

CORNELIUS SHEA

IN THE WONDERFUL
LAND OF HEZ: OR, THE
MYSTERY OF THE
FOUNTAIN OF YOUTH

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of Hez: or, The Mystery
of the Fountain of Youth**

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In the Wonderful Land of Hez; or, The Mystery of the Fountain of Youth

CHAPTER I. AN ECCENTRIC COUPLE

One fine October afternoon, in the year 1880, a sailboat might have been seen gliding serenely over the waters of Lake Okechobee, in the southern part of Florida.

The boat had but two occupants, and these were so different in appearance that a little description of them will not be out of order.

The elder of the two was attired in a very loose-fitting suit of blue flannel, and wore a Panama hat.

He was probably fifty years of age, and one look at his round, smooth-shaven face would have told the casual observer that he was a good-hearted individual.

His eyes were hidden by a pair of blue goggles of extraordinary proportions, which made the man look as though he had donned a diver's helmet.

In stature this remarkable personage was short and very stout.

Prof. Remington Easy was his name, and now, as he has been introduced, we will turn our attention to his companion – a tall, lanky individual, attired in corduroy knee breeches, heavy top-boots, red flannel shirt, linen coat and a broad-brimmed hat – a typical Yankee, for all the world.

This was Martin Haypole, the professor's right-hand man.

The Yankee was not over thirty years of age, and had it not been for the thin bunch of yellow hair he wore on his chin, he would have been a fair-looking man.

Martin was about six feet two inches in height, and weighed probably one hundred and thirty-five pounds; thus it will be seen that he possessed not an ounce of superfluous flesh.

He had often remarked that what he lacked the professor amply made up for, and vice versa. But what are these two curious individuals doing in this wild part of Florida? the reader may ask.

The question is answered in a very few words.

Prof. Remington Easy was of an exploring turn of mind.

About a month before the opening of our story he became deeply interested in that vast, unexplored region in the southern part of Florida known as the Everglades.

The more he studied over the matter the more he became desirous of penetrating the heart of the swamp and discovering something wonderful.

The professor possessed an unlimited supply of cash, and he spared no expense in fitting himself out for his trip.

Thus we now find them in their boat upon the lower part of Lake Okechobee, within about five miles of the beginning of the Everglades.

The sun was yet about three hours high, and the professor hoped to reach a good place to land before the shades of night gathered around them.

It was now the second day since they had entered the upper portion of the lake, by way of the stream beyond it, and the professor judged that the marshes must be close at hand.

Owing to the fact that their boat did not possess one of those useful things known as a centerboard, and that the winds had been contrary ever since they entered Lake Okechobee, they had made but a scant twenty miles in nearly two days.

While Prof. Easy was satisfied with this slow mode of progress, Martin Haypole was not.

The boat, which was christened *Maid of the Marsh*, appeared to be a very insignificant thing in the eyes of the Yankee.

He had laughed at it, swore at it and nearly cried over it.

And now, just as Prof. Easy made a prodigious effort and rose to his feet, he began again.

"I tell you, professor, this is the dod-rottedest boat that ever sot in water. Them trees there to the south'ard are ther Everglades; but d'yer think we'll ever git thar at this rate? Mought better started in a rowboat. *Maid of ther Marsh!* A cussed fine name, ain't it? I hope she gits stuck in some marsh afore long, an' never gits out again. But I'm 'fraid we'll both be gray-headed afore she gits to a marsh. Twenty miles in two days! Well, I swan ter Guinea! If that ain't travelin' in ther nineteenth century, I'm a downright fule!"

"Tut, tut, Martin," replied the professor; "take things easy. I took notice that you were very glad to get in the boat day before yesterday, when that big alligator gave chase after you."

"Oh! she were good enough then, professor. I don't want a 'gator nosin' aroun' me; an' this tub is good enough when that kind of work is goin' on. But when you come right down ter sailin', whar in blazes does this dod-rotted thing come in?"

"Have patience, Martin. We will reach those trees yonder in less than an hour. See! a favorable breeze is even now springing up."

The professor was right. For the first time during their voyage upon the lake the wind was blowing in a direction suited to their course.

The hitherto flapping mainsail now bellied out, and the little craft went skipping through the water like a thing of life.

Even Martin Haypole was temporarily satisfied, and with his hand upon the tiller he watched the rapidly nearing forest in the swamp district.

The breeze kept up, and, sure enough, in a little while they arrived at the end of the lake proper.

As soon as they got among the trees, the breeze ceased to exist, and once more the sail flapped idly about the mast.

"I'll be gosh-dinged if we won't eat supper on land to-night, anyhow!" exclaimed the Yankee, as he pushed the boat, by means of a long pole, into a narrow creek, and made for a little island that was several feet above the level of the marsh.

"Good enough, Martin – good enough!" returned his companion, rubbing his hands. "I am agreeable, I assure you."

At that moment the prow of the boat struck the bank and caused the fat professor to lose his balance and tumble overboard.

"Ha! ha! ha!" laughed the Yankee, as he observed his employer floundering about in the muddy water. "How d'ye like it, professor? You laughed at me when I fell overboard – now it is your turn, by gosh! I told you laughin' was catchin'. Now, if one of them ugly 'gators was ter come along there would be fun. Thunder and lightnin'! if there ain't one, now, I'm a rank sinner!"

A floundering was heard a few feet from the struggling professor, and a half-grown alligator was seen making for him with all his might.

The luckless man had now assumed an upright position, with the dirty, black water even with his chin, and as he observed his peril he bellowed lustily for help.

He strove in vain to reach the gunwale of the boat, but the distance was too far for his short arms.

Haypole, with an amused smile upon his face, allowed the alligator to get within a few feet of his intended prey, and then reached over suddenly and seized his employer by the arms.

He then saw that he would not be able to get him out as quickly as he had anticipated, and his gleeful look turned to one of alarm.

The professor was a heavyweight of the first water, and had it not been for the fact that Haypole was a very strong man, the ferocious alligator would certainly have had a good supper that night.

But by an almost superhuman effort he jerked him from the muddy water just as the ferocious monster made a vicious snap with its huge jaws.

“Murder!” yelled the professor, as he fell in a heap at the feet of the Yankee; “the thing has bitten off my foot!”

“I guess not, professor; he only nipped off ther heel of yer shoe. Great haystacks! but that was a narrar escape, though! I didn’t know you was so ’tarnal heavy.”

As soon as the half-drowned man found that he was not injured, he got mad, and shaking his fist under Haypole’s nose, said:

“Martin, if you ever let such a thing as that occur again, I’ll discharge you on the spot!”

“Now, don’t git mad, old man; you won’t discharge me, you know you won’t. Why, thunderation! You couldn’t git along without me.”

“It makes no difference; the whole thing was your fault. If you had not made such an ass of yourself by pushing the boat so hard against the bank, I would not have fallen overboard at all. Then the idea of your standing here laughing at me when the alligator was coming after me with all his might. You think you are very funny, Martin Haypole; and I’ll tell you what I have a great notion of doing.”

“What?” asked the Yankee, showing just a slight tinge of passion.

“I have a great mind of thrashing you.”

“You had better not try it, professor. I never seen that man yet as could do that in a square rough and tumble.”

Whack!

The enraged professor struck his employee a smart blow on the face with his open hand.

“Thunder and lightning!” howled the Yankee; “I can’t stand that, even if you do be my boss.”

He made a sudden dive forward and seized Prof. Remington Easy by the collar, and prepared to stand him on his head.

But the fat man was still mad, and he ducked down and seized his opponent by his long legs. Then each strove to force the other to the bottom of the boat.

“Drat your tarnal hide! I’ll wallop you, anyhow, now,” exclaimed Haypole.

He let out his full strength, and down went the fat professor, with him on top.

But as they struck the boat gave a lurch, and overboard went both of them.

And the alligator, who was still hovering about the place, opened wide his jaws and swam toward the two struggling forms, who were each striving to see who could shout “Murder!” the loudest.

CHAPTER II. AN ACCEPTED PROPOSITION

“Dick this is a pretty wild spot, isn’t it?”

“Well, I should say so, Leo; and not only wild, but dangerous, as well.”

“Dangerous? Why, you are not afraid of the ’gators, are you?”

“Not exactly; but then there are other things besides alligators to look out for in this region.”

The two speakers were young men, eighteen or nineteen years of age.

They were seated upon the trunk of a fallen tree, on a small island, situated at the lower end of Lake Okechobee, Florida.

A few feet from them a negro lad was busily engaged in cooking a haunch of meat over a brightly burning fire.

The first speaker was Leo Malvern, the son of a wealthy St. Augustine merchant, and his companion was his cousin, Dick Vincey, of New York City.

Dick had come to the South to spend the fall and winter with his relatives, and his cousin had proposed that the two should make a trip as far as the Everglades.

Both liked adventure, and the idea of penetrating into that unexplored region pleased them to a great extent.

They procured all necessary supplies needful for such an undertaking, and set out for their destination, after traveling as far as they could by rail.

The young negro who was engaged in preparing their evening meal – for it was near sunset – was a comical-looking personage, to say the least.

He was not as black as some of his race, but the spread of his nose and mouth, and the habitual grin on his face gave him a decidedly humorous appearance.

He had lived at the home of Leo Malvern’s folks since his earliest infancy, and was a faithful servant.

This interesting young coon, who is to figure as one of the characters in our story, was known as Lucky.

He never knew any other name, and, consequently, was satisfied.

Like the majority of his people, he loved a banjo, and had brought one along on the trip for the amusement of himself and his two young masters, as he chose to call the boys.

“Is supper ready?” asked Dick, as he noticed that the darky was looking at them.

“Yes, sah; it am all done. Ready for ter dive in, you bet,” was the reply, accompanied by a broad grin.

“All right,” said Leo Malvern; “we may as well eat, then.”

The two boys now made their way to the white cloth spread upon the ground, and prepared to do justice to the tempting meal before them.

The odor of coffee and roasted possum made them hungry, although their appetites were not lacking, by any means.

But just as they were about to attack the tempting morsels, the sounds of an angry discussion were heard in the near vicinity.

Leo and Dick sprang to their feet at a bound and seized their rifles.

Their canoe was but a few feet distant, and it was but the work of a minute to spring into it and push off in the direction the sounds came from.

Up to this moment they had judged they were the only human beings in this out-of-the-way place.

But now it seemed that they were not. The voices were those of two men in a dispute, and the boys determined to catch a glimpse of their owners.

Dick paddled with all his might, while Leo held his rifle ready for instant use, in case those they heard might be enemies.

Rounding a bend, they suddenly came in sight of a small sailboat and two struggling men.

It was the *Maid of the Marsh*, and the two men were Prof. Remington Easy and the Yankee.

While the canoe containing the boys was yet a hundred feet away from the boat, the two men suddenly fell overboard.

Then it was that they first observed the alligator making for them.

As the professor and Martin Haypole arose to the surface and began shouting lustily for help, Leo raised his rifle to his shoulder.

Crack!

As the report rang out the hungry alligator ceased his forward progress and began floundering about in the muddy water.

The bullet had pierced his right eye, and in less than half a minute it expired.

Meanwhile the Yankee succeeded in grasping the gunwale of the *Maid of the Marsh*, and at length drew himself safely on board.

Then he hastily lifted his employer from the water, after which he gazed pantingly in the direction of the approaching canoe.

"Much obliged to yer, boys," said he, addressing our two young friends. "Whichever of ye it was that plugged that ugly critter are a good shot, swan if he ain't!"

Leo and Dick at once perceived that the men were not likely to prove enemies, so they lost no time in urging their canoe to the side of the sailboat.

"Glad to meet you, young gentlemen!" exclaimed the professor, rubbing his hands. "I thought us two were the only ones in this wild place. I am glad that such is not the case, though, I assure you. For had it not been for you, both Haypole and myself would surely have been devoured by that ferocious monster. All on account of his pig-headedness, too."

"Now, see here, professor," put in the Yankee, "I ain't a-goin' ter quarrel with you ag'in under no consideration. This oughter be a lesson for us both. Why, I swan ter Guinea! that little foolishness nearly cost us both our nat'ral lives! Come aboard, boys; I've got some fine, old Medford rum here, an' gosh! if I don't stand treat."

The smell of the blood from the dead alligator was drawing others to the spot, and both Leo and Dick deemed it advisable to board the boat.

They at once clambered over the gunwale of the *Maid of the Marsh*, and then, tying their canoe to the stern, questioned the professor and Haypole as to where they had come from, and what they were doing there.

In a very matter-of-fact way Prof. Easy related his whole story, word for word, and in conclusion said:

"Now, then, young gentlemen, tell us how we came to find you in this dangerous and unhealthy place."

It did not take Dick Vincey long to do this, and when he had finished all four seemed glad that the meeting had taken place.

"Leo Malvern and Dick Vincey, eh?" said Prof. Easy. "Well, I'll tell you both bluntly that I like you. I am now going to make a proposition to you, which you can accept or decline as you see fit."

"What is it?" asked Leo.

"I would like to have you accompany me on my exploring trip. You are both made of the right sort of material for such an undertaking; and, if my theory proves correct, you will assist me in making one of the greatest discoveries the world has ever known."

“Before we give you an answer I would suggest that you move your boat over to our island, just beyond the bend. We have a darky there who has supper waiting for us, and we are both hungry. Besides, we have a fire burning there, and it is getting dark. I think it will be pleasanter for all hands,” observed Leo.

“A good idee,” said Haypole. “Here, boys, is ther Medford rum I spoke about; have some?” His offer was declined, greatly to his astonishment.

“Great haystacks!” he exclaimed, swallowing a big mouthful of the liquor; “this stuff won’t hurt ye any more’n apple cider.”

The longer Leo and Dick remained in the company of the two men, the better they liked them.

There was something about Prof. Easy that was bound to make him friends wherever he went, and Martin Haypole – well, he was one of those comical, unsophisticated people whom almost everybody likes.

Dick grasped a pole and assisted to shove the boat out into the stream, and thence to the little island, where Lucky, the darky, was anxiously awaiting the return of the two boys.

When he saw the sailboat approaching through the gathering darkness, he uttered a cry of alarm and hastily seized his rifle, which stood against a tree.

“Hold on, Lucky! it is all right,” shouted Leo.

“Fo’ de Lor’ sakes! Whar did youse done git de boat, Massa Leo?” asked the darky.

“We found her out here with two men in her,” returned Dick, as the prow of the craft struck the little island.

A line was thrown out, which Lucky quickly tied to a tree, and then the four sprang out upon the ground.

The darky still had the possum and coffee warm, and, as there was enough to go around, all hands did ample justice to the meal.

When supper was finished, Leo and Dick thought over the professor’s proposition, and, after a while, concluded to accept it.

The five sat about the fire for a long while, chatting over the matter, and finally, when they began to get drowsy, Leo suggested that they should turn in upon the bottom of the boat, leaving one man on guard for the first part of the night, and when his time was up, to make a change.

“I think it advisable to do this,” said he, “for we can’t tell what might happen while we slept.”

“A good idea,” promptly returned the professor. “Martin will take the first watch.”

“I will, sartin,” said the Yankee.

“And I’ll take second,” put in Dick. “To-morrow night some one else can have a show.”

This seemed to be satisfactory, so all turned in save Haypole, who, rifle in hand, sat down upon the ground near the boat, with his back to a tree.

He kept the fire burning brightly to keep prowling animals away, and listened to the regular breathing of his companions, who were soon fast asleep.

The hours flitted by.

Martin Haypole’s time was nearly up, and he was still seated in the position he had taken on commencing his watch.

Up to this time he had remained wide awake, but now he began dozing.

Suddenly he was brought to his full senses by hearing the crackling of a twig at his elbow.

The Yankee glanced hastily up, and was surprised to see the figure of a man within two feet of him.

Before he could make a move the stranger seized the rifle from his hands, and bounded from the spot with the speed of an antelope.

“Hey!” exclaimed Haypole, springing to his feet and firing his revolver at the retreating form. “Who in thunderation be you, anyhow?”

But a splash told him that the man had taken to the water.

CHAPTER III. THE STONE CUBE AND THE OBELISK

Three weeks later we find Prof. Remington Easy and his exploring party in the very heart of the great Everglades.

Had they not been possessed of a vast amount of pluck and endurance they would never have reached this far.

But to turn back was strictly out of the question to them, and this, coupled with the fact that they were completely fitted out for such an undertaking, was the secret of their success.

As Prof. Easy had expected, they found the central position of the swamp less dangerous to traverse. It seemed to be upon higher and more solid ground, and there was less water, and, consequently, less alligators to look out for.

It is a beautiful morning upon which we find them camped in a very picturesque spot.

The air seems purer than at any time since they entered the recesses of the unexplored region, and all appear happy and contented.

The stranger and his dog have not been seen during all this time, nor has any other human being, outside of their own party.

Each one of the swamp explorers has lost more or less flesh, though it cannot be said that Martin Haypole's loss, in that respect, amounts to much.

Though a native of the Southern clime, Lucky has suffered the most.

He is worn down to a mere shadow, and had it not been for the professor's store of medicines he would certainly have found a grave in the swamp.

As it is, he has just about pulled through by the "skin of his teeth," as the saying goes.

Leo Malvern has just shot a swamp deer, and they are busily engaged in preparing some of the meat for their breakfast.

"Well, professor," said the young fellow, looking up from his task, "I can't say that we have made any great discovery yet, and I guess we are pretty near the heart of the Everglades."

"I haven't given up yet," was the reply. "Here, examine this and tell me what you think of it."

He produced a block of stone about two or three inches square from his pocket as he spoke.

Leo laid down the knife with which he was skinning the animal he had slain, and took the object in question in his hand.

"I found that lying upon the ground a few minutes ago," went on the professor. "Have any of you lost it?"

He was promptly answered in the negative by all hands.

"Nature certainly never formed that," said Leo. "Ah! there are marks upon it!"

The boy was right. Upon one side of the stone were several cuts, resembling, for all the world, Chinese hieroglyphics.

"That's very strange," remarked Dick.

"We are on the eve of a great discovery – mark my words, gentlemen," said the professor, in a manner of excitement.

"I don't see why," ventured the Yankee.

"You don't? How do you suppose this thing came here, then?"

"Somebody has been here afore, most likely."

"That's it, exactly; somebody has been here before, and those who have must certainly live in this neighborhood. Let us look about and see if we can find anything more."

"Humph!" retorted Haypole; "suppose we do find something. What'll it amount to, anyhow?"

No one vouchsafed a reply, and leaving Lucky to get the morning meal ready, Leo, Dick and the professor began carefully searching about the ground.

At length the Yankee became interested, and joined them.

But they looked about the spot where the professor had found the little cube for full half an hour, and not another thing could they find that seemed out of the way in the place.

“Well,” observed Dick, as they were called to breakfast, “I would keep the cube, professor, if I were you, and be very careful not to lose it.”

“Oh! you may rest assured that I will,” was the reply.

After the remains of the breakfast were cleared away, Leo arose to his feet and signified his intention of climbing a tree to see how the land lay.

Selecting a good, tall one, which was at the same time easy to climb, he went up.

The tree was nearly a hundred feet high, and the boy did not pause until he reached the top.

Then he prepared to take in the surrounding country.

The sun, which seldom found its way to the ground in the swamp, was shining brightly all around him, and Leo felt his spirits rise as if by magic.

“This is fine,” he muttered to himself; “but I can’t see much besides tree tops and cane brakes, after all. But it is worth ten dollars to have the sun shine on you five minutes like this. Ah, by George!”

He had just turned his gaze in a southerly direction as the words left his lips.

No wonder he uttered the exclamation.

Leo Malvern was looking upon something besides trees, cane brakes and pools of muddy water now.

About a mile from the tree in which he was perched he plainly saw a stone obelisk, which looked to be in the neighborhood of forty feet high.

Now, Leo knew this could not have grown there; so, locating the exact direction, he began descending the tree to notify his companions of the important discovery he had made.

“Hurrah!” he shouted, when he reached the ground. “I’ve made the greatest discovery yet!”

“What is it?” exclaimed the professor, excitedly.

“There is a stone pillar, or something, about a mile south of us.”

“What!”

“Exactly what I say. Come on; we will go to it.”

Even Haypole became very much excited, and he hurried along after Leo as fast as any of his companions.

“I shan’t be astonished at anything we may find,” said Prof. Easy. “Hundreds of years ago it was supposed that a fountain of youth existed somewhere in these parts; and if that does not, I am sure something else equally as wonderful does.”

They had probably made half the distance to the obelisk, when the baying of a dog suddenly came to their ears.

“What in thunderation is that?” exclaimed the Yankee.

“It is a dog, if I am not mistaken,” replied Leo. “Be cautious, all hands, there is no use in our running headlong into danger.”

With their weapons ready for instant use, they hurried cautiously ahead through the tangled mazes of the swamp.

They did not hear the dog bark again, though they listened attentively for it.

In a few minutes they came in sight of the obelisk that had attracted Leo’s attention from the top of the tree.

It seemed to be very ancient in appearance, for in many places pieces were chipped from it.

Yet it stood as erect as it had when placed there.

A tangled mass of vines clung to it, half hiding the lower part of it.

After peering carefully about, to make sure that there was no one around, our friends advanced toward the huge monument of stone.

It was a difficult matter to reach its base, for so dense was the undergrowth that the Yankee had to unsling the ax from his back and cut their way through.

At frequent intervals they came to a halt and listened, but not the least sound could they hear, save the noise they made themselves.

“It is rather queer where that dog went to,” said Dick.

“That’s so,” replied his cousin, shaking his head.

“Somethin’ funny’ll happen putty soon – see if it don’t,” put in Haypole. “I wouldn’t be much surprised to see ther ‘old boy’ jump outer that big gravestone, an’ put for us. I’ll be ding-wizzened! if I don’t begin ter feel squeamish.”

“Come; let us force our way through these vines and get at the base of the obelisk,” spoke up the professor, pushing his way forward.

A few minutes later all five stood at the foot of the immense shaft, panting and sweating from their exertions.

As they tore the vines aside, they saw it was covered, at regular intervals, with square bits of stone, exactly like the one found by Prof. Easy.

“Ah!” exclaimed the learned man, as he saw this; “this cube I found evidently came from here. Let us see if we can find where it belongs.”

Leo and Dick quickly produced their knives and began cutting away the vines, while the professor put on his glasses, preparatory to making the examination.

They cleared away all around the base, which was about eighteen feet square, and just as they finished, Dick’s eye lit upon one of the places where a cube was missing.

“Here is the spot,” said he. “Now, professor, let’s see if the one you have fits here.”

The professor stepped forward and produced the cube from his pocket.

He was just about to place it in the opening when a rifle shot rang out close at hand, followed by the baying of a dog.

This so startled the man of science that he made an involuntary move forward, thrusting the cube, as he did so, squarely into the hole.

Almost instantly a hidden door flew noiselessly open, revealing a flight of stone steps, leading downward into the bowels of the earth.

A simultaneous cry of surprise left the lips of the swamp explorers as this remarkable occurrence took place.

They gazed into the opening for the space of a minute and no one spoke a word.

But suddenly they were called to their senses by hearing a wild cry at their very elbow.

The next moment a man and a dog rushed through their midst and sprang down the stairway in the base of the obelisk.

CHAPTER IV. WHERE THE STAIRS LED TO

Leo Malvern caught but a fleeting glance at the man and dog as they rushed down the stairs in the base of the obelisk.

But what was the stranger fleeing from?

The swamp explorers glanced around them to find out.

The next moment they learned to their full satisfaction.

In the little clearing, a few yards beyond them, a balloon suddenly settled.

There was but one occupant of the basket, or car, and he was a stern-visaged man of perhaps forty-two.

It was evident that he had not yet seen our friends, for, as the balloon, which was now about half collapsed, settled upon the earth, he sprang from the basket and rushed in the direction taken by the man and dog.

A sudden thought came in Dick Vincey's head.

"Hide – quick!" he whispered to his companions. "He will most likely enter the opening and go on down."

In the twinkling of an eye all hands sprang to the other side of the obelisk and concealed themselves in a thicket.

They were not a moment too soon. The next instant the man who had so strangely landed in that wild spot rushed up to the base of the obelisk and came to an abrupt halt.

An exclamation of surprise left his lips as he beheld the opening in the stone shaft.

"By heavens!" he exclaimed, loud enough for the swamp explorers to hear; "Reginald Lacy, you shall not escape me, even if I have to follow you into the very center of the earth!"

Then he boldly entered the doorway and began descending the stone steps.

Five minutes later our friends made their way to the entrance again and listened for some sound.

But they could hear nothing.

"I am going to make a suggestion," suddenly said Leo.

"What is it?" asked his cousin.

"Let us go down the steps and see what has become of those who have already gone down."

"Agreed!" exclaimed the professor, who was ready for anything.

"Oh! for de good Lor' sakes! don't go down dere. De debbil am dere, suah!" whined Lucky, in a frightened manner.

"Keep still, coon, and don't git skeered. We may as well go as far and see as much as we kin, since we have got ter this dod-rotted country. I, for one, are satisfied to go down them steps."

The Yankee gave a contemptuous glance at the darky as he spoke, and then nodded for Leo to lead on.

Dick had not passed his opinion on the question yet, but that he was perfectly willing need scarcely be said.

But at the same time it occurred to him that they ought to take some sort of a light with them.

They had left their supplies at the point where they had been compelled to use the ax in the thicket.

Dick hastened to the spot and got a small lantern, which was all that was left of three that they had brought along with them.

When he reached the obelisk again his companions had already entered the doorway, and were waiting for him on the steps.

It was but the work of a moment to strike a match and light the lantern; and then the boy followed them down into the place beyond.

Down they went, for at least a hundred steps, and the end of the flight was not reached yet. Another hundred, and still it appeared the same.

"I wonder how many miles we have got ter go afore we git ter ther bottom?" said the Yankee.

"Have patience, Martin," replied Prof. Easy. "We are on the eve of a great discovery – mark my word for it!"

"Humph! I heerd ye say that same thing a good many times before. But, by the great boots in ther haymow, I stepped on somethin' alive jist then!"

"A ground hog!" exclaimed Dick, holding up the lantern. "How in thunder did it ever get there, I wonder?"

"If it can live in here, I am sure we can a little longer. Let us proceed," returned the professor, quietly.

Once more they began descending the steps.

During all this time they had not heard the least sound from those who had preceded them.

Probably one hundred and fifty steps more were descended, and then they reached a wide passage.

"Come," said Leo, leading the way. "We have struck level traveling at last."

The swamp explorers had not proceeded over three hundred yards, before they saw daylight ahead.

It seemed rather strange that it should be daylight, but it was, nevertheless.

With all possible speed they hastened along the passage.

Two hundred yards more and a wonderful sight met their gaze.

They were emerging into a vast tract of country many feet below the earth's crust.

In front of them was the beginning of a long crack, which extended a couple of miles or more, and all along the edges of this the water streamed down in the form of a cascade of unlimited extent.

The sunlight came in through the crack, which was probably a quarter of a mile in width, and lighted up the place.

All sorts of vegetation flourished on the place beneath the opening above; but beyond this our friends could perceive nothing on account of the falling water and the mist arising from the streams in which it fell.

"Wonderful!" exclaimed the professor.

"Darned if it ain't wonderful," assented Haypole.

"Who ever imagined that such a place as this existed?" said Leo.

"We are now under the great Everglades of Florida. It remains for us to find out what sort of place it is," spoke up Dick Vincey.

"I agree with you there," returned Prof. Easy. "Come, let us be moving. It is strange what has become of the man and dog and their pursuer."

They stepped off to the left, and kept walking until they emerged from the mist, which seemed to settle back on either side of the opening.

As they left it behind them they saw that only a sort of twilight prevailed in and about the underground place.

Then a startling thing occurred.

A body of men suddenly appeared from the numerous galleries, to be seen on their left, and rushed toward them.

There must have been fully a hundred of them, and all were attired in long gowns of some dark-colored material, and were barefooted and without any head covering.

The strange horde had the appearance of Turks, both in manner and looks.

The moment Leo and Dick beheld them, they placed their rifles to their shoulders.

Their action was quickly followed by their companions, and then Leo exclaimed:

“Halt! We mean you no harm!”

But the command was entirely disregarded. The crowd of men rushed at them with a quicker pace, if possible, brandishing spears and bows and arrows.

When within about fifty feet of the intruders, they came to a sudden halt and sent a flight of arrows at them.

One of these found lodgment in the fleshy part of Martin Haypole’s leg, and another went through the crown of the professor’s hat.

Leo and Dick thought it high time for them to act.

Dropping to their knees, they began firing into the ranks of the queerly attired strangers.

Crack! crack!

The reports rang out in rapid succession, and at almost every shot a man fell.

At first they seemed to be staggered and amazed, but they soon rallied and answered the rifle shots, by another flight of arrows.

It now behooved our friends to look for a place of cover.

A few yards distant was the mouth of a gallery or passage, and at the command of Leo Malvern they rushed for this with all possible speed.

The inhabitants of the underground place came after them with all their might, uttering, for the first time, loud yells of triumph.

“Hurry up!” cried Dick; “if we can reach the mouth of that passage we’ll give ’em fits.”

The arrows kept flying all around them, and Lucky, the darky, was wounded in the arm.

A minute more and the spot was reached in safety.

“Now!” exclaimed Leo, “give it to them! Everybody fire as fast as he can.”

The next instant five rifles began sending a veritable hailstorm of bullets.

Down went seven or eight of the savage barbarians, as the professor chose to term them, and several more began hopping about like mad from the wounds they had received.

Leo expected to see them turn and flee now, since he and his companions had reached a place where they could most likely hold their own.

But no! They kept on shooting their arrows, which, by the way, did our friends not the least bit of harm, as they had crouched behind a huge boulder.

But in spite of the determined stand our friends made, they were doomed to defeat.

Suddenly they heard a pattering of feet behind them, and, on turning, beheld a crowd of the savages coming through the passage.

They were between two fires!

CHAPTER V. THE DANCE OF DEATH

“God help us!” exclaimed Prof. Easy, as he saw the strange inhabitants of the underground place rushing for them from both front and rear.

But “God helps those who help themselves,” and both Leo Malvern and Dick Vincey were fully aware of this. They made up their minds that they would not be killed or captured until they had used every effort to drive away their enemies.

Brave, young fellows! But what could they hope to accomplish against such fearful odds?

Martin Haypole was the only man they had to stick to them now, as both the professor and Lucky at once threw down their weapons when they observed the horde approaching through the passage.

“Keep on firing!” shouted Leo, “and when they close on us use your revolvers.”

“No – no!” replied the professor; “let us surrender. It is the best thing to do, I think.”

“Never!” exclaimed Dick, and his reply was echoed by his cousin and the intrepid Yankee.

Nearer approached the swarming savages, and presently our friends were hemmed in from all possible means of escape.

It seemed that every man that fell had two or three to take his place.

At length there was a combined rush from all quarters, and the swamp explorers were forced to the ground and made prisoners.

This caused their hopes to rise a trifle.

They were not to be killed at present, and that was one consoling thought.

Their captors seemed to be very gleeful over the fact of having made them prisoners, and at once proceeded to bind their arms behind them, after having first divested them of their weapons.

Then the five swamp explorers were lifted to their feet in their deplorable condition.

“I wonder what in thunderation the scamps are a-goin’ ter do with us,” observed the Yankee.

“The Lord only knows,” groaned Prof. Easy, who now was thoroughly frightened.

“We will have to trust to luck,” said Leo.

“We is done gwine ter be killed – ’deed we is!” exclaimed Lucky, in a despondent tone.

“Wait until you are sure of that before you say it again,” replied Dick.

Then turning to the crowd surrounding them, he continued:

“Come! what are you standing there for? Why don’t you take us to the place you intend to, and have done with it?”

It seemed that he was understood, for without any further ado two men seized each of the captives, and the whole crowd started off down the passage.

It was rather dark in the tunnel-like place, and when they had traversed about three hundred yards, our friends were unable to see any of their surroundings.

But in a very few minutes they saw light ahead of them, and objects again became distinguishable.

A cry of wonder broke from the lips of the five as they were marched out into the light. If they had been surprised when they first entered the underground place, they were even more than surprised now.

They found themselves in a natural cave of many acres in extent, in which was a small village of stone huts.

The queerest thing about the place was that the top of the cave – if cave it could really be called – was entirely open in a circle of six or seven hundred yards in diameter. This admitted both light and rain, and hence it was that an unlimited supply of vegetation could be seen about.

The opening above was many feet from the ground upon which the stone huts were built, and there was no possible means of getting to the level ground above without the aid of an immense ladder.

“Well, this jist beats the Jews!” ejaculated Haypole. “This place looks like a big watermelon hollered out and one of ther ends cut off. I think if I knowed that song called ‘Down in a Coal Mine,’ I’d sing it.”

The prisoners were led along until they came to the largest building visible to them, and there a halt was called.

There were no doors to any of the huts, which showed that the inhabitants were not afraid of being robbed by their neighbors. The crowd who had charge of our friends faced the main doorway of the building they had halted in front of, and then clapped their hands.

Almost immediately a rustle was heard, and the figure of a female came out.

As soon as she appeared every person in sight, save the five captives, dropped to their knees and turned their faces to the ground.

With a look of wonderment upon their faces the swamp explorers eyed the girl – for she did not look to be over eighteen at the most – and marveled at her rare beauty.

She was attired in a trailing, white gown of some gauzy material, and her face was partly concealed by a fold of the same, which was thrown around her shoulders and across her mouth.

The look from her dazzling bright eyes showed that she was surprised at seeing the strangers.

But only for an instant did her gaze rest upon them.

Turning quickly to those who had brought them there, she clapped her hands three times.

All arose to their feet and saluted her.

Then, to the surprise of Prof. Easy, one of the men stepped forward and began addressing the girl in Spanish.

“Oh, queen,” said he, “here are five more people who have dared find their way into the land of Hez. What shall be their doom? Shall they be confined in the magic chamber with the other prisoner to witness the dance of death, or shall they be slaughtered at once?”

“Conduct them to the magic chamber,” said the queen, with an imperious wave of her hand.

She turned to enter the building, when the professor, who could speak Spanish fluently, exclaimed:

“Most gracious queen, listen a moment, please!”

At this the girl turned as if she had been stung, and the fold of her garment, becoming loosened, fell from her face, revealing the most beautiful countenance our friends had ever looked upon, or even dreamed of.

“Heavens!” thought Dick Vincey, “what a beautiful creature.”

The queen had fixed her eyes upon the face of the professor.

“Were you addressing me, sir?” she demanded.

“I was, oh, queen,” he returned. “I would like to say, in behalf of my companions and myself, that if we did wrong in coming to this place, we were not aware of it. Surely you will not condemn us to death for making such a mistake.”

“Enough! Away with them to the magic chamber, and let them witness the dance of death.”

With these words she swept gracefully into the house, and the Hezzians, as we shall now call the natives, seized the prisoners and led them from the spot.

None of the party, save Prof. Easy, could understand any other language than their own, and they were all very curious as to what was going to be done with them.

“What did she say when you spoke to her, professor?” asked Leo.

“She has sentenced us to be shut up in a place called the magic chamber, where there is now a captive already, and witness the dance of death. What will follow I am not prepared to say. That

beautiful but hard-hearted creature is the queen of this strange country, and what she says seems to be law.”

“She don’t look as though she would have us killed,” observed Haypole. “I seen her castin’ sheep’s-eyes at Dick while we was a-standin’ there. Ther only thing that’ll save us is for him ter make love to her.”

“I’d do that willingly enough, if I thought it would save our lives,” said Dick.

Leo and the Yankee laughed in spite of their situation.

It struck them that Dick would be glad to pay his attentions to the beautiful queen, even if it would not benefit them.

But there was no time for further conversation now. The Hezzians had halted at what appeared to be the extreme end of the cave.

Half a dozen of them used their combined efforts to roll a rock aside, which revealed a small opening.

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