

Brereton Frederick Sadleir

The Hero of Panama: A Tale of the Great Canal



Frederick Brereton

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The Hero of Panama: A Tale of the Great Canal

CHAPTER I

A Post of Responsibility

It was one of those roasting days in the Caribbean, when, in spite of a steady trade wind, the air felt absolutely motionless, and the sea took on an oily surface from which the sun flashed in a thousand directions, in rays that seemed to have been lent some added fierceness by the reflection.

Squish! Squelsh! The ground surf, which was hardly perceptible from the coast, and scarcely so from the deck of a liner, was apparent enough from the old tub which wallowed in it. She rolled in a manner that was sickening to behold, until at times her scupper ports took in water, then a surge of the ocean would take her in a different direction; she would dive forward, dipping her nose in the oily sea till the hawser which had been passed out over her stern, secured to a large anchor, brought her up with a jerk and tumbled her backwards with her stern rail awash.

Ugh! It was enough to make a white man groan. Even a nigger would have been inclined to grumble. But the Chinamen aboard the tub seemed, if anything, rather to enjoy this rocking. One of them stood almost amidships, his feet wide apart to preserve his balance, while he gripped the handle of the pump he was working, and turned it over and over with a monotonous regularity that seemed to match with his surroundings.

The man, who was barefooted, boasted of the very lightest of clothing, and wore his pigtail rolled in a coil at the back of his head. Other protection against the roasting sun he had none. Indeed, to look at him, he hardly seemed to need it, while the hot blast which came from the adjacent land passed over him without any apparent effect. Ching Hu was in his element.

"Nicee place, missee," he sang out after a while. "Plenty nicee and warmee. Stay long? No? Velly solly."

On he went, turning the handle without a pause, while there crept into his slanting eyes just a trace of disappointment. He sighed ever so gently, then assumed his accustomed expression. Not the wisest man in all the world could have said whether Ching Hu were happy or otherwise.

Just about ten feet from him, sheltered beneath a narrow awning of dirty canvas, a girl stood on the deck of the small ship, or, rather, she occupied a projection which overhung the water. Had this vessel been a liner, one would have guessed that this projection was the gangway from which the ladder descended towards the water to enable passengers to come aboard. But here a rapid inspection proved it to be merely a platform built out from the side, and suspended some eight feet from the surface of the ocean. From it a clear view of the ship's side was to be obtained, and, in these wonderfully clear waters, of the sandy bottom of the lagoon at whose entrance the vessel was moored. And it was upon the latter, upon the bottom of this heaving ocean, that Sadie Partington's eyes were directed.

"Ching," she called out suddenly, turning towards him, "I think they'll be coming up right now. Call the boys."

"You sure, missee? Yes? Velly well."

Ching Hu raised his eyebrows quaintly as he asked the question, and on receiving a nod from the girl, who at once turned to stare into the water, he raised his voice and called aloud in a sing-song style which would have made a stranger laugh. "Tom, Tom!" he shouted. "You comee now wid Sam. Wanted plenty soon."

A black face popped instantly from the caboose leading to the cabin – a big, round face, the face of a negro of some thirty years of age. Then the shoulders came into view, and following them

the whole figure of the man. He stood for a moment or two on the topmost step, balancing himself against the edge of the caboose, one hand gripping a plate, while the other vigorously polished it with a cloth. It gave one an opportunity of thoroughly inspecting this negro, and promptly one was filled with a feeling of pleasure. It was not because Tom was handsome, for he was the reverse of that. Nature had, indeed, liberally provided him with nose and lips, so much so that those two portions of his physiognomy were the most prominent at first sight. But if his nose were somewhat flattened and decidedly wide, and his lips undoubtedly big and prominent, Tom was possessed of other features which counterbalanced these detractions. His eyes seemed to attract attention at once. They seemed to smile at all and sundry on the instant, and flash a message to them. They were shining, honest eyes, which looked as if they could do nothing else but smile. Then the man's mouth completed his appearance of joviality; between the lips a gleaming double row of ivories were always to be seen, for Tom's smile was permanent. The smallest matter was sufficient to increase it, when the negro's ample face would be divided by a gaping chasm, a six-foot smile that could not be easily banished – the prelude to a roar of mirth and of deep-toned, spontaneous laughter. As for the rest of him, Tom was a monster. Six-feet-three in height, he was broad and thickset, and beside the dainty figure of Sadie Partington had the appearance of a veritable elephant.

"What you say, Chinaboy?" he asked, regarding the placid individual working the pump. "Come plenty soon, eh?"

"Ye-e-s. Missee say now."

"Den dinner be spoiled for sure. Taters boiled to rags ef I wait little minute. Stew no good ef left on fire for longer dan five minute. Missee, what you say dey doin'? They ain't gwine ter move yet?"

"Call Sam; you know as well as I do that the stew won't be spoiled. Come now, they're going to signal."

Sadie turned upon the negro with a frown, then again bent her eyes towards the bottom of the sea; for the girl was always ill at ease when the divers were working. Somehow or other, since her brothers had taken to this particular profession – and she had accompanied them upon their various trips – she had felt impelled to take upon herself the duty of watching them at work. She was only eleven now, though tall and old for her age, and for a year past she had almost daily taken her post on that tiny gangway to watch the two figures moving in the water below. For hours together she would be on the deck of this little boat, careless of the sun and heat, superintending the action of the pump and waiting for signals from the divers. And to Ching Hu, Tom, and the others her veriest nod was law. It was useless to argue with her: Sadie had a way of stamping her small foot which meant a great deal, and set all the men running to do her bidding. It was, therefore, with some show of alacrity that Tom prepared to follow his instructions.

"You Chinaboy," he commanded, grinning at a second Chinaman, who occupied the little galley down below, "yo make sure not boil de taters too much, and sniff dat stew. Not burn um, or, by de poker, Tom make yo smile. Yo comprenez what I say? Eh?"

He grinned one of his most expansive grins, and the Chinaman responded in a similar manner. He jerked his head in Tom's direction, thrusting it out of the galley door as he did so, and sending his pigtail flying. His little, pig-like eyes rolled while he brandished an enormous wooden spoon. "Ling knowee eberyting," he lisped. "See to dinner fine. Hab de stew beautiful."

"Den yo come along, yo Sam, lazy feller," shouted Tom at the pitch of his voice. "Whar yo got to, boy? I gives yo de biggest – oh, so yo dare!" he exclaimed, as a negro came from the after gangway, where a small ladder led to some of the men's quarters. "Yo's been sleepin'."

Tom held out an accusing finger, and gripped his comrade by the bare arm; for, without shadow of doubt, Sam's eyes were blinking. He had the appearance of a man who has just awakened. But the negro shook his head vigorously.

"Yo let go my arm, Tom, yo big elephant," he said, grinning widely. "I'se been down b'low fetchin' a bucket o' coal. What yo want?"

"Missie dar order us both; de boys is comin' up."

Tom still gripped the second negro, and playfully lifted him from off his feet as if he were merely a child, then he set him down against the ship's rail, while the two at once stared into the water. Truly they might have been described as brothers, so very alike were Tom and Sam in appearance. In fact, had their two heads been alone protruding from a window even Sadie would have been troubled to distinguish between them; but the similarity ended with the faces. Tom was huge, Sam was barely five feet in height, and slim in proportion; but he seemed to have inherited all the dignity which Tom had missed. Merry enough at all times, Sam was inclined to be a trifle pompous, and of a Sunday, when in port, his get-up generally was sufficient to open the eyes of everyone who beheld him. Now, however, his feet were bare, and he wore but a shirt and loose cotton trousers.

Let us join them at the rail and stare over into the water. Beneath the oily surface a wide stretch of yellowish-white sand was spread out on every hand, till it became a greenish tinge, and was finally lost in the blurr of the ocean; but directly beneath the ship it sparkled in the sun, while one could easily see the tiniest prominence, the few rocks existing here and there, and the deep shadow of the ship riding to her anchors. A derrick was rigged out over the rail, close to the platform occupied by Sadie, and from this was suspended a long wooden ladder, with ponderous weights attached to its lower end. Close at hand, through a sort of stirrup, passed a couple of ropes, while the piping conveying air to those below ran out over the gangway. It was there, too, that the smaller signal lines were attached.

As Tom and Sam looked over, their eyes caught the reflection from two metal objects down below, and very soon the latter became apparent as the helmets of the divers. They could see the two – for there were that number at work – seated on a huge boulder, side by side, while within some fifteen feet of them were the broken timbers and debris of what had once upon a time been a vessel.

"They've sat like that this past fifteen minutes," explained Sadie. "Seems that there's nothing to be found in the wreck. They'll be wanting to be hauled aboard in a minute. There's George moving."

As she spoke, one of the helmets swung slowly backwards, while the eyes inside peered aloft. Then there came a jerk at the life line. Sadie instantly responded.

"Coming up," she said. "Get a hold of the tackle, boys."

She still kept her place, superintending operations, while Tom and Sam together gripped the tackle, and, having pulled gently at first, began to haul lustily. In a little while one of the divers had reached the foot of the weighted ladder. At once the tackle was slacked off, while all watched the man slowly ascending from the depths, dipping deeper as the swell rolled the ship, and coming nearer the surface as she returned to an even keel. Then, with a squelch, the top of the shining helmet broke through the surface, the man reached the rail, and was lifted aboard. Sadie proceeded at once to loosen the screws securing the helmet to the rest of the dress, and lifted the huge metal globe from off the shoulders of the seated man.

"What luck, George?" she asked impetuously, staring anxiously into his face, and noticing how tired the man seemed, and how sallow he was. "You found something? It's going to pay?"

"Not if we work a year at it," came the answer in a dull, despondent tone of voice. "Help me to get this dress off, Sadie, my dear. I'm burning in it. I've felt smothered, so hot that I couldn't work down below. Jim's coming up at once."

The second diver was, in fact, already being hauled up, and anyone who happened to have watched the first make his ascent from the depths would at once have remarked the difference between the two. For the diver who now sat on a box on the swaying deck of the small vessel was bigger than he who was ascending; at the same time his movements had been far less active. The one now nearing the top of the ladder clambered up the rungs with the agility of a cat, in spite of the fact that every foot he rose made the weights he carried on his back and chest and on his boots all the heavier. His helmet shot out of the water with a burst, as the vessel rolled heavily, pulling the ladder up, only to throw it back at once.

"You hold on dar tight, yo, Massa Jim," shouted Tom, as he leaned over the rail. "Yo tink dis all a beanfeast. Not so when de ship roll so much. S'pose yo lose de hold. Buzz! Yo go right down to de bottom and stay dere fer good. Huh! Come in."

He gripped the extended hand of the diver, hauled the boy aboard, and promptly seated him on a second box. Three minutes later the helmet was off, and one had an opportunity of contrasting the young fellow who had appeared with the diver who had first of all ascended.

The latter was a young man of twenty-five perhaps, and, as we have said, was decidedly sallow and unhealthy-looking; in fact, natural good looks were marred not a little by his complexion. But with the one who had been addressed as Jim it was different. The young fellow was barely seventeen years of age, and his rosy cheeks displayed the fact that diving did not disagree with him. Then, too, his voice was so different. It was crisp and laughing, and anything but despondent; while, when he had rid himself of his diving weights and of his heavy boots, and was on his feet, one saw that he was of a good height, held himself well, and moved with the quick step that one might have expected from having seen him clamber from the depths of the ocean. But there was concern in his face when Sadie called him.

"George don't feel over well, Jim," she called out. "He said a minute back that he was burning hot; now he's downright shivering."

"Fever," said Jim promptly, taking his brother's hand. "Tom, there, just leave Sam and Ching to haul in the tackle. I want you."

"Sah, what for? De master ill?"

Even his smile was almost gone as he looked at George with eyes which were startled and wide open, for the happy-go-lucky Tom, so unused to sorrow or sickness, could tell at a glance that his young employer was anything but himself.

"Get along and fetch a bed on deck," commanded Jim; "then rig a shelter over it. Best place it right aft; there's more room, and you'll be able to pull the awnings over better. George'll stay on deck; it's too hot down below."

Pulling his diving suit off hurriedly, he helped his sister to disrobe the sick man; then, with Tom at George's head and Jim at his feet, they carried him aft and laid him on the bed already prepared. Sadie at once took her seat beside him, armed with a fan, while the negro, Tom, hastened to fetch water from the big canvas sack in which it was placed every day to cool. A strong dose of quinine was given to the sick man, and thereafter there was little to do but to watch him and tend to his immediate needs.

"We'll get up anchor and make right off for Colon," said Jim, as he stood beside his sister, some little distance from the bed. "There's nothing down there to salve, and we're wasting time and money. Better get back and see if there isn't another job to be had. This salvage work ain't paying us at all. We're losing heavily. Guess we'll have to get back on to the land."

Even he was a little despondent as he spoke, for matters had indeed not been going well for George, Jim, and Sadie. Americans born, one only of the three could remember their mother; for she had died shortly after Sadie's birth. But their father was a constant and pleasant memory to them all, for he had been with them till six months previously. A diver by profession, Mr. Silas Partington had managed to save a few dollars, and had bought up a salvage plant, with which for a while he had done excellent business. Then he had met with a grave misfortune. He and those whom he employed had worked for weeks at the salving of a sunken steamer, and had actually brought her to the surface and commenced to tow her into shallow water, when an accident had happened. The bulkhead which they had bolted across the huge rent made in the ship's side by a collision that had sent her to the bottom had, for some unforeseen reason, blown out. The air which had been forced into the vessel, and which had expelled nearly all the water in her, thus bringing her to the surface, had escaped at once, and down she had gone under the ocean; but on that occasion she had found her bed in a deep hollow, where diving was impossible.

"It just broke Father," said George, when describing the thing to Jim. "He lost heavily. There were weeks of work paid for, besides valuable plant lost. It brought him down to this."

"This" was the purchase of an old vessel, and the seeking of salvage jobs along the Caribbean coast. Silas had brought his children with him – George because he was already a partner, Jim and Sadie because he could not afford to keep them on the mainland. The cruise along the coast of Mexico had proved disastrous, for Silas had been blown overboard during one of those terrible tornadoes which occasionally sweep the gulf, and George was left to fend for the family – an undertaking he found none too easy. Jobs were few and far between, and that wretched Caribbean swell, together with a shifting, sandy bottom, made salvage work extremely difficult. The coffers of the Partington family were, indeed, already very empty, and the time was at hand when the ship must be sold to pay wages. And now George was down with fever.

"It's this hole of a place," growled Jim, as he thought the matter out that evening. "A man can't work off this fever-stricken coast and escape it. We'll get back to America. Somehow or other we'll manage to get work."

Early that evening George again was in a high, burning fever, and needed careful watching; but as the night wore on he quietened down. During the first hours of the morning the terrible burning again seized the sick man, and in a moment, as it seemed, he awoke in a frenzy and leaped from his bed. Dashing Jim aside as if he were a child, and knocking Sam to the deck, he leaped over the rail and splashed into the water. In the dim light they watched him striking out for the shore, and as they followed in the dinghy they saw him clamber on to the mud banks and enter the forest. But though Jim searched high and low, and lay off that pestilential part for a solid week, often repeating his search in the forest, there was never any trace of his brother. The sick man was utterly swallowed up by the jungle.

"Dead?" asked Sadie sorrowfully, her young cheeks hollowed by the trouble.

Jim nodded. "Sure," he said, with emphasis. "Dropped in some corner and never rose again. There's no manner of use searching further. Sadie dear, we've got to get ashore and set up somewhere for ourselves. I've got to be father and brother and everything to you."

That, indeed, was the position of affairs. Sadie was too young to look to her own fortunes, while Jim was none too old. But an American lad can make as good a struggle as anyone: Jim swore that he would. He had long since tried to remember friends of his father's, but had given the matter up as hopeless. There were only Ching, Tom, and Sam, all three of whom had been employed on the salvage plant, and were old servants.

"Too poor to help us, anyway," he thought. "They'll easily get employment, and will go their own way. I'll have to hunt out a job in New York. I'll take anything that'll give me enough to feed and give a roof to Sadie. Besides, there's the boat; there'll be a little left for her when all the wages are paid."

"And I ain't gwine ter be dismissed, not nohow," said Tom, when Jim told the jolly negro of his plans. "Me and Sam and Ching's been doin' a jaw. We're a-goin' to hold on to you and missie. We're all a-goin' ter get work together till you've made a pile fer yerself and can give us employment. Yo ain't no right ter order us away."

Thus it happened that Jim, having sold the boat and effects at Colon, went aboard a coaster bound for New York, Sadie and Tom and Sam, with the Chinaman, accompanying him.

"There's five hundred dollars in this bag," he told his sister. "That'll keep the wolf away till we've had time to look round. Don't you fear, Sadie; we'll land upon something good yet, and, who knows, one of these days, perhaps, I'll make that pile that Tom's always talking about. But guess it'll want a heap of doing."

CHAPTER II

En route for New York

"Wanted, hands to help in building construction down town, New York."

The advertisement caught Jim's eye as soon as he looked at the newspaper which happened to be aboard the coaster on which he and Sadie and the others were voyaging to New York, and fascinated him.

"See here, Sadie," he said. "It'll be just the thing. There must be heaps of jobs which I could do, even though I have no knowledge of building. Carrying bricks and so on, you know. There will be good wages, and the money will keep us going while I look round. Eh?"

"And perhaps there'll be a firm working in the docks round New York," ventured the wise Sadie. "Then you'd be able to get a job at diving. I shouldn't mind there; it isn't as dangerous. This building work would give Tom and Sam and Ching jobs too."

"Sure!" exclaimed Jim, beginning at once to feel less despondent. Not that this young American was apt to be downcast for long. But we must tell the whole truth concerning him. The heavy responsibilities so suddenly cast upon his shoulders, and the persistent ill fortune of the family, had somewhat upset his nerves, and robbed him of a little of his accustomed jollity. Still, with five hundred dollars behind him, and this advertisement before his eyes, he felt that the far future might be left to take care of itself; for the immediate prospects were brightening.

"We'll take the job, the whole lot of us," he said, as they sat on the deck in the dusk discussing matters. "We'll take a little tenement down in the working quarters. You'll housekeep, Sadie, and we four will go and earn dollars. Gee! There's no frightening me. This thing was beginning to get on top of me, and bear me down; but now, not a bit of it. I'll win out; one of these days I'll own a salvage plant of my own."

It is better to face difficulties brightly and with full courage than tackle them half-heartedly. Jim felt all the stronger for his courage, and paced the deck alone that night with hopes raised, and with full assurance for the future.

"I'll get a widow woman, or someone respectable like that, to come and help Sadie keep house," he said to himself. "It'll be company for her while I'm away. And of course there's her education: she'll have to have more schooling. We've rather forgotten that she's still only a child, for she behaves as if she were grown up."

That was, indeed, one of the pathetic items in the history of Jim's family. His father, Silas, had been pressed as it were into a course of action which meant a sudden cessation of all home life for Sadie, and which brought the child amongst grown-up men when she should have been at school, with some of her own sex about her, and playmates to romp with. Circumstances had, in fact, acted adversely both for Silas and his daughter.

"But we'll alter all that," Jim told himself. "Heigho! I'm for turning in."

He paced the deck once or twice more, then crept down the companion. He was nearing the bottom, when his progress was suddenly arrested by a shout.

"What's that?" he wondered. "Came from right forward."

Curiosity caused him to run nimbly up the steps again. His head was just emerging from the opening when the shout was repeated, while it was taken up instantly by men above his head, on the bridge of the ship. At the same moment there came the tinkle of the engine telegraph.

"Port! Port your helm! Hard a port!" he heard the lookout shout from his post on the forecastle. "Ship ahead! Port your helm!"

"Hard astern, Mr. Dingle! hard astern!" came in steady but sharp tones from the bridge, then there followed once more the tinkle of the telegraph. Jim felt the tremble and throb of the engines

suddenly die down; indistinct shouts came to him from somewhere in the interior of the coaster. Then the engine throbs recurred furiously, as if the ship were making a frantic effort. Crash!

He was thrown hard against the combing of the gangway, his head striking the woodwork heavily, so that he was partially stunned. That and the succeeding jar, as the coaster came end on into the bows of another steamer, toppled Jim over. He lost his foothold, and rolled down the steps into the gangway down below. Then he picked himself up, feeling dazed and giddy, and for a moment held tight to a pillar supporting the deck.

"A collision," he told himself. "A bad one too – full tilt into one another. It's shaken the electric light out. Lucky they keep an emergency oil lamp going."

The temptation to dash up on deck was strong within him, and had he been alone on the vessel, with none to care for, no doubt he would have obeyed the inclination. But there was Sadie; Jim was her protector. He dashed at once towards her cabin, and came upon her at the doorway, looking frightened.

"There's been a collision, Sadie, dear," he said, endeavouring to keep his voice quiet. "Guess we may have to move; let me come in and fix you."

The child was not undressed, fortunately, and Jim at once pushed into the cabin, groped for one of the cork life preservers which are placed in overhead racks, and adjusted it to her body.

"Now," he said, "bring a warm coat, and leave the other things. Ah, here's Tom!"

"Sah; me here, right enough. You's not hurt, nor missie?"

"Not a scratch, Tom. Just take Sadie right up on deck and stand beside her. That Sam?"

In the dusk outside there was a second figure, and behind that another. The faithful negroes, and Ching Hu, the Chinaman, had rallied at once to their youthful master.

"Me, in course," cried the little Sam. "Guess this here's a collision. But we ain't got no cause to mind; not at all, not at all, missie."

"Get life belts, put them on, and then go on deck," said Jim shortly. "Sadie, take charge of this bag of dollars. I'm going up to see what's happened."

Conscious that he had done all that was possible, and that Sadie was now in excellent hands, he turned and made for the companion, directing Tom to take the whole party on deck, and wait for him near the companion. With a few active steps he was there himself, and able to look about him. There was a slight sea fog enveloping the ship, through which, a hundred yards away, shone the lights of a steamer. Shouts came from her deck, while her siren was blowing frantically. On board the craft on which he himself stood there was also considerable noise and confusion. A couple of lights were swaying right forward, and running there Jim saw that a man was being slung over the bows in a rope's end. Right aft, where were quarters for steerage passengers, there was the sound of many voices, shouts, and hoarse cries of alarm, and once the shrill shriek of a woman.

"How'd it happen?" he asked one of the deck hands standing near him.

"How do most of these here things happen, sree?" came the answer. "This here fog did it. The lookouts war bright enough; but reckon the two ships jest bumped clean into the same course, and didn't see one another till their bows was touchin'. We're holed badly, I'm thinking. You take my advice, and get hold of your traps."

Jim leaned over the rail, and stared at the man swinging in the rope's end. The lantern he carried showed a huge rent in the bows of the ship, while the sound of rushing water came to his ears.

"Six feet by five, down under the water line, mostly," came from the man. "You'd better be slinging me over a sailcloth or something, or else the water'll fill her."

"They'll never do it," thought Jim, staring at the rent. "I've been enough on board ships to know what this means. I'll get back and see that Sadie's safe."

He ran back to the companion, where he discovered his friends seated on the hatchway.

"Tom," he said, "come along below with me. We shall have to take to the boats, and the sooner we've food with us the better. Lead along to the galley."

"Purser's store, sah; I knows very well. You say we gwine ter leave de ship."

"She's holed badly; she's bound to founder, I guess."

"Den de Lor' help us!" groaned Tom. "You listen here, sah. Forty Spaniard workmen living aft. Dey play de dickens. Dey fight for de boats. Not like dat at all. Tom say dat dere be trouble."

The mention of the men who had taken passage aft caused Jim some amount of perturbation. He had noticed them as he came aboard, and it was because of their presence on the ship that he had taken passage for himself and Sadie amidships.

"I'd have gone steerage with her had it not been for those dagoes," he had told himself. "There's little enough money to spare nowadays for luxuries; but they're a rough crowd, and I wouldn't like Sadie to be amongst them."

It had followed that he and Sadie had taken berths amidships, while Tom and Sam and Ching had, as a natural course, got places aft. Jim realized, now that Tom reminded him of the fact, that the Spaniards on the ship might prove a greater danger to them than the foundering of the vessel.

"Guess they're a rough crowd, and likely to lose their heads," he said aloud. "Let's get some food quick, Tom, and then see what's happening. We'll keep close together."

They ran along the alley way towards the purser's store, and, finding the door closed, Tom burst it in with a mighty heave from his shoulder. Jim snatched one of the hanging oil lanterns, and together they made a hurried survey of the contents.

"Here's a sack; hold it open, Tom," commanded Jim.

He ran his eyes round the shelves, then, without hesitation, pitched tins of preserved beef, of milk, and of other foodstuffs into the sack. In little more than a minute it was full to the neck.

"Get ahead," said Jim promptly. "I'll bring along this cask."

He stuffed a metal cup into one pocket, and hoisted a small cask of beer on to his shoulder. Had he been able to make a careful selection he would have sought for water; but in an emergency beer would do as well as anything, and already he knew that time was very limited. Indeed the ship had already a bad list on her; she leaned so much to one side that walking was difficult, while she was down at the head so that his return to the companion was made uphill. But in a little while the two arrived, panting, at the top of the companion, Tom bearing the lantern with him.

"Holy poker! but dere's the duce of a row aft, massa," sang out Sam, seeing them arrive. "I tink dem men is trying to put out de boats."

"How many are there?" asked Jim quickly.

"Seven, I tink. One just here; the others aft. Not like de noise dem scum make."

Jim had never been aboard a vessel under similar circumstances, and had therefore never experienced the confusion which follows a collision. He had read of such affairs, and had marvelled at the wonderful coolness and discipline maintained in some cases. Then he had heard of very opposite results, where men had lost their heads, and where they had fought, each for his own individual safety, as if they were wild beasts. Remembering the class of individual who had taken passage aboard this coaster, he could not help but wonder whether discipline would be maintained on this occasion. The shouts, the babel of sounds coming from the stern, seemed to indicate the opposite.

"See here, Tom," he said, when he had listened for a while. "You and Ching will stay right here by this boat, taking care of Sadie. Just give a look to the tackle, swing her out, and put all the grub on board. Best put Sadie there also. Sam and I'll get along right now to see what's being done. The captain maybe'll want some help. Those fellows along there appear to be fighting like demons."

"Den you git along, sah. Me and Sadie'll be all right. Ching Hu, yo Chinaboy, jest you hoist dat cask aboard, and mind yo don't let um tumble."

That was the best of the huge negro; he could be depended upon to keep his head, while his devotion to Sadie was without question. Jim felt no qualms as to his sister's security as he dashed forward again, Sam close at his heels. A minute later he met a little group coming towards him swiftly. It was the captain of the vessel, with his two officers, and some half-dozen men.

"It's a case with us," Jim heard him say as the group came to a halt.

"She'll be down in half an hour, and that don't give us too much time to get ready. Mr. Jarvis, jest hop down to the engine room and tell 'em all to come up. Quartermaster, guess you'd best make a round of all the cabins; there's time for that, and we want to see that no one's left. You others had best come along with me: we've got to fix those fellows aft. They tell me they're fighting like rats to get the boats out. We'll have to stop 'em. Glad I am there's so few women aboard. What about the young lady amidships?"

"She's safe, Captain," broke in Jim at once. "I've put her in charge of one of my negroes and the Chinaman. She's been placed in the boat by the companion, and we've got food and drink there also. I'm ready to come along and help you aft."

There was a lantern swinging in the captain's hand. He lifted it coolly, for there was no trace of flurry about this solid-looking man, and closely scrutinized Jim's features.

"Gee!" he exclaimed, reaching out to shake his hand. "You're the sort of chap a skipper's glad to know. You've seen to the safety of the sister, as is only right, and now you come along shoulder to shoulder with us. Guess there'll be bad trouble back there."

"Guess there will," answered Jim. "They're fighting, if one can judge by the noise."

"Jest like tigers, and they'll take some quelling. Look here; get a hold of anything handy and don't stand no nonsense. We can't afford to take lip from any of those Spaniards. Ef a man shows a knife, lay him flat on the deck. Come along."

He led the way swiftly along the deck, and the handful of men with him followed closely, picking up any likely weapon as they went. Jim possessed himself of an axe handle. It was long, and moderately heavy, while sufficiently tough to withstand any blow. He swung it up over his shoulder and took his place beside the captain and his mate. In a minute they had arrived at the rail from which one overlooked the small waist of the vessel, where the steerage passengers were accommodated. An oil lamp hung from the boom, which was housed in its crutches over the waist, and the feeble rays served to show what was happening. There were a couple of boats on either side of the deck, and about these a seething mass of men fought. Without knowledge of the sea, having no idea how to swing the boats out, and no order or method, the result of the frantic efforts of these foreign workmen had been disastrous in one case at least. One of the boats hung suspended from the tackles, while its stern washed in the water below, spars and oars and sails having been tumbled out of it. The other three still hung in their davits, and had been hoisted by the tackles from the crutches placed between their keels and the decks. As the captain and his men arrived, some of the men below were tugging at the tackles, while others were cutting the canvas covers of the boats adrift with their knives. In one corner of the waist of the ship three women were huddled, two men being engaged in a desperate fight within three feet of them.

"Down below there!" bellowed the captain. "Stand away from those boats."

He might have spoken to a party of dead men for all the effect his words had. The frantic individuals down below seemed not to have heard them. They still went on with the work of preparing the boats, though it was clear to everyone that, what with their eagerness and their utter selfishness, the hoisting out, if left to them, would end only in disaster.

"Down below there, you dogs!" shouted the captain. "Stand away there! Fall in in the centre of the deck."

He repeated his words in Spanish, for a skipper who sails those seas soon acquires a considerable vocabulary; but his orders fell upon deaf ears only, and all the while time was flying, the ship was settling, the moment when she would founder was drawing dangerously nearer.

"Guess we've got to fix 'em in our own way," said the captain, turning on his little party. "See here, we'll get down this port ladder, beat the men back from the two boats there, and then tackle the others. Jest keep close together, and ef there's opposition don't be too gentle. This ain't the time

for gentleness; they'll understand hard knocks when there ain't anything else that'll knock sense into their silly heads."

He led the way promptly, looking in the feeble rays of his own lantern, and that suspended from the boom, a regular commander. With his clear-cut but anxious features, his peaked beard and short moustaches, this skipper gave one the impression of power, of coolness, and of courage. Indeed he was just the sort of man required in such an emergency, for he inspired his followers with confidence, and took his post at their head as a matter of course. The mate slid down the ladder immediately on his heels and Jim took the whole flight in one bound.

"Now," said the captain.

"Lummy! Dis someting like, dis am," murmured Sam, his eager little face looking up into Jim's. The diminutive negro had armed himself with an enormous stake which he had discovered in some odd corner, and he flourished it. There was a little grin on his face, while his sharp teeth flashed. In fact, in one brief moment, the negro, who had always worked so well and so quietly, who had never displayed any pugnacity or traces of excitement, had become an altered individual. There was something about him which seemed to say that fighting was a pursuit which pleased him, that he was longing for the fray. But by now the whole party was gathered in the waist. The captain led them to the port boats, flinging aside all who stood in his path. In fact, to clear the Spaniards into the centre of the deck was no difficult matter. They were so absorbed in their task that they were taken by surprise. But a moment or two later, when they found a group of resolute-looking men lined up between them and the boats, which seemed to be their only hope of safety, the frantic people became furious and desperate.

"Two of you men just see that the tackles are free and all ready for hoisting," said the captain, his eye on the passengers. "We've got trouble to meet here, and when it's over we shall want to get the boats out precious slippy. Ah, you would, would you?"

In the short space of time which had elapsed since he had come to the waist the fury of the Spaniards had risen perceptibly. It wanted only a maddened leader now to turn the whole pack upon the captain and his men; and, in a trice, the man made his appearance. A huge fellow, with glittering ear-rings, whipped something from his belt and snarled at the captain. Then, with a shout as if he were a maddened beast, he dashed forward, a huge dagger held before him.

"I've got more of that for the likes of you," said the captain, stepping swiftly forward and meeting the man with a terrific blow from his fist. Indeed the Spaniard turned a half-somersault, and landed with a thud on the deck. But his mates were too desperate to notice his discomfiture; they came at the little band in a mob, and in a moment Jim and his comrades were fully engaged. A little active man bent low and ran in at our hero, while the latter caught the glint of something bright in his hand. Crash! The staff with which he had provided himself fell on the Spaniard's head and sent him sprawling. Bang! Sam's ponderous weapon missed the mark at which it was aimed and struck the deck heavily. Next instant the negro was locked in the arms of one of the attackers and was rolling with him on the decks.

But Jim had no time to watch him, nor opportunity of assisting, for the horde of men threw themselves on him and his comrades furiously. One managed to come to close quarters with him and struck with his knife; but the blade did not reach his person. A quick leap to one side saved him. Then the staff swung downwards and the man collapsed.

"A rare blow, lad. A rare one!" shouted the captain. "Boys, we'll be moving forward."

But the command was easier to give than to obey. Not all the efforts of the little party could make an impression. It seemed as if the captain would be defeated in his efforts to control the boats. But suddenly others arrived on the scene. It was the engine hands, headed by an enormous negro. Was it wonderful that Tom should itch to join in the fray? He had seen his mistress into a place of safety and had left Ching to guard her. Then, realizing that instant victory in this struggle could alone save everyone on board, he had led the engineering staff down the companion.

"By de poker! not stand quiet and 'low boats to be hoisted out," he bellowed, forcing his way to the front. "Not 'bey de captain and help when de ship sinkin'. By de poker, but dis not go on! Yo, what yo doin'?"

He seized a man who rushed at him, as if he were merely a child, twisted him round till his feet were in the air, and threw him back at his comrades. Then, smiling all the while, he rushed at the attackers, regardless of their knives, striking them down in all directions.

"Hooray! Now, boys," shouted the captain, "that darkie's done it for us fine. Beat 'em back; there's still time to mend matters."

Bunched together, and led by Tom, the little party threw themselves upon the Spaniards, striking right and left remorselessly. And in the space of a few seconds they had borne them back as far as the bulkhead, above which was the poop.

"If some of you men don't drop those knives precious quick I'll know why," commanded the skipper.

"By de poker – yes! Tom know why, yo bet!"

The huge negro strode in front of all, his big fists doubled, his head thrust forward as if he were a bull about to charge. His eye fell upon the rascal who had begun the attack, and who, meanwhile, had recovered his senses. There was a dagger in the villain's hand, and Tom did not fail to see it. In a trice he had pounced upon the man.

"What yo not obey for?" he demanded wrathfully. "Yo not hear de cap'n say yo to drop all knives? By de poker, but in two seconds yo sorry yo ever born! Yo drop that knife."

There was no disobeying such an order. Tom seized the Spaniard, gripped him with both powerful hands, and shook him till the man's head threatened to fall from his shoulders. Then he turned and grinned at the captain.

"Ready now to do as yo order, Cap'n," he smiled. "S'pose yo say fall in half here and half dere, get ready to haul on tackle. Dey ready to do as yo say."

"George, you're a real treasure! You're a brave man, Tom. Jest get 'em ranged up in order, and quick with it. Young sir, I'll be obliged ef you'll help him."

He nodded to Jim, left three of the men to stand by him, and at once turned to the boats. As for the Spaniards, Tom's huge frame and the prowess he had already displayed seemed to cow them. They obeyed his orders with alacrity, and were soon ranged up in two lines. By then their aid was wanted.

"Yo jest get to dem tackles yo in dat row," commanded Tom. "Haul when you told. If one ob yo try to get into de boats before I say yo can, me carve yo into little pieces – so."

He brandished an enormous knife, which he had picked up from the deck, and showed his teeth. The result might have been anticipated, for the passengers who had been fighting like a pack of beasts but a few moments before were absolutely cowed. They would rather face drowning than the anger of this terrible negro. It followed, therefore, that, now that they were helping in the task, the boats were swiftly swung out.

"Put the women aboard this one," said the captain. "We'll lower them with the boat. The others can go down by a rope ladder; it's smooth, thank goodness, or things would be worse. Now, lads, quick with it; she won't swim much longer."

Riot and fury had now been replaced by order and calm method. One by one the boats were lowered, passengers entered, and a crew was placed aboard. Moreover the purser and his men found time to make a raid on the stores, so that each boat was victualled. As for Sadie, she and Ching sat in the boat lowered from amidships, and waited anxiously for her brother and the others. Presently they came, the captain being the last to step over the rail. By then the decks forward were awash, while the stern of the vessel was pitched high in the air. Her propeller was plainly visible, lifted clear of the water.

"She'll plunge in a few moments. Best get clear away," said the captain. "The other ship, I hear, is foundering also. We'll have to stand by till morning. Is everyone with us?"

The answer had hardly left the mate's lips when there came a cry from Sadie. Her finger shot out, and in a moment all saw the object which had attracted her attention. It was the figure of a man standing on the sinking steamer. Instantly a groan escaped the captain.

"Couldn't risk going back for him," he said; "he must swim for it."

"But he's disabled; he's the man with a broken arm," sang out Jim. "He couldn't swim if you paid him to."

"Can't help it; I've the boat's crew to think of," declared the captain, shaking his head sadly. "That ship's on the point of diving; we're too close as it is. If I go nearer we risk the lives of all, your sister's into the bargain."

"A fact," cried the mate emphatically. "The skipper's saying only what's true."

"Ah! I thought she was going then!" shouted one of the crew aboard the boat, seeing the steamer lurch suddenly. "'Tain't more'n a matter of seconds."

"Then I'll chance being in time; I'm going for him."

Jim tore off his coat, and kicked his shoes away. Before they realized his intentions he had stepped on to the gunwale, and had plunged head foremost into the sea.

CHAPTER III

Jim Partington shows his Mettle

"Come back, lad," shouted the captain, as Jim's heels disappeared beneath the surface of the ocean. Then he rose quickly to his feet, and, gripping the gunwale of the rocking boat with both hands, he stared through the gloom at the sinking ship, and at the solitary figure now clinging to the rail amidships. Indeed the unhappy individual who had been accidentally left on the foundering vessel showed that he was in almost as frantic a condition as had been the Spanish workmen, when fighting in the waist for possession of the boats. He was waving the one arm which was uninjured vigorously, and as Jim set out in his direction he was seen to throw one leg over the rail, to clamber with difficulty upon it, then to sit there holding desperately, and looking as though every movement of the ship would cast him into the water.

"She's a going! Gee! did yer see her lurch then? My, I thought she was under!"

The deck hand who had shouted the words threw up his hands in the direction of the steamer, and turned a pair of startled, staring eyes upon her. There was good reason for his alarming observation, for at that moment the foundering vessel rolled heavily from side to side, as if she found her position irksome. Then she dipped her nose still deeper into the ocean, kicking her stern clear of the water till ten feet of her dripping keel were visible, and until her decks were at such a steep angle that none but an acrobat could have retained his position on them. Indeed the unfortunate individual clinging to the rail was swung from his insecure seat, and, falling backwards, crashed on to the deck and slithered down it till one of the bridge pillars arrested his progress.

"Holy poker, but dat near shave, I guess! Massa Jim, what yo doin' dat for? Yo's mad! Yo's goin' to drown yo'self!" shouted Tom, rising to his feet so rapidly that his huge bulk set the ship's boat rocking dangerously.

"Drown himself! He's jest committing suicide! I tell you, he's bound to go under," growled the captain, who, if the truth had only been known, felt himself so strongly impelled to leap into the sea and help in this foolhardy but gallant effort at rescue that it was only by exercising the greatest self-control that he was able to hold himself in check.

"If I wasn't skipper I'd do it," he cried. "But it would be a fool's game. Besides, I've got to remember that I'm in charge of this expedition."

Meanwhile Jim's head had burst from the surface of the water, and the plucky lad was forcing his way towards the sinking vessel with powerful strokes. He gave no heed to the shouts and calls of those behind him, not even when Sadie, beside herself with anxiety, rose from her seat in the stern of the boat and shrieked to him to return instantly.

"I'll do it, or go under," he told himself grimly. "A sinking ship ain't going to frighten me. Guess a chap couldn't float out there in safety and see a man drowned before his eyes, especially a man that's unable to fend for himself."

Though the water dripped into his eyes from his hair, and made seeing difficult, he, too, had observed the terrific lurch which the foundering vessel had just given; and if he had had any doubts as to her true condition they were instantly set aside by the mass of her stern elevated in such an ungainly manner into the air.

"Aboard there!" he shouted; "jump over into the water. She is going down."

Thanks to an oil lantern which still hung amidships, below the bridge, he could see the man for whose rescue he was striving, and as he thrust his way strenuously through the water he watched the injured passenger pick himself up on hand and knees and struggle towards the rail. He wedged his feet against a stanchion supporting the latter, and as Jim arrived within a few yards of the vessel, the man was again endeavouring to clamber over the rail.

Then there came, of a sudden, another sluggish lurch. The ship appeared to shiver throughout her framework, and rolled heavily from side to side. A moment later her bows rose rapidly from the ocean in which they had been submerged, while the stern regained almost its normal position. It looked, in fact, as if she were making one last gallant effort to float upon the surface. But again she rolled heavily from side to side, till her decks were slanting at a sickening angle, greater indeed than that to which Jim and his mates had become accustomed when cruising to the south along the Caribbean coast.

"By de power, but dat terrific, dat 'nough to shake de life out of anybody," muttered Tom, whose eyes all this while had been staring into the gloom, endeavouring to follow every movement of his young American master. Indeed, so acute was the vision of the dusky giant that details were visible to him, and to Sam, his diminutive brother, which others aboard the boat had no idea of. "Lummy, but Tom not like to see dat ship shake herself so! She go down with a bust in one little moment, and den – and den, what happen to Massa Jim?"

The very thought of the disaster which would follow drove the negro into a condition almost of frenzy. His eyes bulged from their sockets and looked as though they would tumble from his head. A whimper from Sadie set Tom's honest heart throbbing and palpitating. It was real pain to the fine fellow to know that his little mistress was in trouble. That and his own courageous, impetuous nature made it impossible to stay any longer inactive in the boat. Every muscle in his body trembled, while his breath came quick and deep.

"It's goin' ter help!" he shouted. "Nebber yo fear, missie; soon hab Massa Jim back safe and sound."

With that he floundered overboard, causing the boat to rock once more till her gunwale dipped beneath the oily surface of the ocean, a mass of water flooding the interior instantly. His head had hardly bobbed up in view again when there came a sudden exclamation from Sam, and a moment later the little fellow had slipped away to help his dusky brother in his gallant task.

"Jemima! But if that don't take it!" bellowed one of the crew of the boat, looking himself as if he were about to follow. "Every mother's son of 'em'll go down. That ship'll suck 'em under sure. Ain't we going nearer?"

In his eagerness he seized an oar, banged it into the rowlock, and proceeded to bear upon it; but a stern order from the captain at once arrested the movement.

"Belay there!" he cried sharply. "I ain't going to risk the lives of all aboard for those in the water. We're too close to that ship by a long way, much too close to my liking. Drop another oar in there, Macdougall, and pull us away a bit. Harvey, jest get to at bailing; she's taken a bit of water aboard. Miss Sadie, it's the right thing we're doing. It'll help them best in the end."

But there was mutiny in the eye of Macdougall. In the excitement of the moment the eager fellow could not in his own mind differentiate between the safety of those aboard the boat and those who had plunged into the water.

"What's that?" he growled. "Go farther away! Desert them as is wanting our help! Wall, if I ain't jiggered! We calls ourselves white men, and –"

"Stop!" commanded the skipper sternly. "Get down on that seat and pull, Macdougall. You're a fool, I'm thinking. Jest remember that I'm your skipper still, and taking orders from no one. I'm working in the interest of all."

"Aye, aye, sir. Macdougall, get to at it!" growled the mate, scowling at the sailor, and clenching a pair of brawny fists. Not that this officer was really angry with Macdougall. In his heart of hearts he rather admired the man; but discipline was discipline, and the skipper had many a time proved his own courage and discretion. Still, even his persuasion did not make of the sailor a willing man; for the moment Macdougall was obedient, though mutiny and smouldering anger flashed from his eyes.

Meanwhile the sinking vessel had displayed another series of erratic movements. That sickening roll from side to side had been replaced by a gentle pitching fore and aft, and as the seconds fled

swiftly by, the pitching had become slowly and almost imperceptibly greater. Then, suddenly, the vessel tossed her bows into the air till her watermarks were visible to those swimming in the ocean. But it was only for a little while. The bows came down again with a heave, which sent her forecastle beneath the surface, till she looked as though she were in the act of plunging to the bottom. Up she came again, displacing a huge mass of water, and raising a wave which spread quickly across the sea till it reached the boat hovering at a distance and rocked it. She canted heavily to port, showing the whole of her length of deck, and with such a violent movement that the passenger aboard was flung clear of the rail right out into the water. Then souse went her bows once more, raising the stern like a pinnacle into the gloom which surrounded everything.

"Yo grip him and get away back, quick as yo can," bellowed Tom, his mouth almost submerged, his powerful arms bearing him swiftly to help in the rescue. "I's close behind yo, Massa Jim."

But he might have shouted to a log of wood for all the use his words were. Jim heard not a syllable of his warning, for his eyes and all his attention were fixed upon the injured man who had been thrown from the vessel. He reached him in the course of a few seconds, and turning him upon his back supported his head.

"I'm fine," he heard the man say faintly. "This arm of mine don't give me no more than a dog's chance of swimming. You clear off, young chap. You've the right stuff in you, there ain't a doubt; but I'm fine. Don't you get worrying."

The last words were almost cut off by water lapping into his mouth. The huge wave raised by the sudden lifting of the vessel caught them both, and for a moment the two were hidden from sight by a mass of surging green foam. Jim kicked frantically, bearing himself and the man to the surface. Something struck hard against his chest, and, gripping at it with the one hand he had free, he swiftly realized that fortune had been good to him, for it was a buoy, cast loose by the injured passenger himself but a little while before, and now swept to hand at a most opportune moment. He looped his arm over it, and, slipping the other deeper down, hugged the man closer, drawing his head well up on to his own shoulder.

It was as well that he had made this hasty preparation, for, of a sudden, the ship beside which they floated soused her bows deep again, and slid farther beneath the surface. She seemed to hesitate, to make one other effort. There came a loud explosion, accompanied by the sound of splintering and rending wood. Air gushed from a mighty aperture which had made its appearance at the point where but a little while before the Spanish passengers had been fighting so frantically; then she plunged to her bed in the ocean. Swift as a dart she shot beneath the surface, leaving in her wake a swirling whirlpool, a twisting vortex into which everything – splinters of wood, spars, and human beings – were sucked with alarming swiftness, and with such force that none could resist it. So it happened that Jim and the passenger once more disappeared from the ken of those who were watching so eagerly.

How frantically Jim kicked; how desperately he clung to the buoy and to the man at whose rescue he aimed. The swirling water bearing them both down beneath the surface of the Caribbean in the wake of the vessel almost tore them apart in the course of that desperate struggle.

At one moment the pull on the buoy was so intense that he felt as if his arm would be dragged from its socket. An instant later a recoil of the waters swept it back against his face with such violence that his jaw was all but broken.

"Done for," he thought. "I can't stand much more of this. My lungs are bursting, my head feels as if it will explode."

The sound of seething, gushing water deafened him at first, but when he had been a little while immersed the thunderous notes, so distressing a moment ago, seemed to become lessened in intensity. The buzzing was now, if anything, rather pleasant, while his mind, acutely active but a second before, became blissfully content, as if absorbed in paying attention to that curious singing in his ears. But if he himself were unconscious of other things, nature still urged him to struggle on for existence. Jim had no idea of the frantic kicks he gave, of the grim force with which he clung to the man and

to the buoy. Then something revived his senses and caused his wandering wits to take notice of his surroundings. A breeze blew in his face, while someone shouted in his ear. He opened his eyes, and in the gloom that pervaded everything made out the grinning features of Tom.

"Yo's dere, den; yo's safe," he heard the negro exclaim. "By lummy, but dat extra near squeak, so I tell yo! Let go ob de man. Me take him for de moment. Yo puffed, blowin' like an engine."

Jim was exhausted; his breath was coming in quick, painful gasps. He could not spare any for an answer, and, indeed, had so little strength left in him that he did not even resent Tom's movement to take the injured passenger from his care. Instead, he clung to the buoy, fighting for air, wondering vaguely exactly what had happened.

"Yo hang dere quiet and easy," said Tom, one hand on the buoy and his muscular arm about the half-drowned man. "Yo puffin' like a grampus now, but in a little bit yo be better, not make such a noise, have plenty strength again. Den take de man and swim back with him. Tom only come to look on and see dat all well."

It was like the gallant fellow to make light of his own adventure, to stand aside now that he was sure that Jim was safe, so as not to rob him of the honour which would follow. Tom was indeed a very honest negro, a man with a wide, big heart, which held a large corner for Jim and his sister. He grinned in Jim's face, then suddenly turned and looked over his shoulder.

"By de poker, but here someone else!" he muttered. "Who dar? We's safe and sound. Yo hab no cause to worry."

"And I ain't worryin'," came a well-known voice through the darkness. "I comed along here jest to see what's happenin'. Is Massa Jim right and well?"

A growl burst from Tom's lips as he recognized the voice, and at once he turned a pair of blazing eyes upon the culprit who had dared to follow him.

"Dat yo, Sam?" he demanded. "Den what fo yo dare to leave de missie? Yo get back right now, or by de poker, me knock you into twenty cocked hat! What fo yo jump overboard and risk gettin' drowned?"

The question brought a gurgle from the jolly little Sam. He laughed outright beneath the nose of the irate Tom, and, reaching the buoy, clung to it for a moment or so before he deigned to reply.

"Yo's one great big donkey, yo am, Tom," he roared, shaking with laughter. "Yo tinks yo de only man allowed to jump into de water; but dat not so. De young massa place yo in charge of de missie, and yo no right to leave. Me knows dat; me comes along right out here to haul yo back. Yo one great big blackguard."

To the astonishment of Tom and Jim the little fellow burst into violent sobs, though his words had conveyed anything but an idea of sorrow. Sam shook from the top of his woolly head to his shoeless toes, and set the buoy rocking. Big tears coursed down his cheeks, though the water dripping from his hair almost cloaked them, and when he tried to speak again he gulped at the words and failed to express them. It was, in fact, a strange if comical procedure, and for the moment Jim's muddled condition did not help him to arrive at the meaning. But he grasped the truth a moment later, for Tom helped him.

"Yo – yo one little rascal, yo!" he heard the huge fellow exclaim, though there was no anger in his voice, no resentment for the words which Sam had hurled at him. Rather there was a strange trembling which denoted friendly feeling, accompanied by a sudden gripping of hands between the two darkies which seemed to say that they were perfectly agreed. Then Jim gathered the full meaning of Sam's tears, of Tom's magnanimous action. It was joy for his, Jim's, safety that had set Sam howling, and the tears coursing down his cheeks. It was that same feeling which induced Tom to overlook the high-flown language of his small brother and grip his hand so warmly.

"You're just two great grown-up babies," he laughed across at them. "You seem to imagine that no one can do anything without you, that I'm like a piece of china, liable to break on the smallest occasion. See here, Tom and Sam, shake hands. Guess you're both of you white right away through

from head to toe. I owe you both a heap for coming out after me; but mind what I've said – I ain't a piece of china. Guess I'm old enough and ugly enough to look after myself."

Tom grinned back at his young master and hung to the buoy for a while, still clinging to the hand he had offered. Then he dropped it, moved to the farther side, as if to place himself in a position of safety, and presently made his reply.

"Sah," he said, "p'raps you old enough, as yo say, p'raps no. Ugly 'nough: yes, I tink so. Yo's ugly 'nough to do one ob de stupidest tings as ever I seed. What fo yo jump into de sea like dat and swim toward a ship dat was sinking? S'pose she drag yo down? S'pose yo neber come up agin. Who den take care of missie?"

Even behind his fun there was a deal of truth. Who indeed would be left to care for the sister? But Jim had come up again, and, feeling better, he promptly made his presence felt.

"Jest swim back quick," he commanded Sam, "and tell 'em we're all right. Tell 'em to come along. We'll hang to the buoy. Now, Tom, set to splashing with your legs. There'll be sharks about here, and they're extra fond of darkies."

Tom paled for a moment under his dark skin and looked the reverse of comfortable. Then he laughed uproariously, shouted to Sam to hurry his departure, and promptly did as Jim had ordered. For it was as well to be cautious: both knew that sharks abounded in that corner of the Caribbean Sea, and some of the brutes might very well be in the vicinity. They kicked continuously, therefore, till the boat came up with a rush, and they and the injured man were lifted aboard.

"Young man, you can jest give me a grip of yer hand," cried the skipper of the foundered vessel when all were safely in the boat, stretching across to the triumphant Jim. "I guessed when you came up alongside us on the ship, telling me that you had fixed matters for your sister, and were ready to help us out with the trouble those Spaniards were giving, that you had got stuff behind you – the right sort of stuff, too. Then you tackled the hounds in proper style, so that I knew I had a man with me; a man, siree, not jest a boy. But this last thing's better than all. Guess this gentleman owes you a life. Guess he'll be for ever in your debt. Young man, I'm pleased to have met you."

It was a glowing tribute to our hero's courage, and he went crimson from the top of his dripping head to his stockinged toes as he listened to the words. Not that anyone could tell, for the gloom shrouded everything. However, Sadie, sitting beside him, clinging to his arm as if loath to part again with her protector, guessed his pleasure, while her own courageous little heart felt as if it would burst with pride.

"I'm glad you did it, Jim," she whispered, "though I was terrified. And Tom and Sam were really brave; they are so devoted. Can you believe, I had the greatest difficulty to keep Ching with me? He hates swimming, as you know, but he was very nearly following."

"Brave, honest fellows!" answered Jim with a gulp, for such devotion touched him. "They are, indeed, true friends to us."

However, he had no time for further conversation; for now that the captain had given his decision on events so recent, the mate and crew of the boat were determined to make their own voices heard.

"A right proper thing to have done: wish you was my own son," declared the former. "Shake, young man. It's a treat to meet one who's a true American."

"One of the very right sort," growled Macdougall, still trembling with excitement. "See here, young feller, I've nigh lost a job through you. I was for kicking up a rumpus direct against the old man's orders. Chief, I'm main sorry for them words and looks; but there's a time when a man has to kick. I thought you was funkking."

"Funkking!" exploded the mate, though the captain sat rigidly in his place, making no response. "Him funkking! The man you and I have sailed with these past three years and never known to fail us. You guessed that the chief who led us against those Spaniards was funkking! Gee! I've a mind to smash your head in with this oar."

There was real anger in the voice. The mate was furious, and his huge doubled fists showed that he was ready for anything; but the skipper quickly quietened him.

"Belay there, Mr. Jarvis," he said in his ordinary tones. "Macdougall's a fool, as I've already told him; and if he never knew it before he does now. I'm not afraid of anyone's criticisms. There's a motto I'm always a believer in. It runs: 'By their works shalt thou know them'. Guess I've never done a thing to allow any man to think I was funkng. Macdougall was too excited to be responsible for his thoughts; it's just the man's bluntness which has made him tell us so honestly. But take the lesson to heart, Macdougall; keep a clear, steady head always and it'll carry you through heaps of difficulties. Watch the men you work with, and get to know all about them: moments of excitement aren't the times for coming to conclusions. Now let's get on to other matters. How's that gentleman?"

"Fine," came in shaky tones from the bows of the boat in which the rescued passenger had been laid. "Guess I know everything. I've been lying here these last few minutes wondering whether I was alive or dead, and what had been happening. Is that the skipper?"

"It is, sir."

"Then allow me to say that you've as fine a crew as ever I set eyes on. It wasn't their fault that I was left aboard the ship. The collision knocked me silly, and guess I lay away there on the decks out of sight; but I never reckoned you'd have men aboard ready to take such risks to rescue a passenger. That young chap who swam out for me wellnigh went down with the vessel. I held my breath as we went under till I thought I should bust. And all the time I could feel him holding tighter to me and kicking. Gee, he's a full-blooded lad! He's got pluck if you like. And those coloured men come close after him. When I'm feeling better, guess I'd like to take a grip of their hands."

It was evident that he considered Jim to be one of the crew, and his gallant action undertaken in the course of duty; but the captain undecieved him.

"That young chap's a passenger like yourself, sir," he said. "And the darkies are ditto. I allow that you have every reason to want to thank them; you owe them your life. But let us see to the other vessel; this affair has taken her wellnigh out of my head."

The oars were dipped in the water, and the boat was slowly rowed in the direction of the twinkling lights which showed the position of the other steamer. She had sheered off to some distance, but as the boat approached her it became clear that her condition was not so desperate as had been imagined.

"She's listing badly to port and is down at the head. You can tell that easily," declared the experienced captain. "We'll row right alongside and I'll go aboard. You come too, Mr. Jarvis, and we'll take that young man there."

He motioned to Jim, and, having put his helm over, so directing the boat alongside the steamer, he called to one of the hands in the bows to hold to the companion ladder which had been dropped over her side. Casting his eyes about him, Jim was able to pierce the gloom to some extent, and became aware of the fact that a number of small boats were also lying off the vessel. In fact there were at least seven of them. Another remarkable fact was the silence which pervaded everything. A little while before there had been a deal of shouting, and some amount of confusion, no doubt; but now everything was orderly.

"Fine discipline," remarked the skipper. "The chief of this boat got his passengers away first of all, and then set to work to repair damages. Guess he hadn't mad Spaniards to fight. Come along, please."

He scrambled on to the companion and ran nimbly up the steps. A tall man met him when he reached the deck, and introduced himself as the captain.

"You're chief of the ship that's foundered?" he asked.

"I am," came the rejoinder. "We were badly holed, and there wasn't a chance from the very first. Then we had a horde of mad Spaniards to fight: the hounds lost their heads and struggled for the boats. After that we found, when it was too late to go near the ship, that one passenger had been left aboard;

but we saved him, thanks to the pluck of a passenger. Now, sir, I'm sorry for this collision. We'll not discuss it now; the courts ashore will deal with the evidence. I've come along to see how you fared."

"And thanks for the kind thought, sir," came the answer. "Reckon the question of who's to blame can be dealt with as you say. I congratulate you on the way you managed to come out of a difficulty. I'd have sent along; but then, you see, I wasn't sure that we weren't foundering too. There's a hole as big as three rum casks punched in our bows, and you can see that we've shipped no end of water; but our water-tight bulkheads were closed right away and that's saved us. We've the carpenters at work this instant, and as soon as they've plugged the gap with planks and oakum we'll be able to put matters a little more shipshape. Our pumps are just holding the water now; when the gap is plugged we shall gain on it. I reckon to have my passengers aboard in half an hour; you'll bring yours along, and welcome."

Half an hour later, in fact, found Jim and his friends, together with all the passengers and crew of the sunken steamer, aboard; while some twenty-four hours later the port of Colon had been reached.

"And here we have to start right off again," said Jim, discussing affairs with his sister. "That five hundred dollars will have to be drawn upon for clothes and other things, seeing that we lost everything with the ship. It'll mean I shall have to be quicker in getting a job when we reach New York. But don't you fear, Sadie; somehow I've a notion that our fortune is about to improve. Things are looking brighter."

They watched the steamer slowly berthed, and then made for the gangway. Bidding farewell to the skipper and the crew, with whom they had become most friendly, they were about to make their way ashore when the man whom Jim had rescued accosted them.

"I've fixed rooms for you all," he said. "You'll not disappoint me, will you? I've a house away up on the hill, and there's heaps of room."

"But – but we're going on direct for New York," cried Jim, astonished at the proposal.

"No doubt, sir; no doubt. But then there don't happen to be a steamer for a week, and Colon's a bad place to rest in. You'll oblige me by coming. I ain't had a chance, so far, of thanking you and the others for what you did. You'll surely give me a chance to get to know you better. Come and stay for a week till the steamer puts into port."

It may be imagined that Jim eagerly accepted the invitation, and, accompanied by Sadie, Tom, Sam, and Ching, took up his quarters with this new friend. Not for a moment did he guess that this week's delay would make a vast change in his future. His eye at the moment was fixed on New York, where he hoped to make that fortune of which he had laughingly spoken. He never imagined for one instant that the Isthmus of Panama would detain him, and that there he would join his compatriots, the Americans, and with them would take his share in that gigantic undertaking, the Panama Canal.

CHAPTER IV

Relating to Phineas Barton

Phineas B. Barton was in his own way an extremely pleasant and jolly man, but he required a great deal of knowing. He was moderately tall, clean shaven, as is the typical American of to-day, fairly good-looking, and about forty years of age. When he liked he could be voluble enough, but as a general rule his conversation was chiefly noteworthy by its absence; for Phineas was undoubtedly prone to silence and taciturnity.

"It's like this," he explained to Jim; "I'm boss at the present time of the foreign labour we employ on the Panama Canal works, and guess I have to talk most all the day when I'm at work. So a fellow gets used to keeping his mouth shut at other times, so as to rest his jaw. Glad you're coming out to my quarters."

He had thanked Jim quietly and with apparently little feeling for his action in plunging into the sea to save him when the steamer foundered, and after that had said not a word. But that did not imply that Phineas was ungrateful. It was not in his nature to employ many words; he had decided to show his gratitude in other ways. It was for that reason, no doubt, that he had invited our hero to his house. And, now that the whole party had disembarked, he proceeded to lead the way.

"Got any traps?" he asked.

"Not a stick," Jim answered. "We're here as we stand up."

"Then transport isn't a difficulty. It's nine miles to my quarters, and the railway will take us there quick. There's cars going one way or the other most always; come along to the terminus."

Jim and his comrades had no idea of the work which was going on on this narrow isthmus of Panama, therefore the reader may imagine that he was intensely surprised, once he and his friends had left the one-storied dwellings of Colon, to find human beings seething everywhere. Bands of labourers of every colour were working along the route where the canal would open into the Caribbean, while heavy smoke and the rattle of machinery came from another spot farther on.

"Where we're getting to work to cut our locks," explained Phineas, nursing his broken arm. "It's there that I broke this arm of mine two weeks ago. I was fool enough to get in the way of a dirt train, and of course, not having eyes itself, it shunted me off the track with a bang. That's why I was on my way back to the States; but guess that holiday'll have to wait. I'm keen to get back to work."

From the open car in which the party was accommodated he pointed out the various features of the isthmus, and in particular the works of the canal. And gradually Jim gathered the fact that this undertaking upon which his country had set its heart was gigantic, to say the least of it.

"No one knows what we're doing save those who've been here," said Phineas, a note of pride in his voice. "Back home there's folks ready enough to criticize and shout that things aren't being done right; but they ought to come right out here before opening their mouths. You've got an idea of the canal, of course?"

Jim reddened. To be truthful, his own struggle to make a way in this world had occupied most of his attention. He was naturally interested in all that concerned his own country, but even though so near to the isthmus he had never been farther than Colon when the ship put into port, and whilst there had merely observed rather a large number of policemen, both white and black. Of the huge army of workmen engaged in the canal enterprise he had not caught a glimpse.

"It's an eye-opener, this," he admitted. "I had no idea there were so many men, or so much machinery, though if I had thought for a little I could have guessed that there must be a bustle. As to the scheme of the canal, I haven't more than the vaguest idea."

"And I can't give you much information here. We'll want to get aboard an inspection car and run right through. That'll be a job for to-morrow. We'll have the inspector's car, and run along to the other

side. But, see here, this canal's the biggest thing in canals that's ever been thought of. The Suez Canal don't hold a candle to it. The Kiel Canal is an infant when compared with what this will be when it's finished. There's fifty miles, or thereabouts, of solid dirt between Colon and Panama, and America has decided to get to at that dirt and cut a way clear through it, a way not only big enough to take ships of to-day, but to take ships of to-morrow, ships that'll make the world open its eyes and exclaim."

The very mention of the work made Jim gasp. He asked for particulars promptly. "It'll take a heap of time, I expect," he said. "Reckon a canal a mile long and fifty feet wide by thirty deep isn't dug in a day."

"Nor hardly in a year. But we're not digging all the way," explained Phineas. "America has selected what is known as the high-level canal; that is, she's not just digging a track clear through from Atlantic to Pacific, a tide-level canal as you might call it, for there are difficulties against such a scheme. To begin with, there's a tide to be reckoned with at Panama, while this Atlantic end has none; which means your water level at the Pacific side is different from that at the Atlantic. Then there's river water to be contended with. This isthmus gets a full share of rain, particularly near the Atlantic, and the rivers get packed with water in a matter of a few hours. Well, you've got to do something, or that flood will swamp your canal, wash away your works, and do other damage."

"Then the high level has fewer difficulties?" asked Jim.

"You may say so, though the job is big enough in all conscience. Shortly put, it's this. We begin the canal by dredging in Limon Bay, right here beside Colon, and cut our dirt away, in all for a matter of just over seven miles. Then we build three tiers of double locks, which will take any vessel, and which will float them up in steps to the 85-foot level. Once up there the ship steams into a huge lake where there's dry land to-day. We get that lake by damming the Chagres River right there before us, at Gatun, throwing the water back into a long natural hollow, and when the work is finished we shall have a body of water there four-fifths the size of Lake Geneva. Anyway, it'll allow a steamer to get along under her own power till she arrives at the other end of the lake at Obispo. Even then she uses her own power, though she has to slow down. She enters what we call the Culebra cut, just nine miles long, where we are burrowing our way through the hills. That's one of the biggest of our jobs. You'll be interested when you see it. We've a small army of men at work, and rock drills and steam shovels are going all day, while dirt trains travel to and fro more often than electrics in the New York subway. Then comes a lock at Pedro Miguel, and another at Milaflores, which let our ships down to Pacific level. Way down at that end we've a lot of dredging to do to clear the below-sea track of the canal."

Indeed it was no wonder that Phineas found it a matter of impossibility to describe the gigantic, herculean task which America has undertaken. Moreover, it may be forgiven our hero if he failed, in such a short space of time, fully to comprehend what was being done. A canal was being fashioned, that he knew well enough, and now Phineas had given him a rough idea of its direction, and of the methods to be employed to obtain a waterway from one ocean to the other. The rest had necessarily to be left to the imagination, and to the moment when clear plans of the works could be studied.

"But you know a bit about it, and that's good for the present," said Phineas. "I'm not going to give you a bad headache right off by throwing more particulars at you, though I fancy you'd be interested to know just one or two items."

"And those?" asked Jim, by no means bored with the description. In fact, like any healthy youngster, he was intensely interested in this canal, and was burning with impatience to see all the machinery employed, the methods used by the engineers and their staff to bring about the various works. "I'd give something to see the lake," he admitted. "Almost as big as that of Geneva? Gee! That's a whopper."

"You may say so," agreed Phineas, again a tinge of pride in his voice. "There'll be somewhere about 160 square miles of water in that lake, and a fleet will be able to lie to in it. Those locks at Gatun, which are to be double – one for steamers going up, and the other for ships coming down – will each give a usable length of 1100 feet, which is a good 300 feet longer than any ship yet afloat.

They'll be 110 feet wide, and have a minimum depth of 41 feet. Put that all together, and remember that when the gates of the locks are shut, and water allowed to come down, the biggest battleship yet heard of will be lifted solid just about 32 feet, and then warped on into another lock as like the last as two peas. In less than an hour we'll raise a ship up to our high-level canal from the Atlantic, and we'll do it, sir, as easy as you lift rowing boats down on the rivers."

Phineas went hot at the thought of the undertaking, and, looking at him, Jim could see that the man was filled with a huge pride, with a tremendous fixity of purpose, the courage and tenacity to push on with a labour which his country had begun, and which the honour of the nation demanded should be brought to a satisfactory conclusion. And in a little while Jim understood that there was not a white employee engaged on the isthmus who did not dream of the day when the canal would be opened, when their own countrymen, some of whom at this moment were ready to discount their labours, would be amongst the keenest admirers of the finished task.

"But guess it's time we thought of the house," said Phineas, dragging his attention away from the works before him. "I've a shanty way up the hill there, with a housekeeper to look to it for me. She'll take care of Miss Sadie."

They descended from the car and slowly trudged up the hill. Then Phineas gave them a welcome to his home.

"Looks cool and nice; don't it?" he remarked, as they ascended a flight of steps leading on to a wide veranda. "I can see you looking at my windows, young man. Well, we don't have any out here. A chap gets to live without them easily enough. There's just copper gauze right round the veranda, and the same over the window openings. Most days it's so hot one doesn't think of their absence. And if a cold spell comes, one can easily put on something warmer. Now we'll get along in and feed. Ha, Mrs. Jones, that's you again! You didn't think to see me back so soon, till I telephoned from Colon. This is Miss Sadie, and this is Jim, the young man who rescued me. We're just hungry, so we'll come right in if things are ready, and Tom here, and Sam, and Ching can get round to the kitchen. You'll find 'em useful boys."

The widow who looked to Phineas's affairs was a pleasant woman, and gave our hero and his sister a real welcome. As to the negroes, though she looked at them askance at first, she rapidly found them a blessing. For Tom installed himself as butler unasked, while Sam carried dishes to and fro. Ching settled down to the work of washing up the things as if he had been brought to the isthmus for that very purpose.

"All of which just makes things slide along as if they were oiled," said Phineas with a glad smile, as he lolled on his veranda afterwards.

"See here, Jim, them boys of yours can go along helping Mrs. Jones while you're here; but of course, if they were at work on the canal, they would have their own quarters along with the other coloured men. Pity you're not staying. Where do you go after New York?"

It was a leading question, and Jim explained his position frankly.

"I don't complain," he said, "but we certainly have had our share of ill fortune. First Father lost his money, then his life. Afterwards my brother went off his head with fever, and was lost in the forest way down there below Colon. I've got to find work other than diving."

"You've done a bit of that, then?" asked Phineas.

Jim nodded. "A lot," he said. "But I'm not really skilled."

"You've handled tools and machinery?"

"Many a time; Father made me learn from the very beginning."

"See here!" cried Phineas suddenly; "you're after a job, and look to earn dollars. Well, there are dollars to earn here for a good man. Try a spell on the canal works. We've vacancies almost all the while, for men get tired of the job, while others fall sick. Then there's every sort of work, to suit the knowledge of everyone. Of course white men have the pick. They're skilled men, and naturally enough they get posts of responsibility. Some drive steam navvies, others rock drills, while some

are powder men, and place the charges which we fire every night after five. At the locks there's pile driving and concrete laying, with white men to run the engines or supervise. As to diving – well, there may be some of that, but it's the land we're chiefly engaged with."

The temptation to accept the proposal right off was strong, and Jim found it difficult to keep from answering. Then he suddenly asked a question.

"There's my sister," he said. "I suppose Tom and the others could easily get work, and so stay here; but this place hasn't the best of reputations for health. I must look after her."

"And she'll be as well looked after here as anywhere," said Phineas eagerly. "We're high up out of the valley, the house has lately been built, while that yarn about the health of the isthmus is old history. We've changed all that. An American army surgeon, with others to help him, discovered that yellow fever was given by a particular form of mosquito. Well, he set to work to find where that mosquito lived and bred. Then he formed a sanitary corps, drainage was looked to, scrub cut down, windows barred by copper gauze. And we've fixed that mosquito. Yellow fever is now unheard of on the isthmus, while there's very little malarial fever. The canal zone, particularly in these high parts, is as healthy as New York. Come now."

"I agree to stop if she cares to do so," cried Jim suddenly, for there was an eagerness about the man before him which captivated him. It was clear, in fact, that Phineas was anxious that Jim should stay; and since he promised work, and stated that no harm could come to Sadie from residence there, why, if matters could be arranged, Jim made up his mind he would stay. Perhaps here he would find the means to cut the first steps in that flight which was to lead to a revival of his fortunes.

"Then here's a plan," said Phineas. "I'm real glad you'll stay on here, for I want a companion. I lost my wife five years ago, and by rights should be living way over there in one of the hotels the American Government has built for its employees. But I chose to have a house alone, and at times it's lonesome. You'll stay along with me, and Sadie'll have Mrs. Jones to look after her. There's a Government school a quarter of a mile away, with plenty of boys and girls going. As for the darkies and the Chinaman, I can't promise anything at present. Depends on the work they have to do; but I've an idea I could make that fellow Tom extra useful."

Exactly what was in the mind of this American official Jim could not guess. He went to bed that night with a feeling of exultation to which he had been a stranger for a long while, for Sadie had taken to Mrs. Jones, and was delighted at the thought of remaining.

"Why trouble to go along to New York?" she asked him, in her wise little way, when he asked her what she would like. "This place is glorious. The view from the house is really magnificent, and there's no loneliness anywhere. Look at the works going on, with thousands of men. Then Mrs. Jones tells me that there are a number of boys and girls, so that I am sure to have companions. You can earn good wages here, Jim, and perhaps rise to a position of responsibility."

"Rise! that I will!" our hero told himself, for he was bubbling over with enthusiasm. "I've myself alone to look to, and I'll work and make those in authority over me see that I'm trustworthy. I'll show 'em I'm not a skulker. Wonder what job I'll get?"

It was at an early hour on the following morning that he was up and out, only to find Phineas abroad before him.

"That you, youngster?" he sang out cheerily, seeing Jim. "I've been down to the office of the Commission doctor, who's fixed this arm for me. The man who saw to it aboard the ship that brought us in hadn't too much time, for there were others who'd been injured by some of those Spaniards who'd been fighting. In consequence I had a bit of pain last night; but I'm easy now. Let's get some breakfast, then you and I'll be off."

An hour later found the two down at the point where the dirt trains were already dumping their contents, and just where the huge Gatun dam was to be erected, so, standing on an eminence, Jim was able, with the help of his friend, to follow in a logical manner the plans of the American engineers.

For he could look into the long, winding hollow along which at that moment flowed the tributaries of the Chagres River.

"It's just as clear as daylight," said Phineas, his face aglow, for anything to do with the Panama Canal warmed him, so great was his enthusiasm. "Away there below us, where you see two rivers coming together to form what is known as the Chagres River, you may take it that the level of the land is just a trifle above that of the sea, and of course the water on this isthmus has found the lowest level possible. It could not get away to the east because of the hill, and west here, where we are, there's another. So that water just flows out between them, the hills themselves forming, as it were, the neck of a bottle. Well, we're just putting a cork into that neck. We're erecting a dam across the valley between these two hills which will be 7700 feet in length, measured across the top, while its base measurement will be 2060 feet."

"Enormous!" exclaimed Jim. "But surely such a tremendous mass is hardly necessary?"

"What! with 164 miles of water behind it? Young sir, let me tell you that there'll be a clear depth of water of 80 feet all along this end of the lake we're forming. A body of water like that exerts terrific pressure, and to make that dam really secure against a fracture, to make an engineering job of it, as we should say, the dam ought to be constructed of masonry built right into solid rock. But there ain't no rock, more's the pity."

"None?" asked Jim. "Then you won't be able to use masonry?"

"Right, siree! But we're going to fix the business, and reckon, when the dam's finished, nothing'll move it. Listen here, and jest look away where I'm pointing. There's an army of niggers and European spademen at work along the line the dam's to follow. They're working a trench right across, 40 feet down into the soil. Those engines you can see smoking along there are driving sheet piling of 4-inch timbers 40 feet down below the bottom of that trench. When they have finished the job of piling, the trench'll be filled chuck up with a puddled core of clay that'll act like a sheet anchor."

"And so hold the dam in position," suggested Jim.

"Just what I thought you'd say. No doubt that puddled core will help to hold the huge mass of earth that we're going to dump around it. But we're working that piling in and making the core for another purpose also. With a huge body of water in this hollow there'll be a certain amount of soaking into the subsoil – seepage we call it. It might loosen the ground underneath our dam, and so cause the thing to burst; but with a 40-foot trench, filled with a puddled core which'll stop any water, and this extra 40 feet of piling – just 80 feet of material altogether – we stop that seepage, and at the same time kind of fix a tooth into the ground that'll hold the weight of New York city."

The whole thing was gigantic, or, rather, the scheme of it all; for the reader must realize that Jim and his friend were looking down upon an unfinished undertaking. But those smoking engines and the army of men at work were an indication of the enormous labour and skill required in the erection of this Gatun dam, itself only one item in the numerous works of the canal, though, to be sure, one of the vastest. In fact, When Jim learned that from base to summit the dam would measure no less than 135 feet, and would be 50 feet above the level of the water in Gatun Lake, there was no wonder that he gasped.

"It just makes a man scratch his head," laughed Phineas. "And sometimes it makes one inclined to swear, for there's folks in the States who can't cotton to what we're doing here, and who wonder why there are so many men employed and so much money being spent. They seem to think that the canal ought to be finished in a matter of three or four years."

"Then the sooner they come out here and see for themselves what is happening the better for everyone," cried Jim indignantly. "That dam alone will take a vast amount of time, I imagine."

"Then you come along down here, sir, and I'll show you a work that's just as gigantic."

Phineas took our hero to the western end of the trench across which the dam would lie, and there caused him more astonishment. For here another army of labourers was employed in delving, while enormous steam diggers tore huge mouthfuls of earth and rock away from the sides of the

cutting that was being made to accommodate the double line of three locks which, when America has completed her self-imposed undertaking, will raise the biggest vessel ever thought of to the surface of the lake above, or will drop her with equal facility down on to the bosom of the Atlantic.

"There's those steam navvies," observed Phineas, halting in front of one and surveying it reflectively. "A man who runs a machine like that can earn good dollars, and there's competition for the post. Say, Jim, how'd you care to try your hand at it?"

The very suggestion caused our hero to hold his breath. It was not that he was frightened by the mass of machinery; it was merely the novelty of the work. He stepped a pace or two nearer before he answered, and watched closely what happened. A young American, only a few years older than himself, sat on a seat beside the gigantic main beam of the digger, his head within a few inches of the flying gear wheels which transmitted movement, while right beside him, fixed to the base of the steel-girded beam, was the engine. One hand was on the throttle, while the other operated a lever. Down came the huge bucket attached to the secondary beam, the chains which supported it clanking over their stout metal pulleys; then the hand operating the lever moved ever so little, the chains tautened, and the hardened-steel cutting lip of the digger bit into the bank which was being excavated. Deeper and deeper it went. Glug! glug! glug! the machine grunted, while the tip of the main steel girder, where the hauling chains passed over it, bent downwards ever so little. A shower of broken earth burst over the edge of the digger, a faint column of dust blew into the air, while the engine gave forth another discordant glug. Then up came the huge bucket, crammed to the very top with debris, the whole machine shuddering as the strain was suddenly taken off it. But the man remained as composed as ever. He touched another lever, causing the apparatus to swing round on its axis. Almost instantly a movement from his other hand released the trigger holding the bottom of the huge earth receptacle in place, so that, before the machine had actually finished swinging, the huge mouth of this wonderful invention was disgorging its contents into a dirt car alongside.

"Fine!" cried Jim delightedly. "That's a job I should like immensely, but I guess it requires a little training."

"Practice, just practice," smiled Phineas. "See here, Jim; this arm of mine has started in aching again. How'd you care to stay along here and have a lesson? That young chap's a friend of mine, so there'll be no difficulty about the matter."

It may be imagined that Jim eagerly accepted the offer. He was keen enough to accompany Phineas on his promised trip right along the canal works, but already the sight of all that was happening round about Gatun had been sufficient for one day, while the huge machine before him and its cool and unruffled operator fascinated him.

"Gee! nothing I'd like better," he cried.

"Then come along." Phineas at once went close up to the machine, and at a signal from him the operator brought it to a rest.

"Howdy?" asked the young fellow. "Getting in at it, Mr. Barton?"

Under the tan which covered face and arms there was a sudden flush of pride which an ordinary individual might well have passed unnoticed. But Jim was slowly beginning to understand and realize something of the spirit that seemed to pervade every member of the whole staff engaged on the isthmus. For there was no doubt that the completion of the canal was a pet object to them one and all, an undertaking the gradual progress of which filled them with an all-absorbing interest. Each mouthful of dirt, for instance, which this steam digger tore from the ground and shot from its capacious maw into the earth trains was a little more progress, something further attained towards that grand and final completion to which all were sworn.

"Howdy? Say, Harry boy, this here's Jim. You've heard of that little business we had on the way to New York?"

The young man nodded, and regarded Jim critically. "Wall?" he asked curtly.

"He's the lad that came along after me when I was left aboard the foundering vessel."

The one who had been addressed as Harry dropped his hands from the levers, swung round on his seat the better to gaze at our hero, and, still with his eyes on Jim, replied to Phineas.

"I read it in the paper," he admitted. "How did it happen?"

Phineas promptly gave him the narrative, Harry meanwhile keeping his eyes on Jim. Then, when he learned that our hero had decided to stay on the isthmus, and seek work there, he climbed out of the narrow cab bolted to the side of the digger, dropped lightly to the ground, and, walking straight up to Jim, held out his hand.

"It's men we want here," he said pleasantly. "Guess you're one. Glad to shake hands with an American who's done a good turn for my friend Phineas. What job are you after?"

Jim told him promptly, while he exchanged his handshake vigorously; for he liked the look of this young American, and took to him instantly.

"I'm not sure yet exactly what job I'll ask for," he answered. "Guess I'm ready to take anything that's going; but I was wondering whether you'd give me a lesson on the digger."

"Know anything about engines and suchlike?" asked Harry sharply.

Jim nodded. "Guess I do," he said, with that delightful assurance so common to the Americans. "I've handled engines of many sorts, particularly those aboard ship; and for some months past I've been doing diving."

"Git in there," said Harry, motioning to the cab, "I'll larn you to work this plant inside an hour or two. Then all that's wanted is jest native gumption, gumption, siree, spelt with a big G, 'cos a man ain't no good on these here chugging machines unless he can keep his head cool. There's times when the digger pulls through the earth quicker than you can think, and when, if you didn't cut off steam, you'd overwind and chaw up all the chain gear. Then the lip of the digger may happen to get hold on a rock that wants powder to shift it, and if there's steam still on, and the engines pulling, you're likely as not to break up some of the fixings, and tip the whole concern over on to its nose. Hop right in; Mr. Barton, I'll see to this here Jim till evening."

CHAPTER V

The Ways of the Steam Digger

To say that Jim could not have been put into better or more capable hands is to tell only the truth. For Harry, the young American operating the steam digger, was one of those eager, hard-working fellows who strive their utmost, who are not satisfied unless they make the very best of a task, and who, given a machine of great power, cause it to produce the biggest results possible, consistent with proper management, and who, unlike some, do not curtail its strength, and limit its output.

"You jest hop up there inside with me," he said, wiping the sweat from his forehead, and tilting his broad sombrero hat backwards a little. "It'll be close quarters, you bet; but when a chap's learning a job he don't kick at trifles."

Jim obeyed his orders with alacrity. He clambered up into the narrow cab, which was merely a metal framework bolted to the huge, sloping steel girder which may be termed the backbone of the leviathan digger, and seated himself upon a hard wooden seat barely wide enough for one person. Just above his head was a toothed wheel, with another, very much larger, engaging with it. Beside him, causing him to start when he touched it, for it was very hot, were a brace of cylinders, with a lever adjacent for operating the throttle. Right overhead was a roof of split and warped boards, which helped to keep away the rays of the sun; for on this isthmus of Panama the heat is fierce at times, and extremely enervating.

"But, bless you, we don't notice it," said Harry, swarming up after him, and seeing that he had noticed the shelter. "Most all of us wear a big hat. In fact you can say as every white man does. Them dagoes don't; they seem to like the sun, same as the Spaniards. Seen anything of 'em, mate?"

Jim nodded. "Not much," he admitted. "There were a few aboard that ship, and they didn't impress me much. They lost their heads and fought like wild beasts."

"Aye, that's them all over; but they're good 'uns to work once they're set to at it, and know you won't put up with any nonsense. I don't suppose there was ever a part where gangs of them Spaniards works better than they do here, and gives so little trouble. Now and agin there's a rumpus, and the police has to intervene; but it ain't often. See 'em over there."

Jim had been so occupied with his inspection of the giant digger that he had hardly had eyes for his surroundings; but as Harry pointed, he swung round in the cab and surveyed the scene. It was remarkable, to say the least of it. Right behind him lay track on track of metal rails, all running direct towards the Atlantic, and the majority of them on different levels. They seemed to hug various gigantic steps, by which the sides of the huge trench in which the digger was situated ascended to level ground. Hundreds of cars were on these rails, with a little, smoking engine at their heads, and a half-closed-in cab behind. Gangs of European and black labourers were disposed here and there, some breaking up rocks obstructing the tracks, others carrying lengths of double rail track bolted together in readiness to be placed in position, while yet again others were engaged in pouring a liquid into trenches at the side of the cutting. Jim looked puzzled, and Harry laughed outright as he caught a glimpse of his face.

"Gee! It do amuse me when strangers come along," he cried. "Guess this here's an eye-opener. Any fellow can tell what we're doing, and why we're doing it, except the reason for those men and the stuff they're pouring into the trench. Say now, what's it for?"

Jim could not even hazard a guess. It was inexplicable, and seemed, indeed, to be an idiotic proceeding. His face must have shown his thoughts, for Harry burst into a loud guffaw, though, unconsciously, pride again crept into his tones as he answered.

"Guess you ain't the first as thought there was madmen about," he said. "But all that stuff being put into the trenches is jest part of this almighty scheme. Without it we wouldn't be able to work;

for that's a gang from the sanitary corps, and guess they're nosing round most every day. It's their particular job to see as there isn't a place where a mosquito can breed, or where water can easily lay. Ef there's a spot made in purpose to carry away water, same as that 'ere trench, where some of it's bound to lay, why, they spreads kerosene along it, and no self-respecting mosquito'll go near that stuff. It's a terror to 'em. Guess this Panama zone, stretching five miles either side of the canal line, fairly gives them insects the pip, it's that unhealthy for 'em. As for us, we lives in comfort, and goes on living, which can't be said for others who was here before us. But jest get a grip of that throttle lever, and don't be skeared. Keep cool all the time, and when I cry 'stop', jest jerk it off. She'll come up short jest as ef she was alive, and that's something, seeing as this is a hundred-ton digger. She's able easy to cut her way into well over a thousand cubic yards of dirt in an eight-hours day, and can sling some six hundred double horse loads into them trucks. But we ain't dealin' with horses here. It's machines all the time, machines, and men, I guess, to drive 'em."

It was grand to hear the fellow talk; unconsciously a glow crept into Jim's face. To think that he, by the movement of his ten fingers, and by the use of his own brain, could control such work, and then to remember that every little task accomplished was setting his country nearer the day of triumph. For triumph it must be: America, in spite of the croakings of a few, cannot and will not fail. She may experience setbacks; but she will prevail in the end. Her native determination and the grit of her workers will compel her.

"You can jest see how we're moving," said Harry, placing a hand on a second lever. "This here digger's set up on a truck heavy enough to take it, with its boiler right away at the tail end of the truck, to counterbalance the stuff we're lifting. We're on rails, as you can see, with a second track beside us that holds a spoil train, as we calls the trucks into which we chucks the dirt. Right clear afore us is the ground we're digging, and you're jest going to take a bite fer yerself. Watch that digger."

Jim cast his eyes upon the huge bucket with its steel cutting lip placed at the end of a secondary beam slanting downwards from the lower part of the main steel girder. Huge chains ran from the upper edge to the tip of the girder, and, as Harry gently pushed his lever, the chains ran out clanking, and the bucket descended till it bumped on to the ground. It was now at the foot of a broken and steep slope some eight feet in height, at the summit of which was the first of that series of big steps ascending to the top of the lock cutting, and accommodating rail tracks. Indeed a spoil train was crunching along it as he looked, while on half a dozen others trains were to be seen. As to the sloping bank itself, it ran on directly till it came to a dead end, where an army of men were engaged in erecting the lake-end wall of the lock. Behind, it dwindled into other banks, and was lost in the distance.

"Where we started, I guess," said Harry, following his gaze. "First the dredgers got to work, then the steam shovels. You see, we cut deep down in the centre first of all, and then take a step out at either side. Then, while diggers get to work to cut other steps we go deeper again in the centre. But let's get at this here bank. That bucket's drawn the chains out by its own weight. This here lever controls a brake, and I can stop the bucket at any point; but it's there, ready for digging. Give her steam, and gently with it. Be ready to cut off if I shout."

Jim moved his lever ever so gently. The proposition was so new to him that he felt somewhat timid of the results; but Harry was as calm as ever. He watched the cutting edge of the bucket dig deep into the bank, while Jim, watching it also, cast an eye upward at the chains where they passed over the tip of the girder. Chug! chug! chug! they went, while the massive beam trembled; but nothing could stop the irresistible course of the digger. The bucket sheared its way upward through the soil, and in a very little while had accomplished the whole height of the bank; then, its work done, it shot upward, causing the machine to shiver and shake.

"Cut her off," cried Harry, and obedient to the word Jim shoved the lever over.

"Now take a grip of this here lever I've been holding, and pull it to you. Give her steam."

Clank! clank! clank! Jim felt the gears engage as he shifted the lever, and once more opened the throttle of the engine. Now he experienced a new and altogether delightful sensation; for the huge

mass of machinery to which the cab was bolted, and which was situated on the front of the heavy truck carrying the whole apparatus, swung round easily, the loaded bucket well in front and overhead. Harry grinned: it amused him to watch the delight on his pupil's face. But this was not the moment for allowing his attention to become distracted. He kept a careful eye on the bucket, and, a moment later, just as it began to swing over the dirt truck placed on the side track, he pulled a rope, and with a loud clatter the bottom of the bucket banged open and the dirt fell into the truck.

"Stop her!" he shouted, and Jim at once closed his throttle. "This is the boy that works the shutter for us. See here; pull it and give her steam. Watch those two arms to which the bottom of the bucket are bolted. This here gear just overhead works 'em and closes them over the trigger. Gee! If you ain't working this here like an old hand. Now watch it. That bucket's closed, and you've always to remember to close it afore you swing the machine back again to its work, 'cos the edge of the bottom comes low down and would foul the truck. That'd mean a bust up. Now, round with her. Stop her; get a hold of the brake lever and let her drop."

Confused at first, because of the multiplicity of movements, in an hour Jim was quite at home with the machine. True, he made errors; for instance, he forgot that very important movement to close the bucket, and, as a consequence, though he missed the side of the truck he nearly ripped off the head from a negro. But Harry was there to supervise, and a quick movement on his part arrested the machine.

"Hi! What fo you gwine kill me, yo?" shouted the negro, who had been untouched, as it happened. "Yo take care ob that great big playting ob yours. Not here to dig niggers. Not like hab de head knocked off."

Harry roared. "It's only Joe," he shouted. "He's been as near a blow afore now, and loves to make the most of it. See here, Joe," he bellowed, "I ain't a-goin' to have my machine broken against that 'ere hard head of yours. I'll have to be warning the foreman overseer to shunt yer."

That brought a grin from the negro. He showed his teeth, and shook his fist at Harry; but Jim knew his meaning well enough. The big fellow was just like the rest of his people – just a big, strong, healthy baby, who saw the fun in everything, and, if there were no fun, manufactured it promptly.

"It's gwine to break yo into little pieces," he said, clambering on to the cab and poking his face within an inch of Harry's. "Yo say I hab hard head? Lummy! Me hab hard fist as well."

"Git out!" shouted Harry, striking at him with the slack end of the rope that commanded the bucket trigger.

"Who's he?" demanded Joe, nodding at Jim, and suddenly changing the conversation.

"Him? Why, Jim, of course. Saved Mr. Barton."

"Den I knows him."

To Jim's astonishment the negro stretched out a hand and shook his eagerly. Then he explained the situation. "Know Tom and Sam," he said. "Dey down here now, seein' tings. I show dem round. Tom mighty impressed: he tink yo work de digger better'n Harry."

That brought an exclamation from the latter, while Joe jumped down from the machine just in time to escape the swing of the rope. But his words were true; close beside the digger were Tom and Sam.

"By de poker, but yo run him well!" shouted Tom. "Me's watched yo dis last half-hour. Seems to Tom as ef yo soon have a job in the diggin'."

To the huge fellow everything that Jim did was well done, everything he attempted was sure to be accomplished; and never for one moment did he tire of watching his hero. But Jim had his lesson to learn, and for another hour held to the work. By that time he had filled a whole spoil train, and had watched another shunted into position.

"Ready to fill like the last," said Harry. "That's the proposition that jest beat us at first. There wasn't enough trucks nor locomotives to begin with, and not enough tracks, so these fine diggers wasted half their time; but we've fixed it a while since. Soon as a train's loaded it's pulled back, while

an empty spoil train crosses the switches behind. That comes over another switch just behind the digger, and so right on alongside, the last truck just in position for loading, the first 'way ahead. Then, as you've seen for yourself, we move along, a few inches after every dig, filling the trucks as we go."

"And then?" asked Jim. "What happens? Where is the dirt taken? Who unloads the trucks?"

"Gee! You are a chap fer questions. Where does it go? Away up there, at the far end of the river gully, where the Lake of Gatun'll be, there's a sight more dirt than this being taken from the isthmus. Some of that's being dumped at the dam just away over our heads; some of it's being emptied outside Panama, filling up a swamp through which the canal will run. Reckon there won't be swamps when we're done. There'll be good hard ground, and houses'll be built on a spot where there's fever nowadays. We're using dirt at this end in the same way; but you was asking about the dumping?"

Jim nodded, and looked at the spoil train being hauled away. "The gangs of niggers do it, I guess," he said. "But it must take longer than the loading by a long way; at least that's what one would imagine."

"Jest about seven minutes fer the whole train," smiled Harry. "My davy on it! You ask how? Wall, listen here. I've been here a long while, and in them days when we was fixed badly fer more trucks niggers did see to clearing the spoil trains – and precious bad niggers they was, too, about that time. Yer see, they mostly comes from the West Indian Isles, and somehow the place didn't seem to suit 'em. They was too slack to work much; but guess our officials fixed the trouble. They found it was the food, and now every nigger employed on the works gets his meals regular at a Commission barracks, and sech meals as gives him strength. But we was talking of unloading. See that truck 'way in front of the trains, the one just close to the engine? Wall, that's the Lidgerwood apparatus, and guess it beats creation. There's a plough right forward of the train, and a wire rope attached to it. When the spoil train has been brought to the place where the dirt's to be dumped, niggers or Europeans let down the truck ends, so's the whole train's one long platform. The plough then gets pulled from end to end, and shoots the dirt out. Seven minutes for a whole train, siree! Lightning ain't in it!"

Whistles sounded at this minute, and promptly Harry shut down his levers and leaped from the cab.

"Guess you've done right well fer a first time," he said. "In a day you'll be able to get to at it alone. Anyway, you've earned your grub. Come along to the Commission hotel; there's meals there for all whites, and no one can grumble at them."

Wherever he went Jim found something to interest him, so much so that it was a matter of wonder to him that, though he had often been close to the isthmus, he had had no idea of the extraordinary bustle taking place there. It was so extremely surprising to find small towns sprung up where he was assured there was but a single native hut before, to discover buildings so temptingly cool and elegant in appearance, and to learn that America not only employed labour, but provided quarters, food, and recreation for her employees. And here was another example. Harry took him away from the lock cutting, where one of these days a double tier of three locks will elevate ships from the Atlantic, and introduced him to his friends in one of the well-equipped hotels erected for the accommodation of white employees. Hundreds of men were streaming up the steps as they arrived, and passing in behind the copper-gauze screens of the veranda. Jim noticed that all bore much the same appearance – for the most part clean shaven, with here and there some wearing moustaches and beards. Dressed in rough working clothes, with broad-brimmed hats, none showed signs of ill health. There was a buzz of eager conversation as they washed before the meal, and a loud clatter from many tongues as they sat at the tables. As to the food, it was plain, abundant, and well cooked.

"Costs jest fifty cents a day," explained Harry. "If you've finished we'll get to the club. We usually go along fer a smoke at dinner-time. 'Sides, there's a cable of interest now and agin, and sometimes letters."

A few minutes with Harry at the club served, in fact, to banish any doubts which Jim may have had as to remaining on the isthmus. For here was comfort and recreation at the same time, and plenty of men with whom to make friends.

"This here's Jim, him as saved Phineas Barton," Harry told his comrades, and the statement was at once sufficient to rouse interest. Hand-grips were exchanged with our hero. The news of his presence spread round the huge room, in which men were smoking or playing dominoes at little tables, and one by one they strolled up.

"You're stayin' here?" asked one, and when Jim nodded, "I'm main glad: Phineas is one of the best, and a chap who could go in for him as you did must be one of the right kind. What are you going to do?"

"Steam digging, I hope," said Jim. "But of course I'm green yet."

"You'll do. If you've got the grit to face being sucked under by a foundering ship, guess you've the gumption to run one of them diggers. Anyway, I'm glad you're staying. Play yer a game of dominoes one of these mornings."

"Say, siree, ken you sing any?" asked another, when he had shaken hands; "'cos there's concerts here sometimes o' nights, and a new hand aer wanted."

"Guess I can do a little," answered Jim, reddening; for here was a find. No one loved a sing-song more than our hero, and, to give him only his due, he had an excellent voice, badly trained, or not trained at all, to be accurate, but pleasing for all that. "When I've put a little together I'll buy a banjo," he told his interrogator. "I had one aboard the ship, but guess it's deep down below the Caribbean."

"My, that are good news! Say, boys, here's one as can strum on a banjo."

The information was hailed with delight by those present, for a banjo player was an acquisition indeed. These skilled white men engaged in the Panama undertaking were as simple as well could be, and longed for nothing more than mild recreation. After an eight-hours day of strenuous work, and supper at the Commission hotel, it delighted them to gather at one of the clubs and there listen to an impromptu concert. But the midday halt was not the time for dawdling. Already the better part of the interval was gone, and very soon the blowing of steam whistles summoned the workers back to their machines; for nearly every one of the white employees in that hotel managed some sort of machine.

"There's a heap of them engaged with the rock drillers," said Harry, "and ef you go along the line to-morrow, towards Panama, and enter the great Culebra cut, you'll see and hear 'em at work everywhere. Most every night, when the whistles has blown and the men cleared off, you'd think a battle was being fought over there, for there's dynamite and powder exploding on every side, and huge rocks jest bounding down into the trench. Gee! There is a dust up. But I war saying that most everyone who's white has a machine to mind. Of course there are overseers, and lots of officials. Then there's a small army kept going in the repair shops 'way along over Panama direction, at Gorgona. That's a place as would open the eyes of people at New York. I tell you, they turn out a power of work there. See that machine down there running along the rails? Wall, that's home-made, every stick and rod of it put together at Gorgona, and, what's more, it's the invention of one of the employees here."

He was bursting with pride, with a legitimate pride. There was no conceit about Harry, but merely a robust belief in all that his comrades did, and in particular in the brains and muscles at work on this giant undertaking. With a sweep of his hand he pointed to a heavy truck, with a crane-like attachment built on it, running along the rails on one of the higher steps of the huge cutting on which he himself was engaged.

"Jest watch it," he invited Jim. "It's a treat to see it handle rails. You see, our rails wants shifting constantly; for as the diggers clear the dirt they naturally want to get forward or outward, as the case may be, seeing that we cut our steps away to the side. Anyhow, there's need to swap the rails from place to place and lay new tracks, and that 'ere machine is a track layer, which handles the double lengths of bolted rails as if they was sticks."

Jim was fascinated, indeed, as he watched this new wonder; for wonder the machine undoubtedly was. As he looked he could realize that gangs of men and much time might be needed to shift the lines of rails, and time, he remembered, was an item of which his comrades were sparing. Bustle was the order of the day, and of every succeeding day, on the isthmus. As to the machine, it swung its arm over a long length of rail, fastened its clutches upon it, and lifted the double track, ready bolted to its sleepers, into the air. Then it trotted along the rails, and presently deposited its burden somewhere else.

"And by the time it's nipped back for another length, and has brought it, the track gang has got the lengths in line, and has bolted the fishplates to it," explained Harry. "But that digger's waiting for us. Git along, Jim."

Breezy was not the word for this young American. He seemed to enjoy every minute of his life, and would have made an admirable companion for one subject to depression. However, Jim was not that; our hero was naturally inclined to jollity, if at times serious, as became his position of responsibility, but with Harry beside him there was no thought of seriousness. They made a laughing, jolly couple on the digger. The hours flew by, so that Jim was astonished when the five-o'clock whistles blew.

"How's he shaping?" he heard a voice ask, and, turning, found it was Phineas Barton, with another white beside him.

"Shaping! Say, ef there's a digger going free he's fit to take it right off, he's that careful," cried Harry. "See him at it, Major."

"You jest go along as you was before," he whispered in Jim's ear, as the latter hopped back into the cab of the digger. "I ain't going to stay up there alongside of you, 'cos there ain't no need; and you ain't got no cause to feel flustered. The Major's one of the works bosses, and reckon employment lays with him. He'll know in a jiffy that you're able to do the work."

To tell the truth our hero felt somewhat scared at the moment, more even than he had that morning when taking his place for the first time on the machine. But he had perfect confidence now in his powers of control, and, with that assurance to help him, struggled against the unusual feeling of nervousness which had so suddenly attacked him, and let the bucket of the digger rattle down to the bottom of the bank. Time after time he dug his way upwards, and delighted Harry by his management.

"Gee! Ef he ain't got some brass!" the latter exclaimed beneath his breath, as the bucket swung out over the spoil train. "He's copying me with a vengeance. I mind the time when I first started in at the business, and it took me a sight longer to fix the emptying of that bucket. But this here Jim has kind of tumbled to the knack. He swings her out, and ain't stopped swinging afore he opens up and lets his dirt drop. Ef that don't fix the Major, wall he don't deserve to have good men."

As a matter of fact the official was a good deal impressed; but he was a cautious man, and was not inclined to be taken in by a demonstration which might prove to be somewhat freakish. He told himself that under observation there are some men who do better than others, only to break down on ordinary occasions, lacking the stimulus of a gallery to applaud. He yet wanted to prove that this would-be employee had a head on his shoulders, and though he had heard the tale of the rescue, he determined to see if Jim could show coolness on dry land as well as in the water. Therefore he strolled across to the head of the spoil train, to find the driver had not yet quitted his post, in fact he was just in the act of uncoupling from the train, but willingly obeyed an order. Then the official strolled back, to find Jim still busy with the digger, and, waiting a favourable opportunity, waved his arm. What followed made Harry stand up on his toes with anxiety.

"He's sure to boss it!" he growled. "Gee, if I don't talk to that driver! He knows as well as I do that he ought to blow his whistle afore giving his engine steam to draw out. An old hand wouldn't be caught, but most like Jim'll bungle it. He'll get his bucket opened over the train, and the moving cars will catch it."

That, it was evident, was the intention of the Major. He was applying a test which might well strain the cuteness of a raw hand; and, as it happened, it was only watchfulness which saved Jim. Up came his bucket, a mass of dirt tumbling from its edge, and round spun the machine, swinging the bucket over the trucks. In a moment the bottom would fall open. Harry could see him handling the rope which freed the trigger. Then he gave a sigh of satisfaction, for Jim had observed the movement. His hand left the rope, the bucket stopped in its swing, there was the grinding sound of moving gears, and promptly the massive beam returned on its axis.

"That train's moving," he shouted. "I might have had a jam up."

"You might, and no mistake," said Phineas, coming up to the side of the cab. "You jest fixed the business nicely. Reckon if there had been a bust-up the Major deserved to have to pay for the damage. Say, Major, here's a hand wanting a job."

"Bring him to the office to-morrow; I'll take him," was the short reply. "Usual terms; he can get on to a digger way up by Culebra."

Before Jim could thank him the official had departed, leaving our hero still seated in the cab.

"You kin git down off that machine and eat a supper feeling you've earned it," exclaimed Harry, coming up to him and gripping his hand. "I'm main sorry though that you're to work at Culebra, 'cos it would have been nice to meet of an evening."

"And no reason why you shouldn't," cried Phineas. "See here, Harry, Jim's to live with me. He and his sister will have quarters at the house, the two niggers and the Chinaman also. It's an exception, I know, but there it is. Of course he'll get his dinner and supper way up at Culebra; but he'll take breakfast with me, and of an evening he'll come down to the club here. Guess you'll hear more of him."

That the arrangement was likely to prove satisfactory seemed certain, and it may be imagined that Jim was filled with glee. He sat in Phineas's parlour that night, behind the screen of copper gauze, with his mind full of the morrow, wondering what Culebra would be like, and whether the men working there could be half so pleasant as those he had already met.

CHAPTER VI

A Shot in the Dark

Folks in the Panama zone do not keep late hours as a rule, for work begins at an early hour, and he who would be fresh and ready must seek his bed early. However, Jim and his friends were not to find repose on this, almost their first night ashore, as readily as they imagined. Indeed they were to meet with an adventure which was startling, to say the least of it. They were seated in the parlour, Jim and Phineas, discussing their work, while Sadie had retired for the night. Tom and Sam were engaged in an animated conversation in the back regions, and, no doubt, were themselves preparing to turn in. Not one had an idea that a stranger was prowling about outside the house.

"Thought I heard someone about," Jim had remarked, some few minutes earlier, but Phineas had shaken his head emphatically.

"Imagination!" he cried. "There's no one comes around here at nighttimes. You see, this house lies away from the others, and up the hill. Unless a friend's coming up to smoke a pipe with me, there's no one this way of an evening; they don't fancy the climb. Sit down again, Jim. How much do you think you're going to earn on that digger?"

Jim threw himself into his chair again, let his head drop back, and closed his eyes. He already had an inkling of what he would earn. The thought had brought him vast pleasure; for there was enough to pay for his own and Sadie's keep.

"Three dollars, fifty cents, less fifty cents a day for food," he said, after a while.

"Put it at four dollars fifty," said Phineas. "Four dollars fifty cents, less fifteen cents for your dinner. T'other meals you take here. So you'll net four dollars twenty-five a day, and free quarters."

"One moment," exclaimed Jim. "Free quarters! No, Mr. Phineas. You must allow me to pay my way. I couldn't stop with you without making some sort of contribution to the expenses of the house."

"Just as I should have thought," said Phineas, smiling at him. "Any chap with a little pride would want to pay his way: but these quarters are free. The Commission gives you so much a day, and free quarters. If I choose to have a companion, he don't have a call to pay for the rooms he uses; so that's wiped off. Then as to food: if you pay twenty-five cents a day for yourself, thirty for Sadie, seeing that she's only small, making fifty-five, and another ten for general expenses, there'll be nothing more to be said. How's that?"

Jim thought it was extremely fair, as indeed it was, and at once agreed. The arrangement would allow of his putting by some twenty dollars a week, and at the end of a year he told himself that that would mount to a nice little sum. But again he heard a sound outside, and rose to his feet.

"I'm sure I heard a footstep," he exclaimed. "There!"

Phineas was doubtful, still he went to the door with him, and emerged on to the balcony. There was no one to be seen, and it was so dark that had there been anyone they would have escaped detection. They retired again, therefore, to the parlour, unaware of the figure skulking close down at the foot of the veranda. The man – for a man it undoubtedly was – rose to his feet stealthily, and stood there listening for a while, till he heard voices coming from the parlour. Then he clambered on to the veranda by way of the steps, and crept towards the square patch of light which indicated the gauze-covered window of the parlour. Slowly he raised his head till he was able to look into the room. As he did so, the lamplight flickering through fell upon his head and shoulders so that one could get some impression of his appearance. Decidedly short in stature, the man's face was swarthy, while the eyes seemed to be small and unusually bright, quite a feature of the face, in fact. He wore a long, flowing, black moustache, while his chin was covered with a stubbly growth a week old; but there was something about the face which immediately attracted one's attention more than any other feature. It was the mouth. The lips were parted in something resembling a snarl, showing a set of

irregular white teeth, which with the lamplight shining on them looked cruel. A Spaniard one would have said at once. More than that, his features were familiar. Little did Jim guess that the ruffian staring in upon him was one of those who had fought for the boats in the waist of the foundering ship on which he had been voyaging to New York, and that he himself had incurred the man's hatred by a blow which, now that the matter was over, he could not remember having given. But one's actions in the heat of a contest often pass utterly unnoticed and unremembered. Jim had no idea now that this same man had dashed at him with a drawn knife, and that he had floored him with a straight blow from his fist between the eyes. However, if he had no recollection the ruffian had.

"The very one," he told himself, with a hiss of anger, as he peeped in at the two unconscious men. "See the pup. He sits there chatting as if he had no fear, and as if he expected a Spaniard to forget. But I am not one of those; a blow for a blow, I say. I meant to thrust my knife between his ribs aboard the ship; now I will put lead into him. It will be more certain."

His hand went unconsciously to his face, and for a few moments he let his fingers play very gently about his nose, for that was the organ on which Jim's fist had descended with such suddenness and weight. Even now it was decidedly tender, and pained the man as he touched it. That caused his sinister, bright, little eyes to light up fiercely, while the lips curled farther back from his cruel, irregular teeth as the fingers of the other hand fell upon the butt of a revolver tucked into his belt.

"A blow for a blow; if not with the knife, then with the bullet. He who strikes a Spaniard must reckon with the consequences, and afterwards – pouff! there will be no afterwards. The bullet will end everything."

Slowly he drew the weapon, and pulled the hammer back with his thumb till it clicked into position.

"What was that?" asked Jim, hearing the sound distinctly. Even Phineas heard it this time, and stood to his feet.

"Perhaps one of the boys is outside; perhaps your Tom, or Sam," he said swiftly. "Certainly there is someone; we'll go and see."

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