

AN UNHEEDED WARNING

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(A Story of the Isthmus of Panama)

(Period, 1904)

The news had spread like wild-fire: Morgan had been, at last, defeated—Nicaragua was *nowhere* her vaunted route had sunk forever into the wild womb of uncreated undertakings! Panama was *on top*; for the Hay-Bunauvarilla Treaty, the outcome of a well planned and heroically executed Secession, had passed the United States Senate by a vote of Sixty-six to Fourteen! Panamanians were jubilant over the consummation of their long-cherished dream; and Colon and Panama had given themselves up to Chinese fire-crackers, music and bunting, in celebration of the dawn of a new Isthmian era. Colombia was crestfallen at the loss of the gem of her possessions!

New York was all excitement too. On the L's and on the trolley-cars, Panama was rampant; for people, young and old, discussed the news over their morning papers, in which some readers had become so engrossed that they were carried blocks away from the stations at which they had intended to get off.

Wall Street was rife with speculations anent the ten million dollars which the United States Government had agreed to pay the Republic of Panama for the right to construct a Canal through its territory; and to some brokers the occasion seemed, no doubt, a possible opportunity for a 'spec'.

The New York newsboys were simply intolerable with their unearthly shrieks that rent the air:

"Herald! — Sun! — Journal! — World! — Times!

"Latest news—*Der* Panama Canal is sold! Uncle Sam's got it, dead sure, this time—buy a paper, sir?" And they'd thrust a paper in your face just when you were hur-

rying to catch an L-express or a crowded surface trolley-car.

“Sixty-Six to Fourteen had become world-wide ubiquitous. In New York City the news was known in every quarter—even along the docks; for in a ferry station, in the neighborhood of West 27th Street two men sat down discussing Panama over the morning paper. The two were James Lowley and Dick Scanton; the latter having been down to Pier 57, North River, to meet the steamer which had just arrived from Colon, to get some news of the Isthmus.

To Panama, Lowley was a stranger; to Scanton not; for he had been there in the palmy days of '81-87; but left after the crash of '88 which ruined so many! Scanton, however, had been one of Fortune's favorites, for he had taken away with him sufficient money to last a thrifty disposition, such as his, for the balance of his life. Now, it was just sixteen years since he had retired from the Isthmus; yet many and many was the day he had felt the potent charm of the Chagres water, and, so, longed

to return to the old haunts again—to the land of palms and ravishing sunsets! Owing to increased years and to the impaired condition of his health, the longing never materialized; but, let it be said, and to his credit, that his interest in the Isthmus endured all through the entire period of his absence. He, therefore, naturally, felt a deep thrill of gratification rise up in his heart when the glad tidings reached him that dear old Panama had triumphed at last.

Lowley was still occupied reading his paper when a tall, slim, handsome young fellow stepped up and interrupted him—

“Hello there!” he called out in a voice that smacked of long acquaintanceship, “What’s that you’re reading about that, apparently, interests you chaps so much?” he asked, eagerly; and “The Panama Canal,” was Lowley’s quick response.

“Tell me all about it!” exclaimed Charlie Willinger, the new-comer, “for I might take it in my head to go to the Isthmus and try my luck there. Things here,” he continued,

“have gone mighty hard with me lately: I’ve been out of a job for months now, and the little money which I had put aside for the ‘rainy day’ in the proverb, is almost finished—in fact I don’t know what I shall do if something does not turn up in a hurry.” In answer to which Lowley thrust into Willinger’s hand the morning paper he had been reading, saying:

“There you are, Charlie, read it for yourself”; which he did too and to his heart’s content; for when he gave the paper back to Lowley, you could have seen a gleam of hopeful light shining in his eyes, and a smile all over his countenance as he remarked:

“Well, Jim, here’s a chance for us at last! Don’t lose the opportunity; let’s make up our minds to go to the Isthmus; we’re both doing nothing at present, and you really don’t know what might be our luck that side. And, say, I tell you what; I’ll make this deal with you, old fellow: the one that gets a job first will look out for the other until he is fixed also. Come now, what do

you think of the scheme? Is it a go or not?—come, now, answer quickly!"

Here, Dick Scanton, who had, so far, proved himself to be a pretty good listener, had evidently decided that the time had now come for him to cease playing audience, and to put in a word or two; for, all of a sudden, he threw himself back into his chair, crossed his legs serenely, stuck his thumbs through the armholes of his waistcoat, and thus unburdened himself:

"Tut—tut—tut, man!" he exclaimed, with a note of deep astonishment in his voice, "Go to the Isthmus now," he said, "when nothing at all is doing?—the Treaty only ratified a few hours ago!—madness, boys! simply madness on the part of both of you to entertain such a thought just at this particular moment—I guess you must be off your *cabez!* both of you! I should think the most sensible way to go about this thing at all, would be to wait till Uncle Sam commences digging in real, true earnest; but to go now, to my mind, is almost out of the question. See here, Charlie, my

boy, I have been to the Isthmus, and I know just what I'm talking about—was there in the early rush of French Canal days, when people flocked to Colon to look for employment, and were compelled, soon after, to return to their respective homes, because they saw, at once, that they had come too soon.”

After this somewhat lengthy sermon, in every word of which there was truth and wisdom, Scanton rose from his seat, looked at both men with that serious air which generally characterizes the man who gives advice to others, and then resumed to the finish :

“Now, boys,” he said, “I've got to leave you; don't, for heaven's sake, make any mistake about this thing at all. Think it over well before acting definitely. In the meantime, however, should you need any further advice from me, come to my room, both of you, whenever you think it necessary”; saying which, Scanton left his two friends alone to wind up the Panama discussion, which was resumed with increased vigor

and interest. The first one to reopen the conversation was James Lowley:

“Charlie,” he said, timorously, “it’s all very well and good for you to talk about going to the Isthmus; but, tell me, will you, where’s the money to come from to pay our way to Colon? It costs just thirty dollars to get there—steerage accommodations at that; and while it’s very true that I could get the ‘dough’ from Scanton, I must confess that I would not like to ask any favors of——”

“Neither would I!” interrupted Willinger; “but, say, what’s the matter with us working our way down? The voyage, as you know, is only seven days run, and I certainly see no reason why we could not rough it for that short while; so, come on, now; talk quickly and let me know what you decide, for this is Saturday, and the boat sails for Colon on Tuesday afternoon, which gives us, as you see plainly, very little time for thinking. If you agree to it, we’ll go to the steamer on Monday morning and state our case to the captain”; to which,

however, Lowley remained perfectly silent for a moment: Willinger, he thought, was too importunate; and in fact, the whole proposition was all too sudden for him.

And so, stroking his hair, Lowley posed in an attitude of deep contemplation; and if one could only have read his thoughts then, they would, possibly, have found them associated with the picture of a seasick amateur sailor, or, haply, with that of an awkward waiter staggering around a ship's table! In this frame of mind, he finally made answer:

“Charlie, before I give you a definite reply, let's call on Scanton—to-morrow, say—and get his promised and last advice on this momentous affair”; and the suggestion being agreed upon, Willinger and Lowley walked out of the ferry-station together—the one with new hopes burning within him; the other, sceptical of the future.

II.

Charles Willinger, who was born in New York, was a young man about twenty-nine years old; lean and lanky and delicately built, with deep-set pale blue eyes, within whose dreamy depths you could have seen the light of true, stern, honest manliness. Firm of character, and possessing a powerful will of his own, whenever Willinger took a notion into his head, that was the end of it: there was no changing his mind at all and so, with him, the Panama trip was a settled question altogether.

James Lowley was thirty-six years of age, heavily set and short in stature, with dark brown eyes and a fair complexion. Physically, he was the stronger man of the two, but, by far, the lesser in grit and character. Educated liberally in the public schools of the cities in which they were born, Willinger and Lowley had gathered enough

good sense to enable them to earn a decent livelihood for themselves wherever they went; but through gambling on the part of one and drink on the other, hard luck had followed them both lately; and now that reformation had come to them at last, Willinger, like the drowning man in the old proverb, looked on Panama as the "straw" to catch at.

Lowley was a Western man; but he had lived in New York City for the past ten years, for five of which he and Willinger had been inseparable comrades. During the other five years Willinger resided in Nebraska, where he met an only sister of Lowley's—a tall, handsome girl of sixteen summers—and fell in love with her; but after a very short engagement, Mabel, for some reason or other, unknown to all but herself, gave him the *cut*, which broke his heart until, in the utter despair of the moment, he "chucked his job" and took the first train out for New York City. Yet, with it all, he bore up patiently, and kept the secret of his love so well locked up within him, that not

even his best friend had ever been taken into his confidence. The object of his love and he alone, were the only ones that knew about it all; well, and perhaps, too, the little golden charm that hung around his neck, secreted under his singlet,—the locket, and the picture inside, which Mabel had given to him before their lovebonds had been severed.

III.

It was Sunday morning. In a modestly furnished room in a small apartment house, situated in the Bronx, New York City, Dick Scanton, alone and pensive, sat looking over some "curios" which he had brought with him from the Isthmus of Panama long years ago. The collection was a weird and unique one, consisting of stuffed birds of rich, rare plumage, stuffed *iguanas*, ancient rosaries, carved and painted *tutumas*, primitive jewelry made by the San Blas Indians, pottery of every description, a varied assortment of sea-shells, many-shaped and tinted, and, last of all, a bottle containing some pure white liquid stuff that might have been water.

Picking up this bottle, which, it appears, had engaged the greater part of his attention, Scanton gazed at it with a deep, cunning look from the corner of his left eye, and thus soliloquized:

“Well, yes, I’ve changed my mind altogether. I’ll advise them to go: nothing like seeing for oneself. Lowley, it is true, did not seem inclined to take the trip when we talked the matter over yesterday; but if the beggar shows any signs of fear when we again resume the subject, why, then,” he said, “you,” addressing himself to the bottle, which he still held in his hand, “will likely settle the question without any further argument.” With this, he returned the bottle on the table, and as he did so, an impatient rap was sounded upon the door.

The first idea that struck him when he heard the alarm was, that he had been overheard; and he, therefore, hesitated for a moment before he would respond to the summons; but he finally opened the door, and as he did so Charles Willinger stood before him.

“Good morning, Scanton,” he said; “how are you? I’ve come, according to arrangement, to hear your final views about this Panama trip of ours; but I might just as well tell you from now, that no matter what

may be your opinion on the subject, *I* have fully made up my mind to go. Your advice, therefore, can only affect Lowley, who, by the way, is still against the movement; but, as I have stated before, that will cut no figure with me at all;" saying which, Willinger turned around and drew a chair close up to the table, on which the strange "curios" were lined off in exhibition-array.

He had no sooner sat down than he began to examine everything carefully—asking a thousand questions about each article in its turn; but when he came to the *bottle*, his curiosity reached the climax! Picking it up, he looked at it with the gravest scrutiny, turned it upside down several times, shook it vigorously, then asked, with the most solemn unction:

"For heaven's sake, Scanton, tell me, what, in the world, does this here bottle contain?" But before the question was answered another knock was heard at the door, through which, on being opened, Lowley dashed into the room, panting—almost out of breath.

Willinger saw at once that something unexpected had happened, and so he exclaimed outright :

“Holy Gee, Lowley!—what, in the devil, is the matter with you now? Why, bless my soul, you’re as pale as a ghost! Has anything gone wrong since I saw you last? Or perhaps your present excitement is due mainly to your having come in suddenly for a legacy, and are here now,” he added jocularly, “to tell us of your good fortune”; in reply to which Lowley pulled a newspaper from his pocket, and, pointing to an article headed, in great big type, WARNING, said nervously: “There you are, my good fellow—read *that!*”. And this is what the paper said :

“People here and abroad are hereby warned against going to the Isthmus of Panama to seek positions at this particular juncture; for work in real true earnest has not yet begun on the Canal; preliminary surveys, sanitation and organization are the principal features of work engaging attention to-day. It might also be stated that labor is plentiful, with little or no demand. In the higher grades of employment, nothing is offering; trade is dull, and the Merchants are crying out bitterly;

the time, therefore, has not yet come to go to the Isthmus, and we advise people to stay where they are until conditions are settled, due and timely notice of which will be given to our readers.

All of this Willinger read without a ruffle on his countenance; then he quickly turned to Lowley and remarked reprovingly:

“Jim, old chap, it takes mighty little to scare *you*, I see; why, you’re shaking like a jelly-fish! Got the Chagres fever already? You certainly don’t mean to tell me that you take any stock in that blood and thunder newspaper talk, do you? Nonsense, man! I’m really surprised at you! Anyhow, your not going will cut no figure with me, I can tell you; for sure as you stand there, *I* have made up my mind to go, come what may!”

For a moment Lowley was full of dumb astonishment at what he considered to be the rash determination of Willinger, for whom he felt such keen anxiety that cold beads of perspiration rolled down his forehead—bead after bead; but, finally, he braced himself up and said with a nervous tremor in his voice:

“Charlie, I’m not exactly afraid to go; but that article which you’ve just read gives good reason enough why we should not start for the Isthmus now. It would be all very well and good,” he continued, by way of emphasizing the gravity of the situation, “were we both sure of striking something as soon as we got there; but you see there is no certainty about that, and there’s just where the entire difficulty lies! Nineteen hundred and seventy miles is a long way to go, my good fellow, in search of work and then find nothing but disappointment. No, sir! New York City is a good enough place for me just at this present moment; I’m in no hurry; the Isthmus can wait a bit yet for me, Charlie; so count me out of your mad scheme, for I cannot call it anything else. Why, hang it,” continued Lowley, who by this had been wound up to a pitch of nervous excitement on the subject, “don’t you remember what Scanton told us the other day about *Monkey Hill*, and how they used to dump the dead there when there was no money to pay for a decent Christian burial?

Gee!" he exclaimed with a shudder, and a cold feeling running all down his back, "I fancy I see that horrible black coffin now before me with its incongruous inscription on top, '*Pobre Solemnidad.*'"

Here, Scanton, who had been listening patiently, unable to restrain himself any longer, went off into a loud peal of laughter that shook his very frame. Then, by way of prefacing what he had resolved in his mind to say, he stretched himself out to his full length, drew his waistcoat down, peered into the troubled depths of Lowley's eyes, and, gazing upon the bottle that lay upon the table among the "curios," said in a serious tone of voice:

"Jim, old boy, don't worry about that coffin story any longer; those will be things of the past, you bet, as soon as Uncle Sam gets a-hold of things on the Isthmus; but, say, that isn't your real trouble; what's the matter with you is this: you need a tonic badly"; and with this Scanton walked across the floor to a little cupboard that stood in one corner of the room, and took

from it a small flask of good old rye, which he held up to his company saying:

“Now, boys, come along; draw your chairs closer to the table and have *one* with me! nothing like a good, stiff drop, I tell you, when a man is not feeling just up to the mark”; and as he said so, he passed the flask around until the three glasses glowed with the liquor. Lowley, who, it seems, had taken least of any, called for water immediately.

“Can’t take straight *booze* any more,” he protested; so Scanton quickly picked up from the table, the bottle he had brought with him from the Isthmus, tapped upon it approvingly; and, holding it over Lowley’s glass said:

“Here you are, old chap, the best water you ever drunk in your life! Talk about your Croton? Why, Jim, it isn’t a patch to this,” he said, his hand clutching the neck of the bottle. Now sing out ‘when’”. But the ‘When’ came after the liquor in Lowley’s glass had been drowned beneath an over-supply of water. Finally, all hands

clinked glasses together, and Scanton toasted his friends:

“Here’s looking at you, boys, and good luck to both of you!” whereupon the three men tossed their *tragos* down and resumed their seats at the table.

Settling himself again comfortably in his chair, Willinger pulled from his pocket a great, big “whackin” cheroot, which, after many attempts, he finally succeeded in lighting, at the cost, though, of a veritable carnage of lucifers! The “weed” lit, Willinger soon began to puff away for all he was worth, and puffed and puffed and puffed until at one time it seemed as if he’d need a plaster of monster draught at the back of his neck to help him do the “drawing.” It was a tough old proposition of a cheroot, that, but the man behind the smoke proved himself, at last, equal to the difficult undertaking. Willinger smoked complacently on, and listened to the interesting tales that Scanton told of the Isthmus; while Lowley sat quietly watching the columns of curling smoke that rose from Wil-

linger's cheroot up to the low-bent ceiling, till all of a sudden he sprang to his feet and broke out excitedly :

"Charlie, give me a pencil and some paper quickly—quick now, before I forget it all!"

His strange request complied with, Lowley laid the paper down on the table, ran the pencil deftly over it, till from the magic of his hand there grew upon the paper characters that were not altogether unfamiliar to Scanton, who wondered under what strange influence could the pictures have been so correctly conceived and printed; but when he remembered the *bottle*, the whole thing dawned upon him, and so he bothered his head no longer. Suddenly, his tracing done, Lowley raised his head and brought his hand down with such a thud upon the table that the glasses on it rattled, and the flask lost its equilibrium and no small portion of its liquor! Then Lowley proceeded, at once, to explain the meaning of his apparent delight, which had cost him so much embarrassment.

“See here, Charlie,” he said, pointing to the figures on the paper, “this is what I’ve just seen in the wraiths of smoke from out that so-called cigar of yours—look at it, will you? Thousands of men at work digging the Canal; the great Culebra Cut teeming with life again; excavators and engines snorting and puffing and whistling in apparent delight over their resuscitation; the busy streets of Colon; the stores there crowded with customers.” Then Lowley, who, it was evident, had been vanquished completely, ceased his graphic description, drew in a long breath, and extended his hand across the table, saying:

“Put it there, Charlie! Hit or miss, I’m with you this time: I’ve made up my mind to go and cast my lot with you; so let’s call on the Skipper early in the morning and see if it cannot be arranged for us to work our way to the Isthmus.”

By this, Scanton could stand the suspense no longer: he had been amused listening all the while to the little laughable proceedings which had gone on between his

two visitors, and now he felt it was his turn to speak. So, with a smile of triumph that lighted up his whole countenance, he rose from his seat, and said with much deliberation:

“Lowley, I knew that *bottle*, or what was in it, would have fixed you all right—have never known the stuff to fail yet—it’s simply wonderful! I didn’t want you boys to go at the beginning; but I’ve thought the matter over, and have come to the conclusion that it will do you no harm to get a little knowledge of that new and interesting Republic, where you’ll have to drink more than enough of the water that has just worked such a strange and wonderful charm on Lowley!”

When Scanton had finished speaking, he saw a very puzzled look overclouding the faces of his two friends; but all that he would say as further explanation of the matter was:

“Boys, the water which you have just drunk, boasts of a legend as old as the very hills themselves. When you get to the Isth-

mus, talk to the men who have lived there for years and years, and they will tell you why they have gone and returned, and why it was that they just couldn't stay away."

But Willinger and Lowley were none the wiser after Scanton had got through speaking; and so, with the same puzzled look upon their faces, they left the room, and went their way home—both of them filled with the mystery of the water in the bottle.

IV.

The Monday morning that Willinger and Lowley had fixed to call upon the Skipper of the "——" to ask him to take them to Colon, dawned, at last, for these two men. It was, in sooth, a day mixed with hopes and fears for both of them; nevertheless they were up betimes, and out on the noisy streets, cheerfully going about, as they thought unto themselves, the very last mission of their lives! Finally they reached the pier at which the steamer was lying; and Willinger who, as it had been previously arranged, was to do the talking, left his friend on the dock and boarded the ship in search of the Captain, whom he soon found and told what he wanted—

"My good fellow," replied the Commander after Willinger had unburdened himself to him, "this is not the time for you to go to the Isthmus! Why, hang it, there

isn't a blessed thing doing there yet; and it seems to me you'd have sense enough to remain where you are rather than go to the Isthmus at this unsettled stage of the game; but, of course, it's just like the rest of you people up here: you imagine because a Commission and a few civil engineers have gone to Colon that work on the Canal is in full blast already; but you never made such a mistake in all your life, I can tell you! The fact is, in my opinion, it will be some months yet before anything in the shape of Canal work proper will be attempted; therefore, be advised by me and stay where you are for the present." To all of which the undaunted and persistent pleader, by way of answer, opened up another and more powerful onslaught of supplications, before the earnestness of which the Captain felt himself compelled to capitulate; for he finally consented to include the two men on the ship's papers that voyage.

The interview over, Willinger left the steamer, whistling, "For he's a jolly good fellow," by way, no doubt, of eulogizing the

captain and giving expression to the satisfaction he more or less felt over the result of his much dreamt-of mission; for when he stepped from the gang-plank on to the dock, his face was lighted with smiles as he said to Lowley:

“It’s all fixed, Jim, we’re to be on board to-morrow morning at 9 o’clock sharp; the boat sails at 1 p. m., and we’re to go before the mast——”

“Go before the mast!” exclaimed Lowley in a voice of unmistakable terror, as he stepped back a pace or two and began to turn his hands over, over and over again, by way, it seemed, of protesting against their performing such menial service as the one that had been assigned to them.

“Why, yes, Jim, and what about it?—better men than you and I, I can assure you,” said Willinger philosophically, “have done the selfsame thing at one time in their lives, and considered it no disgrace at all—tut!—tut!—tut, man! What, in the name of heaven, did you expect anyhow? You, certainly, didn’t think, for a moment, that you

were going to occupy the Skipper's state-room, and his seat at the saloon-table—did you? If you did, say, 'forget it' at once! May going before the mast, my boy, be all the harm that might attend us in this undertaking of ours; so, come on now, and quit fooling with your hands, which, let us admit, are beautiful and tender, if by so doing, it will give you pleasure. And yet, perhaps, it would be better if you looked instead upon the cheerful side of things, and believe, despite of present conditions, that all will be well at the end"; after which little exhortation, off they both went to tell Scanton that they were sailing the next day for the Isthmus—the new El Dorado.

V.

It was in the month of April, 1904; the sun was shining brilliantly, silvering everything around New York City and the suburbs. The trees along the streets and avenues had just begun to rehabilitate themselves with infant leaves and summer bloom on every bough. On the sidewalks, the tiny sparrows skipped and hopped, and twittered a merry song as Willinger and Lowly leisurely went their way towards the steamer.

Stopping upon the road once to take in, so to speak, a last look of their late surroundings, Willinger remarked in a voice that smacked of forced cheerfulness:

“That’s right, Jim; take in all the sights while you have the chance of doing so; for we don’t know when we’ll ever be this side of the world again! Then again, where we’re going to, we won’t come across anything like that sky-scraper before you now; neither will we find L’s there at all—only

apologies for coaches, drawn by horses, like the one of Mark Twain's creation—hat-racks! But that is neither here nor there to either of us; so let's be moving"; with which command, they both resumed their journey and did not stop again until they reached the pier, where they found Scanton waiting for them.

"Well, boys," he said, "I've come to wish good-bye and God-speed to both of you. Keep a stiff upper lip, Jim; and, say, don't you put up such an ugly face as that, when you are just about to cross the waters—it's bad luck, and enough to stir the wrath of all the storms pent up in the four quarters of heaven! So, brace up now, and get aboard cheerfully," advised Scanton, who remained on the steamer with his two friends until the last gong was sounded, and a coarse sailor-voice yelled out shrilly:

"All ashore that ain't a-going to Colon!" Then everything on deck was bustle and confusion; everybody ran to and fro excitedly, jostling against each other in their mad, sad endeavor to get their share of farewell kisses

and hand-shakes, which came to an abrupt halt when the ship sounded a shrill blast of her whistle, that stirred some hearts with emotion! Then followed the handkerchief season, and not a few tears were shed. Finally the last gang-plank was lowered, and the Captain on the bridge, sang out at the top of his voice:

“Le’ go your stern line!” To which command the answer came back promptly:

“All clear aft, sir!” following which, another deep blast of the ship’s whistle was heard, as the steamer moved slowly and majestically out to sea, midst the waving of hats and handkerchiefs from all, Scanton doing his share of it to his two outgoing friends, who had just begun the first chapter of their Isthmus adventure.