CIHM
Microfiche
Series
(Monographs)

ICMH
Collection de
microfiches
(monographies)

Canadian Institute for Historical Microreproductions / Institut canadien de microreproductions historiques

Technical and Bibliographic Notes / Notes techniques et bibliographiques

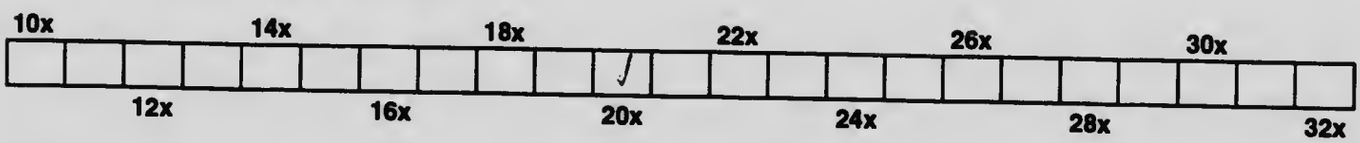
The institute has attempted to obtain the best original copy available for filming. Features of this copy which may be bibliographically unique, which may alter any of the images in the reproduction, or which may significantly change the usual method of filming are checked below.

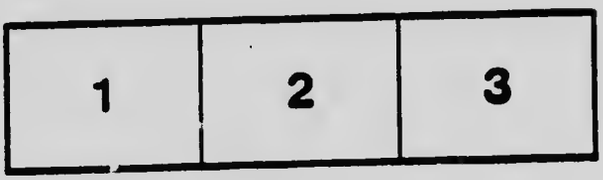
- [x] Coloured covers / Couverture de couleur
- [ ] Covers damaged / Couverture endommagée
- [ ] Covers restored and/or laminated / Couverture restaurée et/ou pelliculée
- [ ] Cover title missing / Le titre de couverture manque
- [ ] Coloured maps / Cartes géographiques en couleur
- [x] Coloured ink (i.e. other than blue or black) / Encre de couleur (i.e. autre que bleue ou noire)
- [x] Coloured plates and/or illustrations / Planches et/ou illustrations en couleur
- [ ] Bound with other material / Relié avec d'autres documents
- [ ] Only edition available / Seule édition disponible
- [ ] Tight binding may cause shadows or distortion along interior margin / La reliure serrée peut causer de l'ombre ou de la distorsion le long de la marge intérieure.
- [ ] Blank leaves added during restorations may appear within the text. Whenever possible, these have been omitted from filming / Il se peut que certaines pages blanches ajoutées lors d'une restauration apparaissent dans le texte, mais, lorsque cela était possible, ces pages n'ont pas été filmées.
- [ ] Additional comments / Commentaires supplémentaires:

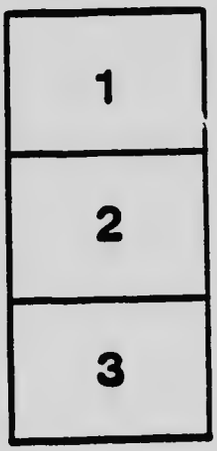
L'institut a microfilmé le meilleur exemplaire qu'il lui a été possible de se procurer. Les détails de cet exemplaire qui sont peut-être uniques du point de vue bibliographique, qui peuvent modifier une image reproduite, ou qui peuvent exiger une modification dans la méthode normale de filmage sont indiqués ci-dessous.

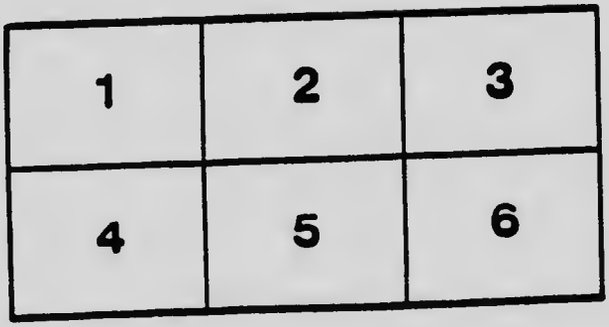
- [ ] Coloured pages / Pages de couleur
- [ ] Pages damaged / Pages endommagées
- [ ] Pages restored and/or laminated / Pages restaurées et/ou pelliculées
- [x] Pages discoloured, stained or foxed / Pages décolorées, tachetées ou piquées
- [ ] Pages detached / Pages détachées
- [x] Showthrough / Transparence
- [ ] Quality of print varies / Qualité inégale de l'impression
- [ ] Includes supplementary material / Comprend du matériel supplémentaire
- [ ] Pages wholly or partially obscured by errata slips, tissues, etc., have been refilmed to ensure the best possible image / Les pages totalement ou partiellement obscurcies par un feuillet d'errata, une pelure, etc., ont été filmées à nouveau de façon à obtenir la meilleure image possible.
- [ ] Opposing pages with varying colouration or discolourations are filmed twice to ensure the best possible image / Les pages s'opposant ayant des colorations variables ou des décolorations sont filmées deux fois afin d'obtenir la meilleure image possible.

This item is filmed at the reduction ratio checked below / Ce document est filmé au taux de réduction indiqué ci-dessous.









KING CONDOR

NLR

1/596

To Allan

From

Murray

1919

The Boys' Big Game Series

THE KING CONDOR OF THE ANDES

Not fifty feet away was the brink of a cliff. Rod tugged desperately to tear his wrists from the grip of the sharp claws; they clutched the tighter.

The King Condor of the Andes

BY
ELLIOTT WHITNEY

Illustrations by Fred J. Arting

The Copp, Clark Co., Limited
Toronto

THE KING CONDOR OF THE ANDES

CONTENTS

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

The King Condor of the Andes

CHAPTER I

A LETTER FROM SOUTH AMERICA

"Got something to show you, Rod, if you'll come up to the house a minute."

"What is it, Phil? You look as proud as if your aunt had just put you into long pants."

"No sarcasm or knickerbockers'll chase you down the street. She says she is going to keep me in these till I'm seventeen — three more months of knee garters," he added only half jokingly. "I told her I was five foot ten and weighed a hundred and sixty without my clothes — and she reminded me they judged hogs by weight."

The two boys hardly looked like chums, in spite of the fact that they were about the same age — overgrown sixteen — and that the better-dressed one affectionately clutched the arm of

the boy in overalls. For Rodney Dillon was just on his way home from work and his clothes were the worse for contact with rails and ties and railway embankments. Philip Crompton looked neat and well-cared for, even in the despised knickers. Nor did he look especially childish. From the chunky calves of his legs to his sturdy shoulders, short neck and capable-looking face he looked full of "drive," as the high school coach put it. That was how Phil impressed you: better at play than at books.

Rod, on the other hand, was rather lean and rangy. Somehow he looked like one of those hounds hunters half-starve to make them keen for game; perhaps at times the comparison was true farther than looks. But of them both more later.

"I expect your aunt would like it better if I came around after supper when I have changed my clothes. If it isn't long pants you want to show me I guess it can wait."

"Well *I* can't." By this time they had turned in at a white-picketed gate and had dashed down a sanded brick walk and onto a spotlessly clean porch.

"This way in, sir. Shall I take the gentle-

man's hat and gloves? Step lightly, Rod, and maybe Aunt Em won't hear us."

But Aunt Em opened the door almost in their faces. "You're late again to-night," was her greeting to Phil. Rod she favored with a cold glance that went through and beyond him. "Again?" she snapped at Phil.

"Bet your life, Aunt Em," answered Phil as he led the way down the hall and upstairs to his room. "Come in, Rod," he invited as he shoved open the door. "Just hang your hat on a chair-back or the doorknob. Doorknob's better — easier to find it if you're in a hurry to get out."

"What did your aunt mean by *again*, Phil?"

"Pshaw, Rod, don't you pay any attention to Aunt Em."

"She meant me, didn't she?"

"Why, yes," was the frank response, "she did, Rod. You see, Aunt Em and I don't exactly agree on my friends. She tells me you're a *common* workingman, but I think you're a — brick."

"Referring to my hair again, are you?"

"Nope. Here, Rod, take a look at the color of that." From an envelope he took a letter

and a folded bit of paper which he tossed carelessly to Rod. He caught it, gave one glance and then:

"Whew! A check for six hundred dollars. Bet it's counterfeit money. Couldn't anybody get six hundred dollars of real money onto that small a piece of paper. All yours, *Mister* Crompton?"

"A letter came along with it that's worth more still. That's what I really wanted to show you — the letter, not the check. It's from dad."

"Well, read me off about a dollar's worth of it. That's all I can afford till pay-day. Blaze away, Phil; I'm harmless."

"He's writing from South America of course. 'Dear Son: By the time this reaches you, you will be graduated from dear old Wentworth High, where your father, farther back than he likes to remember, shivered on that same shaky platform, right under the picture of whiskered old first-principal Aikins, wondering if the president of the board would ever get through with his compliments and get down to the business of handing out diplomas. And I expect you're wondering what you are to do next.'

"I have been, Rod.

"'Well, lad, I hardly know what to advise. So I'm going to give you a choice and let you advise yourself. I've always wanted you to have a college education, and there is no reason why you shouldn't. With Rockpoint, your father's college, right in town, and your Aunt Em to look after you, I guess a boy couldn't ask it much easier. The only trouble is that Rockpoint doesn't teach engineering, and I know you've set your heart on being a civil engineer like your dad. And that brings me to the other choice: I could use you down here. While it wouldn't be a college course in surveying, it'd teach you some things a school doesn't dream about. And I'd guarantee that after four years with me you could hold down a job under any boss.

"'That isn't everything, of course, lad. Life's more than working, and college teaches a fellow how to get a lot out of life he might miss otherwise.

"'I want you to think it over, Philip. Talk it over with that Professor Miller you think so much of at school, and then, before you make up your mind finally, talk to that fine young friend of yours, Rodney Dillon. He'll give you

the practical angle on the proposition. He's a *brick.*' Get that, Rod? 'If I had him down here I could make something out of him.

"'I am sending you a check that will take care of you for a while whichever way you decide. Write me as soon as you make up your mind.'

"Well, that's about all that'll interest you, Rod. Now what has the brick got to say?"

"Have you talked with Mr. Miller yet?"

"No. I figured I'd talk with you first, and if you agreed with my ideas, why I could save one consultation. You see, Prof Miller and I aren't as friendly as we were. He threatened he wouldn't give me my diploma unless I made up some piffling work I flunked in three years ago. Well, what's your verdict?"

"Mine? South America. I used to think I'd like to go to college, myself, but I've changed my mind. Too many blockheads go there nowdays. Why, old Rupp's got six college grads — civil engineers — working for him alongside me, for a dollar and a half a day. Some of them know as much about plotting a curve or laying a switch as old Rupp himself, but they're long on theory and short of do-it-ability. Rule of

thumb fellows like you and me, Phil, can get a lot farther with what hard knocks and handling the tools will teach us than we can by following instructions from a book."

"But why can't I get both? Four years of college wouldn't hurt me, and I could still take a course of hard knocks under dad."

"Sure. Say, Phil, how long is it since you saw your father?"

"Four years. His last job was down in South America too, and then, a year ago, he jumped right into this one. I expect it'll take another year to finish the little railroad he's working on now, and get the mine into working order."

"Mine? What mine?"

"It's a mineral concession the company he works for has taken over. It's about thirty miles inland and they had to build a road to carry the ore to the coast Let me read you the rest of the letter:

"'I'm a little pinched on ready cash just now, as the company ran short of faith and finances at about the same time. Consequently, the whole scheme nearly fell through. Fortunately, one of the directors hated to let go, and

reorganized the company and managed to sell enough stock to keep us going in a small way. Bemish, my assistant down here, and I went into it as deep as we dared — all our cash and the bulk of our salaries. So, as I said, it trims me pretty close right now, but we stand to make a mighty good stake if we win out. We have to depend almost entirely on our native help — Rodney knows how bad that is — but we'll make out all right if we can just keep the Americans we have. One of them left last week and his partner is doing a good deal of grumbling.'

"It's a silver mine, Rod, and there's stacks of ore in plain sight. It'd be great sport to go down there all right — "

"Say, Phil — there's just one question I'd like to ask you: Your father hasn't been home for four years, you say. Did it ever strike you he might be lonesome?"

"Dad? Lonesome? Why dad's the *un*lonesomest man you ever saw. He's so big and cheerful and strong — "

"And unselfish that he keeps his troubles all to himself doesn't he? Why, he wouldn't think of urging you to come down there — he wants

to do the best thing by you — but he's wild to have you. I could see that by his letter."

"Why, I didn't notice — "

"Of course not. Fellows with good dads never know them as well as other people do. Your father was a prince to me. He got me my first job, when I was only thirteen. Where'd I be now if he hadn't picked me up and set me going? Oh, I know I'm not much, but I'm headed in the right direction all the same. And if it was my dad that wrote me a letter like that, I'd be on my way to him in a week. Of course — " he hesitated — "of course he really thinks you ought to go to college. He's willing to sacrifice himself so you can go. I don't know," shaking his head, "perhaps you ought to talk to Professor Miller."

"And you know what he'd say? Rockpoint! I wouldn't go to school at Rockpoint if it was the last school on earth!"

"Why not? It's a fine school."

Before Phil could answer there came a call from below.

"Philip! Have you changed into your house clothes? I want you to do an errand for me."

Phil nodded his head grimly in the direction

of downstairs. "That's the reason," he said. "Aunt Em. She's awfully good to me and all that, but she can't get it into her head that a boy isn't going to grow up into an old maid. She'll be calling me down in a few minutes to take my sewing lesson."

"Jiminy, I wish she'd teach me a few stitches."

"Fancy work — crochet — bias and buttonholes and basting! I'm not going to Rockpoint, I'll tell you that. I'm going to a school so far away Aunt Em can't even come on a visit."

"Yeh — and you'd be crying your eyes out inside of a week to see her. I tell you, Phil, us men don't half appreciate our women folk."

"I guess it works both ways. Do you think Aunt Em'd trust me out alone after ten o'clock? She'd throw three fits and die in the first one — which isn't very respectful, but it's true."

"And meanwhile there's your father. I guess you're not figuring much on him."

"Honestly, do you think I ought to cut the school business?"

"Well, why not try your dad for a year? You could come back to — Rockpoint — if you didn't like it."

"I can see you'd go in a minute."

"I sure would!"

"Well, let's go."

"Who? Me? Us two?"

"Beauty and the beast, yes."

"I'm not invited," laughed Rod, yet seriously enough.

"Here's an invitation," and Phil waved the check, "and here's another," and he extended his hand. "And as for being welcome," he read from the last page of his father's letter: "'I could make mighty good use of a few fellows like the one you're telling me Rodney's getting to be.'"

"Did he write that?"

"Read it yourself."

But Rodney Dillon pushed aside the waving bit of paper and seized Phil's hand in a grip that made him wince. "You just bet I'm game! When do we start? To-morrow?"

"To-morrow! Whew! I'm not sure I'm going —"

"I knew you'd back out!"

"Not sure of going till after commencement, and that's not until Friday. There's a lot to do in the way of getting ready, you know.

There's clothes to get, trunks to pack, Aunt Em's consent to win — ''

"Philip," came again from below. "Philip!" in louder tones, "has that boy gone yet? When you get rid — ''

"I'll be down right away, Aunt Em," Philip interrupted.

"We'll go, all right, Rod. Aunt Em'll have a duck fit when she knows you're going along.''

"Philip!" again from below.

"Chase yourself, Phil," urged Rod. "I'm going out the back way. I'll see you to-morrow night, and we'll fight it out. Hooray for South America — ''

"And the silver mine."

"The railroad, you mean. Hooray for your dad. He's a — a — brick!''

CHAPTER II

AUNT EM, GOOD FELLOW

Stoneville is a little inland village on the Mississippi River, a little better than halfway up. It has two schools and a modest college, a lake or two, and bending round the town like a barrel stave, the Mississippi itself. Bluffs tower above the bank to the north of the town, with a wagon road and a line of shining rails just at their foot.

Off to the south the country is level, and here the shining rails stretch out into a network of switches and sidetrack and freight yards where men are constantly running up and down, waving their arms, while other men bend over the track or swing spike mauls or wrenches in a confusion of energy. Here and there, too, men with tall, three-legged instruments peer through odd-looking eye-pieces and motion with their hands to other men who stand with rods held before them, a bundle of stakes and an axe behind them.

Down the track comes a keen-faced chap,

dressed evidently in his Sunday best, new shoes that squeak and a red tie of painful brightness. As he approaches, arms stop waving, spike mauls and wrenches drop with a clatter, instruments are dropped in the sand beside the track.

"Going to leave us, Rod?"

"Yep. It's me for South America. I'm off to-morrow night on Number Six. Going to catch the Diamond Joe packet at Bridgeport and go the rest of the way on the Mississip. Thought I'd come out and say so long to you fellows."

There was a great hand-shaking then and a rousing cheer as squeaky shoes and red tie faced about and stumped along the ties back through the yards. As he passed an extra large clump of willows a head bobbed cautiously out, followed by the rest of a boy in knickerbockers.

"Gave you a good send-off, didn't they? Say, they must think a lot of — Jiminy! but these ties are hard on tender feet," for Phil noticed that Rod's eyes were suspiciously near to tears and he decided to change the subject.

"Huh, you don't need to be so bashful. I know I'm ready to cry, and I'm not ashamed of it. They've sure been mighty nice to me."

"Well, they acted as if they were kind of

sorry to see you go. It wasn't anything like the send-off I got. From Aunt Em, I mean."

"What'd she say, anyway? You never told me."

"Good reason. Well, she let me get about halfway through, and then you ought to have heard her. Of course I knew what she was going to say before she started, but I didn't know there was so much that could be said. And then, first thing you know, she had started crying, too. If it hadn't been for you, Rod, I expect I would have told her I'd stay."

"And what did she say when she found out about that — about me, I mean?"

"Now, Rod, that wouldn't be fair to either you or me or Aunt Em. Aunt Em's all right, but she just doesn't know that a man's clothes and parents are just the canceled stamp on an envelope — it brought the letter all right, but it isn't worth anything after you've read what's inside. That's what dad used to say, anyway."

The boys walked along, Rod whistling a lively tune and Phil stopping every now and then to pick up a stone from the track and zip it at the glass insulators on the telegraph poles. After he had sent a rock singing off the side of

one Rod stopped his whistle short and spoke.

"I understand, Phil, that you expect to be a civil engineer." Phil looked at him blankly. "Well, there was a wreck down at Elmer Junction last week because some kids got funny with the telegraph wires."

Phil said nothing, but he kept his hands in his pockets until they had turned onto the public road.

"Did you write that letter to your father?" Rod ventured finally.

"I did. I told him we were coming. I figured out the schedule for their supply boat and I guess we can make it for her next trip. Commencement's to-morrow night. We ought to be able to leave Monday. I think we'd better change our minds about that going down the river stunt. It'd take us five or six days to make it from Bridgeport to New Orleans, and the *Juanita* leaves there on Saturday. If we had any bad luck at all we'd be left. Besides, we'll see plenty of water before we hit South America."

They had reached Phil's home, but instead of going upstairs to his room they sat on the vine-shaded porch. The door was partly open,

as were the two windows, but Aunt Em could be dimly heard clattering dishes in the kitchen, so the boys felt free to talk over their plans.

"Well that's all right. But say, I do wish your Aunt Em didn't have such a bad opinion of me—"

"Now don't you worry about that, Rod. Aunt Em means all right, and she's mighty good-hearted. It's just because she thinks so much of me, I guess, and you know there are a lot of people who judge people by their friends just as they judge them by their clothes. Aunt Em'd die before she'd see me in a ragged shirt or a dirty collar, not for my sake exactly, and not for her own. She's just afraid the neighbors will think she isn't taking the right kind of care of me, and really, Rod, you can't expect to be friendly with people who pretend to be anything unless you look right. You wouldn't think of going to church in your overalls, now would you?"

"Huh," grunted Rod, "you needn't preach to me."

"No, but don't you see, Rod, that the people who do things, have things, and dress is just one of the signs. It's just one way of showing

that you care what people think of you. And in a way, friends are like clothes; whether you have a tacky looking overcoat or a tacky looking chum shows your taste — that's what Aunt Em thinks."

"I guess she's right, Phil; but I guess, too, she doesn't know that maybe the kind of clothes I wear hurt me more than they do her. She doesn't know that a fellow might sacrifice the looks of things for a while so that some day he can say 'I am as good as anybody.' My good-clothes money is buying me an education."

"Hang it all, Rod, you don't need to make any excuses to me; I know the real thing when I see it. I'm your friend from the word go. Wait a minute till I go upstairs and get a map and dad's letter and we'll go over our route." He jumped up and bounded up the stairs three at a time. Rod sat looking into space.

"Rodney!" he heard a cautious voice at his ear. He looked around quickly. There in the window was Aunt Em making signs for him to come in.

"Come out into the kitchen," she whispered as she disappeared behind the curtain. Rod rose wonderingly and stepped within and

through the living room and darkened dining room. In the kitchen Aunt Em hastily wiped off a wooden chair and asked him to sit down.

"I couldn't help overhearing you and Phil," she began slowly, then adding impulsively: "You poor boy. You must think I'm awful hard-hearted — " she dabbed at her eyes with the corner of her apron — "but it's only because Philip's welfare means so much to me. I never had any way of knowing you except as a boy who wears greasy clothes — there are dozens of them who pass the house every day — boys with vile manners and bad habits, drifters who aren't fit companions for any respectable boy. You can't blame me for wanting to keep Phil away from the like of them."

"I think I understand — "

"If you do, then you know I didn't want Phil to give up his college chances and go careering off to South America — and you were a good excuse for objecting to his going. Phil doesn't know how lonesome I'll be — "

"His father is lonesome — and he's among strangers. Aunt Em," said Rod boldly, "I believe you love Phil enough to tell him to go down there to be a chum to his dad and to

make a man of himself — and I believe you can trust me to go along with him."

"I do believe it, Rodney. And I'm glad we've come to understand each other. There's no keeping Phil from going, but I'll take a deal of comfort in the thought that there's a boy with him with your pluck. Here he comes now."

Phil could be heard bounding down the stairs in his usual style. The screen door squeaked open and then banged shut again. "Oh, Aunt Em," he called, "have you seen anything of Rod? I left him out here on the porch."

"Why, yes," she answered; "he's out here in the kitchen." She had been standing, her hand on Rod's shoulder. As Phil came through the dining room she removed her hand, then quickly put it back. Phil stopped in the doorway, thunderstruck.

"Gee whiz!" he managed to exclaim. "Gee whiz, Aunt Em, you're a trump!"

"Rodney and I understand each other better, Phil."

"You're a — a — " he paused for lack of a strong enough word. "Aunt Em, there's only one thing that keeps you from being a ab-so-lute good fellow."

"What's that?" asked Aunt Em, with shining eyes.

"If you'd just let me take my new commencement suit back to the Clothes Shop and change my 'knickers' to long pants."

* * * * * * * *

The *Pride of the South Limited* did not ordinarily stop at Stoneville, but this Monday morning, flagged by the station agent, it paused long enough to pick up two boys who piled on, bags and suit cases swinging, turning to wave an excited good-bye as the engine picked up its stride again and quickly pulled the lone figure on the platform out of sight.

"Aunt Em's all right," vowed Phil, a bit tearfully, as he sank back into a seat.

"In spite of the knickers?" chuckled Rod, pulling Phil's suit case from the opposite seat and putting his feet comfortably on the cushions.

Phil snickered in reply and then turned suddenly to his chum. "Got a knife?" The knife was produced. "Aunt Em's all right. I graduated in domestic science and sewing under her teaching! Oh, Aunt Em's the practical teacher, you bet."

"What's the matter, Phil? The excitement gone to your head?"

"Can't I talk about the advantages of taking sewing lessons if I want to? Did you notice I had a bundle under my arm when I met you Friday afternoon down town? I got that at the Clothes Shop. I'm wearing it now. It looks like knickers, my observing friend — well, observe some more."

Phil bent over and applied the knife-blade to the knee of his trousers. A moment later the detested knickers were changed into trousers of most comfortable length, with a natty reef at the bottom.

"It was a shame to fool dear Aunt Em, but I had to do it. Behold the practical result of buttons-bias-and-basting," and the two leaned back in comfortable laughter.

The *Pride of the South* made the long trip to New Orleans in less than thirty hours, but the end of the trip found the two boys ready to hop off and stretch their legs in the dingy station. The station clock pointed to even six; out on the street the hot New Orleans summer sun had made a hundred in the shade seem polar weather. Rod mopped his forehead before he picked up

his suit case and started for the station door.

"Where to?" asked Phil lazily.

"Lead me to a soda fountain and the coolest drink in town."

"Lead me to a lunch counter; I'm starved." Finally they compromised by going to a cool-looking hotel dining room where Rod ordered iced-tea and pie a la mode.

"Now what?" asked Rod as he flipped the last scrap of apple pie and the last spoonful of ice cream from his plate.

"Let's hunt the dock and get a hotel as close as we can."

"Not on your life. This hotel looks good to me. We'd have to come back to the station anyway for the rest of our baggage."

"What's the matter with giving our checks to a transfer man now? He can bring the dunnage down when it comes in the morning. They'll know here what hotel is closest. Waiter, what's the closest hotel to the docks on Orange Street?"

"Orange Street, sah. Ah got a cousin what woks at de Gira'd — dat's about fo' blocks f'om de dock. It's a lil' place but you won' find no better in N'O'leens, sah — 'cept dis one, sah — "

"That's the one for us, Rod — the Girard, on Orange Street — "

"On St. Thomas Street, sah, jus' off'n Orange."

"Thank you, Ben. Ready, Rod?"

Back to the station they hurried, where the matter of baggage was quickly arranged. Once more in the street the boys looked about a bit before starting out. Before them was imposing Canal Street, as wide, Phil said, as all Stoneville.

"Car or cab?" asked Phil.

"Car," replied Rod decidedly. "I've heard about the streets of New Orleans. Most of them so narrow you can reach out and touch both sides with your hands, and rough — the cobble stones bounce you so you can reach the roof on either side. But New Orleans street car service is the best in the world."

"All right, Mr. Guide Book, which car shall we take?"

"When in doubt ask a policeman. Wait a minute — I'll ask one." He was quickly back. Catching his chum by the arm he hurried him across the street and onto a waiting car. "Sit tight and we'll be there in a few minutes."

At last the conductor called "St. Thomas,"

and the boys eagerly made for the door. "It's three blocks to the hotel," said Phil as once more they were on the street.

The boys found the place, small, as the waiter had said, but undoubtedly clean-looking. The room to which they were assigned was cosy and airy. With a sigh of relief they flung down their traps and dropped on the bed.

CHAPTER III

A VOYAGE OF SURPRISES

Half an hour later the two boys, washed up and feeling much more comfortable in soft shirts and flannel trousers, sat in their room. Rod looked anxiously at the open window and then made a mighty slap at the back of his neck. "You don't suppose mosquitos could be coming in at that window?" he ventured.

"I don't know" — slap — "but I expect" — slap — "they could if they wanted to. What do you say to turning in?"

"To fight mosquitos? Not much! What say to a walk?"

"Not a word. I'm too tired."

"Oh, come on; let's go down and see if the *Juanita* is in."

"She'll keep till morning. Let's go to bed."

"You go if you want to. I'm going to see New Orleans — *Nawleens* — while I've time."

"Time? We've got till Saturday."

"Well I've got an uneasy feeling in my bones

and I want to walk it off. Mosquitos always did give me the creeps. Wonder why they don't have any screens. Come on, Lazy-bones — " he grabbed Phil suddenly by the heel and dragged him off the bed — " I've got the woozies and I won't feel easy till I've seen the *Juanita.*"

Phil finally grudgingly went along. Once they were outdoors, Rod's creeps seemed to leave him, and the two whistled a lively tune as they made their way to the levee. It was only a matter of four blocks, though the last hundred yards led through dark byways piled high with bales and boxes, rough lumber and logs, bags of potatoes and great bales of cotton.

At last they could hear the lap-lap of the waves, and feel the damp chill of the river, strong with the fishy smell of fresh water after dark. A moment later the river lay right at their feet. The dock was deserted, save, a hundred yards upstream, the dim lights of a boat showed through the faint mist.

As they walked in that direction they became aware of voices, muffled at first, but distinct as they drew nearer. It was easy to tell that a quarrel was going on. Thrilled by a sense of adventure, the boys paused and listened.

"There's your money!" shouted an angry voice. "Take it or leave it."

"I want to know what I'm fired for before I take it. You ditched me the last voyage, that's plain to me now. I thought maybe it was a accident — that you tried to get word to me ye was a-sailin' ahead o' time — but I know a sight better now."

"Well, what of that? I ain't got time to argy with ye. Take the money and scoot while the scootin's good."

"Now look here, Cap'n — "

"I'll *Cap'n* ye if you don't hunch yourself. I've paid ye what's coming to ye — "

"But I want a explanation, that's what I wants. It's somethin' crooked, Cap'n, that's my guess, and you don't want nobody learnin' the why of them stops o' yourn that ain't down in the log — "

"Stow your jaw!"

"I'll stow nothin' — " There was the sound of a blow. A moment later a figure sped by them in the dark. "I guess it got stowed for him," chuckled Rod, "What were they driving at?"

"Huh, too deep for me. I don't guess that's

the *Juanita,* though." But they groped their way cautiously forward to where the bow of the boat was warped alongside the dock. A shaded lantern hung over the side just at the bowsprit. By its light they read the name: *Juanita.*

"Gee, do you suppose — " began Phil, then suddenly jerked Rod back into the shadows. A door had opened and two men stepped out onto the deck, thence down and across to a plank gangway from the ship's rail to the dock. One was the captain. They passed within two feet of the boys, talking earnestly. Rod had been listening intently; suddenly he caught Phil by the sleeve and beckoned him to follow. These were the words he had heard:

"But why should we be scared of two kids just out of school? "

"Why? " the captain repeated. "Because one of 'em's Crompton's kid, that's why. I'm taking no chances. We sail first thing to-morrow. There'll be no trouble in giving them the slip, but it's got to look regular. So I'll drop this letter at the dock master's office, where they'll be sure to inquire when they come looking for the *Juanita*; then it'll look as if we couldn't help sailing ahead of time. And by Thursday,

when they get the letter, we'll be through the Canal and legging it down along the Isthmus."

It was not safe to follow further, so Rod stepped in behind some bales and waited for Phil. Fifteen minutes later they were back in their room in the hotel, having stopped at the desk to leave a call for five o'clock.

It was two excited young adventurers who sat up till late talking over the thrilling conversation they had heard on the dock. Mosquitos were quite forgotten in the sensation of the minute. But finally each caught the other in a healthy yawn, and they turned to the bed.

"The battle is on," exclaimed Rod, when he and Phil were in their pajamas. "I can hear mosquitos singing in forty different keys. What's this contraption?" He pointed to an iron rod that curved over the center of the four-poster bed from head to foot. "A derrick, I bet you, so the skeeters can hoist you up to get at the under side.

"Eureka — I have found it!" he cried as he made a dive from the floor to the head of the bed.

"Glad to hear it!" shouted Phil as he landed on top of him. "What?"

For answer Rod reached down behind the bed and pulled up a great wad of mosquito netting. Draped over the rod, it made a perfect insect-proof canopy. "Good night, Phil — battle's over."

The next thing they knew there was a terrific banging on the door and a whining voice called:

"Dis is de fo'th and las' time I's gwine call yo' sleepyhaids. I's been a-tellin' yo' fo' de las' half hour dat it's five 'clock — " the voice died away in mumbles — "an' I's done th'ough, dat's what I is."

"Phil," said Rod, some fifteen minutes later. "Didn't someone say 'get up'?"

"Huh? What time — whew! It's nearly six!" In one bound he was out in the middle of the floor and diving into his clothes, Rod close behind him.

Twenty minutes later, as they were finishing breakfast, there was a great clatter on the cobblestones outside and a wagon stopped at the curb.

"Our luggage," exclaimed Phil, catching up his hat and bolting out the door. The man was just jerking Rod's battered trunk to the sidewalk when Phil stopped him.

"Here — take them on down to the levee at the foot of Orange Street and put them aboard the *Juanita* lying there. And there's some suit cases to go along." Then, breathlessly he hurried back to tell Rod what he had done and to get the suit cases. In a few minutes the two were hurriedly following toward the levee.

The transfer man had just backed his wagon against the edge of the dock when they came in sight. He had the first trunk dumped on the deck and the second on his back halfway across the gangway before those on board knew what had happened. Quickly the boys seized their suit cases and sprang aboard, just in time to hear an angry roar from the fore companionway. It was the captain.

"What's the meaning of this? Take that junk off my ship!"

Thump! went the trunk beside the other; thud-thud went the suit cases. The transfer man pocketed a tip Phil handed him, crossed to his wagon, sprang to the seat and was off without a word, signalled by Rod.

The captain stormed over to where the two boys stood. "Off you go, you two. This is no passenger boat — "

"I'm Philip Crompton and this — "

"I don't care who you are — nobody sails in my craft without my say-so. I've had no orders to carry you two — "

"You take orders from my father, don't you? "

"Well, what if I do? I haven't had any. How do I know who you are? You don't ride on my boat! "

"Well we do," answered Rod boldly. "Phil has a letter from his father which amounts to the same thing as an order — "

"Amounts to! " the captain grunted. "It'll amount to fishing your picnic outfit out of the river if you don't step lively in getting it off my deck. Clear out! " He advanced threateningly on the two.

Phil turned undecidedly toward Rod, but the light in his chum's eyes made him square his shoulders and face the oncoming captain resolutely. But Rod merely sat down casually on his trunk and drawled:

"Excuse us, Captain, for not bringing our calling cards, but maybe we could get the *dock master* to identify us." His voice was so cool yet meaning that the captain paused.

"What ye drivin' at?" he demanded.

"We haven't asked the dock master for your interesting letter, yet, captain," Rod answered in the same half-insolent drawl, "but I think we'll get it and send it on to Mr. Crompton — if you're not ready to sail with us."

The shot told. The captain turned on his heel. "We cast off in an hour. The mate'll show you your cabin." He was gone.

The boys hunted up the mate and quickly had their belongings stowed in the six-by-eight stateroom. "That hole?" exclaimed Phil as he peered into the dark recess.

"First trip?" laughed the mate good-naturedly. "You won't find many freighters with staterooms as large as that. It's a bit dark, but we've been using the place as a storeroom. When we get the boxes away from the window, you'll find it's light and airy enough. My name's Ripley — see you later, lads. We pull out as soon as steam's up."

By day the boys saw the boat was an unwieldy affair, extremely broad in the waist and short. It was built very low in the water and had only one deck. It looked like a cross between a river packet and an ocean going tug, but its

engines were powerful, as the boys realized at the first turn of the propellers, and the boat had speed for all she wallowed like a raft.

Down the river she churned her way and in the course of a few hours the boys saw the channel grow narrower and they knew they were in one of the delta-mouths of the Mississippi. Here they barely crept along, guided by buoys showing shallow water. At last the channel began to widen again and the shores to disappear. Another hour and the brownish water of the river current merged into the greenish-blue of the Gulf of Mexico.

There were waves now, but the *Juanita,* thanks to her broad beam, rode on an even keel. Aside from an uneasy feeling about the pit of the stomach at noontime, the boys felt no seasickness. Night saw them well out on the gulf and brought them their first meal, for somehow dinner had not appealed to them.

At the table that night the captain had regained his good humor and was evidently determined to make the best of a bad matter. His cheerful roar — he roared even in ordinary conversation — greeted the boys as they opened the door.

"Well, picnickers, got your sea legs already? You'll make good sailors — on a duck pond."

"That's where a boat like this belongs," retorted Rod. "You must have to ride in shallow water sometimes."

"Give us a heavy dew, eh, Captain Costel, and we wouldn't need the new Canal to cross the Isthmus," laughed Mate Ripley. "There'll be an experience for you lads — through the Canal."

"When do we make it?" asked Phil, swallowing a bite of salt pork with difficulty. "I'd starve to death on this grub," he objected, pushing aside the oily looking butter and taking his bread dry. "Please pass the — never mind, Rod; I guess I don't care for any."

"What's the matter, boys? You're not eating anything," inquired Captain Costel in a genial bellow.

"Well, you see we had a heavy breakfast," Rod answered innocently, "and we haven't quite got used to the resisting power of sea grub. Now in a month or two I think I could relish this bread. I might even be able to eat it. But just now — if you'll excuse me — " he rose, followed quickly by Phil.

The next day the two felt more at ease and the wallowing roll of the boat did not distress them, though the going was rougher. By noon food began to appeal to them and even the *Juanita's* fare was almost inviting.

On the morning of the third day land once more was sighted and from then till the entrance to the Panama Canal they were never out of sight of shore. The boys had been looking forward to this part of the trip and eagerly watched everything connected with the novel passage.

The *Juanita* anchored within the breakwaters of Limon Bay, the entrance harbor of the Canal, at ten o'clock in the evening, but the captain lay by for daylight. At six o'clock next morning steam was up and the *Juanita* heaved anchor and steamed the seven miles to Gatun, through a wide channel marked by buoys. Here there were three pairs of monstrous locks.

Each lock was a thousand feet long, and over a hundred feet wide. In the first there was just enough water to float the ship. It was towed inside by electric locomotives and then the giant steel gate, forty-seven feet high, was closed and the lock was flooded from culverts beneath. When the lock was filled, the boat was towed on

into the next lock and the same operation was gone through there.

When the *Juanita* had passed through the three pairs of locks and had been towed out into Gatun Lake it had been lifted eighty-five feet.

Here the boys were treated to a curious sight. Leisurely drifting about the placid surface of Gatun Lake were tiny floating islands, masses of vegetation dislodged when the lake bed was flooded to its present level. Here and there, too, tops of giant trees with their roots eighty feet below, still waved, many of them gay with tropic flowers.

Again under her own power the *Juanita* steamed the twenty-four miles to the little town of Bas Obispo at the entrance to the famous Culebra Cut, whose construction was one of the hardest tasks of the whole tremendous undertaking because of the caving in of the banks. The cut is nine miles long. At the end is Pedro Miguel, where there is another lock, this time to let the boat down. Here a drop of thirty feet put the *Juanita* on the surface of a placid lake a mile or so long, opening into a larger lake, Miraflores, at the end of which two more pairs of locks put the ship at sea level again. From

there it was a good eight miles to where the setting sun made a dazzling path in the rippling waves of the blue Pacific. It had been thirteen hours since the boat had weighed anchor, eleven of them spent in the actual passage.

"Hurrah!" cried Phil. "I'm just as glad to see the ocean as Mr. —"

"Balboa," suggested Rod.

"As Mr. Balboa was to see Miss Pacific, for now we can eat."

Indeed, the boys had not been able to leave the deck long enough during the fascinating voyage to snatch even a bite.

In spite of the fact that the captain had put a boat ashore at Bas Obispo, the menu that night was the same deadly salt meat and dry sea biscuit. Rod ventured a mild criticism, at which the captain lost the jovial air he had assumed toward the boys. "I guess you can stand for three more days what we stand all the time."

"Three whole days," sighed Rod in pretended despair.

"Yes, only three days, thank my stars," growled Captain Costel as he slammed the door on his way out.

Two of those days passed pleasantly enough.

The Pacific lived up to its calm reputation, and the nights were cool enough to make up for the blistering hot days. When the stars came out, the Southern Cross blazing brightly in the clear sky, and a wisp of a moon touching the waves with light, the boys sat on deck and listened to the sea yarns of First-mate Ripley, who seemed to have taken a shine to the boys.

The morning of the third day, however, brought an unpleasant surprise. Coming out of the stateroom a bit earlier than usual, Phil saw Captain Costel and the mate in earnest conversation just behind a huge pile of kegs ranked on the forward deck. The tops of their heads were barely visible and they did not notice Phil's approach. At the first sentence Phil stopped stock still.

"We've got to manage some way to keep those two boys off the deck to-night. I wish we had pushed them off into the river before we started."

"Leave that to me," answered the mate. "I've got something that'll make them sleep sound — and early. They'll never know anything's happened."

Phil tiptoed back to the stateroom, where in

great excitement he awakened Rod, who was sneaking a nap while his chum was gone. He was quickly awake. "What do you think it means?" demanded Phil finally.

"You know what I believe — I've got a hunch they're trying to double-cross your dad. Else why should the captain object to taking us in the first place? Furthermore, I've been doing a little investigating and thinking on my own hook. There are three cases of rifles in the hold!"

"Rifles!" gasped Phil.

"Rifles — and you bet your dad didn't order them. Then there's railroad spikes and emergency switches and rails — thousands of feet — and they're not the pattern your dad is using."

"But what can we do?"

"Nothing. Just find out all we can — and put your father wise. He'll know what to make of it, I bet. We'll fool the mate — "

"How?"

"It's easy. He is going to give us some dope to put us to sleep. Some kind of knock-out drops. He won't put it in our food to-night, because everything is served from the same dish. No, he'll give us some special treat. When

that happens, we'll know what to do to spoil their plans."

At dinner that evening the boys ate heartily enough, though their suspicions were a bit aroused by the fact that the meal was more elaborate than usual.

"What do you think?" anxiously asked Phil when they were once more on deck.

"I don't know, but I still feel all right inside o' me. Here comes Ripley now. We'll soon know."

"Nice night, isn't it?" began the mate as he came up. "Reminds me of one night about three years ago when I was on the *Isle de Cuba,* just off Honduras Coast. We snapped our propeller shaft just before sundown and lay to for repairs. A boat came out to try to sell us some fruit and we took on a couple loads of Honduras oranges — ever taste any, boys?"

"Any different from the Floridas?"

"Well, if the captain wasn't such a tightwad you could find out for yourself. We took on some at Obispo. But he's taking them — two boxes — to a friend of his down the coast."

"I'd like to test them," Rod said, quickly sensing that this was the mate's little scheme.

"What's that — what's that?" came a subdued rumble behind them from the captain. "Gossiping, Mate?" he demanded of Ripley.

Ripley pretended great confusion, so to help him out Rod said candidly: "He was only telling us about those delicious Honduras oranges, and I was wishing you'd open your heart — "

"Delicious? Huh, that's as how you like it. They're too acid to suit my tongue. If it wasn't for the trouble of breaking out the boxes — "

"I'll do the breaking out," suggested Ripley eagerly; "they just suit *my* tongue," and he smacked his lips. At a nod from the captain he quickly disappeared below. In the dusk the two boys exchanged winks.

In a suspiciously short time he was back again, handing Phil and Rod a rusty-looking orange of the Indian River variety, keeping one for himself, which he quickly peeled with his thumbnail.

"Got your knife, Phil?" asked Rod.

"Why, yes," began Phil, groping in his pockets, then after a terrific nudge from his chum, "No, I haven't, Rod. I guess it's in my coat pocket. Take my orange along and peel it too, will you?" he suggested with a sudden inspiration.

Rod disappeared, returning in a minute or so with two nicely peeled oranges — but not the same, for he too had bought fruit at San Obispo.

After the juicy fruit had been eaten and sufficiently praised, the two boys sat down on deck chairs and stared out to sea.

"Whew, this half light sure makes a fellow drowsy," yawned Rod at length. "Guess I'll hit my bunk for a little nap."

"Think I'll write a letter," said Phil, yawning too and walking sleepily toward their stateroom. Fifteen minutes later two boys were stretched out on their bunks deep in pretended slumber, when a head appeared in the doorway, to be quickly withdrawn with a satisfied chuckle.

A moment later the bunks were deserted and a head was cautiously peering out the window, while its mate pressed close to the crack in the doorway.

But little did the boys see, though they strained eyes and ears till well past midnight. All they knew was that the *Juanita* made a quick tack for shore, that the anchor was dropped, and that there was a great creaking of windlasses, and a great running about as the donkey hoist brought load after load from the hold and swung

it over the side of the ship. That there were barges waiting there to take the cargo the boys easily surmised, but they dared not venture forth to make sure, for always in sight of their door was Mate Ripley. Every few minutes he would tiptoe over and apply his eye to the door — always to be satisfied by the sight of two boys snoring comfortably in their bunks.

At midnight the bustle ceased abruptly and in a few minutes the boys realized that they were once more under way. "What do you make of it all?" asked Phil anxiously when they were at last honestly in their bunks.

"Mischief, that's all. I think we'll have a story to tell your father that'll make him sit up and take notice. Just now" — yawning — "just now — I — think — I'll — I'll — turn — in."

CHAPTER IV

CYRUS TRIGG

"What do you see, Rod?"

Early in the morning the boys had awakened with the feeling that the tugging little engines of the *Juanita* were still. A hurried trip to deck disclosed the fact that the boat was indeed at anchor and that through the light haze, land was visible.

"I can't say I see much of anything. But it's land, I'm sure, and those black streaks must be houses — a dock maybe."

"It's land, all right, and houses," spoke up First-mate Ripley, who had come up behind them, "but nary dock, as you'll find out the minute the fog lifts. It's Cusco, boys — ten houses and a near-store. Three of painted sheet-iron, two of rusty sheet-iron, and five of patch. What's patch? Wait till you see. Cusco's the only town along the coast where no sailor ever asks for shore-leave. How soon you boys want a boat to put off?"

"Right away, eh, Rod?"

"Better wait for breakfast, lads. You'll find salt horse and sowbelly better than the fare ashore."

"I expect a fruit breakfast wouldn't go bad for a change," Rod ventured.

"It wouldn't that!" agreed Officer Ripley heartily. "We buy lots of it along the coast, but not in the restaurants. You'll think better of ship fare after you've tried shore grub a week or two."

The boys had breakfast on board, but even as they finished their coffee they heard a dingey scrape the side of the boat, and a minute afterwards Captain Costel poked his bushy head in at the door and bawled:

"Well!" The boys jumped to their feet as if shot. Often as they had heard it, they had never got used to the captain's roar.

"If you're through daudling over your demitasses, we'll put you two freshwater tars ashore."

"Aye, aye, Captain," returned Rod. "We figured we might have time to eat *dinner* while we waited for you to poke along."

The captain grinned; he clapped Rod on the back and called him a lad of spirit. "Say the

word, mate, and I'll sign you for a cruise around the Horn. No? Well, step lively then and we'll have you in Cusco in ten minutes."

He was as good as his word. At the rude landing, after the trunks and suit cases had been hustled onto the rough platform, he reached over the bow and grasped the hands of the two boys in a hearty shake. "Straight up the street, lads, and you'll run afoul the post office such-as. If you don't find your father, ask for Cyrus Trigg."

"Who's Cyrus Trigg?"

"Hanged if I know. Ask him; I tried it once. So long. Good luck." The boys stood and listened till the creaking of the oarlocks died away. Through the haze came the ringing of a bell; then a hawser grated on the side, the capstan squeaked and groaned as the anchor was weighed. Again the bell rang; there was a terrific puffing and churning, and the boys knew the *Juanita* had shoved her nose into the fog.

They turned and looked at each other. "Well, we're here," and on a sudden impulse they shook hands. "We're here for whatever's going to happen," Rod added. "What first?"

"Let's hunt up this Trigger person—"

"Trigg."

"All right — Trigg, then. What'll we do? Ask somebody?"

"Yep — in Spanish, Phil; you talk it so beautifully. Or we might call a bell boy and have him paged. 'Call for Cyrus Trigg — Trigg — Trigg!'" he shouted in a singsong through his nose. "'Call for Cyrus Trigg — Tri — '"

"Front!" yelled a high-pitched voice so close to Rod's ear that he jumped like a scared colt, bumped into Phil and sent him sprawling over their luggage.

When the two had recovered, Phil his feet and Rod his scattered wits, they turned to see a lanky individual, shock-headed and unshaved, dressed in clinging trousers and collarless shirt, open at the throat and rolled to the sharp elbows; in the States he would have been rated a tramp but here he was unquestionably a fellow American. With one accord the two boys extended their hands.

"Cyrus Trigg, at your service, gentlemen," the stranger drawled in his queer high-pitched voice, limply giving his hand to each in turn.

"I'm Phil Crompton and this is my chum, Rodney Dillon. My father's chief engineer at the camp out yonder."

"I know Cromp," agreed the man, apparently without interest. "Come for a visit?"

"Nope. Work," began Rod vigorously, then paused. "Er — um — what's your line?"

"My line? Loafing," laughed the man. "Been here six years. Came here to set the world on fire. Stayed here to wake the natives up — that was five and a half years ago. Delightful blank since. Only place in the world a man doesn't have to be ashamed of being lazy. Going up to the post office?" He unbent some of his height as he spoke, picked up one of the suit cases but dropped it in favor of a bag that looked lighter.

"Follow my trail, Crompton." He took half a dozen steps, then stopped abruptly. "The fog'll be gone in five minutes and you can find it yourself." He dropped the bag. "I'll see you up there in half an hour. The only building with a flag — can't miss it." He slouched out of sight.

The boys looked at each other and laughed, quietly at first and then uproarously when the shuffle of Trigg's footsteps had died away. Just then a little puff of wind lifted the fog seaward. In an instant the sun blazed down with noonday

heat, and from the shore came the unmistakable odor of fish and clams.

Before them was the tiny cluster of houses, one of them flaunting a gay flag. The boys picked up their baggage and soon dropped it again on the porch-platform before the post office. It was much like the country general store with which the boys were familiar, save that a foreign look and smell seemed to hang over the place. There were no showcases and no counters, but at one end of the room was a table nailed together out of unplaned boards. At one end was a pigeon-holed cabinet — the post office; the rest was used as a weighing and measuring and wrapping platform, as could easily be seen by the relics scattered its length. Just at this time a native, undoubtedly of Indian blood but swarthy as a negro, was stretched full length along the inner edge. As the boys opened the door he swung around, sat up and brought his feet to the floor with a catlike ease and grace that did not fit with his slouchy figure.

The boys looked at him closely as he sat blinking at them, for they knew he was a specimen of the type they would see much of before they were done with South America.

He was of medium height, rather thick-set, with low forehead, broad nose and heavy lips. His eyes were small and pig-like but set far apart. He was dressed in a ragged shirt of dirty brown wool, but his trousers were of velvet and his hat a jaunty affair of beautifully braided straw, decorated with leather band and dangling fringes. His high boots were close-fitting, soft-soled affairs, with a silver spur hanging low over the heel of his left foot.

Having blinked his fill at the boys, he spoke to them in a guttural jargon which, as Phil said, smelled like Spanish and tasted like native Indian. The Spanish, Phil gravely added, was the kind they had left out of the book he had studied. At Rod's suggestion he now tried a little book Spanish on the man, but blank looks were the only response.

"A little livelier, Phil; he thinks you're telling him his grandmother is dead." At that the Indian nodded his head and his eyes began to gleam.

"*Si — si — Los amigos el Signor Treeg —*" he ejaculated over his shoulder as he pattered across to the door and slouched out of sight down the path.

"What'd he say, Phil? Going for the police?"

"That was perfectly good Spanish for 'The friends of Mr. Trigg.' I expect he's gone to fetch our long-geared friend. Meanwhile let's see if we can wake up the post-office department."

But no amount of calling or pounding brought any response. The door behind the counter remained closed and it was with a feeling of relief that they saw the ungainly figure of Cyrus Trigg sauntering up the path.

"Howdy again, Crompton and Rod," he drawled as he came in and took the seat the Indian had recently vacated. "See the post-master?"

"We've tried every way we know to shake him out, but he's hanging tight to his nest. What do you do when the house is on fire?"

"Got a dollar?" asked Trigg abruptly. "Or a half-dollar?"

"What for?" asked Rod hesitatingly.

"Oh, don't worry; I don't want to borrow it —on such short acquaintance." Phil took a silver dollar from his pocket and handed it to Trigg. He promptly tossed it in the air so it fell spinning on the table. "Hola, Manuel!"

he cried, bringing the coin down again with a great clatter.

The back door opened and a half-caste woman peered within, mumbled something which Trigg answered in the same grunting fashion; then she withdrew. In a moment the postmaster himself came in.

Trigg spoke the mongrel Spanish fluently and in a moment he had made the greasy-looking shopkeeper understand his wants. There ensued some sharp argument which ended in clenched fists shaken under noses, many violent shrugs and much snapping of fingers. Finally the postmaster went behind his pigeon-holed cabinet and took out a small handful of letters which he and Trigg scanned carefully. Then Trigg turned to the boys.

"No mail," he said. "Manuel says no one has been in from the camp in three weeks. There's one letter here for Mr. Crompton that came a week ago and they haven't called for yet."

"Do you s'pose — I'll bet it's mine to lad!" exclaimed Phil in dismay. "It's the one where I told him we were coming, and asked him to send someone in to show us the way. Let me

see it, will you?" he asked Manuel. The postmaster made no response, but when Trigg repeated the request in Spanish he quickly dived into the pigeon-holes again and brought out an envelope, much soiled now with handling, but indeed Phil's letter.

"Phew!" whistled Rod. "How far did you say it was to the camp?"

"Eighteen miles according to—" Phil began, but Trigg interrupted.

"It's twenty by the short trail after you've traveled it half a dozen times. Twenty-five to forty the first time. The only safe trail is about twenty-five miles."

"Trail? Isn't there a road. How do they get wagons to the camp?"

"They don't."

"But they have to haul their stuff over. How do they manage?"

"See those animals?" Trigg pointed out the open door. "Those are llamas. They do all the hauling in this part of the country—"

"Those little things!"

"They carry a hundred pounds apiece."

"Shucks," grunted Phil, "I can carry that much myself."

"How far? Wait till you see one of our mountain trails and you'll have a little more respect for a hundred-pound load."

"But how about their machinery — rails? It'd take about a dozen of those llamas to carry one steel rail."

"Huh, you couldn't get enough of them under a rail to carry it up the trail you'll have to travel to camp. Crompton had the rails unloaded up the coast where the old Spanish narrow-gauge came out. He hauled the rails inland on push cars and started in the middle to build his road both ways. He's just finishing the one end. He's got the toughest half yet to lay. I hear," he added to Phil, "that your father's having trouble with his help. Just give him a quiet tip from me that he's going to have trouble with the government before he gets through."

"How's that?" began Rod, but Trigg stopped him with a meaning look at the postmaster, who, for all his stupid look, had become keenly interested at Trigg's words.

"As we say in the States, lads, too much is enough. When you hit the trail I'll fill your ears. Sabe?"

"Sure Mike. How'll we hit her? Horses?"

"Just give your father a quiet tip from me that he's going to have trouble with the government before he's through."

"Horses? This is a horseless country. A donkey's the nearest you can come. There's the llamas, of course, but you want to start in on them gradual. Say a couple to carry your traps and the donks to ride where it's level enough."

"Where can we hire them — or can we?"

"You sure can. A *sol* a day — about fifty cents — cash in advance. Manuel here can help you out."

At that, without further question from Trigg, the postmaster broke into a jumble of shrugs, explanations, objections which Trigg quickly interpreted.

"He says he can let you have the animals for two *sols* apiece for the llamas, three *sols* for the two burros and half a *sol* for the boy who will go along to bring them back. For two days that will be fifteen *sols* — seven dollars and a half."

"That's pretty steep," ventured Rod.

"Fifty percent overcharge for Americans," laughed Trigg. "It's like the farmer who had the calf but no pasture. His neighbor wanted a dollar a month to pasture it. 'But if I sell the calf in six months I'll only get eight dollars for it and I'll have paid you six.' 'I can't help that,' said his friend, 'though it doesn't look

just right.' 'Tell you what,' suggested the owner of the calf, 'you keep it two months more and you can have it.' In other words, six days' hire would pay for the outfit."

"It'd almost be cheaper to buy them if we didn't have so much luggage."

"Why don't you leave your luggage for the next trip, and just get two burros? I can get them for you for ten dollars." He turned to Manuel and talked earnestly.

"Ten dollars it is," he said finally to the boys, "and he'll keep your luggage till the next supply train from the camp. Oh, it's safe enough," he added as he saw the boys exchange doubtful looks. "He'd cheat you blind and overcharge you stiff, but he wouldn't steal — twice. What say?"

"Let's buy, Phil. I see one of those sad-faced donkeys out there now I'd like to own. And it'll be more fun that way."

Phil nodded his head, and at that the postmaster eagerly came around the counter and led the way through the door. Out in what in a civilized community would have been a front yard, grazed a score of queer-looking animals. There were four sorry-looking donkeys, leaner

and taller than the burros the boys knew, but what caught their eyes were the odd, long-necked creatures Trigg had called llamas. "Dwarf camels without the hump," Rod called them.

They were tethered in the queerest fashion. They stood in a ring, heads in, and about the circle of necks was passed a rope. By bending their proud necks the llamas could easily have freed themselves, but this, Trigg explained, they were too stupid to do. "They'd stay that way and starve to death," he remarked, "only that when they finally drop from exhaustion the rope slips off. Well, have you picked out your toy mules?"

"The sad-faced one is mine," Rod decided, "although I will admit he looked a lot better at a distance. I think I'll call him 'Patience.' He looks it. Which is yours, Phil?"

"That brown, saintly looking steed. He looks so meek I think I'll call him Moses. Maybe he'll lead us through the wilderness — whoa there, Mose!" he yelped as a clean pair of heels zipped past his hat.

"Kicked off an 's' that time," laughed Rod as he too ducked. "Mose it is."

"Well," Phil suggested, when Manuel had

caught the beast by the nose and held him still, "I guess there's nothing left but to pay the man, store our traps and be off."

They went back to the store and quickly put their extra luggage in a neat pile behind a stack of burlap-covered bales — alpaca wool as Trigg informed them. Manuel agreed that he would look after the trunks they had left at the landing. Once more they approached the burros, Patience and Mose, now fitted out with rope bridles and rough homemade saddles. Trigg followed them as they led their mounts to the edge of the ten-housed town. A well-marked foot-path broke away from the road and here Trigg paused.

"There's the trail," he pointed. "You won't have any trouble following it. Keep to your right always when it branches — don't ask anyone the way once you get started. You'll find a house or two along the road and almost any of them will sell you something to eat. You'll find a pole stuck out in front of just about every house. If there's a green wreath hung on it, you can buy bread there and usually a meal. If there's flowers or a bunch of wheat, and especially if there's a white cloth or a white paper hanging to the pole, keep away."

"Why, what does that mean?"

"Bad spirits in the house — Indian whiskey, *aguardiente,* is for sale there, and trouble can be had for the asking. But aside from that you can't go wrong. Just mention your father's name, Crompton, if you get in a tight place. It's good as gold around here. Well, you'd better be off. If you make a 'dobe house just beyond a little creek by night, you'd better put up there. You'll know the place by the fact that it's clean. Adios, signors," and he raised his hand to give Mose a slap on the flank.

"Just a minute, Mr. Trigg. What about what you started to say inside there — about the government, I mean?"

"I've changed my mind, lad. No use your worrying. Just tell your father what I said; he'll understand. But I'll say this: It's not going to be a Sunday school picnic either for you boys or for him out there, and unless I miss my guess, you two will get your fill of excitement. Adios," and this time his hand fell in a resounding thwack on the flank of the unsuspecting Mose.

CHAPTER V

THE DESERTED CAMP

"How far do you suppose we've gone, Rod?" said Phil somewhat anxiously as he peered at the sun just dipping behind a jagged-topped mountain.

"I don't know, but if I'm not mistaken there's that creek Mr. Trigg spoke about, and that pile of red clay must be the 'dobe house he told us about — sounds kind of odd to call him *Mister*, doesn't it?"

"Trigg's good enough for me — and him. He reminds me of old Nellie, that bay mare dad traded a leaky flat-boat for — and wished he hadn't. You never could believe she'd once been a colt. Trigg means well but he hasn't any spirit."

"I think you're misjudging him, Phil. Somehow when you wanted to know who Trigg was and the captain says, 'ask him,' it made me think that maybe the old bay mare would kick out if you used the whip."

"Nellie never — "

"I'm talking about Trigg, not Nellie. What are you going to tell your father about that *Juanita* business?"

"Trigg's warning is what worries me."

"I've got a notion you'll find the two are the same thing. I believe there's a big plot going on and it won't be long before things begin to happen. Whoa, there, Mose. Shall we stop here, Phil?"

They were at the 'dobe house. Phil nodded, and they dismounted and led their burros to the door. A pleasant looking Indian woman came at their knock and addressed them in Spanish. To his delight and surprise Phil found he could understand her easily, and he courteously asked if they could find a meal and accommodations for the night. The woman broke into smiles as she assured them that the house was theirs. She clapped her hands and a half-naked youngster came running out and led the burros to a partly roofed enclosure behind the house.

The boys followed the woman inside and before long were seated at a rough table and eating their first South American meal. It made up in strangeness what it lacked in variety. There was a kind of meat — beef the boys decided —

pounded till it resembled hamburger, liberally seasoned with pepper and paprika and fried to a crisp brown. There was a kind of bread, too, heavy but palatable; but the main dish was one over which the boys puzzled a long while. It was not till next day that they learned its real nature. It looked like a small potato, but it was sweet and spongy and almost tasteless. To their question the woman answered "chuñu," pointing as well to the soup which she now brought on in generous steaming bowls. But "chuñu" brought no meaning even to Phil.

Dinner over, they signified their desire to go to sleep, and the woman led the way through the house to a sort of afterthought of a room built against one wing. She pushed the door open and bade them enter. There was no window and no other door, but there was a goodly space under the eaves where the wall did not extend and so the room did not want for ventilation.

"I suppose we ought to sleep in the open, being real adventurers," began Phil, but Rod interrupted him with a pretended snore. He was already stretched full length on a rude couch in one corner.

"Forget it," he finally grunted. "A long

day in the saddle ought to earn any gallant trooper a real bed. Good night!"

It grew mighty cold before morning and they had to get up and do a little exploring for extra covers, but the couch did not prove at all uncomfortable. The sun had already climbed high above the eastern mountain-top when they awoke. Hastily slipping out the door, they went a few hundred yards down the creek and had a delightful swim.

"Looks as if there ought to be trout in there," Rod remarked regretfully.

"Dad says all the streams are alive with them. We'll have some fine sport before we're through. And there's all kinds of hunting in the mountains. Bears — little fellows — mountain lions, peccaries — we'll have a real expedition after we've finished the railroad."

They went back to the house and found breakfast awaiting them. To their delight some tempting brown slabs proved to be fish. "I'm sure going to catch some of those trout one of these days," vowed Rod as he reached for his third. "That swim sure did give me a good appetite."

Glancing out the open door, they saw Patience

and Mose browsing peacefully beside the trail. "Pay her, Phil, while I catch the bronchos," and Rod left the table and cautiously attempted to approach the wary burros.

"How much?" asked Phil in his best Spanish.

The woman spread her hands in pretended refusal. "*Uno sol,*" she ventured finally.

Phil laughed. One *sol*—fifty cents. He took a silver dollar from his pocket and pressed it upon his reluctant hostess. "Oh, no—no!" When Phil insisted, she appeared overwhelmed, but he shrewdly guessed that the extra *sol* was welcome enough. Thanking her for her kindness, he started out to rejoin Rod. The sight that met his eyes brought a laugh that echoed against the mountain-side.

Walking in single file, first Mose, then Patience, then Rod, the two burros with their heads turned as if bidding a reluctant farewell to the 'dobe, Rod with his hand extended in coaxing, up the trail paced the queer procession.

"How do you call these confounded beasts?" exclaimed Rod disgustedly as Phil caught up. "I've tried 'so-boss, so-boss' and 'chick-chick-chick' on them, I've whistled and coaxed, but they don't savvy."

"Wait a minute," suggested Phil. "Let me try to get ahead of them here where the trail is wide; then you drive them along till it narrows and I think we can catch them."

So Rod paused while Phil made a wide detour that brought him a dozen paces ahead of Mose. The two burros stopped in their tracks. A minute later Rod had come up and was astride Mose, before the burro knew what had happened. Patience went kicking riotously up the road but suffered herself to be easily caught by the waiting Phil.

An hour's up-hill riding brought them to a level stretch where a great wide plateau extended to right and left as far as they could see. And here it was they learned the nature of the new dish they had eaten for dinner. The level ground was dotted with men who moved busily about, barefooted, apparently treading something into the ground. As the boys drew nearer they saw that the ground was covered with potatoes, frozen through the cold mountain night and now thawing. The men were mashing the half-thawed tubers by walking on them, after which they were left to dry in the sun. And this was the *chuñu* the woman had told them of. As the

boys afterward learned, this is the national dish. As a rule the dried potatoes are ground in a hand mill and made into a thick soup, but occasionally they are cooked whole.

One of the men they passed was so intelligent looking that Phil asked him how far it was to the camp.

The man broke into a broad grin. "How far on de camp. Me I one time work dere — sure. Ask you de boss; he know Felipe. Till de sol be so — " he pointed to the west at an angle of forty-five degrees — "you ride and de camp she be here."

After two stops, one for a drink from a clear brook that crossed their path, and later to eat a bite of lunch — some curious little cakes they had bought at a house halfway across the high plain — their trail began to lead down hill again. For the first time the burros broke out of their absurd little shuffle and consented to go faster than a walk.

Just after the sun began to climb down toward a rugged old hill due west of them, the path wound in between rough walls of rock. A mile more brought them into a lovely valley, tree-filled and tropical in its verdure. Suddenly the

trail made a sharp bend, then another — and then stopped. Rod jumped excitedly from the back of Mose, gave a glad cry and dropped down on his knees beside a brand new line of ties and shining rails.

"You sure look good to me," he laughed. "I can talk United States to you."

Just above the track was the camp itself, a cluster of a dozen sheet-iron buildings. Above the largest one floated an American flag, and for it the boys quickly made. They saw no one on the way. When they pushed open the door of the main building it was deserted. It showed signs of very recent occupancy, however, so the two went back to the track and peered searchingly in both directions. Not a soul was in sight.

"Wonder where they can be?" asked Phil anxiously.

"It looks queer to me," admitted Rod after a few minutes of investigation. "They've been working here within the last few days. Those shovel marks are fairly fresh, and here are chisel marks without a sign of rust. What's that queer stack of junk down the track there?"

They walked down to look. It proved to be

a great pile of shovels, tamping bars, spike mauls, all the implements used in laying track, lying there in a confused heap as if hurriedly thrown down.

"There are the tools," gasped Phil in dismay, "but where are the men?"

"That's what we'll have to find out. Let's investigate all the cabins." The round of inspection revealed nothing save that the occupants had left hurriedly. The doors stood wide open; a single glance into the first half dozen convinced the boys there was no use in looking further.

"Here's a pretty pickle—" began Rod, then paused. From up the little knoll that lay behind the camp crashed a boulder, barely missing poor Patience who still stood where the boys had dismounted. "A clew!" Rod shouted.

"One more like that and we'll lose a mule."

But now the cause of the disturbance came in sight. He was a bent and wrinkled old Indian, his shriveled face working strangely and his bleary eyes blinking at the two boys. Through his toothless gums he mumbled something as he approached them, and Phil greeted him in Spanish. The old man paused and regarded them shrewdly.

"I spik Anglis," he said finally.

"Good!" exclaimed Rod. "Where is the gang — Mr. Crompton?"

The old Indian looked at the sky, down the track, up the track, around at the camp. "The gang — gone," he answered solemnly. "Mistair Cromp'n — gone."

"Where? When?" both boys questioned eagerly.

"I no can say," was the perplexed answer as the old Indian blinked stupidly.

"But what has happened? Why aren't they here? Mr. Crompton is my father!" burst out Phil, almost in tears. Somehow the old Indian's tone filled him with dread.

"Mistair Cromp'n your *pere?* He gone — one — two day he gone. Gang gone — three — four day gang gone."

"But the other Americans — "

"Six day, two mans — two day, one mans. Meestair Cromp'n I no can find." He lifted his hands in bewilderment. "Gone."

"But what's the meaning of it all? Why should they go?" The man stared stupidly. "Why? For what did they go?" Rod almost shouted, trying to make the Indian understand.

A look of intelligence dawned in the old man's eyes. "Ah, *porque?*" he said at last. "Why? I tell you." He sat down on a bag of spoiled cement chucked against one of the sheds, and leaned his hand on the staff he carried. Raising his other hand and sweeping it tremblingly in a wide circle, he began in a singsong voice. His broken English, and the plentiful sprinkling of mongrel Spanish, made his story hard to follow, but the boys understood enough of it to fill them with dismay. Reduced to English this was his explanation:

There had been much trouble in camp. Mr. Crompton was well liked, but not so all of his helpers — "One he make a fight and go away." The whole tribe of Quichua Picco had been helping build the railroad and open up the mine — all but one, the "great medicine man" Tzecatl, the high priest of the tribe. His son had been killed while blasting in the early days of the road. Thereupon, old Tzecatl threatened all sorts of direful calamities. He had gone about among the men, preaching discontent. Daily he spoke of terrible signs in the sky and of warning thunders coming from the mountain where was the shrine of their great God, Viracocha.

The climax came one day when Tzecatl came into camp after an absence of five days, his clothing torn, his body covered with bruises, clenched in his bleeding hands a feather of great length, snow-white at the tip. This he threw down before the chief. "Hear, O Manco, inca of the people of Quichua, the word I bear from the shrine of Viracocha, the Son of Light, given to me as I knelt beneath the Sacred Nest: 'Thou shalt not labor for the white men who destroy my sons — else will I destroy!' And this feather fell into my hand as a token."

The boys were growing impatient, but the man droned on:

The next day came the crisis. The men had been working about four miles from camp. As they rested in the noon hour, over them sailed a monstrous bird, the Condor. It was sacred — the emblem of their god. He it was who had his nest within the shrine — it was to the Sacred Nest the high priest sent his prayers for power from the Sun-God. The sacred bird — and one of the white men had raised his rifle and fired at it. A single feather eddied down in growing circles, and fell within the chieftain's outstretched hand. "It is a sign!" cried Tzecatl. It was

indeed. That night when they returned to camp they found terror among the women. Picco, the six-year-old son of Chief Manco was gone — vanished. He had last been seen playing beside the little stream that trickled past the end of the camp. Now there was no trace of him save a tiny footprint in the wet sand, a *white-tipped condor feather stuck upright in the center!*

The tribe had hurried away, panic-stricken in their desire to turn aside the wrath of Viracocha. Now they were at the shrine making offerings before the Sacred Nest.

"But the white men?" asked Phil in despair.

"*Quien sabe?* — who knows. I think they fools and hunt on dose boy," shrugged the old Indian.

CHAPTER VI

THE BLACK PANTHER

"But where can dad be?" exclaimed Phil as he paced nervously back and forth across the office, to where the boys had gone after the old Indian's story was finished.

Mose and Patience had been captured and relieved of their loads, and they had been turned loose in an enclosure a hundred yards or so from the track and evidently built for that purpose, as it bordered on the creek and plenty of forage was found in the deep grass.

"Now look here, Phil, we've got to keep cool. There's something worse than this wild condor story happened, or your father wouldn't have left the camp deserted like this. That must be his desk over there. Don't you think we ought to investigate? There might be some clue — "

The desk was a homemade affair, but a heavy padlock protected its contents. With a chisel and hammer the boys pried off the heavy staple and threw back the top. Within, all was confusion, but in the center lay a flat sheet of paper,

half covered with writing. "A letter to me," cried Phil as he picked it up.

"Dear son: By the time you get this you will undoubtedly have decided whether it is to be college or South America for you. I don't want to influence your decision, but I certainly could use you down here. Things are going from bad to worse. I am having a peck of trouble with my Indians; old Tzecatl, their big medicine man, is bound that the tribe shall not work for me. He pretends that it is because his son was accidentally killed while we were blasting a roadbed through a canyon just this side of the mine-to-be, but as a matter of fact, he's a crafty old grafter, and he's sore because I would n't come across. The chief, a mighty intelligent man in whom I take a lot of interest, is my good friend, but Tzecatl is working on their superstition and it begins to look as if he might win out.

My agent at Cusco, too, is getting scared at reports coming from the capital — there's been a change of government and we may have to loosen up with a big lump of money or take the chance of having our grant confiscated. Oh, these Latin countries aren't very reliable. I sent my assistant, Joe Bemish, and Sam

Macalister in three days ago for the mail and to talk with my man —

Sam just got back — with exciting news — but I'll have to wait till Joe comes to get the details. He is the one who talked with my agent. Then I expect I'll have to do something strenuous — which I don't feel like, as I've been having just a touch of fever the last few days. I expect I'll have to go to Cusco myself, so I'll take this letter along. Here comes Joe now— ''

" That's all," said Phil solemnly. " He didn't finish it."

" And he didn't take it along, which is more important. Joe's news must have been mighty serious. Of course your dad might have forgotten it in the excitement, or he may have decided to write another from Cusco — "

" But did he go there? We would have met him."

" He would have taken the short trail — he was in a hurry. No doubt he's in Cusco now — and he knows we've come. About to-morrow night we'll see him come galloping across the track there — "

" I can't wait that long to know that he's safe! If he went by the short trail, he'll come

back that way. I'm going to meet him." Phil started for the door.

"Keep your head, son. It'll be dark in half an hour—"

"There's the moon."

"If we've got good sense we'll wait till morning. That'll give us a chance to think everything over, write a letter he'll get in case we miss him, and put the camp safe. Here," he added, anxious to give Phil something to do that would keep him from worrying, "you write that letter while I go around and lock everything up. I expect I'd better hide those tools, too."

First Rod went to the track where lay the pile of shovels. The roadbed was of sand and it was but the work of a moment to knock all the tools flat and cover them. It was quite dark by this time, but he made his way from cabin to cabin and slammed each door shut and snapped the padlock. He stumbled about in the gloom.

"I hope I don't miss any of them, but I guess it's no great harm if I do," he said to himself. "This is the last—what's that!" he exclaimed in alarm at a sudden sound within. He listened intently, his nerves on edge and his ears so keen

he fancied he could hear the ticking of the watch in his pocket.

"Who's there?" he called when he could control his voice. There was no answer; so Rod laughed at his foolish fears and went on locking the door, wonderfully relieved, however, at the sharp click of the padlock. "I'll look you up in the morning," he assured himself — but when morning came he had forgotten the incident.

Phil had finished his letter when Rod returned, and was now skirmishing around looking for something to eat. Inasmuch as the supplies were kept in a kind of cellar built back into the hillside, and the door was not locked, this was an easy matter. In a few minutes the boys had potatoes sputtering in a skillet on top of the sheet-iron stove, and a pot of coffee was bubbling merrily beside it.

"No bread," said Rod, emerging from the storeroom, "but here's a ham that ought to set off those 'taters to a fare-you-well. Get busy, chef."

"Here's where Aunt Em shines again," grinned Phil, for a second forgetting his worry. "She had a theory that every boy ought to learn plain cooking."

"Phil, the more I see of you, the more I think of Aunt Em. Talk about the desert blooming like a rose! Give me the chap that can make an empty skillet bloom into a square meal."

Once the ham and potatoes were off the stove, they quickly disappeared. Making themselves bunks on the floor, the boys prepared to rest up for morning. Within half an hour Rod was filling the room with a gentle buzzing, but Phil lay looking out the open door till nearly morning. When he awoke it was to find Rod shaking him and scolding cheerfully: "Come on — even if you can't help get breakfast, maybe you can help eat it. Aunt Em didn't give me cooking lessons, but I guess you can curl around those hot biscuits just as well as if she had. Hustle! Train leaves in ten minutes."

It did. But first the boys made an important addition to their equipment. Leaning against the edge of the bunk built in one corner was a thirty-two caliber Winchester. "It's dad's old rifle — the one he hunted bears with when he wasn't much older than I am. We'll take it along, Rod; we may need it."

"All right; it's yours."

"You take it, Rod. I — I — " Phil stammered

and blushed, "that is, you see, I've got a—"

"A sore arm so that you can't carry it?" asked Rod sarcastically.

"No—a gun." Reaching back to his hip pocket, he pulled out a shining little automatic.

"Ho! a popgun!" laughed Rod. "Where'd you get it?"

"I—a—that is—Aunt Em gave it to me," he blurted out.

"Land sakes!" gasped Rod, then his face sobered. "Aunt Em's improving—but she's no judge of firearms—take it from me. What's the matter with this rifle? The magazine won't work at all; it's all gummed up. Oh, well, she'll do for a single-shotter until we can find time for an oil-bath. These cartridges look somewhat the worse for wear—rained on I [illegible] Ready?"

[illegible]ng Mose and Patience quietly browsing [illegible] enclosure, the boys started out afoot, feeling that on this unknown trail the burros would be more hindrance than help—two days' riding over an *easy* trail proved that.

As to the trail itself, the old Indian had directed them as well as he could; for the rest, the boys would have to depend on their wits.

The going was rough from the start. The trail wound in and out, following a deep ravine for a mile or so and then breaking through a dense forest whose tangled vines and close-growing trees shut off the view after the first ten feet.

All had been still out in the valley. Here the jungle was noisy with wild life. Overhead parrots screamed shrilly, and off in the distance a harsh laugh-like snarl sent cold chills up and down the back. Rod clutched his rifle thankfully.

The trail grew narrower and narrower and the woods darker and darker; the branches of the giant trees almost met overhead, and now a thick carpet of grass obscured the path. The sun was getting higher; the boys could not see it but they sensed it by the sudden sultry, steamy heat that seemed to rise in clouds about them. Sweat poured down their backs and dripped off the ends of their noses.

On they plodded, hour after hour, the first spring of their muscles lost in the steady grind of stumbling over fallen logs and crashing through matted vines. "Thank goodness, there's an opening," gasped Rod after an exasperating struggle through a bramble patch that left red welts across his hot forehead.

The path veered a bit to the left and for as far as they could see was clear of underbrush. They broke into a brisk walk, rested by the firm feel of their feet on the packed earth. But ten minutes going brought dismay. Directly across their path was a stream flowing sluggishly between steep banks. There the trail stopped. The opposite bank showed an unbroken wall of green.

"Drat the luck!" exclaimed Phil with a show of temper surprising for him. "We've got on the wrong track somehow. There wasn't any river across the trail, I'm sure of that."

"This is no man trail," asserted Rod, stooping over and looking closely at the path. "This is what hunters call a water-run. It's where the wild animals come down to drink. We didn't see the other end of it because there is a bit of a meadow where we turned in. Come on; we might as well start back — but let's get some fresh water first."

They filled the water bottle they had brought along from the camp, and then once more set out on the return trail. But their feet were not so light, and ten minutes did not find them at the meadow which marked the place where

they had left the old trail. When another ten minutes had passed and still the smooth runway stretched out before them, they became worried.

"We didn't turn off anywhere — the path hasn't divided — but we're surely missing our way," Rod at last admitted. "What'll we do?"

"Go back," said Phil; so go back they did till once more the river was in sight. Once more they retraced their steps. Carefully they watched their way but it was only when the familiar grass-covered opening was within a hundred feet, with the darker green of the old trail dimly showing, that they felt at all sure of themselves.

Then, with a glad cry Phil turned off on an almost imperceptible trail — but the glad cry died in his throat. A tawny shape leisurely trotted across the path a scant dozen steps ahead. Fearfully he clutched Rod by the arm and pointed.

"Did you see it?" he whispered hoarsely.

"What?" asked Rod carelessly, nevertheless bringing his rifle to the ready.

"I don't know — a lion maybe."

Rod tried to laug[h] "They don't have 'em," but he made no move to go forward. All was silent — an ominous silence that ended in a

terrifying animal snarl so close that the two boys jumped back instinctively.

"A panther!" gasped Rod.

"It was blackish — big as a Newfoundland dog, but longer and slimmer — "

"A black panther — the fiercest animal in South America!" answered Rod in an awed whisper. "Let's back up and get — "

Snarl! came another blood-chilling sound still closer.

"Run!" yelled Phil, his nerve completely gone, and out into the open he dashed. As he turned, a warning cry rose to his lips. There, in the path he had just quitted, and between him and Rod, crouched a huge black tiger-like beast, his tail nervously twitching to and fro, his haunches quivering.

Rod turned at the call, and his face went pale. With trembling hands he raised the Winchester to his shoulder, the while the panther crouched deeper for his spring. Rod sighted along the wavering barrel, biting his quivering lips.

It was only a second. "Shoot, Oh, shoot!" begged Phil, the words only a whisper.

Rod steadied his hands, and just as the black bulk left the ground, pulled the trigger.

Click! — that was all. There was no report. Phil sank back, unnerved with horror, to spring to his feet with a glad shout as the bark of the Winchester rang out among the trees. Then, at the sight that met his eyes, he shouted again in astonishment, for Rod stood clutching the barrel of his rifle, the stock shattered, gazing blankly first at a powder-burnt hole in his sleeve and then at an inanimate black mass tumbled almost at his feet.

"I swung on him with the butt end, just as he hit me — and I guess the shock jammed the hammer down and — and — my — arm feels sore."

The panther was not dead, but the tearing blow had caught him across the eye and he lay still enough. The little automatic quickly finished him.

"Let me see your arm," commanded Phil.

"I — I — guess I'll — sit — down," began Rod weakly, then toppled over in a faint.

He quickly came to when Phil dashed his face liberally with water from his bottle. The wound in his arm was only a furrow scraped by the bullet and would quickly heal. Phil bound it tightly with a neat bandage and they were ready

to go on again. After standing shakily for a few minutes looking down at the glossy-coated monstrous cat, Rod turned resolutely away.

"Well, Phil, we'd better be on our way. I'd like to have the old boy's hide — maybe we'll meet your father before we go far, and we can come back and get it — but just now we've got to think about hiking."

The trail did not get any better and more than once the boys were sure they had wandered off, but now and then they came to plainly marked stretches that set them right once more. After one experience more bewildering than usual they came out into an open glade and caught their first real glimpse of the sun since leaving the spot where the panther lay.

"It's four o'clock," suggested Phil. "What say we rest our legs and kind of get our bearings? There's the sun — just about due west, isn't it? And Cusco must lie almost straight southwest. Just to the left of that highest peak, eh?"

"Just about," agreed Rod.

"Well, let's keep our eye on that, and we can't go far wrong. Ready for another sprint?"

Before they started, however, they took time

to put the rifle into working order again. A strap, wrapped round and round the stock and buckled tightly, held the pieces firmly in place, and once more the gun was ready for service.

Then they set forward again, pausing now and then to locate "Observation Peak," as they called it. Once, just in time, it saved them from striking into the wrong branch of the trail. Suddenly Phil, who had been keeping his eyes on the tree-tops, gave a yell of delight.

"It's my day for seeing things! If that isn't the old king-pin of the bird family, I miss my guess. I bet it's old 'Sacred Nest' himself!"

High up in the air, miles it must have been, soared a tiny speck. But as they looked, the speck grew larger and larger. It became as large as a crow, an eagle — an ostrich, Phil declared. It was undoubtedly a condor, the largest bird that flies.

"She stretches ten feet if she's an inch!" exclaimed Phil. "No wonder the Indians thought it carried little Picco off. Look! He's coming down. He's going to light!"

Forgetting the path, the dangers of the forest, everything, in the thrill of the hunt, the two boys darted into the woods in quick chase.

"Can we find our way back?" gasped Rod in sudden caution as they came upon an opening where the bird had apparently come down.

"Sure — it's straight back. But where's the King Condor — Oh!" Phil groaned in disappointment, "he didn't come down. There he goes, a mile away. Let's hurry back before we forget how we came."

"Yes, let's," seconded Rod, but with a queer sinking at his heart as he looked back the way they had come. Which of the dozen ragged forest openings had they traversed? Before they had gone a dozen steps he realized what had happened. They were lost! He turned to Phil, to read in his nervous look the same overwhelming fear.

CHAPTER VII

THE POOL OF THE BIG TROUT

"It's going to be dark in about half an hour," suggested Rod wearily, after they had hopelessly worn themselves out trying to locate the trail. "It's about time we made up our minds on a place to pass the night."

Phil nodded gravely. Each time that they broke through the tangle of vines and bushes it was only to become more confused as the minutes passed and they penetrated farther into the bush. "Observation Peak" had failed them. At every point of the compass showed a mountain, but none of them looked like the one they had singled out. Now they stood at the brow of a little knoll, a treeless meadow at its foot, while a half-mile away a thin strip of gray-leaved bushes gave promise of one of the numerous small rivers.

"I expect you're right," agreed Phil, "and this is as good a place to camp as any. We'd better take these last few minutes of daylight to

see if we can shoot supper. That's most likely a river yonder by those bushes, and we might manage fish for breakfast."

It was upon this promise of fish-for-breakfast that they finally went to sleep, for no game save the gay-colored little parrots showed itself. It is true Rod had a flying shot at a duck-like bird that flapped through the fast growing dusk, but the distance was too great and the sight too poor.

So they came back to the knoll and built up a huge fire with dead limbs gathered from among the trees. Its flaring light made good company in the gloom and as the evening chill came on, its heat felt very comfortable. It was about nine o'clock before either thought of sleep. "Shall we stand watch," asked Rod finally, "or trust to luck and both go to sleep?"

"I'd rather be a live hero than a dead coward. Suppose you snooze till about one o'clock while I stir the coals, and then I'll take my turn."

So they passed the night, though it must be confessed that when the sky had begun to put out its pink promises, Rod let his heavy eyes close for just a second — and the next minute it was six o'clock.

"What now?" he asked when they both had rubbed the sleep out of their eyes.

"Let's hike for the river yonder — if it is one. If we don't get anything with the rifle on the way, we'll have to take a chance on fisherman's luck."

"Fine chance!" Rod snorted. "Without a line and not even a bent pin for a hook."

"I believe I told you once about a relative of mine — a certain Aunt Em. Well, Aunt Em made me a pocket sewing kit, and it is supplied with linen thread that'd hold a whale, and a whole paper of assorted needles."

"I see. You're going to locate a school of fish and fool the little ones into thinking you're going to give them sewing lessons."

"I am not. I am going to heat one of those big needles in the coals of our fire — red-hot — and then let it cool off. Then I'll bend it into a hook; and then temper it again. I caught a five pound catfish on one just like that last summer. Watch me."

The hook was made, and though it had no barb, it looked so businesslike that even Rod was satisfied. Then Phil made more, large and small, and from a darning needle one that was

built for real fishing. That done, they set out, Rod going ahead with the rifle. Twice he fired at small game, and then, just a few hundred yards from the river, which they could see occasionally through the fringe of bushes, he had a real chance.

Attracted by loud grunts and squeals from a copse of broad-leaved bushes perhaps a hundred feet to the left, he stole cautiously over. There he saw two animals — had he been at Stoneville he would have called them young pigs — rooting and tugging in a long trench they had dug.

Rod did not tremble now. The Winchester jumped to his shoulder and his eyes glanced keenly along the barrel as he pulled the trigger. But there was only another disappointing click! The pigs lifted their alert heads and in another second were scampering through the bushes, leaving Rod to throw down the untrustworthy rifle in disgust.

"A fine gun!" he exclaimed as Phil came up. "I expect your father left it behind because it wouldn't shoot."

"I don't think so, Rod — "

"Maybe you think I don't pull the trigger hard enough! I tell you the gun won't shoot —

except when you turn the blooming firearm into a club!"

"I didn't mean that," answered Phil mildly. "I think it's the cartridges. I had my suspicions of them when we took them. They look old and as if they might have been damp. Well, anyhow, let's fish for a change."

But when they reached the river bank, disappointment awaited them. The water was clear and undoubtedly fresh, but as Rod put it, it looked "as if the bottom was coming up to get air." Over a bed of gravel and sand rushed a current barely six inches deep. No fish there, clearly. Rod sat down in despair and disgust. "A minnow would die of exposure in there," he snorted.

"You're a good civil engineer, Rod, but you're no fisherman. I'll bet you that's a fine trout stream."

"Trout? A turtle couldn't swim in there." But Phil had started busily along the bank. "Follow me," he called over his shoulder. Follow him Rod did, over logs and rocks and tangled creepers, floundering over grass-hidden ditches and through ankle-deep mud holes. "A little farther," Phil kept saying as Rod strug-

gled to his feet each time. A disgusted grunt was his only answer.

At last Phil stopped. "Here we are," he said cheerfully. "I'll bet that pool's eight feet deep in spots, and if trout can't be coaxed out from under that foam-flecked spill there, I never cast a fly in my life."

"Good! Coax ahead. You might begin by coaxing a fly to set on the end of your hook while you toss it into the mouth of a nice six-pound trout. Go to it, I say." Rod's usual good humor had been gradually oozing out.

"Of course we could catch a nice bright-winged bug of some kind, but a juicy white grub ought to do the trick. Suppose you lift up your end of that mouldery old log you're holding down — thanks, that one trying to wiggle under your foot will do nicely."

In a short time Phil had cut himself a respectable pole from a convenient bush, had doubled a forty foot length of his thread, deftly tying on his largest hook and weighting the line with a bit of rock. "Now we'll spit on it for luck — here goes."

The grub dropped into the water with barely a splash. The line tightened; Phil stuck the

sharp end of the pole into the bank and sat down. "I guess I'll rest for a few minutes. Not much use casting with a grub. Meanwhile I'll rig up another line and maybe try one of those bugs we see skimming over the water — wow! did you see that?" Rod had. A glistening body had parted the water and one of the bright-winged bugs had disappeared.

"Quick, Rod, help me catch one of those bugs. That's the bait we want."

With hats for nets the two boys quickly captured a gaudy fly about an inch long. Phil skillfully attached it to his hook, cut himself a long slender pole and soon had a neat casting rod. Balancing himself carefully on a point of land that ran out a few feet he began flicking the enticing bait lightly to right and to left, straight out and then near the shore. But no trout rose to the bait; the water was still and the light-winged bugs darted about unharmed. On the bank Rod began to grow impatient. "I may be mistaken," he growled at length, "but it seems to me I'm getting hungry."

"Shut up!" snapped Phil; "you make me nervous. Why don't you rig up a line yourself — you seemed so keen about trout-fishing the other

day. Or else take your gun and see if you can't scare off another prize porker — "

"They *looked* like pigs — "

"They were, Rod — wild pigs. I've read about them; peccaries, they're called, and they say they're bad actors if you get them stirred up. Why don't you scout around — "

"Yeh — and come back to find that big trout sitting here on the bank making a meal off you. Think that grub has been in the water long enough to need dry clothes? If you do, I'll pull him up and change him." He began lifting the pole as he spoke and drawing in the line. There was a sudden rush through the water, the end of the pole whipped down — a lunge, a terrific tug — and Rod found himself sputtering and struggling in nose-deep water.

He managed to scramble out, minus the pole, however. It went lashing across the pool, bobbing up and down in a perfect fury of speed. "He's hooked for fair!" Rod shouted as he darted along the bank trying vainly to get within reaching distance. "He's mine!" he shouted as Phil barely missed grabbing the runaway pole.

At last the fish apparently tired and the pole lay still a short six feet from shore. It was

shallower here and Rod waded out, but the fish quickly came to life when he felt the first pull. Rod had all he could do to keep on his feet as the fish fought gamely against the hook.

"I'll have to let go if he pulls much harder," Rod called. "He'll break that flimsy line."

"Try to get to shore and then give him all the play you can. And if he comes up, I'll see if I can shoot him. We'll never land him on linen thread."

But the fish sulked; pull as he would, Rod could not budge him. Then once more the thin line lashed the water until it was a wonder it did not snap short.

"He's coming up!" shouted Phil finally. Sure enough a long black fin cut the water in an angry swish. "Ease up on him. Rod, see if he'll give me a fair shot." Rod let the line go as slack as he dared — bang! and then a quick leap that sent the water splashing.

"I got him," said Phil calmly. "I'll be starting a fire while you pull in the line."

The fish was a beauty, fifteen pounds if an ounce. It looked like a trout, save that its mouth was larger and there was a row of reddish brown spots running from the top of the gills

to the middle of the tail. True to his word, Phil soon had a fire going, and it was not long before a nicely dressed fish was browning on top a thin flat rock resting in a bed of coals.

"If we only had salt," said Rod as they sat down to the savory meal, "I'd be satisfied to be lost — if it wasn't for your dad."

Phil choked — over a fishbone; of course. "If I just knew he was safe in Cusco — " then his jaw dropped in amazement, for, parting the bushes a dozen feet away, was a man!

CHAPTER VIII

A NARROW ESCAPE

"Signors," the stranger greeted easily, then seated himself beside Rod and silently helped himself to a generous piece of fish. Aside from a bare answer to his greeting, the boys watched him, silent, first in surprise, then in anger. For, having finished his first enormous helping, the intruder reached over and took more. This he repeated till all the choice portions had disappeared. He ate with a certain deadly precision that fascinated the boys, but Rod felt his anger getting the best of him.

"I like your nerve! What do you mean?" he demanded when the man paused an instant.

The stranger looked up. He was a man of fifty or thereabout; he was tall, extremely thin, very dark. He might have been Spanish; a certain handsome regularity of feature told that he was a pure-blood.

"Ah," he answered, "you notice my pres-

ence? Why, then, should I explain it?" His voice purred; it was cat-like too in the sudden snarl that came at the end.

"Because you'll find it necessary," stoutly answered Rod, laying as he spoke, his hand on the Winchester.

"So — but have no fear — " this with a smile of pity — "I shall not harm you. I am Enrico Castelano; I harm no one. Rather tell *me* what *you* do here. Know you not this is my domain?"

"He's cracked," whispered Phil in quick understanding. "I'll bet he's lost too, and the strain has put him out of his head."

"Lost, you say? Ha, there is no foot of this wonderful land that has not echoed to the tread of Castelano. Whom do I address?"

"I am Phil Crompton and my friend is Rod Dillon," answered Phil to humor him. "We are lost — can you tell us the way to Cusco?"

"Lost? To Cusco? Did you come from there?"

"No; we came from the railroad camp — " Rod replied, pausing as he noticed a sudden gleam in the stranger's eyes.

"What seek you?" he demanded hotly. "Must you too come to — but you are only

boys," he ended more quietly. "From the camp, you say? And why do they build a railroad in these mountains?"

"There is a rich mine—" began Phil innocently, then paused abruptly, halted by the stranger's quick "Ah!" as well as by Rod's black look.

"A mine?" questioned the man. "Gold, you think?"

"No—coal," answered Rod, obeying a sudden impulse. "And now we want to find our way to Cusco, or the camp. If you'll direct us—"

"I will take you to the trail," the stranger agreed. "You said *coal?*" he asked sharply, turning to Phil this time, but glancing back at Rod in time to catch the meaning look that passed between the two. He sprang to his feet with a shrill cry. "It is gold—gold!" he exclaimed excitedly. "You shall not—" he paused craftily and laughed, a shrill laugh that did not ring true—"you shall not wander off the trail again with Castelano as your guide. Follow me."

The boys followed, willing enough, though Rod found a chance to whisper a warning to Phil.

"Keep your automatic handy; he's a shifty customer and he means mischief."

But as they walked along the man became very friendly. At first he asked many questions, about the railroad, the mine, but their answers seemed to satisfy him and soon he fell to chatting about other things.

It was evident before long that they were on a trail of some kind, though more than once the boys were suspicious that they were walking in a circle. "He keeps us out in the sun all the time," Phil observed when he chanced to touch elbows with his chum. "What's the idea?" Rod said nothing. On and on they tramped as the sun rose higher and its rays beat down on their unprotected heads. The sweat coursed down their faces; their throats were parched. More than one spring they passed where a few minutes' walk would have relieved their thirst, but their guide shook his head angrily at the suggestion.

"Wait," he commanded. "There is no time for rest till we reach the trail. Water there will be in plenty soon."

"We want it now," gasped Phil in real distress. "I'm dying for a drink. The next one

we pass I'm going to head for — if it's a mile away."

"Here too," asserted Rod. "That looks like one to our right."

"No," denied their guide, but the boys knew he lied. Still they followed, stumbling along behind his hurried steps. After another five minutes he too began to lag, and when Rod called his attention to a tiny stream that trickled over a ledge of rock barely a hundred yards away, he only grunted at the demand that they halt and drink. In fact, he it was who led the way around a grassy knoll and up a steep pathway to where a clear spring gushed from beneath a tall cliff.

"I say, Rod," said Phil in an undertone, "notice that everything's bare where that water runs — no bushes or grass as there generally is — "

"What of it? " asked Rod blankly.

"Didn't you notice that Enrico steered us past all the other places, and steered us *right up to this*? "

"What do you think? "

"Honduras oranges, Rod — get me? "

"I'm thirsty — get *me*? He stopped when he

got a thirst on himself, that's the answer. Don't be so suspicious, Phil."

"He doesn't drink himself," muttered Phil stubbornly. "Is the water good?" he demanded of the guide, who pointed invitingly to the sparkling stream.

"Good? Ah, there is none other like it! It is better than drink; it is a medicine. Many times have I come to this spring. Its waters are a cure for the ills of the flesh. Its taste is bitter but refreshing. It is a—what you call it?—a mineralic spring. We have come miles out of our way so that you might drink of its marvelous water."

"Humph!" grunted Rod sarcastically. "You're an old woman, Phil. What reason could he have for wishing us harm?"

He got down on his hands and knees and stooped over to drink deeply of the enticing water. But suddenly Phil darted forward, caught him by the shoulder and roughly jerked him back. "Look!" he exclaimed. "Look, Rod!" He pointed a dozen feet down the hillside, where the stream had made a tiny pool on a projecting shelf.

Within a few inches of the water lay the body

of one of the green parrots they had seen so often.

"It drank that water — and died!" Phil cried in horror.

"Nonsense, it might have got drowned — or just died there. It had to die somewhere, somehow."

"Ah, yes," echoed Castelano, "It had to die somewhere, somehow. We all do. You are not thirsty? Then let me drink and we can go on our way."

He bent over the tiny stream and Rod quickly stooped over to follow his example — but Phil clapped his hand over his chum's mouth.

"What you mean!" sputtered Rod angrily, shaking off his chum's hand. "Let me drink."

"Not a drop!" grimly answered Phil. Calmly he pulled the tiny automatic from his pocket.

"My friend," he said to their guide, "you can't fool me. You did not swallow a drop of that water. You were just going through the motions. You don't understand what I mean? Well, I understand what *you* mean! Here!" He pulled a traveler's folding cup from his pocket, opened it with a snap and filled it with water. "Drink that!"

A nasty look came into the man's eyes. With an oath he dashed the cup from Phil's hand and in the same instant made a grab for the pistol.

But Phil was too quick for him. "Not so fast," he cried, pointing the little automatic threateningly at Castelano's chest. "Up with your hands." The hands went up. "Search him, Rod, for a gun." Rod quickly saw that beyond a wicked-looking knife the man was unarmed.

"Good. Now you tell us the quickest way to Cusco — no monkey-business or I'll fill you full of holes."

The man sullenly refused to answer. "You'd better talk," advised Phil, a note of determination in his voice that made Rod look at him in new respect. "If you don't, we'll be forced to tie you up and pour a little of that tempting water down your throat."

"Not that!" cried the captive in horror, in his fear lowering his hands.

"Up with your paws!" commanded Phil. "I'll give you two minutes to tell us. We mean business!"

"You bet we do," seconded Rod, advancing on the man with his own knife.

"It is an hour's travel to the trail," sullenly began Castelano. "I will take you there — "

"We want no taking. Tell us. We won't risk your company."

"The way is hard to find," argued the man, easing his position a bit. "Beyond that hill yonder is a wide pampa across whose corner is a heavy forest. A wild-hog path leads from a group of tall trees you can see from the hill. The path is wide; you cannot miss it. It runs straight to a deep canyon which you must cross. There is a break in the canyon wall, on the other side. This side is steep and needs careful climbing. From the break runs an easy trail that will take you to a traveled road, and Cusco lies in sight after five hours' walk."

"He lies," commented Rod bluntly.

"On my honor — " began the man, but Phil silenced him.

"Hike!" he ordered. "Vamoose before I change my mind about that spring water. And don't let us — " but the man was gone.

"Well," exclaimed Rod, blankly, "doesn't it beat all?"

"There's just one thing makes me think he directed us right: It's exactly opposite to the

way he had us headed before. Shall we take a chance on him?"

"There isn't anything else to do. Lead the way, Phil. You're the commander of this expedition. You've sure earned the right to be."

"There's one thing about fish — " commented Phil as they strode along, making up for lost time, having stopped at a spring whose sweet water soon quenched their three-hour thirst.

"Meaning unwelcome guests, or bones?"

"Aside from bones. It doesn't stick to your ribs. Now a piece of juicy beefsteak — "

"Don't mention it," begged Rod. "Tears come to my eyes when I think even of that petrified ham we had in the cabin yesterday morning. And by the way — he said wild-hog trail, didn't he? If I can find a cartridge that the wet hasn't laid its fingers on, I can pretty near promise fresh meat for dinner. Lead on, Pathfinder."

They were entering the woods now, and the shade felt grateful, even though the dense forest growth shut off all the breeze. They had no trouble in finding the run Castelano had described, and less in following its well-worn windings. It grew wider as they went on, but

no sign of game did they see, except of course the ever-present little parrots, chattering in every tree, gay-plumaged birds of small size but loud, harsh voices, and an occasional tiny ground animal that whisked quickly out of sight.

Then, as they turned a long bend in the low bushes, a curious sight met their eyes. Sitting on its haunches, for all the world scratching its ear with its hind foot like any sty-pig, was one of the peccaries they had hoped to see. The two boys stopped a moment to watch it.

It was small — a bit larger perhaps, than a bulldog. Its short hair was brownish in color with darker spots. As it scratched vigorously, its snout had a vicious twist to it that made Rod give an extra glance along his sights. Then he quickly pulled the trigger.

The Winchester barked sharply and the boys could hear the sp — t! of the bullet as it went home. Over and over rolled the peccary and then lay still. With a glad shout the two young hunters ran forward and bent over their prize. But more quickly still they straightened up and looked about in alarm. A warning squeal had come from the copse, then a chorus of ferocious grunts.

Out of the brush rushed a dozen or more wild pigs, while behind them the bushes still crashed with countless other rushing forms. Out flashed Phil's automatic and eight shots rang out in deadly succession, but on came the pigs. There was no doubt that they meant business, and the first onslaught showed that the danger was real. Rod felt sharp tusks that slit his high-laced shoes like knives. "Run for it!" he shouted, leading the way. "Make for a tree!"

But no trees were near. Their sudden sprint had gained the boys a scant dozen feet, but closing up on them at every jump came a horde of pigs that had grown to fifty, with others still darting from the bushes. Safe in a tree, it would have been a sight worth watching. It was the thrill of the chase — with the positions reversed.

The flight could not last long. Phil felt his breath coming shorter and shorter in painful gasps, and even Rod's hardened legs were beginning to give out. One leader of the pursuit with a sidewise swipe of the head gashed his leg to the bone. The sudden pain renewed his strength and put a few feet between him and the blood-hungry animals, but the gain was only brief.

And then, just before them, they saw the canyon Castelano had spoken of. "This side is steep and needs careful climbing!" With terrifying distinctness Rod heard the man's words singing in his ears.

"We've got to chance it, Phil!" he gasped as they reached the brink. "Try to find a safe foothold while I make mincemeat of a few of the ringleaders. Quick!"

He swung about, his rifle clubbed. Thud—thud—thud! Three well-aimed blows rolled over as many of the savage peccaries and gained him a minute's safety. He looked wildly over his shoulder; Phil was six feet below on a narrow ledge, reloading his automatic as quickly as trembling fingers would let him.

"Hurry!" he cried as Rod hesitated. But the second of safety was gone. Before Rod realized what was happening, he felt himself dashed off the edge of the cliff and hurtling through the air. The walls of the canyon slipped past with sickening speed—all grew black.

CHAPTER IX

AN EARLY MORNING VISITOR

Half an hour later a limp, water-soaked boy lay stretched on a narrow strip of sand, while over him bent another boy, water-soaked, too, but not at all limp. Phil straightened up with a tired sigh of relief as he saw the eyes of the white-faced Rod weakly open.

"Whew! that was some job," he muttered when Rod finally pulled himself unsteadily to a sitting position. "It wouldn't have been so bad, only I didn't know whether you were drowned or killed by the fall."

"I fell?" asked Rod, still dazed.

"Twice. I'll swear you hit the water so hard you bounced. And then you sank like a log."

"I remember now; the wild pigs got me."

"They sure did—"

"But how about you?" Rod scanned the rocky walls of the canyon; there was no path, not even a foothold. "How did you get down?"

"Don't ask me!" laughed Phil. "There wasn't anything graceful about it. And I fell

the last twenty feet and bumped my knee something awful — "

" And then you dived for me — "

" Forget it. I fell into the water too, and in trying to get out I stumbled against you. Being as how it wasn't too much bother, I fetched you along. First aid to pig-hunters isn't exactly my line, but I did the best I could."

" I should say you did. Every bone in my body is sore from your thumping. Where's the gun? "

" In the bottom of the creek," grinned Phil cheerfully. " If you'll sit still here, I'll try diving for it."

Merely taking off his coat and shoes, Phil splashed out for the center of the little stream that cut in against the base of the opposite cliff. Then, taking a deep breath, he ducked under. Fully two minutes passed, and then his head bobbed up again. " It's ten feet deep here," he yelled when he had regained his wind. " I think I touched the rifle that time, but a turtle bit me or I had to come up for air — I forget which. Here goes again."

Once more he disappeared. A line of bubbles followed his course under the water. A long

two minutes passed, and Rod was just about to try to get to his unsteady feet, when suddenly a rifle barrel plumped out of the water fifteen feet from where Phil had gone down, and then with an explosion of breath that woke the canyon echoes, Phil triumphantly came to the surface.

"Good boy!" cried Rod with a feeble cheer. "Help me to my feet and we'll find that break in the cliff old Castelano told us about."

"Nothin' shaking," objected Phil vigorously. "We stay here till you're fit for the hike. We'd best dry our clothes while we've got a chance, because we won't have more than another half hour of the sun down here in this hole. You rest up while I scout around a bit. Our thoughtful friend forgot to say which direction that break was. Spread out my coat, will you? I'll let the rest of my clothes dry on me."

Whistling a gay tune, and shoving his hands unconcernedly in his pockets, Phil strode off down the canyon. But go as far as he would, the steep wall towered unbroken above him. "Couldn't climb it with a ladder and a rope," he muttered more than once. At last he gave up the search and returned.

Rod was walking about now, apparently none

the worse for his tumble, though some rude bandages below the knee showed where the sharp tusks of the vicious peccaries had torn the flesh. "What luck?" he hailed.

"None. There's a wide strip of sand beach all along, but no chance to climb. Suppose the path could be farther up stream?"

"Hardly. We didn't go to the end of the trail, and if the way out had been above that our friend would have said so. What shall we do?"

"I ran across some driftwood about a mile down. Suppose we hit her up for there, build a fire and spend the night down here."

"Why stop at a mile?"

"Because in half an hour it'll be dark down here. Come on."

The driftwood was found and a tidy fire built. Luckily the boys carried their matches in waterproof safes, and the unexpected bath had not spoiled them. By the time the fire was crackling merrily the stars were beginning to show between the narrow canyon walls. "This water's pretty thin soup," laughed Phil, "but I guess I'll take an extra helping and call it supper; then I'm going to turn in. What say?"

"Good night, that's all," answered Rod sleepily from the couch he had hollowed out in the dry sand.

It beats all how soundly one can sleep out in the open after a strenuous day, even when one has only a coat for a comfort, sand for a mattress and his cap for a pillow. Only once in the long night from sundown to sunrise did Rod waken. It was near morning then. He rose sleepily on one elbow and turned toward the fire.

"That you, Phil?" he called, seeing that the fire was blazing up under extra fuel. There was no reply from the shadowy figure bending over the coals, but Rod was too sleepy to do more than grunt. "B- -eful, sleepy-head, or you'll fall in the fire and -h your nose."

Long before the sun peeped into the deep canyon the two boys were astir.

"Get cold in the night?" asked Rod casually.

"I don't know. I didn't wake up to find out. I see you did, though; you've burnt up all our firewood."

"*I* did? What's eating you anyway?"

"It's gone, isn't it? What's the answer?"

"That you walk in your sleep. I saw you up

and fixing the fire early this morning — couldn't have been more than three o'clock."

"Get out! Never walked in my sleep in my life. Are you sure?"

"Think I'd see myself walking in my sleep? I called to you but you didn't answer — what's the matter?"

"Where's the Winchester, Rod?" Phil exclaimed excitedly. "You laid it right beside the fire, didn't you?"

"Yes. Surely you didn't — "

"Put it in the fire! Of course not!" Nevertheless he raked in the ashes. "Ah!" he shouted suddenly, pointing at the ground. "We've been robbed! Neither one of us wore our shoes after we got here — and there's a shoe-print!"

"Castelano!" exclaimed Rod. "I'll bet he followed us. Did you notice how he kept eyeing the gun. He hadn't any; that was why he was so anxious to get the best of us."

"He had a deeper motive than that," objected Phil. "Did you notice he acted pretty white until we spoke of the camp and the mine? After that he was ready for murder. I've a notion he either has it in for my father or — " He paused.

"Or what?"

"Or the railroad. But we don't want to stand here wasting precious time. We've got the automatic and we've got his trail. If we don't turn the tables on him my name is *m-u-d*, mud. Come on."

Setting the pace at a swinging half-trot, Phil started off down the canyon.

"I say, Phil," called Rod, hobbling along behind. "You'll have to slow up till I work the stiffness out of my leg. That pig bit pretty deep."

"Let me have a look at it." So they stopped and bathed and dressed the wounds. The cuts were deep but healthy-looking, and promised to make no trouble. Phil's last clean handkerchief was torn to make a bandage, and then they went forward once more, but a bit more slowly and with frequent rests.

The footprints were easy to follow in the soft sand and in spite of Rod's hobble the boys made good time. But the man had had at least three hours' start; catching up to him meant a long, hard grind. The boys were refreshed from their long sleep, but going to bed supperless and getting up breakfastless doesn't put endurance into a fellow's legs. So before long the trot became

a jog and the jog became a spiritless walk.

"Pebble soup for supper and fish soup for breakfast. Guess I'll try a little Adam's-ale for an appetizer," remarked Rod, pausing beside the stream. "S'pose a handful of sand would help keep a fellow's belt tight!"

"Pull her up another notch, high-diver. Shoulders up, chest out, step lively. Yonder's some inviting looking bubbles you might sample. You don't suppose we could have missed that path, do you? We haven't seen a footprint for the last mile."

"Hardly. Well, let's try another lap. My head's beginning to spin from looking up."

On and on they tramped but no upward path met their watchful eyes. The sun was now shining directly on the steep wall beside them, and the glare blinded them. The strip of sand was growing narrower now and the going much rougher. Huge clumps of boulders jutted from the wall and almost blocked the way. The stream made sudden turns and in many places lapped the very edge of the cliff.

It was evident that they must be nearing the place where the path led upward, but only for a fortunate discovery they would have missed it.

"It didn't rain last night, did it?" asked Rod perplexedly when they had tussled their way over a jutting ridge of rocks.

"Of course not," replied Phil shortly; they were both growing cross. They stumped along perhaps a hundred feet. "Why?" snapped Phil at last.

"I just thought it was funny there should be quite a pool of water in a basin on top of one of those big rocks."

"Water? Why — nonsense. But what of it?" They trudged on another hundred feet.

"The walls are getting steeper again," observed Rod, "and not a footprint — "

"Wow — what numbskulls we are!" shouted Phil in sudden comprehension. "Back to the rocks!"

"Why — what — "

"Back to the rocks. Castelano or whoever it was stole our rifle, out-guessed us, that's all. Of course there weren't any footprints; he didn't walk on shore. He waded down the creek and came out over the rocks when he got to the path. That water you noticed was the place where he came out — sure as shooting."

Phil's guess proved to be right, for with

increasing distinctness a difficult trail led from behind one of the fallen rocks and up across the face of the cliff. It took hard climbing and more than one breathless moment where loss of nerve meant a slip and a dangerous fall, but the boys were game, and at last they stood winded but safe, on the edge of the eighty-foot canyon.

"Now where are we—" began Rod, then paused at a sudden exclamation from Phil. "What do you see?"

"A trail that's as plain as the nose on your face—freckles and all. He's taken the chance that we wouldn't find the way up—soon enough at least, and he hasn't even tried to hide his tracks. Look—they go straight up that hill yonder. You can see them from here. We can save five minutes by taking a shortcut."

At the base of the easy slope they found footprints leading straight up to the brow of the hill. Up it the boys climbed, Rod objecting every step of the way. "Why should he go up here? This hill doesn't lead anywhere."

He had his satisfaction when the top was reached, for like the hill, the footsteps did not lead anywhere either. In fact they stopped. Search as they would, the boys found no further

trace. Nor did they even when they had reached the bottom on the other side. The hill stood by itself in a level plain. Circling the base, the boys scanned every inch of the way. Mystified they at last had to give it up.

"There goes dad's gun," gloomily declared Phil.

"And we're still lost," added Rod just as gloomily. "There's only one thing we can do — or two rather. We can strike straight west and we're bound to reach the coast, then south and we'll finally make Cusco. Or we can — and we'd better do that first — hike across to those big hills, shin up the tallest one, and take a squint around on the bare chance that we might see someone or something."

"Lead ahead," agreed Phil. Discouraged, hungry, and not a little weary they plodded across the grass-covered prairie — pampa, they call it down there. It was a matter of four miles to the first low hills and it took nearly two hours to reach the one they had chosen for their survey. Out of breath they at last gained the peak. To the south they looked; nothing but hills, hills and stretches of high-lying plains. To the east a heavy stretch of woods ran to

the horizon. To the west the sun hung low over a limitless plateau. Without hope they turned to the north.

"Nothing!" groaned Phil.

"Nothing," echoed Rod, and sat down. "Not a soul or a house or living animal in sight. We've walked miles and miles since morning in wonderful South America — 'teeming with wild life' my geography says — without seeing any game but parrots, snakes, and mice. Nice country — nit!"

Phil stared hopelessly off into space. At last he turned to his chum, blinking his eyes from the strain. "Guess I only imagined I saw something move off yonder — "

"Where? I can't see anything," following the direction of Phil's finger. "Where?"

"See that bunch of rocks on that farthest hill, with the lone boulder that looks like a house — say *isn't* it a house!"

"I do believe you're right. But, anyway, it's in the wrong direction."

"How do we know? Which way is the camp anyway?" Rod did not answer. "We don't lose anything by taking the chance; we haven't got anything to lose. Let's go."

With a groan Rod came to his feet and the two trotted painfully down the hill. The sun was getting low. Already, down in the valleys, dusk seemed on them. But they trudged gamely on till the last hill was reached. It was quite dark now and as they reached the flat expanse on which the hoped-for house had been seen, they paused in hopes of seeing a light. There was none, but against the sky they saw the clump of rocks and a little farther away the dim shape they had come to investigate. At this close view it looked more than ever like one of the dome-shaped native huts.

With fast-beating hearts the boys drew closer, Phil with his hand clenched on the automatic. "It's a house, all right," he whispered.

CHAPTER X

THE TREASURE CHART

"It's deserted — the door's wide open. Hello there!" Phil called tremblingly when within a few feet. There was no answer.

Still somewhat fearful the boys ventured inside and struck a match. The first feeble gleam of light showed that the place was empty enough but that it had not been so very long. The meager furniture was tumbled about as if the leaving had been hasty. Remnants of provisions were scattered across the floor, in the doorway lay a ragged blanket — then the light went out. With the second match they managed to find an end of a candle and they were able to make a closer search.

First of all they gathered together what provisions they could find. A handful of tea, loose on a sort of pantry shelf, about the same quantity of salt in a tin can, a tough shank of a ham that looked as if it had been dried rather than smoked, a very small quantity of flour and a petrified half-loaf of native bread — that was all.

Yet—"a feast for the famished!" was Rod's approving comment.

There was a rough-built fireplace in one corner in which the bricks were still warm. Here the boys soon had a fire snapping merrily up the big chimney, while over its cheery warmth Phil charmed the sad-looking relics of the last occupant into an appetizing meal. Water had been found in the shallow ravine that ran between their hill and its nearest neighbor, a well-marked path showing the way. The lone broken-handled skillet they found had to serve first as water pail and then as frying pan. The ham was hacked into tiny bits and thoroughly stewed. Then the flour was stirred in with a whittled stick: creamed ham! More water from the spring reduced the bread to the breaking point and it was fried in the ham-scrapings. Then the pan was scoured and tea was made in it, the boys taking turns at sipping the bitter drink from Phil's folding cup.

But it was a merry meal in spite of all that, and when the boys at last leaned back in satisfaction they felt that the long eat-less wait had been well rewarded. In perfect content now they sat before the fire and watched the flames sputter

and crackle on the earthen hearth. "If I wasn't so sleepy," yawned Rod finally, "I'd make another tour of investigation. Do you think this is Castelano's hut?" voicing a thought that had been in the minds of both ever since they had stepped within the doorway of the rubbish-littered cabin.

"I sure do. While you were after that second skillet of water I found this—" Phil poked a pile of trash over toward Rod with his foot. A cardboard box lay uppermost. "Winchester Smokeless—32 calibre" was printed on the label at one end. "That's why he wanted the gun. He had ammunition but no rifle. He must have lost it—I'm anxious to know how. He stopped to clean the gun; from the looks of the rags I found, he sure made a good job of it. I expect he cleaned out the magazine and now he's got a repeater, so maybe it's just as well he left before we came."

Rod made no comment but arose and began poking in corners, turning over filthy rags and rubbish. At each disappointment he would grunt disgustedly and then turn to more promising material. Phil heard him poking about, himself so sleepy that his eyes closed more than once.

At last he became aware that the room was strangely still. Looking up with a start he saw Rod standing, clutching a great handful of loose sheets of paper, at which he stared with fascinated eyes.

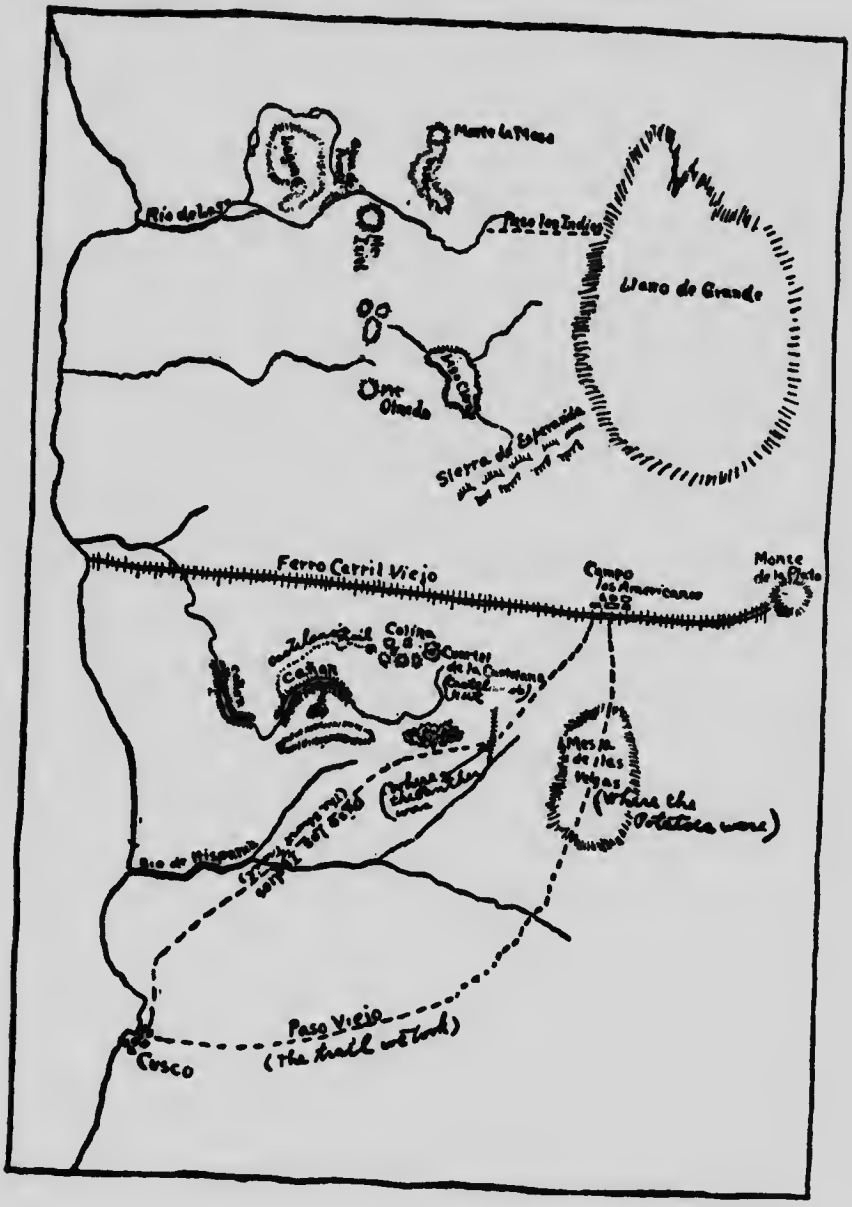
"What'd you find?" demanded Phil, all the sleep cleared out of his brain.

"Jiggers, I don't know," hesitated Rod as he came toward the light. "Let's build up our fire so we can see."

As the red flames lighted up the room the two boys eagerly held the sheets close to their light. Bescribbled and dingy with age and much handling, they were all the same in one respect. Rod's find was a chart or map of some kind, drawn with great exactness and showing many points and computations. Picking out the one in best condition the boys studied it as well as they could in the flickering light.

On each sheet, in a marked-off space beneath the map, appeared a painstakingly printed legend.

The characters were Spanish, and try as they would the boys could only guess at the meaning of the queer sentences. The translation that Phil finally offered was too wild for any belief, but he stoutly insisted on its exactness. "I may not


Monte la Mesa
Río de los
Paso los Indios
Llano de Grande
Sierra de Esperanza
Ferro Carril Viejo
Campo los Americanos
Monte de la Plata
Cañar
Río de Hispanic
Paso Viejo
(the trail inland)
Cusco

talk up with the Greasers here," he grumbled, "but I know my book Spanish from A to Z."

This was the curious jumble:

> *The railroad is a string to a bow — the arrow points to the Mountain of Light through one and three. When the sun is four hours high the shadow falls on the Sacred Spring. The water flows the shadow's length, the bow and not the string, and there the arrow strikes the sun. Take from the bow the string and measure thrice. There seek. I have written.*

"What in the world does it mean?" asked Rod when he had read it through a half-dozen times.

"I expect that's what our friend — for I haven't the slightest doubt this is Castelano's cabin — has been scribbling up all this paper trying to find out. But one thing is a cinch: The map is a treasure chart and that mess of words is the key — or would be if a fellow knew what it means. I'll bet that was why he was so anxious to know what we were after. 'Gold?'

he asked. He thought we were hunting the same thing as he was, I'll bet."

"Well, when we get back to camp I'll take a tug at figuring out some of these hieroglyphics, but just now there are two things that interest me a whole lot more. The first is sleep, and the second is the way back to that same camp of ours."

"Well, both of them are right here."

"I can see the sleep part of it with my eyes shut, but the way back — "

"Right here," Phil interrupted, tapping the chart with his finger. "You don't seem to realize that this thing is a map, not drawn to scale of course, but it shows practically every hill and hollow, river and lake in this neighborhood. That double line there is the railroad. Here's Cusco, and here we are — that square is this cabin. In the morning all we need is the sun and this map and we can cut a straight line to the track. After that we can easy find the camp. It's a cinch!"

With that they drowsed off before the fire and before they knew it the guiding sun was reddening the sky. Breakfast was a hasty meal; the scraps of supper were warmed over and

quickly gobbled. A visit to the spring and then they were ready for the start.

"Any idea how far it is?" asked Rod as they trudged down the hill toward the northeast.

"Not much of one. Fifteen miles maybe. Can't be much more. We ought to aim to strike the base of 'Old Baldy' yonder, that big mountain with his nightcap pushed to one side."

Feeling reasonably certain of getting somewhere finally they made good time. Phil's watch showed ten o'clock when they had covered the five miles to the wooded base of "Old Baldy." Here Rod paused. When Phil impatiently reminded him that five from fifteen left ten and that he had just had a ten-mile wireless from his father's pantry to his empty stomach, Rod refused to budge from the soft spot where he had thrown himself.

"Come on, Rod," Phil begged. "We don't know what might have happened to dad, and every second counts."

For answer Rod began to laugh, louder and louder. At last he sobered up enough to spring to his feet and point down the slope, to their left. "Ten-mile call!" he roared. "Who-oop! Phil, hang up your receiver. Are those rails,

or am I only telephoning standing on my head?"

"You can stand on it all day if you want to," shouted Phil, giving his chum a push that rubbed his nose in the sod, "but I'm on my way!" And across the valley he sprinted.

They were rails, and this was the track they had been hunting for so hard. Better still, scarce half a mile up the track was the camp.

Breathless, Phil ran the whole distance, aware as he drew near that the place was no longer deserted. Fully a hundred Indians lounged about, startled out of their laziness, however, at sight of the two excited boys.

The gang was back. To Phil's eager inquiries concerning Mr. Crompton they made no answer but hurried the boys toward the office. Here sat a white man--an American, the boys saw at a glance. That same glance did not give them a very favorable impression of him, nor did his greeting.

"What in thunder you mean by climbing in here without knocking—"

"Is my father here?"

"Huh? Who are you!"

"I'm Phil Crompton. Has my father come back?"

The man eyed them sharply before replying. "Crompton's kid, eh? No, your father hasn't come back. What you two youngsters doing here?"

"What are *you* doing here? Why aren't you out hunting for your boss?" Rod was exasperated by the man's attitude and came straight to the point. "Who's in charge here anyway?"

"Well, I reckon as I am. I don't know as I'm called on to give an account of myself to two schoolboys," he began hotly, then calmed down, "but your father's safe enough. I got back yesterday and talked with old Cristovol — seems he'd been hanging around. He found Crompton *locked* in one of the cabins here, sick as a dog. Fever, I s'pose. Cristovol couldn't take care of a sick cat and your father'd died only that a party of hunters happened along. They took Crompton along — doctor in the outfit, I understand. They left word they were going to camp about ten miles yonside the Xualtec. That's a creek that runs toward the Pacific. When they get the old man on his feet again they'll send him back. That's why I'm not hunting for the boss. Satisfied?"

"Of course," answered Phil promptly.

Rod made no reply, but as the man sat down leisurely he asked sharply:

"Where's this Cristovol?"

"How do I know?" with great unconcern. "He ought to be dead; he's old enough."

"The rest of the gang — why are they back?"

"Sam Hill!" the man growled, "what you think I am? A puzzle department? Spanking is what you'd get for an answer if you were a kid of mine."

"I'd think I deserved it if I were your son — "

"Come on, Rod; what's the matter with you? He's always peevish that way when he's hungry, Mr. — er — "

"Higgins — Larry Higgins is my handle."

"Well, we're about starved. Mind if we rustle up a bit of grub?"

"Now that's the spirit. Hi there, Tomas," he called out the door in mongrel Spanish, "get these boys something to eat. Pronto, now. Tomas is the camp cook," he explained. "Sit down, and while he's getting breakfast ready I'll tell you what's happened — if our sweet-tempered friend will hold his red-pepper tongue."

Rod grinned, and then Higgins went on:

"We had been having trouble with the men. Old fire-eater Tzecatl, the big spell-binder and medicine man — "

"We know all about that," explained Phil. "The old Indian told us how the chief's son had disappeared — the condor carried him off they thought."

"Huh," grunted Higgins absently, "mebbe it did. At any rate he's back, safe and sound."

"Back! "

"Yep, and so's the gang. Cristovol sent up a smoke signal and they let a runner come in to see what was up. Then of course they all came back — but whether or not they'll work is another question. Some of them ran across me in the hills back there and told me the news, and so yesterday I loped in myself to take charge of things till Mr. Crompton came back."

"How did you know Mr. Crompton hadn't come back? "

Rod's sudden question sounded almost like an accusation. For just an instant Higgins seemed confused. Then he laughed.

"I told you they had sent a runner to camp," he remarked casually.

CHAPTER XI

THE BOSS OF THE JOB

Three days spent in an idle railroad construction camp; Rod and Phil felt they had never before lived through three such dreary days. To be sure, had it not been for their worry concerning Mr. Crompton it might not have been so bad. But no further word had come from him.

All day long the boys wandered about the camp, in their ears the constant jabber of strange tongues. Among them all only two could talk United States, Higgins and the old medicine man, Tzecatl. And Higgins seemed to avoid the boys as much as possible, while Tzecatl favored them with many suspicious stares but with few words. The chief of the tribe had left camp the morning after their arrival — mysteriously. In fact an air of mystery hung over the place. Old Cristovol, the Indian they had met that day they arrived in camp, had disappeared too.

On the morning of the fourth day Rod woke up determined to make something happen. At breakfast he informed Higgins that he intended

at once to make a thorough inspection of the line.

"How about a hand car and some Indians to run it?"

"I've no authority to put the Indians to work. If any of them work, they all do," objected Higgins. "That's the agreement."

"You don't mind if I hire them out of my own pocket, do you?" asked Rod sarcastically. For some reason he and Higgins seemed always on the edge of a quarrel.

"Not at all — if you can get them. Ask old Tzecatl."

"I'll ask nobody." He stepped to the doorway, motioning to the group squatting about on the ground just outside. Holding up four silver quarters in his hand he asked:

"Who wants to earn one of these?"

Four young Indians jumped eagerly to their feet and started forward, but stopped in their tracks at a grunt from the medicine man, who now came lazily forward. At a second grunted command they slouched back and sat down again.

Higgins explained what Rod wished, but Tzecatl was not inclined to give in. "One man — four men — work, all gang work," he objected.

"You see," sneered Higgins to Rod. "I

guess you'd better put off your exploring party till the boss gets back."

"Put off nothing! Three men can run one of those light cars. There's you and Phil and I—"

"Count me out," laughed Higgins ill-naturedly. "I don't take orders from a kid. I happen to be the boss of this camp temporarily."

"Then why don't you put the gang to work and finish up the track? You know there's a time limit on this proposition—"

"Why sure I know that. And, what's more, I know just when the company forfeits its rights. But, shucks, that don't worry me none. These South American countries are all smoke and no fire. There's no one else wants the pesky grant and they'll be glad enough to renew. Of course they've got their price; but there's no chance to finish the road in time now anyway."

"But there is another company—" began Phil, innocently repeating the information Trigg had given them. "Why can't the road be finished in time?"

"Because there's two weeks' steel laying at least—and the time limit is a week from to-morrow, that's why."

"We may not be able to finish," Rod said firmly, "but we're going to make a try. Phil, you and I are going to run that hand car — alone if we have to — but we're going to find out just where we stand."

They walked down beside the track and bent over the hand-holds at the end of one of the cars to drag it up over the ties.

"Hold on there," called Higgins. "You'll just let that car stay right where it is."

"I'll use my father's car any time I feel like it!" snapped Phil.

"Good. You do that — whenever you find one. But that car belongs to the Corliss Construction Company, Larry Higgins at present its legal representative; and you'll just let it alone — see?"

"Put the car on the track," came a drawling voice from the direction of the camp. Looking up, the boys saw their Cusco friend, Cyrus Trigg, strolling carelessly toward them. "I just dropped out to see if you boys found your way all right. Going out for a little excursion?" he asked easily, stooping as he spoke and lifting the other end of the hand car without so much as a grunt. "Not going along, Higgins?" he con-

tinued in the same don't-care fashion as he bent to the handles. "Well, so long then," and the next moment the three were *hrup-hrupping* far down the track toward the west.

"Well?" asked Trigg, easing up on his pumping once they were well out of hearing.

"Not at all," answered both boys decidedly.

"What's the trouble? Higgins?"

"Rod seems to think —"

"Look here, Mr. Trigg, I believe you're Mr. Crompton's friend. Well, tell me this: Higgins is a first-rate track man — why isn't he going ahead with the work when he knows the government's going to confiscate the property if a train isn't run over the rails by a week from to-morrow night?"

"Has he the authority?"

"Authority be hanged! He has the chance. What more could anyone ask?"

"Well, you've got the chance yourself. What more do *you* want. I understand you're a first-class track man, and you know all about this confiscation business I believe —" he stopped pumping and looked squarely at the two boys.

"If I had a gang of men that'd do what I told them, you just bet your sweet life I wouldn't

need an invitation. But it takes more than bare hands to lay steel."

"How about the Indians? Wouldn't they do?"

"They'd *do*, but they won't do it. Higgins is the boss — next to old Tzecatl."

"I see. Well, let me tell you something. In the first place, I don't know a switch tie from an offset angle bar, but I know from Cromp that you know rule-o'-thumb railroading from main line to sidetrack. Somebody's got to build that road, and build it in time. Higgins is a snake; I'd like to bet he'll make a pretty penny by blocking the game here. The other two engineers are away, sent by Cromp to nobody-knows-where. Rod, you're the only hope."

"Just what are you driving at, Trigg?"

"You've got to finish the road. According to the first survey it would be twenty miles long. Just a short sixteen miles are spiked down to gauge. Of course the old Spanish road extends the rest of the way from where the new track leaves off, but it's narrow-gauge and light rails, and, besides, the ties are rotten. How much new track a day can you get out of a hundred men?"

"A mile a day — if everything went right."

"And if it didn't?"

"I'd make it!" He gave the handle a jerk that lifted the wheels off the track. Then his shoulders sagged. "But what's the use of talking; we haven't the hundred men."

Trigg stepped in between the handles and put his foot on the brake.

"Drop me off here," he said, "and go back to camp. When you get there you'll find a man and a message waiting for you. And you'll find the hundred men. Pitch in. If you need me, just tell Chief Manco and he'll know where to find me. And if Higgins tries any funny business — *tie him up*!" he ended with a vigor that took all the drawl out of his voice.

The next instant he had disappeared within the brush bordering the track.

"Do you know," Rod observed as they listened to the crashing die out in the distance, "some day before long I believe old Nellie is going to kick out — and I wouldn't be surprised if Higgins should be in the cart."

"Too deep for me," sighed Phil. "Shall we start back for camp?"

"Yep. Give me a hand while we turn this thing around. I have a notion it runs easier with

the weight on the cogs — unless it was because Trigg was riding the handles. I notice he didn't offer to stick around and help lay track."

It was an hour later that they once more scrambled down the embankment and up the slope to the camp. As they walked toward the office door a tall, dignified looking man stepped out of the shade beside the office and came forward with hand extended in greeting.

"Senor Trigg told you?" he asked very quietly.

"You are Chief Manco?" they asked in surprise. The man might have been mistaken for a Spaniard; though his skin was quite dark his face was regular and handsome, not stupid like the other Indians, but alert and very much alive. He smiled now, and the boys took to him at once.

"I am Chief Manco, head of the ancient tribe of Quichuas. I have just talked with Senor Higgins and he tells me that the work cannot go on till the return of Mr. Crompton." He paused and for an instant the boys did not speak, so surprised were they at his command of English. So he went on: "However, I bear a message, an order addressed to one Rodney Dillon which, I believe, will change things a bit."

He handed Rod a sealed letter. Higgins had come to the doorway during the last of this speech and now stood looking on in amusement.

"Got a valentine, kid?" he inquired mockingly. Rod tore open the end and drew out the folded paper. A hurried glance and then he gave a loud whoop of delight. Turning to Higgins he remarked in his most lordly manner:

"It's a note from the president of the Corliss Construction Company placing me in charge of the work here — with full power to hire, pay and *fire* any and all help. The 'Camp-to-Coast Railroad' is going to be finished. Chief Manco, will you tell your men to be ready to start work right after lunch — one o'clock sharp. Higgins, are you on the payroll?"

Higgins tried to laugh; then he began to bluster. Rod thrust the letter under his nose. "Read that — and look at that signature!"

Higgins made a sudden grab, caught the paper and tore it in shreds. His face became a nasty red and he turned threateningly toward Rod, who had not budged an inch. "That for you and your orders!" he cried, shaking an angry fist dangerously close to Rod's calm face.

A restraining hand fell on his shoulder — a

"That for you and your orders!" he cried, shaking an angry fist close to Rod's calm face.

gentle hand that carried a hint of restrained strength.

"My friend," the chief spoke softly, "I bear the same word-of-mouth instructions as were in that letter, and I am taking Mr. Dillon's orders — in everything," he added meaningly.

Higgins walked back into the cabin, and began throwing things about as if getting ready to leave. "We start work at one," called Rod. "If you're ready to act decent by that time, all right. Otherwise I'll give you an order for your money." There was no answer and the two boys and the chief walked away.

A half-hour later the three sat in the shade of a giant tree, the two boys listening with great interest to the story of the chief's little boy.

"Some day I'll tell you more about it; just now there is a reason why I must appear not to understand what is plain as day. Picco is little — he is not yet four — and he can tell us nothing. He slept — that is all. And he waked up on the top of a mountain, many miles away. And there was a fence — a trap for animals, no doubt — and he could not get out. And then came a big bird — 'the condor, papa!' that soared down into the pen beside him, and then

he remembers only that he screamed and called for help.

"And then the big bird was gone, and there was a hole in the side of the trap — and he was so hungry. He came down the mountain, sobbing his way, and some place old Cristovol found him. A strange story, is it not?" He arose, laughing heartily as if at some joke, giving the boys a meaning look as he arose. Old Tzecatl was passing by within earshot.

"You know," added the chief in unnecessarily loud tones, "the natives here catch the condor by building a small pen, only three or four feet high, and quite open. They put a young sheep or a rabbit in the center as bait. The condor sees it, comes down, and finally drops inside the pen. But the condor is the heaviest flying bird, and he cannot take flight direct from a perch. He needs a run, and the pen is made too small for him to get it. That's the way we catch condors."

Old Tzecatl had passed out of hearing.

"I'll build a pen for a bigger bird one of these days," added the chief, following the medicine man's retreating form with his eyes.

CHAPTER XII

THE CAMP TO COAST RAILROAD

The scene along the little line of track that Rod had that morning named the "C. & C."—"Camp to Coast Railroad," had changed decidedly by three o'clock that afternoon. The sound of pick and shovel, of spike maul and chisel, echoed along the narrow line of shining rails. All was hurry and noise, but there was no confusion. "Make every lick count," was Rod's slogan, to which Phil added another two words as he stood over his gang of sweating graders: "Keep licking." His was the task of leveling off the roadbed, cutting down to grade or building up in accordance with the half-hidden stakes the engineers had set months before.

Fortunately the worst of the work had been done. Back near the camp it had been necessary to blast a way through deep cuts whose rock walls showed weeks of patient drilling and dynamiting. Farther back a long fill had been made, and a hundred yards of trestle, with a

bridge across a shallow river. Now it was merely a matter of smoothing over.

Half of his gang was kept at tearing out the old narrow-gauge track. The rails were short and light; they weighed a scant twenty-five pounds to the yard, as against sixty-six pounds for the new steel. The standard width for track is about four and a half feet — four feet, eight and a half inches, to be exact — while the old track spanned a bare four feet.

Men with claw bars jerked the spikes out of the rotten ties, on the outside of the rail, and then, using the other end of the bars as levers, they quickly slid the rails off to the side of the track. The ties were yanked from the ground and dumped down the bank. Often all that was needed after that was to level off the ridges, and the roadbed was ready for the new track. With forty men Phil was able to keep well ahead of the second gang.

Chief Manco had it in charge and his twenty men bustled back and forth stringing ties along at proper spaces, bringing great push-car loads from monstrous piles a half-mile back, causing great wrath among the spikers, who had to step aside every time a load came rattling and squeak-

ing along. The push cars were of an ancient pattern, having been made from those originally used on the old narrow-gauge track. Occasionally a wheel would work off the end of the hand-made axle and go clattering down the embankment. Then there was a great scrambling to get out of the way of the tumbling timber, for the car always lost its balance and sent the whole load kiting.

In surly silence Higgins stood over eighteen men who carried the rails from where they were strung along the line of the track, and dropped them in a jagged row, end to end upon the ties. Higgins was plainly much put out and his men showed the effect of his ill-temper. They alone plodded along without enthusiasm, and the work dragged.

Just behind them, two men toiled along distributing the angle bars with which the rails were fastened together at the joints, and at their heels a dozen youngsters swung wrenches in a mad scramble to catch up. Catching up meant a few minutes' rest — a rest they used in taunting the rail-carriers. There was one little imp who fairly outdid himself in roasting the men ahead:

"Yah," he would shout in choicest Indian-Spanish, "look out, Lazy-bag-of-bones, you got a sick back. Be careful — don't lean too hard on that rail — you break him. Look out, Valesto, you lift so hard your hand slip and you knock the nose off the man in the moon!"

At every sally, Higgins growled and his scowl grew blacker and blacker. The rails had to be carried farther now and the men were tiring. The teasing behind did not help any, especially since, minute by minute, it grew worse. Moreover, just behind the boys was Rod and his gang pressing hard on their heels. Rod swung a spike maul himself, going ahead with the gauge, a strip of board to show the proper width between the rails, and driving guide spikes at joints and centers. The spikers were picked men, tall athletic-looking fellows who swung straight from the shoulder, chatting carelessly as they drove home the big spikes with skillful blows. The three who worked beside Rod were the best of the lot, and they made good time. Back of them were four more who used the gauge in spiking the quarters behind and ahead of the joints. The rest were spiking to line, their only care being to drive the spikes straight.

It was a busy scene, with only one detail that was not in harmony. At a sudden angry cry from up ahead Rod looked up. The angle-bar gang was in trouble; the continued teasing had at last brought a response from Higgins. He had not wasted time on words. Catching the chief offender by the nap of the neck, he was jolting his face into the sand, yelling at every shove: "You'll shut up now I guess. Take that — and that!"

Rod covered the distance in a few angry strides. "Let go of him!" he commanded, catching Higgins by the shoulder. Higgins let go and whirled on Rod, his fist catching the boy fairly alongside the head and sending him spinning.

Rod was on his feet in an instant, a red welt showing on the cheek that had gone suddenly white. His fists doubled, he faced Higgins fearlessly. The two were not well matched. Higgins was tall and carelessly put together and did not look over strong, but he had several inches advantage of Rod both in height and reach — advantage of which Rod's angry look took no account. Ducking suddenly and shoving his left fist quickly under the older man's guard, he sent

a crashing blow to the pit of Higgins' stomach. The man doubled up like a jackknife but the next instant he had whirled around upon one of the men who stood stupidly by, and seized the rail tongs from his hands. As the tongs were made of inch steel, a blow would crumple in a man's skull like so much paper. Higgins swung the deadly weapon about his head and Rod involuntarily cringed.

"Drop that," came a calm voice, "or you're a dead man!" The chief had come up within a few feet. Higgins turned; seeing the chief was unarmed, he sneered, "I'll drop it on your head, you —"

But the sentence was not finished, for his knees crumpled suddenly under him as a wiry body hurled itself full at him. Rod had caught him from behind. A second later he had Higgins on his back, his wrists pinned in a strong grasp. The chief picked up the tongs, handed them back to their owner and walked coolly away. Rod sprang lightly to his feet.

"Higgins, one more stunt like that and you can hoof it back to Cusco. I'm the boss here and you don't want to forget it. You'd better take your gang back and start filling in for surfac-

ing. Take six or eight more men from the spiking gang there with you. Cover the ties pretty well and give it about a two foot shoulder on both sides the track.

"You, Chicco," he called to the youngster who had been the cause of the trouble, "you go down and tell Senor Crompton to send back sixteen men to spread steel, savvy?"

The youngster grinned and hurried down the track. As the men came back past Chief Manco he spoke to them sharply, and there was no more trouble in that department.

At four o'clock Rod threw aside his spike maul and let an Indian take his place, satisfied that the two gauge squads understood their business thoroughly. So he left the gang tapping away busily and sauntered down to where the chief was working. "Can you leave your gang for awhile?" he asked.

"Oh, yes. They don't need watching. Where to?"

"I thought I'd go over the line and see what we have in the way of material. The ties seem to be holding out pretty well, and I notice another big pile just beyond that bend. How about the rails — are they strung along all the way?"

"No, not altogether. Only as far as that straight stretch ahead. There is a big pile of about five hundred on a mile or so, and then there is a smaller pile — two hundred maybe — down beside the dock. But just out of Crompton — that's the landing, where some day there will be a town — we distributed a little over a mile."

"Let's see. It's a mile from where we started to where the rails leave off, I judge. Five hundred thirty-foot rails would lay — seventy-five hundred feet of track. The other two hundred at the dock would make three thousand — ten thousand, five hundred feet all told. That'd be about two miles, wouldn't it? And a mile here and a mile just out of Crompton — four miles. Trigg tells me there was a little better than four miles left to lay, so I guess it's all there. But we'd better make sure. How are your walking sticks?"

"Never better," laughed the chief, and together they started off down the track. Phil came up to meet them and to him they told their plan, leaving him to oversee the work till their return.

A half-hour's walk brought them to the first pile of rails. Two heavy timbers had been

thrown across the ditch alongside the old Spanish track and on these the rails had been piled. The first few courses were laid evenly, but the top rails had been thrown down every which way and accurate counting was almost impossible.

"We should have brought some men along to straighten out this mess, but wait a second and I'll see what I can do." Without heeding the chief's remonstrance Rod climbed nimbly up to the top of the pile, where he began tugging and straining in an effort to roll down a few of the top rails. The first few went nicely, but some of them seemed to slant into the heart of the pile.

"Here's the king pin," cried Rod as he at last got a leverage on one that seemed to be holding a dozen others out of place. "Watch 'em roll!"

The rail slowly balanced, gave a half twist, and then fell with a clang. With it the entire top of the pile seemed to settle, and then — crash! — something gave way beneath. A rending crack of timbers, and the whole pile of rails plunged together.

Like a flash Rod hurled himself into the air, regardless of where he fell. By the greatest

luck he landed on the ground sprawled out full length. Before he could pull in his legs, a rail had rolled down off the pile and pinned his foot under its weight. Fortunately the ground was soft and no harm was done save that Rod could not move till the chief freed him.

"Whew!" the young high-diver laughed a bit shakily, "that's what I call a rattling good time."

"You missed a first-class funeral by just about half a second. I can't understand it," the chief added very soberly.

"Rotten timbers, that's all."

The chief shook his head gravely. "I helped cut those timbers myself. When we get the rails out of that hole so we can see, I want to take a look at those logs."

"You don't think anyone — "

"What else could have done it? We know that someone is very anxious to prevent the finishing of the road — "

"Higgins?"

"He is only a tool. He'll bear watching, but he's only doing the dirty work for somebody else. We could tie him up, but we'll do better by letting him think we trust him — and never

let him out of our sight. But we know their game and we'll win out. No one sticks a knife in Senor Crompton's back while Manco lives."

"You're strong for Mr. Crompton, aren't you?"

"Strong — Oh, you mean I am his friend. I am, for he is mine. He was mine when it meant my life. My tribe is superstitious. They worship the gods of the old time — Viracocha, the Sun God. They do not believe in the medicine of the white men. Tzecatl is my enemy; I was chosen chief instead of him when old Chief Kechuzan died without a son. Came one time I was sick of the deadly fever — and no Indian is cured of that. The white man's medicine — the scratch on the arm — "

"Vaccination?" suggested Rod.

"That's it. It alone can cure the deadly fever, and the gods of the tribe forbid its use. Only the prayers and the charms of the medicine man, and his bitter brews, might be given the sick chief. And Tzecatl was my enemy!

"Then it was that Senor Crompton, at danger to his life, stole into my tent at midnight and gave me the white man's magic medicine that brought the sore on my arm but that drove away

the fever of death. Yes, Senor Crompton is my friend; I am — yes, strong for him."

"Do you think that Tzecatl had anything to do with this?" Rod pointed at the scattered rails.

"No more than he had to do with the danger to Picco, my son," the chief replied with a puzzling change of manner. "Shall we try to count the rails as they lie?"

The count that followed was none too accurate, as the chief at one end tallied four hundred and sixty while Rod's figure gave eight more.

"Suppose we let the other pile go till to-morrow. I'll send Phil down with some men to check up all along the line, ties, angle bars and everything. It's time we were getting back to figure up what we've done to-day."

Sixty rail lengths — eighteen hundred feet of track had been spiked down, while Phil's gang had leveled off fully half a mile more. It was nearly quitting time, so Rod put all hands to work at filling in so that he might start a surfacing gang to raising track the first thing in the morning.

"Hustle up, men; when you finish that we'll pick up the tools and go back to camp."

The gravel flew. In a very few minutes hand

cars were dropped on the rails and in knots of a dozen the gang *hrup-hrupped* homeward, chanting a weird song to the up and down of the handles.

After a savory meal dished out by the camp cook, Rod and Phil sat long within the office planning the work. If nothing went seriously wrong they were safe. But to-day showed that they must expect trouble.

"We're only boys fighting against men, and we'll need all the luck on our side. They showed their claws to-day; I wonder what'll happen next."

"For one, I'm willing to wait till morning to find out. I'm tired — 'nd sleepy. 'Less they burn the roof over our heads I expect to forget it all till peep o' day. You better do likewise."

"I wonder if *they* will," Phil speculated with a doubtful shake of the head.

"Will what? I — a — I — don't be making fool observations when a fellow's three-thirds asleep."

"Wonder if they'll wait for morning. Rod, don't you think we ought — " He did not finish his sentence, for his chum had yawned himself to sleep half sitting on the edge of his bunk.

CHAPTER XIII

THE SPY IN CAMP

It was near midnight. Within a flimsy sheet-iron shack on a hillside in South America a boy lay on a rough bunk, staring out through the single window into the velvety blackness of a tropic night. He was lonesome and a big lump came in his throat. Two thousand miles away from home and dear old Aunt Em — Aunt Em who scolded him because she loved him. Here he was, a boy with a man's work forced upon him; and off in the mountains or the jungle somewhere was his father, sick or in danger; perhaps both.

But all Phil's thoughts were not homesick ones. Every sense was alert; he was waiting and listening, for just what he could hardly have said. At every night noise he started, and his hand tightened on the grip of his tiny automatic.

Suddenly there came a new note in the out-of-doors rustle. It sounded like a footstep, cautious and stealthy. Up to the cabin door it came, there was a fumbling, a barely audible scratch-

ing, a light tap. But Phil did not stir. Then came the shuffle of retreating steps, and silence. He waited a long while and then rose carefully from his bunk and tiptoed to the door and threw it softly open. In the center of the planks a white square of paper showed plainly against the dark wood. He noiselessly scratched a match and read:

STOP WORK ON THE ROAD AT
ONCE. THIS MEANS BUSINESS

Thoughtfully Phil pulled off the paper, folded it and put it in his pocket. Then he went back to bed and to sleep.

In the morning he woke to see Rod standing in the doorway looking curiously at a torn bit of paper he had just picked up from the ground. "Looks as if we'd had visitors," he remarked, seeing that Phil was awake. "I kind of figured maybe they'd be sending us a black hand threat to scare us into quitting work, but it looks as if something had scared them off."

"Why did you expect that?"

"Huh, I'm no *child;* I pretty near know the tricks they'll be up to — even if you don't."

Plainly Rod was feeling a bit set up over the importance of his new responsibility.

"That being the case," Phil drawled, "you might take a look in my coat pocket there — even if I'm not wise to the tricks of the trade."

Over breakfast the two boys and the chief discussed the latest complication. Rod spoke the general opinion when he said: "Maybe they do mean business, but so do we. The road goes through at any cost."

It was arranged that Phil should take his gang and start out for the end of the line at once, using the hand car as far as they could. As they carried no tools save rail-forks — short levers for tipping over the steel — the light car quickly left the others far behind.

Higgins had not appeared at breakfast time, but none of them felt enough interest to look for him. Before the other cars started, however, he came down to the track and told Rod he was sick and that he guessed he would stay in camp till he felt better.

The rest were divided into two gangs, the one under Chief Manco going ahead with the work of preparing the roadbed and distributing material. Rod's gang set to work with track

jacks and shovels to surface the track they had laid the day before. Rod quickly found his grade stakes and set up his sighting boards; down on his knees he flopped to squint along the rail and tell the track raisers when the lift was high enough. "Joint ahead — center back," he called as regularly as clockwork, keeping his two squads of jack-men constantly on the jump. The joint at its proper height, the shovel men sprang on each side of the center tie and tamped sand and gravel under till the weight was taken off the jack-lever. Other tampers came along behind to tamp the rest of the rail-length.

A half-hour's hustling had put a good stretch of track behind them, when Rod made an exasperating discovery. At the rate he was going the last rail-length they had laid would be a yard above the regular level of the roadbed. Someone had changed the grade stakes, that was easy to see. It meant digging out under the ties and knocking the track down — a tiresome job. It meant as well that hereafter he would have to depend on his eye; but worst of all it meant at least three hours' wasted labor. But Rod only whistled a bit dubiously and then his orders came sharper and faster than ever.

By noon they were up to where the last spike had been driven, so after lunch the jacks were thrown aside and all hands turned to laying track. Manco's men had worked like good fellows, and over a mile of steel was ready for spiking. Accordingly Rod had him bring his gang back and fill in for surfacing.

"I want to keep the work as much together as I can. I'm afraid to leave any of it unfinished overnight," and then he told of the changed grade stakes.

"We'll meet up with worse than that before we're through," gravely added the chief. "Look what I found."

It was part of a note, torn so that only the ends of the lines could be read. But even the little, left no doubt either of future trouble or of the writer.

> "will put up a good fight . . . one certainly know track . . . to Z. I will follow . . . lan you suggest— . . . nk of something more . . . are going right ahead . . . urt to throw a scare into . . . say so I'll tack . . . warning them off. Look out . . . scouting around looking . . . mpton."

"Higgins," said Rod decidedly. "And he was the one who wrote that thing Phil found on the door. They certainly will have to — 'nk of something more'! We're here to stick."

Four o'clock came and with it a queer-looking object skimming along the track. "If it wasn't for the fact that we haven't one, I'd say that was Phil on a speeder."

"What's that?" asked the chief. "It's Phil all right."

"And it's a speeder — a railroad tricycle — a three-wheeled hand car with a seat and a handle that works back and forth instead of up and down. Where'd you get it?" he called as Phil bore down on them, putting on the brake so hard at the last second that he skidded the hind wheel off the track.

"That's the third time it's done that," complained Phil as he picked himself up. "Aside from that bad habit and a constant squeak of 'more oil — more oil,' it's a ground coverer."

"So I notice," commented Rod dryly as he set the wheel back on the track. "Where was it?"

"In the tool shed at the dock. Guess no one ever thought of loosening those nuts and short-

ening the cross-bar here for the narrow-gauge. The men will be along in about an hour. Ready for my report? "

"Fire ahead."

"Four hundred and eighty rails at the first pile, and running to within about half a mile of town we found four hundred and two full-length rails dropped on both sides the track — some of them rolled way to the bottom of the embankment. There were a hundred ninety-seven down at the dock, but fifty of those are cut rails, fifteen to twenty-six feet long — eleven hundred eighty feet the short stuff measures. They're drilled for angle bars at only one end, but there's a Stillson dri' with plenty of three-quarter-inch bits if you need the rails. There's a grindstone in the toolshed, and plenty of maul handles, adzes, twelve kegs of bolts and three boxes of nut-locks.

"There are two big piles of angle bars stacked up against the shanty — about a thousand pair all told. Also there's about a hundred pair of the straps they used for angle bars on the old narrow-gauge, but not a bolt in camp that'd fit. All the switches are in at the dock and the heavy steel runs about a hundred ds from shore. There it's connected up with the old

road and the one rail is thrown way out to the end of the tie, full gauge width. That's how I came to run off the track the first time. I set the cross-bar on the light steel, not knowing they had spread the track there, and suddenly the rails crowded together about a foot — just at the bottom of a grade, of course, and I —

"Well, say, come to think of it, there was the funniest little locomotive down there in the supply shed you ever saw. I named her the "Bouncing Betsy" on sight. Looked like one of those pictures in my old U. S. history, of the first 'Iron Horse,' with a bulgy smokestack and toy wheels. Her trucks are standard gauge or I'd have tied her on behind and towed her along for you to play with. She doesn't look as if she'd had a fire in her since the catacombs were kittens."

"Getting down to business," said Rod severely, "did you check up the ties?"

"I did. At our rate of fourteen to the rail length, there are enough to run the road on trestles to the third lock of the Panama Canal. Now that I've finally got my breath, let me tell you — "

"Tell it to your gang. Get busy. We're going to drive every spike and tighten every joint as

far as we've dropped steel, so if you want any supper, grab a-hold."

The track was as tight as bolts and spikes could make it when finally the hand cars were lifted on the rails and sent spinning homeward. "Another day done," sighed Rod. "I wonder what the night will bring."

"Morning," laughed Phil. "What did you expect? You surely don't think you'll get a love-letter every day."

"I got one to-day, just the same. When we get back to camp I'll show it to you."

But he did not — at least not for a long while, for startling news awaited them. Old Cristovol had come back. He was too excited for English and he jabbered a long story to the chief in his native tongue, his high-pitched voice breaking in his agitation.

"He says he's been to Cusco; Higgins sent him there with a message and told him to wait for an answer. He waited two days, and then came away without one. Cristovol is a shrewd old fellow and he suspected crooked work. Besides, he hates Higgins like poison."

"Is that all? He was so excited I thought — " Rod began, but the chief interrupted, looking

sharply at Phil as he went on with his story.

"No, that isn't it. He told what happened after he found Mr. Crompton sick in the cabin. His story is the same as the one Higgins told — except in one circumstance."

"What?" both boys exclaimed.

"Higgins was one of the party of *hunters* that carried Mr. Crompton away."

"Let me get at Higgins!" cried Phil angrily, breaking away from the chief's restraining hand. He stormed over to the door of the cabin occupied by Higgins, and shouted:

"I'd like a word with you, Higgins!"

The man came to the doorway, not at all alarmed by Phil's angry look. "What's the matter, Phil?" he asked pleasantly.

"I want to know where my father is. You know and you're going to tell me."

"I certainly would if I did. But I don't." His tone was sincere and convincing. "I told you about that party of hunters. If I'd talked with them myself I'd know where they went, but old Cristovol isn't any too bright and he didn't seem to know just what had happened. But I wouldn't worry —" he paused, his eye for the first time falling on the old Indian.

"Yes, Cristovol's back, Higgins. Go on with your little fairy tale. We've had his side of it already."

"Well if he said I know the whereabouts of Mr. Crompton, he lied. I give my word I don't."

"He didn't say that," Rod admitted. "But he did say — that you were in the gang of ruffians that carried him away! What have you to say about that?"

"What's the use of my saying anything? You won't believe me. And if you'd rather believe a dirty Indian than a white man, why go to it and make the best of it." Phil saw the chief take a step forward, so he hastily continued:

"Now see here, Higgins, show that you are a *white* man and tell me where my father is. If he's safe that's all I want to know."

"He's safe enough and in good care — as Cristovol will tell you. Where's the ar[illegible] my message, you old scoundrel?" he de[illegible]. Cristovol shrank back in fear. "You [illegible]'t bring it, did you! I'll teach you to half do your work. Tell these men you lied when you said I was with those men!"

The old man cringed before the angry Higgins. "I no sure," he stammered. "I no see you.

One man he say: 'It is Higgins will meet us by the river.' I follow; it is dark and I no can be sure."

Higgins smiled sourly. "A good witness I must say. But, boys, you wrong me when you think I'd hurt the boss. If I had the slightest fears for his safety, or the slightest idea where to hunt, I'd be the first one out to search him out, sick as I am. That's what was the matter with me yesterday — a touch of the same fever that got your father, Phil. In the morning I'll be on deck again and you'll find Higgins is no shirker."

There was nothing to be said, so the boys, far from feeling satisfied, went to their waiting meal. Here Phil saw the scrap of letter the chief had found. "The two-faced hound!" he cried. "It's his handwriting, and he's double-crossing us. We'll have to try some of his own tricks and pretend to swallow whole the story he's giving us. But he'll find he's not dealing with more than one *Cristovol,* take it from me."

Chief Manco walked past, having quickly finished his own meal. Seeing Phil's worried look he tried to reassure him.

"I don't know what to do," said the boy.

"I know dad would tell me to stay on the job here, but it's driving me wild to sit idly by when he's in danger."

"We don't know that he is. And if he is, there'd be little chance of our finding him in time, with the whole country to hunt over, and the trail a week old. But everything that can be done along that line is being done. The best man I know is doing the best he knows to find your father. Like you, I wanted to go along, but his orders left no doubt in my mind that any help would only be a hindrance. If anyone can find Mr. Crompton, that man will do it."

"Who is it?" asked Phil anxiously. "One of the engineers?"

"No — it isn't Bemish or Macalister," answered the chief hesitatingly. "It's — Cyrus Trigg!"

CHAPTER XIV

"WE'RE LICKED!"

The next day Higgins made good his promise. He seemed hardly the same person, so cheerful and anxious to help was he. To be sure, the boys felt this sudden change was only a scheme to win their confidence and so give a better chance for furthering his plans, but certainly no fault could be found with his work. Still, every time anything went wrong the boys felt Higgins was at the bottom of it.

The men seemed to have become unaccountably stupid. Tools were always left at the wrong end of the track, and twice during the day a hand car had to be sent back to the camp for material Rod had ordered brought along. At last he lost patience. "We'll leave our tools and supplies right here after this," he declared. "We'll build a portable tool-box and trust to bolts and locks since we can't trust to our memory."

So the tool-boxes were built and that night everything was thrown in and securely locked,

Phil having gone in on the speeder to bring padlocks for the purpose.

It had been a hard day, hotter than usual, and the work had been heavier than usual, as in the morning the graders had run into a hill that had to be cut down, while in the afternoon gravel had to be hauled for a long fill where a dip in the old roadbed had to be brought up to grade. Even at that a full mile of steel had been laid and spiked and bolted in full, the surfacing being left till morning. Half the track was on the ground and there were four days in which to finish the rest.

As the boys walked up to the office, leaving the men to unload the hand cars, they saw that the camp had been visited in their absence. Tacked on the door was a roughly printed notice:

> YOU'RE PLAYING WITH DEATH!
> WE GIVE YOU ONE MORE CHANCE
> AND THEN WE ACT. THE WORK
> MUST STOP.

Rod tore it down, but not before Higgins, coming up behind them, had seen.

"What's that?" he asked curiously.

With a sudden impulse Rod handed it over to him, watching his face keenly as he read. "What's it mean?" demanded Higgins coolly.

His face was so blank, so absolutely innocent, that Rod was staggered. "Don't you know?" he at last managed to ask.

"I have my suspicions," the man said candidly. "Just before the blow-up came two weeks ago, Mr. Crompton said that someone was trying to freeze him out; that they'd already done it as far as the government here was concerned, and that unless he put the road through on schedule time, the grant wouldn't be worth the paper it's written on. Somebody's trying to keep the road from being finished, that's my guess."

"Your guess is right."

"Then you're up against a nasty proposition. Nobody ever called me a quitter, but if you've got your head against a stone wall, it's time to use your brains and not your backbone. This is South America, and a man's life down here is worth just about two cents in canceled postage stamps if he's in the way."

"I'm nobody's fool — " began Rod.

"Then you know they're acting mighty white

in giving you a chance to save your skins. There aren't a half-dozen rifles in camp, if they decided to give us a battle, but they'll probably pick you off from the bush. And to-morrow, I should judge," he said slowly and meaningly, " is just about the last day of grace."

" We've got to take the chance," Phil answered, to which Rod added:

" You're with us, aren't you, Higgins? "

" Count on me," he assured them as he turned about to go to his own cabin.

" You could almost believe the old double-tongued snake," softly muttered Rod when Higgins was out of hearing. " We'll count on you, but not the way you mean. Well, at any rate, we can sleep sound to-night, Phil. They've done their little stunt for the day."

But that was not the case, as they found when they were back at the job next morning. It began with the spikers. Within five minutes three spike-maul handles had been snapped off short by careless blows — or so it seemed. But too many others went the same way in the course of the next hour to let it seem accidental. A close examination of the padlocks on the tool-boxes showed they had been tampered with.

Rod soon had a man busy putting in new handles.

Next one of the track jacks broke; a bolt had slipped out of place — also accidentally. From then on, one thing after another went wrong, each mishap just a bit more serious and more mysterious than the last. "They're pretty small potatoes as desperadoes," Rod observed to the chief as they bent over a track gauge that had been shortened fully half an inch, making the respiking of a hundred yards of track necessary. "Why don't they shoot a few of us as a starter, a sort of gentle hint of those terrible things they're going to do later — if what Higgins says is true about the value of human life down here?"

"Life *is* cheap," Chief Manco gravely agreed. "Native life, that is. But Uncle Sam's hand is heavy and his arm is long. They wouldn't dare pot one of you unless they could get you all — and there's one loose where they can't reach him. That's why they're holding off. But something pretty desperate is due within the next few days. These tricks with the tools are child's play. How much will we dress up by night?"

"I'm going to keep the steel gang going till we make the top of that second grade — a good

three-quarters of a mile from where we started this morning. That brings us practically in sight of the dock. Then we'll raise as much track as we can and leave the final dressing off until we're sure of pulling through on time."

Bad luck with a push-car load of rails they were bringing from the pile ahead cut down both the amount of track laid and raised. The cause of the accident could not be discovered. One of the light narrow-gauge rails had tipped inward and the heavily-loaded car had dropped to the ties with a force that snapped the front axle. The rails clanged to the ground and many of them went crashing down the steep embankment. But when the tools were finally put back in the boxes, Rod's gang had a total of a good two miles and three-quarters to their credit. If they could do as well the next two days, they would have one day to spare.

No threatening scrawl appeared on the office door when they returned to camp, nor did the hours of darkness bring any mysterious footsteps outside the door. But the boys found they had not been neglected when they came next morning to where the hand cars had been pulled off the track overnight. No cars were there. But in

the level space a message had been boot-heeled in letters a yard high:

> THIRD AND LAST WARNING! WE ARE THROUGH WITH EASY MEASURES. STAY IN CAMP TO-DAY OR TAKE THE CONSEQUENCES.

"But where are the cars?" asked Rod, peering up and down the track.

"Tell me and I'll tell you. I suspect, though, that they are at the other end of the line. If they'd run on the narrow-gauge, I'd look for them at the bottom of Crompton Harbor. They've been stolen — and we'll have to hoof it."

Hoof it they did, the gang stringing along for half a mile. Fortunately, however, a mile or so out they spied the speeder, abandoned at the bottom of the embankment, no doubt having taken a header down the slope after one of its usual rail-climbing tricks. So Rod and Phil and the chief climbed on, Rod on a board across the front of the frame, the chief on the other side the handles and Phil behind, and they sped toward the stolen cars. At the end of the track they found them, all part or all the way down

the bank. It took much tugging to get four of them back on the track, but at last it was done and the three piled on and started the unwieldy train back toward the walkers.

That day was like a bad dream. Nothing went right. At each new mishap the eyes of Higgins took on a fresh gleam and it was only with great self-control that Rod held himself from trying to give the man a good beating.

With so many handicaps the work lagged terribly. By three o'clock Rod had come to a decision that dismayed Phil when he was told.

"We're through with the jacks. We'll do no more track-raising or filling in. The track goes on the ground and stays there till we've connected up with the other end. We'll never make it if we stop to do any surfacing."

"Then why not let my gang go right ahead and grade all the way to 'town'?"

"No, we don't want to take any risks. We mustn't leave anything any more unprotected than we have to. Our rail pile back there is dwindling, but I think it'll last to where the rails are already dropped."

"I'm just past there. It's about three hundred yards around the bend. At the rate my

gang is going we'll be up to the end of the steel by half-past four."

"We'll be right behind you, and we'll all finish up about the same time. After this next few hundred feet there won't be any more rail-hauling of course, so I can pull half of the men back to spiking. We'll finish out clean and then put all hands on the push cars and drag steel from the pile at the dock. I'll send a hand car in and have the cook send out supper. We work till dark."

But as it turned out, they did not. At five o'clock the last spike was down and all the tools save rail tongs and forks were put away. The push cars were lifted onto the narrow-gauge track, all of them having been made over for that purpose. Rod shortened the cross-bar of the speeder and went ahead of the lumbering procession. Phil and the chief staid behind, to catch a few minutes' rest. They sat in moody silence, each busy with his own thoughts.

At last the chief got up from his seat on the rail and sauntered off down the track with the remark: "Guess I'll go back ' the spring around the bend and get a cool dr ."

Phil made no move to follow. Truth to tell,

he was mighty tired, and his thoughts were none too cheerful; the threatening letters, coupled with his fears for his father, had put him in the dumps.

The chief had barely disappeared around the bend when Phil heard his name—called in a guarded whisper. He looked up surprised, not knowing from just where the mysterious sound had come.

"Senor Crompton!" Again the stealthy call came and this time Phil located the speaker. A pair of sharp eyes peered from among the leaves of a near-by clump of bushes.

Phil rose and walked steadily over, no thought of danger in his mind. The head disappeared and in its stead a hand was shoved out, holding an envelope soiled from much handling. Phil reached up and took it.

"This for me?" he asked before he noticed the inscription: *Philip Crompton.* "Who gave it to you?"

There was no answer. Phil hastily brushed through the fringe of bushes. No one was in sight. The messenger had gone as mysteriously as he came. No trace of him; not a sound, yet Phil's heart beat fast as crouching low and

watching to right and left, he at last came out into the open again.

Then he tore open the envelope, his heart beating faster as he recognized the handwriting and read the ominous message. A groan of dismay and fearful anxiety came through his numbed lips, and he dashed the back of his hand across his eyes.

"What shall I do? Ah, here comes Manco — he will help me."

But before Manco had covered the scant hundred feet to the waiting Phil, Rod, driving the speeder like mad, his face red and straining, brought the machine to a sudden stop and sprang off with a cry of rage and hopelessness.

"Phil! Chief! They've beat us. We're licked — Oh, the cowards — the cowards!" Tears rolled down his cheeks as he told a story broken by exclamations. "The rails are gone — yes, the pile at the dock. We're half a mile short. We're licked!"

"Gone? Where?"

"I don't know. We searched all over, but there isn't a clue of any kind. What can we do?"

"I think the first thing is for me to find

Trigg," suggested the chief. He of them all seemed to take the news calmly — as if he had expected it.

"Trigg!" scornfully repeated Rod. "Oh!" he groaned, "what good can *he* do?"

"Mr. Trigg?" The chief seemed astonished at Rod's question. He paused an instant, then said quietly as he walked away: "I must follow orders. Adios."

Phil had a half impulse to call the chief back and show him the letter. Then a sudden thought silenced him. Nor did he offer to tell Rod of his mysterious visitor as they turned the speeder around and started for the dock. "If the rails are gone, the road won't be finished," he said to himself, "and I needn't say anything about it."

CHAPTER XV

A DESPERATE PLAN

Two gloomy boys sat down beside the track that night after supper, crouched together on one end of a hand car.

"I guess it's all over," said Rod in despair.

"It looks like it," Phil answered in hopeless tones, "unless we can find those rails."

They stared off into the growing dusk in spiritless silence, a long time, while the last light faded from the sky. Suddenly Phil leaned over and whispered very softly: "Rod, don't turn your head right now, but in a little while look off beyond the last car there and tell me what you think you see."

After a long wait Rod spoke, so quietly his voice sounded like a part of the night breeze that had sprung up. "It looks like a bundle of clothes — did it move then, do you think?"

"It's moved a yard since I've been watching it. It's a person. Do you suppose it could be — "

"There's only one person in camp who'd care

to spy on us to hear what we're saying. That's Higgins. He's trying to find out if we have any plans — which we haven't."

"Rod!" Phil spoke eagerly, "I've got one — it just came into my head."

"What?"

"Higgins knows where those rails are. He thinks we don't. Now if he suddenly found out that we did — "

"I get you! We'll fix a 'plant.'"

"Uhuh! We'll start talking very quietly, then louder. You'll keep telling me not to talk so loud, and I'll tell you I know where the rails are and that we'll take the whole gang, before daylight, and get them back. And what will Higgins do? Naturally he's going to warn his friends — and we'll follow him and hear what they say."

"Good, Phil! Go to it."

Then followed a conversation that gradually grew louder and louder, with many cautions from Rod.

"There's no need of being careful," Phil would say. "There's nobody going to be listening to-night. They think we're beat. They'll be singing a different tune before so very long.

But I don't think I'll take the whole gang along. I'll let the rest of them get their night's rest and pick about thirty of the gamest young fellows. The chief will be expecting us at three o'clock; it was certainly a lucky thing for us he took that little trip after you brought the news."

Phil laughed heartily.

"We won't have any trouble in finding the rails in the dark?" asked Rod in pretended anxiety.

"Oh, that's the least of it. The big job will come after that, but we'll put her through — we've got to!" Then he added in a still whisper: "I think that'll get him. Let's pretend to go back to camp."

They arose and walked carelessly past the listener now quite lost in the dark shadows.

"Won't we lose him?" objected Phil as they came within the camp.

"I don't think so. He'll look in on us before he strikes out, to make sure we're safe for awhile. We'll just sit tight till he comes."

In the course of fifteen minutes, sure enough Higgins came strolling past their door.

"Tough luck, boys, but there's one consola-

tion. They'll hardly harm your father now that they've won the game."

"Oh, I don't know," began Rod craftily, then paused at a cough from Phil in pretended warning. "—that is—well—that is, I s'pose we'll not finish the road, but we may be able to do something with the government."

"Huh. Bemish and Macalister are up at the capital now trying to pull the right wires, but I understand they're not having much luck. Good-night, boys; don't take it too hard. I guess I'll turn in," and he sauntered off in the direction of his cabin.

Rod shook his fist at the departing form. "Did you notice he gave himself away then? 'Not having much success, I understand,' he said. Never mind; he'll understand something else before to-morrow night. Come on; he's gone inside."

The two boys crept as close as they dared to Higgins' door. It was fully three-quarters of an hour before it opened cautiously and the man stealthily picked his way up over the hill back of the camp, quickly followed by the two boys. Across the next valley and up another hill they trailed him as closely as they dared, their hearts

thumping with excitement. Here the man stopped a long while, hid in the dense shadow of the heavy timber. The boys dropped flat on their stomachs so as better to see when he went on again.

Again Higgins went forward, but this time the boys waited till he had gained a good hundred feet. They had better take a chance of losing him than to risk being discovered. But Higgins, after that first suspicious stop, forgot his caution. Two more ridges and their valleys the three crossed, and then on the brow of the third hill Higgins stopped. A sudden tiny flare shot up; he was making a fire — a signal, no doubt.

The boys strained their eyes to discover an answering light, but none appeared. Higgins seated himself calmly beside the fire, and leaning back comfortably against a convenient tree trunk, filled and lighted his pipe. It must have been an hour he sat there, for more than once the boys almost napped, but suddenly three figures stepped silently out of the darkness into the ruddy light of the fire.

Here a difficulty presented itself. The fire blazed high; the boys dared not draw much closer, and at this distance the voices of the

men were only a meaningless mumble. Strain their ears as they would, the boys could only catch a word here and there.

"What word is that they keep using?" asked Rod in a temporary silence. "It sounds like 'rock' or 'lock' or — there it was again."

"I know," began Phil, then paused as Rod held up a warning hand. Distinctly came the tail-end of a sentence from the buzzing of tongues: "— deep off the dock."

"I'll bet they dumped them in the ocean!" cried Phil in dismay. "Let's get back."

But just then Higgins stood up and with a parting word to the other three, strode off into the dark in the direction of camp. Rod and Phil lost no time in setting off ahead of him.

In coming, they had of course paid more attention to following Higgins than they had to taking note of their bearings, so it is no wonder that in the course of the next ten minutes they found themselves floundering around, hopelessly lost. They stopped at the top of a hill to try to locate themselves. As they stood there a shadow crossed the valley they had just passed and came directly up the slope.

"It's Higgins, I do believe," came in an

undertone from Rod. "Hold steady; I'm going to tackle him if he comes close enough."

The man came within a few feet of them, quite unaware of danger till an athletic young body lunged full at him and two strong hands clutched his throat and prevented any outcry. A second attack from the rear made resistance foolish.

"We've got you, Higgins," exulted Rod as he gave an extra squeeze. "Lead the way back to camp. And don't forget that a single break from you and Phil empties his automatic into your carcass. Move!" and he gave the man a shove as he let go.

Higgins walked off meekly enough, though the boys kept a close watch for any trickery. Arrived at Higgins' own cabin, Rod opened the door while Phil marched their prisoner inside. "Tie him up, Rod, while I keep him covered."

There was a kerosene lamp, which the boys lighted. In a jiffy they had Higgins laced down on his own bunk with cords that bound him from shoulders to feet. He glared up at the two boys in enraged silence, replying to their questions and their taunts with murderous looks. But not a word would he say.

At last the boys left him. Going to the near-

est cabin, they banged insistently on the door.

"Young Saltiva sleeps here," explained Rod as they waited. "He's about the brightest of the bunch next to the chief." It was Saltiva himself who came to the door, and Rod briefly told him what was wanted.

"We won't be here in the morning to start you out and neither will the chief, but you take the gang to where we left off yesterday and keep them busy at filling in where we've spiked, and in leveling off and distributing ties. And, Saltiva," Rod added sharply; "take another man with you and go to Senor Higgins' cabin. See that he stays as he is till we come back. We've tied him up for safe keeping. Savvy?"

Down the track they hurried and soon the speeder was racing them toward the dock and — they hoped — the missing rails. Every little bit they would change places at pumping the car, and once they stopped for a rest and a drink at a convenient spring. There was a heavy wind in their faces, but two hours brought them to the end of the new steel, the last five minutes or so spent in pushing the car over the uneven track. Then the cross-bar was shortened for the narrower track and once more they made good

time over the light rails of the old Spanish road.

It was half-past two when they reached the tool house beside the dock. "It's a long way from dawn. We might as well rest," counseled Phil. "You take an hour's nap while I watch. I'll call you in time to give me a chance at the hay."

The water was just turning a deep violet under the first glimpse of morning when they rubbed the sleep out of their eyes and went down to the dock edge to peer into the waves that slapped softly against the timbers below.

"Let's get a rope, Rod, and try the depth."

The tool house supplied a rope as well as a weight to tie at the end. A heave, and the line straightened out as they paid it over the edge, down and down and down. At last there was no further pull and they tied a knot to mark the depth.

"Whew!" gasped Rod as hand over hand they raised their sounding line and stretched it across the dock. "A good thirty feet — and the bank drops straight off here. Ten feet out, two rail-lengths wouldn't touch it! No chance to get our steel there, Phil, even if we do find it."

They sat down, stunned by the disappointment of the hopes they had been building at every turn of the speeder wheels all the long ride from camp. They did not dare look at each other, but each felt the heavy hand of despair clutching at his heart. Phil buried his face in his hands and his shoulders hunched over in defeat. Rod got up and paced the length of the dock, a tuneless whistle quivering through his lips.

"So," came a calm voice that brought them both to quick attention. "So — you have found the rails." It was Chief Manco, his face drawn and showing pale in the early morning light, but his eyes and voice as steady as ever. "I thought you would finally decide that here was where they had hidden the rails. There is nothing to do," he ended dejectedly.

"Did you find Trigg?" asked Phil half-heartedly.

The chief sank wearily to an empty box. He looked far out to sea before replying.

"I did not find him. He had not been at the meeting place at all or he would have left some sign. I am afraid something has happened to him — and our last hope is gone. I hunted for

his trail; he has not been near the place. They must have taken him captive."

The three sat there a long moment, silent. Then the chief asked, looking at the tool house:

"You were in there? The door is open."

"We slept in there," answered Phil briefly.

"The store-room door is open too," observed Rod. "We weren't in there. Do you suppose anyone was here last night?"

"I expect they came to spike our last guns by jamming the cylinders of the Bouncing Betsy," Phil remarked bitterly as he walked over toward the half open door. "That's about the only damage they haven't done as yet."

He threw the door wide open to let in the morning light. There, on heavy timbers, stood the Bouncing Betsy. It was a sturdy engine of its type, undoubtedly having served out its full time as a switch engine in the U. S. A. It had the two drivewheels and the flat-topped steam chest of the earlier style, as well as the curious smokestack Phil had spoken of. But the tank was new, and the air-brakes and oil boxes were all of the modern pattern. A casual inspection from the ground showed nothing wrong, and Phil mounted into the cab. A second later he

stuck his head excitedly out of the window and shouted:

"Hi there! Look what I found tied to the throttle." Wildly he waved a scrap of paper to the two who came rushing up.

"What is it?"

"A note from Trigg. Listen! 'Bully for you, boys! I knew you'd win out. But you'll have to run a full train over the road as a legal sign that the line is ready for service. You'll need an official witness. I'm off to bring one. Trigg.'"

"Hurrah!" cried Rod enthusiastically, then: "Oh, what's the use! We're beat."

Still there was a little more hope in his heart as, an hour or so later the three of them started back toward the end of the new line. The speeder was put on the track and Phil and the chief clambered on, Rod choosing to walk.

"I want to see if I can't think of *some* scheme for getting out of this hole," he said as Phil began to tug at the handles. "There must be some way. We can't use the old narrow-gauge rails, that's a cinch. They'd bend double under the weight of the Bouncing Betsy. And even if they didn't she'd be sure to climb the rail within

a hundred yards with no angle bars on the joints. Soft ties and no angle bars; every time a wheel'd strike the joint there'd be a half inch lip to catch the flange of the drivers. No chance there. You fellows go ahead and I'll walk in. Maybe I'll stumble onto some way of using the light steel. I simply can't give up now, that's all there is to it."

He walked along mumbling to himself, while the speeder, under Phil's healthy tugs bore away down the track. At the end of the narrow-gauge they merely laid a pebble behind and ahead of the wheels and then sat down on a tie pile to wait for Rod.

They saw him poking along, his head down, his hands swinging listlessly with his slow stride. Once he stopped, walked over beside the track, bent over something and stood there a long time, evidently in deep thought.

"Struck another snag," observed Phil to the chief. "Rod takes it mighty hard; he was set on making a go of this deal. Well *look at him!*"

For Rod had suddenly straightened up; his arms began to wave wildly up and down, and one ear-splitting yell after another burst from him as if he had suddenly lost his mind.

"I've got it! I've got it!" he shouted as he rushed toward them. "It's the craziest idea you ever heard, but the 'C and C' goes through by cracky! Whoop! Listen to this!"

CHAPTER XVI

BOUNCING BETSY HAS HER DAY

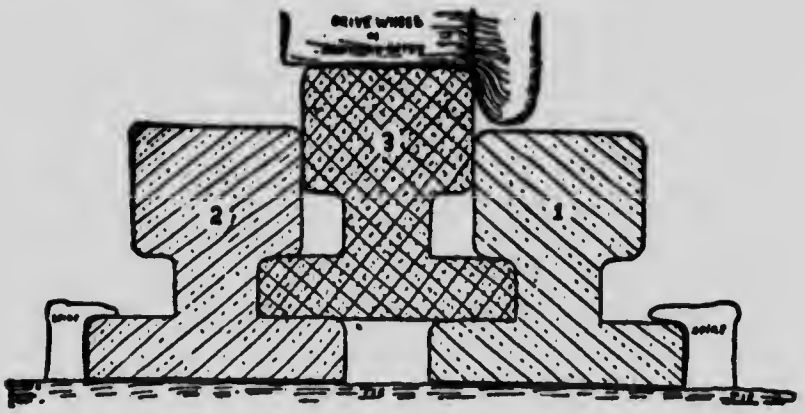
"Come back here," said Rod importantly. They followed obediently behind him. He pointed to where a dozen or so of the light rails from the narrow-gauge track had been put in a neat pile. "That's what gave me the idea."

"Not knowing the idea, that stack of steel doesn't mean very much to me," began Phil, but Rod interrupted him:

"Of course not. Well, in the first place, that light steel is all we have to work on; and a single rail would bend double under our heavy fire-horse back yonder. But if there was some way of using two or three together — get the idea?"

"But what would hold them together?"

"They'd hold themselves. Notice how they fit together in that pile. That's what suggested it. Let me make you a picture of it." He took pencil and paper from a notebook he always carried, and sketched this:



"Now that's the way our combination rail will look from the end. We'll set our gauge for the outside rails and spike them on both sides of the track. Now we'll take just one side. The outside rail is number two. All right; she's down. We drop number one alongside and slip number three in the grooves. Then we spike over number one as tight as she'll go, and the top rail will fit there as snug as a new glove."

"But won't she tip over? There's nothing to — "

"She can't. She's on a flat surface and the other two rails keep her from tipping. And we won't need angle bars because we'll lap the rails. We'll cut two rails, so the joint will come eight feet out on number one, fourteen feet out

on number two and full length on all the rest."

"It looks all right on paper," remarked Phil skeptically.

"I'll demonstrate it for you in cold steel," Rod hotly replied. "Here! Grab the end of that top rail. All right; now over on the ties with her."

He drove in a spike at each end on the outside of the rail. Another rail was brought and laid alongside, about an inch away, with a spike under the inside to tip it away from the first rail. Then a third rail was brought and lowered carefully into place. When the spike was knocked from under the second rail, the three came together with a clang, to Rod's complete satisfaction, fitting together nicely.

"Just as I said," he bragged. "When I put the spikes on the inside, you couldn't tip over the top rail with a pile driver. The wheels of the old Betsy have a fairly high flange, but she'll ride nicely over the inside rail. Shucks! Nothing to it! Of course I wouldn't guarantee the thing forever, but if she works full speed for the trial trip, that's all I care about. We'll have good steel by the time we have to use the road regular. We'll rip up a hundred yards or so

of the heavy steel and put it in next to town. The ' official witness ' won't go any farther than that — if I can help it. And if we make the trip safely I guess there won't be any questions asked."

" That don't seem exactly on the level — "

" It's twice as level as that other gang. Come on; let's see if we can't fix up some angle bars to connect up this contraption with the regular steel without leaving too much of a bump."

By the time the angle bars were done, the gang came in sight down the track. Before the last car had stopped Rod was shouting orders. He kept the gang all together at first so that he could hurry them better. First of all the old steel was torn out, clawbars yanking the rusty spikes out of the soft ties in a single tug. Then the rotten ties were jerked out and thrown down the bank. An hour brought them to the end of the line, where shovels awaited them, Rod having sent a push-car load on ahead.

Back they came toward the tool-boxes once more, doing little more than level off the ridges left by removing the ties. " It's near enough to grade for our needs right now," Rod decided. Three-quarters of an hour was enough to make

the roadbed ready for dropping the new ties. This was fast work, as the ties were spread alongside the track in convenient piles. A half hour and the gang began to string out the steel.

A single rail was laid on each side to begin with, and this was quickly done, as the rails just taken out could nearly all of them be used. A dozen men had been sent back to take out ten rail-lengths of the new steel, in accordance with Rod's plan, and the two gangs finished at about the same time.

Rod meanwhile had fixed his gauges to the proper distance and the minute the last rail clanged into place he picked out twenty of the best spikers and hustled them ahead to spike to gauge. Another gang was sent back to haul rails from where they had been thrown out beside the track, the days before. Each car-load was run to the end of the track and left there for a smaller gang to slap into place as the second gang of spikers was ready for them. This gang worked just about as Rod had when he demonstrated the principle of the new scheme. The inside rail was laid in at the proper distance and tilted back by a spike beneath. The top rail was dropped into place, the spikes removed and

then spike mauls merrily sent spikes and rail home.

But progress was slow. By three o'clock it was plain that the road would not be finished that day.

"We'll have it done by noon to-morrow, though, and we'll have the Bouncing Betsy with steam up, ready to send the sparks flying out of her bulgy stack. But we'll take no chances to-night. We'll set a guard over the unfinished track, and the whole gang will be within call."

At five o'clock Rod sent two hand cars in to bring supper. At six o'clock the men ate, and then worked on till nearly eight o'clock. Barely two hundred yards remained to be done, not counting the hundred yards of heavy steel which had been taken up.

Blazing bonfires were built close together, and a patrol walked the track the whole night through. At six o'clock Rod called the gang to a hasty breakfast, and then once more the sound of steel striking steel filled the air. By eleven o'clock the last spike was down and the C to C Railroad stretched an unbroken line of steel from the dock to the ore dumps three miles beyond the camp.

"Phil, you and the chief chase down to the dock and slip a bit of fire inside the loco. Take as many men as you want; I'm only going to use the jacks enough to take the worst bumps out of the line; I don't care whether she's up to grade or not. Take some extra men with you and send them back with all the lining bars you can find. This track would make a snake dizzy following it. I'll straighten out the worst swings with my eye and let it go at that."

Phil and the chief picked out sixteen husky Indians and set off for the supply shed, followed by Rod's instructions: "There's a pump and plenty of hose in the tool house, Phil. Wouldn't be a bad idea to fill her boiler up and then let the water out again to wash the flues — pump the old Pacific dry if you have to."

"I wish somebody'd pump you dry," yelled Phil over his shoulder. "You may know how to lay track — double-deck track especially — but come to me when you want to know about engines."

There isn't much to filling a boiler with water; all it takes is back-muscles and a pump. Nor does it take much brains to get up steam. A hot fire is all that is needed.

But wood doesn't make a very hot fire, and Phil was sweating like a good fellow before he could show a single pound of steam on the gauge. For a long, long while five pounds was all he could get, for all the fire snapped and crackled and sent a sheet of flame spouting high out of the smokestack.

With pinch bars the men had rolled the heavy wheels along the stout timbers until now the Bouncing Betsy stood on a sidetrack running past the supply shed door. Old ties had furnished the fuel, and the tender was piled high with an extra supply. The chief found an oilcan in the tool house and he inspected every bearing and oilcup with a liberal hand.

"There's a barrel of black stuff in here that smells like oil," he called as Phil sat down to wipe off the sweat. "Suppose that'd help your fire any?"

"Just the thing!" cried Phil a minute later as he put his nose to the bunghole. "It's crude oil. We'll soak the wood with it."

Thereafter the steam gauge showed a decided improvement. The pointer swung to forty pounds in half as many minutes; then it quickly mounted to fifty — sixty — sixty-five.

"Good enough!" cried Phil. "Bring on your Triggs and your official witnesses. The Bouncing Betsy is ready to screech her defiance to the world any minute." He reached for the whistle valve.

"Hold on a minute," laughed the chief. "Better put in your spare time wiping the grease off your face. Here comes the gang."

"How is she?" asked Rod as he scrambled up the gangway. "Whew! All the heat's coming out the back way."

"Sit on top the chimney awhile if you think so. Trigg show up anywhere yet?"

"No, and I'm beginning to worry about him. It won't do a bit of good to have finished the track if he doesn't show up and bring that witness he talked about. Maybe that's why we haven't been bothered any more by those rail-stealers — maybe they've kidnapped Trigg and now they have him tied up along with your father."

Phil's face went pale as he thought of the letter he carried in his pocket. Again he felt an impulse to show it to his chum and the chief, but he fought down the temptation. "No, dad wouldn't want me to give in. He'd say to

me: 'Phil, lad, you finish the road at any cost. You owe it to me not to make your father ashamed of you.' And the cowards who held him captive would not set him free anyway; the chief had told him that.

"Let's tell Trigg we're waiting for him," he said to Rod, pointing toward the whistle. Rod nodded, and Phil opened the valve. A hoarse shriek woke the echoes and made the Indians cover their ears, looking up at the hissing steam with child-like astonishment. The echoes had hardly died against the distant mountains when there came an answer from behind the shed that sounded like the steam calliope on circus day:

"Hey! Hold that train. I want tickets for two."

The two boys shouted with delight. That voice was Trigg's; there was none other quite like it. The next instant he came around the corner, panting and almost wilted with exhaustion and sweat, but half leading, half carrying a staggering hulk of a man who protested at every step. Rod and Phil recognized him at a glance. It was the postmaster at Cusco.

"I call this a master stroke of diplomacy," vouched Trigg when he had recovered his breath.

There came an answer that sounded like the steam calliope on circus day. "Hey! Hold that train. I want tickets for two."

"He's the only government representative in this neck of the woods, and he belongs to the other side, hoof, hide and feathers. I pushed him half the way with my pistol till his legs gave out. I had to carry him the rest of the way. I've agreed to shoot him on sight if he plays us any tricks, either now or when he turns in his report. How's the railroad?"

"Fine as silk. Just getting ready for a trial spin. Like a ride?" Rod grinned amiably.

"Surest thing you know. I'll show Manuel here over the switches and sidetrack while you couple up with our train and run out onto the main line." Manuel objected strenuously, but Trigg led him forcibly out to make the necessary inspection.

In the meanwhile Phil climbed to the engineer's side, threw over the lever and slowly opened the throttle. There was a hiss of steam as the cylinders filled, then a lurch, and the wheels began to turn. Rod, on the other side, nearly fell out of the window, laughing at the Indians. Many of them had never seen a locomotive before; they had not dreamed it would move. They fled down the track in wild terror. Rod sped them along with a series of blasts on the

whistle and then opened the throttle still wider.

It was no task to couple on to the two cars standing on the sidetrack, and they were waiting patiently when Trigg and the postmaster came back.

"All right," said Trigg. "I see you know how to handle the craft, so we'll let you be engineer. Rod, you ought to make a good brakeman, and the chief can feed the fire. I'll be the conductor of course, and you—" he glowered at Manuel—"you can be the passenger. We ought to have one, you know."

But there was more than one passenger. The bravest of the Indians were eager to ride behind the "monster that eats fire," and the first box car carried a full load.

"All abo-o-o-o-ard," called Trigg as the last pair of legs had clambered in the side door. "Ready, Brakie? Ready, Engineer?" He waved his hand. "Shoot!" he cried.

Phil shot. He went carefully for the first mile, not only on account of the three-ply track, but because, truth to tell, his knowledge of the workings of a locomotive had been gained from books rather than experience. But he had already had a chance to try the air-brake and

the reverse, and had learned how to regulate his speed. So by the time he reached the heavy steel he was ready to "let her out."

At best the speed was a bare twenty miles an hour but it brought squeals of mingled fear and delight from the Indians as their car swayed back and forth on the uneven track. A herd of wild pigs were leisurely crossing the track as around a bend the thundering, fire-belching demon burst upon them. Their squeals rivaled those of the Indians, but none were hit. Still Phil pulled the speed down a bit after that. There was no hurry; safety first was the order of the day.

But the miles slipped past steadily and it was not long before the camp came in sight at the end of a long straight stretch. Phil opened the whistle wide. "Toot — to-o-o-ot!" He gave the throttle another twist. "Ring the bell," he called to the chief. "We're going past in grand style."

But they did not go past. At the camp a surprise awaited them. Above the shrill clamor of the whistle came the sound of cheering, and out of the office two men came running, their hands waving and their hats flying in the air.

At a signal from Trigg, Phil brought the engine to a stop.

It was Bemish and Macalister. Trigg motioned to them from the rear car and the two men climbed up. "Go ahead, Engineer. We can talk it over after we've finished the trip," yelled Trigg, and Phil sent the Bouncing Betsy over the few miles that lay beyond the camp. Then he threw the reverse lever and slowly backed his train till it stood below the camp. He looked at the gauge as he climbed out of his seat and stood in the gangway.

"Sixty pounds. Chief, you're an A-Number-One fireman. Let's throw in a good fire and then take a rest."

Down on the ground Trigg and Rod and the two engineers were slapping each other on the back in great glee.

"We came back discouraged," explained Bemish, the elder of the two. "The government here is as crooked as a corkscrew — and they wouldn't say boo or bah to our questions. If the road wasn't done, we *were*. And that was all the satisfaction we could get."

"And we came back to find it done!" exclaimed Macalister. "And by two boys. Let

me shake hands with you again. I'm proud to come from the same country as lads of your spirit."

Phil, with a sick feeling at his heart, heard the congratulations in a daze. Now that the road was done and the game won, what about his father? What was a measly little twenty-mile railroad compared to the best dad a boy ever had? The lump in his throat threatened to become too big for him to swallow, and he groaned in his misery.

"What's the matter, son?" asked Bemish. "Excitement too much for you?"

"No — it's — my father!" The sobs came honestly now.

"Don't you worry about him, Phil. He's all right. We just talked with Higgins up yonder — you tied him up it seems, and young Saltiva wouldn't let us free him. But Higgins told us a party of hunters came along and found your father sick and took him along to their camp where there was a doctor — why, what's the trouble?"

For answer Phil hastily tore a crumpled letter from his pocket and thrust it wildly into Bemish's hands.

"It's from dad. It tells us to stop work on the track or they'll kill him! But I know he wouldn't want me to give in. He'd want me to beat those cowards if it killed us all. But the crazy railroad isn't worth my dad!" The tears poured down his cheeks. "If they hurt him they'll pay for it!"

CHAPTER XVII

AN INTERRUPTED ATTACK

"Come on, Phil, and forget it. There's no use worrying when it doesn't do any good."

"But maybe I can figure it out, Rod. I can't help feeling that there's something more in this letter than just the words. Dad would try to get some message to me if he could; and if it's here I've got to find it."

"I don't believe it's there. Bemish and Macalister and the chief have all given it up and they're all pretty keen. You've spent three hours yourself boring holes through it with your eyes. You know I'm as anxious to help your father as you are yourself. If you'd showed me the letter two days ago I'd have left the confounded railroad at the bottom of the Pacific where they dumped it, before I'd have risked any harm to your dad."

"I know it, Rod; that's why I didn't say a word. Somehow, even while I was reading that letter, I seemed to hear dad's voice telling me to go ahead. I know how he is. Once when he

had contracted to put in a hundred-mile line down in northern Mexico, he took the fever when the work wasn't half done. The doctor ordered him to drop everything and go to the mountains. Dad wouldn't. 'You'll never live through till the end of the road.' 'What of it?' dad answered. 'The road's going through all the same, and I'm going with it as far as my ticket will carry me.' He finished the road — and never put a foot out of bed for four months afterwards.

"Dad'd disown me if I failed him."

"But he wrote that letter to save his life. And I'm afraid we've thrown it away."

"Dad wouldn't back down on his principles to save his neck from hanging! That's why I believe there's something in that letter we haven't found. He pretended he was giving in to them, but I just *know* he was glad of the chance to write that letter."

"Well, I don't. To tell the truth, I don't believe he wrote it at all. I'll bet it's a rank forgery."

"It's dad's writing. They couldn't copy it close enough to fool me."

"Do you mean to say your father can't spell

common words? Look at that 'Ennyway.' And spelled with a capital at that."

"But he spells 'any' right at the top—"

"Sure—that's what I'm driving at. Does this sound like a college man?" He picked up the letter and read:

> *"Dear Phil,*
>
> *"You must not lay Any More track. Stop All work Today. It will Cost my life if railroad is done On or before date Named in grant. And Don't send Out any Rescue party to Save me, or the gang will Never set me free Ennyway. Just keep cool and you can Save me from future Threats.*
>
> *"Your father,*
>
> *"David Crompton."*

"It doesn't sound ignorant to me."

"Perhaps not, but it looks it to me. Even I would know enough to spell *anyway* with an *a*, and I'd save my capitals for a rainy day. There are enough extra ones there to start a bonfire. Your father never wrote that letter."

"He *did!*" cried Phil, all excitement. "Rod,

I believe you've blundered onto the key. There *are* a lot of capitals, and *they were put there on purpose!* Write them down as I pick them out.

"'You must not lay Any'—there's *A*. 'More,' *M*; *A*, next. *T—C—O—N—D—O—R—S—N—E—S—T*. What you got?"

"Nothing. A Chinese alphabet."

"'A-m-a-t-c-o-n-d-o-r-s-n-e-s-t,'" spelled Phil slowly.

"Yeh. 'A mat cond or snest," almost jeered Rod.

"Rod! Look! *Am at Condor's Nest!*"

Rod gave an unbelieving stare and then his shout of delight brought Bemish and Macalister and the chief running in at the door.

"We've found dad! We've found dad!" cried Phil hysterically, too wrought up to make any sensible explanation.

Rod did the talking, the three men catching his excitement as he went on. When he ended by showing them the deciphered message, the chief became doubly excited.

"The Condor's Nest!" he exclaimed. "Ah, I might have known old Tzecatl was at the bottom of this too."

"What do you mean?" demanded Bemish.

"Now is not the time to tell you. First we must find Mr. Crompton. Then I will tell you my story. But if Phil's father is there, we will soon have him safe. And then I will settle a score of my own."

"Let's not waste any time talking," begged Phil. "Take me to my father."

"We must wait," counseled the chief. "We can be sure the camp here is being watched every minute, and just as sure as we are seen leaving, just so sure will a warning go on ahead of us. When night comes, then is the time to act."

So it was arranged. When it should be dark enough, one by one they would steal away from camp to meet at a spot far enough away to be safe from discovery. The chief promised to lead them to Mr. Crompton before dawn. After that there would be time to figure out a plan of attack. In the meantime there was nothing to do but wait.

It lacked still an hour of sundown when Rod and the chief, who had been restlessly wandering about, thought of the neglected Bouncing Betsy.

"It's a wonder she hasn't blown up. But most likely the fire is dead and the steam gone

down by now. Maybe we ought to make her safe in case the scoundrels find we're gone and decide to make an attack. It'd be just like them to start her off full blast and let her cool her nose in the ocean, down on top those rails."

"Ten of my men will keep watch beside her all night, and the rest will sleep on one ear. We shall not take more with us than we have guns — and there are only fifteen."

"Save one for me," grimly reminded Rod. "Let's go back now and see if we can't cheer up poor Phil; he's been simply dying with the blues all day."

Phil they found in the office, as Rod had said, moodily keeping to himself, his face as long as a track gauge, the chief declared when they saw him.

"How soon can we start?" Phil asked, the second they came in the door. He groaned when the chief told him it would be at least nine o'clock. "Three more hours! How far is it?"

"In miles? I can't say that. It is a six-hour journey by day. By night it will be slower, but we will lose no time. I know the trail blindfold; I have been there many times. You will know why when we get there."

"What is it? Just a place? Or is there a real condor's nest?"

"It is both. It is a place and there is a nest. Shall I make you a drawing to show you how the trail runs?" he asked, eager to find something that would distract Phil's thoughts.

"Sure," assented Rod, quickly seeing through the chief's scheme. "Toss us over a pencil and some scratch paper, Phil — or say! Where's that map we found in the hut?"

"That's right." Phil began to show a little interest. "That'd be just the thing. It's in dad's desk." He poked about and brought it out and laid it before the chief.

"Where did you find this?" Manco wanted at once to know. "I have seen one such before."

They told him briefly. He made no comment save to ask: "This Spaniard; you say he was a tall, thin man. Did he have a wide scar across the back of one hand, and carry a rifle with a broken stock and a strap to hold it together?"

"We don't know about the scar, but the rifle, yes. It's dad's. Why? Do you know him?"

"Yes — that is, the cook —" he did not finish the sentence but asked quickly: "This which is written — what is it?"

"It's Spanish," said Rod.

"Of a surely; that much I can see. But the meaning. I cannot read the Spanish," he explained. "I can talk it, yes, and the English too. But I can write nothing and read nothing but the sign language of my tribe. Read it to me."

So Phil read it, in English for Rod's benefit. As he went on, more than once the chief smiled.

"It's a treasure chart," Rod added importantly as Phil finished. "If you can guess the meaning of that pig-Latin, you know where something's hidden or buried — gold and jewels, likely."

"So?" The chief was very grave.

"I expect it's one of those old legends," Rod went on, deceived by Manco's sober air. "You know when the Spaniards conquered whatever his name was, the last of the Incas — "

"His name was Manco, the same as mine; if Quichua were a country, not merely a name, I and not he would be the last of the Incas."

"Anyway he got away for awhile and hid every dollar's worth of plunder they had — and the Incas are supposed to have been rich as all get-out."

"I have heard the legend. More than that, I can interpret that riddle, which, as you say, has come down from ancient times. Oh," he continued quickly, ignoring the eager exclamation of the boys, "you may be very glad I do know the key to this riddle. It does point the way to a treasure — the greatest treasure a boy could ever find."

Puzzled by his manner, the boys waited for him to go on.

"The greatest treasure a boy could find," he repeated. "A splendid father." The boys were too surprised to ask any interrupting questions.

"The explanation is simple. When you hear it you will wonder that you did not see through it at once. *The railroad is the string to a bow — the arrow points to the Mountain of Light through one and three,*" he repeated. "The arrow shoots from the middle of the bow, does it not? From the middle of the railroad then we draw a straight line, the 'arrow,' through *one* and *three* — one mountain and a group of three. There they are," and he pointed to the map. "*To the Mountain of Light.* That is the old Quichua name for Mount Ixitl, and here it is. *When the sun is four hours high* — about eight

o'clock, we'll say — *the shadow* — of the mountain — *falls on the Sacred Spring.* That's a spring every Indian knows. Its waters were used in all religious ceremonies. Now: *The water flows the shadow's length* — the distance from the mountain to the spring — *the bow and not the string.* The course of the stream is a curve, you see, so we draw this straight line to make the cord of the bow. *And here the arrow strikes the sun.* In the religion of the ancient Quichuas, the east is the home of the sun; so we measure east. *Take from the bow the string, and measure thrice.* So three times the straight distance from the spring to the end of the curve we have measured, will take us — where?"

"The Condor's Nest!" cried both boys at once.

"The sacred shrine where all true sons of Quichua worship Viracocha the Sun God. And there it is I shall lead you to-night, for it is within the great cavern they are hiding your father, my great friend, Senor Crompton."

Dark came at last. By nine o'clock a distance of twenty feet hid any passer-by. At that time a succession of three low bird-notes — the agreed signal — sounded through the camp. Shortly

thereafter, at intervals of a few minutes, fifteen silent figures stole cautiously away from the cluster of houses. A half-hour later the figures, still silent and stealthy, came together again in a little valley cut across by the railroad.

In single file then, the chief leading, the little band threaded its way along an unseen trail, over hills and hollows and steep mountain slopes. Sometimes they splashed through shallow streams, and once they had to hold their arms high over their heads to keep their rifles dry. The pace was a hard one and there was no let-up. Only once did the chief pause, and then it was only to point through the tree-tops to where a faint patch of light broke between the heavy clouds. "The dying moon will help us the rest of the way."

He had barely broken his stride and now he pushed forward faster than ever. The weaker ones were beginning to lag, so Trigg suggested that they stop at the next stream for a drink and a five-minute rest.

"Three o'clock," said Phil as he flashed the face of his watch in the moonlight.

"Less than an hour more," added the chief. "Let us hasten."

The steady grind continued, varied now by occasional bursts of speed down easy slopes. Perhaps better than half an hour passed. Suddenly the chief held up his hand. "Wait here. Don't make a single sound. I will be back in a few minutes."

Five slow minutes went by; the chief crept quietly back, coming in at the rear of the party unseen. He touched Phil on the shoulder. "You wait here till the last and then come with me if you want to see your father." Then he turned to the others, who had all come up. "I have found them. Mr. Crompton is there, bound, I think. We had best wait for daylight before attacking. They are in the open. I think Tzecatl warned them of the secret passage I alone know, and they were afraid to stay within the cave. They are in a little basin just outside the entrance; great boulders protect it — and us. We will surround them. Everyone pick his man, and I will call on them to surrender. One hostile move from them and I will drop behind my rock. That is your signal. Fire!"

"Come. I will take each of you to your place."

The dawn was already beginning to gray over

the east when the chief returned to where he had left Phil waiting. A hundred yards forward they walked boldly erect; then on hands and knees they crawled as far again toward a huge boulder that lay sprawled along the ground like a monster lizard. Safe behind its cover, Phil ventured a look ahead through the half-gloom.

There, about the dead embers of a camp fire, lay eight sleepers, their faces hid in the shelter of their blankets. One of them stirred uneasily now and then as if in pain, but made no attempt to rise.

"He's tied," the chief pointed out.

"It's father," Phil exclaimed so sharply that the lone sentry suddenly started from the doze into which he had fallen and looked quickly in their direction. Seeing nothing, after a moment he turned away and busied himself building up the fire.

"Now!" pleaded Phil.

"A few minutes more. This light makes bad sighting."

"Wouldn't it have been better to have rushed them?" Phil was trembling with excitement and his teeth chattered.

"No — no, we must take no chance of hurting your father in the confusion of a charge. This way is best. See how much lighter it's getting every minute."

"Isn't it light enough now? Please, Chief!"

The chief rose to humor him. But even while he was getting to his feet, the sentry too straightened up from bending over the fire and whirled in quiet alarm, his rifle at the ready. But it was away from them he was peering.

"Now, Phil!" Manco raised his hands and cupped them about his mouth to shout a demand of surrender. But no sound came. Instead he too turned and stared in the same direction as the sentry. And then his hands dropped to his sides.

"Look, Phil, look!"

CHAPTER XVIII

AT THE SHRINE OF THE SACRED NEST

From down the lonely, deep-shadowed gulch into which the basin opened, came a series of unearthly sounds that broke at last into a wild exultant cry, hardly human in its grewsomeness. Out of the darkness plunged a man, spectre-like in the half light. Above his head he swung a rifle in frenzied circles. His clothing was torn, his face that of a madman. Suddenly he saw the sentry, the camp fire, the sleeping men, and he halted.

There was a moment's hush. Then, weird and thrilling, a cry of animal rage and hatred shrilled through the little valley. On the instant every sleeper sprang to his feet. The sight of them seemed to increase the fury of the man. The rifle jumped to his shoulder and he rushed toward them, pulling trigger as fast as he could work the magazine of his Winchester.

The band hesitated an instant, and then, as one of them gave a yell of pain, leaped into the

air and fell forward on his face, they took to their heels, the man in close pursuit.

Phil sprang to his feet. Emptying his automatic into the air, he caught his rifle and sprang forward. For a second it sounded like a real battle; the rest of the rescue party sent a volley crashing into space and with a yell joined in the chase.

Phil went only as far as the camp fire. Two bodies lay there; the wounded man and the one who had stirred so restlessly.

"Father!"

"I knew you'd come, son. I've been waiting for you."

"Are you hurt, dad?"

"Nary a bit, Phil. If you'll just untie these ropes—" Phil slashed them with his knife—"I'll be hunky-dory." He rose to his feet, but sank weakly back to a sitting position. "Guess I'm not so strong as I thought. That fever pretty near got me, and these devils almost finished the job."

"Where did the rest go? They seem to have disappeared," exclaimed Phil in some perplexity.

Mr. Crompton chuckled. "They have. They disappeared the same way I did. They're inside

the mountain and unless I'm mistaken they're having a merry time. Tell me what's happened out in the railroad world."

So, while they waited for the return of their friends, Phil told his father all the exciting events of the past few days. As he concluded, Mr. Crompton said heartily:

"I'm proud of you both. Rod's a brick, and, if I do say it, you're a chip of the old block. Hello, we've lost our patient." The wounded man had crawled away into the thicket that came down close at their right. "Let him go; I believe he was more scared than hurt, and we're a lot better off, rid of him. Here comes Rod."

"They all got away," Rod repeated gloomily. "It seems there was some kind of secret passage and they got inside and blocked the way so we couldn't follow."

"That was my fault," chuckled Mr. Crompton. "I showed them that passage when I tried to get away one day. I wasn't tied up then; they merely guarded the door. Chief Manco had showed me how to work that secret door, and one night when I thought them all asleep I slipped away. But the door hadn't been used for so long that I couldn't get it closed, and

they got me before I had gone very far. I was still too weak from the fever to go very fast."

"Well they got it closed all right. But we found the Spaniard."

"What Spaniard is that?"

"The one who scared the gang off. Enrico Castelano —"

"Castelano!" cried Mr. Crompton in surprise. "What do you know about him?"

"We had an adventure with him. That was your rifle he carried. But why —"

"Castelano! I've been hunting him for three months. I've got a story to tell you boys when we get time. You say you found him?"

"The chief did. Castelano was close behind the gang when they swung to the door of the secret passage behind them, and he was nearly crushed. He has some bad cuts and he's lost a lot of blood. There they come bringing him out."

The Spaniard was very pale and little more than conscious. They laid him comfortably on the ground and fashioned some rude bandages for the cuts and bruises. He opened his eyes weakly and spoke once, to ask for a drink of water, and then sank back into a sort of stupor.

His hurts did not appear to be dangerous, and they were satisfied to let him rest.

In the meantime Rod has been skirmishing about among the supplies the others had left, and it was not long before the appetizing smell of frying meat hung over the camp.

"Rod," said Mr. Crompton gayly as they lounged about after a really satisfying meal, "when I build my next railroad I'll give you a job as camp cook."

"I hope you'll save a job for me too," Phil suggested, his face quite serious. "Let me be—"

"I'll make you head of the puzzle department. You ought to be a wonder at figuring out the impossible curve and elevation plots Bemish hands in. 'Interpreter at Large' will be your title."

Trigg, who had kept very much in the background all during the expedition, laughed as he suggested: "I've already made him engineer of the Bouncing Betsy. He knows every bump on the Corliss Railroad—he found them in one trip."

"We'll make you head of the complaint department," Phil paid him back generously.

"'Knocker at Large' is your title. Or do you want a lazier job?"

Mr. Crompton seemed a bit uncomfortable at this, but at sight of the grin on Trigg's face he looked relieved.

"I'm afraid, Phil, you don't understand that Mr. Corliss is president of the road as well as the Construction Company."

"Oh, yes. I saw his letter to Rod giving him authority to go ahead with the work. I never thought of it, but it's kind of funny he didn't come down to take charge of finishing the road himself. He couldn't have been far away, because—"

Trigg and the chief and Mr. Crompton broke out in loud laughter.

"Because he was close enough to know we were in camp."

"Phil," Mr. Crompton's face was sober as a judge, "will you keep a secret? Honor bright, now."

Phil stared his bewilderment, but Rod, after an unbelieving second, jumped to his feet and came over to Trigg with outstretched hand. "How do you do, Mr. Corliss?" he said in very dignified tones. Then with a hilarious

shout he turned to Phil. "Nellie — Oh, Nellie," he gasped, "you've lost your reputation!"

Castelano had begun to show signs of normal consciousness; he groaned as he tried to ease his injured leg.

"What about him?" asked Rod. "You said you had a story to tell us."

"So I have. I never saw the man before, but I am the bearer of mighty good news to him. This is the story:

"Twenty years ago there was a dashing young lieutenant of artillery in the Spanish army. Castelano del Reys was twenty-five, handsome, popular, distinguished for bravery in two campaigns in Cuba. And then came a change. Fast companions, gambling, drink, debts — young Reys became notorious for his bad habits. I don't know the cause of it; but I do know that one day he woke up to find himself accused of having sold important military papers to another government — and ten hours later he was aboard a small sailing vessel on his way to South America.

"Here, as Captain Enrico Castelano, he joined the army of the Revolutionists in Brazil. Luck favored him and he became a colonel of

the staff, immensely wealthy. The rebels controlled the situation in a big section of the country, and Castelano, between campaigns, managed the *hacienda* granted him by his grateful leader. He married — a lady from Spain, it was said, who came over secretly. Five years passed.

"One day the Constitutionalists came down out of season and in three days' fighting wiped out the rebel army. Castelano was the heaviest sufferer. His *hacienda* was pillaged to the last straw. His house was burned, his people killed. The last he saw of his wife she was at the mercy of a half-breed whose machete was even then raised for the fatal blow.

"Castelano escaped, more dead than alive, and for months lived the life of a wild animal, hunted from hiding place to hiding place, half crazed with grief and terror and thoughts of revenge. At last he made the mountains and after untold hardship came into this country.

"This much I know; the rest is hearsay. When he arrived on this side the Andes a revolution had broken out here — they are as regular as the malaria, you know. A battle had just been fought — a running fight more like

savage warfare. Castelano came upon a wounded man, blinded by a charge of buckshot that had torn half his face away. The man was an Indian, of the ancient Quichua tribe; he was very grateful for the sympathy of the Spaniard, though it only served to prolong his agony, for exposure and loss of blood finished the work the buckshot had begun. He became very weak, but there was a message he wished to give the man who had befriended him. As he gasped his last he placed in Castelano's hands a — "

"A chart!" cried Phil and Rod together.

"Yes. But how did you know?"

"Go on; finish your story and we'll tell ours."

"Well, it's nearly done, as far as I can tell it. It was a chart, to what, Castelano never knew. Treasure, no doubt, is what he thought it led to, but the chart would have puzzled even Phil."

"It did!" again cried the two, and even the chief nodded his head sagely.

"What are you driving at?" growled Mr. Crompton, half vexed by the knowing looks the others exchanged. "Well, save that too till I finish. Ten years without human companionship; ten years in exile, a price on his head; ten years

spent in a hopeless search. Enduring privations, disappointment, constant danger; no wonder the man lost his mind. Why he is here to-day I do not know, but this I do know. His coming relieves me from a sacred obligation. Now tell me what your nods and winks and nudges mean, you five conspirators."

So Phil told the story of the adventure with Castelano.

"And this was the place he hunted for all this time. What a coincidence that he should come this morning of all mornings!" exclaimed Mr. Crompton.

"I do not know 'coincidence,'" the chief said slowly, "but if you mean it is strange that he should come at the same time as we did, I say no. Castelano left our camp only a few minutes after we did; he had been watching it for days — Tomas the cook saw him many times. He followed us; our party it was he thought he was attacking. He thought we had found the treasure ahead of him. And all this time, had he talked to any pure-blood Indian, he could have learned the secret of the chart — that it is simply an old legend, one handed down from the days of Spanish oppression hun-

dreds of years ago. This is the shrine of the Sun God; too, it was a rallying place, a stronghold, and at times, too, I suppose, a treasury. Its only treasure now is the Sacred Nest."

"You said you would tell us about that," reminded Rod.

"Wait till I show you the nest. Just now I think we had best look after our friend Castelano. He shows signs of coming to."

"He has only been sleeping," Mr. Crompton declared. "His breathing is regular and the color has come back to his face. Wake him up and let me talk to him."

Rod and Phil approached the injured man and called him by name. His eyes opened.

"Can you sit up if we help you?"

His lips moved but no sound came. Rod brought him a drink, which he gulped down eagerly. Assisted by the two boys he sat up, though his face twitched with pain. He looked blankly about him, no recognition in his eyes.

"Castelano del Reys!" came a sharp voice. The man trembled; he tried to rise to his feet.

"Castelano del Reys!" Mr. Crompton repeated, his voice a challenge.

"Who calls del Reys?" The man's agitation

was pitiful. His hand went to his forehead in a military salute.

"Have you been faithful to king and country, to the service and the honor of an officer of the illustrious Fourteenth Artillery?"

"I have! I have!" the words came in a whisper.

"Rise then and hear the message I bear you from a country who forgets not her sons. Your honor is cleared, del Reys; your innocence has been proved. Spain welcomes you with open arms, her heart sad that she mistrusted you. What have you to say, Lieutenant del Reys?" The man made no answer; he was frankly sobbing.

"What of Joanna Castelano?" Mr. Crompton went on, his voice ringing clearly in the stillness. "Have you no word to send to her?"

"I have sent my prayers to her these many years in heaven."

"Have you no word to send to her on earth? Joanna lives!" Castelano sprang toward the speaker.

"Joanna — *lives!*" His hand went to his temple in a distracted fumbling. His eyes swept the sympathetic circle of faces, and then, before

anyone could save him, he had pitched headlong to the ground.

While the others hurried to revive the fallen man, Mr. Crompton nodded his head in relief and satisfaction. "If he isn't a sane man when he comes out of that faint I miss my guess."

And he was, but he was a sick man too, for his wounds were no slight ones. Bandaged and propped into a comfortable half-sitting position, he lay beside the camp fire while the rest of the party went into the cave to explore. Even Mr. Crompton went along, protesting that the sight of them all put strength into wobbly legs, though he leaned heavily on Phil, "my two-legged cane," he laughingly said.

The entrance to the cave was carefully hidden behind vine-covered boulders. There was a long, winding tunnel, too low for comfortable walking, and then the passage opened into a series of lofty rooms. After that there was another burrow-like stretch where they crawled on hands and knees through inky darkness. Then came blinding light, and the boys found themselves in the queerest cavern in the world. Really it was not a cave at all, for half the space was open to the sky. Even a few trees raised stunted

branches in one corner. But one wall was in itself a cave, whose arch, it was easily seen, had been extended by the hand of a mason.

"Here you see the greatest work of one of the greatest of the Incas. It took forty years to make this fortress, a work that only the hand of Nature could destroy. The roof once reached all the way across. That wall opposite us is fifty feet thick. It is so cunningly built that no one could tell it from the natural rock. Fifty solid feet of masonry — a man-made cave. An earthquake shook down the roof; the walls will stand till the day of doom."

"The Condor's Nest — where is it?" was Rod's impatient question.

"Look upward. You see that crevice near the top? See the sticks hanging over the edge? There is the nest of the greatest winged creature of the world. The condor you call it; the sun-bird the ancient people named it. It is the symbol of our god of light and life, Viracocha, the Sun God. For years the high priest of our religion daily has brought here food for the king of birds. The nest has been there since the childhood of the race. It has come to be a sacred emblem, it and the sun-bird."

"Is there only one?"

"No, there is a royal pair, but no more. When the first nestlings have found their wings, the fittest pair is selected. The male bird is the new king. At the coronation ceremony, when the new king is *circled*, the rest are sacrificed. The old king is sent to the sun—"

"You mean he is killed?" curiously interrupted Rod.

"In the words of the high priest, 'he is released.' For an ordinary bird that would be killing, yes."

"And what about Tzecatl? You told us you would tell us some day. He is high priest now, isn't he?"

The chief's face clouded. "He is a dissatisfied high priest. The laws of my people say that the chief shall be chosen by the warriors from their own number. The priesthood goes from father to son. Tzecatl was born too late. In early days, the high priest was even more powerful than the chief—the inca as he was called then. Now the priest is only a medicine man—and Tzecatl is proud, so proud. He would have my place. From my boyhood he has schemed to become chief in my stead. Through the super-

stition of my people he has put me in great danger many times.

"But the young men of the tribe are loyal to me — those who work for you. The tribe numbers many more; these are but a handful.

"The condor bears the message of the high priest to Viracocha and brings back his answer to the prayers of the Quichuas. Many times he has warned my people against the young chief. Tzecatl will yet win over me."

"Not on your life!" exclaimed Rod and Phil together, so stoutly that the chief did not even smile.

"He nearly did it when my little son was stolen away. You know the story he told my people. And the condor feather in his tiny footprint. To you it seems simple, childish. My people are but children; they believed his poisoned words. Had little Picco not returned — "

"What?"

"The new chief of the Quichuas would have been called Tzecatl. The life of a child means nothing to the cruel medicine man, nor does mine. I must destroy his power or he will destroy me. There is one way, so simple I hardly dare to take it."

"Let us take it for you," suggested Mr. Crompton.

The chief looked at him gratefully. "Viracocha has long been lost to the hearts of his people. The King Condor has taken his place. He is the only real thing that is left of the religion of my fathers. When he dies there will be no worship, no high priest — no Tzecatl."

"And you — do you believe in this religion?" blurted Phil. His father smiled and answered for the chief:

"I saw him baptized with five of his followers by a Spanish priest."

"It is because of that Tzecatl must lose his power. So long as the sun-bird lives, the high priest can sway my people. When the King Condor dies, there will be no more priesthood. And my people will turn to my religion."

"Rod and I will do it," declared Phil. "The reign of the King Condor will soon be over. But won't there just be another King to take his place?" he added anxiously.

"The King has lost his mate; there are no nestlings. The life of one bird lies between me and safety."

"Not for long," promised Phil.

"Listen. Within that nest there is a tiny box, but it contains a portion of each precious thing to be found within the ancient empire of the Quichuas. There is a ruby, small, for not many of these are to be found, a diamond, a nugget of gold, a silver bangle, a copper ring. There is a portion of salt, a grain of wheat, a wristband of gold inlaid with silver and set with many precious stones. To the one who brings me the body of the King Condor I will give this precious box.

"It is a prize worth winning, and the winning will not be easy. The King has been fed on living flesh; he is as fierce as any animal of prey, and his flight is far beyond the range of a bullet."

"Leave it to us," boasted Phil. "Have the jewel box ready. We'll bring you the big buzzard — but how will we know him? Every mountain has its condor. We have seen a dozen."

"You'll know the King. His wings cover any two others of his kind. Capture or kill him, and the proof is easy. He has been circled."

"What's that?"

"About his foot there is a gold band."

"Good. You will not have many days to wait. The King is dead — long live the King!"

"Hurrah!" added Phil, "for the King Condor of the Andes! May he put up a good fight!"

CHAPTER XIX

THE KING CONDOR OF THE ANDES

The boys paid scant attention to the rest of the exploration. The cave was a wonderful place and under ordinary circumstances they would have gone wild over a chance to see the curious relics of a bygone day. Even the secret passageway brought no more than an "Ah!" of surprise at the wonderful mechanism that moved a weight of many tons as easily as one might open an ordinary door, yet that closed it as securely as if the wall were solid rock. Consequently the chief hurried them out as quickly as he could. "We can come back again when we want to see it better," he said as they reached the open air.

"Yes," agreed Mr. Crompton, "I think we ought to get back to camp with as little delay as possible. How soon can we start, Chief?"

"As soon as you and the Spaniard are ready."

"I'm ready now. I'm fit as a fiddle with new strings. How about you, del Reys?"

"I could hardly wait for you to return from

the cave. I heard the chief say there was no treasure there, but I do not care now that I know my name is unstained and that Joanna lives. Only I fear I cannot walk."

It was as Mr. Crompton had said; the man was sane after the first shock of the wonderful revelation that had come to him.

"We will soon fix that," Chief Manco replied. "Not an hour's journey from here is the hut of one of my tribesmen. He will let us have a burro." He spoke to one of the young men, who trotted off without a word. "We will carry you across this ridge to a place where there is an easy trail. There we will wait for Felipe with the burro. Shall we start?"

"All but Phil and I," declared Rod. "The hunt of the King Condor of the Andes begins right here and now. The rest of you go back when you want to, but we stay."

"But we are going to join the chase too," objected Mr. Crompton half jokingly. "As I understand it, this competition is open to all. Bemish and Macalister and I want to try for that jewelry, I'm sure, and some of these young bucks here," he pointed to the Indians, who grinned in reply, "may want to take a shot at

his majesty. You boys think you need a head-start?"

"Not on your life," Rod contended, still unwilling to give up his plan. "But the King Condor isn't going to drop into anybody's hands in a minute, and a few hours one way or another won't make much difference. The rest of you are privileged to start whenever you feel like it. We just want to start from here, that's all."

"All right. Go to it. We're off in a bunch."

In a few minutes the boys were alone in the little basin.

"What's the first move, Rod?"

"The first move is hiding what grub out of this plunder we can't carry along. We may want to come back to it. The next thing is to climb this pile of rocks."

There was a considerable supply of canned goods in the camp larder, and much smoked meat. Under a boulder the boys shoved the food, wrapped in the cleanest of the blankets; then rocks were piled high around the cache.

The sun was high now, and hot. The boys set out on the long climb with great enthusiasm, but a half hour found them loitering, sweaty

and played out. It was not exactly a mountain they were climbing, but rather a ridge with a peak at one end. But ridge and peak must have been three miles in height, so the task was no small one. Each mile up meant three times that much scrambling, for there was no trail, and each new route they tried had an unexpected way of ending up against a cliff that towered a sheer hundred feet above them. That meant going back to try another place.

It meant, too, more than one nasty tumble which only the best of luck kept from being a tragedy. There is no joke in losing one's footing on the brink of a hundred-foot straight drop, with a series of fifty-foot bumps extending a mile or so down a rocky mountain-side.

Three hours of climbing took the edge off their enthusiasm, putting just as keen a one on their appetites. They were nearly halfway up by this time, having just topped the ridge and ready to scale the steeper peak. A hard-looking stretch lay before them, and Phil rebelled at sight of it. "Not another step till we've rested and eaten. I don't see why we want to get to the top of this old frozen wart of nature anyway. Nothing lives on top of it but snowbergs and ice-cream

cones. The condor flies high; he doesn't *light* high. He'll come down where things live."

"Your brightness, out of breath as you are, simply overwhelms me." Rod sat down to illustrate the truth of his words. "We'll follow your wishes, and rest and eat. After that we'll follow out my scheme, and it'll be 'hike-to-peak or bust,' as the saying goes."

"But why? I like to know what I'm wearing out my legs for."

"Maybe it'll make you go faster if I tell you that you'll find out when you get to the top. You'll admit the plan's a good one, I'll bet on that."

"All right; lead the way. If you're going to be the brains of this polar expedition into the realms of ice and snow, you can be the front legs as well."

Up and up they climbed, by paths that made them dizzy to look back on. "We've circled the peak," Phil grumbled, "and I'll swear we're not a hundred feet higher."

"Then the sun's melting off the top of the mountain; because we're getting so close I can see that ice and snow you've been raving about has been all in your imagination."

They were drawing closer to the top, there was no doubt of that. The level space at the very summit, which from farther below had looked like a bald spot, now spread out into a respectable sized plateau. They could not be sure, but off on the farther side something seemed to be moving. "Snowbergs, maybe," suggested Rod sarcastically.

At last they mounted the last rise. Before them was a broad level stretch, a bare knoll at the opposite edge. For it they made, looking vainly for the moving object they had seen before. It had disappeared. There was, as Rod had said, neither ice nor snow; a short moss-like grass covered the ground with a rusty brown-green carpet except where sharp rocks stuck through. The knoll, they saw when they reached its base, was quite bare, and the soil was stony and loose.

"Up that too?"

"I said the top," grimly answered Rod, for he too was tiring. "I want to pick one of those ice-cream cones."

So up it they scrambled, sliding back one step for every two they advanced. "I hope you get all you're looking for," growled Phil, as he spit

out a mouthful of dirt a plunging rock had knocked into his face. "I hope — Hey! look what you're doing!" A perfect avalanche of small stones nearly knocked him off his feet. Looking up he saw Rod, all desire to reach the top evidently forgotten, plunging back down the slope. A second glance and Phil too began a mad scramble to reach the bottom. Over the brow of the hill loomed a head surmounted by two pairs of massive curving horns.

Over and over the boys rolled, rocks, dirt, gravel descending with them. At the bottom Rod painfully picked himself out of the landslide. "What was it, Phil?"

"A snowberg, I guess," he said dryly.

"A bighorn sheep you better say!"

"They don't have 'em. Nothing but a billy goat, Rod. A two-horned sheep. They raise them down here, and that big boy has wandered loose from the herd. Perfectly tame and harmless, I've no doubt."

"All right; you go up and lead him down to water. I'll take my meals standing, thank you. I don't know that we need to go up any higher anyway."

"Pity you didn't think of that two hours ago.

Just what are we way up here for anyhow?"

"The King Condor of the Andes. If we're going to beat out those other fellows we've got to have a system. And this is the first step. We're up where we can see him, that's a cinch. All right. Now we watch for him. He comes soaring along, his eyes and his gizzard keen for food. He sees it from his airy perch; his wings curve ever so slightly and he comes down in decreasing circles. He—"

"He pounces on Rod Dillon, amateur goat hunter, and carries him off his perch into the airy—"

"He seizes his puny prey—a rabbit, a mouse or a *Crompton*—and we mark the spot and set a trap there. Get me?"

"I get you, Rod. While we're waiting hadn't we better build some kind of a shelter so as not to be seen. It'll get cold along about night-time, too."

The shelter was built and within it the boys crouched, scanning the clear sky for a moving black speck. The sun climbed down toward the west and finally sank, but no condor was seen. The night was cold but the boys were well protected and they slept comfortably. Morning

found them astir at four o'clock. Rod made a tiny fire from the tinder-like grass, and they had broiled ham for breakfast.

Again they watched, but although any number of soaring black specks could be seen in the distance, none of them came close enough to give any certainty of its identity with the bird they sought. Disappointment had begun to make them careless, when a low "Ah!" from Phil told of a discovery.

"Right up from the cave!" he exclaimed huskily. "I thought all the time we ought to have stayed there where his nest is."

"You surely don't think he's been staying in that cave while that gang has been there, do you? Just wait a while and you'll see that I'm right. Watch him; isn't he a monster?"

The bird had soared high over their heads in a brief minute or so, with hardly a flap of his wide-spreading wings. He must have been miles away, but even at that distance he was easily the biggest bird the boys had ever seen or even dreamed of. "It's the King all right. If he'll only light!"

"He won't unless he sees food."

"He'll never see anything from that height."

"Won't he though? He could see a field mouse nibbling at that grub we left."

"Then why doesn't he see the grub?"

"Because something else saw it before him. Wow, he's coming down!"

Down swooped the mighty bird in a steep slant, every feather set. A quiver of a wing, and he shot up, circled, came to earth. The boys could not see what happened, but a moment later a black body fluttered along the ground, caught the air, and was off on a long climb.

"Notice his feet? He got what he was after. And we've got what we were after. That's the place where we set our trap."

It was a long, hard tug, but the boys had a goal and they lost no time in resting or in counting bumps and bruises. It was eleven o'clock when they set out. It was nearly dark when they reached the spot they had been aiming for.

"Rabbit holes," chuckled Rod as they came upon the open plot. "That's what brought him down to-day; it'll do it again to-morrow. Know how to set a snare?"

"I do."

"Set some. I'll make a condor trap."

Phil set about converting some stout cord into the sort of snare he had often used for cottontails back in the States. Rod went to a near-by thicket and with the big blade of his knife cut himself an armful of stout six-foot stakes, each as thick through as his wrist. He sharpened the ends and then, taking a heavy stone for a hammer, drove the stakes nearly halfway into the ground, six inches apart, in a circle a dozen feet across. When he was done he had a pen a good three feet high. Between the stakes he put smaller ones, so that for a foot up there was no space between.

At the last, Phil helped him, and Rod explained: "You remember what the chief told us about the way the Indians catch condors? Well, this is how. If we catch our rabbits, we can turn them loose in here — it's tight at the bottom. The old bird sees them, swoops down, drops lightly over the railings — and we've got him. He can't get out. He's a soaring bird and can't rise by flapping his wings, and there isn't enough room in the pen for him to get his run."

"The moral of that is: First catch your rabbits."

But when morning came the rabbits were there. Phil had laid seven snares; he had three rabbits, big fellows not at all like the cottontails of home. They were quickly dropped inside the pen, where for a long time they struggled to get out. When they were finally quiet the boys crawled deep into the thicket, where the heavy foliage hid them completely.

"It was eleven o'clock when the King rose yesterday. Wonder if he'll be on time to-day."

Whether or no he rose on time the boys did not know; at least they did not see him. In fact they had grown heartily tired of waiting, and a bit skeptical of the success of their scheme, when, without the least warning, a big object passed between them and the sun. Rod caught his chum's arm in a warning squeeze, and eagerly they peered out between the thick bushes. There was the condor, the King, if size were any test, and he was coming down!

Straight for the pen he sailed. The instant he made the final dip, the boys saw that Rod had miscalculated; the pen was too small. The condor cleared the near side, swerved downward, but not enough. Crash! against the far side he dashed, and crack! off snapped the stakes like

so many matches before the bird's heavy body.

"Quick, Phil! Up and at him!"

The condor was badly hurt but still he was a dangerous foe. Even crippled there was a chance that he might be able to leave the ground, and, flying, he would make a poor target for their single-shot rifles.

Taking as careful aim as he could on the run, Rod fired. The bullet zipped spitefully against one of the stakes and the struggling bird was unhurt. Phil emptied his automatic, with no result except to increase the efforts of the condor to escape. His wings were poised, ready for flight, but one foot dragged and he could not run fast enough to lift the heavy body from the ground even with the lifting power of his immense spread of wings. Bang! went Phil's rifle. The condor gave a sidewise lurch of his body to show that he was hit; that was all.

Barely ten seconds had passed. Catching up one of the shattered stakes Rod rushed upon the wounded bird. It dodged his attack and struck out fiercely with beak and wings. The boy was forced to give way as the condor came full toward him, with an odd squawk of defiance. As it charged it seemed to regain its strength

and with a sudden dart its heavy body left the ground. Rod had a second's vision of two monstrous wings sucking the air away from him, and a pair of talons flashed past his face.

He made one grab — and the next instant he felt himself lifted off his feet.

"Let go!" yelled Phil, but Rod hung desperately on. He could not have let go had he wished, for two sets of knife-like claws clutched deep into his wrist. Now in the air and now on the ground, they dashed along, for the bird could not sustain his weight.

A cry from Phil made him look down. Not fifty feet away was the brink of a cliff, a sheer fall of hundreds of feet, he knew. He tugged desperately to tear his wrists from the grip of the sharp claws; they clutched the tighter. He could not break loose! He shut his eyes; he was lost. Already he could feel the chill fear of the terrible fall creeping down his backbone.

And then — thump! He had struck the ground, while over him settled a grisly shape with tearing claws and beating wings. Then everything was still.

"What happened, Phil?" he asked some ten minutes later when he came to.

"I shot the condor. I'm afraid I shot you too, but I had to take the chance. Let me see your arm."

Sure enough there was a clean little puncture through the biceps. The scratches, many of them deep and ugly-looking, promised to give much more trouble than the bullet wound.

Rod rose unsteadily to his feet, and after several attempts tottered over to where the condor lay, still at last.

"He must weigh fifty pounds! And look at that spread of wings." He pointed to the one that lay half unfolded, the tip a good five feet from the body. "How far is it to the cave, do you suppose?"

"Nothing shaking on that cave noise. We leg it back to camp to have your wounds looked after."

"Those scratches? I should say not. We can make the cave before the King's muscles stiffen. I want him spread out and stuffed. And he's the King all right. There's the gold band around his foot."

Rod had his way, though Phil objected at every step. He carried the big bird, while Rod stumbled along at his side, more hurt than he

would admit. It was a matter of three miles to the cave, all down hill. They found an easy trail and in spite of a couple bad climbs, and a nasty fall that added a few scratches to Rod's already decorated face, they came to the top of the last slope in little over an hour.

There they paused, well in sight of the pit that had been made by walling up the gully that now formed the cave. A queer sight halted their descent. Two Indians stood on the brink, braced against a boulder that formed a sort of coping. They were straining at a rope that stretched over the edge; while the boys watched, the two began to tug in a desperate effort to pull up on the weight that hung at the end.

Their backs were turned; the boys did not recognize them. "What do you think? Friends or not?" But Rod did not answer, for just then the head and shoulders of a man appeared and in a second Chief Manco had scrambled up on solid ground.

At sight of him the boys gave a relieved shout and tore pell-mell down to where the three astonished Indians stood.

"Oh, you King Condor!" sang Phil as he swung the heavy bird from his shoulder. "We

told you we'd bring him down for you in a hurry."

"By the looks of the two of you, I'd say it was Rod who brought him down."

"Not exactly," Rod chuckled. "I held him while Phil shot him. Awfully careless Phil is. Shot me too." And then, serious again, he told the story of the thrilling fight. "Phil saved my life, the old chump!" he said, affectionately throwing his arm around his friend's shoulders.

Phil was embarrassed. "Aw, get out. Say, Chief, is that thing the treasure chest you told us about?"

"It is." The chief picked up a small box whose cloth wrappings had been untouched for ages, and tore the rags off with one strong tug. A gold-and-silver-inlaid box of some dark wood lay in his hand. He turned to Phil.

"Yonder lies the King Condor, and the reign of Tzecatl is over. The prize I give you is nothing, but with it go the good wishes of my heart." He pressed a spring in the side of the box and the lid sprang open. Within lay a tiny handful of nuggets and jewels, dully gleaming through their coating of dust. "It's yours, Phil. Take it."

"It's not mine — it's ours. Rod and I went halvers on this deal, and I guess the bargain holds — even if Rod did get more than his share of the scratches. And we'd better get to where those cuts can be tended to right away. How far is it, did you say, to that house where you got the burro for Castelano?"

Instead of answering him, the chief cupped his hands about his lips and sent out a weird shout. From below came an answer of the same kind.

"We're coming, Mr. Crompton," called the chief. "Get out the first-aid for a wounded hero and a double-portion breakfast for a pair of mountain-climbers."

"Oh, dad," yelled Phil, "and don't forget to fix a nice solid place to stretch out a fourteen-foot spread of wings. We're bringing back the King Condor of the Andes!"