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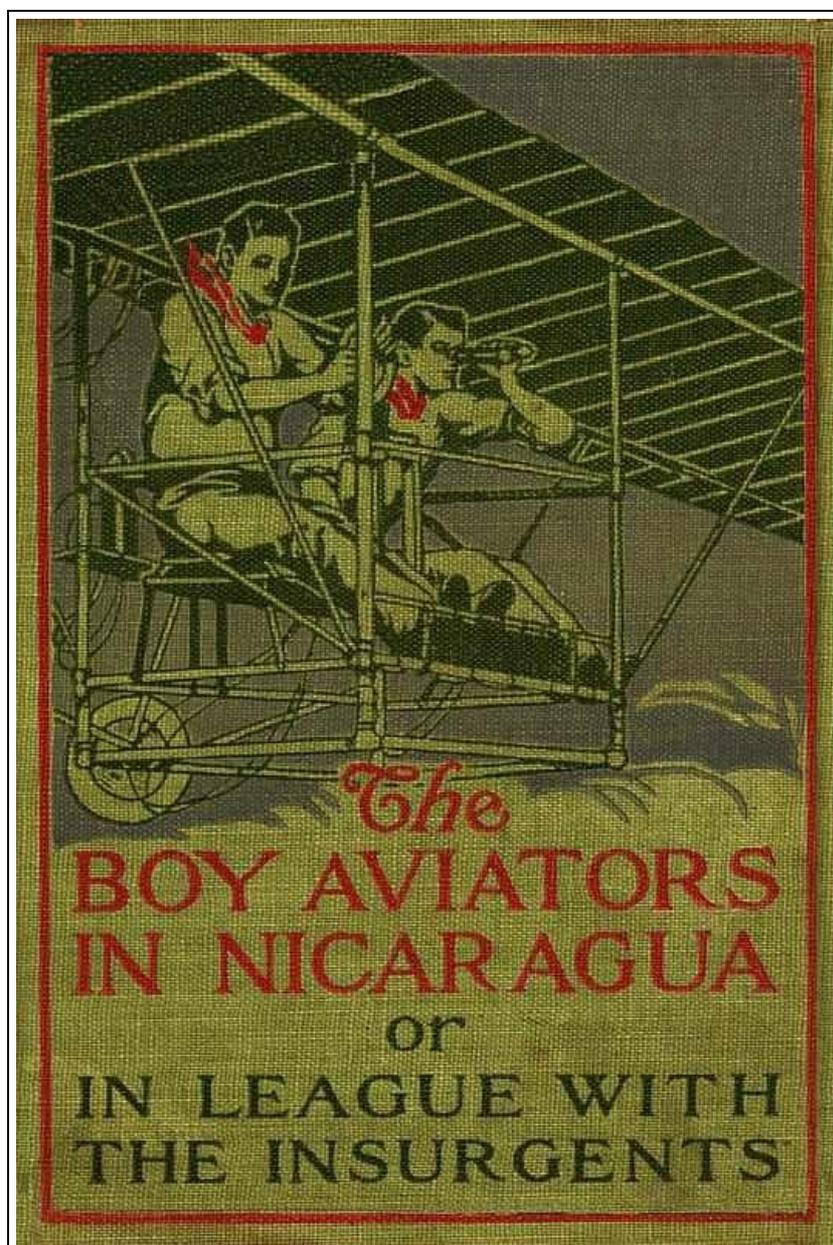
Author: John Henry Goldfrap

Release date: August 18, 2015 [EBook #49734]

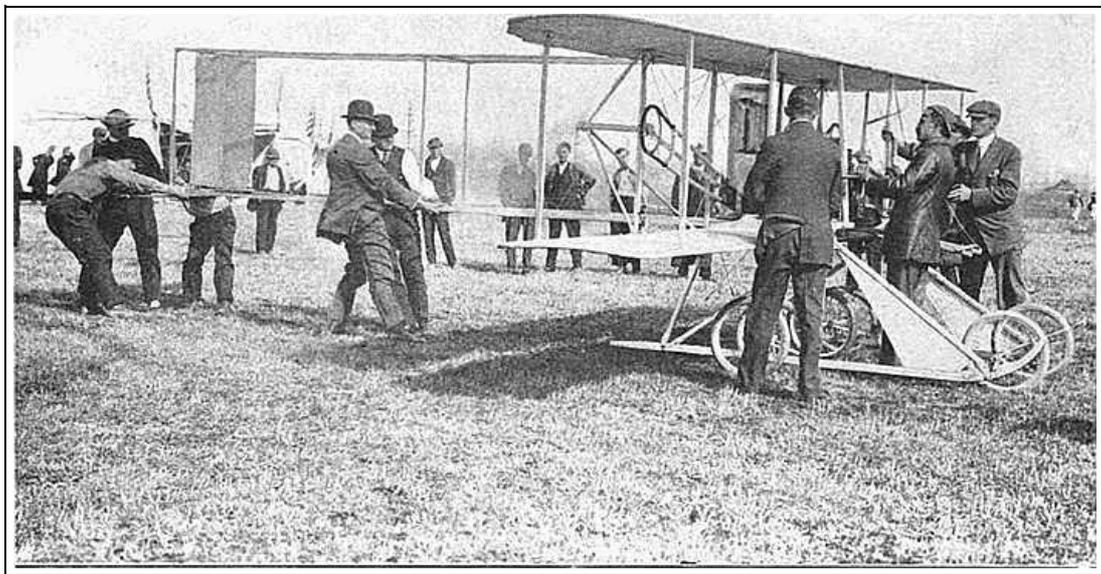
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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THE BOY AVIATORS IN NICARAGUA; OR, IN LEAGUE WITH THE INSURGENTS ***



Book cover



COURTESY OF SCIENTIFIC AMERICAN

THE BOY AVIATORS IN
NICARAGUA

OR

IN LEAGUE WITH THE INSURGENTS

BY
CAPTAIN WILBUR LAWTON

NEW YORK
HURST & COMPANY
PUBLISHERS.

Boy Aviators' Series
By CAPTAIN WILBUR LAWTON
Author of "Dreadnought Boys Series"

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CHAPTER I.

THE BOYS START FOR THE TROPICS.

It was a bitter evening in late December. Up and down the East River tugs nosed their way through the winter twilight's gloom, shouldering aside as they snorted along big drifting cakes of ice.

At her pier, a short distance below the Brooklyn Bridge, the steamer *Aztec*, of the *Central American Trading Company's* line had just blown a long, ear-piercing blast—the signal that in half-an-hour she would cast off her lines. In the shrill summons there was a note of impatience; as if the ship was herself as eager as her fortunate passengers to be off for the regions of sunshine and out of the misery of the New York winter.

The *Aztec* had been due to sail at noon that day, as the Blue Peter floating at her mainmast head had signified. Here it was, however, a good hour since the towering mass of skyscrapers on the opposite side of the river had blossomed, as if by magic, into a jewel-spangled mountain of light and her steam winches were still clanking and the 'longshore men, under the direction of the screech of the boss stevedore's whistle, as hard at work as ever. No wonder her passengers fretted at the delay. 6

Not the least eager among them to see the ship's restraining lines cast off were Frank and Harry Chester, known to the public, through the somewhat hysterical pæans of the Daily Press and the rather more dignified, but not less enthusiastic articles of the technical and scientific reviews, as the BOY AVIATORS. It was an hour since they had bade their mother and an enthusiastic delegation of boy and girl friends good-bye.

Side by side the youths paced the deck muffled in huge overcoats and surveying anxiously, as from time to time they approached the forward end of the promenade deck, a lofty pile of boxes that contained the various sections of their aeroplane the *Golden Eagle* which had made the sensation of the year in aviation circles.

Ever since the *Golden Eagle*, a biplane of novel construction, had carried off from all competitors the \$10,000 prize for a sustained flight offered by J. Henry Gage, the millionaire aeronaut at the White Plains Aerodrome, the boys had become as well-known figures in New York life as any of the air prize contestants during the Hudson-Fulton Exhibition. Frank, the eldest, was sixteen. A well-grown, clean-lived-looking boy with clear blue eyes and a fearless expression. His brother, a year younger, was as wholesome appearing and almost as tall, but he had a more rollicking cast in his face than his graver brother Frank, whose equal he was, however, in skill, coolness and daring in the trying environment of the treacherous currents of the upper air. 7

With the exception of a brief interval for lunch the two boys had amused themselves since noon by watching the, to them novel, scene of frantic activity on the wharf. The ships of the *Central American Trading Co.* had a reputation for getting away on time and the delay had grated on everybody's nerves from the *Aztec's* captain's to the old wharfinger's; in the case of the latter indeed, he had attempted to chastise, a short time before, an adventurous newsboy who had ventured on the pier to sell his afternoon papers. Frank had intervened for the ragged little scarecrow and the boys had purchased several copies of his wares. They had a startling interest for the boys which they had not suspected. In huge type it was announced in all, that the long threatened revolution in Nicaragua had at last broken out with a vengeance, and seemed likely to run like wildfire from one end of the turbulent republic to the other. Troops were in the field on both sides—so the despatch said—and the insurgents were loudly boasting of their determination to march on and capture Managua, the capital, and overthrow the government of President Zelaya. Practically every town in the country had been well posted with the manifesto of the reactionaries, and had taken the move as being one in the right direction. 8

In the news that the revolution, the storm clouds of which had long been ominously rumbling had actually broken out, the boys had an intense and vital interest. Their father's banana plantation, one of the largest and best known in Central America, lay inland about twenty miles from Greytown, a seacoast town, on the San Juan River. The boys were on their way there after a long and trying season of flights and adulation to rest up and continue, in the quiet they had hoped to find there, a series of experiments in aviation which had already made them among the most famous graduates the Agassiz High School on Washington Heights had turned out in its years of existence. Already in their flights at White Plains, and later during the Hudson-Fulton celebration, the boys had earned, and earned well, laurels that many an older experimenter in aviation might have worn with content, but they were intent on yet further distinction. Already they had given several trials to a wireless telegraph appliance for attachment to aeroplanes and the *Golden Eagle* in some private flights had had this apparatus in use. The results had been encouraging in the extreme. With the use of a greater lifting surface the boys felt that they would be justified in adding to the weight the aeroplane could lift and that this weight would be in form of additional power batteries for the 9

wireless outfit both had agreed. In the boxes piled on the foredeck they had indeed a supply of balloon silk, canvas, wire, spruce stretchers and aluminum frames which they intended to put into use as soon as they should reach Nicaragua in the furtherance of their experiments. The conquest of the air both in aviation and communication was the lofty goal the boys had set themselves.

10

"The revolution has really started at last, old boy—hurray!" shouted Harry, throwing his arm in boyish enthusiasm about his staid brother Frank, as both boys eagerly assimilated the news.

"I say, Frank," he continued eagerly, "it's always been our contention that an aeroplane capable of invariable command by its operator would be of immense value in warfare. What a chance to prove it! Three cheers for the *Golden Eagle*." In his excitement Harry pulled his soft cap from his head and waved it enthusiastically.

Frank, however, seemed to view the situation more gravely than his light-hearted brother. As has been said, Frank, while but little older in point of years possessed a temperament diametrically opposed to the mercurial nature of his younger brother. He weighed things, and indeed in the construction of the *Golden Eagle*, while Harry had suggested all the brilliant imaginative points, it had been the solid practical Frank who had really figured out the abstruse details of the wonder-ship's structure.

Despite this difference of temperament—in fact Harry often said, "If Frank wasn't so clever and I wasn't so optimistic we'd never have got anywhere,"—in spite of this contrast between the two there was a deep undercurrent of brotherly love and both possessed to the highest degree the manly courage and grit which had tided them over many a discouraging moment. Nor in the full tide of their success, when people turned on the street to point them out, were either of the boys at all above recognizing their old playfellows and schoolmates as has been known to be the case, it is said, with other successful boys—and men.

11

"I don't know, Harry," replied Frank at length to his brother's enthusiastic reception of the news of the rebellion, "there are two sides to every question."

"Yes, but Frank, think," protested Harry, "we shall have a chance to see a real skirmish if only they keep at it long enough. Confound it though," he added with an expression of keen regret, "the paper says it's another 'comic opera revolution.'"

"I wouldn't be too sure of that, Harry," replied Frank, seriously. "When father was north last he told us, if you recollect, that a Central American revolution was not by any means a picnic. In the battle in which the United States of Colombia drove the Venezuelans from their territory, for instance, there were ten thousand dead left on the field."

12

Frank halted under one of the wire-screened lights screwed into the bulkhead beside which they had been pacing to let the light of the incandescent stream brighter upon his paper. He scanned the page with rapid eye and suddenly looked up with an exclamation that made Harry cry:

"What's the trouble, Frank?"

"Well, it looks as if on the day we are sailing for Nicaragua that that country is monopolizing the news to the exclusion of the important fact that 'The Boy Aviators'—he broke off with a laugh.

"Hear! hear," exclaimed Harry, striking a pose.

"—I say," continued Frank, "that it seems as we haven't a look in any more. The country for which we are bound has the floor. Listen—"

Holding the paper high beneath the light, Frank read the following item which under a great wood-type scare-head occupied most of the front page space not given over to the announcement of the revolution.

NICARAGUAN MYSTERIOUSLY STRANGLED.
ROBBERY NOT MOTIVE; BUT
ROOM IN HOTEL IS RANSACKED BY
HIS SLAYERS.

13

DR. RAMON MONEAGUE, OF CITY OF RIVAS, IS DONE
TO DEATH IN M— HOTEL ON WEST 14TH
STREET.

POLICE HAVE NO CLUES. BUT LOOK FOR
TWO-FINGERED MAN.

CORONER SAYS MAN OF GREAT STRENGTH DID
THE DEED.

"Almost as big a head as they gave us when we won the prize," laughed Harry. "Newspaper head I mean."

"I wish you'd be serious, Harry," said Frank, though he couldn't help smiling at his brother's high flow of spirits. "This is really very interesting. Listen:"

"The body of a man about forty-five or possibly fifty years old was discovered this afternoon in an upper floor bedroom of the M— Hotel on West Fourteenth Street. A brief scrutiny established that the man, who had registered at the hotel a few hours before as Dr. Ramon Moneague of Rivas, Nicaragua, had been strangled to death with exceptional brutality. He had been dead only about an hour when the body was discovered by a chambermaid who found the door unlocked.

14

"Whatever may have been the object of the murder it was not robbery, as, although the dead man's trunk and suit-case had been ransacked and money lay scattered about the room, his watch and valuable diamond pin and rings had not been disturbed.

"Whoever strangled Dr. Moneague to death he was no weakling. Both Coroners, Physician Schenck and the detectives who swarmed on the scene are agreed upon this. The marks of the murderer's fingers are clearly impressed upon both sides of the dead man's throat.

"Perhaps the most remarkable feature of the case, and one which may lead to the slayer's speedy detection, is the fact that his right hand had only two fingers. The police and the coroner's physician and the coroner himself came to this conclusion after a brief examination of the marks on the throat. On the left side of the larynx where the murderer's right hand must have pressed the breath out of the Nicaraguan there is a hiatus between the mark made by the thumb and first finger of the right hand, indicating clearly to the minds of the authorities that the man who killed Dr. Moneague is minus the middle and index fingers of his right hand.

"Every available detective at headquarters and from the different precincts have been put upon the case and every employee of the hotel connected with it even in the remotest way examined closely. No result has developed to date however. The clerk of the hotel admits that he was chatting with a friend most of the morning and after he had assigned Dr. Moneague to a room, and it might have been possible for a stranger to slip in and up the stairs without his noticing it."

"There," concluded Frank, throwing the paper into a scupper, "how's that for a ringtailed roarer of a sensation?"

"It seems queer——" began Harry, but the sudden deafening roar of the *Aztec's* whistle cut him short. His words were drowned in the racket. It was her farewell blast this time. As the sound died away, echoing in a ringing note on the skyscrapers opposite, the boys felt a sudden trembling beneath their feet.

Far down in the engine-room the force was tuning her up for her long run which would begin in a few minutes now. Already a couple of tugs that had been hanging alongside since noon had wakened up and now made fast lines thrown from the *Aztec's* lofty counter to their towing bitts. It was their job to pull her stern first out into the stream where the current of the ebb-tide would swing her head to the south.

"All clear there for'ard?" it was the bearded muffled-up skipper bellowing through a megaphone from the bridge, where the equally swaddled pilot stood beside him.

"We're off at last, Frank old boy," said Harry jubilantly as what seemed a silence compared to the racket of hoisting in the last of the cargo fell over the wharf.

Anything Frank might have had to reply was cut short by a hoarse echo of the skippers hail, it came from the bow.

"All go—o—ne for'ard, sir."

The officer in charge of casting off the bow lines waved his hand and a quartermaster at the stern wigwagged to the tugs to go as far as they liked.

"All go—o—ne aft," suddenly came another roar from that quarter as the tug's screws began to churn up the water. The hawsers tightened and the *Aztec* began to glide slowly backward into the stream.

At that moment from far down the wharf, there came a loud hail.

"Stop the ship—twenty dollars if I make the ship."

A loud yell of derision was the reply from several steerage passengers clustered in the bow of the *Aztec*.

"Hold on, there," suddenly roared the same vigilant old wharfinger who had earlier in the day shown such a respect for discipline that he had shooed the newsboy off the wharf, "hold on there."

The boys heard coming up the wharf the staccato rattle of a taxicab running at top speed.

The two sailors in charge of the gangplank were at that moment casting it loose and lowering it to the wharf. They hesitated as they heard the frantic cries of the old wharfinger.

"Let go, there. Do you want to carry something away," yelled the second officer, as he saw the gangplank under the impetus of the ship being crushed against the stanchions of the wharf.

The taxicab dashed up abreast of the landward end of the imperilled gangway. Out of it shot a man whom the boys, in the blue-white glare of the arc-lights on the pier, noticed wore a short, black beard cropped Van Dyke fashion, and whose form was enveloped in a heavy fur overcoat with a deep astrachan collar.

"Five dollars a piece to you fellows if I make the ship," he shouted to the men holding the gangplank in place. Already the wood was beginning to crumple as the moving ship jammed it against the edge of the stanchion.

The stranger made a wild leap as he spoke, was up the runway in two bounds, it seemed, and clutched the lower rail of the main deck bulwarks just as the two men holding the crackling gangway up, dropped it in fear of the wrath of their superior officer. The man in the fur coat dived down in his pocket and fished out a yellow-backed ten-dollar bill.

"Divide it," he said in a slightly foreign accent. Suddenly he whirled round on his heel. The old wharfinger was bellowing from the wharf that the man in the fur coat would have to wireless his address and his baggage would be forwarded. There were several pieces of it on the taxi. A steamer trunk, two suit-cases and a big Saratoga. These, however, seemed to give the new addition to the *Aztec* ship's company no concern.

"My bag. My black bag," he fairly shrieked, running forward along the deck to a spot opposite where the wharfinger and the taxi-cabby stood.

"My black bag. Throw me my black bag," he repeated.

With trembling fingers he managed to get out a bill from his wallet. He wrapped it round a magazine he carried with a rubber-band which had confined his bill roll.

"This is yours," he shouted, holding the bill-wrapped magazine high, so that the taxi-cabby could see it. "Throw me the black bag."

The taxi-cabby, like most of his kind, was not averse to making a tip.

He dived swiftly into his cab and emerged with a small black grip, not much bigger than a lady's satchel, bound at the corners with silver. It was a time for quick action. By this time the sharp

cutwater of the *Aztec's* bow was at the end of the wharf. In another moment she cleared it. The tide caught her and majestically she swung round into midstream, while the tugs lugged her stern inshore.

The chauffeur poised himself on the stringpiece at the extreme outer end of the wharf.

"Chuck me the money first," he shouted at the gesticulating figure on the *Aztec*, "I might miss your blooming boat."

The magazine whizzed through the air and landed almost at his feet, carrying with it the bill. The taxi-cabby, satisfied that all was ship-shape, bent his back for a second like a baseball pitcher.

"I used to twirl 'em," he said to the wharfinger, as with a supreme effort, he impelled the black bag from his hand. There was a good thirty feet of water between the end of the wharf and the *Aztec* by this time, but the taxi-cabby's old time training availed him. It was a square throw. The stranger with a strange guttural cry of relief caught his precious black bag and tucked it hurriedly into the voluminous inner pocket of his fur coat.

"He must have diamonds in it at least," exclaimed Harry, with a laugh. Both boys, with the rest of the passengers, had been watching the scene with interest, as well they might. As for the man in the fur coat his interested scrutiny was directed with an almost fierce intensity to the pile of blue oblong cases on the fore deck, all neatly labeled in big white letters:

HANDLE WITH CARE.
AIRSHIP "*GOLDEN EAGLE*."
F. and H. CHESTER, GREYTOWN, NICARAGUA.

The man in the fur coat seemed fascinated by the boxes and the lettering on them. From his expression, as a great bunch light placed on the foredeck for the convenience of the men readjusting the hastily laden cargo, fell upon him, one would have said he was startled. Had anyone been near enough or interested enough they might also have seen his lips move.

"Well, he wants to know our bag of tricks again when he sees them," remarked Harry, as the boys with a keen appetite, and no dread of sea sickness to come, turned to obey the dinner-gong.

With frequent hoarse blasts of her strong-lunged siren the belated *Aztec* passed down the bay through the narrows and into the Ambrose Channel. A short time after the cabin passengers had concluded their dinner the pilot took his leave. From his dancing cockleshell of a dory alongside he hoarsely shouted up to the bridge far above him:

"Good-bye, good luck."

Then he was rowed off into the darkness to toss about till the steam pilot-boat *New York* should happen along and pick him up with her searchlight.

"Good-bye, old New York!" cried both boys, seized with a common instinct and a most unmanly catch at their throats at the same instant. From the chart house above them eight bells rang out. Already the *Aztec* was beginning to lift with the long Atlantic swell. The Boy Aviators' voyage toward the unknown had begun.

THE STORM-CLOUDS GATHER.

Señor Don Alfredo Chester, as the boy aviators' father was known in Nicaragua, sat in a grass chair on the cool patio of his dazzlingly whitewashed hacienda on his plantation of La Merced. He thoughtfully smoked a long black cigar of native tobacco as he reclined. The lazy smoke from his weed curled languidly up toward the sparkling sapphire sky of the Nicaraguan dry season, which had just begun; but the thoughts of Planter Chester did not follow the writhing column.

Nor had he in fact any eye for the scene that stretched for miles about him, although it was one of perfect tropic beauty and luxuriance. Refreshed by the long rainy season which here endures from April to December everything glittered with a fresh, crisp green that contrasted delightfully with the occasional jeweled radiance of some gorgeously-plumaged bird flashing across a shaft of sunlight like a radiant streak of lightning. These brilliant apparitions vanished in the darker shades of the luxuriant growth like very spirits of the jungle.

The dense tangle of rank greenery that surrounded the plantation, like a conservatory run wild, held, however, far more dangerous inhabitants than these gaudy birds. In its depths lurked the cruel but beautiful ocelots—prettiest and most treacherous of the cat family. Jaguars of huge size,—and magnificently spotted,—hung in its tree limbs, on the lookout for monkeys, fat wild hogs, or an occasional philosophic tapir. And here too in the huge trees, whose branches afforded homes for a host of multi-colored orchids lurked the deadly coral snake with its vivid checkerings of red and black and the red and yellow blood snake, the bite of either of which is as instantaneously fatal as a bullet through the heart.

From where the hacienda stood—high on the side of a steep hill on whose flanks waved everywhere the graceful broad fronds of the banana—could be obtained a distant glimpse of the Caribbean, flashing a deep sapphire as it hurled its huge swells thundering shoreward. It was on this occasional gleaming glimpse far down the San Juan valley that Señor Chester's gaze was fixed as he thoughtfully enjoyed his cigar.

It was easy to see from even a casual glance at Mr. Chester's strong face that his boys had inherited from him in undiminished measure the keen intellectuality that showed there, as well as the vigorous nervous frame and general impression of mental and physical power that the man gave out. It was on these boys of his that his mind was fixed at that moment. They were then by his calculations about a day away from Greytown, although as the *Aztec* made usually a good many ports of call on her way down the coast it was only a rough guess at her whereabouts.

As he sat on his patio that afternoon Mr. Chester would have given all he possessed to have had it in his power at that minute to have been able to keep his boys in New York, but it was too late for that now.

When it was arranged that they were going to visit him to display to his proud eyes the *Golden Eagle* that had made them famous, neither he, nor any other of the American planters, dreamed that the revolution was so near. So much talk had preceded it that it seemed hard to realize that it was really on and that life and property were in real danger. Some of the editors who write so blithely of comic opera revolutions, should visit Central America during one of them. They would sustain a change of heart.

In common with his brother planters he was heartily in sympathy with the reactionaries, although of course he could not honorably take an active part in the revolution as the United States and Nicaragua were nominally at peace. At Washington, however, the trend of affairs was even then being watched more closely than they guessed.

If the revolution succeeded it meant fair treatment and equitable taxes for the American planters and business men of the republic, if it failed—well, as he had expressed it a few days before at a sort of informal meeting of half-a-dozen influential planters—"We might as well shut up shop."

Another piece of disquieting news which had come to him by cable from New York, and which had set the reactionaries and their secret friends in a frenzy, was the announcement of the murder of Dr. Moneague. As his mind reverted to this subject there was a sound of wheels on the steep drive leading up the hill to the house, and an old-fashioned chariot hung on C. springs, driven by an aged negro, in livery as old as himself, it seemed, drove up with a great flourish.

Señor Chester sprang to his feet hat in hand as it came to a halt, for beside the dignified looking old Spaniard, who occupied one side of its luxuriously-cushioned seat, there sat a young woman of the most dazzling type of the famous Castilian beauty.

"Can usta usted, Señor Chester," exclaimed the old man, with a courteous bow full of old-fashioned grace, as the proprietor of La Merced ranch, hat in hand after the Spanish custom, approached the carriage. "We are going down to Restigue and dropped in here by the way to see if you are still alive, it is so long since you have favored us with a visit. Not since this glorious strike for liberty was made, in fact."

"When do you expect those wonderful boys of yours?" he went on, "whose doings, you see, even we have heard of in this out-of-the-way corner of the earth."

"Indeed, Señor Chester," said the young woman at the yellow old Don's side, "you must bring them to see us the very minute they arrive. My husband—Don Ramon—" she sighed.

"Brave Don Ramon," supplemented her father, "a man in the field fighting at the head of his troops for his country is to be envied. The name of General Pachecho was not unknown when I was younger, but now—" he broke off with a quizzical smile full of the pathos of the involuntary inactivity of age.

"When Don Ramon returns triumphant from the field he can do better than merely discuss his favorite subject of aviation with my boys," proudly remarked Señor Chester, "he can see the *Golden*

Eagle itself. Let us hope that he will introduce it into the new army of the hoped for republic of Estrada."

"Viva Estrada!" cried the girl, and her aged father; caught with common enthusiasm at the name of Zelaya's foe.

"I only wish, though," said Señor Chester, with a half sigh, "that the country was more settled. For us it is all right. But, you see, their mother—"

"Ah, the heart of a woman, it bleeds for her sons, is it not so?" cried Señora Ruiz, in her emotional Spanish manner.

"But, Señor Chester, never fear," she continued. "My husband will not let the troops of Zelaya drive Estrada's forces as far to the east as this."

"But this is the hot-bed of the revolutionary movement. Zelaya has declared he will lay it waste," objected the planter.

"While Don Ramon Ruiz leads the reactionary troops," proudly retorted the woman with feverish enthusiasm, "Zelaya will never reach Restigüe or La Merced or the Rancho del Pachecho."

"Where the torch is laid, who can tell how far the fire will run?" remarked the Don, with true Spanish love of a proverb.

"Oh, don't let's think of such things!" suddenly exclaimed Señora Ruiz, "we revolutionists will be in Managua in a month. Oh, that Zelaya—bah. He is a terrible man. I met him at a ball at Managua a year ago. When he took my hand I shivered as if I had touched a toad or a centipede. He looked at me in a way that made me tremble."

Both his visitors declined Señor Chester's courteous invitation to enter the dark sala and partake of a cup of the native chocolate as prepared by his mocho, or man servant.

"It grows late, Señor," said the old Spaniard, "like my life the sun is declining. Oh, that I should have lived to have heard of the death of brave Moneague! You know of it?"

A nod from Chester assured him. He went on:

"When he went to New York alone to collect revolutionary funds, I told them it was foolish, but I was old, and there were many who would not listen. Peste! how foolhardy to give him the parchment with the mystic plans on it. The secret of the lost mines of King Quetzalcoatl are worth more than one man's life and have indeed cost many."

"Do you mean that Dr. Moneague had the plans of the mines with him when he was killed?" quickly asked Señor Chester. "I always thought the mines were a native fable."

"The young think many things that are not so," was the old Don's reply. "No, my son, Dr. Moneague did not have the plans of the mines themselves but he had what was as good, he had the bit of parchment on which—in the lost symbols of the Toltecs—the secret of the long lost paths by which the precious metals were brought to the coast was inscribed. He spent his life at this work of deciphering the hieroglyphics of that mysterious race, and he solved them; but, brave man, he was willing to yield up the secret of his life work if for it he could get money enough to save his country. You knew that his visit to New York was to see if he could not induce one of your American millionaires to give us funds?"

"I guessed it," was the brief reply. "But why, if he knew the secret of the mines, did he not go there himself?"

"He went there once; but you who have lived long in this country know that, under Zelaya's cruel rule he would have been worse than foolhardy to have brought out any of the miraculous wealth stored there. If Zelaya had heard of it he would have wrung the secret from him by torturing his children before his eyes."

Shaking with excitement the old patriot gave a querulous order to the aged coachman to drive on, and waved his thin yellow hand in farewell. Señor Chester stood long watching the dust of his visitor's carriage as it rose from the banana-fringed road that zig-zagged down the mountain side. At last he turned away and entering the house emerged a few minutes later with a light poncho thrown over his shoulders.

The chill of the breeze that sets seaward in the tropics at twilight had already sprung up and in the jungle the myriad screaming, booming, chirping voices of the jungle night had begun to awaken.

Chester made his way slowly to a small, whitewashed structure a short distance removed from the main hacienda. As he swung open the door and struck a light a strange scene presented itself—doubly strange when considered as an adjunct of a banana planter's residence. On shelves and racks extending round the room were test tubes and retorts full and empty. The floor was a litter of scribbled calculations, carboys of acid, broken bottles, straw and in one corner stood an annealing forge. Here Señor Chester amused himself. He had formerly been a mining engineer and was as fond of scientific experimentation as were his sons.

Stepping to a rack he took from it a tube filled with an opaque liquid. He stepped to the doorway to hold it up to the fading light in order to ascertain what changes had taken place in its contents since the morning.

He almost dropped it, iron-nerved man as he was, as a piercing shriek from the barracks inhabited by the plantation workers rent the evening hush of the plantation.

The noise grew louder and louder. It seemed that a hundred voices took up the cry. It grew nearer and as it did so resolved itself into its component parts of women's shrill cries and the deep gruff exclamations of men much worked up.

Suddenly a man burst out of the dense banana growth that grew almost up to Señor Chester's laboratory. He was a wild and terrifying figure. His broad brimmed straw hat was bloodied and through the crown a bullet had torn its way. A black ribbon, on which was roughly chalked "Viva Estrada!" hung in a grotesque loop at the side of his face.

His clothes, a queer attempt at regimentals consisting of white duck trousers and an old band-master's coat, hung in ribbons revealing his limbs, scratched and torn by his flight through the jungle. He had no rifle, but carried an old machete with which he had hacked his way home through the dense bush paths.

The master of La Merced recognized him at once as Juan Batista, a ne'er-do-weel stable hand, who had deserted his wife and three children two weeks before for the patriotic purpose of joining Estrada's army, and incidentally enriching himself by loot. He had attached himself to General Ruiz's division.

"Well, Juan! Speak up! What is it?" demanded his master sharply. Juan groveled in the dust. He mumbled in Spanish and a queer jargon of his own; thought by him to be correct English. 34

"Get back there!" shouted Señor Chester to the crowd of wailing women and scared natives from the quarters that pressed around. They fell back obediently.

"What is all this, Blakely?" asked Chester impatiently, as Jimmie Blakely, the young English overseer, strolled up as unruffled as if he had been playing tennis.

"Scat!" said Jimmie waving his arm at the crowd and then, adjusting his eyeglass, he remarked:

"It seems that Estrada's chaps have had a jolly good licking."

"What!" exclaimed the planter, "this is serious. Speak up, Juan, at once. Where is General Ruiz?"

It was with a sinking heart that Chester heard the answer as the thought what the news would mean to the radiant beauty he had been talking with but a short time before, flashed across his mind.

"Muerto! muerto!" wailed the prostrate Juan, "dead! dead!" 35

At this, although they didn't understand it, the women set up a great howl of terror.

"Oh Zelaya is coming! He will kill us and eat our babies! Oh master save us—don't let Zelaya's men eat our babies."

The men blubbered and cried as much as the women, but from a different and more selfish reason.

"Oh, they will kill us too and spoil all our land. The land we have grown with so much care," they bemoaned in piercing tones, "moreover, we shall be forced to join the army and be killed in battle."

"Blakely, for heaven's sake take that bit of glass out of your eye, and get this howling mob out of here!" besought Chester desperately. "If you don't I'll kill some of them myself. Here you, get up," he exclaimed bestowing a most unmerciful kick on the still prostrate Juan. "Oh, for a few Americans—or Englishmen," he added, out of deference to Blakely.

"Couldn't do a thing with them without the eyeglass, Mr. Chester," drawled the imperturbable Blakely, "they think it's witchcraft. Don't twig how the dickens I keep it in."

"All right, all right, meet me here at the house and we must hold a council of war, as soon as you've got them herded safe in the barracks," impatiently said Chester, turning on his heel. 36

"Now come on, you gibbering idiots," shouted the consolatory Briton at his band of weeping men and women, "come on now—get out of here, or I'll eat your blooming babies myself—my word I will," and the amiable Jimmie put on such a terrifying expression that his charges fled before him too terrified to make any more noise.

Out of sight of the governor, however, the Hon. Jimmie's careless manner dropped.

"Well, this is a jolly go and no mistake;" he muttered, giving the groveling Juan a kick, where it would do the most good, "well, Jimmie—my boy—you've always been looking for a bit of row and it looks as if you'd jolly well put your foot in it this time—eh, what?"

While all this transpired on the rancho El Merced, the *Aztec* with our heroes on board surprised everybody in Greytown, and no one more than her captain, by arriving there ahead of time. Just about the time that the Hon. Jimmie was herding his weeping charges to the barracks, her mud-hook rattled down and she swung at anchor off the first really tropical town on which the Boy Aviators' eyes had ever rested. 37

BILLY BARNES OF THE PLANET.

Before sun up the next day there was a busy scene of bustling activity at the plantation of La Merced. The bustle extended from the hacienda to the barracks,—the news of the arrival of the *Aztec* having been brought to the estancia the night before by a native runner.

Old Matula, Señor Chester's personal mocho had been down at the stables since the time that the stars began to fade urging the men, whose duty it was to look after the horses, to greater activity in saddling up the mounts, which his master, Jimmie Blakely, and their cortege needed in their ride to the coast to meet the boys.

The native plantation hands, as volatile as most of their race had forgotten the events of the preceding night in their child-like excitement at the idea of the arrival of *The Big Man Bird*, as they called the *Golden Eagle*; this being their conception of the craft gained after numerous consultations of Señor Chester.

Even Juan was strutting around the quarters and posing as a wounded hero, to the great admiration of his wife and the other women who entirely forgot that the night before he had appeared anything but a man of arms, and that his wife had subsisted mainly on the Señor Chester's charity, since his desertion of her to become a patriot.

Jimmie Blakely and Señor Chester had sat far into the night talking over the situation, and it had struck midnight before they arrived at the conclusion that it would be inflicting a needless shock to inform Señora Ruiz of Juan's report of her husband's death until some sort of confirmation had been obtained. Fate, however, took the painful task out of their hands. The gossiping servants who had heard Jose's lamentations lost no time in conveying the news to the estancia of Señor Pachecho. Señora Ruiz received the report of her husband's death bravely enough while the servants were in the room, but after they had left she fell in a swoon and speedily became so ill that the old doctor at Restigue had to be routed out of bed and driven at post haste in a rickety volante to Don Pachecho's home.

After a hasty snack—a la Espagnole—the real breakfast in the tropics not being taken till eleven o'clock or so—the master of La Merced and Blakely mounted their horses and set out at top speed for Greytown.

"I've got my own ideas of welcoming the boys to Nicaragua," confided Mr. Chester to his overseer as they put spurs to their mounts, "I ordered a bonga to be in readiness for us as soon as the *Aztec* arrived. I guess a trip through the surf in one of those will astonish them, eh?"

"I should jolly well think so," replied the Hon. Jimmie, screwing his monocule more firmly in his eye.

The young Britisher was immaculate in khaki riding breeches, long gray coat and yellow puttees. The admired and feared eyeglass, to which he owed so much of his power over the natives, was gleaming firmly from his face, nor did the rapid pace at which the rough-gaited horses were urged over the road, affect its equilibrium. To save time Mr. Chester had elected to take a trail instead of the main road. By doing this they cut off at least ten miles of the distance. It was a wild looking cavalcade that galloped along through clouds of dust over the none too sure footing of the rock-strewn trail. Behind Mr. Chester and Jimmie rode old Matula and the redoubtable Jose. The latter proudly wore about his classic brow a white bandage—in token of his being a hero and wounded. Both Jose and Matula led after them extra ponies for the use of the boys in the ride back to La Merced.

Bringing up the rear was a particular friend of Jimmie's mounted on a razor-backed, single-footing mule that somehow managed to get over the ground as fast as the other animals and without any apparent exertion. Jose's friend was a peculiarly villainous-looking old Nicaraguan Indian, who eked out a scanty living at rubber cutting—that is, slashing the rubber trees for their milk and carting the product in wooden pails to the coast.

He had arrived at the rancho a few days before and not finding Jose there, the patriot being at the front, had just hung around after the easy fashion of the country to wait for him. The clothes of this old scarecrow, who by the way answered to the name of Omalu, consisted of coffee bags all glued over with the relics of countless tappings of the rubber tree. As he bestrode his mule his legs stuck out from his gunny bag costume like the drumsticks of a newly-trussed fowl.

Both Mr. Chester and Jimmie were armed. The former carried, besides his navy pattern Colt, a cavalry carbine slung in a holster alongside his right knee. Jimmie had strapped to a brand new cartridge belt an automatic revolver of the latest pattern. In addition to these weapons Jose and Matula carried their machetes, without which a native of any Central American country will in no wise travel, and old Omalu regarded, with a grin of pride on his creased face, his ancient Birmingham matchlock—commonly known as a gas-pipe gun.

As the cavalcade clattered into the dusty palm-fringed port of Greytown, with its adobe walls and staring galvanized iron roofs, the first launch from the *Aztec* was just landing passengers at the end of the new, raw pine wharf recently built by the steamship company. Before this all landings had been made through the surf, as Mr. Chester intended to land the boys.

The owner of La Merced and his party halted to watch the group of new arrivals making its way down the pier. Among the first to put his foot ashore was the black-bearded man who had such a narrow escape of missing the steamer in New York.

He looked very different now, however, except for his heavy face and suspicious quick glances. He wore spotless white ducks, of which he had purchased a supply a few days before, at the first tropic port of call the *Aztec* made. On his head was a huge Panama hat of the finest weave. In his hand he still gripped the black leather bag that he had caused such a fuss about in New York. It

looked very incongruous in contrast to his fresh South American attire.

"General Rogero!" exclaimed Mr. Chester, as the black-bearded man came abreast of the little party. Hearing the name the person addressed looked up quickly.

"Ah, Señor Chester," he exclaimed, displaying a glistening row of teeth beneath his heavy moustache, "how strange that you should be the first person I should meet after my little voyage to your delightful country. How goes it at the Rancho Merced?" He seemed purposely to avoid the important events that were transpiring.

Mr. Chester assured him that rarely before had the season promised better. The rains had ceased early and the crops looked as if they would be exceptionally heavy.

While they talked a barefooted messenger from the telegraph office in the iron railroad station slouched up to them.

"For you, General," he said, saluting as he handed the bearded man a pink envelope.

With a swift "pardon" Rogero ripped open the envelope the messenger had handed him. From the time it took him to read it it was of greater length than the ordinary wire and he raised his eyebrows and exclaimed several times as he perused it.

When at length he looked up from it his face had lost the almost smug expression it had worn before. In its place there had come a manner of contemptuous command very thinly veiled by a sort of sardonic politeness.

"As you probably know," he said, "and as this telegram informs me, the insurgent forces under the renegade Estrada were beaten back two days ago at El Rondero," he looked insolently from under his heavy lids at the American planter to observe the effects of his words upon him.

For all the effect it had on Mr. Chester however, the words might as well have been directed at a graven image.

"Well?" he said, taking up the thinly disguised challenge flung at him by Rogero.

"Well," sneered Rogero, "I simply thought it might be of interest to you to tell you that you are regarded at Managua as renegado. I may also inform you that to-day at sunrise the two captured Americans suspected of being connected with the revolutionaries were shot down like——"

Whatever General Rogero might have been going to add he stopped short as Mr. Chester bent his angry gaze on him.

"What!" exclaimed the latter, "shot down without a trial—without an opportunity to explain. Zelaya will suffer for this."

"That remains to be seen," sneered Rogero, selecting a cigarette from a silver case and lighting it with calm deliberation. "What I have to say to you is in the nature of a warning, Señor. 'Verbum sapiente,' you know."

"I can dispense with your advice, Señor," cut in Mr. Chester.

"At present perhaps—but we may meet later and under different circumstances. Remember, Señor, that General Rogero of President Zelaya's army shows no mercy to those who choose to ally themselves with dogs of rebels. Whether they are American citizens—or British," he added with a look of scorn at Jimmie, "it makes no difference. A bullet at sunrise answers all questions.—Adios Señores."

He raised his hat with an abrupt gesture, and with a sharp "Venga," to an obsequious orderly from the barracks, who had just arrived with a horse for him, the general swung himself into the saddle and rode off to the Hotel Gran Central de Greytown.

As the general cantered off in a scattering cloud of dust, a youth who had landed from the launch at the same time, stepped up to Mr. Chester and his companion. He looked as if he might have walked off the vaudeville stage. Over one shoulder was slung a camera, from the other depended a canteen. A formidable revolver was strapped at his waist, and a pith helmet with a brilliant green cumer-bund sat low on his reddish hair. While the general had been uttering his sinister threats this figure had been busy taking snapshots of everything from the gallinazos or carrion buzzards that sat in long rows along the ridges of the galvanized roofs to the old women under huge umbrellas, who dispensed evil-looking red and yellow candy from rickety stands.

"I beg your pardon," he said, placing his hand on the pommel of Mr. Chester's saddle. "Would you mind telling me who that gentleman is with whom you have just been speaking?"

As he raised his face he disclosed a plump, amiable countenance ornamented by a pair of huge round spectacles.

"I know this is unusual," he hurried on apologetically, "but I'm Barnes—Billy Barnes of the New York Planet,—correspondent, you know."

"Well, Mr. Barnes, if you are a correspondent you will have a lot of opportunities to meet General Rogero before this little trouble is over," replied Mr. Chester, in an amused tone.

The effect of this reply on Mr. Barnes of the Planet, was extraordinary. He blew his cheeks out like a frog and executed a sort of double shuffle. He gazed at Mr. Chester in a portentous way for a few seconds and then sputtering out:—"You say that's General Rogero?" then, with the cryptic words:

"Joseph Rosenstein, diamond salesman, eh?—oh Lord, what a story!" he dashed off in the direction the general's horse had vanished.

"That young man is either insane or the sun has gone to his head," commented Mr. Chester, as both he and Jimmie watched young Mr. Barnes's fat little legs going like pistons bearing him toward the Hotel Gran Central.

"He's a jolly queer sort of a cove," was the amiable Jimmie's comment, "a bit balmy in the crumpet, I should say."

Any explanation of the meaning of "Balmy in the crumpet" on Jimmie's part, was cut short by a native who ran from midway down the wharf and approaching Mr. Chester, rapidly muttered a few words of corrupt Spanish.

"He says the bongas is ready," said Mr. Chester, turning to Jimmie—"come on. Remember I haven't seen my boys for a year or more."

They hurried down the wharf leaving Matula, Jose and old Omalu behind to watch the horses. Alongside the pier, riding the heavy swells like a duck, lay a peculiar type of boat about thirty feet long, called by the Nicaraguans, a bonga. It was carved out of a solid log of mahogany and painted a bright glaring red inside and out. They clambered down into it by a ladder formed of twisted jungle creepers and a few minutes later were skimming the smooth green swells that lay between them and the *Aztec*.

THE TWO-FINGERED MAN.

The *bonga*, urged along by her two peaked sails, ran alongside the *Aztec*, a quarter of an hour later. The boys were leaning over the rail looking very natty in neat, white duck suits and Panama hats, and the meeting after Mr. Chester and Blakely had clambered aboard up a hastily thrown Jacob's Ladder, can be better imagined than described.

The first greetings over and the boys having been introduced to Blakely, the conversation naturally turned to the *Golden Eagle*. Led by Frank and Harry, Mr. Chester and the overseer proceeded to the fore deck where the crew of the *Aztec* assigned to that duty were making fast a sling to hoist the first of the blue boxes over into the lighter that lay alongside the steamer.

"You see," explained Frank to his interested listeners, "that we have taken good care to cage our *Golden Eagle* securely. I suppose, father, that you would like to hear a few details of its construction. Well, then, ladies and gentlemen,"—adopting a grandiloquent showman's manner—"the *Golden Eagle* is a biplane machine—that is to say, that she has a double set of planes one above the other. They have a spread of fifty-six feet by six and are covered with balloon silk of a special quality lacquered over with several coats of a specially prepared fire and water composition.

"She can lift a weight of two hundred pounds in addition to the three passengers she is capable of carrying. I believe that we will be able before long to stay up in the air for a sustained flight of two hundred miles or more. Already we have made a flight of a hundred and fifty miles and with the new twin propellers that we have adjusted I think we can make the longer distance easily.

"Our engine is fifty horsepower of what is known as the opposed type and every bit of it made in an American shop. It 'turns up' twelve hundred revolutions a minute. We rarely run it that speed, however. The gasolene and the water for cooling the cylinder jackets are suspended in tanks under the deck-house. A pump circulates the water through the cylinder jackets and into a condenser where it is cooled off and is ready to be forced through the cylinders again. The lubricating oil is fed also by a force system which is much more reliable than the gravity method particularly in an airship where there is a tendency to pitch about a lot in the upper air currents.

"The frames upon which the covering of the planes is stretched are formed of an alloy of aluminum and bronze which makes an exceptionally light and strong material for the purpose. We put a few ideas of our own into the *Golden Eagle* when we built her, among them being an improved bird-like tail which makes her handle very readily even in heavy weather.

"And—Oh, yes, I almost forgot the wireless plant. That is really the most unique feature of our craft. We carry our *aerials*, as the long receiving wires are called, stretched across the whole length of the upper plane and the receiving and sending apparatus is right handy to the operator's right hand. We have a double steering wheel fitted tandem, so that anyone sitting behind the operator can handle the rudder while he is busy at the wireless.

"In the pilot-house, as we call it, but it is really more a sort of cockpit in the deck-house, are fitted small watertight mahogany boxes which contain our navigating instruments and we have a brass binnacle boxing in a spirit compass which is lighted at night by the current from a miniature dynamo which also supplies power for a small but powerful searchlight.

"Then there is the ration basket. It weighs but fifty pounds full, but it carries enough provisions for three persons for five days. In it also are three pairs of thin blankets made of a very light but warm weave of material and a water-filter. It contains, too, some medicines and bandages and lotions in case we have a smash-up. So you see," concluded Frank with a laugh, "we have a pretty complete sort of a craft."

After good-byes had been said to the *Aztec's* captain and a few of their fellow-passengers who still remained on board, and the last of the dozen cases containing the *Golden Eagle* had been lowered into the lighter, the little party descended the Jacob's Ladder and took their places in the *bonga*. While they had been on board one of the brown-skinned fishermen who manned her had rigged up a sort of awning astern with a spare sail, and this gave the voyagers a welcome bit of shade. With a cheer from the boys her crew shoved off and the *bonga* heeling to the breeze headed for the palm-fringed shore.

"About time they put about and ran up to the wharf, isn't it?" asked Harry as the *bonga* scudded along so close to the shore that the roar of the heavy surf as the big waves broke on the yellow beach could be distinctly heard.

"Here's where you are going to get a new experience," laughed Mr. Chester, "I want to see whether such bold air sailors as you boys can stand shooting the surf without being scared."

"You don't mean to say that we are going to land on the beach?" gasped Harry.

"That's just what I do," cheerfully replied his father. "In a few minutes you'll see something that will show you that all the wonders of the world aren't monopolized by New York."

The men in the *bonga* were lowering the sails as he spoke and when they had them tied in gaskets each took an oar while the captain ran to the stern with a long sweep.

The men rowed slowly toward the shore till they were almost hurled bow on into the tumbling surf. Suddenly, at a cry from the man in the stern, they stopped work with their oars and the *bonga* tossed up and down on the racing crests of the big waves while they "backwatered."

All at once the man with the steering oar, who had been watching for a large wave to come rolling along, gave a loud command. The rowers fell furiously to work. The boys felt the *bonga* lifted up and up on the crest of the big combers and a second later they were swept forward, it seemed at a rate of sixty miles an hour. The surf broke all about the *bonga*, but she hardly shipped a drop.

As the long narrow craft raced into the boiling smother of white foam her crew leaped out in water almost up to their necks and fairly rushed the craft up the beach before the next roller came

crashing in.

"Well, that beats shooting the chutes, for taking your breath away," remarked Harry as the party strolled along under a palm-bordered avenue on their way to the hotel where they were to lunch. The dripping crew of the bonga followed them carrying the boys' smart, new baggage on their heads.

The Hotel Grand Central was a long building with a red-tiled roof and the invariable patio in the center off which the room opened. The boys were delighted with the place. In the middle of the patio, in a grove of tropical plants, a cool fountain plashed and several gaudy macaws were clambering about in the branches of the glistening greenery. The hot dusty street outside with its glaring sun and blazing iron roofs seemed miles away.

As they were about to turn into the sala, in which their meal was to be served, a man bustled out and almost collided with them. It was General Rogero.

"Ah, Señor, we seem fated to encounter each other to-day," he exclaimed with a flash of irritation as his eyes met Mr. Chester's.

The next moment he had started back with a quick: "peste!" as his dark gaze fell on the boys.

"Why!" exclaimed Harry, "that's the fellow who came down on the ship. The man who said he was a diamond salesman and that he had a lot of stones in that black bag! Do you know him, father?"

"Know him?" repeated Mr. Chester in a puzzled tone as Rogero whisked scowling out of sight into an adjoining room.

"He was a mysterious sort of cuss," chimed in Frank, "kept to himself all the way down and had his meals in his cabin."

"Perhaps he had a good reason to," smiled Mr. Chester; "your diamond salesman is General Rogero of the president's army."

As he spoke and the two boys fairly gasped in astonishment at this sudden revelation of the true character of the man with the black bag, Billy Barnes came hurrying up.

"Hello, my fellow-passengers," he exclaimed heartily; "hello, Frank! hello, Harry!"—it was characteristic of Mr. Barnes, that although he had met the boys for the first time on the steamer he was calling them by their first names the second day out—"as I hinted to your father an hour or so ago, I've run into the biggest story of my career."

"You rushed off in such a hurry that I could hardly call it even a hint," smiled Mr. Chester.

"You'll get jolly well laid up, Mr. Barnes, if you go rushing about like that in this climate—what?" put in Blakely.

"I beg your pardon, sir, really," burst out the impulsive Billy contritely, addressing Mr. Chester, "but you know when a newspaper man gets on the track of a good story he sometimes forgets his manners. But you will be interested in my morning's work."

"Here's what I'm digging on and if it isn't a snorter of a story never let me see New York again."

"Well, what is it, Billy?" asked Harry, "come on, never mind the fireworks—let's have it."

"Just this;" proudly announced the reporter, "General Rogero has only two fingers on his right hand."

"Yes?" from the boys in puzzled tones.

"Well, what of it?" from Mr. Chester.

Billy was evidently artist enough to keep his listeners in suspense for he went on with great deliberation.

"You remember that when he was 'a diamond salesman,' on board the *Aztec* that we hardly ever saw him?—well, there was a reason, as the advertising men say. What was that reason? you ask me. Just this; that he didn't want any one to get wise that he was minus three of his precious digits.

"Why for?—Because the man who killed Dr. Moneague in New York, was shy on his hands in the same way—now do you see!" triumphantly demanded the reporter.

"If our amiable friend Rogero isn't the same man who murdered Moneague in New York I'll eat my camera, films and all," he concluded.

"It doesn't seem to me that you have any proof on which you can base such a serious accusation," said Mr. Chester. "Rogero is a desperate man and an unscrupulous one, but I do not believe that even he would deliberately commit such a crime."

"Don't you, sir?" contradicted Billy, "well, I do. From what I've observed of him, he'd stop at nothing if he had an end to gain. The thing in this case though is, what was his motive for killing Dr. Moneague, except that Moneague, so the police discovered, was an agent of the revolutionists down here?"

Like a flash the recollection of what Don Pachecho had told him about the bit of parchment on which was traced the secret of the lost Toltec mines crossed Mr. Chester's mind. He hurriedly gave his interested auditors an outline of what he knew about the clue to the treasure trove.

"Rogero's the man then for twenty dollars!" excitedly cried Billy. "He had the thing in that black bag he guarded so carefully. If I only could get hold of it we'd have his neck in the halter in a brace of shakes. I've a good mind to try. The first thing I'm going to do, though, is to flash a bit of message to New York—to No. 300 Mulberry Street—and tell my old friend Detective Lieutenant Connolly that I think a run down here would result in his turning up something interesting. Anyhow —," the reporter was continuing, when he was cut short by the sound of a shot from outside and a loud cry of pain. The startled party hurried through the sala and out into the street.

"A shot means a story;" remarked Billy to his camera as he adjusted it ready for action while he hurried along after the others.

ROGERO IS CHECKMATED.

In front of the hotel an excited crowd was clustered about a man who lay in the dust. He was evidently badly wounded if not dead. Near by, a sneer on his evil face, stood Rogero, his still smoking pistol in his hand. As Mr. Chester and the boys hurried up he turned to them and exclaimed:

"You see, Señor, that it is not safe to be a revolutionist in these days."

"Why it's poor Juan!" cried Mr. Chester as he bent over the man who had been shot. "Good God, he's dead!" he exclaimed a second later after a brief examination of the prostrate figure.

"Yes; one of your servants I believe," remarked Rogero carelessly, "the dog was pointed out to me as being a runaway from Estrada's army and, when I called him to me to give him a little wholesome advice, he started to run off so I was compelled in the interests of discipline to shoot him."

There was no more emotion in his voice than if he had been speaking of some ordinary event of life.

"This is a coward's trick!" exclaimed Mr. Chester angrily, "this man was my servant and any complaint you had against him you should have referred to me."

Rogero lightly flicked some ash off the cigarette he was smoking.

"I should be more temperate in my language, Señor, if I were you," he said.

"I am an American citizen, sir," replied Mr. Chester; "the flag of my country floats over that consulate." He pointed to a neat, verandared building a few blocks away. "I shall see that you are made to answer for this wanton crime."

"I am afraid that you will have to defer such action for the present," sneered Rogero, as a file of ragged Nicaraguan soldiers came running from the barracks and, after saluting him respectfully, fell in behind him with fixed bayonets.

"This city is under martial law and I should advise you to be circumspect in your behavior. A suspected insurgent sympathizer is on dangerous ground in these days."

"By the way," he went on viciously, "I am afraid that I shall have to interdict the orders you have given to have that celebrated air-ship,"—there was a bitter irony in his tones that made the boys clench their fists, "conveyed to your hacienda. I am of the opinion that air-ships in the hands of revolutionists sympathizers come under the head of contraband of war and I intend to have this particular one destroyed."

The effect on Harry and Frank of these words was magical. The elder brother sprang angrily forward although his father and Blakely tried to hold him back.

"You mean you would dare to destroy the property of non-combatant American citizens?" he demanded, his blood a-boil.

"I don't talk to boys," was Rogero's contemptuous reply.

"Well, you'll have to talk to us," angrily chimed in Harry coming forward, "if you put a finger on the *Golden Eagle*, or harm her in any way you will find that the United States' government resents any insult or injury to her citizens in a way that you will remember."

So excited were the boys at the dastardly threat of Rogero, and so thunderstruck were their father and Blakely at the man's brutal arrogance that none of them had noticed Billy Barnes who had been standing behind the party. Now he stepped up, with his camera, bellows pulled out and ready for action. Rogero was standing defiantly, his hand on his sword-hilt. For the first time the boys saw his right hand.

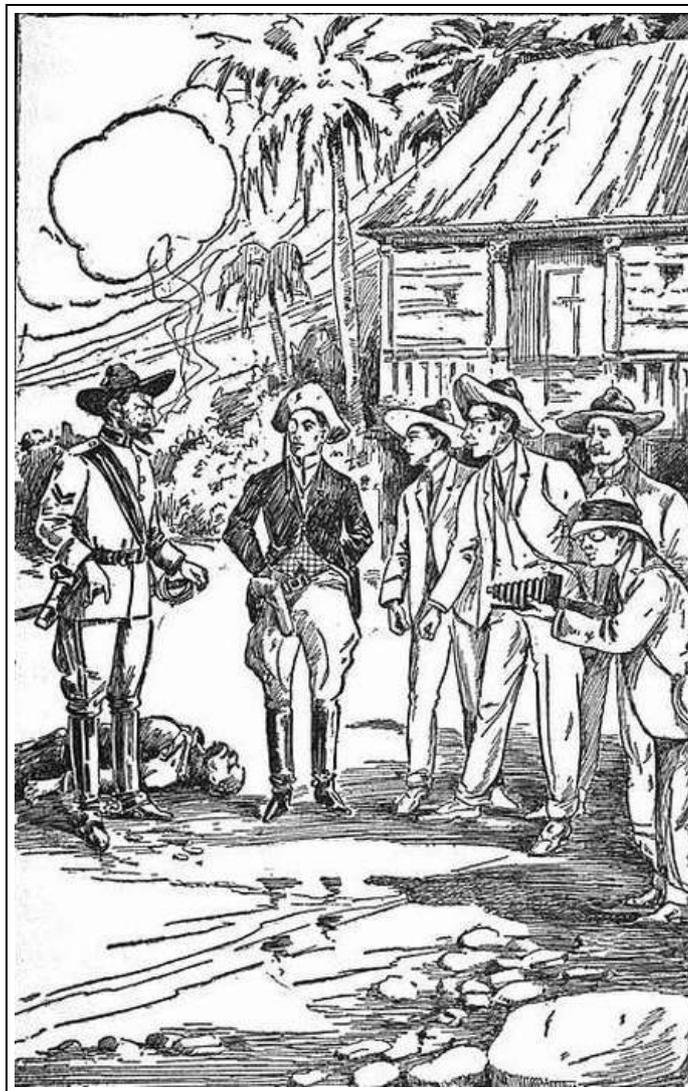
There were two fingers missing!

"Just hold that pose for a second, General," exclaimed Billy, his finger on the button of his machine. Rogero turned with a snarl as the button clicked and his image was irrevocably fixed on the film.

"It will be a beautiful picture," remarked Billy amiably. "You see the light was very good and the lamentable fact that you are shy two fingers will be clearly shown, I hope, in the print I intend to make at the earliest opportunity."

"You dog of a newspaper spy," snarled Rogero, his face a pasty yellow and fear in his eyes, "I know you. You are a sneaking reporter. We don't like such renegades as you in my country. We have a way of dealing with them, however, that usually causes them to cease from troubling us."

He raised his hand to his throat and gave an unpleasant sort of an imitation of the "garrotte" which is the instrument of execution in most Latin-American countries.



"JUST HOLD THAT POSE A SECOND, GENERAL."

"And we in the States have also got a way of dealing with men like you," said Billy meaningly. "Now," he went on in a low voice, stepping close to Rogero, "if you harm that aeroplane in any way I'll forward the picture, I just took to Detective Connolly of the New York Central Office, and I think he can have a very interesting time with it tracing your movements in New York *before the murder of Dr. Moneague!*"

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If he had been struck full in the face the effect on Rogero could not have been more magical. He opened his dried lips as if to speak, but no sound came. In his eyes there was a hunted look.

"I'll have you—," he began when he at last found his voice.

"You'll have nothing," replied Billy cheerfully, "because you don't dare. Now, then; tell these boys they can have their aeroplane unharmed. Write them an order—here's my pad and a fountain pen—don't forget to give them back."

Rogero snarled like a cornered tiger, but he took the pen and scrawled a passport in Spanish on Billy's pad.

"Take your wonderful flying machine then, and I only hope you break your necks," he muttered. With an evil look at Billy which did not at all seem to worry that amiable young gentleman who merely winked knowingly in reply, he turned on his heel and strode off followed by his soldiers.

66

"By Jove, you American pressmen have a high-handed way of doing things, I must say," remarked Blakely. The boys, too, were much delighted and amused and congratulated Billy warmly on his successful bit of strategy. Mr. Chester, however, by no means took the matter so lightly. After he had given orders that the body of the unfortunate Juan be properly cared for and sent back to La Merced for burial, he turned to young Barnes.

"My boy," he said, "we are not in America now, and in the present state of the country Rogero can be a very dangerous man."

"He ought to be shot," indignantly cried Harry.

"Or hanged," put in Frank.

"Both," concluded Billy, with conviction.

"Perhaps," said Mr. Chester, as he headed the little group into the hotel once more, "but in Nicaragua the law of might prevails and that man means mischief."

As he uttered the last words in a grave tone there came a rattle of hoofs far down the street, and the next minute a horseman flashed by the hotel in a cloud of yellow dust. He spurred his horse desperately up to the barracks and, as he drew rein, Mr. Chester and the boys saw Rogero come out on the balcony and the messenger standing in his stirrups, hand him an envelope.

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"News from the front," commented Mr. Chester. Rogero disappeared for a few minutes and when he came out again he handed the messenger another envelope, evidently containing a reply to the

despatch he had just received. The man wheeled his horse almost on its haunches and spurred down the street again.

"What is it?" shouted Mr. Chester in Spanish to him as he dashed by the hotel riding as if his life depended on speed.

"Another great victory," he shouted reining his sweating horse in for an imperceptible fragment of time.

As the clatter of his horse's hoofs died away in the direction of the mountains there was a great commotion in the barracks. Bugles sounded and men ran about with horses, arms and bundles, in the confusion that characterizes improperly-disciplined troops. After about half an hour of this frenzied preparation the troops, some two hundred in number, with Rogero and his dark-skinned staff officers at their head with the blue and white "colors"; fell awkwardly in line and to the music of a crazy band with battered, dirty instruments began their march to the front.

Their way led by the hotel where the boys stood gazing with amusement and some pity at their first sight of a Central American army on the march. Some of the troopers were not much bigger than the newsboys they had left behind in the New York that now seemed so far away. These little fellows tottered along under the weight of haversacks and heavy Remington rifles, keeping step as best they could with their elders. Several of the soldiers carried gamecocks under their arms and others had guitars and mandolins slung over their shoulders; one man even carried a bird in a wooden cage.

Rogero's face bore a deep scowl as he rode by surrounded by his excited staff officers. His eyes were downcast but he raised them as he passed the little group in front of the Grand Central. There was a sinister gleam in them like that in the leaden orbs of a venomous serpent.

"Adios, señors," he sneered, leaning back in his saddle, "we shall meet again and I shall have the pleasure, I hope, of introducing some of you to our Nicaraguan prisons."

FRANK TO THE RESCUE.

Wagons for the transportation of the packing cases containing the *Golden Eagle*, and for the boys' baggage had been secured by old Matula earlier in the day and when the Chester party arrived at the wharf, late in the afternoon, he had made such an impression on the native workers by his imperious commands and promises of extra money from the Señor Chester for fast work, that they found everything in readiness for the journey back to the plantation. The boys were delighted with their ponies, spirited little animals as quick as cats on their feet and able to travel over the rough mountain roads like goats.

The wagon was drawn by a team of bullocks hitched to the pole by a heavy yoke of wood, with the rough marks of the axe still upon it.

"Well, we really are in a foreign country at last," exclaimed Harry as his eyes fell on the primitive-looking wagon and its queer motive power.

In spite of old Matula's by turns imploring, threatening and wheedling persuasions it was almost dark when the expedition was ready to make a start for the plantation. There was a full moon, however, and the moonlight of the tropics in the dry season is a very different thing to the pallid illumination of the northern Luna. As the Chester party, headed by the boys on their ponies, wound through the streets of Greytown and began the long steady climb to La Merced, a radiance like electric light flooded the way and showed them every twig and leaf as clearly as if it had been day. Everywhere, too, the darker shadows were spangled with brilliant fireflies.

They reached the plantation about midnight and found that the servants had made everything ready for their reception. The boys were delighted with the picturesque reception the hands gave them. Every man, woman and child had a torch and the sight of these flickering about in the moonlight long before they reached their destination resembled a convention of huge lightning-bugs.

Inside the main sala there was a tempting meal in the native style laid out. There was huge grapefruit and custard apples, a fruit filled with real custard, crisp bread-fruit roasted to a turn, fragrant frijoles, the national dish of the Latin-American from Mexico to Patagonia, and several kinds of meat and salted fish all cooked in the best style of old Matula's wife, who waited on them.

"Well, this beats Delmonico's," remarked Billy, who at Mr. Chester's hearty invitation had made one of the party. "I always had an idea that you people down here lived like savages," he laughed, "but here you are with a layout that you couldn't beat anywhere from New York to the coast."

Billy's simple-hearted admiration of everything he had encountered on the estancia caused Mr. Chester much amusement. Billy proved his appreciation of everything by sampling all the dishes in turn including a dish of red peppers that caused his temporary retirement in agony.

"Jimminy crickets, I felt as if I had a three alarm fire in my department of the interior," was the way he explained his feelings after he had swallowed a gallon of water, more or less, to alleviate his sufferings.

After their exciting day the boys slept like tops, although their dreams were a wild rehash of the novel experiences they had gone through. Frank dreamed that Rogero in an airship fashioned like a bonga was pursuing them through space and that although they speeded up the *Golden Eagle* to her fastest flight, the evil-faced Nicaraguan gained on them rapidly. He had just run the prow of his queer air-craft into the *Golden Eagle's* stern and Frank felt himself falling, falling down into a huge sort of lake of boiling surf when he awoke to find it was broad daylight, and the cheerful daily routine of the plantation going busily on as if the events of the day before had been as unreal as his dream. Springing out of bed, Frank aroused Harry. The younger boy had just about rubbed the sleep out of his eyes when their father came into the room.

"Come on boys," he said, "and I'll show you how we take our morning bath down here."

The boys slipped on bath-ropes and thrust their feet into slippers. When they were ready Mr. Chester led them out to a small building with latticed sides a short distance from the house. Inside was a cement-lined pool about twenty feet in length by fifteen in width with a depth that varied from five feet at one end to seven at the other. It was full of sparkling water that ran into it from a mountain stream on one side, and was piped back into the bed of the brook, again after it had flowed through Mr. Chester's unique bathroom.

With a loud whoop Harry was just about to jump into the inviting looking bathing-place when Mr. Chester stopped him.

"Look before you leap, Harry," he cautioned, "every once in a while a tarantula or a snake or a nice fat scorpion takes a fancy to a bath, and tumbles in here and they are not pleasant companions at close range."

An investigation showed, however, that there were none of the unpleasant intruders Mr. Chester had mentioned in the bath that morning, at least, and the two boys swam about to their hearts' content, and after dressing came in for breakfast as delightful as their meal of the previous night in its novelty and variety.

Breakfast despatched of course the first thing to do was to superintend the unpacking of the *Golden Eagle*. The bullock cart had been taken down to a cleared spot not far removed from the barracks of the laborers, and a squad of brown-skinned men were already at work when Frank and Harry strolled down there setting up a sort of shelter, thatched with palm leaves under which the boys might work without being in danger of sunstroke.

Everybody on the plantation found some excuse to pass by the shelter that morning while the boys, and three or four envied laborers unpacked the *Golden Eagle*, and began to put the sections in place. A feature of the ship of which the boys were very proud was the ease with which, by a

system of keyed joints, their beautiful sky-ranger could be taken apart or put together again very quickly. Under Frank and Harry's coaching even the Nicaraguan laborers, none of the brightest of humankind, got along very fast, and by the time the second breakfast, as it is called, was ready the frames for the planes were in place and the trough-like cockpit or passenger car ready in position to have the piano wire strands of immense tensile strength that connected it to the steel stanchions of the planes screwed into place with delicate turnbuckles made especially for the *Golden Eagle*.

After lunch the work went on apace. The balloon-silk coverings of the planes were fitted with tiny brass ringed holes through which they were threaded on to the frames by fine wire. This was a tedious business and Frank and Harry did it themselves, not caring to trust so delicate an operation, and one which required so much patient care, to the good-natured, easy-going Nicaraguans, who would have been as likely as not to have scamped the job and left several holes unthreaded. As the whole pressure of the weight of the car and its occupants, fuel and lubricants was to be borne by these planes it can readily be seen why the boys placed so much importance on doing a good thorough job.

It took till sunset to complete this task and the boys were tired enough not to be sorry that their work was done when the big bell that called the laborers in from the banana groves began to clang.

In the work on the *Golden Eagle* the boys had been very materially aided by Billy Barnes, who photographed the craft from every possible and impossible point of view and insisted on Frank snapping a picture of him sitting at the steering wheel.

"It's as near as I'll ever get to steering her, I guess," he explained, "I haven't got the head for these things that you chaps have."

It was Billy Barnes, too, who reported that evening in great excitement that while he was walking along the porch he had seen a big spotted cat "loafing around."

"That wasn't a cat," laughed Mr. Chester, "that was an ocelot and if you think you can qualify as a Nimrod we will go out after supper and try and get a shot at it. They are bad things to have around the place—not that they are really dangerous, but they steal chickens and the men are scared of them and spend most of the day looking out for what Billy calls a 'big cat,' instead of doing their work."

"I don't know what or who Nimrod is," replied the good-natured reporter, "but I sure would like to get a shot at that ossy—what do you call it?"

After supper the hunting party put on stout boots, coming well above their knees, in case of lurking snakes, and armed with rifles started out after the ocelot. Frank and Harry were both pretty good shots, having had a good deal of experience at their father's camp in the Adirondacks in the days before he became a planter. Billy Barnes had never had a rifle in his hand before, but he didn't say so. He opined that to shoot all you had to do was to look steadily at the object aimed at and then, pull the trigger.

"I think we'd better try for him over by Bread-Fruit Spring, sir," said the young overseer as the party, as quietly as possible, sallied out.

"A good suggestion, Blakely," replied Mr. Chester.

"Do they eat bread-fruit?" inquired Billy.

"No, but they drink water, Mr. Barnes," replied Mr. Chester; "now, don't let's have any talking or we shall have our night's work for nothing."

Following Mr. Chester's directions the party spread out in a fan-shape, as they neared the spring, and it was agreed that they should gradually draw in the ends of this "fan" as they neared the spot where they expected to find the ocelot. If any one got lost they were to shout or fire their rifle.

In pursuance of this plan the party carefully tiptoed along, stopping every now and again to listen carefully. Billy Barnes was far out to the left of the rest of the party and as they got deeper into the mysterious shadows of the tropical forest his heart began to beat a little faster than usual. The moon shone down through the immense tree-tops in a few patches, but outside of these circles of light-illuminated spots the jungle was as black as an unlighted cathedral.

Every time a creeper brushed against his face, Billy remembered all he had ever read of huge snakes that hung in trees and crushed people to death with their terrible constricting folds. Then, too, occasionally a sleeping monkey, disturbed by a bad dream or some preying night animal, would start off through the branches with a screech that sounded horribly human. Not for the world would Billy have let the boys or their father know that he was filled with a great longing for human company, but he devoutly wished he was back at the comfortable hacienda.

"A nice finish for the *Planet's* special correspondent," he mused. "William Barnes, Crushed to Death by a Boa Constrictor"—b-r-r-r—"that would look well in a head, wouldn't it?"

Suddenly, as Billy emerged from a dark shadow cast by a huge tree with immense buttress-like roots, the space between any one of which would have served as a barn for a horse and buggy, he saw in the patch of white moonlight right ahead of him a sight that made his scalp tighten and his blood run chill.

Crouching over the body of a deer and tearing at it with low, snarling growls, was a thing that looked something like Billy's "big cat," but was much too large to have ever been mistaken for that peaceful domestic animal. The creature was too engrossed with its meal to pay much attention to the badly-scared boy, and if he had retained his presence of mind he might even have tiptoed off unnoticed, but at that moment the luckless Billy was impelled to sneeze.

As his loud "Ah, c-h-o-o!" sounded the animal lifted its head angrily. In the moonlight Billy could see its white, gleaming teeth and cruel eyes. It looked about, as if puzzled, for a few seconds, but suddenly its green eyes lighted on the petrified Billy, who was too scared even to run.

Instantly it crouched down on its belly and began lashing the ground with its tail. Its upper lip was pulled back in a snarling grin that disclosed its saber-like teeth and dripping fangs.

"It's all off," groaned poor Billy. He raised his rifle to his shoulder in a desperate sort of hope that it might scare the thing away.

"If I only hadn't been ashamed to ask how the thing worked," thought Billy.

As the thought flashed across his mind the animal with a loud, screaming snarl sprang directly at the trembling reporter. More from instinct than anything else he pulled the trigger and a loud report followed. It was a heavy sporting rifle that Billy carried and the unexpected recoil, which, not knowing anything about firearms, he had not prepared for, threw him off his balance. This saved his life for the minute, for as he reeled the huge creature he had disturbed at its forest meal shot past him so close that he could feel its warm breath against his cheek.

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Foiled of its prey for the moment the maddened animal switched round with the agility of its kind and crouched for a fresh spring.

"Gee, now I know how a mouse feels," gasped poor Billy to himself, as the huge creature prepared for what Billy felt was to be its death-spring.

With an agility born of desperation the youth made a wild leap for a hanging tendril of one of the giant creepers that festooned a tree near by. He caught it and began climbing with a skill he never knew before he possessed. He was beginning to think that he could at least reach a branch of the tree where he would be out of his savage opponent's reach, when something happened that threw him into a cold sweat.

He felt the creeper begin to sag. It was breaking under his weight. In vain he tried to brace himself against the tree trunk. His knees slipped and slid and he could get no foothold.

Suddenly, without any warning, the creeper snapped. With a wild shriek of real terror Billy was hurled to the ground. His last conscious thought was of his old home up in New York State and of who would tell his mother of his fate.

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Then like a man in a dream he saw a flash of fire so near at hand that it almost scorched his face. He heard a loud report and a snarling growl of pain and felt something warm and heavy fall with a crushing weight on top of him. Then everything went black.

When he came to he found himself in the center of an excited group. Everybody was shaking Frank's hand and congratulating him, and the boy, looking very embarrassed, was trying to head off the tide of compliments.

"Oh, you're all right, then," exclaimed Harry as Billy opened his eyes on the group in the moonlight.

"W-w-what happened?" gasped Billy, "didn't that critter get me?"

"No, thanks to Frank," exclaimed Harry impulsively; "you owe him your life, Billy. He heard your first shot and hurried to your aid and just in time. The critter didn't get as you call it—didn't get you, but Frank got the critter."

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"As pretty a shot as I ever saw," remarked Mr. Chester.

"Oh, pshaw," said Frank, "I couldn't help hitting him, he looked as big as an elephant; and besides, if I hadn't got him he'd have got me."

"What the dickens was the thing?" inquired Billy, "a lion or tiger?"

"No, but something quite as dangerous—a jaguar," replied Mr. Chester, "and as big a specimen as I have ever seen."

He stirred the magnificently spotted hide of the dead wild beast with his foot as he spoke.

"Frank!" exclaimed Billy, with tears springing to his eyes and real emotion in his voice, "you saved my life to-night." Frank put up a protesting hand.

"No, I will say it," impulsively burst out Billy. "I owe you my life and by jimminy crickets," wringing Frank's hand like a pump-handle, with a hearty grip, "I'll never forget it. Maybe some day I can do something to repay you, and when that time comes count on Billy Barnes."

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How soon the boys were to be in dire need of that help, neither they nor Billy Barnes dreamed as discussing Billy's narrow escape and Frank's brave shot they made their way back to the house.

FEATHERING THE GOLDEN EAGLE.

Bright and early the next day the work of completing the erection of the *Golden Eagle* went on. The lower planes were covered and threaded on to the frames with the same care as the covering of the upper set had been accomplished.

The long bird-like balancing tail was then put in place and the tiller lines—of bronze rope—threaded through guiding pulleys to its planes which were designed to raise or lower the course of the ship when in the air. The lateral steering was accomplished by means of double vertical rudders of the thinnest bronze obtainable, strengthened by a triangular frame of aluminum, and were controlled by a clever device of Frank's from the same wheel that adjusted the horizontal planes.

Then came the pleasant work of fitting up the car. There was a box for Frank's binoculars and separate compartments for each of the instruments used in determining height and speed. Then the thermometer had to be screwed in place and the automobile clock adjusted where the steersman could see it. The food basket was then stocked, for Frank did not believe in doing things by halves and he was determined that when they quit work that night that everything about the ship should be in ship-shape fashion and ready for flight at a moment's notice.

In the food basket, besides the blankets and medicines already mentioned and some folding knives and forks, the boys packed:

Four pounds of beans, a small box of hardtack, a plentiful supply of soup and meat tablets as used by the German army and which contain a supply of nutriment far in excess of their bulk, five pounds of bacon, the same quantity of ham, tins of salt, pepper and seasoning, a can of butter for special occasions and two cans of condensed milk, and five packages of self-raising flour.

"There doesn't look to be enough there to feed a flock of canary birds," remarked Billy, as he watched the stowing of the grub.

"That's because you don't know the exact science of modern rations," replied Frank, "experiments in Germany have proved that the condensed soups and meat essences we have in that are alone capable of sustaining life for a long period, the other things are luxuries."

"Well, me for porterhouse steaks and food you can get your teeth into," replied Billy. "Count me out on this tabloid table-d'hôte idea."

"It's easy to see you were never cut out for an aeronaut," laughed Harry, "here, lay hold of this bar and make yourself useful."

The body of the car was raised on screw-jacks, when the work of attaching it to the planes had been completed, and the food basket carefully slung underneath, where it was readily getatable through a small hinged hatch in the floor of the pilot's cockpit. Then came the work of attaching to the bottom of the frame, and to the tail, the wheels and spring braces which were devised to make a descent in the airship as easy as alighting from a taxicab. The wheels were also to aid in starting the craft.

Frank and Harry had come to the conclusion long before they finished building the *Golden Eagle* that they did not want to have to cart around a runway with them to give the ship start when they wished to make a flight, as is the case with the Wright Brothers' machines. Their air craft was equipped with pneumatic tired-wheels like those of a bicycle, only several times as strong, in order to give her a good running start when her twin propellers were started.

When they wished the *Golden Eagle* to soar aloft from the ground, all that was necessary to do with this equipment was to throw in a clutch geared to the rear pair of wheels and the *Golden Eagle*, like a great bird with her wings spread, began to glide over the ground, and in a few seconds the pressure of the air under her curved planes gave her the necessary lift and she shot up like a hawk, or her namesake, leaving the eyrie.

The forward pair of wheels were movable, castor-fashion, so that when the ship struck the ground they were free to head in any direction in which the ship might take the earth. The rear wheels were attached to the body of the aeroplane in the same manner, except that they had a device connected with them which made it possible to lock them when the operator wished to throw in the clutch that started the engine up. The forward wheels also had a detachable steering appliance connected with them so that in starting the machine it could be steered in any direction the operator desired, like an automobile.

Besides these wheels the forepart of the *Golden Eagle* possessed a pair of inclined planes moving on an axis. To the outer ends of these planes were attached powerful springs. The action of these planes when the forward end of the ship struck the ground on them was of course made free from jar by the spring attachment which acted as a sort of buffer. The wheeled arm attached to the bird-like tail astern was geared in a similar fashion and was designed to support this important part of the aeroplane and protect it from damage when the *Golden Eagle* settled.

Frank eagerly explained the uses and action of all the devices to his father and Jimmie Blakely, the latter of whom had neglected his work shamefully since the *Golden Eagle* had been roosting under its palm-thatched shed. How the ship got its name was at once apparent as soon as the boys had completed covering its wings. The balloon silk they used was of a rich orange hue and indeed the ship looked like nothing so much as a great golden bird.

The last task the boys had to tackle was the delicate one of placing the engine and its condenser in position and connecting it to the gasolene, water and lubricating tanks. Then there was the job of putting in the ignition apparatus and wiring it up to the spark plugs of the motor. Frank and Harry used the jump-spark system as being both simpler and easier to repair in time of trouble than the make and break method. The spark for starting was obtained from batteries, but when under way the *Golden Eagle's* engine was "sparked" by a magneto. Both boys always carried a supply of extra

spark plugs in case of the carbonization of the ones already in the cylinders and they had had very little trouble indeed with this important part of their engine, one which gives more bother usually than any other part of the motor. The spark plugs were hooded with waterproof caps as a precaution against short-circuiting by rain or dampness.

The twin propellers of the Chester boys' craft, four-bladed ones of bronze, framed and covered with specially prepared and varnished fabric. These frames were internally braced by specially tested steel wire and had shown themselves in every way capable of standing the terrific strain that 1200 revolutions a minute put on them. The shafts connecting them with the engine were of the best Tobin bronze, a non-corrosive material and one of the most suitable metals for the construction of propeller shafts.

It took Frank and Harry the best part of another day to adjust the engine to its bed and true up all its connecting parts with spirit-level and plumb-line. This work they had to do alone as it required expert knowledge of the most exhaustive kind.

At last, however, everything was adjusted and screwed in place in a way to satisfy even the critical Frank, who went over every joint and fastening with an eye that spied out immediately the slightest weakness. When everything was announced to be complete at last, a holiday was declared on the estancia and all hands gathered round the palm-thatched shed to watch Frank and Harry tune up the *Golden Eagle's* engine.

Frank's eyes fairly shone as he stepped lightly into the car and opened the valve that sent a flow of life-giving gasolene along a brass tube to the carbureters.

Before he did this, however, the hands had been busy for an hour filling coffee bags with earth and heavy stones and piling them down on all sides of the *Golden Eagle*. Stout stakes were also driven into the ground and the craft securely roped to them in such a way that she could not free herself when her propellers began to whiz round.

"Now, then, hold tight, everybody!" shouted Frank, as he "tickled" the carbureter, and Harry threw in the switch. The Boy Aviator gave the flywheel a light twist back against the compression—there was a loud "bang," that made the women shriek and the next minute the engine of the *Golden Eagle* was purring away as contentedly as if it had never been separated from the craft of which it was the heart and packed up for its long voyage.

But the natives,—where were they? With the exception of one tubby little fellow who was sprawling on the ground and who scrambled to his feet and made off at top speed as soon as possible, there was not one to be seen of all the crowd that had clustered round the *Golden Eagle* but a few minutes before.

They had not heeded Frank's warning cry,—somewhat naturally, not understanding it,—and when the huge propellers began to whirl round, creating a regular whirlwind in which hats were snatched from heads, and dresses blown every which way, they had, with one concerted howl of "Witchcraft," fled to their quarters, where only a great deal of persuasion induced them to leave.

By supper time that night, the boys were delighted to think that their beautiful craft was ready to soar again. Everything in fact was ready for an immediate flight. The sand-bags were removed, the ropes untied from the stakes, and the batteries carefully seen to. It was with light hearts that the boys hurried to the house for their evening meal. As for Billy, he danced a sort of what he was pleased to call a "Peon of Triumph," round the ship. The performance of the engine and the general trim and trig appearance of the Chester boys' flyer had aroused him to such a height of admiration and enthusiasm that he declared himself quite willing to take a trip in it himself—which was "going some" for Billy.

BILLY BARNES TAKES THE WARPATH.

The next day Frank and Harry busied themselves in their father's laboratory during most of the morning. They had been delighted to find such a completely equipped repository of chemicals as it proved to be, and their admiration of their father's researches was only equalled by their natural surprise at finding such a workshop on a Nicaraguan plantation.

"I always knew you were a great dab at chemistry, father," remarked Harry, "but I never dreamed that you had a regular Institute of Scientific Research on tap."

"By the way," asked Frank, who had been busy taking stock of the various chemicals, "have you any picric acid here, father?"

"I believe I have, my boy," replied Mr. Chester, "but that's dangerous stuff to fool with. You know it's a high explosive."

"Perfectly," rejoined Frank, "and it's for that very reason I want it."

"I confess I don't understand you," was his father's reply.

"It's simply this," replied Frank, with a smile at his bewilderment, "it has become a by no means uncommon practice, though of course most of the better class clubs have made rules against it, to mix picric acid with gasolene in racing motor boats and air crafts. It is usually very injurious to the engine, however, and I don't suppose any one would want to use it except in an emergency."

"What do you want it for, then?" asked his father in surprise.

"Well, I believe in always looking ahead, for very often it's the unexpected that happens," rejoined Frank. "Our engine now can turn up 1200 revolutions a minute. I believe that with the use of picric acid in the gasolene we could give her as much additional power as 1500 revolutions a minute."

"Well?" inquired his father expectantly.

"That being so," went on Frank, "the *Golden Eagle* would have just that much more lifting power, the stability of an airship depending upon the speed at which she travels through the atmosphere. So you see," he concluded with a smile, "that some day we might want to carry an extra passenger and in that case a gallon of picric acid would come in mighty handy."

After a little more argument Frank won his point, and that night the boys stored aboard the *Golden Eagle*—after first carefully seeing that it was not in a position where it was likely to prove dangerous—a stone carboy of the explosive acid. They had hardly completed the work when the sound of wheels was heard on the drive, and when they reentered the house they found that Don Pachecho and his beautiful daughter were the visitors.

Señora Ruiz showed plain evidences of her suffering over the news of her husband's death. The boys, who had heard of the disastrous battle from their father, avoided all reference of course to the revolution, but it was Don Pachecho himself who brought the subject up.

"Have you heard the latest news of the revolution. Señor?" he asked, after the introductions were over, and Billy had whispered to Harry what a fine photograph of "an old Spanish don" Mr. Chester's neighbor would make.

Mr. Chester shook his head. Indeed, since a couple of days before the man who carried messages and letters between the hacienda and Greytown, had reported that Zelaya's forces had cut the telegraph wires and taken complete charge of the cables, the party at the plantation had heard nothing of the movements of either the insurgents or the troops of the government.

"I learned from a party of rubber-cutters who passed the plantation to-day," went on Don Pachecho, "that Estrada's troops have suffered a further defeat and that Zelaya's men, under General Rogero, crazed with their victories are burning and destroying property and committing all sorts of outrages everywhere."

"Where was this last defeat?" asked Mr. Chester, seriously.

"It cannot have been more than fifty miles from here," continued Don Pachecho, "that is what makes it so ominous. It means," he went on, his voice rising, "that if Estrada cannot hold them in check that the government troops will drive him back on Greytown within a few hours and then you know what will happen," he shrugged his shoulders.

"Yes, we can hardly expect much mercy from Rogero," commented Mr. Chester. He then described to Don Pachecho what had taken place in Greytown the day that he had met the boys and Billy Barnes. Billy himself also conveyed his suspicions of Rogero as the murderer of Dr. Moneague.

The old don was greatly agitated at this news.

"Ah, the inhuman scoundrel!" he cried, raising his wrinkled hands above his head, "it was without doubt he that killed Moneague. And he now holds the secret of the lost mines. With his power over Zelaya and the wealth that is now at his disposal, he can speedily become powerful enough to ruin us all. I am an old man, Señors, but I do not think that of all the men I have ever seen, that I have met one who was this man's equal in the resources of evil. Woe betide the man who falls into his clutches."

Billy had been listening to this conversation with great attention and he now struck in with:

"What do you suppose he has done with the plan of the lost mines, sir?"

Don Pachecho shrugged his shoulders.

"Señor Barnes, there is only one thing that he can do with it, and that is to keep it always about him. I do not suppose it has been off his immediate person since he killed poor Moneague."

Billy sat lost in thought for a while. Then he raised his head.

"I suppose if he lost it he'd cut up at a great rate," he said, "at any rate, he'd give more attention to getting it back than to keep on licking the revolutionists."

"Undoubtedly."

"Hum," said Billy, in a way he had when he had arrived at any important conclusion.

In the moonlight the party walked down to where the *Golden Eagle* lay under her extemporized garage, or rather aerodrome. Even Señora Ruiz forgot for a second her deep sorrow as she gazed at the beautiful creation, its graceful wings shimmered and silvered by the brilliant moonlight.

"Oh, Señors," she cried, "you built this wonderful fly thing all yourselves?"

When their father had replied for the blushing Frank and Harry in the affirmative, the Spanish woman clasped her hands impulsively.

"But you are—oh, pardon me—but you are so young—chico, is it not so?"

"I take it that 'chico' is Spanish for 'kids,'" remarked the irrepressible Billy *sotto voce* to Harry. What the latter might have replied to this, however, was cut short by a startling thing that occurred at that moment.

Frank who had been bending over the engine had given a loud exclamation.

"Harry—father—Billy, come here quick!" he exclaimed excitedly.

They ran toward him.

"Look here," cried the boy, pointing to the engine, "some one has been tampering with the carbureter. They knew we could not replace it here without weeks of delay."

"And by jimminy crickets!" cried Billy, who had been examining the engine on his own hook, "they must have been scared away just as we came down. See here," went on the reporter, "they left in such a hurry that one of them forgot his hat and the sweatband is still warm and damp. Whoever monkeyed with this engine took off his hat to do it and he couldn't have been at work very long for the hat's still warm and besides, see here, he has only given the carbureter a few turns."

Mr. Chester took the hat that the excited Billy thrust at him and regarded it with some attention. It was a greasy battered affair, but it was trimmed with a new black ribbon on which was sewn in red thread the words "Viva Zelaya."

"Not difficult to trace some of our old friend Rogero's work here," he said. "He evidently means to keep his threat to prevent your flying."

"We shall have to do sentry duty here for the rest of the night, Harry," said Frank in a determined voice.

"You bet we will," agreed his younger brother; an injury to their ship affected these boys far more than any hurt they themselves might sustain.

Rifles were secured from the house, also blankets, and the boys made up a regular camp-fire round which they sat long after Don Pachecho and his bereaved daughter had driven off and the lights in the house had been extinguished.

"I tell you what, Frank," said Harry, "we have simply got to take a hand in this thing now. You know that if that fellow Rogero ever gets as far as this what he means to do to this plantation."

"I know," rejoined his brother, "he would take delight in ruining what father has built up and then blaming it on his troops and the worst of it is we would never be able to get any redress."

Both boys were silent for several minutes, thinking things over.

"What's the matter with taking a little spin in the *Golden Eagle* to-morrow and finding out just where he is, then we can shape our plans accordingly," suddenly broke out Harry.

"Yes, but look here, Harry," replied the conservative Frank, "you know that we are supposed to be non-combatants."

"Oh, hang being non-combatants!" rejoined Harry, "we are not going to sit here and see our father's plantation destroyed by this ruffian, are we? and you know too," he went on, "that the amiable cuss promised to give us a chance to see the inside of a prison if he could lay his hands on us."

"You are right there, Harry," agreed Frank, looking up, "if the revolutionists are driven back any closer we shall have to take up arms to protect ourselves. It has never been the way of Americans to let any one walk all over them without registering a kick."

"You bet ours is going to be an emphatic one, too," enthusiastically cried Harry; "give me your hand, old chap—shake. It's a go?"

"Yes," replied Frank slowly, "it's a go."

"Hurrah," shouted Harry, sitting up with his blanket up to his chin, "we'll give you the spin of your life to-morrow, old *Golden Eagle*."

It had been agreed that Frank was to take the first watch, and so while the elder brother sat rifle in hand, guarding the aeroplane in which they were destined to have such strange adventures in the immediate future, Harry slumbered the sleep of the just.

"I've only been asleep five minutes," he protested when Frank woke him to do his "trick" on guard.

"You've had a three-hour nap," laughed Frank, "and snored loud enough to have brought the whole of Zelaya's army on us if they'd been around."

Whoever the man was who had tried to disable the *Golden Eagle*, he did not put in any further appearance that night, nor did anything happen to vary the monotony of the night-watch. As soon as it was daylight the boys raced for the bath, plunged in, and after a refreshing swim made for the house.

They made for Billy's room intending to drag that sleep-loving young person out and duck him head over heels into the bath at the deep end.

To their amazement the room was empty. The bed had not been slept in. Moreover, Billy's camera and canteen were missing.

Pinned to the bedclothes was the following characteristic note, the effect of which on the boys may be imagined.

"DEAR FRANK AND HARRY.

"I have gone to get the plans that Rogero stole from Moneague. It will make a bully picture to go with my story when he is pinched. It is about up to me to do something. Regards to your father. Please apologize to him for my unceremonious departure for the warpath. Good luck to you, and I wish myself the same. So long.

BILLY BARNES."

Frank gave a long whistle as he read this document.

"Well, of all the—," began Harry, and stopped. Words failed to express his feelings.

"This settles it," said Frank suddenly with decision, "we've got to get after Rogero, now."

"You mean that Billy—," began Harry.

"I mean that we're not going to let Billy get shot for a bit of pottery," cut in Frank.

"The *Golden Eagle* will sail at nine o'clock," he added. "Come on, Harry—we've just time for a bit of breakfast, and then for the air."

THE MIDNIGHT BELL.

It required considerable persuasion on the part of Frank and Harry to induce Mr. Chester to allow them to undertake a trip which, to say the least, was hazardous. After a long talk, however, it was agreed that the boys were to be allowed to go providing that if they did not return within the next three days they were to use every effort to notify their father of their whereabouts.

All opposition being overcome, the boys, after a hearty meal, made a change into light woolen shirts, khaki trousers and rubber-soled canvas shoes. Soft felt hats of the army type completed their attire, and when they had each buckled on a belt to which were strapped magazine revolvers and slung field-glasses and water-padded canteens over their shoulders they were practically ready for their bold dash.

Frank at once made a hasty survey of the ground surrounding the palm-thatched aerodrome and decided that with a little clearing the *Golden Eagle* could be started without any difficulty if no wind got up. A force of men was at once put to work with machetes and long before noon a "runway" of five hundred yards leading downhill had been cleared,—Frank calculating that this would be sufficient to allow the aeroplane to lift and clear the taller banana bushes. The gasoline for the sixty-gallon tank had been shipped from Greytown at the time that Frank and Harry tuned up the *Golden Eagle's* engine, and besides filling the tank to its capacity they loaded their craft up with several five-gallon cans for a reserve supply. A stock of the best cylinder oil and grease for the "screw-up" grease cups that lubricated the crank shafts completed the engine outfit.

The boys calculated on using a pint per horsepower an hour of fuel when the *Golden Eagle's* engine was running at its greatest number of revolutions per minute. As they did not intend to turn up more than 800 revolutions—or R.P.M., as aviators call it—they calculated on a considerable saving of fuel unless some emergency arose.

While the runway was being cleared, several of the native workmen had been at work, under the boys' direction, hauling away the ballast sacks with which the *Golden Eagle* had been weighed down at the time of her engine test. Harry had also produced a brand-new ensign which he ran up on halyards rigged to a stern stanchion, while his brother and father gave three hearty cheers for the fluttering Stars and Stripes.

The last thing the boys did before their final farewells was to tuck a map of the country over which they were to travel in a corner pocket of the pilot-house, and also load up a waterproof silk tent and an axe, shovel and pick.

"It's always as well to be prepared for everything," Frank remarked when his father questioned him about the utility of these last articles. "We don't know but we may have to dig for water or—or anything in fact in which these tools will come in mighty handy."

Mr. Chester nodded admiringly at his son's foresight.

"That's right, my boy," he assented, "be ready for everything and you can't go far wrong."

"Now," declared Frank, after the boys had gone over every stay-wire, stanchion and brace on the machine, and the engine had been carefully wiped and the brass parts polished, "the Chester expedition is ready to get underway!"

Harry hopped nimbly into the pilot-house and took up his seat at the rear of the chassis. His job was that of engineer. Captain Frank followed him a second later and with his hand on the guide wheel to which the controls were connected gave a comprehensive look over the aeroplane.

"What would the Junior Aero boys do if they could see us now?" Harry hailed from his seat, looking up from his adjusting of the grease cups.

"What wouldn't any of them give to be going along?" responded Frank.

It had been arranged that the *Golden Eagle* was to be headed toward the northwest where, like a blue cloud, the Cordillera range loomed against the sky. Somewhere over in that little known part of the country Rogero and his men were marching toward the coast and—the thought thrilled in both the boys' minds, though neither spoke of it—it was over there, too, somewhere in those dim blue mountains, that the lost mines of the Toltecs lay and the little known relics of that ancient civilization.

There was a final handshake between the boys and their father and a shouted good-bye to Jimmie Blakely.

"All right astern, Harry?" hailed Frank.

"Ay, ay, sir," responded his brother.

Harry threw in the switch, having opened the valve that connected the engine with the gasoline tank a few minutes before. At the same instant Frank started the engine. There was an involuntary cheer from the hands who had clustered around the machine but at a respectful distance, recollecting their disconcerting experience at the time that Frank tested the engine.

With her fifty horsepower whirring round her propellers at eight hundred revolutions a minute, the *Golden Eagle* began to move. Faster and faster she glided over the ground till after a run of about two hundred yards her forward end lifted and she shot upward into the air as Frank's trained hand had directed the upward gliding planes. The engine was going at its work with a will and the rhythmical purr, so sweet to the ear of the operator of an aeroplane, showed that there wasn't going to be any balk out of it on this trip.

The watchers below saw the *Golden Eagle*, like a great yellow bird, leave the ground for the upper air in absolute silence. It was such an impressive sight that even the usually voluble natives failed to make any demonstration. At a height of about two hundred feet Frank pulled the control tiller hard over and the *Golden Eagle* swung round slightly on an almost even keel from the eastward course she was on and headed away to the northwest. The last the group at La Merced

saw of her she was a dull bronze speck against the brilliant blue sky, heading steadily for the mountains at a height of about six hundred feet.

It had been arranged between the boys that they should keep going till dusk and then alight in some suitable place and make camp for the night. That they were running great and grave risks they well knew, but neither of them was of the caliber that talks much of such things and so as they forged steadily for the hills with the exhaust throbbing as evenly as a healthy pulse, their conversation was mainly about the course they should adopt to save Billy Barnes if he had actually fallen into Rogero's hands.

That there would have to be quick action neither boy doubted. Rogero was not the man to stop at half measures, and that Billy would be shot or tortured after a drumhead court-martial; or, perhaps, with even not that attempt at legal formality, was practically certain.

As he sat at the wheel, Frank, from time to time, called Harry to take his place at the duplicate tiller wheel while he with the field glasses swept the earth below for any sign of any camp. The portion of Nicaragua over which the *Golden Eagle* was soaring is very sparsely inhabited. With the exception of an occasional river bank camp of wandering rubber-cutters, there is little human life.

"What are we making, should you judge, Frank?" asked Harry, when they had been underway about an hour with only the monotonous dull-green jungle, like a leafy carpet beneath them.

"Easily twenty," replied Frank, "throttled down as we are."

"Has it occurred to you that we are going to find some difficulty in securing a suitable landing-place?"

"I've been thinking of that," replied the elder boy, "it is of course impossible to make a landing anywhere here, and I can't for the life of me, see any break in the jungle in the direction we are headed."

"No," replied Harry, eagerly, "but have you noticed those hills? As we get nearer to them I can see through the glasses that there seem to be rocky plateaus on their upper ridges that would just about suit us for a settling-down place."

"What do you propose then?" asked Frank.

"I was thinking that it would be a good idea to speed up a bit so as to reach the mountains by dark and make camp there till we can scout about a little and get Rogero's bearings."

"That's a good idea," replied Frank, "I've been thinking anyway that we would do Billy more harm than good if Rogero knew that we were flying to his rescue. Our best plan is to pitch our tent there in the hills on one of the plateaus and work from that point as our headquarters. There's the question of gasoline, too, we don't want to run out of that and the less needless flying we do the better say I."

"How far do you suppose those hills are from us now?" asked Harry.

Frank consulted his map.

"Not more than fifty miles at the outside. We can make them easily by sundown if we speed her up," he announced. As he spoke he increased the velocity of the engine till it was running almost at its revolution capacity. Under the increased impetus the *Golden Eagle* drove forward a good ten miles an hour faster.

As the hills grew nearer both boys eagerly focussed their glasses on them. At a distance the range had not looked to be a very considerable mountain formation, but on a closer approach the boys were astonished to see that they were a formidable chain of hills, slashed and cut into every direction by deep canyons, between which there were several broad plateaus almost entirely unwooded. In other places giant trees clothed the hills almost to their summits.

"One of those bare plateaus will make an ideal landing-place," said Frank, as the *Golden Eagle* swung steadily forward toward her decided destination. "The big trees will screen us from the view of anyone except an airship scout and I don't think that there will be much likelihood of our encountering one of those."

It was twilight when Frank swung the starboard rudder over and the *Golden Eagle* began to describe swooping circles above a plateau about five hundred feet up on the mountain-side. It was a ticklish job to land, but under Frank's skilful manipulation of the planes and rudders the boys' ship settled down as gently as a tired bird toward the smooth surface of the plateau. As she struck the ground in a little cloud of dust, but without the slightest jar, Harry threw in the brake clutch that controlled the settling wheels and after sliding about twenty feet, the *Golden Eagle* came to a stop in the wildest part of the Cordilleras of Nicaragua. With a cheer both boys jumped out and excitedly assured each other that their adventures had really begun at last.

There was but little time that night to survey their landing-place. By the time the sun dropped, however, they had accomplished such good work that the tent was up, the portable cots erected and Harry had a fire lighted; while Frank had announced with a shout of triumph that he had found a little runnel of water oozing from the mountain-side which by a little enlargement with the pick and shovel soon formed a pool of clear, cold water.

It was with light hearts that the boys fell to on a supper of fried bacon, coffee and bread. There was not time to cook a more elaborate menu that night, but both declared enthusiastically that what they did have tasted to them as good as a banquet. Supper over and a lantern lighted in the tent it was arranged that Frank should take the first watch, lasting till midnight, and that he should then awake Harry who would do sentry duty till dawn. Till they learned if they had any undesirable neighbors this was agreed to be the prudent course.

After Harry turned in Frank looked over his rifle and revolver and took up a position by the camp-fire. He employed the early part of the night with pencil and pad, figuring out some aeronautical problems, but as it grew near to his hour to be relieved he grew so sleepy that he got up and paced about to fight off his drowsiness. He had made perhaps a dozen turns up and down in front of the tent when something happened that caused even the usually hard-headed boy to start violently and feel a queer sort of chill down his spine.

It was the tolling of a bell!

The hour, the loneliness of the spot all combined to augment Frank's startled amazement at the sound. He could hardly believe his ears. With a beating heart he strained his attention to locate the sound. It seemed to come from a spot further up the mountain-side. Whoever the bell-ringer was he paid no attention to time or rhythm. The bell would toll loud and sharp for a few minutes and then its clangor would die down and almost cease. Then without any apparent reason it would start up again furiously. Hurriedly Frank awoke his younger brother.

"What on earth do you suppose it is? Spooks?" demanded the startled Harry.

"I don't know, but it's something human, and I mean to find out before we leave this place," declared Frank, doggedly.

THE ONE-EYED QUESAL.

Seen in the bright light of the early tropic day the plateau upon which the *Golden Eagle* had settled was certainly an ideal spot for a boy's camp. It was in form a rough circle about a quarter of a mile in circumference. To the west the mountain-side shot up in a rugged cliff. To the east a deep canyon cut down to the valley below, clothed heavily with huge Manacca palms, plane and rosewood trees, here and there interspersed by a lordly mahogany grove. Huge ferns as big as rose-bushes in America shot up out of the rich dark soil, and from the tops of many of the trees whose names were unknown to the boys trailed magnificent orchids and lianas and parasitic plants of many varieties.

From below it would have been quite impossible to have sighted the camp and the mountain above was so rugged and precipitous that any attack or observation from that quarter would have been most improbable. As soon as it was light Harry, with the collapsable canvas bucket went to Frank's spring and got a supply of water. This done he set about getting breakfast. In the meantime Frank had been skirmishing about for fruit, and by the time the fragrant odor of Harry's steaming coffee-pot had diffused itself about the camp the elder boy returned triumphantly with an armful of bananas and dark-green bread-fruit. Harry selected two of the largest of these last and cutting them open set them on the hot coals to roast.

"Why, where on earth did you learn tropical cookery?" demanded Frank as he watched Harry deftly turning the appetizing looking slices.

"I watched the natives down at La Merced," replied Harry, "you see I figured that when you are in Rome do as the Romans do, and that as the jungle is good enough to provide us with ready-grown loaves we ought to return the compliment by knowing how to cook them."

Naturally enough the boys' conversation fell on the mysterious bell-ringing of the night before.

"I can hardly believe that I didn't dream it," remarked Frank.

"But I heard it too," rejoined Harry, "and there is no question that it was a bell and a good, loud-toned one at that."

"Well, what a bell-ringer, let alone a bell, can be doing round here is inexplicable," said Frank. "I took a good look around before breakfast while I was out getting the fruit and I can see no sign of any habitation or settlement that might account for it."

"You don't think it possible that it could be a trick to scare us?" asked Harry.

Frank laughed.

"I considered that too," he replied, "I hardly think that it could be that. Anyhow it will take a good deal more than that to frighten us away. Seriously though I would like to solve the mystery."

"Maybe the monkeys hold prayer-meetings," laughed Harry.

"What's the matter with forming the Chester Exploration Expedition and taking a climb up the mountain after breakfast," he broke out suddenly.

"You're on," rejoined Frank, "I think it will be perfectly safe to leave camp for a while anyhow and we may make some important discoveries."

Accordingly an hour later the boys were making their first plunge into the practically unknown fastnesses of the Cordilleras of Nicaragua. Each carried a canteen full of water, a supply of roasted bread-fruit and several soup tablets besides matches in waterproof boxes and their revolvers and rifles. Of course a pair of field-glasses, and the axe also formed a part of their traveling equipment.

With all this paraphernalia it was hard work clambering up the rugged mountain-side more particularly as when their course required them to plunge into the jungle, they found their way impeded by huge snake-like creepers that hung from the trees and crawled over the ground in every direction. They had been climbing steadily for about an hour when Harry uttered an exclamation of delightful surprise.

"Look, Frank," he cried, pointing to a magnificent bird that flashed through the jungle ahead of them. Both boys gazed admiringly at the marvelous splendor of its plumage. It was about the size of an eagle and its back was covered with a shimmering glossy mantle, so to speak, of emerald green. Its waistcoat was of a deep rich carmine and its long curved beak a bright yellow.

"Why," cried Frank as, with a harsh unmusical cry, the bird vanished, "that's a quesal."

"A quesal?" demanded Harry much mystified.

"Yes, I was reading about them in that book on Nicaragua I got to read on our voyage down here," rejoined Frank.

"They were the sacred birds of the ancient Toltecs who decorated their temples and religious houses with pictures of them," he went on. "To lay hands on them meant death to the sacrilegious person so doing and the priests used to have great colonies of them in the groves round their temples."

"You are as good as an encyclopedia, Frank," laughed Harry, "I'd like to get a shot at one of them, Toltecs or no Toltecs. Or better still to have one alive. Just think what they'd say at home if we brought one back in a cage."

Frank smiled.

"I'm afraid, Harry," he said, "that even if we did catch one we could do nothing like you propose with it. A peculiarity of the quesal is that it will not live in captivity. Not even an hour it is said. The human touch kills them immediately."

The boys steadily pushed forward, although as the sun climbed higher the heat of the dense tropical forest that covered the mountain-side at the point they had now reached became most oppressive. Suddenly there was a loud grunting sound from a few feet ahead and a herd of small brown animals dashed away. Not before Harry, however, had got his rifle to his shoulder and

brought one of them down with a skilful shot.

"A wild pig," he announced triumphantly, turning over the animal he had brought down with his foot. Compared to a domestic porker the wild swine didn't look much bigger than rabbits, but the boys hailed the one Harry had shot as a welcome addition to their larder.

"If we only had some apple sauce," sighed the epicurean Harry.

"Why don't you wish for mustard?" laughed Frank.

Harry's pig weighed about thirty-five pounds, and so he carried it without much effort over his shoulder till they reached a clear space on the mountain-side, where they could cache it and easily find it on their way down.

"Now, if only no ocelots or jaguars come around we'll have roast pork for supper to-night," he remarked as he laid down his burden.

"I'll show you how to fix that," said Frank. With a few blows of his axe he lopped off some low branches from a near-by tree, and placed them in a circle round the carcass.

"That's a dodge, Blakely told me about," he announced when he had finished. "Any animal thief that happens along wouldn't touch that pig now for the world. They see the branches and figure out that it is some kind of a trap."

From time to time as the boys mounted higher, they stopped and carefully turned their glasses on the valley below. Somewhere in its apparently uninhabited sweep they knew that Rogero and his army and Estrada's troops were maneuvering, but nothing that they could see gave them any inkling as to the exact whereabouts of the troops.

"We shall have to make a scouting trip in the *Golden Eagle*," said Frank with determination, as after they had scoured the valley for the twentieth time, they admitted that it was hardly worth the trouble.

"Yes," agreed Harry eagerly, "and the sooner the better."

They stopped for lunch shortly after noon, without having made any progress in discovering anything about the mysterious bell or who its ringer could have been. Although Frank's pedometer showed that they had covered several miles, they had not even come across the semblance of a footpath or any other indication that they were not the first human beings to explore the mountain-side. Lunch despatched they agreed to proceed as far as a battlemented cliff that shot sheer up ahead of them for two hundred feet or more, cutting off any view of the mountain-top, and then turn back. If they had found nothing by that time to throw any light on the bell-ringer or the instrument on which he performed, they decided that it would be waste of time to keep on.

At the foot of the cliff its beetling height was even more impressive than when seen at a distance. It shot up, naked of tree or bush, like a huge wall. There was not foothold for even a mountain goat on its smooth gleaming surface.

"Well," said Frank, as the boys gazed up to where its summit seemed to touch the blue sky, "here is where we stop short. Not even a fly could get up that."

As he spoke, Harry who had been poking at the smooth surface of the obstruction with the axe, gave a sharp exclamation.

"Did you say that the quescal was the sacred bird of the Toltecs?" he demanded in a tone of suppressed excitement.

"Yes," replied Frank. "Why?"

"Why?" repeated Harry, "just look up there and tell me what you make of that?"

He pointed to some half-obliterated markings on the surface of the cliff about thirty feet above where the boys stood. There was no doubt about it—the markings, though dimmed by time and in places almost obliterated altogether, unquestionably formed a rude exaggerated outline of the bird they had seen that morning.

"Well, what do you think of it, Frank?" demanded Harry impatiently, after his elder brother had gazed at the spot for some time.

"Simply this," replied Frank calmly, though his heart beat faster, "that we are very near some sort of Toltec temple, or ruin or even the lost mines themselves!"

BILLY BARNES IS TRAPPED.

Billy Barnes, impulsive as the dash he had made seemed, had not taken the step without duly balancing the dangers and difficulties that would attend it. True, he had come to his decision with what appeared to be careless haste, but the truth was that he was a young man who was by training quick to arrive at conclusions and just as speedy to execute them. He knew perfectly well that if he had talked over his meditated course with the boys, that they would have vetoed his undertaking, and since the adventure of the jaguar, in which he felt he had not shown up to very good advantage, he was eager to distinguish himself in some way.

Moreover, he was urged forward by his newspaper pride, which counseled him to attempt, at any rate, to accomplish what would be the biggest "scoop" of years and make a story that would be talked about for many days, even by the short memored denizens of Park Row. So Billy plunged forward into the jungle with a light heart. He knew nothing whatever of woodcraft, but that fact did not daunt him in the least. He was well provided with money, and so felt no particular apprehension that he would starve, or suffer any serious discomforts. He figured on reaching Rogero's camp in at least two days' time. What action he would take after he arrived there he had decided to leave according to the way things shaped themselves.

The first day of his journey nothing of note occurred. At Amagana, a village on the San Juan river, he had hired a horse, a decrepit, antiquated animal with plenty of "fine points," its owner averred,—"you could hang your hat on some of them," remarked Billy to himself. The steed, however, came up to his simple requirements and his owner assured him that there wasn't a kick in the beast. The young reporter also stocked up his food bags with such portable provender as he could obtain and struck out in the direction in which the last reports had placed Rogero's forces.

He made camp the first night out with a number of wild-looking Nicaraguans from the interior on their way to the coast with a shaggy herd of small cattle. They were in a big hurry, as either Rogero or Estrada would undoubtedly have levied on their cattle if they had encountered them. From them Billy learned that they had heard heavy firing the day before at a place about twenty-five miles from where they were then encamped, and by signs and such English as he could command the leader of the herders indicated to Billy that by following up the river he would undoubtedly get within the line of the government troops which were following its course on their way to Greytown.

Bright and early the next morning Billy saddled his disreputable-looking steed, amid much merriment from the graziers, and jogged off along a trail that led through the jungle along the river bank. He rode hard all that day and at nightfall was rewarded for his progress by a number of uniformed men suddenly appearing from the jungle at his horse's head and pointing their rifles at him.

"Americano—me Americano!" shouted Billy in all the Spanish he knew, "take me to General Rogero."

All that the soldiers of Zelaya could make of this speech was Billy's explanation of his nationality and the name of their General. One man, who seemed to be their leader, motioned to Billy to dismount, and then briefly ordered one of the privates to take charge of the reporter's horse. This done, the man who had given the order signed to Billy to follow him and struck off into a path that wound in a direction away from the river bank.

Now, Billy had as stout a heart as most of his craft, and he had been in tight places before,—most reporters have,—but to say that it did not beat a little faster as he stepped out after his guide, would not be true. It was a bold bit of bluff that he had decided on—a plan that if it made good, would result in the complete discomfiture of Rogero—but, on the other hand, there was more than a chance that it might fail, in which case, as Billy fully realized, he would find himself in a mighty tight place.

He had an unpleasant consciousness also that the soldiers, one of whom was leading his horse, had closed in about him so that even if he had changed his mind at the eleventh hour and decided not to risk putting his head in the lion's mouth, escape was now impossible.

"You're in this thing for fair now," he remarked to himself, "so go through with it with a good front."

After about half-an-hour of threading the winding path they emerged suddenly on a sloping hillside bare of trees, and here was camped Rogero's army. Billy had seen the Greytown contingent on the day that they marched away from the coast, and the men that he saw scattered about the camp now engaged in cooking the evening meal, gambling or strumming guitars differed in nowise, except in degrees of raggedness, from the soldiers he and the boys had been so amused at.

His arrival in camp seemed to create a lot of curiosity and excitement, but his guide paid no attention to the men who thronged about, pouring in questions upon him, but marched Billy up to a tent over which floated the blue and white standard of Nicaragua. There were angry voices inside the tent as he approached; one of which he recognized as that of Rogero.

A ragged orderly paced up and down in front of the tent-flap, which was open to admit the cool air of the evening, and after Billy's guide had rapidly jabbered a few words to him, he abruptly marched into the tent and in a moment emerged and beckoned to them to enter. A second later Billy Barnes stood face to face with Rogero and a little dark-skinned Nicaraguan officer. Outwardly he was calm enough and bowed to the commander of the Zelayan forces with all the Chesterfieldian grace at his command. Inwardly, however, his heart beat fast and thick for he realized that the time to make good his bluff had at last arrived.

Rogero's face, as his eyes fell on Billy, was a study. He had been rolling a cigarette when the reporter was ushered in, but he set down his tobacco and papers while he palpably allowed the

situation slowly to dawn on him, and stared at Billy as if he had been some strange wild beast or natural curiosity.

"You seem to have a strange liking for putting yourself in dangerous places, Mr. Barnes," he said at last, then turning to the little officer:

"Leave us alone," he continued sharply in Spanish, "and," he added, "if the thing is seen anywhere near the camp, fire on it with the machine-guns."

Naturally Billy didn't understand this, but the reader may be informed that the general's remark referred to "a strange thing" that some of the scouts reported having seen in the distant sky the preceding day. Of course it was the *Golden Eagle* on her way to the mountains. This Rogero had been shrewd enough to guess, but that of the ship's destination he had no knowledge, goes without saying. The failure of the spy that he had sent to La Merced to disable the craft, had, however, been reported to him and had not tended to put him in an amiable frame of mind. He realized fully that if he attempted to damage Mr. Chester's property or that of any of his friends, that the *Golden Eagle* would be able, in the hands of her young navigators, to work terrible reprisals upon his army.

"How did you come here and what do you want?" demanded Rogero the next minute. "If you are anxious to be shot, I shall be glad to accommodate you," he went on with an amiable smile.

"No, I don't think I'm quite ready to follow your pleasant suggestion yet," retorted the reporter, "and I think that my country would make it pretty hot for you if you carried it out. I came here to talk business," he went on.

"What business can you have to discuss with me?" demanded Rogero sharply.

"Just this," answered Billy, whose nerve was fast returning. "As you know I have a picture of yours which I don't think you would like to see put to the use for which I snapped it. Now, it's not a professional thing of me to do, but I want to help out my friends as much as possible. I will destroy the negative, and refrain from notifying the New York police of my suspicions of you, on one condition."

"And what is that?" demanded the Nicaraguan general, his face growing black as thunder and tapping impatiently with his riding-boot on the dirt floor of the tent.

"Well, you might call it a double-barreled condition, as a matter of fact," replied Billy easily; "it's simply this,—I want you to give a written pledge not to injure, or permit any of your army to injure, any portion of Mr. Chester's or Don Pachecho's estates or to destroy any property owned by Americans—"

"In time of war more or less injury is unavoidable," parried Rogero.

"Not in your case," replied Billy; "you see you have been advertised by your loving friends—as the wash-powder folks say—and your views on American property-holders are pretty well known. I don't think you'd have a chance to wreak your spite on them."

"Well, get on to your other condition—what is it?" growled Rogero.

"Just this," responded Billy sweetly, "Frank and Harry Chester are good friends of mine. I haven't known them very long, but Frank saved my life the other night."

"Another grudge I owe him," intercepted Rogero.

"Quite likely," went on the unruffled Billy, "but I'd like to do something for them. Now, if I give you this picture will you agree to take a fourth share with the Chester boys and myself in certain mines that you know of—you see I am on to a good many of your secrets."

"What mines?" demanded Rogero evasively, "I know of no mines."

"Well, they haven't been worked very much recently, and that's a fact," rejoined Billy; "but I rather think that you have a bit of parchment in your possession which contains the clue to them, and if they are as rich as the legend has it, then you should be quite willing to take a fourth share, particularly as you are getting back a picture and saving yourself a trip to the States that might have an unpleasant termination."

Rogero sat silent, as if in deep thought, for a few minutes and then, suddenly throwing off his disagreeable manner, he said quite amiably:

"There is a good deal of reason in what you say."

"Ah," cried the delighted Billy, "I thought that you'd see the good sense of it."

The general gave a peculiar smile. It was almost dark in the tent, but Billy could see his companion's teeth gleam in their setting of black beard and mustache.

"If you will excuse me while I order some lights we will talk more of this," he said slowly, like a man who has come to a sudden decision.

"Certainly," politely replied the reporter, who was feeling so elated over his success that the danger of his situation had completely slipped his mind. Rogero stepped briskly out of the tent into the darkness. He had only been gone a few minutes, when from the darkness, which falls rapidly after sundown in the tropics, the startled reporter heard the loud scream of an animal in pain. He sprang to his feet and made for the tent door.

He ran almost into Rogero's arms as he reached the entrance.

"What was that awful cry?" he asked anxiously.

"I rather think it was some of my men cutting your horse's throat," was the calm response. "You see they haven't had much fresh meat lately."

A hot flame of anger swept over Billy. The wanton cruelty of the deed enraged him. He raised his voice in an indignant protest when Rogero held up his hand.

"You are exciting yourself unnecessarily, Señor," he protested; "you will not need the horse any more."

"What—what do you mean—?" demanded Billy angrily.

"Because I like your company so much that I am going to keep you with me for a time;" replied Rogero with a laugh.

Hardly realizing what he did, Billy made a dash for the sneering figure that stood mocking him. Rogero stepped nimbly to one side before the reporter's furious onslaught and the next minute Billy felt a crashing blow descend on the back of his head. The sky seemed to be filled suddenly with

shooting stars that roared and crackled. There was a bright flash of light before the young reporter's eyes and everything grew black.

THE AVIATOR BOYS' BOLD DASH.

In their excitement at their discovery of the figure of the quescal the boys lingered till late in the afternoon at the foot of the cliff scanning it from every possible point of view in an effort to ascertain if there were not some hidden opening in it or at least some precipitous trail leading to its summit. Their scrutiny was a failure so far as any discovery of the kind was concerned, and somewhat disheartened at the impossibility of solving the significance of the quescal they started back for camp.

It was after dark when they reached it having come the last part of their way with the greatest difficulty owing to the failing light. Frank's skill as a navigator however availed them and with the help of his pocket compass which he wore attached to his watch-chain, they finally made camp. Harry had over his shoulder his pig and after the lantern had been lit in the tent and the fire started the younger boy took out his skinning knife and started to dissect his prize.

As butchers the boys were not a success but they managed nevertheless to cut off some very appetizing chops and when these were placed on the tin cover that Harry rigged over the fire and greased with some of the pork fat the boys made a very good meal indeed. Their supper concluded they sat round the fire and discussed the adventures of the day.

They threshed the mystery of the figure of the quescal over and over in all its bearings but without arriving at any conclusion. It seemed to be a hopeless mystery why the bird had been put on the cliff-face.

"There must have been some purpose in it," muttered Frank, for the twentieth time. "Men wouldn't place the figure of the sacred bird on a cliff without intending to convey some meaning by it."

"They may have just decided that the cliff needed decorating and put it there for ornament," weakly suggested Harry.

"Not likely," replied the elder boy. "No, Harry that quescal was put there for some good reason. It was meant to point out"—he stopped suddenly and then jumped to his feet with a wild whoop that made the jungle round about ring.

"By jove I've got it," he cried exultingly.

"Got what," questioned Harry, "hydrophobia or St. Vitus's dance?"

"No," roared Frank, "I've got it. The quescal—the secret it points to."

"Well, go ahead. What have you made of it? Don't keep me in suspense while you caper about like a Salome dancer," shouted Harry.

"Its bill was pointing down, wasn't it?" demanded Frank.

"Yes; but what has that to do?"—began Harry.

"It has everything to do with it," exclaimed Frank. "It would be impossible for there to be an opening in the cliff face itself, wouldn't it?"

"You are right. I guess we about settled that," was the reply.

"Well, I may be wrong," went on Frank, more seriously, "but I don't think I am. My idea is that if we dig a bit at the foot of the cliff, about under the quescal's beak, we shall find something interesting."

"Buried treasure, hurray!" shouted Harry.

"More likely to be buried pottery," laughed Frank. "I don't take much stock in these buried treasure stories; but at any rate, even if we only find an old mule's bones, it would be worth investigating."

"We'll start digging to-morrow morning," gleefully cried Harry.

"No, I am afraid that we shall have to postpone that job," rejoined Frank seriously, "we had another object when we started on this trip. The Chester expedition is out to get hold of Billy Barnes and yank him out of the peck of trouble we both know he's walked into."

"You are right, Frank, as usual," cried Harry abashed, "I simply forgot for a moment."

His eyes swept over the edge of the plateau and rested on the dark sea of jungle which lay stretched apparently into infinity beneath them.

"By jove," he cried suddenly, "look there!" The lad pointed eastward excitedly. As Frank's eyes followed the direction of his finger he saw something that made him get into the tent and out again with field glasses in two jumps. Harry's sharp eyes had spied out half-a-dozen tiny points of fire ranged in a circle so far off that they seemed little more than bright pinpoints on the black curtain of night.

With night glass in hand Frank gazed long at the tiny glowing sparks. At last he handed the glasses to Harry with the remark:

"They are camp-fires all right but whether Rogero's or Estrada's we have no means of knowing at this distance."

Harry confirmed Frank's opinion after a long period of careful gazing.

"They must be a big distance from here," he commented, "even with the glass they seem hardly more than blurs."

"If they are Rogero's camp-fires," went on Frank without replying to Harry's last remark, "it's ten chances to one that Billy Barnes is there now. The only question is how we are to get to his aid without being ourselves discovered. They have machine guns undoubtedly, and if we were to be seen in daylight hovering about the camp it would be easy for them to bring us down and worst of all we should not have done any good."

"That is true," agreed Harry, "but what do you propose to do about it?"

"Go at night," answered the practical Frank.

"At night?" repeated Harry in an amazed tone.

"Yes,—and to-night at that," quietly went on Frank. "We couldn't have a better object to aim for than those camp-fires and we shall be able to do a little scouting and be back here before daylight. I don't want Rogero if that is his camp to discover our hiding-place."

"How do you propose, even at night, to get near enough to the camp to do any good without being discovered?" asked Harry.

"My plan is this," replied Frank, while his younger brother listened with rapt attention, "you will drop me from the *Golden Eagle* by the rope ladder when we near the camp. I will make my way there and see what I can find out. When I want you to pick me up I will flash my electric pocket-lamp twice and you who have been on the lookout, must sail slowly over me so that I can catch the end of the ladder.

"Of course the success of the plan depends upon if we can find an open space to swoop down on," he went on. "I infer though from the fact that we can see the camp-fires at this distance that there must be a cleared space there."

Harry had been silent while Frank outlined his scheme. As his brother ceased talking he shook his head determinedly.

"Do you think I'm going to stand for you taking all that risk even supposing you could do it," he burst out. "Where do I come in? It isn't fair."

"When we left New York who did we decide was to be captain of the *Golden Eagle*?" asked Frank quietly.

"Why, you, of course," rejoined Harry, "but we didn't say anything about your assuming all the perils. If you are going to risk your life I want to run an equal amount of danger—you can't go into this thing alone."

"You will be running risk more than you imagine," replied Frank, "you will have to run with the engine muffled down to a dangerously slow pace. There is a chance too of our coming to grief altogether in making a landing but we are in this thing now and we must see it through. If Billy Barnes is in that camp we are going to get him out of it no matter what may happen."

"Well, of course you are captain and I have to obey orders," said Harry, "if you finally do get in a tight place, though I shall try and take the ground even at the risk of wrecking the machine. If there's going to be any fighting, we'll be side by side."

"That's just the very thing I hope won't happen," was Frank's reply. "I want to get Billy out of there with as little fuss as possible, if he's there at all. I've got a plan that I think will be successful."

"What is that?" asked Harry eagerly.

"Wait and see how it works," laughed Frank, "and now come on we'll turn in till midnight for we shall need all our wits and energy about us to-night."

Both boys had formed the habit of waking at any hour they desired almost to the minute; a habit which some people possess naturally and others can acquire by practice. It was only a few minutes past twelve then by Frank's watch that they both awoke and strapping on their revolvers hurried over to the *Golden Eagle*.

"We'll have to lighten her of everything not absolutely necessary," declared Frank, "you see I hope we shall have an extra passenger to bring back with us and it won't do to risk her buoyancy by overloading."

The provision basket was unstrapped, in accordance with the lightning plan, and everything not absolutely necessary to the operation of the craft cast remorselessly away. The sides and seats of the pilot house were removable and it didn't take long for the boys to unclamp these and store them in the tent. After about an hour and a half's work the *Golden Eagle* was pronounced by her young owners to be ready for flight.

"I don't like to chance it but we've got to have a light," said Frank as he switched on the searchlight, so that he could see where to drive the *Golden Eagle* on the "take-off."

"I hardly suppose though," he went on, "that it will be noticed away up here. We can shut it off as soon as we get underway."

The rays of the light showed the young aviators that they would not have very much room for a running start unless the engine was driven at capacity. Even then the boys decided that in order to run no chances it would be necessary to back up to the extreme edge of the jungle that bordered the cleared plateau on its western edge. Accordingly Frank threw in the clutch that operated the bicycle wheels and as soon as he pulled over the reverse lever the *Golden Eagle* ran backward to the desired point as easily as an automobile is backed in a crowded street.

A great flock of shrieking parrots arose from the surrounding tree-tops with cries of alarm as the brilliant white rays of the searchlight cut through the night. They settled back again, however, after a few scared revolutions about the strange, glowing-eyed monster that they saw beneath them.

As Harry gave the "all-ready" signal, Frank started the engine, which fell to work as usual without a hitch. The *Golden Eagle* dashed forward as he threw in the first, second and third speeds in rapid succession and with her twin-propellers revolving at 1,200 revolutions a minute, rose in a graceful, upward curve just clearing the tree-tops under Frank's trained manipulation.

As she shot forward and upward, heading as straight as an arrow for the twinkling pinpoints—the objective of the midnight trip—both boys gave a sudden startled cry of "Hark!"

Ringling till the whole mountain resounded with the clangor of his wild tocsin, the bell-ringer was at work again!

FRANK TAKES A DESPERATE CHANCE.

So utterly unexpected was the mysterious sound that even the steady-nerved Frank lost his wits for a moment and the *Golden Eagle* gave a dangerous swoop downward as he pulled the wrong plane-control in his agitation. In a second, however, he had righted his error and she soared on again on a level keel doing better than thirty miles an hour under the steady driving of her powerful engine.

Driving an aeroplane at night is a strange sensation. Neither of the boys was new to it entirely, having made night flights up the Hudson from New York to Poughkeepsie when they were experimenting with their ship and wished to keep its performances secret as far as possible.

It is a very different thing, however, to driving along the air above lit-up towns and a boat-thronged river to be soaring through the blackness above a dense tropical forest whose only inhabitants are wild beasts and venomous snakes and, more dangerous than either, tribes of wandering Indians who would be likely to show small mercy to the young aviators if they fell into their hands. Both boys were filled with a sense of isolation and loneliness as the *Golden Eagle* bore them through the dark silence toward the distant camp-fires. Moreover both were thinking of the moment of parting that was to come when they had arrived near enough to the camp for Frank to put his bold plan into execution. Both the young aviators realized that a more dangerous undertaking could not well be imagined but it was not at the danger they flinched but the idea that this might be the last voyage they would ever make together.

The fires grew brighter and brighter as the *Golden Eagle* rushing through the upper air at express speed drew nearer to them. Frank called Harry to the wheel and busied himself with the rope-ladder. It was about thirty feet in length and formed of the best manila hemp rope with tough lignum vitae rounds. The tops of the ladder were roughened so as to afford a better hand and foot grip.

Frank's first step in making his preparations was to hook the two leather loops at one end of the ladder securely into two hooks screwed into the edge of the trap-door in the floor of the pilot-house for the purpose. He then folded it so that the second he was ready to descend he could throw it out and it would fall in a straight line without snarling. He then opened the trap and, lying flat on his stomach carefully scanned through the night-glasses the character of the country over which they were racing along. Before he did this he gave a sharp order to Harry.

"Put out the light."

There was a snap of the switch and the *Golden Eagle's* bright eye grew black.

"Slow down the engine! Muffle her way down!" was the next command, "we don't want to have to open her up, with the consequent noise, till we have to."

As Harry obeyed, the sharp rattle of the exhaust, which had made the whole craft quiver under the strain of the hard-driven engine stopped and became a gentle purr hardly audible.

"That's better," commented Frank.

"How does she head for the fires now?" was his next question.

"South-by-a-quarter east," replied Harry, switching on the binnacle light for a second and squinting at the compass.

"Bear up two points to the east," ordered Captain Frank.

Harry obeyed and the *Golden Eagle* slid away from her straight course for the lights,—leaving them off on her starboard side.

"Just circle round a few times," commanded Frank as they grew nearer and nearer, "the moon ought to be up shortly and then we can get some light on the subject."

"It will make us a target for them if they see us," he went on, "but that can't be helped. We must trust to luck and their bad aim."

As Frank had prophesied the moon shoved the edge of her rim above the low hills that surrounded the encampment a short time later. From his lookout place on the floor of the car Frank could see far below him the silvery radiance that flooded the tree-tops getting stronger and stronger. It showed him too, to his great delight, that there was a big space of ground, covered with what seemed to be short scrub, near to the camp, but separated from it by a dense grove of trees. It looked as if it would be feasible to swoop down to the earth at this spot close enough for the daring boy to drop to the ground from the end of the swinging rope ladder.

"Raise her a hundred feet or so," said Frank, as soon as he had completed his survey. "Steer her right over the camp," he ordered a second later.

"What?" demanded Harry; not sure that he had heard aright.

"Steer her over the camp," repeated Frank, "It's taking a long chance,—but I've got to know the lay of the ground."

If Frank ordered a thing done Harry was accustomed to obey him without a word; so he put the *Golden Eagle* about and pulling the raising plane levers shot the craft up, till Frank cried.

"She'll do at that."

As the *Golden Eagle* swept high in the air over the sleeping camp Frank noticed with exultation by the flag seen in the light of the bivouac fires it was indeed Zelaya's camp. He also observed that they kept a very poor watch. Several men, evidently supposed to be doing sentry duty were asleep round the blaze of one of the outer fires, and only in front of a small tent detached from a group of several that Frank assumed to be those of the officers, was there a guard patrolling. This fellow walked up and down unceasingly with his rifle over his shoulder and from time to time pulled open the tent-flap and peered in.

"He's guarding a prisoner," thought Frank, noticing these actions, and, he added to himself, "if

the prisoner isn't Billy I shall be much surprised."

His survey of the camp completed, Frank had a pretty good mental photograph of it fixed in his mind. The next step in the rescue of Billy Barnes was to be the most dangerous; except the actual dash for freedom.

"Now keep cool Harry," wound up Frank, after the boys had selected the spot on which the *Golden Eagle* was to be brought near enough to the ground in a low curve for Frank to swing himself off onto terra-firma.

"All right Frank," replied the boy, as he manipulated the needful levers for the downward swoop. He did not trust himself to say more. The next minute he felt Frank's firm grip on his shoulder.

"Don't take your hand off the wheel," remonstrated Frank, as Harry prepared to grip his brother's hand in farewell. "Good-bye old fellow and good luck to us all three."

A few seconds sufficed to throw down the ladder and Frank slid down it to its lowest rung with the agility of a cat. He hung there on the plunging contrivance while the *Golden Eagle* swept downward like a pouncing hawk. Suddenly there was a jerk and Frank felt the end of the ladder hit the ground. The *Golden Eagle's* impetus had almost ceased at this lowest point of her swoop and Frank, as he let go with a whispered prayer, could feel the vibration, even where he hung as Harry, opened the engine up for the ascent,—without which the *Golden Eagle* would have been dashed to pieces.

Frank landed in a pile of low bushes which broke his fall and saved him from possible serious injury. Harry in performing the ticklish evolution had been unable to check the speed of the aircraft sufficiently to avoid giving Frank a severe tumble when he dropped off, as Frank learned later the *Golden Eagle* had, in fact, very nearly refused to answer her helm.

As soon as he collected his senses Frank ducked down behind the clump into which he had fallen and lay very still. He wanted to ascertain if the solitary sentry had noticed anything unusual. Apparently he had not, for the relieved boy could catch the sound of his regular footfalls as he paced to and fro in front of the tent in which, Frank was pretty certain, Billy lay a prisoner.

Reassured, Frank crept cautiously through the brush up to the edge of the grove of trees already mentioned as separating the camp from the bit of open ground on which he had landed. The solitary tent stood on the opposite edge of this clump and Frank's plan was to creep up near to it under cover of the dark shadow cast by the grove, before he made his presence known to the occupant.

He threw a glance up from time to time as he made his way carefully over the ground. Far above him the *Golden Eagle* was soaring, and Frank knew that the boy at her helm was at that moment wondering with all his might how their daring adventure was to turn out. Frank noted with satisfaction that the *Golden Eagle* was not nearly as conspicuous as he had imagined she would have been. In fact if he hadn't known that she was up there, he concluded that he would have had to search the sky for some time before he made her out.

It took him what seemed to be an interminable length of time to reach the edge of the clump of trees and wriggle his way up to the back of the tent, but at last he accomplished it, and lay behind the rear flap of the shelter with nothing to shield him from the eye of the sentry but a patch of deep shadow cast by the trees behind him.

Slowly Frank extended an arm and cautiously raised the edge of the flap. He was running a terrible risk he knew. It was, after all, pure assumption on his part that Billy was in there at all. It might as well be Rogero's tent. This thought made Frank pause for a minute but he determined to go ahead as he had planned. If the worst came to the worst he had his pistol and he could make a dash for the open and trust to Harry's being able to pick him up before they were riddled with bullets by the machine guns that he could see packed in another part of the camp.

With fast beating heart he waited till the solitary sentry had reached the farthest point of his patrol. Then he raised the flap a few inches and whispered:

"Billy, are you there? It's me—Frank."

The answer that came back almost made him forget the terrible risk he ran and cry out aloud with joy.

"What's left of me;" came back a whispered rejoinder in Billy's well-known tones, "I'd got a hunch you'd come."

SAVED BY AN AEROPLANE.

The sentry paced by the tent as these greetings were exchanged, and both boys held their breath as he hesitated in front of it but, to their unspeakable relief, he passed on.

"You'll have to cut me loose," murmured Billy, as the sentry's retreating footsteps informed them that he had got a safe distance away, "I'm tied hand and foot and my head feels as if it had a hole in it like the crater of a volcano."

In a flash, as Billy spoke, Frank conceived a daring plan. He would wait till the next time the sentry passed and then slip bodily into the tent under the rear flap. As a matter of fact the most risky part of this business would be the actual creeping in. Once inside there was not much chance of discovery unless the sentry should take it into his head to come right inside—a thing which Frank thought was not likely to happen. His brief inspection of the room when he first lifted the flap had shown him that the unfortunate Billy lay on a cot. It would be, then, an easy matter to slip under this in case the sentry took it into his head to lift the front flap periodically,—as Frank had seen him do from the *Golden Eagle*.

Waiting till the man had once more passed and was swinging down to the end of his post Frank wriggled under the tent-flap and into it.

"You seem to take a personal delight in risking your life to save mine," whispered Billy with a pitiful attempt at humor as Frank whipped out his knife and stood waiting till the sentry should have passed again, before cutting the ropes that were bound round the unfortunate reporter's feet and hands so tightly as to cut into the flesh.

As a measure of precaution Frank crawled under the cot as the man's footsteps drew near once more and it was a lucky thing that he did so for this time the vigilant sentry pulled aside the front flap and peered around the dim place. He saw nothing unusual, however, and dropped it again with a grunt and fell to pacing up and down.

"Now, Billy, we've got no time to lose," snapped out Frank, slipping from under the bed. With a swift slash he released the reporter's hands. A second later the ropes about his feet fell to the floor cut through.

"If he peeks in this time we are goners," whispered Frank as the heavy, regular tread drew near once more; but the man passed by and as his footsteps died away the reunited boys clasped hands warmly.

"You can tell me all that has happened when we get away from here," whispered Frank, cutting short the narrative of his adventures the irrepressible Billy had plunged into, "we've got all our work cut for us now."

"What are we going to do?" asked Billy helplessly, "I'm so stiff from those ropes that I can hardly run and when they knocked me down they gave me this bump that doesn't make my head feel any too good."

"Rub your joints, to get the circulation going again," was Frank's rejoinder. "You'll soon feel all right."

"Yes, but then what are we going to do?" repeated Billy, "We can't get off through the forest. They'll discover that I've gone in a short time and Rogero will send his whole army through the woods to find us. It would never do for him to lose me now, you see. I know too much."

"We are going to get away by aeroplane," was the startling answer. "Once we get up aloft, I don't think that even Rogero can get us." Billy used as he had recently become to the boys' resourcefulness gasped out:

"What?" in such an amazed tone that, grave as was their position, Frank couldn't help laughing.

"That's the idea," rejoined Frank, then hastily he sketched out to Billy their plan. He also pointed out to him the absolute necessity of keeping a cool head when the crucial moment came.

"There will be no second chance," he warned impressively, "even to bring the *Golden Eagle* so near to the earth once, is a desperate measure. If we don't make the ladder on the first jump it's goodnight, remember."

To Billy's credit, be it said, that he listened to Frank's amazing proposal without batting an eyelid. Indeed, he had come to have such faith in the younger boy's ingenuity and ability that he would willingly have jumped over a precipice if Frank had told him it would be all right. All he said was then:

"Count on me, Frank, if this thing gets 'pied' it won't be my fault."

"Or ours either, I can promise you that," returned Frank earnestly.

"Now," he went on, to Billy, who had been vigorously chafing his numbed ankles all this time, varying the performance by rubbing his wrists alternately; "if you've got some of the stiffness out the sooner we are on the move the better."

"All right, Frank," bravely whispered Billy. "It feels like every step I took somebody was jabbing a knife into me," he went on in a rueful tone, "but I guess I can do my part of this job."

"Bully for you," whispered Frank in reply. "Now then," as the sentry's footsteps died away, "it's now or never."

As he spoke he slipped under the tent-flap closely followed by Billy who, plucky as he was, couldn't suppress a slight groan at the pain his wounded head and rope-grazed joints gave him as he moved.

A second later both boys were in the dark shadows of the clump of trees and in comparative safety. That is they were safe till the sentry looked in the tent again and discovered that his prisoner had vanished, a fact they both fully realized.

"We'll have to sacrifice caution to speed," counseled Frank, gliding swiftly along with wonderful

speed and making very little noise. Poor Billy with his hurts and stiffness did not make such good progress.

"Come on, Billy," whispered Frank grabbing him by the arm, and half dragging him along, "it won't be long now."

"I don't think I can last much longer, Frank," groaned Billy. "You'd better get out and leave me here. I don't suppose they'll dare to do anything much to me."

"They won't, eh?" returned Frank, "well you don't know as much of these people as I do. No, Billy, we'll stand or fall together. Come on, buck up, and in a few minutes we'll be safe in the good old *Golden Eagle*."

Frank's words and his bold determined manner had the effect he intended. Billy put on a stiff upper lip and a few minutes later they emerged into the moonlight at the edge of the clearing. Frank fumbled in the bosom of his shirt for the signal light as they cautiously crept across the brilliantly moonlit patch in which Frank and Billy both felt that they must be as conspicuous objects as a pair of bull elephants.

When he found the tiny flash-light with which he was to give the signal to Harry in the *Golden Eagle*, that both boys could now see hovering above them, Frank pressed the button twice. Harry, scanning the ground below him anxiously, saw the tiny flashes instantly and with a feeling of relief, that, so far, the enterprise was going well. The boy set the downward planes of the *Golden Eagle* and muffled down the engine for the peril-filled descent.

Crouching in the brush Frank and Billy, one of them at least with a queer, sinking sensation at the pit of his stomach—watched the great aeroplane swoop down on them like a bird of prey. It was small wonder that they felt apprehensive. What they had to do was to grasp the end of a swinging rope-ladder as, for but the fraction of a minute, it brushed by them—yet neither of them dared entertain the thought of missing it. To do so would have been to unnerve them when they most needed every ounce of presence of mind and cool calculation they could muster.

"Now!" cried Frank suddenly as the air-craft's black shadow enveloped them.

Bracing every muscle till they were tense as steel springs Frank made a leap for the lashing end of the ladder as it tore by him at what seemed to be terrific speed. It was about three feet above the earth. As he jumped and caught it, bracing his foot on the lowest rung, he felt the aeroplane sag down with the sudden weight.

"Open up!" he yelled to Harry, fearing that if she sagged any more the *Golden Eagle* might lose her equilibrium altogether. At the same instant he realized that Billy was making a desperate effort to haul himself onto the ladder also. The reporter had caught it all right but his fingers,—weakened under the tightness of his recent bonds—refused to grip it firmly. Already he had let go with one hand and was gazing with a piteous white face up at Frank.

As the welcome roar of the powerful engine came to his ears and Frank felt the good ship respond nobly to its impetus the youthful aviator reached down and seized the reporter just as Billy's grasp was about to relax altogether. He managed with a desperate effort to haul him up till Billy's foot rested on the lower round.

"You'll have to let me drop, Frank, I can't hold on any longer," he gasped.

"Put your leg through the lower round," commanded Frank sharply. With a last effort, that almost cost him his place on the ladder, the reporter obeyed the order and found that he had at least a chance of holding on with his leg hooked firmly over in this position.

At this moment,—and as the *Golden Eagle* gave a sickening leap upward that made Billy's head swim and would undoubtedly have been the last of the reporter but for the firm grip Frank had of his arm—a shot flashed out from the camp. Instantly there was a turmoil in the place that reached the boys' ears even above the roar of the laboring engine's exhaust.

Lights could be seen moving rapidly about below, and shouted commands rang sharply out on the night. With the additional weight she was carrying, at an angle to which she was not accustomed,—and for which she had not been designed,—the *Golden Eagle* behaved erratically. Despite Harry's most skilful handling and jockeying she refused to rise at her usual rapid pace. In fact she seemed as sluggish as a snail and yawed and lurched in a manner that swung Frank and the reporter about as if they had been suspended at the end of a pendulum.

In this urgent crisis the men in the camp perceived the unaccustomed sight of the struggling aeroplane and, shouting in Spanish, made a dash through the grove of trees into the open space above which the Boy Aviators' craft was struggling bravely to attain the upper air.

Frank, as if in a dream, saw from his perilous perch a dozen rifles leveled at them and, in the glare of a kerosene torch, perceived Rogero hurrying about giving orders and striking men with the flat of his sword in his fury at losing his prisoner.

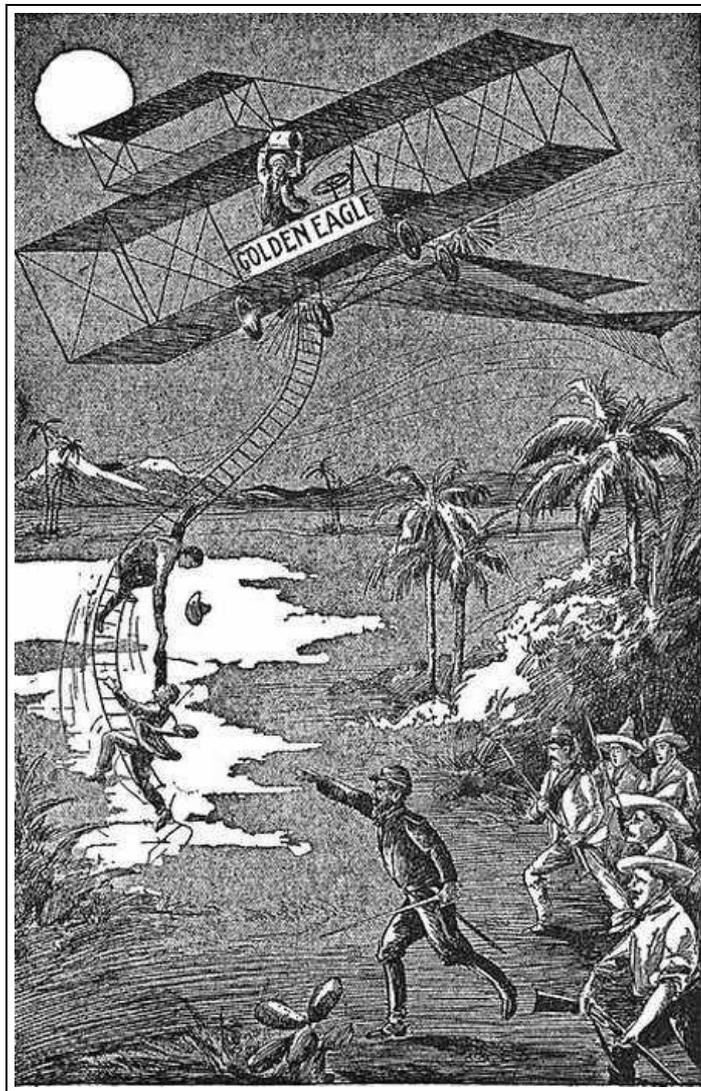
It seemed as if it was all over when suddenly from the car above them Harry's clear voice rang out.

"Stand clear; or I'll throw the bomb!"

The effect of his words was instantaneous. The boys, clinging to the swaying ladder, saw the soldiers dash back as if terror-stricken and Rogero himself—crazed with fury—seemed to have ordered the men not to fire for they dropped their rifles.

Like a flash Frank saw his opportunity. If they could reach the top of the ladder the lurching aeroplane would answer her helm.

"Climb, Billy. Climb! It's your last chance!" he cried. "Climb with every drop of strength in your body!—Quick Harry—the picric acid!"



"CLIMB, BILLY. CLIMB! IT'S YOUR LAST CHANCE."

As though galvanized into a last spurt of life by Frank's emphatic words, Billy's tired muscles came into play and slowly, with what difficulty he never knew, for to this day the young reporter says he doesn't know how he did it—he managed to follow Frank up the ladder. As they did so Harry emptied the acid into the gasolene tank and urged by the tremendous impetus this gave her engines, the ship began to rise.

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As they climbed desperately higher, the *Golden Eagle* gradually regained her equilibrium and began to respond to her riding planes as Harry frantically manipulated them. Frank crawled after what seemed an hour through the trap in the pilot-house floor. Instantly stretching himself out—he reached down to Billy. He seized the reporter by the wrists and fairly lifted him into safety beside him.

Of this brave struggle, however, Billy knew nothing; for as he was pulled through the trap his overwrought nerves gave way and, as the *Golden Eagle* shot into safety at thirty miles an hour, the young reporter lay in a dead faint on her pilot-house floor.

"Bravely done, Harry," cried Frank, grasping his younger brother's hand in a firm grip which you may be sure was heartily returned.

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"That's all right. All's well that ends well"—replied Harry,—with a grin, "it was just a bit of bluff, Frank, but it worked."

"What did you do?" demanded Frank.

For reply Harry pointed to the brightly-polished cylinder of the searchlight that, detached from its socket lay on the floor.

"You heard me call, 'Lookout for the bomb!' or words to that effect?" he inquired.

"Yes," replied Frank, puzzled, "but those fellows don't understand English."

"Well, they understood what it meant when they saw me raise that searchlight over my head as if I was going to chuck it down and blow them all to Kingdom Come," replied Harry, cheerfully.

THE BOYS DISCOVER THE TOLTEC'S "SESAME."

They arrived at camp as day was breaking and found everything just as they had left it. The first thing to be done was to get out the medicine chest and bandage Billy's wounded head after antiseptics had been applied to it. It was only a flesh wound but the weapon,—most probably the butt-end of a rifle,—with which he had been struck, had inflicted a glancing cut that was painful. After a hasty breakfast the boys turned in and slept like tops till late afternoon.

The remainder of the day was spent in describing to the astonished Billy, who soon recovered his usual cheerful attitude toward life, the queer incident of the bell-ringer and the carved quesal on what the boys had already termed Treasure Cliff.

"Yes, but," objected Billy, "any one might have amused themselves by carving it there,—cave-dwellers or something,—of course,"—he hurried on—"I don't know much about these things, but it looks to me like a waste of time to go digging round there on a chance."

"I guess you don't know much about it, Billy," smiled Frank, "the quesal was a sacred symbol of the Toltec priests and it would have been as much as an ordinary citizen's life was worth to have carried it or drawn it anywhere, at any time."

"That's so," agreed Billy, "as you say, Frank, I don't know much about these things. I'm better at digging up stories than treasure. What do you propose to do?"

"Well," said Frank, "my idea was this. We will overhaul an outfit to-night, and to-morrow morning we will start out for the foot of the cliff. We will mark out a space there extending in a semi-circle of which the center will be a point directly below the quesal's beak and see what we can turn up. We three should be able to do a good bit of earth turning in a day, and if we find nothing we can take a fly back to La Merced. We are due there to-morrow night anyway, and if we don't show up father will be worried."

"A bully program," cried Billy.

"With a bully lot of hard work involved," retorted Frank.

Before they turned in that night the boys had selected the outfit they would take. Frank and Harry, of course, carried their pocket electric torches, rifles, revolvers and canteens. The blankets and such provisions as they thought it necessary to take along were done up in neat rolls. Billy was nominated the axe-man of the party, and Frank and Harry took the spade and the pick. Altogether when they set out as soon as it was light enough to see they were a formidable-looking party of pioneers.

They arrived at the foot of the cliff without adventure and set to work clearing away the dense undergrowth which matted the ground at the foot of the rocky wall. Frank had first driven a peg into the ground at a point as nearly in a plumb line with the down pointing beak of the quesal as he could strike. He attached to this a bit of cord about fifteen feet in length and with this improvised compass marked out a semi-circle in which to carry on operations.

The boys' watches indicated noon by the time they had the brush cleared and three very tired but excited lads sat down to a hasty lunch. They knew that the preliminary work had now been done and if they were on the eve of any important discovery that the afternoon's work would probably decide it.

Lunch disposed of they set to work with a will on breaking up the ground. In this the axe and the pick wielded by Billy and Frank came in useful. They pulverized the ground—which in some places was as tough as hard-pan—so that it was easy for Harry to follow along with the shovel and spade up great clods of it. The hands of all three were soon covered with blisters and Billy, who had not yet fully recovered from his trying experiences, was fain, before the work had progressed very far, to throw down his axe with the confession:

"Boys, I'm all in."

He was directed to sit in the shade and watch the work which he did in a rather shamefaced way although he had endured the struggle against exhaustion pluckily enough while his strength held out.

Frank's semi-circle had been pretty well dug over by the time that the great clouds of nesting parrots from the feeding-grounds in the valley began to circle with harsh cries above the trees on the mountain-side which formed their dormitory. Harry threw down his shovel with a cry of disgust.

"Hadn't we better call it a day, Frank," he said, "we have dug up enough earth for a subway excavation and haven't discovered a clue. I guess that quesal of yours was put up there for a joke—it looks like it's been one on us all right."

But Frank was not discouraged so easily.

"Half-an-hour more and then we quit," he agreed, "but let's give it one more try."

"On that condition all right," replied Harry, "but I'm a union man, when it comes to this sort of a job. Eight hours is enough for me, thank you."

For perhaps twenty minutes more the boys dug in silence when suddenly Frank uttered a sharp exclamation.

His pick had struck something that gave out a ringing sound!

When he announced the news in a voice choked by excitement there was no more lethargy on Harry's part—even Billy forgot his aching head and sore hands and went to work with a will. In fifteen minutes or so they had uncovered a large flat stone with a ring of some kind of dull metal imbedded in the center. With a loud cheer all three boys, their fatigue entirely forgotten, joined hands and executed a wild sort of war-dance round their excavation, which was perhaps three feet or so deep.

When they had danced their enthusiasm out the practical Frank somewhat dashed the hopes of

the others, after carefully examining the stone, by saying quietly:

"It looks good, boys; but we've got to raise it."

Here was indeed a poser. They all three tugged at the ring till their already sore hands were almost raw but not even a tremor ran through the stone which was about four feet long by three wide.

"We have no means of telling how thick it is," said Frank, in a discouraged tone, "it may weigh ten tons for all we know."

"We might dynamite it," suggested Billy.

"Yes, and advertise our find to the whole country," retorted Harry.

"I wonder what's under it," surmised Billy.

"Lemons perhaps," mischievously laughed Harry.

While the other two were talking the energetic Frank had been at work. Jumping into the hole he had carefully scraped round the edge of the stone like a man trying to get a waxed cork out of a bottle.

The edges of the stone fitted so closely to the live-rock surrounding it, however, that his hope of finding a crack, in which they could put a lever and pry up the rock, was blasted. There seemed to be no way of solving the puzzling problem. All the treasures of Golconda might have been concealed under the mighty rock and the boys would have no more chance of getting at them than if they had been securely locked in the center of the earth.

It was not Frank's nature to give anything up without a struggle to solve it, however, and he suggested one more try.

"Maybe it is balanced in some way," he suggested.

"A good idea," commented Harry. "What's the matter with our all getting on one side of it and jumping together when one of us says, 'Go.'"

"We might try it," said Frank dubiously, "but I'm skeptical that we will obtain any results."

"We'll get a lot of exercise anyhow," chimed in Billy.

"As if we hadn't had enough to-day," indignantly cried Harry.

Laughing—despite their anxiety—at the ridiculous sight they must present the three boys placed their arms on each other's shoulders and solemnly pranced up and down on the rock first at one end and then at the other. Then they tried jumping on its sides. The great boulder didn't even quiver. It was as solid under their feet as the face of the cliff itself.

"Looks like we'll have to give it up," said Frank at last in a disgusted tone.

"Yes, I don't see what else we can try," Harry agreed, "whoever stowed that rock away meant that no one but himself should ever get it up again."

"He must have been a hopeful young party if he ever figured on doing it by his lonesome," commented Billy, "unless he was some sort of a giant."

"Maybe he had some magic words he chanted over it like:

"Eeny, meeny, minney mo," suggested Harry, solemnly chanting the mystic rhyme, as if he half expected to see the rock swing back in response.

"Yes—or open sesame,—like in the Arabian Nights," scornfully remarked Billy. "Come on, let's quit it. It will be dark before we get back to camp if we don't hurry."

"We certainly have had a fine day's work for nothing. Just to think that we've got to pack all this stuff back to camp with us after all instead of using it to explore the Toltec Caves of Treasure Cliff," cried Harry, speaking the last words in a highly melodramatic tone.

"You're a fine old fraud," he yelled at the unmoved quesal,—looking down from the cliff, with its sunken eye, as it had gazed for almost uncounted centuries. "If I could get up there I'd fix you so as you wouldn't fool anyone else. I'll just take a chuck at you for luck anyway. That old unwinking orb of yours irritates me."

As he spoke the lad stooped down and selected a large flat stone and flung it full at the carved figure with the down-pointing beak.

"Bang in the eye;" he shouted, "give me a walking-stick, Mr. Showman, I"—

Whatever he was going to say was cut short by a wild shout from Frank.

"Good lord!" he yelled, "Look there!"

Billy and Frank followed his finger as he stood pointing on the edge of the excavation.

Slowly; as if some invisible hand was pushing it up on delicately-adjusted hinges—the big rock was swinging open from its sleep of the ages!

As it yawned wider and wider the first steps of a rough flight of stairs,—apparently cut out of the living rock,—were disclosed. From the aperture, as it gaped wider, rushed out a breath of air so fetid and poisonous that the boys grew sick and faint under its baleful odor.

THE FIGURE ON THE CLIFF.

The boys held a hasty consultation as soon as they had retreated a safe distance from the reeking fumes of the Toltec excavation. Till the foul air of the place, probably stagnant for many hundred years, had been given a chance to pour out, it would have been folly to have wasted time on an attempt to descend into the black hole that the swinging back of the huge rock had revealed. There seemed to be little doubt, after the mystery had been discussed again and again, that Harry's lucky shot had released some spring hidden in the quesal's eye and caused the boulder to open. It seemed incredible;—but there was no other explanation, and it was decided to defer all discussion of the matter till a thorough examination could be made of the interior of the cavern they had stumbled upon for the hidden mechanism.

In the meantime a hasty camp was pitched, although there was little thought of sleep in the minds of any of the boys and after supper had been despatched they sat up long, with eyes that refused to grow drowsy, talking over what they were likely to find on their exploration trip, which they had agreed to undertake as soon as it grew light enough to make a start—always providing that the foul air of the place had cleared sufficiently to make such a thing feasible.

At Frank's suggestion watches were finally set, the night being divided into three sections. Harry volunteered for the first, Frank for the second and Billy agreed to tackle the last. He was given the opportunity to select a short period of watching as both boys realized, although he indignantly disclaimed it, that he must be still feeling some effects of exhaustion from his wound.

Harry kept up a fire, for although it was not chilly the boys knew that once in a while a jaguar, bolder than his fellows, had been known to attack rubber-cutters, and they were by no means inclined to have the success of their expedition marred by anything approaching a tragedy. Having nothing better to do the lad amused himself by singing in a not particularly melodious way. Harry knew more about aeroplanes than he did of music and the tone effects he produced were something weird.

He had just attained a particularly high note and was congratulating himself—as is the way of people who have accomplished something they didn't think they could do—when a sound that had startled both Frank and himself before, suddenly brought his satisfaction to an abrupt period.

It was the mysterious bell again!

It was pealing with the same frenzied, timeless clamor that it had manifested on the two previous occasions they had heard it, but it sounded somehow much nearer than it had from the camp on the plateau.

"Ahoy there!" shouted Harry; determined if there was a human agency at work to get some sort of reply, "ahoy!"

There was only the echo of his voice coming hollowly back from the face of the cliff for an answer.

His shouts, however, awoke Frank and Billy.

"Whatever is the matter, Harry?" demanded Frank.

"It's the bell again," replied Harry in awestruck tones.

Before Frank could frame an answer or Billy could speak, the furious pealing broke out anew.

"Why, it's close at hand—somewhere!" exclaimed Frank, after he had listened attentively, his head on one side, for several seconds.

"Sounds as if it might come from the cliff itself;" said Billy; who was feeling rather nonplussed as the metallic clashing continued without interruption, but in the same furious aimless way already familiar to the boys.

"That's right, Billy," agreed Frank, "if I've got any ear for location of sound it is coming from the cliff."

"How can it come from there!" protested Harry, as the bell ceased as suddenly as it had begun, "I'm sure we looked carefully enough over that wall of rock, and there's nothing even resembling an opening in it—even supposing," he added "that anyone would be crazy enough to climb up there—which they couldn't do anyhow—and ring a bell."

"Perhaps it's some kind of a bird or animal," suggested Billy, eager to find some satisfying solution of the uncanny sound.

"Yes, a chimes-bird or a bell-rabbit," scornfully snorted Harry, "no, we'll have to do better than that."

"There's no doubt it's a sure-enough bell," decided Frank.

"And a good loud one, too," replied Harry. "I never heard a clearer or better one even on a church."

"But who in thunder can be ringing it?" resumed Frank.

"There we are, back at the beginning of the question again," rejoined Harry disgustedly.

"You can't convince me that it hasn't got something to do with the cave," exclaimed Frank. "Possibly with the very door we uncovered to-day."

"I suppose the man who rings it marches in prompt at midnight every night—when we had to dig up the ground with pick-axes before we could get it loose enough to shovel—try again, Frank;" laughed Harry.

"Mightn't it be monkeys?" was Billy's contribution.

"Where would they get the bell?" demanded Frank.

"Hum; that's so," replied Billy, abashed at the dashing to earth of the theory he had so hopefully advanced.

"If he'd start up again," said Frank suddenly, "we could get a line on just where the sound is coming from and then when it gets light examine every foot in that direction."

Both his listeners agreed that this would be a good idea. But if the bell-ringer had heard them and maliciously made up his mind not to grant their wish he could not have remained more silent.

"Perhaps if you'll sing again, Harry," remarked Frank, unkindly, after the younger boy had related for the dozenth time how the bell-ringing of that particular night had started; "he will get mad and start pulling the rope once more."

Overlooking the deliberate insult, in his desire to find out if the bell-ringer would not oblige, Harry lustily started an old high-school song. But though he sang till his throat cracked, and his listeners' ears ached, he disturbed nothing but an old white owl that flew from some hiding-place on the face of the cliff, and flapped solemnly round the boys' camp,—its great yellow eyes gleaming wickedly.

"R-r-r-r-r," shivered Billy, as the silent bird wheeled by them so close they could almost have touched it, and suddenly let out an ear-splitting screech that made all the boys jump in spite of themselves. "I hope that it isn't some spirit, or something, of the old Toltecs that has been ringing the bell to keep us away from their cave. I don't mind anything I can hit with a firearm but I haven't much fancy for going into a haunted cave."

"The only 'hants' you'll find in there will be bats and a few relatives of our white-feathered friend that just disturbed you—I hope you are not going to sport any plumage of his color," laughed Frank.

"Come, Frank, that isn't fair," protested Billy, indignantly, "and I saw you jump yourself when that old owl let out that holler."

"I didn't mean it seriously," laughed Frank, good-naturedly, seeing that he had really hurt Billy's feelings, "but you don't, for a moment suppose that there is anything in whatever those steps may lead down to but dust and darkness and bad air, do you?"

"I don't, eh?" retorted Billy angrily, "well, what do you think I dug till I nearly dropped dead for—my health?"

"I suppose you are figuring on running into a treasure trove as soon as we get in there," grinned Harry. "If they took as much care to hide their valuables as they did to lock the front door we'll be a long time, and have a lot of hard work before us,—before we discover the Toltecs's secret."

"Pshaw," replied Billy magnanimously, "what do you suppose I care for the hard work? Anyhow I wasn't serious with you fellows. There might be all the treasure the Toltecs ever saw,—and Captain Kidd and Sir Henry Morgan thrown in, concealed in that cave, or whatever it is at the bottom of that passage, but I've no right to even a share of it—I'm far too deeply in the debt of you fellows for anything like that."

"No, Frank; no, Harry; it isn't the money I care about at all—though I don't deny I can always use all I get my hands on. That's not the point, however, this is your discovery, not mine, and I'm going to help you out on it all I can. I don't want a penny, but if we really find any buried treasure the very idea of it will be all I want in the way of a big sensation."

"Nonsense, Billy," rejoined Frank, touched at the reporter's earnestness. "We are in this thing as partners. We all share the dangers, we'll each take an equal share of the reward, always supposing there is any."

"Of course we will, Billy," put in warm-hearted Harry, "and when we get back to America you'll be able to buy the *Planet* and fire your managing editor."

"I don't know of anything I'd like better," replied Billy in all seriousness, while the boys shouted with laughter at his grave face, "although," he added, "I do owe him a debt of gratitude for sending me down here."

"I don't see what you've done for the paper, Billy, however," returned Frank.

"The wires are all tied up, aren't they?" replied the business-like Billy, "what could I get through? As a matter-of-fact I'm getting more good material, sticking round with you fellows, than I could collect in a year by myself."

Further conversation was cut short at this point by a sudden cry from Harry, who had been sitting with his knees clasped gazing up at the dark sky, which was dissected as though by a knife-blade by the black wall of the cliff-summit where it cut across it.

"What is it, Harry?" demanded Frank.

"Well, there's something very funny about that cliff, that's all,—or else I've got optical delusions," rejoined the youth in an earnest tone.

"Yes," said his hearers breathlessly, for Harry's startled face was sufficient evidence that he had seen something surprising.

"You can believe me or not, as you like," returned Harry, "but a few seconds ago, as you and Billy were talking, I'll swear I saw a man's figure outlined against the sky at the top of the cliff."

THE TOLTEC'S STAIR.

Viewed in the cheerful light of the next morning the uncanny happenings of the night did not have nearly so serious a complexion. In fact both Frank and Billy were sorely tempted to laugh at Harry, and the latter himself was also inclined to think that he might have been mistaken about the figure on the cliff. He even went so far as to admit, under a severe fire of cross-examination that it might, —mind you he only said it might—have been a monkey.

"He must have been a monkey if he was up where you say you saw him, Harry," remarked Billy, deftly transferring a slice of sizzling hot bacon from the smoking tin roaster above the camp-fire onto a plate formed of a round of pilot bread, for this conversation took place at breakfast.

Immediately the meal was concluded the boys, of course, made a rush for the hole. It still smelled musty and fusty, but the overpowering gaseous fumes of the preceding evening seemed to have vanished. Frank was not going to run any risks, however, and under his direction the two other boys set about collecting a huge pile of dried brush which was shoved down into the hole with long branches and then a lot of blazing tinder thrown in on top of it. To the boys' delight the stuff blazed up fiercely and with no indication that the air was too full of gas for combustion to take place; which was a certain sign that it was healthy to breathe.

Accordingly there was soon plenty of bustling preparation about the camp while the boys got in readiness for the decisive plunge into the unknown. There were canteens to be filled at a spring that gushed from the cliff not far away, firearms to be examined and pockets searched to make sure that matches in their waterproof boxes had not been forgotten. Last of all, when everything was ready, Frank with an air of triumph produced half-a-dozen tallow candles.

"Well, you are a wonder," cried Billy. "Whatever made you think of fetching those along?"

"What made the cat stay out of the wet, Master Barnes?" replied Frank merrily, "Forethought. Of course we have our electric torches," he added, "but the candles will shed a more diffused light."

Arrived with their baggage at the edge of the hole there was an excited contest between Harry and Billy as to who should enter first. Frank decided the matter by going himself. With a lighted candle held above his head he carefully descended the first of the steps and warned the boys behind him to be cautious, as they had no means of knowing what sort of a pitfall they might encounter at any moment. For the first few feet of course they had the light of day to guide them; and never had it seemed so sweet to them as when, after they had descended about twenty feet or so, they were plunged into pitchy darkness.

With Frank's candle shedding a yellow glare about them they descended fearlessly after him down what seemed to be an interminable staircase. They had so far followed a straight course down with a slight incline which led inward beneath the face of the cliff. The steps were cut deep and wide and, except for the damp slime with which they were covered, the lads had no difficulty in following them or in maintaining a foothold.

"Can't we light our candles, too, Frank, and have a little more light?" asked Harry suddenly after the little train had descended in silence for some minutes.

"We've got all the light we want," responded the young leader, "and besides, we can't afford to waste illumination. We may need it badly before we get through."

As they got lower the walls of the stairway, as wide as the opening itself where they had entered, began to close in until the boys' elbows were rubbing against the walls on either side of them.

"This would be an awkward place to get caught in by anything coming the other way," remarked Frank, "we couldn't even turn round."

His mouth had hardly framed the words when he uttered a sudden shout of "Lookout!"

The next minute the boys felt a great billow of wind coming toward them and a queer rushing sound as of a great river flowing between rocks. Frank's candle was blown out instantly and they were enveloped in total darkness.

Frank and Harry felt their faces beaten against by countless leathern wings and Billy was fairly knocked over by the onslaught,—which had scared him not a little. It was all over as quickly as it had begun almost.

"Jimminy crickets, what on earth was that?" demanded Billy, picking himself up.

"Bats," laughed Frank, "no wonder they were in a hurry to get out. They must have been imprisoned in here since last that stone swung into place."

"I hope they've all taken their walking, or rather flying papers," commented Billy, sputtering and coughing as were the other boys from the terrific dust the creatures had fanned up with their wings, "anything more like that would get on my nerves."

Frank soon had his candle relit and they resumed their descent. The stairway did not continue very much further, however. When they had reached a point which Frank estimated must have been back underground about half a mile from the face of the cliff their feet suddenly encountered a hard level floor. It was a welcome change from the monotonous downhill march.

"We have a few tons of mountain on top of us now," remarked Harry, who had also taken careful note of the direction the stairway followed.

"Yes," agreed Frank, who had verified his guess of the direction in which they had been proceeding by his compass. "Just think of the work those fellows—or rather their slaves—accomplished when they dug this tunnel through solid rock without powder or dynamite, so far as we know."

"It must have been well traveled," exclaimed Harry, "look here." He called his brother's attention to the narrow walls of the stairway by which they had descended. They were grooved on each side, at a height of about three and a half feet, with a smooth, worn, shallow sort of trench.

"What did that, do you suppose?" asked Billy.

"Slaves' elbows, no doubt," replied Frank, "the thousands of people who must have used this passage in the dead centuries could easily have worn away the walls in that manner. Just as," he continued, "in old cathedrals you will find the altar steps worn by the knees of the countless worshippers who have knelt there."

"Maybe they were bringing out treasure," hazarded Billy.

"That's entirely likely," replied Frank, "in such a case their burdens would naturally have expanded their arms till they rubbed these grooves in the walls with the passage of time."

The little party had come to a halt during this conversation, but now Frank turned to the others.

"We can take our choice," he said, "of going on or of returning to the surface and getting together a more complete equipment."

The unanimous vote was for keeping on, at least for a time, and the Chester Expedition under its young leader took up the march again. Now, however, the walls of the level passage along which they were proceeding seemed to have broadened out and they could walk three abreast without difficulty instead of proceeding Indian file as hitherto. The air of the passage too seemed purer than that of the staircase, and Frank even thought at times he could detect a cool draught, coming from some unknown outlet possibly. It was, however, insufferably hot; with the close, ardent heat of a coal mine.

The passage began to take a gentle gradient upward after they had proceeded along it for about half an hour, and as they pushed on the air grew noticeably fresher. When Harry held up his candle they could see that the roof of the passage was dripping with huge stalactites of a whity color that glistened as the flame fell on them. On either side too they could perceive the wet gleam of the walls. They were still in a confined place.

They pushed ahead in this manner for perhaps fifteen minutes more when suddenly Frank stopped short.

"Don't come a step further," he cried sharply.

The other boys poured out their questions.

"Hark!" was the only reply vouchsafed by Frank.

As he spoke he poked at the floor of the cave with the tip of his shoe and dislodged a stone. He gave it a kick forward and the boys, with tingling scalps and a cold shudder down their spines, heard it plunge down—down into unknown depths till the sound died out in a tiny tinkle, and all was silent as a tomb again.

"Phew!" gasped Harry, "that was a narrow escape, how did you detect it, Frank?"

"I came pretty near not discovering it in time," laughed the young leader, who now that the danger was over was busy holding his candle at every angle to see what their surroundings might be, "as luck would have it, however, my foot dislodged a small pebble just as I was about to step over into what would have been eternity. I heard it drop down just as you fellows heard the larger one. I guess we'll have to thank that little bit of stone for saving the life of one of us at any rate."

"Let's light up and see where we are?" suggested Harry, after the boys, fascinated by the mystery of the vanishing sound, had hurled dozens of rocks into the depths.

"I hate to squander the candles, but I suppose we'll have to," replied Frank. "This one of mine doesn't come near lighting up the place."

A simultaneous gasp came from the boys as, with all three candles lighted, they peered over into the black gulf that yawned at their feet. It was a huge fissure, possibly twelve feet across, and of unknown depth. It reached clear from wall to wall of the passage, which at this point had broadened out into what Harry called "a regular Council Chamber." As if to verify his words the light of the boys' combined candles revealed that the walls were carved with countless figures of quesals and other hieroglyphics intended apparently to typify the ceremony of the sacrifice. Dust and time, however, had done their work, and in many places the figures were chipped away altogether where the rock had flaked off.

At the further side of the chasm they could make out a spot of darker black against the inky surface of the rock which Frank rightly took to be the mouth of a continuation of the tunnel.

"Look here, boys" he cried in excitement, pointing across the abyss at the darker shading that marked the mouth of the entrance of the extension of the passage they had already traversed. "Do you know what that means?"

"Well, I suppose it's another tunnel, but what good does that do us," grumbled Harry; "unless we can jump this little ditch ahead of us?"

"Not for me," put in Billy.

"You don't suppose, do you," demanded Frank, "that the people who took all the trouble to build this outlet from the mines or temples or whatever is at the end of our trip, would have left this chasm impassable? What would have been the sense of it?"

"That's so," rejoined Harry, "but how are we going to find it—if there is some way of getting over?"

"Look for it," rejoined Frank quietly and, suiting the action to the word, he approached the other side of the passage. After a brief search he uttered a cry of triumph.

"I've got it, boys," he exclaimed, "come here."

To his wondering young companions he exhibited the lower links of a heavy chain of some sort of metal which was not iron and to which even Frank could not give a name.

"We're as good as across," he exclaimed.

"Well, how does that solve the problem?" demanded Billy.

"How, my bright young reporter," cried Frank, "did you ever, when you were at school, swing over a ditch on a rope?"

"Lots of times," replied Billy wonderingly; "but——"

"That's what we are going to do here—that is, if the chain is not too weak from age to bear us," replied Frank.

"Do you really mean that?" demanded Harry.

"I certainly do," rejoined Frank.

"Listen!" suddenly cried Billy, "did you fellows hear something?"

They all three paused and listened intently.

From far down in the dark pit that gaped at their feet there came a sound that seemed like a long drawn-out sigh.

THE RAVINE OF THE WHITE SNAKES.

The sound was not repeated; but, perhaps it was because the long spell in the darkness had got on their nerves, or possibly there was some sort of uncanny influence in the air of the long deserted place; but on at least two of the party, namely Harry and Billy, the chasm had a most depressing effect. Not so with Frank. Difficulties only increased his determination to conquer them.

"Come," said the boy leader briskly, "if we are going to jump out of our skins and get nervous at every noise we hear we won't get very far with our exploration. Probably there is a subterranean stream at the bottom of that pit. I have often read of underground rivers."

"It's funny we didn't hear the stones splash then," objected Billy; but to himself.

The chain, which was very heavy and solid, was looped to the wall by a hook, as if the last person who had used it had carefully adjusted it in place before leaving.

"Now for a test," cried Frank, detaching it and dragging it back a few feet from the edge of the chasm. Under his direction all three boys seized hold of it and pulled and tugged with all their might. Their united efforts and weights had no effect on it. The chain was as solid as the day it was put there by a forgotten race centuries before.

"I will go first," announced Frank, when the boys had completed their test of the chain and there seemed no reason to doubt it was perfectly capable of bearing their united weight.

There was some protest from Harry at the idea of his brother risking his life in making the first practical test of the chain. Frank however ridiculed his fears.

"There's absolutely no danger," he exclaimed, "if there were I would be the last person on earth to tackle it needlessly. We have come this far and I simply won't give the search up just now for a little swing across a space which, if we didn't know how deep it was, would seem like a joke. Besides, think of the thousands that must have used this chain bridge safely in the dead ages."

His arguments carried weight and finally Harry and Billy consented to let him be the first to cross. Billy claimed the right to come last as he was the lightest.

Frank extinguished his candle after admonishing the boys to hold theirs high so that he would be able to see to make a fair landing on the further side. This done he gripped the chain firmly, ran back a few steps and then, with his foot in the lower link, swung easily across the chasm and alighted on the other side with as little effort as a man swinging on a trapeze.

"Easy as falling off a log!" he cried from the ledge opposite on which he now stood. "Come on, Harry, it's your turn."

Harry made the swing as successfully as had his brother and the chain was now swung back to Billy. The reporter was frankly nervous and a repetition of the long sigh that they heard from the chasm some minutes before didn't tend to make him less so.

"It sounds like something or somebody waking up from a long sleep," he shuddered.

The young reporter could not have described the sound better if he had cast about for a definition of the emanation from the ravine for an hour. That was exactly what the noise did sound like. The first sigh of somebody, "or something," as Billy said, stretching himself as his eyes open after a long deep slumber.

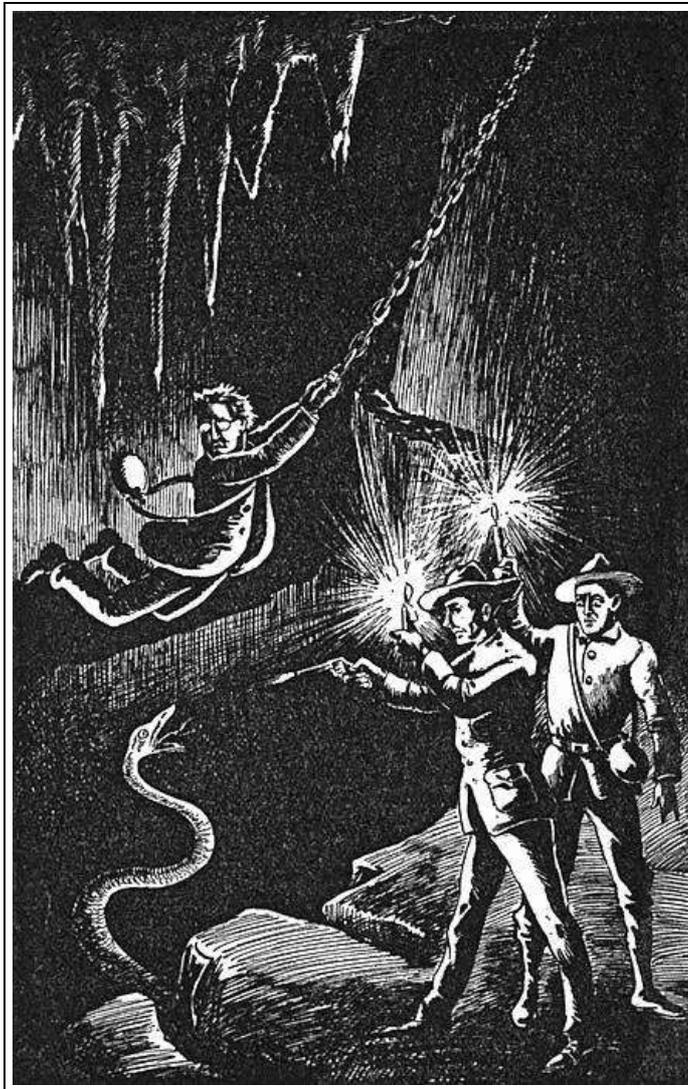
"Come on, Billy, don't be all night," shouted Frank, as the young reporter hesitated and fumbled with the chain that Harry had swung back to him.

"Well, I suppose I've got to do it sometime, and it might as well be now," decided Billy suddenly, making up his mind like a boy about to plunge into his cold tub on a winter morning. As he spoke he gave the necessary run back to gain impetus and started on the swing.

Frank and Harry, standing on the opposite ledge, ready to catch him as he landed, heard the boy scream in mortal terror as he shot over the center of the black gulf.

"Frank! Harry! Save me!" he shrieked.

At the same moment before the boys' horrified eyes a long, wicked white head, with sightless slits for eyes, shot up out of the black mouth of the pit and darted at Billy.



"FRANK! HARRY! SAVE ME," SHRIEKED BILLY.

As it did so Frank's revolver spat out its whole magazine of ten high-powered cartridges. Harry, his arms about Billy, who would otherwise certainly have toppled back into the abyss in his terror, saw the wicked wedge-shaped head vanish instantly as the bullets hummed about it like a loosened hive of bees.

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There came upward from the noisome pit a sound of dry scraping, something like the rustle of silk on some rough surface, and the boys' nostrils were filled with an indescribable odor, something like musk, that was familiar to at least two of them.

"Snakes," cried Frank and Harry simultaneously.

"A snake," corrected Frank, shuddering at the recollection of the loathsome white head and the dry scraping sound that had followed its disappearance, "a giant snake that has lain torpid here for who knows how long."

"But a white snake," objected Harry. As for Billy, he was not yet sufficiently recovered from his terror to say anything but leaned ashy and sickened against the rock wall.

"Most probably a boa constrictor or an anaconda," replied Frank, "that from its long years of life in the dark has lost its pigmentary attributes. A plant, you know, kept in the dark will become white and animals that have been discovered in other caves have also been albinos. This snake, as I figure it out, is one of the descendants of a possibly vast number kept here by the Toltecs to guard their mines from would-be invaders. I can think of no other solution, unless it had something to do with their mystical religion."

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"A mighty good thing you were so handy with your revolver," cried Harry, "eh, Billy?"

"Don't," remonstrated the young reporter in a shaken voice, "I can feel the awful sensation yet. I could almost feel its cold coils about me."

Far down in the pit there came again that scraping sound, like silk drawn over a rough surface. This time all the boys exchanged glances of horror and antipathy.

"Bah!" exclaimed Frank, "think of the horror of falling into that pit into possibly a mass of those creatures."

"I have it," cried Harry suddenly, "they must—supposing there are several of them—have been lying torpid. I suppose it was our shower of stones, Frank, that aroused them."

"I think that is entirely likely," replied Frank, "but, say, boys, look at this," he held his candle up to a mass of carvings on the wall. They represented men in the grasp of serpents with birds' heads and other unfortunates having their lives trampled out by huge quesals. One row of drawings like an Egyptian frieze actually showed a man, presumably, from the fact that he wore only a loin cloth, a slave, being dragged from a chain, which was evidently the one by which they had just crossed, by a huge serpent.

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Gazing upon the sacrifice was a group of bearded men in tall cone-shaped hats.

"Priests," said Frank, "but see here, boys," he pointed excitedly to a row of dancing quesals below the hieroglyphics they had just examined. The boys gazed and their eyes grew round.

The single eye of each of the ridiculously solemn birds, who were shown in profile, each with one leg drawn up in exactly the same manner as if they were executing a solemn dance of some kind, was formed of a blazing red stone. In the gleaming glow of the boys' candles they flashed fire like the orb of the living bird.

"Rubies," cried Harry.

"I certainly believe that they are," replied Frank, taking out his pocket axe and hacking at the rock surrounding one of the blazing crimson stones.

"Why, they must be worth \$5,000 a piece," gasped Billy.

"Say \$10,000 and you'll be nearer the truth," replied Frank, as his efforts with the axe met success and one of the fiery, beaming stones dropped into his hand, "feel the weight of it."

There were ten of the dancing quesals, and the ruby in the eyes of each was of exactly the same size. One by one the boys prised them out and then gazed wonderingly at them.

"Why, that's \$100,000," gasped Harry.

"Estimated," laughed Frank.

"Suppose they turn out to be only glass," put in the skeptical Billy, on whom Frank's conservative manner had had its effect.

For reply the boy leader of the little train that had unveiled what turned out afterward to be the portal to the Toltec mines gave one of the stones a hard crack with the blunt side of his hatchet head.

"Not much glass about that, I should say," he laughed as he held it up and showed that its surface was as unmarred by the blow as if it had been a diamond.

The boys were busy congratulating themselves on their finds and poking about the mouth of the new tunnel that opened its blackness before them that till now they had given no attention to one most important thing—how were they going to get back?

The question was propounded by Frank who was badly worried over the problem. The first flush of the excitement of estimating the value of their discovery and speculating on what lay before them had quite obliterated for the time the consideration of this important matter. It was then with a serious voice that he turned to his young followers and asked:

"How about getting back?"

The idea of the serpent fresh in their minds the notion of recrossing the chasm on the swinging-chain appealed to none of the boys; but, as it did not seem probable there was any other means of exit—at least that they were likely to discover—it was self-evident that they would be compelled to take the desperate chance or starve to death in the blackness of the Toltec caves.

The solution of the problem came with a sharp shock to all of them.

There was no way of getting back!

The chain by which they had swung across dangled idly above the middle of the chasm.

In his excitement at dragging Billy from the coils of the huge white snake Harry had forgotten to secure it on the ledge.

Their escape was cut off.

They had to keep on now, or die miserably where they stood.

THE BOYS ARE TRAPPED.

The numbing sense that comes with an overwhelming disaster tied the tongues of all three boys in this crisis. They stood stupidly gazing at the chain which formed their only hope of escape. It dangled tantalizingly just out of reach, even if it would not have meant death in the white snakes' coils to have attempted to reach it.

White-faced and despairing, they stood there in their tracks for several minutes. Was this to be the end? Were they to die here in these unknown underground passageways? It was a situation to turn to ice-water the blood of the strongest, most determined man. No wonder that in the face of this greatest crisis of their lives the three boys were stricken tongue-tied with horror and apprehension.

It was Frank who spoke at last. His voice assumed a desperate cheerfulness he was in reality far from feeling.

"Come on, boys," he cried, "cheer up. While there's life there's hope. As we can't turn back now the only thing for us to do is to push on as long as we have strength to do so."

"I suppose so," miserably replied Harry, "I wish to goodness I'd never thrown that rock at the quesal's eye," he added in a sort of comic despair.

Under Frank's confident manner, however, their spirits rallied a little and, extinguishing all the candles but one,—that carried by Frank,—they pushed on after him down the new tunnel that lay in front of them. To their surprise this took a heavy upward slant, and then abruptly doubled back toward the direction they had already traversed. This fact kindled a spark of hope in Frank's heart which he did not dare to communicate to the other boys, however, for fear of having later to dash the newly awakened hopes.

It seemed reasonable to suppose that if the passage led upward it would at least be likely to bring them out into daylight and fresh air, and these two things meant much to the boys, who were as much exhausted by the bad atmosphere and depressing surroundings of the darkness as by fatigue and the terrible shock they had just undergone.

So Frank, with a stouter heart, plodded steadily along up the path which still rose steeply in front of them. He looked at his compass and found that they were now traveling almost due east or in an exactly opposite direction to that they had taken when they entered the tunnel. A wild idea flashed across Frank's mind at this discovery that served to further cheer him. Might it not be possible that the path led straight through the mountain? He looked at his watch. It was not yet twelve. They had then been traveling about six hours. Of the exact speed of their progress of course he could make no estimate, but he judged that they had made on an average a little over a mile and a half an hour, allowing for delays. It was possible, too, that the passage had taken windings and deviations which in the darkness they had not perceived.

Suddenly something occurred that brightened the lagging spirits of even Harry and Billy. All three of the boys felt distinctly a cool refreshing draught of air. At first none of them dared to speak of it, for the same reason that Frank had not wanted to express his theory that they were bound through the mountain; but, after a few minutes, the first refreshing draught became a strong steady breeze.

"Hurray," broke from the throats of all three, a poor cracked cheer it was from their exhausted frames—but it was a cheer; and after that they pressed on with more vigor and cheerfulness. Another ten minutes' march and a soft greenish light began to flood the tunnel. Still further on it grew light enough to extinguish the candles. Their hearts beating with the hope of speedy escape from the horrors of the underground passage, the little band pressed briskly forward.

Their spirits were due to receive an abrupt check, however. As they pushed hurriedly on the passage made an abrupt turn and they saw at once from whence the light that had gladdened their hearts had proceeded. It streamed down from the opening of an abandoned shaft that led up about thirty feet to a round top fringed with hanging creepers and tropical growth. The circular top of the shaft revealed to the boys' eyes a round strip of blue sky.

And that was the bitter end of their high hopes of escape from the tunnel.

With fresh despair lying heavy on them the boys examined the walls of the shaft to see if there were not some steps cut there or mounting rounds driven by those who must once have used it, but in whatever manner the ancient Toltecs got in and out of their passage from whatever sort of territory lay at the top of the shaft, they had left no trace of it. The walls were as smooth as a sheet of paper.

"Well," exclaimed Frank, after the examination was concluded, "we have been in some tight places; but I don't think we were ever in a neater fix than this seems to be."

"There's one chance," cried Harry, "and only one—it's just possible that there may be people, civilized people—"

"Or Indians," put in Billy, "what difference does it make who or what they are—"

"As I was about to say," went on Harry, not noticing the half hysterical interruption of the overwrought boy, "it's just possible that if there is anyone in the neighborhood of the top of this shaft that we might be able to attract their attention by shouting."

"A good idea, Harry," replied Frank. It was at once put into execution. The boys shouted at the pitch of their tired voices for a good hour and then desisted from sheer inability to produce another sound. There was no result. Once a bird hopped onto a creeper at the mouth of the shaft and peeped inquisitively down, but that was the only fruit of their efforts. The boys looked blankly at each other. They were three as brave lads as ever stood together facing hardship and adventure, but who shall blame Billy Barnes if tears did well up in his eyes and topple over, and trickle down

his cheeks as, his head in his hands, he sank despairingly on the rock floor at the bottom of the shaft?

The bright blue sky above, the cheerful green of the waving creepers and plants that fringed the mouth of their prison all combined to make their disappointment harder to bear. Each boy felt that if death was to come it would be easier almost to face it in the dark tunnel they had left behind them than here, almost within grasp of life and all they held most dear.

"We'd better take an inventory," remarked the practical Frank at length, "and see just how long we can last out. When we reach the end we've got one desperate chance——"

His listeners looked up from their despairing attitudes inquiringly.

"We can retrace our steps and try to leap the chasm."

"A twelve foot jump at least," exclaimed Harry.

"You've done better than that at home many times," rejoined Frank bravely, "and so have I, and so has Billy, I'll bet."

"It's one thing to do a broad jump at school on the flat ground and another to try it over a chasm full of white serpents," moaned Harry.

The inventory taken, the boys found that they had the following articles on which to sustain life till they were rescued or till death claimed them—the latter seeming the inevitable contingency.

Three canteens of water—minus about a pint each drunk on the journey.

Four packages each of soup tablets and erbe wurst.

A pocketful apiece of pilot bread.

And that was all. To make matters worse the soup tablets needed water to make them edible and although the boys had an aluminum saucepan with them they realized that in a pinch it is more easy to subsist without food than without water. Their supply of water—the chief consideration—was lamentably small for the situation.

"Maybe we could eat the tablets dry and let them dissolve in our mouths," suggested Billy, "I'm so ravenously hungry that I've got to eat something."

The idea was hailed as a good one and the boys made a meal at about 2.30 that afternoon off dry soup tablets—two apiece—and one-half round each of their precious pilot bread.

"Tastes like soap more than soup to me," remarked Billy with a wry face, and then suddenly stopped short, the boy had forgotten for a moment that the "soap" might stand between them and starvation. But the soapy qualities of the tablets were not their worst property. The enterprising manufacturers who made them had seasoned them liberally with salt and pepper, also presumably in compressed form, with the result that half an hour after their meal had concluded the boys were seized with furious pangs of thirst.

They held out as long as they could, knowing the importance of husbanding their water supply, but at last their sufferings became so unbearable that Billy seized his canteen with the remark:

"If I am to die I'm not going to deny myself a drink of water;" and drained a quarter of its contents at one gulp almost. Frank and Harry both possessed plenty of self-control, but the sight of Billy's assuagement of his thirst was more than they could bear, and simultaneously each of them seized his canteen and throwing back his head let the grateful stream trickle down their parched throats.

"I could hear it sizzle," exclaimed Harry, putting his canteen aside with a sigh of satisfaction.

That night the boys bravely fought off all temptation to touch any more of their precious water, but when the sun got up and the parching heat of the day penetrated even into the shaft they could bear it no longer. They took their canteens and drank and when they set them down from their lips they contained only a few drops each. As for food they still had some left, but they scarcely dared to eat it fearing to increase the maddening torture of thirst. As the day wore on they sat round the bottom of the shaft in a sort of hopeless apathy.

Their tongues were swollen till they could hardly speak, their eyes were caked with dust and red-rimmed, their lips blackened and parched by their sufferings. They were indeed a different looking group to the trim Chester Exploration Expedition that had set out so light-heartedly the day before. From time to time they fell into a sleep of sheer exhaustion from which they awakened unrefreshed. Strange visions of cool flashing brooks, green orchards and crystal lakes shot through their minds. The first stages of the delirium that precedes death by hunger and thirst were upon them and they realized it. Long before night came and the coolness relieved their sufferings to a slight extent they had emptied the last drops of water in their canteens. They had even resorted to the expedient of staggering back along the tunnel, to where the walls began to grow damp, and licking off the grateful moisture with their tongues. Infinitesimal as the relief was, still it furnished some alleviation of their sufferings.

At daybreak the next day, Harry and Billy were comatose. They lay with their eyes closed at the bottom of the shaft uncaring of their fate. This is the merciful anodyne that nature sometimes brings to those she dooms to die in the cruelest way imaginable. Frank alone held out against the deadly torpor he felt creeping over him.

"While there's life there's hope," he kept whispering through his cracked lips, but he knew that in his heart hope had died and there was nothing to wait for but death.

An idea suddenly struck him. Perhaps some day, long after they were dead, somebody would stumble on them. He would leave a record of their names and how they met their fate. Feverishly, with half palsied hands, he searched through his pockets for a pencil and a scrap of paper. He drew out a handful of odds and ends from his pocket, and sorted through them for a stub of pencil. As he did so his waterproof matchbox fell from the collection and rolled slowly to his feet. He gazed at it stupidly. The idea flashed into his mind, that they would give a lot of fire now for water and here was the means of fire so carefully protected against the element that would give them life. He laughed mirthlessly, but suddenly staggered to his feet, a last hope animating him—

"Fire!"

Across the boy's reeling brain there shot an idea, as he stared at the matchbox.

If a column of smoke were seen from the shaft mouth it might bring aid. What a fool he was not to have thought of that before. Hastily he tore his shirt into strips and with his blackened, blood-stained hands scraped together some litter that had fallen from the brush above into the shaft.

With trembling hands he lighted it. It caught and blazed brightly up, too brightly in fact. Frank saw that there would have to be more smoke, if his beacon was to be visible. He crawled over to where Harry and Billy lay and ripped their shirts from their backs. The two boys looked at him stupidly, but neither spoke—they were too far gone for that.

As Frank piled the heavy material he had acquired on the blaze, a column of thick blue smoke rolled heavenward out of the shaft mouth. It was their last chance. Nerved by this new kindled hope, Frank gazed at the fire with his rapidly, dimming eyes till it died out into a pile of gray ashes.

Would there be an answer?

How long he sat there Frank never knew. It was long after the ashes had grown cold, however. With a last flicker of consciousness he looked at his watch. Four o'clock. What were they doing at home in New York, what were they thinking at the hacienda? he wondered vaguely.

It was hard to die like this, with the blue sky so near. He gazed up at the shaft mouth as if to take a last farewell of the outer world.

The next minute the exhausted boy leaped to his feet and instantly fell back swooning with a loud cry of joy. Their signal had been seen.

Peering over the top of the shaft, was a wild, brown face fringed with long matted hair and beard, but the eyes were kindly and Frank had read their message of rescue.

THE LONE CASTAWAY.

When Frank opened his eyes he found himself lying on a rough sort of couch, spread with coarse net over clean blankets, in a place that he at first thought was the rocky chamber at the bottom of the shaft. Square windows, cut in the walls, however, through which strips of bright blue sky were visible, and a large sort of altar in the corner on which something that gave forth an appetizing odor, was cooking in an earthen pot, soon disillusionized him. It was a rough dwelling, but after what they had endured, the recollection of the details of which was still dim in the boy leader's mind, it seemed like a taste of paradise. Outside he could hear the voices of Harry and Billy and another that was not familiar to him.

Throwing off the blanket that had been thrown over him, the boy,—still so weak that his knees seemed to have developed strange sort of hinges and his head reeled,—felt his way along by the rough walls of the dwelling to the door. Harry and Billy, already recovered from their experience, were seated outside the place, which Frank now saw, was dug out in the face of a steep cliff, on a bench also cut out of a kind of soft sandstone. The boys jumped up with a loud "Whoop," when they saw Frank, and throwing their arms round him, escorted him to the bench and dragged him down by their sides.

"This is our rescuer, Frank;" announced Harry gratefully, indicating a thick-set, sinewy man, burned almost to the color of the cliffs round about by exposure. Frank recognized the hair-fringed face,—almost monkey-like,—with its kindly eyes as the same that he had seen peering over the edge of the shaft as he had looked up, as he thought to take a good-bye to life. The figure of the man who had saved their lives was no less remarkable than his face. He wore rough rawhide sandals and his clothes were shaggy garments, apparently contrived from deerskins. His hat was an ingenious plaited arrangement of manacca palm leaves.

Frank gazed about him in amazement at the place in which he found himself after the first words of gratitude had been exchanged. It was a cliff-rimmed basin possibly two miles in circumference thickly wooded toward one end, but in the portion in which they were seated, bare and sterile as the Treasure Cliff. The steep walls, however, were pierced with numerous openings, some square and some oblong. The honeycomb of ancient cliff dwellings was joined by steep flights of wide steps cut out of the living rock.

After Frank had eaten a good portion of broth out of the earthen pot, he was prepared to hear the story of their rescue and the no less remarkable narrative of their savior. It appeared that late in the afternoon before that man in the deerskin garments had seen Frank's smoke signal curling up from the mouth of the shaft, which lay about half-a-mile away. He had at once hastened over and gazed down at the first white face he had seen in two long years.

At first he was so startled that he could not believe that the lads lying apparently dead at the bottom of the tunnel were human beings as, for a reason which will be given later, he believed that the other end of the tunnel was impossible of entrance or exit. After the first few minutes of stunned surprise, however, he realized that they were real boys and in sore need of help.

He hastened at once to the burrow that he had selected as his dwelling and secured a long rawhide rope for which he had never imagined he would have any use again. Fastening this to a bush near the top of the shaft, he had hastily secured a bowl of water and some food and after letting these articles down carefully, one at a time, he had lowered himself. After the first application of water to their parched lips the boys recovered their senses and strength rapidly—that is, all but Frank, who for a time they feared was past recovery. Their rescuer, after the boys were sufficiently recovered to be able to stand up and eat some of the stewed, dried deer's flesh and roasted bread-fruit he had lowered into the shaft, then clambered up on his rawhide rope. The next to reach the surface was Billy with the aid of the man above pulling with all his muscular might.

The rope was then lowered again to Harry who attached it beneath Frank's armpits, padding it where it came in contact with his body, with their soft felt hats. Harry then clambered up and then all three laid on to the rope and hoisted the senseless Frank to the surface.

"How long ago was this?" asked Frank, who had no idea what day it might be.

"Two days," was Harry's astonishing reply.

It was then the turn of the man who had come to their aid in the nick of time to tell his story. His name was Ben Stubbs, and before he became a castaway under as strange circumstances as ever befell a man, he had been a sailor before the mast. He had quit the sea when on the west coast of Guatemala to become a mahogany hunter. From this he had drifted into prospecting for gold in Central America, and about two years before, while sojourning with a band of wandering Nicaragua Indians, had cured the cacique of the tribe of a deadly fever. In return they had confided to him the secret of a legendary basin, high in the mountains worked at one time, so they told it, "by old, old people who were here long before us, when the land was young," meaning, as Ben realized, the Toltecs.

They offered to escort him to the place up a hidden trail and the ex-seaman, after consulting with a couple of friends in Corinto—as adventurous characters as himself—decided that they would at least test for themselves the truth of this marvelous legend. They traveled several days' journey from the western coast and at last had reached a deep ravine in the heart of a rugged chain of mountains. Their path had lain up a trail apparently once well worn, but at the time they traversed it so ruined by time that it was hard for the burros, on which they carried their mining implements and camp equipment, to maintain a footing.

The ravine was crossed by a rough bridge formed of the trunk of a single huge tree. The white men got across it in safety, the Indians bidding them farewell at that point, saying that the land

beyond was haunted by "spirits of the men that came before them," and that they could go no further. Beyond the ravine a sheer cliff shot up, but the Indians told the adventurers that by making a day's march to the north they would find an opening in it. The trail they then followed began at the end of the bridge and was so narrow that at times it was necessary to blindfold even the surefooted mountain burros. On one side lay the huge ravine, on the other the steep cliff. They found the opening, or rather bore, in the cliff exactly as the Indians had told them, and after traversing a short passage had entered the cup-like valley in which the boys and their rescuer now were.

"That was two years ago, shipmates," sighed Ben Stubbs, "and it seems like fifty. We thought we would all be millionaires afore long. Poor Jack Hudgins, Bill Stowe and me. Well, mates, we found it all as the Injuns had tole us—the shafts an' all; but we hadn't got no way of gittin' down 'em. Howsomever that didn't worry us none as we found enough bar gold stored up in them houses on the cliff above to make us all rich. We loaded it on our burros after a week's work, and got all ready for the start back.

"That night there come a bit of an earthquake. Not much as you might say for these lands—just a little tremor—we was so used to 'em we paid no 'tention to 'em. The next day was bright and fair and we hit the trail for the timber bridge and riches and the land of the free. Of course, we meant to cache the gold some place and take it out by degrees as they don't like Yankees to take any money out of these countries, an' if they'd caught us they'd have taken the gold an' jailed us. But it wasn't ter be. We gets to the end of the trail where the bridge ought to be an' there weren't none! The earthquake had dislodged it.

"I guess, then we all went a little mad. There we were trapped. We had to drive the burros off the cliff. There was no room to turn them. Every day for months we used to walk down that trail to where it broke off, an' there was a drop plumb clear down to nothing as you might say, and holler and holler just like we was all locoed, and I guess we were. You see we figured that maybe them Injuns would come back; but they never did. Well, shipmates, first poor Jack sickened and died; the thought of his wife and kiddies in 'Frisco, as 'ud never know what had become of him, drove him inter a sort of consumption, I guess. Then Bill Stowe got bit by a rattler as he was on his way to the big bell on the top of the east cliff. You see—"

"The big bell," exclaimed all the boys, recollecting the mysterious clangor.

"Yes," replied the castaway, "it's on the top of the cliff, yander," he pointed to the east, "I guess the old timers put it there. We'd go up there and watch sometimes out over the valley, an' when we'd see the camp-fires of rubber men or mahogany hunters or travelers, we'd jus' naturally ring it to beat thunder. Only the other night I seen a fire down there and I rung and then at last I looked over, but it didn't do no good—"

"Why, Ben," shouted the boys, "that was our fire you saw."

"Your fire," repeated Ben, thunderstruck.

"Yes, you scared us almost to death," went on Frank, "we couldn't make out what it was."

"Thought it was a monkey," put in Billy.

"Well, I guess I'm more monkey than man at that," sighed Ben Stubbs, "living the way I've done, trapping and stalking my food and clothes from the animals in the wood yonder—but, tell me, how did you fellows ever get up here if that was your camp I seen?"

Rapidly they told him of their discovery of the tunnel and it was the ex-sailor's turn to sit back and look astonished.

"But how did you cross that 'ere hole in the ground?" he demanded, "Long ago, when me and my mates was first stranded on this 'ere island, as you might call it, we tried to get out that way—yes, an' we tried other tunnels, too, but we couldn't find no way of doin' it. If we'd known about the sarpints, I'll bet you we wouldn't have tried."

Frank told him about the chain and about the impossibility of reaching it.

The sailor's rugged, bearded face took on an interested air.

"You say you left it dangling thar?" he demanded.

"That's about it," replied Frank. "We could reach it with a long hook or branch, but how are we to overcome the difficulty of the white serpents? It means death to try to get across that chasm, now that they have been aroused from their long sleep."

To the boys' amazement Ben Stubbs winked sententiously. He said not a word, but rising to his feet, led the boys up the cliff to a small cave. In it were several kegs.

"Read that," commanded the ex-sailor pointing to the stenciled lettering on them. Bending down the boys read:

DYNAMITE—(GIANT POWDER)—KEEP
AWAY FROM FIRE OR BOILERS

m'f'd by

THE VULCAN EXPLOSIVE COMPANY OF
S. F.

"I guess if we set off a keg of that stuff in that thar hole it won't be 'xactly healthy for them thar sarpints, eh?" questioned the castaway.

"The very thing," excitedly cried Frank, who had begun to fear that in being rescued by Ben Stubbs, they had only got into another trap. The next minute, however, his hope dropped down to zero once more.

"What about the battery and the fuse wires and the fulminate of mercury caps," he cried, "we can't set a charge off without them."

"We could do without 'em, I reckon—," began Ben.

"You mean throw a stick of dynamite down in there," cried Frank, "why, man, it would kill the serpents all right, but it would kill the man who threw it."

"—but we don't have to," calmly continued the castaway, "'cause we three was practical miners

as came up here, two years ago, and we brought 'em with us."

DYNAMITING TO FREEDOM.

Ben Stubb's welcome solution of the problem of how to escape from the valley, came as a great relief to the boys. As he had related the narrative of his years of solitude up there, their hearts had sunk as the realization, that they too might be doomed to the same fate, had invaded them. With the discovery that the prospector had dynamite and the needful apparatus for setting off a blast without injury to the man who fired it, however, their future had assumed a bright tinge, and when they went to bed that night in the rough cave that had been the outcast's home for such a long time, their dreams of the morrow were pleasant and hopeful.

Both the Chester boys had been deeply worried at the idea of the anxiety their unexplained absence must be causing their father, and Frank bitterly blamed himself for having decided to go forward with the exploration of the tunnel before he had notified his father of their discovery.

They were up betimes and set about the ticklish business of transporting the keg of dynamite to the Serpent Chasm, where it was to be put to such effective use. It was decided that for the purpose for which they required it only a small quantity would be necessary—in fact none of them wanted to run the risk of widening the chasm by placing too heavy a charge. Ben, who was experienced in the use of explosives, figured—the force of dynamite being downward—that if the blast was fired at a depth of roughly two hundred feet down the chasm, that there would be no danger of damaging the upper edges of the abyss so as to render them impossible or to dislodge the chain on which they depended to make their way to freedom.

Before the final preparations to evacuate the valley were set about, however, Ben took steps to hide the bar gold away carefully, with the aid of the boys, who, the warm-hearted sailor insisted, were to receive a share of it as soon as they could make up an expedition to the valley, and return to carry the precious metal out to civilization.

The castaway, too, had another important mission to perform. Beneath that little grove of palms, at the wooded end of the valley already mentioned, there were two rough graves over which Ben had erected two headstones bearing simply his dead comrades' names and the date of their deaths, carved by his knife. Alone the man who had shared their loneliness went to the spot where the dead prospectors slept their last sleep, and knelt bareheaded over the rough mounds. When he turned to the cave he was more serious than the boys had ever seen him during their brief friendship and he did not speak till everything was declared ready and it was time to lower the keg of high explosive into the shaft.

With the rawhide lariat with which he had rescued them, the keg was carefully belayed into the hole and then one by one the adventurers slid down it. It was with moist eyes the boys looked about them, as they once more trod what, but for Ben Stubbs' timely intervention, would have been their tomb. One by one they wrung his hand warmly.

"That's all right, shipmates," Ben kept repeating, much embarrassed, "'twarn't nothing at all—nothing at all—I'd have liked—" he added, with a touch of wistfulness in his voice—"for my poor dead mates to have been here, too, this day."

As they started down the passage under such different auspices to those under which they had made their way up it, Frank suddenly stopped and with his knife cut off about six inches of the trailing rawhide rope. He sliced this length up again into four pieces, kept one himself and handed one to each of his three companions. Long afterward they were to remember those souvenirs and treasure them as among their choicest possessions.

Frank had contrived a sort of sling, out of blankets, in which the heavy keg of powder was slung. Through the loop that this formed a long branch with a hooked end was thrust. This was to grapple the chain with, after the explosion from which they hoped so much had taken place. It was a short time later that they reached a spot about half-a-mile from the White Serpents' Chasm, and here the keg was left after Ben had selected a couple of long brownish sticks from it. These he tipped with fulminate of mercury caps, which were later in their turn to be attached to the five hundred feet of sparking wires of the battery.

At this moment Frank recollected something that sent a thrill of disappointment through him.

"How old is your battery?" he asked anxiously of Ben.

"All of five years," responded the prospector, "why?"

"Because I'm afraid it's too old to be any good," was the reply that sent a shock of bitter disappointment through them all.

Anxiously they watched while Frank made a test. His fear was only too true. No encouraging blue spark responded, when the detonating key was pressed down. In the first feeling of dumb despair nobody found words. Billy was the first to speak:

"Hold on there," he cried, "you fellows have got electric light torches in your pockets?"

"By Jove," cried Frank happily, "what a dumb idiot I am—thank you, Billy. I never thought of that."

To the boys' delight the batteries from their torches, which luckily they had had made of extra power and efficiency, answered perfectly. When they were connected up to the wires a good "fat" spark was shown.

"That's a massive brain of yours, Billy," complimented Frank.

"Oh, pshaw, Frank; you'd have thought of it later," protested the reporter, delighted nevertheless at having gained the young leader's approbation.

"Now then," said Ben, when all was declared ready, "this thing is one man's job. Old man dynamite don't like a crowd around when he celebrates. You boys stay back here."

In view, however, of the danger of an attack by the aroused serpents he consented finally to allow

Frank to accompany him down the tunnel to the chasm. The two companions,—the seasoned, toughened man and the brave boy,—set forth on their dangerous mission in silence. It was no time for talking. All their plans were agreed upon. Ben was to lower the sticks of dynamite, cautiously over the brink of the serpent-filled abyss and Frank, with his rifle ready for emergencies, was to stand behind him ready to drop any of their scaly enemies that might protest against the invasion of their long undisputed kingdom.

A creepy feeling came over Frank as their candles showed them that they were hard upon the chasm. The hour of the experiment upon which so much hung was at hand. Ben without the quiver of an eyelid, held up a hand to enjoin absolute silence and crept on his belly to the edge of the pit. So far everything had gone well. There was not a sign, but the peculiar odor of musk that filled the air, that they were on any more dangerous task than the placing of an ordinary placer mine blast. Frank, as he watched Ben proceed to work, realized the purpose of a long bit of heavy board the prospector had brought with him.

Ben stuck one end of the board, which was about six feet long, out about two feet beyond the edge of the pit brink, having previously rigged the wires into a notch he had cut in its outer end. Frank saw at once that this was to obviate any danger of the giant powder striking the edge of the chasm as it was lowered and causing a premature explosion, which would certainly have cost them their lives.

All went well till Ben had lowered possibly sixty feet of wire and then there came a loud angry hiss, which soon grew into a sound of furious reptilian rage that reverberated in the narrow tunnel, like waves breaking on a beach. As Frank heard, with a chill of horror, this indisputable evidence that at that very moment the dynamite was brushing the soft scaly backs of a nest of huge white serpents, his blood ran cold.

Suddenly, Ben straightened himself up with a shout.

"All set!" he roared, and, leaping to his feet, started running like a jack rabbit back down the tunnel toward the battery-box. As if his cry had been a signal, an enormous white head, with the same sightless eyes that had distinguished the serpent Billy escaped from, arose from the edge of the pit with an angry hiss. In its snow-white head, its red tongue darted in and out like a flash of livid flame.

"Run Frank! Run for your life!" shouted Ben, as the loathsome monster hurled itself out of the pit and started after him. Hardly knowing what he did, Frank fired point-blank at the creature in a perfect spasm of disgust and fear. He saw it writhe in great convulsions and as if in a nightmare, witnessed the awful spectacle of two of its enraged brethren wriggle toward him at lightning speed over the edge of the pit. He turned to run but stumbled. As he fell he felt himself picked up by Ben Stubbs and fairly dragged over the ground up the tunnel to where the battery stood. He saw Ben bend over the box and shout back into the tunnel to where the others were: "Lie flat everybody!"

Mechanically, Frank lay still and mechanically he heard the quick snap as Ben closed the circuit.

The next moment there was a roar that seemed to be the tearing out of the bowels of the earth. The tunnel became filled with choking fumes and Frank knew no more till he found himself crawling back with bleeding and cut hands and face to where the others lay, also stunned from the terrific concussion of the explosion in the small space in which it occurred.

Dazed and staggering the boys still managed to regain their wits in a few minutes, and made their way down the tunnel to where Ben Stubbs had set his battery-box. To their inexpressible relief they found the hardy outcast sitting up with a cheerful grin on his countenance, dabbing away at a wound on his forehead.

"Kind 'er like settin' in a gun-barrel, when someone pulls the trigger, eh, boys?" he remarked cheerfully, "but I guess we set off our little Fourth of July celebration just in time."

It was even as Ben said. When they had sufficiently recovered from their daze to proceed, they discovered the bodies of the three serpents—the one Frank had shot and the two others—torn almost to rags by the force of the concussion.

"There ain't much sarpint life left in that hole now, I'm thinking," remarked Ben, leading the way to the edge of the chasm. The blue smoke of the explosion still curled up from it; but when they threw down some rocks by way of experiment, no answering hiss came back. Modern dynamite had wiped out the Toltecs' watch-dogs.

IN AN AEROPLANE IN AN ELECTRIC STORM.

The boys were for pressing on at once but the deliberate Ben Stubbs insisted on a stop being made to "overhaul ship," as he put it, meaning to tend to the injuries they had all received from the hail of flying rocks driven like small shot by the blast. Had it not been for the prospector's shouted warning to "lie flat" they would undoubtedly have fared worse. As it was a few cuts, that looked alarming but really didn't amount to much, constituted the worst of their injuries.

Lighting his pipe Ben sat down by the battery-box and took what he called a "comft'ble smoke," of palm-bark tobacco of his own manufacture, before he would stir a foot. After that he consented to press forward and, carrying the long stick brought for the purpose of reaching the chain, the little party started on the last stage of their journey. Grappling it with the long stick Frank brought the chain to the side on which they stood without the slightest difficulty.

"So that's the cable you crossed on," commented Ben, "an' to think that it was hanging there all these two years and I never knowed it."

"I wonder you never thought of making a bridge, Ben?" commented Harry.

"Wall, now," drawled Ben sarcastically, "I might have done that, mightn't I, 'ef I could have carried a big enough stick of timber down here."

"I didn't think of that," replied the abashed Harry, while the other boys laughed.

"Ah, there's a lot of things that younkers don't think of," responded Ben sagely; "now when I was aboard the old *Dolphin*, bound roun' the Horn for China——"

"Never mind that now, Ben," broke in Frank impatiently, "let's get back to camp. I'm simply dying for a good feed and a sight of the *Golden Eagle*."

The mention of the aeroplane was an impetus to everybody—the boys because it meant getting back to La Merced and relieving the anxiety of the people there; Billy because with a reporter's instinct he grew restless when kept out of touch with the world no matter what exciting adventures he might have passed through, and Ben Stubbs out of pardonable curiosity to see what he called a "full-rigged air-ship."

One by one the adventurers swung across the chasm which had been so nearly the cause of their death in the tunnel, and when Ben Stubbs, who came last, handed the end of the chain to Frank, the leader of the party hung it upon the hook where it had rested so many years with a peculiar feeling that neither he nor any other man would ever use it again.

An hour later they emerged into the bright sunlight through the Rocking Stone gate as they had dubbed it. The boys made a careful examination of its hidden mechanism as they passed out, but the Toltec mechanics who had put the hidden springs that connected it with the quesal's eye had done their work well, and the young adventurers were no wiser after their examination than they had been before it.

The Treasure Cliff camp was just as they had left it and it seemed curious to gaze on their familiar surroundings and find them unchanged after such a strenuous period of hardship and adventure as they had encountered. Without losing time they at once started down the mountain-side for the *Golden Eagle* camp. Here also, things were unchanged and the boys, after a careful scrutiny of their prize craft, announced her fit for a voyage at any time.

It was decided, after a hasty consultation, that they would start for La Merced that night as soon as it was dark. Ben Stubbs and Billy were to be left to guard the camp. Billy remarking:

"I'll be glad to get a rest. If we are asleep when you come back, tell the maid to wake us."

"And to think that a few nights ago I was a watching yer camp-fire and ringing the bell and—now—here I am!" remarked Ben wonderingly.

The afternoon was spent in examining the rubies and talking over experiences. Frank, too, drew a rough map of the mines, so that when it became feasible to return to and ransack them of the treasure the process would be simplified. While the boys employed themselves in this way, Ben Stubbs borrowed a rifle and strode off into the jungle. He returned shortly before dark with a young wild pig and several brace of wood pigeons. He prepared these with a skill that bespoke his long experience at shifting for himself and when he announced that supper was ready by pounding on the bottom of a saucepan with a spoon, the boys were ready to fall to and eat the meal of their lives.

They were just concluding the meal when there was a low, far off rumble—like that of an approaching thunder storm. It was deeper, however, and longer sustained.

"There's a storm coming," exclaimed Frank and Harry simultaneously.

Ben Stubbs gravely set down his coffee and shook his head.

"Worse'n that, I'm afraid. Sounds to me like the first symptoms of what the greasers call 'terremoto.'"

"What's that?" demanded Billy.

"Why, that's an airthquake," replied Ben, "and every once in a while when they do come, they raise par'ticlar dickens. Ef you two young fellers is thinking of making a trip in that thar sky-jammer of yours to-night, you'd better get a move on with your start," he went on, addressing Frank and Harry, "fer when thar comes an airthquake thar comes an almighty big wind right on its heels."

The boys exchanged looks of concern. It was most important—nay urgent—that they should get to La Merced that night, or at any rate by morning, and set their father's mind at rest concerning their safety. A sudden wind storm would mean that the *Golden Eagle* would have to make such a struggle for life as she never had before.

"We'll have to chance it," decided Frank finally, "after all it must be some distance off and we must get to La Merced to-night. If we don't, we may be delayed several days and in that event we won't know what might happen. We don't want mother in New York to hear that we are lost;" he

added gravely. This consideration wiped out at once whatever hesitancy they might have felt.

The preparations for launching the *Golden Eagle* were simple. Judging that he could not improve on the "backing-up" method he had adopted the last time they sailed from the plateau camp, on the memorable occasion of Billy's rescue, Frank adopted the same tactics with the result that they secured a perfect start, and shot into the darkness with the gracefulness and velocity of a homing pigeon.

It was pitchy dark and in the air there was a hot sulphurous feeling. Not a breath of wind stirred, and if one had lit a candle its flame would have gone straight up without a flicker. Before sunset a heavy bank of lurid-rimmed clouds had loomed up in the southwest.

"Something is coming," said Frank as with one eye on the map and the other on the compass in the lighted binnacle, he steered the *Golden Eagle* steadily through the ominous blackness.

"Well, we've got to keep on now," replied Harry, "we can't turn back very well and make a landing on the plateau in such darkness as this."

As he spoke a long tongue of livid blue lightning flickered across the sky to the north. It lit up every wire and stay on the *Golden Eagle*, as if she had been enveloped in the glow of a blue calcium light. In an instant the illumination died out and it grew as black as ever, or rather the darkness seemed all the more impenetrable to the navigators of the *Golden Eagle*, by reason of the brilliant illumination that had just shattered it.

As they tore along, the engine chugging steadily in a whining purr like the steady voice of a big dynamo, the flashes grew more and more frequent.

"Looks as if we are in for it," remarked Frank.

At the same instant a few heavy drops of rain pattered down on the covering of the planes and then stopped as suddenly as they commenced.

"How far do you figure we are from La Merced, now?" asked Harry after a long silence in which the lightning had kept the aeroplane illuminated in an almost constant blaze of lambent flame.

"Not more than twenty miles," returned Frank, "we must make it before this hits us or——"

He did not mention the alternative. There was no need to. Both boys knew that anything more risky than handling an aeroplane in a gale of wind could not be imagined.

More and more frequent grew the lightning flashes and they were now accompanied by terrific peals of thunder, that seemed to shake every rib and stanchion of the aeroplane.

"It's an electric storm and a bad one, too," exclaimed Frank, as a hissing bolt of lightning tore across the sky as it seemed only a few feet from the laboring aeroplane and struck the earth with a terrific report. Save for the first few warm drops there had been no rain and both boys were inwardly thankful for this. They believed the *Golden Eagle* could force her way through a rain storm, but they did not want to try. For an aeroplane, rain is almost as unfavorable an element as wind.

So filled with electricity was the air that occasionally after a particularly vivid flash, the metal portions of the *Golden Eagle* were outlined in living fire. This added a new terror to the boys' position.

What if the engine short-circuited?

Almost as the thought flashed across their minds the *Golden Eagle* seemed to become suddenly enveloped in a perfect sheet of fire. The boys could hear the hiss of the live electricity as it ran along her stay wires and stanchions. Blinded and half stunned, they realized as the glare crashed out that it must have short-circuited something.

With a great sigh of relief, however, Frank realized that the engine was still running sweet and true. He glanced at the binnacle.

Ah, that was it!

The dynamo had been short-circuited and they had no means of illuminating the compass. True they had matches, but it would be impossible to steer the *Golden Eagle's* course true by that means. The accident was serious.

Hurriedly Frank communicated his discovery to Harry. The younger brother whistled.

"What on earth are we going to do, Frank?" he gasped out.

"Keep right on till we drop. It's all we can do," was the stern rejoinder, "we can't pick up La Merced, without a binnacle light."

SAVED BY WIRELESS.

Frank was right. To keep on was all they could do. Without even a star to guide them and a wind fast springing up, surrounded by a display of electricity, that viewed from a place of safety would have been magnificent, but situated as they were was a terrible menace, they had no alternative.

The boy captain of the *Golden Eagle* stuck bravely to his wheel and time and again when the vessel gave a sickening "duck," he righted her in the nick of time with a skilful adjustment of his planes and compensating balances. Neither boy spoke—indeed, in the roar of the elements that now surrounded them, it would have been difficult to hear. Crash followed crash so swiftly that like the lightning display it seemed all blended into one long horrible glare and uproar. Still, mercifully, it had not rained.

Harry crawled forward after a time from his seat by the engine and shouted in Frank's ear:

"Where are we now?"

"Driving due east, I should judge."

"Have you any hope that we can make a landing?"

Frank shook his head.

"Not in this."

"Then there is only one thing to be done?"

"Yes."

"Keep on driving her?"

"That's the idea."

"Good Lord!" thought Harry, "if the gasolene would hold out we'd land in Europe."

The above conversation was not carried on in consecutive order as reported. The exigencies of guiding the craft, and the noise of the storm, made that an impossibility. Fragmentary sentences were all the boys could exchange, but they understood one another so well that with them a word meant as much as a whole sentence.

On and on drove the plunging craft and still the accident both boys had feared—the short circuiting of the engine—had not occurred. Could it be that they were going to weather it after all? Wild as the thought appeared, it put new heart into them.

"Do you know where we are?" asked Harry, clinging to the forward rail of the pilot-house.

"Not the slightest idea," was the reply, "but I should say we cannot be far from the sea."

The sea! The realization of this new peril sent a chill of terror through both boys. Once blown out to sea and they would stand not a chance of rescue.

"Hadn't we better chance it and drop where we are?" asked Harry at length.

Frank shook a negative response.

"It would mean certain death—we should be dashed to pieces," he said; "if we keep on we've got a fighting chance."

As they were urged along before the storm Harry opened the trap in the pilot-house floor and peered through. By the blue illumination of the constant lightning display, he could see that they were still driving over the tree-tops. They were then still over solid land.

There was not a light to be seen, however, and wherever they were, they had been driven out of the civilized part of Nicaragua it seemed. The boys' hearts sank as they gazed at the character of the country over which they were racing along. As Frank had said, there was not a chance for them to land there. They might ride the storm out if they kept on going—that was all they could do.

Once Frank entertained a desperate thought of heading the ship about, but as he put the helm over she gave such a frightful yaw that both boys thought the minute was their last. The *Golden Eagle* plunged down in a sickening swerve till it seemed that she could never right herself. Frantically Frank, although he could hardly keep his feet on the inclined pilot-house floor, which was pitched over at an angle of forty-five degrees, fought to bring her back on an even keel with one hand, while he clung to the pilot-house rail with the other.

After what had seemed an eternity of suspense the craft answered her helm and regulating planes and regained her balance. The scare the boys had received, though, prevented them from trying any more experiments. Thoroughly exhausted Frank at last relinquished the wheel to Harry, at the latter's earnest solicitation. As the boys changed places the ship, none too steady under the conditions, gave a lurch to port that threw Frank from his feet and sent him crashing against the left-hand rail of the pilot-house. The force of the impact of his body snapped off the stanchions that supported the canvas screening round the pilot-box and he would have shot over the edge into countless feet of space if Harry had not grasped him and hauled him back to safety. Frank thanked him with a look. It was no time for words.

"Hark," suddenly cried Frank, as there came a lull in the storm, "what is that?"

Below them both boys could hear a long, booming sound.

"It's the surf breaking on the beach!" groaned Frank, "only Providence can save us now."

How much longer they drove on above the sea, they had no means of reckoning, even if they had cared to. Their only hope was in daylight when there was a chance that some ship might see them and pick them up. Harry sat grimly at the wheel, keeping the creaking ship dead before the wind, which had now increased.

"It's not much use," he shouted to Frank, who lay on the pilot-house floor so as to keep the center of equilibrium as low as possible, "but we might as well stick to it as long as the engine does."

Frank nodded and shouted back his favorite "While there's life there's hope."

Suddenly, while an unusually prolonged and vivid flash enveloped the *Golden Eagle* and showed a wild sea leaping hungrily below her, Harry gave a loud shout:

"Frank, Frank," he yelled, "look there!"

He pointed a little to the north of the direction the *Golden Eagle* was taking, or rather being driven, which, though the boys did not know it, was due east.

The elder brother raised his head above the pilot-house railing but the flash that illumined the object that caused Harry's exclamation had died out.

"It was a steamer and she'll pass right below us," roared Harry.

"How can we attract their attention," shouted back Frank.

"There's one chance in a thousand and we'll take it," was the response of the youth at the wheel.

"Send out a wireless call."

Frank leaped to the sending apparatus of the *Golden Eagle's* wireless plant. To his delirious delight it was working perfectly despite the ship's buffeting.

Even as he stripped off the cover, and lowered the ground rope which was interwoven with strands of phosphor bronze wire, though, he realized what a long chance it was they were taking. The steamer was nearer by this time. They could in fact see her lights below them; but she seemed a small craft, as well as they in their frenzied excitement at the sudden vision of hope that flamed up in them, could make out. It was unlikely she carried wireless. But, as Harry had said, it was one chance in a thousand. With a fervent prayer that it might be that ten hundredth chance, Frank sent the spark flashing and leaping across the crackling gap.

Dot—dot—dot! Dot—dot! Dot—dot—dot!

It was the universal signal of desperate need that his trembling fingers spelled out: S. O. S.^[1]

If there were a ship fitted with wireless within the radius of their call she would come to their assistance, but both boys realized that that help would be too late to do them any good. Their one chance lay in securing the immediate attention of the craft below them.

"Fire your revolver, Harry!" shouted Frank, bending above the flaring sender spark.

The younger boy drew his magazine gun from his belt and fired all ten bullets it contained in a string of reports.

There came a blinding glare of lightning. In its radiance the boys, high in the air, could see below them the scene on the steamer as if in the light of day. The men on the steamer had evidently also seen them or heard the reports of Harry's revolver, or what was more likely, received the wireless flash. Men were running about her decks and on the bridge the boys could see some one, evidently in command, issuing orders to several sailors who were casting loose a boat.

Their inspection was cut short. As the next flash revealed to them a boat being lowered over the side of the vessel and men pointing up at them, something parted with a loud crack.

It was one of the rudder wires that had carried away and a more serious accident at that moment could not have well befallen them. The *Golden Eagle* without her rudder controls heeled over drunkenly till, with a loud crashing sound, her engine was ripped clean out of her by its own weight.

The next minute the boys felt themselves dropping through what seemed endless space down to the roaring sea.

Even as they fell Frank realized that the parting of the engine from its bed had been a piece of good luck for them for relieved of that weight, there was a chance of the aeroplane floating by her own buoyancy till the boat could pick them up. All this shot through his mind in a second, and almost as it occurred to him he felt the aeroplane hit the water with a mighty thump. The next moment Frank felt the water close above his head and began fighting desperately to regain the surface.

Fortunately both he and Harry were skilled swimmers and as much at home in the water as Newfoundland dogs. As Frank at last found himself safe, clinging to the top of the half-submerged aeroplane, he anxiously looked about him for Harry. What he feared was that Harry might have got entangled in the stay wires or tiller ropes as the *Golden Eagle* fell into the sea.

To Frank's unspeakable relief, however, at this juncture, he heard his name called right behind him, and a second later he had fished Harry out of the sea and hauled him up beside him on to the gradually sinking wreck of the *Golden Eagle*. They both joined in a lusty shout to attract the attention of the men in the boat they had seen lowered just before their dizzy fall.

Their shouts were hardly needed, however, for, from the bridge of the vessel, there shot out a long finger of radiance from the searchlight which, after sweeping about a few times, fell full on the boys. Drenched as they were they could not forbear waving their hands and giving a cheer as its light fell full on them.

Fifteen minutes later the Boy Aviators were on board the insurgent gunboat *General Estrada* and safe.

1. S. O. S. is now the wireless distress call. C. Q. D., the former tocsin having being used by too many would-be humorous amateurs to make its continuance advisable.—*Author's note.*

UNLOADING AN ARMY.

After what they had passed through the previous night the boys, as may be imagined, did not awaken till late next day, to find the sun streaming through the porthole of their cabin and the ship rolling in a heavy beam-end sort of a way that showed them at once that they were at anchor. Hurriedly dressing they hastened on deck and found themselves on board what was evidently a converted yacht, to judge by her brass and mahogany fittings. Several machine guns, though, and the presence forward of hundreds of ragged soldiers gambling and chicken-fighting, showed them that they were not on board any pleasure craft, but one that was equipped strictly for business—and the grim business of war at that.

They had hardly poked their heads out of the companion before a dapper little man in a brass-buttoned sea uniform hastened up to them. This personage introduced himself as Captain Hans Scheffel, of the vessel and a former commander of a German passenger boat. In a few words he informed the boys that the craft was one of the yachts purchased by the revolutionists for conversion into gunboats and that she was at that moment anchored a few miles south of Bluefields, where it was the present plan that the revolutionaries should be put ashore and commence a march to the Rama River, and possibly across it, to gain the main body, as somewhere in the Rama country Rogero and his troops were supposed to be encamped.

The boys were much relieved to learn that the vessel on which they found themselves was not, as they had at first feared, one of the government's craft. They well knew that the government of Nicaragua was no friend to Americans and that, in their case especially, Rogero's enmity would make it risky,—if not actually perilous,—for them to fall into the hands of Zelayan troops.

After the first introductions and explanations of the stout little German and the profuse thanks of the boys for their rescue, he led them below to breakfast in what had been the elaborately decorated saloon of the American millionaire who formerly owned the gunboat. All the "gilt and gingerbread," however, had been stripped from her when she was converted into a fighting-craft, and now she was as plain as a barge in her interior fittings.

The loss of their *Golden Eagle* had been a severe blow to the boys and they were not feeling in any too cheerful a mood as Captain Scheffel ushered them into the room and motioned to a table on which was spread an ample breakfast served by black stewards. They were just sitting down to it with healthy young appetites, that even regret over the loss of their ship could not dull, when one of the doors opening off the saloon opened and a tall, black-mustached young man of unmistakably South American descent entered.

He wore a uniform and a sword and walked with an air of assurance that made it apparent that he was a dignitary of some sort, and that this was the case was at once evidenced when the Captain, with a bow and flourish, introduced to the boys:

"Señor General Ruiz, in command of this section of General Estrada's army."

The name made both boys start.

"General Ruiz," exclaimed Frank, "surely not General Ruiz—Mr. Chester's neighbor?"

"The same;" replied the young man, with a laugh at the boy's frank astonishment, "and you?"

"We are Frank and Harry Chester," began Frank.

"Ah, I might have seen the family likeness," interrupted the soldier with a smile, "forgive me for my inattention."

"But we believed that you were dead!" exclaimed Harry. "Jose, our father's servant, brought the news the day before we arrived in Nicaragua."

Ruiz raised his hands with an exclamation of grief.

"My poor wife," he exclaimed, "it must have been a sad blow to her. However, in a few days now I trust that we shall be on familiar soil and I shall be able to atone to her for her worry and grief."

"Familiar soil—" repeated Frank, delightedly; for this could only mean one thing.

"Yes," replied the general, "we are to join the main force somewhere along the coast south of here and march toward La Merced. I understand that—and I am sorry to convey the news to you—that Rogero has announced that he is going to make it his headquarters."

"His headquarters;" repeated both boys, gritting their teeth, "he would not dare."

"Rogero would dare anything," replied General Ruiz. "If I had not made my escape after the battle in which Jose believed me shot, I should not be here now, but a victim of Rogero's drumhead court-martial. As it was, I had a narrow shave. Fortunately, however, for me, one of my guards was a former servant of my family, and a small bribe, combined with his loyalty to the Ruiz clan, sufficed to make him forget his charge for awhile. I made my way north and then sent messengers to General Estrada, who ordered me to take charge of the northern division which was encamped at Mazucla, fifty miles north of here and bring it down the coast on this gunboat."

General Ruiz concluded his narrative with a few words of sympathy to the boys for the loss of their *Golden Eagle* which, he said, he had always hoped to see, having heard such reports of it from Mr. Chester, but supposed that would now be impossible.

"Not at all," replied Frank bravely, "if you will come to New York six months from now you will see the *Golden Eagle II*, a finer, stancher craft even than the one that lies at the bottom of the Caribbean."

Under General Ruiz's direction the work of disembarking was gone about immediately the meal was concluded. There were five hundred men to be got ashore and runners despatched to learn the whereabouts of Estrada's force with which Ruiz had orders to combine, besides a camp site to be found, all of which demanded expedition.

Frank and Harry watched with much eager amusement and interest the work of getting the

troops ashore. Not many of the men could swim and all of them, like most Spanish-Americans, had a hearty dislike of cold water. When every once in a while one of them happened to miss his footing, in boarding the shore-boats, there would go up a cry that made even the restful blue land-crabs in the mangroves ashore scuttle for shelter.

There were no lighters to be obtained at this point of the coast of course and so the army was landed in the ship's lifeboats—a tedious process. The boys could not help thinking what a contrast the noisy, confused scene offered to the orderly evolutions of American troops. All about the boats, as they were rowed ashore,—landed gunwale-deep with their chattering, ragged occupants,—there cruised ominously the black, three-cornered fins of the man-eating sharks that abound along this coast. Occasionally one of these monsters would actually cruise right up alongside one of the boats. At such times the hubbub became louder than ever and with a great shouting and waving of their broad-brimmed Panamas the soldiers would endeavor to drive the menacing monsters away.

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One of the last boats to leave the vessel's side was loaded until the waves almost lapped over her gunwales and it looked to the boys as if she could never reach the shore in safety. It only needed the least little ripple of a sea to send a wave toppling into her that would swamp her in a wink and spill her crew out into the water and among the sharks. Perhaps the sharks noticed this too for they clustered round till the water was almost black with their wicked torpedo-like evolutions.

"It's a good thing there's a smooth sea," remarked Frank, as, with his brother, General Ruiz and the fussy little captain, he stood on the gunboat's bridge.

"Ya," replied the latter, "if der sea was smood not dere would food for der fishes be by sundown. I regollect vunce yen I vas ad Ceylon dot—"

The worthy captain's reminiscences, however, got no further. They were cut short by a cry from the heavily-laden boat which by now was several yards distant. Two of the men aboard were struggling desperately, having clinched after a wordy war that had started when she left the vessel's side. The boys and their companions could hear the cries of protest of the crew who manned the oars:

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"Sit down or you'll have us over."

Their warning came too late, however. The unexpected disturbance to her equilibrium had careened the overloaded boat till she was canted over to a fatal angle and the water rushed into her. With loud shouts and cries of fear her crew, and the soldiers aboard her, clung desperately to her gunwales but the sheer weight of them pulled her down and the boys could see with horrified eyes the black fins begin to rush in on the doomed men.

There was a boat that had just returned from the shore lying at the foot of the gunboat's gangway and Frank, followed by Harry and General Ruiz, leaped into this and ordered the crew to "give way." The men pulled like demons, at the sight of their comrades' distress, and in a few seconds were in the thick of the battle. Already several of the poor fellows had been seized by sharks and the water about the capsized boat was crimsoned. The ravenous monsters, however, far from being glutted, were rushing in from all directions and their triangular fins shot about in the water for a space of several yards surrounding the doomed boat.

The boys and General Ruiz worked like Trojans hauling in such survivors as they could reach, and in a short time all but those the sharks had taken toll of were aboard. It was then determined to right the other boat and put some of the survivors into her and set them ashore. General Ruiz leaped into her to bale her out but as he did so his foot slipped and, with a desperate grab at the bulwark to save himself, he shot over the side into the water already red with the blood of his followers.

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A cry of horror burst from the throats of the onlookers as they saw this accident. It seemed that their general was doomed to certain death. He came to the surface, however, in a moment and struck out bravely; but behind him came rushing through the water the fin of a huge shark. An agonized shout for help broke from the general's lips as he realized his peril. He had faced death in battle a score of times but to die like this appalled him.

"Save me!" he shouted.

"Fire, Frank, fire!" shouted Harry, wild with excitement, for his elder brother with pale face and lips—but with a hand as steady as a rock—was already standing in the stern sheets of the boat with his revolver leveled.

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"Steady on," rejoined Frank, in a tense tone. "I don't want to run any chance of the bullet deflecting."

In the meantime the rowers had sat paralyzed at the dreadful drama being enacted under their eyes and made no effort to save the unfortunate General Ruiz. Desperately the general swam for the boat. He saw Frank standing upright in the stern and realized that the boy was waiting till he could get a fair shot at the monster. Suddenly the swimmer gave a cry, his hands shot above his head and he seemed to be literally dragged out of view.

At the same instant Frank's revolver opened fire.

One after another the ten shots poured out and before two had been fired the men, with a cheer, saw a huge white-bellied body, armed with a terrible triple row of saw-like teeth, rear itself out of the seas as if in agony and then flop back with a mighty writhing that beat the water into waves and threatened to swamp the boat.

And General Ruiz?

A few seconds after Frank's first shot had left the automatic revolver the swimmer was alongside the boat and being hauled inboard by a score of hands. His first action was to take Frank's hand and grasp it with a pressure that showed him to be possessed of a muscularity rare in Latin-Americans.

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"We Spaniards do not forget," he said, after he had uttered a few warm words of gratitude to the boy who had saved his life.

"Oh," laughed Frank, "it's tit for tat. Didn't you save us last night?"

General Ruiz looked grave.

"Laugh if you will, Señor," he said, "you Americans take things more lightly than we do; but perhaps some day the time will come when I shall be able to render you service, and you will see that my words were not spoken in jest."

That was all, but there was a ring of sincerity in his voice that left no doubt in his hearers' minds that he meant what he said and, while both boys hoped that no contingency would ever arise in which they would be in such dire need of General Ruiz's aid, at the same time they felt that if it ever did they had a friend to count on.

LEAGUED WITH INSURGENTS.

Some six hours after the work of debarkation had commenced it—in spite of the obstacles—was finished and the task of setting up camp was begun. By nightfall General Ruiz had installed his forces on an upland about half-a-mile back from the seacoast as the night-air among the coast-hugging mangrove swamps is very poisonous and a great breeder of fevers. He had, the boys found, quite a respectable equipment, consisting—besides his actual force, all of whom were armed with rifles of more or less use and modern type—of two doctors, both of whom held commissions as captains; a field telegraph outfit and four telegraphers; two machine-firing guns and three mule guns, besides some heavier field-guns of a less up-to-date pattern. Altogether, except for the dilapidated state of his men, General Ruiz was fairly well provided with the implements of modern warfare.

Ruiz himself, and his staff officers, had their tents pitched apart from the main camp and one of the latter insisted on giving up his sleeping quarters to the boys, much against their wills; but he was so insistent that they seemed more likely to offend him by refusal than by accepting his offer, so that night found them snugly ensconced in a comfortable tent equipped with two neat cots, covered with gray army-blankets, and hung with mosquito netting to keep out the myriad insect pests of the tropics.

Long after the supper had been despatched in the general's tent and good-nights said, the boys talked over the situation. It was a novel one. Through the open flap of their tent they could see the ragged sentries pacing up and down, and, further out in the bush, came the cry of the outposts as from time to time they hailed one another. The men all slept huddled up together under ragged blankets and sacking on the ground at the opposite side of the camp, as the boys could see by their camp-fire glow, round which some of the men were still sitting up and talking.

"We should strike out for La Merced at once;" decided Frank, after the subject of their present situation had been talked over for an hour.

"I agree with you," replied Harry, "but how are we going to do it? For all we know we might run plump into Rogero's forces and then we should be in a peck of trouble. No, my advice is to stay with the army a few days, they are marching in our direction anyhow, and then strike off for La Merced when we get within a reasonable distance of it."

"And poor Billy and Ben Stubbs, what will they think has become of us?" went on Frank.

"They will stay at Plateau Camp for a day or two anyhow," rejoined Harry, "and at the end of that time they will have to come down into the valley, for their provisions will have given out."

"That will be pretty nearly as safe for them as walking into a lion's mouth," objected Frank. "The country below there must be alive with government troops and they are sure to encounter them."

"There is nothing we can do till we get back to La Merced, that is certain," rejoined the philosophical Harry. "It's no use crossing bridges till we come to them. If the army marches tomorrow we should be at home by the morning of the day after at the latest."

With this reflection the boys turned in and slept like tops for two hours or so. Their awakening was a startling one. The whole air seemed filled with shouts and yells and there was a scattering sound of shots coming from somewhere in the interior of the jungle.

"It's a night attack!" shouted Frank, springing up and hastily throwing on his clothes. "Come on, Harry!"

Both boys rushed out of their tent just as General Ruiz came to the door.

"We have been attacked," he said, "it looks like treachery somewhere. I don't know how many of them there are; but, so far, we have them in hand."

"You mean we have beaten them off?" asked Frank.

Ruiz shook his head.

"I am too old a soldier to believe that Rogero would attack me with a handful," he said. "No, boys, this attack was made by an advance guard to draw our fire and ascertain just how large a force we really have. The real attack will come in a few minutes."

He was buckling on his sword as he spoke and thrusting his navy revolver into a holster. This completed he held out his hand.

"I must say good-bye, now," he said briskly, "but only for a short time I hope. It is poor hospitality to rush you into the troubles of the revolutionists, but it cannot be helped."

With a stiff salute he turned and began issuing rapid orders to his staff, who rushed over as they got them to where the demoralized troops were struggling confusedly for their banked rifles. In a short time something like order had been restored and a corps of men sent out with machetes to clear paths into the high ground where the guns were to be planted.

"He means to plant some guns above there," pointed Frank, "so as to command the valley when the real attack comes."

At this moment one of the officers hurried up.

"You had better get to shelter, young gentlemen," he said, "the trouble will begin in a few minutes and I expect it will be a hot engagement when it starts."

Frank and Harry shook their heads. To the two high-spirited boys, facing their first taste of real warfare, to be ordered into shelter did not appeal at all.

"Can't we do something to make ourselves useful?" asked Frank, as a company of men at a silent "double-quick" swung by into the jungle, where the scattering fire that had awakened them had died out.

"If the señors really mean that, I will see the general;" courteously replied the officer, hurrying off.

"We have never smelled powder before," exclaimed Harry, "and we don't mean to be sent back to the commissariat when we have a chance to see some real fighting; eh, Frank?"

"Not much," replied Frank, "of course, I suppose, as American citizens and neutral parties, etc., we ought to sit back with our hands folded; but when I think of the threats Rogero made to father I'd like to get a crack at some of those fellows myself."

"I'm with you, Frank, old fellow," cried Harry warmly. "Come on, let's get on our revolvers and see if the general has anything for two peaceful non-combatants who want to fight."

As they came out of the tent with their revolvers strapped on and also a rifle each—which they took the liberty of selecting from a rack of arms left in the tent by the officer who had vacated it for them—they felt that they were on the eve of a really exciting experience.

They had walked only a few steps when a figure, that they soon made out to be General Ruiz himself, stepped up to them.

"Captain Alvarez tells me," he said, "that you young men are pining for action and do not care to sit on the idlers' bench while we are fighting. Now I have a mission for you."

"Yes," chorused Frank and Harry delighted.

"But it is a dangerous one and will require a lot of skill and care to bring it to a successful conclusion."

The boys begged him to tell them what it was. They assured him that they would not fail in anything he might entrust to them.

"Simply this;" replied General Ruiz, looking them straight in the eyes, "there is a lot of ammunition aboard the ship that I meant to bring ashore to-morrow morning, but it is now imperative, with the turn affairs have taken, that we have it here before many hours. I have not a man in the ranks I dare trust on such a mission and I cannot spare any of my officers. Will you do it?"

Of course the boys said they would. To tell the truth they were rather disappointed. Bringing ammunition ashore was rather more prosaic work than they had bargained for; but still, having promised to be of what aid they could, they could not go back on their words.

"You take one of the boats on the beach," went on the General—and the boys noticed that he was now the officer addressing his subordinates and not the courteous friend—"and row off to the gunboat. Captain Scheffel will give you the keys to the magazine and you are to bring off as much at a time as you think wise. I wish to remind you, however, that we need the extra ammunition in a hurry."

"Now," he continued, in a less official tone, "I shall be answerable to your father for you and I don't want you to run any unnecessary risks."

"I don't see what risks we can run, except from sharks, rowing powder and ammunition ashore in a ship's lifeboat," Frank could not forbear saying.

General Ruiz was quick to catch his tone.

"A good soldier's first duty is to obey," he said, "no matter how much he may dislike the duty he is assigned to."

The boys felt the reproof and remained silent.

"And don't despise this errand because you don't happen to think there's any glory in it," the general went on, "there is danger in it,—a good deal more danger than I feel that I have a right to ask you to run,—but, after all," he concluded, "you are just as safe there as in the camp."

The next minute he had gone and the boys started down the trail cut by the machete men, by which the army had advanced from the beach. They knew where the boats were drawn up, under the roots of a giant mangrove, but in the darkness they had some difficulty in finding the exact spot. At last, however, they discovered one of the small craft and Harry leaned over to untie the painter. It was pitchy dark and the man who had knotted the boat's painter was not a scientific tier of knots.

"Bother it;" exclaimed Harry, fumbling with the knot, "we shan't get away till daylight at this rate."

"Here, have some light on the subject," struck in Frank lighting a match. With the aid of the illumination. It didn't take Harry long to cast loose and tumble into the boat. Frank, who had been leaning over him as he fumbled with the rope, straightened up and prepared to follow him. The stump of the match was still in his fingers and shed a yellow glow about them. Suddenly, Frank uttered a sharp exclamation. The next minute the match burned his fingers and died out.

"That was funny;" he exclaimed as he took his seat in the boat and both boys gave way with the oars.

"What was funny?" demanded Harry.

"Oh, nothing;" replied Frank, almost shamefacedly, "I suppose it was fancy—must have been in fact. But as that match died out I am almost certain I saw a face part the creepers and peer at me out of the mangroves."

"Who could it have been?" asked Harry.

"I have no idea," rejoined Frank, "that's why I put it all down to imagination."

Both boys ran the boat alongside the gunboat's gangway a few minutes later.

A sharp "Who goes?" spoken with a marked German accent, showed that good watch was kept aboard the ship. As soon as the boys had announced their identity satisfactorily and been allowed on board, the sentry hurried to arouse Captain Scheffel, who, although he was in pajamas and his eyes heavy with sleep, showed truly Teutonic unconcern in the presence of his midnight awakening.

"Der keys for der magazine—hein?" he remarked placidly. "All right, I get dem for you in a minud."

He shuffled off to his cabin, the boys hardly keeping from laughing at the queer aspect he presented. In a few minutes he was back with a bunch of keys.

"Dis is him," he said, selecting a Yale key, "and, boys, vun vurd—no schmoking in der magazine—hein?"

"We don't smoke at all, captain," replied Frank with a laugh, "and if we did we wouldn't take our

first lesson in a magazine."

"Vell, schmokin' is goot and magazine is goot bud dey don'd mix, ain'd it?" commented the German skipper sententiously as he shuffled back to his bunk. He was simply the hired navigator of the gunboat and, so long as the boys didn't blow his ship up, he had no further interest in their movements.

The boys had carried perhaps their fiftieth case of rifle shells to the deck and piled them there, preparatory to taking them ashore, when their attention was attracted by evidence that the coming fight that Ruiz had prophesied was already on. From where they stood they could catch the flashes of the machine-guns on the hill and hear distinctly the rattle of rifles which accompanied their steady cough.

"Come on, Frank," said Harry, as the sounds were borne to their ears; "we've no time to loaf now. They may need this stuff urgently this minute. Come on; we'll take what we've got here and get ashore with it."

Several of the sailors who had come from below on the news that there was fighting going on ashore gave them a hand to load the cases in the boat and it was not very long before they were ready to cast off.

They rowed landward almost in silence watching between strokes the phosphorescent gleams where the fins of the man-eaters cut about the water on all sides.

"They'd find our cargo pretty indigestible;" laughed Frank, as one monster, whose form showed flaming green in the depths alongside, dashed by with hungry, gaping jaws and dived beneath the boat after darting a glance at the boys out of his little pig-like eyes.

They had marked the location of the landing-place by a tall ceiba tree, which formed an excellent landmark, before they left shore; so that they had no trouble in picking up the spot in the mangroves where the boats lay snugly hidden. As their boat's nose grated in amongst the twisted roots, Frank sprang quickly out and made fast the painter and then Harry began the work of handing the ammunition ashore.

"Ruiz will have to send down some men to carry this stuff up into camp," remarked Harry, puffing under his exertions, which, as each case weighed about fifty pounds, were not inconsiderable.

"And here they come, now;" rejoined Frank, as there was a trampling in the mangroves at the back of them. Both boys looked up to greet the newcomers and tell them how to lay hold of the boxes, when a startling thing happened.

The new arrivals came forward steadily and halted in a line, and, as if moved by clockwork, a dozen rifles went up to as many shoulders, covering the boys, whose hands dropped to their sides in sheer amazement at this unexpected turn of affairs.

Instinctively Frank and Harry reached for their revolvers, as soon as they recovered their senses.

"The señors will not move if they value their lives;" said a voice in excellent English, which proceeded from an officer; evidently in charge of the force of men which had surprised them.

"What?" gasped the boys angrily.

"Because," went on the soft-voiced officer, not noticing their indignant exclamation, "I shall then be under the painful necessity of shooting down the two Señors Chester without the formality of a court-martial."

THE FLOWER OF FLAME.

Ben Stubbs and Billy had stood straining their eyes after the *Golden Eagle*, when the air-craft flew from Plateau Camp, for as long as they could detect against the dark sky, the darker shadow of its outline; then they turned to the camp-fire and Ben Stubbs, whistling loudly, almost defiantly, set about the task of getting supper. Both occupants of the camp felt singularly disinclined for talk and it was not until after supper was finished and Ben's pipe fairly going, that either uttered more than a few perfunctory words.

By that time the storm, into which the *Golden Eagle* had soared on what proved a fatal voyage, was upon them. It came with the same sharp puff of wind and far-off flash of lightning that had first alarmed the boys.

"I'm going to double-lash that tent," remarked Ben Stubbs, briefly, after he had washed the tin plates. "This is goin' to be a hummer and no mistake."

As for Billy the apprehension he felt would not put itself into words. As the storm increased, though, and he helped Ben Stubbs to what the old sailor called "double-gasket" the waterproof tent, his heart sank.

"If the boys could not make a landing?—What then?" It was an unbearable thought and, as often as it came to him, and, try as he would the young reporter could not dispossess himself of it—there came with it a premonition of disaster. Though Ben didn't mention it the same thought was chasing itself through his mind. At last he could contain himself no longer and remarked:

"Now, mate, all's snugged down and ship-shape and I reckon we'd better turn in and get what sleep we can," he looked at the alarm-clock that hung on the tent pole.

"Eight bells," he said, "I wonder how it's going with them boys?" That was all, but the note of anxiety in his voice showed that the hardened old salt was as badly worried about what was transpiring on the *Golden Eagle* as Billy himself.

"I guess they will be all right, don't you, Ben?" anxiously asked Billy, quite willing to catch at even a straw of hope.

For answer Ben pulled the tent flap aside and looked out into the black night.

"Wall," he replied slowly, after he had cast his eye up at the sky, which was ribboned with blue, serpent-like streaks of lightning,—"wall, I've seen dirtier nights; but not many. I don't know much about air wessels;" he went on deliberately, "but my opinion, Mister Barnes, is that this ain't no kind of weather to be navigating on sea or land."

Not a word more could Billy get out of him and he could find no comfort in what the old tar had said.

It was snug enough in the tent, with the lamp hung to the ridge-pole and Ben's pipe going, but outside the storm was evidently waxing in fury. As the thunder crashed and roared its echo was flung against the steep cliff—on the summit of which lay the Toltec treasure valley—with the noise of a battery of heavy guns. It was deafening and to Billy, who had never before experienced a tropic thunderstorm, it was terrifying. He said nothing, however, but sat nursing his knee on the edge of his cot while outside the uproar grew every minute more angry and menacing.

As for Ben Stubbs his conduct was singular. He sat, pipe in mouth, with his head on one side, as though listening intently for something—for what Billy had no idea—and as Ben didn't seem in a talkative mood he didn't ask him.

Suddenly there came a lull in the storm and the old sailor ran to the flap of the tent. Outside he threw himself on the ground, holding one ear close to it. He was up in a second and back in the tent.

Billy looked at him wonderingly. The grizzled veteran of the sea and mountain looked worried.

"What's the matter, Ben?" demanded Billy, struck by the singular aspect of Ben's countenance.

"Matter?" replied the sailor, "matter enough. This is only a Dutchman's hurricane to what's in the wind. Listen! Do you hear that?"

He held up a finger to command attention.

Billy listened and to his ears there was borne, in a lull of the storm, a sound like the far-off whining of thousands of tortured animals. It was like nothing he had ever heard before.

Suddenly he jumped to his feet with an alarmed yell.

"There's something under my cot!" he cried.

"It's shaking it!" he shouted the next minute.

"There ain't nothing under yer cot but the solid earth, mate," replied the sailor gravely, "and it's that what you feels a' shaking. It's the terremoto and it's going to be a bad 'un."

"The terremoto?"

"Yes; the earthquake," was Ben's reply.

"Now, mate," went on Ben Stubbs gravely, "the main thing ter do in er case like this, is ter keep yer head. Keep cool and we'll come out all right."

As he spoke there came a violent convulsion that almost threw Billy off his feet,—at the same moment a terrific puff of wind ripped out the tent pegs in spite of all Ben's "double-gasketing" and the two occupants of it were struggling in its folds, while beneath them the earth shook and above the sky seemed to open and pour out a dreadful flood of living fire.

To Billy it seemed that his last hour had come. To make matters worse the oil had spilled out of the lamp as the tent collapsed and caught fire. The reporter, struggling desperately for release, realized this and shouted aloud,—not from any good he thought it might do, but from mere instinct. He could actually—or so it seemed to him—feel the flames at his legs when suddenly something ripped open the canvas that enveloped his head, and he felt the blessed air.

It was Ben Stubbs' knife that had saved him.

"Close call that, mate," commented the imperturbable Ben, as if he had just warned his companion not to step in front of a street-car, or something like that.

There was no time to answer. There came a deafening crash of thunder and another violent shaking of the earth. In the light of the blazing tent, which lit up the scene like a bonfire, they could see great trees crashing down and the forms of terrified wild animals rushing through them in a wild hope of escaping the fury of the earthquake and the storm. None of the fleeing wild beasts seemed to have the slightest fear of the men or even to notice them. Terror of the aroused forces of nature had overcome all their aversion to their human enemies.

"It's a shame to see all that good game going to waste," was Ben's only comment on the terrific scene that was taking place about them.

Billy looked at him in surprise. Was this man made of steel or iron? He seemed as impassive as either. From his companion's calm demeanor Billy caught renewed courage and thought to himself, with a sort of desperate pride:

"Well if he can stand it I can."

"How long is this likely to last?" Billy asked in a trembling voice of Ben, as the earth fairly heaved under the convulsions that now seemed to be rending its very crust.

"No telling, mate;" shouted Ben, with his mouth at Billy's ear, "it may last an hour or a day—or not more'n five minutes more. Holy Moses—!"

The abrupt exclamation was called forth by an extraordinary sight.

From the Treasure Cliff, as the boys had christened it—there suddenly shot upward a tall pillar of flame, which died down again as abruptly. A sulphurous reek filled the air at the same moment.

Ben seized Billy by the arm with a grip that pained.

"Come on; run for your life—" he shouted—"the whole blame mountain's going."

"Where are we to go?" gasped Billy, who shrank from the idea of the forest; where trees were crashing down every minute.

"Come on, I tell you, don't stop to ask questions," shouted Ben plainly excited, and Billy knew,—even in the turmoil in which his feelings then were,—that the peril must be serious indeed that would excite the cool-headed ex-pro prospector.

"That's only the beginning," shouted Ben as they ran, "if we stay here ten minutes longer our lives won't be worth an old chew of terbacay."

As he spoke he fairly dragged Billy along with him. Their way lay down the steep hill, and they stumbled and slipped, and fell down and scrambled up again like men fleeing from a remorseless enemy.

To Billy it all seemed like a hideous dream. Suddenly the whole scene was illumined by a fresh out-gush of flame from the summit of the treasure cliff. The amazing pillar of fire shot straight up for a height of fully fifty feet and blossomed out, whitely, as its summit into the resemblance of a huge fiery chrysanthemum. Even in his terror Billy could not help admiring, awestricken, the awful, majestic beauty of the sight. It was plain enough now to him what had happened,—the earthquake had opened up some hidden seam in the mountain, possibly that bottomless pit of the White Snakes and this pillar of fire was gushing upward from the bowels of the earth.

Ben, far from being struck with the overpowering majesty of the spectacle, seemed to regard it merely as a fresh cause for apprehension. By this time they were stumbling along through the forest; but the brilliant light of the volcanic flame behind them, made their way as light as day. Right across their way lay a huge fallen tree with a trunk fully forty feet in diameter. Ben uttered a cry of joy as he saw it.

"Quick, Billy, in under it!" he exclaimed, at the same time dragging the reporter to the ground and fairly pushing him under the massive trunk, as if he were afraid Billy would not obey quickly enough.

There was a low growl as he did so and a spotted form slunk away. It was a jaguar that had sought the same shelter as themselves; but such was the savage beast's terror that it made no attempt to attack them and merely crouched, with its ears back and lashing tail, gazing at them from the other end of the trunk. After a few minutes it slunk off into the brightly illuminated jungle and they lost sight of it.

"That's a wise beast," remarked Ben, "purty near as wise as we are. Nothing like getting a roof over your head when there's trouble of the kind that's a comin' around."

As he spoke there was a tiny patter on the leaves all about them.

"Rain!" exclaimed Billy with some glee, recollecting the old New England idea that when rain breaks the worst of a thunderstorm is over.

"Rain," scornfully snorted Ben, "it's the kind of rain you couldn't keep off with an umbrella, son."

Billy looked at him puzzled.

"It's what you might call a rocky rain," explained Ben. "Hark!"

The light patter that Billy had heard rapidly increased to a rattling sound as if some giant were throwing gravel over the jungle. In a few minutes huge stones began to fall all about them and the blazing mountain to emit a roar like a thousand blast furnaces.

"Now do you see why we got under this tree?" demanded Ben, as the stones, thrown up from the mouth of the blazing pit, fell all about them, but, of course, did not harm them in their snug shelter.

Billy merely nodded, he was past speaking; but, with all his own alarm, and that was not a little, his mind still reverted to the boys. Could they ride out this awful night in safety?

How long they lay there, crouching low and listening to the terrible stony downpour about them Billy never knew, but it seemed a veritable eternity. From time to time wild beasts would creep under the same shelter with them without taking any more notice of the two men than if they had been of their own kind. This in itself—so unnatural was it—added to Billy's alarm.

Suddenly, however, Ben uttered an exclamation.

"Don't it appear to you, Billy, that she's dying down at the top?" he asked, pointing to the great

flowering pillar of flame. Billy looked, and for several minutes they both gazed at the volcanic blast furnace in silence. Then they uttered a glad cry.

There was no doubt about it,—the flame was dying down.

The incessant rain of stones too had ceased and the storm had resolved itself into frequent flashes and low growls of distant thunder. Billy gave a whoop of joy.

“Don’t holler till yer out of the wood, mate,” admonished Ben, “and we ain’t out of this yet, by a long shot.”

“But the worst is over, isn’t it?” asked Billy.

“Sure, the worst of the storm is; but we’ve got to get some place out of here, and there are two things we don’t want to run into,—one is Rogero’s army and the other is Injuns.”

“That’s so,” assented Billy, “have you any plan?”

“Wall,” drawled Ben, “the source of the San Juan River ought to be right around to the south of here some place, and I figure that by traveling in that direction we are bound to hit it,—if nothing hits us in the meantime. Then we can get a canoe somehow, and drift down to Greytown.”

“You’re the doctor,” remarked Billy, whose cheerfulness was fast returning.

A few hours later a dawn,—as soft and bright as if the events they had passed through had been a nightmare,—broke over the valley at their feet. It was hard for Billy to realize that the hours of horror they had gone through had been real;—but the huge stones that lay all about and the uprooted and lightning blasted trees that strewed the jungle gave but too vivid evidence that it all had been real. Suddenly a thought struck him.

The pillar of fire. It issued from the treasure cliff, and,—as nearly as he could judge,—from a spot right above the White Serpent’s Abyss! He turned to Ben with an anxious look on his face.

“Ben,” he said, “do you think that the passage is blocked?”

“What passage?” asked the practical Ben, who was looking over his revolver to make sure that it was in working order.

“Why *the* passage—the passage to the Toltec mines.”

Ben whistled.

“Son,” he replied, “there ain’t no more chance of that there passage being there to-day than there is that this yer gun wouldn’t blow my brains out if I pointed it at my head and pulled the trigger.”

This was bad news; as Billy knew that the boys had meant to come back with a properly equipped expedition and make a thorough investigation of the Toltec Valley. He recollected too Ben Stubbs’ bar gold that was cached there.

“Why, Ben, you’ve lost a fortune if that’s true,” he exclaimed petulantly, “and you don’t seem to worry over it? You’ve lost your bar gold.”

“Hev I,” rejoined Ben in a quiet voice that made Billy’s cheeks crimson, “well, youngster, I’ve got my life and I’m thankful for one mercy at a time.”

After that there was no more talk from Billy of the lost treasure.

They struck out to the South at once and about noon, after passing through terrible evidences of the ravages of the storm, and the earthquake, reached the banks of a muddy stream that reeked of malaria and disease. Ben, after a brief period of reconnoitering, announced that it was the San Juan River in his opinion, and that anyhow whatever watercourse it was it would bring them to the coast. Luck was with them for, after an hour or so of casting about, they found a rough native canoe drawn up on the bank. Not far from it, crushed beneath a mighty tree that had fallen in the earthquake, lay the figure of the Indian to whom it had belonged.

“Poor fellow,” said Stubbs, “I guess he’s beyond minding if we do borrow his property.”

A few minutes later they were on board the rough dug-out, which Ben handled as skilfully as a canoe, and on their way to the coast. Not before, however, Ben had cut two sticks of wood from a low growing umbrella tree, with his ever handy knife, and, lashing them together with a bit of creeper, formed a rude cross,—which he placed in the ground at the dead Indian’s head.

“Now that’s all ship-shape;” he exclaimed as after viewing his handiwork with satisfaction he stepped cautiously into the cranky native craft and shoved off into the rapid current.

PRISONERS OF WAR.

As Frank and Harry found themselves confronted with the row of leveled rifles the officer who had addressed them placed a small silver whistle to his lips and blew twice. At the signal a score of men came rushing out of the mangroves, all armed and as villainous looking as the men who had first surprised the boys. The officer gave them a brief order in Spanish, the purport of which the boys did not get.

They were not long to be left in doubt as to its significance however. Two of the men advanced with a rope and motioned to the boys to place their hands together in front of them. The boys' reply was emphatic and startling. Frank's fist shot out, at almost the same moment as Harry's, and in a second both the Nicaraguan worthies were lying flat on the ground, wondering what had struck them. Far from irritating the officer and his men the boys' act seemed to amuse them. They shouted with laughter as their injured countrymen picked themselves up and slunk away with black looks at the boys. They muttered something as they went.

"They are saying, señores," said the polite young officer, "that they hope to form part of the firing squad at your execution."

In spite of themselves both boys gave a gasp of horror.

"Ah, I see I have shocked you," went on their persecutor, "is it possible that you did not know that Rogero has been particularly anxious to find you, ever since you so cleverly rescued your young journalistic friend. In fact I expect to get a very handsome reward for your capture. I can assure you that when our scouts reported two American boys in league with the insurgent troops that I lost no time in taking steps to make sure your capture. I must thank you for the charming manner in which you have walked into my trap. What is it you Americans say 'Will you walk into my parlor, said the spider to the fly?'—ah, yes, that is it. Well, Señores Fly, you see I have you trapped and you might as well submit gracefully to capture."

Like a flash both boys realized the serious position they were in. "In league with insurgents" their sneering captor had said. It would be a difficult matter to prove that they were not and, as non-combatants, of course, they had no business to be on active service for either army. Both boys knew Rogero too well to expect any mercy from him. Brave as they were their hearts sank but only for a moment.

"Come on, Frank, let's make a dash for it," exclaimed Harry. "They can only shoot us."

Frank put out a detaining hand.

"It would be of no use Harry," he said, "we are in their power and had better submit. We will find a way out yet,—never fear."

The boys had carried on this conversation in snatches. This seemed to irritate their captor.

"Do you intend to submit to being bound or shall I have to order my men to club you down," he demanded.

The cold brutality of his tone struck into both the boys like a lash across the face.

"We will be bound, if you think that is necessary," replied Frank contemptuously.

"Yes, I do," replied the officer, "you see you are very slippery customers and we don't want you to fly away, señores flies;" and he laughed at his abominable joke in a way that made both boys long to hammer him into insensibility.

Two men—not the two the boys had knocked down, these could not be persuaded to go near them regarding them as "diabolos,"—quickly bound their wrists with green hide thongs and then, at a sharp command from the officer, the men marched off through the jungle. Frank and Harry well guarded by a dozen men with fixed bayonets marched in the middle. No wonder their spirits fell to zero.

There was not a chance of escape.

Rapidly the boys' brains reviewed the situation. Resourceful as they were they could see no way out of their dilemma. They were fairly trapped. Again and again they bitterly blamed their recklessness in taking any part in the revolutionist's cause, for the fact that they had been caught red handed in the very act of transferring ammunition from the ship to the shore, would be exactly the circumstance Rogero would seize upon to order their execution. They both realized that. Had it not been for that they could have demanded to see their consul and probably Rogero would not have dared to refuse their request—as it was, however, they were to all intents and purposes revolutionists and their fate at Rogero's hands they could anticipate all too clearly.

At dawn they were on the march once more, after a brief encampment at about midnight. From this hurry they gathered that the force that had attacked Ruiz was not the main branch of the army but a marauding force sent out by Rogero. They did not question that they were on their way to the latter's headquarters. What would become of them there they had already guessed. They had little time to act if they were to formulate a plan of escape,—but it seemed maddeningly impossible to frame any scheme, that would hold water when it was conned over.

All day they marched through the steaming jungle. Sometimes they forded chocolate-colored sluggish streams and waded through vile morasses,—where huge alligators slipped from rotting logs into the slimy waters,—or blue herons stood in solemn rows, like an army of ghostly soldiers,—seen among the trees. Then again they issued onto savannahs, on which the sun beat down with a heat that seemed to penetrate the skull. All about them the boys could not help noticing the ravages of the earthquake. Once at an early stage of the march they had asked one of their guards what had uprooted so many trees and caused such widespread damage:

"Terremoto," he replied with a grunt.

At the word Ben Stubbs and Billy flashed across their minds and the night, that seemed now so

long ago, on which they had set out from Plateau Camp. As they passed through villages and noticed the havoc all about,—the masses of ruins and the wretched families huddled upon them, picking over the debris for their buried possessions, Frank's mind reverted to the Treasure Cliff.

How much was left of the passage, after what had evidently been a terrific upheaval of the land. As he thought of this, and communicated his fears that it was completely blocked to Harry, his hand abstractedly—or perhaps through some association of thought—slipped into his pocket and his fingers encountered the rubies they had wrenched from the sculptured quesals beside the gulf of the White Serpents.

If the worst came to the worst he determined to get them to his father somehow and ask him to give Billy Barnes his share. He did not mention his resolution to Harry for the younger boy was deeply depressed and Frank did not want to add to his troubles by obtruding on his mind any of his fears of what their destiny was to be.

All day they marched on; the half-fed looking soldiers seeming as tireless as mountain mules. With the boys the situation was far different; they were not used to forced marches under a tropic sun, and their legs felt like so many pounds of lead long before late afternoon found them advancing over a broad savannah, at the further side of which they could make out a row of palm trees, and gray-iron roofs beyond them, that somehow looked strangely familiar. Before they had gone many yards further they realized why the place seemed as if they had seen it before. The young officer, who had diverted himself over their capture to such a degree, had strode at the head of the column while they were on the march. Now however he fell back and pointed at the scene in front of them with his sword.

"Greytown," he said.

"We are to camp there?" asked Frank.

The officer replied with a short laugh.

"No; we shall stay there for some time—particularly some of us," he added with a sneering emphasis, and looking hard at the boys. "General Rogero took possession of the town two days ago," he added.

This was serious news indeed to the boys whose only hope now lay in an attack by revolutionists which, while it might not do them any good would at least divert attention from their case for several days during which some opportunity to escape or communicate with their friends might present itself. But with Greytown,—a strong strategic point,—in the hands of Rogero and the government forces the outlook was black indeed.

A short time later they entered the town and marched up the well remembered main street, by the hotel where Rogero had shot down poor Jose and into the dusty barracks, from whence they had seen the troops issue, as it seemed to them years before. With their guard pressing closely about them they were about to pass under the gate when a strange thing happened. A bearded man was pressing through the crowd that had surrounded the barracks to see the soldiers and their prisoners march in. Of all that ragged crowd he was the raggedest; but if Frank and Harry had seen an angel they could not have welcomed the sight more than they did the vision of that tattered, bearded man,—for, under the dust and dirt that covered his face, and his wild gestures,—which seemed to redouble as soon as their eyes met,—the boys had recognized Ben Stubbs!

How he had got there they had of course not the remotest idea nor did they know that his errand in town was to buy food for Billy who was played out by the long trip down the San Juan. It was enough for them that he was there near at hand—the first friend they had seen since they left Plateau Camp. Ben on his part seemed equally rejoiced to see them as, it will be remembered, that neither of the two members of the party, left behind at Plateau Camp, had any idea of whether the boys had ridden out the storm in safety or not.

But Ben was typically cautious. With the cunning of an old adventurer he realized that the present was no time to claim acquaintance. Frank and Harry were about to give vent to a loud exclamation when he silenced them by putting a long, brown finger to his lips. The next minute Ben Stubbs was the most active and the loudest of all the crowd, who tried to curry favor with the government troops by reviling the Americans at the top of their voices. To hear Ben Stubbs talk—of course in Spanish—which he spoke like a native, to see his gestures of hatred and contempt a bystander would have thought that the boys had no worse enemy in the world than this scarecrow tatterdemalion whom the crowd jeered at as "loco" (crazy).

It took some time, in the confusion of arrival at the barracks, to get the troops assigned to their quarters in an orderly manner and, during this interval, Frank and Harry, their faces burning with indignation, had to stand, surrounded by their armed guards, in the center of the court and listen to the imprecations of the crowd against Americans, most of which they fortunately could not understand—or they might have been tempted to risk their lives in one dash at the contemptible ruffians who from a safe distance baited them.

While this was going on Ben Stubbs had disappeared and the boys were at a loss to understand and a little angry at his non-appearance. They were not left long to puzzle over it, however, for, after about ten minutes' wait in the barrack-yard, the crazy figure came dancing in once more amid the shouts of laughter of the disreputable mob that thronged the open space, and came straight up to where Frank and Harry stood guarded by the soldiers. He had in his hand a roll of Spanish bread and, amid the jeers of the crowd he held it high above his head.

"Maybe the Americans are hungry?" he shouted, "perhaps they want bread. Here is some for the procos (pigs) may it poison them and all such perros (dogs)."

With that he hurled the roll at them and the boys,—divining that some meaning lay behind all this rigmarole,—signed to one of the soldiers to pick it up and indicated that they were ravenously hungry, as indeed they were, not having been given anything to eat since early morning. The soldier sullenly thrust the roll into Frank's pocket and a few minutes later the boys were pushed into a noisome cell and an iron door clanged to. As the key rasped in the lock they felt that it was like the closing of the world's doors on them and that they were extremely unlikely ever to see another

sunset—unless a miracle intervened.

One thing, however, had been done for which they were thankful before the cell door was shut. The thongs that bound their wrists had been cut. This was an unspeakable relief as the green hide of which they were formed had contracted during the day and they had actually cut into the flesh,—causing excruciating agony.

As soon as their guard had paced away from the cell-door Frank eagerly brought the roll out of his pocket. He broke it open, after first carefully examining it for any signs of writing, and then uttered a cry of delight. Imbedded in the soggy crumb of the roll was a neatly folded bit of paper. With trembling hands Frank opened the screed and, with Harry looking over his shoulder, read as follows:

“Deer buoys:

Noe tyme 2 rite mutch wil say bili & mee is cum
down thee rivver in a canoo. Thank heving u air save
an soun. Now don u wurri ship matz bili and mee
wil see noe harm cums to u. benn Stubbs A. B. (able
seeman.)”

It was with difficulty the boys kept back their tears as they read this ill-spelled but true-hearted document. As they sank into a troubled sleep on the bare benches of their cell that night both boys felt that they had a friend at work for them who would die himself rather than not use every effort in his power to help them escape from what seemed to be a helplessly locked steel-trap.

FACING DEATH.

The boys were roughly awakened the next morning,—at what hour they could not judge but estimated that it must be early by the pale light—and a jug of water and a dark brown mess of badly cooked beans, in an earthenware pot, shoved through their bars by the same ill favored guard who had been on duty the night before. Unpalatable as the stuff looked they nevertheless fell on it hungrily, being actually half-starved and seriously weakened by their march of the day before. The momentary exultation caused by the receipt of Ben Stubbs' letter had evaporated when they awakened and both felt that their prospects were gloomy indeed.

After breakfast they were left in their cell for some time,—the monotony being enlivened by an incident that struck a chill to the already flagging spirits of both boys. The interruption began with a ruffle of drums and then a bugle call. After this there intervened a march and then all was silent for possibly fifteen minutes. Then there boomed out the solemn tolling of a bell and a few seconds later the boys heard, with horrified ears, a sharp command—and then the rattle of a volley. Of course they could see nothing of this,—a blank wall facing their cells and shutting out all view of the barrack-yard,—but from what they heard they could conjure up the ghastly details of the execution as vividly as if they had been present.

It was not long after this, while they were busy with their gloomy thoughts, that a petty officer of some kind, at the head of a file of men came to their cell. The door was thrown open and the boys were handcuffed,—in spite of their protests against the ignominy. With a soldier on either side of them they were then marched across the barrack ground where a depressing sight met their eyes.

A number of soldiers were carrying an oblong box draped in black across the quadrangle. Behind them followed two weeping women and a bent old man. Two children, wide-eyed at what it all meant,—formed the rest of the sad little party. Both boys realized at once with a keen start of repulsion that they were witnessing the last act of the drama whose action they had heard in their cell.

They were marched across the quadrangle, their escort paying no more attention to the sad scene than if it had been an every day occurrence, and up a flight of steep, bare stairs into a long, low room,—down the center of which ran a long table. The table was covered with cheap oilcloth and was littered with pens and paper.

Half-a-dozen men, who were officers to judge by their uniforms, sat at either side of it and at the head was a man whom the boys recognized at once as General Rogero.

His evil eyes gleamed with a sinister glint as they fell on the two boys.

"So,—here we have the young revolutionists,—gentlemen," he said, turning to the other officers, who all regarded the boys with curiosity but with no more compassion than if they had been gazing at the tortured victims of a bull fight.

Rogero leaned back. He was evidently in no hurry to shorten his triumph. He seemed fairly to gloat over his two prisoners. Frank and Harry returned his gaze fearlessly and after a while the leader of the Nicaraguan forces dropped his basilisk eyes with a shamed and embarrassed expression. The next moment he made up for his temporary lapse by striking the table with his fist and informing the boys that they were before a court-martial.

"By what right do you bring us here?" demanded Frank.

"By the right that we offer every man to get a chance for his life," was the startling reply.

"What have we done that puts us within the pale of military law?" again demanded the elder of the brothers.

"I presumed you were intelligent enough to know that citizens of a neutral power, interfering in another government's suppression of sedition, place themselves beyond the protection of their own country," rejoined Rogero.

"We have not interfered in any quarrel you may have with your unfortunate dependents," was Frank's reply, "we are American citizens and I demand the right; if we are to be tried at all,—of a hearing before a civil court."

Rogero smiled his evil smile once more.

"My dear young man," he remarked casually, "in the present unsettled state of the country we have no civil courts. The army is the law and the law is vested in the army."

The other officers chorused their assent. The boys looked desperately about them. No,—there was no means of escape. The windows were guarded and at each door stood a sentry, stiffly at attention.

Rogero instantly divined the purpose of their anxious looks.

"No, Señors, there is no escape," he sneered, "you see, with two such resourceful young men as you have proved to be, we are taking no chances,—as you say in your country. I am much too anxious to keep you here to think of allowing you to slip through my fingers, as did young Barnes—by your cursed tricks," he ended furiously, the passion that underlay his suave exterior glaring suddenly on his face.

The next minute he was the same sneering, smiling snake they had always known him.

"But we are wasting time, gentlemen," he said. "I find there are three charges on the indictment against these unfortunate and imprudent young men, First:—that they conspired with revolutionists against the peace of the Nicaraguan republic; Second:—that they illegally removed a military prisoner from the lines of the Government's army, and, Third:—that they assisted the revolutionists in their landing on the coast, both actively and by furnishing them with contraband-of-war. The last clause, gentlemen of the court, refers to the possession by these young Americanos of a so-called air-ship, which their father—a well-known conspirer against the Government,—induced them to bring to this country so that it might be used against us on behalf of the revolutionists."

"That's a lie," burst out Frank.

"Save your breath, Señor," sneered Rogero, with a threatening glance, "you may not have much more left of it." 319

"The father of these boys," continued Rogero, "like all other Americanos in this country, has objected to the taxes that our noble president Zelaya, has wisely put on all articles they export or bring in and naturally therefore is in sympathy with any revolutionary movement. I do not know, gentlemen, what your verdict will be; but, for myself, I must vote for their immediate execution as a solemn duty to my country."

The boys' cheeks blanched in spite of themselves. This man then actually meant to put them to death.

"Courage, Harry;" whispered Frank, and he added his slogan of "while there's life there's hope!"

"There is one alternative," went on Rogero, "and that is this,—that these young men at once agree to sign a document assigning to the government of Nicaragua all their father's property and forward it to him for his signature by a messenger I have waiting. If Señor Chester the elder will pay this ransom these foolish boys may go free, otherwise—" he gave an expressive gesture the meaning of which was only too plain to need translating into words.

There was a hurried consultation, of what was called, by a ludicrous travesty, the "court-martial," and then the members reconvened. One of them arose and, addressing Rogero who had assumed his seat at the head of the long table, said: 320

"What you have proposed is agreeable to the other members of this court-martial, General."

"Then your verdict, gentlemen, is?" demanded Rogero.

"Death by shooting," was the reply that sent an involuntary shudder through the boys.

Rogero smiled his evil smile again—twice as menacing in his triumph. "You, however, agree to offering them my alternative," asked Rogero anxiously, "La Merced is a rich plantation and so is that of Don Pachecho adjoining it; which I don't doubt we can easily acquire when we have established headquarters at La Merced."

"Of course we agree to your alternative, General," replied the other officer, "as to what you say about Don Pachecho's estancia, however, we can doubtless assimilate that with little difficulty. General Ruiz, his son-in-law, is dead—"

"And he left a remarkably pretty widow," put in Rogero, "really I am in quite a hurry to establish headquarters near such a charming neighbor." 321

"I was going to say," resumed the other, "that as General Ruiz is dead we can naturally claim his property for the government as that of a revolutionist."

This cool proposal met with great applause, induced, in a large measure, by the fact that each officer saw in his mind's eye himself being awarded the property. Rogero, more comprehensive, had already mentally claimed it all for himself.

"You have heard the alternative, prisoners?" snapped Rogero, who had now quite dropped his mask of sardonic politeness, "What do you say?"

"I say that if we are to die we will die as American boys should, and accept no such disgraceful terms," proudly replied Frank.

"And I, that we should be as bad sons as we would be unworthy citizens if we even considered your dastardly proposal," exclaimed Harry.

"Very well, you have signed your own death warrants," bitterly replied Rogero. "In a few days we shall have captured La Merced in any event, and I shall have much pleasure in informing your father of how his two promising youngsters died."

It was well for Rogero at that moment that the boys' hands were manacled. It was perhaps as well for every one in the room that they could not strike a blow. For to such a pitch of fury had the sneering words of the dark-skinned man before them aroused them that had they been free it would have cost him dear. 322

"For the last time I ask you?" demanded Rogero, "will you accede to my proposal?"

"For the last time no—not if it was to save our lives ten times over," replied Frank.

Rogero moved over to a window that overlooked the quadrangle of the barracks.

"I shall have an excellent view of your deaths from this window," he remarked, "and I assure you that nothing I have seen for a long time will give me more pleasure."

"*Not even your murder of Dr. Moneague in New York,*"—quietly retorted Frank.

The effect the boy's remark on Rogero was electric. His brown face seemed to turn a sickly green.

"You American dog—for that, if I could inflict a thousand deaths upon you, you should die them all, one by one," he fairly shouted.

"Take them away," he bawled to the soldiers, who stood staring open-mouthed at the sight of his maniacal fury. "Take them away and shoot them down, before I run them through with my sword." 323

Frank smiled with a bitter contempt. If he had ever felt any doubt as to Rogero's guilt he was convinced of it now. He was beyond a question the murderer of Dr. Moneague. His own fury and consternation at Frank's quiet remark had convinced the boy. As the boys were led out Rogero stood at the window. They could see that he was shaking and muttering to himself as if in terror. At that moment a huge bat, that had been hanging to one of the rafters of the room, which was unceiled, flopped heavily down and nearly struck him in the face. Rogero reeled back with what was almost a scream of horror.

"Vampiro," the boys heard the soldiers say, showing almost as much horror as had Rogero at the sudden apparition of the animal,—which had now flopped heavily off again into some other recess. They did not know then that in most Central American countries the vampire is regarded as an evil spirit and carries the menace of death on its leathern wings, as well as its reputation as a blood-sucker.

FRIENDS IN NEED.

The boys touched each other's manacled hands,—to effect a handclasp was impossible,—as they passed down the stairway. Now that it seemed all over they felt strangely calm. They were determined, at all events, to show no sign of flinching when the crucial moment came. Till that time they both determined to keep up stout hearts.

"Ben Stubbs and Billy won't fail us if its humanly possible to get help," said Frank.

"But how are they to storm a whole garrison," demanded Harry despairingly. His contention did indeed seem unanswerable and, till the boys and their guards had reached the center of the courtyard, no more words were exchanged. A command to halt was abruptly given by the officer in charge and the boys were led over toward the blank wall,—on the other side of which lay the cells, one of which they had occupied the preceding night.

The men who had led them there then shackled their ankles and produced two long bandages of cloth. The boys saw at once that these were intended to blindfold them with. Both gave a shudder of repulsion.

Their signs of objection were noticed by the officer who, rightly interpreting them, ordered the men not to tie the bandages on. Apparently he thought that at such a moment an exact compliance with regulations didn't matter.

At the last moment Frank suddenly thought of the jewels in his pocket. There was only one thing to do and that was to trust to the honor of the officer in charge of the firing squad. He had not a bad face and even seemed disposed to be friendly to what small extent he could. Frank, with his head, beckoned to him. He hurried up.

"Can you speak English?" asked Frank.

"A little," replied the officer.

"At least you can understand what I am going to say," replied Frank "you consider a dying promise a solemn one."

The officer nodded his head.

"I have something to send to my father after I am dead and I am going to entrust you with the commission," went on Frank, "will you promise to carry it out faithfully?"

With another vigorous nod of his head the Nicaraguan assented.

"It is your promise?"

"It is."

"And you will keep it, as a man of honor and an officer?"

"Assuredly, Señor."

"Then feel in my right-hand pocket and take out what you find there," said Frank.

The officer plunged in his hand and drew it out with almost a cry of amazement when he saw the magnificent rubies that lay flashing their crimson fire in his brown palm.

"You see why I exacted such a solemn pledge from you," said Frank, "such rubies as these might tempt any man to break his word."

"But I am a Spaniard, sir," proudly replied the young officer drawing himself to his full height.

Frank saw that he could trust him.

"You will deliver these to Señor Chester at La Merced," he said, "and tell him that two are to be the portion of Señor Barnes, you understand,—one you will keep for your trouble."

The officer replied that he comprehended his commission perfectly.

"And—and," Frank hesitated; do what he could his eyes would fill with tears as he felt that he was making what would be his last request; "tell my father that we died like Americans and to break it to our mother as gently as he can. I think that is all—and thank you."

The young officer seized the boys' manacled hands and pressed them impulsively.

"Ever after this shall I respect Americans, Señor. Forgive me for what I have to do,—it is my duty. Your commission I swear to execute."

With a sharp click of his heels he turned to the firing squad and stood at attention with his sword at his shoulder at one end of the line of twelve men.

The boys, standing side by side, heard the first command ring sharply out.

"Ready,—present!"

"Aim!"

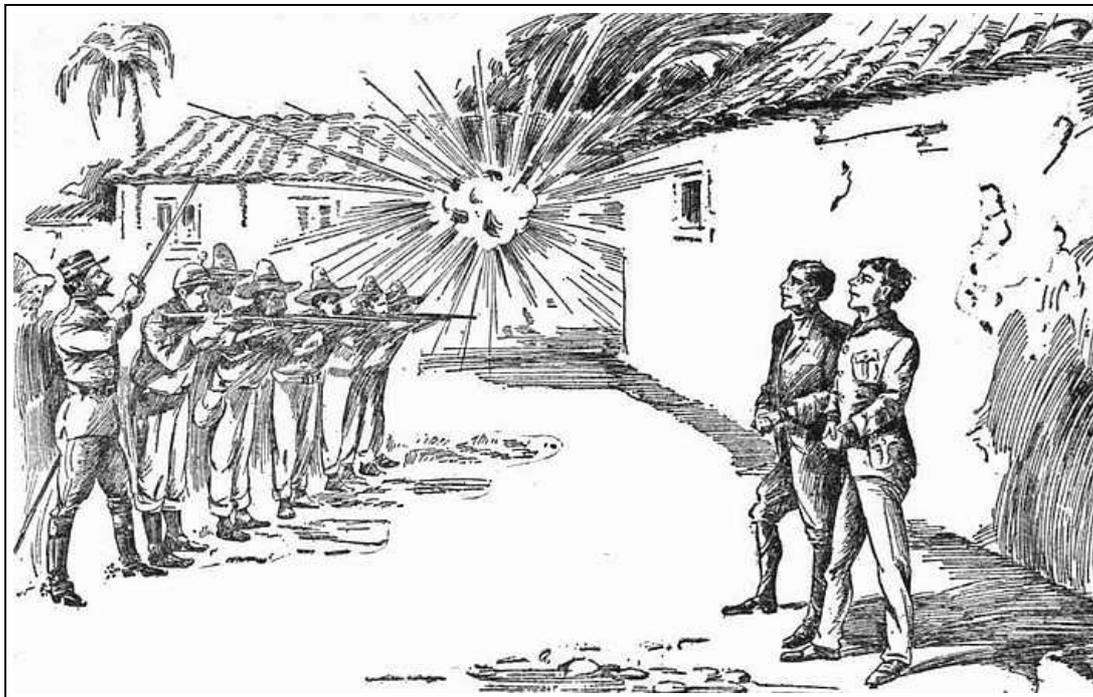
"Good-bye, Harry," whispered Frank.

"Good-bye, old fellow," rejoined his brother. Each was glad to notice that there was not even a tremor in the other's voice.

"Fi—"

The command was never finished.

The firing squad, had their fingers on their triggers when,—with a crash that caused them to drop their weapons in sheer amazement,—a shell ripped through the roof of the garrison trial room from which Rogero stood sombrely watching them. It exploded the next moment with a force that showered the boys with splinters and debris and killed several of the firing squad outright.



“FI—!” THE COMMAND WAS NEVER FINISHED.

All thought of the execution was forgotten in the mad panic into which the garrison was immediately thrown. Men rushed about and officers shouted commands,—the very suddenness of the attack seemed to have paralyzed the whole barracks. In the midst of the uproar and turmoil Rogero,—his face ablaze with hate and rage,—rushed into the courtyard. He had been unhurt in the damage the shell had done to the roof as it ripped through and was mad with fury. He struck right and left with the flat of his sword at the fleeing men and then, with a bellow of fury, made at Frank and Harry who, helpless and half-stunned by the explosion of the shell, had reeled back against the wall.

“Yankee pigs! You escaped the firing squad but I’ll run you through if it’s the last act I perform on earth;” he yelled, rushing at them with his drawn blade. The next minute it was struck out of his hand and he himself knocked sprawling by a blow on the point of the chin.

“That’s the ticket for soup,” the boys heard a well-known voice cry out, as their enemy measured his length; “and if you want any more, my fine rooster, we’ve got it on tap.”

“Ben Stubbs!” they cried out gleefully.

“Yes, and not forgetting one Billy Barnes of New York;” joyously shouted the young reporter, racing up to them, covered with dust, but yelling like a Comanche, “as soon as you’ve got that hardware off you we’ll have a talk-fest—I want to interview you, for the *Planet*.”

“What on earth has happened?” gasped the boys who only a few seconds before had made up their minds to die—and were still dazed at the amazing turn events had taken—

“Happened?” shouted Stubbs. “Well, shipmates, in a way of speaking about forty things has happened at once,—like they does in a four-ring circus. You twist yer head off looking fer ‘em. In the first place me and Billy stole two mules, got up to La Merced right after I wrote that letter and told the folks of your plight,—and, here they come right now with the American consul.”

He pointed to the barrack gate where, pushing through the demoralized crowd of scared soldiers, came the well-known figure of Mr. Chester, followed by the stalwart Blakely, and Mr. Olivares the American Consul.

“Yes, but that shell,” demanded the boys, “which saved our lives.”

“Oh, that was our friend on the revolutionary gunboat at a little target practice I imagine,” grinned Billy Barnes. “I see it touched the spot,” he went on gazing about at the havoc and confusion.

And then further explanations were interrupted for a time while the boys and their father embraced and exchanged such greetings as may be imagined. It had been an anxious time for Mr. Chester and his lined face showed it.

“But thank heaven, it’s all over now, boys,” he exclaimed, “the United States has taken a hand in the mess.”

“What?” cried both the boys.

“Yes,” chimed in Mr. Olivares, “the *Yankee* and the *Dixie*, cruisers arrived off the town this morning with Rear Admiral Kimball and Lieutenant Commander Symington on board. They have orders from Washington to see that peace is at once restored even if Zelaya has to abdicate,—which he probably will in favor of Madriz,” he added—and after-events proved him correct.

“And on top o’ that,” exclaimed Ben Stubbs, unable to keep quiet any longer, “our friend Ruiz gave the government the licking of their young lives at Bluefields yesterday and steamed down here on his gunboat just in time to fire that shell and throw a scare into the spiggtyts at the very physicky moment,”—Ben meant psychological moment.

“Does his wife know that General Ruiz is safe?” asked Harry eagerly, after the boys had related how they became leagued with the insurgents.

“Yes,” replied Mr. Chester, “the news was brought by a runner who managed to get through

Rogero's lines two days ago. Poor woman, she swooned when she heard the news; but now she is perfectly recovered and will be here with Don Pachecho to meet him shortly."

All this time Billy Barnes had been mysteriously missing. Suddenly, however, he reappeared, accompanied by two staunch sergeants-of-marines from the *Dixie*, leading between them a crumpled, despicable figure that even the boys, who had good cause to remember him, had some difficulty in recognizing as that of General Rogero. If it had been another man his condition would have been pitiful. As it was, nobody felt much sympathy for him.

"Well, we got him;" exclaimed Billy triumphantly, "caught him sneaking into the hotel. Now, Mr. Consul, I want to turn this man over to your custody as the murderer of Dr. Moneague, who is wanted for that crime by the New York police. I'll just leave him here till I telegraph to my friend Detective Connelly and file the story for my paper—it will be a crackerjack."

He hurried off, leaving Rogero between his two guards,—facing a group from none of which he had any right to look for mercy. His army had evacuated Greytown in a hurry on the arrival of the American cruisers, as no one of the officers wanted to put himself in the position of taking up arms against the American government. Rogero was therefore alone,—and guarding the town that he had entered in triumph not so very long before, lay a revolutionary gunboat and two trim Yankee cruisers.

"Well," he said bitterly, "you have me cornered but it's not my fault that I didn't finish off those cubs there before you did." He indicated Frank and Harry. The boys turned away. It was not in their nature to exult over a fallen enemy.

"I know there is one possession of mine which you intend to have if you can succeed in fixing this trumped up charge of murder on me and that is this—" he went on as he drew out a bit of parchment from an inner pocket. "I'll foil you,—thus," he exclaimed suddenly and tore the plan of the Toltec treasure trail into a thousand atoms.

"Werry pretty I must say," spoke up Ben Stubbs, "but a waste of time, ship-mate,—that hole into the treasure cave is filled up by the airthquake and the only way to get at the mines will be in another airship."

Rogero's face was a study.

"What, you forestalled me there, too?" he muttered savagely.

"Well I reckon these boys did that," cheerfully replied Ben, "and thereby saved me from a maroon's grave."

Rogero's rage was frantic when he learned this. He snapped his teeth with impotent fury as he was led off to a cell to await the arrival of extradition papers from New York. It might as well be said here that he never reached there. A few hours after he was placed in the cell he,—through some attendant who was faithful to his wishes to the last, or whom, as was more probable, he had bribed,—obtained a phial of poison. When next his cell was visited by the guard the tempestuous general of the Zelayan forces was finished with his earthly battles and had been dead some time.

The boys' irons were struck off as soon as a blacksmith could be found in the panic-stricken city, and that evening they sat in the places of honor at a gay banquet given to the officers of the two cruisers by Mr. Chester and the American Consul, at the hotel where their adventures in Nicaragua had begun. While the festivities were at their height a servant hastened in and whispered to Frank that a man wanted to see him outside.

In the hall Frank found a ragged-looking fellow awaiting him who held in his hand a skin-bag.

"You are the Señor Chester?" he asked.

"Yes," replied Frank.

"Don Alejo he tell me give you dees," said the figure and abruptly vanished. Inside the bag lay all the ten rubies and with them a short note.

"You see that a Spaniard can keep his word as well as an American his courage,—I do not need the ruby you offered me," was all it said.

On his return to the banquet room Frank was compelled to tell in detail all their adventures to the intense interest of the officers and of Admiral Kimball. A buzz of admiration went round the table from time to time as he modestly related their perils and mishaps.

Early the next day Admiral Kimball sent for the boys on board the *Dixie* just as Frank and Harry were congratulating General and Mrs. Ruiz on their happy reunion and thanking the former for his speedy voyage down the coast to their rescue.

"I have been much impressed with your courage and adroitness," said the admiral, when they were closeted with him in his private cabin, "and I believe you are just the boys the government want for a particularly perilous and dangerous mission,—will you undertake it?"

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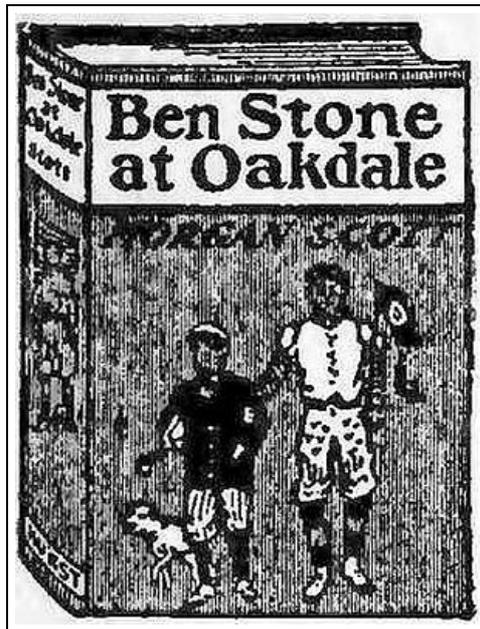
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Transcriber's Notes:

Minor spelling, punctuation and typographic errors were corrected silently, except as noted below. Hyphenated words have been retained as they appear in the original text.

On the frontmatter page enumerating the Boy Aviators books, the count listed ("Six Titles") is left as is, even though seven books are listed in the subsequent text.

Note that some archaic spellings have been retained, even though they might be typographical errors; for example, "whity", "propellor", "collapsable", "disillusionized", "stancher", "monocule".

Inconsistent spellings of "airship" versus "air-ship" have been left as is, due to the frequency of both spellings. Inconsistent use of hyphenation in less frequently used words have been corrected to the form used most often.

Inconsistent usage of "anyone" versus "any one" has been left as is, due to the frequency of both spellings.

On the illustration after page 168, the caption has been changed slightly, to match the quote in the preceding paragraph.

On page 263, the error in Morse code (for the letter "O") has been left as is.

On page 317, "fit" was changed to "fix", as "fit" seemed like a typographical error. The original text is "I don't think we were ever in a neater fit than this".

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THE BOY AVIATORS IN NICARAGUA; OR, IN
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