

LOST *in the* FORBIDDEN LAND

BY
EDWARD
S. ELLIS



FOREIGN ADVENTURE SERIES



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FOREIGN ADVENTURE SERIES

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THE FOREIGN ADVENTURE SERIES

BY

EDWARD S. ELLIS

ILLUSTRATED BY

EDWIN J. PRITTE

No. 1.—Lost in the Forbidden Land

No. 2.—River and Jungle

No. 3.—The Hunt of the White Elephant

The FOREIGN ADVENTURE SERIES is bound in uniform style in Cloth, with side and back stamped in colors.

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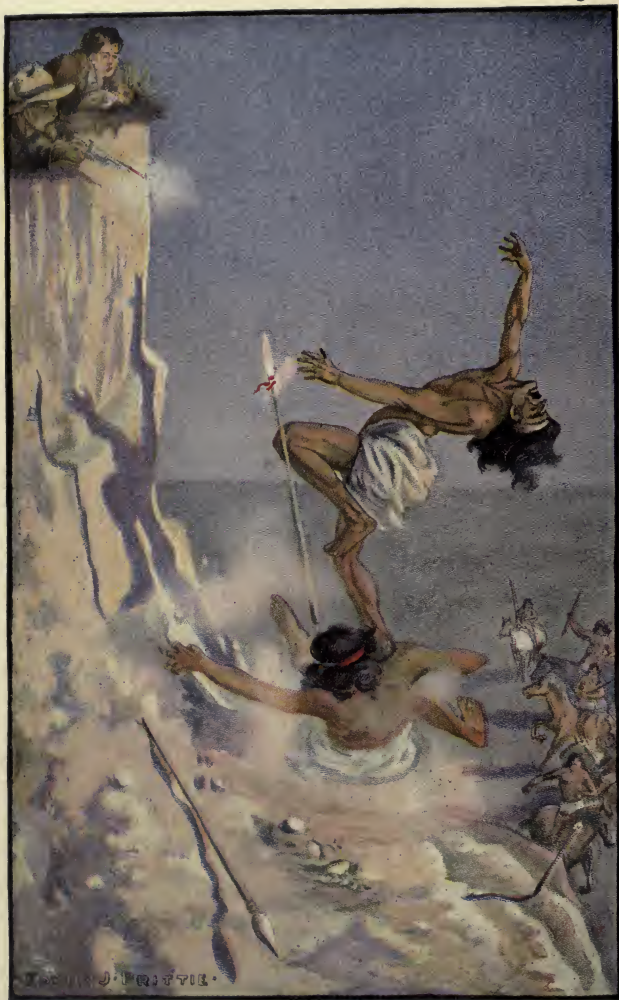
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With a rasping screech he plunged upward and backward.

see page 165

FOREIGN ADVENTURE SERIES

Lost in the Forbidden Land

By Edward S. Ellis

Author of "Deerfoot Series," "Young Pioneer Series,"
"Log Cabin Series," "The New Deerfoot Series,"
"Up and Doing Series," etc., etc.

ILLUSTRATED

By EDWIN J. PRITTIE

THE JOHN C. WINSTON COMPANY

CHICAGO

PHILADELPHIA

TORONTO

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GIFT
Randell

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LOST IN THE FORBIDDEN LAND

CHAPTER I

A MAD SCHEME

IT WAS in the early part of 1899, that, while engaged in making a South American tour, I drifted into the little Bolivian town of Sucre. This town stands on the northern bank of the Pilcomayo, about a hundred miles from its source near Lake Autlapas, in a spur of the great Andean range, which forms the mighty western wall of South America, all the way from the Caribbean Sea to Cape Horn.

I was sauntering in a dreamy mood through the half civilized collection of huts, flimsy dwellings and primitive streets, with the lazy negroes, mongrels, half breeds and original natives lolling lazily in the sun. I was wondering how many centuries would have to come and go before these Bolivians would earn the name of being civilized.

Like most of the people in the interior, the Sucreans are indolent, stupid and in many instances vicious. Were they not so cowardly, a traveler would never be safe, for the police force such as it is, is as corrupt and treacherous as those whom they pretend to govern.

I had traveled sufficiently through Brazil, Argentina and Paraguay to understand the inhabitants. Not only did I carry two of the best Smith & Wesson revolvers, but I made sure that a good supply of cartridges was always in my possession.

These weapons, being in holsters at my hips, always gave the dusky miscreants fair notice of what they were up against when they attacked me. I had winged two or three of them in the course of my wanderings, could speak their gibberish, whose basis is the Spanish tongue, and understood their nature so well that I was rarely in danger from even the lowest classes, among which are to be included the sullen, scowling negroes.

But it was fully a year since I had left New York, and I will not deny that I was homesick. I had become so tired of looking upon and meeting the mongrels and unclean natives that I would have jumped with delight at the sight of a man from my own land.

To appreciate your own country, you must go abroad, and it matters little where.

As I said, I was sauntering along the narrow street, which was unpaved and in places sloped like the roof of a house, when to my amazement some one slapped me on the shoulder and called out in unmistakable English:

“How are you, old fellow?”

Turning my head, I was startled into momentary speechlessness by the sight of a man who could never be mistaken for any other than a genuine American. His appearance suggested the caricatures that were common some years ago of “Brother Jonathan,” for he was tall, thin, with a sharp nose, bright keen gray eyes, and wore a tuft of yellow whiskers on his chin.

His coat was of blue broadcloth, with brass buttons and swallow tail, his trousers were tight fitting and reached but little below his boot tops, while an immense gold chain dangled from his yellow vest.

The only points that varied from the caricatures I have spoken of was that, like me, he carried a revolver at each hip and his small waist was spanned by a belt that was full of cartridges, and, instead of wearing the tall plug hat of his country, his small head was sheltered

by a broad Panama, of such fine material that it must have cost a big sum of money.

His long sandy hair was brushed behind his ears and the expression of his face was keen, inquisitive, alert and good natured.

No wonder I was astonished to meet him in this out of the way corner of the world. I should add that he was smoking a huge cigar, and before I could reply to his salutation, he drew its mate out of an upper vest pocket and thrust it toward me.

“Try it, friend; their weeds in this country taste better than they look. I knew you were an American the moment my eyes rested on you and I tell you it did me good to see you. What’s your name?” he added as he extended his hand, which I cordially grasped.

I was as delighted as he and told him who I was.

I never dreamed of meeting one of my own countrymen,” I added, as we faced each other and I lit my cigar from his; “and I need not tell you that I am as glad as you. May I inquire your name?”

“Higgenbottom—Percy Higgenbottom. I am from New Haven and left home last summer.”

“I cannot understand what brought you to this miserable country.”

“It does look odd, but I might say the same of you.”

“Well,” I replied, “I set out to do the principal parts of South America, but I have grown sick of the business and intend to get back to God’s country as soon as I can and to stay there hereafter.”

My new acquaintance laughed in his peculiar, chuckling way.

“I think it’s on you, Windermeyer; you came for pleasure and that is more than I can understand, for I’m here on business.”

“If that is more creditable to your common sense, it is still more wonderful as a fact, for what do these miserable people know of business?”

“Mighty little; they are the laziest folks on earth; the only able bodied man that I have seen doing anything was one that was asleep and falling off a house. But I’m dealing with the government, and have just made a contract with President Señor Severo Fernandez Alonzo, whose long reign began in 1896—three years ago.”

“You have aroused my curiosity.”

“Come with me to the Waldorf Astoria of Sucre and I’ll tell you all about it.”

The leading hotel of this Bolivian town might serve as a respectable stable in our own land. Like all the buildings in countries subject to earthquakes, it was low and flat, consisting of only two stories, with a broad, covered piazza extending around three sides, screened by climbing vines and flowers. There were a few rickety uncertain chairs, wretched, untidy and scant furniture and provision in the way of drink and food which only a man in sore straits could make palatable.

The landlord sat in one chair with his bare feet resting in another, his dilapidated hat on the porch beside him, his eyes shut and his mouth open, while his snoring could be heard a block away.

Not another person was in sight about the miserable hostelry, and, though Higgenbottom purposely stumbled against his chair while we were passing to the further end of the porch, the landlord was not disturbed. At the angle of the piazza, we seated ourselves, after some careful experiments with the wrecks of chairs, and resting our feet in true American fashion, puffed our cigars and conversed without disturbance.

“I suppose,” said my friend, “that you know something of the many attempts, all ending in failure, to trace the Pilcomayo river from its source near us, to where it joins the Paraguay?”

“Yes; naturally I informed myself before coming to South America. It is strange that though some of the parties were large and well armed, not one succeeded in pushing through the country of the Tobas Indians.”

“I don’t see anything strange about it, when you bear in mind the character of the people who made most of the attempts. They were Spaniards, who knew no more about fighting than Admirals Cervera or Montojo. What fun it would be for a party of American cowboys to waltz from Sucre to Asuncion!”

“No doubt; and that is the only way the job will ever be done.”

“I don’t know about that; *I think I shall get through!*”

I stared at the fellow in amazement.

“You get through! What do you mean?”

He closed one eye and looking quizzically at me, with his big cigar still between his lips, he drawled:

“I have made a contract with the Bolivian government to run a steamer down the Pilco-

mayo through the country of the Tobas; I have the boat ready and the crew engaged; we are to start tomorrow and if you will go with me, I will make it worth your while."

"But, Higgenbottom," I rejoined, "I am astonished beyond measure. Knowing that you must be familiar with the history of all these expeditions, your enterprise is suicide."

"Perhaps it is and perhaps it isn't, but all the same I start tomorrow."

"Tell me something about it."

He was pleased to gratify my curiosity, and sinking down in his chair until his head was lower than his boots on the railing, he smoked and said:

"You can understand how anxious Bolivia is to find the Pilcomayo navigable for steamers, all the way down to the Paraguay, for if that is the fact, Bolivia will have what she has never had—an outlet to the Atlantic. The Argentine Republic is hardly less anxious, for such an outlet would prove a vast advantage to her. She has joined Bolivia several times and President Alonzo gave me to understand that she shared in the expense of my enterprise."

"Were you induced to come all the way from Connecticut to Sucre to undertake this strange contract?"

“By no means; I never heard of the Pilcomayo until I reached Buenos Ayres. You are traveling for pleasure, which I can’t afford; my father has seven boys, and the farm near New Haven won’t support his family, which is still growing, with no one able to say when it will stop. So, when we become old enough to vote, each one has to shift for himself.

“One of my brothers is digging for diamonds in Kimberley, South Africa; another is helping to run things in the Congo State; two others are pegging away in the Klondike. I decided to try South America. I learned all about the Pilcomayo business in Buenos Ayres, while looking around for a job, and made up my mind to show that some things can be done as well as others.”

“By what route did you reach Sucre?”

“I went up the La Plata, Parana and the Paraguay to Caimbra, thus flanking the Tobas Indians, and then with three guides cut across the country to Sucre. The three natives who came with me will make up my crew in going back. They are far better fellows than you can find in this part of the world. We have been here less than two months, and they have averaged a fight a day with the miserable Sucreans, and every time,” added Higgenbot-

tom with a grin, "they have broken a half dozen heads and received only a few trifling bumps themselves. I build great hope on them."

"Your steamer must be a small one."

"It is barely thirty feet long; the engine is ten horse power, and since we cannot carry much coal and couldn't get it any way, we'll burn wood, of which there is no end on the banks of the river."

"That is well enough, but what about the Tobas, who have defeated every attempt thus far?"

The coolness of the Yankee was unique in its way. He crossed the ankles resting on the railing, took two or three puffs at his cigar and drawled:

"Well, likely enough we may have a *little* trouble with them, but we shall have plenty of firearms."

"So had all the expeditions that preceded you."

"You forget they were Spaniards, and couldn't hit anything they aimed at."

"Captain Page was an American."

"And a good fellow, but his boat drew too much; ours is light enough almost to run where there is a heavy dew; then," said Higgenbottom, coming suddenly to an upright position

and showing more animation than before, "I've got an idea that is Yankee clean through; I am depending more on that than anything else."

"What may it be?"

He glanced around to make sure he was not overheard. The landlord was still snoring, and the only other person in sight was a brawny half breed, stretched out full length in the full glare of the sun on the other side of the street, also sound asleep. Besides, what odds could it have made, if we had been overheard, since we spoke in English? Nevertheless, Higgenbottom sank his voice to a half whisper and uttered the single word:

"Dynamite!"

"I was not aware that they knew anything about that stuff in this part of the world."

"They don't know much, but they do in Buenos Ayres and Rosario; you know considerable gold has been found in Bolivia, and a few years ago a party of Americans, with two good engineers, came over the Andes, bringing a quantity of dynamite with them. They stowed it away, where the natives weren't likely to get to fooling with it and used a part for blasting purposes. Before half was gone,

the party became disgusted and went back, leaving the dynamite behind them.

“When I found that out, I rigged up an old brass Spanish field piece, probably two hundred years old, with a powerful spring, which will throw a dynamite cartridge several hundred yards. I have twenty odd good cartridges ready, and if the Tobas get too gay my gun, which I have called ‘Uncle Sam,’ will cough a few dynamite pills among them, and they won’t care about asking any more questions. My only fear is that they won’t give us a chance,” and Higgenbottom chuckled again.

“I fear they will give you too many chances. But of necessity you will often have to go ashore to gather fuel, and your dynamite gun will then be less useful than you seem to believe.”

“I have considered all the chances,” he said more seriously, “and nothing would persuade me to back out. The sum of money which I am to receive, as soon as I reach Asuncion by way of the Pilcomayo, is equivalent to twenty thousand dollars in our country. I think that is better than digging in the Klondike.”

“But much more dangerous. Then it is now April and the rainy season is at an end.”

“The date couldn’t be more favorable. We

shall have pleasant weather and at the same time all the advantage to be gained from the rise of the river. I told you I had been here for two months making my preparations. I could have started a week ago, but determined to wait until everything was thoroughly ready. It is only a little way to the river; come with me.”

He rose briskly from his chair and we hurried off the porch and to the southern outskirts of the town, where the Pilcomayo is no more than a moderately sized creek. Several canoes lay partly drawn up on the bank, and secured with a rope was the boat to which Higgenbottom referred, and which had been constructed, as he informed me, under his own supervision and mostly by himself.

He had all the remarkable mechanical ingenuity for which his people are famed, and had made a boat some thirty feet long, six or eight feet in width, of a pretty, graceful model, and strong and serviceable. The sides were bullet proof, the small engine (a relic of the visit by the Americans several years before) was well protected so that a man could stand behind it without danger from arrows, spears, or any other weapons except that upon which we counted so much ourselves, dynamite. Indeed,

everything was made as perfect as possible for this expedition.

I could not but smile as I looked at the bow. Painted in large black letters on each side of the white prow were the words:

HAIL COLUMBIA, OF THE UNITED
STATES OF AMERICA.

I surveyed the boat and the patriotic name and looking at my friend with a smile, said:

“Higgenbottom, I’ll go with you down the Pilcomayo.”

CHAPTER II

“IF YOU STIR YOU ARE A DEAD MAN!”

PERCY HIGGENBOTTOM was a genius in more than one respect. I never met a man who possessed his mechanical ingenuity.

Closer examination of the craft, which he had christened the Hail Columbia, proved it to be a model in every way. The small engine at the stern was so screened by planking that nothing less than a cannon ball could harm it. The pilot house, near the bow, was equally strong, and a band of heavy glass on all sides allowed the occupant to peer out in every direction without fear of being hit by any missiles such as natives would be apt to hurl. The bunks forward effectually screened the sleepers from any hostile shots.

Each man was furnished with a Winchester rifle, and there was abundance of ammunition. I was the only one without a weapon of this sort, and there was no means of procuring one in Sucre.

I looked upon this after all as a small matter, since it was not likely that all five would ever be so placed that they could use the guns with advantage at the same time.

In such a warm country as the plateaus and lowlands of Bolivia and Argentine, fruit constitutes the principal food, though elk and deer are frequently met. We took with us a goodly supply of cocoa, rice, coffee, tobacco and sugar, all of which grow abundantly in the region.

Besides this, there are immense herds of horned cattle, horses, asses and mules, which roam over the succulent, grassy plains.

Further down in Argentine, the *cinchona*, or quinine bark, abounds, besides sarsaparilla, *jalap*, cedars, the American pine, *algaroba* or carob tree, whose fruit affords not only nourishing food, but the refreshing drink *laaga*.

From Sucre southeastward for three hundred miles, the Pilcomayo flows through a wild, rocky section, growing less hilly until at the point named the character of the country has gradually changed to a level plain or lowland. This is the beginning of that vast pampa known as the Gran Chaco, where the untamable Tobas roam, on the alert to attack every stranger that dares enter their country.

The three natives who composed the crew of

the Hail Columbia were partly of negro blood, docile, obedient and given to few words. The one who had been taught to manage the engine was the eldest and was in middle life, quite wrinkled and, like his companions, had immense bushy hair and wore no clothing except a breech clout.

He was named Padro, and the others were Hernandez and Armetia. They reminded me of the meek Chinamen, as they toiled willingly, silently and patiently.

A striking evidence of the shiftless character of the people in that part of the world was that when we started early the next morning after the interview I have described, there was not a single man, woman or child on the bank to watch us, even though the little steamer was a novel sight to them.

Since the course of the Pilcomayo for a considerable distance is very rough, Higgenbottom was wise in making his craft draw the least possible water. He knew that boats of greater draft had preceded him and he was confident that with the high water he could safely make the descent to the level country below.

I had no intention of being a simple passenger on this voyage, which was to prove the most eventful of our lives. I had given my friend

to understand that I would not consent to share in the price he expected to receive for making his venture, and I meant to give him all the help I could. After watching him for some time managing the wheel with a skill I could not hope to equal, I remarked that I would wait until the stream became broader and smoother before taking my trick, and in the mean time would serve as engineer for a part of the time.

The engine worked with perfect smoothness. We had piled enough wood aboard to last us throughout the day, it being our intention to lie to at night, after replenishing our supply, for it was altogether too risky to plunge down the narrow, boisterous stream except by daylight.

It will be noted that for the time most of the work devolved upon Higgenbottom and myself. He gave his whole attention to the steering, while I manipulated the engine.

This proved so monotonous after a time that I turned it over to Padro, who had been acting as fireman, and, going forward, entered the pilot house, which was just large enough to hold both of us and still give my friend freedom in managing the wheel.

There was no lack of excitement in my new position. Little was attempted in the way of

conversation, for Higgenbottom's wits were occupied and I was deeply interested in watching him. There were deep, impenetrable woods on the right and left, the rocks often towering to the height of ten, twenty and even fifty feet. The rushing torrent was crested with foam, whirling in eddies about boulders, plunging swiftly forward for several hundred yards, like a raceway, then broadening out into triple its usual width, with a more sluggish flow, and again spinning between obstructions, the sight of which caused me to catch my breath.

"It only needs one collision with some of those half sunken rocks to wind up the career of the Hail Columbia," I remarked, and my friend nodded his head without speaking, as he gave the wheel a quick turn.

For hundreds of miles after leaving Sucre there is no village or settlement of whatever nature on either bank of the Pilcomayo. Some of the natives occasionally approach the stream, but this takes place so rarely that neither Higgenbottom nor I gave it a thought.

We knew there was little peril of that nature to be feared until we approached El Gran Chaco, which had been fatal to every explorer who attempted to force his way through it.

The noon had passed but a short time when

the captain pulled the cord attached to a little bell over the engine as a signal for Padro to shut off steam. This was done, and the craft was turned to the right and run close to land, where Hernandez and Armetia, in obedience to orders, sprang ashore and made a rope fast to the trunk of a tree. The landing could not have been effected more easily.

“Anything the matter?” I asked, as the captain left the wheel and passed out of the pilot house.

“I think not, but it is better to examine the engine; it is new and there is probably friction in some part.”

He passed aft and made a careful inspection of all the bearings and machinery. He carefully re-oiled every portion, after which we stepped ashore, on his suggestion that we might as well take our dinner there.

We placed our fruit upon a broad, flat stone, close to the edge of the stream, Percy and I by ourselves, while the crew sat a short distance off, similarly occupied. The water was clear and cold, and each used his tin cup in making coffee.

“It is risky business,” I remarked, “but you could not have guided the boat better had you spent your life on this stream.”

"My heart was in my mouth more than once," replied the captain, with a grin and shake of his head; "the river is clearer than I expected to find it, but some of the sunken rocks I could not locate until the boat was almost over them. I felt it scrape them several times, but," he added with a sigh of relief, "matters will improve as we get further down."

"Yes, in that respect, but they'll be much worse in another."

"You have the Tobas in mind; won't they be surprised when *she* sneezes at them?" he asked, winking toward the slim brass piece at the bow. "I should have liked to use compressed air, but hadn't the means of working it, and the spring will do the business well enough."

"You won't let any of the crew handle that gun?"

"Not much; I won't let even you, for no one besides myself understands the full construction of the piece and how to aim it."

"The trouble with those things is that they are sometimes as dangerous to those at the breach as at the muzzle."

"Not when one knows his business but——"
My friend, sitting crossed legged on the

other side of the stone, the same as myself, was in the act of raising his tin cup filled with steaming coffee to his lips, when he abruptly stayed his hand, and instantly a look of horror came into his eyes and overspread his face.

At first I thought he was looking at me, but immediately I perceived he was staring at something behind me. By a superhuman effort, he regained his self control and in a husky whisper said:

“Windermyer, keep your nerve! If you stir you are a dead man!”

I was petrified as much by his looks and manner as by his words. I felt the cold perspiration break out over my body, but I fixed my eyes upon him, as if I were a drowning man and was watching a boat approaching.

I heard nothing, felt nothing, saw nothing but him, and yet somewhere behind me and within arm's reach and steadily drawing nearer was death in one of its most horrible forms.

“For God's sake,” I gasped in an appalled whisper; “end the suspense in some way, Percy, for I cannot stand this more than a second longer.”

“You must!” he whispered in turn; “keep your nerve; don't move hand or foot; act as if you were a dead man; don't take your eyes from my face!”

CHAPTER III

ONE OF BOLIVIA'S ANIMAL PRODUCTS

AT THIS moment I perceived that my friend, who was sitting as motionless as a statue, was slowly lowering his right hand to his hip, where one of his revolvers reposed. He did not change the fixed stare at the object, whatever it might be, which was behind me.

He was about to draw his weapon, but why such frightful deliberation? Evidently he was afraid of startling my enemy into lightning-like action, by some abrupt movement of his own. Summoning all the power I possessed, I compressed my lips, held my breath, and fixed my eyes unalterably upon Higgenbottom's face.

I saw his muscular fingers close around the butt of his pistol, which began tardily creeping upward until the shining barrel rose to view. Then with the same dreadful slowness the arm commenced straightening out, with the revol-

ver so pointed that I saw the reflected sunlight gleaming in the muzzle.

The man was aiming at my foe, though any one standing ten feet distant would have sworn he was about to shoot me. In that fearful moment, I watched his forefinger gradually increasing its pressure upon the trigger and then, unable to hold my breath longer, I gave a gasping, half shriek and pitched forward on my face.

At the same instant the crack of the pistol rang out and my friend's cherry voice called:

"It's all right, Windermyer! That critter will never hurt you!"

Quickly rallying, as my comrade sprang to his feet and fired a second shot, I leaped over the broad flat stone between us, and as I placed myself at his side, looked behind me.

A serpent no more than two feet in length was threshing the ground, rolling over, twisting and doubling upon itself so rapidly, that it was half a minute before I perceived it was headless; but its frantic struggles suddenly ceased and it lay motionless, dead as dead could be.

"What has become of its head?" was my nonsensical question, for I was still dazed and hardly conscious of what I said.

"I suspect it will be found somewhere in the

Gran Chaco or the Argentine Confederation," was the characteristic reply; "at any rate, it vanished when I pulled trigger the first time, so my second shot was wasted."

Assured that all danger was over, we stepped closer to the body and looked at it more critically.

It was beautifully marked with dark red and yellowish stripes running transversely the length of the reptile, upon a background of brilliant black. Two proofs of its venomous nature were noticeable, or rather had been noticeable. The tail was obtuse and the triangular head, as my rescuer explained, had two deep pits in front of the tiny eyes. The latter peculiarity is an invariable sign of a poisonous serpent.

"I don't know the name of the infernal thing," said Higgenbottom, "but if there ever was concentrated deviltry and the essence of death wrapped up in one package, it is there. I told you that when I tramped from Concepcion to Sucre I had three native companions—the same that are with me now. I started with four, but one of them was stung in the hand by that sort of serpent, while sitting at dinner just as you were, and ten minutes later he was as dead as a door nail."

“Why didn’t it strike me?”

“Because it was a little slow. You saw me start, the moment before I warned you not to stir. Where the devilish thing came from I couldn’t tell, but just then I saw it coiled not more than a foot from your elbow, in the exact position to strike. Its head lay in the center of the coil, for all the world like one of our own rattlesnakes, and its crimson forked tongue was darting in and out, and its beady eyes were fixed upon you in a way that meant business from the word go.

“Providentially you were listening to something I happened to be saying at that moment, and the serpent seemed to be in doubt whether you were a live target and fair game or not. It was waiting to settle the question before striking, which was why I warned you not to stir. My voice seemed to attract its attention for a second or two to me, and I should have been glad could I have drawn its attack, for I was prepared and in no danger. Probably it confused your voice with my own and your rigid position kept up its doubt.

“My fear was that any abrupt movement on my part would precipitate its attack upon you. That explains the care with which I drew my

revolver. The abrupt action came when the trigger was pulled."

"You couldn't have made a better shot."

"Bah! how could I miss, when the target was less than ten feet distant?"

"I always supposed the deadliest snakes were in India."

"That land has more than any other part of the world, but every tropical region has its share. The *cobra di capello* is ranked by scientists as the most deadly serpent in the world, but I think this species runs it a close second. I wonder whether our headless enemy has a mate near," and Higgenbottom, revolver in hand, began looking about him.

The possibility of such being the fact sent a shiver through me, and, whipping out my own weapon, I glanced at my feet and here and there around, ready to fire and retreat on the first warning.

Our flurry had thrown the three natives, sitting a short distance away, into the greatest excitement. They bounded to their feet on the instant the captain's weapon was discharged, and were hurrying toward us, when Padro uttered a terrified cry, and seemed to leap fully six feet from the ground. His companions bounded in

different directions as if a bomb had exploded between them.

“There’s another!” exclaimed the captain, running toward the spot.

But Padro anticipated him. Retreating before the serpent, which showed its amazing audacity by gliding straight toward him, he caught up a fragment of rock that must have weighed eight or ten pounds, and hurled it fiercely at his enemy, and the thing was crushed to a pulp under the formidable missile.

“Captain,” said I, “we seem to have struck a settlement of these pests; I favor a change of base.”

“There’s no need of waiting longer,” he replied.

The rope was unwound from the tree and we sprang aboard. I took charge of the engine for a while, and we were speedily spinning down stream with Captain Higgenbottom at the wheel as before.

The character of the country through which we were passing underwent no perceptible change for a considerable time. Rocks and boulders lined the bank and the dense forests, composed of an endless variety of woods, walled us in on both sides.

One gratifying fact was beyond dispute: the

upper Pilcomayo was becoming broader and smoother, good reason for believing our boat would find less and less difficulty in speeding down stream.

Still there could be no assurance on this point. In truth, the presumption was that we should encounter more than one dangerous, if not impassable portion, for many miles of mountainous region were before us, and it would be strange if the river were not broken by canyons, rapids, cataracts and waterfalls.

During a discussion of this phase of the question, before we started, I asked Higgenbottom what he would do, in the event of being confronted by such a state of affairs.

"There's only one thing that can be done," was his reply; "we'll take the Hail Columbia apart, carry it piecemeal below the impassable place, and put it together again."

"What a task!"

"There's nothing so tremendous about it; these three natives and I built the boat in the first place, and since every part has been fitted, there may be a good deal of hard labor, but nothing impossible of accomplishment. All the same, I hope the necessity may not arise."

"So do I," was my fervent response, as I recalled the small but heavy boiler, and other

portions which would prove a cumbersome burden for the five of us.

Turning over the care of the engine to Padro I went forward and entered the wheelhouse beside the captain, who showed his unruffled mind by smoking one of his black, heavy cigars.

“Now if the Pilcomayo will only behave itself,” he said, with his keen gray eyes scanning the bubbling current ahead, “I can’t see why this excursion of ours to Asuncion may not prove a pleasant picnic.”

What do you mean by the river ‘behaving itself’?”

“Why, doing as it is now doing—broadening out and growing smoother until it becomes the most pleasant kind of stream for the Hail Columbia to navigate.”

“Whatever its course and condition, the men who have attempted its passage during the past century and a half and more, had the same advantage that you will have.”

“You persist in overlooking one of the most important factors in the game, which is the slight draft of the Hail Columbia, which allows it to travel where mighty few craft in the world can go.”

“What do you mean to do when the Tobas attack you, as they certainly will?”

The gray eyes flashed as he replied:

“I shall be disappointed, if they let us alone. In the first place, this boat can outrun any of their canoes and it will be high old fun to dash among them at our topmost speed. You commented this morning on the sharpness of our prow, which may prove more useful than you suspected. Then, too,” he added with his grin, “I’m anxious for Uncle Sam to have a chance to say ‘Howdy?’ to a few hundred of the inquiring aborigines.”

It was impossible for me to share the hopefulness of my friend, but I said nothing to cool his ardor. We were in for it and all that was left for us was to push ahead, trusting to Providence and our pluck and good luck.

Looking down stream, we saw that the river, which was fully fifty yards in width, was fast growing narrower. At the same time, the massive walls became more lofty and a comparatively short distance in advance, they towered two or three hundred feet above the surface, the wooded crests approaching so close in some places that it looked as if a man might leap across, though obviously such could not be the case.

“Captain,” I said, after a moment’s scrutiny

of the river, "it looks as if we are approaching a canyon."

"There isn't any doubt of it," he calmly replied; "I don't know how extensive it is, but we must go ahead, hit or miss."

CHAPTER IV

A PERILOUS PLUNGE

I WAS terrified, for surely this reckless, headlong style of going forward must bring disaster.

“Why don’t you stop and make an examination of the canyon?” I asked, laying my hand on his arm.

“It’s too late; we’re going too fast, and there’s no place to land, even if we cared to do it; brace yourself and trust to heaven.”

He was right. The current was plunging onward with the speed of a race horse, and the most furious reversal of the screw would not check the boat. Each side of the narrow stream was a solid wall of dripping rock. We must dive forward, and, as he had said, it all rested with Providence whether we should emerge alive or be dashed to death.

The next moment, the craft, as if aware of its fearful peril, plunged into the narrow passage and shot ahead with dizzying speed. I held my breath, while the captain smoked his

cigar, grasped the spokes of the wheel and remained as cool as an iceberg.

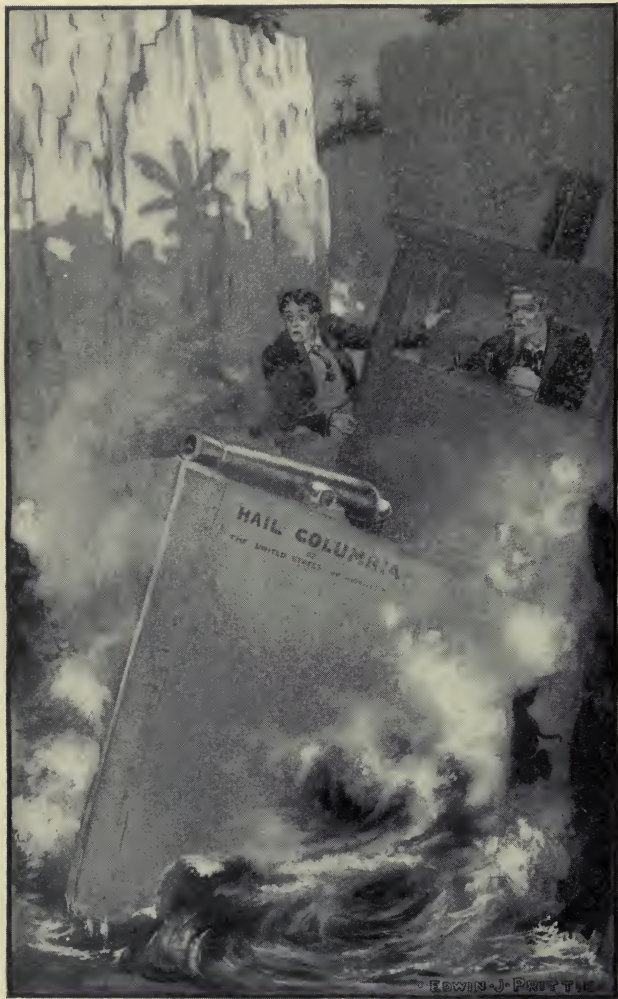
He had signalled to Padro to shut off steam, and we were now at the mercy of the resistless current, which tossed us about as if the Hail Columbia were an eggshell.

It was like the Maid of the Mist careering through the whirlpool below Niagara. Now we shot upward on the crest of an immense wave, then were whirled sideways, again spun clear around like a top, and all the time we were speeding forward with a swiftness that fairly took away one's breath.

I involuntarily closed my eyes when certain that we were about to crash against the rocks in front, and be shattered to a thousand fragments, but I opened them again when I heard and felt the grating of the sharp prow against the dripping mountain wall. The captain was tugging at the wheel, though all his efforts were useless, since we were wholly helpless.

Mist and spray were everywhere. Glancing through the open window behind me, I saw all three of the natives on their knees, hands clasped and their ashy lips trembling with petitions to the saints to save them from impending death.

It was indeed a time for an appeal to Heaven,



"It's too late, we're going too fast."

and I never prayed more fervently, as I stood with feet apart and holding on for dear life to each side of the narrow pilot house.

The coolness of Percy Higgenbottom was not the least amazing feature of the awful drive through that canyon. Never once did he remove his cigar from between his set teeth, and the occasional puffs which showed through the whirling mist proved that he was extracting some sort of a solace from the nicotine.

He kept turning the wheel to the right or left, but he must have known it was labor wasted. Perhaps it was a relief to his tense nerves.

The seconds were minutes in length. The tunnel-like passage wound in and out, turning one way and then another so abruptly that it was impossible to see plainly for more than a hundred yards in advance and oftener not that far. Why the craft was not shattered to atoms is more than I can ever understand, but suddenly the voice of my friend rang out:

“Hurrah! That was well done!”

We were through the canyon and gliding into the broadening and comparatively smooth waters below. All danger for the time was over.

The captain rang for Padro to give the craft steam, but he had to repeat the signal several

times before the dazed fellow understood what was required of him. Then I heard the screw churning the waters, and as the captain whirled the wheel over, the boat circled about and headed up stream, as if it were about to try to force its way back through the canyon.

Before I could understand the meaning of this strange action, Higgenbottom called to me:

“Here, Windermyer! Take the wheel and hold her nose just as it is!”

As I took his place and gripped the spokes, he opened the little door in front and hurried to the bow. The dynamite cartridges reposed in a box beside the gun, the box being nailed in position, so that it could not be displaced by any violent motion of the boat.

I saw him pick up one of the cartridges and carefully push it into the throat of Uncle Sam, forcing it gently to the breach, with the swab or ramrod provided for that purpose.

The captain was about to discharge the piece and I looked around to discover the target.

There it was on the crest of the high bank just behind us, in the form of the largest jaguar upon which I have ever looked. The animal, known as the American tiger, is found from Texas to Patagonia.

It is robust, stouter than the leopard and

powerfully built, its tail barely reaching the ground when it stands erect, and it is one of the most dreaded of all the wild beasts of the American forest.

The animal before us was standing on the edge of the rocky bluff, fully a hundred feet above, and double that distance away. Although the species is noted for its curiosity, this one was evidently surveying the craft with wondering amazement, for it surely had never seen anything of the kind until then.

Its somewhat clumsy form was outlined against the clear sky beyond, as if painted thereon with a brush, its head being high, while it stood as rigid as a statue in bronze.

Having adjusted his dynamite cartridge, Captain Higgenbottom held the cord connected with the spring in the base of the gun, calmly waiting till the tossing stern should be at the right elevation before he discharged the piece. Carefully studying the motion of the craft, he suddenly gave the string a sharp jerk. I heard the rattle of the released spring, a peculiar whirring, coughing noise, and then saw the oblong missile leap out of the muzzle, and describing a graceful parabola, the conical point impinged fairly against the solid rock, some twenty feet below where the jaguar stood.

The explosion that followed was terrific, fragments of the stone dropping on the Hail Columbia like hailstones, while the jar of the hull was perceptible beneath our feet. The wonder is that the boat did not suffer injury.

But the jaguar—oh, where was he?

Through the tempest of splintered rock that flew high in air, I saw him seemingly leap to a prodigious height, but, coming down, he missed the rock, his elongated body tumbling end over end through the misty space into the foaming torrent, where it sank as if it were so much lead.

The captain snatched off his Panama and swung it above his head.

“What do you think of *that?*” he called, turning his grinning countenance toward me.

“I did not see that he was struck.”

“He wasn’t; the concussion simply *raised* him and when he came down he missed his footing; the miserable critter was scared to death.”

“Scared to death!” I repeated; “if he had not been desperately hurt, he would have swum to shore.”

“He was too frightened to swim,” insisted the captain, reëntering the pilot house and bringing the bow of the boat down stream. “I sent that shell by way of experiment and it worked beautifully.”

He was as delighted as a boy over the incident, but I could not join him in his reiterated wish that the Tobas would attack the boat.

For the following ten or twelve miles our progress was smooth and even. The Pilcomayo maintained its increased width as compared with the portion above the canyon, and the current was not only deep, but comparatively free from rocks and obstructions such as kept us in suspense and peril earlier in the day.

The dangerous passage had been effected when the afternoon was about half gone, and at the end of the distance named, the captain began studying the banks on either side in quest of a suitable place to lay to for the night.

It did not take him long to find a favorable spot, and running the boat to the right, the rope was again fastened around the trunk of a tree, and we went ashore at a place similar in many respects to the one where he had halted for lunch.

About three-fourths of the fuel had been consumed, and the crew, each with an axe over his shoulder, entered the dense woods, where some of the trees grew so close together that a man had to move sideways to force his way between them.

The great dread of the natives was of poison-

ous serpents and wild beasts. Fortunately, it was not necessary for them to go more than a short distance from the boat, and Padro took his Winchester with him. They completed their task without molestation from any of the denizens of the wilderness.

While they were thus engaged, the captain and I started a fire underneath the trees near the stream and prepared our coffee. Higgenbottom had brought a quantity of jerked or dried deer's meat with him, which suggested the pemmican, so popular in cold latitudes. This with our black, hard bread, our coffee and delicious fruit, made as palatable a meal as one could wish.

Since indeed a considerable supply remained, and we had brought a small barrel of the coarse native flour, and sugar and cocoa, it looked as if we should not be compelled to use our firearms very often to secure additional provisions. Milk and butter, of course, were out of the question. Both of us had learned long before that it is no hardship to go without them when one has an abundance of the other necessities of life.

By the time our evening meal was finished and the boat was heaped up with all the wood it could carry conveniently, night was closing

in. Not a serpent or wild animal had disturbed us, though they might appear at any moment. The peculiar cries of birds, some strangely musical and other harsh and discordant, sounded from all portions of the forest, and it is remarkable how soon one becomes accustomed to them.

It was arranged that the crew should sleep on board the steamer, where they seemed to feel more secure than on land, while the captain and I were to spend the night ashore.

“We shall have to keep to our cramped quarters on the boat so much of the time,” he explained, “that we shall often yearn for a place to stretch our limbs; let us, therefore, use the chance while it is ours, for it won’t do to try anything of the kind in the land of the Tobas.”

CHAPTER V

A STARTLING AWAKENING

CAPTAIN HIGGENBOTTON was too wise to think of sleeping on the ground in a South American forest, where the wealth of animal and insect life renders exposure dangerous and often fatal. Moreover, as is the case in Cuba, the heavy dews are almost sure to cause illness, often followed by fevers and death.

It is a fact, however, regarding the Argentine Republic, Bolivia and many other countries, that while the climate is unhealthful to the last degree during the rainy season, it is generally the reverse at other times. The rainy period, the reader will bear in mind, was well past, and we had entered upon a term during which the rain was not likely to fall for months. From April to October is the winter to the south of the equator.

My friend and I brought two strong, grassy hammocks from the little steamer, which with some labor were suspended between the

branches of the trees, at a distance of nearly thirty feet from the ground. The ropes were tied with care, for a fall from such a height was likely to be unpleasant to say the least.

We were thus beyond the reach of any serpents or creeping things, our only peril being possibly from jaguars, which are expert climbers. The same perhaps could be said of leopards, though they are less to be feared than the American tiger, which, of course, is much the inferior of his Asiatic brother.

Having adjusted the hammocks we carefully crept into them, each taking a Winchester with him, though neither expected to need the weapon. The space between us was about a dozen feet, and our aerial couches dipped almost parallel.

Having settled comfortably into position, we each lit a cigar and talked for half an hour before we began to feel the approach of drowsiness. What was said was not worth recording.

Before climbing to our perches, we threw a mass of wood on the blaze below, so located that if either of us should fall he was in no danger of being burned.

When I had finished my cigar and flung the stump away, I asked my comrade if he was

asleep. Since he made no reply, I received the only affirmative answer possible.

A few minutes later his heavy breathing showed him to be in the land of dreams, where I expected soon to join him, and probably would have done so, but for an unexpected interruption.

That which I first noticed was a queer chattering sound below me. Leaning over the rim of my hammock, I saw a grotesque sight.

Gathered around the fire and plainly shown in the reflected light, were eight or ten monkeys, moving nimbly to and fro in their vivacious fashion and evidently stirred with curiosity, not only by the fire itself, but by the sight of the hammocks suspended far above them. I could see their comical faces turned upward, while they chattered as if exchanging views over the odd invaders of their domain.

As partially revealed in the broken light, they resembled the monkeys seen in the shows and museums of our own country, though under the full glare of day it is probable I should have detected more than one difference.

They were in continual motion, passing back and forth, looking aloft, their faces reminding me in the firelight of a number of dwarfed old men, and the ceaseless action of the jaws sug-

gested that all were chewing gum, after the manner of their superior brethren, or rather sisters.

Suddenly two of them bobbed off toward the boat, as if they had been appointed a committee to investigate that strange creation. In a few minutes they returned and then there was more chattering.

An instant latter, as if in obedience to their leader, all scattered and disappeared, but they had not departed. Instead, they nimbly climbed the trees, and the odd sounds showed they were among the limbs around us.

Now and then I caught a glimpse of one of the comical creatures, peeping among the leaves at me or at my companion. When one of them crept timidly out on the big limb which partly supported my hammock, I suddenly circled my hat and called "Shoo!" He whisked away in a flash, and the next minute all were chattering again, just far enough off to be invisible among the dense vegetation.

Of course nothing in the nature of danger was to be feared from these creatures, though instances are known when, upon being assailed, they have rallied in large numbers and put up a brave defense. It would have been cruel to

harm them and no such thought entered my mind.

I regretted that Higgenbottom was not awake to be amused by the entertaining sight, but it would do him more good to sleep and I did not disturb him. The faintest possible misgiving that they might cause some annoyance kept me awake longer than usual, but after a time I grew weary of the incessant chatter in the branches, and was sinking into sleep, when a startling thing took place.

I wonder whether those mischievous creatures really understood what they were doing when they began slyly gnawing off the rope which held one end of Percy Higgenbottom's hammock. They must have, for what other reason could they have for gnawing it?

There was not a thought of anything of the kind in my mind, and the monkeys were screened from sight. The captain's snores had risen to a penetrating degree, when presto! the knot nearest his head was eaten asunder, and the next thing I saw was the figure of my friend, as dimly shown in the firelight, turning somersaults through the branches to the ground!

Remarkable good fortune attended that involuntary getting out of bed; for the limbs broke his fall, and it so happened that when he

reached the earth, he landed on his feet. That he was thoroughly awakened need not be said any more than that he was mad "clean through."

His Winchester had fallen unharmed beside him, and snatching it from the ground, he glared around in the firelight, and uttered a number of exclamations so vigorous that it were better to make no record of them.

Seeing that he was unhurt, I gave way to merriment and laughed until I was hardly able to breathe. He stood angry and glowering, and in a few moments savagely demanded:

"What are you laughing at?"

"You; it is the greatest joke of my life; I never saw anything half so funny," and I sank back in my hammock and gave way until I could laugh no more.

"Some folks have no more feelings than to ridicule the misfortunes of others."

"It may be unfeeling, captain, but I can't help it——"

At that moment I found myself going downward, entangled in my hammock, for the instant, and then, as I frantically clutched at the limbs I slid out of the dangling couch, and would have dropped squarely on the head of

my friend had he not leaped to one side in the nick of time.

I admit that I was considerably jarred but the branches served me the same friendly office and I was comparatively unharmed.

I turned around to explain matters to Higgenbottom, but he lay on the ground doubled up with mirth. He certainly had warrant for his merriment, and I made a feeble attempt to join him, but it was a failure. I could only wait until he had recovered, and even then, when he regained his strength, he gave way to fits of laughter that it struck me were altogether superfluous.

Man has been described as a creature who laughs, but I believe that every one of those monkeys that witnessed our discomfiture was shaken from head to the extremity of his tail with merriment, for such wild chattering and skipping about never before disturbed that ancient forest.

Succeeding the captain's outburst came a feeling of resentment at the trick that had been played on him. Throwing additional wood on the fire, he moved around under the trees, gazing aloft at the animals of which he could catch glimpses as they scampered from limb to limb.

“If I could be certain which one did that, I

would bring his fun to a stop," he said, half disposed to fire at a venture.

"Since it is impossible to tell, restrain your wrath. I was jarred twice as much as you, and if I can forgive my tormentor, I am sure you should."

"You are just as mad as I, but are trying to hide it. Well, that ends the hammock siestas in a country which abounds with monkeys."

We walked the short distance through the gloom to where the steamer was moored to the shore, and on the way thither, I noticed for the first time that there was a moon in the clear sky. It was not full, but it shed considerable light, which was unobserved by us amid the shadows of the wood.

Arrived at the boat, we found all three of the crew sleeping soundly. They were so accustomed to the noises of the wilderness that they found them of a soothing nature rather than otherwise.

"I don't fancy sleeping so close to the bank," I remarked; "why not move out into the stream, where it will not be so easy for wild animals to reach us?"

"I was thinking of that very thing. There being so steam up, we can shove the steamer with poles."

The rope was untied from the trunk of the tree, and stepping aboard, we pushed against the bank. The craft was so small it readily yielded, and we kept at work until near the middle of the river, which, as well as I can recall, was seventy-five yards or more in width.

By that time the current was carrying us downward, but when the captain let the anchor drop from the stern, the boat quickly came to rest. The disturbance caused Padro to look up from his couch forward and ask what was going on. A word reassured him and he lay down again, neither of his companions having awakened.

I had been so shaken up by my mishap that I lay awake for some time after the captain's stertorous breathing showed he was again unconscious. I was lying on a blanket just in front of the silent engine, and after a time, with the varied noises of the woods in my ears, sank into unconsciousness.

I must have slept a full hour, when, with no apparent cause, I awoke in full command of my senses. Without stirring I lay still and listened.

Every one of my companions was asleep, and for awhile I could detect nothing out of the usual order of things; but finally, with a thrill

of alarm, I became aware of the fact that there was something unusual going on, and that, too, very near at hand.

CHAPTER VI

DRAWING NEAR EL GRAN CHACO

THE current, split by the sharp prow of the steamer, rippled past, but amid the faint, soothing sound, I distinguished a disturbance of the water, which I knew was caused by something else.

Rising on my elbow, I listened intently and was soon able to note that the noise was traveling around the boat.

When first recognized, it was at the stern and could be plainly followed, as it moved along the opposite side and then around the prow toward where I was lying. Suddenly the noise ceased, and listening a full minute, I was unable to hear it.

“It is some animal,” I reflected, “that has taken a look at the steamer and is now returning to shore.”

Cautiously and silently I raised my head and peered over the side. At the very moment of doing so, the boat tipped several inches, and the frightful front of a leopard came up over the

gunwale, exactly opposite my face and not six inches distant.

It will always be a question with me as to which was the more scared—the wild beast or myself. I was literally transfixed for the instant, when those round, glaring eyes rose so near my own that I clearly felt the hot breath in my face, as it came through the partly opened jaws.

Raising his head, the brute had rested one paw on the upper edge of the gunwhale, his weight causing the slight tipping alluded to, and he either intended to come over the side or to take a look at the interior. It was a remarkable coincidence that he and I made our movements at precisely the same instant, and when so near each other.

The leopard hesitated for a moment as if trying to grasp the situation, and then, with a whiffing snort, dropped back into the water and began swimming in a perfect panic for the left bank of the river, that is, opposite to where we had kindled our campfire.

He was a splendid swimmer and he went through the water with astonishing speed, the ripples spreading out behind him like a fan. In a brief while, he entered the shadows thrown

out by the trees overhanging the bank and I saw him no more.

While this was going on I sat up in my bunk, both forearms resting on the gunwhale and watched him. Not until he had vanished did it occur to me that a fine chance had been offered to use a Winchester and bag a specimen of the royal game of the country. Nothing would have been easier than to send a bullet through that vicious looking head, but it was too late now to think of anything of the kind.

My experience, however, was sufficient to drive away all thought of sleep. When a perch among the branches of a tree, or a couch aboard the steamer itself would give no security, it was better to take turns in acting the sentinel. I wondered that Captain Higgenbottom had not arranged for that before we lay down. It certainly would have to be done later on.

My rifle reposed within arm's reach, and, still leaning on the gunwhale, I resolved to keep guard until daylight, when, the others being awake, it would be safe for me to sleep. With all my senses on the alert, I was sure no enemy could approach within striking distance without instant discovery.

It is probable that I had held the position described for ten or fifteen minutes, when I

closed my eyes and did not open them again until the sun was shining and my friends had been busy about the boat for half an hour.

“While your position was not the most favorable for sleep,” said Higgenbottom, “you were resting so comfortably that we let you alone. We will have breakfast on board and we ought to make considerable progress to-day.”

Steam was already blowing off from the little engine, and while the captain and I were eating our morning meal, I told the story of the leopard. He laughed.

“After this, some one must always stand guard. I didn’t think it necessary, for it will be quite a while before we reach the section of the Tobas, but the wild animals in this part of the world are altogether too fond of prying into other people’s affairs. I don’t expect to use Uncle Sam for a week or more, but he might as well be ready for any emergency.”

He passed forward to where the narrow throated piece of ordnance was securely fixed in place, examined the spring which was operated by the cord that entered through the vent hole, and then, by severe exertion, he forced the mechanism back into a tense position by pressing the ramrod with all his might against it.

Since the arrangement was his own construction, it worked perfectly. Then the highly explosive cartridge was carefully adjusted, and the machine was ready for deadly business.

Once more the captain grasped the wheel in the pilot house, I standing at his elbow, and the eventful voyage was resumed.

Naturally, after he had made his contract in La Paz, the Bolivian capital, the New Englander gathered all the information he could regarding the mysterious Pilcomayo. He therefore knew much more than I, but I am bound to say that this knowledge was anything but extensive.

“Some of the explorers who started down the stream the same as we,” he remarked, “succeeded in reaching the edge of the Gran Chaco before they were massacred or turned back. The same may be said of those who ascended the river from the Rio de la Plata or Parana, so that the only portion unknown is that which flows across the northeastern corner of Argentina and through the Toba country.”

“How extensive is that?”

“As nearly as I can figure out, it is some three hundred miles. We have only to make a dash across the stretch to accomplish that which

has been tried for nearly two centuries in vain."

"My feeling is that it will never be done except by an armed force large enough to beat off any body of Indians that can be collected."

"That may be the case regarding Spanish enterprise, but Yankee ingenuity will play around those people every time. A few dynamite shells and the swift flight of the Hail Columbia will make those redskins feel like thirty cents."

"How easily they might block us by building a dam across the stream in front!"

The shrewd fellow lit another cigar, and since the boat just then required little attention, he grinned at me in his suggestive way.

"No doubt, but this ain't the part of the world where the Tobas live, and it will be a week or more before we get the first glimpse of them. By that time, my good fellow, the river will be three or four times its present width, we shall have a free course and can leave them behind as if they were standing still."

There seemed logic in this, but it was singular that the New Englander in gathering information about the Pilcomayo overlooked one strange fact, of which he and I were to become informed in the most alarming manner con-

ceivable. At present, neither held the slightest suspicion of a truth which, had we but known it, would have overturned our ideas.

That day's work was encouraging and added to our hopes. We encountered more than one rough passage, where all the skill of the captain was called into play, but he was easily equal to the demand. We passed through a second canyon, but it was not so perilous as that already described, and we scraped past several sunken rocks that were dodged in the nick of time.

It is to be remembered that we were rapidly leaving the mountainous section for the lowlands. Even though the southern winter had begun, we were certain to encounter hot, smothering weather, and prudence was necessary to escape fever and the diseases to which the country is peculiarly subject.

We repeatedly saw animals on the shore, most of which surveyed us with wondering curiosity, as well they might. Both the captain and myself occasionally took a shot at a jaguar or leopard, but I am ashamed to say that in no instance was there any evidence that they were hit by the bullets that cut the leaves about them.

The parrots and brilliant songsters that flitted among the branches were not disturbed.

Some of them exhibited every tint of the rainbow, and others looked like balls of flame as they darted through the green vegetation.

It was a relief not to see any of the hideous serpents, which are liable to be encountered at all times. In that section of the continent is found the genuine boa constrictors, some of which are more than a score of feet in length.

It would be monotonous to relate in detail the incidents of the succeeding week or more, since there was a strong similarity in them. We sometimes camped on shore and again slept on the steamer. I need not add that at no time was the boat unguarded, and to this vigilance was doubtless due our immunity from more than one unpleasant visit by wild beasts.

We caught fish and shot several wild turkeys that were foolish enough to approach our camp, and never suffered for lack of food, for even at that season an abundance of wild fruits was everywhere. The river increased in width with a more sluggish current, until it was more than a hundred yards between the banks.

Far to the left and again to the right could be traced the lofty mountain ranges, outlined against the clear sky, some of them of such altitude that their peaks are forever crowned with snow, but none of the cool breezes fanned

our cheeks. The month of April in the lowlands of Bolivia, though marking the beginning of winter, is one of the most trying seasons of the year.

Although we were without the means of locating ourselves with anything approaching certainty, we agreed on the afternoon of the tenth day that we were near El Gran Chaco, and consequently were entering the country of the terrible Tobas, who, as has been shown, wrought such frightful havoc with all explorers who dared to venture into the domain claimed by them.

Standing on the little steamer, which was puffing leisurely forward, we noticed the change in the face of the country that had been going on for two or three days. The hills and mountains had disappeared and on either hand stretched the seemingly limitless grassy pampas, over which millions of horned cattle roam at will, furnishing an exhaustless supply of animal food to the untamable savages of the section. Through the captain's glass he detected a vast herd to the westward, cropping the succulent grass, and he was still studying them when he exclaimed:

“Well, I'll be hanged!”

“What is it?” I demanded.

“A party of Toba Indians,” was the reply.

CHAPTER VII

THE FIRST SIGHT OF THE TOBAS

THE Pilcomayo at this point was fully an eighth of a mile wide, with a current so sluggish that it was hardly perceptible. It was so roiled by previous rains that we could not see the bottom, but we judged the depth to be eight or ten feet, more than amply sufficient for the draft of the Hail Columbia. Had we used one of the poles with which the boat was provided, we should have discovered an alarming fact.

As I have stated, the vast grassy plains stretched away on either hand until the line of the horizon was reached. The Gran Chaco covers hundreds of square miles and there could be no doubt that our steamer was entering a highly dangerous region.

On the left bank and reaching to the margin of the stream, was a stretch of timber, covering eight or ten acres. Contrary to the great extent of forest passed on our way to this point, it was almost entirely free of bushes and un-

dergrowth, and most of the trees stood so far apart that in many places we could catch glimpses of the plain beyond.

It was among these trunks that Captain Higgenbottom had discovered a dozen or more forms that were the first savages we had seen since leaving Sucre, and were undoubtedly some of the terrible Tobas. They were so near that the glass was not required to discern them distinctly.

They were moving to and fro, their whole attention evidently centered upon the boat, and they soon came down to the edge of the wood where they were seen still more plainly.

They were of ordinary stature, wearing no clothing except a breech clout, with bushy hair, and the upper parts of their bodies and their faces were daubed with pigments of varying colors. As may be supposed, we studied them with profound curiosity.

As we had been told, they had no firearms but carried long bows, with quivers of arrows suspended behind their shoulders, after the manner of the primitive tribes of American Indians. In addition to these weapons, most of them had long spears, tipped with stone and ground to a fine point. They can hurl these missiles to a re-

markable distance, and with wonderful accuracy of aim.

It is said that some of the spear points and even the arrow heads are dipped in a virulent poison, so that a slight wound from either missile is sufficient to cause death.

My gaze was still fixed upon the Tobas, when the captain turned the wheel, so as to steer the steamer directly toward them.

“What do you intend to do?” I asked in astonishment.

“Make a call,” he replied with a grin, and seeing that my wonderment was greater, he added:

“I am going nigh enough to drop a shell among them.”

“Why not let them alone, if they do not disturb you?”

“But they *will* disturb us; there’s nothing like the first impression; a visit from one of the dynamite cartridges will be the best kind of a notice to them to keep their hands off.”

This reasoning was not satisfactory, but I made no protest. The windows of the pilot house were closed, so that none of the Toba missiles could reach us, and we were therefore safe for the time.

Padro, Hernandez and Armetia were pallid

with terror, for none understood the Tobas better than they. Their inclination was to get as far from the party as possible, but they were helpless. Padro cowered in front of the engine, where he was beyond reach of his enemies, while his companions did not dare raise their heads sufficiently to peer over the gunwales.

One thing was evident—the Tobas did not hold us in any fear. The occurrences of the past with which they must have been familiar, justified this self confidence.

As we slowly pushed toward the wooded shore, they came down to meet us and constituted a formidable body of barbarians, who were as eager to kill all white men as if they were so many rabid dogs.

“Be careful,” I whispered to the captain, “or they will pierce some of us with their arrows or spears.”

“Impossible; we are protected and the crew will take mighty good care not to draw a shot.”

Nevertheless the Tobas took chances. The tallest of the party, and evidently the leader, stepped directly out in front of his warriors, sighted carefully with his long bow and an instant after the twang of the sinew reached our ears, we heard the dull impact of the missile on the outside of the pilot house.

Nothing would have been easier than to pick off this wretch as well as several of his companions, with our Winchesters, but the captain said:

“That won’t scare them enough; Uncle Sam must speak.”

Slipping out of the pilot house, on the side opposite the Tobas, Higgenbottom stole forward, stooping so low that he was unperceived by any of our enemies, who launched several more arrows, while one hurled a spear with similar accuracy, but no harm could befall us so long as matters remained as they were.

We were about a hundred yards from the natives, and Higgenbottom, who understood perfectly how to manage his gun, waited until he had depressed the muzzle to the right angle, when again he sharply twitched the string; there was the quick buzz of the coiled steel, and the cylindrical shot, weighing several pounds, plunged upward, and, curving over, struck the ground at the very feet of the leader, who looked curiously at it, as if he felt no suspicion of its real nature.

I held my breath and crouched waiting for the terrific explosion, accompanied by its appalling results; but to our unbounded amazement, the cartridge failed to explode. It

seemed to strike the ground right, but it lay as inert as if it were a brick that one of us had tossed to land.

“Well, I’ll be hanged!” was the disgusted exclamation of my friend; “did you ever see anything like that?”

“It must be defective, for it hit the earth properly.”

“It wasn’t defective, for I made them all. Every one of those twenty is perfect and ought to explode.”

Meanwhile, the Tobas, after curiously scrutinizing the oblong object at their feet, picked it up and began an examination of it. Of course they had never before seen anything of the kind and knew nothing of its deadly nature.

“I hope one of them will drop it to the ground. I will give them another——”

“Great heavens!” I exclaimed, “they’re going to throw it back to the boat! If it strikes us there won’t be a piece left as big as your hand.”

It looked as if the leader intended to do as I suggested, for stepping from among his gang, he poised himself for the throw. Higgenbottom rang for Padro to reverse the engine, but, before he could do so, the missile was hurled.

We might have known, however, that no liv-

ing person could throw such an awkward object a hundred yards. Still, it looked as if he were about to succeed, but the shell splashed into the water after traveling not more than half the distance, and sank to the bottom, without having inflicted the least damage upon any one.

It was at this moment that the captain met with the narrowest conceivable escape from death. He exposed himself somewhat recklessly, while reloading the gun, when, like a flash, the leader of the Tobas launched an arrow, which grazed one of the long yellow tufts of hair at my friend's shoulder, and speeding well beyond the steamer dropped into the river.

"By gracious! that fellow can shoot well!" exclaimed Higgenbottom, who took good care not to tempt him again.

I had taken his place at the wheel and turned the prow out into the stream, as the screw began revolving. No danger of any one of the crew exposing himself to spear or arrow so long as he could avoid it.

"I would like to give them another shell," said the captain, looking cautiously up at me, "but I'm afraid there will be a second miss. We have already made a bad impression and another failure will tempt them to renew their attack."

“They can’t well do that, since they have no canoes.”

“I am told they will swim out in the river and attack any enemy, no matter how formidable.”

“We can attend to them with our Winchester.”

By gracious, if the whole party of a dozen or more did not try the very thing we were talking about! Brandishing spears and arrows over their heads and emitting rasping shouts and cries, they began wading toward us.

“Wait until they begin swimming,” I suggested, “and then we’ll pick them off at our leisure.”

But the amazing fact quickly became apparent that there was no necessity for their swimming. When they had advanced half the intervening distance, the water did not rise above their knees.

We had only to remain where we were to have them swarming over the side in the course of a few minutes. The river was much shallower than we supposed, though still abundantly deep for the steamer.

However, we had much the advantage of the situation, for we could move faster than our

enemies and it took us but a short time to place ourselves beyond their reach.

Observing our action, they faced about and returned to land. Thus far no one had been harmed on either side, and the captain was in doubt whether it would not have been much better for all of us, had we sent a few rifle shots among the Tobas.

As for myself, I was relieved that since no real necessity existed for shooting any one, we had refrained from doing so.

Passing in among the trees, a short distance back from the shore, the Tobas were seen to be busy with something. A few minutes later, a column of wavy blue vapor climbed above the treetops and slowly dissolved in the clear air.

"It is a signal fire," I remarked; "they are telegraphing to some of their friends and notifying them of our coming."

"No doubt of it; keep a sharp watch for the answer."

We were not long in descrying it. Directly down stream and perhaps two or three miles away, a second thin column of smoke stained the blue sky. That, too, seemed to ascend from a patch of woods, but the winding course of the river prevented our learning the truth for some time.

Now that no risk was incurred, one of the crew thrust a pole overboard to learn the depth of the water. It was no greater than before, perhaps slightly less.

“This is something I never thought of,” said the captain gravely; “we can’t afford to have the river become much shallower or we shall be stopped. I suppose it is due to the widening of the current.”

“That is one cause, but there must be a great deal of evaporation on these broad, flat plains, even at this season of the year. There will be no more rain for months and it is impossible therefore that our situation should improve.”

CHAPTER VIII

FORGING AHEAD

ONE fact was self evident; while the steamer might be able to go ahead for an indefinite distance, it could never make the return voyage to Sucre. The canyons, tremendous current and numerous obstructions were insuperable.

Captain Higgenbottom was generally optimistic in his feelings and found comfort in the apparent fact that the shallowness of the Pilcomayo was mainly due to its great expansion at the section where we first encountered the Tobas. Most of the lakes of that region are simply the broadening out of rivers.

Heading southward, we sped down stream, for it was important that we should lose no time. The river began narrowing, and as we approached the point where the further signal fire was burning, the banks contracted until they were separated by less than a hundred feet. Even this shrank, and naturally the current increased in depth and velocity.

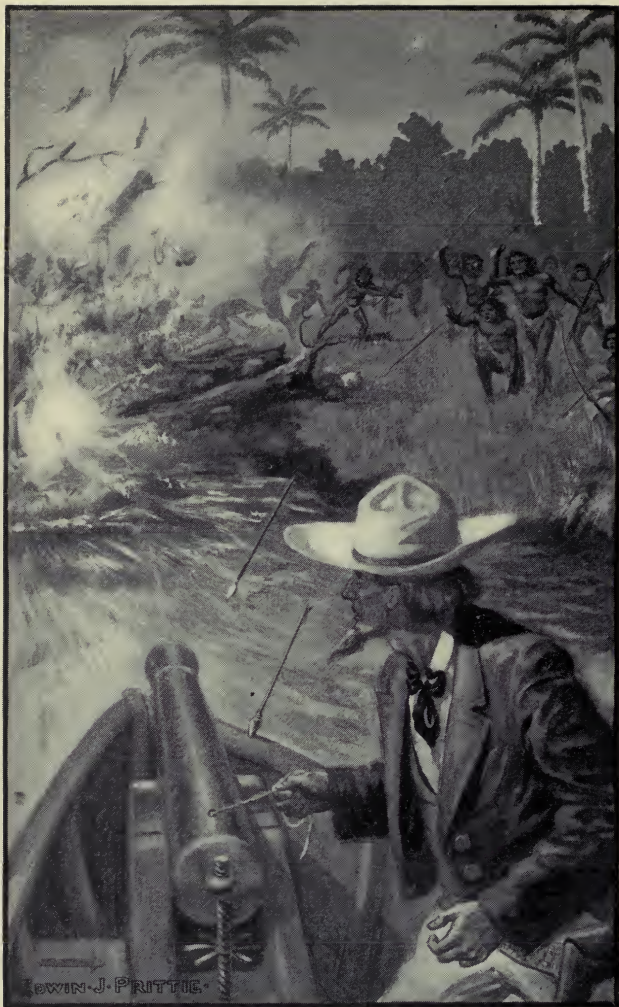
I was standing beside my friend, who, from his slightly elevated position in the pilot house, commanded the most extensive view of the country before us. The vast, grassy plains stretched out on either hand, and the woods, from which the telltale smoke stained the sky, were found to be on our right instead of the left and were no more than two or three acres in extent.

The trees were choked with undergrowth, and for a time we could discern nothing of the savages who, it was certain, were somewhere in the grove.

“I wonder what the devils are doing,” said the captain; “for they seem to be careful about exposing themselves—well, I’ll be hanged!”

There was good cause for the exclamation, for at the same moment we saw that the Tobas had hastily thrown a dam across the narrow river, directly in front of us. Branches of trees, dirt and stones of considerable size had been placed in our path, the whole making so much of an obstruction that the speed and depth of the water were considerably increased.

“What shall we do?” I asked in alarm; “we cannot run into the dam, for it will knock the boat to pieces.”



The hastily built dam was shattered to atoms.

“Take the wheel for a few minutes,” he said, as he signaled for Padro to slacken speed.

We were now within a hundred yards of the dam and approaching it at a comparatively slow pace. Not a Toba had shown himself. The engineer, instead of merely slackening our progress, shut off steam altogether, which was fortunate for us.

Higgenbottom hurriedly made his way to the ordnance in front and immediately depressed the muzzle and pulled the string.

The shell, true to the aim, sped onward, striking the dam near the middle and exploding with frightful force. All know the tremendous power of this chemical, and the obstruction was shattered to atoms, water, mist, bits of stone, wood and dirt flying in every direction, a lot of débris falling in a shower over the boat.

A clean cut passage a dozen feet in width, was opened in the center of the dam through which the water rushed like a mill race. I rang for full steam and headed the steamer for this channel, for nothing else was possible, and we shot through with arrowy speed. Without paying heed to what I was doing, the captain hastily shoved another shell into the gun.

“Down!” I shouted, “or you’re a dead man!”

The air was filled with the most discordant screeches and yells and it looked as if a hundred Tobas leaped from the very ground, dancing, screeching and launching arrows and spears at the boat as it sped past. They ran along the edge of the stream, though they could not equal our speed, and a perfect shower of missiles descended upon the craft.

My friend was wise enough to heed my warning and instantly dropped down out of range. Had he not done so, he surely must have been hit.

But the New Englander, cool, determined and resolute, while prone upon the deck, swung the light piece around so as to point it at the howling group, and again jerked the cord. The dreadful shell dropped directly among the fierce group, burst, and sent fully a dozen into eternity, the whole occurring with such appalling suddenness that it was over before we really comprehended what had taken place.

The execution was so frightful, so overwhelming, that the savages, among the most fearless met anywhere, were dazed. The unharmed or slightly wounded dived into the wood in a panic and instantly vanished from view.

Meantime, the steamer was speeding down-

ward like a race horse. The rush of waters carried it irresistibly and the most I could do was to keep it as nearly as possible in the middle of the channel, and trust to Providence to see us through.

Again the captain, with this wonderful coolness, managed to reload the gun, so as to be ready for another discharge should the opportunity offer.

But we had safely passed two parties of Tobas and Heaven only knew how we should fare when we encountered others.

Higgenbottom climbed up beside me and I surrendered the wheel to him.

“The old gun worked pretty well that time,” he chuckled; “those of the Tobas who were not killed were scared out of their senses. I tell you, Windermeyer, I have solved the right method of exploring the mysterious Pilcomayo.”

“Far from it; we have just entered the dangerous section, which is several hundred miles in extent, and it will be time enough to hurrah when we have left it behind us.”

“At any rate we have made a good beginning—but those fellows are irrepressible.”

This allusion was to their action in replenishing the signal fire which had been kindled in

reply to the one further up stream. The column of smoke was heavy and displayed a peculiar fluttering motion, as it rose above the tree-tops, which made it clear that it conveyed some message to others of the tribe, most probably still below us.

Great as had been the execution of the dynamite cartridge, it had not deprived the savages of their cunning and treacherous methods. It was impossible to share the hopefulness of my friend, for it cannot be denied that our experience from the moment we caught sight of the Tobas, had been exceedingly lively and was ominous of what awaited us in the near future.

The river broadened slightly, with the current quite rapid and so deep that there was no fear of grounding, so long as we exercised ordinary care, though when this state of affairs would end, it was impossible to say. Looking back, nothing could be seen of the savages, nor did any shouts betray their presence in the wood.

Suddenly a cry of terror came from Padro, standing at the stern in front of the engine, and I hurried thither. He could speak broken English, and in answer to my demand for the cause of his alarm, he pointed to Armetia, who was lying on his face lengthwise of the boat and a

couple of paces from where the terrified engineer was staring at the motionless form.

“What’s the matter with him?” I asked.

“He dead!—dead!—dead!” wailed Padro.

Still doubtful, I bent over the prostrate figure and turned it on its side. One glance showed that Padro had spoken truly; the breath of life was gone from the body.

But I was mystified to understand the cause of his death, for I saw no wound upon him, and his dusky countenance looked calm and peaceful, for all the world as if he were asleep.

Reading my question, Padro stooped over and drew forth an arrow that was partly hidden by the body.

“See dat! It do dat!”

In the naked shoulder of the dead man was a slight puncture, such as might have been made by the sting of an ordinary bee. It showed where the keen point of the arrow had barely pierced the skin.

Since the poor fellow had carefully kept out of sight of the Tobas, while the scrimmage was under way, the missile must have glanced against him, taking an eccentric course which robbed it of nearly all its force.

There could be no mistaking the meaning of this incident. The tip of the arrow had been

dipped in a poison as deadly as the virus of the cobra, which needs only to pass under the skin to complete its infernal work.

“What a terrible set these Tobas are,” I said to the captain, as I rejoined him and explained what had taken place; “such missiles are ten-fold worse than dynamite.”

“They may be in some circumstances, but we have certainly wrought the most mischief so far. Besides, I doubt whether all their arrows are thus poisoned. From what I learned in Sucre the practice is not common among them.”

“It needs but one or two in a hundred to give one an unspeakable dread. You have had several narrow escapes yourself, and you may get nipped when you are not thinking of it.”

“A miss is as good as a mile,” was the airy response of my friend, whose spirits most of the time seemed irrepressible.

All our interests were in front of us. We looked back, but the column of smoke which I have described was the only sign of the presence of enemies that met our eyes.

Ahead, the river began broadening again, until it was two or three hundred feet in extent. Once more the muddy water slackened its flow and despite the usual high spirits of Higgenbottom, his face plainly showed he was anxious.

“My only fear,” he said in a low voice, “is that the depth may become too slight to navigate the Hail Columbia.”

“Suppose it does?” I repeated, thereby asking the question that had been uppermost in my mind for several hours.

“I’m blessed if I can tell what I’ll do; don’t let’s cross a bridge until we reach it. Sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof.”

“Ordinarily that may be good philosophy,” I replied with some impatience, “but in circumstances like these it is nonsense. I am convinced that the real obstacle confronting us is the one just named—ah! what does *that* mean?”

The captain noticed it at the same moment—a jarring or tremor which passed through the boat, whose speed was slightly decreased, although the screw was churning the water with the usual vigor.

Higgenbottom nodded his head, for the cause was apparent to both of us. The boat had touched bottom, so lightly, it was true, that the motion was not stopped, and she passed quickly over the shoal place into deeper water.

The incident—slight of itself—meant a great deal. Other shoal spots were certain to be met, and more than likely some of them would prove

still shallower, in which event they could not be passed by the Hail Columbia. The captain became serious, and it will be admitted that he had sufficient cause to be a trifle anxious.

CHAPTER IX

SHORTHANDED

THE afternoon was drawing to a close and we kept on under half speed, continually afraid of running aground and sticking fast. Stepping to the side, I thrust the end of one of the poles into the water, and, to my surprise, found the depth nearly five feet.

“Good!” exclaimed Higgenbottom, as I held up the stick and indicated the depth; “if that only continues, we can ask nothing better.”

“Ah, that ‘if,’ ” I replied; “the whole question hinges on that.”

No more than half of the wood taken on the night before had been used, but it was prudent to renew the supply while the chance was ours, for it might be that when our need was the sorest, we should be shut off from the opportunity.

The captain fixed his attention upon some scrubby trees on our right, a quarter of a mile distant, and headed the steamer for them. The increased depth of the water so encouraged him

that he signaled to Padro to go ahead at full speed, but the screw had hardly responded to the renewed vigor when the boat rapidly slackened its progress and then came to a standstill.

“By gracious! we’re aground!” he called, and then ordered the engineer to reverse under full steam.

It was fortunate that we happened to be going so slowly at the moment we grounded, and that the bottom of the river was soft mud, for with comparatively little effort the boat backed off from the shoal into deeper water.

This accomplished, the captain headed once more toward the wood, advancing so gradually that the craft seemed hardly to be moving.

We had not forgotten the signal smoke of the second and larger party of Tobas, and, ever since leaving them behind, had been on the lookout for the reply to it, but failed to discover anything of that nature.

“There may be a party in that very wood lying in wait for us,” I suggested.

“I have been studying the place but have seen nothing; have you?”

“No; nevertheless they may be there.”

“If so, why should they fail to show themselves, since they can have no reason to suspect we intended stopping there. However, it is

easy enough to learn whether any of the devils are lurking among the trees.”

Again I pushed the pole over the side and found fully three feet of water. Our speed was not increased, and, when we were within a hundred yards, we stopped.

Higgenbottom's scheme was that often used by a military force in approaching a wood where there is reason to fear an enemy is hiding. He launched one of the dynamite shells among the trees.

Again there was a frightful explosion which scattered fragments of limbs and trunks in a shower in all directions, some of the bits of branches rising far above the tops of the tallest trees. But that was all. Not a single person showed himself. The Tobas evidently were waiting somewhere else.

“That cartridge served another good purpose,” said Higgenbottom; “for it has splintered our fuel for us.”

Singularly enough the depth of the water allowed the boat to come up against the bank, and the two natives scrambled over the side to gather the wood, while it could be done in safety. The lifeless form of Armetia was not disturbed, but allowed to lie where it was

stretched when the poor fellow succumbed to the poisoned missile.

Leaving the captain to attend to the boat, I sprang ashore and hurried after the couple, to help gather fuel. The shattered limbs and tree trunks, which were scattered over a space of many feet, afforded a striking illustration of the terrific power of the explosive sent among them. It was as my friend had said; the pieces were within easy reach and we rapidly replenished our partly exhausted supply of wood.

When the work was nearly completed, each of us walked back for our last armful. Padro gathered his load, I did the same, and Hernandez had nearly filled his arms, when he stopped with a half suppressed exclamation.

The natives looked at each other and said something in their native tongue, which of course was unintelligible to me. Padro shook his head and Hernandez again spoke, but with great earnestness. Then he suddenly threw down the sticks he had gathered, turned on his heel started off on a lope, quickly disappearing from view.

Puzzled to understand the meaning of his strange action, I appealed to Padro. He answered, but as before, spoke in his own tongue, and without adding anything moved with his

burden toward the boat, I following close behind him.

When I told Higgenbottom of the occurrence, he addressed Padro in his native language, for the New Englander had learned to speak it quite well, and they conversed for a few minutes.

“We shall never see the fellow again,” remarked my friend, turning to me; “he has run away.”

“And why?”

“Scared; he considers it sure death to go on and believes his only chance for life is to turn about and get out of this infernal country while he has a small chance.”

“Isn't he right?”

“Perhaps he is; we shall learn before long. The only wonder,” added the captain, lowering his voice, so as not to be overheard, “is that Padro didn't go with him.”

“He doesn't seem to be in any panic.”

“All the same, he is as frightened as he can be; we shall lose him pretty soon, that is if he is not picked off before he gets an opening to run away.”

“Do you intend to remain here by the shore?”

“By no means.”

Heading the boat out into the river we steamed forward until the middle was reached, when steam was shut off and the anchor dropped. As we were placed, we had fully a hundred yards of water on either side of the steamer.

“If there are any of the Tobas watching us they can’t approach without being seen,” said Higgenbottom.

“There is no moon tonight.”

“But the sky is clear and there will be plenty of star gleam.”

Night gradually descended, and by and by we were walled in on every hand by darkness. It was as Higgenbottom had foretold. There was no moon, but millions of stars twinkled from the unclouded sky.

On either hand, we could make out the dim, shadowy outlines of the shore, but nothing was seen with distinctness and the silence, save from the noises of the solitude, which were never still, was oppressive.

Since my friend was certain that the terrified Padro would desert on the first opportunity, it was idle to place any dependence upon him.

“It will make us shorthanded,” I said in a low voice, as we stood at the bow beyond hearing of the native, “but either of us can handle

the engine or wheel, and we shall easily get along if that is our only trouble.”

“It is a question with me whether we should remain here or feel our way forward while the chance is ours. We can go so slow that little risk will be run.”

“Unless the river narrows, in which event we shall offer the Tobas a better chance to attack us.”

Finally the captain decided to stay where we were for some hours to come. Resolved to depend upon Padro for nothing, it was arranged that I should mount guard the first half of the night and Higgenbottom the other half. It might seem that each of us would be in danger of falling asleep, since the sentinel keeps his senses only by pacing back and forth; but neither was in need of slumber and we were too deeply impressed with our responsibility to succumb.

Informing Padro, therefore, that he might sleep until called, Higgenbottom stretched out on his couch forward and the native lay down near the engine at the stern. My position was at the bow, where I could readily watch every portion of the river, except immediately aft.

At intervals, I made my way thither, so that

a strict guard was kept of every portion of the boat.

I recall that it was not far from midnight when in passing to the stern, I saw dimly the extended figure of Padro who was apparently asleep. I gave him no further attention and returned to my former station.

Not the slightest sight or sound had been noticed that could awaken misgiving. Peering through the gloom, the faint, shadowy outlines of either shore were visible, but no moving object revealed itself, nor could the listening ear detect anything out of the usual order of things, for the plash which once startled me was made some sportive fish.

At such times one's senses often assume a preternatural acuteness. It will be remembered that the tonnage of the little steamer was so slight that its poise was readily disturbed by a trifling cause. I was standing at the prow, when I suddenly felt a slight but peculiar jarring of the boat, as if something had gently pushed it, and wondering what it could mean, I listened and waited for further clues.

The shock, less than at first, was felt again and then there was an almost inaudible rippling of the water at the stern. Suspecting its mean-

ing, I softly picked my way thither, only to have my suspicions confirmed.

Padro, while pretending to be asleep, had softly risen from his couch, stepped over the gunwale at the stern into the shallow water, and was making his way to land. I could see him better than he could observe me, but he was no more than an indistinct shadow which only permitted me to notice that the water did not reach to his knees, even when he must have sunk a few inches in the mud, and then he vanished from my field of vision.

“That leaves us to ourselves,” I grimly muttered, “for the only native left with us is dead, and little can be expected from him; but the fellows were not much of an element of strength, and I don’t know as they are to be blamed for trying to save their necks while a desperate hope remains. It may be that the wisest course for me and the captain is to imitate them.”

In some circumstances the action of the two natives might have led to the suspicion that they had deserted to join the enemy. That, however, was clearly impossible. The Tobas would accept no recruits from among strangers, for they needed none.

CHAPTER X

STUCK FAST

STANDING at the bow of the motionless steamer, gazing off over the silent river, dimly lit up by the gleam of twinkling stars, I gradually became aware that some object was resting on the water directly ahead and hovering, as may be said, on the line of invisibility.

It was not curious, perhaps, that when I peered at it, the object seemed to fade from sight until I doubted whether it were not some figment of the fancy; but when I removed my eyes and came suddenly back, it was too plain to admit of a mistake. It was like the Pleiades, which under close scrutiny shrinks to six stars, but reveals the seventh at the first glance.

“It’s a Toba canoe!”

The words were spoken by Higgenbottom, who had noiselessly risen, and stood at my elbow, looking in the same direction.

“I agree with you, though it is the first I have seen, and even that is only half visible.”

“How would it do to drop a shell in it?”

“I don’t believe it possible; the cartridge wouldn’t be likely to explode and it strikes me it would be wise for you to be more chary in using your cartridges.”

In the hope of learning more, the captain pointed his glass at the strange craft.

“Yes; it is one of their boats,” he whispered, “and if I’m not mistaken, two of them are in it. Why don’t they come closer or leave?”

It was a hard question to answer, for it was remarkable that the canoe should halt at this precise point and remain there so long, neither approaching nor receding.

“Windermyer,” added my friend, in the same guarded voice, “get up steam as soon as you can.”

I hurried to the stern and hastily filled the furnace with wood. There was so much heat still lingering among the flues that the fuel broke into a blaze as soon as the door was closed. In ten or fifteen minutes there would be enough steam to turn the screw, and I returned to Higgenbottom.

The boat was in plainer view, having slightly shifted its position. It had come a little closer and was turned diagonally toward us, so it was

now easy to see that it contained two occupants.

Evidently they had not satisfied their curiosity from the first standpoint and they began slowly circling about the steamer. One of them swayed a paddle, similar to that used by the Indians in our own country, but with such carefulness that it was almost impossible to hear the slight ripple.

The canoe made a complete circuit of the craft, returning to its first position, where it once more became motionless.

“Windermyer,” eagerly whispered my friend, “you must have enough steam to turn the screw; see whether you have.”

“What do you mean to do?”

“Run 'em down if I can.”

It was a grim jest, but it caught my fancy. I opened the valve of the engine to the fullest extent and quickly discovered that the pressure of the steam was greater than I suspected, for the screw began vigorously churning the water and the boat moved ahead with considerable speed.

Higgenbottom steered straight for the smaller boat, whose occupants must have been startled when they saw the frightful craft bearing down upon them. The one using the paddle

swung it with all the power at his command, sending his boat to one side and out of our path.

But the Hail Columbia also turned and still made for it. The frightened Toba sheered his canoe the opposite way, but in vain, seeing which he drove it ahead with all the skill and strength he could summon.

The light boat skimmed the surface swiftly, but our steamer was capable of a speed which no smaller craft could equal, and despite the efforts of the savage we gained rapidly upon him.

Only one thing remained to do and he or rather they did it. With a suppressed howl, both leaped out of the canoe, one to the right and the other to the left, and splashed for shore in a crazy panic. Since it was impossible to follow both, and there was no special reason for running either down, Higgenbottom gave up the pursuit, checking the steamer at the side of the canoe.

Having shut off steam I ran to the prow in answer to the captain's call.

"Who knows but what we can make some use of that craft?" he said; "fasten it to the side of the boat."

Leaning over the gunwale, I grasped the canoe, drew it nearer, and, after a little manipu-

lation, secured it by means of a cord. The captain came down to inspect it.

The Toba canoe was perhaps a dozen feet in length, and was made of the bark of some species of tree, the big pieces being glued together and over one another, so as to make them impervious to water. The glue, as I afterward learned, was obtained from the same tree that furnished the bark, so that the tree itself must have been accommodating and highly useful.

The paddle had a single blade, which was neither broad nor long, and the buoyancy of the craft was probably sufficient to support four or five persons.

"If I had a paint box aboard," remarked Higgenbottom, "I would christen it the Hail Columbia, Jr., but we shall have to wait for that. However, we have a good head of steam and we may as well improve our time," he added, returning to the pilot house, while I went aft and again set the screw revolving, though only at half speed.

It was taking big risks, but it did seem that we might as well be feeling our way forward, as to remain motionless simply because it was night. Having turned on the steam, I had leisure to inspect our surroundings.

One fact speedily became apparent. The

Pilcomayo, instead of narrowing, was growing broader. When we started, as I have explained, we could dimly trace the outlines of each shore, but looking over the gunwale, first on one side and then on the other, I failed to see either bank. How much greater the width became, of course, it was impossible to guess, since we were without any means of judging.

Just as I feared, we had gone less than a fourth of a mile, when we ran aground, but our moderate speed enabled us to back off, and Higgenbottom turned sharply to the left for fully a hundred feet, when he headed down stream again, while without orders, I slowed our progress still more.

My friend now did a rash thing: he signalled me to go ahead at the highest speed. It was easy for us to speak to each other, with the short distance between, and I called to him to know if he had not made a mistake.

“No,” he replied; “it is our only hope.”

“All right; here we go!”

And I gave her full steam. Almost at the same moment I felt the hull touch bottom, the speed perceptibly slackening, but we pushed on, and before we stopped, swung into clear water again and away we went.

Perhaps it was the best plan, for where it

was impossible to distinguish the channel, even if one existed, nothing was to be gained by hesitation.

As nearly as I could judge, we sped onward for a fourth of a mile, and I was beginning to feel hopeful that the worst was over, when again we grazed bottom. Higgenbottom jingled the bell for more speed, but it was impossible: the boat was doing her utmost.

Further and further we pushed, going slower and slower, while I held my breath in suspense. At last, the advance ceased, with the screw going like a whirlwind.

It being clear that we could not advance further, I reversed with all steam, in the hope of repeating our former maneuver. But the boat refused to budge. The effort was kept up for ten or fifteen minutes, when Higgenbottom came out of the pilot house.

“Let us help with the poles,” he said with the coolness he showed at all times.

He thrust one over the left of the prow and I at the other side. It seemed as if there was not more than an inch or two of water, but we bent to it with might and main, pressing and pushing until our bodies were almost horizontal, and we could not exert another ounce of

strength. At last, panting and perspiring, we ceased.

“It looks as if it is no go,” he remarked.

“You are right.”

“Never say die,” he added cheerily, after we had rested a few minutes, and we went at it again, struggling with desperate energy, but in vain.

The truth was that the high speed of the boat had driven her inextricably into the mud. Nothing except one of Merritt’s wrecking steamers would have sufficed to pull her free again.

The time came when we had to give it up, sit down and calmly face the desperate situation.

“Higgenbottom,” I said impressively, “you gathered all the information possible about the confounded Pilcomayo after you left Concepcion and while in Sucre, but you failed to learn the most important fact of all.”

“What is that?”

“The river grows shallower, as it flows southward. It spreads out in many places as we have discovered, until it is too thin to float a boat even of so slight draft as the Hail Columbia. Not only that, but the water evaporates, and I have no doubt that fifty miles fur-

ther south, there is less of a stream than here and a hundred miles further still less."

"But it must increase *somewhere*, for it is a goodly sized river in the lower portion."

"Of course, for even before it passes through El Gran Chaco it unites with the Paraguay from Brazil, and becomes a respectable stream, but until then it is comparatively insignificant."

"Is there no tide in the Pilcomayo?"

I did not reply, for I knew the question was meant for a grim jest, and my friend added:

"The rainy season is six months off, and shallow as the river is now, it will grow more so each day."

"There is no doubt of that."

"And it is impossible to go back?"

"When we can't move the boat an inch, and it is steadily becoming more firmly fixed, it is evident we can't count upon the Hail Columbia to help us out of our trouble."

Percy Higgenbottom was now serious. Even his habitual spirits forsook him. Sitting on the gunwale, he hummed for a minute or two and then turned toward me.

"Hernandez and Padro had a heap more sense than we, for they left while there was a chance."

"The same chance remains to us."

“Then we must take it! The career of the Hail Columbia has ended, and it looks as if the same may soon be said of ourselves.”

CHAPTER XI

A CHANGE OF BASE

THE crisis had come and we endeavored to face it like men. It was impossible to go forward with the steamer, and equally impossible to turn back. As Higgenbottom declared, the career of the Hail Columbia, so far as we were concerned, was at an end.

As nearly as we could figure out, we were in the southeastern corner of Bolivia, at the point where the Pilcomayo, after running almost due east, makes an abrupt bend to the south, soon beginning to form the boundary between Paraguay and the Argentine Republic, whence it flows for something more than three hundred miles, before joining the Paraguay, Asuncion, the capital of Paraguay, standing at the junction of the two streams.

The stretch of three hundred and odd miles constitutes the dangerous portion of the river, which has never yet been passed by any white man, although the effort has been repeated from early in the eighteenth century. Full of

high hope we had set out from Sucre, only to be stopped before we had penetrated as far as some of our predecessors.

Having given up the problem, the all important question for us to answer was that of saving ourselves. Manifestly two courses were open: to turn back and undertake to tramp overland to Sucre, the first point where we could strike anything approaching civilization, or to push across the northeastern corner of El Gran Chaco to Concepcion, in the northern part of Paraguay, on the river of the same name and one of the most important cities of the country.

“It is perhaps more than two hundred miles to Concepcion,” said my friend, “and fully double that distance to Sucre. The latter route is tenfold rougher and more mountainous, and the job would try us to the utmost.”

“But we should not go far before passing out of the region of the Tobas, and well armed as we are, it would be only a laborious tramp, for we could not be in peril from the wild animals.”

“From here to Concepcion is a broad level plain, easy to traverse.”

“What about food?”

“It abounds with grass, which is the proper nutriment for a couple of asses like ourselves.

But," Higgenbottom hastened to add, as if ashamed of his momentary lapse from seriousness, "the plain is broken by patches of woods; there are tens of thousands of wild cattle, and in some of the wooded portions we shall find edible fruits."

"And Tobas."

"Then I take it you favor turning back?"

"No," I replied; "I was merely bringing out the bad points of the route which I think we ought to take. Even if we started to go up the river, we shall be liable to run into parties of savages for fifty miles or more. So I propose that we take the bull by the horns and start for the Tropic of Capricorn, on which Concepcion stands."

"That being settled, we cannot set out too soon. It is a lucky thing that we caught that Toba canoe; for we can use it to go ashore, instead of splashing through the water where we are liable to sink to our waists in the mud and perhaps over our heads."

Having agreed upon the main scheme, it only remained to complete our preparations. First of all, we made a hasty meal upon the jerked venison and fruit that was left, and then did up a small quantity, sufficient to last three or four days, on short allowance. It was easy to stow

it among our pockets, so as to cause no inconvenience.

Each, it will be remembered, carried a couple of Smith & Wesson revolvers, with a supply of cartridges. Thus we were provided with ten shots apiece, at an instant's emergency.

In addition, there were the two repeating Winchesters, whose magazines contained respectively nine charges. Hernandez and Padro had each taken his gun, while that of the dead Armetia fell to me.

"We are not yet armed *cap-à-pie*," said my friend.

"We ought to consider ourselves so with thirty-eight shots apiece, without renewing a single charge."

"Do as I do."

Stooping over the basket containing the dynamite cartridges, he took out one and shoved it carefully into the right hand pocket of his coat. Then he did the same with his other pocket. Thus, in addition to his firearms, he carried two powerful dynamite shells. I followed suit.

"There," said he, with a touch of his old wag-gery, "if we are driven into a corner, we ought to be able to put up a pretty respectable fight; and if we are captured, our captors must handle us pretty carefully or they will get hurt."

“What about *us?*”

“Of course we’ll all go to kingdom come together. But seriously, Windermeyer, I think it likely these things may come in useful before we reach Concepcion, but we musn’t forget to be careful with them.”

“No; a slip or stumble is likely to explode one and wind up this attempt at exploring the Pilcomayo as effectually as all those that have gone before.”

It was a relief to find something to smile over, and we gently laughed as we stepped gingerly over the gunwale and adjusted ourselves in the Toba canoe. The body of Armetia was left where it still lay near the engine, for we could give it no more fitting tomb than was already provided.

Our first thought was to fill the furnace with wood, tie down the safety valve and let the Hail Columbia blow up, but reflection convinced us that such a course would be the height of folly, since it would advertise our disaster to our enemies. They would be shrewd enough to suspect that before this took place we had abandoned the craft, and consequently they would search the shore for us, whereas if the boat were left as it was, they would be likely to believe we

were still aboard, and several days might pass before they would dare make an open attack.

In the interval we ought to place a good many miles behind us.

But one important fact was not overlooked. There was an uncertain number of Tobas somewhere in the neighborhood, and our safety depended upon getting away without discovery by them. For aught we knew, other canoes were hovering in the vicinity and we might run into them at any moment.

All this was so apparent, that there was no need of discussing it or consulting as to our plan of action. Higgenbottom sat near the stern or bow, for there was no difference between them, and I carefully dipped the paddle into the roiled current.

At the first effort, the end struck the muddy bottom, and I feared the canoe was sunk so low by our weight that we should be compelled to abandon it after all. Instead of paddling I used the implement as a pole, knowing from the feeling while doing so that the canoe was in contact with the bed of the river.

There was satisfaction, however, in the knowledge that the craft was moving, and much to my relief the water soon deepened to more than a foot. Then I devoted the paddle to its

proper use and we gradually moved away from the steamer.

It will be understood that everything for the time depended upon our making a safe start. If discovered by any Tobas prowling in the neighborhood, a fight would be precipitated, with not one chance in a thousand of our saving ourselves, abnormally loaded and primed as we were.

The very thing dreaded took place. We had not reached a point fifty feet distant from the steamer, when my companion exclaimed excitedly:

“Back quick, for God’s sake!”

Without pausing to learn the cause of his startling exclamation, I reversed as may be said, at full speed, and, in a twinkling, was again at the side of the stranded Hail Columbia. I had not discovered as yet what it was that frightened Higgenbottom, and now paused for him to explain.

“Climb aboard again!” he added in a guarded voice, “and don’t forget you’re loaded with dynamite.”

Again I obeyed him unquestioningly, but when on the boat insisted that he should enlighten me.

“Didn’t you see?” he asked in astonishment.

“I saw nothing to explain your alarm.”

“A boat twice as big as our canoe loomed up between us and the shore for which we were heading, and if I’m not mightily mistaken it was crammed full of Tobas.”

“Heavens, I did not catch a glimpse of them!”

“It wasn’t necessary, but you never did a better thing than when you obeyed me without an instant’s hesitation. It may sound absurd to say we are keener eyed than those dusky devils, but I don’t believe they saw us at all.”

“It is more likely that they caught sight of us, but in the gloom did not suspect we were white men.”

“That perhaps is so, but while we were hurrying back a new idea struck me.”

Without waiting to explain, he walked to the dynamite gun, shoved a cartridge down its throat, and turned the weapon toward the eastern shore. He pointed it at an angle of forty-five degrees, which insured the shell traveling the greatest distance, and pulled the string.

This range was easily made, and descending on the low grassy bank, the expected explosion followed, the detonation fairly shaking the earth, particles of which were hurled in every direction, some of them as revealed by the mo-

mentary vivid glare, ascending high in air, while hundreds of bits, as they fell into the river, sounded like pattering hail.

Hardly had this taken place, when the New Englander had the gun charged with a second shell, which was sent after the first, and repeated its performance, with the same impressive uproar and destructiveness.

Then he sent a third cartridge toward the western bank, invisible in the gloom, but the missile dropped harmlessly into the water, doubtless falling far short of the shore.

If anything was certain, it was that the eastern bank, opposite the stranded steamer, was thoroughly cleared of our enemies, and that it was now comparatively safe to repeat our attempt to reach it.

It was a clever idea on the part of Captain Higgenbottom, as was proven a few minutes later, when we once more entered the canoe and reached shore without encountering the first sign of danger.

CHAPTER XII

THE OVERLAND ROUTE

CLOSE to the southern edge of the torrid zone, under the vivid stargleam of a cloudless sky, wherein the beautiful constellation of the Southern Cross gleamed with wonderful splendor, Percy Higgenbottom and I stepped from the Toba canoe upon the eastern bank of the Pilcomayo.

The first thing done after setting foot on the flat, grassy plain, was to give the craft a vigorous shove, which sent it far out in the gloom. The sluggish current would carry it a considerable distance before daylight, and when discovered by the owners, it would tell no tale of having served any white men in the way described.

Peering in all directions, we discerned nothing to cause misgiving. No light showed on the stranded steamer, the furnace door having been closed and the fire having subsided to that degree that all danger of explosion was past.

“Now,” said my companion, “the important

thing is to keep to the right course. You know how prone a person is to wander in a circle when traveling without any guide. We must depend wholly upon our compass."

"Our course should be southeast?"

"Exactly."

"Do you know how to allow for the variation of the needle?"

"I did not forget to study that at Asuncion and Concepcion."

The compass to which my friend referred dangled as a charm from his watch chain. Striking a match, he carefully shaded the tiny flame, so that it shone only on the diminutive glass face. It took but a moment to locate ourselves.

"Off we go," he said, with something of his old cheeriness of manner, "and may God, Who has been so kind to us, still hold us in His keeping."

"Amen," I said, and never was a prayer more fervently uttered.

It will be remembered that we were pretty heavily weighted, for we carried in addition to our small supply of food, revolvers and Winchester, two elongated cartridge shells each weighing two or three pounds. Higgenbottom, as will be recalled, wore the ordinary boots,

more common in this country a half century ago than now, while I had leathern leggings strapped around my lower limbs, and reaching to my knees. Each carried his rifle resting over his right shoulder, and thus equipped we set our faces toward the Paraguayan city more than two hundred miles away, on the eastern side of the immense plain known as El Gran Chaco.

Since there was nothing in the nature of a path or trail, we walked side by side, conversing at times in low tones, but continually listening and peering into the surrounding gloom for that which we prayed we might not hear or see.

The grass was short, not rising more than half way to our knees. We were rugged and strong, and had been cramped so long on the little steamer that for a time the exercise was pleasant.

Aside from the ever present danger from the fierce Tobas, our situation was by no means unpleasant. In the first place, the plain was so level that walking was comparatively easy, the grass offering no obstruction but serving rather as a velvety carpet to our feet. Then the temperature, although oppressive during the middle of the day, was almost cool at other times

and pleasant at night. No rain would fall for months, and we thus escaped one of the most intolerable afflictions of tropical countries. True, the mosquitoes at times were a pest, but no more so than is frequently the case in our own favored land at home.

Although we did our best to follow a direct course, and were quite confident we were doing so, we were too wise to rely upon any impression. Within less than half an hour of our starting overland, Higgenbottom again halted, and drawing out his rubber safe ignited a match with the same care as before.

“Well, I’ll be hanged!” was his exclamation.

I was looking over his shoulder and saw the cause of his impatience. Despite our care, we were bearing too much to the left, so that our course had become almost due east.

“That explains what to many persons is in-explainable,” I remarked, as we made the necessary correction and pressed on again.

“What do you mean?”

“The reason why lost persons travel in a circle.”

“I don’t understand you.”

“You notice that we have both turned unconsciously to the left; each of us is right handed.”

“What of it?”

“The disproportionate strength extends to the right leg as well as the right arm; we use the right leg with slightly more vigor than the left, and therefore bear in that direction.”

“Suppose a person to be left handed?”

“Then he would swerve to the right.”

“And if ambidextrous?”

“He ought to go straight ahead.”

“Your theory is the true one, provided it is the true one; but my recollection of the stories of long hunts in the woods, as told by my grandfather, is that when a hunter was lost, he was as liable to turn to the right as the left and vice versa. It all depended upon how he happened to start.”

“There are exceptions to all rules.”

“But none to a law, since it would no longer be a law, and in the case you speak of, it must be a law.”

“Well, we shall have to leave the question open for future investigation—helloa! what does that mean?”

We had halted at the same instant, led to do so by what seemed to be the sound of rumbling thunder—certainly an amazing occurrence when the sky was unclouded and the season for storms was over. It was not sharp or explo-

sive, but deep and muttering without any increase of volume.

While we stood listening and wondering, a still more alarming thing was noted: the earth under our feet was trembling, with a perceptible swaying motion. The noise and tremor of the ground were caused by an earthquake!

Boast as a man may, he can never become fully accustomed to those remarkable occurrences. It matters not that he may have passed through a number unharmed; he is always confronted by the probability that the new one may indulge in some whim against which he cannot protect himself and which may prove instantly fatal.

Visions of the ground beneath us suddenly splitting apart into a fathomless chasm into which we should drop and be crushed like worms, held us speechless, awed and terrified.

The tremor lasted but a few minutes, though the thunder continued to mutter faintly for some time after the earthquake itself had passed. Both of us had seen much more violent shocks in South America, but, as I have stated, no one can be placed as were we, without being thoroughly frightened, and he who claims the contrary tells a falsehood.

We resumed our walk, so impressed by the

occurrence that when we spoke, we did so for a long time in low tones, as if fearful of being overheard by some one prowling at our elbow. By and by, however, we rallied and remembering the value of time, improved it to the utmost.

When Higgenbottom once more struck a match and examined his compass, it was a pleasure to learn that we had varied only to a slight extent from an exact southeastern course.

“By and by,” he remarked, “we shall be able to manage it, so that if we are lost and have no compass we can stick to the right direction.”

“Provided it is to the southeast.”

Calculating as best we could, we gave ourselves about six hours for travel before the sun would appear in the horizon. Then would be the time for extreme care, and it was not unlikely that we should have to remain in hiding until night came, for we felt that if once discovered by a party of Tobas, it would be impossible to escape a collision with them, and, if they chanced to be numerous, it must prove fatal to us.

We took long strides, and kept it up after the pace began to tell, and the loads we carried made themselves manifest. When my friend

paused again and looked at his compass, he chuckled.

“We are heading southeast in a bee line,” he explained, “and the figures on my watch show that day is at hand.”

A few minutes later, I, who was two or three paces in advance, felt my foot strike water. My companion noticed it the next moment, but thinking it was caused by some small depression in the ground, we pressed on, only to find the plashing continued.

“Higgenbottom,” I said, “do you know of any river or lake between the Pilcomayo and the Paraguay?”

“I never heard of any.”

“It looks, then, as if we had discovered some big body of water. Even if we fail to add to the knowledge of the mysterious river, we shall be able to tell the public something new, that is if we ever live to reach the public’s ear.”

For as I came to a stop I saw the water, as reflected in the starlight, stretching in advance until it faded from sight in the gloom. That it was of insignificant depth was proven by the grass which showed through it.

“This may compel a change of course, but it is growing light and we would better wait until we can learn more.”

Thus we stood until the yellow gleams in the horizon had increased to that degree that we could scan the plain for several miles in all directions.

The outlook was anything but pleasing. Behind us and to the north and south stretched the pampas, and it may be said that it did the same in front, but between us and the solid land in that direction lay a body of water fully a mile in width. Not only that, but it extended north and south further than the eye could reach, cutting directly across our path.

“It is generally a pretty extensive job to circumnavigate a river,” I said, “and there’s no telling what distance we shall have to travel to flank this, even if it is only a lake. We can readily see how far it is necessary to go to reach the further shore.”

“And it doesn’t look deep, for the heads of much of the grass show all the way.”

We decided to cross. Higgenbottom was not particular about wetting his boots, but since they already fitted him tightly, he was afraid they would cause him trouble by shrinking. He therefore removed them, and thrusting his stockings inside hung them over his shoulder, and rolling up his trousers struck off in the water. I followed without discarding leggings

or shoes, keeping a little to the rear, since there was no need of more than one of us plunging into an unseen hole.

CHAPTER XIII

A STRANGE PERIL

WE WALKED the whole mile through the water, without once sinking to a greater depth than six inches. Moreover, the ground was comparatively solid, so that we were not troubled with anything in the nature of mud. My companion, therefore, had much the advantage of me, since he was able to sit down and don dry stockings and boots, while it was the other way with me. However, all this was a trifle hardly worth the mention.

While fording this temporary lake, the sun appeared above the horizon, and the day was fully come when we stepped upon land made dry because of its superior elevation.

We agreed that we were, to say the least, fully twenty miles from the Pilcomayo, for the compass showed we had traveled a comparatively direct course, and we had maintained a good pace, not counting the walk through the water, and had been all of six hours on the way.

Now that our view reached for miles in every

direction we scanned all portions in our field of vision with the intensest scrutiny. Higgenbottom first used his binocular and then passed it to me. The gratifying result of this search was that we discovered no sign of a living thing and consequently, so far as we could judge, were in no present danger.

Naturally our interest lay to the northwest—that is the section we had just traversed. The surface of the plain was so flat that we could see nothing of the Pilcomayo and were unable even to locate it. It seemed to us that we had good ground for being hopeful. The Tobas who were so jealously watching the Hail Columbia would hesitate a long time, after the demonstration from the dynamite cartridges, to attack it.

The sight of the canoe adrift would fail to give any clue to the use it had been put to, and it would be only through the most improbable chance that they would learn of our flight across the plain. Should that, however, come to their knowledge, they would be able to trail and run us down in spite of everything we might do to prevent it.

Absolute safety would seem to demand that we should sit on the ground and eat, sleep and rest until sunset, for in such a posture, varied

by lying prone, if it should become necessary, we should be in no danger of discovery.

But the prospect of throwing away valuable time, when so many miles lay before us, was unpleasant to the last degree. It was more comfortable to travel while the sun was shining, even if it became oppressive during the middle of the day, resting only when our tired frames required it, and it was easier, too, to maintain the right course then than at night.

Finally, after fully discussing the situation, we settled upon what may be considered a compromise.

We would eat our breakfast and then sleep for most of the forenoon. By meridian, we should be fully refreshed, and if all looked well, would resume our journey, continually using the glass to detect the appearance of danger.

It will be admitted that with this aid, which enabled us to see much farther than the most lynx eyed Toba, we should have no excuse for not discovering the savages long before they could possibly discern us. The luxuriant grass was everywhere, making one spot as good a hiding place as another.

We therefore ate our morning meal and then stretched out on the bare ground, so tired that both of us almost immediately sank into refresh-

ing slumber. The climate was so mild we needed no extra covering by daytime or at night, though it would have been well at the latter time could we have been provided with blankets to protect us from the saturating dews.

We had not undertaken to bring any extra clothing with us, believing the suits on our bodies sufficient to last for weeks to come. At any rate, if any mishap befell them, we should be without remedy until we reached Concepcion or met kind friends, and of the latter contingency, it need not be said that we did not have the most shadowy hope.

Higgenbottom was the first to open his eyes, and when he did so, the sun had crossed the meridian and the afternoon was well begun.

Both felt like new men, for the rest was what we needed and we were in exuberant spirits. As I rose to a sitting position and looked around, my companion was standing with his binocular to his eyes, attentively scanning the surrounding country. Observing that I had awakened, he said:

“I have described a complete circle twice.”

“With what result?”

“None at all, which is the best possible result. Now, suppose you try it.”

I rose to my feet and repeated his act to the

extent of sweeping once every portion of the country that came within my range of vision. I was happy to confirm what he had said.

“Now,” he remarked, “we ought to make twenty or thirty miles more before dark.”

“But we have forgotten our dinner or lunch or whatever you please to call it.”

“It is you who have forgotten that we agreed to go upon a short allowance for three or four days. Two meals a day are all,” he added decisively.

“By George! I was never so hungry in my life,” I said ruefully; “I feel as if I hadn’t eaten anything for a week.”

“If you feel that way, a half day won’t make any difference in your emotions.”

“What can’t be cured must be endured,” I replied with a sigh, appreciating the wisdom of my friend’s sentiments and with no thought of really opposing them.

As before, we made our course due southeast. One of the most natural things for a person to do when placed in a similar situation is to make calculations upon the extent of the work before him. In fact, I have always found it impossible to refrain and Higgenbottom felt much as I did.

“Let us say that it is exactly two hundred

miles from where we are now to Concepcion," said I, "though I admit it may be a little further."

"Say rather that it is that distance to the Paraguay river, at a point north of Concepcion, for when we reach that stream, we shall find it navigable, with plenty of shipping, none of which can possibly be hostile."

"Why not then make the river itself our destination instead of the city?"

"That has been my purpose from the beginning—that is in a certain sense. Concepcion is the first place at which we wish to stop, but I hope we shall reach it by striking the nearest point of the Paraguay and passing down that."

"That's better yet; then our overland journey will be no more than two hundred miles?"

"Not unless we wander off the track."

"Which is impossible so long as you have your compass."

"That much is admitted."

"Well, then, we ought to travel from forty to fifty miles every twenty four hours, which will take us to the Paraguay within five days."

"Your mathematics are correct, but such forecasts end nearly always in disappointment. We shall have the plain all the way, varied now and then by patches of timber, and there is al-

ways the possibility of finding some of the Tobas in our path. It may be that we shall have to stop traveling by daylight, in which case, our time will be doubled. Besides, suppose we have a fight——”

He did not complete his sentence, for there was no need of it. I felt that my forecast, as he termed it, was childish, but nevertheless I could not help making it.

Well aware of the risk we were incurring, we never forgot our caution. The glass which dangled from a string around Higgenbottom's neck, was continually raised and pointed toward different points of the compass.

I noticed that he looked to the rear as often as in any other direction, and when he passed the instrument to me I did the same, for our chief dread, so long as nothing appeared, was that of being pursued by the savages with whom we had already had an encounter.

It was noticeable throughout the first hour or two that the plain, although comparatively level, gradually rose until we must have been twenty or thirty feet above the Pilcomayo, which had now been left a considerable distance to the rear. Thenceforward, the pampa was like the floor of a house.

It was not yet the middle of the afternoon,

when Higgenbottom, who was a short distance in advance, held his binocular pointed eastward so long that I became uneasy.

“Have you discovered anything?” I asked, stepping beside him.

“Confound it! I am afraid so,” was his reply, and passing the glass to me he added:

“What do you make of it?”

The moment I leveled the glass to the eastward, I saw he was right. Far away on the plain a peculiar quivering movement was discernible.

I would have thought it was caused by the wind blowing over the grass, had I not noticed that the space thus agitated had a dark brown color. Suddenly the truth flashed upon me.

“It is a herd of cattle, numbering thousands,” I said, passing the glass back to my companion.

He studied the sight for a few minutes and then added:

“You are right; it is one of those immense droves of cattle on the move; they are at a full gallop, and, by heavens, they’re coming directly toward us!”

It was a startling fact. The enormous aggregation was speeding over the plain in our direction, and peering to the right and left, we

could see neither the beginning nor end of the right or left wing. It was, therefore, impossible for us to get out of their path by turning aside.

There was no tree within reach to give refuge, and we could do nothing but stand where we were and await the onslaught.

Would they overwhelm and crush us under their multitudinous hoofs? Had we any means of checking them? None at all, for it is well known that such herds, when under the impulse of a stampede or panic, will dash straight over the bluffs of a river hundreds of feet in height.

Rather it should be said those at the rear crowd over those in front, when the latter, awakening to their danger, make frenzied efforts to check themselves, but are swept irresistibly onward by the fearful rush of the thousands behind them.

Could we turn them aside? That was the only possible hope, but what way was there of bringing it about? We were in a sorry plight, indeed, and I hastened to suggest the only way which occurred to me to avert being trampled to death by the oncoming herd.

“When they come within range,” said I, “we will open fire with our Winchesters, shout and

wave our hats. Possibly we can make them divide and pass by on both sides of us.”

Here it was that the Yankee ingenuity of Percy Higgenbottom came to our aid.

“I have a better plan.”

As he spoke he ran a number of rods straight toward the herd, now thundering down upon us, and placed one of his dynamite cartridges on the ground. Then he hurried back, glowing and expectant.

“Let us see how *that* will work.”

CHAPTER XIV

A STRANGE DANGER AND A STRANGE ESCAPE

IT WORKED beautifully.

No more terrifying sight can be imagined than that of the thousands of panic stricken cattle, bearing down upon us in a wild stampede. All were tearing forward at a headlong run, snorting with affright, the myriads of horns often striking together with a curious, crackling sound, many emitting short bellows, eyes glaring, and the vast herd pouring along like the ocean when it has broken its barriers and is overwhelming a whole country.

And we two men stood directly in their path, with not a break visible in the appalling army of quadrupeds, when the front was within a hundred yards, coming with undiminished speed. My heart was in my mouth, for if the cartridge failed to explode, we should be crushed and trampled into nothingness within the following minute.

Gazing at that awful torrent, I saw also the small oblong object resting in the grass and

barely visible from where we stood. It looked harmless and perhaps was to prove so, but of what was it not capable if it would only do its appointed work!

Suddenly there came a muffled explosion, and one, two, three of the infuriated cattle rose in air. More properly speaking, they were raised, and as they went up it was in small fragments that were scattered over a number of square rods.

In addition to this trio, more than twice as many were hurled sideways and forward and backward, rolling over and over, in lumps and heaps that bore no resemblance to their original being.

A great hole was gouged out of the ground, and the shell acted as if it were an irresistible wedge fired into the front of the herd from some giant piece of ordnance. The terror which took possession of the survivors was tenfold greater than that which would have checked them upon the top of a lofty bluff over which they were about to plunge.

With a power that otherwise never could have been theirs, they pressed to the right and left, and in a few seconds were thundering past us, while we stood in an open space that was fully a score of feet in width.

It looked as if our peril had been averted in this extraordinary fashion, but neither my friend nor myself could feel assured on that point. Although from where we stood, we could see the further side of the army of quadrupeds, yet many thousands of furious beasts were still in front, and the gap was likely to be closed any moment, when the frightful death that had threatened us before would be inevitable.

Inspired by this fear, I ran forward until I was as close as possible to the apex of the angle formed by the fan-like space, and hastily placed one of my cartridges on the ground, in the same position as the other, and then instantly dashed back to my friend, who nodded approvingly. He had been on the point of doing the same thing.

To escape the possible consequences of the explosion, we retreated a number of steps, walking backward and with our eyes fixed upon the dangerous point.

That which I anticipated took place. The apex kept steadily edging nearer to us, and before long a huge bull, who must have gloried in the pride of his tremendous strength, lunged forward over the shell, as if determined that no

obstacle should swerve him a hair's breadth from his course.

To put it mildly, that *taurus* made a mistake, for the next moment his headless body, turning end over end, soared aloft for fully twenty feet, before it came down with a "dull thud" and lay an inert pile whose forceful lesson was not lost on his surviving companions.

Others were slain or mortally hurt, and the panic was greater if possible than before. The rushing swarm was wedged further apart, so that as it passed us, the cleared space was doubled.

A few minutes later, the whole herd were at our backs, and we turned around to gaze upon the remarkable sight. The dampness of the soil and the abundance of grass prevented any dust rising, when but for that we should have been almost suffocated, and, since our position was slightly elevated, we could see the moving sea, the galloping bodies suggesting the short, agitated waves, as it rolled westward, until it became a quivering, tremulous dark mass that gradually lost all semblance to its true character and finally faded out in the distance.

The first words spoken were by Higgenbottom, who, in his quaint way, made the inquiring remark:

“Suppose, Windermyer, we hadn’t brought those cartridges with us?”

“The consequences would have been unpleasant.”

“Slightly; not only did they save our lives, but they furnished us with abundant food, and I think I recall a remark of yours to the effect that you were hungry.”

Going forward, we found enough beef at our disposal to supply a meal to a regiment, and it was in slices to suit any taste, from a piece no larger than one’s hand to one weighing thirty or forty pounds. Moreover, we could take our choice from any part of the animal.

But all was not as we could have wished. There was no water at hand with which to cleanse the steaks and no means of kindling a fire to cook them; for despite the well known fact that the Gran Chaco is broken in many places by patches of timber, we had come upon none, nor, so far as we could see, were we near any.

As in other cases, we were forced to fix upon a compromise. The atmosphere in most of South America is so dry that meat does not spoil, when exposed to it. On many of the boats navigating the inland streams, or at the ranches in the interior, the flesh of animals

when exposed for a few days, becomes thoroughly dried or "jerked" without losing any of its sweetness.

It need hardly be said that the cattle which we had encountered were in no condition for the market. They were thin and lean, better fitted for running, as they had proved, than for the table; but we cut several thin strips from the parts that were the least tough and stringy, and flung them over our shoulders.

Hungry as I was, I preferred to wait until the supply brought with us was exhausted before eating the fresh meat. Besides, there was hope of coming upon wood which would permit us to broil the steaks.

To do all this required much more time than has been taken in the telling. We were on the point of resuming our journey eastward, when my companion asked:

"What do you suppose stampeded those cattle?"

"It might have been one of a dozen causes, or simply a whim of some of them. On the Llano Estacado of Texas and the prairies further north, I have been told by cattlemen that an animal in the middle of a herd may happen to have a bad dream, and by his cavortings start off the whole drove in a stampede.

I don't believe there is a more stupid creature for its size in the world than a cow, unless it's a big bull. Whoever heard of a trained cow?"

"All that may be true, but I feel a trifle uneasy over this affair."

He emphasized his misgiving by again bringing his glass to his eyes and attentively scrutinizing the country to the eastward. If it should so happen that a party of Tobas had caused the stampede, we were in peculiar danger, for the grass upon which we had hitherto relied to hide us when we lay down, had been trampled flat by the tens of thousands of hoofs, and would afford no screen whatever. This condition extended so far to the north and south that it would be like flanking a river or lake to pass around it, while the extent eastward was indefinite.

But we might as well go forward as to stand still, and we did so, Higgenbottom keeping slightly in advance, frequently using his binocular and not forgetting to shape his course by his compass. We should have been relieved had it been later in the day, for there was good ground for alarm.

It did seem as if there never was a threatened danger in that pestiferous country that did not prove a reality; for we had not walked

a mile when we discerned a party of mounted Indians, who assuredly were Tobas, directly in our front and riding as straight for us as the cattle had come a short time before.

The strange fact about their appearance was that Higgenbottom first discovered them without the aid of his glass, and I observed them at the same moment. So sudden indeed did they show themselves that it looked as if riders and horses had been lying on the ground and had suddenly risen to their feet, though it was incredible that such should have been the fact.

But there they were, apparently two score in number, and it looked as if we were inextricably caught.

One thing was evident: we were only adding to our peril by maintaining our erect position, for we must be visible to any horsemen that were visible us.

One of the peculiarities marking the stampede of the cattle was that here and there, scattered over the plain, were the dead bodies of some of them. Perhaps one stumbled. If so, he never had the chance to rise again, since he was immediately trampled to death by the mad throng behind him.

At any rate, they were stretched before us,

scattered here and there like tiny islets in a lake.

It happened that two such bodies lay near together and only a short way off. My companion and I ran to them and dropped to the ground, facing the oncoming horsemen.

“If I could make certain of the exact line they will follow,” said Higgenbottom, “I would lay my remaining cartridge in front of them.”

“The prospect of its serving us is too slight. Besides, they may turn off to one side and pass us by.”

“It is probable they saw us before we lay down.”

“But not certain; there are so many dead bodies that these will serve as screens for us. They have no reason to expect two white men to be wandering through this part of the country.”

“That may all be, and yet if they saw us before we lay down they will be sure to investigate. Could it have been *they* who stampeded the cattle?”

“No; for, if so, they would not have been so far to the rear; their horses can outspeed any other quadruped, and they would have been on the heels of the cattle or among them.”

But it was useless to speculate. We kept

our faces toward the Tobas, the rifle of each resting on the body in front, which served as a barricade and we hoped also as a screen against discovery. The savages were approaching at an easy gallop and were soon so near that we counted them. Inasmuch as each made the number the same—twenty three—it is quite certain we were right.

CHAPTER XV

RIDING DOUBLE

AS I have stated, there could be no doubt that the approaching horsemen belonged to the dreaded tribe of Tobas. They were a formidable body, almost naked, with their painted breasts and faces, and immense bushy heads of hair, their big bows and spears, and their fully warranted self confidence.

They are lords of El Gran Chaco, and will remain supreme until some powerful military force marches through their country and sweeps the dusky desperadoes from its path.

Like our own wild Indians, all rode bare-back, the only implement used to help in managing their animals being a halter, made of the tough bark of some tree, with one end twisted around the nose of the beast.

The horses themselves are small animals that are properly ponies, possessing considerable speed and great endurance. They are of pure blood, though wild asses and mules are often

encountered on the pampas of the South American countries.

Those which we were watching were generally of a dark bay color, with black points, and several showed white markings. Two or three were of a coal black hue, and one was curiously mottled like the trick animals sometimes seen in a circus.

The great question with us was whether these Tobas knew that two white men were lying each behind the body of a dead cow and watching them. Hope was awakened when, while the horsemen were a fourth of a mile away, they were observed to veer slightly to their right, which course, if continued, would take them to the north of us, though by no means as far as we could desire.

“That may mean that they have not seen us,” remarked my companion, who was no more than a dozen feet from me, “or it may be a movement intended as a reconnoissance.”

“More likely the latter.”

When directly opposite, they were two hundred yards distant and still apparently in direct pursuit of the vanishing herd of cattle, a fact which warranted us in hoping they had not discovered us.

But, as in the former instances, the outcome

was the very thing we feared. Hardly was the party at the point named, when it was revealed that they were aware of our presence. All halted, and two headed straight for us, coming on a slow walk, while the others, who had been riding at an easy canter, attentively watched them.

We had shifted our own positions so as to face them, our bodies protected by those of the dead animals. Each held his Winchester aimed, for in such a situation everything depends upon promptness.

The two Tobas who were thus drawing near were of unusual size, and one I should judge from his appearance, had a stature of at least six feet. This fellow bestrode the mottled pony to which I have alluded, and was armed with an immense bow and arrow.

The horse of the other was of a shining, coal black color, and the rider carried a long spear at his hip, the point projecting in front of his animal's head, while the butt extended beyond his tail. It was a dangerous weapon, which he could hurl with wonderful accuracy for a long distance, and a shudder came over me as I reflected that it was more than probable the point had been dipped in deadly venom.

The one with the bow and arrow was slightly

in advance of his companion, and both of us believed him to be the real leader. Their ponies continued their slow advance, until within bow-shot, when they paused and the archer began coolly fitting an arrow to his bow.

All this time our hats showed over the barricades, and we did not remove our gaze from the two enemies. The action of the bowman proved that he intended to launch his deadly missile at the New Englander, while the spearman's preliminary actions indicated that I had been selected as his victim.

The moment had come when any further hesitation on our part meant death.

Higgenbottom and I fired exactly together and neither threw away his shot. The archer was in the act of sighting his arrow, when with a howl he recoiled and then rolled sideways to the ground. My man did precisely the same thing, and both ponies, panic stricken by the occurrence, threw up their heads with snorts of affright, and galloping about in a half circle, headed for the group at the rear.

"Now give it to *them!*" added my companion, springing to his feet, pointing his gun at the group and firing four charges in rapid succession.

The idea was good, for it promised to stam-

pede the party, and sighting my repeater as quickly as I could, I went my friend one better, by sending five bullets among the dazed savages.

What is more all of the shots were not thrown away. One of mine killed a pony and the howl of the Toba showed that Higgenbottom had hit him hard, for he dived involuntarily off his animal as it fell, but with vivacious nimbleness ran to the black horse from which I had shot the rider, and with a powerful leap, landed astride of him, and hammering his naked heels against his ribs, sent him skurrying after the others who were speeding away like mad.

The whole party had been put to flight, seeing which we sat down on the ground and partly replenished the magazines of our rifles, neither of us credulous enough to believe that that was the last by any means of the Tobas. A singular occurrence followed.

The savages halted fully an eighth of a mile distant—too far for us to throw away any shot. Two of the miscreants, most likely leaders both, lay lifeless on the plain, while the mottled horse of which I have spoken, and upon which the tall bowman had ridden, refused to follow his companions.

Standing motionless, with head high in air

and his bark halter dangling to the ground, he emitted a neigh and looked directly at us. The brute seemed to ask by his action:

“Who are you and what do you mean by slaying my master?”

Then, stranger than that, the piebald began walking slowly toward my companion, just as the timid but curious antelope will draw near the signal that has been displayed on purpose to entice him within range of the hunter.

“What a splendid fellow!” exclaimed Higgenbottom admiringly; “but he has all the curiosity of a woman.”

When he was within a hundred feet, head still high, his silky nostrils snuffing the air and stepping hesitatingly, a new hope came to us.

“What a prize if we can capture him! Don’t do anything to frighten him.”

More and more timidly he advanced until half of the intervening distance was passed. At that point, his fear overcame his curiosity, if it was really that feeling which agitated him, and he stood still, not daring to come any closer.

His unaccountable action caused my comrade to resolve to make him our own. Without rising from his prone position, Higgenbottom spoke gently, uttering a number of soothing

words, which seemed to produce the desired effect, for when the man rose so as to reveal the upper part of his body, the horse, which had shown a disposition to break into flight, stood still, pointed his nose toward him and snuffed again.

My friend now rose to his feet, and stepping around the barricade, began cautiously approaching the pony. He kept up his gentle utterances and held a banana extended in his hand. When the animal seemed on the point of breaking away, Higgenbottom stopped, but continued his persuasive wooing.

Thus the advance went on step by step, the course of the horse being the most extraordinary in some respects that I have ever seen. The moment came, when with a quick movement, my companion leaped slightly forward, seized the dangling halter and held the animal a prisoner.

Realizing this, the captive snorted and tugged to get away, but was held fast. After his nose and neck had been patted, he seemed to lose all fear, and obediently followed the halter grasped by his new master back to where I had risen to my feet.

The Tobas, who saw all this from a distance, must have been as much astonished as

we, but they made no move to interfere. Almost at the moment their former property was captured, they broke into a gallop, heading northward, leaving the two lifeless bodies stretched on the ground and one of their best horses in our hands.

“That isn’t the last of them by any means,” I said to Higgenbottom, as we both gazed after the party.

“You are right, and this isn’t the place to wait for them; they have gone after reinforcements.”

“Ah, if we only could have secured another of their ponies, we might laugh them to scorn,” said I.

“But since that is out of the question, we must make the best use of the one that was good enough to come to us.”

Higgenbottom vaulted upon the shiny back of the mottled steed, and I sprang up behind him. It took but a few minutes to adjust ourselves to our new surroundings, during which the pony showed natural nervousness, but behaved better than we expected.

I steadied myself by placing one arm around the waist of my friend, who, holding his rifle in his left hand and grasping the bridle with his right, glanced at his compass, fixed the right

course in his mind, and spoke gently to the animal.

The latter stepped forward without any urging, and broke into the easiest swinging canter that can be imagined. Looking behind us, the Toba party was almost invisible to the northward.

Now, while the horse, which Higgenbottom immediately christened Uncle Sam, in memory of his dynamite gun, was probably the equal in speed and endurance of any other of his species, it must be remembered that he was doing double duty. Each of us was quite large and heavy, and it was unreasonable to hope that in case of pursuit our steed could travel either as fast or as far as his pursuers.

This being axiomatic, as may be said, we proceeded to make hay while the sun shone. The canter appeared to be the natural gait of the animal, and he was allowed to maintain it, while the miles were rapidly placed behind us.

It was agreed to let him follow his own wishes. When tired, he might drop to a walk or stop altogether as he preferred. If hungry, we soon reached a section untrampled by the stampeded cattle, where he could eat his fill.

His endurance was amazing, for he kept up his voluntary flight for hour after hour until

the afternoon was well advanced. Then, when Higgenbottom, out of pitying admiration for the noble creature, drew him down to a walk, it suddenly occurred to him that during all that time he had forgotten to consult his compass. He now hastened to do so and immediately uttered the disgusted exclamation:

“Well, I’ll be hanged! We’re away off! We have been traveling due north for I don’t know how many hours.”

CHAPTER XVI

AT BAY

THE blunder was the more exasperating since there was no palliation for it.

Strange that in the novel experience of riding double across the pampa, neither Higgenbottom nor I had once thought of the danger of wandering from the true course.

“Confound it!” he added with impatient waggery; “it seems that a horse as well as a man will travel in a circle when left to himself.”

“It may be that in the case of Uncle Sam he did it purposely to find his former companions who disappeared in that direction.”

The possibility of this being the fact startled my friend into slewing the animal around, so that we traveled nearer south than southeast. We had not neglected to scan the horizon for our enemies, and, as if to complete our misfortunes, we now caught sight of them approaching from the north, not distant more than a

couple of miles, and of course heading for us.

The party numbered fifty or more, and we did not doubt that it included those with whom we had had our last brush. So it was true, as we suspected from the first, that they had gone in quest of reinforcements, and, having obtained them, now "meant business."

At the same moment, we made another discovery. Directly ahead loomed one of the buttes, such as are often seen on our own western prairies, and it was fully a hundred feet in height. We scanned it with deep interest and my companion said:

"I believe we shall have to make our last stand there."

"Why?"

"I have noticed within the last few minutes that the Tobas are gaining on us. As grand a horse as Uncle Sam is, he cannot carry two men of our weight as fast as those animals can travel, with a single rider apiece. If we keep straight on, we shall be overtaken inside of an hour, and it will probably be on the open plain, where we shall not have half a chance to defend ourselves. We can put up a decent fight at that bluff."

"I agree with you; let's make for it."

He had already headed the pony that way,

and, with slight urging, he broke into a swift run, the still air fanning our faces in a breeze, while his hoofs beat the soft earth with a rhythmic sound that showed how fast the noble creature was traveling.

“I hope those cartridges of ours will not be jolted into exploding,” remarked the New Englander, “but we’ve got to take the chances.”

Glancing back, the mounted Tobas were seen thundering along at the top of their speed, and there could be no mistake as to their gaining fast upon us. They were coming up, as may be said, hand over hand. But there was little fear of our failing to reach the supposed refuge in time, unless overtaken by some mishap.

Nothing of that nature intervened, and with the same majestic stride, Uncle Sam brought us to the foot of the bluff, while the Tobas were still at a distance that threatened no harm to us. It was no time for sentiment, and the steaming steed had hardly halted, when we leaped to the ground.

“Good by!” said Higgenbottom; “you did us a splendid turn, and I wish we could keep you, but it is impossible. Off with you!”

On receiving a resounding slap on the haunch, the animal snorted his farewell and facing his companions, trotted away to meet them.

The bluff upon which all our hopes were now centered was, as I have said, all of a hundred feet high. It was as if an acre of earth, covered with grass, had been pushed upward to that height, leaving the sides composed of gravel, clay and dirt, rising out of the earth and roughened and crumbling from the exposure to the weather.

Another comparison suggested by its appearance was that of an immense bouquet or nosegay, though of course the flowers were lacking.

Our first fear, as we approached it, was that the slope was so nearly perpendicular on all sides that it would be impossible to climb it. Higgenbottom dashed forward in one direction and I the other, meeting on the opposite side.

"I think we can do it here," said my companion, clearly nervous over the critical situation.

"We *must!*" I replied, instantly starting up the incline, which was so nearly vertical that it taxed my utmost strength.

The ground crumbled under my feet and I had taken but a few steps when I slid back again.

"A little to the left," suggested Higgenbottom, who had already made some progress and was therefore in advance; "it is all the better

for us that it is so hard to climb; it will make the job tougher for the Tobas.”

“And I am afraid too tough for us.”

But the next moment I was encouraged by the fact that though I slipped and stumbled I was really ascending the steep slope. My friend in front of me was my “pacer” so to speak, and I grimly vowed to keep at his heels.

Our position prevented us from seeing the savages, but they were coming like a whirlwind and would soon be in sight of us.

Repeatedly it looked as if we were stopped for good, and would have to make our stand on the side of the cliff, where the advantage was fatally less than on the crest, but we were inspired by the most powerful of all motives—the hope of life; and, panting and almost breathless, in imminent peril of rolling down to the base with the streams of débris that were continually sweeping under our feet, we toiled onward, with a desperation that was at the highest tension.

Finally, only a dozen feet separated us from the summit.

I was looking at my leader when an object suddenly appeared in the brief space between us and then slid down with the rattling dirt passing beneath me. It was an Indian arrow,

launched by one of the Tobas, and casting a glance below, I saw that the whole party of horsemen had arrived and were grouped at the base where we began our laborious climb.

I said nothing to my friend, for it could do no good. He was straining every nerve and so was I. But a second arrow was fired, and I distinctly felt it graze my ear.

A cold shudder thrilled me and for the instant I believed I had been wounded; but other missiles were sure to follow, and it was not to be expected that all or even many of them would miss their mark.

Had the bluff been ten feet higher, we should have been forced to stop, even though exposed to certain death, to regain our breath and strength. As it was, Higgenbottom was barely able to drag himself over the edge, where he lay on his face, so used up that he could only pant, too exhausted to gasp a syllable.

And my plight was equally distressing. By superhuman exertion, I pulled myself over, unable even to draw my feet out of sight, until I caught my breath. We had no more strength than a couple of children, and had a single Toba appeared on the scene, within the following five minutes, he could have wrought his

sweet will with us, and we not able to raise a hand to defend ourselves.

But in a little while we pulled ourselves further from the margin of the bluff and managed to speak in broken sentences.

“I wonder if they dare follow,” was the first thing uttered by my companion.

I slewed my body around and still lying on my face, peered over.

Two nearly naked Tobas were not only climbing the same steep ascent, but were half way up! They must have started while we were on the way.

The daring of those wretches is unsurpassable, and helps to account for the annihilation of scores of explorers who attempted to follow the Pilcomayo through the Gran Chaco.

“I guess we’re good enough for you,” I grimly muttered, as I drew my Winchester round in front.

“Hold on,” said Higgenbottom, “let them come nearer and then we will use our revolvers.”

I liked the suggestion, and, laying my larger weapon aside, drew one of my pistols, in imitation of my companion.

One reason for allowing the savages to come closer was that it gave us a few more minutes

in which to recover our full strength. Our respiration rapidly decreased, while we furtively watched the wretches steadily coming upward, with the large group below watching them.

They were much better climbers than we, for they progressed with little apparent exertion. Had they started when we were half way up the slope, they would have overtaken us at the upper edge.

But of what could they be thinking? Did they suppose that after our terrific effort, we would lie supinely down and permit them to slay us? Were these a couple of ambitious warriors, eager to earn the applause of their brethren?

Not wishing to draw a flight of arrows while our heads projected over the margin, we drew back, carefully examined our revolvers, and awaited the moment when the two should come within certain range.

As in our own case, one was following the other, the passageway being too narrow to allow them to walk side by side, but they were so near, that the one at the rear could touch his leader at any moment with outstretched hand.

“I claim the first shot,” said Higgenbottom,

as with pistol grasped, he thrust his head forward again and looked over.

Hardly had I time to do the same, when he let fly. The Toba was no more than twenty feet below, when the two shots were fired, both speeding true to their aim, and, hitting the leader fairly in the breast. Either bullet would have been fatal.

With a rasping screech, he flung his arms aloft, leaped upward and backward several feet, and, before his companion could dodge, struck him as if fired from a catapult. The impact was resistless, and carried the second off his feet.

The two went rolling, sliding and tumbling, so mixed up with the rattling dirt and gravel that it was impossible to tell them apart, or to distinguish the dead man from the live one.

But I took a shot as may be said for luck, though never able to learn whether I struck the living or defunct one, or whether I missed both. They never ceased falling, and sped downward until they slumped to the level ground at the feet of the amazed horsemen, who, I may say without too much self esteem, must have concluded that they were up against as lively a couple of explorers as it had ever been their fate to meet.

Moreover, something more of the same nature was quite likely to happen if this foolishness continued. For a while we thought that others would try it at once, in spite of the fate of the first two, for they do not know the meaning of fear as we had reason to know. However, the more enthusiastic were restrained by the cooler heads. Our next dangers were to come in another way.

CHAPTER XVII

A DESPERATE SCHEME

I AM quite convinced that the reader will concede one merit to Percy Higgenbottom and myself, the same being our disposition to face unflinchingly any and every peril that confronted us, and not to allow ourselves to be misled by false hopes.

Now, here we were, on the crest of the butte, which was as level as a floor, covered with grass and no trees, the appearance suggesting the origin to which allusion has already been made, namely, that of a section of the pampa having been pushed upward from the level to a height of a hundred feet.

It has been shown that the butte which we had climbed and upon which we turned at bay, could be scaled only on one side, where the ascent was so steep that the work was exhausting to the last degree. We had made that climb, and generously armed as we were, could hold a thousand Tobas at bay.

This was exceedingly comforting in one re-

spect, but what of it? We were virtually caught in a trap, from which no way offered itself of escaping. We had enough food to last us a week by husbanding the supply, but we were without a drop of water with which to quench our thirst.

All the savages, therefore, had to do, was to hold their place at the base of the butte, or within a short distance, and we should be forced to descend and fight it out with them or await a lingering death on the summit. In common but expressive language, our enemies had us foul.

“There’s nothing to be made by waiting,” said my companion, after we had discussed every phase of the situation; “we can stand them off for several days and nights, but the end will be the same.”

“We have got to make a break for liberty, and it is best to do it tonight, while we are fresh and strong,” I replied; “for each night will see us weakened and less prepared to put up a fight.”

The afternoon was drawing to a close and darkness would soon be upon us. Peering over the edge of the bluff, we saw that most of the Tobas had dismounted and were moving here and there, in a lolling, lazy fashion, as if they

felt that the situation had taken the form of a merely waiting game.

One thought must have occurred to the reader. We had two dynamite cartridges in our possession. Why not clear the way by exploding one of them among the wretches, and then, in the confusion, make a dash from the foot of the butte?

That was the only plan that seemed possible, and we decided not only to resort to it, but to do so within the next hour or two, while the night was still young. We even hoped we might secure a horse apiece during the hurly burly and leave our enemies well behind before they could attempt effective pursuit.

But no mistake must be made at the beginning when a slip would spoil everything.

“To drop the shell among them from where we are now,” said my companion, “would do its work, but it would take so much time for us to descend that they would rally and be ready for us.”

“True; therefore we must steal downward to, say, two thirds of the way to the bottom, throw the cartridge, and the moment it explodes, hasten to the base and then ‘Hurrah for Harry and St. George!’ ”

It was not yet fully dark, and we were sitting

on the ground occasionally peeping over the edge to make sure no march was stolen upon us, when both heard a peculiar thud directly behind us. Turning we saw one of the Toba arrows with its head buried several inches in the ground and the other end pointing upward.

“Where did that come from?” I asked in astonishment.

“Where *could* it come from?” added Higgenbottom by way of reply; “there is but one source—well, I’ll be hanged!”

A second missile dived into the ground still closer, both of us involuntarily starting, as we saw how narrowly it missed us.

I hitched to the edge of the butte and looked over. Perhaps a hundred yards from the foot stood a single Toba warrior, long bow in hand and deliberately launching his arrows at us. Since it was impossible to aim directly at his target, he sent the arrows high up in the air, where they curved over and dropped upon the top of the butte.

The native, knowing we were there, was trying to reach us by this roundabout course, and, as I have shown, had come mighty near succeeding.

At the moment I solved the puzzle, he let fly with a third arrow, which we plainly saw as it

climbed the air, far above our heads and at a considerable distance away. Then, as it ceased ascending, it seemed to poise for a moment at the height, as if seeking us out, when it dived for us.

And, by heavens, it dived so truly that if I had not been quick to roll to one side, it would have buried its head in my back instead of in the earth.

“I think it is time *we* had a little of that fun,” muttered the New Englander, thrusting the muzzle of his Winchester over the margin of the butte and carefully aiming at the miscreant, who evidently believed he had all the sport to himself.

He was in the act of letting fly with a fourth missile, when my companion fired, hitting the fellow so fairly that when he leaped in air with a wild cry and fell to the ground, he did not get up again.

“What’s more,” grimly added my friend, “I didn’t have to shoot over your head to wing you. Now, if any other of your friends want to try that trick he will never have a better chance.”

But if any of them held such an intention, it was postponed. We waited several minutes, and, observing nothing of the kind, I reached

out and drew from the ground the arrow which I had dodged by so narrow a chance.

The head was composed of some kind of flint or hard stone, diamond shaped and ground to a point of astonishing keenness. It suggested a stiletto which a slight pressure would force deep into one's flesh.

That, however, which most interested me, was the appearance of the flint itself. It was perhaps two inches in length, and from the extreme point half of its surface was covered with a yellowish substance resembling mucilage. Although hard while exposed to the air, no doubt it would readily dissolve when subjected to moisture.

We were horrified, for there could be no doubt what this appearance meant. That gelatinous substance was the deadliest poison conceivable. Let but the tiniest particle pass under the skin and the victim would die as quickly as had poor Armetia.

“And that isn't the end of this,” said Higgenbottom; “they will be afraid to try it while we can see them, but when it is fully dark, a half dozen will begin their devilish bombardment and keep it up until the top of this butte resembles the back of some huge porcupine.”

“*Therefore, when that takes place we must be out of range.*”

“Which can be done only by leaving this place.”

Such being our resolve, we impatiently awaited the moment for making the crucial test upon which the question of life and death depended.

Twilight in the tropical regions is always brief. While we were talking in low tones and peeping over the edge of the butte, we saw that the night had fully come. Again the deeply blue vault was studded with its myriads of stars, which seemed to gleam with a cold, pitying splendor upon us, and the horses and warriors at the base of the bluff faded and melted in the gloom, until not a glimpse of any of them could be obtained.

In the intense stillness, we plainly heard the neighing now and then of a pony, the soft beat of his hoofs, as he changed his position, and occasionally the odd, guttural words of the Tobas, as they spoke to one another in conversational tones. Once the rattling of gravel made us think some of them were about to repeat the mad attempt to climb the slope.

We thrust our heads and shoulders over the lip of the butte, each grasping his revolver and

waiting for the miscreants to show themselves; but, as the moments passed without bringing them to view and without our hearing a repetition of the streaming dirt and gravel, it was clear that the Tobas were too wise to repeat an attempt that was sure to result disastrously to them.

“Do you imagine,” I asked, “that they will dream of any such scheme as we have in mind?”

“It must be all guesswork, but on general principles, I should say that if they do look for anything of the kind, they will not expect it until the night is pretty well along.”

“Now, then, is the time to risk it,” replied my companion, who was as impatient as I to act.

What we had specially to guard against was of betraying ourselves by starting the dirt and gravel under our feet. The utmost care was necessary. We should have preferred to wait until we were almost at the bottom, but to do so, would place us in danger from our own action. The furious force of the exploding shell might injure or kill us as well as the Tobas.

It was understood, as has been intimated, that we meant to pick our way until within

some thirty feet of the base, and then launch the cartridge, following it with a dash for freedom.

My companion took the lead, passing softly over the side of the butte, Winchester in hand and moving with all the caution possible. As soon as the way was cleared, I followed.

There being no moon, we did not fear discovery until the distance was greatly lessened, but it need not be said that never were our eyes and ears called upon for more delicate and intense service.

The result at first was discouraging. The débris started in a stream, and we stopped, half disposed to retreat, but the fall was quickly checked, and we could hear nothing from the gloom below to indicate that our purpose was suspected. Indeed, why should the Tobas look for anything of the kind after our desperate effort to place ourselves beyond their reach?

Steadying himself by pressing his hand against the bluff behind him, and stepping downward with the most extreme care, Higgenbottom continued the descent, foot by foot, until he paused and turning round, whispered:

“We are over half way to the bottom.”

“Yes; there’s no doubt of it, and I can catch a glimpse of some of them.”

“All right; here we go!”

Balancing himself with skill, he carefully drew out the single shell remaining with him and holding it suspended in his hand, peered downward and listened.

CHAPTER XVIII

A DASH FOR FREEDOM

THE stillness was so profound that we feared the Tobas had penetrated our purpose. One of them said something, to which his companion replied in the guttural fashion we had already noticed. A single horse took a few steps, his hoof beats reaching our ears with startling distinctness. Then again all was still.

My companion was standing erect and I was in the same position and within arm's reach. The background of the bluff helped to screen us, and it would seem that even the sharp eyed Tobas could not make out our forms in the gloom, for only the faintest shadows showed where they were grouped.

In the dim stargleam, I saw Higgenbottom draw back his hand and the next moment he made a quick flirt forward, and the cartridge shell was visible for an instant, as it sped outward and then vanished in the gloom. It seemed a long while in the tense condition of

our nerves that we stood braced and waiting for it to strike and explode.

I heard it plainly as it struck the ground with a thump, and then I held my breath. But no explosion followed!

For a few seconds we were dazed. We had counted on nothing of this nature, but from some cause, impossible to understand, the shell failed to do its duty. How the terrible explosive could stand such a jar and remain intact was a mystery, but that it had done so was beyond question. The chemical, so potent for terrible work, is sometimes erratic in its action, exploding seemingly without reason, and refusing to do so when no cause is apparent.

“Well, I’ll be hanged!” muttered the disgusted and dismayed New Englander, in a dangerously loud voice; “Who would have thought it?”

The only shell left was in my possession and I drew it from my coat pocket.

“It’s do or die!” I whispered; “here goes!” and I tossed the thing over my comrade’s head and out toward where I knew the Tobas were grouped.

There was no failure this time.

The next instant it was as if a volcano had burst upward through the solid ground. The

atmosphere was one vivid blinding glare, and for a moment I believed both of us had been mortally hurt.

But amid the horrible confusion and tumult, Higgenbottom called:

“Quick! Now’s our chance!”

I had been shocked more than he, and was severely bruised by some of the débris hurled in every direction. Shading my eyes with one hand, I strove with desperate might to recall my senses and to clear my vision.

I remember hearing the awful shrieks of the savages, many of whom must have been blown to fragments, and then, as with a superhuman effort, I partially regained my self control and saw that my comrade was missing. He had rushed down the slope, counting upon my following, while I was standing idle.

Fearful that my delay was fatal, I leaped almost the entire distance, but striking the sloping path near the base, carried bushels of gravel and dirt with me, as I stumbled, rolled, slid and scrambled to the bottom, where, fortunately I landed on my feet.

There was no time to halt or try to get my bearings. It was impossible to retreat and the moment I found myself on the plain again I started on a dead run, straight out from the

butte, with no attempt to note the direction. My one purpose was to get as far away as I could in the quickest time possible, and I did so.

I was still running when a frightened neigh sounded at my side, and I perceived a pony galloping in the same direction with me. Acting wholly under impulse, I reached out and grasped the flying halter, and with one desperate bound, vaulted upon his back.

The horse, like all the quadrupeds and bipeds of the vicinity, was in a wild panic and showed for the time no consciousness that he was carrying a rider. I hammered my heels against his ribs, and with another neigh of terror, he broke into a gallop directly out into the darkness and across the pampa.

It was at this instant that I thought of Higgenbottom, wondering what had become of him, and whether he could possibly have met with such good fortune. It would not do to desert him, and yet in what way could I aid him?

Tugging at the halter, I gradually checked the speed of my horse and managed to bring his head around so as to face the butte, which rose like a castle against the starlit sky. Shouts, cries, shrieks and groans still filled the air and the sounds of many hoof beats showed

how complete a panic had taken possession of the whole party.

Suddenly a horseman loomed to view in the darkness and was headed straight toward me. I was thrilled at the thought that my friend after all had met with the same astonishing good fortune that was mine.

“Come on, old fellow!” I called; “things have turned out better than we dared to hope.”

Without waiting for him to reach my side, I turned the nose of my pony away and again banging his ribs, sent him flying off in a gallop, but partly held him in until my companion could join me.

“Was there ever such good luck?” I chuckled; “we have a horse apiece, and no doubt they are among the best of the party. How do you feel, Higgenbottom?”

Receiving no response, I looked sharply around at the horseman who was almost up to me. As I did so, I saw his arm raised above his head, with a long, formidable spear grasped, which he was in the act of launching with deadly aim.

It was not Higgenbottom, but a Toba warrior whom I had mistaken for him!

With a gasp of affright, I ducked my head and plunged over the shoulder of my pony with

a quickness which no equestrian ever surpassed. A second later would have been fatal, for, as I landed, I heard the whizz of the infernal missile, as it whisked past and struck the ground several yards beyond.

The Indian must have been sure he had impaled me, for he, too, leaped down, and, abandoning his animal, darted forward to finish me if haply I were still alive.

He found me very much alive, for holding my Winchester and halter with my left hand, I stooped under the neck of my steed and let fly with two chambers of my revolver as quickly as I could aim and pull trigger. With little more than two paces separating us, it is unnecessary to add further particulars.

Neither of the ponies was accustomed to firearms. The one belonging to the fallen Toba bounded away in a wild panic, and my animal tugged so hard at his halter that I was in danger of being carried off my feet. But I managed to hold on and keep upright, and as soon as I was near enough I took a flying leap that placed me on his back again and made me master for the time of the situation.

It was some minutes before I could fully regain control of the animal, for naturally he was greatly shaken by what he had passed

through and often started and shied without cause. Finally, when he became tractable, I brought him to a standstill.

My situation was most peculiar. There I was in the middle of the plain, astride of a strange horse, wholly ignorant of what had become of my friend and without the slightest knowledge of which way to turn. The only compass of the exploring party was with the New Englander, and where was he?

While my heart glowed with gratitude over the extraordinary manner in which I had eluded the vengeance of the Tobas, I was distressed beyond measure about my friend. It was impossible to deny that the chances were that he had lost his life, for it was not to be expected that such a run of luck as mine could have come to him, and it has been shown how narrow was my escape from the mounted savage, even after I had secured possession of a horse.

I started to capture the second pony, whose owner had fallen before my revolver, having a vague idea that he might be made to serve my friend, but the prospect was too remote, and anyhow, the animal dashed off in the gloom before I could make any serious effort to secure him.

The all important problem with me was in

what way I could help Higgenbottom, if he was really in a condition to be helped. Since we started out on our eventful attempt to explore the Pilcomayo, we had not been separated until now, and having never considered such a possibility, had not arranged any code of signals by which to communicate in the presence of danger.

I might whistle or shout, with the likelihood that the reply which appeared to come from him would really be emitted by one of the Tobas, who would thus be provided with the means for my undoing.

In sore perplexity, I dismounted, and firmly holding the bridle of the pony, knelt down and pressed my ear to the ground. Such I knew was the custom of the American Indians, and somehow or other I fancied it might help me.

The readiness with which sound travels through the earth when it cannot be heard in the air is startling. The moment my ear touched the ground, I instantly raised my head and glanced around, certain that several horsemen were within sight, but nothing of the kind appeared, and after waiting a few minutes, I knelt down and pressed my ear once more against the better conductor.

The same sounds were heard, but were so perceptibly fainter that it was evident the

horsemen were traveling in another direction. Still I listened, until in a brief while, nothing could be distinguished. This, while interesting, was valueless. Much as the reflection pained me, it was idle to hope I could be of any help to my friend before the morrow, and only then through some lucky turn of events.

“Now, if Higgenbottom were in my position,” I thought, “he would put forth every effort to push ahead, and that is the best thing for me to do in the circumstances.”

But the difficulty to which I have referred confronted me. I had no idea of the right course to take, and was without means of learning it until the rising sun should come to my help; but it was intolerable to remain motionless, and I set to work to formulate a reasonable theory as to the right course to be pursued.

Recalling the point where I had last seen the butte, and remembering that the path by which we had climbed it was on the south side, it seemed I could not be far wrong when I fixed upon a course leading to the southeast. In truth, there was no doubt in my mind that I *started* right, but the task was to keep to a course.

The method of doing this was simple. I fixed the location of the Southern Cross; then noted

the lowest star's location as compared with another, whose name I did not know, and found that by following a course directly between the two my route would be substantially to the southeast.

This was the theory by which I was guided during the hours of the night that remained, and throughout which I pressed my pony with little mercy or consideration.

CHAPTER XIX

ALONE ON THE PAMPA

ALTHOUGH I had nothing in the nature of a saddle, my horse was one of the easiest riding animals I ever bestrode. He had a peculiar, racking gait, which he seemed to prefer to a walk, trot or canter, and, since it was quite rapid, I neither urged nor checked him, quite satisfied that he should hold his favorite pace.

Confident that I had started in the right direction, I did not forget to consult my compass, as formed by the two stars I have named. It was a curious fact that my pony showed the same tendency to which I have already referred several times—that of bearing to the left. This was easily checked, and he proved more tractable under the simple halter than would be supposed.

The even, sweeping progress must have lasted for nearly two hours, when he dropped so abruptly to a walk that I came within a hair of sliding over his head. At the same time, he

pricked his ears and snuffed, sure evidence that he had detected something out of the usual order.

My Winchester was resting across the back of the animal just above my thighs, and I grasped the weapon more firmly, ready to aim and fire on the instant it became necessary.

If my horse had been frightened, he would have stopped altogether or shied to one side, but he did neither. He walked forward, with neck outstretched, gently snuffing the air, as if it was the sense of smell upon which he was depending instead of sight.

A few minutes later, it looked as if there were a million stars gleaming on the pampa in front of me. The cause was plain: we had again reached a body of water, which reflected the myriad orbs of night.

How deep or wide it was could not be guessed, but I believed it was shallow, since that peculiarity marks all the water found in El Gran Chaco. I looked up at the sky and saw that, as I viewed it, we were following the true course and consequently it was necessary that we should cross the stream.

I might have hesitated, had the pony shown any timidity, but with a gentle snuffing and a still slower step, he advanced into the water and

kept on. I gently urged him, for, if the sheet was to be crossed, there was no call to be tardy about it. He increased his pace, and in a few minutes we were out of sight of both shores.

The depth slightly grew, until the water rose to his knees, though I knew from his action and the sound of his hoofs, that he sunk at each step into several inches of mud. At this moment, the pony stopped, stretched his head downward, and began drinking.

“A good example,” I said to myself, and, learing over, scooped up some of the element in the hollow of my hand and drank it.

It was as warm as dishwater, and no doubt was roiled. I felt little thirst, and, after a few mouthfuls was satisfied. The animal drank his fill, and then resumed his splashing advance, emerging soon after on the other side.

I judged the sheet was a half mile in width, and it resembled the body of water which we had crossed the day before.

The instant we struck hard earth again, the pony resumed his peculiar, racking gait, and a glance at my starry guide showed that he was following the right course.

“Ah, if I only had Higgenbottom with me,” I sadly repeated a score of times; “he would make no mistake with his compass, and he car-

ries a binocular that I shall need tomorrow. Cool, brave and resourceful, I should be much safer with him than alone. God protect him, for something tells me it has not been as well with him as with me."

I struck a match and glanced at my watch. To my astonishment, it was far beyond midnight. I had been longer on the road than I supposed, for it will be remembered that our start was made early in the evening.

The easy, soothing pace of the pony produced the inevitable effect. I had not slept since the preceding forenoon, the stirring incidents in which I was involved having driven all such disposition from me; but the strain was lifted, and something in the nature of a reaction followed. I found my senses wandering, and like many a man in a similar situation, I dropped into unconsciousness, though I doubt whether I ever would have believed it, except for my startling awakening.

I suppose it was the same instinctive action that keeps one from falling out of bed that prevented me from slipping off my animal during the period (how long or short I cannot guess), that I was borne forward in a sound sleep. But while in that delightful situation, I suddenly shot over the head of the pony, landing so

squarely on my forehead that the wonder is my neck was not broken.

As it was, every bone, nerve and muscle in my body was shaken, and for a moment I was sure I was dangerously hurt.

The horse, while swinging along, paused as abruptly as if he had struck a stone wall, and, unable to offer the slightest resistance, I kept on until checked by the solid ground.

The animal was terrified by the unexpected appearance of a dreaded danger directly in front of him. I heard the warning growl of a wild beast, which served to bring back my wandering senses on the instant, and leaping to my feet, Winchester in hand, I faced the new peril.

An animal larger than an enormous mastiff, was crouching on the ground, growling and lashing its tail, its catlike eyes glowing with a phosphorescent light, as it crept slowly forward, all the time gathering its muscles for a spring at me.

I believed it was a puma or cougar that had appeared so abruptly in our path, and, leveling my rifle at the compact catlike head, I started to pump half a dozen bullets or less into its brain.

But I didn't pump one. With a cold shiver, I found that the weapon had been so injured by being hurled over the head of my horse that it

was useless. The lock would not work, and my Winchester was simply a club, of no more use than an ordinary tree branch.

Hardly was the discovery made, when the puma leaped. At the moment of doing so, he emitted a grating snarl, and then his body rose in a graceful but terrible curve which would have landed him on my head and chest, had I not whisked to one side just in time to elude him.

Instead of attempting to use my Winchester as a club, I flung it aside and drew one of my revolvers. When the brute missed, he snarled again, and whirling with lightning-like swiftness, made a second leap directly at me. While in the act of doing so, and with the muzzle of my Smith & Wesson almost touching his nose, I discharged the whole five chambers in instant succession.

Ordinarily so small a weapon would have produced little effect against a formidable brute, but a revolver can do a good deal of execution, when it has the opportunity my weapon had.

I doubt whether a whole platoon of musketry would have been more destructive than that bombardment of the cougar with my revolver. At the moment I fired, he was in the act of leaping and did leap, but, instead of projecting himself against me, he bounded directly up in the

air, and falling on his head and shoulders, rolled over, furiously clawing the dirt, and dying in a moment in front of me, as I sprang backward to escape his claws.

“It isn’t often a South American puma is slain by the revolver of a gentleman,” I said, “but it looks very much, my fine fellow, as if you are a victim.”

But where all this time was my pony? I looked around, but he was nowhere in sight. Hardly had he sent me flying over his head, when in an ecstasy of terror, he whirled to one side and dashed off at headlong speed. Doubtless he was still running and would keep it up for miles.

As proof of his panic, when I knelt down and applied my ear to the ground, I could not hear the slightest sound of his flying hoofs. He was gone beyond recovery.

“There is one consolation,” I reflected, trying hard to take a philosophical view of my dilemma, “he carried me a goodly distance toward home.”

Aye, provided he had really done so, I added the next moment, shuddering at the probability that in the face of all my care, he had veered to one side, and, for aught I knew, had been bear-

ing me back to the butte, where he had left most of his companions.

But the question could not be answered until the sun appeared, and, pulling myself together, I slung my broken Winchester over my shoulder, and struck off at a rapid pace, resolved not to throw away an hour's time.

By and by, when I lit another match and looked at my watch, I found that the night was almost gone. Before long, some portion of the horizon must begin to show the growing light of the rising sun. As if the foolish artifice could help, I kept my gaze fixed on the gloom directly in advance, determined that the sun *should* make its first appearance there.

And by gracious, it did!

With a thrill of hope and gratitude that cannot be described, I saw the first streakings a little to the left of the course I was following. This was proof that I was still pursuing, as I had from the first, a due southeastern course. Had Higgenbottom been with me, guiding every rod of our progress by his compass, it could scarcely have been done more accurately.

“Hurrah!” I shouted, snatching off my sombrero and waving it above my head, forgetting for the moment my useless Winchester, the fact that I was afoot and alone on the pampa, with

slight prospect of ever seeing my friend again, and with equally slight hope of making my way out of the accursed country.

As the sun came up and its glorious light illumined the endless, grassy prairie, I anxiously swept every visible portion, hopeful and yet fearful of what should meet my vision.

My situation was like that of the mariner adrift on a spar in mid ocean, who scans the heaving waters in vain for a sight of the friendly sail. North, south, east and west, in every direction, stretched the green motionless sea, with not a sign of butte, or living creature or wild animal to break the monotony.

Amid this very loneliness of desolation, I was borne up by the consciousness that the result of it all had been to carry me forward on my homeward journey. I must be well within the province of Paraguay, not far from the Tropic of Capricorn, and within a comparatively short distance of the river, which once reached, would bear me to Concepcion, my destination, where all dangers, so far as the Tobas were concerned, would be at an end.

So I took heart and strode off with a vigorous step, continually sweeping every portion of the visible pampa with my clear vision; and, as might have been supposed, I had not pro-

gressed for an hour, when once more I was brought to an abrupt standstill by the unmistakable appearance of danger in the very form I most dreaded to see.

CHAPTER XX

AT LAST

AS IN the previous instance, it was a party of horsemen, who, when first seen, resembled a number of faintly moving specks in the distance, but, instead of appearing directly in front, they were somewhat to the north.

But there could be no mistaking their identity, and that fact was enough, or rather more than enough, for me. I did not wait for a closer scrutiny, but lay flat on the ground, surrounded by the grass which was six inches or more in height.

It was good reasoning on my part that, if I could not see objects the height of a man at a distance of a hundred yards, those horsemen were unable to discern me. Moreover, a man on foot is so much less conspicuous than one on a horse that I was certain even the keen eyes of the Tobas had failed to detect me.

The question was then as to whether they would come near enough to render discovery

probable. Every now and then I raised my head far enough to look across the intervening plain and study the dreaded marauders.

Several times my heart was in my mouth, for they seemed to be heading directly toward me, but, with a feeling of unspeakable relief, I soon realized that they were traveling to the westward, and unless an abrupt change took place in their course, there was no danger of my being seen.

Relieved of the great fear, I made a careful examination of my injured Winchester. It took but a few minutes to find that the lock was so broken that it was altogether beyond my power to repair it.

The weapon's usefulness was at an end, and it would be simply burdening myself to carry it with me.

I still had my revolvers, which were in excellent condition, and a goodly supply of cartridges.

"As nearly as I can figure out," I said to myself, "it will take two or three days to reach Paraguay, and the danger from the Tobas ought to diminish as I travel eastward. Every mile will have to be made on foot and I must carry with me only such things as are indis-

pensable. Consequently, my Winchester remains here.”

And it did. Rather curiously, through all the tumult and exciting occurrences of the previous night, I had retained a couple of the beef strips with which Higgenbottom and I provided ourselves after the first explosion of the dynamite cartridges. The meat had become quite dry, and one of the strips afforded me a substantial meal that was by no means unpalatable.

When I had disposed of it I was refreshed and strengthened. I decided that that should answer for the day, and on the following morning I would eat the remaining quantity. This would exhaust my food supply, but it would be a strange thing for an able bodied man, armed with two Smith & Wesson's to starve to death in a tropical country.

The reader need not be reminded of the plentitude of vegetable as well as animal life. Indeed, the school geographies refer to most of South America as a vast conservatory with the roof removed.

When at last the horsemen flickered from view in the far away western horizon, I rose to my feet and resumed my long journey to the southeast. The same apparently endless sea of grass stretched away on every hand, and

about noon I made out the form of a butte, similar to the one already described, so far to the northwest that the atmosphere imparted to it a soft bluish tint, which mellowed its rough outlines and made it an object of beauty.

So far as I could judge, I had no use for it, and I did not change my course, but gradually placed it on my left and finally it sank from sight, like a low lying cloud in the sky.

The next object that interested me was an unmistakable grove of timber, so nearly in my front that I made straight for it. I was growing wearied and was in need of sleep. Something in the appearance of the patch of woods suggested cool shadows and rest; but any one who has been placed in a situation resembling mine knows how deceptive distance is on the prairie.

The rock or stream which appears to be within half a mile, is probably three or four miles away, and, although I roused myself into taking long and vigorous strides, it seemed for a long time impossible to lessen the interval between myself and the wood, and I feared I should not be able to reach it before nightfall.

But the sun was still in the sky, when, pretty well worn out, I moved in among the trees and undergrowth, stepping carefully and peering

around, for I could not forget that I was in the land of the jaguar, the leopard, the cougar, the black bear, the ant bear, and of the viper, the scorpion, the boa constrictor, the vampire bat and endless noxious insects, to say nothing of the Tobas, more to be feared than all of them.

A strange silence pervaded the grove which was several acres in extent. The undergrowth was not dense, though it appeared everywhere, and the tall trees were joined by loops of vines, whose beginning and end it was hard to find. Here and there a bird of gorgeous plumage was perched among the topmost branches, apparently dozing, though noon had long since passed. Several, disturbed by my appearance, uttered discordant cries and fluttered to more distant branches, from which they curiously watched me as I moved along.

But neither serpent, wild animal nor wild man was to be seen on the ground. I carefully picked my way across the grove to the further side and then came back to the center without discovering the slightest thing to cause uneasiness.

The most interesting and gratifying find was made at this point. In the very middle of the grove grew three trees of moderate height, with delicate green leaves, resembling that of

our own beech and with a considerable spread of limb.

Here and there, among these pretty leaves was seen a bright green fruit, suggesting a species of apple, but more elongated in shape. Some of the larger specimens had taken on a yellowish tint, which showed they were ripe.

I had heard of the algaroba or carob tree, but this was the first time I had seen it. When plucked and eaten, the fruit was found pleasant, though the flavor was different from any fruit of our own country. Its most marked peculiarity is its juiciness, which is so great that one or two of the fruits when slowly eaten by a feverish person will wholly satisfy his thirst.

The carob tree is more common in the Argentine Republic than elsewhere, and the well known drink, *laaga*, of which the natives are very fond, is made from it.

“Now,” I said to myself, “since I have come thus unexpectedly upon a fresh supply of food, I should be very foolish not to turn it to the best possible account.”

Whereupon I fell to and gorged myself with the delicious fruit, of which I intended to carry away a goodly supply, since I was not likely to find any more on my long journey to the Paraguay.

The present cause for discomfort was as to how the coming night should be spent. The mildness of the weather was such that it was no hardship to lie on the ground until morning without any blanket or extra covering; but, though I had failed to observe any proof of animal or reptile life, it nevertheless was about me and would be sure speedily to manifest itself.

The evident thing to do was to kindle a fire, which would be so screened by the surrounding vegetation as to be invisible on all sides beyond the edge of the grove, but the fire, to be effective in holding danger at a distance, must be kept going, and I was so tired from my long tramp that I was sure soon to sink into slumber.

The only really safe course was to perch among the branches, where I should be beyond reach of any prowling wild animals or venomous serpents; but the hammocks with which Higgenbottom had provided himself at Sucre, and which afforded so much enjoyment to the monkeys during our first night on shore, were gone, and, since no other recourse was open, I began gathering limbs and branches, collecting a goodly supply before darkness settled upon the scene. Then, from my match safe, which fortunately was only half empty, I kindled a

fire which soon sent its yellow reflection against the exuberant vegetation overhead and among the trees around me.

When night was fully come the scene was picturesque and striking. For greater safety, I started two fires and placed myself between them, where the warmth was uncomfortable until I allowed them to die down somewhat.

Looking aloft, I saw a dozen or more birds attentively watching me, some small, some large, some with sober jackets and others of brilliant plumage, perched here, there and everywhere, one so near that I could have knocked it over with a short stick, while the largest and therefore the biggest coward was so far up among the branches that I could make out only a portion of its figure. It suggested the American snow owl, but it need not be said it was no relative of that well known bird.

“I wish I could be sure you were the only ones that would feel any interest in me,” I muttered, as I assumed an easy position on the ground and glanced from one to the other, “but there are quadrupeds—well, I’ll be hanged!” I exclaimed, involuntarily quoting Higgenbottom’s favorite exclamation, as I drew one of my pistols and leaped to my feet.

By the merest accident, I had looked off to

the right among the trees and undergrowth, when I caught sight of two round, glaring balls of light, which, there could be no doubt, were the eyes of some wild animal, probably a jaguar, or tiger, or leopard who also possessed an inquiring mind.

His position was so far back among the shadows that nothing could be seen of his head or body, but the height of the glowing orbs from the ground indicated that he was an animal of extraordinary size, and one against which my revolvers would not be very effective except in circumstances as favorable as the night before.

But the most daring wild beast is afraid of fire, and so long as I kept the two going and did not wander away from them, I was as safe as within the stone walls of a castle.

My action in springing to my feet startled the brute, which instantly recoiled, and the flaming eyeballs vanished; but he was stealthily watching me from some near by point in the gloom of the wood.

Hoping to frighten him, I leveled my pistol at the spot where the glowing eyes were seen a moment before, and let fly with two chambers. The bullets zipped among the leaves and undergrowth, but probably missed the crouching animal by a dozen feet.

Meaning to be caught at no disadvantage, I recharged the two empty chambers, and then took two or three short, slow steps in the direction of the jaguar, as I had decided the animal was. Such a course will sometimes scare the bravest brute, since it implies a courage and intention on the part of a man which is far from being the truth, but, in the present instance, it was I who was startled almost out of my senses.

The shock was caused by a warning growl directly behind me, and turning like a flash, I saw the jaguar no more than ten feet distant, apparently debating whether to venture nearer or to make his leap from where he stood. In obedience to an impulse, I instantly fired three bullets at him, every one of which landed. Instead of making his charge, he whirled about and whisked off in the gloom.

After this experience, nothing could have made me believe that any sleep would come to me, though I was in sore need of it. I congratulated myself that I had collected so much fuel that it would last until daylight, if economically used.

Accordingly, I sat down on the ground between the fires, revolver in hand, prepared to mount guard until the morrow. I expected each minute the reappearance of the brute, but

an hour passed without the first evidence of its being in the neighborhood. Gradually my strained position relaxed, the rifle slipped slowly off my knees and then, strange as it may seem, I dropped asleep.

CHAPTER XXI

A STARTLING CHANGE OF FORTUNE

YOU will admit that I had passed through more than one stirring adventure in the wild country to which I was led by a strange concurrence of circumstances, but among all the awakenings, there was none that in the way of cold, helpless, paralyzing terror could compare with that which came to me, after sinking to sleep in the grove, where all the many dangers had passed me by, else I should never have sunk into such unconsciousness.

The gray light of early morning was stealing through the timber when, much refreshed and strengthened, I opened my eyes and looked around me. Both fires had died out and no prowling wild animal was in sight. I rose to my feet, intending to resume my hopeful tramp toward the rising sun, or to be exact, a little to the south of it.

It was at this juncture that I made an alarming discovery; both of my revolvers were gone!

“That’s the queerest thing I ever heard of,”

I said, completely mystified; "I might have displaced one in moving about in my sleep, but how the mischief could I lose both——"

An icy shiver ran down my spine, for just then I heard a singular, chuckling sound that suggested a wild animal trying to laugh. I turned like a flash, instinctively suspecting the nature of the new peril. From behind the trees in the grove and from every point of the compass came a party of hideous looking Tobas. There were thirteen of them—unlucky number—as I afterward ascertained. All were naked except for the breechclouts, their heads were covered with enormous masses of bushy wool, their bodies from the waist up to the roots of the hair, including the bare legs, were covered with daubs, splashes, circles and spots of yellow, red, black and blue pigments that added, if the thing be admitted as possible, to the horrible appearance of the savages, who rank among the most merciless members of human kind. Their only weapons were spears, such as have been referred to already. Each was about the length of one of their bodies and was sharp-pointed, the tips of some, if not all, smeared with one of the most venomous poisons known. Their skill in throwing these frightful implements is almost incredible.

The sight of the fierce warriors brought the whole truth to me on the instant. They had come upon me while asleep, probably guided by the smoke of my camp fire, despite my confidence that it would not betray me. Nothing would have been easier than to slay me like a serpent, as I lay unconscious on the ground, but they preferred a ten-fold sweeter enjoyment: they would make me prisoner and have their own exquisite sport.

So deep was my slumber that one of their number had removed my only weapons without awakening me. This, as well as my discovery, had probably taken place within the hour preceding the return of my senses. They chose not to disturb me, though had they come upon me earlier it is not probable they would have been so patient.

I was as helpless as a creeping babe. To offer anything in the nature of resistance would have precipitated my doom, which through some whim they had chosen to defer for the time. While there is life there is hope, and I lost no time in imitating the submissive lamb.

“I surrender; I am your prisoner; do what you please with me.”

It is not to be supposed that these savages, with their snapping black eyes, and grinning,

wide mouths, which displayed their fang-like teeth, had the remotest conception of the meaning of the words, but my manner must have told them I acknowledged the situation and placed myself at their disposal. *

"It am de bestest ting yo' kin do!"

A bolt of lightning from the blue would not have thrilled me more than the utterance of these words by one of their number. The description which I have given of the Tobas Indians shows that they resemble the Africans fully as much as the aborigines. Their skin is swarthy and dark rather than coppery; their features are heavy, they are thick-lipped, and, if they cut their hair short, it would be like that of the negro. Naturally I glanced toward the one who had addressed me and I was amazed again. The peculiarities described were so marked in his case that I was sure on the instant that he was not a Toba, but a genuine African. But what was he doing among these people?

He read the meaning of my wondering looks and said:

"Yas; I'm a cullud gemman all de way from Alerbama, but I hab libed among dese folks for a good many yeahs; dunno wheder I'll be able to do nuffin for yo' but I reckons dere aint any

chance; it's best dat I act toward yo' like dey do; if I see any show for yo' I'll do what I kin, but if yo' gits away from dem, yo'll be de *fust* white man dat doned it; dey'll watch us bofe close and yo' mustn't act as if yo' 'xpected me to be yo' friend."

It is impossible to describe the effect of these words. It was not what the African said, but rather his manner of saying it. It was manifest he must understand the tongue of the Tobas, who on their part did not comprehend a word of English. When necessary, therefore, he would act the part of interpreter. It was manifest further that his long residence had made him one of the savages—at least his captors believed him to be such, and it might prove he was as diabolical as they.

One thing, however, was certain: he was unusually intelligent and quick-witted for one of his race. The words which he uttered were certainly friendly, but, instead of grinning and *looking* like a friend, he scowled and shook his head, as if his hatred of my race was as implacable as that of the wild men around him. I would have been a dolt, had I not caught on instantly and helped in carrying out the deception. I pressed my hands in front of me, as-

sumed an appealing expression, and said with the manner of one begging for mercy:

“I understand; I’ll follow your advice; I’ll act as if I don’t expect anything more from you than from them, and heaven knows that’s mighty little, but can you not give me some idea of what is likely to be done with me?”

Before he could reply, the leader of the Tobas, a thin, cadaverous savage, fully six feet in height, and somewhat stoop-shouldered, said something to him. He listened with every appearance of deference and then spoke to me:

“My name am Casa; de debbil dat hab jes’ spoke to me am de head chief and his name am Zip-wip-na; he am a debbil *suah*, but I dassent tole him so; he wants me to ax yo’ who yo’ am.”

“My name is Jared Wintermyer, and as you can see I’m an American.”

This reply being duly translated to the scowling chief, Casca continued:

“Dat doan’ tole him much; he wants to know what yo’ doin’ in *his* kentry.”

“Shall I tell him the truth?”

“Dat’s what my mudder always tole me and when I didn’t and she found it out, she lammed de eberlasting stuffin’ out ob me.”

It is hard to picture an African making this

remark, with the appearance and manner of a man savagely cursing you, but Casca did it to perfection, and, despite the horrible situation in which I stood, it was hard for me to repress a smile. I said:

“Tell your good and mighty chief that I joined an American who wished to make the ascent of the Pilcomayo in a small steamer, but we failed, and are trying to get out of the country; Casca,” I abruptly asked, “can you tell me anything about my friend?”

“Not jes’ now; nebber mind ’bout *him*; yo’ hab ’nough to tend to yoself.”

Turning to the chief, he carefully explained my presence in that region.

“He wants to know *why* yo’ come into his kentry.”

“This friend was hired by the Bolivian government to make an exploration of the Pilcomayo to learn whether a profitable trade can be opened with the people along its banks.”

Casca now talked for several minutes with “Zip-wip-na,” each speaking several times and holding quite a conversation. Finally Casca turned to me again:

“I tole him dat yo’ was de biggest tief in Bolivia and so was de oder white man; dat yo’ bofe had been in jail mos’ ob yo’ lives, but

busted out agin; stead ob killin' yo' de boss in Bolivia put yo' two on a boat and sent yo' up de Pilkermyer; he didn't want to shoot yo' bofe and he knowed dat de Tobas would take de job off his hands."

"Good gracious, Casca! I didn't say anything like *that*; you told me to speak the truth and there isn't a particle of it in what you said."

"I know dat, but I'd been a fool to tell Zip-wip-na dem words; understand yo' am to tell *me* de truf and whateber lyin' dere am to do,—why dat's b'longs to me. Yo' see I'm trying to gib Zip-wip-na de idee dat yo' hates de Bolivians and all white trash and would like to find a place where yo' can lib and neber see any ob 'em again."

Bear in mind these remarkable words were spoken with every appearance of intense anger against me. It was evident that Casca was "solid" at the Tobas court, and it was all important for his own safety that he warded aside every suspicion against himself. He had formulated a large, bold scheme, and it was doubtless the only one that gave even a shadowy promise of benefiting me. I feared he was pushing it too rapidly and there was danger of

defeating his own purpose. But it was not for me to criticise.

There were many things I longed to ask Casca, but it would not do to be impatient with them. The presence of the governor of my own State would not have astonished me more than the sight of this genuine southern darkey among the Tobas of Paraguay. Had he not been there, my life would not have been worth a moment's purchase. Probably it was not worth that anyway. Under heaven, everything depended upon the African.

During this singular interview, I knew I was safe for a brief while at least. It was while waiting for Casca to translate my words and those of the chief, that I counted the warriors and noted some of the other points mentioned. At first, they all fixed their black, penetrating eyes on me, as if trying to read the meaning of my words, and then, before the termination of the conversation, nearly every one seemed to lose interest in me. Five or six strolled off in the grove, going so far that only a glimpse of them was caught. The remainder began talking to one another in low explosive tones, that made me think of the clucking of hens. They stood so far back from their leader that their words did not annoy him or Casca. Finally,

they too lounged away, passing wholly beyond sight.

At this point, it is well to give some information about Casca, the interesting character with whom I came in contact at the time I was unfortunate enough to fall a captive to the dreaded Tobas of El Gran Chaco. The knowledge, it will be understood, came to me piece meal and at different times, during that memorable experience of mine, which, it is safe to say has befallen few of my countrymen. Indeed I know of none who ever passed through what I did.

It was three years previous to the date of the incidents I am describing, that Professor Carl Turner, the well known German scientist and explorer, made the unfortunate attempt, which like all that preceded and thus far have followed, resulted in irretrievable disaster. Professor Turner was a wealthy man, who had done creditable work in other parts of the world, and was actuated by the honorable purpose of adding to the geographical knowledge of mankind. He knew of the abortive attempts that had been made to explore the Pilcomayo, but he had been so successful in Africa and Australia, where others had failed, that he was full of hope and in high spirits, when he left

Buenos Ayres, accompanied by three Germans, two Englishmen and the African Casca, who was engaged as cook. Casca was addicted to wandering, and had left his native State in a similar capacity on a trading ship, but deserted at Buenos Ayres, because of ill treatment by his captain. He had only a vague idea of the dangers that were inevitable in such an enterprise as that of Professor Turner. I have intimated, however, that the African was unusually intelligent for one of his race, and, before the small steamer left Asuncion, on the voyage up the Pilcomayo, he had learned a good deal of that which, had he known at Buenos Ayres would have prevented his making the venture; but he could not well withdraw, and showed none of the misgivings that possessed him.

Most of the information gathered by this remarkable fellow came to him during the few days spent in Asuncion, while the expedition was making ready. He fixed upon a policy which was admirable in its cunning, and which beyond a doubt saved his life. He decided to make himself as much like a Toba Indian as was possible. His blood favored him, for he was not very dark, and was gifted with an exceptionally bushy head of hair. Under the plea that the weather was oppressive—though such

was not really the fact—he gradually shed his superfluous clothing until he was barefooted and wore only a breechcloth. Some of his companions objected to this scanty attire, but Professor Turner, who was a good natured man, smiled and allowed him to do as he pleased. Thus, at a small distance, he might have well been mistaken for one of the people whom he held in supreme fear.

The little steamer closely resembled that used and abandoned by Higgenbottom. Professor Turner relied upon winning the good will of the natives, and carried numerous presents, such as stir the envy of barbarians. He was not foolish enough to neglect firearms and ammunition, but he intended to appeal to them only as a last resort.

The usual sequel followed. All his good will and kindness were thrown away. He and his crew were overwhelmed by the Tobas and every white man slain. The attack was at night. Casca had foreseen what was coming, and before the furious assault was made, he deserted the party, with whom he could not have been of the slightest help, and boldly strode into the Toba camp, where fully a hundred warriors, under the lead of the famous chieftain Zipwip-na, were making ready for the massacre.

He made it known by signs that he had run away from the white men whom he hated and wished to help destroy. He carried a pistol and did take part in the attack, for the savages, after much consultation and hesitation among themselves, accepted him conditionally as a recruit. He fired his weapon many times, but there is not the least reason for doubting his declaration that he took pains not to injure any of those for whom his heart bled. He even declared that in the turmoil, he managed to wing one of the particularly obnoxious Tobas, and, had he dared, he would have dropped Zip-wip-na himself in his tracks.

Casca accompanied the Tobas to their village, and after some months of distrust, was allowed to become a member of the tribe. He intended from the first to seize the first opportunity to escape, but he knew a second chance would never come to him. The shrewd fellow understood the meaning of several seemingly good openings which offered, and carefully refrained from using them. He intended to wait until success was reasonably certain at least. This explains how three years had come and gone, and he was still among the ferocious people. Having learned their language, he made them understand that the white race had enslaved his

kind—though of course that had passed away before the birth of Casca—and he declared he detested all whose faces were pale, and would eagerly help exterminate them.

When the powder which he brought away from the captured steamer gave out, there was no way of getting more. So he discarded that form of weapon, and became as expert in handling a spear as Zip-wip-na himself. In fact, Casca was in reality a Toba, but he was homesick, and filled with a longing to get away from the horrible country and people that was certain to take the form of action, whenever he believed the chances of success were greater than those of failure.

CHAPTER XXII

A BREAK FOR LIBERTY

I HAD noticed during my interview with the Toba chieftain through Casca that the latter had both my revolvers. The weapons being unknown, or at least slightly understood by the natives, they had no use for them. The belt of cartridges around my waist had not been disturbed, and, therefore, I was the only one who had any ammunition.

The chief and his interpreter talked so long that I wondered what it could be about. The other Tobas had wandered away, so that the two persons were the only ones whom I saw. When, after a time, Casca turned to address me, his words were of the most startling nature. You must bear in mind that in speaking to me, no matter what he said, his manner was that of a bitter enemy. He had won the confidence of the Tobas, but it needed only a slight mishap or forgetfulness on his part to scatter it to the winds, and his fate would be as shocking as that which threatened me.

“The village ob dese warmints am a long way to de norf; dey hab only one hoss apiece and none fo’ yo’; it will take till dark for dem to git dar, wid dere hosses on a gallop; do yo’ know what ole Zip-wip-na, de head warmint, means to do?”

“I’m sure I haven’t the slightest idea.”

“He means to make you trot all de way, while we ride alongside and keep stickin’ de p’int ob our spears into yo’, when yo’ got tired.”

“Aren’t the points poisoned?”

“Some ob ’em is, but not all; we’re to use de ones dat ain’t p’isoned. I tole him dat would finish yo’ up too soon; white man can’t stand such tings like us niggers; I said, too, dat de wimmen folks and little chillens—bless ’em!—orter not be cheated out of de innercent enj’yment dey would hab in helpin’ stickin’ yo’ to def and dancin’ bout yo’ while yo’ am dyin’; I begged him to remember his dooty to dem, but he am ugly and says he won’t wait; de rest ob ’em feels de same way,—so it’s settled.”

While addressing these terrifying words to me, Casca came slowly forward, gesticulating wildly with both arms. The chief did not move from his first position.

“What earthly chance is there for me, Casca?” I asked tremblingly.

“Hab yo’ got yo’ nerve wid yo’?” he asked, still gesticulating.

“I’ll do anything you tell me to do.”

“Wal, den, de minute yo’ kin make sartin, shoot him down and dash for de hosses; take de black one to de right,—dat’s his and kin outrun all de oders; lep on his back and doan’ stop his runnin’ till he drops dead.”

“But how in the name of heaven am I to shoot him——”

While talking, Casca continued approaching, until no more than a single step separated us. Then with inimitable quickness he whirled about, and, in the act of doing so, flung one of the revolvers toward me and I deftly caught it in my hand. Remember, I was not sitting down, and both weapons were fully loaded.

In the same instant, the negro leveled his own pistol at the dazed Zip-wip-na and fired. With a shriek, the chief threw up his arms and sprawled forward on his face, absolutely dead.

“Run! run! like de debbil!” said Casca in a husky undertone; “doan’ forgot de black stallion on de right!”

It was a strange providence that led the other Tobas to saunter off toward the fringe of the grove. They had heard the decision of their leader and were impatient for the sport to

open. Thus for the moment they were out of my way. I was surprised at my own quickness in "catching on." Ducking my head and crouching as low as possible, I skurried through the undergrowth, making straight for the point that had been indicated by my dusky friend. Not a hair's breadth did I deviate, and came out where the horses were cropping the succulent grass. They were too well trained to require tethering. None of course was provided with a saddle, and the bridle consisted of a thong of twisted hide, looped around the lower and upper part of the head, with the longer end dangling over the ground. The contrivance resembled the ordinary halter in use in this country.

I came upon the animals so quickly and quietly that I was not noticed until among them. The black creature flung up his nose and shied, but I had seized the end of the halter and with a single bound landed upon his back, turned his head away, banged my heels against his satin ribs, struck him smartly with the end of the thong and shouted. On the instant, he stretched out his neck, broke into a dead run, and sped with arrowy swiftness across the plain.

Did mortal man ever manage any affair with

more marvelous daring and cleverness? The sharp explosion of the pistol, the shriek of the victim and the shout of the negro threw the Tobas into consternation, and all came rushing headlong toward the couple. It was this temporary diversion that gave me my single chance for life. When the savages reached the spot, they saw their terrible chieftain stretched on his face as dead as dead could be, while within arm's length, lay the African rolling, writhing and groaning as if in the agony of his last few moments. Their thought must have been that the single shot had killed one and mortally wounded the other. Casca did not retain his revolver, which lay on the ground at his feet.

Meanwhile, the colored fellow, despite his apparently intense suffering, kept track of events. He saw the horrified warriors looking down upon him and the body of their chief, and then they glared around for *me*. Instantly he addressed them in broken but vigorous words in their own language:

“He shot your chief! He nearly killed me! Run! run! do not let him get away!”

To add emphasis to his appeal, he so far overcome his agony as to sit upright, and point in the direction I had taken. The sound of galloping hoofs showed that his words were war-

ranted and the whole party dashed off pell mell.

The story which Casca must have formulated almost in the twinkling of an eye was this:

Zip-wip-na having decided that I should suffer the prolonged torture already referred to, the negro approached me to make known that decision. With the quickness and force of a bolt of lightning, he said I dropped my head and struck him full in the stomach. In the act of going over and while partly stunned, I snatched both pistols from his belt, shot the chief, before he could comprehend what was going on, flung the weapon at him, and, made off. Casca staggered to his feet with the intention of joining in the pursuit, but he was too weak and had to sink back to the earth until he could rally. Wasn't he a shrewd rascal?

I took advantage to the utmost of the chance so wonderfully thrown in my way, and events rushed by with hurricane swiftness. If the Tobas could get nigh enough to reach me with their poisoned spears, it would be all over quickly, and I have referred to the accuracy and distance which they could hurl the fearful implements.

When my black stallion had thundered for a hundred yards or so, I looked back. The warriors were swarming out of the grove and hur-

riedly mounting their animals. They had been exceedingly prompt and were sure to do their utmost, but if my horse were all that Casca had said, I was already beyond their reach and fast drawing away.

A series of shouts and yells, which must have been the war cries of the savages, split the pulsing air and again I glanced around. The whole eleven were coming after me at the highest speed of which their steeds were capable. One was left without a master, but the man was not far off. When an appropriate interval had passed, and Casca knew no one could see him, he did a peculiar but characteristic thing. He bounded to his feet, peered around to make sure he was alone, and then, within a few feet of the inanimate form, actually danced a double shuffle, crooning gleefully an old fashioned plantation melody:

“ ‘Alabama agin! Alabama agin!
Ef I lib till de sun shines tomorrer,
I’ll go back to Alabama agin!’ ”

Then he stooped and picked the revolver from the ground. Examination showed that four of the chambers were loaded, and he carefully shoved it behind the girdle at the top of his breechclout.

“Mebbe dey’ll come in handy some time afoah many yeahs.”

His next proceeding was to lift his spear. He turned up the sharp point and scrutinized it, even running his stubby thumb over the keen tip.

“Plenty ob p’ison dere; neber did like fightin’ wid dat sort ob ting. Now if dat white trash, dat calls hisself Mr. Wittemyer habs any sinse he hab a good show, but I’s afeard he am a debblish fool.”

With which he sauntered to the margin of the timber, mounted the remaining horse and striking him into a gallop, followed after my pursuers and myself. He could not surpass the speed of any of the Tobas, but was able to hold his own in the long race upon which he entered.

Let me try to make as clear the situation into which I was thrown by the series of incidents in which I had become involved. In making my dash for freedom, the head of my horse was turned almost due east. If this course could be maintained for something less than two hundred miles, it would bring me to the Paraguay river, one of the most important streams in the southern part of the continent. Behind me, at a still greater distance, to the westward, flowed

the dreaded Pilcomayo. Following a generally southerly direction the two joined at Asuncion, a hundred and fifty miles south of where I was speeding across the plain.

In other words, I was still galloping over the terrible Gran el Chaco, striving to place it behind me, but a considerable distance must be passed before I could succeed in doing so. The farther I went, the less would my peril become. But for the taking off of Chief Zip-wip-na, it is improbable that the Tobas would have pursued me far to the eastward, but inspired by revenge, they would not relax their furious efforts so long as there was the least hope of laying hands on me.

If you will examine the geographies and encyclopedias, you will get precious little information about the region over which I was riding for life. The maps show a bare stretch of territory which, except for a few streams, is blank. That is because no one knows anything about the country which I have proved is "forbidden land." The course of the Rio Verde Guaicuru, and other rivers is conjectural. Strange it is that in the province of Paraguay lies this large extent of territory of which comparatively nothing is known, for the simple reason that the untamable Tobas Indians have slain every ex-

plorer or baffled every attempt to penetrate the mysterious region.

It did not fall to my lot to add much to the sum of geographical knowledge of El Chaco and the terrible Pilcomayo. I was too busily engaged with other matters to pause to make any surveys. There is one fact, however, which I can give that is not generally known. That is, the mountainous surface to the east of the Paraguay river extends partially into the country to the west (that is the one over which I was galloping), although nothing of the kind shows on the maps.

The stallion which I bestrode deserved all the praise Casca had given him. He was the finest animal I saw while in Paraguay. His graceful limbs worked with the smoothness of machinery, and he seemed to enjoy the wonderful pace which made the still air rush by my face like a gale. He showed no evidence that he was aware of the change of masters, or, if aware of it, that he cared, for he kept up his terrific speed mile after mile, as if it was the most natural and the easiest thing he could do. I was specially impressed with the ease with which he swept over the level, grassy pampas, and which made his pace seem less than it really was.

Every now and then I looked around. The

Toba horsemen were in sight but were clearly losing ground. I could afford to laugh at their efforts, but did not do so, for I was oppressed by the certainty that I was not yet "out of the woods." It was too much to expect that these favorable conditions would last until I reached the Paraguay, still a long way in front. I had eaten nothing since the preceding night, but that was a small matter, and I could fast without inconvenience until darkness came again. The same was to be said as to water, though I was conscious of a troublesome thirst. The stallion was better provided than I as respected food, for the pasturage around him would have sufficed to fatten many a thousand cattle.

The position of the sun enabled me to hold to the right direction. It was near meridian, when I looked back and observed a new feature in the situation, though it did not cause me any concern. The Toba horsemen, now barely visible, had parted company and branched out to the north and south, so as to cover a stretch of half a mile. I could not imagine what they hoped to accomplish by this change in the method of pursuit, but they were more familiar with the face of the country than myself, and must have had some reason for what they did.

Far away in the eastern horizon, a wavy blue

line was gradually coming into more distinct view. For some time, I took it to be a bank of clouds in the otherwise clear sky, but the formation was so unusual that I was in doubt. Ere long its true character dawned upon me: I was drawing near a chain of mountains or lofty hills.

They interposed directly across my line of flight, stretching to the north and south, many miles beyond the farthest reach of my vision. Turning to the left or right, with a view of flanking the obstruction, would compel me to journey along two sides of a triangle, while most of my pursuers had but the single line to traverse. The purpose of the Tobas in spreading apart like a fan, was now apparent. They could readily head me off, if I resorted to the means named.

Manifestly the one and only thing for me to do was to keep on in the direct line I had been following ever since my burst of speed from the grove. The shift of conditions was anything but agreeable. I was following no marked trail, a glance at the grassy plain as I thundered over it, revealing nothing of the kind. How wide the hills were across, it was impossible to form any idea, but it was more than probable that when I reached their base, I

should find my path blocked. It was unlikely that any route would appear over which my stallion could force his way.

Should this prove the case, it would be necessary for me to dismount and proceed on foot, leaving my steed to wander whither he willed. After my remarkable escape thus far, I could not but feel hopeful of the ultimate outcome, but it was self evident that the task was not to be anything like the easy one which seemed to confront me a short time before.

My stallion had been bounding forward at such high speed, that mercy demanded a let-up in the pace. Besides, there was danger of a break-down ere long, unless something of the kind were done. I, therefore, pulled strongly on the halter and addressed a command in civilized language for him to moderate his speed. He may not have understood my words, but he did the pull upon the halter, and came down to an easy gallop, which finally dropped to a walk. Foamy sweat showed under the legs and on different parts of the body and he was pretty well pumped, though ready to answer on the instant any demands upon his splendid nerve and courage.

Turning on his back, I closely scanned the horizon behind me. Most of the horsemen were

in plain sight, and between the one farthest north and him farthest south, was a full mile's space. The prospect surely was black enough and it looked as if the Tobas were confident of "walling me in."

CHAPTER XXIII

THE CUL DE SAC

SINCE it was almost certain that the usefulness of my horse would cease as soon as we entered the mountain region, if not before, it was wisdom for me to make the best use I could of him while he remained under my command. Moreover, if my pursuers could maintain their spanking gait, there was no reason why I should not do the same. So I jerked smartly at the halter, struck my heels against the stallion's sides, and he was off again like a bird on the wing.

Despite the dangerous situation, a certain monotony accompanied the events of the afternoon. My steed and myself were hungry and thirsty, but we came upon no water, and I would not allow him to pause except for a few minutes, now and then, to crop the succulent grass. I was determined that the Tobas bearing down upon me and trying to cut off my escape, should not lessen the distance between us.

For mile after mile the even, smooth surface

continued. Then in the latter part of the afternoon, when drawing near the hills, the ground became more undulating and the grass less abundant. The sun was well down the sky, when the roughness of the ground compelled me to draw the stallion down to a walk, while I anxiously peered into the gathering gloom to learn the nature of the region before me.

The interfering mountains were of peculiar conformation. The approach to them was not of the usual gradual character, diversified by foothills, but one hour after galloping over the level pampa I was among them, with my horse forced to walk and with the probability that even this method of advance would soon be checked.

I do not think any phase of the situation was overlooked. The darkness would make it impossible for the Tobas to see my trail. I was secure against that until the dawning of the next day. If I should then discover they were drawing too near, I could leave the back of my animal, and ought to be able to throw even such keen-eyed trailers off the track. Moreover, while it was to be expected that these aborigines possessed a certain familiarity with the region, it was not likely that such knowledge was mi-

nute, and they would therefore have no special advantage over me, while among the hills.

Knowing nothing of them, the impression grew upon me that they formed a spur, which at the most was no more than fifteen or twenty miles across. It followed that if I could find a trail leading to the other side, where it was to be presumed the level plain again appeared, I would regain the advantage that had been mine after the flight from the grove, and ought to be able to hold it until out of the zone of danger.

Suddenly the splash and gurgle of water struck my ear. My horse had noted it before me, and, without waiting for permission, pricked his ears, snuffed the air and broke into a gallop which quickly took him to where a cool, clear stream, as thick as a man's arm, fell over the rocks for a distance of eight or ten feet, when it gathered in a pool and the overflow resumed, tumbling, dashing and frolicking its course among the stones and boulders till lost to sight in the darkness.

I don't know which was the first to drink from the refreshing fountain. As the stallion plunged his nose into the water, I slipped off his back and did the same, and each drank till he could hold no more. Perhaps there was

some risk to the animal in his heated condition, but it was no time to think of such things. Probably he was accustomed to gorging himself in this way and no harm would follow. The next minute I was upon his warm back and pulled his nose away and started him forward, for I was beginning to feel nervous over those shadowy forms that probably were closing in on me.

A full half hour was spent in groping for a natural path that would allow the horse to press to the eastward, but at the end of that period, it was demonstrated that the thing could not be done. The only way to advance was on foot.

The moment was too critical for sentiment. I dropped from the back of the stallion and patted his nose.

“You can never know, my noble fellow, how much I thank you for what you have done. If there is a hereafter for such as you—and who has authority to say there is not?—you shall have your reward. Good by!”

I turned his head, so as to face the road we had traversed, slapped his flank, and watched him as he began walking over the back trail. Night had fully come, but the sky had no moon at that hour, and only the brilliant stargleam showed. The splendid creature soon melted in

the obscurity, but for some minutes after I could hear the receding hoofs, till they died out in the distance and I was left alone.

Sooner or later, the Tobas must come upon the black stallion, and, when they did so, they would understand how it was. I was in the mountains on foot, and thenceforward was thus to be hunted for. I had no rifle with which to defend myself, but a good Smith & Wesson was mine, and I still had a fair number of cartridges, but I was in a wholly unknown section, where it must seem to them it would be easy to run me down.

It was inevitable that in all my speculation, planning and scheming, Casca the African should be a conspicuous factor. He had proved in the most striking manner his friendship for me and had faced risks that few men would have dared to combat. Having succeeded thus far by one of the most audacious strokes conceivable, it was fair to believe he would be heard of again. I did not doubt that he had carried through his remarkable drama, but the question remained as to how he could give me further help.

He must be with the Tobas, acting his part so well as to avert suspicion, but if *he* found me, *they* must find me. How, when and where

he could strike another blow in my behalf must be determined by himself. Meanwhile, the thing for me to do was to push as far to the eastward as I could before the rise of the morrow's sun.

While these thoughts were in my brain, I was toiling forward. After being seated for so many hours on the back of a galloping horse, it was a vast relief to use my legs again. I should have been glad to walk all night, if I could have known how to guide my footsteps. My costume was light; my shoes were good, and the temperature was not oppressive. Moreover, no one could have had a stronger incentive than I for haste.

Although my horse would have been unable to advance in the direction desired, I met with better success than I anticipated. Sometimes I had to step upon a boulder, leap across a fissure, climb a huge rock or pick my course around a big obstruction, but only now and then was I brought to a halt and compelled to reconnoitre before resuming progress.

The gloom had become so deep that I could not see more than fifty feet in any direction. This was not wholly a disadvantage.

“The Tobas can't locate me before daylight and I much doubt whether they will be able to

do it even then. By that time, I ought to be well over toward the other side of these hills, which bobbed up just at the time when it was bad for me.”

My experience on Gran el Chaco had impressed one important lesson upon me, which was to stick to the course I had in mind, and guard against the old weakness that I have pointed out, which leads one to travel in a roundabout course or circle. The stars shone with such brilliance that when they began peeping from the sky, I fixed upon a group, toward the eastern horizon. They were so high that I knew they would not set much before morning. I made sure they were stamped so clearly on my vision that they could not be mistaken, and resolutely clung to them as my compass. Now and then they seemed to shift far to the right or left, but common sense prevailed, and I escaped self-deception in that respect.

A pleasing discovery came within the following half hour. Pushing aimlessly onward as I had been steadily doing, I had come upon a natural trail which gave every indication of leading directly through the mountains. At some time in the past it must have been traversed by animals, and I was almost certain it

had been used by the Tobas in riding their horses from one side to the other.

This was a piece of good fortune indeed, and I was in high spirits, for what could give a better promise of final escape? Once on the other side of the mountain spur, with the level plain confronting me, it would be a straight tramp to the Paraguay river. The path, although up and down and seldom level, steadily ascended until I must have been several hundred feet above the entrance point.

A little reflection convinced me of a disquieting fact or two. Inasmuch as I had come upon the trail after penetrating some distance among the hills, it followed that its beginning was at some other point than where I left the plain. This point must be known to the Tobas, who would take to it without delay. In that case, it was quite likely they were not far behind me.

This conclusion caused such a shock that I stopped short and looked back and listened. Naught met my eyes but the dim outlines of rocks, fading in the obscurity, with the millions of stars scintillating in the crystalline air overhead. The stillness was like that of the tomb, but through the warm air, a faint murmur stole to my ear like the voice of silence itself. It was the sound of some far away waterfall, so slight,

however, that I could not tell whether it was in front or on one side of the trail.

I gasped and laid my hand on my revolver, for surely that was the dim figure of a man which suddenly appeared in the path behind me, as if he had abruptly risen from the earth. If there was to be a fight, I meant to get in the first blow.

But while I looked, the phantom began a strange, flickering motion, elongated to an absurd height, and then whisked upward in the gloom and vanished. It was purely fancy, and, when assured of that fact, as I was the next moment, I resumed my advance, but stepped like an Indian scout entering a hostile camp, frequently pausing and listening, but without discovering anything to cause additional misgiving.

The path now dipped downward, loose pebbles rattled under my feet, and I stepped over a brook which wound its way across the trail. While ascending the slope on the other side, a dense mass of undergrowth brushed against my face and sides. In pushing aside the leaves, something that was harder than the foliage met my hand. I stopped, groped around till I touched the substance again. Instantly I recognized it as the algaraba or carob fruit, which,

as you will remember, is not only nourishing, but deliciously juicy. A slight examination of the bushes showed that there was an abundance of it. When I add that I had eaten nothing for twenty-four hours, that I had grown to be quite fond of this tropical production, it need not be added, that, despite the ever present shadow of danger, I ate ravenously. It was a godsend indeed, for I do not see in what other way my hunger could have been satisfied before the morrow.

My halt was hardly fifteen minutes in duration. A hungry man, with a plentiful supply of palatable food can do a good deal in that time.

A more disturbing sensation can hardly be imagined than the suspicion that some one is stealthily following you in the darkness. Time and again, I stood for a minute or two motionless in the path, peering into the obscurity behind me, and listening for the danger which more than once I was sure was about to leap upon me. The annoyance could have been removed at any time by turning aside from the trail and hiding till daylight, but that meant a stoppage of all advance for the time named, and the hours were too precious thus to be thrown away. Wisdom suggested that no such

halt should be made, so long as the advance could be pressed.

It must have been near midnight when I was startled by the discovery that it was not from the rear alone that danger was to be feared. It was not to be supposed that any of the Tobas could have flanked me and were approaching from the front, but I forgot that a quadruped might do so. From this fancied security, I was awakened by a sudden growl near at hand. It came at the moment when I had stopped and was looking in the other direction.

Turning my head like a flash, I saw the figure of an animal that suggested a large mastiff, which it could not be, but it was some sort of wild beast that did not intend I should go farther without his permission.

It cannot be said that I was much frightened, for I had tested the revolver which I hastily drew, too often to distrust it. I was sure I could send several bullets into that catlike head with its glowing eyes before he could reach me, and fired at so short a distance, they would be as effective as rifle bullets.

There were two reasons why I did not wish to fire: my supply of cartridges was running low and the commonest prudence suggested that they should be carefully husbanded, so long as

I was in the country of the Tobas. Again, there was good reason to believe those savages were so near they would hear the report of the weapon.

For two or three minutes brute and I stared at each other. The fact that the cougar, as I believed him to be, contented himself with growling without taking a step forward, showed he was not quite certain of my character, and was not clear as to what he ought to do. The situation called for strategy, and, despite the undignified figure I cut, I tried it.

I assumed a crouching posture, which shortened my stature almost one-half; I solemnly flapped my wings like an immense vulture about to take flight from the limb of a tree, and emitted the most unearthly noises conceivable. At the same time, with grotesque flourishes of my legs, I slowly advanced toward the creature.

It would be interesting if one could know what fancies passed through the brain of the cougar during those trying minutes. No danger is so terrifying as that whose nature is unknown. The brute held his own for a brief while, growling and lashing his tail so vigorously that I heard its thumping against his ribs. So long as he did not retreat, I kept slackening my rate of advance. The prospect of eventually

reaching him was so unwelcome that, when only two or three paces separated us, my progress wholly ceased, though the ghostly flapping of the arms and flourishes of the lower limbs continued.

Fortunately for me this demonstration proved too much for the brute. With a rasping snarl, he whirled around and dashed off in the ecstasy of terror, leaving me master of the field, and that too without firing one of my valuable cartridges. I would have laughed over the result, had not the situation forbidden all emotion of that nature.

The fear that the cougar might be lying in wait somewhere along the trail caused me to keep my pistol in my hand as I stole silently forward, but nothing more was seen of him. It is quite certain that he had been so thoroughly scared that he did not recover from the shock for a long time after I had passed out of his life.

It seemed to me that it was hardly an hour later when, to my astonishment, the growing light in advance heralded the coming of day. At such times, one is troubled as a rule by the slow passage of time, but once more it proved the other way with me.

The consciousness was pleasing, but as the

light increased, a most discouraging discovery broke upon me. The trail had come to an end and it was impossible to advance farther. Strange as it may seem, I had actually entered a *cul de sac*, and was as effectually stopped from going on as if I had run against a mountain wall. In truth it may be said that that was really what I had done.

CHAPTER XXIV

CHECKED

IF EVER a man was cornered I was that man. After having penetrated to a considerable distance among the mountainous hills, I found farther progress stopped as utterly as if I had brought up against the side of a house. That which I had supposed all along was a well traveled trail was nothing of the kind. While it was one of those natural paths that are liable to be met with at any time in similar sections, it was not traversed by the natives of the country, at least not on the back of their horses. Wild animals doubtless made their way over it at times, and it was their footprints which I had mistaken for those of beasts ridden by the Tobas.

My situation was alarming and I stood for some minutes debating what was the best thing to do. To turn back promised to bring me face to face with the venomous enemies from whom I had been fleeing for many hours, for it was more than likely the sharp-witted Tobas had

located me with the coming of daylight, and the stallion whom I had discarded was almost certainly in their hands.

The place in which I had come to a full stop was somewhat depressed, and I was surrounded on every hand by towering masses of rocks, boulders, fissures and chasms, which made the scene of the wildest nature conceivable. A temporary refuge was at command, whichever way I turned, but that meant an indefinite halt, with little or no promise of final escape. Sorely perplexed, I stood glancing around, searching for some avenue that led farther into the hills.

Something of the kind seemed to present itself a little way in front and to the left, where it seemed that by climbing a mass of rocks I should find the means of pushing into the dismal solitude. I was in the act of taking the first step, when a shadow flitted in front of my face suggesting the lightning-like darting of a bird's wing. Instinctively I snapped back my head and glanced around. One of those infernal spears had come within a hair of piercing my cheek, but just missing it, whizzed past, and, striking the face of a rock a dozen feet to my right, fell to the ground.

The missile had come from my left—the direction of the rocks where I hoped to climb into

some sort of an opening. Instead of being thrown into a panic by this proof of the nearness of my enemies, I stood still and looked keenly toward the point from which the weapon had come. Not a living creature was to be seen. Whoever had hurled the deadly weapon was crouching somewhere out of sight.

Those fellows were generally provided with three, four or more of their poisoned spears, and a second, aimed with fatal accuracy, was likely to follow the first. Yielding to an impulse whose whimsicality cannot be explained, I stepped to the right, picked up the missile that had missed me, and then, with my drawn revolver in hand, strode toward the rocks from behind which it had been launched. I was fully resolved to shoot the warrior at sight, for it would have been the height of foolishness to show any consideration for the wretches who were bent on capturing me and putting me to the torture, provided some impatient warrior, like the one who had come so unexpectedly on the ground, did not wind up the business by picking me off when I could not defend myself.

Within six paces of the rocks which I had purposed to climb an opening presented itself. It was irregular in shape, two or three feet wide at the broadest part and of a height that

permitted me to enter by stooping slightly. Everything beyond was as black as a wolf's mouth. The cavern might be only a few yards in depth or it might open into an area of gloomy emptiness like that of the Mammoth Cave of Kentucky. There was no time to debate or halt. Overcome by a momentary panic at the dread of the hurtling of the second poisoned spear, I bounded forward, ducked my head and whisked into the opening. There was no interference with my action, and I drew a breath of relief when conscious that protection was secured, if only for a brief while.

The light at the entrance allowed me to see for eight or ten paces into the interior, at which point the gloom became impenetrable. It was easy to observe that the passage broadened and the floor sank abruptly, though that which may be termed the roof did not rise. Hurried as I was, I was prudent enough to pick the few steps with great care. Thinking quickly, the impression was strong that it was not prudent for me to enter any farther, at least for the present, for I should be followed and driven into a still narrower corner. The only element that could be appealed to in the case of the Tobas was fear, which would be intensified by promptness

on my part. The true motto is to discourage your foe as quickly as you can.

With this resolution, I halted at the point named, and with drawn revolver, awaited the appearance of one or more of my enemies. It will be remembered that I had picked up the poisoned spear—as I supposed it to be—and brought it with me, though there was no conceivable pretext for doing so. I fancy I had a dim idea that it might serve me in a hand to hand encounter, though the revolver promised to be a hundred-fold more effective.

The increased depth of the entrance allowed me to stand upright, with every nerve on the *qui vive*, eager for the chance to send any or all of the Tobas to their eternal hunting grounds. Carefully counting my cartridges I found that in addition to the five in the chambers of my weapon, there were nineteen remaining in my belt. Provided every one of these could be made effective, it would dispose of the whole band that had chased me from the grove and leave a “surplus in the treasury.” But no such fatal percentage is within the reach of the most expert handler of the convenient little weapon. Some of the shots of necessity must be lost, and, while there was risk in husbanding my ammunition too carefully, there was no less

danger of wasting the shots. Heaven helping me I would make every one tell.

Some ten or fifteen minutes passed in this waiting attitude, with my nerves keyed to the highest tension, when the sunlight at the opening of the cave was obscured. Directly in front of it, and with not the first attempt to screen himself, stood my man, for I could not doubt that he was the one who had hurled the spear at me. As if in contempt of all and everything I could do, he was planted squarely in front, his head bent a little forward, his attitude suggesting that he was peering into the cavern and listening. He held a second spear in his hand ready to drive it into my body at the first glimpse of the same.

When I say that the opportunity thus presented was an ideal one, that I never sighted more carefully and never had a fairer mark, and that there was no miss on the part of my little weapon, it would seem that enough had been said. The Toba emitted a single emphatic exclamation and lay directly in the opening where he had fallen and where he must continue to lie until some of his friends drew the body away.

“The others can’t have a better object lesson,” was my thought; “it doesn’t look to me

as if they will try to buck the center, after my touch down.”

The emptied chamber was refilled and I sat down to await developments. As the minutes passed a man in my situation cannot help doing a good deal in the way of thinking.

Now, nothing was clearer than that the strained situation must come to an end before many hours. The Tobas could be stood off for the rest of the day, and possibly through the succeeding night, by which time the disadvantage must be fatally against me. Providentially, I had had a full meal a brief time before, and hunger was not likely to be a factor in the case. It was not probable that water was within reach, so that if no other cause intervened, they must eventually bring about my downfall.

Still another weakness could not be staved off. No resolution or effort can resist the insidious approach of sleep. To that one must succumb sooner or later. The corollary of all this was that the question must be settled before the rise of the morrow's sun.

Seated on the flinty floor, with my back against the rocks at the side, my face turned toward the opening and my revolver grasped and resting across my knees, I considered the

possibilities of the cavern itself as a means of escape. Did it extend far into the hills? Had it a rear opening, through which I might pass unseen? Had it hidden nooks where a fugitive might hide himself against discovery? If there was an outlet at the rear was it not known to the Tobas? Again hope asked, Why should this natural retreat be familiar to these wild men, when there was no conceivable reason for their making any use of it?

When a man feels no hunger or thirst, has a loaded revolver in his grasp, with a goodly number of cartridges in reserve, and knows he cannot be overcome by a surprise or rush, he must be a nobody indeed if he does not feel pretty courageous.

“I wish they would try to charge upon me,” I muttered; “what a fine chance to pick them off! If they kept it up after my pistol was emptied, I should do some punching with the poisoned spear. This would prove a Thermopylæ or Alamo indeed, without any historian to give glory to the single survivor——”

Amid the profound silence a soft gliding noise fell upon my ear. The impression at first was that it was at some point behind me. Nervously clutching my revolver, I peered into the impenetrable gloom and listened.

Again the faint rustling made itself heard, but on the instant I knew it was from the front of the cavern and at the entrance. Seeing nothing, but eager to anticipate any surprise, I hurried a few feet toward the opening and then paused, my first thought being that the Toba had rallied from this wound and was creeping away, but a moment's reflection convinced me that the bullet had been too well aimed to permit anything of that nature.

None the less, the body *was* moving. It has been said that it fell directly into the passageway, so that no one entering could do so without stepping over it. It was now slowly receding from sight. Surviving friends had seized a foot and were carefully drawing it away.

So profound was my resentful rage that I stole still nearer, searching for a sight of the Tobas engaged in doing this. They were seeking my life, and I was anxious to follow the Golden Rule of David Harum which advises you to do the other fellow before he does you.

I got the chance the next minute. The hand and arm of one of the Tobas showed, as he reached out to get a better hold of his fallen companion. Like a flash I let fly and hit the limb fairly, as its instant withdrawal accompanied by a howl proved.

“My dusky friend, you will find that one of the most dangerous things for an untamed barbarian to do is to rouse the ire of a subject of the United States of America,” I muttered, as I held the weapon for instant use again. But the opportunity was not presented. The body had been seized by another Toba and whisked in a twinkling beyond view.

It will be admitted that these forceful proofs of my vigilance could not fail to have a deterrent effect on the party of wild men that were gathered around the opening. Nothing was more certain than that they would make no further demonstration for several hours, most likely not before nightfall. I decided to improve the time by the best examination I could make of the cavern which for the time had become my Port Arthur.

Turning away, therefore, from the opening, through which a few minutes later the savages might have pushed their way unchallenged, I groped with the utmost care along the passage. It continued descending, and, before going more than three or four rods, my position was so depressed that the irregular opening was no longer in view,—only a dim reflection showing its location.

Throughout my varied experiences in the for-

bidden land, I had managed to preserve my rubber match safe, which was half filled with its tiny bits of pine and phosphorus. Drawing forth one of these, I scratched it on the corrugated bottom and held the little twist of flame above my head. As the bit of fire grew, it partially lit up the gloom in front and disclosed an impressive scene. The cavern expanded into an immense amphitheatre, whose limits were beyond reach of my vision. It must have been hundreds of feet in width and depth, with a height almost as great. The rocky floor in front of me still sloped abruptly downward, for twenty or more paces, when something resembling a level was reached.

By the time this much was ascertained my match was burning my fingers, and I flung away the fragment and lit another. The same striking view opened before me, and this time I caught the gleam of something on the farther side of my field of vision. A second glance showed that it was water, and a soft, gurgling revealed that it was a running stream, which must have entered the cavern at one side and flowed out at the other.

“That makes one thing certain,—I shall not die of thirst, but no way of providing myself with food has shown itself.”

That which I looked for and fervently prayed I should not find was an opening through which the Tobas might steal upon me from the rear. I failed to discover anything of that nature, but unfortunately the fact could not be accepted as proof that such entrance did not exist.

Hesitating a brief while, I next descended the slope, and finally after much pains and labor reached the edge of the underground river, whose flow was quite perceptible, though so smooth that it seemed to encounter no obstruction. Here another match was lighted and held above my head. The stream was thirty or forty feet wide and probably quite deep, though there was no means of telling the extent. It flowed through a valley-like depression, with no high, rocky banks on either side, and was lost in the gloom on the left, as it was shut off from sight on the right, its course being slightly curving. Searching scrutiny failed to show a glimmer of light that would have been created by any opening in the cavern. I lay down on my face and drank deeply, finding the current clear and moderately cold.

Although I had not been long absent from the passage, a feeling of uneasiness caused me to turn and retrace my steps. Since there seemed no cause for using my matches, I husbanded

them for the future, but when it began to look as if I had lost my way, I lit another, and thus set to right, soon returned to my post, a few paces in front of the opening, which had proved fatal to one of the Tobas and somewhat costly to another.

So far as I could perceive, not the slightest change had taken place. It was hardly to be supposed that the wild men, after their lesson, would make a second venture until the opportunity was more inviting.

Hour after hour I maintained my post, my back against the rocks, the revolver in my lap, and sight and hearing keyed to the highest tension. During all that time I neither saw nor heard anything to make me suspect a living person was within miles of my refuge. I did not forget to give attention to the rear, which also failed to yield any sign. Although I would have been loath to admit it, I have no doubt now that I slept fully two hours. It was a strange but unavoidable oversight on my part, but after all, was a piece of good fortune, since it prepared me for the vigilance that would be indispensable throughout the night.

My next discovery was that the day was gone, and it was beginning to grow dark on the outside. While this naturally must lessen the il-

lumination, it would be easy to locate the opening at all times, for the stargleam would reveal it.

It was still comparatively early in the evening, when a disturbance entered my field of vision. Something again obtruded across the passageway, deepening the obscurity, and casting a shadow, as may be said, into the tunnel itself.

On the alert, I crept silently forward, to make sure of my aim. There was no mistake about it: the bushy head and the shoulders of a man were slowly rising into view and soon assumed distinct form. I was not ten feet distant, when I sighted as carefully as I could, where it was necessary to depend wholly upon the sense of feeling, and quickly had the fellow so fixed that escape was out of the question. But while my finger was pressing the trigger a soft and not unmusical crooning came through the stillness:

“Alabama agin! Alabama agin!
Ef I lib till de sun shines tomorrer,
I’ll go back to Alabama agin.”

CHAPTER XXV

SHUT IN

THERE was no mistaking the voice. It belonged to Casca.

He never knew by what a hair's breadth he escaped death at the hands of him who never would have ceased to mourn the tragedy for which after all he would not have been responsible.

With a gasp of relief I lowered my weapon, but did not speak, for prudence warned me to wait for the cue from the African.

Having finished the snatch of a melody that was popular a half-century ago, he called out, with an impatience of tone that belied the words themselves:

“Ef yo’ am in dar don’t spoke! I’ll call two, free times, but yo’ must keep mum; den I’ll begin crawlin’ in to whar yo’ is, and den we’ll *bofe* spoke. Ef yo’ hyars me, give a little hiss like de gander dat I fears yo’ am!”

He listened and I emitted a sibilant sound which reached his ears.

“I hyars yo’, honey; I’s comin’.”

He stooped more than was necessary, and noiselessly entered the passage, as if fearful of being fired upon with every inch of advance. The Tobas during those trying minutes must have accepted him as the hero he had become long before in my eyes.

My dusky friend advanced steadily till hardly a pace separated us. Then he stopped and partly straightened himself, meanwhile peering into the gloom.

“Is yo’ dar?” he asked in a ghostly whisper.

“Yes,” I whispered in return, “God bless you, Casca!”

I managed to seize his hand and to press it warmly. He brought with him a single spear, but had transferred it to his left hand. As he returned my pressure, he chuckled:

“Dis am de best joke sin de time I loaded a watermillion would a package ob gunpowder, dat went off jes’ as Deacon Johnson sunk his jaws into de same and it blowed all de wool off de top of his head.”

“Are the Tobas out there?” I asked, in the same guarded undertone.

“Yas,—de whole caboodle, includin’ him dat you plugged and de debbil dat wont eber be able

to play de wiolin 'count ob dat bullet he got frough de elbow."

"Is it possible, Casca, that none of them has any suspicion of you?"

"Lord bress yo' ef dey had, Casca Jones wouldn't be hyah, but I'm thinkin' dat powerful soon de'll sot me down as de biggest willain dat Alabama eber sent out inter de world; I've got yo' pistol hyah, and dar's four charges in it; yo' 'members dat I made dat ole chief debbil, Chief Zip-wip-na a present ob one of dem; Ise took good keer to sabe de rest to use on de oder trash."

"And I have a pretty good supply of cartridges left."

It took but a few minutes for the faithful African fully to explain matters. I have already told of his action in the grove, after my hurried flight. He was gradually able to draw closer to the Tobas who were pursuing me, and at nightfall he came up with the horseman who occupied the middle of the line, and who, after the death of the regular chief, had become the leader. When they saw me vanish among the hills, this fellow called the others around him to decide upon the policy to be followed.

Having reached this point in his narration, Casca added the remarkable statement that he

was more familiar with the hills in which I had taken refuge than were any of the Tobas. This was due to the fact that he and Zip-wip-na had hunted through the region, a year previous. It was one of those few occasions when the chief tested the African's wishes regarding a stay among his tribe. Had the couple been alone, Casca would have been very quick to take advantage of the opening, but the sagacious fellow knew that fully a dozen warriors were scattered here and there among the hills, and it would have been impossible for him to elude them. He played his cards so well that he dissipated all suspicion on the part of the Tobas and their chief. Thus it will be seen that the taking off of this leader was more advantageous to me than at first seemed to be the fact.

Casca did not know of my narrow escape from the spear of the warrior who saw me before I discovered him, but the others who were searching among the hills for me hastened to the spot, when his cry and the muffled report of my pistol told their story. All this time Casca had been trying to locate me, and to open communication between us, but the exceeding delicacy of his situation will be understood.

“When I seed what yo’ had did and knowed whar yo’ war and what you war likely to do

agin, as soon as dey give yo' de chance, it nearly made me bust to keep from singin' 'Alabama agin' and dancin' de double shuffle, as I doned among de trees after de debbils started after yo' and luf me behind; but I managed to hold in and look and act as if I war mad clean frough."

"Is your spear poisoned?"

"It's de wust one in de kentry; a prick from it will be worse dan de bite ob an Alabama rattler."

"I have brought one with me also into the cave."

"No, you habent," was the reply; "dat spear habent a bit of p'ison on it; do you 'spose dat ef it had, de warmint would hab tried to hit yo' wid it? Not by a big majority; he wanted 'jes to gib yo' a taste ob what war waitin' for yo'."

"But what is your understanding with the Tobas?"

"Yo' knows dat dey'll fight like de debbil, but dar aint one ob 'em dat dare come into dis passage frough fear dat yo' am waitin' fur 'em to do dat wery ting; when yo' plunked dat warmint dat was pullin' de leg ob de one yo' had plunked previous and aforetime, it jes' give 'em de biggest scare dat war eber handed out to anybody. So dey all sot around and decided to wait till night afore tryin' it agin. When night

come dar pluck hadn't growed much and I know dey felt powerful reliebed to hear me say I'd try it."

"What was the understanding between you?"

"If I was able to got wery far into de cavern I was to gib dem de signal and dey 'greed to rush in after me; dat's what de warmints am waitin' fur now," added Casca with one of his chuckles.

The African now proposed something which may perhaps have been justifiable in the circumstances, but to which I could not give assent, since it savored too much of the ways of the Tobas themselves. He urged that the signal should be given, and the wild men be allowed to swarm into the passage. At the most favorable moment, we were to open on them with our revolvers, after which the muscular fellow would bring his poisoned spear into use. He was confident that we could wipe out the whole band, and leave the way clear to our escape at our leisure from the country.

I am half inclined to think he was right and certainly the Tobas deserved such a wholesale taking off, but I recoiled from the scheme.

"Don't urge me, Casca; I don't doubt that the repulse, even if we did not slay all, would

make us safe from further attack, but we have enough advantage as it is, and we shall be able to stand them off by honorable warfare."

"We'se got to do sumfin moah dan *stand 'em off*," he growled, but finally deferred to my wishes, though his assent was made with ill grace.

My colored friend was certainly fertile in expedients. Much as has been said between us, we had not been together for more than ten or fifteen minutes. Since by my wish the line of policy had been radically changed, he was quick to propose an ingenious scheme to which I gave my consent. It was to make the Tobas, waiting and listening on the outside, believe he had been shot and killed by me. This, it would seem, ought to keep them from entering the cavern for an indefinite time, and probably would cause them to decide to starve us out.

No sooner had he explained his idea, than he pointed his weapon at the top of the passage and pulled the trigger. The report reverberated through the rocky retreat, but it hardly equalled one-tenth of the volume made by his tremendous lungs. He emitted a yell that fairly split my ears, and then, giving vent to his suppressed feelings, he executed his favorite double shuffle, at the risk of bruising his huge

feet irreparably, and by hard work toned down his joyous song:

“Alabama agin! Alabama agin!” etc.

Then sitting beside me in the gloom, he chuckled:

“Gee whilikins! but dat will scare 'em out ob a yeah's growth and none ob 'em will creep in hyah to drag me away like dey did wid de oder warmint.”

No doubt the shot and accompanying cry accomplished all that their author intended. It was fully night, but enough light remained to bring the opening of the passage into clear relief. The most stealthy Toba could not enter it without being detected by us, and he was too certain of his reception to incur such a risk.

Casca struck his broad hand upon his knee with a resounding slap.

“You kin sot it down as a fac' dat none ob 'em will try to crawl in onto us; we kin go to sleep or take a look round de inside ob de cavern.”

“How much do you know about it, Casca?”

“Not much, except dat it am bigger inside dan a dozen meetin' houses.”

“Do you know whether there is any opening

at the rear, by which the Tobas could steal upon us?"

"Dunno," was his reply; "ole Zip-wip-na and me took a good look round inside and outside; his folks hab a way of starting a fiah by rubbin' tow sticks togedder, and he walked ahead ob me into cavern, holdin' a big torch ober his head. I tell yo'," added Casca, "when I seed him step into de ribber ahead ob me, and I knowed how easy I could grab him and hold him under de watah till he hadn't any bref left, it was powerful hard work fur me to keep from doin' dat same, but I knowed de oder debbils war waitin' outside, and I played de good boy."

"Did you wade across the stream?"

"Yas, clar to de oder side."

"Did you have to swim?"

"It comes only to yo' waist in de deepest part, which am in de middle; we tramped long de oder bank till we come to de place where it dipped under de rocks at de furder side ob de cavern, and den we comed back."

"Several things are certain," I remarked thoughtfully; "of course we cannot suffer for the want of water, and, provided the Tobas do not discover any other opening by which to steal a march upon us, we can keep them out of

the cavern, but what are we to do for something to eat?"

"Can't do nuffin," growled Casca, "which we could hab done if yo' warnt so squeamish."

"Do you suppose there are any fish in this underground stream?"

"Dunno; but what difference would it make if dar war a tousand? Dar aint no way for us to cotch 'em, onless yo' hab a fish line and some bait hid about yo' clothes."

"I haven't anything of the kind; I am thinking of a plan that I must admit is a pretty desperate one."

"What am dat?"

"That we should see that every chamber of our revolvers is loaded and then make a dash out the front, firing right and left; don't you think it would scatter them?"

The scheme commended itself to my companion, who became urgent that we should act upon it without delay.

"Wont dey open dar eyes, when dey obsarve dat I've jined forces wid yo'? But hold on," he added with such abruptness that I knew he had thought of some formidable objection to the dash which at first commended itself to him; "Ise afeard it wont do."

"Why not?"

“As I figger it dar’s ten ob de warmits left, countin’ de last one yo’ hit, and ebery one ob ’em has got one or more p’isoned spears among ’em dat aint p’isoned; we’d made de biggest kind ob hustle, but we couldn’t wipe ’em all out quick ’nough to stop one or two from drivin’ some ob de p’isoned tings into our hides, and *den* it will be all day wid us.”

This was a serious objection indeed, and, while I sat silent and meditating, Casca gloomily aded:

“And dat aint de wust ob it.”

“What is the worst?”

“Dar’ll be twenty moah warmints outside purty soon, ef dey habent already arrove, which am likely.”

“How can you know that, Casca?”

“De talk afore I comed in was dat if I didn’t come out agin or let ’em know dat all was right, dey war to signal for some more ob de warmints dat aint fur off and dey’ll be sure to be on hand.”

“We have heard nothing that sounds like a signal.”

“Dey will send two ob dar best runners back among de hills and let dem do de callin’ and we wont heah a word ob it.”

“Then let us make our charge at once.”

But the African, who was certainly not lacking in personal courage, refused to agree to my proposal. Certainly none knew better than he the deadly nature of the favorite weapon of the wild men, and I could not fail to admit the reasonableness of his stand.

We sat in silence for a number of minutes, each busy with his thoughts. I could not but admit that I was at the end of my resources, and found it impossible to figure out any way of helping ourselves. I was able even to feel sympathy for the loyal colored man, who had taken the irrevocable step that he might help me to my life and freedom. Such a contingency as a rescue was out of the question, for where was there any one to rescue us? It was impossible to tell whether Higgenbottom was alive or dead. All the probabilities pointed to his death, but if among the living, he could not have the remotest idea of my dilemma, and had it been known to him, could not bring any party to my assistance.

I was waiting for Casca to speak, when a heavy, thudding sound fell upon our ears. Instinctively we glanced at the opening of the passage. Where we had seen the dim glow caused by the starlight, there was nothing but blank, impenetrable darkness. Not the slight-

est outline of the primeval door could be distinguished.

We knew what it meant; the Tobas had rolled over a huge boulder, so that it blocked the tunnel; it may be said we were not only shut in, but the lid was hermetically sealed.

The African uttered an expression of angry disgust.

“What did de blamed fools done *dat* fur? Dey must hab knowed yo’ haint any idee ob pokin’ yo’ nose outside, and dar aint no use ob shettin’ yo’ in, when all yo’s doin’ is to stay whar yo’ be already.”

“Let’s make a little investigation, Casca.”

“Wharfur?”

“I know of no special reason, but possibly we shall learn something of interest to us.”

CHAPTER XXVI

THE BLACKNESS OF DARKNESS

IN THE surprise of the incident, neither my dusky companion nor myself realized for a few minutes its fearful meaning. We moved silently along the dark passage, though there was no reason for so much caution, until we reached the mass of stone that had been rolled into position.

“Here it is,” I whispered, as I placed my hand against the boulder.

“I reckons it am,” added Casca in a voice that he did not attempt to moderate; “I tells yo’ what we must do.”

“What’s that?”

“We must shove it out ob de way and den make a rush; bofe our pistols am loaded and we kin pop some ob ’em ober, and I’ll use my p’isoned spear.”

No scheme could be more desperate, but there was no hesitation, each instinctively feeling that it was the only one that offered a grain of hope.

I shoved my weapon into my belt, so as to give my hands free play, and I knew Casca was equally prepared.

Groping about till we learned something of the conformation of the boulder on the side toward us, we placed our hands against it near the middle, braced our feet, and I whispered:

“Are you ready?”

“Yas.”

“Then together; *now!*”

We pushed with the last ounce of strength at our command. We held our breath and no two men could have striven harder. Our feet slipped at first, but we got a firm hold on the flinty floor, and wrought with might and main.

We did not budge the boulder to the extent of a hair.

We kept it up till exhausted and then tried again. When I once more muttered “*Now,*” we did our utmost. Alas! we might as well have tried to shove a locomotive off the rails. Finally we stopped, panting and tired.

“No use, Casca; we are shut in hard and fast.”

“It does sorter hab dat look,” he replied, with no evidence of disappointment; “we shall hab to try sumfin else.”

“Something else!” I repeated; “what can it be?”

“Dunno; I’ll hab to do some thinkin’.”

Although the rock shut us in, as I have shown, there were crevices at the sides and one at the top caused by the irregular outline of the obstruction, but none of these was large enough to allow an animal bigger than a rabbit to squeeze through. The starlight showed faintly beyond, so that the outline of these small openings could be traced by the eye.

Suddenly Casca placed his big hand on my arm and whispered:

“*Sh!*”

The craggy opening at the top of the boulder was darkened. Something had interposed to shut off the light. Before I could conjecture its meaning, my ears tingled with the resounding report of the African’s revolver, beside my face. He had fired at the object, which was the face of one of the Tobas, evidently trying to peer into the passage, or he may have turned his ear to the opening, with a view of hearing what was going on within. Be that as it may, he paid for his recklessness with his life, for the bullet passed through his brain and he toppled over backward with a single cry which told its story.

And then Casca Jones did an astonishing thing. With his mouth as close to the opening as was safe, he shouted to the Tobas in their own tongue, afterward explaining to me what he said. He announced to them that he was with the white man, that neither of them had suffered so much as a scratch and both were in the best of spirits. Moreover, he declared that it was he who had shot Chief Zip-wip-na, for no other reason than to give me the chance of getting away on his horse, which I had mounted on his advice. It was he also who had fired the last shot and he intended to shoot every blamed Toba upon whom he could draw bead.

“Why under heaven did you do that?” I asked.

He chuckled.

“I want to make ’em mad and I guess I’ve doned it; I wish ’em to know dat dey’re up against two ob us instead ob only one.”

“What good can that do?”

“Ef dey thought dere war only yo’, dey’d be likely after awhile when it looked to ’em dat yo’ war purty weak, to sneak in on yo’, and fotch yo’ out to hab some fun wid yo’; now dat dey knows I’m wid yo’, I reckons as how dey won’t try anyt’ing ob dat sort.”

There may have been wisdom in the view of

the colored man, but it was hard after all to see how it could help us, even in the slightest degree. If in the end, I should succumb to hunger, he must do likewise. However, the thing was done, and it was useless to think of recalling it, even had we wished to do so.

As a rule an unharmed man with weapons at his command does not yield to despair for a considerable time to say the least. While my comrade was chuckling, I was thinking hard.

“Casca,” I said, “there is no use in our trying to push that boulder away from the entrance by sheer strength; I wonder whether we cannot bring a lever into play.”

“What’s dat?” he asked, failing to catch my meaning. I explained, and he said:

“It am obzactly de ting, but dere’s only one ting against it.”

“What’s that?”

“Whar we gwine to git de leber?”

That was the question indeed, but I had cogitated over the answer.

“There must be something that will serve somewhere in the cavern; a strong stick will be just the thing.”

“How did a stick eber got inside ob *dis* place?” he asked.

The chance of anything of the kind was slight,

but we resolutely set out to hunt for it. Nothing could be more certain than that none of the Tobas would roll away the stone and enter the passage themselves. As Casca had said, they might try it after awhile, but hours—twenty-four at least—must pass before they would take the risk. No danger, therefore, could threaten us for a long time, from that direction.

I took the lead along the passageway, down the slope, until the soft gurgling showed we stood on the margin of the underground river. There we paused amid the blackness of darkness, for not the slightest glimmering ray was to be seen in any direction. The matches in my rubber safe were precious, but this was the time to use them. I handed three to Casca, telling him to pick his way alongside the stream for a few yards to the left and there make the best search he could with the feeble help of the tiny illumination.

With a view of economy, I decided not to ignite any of mine until after his hunt was over. He did his work well. A few minutes later, I saw the little flickering point, as he raised it above his head. By its momentary glare I traced the woolly crown and gained a partial view of the dusky countenance as he thrust it

forward and in a crouching posture peered intently here and there. He took several steps along the side of the stream, slowly circling the point of yellow light above and in front of his head, until it dropped at his feet and flickered out in darkness.

The next bit of flame showed him a rod farther off. The shrewd fellow had moved to the edge of the field of vision before lighting his second match. He now repeated the act, using the tiny stick until it was burned close to his fingers, when he dropped it. Then the third match came into play like the others. This was the last and when it expired I called:

“How did you make out, Casca?”

“Didn’t find a blamed ting!” was his disgusted reply.

“Wait where you are till I try my hand.”

It is hardly necessary to say that the result in my case was precisely the same as in his. The interior of the immense cavern was composed of rocks, dirt and the flowing stream. It seemed the acme of absurdity that I had ever supposed it could be otherwise. In what possible way could anything in the nature of wood have entered the place? The only way must have been through some one carrying it thither,

and it was not conceivable that such a thing had ever been done.

“I have a few matches left,” I said, excluding, so far as I could, the feeling of despair from my tones; “and we will save them for some future emergency.”

“Dat am so,” was the philosophical comment of Casca, who had returned to my side; “dar’s only one ting for us to do.”

“I shall be glad to know what it is.”

“Sot down and tink ober tings.”

Little promise in that, but the sturdy fellow coolly seated himself on the soft earth, where he could rest his shoulders against one of the boulders or rocks which were everywhere, and, for nothing better to do, I did the same.

The temperature within the cavern was equable and pleasant. We were far enough below the surface to be beyond reach of the tropical atmosphere above, the flowing water doubtless adding to the natural coolness. Whatever was in store for us, we could never suffer because of heat or cold, for no change at most could have been more than a few degrees. That phase of the subject therefore may be dismissed.

It has been said that nothing was to be feared from the Tobas through their forcing an entrance into our refuge. As I sat beside my

friend I could not help wishing they would thus invade our retreat, for it would precipitate the issue, while we were in the full possession of our strength and faculties. I had cast aside my spear as an incumbrance, but Casca took care to retain his. With its poisoned tip it must prove a formidable weapon in any struggle with our enemies. The reeds to which the sharpened points were fixed were so weak that they would have snapped like pipe stems had we tried to use them as levers.

“My spear would be a handicap,” I reflected, “for I am unaccustomed to handling it, and my enemies would make a sieve of me before I could bring it into play, but so long as I have enough cartridges at command, I shall be able to give a good account of myself. Casca may keep to his spear, for he knows how to use it, and I will cling to my revolver, for it will not fail me in a pinch.”

Not the least impressive feature of our imprisonment was the profound silence that wrapped us about as with a mantle. The soft flow of the stream at our feet seemed to add to the stillness. A squadron of cavalry might have galloped over our heads, without any disturbance coming to our ears. Darkness, silence,—such was the world in which we sat and

breathed and vainly thought of some way out of our dungeon.

Suddenly a familiar sound fell upon my ears. My companion was sleeping as soundly as in his bed in far away Alabama.

“Strange that he can slumber at such a time as this,” I said to myself; “nothing of the kind can come to me for a long, long while.”

Ten minutes later, I joined Casca in the land of dreams.

Probably we slept a couple of hours. Both were in need of rest, and no one can fight off nature’s demand for recuperation. It so happened that we regained consciousness at the same moment. I could not help smiling over what had taken place.

“Gracious alive!” I exclaimed, “but I am hungry.”

“All right,” was the cheerful response; “let’s git sumfin to eat.”

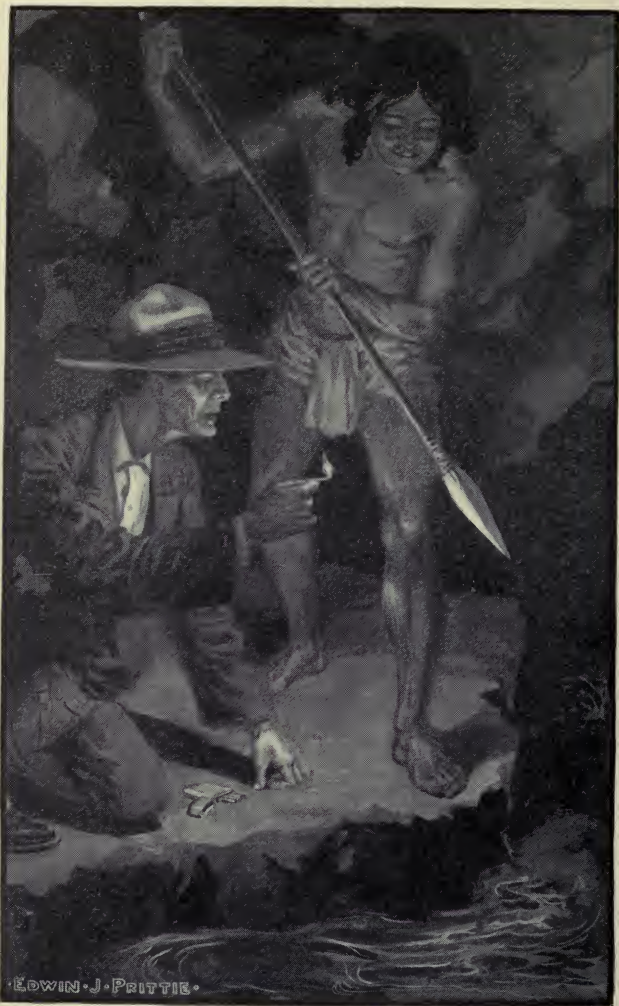
I supposed the words were a grim jest on his part, but quickly learned he was in earnest.

“How many matches hab yo’ left?” he asked.

“Not many; why do you ask?”

“Light one and hold it close to de side ob de water, and afore it goes out light anoder and den anoder, till I tole yo’ to stop.”

Suspecting his purpose, I did as requested.



Plunged the point of his weapon into the water.

As the little flame lit up the gloom the African was revealed at my side, crouching low, with his spear tightly grasped in both hands. Carefully following his directions, I peered into the crystal depths of the underground river.

It is well known that a fire kindled at night on the bank of a stream will draw fish toward it. That is what we were trying to do. Seeing none for a few minutes, though I kept the tiny flame going, I said:

“I’m afraid we can accomplish nothing, Casca——”

At that instant he made a step forward, and with incredible quickness plunged the point of his weapon into the water, caught a fish on the end, and flirited it behind him on the ground back of us. He had succeeded better than I dreamed it possible for him to do.

Placing his bare foot on the prize, he made sure it could not flap back into the stream, and said:

“Let’s got all we kin.”

With heart throbbing with hope, I lit match after match, while the fellow was alert for a second thrust of his weapon. Once or twice he caught a flicker in the water and started to strike, but the fish whisked out of reach, and he waited for a better chance. It seemed, how-

ever, as if the fate of the first had frightened the others and they were shyer than at the beginning.

The end came sooner than either anticipated.

“This is my last match, Casca.”

“All right; I’ll make a try dis time.”

When the bit of flame was scorching my fingers, he gave a vicious stab with his spear and swung it backward. He had speared a fish, but it slipped off the primitive hook and fell into the water beyond reach.

“We’s got de oder one suah,” was his comment, as he picked it from the ground and proceeded to prepare it for our meal. This was simple enough, for all he could do was to slit it open and remove the insides. Cooking was out of the question, and, had we been able to broil it over live coals, it could not have tasted better than it did. I have no idea of the species to which it belonged. In form and general appearance it resembled a pickerel, though it is not to be supposed it was one. The flesh was quite tender, and it must have weighed nearly two pounds before dressing. We ate every particle and our hunger was fully satisfied for the time being.

But, feeling our strength renewed, neither could shut out the knowledge of the woeful

prospect before us. We were shut in the cavern beyond all possibility of forcing our way out, for it may be doubted whether a dozen men in our situation would have been able to roll away the stone from the mouth of the sepulchre. We had abandoned hope in that direction long before, and were compelled to face the dreadful outlook.

Suppose I had been in possession of a gross of boxes of matches, or that there had been an abundance of fuel with which to attract the fish of the underground river within reach of Casca's spear. The time must come sooner or later, when the supply would give out, and we should remain imprisoned as securely as before.

Although the African had impaled our fish on the point of his poisoned spear, no harm could result from our swallowing the flesh. It is known that the venom of the rattlesnake causes no inconvenience when swallowed, it being innocuous unless it enters a wound or comes in direct contact with the blood. I did not need Casca's assurance on this point, and no unpleasant results followed the last meal we were destined to eat in the cavern. In fact, I hardly gave the matter a thought.

We sat for fully an hour without either moving or speaking a word. There could be no

doubt that the African was doing the thinking of which he had spoken. Certainly such was my occupation, and it brought not the first glimmer of hope to me.

“We may as well make up our minds, Casca, that it is all over with us,” I said, with a deep sigh; “we have put up the best fight any one could make in the circumstances, and it only remains to meet our fate bravely; I am sorry that it will be long drawn out. If it would only come and be over in a few minutes, it would be far easier to bear.”

The African’s reply to this remark was as characteristic as astonishing. He rose slowly to his feet, and sang in his rich, musical voice:

“ ‘Alabama agin! Alabama agin!
Ef I lib till de sun shines tomorrer,
I’ll go back to Alabama agin!’ ”

Then, incredible as it may seem, he executed his double shuffle, sending the dirt flying in all directions, some of the particles striking against me. He suddenly ceased with a resounding slap of one of his feet on the ground, after the manner of professional dancers, and astounded me by exclaiming:

“Ise found de way, boss! we’s gwine to leab dis blamed place in a hurry!”

CHAPTER XXVII

THE LAST RECOURSE

MY FIRST belief was that my comrade had gone daft, but no African ever became insane in circumstances like those described. Whether he was the victim of some strange fallacy or not, he was in earnest and in the possession of his faculties.

“Ise found a way, suah as yo’s born,” he added; “while I was tinkin’ I done some big prayin’ and de good Lawd showed me de path.”

“For heaven’s sake tell me what it is, Casca.”

He did so in his characteristic manner:

“Dis riber comes into de cavern up yonder and it goes out somewhar below; we’ll take a big dive and swim to de p’int whar it busts out into de open kentry.”

Why had I not thought of this before? It would seem that it should have occurred to both of us at the same moment, and soon after entering the cavern. Probably it never would have come to me at all. The whole credit belonged to my companion.

And then, seated on the ground we discussed the momentous question in all its bearings. Casca did not know at what point the stream emerged into the open, but it must do so *somewhere*. When he partially explored the place with Chief Zip-wip-na and came out again, he gave no attention to the matter in which we were now so profoundly interested. He knew the stream wound among the hills within a quarter of a mile, and we hoped the outer air would be reached much nearer the cavern than that. If not, we were certain to be drowned. Indeed, it would not take many rods of submarine traveling to finish us.

The current was quite powerful and the depth as has been shown, was several feet. If it emerged into the open air, fifty or possibly a few more yards away from where it dipped under the mountain wall, there was a fair chance of our making the voyage successfully. If the underground flow continued much farther, we were doomed. The question could only be settled by actual trial.

Moreover, it seemed more than likely that we would encounter obstructions in the form of obtruding rocks, while gliding down stream under the surface. A stunning blow, or check for only a few moments must be as fatal as a dozen

poisoned spear-thrusts. The possibility, however, of a successful "shooting of the chutes" made both eager for the trial, but I was resolved that every precaution should be taken.

"One of us will go first, keeping as near the middle of the current as he can, for it is there we shall be less likely to meet with obstructions. How shall we know whether the first one has succeeded?"

"I'll go fust," said Casca, "but when I got out on de oder side, I doan' see how Ise agwine to tole yo'. If I yells, yo' can't hear me and de blasted Tobas will, for dey wont be wery fur off."

"Give yourself no uneasiness on that score; if you wish, you may make the first venture, and I'll follow a few minutes later; there's no use of speculating and guessing; each has got to take his chance; if we fail, it will be preferable to a lingering death in this horrible place. Let me suggest, Casca, that it will be safer for you to float down feet first."

"Wharfur?"

"It will injure you less to strike a rock with your feet than with your head."

The fellow chuckled.

"Dat may be de way wid yo', boss, but not wid *dis* chile; if dar's any rocks to run aginst, I

wants to soak 'em wid my head; shouldn't wonder if I could knock 'em loose so as to cl'ar de path for yo'self."

"Have it your own way, but I can't believe your skull is as thick as you pretend."

We now groped forward along the side of the underground river, until we came to the perpendicular wall under which it swept, without an inch of space between its surface and the rocky roof. Here it narrowed somewhat, and the current had a perceptibly quicker flow, which perhaps promised better than if it had been otherwise.

We were both so anxious for the attempt that we did not linger with our farewells. It would seem that it was a time for sentiment, for it was quite probable the parting was to be our final one, but we were not in the mood for "gush."

"You intend to wade out as near to the middle of the stream as you can," I said, as we stood on the spot named; "then to drop under the surface and float down head foremost."

"Dat's de idee and yo' won't be long ahind me?"

"I certainly shall not linger after giving you a chance to make the voyage and to get out of my way. Well, good-by, Casca; God be with you and with both of us!"

We grasped hands in the darkness and there was a tremor in the brave fellow's voice as he replied:

“De same to yo'self; take in a bref dat will fill yo' down to yo' heels, jes' as yo' goes under, and den doan' breathe agin for half an hour, onless yo' finds yo' hab reached de air whar de trouble am ober.”

Although our eyes were not of the slightest help, I knew he had entered the underground river. The gentle gurgling where it dipped under the rocks prevented me from hearing the slight splash made by him. A minute later, I called his name, but there was no reply. He was gone.

“God be with him!” was my fervent prayer; “he deserves success, and God have me in his keeping, for I am close to death or to a happy issue out of my perils.”

My revolver was thrust into my hip pocket. The submergence would not wet the charges in the chambers, nor moisten the metal cartridges in my belt. It has been said that my spear was discarded some time before, so that my hands were as free as my feet. But when I once surrendered to the sweep of the current I should be as helpless as a balloon in a hurricane.

After the first plunge there could be no return: I must sweep onward to life—or to death.

Carefully feeling each step, I waded out until I judged I was near the middle of the stream. There the water rose a little above my waist, and the rush was so strong that it was with difficulty I kept my feet, till I reached up and rested my hands against the dripping wall which pressed upon the top of the stream. Thus braced, it was easy to maintain my position. Then I spent several minutes in earnest prayer, for when Death brandishes his spear in one's face, there is but the single Source to which he can appeal. Then, expanding my lungs to their utmost, I threw myself on my back, head up stream and shot under the mountain wall.

There was no way of reckoning time. Although it seemed a number of minutes were occupied in that fearful passage, of necessity it could have been only a few seconds. For a space I went as smoothly as when a boy I dives and swims for several rods beneath the surface of the mill pond at home. Then my natural buoyancy brought me up and my face scraped along the rocks above, until through fear of serious injury I forced myself under again.

The next shock was when my right foot came

in contact with the point of an obtruding rock. The impact caused me to slew around, and, although I prevented myself from being stopped, I was floating sideways, with the prospect that my posture would quickly change to that of my friend who had preceded me. I fought desperately to prevent it, and a peculiar ringing, shrinking sensation thrilled my brain, such as one feels when cringing before an expected blow. I locked my hands above my crown, so as to interpose them as a shield, and held my lips tightly closed, until it seemed the distended blood vessels must burst.

Frightfully soon the crisis came when I must have air or perish. I flung up my hands, and blissful fact! they impinged against nothing; unable to hold back my terrific yearning, I parted my lips and drew in—blessed, life-giving air!

Then I opened my eyes and saw the stars twinkling overhead. On the right and left the rocky walls of the stream were outlined in the gloom, and I was swiftly sweeping downward,—who could say whither?

The river was much straiter and I dropped my feet. They touched the flinty bottom, but I was unable to sustain myself. Two powerful strokes swept me nearer the right bank, and,

when I dropped my feet again, the depth was so shallow that I made my way to shore without difficulty. There I sat down on the rocks, and, if ever a man gave heartfelt thanks to heaven for its mercy I was that man, for all I had undergone was a wetting, which was by no means unpleasant. The slight scraping of my face amounted to nothing, and I had suffered no harm whatever.

Naturally my next thought was of Casca Jones. Where I had been so fortunate, it was reasonable to believe he had done equally well. Since the Tobas could not be at any great distance, it would not do to call his name, but, if he had passed safely through the tunnel he would be on the lookout for me, and ought to be near at hand.

So it proved. He had landed a little way above, but his keen eyes observed me as I came ashore, and he quickly reached the spot.

"I knowed it went all right wid yo'," said the happy fellow.

"How could you know that?" I asked, as I took his hand.

"'Cause I sailed down stream befoah yo' wid my head in front; *dat* knocked eberyting out ob de road and made a cl'ar passage for yo'self."

CHAPTER XXVIII

“ALABAMA AGIN!”

CASCA agreed with me that the Tobas were at no great distance, for we certainly were not far from the mouth of the tunnel, which they had blocked with the boulder. Knowing there was no escape for us there, it was not unlikely that some of them had scattered, and were engaged at that very time in searching for a rear entrance to the prison. The one thing for us to do was to get as far from the spot as we could, and with the least possible delay. It would not do for the African to come in contact with any of the wild men, for, since they had learned from his own lips of the part he had played, he would be subjected to tortures too appalling to be thought of without a shudder.

And yet only one thing prevented the daring fellow from attempting to steal a couple of horses from the Tobas. The animals were grazing somewhere in the neighborhood, and he was confident he could abstract them without

great risk to himself. I strongly suspect he would have been glad to collide with several, for, as he told me afterward, he had a score which he longed to wipe out. Although he had wasted three years among these strange people and had disarmed all suspicion against himself, there were several who had persecuted and made him suffer without apparent excuse, unless it may have been they felt he represented, despite his color, the race which they all hated with inconceivable hatred.

The one self-evident fact that restrained the African was that even if he succeeded in running off two of the Toba horses, they would be a hindrance instead of a help to us. There was no trail by which they could make their way through the mountains. That must be done by us on foot, and we set out without delay. Casca took the lead, because of his knowledge of the country and of the people whom we must shun.

He had brought his spear through the underground passage and said it was as good as ever. In fact, he would be sorry if he should have to leave the country without testing it upon some of the "varmints" who had made his life a burden for so long.

It was past midnight when we made our escape from the cavern. There was the best rea-

son for believing the Tobas would not learn of our flight for several days, if they did even then. The possibility of accidental discovery existed, however, and caused the utmost care on our part during the hours that we climbed and plodded and picked our course through the dismal region.

The time came when we arrived at a point so far removed from the cavern that we could halt for consultation, without any fear of a descent by the Tobas. It was evident that only an hour or two of darkness remained. Our belief was that in the interval we should be able to approach close to the eastern boundary of hills, when we expected to reach the pampas again. Casca had never been as far even as the place already attained by us, and therefore knew no more of the configuration of the country than I. Whatever we learned must be through observation.

“It seems to me,” said I, “that the safer course is to keep on in the direction we are following until daylight, and then to lie by till night.”

“Wharfur?”

“If the Tobas learn of our flight, as they may do, they will try to follow us; we shall have no chance, if they catch us on the open plain, where

we shall be without shelter and they can ride us down. We ought to be able to hide our footprints among these rocks where we can travel for rods without leaving the slightest sign. When it is dark again, we will start out on the plain and keep it up throughout the night. By that time, we ought to be twenty or thirty miles from here and so far in advance of them that they will have little chance of running us down."

In the stargleam I could make out the dusky face close to my elbow, as the African studied my countenance with a curious expression. I waited for him to speak.

"Do yo' know, boss, what I'm thinkin' about?"

"I haven't the slightest idea."

"Yo' aint as big a fool as yo' look to be."

And he shook and chortled with mirth. I could take no offence with the brave fellow, who had done me the best service in his power. I laughed also and replied:

"That's the difference between you and me, but what do you think of my plan?"

"It am de bestest in de world," was his emphatic comment.

It was followed as outlined. As we labored through the rocky region, our chief effort, while

maintaining the general direction, was to avoid stepping on the ground, and to make the invisible trail as sinuous as possible. I am sure that a Sioux Indian would have found it impossible to follow us with the sun shining overhead. It must be remembered, too, that there was little likelihood of the Tobas learning of our flight from the cavern.

When the eastern horizon grew rosy, we sought a place among the rocks where, if driven to the wall, we could put up a stout defence. We were pretty well tired out, and having agreed upon the refuge, we lay down and slept for several hours.

Casca awoke long before I did. When I opened my eyes, he was returning with a meal of fruit, which, as I have shown, was plentiful in that remarkable region. Water was near, so that, barring a certain degree of anxiety, our situation was as comfortable as we could ask. I depended upon my companion to keep a look-out, since he was more familiar with the ways of the Tobas. At nightfall, he reported that he had not been able to discover the first sign of them among the hills. The conclusion was reasonable that they, with such reinforcements as might have reached them, were still awaiting the crisis at the mouth of the cavern.

We set out in high spirits, and kept up our laborious tramp throughout the long hours of darkness. Before morning came, we reached and passed the eastern limit of the mountainous district, and began our journey across the grassy pampas toward the Paraguay, which flowed at an uncertain distance in front of us. Casca was sure the Tobas rarely or never penetrated thus far from their hunting grounds, and the prospect of disturbance from them grew less with every passing hour. Because of this, we decided after a rest and meal, to resume our tramp and to keep it up until wearied out.

It would be tedious were I to dwell upon the particulars of the remainder of our journey. We had crossed the zone of danger, and never saw anything more of the dreaded Tobas. We were plodding forward on the fourth day, when late in the afternoon, Casca uttered a joyous exclamation.

“What is it?” I asked, looking up in surprise.

“Doan’ yo’ saw it?” he asked in turn, extending his chubby finger to the eastward.

Strange that neither of us had observed it before, for only a mile away, in plain sight, a broad, gleaming river was flowing calmly southward.

“Thank heaven!” I exclaimed; “it is the Paraguay.”

There was no doubt of it. A schooner with all sails spread was passing down stream and a half mile behind it, a small vessel of similar pattern was coming around a bend, while some distance to the south a small steamer was puffing into view.

“That’s the boat for us!” I added, and both of us increased our pace. Before we could reach the bank of the river, the steamer was almost abreast of us. Casca and I fired our pistols in air, and, swinging my hat over my head, I shouted and broke into a run. We should have attracted little or no attention, but for another fact which speedily came to light. The steamer’s puffs ceased and the screw was kept moving just enough to hold her stationary in mid channel. That which sent a thrilling tingle through my veins was the sight of the Stars and Stripes fluttering from the fore. No one who has not been in a situation similar to ours can appreciate the emotions of a man when he gazes upon that flag, the most beautiful ever patterned by the ingenuity of man, waving in the breeze before him. Casca and I broke into a faster run, at sight of a small boat putting

out from the side of the larger one to take us aboard.

We had hardly entered the lesser craft when I heard a cheer from the deck of the steamer. Peering across the comparatively slight distance, I saw a man standing just beside the pilot house, waving his hat and calling me by name.

Could it be possible? Yes; there was no doubt of it. That individual was my old comrade Percy Higgenbottom, of whose fate I knew nothing until that minute. It was the New Englander himself who, leaning over the gunwale, seized my hand and almost dragged me aboard, where, as you may suppose, the meeting was of the most happy nature.

A few words explained the presence of Casca with me, and he received a welcome that tickled the cockles of his heart, but Captain Collins speedily suggested that it was advisable that he be furnished with enough clothing to show a proper regard for decency. The grinning fellow was taken forward, where after a time, he was fitted out with something after the order of civilization. The only trouble was with the shoes, for there was none on the boat sufficiently large to cover his feet, which, naturally of generous proportions, had become still more so, during his residence among the Tobas.

The steamer Neptune was in charge of Captain Ephraim Collins of Salem, Massachusetts. He had been on a trading voyage into Brazil, and was now on his way to the Rio de la Plata, whence he intended to return to Savannah and thence to Boston. He expressed himself as more than willing to take me to Concepcion, or as far as I wished to go. Furthermore, when he learned that Casca had once served as a cook on a vessel, he offered to give him employment in the same capacity on the Neptune. It was to be expected that he was somewhat rusty in his calling, but his physique was so powerful that he could be utilized in other directions. When the steamer paused at Savannah on her homeward voyage, the jolly African would be so near his beloved Alabama and his friends, that with the wages then due him, he could appear at his old home in appropriate and impressive style.

Sitting on the upper deck, where the cool breeze fanned our faces, Higgenbottom and I smoked our cigars and exchanged experiences. When my story was finished, he said:

“The most curious part of this business is that what I passed through was so similar to what befell you at the beginning. You know after that affair at the butte, we had no chance

to arrange matters or to come to any sort of understanding. It was each for himself with little show for either. When I suddenly got a chance to mount a horse, I bounded upon his back and scooted off in the darkness without a thought of the direction. The great thing was to secure a start and that was what both of us gained.

“When morning came I was beyond sight of the Tobas, but I found my horse had been following a wrong course and I was farther from Paraguay than at the beginning. I set myself straight by means of my compass and kept it up until my horse collapsed and I was that tired that I could hardly keep my eyes open. Twice I saw parties of Tobas, but avoided them and at night when I entered a grove, the same as you did, I came within a hair of being squeezed to death by a constrictor which so terrified my pony that he dashed off and I never saw him again.

“The next piece of ill luck was the loss of my compass. It slipped off my watch chain and there was no use of searching for it. After that I made my own calculations and pushed on as best I could, but with all my care, I continually went astray until I managed to reach the Para-

guay with the help of Providence and ran across good Captain Collins.

“Somehow or other, I felt sure you would pull through, and it was the same regarding myself, for I could not forget that we were both *Americans*. It seemed likely you would be making for this river, and I persuaded, without any difficulty, the kindhearted Captain to head up stream for a couple of days while we made search for you. That explains how it was that when we saw you wave your hat and start toward us on a run, I was pretty certain who it was, and we lost no time in bringing you aboard.”

I may add that Percy Higgenbottom was persistent in his efforts to secure remuneration from the Bolivian government for his attempt to explore the Pilcomayo, but he was unsuccessful, for the officials—legally enough—refused to reimburse him to the extent of a farthing.

“Perform your part of the contract,” said the suave President Señor Severo Fernandez Alonzo, “and we will perform ours.”

“I’ll be hanged!” exclaimed my disgusted friend, when compelled to give it up, “If I ever go within a thousand miles of that infernal Pilcomayo again, it will be when I am blind, deaf, and dumb and haven’t a grain of sense left. I

hope those Bolivian officials will make the next try at it and get a taste of the real thing.”

“I am with you so far as any repetition of *our* folly is concerned,” I said, and we shook hands on it.

At Concepcion, we parted company with Captain Collins and Casco Jones. The fellow was bubbling over with happiness at the prospect of soon being among his old friends, from whom he had been cruelly exiled for years. My last sight of him was standing at the stern of the little steamer and waving his hand at me, while amid the bustle and noise of the South American port, I could hear his musical crooning:

“Alabama agin! Alabama agin!
Ef I lib till de sun shines tomorrer,
I’ll go back to Alabama agin!”

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EDWARD S. ELLIS, the popular writer of boys' books, is a native of Ohio, where he was born somewhat more than a half-century ago. His father was a famous hunter and rifle shot, and it was doubtless his exploits and those of his associates, with their tales of adventure which gave the son his taste for the breezy backwoods and for depicting the stirring life of the early settlers on the frontier.

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HOW I CAME TO WRITE MY FIRST BOOK.

WHEN I was sixteen years old I belonged to a composition class. It was our custom to go on the recitation seat every day with clean slates, and we were allowed ten minutes to write seventy words on any subject the teacher thought suited to our capacity. One day he gave out "What a Man Would See if He Went to Greenland." My heart was in the matter, and before the ten minutes were up I had one side of my slate filled. The teacher listened to the reading of our compositions, and when they were all over he simply said: "Some of you will make your living by writing one of these days." That gave me something to ponder upon. I did not say so out loud, but I knew that my composition was as good as the best of them. By the way, there was another thing that came in my way just then. I was reading at that time one of Mayne Reid's works which I had drawn from the library, and I pondered upon it as much as I did upon what the teacher said to me. In introducing Swartboy to his readers he made use of this expression: "No visible change was observable in Swartboy's countenance." Now, it occurred to me that if a man of his education could make such a blunder as that and still write a book, I ought to be able to do it, too. I went home that very day and began a story, "The Old Guide's Narrative," which was sent to the *New York Weekly*, and came back, respectfully declined. It was written on both sides of the sheets but I didn't know that this was against the rules. Nothing abashed, I began another, and receiving some instruction, from a friend of mine who was a clerk in a book store, I wrote it on only one side of the paper. But mind you, he didn't know what I was doing. Nobody knew it; but one

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day, after a hard Saturday's work—the other boys had been out skating on the brick-pond—I shyly broached the subject to my mother. I felt the need of some sympathy. She listened in amazement, and then said: "Why, do you think you could write a book like that?" That settled the matter, and from that day no one knew what I was up to until I sent the first four volumes of Gunboat Series to my father. Was it work? Well, yes; it was hard work, but each week I had the satisfaction of seeing the manuscript grow until the "Young Naturalist" was all complete.

—*Harry Castlemon in the Writer.*

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