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**BRAVE AND BOLD**  
A DIFFERENT COMPLETE STORY EVERY WEEK

No. 127

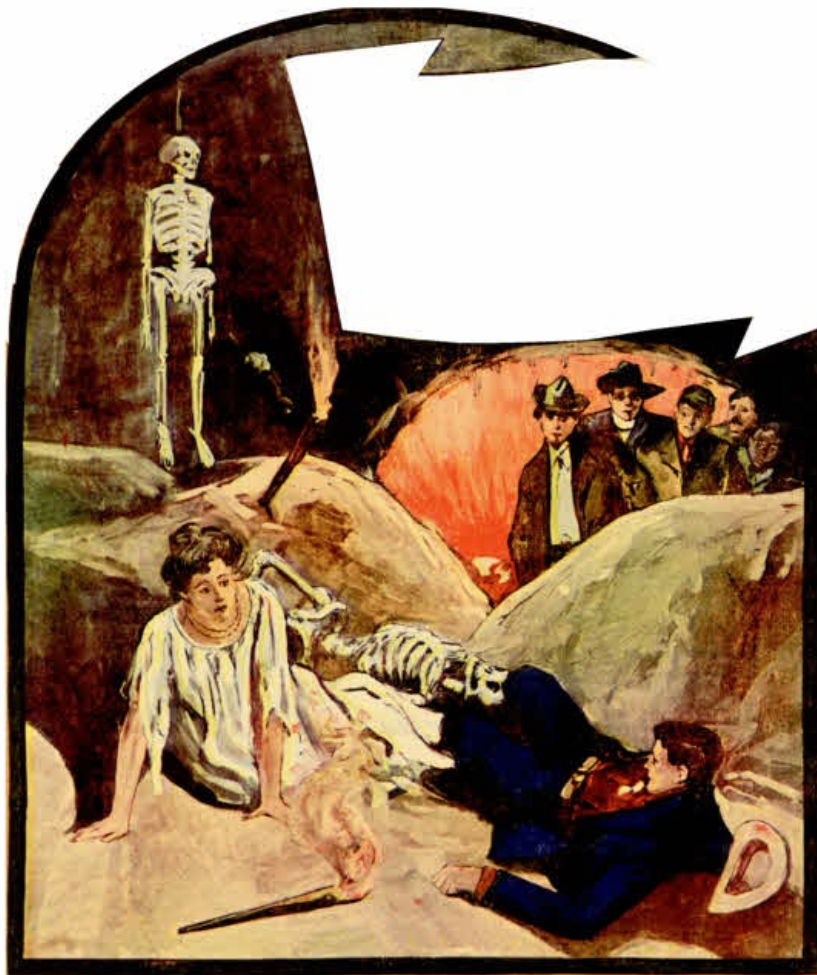
**IN THE WONDERFUL  
LAND OF HEZ**  
or The Mystery of  
the Fountain of Youth



Something snapped above them, and down came the girl, bringing the skeleton with her, knocking the daring boy flat upon his back.

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# BRAVE & BOLD

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## IN THE WONDERFUL LAND OF HEZ;

OR,

### The Mystery of the Fountain of Youth.

By the author of "The Wreck of the 'Glaucus.'"

#### CHAPTER I.

##### AN ECCENTRIC COUPLE.

One fine October afternoon, in the year 1880, a sailboat might have been seen gliding serenely over the waters of Lake Okechobee, in the southern part of Florida.

The boat had but two occupants, and these were so different in appearance that a little description of them will not be out of order.

The elder of the two was attired in a very loose-fitting suit of blue flannel, and wore a Panama hat.

He was probably fifty years of age, and one look at his round, smooth-shaven face would have told the casual observer that he was a good-hearted individual.

His eyes were hidden by a pair of blue goggles of extraordinary proportions, which made the man look as though he had donned a diver's helmet.

In stature this remarkable personage was short and very stout.

Prof. Remington Easy was his name, and now, as he has been introduced, we will turn our attention to his companion—a tall, lanky individual, attired in corduroy knee breeches, heavy top-boots, red flannel shirt, linen coat and a broad-brimmed hat—a typical Yankee, for all the world.

This was Martin Haypole, the professor's right-hand man.

The Yankee was not over thirty years of age, and had it not been for the thin bunch of yellow hair he wore on his chin, he would have been a fair-looking man.

Martin was about six feet two inches in height, and weighed probably one hundred and thirty-five pounds; thus it will be seen that he possessed not an ounce of superfluous flesh.

He had often remarked that what he lacked the professor amply made up for, and vice versa.

But what are these two curious individuals doing in this wild part of Florida? the reader may ask.

The question is answered in a very few words.

Prof. Remington Easy was of an exploring turn of mind.

About a month before the opening of our story he became deeply interested in that vast, unexplored region in the southern part of Florida known as the Everglades.

The more he studied over the matter the more he became desirous of penetrating the heart of the swamp and discovering something wonderful.

The professor possessed an unlimited supply of cash, and he spared no expense in fitting himself out for his trip.

Thus we now find them in their boat upon the lower part of Lake Okechobee, within about five miles of the beginning of the Everglades.

The sun was yet about three hours high, and the professor hoped to reach a good place to land before the shades of night gathered around them. [2]

It was now the second day since they had entered the upper portion of the lake, by way of the stream beyond it, and the professor judged that the marshes must be close at hand.

Owing to the fact that their boat did not possess one of those useful things known as a centerboard, and that the winds had been contrary ever since they entered Lake Okechobee, they

had made but a scant twenty miles in nearly two days.

While Prof. Easy was satisfied with this slow mode of progress, Martin Haypole was not.

The boat, which was christened *Maid of the Marsh*, appeared to be a very insignificant thing in the eyes of the Yankee.

He had laughed at it, swore at it and nearly cried over it.

And now, just as Prof. Easy made a prodigious effort and rose to his feet, he began again.

"I tell you, professor, this is the dod-rottedest boat that ever sot in water. Them trees there to the south'ard are ther Everglades; but d'yer think we'll ever git thar at this rate? Mought better started in a rowboat. *Maid of ther Marsh!* A cussed fine name, ain't it? I hope she gits stuck in some marsh afore long, an' never gits out again. But I'm 'fraid we'll both be gray-headed afore she gits to a marsh. Twenty miles in two days! Well, I swan ter Guinea! If that ain't travelin' in ther nineteenth century, I'm a downright fule!"

"Tut, tut, Martin," replied the professor; "take things easy. I took notice that you were very glad to get in the boat day before yesterday, when that big alligator gave chase after you."

"Oh! she were good enough then, professor. I don't want a 'gator nosin' aroun' me; an' this tub is good enough when that kind of work is goin' on. But when you come right down ter sailin', whar in blazes does this dod-rotted thing come in?"

"Have patience, Martin. We will reach those trees yonder in less than an hour. See! a favorable breeze is even now springing up."

The professor was right. For the first time during their voyage upon the lake the wind was blowing in a direction suited to their course.

The hitherto flapping mainsail now bellied out, and the little craft went skipping through the water like a thing of life.

Even Martin Haypole was temporarily satisfied, and with his hand upon the tiller he watched the rapidly nearing forest in the swamp district.

The breeze kept up, and, sure enough, in a little while they arrived at the end of the lake proper.

As soon as they got among the trees, the breeze ceased to exist, and once more the sail flapped idly about the mast.

"I'll be gosh-dinged if we won't eat supper on land to-night, anyhow!" exclaimed the Yankee, as he pushed the boat, by means of a long pole, into a narrow creek, and made for a little island that was several feet above the level of the marsh.

"Good enough, Martin—good enough!" returned his companion, rubbing his hands. "I am agreeable, I assure you."

At that moment the prow of the boat struck the bank and caused the fat professor to lose his balance and tumble overboard.

"Ha! ha! ha!" laughed the Yankee, as he observed his employer floundering about in the muddy water. "How d'ye like it, professor? You laughed at me when I fell overboard—now it is your turn, by gosh! I told you laughin' was catchin'. Now, if one of them ugly 'gators was ter come along there would be fun. Thunder and lightnin'! if there ain't one, now, I'm a rank sinner!"

A floundering was heard a few feet from the struggling professor, and a half-grown alligator was seen making for him with all his might.

The luckless man had now assumed an upright position, with the dirty, black water even with his chin, and as he observed his peril he bellowed lustily for help.

He strove in vain to reach the gunwale of the boat, but the distance was too far for his short arms.

Haypole, with an amused smile upon his face, allowed the alligator to get within a few feet of his intended prey, and then reached over suddenly and seized his employer by the arms.

He then saw that he would not be able to get him out as quickly as he had anticipated, and his gleeful look turned to one of alarm.

The professor was a heavyweight of the first water, and had it not been for the fact that Haypole was a very strong man, the ferocious alligator would certainly have had a good supper that night.

But by an almost superhuman effort he jerked him from the muddy water just as the ferocious monster made a vicious snap with its huge jaws.

"Murder!" yelled the professor, as he fell in a heap at the feet of the Yankee; "the thing has bitten off my foot!"

"I guess not, professor; he only nipped off ther heel of yer shoe. Great haystacks! but that was a narrar escape, though! I didn't know you was so 'tarnal heavy."

As soon as the half-drowned man found that he was not injured, he got mad, and shaking his fist under Haypole's nose, said:

"Martin, if you ever let such a thing as that occur again, I'll discharge you on the spot!"

"Now, don't git mad, old man; you won't discharge me, you know you won't. Why, thunderation! You couldn't git along without me."

"It makes no difference; the whole thing was your fault. If you had not made such an ass of yourself by pushing the boat so hard against the bank, I would not have fallen overboard at all. Then the idea of your standing here laughing at me when the alligator was coming after me with all his might. You think you are very funny, Martin Haypole; and I'll tell you what I have a great notion of doing."

"What?" asked the Yankee, showing just a slight tinge of passion.

"I have a great mind of thrashing you."

"You had better not try it, professor. I never seen that man yet as could do that in a square rough and tumble."

Whack!

The enraged professor struck his employee a smart blow on the face with his open hand.

"Thunder and lightning!" howled the Yankee; "I can't stand that, even if you do be my boss."

He made a sudden dive forward and seized Prof. Remington Easy by the collar, and prepared to stand him on his head. [3]

But the fat man was still mad, and he ducked down and seized his opponent by his long legs.

Then each strove to force the other to the bottom of the boat.

"Drat your tarnal hide! I'll wallop you, anyhow, now," exclaimed Haypole.

He let out his full strength, and down went the fat professor, with him on top.

But as they struck the boat gave a lurch, and overboard went both of them.

And the alligator, who was still hovering about the place, opened wide his jaws and swam toward the two struggling forms, who were each striving to see who could shout "Murder!" the loudest.

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## CHAPTER II.

### AN ACCEPTED PROPOSITION.

"Dick this is a pretty wild spot, isn't it?"

"Well, I should say so, Leo; and not only wild, but dangerous, as well."

"Dangerous? Why, you are not afraid of the 'gators, are you?"

"Not exactly; but then there are other things besides alligators to look out for in this region."

The two speakers were young men, eighteen or nineteen years of age.

They were seated upon the trunk of a fallen tree, on a small island, situated at the lower end of Lake Okechobee, Florida.

A few feet from them a negro lad was busily engaged in cooking a haunch of meat over a brightly burning fire.

The first speaker was Leo Malvern, the son of a wealthy St. Augustine merchant, and his companion was his cousin, Dick Vincey, of New York City.

Dick had come to the South to spend the fall and winter with his relatives, and his cousin had proposed that the two should make a trip as far as the Everglades.

Both liked adventure, and the idea of penetrating into that unexplored region pleased them to a great extent.

They procured all necessary supplies needful for such an undertaking, and set out for their destination, after traveling as far as they could by rail.

The young negro who was engaged in preparing their evening meal—for it was near sunset—was a comical-looking personage, to say the least.

He was not as black as some of his race, but the spread of his nose and mouth, and the habitual grin on his face gave him a decidedly humorous appearance.

He had lived at the home of Leo Malvern's folks since his earliest infancy, and was a faithful servant.

This interesting young coon, who is to figure as one of the characters in our story, was known as Lucky.

He never knew any other name, and, consequently, was satisfied.

Like the majority of his people, he loved a banjo, and had brought one along on the trip for the amusement of himself and his two young masters, as he chose to call the boys.

"Is supper ready?" asked Dick, as he noticed that the darky was looking at them.

"Yes, sah; it am all done. Ready for ter dive in, you bet," was the reply, accompanied by a broad grin.

"All right," said Leo Malvern; "we may as well eat, then."

The two boys now made their way to the white cloth spread upon the ground, and prepared to do justice to the tempting meal before them.

The odor of coffee and roasted possum made them hungry, although their appetites were not lacking, by any means.

But just as they were about to attack the tempting morsels, the sounds of an angry discussion were heard in the near vicinity.

Leo and Dick sprang to their feet at a bound and seized their rifles.

Their canoe was but a few feet distant, and it was but the work of a minute to spring into it and push off in the direction the sounds came from.

Up to this moment they had judged they were the only human beings in this out-of-the-way place.

But now it seemed that they were not. The voices were those of two men in a dispute, and the boys determined to catch a glimpse of their owners.

Dick paddled with all his might, while Leo held his rifle ready for instant use, in case those they heard might be enemies.

Rounding a bend, they suddenly came in sight of a small sailboat and two struggling men.

It was the *Maid of the Marsh*, and the two men were Prof. Remington Easy and the Yankee.

While the canoe containing the boys was yet a hundred feet away from the boat, the two men suddenly fell overboard.

Then it was that they first observed the alligator making for them.

As the professor and Martin Haypole arose to the surface and began shouting lustily for help, Leo raised his rifle to his shoulder.

Crack!

As the report rang out the hungry alligator ceased his forward progress and began floundering about in the muddy water.



The bullet had pierced his right eye, and in less than half a minute it expired.

Meanwhile the Yankee succeeded in grasping the gunwale of the *Maid of the Marsh*, and at length drew himself safely on board.

Then he hastily lifted his employer from the water, after which he gazed pantingly in the direction of the approaching canoe.

"Much obliged to yer, boys," said he, addressing our two young friends. "Whichever of ye it was that plugged that ugly critter are a good shot, swan if he ain't!"

Leo and Dick at once perceived that the men were not likely to prove enemies, so they lost no time in urging their canoe to the side of the sailboat.

"Glad to meet you, young gentlemen!" exclaimed the professor, rubbing his hands. "I thought us two were the only ones in this wild place. I am glad that such is not the case, though, I assure you. For had it not been for you, both Haypole and myself would surely have been devoured by that ferocious monster. All on account of his pig-headedness, too."

"Now, see here, professor," put in the Yankee, "I ain't a-goin' ter quarrel with you ag'in under no consideration. This oughter be a lesson for us both. Why, I swan ter Guinea! that little foolishness nearly cost us both our nat'ral lives! Come aboard, boys; I've got some fine, old Medford rum here, an' gosh! if I don't stand treat."

[4]

The smell of the blood from the dead alligator was drawing others to the spot, and both Leo and Dick deemed it advisable to board the boat.

They at once clambered over the gunwale of the *Maid of the Marsh*, and then, tying their canoe to the stern, questioned the professor and Haypole as to where they had come from, and what they were doing there.

In a very matter-of-fact way Prof. Easy related his whole story, word for word, and in conclusion said:

"Now, then, young gentlemen, tell us how we came to find you in this dangerous and unhealthy place."

It did not take Dick Vincey long to do this, and when he had finished all four seemed glad that the meeting had taken place.

"Leo Malvern and Dick Vincey, eh?" said Prof. Easy. "Well, I'll tell you both bluntly that I like you. I am now going to make a proposition to you, which you can accept or decline as you see fit."

"What is it?" asked Leo.

"I would like to have you accompany me on my exploring trip. You are both made of the right sort of material for such an undertaking; and, if my theory proves correct, you will assist me in making one of the greatest discoveries the world has ever known."

"Before we give you an answer I would suggest that you move your boat over to our island, just beyond the bend. We have a darky there who has supper waiting for us, and we are both hungry. Besides, we have a fire burning there, and it is getting dark. I think it will be pleasanter for all hands," observed Leo.

"A good idee," said Haypole. "Here, boys, is ther Medford rum I spoke about; have some?"

His offer was declined, greatly to his astonishment.

"Great haystacks!" he exclaimed, swallowing a big mouthful of the liquor; "this stuff won't hurt ye any more'n apple cider."

The longer Leo and Dick remained in the company of the two men, the better they liked them.

There was something about Prof. Easy that was bound to make him friends wherever he went, and Martin Haypole—well, he was one of those comical, unsophisticated people whom almost everybody likes.

Dick grasped a pole and assisted to shove the boat out into the stream, and thence to the little island, where Lucky, the darky, was anxiously awaiting the return of the two boys.

When he saw the sailboat approaching through the gathering darkness, he uttered a cry of alarm and hastily seized his rifle, which stood against a tree.

"Hold on, Lucky! it is all right," shouted Leo.

"Fo' de Lor' sakes! Whar did youse done git de boat, Massa Leo?" asked the darky.

"We found her out here with two men in her," returned Dick, as the prow of the craft struck the little island.

A line was thrown out, which Lucky quickly tied to a tree, and then the four sprang out upon the ground.

The darky still had the possum and coffee warm, and, as there was enough to go around, all hands did ample justice to the meal.

When supper was finished, Leo and Dick thought over the professor's proposition, and, after a while, concluded to accept it.

The five sat about the fire for a long while, chatting over the matter, and finally, when they began to get drowsy, Leo suggested that they should turn in upon the bottom of the boat, leaving one

man on guard for the first part of the night, and when his time was up, to make a change.

"I think it advisable to do this," said he, "for we can't tell what might happen while we slept."

"A good idea," promptly returned the professor. "Martin will take the first watch."

"I will, sartin," said the Yankee.

"And I'll take second," put in Dick. "To-morrow night some one else can have a show."

This seemed to be satisfactory, so all turned in save Haypole, who, rifle in hand, sat down upon the ground near the boat, with his back to a tree.

He kept the fire burning brightly to keep prowling animals away, and listened to the regular breathing of his companions, who were soon fast asleep.

The hours flitted by.

Martin Haypole's time was nearly up, and he was still seated in the position he had taken on commencing his watch.

Up to this time he had remained wide awake, but now he began dozing.

Suddenly he was brought to his full senses by hearing the crackling of a twig at his elbow.

The Yankee glanced hastily up, and was surprised to see the figure of a man within two feet of him.

Before he could make a move the stranger seized the rifle from his hands, and bounded from the spot with the speed of an antelope.

"Hey!" exclaimed Haypole, springing to his feet and firing his revolver at the retreating form. "Who in thunderation be you, anyhow?"

But a splash told him that the man had taken to the water.

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## CHAPTER III. THE STONE CUBE AND THE OBELISK.

Three weeks later we find Prof. Remington Easy and his exploring party in the very heart of the great Everglades.

Had they not been possessed of a vast amount of pluck and endurance they would never have reached this far.

But to turn back was strictly out of the question to them, and this, coupled with the fact that they were completely fitted out for such an undertaking, was the secret of their success.

As Prof. Easy had expected, they found the central position of the swamp less dangerous to traverse. It seemed to be upon higher and more solid ground, and there was less water, and, consequently, less alligators to look out for.

It is a beautiful morning upon which we find them camped in a very picturesque spot.

The air seems purer than at any time since they entered the recesses of the unexplored region, and all appear happy and contented.

The stranger and his dog have not been seen during all this time, nor has any other human being, outside of their own party.

Each one of the swamp explorers has lost more or less flesh, though it cannot be said that Martin Haypole's loss, in that respect, amounts to much.

Though a native of the Southern clime, Lucky has suffered the most.

[5]

He is worn down to a mere shadow, and had it not been for the professor's store of medicines he would certainly have found a grave in the swamp.

As it is, he has just about pulled through by the "skin of his teeth," as the saying goes.

Leo Malvern has just shot a swamp deer, and they are busily engaged in preparing some of the meat for their breakfast.

"Well, professor," said the young fellow, looking up from his task, "I can't say that we have made any great discovery yet, and I guess we are pretty near the heart of the Everglades."

"I haven't given up yet," was the reply. "Here, examine this and tell me what you think of it."

He produced a block of stone about two or three inches square from his pocket as he spoke.

Leo laid down the knife with which he was skinning the animal he had slain, and took the object in question in his hand.

"I found that lying upon the ground a few minutes ago," went on the professor. "Have any of you lost it?"

He was promptly answered in the negative by all hands.

"Nature certainly never formed that," said Leo. "Ah! there are marks upon it!"

The boy was right. Upon one side of the stone were several cuts, resembling, for all the world, Chinese hieroglyphics.

"That's very strange," remarked Dick.

"We are on the eve of a great discovery—mark my words, gentlemen," said the professor, in a manner of excitement.

"I don't see why," ventured the Yankee.

"You don't? How do you suppose this thing came here, then?"

"Somebody has been here afore, most likely."

"That's it, exactly; somebody has been here before, and those who have must certainly live in this neighborhood. Let us look about and see if we can find anything more."

"Humph!" retorted Haypole; "suppose we do find something. What'll it amount to, anyhow?"

No one vouchsafed a reply, and leaving Lucky to get the morning meal ready, Leo, Dick and the professor began carefully searching about the ground.

At length the Yankee became interested, and joined them.

But they looked about the spot where the professor had found the little cube for full half an hour, and not another thing could they find that seemed out of the way in the place.

"Well," observed Dick, as they were called to breakfast, "I would keep the cube, professor, if I were you, and be very careful not to lose it."

"Oh! you may rest assured that I will," was the reply.

After the remains of the breakfast were cleared away, Leo arose to his feet and signified his intention of climbing a tree to see how the land lay.

Selecting a good, tall one, which was at the same time easy to climb, he went up.

The tree was nearly a hundred feet high, and the boy did not pause until he reached the top.

Then he prepared to take in the surrounding country.

The sun, which seldom found its way to the ground in the swamp, was shining brightly all around him, and Leo felt his spirits rise as if by magic.

"This is fine," he muttered to himself; "but I can't see much besides tree tops and cane brakes, after all. But it is worth ten dollars to have the sun shine on you five minutes like this. Ah, by George!"

He had just turned his gaze in a southerly direction as the words left his lips.

No wonder he uttered the exclamation.

Leo Malvern was looking upon something besides trees, cane brakes and pools of muddy water now.

About a mile from the tree in which he was perched he plainly saw a stone obelisk, which looked to be in the neighborhood of forty feet high.

Now, Leo knew this could not have grown there; so, locating the exact direction, he began descending the tree to notify his companions of the important discovery he had made.

"Hurrah!" he shouted, when he reached the ground. "I've made the greatest discovery yet!"

"What is it?" exclaimed the professor, excitedly.

"There is a stone pillar, or something, about a mile south of us."

"What!"

"Exactly what I say. Come on; we will go to it."

Even Haypole became very much excited, and he hurried along after Leo as fast as any of his companions.

"I shan't be astonished at anything we may find," said Prof. Easy. "Hundreds of years ago it was supposed that a fountain of youth existed somewhere in these parts; and if that does not, I am sure something else equally as wonderful does."

They had probably made half the distance to the obelisk, when the baying of a dog suddenly came to their ears.

"What in thunderation is that?" exclaimed the Yankee.

"It is a dog, if I am not mistaken," replied Leo. "Be cautious, all hands, there is no use in our running headlong into danger."

With their weapons ready for instant use, they hurried cautiously ahead through the tangled mazes of the swamp.

They did not hear the dog bark again, though they listened attentively for it.

In a few minutes they came in sight of the obelisk that had attracted Leo's attention from the top of the tree.

It seemed to be very ancient in appearance, for in many places pieces were chipped from it.

Yet it stood as erect as it had when placed there.

A tangled mass of vines clung to it, half hiding the lower part of it.

After peering carefully about, to make sure that there was no one around, our friends advanced toward the huge monument of stone.

It was a difficult matter to reach its base, for so dense was the undergrowth that the Yankee had to unsling the ax from his back and cut their way through.

At frequent intervals they came to a halt and listened, but not the least sound could they hear, save the noise they made themselves.

"It is rather queer where that dog went to," said Dick.

"That's so," replied his cousin, shaking his head.

"Somethin' funny'll happen putty soon—see if it don't," put in Haypole. "I wouldn't be much surprised to see ther 'old boy' jump outer that big gravestone, an' put for us. I'll be ding-wizzened! if I don't begin ter feel squeamish." [6]

"Come; let us force our way through these vines and get at the base of the obelisk," spoke up the professor, pushing his way forward.

A few minutes later all five stood at the foot of the immense shaft, panting and sweating from their exertions.

As they tore the vines aside, they saw it was covered, at regular intervals, with square bits of stone, exactly like the one found by Prof. Easy.

"Ah!" exclaimed the learned man, as he saw this; "this cube I found evidently came from here. Let us see if we can find where it belongs."

Leo and Dick quickly produced their knives and began cutting away the vines, while the professor put on his glasses, preparatory to making the examination.

They cleared away all around the base, which was about eighteen feet square, and just as they finished, Dick's eye lit upon one of the places where a cube was missing.

"Here is the spot," said he. "Now, professor, let's see if the one you have fits here."

The professor stepped forward and produced the cube from his pocket.

He was just about to place it in the opening when a rifle shot rang out close at hand, followed by the baying of a dog.

This so startled the man of science that he made an involuntary move forward, thrusting the cube, as he did so, squarely into the hole.

Almost instantly a hidden door flew noiselessly open, revealing a flight of stone steps, leading downward into the bowels of the earth.

A simultaneous cry of surprise left the lips of the swamp explorers as this remarkable occurrence took place.

They gazed into the opening for the space of a minute and no one spoke a word.

But suddenly they were called to their senses by hearing a wild cry at their very elbow.

The next moment a man and a dog rushed through their midst and sprang down the stairway in the base of the obelisk.

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## CHAPTER IV. WHERE THE STAIRS LED TO.

Leo Malvern caught but a fleeting glance at the man and dog as they rushed down the stairs in the base of the obelisk.

But what was the stranger fleeing from?

The swamp explorers glanced around them to find out.

The next moment they learned to their full satisfaction.

In the little clearing, a few yards beyond them, a balloon suddenly settled.

There was but one occupant of the basket, or car, and he was a stern-visaged man of perhaps forty-two.

It was evident that he had not yet seen our friends, for, as the balloon, which was now about half collapsed, settled upon the earth, he sprang from the basket and rushed in the direction taken by the man and dog.

A sudden thought came in Dick Vincey's head.

"Hide—quick!" he whispered to his companions. "He will most likely enter the opening and go on down."

In the twinkling of an eye all hands sprang to the other side of the obelisk and concealed themselves in a thicket.

They were not a moment too soon. The next instant the man who had so strangely landed in that wild spot rushed up to the base of the obelisk and came to an abrupt halt.

An exclamation of surprise left his lips as he beheld the opening in the stone shaft.

"By heavens!" he exclaimed, loud enough for the swamp explorers to hear; "Reginald Lacy, you shall not escape me, even if I have to follow you into the very center of the earth!"

Then he boldly entered the doorway and began descending the stone steps.

Five minutes later our friends made their way to the entrance again and listened for some sound.

But they could hear nothing.

"I am going to make a suggestion," suddenly said Leo.

"What is it?" asked his cousin.

"Let us go down the steps and see what has become of those who have already gone down."

"Agreed!" exclaimed the professor, who was ready for anything.

"Oh! for de good Lor' sakes! don't go down dere. De debbil am dere, suah!" whined Lucky, in a frightened manner.

"Keep still, coon, and don't git skeered. We may as well go as far and see as much as we kin, since we have got ter this dod-rotted country. I, for one, are satisfied to go down them steps."

The Yankee gave a contemptuous glance at the darky as he spoke, and then nodded for Leo to lead on.

Dick had not passed his opinion on the question yet, but that he was perfectly willing need scarcely be said.

But at the same time it occurred to him that they ought to take some sort of a light with them.

They had left their supplies at the point where they had been compelled to use the ax in the thicket.

Dick hastened to the spot and got a small lantern, which was all that was left of three that they had brought along with them.

When he reached the obelisk again his companions had already entered the doorway, and were waiting for him on the steps.

It was but the work of a moment to strike a match and light the lantern; and then the boy followed them down into the place beyond.

Down they went, for at least a hundred steps, and the end of the flight was not reached yet.

Another hundred, and still it appeared the same.

"I wonder how many miles we have got ter go afore we git ter ther bottom?" said the Yankee.

"Have patience, Martin," replied Prof. Easy. "We are on the eve of a great discovery—mark my word for it!"

"Humph! I heerd ye say that same thing a good many times before. But, by the great boots in ther haymow, I stepped on somethin' alive jist then!"

"A ground hog!" exclaimed Dick, holding up the lantern. "How in thunder did it ever get there, I wonder?"

"If it can live in here, I am sure we can a little longer. Let us proceed," returned the professor,

quietly.

Once more they began descending the steps.

During all this time they had not heard the least sound from those who had preceded them.

Probably one hundred and fifty steps more were descended, and then they reached a wide passage.

"Come," said Leo, leading the way. "We have struck level traveling at last."

[7]

The swamp explorers had not proceeded over three hundred yards, before they saw daylight ahead.

It seemed rather strange that it should be daylight, but it was, nevertheless.

With all possible speed they hastened along the passage.

Two hundred yards more and a wonderful sight met their gaze.

They were emerging into a vast tract of country many feet below the earth's crust.

In front of them was the beginning of a long crack, which extended a couple of miles or more, and all along the edges of this the water streamed down in the form of a cascade of unlimited extent.

The sunlight came in through the crack, which was probably a quarter of a mile in width, and lighted up the place.

All sorts of vegetation flourished on the place beneath the opening above; but beyond this our friends could perceive nothing on account of the falling water and the mist arising from the streams in which it fell.

"Wonderful!" exclaimed the professor.

"Darned if it ain't wonderful," assented Haypole.

"Who ever imagined that such a place as this existed?" said Leo.

"We are now under the great Everglades of Florida. It remains for us to find out what sort of place it is," spoke up Dick Vincey.

"I agree with you there," returned Prof. Easy. "Come, let us be moving. It is strange what has become of the man and dog and their pursuer."

They stepped off to the left, and kept walking until they emerged from the mist, which seemed to settle back on either side of the opening.

As they left it behind them they saw that only a sort of twilight prevailed in and about the underground place.

Then a startling thing occurred.

A body of men suddenly appeared from the numerous galleries, to be seen on their left, and rushed toward them.

There must have been fully a hundred of them, and all were attired in long gowns of some dark-colored material, and were barefooted and without any head covering.

The strange horde had the appearance of Turks, both in manner and looks.

The moment Leo and Dick beheld them, they placed their rifles to their shoulders.

Their action was quickly followed by their companions, and then Leo exclaimed:

"Halt! We mean you no harm!"

But the command was entirely disregarded. The crowd of men rushed at them with a quicker pace, if possible, brandishing spears and bows and arrows.

When within about fifty feet of the intruders, they came to a sudden halt and sent a flight of arrows at them.

One of these found lodgment in the fleshy part of Martin Haypole's leg, and another went through the crown of the professor's hat.

Leo and Dick thought it high time for them to act.

Dropping to their knees, they began firing into the ranks of the queerly attired strangers.

Crack! crack!

The reports rang out in rapid succession, and at almost every shot a man fell.

At first they seemed to be staggered and amazed, but they soon rallied and answered the rifle shots, by another flight of arrows.

It now behooved our friends to look for a place of cover.

A few yards distant was the mouth of a gallery or passage, and at the command of Leo Malvern they rushed for this with all possible speed.

The inhabitants of the underground place came after them with all their might, uttering, for the first time, loud yells of triumph.

"Hurry up!" cried Dick; "if we can reach the mouth of that passage we'll give 'em fits."

The arrows kept flying all around them, and Lucky, the darky, was wounded in the arm.

A minute more and the spot was reached in safety.

“Now!” exclaimed Leo, “give it to them! Everybody fire as fast as he can.”

The next instant five rifles began sending a veritable hailstorm of bullets.

Down went seven or eight of the savage barbarians, as the professor chose to term them, and several more began hopping about like mad from the wounds they had received.

Leo expected to see them turn and flee now, since he and his companions had reached a place where they could most likely hold their own.

But no! They kept on shooting their arrows, which, by the way, did our friends not the least bit of harm, as they had crouched behind a huge boulder.

But in spite of the determined stand our friends made, they were doomed to defeat.

Suddenly they heard a pattering of feet behind them, and, on turning, beheld a crowd of the savages coming through the passage.

They were between two fires!

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## CHAPTER V. THE DANCE OF DEATH.

"God help us!" exclaimed Prof. Easy, as he saw the strange inhabitants of the underground place rushing for them from both front and rear.

But "God helps those who help themselves," and both Leo Malvern and Dick Vincey were fully aware of this. They made up their minds that they would not be killed or captured until they had used every effort to drive away their enemies.

Brave, young fellows! But what could they hope to accomplish against such fearful odds?

Martin Haypole was the only man they had to stick to them now, as both the professor and Lucky at once threw down their weapons when they observed the horde approaching through the passage.

"Keep on firing!" shouted Leo, "and when they close on us use your revolvers."

"No—no!" replied the professor; "let us surrender. It is the best thing to do, I think."

"Never!" exclaimed Dick, and his reply was echoed by his cousin and the intrepid Yankee.

Nearer approached the swarming savages, and presently our friends were hemmed in from all possible means of escape.

It seemed that every man that fell had two or three to take his place.

At length there was a combined rush from all quarters, and the swamp explorers were forced to the ground and made prisoners. [8]

This caused their hopes to rise a trifle.

They were not to be killed at present, and that was one consoling thought.

Their captors seemed to be very gleeful over the fact of having made them prisoners, and at once proceeded to bind their arms behind them, after having first divested them of their weapons.

Then the five swamp explorers were lifted to their feet in their deplorable condition.

"I wonder what in thunderation the scamps are a-goin' ter do with us," observed the Yankee.

"The Lord only knows," groaned Prof. Easy, who now was thoroughly frightened.

"We will have to trust to luck," said Leo.

"We is done gwine ter be killed—'deed we is!" exclaimed Lucky, in a despondent tone.

"Wait until you are sure of that before you say it again," replied Dick.

Then turning to the crowd surrounding them, he continued:

"Come! what are you standing there for? Why don't you take us to the place you intend to, and have done with it?"

It seemed that he was understood, for without any further ado two men seized each of the captives, and the whole crowd started off down the passage.

It was rather dark in the tunnel-like place, and when they had traversed about three hundred yards, our friends were unable to see any of their surroundings.

But in a very few minutes they saw light ahead of them, and objects again became distinguishable.

A cry of wonder broke from the lips of the five as they were marched out into the light. If they had been surprised when they first entered the underground place, they were even more than surprised now.

They found themselves in a natural cave of many acres in extent, in which was a small village of stone huts.

The queerest thing about the place was that the top of the cave—if cave it could really be called—was entirely open in a circle of six or seven hundred yards in diameter. This admitted both light and rain, and hence it was that an unlimited supply of vegetation could be seen about.

The opening above was many feet from the ground upon which the stone huts were built, and there was no possible means of getting to the level ground above without the aid of an immense ladder.

"Well, this jist beats the Jews!" ejaculated Haypole. "This place looks like a big watermelon hollered out and one of ther ends cut off. I think if I knowed that song called 'Down in a Coal Mine,' I'd sing it."

The prisoners were led along until they came to the largest building visible to them, and there a halt was called.

There were no doors to any of the huts, which showed that the inhabitants were not afraid of being robbed by their neighbors. The crowd who had charge of our friends faced the main doorway of the building they had halted in front of, and then clapped their hands.

Almost immediately a rustle was heard, and the figure of a female came out.

As soon as she appeared every person in sight, save the five captives, dropped to their knees and

turned their faces to the ground.

With a look of wonderment upon their faces the swamp explorers eyed the girl—for she did not look to be over eighteen at the most—and marveled at her rare beauty.

She was attired in a trailing, white gown of some gauzy material, and her face was partly concealed by a fold of the same, which was thrown around her shoulders and across her mouth.

The look from her dazzling bright eyes showed that she was surprised at seeing the strangers.

But only for an instant did her gaze rest upon them.

Turning quickly to those who had brought them there, she clapped her hands three times.

All arose to their feet and saluted her.

Then, to the surprise of Prof. Easy, one of the men stepped forward and began addressing the girl in Spanish.

“Oh, queen,” said he, “here are five more people who have dared find their way into the land of Hez. What shall be their doom? Shall they be confined in the magic chamber with the other prisoner to witness the dance of death, or shall they be slaughtered at once?”

“Conduct them to the magic chamber,” said the queen, with an imperious wave of her hand.

She turned to enter the building, when the professor, who could speak Spanish fluently, exclaimed:

“Most gracious queen, listen a moment, please!”

At this the girl turned as if she had been stung, and the fold of her garment, becoming loosened, fell from her face, revealing the most beautiful countenance our friends had ever looked upon, or even dreamed of.

“Heavens!” thought Dick Vincey, “what a beautiful creature.”

The queen had fixed her eyes upon the face of the professor.

“Were you addressing me, sir?” she demanded.

“I was, oh, queen,” he returned. “I would like to say, in behalf of my companions and myself, that if we did wrong in coming to this place, we were not aware of it. Surely you will not condemn us to death for making such a mistake.”

“Enough! Away with them to the magic chamber, and let them witness the dance of death.”

With these words she swept gracefully into the house, and the Hezzians, as we shall now call the natives, seized the prisoners and led them from the spot.

None of the party, save Prof. Easy, could understand any other language than their own, and they were all very curious as to what was going to be done with them.

“What did she say when you spoke to her, professor?” asked Leo.

“She has sentenced us to be shut up in a place called the magic chamber, where there is now a captive already, and witness the dance of death. What will follow I am not prepared to say. That beautiful but hard-hearted creature is the queen of this strange country, and what she says seems to be law.”

“She don’t look as though she would have us killed,” observed Haypole. “I seen her castin’ sheep’s-eyes at Dick while we was a-standin’ there. Ther only thing that’ll save us is for him ter make love to her.”

“I’d do that willingly enough, if I thought it would save our lives,” said Dick.

Leo and the Yankee laughed in spite of their situation.

It struck them that Dick would be glad to pay his attentions to the beautiful queen, even if it would not benefit them.

But there was no time for further conversation now. The Hezzians had halted at what appeared to be the extreme end of the cave. [9]

Half a dozen of them used their combined efforts to roll a rock aside, which revealed a small opening.

Into this they filed, taking our friends with them.

It was dark as pitch inside, but at a word from one of the men a light suddenly appeared.

How it came so quickly our friends were at first at a loss to understand, but in a few seconds it was made plain to them.

As their eyes became accustomed to the ghostly glare the light made, they began looking around them.

They found that the place into which they had been conducted was a cave of about one hundred feet square.

In the center, upon the floor, a man attired in the habiliments of civilization sat, with his arms bound behind him.

A single glance sufficed to show the swamp explorers that it was the man who had left the balloon and started down the stairs in quest of the one with the dog.

He looked up when he saw men of his own appearance approaching, and a smile lit up his countenance.

The five prisoners were at once placed at the side of this man, and then those who had brought them thither immediately left the cave.

Then it was that they first saw what caused the light.

A girl, who was almost as beautiful as the queen herself, had entered through a passage at the other side of the cave at about the same time they had.

She carried a blazing torch, which she waved to and fro in a weird sort of fashion.

A heavy band of metal was about her neck, and upon her wrists bracelets glittered and flashed in the rays of light.

She began walking in a circle about the six prisoners.

When she had made the circuit five times, a low, grinding music struck up from some unseen place near by.

Almost instantly a slight commotion was heard, and fully forty girls, attired the same as the first, entered the cave.

Each one carried a lighted torch, and the flame of each shed forth a light of different hue.

As soon as they had placed themselves in position, the hidden music changed to a quick air, and they began to dance in a wild, graceful sort of way.

For five minutes the girls kept up the dance, and then a change occurred.

An ominous, rattling sound was heard, and a score of human skeletons dropped from above and stood upright upon the ground.

Then the dance began in earnest, the skeletons joining in, it seemed.

The girls struck up a chant in time with the music, which had again changed, and began gliding about, right and left, with their grewsome partners.

Lucky, the darky, whose nerves were not overstrong, fainted away, while the rest of the party felt an icy chill gliding down their backs.

Probably the least interested one in the party was the man who had been in the cave when our friends entered.

He gazed at the scene with a look of indifference on his face, and even smiled when the girls grasped the hideous relics of humanity about their fleshless waists and whirled them around.

Round and round spun the dancers, oftentimes nearly stumbling over the captives upon the floor.

Suddenly one of the fair dancers got tangled up with her "partner," and stumbled headlong over Leo.

As she did so, the boy heard a metallic ring close beside him.

As soon as she arose to her feet and glided away, he saw a knife lying upon the ground.

Moving slightly, he kicked Dick gently.

"What's up?" asked his cousin, taking his eyes from the curious scene for a moment.

"I have found a knife," was the whispered reply. "I am going to get hold of it with my teeth and cut your hands loose."

Rolling over on his stomach, he seized the knife by the handle in a strong grip between his teeth.

Dick turned so his back was toward Leo, and then the boy began sawing away at the bonds which held his hands together.

It was a difficult job, but Leo was plucky, and presently he was rewarded by seeing his cousin's hands free.

Then it was but the work of a moment for Dick to liberate him.

"Now," said Leo, "cut the rest free."

Just as he was about to do so, a crowd of hideous-appearing men, attired in the skins of various animals, rushed in the cave, and seizing about half of the dancing girls, carried them screaming from the spot.

Then the dance ceased as if by magic.

There was now but one girl left to each skeleton, and these placed their fair, white arms about the necks of the horrible objects.

The music now clashed into a sound like the shriek of a doomed soul, and then both girls and skeletons began to rise slowly in the air.

"By heavens!" exclaimed Leo, springing to his feet; "I am going to know the cause of some of this humbug."

Springing forward, he seized one of the girls about the waist and gave a tug downward.

Then something snapped above them, and down came the girl, bringing the skeleton with her, knocking the daring boy flat upon his back.



## CHAPTER VI.

### "ESTO PERPETUA."

Leo Malvern sprang to his feet, and seized the girl by the shoulders.

"Utter a single cry and I will kill you!" he exclaimed.

She seemed to understand him, for she did not make the least effort to cry out.

"Do you understand what I say?" he asked.

"I do!" was the reply, in fair English.

"Then arise to your feet and lead us from this place."

"Will you protect me if I get into trouble?"

"I will—with my life!"

"Then be it so. Come!"

The torch which the girl had possessed was still smoldering upon the floor, and quickly stamping this out, she seized Leo by the arm, and directed the rest to catch hold of him for a guide.

Then she started swiftly across the cave and entered the mouth of a passage.

Along a dark, narrow passage they made their way, until a large, vaultlike chamber was reached.

Here the girl came to a halt, and, placing her hand upon the shoulder of Leo, said:

[10]

"I have brought you to the burial place of our people. You will be safe here, for there are hundreds of nooks and niches to conceal yourselves in. I will go back and endeavor to find your weapons for you."

"But," said Leo, "I promised to protect you if you got into trouble. How am I to do so if you leave us?"

"It matters not; come a few paces this way; I would say something that is for your ears alone."

The boy allowed her to lead him a few yards from his companions.

Then the beautiful girl seized him by the hands, and exclaimed:

"Let me tell you what caused me to break the laws of Hez and lead you from the magic chamber. I saw your face pictured in a dream a few nights ago, and the dream led me to believe that I was looking upon the face of my future lord and master. It was so real, that when I saw you, when you bade me rise to my feet after pulling me down with the skeleton, that I could not refuse to aid you. I believe in dreams, do you not?"

"Well—er—sometimes," replied Leo, completely staggered at the girl's speech.

"I knew you did. Then listen: I swear to protect you and your friends as long as you remain in the land of Hez. Now, tell me your name, my future lord and master."

"Leo Malvern."

"'Tis well. I shall ever remember it. Mine is Azurma. I am a member of the royal family."

The girl kissed his hand fervently and then left the spot, while Leo groped his way to the side of his companions, to whom he related what had occurred.

Prof. Easy then informed Philander Owens as to who he and his companions were, and why they had chosen to brave the dangers of the great swamp, after which all hands lapsed into silence.

Finally Dick broke it by exclaiming:

"I don't see any use of our remaining in this dark place until that girl comes back. I, for one, am going back into the place called the magic chamber and light a torch and see what it is like in there."

"Hold on!" exclaimed the professor. "Haven't you already seen that it does not pay to be rash? Just have a little patience and sit down and wait."

"I am sorry, but I can't comply with your request," returned the adventurous boy. "I am deeply interested in the cave where the dance of death took place. Come on; who is going with me?"

"Gosh hang it!" exclaimed Haypole; "I'll go."

"Better wait, Dick," said Leo, who was anxious to be there when Azurma came back.

"Oh, that's all right, old fellow. We won't run into any danger. We'll see you later."

With these words, Dick and the Yankee felt their way along until they came to the passage leading from the vault.

Having once found it, they boldly entered and walked softly along.

They kept on for fully five minutes, and then it occurred to Dick that they ought to have entered the magic chamber by this time.

He produced a match from his pocket and struck it.

To his astonishment he found himself in a small, open square, with four passages branching off in different directions.

By the flickering light of the match in his companion's hand the Yankee saw a torch lying upon the floor.

Stooping down, he picked it up and lighted it.

"Now, I guess we will be able to find our way," said he.

"I guess so. Ah! what have we here?" exclaimed Dick, pointing to a smooth rock, upon which were several inscriptions.

Haypole held the torch nearer, and they saw a long column of names engraved upon the rock.

But they were Spanish, and they failed to make them out.

Beneath them was a hand with the index finger pointing to a passage at their right.

"This must be the way out, Martin," said Dick. "Come on; we will follow this passage."

"Good enough!" returned the Yankee, and they at once set out.

But they soon found that the passage went downward instead of on a level, as the one they had before traversed.

However, they did not turn back; the hand upon the rock pointed that way, and both were anxious to see what it meant.

Down they went for fully fifteen minutes, and then they observed a bright light ahead of them.

But it was not the light of day that they saw; it was a sort of pale, greenish tint.

In a few minutes they emerged into a vast chamber of a conical shape, which seemed to be lighted by electricity, though where the seat of the light was located they could not tell.

In the center of the conical-shaped cavern was a pool of crystal water, from which a sparkling fountain shot upward, sending a myriad of glistening drops scattering through space.

In the curious light that prevailed the fountain resembled a monster Roman candle, and the two who gazed upon the scene for the first time were entranced at the wonderful spectacle.

The pool of water rested in a natural basin of rock, and a slanting floor of white stone stretched out from its edges.

After gazing at the fountain for a while, Dick led the way to the edge of the pool.

Here, for the first time, he noticed a tablet of stone which leaned against a boulder.

The boy gave a start and pointed to it, at the same time calling his companion's attention.

Upon the tablet was engraved a hand, like the one they had seen at the point where the four passages met, and the index finger pointed directly into the pool of sparkling water.

Beneath the hand was the rough delineation of a rose in full bloom, and under all were the words:

"ESTO PERPETUA."

Dick's small acquaintance with Latin told him that *esto perpetua* meant: "Let it be perpetual," and he wondered what it could all mean.

While he was studying over the subject, a slight noise was heard in the direction they came from.

Instinctively he clutched the Yankee by the sleeve, and both dropped to the ground behind the boulder against which the tablet rested. [11]

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## CHAPTER VII.

### THE LEGEND OF HEZ.

Dick and the Yankee had no sooner sought seclusion behind the boulder than a man of ragged and unkempt appearance came from the mouth of the passage with a dog at his side.

Both gave a violent start of surprise.

It was the man and dog who had entered the base of the obelisk before them.

The stranger still carried a rifle, and as Haypole saw this he clutched his companion by the shoulder and exclaimed, in a low tone:

"Ther infernal skunk has got my rifle! It sartainly is he who stole it that night in th' swamp."

"Never mind," whispered Dick. "Let's watch him and see what he is up to."

The man, who has been spoken of as Reginald Lacy, paused near the edge of the pool and looked at his surroundings with an air of extreme surprise.

He patted the dog upon the head in an affectionate way and said:

"Well, Jupiter, we have struck a wonderful country. But we are not safe, old fellow—not by any means. Owens is still upon our track, and he evidently means business. But he shall never kill me, Jupiter; I may deserve it, but I will never die at his hands."

The dog wagged his tail and crouched at his master's feet, who, surveying the clear water before him, went on:

"That water looks cool and tempting; I believe I will take a bath."

With that Reginald Lacy began removing his tattered garments, preparatory to taking a plunge in the crystal pool.

In a very short time he was ready, and, walking down to the edge of the pool, he placed his hand in the water to test its temperature.

It must have been perfectly satisfactory, for without further hesitation he plunged in.

The dog gazed at his master for a moment and then followed suit.

The effect upon the man and dog seemed to be startling.

They sported about in the crystal water, apparently imbued with new life and strength.

"This is glorious!" Dick and the Yankee heard the man say, as he stood neck deep in the water under the spray of the fountain.

The dog answered with yelps of delight as he swam swiftly about and sported to his heart's content.

"By Jove!" whispered Dick, to his companion, "the water does look inviting; it wouldn't be a bad idea for us to take a swim."

"I guess I don't want any of it," returned the Yankee. "That dod-rotted water don't look nat'ral to my eyes. Look at that feller; he seems ter be gittin' crazy—gosh! if he don't!"

Reginald Lacy was acting rather queer for a man! He was cutting up all sorts of boyish antics and laughing like mad.

Presently he waded ashore, and, after washing the rags he had worn, put them on wet, as they were, and entered the passage again, calling the dog after him.

As soon as they had disappeared from view, Dick and Haypole came from behind the boulder.

"Let's follow him, Martin," said Dick; "maybe he knows the way out of this place."

"All right," returned the Yankee. "It are about time we went back to ther place whar we left the professor an' ther rest, anyhow."

Picking up the torch, which they had thrown upon the ground when they first entered the wonderful cavern, Dick lighted it, and they started up the passage after Reginald Lacy and his dog.

But they could neither see nor hear any signs of them as they trudged along, and at length, when they reached the spot where the four passages met, they were forced to acknowledge that he had eluded them in some unexplained manner.

"Well, what in thunder will we do now?" asked the Yankee, as he took a seat upon the ground.

"Do?" replied the boy. "Why, go on through one of the passages until we find our companions. Let's make a bee line through the one to our left."

"All right; I'm with you."

With Dick in the lead, they started swiftly along the passage.

Presently they heard the sounds of approaching footsteps.

"Somebody coming ter look fer us, I'll bet a dollar," remarked Haypole.

"I shouldn't wonder. What shall we do—go on and meet whoever it is, or wait till they come up?"

"Let's wait."

"All right," and leaning against the rocky wall, Dick listened to the sounds which were coming nearer every second.

They soon perceived a light, and the next minute saw a number of the men of Hez approaching, carrying torches.

That our two friends were perceived at the same time was plainly evident, for the strangely attired men uttered exclamations of pleasure, and motioned the pair not to be afraid.

At the same time one of their number called out, in good English:

"Fear not, my friends. No harm shall befall you. We have come in search of you, at the queen's order. Your friends and companions are safe and sound, and await you."

"Who in thunder are you?" asked Haypole, stepping forward.

"I am an American, like yourself. But, come! There is no time for parleying now. Follow us, and you will be safe."

"Lead on!" exclaimed Dick Vincey. "I am glad the queen wants us; I can have another look at her handsome face."

Away went the men with Dick and Haypole in their midst, through various passages and caves, until finally they came in sight of the village of stone buildings.

It did not take the two returned wanderers long to observe Leo and the professor standing in front of one of the houses, and they were now satisfied that no harm would befall them.

Leo and Prof. Easy rushed forward to meet them, and while they were talking together the man in charge of the searching party went to report to Queen Olive. [12]

"Where have you fellows been?" asked Leo, shaking his cousin's hand.

"To the queerest and most beautiful spot mortal eyes ever rested upon," replied Dick.

And then he proceeded to relate where he and the Yankee had been, and what they had seen.

"Wonderful!" exclaimed the professor; and then turning to the man who spoke English in the crowd of Hezzians who had brought the two lost ones back, he said:

"Do you know anything of this pool and fountain, my man?"

"I do," was the reply; "it is the identical fountain Ponce de Leon was in search of so many years ago. If you want to learn all about it, converse with Roderique de Amilo, the one who discovered it. There he is over there in front of his dwelling."

"Is that Roderique de Amilo?" asked Leo. "Why, he is crazy, is he not?"

"No; anything but crazy, as you will find when you become better acquainted with him. He is the discoverer of the magic fountain and the founder of this race.

"Yes," went on the man, seating himself upon a rock; "I may as well tell you all about it now as any other time, since you are all to be citizens of Hez in the future. It is a queer story, and I have not said that I believe it.

"To begin, my name is Andrew Jones; I am from Kentucky, and have no relatives living save my wife, who is a native of this place. I came here a little over a year ago, and expect to stay here as long as I live.

"Roderique de Amilo is the founder of this race, though he seldom admits it. He discovered this underground country in the year 1509, by being washed over the falls into the river you passed on entering here.

"While here he discovered the fountain you speak of, and feeling satisfied that it was the one he was in search of, he bathed in it, the result being that he attained perpetual youth.

"Then it dawned upon him that he should have a helpmate; so one day he went to the edge of the pool and prayed for a wife, and lo! before his prayer was finished there arose from the crystal water the most beautiful woman man had ever seen!

"Well, to make a long story short, De Amilo took her for his wife, and from them came these people, who number about three hundred, outside of those who came here after.

"You have the legend just as everybody who comes here gets it. You may draw your own conclusions from it, as I have done."

"Well, I don't believe it," said Haypole, bluntly.

Andrew Jones laughed.

"Few do," said he; "and none seem to care much."

"But how about the beautiful woman who came from the pool in such a mysterious manner?" said Dick. "Surely that was not Queen Olive?"

"Oh, no!" replied Jones; "I forgot to tell you about her. She visited the pool one day after she had lived here in the neighborhood of a hundred years, and concluded to bathe in its clear waters. The moment she entered it she disappeared, and has never been heard of since."

"That yarn would make a first-class fairy story for little children," said Leo, laughing. "But, anyhow, I shan't dispute it. Ah! here comes the queen's messenger after Dick and Martin, I



suppose. Go on, fellows, and take the iron-clad oath of allegiance to Hez.”

Sure enough, Dick and the Yankee were led to the queen’s house, and while they were gone Leo and the rest busied themselves in cleaning their weapons, which Roderique de Amilo had so kindly returned to them.

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## CHAPTER VIII.

### DICK VINCEY AND THE QUEEN.

Queen Olive stood in the doorway of the handsomely furnished stone building, called the palace, when Dick and the Yankee were brought up.

With a wave of her hand she ordered the Hezzians to retire, and then motioned the two to follow her inside.

Dick noticed that the beautiful queen eyed him with a more than ordinary look, and he was not a little puzzled over it.

But he was destined to know what it meant ere long. Martin Haypole had mentioned in a joke that the queen of Hez had fallen in love with the good-looking Dick Vincey, and this was indeed the case.

The graceful creature led them to the table on which rested the strip of parchment containing the signatures of those who had signed the agreement to stay in the land of Hez forever.

Dick glanced over these, and saw the names of Leo and the rest of his companions, and, consequently, he had little hesitation in taking the oath.

"Now, then," observed Queen Olive, "you may retire to the company of your friends; I would speak a few words in private to this young man."

The Yankee at once took his departure, and the fair ruler of Hez led Dick into a handsomely furnished apartment.

She motioned him to a seat on a divan of dyed skins, and then blew a tiny whistle attached to one of her bracelets.

Almost immediately a servant appeared and bowed to the floor.

The queen addressed her in Spanish for a moment, and she retired, only to return five minutes later with a stone tray containing a choice repast, the sight of which made Dick's mouth water.

"You are hungry, I know—appease your appetite."

He did not wait for a second invitation, but at once proceeded to eat, all the while wondering why it was that he was treated in such a royal manner.

When he had satisfied his appetite the queen again blew her whistle, and the servant returned, bringing in a decanter and a couple of drinking vessels.

She then took the tray and retired.

"Now, then," said her majesty, as she poured some amber-colored liquid from the decanter, "to begin with, I want you to tell me your name."

This Dick promptly did, and then, following the example of his fair hostess, placed the beverage she had poured from the decanter to his lips.

It had such a peculiar, exhilarating taste that he drained the cup at a single gulp.

Of all the wines he had ever drunk, that certainly was the best.

That it was intoxicating, he knew, for the moment he had swallowed it a sort of dreamy feeling of the deepest content came over him, and he settled back upon the divan and gazed into the face of the lovely creature before him with a listless smile upon his countenance. [13]

"Do you think you will ever want to leave this land?" asked Queen Olive, as she took a seat before him.

"No," returned Dick; "never—as long as you remain here."

Instead of becoming offended at this speech, a look of pleasure came over her face.

"Why? Am I more beautiful than the ladies of your own country?" she asked.

"Yes—a thousand times yes!"

"Do you like me?"

This question staggered the boy, and he involuntarily half arose to his feet.

Did he like her! What a question for such a beautiful creature to ask him! And she a queen, too!

"Why, what do you mean?" he stammered, in reply.

"I mean just this: I have selected you as the man to be my future husband. It was decreed long ago that no queen who ruled the land of Hez should ever marry, unless her husband be a man who was not a native of the place. Thus far such has happened regularly, there always being a stranger to arrive here at about the right time. But this time more than one came, and out of the number I have chosen you."

"But," interposed Dick, who had settled back upon the divan again, and returned to his half-listless condition, "why should you choose me—a complete stranger, and entirely unknown to you?"

"Because I love you!"

"Well, you see, oh, queen, while you have long considered the question of marriage, I have never

given the subject a thought until now. You must give me time to study over the question."

"You may have as much time as you desire," she said; "that is, if you answer one question to my satisfaction."

"What is that question, oh, queen?"

"Don't address me by that title—call me Olive," she exclaimed, rising and laying her hand upon his shoulder. "The question I would ask is, Do you love me?"

For the space of a minute a deep silence reigned, and then Dick Vincey spoke:

"I do, Olive."

He stretched forth his arms as if to fold her to his bosom, but she waved him back with a pleased laugh.

"I am glad," was all she said. And then she motioned him to retire to the companionship of his friends.

Much mystified, Dick obeyed.

He was half angry at being turned aside just as he had made his declaration of love; but then he did not know that the queen was but putting him to the test to see if he was sincere.

"What's the matter, old fellow?" asked Leo, as Dick approached the house that had been given to the swamp explorers. "You look as though you were worried over something."

"Oh, I am all right," was the reply; and then he took the weapons belonging to him, strapping the belt about his waist and thrusting the pair of revolvers and hunting knife into it.

"How did you make out with ther gal—queen?" said Haypole, who stood in the doorway perfectly contented, now that he had had a good meal, and was in the company of Prof. Easy and the rest.

"That reminds me," exclaimed Dick, suddenly. "I left something in the palace; I'll go and get it, I guess."

Then, before he could be questioned any further, he started back to the house of Queen Olive.

Arriving there, he did not hesitate, but boldly walked in.

The handsome queen was waiting for him, it seemed, for she met him in the hallway, and conducted him again to the room he had before been led into.

"I knew you would come back," said she, quietly.

"Why?" he asked, in a petulant manner.

"Because you really love me."

"I told you I did before you dismissed me a few moments ago."

"Ah! but this proves it. And now, let me say, I shall consider myself engaged to you. But our marriage cannot take place under two years from the time of our first meeting—that is one of the laws of this country."

"Laws be blowed!" exclaimed Dick. "If I was willing to marry you now I might change my mind before that time."

"But you will not, though. Two years hence we will be man and wife, and you will be the happiest man in the Land of Hez, and I will be the happiest woman!"

Then there was a pause, after which Olive, as she desired Dick to call her, poured out some more of the wine and handed it to her lover.

As soon as the boy had drunk it, the same feeling of content, as on former occasions, came over him, and he grew talkative.

"Tell me about this wonderful country, Olive," said he, taking her by the hand.

"That I will gladly do, Dick," replied she, with equal familiarity, and she proceeded to relate the same legend as told by Andrew Jones a short time before.

"Do you believe that story, Olive?" he asked.

"I hardly know whether I do or not. It seems so strange and unnatural. Yet Roderique de Amilo was as he is now as long ago as the oldest of our people can remember."

"How is it that he does not rule the Land of Hez himself?"

"Because, the legend states, that he agreed with his beautiful wife that it should forever be ruled by woman. It was for that reason that she plunged into the pool, thinking it would prove a perpetual life to her."

"Has anybody else ever bathed in the pool?"

"Oh, yes; a dozen or more. But not until a few years ago; none of our people would ever believe the story before."

"Then some do believe it now?"

"Yes, a few, and there must be something wonderful about the crystal waters of the fountain, for those who have bathed in it have never visibly grown older."

"I think I shall have to take a bath in it some day myself," said Dick, with a smile.

“And I, too,” replied Olive, thinking he meant it. “It would be so nice, when we are married, to go on living and never grow old, with no fear of dying, unless through some accident. Could anyone ask for anything more than that?”

Dick was about to make a reply, when the report of a rifle rang out close by.

Hastily excusing himself, he dashed from the room outside.

He beheld the man known as Reginald Lacy fleeing across the level country beneath the opening in the roof, and after him, in hot pursuit, was Philander Owens, a still smoking rifle in his hands. [14]

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## CHAPTER IX. THE DEVIL'S KINGDOM.

Dick at once made his way to the side of Leo, who was just coming from the house, followed by Haypole and the professor.

"Great Scott!" exclaimed Dick. "Owens seems to be very savage against that ragged stranger. What shall we do—help him catch him?"

"No," returned his cousin. "It is no affair of ours; let them settle their own difficulty."

"That's right," nodded Prof. Easy. "We do not understand their case, and should, therefore, let them alone."

"Ter tell ther truth, I don't like either one of them fellers," observed the Yankee. "They be too blamed mysterious for me."

But if our friends did not attempt to assist Philander Owens in catching Reginald Lacy, the men of Hez were not going to allow him to roam about their haunts without first taking the oath of allegiance to the tribe.

Roderique de Amilo quickly called a score of men together and started in pursuit after Owens, who was doing his best to overtake his enemy.

All soon disappeared, and then our friends set about to fix up their home to suit their tastes.

They arose soon after daylight, and after they had eaten a light breakfast, prepared to look around a bit.

Then it struck Leo that it was about time he saw something of Azurma, the girl who had conducted them from the magic cave. From the strain in which she had conversed to him, he thought she would again seek his presence long before this.

Prof. Easy was bent on seeing what kind of place Hez was, and, at his request, a party was formed to make a tour of the place.

The party was formed of but seven—Leo, Dick, Prof. Easy, Martin Haypole, Lucky, the darky, and the American known as Andrew Jones, and Roderique de Amilo.

They set out in the direction taken by Reginald Lacy and his persistent pursuer.

"A wonderful land is this," remarked De Amilo, as they walked along. "I have never fully explored it myself in all the years I have lived here. Nearly everything you will meet and see that interests you will be found to be mysterious. In fact, this whole country is a land of mystery."

"It was a dod-rotted mystery how we ever come ter git in here, anyhow," said the Yankee.

"That reminds me," put in Andrew Jones, suddenly. "How did you get the door in the obelisk open, anyway?"

The professor quickly explained how they had found the stone cube, and the use they had put it to.

"By Jove!" exclaimed Jones. "The very identical way that I got in myself. How can it be that the cube was missing from the hole in which it fitted, and found so many yards from the obelisk?"

"That's where the mystery comes in," said Leo.

"Yes, that's so. I forgot what kind of place I was in. Talking to my own countrymen made me think I was back in civilization again."

They had by this time entered one of the many passages, and torches were put in use.

At the suggestion of Dick, Roderique de Amilo led them to the fountain and pool, and Leo and the professor were surprised beyond measure at what they saw.

The Spaniard pointed to what was inscribed upon the stone tablet, and said:

"I did that; and I am the living proof that what it means is true."

Then he again went over the legend of Hez, and wound up by pointing to the identical spot in the pool where the beautiful woman, whom he afterward made his wife, arose so mysteriously.

De Amilo told his story in such a solemn way that his hearers were more or less impressed with it.

"I believe that in some manner that man has become satisfied that yarn is true himself," said Leo, in a whisper to his cousin.

"Yes," assented Dick; "either that or else the legend is true, after all."

Leo smiled.

"Why, you don't believe it, do you, old fellow? Has the beautiful queen told you the same thing?"

"She did tell me the same story, and I am not prepared to say whether I believe it or not."

At this juncture their conductors signified that they were going to leave the pool in the strangely lighted cavern, and the conversation ended for the time.

"We will now show you the devil's kingdom, which is one of the most wonderful sights to be seen in this land," observed Jones, as they entered the passage again.

It was here that De Amilo came to a halt. Turning to those who were following him, he said:

"Is there anybody among you who desires to live forever? If so, bathe in the pool beneath the spray of the fountain."

But all hands, even to Jones, shook their heads, and they went on their way, the Spaniard leading them in silence.

When they arrived at the point where the four passages met, they again came to a halt.

A moment later they started through the mouth of one of these, and presently found themselves going down a sort of winding stairs.

Down, down they went for many feet, and then they came to a vast, shell-like cavern of what appeared to be almost unlimited size.

It was illumined by a strange, flickering, red light, and a purple mist pervaded the atmosphere.

Full of curiosity, our friends followed their conductors until they came to a broad roadway, that certainly looked as though it had been built with human hands.

Along this, for perhaps a quarter of a mile, they went, and then they saw that it suddenly shot downward at an angle of forty-five degrees.

As they rounded a cleft of rock, Andrew Jones came to a halt, and, pointing downward, exclaimed:

"Look there! Did you ever see anything to beat that?"

The swamp explorers followed the direction his finger pointed, and beheld a truly marvelous sight.

Beneath them was a rift of many feet in length, and in the sides, at irregular intervals, were small apertures resembling the portholes of a war ship, through which, ever and anon, came puffs of flame and smoke.

To look at the scene in a certain way, one could almost imagine that a pair of immense ironclads were engaged in battle.

But no noise, beyond a fizzing sound, could be heard when the puffs came.

[15]

Through the center of the rift, or ravine, as it might properly be called, a stream of water flowed, and this glittered and flashed in all the colors of the rainbow as the lurid streaks of flame belched over it.

On either side the walls sloped down in the form of a very steep hill, passing directly over the portholes from which the puffs of flame came.

"So that's what you call the Devil's Kingdom, is it?" remarked the professor, addressing Jones.

"Yes; that is the name Señor de Amilo gave it," was the reply.

"Well, I'll be ding-wizzened, if it ain't a good name for it!" exclaimed Haypole, shrugging his shoulders. "Now, if ther old boy was ter come out of one of them streams of fire, an' walk up an' down ther middle of that stream, with a pitchfork over his shoulder, ther scene would be complete."

"Great Scott!" cried Dick and Leo in a breath; "there he is, now!"

Ejaculations of surprise went up from all hands, as with distended eyes they saw a log go shooting down the stream with a figure clinging to it.

"That's Philander Owens, or I'm a sinner!" exclaimed the Yankee.

"That's so," said Leo, taking a step forward to get a better view of the startling scene.

As he did so he stepped upon a small stone, which, rolling under his foot, caused him to slip and lose his balance.

The next instant he went shooting down the smooth decline with the velocity of the wind!

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## CHAPTER X. IN THE BOWELS OF THE EARTH.

When Leo Malvern felt himself sliding down the slippery wall of rock he closed his eyes and uttered a silent prayer, thinking that all was up with him.

In vain he strove to seize upon something to stay his progress; there was naught but the smooth surface, and his speed kept on increasing.

Luckily he was sliding feet foremost, and had it not been for the fact that death stared him in the face, he would almost have imagined that he was coasting down an icy hill without a sled.

He had a recollection of hearing a cry of horror escape the lips of his friends, and then nothing save the roaring sound of the belching flames below him reached his ears.

Leo was but a few seconds in making the descent, and yet it seemed to be as many hours to him.

Just as he slid over the edge of the decline there came a puff of smoke and flame which completely enveloped his form and screened him from the view of his companions above. Blinded and scorching from the heat, he fell, with a splash, into the cooling waters of the rushing stream.

When he found that he was not dead, nor yet materially injured, he made a mighty effort and struggled to the surface.

He found he could keep his head above the water with little or no difficulty, and with a feeling of relief he endeavored to look ahead and see whither he was being carried by the rushing stream.

Puff! puff! The terrible cross fire of flame and smoke kept shooting over him a few feet above his head, making it one of the most fearful experiences he had ever undergone.

"My God!" thought the boy, "will I ever get out of this alive?"

But on swept the rushing current, and on went Leo, while the fire and flame roared over his head, ever and anon scorching his defenseless face.

But suddenly the flashes of fire ceased as if by magic, and all was in darkness.

The stream flowed through a tunnel, and it was this that the boy had reached.

Whizz! whirr! Away he sped, expecting every moment to strike upon a sharp rock and be dashed to pieces.

But no such thing occurred. Scarcely more than a minute had elapsed before he again suddenly whirled into the light.

Leo was now nearly exhausted from his frantic efforts to reach the shore, and it was fast telling upon him now.

The continual splashing of the water upon his face made it difficult for him to breathe, and he felt soon that he must give up.

But he made one more mighty effort and half arose in the water to see what sort of a place he had entered.

He noticed that the stream had widened considerably, and that there were no more signs of any fire.

A few seconds later he heard a dull, roaring sound, which caused him to turn a shade paler.

A rapids was close at hand!

Of this Leo felt certain. He had often before heard the noise made by the falling of a large body of water.

Although the stream was quite wide at this point it was running like a mill race.

Nearer and nearer the sound of the roaring waters came to the helpless boy, and his last hopes sunk.

What chance of life had he in being washed over a falls, at the bottom of which, in all probability, was an endless amount of sharp, jagged rocks, as is invariably the case?

Folding his arms, Leo threw himself upon his back, and allowed himself to float along at the mercy of the powerful current.

The roaring sound now became deafening, and he felt that the end was near.

But stay! The sharp bark of a dog is heard, and there is a splash close at hand.

Half a minute later a pair of jaws close upon the collar of Leo's coat, and he comes to a standstill with a sudden jerk.

What had happened now? was the thought that entered his brain as he opened his eyes.

A dog had him gripped firmly by the collar, and both were being towed slowly toward the left bank of the stream.

As soon as Leo became aware of this he threw himself over, and caught hold of the rope, which was secured about the intelligent animal's neck, thus lessening the strain upon him.

A cry of satisfaction went up from some one on the shore as this action was perceived, and both boy and dog were towed faster through the rushing water.

Two minutes more, and Leo felt his feet strike the bottom.

It was then but the work of a moment for his preserver to pull him ashore.

Leo was so exhausted that he fell to the ground in a semi-unconscious state.

[16]

It was several minutes before he recovered himself, and when he did so his first thought was to see who it was that had thus saved him in the nick of time.

A man stood before him, patting a huge mastiff on the head, and the young fellow could but give a start of surprise when he saw that it was Reginald Lacy, the man whose life was sought by Philander Owens.

"So you have recovered, young fellow?" said Lacy, as he coiled the rope which had been attached to the dog's neck.

"Yes," returned Leo, rising to his feet, "and I thank you a thousand times for saving my life!"

"Don't mention it. I could not stand by and see a man whom I had nothing against go over the falls, and be dashed to pieces on the rocks below. Had you been my enemy, I would not have raised a hand to help you."

Then the thought struck the young swamp explorer that Philander Owens, clinging to a log, had preceded him down the turbulent stream but a minute before. Had Reginald Lacy stood upon the shore and watched him go whirling to his death?

As he looked at the man and saw the satisfied expression that gleamed from his eyes, he made up his mind that such indeed was the case.

"That is a splendid dog you have," remarked Leo. "Had it not been for him all would have been up with me."

"Yes," assented Lacy. "There are few better dogs than Jupiter. He is the best friend I have got in the whole world."

As he spoke a far-away look came into his eyes, and his lips twitched nervously.

"How did you get away down here, anyhow?" asked Leo.

"Through a network of passages. I was pursued, as you know, by a man who desired to take my life; but he will never do it now."

"Why, is he dead?"

Lacy gave a start.

"Who said he was dead?" he asked.

"Oh! no one. I only thought as much. I saw him go rushing down the stream a few minutes ago. That was the cause of my falling into it."

"Well, if he is dead I didn't kill him," was the vague reply.

"Let us find our way back to the village," suggested Leo.

"Do you think I will not be harmed if I go there?"

"I am sure you will not."

"All right; I'll go, that is, if I can find the way."

"Why, don't you think you can lead the way back over the same route you came?"

An anxious expression came over the boy's face as he asked the question.

"I don't know for sure. I came in such a hurry, being pursued by a human sleuthhound as I was. But I ought to be able to find the way without much trouble. Anyhow, we will try. If I can't, probably Jupiter can. Come—we may as well start at once."

But here an unforeseen obstacle presented itself.

The opening of this passage, which ran upward in a steep ascent, was very small—not over four feet in diameter.

They had not gone into this more than a dozen feet before they came to a halt, and saw that they could go no further.

A monster boulder of iron stone had slipped or been pushed into the passage from above, and it would have taken at least a score of men to remove it.

"Some of my hated enemy's work," said Lacy, as he played with his beard nervously. "This is as far as he followed me. He must have pushed this boulder from above and then went back and fallen into the stream. Well, we must find some other way of getting out, or else we can stay here in this wonderful underground place and starve!"

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## CHAPTER XI. AZURMA'S SEARCH.

Dick Vincey gave an agonizing cry as he saw his cousin disappear in the flame and smoke below them.

"He's lost—he's lost!" he almost wailed. "What will his parents say when I return without him?"

"It's too bad," said Martin Haypole, consolingly, "but I wouldn't take on so much, if I was you. You know none of us won't ever git back ter home, anyway—we have took our oaths that we won't never leave this dod-rotted country."

"Come," remarked the professor, "let us get away from this place. Leo is dead long before this—no earthly power could save him."

"You are right," assented Andrew Jones. "I am sorry, but it can't be helped."

"There is a possibility of his having passed through the flame and smoke alive," said De Amilo, the Spaniard; "but the rushing stream—if he is not drowned in that, he will be carried over a falls a few hunderd yards further down, and be dashed to pieces on the rocks."

No one in the party had the least doubt but that Leo Malvern was dead, and with a feeling of sorrow they turned from the spot and started for the village.

"May de good Lor' save him!" whined Lucky, the darky, wringing his hands. "Massa Leo was de bestest friend dis poor darky eber had, an' now him done gone an' got killed. Oh, why did us eber come to de Eberglades, anyhow?"

"It is my fault," said Prof. Easy; "I had no business to induce him to accompany me on my exploring tour. We have made many discoveries, but this fearful accident spoils all the pleasure there is in it."

"I don't blame you, professor," returned Dick. "It was our own free wills that brought both Leo and myself to the Land of Hez. Say no more about it, please."

As soon as the village was reached, Dick at once apprised Queen Olive of what had happened.

She sympathized with him, and tried to comfort him, at the same time saying:

"There is a possibility that your cousin is not dead. If that is the case, there is but one who could seek him out in the earth's bowels and find him."

"Who is that one?" asked Dick, his hopes arising.

"Azurma," was the reply. "She has claimed him for her husband, and if sent to look for him, she would never come back without him."

"Send her, then."

"There will be no need of me sending her. When she hears what has happened she will start at once on her own hook. She has been unable to see Leo since she left him in the dark cavern, the reason being that I ordered her not to do so, in punishment for leading you and your companions from the magic chamber." [17]

The queen blew a tiny whistle, and a servant appeared.

"Send Azurma here," said she, in Spanish.

The servant bowed and retired, and a few minutes later the beautiful Hez girl appeared.

"What is it, O queen?" she asked. "Can I now be permitted to see my future lord and master?"

"You can; but you must first seek him out. He is lost, having fallen into the stream that flows through the Devil's Kingdom. You are at liberty to go where you please in the Land of Hez."

An expression of gratefulness, intermingled with fear, came over the girl's face, and then, without noticing Dick in the least, she bowed and retired.

The brave girl plodded on her way until she came to the point where the four passages met, and here she came to a pause.

"He went down the stream that flows through the Devil's Kingdom," she murmured, "and so must I, if I would find him. If he perished, then so shall I! I have said it, and my word shall not be broken!"

Then with an expression of determination upon her face, she started down the passage.

She only stopped for a moment to view the scene that had seemed such a wonder to our friends, and then started off at right angles, with an idea of picking her way to the shores of the stream below, beyond the smoke and fire.

That Azurma knew what she was doing was plainly evident, for after a tedious descent of probably a mile, she came to the point she desired to reach.

The roaring of the flames was behind her, and the swiftly rushing tide was within a few feet of her on the right.

Eagerly she scanned the shores on either side of the subterranean stream for a sign of Leo Malvern.

But not the least trace of him could she see.

But Azurma had not given up all hope yet.

With a resolute air she started along the shore in the direction the water flowed.

She now could hear the roaring of the water as it dashed over the falls, and her face paled.

Had the one she loved been swept over this?

The thought was a sickening one to her, and for a moment she tottered and almost fell to the ground.

Just then the girl caught sight of a number of footprints in the sand.

In a moment she was kneeling upon the ground examining them.

As soon as she saw that they were not made by her own people, a cry of joy escaped her lips.

As the reader has already surmised, they were the footprints of Leo Malvern and Reginald Lacy.

Full of hope now, that her mission would prove successful, Azurma followed the tracks.

She reached the mouth of the passage and was just about to enter it when a warning hiss told her that there was danger ahead.

The girl drew back with a half-smothered cry of alarm.

"The picuasus!" she cried, in her own tongue. "Oh! what shall I do now?"

She hastily withdrew from the mouth of the passage and looked about for a safe place of retreat.

As she did so an immense turtle appeared through the opening, and thrusting a horrible-looking head from its shell, peered around to find the one who had disturbed it.

The moment the creature's beadlike eyes rested upon Azurma a transformation took place.

From the appearance of a huge turtle, it suddenly changed to a spider of the most gigantic proportions.

Long legs stretched out in every direction, and it began walking toward the poor girl, with its body at least two feet from the ground.

Azurma stood as though petrified, her face the color of ashes.

With rapid strides the many-legged creature neared her.

When it had approached to within ten feet of her she seemed to regain her senses.

Uttering a wild shriek, she started to flee from the spot with all her might.

An ominous hiss came from the picuasus, as Azurma called it, and the horrible thing increased its speed.

Straight for the river the girl ran, and it was evident that rather than be torn to pieces by the underground denizen she would throw herself into the rushing water.

When within ten yards of the water's edge Azurma stumbled and fell, and the next instant the picuasus stretched forth its long tentacles to seize her.

But they did not reach. At that moment the report of a rifle rang out, and it tumbled to the ground in a heap.

Azurma was saved!

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## CHAPTER XII.

### AZURMA FINDS LEO.

Reginald Lacy sank to the ground in a dejected manner when he found that the mouth of the passage was blocked.

"We can't get out," he said, hoarsely. "We may as well make up our minds that we have got to starve to death!"

"Brace up!" exclaimed Leo. "Never give up until you are sure that you are lost. It was only a short time ago that I was certain that I was rushing to my death. But I was saved, and that has taught me a lesson. I will not give up now until I feel the last breath leaving my body."

The boy's words seemed to imbue the man with a new hope.

He struggled to his feet again and patted his faithful dog on the head.

"If I only had something to eat," he said, "there might be a chance. I am very hungry, and so is Jupiter."

"Let us find something to eat."

"Where?"

"Around here, somewhere. There might be living creatures about; we have not searched, you know."

"That's so; I never gave it a thought before. Lead on and take my rifle; maybe you will be able to shoot something."

Leo took the weapon and saw that it was loaded with but four cartridges.

That was the only firearm between the two, Leo having lost his when he tumbled down the rocky decline in the Devil's Kingdom.

"We have only got four shots to depend on," said the boy, motioning Lacy to follow him; "but if I have occasion to use them I'll make every one tell."

His companion nodded, and the two started back toward the place they had come from.

[18]

In a few minutes they reached the shore and began looking about them for some signs of a creature that might do to eat.

A couple of hundred yards to the right was a group of rocks, which looked as though it might possibly contain the lair of a wild beast of some sort.

Toward this Leo directed his steps, Lacy following.

They searched about the place for over half an hour, but not a living thing could they come across.

Again they sat down, Lacy being very dejected.

The dog, who had been nosing about considerably, suddenly started off at a quick bound, at the same time uttering a short bark.

"He has struck the trail of something!" exclaimed Reginald Lacy, springing to his feet as quickly as his feeble condition would allow him.

"Let us follow him," says Leo.

Away they went after Jupiter, in the hopes that he was about to start up some game.

They had no sooner entered a small passage between two clefts of rock than they were startled by hearing a wild scream.

"Great God!" exclaimed Lacy. "What is that?"

"It sounds to me like the cry of a female in distress," replied his young companion, turning about and starting hurriedly in the direction the scream came from.

In a few seconds Leo came in sight of Azurma, with the horrible picuasus pursuing her.

Again a wild scream left the girl's lips, and though the distance was rather great, the boy instantly concluded to risk a shot.

He knew full well if he missed the girl was lost, and that nerved him to do his best.

He placed his rifle to his shoulder, and, taking a quick aim, pulled the trigger.

Crack!

As the report rung out the picuasus fell, the bullet having pierced one of its eyes.

As brave as she was, Azurma had swooned, and as soon as he reached the spot, Leo set about to bring her to.

He soon accomplished this, and by the time Reginald Lacy reached the spot she was sitting up clasping her preserver by the hands and gazing into his eyes in a mute expression of joy.

"I have found you, O my future lord and master!" she said, and then she did not speak again for fully a minute.

Reginald Lacy stood staring at her like one in a dream. At length he spoke.

"How did you get here, miss?" he asked. "Can you lead us to a place where we can get something to eat?"

"Are you hungry?" said Azurma, rising to her feet and unslinging the bag from her shoulder. "If you are, eat."

Lacy needed no second invitation.

He seized the food with a cry of joy and began devouring it ravenously.

"God bless you, my girl!" he exclaimed, hoarsely; "you have saved my life. But my dog must have something, too. I will call him, and share with him."

He gave a long whistle, and in a few moments Jupiter came rushing from a pile of rocks with the speed of an antelope.

The scent he had taken had proved but a myth, after all, and the dog, like his master, being very hungry, soon forgot all about it.

He scarcely noticed the dead picuusus, but at once eagerly swallowed the food Lacy gave him.

"Now, Azurma," said Leo, "can you take us back to the village?"

"I can, and will at once, O my——"

"Hold on," interrupted the boy. "Call me Leo; don't use any more high-fangled titles—I don't like it."

"Be it as you say, then, Leo. Whenever you are ready, I will conduct you safely to your friends and mine."

Then, acting on Azurma's advice, he seized her by the hand and started with all speed for the stream, Lacy and the dog following close behind.

Once there, Leo turned to look for Reginald Lacy and the dog.

A startling scene met his gaze.

Lacy had ventured too far out and the current had carried him off his feet.

Jupiter had seized him by the collar and was endeavoring to swim ashore with him.

"Help!" exclaimed Lacy, doing his best to stem the tide.

"Let the dog swim ashore with the rope—that is your only hope!" exclaimed the boy, rushing into the water as far as he dared.

But this Jupiter could not be made to do. He was bent on saving the life of his master, but he was going to do it in his own way.

Further and further the man and dog were sucked from the shore, in spite of the superhuman efforts they made.

Leo was completely dismayed. The very ones who had saved his life were now going to their own death over the falls.

He had no rope to throw to them, and could but stand upon the bank and witness it.

Faster and faster the struggling man and dog were carried, and nearer and nearer they were whirled to the falls.

Azurma had turned her back upon the scene, but a strange fascination seemed to hold Leo's eyes upon the doomed man and his faithful dog.

The next moment they went whirling over the cataract with a mighty rush.

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## CHAPTER XIII.

### BALLOTING FOR HUSBANDS.

Completely unnerved at the sight, Leo turned from the spot.

"Come, Azurma," said he, "we will go back to the village."

"Yes, Leo," was the reply; "nothing could save the man and dog from death. Their lifeless bodies are floating in the pool at the foot of the falls by this time."

For fear that another picuasus might show up, they hurriedly left the spot.

Azurma led the way back over the same route by which they had come, and in due time they arrived at the village, without further accidents.

The girl clasped Leo lovingly by the arm when they neared the palace, and Dick and Martin Haypole, who saw them coming, flung their caps in the air and uttered a cheer that brought out almost every soul in the village.

"Well, I'll be everlasting ding-wizzened if ther boy isn't alive an' well as any of us! An' ter think that he passed through both fire an' water without gettin' a scratch! 'Tain't fer him to die in this country—that's certain."

And Dick! The boy could hardly express his joy at finding his cousin alive.

Queen Olive, who could not help hearing the commotion, came outside and nodded when she saw what caused it, as though she was well satisfied with Azurma's success. [19]

"I knew that if he was alive she would find him," said she to Dick.

"All that I can say is that I am glad of it," was the reply.

"Azurma is a very brave girl," said Leo. "Had it not been for her I would never have found my way to this place again. I don't know how I shall ever repay her."

"Oh, that is easy," returned Azurma; "promise to become my lord and master when the proper time arrives."

The queen then spoke, informing Leo what the custom of Hez was, concluding with:

"I have just been visited by a committee of unmarried ladies, who demand that they shall have an opportunity of drawing lots for each of you. It is the custom, and we must adhere to it. I have appointed to-morrow morning for the drawing to take place. You will all remember this, and be at the palace an hour after sunrise."

With these words she left our friends, taking Azurma with her.

The next morning, at the appointed time, Leo, Dick, Prof. Easy, Martin Haypole and Lucky made their way to the abode of the queen.

At least half a hundred girls and middle-aged women were there, and it was with great difficulty that our friends managed to squeeze their way in.

More than one pair of eyes cast a bewitching glance at them as they passed, and Lucky and the Yankee grinned in a wholesale manner.

Queen Olive was at the further end of the long hall through the center of the building, and Dick noticed that her face wore an anxious look.

When all had assembled and the utmost quiet reigned, she arose and addressed the audience in Spanish.

"Women of Hez," said she, "we have assembled here this morning, according to our ancient custom, to choose five husbands. Our law is that no woman shall ever marry, unless her husband be a stranger from the outside world. That is the way our race was founded, and is the reason why we are so few in number. But the custom must be kept up. There are fifty-one of us here, and there are but five strangers. Forty-six must be disappointed. As Queen of Hez, I shall choose one of the five without going into the form of drawing lots."

A slight murmur of disapproval arose from the assemblage as these words rang out.

Queen Olive evidently expected this, for, with flashing eyes, she exclaimed:

"Silence! I am the ruler of this land, and my word is law."

Then motioning to Dick to step forward, she went on:

"This is the man I have chosen for my husband; he loves me and I love him."

Nothing abashed, Dick took his place beside the beautiful creature.

But that the girls were anything but satisfied was plainly apparent. They thought that in a case of this kind the queen should place herself upon an equal footing with them, and take her chances.

But Queen Olive thought differently, and that settled it, for the time being, anyhow.

As soon as her majesty ceased speaking, Azurma pushed her way through the crowd and made an eloquent address, relating how she had saved Leo from a death of starvation, winding up with a strong argument that he should be given to her.

But the Hez beauties would not listen to this, and so Azurma's appeal was ruled down.

At Queen Olive's order, a small, square box was brought forth, which contained a number of small pieces of coal-like substance, and one small bit of crystal of the same size and weight.

Then every female present was securely blindfolded and directed to step forward, one at a time, and pick out one of the pieces.

The one who was fortunate enough to get hold of the bit of crystal was the one to have the husband.

In case that no one got hold of the crystal, the queen had the power to give him to whoever she saw fit.

Leo fervently desired that this might be the case, for he felt that if he was compelled to become engaged to any of the females present he would rather it would be Azurma, for the simple reason that she wanted him, and he owed her a debt of gratitude for coming to hunt him up.

When everything was in readiness, the women stepped forward to draw the pieces from the box.

It was quite interesting, and our friends watched the result with bated breath.

As fast as one selected, the bandage was removed from her eyes and she retired to the other end of the hall.

Azurma was the fifth one to draw, and when a black ballot was disclosed to her view, she uttered a cry of dismay, and staggered blindly from the spot.

The next to step forward was a girl as young and fully as beautiful as she.

As she lifted the ballot from the box a murmur went up from the assemblage.

She held the piece of crystal in her hand!

With an expression of triumph upon her beautiful face, she held out her arms and approached Leo.

But she never reached him. A figure bounded forward with the swiftness of an enraged panther; a blade flashed in the air, and the would-be bride fell to the stone floor, the blood spurting from a wound in her left side.

It was Azurma who had committed the deed, and with flashing eyes and heaving breast she drew herself to her full height.

"Thus I have broken the laws of Hez!" she exclaimed, in a dramatic tone. "Do with me what you will, O queen!"

It had all happened so quickly that our friends were utterly astounded, and before they could fully comprehend what had taken place, Azurma was seized and bound, and conducted from the building.

And the girl who had proven so unfortunate in picking out the crystal—she never spoke again. The blade had severed her heart in twain, and the beautiful Azurma was a murderess!

Leo turned sick at heart when he realized that he was the cause of the tragedy, and he leaned against the wall in a dazed condition.

"Remove the body!"

It was Queen Olive who spoke.

Her command was instantly obeyed, and then, as though nothing had happened, the ballots were shaken about in the box, and it was announced that it would be decided who should have Martin Haypole.

"Gosh!" exclaimed the Yankee; "I hope no one don't git killed on my account! I'll be satisfied with any of ther younger gals!" [20]

This time nearly everyone had a chance at the box before the crystal was drawn, and then it resulted in favor of a buxom Hez maiden of fair appearance and uncertain age.

"Well, I rather guess you'll do," observed Haypole, as he shook hands with her, "though I'll be ding-wizzened if I don't wish it had been one of ther younger ones. Howsumever, beggars mustn't be choosers, an', though I ain't exactly been a-beggin' for a wife, I'll take yer when ther times comes, an' try an' be satisfied."

The next victim was the professor, and, with his face wreathed in smiles, he waited the result.

Almost the first one to draw was the fortunate one, and she being one of the beauties of the country, the professor nearly swallowed his false teeth, so broad was his smile of satisfaction.

"Golly!" said Lucky, when he was ordered to step forth for inspection; "I declar' ter goodness, if dey ain't treatin' dis chile well in dis yer country! Furst dey make him all white, wif de excepshun of his face, which am a yaller color, an den dey present him wif a wife! Well, I's'll be satisfied wif any ob dem."

In a few minutes it was all settled, and the winner of the prize, who was old enough to be the darky's mother, seemed to be perfectly satisfied.

"Now," said the queen, "all who have been chosen as husbands will leave, except the one who lost his bride at the hand of Azurma. Another ballot must be taken for him."

Even Dick was forced to retire with the others, and that left Leo the only male in the crowd.

The more the young fellow thought over what had just occurred the stronger became his determination that he would allow the farce, as he considered it, to go no further.

The part he had already played had been quite enough for him, and he made up his mind that if Azurma could not have him, no one else should.

Just as the queen was getting the box ready, he stepped forward and exclaimed:

“Stop! I have had enough of this. I will allow no further drawing for me, as I have made up my mind not to marry at all!”

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## CHAPTER XIV.

### AZURMA SUFFERS THE PENALTY OF HER CRIME.

The next morning the swamp explorers were up bright and early.

They had been invited to be present at the execution of the murderess, Azurma, and though none of them were bloodthirsty enough to long for such sights, the novelty of the thing caused them to make up their minds to see it out.

That Leo was very much put out about the affair was certain. He considered that he was the direct cause of the whole trouble, and while the fair girl deserved punishment for her rash and bloody act, he made up his mind that a jury in any civilized portion of the world would hardly find her guilty of murder in the first degree. She might receive a sentence of imprisonment for life, and probably not as bad as that.

He concluded to speak to the queen about it, and got Dick to accompany him to the palace just before the procession was ready to start for the place of execution.

She granted him an audience readily enough, but would not listen to his appeal that she might be a little more lenient with Azurma.

"No," said she, with a decided shake of her head; "she must die as I have ordered. I cannot; nor would not if I could, countermand my orders. We are ready to start now, tell the rest of your companions to fall in line, and be sure to go with us to see the vile murderess take her death ride into the Devil's Kingdom!"

There was no getting over it, so our friends promptly fell into line with nearly the entire population of Hez.

Azurma was then brought forth by two men, and she cast a look of defiance at Queen Olive and the rest of the women.

The word was given, and the procession filed away, the swamp explorers keeping near the doomed girl, and marveling at the fortitude she possessed.

Torches were lighted, and they passed through the dark passage into the magic chamber.

Here Azurma turned her gaze upon Leo, and said:

"It was in this place that I first met you, my Leo. Then I thought you would be mine, but they robbed me of you. But I promise, that though they kill me, I will meet you in another world, and then we will be happy. This I swear!"

At this point the girl was hustled on, and deeply impressed by her words, Leo and his companions followed with the crowd.

In a short time the spot that overlooked the place dubbed the Devil's Kingdom was reached, and the party came to a halt.

A shudder came over Azurma as she surveyed the horrible place below, but in an instant she had regained her composure and was as calm as ever.

The puffs of fire and smoke roared and hissed below them, and the stream which flowed through the place seemed to rush along with unusual speed.

"I am ready to suffer the penalty of my crime, O queen! It is sweet to die for those we love!"

It was the doomed girl that spoke, and as she turned her eyes upon the assemblage her face looked more beautiful than ever.

"If you have anything to say, out with it at once," said the queen. "According to our ancient laws you must die, and our laws must not be broken."

"I will say this much," replied Azurma, advancing to the very edge of the steep, rocky slant: "The women of Hez have robbed me of the one I love, and now, as I stand upon the very brink of death, I set my curse upon all who took part in it. And, furthermore, I do swear that I will return from the undiscovered country into which I am now to be hurled, and heap destruction upon all Hez. This I promise you; and if I do leave this country to find a haven of rest in another more beautiful one—as I firmly believe I shall—I will do my best to get the people of that country to follow me to Hez and aid me in accomplishing my revenge."

She paused for a moment and looked keenly around to see the effect of her words.

She was evidently satisfied, for a smile broke over her beautiful face.

Then, directing her gaze upon Leo, her lips parted.

"Farewell, my Leo; forget not what I said in the magic chamber."

The next instant, to the astonishment of all hands, she turned and sprang over the verge of the awful place and went gliding toward the flame and smoke below!

She had cheated the executioners from throwing her into the Devil's Kingdom by committing the deed herself. [21]

Down—down the horrible descent she glided until the lurid flames hid her from view, and then, with a mighty splash, the beautiful murderess plunged into the rushing stream.

A shudder crept over everyone in the party, and one and all they turned their heads.



For fully a minute a deep silence reigned.

At length it was broken by Queen Olive.

"Come," said she, in a strange, unnatural tone, "let's go back."

Everybody seemed to be willing, so they started at once.

As soon as they arrived at the village, our friends sought the seclusion of their own dwelling to talk over the startling events that had so recently occurred.

About an hour after darkness set in the younger population of Hez began moving toward the magic chamber, and among them were Dick, the professor, Haypole and Lucky.

Each of these escorted the fair one to whom he had been engaged, and the Yankee and the transformed darky presented an amusing spectacle as they made their way along in the procession.

Dick was more or less elated at being at the head of the line with the beautiful queen at his side, and for the time being he forgot all about Leo.

When they reached the magic chamber, he found it was lighted by a number of brightly burning torches, stuck in niches in the rocky walls.

Almost as soon as he and Queen Olive entered a strain of music struck up, he knew not from where, and he found his partner and himself leading a fantastic, weird march.

Back and forth, through the roomy cavern, they made their way, the boy doing as the queen directed him.

At length, after about ten minutes of this sort of thing, the music suddenly ceased and everybody came to a halt.

Then it again struck up, and the opening dance began.

It was very similar to the old-fashioned Virginia reel, and our friends had little or no difficulty in going through the figures.

Prof. Easy seemed to be in his seventh heaven.

He danced about like a wild man of the woods, and laughed like a child in possession of a new toy.

And Martin Haypole. He swung his long legs around regardless of any mischief he might do, and forgot all the cares and troubles of his life.

Lucky was probably the most nimble-footed male on the floor, and he soon laid all the rest in the shade.

When the first dance came to an end, Queen Olive informed Dick that a number of the girls would give the dance of death—the same that our friends had witnessed on their arrival in Hez.

This, she informed him, was always indulged in by those who were not fortunate enough to have a partner for life, or a chance of soon having one, at every occasion like this.

Now that they knew what was coming, the four were anxious to see it, and they took seats with those who were not to participate in it on the stone floor of the cavern.

It was but a repetition of what they had seen before, but it was entrancing, for all that.

The graceful, undulating movements of the gaudily bedecked creatures seemed to move as if by a strange mechanism, and when their skeleton partners dropped down from above, the scene was complete.

As before, when the thing wound up, a crowd of figures resembling animals rushed in and seized the girls, and the skeletons disappeared.

At the same instant the lights went out and all was in total darkness.

This was evidently not on the program, for the audience gave a cry of alarm, and a number hastened to light up the scene again. When they had done so it was found that both Dick and the queen had mysteriously disappeared.

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## CHAPTER XV. THE NAZTECS AND THEIR PRISONERS.

Reginald Lacy and his faithful dog were swept over the falls with frightful velocity.

Jupiter still gripped his master by the collar, and it was evident that he meant to hang on until death parted them.

Down the foaming cataract they were carried, and the terror of his dreadful situation caused Lacy to lose possession of his faculties.

When he came to again he found himself lying upon a strip of sand with his feet in the water.

Jupiter sat before him, patiently waiting for his master to come to life and speak to him.

At first the man thought that he must certainly be injured in some way, but a single effort on his part showed him that he was not.

He rose to his feet but very little the worse for his journey over the rapids, and patted the dog's head.

A slight noise behind him caused him to turn. The next instant a dozen men sprang upon him and bore him to the ground.

Jupiter, the dog, endeavored to render his master some assistance, but a blow from a heavy club stretched the animal senseless on a slab of rock.

Then Lacy's hands were securely bound behind him, and his captors, who were a queer-looking set, raised him to his feet.

They began talking rapidly in some unknown tongue, and at length decided to take their prisoner down the decline to the cave below.

Lacy did not offer the least resistance, but with a strange, hunted look in his eyes he walked along with his captors.

They took him to a cavern where there were a number of strange men already assembled, and where Lacy observed another prisoner lying on the ground, bound hand and foot.

After a short consultation, a couple of men walked over to the prostrate man and liberated him, save untying his hands.

Even then the man did not look up, but kept his eyes fixed on the ground in a sullen manner.

But Reginald Lacy was gazing at him with a look of fear upon his face.

It was his enemy, Philander Owens!

An order was given, and both prisoners were marched to the other end of the cave, where an opening was visible.

Through this went the inhabitants of the underground world, leading their prisoners with them.

The strange inhabitants of the place kept on with their prisoners until they reached a massive building of a purple color, which was situated at the end of the single street contained in the city —if city it could be called. [22]

Here they came to a halt.

Then, for the first time, the eyes of Owens rested upon his fellow captive, and such a look of hate darted from them!

Lacy quailed before him, and in a husky voice said:

"Aren't you satisfied yet? Or do you still hate me as much as ever?"

"Just as much!" was the reply, in a bitter voice. "Why shouldn't I? But never mind—my hour of vengeance will yet come!"

"Death stares us both in the face," said Lacy, in a calmer tone. "Why not let bygones be bygones?"

"What! after I went to the expense to purchase a balloon to hunt you down after you had taken to the Everglades? Why, you vile hound! I have spent a fortune, almost, for the purpose of hunting you down. Never! If I ever hated you, I do now!"

"As you will," returned Lacy, becoming more cool every moment. "But remember, we are both on an equal footing now."

"I would soon show you if we were both free!" exclaimed Owens, hotly.

As if he were understood, a richly decked personage suddenly appeared in the doorway of the purple-hued building and spoke a few words.

To the surprise and joy of Owens, his hands were untied.

Then Lacy was treated in a like manner. The man, who was evidently the king, was just about to make an address to his people in regard to the two strangers from an unknown land, when a startling thing occurred.

Owens made a sudden leap and seized Lacy by the throat.

The men were about of one size and build, and were evenly matched as far as appearances were. Owens was boiling over with rage, while on the contrary his opponent was perfectly cool and collected.

Lacy had gripped his foe about the neck, and he strove to throw him with all his might.

At the commencement of the sudden encounter between the two men, the inhabitants of the place were thrown into a state of dumfounded amazement.

But at length the king shouted the one word:

*"Naztec!"*

"Naztec, Naztec!" came the response from all hands.

And in the twinkling of an eye the combatants were separated and led away in different directions.

Lacy was conducted to a building on the right and placed in a small room, where two men promptly placed themselves to guard against his leaving the place.

"Naztec!" repeated one of the men, and then motioned to Lacy that if he would remain passive he would not be harmed.

One of the men pointed to a soft couch in a corner of the room and motioned him to lie down.

Then it struck Lacy that he was very tired and sleepy, so he promptly obeyed.

In a very short time he was fast asleep.

It must have been ten or twelve hours before he awakened, and when he did so he felt greatly refreshed.

As soon as he arose half a dozen men appeared and conducted him from the room to the street outside.

He was walked up and down this for about ten minutes and then returned to the place whence he came.

A substantial meal was now set before him, and Lacy ate it in a hearty manner, all the while wondering why it was that he was receiving such excellent attention.

But he was destined to soon learn.

Philander Owens was used exactly the same in another building not far away, and he, too, wondered why it was thus and so.

About twenty-four hours later both ceased to wonder.

Lacy had risen but an hour before, when he heard the beating of a tom-tom, or some other outlandish instrument.

The sum and substance of it was, that the ruler of the place had arranged for a contest of strength to take place between the two prisoners.

He had noticed the savageness with which the men had come together when they had been brought before him, and he concluded that if they were fed up a little, and taken care of, they would be able to give a first-class entertainment to the populace.

Owens had been captured a few hours before Lacy showed up and attempted to roll the boulder down, but he had not been taken before the king until they both were together.

At the beating of the tom-tom the people of the place began to gather at the end of the wide street in front of the purple-hued building, and Lacy and Owens were each led from the house they had been kept in.

Owens was clad in a red tunic, while, as has already been stated, Lacy wore a blue one.

Both men seemed glad when the king motioned them to settle what differences they had then and there. One, because he hated the man who stood before him beyond the depth of conception; and the other, because he thought it about time that the thing was settled.

Instead of grappling with each other, the two men began sparring for an opening.

At length Lacy planted a stinging blow on his adversary's nose, causing the blood to flow freely.

"Naztec!" yelled the crowd, applauding wildly.

Stung to madness, Owens made a sudden dive to the left and seized a knife from the belt of a man standing near.

With a look of fury in his eyes, he sprang upon Lacy, and raised the weapon to plunge it in his heart.

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## CHAPTER XVI.

### DICK AND THE QUEEN IN PERIL.

It is now about time that the mysterious disappearance of Dick Vincey and the Queen of Hez was explained.

The very instant the torches were extinguished in the magic chamber the two were seized and borne to the earth.

Before they could cry out, gags were thrust in their mouths, and then in the confusion that prevailed they were carried rapidly from the spot.

Dick strove manfully to free himself, but it was useless; a heavy cloth had been wound tightly around his body, rendering him powerless to use his arms.

The pair were carried swiftly along for about half an hour, through innumerable passages and tunnels, until at length they reached a spot where it was light.

But it was not the light made by burning torches—it looked more, to Dick, as though he was being carried through a street with a plentiful supply of electric lights in it.

However, his eyes were gladdened by the light but for a minute or so. The next instant their captors entered a cave, where all was in darkness, and came to a halt. [23]

The two prisoners were deposited upon the hard ground as though they had been mere bundles of rags, and then those who had brought them thence took their departure.

For fully an hour the utmost silence reigned, and then it was suddenly broken by the sound of approaching footsteps.

Both Dick and his fair companion were beginning to suffer from their cramped positions, and they breathed a sigh of relief when they heard some one coming.

A moment later a lighted torch came in view, and a dozen Hez maidens appeared on the scene.

They were those who had balloted for husbands and who had been disappointed.

Dick saw it all now. They were evidently dissatisfied with the queen choosing him without allowing them a voice in the matter, and they had now taken the law in their own hands.

The boy was right. Such was really the case. The twelve maidens who now stood before them had conspired together and broken the laws of the Land of Hez.

They had caused the couple to be brought to this out-of-the-way place to force Queen Olive to give Dick over to them, and then swear to let the matter drop forever.

In case she refused, the two were to be left in the cave to perish, while the conspirators would go back to the village and circulate the rumor that their queen, being unable to wait until the two years had passed, had fled to the outside world with her lover.

That this story would be believed by the simple Hez people there was not the least particle of doubt.

The leader of the twelve maidens was Queen Olive's younger sister—heir to the throne!

It was she who acted as speaker for her companions, and after having removed the gags from the mouths of the two prisoners, so they would be able to answer her, she proceeded to inform them of the reason they had been abducted from the magic chamber.

"Our plan was well carried out," said she, "and the twelve here assembled are the ones that did it. We have rebelled against the throne, and unless you agree to our terms, you must lie in this cave, bound as you are, to furnish food for the dreaded picuasus. What is your answer, my sister?"

The eyes of the queen flashed with rage that was intense, and for a moment she could not find words to make a reply.

But finally she calmed herself and said:

"My answer is this, base conspirators! I will not agree to your terms, even though you do leave me here to die, which you dare not do."

"Dare not? We will show you. I will give you just five minutes to consider your reply, and if in that time you do not agree, we will certainly leave you both here—unless the young man whom you have chosen for your husband desires to accept one of us, and will take an oath not to reveal what has happened."

"I will not do that!" said Dick, hotly. "Do your worst, you she-fiends; we will triumph in the end."

"Nobly spoken, my brave young lover!" spoke up the queen. "It will be as you say—we will triumph in the end."

There was no reply to this until the five minutes had elapsed, and then the queen's sister, with a perfectly immovable face, spoke up.

"What is your decision?" she asked, coolly.

"You have it already. Free us immediately, or I give you my word that every one of you shall suffer the fate of Azurma."

There was a ripple of mocking laughter at this, and the leader of the conspirators went on:

"Is that your final answer?"

"It is."

"Be it so, then. From this time forward I am the queen of the Land of Hez. Farewell, my sister. May you and your lover enjoy the agonies of death you have so freely chosen!"

This nerved Dick to a feeling of desperation, and he strove to free himself with all his might.

But it was utterly useless; the heavy cloth that bound his hands to his sides was too firmly wound about him.

Then, too, his legs were secured in the same manner, and he soon found that he could scarcely even turn over.

"It is useless," he said, panting from his exertions. "We have got to die!"

"Oh, say not so," wailed the queen, and she fell back in a faint.

And Dick! He relaxed his muscles and fell into as comfortable a position as was possible, and set to thinking over their situation.

What worried him most was what the queen's sister had said about them furnishing a meal for the dreaded picuasus.

He had heard about those monsters from Leo, and that he and his beautiful companion were in the limits of the domain of the horrible turtle spiders he felt certain.

What if one of them should come prowling that way now?

The thought was maddening to Dick, and he again strove to free himself.

But after five minutes of fruitless endeavor he fell back exhausted.

Soon after this he fell into a troubled sleep, from which he did not awaken until some hours had elapsed.

He felt cramped and sore, and soon as the full sense of his situation came to him, he listened intently.

But not a sound could be heard, save the regular breathing of the girl at his side, who was now sleeping peacefully.

He determined not to disturb her slumber, and so did not attempt to burst his bonds again.

The seconds flitted into minutes, and the minutes into hours, and still there was no change.

Had it not been for Queen Olive's regular breathing, Dick would have thought her dead.

"Let her sleep," he thought. "She is now entirely oblivious to our horrible situation, and if I wake her up, she will only rave and go on at a great rate."

About five minutes later the boy heard a sound which sent a thrill through his body.

A faint pit-pat could be heard, which told him that some living creature was approaching.

"The picuasus!" he muttered to himself. "Well, it will soon be over."

Nearer and nearer the sounds came, and presently the boy's instinct told him that the animal, or whatever it was, had halted within a few feet of him.

The next moment he felt the cold nose of the creature touching his face!

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## CHAPTER XVII. AZURMA AND THE NAZTECS.

Azurma, the beautiful murderess, had jumped upon the rocky slide with the firm conviction that she was going to her death.

She held her breath and closed her eyes during the fearful descent.

When she had passed through the flames and found herself comparatively uninjured, a sudden hope arose in her breast that she might come out all right yet.

This thought no sooner entered her mind than she struck the water with a splash and sank below its surface.

Down, down, the girl went, for many feet.

When she struggled to the surface again she was at least two hundred yards from the place where she had fallen in.

Blinded and half choked, she kept her head above the water, and in a few seconds she was beyond the limits of the roaring fire and smoke.

The girl did not offer to struggle in the least, but allowed the merciless current to carry her along at its will.

This was the wisest thing she could do, for it left her what strength she possessed to be used later on.

On she whirled, the current running so strong that she kept on top of the water without the least effort on her part.

In a few more seconds the falls will be reached.

Azurma hears the angry roar of the tide in her ears, and prepares herself for the worst.

She lifts her head for a single instant, and sees the foaming crest but a few yards distant.

The next minute, with a rush and a roar, she is carried over.

Contrary to her expectations, she is not dashed to a shapeless mass upon a bed of jagged rocks, but finds herself struggling in a lake of comparatively still water.

Azurma knew how to swim, and, after brushing her long tresses from her eyes, she drew a long breath and started for the shore, close at hand.

Faint and exhausted, she reached it, and sank upon the ground in a semi-unconscious condition.

She was aroused to her full senses presently by hearing the pattering made by some animal running toward her.

In an instant she sprang to her feet.

A cry of joy escaped her lips.

Coming toward her was Jupiter, the dog she had seen go over the falls with his master the day before.

The animal came directly to her feet and lay down, acting in a very strange manner. His head was covered plentifully with clotted blood, showing the girl that he was suffering from a severe wound.

Lying upon the ground, he looked her in the face and whined in a piteous manner.

"Poor dog," said Azurma. "What has become of your master? Is he dead? If not, take me to him."

She waved her hand for the dog to get up and lead the way.

He seemed to comprehend her meaning, but acted in a dazed sort of way.

Running away from her for about fifty yards, he suddenly turned and made a circle, and then rolled over and over upon the ground.

Instead of being frightened at these strange actions, Azurma became interested.

Instinct told her that something unusual ailed the dog.

She made up her mind to find out what it was, if possible.

Quickly making her way to his side, she talked to him in a soothing manner, and then proceeded to examine the wound on his head.

A moment's inspection sufficed to show her that the animal's skull had received a fracture, and that a part of the bone was depressed.

Something told her that if she could lift the piece of bone back to its place, Jupiter would be all right.

A needle-like instrument was pinned to the white, gauzy sash about her waist, and with this she endeavored to do the job.

Though she knew little or nothing about surgery, she was successful.

The dog howled piteously during the operation, but did not offer to prevent her from doing it.

When it was finished he rolled over on his side and appeared to fall into a deep sleep. The girl bathed the dog's wound with her water-soaked garments, and then seated herself by his side to await developments.

It must have been an hour before the dog began to show signs of awakening, and as soon as he did, Azurma, who had heard Reginald Lacy call him by name, arose to her feet.

"Come, Jupiter; show me where your master is."

The animal seemed to have fully recovered; he began springing about her feet, uttering his quick, sharp barks in a joyful manner.

Then, catching Azurma by the dress, he attempted to pull her along after him in the direction of the opening where the light came from.

"I'll go with you willingly," said the girl, catching on to the idea that Lacy was somewhere in that direction.

Away they went, the faithful dog leading, and ever and anon turning around to see if Azurma was still following.

In this manner they soon reached the identical place Lacy had entered several hours previously.

Azurma was very much puzzled at her surroundings. She, nor none of her people, had ever been in that portion of the underground country before, but she could plainly see the tracks made by Lacy, and concluded to follow as far as Jupiter chose to lead her.

Along through the lighted passage they went until they arrived at the point where Lacy had been pounced upon and captured by the Naztecs when in the act of hurling the boulder down upon the defenseless form of his enemy.

Azurma's quick eye told her that a struggle had taken place here, for she found the shred of a garment, evidently a piece of the shirt Lacy wore, while upon the ground was a clot of blood.

But as she could find no more of the latter, she rightly judged that it had come from the dog.

A strange light shone in the girl's eyes as she surveyed her surroundings.

"Is it possible that the last words I addressed to the women of Hez will come true?" she asked herself. "I have escaped death, and am now in the limits of another country, where people must certainly live, for they were not animals who carried off the dog's master and left the poor creature lying here for dead. I will go down there where it is so light; Jupiter seems anxious to go, and I will follow."

Without any further hesitation she started down the descent, and at length stood in the cave in which Owens had been lying bound hand and foot. [25]

But the place was deserted now, and Azurma followed the dog through the opening at the other side, and stepped into the single street of the strange, little city.

The scene that met the girl's eyes was so entirely different to what she had anticipated that for a moment she was completely bewildered.

But not so with the dog.

He gave a single bark and dashed away with the speed of the wind toward the further end of the street, where a large number of people were congregated.

It was at this identical moment that the contest of strength between Reginald Lacy and Philander Owens was about to take place.

Jupiter reached the spot just as the enraged Owens was about to plunge the gleaming blade into his master's heart.

With a mighty bound the animal sprang upon the would-be assassin and bore him to the ground.

Then, but for the interposition of a number of the Naztecs, he would have literally torn him to pieces.

As it was, Owens' shoulder was so badly lacerated by the dog's teeth that he had to be carried from the place in a semi-conscious condition.

Lacy staggered to the side of Jupiter and hugged him as a mother would her child.

The Naztecs gazed upon the scene with a look of wonderment in their eyes.

True, they had such things as dogs in their country, but none like the faithful animal who was now before them, and who had saved his master's life!

At a signal from the king, or ruler, of the place, the crowd clapped their hands in a burst of applause, and then began singing a sort of chant.

At this moment Azurma, who had hitherto been unobserved, came upon them.

Reginald Lacy was one of the first to notice her, and when he did so he gave a start of surprise.

She had joined the Naztecs in singing the chant, and appeared to be perfectly acquainted with it.

The moment the king laid his eyes upon the newcomer, he made a sudden signal, and everybody, save Lacy and the girl herself, dropped upon their knees.

Azurma seemed as much astonished as Lacy at the proceedings, but she did not hesitate to shake hands with the man who had preceded her to the queer country.

"Do you know these people?" asked Lacy, quickly.

"No; I never saw nor heard of them before."

"Do you understand their language?"

"I know the chant they were singing. It was learned to the people of Hez by Roderique de Amilo, the founder of the race."

"Oh!" exclaimed the man, brightening up; "if that is the case, you can, most likely, make yourself understood to them. Are you acquainted with the language in which the chant is sung?"

"I am."

"Then advance to that man over there and ask him who and what they are, and what they are going to do with us."

He pointed to the king, who stood with bowed head, as he spoke.

Azurma at once obeyed, and when she began talking the king lifted his head and nodded in a pleased manner.

He replied to all the girls' questions, who, in turn, translated the conversation to Lacy.

The substance of it was that the people were really called Naztecs, and that their race had been in existence for hundreds of years.

For the past century the population had gradually dwindled, from some unknown cause, and they now numbered scarcely seven hundred, all told.

Many, many years before, the king said, one of their beautiful maidens had disappeared, leaving word that she would surely come back, or else send some one in her place, who was as beautiful as her, in some future generation.

This had been recorded by the forefathers of the Naztecs, and, consequently, they were always on the lookout for the girl to turn up.

When they saw Azurma they took it for granted that she was the one sent in place of the lost maiden of ages before.

With this brief explanation we will proceed.

Azurma was cute enough to allow the Naztecs to believe that she was really the one they took her to be.

By so doing she came in possession of a power which she would not otherwise have had.

She had no difficulty in persuading the king to set Lacy and his dog free, and give them the privilege of going anywhere about the city.

She told his royal highness where she had come from, and he at once set forth his desire to visit Hez, if possible.

Whereupon Azurma set her people down as a bloodthirsty race, and offered to lead the Naztecs upon them at some future day, and exterminate them.

This seemed to satisfy the king, and he gave orders that hereafter Azurma should be treated as a princess.

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## CHAPTER XVIII.

### WHAT HAPPENED TO DICK AND QUEEN OLIVE.

When Dick Vincey felt the cold snout of an animal touching his face, a convulsive shudder ran over his body.

He thought that his earthly career was ended, for a certainty.

But, instead of being seized and torn to pieces by the horrible picuasus, as he supposed it to be, the animal uttered a low whine, and began licking his face.

Almost at the same instant the boy heard footsteps approaching.

Then it flashed across his mind that the animal who stood over him must be a dog.

He opened his eyes and strove in vain to pierce the inky darkness and see what it was.

The footsteps were coming nearer all the time, and fearful that the person who was approaching might turn in some other direction, Dick shouted out:

"Help!"

Queen Olive awoke with a wild cry of alarm on her lips, and tremblingly asked Dick what had happened.

Before he could reply, a light flashed up and illumined the cave, almost blinding the two prisoners for a moment.

But this soon passed off, and they saw a man, attired in a fantastic garb of limited extent, hurrying toward them.

A huge dog was standing over Dick, which the boy recognized at once as Jupiter, the dog he had seen go over the falls with his master. [26]

But when the man halted in front of them and held his lighted torch near their faces, a cry of astonishment, intermingled with joy, left the boy prisoner's lips.

It was no other than Reginald Lacy himself who stood before them.

Lacy seemed to be as much surprised as Dick, but drawing a knife from his belt, he quickly severed the bonds that held the couple prisoners.

"How came you here?" he asked, as Dick arose to his feet and patted Jupiter on the head.

"You shall hear the whole story," was the reply; "but let us first get out of this place. I, for one, have had quite enough of it to last the rest of my life. Come, Olive, we are saved!"

Without any further ado, Lacy led the way out of the cave, going through a long, dark passage, the mouth of which opened into the vast cavern just above the falls.

Once here, Dick breathed a sigh of relief.

"Now, Mr. Lacy," said he, "I will tell you how the queen of Hez and myself came to be in the predicament you found us."

He then related, in as few words as possible, all that had transpired in the past few hours, winding up by asking Lacy how he and the dog escaped death when they went whirling over the falls.

"That is easily explained," returned Reginald Lacy, with a smile. "There were no rocks at the foot of the falls, and, consequently, the danger of going over them is not great. There is another person who went safely over them since I did."

"Who was it?" asked Dick. "Surely not Azurma?"

"But it was, just the same. She is now living, and is as hale and hearty as she ever was."

"Where is she?" asked Queen Olive, in an interested manner.

"In the city of the Naztecs, a few miles from here."

"What do you mean?" gasped Dick, in astonishment.

"Exactly what I say, my boy. There is a race of people, similar in character to those who live in the Land of Hez, not far from here. Their city is my home for the present, as well as that of Azurma. But come, we had better be moving from here; there is no telling when one of those big turtle spiders might show up. What do you say if you both accompany me to the city of the Naztecs? I'll guarantee that you will be used well."

"We will go!" said Queen Olive, suddenly. "It would not do for me to go back to Hez at this late hour. The people would scarcely believe the abduction, and it is hard to tell exactly what might take place."

"Lead the way, Mr. Lacy," spoke up Dick. "I am satisfied with anything. This is a country of wonder and mystery, and I desire to see all I can of it."

Reginald Lacy had left the city with his dog to make an exploration of the surrounding country.

Unconsciously his steps led him to the spot where Dick and his fair companion lay bound hand and foot.

But it was Jupiter's fault more than his own that he came that far away from the little city.

The dog wanted to pursue an upward course, and Lacy allowed him to have his way.

He had passed through many caverns and chambers, and were it not for the dog, he knew that he would never be able to find his way back again.

But Jupiter was a dog that could be depended upon, and no one knew this better than his master.

Lacy was very much pleased at finding Dick, and as they threaded their way through the mazes of the underground world, he told the boy about the presence of Philander Owens in the city they were bound for.

"I wish," said he, "that you would see him, and endeavor to get him to let what has passed be forgotten. He is very bitter against me, though for what reason it is not likely that anybody, save the pair of us, will ever know."

"I will do all I can," returned Dick.

The beautiful queen spoke never a word during the descent into the valley below.

That she was becoming weary and footsore was plainly evident by the manner in which she clung to Dick's arm.

She was as much puzzled as Dick when they entered the lighted chamber and started through it.

But when they came to what lay beyond she could scarcely believe her senses.

She had never laid eyes upon such buildings as the little city contained, and could hardly bring herself to believe that she was not dreaming.

With Dick it was different. He was not surprised at anything, but took every new thing he saw the same as though he had always been aware of its existence.

As Lacy and his dog entered the city with the two strangers, much excitement was manifested by the Naztecs.

They crowded around the newcomers, and began asking all sorts of questions in their peculiar language.

Queen Olive understood it perfectly, and she lost no time in giving them all the information they desired.

Attracted by the confusion outside, Azurma came forth from the room assigned to her in the purple-hued building.

As soon as she observed who the strangers were, a cry of joy left her lips, and she rushed to them.

"Where is Leo? Did he not come with you?" she asked of Dick.

"No, he did not," was the reply. "So you escaped death, after all, Azurma?"

"Yes, but no thanks to her who condemned me to death!" said the girl, looking at her former queen.

"Was it my fault that you were condemned to death?" asked Queen Olive, in a calm voice.

"No," replied the girl, after a moment's thought. "Forgive me for speaking as I did. You did but your duty."

Then, as is generally the case, the two women embraced each other, and were more friendly than they had ever been before.

The Naztecs seemed very proud of their visitors, and treated them with the utmost kindness.

They were also given rooms in the palace, and a royal reception was held in their honor.

But though Dick was treated after the manner of a prince, and had the girl he loved near him, he was yet far from being happy.

Had he been in his own country, with Leo and the rest of his associates about him, it would have been different.

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## CHAPTER XIX.

### LEO WEDS, AFTER ALL.

When the new queen had reigned for a year, she one day took it in her head to modify one of the principal laws of Hez.

It was to change the time of the maidens waiting for their husbands from two years to six months.

As this was more of a common-sense view of the matter, her people unanimously agreed to it, with the exception of Roderique de Amilo.

He was for keeping the ancient laws of the country the same.

But one against so many did not amount to much, so the law went into force.

Elated by the favor with which her new law was received, the queen, whose name, by the way, was Nalie, concluded to make another change, and a big one, at that.

Hitherto none of the males born in Hez had been allowed to marry under any consideration.

Consequently the race was fast dying out, as very few men from the outside world came to the strange country, and when they did, it was merely by accident.

When her majesty issued this edict, she announced that her reason for doing so was to keep the race in existence forever.

This, too, met with the approval of the Hezzians.

The day soon arrived which the queen had fixed when all those who desired to enter a state of matrimony could do so, and nearly all the unmarried ones took advantage of it.

The building in which dwelt the supposed founder of the Hez race, Roderique de Amilo, who was to perform the ceremony, was a circular one, and contained but two rooms. The rest of the space was taken up by a broad hall, which opened at either end of the house.

There were no seats of any kind in the hall, and, consequently, all had to stand up.

When Leo, whom the queen had chosen for her future husband, and Nalie arrived, De Amilo had just commenced to marry some of the Hezzians to the maidens they had chosen.

The ceremony was about the same as the Spanish one of to-day, only it was somewhat shorter.

The couples were married as fast as the acting priest could rattle off the words of the ceremony, and sent away happy.

At length it came Prof. Easy's turn, and with his face wreathed in smiles, he stepped up to the scratch with his blushing, young bride leaning upon his arm.

As soon as the knot was tied, they marched off to the little house that had been assigned to them.

Next came Martin Haypole, and then Lucky.

When these had been disposed of, there was but one couple left, and that was Leo and the queen.

A few had remained to see their ruler married, but the majority had gone away to their usual avocations.

As Leo and his fair companion stepped to the front, there was a disturbance at one end of the hall, and a figure rushed in.

Leo turned hastily around, and a cry of astonishment left his lips.

It was Azurma, the girl whom he thought dead, who had rushed in.

She stood in front of Queen Nalie with uplifted hands, but not a word escaped her lips.

Everybody in the building recognized her, and a wild yell of terror went up.

Down upon their faces went all save Leo, who was thunderstruck, but not frightened in the least.

Azurma glided to him, and, placing her hand upon his shoulder, said:

"Come, my Leo; I will take you to your cousin Dick, who yet lives."

Hardly knowing what he did, the boy followed her from the building.

No one barred their progress, and in a couple of minutes they had entered one of the numerous passages, and were lost to view.

Leo followed Azurma through the passage without saying a word.

He was very much mystified at the girl's sudden appearance.

Over a year before she had been condemned to death, and he had seen her with his own eyes go shooting into the turbulent stream that flowed through the Devil's Kingdom.

He remembered Azurma's last words, as he followed her along, and he began to think that not only the Land of Hez was one of mystery, but the ones who lived in it mysterious, also.

The girl clung to his arm and did not offer to speak until they had reached a point fully a mile from the village governed by Queen Nalie.

Azurma related her miraculous escape, and told how she reached the land of the Naztecs, how

Reginald Lacy and his dog had found Dick and Queen Olive in the cave, and wound up by saying that both she and Queen Olive had been created princesses in the Naztec nation, and that Dick had been the king's adviser for the past seven months.

She also informed him that Philander Owens was a resident of the city, and that he and Reginald Lacy had buried the hatchet, and were now fast friends.

They had married sisters, she said, and lived in the same house.

All this was startling news to Leo, and he longed for the moment when he could meet Dick and embrace him.

Azurma, who knew the way perfectly, led him to the grounds near the foot of the falls, by way of the rocky descent near the Devil's Kingdom.

In a little over an hour from the time the two left Hez they reached the mouth of the long, lighted chamber leading to the strange underground city.

Before they were halfway through this they met Reginald Lacy and Jupiter, the dog.

The meeting between Leo and Lacy was a very pleasant one, and the faithful dog, who recognized the young fellow at once, pranced playfully about his feet.

"Come," said Lacy, leading the way—"come and see what you think of our city."

They reached the end of the wide passage and descended into the cave below.

Leo was not a little astonished at what he saw, and when he reached the center of the little place he could not suppress a cry of admiration.

The meeting between the cousins was a joyous, not to say affecting, one.

Leo had supposed Dick to be dead, and Dick had worried considerably as to how Leo was getting on in Hez.

Leo's surprise was complete when Olive—as we will hereafter call the ex-queen of Hez—came [28] forth, carrying an infant son about a month old in her arms.

"This is my wife and son, Leo," said Dick. "The youngster is named after you. What do you think of him?"

"What do I think of him? I congratulate you, old fellow! Why, it don't seem possible that you are a man of family. And your wife! Well, she hasn't lost any of her good looks. I tell you, wonders will never cease. I am the only single man left in our party of swamp explorers now."

"Is that so?" asked Dick. "I thought that none of them could marry until two years had elapsed."

"The new queen changed the law. The professor, Haypole and Lucky were married to-day; and if Azurma had not showed up just as she did, I, too, would have been a benedict."

"Who was to have been the bride?" asked Olive.

"Your sister—Queen Nalie."

"Ah! Was it an act of your own free will and accord?"

"No, hardly;" and Leo explained the whole circumstance from beginning to end.

"How is the new queen liked by the people of Hez?"

"Very well, I guess."

"Do you know one thing?"—and Dick's wife called Leo aside. "I have agreed to leave this underground world with my husband, if we can find a way to get out, and go, with him to the land of his own people. He is making arrangements to lead a number of the men of this place to Hez and capture it. That once done, he says, he can easily find some means of getting to the outside world."

"That's true, old fellow, chimed in Dick.

"I now have eighty good fighting men at my command, and I think we shall be able to down the Hezzians, even if they do outnumber us."

"You can count on me to do my part, I assure you," said Leo.

The Naztecs seemed to be pleased at another addition to their number.

Dick, Lacy and Owens had taught them many things they had been entirely ignorant of; and as they were an intelligent race, they were constantly on the lookout to learn something new.

Leo now appeared to be more contented than he had at any time since he came to the land of mystery.

He soon got used to the mode of living in the country of the Naztecs, and, like his predecessors, soon acquired their language.

There was only one thing that bothered him, save his desire to get to his native heath once more, and that was the undying love Azurma bore him.

He liked the girl well enough; but, unlike Dick, he did not allow himself to become "gone" on any of the beauties of the strange land.

But duty told him that he ought to marry the girl, for she was growing thinner every day, and all on account of him.

He concluded to wed her, and make the best of it, and one day, about three weeks after his advent into the Naztec country, Leo and Azurma were made man and wife according to the established rules of the country.

There never was a happier bride in the whole world than Azurma; and from that time until the day of her death Leo never regretted marrying her.

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## CHAPTER XX. MANUFACTURING A CANNON.

Leo Malvern had not been long in the city of the Naztecs ere he began to assist Dick in training the men how to fight.

Like his cousin, he desired to make his way to the Land of Hez and force a way to the outside world.

Neither allowed the Naztecs to become aware of what their intentions were after they had once defeated the Hezzians in battle, but trusted to luck to leave them in possession of Hez and force their way out.

While working about the soil near the city, Dick had discovered the materials for making a first-class blasting powder, and by means of this they hoped to blow open the door in the obelisk and thus find their way to freedom.

The discovery of a combustible substance that could be set off by a spark set Philander Owens to thinking.

He knew full well that the men of Hez outnumbered the party Dick and Leo intended to lead against them, by three or four to one.

Consequently, something more powerful in the line of weapons than spears and axes must be introduced.

Owens was an inventive sort of genius, and it did not take him long to figure out how a destructive weapon could be made.

There was a bed of copper ore in the vicinity of the underground city of the Naztecs, and Owens went to work mining a quantity of this.

He did not inform anyone of his intentions until he was forced to for want of help in his undertaking.

One day he called Dick and Leo aside and said:

"Are you most ready to march upon the Hezzians and fight your way to the outside world?"

"Yes," replied Dick; "we have got the eighty men pretty well drilled now."

"If we had a nice, little cannon—say a ten-pounder—we could work our way through them nicely, couldn't we?"

"I should say we could!" exclaimed Leo. "But why do you speak of such a thing when it is entirely out of the question?"

"I don't think it is out of the question, my boy."

"What do you mean?" asked Dick, with wide-open eyes.

"I mean just this—I am going to cast a gun."

The cousins were too much astonished to speak, but when Owens went on and explained his plans, they fell in with him, heart and soul.

The first thing to do now was to procure something to melt the ore in.

Dick concluded to ask the king for what he wanted, and he accordingly did so, telling him that it would add to their advantage in routing the Hezzians when the attack was made.

"There is naught in the city that would serve for such a purpose, unless it be in the sacred cave."

"Where is that?" asked Dick.

"On the hillside, at the south of the city."

"Will you allow me to go there and see if I can find what I want?"

"Wait," said the king; "let me tell you about the sacred cave. The mouth of it is sealed, and has been for many, many years. It was decreed by a former king that no person of the Naztec nation should ever break the seal and enter it. It contains all the articles required for smelting copper, silver, gold and other metals. At that time working in metals was one of the principal industries of the place, since it was then that the houses in the city were built.

"You will observe that they are all built of stone and metal. The metal, of course, had to be cast to be wrought into its proper shape. And so it went on, till the houses were all done, and the city of the Naztecs completed. Then it was that the king issued the edict that all the smelting appurtenances should be placed in the cave and its entrance sealed."

"That's quite an interesting story, I assure you," remarked Dick. "Then, if what you say is true, the very things we need are in the cave."

"Yes, but we dare not open it."

"None of the Naztec nation dare do it, you mean."

"Exactly."

"But I am not of the Naztec nation. I may open it, I suppose?"

The king thought a moment, and then said:

"As you please. I will neither tell you to do it nor not to do it. I trust that you will in due time get your weapon of warfare constructed, though."

That settled it.

Dick at once repaired to Leo and Philander Owens, and told them what he had learned.

Reginald Lacy was sought, and together the four repaired to the sacred cave.

They had no difficulty in finding it, since the king had told Dick exactly where it was.

By dint of using a couple of heavy, metal bars, they managed to pry a stone from the entrance, which was sealed with a substance like cement.

When the stone was rolled sufficiently aside, a cry of joy escaped the lips of the four.

The cave was evidently just as it had been left when the workers in metal had completed their job so many years before.

It contained a pair of huge furnaces, crucibles, ladles for dipping out the molten metal, and everything needful.

But all these things were quaint and very ancient in appearance, reminding our friends of what they had read concerning the building of King Solomon's Temple, in the Bible days.

Not one of the Naztecs bothered them while they busied themselves about the cave.

There was an abundance of fuel for the furnaces in the place, and before an hour had elapsed Dick and Leo had kindled the fires.

Meanwhile, Owens and Lacy had been busy in conveying the copper ore to the place.

Not until they had deposited all they thought they needed in the cave did they discover an abundant supply already there, of copper, silver and gold.

The silver was more plentiful than any of the rest of the ore and at the suggestion of Lacy, it was decided to cast their cannon of four-fifths of copper and one-fifth silver.

Quite an expensive gun, the reader might say. But of what use was the silver to our friends in that out-of-the-way place? Even if they succeeded in defeating the Hezzians and getting out of the underground place, it would be impossible to carry much away with them.

Anyhow, there was more than enough gold to load each of the four down, and they made up their minds to take all they could of this with them.

Now that they had succeeded in obtaining the metal and the means of melting it, the next thing was to manufacture a mold.

But Philander Owens considered this the easiest part of it, and in less than half a day he had made one sufficient to answer the purpose.

He formed it by digging a hole in a bed of soft sand of the depth required for the proposed cannon, and then by running a round piece of wood of the size of the bore they wanted down into this within a few inches of the bottom, the mold was complete.

Of course the touchhole would have to be drilled, and the wood burned out afterward.

When everything was in readiness, Dick and Leo held the stick firmly in its place, and Lacy and Owens poured in the molten mixture.

There was a furious sizzling for a minute or so, and then, when the steam caused by the intense heat coming in contact with damp sand had cleared away, they saw that, to all appearances, their cast had been successful.

An examination told them that it was a success, and a complete one, at that. They did not even have to burn the stick out, for the wood, though being of the hardest kind, had shrunk a trifle, which allowed them to pull it out easily enough.

"Hurrah!" exclaimed Leo, waving his cap in the air. "Now, to bore out the touchhole and our cannon is completed!"

As soon as it had cooled, they dug it out and rolled it over upon the ground.

While Lacy and Owens were engaged in boring out the touchhole, the cousins melted up a number of bars of gold into a shape convenient to take with them.

It took the two men some time to make the required hole, and, at length, when they had completed it, they had been at least twelve hours in constructing their cannon.

"Now," observed Dick, "we must try it before we go home."

The rest promptly agreed with him, and he proceeded to load the huge weapon with a good charge of the powder that had been manufactured by them.

This was plentifully wadded and pounded in thoroughly, and then they prepared to set it off.

To avoid any possible accident, a slow-match was rigged and lighted, and then they repaired to a safe distance to await the result. [30]

There was a fizzing noise, made by the slow-match, and a few seconds later a terrific explosion rang out, which shook the very ground upon which they stood.

At the very instant it died out a rumbling sound was heard, and the unknown light that illumined

the strange country went out as if by magic, leaving them in total darkness!

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## CHAPTER XXI.

### THE EARTHQUAKE SHOCK.

Two years had slipped by since the advent of the party into the land of mystery, and at length the white men left in Hez determined they would endeavor to find their companions who had disappeared, and who, they believed, were not far distant, but for some reason were prevented from rejoining them.

Prof. Easy, Haypole and Jones concluded to make an effort to find a way to get below on a level with the Devil's Kingdom.

They set out very early one morning, taking the passage that led to the brink of the latter-named place.

When they arrived there they began carefully studying their surroundings, to find a means of descent.

They had scarcely been there ten minutes when a low rumble was heard, coming, it seemed, from beneath them.

"An earthquake!" exclaimed the professor.

The words had hardly left his lips when all three were thrown upon the ground by a tremendous shock, which lasted nearly half a minute.

When they rose to their feet, a few moments later, in a half-dazed condition, a startling sight met their gaze.

The light, which had hitherto been quite bright, was now very dim, and flashed forth in fitful bursts.

But it was enough to enable them to see that a huge pile of rocks had been scattered about, showing a clear passage to the country below.

"If there are no further shocks," remarked the professor, calmly, "this will prove a Godsend to us. It has shown us what we have been looking for for so long."

They waited for perhaps half an hour, and then, as they experienced no further signs of another quake, they started down the decline before them.

Down they went, until they struck the level of the stream that emerged from the Devil's Kingdom.

Once here, they had no difficulty in discovering footprints made by somebody who had been there before them.

"Hurrah!" shouted the Yankee. "I knew I was right. We'll find Leo and Dick sure—see if we don't! These are the prints of the gal's feet, who brought Leo here."

His companions were forced to admit that he was right, and so they followed the trail along the bank of the stream until the falls were reached, and then another descent had to be made.

There was nothing to hinder them from going down, so they did so at once.

Andrew Jones produced a torch, and was just about to light it, when Haypole caught him by the arm in an excited manner, and exclaimed:

"Gosh-ding it, look there! It looks like a political torchlight procession, don't it?"

He pointed to a spot on their left as he spoke.

About three miles distant they plainly observed a band of men, carrying torches, emerge from the mouth of a cavernous passage.

"I ain't got a great deal of money with me, but I'll be ding-wizzened if I won't bet fifty dollars that Leo is in that gang!" said the Yankee, producing his pocketbook in a matter-of-fact way.

"I have not got any money, and if I had I would not bet with you," returned Jones. "I am of the same opinion as you. Let us advance toward them; we can get near enough to see just who and what they are without being observed ourselves."

"Agreed!" exclaimed Prof. Easy; whereupon they set out in the direction of the approaching torchlights.

As they gradually neared them, they saw that there were about thirty persons marching along, dragging some heavy concern behind them, and carrying torches.

"Do you know what I am a-goin' ter do?" said Martin Haypole, coming to a halt. "I am a-goin' ter fire off my revolver an' prove that Leo Malvern is in that crowd."

In an instant he had drawn his revolver and fired a shot.

The echo of the report had scarcely died out when there was an answering one from the approaching torch bearers.

"Great boots!" yelled the Yankee, jumping about three feet in the air; "what did I tell you?"

Then he opened wide his mouth and led his companions in a deafening cheer.

## CHAPTER XXII.

### FREEDOM AT LAST.

Well satisfied that Leo was in the approaching party of torch bearers, the professor and his two companions hurried to meet them as fast as they could run.

In less than five minutes the two parties met.

A cry of joy went up from the three searchers.

There were four men of their own race in the party of torch bearers.

A single glance told them this much, and they also recognized all four.

They were Leo Malvern, Dick Vincey, Reginald Lacy and Philander Owens.

Martin Haypole uttered a whoop, and, rushing forward, seized the hands of the two brave, young fellows who had been his companions in their journey through the Everglades to the end of mystery. [31]

"I'm downright glad to see you both alive an' well!" he exclaimed. "Where in thunderation have you been so long, Dick?"

"I can tell you the whole thing in a few words," replied Dick, as he shook hands with his former associates.

Then he proceeded to relate what had befallen him from the time he and the queen had disappeared from the magic chamber.

When he came to the point where their newly constructed cannon was fired off, in order to test it, he said:

"The report must have caused some disturbance among the gases and electric fluids in the underground country, for immediately afterward there came a terrible shock, and everything was in darkness.

"It seemed to be a veritable earthquake, and we were thrown to the ground with such force that it was several minutes before we regained our senses and rose to our feet.

"When we did so we knew that something awful had happened, so we put for the city with all possible speed.

"On arriving there, we discovered that it was but a mass of ruins.

"Every building in it was leveled to the ground, and all the combustible substances in the place had taken fire from the burning furnaces that had been in some of the houses.

"As the flames leaped upward it was a grand but terrible sight, and we could but look upon it with a feeling of awe.

"But we were sickened at heart when we learned, a few minutes later, that of all the inhabitants of the thriving little city, only twenty-nine were left.

"The others had all been crushed to death by the falling buildings.

"Among the victims of the terrible disaster, brought about by the discharge of our gun, were our wives—I mean Queen Olive, Azurma and two Naztec ladies, whom Lacy and Owens were wedded to.

"The survivors were terror-stricken, and begged us to lead them from the spot at once to the land of the Hezzians, and fearful that another shock might take place, we placed our gun on an improvised drag and started, knowing that we could do nothing further for those who lay beneath the ruins of the city.

"Full of sorrow, we turned the angle that hid our view of the destroyed city, and journeyed through the chamber of rock to the open.

"Here everything was in darkness, but we had provided ourselves with torches, and lighted them as we emerged. Shortly after that we heard the shot you fired, and Leo answered it. That is all there is of it, but it is quite enough, I can tell you."

There were tears in Dick's eyes as he related the events that had so recently taken place, and, recognizing the situation, the professor and his two companions did not question him further.

On the contrary, they related their experiences since they had parted company, and then, seizing hold of the ropes attached to the drag, they all started for Hez.

Andrew Jones knew full well that the Hezzians would not allow them to depart in peace from the underground world, or he would never have sanctioned the movement to drag the cannon along with them.

He thought if the destructive powers of the weapon was once proved to them, they would give in and allow the party to depart.

It was no easy matter to drag the heavy piece up the steep hills they were forced to traverse, but there were enough to do it, and so they managed it very well.

On their way to Hez they observed that the earthquake, or whatever it might be called, had caused many changes.

But, luckily for them, their way was not blocked up, and in due time they came in sight of the village.

But what a wonderful change had been wrought here!

The surface of the ground above had given way and caved in, making the opening above the village of stone huts more than four times its former size.

The majority of the buildings were buried from sight beneath tons of dirt, and not a sign of any of the Hezzians could be seen.

The earth had caved in in the form of a slant, and, with a cry of joy, our friends began mounting this.

When they reached the top crust of the earth once more, a prayer of heartfelt thanks left the lips of one and all.

But the Naztecs could not be induced to follow them to the outside.

The light of day was so strange to them that they were too frightened to proceed further.

In vain did Dick and Leo coax them to come up; but they only shook their heads, and at length turned their steps in the direction of their former homes in the bowels of the earth.

The swamp explorers found themselves upon a comparatively high piece of ground, which was surrounded by the marsh lands that composed the greater portion of the vast Everglades.

It was the first time they had set eyes upon the huge trees and tangled undergrowth of the outside world in two whole years, and, dreary as their surroundings were, they thought it the most beautiful sight they had ever witnessed.

Those who had reached the earth's surface were Dick Vincey, Leo Malvern, Prof. Remington Easy, Martin Haypole, Andrew Jones, Reginald Lacy and Philander Owens.

The only one missing of those who had entered the door in the obelisk, two years before, was Lucky, the darky.

Leo and Dick thought of this at about the same time, and were for going back to search for him. [32]

As they were arguing over the matter with their friends they heard a whistle in the distance, and, on looking in the direction it came from, discovered the darky approaching them.

"Hurrah!" yelled Lucky, as he observed them, "I's so glad I hab foun' youse, Massa Leo and Massa Dick."

"How did you get out of the Land of Hez?" asked Leo.

"De roof done cave in a little while back an' kill putty nigh all de people. I run for de stairs dat we cum down when we fust cum here, an' went up them till I seed a light. I got out easy enough, as de big gravestone had fall down an' broke in two. I was terribly scared—'deed I was; an' waited in de bushes till I heered youse a-talkin'. Den I whistled an' cum over here."

That was the explanation Lucky gave for his sudden appearance, and it about covered the matter.

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## CHAPTER XXIII.

### OUT OF THE EVERGLADES.

"Now, then," observed Dick Vincey, "let us leave the land of mystery forever! We have passed through many strange things while in it, and many enjoyable days, as well. Let us say farewell to the underground world and our families, who are buried beneath the ruins of the Naztec city and the village of Hez!"

There were tears in the eyes of the young man as he spoke, and, with their eyes turned to the cavern they had emerged from, all hands uttered the one word:

"Farewell!"

Then they left the spot and started for the place where the obelisk had been.

The huge stone column lay upon the ground in a dozen pieces, while the stairs leading into the earth's bowels were plainly visible.

"Now," said Leo, "to get out of the Everglades."

As they started over the ground in the direction they first came, Dick suddenly missed Jupiter, the dog, for the first time.

When he came to think of it, he had not seen him since they left the ruined city of the Naztecs.

He spoke about it to his friends.

"The poor animal must have been killed during the earthquake, and his master was too much excited to notice his absence," said Leo.

The attire worn by our friends was of the style of the places they had lived in, and they looked curious enough as they made their way through the swamp.

When they came through the Everglades, they had chipped the trees on the route they took, and as these marks were still plainly visible they anticipated but little difficulty in getting back to their boat, the *Maid of the Marsh*, which was looked upon with so much disgust by the Yankee.

They found the boat half covered with mud, but otherwise she was uninjured.

It took them nearly a day to clean her and get her ready for use once more, and when this job was finished all hands felt better.

A week or so later eight forlorn-appearing men might have been seen camped upon the borders of Lake Okechobee.

They were Dick Vincey, Leo Malvern, Prof. Remington Easy, Martin Haypole, Andrew Jones, Philander Owens, Reginald Lacy and the darky, Lucky.

The long gowns they wore were torn and dirty, and they looked more like a crowd of ragpickers than anything else.

But they would soon be in the limits of civilization again, and they felt thankful for it.

Their journey from the Land of Hez to their present position had been a perilous one, indeed.

But by perseverance and pluck they managed to elude the quicksands of the great swamp, and escape from being devoured by the ferocious alligators it contained.

Two weeks more and they reached the home of Leo Malvern.

It is needless to state that the cousins were received with pleasure.

Their relatives had long given them up as dead, and hence their joy at meeting them alive and well.

The wonderful story of their adventures was taken as a joke at first, but when all hands stoutly adhered to it, the relatives of Dick and Leo were forced to believe it.

"There are a few questions I would like to ask some of you fellows," said Martin Haypole, a day or two after their arrival at Leo's home. "First—who built the obelisk at the entrance of Hez? Second—was the legend of Hez true, and was Roderique de Amilo as old as he claimed? Third—was the pool and fountain in the dazzlingly lighted cavern really the Fountain of Youth Ponce de Leon was in search of? And, fourth—was it really the discharge of the cannon that caused the earthquake that wrought such a ruin upon the city of the Naztecs and the Land of Hez?"

As the Yankee asked these questions he knocked the ashes from his pipe and glanced around at his hearers.

"Your questions will never be answered in this world," replied the professor, gravely. "We can form our own opinions—that is all."

And so it is. We have stated the incidents of our story in a manner meant to be plain; now we will leave the reader to answer Martin Haypole's questions.

THE END.

The next issue of BRAVE AND BOLD, No. 128, will contain "Stonia Stedman's Triumph; or, A Young Mechanic's Trials." This story relates the experiences that befell a young workman, and shows how he eventually triumphed over a clique of jealous fellow workers, at the same time unearthing the schemes of a band of dangerous moonshiners. Be sure and read Stonia's gallant struggle

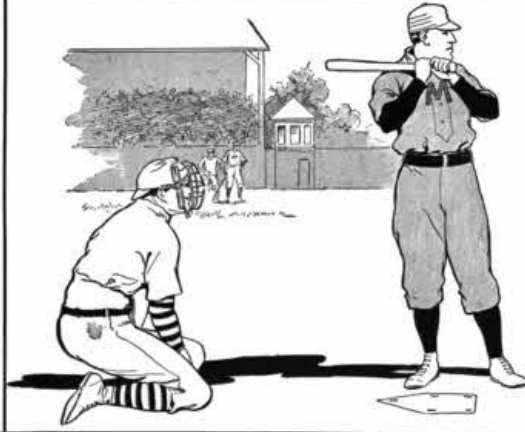
against great odds.

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# BE A ROOTER

**Root For a Record in the National Game and for Tip Top Prizes**

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Do You Want to Try for the Pennant?  
Do You Want a Fine Outfit for Your Team?  
Do You Want to Score High in the National Game?

**HERE IS YOUR CHANCE**

Root for the Famous Tip Top Prizes and Pennant



## PLAY BALL



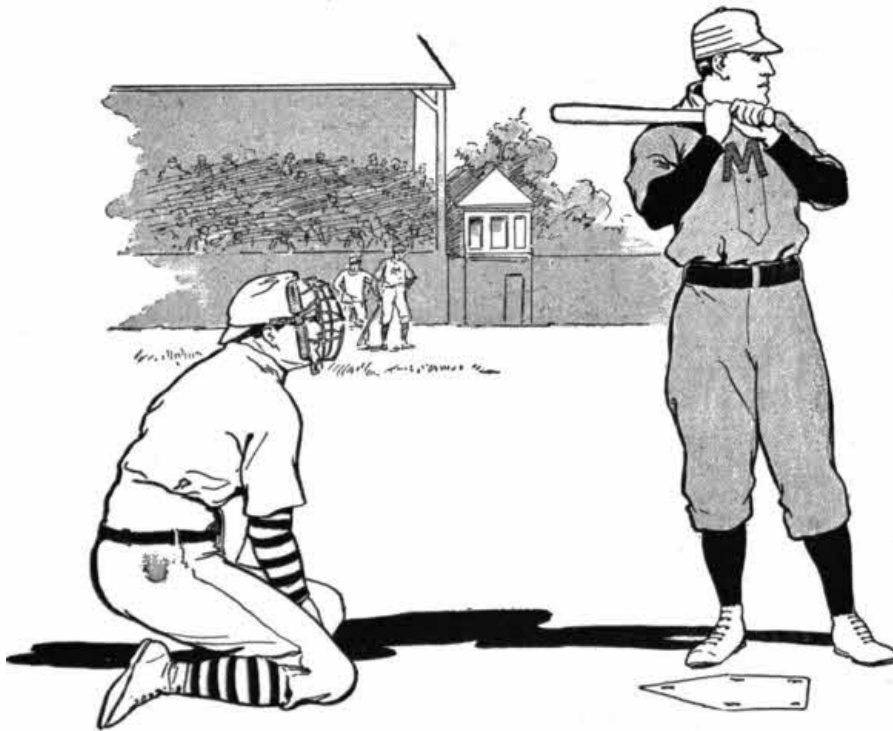
Watch Every Number for Further Announcements

# BE A ROOTER

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*Root For a Record in the National Game and for Tip Top Prizes*

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**TIP TOP'S NATIONAL BASE BALL CONTEST**

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**Do You Want to Try for the Pennant?**

**Do You Want a Fine Outfit for Your Team?**

**Do You Want to Score High in the National Game?**

*HERE IS YOUR CHANCE*

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**Root for the Famous Tip Top Prizes and  
Pennant**

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**PLAY BALL**

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*Watch Every Number for Further Announcements*

## Transcriber's Note:

Based on the available evidence, the author for this book is most likely Cornelius Shea.

This story originally appeared, very likely in a longer version, as "Under the Everglades; or, Two Years in a Land of Mystery," *Golden Hours* issues 176 through 185, June 13, 1891 to August 15, 1891, published by Norman L. Munro & Company.

Punctuation has been made consistent.

Variations in spelling and hyphenation were retained as they appear in the original publication, except that obvious typos have been corrected.

Changes have been made as follows:

p. 22: "hate as he darted" changed to "hate darted" (of hate darted)

p. 30: "looking for so" changed to "looking for for so" (looking for for so)

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\*\*\* END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK IN THE WONDERFUL LAND OF HEZ; OR, THE  
MYSTERY OF THE FOUNTAIN OF YOUTH \*\*\*

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