

Jack North's Treasure Hunt

Daring Adventures in South America

by Roy Rockwood

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XXX Down they plunged side by side from the island into the water

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Chapter I

A Chance for a Position.

“Where are you going, Jack?”

“To the shops of John Fowler & Company.”

“To look for a job?”

“Yes.”

“Then you are in luck, for I heard this morning that they want another striker in the lower shop at once.”

“Then I’ll strike for the opening at once, and my name is not Jack North if I don’t land it.”

“It will be John Slowshanks when you do get it, mind me!” cried out another voice, from an alley-way near at hand, and before Jack North or his companion could recover from their surprise the speaker, a tall, awkward youth of twenty, sped up the street at the top of his speed.

The scene was in Bauton, a large manufacturing city of New England. The first speaker was a workman at the shops that had been mentioned, but beyond the fact that he placed the youth before him in the way of getting work, he needs no special introduction.

The other person was a lad of eighteen, with brown, curly hair, blue eyes, and a round, robust figure. His name was John North, and he was the son of a couple in humble circumstances.

“Take care!” cried the man, “that sneak will get in ahead of you, and then a snap of your little finger for your chance of getting the job at Fowler’s.”

Jack North did not stop to hear his friend through. He was very much in need of a situation, and he knew the young man who had rushed in ahead of him as a bitter enemy. That fact, coupled with his desire to get work, caused him to dash up the street as fast as he could run.

Naturally the appearance of the two running at such a headlong pace aroused the attention of the passers-by, all of whom stopped to see what it meant. Others rushed out of their houses, offices or workshops to ascertain the meaning of the race, until the street was lined with excited, anxious men, women and children.

“Is it fire?” asked an old, gray-headed man, and another, catching only the sound of the last word, repeated it and thus a wild alarm was quickly spread.

Meanwhile Jack North had found that he could not overtake his rival. He was not a fleet runner, while the other had gotten a start of him, which he could not hope to make up.

But he was too fertile in his resources to despair. In fact he was never known to give up a contest which he had once fairly entered. This persistence in whatever he undertook was the secret of Jack North’s wonderful success amid environments which must have discouraged less courageous hearts.

Still it looked to his enemy, as the latter glanced back to see him leisurely turn into a side street leading away from their destination, that he had nothing further to fear from him.

“Thought you would be glad to give in,” cried out the delighted seeker of the situation at the engine shops, and believing that he had nothing further to fear, the awkward youth slackened his gait to a walk.

Though Jack turned into the alley at a moderate pace, as soon as he had gone a short distance, he started again into a smart run.

"I shall have farther to go," he thought, "but Fret Offut will think I have given up, and thus he will let me get in ahead of him."

This seemed the truth, when, at last, Jack came in sight of the low-walled and scattering buildings belonging to John Fowler & Co., engine builders.

Fret Offut was nowhere in sight, as Jack entered the dark, dingy office at the lower end of the buildings.

A small sized man, with mutton chop side whiskers, engaged in overhauling a pile of musty papers, looked up at the entrance of our hero.

"Want a job as striker, eh?" he asked, as Jack stated his errand. "I believe Henshaw does want another man. I will call him. What is your name?"

"Alfret Offut, sir. It's me that wants the job, and it's me it belongs to."

It was Jack North's enemy who spoke, as he paused on the threshold panting for breath, while glaring at our hero with a baleful look.

"How come you here?" he demanded of Jack, a second later.

"My feet brought me here, and with less slowness than yours, judging by your appearance," replied young North.

With the arrival of the second person on the scene, the clerk had turned away to find Henshaw, and while he was gone the rival youths stood glaring upon each other.

After a short time a big, red-faced, soot-be-grimed man appeared, saying as he reached them:

"If Offut will come this way I will talk with him."

"Henshaw," said the clerk simply, returning to his work, leaving the newcomer to attend to the visitors as he thought best.

"Ha—ha!" laughed young Offut, softly, as he followed the foreman, "where are you now, Jack North?"

Though Jack gave slight token of his feelings, he was more vexed at this usurpation of his rights than he cared to show. He lost no time in starting after the others in the direction of the shop. "I'm going on twenty-one," Offut said, as they stopped at the door, "and there ain't a chap as can outlift me."

"Beg your pardon, Mr. Henshaw," said Jack, brushing up, "but it's I who am after the job and to whom it belongs. Mr. Jacobs—"

"Is your name Alfret Offut?" interrupted the other youth sharply in the midst of Jack's speech. "I reckon Henshaw knows who he is talking to." "It was me Mr. Jacobs recommended the place to, and you are trying to steal it from me," cried Jack. "You are telling a likely story, Jack North, and if you say another word I'll hit you. Henshaw called for me, and it's me he's going to give work."

Mr. Henshaw, who for the first time seemed to realize the situation, looked surprised, as he gazed from one to the other.

Disliking to raise a fuss Jack remained silent at first, but he felt bound to say:

"I was first at the office, and I claim—" "You'd claim the earth, as far as that is concerned, you miserable chick of nobody!" broke in Offut.

The last was more than Jack could stand, and stepping quickly forward, he cried: "Stop, Fret Offut! you have said enough. I don't want any quarrel with you, but I am as good as you."

“Are yer?” demanded the fiery Offut, whose greatest delight seemed to be in provoking a quarrel. “I can lick you out of your boots, and I will do it before I will let you get in here.” By this time Mr. Henshaw, a rather rough man, as slow as he was of comprehension, was interested in the dispute, and not averse to encouraging sport of the kind, he said:

“That’s it, boys; fight it out. I’ll hire the lad that downs the other.”

“Then the job is as good as mine!” cried Fret Offut, rushing at Jack with great bluster and no regard to fairness.

Chapter II

The Test of Strength.

If taken unawares, Jack North did not allow his enemy to get very much the advantage of him. As the other rushed forward, expecting to overpower him by sheer force, he met him squarely in a hand-to-hand struggle for the mastery.

Mr. Henshaw seemed delighted, and he cried out:

“Limber up, lads, limber up! A job to him that comes out on top! Hi, there!”

Sundry other exclamations came from the excited foreman at every change of the situation, while several spectators, attracted to the place by the out-cries, gathered about the young contestants, lending their voices to the confusing sounds of the scene.

While Fret Offut was taller and larger than Jack North, he lacked the latter’s firm-set muscles, and what was of even greater account, his unflinching determination to win. Our hero never knew what it was to possess a faint heart, and that is more than half the battle every time.

Thus when young Offut crowded him back against the wall of the building, and every one present felt sure he must be overpowered, Jack set his lips more firmly together and renewed his resistance with redoubled effort.

Then, as he struck his foot against a piece of scrap iron and reeled backward in spite of all he could, his friends groaned, while Fret Offut cried, exultantly:

“Ho, my fine cub, down you go this time! Henshaw—”

But Mr. Henshaw never knew what was to be said to him, neither did the young bully ever realize fully just what followed.

Jack, concentrating all the strength he possessed, rallied. He threw out his right foot in such a way as to catch his antagonist behind his left knee, when the latter suddenly found himself sinking. At the same time the grasp on his collar tightened, while with almost superhuman power he was flung backward. With such force did Jack handle his adversary that he sent him flying several yards away, where he fell in a pool of dark, slimy water.

The spectators cheered heartily, while Mr. Henshaw clapped his grimy hands and shouted at the top of his voice:

“Well done, my hearty! That’s a handsome trick and well worth a job.”

Fret Offut arose from his unwelcome bath, dripping from head to foot with the nasty mess, presenting a most unprepossessing appearance.

The foreman was turning back into the shop, followed by Jack, and the crowd was rapidly dispersing.

“Hold on!” he bawled, “that wasn’t fair. I tripped—stop, Henshaw! don’t let my job go to that miserable thief.”

Getting no reply to his foolish speech, Offut followed the others into the shop. His appearance being so ridiculous he was greeted with cries of derision from the workmen, which only made him the more angry and belligerent.

“I’ll get even with you for this, Jack North!” he cried, “if I follow you to the end! My father always said your family was the meanest on earth, and now I know it is so. But you shall hear from me again.”

With these bitter words the defeated youth, who really had no one to blame but himself for his ill-feeling, disappeared, though it was not to be long before he was to reappear in the stirring life of Jack North, and bring him such troubles as he could not have foreseen.

It proved that Mr. Henshaw was anxious for another workman, and after asking Jack a few questions, told the lad he might begin his task at once.

The pay was small, less than five dollars a week, but Jack did not let that cause him to refuse the opportunity. He needed the money, for his folks were in poor circumstances, and he went about his work with a stout heart.

He quickly proved an adept workman, observing, rapid to learn and always diligent, so much so that the foreman took a strong liking to him.

Several days passed and it became evident to Jack that if he had left one enemy outside the shop, he had another within, who was ready to improve every opportunity to trouble him. This was a small, thinfaced man who worked with him, and whose name was Mires. Besides being physically unable to carry an even end with him, this workman was prone to shirk every part of his work that he could, this portion falling largely on Jack to do in addition to his own.

Jack paid no heed to this, however, but kept about his work as if everything was all right, until a little incident occurred which completely changed the aspect of affairs.

Unknown to our hero, there had been a practice of long standing among the workmen of “testing” every new hand that came in, by playing what was believed to be a smart trick upon him. The joke consisted in sending the new hand in company with a fellow workman to bring from a distant part of the shop a pair of wheels, one of which was of iron and weighed over four hundred pounds, while its mate was made of wood and finished off to look exactly like its companion. The workman in the secret always looked out and got hold of the wooden wheel, which he could carry off with ease, while his duped associate would struggle over the other to the unbounded amusement of the lookers-on.

It heightened the effect by selecting a small, weak man to help in the deception, and Henshaw, liking this joke no less than his men, on the third day of Jack’s apprenticeship, said:

“North, you and Mires bring along them wheels at the lower end. Don’t be all day about it either,” speaking with unusual sharpness.

“Yes, sir.”

In a moment every one present was watching the scene, beginning to smile as they saw Mires start with suspicious alacrity toward the wheels. Some of the men, in order to get as good a view as possible of the expected exhibition, stationed themselves near at hand, having hard work to suppress their merriment in advance.

“Purty stout, air ye?” asked Mires, as he and Jack stood by the wheels.

“I never boasted of my strength,” replied Jack, beginning to wonder why so much interest was being manifested over so slight a matter. His surprise was increased at that moment by discovering Fret Offut among the spectators, his big mouth reaching almost from ear to ear with an idiotic grin.

“Come to see the fun!” declared the latter, finding that he had been seen by Jack.

“I’ll take this one,” said Mires, stooping over the nearest wheel which was half buried in dust and dirt.

Then, without any apparent effort, the small sized workman raised the wheel to his shoulder and walked back from the direction whence they had come.

“Now see the big gawk lift his!” exclaimed Fret Offut, who had somehow been let into the secret. Still ignorant of the deception being played upon him, Jack North bent over to lift the remaining wheel.

Chapter III

A Long Trip Proposed.

Having seen Mires carry off the other wheel with comparative ease, Jack naturally expected to lift the remaining one without trouble.

His amazement may be therefore understood when, at his first effort, he failed to move it an inch from the floor.

It lay there as solid as if bound down!

His failure was the signal for Fret Offut to break out into a loud laugh, which was instantly caught up by the workmen, until the whole building rang with the merriment.

“Baby!” some one cried. “See Mires carry his. North ain’t got the strength of a mouse!”

By that time Mires had reached the opposite end of the shop, and was putting down his burden to turn and join in the outbursts over the discomfiture of his young companion.

Jack had now awakened to the realization that he had been the easy victim of a scheme to cast ridicule upon him.

Mires could never have carried away this wheel. The thought of the trick which had been played upon him aroused all the latent energy he possessed. He did not believe the wheel could weigh five hundred pounds, and if it did not he would lift it, as he believed he could.

Thus, with the shouts and laughter of the spectators ringing in his ears, Jack stooped for a second attempt to accomplish what no one else had ever been able to do.

"I'll grunt for you!" called Offut in derision. "Spit on your hands!" said a workman. Jack compressed his lips for a mighty effort, and his hands closed on the rim of the wheel, while he concentrated every atom of strength he had for the herculean task.

The cries of the onlookers suddenly stopped as they saw, to their amazement, the ponderous object rise from the floor, slowly but surely, until the young workman held it abreast of him. Not a sound broke the deathlike stillness, save for the crunching of his own footsteps, as Jack North walked across the shop and dropped his burden upon the wheel Mires had placed there.

A loud crash succeeded, the heavy iron wheel having broken the imitation into kindling wood and smashed into the floor.

The cries of derision were supplemented by loud calls of admiration, which rang through and through the old building until a perfect din prevailed.

Fret Offut waited to see no more, but stole away unobserved by the stalwart iron workers, who crowded around their victorious companion with hearty congratulations. Jack had won the friendship of nearly all by his feat, while Henshaw at once boasted of the act.

Mires, fancying that the laugh had been turned upon him, and he was about right, allowed all of the bitterness of his sullen nature to be turned against the young apprentice. In his wicked heart he vowed he would humiliate Jack in the eyes of his admirers in some way and at some time. But no opportunity came for him, as month after month passed.

Jack showed a wonderfully industrious nature, and he never seemed idle. When not at work he was studying some part of the ponderous machinery about him, as if anxious to learn all there was to be known about it. The knowledge he thus obtained was to be of inestimable value to him in the scenes to come.

This trait of his pleased Henshaw, who, if a rough man, was honest in his intentions, and he caused Jack's wages to be raised to seven dollars a week. This was done in opposition to his assistant, who had taken a strange dislike to him. His reasons for this will become apparent as we proceed. About that time Jack was surprised to find that Fret Offut had found employment in the building, though it was more as a helper than as a regular workman, his chief task being to wheel the scraps of iron and waste material away and to wait upon the boss of the big steam hammer.

He did not offer to speak to Jack, but the latter soon saw him holding whispered conversations with Mires and the second boss, Furniss, when he felt certain by their looks and motions that he was the subject of their remarks. Once he overheard Offut tell a companion:

"I sha'n't wheel scrap iron always and Jack North won't be boss, either."

Jack had been at the engine works about six months, when he accidentally learned that the company were planning to ship one of their machines to South America, and that they were looking about for a suitable person to send with it, to help unload it properly and set it up. A few days later, as he was leaving the shop to go home, Henshaw came to him, saying:

“Let me put a flea in your ear, Jack. John Fowler has got his eye on you for the one to go to South America.”

Scarcely any other announcement could have brought greater joy to Jack, for he had a great desire to travel, and this long journey would take him away from home for many months, he felt it would be a grand opportunity. But he knew that Furniss had been working for the place, and he could not realize that such good fortune was to fall to him, so he said to Henshaw:

“I thought that Furniss was sure of the chance. I heard him say as much only yesterday.” “A fig for Furniss! Old John had a long talk with me this morning, and I told him you were just the chap for the place, young and capable. He nodded his head and I could see that you were as good as taken. Of course we shall miss you, but it’s a trip a youngster like you can’t afford to miss.”

“I should like to go, Mr. Henshaw, and I thank you for your kind words.”

“Don’t cost nothing,” returned the bluff foreman, as he started homeward.

Jack was too happy over his prospects to mind the baleful looks of Furniss the next day, or to hear the jibes of Fret Offut. Could he have foreseen the startling result he must have been bound with dismay.

The following Monday, when the day’s work was done and he was leaving the shop, Mr. Henshaw came along, and slapping him on the shoulder, said: “Let me congratulate you, my lad. It is just as I said; you are going to South America—if you will.”

“It seems too good to be true, Mr. Henshaw.” “It’s the blessed truth and I know it I don’t blame you for feeling well over such an appointment, for it is something any of us might be glad of. But you deserve it.”

The appearance of Furniss checked Jack’s reply. He could see the other understood that he had lost. He had another proof of the fact before he got home from Fret Offut, who said:

“Feel mighty stuck up, don’t yer? But let me tell yer, ’twon’t do any good.”

This was the first time he had spoken to Jack since he had begun work in the shops, and our hero made no reply.

The following day, as he was about to leave the shop at the close of his work, Jack was accosted by Furniss, who asked him to assist him a moment at the big hammer.

Jack started at once to his help, noticing that the building was completely deserted at the time, except for the second boss and himself; even Henshaw, who generally stayed until after the workmen had left, was gone.

His surprise may be imagined then when he saw Fret Offut step from behind a huge boiler as he approached. Still he did not dream of any sinister purpose in the minds of the two, and he was about to stoop to lift a piece of iron at the request of Furniss, when he discovered a bar of iron so suspended over his head from the cross timber that a slight movement on his part was sure to bring it down upon his head.

No sooner had he seen his precarious situation than he started back, when Fret Offut flung a heavy slug at his feet. The effect was startling, for the concussion on the floor sent the menacing bar overhead downward with fearful force.

Jack succeeded in dodging the blow so far that he escaped the full weight of the falling iron, which struck the floor endwise with a heavy thud. But before he could

get beyond its reach the massive bar tipped over, falling in such way as to strike him in the side of the head, and felling him senseless to the floor.

In a moment Furniss and Offut were bending over him with anxious looks on their grimy countenances.

“Is he killed?” asked the younger of the twain.

Jack answered the question himself by opening his eyes, though he was still too bewildered to attempt to rise.

“What did you do that for?” he demanded.

“Do what?” questioned Fret Offut. “You know well enough. You fixed that bar so it would hit me.”

“Hear the boy talk!” came from Furniss. “It is true. If I get the chance—”

“Stop, you shan’t get us into trouble,” yelled the man, in a rage.

“Not much,” put in Offut. “Let’s teach him a lesson he won’t forget!”

“So we will,” answered Furniss; and both started forward to attack Jack.

Chapter IV

Just in Time.

Though still somewhat dazed by the blow on his head, Jack realized that the unprincipled twain in their desperation would stop short of no crime in order to carry out their purpose.

Thus Furniss had barely laid his hand on him before he was on his feet ready to fight for his life if necessary.

Flinging aside the second boss, he turned to meet the assault of Fret Offut, whom he caught by the collar and flung headlong upon a pile of scrap iron and ashes still warm from the furnace.

Shrieking with pain the big youth scrambled to his feet and began to dance around as if he had a coal of fire in the heel of his shoe.

Furniss rallied to grapple anew with Jack, but though a strong man he found his match. Used to hard work all of his life, Jack’s sinews seemed like bands of steel and there was no breaking from his grasp.

“Help, Offut—quick!” cried Furniss, as his head was jabbed into the midst of a box of coal. “He—he’ll kill me!” spluttered the discomfited man.

But Fret Offut failed for good reasons to heed the supplications of his friend.

The next instant Furniss managed to get a hold on Jack which enabled him to throw him upon the floor.

“Go to South America, will you?” cried the exultant Furniss. “Let that settle it,” and he aimed a furious blow at his victim’s head.

But Jack was too nimble to remain still and receive whatever attack the other might rain upon him, and when Furniss’ fist descended it missed its mark, to strike plump upon the sharp edge of a bar of iron, peeling the skin on its back from knuckle to wrist.

At the same time Jack turned his adversary and, clearing him, vaulted to his feet, carrying the other backwards by the impetuous movement and sending him headfirst into a bucket of water.

Before he could rise Jack had caught him by the throat with one hand, and he immediately began to “churn” the other’s head up and down in the black water, while the discomfited wretch, trying in vain to break away, exclaimed in gasps:

“Help—don’t—you’ll kill me! I—Of—ut—h-e-l-p—murder!”

“Will you promise to let me alone after this?” demanded Jack, giving his victim another plunge in the bucket.

“Yes. Let me go or I’ll tell Fowler. Oh—oh!”

“Tell Fowler, will you?”

“No—no! Let me go!”

“You promise it?”

“Yes,” spluttered the man as soon as he could speak.

“I think that will be enough this time.” declared the triumphant Jack. “If I could get my hands on you, Fret Offut, I would give you a dose of the same medicine.”

“I ain’t done nothing!” cried the terrified youth. “Don’t you dare to touch me!” and by that time he had reached the door, to disappear an instant later.

Feeling that he had nothing more to fear from his enemies, Jack left the shop to go to his home, his mind soon occupied with thoughts of his South American voyage rather than with the more unpleasant memory of his recent trouble with young Offut and Furniss.

Before going direct to his home to tell the news there, Jack sought another home that he might first break the account of his good fortune to one whose fair countenance had been in his mind’s eye all the afternoon.

He knew the hardest part of his starting on his long voyage would be in tearing himself away from a certain blue-eyed damsel named Jenny Moodhead.

At her home he was met by the girl’s mother, who, in answer to his inquiries for Jenny, said:

“Jane is not here, and I do not see why you have not met her, as she said she was going to see you as you came from the shops. I am afraid something has happened to her.”

Without further loss of time, Jack started to retrace the way to the engine shops, though going by a different course from that which he had come.

He had got about half way there, and was passing near an old ruined mill, which stood more than half over the river, when he was startled by the sound of a voice, which was too familiar for him not to recognize.

“Don’t you dare come any nearer, Fret Offut! Stand back, or the worst will be your own!”

It was Jenny speaking, and as Jack dashed down to the side of the old mill he discovered her at the further extremity of the ruins defiantly facing young Offut, who was kept from approaching any nearer to her by a club she held in her hands, uplifted over her head.

Between the two was a gulf of dark waters a dozen feet or more in width, but spanned by a plank over which the girl had evidently passed in reaching her place of retreat.

"I'll take up the plank so you can't come back!" declared young Offut. "You see if you do not answer me in a becoming manner I can—"

Fret Offut did not have the opportunity to finish his sentence before a stout hand was laid on his shoulder and he was plunged headfirst into the river. "Get out the best you can!" cried Jack North.

He turned to the girl. "Has he dared so much as to lay a ringer on you, Jenny?"

"Oh, Jack! I am so glad to see you! No, he had not touched me, though I don't know what he might have done if you had not come. You won't let him drown?"

"It would serve him about right, if I did. But he will take care of himself. See, he is crawling out below the mill. Come with me, Jenny, for I have important news to tell you. I am going to South America!"

"To South America! Oh, Jack, why?"

"The firm want me to go, and they will pay me well for my services. I am to look after some machinery that is to be shipped."

"But you will come back?" questioned Jenny, anxiously.

"Sure, as soon as my task is done. But now tell me about Fret Offut."

"Oh, there is not much to tell. He—he wanted to be sweet on me and—and I wouldn't have it. That made him angry, and he followed me to this place, and—you saw the rest."

"I hope he won't bother you again."

"I don't think he will," said Jenny. "Anyway, I'll keep my eyes open for him."

After that Jack spent a pleasant hour in the company of the girl who was his dearest friend, and then went home to prepare for his trip of so many thousand miles.

His parents already knew something about the proposed journey, so they were not much surprised. They had seen Mr. Fowler and talked it over with the manufacturer. Mrs. North did what she could to get Jack's outfit ready for him.

"I'll be glad to leave such fellows as Fret Offut behind," said Jack, to his father.

"Fret Offut is a bully and a fool," said Mr. North, who was a blunt-spoken man. "He will never get along in life."

Jack had spoken without knowing the truth. He was not to get rid of Fret Offut just yet, as we shall soon see.

Chapter V

On the Island of Robinson Crusoe.

Ho! for South America!

Bravely did the good steamer STANDISH keep on her long, and, at times, stormy voyage to the far distant shore of Western South America. She escaped the severest storms of the Northern Atlantic, crossed the equatorial line in fine shape, and stemmed the furious wrath of Cape Horn in safety. But every one on board felt freer and in better spirits, when at last they entered the Pacific regions where storms are of rare occurrence.

The steamer's destination was Valparaiso, Chili, and the commander talked of getting into port shortly.

Among those looking most hopefully forward to the termination of the voyage was our hero, who had been sent by his employers on the responsible errand of seeing that one of their engines was properly delivered and put into good running order. He fondly believed it was the great opportunity of his life.

He was never more surprised than he was upon finding at the last moment that Fret Offut had been delegated to accompany him as helper.

At first he could not believe it; but there the awkward youth was, and that he was sent for that purpose was plainly indicated by the order from John Fowler & Co.

To his still greater surprise, the other seemed to have forgotten or overlooked their differences, and he greeted Jack with all the warmth of an old friend.

"If he can afford to be friendly I can," thought Jack, who was not a person to cherish long any bitterness of feeling against another, and he resolved to treat Fret as well as possible.

This, coupled with that bond of sympathy for an associate one is sure to have on leaving those dear to him far behind, made the two seem somewhat like friends.

Had Jack known the truth, known the frequent and long conversations his deceitful companion had held with the plotting Furniss, and how the latter had worked to get Offut sent on this voyage with him, our hero would have felt different toward the other. The second boss's parting words had been: "Remember you owe this opportunity to me, Fret Offut, who might have gone but for my willingness to let you. Don't forget either that if, for any reason, North does not get to Valparaiso you will step into his place, and gain the honor he is anxious to get."

This was spoken with such signs and indications as only one in the secret could understand, and young Offut nodded knowingly, as much as to say:

"I understand perfectly, and will not fail in my part to gain our ends."

It may have been that the looked-for opportunity did not come, as he had expected, or that his courage failed him in his cowardly purpose, for no harm befel Jack until on the evening before the day, which, if nothing unfavorable occurred, the commander had promised would bring them within sight of land. Jack stood by the quarter-rail a long time watching the sun sink into the distant water, and then the silent coming of the stars into the firmament overhead.

It was a beautiful evening, though fleecy clouds were beginning to fringe the horizon, and he was certain the whole sky would be obscured soon.

But his mind was more engrossed with thoughts of his parents and Jenny at home than with the calm grandeur of a tropical sea, and he was wondering how many months must pass before he should be able to meet her, when the sound of a cat-like step behind him arrested his attention.

Thinking of no harm, he turned slowly to greet the one approaching, to find himself confronted by the tall figure of Fret Offut.

A look of wild fierceness was on the other's features, and before Jack could speak his arms were uplifted, swinging overhead a belaying pin.

Reading at a glance Offut's horrible purpose, Jack attempted to seize his upraised hands, but he had barely made a move before the weapon descended upon him!

With an indistinct recollection of a dull sense of pain in his head, Jack knew no more until he was brought back to consciousness by the feeling of water around him and it slowly dawned upon him that he had been sent overboard from the ship into the sea by the blow from Fret Offut.

It was too dark for him to see any distance, so he listened for some sound of the steamer.

Once he thought he caught the regular swish, swish of the big wheel; but he must have been mistaken, for after a moment he realized that the STANDISH was not within hearing.

He had begun to shout for help, and this shouting he kept up until he was hoarse, and he felt that it would be better to save all of his strength in the great battle for life ahead.

No one, who has not been there, can know the utter hopelessness of being castaway upon the great, boundless ocean with not even a plank to keep him from a watery grave.

Jack North was brave and sanguine, but for a time he felt that it was useless for him to try and keep up. Then the thought of home and loved ones, with all the bright dreams and hopes of life, gave him the resolution to fight for victory over defeat until the very last. He had heard of sailors who had been cast away, and who had managed to keep afloat a whole night and day. Might not he keep from drowning until morning?

At any rate he would not give up while he had the strength to struggle against fate.

Buoyed up with hopes which he knew were groundless, he swam on and on through the dark expanse of waters girdling him.

When he had gone as far as he deemed prudent he would turn upon his back and thus float upon the bosom of the great deep, borne by its ceaseless tide he knew not whither.

Perhaps he was being carried further and further out to sea, or it might be he was slowly approaching the shore of the southern continent.

That was the longest, most gloomy night Jack North ever knew. He saw nor heard nothing of the steamer during the long hours of darkness and desolation.

With the first faint streak of daylight he scanned the surrounding sea with anxious, eager gaze. But whither he would look, north, south, east or west, not an object broke the monotony of the view.

He felt that he was hopelessly lost, and he wondered in his despair if his true fate would be known.

As it grew lighter he continued to watch the sea for some welcome sight, until he saw, away on his left, a dark rim on the horizon. Was it a cloud or—land?

He dared not hope it was the latter at first, but as it grew plainer he felt a thrill of joy pass through his worn-out frame.

"Land!" he cried, coming near drowning in the exuberance of his new-found discovery.

Even after he had seen land it seemed he was doomed to disappointment.

It did not appear that he had strength to reach it. Still the prospect ahead served to give power to his weary limbs and a new lease of endurance to his overworked body.

As he swam nearer he saw that great pointed peaks pierced the sky wherever he looked, while abrupt walls of rock rose from the water's edge to the height of many hundred feet.

These he realized could not be scaled by him, and as he gazed on the gray, moss-covered rocks dripping with the spray of the ocean that continually beat against their rugged sides, hopelessness again came near overpowering him.

Above the granite front of this lonely island, as he believed it to be, he could see stupendous ridges of reddish earth rise in countless numbers and always running back toward the centre, with here and there green pastures of grass, but he looked in vain for a break in the adamant barrier which made this ocean-bound realm unapproachable.

In his despair he was nearly overjoyed to suddenly see a boat, with two men in it, come around an angle of the rock-bound shore.

He shouted as loudly as he could in his exhausted state for help, and then gave up the battle, and sank.

But strong arms were near, and the boatmen, hearing his cries, rowed rapidly to his assistance and picked him up as he was going down for the last time.

When Jack recovered consciousness he found himself lying on a rude couch, with a friendly face looking into his and his hand held by the same person.

"Well, here you are," said the man. "I had about given up looking for you to come out of it. You must have had a long, hard pull against the sea."

"Where am I?" asked Jack. "Who are you?"

"You are on the island of Robinson Crusoe. As to myself, I am an American by the name of William Pearce. Before I shall ask you even your name I shall advise you to keep quiet and go to sleep if you can. You are among friends."

Jack was fain to follow this well-meant advice, and a few minutes later he was sound asleep.

It was nearly night before he awoke, and even then his friend would not allow him to leave his couch.

"Here is a dish of goat's milk and I will soon have some warm oat porridge."

Jack felt stronger when he had partaken of the simple food offered him, but he was still too weak to move about very much, and in less than five minutes he was again asleep.

He did not awake until the following morning this time, when he found himself in pretty good condition.

His host being absent at the time, he had an opportunity to examine his surroundings. He found himself in a small hut built of the straw of wild oats, interwoven with long, slender sticks, while the roof was treated in the same way. Only a few rather primitive utensils of cooking and living were to be seen, and he was wondering what sort of a hermit he had fallen in with when the man entered.

He was past middle life, with a sunburned, bearded and honest countenance.

Upon seeing that Jack had awakened, his looks instantly brightened and he spoke cheerily:

"Glad to see you looking so well. You will be all right in a day or two."

“Is it possible that I am on the island where Robinson Crusoe spent his lonely years?”

“It is so.”

“I can hardly believe it.”

“Nevertheless it is a fact.”

“If I ever get away from it I will read the story all over again.”

The man laughed.

“That’s natural.

“But do you live here alone?”

“Oh, no; there are six Chilian families here with me. But you are beating me at asking questions, for you have learned all there is to be learned of me, while I cannot name you from any descendant of old Adam.”

Without further delay Jack told his companion the story of his adventures.

Chapter VI

A Terrible Mistake.

Jack found Robinson Crusoe’s island a pleasanter place than he had expected. Among the ridges were many pretty valleys which were covered with patches of woods or grass. Everything bore a peculiar hue of green, from the groves of myrtle, pimento and corkwood to the grassy plots, the natural fields of oats and even to the moss-covered rocks of the spinelike mountains.

The coast, as far as he could see, overhung the sea or rose perpendicular to such a height as to make it inaccessible, except at one place where a rent in the wall allowed man to enter the almost sacred domain.

The rude, picturesque huts of Mr. Pearce and his associates stood in a romantic valley, where the American told him had stood the “castle” of the Crusoe inhabitant of the island, Alexander Selkirk, whose strange story has been read the wide world over.

Jack had been at the island nearly a week, and he was looking forward to an opportunity to go to the mainland in a few days, when Mr. Pearce informed him that something singular had transpired during the night.

“Though no vessel is in sight this morning, I am sure some one landed here last night between midnight and daylight.”

“Do you think there is anything to fear from such a visit, providing some one has been here?”asked Jack.

“I don’t know. This island was used several years as a penal colony for Chili, but an earthquake so upset things that the one hundred and fifty odd prisoners escaped, and since that no one has been sent here. But it has been the refuge of two or three outlaws since, as if the place had a strange fascination for them. Perhaps they think it is a safe place to flee to after what has occurred here. I have had no trouble with them worth mentioning.”

“Do you think one came last night?”

“Looks like it. But I will find out before I am much older. I will get the Chilians to go with us and we will explore the cells.”

Jack was not kept in suspense long as to Mr. Pearce’s meaning.

Upon reaching the foot of a bluff about half a mile from the ruins of what looked like an old fort, but which was now embedded in banks of clay and overgrown with moss and rank weeds, he found that the whole structure had been built of stone.

“It was done by the Chilian government in 1767,” said Mr. Pearce, “and was undone by an earthquake in 1835. This you see here nearest was the front wall of the main rampart. But here is the greatest wonder in the hillside. This old building—fortress, as it might be truthfully called—was the abode of the officers and their men who were stationed here to watch and guard the island, while these other retreats which are marked by those black mouths were used for an altogether different purpose.”

Mr. Pearce pointed, as he spoke, to numerous dark openings in the side of the hill, there being many completely hidden by the rank ferns hanging in festoons at their entrance.

“It was in these pits, dug into the earth to the depth of two or three hundred feet, that the Chilian government confined their convicts, and where, if all reports be true, they underwent tortures that made life a living death. The earthquake tore down all the heavy doors, as if the elements were in league with the poor captives, every one of whom thus managed to escape.

“It is in these places the fugitives who seek this island for safety conceal themselves. We can find some sign at the mouth if any one has entered a cell since yesterday.”

He then led the way along the broken-down entrances of the underground excavations, now occupied by bats, toads and vermin, but where once miserable wrecks of manhood had found a terrible punishment for their crimes.

A wild goat sprang out from one of the cells and bounded away, but no trace of a human being was found, until at last Mr. Pearce stopped before one cell which was reached by descending several stone steps.

“This was one of the cells for exceptionally bad prisoners,” said Mr. Pearce. “It is not as deep as some of the others, but reeks with a cold sweat, and the air is so damp and chilly as to make one shiver the moment he enters. Just think of the poor wretches confined here, where no ray of sunlight could ever reach them, and no living soul to pity them in their hopeless despair! This does not run into the earth more than twenty-five feet. Your eyes are younger and sharper than mine; see if those are not fresh footprints.”

“They are,” replied Jack, as soon as he had made a hasty examination; “and I am sure they are made by an American shoe!”

“Whew!” exclaimed Mr. Pearce, “that makes it more mysterious, and it behooves us to move with great caution. One of us had better remain on the outside, while the other makes an exploration of the den. Which will you do?”

“I will go inside, if it makes no difference to you, only I wish you would let me have one of your pistols.”

“Of course, and you can take this knife, too. Move cautiously, for if there is an American run to earth in there, you may count on it that he will fight for his life. It

will be different from facing one of those Chilians, who make a good deal of noise and but a little resistance.”

Jack promised to act with caution, and taking the weapons tended him by his companion, he boldly pushed his way down the rough stairway leading to the dark dungeon.

“Give the signal at the least sign of danger, and I will be there in a trice,” were Mr. Pearce’s parting words. “Meanwhile if you hear me whistle, don’t fail to come back as quickly as possible.”

By this time Jack was at the foot of the descent, and parting the damp ferns that overhung the mouth of the cell, he was about to enter the dismal passage, when his foot struck something that rustled.

Reaching down in the darkness, his hand touched a sheet of paper or parchment, which he picked up.

He had hardly done this before Mr. Pearce gave a shrill whistle, which caused Jack to return to his side, wondering what had happened.

His surprise may be imagined when he saw a squad of armed men drawn up in front of them!

“They are Government soldiers in search of the fugitive,” whispered Mr. Pearce. “Don’t do anything rash if you value your life. Let me speak to them.”

A short consultation then followed in Spanish, the new-comers all the time covering the twain with their cocked carbines.

Finally Mr. Pearce turned to Jack, saying: “It is just as I thought. They are looking for an escaped prisoner—an Englishman, or rather youth, as they tell me. They think you are the one and demand your immediate surrender. The best thing you can do is to give up without resistance. I will stand by you when the time comes for the need of my help. They won’t believe a word I say now. See they are getting impatient. What answer shall I give them?”

Jack, who did not understand a word that they had said, realized from their manner that he could expect no mercy from the Chilians. If Mr. Pearce could not benefit him now, how could he later? Still his only alternative seemed to be to surrender, upon the condition that he be given fair treatment at the hands of the government.

But notwithstanding this stipulation, no sooner had he signified his intention of yielding without resistance than he was roughly siezed and bound. Then some of his captors dragged him back against the side of the bluff. The leader gave a few words of command to his followers, who obeyed by instantly bringing their firearms to their shoulders, pointed at Jack!

“Great sun!” exclaimed Mr. Pearce, his face turning white as marble as he witnessed this summary threat, “they mean to shoot you on the spot!” He had barely uttered these startling words before the leader of the squad raised his right hand, as a signal for the marksmen to fire.

Chapter VII

A Plea of the Enemy.

Jack realized that only a desperate effort could save him.

Mr. Pearce, whose friendship he had no reason to doubt, stood speechless and horrified at the inhuman act of the Chilians, unable to lift a finger if it would have saved his life.

Jack was standing near to the entrance of the convict cell and as the Chilian commander raised a hand for his men to fire, he suddenly doubled himself up like a jack-knife, turning a complete somersault in the direction of the underground stairway.

His feet had not been secured, though his hands were fastened behind him.

Acting on the impulse of the moment, without any consideration for the result other than an escape from the murderous fire, he plunged head-first into the entrance at the very instant the volley of bullets sped on their deadly mission.

So closely timed were the two actions that the Chilians mistook his jump for the result of their shots, and an exclamation of satisfaction left the leader's lips, while no immediate attempt was made to reach the side of their victim. This enabled Jack to regain his feet and to disappear into the dark mouth of the cavern before his enemies had recovered from their surprise.

Though severely shaken up by his precipitation into this retreat, unheeding the creeping creatures under his feet, which made a furious rush to and fro, Jack groped his way further and further into the gloomy place. The damp, sweaty walls covering him with a slimy moisture. Now and then some of the loosened earth would fall upon him, adding to the uncanny experience of his advance.

He expected the Chilians would follow him, but he hoped in some way he might escape them. He kept on without hearing any sound of a pursuit, until he was suddenly conscious of being confronted by some one, while a trembling voice called out from the darkness ahead:

"Stop! I am armed, and you come nearer at the peril of your life!"

It was too dark for him to see any one, but he heard a slight movement as the words were uttered, and he instantly recalled to mind the fact that the fugitive fleeing from the Chilians was supposed to be hiding in this place.

Accordingly, as he stopped, he said in a low tone:

"Be careful and you have nothing to fear from me."

Jack had been glad to notice that the unknown had used pure English in addressing him. In a moment he asked:

"Who are you?"

"A friendless American boy who has been hunted down like a dog because—"

"Fret Offut!" broke in Jack recognizing the other's voice.

"Jack North!" gasped the fugitive "You have betrayed me, Jack!"

"Not a bit of that. I am here on account of you."

That was no time to question one's motives. Jack knew that the other was his mortal enemy, but just then and there he could do no better than to forget the past. Whatever the offense he had committed against the Chilians, Fret was scarcely in worse color with them than himself.

It did not occur to honest Jack North that by delivering up his enemy he might save his own life.

Though Fret had abused his confidence shamefully, he did not have the wish to give him over to these foreign pursuers. For aught he knew his companion might be as guilty of crime against them as against himself.

Meanwhile why had the Chilians not entered the cell in pursuit of their prisoner? Were they in fear of him? Not so much that as they were in fear of entering that underground retreat, teeming with superstitious traditions.

In fact no Chilian could have been induced to enter there under any provocation short of death!

Mr. Pearce knew this, and when he saw Jack disappear he was confident the lad was safe for awhile.

It is true the leader of the party did command his men to enter, and uttered all sorts of threats against them, but they simply listened without moving.

Neither did their commander offer to lead the way.

Mr. Pearce, knowing this superstitious dread of all Chilians to enter the subterranean prisons, waited until the leader had stopped commanding and abusing his soldiers, when he ventured to interpose on Jack's account.

As he was a man of consequence in the opinion of the Chilian chief, his words soon had the desired effect.

"Somebody,—the person you are in pursuit of—may have landed on the island last night, but this boy is a friend of mine and knows no more of him you want than I do. I vouch for his honesty, and as he has been here over a week you can see that he is not the one you are looking for, who you say must have come here since sunset yesterday."

No doubt the Chilian was glad to get off so easily in doing what he deemed was his duty, for he ordered his men to return to their vessel without further delay.

That was the last to be seen of them, but Mr. Pearce cautiously waited until he saw the ship sailing away from the island before he spoke to Jack.

"Come out of that hole if the bugs have not carried you off," he called out in his blunt way. "The Chilians have gone back to Valparaiso to report that they could not find their man here."

Jack and Fret Offut had come to something of an understanding, though the latter was reluctant to meet Mr. Pearce.

The islander was surprised at sight of him, but Jack hastened to say:

"It proves the person those Chilians were so anxious to catch is an acquaintance of mine, being none other than one of the Standish's passengers."

"A friend of yours, eh? Those infernal—excuse me, I don't believe I will say it. Come, let's go down to the house."

If Mr. Pearce was not pleased with the appearance of young Offut he did not show it, though he told Jack privately that it might be best for all concerned if they should leave the island as soon as an opportunity offered itself.

"You see another searching party may come at any hour, and I might not be as successful with another, particularly with two to answer for."

Jack had no desire to remain any longer than he could help, as pleasant as he had found life with his newly-made friend. He was anxious to get to Valparaiso before the Standish should leave on her return voyage.

He had another reason, too, and a most important one.

He handed the paper he had picked up at the entrance to the convict cell to Mr. Pearce for him to read if possible, for it was written in Spanish, which he could not make out at the time.

Mr. Pearce read it with some difficulty, explaining it as best he could when he had carefully studied it for half a day.

Chapter VIII

The Lonely Pimento.

“The writer of this strange manuscript,” began Mr. Pearce, “was evidently an unlettered person, for it is filled with so many errors as to be difficult to get the author’s meaning in many places. He was also a fugitive from justice.—I should judge, nearly all his life. He speaks of the diamond mines of Brazil and the hoarded treasures of the children of the sun in the same sentence. Then he goes on to describe a wonderful island that he discovered while hiding from pursuers under the shadows of the Andes in Tarapaca, Peru. Let me read:

“I had come out of a dense growth of corkwood to look on a big body of water hemmed in by the mountains, when I saw some way from the shore a small island. I noticed it particularly on account of a solitary pimento tree standing in the centre, with a big rock at its foot.

“I was hard pressed by my enemies, and seeing what I believed was a hole under the rock I swam out to the island. I did find plenty of room to hide in and my pursuers did not think of looking there for me, though they made the entire circuit of the water.

“I stayed there two days before I dared to venture out, but it was not until I had decided to leave the place that I made the most wonderful discovery of my life.

“The island, which was made up mostly of rocks, was fairly honey-combed with tunnels and underground passages, little and big, every one of which was filled with gold!

“Gold lay under my feet; gold on my left hand; gold on my right; gold overhead; gold everywhere! I knew from certain inscriptions that I could partly decipher that this hidden treasure was a part of the Incas wealth in the days of Pizzaro.

“At first I was so bewildered by my discovery that I could do nothing, but finally I took as much of it as I could carry and left the place.

“I was, as I thought, careful to note all of its surroundings so I could come again when I should wish to get the rest of my hoard. I say I did this carefully, but a year and a half later when I came to get the rest of my treasure I could not find it. I could not even find the island, though I went over the ground from Titocaca to Atacama a hundred times.

“I could not even find the lake!

“I felt sure I should know that pimento tree anywhere on account of its odd shape. It had three branches leaving the trunk, one of which ran up several feet higher than the others, a dead branch pointing to the northward like a skeleton finger. There was a rim of mountains around the lake, except for a break in the range on the north.

“Since I have been there the whole mystery has been solved in my mind and I can see that the lonely pimento with its skeleton finger is the key. I was there during the wet—”

“The rest is missing,” said Mr. Pearce, “but I have given you the substance of the illiterate scrawl in tolerable English as far as it remains. Looks as if the sheet had been torn apart. There is a fortune for you if you can only find it.”

Mr. Pearce spoke somewhat lightly, but Jack could see that he was deeply interested in the account.

Our hero had been cautious enough not to let Fret Offut into the secret, knowing he could not be trusted.

“I believe I could find that wonderful island which plays at hide and seek if I were to try it,” said Mr. Pearce. “What do you say to going fortune hunting?”

Naturally Jack’s sanguine nature was thoroughly aroused and nothing could have suited him better, and from that time they discussed the lost island with its treasure at every opportunity they had when Fret was not with them.

There was one serious drawback to their plans.

It might be a long time before they would have an opportunity to leave the island where Robinson Crusoe had spent so many lonely years. During his stay there Jack explored every part of the island. He noticed that the soil had every promise of great fertility, but that even his friend had so far taken on the laziness of the Chilians that he cultivated as little as possible. This island had become a sort of rendezvous for the ships rounding Cape Horn, and many of them had contributed to its natural and animal wealth by planting orchards and sowing grains and in leaving there many domesticated creatures.

But at this season of the year it was likely to be considerable time before a vessel should touch there, and Jack had been on Robinson Crusoe’s island a little over a month, before he found a chance to go to Valparaiso.

He was glad for the opportunity, but disappointed at the last moment to find that Mr. Pearce had concluded to give up going with him.

“Too much like work, Jack. You see I have fitted in here, and if we should find that treasure it would be of no earthly good to me as I am alone in the world. I hope you will find it, my lad, and that it will help you and Jenny to make a happy home. Good bye.”

“Good bye,” said Jack, as he pressed his friend’s hand warmly, for he had grown to like the kindhearted gentleman.

Fret Offut nodded lightly to the other, as he entered the boat which was to take them to the vessel.

The trip to Valparaiso was uneventful, but there Jack met with a great disappointment.

The STANDISH had left for its homeward voyage.

Thus Jack found himself left alone among strangers, save for the companionship of Fret Offut, who seemed disposed to hold aloof from him. The other had refused to tell him the cause of his being hunted by the Chilians, though Jack suspected that it was in some way the result of his attack upon him. Fret had told enough in his sleep for our hero to know that he had been arrested for the deed, and that he had afterwards escaped. But Jack did not feel like saying anything to Fret about it, as long as he showed no inclination to mention the subject.

Knowing that it might be several months before he could return to his home and being short of money, Jack at once began to look about for an opportunity to earn a living. Unable to find anything to do in Valparaiso, he walked to Tocopilla, though Fret declined to accompany him. In this town he found work as a machinist at the princely income of four Spanish dollars a week. But this was better than nothing and he went to work with a hearty good will.

He worked in Tocopilla steadily for a month. During the time he heard nothing from home or from Fret Offut.

He still kept the paper describing the mysterious island holding its vast, hidden treasure, but he had not felt like undertaking the long journey necessary to search for it.

Seeing no prospect of advance in his position, Jack was beginning to think of seeking his fortune elsewhere, when his whole future life was changed into a different groove by the appearance of a stranger at the place where he was working.

The newcomer was a Peruvian, who had been an engineer on a railroad running through the southern part of Peru, but had left to come to Tocopilla.

He and Jack soon became friends, when the latter said to him one day:

“What was the trouble with engineering, that you should leave to come here, where you can’t begin to get the pay you did there?”

“The pay was good enough, but the shooting was better. I care more for my life than I do for a few silver doubloons.”

“I am afraid I do not understand you. I was not aware that shooting and engineering went together.”

“They do in the case of the St. Resa road, Jack.”

“Tell me about it, Francis. I am interested.”

“Then I can take out that interest shortly. The road runs through debatable ground from St. Resa to de la Pama. Not an inch of it but what is being hotly contested. But it isn’t the regulars that make the trouble, for at present the territory belongs to Peru, though how soon she will lose it is not for me to say. It’s the murderous bush-raiders that are making the trouble.”

“Who are the bush-raiders?”

“That question shows a lamentable ignorance. The bush-raiders are bands of guérillas united to make war upon anybody and anything that crosses their path. They pretend to favor Chili, but they are merely using that for a cloak, and are robbers of the worst class, outlawed by all governments. Of course you know that Chili and Peru are at war?”

“I have heard of it.”

“Well, these bush-raiders, pretending to favor Chili, are making hot times all along the St. Resa. It is necessary to keep the road open if Peru hopes to hold the country, and the company are doing their best, backed by the government. They have had as many as twenty men on in the last six months.

“The three men on before me were killed by the bush-raiders, and the one before the first of them fell off and was killed while running the gantlet of fire set by the fiends.”

“You say the road is all in Peru?”

“Yes, in Southern Peru. It runs through the nitrate regions. Bless me if I don’t think there is a fortune in those mines if properly worked.

“Say, Jack, if you are dissatisfied with the money you are making here there is an opportunity for you. You are young and full of fire, just such a rash head as the bush-raiders like to get hold of. The company is offering as high as twenty pistoles a month for a man to run that engine. More for one day than you get here in a week. But bless me, if every pistole was a doubloon and I had as many of them as I could carry I would not try another trip. What are a few paltry pistoles to a man’s life?”

“I believe I would like to get that position as engineer on the St. Resa,” said Jack, after a moment’s pause. “I can run an engine, you know.”

“You have only to apply for it,” replied the other. “But say, Jack, if you should be fool enough to go up to get killed on that old engine, you had better take a fireman along with you, for you will not be able to find a helper up that way.”

Another silence fell upon the twain, during which Jack’s hands were not as busy as his brains, until finally he laid aside his work, saying in his blunt way:

“I shall start within a week for St. Resa, unless in the meantime I get some sort of word from John Fowler & Company, or from my folks.”

After that the days flew by on the wings of the wind. Eagerly Jack waited for some kind of word from his home, but not a letter reached him, for the reason that his folks were very poor and had many troubles of their own, and because the manufacturing company that had sent him to South America were in financial difficulties.

Sunday passed and then Monday, and the week came to an end. Jack had another talk with the Peruvian about the railroad position and then slapped his hands together.

“I’m going to have a try at it, come what may,” he said, determinedly.

Chapter IX

Jack Becomes an Engineer.

Jack as usual, was as good as his word.

He stopped long enough to lay down his tools and seek the foreman for a leave of absence.

“Going to St. Resa? You will make the journey but one way. You will never come back.”

But Jack was determined, and nothing that the other could tell him of the perils he was sure to encounter could deter him from his purpose.

An hour later he turned his back on Tocopilla.

He was passing one of the outer gates, near the edge of the city, when he was stopped by one of the many beggars which invest the town.

“Only a miserable pittance,” implored the ragged wretch, holding out a dirty hand for the gift.

Something in the beggar’s tone and manner arrested Jack’s attention. He had been addressed in English, which was unusual, but there was more than the language to attract him to the poor alms seeker.

Then, as he bent a closer gaze on the person, he exclaimed:

“Fret Offut! can this be you?”

“Jack North!” exclaimed the other. “I did not think of seeing you here.”

“Nor I you, most of all in this condition.”

“It was all I could do, Jack,” whined the other. “I have had such bad luck since you left me! But ain’t you looking like a peacock!”

“I have managed to get a living by working hard.”

“I’ll warrant you have; but I wouldn’t work at the starvation wages they offered me. Say, where are you going?”

“To St. Resa.”

“In South Peru?”

“Yes.”

“What do you expect to do there?”

“Going to apply for a situation as engineer on a railroad.”

“Whew! I heard a man say this morning they were offering big pay. Let me go with you, Jack? You will do this for old time’s sake? I will be fireman.”

Jack’s first thought was to refuse the other’s company. He felt that Fret had already done him harm enough, and that his presence would be a positive injury to him. But upon second thought he became more generous. In spite of all Fret had done against him he could not help pitying the young fellow now in his forlorn condition, and thus he said:

“If you will promise that you will not try to make trouble for me and that you will do the very best you can for yourself. You mustn’t forget, too, that you are going where you may not come back alive.”

Fret Offut promised very solemnly to all that Jack asked, and the couple started on their hazardous journey into the interior of the country which was about to become the battleground of three nations.

They received a warm welcome at the railroad company’s office as soon as the object of their call was known. It had been a week since the last train had gone over the route, and a big accumulation of freight wanted to be moved. They were offered big wages and accepted.

“Well, Fret, we’re in for it now,” said Jack, as they went to the station to make their first trip.

The young fireman made no reply. He was already beginning to regret the step he had taken, though Jack’s fearlessness was not without its effect on him.

A big crowd was at the station to see the train start, which made Fret feel the importance of his position.

The train had a fifty-mile run and Jack found that he was expected to make it and return the same day. This did not seem a difficult task, providing the bush-raiders let them alone.

The road was in a terrible condition, yet the first trip was made without adventure and Fret's spirits rose.

"Probably the bush-raiders did not know we were going yesterday," said Jack, as his helper was boasting of their easy job.

Jack could not say as much when he got back from his second trip, for no less than three shots had been fired into the caboose.

Fret Offut was in genuine alarm. The situation was worse than had been described to Jack. Reports showed that the bush-raiders were gaining in numbers every day, and growing more bold as they increased in strength. The country, sparsely settled, through which the railroad ran seemed especially fitted for their guerrilla warfare, to say nothing of the poor state of the road-bed, which at places actually made the passage dangerous. Then, too, the cars and engine were cheap and simple affairs, offering no protection from the bullets of the enemies.

But Jack had no intention of giving up at this stage of the situation, and Fret concluded to risk a third trip.

The company were anxious for the train to be kept running, but offered no protection, if it could supply any.

The round trip on this day was made without any shots being fired by the enemies, though at least twenty bush-raiders were seen drawn up in sight of the train, as it wound its way through one of the gloomiest spots of the entire route.

One of the disreputable looking party waved a red cloth on the muzzle of his short-barreled carbine as they whisked past.

"Look out for to-morrow," said Jack. "That looks to me like a sort of warning."

It proved that he was not the only one who had his suspicions, for as he swung himself upon the engine the following morning some one stepped from out of the motley crowd collected about the station and thrusting a scrap of paper into his hand instantly disappeared.

As soon as they were fairly on their way Jack smoothed out the crumpled paper to read in a scrawling hand:

"Look out for the bush-raiders to-day."

The sheet bore no signature or date.

"Looks like a scare by some one," remarked Jack, as he handed the missive to Fret. "But there can be no harm in keeping a sharp lookout," he admitted. "I suppose the trouble has got to begin soon, and it might as well be to-day as to-morrow."

Fret Offut, whose stock of courage was small, turned pale, as he read the brief message:

"You ain't going to keep on, Jack?"

"What else are we hired for? We should be the laughing stock of the country if we stopped now."

"But this warning makes it different."

“Not a bit as I can see. We came up here expecting to take our chances, and as for me it seems the bush-raiders have been very modest in opening proceedings. It is too late for us to turn back. I—”

“No—no! Stop, Jack, and I will get off.”

“If you don’t get off until I stop you will ride into de la Pama. Now don’t be foolish and let that little piece of paper upset you. It was no more than we expected. Keep a cool head and stand to your post.

“It may not be as bad as it threatens. But if you persist in leaving you can do so when we have made this trip. I don’t propose to be left in the lurch by losing my fireman at a time I cannot afford to let him go.”

Jack’s quiet determination and assurance served to quiet Fret’s fears, so he said nothing further about quitting his duty.

After leaving St. Resa, the train, which was a mixed one, made up of two passenger coaches and a dozen freight cars, had to stop at irregular intervals, following which the road ran through a twenty-mile wilderness, the most of the way rugged in the extreme.

It was during this part of the journey that Jack expected trouble if anywhere, and as he approached the broken region he kept a sharp watch on every hand.

Fret, though pale and trembling, kept his post.

“Give me every pound of steam possible,” said Jack. “If we don’t go through Whirlwind Gap flying it will be because the old engine has lost her cunning.”

They were now rushing along at a tremendous rate of speed considering the condition of the track, and the old engine rocked and lurched as if it would leave the track at any moment. There were but a few passengers aboard, for only those who were compelled to do so traveled during this dangerous period. Jack knew there was a valuable freight behind him, to say nothing of human lives, and he was determined to get into de la Pama if it lay in his power.

Thus, with a full realization of the peril of his situation, he was standing at his post, with one hand on the throttle and the other on the reversing lever, peering intently ahead, taking in every object as they sped furiously over the rails, when he suddenly beheld a sight which for a moment fairly took away his breath.

They were swiftly approaching the foot of a high bluff, upon the top of which he had discovered a dozen of the bush-raiders looking down upon him. But they were not the most startling part of what he saw and heard.

As the train dashed madly under the rocky wall, above its terrific thunder rang a deafening crash, and he saw with horror a huge boulder coming down the side of the cliff, directly toward the engine!

It had been loosened from its bed by the bush-raiders, and so well had they timed their work that it would be impossible for the engine to get beyond its reach before the rock should fall upon it!

It would be equally hazardous to try and stop the train.

Fret Offut had seen the appalling sight, and with a despairing cry, feeling that it would be death to remain on the engine, he leaped far out over the embankment.

“Fret!” cried Jack, but no answer came back to the call.

Jack North felt that it was all over with him, but true to the instinct of his nature, he stood bravely at his post.

Chapter X

A Narrow Escape.

With the wild cry of Fret Offut and the exultant yells of the bush-raiders ringing in his ears above the thunder of the rushing train, Jack North heard the ominous crash, of the descending boulder, and saw with a dazed look its swift approach.

The locomotive, throbbing and panting like a human being in a race for life, was fairly flying along the winding track.

It all lasted but a moment, the downward rush of the deadly body, the cries of exultation and despair, the lightning-like passing of the fatal spot by the engine, and the ordeal was over as quickly as it had come!

The descent of the ponderous missile was swift and sure until a projection on the side of the cliff was reached, when with a terrific concussion the boulder glanced. It suddenly shot outward like a cannon ball, and was carried fairly over the engine into the gulch below.

Jack witnessed this miraculous movement with breathless eagerness bordering upon terror.

The huge rock passed so near that it scraped the top of the caboose, and the current of air it raised swept the boy engineer's cap from his head.

The train had got its length beyond the place before Jack could realize that he had escaped.

The bush-raiders reminded him of it then, if he needed any further notification, by a volley of bullets and renewed yells of rage.

Though some of the leaden missiles flew uncomfortably near his head, Jack was unharmed, and as he was borne on by the iron horse around the next curve in the track, leaving his enemies out of sight, he offered a prayer of thankfulness for his providential escape.

Fret, he was certain, must have been killed by his mad leap from the engine. As much as he would have liked to have gone back and looked for the youth, he knew such a course would have been the height of folly. Besides his own life to look after, there were the passengers who had intrusted themselves to his care.

"Poor Fret! I could do no good now, and I must remember the others. If you had only remained on the engine it would have been better for you."

To his infinite relief, Jack saw nor heard nothing further of the baffled bush-raiders, who must have been greatly surprised at the escape of the train with its rich freight.

At the first station, which was several miles away from the scene of the outlaws' attack, the young engineer told of the loss of his fireman and his own narrow escape from death, when an armed squad of men started to search for the body of the missing youth, and to rout the bush-raiders if they could be found.

Finding an assistant at this place, Jack finished his run to de la Pama and then came back to this station, which was known as Resaca.

The relief party had not returned, but Jack was told that a bridge had been found to be unsafe for the passage of the train, so he could not reach St Resa that day, while it might be a week before the road would be in a condition to resume his regular trips. But he was willingly allowed to start after the relief party with the engine and one car, accompanied by a dozen armed men.

They were approaching the bridge mentioned, when they met the others coming back, bearing in their midst the lifeless form of Fret Offut.

Jack immediately stopped to have the body of his associate put on the car, when he started on the return to Resaca.

The untimely fate of Fret Offut impressed him with the great uncertainty of life. It was true the other had never been his friend, but now that was forgotten and he felt a deep regret over the youth's sad end.

The return to Resaca was made in safety. In fact nothing had been seen of the raiders since the start, and it was uncertain what might be their next move.

The following day Jack saw that Fret's body was given burial in a little plot within sight of the low-walled church of this clustered settlement, he being the only mourner.

"If I should fall in my hazardous work, I could not expect as much as poor Fret gets in this land of strangers. The last bond between this wild country and home seems to be broken. Little did we think of this, Fret, when we anticipated that South American trip!"

The last sad duty done for Fret Offut, and finding that the bridge would not be repaired inside of a week, Jack resolved to take a little outing on his own account.

He still carried with him the paper so strangely found on Robinson Crusoe island, and he was determined to make a search for the hidden treasure which it mentioned.

Accordingly, mounted on a small but sure-footed and faithful pony, with a supply of provisions, Jack set out on his uncertain journey without telling any one his intentions, little dreaming of the result which was to come of his secret movement.

He believed the mysterious island was nearly north of Resaca, so he shaped his course in that direction, keeping a sharp lookout for any enemy that might be in his pathway.

He was in the heart of the great dry region of South America, a district of nearly a thousand miles in length, where rain seldom if ever falls, and the country is afforded sufficient moisture by the sea vapors condensed on the Andes and sent down upon the plains and lowlands. The desert of Atacama lay many miles to the south, but as he progressed he often found sections of the country without a thing growing upon the land, though sometimes these spots were bordered by the most abundant growth he had ever seen, even in that realm of grand forests and magnificent flora.

Everywhere, save on these dark patches of waste land, the vegetation was on the boldest scale imaginable, the magnitude of the trees being simply beyond the comprehension of him who had never seen them, while some of even the largest were adorned with beautiful flowers, making them seem like gardens of themselves.

On account of the density of the growth, Jack often found it difficult to advance, and many times he was obliged to make long detours in order to reach a certain point.

Zig-zagging about, always keeping his eyes open for bush-raiders, wild beasts, and, above all, for the strange island, he had spent four days in the wilderness, when he felt that it was time for him to think of returning to civilization.

He had seen no sign of the looked-for body of inland water with its treasure island, though the increasing presence of cinchona trees told him that he was already ascending into the region of the Peruvian Andes.

"I am sure it is at the foot of these mountains that the strange island exists," he thought, as he paused on the summit of one of the foothills of the snow-crowned Monarch of Mountains. "But there is no sign of water, and how can I expect to find an island where there is no water?"

The involuntary speech brought a smile to his lips. As he would explain his thoughts, he said aloud:

"Somehow I got it into my head that there was a lake in this region, and there I was to find my treasure island. But I have been a fool to look for either. Come, Juan," patting the neck of his pony, "let us go back while we have sense enough to do so."

But while he spoke he lingered around the place, as if there was some strong fascination for him. It was a beautiful scene, made up almost entirely of forest, but such a forest as only Peru, with its wonderful natural wealth, can produce.

The trees were composed largely of rosewoods in all their varied beauty, the giant quassia in all their hues and tints of foliage, with a sprinkling of cinchona, lending a happy blending of more sober coloring, while from the lowlands was wafted to him on the gentle breeze of that tropical clime the perfume of the tinga.

The finger of silence lay on the lip of Nature, even the broad leaves of the quassia rising and falling on the shifting breaths of air, without that peculiar rustling sound generally belonging to the forest domain.

It was the most beautiful scene he had ever looked upon, and as he allowed his gaze to slowly move around the encircling country, he found himself looking down upon the strangest valley or mountain pocket he had ever beheld.

The singular feature of this isolated, wood-environed retreat was its complete absence of all kinds of growth, except for a sort of silky grass which covered its uneven surface like a rich carpet of the deepest green tint. Near the centre was an oval elevation of rock and earth higher by a few feet than knobs and miniature hills which dotted it elsewhere.

It was bare of vegetation, not even the silken tasia ornamenting its sides, though a solitary tree did rise in lonely grandeur from its utmost crest.

Jack uttered a low exclamation as he saw that this tree was a pimento.

In a moment his mind reverted to the description given in the strange manuscript, but a look of disappointment succeeded his eager anticipation.

"What a fool!" he exclaimed. "That tree stood on an island—"

A rustle in the undergrowth arrested his attention at that moment, and, before he could avoid the unexpected attack, a dark lissom body shot through the air, to alight squarely upon his pony, that, with a snort of terror, started madly through the growth.

Chapter XI

Under the Head of a Jaguar.

Jack was nearly unseated by the sudden dash of his pony, and managing to retain his position he was in imminent danger of being swept off by the branches of the trees.

The deep growl of the creature at his back rang in his ears, and he could feel the poor pony quiver in every muscle, as the fearful claws of the brute were buried deep into its flesh.

This occupied but a moment's time from the attack of the wild beast to the end of the pony's flight, but it was such a moment as Jack never forgot.

He had seen a precipice in the pathway of the terrified animal, but not in season to stop the maddened creature or turn it aside, though he did make a frantic effort to do so. As if bent upon its own destruction, the pony made a suicidal leap down the precipitous descent.

The frightened creature struck upon its feet, but immediately fell over on its right side, carrying its rider with it and pinning him under its body.

The savage beast had not lost its hold, and as Jack lay there within its deadly reach he saw for the first time that it was the most dreaded of the wild beasts of South America, the jaguar.

He had barely taken a swift glance at the furious brute before a warning growl above him broke the momentary silence and then a second form, the mate of that beside him, plunged down from the top of the cliff, landing beside the first, that uttered a fierce growl at the same time.

Jack's heart fairly stopped its beating, and finding himself unable to move his right limb, he felt that it was all over with him.

The pony had apparently been killed by its fall, together with the attack of the jaguar, as it did not move after it fell over on its side.

The ferocious beasts, with a succession of sharp growls and snarls, began to feast upon the still warm carcass of the poor horse.

It was fortunate, and showed Jack's remarkable presence of mind as well, that at that critical moment he remembered that old hunters had said if one feigned death he might escape the attack of a wild beast under ordinary circumstances, the story of Dr. Livingstone lying under the lion's paw coming vividly into his mind. But his left leg lay on top of the pony's body and close to where the two jaguars were exercising their teeth and claws on the flesh.

That morning before starting from Resaca he had put on a pair of boots with stout tops as a means of protection from the bushes and brambles he might encounter on his long ride. But he could not hope these would protect him long, if at all, from the attacks of the voracious brutes.

Words cannot describe his feelings as he lay there listening to the ominous growls and crunching of the hungry animals, expecting every moment to feel their sharp teeth in his own flesh.

Two or three times he felt one or the other of the jaguars push savagely against his foot, which was lifted and carried forward upon the pony's neck in their eagerness to get at the warm meat.

All of that horrible scene Jack heard and felt rather than saw, for he did not dare to open his eyes—dare to draw a full breath.

After awhile he heard one of the pair move away a short distance, and he could hear it licking its dripping chops after its feast.

Its mate continued its voracious attacks upon the carcass, the grinding of its jaws and the crackling of the pony's bones making horrible sounds for the helpless boy.

When this had continued for several minutes longer, the second jaguar stopped eating and began to lick Jack's boots.

Nothing so far had equaled the horror of that sensation.

It seemed to Jack that he must go mad if it continued long!

After what seemed a long time to him in his intense agony, the dull, rasping sound ceased; the jaguar had ended its licking, but, as if loath to leave the spot, it allowed its head to fall forward on the half eaten body, with its nostrils lying on Jack's foot. Its slow and regular breathing finally told that it had fallen asleep after eating its dinner.

Jack a little later heard the cat-like steps of its mate leaving the place, until the pitter-patter died away in the distance.

Then, for the first time, he dared to open his eyes, though he did not venture to move his head or hand a particle.

He could see the sleeping jaguar's head and that was all that was in sight of the creature, that still remained motionless but likely to start up at his first movement.

As Jack's gaze followed his narrow orbit of vision he soon saw his firearm, which had slipped from him in his ride over the precipice and fallen near where he lay in that terrible situation.

He had no sooner seen the weapon than a wild desire to get possession of it filled his mind. If he only had that in his hands he believed he could shoot the jaguar before it could do him harm.

The longer he pondered upon this the stronger became the desire to make the attempt. Failure could not be any worse than that awful suspense, which in all probability must end in death.

Then, as he realized that the jaguar's mate might return at any moment, he resolved to make the bold venture without more delay.

He was first careful to make himself sure that the brute was still asleep, when he slowly and cautiously raised his hand enough to reach for the carbine, which fortunately lay stock toward him.

Not a sound broke the deathlike stillness of the lonely scene, save the labored breathing of the sleeping jaguar.

Never allowing his gaze to leave the creature, he continued to reach for the firearm until he felt his hand touch the stock.

As complete control as he had maintained over himself so far in the trying ordeal, at this critical moment he so far forgot himself as to draw a long breath—a breath of relief to think that he had something with which to defend himself.

That breath was instantly answered by a terrific growl!

It had awakened the light-sleeping beast, which quickly raised its head, and its whole appearance immediately changed, as it glared furiously around.

It seemed to realize at once that it had been fooled by this human creature within its clutch, and with another growl, louder, fiercer and more startling than any yet, it prepared to spring on its new victim.

But it was no quicker of action than Jack, who knew that his life hung on prompt work. At the same time he lifted the carbine from the ground, he cocked the weapon. At that moment the open jaws of the aroused jaguar were thrust into his face, and the hot breath of the wild creature fanned his cheek. The next instant he ran the muzzle of the firearm into the maddened brute's throat and pulled the trigger.

A dull report followed, the jaguar's head was blown into fragments, and Jack knew that his life was saved.

Chapter XII

Put to the Test.

Though he had no more to fear from this jaguar, Jack knew that its mate was likely to return at any moment, and as soon as he had recovered somewhat from the effect of the ordeal through which he had passed, he freed himself from the weight of the pony's body.

He was glad to find that his limb had not received any serious injury, though it was so paralyzed from lying under the pressure that it was a few minutes before he could stand alone.

But he lost no more time than he could avoid before he left the place, feeling that his situation even then was not pleasant to contemplate. He was not only afoot in the heart of a trackless wilderness, but many miles from the nearest point of civilization.

Half an hour after leaving the scene of the jaguar's attack, he made a discovery which caused him no little concern.

He had lost his compass.

Realizing the risk of returning to the fatal spot, as well as the uncertainty of finding the lost instrument, he kept on without it, endeavoring to pursue as direct a course as possible.

In this he was unsuccessful, and two days later he was wandering at random through the intricate labyrinths of a Peruvian forest, nearly worn out and disheartened.

Hoping that his shots might be heard by some one who would come to his rescue, he had fired all but the last load of ammunition he had with him, and that charge was in his carbine.

"I might as well discharge that," he said to himself. "It is my last chance and I might as well take it now as later. It is useless for me to try to find my way out of this wilderness."

In his desperation he cocked the weapon, and pointing it skyward pulled the trigger.

Loud and long rang out the report on the deep silence of the forest, the distant foothills taking up the sound and flinging it back to the valleys in echoes that repeated the detonation far and wide. As the last sullen sound died away in the distance he leaned against one of the trees, saying half aloud:

"I might as well meet the worst here as anywhere."

Five, ten, fifteen minutes passed away, and satisfied that his last shot had been fired in vain, Jack started to resume his aimless wanderings, when the sound of footsteps fell upon his ears.

At first he thought it might be some wild beast prowling through the woods, but it was not long before a human figure burst into sight.

There was little of beauty in the youthful stranger who had thus unceremoniously appeared, but Jack had never been so glad to see any one in his life.

At sight of his woebegone countenance the newcomer came to a sudden halt in his impetuous advance, exclaiming in a voice with a peculiar and characteristic nasal twang:

"Consarn ye! who air yeou scrouched down there in that way? Aair yeou the feller who has been wasting ammunition so like a scart peon?"

The speaker's tone was not unfriendly, and Jack was nearly overjoyed to find that the new-comer was not a Peruvian.

Springing from his seat on a fallen tree, where he had sunk in his respair, he cried in genuine gladness:

"You're an American!"

"No more'n yeou air!" replied the other, brushing back his long blonde hair from his forehead as he spoke, and looking straight into our hero's countenance with a pair of deep blue eyes.

Then, when the two had stared upon each other for fully a minute, both burst into a fit of laughter.

"Shoo neow!" exclaimed the Yankee boy, "who air yeou and what air yeou doing here?"

"I might ask the same question of you," replied Jack. "My name is John North and I come from Banton, Connecticut.

"Bet yeou air called Jack every time. My name is Plummer Plucky, but I'm called Plum for short, though that is all they can make short about me. I hail from New England too, and I'll bet my dad is hoeing taters in sight of Plymouth Rock."

"I am lost in this wilderness," went on Jack. "I hope you can show me the way out."

"Bet your boots on that. I live, leastways stop, not three hours' tramp from here, though if yeou had come to-morrer yeou wouldn't found me here. I have been

working on the estancia of Don de Estuaray, the dirtiest, meanest, miserliest, yellowest old Spaniard that ever drew the breath o' this beautiful country."

"Evidently you love the Don," said Jack, with a smile.

"Do I? Do you know what he pays me fer work thet's enough to kill a man?"

"I haven't the slightest idea."

"No more you have. He pays me three dollars and sixty cents a month—think of it—if you can!"

"That's a small fortune" went on Jack. He rather liked the fellow before him. "I suppose you've got a pile saved up in the bank out of it."

"Think so? Consarn ye, yer ain't got no right to think so!" And now the other really looked somewhat angry.

"No, I don't think so," answered Jack, promptly. "I was only fooling. They don't pay big wages down here—I've found that out—down near the coast, where I worked at starvation wages myself."

"Wall, I aint jest starved," said the other youth, somewhat mollified. "I git feed enough—leas'-wise, I take what I want. But it ain't enough money—no it ain't—nohow, consarn him anyway!"

Jack had too much at stake to desire a quarrel with his new-found acquaintance, so he hastened to say:

"I hope you will forgive me if I have said anything to offend. I trust we shall be friends."

Whatever of anger Plum had shown quickly left his honest countenance, and frankly holding out a hand, he said:

"I never pick a quarrel with any one, but I won't let any one tread on my toes. I reckon we shall be friends."

The clasp of the hands which followed cemented the firmest friendship of Jack North's life, an acquaintance which, notwithstanding its inauspicious beginning, was destined to ripen into a heart-felt intimacy.

The hand-shaking over, the twain, Plum leading the way, started in the direction whence the latter had come at the sound of Jack's carbine. On the way toward the estancia where the former had been working, our hero learned the complete story of his past life; how he had left home to win a fortune and drifted over the world until he was now employed by this Don de Estuaray at the princely sum which had been the crumb of argument between them a few minutes before.

Jack in turn told the other his story, except that part bearing upon the island of treasure, and long before they had reached signs of civilization they had become fast friends.

So favorably impressed was Jack with the appearance of his new-found chum that he proposed that Plum should apply for the position of fireman on the St. Resa railroad, a proposition which met the other boy's hearty approval the moment he learned the wages he was likely to get His first question was:

"Do yeou s'pose they will have me?"

"Gladly. It isn't a question of that, but whether you have the sand to stand up in a spot where you are likely to lose your life any minute."

"Reckon I can stand up where you can, and if I do lay down it will be to stay there. Give me your hand, old feller. I like yeou."

They were now approaching the estancia of Don de Estuaray, who lived in a pleasant valley several miles from any settlement, and as they advanced Jack could not help noticing the tall growth of a patch of vegetation on their right hand, as they were entering the spacious grounds.

To his wonder he saw cotton plants that reached far above his head and sugar cane which stood like forest trees. Plum Plucky, standing on his shoulders, with Fret Offut, had he been living then and there, on his shoulders, could not have reached the top of the lowest plants!

He saw indigo plants that amazed him for their size, and altogether it was such a sight as he had never seen.

A short distance away he saw a field of oats which reared their heads into the air to a height of more than fifteen feet.

Plum Plucky seeing the look of surprise on his countenance, said:

“Can’t guess what made that stuff grow so? I can tell you. I just brought down some of that funny dirt found in the barren spots on the hills yonder and put a good lot round the roots. It beats all creation how it sends the stuff into the air. The don said I’d kill it all, but I knowed better, for I had seen the wild stuff growing like fun all round the edges of sich places. But it don’t seem to hitch on in the spots themselves. S’pect it’s too stout there.”

Jack at once recalled the accounts he had heard of the nitrate beds on the Peruvian hills, though he did not dream then of the importance of this discovery to him.

Our hero was anxious to get back to Resaca, knowing that his prolonged absence might have already cost him his situation as engineer on the railroad, and as Plum Plucky had fully decided to go with him, they lost no further time in starting for that place.

They found the railroad officials in a fever of excitement.

Believing that Jack had left them and finding no one to take his place, the bush-raiders having grown bolder in their depredations, in their despair, the managers were offering double their previous pay for a man who would dare to undertake the work of getting a train through from St. Resa to de la Pama.

Jack felt unbounded delight upon finding that the pay had been raised to over a hundred dollars a trip, and without any explanation he offered himself for the situation a second time.

He was gladly accepted, with no questions asked while Plum was given the position of fireman at a salary which caused him to look with amazement.

“Well!” he exclaimed, “it’s too good to last.”

“Wait till you meet the bush-raiders,” said Jack.

“I reckon I can take any medicine that you can,” was the answer, and the boy engineer realized that he had filled Fret Offut’s place with a companion of altogether different make-up.

Somewhat to their surprise three trips were made without any molestation from the outlaw band, when the young couple were put to a test few would have the courage to meet.

A party of Peruvian soldiers had been sent out to protect, as far as possible, the road, but upon this run Jack learned at a small station before coming to the stream where the bridge had been repaired, that this squad had been completely

routed by the outlaws of the forest, and the victorious raiders were lying in wait for the train.

In this dangerous prospect every passenger left the cars at this place, but the order came for the train to go on if a suitable escort could be raised.

In twenty minutes as many armed men were waiting a start, though, as Jack looked over the motley party, he realized that not one of them would be worth a fig in a fight with the bush-raiders. Worse than that, he felt confident that the majority, if not all, were in league with the outlaws, and when the proper time came would openly join with them in trying to capture the train.

But the station agent, blind to this fact, priding himself upon having done his duty, pompously ordered Jack to proceed on his way.

As if not to be outdone, the conductor who remained with one brakeman, reiterated the command.

"It looks so we were in for it," said Jack, as he took his post at the lever. "What do you say, Plum, have you the grit to try it?"

"I am with you, Jack, let come what may. See! I have got on a smashing head of steam."

Without another word Jack pulled the bell-cord, and, throwing the valves wide open, sent the train thundering out of the station along the gleaming track into dangers which the bravest would not have cared to anticipate.

Chapter XIII

Precious Moments.

The little crowd at the station waved their hands and gave expression to prolonged cries, as the train thundered away on its perilous run.

Soon beyond the hearing of these outcries the two youths, standing so bravely at their posts, heard no sound save the deep rumbling of the engine and cars, as they sped swiftly on their way through the wilderness.

Jack was the first to speak.

"Fix the fire so you can leave it for a short time if necessary, Plum."

"Leave it any time, Jack. I wasn't so green firing as they thought me. Reckon my firing Joe Staples' old saw-mill didn't hurt me any for this business."

"Did you burn it down, Plum, or was it sav—"

"Scat! you know what I mean. But do yeou begin to see anything ahead?"

"I could hardly expect to so soon, for they will be pretty sure to keep out of sight until we are into their trap."

"Do yeou think they will have a rock on the track?"

"Perhaps some obstruction. I can't just imagine how they will take us this time."

"Say, Jack, what do yeou think of 'em fellers on the train?"

The words seemed so much like an echo of his own thoughts that the boy engineer started with surprise at the question.

"I'll bet yeou," continued Plum, "they'll make us more trouble than the fellers in the bushes."

"Plum Plucky, you just speak my mind. I was thinking how we could best get rid of them."

"Bully for yeou, Jack North! Tell me what to do and I'm with yeou tooth and nail."

"In one respect we are fortunate," said Jack, in a tone which showed that he had been pondering carefully over the matter. "The car they are in is to the extreme rear."

"You intend to take the freight through if possible?"

"At any cost."

"Well, then, what does their being in the rear car have to do with our getting the rest through? Looks so they air fixed to help the raiders best so."

"Why simply—look yonder!" said Jack, pointing suddenly a little to their right in the distance ahead.

Plum Plucky did as he was told.

"What is it, Jack, a big rock?"

"Rock? No! Look over those tree-tops; don't you see that thin column of smoke rising high into the air and as straight as a church spire?"

"Gosh! yes. What of it? There can't be much wind."

"It is a signal of the bush-raiders."

"S'pose it is?"

The train was now winding through the valley of the Rio Tasma, and the sullen roar of the mountain stream was beginning to be heard above the thunder of the cars, which were rushing along at a rapid rate.

"I am sure of it," replied Jack, as he continued to watch the ascending smoke, though without neglecting his survey ahead. "What else can it mean?"

"Sure enough."

"Do you think we have a brakeman we can count on in case of an attack?"

Plum hesitated a moment before replying.

"Not unless it is little Pedro."

"Just my mind. See! the smoke is dying out. Whatever message they had to make has been made."

"What do you think it could be?"

"I will tell you what I think. Just before that column appeared we must have been in sight of whoever was on that height, and they gave that as a signal that we were coming."

"Jack you are nobody's fool; but couldn't they hear the sound of the train?"

"Not above the roar of the river if they are on the other side."

"I didn't think of that. But what about little Pedro?"

"Only this: In case those chaps in the rear car show signs of being against us we must get rid of them as soon as possible. Do you think you can go back to Pedro?"

"Yes."

"Well, do so at once and return as soon as you can, for every moment is precious now. Tell Pedro the moment he hears the bell ring to uncouple the rear car. Mind you, only that. He must be there ready at all times until we have passed through the woods. Get back as soon as you can."

"You can count on that," and with these words Plum began to climb over the tender toward the line of cars behind.

The bridge of the Rio Tasma was now in plain sight, and Jack's whole attention was fixed upon the new structure that spanned the rapid stream.

Everything seemed all right there, so he allowed the train to rush on at unabated speed.

There was a wild fascination about this perilous trip that Jack could not shake off. Every moment he expected to run into some unknown danger, and he would not have been surprised to find the bridge suddenly collapsing beneath the train.

But nothing of the kind occurred, and the engine was speedily across the stream.

He was approaching the place where he had so narrowly escaped death from the falling boulder, and he could not help glancing toward the top of the cliff, as he was carried around the curve.

At that moment the report of a gun rang out sharply on the air, the sound coming from the rear of the train.

Then an answering report came from the depths of the forest ahead!

"The men in the car are signaling to the raiders!" flashed through Jack's mind, and, simultaneously with the thought, he gave the bell cord a quick jerk.

"If Plum has only got there," he thought, as he turned his gaze upon the course ahead.

He knew that Plum nor Pedro could not uncouple the car as long as they were climbing the upgrade, but immediately beyond the bend a descent was made into the valley.

He was rapidly approaching the summit, when he made a discovery which sent a thrill of horror through his frame.

Not a hundred yards ahead lay on the right hand rail a huge boulder!

That the bush-raiders had put it there to wreck the train he had no doubt.

Just then the train gave a sharp lurch, and the reports of firearms pealed above the din of the moving train.

Instantly the bell cord was pulled vigorously three or four times.

Plum Plucky was in trouble.

Chapter XIV

The Attack on the Train.

The firing from the rear increased, but Jack had enough to attend to without giving it a second thought.

Out from the depths of the forest overhanging the track ahead had sprung a score or more of armed men.

Expecting the terrible collision they had planned, they had leaped upon the track in front of the oncoming train, flourishing their weapons and uttering wild yells of triumph.

It was a moment to Jack North which meant all to him. To stop the train was to throw it into the hands of his enemies; to keep on was like rushing into the very jaws of destruction. The commotion still raging at the rear of the train, the exulting fiends in the pathway ahead, and not less the silent but ominous boulder on the gleaming track foretold the end, let him act as he might.

With that unerring precision of gaze which never failed him, Jack saw that the stone lay at such a place and in such a position that the engine would not strike it squarely, but sidewise, as it swept around the curve. To make it more favorable the obstruction, as has been said, lay on the right, or outside rail.

Had it been on the opposite one all would have been changed to a terrible certainty.

There was no cowcatcher in front, similar to those seen on the engines in this country, but there was a heavy iron fender in its stead, which presented a square defense. This bar would strike the rock below midweight, and in such an oblique manner that he believed the barrier would be hurled from the track without derailing the engine.

Jack understood that he was taking a fearful risk, but with all these favoring circumstances it could not be more disastrous than to stop and to fall easy victims to the bush-raiders and their allies.

These thoughts flashed through his mind and he resolved to keep on at all hazards. Thus he let on all the steam in reserve and stood grimly at his post.

The engine obeyed like a living creature. It gave a mighty plunge forward and dashed upon the ponderous barrier disputing its advance.

The suspense was of brief duration, but Jack's thoughts flew fast and far. He realized that if the engine failed to clear the track it would be all over with him in a moment.

He was thinking of Jenny when the shock came with a force which fairly lifted the heavy engine! A crash and another shock threw him face downward on the floor of the cab.

He felt that the crisis had been passed and the train was still rushing on. Furious yells—yells that made the wildwoods ring with their intonations—filed his ears, and a volley of bullets whistled around his head.

He looked up and saw the trees rushing past him at a terrific speed.

A backward glance showed him some of the outlaws beside the track, while others were scattered on both side of the rails, where the engine had flung them in heaps.

At the bottom of the valley lay the big boulder, which had been dislodged and hurled into the depths.

The front of the engine showed the marks of its fearful blow, and he began to realize more fully the awful risk he had taken.

The firing from the rear car had ceased, and wondering what had become of Plum Plucky, he pulled the bell cord once.

A prompt response was given by two violent jerks on the rope, when he knew that Plum was alive and on the train.

He did not have long to wait before he heard some one crawling over the tender, and a moment later his fireman dropped beside him.

"Golly, Jack!" exclaimed Plum, "wasn't that a squeezer?"

“What have you done?” asked Jack.

“We’ve got ’em!” beginning to execute a dance on the footboard.

“What do you mean? Have you lost your senses?”

“I mean we’ve got the traitors as tight as a squirrel in a box-trap. Some of ’em jumped off and were killed, but we’ve got the most of ’em, and Pedro is holding ’em there fast.”

The train had slowed so the two could talk as they continued on.

“I don’t understand you, Plum,” said Jack, ready to believe almost anything after what he had passed through.

“Well, yeou see I just played a Yankee trick on ’em. Just as I had got back to Pedro, and before I could tell him what to do, some of the men come out of the car, and I see they were going to uncouple it just as you had told me to! By that I knew some trick was up, and before they could tell what had struck ’em I pushed the sinners back into the car and shut the door. No sooner had I done that than I covered ’em with my gun and asked Pedro to help me. In the midst of it there came that awful chuck, when I thought for a minute we’d all gone together. But it was soon over, and Perdo is standing guard over our prisoners. As I said some of ’em jumped off, but I guess they won’t jump ag’in. Do yeou s’pose the trouble is over?”

At first Jack could scarcely believe the other’s story, but he saw that his excited companion was in earnest.

“It was a fearful moment, Plum, and we should be thankful that we came out alive. I think we have learned the raiders a lesson they won’t forget. It will be best to try and get your prisoners to Resaca.”

It would not do to stop the train or even check its speed, as the prisoners would be sure to take advantage of the situation. Thus Jack was obliged to keep a sharp lookout and crowd the old engine on as fast as he could with any degree of safety.

No further adventure befalling them, Jack and Plum at last had the satisfaction of reaching Resaca. Never was there greater surprise in town than when this train came into the station and the true situation became known.

Officers were called to take charge of the prisoners in the car, but as nothing could be proved against them, except what Jack and Plum stated, and as their evidence was immediately discredited, the whole party went free, vowing vengeance against their captors.

Jack saw that, on account of their being foreigners, they had really lost favor by the capture, and he was glad to get clear so easily. After this they ran a week without interference, not a solitary bush-raider having been seen. Evidently the survivors had learned a lesson not to be quickly forgotten.

Of course our hero and Plum received a few praises for their success in getting the train through as they had, but it was evident to both that they could not get full credit for whatever they might do. In fact it was difficult for them to get acknowledgment for doing an ordinary duty.

This was due to the fact that they were foreigners and looked upon with suspicion, no matter what they did.

Jack was not therefore much surprised when one day, as he was stepping upon his engine at St. Resa, to have a bright-buttoned official stop him and motion for another man to take charge of the locomotive.

This new arrival was a Peruvian, and the boy engineer was not long in learning that he was willing to work for twelve pistoles a month. Though smarting under this unfair treatment, Jack offered no objections as he stepped aside. The war with Chili was assuming more alarming proportions, and he foresaw that troublesome times were near at hand.

Plum Plucky, upon finding that he was going to have a new master, jumped down from the cab, exclaiming:

“You can’t have my valuable services if you turn off Jack North!”

This was a turn in affairs the officials had not looked for, but the boys did not stop to listen to their protestations.

Later they learned that the train did not make a run that day.

Chapter XV

The Treasure Island.

“Now,” said Plum, as soon as he joined his friend, “I call that about the meanest trick I ever see played on a feller. Of course I wasn’t going to stay to fire for that weazen-faced son of old Piz-arro.”

“It seems too bad you should lose your job on my account, Plum. Particularly when I am more than half glad to lose mine, while you have made a real sacrifice.”

“Oh, carrots! I ain’t any worse off than I was before. But what are you going to do, Jack?”

“I am going to speculating.”

“What!” in amazement.

“Speculating, Plum. I have been thinking several days of a scheme in which I believe there is more money than in running an engine for bush-raiders to run down.”

“I’ll bet you’re going to speculate in that dirt I put round the don’s plants.”

“You got it right the first time, Plum. I—”

“Ginger! going to raise coffee? ’Cause of you air I can give you a pointer.”

“No; you are on the wrong track now. But I have no objection to telling you. Ever since I saw the result of your experiment I have been thinking that the stuff would sell like hot cakes in our own country, in places where the land is worn out and needs some such a stimulant. At any rate I am going to send home a cargo and see what comes of it.”

“Hooray! I see it all now. It may pay, but I doubt it. How air you going to get the stuff there?”

“In the first place I have got to get possession of the article itself, though I do not believe this will be a very expensive undertaking. I have a few dollars I have saved up from my wages, and I think I can borrow some somewhere. I am going to buy one of the nitrate tracts as soon as I can get suited.”

“You can buy a big mine for a hundred dollars, ’cause they’re looked on with disfavor. But after you’ve bought one, what then?”

"I am going to team a cargo to the nearest port and then charter a ship to take it home."

"You're smart enough to be a general, Jack North," and having paid him the highest compliment that he could, according to his estimate, Plum added:

"Say, Jack, I want to drive the team for you."

"You shall. But, as I am anxious to begin operations, I am going to look for my first purchase."

"Don de Estuaray is the man you want to see. There is a big bed on his estancia."

"It seems to me your experiment may have opened his eyes."

"He may catch onto my scheme quicker than some one who has seen nothing of what this nitrate will do."

"Of course you're right and I'm a blockhead, as usual. But go ahead and I'll tag at your heels like a dog."

Jack's first move was to get a couple of ponies for himself and Plum to ride. Then the pair, with provisions enough to last several days, set out on their quest.

Taking the direction of what he believed to be the heart of the nitrate region, Jack in a couple of days found several beds which he felt would prove rich fields of speculation.

His prime object was to find a bed which should not be too far removed from the railroad, or at least where its product could be the easiest teamed.

It was during his search one day that he got separated from his companion, in his desire to explore a wider stretch of country, when he quite unexpectedly found himself in the vicinity of his adventure with the jaguars.

The memory of that encounter brought back to his mind the lonely pimento he had seen in the valley on the opposite side of the hilly range, and the story of the hidden treasure filled his thoughts.

"If I could only find that now how it would help me to carry on my speculations."

Determined to look again on the spot, he climbed the ascent, until for a second time he stood on the height.

Before he had reached this elevated position he had heard a deep rumbling sound in the distance—a sound which seemed like the whirl and rush of angry waters, as if he was approaching a high cataract.

Ere he had gained the extreme top of the elevation, however, this noise suddenly died away, and the calmness of the primeval wilderness lay on the scene as he paused on the summit to gaze into the valley.

Naturally his gaze had turned in that direction, and an exclamation of astonishment left his lips, as he saw that the valley was gone!

The great basin was filled with water, the high hills and mountains forming a mighty rim with a piece of the huge bowl broken away where the gap existed in the elevated range on the north. But another feature of this inland lake had greater interest for him.

Near its centre was a small, barren island, entirely destitute of growth except for a solitary tree standing on its highest point.

The lonely monarch stood stark and stern in all its solitude, with one branch lifted like a skeleton arm pointing toward the north.

"The pimento—the treasure island!" exclaimed Jack with suppressed emotion.

The longer he looked upon the little island and its surroundings the more fully convinced he became that it was the spot described in the paper he had found so singularly on Robinson Crusoe's island.

When he had recovered somewhat from his glad surprise he urged the pony down the rough descent until the shore of the lake was reached.

"Oh, Don!" he said to the faithful pony, "you must take me to the island," never dreaming of the effort it would cost.

As he spoke a commotion began in the water at the north end, though that in front of him was still as unruffled as ever. But the pony had barely plunged into the tide before a deep, guttural sound came up from the depths and long lines of foam appeared on the surface.

Nothing daunted by this, Jack continued to urge the animal ahead in spite of its desire to turn back, until they were about midway between the bank which they had left and the island.

The strange noise had increased so that now it completely filled Jack's ears, while the water was in a fearful state of agitation. It had taken on a peculiar greenish hue, with big flecks of white foam, and here and there were fountains spouting up bright yellow liquid, which rose to the height of from ten to twenty feet.

The youth felt a strong undercurrent, and, finding that he could not reach the island, he tried to get back to the shore he had left.

By this time the pony was struggling helplessly in the mysterious power sucking it downward.

Then, before Jack could clear his feet from the stirrups, so as to look out for himself, he was drawn under the seething waters with his horse!

Chapter XVI

At the Boiling Lake.

As Jack felt the swirling waters closing over him, he made greater effort to keep on the surface.

His gallant pony was struggling furiously for the same purpose, but the power pulling them down was irresistible.

A continual roaring filled his ears, and it seemed as if he was being drawn into some infernal region.

In spite of all he could do he was carried downward, until suddenly he felt a terrible shock, as if he had been hurled against some stony surface, and the next he knew he was floating on the water near the north end of the lake, which was then quite tranquil. He had no difficulty in swimming to the nearest point of land.

Scrambling up the precipitous bank he was glad to sink upon the ground for rest.

He was wondering if his pony had perished, when he was gladdened by the sight of the animal on the opposite side of the lake.

Before going to the horse Jack resolved to try to swim out to the island, and as the water had now assumed the calmness which had prevailed at the time he had first seen it, he did not think of further trouble. He had received some bruises from his recent experience, but beyond them he felt little the worse for his adventure.

Removing his outer garments, so as to give greater freedom to his movements, he stepped down to the edge of the dark flood, which was filled with the fine particles of earth it had swallowed.

As calm as the water was then, he had barely touched it with one foot before a shriek, which rang in his ears for a long time afterwards, rang high and far, cut short in its midst by a fearful rush of the aroused flood, and a column was suddenly thrown into the air to the height of a hundred feet!

It was such a terrific, appalling outburst that he hastily clambered back upon the bank, to watch the strange sight. For fully two minutes the waterspout quivered and vibrated in the air, when it collapsed as abruptly as it had appeared.

The water of the lake continued to boil for five minutes, when it began to subside, though bearing traces of agitation for five minutes longer, during which Jack watched it with intense interest.

Still undaunted by this marvelous display, Jack resolved to try a third time to reach the island, selecting a more favorable place for his descent into the water this time.

As no outbreak had immediately followed his entrance into the lake this time, he was beginning to think that the strange phenomenon was over. But he was soon to be undeceived.

All at once, without warning, a dozen columns of water sprang upward, threatening for a moment to drain the lake dry, and among these rushing, writhing pillars Jack was borne into the air.

When the powers subsided he fell back with such a force as to render him almost senseless. The lake was still churned and convulsed by the mighty agency controlling it, and he had a hard fight to reach the shore, where he lay completely exhausted.

Slowly recovering his strength he finally sat up and began to wring the water out of his clothes, deciding to leave the place as soon as he felt able. The water was calm then; though a short time before it had been tossed and whipped into fury by the mysterious element controlling it.

“Were the whole Incas treasure buried on that island it would be safe from the hand of the despoiler,” he said, speaking aloud his thoughts. “But I do not understand it. I am willing to wager that this is the same valley I saw when I was this way before, though it was as dry as a palm leaf then. How calm it is now, but I suppose if I should dare to enter its sacred precinct it would begin again its fearful convulsions.”

As he finished speaking, Jack picked up a small stone and tossed it into the lake. No sooner had it disappeared beneath its dark surface than another column of water shot upward with a sort of hissing that was terrific, and in a moment the whole body was once more undergoing a series of spasms frightful to behold.

Watching it until the outbreak was over, Jack lost no further time in seeking the pony. Then he began to climb the hillside leading from the place.

Upon the crest he paused for a last look, saying:

“It is calm enough now. Sometime I will come again, for I will know its secret if I die for it. There is and must be a natural explanation for all this.”

Finding Plum Plucky waiting anxiously for him at the expected place of meeting, Jack led the way toward civilization, having come to the conclusion to close the trade on one of the nitrate beds he had seen and begin operations as soon as possible.

He said nothing to his companion of his experience in the valley of mystery, partly because the stirring scenes immediately following caused him to put it in the background of his memory for a while.

He was the more anxious to get his first cargo of nitrate off as the war cloud was deepening fast, and not only was Peru and Chili at a state of bitter antagonism, but Bolivia was threatening to mix in the trouble. A three-cornered war, with Southern Peru for its battleground, was anything but what he desired to see.

The next day he bought his first nitrate bed, paying for it forty pistoles, which was considerably more than he had expected, but it was large, and if his plans only worked he believed there was a small fortune in it.

He then hired oxen enough to make two six-ox teams, with suitable wagons to draw the nitrate on, and he engaged the services of half a dozen Peruvians to help in the work of getting out the first loads.

As the bed lay remote from the few beaten paths of the thinly populated country, it would involve considerable hard work and time to get passable roads cut through, so as to be able to draw loads of any size.

“By gosh!” drawled Plum Plucky, as they set out on their work, “I’m going to stand by yeou; but yeou may hang my hat on a scare-crow if I don’t think yeou’ll blow yerself dry.”

“By that I suppose you mean that I shall lose all I am putting into my venture,” said Jack, good-naturedly.

“That’s just what I mean. I’ll bet yeou have got about every dollar yeou have into it now.”

“I have figured up that I shall have about twenty pounds left when I have paid off my help.”

“Say, Jack! I’d like to be there when you get in with yer first load of dirt and see ’em laugh. Don’t s’pose yeou have any dirt in the teown yeou come from.”

“Not dirt that is pure nitrate of soda, and possessing the highest qualities for fertilization of any known compound. Hello! what is up now?”

Chapter XVII

In the Nitrate Fields.

The last exclamation was called from Jack by the fact that the teams had suddenly stopped, and the native drivers were shouting excitedly over something which had happened.

They were at the time trying to make a roadway to the nitrate bed through a trackless wilderness, and had thus far progressed with greater ease than the young speculator had calculated.

But upon reaching the spot where the teamsters and workmen were holding an excited controversy, Jack found that the cause of the excitement was the fact that the way had been stopped by a sharp, rocky ridge, which extended for miles in both directions.

"We can't go any further, señor," declared the head driver. "No team can find its way through these rocks and up and down the hill."

Jack had seen this place when making his survey and had calculated upon the difficulty in passing it, having the route most feasible at this point.

"Let two men come forward with axes to clear away the stunted growth, and the rest get their levers. I will show you by to-morrow it can be passed."

Lively work followed, the men taking hold with a vim, so that by noon the next day a path had been cleared, so the teams could cross the rocky ridge.

The balance of the distance to the mine was very favorable and at last Jack had the satisfaction of finding himself at his destination, when the men were set to work loading the carts, the oxen getting a chance to rest while it was being done.

While superintending the work Jack had time to realize more fully than before the gigantic undertaking he had upon hand. It is true the worst seemed over, now that the path was cleared, but he knew with the rude implements he had to work with that this had been poorly done, and that the loaded teams would have difficult work to reach the open country. Even then he would be many miles from the nearest seaport, where he was likely to meet with another obstacle in finding a ship to transport his cargo to the United States. Then, after he had reached home, how would he be treated? A failure to sell his nitrate meant the loss of every penny of money he had worked so hard to earn. But these anxious thoughts did not rob him of his confidence in his ultimate success. Now he had put his shoulder to the wheel, he was not one to look back.

When the hour came for him to give the order to hitch up the cattle and prepare for the return journey, he gave his orders in a cheery tone.

"I tell you, Jack," said Plum, speaking with less drawl than common, "I'm mighty glad to do this. I don't see how you can be so chipper, for I'm dead sure we're going to have loads of trouble before we get out of this."

"No great thing was ever done without having more or less trouble at the outset," replied Jack. "As soon as we get started we shall find it easier. Hi, there, Pedro!" addressing one of the Peruvian drivers, "you have those oxen yoked wrong. You ought to know better by this time."

"Who knows best, señor, you or I?" demanded the Peruvian, showing anger at what he deemed an unwarranted interference.

Jack said nothing further, feeling that he had spoken too sharply perhaps, though he knew he was in the right. He had found the natives anything but pleasant men to deal with, and the quarrel of one was sure to be taken up by his companions.

Five minutes later the foremost team was leaving the nitrate bed, starting on its long journey at the slow pace of oxen, while the other soon followed.

Vague reports had reached Jack before he had left on his trip, of the uprising of the people, and of the guerrilla warfare being carried on by the straggling armies of the North and South. Still he did not think he would be molested, and he felt in good spirits, as they followed the rough pathway.

To be on his guard as much as possible, however, he had thought best to keep a short distance ahead of the teams, while Plum Plucky followed about the same distance behind, the two thus maintaining a continual watch over the train.

Nothing occurred to delay their progress, until Jack found himself climbing the steep upgrade, which the Peruvians had declared impassable before they had done so much work in clearing it. The course was uneven now, and considerable of the way it was little more than a scratch on the mountain side, with a sheer descent on one side of hundreds of feet.

He had got about half way toward the top when the loud cries of the teamsters caused him to look back.

A glance showed him that the foremost team was "hung up" at a particularly bad place.

The drivers were belaboring the patient oxen unmercifully, but not another inch could they make the animals pull the load.

Shouting to the men to stop their useless goading of the oxen, our hero ran back to the spot, finding that the second team had stopped a short distance below, where it was comfortably waiting for the other to move ahead so it could resume its tedious journey.

As there was no chance to get the oxen on the lower team past the upper one, so as to be hitched on to help, on account of the narrowness of the road, Jack quickly dismissed such an idea from his thoughts.

Not wishing to throw off a part of the load, which must be lost by so doing, he stepped alongside the cattle and began to stroke them and to speak gently to them.

"Both teams couldn't pull the load up this path, señor," said one of the drivers.

"I am sorry I did not think to double up at the foot of the ascent, but it is too late to complain now. Come, boys! all together."

Jack had taken the long, slender pole, with its ten feet of lash, with which the drivers urged on their patient teams, and swinging the unwieldy instrument over their heads as he uttered the words, he hoped to make them start.

The result was most unexpected.

Putting their shoulders to the work with renewed life, the obedient oxen fairly touched the ground with their bodies as they tugged ahead with their burden.

The cart creaked and the axles groaned, while the heavy wheels began to revolve.

"Hooray! it is mov—"

Plum Plucky gave expression to the exultant cry, but he did not have time to finish before a loud snap was heard, and the oxen were seen to suddenly plunge up the grade, leaving the cart!

"The pull pin has broken!" cried one of the Peruvians, terrified.

"The clevis has broke—look out!" yelled Plum, turning pale. "The other team will be smashed!"

The heavily loaded wagon, freed suddenly from the power which had pulled it to this precarious position, stood for a moment as if balanced on the pinnacle.

Of course Jack had seen what was taking place with a quicker eye than any of his companions, and as he saw the wagon trembling in the balance for a moment before it started on its downward course to destruction, and realizing that a timely action could yet save it, he rushed forward to seize hold of one of the wheels, shouting to his assistants:

“Quick—put your shoulder to the wheel and we may save it!”

Plum did spring forward to help his friend, but even he was too late to be of any avail, while the Peruvians stood idle, without offering to move.

While the united strength of all might have stopped the wagon, Jack’s resistance was futile, and in a moment the loaded vehicle started on its downward course, soon gaining a momentum that nothing could stop.

Faster and faster it moved, the wheels creaking and groaning unanimously, as it gained in speed.

The drivers of the other team in the pathway below uttered wild cries of terror, as they saw their danger, and began to scramble helter-skelter up the mountain side.

The runaway was going directly upon them, but they were likely to escape.

Not so with the oxen and wagon, which seemed surely doomed.

Jack saw at a glance his whole work going to naught in a moment’s time.

Then his presence of mind returned to him and he thought he saw a way to avert a part of the loss.

Bounding down the pathway after the runaway, he soon managed to catch hold of the tongue, which was dodging swiftly from one side to the other of the path, according as it was swung to and fro by the motion of the forward wheels.

Grasping this forearm with all the strength he possessed, Jack swung it toward the near side, until locking the forward wheel on that side against the sill of the cart.

He had seen that the only chance to save the rear wagon was at the sacrifice of the other, and no sooner had he begun to hold the pole in that position that the wagon began to turn toward the gulf yawning on that side of the track.

It was a fearful alternative, but the best he could do, and Jack breathed a sigh of relief as he found the hind wheels going over the brink of the chasm.

For a moment the big load stood quivering on the edge of the precipice, and then, with a crash which sounded far up and down the rugged valley, the wagon went headlong to its doom.

Chapter XVIII

An Alarm of Fire.

Breathless and exhausted by his almost superhuman effort, Jack sank down upon the hard rocks, where he had stood at the fateful moment.

Plum Plucky, further up the broken pathway, stood in silent awe, while the Peruvians looked on from their perches on the mountain side with bulging eyes and chattering teeth.

The only creatures which seemed unconcerned were the oxen which had been so narrowly threatened, as they quietly chewed their cud, while they blinked their big, soft-lighted eyes. Plum was the first to speak.

“Jiminey whack, Jack! but you’ve done it.”

“It was my only chance to save the oxen and the other load,” said Jack, rising to feet. “Better save half a loaf than to lose it all, you know. Simply couldn’t turn it into the rocks.”

“But I don’t see how you could think of it. I was scart, I ain’t ashamed to own. I’ll bet that other is smashed into kindling wood.”

Jack was already looking over the precipice after the lost wagon, saying in a minute or so:

“It has come out better than I should have expected, though it will do us no further good. It has lodged among some trees and rocks, and I do not believe a wheel has been broken.”

“That’s so, Jack, though I reckon it don’t make any difference to us. But if ’em rocks don’t start to grow it’s ’cause the nitrate ain’t any good, for the stuff is sowed all over the Andes.”

“It is pretty well scattered, that is a fact. But come, boys, we must hitch on the other oxen, and see if the double team can pull this load to the top.”

Though the loss of one of his wagons and a portion of his nitrate, which had cost him so much to get so far, was felt keenly by Jack, he showed his indomitable will by immediately giving his attention toward carrying out the work of crossing the ridge.

The remaining load proved an easy burden for the united teams, and in a few minutes the heavy wagon was moving slowly up the path, the loud commands of the Peruvian drivers echoing up and down the valley with somewhat startling effect.

“As soon as we get to the summit,” said Jack to Plum, “you and I will go back and see if there is not some way to save the other wagon, even at the sacrifice of its load.”

“I s’pose we might throw off what nitrate there is left on it, and by hitching together all the chains and ropes we have—”

“I wonder what is wrong now,” exclaimed Jack, for the team had again stopped, though the wagon was not more than its length from the summit. To the drivers he shouted:

“Drive up a little further, so the wagon will stand without—”

Loud, angry cries stopped him in the midst of his speech.

Anxious to know what had caused another interruption in the advance, he hurried forward, to meet a most unexpected sight.

Drawn up in front of the team in the narrow path was a squad of Chilean soldiers, or bushwhackers, more properly speaking, for he knew they did not belong to the regular army.

The Peruvians were cowering by the side of the wagon and cattle, muttering over something in their native tongue which our hero did not understand.

“Ho, there, soldiers!” he called out, in his best Spanish, “what does this mean?”

“It means if you don’t get out of our path, Americanos, we will hew you down!”

“Don’t be too fast, señor captain,” Jack made bold to say, “this path is one of my own making, though if you will allow me to get my team to the—”

“Pitiful dog!” cried the Chilian, “Captain de Costa commands you to clear his way without any insulting words.”

Jack saw that it would be worse than useless to have any words with this imperious Chilian, who in his petty command felt more arrogant than a king on this throne. Accordingly he began in a respectful tone:

“If Captain de Costa will kindly allow us to drive to the summit we shall be able—”

“Americano dog! will you surrender?”

By this time the Peruvians had taken to their heels, and Jack and Plum stood alone in front of the pompous captain and legion.

Jack’s first thought was to boldly refuse the demand, knowing the other had no business to interfere with him, and to make such a resistance as he and his companion could. But single-handed, against such odds, he knew it would be folly.

“If you please, Captain de Costa, we two are but peaceful American boys, both of us engaged—”

“Will you surrender?” thundered the Chilian, advancing with uplifted sword, as if he would carry out his threat of hewing him down.

“We are offering no resistance to you, señor captain. If you will allow us to—”

At a motion from the Chilian leader his soldiers leaped forward, and Jack and Plum were quickly made prisoners.

The order was then given for the lads to be intrusted to a portion of troops under the command of a sergeant, and then the march down the pathway toward the nearest town was begun.

The last Jack saw of his team it was still standing just over the brow of the height, the patient oxen chewing their cuds as unconcerned as if the fortunes and the lives of their owners were not in the least endangered.

“What is going to be the end of this?” asked Plum, as they were marched along side by side.

“It is impossible to tell. I do not think it will be best for us to have much to say to each other if we wish to keep together. We must keep our eyes open for a chance to escape.”

Plum taking the hint, the friends walked along in silence until the journey seemed without end.

The soldiers kept up a continual run of conversation, Jack catching enough to know that the Chilian forces were gaining successes wherever they met the Peruvians. He also learned that the army of Bolivia was now their greatest concern, and that the latter was then on a march over the Andes to meet them.

At nightfall a halt was made under a spur of the mountains, but before the sun had tipped with gold the crest of the distant Andes the weary journey was resumed.

That day about noon they came in sight of a little up-country town, which the prisoners soon learned was known as Santa Rosilla. Its long, narrow streets bore a

deserted appearance, save for the motley-coated soldiers passing to and fro, as if on guard.

The town bore every sign of a recent siege, while the indications were as strong that the inhabitants had been completely routed and killed or driven back into the mountains by their conquerors.

Straight down the grand plaza marched the soldiers with their captives, making their way toward the casa consistorial, or town house, above which flapped in the sleepy breeze the flag of Chili.

The door of the town house, which bore the marks of many bullets, was off its hinges, but the rooms within were secure enough for all prisoners of war that might fall into their hands in that isolated district, and thither our twain were marched.

To their delight, which they were careful to conceal, they were put into a room together, though under a strong guard.

"Looks so we were in for it," said Plum, after they had been left by themselves for an hour or more.

"It was a hard set-back to my plans," said Jack.

"I wonder what they will do with us," ventured Plum, expressing the thought uppermost in our hero's mind.

"From what I have overheard I should judge we were likely to be shot at the first opportunity."

"Pears to me you're mighty cool about it. Will they dare to shoot us? We are not mixed up in their war, and it might make trouble for them in the end, if I know anything."

"They don't stop to consider that. It is my opinion they would dare to do anything but meet an equal number of the enemy. It looks bad for us, Plum."

"I wonder if we can't dig out of here somehow? These walls don't seem so awful thick."

"Of course we must try and get out of this. The first thing to do will be to free our limbs. Can you loosen your bonds any?"

For the next ten minutes the boys were busy trying to free their hands from the ligatures which had been fastened in no uncertain way.

"It's no use," acknowledged Plum at last. "I believe mine grow tighter and tighter. Hark! I should think that soldier on guard in the hall would get tired of that everlasting tramping back and forth. I've a mind to tell him to stop."

"Better not do it. I wonder if by standing on my shoulder you could look out of that window up there?"

"I have been thinking that same thing. Let's try it."

Naturally their attention had been attracted to a small window, which afforded light and ventilation for the room, but which was about ten feet from the floor.

Tied hands and feet, as they were, the boys tried many times to carry out their plan without avail, until it must have been near midnight when Plum said:

"It's mighty aggravating. There must be lights on the streets, for I've seen their flash."

"Let's try once more. If I lie down perhaps you can get on my neck, after which I believe I can raise you to the window."

This proved a most difficult feat, but after repeated attempts Plum succeeded in gaining the desired position, when Jack slowly straightened up, until he had brought his companion's head on a level with the window, where by leaning against the wall he was enabled to hold him for a hasty look over the scene without.

Plum had barely gained his unsteady perch before he exclaimed in a tone of excitement:

"Oh, Jack! the town is on fire! Everything is burning up!"

At that moment the dull boom of a cannon reached their ears.

Chapter XIX

Chilians on Both Sides.

"Looks as if the old town was being raided by some enemy," declared Plum, after a short pause, during which another peal of the distant cannon awoke far and wide the dismal night.

Loud cries were now heard outside the town house, making the youths' situation one of excitement. In the hall adjoining their prison the steady tramp of the sentry's feet had suddenly ceased.

"How about the fire?" asked Jack, bracing himself more firmly against the wall under the weight of his companion.

Boom! boom! boom! rang sullenly on the scene before Plum could reply, and then the rattle of musketry succeeded and the hoarse shouts of men giving orders such as no one could understand in the wild confusion.

"The fire lifts higher and higher," said Plum, as soon as a lull in the tumult allowed him to be heard by his companion. "It seems to be burning on the northeast corner of the town, and the wind is driving it down this way like a race horse. The plaza is full of soldiers."

The cannonade soon became almost continual, and was fairly deafening.

"What will become of us?" asked Plum, showing his first sign of hopelessness.

"Is the window large enough to let us crawl out if our hands were free?" asked Jack.

"It may be; but it is crossed with bars of iron no man could break with his hands."

"Take your last look and then come down."

Plum took a hurried survey of the scene which he realized he might never look upon again, but his narrow orbit allowed of nothing more than what he had described.

The cannons were still thundering forth their loud-voiced peals of war, half drowned by the incessant rattle of the smaller arms in the hands of the town's defenders.

In a moment Plum descended to the floor in a heap.

"Get on your feet if you can," said Jack a moment later.

By resting against the wall, as his companion was doing, Plum Plucky soon stood beside him.

"I should like to know what we are to do in this condition. We are sure to be killed."

"Hark! do you hear anything of the sentry now?"

"No; he went out to join the soldiers. I see him."

"Then our way is clear. Now, Plum, I want you to brace yourself as best you can, and when I give the word throw all your weight against the door with me."

"Going to try and break it down?"

"Yes; ready?"

"Ready."

"Now then, together!"

The old door shook and creaked beneath their combined efforts, but it withstood the shock.

"Again—together!"

This time the whole building trembled, and the door creaked and groaned, but still defied them.

"Still again—together!"

But the third attempt, nor yet the fourth nor fifth cleared their pathway, though when both the boys were bruised from head to feet the rusty hinges suddenly gave away and they went headlong into the narrow hallway.

Jack struck upon top, and he was the first to gain his knees, as near an erect position as he could easily gain, and he began to crawl toward the open air, saying:

"Follow me, Plum."

On the outer threshold they paused to take a hasty survey of the surroundings, soon satisfying themselves that a terrific battle was being waged at the upper end of the town.

"The quicker we get away the better," said Jack, beginning to move laboriously toward the grand plaza, with Plum close behind him.

In that slow, tedious way the two crossed the yard in front of the town house, and then steering for the cover of a line of shrubbery bordering on the west side of the plaza, they crawled as fast as they could in that direction.

The sound of the cannon was not heard so constant now, but the storm of the musketry had not seemed to cease to any extent.

What meant infinitely more to them, the firing was rapidly drawing nearer. The fire, too, of the burning town was growing brighter and brighter, even the plaza showing plainly under its vivid glare.

Upon reaching the shrubbery they stopped for a brief respite.

"Look, Jack!" exclaimed Plum, in a shrill whisper, "our prison is on fire! We didn't get out any too soon."

Jack had made the same discovery. He made no reply, his thoughts being busy in another direction.

An incendiary had kindled a fire at one end of the building and so fast did the flames increase and spread that while they watched them they sprang up and enveloped one whole side in a crimson sheet.

“We must get away from this place,” said Jack. “The two factions of war are coming this way on a run. It must be the captors of the town have met more than their match this time.”

Again the escaping couple began their slow retreat, now under cover of a dense growth reaching they knew not how far. Nor did that matter so long as it afforded them shelter from their enemies.

Once, having gained a little summit from which they could look down on the exciting scene, they stopped to gaze back, their curiosity aroused by the wild medley of cries.

The town house was now all ablaze, the lurid fire feeding upon its walls lighting far the night scene, while throwing a weird glamor over the contending factions of war-crazed men, who had now both reached the further side of the plaza and temporally suspended hostilities.

There was a reason for this last, too, as explained by Jack’s words, as he analyzed the situation:

“They are Chilians on both sides, Plum!”

“Do you mean, Jack, that this attack on the Chilians of the town has been made by some of their own countrymen?”

“Yes; there has been some mistake made, which has cost many needless lives. What a painful surprise it must be to them!”

Jack afterwards learned that he had been right in his conjectures, and that through some unexplainable blunder one division of the Chilian army had been sent to capture the town already in possession of another portion.

Santa Rosilla was in the possession of the Chilians sure enough now!

But Jack and Plum dared not stop to see the outcome of this singular meeting between the armed forces, but improved every moment to get away from the ill-fated town.

Chapter XX

Preparations for Departure.

Three days later, having actually worn off the bonds on their lower limbs by their long, painful journey on their hands and knees through the dense growth, until a friendly Peruvian lad finished their liberation, Jack and Plum entered de la Pama, two sorry-looking youths but still full of courage. Almost the first news they learned was that the St. Resa railroad was again without the men to run the train, which had been stalled for weeks. In fact, the engineer and his helper who had succeeded them, had not made one complete trip, the fireman having blown out the boiler soon after leaving De la Pama.

In this dilemma the officials hailed the appearance of the boys with unfeigned delight. But Jack was sorry to learn that it had been decided not to pay over thirty pistoles a month for his services.

“We might as well let the cars stand idle as to pay out all we can get for help. Then, too, the business is not going to be very good while this war lasts, señor.”

The pay was still big for that country, and Jack resolved to accept, though before doing so he asked: “What will you pay my fireman?”

“Twenty pistoles, señor. That is the best we can do. We can get plenty of men for that price.”

“It doesn’t look so. But what do you say, Plum? That will bring you seventy-two dollars a month, if I reckon right. I will try it for awhile if you will go with me.”

“I’m with you.”

Most unexpected to them at the time they began, the “awhile” proved for a year. Jack had not dreamed he should stay so long, but his previous experience had left him penniless, and with his fixed determination to try again, he knew he would not be able to find so good an opportunity to earn the needed money to begin renewed operations. During those days Jack sent several letters to his folks and to Jenny. In return he received a letter from his father, stating that all was now going fairly well with the family and if he wanted to stay in South America he could do so. Mr. North also sent the information that Fowler & Company had gone into the hands of a receiver and there was no telling whether the business would be continued or not, and Jack need not expect any back pay from the concern.

From Jenny Jack heard not a word, much to his anxiety and dismay. The fact was that Jenny’s folks had moved to another town and she had not received Jack’s letters, and consequently did not know exactly where he was.

“I suppose she has forgotten all about me,” he thought, with a sigh. “Well, I suppose I ought to go back, but I hate to do it before I’ve managed to get some money together. There’s a fortune in that nitrate and I know it, and some day I’ll get hold of it.”

Very much to Jack’s surprise they were not molested very much by the bush-raiders, whose power seemed to have been checked by the advance of the opposing armies, for the war was still carried on, though in a sort of desultory manner, as if each side was afraid of the others. Jack could foresee that the Chilians were pretty sure to secure that portion of the country before they got through. Plum Plucky had stood by his friend all of this time, and they had met with some thrilling experiences, but come out of them safely.

Jack saved his money like a miser, and with undimmed faith in his ultimate success bought five more nitrate beds, to be laughed at by his friend.

“Should think you would want to look after ’em loads you have got over on the Andes,” Plum would frequently say.

Each time Jack remained silent.

“Say, Jack,” Plum would then invariably say, “don’t yeou s’pose ’em oxen are getting hungry by this time?”

Still the other held his peace.

Jack had not forgotten the mysterious island in the equally mysterious lake amid the Andes, and twice during the year his memory had been refreshed by startling accounts given of the place by different parties that had visited the valley. These men had given it the name of the “Devil’s Waters,” not very inappropriately.

At the end of the year, it now being certain that the Peruvians were losing their hold on the province which comprised the territory in which they were located, Jack said to his companion:

“I am almost sorry to say that I shall make my last trip to-morrow, Plum.”

“Going back to nitrates?” asked the other, showing but little surprise.

“Yes. I must get a cargo to America as soon as possible.”

“Should think you would want to. Guess I will stick to the old gal here a little longer. When I have got enough money to get out of this swamp in the way I want to I shall go back to old New England.

“I tell you there is no place like the Old Bay State. Yeou won’t think me a sneak for deserting yeou now, Jack?” dropping back into his old-time nasal drawl.

“Oh, no, of course not. In fact, I think you are doing just as I should if I were in your place. I will speak a good word for you to get my position as engineer. You can run the engine as well as I now.”

“Good for you, Jack. Now, how do you think of getting that stuff to the States?”

“About the same way I tried first, only I shall not try to go behind that spur of the Andes, as I did before.

“I can see my mistake now, though I believe that is the richest deposit I have, and I shall sometime make something out of it. I am going to get a cargo from the bed nearest to the railroad and get the company to freight it for me to the seaboard.”

“Then I shall see you occasionally, Jack.”

“Oh, yes. I shall not be far away.”

Jack was as good as his word, and the following day Plum Plucky proudly took his place as engineer, with a new fireman to help him.

Jack then began to carry out his scheme of getting a cargo of nitrate to his native land.

This time he obtained his supply of nitrate from a bed less than ten miles from the railroad, drawing it to the station with ox teams. With his better knowledge of the country he met with success in this part of the undertaking, and then the train carried it to the sea-coast for him at moderate rates.

Before this had been done he had bargained with a Peruvian captain of a merchantman to carry the cargo to Philadelphia.

This had proved the most difficult part of his arrangements, for with the existing war between the countries it was sometime before he could find a man willing to do it.

But he found one at last and the nitrate was eventually loaded on the vessel.

It was a proud, and yet an anxious, moment for Jack when he found everything in readiness to leave the harbor.

The captain had declared his intention of setting sail under cover of darkness, so as to escape an attack from a Chilian ship should one offer to dispute his passage.

That afternoon Jack saw Plum to bid him goodbye, feeling sorry to part with his honest friend.

The latter actually cried.

“Hang it, Jack! I’ve a mind to go with you. Think of me in this heathenish country and you among friends and rolling in wealth.”

“All but the wealth, Plum. But I shall be glad to have you go with me.”

“I thank you, Jack, but I mustn't. I must stay here long enough to get the money to pay up the mortgage on dad's farm, when I shall skip by the light of the moon. You may not find me here when you come back, Jack, but I wish you well.”

A little after sunset the Peruvian ship moved slowly out of the harbor of San Maceo, Jack watching the land as it receded from sight with a peculiar interest, and his mind ran swiftly back over the eventful time he had passed in that faraway land.

He had given the captain the last pistole he possessed, as he had been obliged to pay him in advance to get him to undertake the task, so he was again penniless. But he had no doubt he would have money enough as soon as he could get home and dispose of his cargo. Over and again he had figured out his profit, if it should prove saleable at the moderate price he had fixed upon it. Is it a wonder his thoughts were in a tumult? Is it strange that he found it difficult to make himself believe that at last after that long waiting, he was really homeward bound?

“How glad they will be to see me!” he thought. “And Jenny! She will not be expecting me. It has been so long since I left. Some of them may be—”

He was interrupted in his meditations by the report of a gun in the distance, and, glancing to the port, he discovered a ship coming up rapidly.

That there was something wrong in the appearance of the stranger was evident from the bustle and excitement which had suddenly sprung up among officers and crew, not one of whom spoke anything but Spanish.

All sail had been crowded on that the ship could possibly carry; but heavily loaded and at best a poor sailer, the new-comer continued to overhaul them at a startling rate.

Coming alongside of Jack finally, the captain said:

“We are lost, señor! I ought to lose my head for undertaking such a mad project.”

“It may not be as bad as you seem to think, señor capitan,” replied Jack, hoping to encourage the commander.

But all that he could say was in vain.

The Chilian warship, as the stranger really was, continued to keep up its firing, though the Peruvian vessel had not fired a gun.

Jack anxiously watched the approach of their pursuer, feeling that his fortune, if not his life, was at stake.

It is possible if the Peruvian had laid to and allowed the other to come up without the show of running away, that it might have been permitted to continue its course unmolested. And again it may not have been so.

At any rate the Peruvian captain held to his flight as his only hope of salvation, until at last a shot, better directed than the random firing so long kept up, struck the doomed merchantman fairly amidship.

The craft instantly lurched and trembled from bow to stern.

“She is sinking!” shrieked the captain. “Quick—to the boats!”

Chapter XXI

A Panic on Shipboard.

A scene of the wildest description followed the frantic captain's announcement and order. The sailors were panic stricken, and more than half of them plunged headlong into the sea.

The captain was scarcely less distracted than his men, and he only added to the helplessness of the situation by his words and actions.

Jack tried to pacify him by saying:

"Pardon me, señor capitán, but the ship will not sink at once if at all. You have plenty of time in which to save your lives."

"But the Chilean! We shall be made prisoners of war. Heaven protect me! I was a fool to listen to you, Señor North."

"It is too late to think of that now. It is your duty to see if something cannot be done to stop the ship's leak."

It was useless to try to reason with the Peruvian captain. He was sure the ship was going to sink, and seemed determined that she should.

Meanwhile the Chilean continued to draw nearer, though it had nearly stopped firing.

The trumpet-like tone of the commander rang over the water just as the terrified Peruvians lowered a boat and leaped headlong into it, that is, those who had not previously jumped into the sea.

Finding himself alone on the sinking vessel, which was going down fast, Jack answered the Chilean's challenge:

"Ship ahoy! what do you want?"

"What ship is that?"

"The merchant ship, SANTA CLARA, Señor Captain, now sinking from the effects of your shot."

"Lay to and I'll come aboard."

This command was not obeyed.

The doomed vessel was now lurching fearfully, and Jack knew that he could not leave it any too soon for his own safety of life. Fortunately the shore was not so far away but he believed he could reach it, and throwing off his outer garments, he leaped into the water.

The Peruvians were struggling in every direction, the boat having been upset by them in their mad endeavors to save themselves. Jack knew that the farther he got away from them and the quicker he did it, the better it would be for him. He left them in their furious, but futile, efforts to escape or drown, as their attempts for life deserved.

After swimming a short distance he looked back to find that he was just in season to witness the fate of the ship. He saw her make a sudden lurch forward, and then she seemed to right herself for a moment, but it was her death struggle, for with the next breath she went downward, quickly disappearing from sight forever.

“Another plan gone wrong,” thought Jack, “and again I am where I began.”

A less courageous youth than Jack North must have given up then, but with the stern determination of his nature not to give up, he resumed his swimming, reaching the land half an hour later.

“This is worse than before,” he said ruefully, as he viewed his drenched figure, “for I did save my coat then. Yes, and my cargo of nitrate is still on the mountain waiting for me. I think I will toss up a cent to see what I shall do next. No! come to think of it, I haven’t got the cent to do that!”

His first thought was to return to the machine shop in Tocopilla, but as De la Pama was nearer he decided to go there in the morning. “It is useless for me to remain here,” he reasoned, “I wonder how many of the Peruvians have escaped? They were a set of cowards anyway, and the captain the biggest fool of them all. I hope he will make good use of my money.”

Jack laid down supperless that night under the green blanket of a Peruvian forest, and he went on toward De la Pama the next morning breakfastless, thinking:

“There is one thing certain, I will not take Plum’s job from him. If he has no fireman, and will accept me, I will go as his helper.”

Though he did not seek immediately his friend, almost the first person he saw in town was Plum. It would be difficult to say which was the more surprised.

“What! not gone to the States, Jack?”

“No, Plum.”

“Something gone wrong, Jack, again?”

“About my usual luck, Plum. I am where I began—without a cent in my pocket,” and he quickly told the other what had befallen him since they had parted.

“It’s too bad, Jack, but I’ll tell you what I’ll do. I have what amounts to three hundred dollars that I’ve saved and every dollar of it is yours till you can pay it back.”

“I could not think of taking your hard earnings, Plum, for it is uncertain if I should ever be able to pay it back.

“I thank you from the bottom of my heart, but must look for work again.”

“Then you shall have my job, Jack. I had rather fire anyway; honest, Jack.”

“Thank you again, Plum, and it’s just like your generosity, but I cannot rob you of your situation. How does your fireman do?”

“Tip-top, I am sorry to say. To tell the truth, Jack, he does so well I am afraid he will get my job away from me. I wish you would take the lever again, Jack, and let me fire. I never had so good a time in my life as I did then.”

This was a little past noon, and a few minutes later Jack would be obliged to part with Plum, who must start on his return to St. Resa.

“There is one favor you can do me, Plum. If you will lend me money enough to buy a pair of oxen I will begin to team a cargo of nitrate down myself. I do not feel you will take much risk in letting me have that amount.”

“I only wish you would take more, Jack.”

“I think I have hit on a better plan this time,” said Jack, as he took the loan. “I am going to draw enough for a shipload down on the Bolivian coast and house it there until an American ship comes into harbor.

“I may have to wait a long time, but it will be best in the end.”

With his oldtime vivacity Jack set out on his new undertaking. He soon found a yoke of oxen to his liking, and finding he had money enough he bought a second pair. Then he started for the mountain ridge where he had so unceremoniously left his two loads of nitrate so long before.

He did not expect to recover the one that had gone over the precipice, though it had not moved from its singular position. To his joy he found the other just where he had left it. The rust had gathered on the iron-work and the sun had discolored the wood, but the wagon was in running order, and as the path from this point was generally descending he had no trouble in drawing the load, though his team consisted of one yoke of oxen less than before.

It would be tedious to follow him in his long, lonely journeys to Cobija, on the coast of Bolivia, where he stored his nitrate until he had there enough for a ship's cargo. During the time his cattle lived by feeding on the grass that grew on the more fertile places along the route, while he lived on whatever food he could pick up, sleeping at night under his cart.

He had no further use for his oxen, so he sold them at the first favorable opportunity, realizing enough for them to pay back the money he had borrowed of his friend, with a fair rate of interest. Surely he had made a more auspicious beginning this time.

Chapter XXII

The Fate of Plum Plucky.

It had been three months since Jack had seen Plum, so he resolved to go to De la Pama and see his friend before making another move in his venture. But he had not left town before he was surprised to meet his friend, who had come to Cobija in search of him.

"Lost my job and so I thought I would hunt you up," said the latter, bluntly. "Got a stunning piece of news for you, too. There is an American brig ship just above here at the next town, and I made bold to ask him to take your cargo to New York. He says he will do it for a snip in the profits."

This was a bit of news worth hearing, and in the exuberance of his spirits, Jack flung his cap high into the air and threw his arms about the neck of his friend.

"At last I believe my dream will be fulfilled, but I shall never forget it was you who helped to accomplish it. But I want to pay the money I owe you."

"Not yet, Jack; better keep it awhile longer. I know it is safe. You may need it you know. Besides I am going to the States with you. I have got enough of this country. The war grows hotter and hotter up St. Resa way. I am homesick!"

Jack lost no time in seeing the captain of the brig, a man named Hillgrove, and who gave our hero a most cordial greeting. He had been in Bouton daring his adventurous career, though he could give Jack no information of his friends. He knew John Fowler, the great engine builder, and that simple fact gave him

confidence in the young speculator, who must have presented a not very favorable appearance to him.

Jack's long exposure to the tropical sun had fairly blackened his countenance, his hair was long and unkempt, while his clothes were sadly in need of repair, or more truthfully new ones to take their place. But there was an honest frankness in his manner, and Captain Hillgrove entered into the spirit of the venture with a hearty good-will. The bluff old sea dog, too, true to his nature, was anxious to get out to sea again as soon as possible.

"I must and will get out of this infernal country within a week," he said. "So I will run down to Cobija as soon as possible, and if your nitrates is on board by that time the old ELIZABETH will be good-natured."

Plum having decided to go home with Jack, it was necessary for him to return to De la Pama for his money.

"I will be back sure, Jack, on the third, if not before," were his parting words.

Captain Hillgrove ran into Cobija the next morning, when the loading of the nitrates was begun with as little delay as possible, Jack feeling in the best of spirits as he superintended the work.

But on the eve of the third day, Jack having got the last of the cargo aboard a little after noon, to his anxiety, Plum Plucky had not appeared.

"He will surely come before morning, unless something has happened to him, for I never knew Plum to break his word," said Jack to the skipper.

"Can't wait any longer!" declared captain Hillgrove the following morning, when it was found that Plum was still missing. "We shall all be confiscated by these infernal Spaniards."

Jack was now really alarmed about his friend, whom he believed had been waylaid and robbed. But he could not think of leaving without making a search for him.

"I am going to start for De la Pama to look for him, but you may expect me back by sunset."

"If you are not I shall set sail without you, for I have seen some of the Chilian spies around today."

"You need not wait any longer than sunset," said Jack, who could not blame the other for his impatience.

Losing no more time, Jack mounted a fleet pony that he had hired at an exorbitant price, and set out for De la Pama at a furious pace.

Toward noon he was gladdened by the sight of an inhabitant of the town whom he knew, and who was on his way to Cobija.

Halting the Peruvian he inquired of him in regard to Plum. This fellow, who knew Plum well, replied that he had seen him in town, and that he had left two days before. Upon second thought, he volunteered the startling information that news had come of an American being waylaid and killed by a party of bush-raiders a dozen miles east of De la Pama!

"Did the young engineer start directly for Cobija?" asked Jack anxiously.

"No; he went toward the east, saying he wished to go to Don de Estuaray before he went to Cobija."

This was sufficient to arouse the fears of Jack, who procured a fresh horse and put on as rapidly as possible across the wild country toward the estancia of Don de Estuaray.

All the afternoon he rode as fast as he could, but he saw nothing of his missing friend. In his anxiety he halted on top of an eminence of land commanding a wide view of the surrounding country, to scan the lonely scene.

His attention was finally caught and held by the flight of one of those enormous vultures of the Andes, which was descrying a circle in the air directly over the valley at his feet. Smaller and smaller grew the orbit of this dark bird while he watched, until suddenly it ended its gyrations and swooped swiftly down out of sight.

Then a second took its place in the air, soon following it to the earth, in turn succeeded by a third, and that by another, and so on, until a dozen had come and gone in this mysterious way.

With a dread foreboding at his heart, Jack rode forward into the isolated valley, when, from a small opening in the centre of the place the sudden whir of wings and the rapid flight of many dark bodies told him the secret of it all.

He found what he expected a moment later—the bones of a human being picked clean of all flesh by the vultures, while scattered here and there were shreds and pieces of the garments worn by the unfortunate person.

He found enough of the clothes to know only too well that they belonged to his lost friend Plum Plucky, and tears filled his eyes as he turned away to shut out the sad spectacle.

“This is fearful!” he murmured. “Poor, poor fellow!”

At this very moment, though of course unknown to him, tired of waiting for him any longer, Captain Hillgrove was sailing out of Gobija harbor, anxious to reach the open sea before night should set in.

Chapter XXIII

Jenny.

The vultures were still screaming over his head, venting their rage over being disturbed in their feast, as Jack hastily brushed the tears from his eyes and looked more clearly around him.

“Poor Plum!” he exclaimed, “this is indeed a sad fate. It seems a certain fatality for any one to be my friend. But I suppose you were killed for your money. It seems only decent that I should give your bones human burial.”

With his knife and the stirrups taken from the trappings of his horse, Jack hollowed out a spot to receive all that was left of the body he had found.

By the time he had finished the sad task it was quite dark in the forest, so he knew he must get away from the lonely place as soon as possible, if he valued his own life.

With a last farewell look at the wildwood grave which he was never to see again, he rode away through the wilderness.

He soon found, however, that his horse was so spent that it must have rest before going much further.

As impatient as he was to reach Cobija, wondering what Captain Hillgrove would think of his prolonged absence, he yielded to the unavoidable and stopped awhile in the heart of the forest.

It was broad daylight when he rode into De la Pama on a used up horse and himself quite fagged out.

But notwithstanding his condition, he felt obliged to push on for Cobija, dreading lest he should find Captain Hillgrove already gone. Accordingly remounting the pony he had previously ridden, he started for the sea coast at a rapid gait.

The wiry little animal made a remarkable record, but he might as well have been on the road another day, as it seemed, for he found his worst fears realized.

Captain Hillgrove had sailed!

Whither should he turn now? What should he do? Never in his life had he felt so lonely and so near despair as he did at that time. The indomitable pluck which had carried him through so many trials began to leave him. Then, he rallied, exclaiming:

“I will earn money enough to take me back to the United States on the first ship that comes this way. Perhaps with a sample of my nitrate I—”

He suddenly felt a heavy hand laid on his shoulder, and turning he was both astonished and pleased to find one of the seaman of the ELIZABETH standing beside him!

“Ahoy, shipmate!” greeted the sailor, giving the true nautical pitch, “so I’ve follered you into port at last, though it’s a sorry cruise I’ve had.”

“Captain Hillgrove!” cried Jack, elated. “Where is he?”

“Outside, shipmate. He durstn’t stay inside longer, and he sent me to keep a lookout for you. I was giving you up when I clapped my old watchdogs on you. You are ready to go out to the ELIZABETH in my boat?”

Jack’s reply was an exclamation of joy and a more fervant grip of the honest old tar’s hand.

“Captain Hillgrove had not deserted me after all!”

Without further trouble or delay the couple made the trip to the waiting vessel, when Jack was greeted by the bluff old skipper:

“Bless my eyes! but I had given you up to old Davy Jones.”

“And I thought you had left me in the lurch,” said Jack frankly, as he cringed under the grip given his hand by the other.

“I did not dare stay in Cobija longer, my hearty. If I had done so nary a bit of your dust would have been left on the ELIZABETH. Bless my eyes! but I’m just overflowing and roaring glad—run up the yards lads. Lively, lads! put the old ELIZABETH on her wings. We must be a long way from here afore sun-up.”

Exciting scenes followed, of which Jack was a spectator and not an actor. For the present his work was done, and he had time now to ponder upon his ups and downs, hardly able to believe that at last he was really on his homeward journey.

He felt far more confident in the care of bluff Captain Hillgrove than in that of the fickle Peruvians.

Nor was his confidence misplaced, for the night passed without anything occurring to interrupt their progress, and when the sun rose the following morning it found them many leagues from land, and bowling merrily on their way.

Captain Hillgrove listened to his account of the fate of poor Plum Plucky with a feeling of sorrow, though he had never met the young American.

Jack's return home was something of a triumph, though he was saddened by the loss of his companion during those trying scenes he could not put from his mind, while his longings to reach home were tinged with those forebodings one cannot escape who has been away so long, and the nearer he approached his native land the more ominous became those feelings!

Were his parents still living and well? Was—was Jenny still true to him? What had she thought of his long, weary years of absence? Until then he had not realized that he had been away so long.

At last the old *Elizabeth* was safely moored at her dock.

Though Captain Hillgrove was anxious to know what the result of their speculation was going to be, he allowed Jack time to hunt up his relatives and friends before the nitrate was moved from the ship's hold.

I cannot begin to explain the joyous reception accorded our hero at his home, for many had given him up as dead.

With a tremulous tongue he asked for Jenny dreading, doubting, expecting he knew not what; and then his cup of happiness overflowed at the thrice-welcome news of her well-being and faithfulness to him, and that she had just returned to her native town.

Jenny was not only living and well, but she had never given up looking for him, believing he would some day return to her.

The sweet happiness of the meeting between the pair is too sacred to be revealed.

When the first transport of his reception home had passed, Jack proceeded to put on the market his ship-load of nitrate, to be met with another rebuff in the checkered wheel of fortune.

He could find no one with faith in the virtue of his product brought from the wilds of South America.

Captain Hillgrove began to think he had made a profitless voyage, though be it said to his credit, he stood ever by Jack.

The latter met the words of scorn uttered against him with his characteristic good-nature. Some of the nitrate was put in the hands of competent chemists, and still more with practical agriculturists.

"I shall win out," said Jack confidently.

"I trust so with all my heart," answered Jenny.

At last some favorable reports came in and then the load of nitrates was sold at a fair profit. Of the amount Jack got several hundred dollars, the rest going to the captain of the *ELIZABETH*.

Chapter XXIV

Jack and the Ocelot.

The one most satisfied with the result of this first cargo of nitrate was Captain Hillgrove. He had not expected great returns, but found himself so well paid that he was willing to return for another load as soon as possible.

Jack felt confident of his ultimate success. Already he was the possessor of a fair sum, and with the apparently unlimited deposits of nitrate now in his possession, he believed he could easily secure a fortune. As soon as he should get back to Peru he resolved to get possession of other nitrate beds before the price should advance.

But with that far-seeing sagacity of his he made no talk of what he had done or what he had in mind. Quietly he went about his work, engaging several ships to go to South America with him, prepared to return with loads of the precious substance. He fitted up an office at home and put a trusty man in the place to begin to work up a business. He had fondly looked forward to giving this place to Plum Plucky, but stern fate had decreed different plans.

Jenny was enthusiastic over her Jack's plans, and that they might not be separated so long again she consented to their marriage, which took place before he started on his second trip to Peru, and she accompanied him.

Now that Jack had really got started in his speculations, he studied how best he might promote his interest. His young wife going with him to South America, he resolved to locate in that country until he had got fairly under control the gigantic business he intended to build up.

While successful in his nitrate ventures, he still preserved the manuscript he had picked up in the convict cell on the island of Robinson Crusoe, and he looked forward to the time when he should be able to visit the strange lake in the Andes with means to reach its mysterious island of buried treasure.

So at last, accompanied by a party of surveyors and explorers, armed with papers which would make him the owner of the whole region as soon as the boundaries could be fixed, he started for the place.

He had told his real object to no one, knowing that to do so would be to ruin his prospects without benefiting any one permanently.

He had no difficulty in leading the way to the spur of the Andes where he had met with his thrilling experience with the jaguars, and then the party started for the rocky ridge overlooking the niche in the mountains holding the Devil's Waters.

It was a route that Jack had traveled several times, and feeling in the best of spirits, he set off on a gallop, on the pony he was riding.

"Poor Plum!" he murmured, as he rode along. "How I wish he was a live to enjoy this with me."

On and on went our hero until he came to where there was a break in the trail. He was absorbed in thought at the time and did not notice that his pony turned to the left instead of the right.

The way seemed easy, and presently the pony set off on a gallop, which soon brought Jack out of his reverie.

“Hullo! where am I going?” he asked himself, and brought his steed to a halt. Then he gazed around in perplexity. “I declare I must be lost!”

With the memory of what had happened when he had been lost before, Jack lost no time in turning back. But soon he became bewildered, and brought his steed to a standstill a second time.

“What does this mean, Firefly?” he asked of the pony, but the animal could not answer.

Jack heaved a sigh and then drew a pistol he carried.

“I’ll fire a shot—that will attract the attention of the others,” he reasoned. “What a dunce I was to get lost! I surely make a fine leader!” Throwing up the pistol he discharged it. Hardly had he done so when his pony started to bolt. Away dashed the steed under some trees and then through a mass of vines, and Jack was thrown to the ground, striking on his head as he fell—and then his senses forsook him.

How long he laid where he had fallen he did not know exactly but when he came to his senses, it was to find darkness around him. There was no rain, but heavy clouds filled the air and a heavy breeze filled the woods around him. He got up slowly, to make certain that no bones were broken, and then looked around for his pony. The animal had disappeared and could not be found. His pistol was also gone.

“Now I am surely in a pickle,” reasoned Jack. “The question is, what am I to do next?”

He knew his party must have gone on long before this. He would have to find them in some way. But how?

Not relishing a stay in the bushes he started for higher ground. He had not gone a dozen rods when he found himself at the edge of a ravine, lined with tall trees and vines.

“I certainly did not come that way,” he said to himself. “But beyond is higher ground and I had better go up than down.”

Thus reasoning, he looked around for some means of getting over the ravine. A number of vines grew across, and he determined to test them and if they were strong enough, to use them as a rope for getting across.

The vines appeared to be as firm as a cable, and without giving the matter a second thought he launched himself forth and started to the other side of the cut in the forest.

He had progressed less than two yards when he felt one end of the vines giving way. He tried to turn back, but it was too late, and down he went.

Some heavy bushes broke his fall somewhat, but he continued to go down and down, until with a dull thud he landed on a mass of soft dirt. He was unharmed and soon arose to his feet, to gaze around in fresh dismay.

He had landed in an opening or cave, and presently went down into it still further. Then, as he picked himself up, he heard a sudden low growl, that filled him with fear. He strained his eyes and made out a small animal, which proved to be the cub of an ocelot.

He followed its course to a litter of leaves and straining his glance in that direction made out two other cubs.

They were too small to be dangerous. Plum had told him that there were very few ocelots in that vicinity and these rather cowardly, unless attacked or enraged.

Jack looked hurriedly around. The parent ocelot was not in evidence. The baby cub he had stumbled over, however, was making a great outcry, and our hero decided he would not linger any longer than was necessary.

He got under the hole he had fallen through. It was not accessible by climbing, for the walls of the cave were perfectly perpendicular and came nowhere near the central aperture.

Jack reached up and caught at the dangling end of the broken vine. It sustained one hard pull, but, as he set his full weight, it tore up roots and all, bringing down a shower of dirt and gravel.

About eight feet over his head the youth made out an exposed root of the tree. It ran out of the solid dirt a few inches, looped, and was again solidly imbedded.

If he could reach this, he could grasp higher pieces of roots that showed plainly, and easily draw himself to terra firma.

Our hero went back to the extreme end of the cave. The young cubs set up outcries of affright as he passed near them, but he paid no attention to them.

He braced for a run and a jump to reach the piece of root that was the bottom rung of a natural ladder to liberty.

Poised on one foot, Jack stood motionless in some dismay. The entrance to the cave was suddenly darkened. A great heavy body dropped through. The mother ocelot landed on four feet on the cave floor with a terrific growl.

She ran first to her crying cubs, nosed them affectionately, and then turned with low, ominous growlings.

Jack saw the beast's eyes fix themselves upon him. They glowed with fire and fury. Its collar ruffled and its white teeth showed.

Jack had not so much as a stick to defend himself with. He had loaned his hunting knife to a friend when they first started and his pistol had been dropped in the woods.

In his pocket was a small pocket knife. He was groping for this when the ocelot, that had for a minute or two stood perfectly motionless, made a forward movement.

It was not a spring or a glide, but a rush. Jack knew why they called this species the Honey Eater. Its paws were enormous and armed with long curved sharp pointed claws.

He was hedged in. The beast, still advancing, reared on its hind feet.

Its forepaws were extended and whipping the air. Jack knew that one contact would tear the bark from the toughest tree. He mechanically seized the first object his groping fingers met in his coat pocket.

It was one of two condiment bottles that he had brought from the last camp. This was the one containing pepper.

In a desperate sort of a way Jack discovered this. He tore off the top of the bottle.

It was all that he could do to stay the course of the determined animal.

As the ocelot thrust out one formidable paw to tear its victim into its clasp, Jack flung the contents of the pepper bottle squarely into its eyes.

Chapter XXV

In the Quicksands.

Jack ducked down and dodged the ocelot, and got past the animal. He could do this now, for the whole contents of the pepper bottle had gone squarely into the eyes of the beast.

The effect was indescribable. The animal gave a frightful roar, dropped to the floor, and, rolling over and over, tore frantically with its paws at its blinded, smarting eyes.

The cubs, excited and frightened by the uproar, joined in the chorus. They waddled around, getting in our hero's way, and by their cries arousing the mother from her own distress.

She got upright, and seemed to spot Jack. Her advance, however, was clumsy and at fault, and the youth had time to get out of her way.

A second and a third rush she made at him. The last time one paw struck Jack's coat sleeve and ripped it from place.

"This is getting serious," murmured the lad. "Each time she comes swifter and surer. I must get out of here, now or never."

Jack drove the cubs to their litter, and poked them with his foot. They set up a frantic uproar. This was just what he wanted. The mother flew towards her offspring.

The moment that she did so, Jack glided to the opposite wall of the cave.

He made a sharp run for the opening overhead, calculated poise and distance nicely, and landed with success.

He grabbed the rounding root. It held like iron, but his feet were dangling, and as he swayed there the big ocelot brushed by them on the hunt for the intruder.

Jack held firmly to the root and swung up his other hand. He caught at a higher tree root. Now he had a double hold.

He knew that the ocelot might come after him even up there, and lost no time in climbing from root to root. At last his head projected through the mesh of verdure into clear daylight. Jack lifted himself to solid ground and leaned against the tree trunk, out of breath and perspiring.

"That was action," he panted. "Will the beast come after me? No—but something else may. Oh, the mischief!"

The roars and growlings down in the cave seemed to have attracted outside attention. Jack turned sharply, at the sound of crackling branches and rustling leaves at a densely-verdured spot near at hand.

There burst through the greenery a new enemy. This was an ocelot larger than the one he had just escaped from.

"That is the head of the family, sure," thought Jack. "It's a race, now."

The new feature in the incident came straight for our hero, with bristling muzzle and fiery eyes. Jack started down the edge of the ravine.

It crumbled so that he could not make very rapid progress. To turn aside into the jungle meant to fight his way through thick, thorny bushes. To leap down into the dry water-course was even worse. There, as he knew, the spongy, shifting sand bottom would prevent even the progress of a decent walk.

Jack glanced back over his shoulder. The big ocelot, more sure-footed than himself, was following him up resolutely.

Jack took the first tree he came to. It was a dead one. There were lower branches within reach, and he swung himself up to its first crotch readily. The ocelot did not pause. It started up the tree without delay. Jack armed himself with a piece of a thick limb. Reaching down, as the beast got about four feet away, he delivered a smart whack directly across its snout.

The animal issued a terrific snort. Its eyes blazed madly. A second blow with the club brought the blood, but it kept on climbing.

Jack knew that it would be folly to tempt to battle at any closer quarters. He stood on a dead limb about twenty feet from the ground.

The limb was as thick as his arm, and over thirty feet long. It ran clear across the ravine, and a discovery of this fact gave Jack an idea.

He planned to go out to the far end of the limb, swing from its extremity and drop to the ground, landing on the ether bank of the cut.

The ocelot could not get hold or balance to venture as far out on the limb as the lad dared to go. Jack calculated that the time it lost in getting down to the ground again, would enable him to meantime put a considerable distance between himself and the enemy.

The lad sat astride the dead tree branch and began to walk himself outward from the main trunk of the tree.

The ocelot reached the crotch, surveyed Jack with a savage growl, and carefully planting its feet, started out after him.

Its progress was slow. Jack hitched himself along more rapidly. The branch began to creak. Our hero doubted if it would sustain their double weight. However, he trusted to the wary instinct of the ocelot, which kept coming right forward. Jack was about eight feet from the end of the branch when it gave a very ominous crack. In fact, he saw the white splinters show where it joined the tree.

He swung both feet to one side of the limb, held on only by his fingers, and planned to get to its end hand over hand.

Snap! Jack hurried progress, but it was no use. He saw the ocelot crouch and hug the limb. It gave way at its base. Jack let go. He landed directly on the smooth, sandy bottom of that portion of the ravine.

He struck the ground upright, squarely with both feet. Glancing quickly at the tree, he saw that the branch had whipped right down against the trunk.

The limb had not entirely broken loose, but swayed from several sustaining wood filaments. The ocelot, still hugging the limb, was clawing frantically at the main trunk of the tree to get a new hold there to keep from a tumble.

"It won't do to stop, I see that," murmured Jack. "Ugh! what kind of a mushy mess have I got into?"

Jack looked down at his feet. They had sunk into the sand and were covered to the ankles. With the greatest difficulty he pulled out one foot.

The instant he put it down again in a new spot, however, it sank afresh. He released the other. This threw his weight on a single foot, which went down half way to the knee.

It was not ten feet to the bank of the ravine. Jack lost all interest in the ocelot as he thrilled at a startling discovery.

“Quicksand!” he breathed hastily. “There is not a moment to lose!”

Our hero tugged to get the sunken foot free. He succeeded. Then, half-dancing about, he threw himself flat.

His idea was to make a hurried scramble for the bank on hands and knees. But he uttered a cry of the greatest alarm as his hands went down into the treacherous mass clear to the wrists.

It took a great effort to get upright again. By the time he had done so, Jack realized that he was in a most serious and critical situation.

He was sunk now clear to the knees in a weaving, shifting mass. It circled his imprisoned limbs like great moving ropes, pulling him downward with a suction force that was tremendous.

The youth uttered a gasp of real horror. He could not budge either limb. As he sank to the thighs, he gave himself up for lost.

He saw that no help of any kind whatever was at hand. He knew that the camp of the men who had come with him must be near. He raised his voice to a desperate pitch.

He let out a series of the most piercing yells. But his heart sank, as from the neighboring jungle there instantly arose a mocking imitation from the throats of several parrots.

They drowned out his cries for help. Jack shuddered as the shifting sands wound about his waist. He drew up his tingling fingers with a shock as the mass swept them in ominous, warning contact.

“It is the last of me,” thought Jack, as tears of despair came to his eyes. “Jenny and the folks will never know my fate!”

Jack looked up at the dark sky, sick at heart, but trying to resign himself to the terrible fate that hung over him.

His glance shifted to the tree. He instinctively dodged his head to one side as he did so. Something spirited was happening there.

The ocelot had got a clutch on the main tree trunk, now. As it let go of the dangling limb, however, this parted under the strain.

Its small end struck the ground, and it swung out, coming for Jack and threatened to crush him.

The limb fell with a crash, the big end just reaching the west side of the ravine. Its centre grazed our hero’s shoulder.

“I am saved!” cried Jack.

He threw one arm tightly around the limb, then the other. Now he was clinging to a natural bridge spanning the ravine from one side to the other.

Jack held on and tugged hard to draw himself up from this quicksand bath.

It was hard work. Finally he got one limb free, then the other. They were numb, and felt like pieces of lead.

Jack was so exhausted with the effort that, crawling on top of the limb, he lay there lengthwise, almost exhausted.

Chapter XXVI

A Night in the Jungle.

It was a good quarter of an hour before Jack felt like making another move. As he lay on the log he kept a lookout for the ocelots, but neither of the beasts appeared, the larger having gone to the cave-like opening to learn what was the matter with its mate.

"I must get away from this vicinity," thought our hero, and at last started off.

He scarcely knew in what direction to turn, for the running away of his pony and his adventures with the wild beasts and in the quicksands had completely bewildered him.

"I'd give a good round sum to be back with our party," he thought, as he pushed his way through the jungle. "I wonder if they are out searching for me?"

At last he had to rest again, and thinking himself safe for the time being he set about cleaning his hands and face, and also his outfit.

"This is certainly treasure hunting with a vengeance," he mused. "I think I would have done better had I stuck to the nitrates. Maybe I'll lose my life and the vultures will pick my bones, just as they did poor Plum's."

It made our hero more dismal than ever to think of how Plum had departed, and he was very sober as night drew on and he still found himself alone and with no idea of where he was.

"I'll have to stay here alone in the dark," he said, half aloud. "That won't be pleasant, but it can't be helped."

Soon it was so dark that to advance further would have been foolish.

Accordingly Jack came to a halt, and looked around for some means of making himself comfortable for the night.

He did not deem it wise to remain on the ground, where some wild beast might leap upon him, and so looked for some wide-spreading tree among whose branches he might rest in peace.

At length he found a tree to his liking and having taken a final look around, ascended to a number of the upper branches.

Here there was a sort of natural platform, where he might lie without much danger of falling to the ground.

It was now pitch dark, the clouds obscuring the stars in the heavens. He was very hungry but had absolutely nothing with which to gratify his appetite.

"I'll have to get something for breakfast," he reasoned. "If I don't I'll be likely to starve to death."

It was but natural that Jack should find sleep difficult, and it was a good two hours before he went off soundly. When he awoke it was with a start.

Jack listened intently, for he realized that some movement at the foot of the tree had awakened him. He tried to look downward, but the darkness and the leaves hid everything from view. He waited with bated breath and soon heard a faint scratching. That some wild animal was at the foot of the tree he had no doubt.

"I hope it doesn't try to come up," he thought. "If it does, what am I to do?"

He did not dare to make a noise, and so remained silently on guard. The minutes went by slowly, until a good hour had passed. The noises below continued but that was all.

"Well, even if the beast can't get up it evidently intends to tree me," thought Jack, dismally.

Sleep was out of the question, and rather impatiently the youth waited for the coming of dawn.

At last came a faint light in the east and at last daylight was at hand.

For some time Jack had heard no further noises below him and he fondly hoped the thing on the ground—whatever it was—had gone away. But now the noise was repeated, and then came another sound that made him start in wonder and anticipation.

"Can it be possible!" he murmured, and began to climb down the tree with all speed. Soon he reached the lower branches, and looking downward saw his pony resting directly under him!

"Blind luck!" he cried. "And I thought it was a wild beast! How foolish I was not to come down and take a look!"

Not to scare the pony, Jack called out softly, at which the steed pricked up its ears. Then our hero slid down the tree to the ground and caught the pony by the head. It did not offer to run away, but whinnied with evident satisfaction.

It gave Jack great pleasure to find the pony again, and he felt far less lonely than he had during the night. He mounted into the saddle, and, guided by the sun turned in the direction where he thought the mountain trail might lie.

It was a dull day, a peculiar smoky air filling the jungle.

From a distance came the cry of wild birds, but that was all.

Jack journeyed for a good two hours, and then came to what looked like another ravine. But the banks were not so steep as before and he had but little difficulty in going down one side and getting up the other.

"Well, I never!"

This was the cry that burst from his lips half an hour later. A moment before he had realized that the surroundings looked familiar. Now, on the ground before him, he saw his lost pistol, shining among the grass and leaves.

He lost no time in securing the weapon. It was ready for use and with great satisfaction he placed it in his pocket.

"Now I've got something with which to defend myself," he reasoned. "It may not be as good as a gun, but it is better than nothing."

Onward he went once more, stopping once to get some handful of berries which he knew were good to eat, and then again for a drink of water for himself and his steed. He had left his former trail, fearful of going in a circle once more,—a common experience of those traveling in a dense forest.

By noon Jack was more than hungry and he decided to shoot something and cook it for a meal. He kept his eyes open, and when some plump birds came close,

brought down two with ease. Then a fire was lit, and he spitted the birds and broiled them to his satisfaction. He took his time over the meal, allowing his pony to graze in the meanwhile. Close at hand was a spring of cold, mountain water and at this he quenched his thirst, and the pony did the same.

“There, that makes me feel better,” said the youth to himself. “It will last me until nightfall, and by that time I ought to be able to find the others of the party, or gain some regular trail which leads to somewhere.”

So speaking Jack started to get into the saddle once more. As he did so, he heard a rustling in the leaves of some bushes behind the spring. The pony gave a violent snort and gave a side step, which threw our hero to the ground.

“Whoa there, Firefly!” he called out. “Whoa, I say!”

But instead of quieting down, the pony became more violent and it was impossible for Jack to hold the steed. The pony broke away and like a flash whirled around and disappeared once more into the jungle.

Somewhat bewildered, Jack stood up and gazed around him.

“What can this mean?” he asked himself. The next instant he saw the reason for the pony’s extreme fright. A snake had appeared, coming rapidly over the rocks. It was ten or twelve feet long and as thick as a man’s arm. It was hissing viciously and had its glittering eyes fastened full upon our hero!

Chapter XXVII

Jack and the Big Snake.

It was no wonder that Jack was both startled and alarmed. The snake was certainly powerful, and the youth knew that many of the reptiles of that vicinity were poisonous. A sting might mean death, and if the snake should wind itself about him, he might be strangled until his breath was gone, never to return.

By instinct more than reason he leaped to one side. At this the snake, hissing louder than ever, did likewise. Then Jack made a wild leap into the air, caught a low-hanging tree branch, and hauled himself upward.

For the time being our hero was clear of the snake, but he felt far from comfortable. He perched himself on the limb and watched the reptile closely. It whipped this way and that over the ground as if in high anger over missing its intended prey.

Thus several minutes passed. The snake circled the tree three times and then began to come up with a quickness that chilled Jack to the bone. There was no help for it, and pulling his pistol, the youth blazed away at the snake. The first shot took no effect, but the second hit the reptile fairly in the body. It whipped around its head for a moment, then came forward as before.

Jack was as far out on the limb as he could get, and now, as the snake came forward, he blazed away a third and fourth time. Then he let himself drop to the ground.

As he did this, the reptile thrashed around wildly in the tree, hitting one limb after another with its tail. Then it came to the ground in a heap, writhing horribly in its death agonies. Jack had wounded it fatally, but the body would continue to move until sundown, if not longer. When the scare was over the youth found himself bathed in a cold perspiration and trembling as if with the ague. He realized that he had had a narrow escape, and thanked providence that the snake was dead.

Jack did not remain in that vicinity long, but set at once to work to find his pony. Fortunately the animal had not gone far on this occasion and a call soon brought the steed to the youth's side. Then Jack hopped into the saddle once more.

"Gracious! what a lot of adventures I am having!" he murmured, as he again rode along. "I hope I don't have any more."

On and on through the forest rode Jack, gradually gaining higher ground. The sun was breaking through the smoky air and this did something towards raising his spirits.

A good two miles covered, and our hero came out in a clearing some distance above the jungle. Here he could get a tolerable view of the surrounding country and he looked eagerly for some trace of his party. To the southward he made out what he took to be the smoke of a camp-fire, but that was all.

"I may as well turn in that direction," he reasoned. "Where there is a fire there must be human beings. And as the war is now at an end it isn't likely that they will harm me."

For some distance the new route was an easy one, but then it became rougher and rougher, until riding was all but impossible. At some points he had to dismount and lead the pony. Once both went into a rocky hollow, Jack barking a shin and the pony skinning a knee.

"I hope this doesn't last very far," thought the youth. The roughness continued a quarter of a mile, when he came out on a beautiful grassy plain, at the rear of which he saw a thatched house and a small garden enclosure containing a score or more of chickens.

As he approached the house an old man came forth to meet him. He viewed Jack with astonishment, for visitors in that lonely spot were rare. "Where does the most noble señor come from?" he asked, bowing low.

"I came from the town far below here," answered Jack. "I have lost my way," and then as well as he was able he described the road he wished to find.

"The *Americano* señor is a long distance from that road," said the native.

"Can you guide me to it?" questioned the youth, eagerly. "I will pay you well for your services."

At the mention of pay the native showed an increased interest. He was naturally a lazy fellow, but the promise of a Peruvian half dollar made him hustle to take Jack on his way. He too had a pony, and soon the pair set off, across the plateau and then through a sparingly grown forest, where some of the trees were of enormous height.

"What had made the air so smoky?" questioned Jack, as they rode along. "Have there been heavy forest fires?"

“No forest fires, señor,” the native answered. “The smoke comes from the bowels of the earth. The rocks have opened once more—we shall soon have an earthquake.”

“You think so?” cried Jack. He had experienced several slight earthquakes while in that quarter of the globe, and, though they had done small harm, he dreaded the coming of another quake.

“Yes, señor.”

“How soon?”

“Two, three days, it may be—or perhaps a week,” answered the native.

After that they rode along in silence for fully half a mile, when they reached a trail running east and west.

“Is this the road the señor is looking for?” asked the native, bringing his pony to a halt.

“I believe it is,” answered Jack. “But I must look around first to see if my party has passed this way.”

He surveyed the scene with care, but could find no trace of the others. Had they come thus far, or had they turned back, in a hunt for him? Jack was in a quandary over what to do next. Night was again coming on, and he had no desire to remain alone again, after his many adventures of the past twenty-four hours.

“Where can we stop around here?” he asked.

“The señor wants his humble servant to remain with him over night?”

“Yes, unless some other house is handy, and others there.”

“There is a house not far away, but it is empty.”

“Then let us go to it. It will be better to remain there than to stay in the open.”

They went up the trail a short distance, and then turned to the southward and took to a side road leading through a patch of high brushwood. Crossing a tiny mountain torrent, they came in sight of a dilapidated house, one end of which was all but wrecked. To the surprise of both Jack and his guide, smoke was issuing from behind the structure.

“Somebody must be here after all,” said the youth, as he rode forward.

“It must be a stranger, señor,” was the native’s reply.

Not to fall into the hands of enemies Jack advanced with caution. As he rounded the end of the dilapidated house, he saw a bright fire burning among some piled-up stones. In front of this fire a tall young man, dressed in rags, was crouching, cooking something in a battered pan. As Jack came closer the young man suddenly leaped to his feet, uttering a cry of alarm. Then he gave another cry, and dropping the pan with its contents to the ground, he rushed forward with wide-stretched arms yelling at the top of his voice.

“Jack! Jack! It is really my own Jack! Oh, how glad I am to see yeou!”

Chapter XXVIII

Back from the Dead.

Jack literally fell from his horse. Was he dreaming or was this a ghost that confronted him? He gazed at the other fellow with eyes that almost popped from his head.

“Ain’t yeou glad to see me?” came from the fellow in rags, and his voice took on a hurt tone. “Plum! Is it—is it really you?” faltered Jack.

“Sure ez yeou air born it’s me,” was the answer from Plum Plucky.

“But I thought you were dead—I was sure you were dead. Why, I—I buried your bones!”

“Not by a jugful yeou didn’t bury my bones, Jack. I’ve got ’em all with me, although I allow they ain’t much meat on ’em jest now,” went on Plum, dolefully.

“But this—this staggers me! I was certain you were dead, and when I found a heap of bones which the vultures had picked clean I buried them for yours. This is the most wonderful thing I ever heard of. I can’t understand it. Where have you been, and why didn’t you let me hear from you?”

“I have been a prisoner of war,” answered Plum. “Got caught in the mountains one day. Fust they was up fer shootin’ me, but then they changed their minds and carted me off to some little town in the mountains. They fired me into a dungeon an’ I took sick, an’ would have died only a native gal up an’ nussed me back to health. Then I give the gal some silver I had hidden away an’ she showed me how to git away, an’ I got. Then I got lost in the mountains, an’ would have starved to death only I run down some sort o’ a wild beast that had two legs broken in a fall over the rocks. I killed the beast—I reckon it was a puma—with some rocks, an’ lived on the meat fer nigh on to a week. Then, after all kinds o’ adventures in the mountains, I reached here, an’ here I am, an’ so happy to see yeou I don’t know what to do.”

As he finished tears stood in the honest eyes of the Yankee lad, and Jack was no less affected. They embraced, the native looking on in wonder, until the matter was explained to him.

“I know this road like a book, so ye won’t need that native no longer,” said Plum. “But I’d like to have his nag. I’m dead tired o’ hoofin’ it.”

“You shall have the pony—if he will sell,” said Jack.

“Got any money to pay with? I ain’t got a red cent.”

Jack had some funds with him, and soon a bargain was closed with the native. Then the fellow went off, leaving the former chums to themselves.

The supper Plum had been cooking was spoilt, but another was presently prepared and both sat down to do justice to the repast. As they ate each told his story in detail, and Jack related his reason for coming back to that portion of the country.

“I’m glad to learn yeou made money on them nitrates,” said Plum. “An’ I am glad, too, that you found yer gal true blue an’ waitin’ for ye, Jack. But about this treasure hunt,—well, I don’t put much stock in it.”

“I want to solve the mystery of that boiling lake, Plum. Even if I don’t get the treasure it will be something to learn what makes that water shoot up as it does.”

“Oh, I suppose so, but don’t yeou take too many risks finding eout,” returned the Yankee lad.

Plum said he had expected to remain at the deserted house all night and then push on for the seacoast. But now he had met Jack, and had a pony at his service, he was willing to go anywhere.

"I ain't got no home nor nuthin'," he remarked. "One place is ez good ez another to me,—only I like to be among friends."

"Stay with me, Plum, and welcome," said Jack, cordially. "I can use you in my business, if you want to come in."

"I am with yeou every time," said Plum, and shook hands on it. As said before, he was without funds and more than glad that our hero was willing to assist him.

The night was spent at the dilapidated house without anything unusual happening, and early in the morning they got breakfast,—eating some birds Jack brought down with his pistol—and then went on their journey.

Noon found them on the main road, and an hour later they came across two of the members of Jack's party.

"Well, I am glad to see you are alive," said one of the men. "We had about given you up for lost."

"I came pretty near being lost forever," answered Jack, and once again had to tell his story. Then one of the men was despatched to bring up the rest of the party; and by nightfall all hands were together again.

"I shall certainly be more careful in the future," declared Jack. "Such absent-mindedness does not pay."

Fortunately some extra clothing had been brought along, and a suit was given to Plum, for which he was exceedingly thankful. That night Jack slept finely, and in the morning declared himself in the best of health.

Once again the party moved forward to the rocky bowl in the mountains holding the Devil's Waters. By noon the summit of the ascent was gained and the party came to a halt. Then Jack went ahead accompanied only by Plum.

As soon as Jack reached a spot where he could look into the vast bowl he saw that something unusual had occurred. He was mystified and appalled and sat on his pony spellbound.

The roar and thunder of the mysterious boiling lake was gone. Not a sound broke the stillness of the mountainous scene. He looked down on a grass-covered valley, somewhat round, in size and having in its center a mound or "island," upon which grew a lonely pimento tree. A branch of the tree, devoid of foliage, pointed like a great finger, to a cut in the great mountain bowl.

There was no mistaking such a landmark, and as Jack viewed it he gave a long low whistle.

"Well?" demanded Plum, questioningly.

"I am—am staggered, Plum."

"Why?"

"This doesn't look like a lake, does it?"

"Sure not, Jack."

"Well, the last time I was here it was a boiling, writhing lake, and that mound you see yonder was an island in the middle."

"Gosh all hemlock, Jack! Yeou don't mean it!"

"I assuredly do."

"There ain't a drop o' water around here neow!"

"I know it and that is what puzzles me."

"Ain't mistaken in the spot?"

"Not at all. Do you see that solitary pimento tree? Well, that was there, exactly as it is now."

"Yeou said it would be, I remember that," said Plum, scratching his head. "But this ain't no lake."

"It has been. See, the grass shows signs of having been covered with water mixed with mud."

"That is so too, an' neow I look at it, Jack, ther's big holes in the ground here an'there, where the water must have run off."

For several minutes Jack and his friend surveyed the scene. Then our hero urged his pony down the somewhat steep side of the gigantic mountain bowl.

"Whar be yeou a going now?" asked Plum.

"To the mound in the middle of the valley, to see if I can find the treasure," shouted back Jack.

"All right, I'm with yeou," answered the Yankee lad, and followed down the slope.

Chapter XXIX

The Treasure of the Boiling Lake.

It must be owned that Jack's heart beat rather rapidly as he rode down into the little valley, hemmed in on all sides by the high walls of the Andes mountains.

He remembered well what the paper had said concerning the treasure, yet he did his best to steel himself against possible disappointment.

Plum Deemed to read his thoughts, for as he rode up he said:

"Jack, thet treasure might have been here years ago, but don't be disapp'inted if it's gone now. Them waters may have washed it away."

"I am willing to take what comes, Plum," was the answer. "But I want to know the exact truth—I hate to be kept in suspense."

"Well, we'll know afore long, I calkerlate," returned the Yankee lad.

They had to pick their way with care to the "island," as Jack insisted upon calling it. The bed of the valley was filled with holes and cuts, all of unknown depth. Here and there the flat rocks were split in twain in the most extraordinary fashion.

"There has been some great convulsion of nature here," said Jack. "Maybe the earthquakes have something to do with the disappearance of the water."

"If the water was here—an' I believe what you say—it must have gone down in 'em holes and cuts," said Plum. "But what made it spout up ag'in?"

"Some contraction of the hollows under the lake's surface," answered Jack. "Maybe a cave would get filled with water, then some rocks would fill the cave up, causing the water to spout out into the valley."

"It must be thet—but it is certainly wonderful, Jack."

At last the pair reached the side of the mound or "island," Here they could gain a good idea of the big pimento tree with its stricken branch pointing to the distant hills. Around the pimento the rocks were strewn in all directions.

"If there was a cave here it is filled up," said Jack.

"Pity we didn't bring a spade along," answered his companion.

Dismounting, they tied their ponies to the pimento and then began to look around the mound, which was several acres in extent. Rocks were cast up in all directions, as if by the force of a volcano.

A half hour had passed, and they had found nothing of value, when of a sudden Plum snatched up something and gave a yell:

"Gold! gold!"

"True enough," answered Jack, when he had examined the piece. It was the size of his little finger and similarly formed.

"The treasure must be here!" went on the Yankee lad. "Come, let us look for it."

"That is what we are doing already," answered Jack, with something of a happy laugh. He, too, had spotted something yellow between the rocks, and now brought it forth, another piece of gold, twice the size of Plum's find.

"Good for yeou!" shouted the Yankee boy. "The rocks must be full o' gold!"

In feverish haste the search was continued, and soon Jack had at least a pound of gold to his credit, while Plum had nearly as much. Then, of a sudden, Jack stepped on some loose dirt and shot out of sight.

"Hi! what yeou doing?" yelled Plum, in alarm, as he retreated from the hole that had appeared.

"Help me out!" called up Jack. He had gone down about a dozen feet, to bring up in a bed of sand and small stones.

"Hurt any?" queried Plum anxiously.

"Not a bit, Plum."

"Any gold down there?"

"I'll see," said Jack.

He hunted around the opening and soon discovered a passageway between two immense rocks. He lit a match and one look around made his eyes open wildly.

Gold was there, on all sides of the passageway—enough to make him rich for life!

"Plum, look here!" he yelled. "Gold—all you want of it!"

"Du tell!" roared the Yankee boy, and without stopping to think twice he dropped down to the bottom of the hole.

Another match was lit, and then some dry brushwood, and by the flickering light the two youths filled their pockets with the precious metal.

"We can load our ponies with gold," said Jack. He was so delighted he could scarcely speak.

"That's it—we'll carry away all we can an' then come back fer more," answered the Yankee lad.

How to get to the top of the hole once more was a problem, but at last Jack climbed on Plum's shoulders. He was then able to grasp a tree root, and by this means hauled himself upward.

"I'll tell you what to do, Plum!" he called down. "You throw up the gold to me and I'll load it on the ponies."

“All right, Jack. But don’t forgit to pay me fer the job,” laughed Plum.

“Pay you? Why, Plum, a good share of this gold is yours!”

“Yes, but yeou knew about the treasure, I didn’t.”

“I don’t care. You can have a third anyway—and I’ll pay all expenses of this trip.”

“Thanks, Jack, yeou allers was a good feller.”

After that both boys worked away like Trojans for the best part of an hour. The gold was there and Plum flung up one piece after another, until the saddle bags on both ponies were overflowing.

“We’ve got a load!” cried Jack at last. “Any more down there?”

“Plenty,” was the answer.

“Well, let us take this to yonder hills and hide it. Then we can come back for more.”

“Why to the hills, Jack?”

“Because something tells me not to trust this spot too long, Plum. Remember the boiling lake.”

He assisted the Yankee lad to the top of the opening and then, mounted on their ponies, they made their way over the dry bottom of the lake to the rocky ridge beyond. Here they deposited the gold in a safe place, and then returned to the “island.”

“I’ll go down this time,” said Jack, and did so. A torch had been brought along, and sticking it in a crack of the rocks, the youth went to work with a will.

In less than half an hour the ponies were again loaded with gold. Jack had picked up almost the last piece in sight when he came to a sudden pause in his work.

What was that strange sound, and was it possible the earth beneath him was trembling? He leaped back to the center of the hole. Yes, the earth was surely quaking, and now some loose dirt came down on top of him.

“It is the earthquake!” he murmured, and at that moment came a loud cry from Plum.

“Jack! Jack! come up, as quick as yeou can! The water is squirting up through ’em holes, an’ the lake is filling up!”

Chapter XXX

A Ride for Life—Conclusion.

The earthquake was indeed upon them, and as Plum threw down a rope to Jack the whole landscape seemed to rock to and fro, causing the Yankee lad to miss his footing and pitch headlong on our hero’s head.

“Oh, Jack, did I hurt you?” spluttered Plum, as he stood upright at the bottom of the hole.

Jack did not answer, for at that instant the earth shook again, sending them both on their backs. Then all became, for the instant, quiet.

“We must get away from this spot!” gasped Jack. “If we don’t, we’ll be buried alive!”

The rope had fallen at his feet. He picked it up. There was a noose at one end and this he whirled upward.

Twice he missed the object for which he aimed, but the third time the rope caught fast to a projecting rock.

“Now, Plum, up you go!” he said, and gave his companion a lift. Fear lent the Yankee lad strength and he went up hand over hand in rapid fashion. Jack followed, and in a moment more both stood on the surface of the island.

The sight that met their gaze was enough to make them shudder. On all sides the darkish-green water was spouting from the holes and cuts in the lake bed. Some of the columns arose to a height of a hundred feet, the water falling back into the basin with a tremendous report, and causing the drops to fly in all directions. At one point in the lake the water was already a foot or more deep.

“To the shore!” yelled Jack, and flew for a pony, while Plum did likewise. The animals were crazy with fear and could scarcely be controlled.

As they left the island there came another movement of the earthquake, followed by a crash behind them. They looked back, to see the lonely pimento tree fall into the very hole they had just left!

“Gosh! what a narrer escape!” gasped Plum.

“We are not out of it yet, Plum,” answered Jack. “Come, we must ride for all we are worth. Perhaps we had better throw away the gold.”

“No! no! Don’t do it!” screamed the Yankee lad. “We can make the shore if we hurry.”

Down they plunged side by side from the island and into the water that was now flowing in all directions around the mound. They made a bee line for the rocky ridge beyond.

Illustration:

Down they plunged side by side from the island
into the water

“Look out for holes!” cried Jack, but even as he spoke his pony plunged downward, nearly causing our hero to take a header. But he clung fast, and, struggling up, the pony went forward as before.

It was a ride that can scarcely be described. Soon the water was up to the bodies of the ponies and then they were carried off their feet. They swam a short distance, and then, coming to a shallow spot, galloped on as before.

It was a wild ride, and dripping from foam and water the ponies kept on until once again they had to swim.

Then came a roar from the bottom of the lake, and steeds and riders were hurled high in the air, to fall again with a noise in the spume of the boiling lake.

“We—we air lost!” panted Plum. “Th—the wind is gone out o’ me!”

“Keep on, we have only a short distance further to go!” cried Jack.

The earth was shaking again and the water appeared to swing away from them toward the island.

Then it came on with a rush, carrying ponies and riders far up the rocky ridge. Then the water went back as before, boiling and foaming furiously, while a mist blotted out the immediate landscape.

“Come, don’t stop here!” yelled Jack, urging his pony forward. “To higher ground, before it is too late!”

Again they went on, but not for far. Another earthquake threw them flat and Plum rolled down under his pony. Then the quaking ceased; and that was the last of the earthquake. Arising, Jack helped his companion and found that the Yankee youth was uninjured. Both looked down the rocks toward the lake. The water was boiling and foaming as before, but gradually the surface of the lake grew calm. Then Jack gave another exclamation:

“The island! It is sinking from sight!”

It was true, the island was going down slowly but surely. In a few minutes it was but a mere speck on the surface, and then even this disappeared.

“Gone!” gasped Plum. “But we got the gold—or a good part o’ it!”

“Thank heaven that our lives were spared!” murmured Jack. “I never want to go through another such experience—not for all the gold in the world!”

* * * * *

A few words more and we will bring our tale to a close.

When they had rested, Jack and Plum rejoined the others of the party. The story of the hunt for gold was told, much to the amazement of the rest, and, later, the gold was taken down to the seacoast and placed with some reliable bankers. The boiling lake was inspected and found to be deeper than ever. Strange to say, the lake remained where it was for about two months, when it gradually disappeared, and that was the last seen of it. The ground around where the pimento island had been was greatly upheaved, and a long search in that vicinity failed to bring any more gold to light.

The treasure that had been found proved to be worth nearly thirty thousand dollars, one-third of which went to Plum and the rest to Jack. Out of his share our hero paid all the expenses of the trip and also rewarded handsomely all those who had accompanied him into the mountains.

With a portion of his money Jack continued to develop his nitrate fields and shipped vast quantities of the stuff to this country and elsewhere. He soon became immensely wealthy, and then settled down with his wife, Jenny, in Boston, where we will bid him farewell.

