

CHAPTER XXIV.

MORE SURPRISES.

"WHAT do you make of it, Charley?" Walter inquired, as he munched away at his fish and yams.

"The roads, walls, and these buildings were undoubtedly built by the Spaniards," said his chum, decidedly. "I have seen lots of their work in St. Augustine, and the West Indian islands, and there is no mistaking its character. They are the greatest road-builders since the Romans."

"But history contains no mention of such a place as this," Walter objected.

"Yet here it is, history or no history," Charley replied. "Perhaps all the voyages of gentlemen adventurers following Columbus were not known to the historians of the time. Perhaps this place may have been built by a detachment of De Soto's expedition. We must bear in mind that Florida was long the favorite land amongst the Spaniards. From the small number of buildings, I should say that this place was very likely built by a comparatively small party, using, no doubt, the Indians for slaves."

"And the slaves at last destroyed their masters," Walter suggested.

"I am not so sure about that," replied his chum. "I expected to find bones in the fort but we discovered none. Perhaps the builders abandoned this place even after going to so much trouble to fortify it."

"Maybe we can find something to throw light upon it in the other buildings," Walter remarked. "While you are finishing your dinner, I am going to see where that spring goes to."

Walter followed the little rivulet to where it disappeared in a small gully under a corner of the wall. Climbing the stones the lad dropped down lightly on the other side.

Charley finished his lunch, washed his hands at the spring, and resuming his seat in the doorway, leaned back upon one of the great pillars to wait for his chum. The air was soft and warm and the noises of the swamp stole to the tired lad's ears with a gentle lulling sound. His eyes slowly closed and his head dropped forward upon his breast and he slept.

Quickly the hours slipped away and the sun was getting low in the west, when Charley awoke. One glance at the declining sun brought him to his feet, anxiety and dread in his heart. What could have

become of Walter? It took the thoroughly alarmed lad but a moment to reach the wall where his chum had disappeared. He swarmed up it like a monkey and dropped down on the other side. But no solid ground met his descending feet. Instead, he crashed through leafy boughs and landed in a tangled mass of vines. In the second before the vines gave way under his weight, Charley succeeded in grasping a limb and swinging himself in to the trunk of the tree where he found a safe resting-place between two branches. Below him yawned a gigantic pit, its edge hidden from view by the clustering trees.

"Walter," he called anxiously, "are you down there?"

"Yes," growled his chum's voice, "and I have been here for hours. You're a nice companion for a man when he gets in trouble."

"I fell asleep," confessed Charley, sheepishly.

"Well, don't sleep any longer," said his chum sharply. "Help me out of this, quick. It is awful down here."

"All right, be patient a minute and I will have you out," Charley answered as he climbed nimbly up his tree and reached the edge of the pit. A moment's search and he found what he wanted, a long, stout grape vine strong as a rope. He cut off a piece some forty feet in length, fastened one end to the tree, and

dropped the other down into the pit. "You'll have to pull yourself out, Walt," he called.

With the help of the grape vine and the aid of foot holds on the trees growing up from the sides of the pit, Walter succeeded in scrambling out. His face was pale and there was a look of horror in his eyes.

"I believe I would have died if I had been compelled to stay down there all night," he declared in a voice that trembled.

"What is there down there?" asked Charley regarding his chum curiously.

"The demon work of the fiends who built this wall," said Walter fiercely, "It's their old stone quarry. They didn't bring rock from the coast, they just dug down till they found the kind they wanted. And Charley, all around the sides, chained to the solid rock, are the skeletons of the workers."

"I am right about the Spaniards building this place then," Charley observed. "That's the way that most Christian nation always used to treat its captives."

"Let's go," his chum urged, "I guess my nerve is shaken from being down there with those skeletons so long. The sun is getting low, anyway. We will not have time to more than get back home before dark."

"You're right, we must go, but I wish we had time to go through the balance of those buildings," said Charley, regretfully.

The two boys soon regained the canoe and paddled safely past the floating crocodiles.

"We haven't solved the mystery, after all," remarked Walter, as he urged the canoe forward.

"No, but we have done far better," declared Charley, enthusiastically, "we have found a place where we will have ample protection in case we are attacked by the outlaws. I am in favor of moving our camp there to-morrow morning."

"Of course that is the wisest plan," Walter agreed, "but since my experience in that pit I have a dread of the place."

"That will wear off in time. Hallo, there's our island and there's the captain and Chris on the bank waiting for us."

"I expect we will get a good lecture," grinned Walter, "I guess we deserve it, too."

But the captain was so delighted over their safe return, that he let both off with a light scolding.

Over the supper, the boys related the story of their discoveries amid exclamations from the captain and Chris.

The captain readily agreed to their proposal to

move camp to the larger island. "The young chief showed me how to fix signs that would tell him which way we had gone in case we left the island before he returned," the captain observed.

This removed the only possible objection to the plan, and early next morning the hunters prepared to shift camp.

The little patch of yams was dug up, yielding several bushels of the sugary tubers, the remaining ears of Indian corn were plucked from the stalks, and a large quantity of dry gourds gathered, these, together with the little that remained of their stock of provisions, were conveyed to the canoes and our hunters were ready to depart. Before leaving, the captain arranged the signs agreed upon with the young chief. These were very simple, consisting merely of twigs partly broken off and laid to point in the direction they had gone.

"I reckon he'll see those," observed the captain. "The worst of it is, though, that Injin Charley ain't likely to overlook them either."

"That can't be helped," said Charley, "and once we are in our new home, we will stand some show of being able to defy them. I only wish we had the two rifles that were lost when the canoe upset. I wouldn't fear the outlaws at all then."

"I wish we had more provisions," Walter added.

“Chris used the last of the coffee this morning, and there is not much of anything else left.”

“It ain’t no use wishing, lads,” declared the captain, “we had ought to be thankful for what we have. The Lord will provide. Jes’ think of the trials an’ dangers He has brought us through already.”

A thoughtful silence, that continued until they reached the island, followed the old sailor’s gentle reproof.

Although they had been partly prepared by the boys’ account of their discoveries, the captain and Chris were astonished at the sight of the great wall, the road, and the group of stone buildings. It was plain, too, that there was a good deal of superstitious dread mingled with their wonder.

Charley was quick to note this in their faces and gave them no time to brood upon their fears. “We have got a lot of work to do,” he declared, as they deposited the loads they had brought up from the canoes. “I think, we will get along better if we divide it up and go at it with some system. Now, the captain and I will bring up the balance of the things, and the canoes,—it will not do to leave them where the outlaws can find them if they pay us a visit. While we are doing that, Walt, you pick out one of the buildings for us to occupy—the fort

is too big, we would be lost in it; and you, Chris, light up a fire and get us something to eat."

The two addressed, accepted Charley's suggestions, cheerfully, and he and the captain departed to carry out their own task. When they returned laden with the balance of the canoe's cargo, Walter was standing idly by the fire watching Chris prepare the dinner.

"What, through already?" demanded Charley in surprise.

"No, just resting," smiled his chum. But the moment the captain's back was turned, his face became grave, and he gave a warning shake of his head in Chris' and the captain's direction.

Charley was quick to catch its significance. "I am afraid that carrying is too much for my shoulder," he said, quietly, "Chris, you give the captain a hand with the canoes, and I will look after the dinner."

No sooner had the two disappeared, than Charley turned to his chum. "What's the trouble?" he demanded eagerly.

"Come and see," said Walter soberly.

He led the way quickly to the first building and entered the open doorway, followed closely by Charley. At the threshold, Charley paused in horror. The room in which he looked was about twenty by fourteen feet in size. In the center a great slab of

stone rested on four large blocks of the same material. It had evidently once done duty as a table for at one side of it was a bench of stone, and upon the bench sat, or rather lolled, four white, ghastly, grinning skeletons. Death had evidently come to the sitters like a bolt from the sky. One rested, leaning forward, with the bony claws clinching the table, while yet another held a pewter mug as if about to raise it to his grinning jaws. They had evidently been feasting when the grim visitor came, for before them on the table sat a great stone jug and dishes of crockery stained and discolored with age.

"You acted wisely, Walt," declared Charley, recovering his composure. "If Chris and the captain had caught sight of them, we would never have been able to keep them on the island. We will have to work quickly and get them out of sight before they return."

With deep repugnance the boys immediately began the grewsome task of removing the bodies.

"We have no time to bury them now," said Walter, "let's lower them into the pit; they will not be seen there, and we can bury them at the first opportunity."

The lads did not linger any over their task, but quickly bore their ghastly burdens to the wall. With the aid of grape vines, the whitened bones were

hoisted to the top of the wall and lowered into the pit.

They had only time to get back to the fire and pretend to be busy with the dinner when the captain and Chris appeared bearing the first canoe.

"Now for the other buildings," said Charley, sharply, as the two again disappeared, "we have got to work lively if we are to finish before they return."

From building to building the lads swiftly passed. In all but one they found ghastly occupants, some stretched out in the posture of sleep, some sitting at table like the first seen, but all showing that death had come suddenly and unexpectedly.