

415
DETECTIVE & ADVENTURE TALES.

PLUCK

The Black Hound.

By CEDRIC WOLFE.

The Secret of the Sierra.

By CHARLES HAMILTON.

1^D



"UNDER THE BLACK HOUND'S WATCHFUL EYES
THE HERONDALE SECRET SAFELY LIES."

THE SECOND LONG STORY.

COMPLETE IN THIS ISSUE.

THE SECRET OF THE SIERRA.

A TALE OF ADVENTURE

BY

CHARLES HAMILTON.

CHAPTER I.

Two Britishers in Venezuela—The Mysterious Document—Bernal Cabrera's Bold Game.

"IT'S in Spanish; I can see that," Frank Leslie remarked, looking at the torn and soiled document in a meditative way.

"It might as well be in double-Dutch, as neither of us can read Spanish," said Jim Roland.

"Oh, we can get it translated easily enough. I'll show it to Bernal Cabrera—"

"Talk of the Prince of Darkness," ejaculated Jim Roland. "There he is."

The two young Britishers were lounging under the palms on the sunny azotea—the flat, gardened roof—of a hacienda on the outskirts of the city of Caracas.

Frank Leslie leaned over the adobe parapet and called to the horseman who was cantering down the road from the direction of the city.

"Hallo, Cabrera! Got a few minutes to spare?"

The Venezuelan drew rein and looked up. He was a dashing-looking fellow, with his velvet jacket, scarlet sash, and gold-banded sombrero. His face was darkly swarthy; his eyes jet-black and glittering, somewhat shifty in their expression.

He nodded and dismounted, flung his reins over a post, and a minute later joined the two young Britons on the palm-shaded azotea.

"What can I do for you, señores? My time is entirely at your disposal."

"Thanks," Frank extended his cigarette-case. "Then I'll spin you the yarn. We have here a document which came into our hands last night in a rather remarkable manner. We were passing through the Calle de Alemejo rather late—"

A strange glitter shot into the eyes of Cabrera.

"And what happened there, señor?"

"A man came tearing up the street, running as if for life. He stopped when he saw us, glared at us for a few seconds, and then thrust a crumpled paper into my hand, panting out in English: 'If I do not reclaim that to-morrow morning, it will make you rich!' The next moment he was gone, vanishing into a dark alley; and while we still stood dumbfounded, five or six shadowy figures with drawn knives tore past us in pursuit of him."

A quiver passed over the swarthy face of Bernal Cabrera. Evidently he was intensely interested.

"And you still have the paper?"

"It is here. It is nearly sundown now, and he has not reclaimed it, so I reckon I am justified in regarding it as my property—that is, Jim's and mine—although, of course, if the man claimed it at any time we should give it up."

"And you did not know the man, Don Francisco?"

Frank shook his head.

"Not from Adam. But he must have known something of us. It is clear, I think, that he placed the paper in our hands to save it from the clutches of the men who were after him."

"That's clear enough," remarked Jim. "And that, added to his words, makes us think that the paper may have some value."



The chums looked bewilderingly at each other. From above their heads came the sound as of grinding rocks. (See page 24.)

Cabrera nodded. His eyes were strangely eager as they rested on the document in Frank's hand.

"Only," resumed Frank, "as it's in Spanish, it won't be of any use to us till we get it translated. That's where we want your assistance, Señor Cabrera."

"I will gladly give it. So you have not read the document?"

"No," Frank laughed. "I can speak a little Spanish, but I can't read it. Of course, I understand a few words—'sierra,' 'llano,' 'los Indios,' and so on; but not enough to catch the drift of the thing."

It was unmistakably relief that flashed into the swarthy face of Bernal Cabrera. He held out his hand.

"Let me look at it."

Frank tossed the document to him. He clutched it, and his eyes hungrily devoured the scrawl. The chums looked at each other. Cabrera's manner was awakening strange suspicions in their minds.

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"THE AMATEUR CHAMPION."

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AND

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TWO

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CHAPTER 2.

The Document Translated—The Night Attack on the Hacienda—Cabrera has Bad Luck—The Departure.

Cabrera looked up abruptly. Perhaps he read suspicion in the glances bent upon him. He made an effort to appear unconcerned.

"Señores, you say you are willing to restore this document to its owner?"

"Perfectly."

"Then you may entrust it to me. The man who placed it in your hands is my friend. I will return it to him."

Again Frank and Jim exchanged glances. The same thought leaped into their minds simultaneously. Cabrera had found a valuable secret in the mysterious document, and wanted to keep it to himself.

"No, you won't!" broke out Jim.

"Certainly not," said Frank. "If the man claims it in person we are willing to restore it. Until then it is our property."

A fierce look came over Cabrera's face. His fingers tightened upon the paper.

"But, señor—"

Frank interrupted him.

"You haven't given us the translation yet. Go ahead!"

Bernal Cabrera hesitated.

"Señor, I tell you this document belongs to my friend, and it contains a secret he is far from wishing to make known. Why not—"

"I have given you my answer to that, Señor Cabrera," said Frank coldly. "If you are not going to translate the document, return it to me."

There was a desperate look in the Venezuelan's eyes. Turning, he made a tiger-like spring towards the steps leading down from the azotea. But both Frank and Jim were on the alert. Before the Venezuelan could take a second spring Frank's grasp was upon his shoulder, and he was swung forcibly round.

"No, you don't! Give me that paper, you scoundrel!"

A drawn dagger gleamed in Cabrera's hand. But Jim held hold of his wrist in a jiffy. He gave it a twist which made the Venezuelan drop the weapon with a howl of agony.

"Hold him, Jim! Throttle him if he won't keep quiet!"

"Right-ho!"

With Jim Roland's clutch on his throat Cabrera reeled back, choking, against the parapet of the azotea. And Frank, forcibly unclasping the fingers of his left hand, tore the document from his grasp.

"Let him go, Jim!"

"Got it?"

"Yes."

Jim twisted the Venezuelan round and pitched him towards the steps. Scrambling up he lost his footing upon the verge, and rolled to the bottom. He picked himself up there considerably rumpled and dusty, and turned a face burning with rage towards the Britishers.

"Confound you!" he yelled. He had lost his senses with fury, and he shook his clenched fist as he yelled, "Your lives shall pay for this. I will have the paper ere long, and your life-blood with it!"

"All right. You'll find us at home," retorted Jim, with exasperating coolness.

Still with fluent Spanish curses streaming from his lips, the Venezuelan limped through the saguan to his horse, and dragged himself into the saddle. As he dashed away towards Caraccas, he turned twice to shake his fist at the hacienda.

Frank and Jim looked at each other comically for a moment, and then burst out laughing.

"I don't think I ever thought much of Cabrera, Frank; but I didn't think he was such a blackguard as that. Fancy trying to scoot with the paper under our very noses!" He laughed again. "Cool, by Jove!"

"But I say, Jim," Frank looked serious. "That shows that this paper must be valuable. He wouldn't have taken such a chance as that for a trifle."

"No. Of course, it was a lie about the owner being a friend of his. But I'll tell you what, Frank; it's extremely likely that Bernal Cabrera was one of the gang of bravoes whom we saw chasing the poor fellow."

Frank nodded thoughtfully.

"I wonder who he was. He was dressed like a llanero, and looked an old man. Did those scoundrels kill him, I wonder?"

"If he lived still he would have reclaimed the paper."

"True. He must be dead. But, Jim, if this document is a guide to treasure, as everything seems to indicate, what do you say to having a stroke for it?"

Jim Roland's eyes glistened with excitement.

"You bet. We came to Venezuela to seek for adventure and fortune. Who knows but what this may lead to both? But how shall we get the confounded thing put into English? After this we shall have to be careful about letting a chance acquaintance see it."

"We'll take it to the British Consul. He will do the trick, and we can trust him."

"Then let us lose no time about it."

Ten minutes later the chums were riding towards Caraccas.

RIDE four days to the west from Ciudad Bolivar. Keep north of the Orinoco. Cross the yellow llano to the barren sierra. Look out for the Indians (los Indios), the fierce warriors of El Cascabel the cacique. Follow the white trail to the valley of pecans, and dig at the foot of the blasted ceiba."

That was the translation of the mysterious document the unknown had placed in the hand of Frank Leslie.

"Rather a puzzle still, Frank," Jim remarked, as they sat in the hacienda that evening, discussing their supper and the document at the same time. "What is a 'yellow' llano? The plains I have seen were all green."

Frank nodded.

"And the 'white trail.' That's another poser, Jim. But it is quite possible that these mysteries will become clear as soon as we are on the spot."

"Probably. Anyway, it's clear enough that a treasure is buried at the foot of the blasted ceiba. The old fellow's declaration that the document would make us rich can have no other meaning."

"Well, what do you say? Shall we have a try for it?"

"Rather—and the sooner the better. Cabrera's read the paper, you know, and he's pretty certain to go for it also."

"He had only a hasty look through it, and I doubt if he can remember all the directions," Frank observed.

"In that case, old chap, you may depend upon it that he'll try to get the paper away from us. We had better sleep with one eye open to-night, and leave here first thing in the morning. And you may as well send away the peons. We sha'n't want them any more, and they would be of no use in a scrimmage."

The night was dark, few stars glimmering in the murky sky. Frank and Jim were alone in the hacienda. The peon servants, dismissed as Jim suggested, had gone back to Caraccas. Frank saw to the fastenings of the doors. This done, the chums ascended to the azotea. There they frequently passed the warm tropical nights.

"My watch first, Jim."

"All right. Call me at three."

Jim stretched his sturdy limbs upon a pile of blankets, and was soon sleeping soundly. Frank sat under a drooping palm, somewhat sleepy but resolutely watchful.

The hacienda was in a solitary spot, and if Cabrera had any intention of attempting to seize the document, there was nothing to prevent him from making an attack during the hours of darkness.

Midnight passed, and Frank heard no sounds on the road. He began to think that he had credited Cabrera with more pluck and determination than he possessed. But abruptly there came, faintly through the darkness, sounds which warned him that the danger was no delusion. Behind the hacienda lay a grove of citron-trees, and it was thence that the sounds proceeded—sounds of light, stealthy footfalls and cracking twigs.

Frank started up, his pulses tingling. He understood at once. Instead of coming by the road the enemy had skirted through the wood and were approaching the hacienda from the rear.

With noiseless steps Frank crossed the azotea, and, keeping in the shadow of a palm, peered over the parapet into the darkness beneath. He could make out shadowy figures advancing from the trees. He counted five. Two of them carried a long ladder.

"Sh!" Jim Roland started into wakefulness with Frank's finger on his lips. "Not a sound. They are here!"

"You have seen them?" Jim spoke in the faintest of whispers. "How many?"

"Five."

"What are they doing? Trying the doors?"

"Cabrera knows better than that. He has brought a ladder."

"Great Scott!"

"Keep your revolver handy. We are going to give 'em a surprise."

Jim chuckled inaudibly.

"I follow your lead, Frank."

The Venezuelans, moving with great caution, making scarcely a sound, reared the ladder against the wall. Cabrera had known that it would be useless to attempt to force a door without giving the alarm, and he had shown a good deal of cunning in selecting the azotea as the point of attack.

The hacienda was built in the usual style of Spanish-American residences, with a courtyard (patio) in the centre, upon which the window opened.

Once on the roof, the assailants could descend the stone steps into the patio, and obtain admittance to the building by breaking through one of the windows. Had not the Englishmen been on guard there can be no doubt that the plan would have succeeded perfectly. But with the chums waiting,

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revolver in hand, behind the parapet, the chances were that the Venezuelans would get a good deal more than they bargained for. The top of the ladder rested against the rim of the parapet. "Follow me, comrades! Not a sound!" It was Bernal Cabrera's voice. He spoke in a whisper in Spanish.

Frank nudged Jim. There was a slight creaking sound as the lithe Venezuelan mounted the ladder. His head rose over the parapet. The next moment he uttered a horrified gasp as the muzzle of a revolver was shoved into his face, and a hand fastened upon his collar.

"Good-evening, señor!" drawled Frank Leslie. "Happy to see you! I suppose this is intended to be a pleasant little surprise-party?"

"Caramba!" The Venezuelan glared at him like a tiger. His black eyes glittered with rage.

"Don't move, señor." Frank's calm voice had a warning note. "You are my prisoner, and I shall blow your brains out if you don't keep quiet."

There came a flash and a crack from below. A bullet whizzed past the parapet's rim. The chums kept well back, however, and the lead could not touch them.

"Drop your weapon, Cabrera."

With the revolver touching his brows, Cabrera dared not disobey. His poniard clattered down upon the earth.

"Got the rope ready, Jim?" Frank dragged the Venezuelan over the parapet. "I shall kill you if you resist, Cabrera."

"A thousand curses!"

"Shut up! Chuck the ladder down, Jim!"

With a shove, Jim sent the ladder tumbling back. The Venezuelans below were swearing in chorus.

"Now rope him up."

The Venezuelan was powerless to resist. There was grim determination in the young Englishman's face. Cabrera had either to submit to bonds or to fall on the azotea with a bullet in his head, and he chose the safer alternative. Jim had his hands tied in a jiffy. Then, marching him to a garden-seat under the palms, he roped him to it securely.

"Now I think you're safe till morning, my beauty," Jim remarked, stepping back and viewing his handiwork complacently.

"Let me go, you cursed foreigner!" Bernal Cabrera was choking with rage and chagrin. His face was white under its tan, and he snarled like some savage beast. "Release me, you English hound!"

"Thunder, you don't want much! Do you think I have taken all this trouble for nothing?"

The Venezuelans had not attempted to replace the ladder. The ill-luck of their leader made them aware of how slight a chance they had of scaling the parapet while the two Britons were on the watch.

"Hallo, there!" It was Frank's voice hailing them from the azotea. "Sheer off, you scoundrels, or I shall fire into you."

There was a rapid scamper of feet. Where they stood the Venezuelans had no cover. Like scared rabbits they bolted into the trees. Frank laughed aloud. From the trees shots whizzed over the hacienda. Frank crossed to Cabrera. The prisoner was grinding his teeth and writhing in his bonds.

"How long do you intend to keep me here, curse you?" he snarled. "I warn you that if you have any idea of sending me to the calabozo for attacking your house, you will only get yourself into trouble."

Frank nodded.

"I am quite aware of that, señor. I know the state of the law in Venezuela too well to think of charging you before the alcalde. I shall simply keep you tied up till it's safe to let you go."

"The bonds are cramping my limbs. This is torture to me."

"You should have thought of that before you came here."

Frank shrugged his shoulders. "Would you prefer to have your brains blown out? That is the only alternative."

"Let me warn you," said Cabrera, in a hissing voice, "not to seek the treasure of Manuel Gonzales. I know you have had the document translated; but if you ride to the Orinoco you will find only your grave on the llano or in the sierra."

"Perhaps. But we will give you a bit of a tussle first," said Frank carelessly.

"You have made rather a bungle of it so far, señor," Jim remarked. "The best thing you can do is to drop us like hot potatoes, and mind your own business."

The chums kept watch for the rest of the night. But the Venezuelans made no advance. They lurked among the citrons till dawn, every now and then sending a shot whizzing over the hacienda, but at the first gleam of light they beat a retreat. The chums heard them go, and were glad of it.

"They're gone!" yawned Jim. "And now I vote that we take a snack and scoot too."

"Are you going to leave me here, you cursed Inglesos?" demanded Cabrera fiercely.

"That would be safer, Frank," said Jim. "We'll give up the

keys to old Carrero, and tell him we sha'n't want the house any more, and ask him to come down later, and set this scoundrel loose. That will give us plenty of time to clear out before he can collect his cutthroats and begin his tricks again."

And Jim suited the action to the word. When the chums rode away from the hacienda they left Cabrera still on the azotea. The blackest passions ran riot in his breast as he listened to the hoof-strokes dying away in the distance.

CHAPTER 3.

Out on the Llano—Cabrera Again—A Hot Chase—Britishers at Bay.

"WHAT are you looking at, Frank?" "I believe I saw a sombrero above the mesquite yonder."

"Thunder! That means danger!"

There was a blaze of sunshine on the llano. Frank and Jim, mounted upon wiry Venezuelan horses, were riding westward, through rich grass that rose to their saddle-girths. Far to the south the rich grasslands were rimmed by the dark forests of the Orinoco.

The chums were heading for a clump of ceibas, under the shade of which they intended to make the noonday halt. For in Venezuela, as in most of the Spanish-American countries, travelling is never done when the sun is at the meridian. Man and beast instinctively seek shelter from the tropical blaze.

A couple of months had passed since the mysterious document came into the hands of the chums. They had lost no time. They had left Caracas for Ciudad Bolivar on the Orinoco. Keeping to the north of the great river, as the document directed, they were riding to the west. This was the third day of the ride. Depending upon their own courage and their weapons for safety, they had plunged into the sea of grass.

Whether Bernal Cabrera and his associates were still on their track they did not know. Sharp as their look-out had been, they had seen no sign of the desperadoes between Caracas and the Orinoco, but they both felt a conviction that they had not seen the last of Cabrera.

As they rode towards the ceibas, an extensive belt of mesquite lay upon their right, and towards this Frank had thrown frequent vigilant glances; for they were in the land of "los Indios."

Now, and vigilance was more than ever needed.

"I am sure of it," Frank said, with conviction. "There are horsemen on the other side of the mesquite, Jim. Look! Do you see that glimmer? It is the sun on the gold band of a sombrero."

"White men, then. The Indians don't wear sombreros. Cabrera, do you think?"

"More likely than not. Although we have seen nothing of him, I am sure he is trailing us. The directions of the paper are so queer that I doubt if Cabrera can recollect them all, after a single hasty perusal, but certainly he knows enough to inform him of our route. He can follow us if he chooses, and after his doings at Caracas, there can be little doubt that he will choose."

"That's my idea. Bear to the left, then, and if they're after us they'll have to show themselves."

The change, of course, took them directly away from the mesquite. If the strange horsemen wanted to keep them in sight they would have to emerge upon the open llano.

"There they are!" Frank looked back. "Cabrera, by Jupiter, and seven more!"

Jim gave a whistle.

"A regular army! Eight against two! Long odds, old chap! But, after all, one Englishman ought to be able to handle four South Americans."

Frank smiled.

"Whip and spur, Jim. And, remember, when the shooting begins, shoot to kill! They mean murder, sure enough, and we have got to look out for ourselves. Shoot to kill!"

"You bet!"

They dashed on at full speed, careless of the heat. Behind them the Venezuelans galloped hard. Frank's vigilance had saved the chums from a terrible danger. Half-a-mile further on the mesquite stretched to the south, within easy shot of the route they were following, and at that point the Venezuelans could have bowled them over with a volley without danger to themselves. That doubtless had been Cabrera's intention. But now he had been compelled to show his hand, and a conflict was inevitable.

About a mile to the south, towards the Orinoco, stood what Spanish-Americans call a "motte," a clump of timber, standing like an island in the ocean of grass. It was for this that the chums were riding.

"Thunder, it's hot!" gasped Jim. "I believe I am on the point of melting."

"Only a minute more, Jim. And if those rascals dare to follow us to the timber we'll make it warm for them."

Under the trees they gladly rode. Flinging their reins over low branches, they sprang to the ground and unslinging their rifles,

The timber-land, though small, was thickly grown, heavy masses of Spaniard's beard hanging from the branches, and thick lianas lacing the great limbs of the trees together. Better cover for riflemen could not have been found in the wide llanos.

"Now let them come!" Frank's face was very grim, as he looked forth. "It will be death to some of them, and first of all to our friend Bernal Cabrera."

The Venezuelans were coming on at full gallop. The perspiration streamed down their swarthy faces. They panted as they rode.

Crack! Crack!

Bernal Cabrera fell suddenly backwards in his saddle. From his lips broke a sharp shrill yell. The drag upon the reins made his horse rear, and he was flung heavily to the earth. He disappeared in the tall grass.

One of the Venezuelans clapped his hand to the side of his head. The horseman drew rein abruptly, some looking at their fallen leader, some at the timber.

"Don't give 'em a rest!" exclaimed Frank. "It's a case of the whole hog or none."

Crack! Crack!

The rifles were magazines, and the second shots followed the first with scarcely a pause.

Two terrible cries succeeded. A Venezuelan crashed down to the ground. Another fell forward, clutching his horse's mane to keep his seat. The reports had scarcely died away when the Venezuelans had wheeled their horses, and gone scampering away over the llano. Frank chuckled grimly.

"They didn't think Britishers would be able to hold their own on the llano like this," he said. "I've no doubt Cabrera expected to rope in a couple of greenhorns without the least difficulty. I think this lesson will do them good, and perhaps teach them to give Britishers a wide berth in the future."

"Two down and two scratched," said Jim. "How's that, ampie?"

Frank's glance followed Jim's extended finger. The horse of the Venezuelan had stopped by his fallen master. A brown hand reached up from the grass to grasp the rein. Bernal Cabrera, slowly and with difficulty, gained his feet, and dragged himself into the saddle. Frank sighted his rifle, and then irresolutely lowered it.

"I can't do it!" he exclaimed. "It is madness to spare him, but I can't kill him."

The chance was gone the next moment. Cabrera dashed away to rejoin his comrades beyond rifle-shot of the timber-land. The other Venezuelan who had fallen gave no sign of stirring, so the chums could only conclude that he had been killed outright.

"Wonder what their next move will be, Frank?" Jim remarked, after watching the Venezuelans for a time. They showed no disposition to advance again. Their backs were turned to the chums, and they were riding slowly towards the clump of ceibas for which Frank and Jim had been making when they first sighted the enemy in the mesquite. "I'll bet Cabrera feels fit to kick himself."

"We'll camp here till dark, Jim, and leave after nightfall. We have a clear route before us, and can follow it almost as easily by night as by day."

"Right you are!"

The burning day passed. The adventurers remained in the shelter of the timber. The sun glided red down the west. Not a sign came from the Venezuelans. Darkness was rushing from the east, and the wide llano was black with gloom. In case the enemy might have placed themselves to intercept a westward ride, the chums, leaving the timber, galloped due south for three or four miles, and then struck off sharply to the west.

If the Venezuelans were on the watch they were eluded by this device, for the young Britons saw and heard nothing of them. When the dawn glimmered on the llano, the two were twenty miles from the scene of the fight.

CHAPTER 4.

On the Track—Camped on the Sierra—The Peril of the Night—El Cascabel the Cacique—The Chums Chip in and Find a Friend.

"THE yellow llano!"

Frank drew rein, and shaded his eyes with his hand as he looked across the plain. It was late in the afternoon, and the chums were still riding the western trail when the strange sight burst upon their view.

It was the "yellow llano" mentioned in the mysterious document. Of that there could be no doubt.

"Sunflowers, by Jupiter!" exclaimed Jim, in wonder.

The llano was clothed with them. Mile upon mile glimmered the golden blooms. As far as the eye could reach stretched the sea of nodding sunflowers.

"So that's what is meant by the 'yellow llano,'" remarked Frank. "There's no mistaking a sign like that."

Soon they were riding saddle-deep in the sea of blossom, the enormous flowers brushing against their thighs as they rode. An expression of extreme satisfaction came upon their sunburnt faces.

"Evidently we are on the track," Frank remarked. "Next we are to reach the 'barren sierra.' He lifted his riding-whip and pointed. "Do you see that blue line against the sky? That is the sierra, beyond a doubt."

That night they camped in the midst of the sunflowers. Eager for the trail, they were in the saddle again at the first glimpse of dawn. The blue sierra in the west was now clear to the view. It was one of those low ranges of hills through which the mighty Orinoco rolls in the land of the Arigua Indians. In the clear atmosphere of the llano the sierra appeared nearer than it was. It was nightfall again before the chums reached the first rocky slopes.

"Barren" the document had called it, and truly. Cliffs and rugged ridges of bare rock, cleft by deep canyons and arroyos, with here and there a little stream rippling down towards the Orinoco.

"It doesn't look very inviting," Frank said, as they drew rein in the shadow of a big rock. "But there's one advantage—this kind of ground retains no trail, and if Cabrera is still following he will be puzzled to find us."

"There's something in that. I hope the white trail will be as easy to recognise as the yellow llano."

"Anyway, we'll begin to look for it at dawn."

The night was fine but dark. The young adventurers kept watch in turns more vigilantly than ever, for, according to the document, they were now in the country of El Cascabel the cacique, probably some Indian chief of ferocious tendencies. Shortly before dawn Jim, who was on the watch, started up, grasping his rifle. He heard a sound of hoof-strokes, distant, but becoming more clearly audible every moment. A number of horsemen were advancing from the direction of the plain of sunflowers.

"Frank, old chap!" Frank started and yawned. "Listen! Do you hear?"

"I hear," Frank strained his ears to listen. "Five or six riders, and coming this way. Keep the horses quiet."

In the shadow of the big rock the chums were not likely to be seen by the passing horsemen. They had, of course, no camp-fire in so dangerous a country. They muffled blankets round the horses' heads. Grasping their rifles, finger on trigger, they waited. If they were seen and attacked, they would at least have first fire.

Closer and closer came the hoof-beats through the darkness, clinking upon the rough rocks of the sierra. Dimly the forms of the horsemen loomed up in the gloom. The murmur of voices came eerily to the listening Englishmen. They recognised, not without a thrill, the well-known tones of Bernal Cabrera.

"They have entered the sierra—there can be no doubt of that. Their trail through the sunflowers could have been followed by a blind burro!"

"But there is no trail on these rocks, Don Bernal."

"True. Our work is harder now. But, on the other hand, there's plenty of cover. Once we get a sight of them we shall pick them off like coyotes!"

They were past!

Not a suspicion had they of the proximity of the men they were seeking. Frank drew a deep breath, and looked at Jim. Jim made a grimace.

"They don't mean to give us a rest, Frank."

"It means shooting again soon," said Frank. "Did you count them as they passed, Jim?"

"Yes. They are six now."

"Still big odds. Cabrera is a determined rascal. He doesn't seem much the worse for his wound."

They did not think of sleep again. The neighbourhood of their enemies was too disquieting for that. Certainly the document of Manuel Gonzales had led them on a perilous trail. At dawn they were discussing their frugal breakfast of dried beef, corncake, and pure water, when the sound of distant firing came to their ears.

Westward of their camp rose a high, rocky ridge where dislocated boulders lay in confusion, as if scattered in sport by a giant's hand. From beyond this came the sound of echoing rifle-shots, and the staccato beat of a flying horse's hoofs.

"What does this mean?" Frank exclaimed. "It's somebody doing some lively scouting, and he's coming over the ridge."

"Look! There he is!"

"An Indian, by Jupiter!"

"A redskin! Down he goes!"

A copper-skinned horseman, with his long hair and his poncho flying wildly behind him, was urging his pony furiously across the ridge. But just as the chums saw him, a bullet from behind struck his steed, and man and horse went down together.

"Poor fellow! He's—Scott, he's up again!"

The Indian was on his feet in an instant, springing down the rocky slope. Over the ridge appeared a group of wildly-spurring horsemen.

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The Bri

"Cabrera's gang!"

The copperskin, as if giving up hope of escape now that he had lost his horse, turned to bay amongst the boulders. A lissu figure he made, standing erect, with glittering eyes and quivering nostrils, his long lance lifted in his right hand.

"Shoot him down!" yelled Bernal Cabrera.

The Venezuelans dragged their horses to a halt. Frank's finger sought his trigger.

"Jim, I can't stand this! Indian or not, I won't see a man shot like a dog!"

"Blaze away, old chap! We'll settle Cabrera's hash, even if we have to fight the redskin afterwards."

Neither the Indian nor his pursuers, in their excitement and preoccupation, had observed the chums standing by the big rock. The Indian yelled defiance in his dialect. But, brave as he evidently was, he held no chance, for the Venezuelans, instead of coming to close quarters, were levelling their rifles to riddle him with bullets.

"Now, Jim!"

"Right-ho!"

The chums fired together. Two of the South Americans, who were already pulling trigger, uttered fearful cries, and reeled in their saddles. The other four jumped as if electrified at the sound of the sudden fire, and without even looking to see whence it proceeded, wheeled their horses and dashed away over the ridge.

Probably they suspected that the Indian had led them designedly into an ambush, and feared to see a horde of copper-skinned warriors start up from the rocks.

The Indian swung round and stared at the Englishmen in blank amazement.

Frank, looping his rifle in his arm advanced with open, extended hands in sign of amity.

For a moment the copper hand still clenched upon the spear. Then it relaxed, and the Indian stepped towards the paleface with regard and gratitude blended with the astonishment in his dusky face. He spoke rapidly in his own dialect. Frank caught the word "amigos"—friends—and nodded.

"Si, si, señor, amigos," he said. And went on in English: "Can you speak my language?"

The copperskin nodded vigorously.

"You Ingleso? Me El Cascabel, great cacique of the Ariguas. Me know Inglesos on Orinoco."

Frank understood. The Indian chief had dealings with English traders, who came up the Orinoco from British Guiana, and from them he had picked up some knowledge of the language. Jim Roland whistled as he heard the cacique pronounce his name. So this was "El Cascabel, the cacique," of whom Manuel Gonzales's document warned them to beware. He was not much like the mental picture they had formed of him.

They had imagined a ferocious savage. El Cascabel was a fine-looking man. His face was prepossessing in spite of its copper hue. His eyes, fierce and keen as an eagle's, were true and steady. The adventurers felt immediately that he was a man to be trusted.

"Ingleso save the life of El Cascabel. El Cascabel the brother of Ingleso," said the cacique.

"With all my heart, chief."

El Cascabel stepped towards the two Venezuelans who had fallen. One man was dead, the other was painfully groaning. The hoof-beats of the flying horsemen had died away.

"We're in luck, Frank," Jim remarked. "El Cascabel will be a great deal more useful as a friend than as an enemy. And I think he's to be trusted."

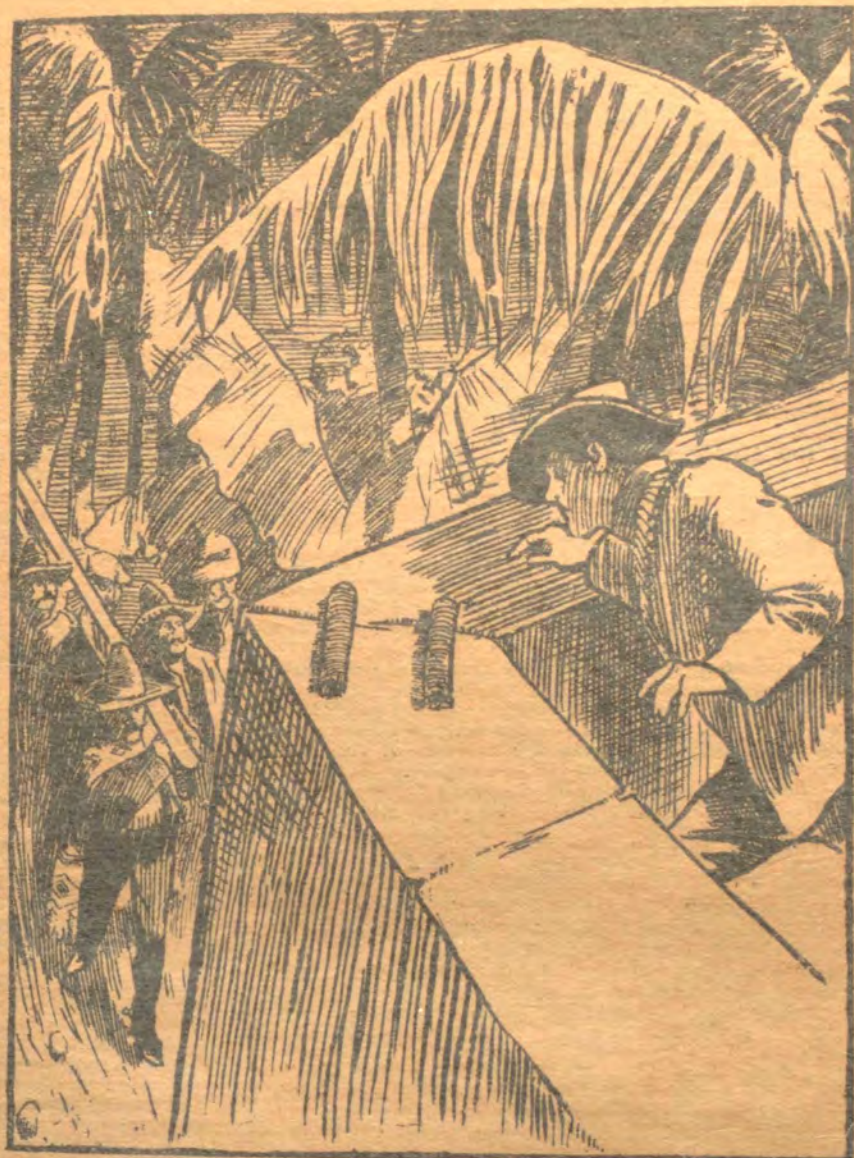
"I am sure of that. Some of these copperskins have a fine sense of honour. In fact, the redmen of South America can give points to a good many of the whites in that line. But what the dickens is he about?"

"He's going to stick that poor beggar. Stop him, for Heaven's sake!"

Frank sprang towards the cacique. El Cascabel had lifted his spear to transfix the wounded Venezuelan. Frank grasped his arm and stopped the lunge just in time.

"Why does my brother hold my hand?"

"You must not kill him, chief."



Frank crossed the azotea noiselessly, and, keeping in the shadow of a palm, peered over the parapet into the darkness. (See page 20.)

The cacique shook his arm free, and stepped back, lowering the point of his spear.

"Let my brother listen, and if he still asks for the life of the white coyote, El Cascabel will spare him."

Frank nodded. He wondered what was coming.

"Many moons ago the Snake and his braves came to buy gold-dust of the people of El Cascabel."

Frank and Jim comprehended that "the Snake" was the Indian's name for Bernal Cabrera.

"The Snake obtained the gold-dust, but instead of giving to the Ariguas the cloth and beads he had promised, he gave them death-water."

"Poison?"

The cacique nodded.

"The Snake was a great liar. He had no beads or cloth. He cheated the Ariguas, and stole the gold-dust, and five of El Cascabel's warriors died. El Cascabel swore the blood feud against the Snake and his braves."

"He was an infernal scoundrelly thief, and no mistake. But all the same, this fellow is dying. Let him die in peace."

"The Ingleso saved the life of El Cascabel, and it shall be as he says," said the cacique, with a great deal of dignity. But he cast a longing look at the groaning llanero. "It shall not be said that El Cascabel was ungrateful."

The Indian chief unwound his bola and roped in one of the dead men's mustangs.

"El Cascabel goes now to rouse his braves to the trail of vengeance," he said. "His heart is glad that the Snake has come again to the country of the Ariguas." He fixed his keen

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eyes upon Frank. "What are my brothers doing in the land of El Cascabel?"

"We are on the trail for gold, chief," Frank said candidly. "We do not come as enemies of the red braves. When we have found what we seek, we shall ride peaceably back to Ciudad Bolívar."

The dark eyes of the cacique had an intelligent look.

"And the Snake—does he seek also the gold?"

"That's the case. He's our rival in the quest; and this is the second tussle we've had."

"My brothers need fear him no more. Twenty warriors will follow El Cascabel upon his trail," the cacique declared. "But the Cascabel will give a sign to his brothers that his warriors may know them for friends." He drew from his girdle a curiously-wrought pipe, found the bowl of which coiled a cleverly carved rattlesnake. He held it out to Frank. "Show this to any brave of the Arigua nation, and he will know that you are the brother of El Cascabel."

And he rode away at a gallop, eager to gather his warriors for the death-trail.

CHAPTER 5.

On the White Trail—Cabrera's Devils—The Venezuelans Victorious.

"WHAT is it, Frank?"

"The white trail."

"Jupiter! So it is."

For two days the adventurers had sought it. During that time they had seen nothing of either Cabrera's gang or the braves of El Cascabel. They had begun to hope that the Venezuelans had been frightened away by the copper-skinned.

They had camped after dark at the opening of a wide canyon. Glimmering dawn revealed to their eyes a strange sight. Right up the canyon, as far as eye could reach, the ground was of snowy whiteness. On either side the acclivities were gleaming white. The chums, new to the marvels of the Spanish-American sierra, gazed about them in wonder.

"What is it, Frank? It can't be snow!"

"No. Hanged if I can tell." They rode into the canyon.

"Ah, I see!"

"What is it, then?"

"Soda."

"Soda!"

"Nothing else."

Soda it was; a deep incrustation, miles in extent, crackling into sparkling dust under the hoofs of the horses.

The "white trail," clearly. Frank drew out the mysterious document, and read it through once more.

"Follow the white trail to the valley of the pecans, and dig at the foot of the blasted ceiba." This is the white trail, sure enough, Jim.

"No doubt about that. It seems all plain sailing now."

The horses crunched on through the crusted soda. Behind they left a trail as clearly marked as prints in deep snow.

"That's bad," Jim remarked, looking back. "A blind man could follow that."

"Still it shows that we are first in the field, for there are no tracks in the soda ahead of us."

"That's so." Jim carefully scanned the gleaming track.

"Bernal Cabrera hasn't hit upon the white trail yet."

It was a strange and uncanny route. As the sun rose higher the soda flashed and sparkled back its rays, in all the colours of the rainbow.

The heat became intense. The light reflected from the dazzling sheets of soda was almost intolerable to the eyes. Still the canyon stretched, seemingly endless, before the adventurers.

They were reluctant to halt for noon in a place where no shade could be had from the blinding sun-glare. Not a trace of vegetation was to be seen—not even an overhanging rock to keep off the vertical beams.

"Eureka!" exclaimed Frank suddenly. He drew rein.

"This is just what we want, Jim. It's corn in Egypt and no mistake!"

At that spot the canyon-side rose in a rugged, rocky slope. Huge boulders lay piled on the acclivity, looking as if the touch of a hand would send them whirling downward. In the face of the cliff opened a deep, dark aperture, the mouth of a cave of unknown extent. To the chums, dazzled and scorched by the tropical sun, the black opening appeared extremely inviting. They dismounted, and led their horses into the cool shadow of the interior.

Within the cave they sat on lumps of rock to eat and rest. The cave was not of large dimensions. It was about ten feet wide, and extended as far into the sierra. Its height varied—seven or eight feet at the opening, higher inside.

Frank was stretching himself on the cool rock for a rest, when a sudden sound in the canyon without made him spring up. He had heard the crunching of a horse's hoofs on the soda incrustation. He stepped to the opening, and looked out. He

sprang back just in time as a rifle cracked. A bullet flattened itself upon the rock.

"Danger, Jim!" he said grimly.

"Cabrera?"

"Yes."

With their rifles in their hands the young Britishers stood in the dusk of the cave, ready to receive the enemy if they tried a rush.

"They won't rush us, Frank," Jim remarked, after a long pause. "Cabrera's had a taste of our quality, and he knows better than that. Did you see him?"

"Yes, the four of them. Our track in the soda has led them here."

Frank's expression grew very uneasy.

"What are they doing? Cabrera is up to some treacherous trick."

"Perhaps they see that they can't get at us, and they've scooted," Jim suggested.

Frank shook his head.

"I don't think that. But we'll soon see."

He placed his sombrero on the muzzle of his rifle and projected it beyond the mouth of the cave.

Crack! Crack! Two bullet-holes showed in the hat as he drew it back. Frank laughed.

"That shows they're still there, Jim."

"Conclusive evidence. But what's their game? Do you think they mean to make a siege of it?"

Frank nodded in a very thoughtful way.

"Possibly. Cabrera must know that we have no water here but what our gourds contain, and that our supply of grub is limited. It's the game he's likely to play."

Jim looked blank.

"And we can't get out without being potted like partridges, Frank."

"We might make a break after dark," said Frank. "Besides, El Cascabel is on the track of the Venezuelans. If the firing should reach the ears of any of his scouts, it will be a bad look-out for Cabrera and his gang."

Crunch! Gr-r-r-rh!

"What the dickens is that?"

The chums looked bewilderedly at each other. From above their heads came the sound as of grinding rocks.

Crash! The light was blotted out, as though black night had suddenly fallen upon the earth.

"Good heavens! It's an earthquake!" gasped Jim.

"No; it isn't that."

Frank struck a match and advanced towards the mouth of the cavern. It was blocked up by an immense mass of rock. Here and there a gleam came through some crevice, but faintly, dimly.

Frank gave a bitter smile. Clearly now he understood the cunning game of the Venezuelans. Two of them had kept watch in the canyon to cut off the escape of the Britishers. The other two had climbed the hillside by a circuitous route and reached the steep slope above the cavern's mouth. There they had displaced one of the immense boulders, rolling it down to block the opening below.

Well had they done their work. The huge mass had crashed down directly before the cave, shutting out the light of day, cutting off all egress for the imprisoned Englishmen.

"Great Scott!" ejaculated Jim. "They've done us this time, and no mistake."

The match went out.

"We are buried alive, Jim."

"Perhaps we can shift that rock," Jim said hopefully.

Frank shrugged his shoulders.

"We could shift the sierra itself as soon."

"Let's try, anyway."

They put their shoulders to the rock and shoved with all their strength. Not a fraction of an inch did the rock budge. There was no movement at all perceptible. The chums gave it up, panting.

"We're done, Jim."

"Looks like it, by Jupiter."

"Hola, señores!"

It was the voice of Bernal Cabrera from the outer side of the rock. It thrilled with exultation in every tone.

"The hound! He thinks he's got us in a cleft stick now!" growled Frank.

"And he ain't far wrong, old chap!"

"Señores, can you hear me?"

"We can hear you, scoundrel!"

The Venezuelan chuckled.

"You have led me a long dance, señores; but I have got you at last!"

"We are not dead yet."

Cabrera chuckled again.

"How long will it take you to starve to death, Señor Ingleso?"

Frank did not reply to that.

"You have defeated me three times, señores, and killed four

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of my men. It's my turn now. Do you think you will ever get out of this death-trap?"

"At any rate, you scoundrel, you will never obtain the document of Manuel Gonzales!"

Again the exultant chuckle. Cabrera seemed unable to contain his glee.

"Nor do I seek to obtain it, Señor Ingleso."

"That's a lie!"

"You forget that I have read it, señor. It is true that I could not recall the whole of the mysterious directions; one sentence alone remained clear in my mind—it was the last."

Frank felt a sinking at the heart. The taunting tones went on:

"But you have been my guides, señores. Your trail has led me hither, and I no longer require guiding, for the most important sentence I recollect clearly—Follow the white trail to the valley of the pecans, and dig at the foot of the blasted ceiba. Is that correct, señor?"

For once an oath leaped to Frank Leslie's lips. Truly the Venezuelan no longer needed the aid of Manuel Gonzales' document!

"That this is the white trail, I have no doubt," resumed Cabrera. "I have but to ride on to the valley of the pecans and secure the treasure! How do you like that?"

"I would give all the treasure were it in my hands," Frank said hoarsely, "to stand before you in a fair fight, you cowardly hound!"

Cabrera laughed mockingly.

"No doubt. But you will never stir from that death-hole. I have no further use for you or your precious document, and you may rot there together! Adios, señores! I go to seek the treasure!"

The mocking voice ceased, they heard the sound of hoofs powdering the soda. In the lantern-light the chums looked at each other.

"So ends our treasure trail, Frank," growled Jim. "He has done us brown. I don't think I mind pegging out half so much as letting that boulder collar the treasure. That's the kindest out of all."

"We're not dead yet, Jim, and while there's life there's hope," Frank said quietly.

Jim made a grimace.

"Precious little, Frank, that I can see."

Frank leaned against the rock with folded arms, his brows wrinkled in deep thought.

Jim wandered aimlessly about the cave. He had given up hope, but he had not lost his pluck. He tapped the rock here and there in a tentative way. Nowhere did it sound hollow. The solid sierra was round them, and there was no escape!

An hour—two hours—passed.

"Well, Frank, old chap, what do you think now?"

"I'm afraid it's all up with us, Jim, old boy! That scoundrel spoke the truth—we have found our grave in the sierra!"

And then there was dull silence in the living tomb.

CHAPTER 6.

Light at Last—On the Trail With El Cascabel—A Surprising Recognition:

WHEN there no longer came gleams of light through the crevices the buried adventurers knew that it was night upon the sierra. There had been no sound in the canyon. In the hope of being heard by some wandering scout of El Cascabel's they had shouted and fired their rifles at intervals. It was their only chance, and it had failed them.

The night passed in dreary misery. The horses, knowing by instinct that there was peril, hung their heads and whimpered instead of sleeping. The atmosphere of the cave grew heavy and oppressive; but the crevices admitted sufficient fresh air to sustain life. It was not suffocation, but hunger and thirst that the adventurers had to fear.

Thrice during the night they tried their strength upon the rock. Each time dead failure was followed by dull depression and despair.

Morning dawned. Gleams of light came again to the weary, watching eyes. Thirst had already seized upon both horses and men. The animals whimpered pitifully, but very little remained in the gourds. That little had to be husbanded.

Crunch! Crunch! Hoof-strokes on the soda-crust of the canyon! At the sound their hearts leaped and beat.

They showered blows on the rock; they shouted; they fired their rifles. If the deadliest foes were without, better their tender mercies than hunger and thirst and dismal doom in this recess of the sierra.

They heard horsemen clattering to a halt; they heard exclamations of wonder in an unknown tongue.

"Not Cabrera's gang, then!" said Frank. He drew a deep breath. "They're Indians, Jim, and they may not belong to El Cascabel's tribe; but anything's better than staying here."

"What-ho!" said Jim heartily, and he pounded away for all he was worth. "Got old Cascabel's peace-pipe handy, Frank?"

"Here it is."

"I hope it'll work the oracle if El Cascabel isn't there."

"If it doesn't," Frank said grimly, "it will be a bad look-out for us."

A flood of sunshine rushed into the cave. Nine or ten pairs of arms, not without difficulty, had rolled away the huge rock.

Dazzled by the sudden light the adventurers stood for a moment blinking blindly in the sun-glare. As in a vision they saw a ring of copper faces, gleaming black eyes, threatening spears.

Frank collected himself in an instant. He could not see El Cascabel there, and he had to take the chances of life and death. He stepped boldly forward, and extended in his hand was the peace-pipe of the cacique.

It was evident that the Ariguas knew the symbol of their chief and what was meant by it, for every spear was lowered at once.

"Amigos!" grunted the copper-skinned warriors; and the chums drew deep breaths of relief.

"It's worked the oracle, Frank!" Jim exclaimed gleefully.

"And—why, there's El Cascabel himself!"

The cacique had remained sitting upon his horse while his braves rolled away the rock from the mouth of the cave. As the two Britons emerged into the sunlight he saw them, and, with an exclamation, pushed his horse towards them.

"Me glad see white brothers!" he exclaimed. "How Inglesos come in cave?"

"The Snake and his fellows caught us napping and shut us up there, chief. We owe our lives to you!"

The cacique smiled.

"Inglesos save El Cascabel; El Cascabel save Inglesos!" he ejaculated sententiously. "It is the will of Wacondah!"

"You are on the trail of the Snake?"

El Cascabel nodded.

"Will my brothers join me to hunt down the white coyotes?"

Frank's eyes glittered.

"Gladly, chief! I was about to ask it."

And Jim chimed in with a very decided:

"What-ho!"

Both the young Britons were eager to get a blow back at the black-hearted Venezuelan who had robbed them and condemned them to so fearful a doom.

The horses were brought out and given water from the Indians' gourds. The chums mounted, and rode up the white trail with El Cascabel.

A sudden whoop burst from the Indians—it had a triumphant note in it. Frank and Jim looked up hastily. Four copperskins were riding down the canyon towards them, and in their midst rode a white prisoner, bound to his horse.

A man of sturdy frame, with swarthy face and flashing black eyes, his head haughtily erect although there were bonds upon his limbs.

"One of Cabrera's gang," said Frank; then immediately added, "No, it isn't. I know that face. Thunder, it's the llanero—the man of Caracas!"

Jim gave a prolonged whistle.

"Great Scott! Manuel Gonzales!"

No wonder the chums were amazed, for in the prisoner of the red braves they recognised the man they had long believed dead, the man Cabrera had called Manuel Gonzales, the stranger who had thrust the mysterious document into Frank's hand that night in the Calle de Alemejo at Caracas!

CHAPTER 7.

"The Quality of Mercy"—Frank Gains His Point—Story of the Mysterious Document—The Valley of the Pecans—"On the Last Lap."

THE horses crunched to a halt; another whoop broke from the redskins—it boded no good to Manuel Gonzales. The Ariguas were clearly joyous at finding the llanero in their hands.

There was no fear in the llanero's swarthy face. He looked curiously at the two Britishers, but made no appeal to them.

Frank turned to the cacique.

"Is that man your prisoner, El Cascabel?"

The cacique nodded, with a troubled look. He guessed that Frank was about to ask what he (El Cascabel) would be decidedly reluctant to grant.

"But he is my friend, chief!"

"He is the enemy of the Ariguas," said the cacique coldly.

"In the lodges of El Cascabel he is doomed to sing his death-song!"

Frank felt some dismay. He could see that there was bitter blood between the llanero and the redskins.

"But he is my friend, chief! If I ask for his life you will not refuse me?"

El Cascabel bent his head.

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"If El Ingleso asks, El Cascabel cannot refuse."

He spoke rapidly in his own dialect to the warriors. The copper faces grew sullen, but the Ariguas made no vocal demur. They fell back from the prisoner, leaving him sitting his horse alone.

The llanero (plainman) had listened to the talk upon which his life depended without moving a muscle. Evidently he was a man of iron nerve.

"You spare him, chief?" asked Frank joyfully.

"I give him to my brother. But let El Ingleso take him from the sight of the Ariguas. My warriors have long memories and sharp spears!"

Frank understood the hint.

"Thank you from my heart, chief!" He held out his hand. "Farewell, then!"

Then spoke Manuel Gonzales.

"El Cascabel, I would never have asked my life of you; but, since you grant it, I am not ungrateful. Henceforth the hatchet is buried between us. With to-morrow's sun I leave the land of the Ariguas and never again will I enter it."

The cacique inclined his head.

While Frank's knife glided over the tough llanas which bound the llanero to his horse the Indians rode on up the trail.

Freed from his cramping bonds the llanero stretched his long limbs. He shook hands heartily with the Britons.

"You have saved my life, señores, and I shall not forget it." He spoke in excellent English. "It was, I presume, my document which led you hither?"

"Yes. As you did not reclaim it——"

"You deemed me dead?"

"Exactly!"

"And you came to seek the treasure?" the llanero said thoughtfully. "Many men would have left me in the hands of the copperskins in order to keep the treasure to themselves."

Frank smiled.

"That's hardly British form, my friend."

The llanero nodded.

"Now, señores, we will seek the treasure together! What do you say? Cabrera's gang remains to be dealt with. We will take the trail together and share equally?"

"If there's any treasure left to share," observed Jim. "But the fact is, señor, Bernal Cabrera has read your document, and he's twenty-four hours ahead of us, and by this time he's probably made a clean sweep and scooted!"

The llanero smiled.

"I do not fear that, señores, for a reason I shall explain to you. Are you ready to ride? Follow my lead, and we shall find both our prize and our enemies."

The chums had no hesitation in following the lead of the Venezuelan llanero. They were strangers in the land, while he knew the sierra like a book.

The redskins had disappeared up the white trail. The llanero led the chums the same way for a hundred yards or so, and then turned into a branching gully.

"Are we going to the valley of the pecans, señor?" asked Frank.

"Yes. This route is longer and will take us to the southern end. I have a reason."

The trail was rough. The soda incrustation was left behind. The route ascended. The three rode at a moderate pace side by side.

"We shall ride this trail for two hours, señores," Gonzales remarked. "In the meantime I will explain what has doubtless puzzled you. You must have been greatly astonished, Señor Don Francisco, when I thrust the document into your hand that night in Caracas."

"Well, I was a bit," Frank admitted; "but I guessed your motive when I saw the gang of braves on your track. Was Cabrera among them?"

"He was their leader."

"I guessed, afterwards, that he had had a hand in that game."

"The document had been in my hands only a few days. It was given to me by an old comrade, Felippo Martinez, on his deathbed. It was Martinez who, more than a year ago, discovered a rich deposit of gold in this wild sierra. He had fallen foul of the redskins, and he was wounded and had lost his horse. And besides that, the treasure was as much as two horses could carry. He removed it, therefore, from the exposed arroyo in which he had found it, and cached it at the foot of the blasted ceiba, that being a spot he could easily

find again. His idea was to return to Caracas and find some trusty comrade to ride with him to the valley of the pecans and regain the treasure and carry it off in safety."

"But the struggle across the wild llano, afoot and wounded as he was, was too much for him. He reached Caracas, only to die. He gave the document to me, that I, at least, might benefit by his discovery. But Bernal Cabrera was on the track."

"There had been talk among the llaneros at the posadas of Martinez's fortune, and by espionage Bernal Cabrera learned of the existence of the document. He was the leader of a gang of desperadoes of the llano, and he gathered them for a blow at the treasure. Twice I was attacked treacherously. The first time I eluded them, but the second time they caught me at a disadvantage."

"It was late; the streets deserted. They attacked me suddenly. My weapons were wrenched away; a poniard pierced my side. I fled, with the demons at my heels. I knew they would have me in a few minutes more, and my only thought was to get rid of the document before they could seize me. I had already dragged it from my pocket when I suddenly came upon you. In a flash I decided what to do. I had seen you about Caracas, señores; I knew you were Britons, and I thought you were to be trusted."

"You know what followed. I left the document in your hand. In the alleys they ran me down, but they did not find the document. Twice again I was stabbed, but before my senses left me I heard them muttering that I must have thrown it away, and they scattered to search for it. Afterwards, I learned that I was picked up by one of President Castro's patrols, and taken to the American hospital. It was not expected that I should live. But a South American llanero is not easy to kill. I recovered, and in a very short time I was on the trail."

"I found that you, señores, had quitted your hacienda, and that Cabrera and his band were no longer seen in Caracas. From Señor Carrero, your landlord of the hacienda, I learned of the night attack Cabrera had made upon you, and how you had left him roped up on the azotea. You were wrong, señores. You should have driven a poniard to his heart!"

"That both you and Cabrera had started for the Orinoco to seek the treasure was, of course, clear to me. I left Caracas and came with all speed to these sierras. You had a long start, but my knowledge of the country more than compensated for that. I came by a shorter route. I was first in the field."

"My idea was to remove the treasure from the cache at the foot of the ceiba and conceal it in a new cache, where it would be out of the power of Bernal Cabrera. Then I would seek to join you, señores, and between us we would carry the gold to Caracas."

Frank broke in animatedly.

"And have you removed it?"

The llanero nodded.

"Then if Cabrera digs at the foot of the blasted ceiba, he will find——"

A grin came upon the swarthy face of Gonzales.

"He will find a slab of stone with the name of Manuel Gonzales scratched upon it, to show him who has been there before him."

Frank laughed heartily. He could picture the faces of the Venezuelans when they found it.

"Ye gods, what a sell for Cabrera!" chuckled Jim. "He will feel like kicking himself all the way back to Caracas, you bet!"

"I had no knowledge that the Ariguas were on the war-trail," Gonzales resumed. "I had just shot an antelope for my dinner, and was skinning it when those red devils pounced upon me, giving me no chance to get hold of a firearm. They had heard my shot, and crept upon me as cautiously as snakes. But for you, Inglesos señores, I should have been taken to the town of El Cascabel and hacked to pieces by the squaws. You will be well repaid for your honourable dealing, señores. For if I had perished, the secret of the cache would have remained a secret for ever."

Frank smiled.

"We have a proverb in our country, señor, that honesty is the best policy; and I really think that this is a proof of it."

The trail became more rugged. The dark pines were around them now. They were high up in the sierra.

"Then you did not, as the document directs, follow the white trail to the valley of pecans, Don Manuel?" Frank remarked. "The absence of tracks in the soda-crust led us to believe that we were first in the field."

The llanero laughed.

"I did not care to leave so conspicuous an indication of my route, señor, in so dangerous a region. Knowing these hills well, it was not difficult for me to reach the valley of the pecans across the sierra without setting hoof on the white trail."

The sun was red in the west. They rode on steadily through the pine-woods. Gonzales had told his tale. Frank, in his

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turn, related what had befallen the adventurers since they set out from Caracas.

The llanero listened with interest. He gave a slight shrug of the shoulders at the mention of the saving of El Cascabel's life. He was born to the merciless war of the llano, and the Englishmen's ideas were not wholly comprehensible to him.

"In your place, señores, I should have let Bernal Cabrera finish the redskin," said Cabrera.

"Careful, now, señores," he said, a little later. "We have passed the ridge, and we descend now."

At length they emerged from the shrouding pine-woods. Before them lay a gentle slope clothed in rich grass, with tracts of mesquite. It led down into a fair and verdant valley, where the pecan-trees grew in luxuriant groves.

The chums rose in their saddles and looked ahead with a simultaneous exclamation:

"The valley of the pecans!"

They rode down the slope in the light of the setting sun.

"We're on the last lap!" Jim exclaimed gleefully. "It will be a walk-over after all, Frank."

Frank swept the valley with his eyes. Of human occupants he could see no sign.

"Looks like it," he assented.

But Gonzales shook his head.

"We have not done yet with Bernal Cabrera, señores," he declared.

CHAPTER 8.

"Gold!"—Face to Face Again—Bernal Cabrera.

"Halt, señores! This is the place."

The adventurers drew rein. Gonzales sprang to the ground. They had crossed the valley of the pecans. They halted at the foot of a towering cliff. Round the base the pecan-trees grew thickly, with scarlet vines interlacing their branches. Black-faced monkeys and brilliant-hued parrots hopped and chattered and peeped among the red blossoms.

Gonzales, with his hand on the bridle of his horse, forced a path through the thickets. Frank and Jim, leading their horses, followed in his track. The thickets were passed in a few minutes. Beyond lay a deep embayment in the cliff—narrow at the opening and widening within—a "pocket," in the parlance of the mountain-men.

The pecan thicket completely closed and concealed the opening. Above, far above, appeared a patch of blue sky.

"The cache is here?" asked Frank.

"It is here, señor."

The chums were eager. Their eyes glittered. The llanero was calm enough as he drew a spade from a crevice in the cliff where it had been hidden.

"One, two, three." He was stepping slowly and counting his paces. He counted twelve. "Señores, this is the spot."

The ground, cunningly replaced, betrayed no trace of previous digging. But when the llanero began to delve, the ease with which the earth came up showed that it had recently been loosened by a spade.

The day was fast waning. But sufficient light remained for the work. Gonzales stepped back.

"Look, señores!"

A number of large bags, roughly made of hide, lay in the excavation.

"And that—that—"

"That is the treasure."

Gonzales dragged a bag from the cache and shook out the contents. Nuggets large and small rolled upon the grass. The chums uttered exclamations of delight. Some heavy, with quartz, some of pure gold, all glimmering dully yellow, all enchanting to the eyes of the gold-hunters.

Breathlessly the adventurers gazed upon their prize. A fortune lay before them—a fortune for each of the three.

"Splendid!" cried Frank. "Glorious!"

"Ripping!" ejaculated Jim.

The old folks at home open their eyes!

There was a sound of snapping branches.

"Look out!" yelled Gonzales. "Cover!"

In a second the adventurers, forgetting the treasure, sprang to cover among the boulders, with which the ground was plentifully strewn. Their eyes and their rifles gleamed towards the pecan-trees which barred the opening from the valley.

Crack!

It was Gonzales's rifle that rang. A scream answered from the pecan-trees. The llanero reloaded his rifle tranquilly.

"Did I not tell you so, señores? Bernal Cabrera has crossed our path once more."

The light was fast dying. Already it was dusk in the rocky recess, and dark under the pecan-trees.

"Caramba!" growled Bernal Cabrera. There was a red mark across the Venezuelan's swarthy cheek; the llanero's bullet had hit him there. "Caramba, we have run them down at last! Did you see the gleam of gold, comrades? They have unearthed the treasure!"

Greed of gold was plainly writ in the dusky faces of these thieves of the llano. They had caught a glimpse of the treasure glimmering there on the ground, and the sight had set their blood on fire.

"Let us advance, then!" exclaimed Miguel Xeres.

Cabrera shook his head.

"It will soon be dark, then we'll rush them." And the Venezuelans settled down to wait.

Cabrera's eyes gleamed with hate. The blackest passions had been roused in his breast by the trick the llanero had played.

He had easily found the blasted ceiba—a huge tree shivered by lightning, a conspicuous object in the valley of the pecans. The Venezuelans had dug at the foot of it in the full expectation of finding the treasure there. They found nothing but the slab of stone with the llanero's name cut upon it, and then they knew that Manuel Gonzales had survived that night in Caracas and that he had preceded them upon the treasure trail.

Furious at the loss of the prize they had made so sure of, the gold-seekers did not abandon the quest. They lingered in the valley, seeking traces of the llanero who had baffled them, inspired almost as much by longing for revenge as by greed of gold. And now, they believed, their hour had come.

Cabrera rose. The sun had touched the rim of the west, and the last gleam of daylight was in the sky.

"Look to your weapons!" Cabrera's eyes were glittering like a cat's in the gloom. "It will be a fight to a finish. Gonzales saved the Inglesos from starving in the cave"—that was the Venezuelan's supposition—"but he will not be able to save them now! Forward!"

The sun had passed the horizon. The sudden darkness of the tropics fell upon the sierra and the valley of the pecans.

"They are coming!" whispered Gonzales. The llanero's keen ear had detected the sound of carefully-parted branches.

The chums set their teeth. They knew that this would be a desperate fight, not only for the treasure, but for life itself—and they were ready for it.

"Let them come!" said Frank quietly.

Crack, crack, crack, crack!

A burst of rifle-fire, a clatter of rushing feet, fierce oaths, yells; then a piercing shriek, a heavy fall!

Crack, crack, crack!

Another cry; again the thud of a body upon the ground.

A fierce laugh broke from Gonzales.

"They are running!"

"Licked, by thunder!" shouted Jim. "Come back, you scoundrels, and let us finish you!"

A volley of curses answered from the pecan-trees.

"Two of them will never pull trigger again!" the llanero chuckled. "But we shall have to fight our way through yonder thickets to-morrow, señores, for—Hark! That is Cabrera's voice!"

"Curses upon you, Manuel Gonzales!" the infuriated Venezuelan was screaming. "But the game is not yet played out; not yet have you finished with Bernal Cabrera!"

Frank smiled grimly.

"He does not know that the Ariguas are on his trail," he said. "By this time El Cascabel must have reached the valley of the pecans."

Jim lifted his hand.

"Hark!"

There was a crashing of branches, a pattering of moccasined feet, amongst the pecans; a wild howl of fear, a thrilling Indian war-whoop.

"Dios!" murmured Gonzales. "Los Indios!"

For a few moments an uproar of conflict; then a ringing whoop, vibrant with ferocious triumph.

A tall form stepped from the pecans, a well-known voice was heard.

"Where are my white brothers?"

"We are here, El Cascabel!" Frank sprang forward and grasped the coppery hand. "Again you have saved us!"

The cacique's eyes were gleaming.

"Let my brothers sleep in peace, the Snake will follow their trail no more!"

Under the dark trees lay Bernal Cabrera, his face upturned, his treasure-hunt was ended for ever!

El Cascabel and his braves rode with the adventurers as far as the plain of sunflowers on their homeward route.

Four days after parting with the Redskins the three arrived at Ciudad Bolivar. There the gold was divided—a fortune for each—and the chums said farewell to the llanero.

Manuel Gonzales returned to Caracas, but Frank and Jim went down the Orinoco in a trader's boat to British Guiana.

A month later they stood on the deck of a homeward-bound steamer, watching the shores of South America sinking in the haze of the western horizon.

THE END.

(Two long stories again next Saturday: "THE AMATEUR CHAMPION," a tale of the Ring, by Harry Adams, and "THE YELLOW STAR," a story of Dr. Nevada, Detective. Order PLUCK in advance.)

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