CHAPTER X.

LIEUTENANT STERLING'S SECRET MISSION

LIEUTENANT Derrick Sterling leaned back in his chair, folded his arms, and slowly repeated his statement.

“No, you’re not out of a job, Standish! You are going with me!”

Rod stared across at his new-found friend with a bewilderment so intense that the other burst into a peal of laughter.

“Can you be ready to leave Colon at day-break in the morning?” Sterling continued with a twinkle.

“I can go tonight, if necessary,” Rod said, recovering himself, “but I would be immensely obliged to you if you would make your meaning clear enough to penetrate this befuddled head of mine!”

Sterling kicked aside his chair, and walked slowly across the veranda and back before he replied.

“To put it bluntly, Standish, I am on a secret mission for Uncle Sam!”

Rod stared.
"Doesn't that sound theatrical, though? Fact of the matter is, old man, that I'm rather impulsive, but I flatter myself that I can size up a chap that's true blue, and I know you won't betray my confidence. I presume the policy of wisdom for me would be to keep my lips closed, but I'm going to break away from it for once and give you my story. Of course, you have heard of the famous French engineer, De Lesseps?"

Rod nodded. "The man that built the Suez Canal?"

"Yes, and the man that tried to build the Panama Canal later, and failed. That was back in 1879, and his failure cost the French people something like a cool million francs!"

Rod whistled. "But what has that got to do with you and me?"

"I'm coming to that. De Lesseps came over to Panama with a flourish of trumpets and an army of men and scores of ship-loads of machinery and supplies. When the project finally fell through and the Canal was given up, practically all of the equipment was abandoned. Some of it was left in the heart of the jungle and was ruined by the weather. It was expensive machinery, and good machinery. The French are clever engineers, let me tell you. We can't improve much on most of De Lesseps' equipment
even today. Now I have finally reached the point of my story, as you will see in a minute.

"We have found that part of De Lesseps' machinery, in spite of the rust, can still be made over so that it can be utilized in the present construction work of the Canal, and save hundreds of dollars. Of course, lots of the machinery is worthless. And then lots of it has disappeared."

"Disappeared?" echoed Rod. "How?"

"Buried in the jungle! The Panama foliage is so dense and thick that you can almost see it grow. I have cut my way through jungle so heavy and tangled that it seemed to be fighting you like the claws of a wild animal. If it hadn't been for my machete, I would have been absolutely helpless. I could not have been more of a prisoner in that foliage if I had been bound with ropes. If a piece of machinery—I mean a good-sized piece—were left in the jungle for any length of time, even for a year, it would be buried by the underbrush almost as thoroughly as though the earth had swallowed it! Oh, I'm not exaggerating!" Sterling broke off, noticing Rod's glance of incredulity. "Last year, a party of American engineers were prospecting not far from Culbra. The old French map of De Lesseps showed the site of a construction camp in the neighborhood, but no one
had been able to find it and it was concluded that there had been a mistake in the map. While the party were fighting their way through the jungle, one of the men tripped, and as he fell, his machete struck against something hard which gave forth a sound like iron. An investigation was made, and what do you think was discovered? The abandoned French village was found—consisting of over thirty buildings, some of them large barracks, and ware-houses. You must remember that over thirty years had elapsed since it had been inhabited. The jungle literally had swallowed it!"

"Go on," said Rod, "what is all this leading to?"

"Simply this. We have recovered a whole lot of the old French machinery, and have found it so good, as I said, that we always keep our eyes open for more. A short time ago, the Chief—that's Colonel George W. Goethals, in command of the Canal, you know—heard of a lot of abandoned French dredges lying up in the jungle above the mouth of the Chagres River. He was given to understand that the machinery was almost worthless. In fact, the man who carried the information to him wanted to buy the whole lot and dispose of it as old iron. The chief was about to close the deal when two things occurred which aroused his suspicions
that all was not right. One of these was the man’s eagerness to finish the transaction. The other was that the chief of police—Colonel George R. Stanton, a typical Rough Rider that you should meet on your first opportunity, Stan-dish—happened into the office one day and rec-ognized the man.

“Who was he?” asked Rod, who was deeply interested.

“You see, the chap’s name is Bulger—‘Big Bill’ Bulger, they call him down here. Stanton has known him or known of him for several years, and says he is one of the most unscrupulous men on the Isthmus. As soon as he heard about the affair of the dredges, he said that he wouldn’t take Bulger’s estimate of their value under oath—that if ‘Big Bill’ said they were worthless, you could bank on it that they would bring a handsome sum. The end of it all was that Colonel Goethals told Bulger that he would have to take a week longer to decide, and in the mean-time, he determined to make a thorough investi-gation of the whole affair for himself. Stanton is working night and day just now, and, any-way, his authority is confined to American terri-tory so that it might prove awkward for him to undertake an expedition beyond the bounds of the Canal Zone in his official capacity. As a solution of the problem, he was good enough
to suggest that the Chief send me. So I left Culebra this morning with a couple of picked men that Stanton let me have from his staff, ostensibly on a three or four days' hunting trip, my real purpose being to find that machinery, examine its condition, and discover just how far Bulger is lying.

"And, of course, he doesn't know anything about your expedition?" Rod queried.

"Not he! The Colonel is going to try to keep him in Culebra until I get back. It will be worth something to unmask the man, even apart from the possible value of the machinery, for although Stanton has suspected him of crookedness for a long time, he has always been clever enough to cover up his trail or else keep just within the law."

"If that is true," said Rod musingly, "and he should by any chance, learn of your plans, he might make things unpleasantly lively for you out there in the jungle. From what you tell me of the Panama thickets, he would surely have some excellent opportunities!"

"You don't mean to hint, Standish, that you are afraid?" And then at Rod's sudden flush, Sterling said quickly, "Forgive me, old man! I ought to have known better than to have made that remark, after the way you showed your mettle this morning. Can I count on you?"
Rod hesitated. "There is nothing I would like better, but—"

"But what?"

"There are two obstacles. By a peculiar chain of circumstances, which I may tell you about some day, the limit of my available cash assets at this moment is less than one dollar—yes, a good bit less, and I fancy that a trip such as you have in mind demands a peculiar equipment, which frankly I am not in a position to buy. Then again, you will understand, that I have simply got to find steady employment at the first moment possible, and I hardly imagine that either you or I will have steady work looking for old French machinery!"

Sterling looked grave. "Really, old man, I had no idea things were so bad, but I think I can relieve your mind and dispose of your objections—if you have mentioned them all—in just about two minutes. In the first place, I can furnish you with all of the equipment that you will need—most of it out of my own kit. You and I are just about of a size, I fancy, and I happen to be pretty well stocked up. In the second place, I am sure that the Chief will put you to work at once as soon as we get back, especially if our trip should save the government from being badly swindled. The Colonel is an old friend of my father's, Standish—they graduated to-
gether at the 'Point'—and he has a rather warm spot in his heart for me, in spite of my faults, which you will find are both numerous and varied. And then, you seem to be forgetting that you saved my life, and that I would be a cad not to stand by you!"

For a moment, Rod stared silently out over the railing toward the gray-blue surf of the Atlantic. As he turned he saw that Sterling was holding his hand out toward him, and that the customary twinkle in his eyes had given place to an unusual earnestness.

"As I told you before, Standish, I'm an impulsive chap, but, hang it all, old man, I like your grit, and I'd like to be chums! What do you say? Will you go?"

"I'll go!" said Rod simply.

Sterling joined him at the rail and unfolded a small pocket map. "Now that's settled, I'll explain something of our line of march. This dot here is Colon. Over at the right there is the Chagres. You can see where it empties into the Atlantic," he said as Rod bent over his shoulders. "From what I understand, we should locate the lost machinery on the right bank of the river, possibly eight or ten miles from the mouth. Do you see the black spot here?" Sterling asked, indicating a point perhaps ten miles northwest of Colon. "This is Gatun, which is
famous as the site of one of the most wonderful engineering feats in the world. That is the great dam, which you know—or probably don’t know—is to make the Chagres River into a monster artificial lake, over a hundred miles square!”

“A hundred miles square!” gasped Rod. “And is that to be a part of the Canal?”

“One of the principal parts. I will tell you all about that later when we strike Gatun. Talk about the Pyramids of Egypt! Why, my boy, you will think you have been taken back to the genii of the Arabian Nights when you see some of the little stunts that American engineers are doing down here in the Panama jungle. It makes me proud that I’m an American and an engineer, even if I am only on the tag end of the Big Job, myself!”

Rod’s eyes sparkled, and he bent over the map again. Would he ever have the right to call himself an engineer? he asked himself wistfully.

“But to get back to our route,” continued Sterling. “Here are two ways we could proceed. We could either take a launch and skirt around the Atlantic Coast line to the Chagres, and then beat our way up the river, or we could take the Panama Railroad to Gatun, and follow the river down through the jungle. You see, we will find the machinery somewhere between Gatun and the coast. I am inclined to the opinion
that this is much the better course for us to take, for two reasons. It is, of course, shorter and more direct, and then I imagine that after we reach the river, a boat will hamper rather than help us. If the dredges are located in the way Bulger describes, you could hardly find them from the water, and would have to leave the boat anyway and take to the brush. Have I made myself clear?"

"Quite clear!" Rod said.

"Then we will take the first train for Gatun in the morning!" Sterling snapped open his watch with an exclamation. "Jumping bull-frogs!" Rod was to find that this was the eccentric young lieutenant's favorite expression, and that, as the latter put it, he was able to give it fifty-seven separate and distinct shades of meaning! "Do you know what we have forgotten?"

"No, what?"

"That highly essential event of dinner. Come on, old man. I could eat even Panamanian cooking just now, myself!"

An hour later, Lieutenant Sterling pushed back his chair from the hotel table with a sigh of contentment. Rod had almost forgotten his food in a study of the novel characters around them. To the youth from Boston, they were of far greater interest than his meal, hungry
as he was. It was a typical border-crowd of the American tropics. Steel-muscled, sun-browned men in Panama hats and in khaki leggings, rubbed elbows with slow-moving, indolent diners in cool, neatly pressed white duck. The former had an odd habit of clipping their words, and their movements suggested the leader accustomed to command. It was with almost open contempt that they gazed at their languid, lounging neighbors, sipping iced "Rola" and complaining of the heat.

"I'll venture to say that you've never taken dinner in a more curious crowd than this!" said Sterling grinning.

"That is what I was thinking," responded Rod. "Are most of these men employed on the Canal?"

"Very few of them. The majority are what you might term real soldiers of fortune,—tropical tramps, always on the search for fortune, or adventure. To do them justice, I think most of them would rather have the adventure than the fortune. The story of their lives would make a book more interesting than fiction."

Rod thought of his father's knock-about career in the queer, unknown corners of the globe. Were these the men that had shared his dangers and hardships?

"True blue, every one of them!" said Sterling emphatically. "Rough in appearance, perhaps,
but they would give their last cent, yes, and their lives just as willingly, for a friend!"

“What is their chief occupation?”

“Most of them have several. They are on the hunt for gold one year, and the next year are helping to build a bridge or a railroad somewhere off in the jungle. Or they may be taking part in a revolution in one of those tea-cup republics down here that have one of those little events every other week—but not one of them would draw his gun in a dishonest cause. I could tell you a dozen stories of how they had refused to sell their services to a man or a government that they were convinced was not fighting fair.”

Rod’s eyes flashed. It all seemed like an echo of the stories of his father that used to arouse his enthusiasm in the old jaunts around Boston. He wondered if any of those wind-tanned, hard-muscled men would know the name of Captain Standish?

“Now for the other side of the picture,” continued Sterling with a smile. “I mean our neighbors in white duck, who seem more fitted to hold a fan than a gun. They are mostly native planters and speculators, who have so many slaves to run at their nod that it has become almost an effort for them to do their own breathing. Some of them are from the Panama Sa-
vannahs, some from Jamaica, and I dare say many of them from Columbia and Brazil. When they are not indulging in a siesta, they spend most of the day sipping black coffee. But I say, Standish, I want to show you something more of Colon and Cristobal. A stroll will do both of us good.”

Rod rose to his feet and followed his companion as they threaded their way among the little square tables toward the door. When they reached Front Street, Sterling hesitated undecidedly and then turned back toward the boundary of Christobal and the Atlantic docks:

“As a matter of fact, there are only two real points of interest here,” he said as Rod fell into step. “One of them is the statue of our old friend, Christopher Columbus. And the other is the house that De Lesseps occupied during his residence in Panama. We’ll call it ‘De Lesseps’ Palace,’ and while it will fall a whole lot below your ideas of a palace, yet when viewed from the stand-point of Colon its name is pretty well justified. The French are always great on luxury, you know. I have heard that in the old French and Indian wars on the frontier, the French officers carried perfume and powder even on the roughest marches!”

“Hello there, Mr. Sterling! Don’t you speak to your friends?”
The two whirled as a rough voice hailed them from the doorway of a corner curio store. A red-faced man in a huge Panama hat and greasy khaki leggins stood lounging in the entrance and grinning at the lieutenant in a manner that disclosed two rows of very yellow, very uneven teeth. Sterling was close under six feet in height, himself, but the other towered several inches above him, the effect of his immense stature increased by his broad-brimmed hat so that he looked a veritable giant.
CHAPTER XI.

A COUNCIL OF WAR

THE lieutenant flushed at the noisy greeting and half drew back as the man swaggered toward them, holding out a hairy hand with a deepening of his grin.

“Shake, Mr. Sterling!”

The lieutenant’s shoulders stiffened, and the hard, grim look Rod had seen on his face when his runaway horse was plunging toward the rearing mule team, settled around the corners of his mouth.

“You must excuse me!”

The giant threw back his head with a boisterous laugh.

“So the dandy young lieutenant won’t shake hands with ‘Big Bill’ Bulger, eh!”

The sudden revelation of the man’s identity did not surprise Rod. Instinctively he edged nearer to his friend.

“By the way, lieutenant,” Bulger continued, still laughing as though he regarded the whole affair as a joke, “I understand you are leaving
on a little hunting trip. Can I be of any service?"

"Not the slightest!" Sterling said stiffly. For the first time, an uneasy suspicion suggested itself to him. Was Bulger's presence in Colon something more than chance? Could it be that the man was following him?

Bulger's laugh ceased suddenly, so suddenly as to suggest that it had largely been forced.

"I know the jungle as well as any man in Panama, lieutenant, especially the Chagres River section." Sterling flushed at the emphasis on the Chagres River, although Bulger gave no sign that he noticed it. "I think I can give you some useful hints. Would you mind telling me where you are going?"

"Really, Mr. Bulger, that is my affair. I don't see what possible interest that can have for you! I am in a hurry just now, anyway. Come on, Standish."

Sterling turned away with a fine assumption of indifference. As Rod followed him, he saw that Bulger's grin had been succeeded by an ugly, menacing scowl, showing his yellow, uneven teeth more vividly than ever. Bulger raised his voice, with a harsh, venomous rasp which he did not try to hide.

"Never mind, Lieutenant Derrick Sterling. I know just where you are bound for just as
well as you do! And let me tell you, that’s a dangerous piece of jungle down there, a mighty dangerous piece, for an untamed West Point youngster like you!” Sterling’s hands clinched, but he did not turn nor respond. For the rest of the block, the two walked without speaking. It was Rod that broke the silence.

“Do you think he has found out your errand, Sterling?”

“I’m sure of it!” was the grim reply. “I’d give something to know how he did it!”

“I’m afraid you have made a bad enemy, old man.”

“I don’t care for that. A man like Bulger is generally a coward. But one thing is certain, Standish.”

“What’s that?”

“Bulger has a whole lot at stake, or he wouldn’t make such an effort to follow me. I think I’ll find Stantons’ men, Brady and Dundy, and explain the new development in the situation.”

“Do you think Bulger knows them?”

“I hardly think so. They are both new in the force, but it doesn’t make much difference. It’s just as well that he should understand that we are not alone. It’s a good thing, sometimes, to impress the enemy with your strength. Are you beginning to be sorry for your bargain, Standish?”
“Not I! I came of a fighting stock, Sterling, and, anyway, I’d be worse than a coward to desert you now! Don’t you think it would be wise to look up your men now and let the sight-seeing go? I can do that any time, you know.”

Sterling nodded thoughtfully, and they abruptly changed their course. The lieutenant had arranged to communicate with the two police officers by telephone at the Cristobal headquarters if he should need them. Stanton had suggested that Sterling, himself, should not call at the building unless absolutely necessary, in order to keep a possible suspicion of their cooperation from being noised abroad. The young officer stepped into a telephone booth, and directed Brady and Dundy to join him at the Y. M. C. A. Club building. The men were so prompt in their response that Sterling and Rod found them already awaiting them, when they turned up the steps.

The four made their way to the second-floor veranda, and found a deserted corner, out of ear-shot of the groups of men that filled the building. It was a spot admirably adapted for a council of war, and into such, the discussion speedily resolved itself, after Sterling had introduced Rod to his companions.

“Standish, did you say?” repeated Dundy as he took the lad’s hand.” I don’t imagine you
are any relation to Captain Ralph Standish, are you?"

"He was my father," said Rod.

"Your father? Well, this is a real pleasure! I was with your dad for two years in Nicuaruga, boy. Haven't you ever heard him tell of Jack Dundy and the big boa? I believe it was the largest and the meanest snake that ever wound around a tree, Brady! The thing got me on the edge of camp one rainy evening when I was hunting dry twigs to keep the coffee boiling. Before I knew what was happening, I was backed up against a tree, with three of the boa's coils around me and feeling as though some one had shut a folding bed up over me. If it hadn't been for Captain Standish, I reckon that Stanton would have assigned you another man for this little hunting trip of yours, lieutenant!"

"He never told me the story," said Rod thoughtfully. "What did he do?"

"No, it wouldn't be like him to tell the yarn," said Dundy, "the way he ended it. He heard my yell and came on the jump. When he saw the situation, he raised his rifle and banged away. But he missed clean, and it was his last bullet. I thought it was all up with me and shut my eyes to keep out the sight of the snake's waving head. The next thing I knew there was a shout and
a dull, heavy thud and that awful weight was off my chest. I drew a long breath of the sweetest air I have ever tasted, and looked around me like a chap that has just come out of a nightmare. The snake was lying in a limp, squirming circle on the ground and its head was beaten to a pulp. What do you think Captain Standish had done? He had jumped on that thing with his clubbed rifle,—yes, sir, gentlemen, with his clubbed rifle! There must have been a fight for a minute or two that would have made Hercules stiffen up. When it was over, the stock of his gun and the head of the snake were both finished!”

Dundy drew a deep breath, “I got him a new rifle when we struck a settlement, and we always called it the ‘snake gun’! Did you ever see it, Mr. Standish?”

“Yes,” said Rod, with a catch in his voice, “but he never told me how he got it. I have it with his things now.”

“Where is he? You don’t mean to tell me that—”

“He’s dead, Mr. Dundy. It’s been nearly a month now. I’d rather not talk about it for awhile, if you please.”

Dundy suddenly bared his head and reached over and clapped the boy on the shoulder.

“I understand, lad. There are a lot of chaps
in the tropics—you might think them a little rough, but they're white clean through!—who will feel an empty place in their hearts when they hear that. So you are Standish's boy? Well, you've got his eyes, and that trick of closing your mouth is his, too, I'm mighty glad we are going to be together on this jaunt of Sterling's. I have an idea that before we get back, we'll be a whole lot better acquainted."

"When I tell you my piece of news, Dundy, I fancy you will make that prophecy even stronger," said Sterling grimly. "Bill Bulger is shadowing us!"

Dundy gave a prolonged whistle, and Brady, the silent, who never spoke when he could make signs serve the purpose, brought his hand down onto his knee with a sharp smack.

"I fancied the news would stir you a bit," continued Sterling, who rapidly narrated the story of the encounter in front of the hotel. "What do you make of it, Dundy?" he queried as he finished.

Dundy pondered the question reflectingly. "He means mischief, lieutenant, and when 'Big Bill' means mischief, it is just as well to keep the storm signals up. I imagine he must have lost his temper when you left him, or he never in the world would have shown his hand the way he did. What do you say, Brady?"
Brady tipped back in his chair, gazed thoughtfully at the toes of his shoes as though seeking inspiration from their square corners, and nodded his head slowly and solemnly.

"Bulger is a coward," continued Dundy, as he saw that his comrade had finished his contribution to the subject. "But sometimes a coward is more to be feared than a braver man. Bulger fights from behind a tree, where you can't see him. If he came out into the open, we wouldn't have nearly so much cause for alarm."

"Do you think he will follow us to Gatun?" asked Sterling.

"I wouldn't be surprised if we didn't see him again until we reached the jungle. He's much too cunning to show himself any more than he can help until we get away from the settlements. Just the same, if I have sized up my man right—and I will stake my twenty years of service that I have—he will know every one of our movements from now on. Bulger won't take any chances on our stealing a march. He's playing for a big stake, whatever it is, and unless he's blinder than a bat, he begins to see now that the government is suspicious of him."

"Do you think that he knows you and Brady are in our party?"

"He knows it now if he didn't know it before!" was the emphatic reply.
The lieutenant sat in a brown study for a moment. "Are there any changes in our plans that you would suggest, Dundy?"

"I don’t think it would do us any good if we did make any changes. Bulger knows our destination, and if we don’t hear from him before, we are bound to find him there. If those dredges are really valuable—and I am confident now that they are—'Big Bill' won’t leave a stone unturned to prevent our finding them. But he can’t stop us from reaching the jungle, and I don’t think he will try. Besides, that isn’t his game. It would be too risky. He will wait until we are beyond a settlement before he strikes. Then look out for war!"

Sterling rose to his feet. "Well, we will be ready to start in the morning, men. I have had my orders from the Chief, and I intend to put them through—Bulger, or no Bulger! We’ll meet you at the station for the first train, and unless something I have not figured on turns up, we ought to be well down the Chagres by this time tomorrow."

"That’s the spirit, lieutenant," said Dundy heartily. "And you can count on Brady and myself at your shoulders whenever you give the word to march!"

"Thank you," said Sterling gratefully.

Brady shook the young officer’s hand, repeated
the action with Rod, and then with the air of a man who has sufficiently declared himself, disappeared through the doorway at Dundy’s heels. Under Sterling’s guidance, Rod found the remainder of the afternoon lively enough to satisfy even his restless spirit. The lieutenant jotted down a list of the various items of equipment which he needed on the trip, and insisted on supplying those which Rod’s stock did not contain, from his own supply. The lad had brought his rifle and hunting outfit from Boston, and as both had been bought under the direction of his father’s expert eye, they were not only of a substantial quality but thoroughly practical. The entire list, Sterling found did not contain a single unnecessary article, and on the other hand, nothing had been overlooked that could contribute to the comfort of the hunter, even to a waterproof poncho. Sterling’s eyes sparkled as he noticed an electric pocket lantern in the equipment.

“That article is apt to prove one of the most useful things you have brought, old man.”

“I was half tempted to leave it at home,” said Rod smiling. “You see I had no idea what I was going to strike down here, and I imagined I was bringing a lot of useless baggage along that would only be in the way.”

“Well, as far as I can see, you haven’t a use-
less article in the lot. You must have been in the woods before."

"I have been, said Rod dryly.

That evening as the two returned to their room in the hotel after a glimpse of Colon after dark—a decidedly dilapidated, straggling, uninviting Colon, too,—Rod asked the lieutenant thoughtfully, "I say, old man, can't you give me something about the history of the Canal? Of course, I've read a lot about it, but I feel that I have a personal interest in it now, and I would like to know more of the details than I do. I have an idea that you can give me a lot of curious information."

Sterling smiled. "You have struck me at my weakest point, or shall I say my strongest? I always did like to tell a yarn, Standish. Even when I was a youngster, they used to say that when I got thoroughly wound up, everybody else had to stop." The lieutenant changed his position to a rocker, and elevated his feet to a comfortable position on the edge of the table.

"The history of the Panama Canal," he said thoughtfully, "really begins with the adventure of the Man in the Cask."
CHAPTER XII.

MACHETE AND STEAM SHOVEL

"THE Man in the Cask," repeated Rod curiously. "That sounds interesting. I have read of the 'Man in the Iron Mask,' but I have to confess that I have never heard of the other gentleman."

The lieutenant chuckled. "Between you and me, I find him much the more entertaining of the two. But you are wrong when you say you have never heard of him. I dare say, however, you wouldn't recognize him by that name. Surely, you must be acquainted with the exploits of Balboa, soldier and sailor of fortune and discoverer of the Pacific Ocean?"

"Of course!" said Rod. "You don't mean to say—"

"That Balboa was the 'Man in the Cask'? Exactly. In the early years of the sixteenth century, Vasco Nunez de Balboa—how is that for a four-storied name, Standish?—was a swashbuckling Spanish adventurer, selling his sword wherever he could get the most for it. He was a typical soldier of fortune, a daredevil to his
finger tips, and his early exploits, before history ever heard of him, I imagine would fill a good-sized book. As was generally the case with a man of his type, he was heavily in debt, and finally his creditors began to press him so hard that his free and easy career was interrupted. In those times, a man who couldn't or wouldn't pay his debts could be thrown into prison and kept there. Balboa saw a dungeon yawning for him, and he made up his mind to leave Europe. Just then every one was talking of the fabulous wealth of the New World. Those were the days when people thought that gold could be picked up under the trees of America in buckets, and it was not strange that Balboa should become fired by the glittering tales that he heard. Before he could make his plans for a passage, however, his creditors learned of his intentions and he realized that the moment he tried to go aboard a ship he would be arrested. In this extremity, a friend came to his assistance.

"A disguise would hardly be effective enough under the circumstances, and it was hardly possible for Balboa to slip aboard as a castaway. His friend was quick-witted, however, and hit on no less an expedient than nailing the fugitive up in a wine-cask and storing him in the hold! Balboa was desperate enough to agree to anything, so a cask was made ready, and fitted with
a slender stock of provisions. A ship, bound for America, was chosen for the adventure and when her cargo was being carried on board, the cask with the imprisoned Balboa was taken over the side.

"It was not until the boat was two days at sea that Balboa worked his way out of his hiding place and appeared on deck. Then, of course, he was safe from danger of arrest. The narrowness of his escape was shown by the fact that his creditors, not content with an inspection of the passengers and crew, searched the boat from deck to hold, and more than once stumbled past the cask containing the man they sought."

"Was that the voyage that ended with the discovery of the Pacific?" asked Rod.

"Yes, but it was not until some time after his landing in Panama that Balboa undertook his expedition across the Isthmus. You see, the commander of the ship on which he had concealed himself was a friend of his, also a much-embarrassed Spanish adventurer by the name of Enciso, whose purpose was to cruise through the Indies and down the coast of South America on a treasure-hunt. Balboa joined his expedition, and was gone for over two years. His exploits during this period on land and sea brought him face to face with almost every
variety of danger from death by the poisoned arrows of the Indians to famine and shipwreck. Have you ever read Washington Irving's Life of Columbus and His Companions, Standish? No? Well, let me recommend it to you, old man, if you are as fond of adventure-stories as I am. It devotes several chapters to our friend, Balboa, and the early history of Panama that will surprise you.

"But to get back, or rather forward, to the discovery of the Pacific. The principal Central American colony at this time was at Darien. Enciso was put in command here when Balboa first reached the coast, but through jealousies among his officers, his power was weakened and he was finally deposed. Balboa stepped into his place, and Enciso returned to Spain to have his friends at court intercede for him. In the meantime, the Spaniards were inflamed by glowing tales from the Indian camp-fires of a wonderful sea still farther to the west that had never been reached by a white settler. Balboa, knowing that Enciso's influence at the Spanish court would place him in a dangerous position, determined to lead an expedition through the jungle in the hope of finding the strange western ocean and winning back the favor of the government at home by the discovery. Early in September of 1513 he made his start, accompanied by nearly
two hundred white men and a large force of Indians, with their funny hairless dogs, which are almost as useful to the native of the tropics as the Esquimeaux dogs are to the inhabitants of the Polar Zone.

"It was a dangerous line of march. Not only were they the first white men to penetrate the interior but they were hampered at almost every turn by the attacks of hostile Indians. The descendants of these Indians today, Standish, are the only unconquered tribe of red men on the American Continent and still successfully defend their territory from invasion, although it is hardly thirty miles from the line of the Canal. Sometime, if you will remind me, I'll tell you something of their present-day history.

"Balboa was obliged to fight more than one pitched battle, and lost scores of men in the engagements and was forced repeatedly to change his route. In the course of twenty days, he hardly averaged more than three or four miles a day, so you can understand how slow and tedious his progress must have been. It was the twenty-fifth of September, nearly a month after he had started, that one of his native guides pointed to a tall tree and told him in broken English that from its branches, the great western sea was visible. Whether Balboa believed the man or not, I don't know, but he made his way
up into the limbs, climbing higher and higher until away in the distance across the tangle of the jungle, the gray line of the Pacific came into view. I have often wondered, Standish, what his feelings must have been. Think of it, he was the first white man to gaze on the world's greatest ocean!"

"The water was only about twenty-five miles away. I have often walked that far in a day, myself, and yet how long do you imagine it took Balboa to reach it? Twenty-five days! The party had to chop every step of their way through a wall of trees and thickets so dense that it was almost like tunneling through solid earth. And it is that journey that really forms the first chapter in the history of the Panama Canal."

"What became of Balboa afterward?" asked Rod.

"The end that came to nine out of ten of those early explorers, whose deaths were as violent as their lives had been. You would think that a man who had made a discovery as great as Balboa's would have fame and fortune assured to him. But instead of riches and honors, in return for his wonderful exploit, he was beheaded."

"Beheaded!" echoed Rod incredulously.

Sterling nodded. "It happened like this. Enciso's friends never forgave him for the part he had played in that gentleman's downfall. One
of them, a man by the name of Pedrarias, was appointed governor of Panama, and made his headquarters in the old city of Panama, which later on was destroyed by pirates. He and Balboa clashed on a number of occasions, until finally Balboa determined to leave the country, and explore farther south. He had heard stories of the fabulous wealth of Peru, and fitted out a ship for the voyage down the Pacific.

"The day before he was to sail, Pedrarias, fearing that he would gain greater distinction if permitted to carry out his plan, arrested him on a trumped-up charge of treason. Curiously enough, the officer who took him into custody was none other than Pizarro, who a few years later was, himself, to undertake the very voyage that Balboa had planned. Had the latter been allowed to carry out his project, the chances are that he and not Pizarro, would have been the conqueror of Peru.

"Well, Balboa was thrown into prison and brought to trial before his friends could come to his assistance. The result, of course, was a foregone conclusion. He was found guilty and sentenced to death. The next day, in sight and sound of the great ocean of which he was the discoverer, he was led to the headsman's block, and his ill-fated life came to an end."

"When was the first real effort made to build
the Panama Canal?” ask Rod, as Sterling showed no disposition to break the silence. “I imagine that my question will make a jump three or four hundred years ahead of the days of Balboa, eh?”

“No at all!” was the surprising reply. “I know that the popular impression is that the Canal is a comparatively recent project, but history shows that men have been trying to dig it for over three hundred years. Even as far back as the sixteenth century, an artificial water-way between the Atlantic and Pacific was one of the dreams of the Central American colonists, and several surveying parties were even sent over from Europe to explore the wilderness. The difficulties of the work and the dangers of the jungle were so great that many men began to have a superstitious belief that the Lord did not want the oceans to be joined—that He had separated them, and, that it would be flying in the face of Providence to attempt to unite them.

After nearly fifty years of explorations in an attempt to find either a natural water-way or a site where a canal could be built, King Philip the Third, of Spain issued the most remarkable decree in the history of Panama.”

“What was that?”

“Nothing less than an edict, pronouncing the sentence of death on any man that sought to build a channel between the two oceans!”
"Good gracious!" gasped Rod. "Do you mean to tell me that digging the Panama Canal, or trying to dig it, was once a crime punishable by execution?"

"That is practically what it amounted to, yes. It is almost impossible for us to appreciate the power of superstition three hundred years ago. You must remember that long after that we were hanging women in the United States for witchcraft. It is a curious fact," continued the lieutenant, "that in the first years of the history of the Canal, one ruler threatened death to those who tried to build it, and in the last years—that is, getting down to present-day facts—another ruler is offering rewards and medals to the men who should dig it. I refer to President Roosevelt. You know he ordered a number of honor-medals made which are to be given to men who have spent a prescribed period in the Canal service. They are worth earning too, by the way. I wouldn't mind having one myself."

"After the early Spanish days," said Rod, "was the project of the Canal forgotten?"

"Nothing of any real importance was done toward reopening the subject for over two hundred years," was the answer. "In fact, the next chapter in the story of the Canal brings us down to modern times. In 1819, Panama achieved independence from Spain, and the subject of
the water-way again came to the front, receiving fresh impetus when the California gold fever of 'Forty-Nine' broke out and most of the pioneers were forced to make the long voyage down around Cape Horn in order to reach California from the eastern coast of the United States. It was not until De Lesseps undertook the project in 1879, however, that actual labor in the digging of the Canal began, although a half a dozen routes had been surveyed all the way from Nicaragua to southern Panama. When it was announced that De Lesseps was at the head of a giant company, formed in France for the purpose of building the Canal and that $175,000,000 had been secured for the work, the public believed that the water-way was finally to become a reality.

"For ten years, De Lesseps pushed his operations. The original estimate of $175,000,000 was increased to $260,000,000 but it was all to no purpose. The whole venture was frightfully mismanaged. De Lesseps was a good engineer, but a poor financier, and the men whom he placed in charge of his various departments, betrayed his trust in every direction. Vast sums were squandered and vast sums were stolen, and in the end, De Lesseps saw that while his attention had been confined to the mechanical features of the work, his company had been brought
to the verge of bankruptcy. Then again, the French neglected the proper protection of their health, and disease made fearful ravages in the ranks of the workmen. Panama at this time was one of the worst centers of malaria and yellow fever in the world, and it was nothing unusual for twenty-five and thirty men out of every hundred in the French employ to be killed every year by the jungle fevers! De Lesseps made a really splendid fight, even although it was marred by so much mismanagement and dishonesty, but in 1889, he was forced to acknowledge himself defeated, and he retired to France, leaving nothing but a blackened trail of disaster to tell the story of his ten years' labor.”

“Didn’t France make another effort to build the Canal later on?” asked Rod.

Another company was formed, but it never did any active work. When the United States, shortly after the Spanish-American war, decided to undertake the project, negotiations were opened by our government with the French corporation and the latter agreed to dispose of all of its equipment and rights on the Isthmus for the sum of $40,000,000.”

“Wasn’t this pretty stiff?”

“No, indeed. It was really a great bargain, and the American government accepted it without much discussion. A treaty was formed with
Panama which gave us a lease of territory ten miles in width, extending from the Atlantic to the Pacific, and work under the American flag was started as soon as possible. Without counting minor efforts, we are the third nation to undertake the Panama Canal. If we succeed, we will finish the work nearly four hundred years after the plan first entered the minds of men."

Sterling had removed his collar and kicked off his shoes during the latter part of his account. As Rod arose to follow his example, he saw with surprise that it was nearly eleven o'clock.

"When does the government expect to finish the Canal?" he asked.

"If the present rate of progress continues," replied Sterling, "the first ship ought to go through it early in the year 1915. But I am not going to answer another question tonight, old man. I have talked myself hoarse, and we've got to be up and doing by six o'clock if we want to make the first train to Gatun. I'll leave you to dream of steam shovels and dredges, and don't forget the dynamite! You will find that it is a big word down here. Good night!"