

 GRAND TALE OF STIRRING ADVENTURE !

THE LAND OF MYSTERY!



The cowardly renegade, scared half out of his senses by his intended victim's prompt action, yelled eagerly to his followers to fall back, and leave the white men alone.

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The Land of Mystery.

By CHAS. HAMILTON.



Jerry's Suspicions—A Cunning Traitor—Ambushed—A Fierce Attack—The Adventurers Make a Bold Stand

"I'll tell you what it is, Jack. I believe that darned monkey-faced half-breed Portugee guide of ours is playing us false. Here we've been sweating through dismal swamps and dense forest for days on end, and I'm hanged if we seem to be getting any nearer the promised land."

Gerald Langley halted a moment to light a fresh cigar after thus giving vent to his suspicions, while his chum cast a thoughtful glance at the individual in question, who was marching a little ahead of them in company with Hossen Ali, the Englishmen's Arab servant.

"I don't see what his object would be in tricking us," muttered Jack Masters, when his friend once more stepped forward to his side. "He's too big a coward to dream of attempting to rob us single-handed; and the coolie cattle who are carrying our baggage have too great a respect for our shooting powers to aid him in any such enterprise. We scored a big hit with the beggars by the easy way we dropped those lions the other night. No, Jerry; I fancy Mr. Alonzo Luis is too cunning a rascal to venture on any foul play with us."

"Maybe you're right," replied Langley dubiously; "but it seems a bit queer he should first excite our adventurous instincts by describing the wonders of this unknown country we're bound for, and then offer us his services as a guide without asking for any reward. What profit does he expect to make out of the journey?"

"What profit?" exclaimed Jack, gazing at his chum in surprise. "Why, man alive, he expects to have his share of such treasure as we have a chance to lay hold of in the land of mystery. Didn't he tell us that these strange people we are going to visit possess tons of precious jewels, such as few white men have ever laid eyes on, and value them so lightly, that we shall have no difficulty in carrying away enough to make us millionaires many times over, and that without committing bloodshed?"

"And you believe such a wild-brained yarn as that?" queried Jerry with a hard laugh. "Hang it, pard, I fancied you were a bit more fly. Why, the artful brute never even told us how he came by his wonderful knowledge, except that he muttered some nonsense about a dying Englishman merely to gull us the easier."

This blunt argument seemed to nonplus Jack for a moment; but he speedily recovered himself, and replied rather sharply: "If you suspected the rascal, why didn't you say so before we left the coast, and started on this march into the heart of Africa? You believed the yarn then, didn't you?"

Langley puffed moodily at his cigar before answering:

"True," he said slowly, "I was fool enough to be gulled by the skunk's glib tongue. Then he professed to be a friend of Dupois, though he was careful not to come forward before our French comrade set sail for Europe, and that helped to stifle my suspicions. Now, however, I feel pretty sure that we've been neatly tricked, and, personally, I'm going to keep a strict watch on Mr. Alonzo Luis, so as to be ready to put a bullet in him if he shows any inclination to play us false."

At this moment the subject of their conversation turned suddenly round, and, addressing the two white men with a grin, shouted blandly:

"Dere is a ribber ahead of us, senors. Ve vill halt dere for de night, an you mucho please."

Jack merely nodded in answer, while Jerry eyed their guide with a grim smile.

A few minutes later the little cortege arrived within sight of a broad, sluggish stream, both banks of which were covered with thick vegetation.

Under Hossen's superintendence, however, the half dozen native coolies who accompanied the adventurers soon cleared away the jungle for a space of some thirty feet along the side of the stream, and, piling up the débris in the middle of the clearing, set it alight, and began to cook their own and their masters' supper.

Meanwhile Jack, aroused by his chum's suspicions, had been closely questioning their guide on various points of his story, but Alonzo bore the cross-examination without flinching, and if he lied he proved himself a past master in the art of lying.

An iron grip seemed to fix itself on his neck, and he was jerked upward with a force that took his breath away.

"To-morrow, senors," he said in conclusion, "ve shall most likely reach de great lake de Engleeshman did speak me of. Den will you see dat I mucho truth speaking, genteelman."

"Very good," replied Jack, "We shall expect to arrive at this lake to-morrow without fail. You understand, Alonzo. We don't absolutely disbelieve you, but your yarn is a trifle tall, and we have been marching now a good long time, and we don't seem to get any nearer to this land of mystery you spoke about."

The Portugee bared every yellow fang in his head in a wide grin, and shrugged his shoulders rather contemptuously as he answered glibly:

"Ah, you mucho suspect me! Ah, yes! But why? I tell you no truth—vat I get by dat?"

As he put this question, he turned his cunning little eyes full on Langley, while a slight sneer hovered on his lips.

"Deuce take it, man! Don't ask me what your object is," retorted Jerry roughly. "I can only tell you this. That if you do play traitor to us in any way I'll put a leaden bullet through that ugly skull of yours, as sure as I'm alive!"

"Perhaps you won't be alive den," snarled Alonzo, in an undertone. Then aloud he added: "You vas mucho wrong. I no play you false, on my honour as a genteelman."

With that he made a profound bow to each of the Englishmen in turn, and moved away towards the fire, smiling like a fiend to himself, doubtless at some evil thought that was uppermost in his mind.

"You were right, Jerry—that skunk means mischief!" exclaimed Masters directly they were alone. "His honour as a gentleman. Pahaw! that's a poor thing to swear by, for I doubt if he knows the meaning of either word."

Just then Hossen approached the two young men, and, with a grave bow, announced that their supper was ready.

"What do you think of our guide, eh?" queried Jack, addressing the Arab in a low tone. "You have been talking to him a good deal latterly."

The ghost of a smile flitted across Hossen's solemn visage as he answered coolly:

"Me think him berry bad man, sahib. Him cut throat; make slave; do anything, berry bad."

"And this yarn of his about the mysterious land," exclaimed Jerry. "That's all a pack of lies, of course."

The Arab glanced up quickly, and his dark eyes flashed with excitement.

"No, no, sahib! Him tell truth there!" he cried. "Me hear of that land many moons back, but me not know in what direction it lies. We find it now, and then hang bad Portugee."

"Hum, we'll see about that," muttered Jack, as he moved towards the fire. "If Alonzo guides us to the place he will have acted square, so we should have no cause to find fault with him."

"If he does," repeated Jerry, with a hard laugh, while Hossen allowed himself to smile properly at the bare idea of such a thing.

That the Portugee was fully aware that he was strongly suspected of being a traitor to his comrades there could be no doubt, yet his manner during the rest of the evening did not serve to increase such suspicion, for he laughed and chatted a way gaily; in fact, was the gayest of the whole party, his jokes making even Hossen smile; while the negro coolies rolled on the ground and made the night hideous with their boisterous laughter.

"You are in good spirits to-night, it seems," said Jack quietly, after one of these outbursts. "Is it because we are nearing our goal?"

Alonzo darted on the speaker a strange look, which had something sinister in it; but his voice was more bland than ever, as he replied:

"Dat is so, senor. I make mucho merry because my work s done."

On hearing these strange words, Jerry quite openly reached out his hand, and picked up his rifle, saying very grimly as he did so:

"That means we are in danger. Look out, pards, or we're

His sentence remained unfinished, for at that moment the treacherous Portugee uttered a long, shrill whistle, then, without waiting for an answer, he leapt clean across the fire, and plunged headlong into the dense jungle.

So quick was his action, that Jerry had no time to raise his weapon to take aim; therefore, the bullet that he sent whizzing after the traitor flew wide of its mark.

The next minute, from out of the jungle on either side, darted a dozen flashes of fire, and a perfect hail of bullets swept across the camp.

Three of the coolies rolled over dead or mortally wounded by the discharge; while their companions, uttering loud yells of fear, sought refuge in the undergrowth.

The Englishmen and Hossen, however, having luckily escaped unscathed from the storm of lead, boldly replied to the volley with their rifles, taking aim at those spots from whence had come the flashes of fire.

A couple of agonised shrieks proclaimed that in two cases

anyway their shots had told with good effect, but this did not prevent their assailants from once more pouring in a fierce discharge.

Quite unmoved by the rain of hissing missiles that spattered all around them, the three brave adventurers held their ground firmly, and again answered with a prompt discharge, that, judging from the cries which followed it, must have accounted for a few more of their foes.

"Now's our time. We must clear out from here before they fire again!" cried Jack, scattering the embers of the fire with his feet as he spoke, so as to leave them in comparative darkness.

"The river, sahibs. We must cross that," replied Hossen; and, suiting the action to the word, he turned in that direction; but even as he did so, their unknown enemies, divining their purpose, rushed out from the jungle, uttering loud yells of fierce defiance.

"Slave-dealers! A round score of them. I guessed so," muttered Jack. "Let them have it, pards. Show the skunks no mercy!"

With that he sprang forward to meet their crowd of foes and the whip-like snap of his revolver rang out again and again in the still night air.

Nor were Jerry and Hossen behindhand at the game, and the cruel-hearted slave-traders soon discovered that they had made a big mistake.

Two fierce negroes, a stalwart Arab, and a European half-caste dropped lifeless to the ground in quick succession as Jack advanced, while five more similar miscreants bit the dust, thanks to his comrades' prowess.

Then the situation slightly changed, for the adventurers had emptied their revolvers, and their foes, being armed with swords or spears, stood at a temporary advantage.

But it was not for long, as Jack, thanks to his great strength, and wonderful activity, speedily wrested a sword from the hand of his nearest assailant, and laid about him with such desperate energy, that the remainder of the wretches instinctively fell back.

By this time Jerry and Hossen had also succeeded in securing, the former a sword, and the latter a spear, which they both used with excellent effect.

"They are bolting. Hurrah! Don't let the devils escape," roared Masters, hewing down a huge negro, whose hideous face looked diabolical in the pale moonlight.

For answer Jerry swung round his keen weapon with the full strength of his muscular arm, and literally beheaded another of their foes; while Hossen, with his dark eyes glowing like live coals, sprang hither and thither, thrusting his spear deep into the vitals of one wretch, and withdrawing it by a single turn of the wrist, to plunge it a second after into the throat of another of the gang.

"Allah il Allah!" shouted the fierce Arab, and his battle-cry completely confused his slave-trading countrymen.

Out of the score of wretches who rushed out to the attack, there remained now not more than half a dozen, and though they still outnumbered the adventurers by two to one, their spirit was broken, and they began to sullenly retreat.

It was at this juncture that Alonzo, who had carefully remained hidden in the jungle during the first part of the fight, dashed out into the open, uttering real yells of alarm, which served to turn his villainous accomplices' retreat into a panic-stricken rout.

On seeing their treacherous guide thus placed wholly at their mercy, the adventurers instantly sprang upon him, and while Jerry's sword hovered over his head, Hossen's spear pricked sharply against his throat.

But ere either one of them could drive their weapons home, Jack's voice rang out loud and commanding, bidding them spare the traitorous wretch's life.

"What for?" exclaimed Langley testily; "the brute deserves no mercy at our hands."

"He is unarmed," replied Masters quietly; "therefore, to kill him would be murder."

"The sahib means justice," growled Hossen, digging in his spear a little deeper, which had the effect of making Alonzo scream louder than ever.

"I said murder," answered Jack sternly, "and I bid you drop your weapon, and make that scoundrel a prisoner."

Neither Jerry nor Hossen hesitated an instant longer, for their deep love and respect for Jack made them always obey him willingly; therefore, instead of killing the traitor, they simply bound his hands tightly behind his back, and eyed him scornfully.

"Is my life spared, noble senors?" murmured the wretch in a broken voice, glancing behind him the while very nervously.

"It is, for the present," replied Masters coldly; "but I warn you that at the least attempt of further treachery on your part, I will kill you with my own hands. You savee?"

"So vell, senor, dat I vill in return save your life," replied Alonzo eagerly. "In-dat jungle dere is lurking a mob of bloodthirsty natives, who vill rush out and attack you very soon, thinking you is de slave-traders."

As if to add emphasis to his words, a fearful shriek of mortal agony at that moment rang out from the direction of the forest, and a broad-bladed spear whizzed out from the jungle, and fell almost at the Englishmen's feet.

"We must get across the river quick," exclaimed Jack; "those beggars mean mischief right enough. Forward, pards! Hand me your sword and rifle, Jerry, and take charge of the prisoner. Hossen and I will carry the weapons across. Our ammunition, luckily, is in waterproof cases."

A Desperate Retreat—In the River—The Adventurers Find a Post of Refuge—A Double Attack—Jack Scares the Savages—Adrift on a Frail Raft.

Without a moment's further delay the adventurers hastened to the river's bank, and plunged boldly into the murky water, even as a horde of fierce, well-armed natives burst out from the jungle in their rear.

A chorus of hideous yells, followed by a volley of spears and arrows, that splashed into the water all around them, warned the fugitives that they were observed, and they redoubled their efforts to reach the further bank of the river.

But, hampered as they were with the prisoner and their weapons, this was no easy task, more especially as the current of the river was very rapid, and before they were half across a number of their foes were close behind them.

"Let yourselves go, pards, and the current will carry us down ahead of these devils," roared Jack, raising himself breast high in the water to allow his words to carry.

That his comrades heard and understood his meaning, was evident, for they ceased their efforts to stem the stream, which whirled them down like human straws for some distance, until, at length, their course was interrupted by a floating mass of fallen tree-trunks and decayed vegetation, that jutted out from the further bank of the river like a natural pier.

With some little trouble the fugitives succeeded in scrambling up on top of this obstruction; then, without pausing to even recover their breath, they glanced back to see how their foes were faring.

As it chanced, it was lucky that they did so, for already full a dozen of the fierce natives were within a hundred yards of their place of refuge; while higher up, the river appeared to be alive with black, woolly heads.

Leaving Alonzo to amuse himself with his no doubt pleasant meditations, the three adventurers hastily loaded their rifles, and opened a brisk fusillade on their enemies.

One after another of the swimmers sank below the surface, as the deadly missiles struck them, but still the rest, nothing daunted, came bravely on, and a number of them were soon within a few lengths of the obstruction.

"You load, Hossen, and we'll fire," said Jack calmly; "that will enable us to keep up a continual discharge, and so hold them at bay."

The plan was a good one, and for some few minutes it succeeded admirably, none of the swimmers being able to get within striking distance of the white men, owing to the incessant fusillade.

Then, however, some cunning native dropped on to the idea of landing higher up the stream, and attacking the fugitives from the land side, while they were still busy keeping off the leading party of swimmers.

The attention of the adventurers being wholly taken up by their foes in the water, they did not tumble to this cunning ruse, until a dismal shriek from the traitor Alonzo warned them of some fresh danger.

Then, at a single glance, they saw how truly hazardous was their position, for behind them the bank was lined with angry foes, whose keen weapons twinkled in the bright moonlight, while the water all around their frail position of refuge teemed with the black heads of other furious savages, who evidently were merely waiting for an arranged signal, before making a last desperate assault.

"Jumping Jehosaphat! I we're in a tight corner this journey, pards, and no mistake," muttered Jack. "If these cusses make a determined rush from both points at the same moment, we shall run a good chance of becoming cold meat."

Jerry gave a nod of assent, and then glanced around him almost desperately.

"I wonder where this river would take us to if we trusted to the current?" he said slowly; "judging from my pocket-compass its course doesn't seem to bear seawards."

"I can tell you, senior," broke in Alonzo eagerly, "dis ribber does empty itself into the big lake dat I make tell you of across which is de land of mystery."

"Are you sure of that?" asked Jack sternly. "I warn you not to trifle with me now."

"On my honour," began the Portugee, but Jerry hastily stopped him, saying curtly:

"Don't swear on that, or we can't believe you. Say on your word, as a lying, traitorous rogue, and then, perhaps, we may get at the truth."

"Don't trouble, sahibs, to question him further," hastily interposed the Arab; "it is small matter now where the river takes us, so long as we escape from these infidel dogs. An Allah wills it we shall get somewhere."

"Very truly said," exclaimed Jerry with a laugh. "Come then, Hossen, we will cut away with this natural raft, for I can see it is only held to the bank by a few stout creepers. Our swords will very soon sever those, and Jack can keep back these fiends for a few minutes single-handed."

His words served to put fresh life into the little party, and while Masters prepared to hold back the foe on both sides, his two comrades boldly advanced towards the bank, sword in hand.

The natives, on seeing this movement, raised a wild yell of defiance, and those on shore rushed forward to meet Jerry and Hossen, while their companions in the water made a desperate attempt to scramble up on to the natural raft.

But Jack, with a revolver in each hand, gave them such a warm reception that the first rush was instantly checked, the easier, perhaps, as the wretched creatures were quite unused to revolvers, and fancied at first that the white man was killing them by magic.

Taking advantage of this temporary success, Jerry and Hossen plied their swords with such goodwill that the tough, fibrous creepers were soon parted on one side, and the raft swung round in the middle of the current, being only held to the bank by one last natural rope.

But the natives had now recovered somewhat from their first repulse, and, realising that their intended victims were about to escape, they once more made a resolute rush forward to prevent them succeeding in their object.

By this time, however, Jack had contrived to reload the three revolvers, and so prompt and deadly was the discharge he poured into the ranks of their savage foes that the latter, after wavering a moment, again fell back, thus giving Jerry time to sever the last creeper.

"Hurrah, we're off!" shouted the lad joyfully. "We'll soon settle these brutes in the water now."

With that he snatched up his rifle, and, taking hasty aim at the nearest swimmers, emptied both barrels in quick succession, causing two more of the woolly heads to instantly disappear beneath the surface of the water.

Meanwhile Hossen, using his broad-bladed spear as a paddle, had urged their frail craft fair into the centre of the rapid current, which was speedily sweeping them out of the neighbourhood of their dangerous foes.

A final volley from the Englishman's weapons, which was answered by a fierce discharge of spears and arrows from the shore, ended the affair, for a second later the raft whirled round a bend in the river, that completely hid it from the view of the furious natives.

"We've escaped just in the nick of time, I reckon!" exclaimed Jack. "Thanks to your promptness, pard, in cutting through the creepers."

"You mean thanks to your clever revolver practice, which drove back the wretches, and enabled us to cut the raft free," replied Jerry. "We should have been corpses jolly sharp if your aim hadn't been so jolly good."

"Oh well, we won't waste time wrangling about that now," returned Jack with a laugh. "We all did a share of the work, and did it well."

"True, sahib," murmured Hossen. "And we saved the Portugee pig."

"Pig, senors! You make hear dat? De vile Arab dog do call me pig."

At this point Alonzo's appeal was abruptly ended by Hossen, who struck him across the mouth with his shoe, and shouted fiercely:

"Sahibs, him call me a vile dog! By Allah, he would throw dirt in my beard, and for that he shall die!"

As he spoke, he raised aloft his spear, and with a quick downward movement was about to thrust it deep into the helpless captive's body, when Jack sprang forward, and with a sharp blow knocked it flying out of his hand.

"Scoundrel as he is, he sha'n't be murdered in cold blood!" cried the young Englishman sternly. "You understand that, Hossen! If you attempt to injure him again while his hands are tied, you'll have to deal with me."

"But, sahib, he insult me. Call me dog," replied the Arab, while a fierce light flashed in his eyes.

"Pooh, that's hardly a reason why you should murder him," returned Jack, biting his lip to keep himself from smiling at the absurd nature of the quarrel. "Besides, I fancy you called him by some unpleasant name first."

"Him call me pig," whined Alonzo. "Me a real Portugee Dom."

"Yes, yes!" howled Hossen. "You pig! spy! dog! you—"

Words seem to fail him in which to express his contempt of the traitor, for he stopped suddenly, and, with a frantic gesture of his hands above his head, stooped forward and spat

in the water, by which he no doubt intended to convey some deadly insult to his enemy.

Nor was Alonzo in any way backward in replying, for, being sure now that Jack would not allow him to be murdered, he vented his spite on the Arab by hurling such epithets at him as he knew would be sure to drive him nearly frantic with rage.

Perhaps by so doing the cunning rogue hoped to lash Hossen up into such a state of fury that he would again attempt some violence towards him, and thus get to loggerheads with his master.

But if this was indeed his idea, he was doomed to disappointment, for the Arab had too great a respect for Jack to dream of disobeying his order, whatever insult he received.

For some few minutes then the twain exchanged compliments of a decidedly slangy nature, after which they were both compelled to cease, owing to their having come to the end of their stock of abusive language.

Meanwhile the two Britishers had been carefully inspecting their frail craft, with the object of discovering whether it would hold together for any length of time.

"It seems to me," muttered Jack, "that these half rotten tree-trunks are so firmly matted together with weeds and creepers that there is little likelihood of their coming to pieces for some hours yet, unless, indeed, they chance to strike against a rock or some other floating débris."

"In that case we might attempt to cross the lake on them," replied Jerry, "if this current does really carry us into it."

"How far are we from the lake you mentioned, Alonzo?" inquired Jack, turning sharply to address the Portugee.

"In less dan ten minutes you vill enter upon it, senor," replied the traitor, blandly. "You have mucho leetle time to make de raft touch de shore."

"We don't intend to let it touch the shore," returned Masters coolly. "We are going to sail across the lake on it."

"Eh, vat! You make sail on de lake vith dis rotten craft!" almost shrieked Alonzo. "You vas mad! Ve shall all mucho drown!"

"You won't, because you're born to be hanged!" exclaimed Jerry with a laugh. "So, don't worry."

An evil look came into the villain's cunning little eyes at this taunt, but he made no reply save a sneering smile.

"There, sahibs; there is the lake!" cried Hossen a few minutes later, pointing eagerly ahead to where a heavy cloud of mist rose up like a wall of vapour, and shut off the view.

"Just so," replied Jack quietly. "Now it only remains to see how far across this current will carry us. 'Tis possible it may lead us right to the land of mystery."

"No, senor; oh, no, it will not do dat!" interposed Alonzo with a shudder. "De wonderful peoples dat I tell you of live upon a rock in de middle of dis lake."

"Oh, come, that's a bit too steep!" exclaimed Jerry. "Say at once that your yarn is all a pack of lies, and we'll perhaps forgive you for gulling us. It would have to be a tarnation big rock to hold all the inhabitants you spoke of—hundreds, or thousands, I think you said they numbered, and I believe you added that they were rich in cattle as well as gold and precious stones."

The Portugee grinned. "Dat is true," he said, "I not speak no truth. You find de rock, you see I no deceive you."

Jack eyed him sternly for a moment, then said very coldly: "If you speak the truth, and succeed in leading us to this strange land, we will spare your life. But if you have lied to us, look out for your skin, Mr. Alonzo. We are bad men to joke with, as you've already learnt to your cost."

The traitor shrugged his shoulders, with a low laugh:

"Spare your threats, senor," he sneered. "Your own lives are in more danger dan mine; for, even if you succeed in crossing dis great lake on dis clumsy raft, and reach de land I tell you of, de people dere vill kill you mucho quick."

"And you?" queried Jerry. "Why will they let you live?"

"Because, senor, dey know me, and I know dere secret," replied the Portugee calmly, and once more he gave vent to a harsh, chuckling laugh.

This unlooked-for confession both startled and surprised the Englishmen, and they would have questioned the cunning wretch further had not the raft just then plunged into the curtain of mist, and given them something else to think of.

"The current is still carrying us on!" exclaimed Jack excitedly. "We are moving faster if anything."

"If the sun would only rise and disperse this mist, I'd say we are in luck," replied Jerry. "Bah, it's getting thicker than ever!"

"Yes, senor; and it vill get thicker still," snarled Alonzo. "De sun has no power to drive dis mist away; it never goes."

"Never goes!" cried all three adventurers in a breath. Then Jack added quickly: "But this rock, the land you have talked about? How can we see it if it is always shrouded in mist?"

"Loose my hands, senor, and I vill answer you," was the Portugee's cool retort.

Masters glanced inquiringly at his chum, whose open, sunburnt face looked white and shadowy in the fog.

"Set him free," replied the latter quietly. "He can do us no harm, and 'tis only fair to give the poor devil a chance of battling for his life if the raft goes to pieces."

Jack made no other reply than to step up to the prisoner and cut the lashings which bound his wrists together.

"Now speak," said the Englishman, "and prove yourself to be at least grateful if you cannot be honourable."

"Vith pleasure, senor," replied the scoundrel in the same sneering tone he had used during the previous conversation.

"I vill tell you dat dis land you seek is so big dat you cannot avoid seeing it, though it is partly veiled by de mist around its base. Dat you vill never enter it I can swear, for no man ever has yet dat did not know de secret road dat leads into it."

"But you will show us that road," cried Jerry firmly, "as you know the secret of it!"

"Dere you have made von big mistake, senor," returned the Portugee tauntingly. "De secret is mine, and you shall never learn it. No! Ten thousand times no! Had I known dat you would reach dis far I would not have guided you; but dat vas a meestake, you see. I no think you would escape from my friends, and I bring you into dere hands dat dey might—"

"Here, enough of that!" interrupted Jack roughly. "You are lying badly, Mr. Alonzo, to cover your past sins. But it's no use, cocky; you won't make us believe you know any secret road into—"

Crash! crash! crash!
The rest of Jack's speech was lost in the loud noise occasioned by the rude raft being violently dashed against a cluster of rocks, whose sharp, jagged edges barely showed themselves above the swirling current.

Cast on the Rocks—Jack's Awful Peril—A Terrible Moment—Scaling the Mountain—A Fresh Torture—Amid Snow and Ice—The Mysterious Land.

For some few seconds after this unlooked-for catastrophe, the three adventurers were conscious of little else, save that they were battling for dear life against the hissing rush of tumbled water, that threatened to completely overwhelm them.

But somehow, without knowing it, they had all contrived to hang on tight to one single tree-trunk, the sole remaining remnant of their raft, and when, at length, they were swept past the cruel rocks, and borne onward on the bosom of the swift current, they found, to their joyful surprise, that they were still together.

"We are all saved," spluttered Jack, in a choking voice.

"All except the Portugee pig, sahib," replied Hossen gravely. "Allah is merciful to us."

"Perhaps the rascal succeeded in saving himself on another log," exclaimed Jerry; "he is cunning enough for anything."

Jack glanced round him, and tried vainly to penetrate through the thick current of vapour that hung around them.

"He may have escaped, as you say, Jerry," he murmured.

"I hope so, poor wretch."

"I don't," grunted his chum, "the skunk deserved to die, and—"

"Look, sahibs, look!" screamed Hossen at this juncture, "we shall be hurled on those fearful rocks."

Startled by his cry, the two Britishers glanced ahead of them, to see rising up, like a huge natural wall, a towering mass of rocks, against which the water beat fiercely.

To right and left of them, as far as the eye could travel in that murky atmosphere, the same rugged barrier appeared, with, at its base, a frothy swirling mass of white broken water.

"The land of mystery, pards," shouted Jack; "keep cool, and seize your chance to clamber up on a ledge of rock."

Hardly had he finished speaking before they were amongst the tumbled water, and within a few feet of the awful barrier.

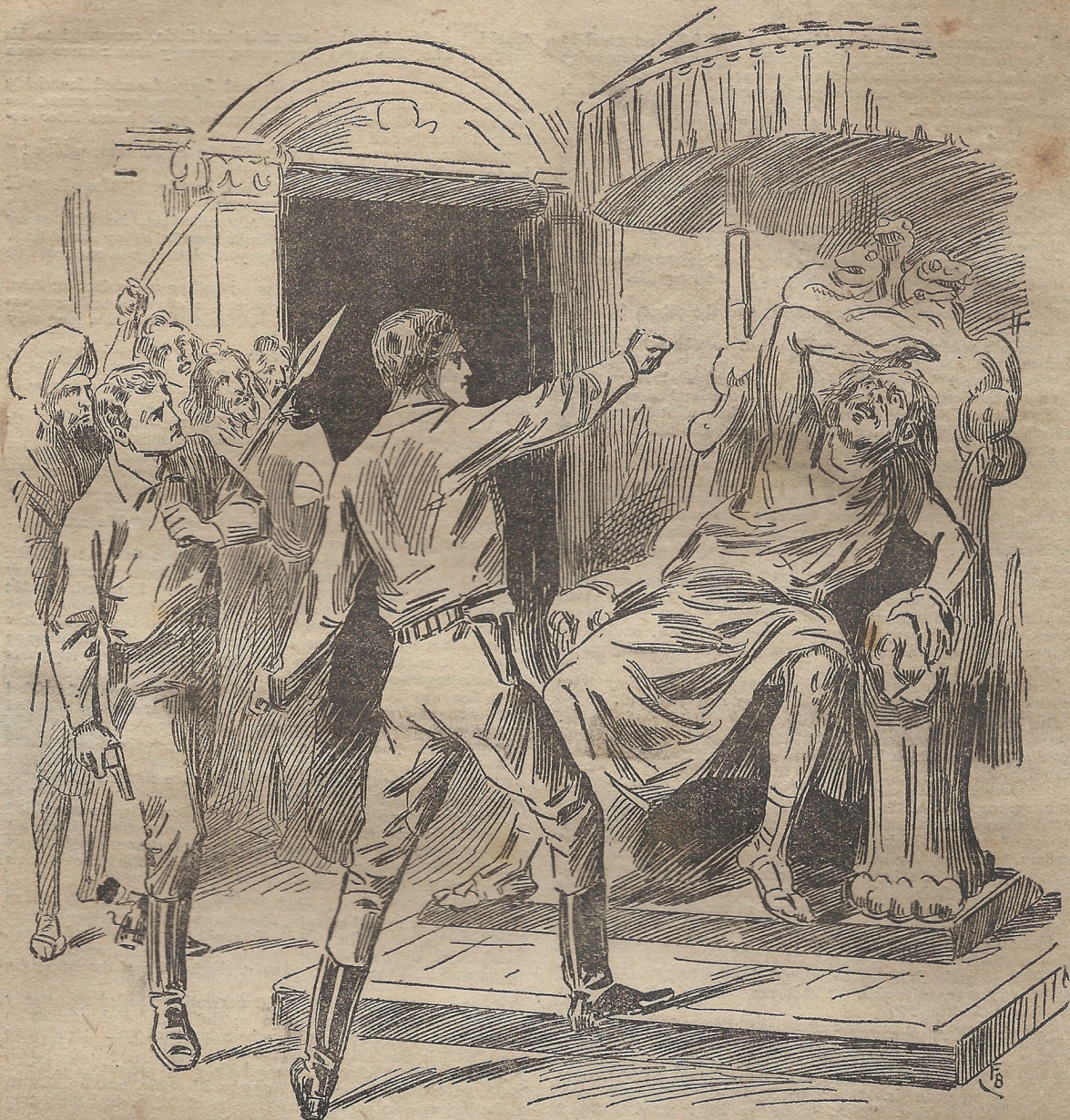
To men of less nerve and strength their position would have been hopeless indeed, for it required a cool head to judge rightly the moment to spring upward, and grasp the jagged rocks above them, and it needed a strong arm to hang on, when once they had got a grip of a likely support.

A single moment's hesitation, an instant's nervous fear, would have meant being dashed with fearful violence against those cruel rocks, and no human frame, however stoutly made, could have sustained such a fearful shock without being immediately smashed to a pulp.

Knowing this, the three adventurers instinctively braced themselves up for the struggle, and, as if moved by a common impulse, they all made their upward spring at the same identical moment.

Jack and Jerry, whose muscles had been trained by years of healthy exercise, each succeeded in grasping a jutting mass of rock just out of reach of the water, and held on with the grim tenacity of death.

But Hossen, with a suppleness that was surprising even in an Arab, went one better, for his mighty spring landed him,



The cowardly renegade, scared half out of his senses by his intended victim's prompt action, yelled eagerly to his followers to fall back and leave the white men alone.

at a single bound, out of all danger of being swept back into the water.

"Come, sahibs! Take my hand, and I will drag you to a place of safety!" he cried, clinging by one of his sinewy hands to a ledge of rock, and leaning over to extend the other to his masters.

"Go, Jerry, quick! I can hang on till you're safe," gasped Jack.

The younger man well knew that to stop and argue meant certain death to both; therefore, without a second's hesitation, he gripped hold of the Arab's lithe fingers, and, with the latter's assistance, pulled himself up on to the ledge.

"Now Jack, it is your turn," he shouted, stooping over to aid in hauling his comrade up.

"Quick, sahib! Take my hand, or the giddy sickness will seize you!" cried Hossen, bending over still further in his eagerness to save his beloved friend and master.

Jack heard their words, and nerved himself up for the final effort; but the strain on his muscles had been so great for the last few moments, that their pliancy seemed to have gone, and, try as he would, he could not stir even a finger.

Then the vertigo that the Arab had warned him of began to steal over his senses, and the hissing, foaming water at his feet

seemed to lure him to loose his hold, and drop down to destruction.

"Come, Jack, come!" shouted Jerry in a voice of agony; "remember you are an Englishman, therefore you cannot be a coward."

"Merciful Allah, give him strength!" howled Hossen. "Come, my master, come, or we will die with you!"

This double appeal had a strange effect upon Masters, whose senses were fast leaving him.

Jerry's voice and tone brought vividly back to his mind his schooldays, when he had been Langley's protector in many a fisticuff battle; while the Arab's kindly words reminded him that there was a power greater than man's that was ever willing to hearken to an honest appeal.

Uttering a hasty, heartfelt prayer for strength, he once more made a resolute effort to overcome his weakness. Then, nerving himself to the utmost, he made a clutch at Hossen's hand.

But his fingers, instead of closing on those of his comrade, scraped against the rock, and, a sudden dizziness stealing over him again, he felt himself reeling back, when an iron grip seemed to fix itself on his neck, and he was jerked upward with a force that took his breath away.

A few minutes later, when his senses had fully returned to him, he found himself half sitting, half lying on a narrow ledge of rock, with his two friends, one on either side of him.

"I am saved," he murmured, squeezing a hand of each gratefully in his own.

"Yes; thanks to Hossen, old chap," replied Jerry cheerfully; "he hung right over the ledge, and grabbed you just as you were falling. It was touch and go that time."

"You held me, sahib," interposed the Arab gravely; "had I fallen I should have dragged you down with me."

"Oh, certainly!" replied Longley coolly; "if one went under, all went under. I thought that was understood. We will die together, however we die."

"That was arranged between us long ago," said Jack gently; "but, all the same, I have to thank you both for my life. Now, pards, are you ready to march?"

He rose to his feet with the words, and the others followed suit.

"We are ready to march, sahib; but to where?" queried Hossen.

"To where?" repeated Jack in surprise. "Why, man alive, up these rocks, of course, and into the land of mystery."

His companions uttered no reply, but immediately began to scale the rough face of the cliffs, like men who had an object in view.

For some distance up their progress was fairly easy, the broken rocks affording in most places a secure foothold; but, after a while, the surface of the ground became smoother, and they began to understand the real nature of their task.

"Courage, pards, we are getting above the mist," exclaimed Jack suddenly; "a few feet more and we shall again see the blue sky."

Cheered by these bold words, and further encouraged by a ruddy light that appeared above their heads, which told them that the sun was shining beyond the veil of mist, the adventurers continued bravely struggling upward until, at length, they emerged out on to a narrow platform, in the full glare of the tropical sunshine.

Their first glance was naturally downwards, for they were eager to trace out the path by which they had travelled.

But below them the earth, water, and even the rocks immediately beneath their feet, were all shut out by the thick, white curtain of mist, which lay like a winding-sheet over the lower world.

"We are up in the clouds," cried Jerry; "surely these must be the mountains of the moon."

"We are where no other man has ever trod, of that you may be sure," replied Jack gravely. Then, pointing upward, he added: "But see, our work is far from finished yet."

At his words the others glanced eagerly round, to see, towering high above their heads like a huge black wall, a mass of solid rock, the summit of which was capped with snow.

On either side, as far as the eye could reach, this wall extended; nor did its surface seem more broken in any one place than another.

"Can we scale that terrible mountain, sahibs?" murmured Hossen, in an awed voice. "Is it not the will of Allah that we should die here?"

"Allah gives men brains and strength that they may seek and overcome the wonders of the earth," replied Jack coolly. "Yonder mountain range looks unscalable, as you say; but we should be rank cowards to acknowledge that without ever attempting to scale it. Come, pards, let us rest awhile here, in the hot sunshine. Then, when we have recovered our strength, we will continue the ascent."

His companions, as usual, made no demur; so while Hossen sought round the rocks for something that might stay their hunger, his masters rigged up a rude tent by fixing their coats over two adjacent boulders.

The Arab soon returned, bringing with him a couple of fair-sized lizards, which he skinned, and partly cooked in the sun's hot rays.

With this meagre fare, the bold adventurers stayed the gnawings of hunger; but they soon discovered that they had a worse foe to contend with, for an insatiable thirst began to assail them, and their water-bottles were empty.

In vain they sought among the rocks for even the tiniest pool of water. None was to be found, and they speedily realised that they had no hope of moistening their parched throats, until they reached the far distant ridge of snow.

As it was now about the hottest hour of the day, to continue the ascent would have been sheer madness; therefore, at Jack's suggestion, they lay down under the rude tent, and sought to find forgetfulness in sleep.

Fortunately, perhaps, they were already completely exhausted by the exertions they had undergone, so that sleep came to them easily. Yet, even in their slumbers, they were sorely troubled by the demon of thirst.

That is to say the Englishmen were.

Hossen, accustomed from his childhood to travel for days together across the arid deserts of his native land without

touching water, felt the loss of it but little, compared to his masters, who, like most Europeans, usually drank more than they ate.

Thus it was that, while Jack and Jerry dreamed feverishly about clear running streams and wells of pure, limpid water, the Arab slumbered peacefully, and awoke some hours later refreshed in body and mind.

"Shall we start now, or wait till the moon rises, sahibs?" he asked cheerfully.

"We will start now," replied Jack hastily. "The efforts of climbing will make us forget our thirst."

In this, however, he was woefully mistaken, for with every upward step they took the Englishmen's agony increased, and their eyes gazed ever longingly at the ridge of snow above their heads.

Slipping and scrambling, now struggling up a foot or two, only to slide back and begin again, the adventurers' progress was very slow, and another dawn found them still a long way from the summit.

But by this time the air had become cooler and fresher, so that their pangs of thirst were somewhat relieved. Still, they suffered untold tortures, which increased as the day wore on.

"We shall reach the snowline by nightfall," said Jack cheerfully, "and then we shall laugh at our sufferings."

But in this he was mistaken, for sunset found them still a long distance below the summit, while ahead of them the face of the cliff was so smooth that it resembled a sheet of glass.

"We are lost," murmured Jerry wearily. "We can never climb up that wall of ice!"

"Ice!" exclaimed his chum. "Yes, it is ice! Thank Heaven, we have still our knives! With those it will be easy to cut niches in which to place our toes. Forward, pards; the worst is over, and we are saved!"

Stirred by his brave words, his companions began to follow his example, by lying face downwards on the ice, and digging holes in it with their sharp hunting knives to form supports for their fingers and toes.

In this way they still continued to slowly ascend, troubled now by the cold rather than by thirst, for the broken ice afforded them a good substitute for water.

If Hossen had to some extent escaped from the pangs of the former evil, he was doomed to suffer doubly at the hands of this new foe, for the poor Arab was quite unused to a temperature such as they were now in.

With a courage that did him credit, however, he struggled on, aided by his comrades, who could quite understand his sufferings, until at length, by almost superhuman efforts, they succeeded in reaching first the snowline, and then the extreme summit of the mountain range.

Then, as if it had only been waiting to gild with its golden beams their crown of success, the sun rose just as they crossed the highest crest, and the three intrepid men, bending forward, gazed down with wondering eyes at the beautiful scene which lay spread out beneath their feet on the far side of the mountain range.

A valley, wide, fertile, and well watered, extended apparently from the base of the mountain on their side, right across to the foot of a range of hills, whose snow-capped tops were just visible in the distant horizon.

On either hand other ranges of hills, some looking dark and bleak, while others were just tipped with snow, rose up like an encircling wall to enclose this Garden of Eden, in which men lived unknown to men.

Without these natural walls of granite, the earth and water was shrouded by a perpetual mist, but within, owing to the bed of the valley being situated some hundreds of feet above the lake, the atmosphere was clear and pure, while the climate was simply divine.

"Let us hasten to get down into yonder lovely place," cried Jerry excitedly. "See, there are cities and towns built, I should fancy, of marble; and look—look at those lovely green fields, and that clear rushing stream that seems to divide the valley in halves!"

With that he made a step forward to descend, and Hossen eagerly followed suit, but Jack held them back, saying solemnly:

"Remember, pards, an adventure we once had in a valley such as this when our brave comrade Dupois was with us. Let us be prudent this time, and act warily in approaching these strangers, who may never have seen a white man before."

"But Alonzo!" exclaimed Jerry. "He may be here already; and then he said that an Englishman had been here before, and lived some years. If so, we ought to receive a warm greeting."

"Warmer perhaps than we wish," replied Jack grimly. "See to your revolvers, pards. 'Tis well we have saved them, for, if as you say, Jerry, that skunk Alonzo is alive, and has reached here ahead of us, we shall have to fight hard for our lives without doubt."

Impressed by his grave speech, his comrades hastily loaded their weapons. Then in perfect silence they commenced the descent, finding the task considerably easier than the one they had just concluded, as the mountain range on this side was in most places more rugged.

**In the Strange Land—A Meeting with the Natives—
The White King of Tucoma—Jack Surprises
Anizar—A Cowardly Trick—A Fight for Life.**

"Which way shall we go, sahibs? Yonder there is a road leading to a big town; while to our left I can see some caves in the base of the cliff?"

As he put the question, Hossen smiled, for the warm sun had restored his wonted courage and he feared nothing that man could do against them.

"We will go to the town, tell our story, and ask for hospitality," replied Jack. "Even if they are the veriest savages they cannot refuse us that, more especially as we appear to come unarmed."

"That is unless Alonzo is here," muttered Jerry. "He would tell a different story."

"You seem to have quite made up your mind that the traitorous skunk escaped," replied Jack seriously. "Myself, I don't see how he could."

Langley laughed.

"The devil takes care of his own," he said quietly. "You see, we haven't done with the Portugee yet."

"I shall have done with him the next time we meet," growled Jack, as he moved forward towards the town. "I only show mercy once to traitors."

By this time they had reached the broad, well-made road, and were marching briskly forward in the direction of the town, taking care, however, to keep a sharp look-out around them in case a sudden assault should be made upon them by any natives who might be lurking among the thick bushes that lined both sides of the path.

"It seems these people follow the custom of most dwellers in tropical climates, and remain under shelter during the hottest part of the day," said Jerry. "Anyway, we have not seen a vestige of a human being so far."

"No, sahib, but we soon shall do," replied Hossen quickly. "Hark! And I don't mistake. I can hear the sound of drums beating at no great distance ahead of us, and other noises that should betoken the approach of a large body of men."

"Let us hasten and get round that turn in the road!" exclaimed Jack. "Then we ought to have a good view of the town, and also learn the meaning of those sounds."

Quickening their pace, they soon arrived at the spot indicated; but, even as they turned the bend, they instinctively halted; for there, barely five hundred yards in front of them, a body of some two hundred stalwart warriors, well armed with bows and arrows, spears, and swords, was drawn up right across the roadway.

A single glance informed the adventurers that these strangers did not belong to the usual type of African savages, for their features were well formed and regular, while the colour of their skins was a golden-yellow, closely resembling brass.

Save for two of their number, who stood somewhat in advance of the rest, and were evidently officers, they wore no clothing, except a cloth round their loins; and their long, straight hair, dark as a raven's wing, was quite devoid of ornament.

The two officers, however, were doubtless dudes in their way for each of them had flung over his left shoulder a small cloak, made of the skins of some animal of the tiger-cat species, while their hair, instead of hanging loose about their shoulders, was gathered up into a big knot on top of their heads, where it was held in position by large golden pins thickly encrusted with precious stones.

Their weapons also, blade and hilt alike, were studded with various gems of a size and brilliancy that made the white men gasp with surprise.

"Alonzo told us no lie," muttered Jerry. "This valley must teem with riches. For, see, even the natives themselves have golden skins!"

"All is not gold that glitters," replied Jack. "These onuses are very pretty to look at, but I sorter fancy they are devils at heart. However, we shall soon have a chance to prove that, for they are advancing towards us."

"Shall we fire, sahib?" murmured Hossen eagerly. "That might frighten them away."

"No, no!" replied Masters sharply. "Keep your revolver hidden. We must try fair means with these gentry first; it may be that they will treat us kindly."

Saying which, he moved forward a few paces alone, and, after raising his hands above his head to show that he bore no weapon, made signs to the natives, by which he intended to signify that he and his comrades had no hostile intent.

At first the two officers appeared rather puzzled to understand his meaning; but, after a further pantomime of gestures, the elder of the twain smiled and nodded, then pointed behind him in the direction of the town.

"That's all right; the old chappie has twigged my meaning," exclaimed Jack gaily, "and I guess he's inviting us to come and visit their town. He seems friendly enough, anyway."

Much to the Britisher's surprise, the officer, on hearing his words, replied in fairly good English:

"The great white men are friends to the people of Tucoma. It is good. Welcome, great white men! Anizar is thy brother, and would fain embrace thee."

The adventurers exchanged a hasty glance of pleased surprise. Then Jack, turning again to the officer, asked pleasantly: "Who is Anizar, and how comes it that you speak our tongue?"

The native smiled proudly.

"Anizar is our king," he replied. "He is a white man, like yourselves. He uses your tongue, which he has taught to us, his servants. Many moons ago he came to Tucoma, to rule over us. Other white men have come since; but Anizar loved them not, so they went back to the sun. All except the laughing man, and he found favour in the king's eyes. Therefore, the people of Tucoma welcome him."

"What the devil does he mean by all that gibberish?" growled Jerry in a low tone. "Is this Anizar really an Englishman?"

"It seems so," replied Jack gravely; "anyway, we shall soon know. But who is the laughing man. I am half afraid it must be that smiling traitor, Alonzo."

"Will the great white men come and embrace the king?" interrupted the officer a trifle suspiciously. "If so, Batito, their servant, will lead them to him."

"Lead away, Mister Batito," replied Jack, with an attempt at being gay, though his mind was very uneasy with regard to this unknown white man, "we will follow you gladly, and have a chat with your king."

On hearing this a look of relief crossed the officer's face, and he immediately gave an order to his followers in the native tongue, whereupon they at once closed round the adventurers in a body, and commenced to escort them towards the town, amidst great beating of drums, blowing of horns, and a tumult of shouting.

In this manner they advanced to the gate of the town, where they were met by a large crowd of natives of both sexes and every age, who joined their shouts to those of the soldiers, until at last the noise became fairly deafening.

Huddled up in the centre of the mob, the adventurers were unable to get more than a transitory glimpse of the town, as they were borne hastily through it; but what they did see impressed them greatly.

Broad streets, lined on either side by huge mansions built of marble, and beautifully ornamented with scrolls and devices in solid gold.

Park-like squares, in which played countless fountains—some made of marble, and others again fashioned out of pure gold, and encrusted with magnificent jewels, that twinkled like stars in the sun's hot rays.

These, and many other sights of similar magnificence, flashed constantly before the white men's eyes as they pressed onward, until very soon they grew weary of gazing on the gorgeous display, and it was with a sense of relief that they at length found themselves halted within the courtyard of a large palace, that Batito informed them was the king's residence.

Passing up a wide flight of marble steps, and through a huge doorway, the adventurers, still escorted by the officer and some twenty of the soldiers, traversed several splendid corridors, the walls of which sparkled with hosts of precious stones, wrought into numerous pictured designs, until they finally arrived at the large hall of audience, where Anizar was already seated in state, awaiting their coming.

One single glance at the coarse, bloated face and evil eyes of this usurping despot, told the visitors what fate they might expect at his hands.

The king, for we must call him so, though he had no real right to the title, was undoubtedly a white man, and, from his speech, evidently of English birth; but, save for that, he was undoubtedly the biggest savage in the room.

Leaning forward in his golden chair of state, he roughly thrust aside several of his attendants who were hovering near him, and glaring at the bold adventurers with a sinister gleam in his small, beady black eyes, exclaimed hoarsely: "Who are you, and what the deuce do you want here?"

Stiffing his wrath and disgust with a visible effort, Jack quietly explained how he and his comrades had succeeded in entering the land of mystery, laying great stress on the fact that they had been guided thither by a Portugee named Alonzo Luis.

The king listened to the story, with a cruel smile playing about his bearded lips, that boded ill for the speaker and his companions.

"Lies, all lies!" he roared fiercely, directly Masters had finished. "I know your cursed spying breed, and I know how to rid myself of such dirty cowards!"

"Do you?" exclaimed Jerry, with a sneering laugh; "then you'd better set about it, Mister No Nation Skunk. You'll



Anizar, on finding his threat disregarded, loosed hold of the girl, and raised his sword to ward off the blow that Jerry aimed at his head.

soon learn what sort of cowards we are. Try it on, you ginger-bread imitation of a king, and you'll pretty soon find yourself wiping up the floor!"

"Seize the dogs! Cut 'em down! Slice 'em in quarters!" howled the tyrant fiercely, half rising to his feet, and waving his arm furiously to enforce his order.

A large number of the assembled officers, who understood English, at once sprang forward to do his bidding; but ere they could reach the spot where the adventurers stood, the Britishers' revolvers were out, and Jack's weapon was pointed straight at Anizar's head.

"Call off your dogs, scoundrel, or I'll scatter your brains on the floor!" shouted the brave young Britisher coolly. "We aren't quite such fools as you take us for."

The cowardly renegade, scared half out of his senses by his intended victim's prompt action, yelled eagerly to his followers to fall back, and leave the white men alone.

Then, as the natives almost reluctantly obeyed, he turned once more to his guests, and said in a cringing, whining tone:

"Noble sirs, I meant you no harm. I'll swear that I didn't intend to let you be killed. I only wished to see if you were

brave so that I might offer you service in my army, my brothers."

"Hold on, that's enough!" cried Jack sternly. "Don't insult us by calling us your brothers. Bah! I wouldn't be seen lying dead on a dustheap with such a dirty mongrel as you! Darned if I'm not half inclined to shoot you as you sit, and rid the world of a craven hound who would murder his countrymen to hide his own crimes. Where are the other white men who came into this cursed land, eh? Have you murdered them?"

Anizar moistened his parched lips with his tongue, and glared round him like a hunted animal brought to bay; but he did not dare to again show his rage, for Jack's weapon was still pointed straight at his head.

"What white men?" he snarled. "You are the first I have seen in Tucoma."

"That's a lie!" broke in Jerry, "for your own officer, Batito, told us some had been here, and I believe he said they had returned to the sun."

The king shot a cruel, vindictive glance at the native in question as he replied. "If they came here, I did not see them



The Englishmen and Hossen . . . boldly replied to the volley with their rifles, taking aim at those spots from whence had come the flashes of fire.

and Batito must have killed them without consulting me. If it was so, I will make Batito pay for their lives with his own."

At this threat the officer gave a quick start of surprise, and was evidently about to make a sharp retort, when Anizar, noticing that Jack had imprudently lowered his revolver, leapt suddenly from his chair, and, darting amongst the crowd of soldiers and attendants, yelled out to them to seize or kill the strangers.

In a moment the whole hall was in an uproar, and the three adventurers were fiercely assailed on every side by the mob of furious natives.

Again and again their revolvers cracked, and so deadly was their aim at such close quarters that the ground around them was soon strewn with the bodies of their cruel foes.

But these natives of Tucoma proved to be brave even to rashness, for, despite the fearful slaughter of their comrades, they still pressed eagerly forward, and strove to cut down or stab the strangers.

Standing back to back, the latter kept up a constant rapid fire on their assailants until the last chambers of their revolvers were empty. Then, hastily snatching up three of the swords, that their victims had dropped almost at their feet, they began to lay about them with the energy of doomed men.

The conflict now assumed a different aspect, for the natives, reinforced by a fresh body of soldiers, who had hurried into the

hall to learn the cause of the uproar, closed round the bold strangers, and attacked them with renewed vigour.

"Keep it up, pards, we'll teach the skunks a lesson this time!" shouted Jack hoarsely, "and if only that devil Anizar would come forward we'd soon rid the earth of the black-hearted villain."

"Boast on, dog; 'tis not for long," howled the renegade from his post in the rear of the soldiers; "I can afford to laugh at the threats of a fool who is in the grip of death."

Then, as if to add emphasis to his taunt, he gave vent to a coarse, jeering laugh, that served to rouse up the adventurers' rage still further against him, and made them eager to punish the villain, as he deserved.

"He laughs best who laughs last," roared Jerry furiously. "Come on, comrades, let us cut a road through this scum to the spot where that devil is hiding himself."

With that he dashed recklessly forward, and commenced hewing and slashing to right and left among the foe, driving back the wretches by the very fury of his onset.

Close on his heels came Jack and Hossen, the former using his sword with cunning skill, while the latter swept round his gory blade with such terrible force that his opponents dropped down beneath his blows like oxen in a shambles.

"Hurrah! they are giving way," shouted the Britishers simultaneously.

"Allah il Allah," yelled the Arab, "the dog's liver is turned to water! Strike hard, sahibs, and they will fly before us!"

An Unequal Contest—The Adventurers are Made Prisoners—A New Friend—Jack Gives the Natives a Taste of His Strength—A Deserted Home.

For a single moment it seemed that Hossen was right, for the natives, scared by the strangers' intrepid valour, retreated sullenly back a few steps.

But then loud above the din of battle sounded the measured tramp of many naked feet pattering on the hard marble flooring of the adjoining passage; while at the same time Anizar's voice rang out so fiercely that his followers instinctively recovered their courage, and once more strove to bear down the adventurers' bold defence by sheer weight of numbers.

Hemmed completely in by the furious blood-lusting mob, the three comrades fought like tigers brought to bay for some seconds longer; but then even their iron strength began to flag, and a final desperate rush on the part of their foes sent them crashing to the ground, where they lay stunned and bleeding.

Placed thus quite at the mercy of their infuriated enemies, it seemed that nothing could save them from being instantly hacked to pieces by the wretches' swords, and this would, indeed, have been their fate had not Anizar's vile mind suggested to him a crueller and more painful mode of death.

By his orders, then, the adventurers were securely bound hand and foot, after which they were dragged out of the hall by a number of the soldiers, and thrust roughly into a small chamber, where they were left to recover their senses at will.

Hossen was the first to revive, and he glanced round him instantly to see if his beloved masters had also escaped with their lives.

The sight of the two Englishmen lying motionless at his side did much to restore the Arab's strength and courage, for he knew that they must both live, or the natives would not have troubled to bind their limbs.

"Allah is indeed merciful to us," he murmured sottily. "Allah be praised!"

At the well-known sound of his voice his comrades opened their eyes, and stared half stupidly around.

"Where are we?" muttered Jerry rather feebly. "Is that you, Hossen? How came we here?"

"The sahib will remember," began the Arab slowly; but Jack, whose senses had now fully returned, hastily interrupted him with:

"Yes, yes; we remember. We are in the king's palace at Tucuma, and the wretch has saved our lives so that he may kill us by some cruel torture. Very good, the question now is, how can we escape?"

Jerry rolled himself over on his side, and gazed earnestly around him.

"There is no window to this place," he said, "and the door appears to be built of pretty tough wood, so I don't see much hope of our escaping."

"If we could get rid of the cords that bind our limbs we might attack the gaoler when he brings our food," replied Hossen. "Hark! He is coming now, I think."

"A good many he's," retorted Jack grimly, as a loud patter of feet sounded without the door. "They are coming to take us to the torture, I reckon."

As he spoke the door suddenly opened, and four soldiers hastily entered, dragging after them the body of a man, whom the prisoners instantly recognised as being the native officer Batito.

"Hallo, old chap! Has Anizar vented his spite on you?" cried Jack, as the soldiers flung down their burden close beside the other captives.

Batito groaned dismally in answer; then, as if stirred by some inward thought or passion, he strove fiercely at the lashings which bound his wrists, while a slight foam gathered on his lips.

The brutal soldiers, understanding no doubt the cause of his agony, laughed sneeringly at his frantic efforts to free himself, and uttered taunting gibes in their own tongue.

This cowardly conduct had the effect of instantly rousing the adventurers' anger, and they also began to strive at the cords which bound them.

"Free my hands, you yellow-livered skunks, and, by thunder, I'll make you laugh to a different tune!" cried Jack. "You think you've got us safely in your power, do you! Well, I reckon you'll learn your mistake before many hours are past!"

"The dirty snivelling cusses will know then how dangerous it is to play tricks with real Britishers," chimed in Jerry. "And they'll find out that an Arab of the desert makes a bad prisoner."

The natives, who evidently understood English, glanced quickly at the speakers; but they made no verbal reply, though it was evident that they were not a little alarmed at the threat.

"Speak not to them, oh, brave white men!" exclaimed Batito contemptuously. "The dogs merely yelp at their

master's bidding. To-day their skins are whole, and Anizar fondles them; but maybe to-morrow his humour will change, and their bodies will become food for the vultures."

Cowed by his ominous words, which they had reason to know were likely enough to prove true, the soldiers slunk hastily out of the chamber, closing and bolting the door behind them.

Hardly had their footsteps died away in the distance ere Hossen exclaimed, in a low, joyful voice:

"Sahibs, I am free! Those infidel dogs must have bound me so quickly that they forgot to draw the cords really tight. For see, when I moved my hands, lo! the lashings fell off, and left me at liberty!"

He rose to his feet, and spread out his arms to show proof of his words; then, stepping hastily across the room, he freed each of his comrades in turn.

Directly this welcome task was finished, the four prisoners held a hurried consultation as to the best means of effecting their escape.

Jerry and Hossen, impatient of any delay, were for breaking down the door, and trusting to their prowess in fighting a road out of the palace.

But Batito, who knew what a host of trained, well-armed soldiers there would be ready to oppose them, regarded this desperate course as nothing more or less than sheer madness.

"I am as eager as you are, my noble friends, to escape from this vile prison," he said, "for I have a much-loved daughter, who, I fear, will become a prey to the designs of the wicked king unless I am at hand to protect her. But it does not seem to me that the plan you propose would have any chance of success."

"I agree with you there, comrade," exclaimed Jack gravely. "To escape from here in safety we must act cunningly, for our courage would avail us little against the odds we should have to face in an open encounter."

"That's right enough, pard," muttered Jerry; "but can you see any way of getting out of this cussed cell except through the doorway?"

"I think I can," replied Masters cheerfully. "If I don't mistake there is a hollow place, probably another chamber or a vault, beneath this room, and it seems to me that, if we could manage to raise one of these marble flags that form the flooring, we could easily drop down into—"

"Yes, yes, noble white man, that is true," interposed Batito eagerly. "Beneath us there is a passage which leads out through a secret door into the square. Quick! let us get to work while we have time, for if we delay, they may come and discover us at our task."

Encouraged by the hope thus held out to them, the adventurers at once started to loosen one of the marble slabs, using for the purpose Hossen's tough-bladed hunting knife, which had escaped the notice of their captors when they so hastily bound him.

Thanks to this lucky fact, and their great strength, the prisoners soon succeeded in forcing up the flagstone, to find, as the officer had said, a wide underground passage right below them.

"Down you go!" cried Jack. "Let Batito lead the way, as he knows the road."

Nothing loth, the native dropped through the hole, and was quickly followed by Jerry and Hossen, then Masters himself prepared to descend; but even as he did so, the door of their cell suddenly opened, and a file of soldiers hurriedly entered.

A single glance told them what was on, and, uttering a fierce shout of rage, the foremost wretch raised his sword, and rushed at Jack.

But the young Englishman, who was cool as a cucumber in the face of danger, swung his body aside in time to avoid the stroke the soldier aimed at him, and in return launched out his hard fist, and sent the savage warrior reeling back into the arms of his comrades with a clean blow betwixt the eyes.

Then, before the rest of the startled wretches had time to recover themselves, he stooped quickly down, and, picking up the heavy flagstone without any apparent effort, poised it for a second in the air, and then hurled it with unerring aim far into their midst.

That the great block of marble did considerable damage to his foes Jack had no doubt, for a chorus of hideous shrieks came to his ears as he dropped through the hole.

"What's up, chum? Are any of the skunks following us?" exclaimed Jerry rather eagerly, as his friend fairly pushed him along the passage in the rear of Batito and Hossen.

"I guess they'll think twice before they tackle this child again," growled Masters fiercely. "I dropped that big stone on their toes, and I don't fancy they quite liked it."

"Perhaps it hurt their pet corns," replied Langley with a laugh. "What a pity Anizar wasn't there to catch it on his head."

"Sahibs," murmured the voice of Hossen from a short distance ahead, "we are nearing the secret door, so be ready in case any of the infidel dogs are lurking in the square."

"I hope we shall meet a few of them," muttered Jerry

savagely. "I'm fairly stripping to show 'em how a Britisher can handle his dukes."

As it happened his wish was speedily granted, for, on passing through the secret door, they found themselves instantly face to face with a body of soldiers, who were marching towards the palace.

By this time night had fallen, and the moon not having risen as yet, the large open square was but feebly lit by the stars.

Still, for all that, the party of soldiers instantly recognised the three strangers, and, while raising a loud shout of warning to their comrades within the palace, they sought to seize upon the bold fugitives.

"Follow me, noble sirs; we must fly ere others come!" shouted Batito, turning sharply aside to avoid a thrust from the foremost soldier's weapon.

"Lead on, old chap, these skunks won't stop us!" replied Jack, dashing his fist into the face of the nearest foe, and snatching the sword from the wretch's hand as he reeled back with the shock.

Jerry made a similar attack, while Hossen, with great agility, contrived to trip up two more of their enemies in quick succession.

This method of fighting so astonished the natives that they hastily retreated a few steps, thus leaving the adventurers free to follow their guide.

The latter was already half across the square, when his companions in misfortune joined him, with the whole party of soldiers close on their heels.

"There is my house," gasped Battio, pointing to a large, detached stone building that stood on the opposite side of the square, almost facing the palace. "If we can once get inside, we shall have a chance of defending ourselves."

Encouraged by his words the fugitives quickened their pace, and arrived in front of the big gateway some few yards ahead of their pursuers.

Fortunately the gate was open, so that they were able to dart straight in and close the huge wooden barrier fair in the faces of their foes.

"Now we are safe; anyway, for a short time," panted Batito. "This door is very strong, so they will have some trouble in battering it down."

"Yes; but cannot they get in by any other road?" exclaimed Jerry.

"This is the only gate, noble sir," replied the officer, "and, as you may have observed, there are no windows on the ground-floor. Here, in Tucoma, we have many quarrels among ourselves; therefore every man builds his house in such a way that it is capable of resisting a fierce assault."

"That's lucky for us," returned Jack; "but how comes it, comrade, that you have no garrison in your little fortress?"

The officer gave a quick start of surprise, and glanced round the small, deserted courtyard with an anxious, puzzled look on his face.

"My retainers cannot surely have heard of my disgrace, and fled," he murmured; "but, even if so, some few would have certainly remained to protect their young mistress. Yet it seems strange that the gate was left open. Let us search in the chambers above, noble sirs; maybe we shall find them holding counsel with my daughter Lola as to the best means of effecting my rescue."

The eager way in which the officer spoke showed how deep was his love for his child, and the adventurers, respecting his feelings, forbore to give utterance to their gloomy suspicions; but contented themselves instead with following him closely up the wide marble staircase and through the many gorgeously apartments that were situated on the upper floor.

Room after room they visited without discovering any trace of the missing servants or their mistress, nor did any human voice reply to the frantic shouts the anxious father gave vent to.

"The craven hounds have all fled, noble sirs, and my poor child has doubtless been seized, and carried away by Anizar's vile followers!" cried Batito, coming to a halt at length in a chamber that was furnished more elegantly than the others they had passed through. "That wretch," he continued, "has long sought to add my sweet Lola to his harem; but she hated him, and I loved her too well to sacrifice her happiness, even at the tyrants' bidding!"

With that he sank down upon a pile of cushions, which had evidently been the young girl's favourite seat, and, covering his face with his hands, began to weep bitterly.

"Come, comrade," cried Jack, who, together with his companions, was deeply affected by the unfortunate father's grief, "it won't mend matters to sit here and cry. Let us rather think out some plan of rescuing the maiden from that devil's clutches. Myself, I'm game to make a shot at entering the palace single-handed, and cutting a road into the harem with this useful tool."

He swung aloft a double-bladed battleaxe, which he had picked up in one of the other rooms they had passed through, and smiled grimly round on his friends.

"You won't go alone," replied Jerry quickly; "Hossen and I will come with you."

"The sahib knows that his unworthy servant has no greater desire than to die in his service," murmured the Arab, with a ferocious gleam in his dark, flashing eyes that boded ill for the myrmidons of King Anizar.

"My noble friends," exclaimed Batito, in a tone of mingled awe and respect, "your brave offer touches me to the heart; but I cannot allow you to fling away your valuable lives so recklessly. Know that to do as you propose, you would have to fight your way through quite two hundred soldiers, and you would find, besides, eight closed doors between yourselves and the harem, even when you have entered the palace courtyard. Believe me, the plan you suggest is impossible."

"Bah! nothing is impossible to brave men," returned Jack coolly. "We will break down the eight doors you mention, comrade, and scatter to the four winds the two hundred craven wretches who own the beast Anizar as their master. We are Britishers, and Hossen is an Arab of the desert, which means that we belong to two of the bravest races on the face of the earth. If you wish to have further proof of what I say, come and see us fight."

Batito smiled sadly.

"No," he said, "I will not come, for I know you speak the truth, and I can aid you more by going and rousing up some of my friends to assist you."

A Strange Story—To the Rescue—The Fight in the Palace—A Pair of Cruel Villains—Anizar's Vile Threat—Jerry Saves Lola.

The moon had just risen when the three adventurers and the officer passed out once more into the square, and by her pale light they could plainly see a number of shadowy forms gliding about in front of the palace gateway.

"They keep good watch," muttered Batito gloomily. "'Tis evident that they fear an attack."

"Well, in that case they won't be disappointed," replied Jerry cheerfully. "I guess we'll soon give them some work to do."

"Your daughter, you say, will recognise any one of these three rings you have given us, and will understand that we are friends?" queried Jack earnestly. "And we are to look for a maiden with yellow hair, and blue eyes, the colour of our own."

"That is so, noble sir," replied the officer. "You can make no mistake, for Lola is the only woman in Tucoma that possesses such hair and eyes. She inherited them from her mother, who was partly of your race."

"An Englishwoman, do you mean?" cried Jack in surprise.

"How can that be?"

The officer smiled. "She was the daughter of a white man who came here with Anizar, and I married her. She was a good wife, and I missed her sorely when she died; but she lives again in Lola, who has ever been a good daughter to me."

"That is another reason why we should rescue her, sahibs," broke in Hossen quietly. "A woman of your race is no fit inmate for an harem."

"Very true," replied Jack; "so come, pards, let us waste no more time talking. Farewell, Batito. Go and rouse your friends, and meet us at the palace gate. No doubt we shall be glad of your assistance by then."

A hearty handshake all round followed. Then, while the officer hastened away to seek the aid of his countrymen, the three adventurers bent their steps towards the palace, feeling quite confident of being able to accomplish their desperate task.

"Remember, pards, if one of us falls, the others will push on, and, if only one succeeds in reaching the harem, he will fulfil the oath we have sworn to Batito, and kill the girl if we cannot rescue her!" exclaimed Jack, in a low, stern voice.

His companions made a sign that they understood, after which they strode on again in silence.

A minute later, when they were with a few feet of the huge gate leading into the palace, a couple of soldiers sprang out from amongst the shadows, and uttered some words in the native language.

In reply the Englishmen's axes whizzed through the air, and the two men sank lifeless to the earth.

But the noise thus occasioned roused the guard in the courtyard, and a flight of arrows hissed though the air, just above the adventurers' heads: while at the same time a bell clanged loudly, as if in warning to the garrison.

"The beggars have woke up, so we must get to work at once on the gate," cried Jack. Then, suiting his action to the word, he began to ply his axe with such fierce energy, that the great wooden barrier cracked ominously, and the splinters flew in every direction.

Jerry and Hossen, who had both been provided with similar weapons by Batito, quickly added their blows to his, with the

result that in a very few moments they had burst the gates asunder, and were face to face with their first batch of foes.

The soldiers, amazed at such daring on the part of only three men, and remembering, perhaps, the previous slaughter of their comrades in the hall, fell back half dismayed as the besiegers advanced.

Encouraged by this temporary success, the latter rushed forward, and, swinging aloft their terrible axes, brought them down with sweeping force on the heads of their foremost foes.

Again and again the deadly weapons fell with lightning quickness, while with each blow the strikers advanced a step, so that very soon they had crossed the courtyard, and were within the palace itself.

By this time, however, the whole garrison had turned out, and the broad corridor, which led into the inner part of the building, was thronged with officers, soldiers, and slaves.

It was just at this juncture, when the position of affairs looked rather bad for the adventurers, that Jerry, who was the tallest of the trio, caught sight of an ugly yellow face peering out from a doorway at the rear of the mob.

"Why, there's that skunk Alonzo!" he shouted. "I told you he didn't get drowned in the lake. 'Tis evident that he's in league with Anizar, and knows of an easy road into this cursed land of mystery."

"I'll show the treacherous devil an easier road out of it!" roared Jack, "and some of these heathen dogs as well."

On hearing this threat, the Portuguese uttered a harsh, derisive laugh, and shouted back contemptuously:

"You no live long enough, you British pig, to do dat. I no afraid of you."

A minute later, however, he had reason to change his mind, for the three besiegers, goaded into a state of frenzy by the presence of their traitorous guide, literally hewed a path through the mass of foes in front of them, and reached the doorway where he stood.

Alonzo, taken by surprise, had no time to fly, and his life would have surely ended at that moment, had not the crowd of soldiers suddenly closed up once more round the adventurers, and forced them back from the spot.

Driven right up against the wall, the valiant trio were hemmed into a small space between two huge marble statues, and it seemed that this time they were truly doomed.

But with men of their stamp great peril usually acts as a spur to greater exertions, and very often gives rise to some bright idea that instantly turns a seemingly hopeless defeat into a brilliant victory.

Thus it was in the present case, for, on glancing desperately around him in search of some road of escape, Jack's eyes chanced to fall on the two big statues beside them.

"Quick, Jerry!" he shouted, "toss down that stone image on the brutes' heads. I'll do the same with this one. Hossen will keep the devils busy for a moment."

The Arab, in reply, gave vent to his usual battle-cry, and redoubled his blows, while his two masters dropped their axes, and, seizing hold of the ponderous marble statues, hurled them fair into the centre of the crowd of foes.

Thrown into utter confusion by this unexpected diversion, the mob of natives reeled back half way down the passage. Then, ere they could recover from their surprise, the adventurers were again amongst them, and once more their terrible axes flashed and hissed through the air.

But now the spirit of the soldiers was completely broken, and, without attempting to further oppose their brave assailants, they took to their heels and fled, some one way and some another.

Finding themselves practically masters of the palace, the adventurers did not pause even to regain their breath, but rushed off in the direction that Batito had told them the king's private apartments were situated.

Of the eight doors he mentioned, all except the last one were open, so that they were saved the task of breaking them down.

This last door, however, which led directly into Anizar's apartments, was securely fastened on the inner side, and, being made of tough wood, it resisted their first efforts to burst it open.

"We must have it down, pards," cried Jack. "Come, now, all together for a final rush!"

As he spoke they dashed themselves fiercely against the obstruction at exactly the same moment, and sent it flying inwards with a crash.

But then, almost before they had time to give play to their weapons, a number of fierce, well-armed eunuchs rushed out from an inner apartment, and furiously assailed them.

These wretches, goaded on no doubt by the promise of a big reward, fought with such fiendish fury that the adventurers could make no headway against them, though they succeeded in forcing them back step by step into the inner chamber, from whence an open door led into a large, beautifully arranged garden.

Chancing to throw a hasty glance into this garden, even as he parried a furious sword-thrust from one of his opponents, Jerry saw, to his rage and horror, Anizar and the Portuguese

Alonzo running away at full speed from that part of the building, dragging with them by her arms a lovely young girl, whose long yellow hair proclaimed her to be the missing Lola.

"Look out, pards, the brutes are taking the girl away!" he shouted. Then, without a second's hesitation, he dashed aside the nearest eunuch, and sprang out through the door into the garden.

The two flying miscreants, overhearing his words, glanced over their shoulders in evident terror, and at once hastened their flight; but Jerry was a good runner, and he overtook them before they had gone another ten yards.

"Mercy, noble senor, mercy!" howled Alonzo, dropping his share of the burden, and falling on his knees.

Anizar, however, rendered desperate by the fear of death, drew his sword, and, turning fiercely round, screamed out in a voice that trembled with rage:

"Keep back, you cursed English dog, or I will drive my weapon through the wench's heart."

With that he placed the point of his sword against the helpless girl's side, and gave vent to a hoarse, brutal laugh.

But Jerry, carried away by his passion, paid no heed to the cruel threat, nor the menace which accompanied it, other than to raise his axe in readiness to strike.

Perhaps he guessed that the renegade, when it came to the point, would forgo his revenge in order to use his weapon to protect himself; and if so, he guessed rightly, for Anizar, on finding his threat disregarded, loosed hold of the girl, and raised his sword to ward off the blow that Jerry aimed at his head.

But as well might he have striven to turn aside a cannon-ball, for the brave young Englishman's strength was doubled by the sight of the wretch's lovely, helpless victim, and his axe fell with such terrible force on the villain's uplifted sword that it shivered the blade to atoms, and split the vile miscreant's skull in twain.

"Has the brute injured you, poor child?" exclaimed the gallant youth, stooping down and lifting the girl up in his arms, without paying any heed to Alonzo, who was still on his knees in the middle of a flower-bed, howling out prayers for mercy.

"No—oh no, noble stranger; thanks to you," murmured Lola, gazing timidly up into her deliverer's face, with a tender look in her soft blue eyes that made his heart throb wildly.

"And this other scoundrel?" queried Jerry, indicating the Portuguese with a wave of his hand, "has he dared to insult you?"

"N—no," said Lola softly, "he only helped to drag me out here."

"That's quite enough, added to his other sins," replied Langley sternly; "he shall go to join his vile comrade Anizar at once."

With that he stepped towards the wretched spy, still, however, holding the girl close against his breast, for he was loth to part with such a lovely burden.

"Now, Alonzo," he cried, "are you ready to die? If not, prepare yourself quickly, for I have no time to waste on you!"

"Oh noble, brave, illustrious senor, spare me!" howled the Portuguese, clawing up handfuls of earth in his terror. "I meant to rescue de senora, on my oath I did. Dat is why I did help Anizar drag her away. Oh, spare me, senor, spare me! and I will swear never to cheat you again."

"I'll take darned good care you never get the chance, you dirty, low-lived skunk!" roared Jack, who emerged at that moment from behind a clump of bushes, accompanied by the faithful Hossen.

"Senors, noble senors, do not murder me!" whined Alonzo. "Spare my life, and I will show you de proper road out of dis wicked land?"

"What does Miss Lola say?" queried Jack, glancing at the girl with a kindly smile. "Shall we kill the wretch or not?"

The girl hesitated a moment; then, looking softly up into Jerry's face, she said, with childish candour:

"Oh! please don't kill him, and, and don't let him take you away?"

She laid such emphasis on the you, that Jack burst into a hearty laugh.

"Well," he said, "we'll forgive Alonzo this time, and if your countrymen will cease trying to cut our throats, my dear, I'll promise you Jerry shall stay here a little while longer."

"Not above ground, sahib," broke in Hossen coolly. "Hark how those infidel dogs are yelling! Think you they will let us live here in peace? No; rather let us accept the Portuguese pig's offer; and Jerry sahib can bring the yellow-haired damsel with him, if he wants to keep his prize."

At this blunt speech both Langley and Alonzo looked angry, the former because he thought Hossen spoke contemptuously of Lola, and the latter because the Arab again called him a pig.

"Come, come!" exclaimed Jack hastily; "we have no time now to quarrel. Hossen is quite right, though he puts the matter rather bluntly. We must get out of this country pretty sharp, or we shall leave our bones here."

"But Lola," murmured Langley, as he pressed her still tighter to him, "will she come?"

Jack glanced again at the girl, and then burst out laughing. "Will a duck swim?" he answered gaily. "You needn't worry yourself on that point, chum. Lola won't part from you in a hurry."

"No, I won't," coolly replied that young lady herself; "I shall go with you to that England that my grandfather used to talk about."

"And your father?" queried Jack, with a slight shrug of his shoulders.

"Oh! he will come too," replied Lola, "if he is alive; but the king said he was dead, though I don't believe it."

"He was alive an hour or so back," broke in Jerry kindly, "and he promised to meet us outside the palace gate, with a number of his friends."

"That is so," began Jack. Then he stopped, for a sudden uproar sounded from within the palace, and a moment later a man, half naked and smothered in blood, came rushing out into the garden.

"Fly, noble sirs, fly!" he yelled, staggering towards the adventurers, and wildly waving his arms. "An you stay here a minute longer you are doomed!"

"It is Batito!" cried Jack, stepping hastily forward to assist the unfortunate native.

But even as he did so the latter uttered a loud cry, and, flinging up his arms, fell face downwards to the ground.

A Hasty Flight—Through the Underground Tunnel—The Road Down the Precipice—Alonzo's Last Vile Act of Treachery—Hossen's Revenge—Into the Unknown.

"He is quite dead, poor fellow; it is a wonder how he could have reached this far with such ghastly wounds upon him," murmured Jack, as he rose to his feet, after examining the body reverently.

"Let us take his advice, then, and go from here while there is time," replied Jerry. "He gave up his life to try and save ours; therefore, the least we can do is to obey him, and endeavour to carry his child to a place of safety."

"Just so," returned Jack. "But how are we to escape without running the gauntlet through the midst of our foes?"

"If de senors will trust me I do think I can show dem a road of escape," interposed Alonzo hastily. "It is not de way I would have taken you, as to dere we must pass through de town; but Anizar did tell me of it once."

"And it will lead us out of this accursed land?" inquired Jack. "You are sure of that?"

The Portugee shrugged his shoulders as he replied quietly: "I believe so, senor. Anizar did say it would."

"Let us try it, anyway," exclaimed Jerry. "It cannot be any more risky than staying here."

"But the yellow-haired damsel, sahibs?" broke in Hossen. "We cannot leave her behind."

"I don't intend to," retorted Langley calmly, as he picked the weeping girl right up in his arms and held her there firmly. "Lola belongs to me, and I'll take care of her."

"She is a legacy left to us by a truly brave man," added Jack tenderly, "and no harm shall come to her while we live."

"You are right, sahibs," replied Hossen, "and sooner than a hair of her head should be injured I would die ten thousand deaths. Lead on, pig!" he added, turning to the Portugee, "the sahibs are waiting, cannot you see?"

Alonzo favoured the speaker with an evil look, but he dared not make any retort, for on the Arab's face rested a grim smile that rather frightened him.

Moving hastily forward then, he led the adventurers to a remote part of the garden, where they found a stone trapdoor half hidden beneath a clump of bushes.

Lifting this up, they passed down a steep flight of steps, and entered a narrow underground passage or tunnel, which appeared to lead deep down into the bowels of the earth.

"Are you sure this is the road, Alonzo?" inquired Jack. "If so, it won't be a very pleasant one to travel by."

"The senor seems to doubt my word," sneered the Portugee, "or perhaps he is frightened."

"Lead on, pig! the sahibs have no wish to listen to your grunting!" cried Hossen sternly. "My knife is at your back, so if you lead us wrong you will die first!"

Scared by this threat, Alonzo moved forward a trifle faster, feeling his way along the wall with his hands, for the darkness was intense.

Foot by foot, and yard by yard, the fugitives stumbled slowly onward for some hours; then right ahead a tiny patch of light showed itself, and the air in the tunnel became distinctly fresher.

"What is that noise?" exclaimed Jerry suddenly. "Surely we must be approaching a waterfall, and a very big one at that."

"It certainly sounds like it," replied Jack, "or maybe it is a stream overhead."

"We shall soon know, sahibs," said Hossen gravely, "for, see, we are nearing the end of the tunnel."

A few minutes later and they were all standing clustered on a small rocky ledge that was situated midway up the side of a huge mountain; while far away below them lay the thick bank of fog, which they knew covered the lake, and shrouded the mysterious island from view.

"We cannot descend this way," exclaimed Jerry hastily. "The cliff runs down as straight as a wall, and there does not appear to be the least foothold."

"I'm not quite so sure of that," replied Jack, who was bending eagerly forward. "I fancy I can see plenty of holes in the face of the rock by which we might make the descent. But the question is, if we did succeed in getting down, how are we to cross the lake?"

"Anizar did say dat dere vas a boat hidden in a cave right below dis spot," interposed Alonzo hastily. "I do think I can find him."

"Good. Well, in that case we had better try the descent," returned Jack cheerfully. "That is, if Lola thinks she can manage it."

The girl glanced down the awful precipice, and shuddered visibly.

"I will try," she said sadly. "But I fear I shall fall."

"Vait a minute, senors," cried the Portugee a trifle eagerly; "I have here a cord dat vill reach, I think."

With that he unwound a long coil of silken rope from about his waist, and, flinging it over the ledge, let it fall to its full extent.

Then, drawing it up again, he showed the adventurers that it was wet for quite six feet at the end, by which they knew that it must have reached the surface of the lake.

"Dere, senors," he exclaimed, "dat makes de task easy. I vill climb down and find de boat, den I vill shout up to you, and you vill tie de rope round de senora's waist, and gently lower her down. De rope is strong, you need have no fear; it vill not break."

Jack and Jerry both tested this for their own satisfaction; then, without dreaming of any trickery on the part of their treacherous guide, they agreed to his proposal.

They might, however, have guessed that Alonzo was playing some deep game by the eager way in which he slipped over the ledge, and commenced the descent down the awful precipice.

"That devil has used this road before," muttered Jack. "See how quickly he slides down. He knows just where to put his feet."

"The pig is cheating us, sahib," replied Hossen; "but I know not how."

Jerry said nothing for he was busy tying the rope round Lola's slender waist, and whispering words of loving encouragement in her shell-like ear.

"I am going to die," murmured the girl sadly. "Some feeling within tells me that. Kiss me, Jerry, once, for we shall never meet again, and take this necklace, dear, and keep it in remembrance of your Tucoma sweetheart, the wild savage girl whom you taught to love with one look from your eyes."

She flung her arms round his neck as she spoke, and their lips met in one long-drawn kiss; then, disengaging herself almost violently from his embrace, she thrust the splendid necklace of large, well-cut diamonds into his hand, and turned to bid farewell to the others.

"To you, brave white man," she said, addressing Jack, "I leave nothing but a memory which I know you will treasure to your dying day, for your generous heart will beat in sympathy with that of your friend. But to you," she added, glancing round on Hossen with a wild light in her eyes, "I leave a task that I know you will gladly fulfil. What it is I cannot tell you in words, but your fierce nature will guess my meaning when the right time comes."

Awed by her solemn words, the adventurers would have pressed her to explain her fears more fully; but at that moment Alonzo's voice floated up from below, bidding them lower the girl, as he had found the boat.

With every care, then, they launched their precious charge over the ledge of rock, and lowered her down gently foot by foot, until she vanished beneath the mist.

A moment later and the rope became slack, by which they concluded that she had reached the boat in safety.

"We had better hold on to make sure," said Jack. "Alonzo will shout if she is all right."

Then for some few seconds they stood bending forward and straining their ears to catch the welcome cry from below; but no sound broke the utter stillness of the dreary scene, save only the harsh croak of a bullfrog and the shrill scream of some waterfowl.

But was it a waterfowl?

No! Merciful Heaven, it was a human shriek that rang out, hollow and ghastly, in the still, hot air!

Again it was repeated, then came a sullen splash in the water, and the creaking sound of a pair of oars being stealthily used.

"By Allah, I understand her meaning now!" shouted Hossen. "And she shall not go unavenged!"

Even as he spoke he swung himself recklessly over the ledge, and began descending the sheer face of the cliff with a swiftness that seemed nothing short of marvellous.

Jack and Jerry, now thoroughly alarmed, hastily followed him; but their limbs were stiff in comparison with his, so that, by the time they reached the small cave at the water's edge, the Arab had disappeared.

Nor was the boat to be seen, though a faint sound, as of oars being hastily plied, floated to them from out of the mist.

"The wretch must have carried Lola off!" exclaimed Jack fiercely. "If so——"

He got no futher, for a terrible cry from his chum choked his very utterance, nor could he speak when Jerry, with some trouble, drew from out of the water, almost at their feet, the dead body of poor little Lola.

Still sticking in her breast was the assassin's knife, which both men instantly recognised as Alonzo's, while it was easy to see, from the marks on her throat, that she had been partly strangled before she was stabbed to the heart.

"Why did he do it?" gasped Jack, in a broken voice.

"To get the diamond necklace that she gave to me," replied Jerry in a voice so awfully calm, that it made his friend shudder.

Then for a full minute a deathlike silence reigned in the cave, during which we think both men uttered a fearful inward prayer for vengeance on the murderer.

If it was so, their prayer was answered quickly, for all at once an awful shriek rang out from the heart of the mist.

Again and again, and yet again, it was repeated, growing each time more horrible in its intensity; then quite suddenly it ceased, and the Englishmen, after waiting a brief few minutes, saw a boat emerge out from the thick bank of fog, and in the boat stood Hossen quite alone.

"Are you ready, sahibs?" murmured the Arab in his usual grave tones.

Jack answered with another question.

"Is he dead?" he said sternly.

"Do I ever fail in a task that is allotted to me?" answered Hossen quietly.

"Never!" replied both Englishmen in a breath, and they stepped into the boat.

Landing on the further side of the mysterious lake the three adventurers plunged into the thick unknown forests of Central Africa, where it is possible the reader may hear of them again.

THE END.

Next Wednesday, "*Scarlet Feather; or, The Lone Chief,*" a grand story of the Wild West.

Don't skip this Grand Story! How the Detectives solved the Mystery of Dr. Thrashard's School.



By the Author of "*The Path of Guilt,*" "*The Real Adventures of Sexton Blake,*" &c.

NEW READERS BEGIN THE STORY HERE.

Sexton Blake, the renowned crime investigator, receives a letter from Dr. Thrashard, M.A., head-master of the Drearville Academy for the Sons of Gentlemen, requesting him to go or send a representative to the school to investigate a mystery. Blake suggests to Wallace Lorrimer, his pupil and assistant, that he go to the school in the guise of a scholar, and the young man agrees to do so. Lorrimer's name at the school is Timothy Tattlemore, and not even the head-master is aware that the new scholar is a detective in disguise.

Lying awake in bed, "Timothy Tattlemore" sees Dr. Thrashard walking in his sleep. He follows him, but the doctor disappears through a baize door that leads into a disused wing of the rambling old building. Lorrimer attempts to follow, but finds the door locked! Two days later a whisper runs around the school: "There has been another robbery!" Tattlemore hears from Tom Watkins (the captain of the school) that mysterious robberies are constantly occurring at Drearville. In return, he tells Watkins how he witnessed Dr. Thrashard walking in his sleep. As the boys get up and walk away, a ruffian-looking man, Ned Garstike, rises from his hiding-place in a ditch. He has overheard everything.

Tom Watkins goes on to tell Tattlemore how a small boy named Claude Henshawe mysteriously disappeared from the school a fortnight before. It was said that he went home to his uncle; but nobody saw him go, and Tom Watkins suspects foul play. That night Tim Tattlemore volunteers to go on a secret expedition to the village to forage for cakes and ginger-beer for a midnight feast in the dormitory. Pat Murphy and Tom Watkins accompany him. On their way back a light is seen in the disused east wing of the old school. Tim Tattlemore, because of what Watkins has told him, resolves to investigate. The two boys send Pat Murphy back to

the dormitory with the cakes and ginger-beer, while they themselves climb up the ivy to the window where the light appears. Chained to the wall by fetters of iron, is a young boy Claude Henshawe. At the door, candle in hand, apparently gazing at Claude, is the head-master of the school, Dr. Thrashard!

TIM TATTEMORE'S TRIUMPH.

Claude Henshawe's Story—Setting the Captive Free—Interrupted—Held by the Enemy—Tim Tattlemore Makes a Dash for Liberty, and Gets a Surprise—A Load Off Dr. Thrashard's Mind—The Mystery Solved.

It was wonderful that Tom Watkins retained his hold upon the ivy, so great was the horror of the sight he beheld. Tim Tattlemore, more accustomed to surprises, noted his companion's pallid face and shaking limbs, and threw a protecting arm around him.

"All serene now, Tim!" whispered the Captain of the School, forcing a smile. "But what does it mean? Old Daniel, there—do you think he is keeping little Clau—"

"Hush, Tom!" answered the disguised detective. "Watch, laddie, and mum's the word!"

With bated breath, and with their faces pressed as close to the antique diamond panes of the window as they dared, the school chums watched the head-master as, clad only in his night attire, he wandered around the room and appeared to be muttering to himself.

"Tim, Tim, he's asleep—he's walking in his sleep!" whispered Watkins excitedly, quite unable to keep silence.

"Yes, yes, you've guessed it, old man," came the answer,

SCARLET FEATHER. Next Wednesday. A grand tale of the West.

in a low tone. "He can't see the youngster; he doesn't see anything, although his eyes are wide open. And little Claude's too frightened to do anything but stare at him—see!"

As Tim spoke, the doctor passed so close to the captive schoolboy that Claude Henshaw could almost have touched him with his outstretched hand.

The detective watched anxiously, dreading lest the little boy should overcome his fright, and awaken the sleep-walker.

"He musn't speak! he musn't touch him!" he whispered excitedly—"that would spoil everything!"

Tom Watkins, although his mind was still in a whirl, looked at his companion sharply. What did Tim Tattlemore mean?

"Spoil everything, Tim?"

"Hush! I was talking out loud, old fellow—a stupid habit of mine. I shall have a lot to tell you presently, Tom, for I'm not exactly what you think me. But not now, not now! Ah, he's going, he's going!"—bending forward with tense face to watch the white-clad form of the head-master as it passed out of the room.

"S-s-sh! Keep quite still and quiet, Tom, a minute or two longer!"

As he spoke, the detective fumbled in his pocket for his knife—a wonderful combination affair, containing a corkscrew, a file, a buttonhook, and all sorts of other useful things, besides the ordinary blades.

Tattlemore's knife had already become quite one of the most celebrated things at Drearville College, and there was hardly a boy in the school who did not envy the new scholar the possession of such a treasure. It looked as though the time had come when Tim Tattlemore's knife would prove to be of real service to him and to others.

Three minutes passed slowly by, and the detective judged that by this time the doctor must be at some distance from the room which formed poor Claude Henshaw's prison.

"Now, Tom," he whispered, "you attract the youngster's attention—as softly as you can—and warn him not to cry out."

Tap, tap, went Tom Watkins's knuckles on the diamond-paned casement.

"Hallo, there! Claude! Claude!" he called, as loudly as he dared, and the prisoner's white, scared face was turned sharply towards the window.

"Don't call out, Claude. It's I, old man, Tom Watkins—your old pal, Tom!"

The youngster's lips parted, but no words left them. Instead, his eyes lit up with sudden joy, and he sprang to his feet with arms outstretched, while the chain that fettered him to the wall clanked hideously.

Tim Tattlemore, meanwhile, lost no time in getting to work on the window. Holding on to a stout branch or the ivy with one hand, he employed the other in forcing back the catch of the window. He was not greatly surprised to find that it slid back quite easily. He had expected as much, and a quiet smile of satisfaction curved his lips.

"In you go, Tom," he whispered, as he opened the window, and Watkins eagerly sprang into the room.

"Claude, Claude! Poor little kiddy!" he cried, and fairly hugged the boy, who had been so foully and treacherously treated. "The brutes—whatever they were—to chain you here like a wild beast! But we'll have you out of it, precious soon!"

Little Henshaw's eyes wandered questioningly from Watkins to Tattlemore.

"Oh, that's Tim Tattlemore, Claude," explained the captain of the school—"the new boy, and one of the best fellows in the wide world!"

"That'll do, Tom," laughed Tattlemore; "let's cut the cackle, and get to business, old man!"

He had opened out the file of his wonderful knife, and at once started to work on one of the links of the chain that bound Claude Henshaw to a huge iron staple in the wall.

Not a sound broke the stillness, save the jar of the file. The departure of the doctor and his candle had left the room not quite in darkness, for the boys at once noticed that a tiny jet of gas burned at a bracket on the wall, and this they had turned up as high as they dared.

Tom Watkins, fearing an interruption, stood on guard at the door for some moments, listening for any sound that might tell him the sleepwalking head-master was returning in that direction.

At last the lad felt certain that Dr. Thrashard was gone for good. He secured the door by means of a large, rusty bolt, then came over to Tim's side and watched the regular backward and forward motion of the file. Little by little the stout link of iron was being cut through; but in doing such rough work the file itself was being worn steadily away. Would it last out the job? was the question that each anxious watcher asked himself.

Tom Watkins spoke at last, but in a low, cautious whisper.

"How long have you been here, Claude?"

"Ev-er since I left the school, Watkins," faltered the

youngster. "How did you know I was up here? How did you find me?"

"By the light, laddie. We wondered what the dickens there was a light here for."

"Yes; this is the east wing, isn't it?" asked little Henshaw, who seemed as one crushed down by the weight of an overwhelming horror.

"Why yes, of course it is!" retorted the Captain of the School. "Come, buck up, Claude, pull yourself together! Surely you've known where you are all this time?"

"No," Claude answered wearily—"no, I haven't Tom—not for certain. They said I was in the east wing, and they'd leave just a jet of gas burning so that if the ghost came here I should be able to see it."

"The brutes—whatever they were!" growled Tom Watkins. "And so, when Old Daniel came in, walking in his sleep, you took him for the ghost, eh?"

"Ye-es, and I—I'm not really afraid of ghosts, Tom; but you see—"

"That's all right, chummy; don't you worry about that! But hadn't the ghost been to visit you before?"

"No; but to-day was the first time that door was left unbolted."

"Indeed!"

"Yes; they said bolting the door wouldn't keep the ghost out, because ghosts could get in by the keyhole or through a crack in the floor. But once before somebody tried the handle of the door, but couldn't get in."

"Ah! when was that?"

"At night; two nights ago, I think."

Tom looked at Tattlemore, who paused a moment in his work to cast an answering look at Tom. Two nights ago! That was the night when Tim Tattlemore watched and followed Dr. Thrashard, the sleepwalker.

Though a smile of satisfaction showed on the detective's face, a great horror lurked at his heart. What was the hideous meaning at the back of this foul mystery? What connection had Dr. Thrashard, the staid and learned schoolmaster, with the prisoner of the east wing?

"Nearly through now, youngster," said the supposed Tim Tattlemore.

"Nearly through!" echoed Tom Watkins. "Hear that, Claude? We'll soon have you at liberty now, and then just see the feed of cakes and ginger-beer we'll give you—if Pat Murphy's left any of them!" he muttered under his breath.

"They must have brought me up here that—that morning, Watkins," said Claude, whose spirits were slowly returning to him. "You know that day I was to have left the school?"

"Yes, laddie, yes?"

"Well, I was walking down to the football-field. I—I was just having a last look round the old place, you know, Tom, when somebody—two men, I think, or perhaps three—darted out from behind a hedge, and seized hold of me."

"What were they like?"

Tattlemore was the speaker this time, and he paused in his work, eagerly awaiting the answer.

"I—I don't know," said Claude confusedly. "One of them put his hand over my eyes."

"Ah!" And, with a sigh of disappointment, Tattlemore began to ply his file more vigorously than ever.

"Yes, and what happened next?" asked Watkins.

"Then," Claude went on, "I felt something put over my face; there was a sickly smell, and I just went slap off to sleep. The next thing I knew was that I was here, chained to the wall."

"And you've been here how long?"

"I've counted seventeen days."

"Good heavens!" groaned Tattlemore. "And what have you done for food and drink?"

"Oh, they've brought me that every day. They climbed up to the window just as you did, Tom. Ah! what's that?"

The boy had been sitting on the floor while Tattlemore worked away at his chain; but he sprang up now, gazing at the window with fear-distended eyes.

From his pallid lips broke a cry of warning to Tim Tattlemore; but it came just a moment too late.

Through the window scrambled a man who dashed forward with an awful oath, and flung himself upon the stooping detective.

Tom Watkins leapt forward to his chum's assistance, but by this time a second man had made an entrance by the window, and the Captain of the School found himself engaged in a useless struggle against a man who was twice his weight and greatly his superior in brute strength.

The first man, gripping Tim Tattlemore by the neck, effectually prevented him from calling out the while he forced him backward to the ground. Tom Watkins, breathing hard, struggled manfully with his opponent, while Claude Henshaw, who had free lungs if he was free in nothing else, set up a ringing scream for help.

"D'ye hear, Ned? Just silence that kid!" cried Tim

Tattlemore's assailant. "I've got me 'ands full 'ere. Just ketch him a swipel!"

Ned Gastike, for he it was, loosed his hold of Tom Watkins for one moment, and aimed a murderous blow at little Henshaw. His huge gnarled fist caught the youngster on the temple, and floored him—for the time being dead to all that went on around him.

Watkins—brave Tom Watkins, gathered together the remnants of his sore-tryed strength, and hurled himself on the brutal ruffian. All the anger, all the bulldog pluck of his British ancestry seethed to the surface, and for a moment the odds seemed dead against Ned Gastike.

Only for a moment, however. The dastard aimed a cowardly kick at the lad's stomach, then, dashing in, he caught poor Tom a swinging right-hander on the side of the head, and, so far as Tom Watkins was concerned, the battle was over.

Long as it takes to tell, all this had happened within the space of a minute.

But now Ned's partner in villainy, Bill Fanks, was finding Tim Tattlemore too much of a handful for him; and Ned, though he was in no mood for further fighting, was forced to go to his assistance.

Against the pair of them Tim struggled in vain.

He was quickly overpowered, a handkerchief stuffed in his mouth as a gag, and his arms and hands tightly bound to his sides and his legs lashed together with cords, which Ned Gastike produced from a cupboard in the room. Tom Watkins, who was now beginning to regain consciousness after his knock-out blow, they served exactly in the same manner.

Tom and Tim, lying bound hand and foot, with their eyes alone left to their use, soon saw the plan their two assailants had formed.

From the cupboard Ned Gastike brought a coil of rope, so stout and heavy that it might have served as a ship's cable. The men, Tattlemore guessed, were going to lower them through the window to the ground below, take them away somewhere, and keep them close prisoners until their own fiendish schemes were crowned with success.

As the detective expected, so it happened. Silently, swiftly the sinister work was carried out, and all the while little Claude Henshaw lay silent and motionless on the floor, with a thin stream of blood trickling from a cut on his forehead.

The bound and helpless chums being landed one by one on the gravel path below, Ned Gastike and his companion swiftly followed them, after almost extinguishing the gas in the room.

With a jack-knife Gastike cut away the cords binding the captives' legs, in order that they might walk.

"Now, my lads, it's quick march along o' us, d'ye see?" he whispered hoarsely. "You knows a bit too much, both of

yer, and you've jest got to go somewhere where there'll be nobody to listen to what you've got to say. Now, I've got a revolver"—producing it from his pocket—"and Bill's got another, and if either of you tries to git away, by Jiminy, it's a pop she goes, my beauties, and another young man died young. D'ye see?" And the villain leered horribly in his victims' faces.

"Not so much of the cackle, Ned!" said his partner irritably. "Your jaw'll be the death of you! Now, young 'uns, over the fields yonder to Norbury, and jest step out lively. No, you lead the way, and we'll follow. It ain't for the likes of Ned and me to walk alongside o' the quality!"

And the ruffian chuckled at what he thought an excellent joke.

With arms and hands tightly bound, and with gagged mouths, Tom and Tim were helpless, powerless to resist.

For the present they must meekly obey their persecutors. The only alternative was an almost certain death, for both Ned and Bill carried revolvers, and neither of them was a man whose aim or nerve would be likely to fail him at a critical moment.

So away they marched, taking a turn to the left, avoiding the village, and behind them walked Ned Gastike and Bill Fanks, with revolvers cocked.

"By Jiminy," whispered Ned Gastike, who could not remain silent for long, "if we'd ha' bin five minutes later, Bill, the bloomin' game would ha' bin blown!"

A grunt of assent was all Bill Fanks gave by way of answer.

But if only the two scoundrels could have turned and seen the curly head and the pair of bright eyes at one of the windows of the Long Dormitory, of Drearville Academy, perhaps they would not have felt quite so elated over their success.

"Ooh! the murderin' divils!" muttered Pat Murphy, for he it was who kept vigil at the dormitory window—"it's Tom Watkins and Tim Tattlemore they're leadin' away entirely! Oh, just wait while I be puttin' on me clothes, ye omadhauns—just wait, I say!"

Pat shook his fist at the retreating forms, now almost lost to view; then he looked around and along the dormitory to ascertain whether all his school chums slept. Yes, thanks to the cakes and ginger-beer, and thanks still more to their youth and health, every boy in the dormitory was fast asleep. Pat waited a moment, debating within himself whether he should wake one of them, and tell him what was going on. Finally he decided not to do so.

Now fully dressed, he scrambled out from the window on to a stout limb of ivy, and gently pulled down the casement behind him. In less than a minute his feet trod on firm ground, and he, too, hurried away over the fields to Norbury.

(To be continued.)

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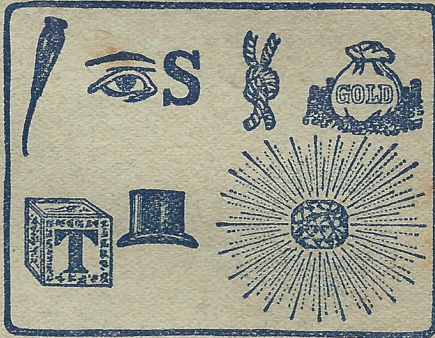
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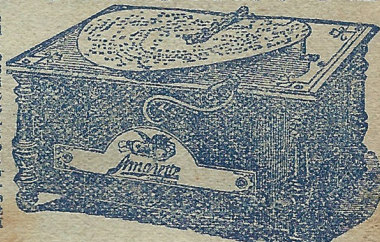
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