

Duffield J. W.

Bert Wilson at Panama



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CHAPTER I

THE HOLD-UP

"Hands up! Quick!"

Now, in wild countries, such a command is never disobeyed, except by a fool or a would-be suicide. As Dick Trent was neither, his hands went up at once. And as he looked into the wicked muzzles of two bulldog revolvers, he inwardly cursed the carelessness that had led him so far afield, unarmed.

For that he had been careless there was not the shadow of a doubt. All that morning, as his train wound its way through Central Mexico, there had been unmistakable evidence on every side of the disturbed state of the nation. From the car windows he had seen a fertile country turned into a desert. The railroad line itself had been fairly well guarded by strong detachments of Federal forces; but outside the direct zone of travel there were abundant witnesses of strife and desolation. Smoke was rising from the remains of burned villages, the fields were bare of cattle driven off by marauding bands, harvests remained ungathered because the tillers of the soil had either fled for safety to the larger towns or been forced to take up arms with one of the contending factions. There were at least four important leaders, backed by considerable forces, who claimed to represent the people of Mexico, while countless bands of guerillas hung on the flanks of the regular armies. These last were murderers, pure and simple. It mattered nothing to them which side won. They robbed and slaughtered impartially, wherever booty or victims awaited them, and their ranks were recruited from the very scum of the earth.

Only that morning a brisk action had taken place at a small town on the line, and although the guerillas had been driven off they had managed to inflict considerable damage. A desperate attempt to destroy a bridge had been foiled, but one of the trestles had been so weakened that the heavy train did not dare to cross until repairs were made. This caused a delay of an hour or two, and, in the meantime, most of the passengers left the train and strolled about, watching the progress of the work.

Among these had been Bert Wilson and Tom Henderson, Dick's inseparable friends and companions. A strong bond of friendship united the three and this had been cemented by many experiences shared in common. They were so thoroughly congenial, had "summered and wintered" each other so long that each almost knew what the others were thinking. Together they had faced dangers: together they had come to hand grips with death and narrowly escaped. Each knew that the others would back him to the limit and would die rather than desert him in an emergency. By dint of strength and natural capacity Bert was the leader, but the others followed close behind. All were tall and muscular, and as they stood beside the train they formed a striking trio – the choicest type of young American manhood.

They were on their way to Panama to witness the opening of the Panama Canal. That stupendous triumph of engineering skill had appealed to them strongly while in course of construction, and now that it was to be thrown open to the vessels of the world, their enthusiasm had reached fever heat. All of them had chosen their life work along engineering and scientific lines, and this of course added to the interest they felt simply as patriotic Americans. They had devoured with eagerness every scrap of news as the colossal work went on, but had scarcely dared to hope that they might see it in person. A lucky combination of circumstances had made it possible at the last moment to take the trip together;

and from the time that trip became a certainty they thought and talked of little else than the great canal.

"How shall we go?" asked Tom, when they began to plan for the journey.

"Oh, by boat or train, I suppose," said Dick flippantly. "It's a little too far to walk."

"Yes, Socrates," retorted Tom, "I had imagined as much. But bring your soaring intellect down to earth and get busy with common things. Which shall it be?"

"I'd leave it to the toss of a coin," was the answer. "I don't care either way."

"I vote for the train," broke in Bert. "We've had a good deal of sea travel in our trip to the Olympic Games and that last voyage to China. Besides, I'd like to see Mexico and Central America. It's the land of flowers and romance, of guitars and señoritas, of Cortes and the Aztecs – "

"Yes," interrupted Dick grimly, "and of bandits and beggars and greasers and guerillas. Perhaps you'll see a good deal more of Mexico than you want. Still, I'm game, and if Tom – "

"Count me in," said Tom promptly. "A spice of danger will make it all the more exciting. If the Chinese pirates didn't get us, I guess the Mexicans won't."

So Mexico it was, and up to the time they stopped at the broken bridge no personal danger had threatened, although it was evident that the country was a seething volcano. How near they were to that volcano's rim they little dreamed as they sauntered lazily down to the bridge and watched the men at work.

The damage proved greater than at first thought, and it was evident that some time must elapse before it could be thoroughly repaired. Bert and Tom climbed down the ravine a little way to get a better view of the trestle. Dick chatted a while with the engineer as he stood, oil can in hand, near the tender. Then the impulse seized him to walk a little way up the road that ran beside the track and get some of the kinks out of his six feet of bone and muscle.

It was a perfect day. The sun shone hotly, but there was a cooling breeze that tempered the heat and made it bearable. Great trees beside the road afforded a grateful shade and beneath them Dick walked on. Everything was so different from what he had been accustomed to that at each moment he saw something new. Strange, gaily-plumaged birds fluttered in the branches overhead. Slender feathery palms rose a hundred feet in the air. Here a scorpion ran through the chapparal; there a tarantula scurried away beneath the dusty leaves of a cactus plant. Up in the transparent blue a vulture soared, and made Dick think of the abundant feasts that were spread for these carrion birds all over Mexico. And just then as he rounded a curve in the road, his heart leaped into his throat and his hands went up in response to a quick, sharp word of command.

"Fool, fool," he groaned to himself. Then he rose to the emergency. He took a grip on himself. And his cool gray eyes gave no sign of his inward tumult as he looked steadily at his captor and returned gaze for gaze. And as he gazed, the conviction grew that his life was not worth a moment's purchase.

Before him, surrounded by his followers, stood a man of medium height, but evidently possessed of great muscular strength. He wore a nondescript costume of buckskin, studded with silver buttons and surmounted by a serape that had once been red, but now was sadly faded by wind and weather. A murderous machete was thrust into a flaunting sash that served as a belt and a black sombrero overshadowed his face.

That face! Dick had never seen one so hideous except in nightmare. A sword cut had slashed the right cheek from the temple to the chin. The mouth from which several teeth were missing was like a gash. His eyes, narrowed beneath drooping lids, were glinting with ferocity. They were the eyes of a demon and the soul that looked through them was scarred and seamed by every evil passion. So the old pirates might have looked as they forced their victims to walk the plank. So an Apache Indian might have gloated over a captive at the stake. Dick's soul turned sick within him, but outwardly he was as cold as ice and hard as steel, as he stared unflinchingly into the cruel eyes before him.

Perhaps that level gaze saved his life. The bandit's hand was trembling on the trigger. One dead man more or less made no difference to him and he could rob as easily after shooting as before. Something told Dick that, had he weakened for a moment, a bullet would have found lodgment in his heart. He braced himself for the strange duel and as he looked, he saw the savage eyes change into a half-resentful admiration. It had been a case of touch and go, but Dick, by sheer nerve had won a brief reprieve. Without lowering the revolvers, the bandit called to one of the scoundrels, of whom twenty stood near by with carbines ready:

"Search him, Pedro," he commanded.

The fellow came forward quickly. Every movement showed the awe and fear in which the chief was held. He went through every pocket with a skill born of long experience. Dick's watch and money were taken from him, and, at a sign from the leader, his coat and shoes were also added to the loot.

"Now tie him and put him on one of the horses," said the captain, "and we'll be off. There may be some more of these accursed Americanos near by."

In a twinkling a lariat was dragged from the saddlehorn of the broncho, and Dick's arms were roughly tied behind his back. The rope cut cruelly into his flesh, but, with such an undaunted prisoner, they were determined to take no chances. Then he was lifted to the saddle and his feet tied beneath the horse. A bandit leaped up behind him and grasped the reins with one hand, while he held Dick with the other. Not till he was thus securely trussed and unable to move hand or foot, did the chief lower the revolvers with which he had kept the prisoner covered. A sharp command, a quick vaulting into the saddles, and the guerilla band was off to its eyrie in the mountains.

Events had passed so rapidly that Dick's brain was in a whirl. It seemed as though he were in a frightful dream from which he must presently awake. Scarcely ten minutes had wrought this fearful change in his fortunes. A quarter of an hour ago he was free, serene, apparently master of himself and his fate. Now he was a captive, stripped of money and goods, tied hand and foot, in the power of a desperate scoundrel, while every step was carrying him further away from happiness and friends and life.

For he did not disguise to himself that death probably yawned for him at the journey's end. Whatever the whim that had saved his life so far, it was unlikely to continue. He tried to figure out why the revolver had not barked when it had him so surely at its mercy. It was absurd to think that this human tiger had been deterred by any scruple. He was of the type that revelled in blood, who like a wild beast lusted for the kill. Perhaps he had not wanted to leave the evidence of his crime so close to the victim's friends, whose fury might prompt to bloody revenge. The noise of the shooting might have brought them like hornets about his ears. Or did some idea of ransom, if it could be managed, appeal to his avarice? Or, possibly, he might be held as a hostage to be exchanged for some precious rascal now held by the enemy. In these last suppositions there were some glimmerings of hope and Dick drew from them such comfort as he might; but underneath them all was the grim probability that would not down that he was probably bound on his last journey.

His tortured thoughts turned back to Bert and Tom. He could see them now in his mind's eye, chatting and laughing on the edge of the ravine, while the men shored up the tottering trestle. Presently they would turn back and idly wonder what had become of Dick. A little longer and their wonder would change into a certain uneasiness. Still they would not permit themselves to think for a moment that anything could have happened to him. They would guess that he might be in the smoker or the buffet and would saunter leisurely through the various cars. Only then when they failed to find him would they become seriously alarmed. And he could see the look of fierce determination and deadly resolution that would leap to their eyes when they realized that he must have met with disaster.

For they would come after him. He had no doubt of that. Some time, some way, they would come upon him, dead or alive, unless their own lives were lost in the effort. He knew that they would stick to the trail like bloodhounds and never falter for an instant. They had faced too many perils

together to quail at this supreme test when his life was at stake. Dear old Bert! Good old Tom! His heart warmed at the thought of them and a mist came over his eyes.

But what chance did they have of finding him? They were in a strange land where even the language was unknown to them, and where the natives looked with suspicion on everything American. The country through which they were passing was of the wildest kind, and the hard sunbaked trail left little trace. The woods were thick and at times his captors had to use their machetes to cut a way through the dense under growth. In places where streams were met, they walked their horses through the water to confuse the trail still further. They were evidently familiar with every foot of ground, and no doubt their camp had been located in some place where it would be practically impossible for pursuers to come upon them without abundant warning. The chances of success were so remote as to be well nigh hopeless. There was no use in deluding himself, and Dick pulled himself together and resolutely faced the probability of death.

He did not want to die. Every fibre in him flamed out in fierce revolt against the thought. Why, he had scarcely begun to live. He stood at the very threshold of life. Some lines he had read only a few days before, curiously enough came back to him:

"'Tis life, of which our nerves are scant,
O life, not death, for which we pant,
More life and fuller that we want."

Yes, that was it. He wanted life, wanted it eagerly, wanted it thirstily, wanted it desperately. Never before had it seemed so sweet. An hour earlier it had stretched before him, full of promise. The blood ran warm and riotous through every vein. He had everything to live for – health, strength, home and friends. And now the ending of all his dreams and hopes and plans was – what?

A shadow fell across him. He looked up. It was the vulture, circling lower now, as though its instinct told it of a coming feast. Dick shuddered. The air seemed suddenly to have grown deadly chill.

CHAPTER II

THE PURSUIT

Down at the ravine, stretched out at full length beneath the shade of a great tree, Bert and Tom were watching the progress of the work, as it slowly neared completion. There was more to do than was at first thought, but after making allowance for this, it seemed to drag on endlessly.

"Not much genius in that crowd, I imagine," said Bert.

"What do you mean?" asked Tom, looking up in surprise.

"Why," returned Bert, "I forget what philosopher it was – Carlyle, I think – who says in one of his books that 'genius is only an infinite capacity for hard work.' You don't see much of it straying around loose here, do you?"

"Well no," laughed Tom, "not so that you would notice it. I've just been looking at that fellow over there with a hammer. I'll bet I could take a nap in the time it takes him to drive a nail."

"They ought to have as foreman one of those husky, bull-necked fellows I've seen in some of the section gangs laying out a railroad in the Northwest," went on Bert. "Those fellows are 'steam engines in breeches.' There isn't much loafing or lying down on the job when they're around. When they speak, the men jump as though they were shot."

"Yes," answered Tom, "or perhaps a mate on a Mississippi steamboat would fill the bill. Those colored roustabouts certainly get a move on when they feel his gimlet eye boring through them."

"After all, I suppose the climate is a good deal to blame," mused Bert. "It's hard to show much ginger when you feel as though you were working in a Turkish bath."

"Right you are," responded Tom. "We fellows born and bred in a cold climate don't realize how lucky we are. It's the fight with old mother nature that brings out all that's strong and tough in a man. I guess if the old Pilgrim Fathers had landed at Vera Cruz instead of on the 'stern and rock-bound coast' of New England they'd have become lotus eaters too."

"Well, that's what we're getting to be already," said Bert with a yawn, "and if I lie here much longer I'll strike my roots into the bank."

"Sure enough," assented Tom, "here we are talking about the laziness of these fellows, but I don't see that we're wearing any medals for energy."

"Energy," drawled Bert. "Where have I heard that word before. It sounds familiar, but I wouldn't recognize it if I saw it. I don't believe there is any such thing south of the Rio Grande."

"Come, wake up," retorted Tom. "Get out of your trance. I'll tell you what I'll do. Do you see that tree up there? I'll race you to it. That is, if you give me a handicap."

"Done," said Bert, who could never resist a challenge. "How much do you want?"

"How about a hundred feet? That oughtn't to be too much for a Marathon winner to give a dub like me."

"You don't want much, do you?" laughed Bert. "Your nerve hasn't suffered from the heat. But get your lead and I'll start from scratch."

Tom, quick as a cat, was not to be despised. On more than one occasion he had circled the bases in fifteen seconds. But he was no match for the fellow who at the Olympic games had won the Marathon race from the greatest runners of the world. For a little he seemed to hold his own, but when Bert once got into his stride – that space-devouring lope that fairly burned up the ground – it was "all over but the shouting." He collared Tom fifty feet from the tree and cantered in an easy winner.

Tom had "bellows to mend" and was perspiring profusely, but to Bert it had simply been an "exercise gallop" and he had never turned a hair.

"Well, you got me all right," admitted Tom disgustedly. "I've got no license to run with you under any conditions. But at any rate the run has waked me up. I've lost some of my wind, but I've got back my self-respect. But now let's go and hunt Dick up. I wonder where he is anyway."

"Probably stretched out on a couple of seats and taking a snooze," guessed Bert. "I'll bet he's lazier even than we are, and that's saying a good deal."

"Well, let's rout him out," said Tom. "Come along."

But when they reached their section of the car, Dick was nowhere to be seen.

"Taking a snack in the buffet, perhaps," suggested Bert. "There's something uncanny about that appetite of his. I'd hate to have him as a steady boarder."

But here their search was equally unavailing. The attendant at the buffet did not remember having seen any one of his description lately.

"Great Scott," ejaculated Tom. "Where is the old rascal anyway?"

Bert bent his brows in a puzzled frown. It certainly did seem a little queer.

"He must be close by somewhere," he said slowly. "He can't have vanished into the thin air. Perhaps the porters or the train men have seen something of him."

With a growing sense of uneasiness they went from car to car, but the mystery remained unsolved until they reached the engineer.

"Sure," replied that worthy, "I know who you mean. He was talking to me alongside the engine here."

"How long ago?" asked Bert, anxiously.

"O, it must be all of two hours," was the reply. "I remember it was just a little while after the train stopped. When he left me he started up that road," pointing to the path beside the track. "Said he was going to stretch his legs a little."

"Two hours ago!" exclaimed Bert.

"And not back yet!" cried Tom.

The boys looked at each other and in their eyes a great fear was dawning.

"O, I guess he's all right," said the engineer, "though he certainly was taking chances if he went very far. Things are rather risky around here just now, and it's good dope not to get too far away from the train unless you're pretty well 'heeled' and have got some friends along."

But his last words fell upon unheeding ears. With a bound, Bert was back in the car, closely followed by Tom. They rummaged hastily in their bags until they found their Colt revolvers – the good old .45s that had done them such good service in their fight with the pirates off the Chinese coast. Not a word was spoken. There was no time for talk and each knew what was passing in the mind of the other. Dick was gone – dear old Dick – and at this very moment was perhaps in deadly peril. There were only two things to be done. If he were alive, they would find him. If he were dead, they would avenge him.

That they were taking their own lives in their hands in the effort to aid their comrade did not even occur to them. It seemed the simplest thing in the world. It was not even a problem. Not for a moment did they weigh the cost. Were they hucksters to split hairs, to measure chances, when their comrade's life hung in the balance? As for the risks – well, let them come. They had faced death before and won out. Perhaps they would again. If not – there were worse things than death. At least they could die like men.

They thrust their weapons in their belt, threw a handful of cartridges in either pocket, leaped from the car and started on a run up the road.

As they ran, they gathered speed. The road fell away like a white ribbon behind them. The wind whistled in their ears. The canter they had already indulged in had put them in form and their anxiety gave wings to their feet. No time to spare themselves when every minute was precious – fraught with the chances of life or death. More than once they had run for glory – now perhaps they were running for a life. And at the thought they quickened their pace until they were fairly flying.

Their keen eyes scanned each side of the path for some sign of Dick's presence, but not until they came to the turn in the road was their search rewarded. Then they stopped abruptly.

Something had happened here. There were no signs of a struggle, but the ground was torn up as though by the pawing of horses. The upturned earth was fresh at the edges and the prints of hoofs could be clearly seen. A bit of cloth fluttered on a tree and a broken strap lay on the ground. An ace of spades near by made it look as though a card game had been suddenly interrupted and this impression gathered force from the presence of an empty bottle that still smelled strongly of mescal, the villainous whisky of the Mexicans.

Like hounds on the scent the boys circled round the spot, trying to get the meaning of the signs. Their experience in camping had made them the keenest kind of woodmen and they could read the forest like an open book. Bert's sharp eyes caught sight of the bark of a sapling freshly gnawed. By its height from the ground he knew at once that this had been made by the teeth of a broncho. The mark of a strap a little lower down showed that the beast had been tethered there. All around the clearing he went, until he had satisfied himself that at least twenty horses had been standing there a little while before.

Tom in the meantime had been studying the hoofprints. One of them especially arrested his attention. He followed the trail some hundred feet and came running back to Bert.

"One of those horses has carried double," he panted. "See how much deeper and sharper his prints are than the others. And though he started off among the first he soon came back to the rear. The others with a lighter load got on faster."

Bert hastily confirmed this conclusion. There was no longer any room for doubt. They saw the whole scene now as clearly as though they had been on the spot when it happened. Dick had come unexpectedly and unarmed upon this band of guerillas. They had at least been twenty to one, and he had had not the ghost of a chance. They had carried him off into the mountains. For what purpose? God only knew.

But at least they had spared his life. There was still a chance. While there was life there was hope. And they would never leave the trail until that last spark of hope had gone out in utter darkness.

Now that they had fully settled in their own minds just what had happened, the next thing in order was to plan the rescue. And this promised to be a tremendous task. The chances were all against them. They had no delusions on that score. The odds of twenty to two were enormous. Mere courage was not enough to settle the problem. With a heart of a lion they must have the cunning of a fox.

The boys sat down on the grassy bank and cudgeled their brains. The fierce excitement of the last few minutes had gone down, to be replaced by a steady flame of resolution. Bert's mental processes were quick as lightning. He could not only do, but plan. It was this instant perception and clear insight, as well as his pluck and muscle, that had made him a natural leader and won him the unquestioned position he held among his friends and comrades. Like a flash he reviewed in his mind the various plans that occurred to him, dismissing this, amending that, until out of the turmoil of his thoughts he had reached a definite conclusion.

He lifted his head from his hands and in short crisp sentences sketched out his purpose.

"Now, Tom," he said, "we've got to work harder and quicker than we ever did before. Here's the game. Make tracks for the train. It must be pretty nearly ready to move now. Go through Dick's bag and get his revolver. It may come in handy later on. Grab another big bunch of cartridges. Get the pocket compass out of my valise. Go into the buffet and cram your pockets full of bread and meat. We might shoot small game enough to keep us alive, but shooting makes a noise.

"Do these things first of all, and then hunt up Melton. You know whom I mean – that cattleman from Montana that we were talking to yesterday. He's a good fellow and a game sport. He told me he was going to Montillo on business connected with his ranch. That's the first station on the other side of the bridge. The train will be there in an hour. Tell Melton the fix we're in. He's chased outlaws himself and he'll understand. Ask him to go to the American Consul the minute he gets to Montillo

and put it up to him that American citizens need help and need it quick. It's an important town and we'll probably have a consul there. If not, ask Melton to put the facts before the Mexican authorities. They don't love Americans very much, but they're a little afraid that the Washington people may mix in here, and they may not want to get in bad with them. Besides they hate the guerillas just about as much as we do. Anyway we'll have to take the chance."

"How about following the trail?" suggested Tom. "There are plenty of bloodhounds around. They use them to chase the peons and Yaquis. Shall I ask Melton to send some along if he can?"

"No," replied Bert. "I thought of that, but their baying might give us away. If they suspect pursuit, they might kill Dick and scatter before we could get to them. You and I are woodmen enough to follow a trail made by twenty horses. If there were only one they might get away with it, but not when there are so many. Now get a move on, old man. I'll wait for you here studying the signs, and we'll start as soon as you get back. If reinforcements catch up to us, all right. If we can get Dick without them so much the better. If not, they'll help us later on."

Without another word Tom leaped to his feet and was off down the road like the flight of an arrow.

CHAPTER III

A GALLANT COMRADE

As he flew on, he heard the shrill whistle of the engine and the ringing of its bell. The train was getting ready to move. Groups of workmen, tools in hand, were coming from the ravine, and the passengers, glad that the wearisome wait was over, were getting on the platform, ready to climb into the cars. He let out a link and reached the train just as the engineer was getting into his cab. Tom blurted out the facts of Dick's capture, and the conductor, coming up just then, willingly consented to hold the train a few minutes longer.

To carry out Bert's instructions was with Tom the work of a moment, and then, with pockets crammed to bursting, he sought out Melton, the cattleman.

That individual, a grizzled weather beaten veteran of the plains, listened with the liveliest sympathy and indignation. His eyes, beneath his shaggy brows fairly blazed as Tom panted out the story.

"The dogs! The whelps!" he cried, as he brought down his gnarled fist with a tremendous thump. "If I were only twenty years younger or a hundred pounds lighter, I'd come with you myself. But I'd only hold you back if I went on foot. But you'll see me yet," he went on savagely; "I'll fix up things at Montillo as you ask, and then I'll get a horse and come after you. I thought my fighting days were over, but I've still got one good fight under my belt. Go ahead, my boy. You're the real stuff and I wish I had a son like you. You make me proud of being an American. I'll do my best to be in at the death, and God help those greasers if I get them under my guns."

His warmth and eagerness proved that Bert had made no mistake in enlisting him as their ally at this time of deadly need. With a fervent word of thanks and a crushing hand grip, Tom leaped from the train and sped back to the comrade who was impatiently awaiting him. A hurried report of his mission and they were off on the trail.

What was at the end of that trail? Dick, alive or dead? Rescue or defeat? A joyful reunion or graves for three? All they knew was that, whatever awaited them, it was not disgrace. And they grimly pulled their belts tighter and pressed forward.

As they climbed upward they came to an open space from which they had a wide view of the surrounding country. As they looked back to the south, they heard the faint whistle of the departing train and saw the thin veil of smoke that it left behind. Not until that moment did they realize how utterly alone they were. It was the snapping of the last link that bound them to civilization. With the swiftness of a kaleidoscope their whole life had changed. That morning, without the slightest idea of what fate had in store for them, they had been together, exchanging jest and banter; now one of their comrades was a captive in the power of desperate brigands and they were on their way to save him or die with him. It was a forlorn hope; but forlorn hopes have a way of winning out in this world, where grit is at a premium, and although they were sobered at the awful odds against them, they were not dismayed.

If they should be too late! This was the terrible fear that haunted them. Already the afternoon had advanced and their shadows were growing longer behind them. Bert consulted his watch. Night comes on suddenly in those latitudes and there were only a few hours of the precious daylight left. Whatever they did that day would have to be done before darkness set in. It was difficult enough to follow the trail by daylight, but at night it would be utterly impossible. Since they had not killed Dick at once the probability was that his life would be safe during the flight. But at night they would be resting, with nothing to do but drink and gamble and indulge in every vice of their depraved natures. What devilry might come to the surface, what thirst for blood and death that could only be slaked in

the torture of their captive! Nine-tenths of the world's crime is committed under cover of the night, and it is not without reason that Satan has been called the "Prince of Darkness."

Such thoughts as these gave an added quickness to their steps. The way led steadily uphill. The path was rough and they tripped often over the tangled undergrowth. Long creepers reached down like snakes to grasp them from the branches overhead. Once they narrowly escaped a treacherous bog that got a firm grip on Tom's feet, and from which Bert only pulled him out by the utmost exertion of his strength. At times they lost the trail altogether, and fumed for nearly an hour before they took up the thread again. At the brook through which Dick's captors had walked their horses, they had almost begun to despair, when an exclamation of Tom's showed that he had found the spot where they had left the water. But through all these vexations, they stuck to the work with dogged tenacity. Then suddenly, almost without warning, night came down on them like a blanket. There was nothing of the long dusk and waning light common to northern climes. Five minutes earlier there was light enough for them to read by. Five minutes later and they could not see their hand before their face.

"Well, Tom, old scout," said Bert, "it's no go for to-day. We've got to go into camp."

"Yes," agreed Tom, bitterly, "we've done our best, but our best isn't good enough. Poor Dick –"

"Brace up, old fellow," replied Bert, feigning a cheerfulness he did not feel, "we'll get there yet. To-morrow's a new day. And remember that this same darkness is holding up the guerillas too. They've got to go into camp and they're not getting any further ahead of us. Likely enough they'll feel pretty secure now and they won't be stirring so early to-morrow, while we'll be afoot at the first streak of daylight. What we've got to do now is to figure out the best and safest way to spend the night."

Near the spot where they were when darkness had overtaken them, was a grassy knoll, at the edge of which uprose a giant rock. At the foot of this they drew together enough of branches and shrubs to make a rude bed, and prepared to settle down and spend as best they could the hours before the coming of the dawn. They did not dare to make a fire, lest some prying eyes might discover their location. They had nothing to cook anyway, but the fire would have served to keep up their spirits and the smoke would have kept off the mosquitoes that hovered over them in swarms. It would have helped also to drive the chill from their bones, brought on by the heavy mists that rose from the lush vegetation and set their teeth to chattering. They drew close together for the companionship, and munched their bread and meat in silence. They were feeling the reaction that follows sustained effort and great excitement, and their hearts were too sick and sore for speech.

Then suddenly while they brooded – as suddenly as the sun had set – the moon arose and flooded the world with glory.

It put new life into the boys. They took heart of hope. Their mental barometer began to climb.

"I say, Bert," exclaimed Tom, eagerly voicing the thought that struck them both at once, "couldn't we follow the trail by moonlight?"

"I don't know," answered Bert, quite as excitedly. "Perhaps we can."

Let's make a try at it."

They started to their feet and hurried to the spot where they had left the trail. Bathed in that soft luminous splendor, it certainly seemed as though they should have no difficulty in following it as easily as by day. But they soon found their mistake. It was an unreal light, a fairy light that fled from details and concealed rather than revealed them. It lay on the ground like a shimmering, silken mesh, but through its tremulous beauty they could not detect the signs they sought. They needed the merciless, penetrating light of day. Their hopes were dashed, but they had to yield to the inevitable. They were turning back dejectedly to their improvised camp, when Bert stopped short in his tracks.

"What was that?" he whispered, as he grasped Tom's arm.

"I don't hear anything," returned Tom.

"I did. Listen."

They stood like stones, scarcely venturing to breathe. Then Tom, too, caught the sound. It was the faint, far-off tramp of horses. Bert threw himself down with his ear to the ground. A moment later he jumped to his feet.

"Three horses at least," he said quickly. "Get in the shadow of the rock and have your gun ready."

They crouched down where it was blackest and strained their eyes along the road up which they had come. Nearer and nearer came the cautious tread, and their fingers fidgeted on the trigger. Then a faint blur appeared on the moonlit path. Another moment and it resolved itself into a burly figure riding a wiry broncho and leading two others. The moonlight fell full on his rugged face and the boys gave a simultaneous gasp.

"Melton!" they cried, as they rushed toward him.

At the first sound, the newcomer had grasped a carbine that lay across his saddle, and in a flash the boys were covered. Then, as he recognized them, he lowered the weapon and grinned delightedly. In another second he was on the ground and his hands were almost wrung off in frantic welcome.

"Guessed it right the first time," he chuckled. "Melton sure enough. You didn't think I was bluffing, did you, when I said I'd come? If I'd left you two young fellows to make this fight alone, I could never have looked a white man in the face again. We Americans have got to stick together in this God-forsaken country. It's a long time since I've ridden the range and taken pot-shots at the greasers, but I guess I haven't forgotten how. But now let me get these bronchos hobbled and then we'll have a gabfest."

With the deftness of an' old frontiersman, he staked out the horses where the grazing was good, and then the three sought the shelter of the rock. The boys were jubilant at this notable addition to their forces. His skill and courage and long experience made him invaluable. And their hearts warmed toward this comparative stranger who had made their quarrel his, because they were his countrymen and because he saw in them a spirit kindred to his own. Not one in a thousand would have left his business and risked his life with such a fine disregard of the odds against him. Up to this time they had had only a fighting chance; now they were beginning to feel that it might be a winning chance.

The old cattleman settled his huge bulk on the pile of boughs and drew his pipe from his pocket. Not until it was filled and lighted and drawing well, would he "unlimber his jaw," to use his own phrase, and tell of the day's experience.

"I figured it all out on the trail," he began, as he leaned back comfortably against the rock, "and the minute we got to Montillo, I made a bee line to the American Consul. A fellow in brass buttons at the door wanted my card and told me I would have to wait in the anteroom. But I'm a rough and ready sort of fellow – always believe in taking the bull by the horns and cutting out the red tape – and I pushed him out of the way and streaked right into the consul's private office. I guessed the old man was kind o' shocked by my manners – or my lack of them – but he's a good sort all right, and when I gave him straight talk and told him I wanted him to mix war medicine right away, pronto, he got busy on the jump. He sent out one of his men to get me three of the best horses that could be had and then he scurried round with me to the big Mogul of the town – sort of mayor and chief of police rolled into one. I ain't much on the lingo, but I could see that the old boy was handing out a pretty stiff line of talk, and that the mayor was balky and backing up in the shafts. Not ugly, you know – anything but that. He was a slick proposition – that mayor. Smooth as oil and spreading on the salve a foot thick. Shrugging his shoulders and fairly wringing his hands. So sorry that anything had happened to these good Americanos whom he loved as though they were his brothers. He was desolated, broken-hearted – but what could he do? And every other word was manana – meaning tomorrow. That word is the curse of this country. Everything is manana – and then when to-morrow comes, it's manana again."

"Well, the old man stood this for a while, and then a sort of steely look came into his eyes that meant trouble and he sailed into him. Say, it did my heart good. Told him there wasn't going to be any manana in this. If there was, Mexico City would hear of it and Washington would hear of it,

and before he knew it he'd be wishing he were dead. Those boys had to be helped mighty quick. He must call out his guards, get a troop of cavalry and send them off on the run. I backed up his play by looking fierce and rolling my eyes and resting my hand kind o' careless like on my hip pocket. I guess the mayor had visions of sudden death at the hands of a wild and woolly Westerner – one of those 'dear Americanos whom he loved as a brother – and he came down like Davy Crockett's coon. He started ringing all sorts of bells on his desk and sending this one here and the other one there, and promised by all the saints that he'd have them on the trail within an hour or two. To make it surer I asked the consul as a special favor to say that if they didn't come, I'd be back in a day or two – drop in kind o' casual as it were – to know the reason why."

He chuckled, as he refilled his pipe and went on:

"Of course, I couldn't wait around there on any such chance as that. We went straight back to the consul's office and these three horses were waiting for me. They ain't much to brag of and I've got some on my ranch that could lay all over them. But they're gritty little beasts and the best that could be got on such short notice. The consul lent me his rifle which seems to be a pretty good one, and I've got the pair of revolvers that I always carry with me.

"Then I struck the spurs pretty sharply into the broncho and lighted out. I knew there wasn't much daylight left and we certainly did some traveling. I wanted to get up to you before dark if I could, but you had too big a start. I had no trouble in following the trail – I've tracked Sioux Indians before now, and these Mexicans are babies compared to them, when it comes to covering up – and when the dark came on I knew I wasn't very far behind. Then as the horses were still full of go, I just dropped the reins on their neck and let them meander along. So many horses have passed this way that I felt sure they would get the scent and keep on in the right direction. And as you see I wasn't very far out.

"Well," he ruminated, "I guess that's about all."

"All!" exclaimed Bert, warmly. "As if that wasn't enough. I never knew a finer or more generous thing. You've put us in your debt for life."

"Yes," broke in Tom, "for sheer pluck and goodness of heart – "

"Come, come," laughed Melton, "that's nothing at all. It's I who owe you a lot for the chance to get into such a lively scrap as this promises to be. I was getting rusty and beginning to feel that I was out of it. But now I feel as though twenty years had dropped away since this morning, and I'm just aching to hear the bark of a gun. It takes me back to the wild old days, when a man's life depended upon his quickness with the trigger. My blood is shooting through my veins once more, and, by thunder, I'm just as young at this moment as either of you fellows."

"Did you get any idea at Montillo who this guerilla chief might be?" asked Bert.

"Why, yes," replied Melton, slowly and almost reluctantly. "Of course they're only guessing, and they may not have the right dope. But while the consul was spelling with that mayor fellow, I caught every once in a while the word 'El Tigre.' That means 'the Tiger' in our language, and on our way back to the office he told me enough to show how well the name fits him. Some of the stories – but there," he broke off, checking himself abruptly, "it's getting late, and we've got to be stirring at the first streak of daylight. Now you fellows turn in and I'll sit here and figure things out a little."

Bert and Tom vigorously protested that they would take turns in watching, but he waved them off with a good humor that still had in it a touch of finality.

"Not a bit of it," he said. "More than once I've gone days and nights together without a wink of sleep, and felt none the worse for it. I'm a tough old knot, but you young fellows have got to have your sleep. Besides, I've got a lot of things I want to think out before morning."

Under his kindly but forceful persistence, there was nothing else to be done without offending him, and he had done too much for them not to have his way in this. So, under protest, they stretched their weary bodies on the rude couch they had prepared. At first their minds were so full of anxious thoughts about Dick that it seemed as though they couldn't sleep. But old nature had her way with them and before long they were lost in the sleep of utter exhaustion.

"Mighty lucky I stopped that fool tongue of mine in time," mused Melton, as he looked at their tired faces, "or there would have been no sleep for them this night."

For it was a gruesome story that the consul had told him that afternoon. A fearful reckoning would be demanded of the "Tiger" at the day of judgment. A more villainous character could not be found in the length and breadth of Mexico. Awful tales were told of him and others more horrible *could* not be told. That he was a robber and murderer went without saying. Every bandit chief was that. Those were mere everyday incidents of the "profession." But the evil preeminence of the Tiger lay in his love of torture for its own sake. He reveled in blood and tears. He was a master of devilish ingenuity. The shrieks of the victims were his sweetest music. He was, morally, a cross between an Apache Indian and a Chinese executioner. There were whispers of babies roasted in ovens, of children tortured before the eyes of bound and helpless parents until the latter became raving maniacs, of eyes gouged out and noses cut off and faces carved until they were only a frightful caricature of humanity. His band was composed of scoundrels almost as hardened as himself and with them he held all the nearby country in terror. Rewards were out for his capture dead or alive, but he laughed at pursuers and so far had thwarted all the plans of the Government troops.

And this was the man into whose hands Dick had fallen. The boys had wondered why the bandit, if he meant to kill Dick at all had not done so at once. Melton shook with rage as he thought that perhaps he knew the reason. Perhaps at this very moment —

But such thoughts unmanned one, and, hoping that Providence would prove kinder than his fears, he resolutely turned his mind in other channels.

And there was plenty to think about. He had been engaged in many dare-devil adventures in his varied life, but, as he admitted to himself with a smile half grave, half whimsical, there were few that he remembered so desperate as this. He did not underrate the enemy. Like most Western men, he had a contempt for "greasers," but he knew that it was not safe to carry that contempt too far. An American, to be sure, might tackle two or three Mexicans and have a fair chance of coming out winner, but when the odds were greater than that his chances were poor. But in this case the odds would probably be ten to one or more. Then, too, these were men whose lives were forfeit to the law — double-dyed murderers who could look for nothing but a "short shrift and a long rope" if they were captured. They would fight with the fierceness of cornered rats. Moreover, they would be on the defensive and in a country where they knew every foot of ground and could seize every advantage. Altogether the outlook was grave, and it speaks volumes for the character of the man that his spirits rose with danger and he would have been bitterly disappointed if he were cheated of the promised fight.

Absorbed in his thoughts, the night passed quickly, and as the first ray of light shot across the eastern sky, he roused the boys from slumber.

"Time to get a move on," he announced cheerily. "A bite of grub and we'll be off. The horses can make better time in the cool of the morning, and if we have any luck we may strike those fellows before they've had time to get the sleep out of their eyes."

His energy found an echo in that of the boys, and in a few minutes their meagre breakfast had been despatched, the horses saddled and they had hit the trail.

The path wound steadily upward. It was too narrow for them to ride abreast, and Melton rode in advance, scanning the road with the eye of a hawk. Three hours passed, and just as they were nearing the top of the plateau, the leader suddenly stopped. With uplifted hand to enjoin silence, he turned into the dense forest at the side of the path and dismounted. Bert and Tom followed suit.

"I smell smoke," Melton whispered. "There's a campfire not far off."

And as a vagrant breeze strayed toward them, the boys, too, sniffed the unmistakable odor of smoke.

"Of course," went on Melton in a low tone, "it's no sure thing that this comes from the camp of the fellows we're after. But all the chances lie that way. We'll tie our horses here and go ahead on foot. See that your guns are handy and don't step on any loose twigs."

A moment later and the bronchos were securely tied, and, silent as ghosts, they crept up the woodland path.

CHAPTER IV

THE CAPTURED SENTRY

They had wormed their way through the thick undergrowth for perhaps three hundred feet, when Melton, who was in the van, paused abruptly and gave a sign of caution. Then he beckoned the boys to come nearer.

"They've got a sentry posted here," he whispered, "I'd hoped they'd be too careless or too drunk to do it. Look over there a little to the right."

They peered through the bushes and saw, sitting on a tree stump, a Mexican, carrying a carbine, slung in the hollow of his arm. His back was toward them at the moment, but even while they gazed, he lazily rose and turned around, so that they caught a full view of his face. It was a rascally face that left no doubt in their minds that he was one of the bandit crew. A long knife was thrust in his belt, and he looked like an ugly customer to tackle in a fight. His small, piglike eyes looked listlessly about, and then, seeing no sign of danger, he reseated himself, and taking a flask from his pocket, applied it to his lips.

At a glance from Melton, they retreated as noiselessly as they had advanced, and not until they had gotten beyond earshot, did they stop for consultation as to their next move.

Bert and Tom felt their hearts beating high with excitement, but Melton was as cool and impassive as though he were seated on the veranda of his ranch.

While they waited for him to speak, he drew from its sheath a long double-edged bowie knife and fingered it thoughtfully.

"It's a long time since I've done it," he mused. "I wonder if I can do it now. I'll try it out first."

Rising, he went over to a tree about fifty feet away. At a height of six feet from the ground, he cut out a circle of bark, about the size of a saucer. The white patch stood out in strong contrast to the rest of the tree. Returning to the boys, who had looked on puzzled at his action, he planted himself solidly and took the bowie by the blade. A moment he stood thus, measuring the distance. Then he raised the weapon and hurled it at the bark. It whizzed through the air in a gleam of light, and struck two inches inside the circle, where it hung quivering. It was a marvelous bit of knife play, and Bert and Tom could hardly repress an exclamation.

"That's all I wanted to know," muttered Melton, as he came back, after pulling the knife from the tree and restoring it to its sheath. "It's a little trick that has saved my life once or twice before on the plains, and I wanted to make sure that I hadn't forgotten. I guess if I could hit that circle, I could do for the Mexican."

"For as you boys may imagine," he went on, "I wasn't doing this thing for pastime. We've got to get that sentinel out of the way. Of course, it would be an easy thing to wing him with a bullet. But that makes a noise and probably the camp is not far off. Our only chance lies in taking them by surprise. If they once get wind of our coming we'll have as much chance as a celluloid dog chasing an asbestos cat through Hades. I'd rather take this fellow alive if we could, for we might be able to get some valuable information from him. But I'm afraid he'd let out a yell or shoot off his gun before we could get to him. I guess we'll have to depend on this little persuader," he concluded, as he put his hand on the shaft of the knife.

Bert had been thinking rapidly.

"Couldn't we save that as a last resort?" he ventured. "I think that perhaps I might creep up on that fellow without his seeing me."

"But how?" asked Melton in surprise. "You'd have to be as quick as a coyote and as light as a cat to do it. What's your idea?"

"Why," replied Bert, "I figure that we might go back to the place where we first saw him. You can see from the listless way he looked around that he isn't really on the alert. Then too, he's drinking. If we find that he's facing our way, I'll make a circuit and get back of him. Then at the right second I'll make my dash. He probably won't hear me until I get close to him, and then he'll be so paralyzed, what with the surprise and the drink, that I'll have my hands on his throat before he can make a sound. In the meantime, you keep him covered with your knife, and if he sees me too soon you can let fly."

Melton, a man used to quick decisions, spent only a moment weighing the pros and cons, looking keenly at Bert the while. What he saw seemed to satisfy him.

"It's a plucky stunt," he said, "but you're the lad to do it if any one can. I'd sure like to make that fellow talk before he goes over the great divide. Come along."

Noiselessly, they reached their former point of observation. The sentinel still sat there facing their way. The flask was in his hand and they could see from the way he tilted it that it was nearly empty. His carbine stood with its butt on the ground and the muzzle resting against the stump. Crouching low in the thicket, Melton drew his knife from its sheath, his eye gauging the distance. Bert, who had shed his coat and shoes, with a parting pat from Tom, made a wide circuit to the left, creeping along with his body close to the ground and scarcely daring to breathe. Once a twig cracked beneath his hand and his heart seemed to stop beating. But no sound came from the unsuspecting sentry, and after a moment's pause he went on. Soon he reached a point about a hundred feet in the rear of the Mexican, and behind the shelter of a huge tree rose slowly to his feet.

For forty feet the undergrowth was thick enough to conceal him. But then came the little clearing where for sixty feet no concealment was possible. He did not dare to tiptoe over it, because, if he were seen he could not get under way fast enough to reach his quarry. It must be a lightning dash. Once he had run a hundred yards – three hundred feet – in ten seconds flat. That would give him three seconds or less to cross the clearing. But a bullet could travel faster still. He drew a long breath and then, as lightly and swiftly as a panther, he leaped over the intervening space.

He had covered half the distance when the sentry heard him and sprang to his feet. For the fraction of a second he stood, petrified with surprise and fright. Then he reached for his carbine, but as though realizing that he could not level it in time, he abandoned that idea and snatched at his knife. And just then Bert launched himself on him like a thunderbolt.

Down they went fighting like wildcats. They rolled over and over. Bert's hands were on the rascal's throat and he could not utter a cry. But his knife was out and upraised to strike, when Tom, who with Melton had rushed from the bushes the moment the clash had come, grasped the uplifted hand and wrenched it until the knife fell to the ground. Another instant, and the scoundrel, bound with his own belt and gagged with a portion of the serape torn from his shoulders, was sitting huddled up on the ground, with his back against the stump, while baffled rage and hate glowed from his wicked eyes.

"Good work, my boy, good work," said Melton, as he grasped Bert's hand warmly. "You tackled that fellow like a ton of brick. I never saw a prettier rough house than that was for a minute. Now get your breath back while I try to get this fellow to listen to reason. I know this breed of cattle pretty well and I have a hunch that it won't be long before we understand each other."

He drew out his bowie knife and felt its edge, while the prisoner looked on with a growing terror in his eyes.

Melton reached down and grabbing the fellow by the collar jerked him to his feet.

"Now, listen," he said, in the mongrel blending of English and Mexican that is understood on both sides of the border. "You're going to be a dead man in one minute if you don't tell me the truth. Sabe?"

Melton's eyes were like two lambent flames, and as the fellow looked into them, he wilted like a rag. He nodded his head eagerly as a sign that he would tell all he knew.

"I guessed as much," said Melton, grimly, as he turned to the boys. "These dogs would betray their own brother to save their miserable carcass. Untie that gag, and I'll turn him inside out until I get from him all he knows."

He placed the point of his bowie at the brigand's throat, and held it there while the boys removed the gag.

"One yip from you, and this knife goes in up to the hilt," said Melton.

"Now tell me how far away your camp is from here."

"About a mile," replied the man, sullenly.

"What is the name of your captain?"

"El Tigre," was the answer, and the fellow shivered as he mentioned that redoubtable flame.

"How many men has he with him?" was the next question.

The bandit did not know exactly. There had been fifty or more, but a dozen or so had been sent on an expedition late last night. Maybe there were thirty or forty there now. He could not tell for sure.

The knife pricked sharply, and the fellow went down on his knees in an agony of terror, and swore by all his saints that he was telling all he knew. Why should he lie to the senor? The senor might kill him, but what he was saying was the truth.

"Get up," said Melton, disgustedly, for the cowardice of the cringing creature sickened him. "Now tell me what captives were in the camp and what your chief intends to do with them."

There were two captives there just now. One of them was a Chinaman, who had been taken in a raid on a hacienda, down in the valley. The other was an Americano, who had been surprised yesterday, when he came upon the band, just as they were getting ready to go away into the mountains. Three days ago there had been seven prisoners, but now – . The rascal made an expressive gesture that told only too clearly what had become of the miserable seven, and Melton had need of all his self-control not to end his prisoner's worthless life then and there, while Bert and Tom grew pale as they thought of Dick.

By an effort they restrained themselves, and the questioning went on. The bandit did not know what his chief intended to do. He rather thought that very morning the Chinaman would be put out of the way. But the young Americano, so cool, so brave – he did not know. El Tigre had seemed to be puzzled about him. The chief had been drinking hard and was very ugly. Yes, that was all he knew, and if the senor were to kill him, he swore on the head of his father that he had told nothing but the truth.

At a sign from Melton, the boys replaced the gag. They had drained him dry of information, and now they knew the work that was cut out for them. They dragged him into the thick underbrush and tied him to a tree. Then with a parting prick from the bowie, and a threat of instant death, if he sought to release himself before their return, they braced themselves for the task before them.

"It's up to us, my lads," said Melton, as he carefully examined his weapons to see that they were in prime condition, while Bert and Tom followed his example. "The next half hour will probably tell the story. We're in for a lovely scrap, and we'll have that friend of yours with us when we come back, or we'll never come back at all."

A keen sense of elation thrilled Bert and Tom, as they fell in behind the old frontiersman, and followed him in Indian file up the path. The sickening suspense was over. The storm was about to break. Waiting was to be replaced by action. A few minutes more and they were to be battling for Dick's life and their own. The primeval man had broken through the veneer of civilization, and their nerves were tingling with longing for the fight.

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