The Moving Picture Boys At Panama

By
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CHAPTER I

TO THE RESCUE

With a series of puffs and chugs a big, shiny motor cycle turned from the road into the graveled drive at the side of a white farmhouse. Two boys sat on the creaking saddles. The one at the front handle bars threw forward the clutch lever, and then turned on the power sharply to drive the last of the gases out of the twin cylinders.

The motor cycle came to a stop near a shed, and the two lads, swinging off, looked at each other for a moment.

"Some ride, that!" observed one. "You had her going then, Blake!"

"Just a little, Joe—yes. It was a nice level stretch, and I wanted to see what she could do."

"You didn't let her out to the full at that; did you?"

"I should say not!" answered the one who had ridden in front, and guided the steed of steel and gasoline. "She'll do better than ninety miles an hour on the level; but I don't want to ride on her when she's doing it."

"Nor I. Well, it was a nice little run, all right. Funny, though, that we didn't get any mail; wasn't it?"

"It sure was. I think somebody must be robbing the post-office, for we ought to have had a letter from Mr. Hadley before this," and he laughed at his own joke.

"Yes," agreed Joe, "and I ought to have had one from—"

He stopped suddenly, and a blush suffused the tan of his cheeks.

"Might as well say it as think it," broke in Blake with another laugh that showed his white, even teeth. "Hasn't Mabel written to you this week?"

"What if she hasn't?" fired back Joe.

"Oh, nothing. Only—"

"Only I suppose you are put out because you haven't had a postcard from Birdie Lee!" challenged Joe.

"Oh, well, have it your own way," and Blake, with a shrug of his broad shoulders, began to wheel the motor cycle into the shed.

"No, but it is queer; isn't it?" went on Joe. "Here we've been back from the flood district over two weeks now, and we haven't had a line from Mr. Hadley. He promised to write, too, and let us know what sort of moving pictures he might be in line for next. Our vacation will soon be over, and we don't want to be idle."

"That's right," agreed his chum. "There's no money in sitting around, when the film isn't running. Oh, well, I suppose Mr. Hadley has been so busy that he hasn't had time to make his plans.

"Besides," Blake went on, "you know there was a lot of trouble over the Mississippi flood pictures—reels of film getting lost, and all that—to say nothing of the dangers our friends ran. Birdie Lee said she'd never forget what they suffered."

"I don't blame her. Well, maybe they haven't got straightened out enough yet to feel like writing. But it sure is nice here, and I don't mind if we stay another week or so," and he looked up the pleasant valley, on one side of which was perched the farmhouse where the two moving picture boys had been spending their vacation.

"It sure is nice," agreed Blake. "And it's lots more fun since we got this motor cycle," for they had lately invested in the powerful vehicle on which they had made many trips about the surrounding country.

As Blake went to put the machine in the shed, which their farmer-landlord had allowed them to use, Joe turned to glance back along the road they had come.

The farmhouse was set up on a little hill, above the road, and a glimpse of the highway could be had for a long distance. It was the sight of something coming along this thoroughfare that attracted Joe's attention.

"What are you looking at?" asked Blake, returning after having put away the motor cycle.

"That horse and buggy. Looks to me as though that horse was feeling his oats, and that the fellow driving him didn't know any more about handling the reins than the law allows."

"That's right, Joe. If he doesn't look out he'll have an upset, or a runaway."

The vehicle in question was a light buggy; drawn by a particularly large and spirited horse. Seated in the carriage, as the boys could see from their point of vantage, were two men. Who they were could not be distinguished at that distance, but the carriage was rapidly coming nearer.

"There he goes!" suddenly cried Joe.

As his chum spoke Blake saw that one of the reins had parted, probably because the driver pulled on it too hard in trying to bring the restive steed down to a walk.

Once the spirited horse felt that he was no longer under control, save by one line, which was worse than none, he sprang forward, and at once began to gallop, pulling after him the light carriage, which swayed from side to side, threatening every moment to collapse, overturn, or at least be torn loose from the horse.

"There he goes!" yelled Joe again.

"I should say so!" agreed Blake. "There are going to be some doings soon!"

This was evident, for the horse was running away, a fact not only apparent in itself, but heralded by the looks on the faces of the two occupants of the carriage, and by their frightened cries, which the wind easily carried to the watching Joe Duncan and Blake Stewart.

On the road below them, and past the boys, swept the swaying carriage in a cloud of dust. As it was momentarily lost to sight behind a grassy knoll, Blake cried:

"The broken bridge, Joe! The broken bridge! They're headed right for it!"

"That's right!" exclaimed his chum. "How can we stop them?"

Once having recognized the danger, the next thought that came to the minds of Blake and Joe, trained for emergencies, was how to avert it. They looked at each other for a second, not to gain a delay, but to decide on the best possible plan of saving the imperiled men.

"The broken bridge," murmured Blake again. "That horse will never be able to make the turn into the temporary road, going at the speed he is!"

"No, and he's probably so frightened that he'll not try it," agreed Joe. "He'll crash right through the barrier fence, and—"

He did not finish his sentence, but Blake knew what his chum meant.

About half a mile beyond the farmhouse the road ran over a bridge that spanned a deep and rocky ravine. About a week before there had been an accident. Weakened by the passing of a heavy traction threshing engine, it had been broken, and was ruled unsafe by the county authorities.

Accordingly the bridge had been condemned and partially torn down, a new structure being planned to replace it. But this new bridge was not yet in place, though a frail, temporary span, open only to foot passengers and very light vehicles, had been thrown across the ravine.

The danger, though, was not so much in the temporary bridge, as in the fact that the temporary road, connecting with it, left the main and permanent highway at a sharp curve. Persons knowing of the broken bridge made allowances for this curve, and approached along the main road carefully, to make the turn safely into the temporary highway.

But a maddened horse could not be expected to do this. He would dash along the main road, and would not make the turn. Or, if he did, going at the speed of this one, he would most certainly overturn the carriage.

The main highway was fenced off a short distance on either side of the broken bridge, but this barrier was of so frail a nature that it could not be expected to stop a runaway.

"He'll crash right through it, run out on the end of the broken bridge and——"

Once more Joe did not finish.

"We've got to do something!" cried Blake.

"Yes, but what?" asked Joe.

"We've got to save them!" cried Blake again, as he thought of the two men in the carriage. He had had a glimpse of their faces as the vehicle, drawn by the

frenzied horse, swept past him on the road below. One of the men he knew to be employed in the only livery stable of Central Falls, on the outskirts of which he and Joe were spending their holiday. The other man was a stranger. Blake had only seen that he was a young man, rather good-looking, and of a foreign cast of countenance. Blake had momentarily put him down for an Italian.

"The motor cycle!" suddenly cried Joe.

"What?" asked Blake, only half comprehending.

"We might overtake them on the motor cycle!" repeated his chum.

A look of understanding came into Blake's eyes.

"That's right!" he cried. "Why didn't I think of that before, instead of standing here mooning? I wonder if we've got time?"

"We'll make time!" cried Joe grimly. "Get her out, and we'll ride for all we're worth. It'll be a race, Blake!"

"Yes. A race to save a life! Lucky she's got plenty of gas and oil in her."

"Yes, and she hasn't had a chance to cool down. Run her out."

Blake fairly leaped toward the shed where he had wheeled the motor cycle. In another instant he and Joe were trundling it down the gravel walk to the road.

As they reached the highway they could hear, growing fainter and fainter, the "thump-thud," of the hoofs of the runaway horse.

Joe held the machine upright while Blake vaulted to the forward saddle and began to work the pedals to start the motor. The cylinders were still hot from the recent run, and at the first revolution the staccato explosions began.

"Jump up!" yelled Blake in his chum's ear—shouting above the rattle and bang of the exhaust, for the muffler was open.

Joe sprang to leather, but before he was in his seat Blake was letting in the friction clutch, and a moment later, at ever gathering speed, the shining motor cycle was speeding down the road to the rescue. Would Joe and Blake be in time?

CHAPTER II

ON THE BRINK

"What—what's your plan, Blake?" yelled Joe into his chum's ear, as he sat

behind him on the jolting second saddle of the swaying motor cycle.

"What do you mean?" demanded Blake, half turning his head.

"I mean how are you going to stop that runaway, or rescue those fellows?"

"I haven't thought, yet, but if we can get ahead of the horse we may be able to stop him before he gets to the road-barrier or to the dangerous turn."

"That's right!" panted Joe, the words being fairly jolted out of him. "Head him off—I see!"

"Hold fast!" exclaimed Blake, as the conductor does when a trolley car goes around a curve. "Hold fast!"

There was need of the advice, for a little turn in the road was just ahead of them and Blake intended to take it at almost top speed.

Bumping, swaying, jolting, spitting fire and smoke, with a rattle, clatter and bang, on rushed the motor cycle on its errand of rescue.

"Hark!" cried Joe, close to Blake's ear, "Listen!"

"Can't, with all this racket!" yelled back Blake, for he had opened the throttle to gain a little increase of power. "What's the matter?"

"I thought I heard the horse."

"Hearing him won't do any good," observed Blake grimly. "We've got to see him and get ahead!"

And he turned on a little more gasoline.

While Blake and Joe are thus speeding to the rescue of the men in the runaway, we will take a few moments to tell our new readers something about the boys who are to figure prominently in this story.

Joe Duncan and Blake Stewart were called the "Moving Picture Boys," for an obvious reason. They took moving pictures. With their curious box-like cameras, equipped with the thousand feet of sensitive celluloid film, and the operating handle, they had risen from the ranks of mere helpers to be expert operators. And now they were qualified to take moving pictures of anything from a crowd, shuffling along the street, to a more complicated scene, such as a flood, earthquake or volcanic eruption. And, incidentally, I might mention that they had been in all three of these last situations.

The first volume of this series is called "The Moving Picture Boys," and in that I introduced to you Blake and Joe.

They worked on adjoining farms, and one day they saw a company of moving picture actors and actresses come to a stream, near where they were, to take a

"movie drama."

Naturally Blake and Joe were interested at once, and making the acquaintance of Mr. Calvert Hadley, who was in charge of the taking of the play, or "filming it," as the technical term has it, the two boys were given an opportunity to get into the business.

They went to New York, and began the study of how moving pictures are taken, developed from the films, the positives printed and then, through the projecting machine, thrown on the screen more than life size.

The process is an intricate one, and rather complicated, involving much explanation. As I have already gone into it in detail in my first book of this series, I will not repeat it here. Those of you who wish to know more about the "movies" than you can gain by looking at the interesting pictures in some theater, are respectfully referred to the initial volume.

Joe and Blake were much interested in the Film Theatrical Company. My former readers will well remember some members of that organization—C.C. Piper, or "Gloomy," as he was called when not referred to as just "C.C."; Birdie Lee, a pretty, vivacious girl; Mabel Pierce, a new member of the company; Henry Robertson, who played juvenile "leads"; Miss Shay, and others in whom you are more or less interested.

After various adventures in New York City, taking films of all sorts of perilous scenes, Joe and Blake went out West, their adventures there being told in the volume of that name. They had their fill of cowboys and Indians, and, incidentally, were in no little danger.

Afterward they went to the Pacific Coast, thence to the jungle, where many stirring wild animal scenes were obtained, and afterward they had many adventures in Earthquake Land. There they were in great danger from tremors of the earth, and from volcanoes, but good luck, no less than good management, brought them home with whole skins, and with their cases filled with rare films.

Having finished in the land of uncertainty, the work assigned to them by Mr. Hadley and his associates, Joe and Blake had gone for their vacation to the farm of Mr. Hiram Baker, near Central Falls. But their intention of enjoying a quiet stay was rudely interrupted.

For not long after they had arrived, and were resting quietly under a cherry tree in the shade, Mr. Ringold, with whom they were also associated in moving picture work, called them up on the long distance telephone to offer them a most curious assignment.

This was to go to the flooded Mississippi Valley, and get moving pictures of

the "Father of Waters" on one of "his" annual rampages.

Of course Blake and Joe went, and their adventures in the flood fill the volume immediately preceding this one.

And now they had returned, anticipating a second session of their vacation. They had brought a motor cycle with which to go about the pretty country surrounding Central Falls.

"For," reasoned Blake, "we haven't much time left this summer, and if we want to enjoy ourselves we'll have to hustle. A motor cycle is the most hustling thing I know of this side of an automobile, and we can't afford that yet."

"I'm with you for a motor cycle," Joe had said. So one was purchased, jointly.

It was on returning from a pleasant ride that our heroes had seen the runaway with which we are immediately concerned. They were now speeding after the maddened horse dragging the frail carriage, hoping to get ahead of and stop the animal before it either crashed into the frail barrier, and leaped into the ravine, or upset the vehicle in trying to make the turn into the temporary road.

"There he is!" suddenly cried Blake. The motor cycle, bearing the two chums, had made the curve in the road successfully and was now straightened up on a long, level stretch. And yet not so long, either, for not more than a quarter of a mile ahead was another turn, and then came the bridge.

"I see him!" answered Joe. "Can you make it?"

"I'm going to!" declared Blake, closing his lips firmly.

Every little bump and stone in the road seemed magnified because of the speed at which they were moving. But Blake held the long handles firmly, and, once the curve was passed, he turned the rubber grip that let a little more gasoline flow into the carbureter to be vaporized and sprayed into the cylinders, where the electric spark exploded it with a bang.

"We—are—going—some!" panted Joe.

"Got—to!" assented Blake, grimly.

On swayed the thundering, rattling motor cycle. The carriage top had either been let down, or some of the supports had broken, and it had fallen, and the boys could now plainly see the two men on the seat. They had not jumped, but they had evidently given up trying to make the horse stop by pulling on the one rein, for the animal was speeding straight down the center of the road.

"We aren't catching up to him very fast!" howled Joe into Blake's ear, and he had to howl louder than usual, for they were then passing along a portion of the road densely shaded by trees. In fact the branches of the trees met overhead in a thick arch, and it was like going through a leafy tunnel.

This top bower of twigs and branches threw back the noise of the explosions of the motor cycle, and made an echo, above which it was almost impossible to make one's voice heard.

"Look out!" suddenly cried Blake. "Hold fast!"

At first Joe imagined that his chum was going to make another curve in the road, but none was at hand. Then, as Blake watched his chum's right hand, he saw him slowly turn the movable rubber handle that controls the gasoline supply. Blake was turning on more power, though now the machine was running at a higher rate than Joe or Blake had ever traveled before.

With a jump like that of a dog released from the leash, the motor cycle seemed to spring forward. Indeed Joe must needs hold on, and as he was not so favorably seated as was his chum, it became a matter of no little trouble to maintain a grip with his legs and hands.

"We—sure—are—going—some!" muttered Joe. But he did not open his mouth any more. It was too dangerous at the speed they had attained. A jolt over a stone, or a bit of wood, might send his teeth through his tongue if he parted his jaws. So he kept quiet.

Ahead of them the carriage swayed and swerved. The horse was a speedy one, but no creature of bone, blood, muscles and sinews can distance a fire-spitting and smoke-eating machine like a motor cycle. The distance was gradually being cut down.

But now, just ahead of them, was the curve, immediately beyond which was the broken bridge, and also the temporary one, shunting off at a sharp angle from the main highway.

"Look out! Hold on!" once more cried Blake, speaking in quick tones.

For a moment Joe wondered at the added caution, and then he sensed what Blake was about to do.

To one side of them stretched a level field. The road made a slight detour about it, just before meeting the ravine, and by crossing this field it was possible for the boys to reach the bridge ahead of the swaying carriage. But at the speed they were now running it was dangerous, and risky in the extreme, to run across the uneven meadow. Blake, however, evidently was going to chance it.

"Hold fast!" he cried once more, and Joe had no more than time to take a firmer grip on the bar in front of him, and to cling with his legs to the foot supports and saddle, than they were off the road, and into the green field. The fence had been taken down to allow for the storage of bridge-building material in the meadow.

"Now we'll get him!" cried Blake, but he spoke too soon. For the motor cycle had not gone ten feet into the uneven field, jolting, swaying and all but throwing off the moving picture boys, than the sound of the explosions suddenly ceased, and the machine began to slacken speed.

With a quickness that was added to by the rough nature of the ground, the motor cycle slowed up and stopped.

"What's the matter?" cried Joe, putting down his feet to support the machine.

"Something's busted—gasoline pipe, I guess!" cried Blake. "Come on! We've got to run for it!"

The accident had occurred only a short distance from the road. Together the two chums, leaping clear of the motor cycle, made for it on the run.

But they were too late. They had a glimpse of the runaway horse dashing straight at the fence barrier.

The next moment there was a splintering crash, and he was through it.

"Oh!" cried Blake.

The thunder of the horse's hoofs on what was left of the wooden approach to the broken bridge drowned his words.

Then the animal, with a leap, disappeared over the jagged edges of the planks. The boys expected to see the carriage and the two occupants follow, but to their intense surprise, the vehicle swayed to one side, caught somehow on one of the king beams of the bridge and hung there.

"Come on!" cried Blake, increasing his speed; "we've got a chance of saving them yet!"

CHAPTER III

A SURPRISE

They reached—only just in time—the broken and collapsed carriage with its two front wheels mere twisted and splintered spokes. The moving picture boys reached it, and with strong and capable hands pulled it back from the brink of the ravine, over which it hung. In the depths below the horse lay, very still and quiet.

"Pull back!" directed Blake, but Joe needed no urging. A slight difference—inches only—meant safety or death—terrible injury at best, for the ravine was a hundred feet deep. But those few inches were on the side of safety.

So evenly was the carriage poised, that only a little strength was needed to send it either way. But Joe and Blake pulled it back on the unwrecked portion of the bridge approach.

The two men were still on the seat, but it had broken in the middle, pitching them toward the center, and they were wedged fast. Hank Duryee, the town livery driver, did not seem to be hurt, though there was an anxious look on his face, and he was very pale, which was unusual for him.

As for the other man he seemed to have fainted. His eyes were closed, but his swarthy complexion permitted little diminution in his color. There was a slight cut on his head, from which had trickled a little blood that ran down to his white collar.

"Easy, boys!" cautioned Hank, and his voice rasped out in the quiet that succeeded the staccato noise from the motor cycle. "Go easy now! A touch'll send us down," and he gazed shudderingly into the depths below.

"We've got you," Blake assured him, as he and Joe drew still farther back on the platform of the bridge what was left of the carriage. As they did so one of the rear wheels collapsed, letting the seat down with a jerk.

"Oh!" gasped Hank, and a tremor seemed to go through the insensible frame of the other.

"It's all right," Blake assured the livery stable driver. "You can't fall far."

"Not as far as down—there," and Hank pointed a trembling finger into the depths of the ravine.

"Can you get out—can you walk?" asked Joe.

"Yes. I'm more scared than hurt," Hank made answer.

"How about him?" asked Blake, motioning to the other occupant of the carriage.

"Only a little cut on the head, where he banged, up against the top irons, I guess. A little water will fetch him around. My! But that was a close shave!"

He staggered out on the broken bridge. His legs were unsteady, through weakness and fear, but not from any injury.

"How did it happen?" asked Joe.

"Horse got scared at something—I don't know what—and bolted. I didn't want to take him out—he's an old spitfire anyhow, and hasn't been driven in a week. But this feller was in a hurry," and he nodded toward the unconscious man, "and I had to bring him out with Rex—the only horse in the stable just then.

"I said I was afraid we'd have a smash-up, and we did. The line busted near

Baker's place, and—well, here we are."

"Better here than—down there," observed Joe in a low voice.

"That's right," agreed Hank. "Now let's see what we can do for him. Hope he isn't much hurt, though I don't see how he could be."

"Who is he?" asked Blake, but the livery stable driver did not answer. He was bending back the bent frame of the dashboard to more easily get out the swarthy man. Joe and Blake, seeing what he was trying to do, helped him.

Soon they were able to lift out the stranger, but there was no need of carrying him, for he suddenly opened his eyes, straightened up and stood on his feet, retaining a supporting hand on Hank's shoulder.

"Where—where are we?" he asked, in a dazed way. "Did we fall?"

He spoke with an accent that at once told Blake and Joe his nationality—Spanish, either from Mexico or South America.

"We're all right," put in Hank. "These young fellows saved us from going over into the gulch. It was a narrow squeak, though."

"Ah!" The man uttered the exclamation, with a long sigh of satisfaction and relief. Then he put his hand to his forehead, and brought it away with a little blood on it.

"It is nothing. It is a mere scratch and does not distress me in the least," he went on, speaking very correct English, in his curiously accented voice. He appeared to hesitate a little to pick out the words and expressions he wanted, and, often, in such cases, the wrong words, though correct enough in themselves, were selected.

"I am at ease—all right, that is to say," he went on, with a rather pale smile. "And so these young men saved us—saved our lives? Is that what you mean, señor—I should say, sir?" and he quickly corrected his slip.

"I should say they did!" exclaimed Hank with an air of satisfaction. "Old Rex took matters into his own hands, or, rather legs, and we were just about headed for kingdom come when these fellows pulled us back from the brink. As for Rex himself, I guess he's gone where he won't run away any more," and leaning over the jagged edge of the bridge the stableman looked down on the motionless form of the horse. Rex had, indeed, run his last.

"It is all so—so surprising to me," went on the stranger. "It all occurred with such unexpected suddenness. One moment we are driving along as quietly as you please, only perhaps a trifle accentuated, and then—presto! we begin to go too fast, and the leather thong breaks. Then indeed there are things doing, as you say up here."

He smiled, trying, perhaps, to show himself at his ease. He was rapidly recovering, not only from the fright, but from the effects of the blow on the head which had caused the cut, and rendered him unconscious for a moment.

"It sure was a narrow squeak," declared Hank again. "I don't want any closer call. I couldn't move to save myself, I was so dumbfounded, and the carriage would have toppled down in another, second if you boys hadn't come along and hauled it back."

"We saw you pass Mr. Baker's house," explained Blake, "and we came after you on the motor cycle. Tried to get ahead of you, but the old machine laid down on us."

"But we got here in time," added Joe.

"You did indeed! I can not thank you enough," put in the Spaniard, as Joe and Blake both classed him. "You have saved my life, and some day I hope not only to repay the favor, but to show how grateful I am in other ways. I am a stranger in this part of your fine country, but I expect to be better acquainted soon. But where is our horse?" he asked quickly, not seeming to understand what had happened. "How are we to continue our journey?" and he looked at his driver.

"We're at the end of it now, in more ways than one," Hank answered, with a smile. "You're just where you wanted to go, though not in the style I calculated on taking you."

"But I do not comprehend, sir," said the Spaniard, in rather puzzled accents. "I have engaged you to take me to a certain place. There is an accident. We go through a fence with a resounding crash—Ah! I can hear that smash yet!" and he put his hands to his ears in a somewhat dramatic manner.

"Then everything is black. Our horse disappears, and—"

"He's down there, if you want to know where he disappeared to," broke in Hank, practically.

"It is no matter—if he is gone," went on the Spaniard. "But I do not comprehend—assimilate—no, comprehend—that is it. I do not comprehend what you mean when you say we are at our journey's end."

"I'll tell you," exclaimed Hank, as he glanced at Joe and Blake in a manner that caused them to wonder. "You said you wanted to find—"

"Pardon me—my card, gentlemen!" and the stranger extended a rectangle of white on which was engraved the name Vigues Alcando.

Blake took it, and, as he did so, from the pocket whence the Spaniard had extracted the card, there fell a letter. Joe picked it up, but, to his surprise it was

addressed to himself and Blake jointly, and, in the upper left hand corner was the imprint of the Film Theatrical Company.

"Why—why," began Joe. "This is for us! Look, Blake!"

"For you! That letter for you?" cried Mr. Alcando. "Are you the moving picture boys?"

"That's what they call us," answered Joe. "This is Blake Stewart, and I'm his chum, Joe Duncan."

"Is it possible—is it possible!" cried Mr. Alcando. "And you have saved my life! Why—I—I—er—I—Oh! To think of this happening so! You are—you are—!" He put his hands to his head and seemed to sway.

"Look out! He's going to fall!" warned Blake, springing forward to catch the Spaniard.

CHAPTER IV

A DELAYED LETTER

But Mr. Alcando, to Americanize his name, did not faint. After reeling uncertainly for a moment, he obtained command of his muscles, straightened up, and stood rigid.

"I—I beg your pardons," he said, faintly, as though he had committed some blunder. "I—I fear I am not altogether myself."

"Shouldn't wonder but what you were a bit played out," put in Hank. "What we've just gone through with was enough to knock anyone out, to say nothing of the crack you got on the head. Maybe we'd better get a doctor?" and his voice framed a question, as he looked at Joe and Blake.

"No, no!" hastily exclaimed the Spaniard, for he was of that nationality, though born in South America, as the boys learned later.

"I do not require the services of a physician," went on Mr. Alcando, speaking rapidly. "I am perfectly all right now—or, I shall be in a few moments. If I had a drink of water—"

His voice trailed off feebly, and he looked about rather helplessly.

"There used to be a spring hereabouts," said Hank, "but I haven't been this way in some time, and—"

"I know where it is!" interrupted Blake. He and Joe, with a training that had

made it necessary for them to "size up," and know intimately their surroundings, for use in taking moving pictures, had sensed the location of a bubbling spring of pure water along the road on their first visit to it. "It's right over here; I'll get some," Blake went on.

"If you will be so kind," spoke the Spaniard, and he extended a collapsible drinking cup.

Blake lost little time in filling it, and soon after drinking Mr. Alcando appeared much better.

"I am sorry to give all this trouble," the Spaniard went on, "but I have seemed to meet with considerable number of shocks to-day. First there was the runaway, which I certainly did not expect, and then came the sudden stop—a stop most fortunate for us, I take it," and he glanced, not without a shudder, in the direction of the gulch where the dead horse lay.

"And then you pulled us back from the brink—the brink of death," he went on, and his voice had in it a tone of awe, as well as thankfulness. "I can not thank you now—I shall not try," he went on. "But some time, I hope to prove—

"Oh, what am I saying!" he broke in upon himself. "I never dreamed of this. It is incomprehensible. That I should meet you so, you whom I—"

Once more his hands went to his head with a tragic gesture, and yet it did not seem that he was in physical pain. The cut on his head had stopped bleeding.

"It is too bad! Too bad! And yet fate would have it so!" he murmured after a pause. "But that it should turn in such a queer circle. Well, it is fate—I must accept!"

Joe and Blake looked at each other, Blake with slightly raised eyebrows, which might mean an implied question as to the man's sanity. Then the moving picture boys looked at Hank, who had driven them about on several excursions before they bought the motor cycle.

Hank, who stood a little behind the Spaniard, shrugged his shoulders, and tapped his head significantly.

"But I must again beg your pardon," said Mr. Alcando quickly. "I most certainly am not myself this day. But it is the surprise of meeting you whom I came to seek. Now, if you will pardon me," and he looked at the letter, addressed to Blake and Joe jointly—which epistle had been handed to him after it had been picked up from the ground.

"And were you really looking for us?" asked Joe, much puzzled.

"I was—for both of you young gentlemen. My friend the driver here can testify to that."

"That's right," said Hank. "This gentleman came in on the New York express, and went to our livery stable. He said he wanted to come out to Baker's farm and meet you boys.

"I happened to be the only one around at the time," Hank went on, "and as I knew the road, and knew you boys, I offered to bring him out. But I wish I'd had some other horse. I sure didn't count on Rex running away.

"And when I found I couldn't stop him, and knew we were headed for the broken bridge—well, I wanted to jump out, but I didn't dare. And I guess you felt the same way," he said to Mr. Alcando.

"Somewhat, I must confess," spoke the Spaniard, who, as I have said, used very good English, though with an odd accent, which I shall not attempt to reproduce.

"And then came the smash," went on Hank, "and I didn't expect, any more than he did, that you fellows would come to our rescue. But you did, and now, Mr. Alcando, you can deliver your letter."

"And these really are the young gentlemen whom I seek?" asked the Spaniard. "Pardon me, I do not in the least doubt your word," he added with a formal bow, "but it seems so strange."

"We are the moving picture boys," answered Blake with a smile, wondering what the letter could contain, and, wondering more than ever, why a missive from the Film Theatrical Company should be brought by this unusual stranger.

"Then this is for you," went on Mr. Alcando. "And to think that they saved my life!" he murmured.

"Shall I read it, Joe?" asked Blake, for the Spaniard extended the letter to him.

"Sure. Go ahead. I'll listen."

Blake took the folded sheet from the envelope, and his first glance was at the signature.

"It's from Mr. Hadley!" he exclaimed.

"What's up?" asked Joe, quickly.

Blake was reading in a mumbling tone, hardly distinguishable.

"Dear boys. This will introduce—um—um—um—who is desirous of learning the business of taking moving pictures. He comes to me well recommended—um—um" (more mumbles). "I wish you would do all you can for him—um—and when you go to Panama—"

That was as far as Blake read. Then he cried out:

"I say, Joe, look here! I can't make head nor tail of this!"

"What is it?" asked his chum, looking over; his shoulder at the letter the Spaniard had so strangely brought to them.

"Why, Mr. Hadley speaks of us going to Panama. That's the first we've had an inkling to that effect. What in the world does he mean?"

"I hope I have not brought you bad news in a prospective trip to where the great canal will unite the two oceans," spoke the Spaniard in his formal manner.

"Well, I don't know as you'd call it bad news," said Blake, slowly. "We've gotten sort of used to being sent to the ends of the earth on short notice, but what gets me—excuse me for putting it that way—what surprises me is that this is the first Mr. Hadley has mentioned Panama to us."

"Is that so?" asked Mr. Alcando. "Why, I understood that you knew all about his plans."

"No one knows all about Hadley's plans," said Joe in a low voice. "He makes plans as he goes along and changes them in his sleep. But this one about Panama is sure a new one to us."

"That's right," chimed in Blake.

"We were speaking of the big ditch shortly before the runaway came past," went on Blake, "but that was only a coincidence, of course. We had no idea of going there, and I can't yet understand what Mr. Hadley refers to when he says we may take you there with us, to show you some of the inside workings of making moving pictures."

"Did you read the letter all the way through?" Joe asked.

"No, but—"

"Perhaps I can explain," interrupted the Spaniard. "If you will kindly allow me. I came to New York with an express purpose in view. That purpose has now suffered—but no matter. I must not speak of that!" and there seemed to be a return of his queer, tragic manner.

"I am connected with the Equatorial Railroad Company," he resumed, after a momentary pause, during which he seemed to regain control of himself. "Our company has recently decided to have a series of moving pictures made, showing life in our section of the South American jungle, and also what we have done in the matter of railroad transportation, to redeem the jungle, and make it more fit for habitation.

"As one of the means of interesting the public, and, I may say, in interesting capitalists, moving pictures were suggested. The idea was my own, and was

adopted, and I was appointed to arrange the matter. But in order that the right kind of moving pictures might be obtained, so that they would help the work of our railroad, I decided I must know something of the details—how the pictures are made, how the cameras are constructed, how the pictures are projected—in short all I could learn about the business I desired to learn.

"My company sent me to New York, and there, on inquiry, I learned of the Film Theatrical Company. I had letters of introduction, and I soon met Mr. Hadley. He seems to be in charge of this branch of the work—I mean outdoor pictures."

"Yes, that's his line," said Joe. "Mr. Ringold attends to the dramatic end of it. We have done work for both branches."

"So I was told," went on Mr. Alcando. "I asked to be assigned a teacher, and offered to pay well for it. And Mr. Hadley at once suggested that you two boys would be the very ones who could best give me what I desired.

"He told me that you had just returned from the dangers of the Mississippi flood section, and were up here resting. But I made so bold upon myself to come here to entreat you to let me accompany you to Panama."

Mr. Alcando came to a stop after his rather lengthy and excited explanation.

"But Great Scott!" exclaimed Blake. "We don't know anything about going to Panama. We haven't the least idea of going there, and the first we've heard of it is the mention in this letter you bring from Mr. Hadley."

"It sure is queer," said Joe. "I wonder if any of our mail—"

He was interrupted by the sound of rapid footsteps, and a freckle-faced and red-haired boy, with a ragged straw hat, and no shoes came running up.

"Say—say!" panted the urchin. "I'm glad I found you. Here's a letter for you. Pa—pa—he's been carryin' it around in his pocket, and when he changed his coat just now it dropped out. He sent me down with it, lickity-split," and the boy held out an envelope bearing a special delivery stamp. Blake took the missive mechanically.

CHAPTER V

ANOTHER SURPRISE

While Blake was tearing off the end of the envelope, preparatory to taking out the enclosure, Joe looked sharply at the red-haired lad who had so unexpectedly delivered it.

"How'd your father come to get our letter, Sam?" asked Joe, for the lad was the son of a farmer, who lived neighbor to Mr. Baker.

"Sim Rolinson, the postmaster, give it to him, I guess," volunteered Sam. "Sim generally takes around the special delivery letters himself, but he must have been busy when this one come in, and he give it to pa. Anyhow, pa says he asked him to deliver it."

"Only he didn't do it," put in Joe. "I thought something was the matter with our mail that we hadn't heard from New York lately. Your father was carrying the letter around in his pocket."

"But he didn't mean to!" spoke Sam quickly. "He forgot all about it until to-day, when he was changing his coat, and it fell out. Then he made me scoot over here with it as fast as I could. He said he was sorry, and hoped he hadn't done any damage."

"Well, I guess not much," Joe responded, for, after all, it was an accommodation to have the letters brought out from the post-office by the neighbors, as often happened. That one should be forgotten, and carried in a pocket, was not so very surprising.

"Then you won't make any fuss?" the barefoot lad went on, eagerly.

"No—why should we?" inquired Joe with a smile. "We won't inform the postal authorities. I guess it wasn't so very important," and he looked at Blake, who was reading the delayed letter.

"Whew!" finally whistled Joe's chum. "This is going some!"

"What's up now?"

"Another surprise," answered Blake. "This day seems to be filled with 'em."

"Is it about Panama?"

"You've guessed it. Mr. Hadley wants us to go there and get a series of moving pictures. Incidentally he mentions that he is sending to us a gentleman who wants to go with us, if we decide to go. I presume he refers to you," and Blake nodded in the direction of Mr. Alcando.

"Then you have confirmatory evidence of what my letter says?" asked the Spaniard, bowing politely.

"That's what it amounts to," Blake made answer. "Though, of course, seeing that this is the first we've had Panama brought up to us, we don't really know what to say about going there."

"Hardly," agreed Joe, at a look from his chum.

"And yet you may go; shall you not?" asked the Spaniard, quickly. He seemed

very eager for an answer.

"Oh, yes, we may—it's not altogether out of the question," said Blake. "We'll have to think about it, though."

"And if you do go, may I have the honor of accompanying you to the Isthmus?" Again he seemed very anxious.

"Well, of course, if Mr. Hadley wants you to go with us we'll take you," answered Joe slowly. "We are employed by Mr. Hadley, as one of the owners of the Film Theatrical Company, and what he says generally goes."

"Ah, but, gentlemen, I should not want you to take me under compulsion!" exclaimed the Spaniard, quickly. "I would like to go—as your friend!" and he threw out his hands in an impulsive, appealing gesture. "As a friend!" he repeated.

"Well, I guess that could be arranged," returned Blake with a smile, for he had taken a liking to the young man, though he did not altogether understand him. "We'll have to think it over."

"Oh, of course. I should not ask for a decision now," said Mr. Alcando quickly. "I shall return to my hotel in the village, and come out to see you when I may—when you have made your decision. I feel the need of a little rest—after my narrow escape. And that it should be you who saved my life—you of all!"

Again the boys noted his peculiar manner.

"I guess we had better be getting back," suggested Hank. "Have to foot it to town, though," he added regretfully, as he looked at the smashed carriage. "I hope the boss doesn't blame me for this," and his voice was rueful.

"I shall take it upon myself to testify in your favor," said the Spaniard with courtly grace. "It was an unavoidable accident—the breaking of the rein, and the maddened dash of the horse off the bridge. That we did not follow was a miracle. I shall certainly tell your employer—as you say your boss," and he smiled—"I shall tell him you could not help it."

"I'd take it kindly if you would," added Hank, "for Rex, though he had a terrible temper, was a valuable horse. Well, he won't run away any more, that's one sure thing. I guess that carriage can be patched up."

"Why don't you ask Mr. Baker to lend you a rig?" suggested Blake. "I'm sure he would. I'll tell him how it happened."

"That is kind of you, sir. You place me more than ever in your debt," spoke the Spaniard, bowing again.

"How did you know we were here?" asked Joe of the boy who had brought the delayed special delivery letter.

"I stopped at Mr. Baker's house," Sam explained, "and Mrs. Baker said she saw you come down this way on your motor cycle. She said you'd just been on a ride, and probably wouldn't go far, so I ran on, thinking I'd meet you coming back. I didn't know anything about the accident," he concluded, his eyes big with wonder as he looked at the smashed carriage.

"Are you able to walk back to the farmhouse where we are boarding?" asked Blake of Mr. Alcando. "If not we could get Mr. Baker to drive down here."

"Oh, thank you, I am perfectly able to walk, thanks to your quickness in preventing the carriage and ourselves from toppling into the chasm," replied the Spaniard.

Hank, with Mr. Alcando and Sam, walked back along the road, while Blake and Joe went to where they had dropped their motor cycle. They repaired the disconnected gasoline pipe, and rode on ahead to tell Mr. Baker of the coming of the others. The farmer readily agreed to lend his horse and carriage so that the unfortunate ones would not have to walk into town, a matter of three miles.

"I shall remain at the Central Falls hotel for a week or more, or until you have fully made up your mind about the Panama trip," said Mr. Alcando on leaving the boys, "and I shall come out, whenever you send me word, to learn of your decision. That it may be a favorable one I need hardly say I hope," he added with a low bow.

"We'll let you know as soon as we can," promised Blake. "But my chum and I will have to think it over. We have hardly become rested from taking flood pictures."

"I can well believe that, from what I have heard of your strenuous activities."

"Well, what do you think about it all?" asked Joe, as he and his chum sat on the shady porch an hour or so after the exciting incidents I have just narrated.

"I hardly know," answered Blake. "I guess I'll have another go at Mr. Hadley's letter. I didn't half read it."

He took the missive from his pocket, and again perused it. It contained references to other matters besides the projected Panama trip, and there was also enclosed a check for some work the moving picture boys had done.

But as it is with the reference to the big canal that we are interested we shall confine ourselves to that part of Mr. Hadley's letter.

"No doubt you will be surprised," he wrote, "to learn what I have in prospect for you. I know you deserve a longer vacation than you have had this summer, but I think, too, that you would not wish to miss this chance.

"Of course if you do not want to go to Panama I can get some other operators

to work the moving picture cameras, but I would rather have you than anyone I know of. So I hope you will accept.

"The idea is this: The big canal is nearing completion, and the work is now at a stage when it will make most interesting films. Then, too, there is another matter—the big slides. There have been several small ones, doing considerable damage, but no more than has been counted on.

"I have information, however, to the effect that there is impending in Culebra Cut a monstrous big slide, one that will beat anything that ever before took place there. If it does happen I want to get moving pictures, not only of the slide, but of scenes afterward, and also pictures showing the clearing away of the débris.

"Whether this slide will occur I do not know. No one knows for a certainty, but a man who has lived in Panama almost since the French started the big ditch, claims to know a great deal about the slides and the causes of them. He tells me that certain small slides, such as have been experienced, are followed—almost always after the same lapse of time—by a much larger one. The larger one is due soon, and I want you there when it comes.

"Now another matter. Some time after you get this you will be visited by a Spanish gentleman named Vigues Alcando. He will have a letter of introduction from me. He wants to learn the moving picture business, and as he comes well recommended, and as both Mr. Ringold and I are under obligations to people he represents, we feel that we must grant his request.

"Of course if you feel that you can't stand him, after you see him, and if you don't want to take him with you—yes, even if you don't want to go to Panama at all, don't hesitate to say so. But I would like very much to have you. Someone must go, for the films from down there will be particularly valuable at this time, in view of the coming opening of the Canal for the passage of vessels. So if you don't want to go, someone else representing us will have to make the trip.

"Now think the matter over well before you decide. I think you will find Mr. Alcando a pleasant companion. He struck me as being a gentleman, though his views on some things are the views of a foreigner. But that does not matter.

"Of course, as usual, we will pay you boys well, and meet all expenses. It is too bad to break in on your vacation again, as we did to get the flood pictures, but the expected big slide, like the flood, won't wait, and won't last very long. You have to be 'Johnnie on the Spot' to get the views. I will await your answer."

CHAPTER VI

SOMETHING QUEER

For a little while, after he had read to Joe the letter from Mr. Hadley, Blake remained silent. Nor did his chum speak. When he did open his lips it was to ask:

"Well, what do you think of it, Blake?"

Blake drew a long breath, and replied, questioningly:

"What do you think of it?"

"I asked you first!" laughed Joe. "No, but seriously, what do you make of it all?"

"Make of it? You mean going to Panama?"

"Yes, and this chap Alcando. What do you think of him?"

Blake did not answer at once.

"Well?" asked Joe, rather impatiently.

"Did anything—that is, anything that fellow said—or did—strike you as being—well, let's say—queer?" and Blake looked his chum squarely in the face.

"Queer? Yes, I guess there did! Of course he was excited about the runaway, and he did have a narrow escape, if I do say it myself. Only for us he and Hank would have toppled down into that ravine."

"That's right," assented Blake.

"But what struck me as queer," resumed Joe, "was that he seemed put out because it was we who saved him. He acted—I mean the Spaniard did—as though he would have been glad if someone else had saved his life."

"Just how it struck me!" cried Blake. "I wondered if you felt the same. But perhaps it was only because he was unduly excited. We might have misjudged him."

"Possibly," admitted Joe. "But, even if we didn't, and he really is sorry it was we who saved him, I don't see that it need matter. He is probably so polite that the reason he objects is because he didn't want to put us to so much trouble."

"Perhaps," agreed Blake. "As you say, it doesn't much matter. I rather like him."

"So do I," assented Joe. "But he sure is queer, in some ways. Quite dramatic. Why, you'd think he was on the stage the way he went on after he learned that

we two, who had saved him, were the moving picture boys to whom he had a letter of introduction."

"Yes. I wonder what it all meant?" observed Blake.

The time was to come when he and Joe were to learn, in a most sensational manner, the reason for the decidedly queer actions of Mr. Alcando.

For some time longer the chums sat and talked. But as the day waned, and the supper hour approached, they were no nearer a decision than before.

"Let's let it go until morning," suggested Blake.

"I'm with you," agreed Joe. "We can think better after we have 'slept on it.'"

Joe was later than Blake getting up next morning, and when he saw his chum sitting out in a hammock under a tree in the farmyard, Joe noticed that Blake was reading a book.

"You're the regular early worm this morning; aren't you?" called Joe. "It's a wonder some bird hasn't flown off with you."

"I'm too tough a morsel," Blake answered with a laugh. "Besides, I've been on the jump too much to allow an ordinary bird the chance. What's the matter with you—oversleep?"

"No, I did it on purpose. I was tired. But what's that you're reading; and what do you mean about being on the jump?"

"Oh, I just took a little run into the village after breakfast, on the motor cycle."

"You did! To tell that Spaniard he could, or could not, go with us?"

"Oh, I didn't see him. I just went into the town library. You know they've got a fairly decent one at Central Falls."

"Yes, so I heard; but I didn't suppose they'd be open so early in the morning."

"They weren't. I had to wait, and I was the first customer, if you can call it that."

"You are getting studious!" laughed Joe. "Great Scott! Look at what he's reading!" he went on as he caught a glimpse of the title of the book. "'History of the Panama Canal' Whew!"

"It's a mighty interesting book!" declared Blake. "You'll like it."

"Perhaps—if I read it," said Joe, drily.

"Oh, I fancy you'll want to read it," went on Blake, significantly.

"Say!" cried Joe, struck with a sudden idea. "You've made up your mind to go to Panama; haven't you?"

"Well," began his chum slowly, "I haven't fully decided—"

"Oh, piffle!" cried Joe with a laugh. "Excuse my slang, but I know just how it is," he proceeded. "You've made up your mind to go, and you're getting all the advance information you can, to spring it on me. I know your tricks. Well, you won't go without me; will you?"

"You know I'd never do that," was the answer, spoken rather more solemnly than Joe's laughing words deserved. "You know we promised to stick together when we came away from the farms and started in this moving picture business, and we have stuck. I don't want to break the combination; do you?"

"I should say not! And if you go to Panama I go too!"

"I haven't actually made up my mind," went on Blake, who was, perhaps, a little more serious, and probably a deeper thinker than his chum. "But I went over it in my mind last night, and I didn't just see how we could refuse Mr. Hadley's request.

"You know he started us in this business, and, only for him we might never have amounted to much. So if he wants us to go to Panama, and get views of the giant slides, volcanic eruptions, and so on, I, for one, think we ought to go."

"So do I—for two!" chimed in Joe. "But are there really volcanic eruptions down there?"

"Well, there have been, in times past, and there might be again. Anyhow, the slides are always more or less likely to occur. I was just reading about them in this book.

"Culebra Cut! That's where the really stupendous work of the Panama Canal came in. Think of it, Joe! Nine miles long, with an average depth of 120 feet, and at some places the sides go up 500 feet above the bed of the channel. Why the Suez Canal is a farm ditch alongside of it!"

"Whew!" whistled Joe. "You're there with the facts already, Blake."

"They're so interesting I couldn't help but remember them," said Blake with a smile. "This book has a lot in it about the big landslides. At first they were terribly discouraging to the workers. They practically put the French engineers, who started the Canal, out of the running, and even when the United States engineers started figuring they didn't allow enough leeway for the Culebra slides.

"At first they decided that a ditch about eight hundred feet wide would be enough to keep the top soil from slipping down. But they finally had to make it nearly three times that width, or eighteen hundred feet at the top, so as to make the sides slope gently enough."

"And yet slides occur even now," remarked Joe, dubiously.

"Yes, because the work isn't quite finished."

"And we're going to get one of those slides on our films?"

"If we go, yes; and I don't see but what we'd better go."

"Then I'm with you, Blake, old man!" cried Joe, affectionately slapping his chum on the back with such energy that the book flew out of the other's hands.

"Look out what you're doing or you'll get the librarian after you!" cried Blake, as he picked up the volume. "Well, then, we'll consider it settled—we'll go to Panama?"

He looked questioningly at his chum.

"Yes, I guess so. Have you told that Spaniard?"

"No, not yet, of course. I haven't seen him since you did. But I fancy we'd better write to Mr. Hadley first, and let him know we will go. He'll wonder why we haven't written before. We can explain about the delayed letter."

"All right, and when we hear from him, and learn more of his plans, we can let Mr. Alcando hear from us. I guess we can mosey along with him all right."

"Yes, and we'll need a helper with the cameras and things. He can be a sort of assistant while he's learning the ropes."

A letter was written to the moving picture man in New York, and while waiting for an answer Blake and Joe spent two days visiting places of interest about Central Falls.

"If this is to be another break in our vacation we want to make the most of it," suggested Joe.

"That's right," agreed Blake. They had not yet given the Spaniard a definite answer regarding his joining them.

"It does not matter—the haste, young gentlemen," Mr. Alcando had said with a smile that showed his white teeth, in strong contrast to his dark complexion. "I am not in so much of a haste. As we say, in my country, there is always mañana—to-morrow."

Blake and Joe, while they found the Spaniard very pleasant, could not truthfully say that they felt for him the comradeship they might have manifested toward one of their own nationality. He was polite and considerate toward them—almost too polite at times, but that came natural to him, perhaps.

He was a little older than Joe and Blake, but he did not take advantage of that.

He seemed to have fully recovered from the accident, though there was a nervousness in his actions at times that set the boys to wondering. And, occasionally, Blake or Joe would catch him surreptitiously looking at them in a strange manner.

"I wonder what's up?" said Blake to Joe, after one of those occasions. "He sure does act queer."

"That's what I say," agreed Joe. "It's just as though he were sorry he had to be under obligations to us, if you can call it that, for saving his life."

"That's how it impresses me. But perhaps we only imagine it. Hello, here comes Mr. Baker with the mail! We ought to hear from New York."

"Hasn't Birdie Lee written yet?" asked Joe.

"Oh, drop that!" warned Blake, his eyes flashing.

There was a letter from Mr. Hadley, in which he conveyed news and information that made Blake and Joe definitely decide to make the trip to Panama.

"And take Alcando with us?" asked Joe.

"I suppose so," said Blake, though it could not be said that his assent was any too cordial.

"Then we'd better tell him, so he'll know it is settled."

"All right. We can ride over on the motor cycle."

A little later, after a quick trip on the "gasoline bicycle," the moving picture boys were at the only hotel of which Central Falls boasted. Mr. Alcando was in his room, the clerk informed the boys, and they were shown up.

"Enter!" called the voice of the Spaniard, as they knocked. "Ah, it is you, my young friends!" he cried, as he saw them, and getting up hastily from a table on which were many papers, he began hastily piling books on top of them.

"For all the world," said Joe, later, "as though he were afraid we'd see something."

"I am delighted that you have called," the Spaniard said, "and I hope you bring me good news."

"Yes," said Blake, "we are going—"

As he spoke there came in through the window a puff of air, that scattered the papers on the table. One, seemingly part of a letter, was blown to Blake's feet. He picked it up, and, as he handed it back to Mr. Alcando, the lad could not help seeing part of a sentence. It read:

"... go to Panama, get all the pictures you can, especially the big guns...."

Blake felt himself staring eagerly at the last words.

CHAPTER VII

IN NEW YORK

"Ah, my letters have taken unto themselves wings," laughed the Spaniard, as he stooped to pick up the scattered papers. "And you have assisted me in saving them," he went on, as he took the part of the epistle Blake held out to him.

As he did so Mr. Alcando himself had a glimpse of the words Blake had thought so strange. The foreigner must have, in a manner, sensed Blake's suspicions, for he said, quickly:

"That is what it is not to know your wonderful American language. I, myself, have much struggles with it, and so do my friends. I had written to one of them, saying I expected to go to Panama, and he writes in his poor English, that he hopes I do go, and that I get all the pictures I can, especially big ones."

He paused for a moment, looking at Blake sharply, the boy thought. Then the Spaniard went on:

"Only, unfortunately for him, he does not yet know the difference between 'guns' and 'ones.' What he meant to say was that he hoped I would get big pictures—big ones, you know. And I hope I do. I suppose you do take big moving pictures—I mean pictures of big scenes, do you not?" and he included Joe in the question he asked.

"Oh, yes, we've taken some pretty big ones," Blake's chum admitted, as he thought of the time when they had so recently been in the flooded Mississippi Valley, and when they had risked danger and death in the jungle, and in earthquake land.

"Though, I suppose," went on Mr. Alcando, as he folded the part of a letter Blake had picked up, "I suppose there are big guns at Panama—if one could get pictures of them—eh?" and again he looked sharply at Blake—for what reason our hero could not determine.

"Oh, yes, there are big guns down there," said Joe. "I forget their size, and how far they can hurl a projectile. But we're not likely to get a chance to take any pictures, moving or otherwise, of the defenses. I fancy they are a sort of government secret."

"I should think so," spoke Blake, and there was a curious restraint in his manner, at which Joe wondered.

"Yes, we probably won't get much chance to see the big guns," went on the Spaniard. "But I am content if I learn how to become a moving picture operator. I shall write to my friend and tell him the difference between the word 'one' and 'gun.' He will laugh when he finds out his mistake; will he not?" and he glanced at Blake.

"Probably," was the answer. Blake was doing some hard thinking just then.

"But so you have decided to go to the Canal?" asked the Spaniard, when he had collected his scattered papers.

"Yes, we are going down there," answered Blake, "and as Mr. Hadley wishes you to go along, of course we'll take you with us, and teach you all we know."

"I hope I shall not be a burden to you, or cause you any trouble," responded the Spaniard, politely, with a frank and engaging smile.

"Oh, no, not at all!" returned Joe, cordially. He had taken quite a liking to the chap, and anticipated pleasure in his company. Usually when he and Blake went off on moving picture excursions they had some members of the Film Theatrical Company with them, or they met friends on the way, or at their destination. But neither C.C. Piper, nor any of the other actors were going to the Canal, so Blake and Joe would have had to go alone had it not been for the advent of Mr. Alcando.

"We're very glad to have you with us," added Blake. "How soon can you be ready to go?"

"Whenever you are. I can leave to-day, if necessary."

"There isn't any necessity for such a rush as that," Blake said, with a laugh. "We'll finish out our week's vacation, and then go to New York. Our cameras will need overhauling after the hard service they got in the flood, and we'll have to stay in New York about a week to get things in shape. So we'll probably start for the Canal in about two weeks."

"That will suit me excellently. I shall be all ready for you," said the Spaniard.

"Then I'll write to Mr. Hadley to expect us," Blake added.

The boys left Mr. Alcando straightening out his papers, and started back through the town to the farm.

"What made you act so funny, Blake, when you picked up that piece of paper?" asked Joe, when they had alighted from their motor cycle at the Baker homestead a little later.

"Well, to tell you the truth, Joe, I was a bit suspicious."

"What about; that gun business?"

"Yes," and Blake's voice was serious.

"Buttermilk and corn cakes!" cried Joe with a laugh. "You don't mean to say you think this fellow is an international spy; do you? Trying to get secrets of the United States fortifications at the Canal?"

"Well, I don't know as I exactly believe that, Joe, and yet it was strange someone should be writing to him about the big guns."

"Yes, maybe; but then he explained it all right."

"You mean he tried to explain it."

"Oh, well, if you look at it that way, of course you'll be suspicious. But I don't believe anything of the sort. It was just a blunder of someone who didn't know how, trying to write the English language.

"It's all nonsense to think he's a spy. He came to Mr. Hadley well recommended, and you can make up your mind Mr. Hadley wouldn't have anything to do with him if there was something wrong."

"Oh, well, I don't exactly say he's a spy," returned Blake, almost wavering. "Let it go. Maybe I am wrong."

"Yes, I think you are," said Joe. "I like that chap, and I think we'll have fine times together."

"We'll have hard work, that's one thing sure," Blake declared. "It isn't going to be easy to get good pictures of the big ditch. And waiting for one of those Culebra Cut slides is going to be like camping on the trail of a volcano, I think. You can't tell when it's going to happen."

"That's right," agreed Joe with a laugh. "Well, we'll do the best we can, old man. And now let's go on a picnic, or something, to finish out our vacation. We won't get another this year, perhaps."

"Let's go down and see how they're coming on with the new bridge, where the horse tried to jump over the ravine," suggested Blake, and, a little later they were speeding in that direction.

The final week of their stay in the country went by quickly enough, and though the boys appreciated their vacation in the quiet precincts of Central Falls, they were not altogether sorry when the time came to leave.

For, truth to tell, they were very enthusiastic about their moving picture work, and though they were no fonder of a "grind" than any real boys are, they were always ready to go back to the clicking cranks that unwound the strips of

celluloid film, which caught on its sensitive surface the impressions of so many wonderful scenes.

They called at the hotel one evening to tell Mr. Alcando that they were going to New York the following day, and that he could, if he wished, accompany them. But they found he had already left. He had written them a note, however, in which he said he would meet them in the metropolis at the offices of the moving picture concern, and there complete plans for the trip to Panama.

"Queer he didn't want to go in to New York with us," said Blake.

"There you go again!" laughed Joe. "Getting suspicious again. Take it easy, Blake."

"Well, maybe I am a bit too fussy," admitted his chum.

Their trip to, and arrival in, New York was unattended by any incidents worth chronicling, and, taking a car at the Grand Central Terminal, they were soon on their way to the film studios.

"Well, well! If it isn't Blake and Joe!" cried C.C. Piper, the grouchy actor, as he saw them come in. "My, but I am glad to see you!" and he shook their hands warmly.

"Glad something pleases you," said Miss Shay, with a shrug of her shoulders. "You've done nothing but growl ever since this rehearsal started." Blake and Joe had arrived during an intermission in the taking of the studio scenes of a new drama.

"Is he as bad as ever?" asked Joe of Mabel Pierce, the new member of the company.

"Well, I don't know him very well," she said, with a little blush.

"He's worse!" declared Nettie Shay. "I wish you'd take him out somewhere, boys, and find him a good nature. He's a positive bear!"

"Oh, come now, not as bad as that!" cried Mr. Piper. "I am glad to see you boys, though," and really he seemed quite delighted. "What's on?" he asked. "Are you going with us to California? We're going to do a series of stunts there, I hear."

"Sorry, but we're not booked to go," said Blake. "I guess it's Panama and the Canal for us."

Mr. Piper seemed to undergo a quick and curious change. His face, that had been lighted by a genial smile, became dull and careworn. His manner lost its joyousness.

"That's too bad!" he exclaimed. "Panama! You're almost sure to be buried alive under one of the big Culebra slides, and we'll never see you again!"

CHAPTER VIII

OFF FOR PANAMA

There was a moment of silence following Mr. Piper's gloomy prediction, and then Miss Shay, with a laugh, cried out:

"Oh, what a shame! I'd keep still if I couldn't say anything nicer than that."

"Not very cheerful; is he?" spoke Joe.

"About the same as usual," commented Blake, drily.

"Well, it's true, just the same!" declared C.C. Piper, with an air of conviction.

"'The truth is not to be spoken—at all times,'" quoted Miss Pierce.

"Good for you!" whispered Joe.

C.C. seemed a little put out at all the criticism leveled at him.

"Ahem!" he exclaimed. "Of course I don't mean that I want to see you boys caught in a landslide—far from it, but—"

"But, if we are going to be caught that way, you hope there will be moving pictures of it; don't you, C.C.?" laughed Blake. "Now, there's no use trying to get out of it!" he added, as the gloomy actor stuttered and stammered. "We know what you mean. But where is Mr. Ringold; or Mr. Hadley?"

"They're around somewhere," explained Miss Shay, when the other members of the company, with whom they had spent so many happy and exciting days, had offered their greetings. "Are you in such a hurry to see them?" she asked of Blake.

"Oh, not in such an awful hurry," he answered with a laugh, as Birdie Lee came out of a dressing room, smiling rosily at him.

"I guess not!" laughed Miss Shay.

Soon the interval between the scenes of the drama then being "filmed," or photographed, came to an end. The actors and actresses took their places in a "ball room," that was built on one section of the studio floor.

"Ready!" called the manager to the camera operator, and as the music of an unseen orchestra played, so that the dancing might be in perfect time, the

camera began clicking and the action of the play, which included an exciting episode in the midst of the dance, went on. It was a gay scene, for the ladies and gentlemen were dressed in the "height of fashion."

It was necessary to have every detail faithfully reproduced, for the eye of the moving picture camera is more searching, and far-seeing, than any human eye, and records every defect, no matter how small. And when it is recalled that the picture thrown on the screen is magnified many hundred times, a small defect, as can readily be understood, becomes a very large one.

So great care is taken to have everything as nearly perfect as possible. Blake and Joe watched the filming of the drama, recalling the time when they used to turn the handle of the camera at the same work, before they were chosen to go out after bigger pictures—scenes from real life. The operator, a young fellow; whom both Blake and Joe knew, looked around and nodded at them, when he had to stop grinding out the film a moment, to allow the director to correct something that had unexpectedly gone wrong.

"Don't you wish you had this easy job?" the operator asked.

"We may, before we come back from Panama," answered Blake.

A little later Mr. Ringold and Mr. Hadley came in, greeting the two boys, and then began a talk which lasted for some time, and in which all the details of the projected work, as far as they could be arranged in advance, were gone over.

"What we want," said Mr. Hadley, "is a series of pictures about the Canal. It will soon be open for regular traffic, you know, and, in fact some vessels have already gone through it. But the work is not yet finished, and we want you to film the final touches.

"Then, too, there may be accidents—there have been several small ones of late, and, as I wrote you, a man who claims to have made a study of the natural forces in Panama declares a big slide is due soon.

"Of course we won't wish the canal any bad luck, and we don't for a moment want that slide to happen. Only—"

"If it does come you want it filmed!" interrupted Blake, with a laugh.

"That's it, exactly!" exclaimed Mr. Ringold.

"You'll find plenty down there to take pictures of," said Mr. Hadley. "We want scenes along the Canal. Hire a vessel and take moving pictures as you go along in her. Go through the Gatun locks, of course. Scenes as your boat goes in them, and the waters rise, and then go down again, ought to make a corking picture!"

Mr. Hadley was growing enthusiastic.

"Get some jungle scenes to work in also," he directed. "In short, get scenes you think a visitor to the Panama Canal would be interested in seeing. Some of the films will be a feature at the Panama Exposition in California, and we expect to make big money from them, so do your best."

"We will!" promised Joe, and Blake nodded in acquiescence.

"You met the young Spaniard who had a letter of introduction to you; did you not?" asked Mr. Hadley, after a pause.

"Yes," answered Blake. "Met him under rather queer circumstances, too. I guess we hinted at them in our letter."

"A mere mention," responded Mr. Hadley. "I should be glad to hear the details." So Blake and Joe, in turn, told of the runaway.

"What do you think of him—I mean Mr. Alcando?" asked the moving picture man.

"Why, he seems all right," spoke Joe slowly, looking at Blake to give him a chance to say anything if he wanted to. "I like him."

"Glad to hear it!" exclaimed Mr. Hadley heartily. "He came to us well recommended and, as I think I explained, our company is under obligations to concerns he and his friends are interested in, so we were glad to do him a favor. He explained, did he not, that his company wished to show scenes along the line of their railroad, to attract prospective customers?"

"Yes, he told us that," observed Joe.

"What's the matter, Blake, haven't you anything to say?" asked Mr. Hadley in a curious voice, turning to Joe's chum. "How does the Spaniard strike you?"

"Well, he seems all right," was Blake's slow answer. "Only I think—"

"Blake thinks he's an international spy, I guess!" broke in Joe with a laugh. "Tell him about the 'big guns,' Blake."

"What's that?" asked Mr. Hadley, quickly.

Whereupon Blake told of the wind-blown letter and his first suspicions.

"Oh, that's all nonsense!" laughed Mr. Hadley. "We have investigated his credentials, and find them all right. Besides, what object would a South American spy have in finding out details of the defenses at Panama. South America would work to preserve the Canal; not to destroy it. If it were some European nation now, that would be a different story. You don't need to worry, Blake."

"No, I suppose it is foolish. But I'm glad to know you think Mr. Alcando all right. If we've got to live in close companionship with him for several months, it's a comfort to know he is all right. Now when are we to start, how do we go, where shall we make our headquarters and so on?"

"Yes, you will want some detailed information, I expect," agreed the moving picture man. "Well, I'm ready to give it to you. I have already made some arrangements for you. You will take a steamer to Colon, make your headquarters at the Washington Hotel, and from there start out, when you are ready, to get pictures of the Canal and surrounding country. I'll give you letters of introduction, so you will have no trouble in chartering a tug to go through the Canal, and I already have the necessary government permits."

"Then Joe and I had better be packing up for the trip," suggested Blake.

"Yes, the sooner the better. You might call on Mr. Alcando, and ask him when he will be ready. Here is his address in New York," and Mr. Hadley handed Blake a card, naming a certain uptown hotel.

A little later, having seen to their baggage, and handed their particular and favorite cameras over to one of the men of the film company, so that he might give them a thorough overhauling, Blake and Joe went to call on their Spanish friend.

"Aren't you glad to know he isn't a spy, or anything like that?" asked Joe of his chum.

"Yes, of course I am, and yet—"

"Still suspicious I see," laughed Joe. "Better drop it."

Blake did not answer.

Inquiry of the hotel clerk gave Blake and Joe the information that Mr. Alcando was in his room, and, being shown to the apartment by a bell-boy, Blake knocked on the door.

"Who's there? Wait a moment!" came in rather sharp accents from a voice the moving picture boys recognized as that of Mr. Alcando.

"It is Blake Stewart and Joe Duncan," said the former lad. "We have called—"

"I beg your pardon—In one moment I shall be with you—I will let you in!" exclaimed the Spaniard. The boys could hear him moving about in his apartment, they could hear the rattle of papers, and then the door was opened.

There was no one in the room except the young South American railroad man, but there was the odor of a strong cigar in the apartment, and Blake noticed this with surprise for, some time before, Mr. Alcando had said he did not smoke.

The inference was, then, that he had had a visitor, who was smoking when the boys knocked, but there was no sign of the caller then, except in the aroma of the cigar.

He might have gone into one of the other rooms that opened from the one into which the boys looked, for Mr. Alcando had a suite in the hotel. And, after all, it was none of the affair of Blake or Joe, if their new friend had had a caller.

"Only," said Blake to Joe afterward, "why was he in such a hurry to get rid of him, and afraid that we might meet him?"

"I don't know," Joe answered. "It doesn't worry me. You are too suspicious."

"I suppose I am."

Mr. Alcando welcomed the boys, but said nothing about the delay in opening his door, or about the visitor who must have slipped out hastily. The Spaniard was glad to see Blake and Joe, and glad to learn that they would soon start for Panama.

"I have much to do, though, in what little time is left," he said, rapidly arranging some papers on his table. As he did so, Blake caught sight of a small box, with some peculiar metal projections on it, sticking out from amid a pile of papers.

"Yes, much to do," went on Mr. Alcando. And then, either by accident or design, he shoved some papers in such a way that the small box was completely hidden.

"We have just come from Mr. Hadley," explained Joe, and then he and Blake plunged into a mass of details regarding their trip, with which I need not weary you.

Sufficient to say that Mr. Alcando promised to be on hand at the time of the sailing of the steamer for Colon.

In due time, though a day or so later than originally planned, Blake and Joe, with their new Spanish friend, were on hand at the pier. Mr. Alcando had considerable baggage, and he was to be allowed the use of an old moving picture camera with which to "get his hand in." Blake and Joe, of course had their own machines, which had been put in perfect order. There were several of them for different classes of work.

Final instructions were given by Mr. Hadley, good-bys were said, and the boys and Mr. Alcando went aboard.

"I hope you have good luck!" called Birdie Lee to Blake, as she waved her hand to him.

"And so do I," added Mabel Pierce to Joe.

"Thanks!" they made answer in a chorus.

"And—look—out—for—the—big slides!" called Mr. Piper after them, as the steamer swung away from the pier.

"Gloomy to the last!" laughed Blake.

So they were off for Panama, little dreaming of the sensational adventures that awaited them there.

CHAPTER IX

THE LITTLE BOX

Blake and Joe were too well-seasoned travelers to care to witness many of the scenes attendant upon the departure of their vessel. Though young in years, they had already crowded into their lives so many thrilling adventures that it took something out of the ordinary to arouse their interest.

It was not that they were blasé, or indifferent to novel sights, but travel was now, with them, an old story. They had been out West, to the Pacific Coast, and in far-off jungle lands, to say nothing of their trip to the place of the earthquakes, and the more recent trip to the flooded Mississippi Valley.

So, once they had waved good-by to their friends and fellow-workers on the pier, they went to their stateroom to look after their luggage.

The two boys and Mr. Alcando had a room ample for their needs, and, though it would accommodate four, they were assured that the fourth berth would not be occupied, so no stranger would intrude.

When Blake and Joe went below Mr. Alcando did not follow. Either he liked the open air to be found on deck, or he was not such a veteran traveler as to care to miss the sights and sounds of departure. His baggage was piled in one corner, and that of the boys in other parts of the stateroom, with the exception of the trunks and cameras, which were stowed in the hold, as not being wanted on the voyage.

"Well, what do you think of him now?" asked Joe, as he sat down, for both he and Blake were tired, there having been much to do that day.

"Why, he seems all right," was the slowly-given answer.

"Nothing more suspicious; eh?"

"No, I can't say that I've seen anything. Of course it was queer for him to have someone in his room that time, and to get rid of whoever it was so quickly

before we came in. But I suppose we all have our secrets."

"Yes," agreed Joe. "And he certainly can't do enough for us. He is very grateful."

This was shown in every way possible by the Spaniard. More than once he referred to the saving of his life in the runaway accident, and he never tired of telling those whom he met what the boys had done for him.

It was truly grateful praise, too, and he was sincere in all that he said. As Joe had remarked, the Spaniard could not do enough for the boys.

He helped in numberless ways in getting ready for the trip, and offered to do errands that could better be attended to by a messenger boy. He was well supplied with cash, and it was all Joe and Blake could do to prevent him from buying them all sorts of articles for use on their trip.

Passing a sporting goods store that made a specialty of fitting out travelers who hunted in the wilds, Mr. Alcando wanted to purchase for Blake and Joe complete camping outfits, portable stoves, guns, knives, patent acetylene lamps, portable tents, automatic revolvers and all sorts of things.

"But we don't need them, thank you!" Blake insisted. "We're not going to do any hunting, and we won't camp out if we can help it."

"Oh, but we might have to!" said Mr. Alcando, "then think how useful these outfits would be."

"But we'd have to cart them around with us for months, maybe," said Joe, "on the slim chance of using part of the things one night. We don't need 'em."

"But I want to do something for you boys!" the Spaniard insisted. "I am so grateful to you—"

"We know that, by this time," declared Blake. "Please don't get anything more," for their friend had already bought them some things for their steamer trip.

"Ah, well then, if you insist," agreed the generous one, "but if ever you come to my country, all that I own is yours. I am ever in your debt."

"Oh, you mustn't feel that way about it," Blake assured him. "After all, you might have saved yourself."

"Hardly," returned the Spaniard, and he shuddered as he recalled how near he had been to death on the bridge.

But now he and Blake and Joe were safely on a steamer on their way to Panama. The weather was getting rather cool, for though it was only early November the chill of winter was beginning to make itself felt.

"But we'll soon be where it's warm enough all the year around," said Joe to Blake, as they arranged their things in the stateroom.

"That's right," said his chum. "It will be a new experience for us. Not quite so much jungle, I hope, as the dose we had of it when we went after the wild animals."

"No, and I'm glad of it," responded Joe. "That was a little too much at times. Yet there is plenty of jungle in Panama."

"I suppose so. Well, suppose we go up on deck for a breath of air."

They had taken a steamer that went directly to Colon, making but one stop, at San Juan, Porto Rico. A number of tourists were aboard, and there were one or two "personally conducted" parties, so the vessel was rather lively, with so many young people.

In the days that followed Joe and Blake made the acquaintance of a number of persons, in whom they were more or less interested. When it became known that the boys were moving picture operators the interest in them increased, and one lively young lady wanted Blake to get out his camera and take some moving pictures of the ship's company. But he explained, that, though he might take the pictures on board the steamer, he had no facilities for developing or printing the positives, or projecting them after they were made.

In the previous books of this series is described in detail the mechanical process of how moving pictures are made, and to those volumes curious readers are referred.

The process is an intricate one, though much simplified from what it was at first, and it is well worth studying.

On and on swept the Gatun, carrying our friends to the wonderland of that great "ditch" which has become one of the marvels of the world. Occasionally there were storms to interrupt the otherwise placid voyage, but there was only short discomfort.

Mr. Alcando was eager to reach the scene of operations, and after his first enthusiasm concerning the voyage had worn off he insisted on talking about the detailed and technical parts of moving picture work to Joe and Blake, who were glad to give him the benefit of their information.

"Well, you haven't seen anything more suspicious about him; have you?" asked Joe of his chum when they were together in the stateroom one evening, the Spaniard being on deck.

"No, I can't say that I have. I guess I did let my imagination run away with me. But say, Joe, what sort of a watch have you that ticks so loudly?"

"Watch! That isn't my watch!" exclaimed his chum.

"Listen!" ordered Blake. "Don't you hear a ticking?"

They both stood at attention.

"I do hear something like a clock," admitted Joe. "But I don't see any. I didn't know there was one in this stateroom."

"There isn't, either," said Joe, with a glance about. "But I surely do hear something."

"Maybe it's your own watch working overtime."

"Mine doesn't tick as loud as that," and Blake pulled out his timepiece. Even with it out of his pocket the beat of the balance wheel could not be heard until one held it to his ear.

"But what is it?" asked Joe, curiously.

"It seems to come from Mr. Alcando's baggage," Blake said. "Yes, it's in his berth," he went on, moving toward that side of the stateroom. The nearer he advanced toward the sleeping place of the Spaniard the louder became the ticking.

"He's got some sort of a clock in his bed," Blake went on. "He may have one of those cheap watches, though it isn't like him to buy that kind. Maybe he put it under his pillow and forgot to take it out. Perhaps I'd better move it or he may not think it's there, and toss it out on the floor."

But when he lifted the pillow no watch was to be seen.

"That's funny," said Blake, musingly. "I surely hear that ticking in this berth; don't you?"

"Yes," assented Joe. "Maybe it's mixed up in the bedclothes." Before Blake could interfere Joe had turned back the coverings, and there, near the foot of the berth, between the sheets, was a small brass-bound box, containing a number of metal projections. It was from this box the ticking sound came.

"Why—why!" gasped Blake. "That—that box—"

"What about it?" asked Joe, wonderingly.

"That's the same box that was on his table the time we came in his room at the hotel—when we smelled the cigar smoke. I wonder what it is, and why he has it in his bed?"

CHAPTER X

THE SECRET CONFERENCE

Blake was silent a moment after making this portentous announcement. Then he leaned forward, with the evident intention of picking up the curious, ticking box.

"Look out!" cried Joe, grasping his chum's hand.

"What for?" Blake wanted to know.

"It might be loaded—go off, you know!"

"Nonsense!" exclaimed Blake. "It's probably only some sort of foreign alarm clock, and he stuffed it in there so the ticking wouldn't keep him awake. I've done the same thing when I didn't want to get up. I used to chuck mine under the bed, or stuff it in an old shoe. What's the matter with you, anyhow? You act scared," for Joe's face was actually white—that is as white as it could be under the tan caused by his outdoor life.

"Well, I—I thought," stammered Joe. "Perhaps that was a—"

"Who's getting suspicious now?" demanded Blake with a laugh. "Talk about me! Why, you're way ahead!"

"Oh, well, I guess I did imagine too much," admitted Joe with a little laugh. "It probably is an alarm clock, as you say. I wonder what we'd better do with it? If we leave it there—"

He was interrupted by the opening of the stateroom door and as both boys turned they saw their Spanish friend standing on the threshold staring at them.

"Well!" he exclaimed, and there was an angry note in his voice—a note the boys had never before noticed, for Mr. Alcando was of a sunny and happy disposition, and not nearly as quick tempered as persons of his nationality are supposed to be.

"I suppose it does look; as though we were rummaging in your things," said Blake, deciding instantly that it was best to be frank. "But we heard a curious ticking noise when we came down here, and we traced it to your bunk. We didn't know what it might be, and thought perhaps you had put your watch in the bed, and might have forgotten to take it out. We looked, and found this—"

"Ah, my new alarm clock!" exclaimed Mr. Alcando, and what seemed to be a look of relief passed over his face. He reached in among the bed clothes and picked up the curious brass-bound ticking box, with its many little metallic projections.

"I perhaps did not tell you that I am a sort of inventor," the Spaniard went on. "I have not had much success, but I think my new alarm clock is going to

bring me in some money. It works on a new principle, but I am giving it a good test, privately, before I try to put it on the market."

He took the brass-bound, ticking box from the bed, and must have adjusted the mechanism in a way Blake or Joe did not notice, for the "click-click" stopped at once, and the room seemed curiously still after it.

"Some day I will show you how it works," the young Spaniard went on. "I think, myself, it is quite what you call—clever."

And with that he put the box in a trunk, and closed the lid with a snap that threw the lock.

"And now, boys, we will soon be there!" he cried with a gay laugh. "Soon we will be in the beautiful land of Panama, and will see the marvels of that great canal. Are you not glad? And I shall begin to learn more about making moving pictures! That will please me, though I hope I shall not be so stupid a pupil as to make trouble for you, my friends, to whom I owe so much."

He looked eagerly at the boys.

"We'll teach you all we know, which isn't such an awful lot," said Joe. "And I don't believe you'll be slow."

"You have picked up some of it already," went on Blake, for while delaying over making their arrangements in New York the boys and their pupil had gone into the rudiments of moving picture work.

"I am glad you think so," returned the other. "I shall be glad when we are at work, and more glad still, when I can, with my own camera, penetrate into the fastness of the jungle, along the lines of our railroad, and show what we have done to bring civilization there. The film will be the eyes of the world, watching our progress," he added, poetically.

"Why don't you come up on deck," he proceeded. "It is warm down here."

"We just came down," said Joe, "but it is hot," for they were approaching nearer to the Equator each hour.

While the boys were following the young Spaniard up on deck, Joe found a chance to whisper to Blake:

"I notice he was not at all anxious to show us how his brass-box alarm clock worked."

"No," agreed Blake in a low voice, "and yet his invention might be in such a shape that he didn't want to exhibit it yet."

"So you think that's the reason, eh?"

"Surely. Don't you?"

"I do not!"

"What then?"

"Well, I think he's trying to—"

"Hush, here he comes!" cautioned Blake, for their friend at that moment came back from a stroll along the forward deck.

But if Joe was really suspicious of the young Spaniard nothing that occurred in the next few days served to develop that suspicion. No reference was made to the odd alarm clock, which was not heard to tick again, nor was it in evidence either in Mr. Alcando's bed, or elsewhere.

"What were you going to say it was that time when I stopped you?" asked Blake of his chum one day.

"I was going to say I thought it might be some sort of an improvement on a moving picture camera," Joe answered. "This may be only a bluff of his—wanting to learn how to take moving pictures. He may know how all along, and only be working on a certain improvement that he can't perfect until he gets just the right conditions. That's what I think."

"Well, you think wrong," declared Blake. "As for him knowing something about the pictures now, why he doesn't even know how to thread the film into the camera."

"Oh, well, maybe I'm wrong," admitted Joe.

Day succeeded day, until, in due time, after their stop at San Juan, where the boys went ashore for a brief visit, the steamer dropped anchor in the excellent harbor of Colon, at the Atlantic end of the great Panama Canal.

A storm was impending as the ship made her way up the harbor, but as the boys and the other passengers looked at the great break-water, constructed to be one of the protections to the Canal, they realized what a stupendous undertaking the work was, and they knew that no storm could affect them, now they were within the Colon harbor.

"Well, we're here at last!" exclaimed Joe, as he looked over the side and noticed many vessels lying about, most of them connected in some manner with the canal construction.

"Yes, and now for some moving pictures—at least within a day or so," went on Blake. "I'm tired of doing nothing. At last we are at Panama!"

"And I shall soon be with you, taking pictures!" cried the Spaniard. "How long do you think it will be before I can take some views myself?" he asked eagerly.

"Oh, within a week or so we'll trust you with a camera," said Blake.

"That is, if you can spare time from your alarm clock invention," added Joe, with a curious glance at his chum.

But if Mr. Alcando felt any suspicions at the words he did not betray himself. He smiled genially, made some of his rapid Latin gestures and exclaimed:

"Oh, the clock. He is safe asleep, and will be while I am here. I work only on moving pictures now!"

In due season Blake, Joe and Mr. Alcando found themselves quartered in the pleasant Washington Hotel, built by the Panama Railroad for the Government, where they found, transported to a Southern clime, most of the luxuries demanded by people of the North.

"Well, this is something like living!" exclaimed Blake as their baggage and moving picture cameras and accessories having been put away, they sat on the veranda and watched breaker after breaker sweep in from the Caribbean Sea.

"The only trouble is we won't be here long enough," complained Joe, as he sipped a cooling lime drink, for the weather was quite warm. "We'll have to leave it and take to the Canal or the jungle, to say nothing of standing up to our knees in dirt taking slides."

"Do you—er—really have to get very close to get pictures of the big slides?" asked Mr. Alcando, rather nervously, Blake thought.

"The nearer the better," Joe replied. "Remember that time, Blake, when we were filming the volcano, and the ground opened right at your feet?"

"I should say I did remember it," said Blake. "Some picture that!"

"Where was this?" asked the Spaniard.

"In earthquake land. There were some times there!"

"Ha! Do not think to scare me!" cried their pupil with a frank laugh. "I said I was going to learn moving pictures and I am—slides or no slides."

"Oh, we're not trying to 'josh' you," declared Blake. "We'll all have to run some chances. But it's all in the day's work, and, after all, it's no more risky than going to war."

"No, I suppose not," laughed their pupil. "Well, when do we start?"

"As soon as we can arrange for the government tug to take us along the Canal," answered Blake. "We'll have to go in one of the United States vessels, as the Canal isn't officially opened yet. We'll have to make some inquiries, and present our letters of introduction. If we get started with the films inside of a week we'll be doing well."

The week they had to wait until their plans were completed was a pleasant one. They lived well at the hotel, and Mr. Alcando met some Spaniards and other persons whom he knew, and to whom he introduced the boys.

Finally the use of the tug was secured, cameras were loaded with the reels of sensitive film, other reels in their light-tight metal boxes were packed for transportation, and shipping cases, so that the exposed reels could be sent to the film company in New York for developing and printing, were taken along.

Not only were Blake and Joe without facilities for developing the films they took, but it is very hard to make negatives in hot countries. If you have ever tried to develop pictures on a hot day, without an ice water bath, you can understand this. And there was just then little ice to be had for such work as photography though some might have been obtained for an emergency. Blake and Joe were only to make the exposures; the developing and printing could better be done in New York.

"Well, we'll start up the canal to-morrow," said Blake to Joe on the evening of their last day in Colon.

"Yes, and I'll be glad of it," remarked Joe. "It's nice enough here at this hotel, but I want to get busy."

"So do I," confessed his chum.

They were to make the entire trip through the Canal as guests of Uncle Sam, the Government having acceded to Mr. Hadley's request, as the completed films were to form part of the official exhibit at the exposition in California later on.

"Whew, but it is hot!" exclaimed Joe, after he and Blake had looked over their possessions, to make sure they were forgetting nothing for their trip next day.

"Yes," agreed Blake. "Let's go out on the balcony for a breath of air."

Their room opened on a small balcony which faced the beach. Mr. Alcando had a room two or three apartments farther along the corridor, and his, too, had a small balcony attached. As Blake and Joe went out on theirs they saw, in the faint light of a crescent and much-clouded moon, two figures on the balcony opening from the Spaniard's room.

"He has company," said Joe, in a low voice.

"Yes," agreed Blake. "I wonder who it is? He said all of his friends had left the hotel. He must have met some new ones."

It was very still that night, the only sounds being the low boom and hiss of the surf as it rushed up the beach. And gradually, to Joe and Blake, came the murmur of voices from the Spaniard's balcony. At first they were low, and it

seemed to the boys, though neither expressed the thought, that the conference was a secret one. Then, clearly across the intervening space, came the words:

"Are you sure the machine works right?"

"Perfectly," was the answer, in Mr. Alcando's tones. "I have given it every test."

Then the voices again sunk to a low murmur.

CHAPTER XI

ALONG THE CANAL

"Blake, did you hear that?" asked Joe, after a pause, during which he and his chum could hear the low buzz of conversation from the other balcony.

"Yes, I heard it. What of it?"

"Well, nothing that I know of, and yet—"

"Yet you're more suspicious than I was," broke in Blake. "I don't see why."

"I hardly know myself," admitted Joe. "Yet, somehow, that ticking box, and what you saw in that letter—"

"Oh, nonsense!" interrupted Blake. "Don't imagine too much. You think that curious box is some attachment for a moving picture camera; do you?"

"Well, it might be, and—"

"And you're afraid he will get ahead of you in your invention of a focus tube; aren't you?" continued Blake, not giving his companion a chance to finish what he started to say. For Joe had recently happened to hit on a new idea of a focusing tube for a moving picture camera, and had applied for a patent on it. But there was some complication and his papers had not yet been granted. He was in fear lest someone would be granted a similar patent before he received his.

"Oh, I don't know as I'm afraid of that," Joe answered slowly.

"Well, it must be that—or something," insisted Blake. "You hear Alcando and someone else talking about a machine, and you at once jump to the conclusion that it's a camera."

"No, I don't!" exclaimed Joe. He did not continue the conversation along that line, but he was doing some hard thinking.

Later that evening, when Mr. Alcando called at the room of the two chums to

bid them goodnight, he made no mention of his visitor on the balcony. Nor did Blake or Joe question him.

"And we start up the Canal in the morning?" asked the Spaniard.

"Yes, and we'll make the first pictures going through the Gatun locks," decided Blake.

"Good! I am anxious to try my hand!" said their "pupil."

With their baggage, valises, trunks, cameras, boxes of undeveloped film, other boxes to hold the exposed reels of sensitive celluloid, and many other things, the moving picture boys and Mr. Alcando went aboard the government tug Nama the next morning. With the exception of some Army engineers making a trip of inspection, they were the only passengers.

"Well, are you all ready, boys?" asked the captain, for he had been instructed by his superiors to show every courtesy and attention to our heroes. In a sense they were working for Uncle Sam.

"All ready," answered Blake.

"Then we'll start," was the reply. "I guess—"

"Oh, one moment, I beg of you!" cried Mr. Alcando. "I see a friend coming with a message to me," and he pointed along the pier, where the tug was tied. Coming on the run was a man who bore every appearance of being a Spaniard.

"You are late," complained Mr. Alcando, as the runner handed him a letter. "You almost delayed my good friend, the captain of this tug."

"I could not help it," was the answer. "I did not receive it myself until a few minutes ago. It came by cable. So you are off?"

"We are off!" answered Mr. Alcando.

Then the other spoke in Spanish, and later on Blake, who undertook the study of that language so as to make himself understood in a few simple phrases knew what it was that the two men said. For the runner asked:

"You will not fail us?"

"I will not fail—if I have to sacrifice myself," was the answer of Mr. Alcando, and then with a wave of his hand the other went back up the pier.

"All right?" again asked Captain Watson.

"All right, my dear sir, I am sorry to have delayed you," answered Mr. Alcando with more than his usual politeness.

"A little delay doesn't matter. I am at your service," the commander said. "Well, now we'll start."

If either Blake or Joe felt any surprise over the hurried visit, at the last minute, of Mr. Alcando's friend, they said nothing to each other about it. Besides, they had other matters to think of just then, since now their real moving picture work was about to begin.

In a short time they were moving away from the pier, up the harbor and toward the wonderful locks and dam that form the amazing features (aside from the Culebra Cut) of the great Canal.

"Better get our cameras ready; hadn't we, Blake?" suggested Joe.

"I think so," agreed his chum. "Now, Mr. Alcando, if you want to pick up any points, you can watch us. A little later we'll let you grind the crank yourself."

I might explain, briefly, that moving pictures are taken not by pressing a switch, or a rubber bulb, such as that which works a camera shutter, but by the continuous action of a crank, or handle, attached to the camera. Pressing a bulb does well enough for taking a single picture, but when a series, on a long celluloid strip, are needed, as in the case for the "movies," an entirely different arrangement becomes absolutely necessary.

The sensitive celluloid film must move continuously, in a somewhat jerky fashion, inside the dark light-tight camera, and behind the lens. As each picture, showing some particular motion, is taken, the film halts for the briefest space of time, and then goes on, to be wound up in the box, and a new portion brought before the lens for exposure.

All this the crank does automatically, opening and closing the shutter, moving the film and all that is necessary.

I wish I had space, not only to tell you more of how moving pictures are made, but much about the Panama Canal. As to the former—the pictures—in other books of this series I have done my best to give you a brief account of that wonderful industry.

Now as to the Canal—it is such a vast undertaking and subject that only in a great volume could I hope to do it justice. And in a story (such as this is intended to be), I am afraid you would think I was trying to give you pretty dry reading if I gave you too many facts and figures.

Of course many of you have read of the Canal in the newspapers—the controversy over the choice of the route, the discussion as to whether a sea level or a lock canal was best, and many other points, especially whether the Gatun Dam would be able to hold back the waters of the Chagres River.

With all that I have nothing to do in this book, but I hope you will pardon just a little reference to the Canal, especially the lock features, since Joe and Blake had a part in at least filming those wonderful structures.

You know there are two kinds of canals, those on the level, which are merely big over-grown ditches, and those which have to go over hills and through low valleys.

There are two ways of getting a canal over a hill. One is to build it and let the water in to the foot of the hill, and then to raise vessels over, the crest of the hill, and down the other side to where the canal again starts, by means of inclined planes, or marine railways.

The other method is by "locks," as they are called. That is, there are built a series of basins with powerful, water-tight gates dividing them. Boys who live along canals well know how locks work.

A boat comes along until it reaches the place where the lock is. It is floated into a basin, or section, of the waterway, and a gate is closed behind it. Then, from that part of the canal which is higher than that part where the boat then is, water is admitted into the basin, until the boat rises to the level of the higher part of the canal. Then the higher gate is opened, and the vessel floats out on the higher level. It goes "up hill," so to speak.

By reversing the process it can also go "down hill." Of course there must be heavy gates to prevent the higher level waters from rushing into those of the lower level.

Some parts of the Panama Canal are eighty-five feet higher than other parts. In other words, a vessel entering the Canal at Colon, on the Atlantic side of the Isthmus, must rise eighty-five feet to get to the level of Gatun Lake, which forms a large part of the Canal. Then, when the Pacific end is approached, the vessel must go down eighty-five feet again, first in one step of thirty and a third feet, and then in two steps, or locks, aggregating fifty-four and two-thirds feet. So you see the series of locks at either end of the great Canal exactly balance one another, the distance at each end being eighty-five feet.

It is just like going up stairs at one end of a long board walk and down again at the other end, only the steps are of water, and not wood.

The tug bearing Blake, Joe and Mr. Alcando was now steaming over toward Toro Point break-water, which I have before alluded to. This was built to make a good harbor at Colon, where violent storms often occur.

"I want to get some pictures of the breakwater," Blake had said, since he and his chum were to present, in reels, a story of a complete trip through the Canal, and the breakwater was really the starting point. It extends out into the Caribbean Sea eleven thousand feet.

"And you are taking pictures now?" asked Mr. Alcando, as Blake and Joe set up a camera in the bow of the boat.

"That's what we're doing. Come here and we'll give you lesson number one," invited Blake, clicking away at the handle. "I will gladly come!" exclaimed the Spaniard, and soon he was deep in the mysteries of the business.

There was not much delay at the breakwater, as the boys were anxious to get to the Canal proper, and into the big locks. A little later their tug was steaming along the great ditch, five hundred feet wide, and over forty feet deep, which leads directly to the locks. This ditch, or start of the Canal proper, is about seven miles long, and at various points of interest along the way a series of moving pictures was taken.

"And so at last we are really on the Panama Canal!" cried Joe as he helped Blake put in a fresh reel of unexposed film, Mr. Alcando looking on and learning "points."

"That's what you are," the captain informed them, "and, just ahead of you are the locks. Now you'll see something worth 'filming,' as you call it."

CHAPTER XII

ALMOST AN ACCIDENT

"What's that big, long affair, jutting out so far from the locks?" asked Blake, when the tug had approached nearer.

"That's the central pier," the captain informed him. "It's a sort of guide wall, to protect the locks. You know there are three locks at this end; or, rather, six, two series of three each. And each lock has several gates. One great danger will be that powerful vessels may ram these gates and damage them, and, to prevent this, very elaborate precautions are observed. You'll soon see. We'll have to tie up to this wall, or we'll run into the first protection, which is a big steel chain. You can see it just ahead there."

Joe and Blake, who had gotten all the pictures they wanted of the approach to the lock, stopped grinding away at the handle of the camera long enough to look at the chain.

These chains, for there are several of them, each designed to protect some lock gate, consist of links made of steel three inches thick. They stretch across the locks, and any vessel that does not stop at the moment it should, before reaching this chain, will ram its prow into it.

"But I'm not taking any such chances," Captain Watson informed the boys. "I don't want to be censured, which might happen, and I don't want to injure my boat."

"What would happen if you did hit the chain?" asked Blake. They had started off again, after the necessary permission to enter the locks had been signaled to them. Once more Blake and Joe were taking pictures, showing the chain in position.

"Well, if I happened to be in command of a big vessel, say the size of the Olympic, and I hit the chain at a speed of a mile and a half an hour, and I had a full load on, the chain would stop me within about seventy feet and prevent me from ramming the lock gate."

"But how does it do it?" asked Joe.

"By means of machinery," the captain informed him. "Each end of the chain fender goes about a drum, which winds and unwinds by hydraulic power. Once a ship hits the chain its speed will gradually slacken, but it takes a pressure of one hundred tons to make the chain begin to yield. Then it will stand a pressure up to over two hundred and fifty tons before it will break. But before that happens the vessel will have stopped."

"But we are not going to strike the chain, I take it," put in Mr. Alcando.

"Indeed we are not," the captain assured him. "There, it is being lowered now."

As he spoke the boys saw the immense steel-linked fender sink down below the surface of the water.

"Where does it go?" asked Blake.

"It sinks down in a groove in the bottom of the lock," the captain explained. "It takes about one minute to lower the chain, and as long to raise it."

"Well, I've got that!" Blake exclaimed as the handle of his camera ceased clicking. He had sufficient views of the giant fender. As the tug went on Captain Watson explained to the boys that even though a vessel should manage to break the chain, which was almost beyond the bounds of possibility, there was the first, or safety gate of the lock. And though a vessel might crash through the chain, and also the first gate, owing to failure to stop in the lock, there would be a second gate, which would almost certainly bring the craft to a stop.

But even the most remote possibility has been thought of by the makers of the great Canal, and, should all the lock-gates be torn away, and the impounded waters of Gatun Lake start to rush out, there are emergency dams that can be put into place to stop the flood.

These emergency dams can be swung into place in two minutes by means of electrical machinery, but should that fail, they can be put into place by hand in about thirty minutes.

"So you see the Canal is pretty well protected," remarked Captain Watson, as he prepared to send his tug across the place where the Chain had been, and so into the first of the three lock basins.

"Say! This is great!" cried Blake, as he looked at the concrete walls, towering above him. They were moist, for a vessel had recently come through.

Now the tug no longer moved under her own steam, nor had it been since coming alongside the wall of the central pier. For all vessels must be towed through the lock basins, and towed not by other craft, but by electric locomotives that run alongside, on the top of the concrete walls.

Two of these locomotives were attached to the bow of the tug, and two to the stern. But those at the stern were not for pulling, as Joe at first supposed, for he said:

"Why, those locomotives in back are making fast to us with wire hawsers. I don't see how they can push with those."

"They're not going to," explained Captain Watson. "Those in the stern are for holding back, to provide for an emergency in case those in front pull us too fast."

"Those who built the Canal seem to have thought of everything," spoke Blake with much enthusiasm.

"You'll think so, after you've seen some more of the wonders," the tug captain went on with a smile. "Better get your cameras ready," he advised, "they'll be opening and closing the gates for us now, and that ought to make good pictures, especially when we are closed in the lock, and water begins to enter."

"How does it come in?" asked Joe. "Over the top?"

"No, indeed. They don't use the waterfall effect," answered Blake, who had been reading a book about the Canal. "It comes in from the bottom; doesn't it, Captain Watson?"

"Yes, through valves that are opened and closed by electricity. In fact everything about the lock is done by electricity, though in case of emergency hand power can be used. The water fills the lock through openings in the floor, and the water itself comes from Gatun Lake. There, the gate is opening!"

The boys saw what seemed to be two solid walls of steel slowly separated, by an unseen power, as the leaves of a book might open. In fact the gates of the locks are called "leaves." Slowly they swung back out of the way, into depressions in the side walls of the locks, made to receive them.

"Here we go!" cried the captain, the tug began to move slowly under the pull of the electric locomotives on the concrete wall above them. "Start your

cameras, boys!"

Blake and Joe needed no urging. Already the handles were clicking, and thousands of pictures, showing a boat actually going through the locks of the Panama Canal, were being taken on the long strip of sensitive film.

"Oh, it is wonderful!" exclaimed Mr. Alcando. "Do you think—I mean, would it be possible for me to—"

"To take some pictures? Of course!" exclaimed Blake, generously. "Here, grind this crank a while, I'm tired."

The Spaniard had been given some practice in using a moving picture camera, and he knew about at what speed to turn the handle. For the moving pictures must be taken at just a certain speed, and reproduced on the screen at the same rate, or the vision produced is grotesque. Persons and animals seem to run instead of walk. But the new pupil, with a little coaching from Blake, did very well.

"Now the gates will be closed," said the tug captain, "and the water will come in to raise us to the level of the next higher lock. We have to go through this process three times at this end of the Canal, and three times at the other. Watch them let in the water."

The big gates were not yet fully closed when something happened that nearly put an end to the trip of the moving picture boys to Panama.

For suddenly their tug, instead of moving forward toward the front end of the lock, began going backward, toward the slowly-closing lock gates.

"What's up?" cried Blake.

"We're going backward!" shouted Joe.

"Yes, the stern locomotives are pulling us back, and the front ones seem to have let go!" Captain Watson said. "We'll be between the lock gates in another minute. Hello, up there!" he yelled, looking toward the top of the lock wall. "What's the matter?"

Slowly the tug approached the closing lock gates. If she once got between them, moving as they were, she would be crushed like an eggshell. And it seemed that no power on earth could stop the movement of those great, steel leaves.

"This is terrible!" cried Mr. Alcando. "I did not count on this in learning to make moving pictures."

"You'll be in tighter places than this," said Blake, as he thought in a flash of the dangers he and Joe had run.

"What'll we do?" asked Joe, with a glance at his chum.

"Looks as though we'd have to swim for it if the boat is smashed," said Blake, who remained calm. "It won't be hard to do that. This is like a big swimming tank, anyhow, but if they let the other water in—"

He did not finish, but they knew what he meant. Slowly and irresistibly the great lock gates were closing and now the tug had almost been pulled back between them. She seemed likely to be crushed to splinters.

CHAPTER XIII

IN THE JUNGLE

"What will we do with the cameras, Blake? The films, too, they will all be spoiled—we haven't enough waterproof cases!" cried Joe to his chum, as the boat, through some accident or failure, backed nearer and nearer to the closing steel gates.

"Will we really have to jump overboard?" asked the Spaniard. "I am not a very excellent swimmer."

But Blake, at whom these questions seemed directed, did not have to answer them. For, after a series of confused shouts on the top of the concrete wall above them the movement of the boat, as well as the slow motion of the lock gates, ceased. It was just in time, for the rudder of the tug was not more than a few feet away from the jaws of steel.

"You're all right now," a man called down to those on the tug, from the wall over their heads. "Something went wrong with the towing locomotives. There's no more danger."

"Well, I'm glad to know that," answered Captain Watson gruffly. "You might just as well kill a man as scare him to death. What was the matter, anyhow?"

"Well, all of our machinery isn't working as smoothly as we'll have it later," the canal engineer explained. "Some of our signals went wrong as you were being towed through, and you went backward instead of forward. Then it took a minute or so to stop the lock gates. But you're all right now, and you'll go on through."

Blake and Joe looked at each other and smiled in relief, and Mr. Alcando appeared to breathe easier. A little later the tug was again urged forward toward the front lock gates. Then the closing of those at her stern went on, until the vessel was in a square steel and concrete basin—or, rather, a

rectangular one, for it was longer than it was wide, to lend itself to the shape of the vessels. As Blake had said, it was like a big swimming tank.

"Now we'll go up," Captain Watson said. "You can't get any pictures in here, I suppose?" he added.

"We can show the water bubbling up as it fills the lock," said Blake. "Water always makes a pretty scene in moving pictures, as it seems to move at just the right rate of speed. We'll take a short strip of film, Joe, I guess."

The tug did not occupy a whole section of the lock, for they are built to accommodate vessels a thousand feet long. To economize time in filling up such a great tank as that would be the locks are subdivided by gates into small tanks for small vessels.

"It takes just forty-six gates for all the locks," explained Captain Watson, while Blake and Joe were getting their camera in position, and the men at the locks were closing certain water valves and opening others. "Each lock has two leaves, or gates, and their weight runs anywhere from three hundred to six hundred tons, according to its position. Some of the gates are forty-seven feet high, and others nearly twice that, and each leaf is sixty-five feet wide, and seven feet thick."

"Think of being crushed between two steel gates, of six hundred tons each, eighty feet high, sixty-five feet wide and seven feet thick," observed Joe.

"I don't want to think of it!" laughed Blake. "We are well out of that," and he glanced back toward the closed and water-tight lock gates which had so nearly nipped the tug.

"Here comes the water!" cried the captain. There was a hissing and gurgling sound, and millions of bubbles began to show on the surface of the limpid fluid in which floated the Nama. The water came in from below, through the seventy openings in the floor of each lock, being admitted by means of pipes and culverts from the upper level.

As the water hissed, boiled and bubbled while it flowed in Blake took moving pictures of it. Slowly the Nama rose. Higher and higher she went until finally she was raised as high as that section of the lock would lift her. She went up at the rate of two feet a minute, though Captain Watson explained that when there was need of hurry the rate could be three feet a minute.

"And we have two more locks to go through?" asked Joe.

"Yes, two more here at Gatun, and three at Miraflores; or, rather, there is one lock at Pedro Miguel, where we go down thirty and a third feet, and then we go a mile to reach the locks at Miraflores.

"There we shall have to go through two locks, with a total drop of fifty-four

and two-thirds feet," Captain Watson explained. "The system is the same at each place."

The tug was now resting easily in the basin, but some feet above the sea level. Blake and Joe had taken enough moving pictures of this phase of the Canal, since the next scenes would be but a repetition of the process in the following two locks that would lift the Nama to the level of Gatun Lake.

"But I tell you what we could do," Blake said to his chum.

"What's that—swim the rest of the way," asked Joe, "and have Mr. Alcando make pictures of us?"

"No, we've had enough of water lately. But we could get out on top of the lock walls, and take pictures of the tug going through the lock. That would be different."

"So it would!" cried Joe. "We'll do it!"

They easily obtained permission to do this, and soon, with their cameras, and accompanied by Mr. Alcando, they were on the concrete wall. From that vantage point they watched the opening of the lock gates, which admitted the Nama into the next basin. There she was shut up, by the closing of the gates behind her, and raised to the second level. The boys succeeded in getting some good pictures at this point and others, also, when the tug was released from the third or final lock, and steamed out into Gatun Lake. There was now before her thirty-two miles of clear water before reaching Miraflores.

"Better come aboard, boys," advised Captain Watson, "and I'll take you around to Gatun Dam. You'll want views of that."

"We sure will!" cried Blake.

"Isn't it all wonderful!" exclaimed Joe, who was deeply impressed by all he saw.

"It is, indeed!" agreed the Spaniard. "Your nation is a powerful and great one. It is a tremendous achievement."

Aboard the tug they went around toward the great dam that is really the key to the Panama Canal. For without this dam there would be no Gatun Lake, which holds back the waters of the Chagres River, making a big lake eighty-five feet above the level of the ocean. It is this lake that makes possible the operation of a lock canal. Otherwise there would have to be a sea-level one, and probably you boys remember what a discussion there was, in Congress and elsewhere, about the advantages and disadvantages of a sea-level route across the Isthmus.

But the lock canal was decided on, and, had it not been, it is probable that the

Canal would be in process of making for many years yet to come, instead of being finished now.

"Whew!" whistled Joe, as they came in sight of the dam. "That sure is going some!"

"That's what it is!" cried Captain Watson, proudly, for he had had a small part in the work. "It's a mile and a half long, half a mile thick at the base, three hundred feet through at the waterline, and on top a third of that."

"How high is it?" asked Joe, who always liked to know just how big or how little an object was. He had a great head for figures.

"It's one hundred and five feet high," the captain informed him, "and it contains enough concrete so that if it were loaded into two-horse wagons it would make a procession over three times around the earth."

"Catch me! I'm going to faint!" cried Blake, staggered at the immensity of the figure.

"That dam is indeed the key to the whole lock," murmured Mr. Alcando, as he looked at the wonderful piece of engineering. "If it were to break—the Canal would be ruined."

"Yes, ruined, or at least destroyed for many years," said Captain Watson solemnly. "But it is impossible for the dam to break of itself. No waters that could come into the lake could tear it away, for every provision has been made for floods. They would be harmless."

"What about an earthquake?" asked Joe. "I've read that the engineers feared them."

"They don't now," said the captain. "There was some talk, at first, of an earthquake, or a volcanic eruption, destroying the dam, but Panama has not been visited by a destructive earthquake in so long that the danger need not be considered. And there are no volcanoes near enough to do any harm. It is true, there might be a slight earthquake shock, but the dam would stand that. The only thing that might endanger it would be a blast of dynamite."

"Dynamite!" quickly exclaimed Mr. Alcando. "And who would dare to explode dynamite at the dam?"

"I don't know who would do it, but some of the enemies of the United States might. Or someone who fancied the Canal had damaged him," the captain went on.

"And who would that be?" asked Blake in a low tone.

"Oh, someone, or some firm, who might fancy that the Canal took business away from them. It will greatly shorten certain traffic and trade routes, you

know."

"Hardly enough to cause anyone to commit such a crime as that, do you think?" asked the Spaniard.

"That is hard to answer," went on the tug commander. "I know that we are taking great precautions, though, to prevent the dam, or the locks, from being damaged. Uncle Sam is taking no chances. Well, have you pictures enough?"

"I think so," answered Blake. "When we come back we'll stop off here and get some views from below the dam, showing the spillway."

"Yes, that ought to be interesting," the captain agreed.

The tug now steamed on her way out into Gatun Lake, and there a series of excellent views were obtained for the moving picture cameras. Mr. Alcando was allowed to do his part. He was rapidly learning what the boys could teach him.

"Of course it could never happen," the Spaniard said, when the cameras had been put away, for the views to be obtained then were of too much sameness to attract Joe or Blake, "it would never happen, and I hope it never does; but if it did it would make a wonderful picture; would it not?" he asked.

"What are you talking about?" asked Blake.

"The Gatun Dam," was the answer. "If ever it was blown up by dynamite it would make a wonderful scene."

"Too wonderful," said Joe grimly. "It would be a terrible crime against civilization to destroy this great canal."

"Yes, it would be a great crime," agreed the Spaniard in a low voice. A little later he went to his stateroom on the tug, and Blake and Joe remained on deck.

"Queer sort of a chap; isn't he?" said Joe.

"He sure is—rather deep," agreed his chum.

"Are you boys going into the jungle?" asked the tug captain that afternoon.

"Yes, we want to get a few views showing life in the woods," answered Blake. "Why?"

"Well, the reason I asked is that I can take you to the mouth of the Chagres River and from there you won't have so much trouble penetrating into the interior. So if you're going—"

"I think we had better go; don't you?" asked Blake of his chum.

"Surely, yes. We might get some fine pictures. They'll go well with the Canal, anyhow; really a sort of part of the series we're taking."

"All right, then, I'll leave you in the jungle," the captain said.

A day or so later, stops having been made to permit the boys to film certain scenes they wanted, the tug reached Gamboa, where they stopped, to plan a trip into the interior.

Then, one morning, with their cameras loaded with film, they started off for a brief trip into the jungle.

CHAPTER XIV

IN DIRE PERIL

A small launch had been provided for the use of Blake and Joe in going into the jungle, the first part of their trip being along the Chagres River. The tug on which they had come thus far was not suitable.

Accordingly they had transferred what baggage they needed to the launch, and with their moving picture cameras, with shelter tents, food, supplies and some West Indian negroes as helpers, they were prepared to enjoy life as much as possible in the jungle of the Isthmus.

"You boys don't seem to mind what you do to get pictures," commented Mr. Alcando, as they sat in the launch, going up the stream, the existence of which made possible Gatun Lake.

"No, you get so you'll do almost anything to get a good film," agreed Blake.

"This is easy compared to some of the things we've done," Joe remarked. "You'll become just as fascinated with it as we are, Mr. Alcando."

"I hope so," he admitted, "for I will have to penetrate into a much wilder jungle than this if I take the views our company wants. Perhaps I can induce you to come to South America and make films for us in case I can't do it," he concluded.

"Well, we're in the business," remarked Blake with a smile. "But you'll get so you can take for yourself just as good pictures as we can."

"Do you really think so?" asked the Spaniard, eagerly.

"I'm sure of it," Blake said.

The little suspicions both he and Joe had entertained of their companion seemed to have vanished. Certainly he neither did nor said anything that could be construed as dangerous. He was a polished gentleman, and seemed to regard the boys as his great friends. He often referred to the runaway accident.

As for the odd, ticking box, it seemed to have been put carefully away, for neither Blake nor Joe saw it, nor had they heard the click of it when they went near Mr. Alcando's possessions.

The first night in the jungle was spent aboard the boat. It was pleasant enough, mosquito canopies keeping away the pests that are said to cause malaria and yellow fever, among other things. But, thanks to the activities of the American sanitary engineers the mosquitoes are greatly lessened in the canal zone.

"And now for some real jungle life!" cried Blake the next day, as the little party set off into the forest, a group of laborers with machetes going ahead to clear the way.

For several miles nothing worth "filming" was seen, and Blake and Joe were beginning to feel that perhaps they had had their trouble for nothing. Now and then they came to little clearings in the thick jungle, where a native had chopped down the brush and trees to make a place for his palm-thatched and mud-floored hut. A few of them clustered about formed a village. Life was very simple in the jungle of Panama.

"Oh, Blake, look!" suddenly cried Joe, as they were walking along a native path. "What queer insects. They are like leaves."

The boys and Mr. Alcando saw what seemed to be a procession of green leaves making its way through the jungle.

"Those are real leaves the ants carry," explained the guide, who spoke very good English. "They are called leaf-cutting ants, and each one of them is really carrying a leaf he has cut from some tree."

On closer inspection the boys saw that this was so. Each ant carried on its back a triangular leaf, and the odd part, or, rather, one of the odd features, was that the leaf was carried with the thin edge forward, so it would not blow in the wind.

"What do they do with 'em?" asked Joe. "Eat 'em, or make houses of 'em?"

"Neither," replied the guide. "The ants put the leaves away until they are covered with a fungus growth. It is this fungus that the ants eat, and when it has all been taken from the leaves they are brought out of the ant homes, and a fresh lot of leaves are brought in. These ants are bringing in a fresh lot now, you see."

"How odd!" exclaimed Blake. "We must get a picture of this, Joe."

"We sure must!" agreed his chum.

"But how can you take moving pictures of such small things as ants?" asked Mr. Alcando.

"We'll put on an enlarging lens, and get the camera close to them," explained Blake, who had had experience in taking several films of this sort for the use of schools and colleges.

A halt was called while the camera was made ready, and then, as the ants went on in their queer procession, carrying the leaves which looked like green sails over their backs, the film clicked on in its indelible impression of them, for the delight of audiences who might see them on the screen, in moving picture theaters from Maine to California.

"Well, that was worth getting," said Blake, as they put away the camera, and went on again. "I wonder what we'll see next?"

"Have you any wild beasts in these jungles?" asked Mr. Alcando of the Indian guide.

"Well, not many. We have some deer, though this is not the best time to see them. And once in a while you'll see a—"

"What's that?" suddenly interrupted Blake, pointing through the thick growth of trees. "I saw some animal moving then. Maybe it was a deer. I'd like to get a picture of it."

There was a movement in the underbrush, and a shouting among the native carriers.

"Come on!" cried Joe, dashing ahead with a camera.

"Better wait," advised Mr. Alcando. "It might be something dangerous."

"It's only some tapirs, I think," the guide said. "They are harmless."

"Then we'll film them," decided Blake, though the mere fact of harm or danger being absent did not influence him.

Both he and Joe had taken pictures of dangerous wild animals in Africa, and had stood at the camera, calmly turning the handle, when it seemed as though death was on its way toward them in horrible form. Had occasion demanded it now they would have gone on and obtained the pictures. But there could be no danger from the tapirs.

The pictures obtained, however, were not very satisfactory. The light was poor, for the jungle was dense there, and the tapirs took fright almost at first, so the resultant film, as Blake and Joe learned later, when it was developed, was hardly worth the trouble they took. Still, it showed one feature of the Panama jungle.

All about the boys was a wonderful and dense forest. There were many beautiful orchids to be seen, hanging from trees as though they really grew, as their name indicates, in the air. Blake and Joe took views of some of the most

beautiful. There was one, known as the "Holy Ghost" which only blooms twice a year, and when the petals slowly open there is seen inside them something which resembles a dove.

"Let's get some pictures of the next native village we come to," suggested Blake, as they went on after photographing the orchids and the tapirs.

"All right, that ought to go good as showing a type of life here," Joe agreed. And they made a stop in the next settlement, or "clearing," as it more properly should be called.

At first the native Indians were timid about posing for their pictures, but the guide of the boys' party explained, and soon they were as eager as children to be snapped and filmed.

"This is the simple life, all right," remarked Blake, as they looked at the collection of huts. "Gourds and cocoanut shells for kitchen utensils."

That was all, really, the black housekeeper had. But she did not seem to feel the need of more. The Panama Indians are very lazy. If one has sufficient land to raise a few beans, plantains and yams, and can catch a few fish, his wants are supplied. He burns some charcoal for fuel, and rests the remainder of the time.

"That is, when he doesn't go out to get some fresh meat for the table," explained the guide.

"Meat? Where can he get meat in the jungle, unless he spears a tapir?" asked Blake.

"There's the iguana," the guide said, with a laugh.

"Do they eat them?" cried Joe, for several times in the trip through the jungles he had jumped aside at a sight of the big lizards, which are almost as large as cats. They are probably the ugliest creatures in existence, if we except the horned toad and the rhinoceros.

"Eat them! I should say they did!" cried the guide. "Come over here."

He led the way toward a hut and there the boys saw a most repulsive, and, to them, cruel sight. There were several of the big iguanas, or lizards, with their short legs twisted and crossed over their backs. And, to keep the legs in this position the sharp claw of one foot was thrust through the fleshy part of another foot. The tail of each iguana had been cut off.

"What in the world do they do that for?" asked Blake.

"That's how they fatten the iguanas," the guide said. "The natives catch them alive, and to keep them from crawling off they fasten their legs in that manner. And, as the tail isn't good to eat, they chop that off."

"It's cruel!" cried Joe.

"Yes, but the Indians don't mean it so," the guide went on. "They are really too lazy to do anything else. If some one told them it was work to keep the lizards as they do, instead of just shutting them up in a box to stay until they were needed to be killed for food, they'd stop this practice. They'd do anything to get out of work; but this plan seems to them to be the easiest, so they keep it up."

"Is iguana really good eating?" asked Joe.

"Yes, it tastes like chicken," the guide informed them. "But few white persons can bring themselves to eat it."

"I'd rather have the fruits," said Mr. Alcando. The boys had eaten two of the jungle variety. One was the mamaei, which was about as large as a peach, and the other the sapodilla, fruit of the color of a plum. The seeds are in a jelly-like mass.

"You eat them and don't have to be afraid of appendicitis," said the Spaniard with a laugh.

Several views were taken in the jungle "village," as Joe called it, and then they went farther on into the deep woods.

"Whew! It's hot!" exclaimed Joe, as they stopped to pitch a camp for dinner. "I'm going to have a swim." They were near a good-sized stream.

"I'm with you," said Blake, and the boys were soon splashing away in the water, which was cool and pleasant.

"Aren't you coming in?" called Blake to Mr. Alcando, who was on shore.

"Yes, I think I will join you," he replied. He had begun to undress, when Blake, who had swum half-way across the stream, gave a sudden cry.

"Joe! Joe!" he shouted. "I'm taken with a cramp, and there is an alligator after me. Help!"

CHAPTER XV

IN CULEBRA CUT

Joe sprang to his feet at the sound of his chum's voice. He had come ashore, after splashing around in the water, and, for the moment, Blake was alone in the river.

As Joe looked he saw a black, ugly snout, and back of it a glistening, black and knobby body, moving along after Blake, who was making frantic efforts to get out of the way.

"I'm coming, Blake! I'm coming!" cried Joe, as he ran to the edge of the stream, with the intention of plunging in.

"You will be too late," declared Mr. Alcando. "The alligator will have him before you reach him. Oh, that I was a good swimmer, or that I had a weapon."

But Joe did not stay to hear what he said. But one idea was in his mind, that of rescuing his chum from peril. That he might not be in time never occurred to him.

Blake gave a gurgling cry, threw up his hands, and disappeared from sight as Joe plunged in to go to his rescue.

"It's got him—the beast has him!" cried the Spaniard, excitedly.

"No, not yet. I guess maybe he sank: to fool the alligator," said the guide, an educated Indian named Ramo. "I wonder if I can stop him with one shot?" he went on, taking up a powerful rifle that had been brought with the camp equipment.

Joe was swimming out with all his power, Blake was nowhere to be seen, and the alligator was in plain sight, heading for the spot where Blake had last been observed.

"It's my only chance!" muttered Ramo. "I hope the boy stays under water."

As he spoke the guide raised the rifle, took quick but careful aim, and fired. There was no puff of smoke, for the new high-powered, smokeless powder was used. Following the shot, there was a commotion in the water. Amid a smother of foam, bright red showed.

"You hit him, Ramo!" cried the Spaniard. "You hit him!"

"I guess I did," the Indian answered. "But where is Blake?"

That was what Joe was asking himself as he plunged on through the stream, using the Australian crawl stroke, which takes one through the water at such speed. Just what Joe could do when he reached his chum he did not stop to think. Certainly the two would have been no match for the big alligator.

But the monster had met his match in the steel-jacketed mushrooming bullet. It had struck true and after a death struggle the horrid creature sank beneath the surface just as Blake shot up, having stayed under as long as he could.

"All right, Blake! Here you are! I'm with you!" cried Joe, changing his course to bring himself to his chum. "Are you all right?"

"Yes, except for this cramp. The alligator didn't get near enough to do any damage. But where is he?"

"Ramo shot him," answered Joe, for he had seen the creature sink to its death. "You're all right now. Put your hand on my shoulder, and I'll tow you in."

"Guess you'll have to. I can't seem to swim. I dived down when I saw how near the beast was getting, thinking I might fool him. I hated to come up, but I had to," Blake panted.

"Well, you're all right now," Joe assured him, "but it was a close call. How did it happen?"

"I'm sure I don't know," said Blake, still out of breath from trying to swim under water. "If I'd known there were alligators in this river I'd never have gone so far from shore."

"That's right," agreed Joe, looking around as though to make sure no more of the creatures were in sight.

He saw none. On the shore stood Ramo, the guide, with ready rifle.

"Feel better now?" asked Joe.

"Yes, the cramp seems to be leaving me. I think I went in swimming too soon after eating those plantains," for they had been given some of the yellow bananas by a native when they stopped at his hut for some water. "They upset me," Blake explained. "I was swimming about, waiting for you to come back and join me, when I saw what I thought was a log in the water. When it headed for me I thought it was funny, and then, when I saw what it was, I realized I'd better be getting back to shore. I tried, but was taken with a fierce cramp. You heard me just in time."

"Yes," responded Joe, as he and Blake reached water shallow enough to wade in, "but if it hadn't been for Ramo's gun—well, there might be a different story to tell."

"And one that wouldn't look nice in moving pictures," Blake went on with a laugh. "You did me a good turn," he said to Ramo a little later, as he shook hands with the dusky guide. "I shan't forget it."

"Oh, it wasn't anything to pop over an alligator that way," Ramo returned. "I've often done it for sport. Though I will admit I was a bit nervous this time, for fear of hitting you."

"I wish I had been the one to shoot it," said the Spaniard.

"Why?" asked Joe, as he sat down on the warm sandy bank of the stream to rest.

"Why, then I should have repaid, in a small measure, the debt I am under to you boys for saving my life. I shall never forget that."

"It wasn't anything," declared Blake quickly. "I mean, what we did for you."

"It meant a great deal—to me," returned the Spaniard quietly, but with considerable meaning in his tone. "Perhaps I shall soon be able to—but no matter. Are there many alligators in this stream?" he asked of Ramo.

"Oh, yes, more or less, just as there are in most of the Panaman rivers. But I never knew one to be so bold as to attack any one in daylight. Mostly they take dogs, pigs, or something like that. This must have been a big, hungry one."

"You'd have thought so if you were as close to him as I was," spoke Blake with a little shudder.

No one else felt like going in swimming just then, and the two boys dressed. Blake had fully recovered from the cramp that had so nearly been his undoing.

For a week longer they lived in the jungle, moving from place to place, camping in different locations and enjoying as much as they could the life in the wild. Blake and Joe made some good moving picture films, Mr. Alcando helping them, for he was rapidly learning how to work the cameras.

But the views, of course, were not as good as those the boys had obtained when in the African jungle. These of the Panama wilds, however, were useful as showing the kind of country through which the Canal ran, and, as such, they were of value in the series of films.

"Well, we'll soon be afloat again," remarked Blake, one night, when they had started back for Gamboa. "I've had about enough jungle."

"And so have I," agreed Joe, for the last two days it had rained, and they were wet and miserable. They could get no pictures.

Their tug was waiting for them as arranged and, once more on board, they resumed their trip through the Canal.

Soon after leaving Gamboa the vessel entered a part of the waterway, on either side of which towered a high hill through which had been dug a great gash.

"Culebra Cut!" cried Blake, as he saw, in the distance Gold Hill, the highest point. "We must get some pictures of this, Joe."

"That's right, so we must. Whew! It is a big cut all right!" he went on. "No wonder they said it was harder work here than at the Gatun Dam. And it's here where those big slides have been?"

"Yes, and there may be again," said Blake.

"I hope not!" exclaimed Captain Watson. "They are not only dangerous, but they do terrible damage to the Canal and the machinery. We want no more slides."

"But some are predicted," Blake remarked.

"Yes, I know they say they come every so often. But now it would take a pretty big one to do much damage. We have nearly tamed Culebra."

"If there came a big slide here it would block the Canal," observed Mr. Alcando, speculatively.

"Yes, but what would cause a slide?" asked the captain.

"Dynamite could do it," was the low-voiced answer.

"Dynamite? Yes, but that is guarded against," the commander said. "We are taking no chances. Now, boys, you get a good view of Culebra," and he pointed ahead. Blake and Joe were soon busy with their cameras, making different sets of views.

"Hand me that other roll of film; will you, please?" asked Blake of the Spaniard, who was helping them. "Mine is used up."

As Mr. Alcando passed over the box he muttered, though possibly he was unaware of it:

"Yes, dynamite here, or at the dam, would do the work."

"What—what's that?" cried Blake, in surprise.

CHAPTER XVI

THE COLLISION

Judging by Mr. Alcando's manner no one would have thought he had said anything out of the ordinary. But both Blake and Joe had heard his low-voiced words, and both stared aghast at him.

"What's that you said?" asked Blake, wondering whether he had caught the words aright.

"Dynamite!" exclaimed Joe, and then Blake knew he had made no mistake.

Somewhat to the surprise of himself and his chum the Spaniard smiled.

"I was speaking in the abstract, of course," he said. "I have a habit of speaking aloud when I think. I merely remarked that a charge of dynamite, here in Culebra Cut, or at Gatun Dam, would so damage the Canal that it might be out

of business for years."

"You don't mean to say that you know of any one who would do such a thing!" cried Blake, holding the box of unexposed film that the Spaniard had given him.

"Of course not, my dear fellow. I was speaking in the abstract, I tell you. It occurred to me how easy it would be for some enemy to so place a charge of explosive. I don't see why the Canal is not better guarded. You Americans are too trusting!"

"What's that?" asked Captain Watson, coming up at this juncture.

"I was merely speaking to the boys about how easy it would be to put a charge of dynamite here in the cut, or at the dam, and damage the Canal," explained Mr. Alcando. "I believe they thought I meant to do it," he added with a laugh, as he glanced at the serious faces of the two moving picture boys.

"Well,—I—er,—I—," stammered Blake. Somewhat to his own surprise he did find himself harboring new suspicions against Mr. Alcando, but they had never before taken this form. As for Joe, he blushed to recall that he had, in the past, also been somewhat suspicious of the Spaniard. But now the man's frank manner of speaking had disarmed all that.

"Dynamite, eh!" exclaimed the captain. "I'd just like to see any one try it. This canal is better guarded than you think, my friend," and he looked meaningly at the other.

"Oh, I have no doubt that is so," was the quick response. "But it seems such a simple matter for one to do a great damage to it. Possibly the indifference to guarding it is but seeming only."

"That's what it is!" went on Captain Watson. "Dynamite! Huh! I'd like to see someone try it!" He meant, of course, that he would not like to see this done, but that was his sarcastic manner of speaking.

"What do you think of him, anyhow?" asked Joe of Blake a little later when they were putting away their cameras, having taken all the views they wanted.

"I don't know what to say, Joe," was the slow answer. "I did think there was something queer about Alcando, but I guess I was wrong. It gave me a shock, though, to hear him speak so about the Canal."

"The same here. But he's a nice chap just the same, and he certainly shows an interest in moving pictures."

"That's right. We're getting some good ones, too."

The work in Culebra Cut, though nearly finished, was still in such a state of progress that many interesting films could be made of it, and this the boys

proposed to do, arranging to stay a week or more at the place which, more than any other, had made trouble for the canal builders.

"Well, it surely is a great piece of work!" exclaimed Blake, as he and Joe, with Mr. Alcando and Captain Watson, went to the top of Gold Hill one day. They were on the highest point of the small mountain through which the cut had to be dug.

"It is a wonderful piece of work," the captain said, as Blake and Joe packed up the cameras they had been using. "Think of it—a cut nine miles long, with an average depth of one hundred and twenty feet, and in some places the sides are five hundred feet above the bottom, which is, at no point, less than three hundred feet in width. A big pile of dirt had to be taken out of here, boys."

"Yes, and more dirt will have to be," said Mr. Alcando.

"What do you mean?" asked the tug commander quickly, and rather sharply.

"I mean that more slides are likely to occur; are they not?"

"Yes, worse luck!" growled the captain. "There have been two or three small ones in the past few weeks, and the worst of it is that they generally herald larger ones."

"Yes, that's what I meant," the Spaniard went on.

"And it's what we heard," spoke Blake. "We expect to get some moving pictures of a big slide if one occurs."

"Not that we want it to," explained Joe quickly.

"I understand," the captain went on with a smile. "But if it is going to happen you want to be here."

"Exactly," Blake said. "We want to show the people what a slide in Culebra looks like, and what it means, in hard work, to get rid of it."

"Well, it's hard work all right," the captain admitted, "though now that the water is in, and we can use scows and dredges, instead of railroad cars, we can get rid of the dirt easier. You boys should have been here when the cut was being dug, before the water was let in."

"I wish we had been," Blake said. "We could have gotten some dandy pictures."

"That's what you could," went on the captain. "It was like looking at a lot of ants through a magnifying glass. Big mouthfuls of dirt were being bitten out of the hill by steam shovels, loaded on to cars and the trains of cars were pulled twelve miles away to the dumping ground. There the earth was disposed of, and back came the trains for more. And with thousands of men working, blasts

being sent off every minute or so, the puffing of engines, the tooting of whistles, the creaking of derricks and steam shovels—why it was something worth seeing!"

"Sorry we missed it," Joe said. "But maybe we'll get some pictures just as good."

"It won't be anything like that—not even if there's a big slide," the captain said, shaking his head doubtfully.

Though the Canal was practically finished, and open to some vessels, there was much that yet remained to be done upon it, and this work Blake and Joe, with Mr. Alcando to help them at the cameras, filmed each day. Reel after reel of the sensitive celluloid was exposed, packed in light-tight boxes and sent North for development and printing. At times when they remained in Culebra Cut, which they did for two weeks, instead of one, fresh unexposed films were received from New York, being brought along the Canal by Government boats, for, as I have explained, the boys were semi-official characters now.

Mr. Alcando was rapidly becoming expert in handling a moving picture camera, and often he went out alone to film some simple scene.

"I wonder how our films are coming out?" asked Blake one day, after a fresh supply Of reels had been received. "We haven't heard whether Mr. Hadley likes our work or not?"

"Hard to tell," Joe responded. But they knew a few days later, for a letter came praising most highly the work of the boys and, incidentally, that of Mr. Alcando.

"You are doing fine!" Mr. Hadley wrote. "Keep it up. The pictures will make a sensation. Don't forget to film the slide if one occurs."

"Of course we'll get that," Joe said, as he looked up at the frowning sides of Culebra Cut. "Only it doesn't seem as if one was going to happen while we're here."

"I hope it never does," declared Captain Watson, solemnly.

As the boys wanted to make pictures along the whole length of the Canal, they decided to go on through the Pedro Miguel and Miraflores locks, to the Pacific Ocean, thus making a complete trip and then come back to Culebra. Of course no one could tell when a slide would occur, and they had to take chances of filming it.

Their trip to Pedro Miguel was devoid of incident. At those locks, instead of "going up stairs" they went down, the level gradually falling so their boat came nearer to the surface of the Pacific. A mile and a half farther on they would reach Miraflores.

The tug had approached the central pier, to which it was tied, awaiting the services of the electrical locomotives, when back of them came a steamer, one of the first foreign vessels to apply to make the trip through the Isthmus.

"That fellow is coming a little too close to me for comfort," Captain Watson observed as he watched the approaching vessel.

Blake and Joe, who were standing near the commander at the pilot house, saw Mr. Alcando come up the companionway and stand on deck, staring at the big steamer. A little breeze, succeeding a dead calm, ruffled a flag at the stern of the steamer, and the boys saw the Brazilian colors flutter in the wind. At the same moment Mr. Alcando waved his hand, seemingly to someone on the steamer's deck.

"Look out where you're going!" suddenly yelled Captain Watson. Hardly had he shouted than the steamer veered quickly to one side, and then came a crash as the tug heeled over, grinding against the concrete side of the central pier.

CHAPTER XVII

THE EMERGENCY DAM

The crashing and splintering of wood, the grinding of one vessel against the other at the concrete pier, the shrill tooting of the whistles, and the confused shouts of the respective captains of the craft made a din out of which it seemed order would never come.

"If I could only get this on a film!" said Joe to himself during a calm moment. But the cameras were below in the cabin, and the tug was now careened at such an angle that it was risky to cross the decks. Besides Joe must think of saving himself, for it looked as though the tug would be crushed and sunk.

"Pull us out of here!" yelled Captain Watson to the man on the lock wall in charge of the electrical towing locomotives. "Pull us out!"

That seemed one way out of the trouble, for the Nama was being crushed between the Brazilian steamer and the wall. But the order had come too late, for now the tug was wedged in, and no power could move her without tearing her to pieces, until the pressure of the big steamer was removed.

So, wisely, the men in charge of the towing machines did not follow Captain Watson's orders.

"Over this way!" cried Blake to his chum, and to Mr. Alcando, who were standing amid-ships. Joe was at the bow, and because that was narrower than

the main portion of the tug, it had not yet been subjected to the awful pressure.

But there was no need of Joe or the others, including Captain Watson, changing their positions. The Brazilian ship now began drawing away, aided by her own engines, and by the tow ropes extending from the other side of the lock wall. The Nama, which had been partly lifted up in the air, as a vessel in the Arctic Ocean is lifted when two ice floes begin to squeeze her, now dropped down again, and began settling slowly in the water.

"She's sinking!" cried Blake. "Our cameras—our films, Joe!"

"Yes, we must save them!" his chum shouted.

"I'll help!" offered the Spaniard. "Are we really sinking?"

"Of course!" shouted Captain Watson. "How could anything else happen after being squeezed in that kind of a cider press? We'll go to the bottom sure!"

"Leave the boat!" yelled one of the men on top of the lock wall. "We're going to tow you out of the way, so when you sink you won't block the lock!"

"Let's get out our stuff!" Blake cried again, and realizing, but hardly understanding, what was happening, the boys rushed below to save what they could.

Fortunately it was the opening of many seams, caused by the crushing process, rather than any great hole stove in her, that had brought about the end of the Nama. She began to sink slowly at the pier, and there was time for the removal of most of the articles of value belonging to the boys and Mr. Alcando.

Hastily the cameras, the boxes of exposed and unexposed film, were hoisted out, and then when all had been saved that could be quickly put ashore, the tug was slowly towed out of the way, where it could sink and not be a menace to navigation, and without blocking the locks.

"Poor Nama" murmured Captain Watson. "To go down like that, and not your own fault, either," and he looked over with no very friendly eyes toward the Brazilian steamer, which had suffered no damage more than to her paint.

"You can raise her again," suggested one of the lock men.

"Yes, but she'll never be the same," sorrowfully complained her commander. "Never the same!"

"How did it happen?" asked Blake. "Was there a misunderstanding in signals?"

"Must have been something like that," Captain Watson answered. "That vessel ought to have stayed tied up on her own side of the lock. Instead she came over here under her own steam and crashed into me. I'm going to demand an investigation. Do you know anyone on board her?" he asked quickly of the

Spaniard. "I saw you waving to someone."

"Why, yes, the captain is a distant relative of mine," was the somewhat unexpected answer. "I did not know he was going to take his vessel through the Canal, though. I was surprised to see him. But I am sure you will find that Captain Martail will give you every explanation."

"I don't want explanations—I want satisfaction!" growled the tug captain.

"There goes the Nama," called Blake, pointing to the tug.

As he spoke she began to settle more rapidly in the water, but she did not sink altogether from sight, as she was towed toward the shore, and went down in rather shallow water, where she could be more easily reached for repairs.

"It was a narrow escape," Joe said. "What are we to do now, Blake? Too bad we didn't get some moving pictures of that accident."

"Well, maybe it's a good thing we didn't," returned his chum. "The Canal is supposed to be so safe, and free from the chance of accidents, that it might injure its reputation if a picture of a collision like that were shown. Maybe it's just as well."

"Better," agreed Captain Watson. "As you say, the Canal is supposed to be free from accidents. And, when everything gets working smoothly, there will be none to speak of. Some of the electrical controlling devices are not yet in place. If they had been that vessel never could have collided with us."

"I should think her captain would know better than to signal for her to proceed under her own power in the Canal lock," spoke Joe.

"Possibly there was some error in transmitting signals on board," suggested Mr. Alcando. And later they learned that this was, indeed, the case; or at least that was the reason assigned by the Brazilian commander for the accident. His vessel got beyond control.

"Well, it's lucky she didn't ram the gates, and let out a flood of water," said Joe to Blake a little after the occurrence.

"Yes, if that had happened we'd have had to make pictures whether we wanted to or not. But I wonder what we are going to do for a boat now?"

However, that question was easily settled, for there were other Government vessels to be had, and Blake, Joe and Mr. Alcando, with their cameras, films and other possessions, were soon transferred, to continue their trip, in the Bohio, which was the name of the new vessel. The Nama was left for the wrecking crew.

"Well, this isn't exactly the quiet life we looked for in the canal zone; is it, Blake?" asked Joe that night as he and his chum were putting their new

stateroom to rights.

"Hardly. Things have begun to happen, and I've noticed, Joe, that, once they begin, they keep up. I think we are in for something."

"Do you mean a big slide in Culebra Cut?"

"Well, that may be only part of it. I have a feeling in my bones, somehow or other, that we're on the eve of something big."

"Say, for instance—"

"I can't," answered Blake, as Joe paused. "But I'm sure something is going to happen."

"No more collisions, I hope," his chum ventured. "Do you know, Blake, I've wondered several times whether that one to-day was not done on purpose."

Blake stared at his chum, and then, to Joe's surprise replied:

"And I've been thinking the same thing."

"You have?" Joe exclaimed. "Now I say—"

"Hush!" cautioned Blake quickly, "he's coming!"

The door of their stateroom opened, and Mr. Alcando entered. He had a room across the corridor.

"Am I intruding?" he asked. "If I am—"

"Not at all. Come in," answered Blake, with a meaning look at his chum.

"I wanted to ask you something about making double exposures on the same film," the Spaniard went on. "You know what I mean; when a picture is shown of a person sitting by a fireside, say, and above him or her appears a vision of other days."

"Oh, yes, we can tell you how that is done," Joe said, and the rest of the evening was spent in technical talk.

"Well, what were you going to say about that collision?" asked Joe of Blake when Mr. Alcando had left them, at nearly midnight.

"I don't think it's exactly safe to say what I think," was Blake's response. "I think he is—suspicious of us," he finished in a whisper. "Let's watch and await developments."

"But what object could he—"

"Never mind—now," rejoined Blake, with a gesture of caution.

Several busy days followed the sinking of the Nama. The moving picture boys went through the Miraflores locks, making some fine films, and then

proceeded on to the Pacific Ocean breakwater, thus making a complete trip through the Canal, obtaining a series of pictures showing scenes all along the way. They also took several views in the city of Panama itself.

Of course theirs was not the first vessel to make the complete trip, so that feature lost something of its novelty. But the boys were well satisfied with their labors.

"We're not through, though, by any means," said Blake. "We have to get some pictures of Gatun Dam from the lower side. I think a few more jungle scenes, and some along the Panama Railroad, wouldn't go bad."

"That's right," agreed Joe.

So they prepared to make the trip back again to Colon.

Once more they were headed for the locks, this time to be lifted up at Miraflores, instead of being let down. They approached the central pier, were taken in charge by the electrical locomotives, and the big chain was lowered so they could proceed.

Just as the lower gate was being swung open to admit them to the lock, there was a cry of warning from above.

"What's that?" cried Joe.

"I don't know," Blake answered, "but it sounds as though something were going to happen. I didn't have all those feelings for nothing!"

Then came a cry:

"The upper gate! The upper gate is open! The water is coming down! Put the emergency dam in place! Quick!"

Joe and Blake looked ahead to see the upper gates, which were supposed to remain closed until the boat had risen to the upper level, swing open, and an immense quantity of foamy water rush out. It seemed about to overwhelm them.

CHAPTER XVIII

THE BIG SLIDE

For a short space there was a calm that seemed more thrilling than the wildest confusion. It took a few seconds for the rush of water to reach the Bohio, and when it did the tug began to sway and tug at the mooring cables, for they had not yet been cast off to enable it to be towed.

Blake rushed toward the lower cabin.

"Where are you going?" cried Joe.

"To get the cameras," replied his chum, not pausing. "This is a chance we mustn't miss."

"But we must escape! We must look to ourselves!" shouted Mr. Alcando. "This is not time for making moving pictures."

"We've got to make it this time!" Joe said, falling in with Blake. "You'll find you've got to make moving pictures when you can, not when you want to!"

To do justice to Mr. Alcando he was not a coward, but this was very unusual for him, to make pictures in the face of a great danger—to stand calmly with a camera, turning the crank and getting view after view on the strip of celluloid film, while a flood of water rushed down on you. It was something he never dreamed of.

But he was not a "quitter," which word, though objectionable as slang, is most satisfactorily descriptive.

"I'll help!" the young Spaniard cried, as he followed Blake and Joe down to where the cameras and films were kept.

On came the rush of water, released by the accidental opening of the upper lock gates before the lower ones were closed. The waters of Gatun Lake were rushing to regain the freedom denied them by the building of the locks.

But they were not to have their own way for long. Even this emergency, great as it was, unlikely as it was to happen, had been foreseen by those who built the Canal.

"The dam! Swing over the emergency dam!" came the cry.

The Bohio was now straining and pulling at her cables. Fortunately they were long enough to enable her to rise on the flood of the rushing water, or she might have been held down, and so overwhelmed. But she rose like a cork, though she plunged and swayed under the influence of the terrible current, which was like a mill race.

"Use both cameras!" cried Blake, as he and Joe each came on deck bearing one, while Mr. Alcando followed with spare reels of film. "We'll both take pictures," Blake went on. "One set may be spoiled!"

Then he and his chum, setting up their cameras on the tripods, aimed the lenses at the advancing flood, at the swung-back gates and at the men on top of the concrete walls, endeavoring to bring into place the emergency dam.

It was a risky thing to do, but then Blake and Joe were used to doing risky

things, and this was no more dangerous than the chances they had taken in the jungle, or in earthquake land.

On rushed the water. The tug rose and fell on the bosom of the flood, unconfined as it was by the restraining gates. And as the sturdy vessel swayed this way and that, rolling at her moorings and threatening every moment to break and rush down the Canal, Blake and Joe stood at their posts, turning the cranks. And beside them stood Mr. Alcando, if not as calm as the boys, at least as indifferent to impending fate.

Captain Wiltsey of the Bohio had given orders to run the engine at full speed, hoping by the use of the propeller to offset somewhat the powerful current. But the rush of water was too great to allow of much relief.

"There goes the emergency dam!" suddenly cried Blake.

"Gone out, you mean?" yelled Joe above the roar of waters.

"No, it's being swung into place. It'll be all over in a few minutes. Good thing we got the pictures when we did."

Across the lock, about two hundred feet above the upper gate, was being swung into place the steel emergency dam, designed to meet and overcome just such an accident as had occurred.

These dams were worked by electricity, and could be put in place in two minutes; or, if the machinery failed, they could be worked by hand, though taking nearly half an hour, during which time much damage might be done. But in this case the electrical machinery worked perfectly, and the dam, which when not in use rested against the side of the lock wall, and parallel with it, was swung across.

Almost at once the rush of water stopped, gradually subsiding until the tug swung easily at her mooring cables.

"Whew!" whistled Blake in relief, as he ceased grinding at the crank of his moving picture camera. "That was going some!"

"That's what!" agreed Joe. "But I guess we got some good films."

"You certainly deserved to!" exclaimed Mr. Alcando, with shining eyes. "You are very brave!"

"Oh, it's all in the day's work," spoke Blake. "Now I wonder how that happened?"

"That's what I'd like to know," said Captain Wiltsey. "I must look into this."

An inquiry developed the fact that a misplaced switch in some newly installed electrical machinery that controlled the upper lock gate was to blame. The

lock machinery was designed to be automatic, and as nearly "error proof" as anything controlled by human beings can be. That is to say it was planned that no vessel could proceed into a lock until the fender chain was lowered, and that an upper gate could not be opened until a lower one was closed. But in this case something went wrong, and the two gates were opened at once, letting out the flood.

This, however, had been foreseen, and the emergency dam provided, and it was this solid steel wall that had saved the lock from serious damage, and the Bohio from being overwhelmed.

As it was no harm had been done and, when the excitement had calmed down, and an inspection made to ascertain that the gates would now work perfectly, the tug was allowed to proceed.

"Well, what are your plans now, boys?" asked Mr. Alcando on the day after the lock accident.

"Back to Culebra Cut," answered Blake. "We have orders to get a picture of a big slide there, and we're going to do it."

"Even if you have to make the slide yourself?" asked the Spaniard with a short laugh.

"Not much!" exclaimed Blake. "I'd do a good deal to get the kind of moving pictures they want, but nothing like that. There have been some rains of late, however, and if things happen as they often have before in the Cut there may be a slide."

"Yes, they do follow rains, so I am told," went on the Spaniard. "Well, I do not wish your Canal any bad luck, but if a slide does occur I hope it will come when you can get views of it."

"In the daytime, and not at night," suggested Joe.

For several days nothing of interest occurred. Blake and Joe sent back to New York the films of the mad rush of waters through the lock, and also dispatched other views they had taken. They had gone to Culebra Cut and there tied up, waiting for a slide that might come at any time, and yet which might never occur. Naturally if the canal engineers could have had their way they would have preferred never to see another avalanche of earth descend.

Mr. Alcando had by this time proved that he could take moving pictures almost as well as could the boys. Of course this filming of nature was not all there was to the business. It was quite another matter to make views of theatrical scenes, or to film the scene of an indoor and outdoor drama.

"But I do not need any of that for my purpose," explained Mr. Alcando. "I just want to know how to get pictures that will help develope our railroad business."

"You know that pretty well now," said Blake. "I suppose you will soon be leaving the Canal—and us."

"Not until I see you film the big slide," he replied. "I wish you all success."

"To say nothing of the Canal," put in Joe.
"To say nothing of the Canal," repeated the Spaniard, and he looked at the boys in what Blake said afterward he thought was a strange manner.
"Then you haven't altogether gotten over your suspicions of him?" asked Joe.
"No, and yet I don't know why either of us should hold any against him," went on Joe's chum. "Certainly he has been a good friend and companion to us, and he has learned quickly."
"Oh, yes, he's smart enough. Well, we haven't much more to do here. A slide, if we can get one, and some pictures below Gatun Dam, and we can go back North."
"Yes," agreed Blake.
"Seen anything of Alcando's alarm clock model lately?" asked Joe, after a pause.

"Not a thing, and I haven't heard it tick. Either he has given up working on it, or he's so interested in the pictures that he has forgotten it."

Several more days passed, gloomy, unpleasant days, for it rained nearly all the time. Then one morning, sitting in the cabin of the tug anchored near Gold Hill, there came an alarm.

"A land slide! A big slide in Culebra Cut! Emergency orders!"

"That means us!" cried Blake, springing to his feet, and getting out a camera. "It's our chance, Joe."

"Yes! Too bad, but it had to be, I suppose," agreed his chum, as he slipped into a mackintosh, for it was raining hard.

CHAPTER XIX

JOE'S PLIGHT

From outside the cabin of the tug came a confused series of sounds. First there was the swish and pelt of the rain, varied as the wind blew the sheets of water across the deck. But, above it all, was a deep, ominous note—a grinding, crushing noise, as of giant rocks piling one on top of the other, smashing to powder between them the lighter stones.

"What will happen?" asked Mr. Alcando, as he watched Joe and Blake making ready. They seemed to work mechanically—slipping into rubber boots and rain coats, and, all the while, seeing that the cameras and films were in readiness. They had brought some waterproof boxes to be used in case of rain—some they had found of service during the flood on the Mississippi.

"No one knows what will happen," said Blake grimly. "But we're going to get some pictures before too much happens."

"Out there?" asked the Spaniard, with a motion of his hand toward the side of the big hill through which the Canal had been cut.

"Out there—of course!" cried Joe. "We can't get moving pictures of the slide in here."

He did not intend to speak shortly, but it sounded so in the stress of his hurry.

"Then I'm coming!" said Mr. Alcando quietly. "If I'm to do this sort of work in the jungle, along our railroad, I'll need to have my nerve stiffened."

"This will stiffen it all right," returned Blake, sternly, as a louder sound from without told of a larger mass of the earth sliding into the waters of the Canal, whence the drift had been excavated with so much labor.

It was a bad slide—the worst in the history of the undertaking—and the limit of it was not reached when Joe and Blake, with their cameras and spare boxes of film, went out on deck.

The brown-red earth, the great rocks and the little stones, masses of gravel, shale, schist, cobbles, fine sand—all in one intermingled mass was slipping, sliding, rolling, tumbling, falling and fairly leaping down the side of Gold Hill.

"Come on!" cried Blake to Joe.

"I'm with you," was the reply.

"And I, also," said Mr. Alcando with set teeth.

Fortunately for them the tug was tied to a temporary dock on the side of the hill where the slide had started, so they did not have to take a boat across, but could at once start for the scene of the disaster.

"We may not be here when you come back!" called Captain Wiltsey after the boys.

"Why not?" asked Joe.

"I may have to go above or below. I don't want to take any chances of being caught by a blockade."

"All right. We'll find you wherever you are," said Blake.

As yet the mass of slipping and sliding earth was falling into the waters of the Canal some distance from the moored tug. But there was no telling when the slide might take in a larger area, and extend both east and west.

Up a rude trail ran Blake and Joe, making their way toward where the movement of earth was most pronounced. The light was not very good on

account of the rain, but they slipped into the cameras the most sensitive film, to insure good pictures even when light conditions were most unsatisfactory.

The moving picture boys paused for only a glance behind them. They had heard the emergency orders being given. Soon they would be flashed along the whole length of the Canal, bringing to the scene the scows, the dredges, the centrifugal pumps—the men and the machinery that would tear out the earth that had no right to be where it had slid.

Then, seeing that the work of remedying the accident was under way, almost as soon as the accident had occurred, Blake and Joe, followed by Mr. Alcando, hurried on through the rain, up to their ankles in red mud, for the rain was heavy. It was this same rain that had so loosened the earth that the slide was caused.

"Here's a good place!" cried Blake, as he came to a little eminence that gave a good view of the slipping, sliding earth and stones.

"I'll go on a little farther," said Joe. "We'll get views from two different places."

"What can I do?" asked the Spaniard, anxious not only to help his friends, but to learn as much as he could of how moving pictures are taken under adverse circumstances.

"You stay with Blake," suggested Joe. "I've got the little camera and I can handle that, and my extra films, alone and with ease. Stay with Blake."

It was well the Spaniard did.

With a rush and roar, a grinding, crashing sound a large mass of earth, greater in extent than any that had preceded, slipped from the side of the hill.

"Oh, what a picture this will make!" cried Blake, enthusiastically.

He had his camera in place, and was grinding away at the crank, Mr. Alcando standing ready to assist when necessary.

"Take her a while," suggested Blake, who was "winded" from his run, and carrying the heavy apparatus.

The big portion of the slide seemed to have subsided, at least momentarily. Blake gave a look toward where Joe had gone. At that moment, with a roar like a blast of dynamite a whole section of the hill seemed to slip away and then, with a grinding crash the slanting earth on which Joe stood, and where he had planted the tripod of his camera, went out from under him.

Joe and his camera disappeared from sight.

CHAPTER XX

AT GATUN DAM

"Look!" cried Mr. Alcando. He would have said more—have uttered some of the expressions of fear and terror that raced through his mind, but he could not speak the words. He could only look and point.

But Blake, as well as the Spaniard, had seen what had happened, and with Blake to see was to act.

"Quick!" he cried. "We've got to get him out before he smothers! Pack up this stuff!"

As he spoke he folded the tripod legs of his camera, and laid it on top of a big rock, that seemed firmly enough imbedded in the soil not to slip from its place. Then, placing beside it the spare boxes of film, and throwing over them a rubber covering he had brought, Blake began to run across the side of the hill toward the place where Joe had last been seen.

"Come on!" cried Blake to Mr. Alcando, but the Spaniard needed no urging. He had laid with Blake's the boxes of film he carried, and the two were now speeding to the rescue.

"Go get help!" cried Joe to an Indian worker from the tug, who had followed to help carry things if needed. "Go quick! Bring men—shovels! We may have to dig him out," he added to Mr. Alcando.

"If—if we can find him," replied the other in low tones.

"Go on—run!" cried Joe, for the Indian did not seem to understand. Then the meaning and need of haste occurred to him.

"Si, señor, I go—pronto!" he exclaimed, and he was off on a run.

Fortunately for Blake and Mr. Alcando, the worst of the slide seemed to be over. A big mass of the hill below them, and off to their right, had slid down into the Canal. It was the outer edge of this that had engulfed Joe and his camera. Had he been directly in the path of the avalanche, nothing could have saved him. As it was, Blake felt a deadly fear gripping at his heart that, after all, it might be impossible to rescue his chum.

"But I'll get him! I'll get him!" he said fiercely to himself, over and over again. "I'll get him!"

Slipping, sliding, now being buried up to their knees in the soft mud and sand, again finding some harder ground, or shelf of shale, that offered good footing,

Blake and the Spaniard struggled on through the rain. It was still coming down, but not as hard as before.

"Here's the place!" cried Blake, coming to a halt in front of where several stones formed a rough circle. "He's under here."

"No, farther on, I think," said the Spaniard.

Blake looked about him. His mind was in a turmoil. He could not be certain as to the exact spot where Joe had been engulfed in the slide, and yet he must know to a certainty. There was no time to dig in many places, one after the other, to find his chum. Every second was vital.

"Don't you think it's here?" Blake asked, "Try to think!"

"I am!" the Spaniard replied. "And it seems to me that it was farther on. If there was only some way we could tell—"

The sentence trailed off into nothingness. There was really no way of telling. All about them was a dreary waste of mud, sand, boulders, smaller stones, gravel and more mud—mud was over everything. And more mud was constantly being made, for the rain had not ceased.

"I'm going to dig here!" decided Blake in desperation, as with his bare hands he began throwing aside the dirt and stones. Mr. Alcando watched him for a moment, and then, as though giving up his idea as to where Joe lay beneath the dirt, he, too, started throwing on either side the clay and soil.

Blake glanced down the hill. The Indian messenger had disappeared, and, presumably, had reached the tug, and was giving the message for help. Then Blake bent to his Herculean task again. When next he looked up, having scooped a slight hole in the side of the hill, he saw a procession of men running up—men with picks and shovels over their shoulders. He saw, too, a big slice of the hill in the Canal. The wonderful waterway was blocked at Culebra Cut.

Blake thought little of that then. His one idea and frantic desire was to get Joe out.

"They'll never get here in time," said Mr. Alcando in a low voice. "We'll never get him out in time."

"We—we must!" cried Blake, as again he began digging.

Mr. Alcando had spoken the truth. The men could not get there in time—Joe could not be dug out in time—if it had depended on human agencies. For not only was Blake unaware of the exact spot where his chum lay buried, but, at least so it seemed, there had been such a mass of earth precipitated over him that it would mean hours before he could be gotten out.

However, fate, luck, Providence, or whatever you choose to call it, had not altogether deserted the moving picture boys. The very nature of the slide, and the hill on which it had occurred, was in Joe's favor. For as Blake, after a despairing glance at the approaching column of men, bent again to his hopeless task, there was a movement of the earth.

"Look out!" cried Mr. Alcando.

He would have spoken too late had what happened been of greater magnitude. As it was Blake felt the earth slipping from beneath his feet, and jumped back instinctively. But there was no need.

Beyond him another big slide had occurred, and between him and Mr. Alcando, and this last shift of the soil, was a ridge of rocks that held them to their places.

Down in a mass of mud went another portion of the hill, and when it had ceased moving Blake gave a cry of joy. For there, lying in a mass of red sand, was Joe himself, and beside him was the camera, the tripod legs sticking out at grotesque angles.

"Joe! Joe!" yelled Blake, preparing to leap toward his chum.

"Be careful!" warned Mr. Alcando. "There may be danger—"

But no known danger could have held Blake back.

"He is there!" Blake cried. "We were digging in the wrong place."

"I thought so," said the Spaniard. But Blake did not stay to listen to him. Now he was at Joe's side. The slide had laid bare a ledge of rock which seemed firm enough to remain solid for some time.

"Joe! Joe!" cried Blake, bending over his chum. And then he saw what it was that had probably saved Joe's life. The boy's big rubber coat had been turned up and wound around his head and face in such a manner as to keep the sand and dirt out of his eyes, nose and mouth. And, also wrapped up in the folds of the garment, was the camera.

Rapidly Blake pulled the coat aside. Joe's pale face looked up at him. There was a little blood on the forehead, from a small cut. The boy was unconscious.

"Joe! Joe!" begged Blake. "Speak to me! Are you all right?"

He bared his chum's face to the pelting rain—the best thing he could have done, for it brought Joe back to consciousness—slowly at first, but with the returning tide of blood the fainting spell passed.

"We must get him to the boat," said Mr. Alcando, coming up now.

"Are you hurt? Can you walk?" asked Blake.

Joe found his voice—though a faint voice it was.

"Yes—yes," he said, slowly. "I—I guess I'm all right."

There seemed to be no broken bones. Mr. Alcando took charge of the camera. It was not damaged except as to the tripod.

"What happened?" asked Joe, his voice stronger now.

"You were caught in the slide," Blake informed him. "Don't think about it now. We'll have you taken care of."

"I—I guess I'm all right," Joe said, standing upright. "That coat got wound around my face, and kept the dirt away. I got a bad whack on the head, though, and then I seemed to go to sleep. Did I get any pictures?"

"I don't know. Don't worry about them now."

"We—we missed the best part of the slide, I guess," Joe went on. "Too bad."

"It's all right!" his chum insisted. "I was filming away up to the time you went under. Now, let's get back."

By this time the crowd of men, including Captain Wiltsey, had arrived. But there was nothing for them to do. The slide had buried Joe, and another slide had uncovered him, leaving him little the worse, save for a much-muddied suit of clothes, and a bad headache, to say nothing of several minor cuts and bruises. It was a lucky escape.

Back to the tug they went, taking the cameras with them. Joe was given such rough and ready surgery and medical treatment as was available, and Captain Wiltsey said he would leave at once for Gatun, where a doctor could be obtained.

Fortunately the blockading of the Canal by the slide did not stop the Bohio from continuing her journey. The slide was north of her position.

"I do hope we got some good films," said Joe, when he had been made as comfortable as possible in his berth.

"I think we did," Blake said. "Your camera was protected by the rubber coat, and mine wasn't hurt at all."

Later the boys learned that though they had missed the very best, or rather the biggest, part of the slide, still they had on their films enough of it to make a most interesting series of views.

Late that afternoon Joe was in the care of a physician, who ordered him to stay in bed a couple of days. Which Joe was very willing to do. For, after the first excitement wore off, he found himself much more sore and stiff than he had realized.

They were at Gatun now, and there Blake planned to get some views of the big dam from the lower, or spillway side.

"But first I'm going back to the slide," he said. "I want to get some views of the dredgers getting rid of the dirt."

CHAPTER XXI

MR. ALCANDO'S ABSENCE

Blake spent a week at Culebra Cut, making pictures of the removal of the great mass of earth that had slid into the water. The chief engineer, General George W. Goethals, had ordered every available man and machine to the work, for though the Canal had not been formally opened, many vessels had started to make trips through it, and some of them had been blocked by the slide. It was necessary to get the dirt away so they could pass on their voyage.

So with dredges, with steam shovels, and hydraulic pumps, that sucked through big flexible pipes mud and water, spraying it off to one side, the work went on. Blake had Mr. Alcando to help him, and the Spaniard was now expert enough to render valuable assistance. While Blake was at one scene, getting views of the relief work, his pupil could be at another interesting point.

Blake had telegraphed to New York that the one picture above all others desired had been obtained—that of a big slide in the Culebra Cut. He did not tell how Joe had nearly lost his life in helping get the films, for Blake was modest, as was his chum, and, as he said, it was "all in the day's work."

Joe was left to recover from the shock and slight injuries at Gatun, while Blake and Mr. Alcando were at Culebra. For the shock to the young moving picture operator had been greater than at first supposed, though his bodily injuries were comparatively slight.

"Well, what's next on the programme?" asked Joe of Blake, about two weeks after the accident, when Blake had returned from Culebra. Most of the work there was done, and the Canal was again open, save to vessels of extreme draught.

"I guess we'll go on making pictures of Gatun Dam now; that is, if you're well enough," spoke Blake. "How do you feel?"

"Pretty fair. How did Alcando make out?"

"All right. He's learning fast. We can trust him with a camera now, out alone."

"That's good. I say, Blake," and Joe's voice took on a confidential tone, "you

haven't noticed anything strange about him, have you?"

"Strange? What do you mean?"

"I mean while he was off there with you. Anything more about that alarm clock of his? And did anything more develop about his knowing the captain of that vessel that sunk the Nama?"

"No, that was only coincidence, I think. Why, I can't say that I've noticed anything suspicious about him, Joe, if that's what you mean," and Blake's voice had a questioning tone.

"That's what I do mean," spoke Joe. "And if you haven't I have."

"Have what?"

"I've been watching Alcando since you and he came back, and I think he's decidedly queer."

"Suspicious, you mean?"

"I mean he acts as though something were going to happen."

"Another landslide?" asked Blake with a laugh. "No chance of that here at Gatun Dam."

"No, but something else could happen, I think."

"You mean the—dam itself?" asked Blake, suddenly serious.

"Well, I don't exactly know what I do mean," Joe said, and his voice was troubled. "I'll tell you what I noticed and heard, and you can make your own guess."

"Go on," invited Blake. "I'm all ears, as the donkey said."

"It's no laughing matter," retorted his chum. "Haven't you noticed since you and Alcando came back," he went on, "that he seems different, in a way. He goes about by himself, and, several times I've caught him looking at the dam as though he'd never seen it before. He is wonderfully impressed by it."

"Well, anybody would be," spoke Blake. "It's a wonderful piece of engineering. But go on."

"Not only that," resumed Joe, "but I've heard him talking to himself a lot."

"Well, that's either a bad sign, or a good one," laughed his chum. "They say when a fellow talks to himself he either has money in the bank, or he's in love. You can take your choice."

"Not when it's the kind of talk I overheard Alcando having with himself," Joe resumed. "I went out on the dam yesterday, and I saw him looking at it. He

didn't see me, but I heard him muttering to himself."

"What did he say?" Blake wanted to know.

"I didn't hear it all," was Joe's answer, "but I caught two sentences that made me do a lot of thinking. They were these: 'I just hate to do it, though I'll have to, I suppose. But I'll not put the blame on'—" and Joe came to a pause.

"Well, go on," urged Blake.

"That's all there was," Joe continued. "I couldn't hear any more. What do you suppose he meant?"

"He might have meant nothing—or anything," Blake remarked slowly. "It sounds to me as though he meant that he had made a failure of the moving picture business, and was going to quit. That must be it. He meant that he had to give it up, though he hated to, and that he wouldn't blame us for not giving him better instruction."

"Could he have meant that?"

"He could," Blake replied, "for, to tell you the truth, he'll never be a good operator. He hasn't a correct eye for details, and he can't focus worth a cent, though that might be overcome in time. He does well enough for ordinary work, but when it comes to fine details he isn't in it. I found that out back there at Culebra when he was working with me. Of course he was a lot of help, and all that, but he's a failure as a moving picture operator."

"I'm sorry to hear that," said Joe, with genuine sympathy.

"So am I to have to come to that conclusion," Blake went on. "I guess he knows it, too, for he said as much to me. So I guess that's what his talking to himself meant."

"Perhaps it did. Well, we did our best for him."

"We surely did, and I guess he appreciates that. He said so, anyhow."

"And so you're going to get some Gatun pictures and then quit—eh?"

"That's it, Joe, and the sooner we get them the sooner we can get back home. I've had all I want of Panama. Not that it isn't a nice place, but we've seen all there is to see."

"We might try a little more of the jungle."

"We got enough of those pictures before," Blake declared. "No, the dam will wind it up, as far as we're concerned."

If Mr. Alcando felt any sorrow over his failure as a moving picture operator he did not show it when next he met the boys. He was quite cheerful.

"Are you fully recovered, Joe?" he asked.

"Oh, sure! I'm all right again."

"I only wish I could have had a hand in rescuing you," the Spaniard went on. "It would have been a manner of paying, in a slight degree, the debt I owe you boys. But fate took that out of my hands, and you were saved by the same sort of slide that covered you up."

"Yes, I guess I was born lucky," laughed Joe.

Preparations for taking several views of the big Gatun Dam from the lower, or spillway side, were made. One afternoon Mr. Alcando asked if he would be needed in making any views, and when Blake told him he would not, the Spaniard went off by himself, taking a small camera with him.

"I'm going to try my luck on my own hook," he said.

"That's right," encouraged Blake. "Go it on your own responsibility. Good luck!"

"He's trying hard, at all events," said Joe, when their acquaintance had left them.

"Yes," agreed Joe. "He wants to make good."

Several times after this Mr. Alcando went off, by himself for more or less prolonged absences. Each time he took a camera with him.

It was a small machine, made more for amateurs than for professionals, but it gave good practice.

"How are you coming on?" asked Blake one day, when Mr. Alcando returned after a trip which, he said, had taken him to Gatun Dam.

"Oh, pretty well, I think," was the answer, as the Spaniard set down his camera and carrying case. "I got some good scenes, I believe. When are you going to make the last of the spillway views?"

Blake did not answer. He was listening to a curious sound. It was a ticking, like that of an alarm clock, and it came from the interior of the carrying case that held extra reels of film for the little camera Mr. Alcando had.

Blake felt himself staring at the black box.

CHAPTER XXII

A WARNING

"What is the matter?" asked Mr. Alcando, as he noted Blake's intent look. "Is something—?" He did not finish.

"That sound—in the film-case—" began Blake.

"Oh, my alarm clock—yes!" exclaimed the Spaniard. "I take it out with me on my trips. Often, when I have finished taking pictures, I try to do a little work on it. There is one feature I can't seem to perfect, and I hope some day to stumble on it. Without it the clock is a failure. I had it with me to-day, but I could make no progress—none at all. I think I shall put it away again," and taking with him the case, from which came that curious ticking noise, he went to his stateroom.

Blake shook his head. He did not know what to think.

"He'll never make a good moving picture operator," he said to himself. "You've got to give your whole mind to it, and not be monkeying with inventions when you set out to get views. An alarm clock!

"Suppose he does perfect it? There are enough on the market now, and I don't believe there's a fortune in any of 'em. He might much better stick to what he set out to learn. Well, it isn't any of my business, I suppose. Joe and I have done all we can."

Several times after this the Spaniard went off by himself, to make simple moving picture views with the little camera. But, whether or not he took along the curious brass-bound box, with the metal projections, which he said was an alarm clock, was something Blake or Joe could not discover. For Blake had told Joe of Alcando's confession.

Certainly if Alcando did take his model with him, he did not wind it up until leaving the boys, for no ticking sound came from the case.

The Canal was now as it had been before the big slide. Vessels were passing to and fro, though in some parts of the waterway much finishing work remained to be done. Blake and Joe took some views of this, and also "filmed" the passage of the various ships to make their pictures of wider appeal when they would be shown at the Panama Exposition. Mr. Alcando did his share, and, for a time seemed to show a great interest in his work, so that Blake had hopes the Spaniard would really become a good operator. But something was always lacking, and it was not altogether effort on the part of the pupil.

The time was approaching when Blake and Joe must bring their work to an end. They had accomplished what they set out to do, and word came back from New York, where their films had been sent for development, that they were among the best the boys had ever taken.

"Well, I will soon be leaving you," said Mr. Alcando to the chums, one day. "I

have heard from my railroad firm, and they are anxious for me to come back and begin making pictures there."

"His friends are going to be sadly disappointed in him," thought Blake. "It's too bad. He'll make a failure of those views. Well, if he does they may send for Joe and me, and that will be so much more business for us, though I'm sorry to see him make a fizzle of it."

But Mr. Alcando appeared to have no fears on his own account. He was cheerfully optimistic.

"I shall want several cameras, of different kinds," he said to the boys. "Perhaps you can recommend to me where to get some."

"Yes," spoke Joe. "We'll help you pick them out if you are going back to New York."

"I am not so sure of that," the Spaniard said. "I will know in a few days when I hear from my railroad friends. I expect a letter shortly."

There was some little delay in getting the pictures Blake wanted of the Gatun Dam. Certain work had to be done, and Blake wanted to show the complete and finished structure. So he decided to wait.

About a week after the above conversation with Mr. Alcando, the Spaniard came to the boys, waving an open letter in his hand. The mail had just come in, bringing missives to Blake and Joe. Some were of a business nature, but for each boy there was an envelope, square and of delicate tint—such stationery as no business man uses. But we need not concern ourselves with that. We all have our secrets.

"I have my marching orders," laughed the Spaniard. "I leave you this week, for my own particular jungle. Now I must arrange to get my cameras."

"We'll help you," offered Joe, and then, with the catalogue of a moving picture supply house before them, the boys sat down to plan what sort of an outfit would best be suited to the needs of Mr. Alcando. He was not limited as to money, it was evident, for he picked out the most expensive cameras possible to buy.

"I wish you boys would come and see me, when I get to work taking views along our railroad line," he said. "It isn't altogether a selfish invitation," he added with a laugh, "for I expect you could give me good advice, and correct some of my mistakes."

"I'm afraid we won't get a chance to go to South America," Blake answered.

With a tentative list of what he needed, Mr. Alcando went to write a letter to his railroad officials, asking them to order his outfit for him.

As Blake pushed back his chair, intending to leave the cabin to seek his own stateroom, he saw, on the floor, a piece of paper. Idly he picked it up, and, as he saw it was part of a letter to the Spaniard he folded it, to hand to him. But, as he did so he caught sight of a few words on it. And those words made him stare in wonder. For Blake read:

"Stuff is all ready for you. You had better do the job and get away. There is some fine scenery in Europe."

Saying nothing to his chum about it, Blake went with the letter toward the Spaniard's stateroom. He was not in, but Blake put the paper on a desk, with some others, and came out hastily.

"I wonder what that meant?" he thought to himself. "That must have been his orders to come back to Brazil and make the pictures. But if he goes at it that way—just to do the job and get away, he won't have much success. And to think of going to make films of European scenery when he isn't really capable of it."

"Well, some of these foreigners think they know it all when they have only a smattering of it," mused Blake. "Though Alcando isn't as bad that way as lots of others. Well, we've done our best with him. And how unjust all our suspicions were—Joe's and mine. I wonder what he really did think he was up to, anyhow?"

The next day Blake and Joe were busy making many important views of the big dam, which held back the waters of the Chagres River, creating Gatun Lake. The Spaniard, too, was busy with his preparations for leaving. He was away from the boys nearly all day, coming back to the boat, which they made their headquarters, in the evening.

"Get any pictures?" asked Blake. "If you have we'll pack up your reel and send it to New York with ours. Where's the little camera and case?"

Mr. Alcando stopped short, as though struck.

"By Jove!" he cried. "I left it out at the dam. I was making some views there, and used up all the film. Then I got to working on my alarm clock, and forgot all about the camera and film case. I left them out there, and my clock, too. I'll go right back and get them!"

He turned to leave the cabin, but, as he did so, Captain Wiltsey entered. He paid no attention to the Spaniard, but, addressing Blake and Joe said:

"Boys, I have a little task for you. Have you any flash-light powder?"

"Flash-light powder? Yes, we have some," Blake said. "But we can't use it for moving pictures. It doesn't last long enough."

"Perhaps it will last long enough for what I want," the captain said.

"If you'll excuse me, I'll go back and get the camera I was so careless as to leave out," spoke Mr. Alcando.

"I'm glad he's gone," Captain Wiltsey said, as the cabin door closed. "I'd rather tell this to just you boys. I've just had a queer warning," he said.

"A warning?" repeated Joe.

"Yes, about Gatun Dam. There's a rumor that it is going to be destroyed!"

CHAPTER XXIII

THE FLASHLIGHT

For an instant the moving picture boys could hardly grasp the meaning of the fateful words spoken by Captain Wiltsey. But it needed only a look at his face to tell that he was laboring under great excitement.

"The Gatun Dam to be destroyed," repeated Joe. "Then we'd better get—"

"Do you mean by an earthquake?" asked Blake, breaking in on his chum's words.

"No, I don't take any stock in their earthquake theories," the captain answered. "That's all bosh! It's dynamite."

"Dynamite!" cried Joe and Blake in a breath.

"Yes, there are rumors, so persistent that they cannot be denied, to the effect that the dam is to be blown up some night."

"Blown up!" cried Blake and Joe again.

"That's the rumor," continued Captain Wiltsey. "I don't wonder you are astonished. I was myself when I heard it. But I've come to get you boys to help us out."

"How can we help?" asked Blake. "Not that we won't do all we can," he added hastily, "but I should think you'd need Secret Service men, detectives, and all that sort of help."

"We'll have enough of that help," went on the tug boat commander, who was also an employee of the commission that built the Canal. "But we need the peculiar help you boys can give us with your cameras."

"You mean to take moving pictures of the blowing up of the dam?" asked Joe.

"Well, there won't be any blowing up, if we can help it," spoke the captain, grimly. "But we want to photograph the attempt if it goes that far. Have you any flashlight powder?"

"Yes," Blake answered. "Or, if not, we can make some with materials we can easily get. But you can't make more than a picture or two by flashlight."

"Couldn't you if you had a very big flashlight that would last for several minutes?"

"Yes, I suppose so."

"Well, then, figure on that."

"But I don't understand it all," objected Blake, and Joe, too, looked his wonder. Both were seeking a reason why the captain had said he was glad Mr. Alcando had gone out to get the camera he had forgotten.

"I'll explain," said Mr. Wiltsey. "You have no doubt heard, as we all have down here, the stories of fear of an earthquake shock. As I said, I think they're all bosh. But of late there have been persistent rumors that a more serious menace is at hand. And that is dynamite.

"In fact the rumors have gotten down to a definite date, and it is said to-night is the time picked out for the destruction of the dam. The water of the Chagres River is exceptionally high, owing to the rains, and if a breach were blown in the dam now it would mean the letting loose of a destructive flood."

"But who would want to blow up the dam?" asked Blake.

"Enemies of the United States," was the captain's answer. "I don't know who they are, nor why they should be our enemies, but you know several nations are jealous of Uncle Sam, that he possesses such a vitally strategic waterway as the Panama Canal.

"But we don't need to discuss all that now. The point is that we are going to try to prevent this thing and we want you boys to help."

"With a flashlight?" asked Blake, wondering whether the captain depended on scaring those who would dare to plant a charge of dynamite near the great dam.

"With a flashlight, or, rather, with a series of them, and your moving picture cameras," the captain went on. "We want you boys to get photographic views of those who will try to destroy the dam, so that we will have indisputable evidence against them. Will you do it?"

"Of course we will!" cried Blake. "Only how can it be done? We don't know where the attempt will be made, nor when, and flashlight powder doesn't burn very long, you know."

"Yes, I know all that," the captain answered. "And we have made a plan. We have a pretty good idea where the attempt will be made—near the spillway, and as to the time, we can only guess at that.

"But it will be some time to-night, almost certainly, and we will have a sufficient guard to prevent it. Some one of this guard can give you boys warning, and you can do the rest—with your cameras."

"Yes, I suppose so," agreed Blake.

"It will be something like taking the pictures of the wild animals in the jungle," Joe said. "We did some of them by flashlight, you remember, Blake."

"Yes, so we did. And I brought the apparatus with us, though we haven't used it this trip. Now let's get down to business. But we'll need help in this, Joe. I wonder where Alcando—?"

"You don't need him," declared the captain.

"Why not?" asked Joe. "He knows enough about the cameras now, and—"

"He's a foreigner—a Spaniard," objected the captain.

"I see," spoke Blake. "You don't want it to go any farther than can be helped."

"No," agreed the captain.

"But how did you and the other officials hear all this?" Joe wanted to know.

"In a dozen different ways," was the answer. "Rumors came to us, we traced them, and got—more rumors. There has been some disaffection among the foreign laborers. Men with fancied, but not real grievances, have talked and muttered against the United States. Then, in a manner I cannot disclose, word came to us that the discontent had culminated in a well-plotted plan to destroy the dam, and to-night is the time set.

"Just who they are who will try the desperate work I do not know. I fancy no one does. But we may soon know if you boys can successfully work the cameras and flashlights."

"And we'll do our part!" exclaimed Blake. "Tell us where to set the cameras."

"We can use that automatic camera, too; can't we?" asked Joe.

"Yes, that will be the very thing!" cried Blake. They had found, when making views of wild animals in the jungle, as I have explained in the book of that title, that to be successful in some cases required them to be absent from the drinking holes, where the beasts came nightly to slake their thirst.

So they had developed a combined automatic flashlight and camera, that would, when set, take pictures of the animals as they came to the watering-

place. The beasts themselves would, by breaking a thread, set the mechanism in motion.

"The flashlight powder—I wonder if we can get enough of that?" spoke Joe. "It'll take quite a lot."

"We must get it—somehow," declared the captain. "I fancy we have some on hand, and perhaps you can make more. There is quite a chemical laboratory here at the dam. But we've got to hustle. The attempt is to be made some time after midnight."

CHAPTER XXIV

THE TICK-TICK

"Put one camera here, Joe."

"All right, Blake. And where will you have the other?"

"Take that with you. Easy now. Don't make a noise, and don't speak above a whisper!" cautioned Blake Stewart. "You'll work one machine, and I'll attend to the other. We'll put the automatic between us and trust to luck that one of the three gets something when the flash goes off."

The two boys, with Captain Wiltsey, had made their way to a position near the spillway, below the great Gatun Dam. It was an intensely dark night, though off to the west were distant flashes of lightning now and then, telling of an approaching storm. In the darkness the boys moved cautiously about, planting their cameras and flashlight batteries to give the best results.

They had had to work quickly to get matters in shape before midnight. Fortunately they were not delayed by lack of magnesium powder, a large quantity having been found in one of the laboratories. This was quickly made up into flashlight cartridges, to be exploded at once, or in a series, by means of a high voltage storage battery.

The moving picture cameras had been put in place, Blake to work one and Joe the other, while the automatic, which was operated by clockwork, once the trigger-string was broken, also setting off the continuous flashlight, was set between the two boys, to command a good view of the dam, and of whoever should approach to blow it up.

It now lacked an hour of midnight when, so the rumors said, the attempt was to be made. Of the nature of these rumors, and of how much truth there was in them, the boys could only guess. They did not ask too much, knowing that

there might be Government secrets it would not be wise for them to know.

But that certain level-headed men did "take stock" in those rumors was evident, for elaborate preparations had been made to protect the dam. The preparations were conducted with as much secrecy as possible in order that the conspirators might not become aware of them.

"We don't want to scare them off," explained Captain Wiltsey. "That may seem a strange thing to say," he went on, "but it is the truth. Of course we don't want the dam blown up, or even slightly damaged, but it will be better to let them make the attempt, and catch them red-handed, than just to scare them off before they make a try. Because, if we do that they may only come back again, later, when we're not ready for them. But if we let them see we are prepared and can catch some of them at work, it will end the conspiracy."

"That's right!" agreed Blake. "Well, we'll do all we can to help make the capture. We'll capture their likenesses on the films, anyhow, and you'll know who they are."

"Which will be something," the captain said. "We haven't been able as yet to discover the identity of any of them. They have kept very secret, and worked very much in the dark."

It had been arranged, among Captain Wiltsey and his helpers, that they were to give a certain signal when they discovered the dynamiters at work, and then the boys would set off their flashlights and begin to work their hand cameras. The automatic one, of course, would need no attention, provided the miscreants went near enough the net-work of strings to break one and so set the mechanism in motion. But that was problematical, and, as Joe said, they would have to "trust to luck."

And so the preparations for receiving the midnight callers went on. Joe and Blake worked in silence, making ready for their part in it. All about the boys, though they could neither see nor hear them, were Uncle Sam's men—soldiers, some of them—stationed near where, so rumor said, the attempt was to be made to explode the dynamite.

"We really ought to have another helper," said Blake, thoughtfully. "There is one place we can't get in focus no matter how we try, with the three machines we have. If we had another automatic it would be all right, but we have only the one. Another hand camera would do, but we'd have to get someone to work it. I would suggest we get Mr. Alcando, but you don't seem to want him. He could easily take charge of one."

"It is better to have no foreigners," replied the captain. "Not that Mr. Alcando might not be all right, for he seems a nice chap. But he is a Spaniard, or, rather a South American, and some of the South Americans haven't any too much

love for us; especially since the Canal was built."

"Why?" asked Blake.

"Oh, for various reasons. Some of them have lost trade because it shortens routes. But there, I must go and see if all the men are in place." Captain Wiltsey left him, and once more the moving picture boy resumed his vigil. All about him was silence and darkness. As well as he could he looked to see that his camera was pointing in the right direction, and that it set firmly on the tripod, the legs of which were driven into the ground.

"I'll just step over and see how Joe is," thought Blake. He judged it lacked half an hour yet of midnight.

He found Joe busy mending a broken wire that ran from the battery to the flashlight powder chamber.

"Just discovered it," Joe whispered. "Lucky I did, too, or it would have failed me just when I needed it."

"Is it fixed?" asked Blake, as his chum straightened up in the darkness.

"Yes, it'll do for a while, though it's only twisted together. Say, but isn't it dark?"

"It sure is," agreed Blake.

Together they stood there near the great dam. There came to their ears the splashing of water over the spillway, for the lake was high, and much was running to waste.

"Well, I guess I'll be getting back," said Blake in a low voice. "No telling when things will happen now."

As he started to go away Joe remarked:

"Where are you wearing your watch? I can hear it over here."

"Watch! I haven't mine on," Blake answered. "You can't see it in the dark, so I left it on the boat."

"Well, something is ticking pretty loud, and it isn't mine," Joe said, "for I did the same as you, and left it in my cabin. But don't you hear that noise?"

They both listened. Clearly to them, through the silence of the night, came a steady and monotonous tick—tick-tick—

"It's the clockwork of the automatic camera," Blake whispered.

"It can't be," answered Joe. "That's too far off. Besides, it's a different sound."

They both listened intently.

"Tick! Tick! Tick!" came to them through the dark silence.

CHAPTER XXV

MR. ALCANDO DISAPPEARS

For several seconds Blake and Joe stood there—without moving—only listening. And that strange noise they heard kept up its monotonous note.

"Hear it!" whispered Joe.

"Yes," answered Blake. "The brass box—the box—he had!"

"Yes," whispered Joe. All the suspicions he had had—all those he had laughed at Blake for harboring, came back to him in a rush. The brass-bound box contained clockwork. Was it an alarm after all? Certainly it had given an alarm now—a most portentous alarm!

"We've got to find it!" said Blake.

"Sure," Joe assented. "It may go off any minute now. We've got to find it. Seems to be near here."

They began looking about on the ground, as though they could see anything in that blackness. But they were trying to trace it by the sound of the ticks. And it is no easy matter, if you have ever tried to locate the clock in a dark room.

"We ought to give the alarm," said Blake.

"Before it is too late," assented Joe. "Where can it be? It seems near here, and yet we can't locate it."

"Get down on your hands and knees and crawl around," advised Blake. In this fashion they searched for the elusive tick-tick. They could hear it, now plainly, and now faintly, but they never lost it altogether. And each of them recognized the peculiar clicking sound as the same they had heard coming from the brass-bound box Mr. Alcando had said was his new alarm clock.

"Hark!" suddenly exclaimed Blake.

Off to the left, where was planted the automatic camera, came a faint noise. It sounded like a suppressed exclamation. Then came an echo as if someone had fallen heavily.

An instant later the whole scene was lit up by a brilliant flash—a flash that rivaled the sun in brightness, and made Blake and Joe stare like owls thrust suddenly into the glare of day.

"The dynamite!" gasped Joe, unconsciously holding himself in readiness for a shock.

"The flashlight—the automatic camera!" cried Blake. There was no need for silence now.

The whole scene was brilliantly lighted, and remained so for many seconds. And in the glare of the magnesium powder the moving picture boys saw a curious sight.

Advancing toward the dam was a solitary figure, which had come to halt when the camera went off with the flashlight. It was the figure of a man who had evidently just arisen after a fall.

"Mr. Alcando!" gasped Joe.

"The Spaniard!" fairly shouted Blake.

Then, as the two chums looked on the brilliantly lighted scene, knowing that the camera was faithfully taking pictures of every move of their recent pupil, the boys saw, rushing toward Alcando, a number of the men and soldiers who had been in hiding.

"He's surrounded—as good as caught," Blake cried. "So he's the guilty one."

"Unless there's a mistake," spoke Joe.

"Mistake! Never!" shouted his chum. "Look—the brass box!"

The glare of the distant flashlight illuminated the ground at their feet, and there, directly in front of them, was the ticking box. From it trailed two wires, and, as Blake looked at them he gave a start.

The next moment he had knelt down, and with a pair of pliers he carried for adjusting the mechanism of his camera severed the wires with a quick snap. The ticking in the box still went on, but the affair was harmless now. It could not make the electrical current to discharge the deadly dynamite.

"Boys! Boys! Where are you?" cried Captain Wiltsey.

"Here!" cried Blake. "We've stopped the infernal machine!"

"And we've got the dynamiter. He's your friend—"

The rest of the words died away as the light burned itself out. Intense blackness succeeded.

"Come on!" cried Joe. "They've got him. We won't have to work the hand cameras. The automatic did it!"

They stumbled on through the darkness. Lanterns were brought and they saw Mr. Alcando a prisoner in the midst of the Canal guards. The Spaniard looked

at the boys, and smiled sadly.

"Well, it—it's all over," he said. "But it isn't as bad as it seems."

"It's bad enough, as you'll find," said Captain Wiltsey grimly. "Are you sure the wires are disconnected, boys?" he asked.

"Sure," replied Blake, holding out the brass box.

"Oh, so you found it," said the Spaniard. "Well, even if it had gone off there wouldn't have been much of an explosion."

"It's easy enough to say that—now," declared the captain.

But later, when they followed up the wires which Blake had severed, which had run from the brass-bound box to a point near the spillway of the dam, it was found that only a small charge of dynamite had been buried there—a charge so small that it could not possibly have done more than very slight damage to the structure.

"I can't understand it," said Captain Wiltsey. "They could just as well have put a ton there, and blown the place to atoms, and yet they didn't use enough to blow a boulder to bits. I don't understand it."

"But why should Mr. Alcando try to blow up the dam at all?" asked Blake, "That's what I can't understand."

But a little later they did, for the Spaniard confessed. He had to admit his part in the plot, for the moving pictures, made by the automatic camera, were proof positive that he was the guilty one.

"Yes, it was I who tried to blow up the dam," Alcando admitted, "but, as you have seen, it was only to be an attempt to damage it. It was never intended to really destroy it. It was an apparent attempt, only."

"But what for?" he was asked.

"To cause a lack of confidence in the Canal," was the unexpected answer. "Those I represent would like to see it unused. It is going to ruin our railroad interests."

Then he told of the plot in detail.

Alcando was connected, as I have told you, with a Brazilian railroad. The road depended for its profits on carrying goods across South America. Once the Canal was established goods could be transported much more cheaply and quickly by the water route. The railroad owners knew this and saw ruin ahead of them if the Canal were to be successful. Consequently they welcomed every delay, every accident, every slide in Culebra Cut that would put off the opening of the great waterway.

But the time finally came when it was finished, and a success. Then one of the largest stockholders of the railroad, an unprincipled man, planned a plot. At first his fellow stockholders would not agree to it, but he persuaded them, painting the ruin of their railroad, and saying only slight damage would be done to the Canal.

His plan was to make a slight explosion, or two or more of them, near Culebra Cut or at the great dam. This, he anticipated, would cause shippers to regard the Canal with fear, and refuse to send their goods through it. In that way the railroad would still hold its trade.

Alcando was picked for the work. He did not want to undertake it, but he was promised a large sum, and threats were made against him, for the originator of the plot had a certain hold over him.

"But I was to throw the blame on innocent parties if I could," the Spaniard went on, in his confession. "Also I was to select a means of causing the explosion that would not easily be detected. I selected moving pictures as the simplest means. I knew that some were to be made of the Canal for Government use, and I thought if I got in with the moving picture operators I would have a good chance, and good excuse, for approaching the dam without being suspected. After I had accomplished what I set out to do I could, I thought, let suspicion rest on the camera men.

"So I laid my plans. I learned that Mr. Hadley's firm had received the contract to make the views, and, by inquiries, through spies, I learned who their principal operators were. It was then I came to you boys," he said. "Ashamed as I am to confess it, it was my plan to have the blame fall on you."

Blake and Joe gasped.

"But when you saved my life at the broken bridge that time, of course I would not dream of such a dastardly trick," the Spaniard resumed. "I had to make other plans. I tried to get out of it altogether, but that man would not let me. So I decided to sacrifice myself. I would myself blow up the dam, or, rather, make a little explosion that would scare prospective shippers. I did not care what became of me as long as I did not implicate you. I could not do that.

"So I changed my plans. Confederates supplied the dynamite, and I got this clock-work, in the brass-bound box, to set it off by means of electrical wires. I planned to be far away when it happened, but I would have left a written confession that would have put the blame where it belonged.

"I kept the battery box connections and clockwork inside the small camera I carried. Tonight all was in readiness. The dynamite was planted, and I set the mechanism. But something went wrong with it. There was too much of a delay. I came back to change the timer. I broke the string connections you made, and—I was caught by the camera. The news had, somehow, leaked out, and I was caught. Well, perhaps it is better so," and he shrugged his shoulders with seeming indifference.

"But please believe me when I say that no harm would have come to you boys," he went on earnestly, "nor would the dam have been greatly damaged.
"It was all a terrible plot in which I became involved, not all through my own fault," went on the Spaniard, dramatically. "As soon as I met you boys, after you had saved my life, I repented of my part, but I could not withdraw. The plans of this scoundrel—yes, I must call him so, though perhaps I am as great—his plans called for finding out something about the big guns that protect the Canal. Only I was not able to do that, though he ordered me to in a letter I think you saw."
Blake nodded. He and Joe were beginning to understand many strange things.
"One of the secret agents brought me the box containing the mechanism that was to set off the dynamite," the Spaniard resumed. "You nearly caught him," he added, and Blake recalled the episode of the cigar smoke. "I had secret conferences with the men engaged with me in the plot," the conspirator confessed. "At times I talked freely about dynamiting the dam, in order to throw off the suspicions I saw you entertained regarding me. But I must explain one thing. The collision, in which the tug was sunk, had nothing to do with the plot. That was a simple accident, though I did know the captain of that unlucky steamer.
"Finally, after I had absented myself from here several times, to see that all the details of the plot were arranged, I received a letter telling me the dynamite had been placed, and that, after I had set it off, I had better flee to Europe."
Blake had accidentally seen that letter.
"I received instructions, the time we were starting off on the tug," went on Alcando, "that the original plot was to be changed, and that a big charge of dynamite was to be used instead of a small one.
"But I refused to agree to it," he declared. "I felt that, in spite of what I might do to implicate myself, you boys would be blamed, and I could not have that if the Canal were to suffer great damage. I would have done anything to protect you, after what you did in saving my worthless life," he said bitterly. "So I would not agree to all the plans of that scoundrel, though he urged me most hotly.
"But it is all over, now!" he exclaimed with a tragic gesture. "I am caught, and it serves me right. Only I can be blamed. My good friends, you will not be," and he smiled at Blake and Joe. "I am glad all the suspense is at an end. I deserve my punishment. I did not know the plot had been discovered, and that the stage was set to make so brilliant a capture of me. But I am glad you boys had the honor.
"But please believe me in one thing. I really did want to learn how to take moving pictures, though it was to be a blind as to my real purpose. And, as I say, the railroad company did not want to really destroy the dam. After we had put the Canal out of business long enough for us to have amassed a fortune we

would have been content to see it operated. We simply wanted to destroy public confidence in it for a time."
"The worst kind of destruction," murmured Captain Wiltsey. "Take him away, and guard him well," he ordered the soldiers. "We will look further into this plot to-morrow."
But when to-morrow came there was no Mr. Alcando. He had managed to escape in the night from his frail prison, and whither he had gone no one knew.
But that he had spoken the truth was evident. A further investigation showed that it would have been impossible to have seriously damaged the dam by the amount of dynamite hidden. But, as Captain Wiltsey said, the destruction of public confidence would have been a serious matter.
"And so it was Alcando, all along," observed Blake, a few days later, following an unsuccessful search for the Spaniard.
"Yes, our suspicions of him were justified," remarked Blake. "It's a lucky thing for us that we did save his life, mean as he was. It wouldn't have been any joke to be suspected of trying to blow up the dam."
"No, indeed," agreed Blake. "And suspicion might easily have fallen on us. It was a clever trick. Once we had the Government permission to go all over with our cameras, and Alcando, as a pupil, could go with us, he could have done almost anything he wanted. But the plot failed."
"Lucky it did," remarked Joe. "I guess they'll get after that railroad man next."
But the stockholder who was instrumental in forming the plot, like Alcando, disappeared. That they did not suffer for their parts in the affair, as they should have, was rumored later, when both of them were seen in a European capital, well supplied with money. How they got it no one knew.
The Brazilian Railroad, however, repudiated the attempt to damage the Canal, even apparently, laying all the blame on the two men who had disappeared. But from then on more stringent regulations were adopted about admitting strangers to vital parts of the Canal.
"But we're through," commented Blake one day, when he and Joe had filmed the last views of the big waterway. "That Alcando was a 'slick' one, though."
"Indeed he was," agreed Joe. "The idea of calling that a new alarm clock!" and he looked at the brass-bound box. Inside was a most complicated electrical timing apparatus, for setting off charges of explosive. It could be adjusted to cause the detonation at any set minute, giving the plotter time to be a long way from the scene.
And, only because of a slight defect, Alcando would have been far from the scene when the little explosion occurred at Gatun Dam.
Once more the great Canal was open to traffic. The last of the slide in Culebra Cut had been taken out, and boats could pass freely.
"Let's make a trip through now, just for fun," suggested Blake to Joe one day,

when they had packed up their cameras.
Permission was readily granted them to make a pleasure trip through to Panama, and it was greatly enjoyed by both of them.
"Just think!" exclaimed Blake, as they sat under an awning on the deck of their boat, and looked at the blue water, "not a thing to do."
"Until the next time," suggested Joe.

"That's right—we never do seem to be idle long," agreed Blake. "I wonder what the 'next time' will be?"

And what it was, and what adventures followed you may learn by reading the next volume of this series, to be called "The Moving Picture Boys Under the Sea; Or, The Treasure on the Lost Ship."

"Here you go, Blake!" cried Joe, a few days later. "Letter for you!"

"Thanks. Get any yourself?"

"Yes, one."

"Huh! How many do you want?" asked Blake, as he began reading his epistle.
"Well, I'll soon be back," he added in a low voice, as he finished.

"Back where?" asked Joe.

"To New York."

And so, with these pleasant thoughts, we will take leave of the moving picture boys.