words, and more of them."

"I'm glad he knows the position we are in," said the lad, with relief. "He may be able to help us in some way."

"Don't you worry, lad. Bruce will do all he can for you—he's that kind," said the sheriff kindly. "Now you had better all turn in and get a good night's rest. It will be a long hard trip in to-morrow."

All hands thanked the kind officer and retired to their tents, where they were soon fast asleep.

Chris, who, as usual, was the first one out in the morning, awakened the others with shouts of delight.

"Jim's coming," he cried in their ears. "Jim an' Mr. Bruce and that little man, Jones. They are within a half mile of camp."

CHAPTER XXXI. MR. JONES BUYS THE OUTFIT.

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THE Americans came tumbling out of their tents just as Mr. Bruce, with his companions, rode into camp.

"No questions, no questions, until we have had something to eat," protested the lawyer good-humoredly, as our little party crowded around him. "We haven't had a bite to eat since yesterday noon. Just fill us up with something hot and tasty and we'll talk on anything you name. I am not going to say another word on an empty stomach, except to the sheriff here, and that only to tell him that I've got an order from the judge revoking that warrant he's got for all of you fellows, and that he might as well trot right back to town."

"Not before breakfast," protested the officer vigorously.

"As these boys' counsel, I advise them not to feed either you or your men," said the lawyer, with twinkling eyes. "They ought to punish you by sitting you in the corner and letting you watch the rest of us eat."

"That would be inhuman," declared the sheriff. "Um, man, just smell those fish frying and that coffee steaming."

At this moment Chris announced breakfast and all filed in to where the little negro had the table filled with fried fish, quail, ham and eggs, potatoes, hot corn bread and coffee. Silence reigned supreme as the hungry lawyer and his companions attacked the savory food. When at last they had satisfied their gnawing appetites the lawyer turned to the sheriff. "You can run along home now," he said. "Here's that paper I spoke about to show that everything's all right and proper. You can leave the boys with me now."

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"I'm not sure but that I ought to take charge of their pocketbooks for them if you are going to remain here," said the sheriff, with a laugh.

"I'll promise that their pockets will be fuller when I leave them than they are now," said Mr. Bruce.

"All right, I'll go then," agreed the sheriff, with a grin. "So long, boys, and the best of luck to you."

"That's a true-blue old chap," remarked the lawyer, as the sheriff departed. "We joke pretty rough with each other sometimes, but I like him and I think he likes me."

"He is good and kind," Charley agreed. "Do you feel able to talk business now?"

Mr. Bruce lit a cigar and puffed in dreamy content for a few minutes before replying.

"You know my friend Mr. Jones here, I believe?" he said, with an airy wave of the hand toward the little man whose face at that moment looked as though he had just taken a dose of castor oil. [242]

"We have seen him before," said Charley coldly.

"Mr. Jones is a remarkable man, a very remarkable man," said the lawyer, and the lad thought he could detect a mocking note in Mr. Bruce's voice as he continued. "Like many other remarkable men, however, Mr. Jones has not until the present time been able to gratify his greatest desire and ambition. Is that not correct, Jones?"

"Go on. You're doing the talking," said the little man grimly.

"That's so, I am," said Mr. Bruce, with the air of one who had just been informed of a startling fact. "You're a man of unusual observation and intelligence, Jones. Well, gentlemen, even in childhood Mr. Jones gave evidence of what was to be his ruling passion in life. Before he had reached the age of five, he nearly lost a finger in trying to discover how his mother's clothes-wringer worked. Your mother did have a clothes-wringer, didn't she, Jones?"

"That was before the clothes-wringers came into use," growled the little man testily. "Can't you come to the point?"

"Dear me, so it was," agreed the lawyer. "I have got my facts all mixed some way. Well, at the age of six, Mr. Jones was licked by his father for taking the family lawn-mower to pieces to discover what made it cut grass."

"We didn't have any lawn or lawn-mower," declared the little man mildly. [243]

"At the age of seven Mr. Jones used to sit for hours by the railroad track wondering what made the locomotive's wheels go round. At ten he ruined a bicycle, a present from an uncle, by taking it to pieces trying to discover why it would keep upright when moving but would fall down when stationary."

The boys grinned, and the little man squirmed uneasily in his seat.

"Gentlemen, you have no doubt discovered by now what Mr. Jones' ruling passion was, and is, namely, an almost overwhelming love of machinery. I have not sketched out his entire life, but I have not the slightest doubt that this passion displayed so early in life grew with the passing years until it became a mania. I believe that, when Mr. Jones came to own an automobile, the happiest hours of his life were those spent under the machine with a monkey-wrench in his hand and his clothes covered with grease."

"Can't you come to the point?" demanded the little man irritably.

"In just a minute, Jones," said the lawyer gently. "Now, gentlemen, I have related all this to show you how natural it was when Mr. Jones first laid eyes on your magnificent machine he became possessed of the desire to own it. His whole heart and every fiber of his being yearned to possess that marvel of cog-wheels, levers, and power. The desire grew so upon him that he could not sleep at nights, and at last he came to me and begged me to see if you would not sell out to him. I warned him that you loved your work, and that nothing but a very high price would tempt you to give it up, but that has not diminished his ardor, and so I brought him out here to see what could be done in the matter." [244]

The lads' hearts beat high with hope. Here was a way out of their difficulties they had never dreamed of. They managed to keep their delight out of their faces, however, for they realized that the lawyer was playing a deep game, which they did not understand.

"I am afraid that you will set an unreasonable price on your outfit," said Mr. Bruce, "so I suggest if you will entertain a proposition to sell, that you let me conduct the negotiations. I would hate to have Mr. Jones pay more for the machine than it is worth to him."

The little man winced visibly and shifted uneasily in his chair.

"We would sell, if we could get a proper price," Charley said slowly. "We are willing to leave the matter in your hands."

"Good," said the lawyer. "Now we can get down to business. Let's see; the machine cost \$12,000 laid down at Jupiter, I believe."

"I'll buy it for that," said the little man promptly, while our chums held their breath.

"Not so fast," said the lawyer. "I'm not setting a price yet. I'm just figuring up things. Twelve thousand dollars was the price at Jupiter, but it cost a lot more to set it up and get it on the ground to work; then, there's the camp outfit, mules, truck, etc. The whole thing should be worth [245]

at least \$18,000."

"I'll take it at that," said Mr. Jones quickly.

"Don't be so hasty," reproved the lawyer. "I am not half through my figuring yet. I believe the lads here have done a lot of work which they haven't been paid for yet."

"About \$2,000 worth," Charley said; "then there is \$1,700 coming on work that Murphy did."

"That makes \$3,700," said the lawyer with satisfaction.

"It's highway robbery!" exclaimed the little man excitedly.

"We haven't counted in the good will of the business yet, nor the mental anguish my clients have suffered from troubles caused by enemies to this road-building. I think \$25,000 would be a fair selling price."

"It's blackmail!" shouted the little man. "It's nothing but pure blackmail."

"Oh, no," said Mr. Bruce calmly. "You know you don't have to buy unless you want to. But I haven't finished yet. The buyer would have to keep on all the present crew, if they wish to stay. The sick ones would have to be well cared for, and their wages go on just the same as if they were at work. He would have to rebuild all the bridges destroyed between here and Jupiter, and, lastly, he would have to pay to Willie John, the Seminole, whose son was killed while working for the company, the sum of \$5.00 a week for life. That's my proposition for my clients. Of course, if you do not want to accept it, Mr. Jones, you do not have to do so."

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For a few minutes silence reigned in the tent. Then the little man, with a groan, pulled out his checkbook. "I give up," he said. "You've got me where I can't do otherwise."

"Sensible man," approved the lawyer. "Now, gentlemen, will you please call in your engineers and teamster? I've got some papers I want all hands to sign." The rest of the Americans were quickly assembled in the tent, and the paper signed, after which Mr. Jones handed the lawyer a check for \$25,000 and received the papers in exchange.

"Do you know, Mr. Jones," said the lawyer, as he held the check in his hand, "this road building could have been stopped long ago if its enemies had been smart enough to do one little thing?"

"What was that?" inquired the little man, with a display of interest.

"Pull up and destroy the surveyors' stakes," said Mr. Bruce, smiling.

Chagrin swept over the little man's face. "I guess I am beginning to get old and feeble-minded," he said humbly.

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"Not too old but to be watched, and carefully, too," said the lawyer. "Gentlemen, I think Mr. Jones would like to retire and rest up a bit, after his hard ride. If you could place a tent at his disposal, it would be a great favor. I would suggest that a few men be placed around the tent until one of you can ride in and get this check cashed."

"Think I would stop payment on it?" growled Mr. Jones.

"You might, you know," said the lawyer quietly.

So Mr. Jones was escorted to a tent, and a guard of Spaniards placed around it.

Walter offered to ride in on the little man's pony to get the check cashed and the money placed to their credit in the bank. Charley would have liked to have made the trip himself, but his arm was paining him so intensely that he decided to remain behind. Soon after breakfast Walter rode away on his errand.

"I am thoroughly bewildered," Charley said to Mr. Bruce. "I don't see how you forced Jones to buy us out at such an enormous price, and I do not see any solution of our mystery. It is still a mystery."

"Same here," agreed Captain Westfield. "I must own up, I am as curious as a woman about it."

"I am willing to explain now," said Mr. Bruce, with a smile. "It's a very simple affair, after all."

CHAPTER XXXII. THE MYSTERY SOLVED.

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MR. BRUCE paused before beginning his story. "I take it that you are well satisfied with the settlement you have made with Jones?" he asked.

"More than satisfied—delighted," said Charley, at which sentiment Captain Westfield nodded his head vigorously.

"Very well," said the lawyer. "I am glad of that, for I must confess I have carried things with a pretty high hand in this matter. I am almost afraid to tell you the whole truth now, for you may

condemn me for the settlement I have made of your affairs after I tell you everything, but I have acted for what I thought was your best interests all the way through."

"We believe that," said Charley simply. "But for you we would have lost out completely. We would not ask for particulars if it were not that the mystery of the whole business still puzzles us."

"And yet it's a simple thing," said the lawyer. "You gave me nearly all the clues to it that day you called at my office in Palm Beach. You told me of all the efforts that had been made to hold up your work. You told me about the man Jones, and what the agent at Jupiter had told you about his getting cipher telegrams from the state capital and New York, and you also showed me a newspaper clipping, telling of the efforts of a big company to get free from the State of Florida a big grant of land between Indiantown and the jungle. Why, your mystery was nearly all solved in just what you told me that day."

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"I don't see how," said Charley bewildered.

"The connection was plain enough," said Mr. Bruce, with a smile. "It was a big New York company that wanted to get the land for nothing. Jones was getting mysterious messages from New York and from the state capital. You were almost certain that Jones was the one back of all your troubles. Well, the deductions from all those facts were simple enough. Jones was evidently the agent for the New York company. Jones was not trying to kill any of you or to break up the machine. He was simply trying to hold up and delay the building of the road. Why did he want to hold up your work, you will ask. Well, the answer is contained in that newspaper clipping. The legislature will not meet until next month, when they will likely give the land grant to the company. The inference was plain, Jones' company wanted to have the road built, but not before they got the land from the state."

"But why?" persisted Charley, still puzzled.

"That's the question that puzzled me," smiled the lawyer. "It was what brought me out here the first time to look over the ground, and I found that you were carrying the answer around without knowing it. You were like Jones was about the surveyors' stakes. It was such a little thing that you never thought it of any importance."

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"Go on," said Charley, still mystified.

"Those bits of rock you had in your game bag were phosphate at the highest grade," said the lawyer, with a smile. "The company was asking the state to give them millions of dollars' worth of phosphate for nothing, trusting to the state's ignorance of the value of the land."

"I see," said Charley excitedly, "they wanted to hold the machine back from digging through that land until they got the grant from the state. They reasoned that, when the shovel began to throw out that stuff, someone would be sure to recognize it, and the news would leak out, destroying their chances of getting millions of dollars for nothing."

"That's about the size of it," Mr. Bruce admitted.

"But I still don't see how you made Jones buy our machine at such an enormous price," said the lad.

"I am rather proud of that stroke," admitted the lawyer. "Perhaps my method was not entirely ethical, but, as a lawyer, I owed a duty to you, my clients, before any abstract duty to the state. Once I got the lay of things, I began to study out how I could turn my discoveries to your advantage. Of course, I could have made public the discovery of the phosphate and the grant would not be made, but that would not repay you fellows for your losses. So I hit upon a scheme which was simple but effective. Do you remember I had you all sign some papers the first time I came out here?"

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"Yes," said Charley, "and I have often wondered what they were."

"Each one has a homestead entry on 160 acres of that phosphate land. The whole of them just about covered the land for which the company was asking a grant. I got those entries all filed in the state land office, and that put an end to the grant question, and it brought Jones to my office almost foaming at the mouth, and ready to make almost any kind of terms. That is how I was able to make him buy your machine at a big price and assume your indebtedness. The papers you all signed to-day were a bill of sale and the relinquishment of your homestead claims. They leave the phosphate land open to grant again, if the state sees fit."

"It looks to me," observed Captain Westfield, "that we have given up millions of dollars to secure thousands."

"That's one way of looking at it," replied the lawyer dryly. "But let us see the other side. If you held that land you would have to live on it for four years before the state would give you title to it. You would have to build a railroad to the coast to get your phosphate out to market, and you would have to finish up the county road you are building, which would be a losing proposition from now on. In other words, it would take four years of your time, and about \$300,000 of capital before you would get anything out of the phosphate."

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"You're right," Charley agreed. "The homesteads would have just been white elephants on our hands. There is one feature about our settlement with Jones, however, that does not seem exactly

right to me. The law ought to punish him for the killing of that Indian boy."

"That was the independent act of the gunmen, not Jones' act," said the lawyer. "Jones gave them orders not to hurt any of you, but just to frighten you off the job. He was away in town when the shooting was done. Of course, he is responsible, in a way, for the gunmen were his agents. He brought them out here. But how can it be proved against him? The gunmen are all dead, and, while we know Jones was responsible for your troubles, we would have a hard job proving it, for he has kept in the dark and covered up his tracks pretty well."

"You're right," the lad admitted, "and I for one am well satisfied with the way you have handled things. You have done the wisest thing all the way through. We are lucky to get out of the business so well off." [253]

"You certainly are," agreed Mr. Bruce decidedly. "There is one thing I have not told you about yet, which will make you still gladder that you are out of the business."

"What is it?" Captain Westfield asked.

"The county's road fund is exhausted," replied the lawyer. "You would have had to wait until the taxes are collected next year before you could have gotten any money for your road work."

"Whew!" Charley whistled. "Then Jones has bought \$3,700 worth of bad debts?"

The lawyer chuckled. "Yes, and he knows it. He's a pretty sore man just now. But you needn't waste any sympathy on him. His company is a rich one and can afford to wait a year for their road money. The road will benefit them more than anyone else, anyway. Well, that's all the story, gentlemen, and, if you don't mind, I will lie down and rest a while. I am not used to horseback riding, and I'm just one big ache now. Jones and I are going to stay out here with you until your chum gets back. I want to do a little hunting while I'm waiting, and I would like to get a look at that old Spanish fort you told me about."

"We can go out there to-morrow, and hunt on the way," Charley said, as he showed Mr. Bruce to his own tent. "I will send Willie John out to Indiantown to-day, and have him bring back ponies for all hands. We will make a general holiday and party of it." [254]

Early next morning they all started out on the proposed trip. Even Mr. Jones was released from his tent and permitted to accompany the party. All carried guns and supplies, and Charley also carried a lantern and a supply of candles, for he was determined to search closely the hole in which Walter had found the gold and jewels.

Two days later the party returned, tired but happy, their ponies loaded with game. Charley also bore a second cylinder the same as the one Walter had found.

Soon after they arrived Walter rode into camp with the happy news that the check was cashed and the money placed to their credit in the bank.

The next morning our little party packed up their belongings and bid good-by to the engineers and Spaniards, who had decided to stick by the job. To each of the Spaniards they gave a \$10 bill, and to the engineers \$20 each as a parting gift out of the abundance they had made. Both the laborers and engineers were sorry to see them go, and, for their part, the boys and the captain disliked the parting, for they had grown quite attached to their willing helpers.

"Drop us a line once in a while," Charley told them, in parting. "We may get into some business again where we will need men, and I do not know where we could get better ones." [255]

Mr. Jones had granted them the use of the mules and wagon with the teamster to bring the rig back, and with their things stowed in the wagon our little party took their departure for Jupiter. As Mr. Bruce had ridden out on one of the mules he accompanied them back in the wagon.

"We are coming out of this business in fine shape," Charley said, with satisfaction. "When the jewelry is disposed of we will have over \$7,000 apiece."

"Where are you going from here?" Mr. Bruce inquired; "and what are your plans for the future?"

The chums looked blankly at each other. "Why, we haven't even decided where we are going," Walter gasped.

"Back to our old camping-place on the point for me," said Captain Westfield decidedly. "I'm sick for a breath of sweet, salt air once more. While we are resting up we can decide what we are going to do next." And so it was agreed.

At Jupiter our little party bid good-by to Mr. Bruce and Mr. Jones, who returned to Palm Beach on the first train. Before parting, Mr. Bruce drew Charley to one side. "I am going to always regard you and your chum as my mascots," he said. "I am ashamed to confess it, but yours was the first and only case I have had since I was admitted to the bar. It is always hard for a young lawyer to get a start, and it is especially so in this state. You have broken the ice for me, and now Mr. Jones has retained me as counsel for his company, at a salary of \$3,000 per year." [256]

"Good," said Charley heartily. "I congratulate Jones on having sense enough to know that he could not get a better attorney."

The friendly station agent was delighted to see the little party back again, and pleased to learn that they had done so well in their unpromising venture. As he had just been granted a short vacation, the boys invited him to camp out with them for a while, an invitation which he was quick to accept.

And now all five of them are camped on that sand point again, fishing, swimming, boating, getting oysters and clams, hunting turtle eggs, and having a good time generally. They are having lots of fun, but, as Captain Westfield remarked the other day: "I'll bet it won't be two weeks before you lads will get tired of this, and will want to get out and look for more trouble," to which Chris sighed:

"Golly, I hopes not. Dis nigger is sho' enjoying dis sunshine and fishin'."

THE END.

Transcriber's Notes:

Original text did not have a Table of Contents. One was created by the transcriber to aid the reader.

Obvious punctuation repaired.

Page 12, "Okechobee" changed to "Okeechobee" (lays the great lake Okeechobee)

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THE BOY CHUMS IN THE FLORIDA JUNGLE

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