

Foster James H.

Captured by the Arabs



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CHAPTER I

Followed by Rascals

“**THE** Sahara Desert! Adventure! Exploration!” breathed Joe Lewis, as he sat with four companions on the deck of the steamer *Sylvania*, awaiting their first glimpse of North Africa.

“It’ll be wonderful!” muttered Bob Holton, who was also deeply touched. He, like his chum, had often pictured this mission into the heart of the vast expanse of sand. Soon it would be the real thing. Already the youth could feel his feet plod through the loose soil, could sense the delight of long traveling in a little-known land.

Dr. Kirshner, a noted archæologist, looked up from the book he was reading. His bronzed face took on a wide smile as he scrutinized the two young men.

“Got the old spirit, all right,” he said with twinkling eyes. “I suppose it came from that expedition in Brazil. Every explorer gets it sooner or later.”

“That’s right,” agreed Mr. Lewis, Joe’s father. “They say the main characteristic of a true explorer is his ability to sense the thrill of adventure.”

“Then we’re real explorers. Isn’t that right, Dad?” grinned Bob.

“We’?” asked Mr. Holton, trying to appear serious. “Where do you get that ‘we’ stuff? You and Joe have only bothered us on one expedition. We men have faced the scorching sun scores of times, and should by now have caught the true meaning of it all. But you boys – ”

“Wait a minute,” cut in Bob, determined not to be beaten so easily. “Where would you have been if it hadn’t been for Joe and me? It was our ingenuity that brought about the success of the expedition.”

“Well, I must say I hadn’t thought of that before,” laughed Mr. Holton.

“It’s true, all right.” Bob stoutly defended himself and his chum. “If you say the word I’ll prove it.”

Mr. Holton smiled. He took a great delight in arguing in a friendly manner with his son, although at times he was forced to admit defeat. This time he was satisfied to drop the matter and turn his eyes to the western sky, where the sun, a great ball of red fire, was sliding into the bluish waters of the Mediterranean. Gradually the ball faded from view, leaving a soft blue sky, which a moment later became streaked with long gold streamers. At last these became molded into one great mass of color and light, crossed and dotted with every hue of the rainbow. Slowly the spectacle faded from view, and the sky became a warm blue, out of which came countless glittering stars.

It was a wonderful sight, and although the adventurers had witnessed it several times before, they never seemed to tire of it. Bob and Joe especially were deeply stirred.

“Now that we’ve seen our last sunset on this voyage, suppose we get our belongings together,” said Mr. Holton, getting up from his chair. “It won’t be long until we reach Algiers.”

“And if what we’ve heard is true, it’s a wonderful city,” added Mr. Lewis. “Has the most unusual blend of things Arab and European on the globe. Monuments, mosques, palaces, everything and more that characterizes the spirit of North Africa.”

He arose and led the way up the deck to the cabin, where already people were gathering to await the first sight of land. Among the passengers were brightly garbed Egyptians, Algerians, Arabs, and many others with quaint and picturesque costumes. Everyone was in a gay mood, laughing and talking merrily. That is, all but two tall Arabs, whose quiet gaze was fixed on Bob,

Joe, and the others of the American expedition. That the men intended mischief was sensed by the boys, although their elders had caught no element of danger.

“Wonder what they want?” murmured Bob, in an undertone to his chum. “Fact is, I’ve noticed them before, but never said anything about it. They seem to follow us, for some reason or other.”

Joe nodded.

“I’ve thought the same thing,” he said quietly. “But as they made no move against us, I almost forgot about it till now.”

The youths said no more until they reached their stateroom, which was directly across the hall from that of their elders. As soon as their belongings were together, Bob decided to mention the matter to his father and friends.

“Ten to one they haven’t noticed these men,” he said to Joe, “and it might be best for us to put ’em wise.”

The youths found their companions preparing to leave for the deck and motioned for them to come in the room. Then Bob told of the actions of the two Arabs, pointing out that they probably had no good intentions.

The men listened closely, eager to get all the details. When the boys were finished, Mr. Lewis looked grave.

“They probably heard Dr. Kirshner mention the hidden treasure,” he said soberly, at the same time glancing about as if he expected to see the Arabs at the door.

“Hidden treasure? What treasure?” demanded Joe excitedly, while Bob looked up in surprise.

“It may only be a yarn,” replied Dr. Kirshner. “In fact I just heard about it this morning. An intelligent Arab with whom I made friends pointed out that he had definite information that there were great riches amassed in a cave in the heart of the Sahara Desert. It seems that they had been placed there by native tribesmen, or Tuaregs, who inhabited this region hundreds of years ago. Tuaregs even today are very fond of raiding caravans and small towns. Got it in their blood, I guess.” He paused a moment for breath, and Bob seized upon the opportunity.

“But why did the Arab tell you this?” he asked. “Didn’t he know – ”

“I know what you’re thinking,” the scientist interrupted. “You’re wondering why I got in on this. I did too at the start. But as soon as he had finished with the details, he told me that he was not equal to making the expedition alone and had no relatives or good friends to accompany him. He went on to say that few expeditions are sent out into those remote regions, and that he would gladly share the treasure with us if we would go with him.

“Now as this treasure cave is supposedly in the region that we intended to explore, your dads and I could see no reason for not taking him up. His services as a guide will also be invaluable.”

“But – but how does he know where to search?” questioned Joe Lewis, his tone indicating that he was greatly puzzled.

“He has a map,” returned the archæologist. “Got it from an old tribesman who was about to die. Whether or not it is accurate, we have yet to see – if nothing prevents us,” he added significantly.

“Nothing will – if we can help it,” said Bob, delighted at such an opportunity.

A few minutes later they lugged their possessions out on deck. And they were none too soon, for it was scarcely ten minutes later that the lights of land became visible – dimly, of course, but they were there.

“At last,” sighed Mr. Holton, who, although he enjoyed the long voyage, was anxious to reach his destination.

Although land was a great distance away, the adventurers went to the prow to catch a first glimpse of that mysterious country on which they would soon set foot.

Bob and Joe watched closely as the myriad of lights grew more plain. A stronger beam flashed from the Cape Matifou lighthouse, and numerous lights from ships in and about the harbor were

also visible. No more could be seen. But it was enough. Bob and Joe were convinced that Algiers was a charming city indeed.

“How large a place is it?” asked Joe, as the *Sylvania* neared the port.

“About two hundred and fifty thousand,” returned Mr. Holton. “And all different races, from Americans to Turks and Jews. Oh, we’ll see sights all right.”

Gradually the boat pulled into the harbor, reversed her engines, and stopped at a large dock. Then among lights the gangplank was lowered, and the boys and their elders soon found themselves among the many hurrying passengers. Lights were everywhere, almost as numerous as in an American city, and they had no trouble in finding their way to a hotel.

“Oh, by the way,” exclaimed Joe with a sudden recollection, “what became of your friend the Arab – the one who knows about the hidden treasure?”

“He’s at another hotel,” replied Dr. Kirshner. “I have his address on paper. We’ll go over there in the morning. He had already made reservations at this hostelry or would have put up with us.”

The remainder of that evening was spent quietly, for the explorers were tired after the long journey on the *Sylvania*.

Bob and Joe were up early the next morning, and after a small but satisfying breakfast they started out for a short walk. But they had scarcely covered a square when Joe, who had happened to glance back, stopped suddenly and nudged his friend.

Bob looked, and an answering expression of surprise and anger came on his face.

Walking slowly into the hotel were the two Arabs who had acted so suspiciously on the ship.

CHAPTER II

Scoundrels at Work

“**WHAT** do you suppose they want?” asked Joe, as the youths followed the movements of the Arabs.

“They’re not there for any good,” returned Bob, a look of anger, and at the same time anxiety, on his face. “Probably want to find that map that tells of the hidden treasure. Oh, of course it could be a coincidence that they picked the same hotel that we did, but it isn’t likely.”

The boys watched the suspicious characters until they disappeared into the hotel. Then Joe suggested that they cautiously follow.

“All right,” Bob agreed. “But we must be careful and not get too close. They might have guns and think nothing of using them, and they could probably get away in this country.”

Slowly the youths moved up to the entrance and peeped around the corner. Satisfied that there was no one in sight, they went inside.

“Nobody here but our dads and Dr. Kirshner,” observed Bob, glancing about. “I wonder if they noticed the Arabs?”

“Let’s ask them.”

The men had noticed the fellows, they said, but thought nothing about it. Why? Was anything wrong?

Bob explained that they were the two who had acted in a suspicious manner on the ship, and at once the scientists’ faces lightened.

“Come on,” urged Dr. Kirshner. “We can’t get there any too rapidly. When they find that we haven’t got the map, they’ll probably help themselves to money and anything else that happens to be lying about. They may even search other rooms.”

Hastily, and yet quietly, the boys and their elders went up the stairway. They were unarmed, their revolvers and other firearms having been left in their rooms. This might prove a handicap if the Arabs possessed weapons, but the Americans thought nothing of the risk they were taking.

“We’re five to two, even if we haven’t our guns,” said Bob, clinching his fists. “They’re likely to be shaken by numbers.”

But Dr. Kirshner, who knew the ways of these cunning natives, smiled grimly.

In a short time they reached the floor on which were their rooms and turned cautiously down the hall. With utmost care lest they be discovered, the explorers tiptoed up to their rooms.

Mr. Holton took the lead and glanced around the door into the room. A moment later his face scowled.

“What is it?” demanded Joe, in a whisper. “Are they inside?”

Mr. Holton shook his head.

“Worse than that,” he said solemnly. “Take a look.”

While the others are taking in the situation, it might be well to tell something about Bob Holton and Joe Lewis and, incidentally, their fathers.

Bob was a big, well-built youth of some eighteen years. He was particularly fond of adventure and life in the open, and always welcomed an opportunity that might bring about a realization of his desire.

Joe, who was about the same age, was of medium size and strength, with a naturally dark complexion that was now still further darkened by the tropical sun. He, like his friend, was fond of adventure, hunting and fishing and hiking whenever the opportunity presented itself.

The youths were together much of their time and agreed on practically every point. Their home was in Washington, D. C., where their fathers, Mr. Holton and Mr. Lewis, were employed as naturalists by a large museum.

A short time before, the youths were successful in persuading their fathers to take them on an expedition to unexplored Brazil. Here they helped the naturalists shoot and classify wild animals, birds, and reptiles and had many thrilling adventures with wild animals and savage Indians. How they fought hand-to-hand with a huge jaguar, barely prevented themselves from being crushed by a terrible anaconda, battled against rapids, and finally became lost and wandered for days in the world's greatest jungle are told in the first volume of this series, entitled, *Lost in the Wilds of Brazil*.

The boys spent the following winter finishing up in high school, and scarcely was graduation over when their fathers were requested by the museum to make an expedition to the Sahara Desert to collect specimens of any animal life that might be present in the remote interior. Dr. Kirshner, of whom something has been said, wished to accompany the naturalists to investigate the remains of ancient civilizations. At once Bob and Joe requested that they be taken also, and after careful consideration their elders at last consented. What the boys were particularly looking forward to was taking motion pictures of the desert, for they had been engaged by the Neuman Film Corporation to get many unusual scenes.

Less than a week later the expedition sailed on the steamer *Sylvania* and made the long voyage without any special incident.

Now let us return to the boys, as they advanced into their elders' room.

At once their mood changed, an expression of astonishment, later turning to anger, creeping over their faces.

Everything in the room was in the wildest disorder. Clothes, shoes, satchels, rifles, papers lay scattered about, the scene suggesting that a cyclone had visited the place. It was most deplorable, and the travelers stood for some time as if trying to catch the true meaning of it all.

Finally their anxiety caused them to move forward and inspect the belongings.

"Good thing we didn't have the treasure map," remarked Mr. Lewis, examining the contents of a small black bag. "It wouldn't be here now."

At the end of their inspection the explorers found that nothing had been taken from their belongings. It appeared that the crafty Arabs wished only the treasure map, and that, not being able to find it, they had left without any other spoils.

"They sure acted in wild haste," observed Mr. Holton. "It's almost impossible to see how all this could have been torn up so quickly. It wasn't five minutes from the time that you boys told of seeing the men that we were up here."

"Trust the Arabs to do that," said Dr. Kirshner, with a dry smile.

The scientists' possessions were placed back in their proper places, and then they went to inspect the room occupied by Bob and Joe.

"Probably nothing taken from here, either," was the opinion expressed by Mr. Holton, and he proved right, as they later found.

"This shows that these Arabs are desperate characters, and will probably stop at nothing," said Dr. Kirshner, after a moment of thought. "We must be extremely careful to lock everything up from now on. It may even mean that we'll have to watch ourselves, too."

"What do you mean?" asked Joe.

"Simply that they may try to kidnap one or all of us to get possession of the map," he replied in a low voice. "I know these natives. I've seen some of their actions before and feel sure that if these two men thought there was a good chance to get the map, they would try to do it."

"It may not be as easy as they think," said Bob, although he was a bit uneasy.

No more time was spent in the rooms, for they were all desirous of seeing more of the strange city and country.

“It might be wise to call on our Arabian friend first,” said Dr. Kirshner. “The one who knows about the treasure, I mean. We haven’t seen him since we left the ship last night, and he may be anxious to know what plans we have in mind.”

“Yes,” agreed Joe. “And while there we can warn him against these crooks. They may come on to him for the map, since they found that we haven’t it.”

First, however, the boys’ fathers and Dr. Kirshner wished to breakfast.

“And while they’re busy eating, suppose we go out,” suggested Joe. “We don’t need to stay but a few minutes.”

Bob agreed. He, like his friend, was anxious to observe the strangeness of this unusual city. If what he had heard was true, it would be something to be long remembered.

Out on the street the youths were at once impressed by the wide variety of races and costumes. Frenchmen, Italians, Spaniards, Mahonese, and Maltese all walked side by side, the majority in European garb. Arabs, or rather those who are commonly called Arabs, for they are a very mixed breed, sauntered along, clad in their long gowns and *hlafa*, which hung down over the face and sides of the head. Occasionally a Negro could be seen, although this was the exception rather than the rule.

“Sure have variety here,” smiled Joe. “There’s about every race imaginable present.”

In a short time the youths reached the Place du Gouvernement, or central square, and the busy scene of life was very interesting. On one side of the forum was the Mosque of Djema-el-Djedid and the Grand Mosquée, and on the others were stores, hotels, and cafés. Stretching away in the distance were the four great streets of the city.

Bob and Joe spent some time in one position, watching the throng of Arabs, soldiers, Jews, and others peculiar to this metropolis. Strange, the boys thought, that the people paid little or no attention to them. But this was probably due to the fact that hundreds of tourists visit the city each year.

“I’d like to visit some of the stores,” remarked Bob. “But we’d better get back to the hotel.”

“Yes. Our dads and Dr. Kirshner will probably be waiting for us.”

Reluctantly they made their way back and found that the scientists were ready to leave for the Arab friend’s hotel.

“We’ll trust that we’ll find him in his room, or in the lobby,” said Mr. Holton, as he and the others followed Dr. Kirshner.

“He’ll probably be there,” returned the archæologist. “He’s expecting us over this morning to talk over the best procedure to find the hidden treasure.”

The hotel in which the Arab was staying was but a short distance up the street and around the corner. The explorers were barely within sight of the building when a figure rushed madly out of the door and came toward them.

“Something the matter with that fellow?” asked Bob, surprised to see such haste from the native.

“Looks that way,” returned Mr. Holton. “He’s – By George! It’s our Arab friend. Wonder what has happened?”

A moment later the man was up to them, his face white, his hands trembling.

“The treasure map!” he cried in poor English. “It is gone!”

CHAPTER III

A Villainous Deed

AT the Arab's dread remark it seemed for a moment that the explorers were going to sink through the street. Dr. Kirshner reeled, and the perspiration came out on Mr. Holton's face. Mr. Lewis and the boys were spellbound.

Gone! Hundreds of dollars – yes, thousands. After all this anticipating the good fortune of finding the supposedly hidden treasure. The explorers could hardly believe it.

At last Dr. Kirshner got a grip on himself.

“Do you have any idea where the thieves went?” he asked of the Arab, whose name was Fekmah.

“No,” was the reply. “They have complete disappeared. I try see where they go, but could not. They gone when I got to my room.”

“When did you first notice that the map had been taken?” inquired Bob in an anxious voice.

“No more than ten minutes ago,” Fekmah answered. “I had gone out to stay but a moment, and when came back to my room the door open and map gone. I run around to back and look out, but they gone.”

“Gone!” echoed Mr. Lewis. “We should have warned Fekmah to be on the lookout. If Bob and Joe had discovered the suspicious actions of the rascals sooner, it would have given us time to do so. But the fact that nothing strange was noticed till the night we were to reach port gave us no time to tell it.”

“So you knew?” asked the Arab friend. “You knew that robbers were after the map?”

Dr. Kirshner nodded.

“They broke into our rooms this morning, but when they couldn't find the map they left without taking anything else,” he said. “We were just going over to warn you to be on the lookout and guard the map closely when we saw you.”

The Arab scowled and gritted his teeth.

“Allah curse them!” he exclaimed, vexed all the more because of almost but not quite knowing in time. “It's too late now to find them, and they prob'ly gone by now.”

“Gone where?” asked Mr. Holton.

Fekmah spread his hands apart in a wide gesture and then pointed to the south.

“To get treasure,” he said quietly.

“Then we'll get there first!” exclaimed Dr. Kirshner. “No thieves will get ahead of us. I think it might be well to start on the journey at once – that is, if you can go that soon,” he said to the Arab, who nodded.

“But how will we know where to go without the map?” asked Mr. Lewis.

“I have general idea,” Fekmah returned. “I studied it so much that know about where go. And I can leave any time.”

“Fine!” blurted out Dr. Kirshner. “We'll get our belongings together and leave tomorrow. But first let me introduce my friends. I don't believe you're acquainted with them,” and he proceeded to introduce the Arab to Mr. Holton, Mr. Lewis, and Bob and Joe.

“Now let us all come up to my room,” said Fekmah. “We can talk over plans for the treasure search. There are much things you should know.”

They walked on up the street to a comparatively large building and were led in the door and up the stairs by Fekmah.

“So this is the hotel where he's staying,” said Bob, casting eager eyes about the place.

“Sure is luxurious,” remarked Joe. “It's the best in town.”

The Arab's room was halfway down the hall, and to it they went.

"Now sit down," directed Fekmah, "and we will talk things over."

They did so and then made ready for what the Arab had to say.

There was a short silence. Then Fekmah resumed the conversation.

"Like Dr. Kirshner said, we should leave at once if expect to find the hidden riches before the thieves get ahead of us," he began, showing an unusual ability to speak English correctly. "There are two routes we can take to get to the edge of the desert. We can take the railroad to Oran and then to Figuig, or can get on train to Wargla." He moved over to a small satchel and took out a cloth map, which he unfolded and laid on a small table that was in the middle of the room. The map was French, and although the naturalists and their sons had a slight knowledge of that language, Dr. Kirshner and Fekmah were the only ones who knew it thoroughly.

"I think we can make out enough to satisfy ourselves, though," said Mr. Holton.

The Arab traced the one route and then the other, pointing out the possibilities of each one. The object was to take a train to the farthest point in the desert possible and start the expedition from there on camelback.

"Now," continued Fekmah, "our destination is the Ahaggar Mountains. They are about seventeen hundred kilometers (about a thousand miles) from here. From what we measured, the best route is to go to Wargla and get camels from there. What you think?"

"I believe you're right," returned Dr. Kirshner. "That route is much shorter, and we'll have less difficulty in finding our way from Wargla than from Figuig. Nearly all expeditions depart from Wargla, and there are numerous small settlements on the way to the Ahaggar Mountains. Can we get a train in the morning?"

The Arab nodded.

"There about three trains a day out," he said. "I believe one leaves in morning, so we can get there easy."

"Fine!" exclaimed Mr. Lewis. "Then we'll leave now and get packed and be here for you early in the morning."

Fekmah bowed.

"And I will make the stolen map over again from memory, as near as can," he said.

They bade the Arab good-bye and left the hotel to get their belongings together. If they were to leave for the Sahara the next morning, a great deal of packing would have to be done.

"Don't suppose there's any use trying to find the thieves, is there?" asked Joe, as they approached their hotel.

Dr. Kirshner laughed unwillingly.

"They are probably halfway to the Sahara by now," he returned, although he knew this to be an exaggeration.

When the explorers arrived at their rooms, Dr. Kirshner directed the preparations for the expedition, and the remainder of the day was spent in doing this. It seemed that the archaeologist had forgotten his duties as a scientist and was thinking only of finding the hidden riches.

"If we are fortunate enough to find our objective, we will be paid many times the cost of the expedition," he said.

"If those crooks don't get ahead of us," added Joe, with a grim smile.

"They won't – not if we can help it," blurted out Bob, fumbling his automatic.

At noon the adventurers stopped only a few minutes for a meal, so eager were they to finish the task of preparing for the expedition. They found it necessary to purchase much that they did not have, and the bazaars of Algiers were visited often for the unusual in the way of luxuries.

At last the work was completed, and all sat down to rest after the strain. Bob and Joe had had the experience once before of helping to make preparations for an expedition and knew what was expected of them.

“I wish we could take motion pictures of this city,” remarked Bob that evening. “But we’ve been instructed to wait till we start the journey in the Sahara.”

The next morning the explorers were up early, and after a bountiful breakfast they made their way to Fekmah’s hotel.

The Arab was expecting them and had finished making a second map. It was none too accurate, for he did it from memory, but it promised to be the only means between defeat and failure.

“You may wonder why I bothered to make more map,” he said to his friends. “But it possible that I forget some of the landmarks when we are on way, and this will – ”

“Come to the rescue,” interrupted Joe, smiling.

“And also,” Fekmah went on, “you may have this if anything should happen me.”

“Let’s hope nothing will,” said Bob.

“And now,” began Dr. Kirshner, “I’m going down to the railroad station and find out if we can get a train this morning. I’ll be back in a short time.”

“While he’s gone, suppose we go out,” suggested Joe to his chum. “There’s a lot we can see around here before we leave.”

“All right,” Bob replied. “But we don’t want to stay too long. There might be a train out in an hour.”

The youths decided to see the old section of the city, as they had heard from Dr. Kirshner that many points of interest were to be found there. It was but a few minutes’ walk to their objective, and they turned their eyes about.

As they were passing a café, Bob motioned for his friend to look inside.

A gray-haired, shriveled old man in torn clothing was strumming a guitar and walking from one end of the café to another, holding out a hand for money. But no one seemed inclined to give him any. Evidently this was a common occurrence, for the people paid little or no attention to the old beggar.

“I’ve half a mind to give him a break,” started Bob, but Joe pulled him back.

“If we want to see any of this town we’ll have to be at it,” Joe said, leading the way down the street.

The narrow ways were lined with shops and bazaars, offering the shopper a wide variety of commodities.

“But most of the things they sell you don’t want,” smiled Bob, glancing at a counter laden with coarse native food.

The youths noticed that certain streets were devoted to the selling of certain products. For instance, one avenue was lined with shops displaying brassware.

“It ought to be easy to find what you want,” grinned Joe. “Just walk down one street and you will have a large choice of the same thing.”

The boys spent nearly a half-hour in the native quarter. Finally Bob suggested that they get back to the hotel, and his friend was also in favor.

In a short time they were back in the hostelry and proceeded to go to their rooms. But they were scarcely at the doors when the sound of footsteps came to their ears. The next moment Dr. Kirshner came into view.

“Hello,” greeted Bob, and then his jaw dropped.

That something was wrong was evidenced by the frown that was on the archaeologist’s face. His usual smile was absent.

“There’s been a wreck,” he said in an anxious voice. “The train has been wrecked. I guess we can’t get to Wargla so soon after all.”

CHAPTER IV

Lured to Danger

BOB and Joe gasped in astonishment.

“The train wrecked!” muttered Bob and then started. “What caused it?”

“I imagine you’re thinking the same as I,” the archæologist said quietly. “That those thieves were responsible for it to prevent us from getting to Wargla at once.”

Joe’s face glowed with anger.

“The dirty beggars!” he cried. “Was anyone hurt?”

“No. It happened that no one was. But the locomotive was derailed and lodged in a ravine, and the work of getting it back on the track and repairing it won’t start any too soon in this country. It may be two or three days before order will be restored. It looks like those robbers have won out after all.”

They walked on into the room, where they were met by the boys’ fathers and Fekmah.

“Is there anything wrong?” asked Mr. Holton, as he noticed the sober faces of his friends.

The situation was explained, and the men frowned. Fekmah especially was agitated.

“May the black monsters of Tidihet feast on them!” he exclaimed, running his fingers through his white hair. “Allah will punish them – they will not go free!”

“But that won’t help us any,” said Mr. Lewis dryly. “We’ve got to figure out some way to stop them, if it’s at all possible. The question is, what will it be?”

“There’s no way of telegraphing,” said Dr. Kirshner, gazing thoughtfully at the floor. “If we had any idea where they went – that is, what route they took – we might overtake them on fast dromedaries. But the chances even then would be slight.”

“We might –” began Joe but was interrupted by a knock at the door.

For a moment the adventurers looked at one another in surprise. Then Mr. Holton moved over and cautiously opened the door.

The figure that stood in waiting was a tall, powerful Arab, with dark, piercing eyes that were none too pleasant to look at. He towered several inches above Mr. Holton, who was himself nearly six feet. Around the man’s shoulders and reaching nearly to the floor was a white gown, and on his head was the conventional *hlafa*.

For several moments he stood looking at the occupants of the room, as though forming a rapid opinion of the situation. Then he again turned to Mr. Holton and muttered something in the native tongue.

That Bob’s father understood was evidenced by the look of surprise that came on his face. A moment later he turned to his friends.

“He says Fekmah is wanted by a friend,” Mr. Holton said. “Won’t say any more. I don’t know what to make of it.”

“A friend?” Fekmah gasped. “Why, I know no person here. What could it mean?”

Again the stranger said something in Arabic and motioned for his objective to come out.

For a moment Fekmah was thoughtful. Then he decided to investigate.

“I will be back in short minutes,” he said and walked toward the door.

“Wait a minute,” called Dr. Kirshner. “I’m going with you.”

“And I, too,” cried Bob, getting up from his chair.

Joe also put in a request, but the archæologist shook his head.

“Two more are enough,” he said quietly, as he and Bob followed the Arab down the hall.

“Be careful,” warned Mr. Lewis, as they reached the stairs. “There’s no telling what that fellow may want.”

They reached the street and were directed around the corner and up a narrow byway, the stranger remaining several yards in the van.

“Keep a ready hand on your automatic,” whispered Dr. Kirshner to Bob. “Something may happen in a short time now.”

“Do you believe Fekmah is really wanted by friends?” the youth asked, glancing about as if he expected any minute to be confronted by a band of desperate characters.

“Beyond me,” was the reply. “But I believe it would be safer to say no than yes. But there is a possibility that he met someone and has forgotten about it.”

“What could they want of him? It all seems funny to me.”

On they went, now upward by a gently sloping street that was so crooked it seemed to have no outlet.

Suddenly the street stopped at a narrow, winding stairway that led almost straight up. All about were crowded houses of clay, dirty and weather-beaten and suggesting that only the very poorest of Arabs lived there.

Having made sure that the others were following him, the stranger led the way up the stairs. At the head was a small door, and this was opened for them to go inside.

But they hesitated.

“Ask him what he wants,” directed Bob. “There could be anything in there.”

Dr. Kirshner turned to the Arab and in a stern voice put the question before him.

The latter surveyed the American closely, then said in the native tongue:

“I wish nothing of *you*. It is Fekmah who is wanted. But if you and your friend must intrude, you may come in.”

The man’s attitude did not win the friendship of the explorers, but chiefly because they were at a loss to know what to do next they followed him inside.

A moment later the door was closed and they found themselves in a sort of twilight.

As soon as their eyes became accustomed to the dim light, they made out four figures sitting in the corner of the room. The bare floor alone served the place of chairs, and the men seemed comfortable. Bob at once formed the conclusion that these Arabs were of the same type as the stranger who escorted them here, and felt a bit uneasy. He would have felt much better with a hand on his gun, but this would have aroused the suspicions of the natives. Nevertheless he kept on guard for any treachery. If it came to a fight, he knew that it would be two to five, for Fekmah was, in his age, not capable of taking part.

None of the Arabs was able to speak English, evidently, but Dr. Kirshner knew the native language from his previous visits to North Africa. And he promised to translate occasionally to Bob.

But a moment later it was plain that there was little translating to be done, for one of the Arabs said something to Fekmah and motioned for him to come into the next room. The Americans were to remain where they were.

“I don’t like this,” muttered Dr. Kirshner, as he and Bob were told to be seated on the floor. “Anything may happen to him in there.”

“Suppose we go with him,” suggested Bob.

The archæologist nodded. He arose from his chair and started to follow, but one of the Arabs gently pushed him back.

“It is Fekmah who is wanted,” the fellow said in a queer bass voice. “You will wait here. It will only be a moment.”

Dr. Kirshner had half a notion to push through and follow his Arab friend, but he changed his mind and sat down with Bob on the floor.

“What’s the big idea of all this?” the youth asked in a puzzled voice. “They trying to double-cross us or something?”

The archæologist did not answer, for he felt all too sure that something serious was wrong. But what was there to do?

There was no conversation between the archæologist and the natives, for each seemed busy with his thoughts. Bob was extremely grave, and he wondered what was taking place in the adjoining room. Perhaps the Arabs wished to sell Fekmah something and did not wish to be thwarted by the whites. Or perhaps they wanted to engage themselves as guides on the coming expedition and knew they would have a better chance with Fekmah than with the Americans. But whatever it was, Bob felt uneasy. If their friend did not return before long he would go after him, the youth thought.

“We’ll wait a few more minutes,” said Dr. Kirshner. “Then – ”

“Listen!” commanded Bob. “What was that?”

“I didn’t hear anything. What – ”

“There it is again. Sounds like a muffled cry for help. It’s – it’s Fekmah!”

CHAPTER V

A Fight for Freedom

BOB was on his feet in an instant and dashed toward the door to the next room. But two of the Arabs were there first. With a catlike quickness they drew knives and advanced on the Americans. The other two natives came at them from the side.

“What does this mean?” demanded Dr. Kirshner, looking from one to the other, his black eyes snapping with anger.

“You are going to die!” was the grim answer from an evil-looking, flat-nosed fellow. He moved forward a step or two.

Bob did not understand the man but sensed that something sinister was to take place. He noticed the look of anger and anxiety on the scientist’s face.

With a sudden movement he drew out his automatic, at the same time stepping back several feet. His action was so quick that the Arabs were taken by surprise and stood for several moments trying to grasp the true meaning of it all.

“Now get back!” he commanded, flashing the shining pistol in their faces. “Take away their knives,” he said to Dr. Kirshner. “I’ve got them covered. Tell them I’ll shoot the first man who makes a forward move.”

The scientist did as directed and found that, beyond a vicious-looking knife, they were unarmed.

“You stay here and guard them,” said Bob. “I’m going in and see what’s happened to Fekmah.”

He moved over to the door and opened it. Holding the pistol in readiness, he walked slowly in the room. One glance told him that no one was in sight. But there was a door leading into a large alcove, and it was possible that he could find someone there. Perhaps the Arabs were in hiding, having sensed that they were in danger.

Tiptoeing as quietly as possible, Bob made his way to the closed door. He stood for several moments wondering what to do next. Then he decided to make a bold move.

Clutching his tiny automatic tightly, he took hold of the knob and with a sudden twist threw open the door.

The next instant he shrank back, for a tall Arab was almost upon him. The man held a vicious-looking knife in his uplifted right hand and was apparently ready to open the door when Bob did so first.

During the next few seconds Bob’s brain was in a whirl. He had half a mind to shoot the fellow outright and take no chances. But a moment later he thought better of it. He did not want to be guilty of murdering even this cruel Arab. If he had been as good a shot with a pistol as he was with a rifle, he would have shot the knife from the fellow’s hand. But as it was, he knew this could not be done.

Suddenly the Arab lowered the knife and, scowling cruelly, he rushed at the youth furiously.

Realizing that he must act quickly, Bob aimed at the man’s leg and fired. But his hand was unsteady from the terrific strain, and the bullet missed and lodged itself in the wall.

With a hoarse bellow the Arab came forward with terrific force, muttering angrily. He had the knife in readiness now, and was about to plunge it into the youth’s body when something unexpected happened.

Seeing a good chance, Bob pushed his foot forward with all his strength, bringing the man down with a thud that resounded through the little room. The Arab was taken completely unawares, and the knife went sliding across the floor.

The next instant he was on his feet, and, showing his black teeth wickedly, he darted toward his young enemy, his large hands ready to grip anything they might rest on.

Now was the time to act, Bob thought. Leaping forward, he sent his fist crashing into the Arab's nose with all the strength in his powerful young body.

The man reeled, backed up, and then fell against the wall. Another victim of the youth's boxing ability had gone to his fate.

Perspiration was dripping from the boy's brow. His leg ached from the twist he gave it in bringing the Arab to the floor. Every muscle in his body seemed fatigued. For a brief moment a sensation of nothingness crept over him, and he felt slightly numb.

With a start he regained his composure and, with one glance at the still limp Arab, he dashed through the door, the shining automatic still in his possession. One thought stood out in his mind above all others. He must find Fekmah.

No one was in the alcove, but another door led out into a sort of hallway, and casting aside all thoughts of personal danger, Bob passed through it.

The next instant he found himself in a narrow passageway, with no windows or other means to admit light. The semidarkness was tantalizing, overcoming, but the boy went bravely on. Occasionally he stopped to listen. But no sound reached his ears. Could it be possible that Fekmah had been...

The thought was not a pleasant one, and Bob dismissed it from mind. Here was a door. Perhaps this would reveal something.

As quietly as possible he turned the latch and peeped in the room.

In the darkness he could make out no one at first. Then his eyes almost burst from his head as he saw, lying on the floor in the corner, tightly bound and gagged – Fekmah!

For a moment Bob stood spellbound. Then he rushed over to the unfortunate man.

"Fekmah," he cackled gently and then bent over and felt of the Arab's heart. It was still beating, and with a swift motion of a small knife Bob cut the ropes that bound the man. Then he removed the gag and stood back to see if his friend had been injured.

The Arab's eyes opened, and he sat up with a start. A moment later the look of fear vanished from his face as he saw Bob.

"Praise be to Allah!" he murmured, getting feebly to his feet.

"Are you hurt?" the youth asked.

"No – not yet," was the grim reply. "But the evil-doers were going to come back and kill me if I not tell where to find treasure. It is time now that they come. Let us go in haste, or they will stab us."

"Treasure?" cried Bob. "You mean they wanted you to tell where the hidden riches in the desert are?"

"Yes. They were going torture me if I not tell. They are demons. Allah curse them!"

"But how did they know?" demanded Bob. "How did they find out about it? They're not the same ones who wrecked the train, are they?"

Fekmah shook his head.

"How they find out, I not know," he said.

Cautiously they made for the door and opened it. Satisfied that there was no one in sight, they walked through the hallway and into the alcove.

"Now we must be careful," Bob warned. "I knocked a man out a while ago, and he may have come to by now."

But when they reached the place, they found the fellow still limp.

At sight of the Arab, Fekmah looked at Bob with admiration. It was evident that the youth had gone beyond his expectations.

In a short time they reached the door into the first room and found that Dr. Kirshner was still guarding the Arabs. The scientist looked up in relief when he again saw Bob and Fekmah.

"I feared something had happened to you," the scientist said. "I shouldn't have allowed you to go in there," he said to Bob. "But I see you've done your duty and brought back Fekmah."

"But what shall we do now?" Bob asked. "Are there any officers to take charge of these crooks?"

"Yes," the archæologist returned. "You and Fekmah stay here and guard these men and I will go after them. It is best not to take them down to the police station for fear of attracting too much attention. Other Arab friends might charge us in a large band."

The next moment he was gone, after having promised that he would be back with officers in a few minutes.

"There ought to be some way to get the fellow I knocked out in here," Bob thought, as he guarded the Arabs closely. "But I'd better not risk letting Fekmah have the gun. I'll trust the fellow is still out of his senses when Dr. Kirshner and the officers arrive."

The Arabs whom the youth was guarding were silent, but their evil faces suggested what they would do if given the chance.

Bob was in a position where he could also watch the door in the next room. He was taking no chances on an attack from behind.

"I bet Dad and the others are worried," the boy thought. "We've been gone a long time."

Inside of ten minutes Dr. Kirshner was back with three native policemen, who handled the crooks roughly. Each man was handcuffed and made to walk in front of the officers.

"Now," said Dr. Kirshner, "suppose we get back to the hotel room. Our prolonged absence has probably caused a great deal of anxiety among our friends."

"Yes," Bob returned. "We – " He stopped suddenly and then dashed into the next room for the crook whom he had previously knocked out.

But he was not surprised to find the man gone. An opened door revealed that he had escaped.

"No use looking for him," the youth thought, as he retraced his footsteps back to his companions.

Bob was forced to explain to Dr. Kirshner, who was puzzled at the youth's sudden dashing away. When he had finished, the scientist regarded him admiringly but warned him against taking unnecessary chances.

"Those fellows would think nothing of stabbing you to death," he said, shaking his head gravely.

They went on up the street and arrived in a short time at the hotel in which were their friends. Up at Fekmah's room they were given a hearty welcome.

"What kept you so long?" asked Mr. Holton, seeing at a glance that something was wrong.

Dr. Kirshner related the details of the previous happenings, laying stress on the pluck and bravery of Bob.

The naturalists and Joe listened closely, eager to get an account of everything. They did not seem unduly surprised, for at the start they felt that something was wrong. But that their friends would be in such grave danger was not in the least anticipated.

"It's lucky that you're here to tell it," said Mr. Lewis, with a shaking of his head. "Such desperate characters know nothing else but to rob and kill."

"But as it is," smiled Joe, "you came out all right, and had an unusual experience at that." Secretly he was sorry he had not taken part in it.

"And that is the second time Bob brought in criminals," said Mr. Lewis, recalling an incident that happened the summer before.

"I'd rather you wouldn't take such risks, though," urged Mr. Holton. "If one taxes good fortune too much, he is sure to come to a tragic end some time."

There was a short silence. Then Joe ventured to touch upon the matter that concerned them before the abrupt interruption of a short time ago.

“What will be our next move?” he inquired.

“Hmm,” hesitated Dr. Kirshner, “that is hard to say at present. I suppose, though, that the logical thing to do is wait and take a train to Wargla as soon as possible. When the track will be cleared is hard to say. It might be a day, or it might be several. I can see no other way of getting to Wargla, can you, Fekmah?”

“No,” replied the Arab. “Of course there are good roads part of way, and might ride automobile some of way, but train could get there sooner, even if we wait.”

“I guess you’re right,” agreed Joe, thoughtfully. “There’s no use wasting time trying to do a thing that can’t be done. Have you made inquiries as to about when we can expect the train to be ready?”

“Yes,” answered Dr. Kirshner. “The station agent said inside of two days, but it probably won’t be that soon.”

“Let’s hope it will,” said Bob. “I’m anxious to get started into the desert. How long will it probably be before we reach our destination, once we get started on camelback?”

“That all depends,” replied the archæologist. “If we see fit to use dromedaries, or the one-hump camel, we will make much better time. They can travel from ninety to a hundred miles a day with ease, and if forced, can do much better than that.”

“But the jolting is most uncomfortable,” Mr. Lewis reminded him, and Fekmah nodded.

“Soon get used to it, though, don’t you?” asked Joe.

Fekmah laughed.

“No, never,” he said. “But not feel it so bad after many days of riding.”

“But getting back to your question,” resumed the archæologist, speaking to Joe, “if we have good luck we should cover the thousand miles to the Ahaggar Mountains inside of two weeks, considering, of course, stops at oases, small towns, and the like. Then how soon we can find the hidden riches would be a mere guess, because without the map Fekmah will probably have much more difficulty in recognizing various landmarks.”

“But you must remember that our main object was to work for the good of science,” Bob’s father said. “Mr. Lewis and I were to get specimens of any animal life that exists in the far reaches of the desert, and you were to look up the remains of ancient civilizations. Incidentally, though, we’ll search for the hidden riches.”

“And Joe and I were to take motion pictures when we get started on camelback,” said Bob proudly.

“Speaking of animal life,” began Mr. Lewis, “suppose in the morning we get out in the open country and see if we can collect any specimens. From what I’ve read and heard, I guess it is necessary to go at least as far as Arba before we would find a region that is worth hunting in.”

“I’m with you,” said Mr. Holton. “We’ll engage an automobile to take us the fourteen miles or so to Arba, and then foot it from there. It will be funny if we can’t bag a few worth-while specimens, at least.”

“Of course Joe and I can go, can’t we?” grinned Bob.

“You bet. And Dr. Kirshner and Fekmah, if they care to.”

But those persons announced that they would remain in Algiers and further discuss the coming expedition.

“Then too,” the archæologist remarked, “I’d like to keep posted on the progress made in getting the train ready for the journey to Wargla.”

It was well past noon, and the explorers now realized for the first time that they were extremely hungry. The strain of the eventful morning had stimulated their appetites to a high degree, and they felt they could devour almost anything in the way of food.

“Lead me to the café and watch what happens,” said Joe, making for the door.

The others followed, and although not as emotional they were no less hungry.

The meal tasted good, despite the fact that they were ignorant of its composition. Fekmah tried to explain one of the dishes, but the foodstuffs used in its preparation were unknown to the Americans, and they were as much in the dark after he had finished the explanation as before he had begun it.

“We’ll trust there isn’t anything repulsive in its make-up,” smiled Mr. Holton.

“At any rate the taste isn’t so bad,” came from Bob. “I’ve seen stuff much worse.”

“Referring to the delicacies of the South American Indians, I suppose,” laughed Mr. Lewis, and the boys nodded.

“We were forced to eat almost anything for a while,” reflected Joe. “Getting lost in the Brazilian jungle was a serious thing, and we realized it. Then when we got in with those savages, we accepted their offer of food at once, even though we weren’t sure it was all right.”

“That was a great adventure, boys,” remarked Mr. Holton, his thoughts going back to the countless days of river traveling in unknown South America. “The more I think of it the more convinced I am that we should be extremely proud of that exploit. Mr. Lewis and I have had many adventures in unknown lands while collecting specimens for the museum, but none surpasses that one.”

“I’d like to go there some time,” said Dr. Kirshner. “But so far, my work as an archæologist has not called me into that region. When it will, if ever, I do not know.”

After the bountiful meal the explorers took it easy in the hotel, and Fekmah returned to his room.

“Since we haven’t anything in particular to do, we might as well rest up for the hunting trip tomorrow,” said Mr. Lewis, as he and the others sat in the lobby of their hotel. “We’ve had a hard day of it and deserve to be idle for a while.”

The others agreed, and the remainder of the day was spent in quiet.

But early the next morning the boys and their fathers were busily preparing for the hunting expedition. By seven o’clock they had their rifles and other necessities in readiness, and with a farewell to Dr. Kirshner, who wished to talk over the Sahara journey with Fekmah, they left the hotel.

Mr. Lewis had earlier made arrangements for a car to take them to Arba, whence they would go on foot into the forests and desert. The automobile was parked in a small garage not far away, and they reached the place in but a few minutes. It was a low, dirty structure, with few windows.

A swarthy native came out to meet them and at once recognized Mr. Lewis. He led the way through a small door and into a room that served as the garage.

“Here we are,” said Joe’s father, as they rounded a corner.

He pointed to something that at once caused Bob and Joe to burst out with laughter.

CHAPTER VI

Through Unknown Forests

“**THAT** a car – an automobile?” asked Bob, holding back his laughter.

“You don’t mean to say that thing will take us fourteen miles!” cried Joe, no less moved than his chum.

The naturalists smiled. They had apparently not expected this.

“It’s about the best we can do here,” confessed Mr. Lewis. “Of course there are better automobiles, but none of them seems to be for hire. You see, this drive-yourself idea doesn’t appear to be very popular here. I suppose it’s because there is so much danger of being attacked by bands of nomads who would think nothing of robbing the occupants and stealing the car. But this car, although not beautiful to look at, has a good motor and good tires, and that’s about all we could expect. Remember, we’re not in America now.”

The object of their remarks was indeed not anything to be especially proud of. A well-known American make, it had undoubtedly been of great service in its time, and was still capable of covering many more miles. It had no top, and nothing to show that one had been present, but the seats were in fair condition, and a well-shined windshield promised to keep away the formidable dust of the desert.

“Well, I suppose we could do much worse,” sighed Joe, taking his place in the back seat.

After a few more remarks with the keeper of the garage, the adventurers started the motor and pulled out into the street, Mr. Lewis at the wheel. The chug of the engine was almost deafening, but, as Bob remarked, they would probably get used to it.

“Ought to be some new springs,” said Joe, with a wink at his chum.

“And there could be new upholstering,” added Bob. “Of course it needs new –”

“All right, boys,” smiled Mr. Holton, cutting off their capricious suggestions. “If you don’t like it, you know what you can do.”

“I guess we’d better shut up,” grinned Bob. “We may get thrown out on our ear.”

Mr. Lewis had studied the map of Algiers and had no difficulty in finding his way out of the city and to Maison Carrée, which might almost be called a suburb of the metropolis. From here they went almost straight south and soon came to a narrow river, which was spanned by a small bridge.

“Scarcely any curves from here on,” said Mr. Lewis, as he increased the speed of the car.

The road remained good, and in a short time they reached Arba, their destination. Here for the first time they caught a glimpse of a camel caravan, for they are never seen as far as Algiers. It was composed of about ten dromedaries, with only three riders. Strapped on the brutes’ backs were packs containing probably dates and other products of the desert.

Bob and Joe took in the scene with intense interest, for soon they would be fitted out in a like manner for the long desert journey. The youths were particularly anxious to observe the manner in which the brutes are ridden. They had heard that to straddle a camel and be able to bounce freely along was an art that came only of long practice. Whether this was true they did not know but resolved to find out sooner or later from Fekmah.

“I’ll bet it’s harder than it looks, though,” remarked Joe.

A little later they saw other caravans of donkeys, the usual beast of burden used near the coast.

“The Arab, unlike other natives, never carries his load,” explained Mr. Holton. “I guess he thinks it lowers himself too much.”

They drove on into the town and had more trouble finding good streets than in Algiers.

Luckily it was Wednesday, and the market was in full swing. Traders were swarming everywhere, buying and selling the queer native goods and foodstuffs.

“Suppose we park the car where we can and look about a bit,” suggested Joe. “It’s no special hurry to begin the hunt, is it?”

The others were more than willing, and as soon as possible the automobile – if it could be called that – was stopped at a convenient corner.

“Sure feels good to get out and stretch,” smiled Bob, taking advantage of the opportunity to relax his cramped legs.

They left the car and made for the business center of the town, intent upon spending a half-hour or so in watching the busy scene of interest.

It was soon discovered that except for the large market there was little of interest to be seen. In many respects the town resembled Algiers, although on a much smaller scale and not nearly as modern. The streets were narrow and, in many cases, curving, and the houses were far from attractive. But the hustle and bustle of the natives clearly indicated that Arba was of considerable importance commercially.

This was especially noted in the city market, where every article imaginable was for sale. Bakers, vegetable dealers, butchers, shoemakers, wine venders, and many others did their best to convince the buyer of the worth of their products.

“And over there in that tent is a physician,” pointed out Mr. Lewis. “How good he would be considered in the United States is hard to say, but the Arabs seem to have confidence in him. Look at the patients going in.”

“For my part, I’d rather trust nature to cure my illness,” smiled Bob, as he noted the rather blank expression of the native physician.

The explorers spent nearly a half-hour in the city, taking in the various sights so strange and interesting to a visitor from a far-away land. At last Mr. Holton moved that they go back to the car and get their rifles and begin the hunt, and the others were in favor of doing so.

Their lunch, cartridges, binoculars, and other hunting necessities were packed in lightweight ruck sacks, which required but a minute to strap on their backs.

The car was to be left where it was, as probably no better parking place could be found.

“Guess we’re ready,” said Mr. Lewis, picking up his rifle.

It required but a short walk to reach the edge of the town, and one glance revealed that the country here was wild and uncultivated. Mountains were but a short distance away, and some of the peaks were rather impressive.

“Those forests look like there might be anything in them,” observed Joe, directing his glance at the towering wooded slopes.

“We’ll see in a short time,” said his father, fumbling his rifle.

The foothills over which they were passing were, for the most part, bare and devoid of heavy vegetation. But a little later they came to a region that gradually sloped upward, and less than an hour’s traveling brought them to the base of a high, sloping mountain, which was covered with a dense forest.

With renewed efforts they began the task of climbing, keeping a sharp lookout for any wild animals that might dart out in front of them.

“About all the wild animals to be found here are rabbits, jackals, hyenas, panthers, and a very few lions,” said Mr. Holton, as they trudged up the hill.

Luckily there were no sharp cliffs to be scaled. Instead, the way was gradual, unbroken.

“I’d like to get a glimpse of one of those queer creatures that have been reported to exist in these woods,” remarked Mr. Holton with a smile.

“What’s that?” asked Joe.

“Another Arabian myth, most likely. At any rate I know of nobody who has ever been fortunate enough to see one. It is supposed to be about the size of a badger and is a very peculiar combination of six or more well-known animals. The face, eyes, tail, abdomen, and other body

regions are supposed to be taken from other creatures; and all the details are very accurate and convincing, to hear the Arab tell it. Again arises the question of where such queer conceptions get into his head.”

As they hiked on, Bob and Joe began to get behind their elders. There was much to be seen in the way of odd plants and colorful flowers, and their attention was continually diverted from one thing to another.

“I suppose when we get as seasoned in the art of exploring as our dads we’ll not notice such minorities,” said Bob. “But right now – ”

He stopped suddenly as he caught sight of something that made his blood turn cold.

Not five feet away was a huge wild boar, showing its terrible tusks savagely as it prepared to rush at the youths.

CHAPTER VII

Good News

“**WHAT** is it?” cried Joe, as he noticed the look of anxiety on his chum’s face.

For answer, Bob pointed to the wild boar, and as Joe glanced around he shrank back in consternation.

“Quick!” he cried. “It’s going to charge!”

There was no time to lose. The animal, angered because cornered, was getting ready to stand its ground savagely. And the boys had heard of the wild boar’s terrible ferocity.

Almost in unison the youths raised their rifles and took careful aim. The guns were of only twenty-two caliber, not any too powerful for the occasion, but the chance had to be taken.

“Now,” murmured Bob, holding his rifle in a steady position.

Bang! Bang! Two shots rang out, and each found the mark.

But the small bullets did not stop the beast’s charge, and it came on with horrible atrocity.

“Run!” cried Bob, his nerve completely gone. “Let’s go up a tree!”

As the youths darted to one side, a shot rang out; another; and still another. A moment later the wild boar sank to the ground in a crumpled mass, gave a convulsive twitch, and then lay still.

Mr. Lewis and Mr. Holton came running up, on their faces a look of apprehension.

“A narrow escape!” said Joe grimly. “It’s a good thing you came across with those high-speed bullets. They sure did the job, all right.”

“We just happened to glance around in time,” explained his father. “We didn’t know you boys were so far behind. Why didn’t you bring larger rifles?”

“Weren’t expecting to meet such a creature as this,” replied Bob. “I had an idea that this was a tame country, but I see I’m wrong,” with a glance at the wild boar.

“You certainly are,” smiled Mr. Holton, shaking his head. “And this incident may be the beginning of a series of adventures with wild animals. Where there’s one of a thing there’s likely to be another. So stick close, boys. I’d hate to have to rely on those twenty-twos again.”

The wild boar was shattered by the bullets and was no good as a specimen. The naturalists especially wanted one of these terrible beasts and were put out to think that this one had been made worthless by the rifles, but they were thankful that they had been able to come to the rescue of their sons.

With one last look at the creature they resumed the hike, this time keeping a closer lookout for any other formidable beast.

As they penetrated deeper into the forest, signs of life began to increase in numbers. Small rodents darted out, only to be brought down by the guns of the naturalists; lizards of grotesque and ugly shapes were all about; birds of many colors flew overhead, their plumage showing brightly in the sunlight. It was a sight that the youths never grew tired of.

Suddenly a jackal ran out, and Mr. Holton lost no time in firing at it. It was carefully but quickly skinned and placed in the burlap bag for the specimens.

“This forest certainly is untrodden,” observed Mr. Lewis, unable to discern the faintest traces of human tracks. “It has probably been a long time since anyone broke into its fastness.”

“Which is all the better for us,” said Joe. “Animals here probably have never heard the sound of a gun before.”

Along toward noon they picked out a small grassy area and got out the kit of lunch. The sandwiches were spread on a paper, and thermos bottles of cold lemonade were opened. To the tired adventurers it promised to be a feast fit for a king.

“No meal in the most luxurious café tastes better than a bountiful lunch in the heart of a forest,” said Mr. Lewis.

Bob’s father nodded.

“It has been said that no one but an explorer really knows what an appetite is,” he remarked. “And in times when I’m working in the museum at home and not doing any strenuous work I can fully realize the truth of it.”

They ate the lunch in quiet contentment, taking it easy on the soft grass. It seemed good to be out on the trail again, feasting on the wonders of nature. Bob and Joe were impressed by the stillness of the great forest.

“This is about the only kind of a woods you can get through,” remarked Bob, his eyes on the numerous cork-oak trees. “A tropical jungle has so much undergrowth and vines that it keeps you busy cutting them away with a machete.”

An hour or two after the repast was spent in resting their tired limbs and chatting merrily. Then Mr. Lewis suggested that they continue the hunt.

“We won’t have so very much time left,” he said. “And we’d like to get several more specimens.”

A little later they came to a narrow valley between two high mountains. A tiny spring trickled from beside a large rock, and they welcomed the taste of the refreshing liquid. It was quite cold, showing that it probably came from an underground stream.

“Drink all you want,” said Mr. Lewis. “It’s likely the last water we’ll see till we get back to Arba.”

All the remainder of that afternoon the explorers trudged on, bringing down several small animals and birds. None of them happened to be dangerous, however.

The hunters had described a wide circle that took them by sundown within a mile or two from Arba, and the accuracy of the naturalists’ calculations was greatly appreciated, for they were very tired and did not feel that they would care to have to hike a great distance to get to the automobile.

“Wonder if the old car’s still there,” mused Bob, as they came to the limits of Arba.

“Don’t know why it shouldn’t be,” returned his chum. “Nobody’d want it for anything.”

It required but a short time to reach the main part of the town. Then they turned off on the street where the car was parked.

“It’s there!” cried Joe, making out its ancient shape in the distance.

The others shared in his enthusiasm. They had had an uneasy feeling about its safety all day, despite the fact that the ignition had been locked.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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